

What Role Did the Sassanid Empire Truly Play in the Fall of the Western Roman Empire?

Exploring Divergences in Causal Frameworks

Nicholas Strunc

ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to add to the existing body of literature regarding the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire by introducing the contributions of the Sassanid Empire to the literary discussion. The argument of this thesis will be that the Sassanid Empire exacerbated structural weaknesses in several facets of the Roman imperial system to an extent that the Sassanid Empire must be considered a necessary and contributory cause in the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire. The source evidence will be drawn from contemporary literary sources, archeological evidence, and numismatic analysis. This thesis will not posit a monocausal argument regarding the Sassanid Empire and its effect on the fall of the Western Roman Empire, rather it will emphasize the role that the Sassanid Empire must play in a more nuanced and multi-causal thesis on the subject.

Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.

*Marcus Aurelius
Roman Emperor 161-180 AD*

To my parents and my brother, thank you for your guidance and your support in all my endeavors.

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Introduction

...all the warriors were summoned and there was a hand-to-hand contest with drawn swords; blood streamed on all sides from the vast carnage; the trenches were blocked with bodies and so a broader path was furnished. And now the city was filled with the eager rush of the enemy's forces, and since all hope of defense or of flight was cut off, armed and unarmed alike without distinction of sex were slaughtered like so many cattle.¹

This passage from Ammianus Marcellinus's historical account of Roman Late Antiquity, the *Res Gestae*, describes the siege and fall of Amida, a fortress city on the Eastern frontier, to the troops of Shapur II, ruler of the Sassanid Empire, in AD 359. This ancient city, located in modern day Turkey, was a cornerstone of the Roman imperial defense against the armies of the Sassanid Empire on the eastern frontiers.² Ammianus, a 4th century Roman military officer, describes the Sassanid king as driven by emotion and aggression and asserts that the Sassanid army is barbaric in its origin and worthy of fear.

But night put an end to the conflict; and having taken a nap during the brief period of rest, the king, as soon as dawn appeared, boiling with wrath and resentment and closing his eyes to all right, aroused the barbarians against us, to win what he hoped for.³

...we believe that the famous "sons of earth" did not come forth from the bosom of the land, but were born with extraordinary swiftness - those so-called sparti, who, because they were seen unexpectedly in sundry places, were thought to have sprung from the earth, since antiquity gave the matter a fabulous origin.⁴

These vivid descriptions of the threat of a Sassanid army and such fearful prose from a man like Ammianus suggests that the Sassanid Empire was aggressive, driven by the passions of its kings, and willing to sacrifice blood and treasure to defeat the Romans.

¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae*. In *Res Gestae: Loeb Classical Library Edition*. Translated by J.C. Rolfe. Accessed from <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Ammian/home.html> 5/6/15 @ 8:51 pm xix.8.

² Ammianus, *Res Gestae* xix.8.1.

³ Ammianus, *Res Gestae* xix.8.

⁴ Ammianus, *Res Gestae* xix.8.

Over the past decade, differing scholarly views have emerged regarding the role of the Sassanid Empire and the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

Peter Heather in his 2005-book *The Fall of the Roman Empire* asserts that the catalyst for the decline of the Roman Empire and the eventual fall of Western Roman Empire was the emergence of the Sassanid Persian Empire out of the ashes of the Parthian Empire:

*The Sassanids were sufficiently powerful and internally cohesive to push back Roman legions from the Euphrates and from much of Armenia and Southeast Turkey. Much as modern readers tend to think of the “Huns” as the nemesis of the Roman Empire, for the entire period under discussion it was the Persians who held the attention and concern of Rome and Constantinople.*⁵

Adrian Goldsworthy (2009) presents a contrasting view regarding the Sassanid threat in his book, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower*. He argues that the fall of the Western Roman Empire was a result of repeated blows to a decaying state over a long period of time.

*The Roman Empire continued for a very long time. At times the empire could still be formidable and did not simply collapse. Perhaps we should imagine the late Roman Empire as a retired athlete, whose body has decline from neglect and an unhealthy lifestyle. Over the years the person would grow weaker and weaker, and in the end could easily succumb to disease. Long decline was the fate of the Roman Empire. In the end, it may well have been ‘murdered’ by barbarian invaders, but these struck at a body made vulnerable by prolonged decay.*⁶

Both authors make arguments that incorporate the barbarian threats of the tribes and confederations along the Rhine and Danube, they both include internal weaknesses associated with extensive Roman imperialism, but only Heather develops the Sassanids as a significant part of his causal framework.

⁵ Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 60.

⁶ Adrian Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 414-415.

I will argue that the Sassanid Empire was a necessary, but not the sole, causal factor in the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The Sassanid Empire exacerbated existing structural weaknesses (military, economic, social and political) within the Roman Empire. Furthermore, these conditions opened the gates for other destructive or erosive insults to the Empire, such as barbarian invasions and internal strife to proliferate, leading to the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century. In arguing this, I will attempt to bridge the gap between the arguments of these two authors and create a more robust framework for understanding the role that the Sassanid Empire truly played in the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

In order to reconcile these divergent views, I will use the following road map. The first substantive chapter of this thesis will give an overview of Roman-Sassanid relations, providing a groundwork for understanding Romano-Sassanid relations both in the context of war and the context of peace. This chapter will also include references to Rome's relationship with the Parthians, highlighting the paradigm shift that occurred with the Sassanid toppling of the Parthian Empire. The second chapter will focus on the third century crisis and the role that the Sassanid Empire played in facilitating and exacerbating it. The third chapter will attend to 4th century developments touching upon the development of Roman fortresses along the Mesopotamian frontier and major Roman and Sassanid military campaigns as well as the development of commercial and socio-economic transfers in the periods of peace between these campaigns. Finally, this thesis will focus on late 4th-century and early and mid 5th-century barbarian developments and how the Sassanids provided a fatal distraction for the Romans from these threats. This chapter will also include a coalescence of the centuries of Romano-Sassanid interactions,

as outlined in previous chapters, and provide a robust conclusion as to why the Sassanid Empire was a necessary causal factor for the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

To make this argument, I will be forced to rely on a set of contemporary sources that are incomplete or otherwise unduly biased. Authors like Cassius Dio and Ammianus Marcellinus will be featured prominently in this thesis and this presents a problem. A heavy reliance on Roman literature has the potential to skew facts with a decidedly Roman slant. Very little Sassanid literary evidence exists to balance out this equation, therefore, my source methodology will be diverse, including Roman and Sassanid numismatic evidence as well as Roman and Sassanid archaeological evidence.

Roman and Sassanid archeological remains that will be analyzed range from building and fort sites along the Syrian frontier with the Sassanid Empire, to Trajan's column, to Sassanid triumphal column etchings. Coinage will act as another mode of diversification for source evidence but like literary evidence it is slightly problematic. Coins were often used as a propaganda tool, thus coinage can present unduly biased accounts of significant events. However, this propaganda can yield a neat synthesis of social and political situations in the eras that the coins were minted. For example, a Sassanid bronze *hexachalkon* or *tetradrachm* from the 3rd century depicts the Sassanid king Shapur I on one side and the defeated emperor Valerian on the other, providing a balance to the Roman contemporary accounts of Valerian's campaign against the Sassanids.⁷ Also, the metal content of coins changed over time depending on the relative ratio of precious metals to other non-precious metals and this will allow for an analysis of

⁷ SIC, Shapur I, 240-271 CE hexachalkon [bronze], acquired in Pakistan, *crude aG*

the relative gradation of the value of coins over time in both the Roman and Sassanid Empires.

The causal frameworks for the fall of the Western Roman Empire should face continual scrutiny and assumptions must be dusted off and reanalyzed for the Roman Empire was one of the longest lasting major power in world history and its legacy is still felt throughout the world, particularly the western world. But more than its influence on language, culture, notions of warfare, civic participation, and other aspects of everyday life, the Roman Empire and the fall of its western half might teach us about what makes a powerful state flourish and what can cause it to fail. What role did the Sassanid Empire truly play in the fall of the Western Roman Empire?

Chapter 1: Tension, The Framework of Romano-Sassanid Relations

Introduction

In a letter from the emperor Severus Alexander to Ardashir, the founder and first king of the Sassanid Empire in the 220s, Alexander warns Ardashir to respect peace and reminded him of the great victories of Augustus, Trajan, and Septimius Severus.⁸ In response to this letter, Ardashir requested that Rome withdraw from Syria and Asia Minor.⁹ This simple exchange of letters is very telling of the relationship that would develop over time between the Roman Emperors and Sassanid Kings. While at times these two powers would interact peacefully, the official imperial Roman line as well as the official Sassanid line was antagonistic.

The pages that follow will attempt to answer the question: How did the Sassanid Empire come to be and what was the nature of the Sassanid Empire's relationship with the Roman Empire? In order to answer this question, I will discuss the emergence of the Sassanid Empire out of the Parthian Empire and the evolving relations between it and the Roman Empire from the 3rd to the 5th centuries.

The contemporary literary sources of this period are mostly Roman in origin and the authors of the period include Cassius Dio, Herodian, Ammianus Marcellinus, Procopius, and Agathis. These authors concentrate particularly on Roman-Persian (Sassanid) warfare, and though much peaceful interaction occurred as well, the Roman contemporary preoccupation with warfare reinforces the view that the Romano-Sassanid

⁸ Herodian. *Roman History*. in *Herodian of Antioch's History of the Roman Empire*. Translated by Edward C. Echols. (LA: University of Berkeley Press, 2007), VI.ii.4-5.

⁹ Herodian, *Roman History*, VI.ii.5-6.

relationship was dominated by warfare.¹⁰ Numerous inscriptions boasting of the accomplishments and victories of Sassanid rulers like Ardashir, Shapur I, and Narses also paint a similar picture on the Sassanid side.¹¹

The Fall of the Parthians: The Second Century Crisis

In the year AD 226, Ardashir, the founder of the Sassanid dynasty was crowned king of kings in his new capital of Ctesiphon. This ended a long period of internal strife in Mesopotamia and the Khorasan (Iran) that began with Trajan's eastern campaign. From the years AD 114 to 117, Trajan managed to annex Armenia, which was a client kingdom of the Parthians at the time, annex northern Mesopotamia, and install a puppet ruler in the rest of Mesopotamia. In doing so, he cut the Parthian Empire off from its most fertile and prosperous province and took the Parthian capital, Ctesiphon. Trajan died in AD 117 before renewing war and was not able to destroy the Parthians outright.¹² Trajan set a precedent whereby wars of aggression became the policy norm of Roman emperors regarding the Eastern Frontier. This aggressive stance towards the East continued on after the fall of the Parthians and one question that will be remarked on later in this thesis will be: what motivated Roman emperors to invade Parthian, and later Sassanid, territory?

War did not break out again until AD 161 when the Parthian king Vologases IV attacked Armenia. This indicates that war between Rome and the Parthians was not constant, but rather was punctuated by long stretches of peace. The result of this war was

¹⁰ Jan William Drijvers, *Rome and the Sasanid Empire: Confrontation and Coexistence* (Brussels: Rousseau, 2008), 442.

¹¹ See Rustam, Naqsh-I *Res gestae divi Saporis* for illustrative examples

¹² Rose Mary Sheldon, *Rome's Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010), 143.

another invasion of Mesopotamia this time by Roman general Avidius Cassius (Hadrian had abandoned the holdings captured under Trajan). Cassius won battles at Dura-Europos and Seleucia and he eventually managed to assault and sack Ctesiphon in AD 165.¹³ In AD 195 another Roman invasion of Mesopotamia, under emperor Septimius Severus led to Roman reacquisition of northern Mesopotamia and the third sacking of Ctesiphon in AD 197.¹⁴ One last war occurred in AD 216 under emperor Caracalla, the most significant event of which was the sacking of Arbela, in northern Mesopotamia, in AD 215.

The Parthian Empire was a decentralized, feudal system akin to the Perso-Hellenic hybrid system of government used by the Seleucid Empire before them. Territories of the empire were divided into three provincial hierarchies, *marzbān*, *xšatrap*, and *dizpat*. These three distinct units are similar to the Seleucid designations of *satrapy*, *eparchy*, and *hyparchy*.¹⁵ These designations generally were akin to vassal states that were nominally under the control of the central Parthian administration but day to day power was held by prominent noble families who ruled over large estates and supplied soldiers and tribute to the king.¹⁶ This quasi-feudalist structure was also married with the incorporation of semi-autonomous kingdoms, including: Armenia, Media Atropatene,

¹³ Martin Sicker, "The Struggle over the Euphrates Frontier," *The Pre Islamic Middle East* 14, no. 2 (2000): 167-168.

¹⁴ George Rawlinson, *Parthia* (NY: Cosimo Inc., 2007), 337-338.

¹⁵ Geo Widengren, "Sources of Parthian and Sasanian History" in Yarshater, Ehsan *Cambridge History of Iran* (London & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1263.

¹⁶ James R. Ashley, *The Macedonian Empire: The Era of Warfare Under Philip II and Alexander the Great, 359-323 BC* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 385-391.

Gordyene, Adiabene, Edessa, Hatra, and Persis.¹⁷ In addition to large swaths of territory with varying degrees of autonomy, there were a number of Hellenic style city-states of some considerable size.¹⁸ These city-states were also granted varying degrees of autonomy. This system worked when the royal family had the prestige and legitimacy to coopt these many regional mezzanine rulers. It broke down when the royal family lost that sway over the nobility and autonomous vassals. This is what occurred as a result of the string of second century successes of the Romans against the Parthians.

The Parthian Empire, quite differently from the Roman Empire, had no standing army, but rather utilized levies, mercenaries, fealty-sworn nobles, and personal retinues in times of war. The only forces that were maintained full time were the garrisons of border forts and the king's personal retinue that was comprised of nobles, serfs, and mercenaries.¹⁹ Neither of these pools of active troops was very large, however, the kings of the Parthian Empire were able to marshal troops and create armies remarkably quickly. The ability to levy troops was a function, in this system, of the personality of the king in power and the legitimacy of the royal family. Repeated defeats by the Romans robbed the Parthian leadership of much of the mechanism by which its military functioned, control over territorial levies.

These wars, primarily successes for the Romans, were hammer blows against Parthian economic power as well. In ravaging Mesopotamia multiple times over the

¹⁷ V.G. Lukonin, "Political Social and Administrative Institutions: Taxes and Trade" in *Cambridge History of Iran* edited by Ehsan Yarshater (London & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 701.

¹⁸ Klaus Schippmann, "Arsacids II: the Arsacid Dynasty," *Encyclopedia Iranica* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 532.

¹⁹ David Kennedy, "Parthia and Rome: Eastern Perspectives," *The Roman Army in the East* (Anne Arbor: Cushing Malloy Inc., 1996), 84.

second century, the Romans denied the Parthians much of the agricultural and trade surpluses of Mesopotamia. Thus, the unsuccessful defense of the Parthian Empire by sitting kings of the second century eroded much of their imperial authority leading to the instability in Parthian politics.

The Cost of Defeat: The Rise of the Sassanid Empire

Ardashir was the head of a Persian noble family from Estakhr, a village in modern day southern Iran. Taking advantage of the protracted instability of the Parthian system, Ardashir managed to consolidate his rule over several Parthian vassal states. Eventually, the military forces of the Parthian king Artabanus V confronted him. Ardashir won several victories against the Parthian army and in last battle of Hormizdegan in AD 224 the Parthian king was killed.²⁰ After the king's death, Ardashir secured his rule over the holdings of the Parthian Empire and in doing so set up a new dynasty named for his ancestor Sasan.²¹

This empire supplanted its Parthian predecessors in the 220s and set the stage for a new period of warfare in the East for the Romans. A mere six years after creating the Sassanid Empire, Ardashir backed up his antagonistic request made in response to Alexander Severus with action. In AD 230, he invaded Roman territory, besieging Nisibis, and undertaking raids that led as far as Syria and Cappadocia.²² The following narrative comes from Herodian and gives a good idea of the damage that this campaign caused:

²⁰ W.B. Fischer et al, *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 116-118.

²¹ John Morris Roberts, *A Short History of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 145.

²² Herodian, *Roman History*, VI.ii.1.

*Although the barbarians seemed to have been victorious through the help of some superior numbers, they were still worn out by the many clashes in Media and the battle in Parthia, where many had died and even more had been wounded. Almost, the same number of soldiers had fallen on both sides and the surviving barbarian soldiers seem to have won because of their number and not their force.*²³

Herodian, a Roman civil servant and possibly a senator, is someone who would have had access to Roman imperial status reports as well as official imperial propaganda decrees, thus his account provides a good contrast between the “official” line on this war as well as the “unofficial” account of events.²⁴ This account is revealing for a few reasons. First, the mention of Sassanid “superior force” indicates that Ardashir campaigned with a force that was larger than the one available to Severus Alexander. Second, the fact that Sassanid raids reached as far as “Syria” and “Cappadocia” indicates that the Sassanids, at least on a smaller more temporary scale, were capable of penetrating deeply into the heart of Roman Eastern territories. Lastly, Herodian claims that the Romans and Sassanids lost the “same number of soldiers” and if this is taken in conjunction with the first part of the excerpt that described the Sassanid army as numerically superior, this indicates that this campaign had been destructive to the Roman legionary rank and file.

Following this war, the Sassanids attacked again in AD 238 and made inroads against the Romans. In AD 240, Ardashir managed to capture the city of Hatra, a strategic trading and commercial hub of Northern Mesopotamia.²⁵ This episode is interesting because it was indicative of not only political/military considerations (Hatra occupies a key entry and exit point to the deserts of Northern Arabia) but also

²³ Herodian, *Roman History*, VI.vi.5-6.

²⁴ See Herodian’s knowledge of *senatus consultum tacitum* as well as account of Herodian’s reliability in Zosimus *Historia Nova* and John of Antioch *World Chronicle*

²⁵ Anonymous, *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis*, XVIII.1-16.

commercial considerations. This theme of commercial wars will become very important for future discussion of Roman Sassanid relations in the 4th and 5th centuries.

Following this victory, Ardashir's son Shapur I succeeded to the throne and was faced with a Roman counterattack under the emperor Gordian III. There is a slight point of contention here as western contemporary sources indicate that a second Sassanid invasion prompted Gordian's counterattack.²⁶ Nevertheless, this campaign proved to be a bloody contest whose end result was the destruction of Gordian's army and Gordian's death as well.²⁷ In the wake of this disaster a man named Philip was declared emperor and forced to pay a large indemnity to the Sassanids.

Draining Imperial Strength: Warfare with the Sassanids

The third century saw several more wars between the Romans and the Sassanids. In AD 252-53 Shapur I launched an attack on Rome's eastern provinces devastating Syria and sacking Antioch. In his third campaign, Shapur I launched further raids into Syria, Cilicia, and Cappadocia, in the process capturing the emperor Valerian.²⁸ Evidence of this event can be seen in a triumphal relief at Bīšāpūr representing Shapur I's victory against Valerian.²⁹ After this event, men like Septimius Odaenathus, a dynast of Palmyra, carved out large portions of the Eastern and Western provinces as part of the "Gallic" and

²⁶ Anonymous, *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Gordian*, In *Historia Augusta, Vol. I*, Translated by David Magie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921) XXVI.6

²⁷ *The Shapur Inscription on the Ka'ba-I Zardust at Naqs-I Rostam* § 6 & 7.

²⁸ Michael Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery of the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1999), 20.

²⁹ R. Ghirshman, "Triumphal relief of Šāpūr I at Bīšāpūr," In *Iran, Parthians and Sassanians*, Edited by R. Ghirshman (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

“Palmyrene Empires”.³⁰ In many ways, the Sassanid Empire was to Rome’s Third Century Crisis, what the Romans were to the Parthians in their Second Century Crisis.

While scholars both contemporary and modern tended to focus on these periods of active warfare between the Romans and Sassanids, it is important to acknowledge that there were periods of relative peace between these two powers. Even in times of peace, however, significant Roman resources were allocated to the active defense of the Eastern frontier as well as the construction or repair of frontline fortifications. These fortresses, created by a string of 4th century emperors, were constructed as a part of a system of heavily defended strongpoints meant to break up and tire out Sassanid armies.

The case of Shapur II’s invasion of Northern Mesopotamia provides a good illustrative example of the difficulties of this fortress system for the Romans. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, the Roman emperor Constantius was given information that the Sassanid King Shapur II planned an invasion of the Northern Mesopotamia. Constantius did not maneuver a sufficient number of troops to check this invasion and this permitted the Sassanids to bypass the key fortress of Nisibis and march into Syria.³¹

Shapur II did not march directly to Syria, however, as he was provoked into laying siege to the fortress city of Amida.³² This opening of Shapur II’s campaign lays bare two distinct disadvantages of relying on a fortress system for frontier defense. First, the Sassanids, if their objectives were in Syria, Asia Minor, or Egypt, could bypass large fortresses and avoid long drawn out sieges. Second, if they did attempt to siege a fortress,

³⁰ Grant, *Collapse and Recovery*, 20.

³¹ A.D. Lee, *Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 108.

³² R.C. Brockley, “Ammianus Marcellinus on the Persian invasion of A.D. 359,” *Phoenix* 42, no. 1 (1988): 244-260.

the Sassanids had developed sophisticated siege craft. By the 4th century, the Sassanids could press home and capture a fortified city, destroying both the Roman garrison and the fortress in the process.³³

The siege lasted 73 days and the capture of the fortress represented a serious loss to both the Romans and Sassanids. Shapur II's army sustained casualties in the 10,000s, a not insignificant portion of his army, whereas the Romans lost a key border fortress as well as a civilian population of 20,000 and seven legions and several cavalry detachments.³⁴ The identification of these units can allow for a rough estimate of the Roman military casualties. A typical late Roman legion was composed of 1,000 soldiers and cavalry *vexillationes* numbered between 300-500.³⁵ Therefore, the loss of these units can yield a conservative estimate of casualties between 10,000-15,000.

Though the fortress at Amida was captured, it represented a Pyrrhic victory for Shapur II who, though he advanced further and took another fortress at Singara, was unable to sustain his campaign and was forced to retreat.³⁶ The fall of Singara was also costly for the Romans as it represented the slaughter of the local populace (which would have retreated behind the walls of Singara) and two legions.³⁷ In conclusion, while these fortresses fulfilled their objective of slowing and tiring out the Sassanid invasion force, it came at a serious cost in manpower, raw resources, coin (secured in the fortresses), and

³³ See Ross Cowan, "Adapting to the Enemy in the Sassanid Wars: Cataphracts and Siegecraft," (NY: Martin Wieland, 2014) for extended description of Sassanid siege craft

³⁴ Noel Lenski, *Two Sieges of Amida (AD 359 and 502-503): The Experience of Combat in the Late Roman Near East* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2014), 222.

³⁵ Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 1449-1450.

³⁶ Claudius Ptolemaeus, *Geographia*, V.xviii.9.

³⁷ Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, XX.vi.

the fortresses themselves, which were expensive to create. What did these expenses look like?

Financial and Manpower Challenges for Rome

In order to more accurately determine the expenses of warfare on the Eastern frontier, we will look at the case study of Dura-Europos. Dura-Europos was originally under the control of the Parthians, but was captured by the Romans in AD 165. The Romans then constructed fortifications and built out the amenities of the city. In AD 256, however, the Sassanids captured the city and the site was abandoned.³⁸ Archeological digs that began in 1920 reveal that Dura was surrounded by a defensive wall of mud-brick and contained an amphitheater, agora, baths, and several temples. It also included a large military quarter separated from the main city by another mud brick wall.³⁹

Using logistical analyses of Donald Engels (1978) for the Macedonian Army under Alexander the Great, we can gain some insight into the costs of supplying a garrison of several thousand troops and the cost of constructing the fortress that housed them.⁴⁰ The estimated monthly consumption of a pre-Tetrarchy imperial legion (numbering 5,000 men) was 225 tons of grain and 450 kg of forage (fodder) for horses.⁴¹ If this number is used as a reference point for later Roman legions of roughly 1,000 men, then the supplies needed for the permanent garrison (2,000) plus contingents of several

³⁸ Hugh Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 74.

³⁹ M.I. Rostovtzeff et al., *Excavations at Dura-Europos, Ninth Season, Part Three* (New Haven: Routledge, 1952), 69-70.

⁴⁰ This reference point was chosen because the costs of military upkeep would stay relatively similar in antiquity in that a soldier's food requirements or horses' fodder requirements would be relatively static numbers. See Richard A. Gabriel (2007) for extended discussion of supply armies in antiquity.

⁴¹ D. Engels, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army* (London: Routledge, 1977), 28-40.

thousand legionaries and cavalrymen could have been as high as 250 to 300 tons of grain and 2,250 kg of fodder per month.⁴²⁴³ This fortress, given the garrison force, could be compared to a typical Roman legion fort (which would have house a legion of 5,000 men) and would have required 15,000 cubic meters of stone, 5,000 cubic meters of clay, and 21 ha of turf to build.⁴⁴

Given these material requirements, we are now in a position to understand the costs of material in coin. At the time of the construction of the fortifications of Dura Europos to counter the forces of Shapur I (c. 256), the cost of a *modius* of grain, 8.73 liters was 40 *nummi*.⁴⁵ The gold *solidus* of that time, currency delineated in gold was the primary means of state bulk expenses, had the purchasing power of 7,200 *nummi* and thus could buy 30-40 *modii* of wheat.⁴⁶ With 1 ton of wheat equal to approximately 150 *modii* the cost of supplying grain for one month to Dura-Europos can reasonably be estimated to be 1,050 *solidii*.

Calculating construction costs is slightly more problematic. Figures for the cost of stone, clay, and other building materials are nonexistent and determining substitute metrics for understanding the costs are hampered by fluctuations in price as a result of inflation, transportation costs, and the cost of labor. As a stretch it is possible to rectify this gap in archeological and numismatic evidence by comparing the costs of aqueduct

⁴² Assumption of the presence of the cavalry is based on the attestations of the presence of *cohors II Ulpia equitata*

⁴³ Fodder estimates are based on a cavalry cohort of 500 men with the 450 kg calculation for pre-tetrarchy cavalry contingent for a typical legion of 100 horsemen

⁴⁴ Tacitus, *Annales*, in *Histories*, translated by C. H. Moore (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).

⁴⁵ "Table 1: Roman Units" accessed from <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk/reference/measures.shtml> 3/25/15 at 1:08 pm

⁴⁶ SIC, Theodosius, c. 379 *solidus* [gold], acquired in Iraq, *fine Au*

construction to fort construction. Both were built of similar materials and required a similar level of architectural expertise. The Aqua Marcia, Rome's third aqueduct, built with the plunder from the Pyrrhic War, cost roughly 2,000,000 *sesterces* per kilometer of construction.⁴⁷ Dura-Europos was roughly 0.49km² therefore the creation of a stone wall consistent with the construction techniques of the Aqua Marcia yields a cost, again very rough, of 1,000,000 *sesterces*.⁴⁸ This cost sounds relatively reasonable but, adjusted for the inflation of the Roman currency from the time of the Pyrrhic War (c. 275 BC) to the 4th century AD, the cost is several multitudes higher than that original 1,000,000 *sesterces* amount. Without delving into the costs of fodder and the wages of the garrison soldiers themselves, it can be understood that any reasonably sized fortress represented a significant cost to the Roman Empire.

In the later Roman Empire, much of the Roman Army's recruitment was done through conscription, thus replacing the losses of such battles as the siege of Amida or Singara was limited only by the availability and cooptability of the recruitment area of a legion.⁴⁹ What presented the highest cost was the arming of new legionaries. Though the cost of equipment was deducted from a soldier's pay, the Roman state needed to pay the cost to maintain extensive armory works.⁵⁰ In the mid-second century, evidence exists as

⁴⁷ Frontinus, *De aquaeductu urbis Romae*, in *Sextus Iulius Frontinus: Water-Management of the City of Rome*, translated by R.H. Rodgers (London: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴⁸ Figure of Dura-Europos's size derived from calculations based on archeological surveys of original city limits, based on Figure 3 in Appendix II.

⁴⁹ See Pat Southern & Karen Dixon, *The Late Roman Army* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1996) Ch. 4 "Recruitment" for extended discussion of late Roman recruitment practices.

⁵⁰ Paul Erdkamp, *A Companion to the Roman Army* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 315.

well of alterations to the basic legionary kit, the elimination of the leather *pteruges*.⁵¹ Legionaries were heavy infantry soldiers that fought in close order, group formation, thus a reduction in protection is indicative of attempts by the Roman state to create a more cost-effective means of arming legionaries on a large scale.⁵²

Tensions Beyond War: Extra-Martial Interplay Between Two Empires

War with the Sassanids proved to be very expensive as well as a consistent enterprise for centuries. War was not constant, however, as much of the 4th and 5th centuries were characterized by long periods of peace. This facilitated the creation of a complex diplomatic process to bridge the gaps between wars and peace. Complex rituals and formalized methods of communication developed to accommodate the intense interactions between the Roman and Sassanid empires. When a new ruler ascended to either throne, for example, it was the custom to send an embassy to the other court to announce the accession; ambassadors enjoyed special privileges; their baggage was exempt from custom duties, and when they reached the frontier, the government to which they were sent provided for their journey to the capital and defrayed their expenses. For important negotiations men of high rank were chosen and were distinguished as "great ambassadors" from the envoys of inferior position who were employed in matters of less importance.⁵³

⁵¹ Phil Barker, *Armies and Enemies of Imperial Rome* (West Sussex: Flexprint Ltd., 1981), 65.

⁵² Riley "Trends in Transport: Military Supply Structures as Measures of Centrality and Localism" accessed from http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/tempus/archives_files/Riley.pdf 3/10/15 @ 3:50 pm.

⁵³ J.B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 92-93.

As a result of warfare, and the subsequent diplomatic processes behind its resolution, came interplay between the nobility of the Sassanids and Romans. Men of high birth, sent on diplomatic mission, provided a catalyst for the exchange of ideas and customs. An unexpected consequence of this antagonistic relationship between the Roman and Sassanid Empires was a gradual adaptation of certain elements of Sassanid society by the Romans. This exchange was facilitated by the fact that Syriac, an Aramaic dialect, was the lingua franca, of the exchange in the eastern border provinces both Roman and Sassanid.⁵⁴ Exchanges of religious views, cultural norms, as well as royal trappings, were common. Sassanid court rituals, for example, made their way into the Roman court repertoire, as did architectural construction, form, and ornamentation, and artistic motifs. Extrapolations regarding this subject of Roman-Sassanid extra-military interactions will take place in a later chapter.

In stepping back to get a bigger picture of the interactions between the Sassanid Empire and the Roman Empire, from 226 to the end of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476, the following image is painted. The Sassanid dynasty came to be at the same time as the Roman Empire was entering a period of serious internal instability. Ardashir and his son Shapur I took advantage of this weakness, launching several campaigns against the Romans. Though neither side claimed decisive victories during this century, the Sassanids inflicted huge losses upon the Roman military, economy, and political structure.

⁵⁴ Drijvers, *Rome and the Sasanid Empire*, 449.

Conclusion

By the 4th century, after the restoration of stability in the Roman Empire, the same antagonistic relationship was in place, but both sides recognized that neither had the strength to decisively defeat the other. As a result, intense martial interactions bled over into intense diplomatic interactions. This process continued into the 5th century. Commercial interactions in border provinces further increased the interplay of both Sassanid and Roman nobility and in aggregate this all had an “Orientalizing” effect on the Roman world, more will be said about the indicators of this effect later on. Thus in times of peace and war, Roman interactions with the Sassanid Empire profoundly altered the state of affairs in the Roman world. Courtly officials donned Sassanid style garb as they attended Roman emperors who ruled the empire from palaces wearing a royal diadem, based on Sassanid designs, clad in the glittering robes of a Sassanid king, and hedged about with the pomp and etiquette of an Oriental court.⁵⁵

The following chapters will build upon this skeleton structure of Romano-Sassanid interactions and delve into causation behind warfare, the expansion of Oriental practices in Roman life, and the effect that commercial trade interactions, military spending, imperial bureaucratic and courtly costs had on the Roman economy.

⁵⁵ M.P. Charlesworth, “The Fear of the Orient in the Roman Empire,” *The Cambridge Historical Journal* 2, no. 1 (1926): 16.

Chapter 2: The Third Century Crisis and the Rise of the Sassanid Empire

Introduction

Following years of bloody and costly warring on the eastern front with the hostile and expansionary Sassanid Empire, and his botched attempt to defeat the Germanic invaders along the Rhine and Danube, Severus Alexander was assassinated in AD 235.⁵⁶ The death of Severus Alexander, the last of the Principate emperors, marked the beginning of third century crisis, a period of time in which between 20 and 30 “legitimate” emperors took the throne.

This chapter will delve into an extended analysis of this third century crisis and attempt to answer the following question: How did the Sassanid Empire contribute to or exacerbate the third century crisis? I will argue that the third century was a period of intense stress on the framework of the Roman state due, in large measure, to intense martial interactions with the Sassanid Empire. In short, the external threat of and conflict with the Sassanid Empire, made worse the internal instability of the empire such that this political crisis went on for decades not years. In order to make this argument, I will discuss the rise of a new type of emperor, “the Barracks Emperor”, the breakdown of the territorial structure of the Roman Empire itself, civil war in the Sassanid Empire, and finally, reforms of the Roman Empire at the end of the 3rd century.

⁵⁶ Valentine N. Hopkins, *The Life of Alexander Severus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 240.

The Barracks Emperors (AD 224–258)

With the death of Alexander Severus came a new string of Sassanid invasions beginning in AD 235. Ardashir, at that time, gained control over a number of key Roman fortresses in Roman Mesopotamia, among them Nisibis and Carrhae.⁵⁷ In AD 240, Ardashir managed to capture the city of Hatra, a strategic trading and commercial hub of Northern Mesopotamia.⁵⁸ Following this victory, Ardashir's son Shapur I took the throne and was faced with a Roman counterattack under the emperor Gordian III. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, this campaign ended with the destruction of Gordian's army and his death.⁵⁹ In the wake of this disaster, Philip was declared emperor and forced to pay a large indemnity to the Sassanids.

The loss of face that Philip incurred for paying the indemnity proved to be his undoing. Claimants like Decius exploited this weakness. Decius was a Roman commander that Philip had appointed to defeat the Goths along the Danube. Instead of fighting the Goths, he used the troops assigned to him to rebel, eventually killing emperor Philip in battle near modern-day Verona. He, in turn was killed in battle against the Goths in AD 251. This episode is indicative of the entire period known as the period of "Barracks Emperors". Gordian III and Decius were both examples of these so-called "Barracks Emperors" that ruled with varying degrees of failure from the death of Alexander Severus, until the rise of the emperors Valerian and Gallienus in AD 253. Barracks Emperors were so called because these were men who seized imperial authority

⁵⁷ J. Wiesehöfer, "Die Anfänge sassanidischer Westpolitik und der Untergang Hatras," *Klio* 64, no. 1 (1982): 437-47.

⁵⁸ *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis*, in "Seventh International Conference of Manichean Studies: Abstracts," Edited by Luigi Cirillo (Paper presented at seventh international conference of Manichean Studies, Dublin, Ireland, 2009), XVIII.1-16.

⁵⁹ *The Shapur Inscription on the Ka'ba-I Zardust at Naqs-I Rostam* § 6 & 7.

by virtue of their command in the army. These men were typically of the lower classes and enjoyed no legitimacy other than that afforded by the legions.

What makes this period of time so devastating was a combination of two primary factors. First, because these barracks emperors were typically men of lower birth who rose to prominence as border commanders, their wars of usurpation drew vast numbers of troops from the border zones into the interior. It was in these interior regions where many of the battles for internal supremacy were fought. This was problematic because there were fewer and fewer troops available for border security and to dissuade invasions or raids and because the supply of these armies fell to the interior regions while border regions suffered devastation from raiding and invasions. Thus, the nature of who was fighting for the throne had shifted to low born military commanders whose ambitions reduced not only the security, stability, and prosperity of border regions, but interior regions as well.⁶⁰

Second, an antagonistic Sassanid Empire replaced the relatively passive and internally weak Parthian Empire. This presented the Romans with a new and very potent enemy in the East at a time when the Roman army was stretched to its limit fighting civil wars and counterattacks against the Barbarian tribes along the Rhine and Danube. The Sassanids distracted the Roman Emperors from decisively defeating usurpers and securing power firmly and allowed the Germanic tribes in the North an extended reprieve from Roman interference in local politics. The reign of Ardashir is a good reference point for understanding both the antagonistic stance of the Sassanids towards the Romans and the effectiveness of the Sassanids at destabilizing the Roman political situation.

⁶⁰ O. Hekster, *Rome and its Empire, AD 193-284* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 16.

What was it that motivated this aggressive Sassanid policy towards the Romans in the third century? From his ascension to the throne after defeating the forces of the Parthian king Artabanus in the battle of Hormizdagan until AD 230, Ardashir set about consolidating his position among the former territories of the Parthian Empire. Once this task was complete, Ardashir's focus pivoted outward and he began attempting to secure his territories from external threats, the most prominent and immediately dangerous of whom, was the Roman Empire. His campaign trajectory supports this notion for instead of marching his whole army to raid northern Mesopotamia and advancing into Syria, Ardashir laid siege to the strategically important frontier city of Nisibis, while his cavalry engaged in quick raids and skirmishes in Syria and Cappadocia.⁶¹

Ardashir's strategy lends itself to the notion that his motivations for war with Rome were strategic and not merely quests for glory. Roman contemporary sources contradict this and nominally point to the Sassanid Persian aspirations to "restore and reunite the whole empire [the Achaemenid Empire] as it had once been" as *casus belli*.⁶² In arguing this point, Roman authorities were able to perpetuate the line that Ardashir had not accomplished his objectives and that what looked like a defeat was actually a Roman victory. However, the notion of Ardashir's war as geopolitical is further reinforced by Ardashir's decision not to press his attack into Syria after defeating a Roman army that had formed the right wing of emperor Alexander Severus's counterattack. With the Roman Empire knocked off balance, Ardashir withdrew back to Sassanid lands, content with the damage he had done both materially, in term of Roman troops and fortresses, but

⁶¹ Gustavo Destro, *Sassanian Motivation for War Against Rome in the Third Century*, (British Columbia: Simon Fraser University Press, 2014), 3.

⁶² Herodian, *Roman History* VI.ii.2-3.

also strategically. Ardashir helped create a serious succession crisis that perpetuated until the end of the third century.

Breakdown of the Territorial Structure: The Gallic and Palmyrene Empires (AD 258–274)

With the Roman Empire embroiled in internal warfare, a result of the rapid succession of Barracks Emperors, Ardashir and his successors kept up their attacks on the Eastern frontiers. In AD 260, king Shapur I defeated the emperor Valerian and his army at Edessa.⁶³ After this devastating defeat, Shapur went on to occupy cities in Syria, Cilicia, and Cappadocia. According several sources, he even occupied the key Roman city of Antioch for a time.⁶⁴ This was a high water mark for the Sassanids against the Roman Empire. Not only were Sassanid armies defeating Roman armies, but they were also capturing important chokepoints along the Roman-Sassanid frontier. Additionally, this marked the genesis for Romano-Sassanid religious interaction, as many Christians were absorbed into the Sassanid Empire.

At first, Shapur I's rule was marked by the spread of Christianity and relative religious tolerance, but the spread of Christianity eroded the power and legitimacy of the Zoroastrian priesthood. This led Shapur I to change his religious stance to something decidedly more intolerant. The king affirmed imperial links to the Zoroastrian priesthood and created anti-Christian laws of intolerance. This phenomenon of intolerance for the sake of imperial religious legitimacy was reflected in the caesoropapist policies of the Roman state in the fourth and fifth centuries. Sassanid religious developments of this

⁶³ K. Strobel, "Jüdisches Patriarchat, Rabbinentum und Priesterdynastie von Emesa: Historische Phänomene innerhalb des Imperium Romanum der Kaiserzeit," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period Volume Four*, translated by Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

⁶⁴ ŠKZ § 10-17

time had profound effects on future Roman internal religious policies as well as on future religious conflict with the Sassanids.⁶⁵

Zoroastrianism was an ancient monotheistic Iranian religion that rose to prominence in the days of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. The religion posits that there are two opposing forces in the world: *Spenta Mainyu* or “progressive mentality” and *Angra Mainyu* “destructive mentality” all presided over by one god, *Ahura Mazda* “Illuminating Wisdom”.⁶⁶ Ardashir and his successors did their best to coopt Zoroastrianism as a tool of legitimacy. For example, in a ceremonial rock carving at Naqsh-e-Rostam, Ardashir is portrayed on horseback standing on top of the dead body of Artabanus. *Ahura Mazda* mirrors Ardashir as he, also on horseback, is lording over the body of the evil spirit, *Ahremen*, and handing the king the symbol of sovereignty.⁶⁷ This stylized representation of Ardashir’s victory over Artabanus indicates both the primacy of *Ahura Mazda* and by extension Zoroastrianism in the Sassanid Empire and its use as a tool of Sassanid imperial legitimacy.

Valerian’s capture by the Sassanids during his campaign in AD 260 created a central power vacuum that allowed for portions of the Roman Empire to begin breaking away. For example, Septimius Odaenathus, a dynast of Palmyra, carved out a large portion of the Eastern provinces as part of a “Palmyrene Empire”.⁶⁸ Ironically, Odaenathus may be responsible for halting the Sassanid threat, at least temporarily. After

⁶⁵ Paul, K., *Von Nero bis Konstantin dem Grossen, Politische und soziale Aspekte einer kirchengeschichtlichen Wende* (Frankfurt: Peacock D.P.S.,1983), 108-112.

⁶⁶ Richard Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World’s Religions* (NY: Oneworld Publications, 2004), xii.

⁶⁷ Touraj Daryaee, *Sassanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: Tauris, 2009), 5.

⁶⁸ Grant, *The Collapse and Recovery of the Roman Empire*, 20.

his defeat of Valerian, Shapur I attempted to advance into Anatolia but was pushed back by a combination of local Roman defense forces and attacks by Odaenathus.⁶⁹

Likewise, the Gallic Empire, created by Postumus in AD 260 was created as a result of that same central power vacuum. The Gallic Empire was, in many ways, still a “Roman Empire” in that it had its own praetorian guard, consuls elected each year, and most likely an independent senate.⁷⁰ These breakaway empires reflected more so the need for immediate local security, rather than a shift from the Roman Empire to a series of successor states. More specifically, the Gallic Empire’s case foreshadows the response of Gallic local elites to protracted macro-level instability in the Roman world in the fifth century.

The political situation of the Roman Empire was most dire at this point. Fortunately, a new string of tough emperors took power such as Claudius II Gothicus who managed to defeat a Gothic invasion in 269 as well as recover *Hispania* from the Gallic Empire. His successor, Aurelian continued in his footsteps defeating invasions by the Visigoths, the Vandals and the Sassanids. This period was characterized by a sequence of desperately needed victories, without which, the Roman Empire may not have survived. Claudius and Aurelian both represented a second wind of Roman imperial leadership and by AD 274 the Roman Empire had been reunited into a single political entity. But what was the result of this period of political instability?

Having stepped back from the proverbial abyss, the Roman Empire was severely wounded. Protracted internal warfare as well as long periods of border and interior raids

⁶⁹ *Sibylline Oracles*, in *The Sibylline Oracles*, translated by Milton S. Terry (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1918), XIII.155-171.

⁷⁰ J.F.Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire: Separatism and Continuity in the North-western Provinces of the Roman Empire* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1987), 24-30.

by both the Northern tribes as well as the Sassanids left Rome's economy in a terrible state. Once-prosperous cities were destroyed, their populations dispersed, and whole areas of agricultural production laid waste. Examples of the extent of this devastation were the sackings of Nisibis and Antioch c. AD 238 and c. 253 respectively by Shapur I.⁷¹ Though both cities were regained, these sackings stripped them of capital and thus the Romans were forced to rebuild both a major trade hub (Nisibis) and a major military staging area (Antioch). The Roman authorities did not have the revenue adequate for these and other rebuilding projects, which led to hyperinflation. Inflation had always been an issue of the Roman Empire as no form of public debt issuance existed for meeting expense obligations. However, this inflationary tendency rapidly accelerated in the 3rd century. From the time of Augustus to Gordian III the weight of a silver *denarius* had dropped from 3.64 to 2.1 grams with silver content itself dropping from 3.52 to 1.0 gram.⁷² By AD 268 there was only 0.5 percent silver in the *denarius*, leading to its discontinuation as a reliable medium of exchange.

The annual pay of a legionary soldier in *denarii* can also provide a metric for understanding the level of coinage debasement. At the beginning of the 3rd century under the rule of Septimius Severus annual legionary pay was somewhere between 400 and 600 *denarii*, source evidence is unclear as to the exact amount. By the reign of Maximian Thrax in the mid 230s, this annual sum had increased to between 1,200 and 1,800 *denarii*. By the reign of Diocletian at the end of the 3rd century, annual legionary pay had reached

⁷¹ R.N. Frye, "The Political History of Iran under the Sassanians," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Edited by Bayne Fisher et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 124-25.

⁷² Richard Duncan-Jones, *The Economy of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 374.

between 7,500 and almost 12,400.⁷³ Not only had the pay of an individual soldier increased 20 times over, but the reported number of legions had also increased in that same period from 33 to 68 legions with an estimated increase of annual burdens for the legions increasing from 61,400,000 *denarii* to 419,850,000 *denarii*.⁷⁴ In short, the burdens of the state, specifically the costs of the army in this case, ballooned in the third century as a result of internal strife, barbarian incursions, and warfare with the Sassanids.

The erosion of the Roman imperial coin economy, coupled with the dangers of travel, disrupted much of Rome's internal trade network. Travel became hazardous during this time as a result of increased banditry and raiding from barbarians and internal usurpers. This led to increased localism and a resultant decline of taxes, duties, and customs levied by the Roman imperial authority. This local level instability also led to the rise of small walled cities typical of the Medieval Ages. Archaeological evidence suggests that there was a departure from the sprawling, open, proto-industrial cities of early antiquity.⁷⁵ Though the direct cause of the decline of domestic trade was local level instability, warfare with the Sassanids was a contributory factor. The stripping of border region garrisons to fill the depleted ranks of Rome's Eastern legions left power vacuums in many Roman provinces. Without military security movement around the empire slowed to a crawl.

⁷³ Prodromídis Pródromos-Ioánnis, "Another View on an Old Inflation: Environment and Policies in the Roman Empire up to Diocletian's Price Edict," (NY: Centre of Planning and Economic Research, 2006), 13.

⁷⁴ Figures are averages of high and low attestations from column 4 "Estimated annual burden for the legions (in million *denarii*) in Table 1 of footnote #20

⁷⁵ Ferdinand Lot, *End of the Ancient World and the Beginnings of the Middle Ages* (NY: Harper Torchbooks Printing, 1961)

The deleterious effect of protracted political instability of the third century fell hardest on the western portion of the Roman Empire. Because warfare between the Romans and the Sassanids was localized to the Mesopotamian and Armenia frontiers, with some cases of Sassanid armies penetrating farther into Roman lands, much of the East was spared the devastations of foreign incursions. This allowed the East to maintain a high level of urbanization as well as to preserve a good portion of its agricultural base. Meanwhile, the absence of adequate frontier garrisons in the West, as a result of revolts by generals and a shifting of soldiers to the East, left the western provinces hopelessly exposed and vulnerable to raiding. The Sassanids were a direct military threat to the East and Roman responses to this threat had exacerbating effects on the existing problems of the West.

Civil War in the Sassanid Empire: A Decade of Roman Reunification (AD 274-284)

As was mentioned previously in this chapter, the Palmyrene Empire broke away from the Roman Empire as a result of internal weakness and the pressing need for local security. The breakaway Palmyrene Empire had, ironically, proved to be a godsend as it provided a key buffer zone between the Romans and the Sassanids until the assassination of its emperor, Odaenathus in AD 267.⁷⁶ After Odaenathus's death, the Palmyrene Empire was thrown into a period of confusion, which allowed the emperor Aurelian to march East unopposed until he reached Antioch. Once there, the emperor won victories at Daphne and Emesa.⁷⁷ Palmyra fell within the year and Aurelian then turned west reconquering the Gallic Empire.

⁷⁶ Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 268.

⁷⁷ Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 272.

By the time the Roman Empire had been reunited, the Sassanid Empire was showing signs of weakness. Bahram II's reign from AD 274-293 was marked by considerable internal weakness, and against this backdrop, the peace of AD 299 can be understood. The Roman emperor Carus, in AD 282, invaded the Sassanid Empire and had remarkable success. He drove deep into Mesopotamia and occupied the Sassanid capital Ctesiphon. Carus's death put an end to this advance and the Romans retreated, leaving the Sassanids to reconquer Mesopotamia.⁷⁸ This decade proved to be a key moment in the third century as Sassanid weakness allowed the Romans to reassert dominance in the East and set the stage for Diocletian's rebuilding of the empire.

Diocletian and the Reformation of the Roman Empire: (AD 284–305)

This was the Roman Empire that Diocletian inherited upon taking the throne in AD 284, a land still burning with the fire of Barbarian raids and Sassanid campaigns and rife with potential usurpers. Finally, however, the pendulum had swung in the Romans' favor, as the Sassanids faced their own bout of internal dissent. Diocletian's recipe for successful reformation of the Roman Empire stood on three legs. First, Diocletian established a tetrarchical system of rule whereby four emperors would be in place, each having responsibility for a quarter of the empire. This system built on the advantages of such a system that developed organically with the Gallic and Palmyrene Empires. Smaller governed units gave the Roman Empire the ability to respond to multiple threats, an attribute that had been lacking under the old Principate system. Also, this division of imperial responsibilities left the emperorship more robust.

⁷⁸ Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (London: Brill, 1968), 3.

The drawback was that this created a multitude of new positions in the imperial court and bureaucracy, placing a greater strain on the Roman economy. Alongside the vast expansion of military spending of Diocletian, as indicated in our discussion of military expenditure figures earlier in this chapter, this led to a fourfold increase in state expenditures on imperial courts. Thus administrative reform came at the cost of antagonistic centralization and a vast expansion of the empire's civil and martial arms, increasing the expenses of the state.

Second, Diocletian campaigned successfully against the Sassanids in the 280s and even sacked Ctesiphon in AD 299.⁷⁹ This was important because the resultant peace treaty that Diocletian signed with the Sassanids became a robust peace that lasted until the mid 330s. Even though Diocletian had won a resounding victory over the Sassanids, he imposed moderate concessions on the Sassanid king. The principle points of the treaty were as follows: the Romans gained control over Intelene, Sophene, Arzanene, Cordyene, and Zabdicene, the Tigris marked the boundary between the Romans and Sassanids, the fortress of Zintha marked the edge of Armenian territory, and Nisibis became the only city for commercial transactions between the Sassanids and Romans. The concessions imposed on the Sassanids under this treaty were not exorbitant and as a result the Sassanids were not predisposed to break the treaty. Diocletian, with his eastern border finally secured was able to go about consolidating his domestic position and reassert dominance over key Germanic tribes and confederations. This ended the long period of Sassanid dominance along the Eastern frontier.

⁷⁹ Pat Southern, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine* (NY: Routledge, 1997), 360-61.

Third, Diocletian created a string of new economic policies such as the imposition of requisitions in kind as opposed to taxes paid in coin. In order to accurately determine these requisition rates, Diocletian also went about an extensive census of the empire assessing the value of labor and land of each landowner, creating economic units of *capita* and *iuga*.⁸⁰ He also created a new coinage system that relied on five coins: the *solidus* (gold coin), the *argenteus* (silver), the *follis* (copper with silver), the *radiates* (copper) and *laureatus* B (copper).⁸¹ In order to protect the vital functions of the state Diocletian also created hereditary professions. Peasants were tied to the land, while soldiers' children were forced into military service.⁸²

While stability was finally regained under Diocletian, the cost proved tremendous. From a martial perspective, the rise of the Sassanid threat was followed by an unprecedented expansion of Rome's eastern military presence. Operating under an assumption that the late 2nd century ratio of legionary to auxiliary infantry [1:1] held firm in the early 3rd century, then the on paper size of legionary forces in the East would have numbered roughly 65,000 legionaries, 65,000 auxiliary infantry, and several units of cavalry and other support troops whose total would have been in the 10,000s. All told, this would have constituted about a third of overall combat effective troops of the Roman Empire, somewhere between 150,000 and 175,000 troops total. This third of the Roman Army was deployed to a relative small area, the Mesopotamian frontier. This left the remainder of Rome's troops to be spread over the rest of the Roman Empire.

⁸⁰ Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 20.

⁸¹ David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay: AD 180-395* (NY: Routledge, 2005), 392-393.

⁸² Michel Christol and Daniel Nony, *Rome et son Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 241.

Given the unequal distribution of troops across the empire, the Western provinces were contributing massive amounts of local wealth for upkeep, but were reaping little of the benefits of a larger military. These were the provinces that, arguably, suffered the most from the third century crisis. They faced external threats from barbarian tribes as well as internal seizures and requisitions of in-kind provisions and manpower by usurpers. Thus, the third century marked a stark delineation of fortunes for different Roman regions. The Roman East, ironically due to the presence of the Sassanid threat along its borders, reaped the benefits of military expansion and the nature of frontier warfare in the east left vast areas of the east untouched by war and still economically potent. The western provinces, by contrast, were devastated by external invasion and internal dissent.

Also under the rule of Diocletian, the nature of the Roman court began to change. In order to bring the disparate elements of the Roman imperial government under tighter control, Diocletian adopted a number of changes to the imperial court that created a “patrimonial” palace-based bureaucracy.⁸³ In doing so, Diocletian created a system whereby the imperial court was the “clearing house” for imperial decision-making. Unfortunately, Diocletian could not be part and parcel to all decisions and this meant a reliance on a rigid caste system of jockeying subordinates who advised the emperor with varying degrees of trustworthiness:

Four of five men gather and form a plan to deceive the emperor, then tell him what he must approve. The emperor, who is shut up in his palace, cannot know the truth. He is

⁸³ Rowland Smith, “The Imperial Court of the Late Roman Empire,” in *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies*, edited by A.J.S. Spawforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 161.

*forced to know only what these men tell him; he appoints judges who ought not to be appointed, and removes from public office men whom he ought to keep in office.*⁸⁴

This system bears a striking resemblance to the Sassanid court system. In the Sassanid system those men of high status politically, economically, or religiously played advisory roles to the Sassanid kings and were relied on to carry out his orders. One marker of strong kings of the Sassanid Empire was his ability to circumvent entrenched nobles with new men and outsiders such as eunuchs.⁸⁵ Diocletian followed the Sassanid lead by incorporating eunuchs into the imperial court system, relying on them primarily to hold two key positions, *cubicularii*; chamberlain, and *praepositus sacricubiculi*; the grand chamberlain.⁸⁶

Conclusion

What changed at the onset of the third century crisis was the rise of Ardashir and the Sassanid dynasty out of the ashes of the Parthian Empire. Ardashir's rise to power marked the end of almost a century of severe Parthian internal weakness brought on by none other than the Romans themselves.⁸⁷ The Sassanids, within the space of a few years, became the predominant enemy of the Roman Empire, and a frontier that had been important but never herculean to defend, became a serious battleground for a conflict that lasted, almost without interruption, from AD 226 to AD 299. The case of Alexander Severus's campaign indicates that this new threat shocked the Roman system and stretched traditional equilibriums to the breaking point. Thus the rise of Sassanid Empire was a necessary cause for the onset of the Third Century Crisis and a contributory cause

⁸⁴ Smith, *Imperial Court*, 162.

⁸⁵ Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, XVIII.v.6.

⁸⁶ Shaun Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2008), 38.

⁸⁷ See the Trajan campaigns against Parthia as evidence.

to the decades of turmoil that followed. In order to respond to this threat as well as internal revolt and barbarian incursions, the Roman state was forced to vastly increase its military spending, all the while relying on a tax base that was shrinking further and further with each year of instability. A string of “Barracks Emperors”, who came to power at the expense of border security, one by one proved incapable of balancing imperial attention to internal threats with the external threat of the barbarians and the Sassanids. With the failure of each of these emperors, a little bit of the old Principate system was washed away. The break up of the Roman state in the 260s accelerated the erosion of this old Principate system.

By the rule of Diocletian, the Roman Empire was a vastly different place. Increased centralization, the proliferation of a companion field army attached to the person of the emperor, and the rising rigidity of Roman society were all markers of this change. Furthermore, Diocletian appears to have been adapting Sassanid court practices such as the use of court eunuchs and creating a palace based patrimonial governmental structure. In doing so, Diocletian replaced the Principate with the Dominate. There is evidence of several other areas of Roman adaptation of better Sassanid practices. For example, one can see these changes in the senatorial records of Alexander Severus’s campaign against the Sassanids. The record stated “[the Romans] killed 10,000 mailed horsemen, whom they call *Clibanarians*, in battle and equipped [their] men with their armor”.⁸⁸ The Romans not only recognized the military power of such troops but they also took steps to arm themselves in similar fashion. More than anything, when looking back at the Diocletian’s reign, internal revolt was still an imminent threat, the barbarians

⁸⁸ *Scriptores Historiae Augustae: Severus Alexander*, in *Historia Augusta, Vol.*, translated by David Magie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), 56.2 & 5-8.

of the Rhine and Danube frontier were still threatening, but one piece of the puzzle had fallen into place, Roman supremacy in the East. The weakness of the Sassanid Empire in the last couple of decades of the third century, it would appear, provided Diocletian the breathing room he needed to reassert imperial control and promote stability.

Chapter 3: Romano-Sassanid 4th Century Relations and Tensions

Introduction

As we ended the previous chapter, the Roman Emperor Diocletian was attempting to put the pieces of the Roman Empire back together. As his eastern policy indicated, Diocletian understood the need to stabilize the frontier with the Sassanids and forge a robust and lasting peace. Instead of imposing an embarrassing and potentially destabilizing peace treaty upon the Sassanids, Diocletian sent a high official, Sicoirus Probus, as ambassador to negotiate a balanced treaty. The result was a modest peace, one devoid of serious secessions of territories or payment of indemnity.⁸⁹ This was a result of Diocletian's policy in the East: to not overexert the capacities of the empire, to refrain from expansion, and to be content with a restoration of the borders that had been fixed by the Eastern policy of the Severi.⁹⁰

With the signing of this treaty came a new face in the 4th century of Romano-Sassanid relations. It was no longer characterized by unceasing warfare, but rather by long stretches of amicable peace punctuated by shorter periods of conflict. A dynamic change occurred where the Sassanids and Romans began to interact in societal spheres beyond warfare. This military and non-military interplay between the Romans and the Sassanids in the 4th century will be the focus of this chapter. In doing so, I will attempt to answer a two part question: what were some of the non-military changes to the Roman

⁸⁹ E. Winter, "Handel und Wirtschaft in sāsānidisch – (ost) – römischen Vertägen und Abkommen," in *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals*, translated by B. Dignas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 603-605

⁹⁰ Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 126.

Empire brought on by the Sassanid Empire in the 4th century and, more importantly, how did those changes contribute to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century?

Constantine's Reforms: Civil War, Roman Court Life, and State Religion (AD 312-338)

In AD 305 Diocletian and his co-emperor, Maximian, abdicated and were succeeded by the emperors Constantius and Galerius. Unfortunately, after a year, Constantius died and his son Constantine I was proclaimed emperor. This prompted another period of civil war that only ended in AD 316 after Constantine had dispatched all remaining Augusti and Caesars. Part of this civil war included a battle between Constantine and Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in AD 312. The popular narrative has it that Constantine saw a vision of the Chi-Rho the evening before the battle. Our contemporary source of the battle, Eusebius, describes the event, saying that Constantine looked up and saw a cross of light along with the Greek words *Εν Τούτῳ Νίκα*. The literal meaning of which is “In this sign, [you shall] conquer”. Eusebius’s account has long faced criticism for romanticizing Constantine’s conversion to Christianity.⁹¹ Whether the event happened or not, the Chi-Rho began to appear on coins c. AD 317, which indicates that Constantine had adopted a new imperial symbol, one of Christian origin. He went further in bringing Christianity to the empire; he converted to Christianity and, in his 313 Edict of Milan, gave Christians and other religious groups the right to open and free observance and practice of their worship.⁹²

⁹¹ Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 41.

⁹² Lactantius “Edict of Milan” in *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, translated by Dana Munro (Philadelphia: Routledge, 1898), 29-30.

It is easy in retrospect to consider this the pivotal moment in Roman imperial adaptation of Christianity as a state orthodoxy but the reality is slightly more complicated. Constantine appears to have included the legend of Sol Invictus in coinage as well as the statuettes of standard bearers in the reliefs of the Arch of Constantine.⁹³ Taken in conjunction with coinage that appeared at the same time with images of the Chi-Rho, it can be inferred that Constantine relied on a number of deities during his reign for legitimacy. This makes sense when considering that Constantine did not convert to Christianity until his death.⁹⁴ Therefore, the Roman Empire had not become Christian as of yet, but had taking its first tentative steps in that direction. It seems strange that the Sassanids did not capitalize upon this period of civil war in the Roman Empire to reassert themselves on the Eastern frontier.

After the successes of Aurelian, Carus, and Diocletian (along with his son Galerius), the Sassanid Empire underwent a few decades of serious internal turmoil. Several kings came and went after the peace of AD 299 and it was only in AD 337, almost forty years after the peace made with Diocletian that a strong king took the throne and provoked war with the Romans, Shapur II.⁹⁵ This period of four decades can thus be seen as an important reprieve for the Roman state to rebuild its institutions and regain some internal cohesion.

One of the largest reforms of Constantine during this period was the creation of a new capital Constantinople. This was a serious political maneuver as Constantine's

⁹³ Jonathon Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 115.

⁹⁴ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, in *Life of Constantine*, translated by Stuart Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 4.62.4.

⁹⁵ Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia* (London and NY: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 17.

relocation of imperial power farther East had two profound effects. First, Constantine managed to cut off the old Roman aristocracy from the locus of power and in doing so he centered the whole process of imperial appointments on the person of the emperor.⁹⁶ Second, he shifted the whole focus of imperial power much farther East, which had the effect of distancing the Western portion of the Empire from influence and patronage. It was the Eastern portion of the empire that benefitted from this change. The whole move is best summed up in the words of Eusebius:

*The commanders of the whole army, the comites, and all the ruling class, who were bound by law to pay homage to the emperor first, filed past at the required times and saluted the emperor on the bier (platform) with genuflections after his death in the same way as when he was alive. After these chief persons the members of the Senate and all those of official rank came and did the same, and after them crowds of people of all ranks with their wives and children came to look.*⁹⁷

Under Constantine intricate rules for promotion developed and formally designated sub-units proliferated, such as the "Sacred Wardrobe" (*scrinium sacrae vestis*), the palace "Lamplighters" (*lampadarii*), the "Commissars" (*mensores*) responsible for supplying and billeting the court on its journeys away from the palace, and the *scrinium dispositionum*, a unit dedicated to the creating time tables of the ruler's daily business.⁹⁸ Constantine also enacted imperial patronage for the building of key churches across the empire and granted bishops and some priests exemptions from undertaking magistracies and other expensive services for their local community.⁹⁹ In summation Constantine: pushed through reforms that elevated the position of emperor to a deeply venerated status, created a rigid administrative and bureaucratic structure, and

⁹⁶ Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay*, 386.

⁹⁷ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 67.1.

⁹⁸ A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: A Social, Economic & Administrative Survey* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964), 567, 582, 578.

⁹⁹ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 3.31.2-3.

began a process of linking the Christian church with the Roman state. While these reforms may appear sudden and revolutionary, many of them were continuations of policies of past emperors. For example, Diocletian was the emperor who first began establishing the emperor as a venerated individual secluded from the general population. One decided break that Constantine made with Diocletian's succession policies was that he firmly placed all rights of inheritance in the hands of members of the Constantine dynasty and royal household. These steps taken by Constantine put the Roman Empire along a new path of totalitarianism and social rigidity that is reminiscent of its Eastern neighbor, the Sassanid Empire.

The Sassanids had also developed a rigid caste system divided into four classes: *atorbanan* (priests), *arteshtaran* (warriors), *dabiran* (secretaries), and *vasteryoshan-hookheshan* (commoners).¹⁰⁰ Membership in a class was based on birth, however, some exceptionally talented individuals could move up to a higher social stratum. It should be noted that the top three strata of this society were professionalized classes, in the employ of the state. Like the Roman Empire, the Sassanid state was religiously diverse and a variety of religions could be found within its borders: Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Mazdakism, and others. Zoroastrianism was far and away the religion with the largest number of adherents and the greatest legitimacy in Sassanid society. Some scholars have long argued that Zoroastrianism was a state religion while others argued that, although all kings recognized and honored Ahura-Mazda, and Iran was "zoroasterianized" through Sassanid royal patronage, it was never a state religion. Given

¹⁰⁰ Abdolhossein Zarinkoob, *Ruzgaran: tarikh-i Iran az aghz ta saqut saltnat Pahlvi, in Rome's Enemies: Parthians and Sassanid Persians*, Translated by Peter Wilcox and Angus McBride (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 201.

the prominent position that the Zoroastrian priestly class held in society and the salience of fire construction during most periods, it can be concluded that Zoroastrianism had its ebbs and flows in importance.¹⁰¹ At times it was state orthodoxy, at others, a rallying banner of revolt. Evidence of Sassanid royal support for Zoroastrianism and the Zoroastrian priestly class can be seen in the rights and privileges given to the Zoroastrian priestly class and royal patronage of many religious sites, new temples, and other religious architecture.¹⁰² The Sassanid court also featured a pre-eminence of the royal family, and extensive genealogical surveys in contemporary sources of family members indicate the importance of lineage for members of the royal court.¹⁰³

After the emperors of the Roman Empire became more and more intertwined with the Christian Church, a new point of friction appeared between the Romans and Sassanids. Religion became a new *casus belli* for both powers and this led to, among other reasons, a renewal of conflict between them. This renewed period of conflict would be characterized by many of the themes of previous wars but one new addition was religion as a cause for war.

The Mid 4th Century: Renewed Hostilities (AD 338-364)

Hostilities eventually broke out again in AD 336 after border incursions into Armenia by prince Narseh, Shapur II's son. As Armenia had been a Christian kingdom since AD 301, religious motivations might have played a role in the war. This notion is reinforced by our source Eusebius, who wrote that Constantine had sent a letter to Shapur

¹⁰¹ Drijvers, *Confrontation and Coexistence*, 444-45.

¹⁰² See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2001) for examples.

¹⁰³ Josef Wiesehöfer, "King, Court, and Royal Representation in the Sasanian Empire," in *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies*, Edited by A.J.S. Spawforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64.

II asserting his patronage over the Christian subjects of the Sassanid Empire.¹⁰⁴ Constantine never managed to launch his campaign against the Sassanids as he died in AD 337.¹⁰⁵

According to Festus, war began in earnest during the reign of Constantine II, who fought against the Sassanids with varying and indecisive outcomes. The two powers fought nine battles. Festus mentions that the Romans were victorious at the battles of Narasara, Singara and the first battle of Sisara. The second battle of Sisara was a Roman defeat.¹⁰⁶ Festus also goes into some detail about important sieges such as the siege, and eventual loss, of Amida and the three sieges of Nisibis. Festus's account reveals several important themes of warfare between the Romans and the Sassanids at this time. First, there were quite a large number of battles. Second, the mix of successes and failures indicate that the war was very indecisive. Third, the main focuses of sieges were economically and strategically important trade cities in Northern Mesopotamia.¹⁰⁷ Thus, religious motivations could have played one role in the cause for warfare in conjunction with trade concerns.

Trade had always been an important consideration between the Roman and Sassanid Empires. As part of the peace accords of AD 299, trade between the Roman and Sassanid Empires was reserved to one city, Nisibis. In limiting trade to a Roman occupied city, the Romans were able to collect transaction and customs duties while the Sassanid merchants were forced to pay 25% as opposed to the traditional 12.5% duty of

¹⁰⁴ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 4.9.f.

¹⁰⁵ Garth Fowden, "The Last Days of Constantine: Oppositional Versions and Their Influence," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 84, no. 1 (1994): 146-48.

¹⁰⁶ Festus *Breviarium rerum gestarum populi Romani*, translated by Jennifer A. Meka (Buffalo: Canisius College, 2001), XXVII.

¹⁰⁷ Dignas & Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 89.

the selling price.¹⁰⁸ Against this backdrop of trade competition, the three sieges of Nisibis are quite understandable. Thus, war with the Sassanids had both commercial and religious elements.

Constantius II managed to grind the Sassanids into a stalemate, but not without substantial losses. He also managed to defeat an Alamanni army that invaded at the same time. Unfortunately, he was not able to successfully deal with internal rivalries as indicated by his death at the hands of Constans at Aquileia in AD 340. Civil war proliferated across the empire as members of the house of Constantine vied for power. Constans and Constantius managed to defeat the Sassanids at the Siege of Singara in AD 348 and subdue revolts of Christian heretics, the Donatists, in Africa, but were unable to stop Magnentius from usurping the throne in the west. Magnentius killed Constans but later died by his own hand after his defeat at the battle of Mons Seleucia in AD 353.

By the 360s the Sassanids firmly held the upper hand over the Romans. They had pushed the Roman frontier further up into Northern Mesopotamia and contested the client state status of Armenia. Shapur II apparently took this moment to solidify his gains and proposed a peace.¹⁰⁹ Instead of accepting a peace treaty, the emperor Julian (AD 361-363) embarked on his own campaign against the Sassanids. Ammianus Marcellinus posited that Julian was embarking upon the expedition as revenge for Sassanid aggression in the years before his ascension to the throne.¹¹⁰ Libanius likewise stated that the

¹⁰⁸ N. Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities, and Civilians in Roman Syria* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 213-218.

¹⁰⁹ Libanius, *Oration*, in *Centre Libanios*. translated by P.L. Malosse (Paris: CRISES Research Center, 2014), XII.76-77.

¹¹⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae XXII.xii.1-2*.

campaign was meant to punish the Sassanids for recent aggression.¹¹¹ These two attestations lend weight to this argument and also basic pragmatism would make such a campaign understandable. As Julian had only recently come to power, he required a mode of justifying his rule. He had made a name for himself as a military commander, as indicated by his victory at the Battle of Strasbourg attested by Ammianus, therefore war with the Sassanids was an rational choice. It was even more appealing because Julian's acceptance of unfavorable terms of peace with Shapur II could have had destabilizing and delegitimizing effects on his rule.

While his motives were understandable, the tactics and strategy of Julian during the campaign proved to be his undoing. Instead of meeting the Sassanids in the field, Julian embarked on an invasion into the heart of Mesopotamia to capture Ctesiphon.¹¹² The campaign was, in short, a disaster. While the Romans enjoyed early successes, Julian's tactical miscalculations, for example he burned his fleet of supply ships as a "tactical necessity" instead of leaving them afloat for supply and transport purposes, led to a precarious position where the Roman army was cornered in its camp and running low on supplies.¹¹³ Julian was mortally wounded and his successor Jovian was forced, for the sake of his life and the lives of the men of the army, to sign an embarrassing peace treaty that ceded much territory to the Sassanids and forced the Romans to pay a large indemnity.¹¹⁴ This treaty proved to be Jovian's undoing as he was overthrown and killed in AD 364 only a year after ascending to power.

¹¹¹ Libanius, *Oration*, XVII.18.19.

¹¹² Glen Warren Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (London: Routledge, 1978), 110.

¹¹³ Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, 232.

¹¹⁴ Ammianus, *Res Gestae* XXV.xii.13.

Late Fourth Century Developments: Diplomacy and Trade, The Battle of Adrianople, and Division of the Empire (AD 364-395)

As part of the peace treaty that was signed between Jovian and Shapur II, the Romans ceded all territory East of the Tigris including the important trade cities Singara and Nisibis. Trade, as was mentioned earlier, was an important consideration for the Romans when approaching eastern policy. A contemporary description of the Sassanids will indicate why such trade considerations were important:

*...[the Persians] are said to have everything in abundance, for the nations neighbouring their territory are given the opportunity to engage in trade and therefore they themselves also seem to have plenty of everything.*¹¹⁵

Nisibis was, after the deaths of Julian and Jovian, still the only city of commercial exchange, but after the peace treaty with Jovian, it fell under Sassanid control.¹¹⁶¹¹⁷

Ammianus Marcellinus provides an account of the exodus of Roman subjects from the city and how its capture by the Sassanid sent shock waves through the empire.¹¹⁸ Thus victory in war for the Sassanids meant a recapturing of a more favorable trade position with the Romans.

These frequent wars, be they for trade, religious concerns, or merely prestige, were draining on the Roman economy, as they had been in the 3rd century. With the loss of favorable trade relations with the Sassanids, the Roman vehicle for taxation was called on, in the fourth just as the third century, to squeeze more revenue from the average taxpayer.¹¹⁹ This view is central to the prevailing high taxation model but I will not argue that taxes rose continuously. Rather, I argue that the gap between the potential surplus of

¹¹⁵ Kai Broderson, *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* (NY: Brill, 2015), 19.

¹¹⁶ Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 212.

¹¹⁷ Ammianus, *Res Gestae* XXV.vii.18.

¹¹⁸ Ammianus, *Res Gestae* XXV.ix.1-12.

¹¹⁹ Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, 468-69.

the average tax payer and the collection of that surplus as tax revenue closed over a period of time to the point where the Roman state could not feasibly squeeze any more revenue out of the lower classes. The loss of customs and duties levied from merchants in the East also proved to be a contributory cause to the empire's late 4th century financial troubles.

Just as it was unfeasible to extract more taxes from the lower classes, so too it was politically unfeasible to raise taxes for the privileged economic elites. Though they held the largest surplus of potential revenue, these privileged economic elites coincided sharply with the privileged political elites as well. No emperor could therefore conceive of squeezing the elites for fear of revolt.¹²⁰ Unfortunately, heavy taxation on the commoners had the effect of forcing lower class members to tie themselves to local elites who could provide them with day-to-day border security from outside incursions and tax collectors. Proto-feudalistic civil society began to develop as a result of this, particularly in the Western provinces that were more rural, exposed to barbarian raids, and poorer than the urbanized provinces of the East.

Trying to balance taxation was just one high wire act among many that the Roman emperors were forced to address. Valens, in AD 378, unfortunately fell dramatically from the wire, figuratively plummeting to his death during the Battle of Adrianople. While Valens was marshaling his forces at Antioch to mount a campaign against the Sassanids, a group of Goths entered Roman territory under a white flag. These Goths were attempting to escape the onslaught of Hunnic expansionism and beseeched the Roman court for land on which to settle. This could not have come at a worse time, as Valens

¹²⁰ Hartmut Ziche, "Making Late Roman Taxpayers Pay: Imperial Government Strategies and Practice" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

was attempting to expel Sassanid forces from Armenia and reinstall the favored Roman candidate for the kingship of Armenia, Papas.¹²¹ Armenia represented both a religious and strategic issue for the Romans. Not only was the imposition of a non-Christian ruler over Armenia a blow to Roman imperial legitimacy as the defenders of all Christians, as indicated by the letter between Constantine and Shapur II, but also it left the fortresses of the Mesopotamian frontier exposed.¹²² Because Valens did not have the men and material ready in the Balkans to fight the Goths and because he saw an opportunity to obtain some hardy troops and revenue from a taxable Gothic farming population in the Balkans, he arranged for them to stay within the empire.¹²³ Sources are scant regarding the series of events that led to the revolt of the Goths, but it seems that either through mismanagement or corruption supplies were not sent in adequate amounts to placate the Goths who in turn began devastating the provinces along the Danube.

Valens was forced to return westward, hastily gathering up men to counter this threat. Much like in the past, even when war was not actively being waged between the Romans and Sassanids, the Sassanids preoccupied the Roman emperors, such that they were left vulnerable to other threats. Valens was forced to react quickly to the Gothic advances but, either through his own mismanagement of his forces or undisciplined actions taken by those under his command, Valens's army was destroyed, with only about a third of the original 60,000 managing to escape. Valens himself is said to have

¹²¹ Dignas & Engelbert, *Winter Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 34.

¹²² Though Armenia is a mountainous region, it holds possession of key passes that bypassed the Roman eastern frontier system, see Figure 1 for illustration of this

¹²³ Zosimus, *Historia Novia*, translated by Roger Peare (London: Green and Chaplin, 1814), IV.20.

died in the flames of a cottage fire.¹²⁴ Valens also failed to wait for the supporting troops of the Western emperor Gratian, whose army was positioned close by in Sirmium.¹²⁵ Whether this was a strategic move on Valens' part to move quickly and assault the Gothic army before reinforcements arrived or a tactic born of hubris is still hotly debated.

The Battle of Adrianople resulted in the destruction of the core of the Eastern Roman Army and another period of internal contest for the throne. The next couple decades were dominated by this internal warfare, all the while, the barbarians began making inroads into the western half of the empire while the eastern half of the Roman Empire was preoccupied with countering Sassanid threats and rebuilding her army. Theodosius I finally put an end to this period of unrest by deposing Arbogast and Eugenius, briefly reuniting the Roman Empire under one emperor.

Conclusion

The Roman Empire, much like in the third century, had to balance operations against the Sassanids with domestic stability and barbarian threats. Furthermore, economic concerns were still omnipresent as the empire was faced with mounting expenses and an eroding tax base. Several elements of the 4th-century Romano-Sassanid relations and tension were very different from those encountered in the preceding eras.

War with the Sassanids was not one sided. Often these wars were costly and indecisive with one side or the other gaining moderate concessions after much bloodshed. As a result, considerable diplomatic interaction occurred between the Sassanids and the Romans in order to smooth over issues. This, in turn, bled into increased levels of trade

¹²⁴ Ammianus, *Historiae*, XXXI.13.

¹²⁵ Ammianus, *Historiae* XXXI.

between the two powers as the Empire's financial resources were spent on the military and administrative functions as well as luxury goods for the imperial court and top economic players. This diplomatic and economic interplay led to a diffusion of beliefs and customs that altered the landscape of Roman high court life. Edward Gibbon best summarizes this change in court life, and by extension, popular Roman culture:

*The simplicity of Roman manners was [now] insensibly corrupted by the stately affectation of the courts of Asia. The distinctions of personal merit and influence, so conspicuous in a republic, so feeble and obscure under a monarchy, were abolished by the despotism of the emperors; who substituted in their room a severe subordination of rank and office, from the titled slaves, who were seated on the steps of the throne, to the meanest instruments of arbitrary power.*¹²⁶

With the death of Theodosius I in AD 395, the Roman Empire was formally divided into the West, under the rule of Honorius and the East under Arcadius. Given what we know about the last few decades of the fourth-century Roman Empire it would appear that the Eastern and not the Western Empire was in most dire peril. The purpose of the concluding chapter of this thesis will be to answer the following question: why did the Western and not the Eastern Roman Empire fall? In order to answer this question, the concluding chapter of this thesis will incorporate what we have learned from 3rd and 4th century Romano-Sassanid interactions as well as other causal forces such as internal revolt, court intrigue, and barbarian invasions to construct a causal framework for understanding the puzzle.

¹²⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire Vol. 1*, (NY: Penguin Press, 1994), 603-04.

Conclusion: Court Intrigue, Barbarians, and the Fall of an Empire

Introduction

We left off the previous chapter with the observation that the Eastern Roman Empire, at least superficially, was in worse shape than the Western Roman Empire. It was the Eastern not the Western Roman Empire that lost the core of its army at the battle of Adrianople, was without an emperor, and was facing threats from the Goths along the Danube and the Sassanids in Armenia and Mesopotamia. Yet by AD 476 it was the Western not Eastern Roman Empire that ceased to exist as a political unit.

In this concluding chapter, I will ask the question: why did the Western and not the Eastern Roman Empire fall? To answer this question I will discuss the early-fifth century period of recovery by the Eastern Roman Empire in the wake of the formal divide of East and West, as well as Western attempts to respond to the string of barbarian incursions that occurred at the time. Following this discussion, I will describe the attempts by the Eastern Roman Empire to shore up the defenses and imperial strength of the sickly Western Roman Empire. Finally, I will conclude with a quick overview of the almost three centuries of Romano-Sassanid interactions and create an overarching narrative of Sassanid contributions to the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

Rebuilding the Eastern Army, Stabilizing the Frontier, and Combating Paganism: The Rule of Theodosius I (AD 379-395)

In the wake of the battle of Adrianople, the Eastern Roman Empire was without an emperor and this put the Western Roman Emperor, 19-year-old Gratian, in a very precarious position. In order to stabilize the East, Gratian appointed Theodosius I the

commander of the Illyrian legions. As Valens did not have a successor, this amounted to an invitation for Theodosius I to become Gratian's co-emperor.¹²⁷ This appointment proved to be a success as Theodosius campaigned successfully against Fritigurn and the Gothic army from Adrianople. In order to defeat the Gothic army, Theodosius was forced to rebuild the eastern army.

Through extensive conscription levies, recruitment drives, and draconian draft dodging laws, Theodosius managed to raise a substantial number of troops. One direct attack on the Goths that Theodosius attempted is evidence enough of the folly of a direct assault strategy as the Roman column was badly defeated and Theodosius was, himself, badly wounded.¹²⁸ Instead small-scale skirmishes and ambushes whittled down the Gothic forces and eventually the Goths were defeated. Theodosius I managed to check off the first item on the list of imperial mandates, defeat the barbarians.

A year after Theodosius I's defeated the Goths internal revolt was raging. The usurper Magnus Maximus rallied the troops of Britain as well as Gallic troops to his side and invaded the Western territories of the Empire, killing Gratian in the process.¹²⁹ Theodosius managed to send an expeditionary force that defeated Maximus at Aquileia in AD 388. Thus Theodosius I managed to check off the second item on the imperial checklist, defeat usurpers. But what of the Sassanid Empire at this time, why had they not capitalized on the Gothic War or the revolt of Maximus to strike again at Rome?

The answer to the above question involves two key elements. The first was that Sassanid ambitions had been sufficiently achieved in the latter half of the 4th century. The

¹²⁷ Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, 259.

¹²⁸ Stephen Williams et al., *Theodosius: The Empire at Bay* (Batsford: Penguin Press, 1994), 28-35.

¹²⁹ Stephen William et al., *Theodosius*, 36-40.

peace treaty imposed on Jovian after the death of Julian in AD 363 had ceded many key areas of Mesopotamia, and the key client state of Armenia had been partitioned in a manner favoring the Sassanids.¹³⁰ Valens made some preliminary moves to reclaim what had been lost, hence his preparations at Antioch before the Battle of Adrianople, but his death and Theodosius's need for a stable Eastern frontier led to tacit Roman confirmation of Sassanid territorial gains.

The second element of Sassanid docility was nomadic in origin. The Romans were not the only people to contend with the Huns and other steppe warrior peoples. The Sassanids faced numerous 5th-century nomadic invasions particularly from the two Northern Frontier sectors, Transoxania (modern Uzbekistan) and the Caucasus. A Hunnic large-scale raid in AD 395 is an example of the shared nature of the nomadic threats from the North as both the Black sea regions of Rome and the Median and Armenian holdings of the Sassanids were devastated. As a result of this threat the Sassanids and Romans created a defense agreement whereby the Sassanids would fortify and garrison the northern regions against Hunnic incursions while the Romans would subsidize these garrisons, thus defraying the costs.¹³¹ Mutual defense born of pragmatism is another explanation for relative peace between the Sassanids and Romans at this time.

After defeating the usurper Maximus, Theodosius needed a stand-in for the Western throne. He turned to the young son of the former Emperor Valentinian I (364-AD 375), Valentinian II. Coins dated to the period indicate that Theodosius played a guardian role for Valentinian II and though nominally in control of the entire empire,

¹³⁰ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 386.

¹³¹ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 387.

Theodosius paid homage to the house of Valentinian.¹³² Things did not remain stable, however, as indicated by the apparent suicide of Valentinian II in AD 392 and the revolt of Flavius Eugenius.

Eugenius was the puppet usurper of the Western *magister militum*, Arbogast. Tensions solidified in the summer of AD 392 not only because Theodosius I was led to believe that the young Valentinian II died as a result of foul play, but for religious reasons. While nominally a Christian, Eugenius had some apparent pagan sympathies and thus the coming conflict between Eugenius and Theodosius I had an element of Christian orthodoxy versus pagan revivalism.¹³³ The end result of this tension was an Eastern Roman invasion of the Western Roman Empire, which culminated in the Battle of The Frigidus River in AD 394. The battle ended in a decisive but costly victory for Theodosius I. The forces of Theodosius I took casualties in excess of 10,000, out of a total of between 40,000 and 50,000 troops, while Eugenius's forces took roughly 75% casualties, this could have been as high as 30,000.¹³⁴

This battle includes several themes and elements that are worth discussing. First, though nominally the head of state, true power lay not with Eugenius but his Frankish *magister militum* Arbogast, thus we see extensive power grabbing by a “barbarian” powerbroker even before the beginning of the fifth century. Second, the issue of Christian orthodoxy and pagan revivalism makes an appearance and harkens back to previous

¹³² SIC, Valentinian II 375-392 CE solidus [gold], acquired in Trier, *fine Au*.

¹³³ Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 112-117.

¹³⁴ For an extended discussion of Frigidus casualty figures see P.T. Crawford “The Battle of Frigidus River” accessed from https://www.academia.edu/6458613/The_Battle_of_Frigidus_River_The_Ancient_World_XLIII_2012_33-52 3/29/15 @ 2:31 pm.

discussions of Roman religious tolerance and Sassanid influence on these policies. The Battle of Frigidus River indicates that political and religious power had irrevocably become intertwined in the Roman state system in much the same way as Zoroastrianism linked itself decidedly to the Sassanid imperial power structure. This indicates that not only had Sassanid religious influences shaped Romano-Sassanid relations in a certain way, but it also altered the landscape of Roman domestic religious discourse. Lastly, the incredibly high casualties of this battle had an immediate effect on the security of the Roman Empire. Civil war has always had an added problem that the losses on both sides constituted net losses for overall Roman troop numbers. This means that the combined Roman losses for this single battle were in excess of 50,000.

The Western Roman army at the time of the Battle of Frigidus River would have numbered somewhere in the vicinity of 113,000 *comitatus* forces supported by 135,000 *limitanei*.¹³⁵ The Eastern Roman Army was larger, with approximately 104,000 *comitatus* forces supported by 248,000 *limitanei* forces.¹³⁶ Given these estimates, then the overall troop numbers of the Roman Empire on the eve of the Battle of Frigidus River were somewhere in the vicinity of 600,000.¹³⁷ The loss of 50,000 troops, more or less, reduced the size of the Roman armed forces by 8%. Such a sudden loss of troops was damaging to the fragile stability of the empire and this burden of loss, given the outcome of the battle, fell on the Western Roman Empire. After the death of Theodosius I and the formal division of the Empire between his sons Arcadius and Honorius, the Western Roman

¹³⁵ Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 1417-1450.

¹³⁶ Jones, *Later Roman Empire*, 1450.

¹³⁷ These figures are derived mostly from “paper” figures of the *Notitia Dignatatum* and could have been lower given the realities of understrength units.

Empire even more so than the Eastern Roman Empire had to find the means to rebuild their forces.

The Formal Division of the Empire: Court Intrigue, Barbarian Invasions, and the Decline of the Western Roman Empire (AD 395-444)

In the months following the death of Theodosius I, the new *magister militum*, a man named Stilicho, asserted himself as the power broker of the Western Roman Empire as Theodosius I's son Honorius was only nine when he took the throne.¹³⁸ This pattern of weak child emperors as figureheads and barbarian military strongmen as true powerbrokers was a consistent theme of the 5th century and is indicative of the changes to the late Roman imperial court system. The proliferation of court intrigue and shadow figures controlling the reins of power was a main causal factor in the decline of the Western Roman Empire as internal court politics got in the way of administering the empire itself. Stilicho's supremacy proved to be necessary, however, as internal and external threats appeared within a couple years of Honorius's ascension to the throne.

The first of these threats was internal, as a Roman *comes*, commander of a field army, Gildo revolted in North Africa, but under the supervision of Stilicho this threat was dispatched by AD 398. The next threat was external. The Goths under their leader Alaric emerged from the Battle of Frigidus River dissatisfied with their current position. In AD 399 a revolt in Asia Minor allowed a man named Gainas to gain control of the Eastern Roman court and he promptly transferred Alaric and his provinces in the Western Balkans over to the West.¹³⁹ In doing with Gainas stripped from Alaric the means of

¹³⁸ Zosimus, *Historia Nova*, IV.lix.1.

¹³⁹ Thomas Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome: A Study of Roman Military Policy and the Barbarians, ca. 375-425 CE* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 175.

provisioning and paying his Gothic army. Out of desperation and necessity, he turned his army West in order to extract favorable terms from Stilicho.

Alaric invaded Italy in AD 401 and besieged the Western Emperor Honorius in Hasta Pompeia in Liguria (Northern Italy) and only retreated back to Illyricum after two indecisive battles with the cobbled-together forces of Stilicho. Stilicho, understanding the need to pacify Alaric granted him the title *comes* and gave him control of Dalmatia and Pannonia Secunda.¹⁴⁰ The Eastern Roman Empire was plagued, at this time, by the same issues as the Western Roman Empire. Internal revolts, child emperors, court intrigue, and barbarian strong men and as a result, little support could be provided to Stilicho. Stilicho and his supporters fell prey to a major coup c. AD 408.¹⁴¹

Stilicho's death also meant the death of any semblance of a Western Roman Army and Alaric took this moment to invade Italy again for the express purpose of a better "deal" with the Western Roman emperor. Other ambitious men, sensing weakness, also acted. In AD 409 Olympius, the architect of the coup to oust Stilicho, himself fell to court intrigue and a usurper named Constantine III established his own power bloc in Gaul.¹⁴² Honorius only managed to hold onto his shred of power with the help of an Eastern Roman army of 4,000 men.¹⁴³ In AD 410 Rome fell to Alaric due to starvation and this sent shockwaves through the empire.¹⁴⁴ To make matters worse, a number of Germanic peoples crossed the Rhine in the first decade of the 5th century and began carving up portions of Gaul and Spain. It was also at this time that the population of

¹⁴⁰ Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 193.

¹⁴¹ Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 218.

¹⁴² Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 238-39.

¹⁴³ Burns, *Barbarians Within the Gates of Rome*, 242.

¹⁴⁴ See Procopius, *De Bellis* III.2.25-26 for imperial reaction to the loss of Rome.

Britannia evicted the officials of the usurper Constantine III and Britannia ceased to be a functional part of the Western Roman Empire. These lands had either been forcefully taken by barbarian groups, like the Vandals, or given as part of *foedus* agreements to groups like the Visigoths.¹⁴⁵ This trend of providing land for services was the only means that Western Roman Emperors truly had left for raising new armies. This policy highlights the rising institutions of fealty-based proto-feudalism where land was given in return for service.

The Eastern Roman Empire was facing, during this period, its own set of internal and external problems. During the reign of Honorius's brother Arcadius (AD 394-408), the Eastern Roman Empire was dominated by one of Arcadius's ministers Rufinus, a court eunuch, who was ousted by Arcadius's wife Aelia Eudoxia.¹⁴⁶ This type of court domination of a weak emperor persisted beyond Arcadius's death as his son Theodosius II took the throne at the age of 7. Theodosius only became the true emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire in AD 416, thus for this entire period under discussion both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires had young and/or ineffective emperors and the policies of each empire fell prey to the political machinations of court members. The Eastern Roman Empire was not only internally weak during this period of Western imperial decline but also faced two primary external threats.

The Huns were a constant threat to the stability of the Balkans and groups of Huns led by charismatic leaders launched raids on a consistent basis. For example, in AD 408, a Hunnic leader named Uldin led an invasion of Moesia (the Balkans) that was

¹⁴⁵ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 251.

¹⁴⁶ Alan Cameron and J. Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley/Oxford: University of California Press, 1993).

repulsed with great difficulty.¹⁴⁷ Other powerful leaders appeared on the scene in the 420s such as Rua, the uncle of Attila. In AD 422, the Eastern Roman government agreed to pay Rua a tribute of 350 lbs of gold in exchange for keeping the peace. When the Roman authorities refused to increase this tribute, Rua invaded, but, fortunately for the Eastern Empire, he died soon after embarking on his invasion.¹⁴⁸ This gave the Eastern Roman Empire a reprieve until the 440s but, as we will discuss later, the Huns returned even more centralized and powerful.

Hunnic expansionism was not without its benefits for the Eastern Roman Empire. As we touched upon earlier, the Sassanids were forced to focus their military attention on the Caucasus region in order to prevent Hunnic devastation of Sassanid northern territories.¹⁴⁹ The Sassanids were also forced to divert attention east as they faced another nomadic tribe, the Hephthalites or “White Huns”. The Sassanids fought several wars against both the Huns and Hephthalites. These invasions occurred throughout the 5th century, only ending in the 6th century. It would appear then, that the causal factor behind amicable 5th century relations was motivated by pragmatism; both empires were too busy fighting other enemies to effectively fight each other. That being said, war was never far off.

Throughout this period of time Eastern Romano-Sassanid relations remained quite amicable. As we discussed earlier, however, this amicable relationship was born as much from necessity as from any general trends of unity between the two powers. The

¹⁴⁷ Rudi Paul Lindner, “Nomadism, Horses and Huns,” *Past and Present* 92, no. 1 (1981): 3-19.

¹⁴⁸ Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, 320.

¹⁴⁹ Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars Part II AD 363-630* (London: Routledge, 2002), 13.

important indicator that this was a relationship of pragmatism is the extensive troop levels that the Eastern Roman Empire maintained along the Eastern frontier. The *Notitia Dignatatum* lists an eastern field army of 31 regiments, roughly one quarter of all field regiments of the Eastern Roman Empire, as well as 156 regiments of frontier troops out of an imperial total of 305 frontier regiments available.¹⁵⁰ Though short in duration, the Romans and Sassanids had two wars during this time period under discussion, in AD 421 and 441. These conflicts appear to have been motivated by: (1) Roman inability or refusal to continue subsidizing Sassanid frontier garrison in the Caucasus region and (2) religious conflict, specifically regarding the Christians of Armenia.¹⁵¹ All this points to the fact that the Sassanids were both a powerful and immediate threat to the Eastern Roman Empire, particularly because the most productive and prosperous regions of the Eastern Empire were threatened by it.¹⁵²

During this same period of time, AD 420-444, the same patterns of weakness continued in the West. Usurpers continued to fight each other, wielding barbarian forces as unwieldy hammers as they battered away at each other, vying for the Western imperial throne. The strikes of these hammers fell hard on the Western provinces and each usurper's ascension and fall from grace left the Western Roman Empire shorter of money, in control of less land, and beholden to the whims of powerful and charismatic barbarian leaders. Given the issues of court intrigue destabilizing the Eastern Roman interior as well as the threats of both the Huns and the Sassanids, it is understandable that

¹⁵⁰ *Notitia Dignatatum* 5,6,8. See Blockley (1992) and Rubin1986 for extended discussion of eastern troop numbers.

¹⁵¹ Frye, *The Roman Empire and its Neighbors*, 145.

¹⁵² Duncan-Jones, *Money and Government in the Roman Empire*, Appendix 4 "Variations in land-tax in Egypt", 251.

the East was unable to send more help than it did to the West. Indeed the fact that any support was given at all is indicative of close ties between the two empires. In the middle of the 5th century, unfortunately, things went from bad to worse as Attila the Hun emerged as the dominant figure in the Hunnic power structure.

Attila the Hun, Majorian, and Romulus Augustulus: The Fall of the Western Roman Empire (AD 444-476)

Attila the Hun managed to gather a tremendously powerful military force on the Hungarian Plains and from this seat of power, he was able to extract vast sums of money from both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires. Attila was poised at the perfect time to strike at the Eastern Roman Empire upon his ascension as the dominant player in Hunnic politics. In AD 440, the Eastern Roman Empire committed a vast sum of troops to a reconquest of North Africa. Though seemingly a fool's errand, this move was a calculated gamble by the Eastern Roman Empire to reassert dominance over the supply of grain to the Italian peninsula.¹⁵³ Presumably success would have breathed new life into the toppling Western Empire. The expedition was, unfortunately, called off as Attila instigated a new period of Hunnic invasions that fell heaviest on the Eastern Roman Empire. Attila invaded the Balkans in the early 440s and this invasion was devastating not only to the countryside but to cities as well. Attila brought a vast army and the knowledge of siege craft, which allowed him to take major cities like Viminacium and Naissus by assault.¹⁵⁴ But there was a limit to Attila's ability to attack the Eastern Roman Empire.

¹⁵³ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 368.

¹⁵⁴ Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 303.

Constantinople occupied a chokepoint that separated its European and Asian holdings. While Attila could take the cities of the Balkans without too much difficulty, the Theodosian Walls, erected by Theodosius I a few decades prior, were vastly more difficult to take. Instead of needlessly losing men and legitimacy in a failed siege of Constantinople, Attila settled for a huge indemnity in 450.¹⁵⁵ He then turned his attention West.

In AD 451, Attila the Hun mounted a huge invasion of the Western Roman Empire. This could have spelled the end for the West but at the battle of the Catalaunian Plains, the combined forces of the Western Roman Empire and their barbarian “allies” living within the Empire stopped Attila’s army.¹⁵⁶ The next year Attila again invaded, striking deep into Italy. A lack of supplies, disease, and Eastern Roman harassment of Hunnic territories in Pannonia proved enough of a hindrance for Attila to call off the invasion. Attila died a year later and this ended the immediate threat of the Hunnic Empire.

Peace did not last long however, as the strongman at the time, Valentinian III murdered Aetius. Valentinian was, not long after, murdered by some of Aetius’s supporters, and this set forth another period of civil war that only ended in AD 457 with the rise of Majorian to the Western imperial throne with the backing of a Suevic king, Ricimer. Majorian was a successful Roman general and he represented the last push for Western Roman reassertion of dominance. He managed to reconquer many lost territories

¹⁵⁵ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, XXIV – Attila Part 1.

¹⁵⁶ Jordanes. *Getica*, in *The Gothic History of Jordanes*, translated by Charles Christopher Mierow (NY: Evolution Publishing, 1915), XXXX.213.

including parts of Northern Spain and Southern Gaul.¹⁵⁷ This slight revival was cut short by intrigue as rifts developed between Majorian and his barbarian allies. Majorian was murdered on the orders of Ricimer, which fractured Western Roman imperial loyalty as remaining sections of the Western Roman Empire broke away.¹⁵⁸ In AD 467, after two years of no Western emperor, the Eastern Roman Empire finally managed to send an army west under the command of Anthemius, a successful Roman general, to restore the Western imperial throne. In AD 468, the Eastern Roman Empire also sent a large expedition to recapture North Africa. This effort was too little too late. By AD 472 Anthemius was defeated by a Visigothic army and Rome was again captured, this time by Ricimer.¹⁵⁹

Another Roman army sent from the East under the command of Julius Nepos recovered some of the territory of Italia and Nepos placed his son Romulus Augustulus on the Western throne. A former secretary of Attila, Orestes, promptly drove Julius Nepos and his Eastern Roman Army out of Italy. Orestes refused to grant a Gothic leader Odoacer federated status, which prompted Odoacer's invasion of Italia in AD 476. Orestes was captured by troops loyal to Odoacer at Piacenza where he was executed in August of AD 476. At that time Odoacer installed himself as the ruler of Italia and he forced Romulus Augustulus to abdicate.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Gregory of Tours. *Historia Francorum*, In *History of the Franks: Books I-X*, translated by Earnest Brehaut (NY: Medieval Textbooks, 1997), II.11.

¹⁵⁸ Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge: Medieval Textbooks, 2014), 391.

¹⁵⁹ Halsall *Barbarian Migrations*, 277.

¹⁶⁰ Ralph W. Mathisen, *De Imperatoribus Romanis* accessed from <http://www.roman-emperors.org/auggiero.htm> 5/18/15 @ 12:19 pm

Conclusion

With the end of the Western Roman Empire properly narrated, we are now able to turn back to the rest of the thesis and return to the original question: what role did the Sassanid Empire play in the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire?

In the third century the Roman Empire was rocked by decades of protracted internal dissent, which was made even more disastrous by the incessant and large-scale warfare along the eastern frontier with the Sassanids. The Sassanid Empire was, first and foremost, a distraction. War with the Sassanids distracted emperors from dealing with imperial usurpers and gave opportunistic barbarian peoples the freedom to raid and devastate the border regions of the Rhine and Danube frontiers. This had a particularly devastating effect on the Western portion of the Empire as they were forced to contribute both troops and tax revenue to the East, while they took the brunt of third century devastation.

Even when third-century emperors were successful in defeating internal rivals and subduing barbarian border incursions, many of these emperors embarked on large and ultimately unsuccessful campaigns against the Sassanid Empire. Julian, Valerian, and Gordian are all examples of emperors whose eastern ambitions proved to be their undoing. Not only was Sassanid expansionism a distraction, but Roman expansionism against the Sassanid Empire was a further distraction from the task of restoring the power and vitality of the Roman Empire.

Continual warfare with the Sassanid Empire also proved to be a catalyst for economic decline. As we saw in descriptions of the campaigns of emperors like Severus Alexander and Julian, the cost of providing the forces and support necessary for large

scale protracted warfare against the Sassanids was staggering, and this, coupled with internal usurpation and barbarian raids, all contributed to a weakening of the Roman economy. Depopulation, hyperinflation, and the destruction of domestic trade routes stagnated the economy and therefore the Roman Empire was, in the third century, forced to do more and more with less and less. The Sassanids, in the third century, were a contributory cause in the Third Century Crisis but also were a proximate cause in the perpetuation of the crisis.

Force of will, extraordinary skill, luck, and a couple decades of civil war within the Sassanid Empire allowed emperors like Aurelian, Carus, and Diocletian to reassert a modicum of stability. As we saw in the analysis of the 4th century, the Roman Empire was no longer the same state as before. Rigid hierarchy and hereditary professions replaced a civil and social structure that, while never very fluid, was in flux as slaves became freedmen, freedmen became citizens, and inhabitants of the Empire were allowed some latitude in governing their affairs. An increasingly centralized state authority began a new trend of heavy-handed economic, social, and by the late 4th century, religious policies. These policies altered the traditional Roman value system that prized civic and martial participation with a hierarchy with the emperor at the center with the masses subservient to his will. The main sources for this change were (1) the diplomatic and economic interplay between the Roman and Sassanid Empires during periods of peace in the 4th century and (2) the constant need to provide the necessary revenue and state support for wars along the Rhine, Danubian, and Mesopotamian frontiers. In the short term, these changes allowed for a resurgence of the Roman Empire, but the long-term

implications of such changes were stoicism, asceticism, and escapism, as well as a general popular disconnect with the Roman imperial elites.

These changes as well as the physical damage caused by the Sassanids, allowed other forces to weaken the Roman government, economy, and military in the 5th century. In the Western Roman Empire during this time period there was a continual lack of strong emperors and thus the empire fell prey to a protracted period of factionalism and court intrigue. The only bulwark against almost constant barbarian incursions were the barbarians themselves, but the cost of pitting barbarian against barbarian was the whittling away of Western Roman territory and coin. Every period of internal turmoil in the 5th century weakened the West to the point that in AD 476, the Western Roman Empire was too small to project any significant power. The abdication of the last Roman emperor was merely a symbolic end to an empire that had fallen into disrepair decades before. In the East a young emperor, Theodosius II did not truly emerge as a potent power broker until the mid 420s. By this time, wars with the Sassanids and Huns proved serious distractions that limited Theodosius II's ability to aid the Western Roman Empire. Attempts at the end of the 430s for relief proved disastrous and a decade of defeats at the hands of Attila and the Huns in the 440s left the Eastern Roman Empire without the means to help the Western Roman Empire. By the late 460s, the Western Roman Empire had crossed the event horizon and was no longer a viable powerbroker in the West.

In the end, the Sassanid Empire did not prove to be the sole causal factor in the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire, but rather it was a necessary and contributory cause in the fall of the Western Roman Empire. It exacerbated existing structural weaknesses of the Roman system, distracted imperial authorities from other

threats, exacerbated economic weaknesses as increased military spending eroded the empire's economic base and, through trade and diplomatic interplay, contributed to a change in late Roman court life that permitted the expansion of court intrigue. The Sassanid Empire was not the sole cause of the fall of the Western Roman Empire; it was merely one factor among many that contributed to its demise.

Appendix I: List of Sassanid Kings and Roman Emperors

<i>Sassanid Kings</i>		<i>Roman Emperors</i>
Ardashir I 224-239/40		Alexander Severus 22-235
		Maximus Thrax 235-238
		Gordian I 238
		Gordian II 238
		Pupienus 238
		Balbinus 238
Shapur I 239-272		Gordian III 238-244
		Philip the Arab 244-249
		Decius 249-251
		Trebonianus Gallus 251-253
		Aemilianus 253
		Valerian 253-260
		Gallienus 253-268
		Claudius II 268-270
		Quintillus 270
Hormizd I 272-273		Aurelian 270-275
Bahram I 273-276		Tacitus 275-276
		Florianus 276
Bahram II 276-293		Probus 276-282
		Carus 282-283
		Numerian 283-284
		Carinus 283-285
		Diocletian 284-286
	<i>Western Empire</i>	<i>Eastern Empire</i>
Bahram II 293	Maximian 286-305	Diocletian 286-305
Narse 293-302		
Hormizd II 302-309		
	Constantius I 305-306	Galerius 305-311
Adarnarse 309	Severus 306-307	
	Maxentius 306-312	
	Maximian 307-308	Licinius 308-324
	Constantine I 306-337	Maximinus Daia 309-313
		<i>Re-United Empire</i>
Shapur II 309-379		Constantine II 337-340
		Constans 337-350
		Constantius II 337-361
		Julian 361-363
		Jovian 363-364
		<i>Eastern Empire</i>
		Valens 364-378
Ardashir II 379-383		Theodosius I 379-395

Shapur III 383-388		Arcadius 395-408
Bahram IV 388-399		Theodosius II 408-450
Yazdgard I 399-420		
Bahram V Gor 420-439		
Yazdgard II 439-457		Marcian 450-457
Hormizd III 457-459		Leo I 457-474
Peroz 459-484		Leo II 474
		Zeno 474-491

Appendix II: Maps and Illustrations



Figure 1: Strategic Location of Armenia¹⁶¹



Figure 2: Relief at Naqs-i Rostam in Bīšāpūr¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Map courtesy of <http://www.armenian-history.com/images/maps/Orontid-Armenia.png> accessed 5/5/15 @ 12:45pm

¹⁶² Photo Courtesy of Michael Reschke (2005)



Figure 3: Outline and Overview of Dura Europos Site¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Map courtesy of <http://www.le.ac.uk/ar/stj/dura.htm> accessed 5/5/15 @ 12:50pm

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What Role Did the Sassanid Empire Truly Play in the Fall of the Western Roman Empire? Exploring Divergences in Causal Frameworks

Nicholas Vladimir Strunc
Bates College, nstrunc@bates.edu

Nicholas Vladimir Strunc
Bates College

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