



Malta  
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Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

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2016

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Malta Classics Association*

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**Malta Classics Association,**

The Department of Classics and Archaeology,  
Archaeology Farmhouse, Car park 6,  
University of Malta, Msida  
classicsmaltasoc@gmail.com

**[www.classicsmalta.org](http://www.classicsmalta.org)**

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## Through Western Eyes: Greek and Latin Sources for Byzantine-Iranian Relations

*David Frendo\**

It is scarcely possible to condense several centuries of history into a few minutes of hurried exposition. Yet, the attempt to do just that must somehow be made.

Following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. and the carving out between his generals, Ptolemy Soter and Seleucus Nicator, of the bulk of his empire, the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia were thrown into an unprecedented state of turmoil, from which their cultural continuity was to emerge disrupted and their traditional values, belief systems and institutions undermined and increasingly marginalized. Nevertheless, it proved expedient for the rulers of the successor states to pay lip service to the past history and achievements of those ancient civilizations whose territories they had annexed or usurped by right of conquest. But perhaps the most compelling reason for such a move lay in the competing ambitions of Ptolemy and Seleucus. Thus, Ptolemy commissioned the Egyptian priest, Manetho, to write in Greek a history of Egypt, probably because Seleucus Nicator had earlier commissioned Berossus (also a priest), to set down, also in Greek, a compendium of Babylonian wisdom.<sup>8</sup> The two works were finally dedicated on completion to Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Antiochus I respectively.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the dangerous tendency to become embroiled in conflicts with the Ptolemies over disputed territory, the greatest threat to the survival of the Seleucids was the vastness, disparate nature and lack of cohesion of the lands and peoples that had come under their control. A mere 75 or so years after the death of Alexander, the eastern fringes

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. P. Green (1990), 190 and 780, n. 18.

<sup>9</sup> See P.M. Fraser (1972), 505-510.



of this vast territory were slipping out of Seleucid control, and in 247 B.C., a successful revolt, spearheaded by two brothers, Arsaces and Tiridates, marked the beginning of the Parthian era and set in train a slow but relentless process of disintegration.<sup>10</sup> Worse still, the Seleucids, torn by internal dynastic rivalries, weakened by intermittent warfare with Egypt and constantly diminished owing to the steady westward expansion of Parthian control and sovereignty, had already been dealt a fatal blow to their continued existence by the Romans in their eastward expansion some 59 years before that date. By the Treaty of Apamea of 188, Antiochus III had been forced to evacuate the whole of Asia Minor west of the Taurus.

Following the Roman Republic's defeat of Antiochus the Great in 190 or 189 B.C. and the terms dictated by the Treaty of Apamea in 188, the power of the Seleucid monarchy was irreparably broken and the whole of Asia Minor west of the Taurus transferred to the indirect control of the Romans. As Seleucid power became increasingly fragmented and further weakened by frequent dynastic rivalries, a Parthian state continued to take shape and even to expand westwards. At the same time, the aggressive and expansionist power of the Roman Republic<sup>11</sup> progressively strengthened and extended its grip on Asia Minor, on a region, that is, which was both partially Hellenized and profoundly imbued in respect of language, religion, and culture with the traditional values of Iranian society.<sup>12</sup>

In the period from the first diplomatic encounter between Rome and Parthia in 96 B.C. to the reckless and unprovoked invasion of Parthia by the Triumvir M. Licinius Crassus in 54 – 53 B.C., the Parthian kings appear

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. N.C. Debevoise (1938), 9.

<sup>11</sup> For the extent to which competition in the pursuit of military victory and territorial expansion had become a way of life among the ruling elites of Republican Rome and had been built into the moral and social structure of the state, see W.V. Harris William (1979), *passim* and especially 9-53 and 105-130.

<sup>12</sup> With regard to the ancient and ethnically diverse population of Asia Minor, cf. L. Raditsa (1983) in *C.H.I.* 3.1.106: "the domination of the Achaemenians lasted two hundred and fifty years, Alexander's lasted much less than his short life and did not extend beyond it."

to have gone to considerable lengths to avoid any accidental collision of interests or of military forces.<sup>13</sup> But the mechanisms that governed the Roman state, now virtually in the hands of Pompey, Caesar and Crassus, three competing dynasts bent on foreign conquest and military glory, were fast spinning out of control. The Roman legions suffered a crushing defeat at Carrhae, Crassus lost his life, and, four years later, Rome was plunged into a civil war which was to seal the fate of an already moribund Republican constitution. The death of Crassus in 53 marks the end of the First Triumvirate and ushers in a period of growing unrest and potential anarchy. When faction fighting began to assume the proportions of gang warfare with the death in January 52 of Caesar's agent Publius Clodius Pulcher at the hands of the armed supporters of T. Annius Milo, Pompey stepped in as sole consul until August. A further deterioration of the situation occurred when on the 2nd of December, 50 B.C., Pompey accepted the request of Consul Marcellus to "save the state", a fateful decision which marks the start of the Civil War. In 44, Caesar, having defeated all opposition and having had himself appointed dictator for life, was about to set out for his projected expedition against Parthia when he was surrounded by a group of conspirators who drew their concealed weapons and stabbed him to death. However, the pretext of avenging the death of Crassus continued over many centuries to combine with expansionist dreams of Parthian conquest and, ultimately, of emulating the exploits of Alexander the Great.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, the end result of this long period of relentless and sustained Roman aggression (155 B.C. – A.D. 227) was the collapse of the Parthian monarchy and state and the establishment of a new dynasty centred in Fars. This New Persian Dynasty appeared on the scene with its own claims to territorial sovereignty,

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<sup>13</sup> For a similar view of Parthian policy towards Rome, see A. Keaveny (1981), 195-212, especially 210-211. However, the existence of these alleged treaties has been convincingly questioned by J. Wolski (1993), 92-93.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account of some of these expeditions and of their consequences for both Rome and Parthia, see N.C. Debevoise (1938), 96-135 (Antony), 218-233 (Trajan), (255-262) (Septimius Severus).

claims that were rooted in vague memories, political opportunism and religious fervour<sup>15</sup>.

At any rate, this unforeseen turn of events seems to have caught the Romans completely off their guard, as is clear from the account with which Cassius Dio, our only contemporary well-informed and relatively reliable source, brought his monumental *Roman History* to a close.<sup>16</sup> It is perhaps worth noting also that, where he deals with the events of his own times, Dio's information is derived both from direct experience of public life and from personal contact with other similarly placed individuals, so that his testimony is often of considerable value. The relevant passage runs roughly as follows:

There were many rebellions involving large numbers of people, some of which caused great alarm, but they were all put down. But the situation in Mesopotamia was more alarming and struck a more genuine terror in the hearts of all, not just the Romans, but the rest of mankind as well. Artaxerxes, a Persian, after conquering the Parthians in three battles and slaying their king, Artabanus, marched against Hatra in an attempt to convert it into a base for operations against the Romans. He did in fact manage to breach the wall, but he lost a considerable number of soldiers as the result of an ambush and so turned his attack against Media. By a combination of force and intimidation, he took over a large part of that country and of Parthia and then moved against Armenia. Here he suffered a defeat at the hands of the local population, certain Medes and the sons of Artabanus, and took to flight according to one report, but withdrew according to another with a view to equipping a larger force. Consequently, he gave us cause for alarm when he bore down with a large army not just on Mesopotamia, but also on Syria, threatening that he would recover everything that the Ancient Persians had held as

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<sup>15</sup> These matters have been touched in D. Frendo (2002), 25-36, and especially 25-30 and 31-32.

<sup>16</sup> Not all of the eighty books of this massive *History of Rome* from its legendary beginnings to A.D. 229 have survived the wreckage of time intact, but the missing portions are supplied by three later sources that did have access to much of what has since been lost. Incidentally, Dio himself informs us that for the years 222 – 229, he could only provide brief notes, so that what we actually have here is an abridgement of a sketchier than usual original, for which, see f. Millar (1964), 1-4; 120-121 and 170-171.

far as the Greek Sea, on the grounds that all this too belonged to him through his forefathers. He does not pose any serious threat in himself, but what does cause alarm is the fact that the morale of our troops is such that some are actually joining him and others are refusing to defend themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The next stage in the development of full-scale hostilities, following Ardashir's invasion of Mesopotamia and Syria, is recorded from an Iranian perspective in the preamble to the celebrated trilingual inscription of Shapur I on the rock relief at Naqsh-e-Rustam in Fars commemorating his victorious exploits and commonly referred to as the *Res gestae Divi Saporis*. In it one may detect both a new note of religious fervour and an old thread of religious continuity.

The first two sections of this document throw an interesting sidelight on Iranian perceptions of Roman aggression and lack of entitlement to rule over any of the ancestral territories belonging to the Sasanian Empire.<sup>18</sup> The general impression conveyed is of large invading forces recruited from remote and alien lands: it is a pattern often repeated down the centuries in the long history of the Middle East and having its only counterpart in the equally relentless westward advance of the Turkic peoples into the same area.

It seems not inappropriate at this point to pause and take stock of some of the more important social, political, cultural and economic

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<sup>17</sup> Dio's *Historia Romana*, 482-484. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated. Dio reinforces what he has said about the decline of military discipline with a reference to his own recent experience as governor of Pannonia Superior (probably in 226-228), and then concludes his work very decisively on an autobiographical and deeply personal note.

<sup>18</sup> For the text of this inscription, see M. Back ed. (1978), 284-371. The English translation used here is that of R.N. Frye (1983), 371-373. It runs as follows: "I, the Mazda-worshipping lord Shapur, king of kings of Iran and non-Iran, whose lineage is from the gods, grandson of king Papak, am ruler of Eranshahr and I [hold?] the lands..." There then follows a hugely extensive list of the alleged domains of the third-century Persian Empire. Sections 3-12 tell of the victories of Shapur against the forces of the Roman emperors Gordian III (238 – 244) and Valerian (253 – 260) and throw an interesting sidelight on Iranian perceptions of Roman aggression and lack of entitlement to any part of the territories just enumerated: "when at first we became established in the empire" (the document continues), "Gordian Caesar raised in all of the Roman Empire a force from the Goth and German realms and marched on Babylonia (an ethnic composition corresponding to that of the armies of the Later Roman Empire)".

developments that took place in the major Hellenistic successor states during the centuries that witnessed their successful establishment, confident self-assertion, gradual decline and eventual annexation by the Romans. To that end, it will be necessary to say a few words on the vexed and complicated question of the nature of Hellenization both as a theoretical construct and as a historical phenomenon. If by “Hellenization” we are to understand “a policy of fostering the spread of Greek language, civilization and culture among the non-Greek populations of the conquered territories”, then I think that question is not hard to answer: no such unselfish ideal of sharing the benefits of their dominant position with the very peoples whose territories they had just appropriated can even remotely have occurred to the motley crowd of Greek and Macedonian adventurers that made up the new ruling elite of these Hellenistic successor states. Incidentally, the lack of hard evidence for any kind of interpenetration of Greek and Egyptian culture is well illustrated by the fact that, whereas prosopographical research reveals something over two hundred literary figures in Ptolemaic Egypt, all of these being foreigners.<sup>19</sup>

By the late 2nd century A.D., however, there is a decisive shift in favour of acculturation and assimilation of many aspects of the now dominant (hybrid) Greco-Roman civilization with its two world languages, namely, Greek in the eastern and Latin in the western halves of the Roman Empire. A particularly vivid illustration of the wholesale adoption of narrative themes of Egyptian provenance in an equally Egyptian religious setting may be seen in book eleven of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius of Madaurus.<sup>20</sup>

A similar example of cultural fusion is reflected, though with greater subtlety and indirection, in the Greek East in the life and writings of Lucian. Lucian was born around 120 A.D. in the town of Samosata situated in a mountainous area straddling the Euphrates. Formerly the royal capita of Commagene, an ex-client kingdom annexed by Vespasian fifty years earlier and incorporated into the northern corner of the province of

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<sup>19</sup> P. Green (1990), 325 and 817, n. 77.

<sup>20</sup> See Apuleius, 20-31.

Syria, its ethnically mixed population (Iranian with Semitic traces) had acquired a veneer of Hellenization as early as the first century B.C. Despite Roman occupation, the principal social institutions had remained Greco-Iranian. Lucian's career, for instance, is an interesting illustration in that he successfully overcame his impoverished family circumstances, learned and mastered the Greek language, trained as an orator, and earned his living by giving lectures, first in Asia Minor, later in Athens. The internal evidence of his writings indicates that his speeches were delivered as far afield as Gaul, Macedonia and the Po valley. Probably around 170, Lucian gave up lecturing temporarily in order to take up a minor post in the imperial bureaucracy in Egypt. His life then fades into final obscurity some time shortly after the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180.<sup>21</sup> But, before we leave Lucian, it must be stressed that the scale, range and scope of his literary output, his lucid style and fluent command of Attic Greek mark him out as by far the greatest stylist of his day and one of the greatest of all times.<sup>22</sup> Thus, what had long been the exclusive preserve of a privileged elite had finally yielded its place to superior talents and to the assimilative power and universalistic tendencies of Rome.

But the late third century was to usher in a period of anarchy unparalleled in Roman history. The fifty years that separate the murder of Severus Alexander in 235 from the death of Carinus in 285 witnessed in rapid succession 26 senior emperors or *Augusti*, 3 junior emperors or *Caesares*, and 41 usurpers, bringing the total to a staggering 70! What was eventually to emerge with the restoration of order was a state changed beyond recognition especially in terms of its religious and cultural orientation.

Towards the end of the 1st century A.D., it is possible to trace the first manifestations of a hitherto unknown religion of Iranian provenance, as it spreads simultaneously into the valleys of the Danube and the Rhine, and even into the heart of Italy.<sup>23</sup> That religion is the religion of Mithras and its rise is evidenced as far west as Britain, where it was the first of the

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<sup>21</sup> See Ch. Robinson (1979), 1-63.

<sup>22</sup> As demonstrated persuasively by R. Cantarella (1979), 316-317.

<sup>23</sup> See F. Cumont (1956), 33-103.

eastern mystery cults to gain a foothold, and where its principal adherents were soldiers and merchants. It was exclusively or, almost so, confined to men, and though its numbers were small, its devotees were persons of consequence: officers and business-men.<sup>24</sup> In offering an ordered life of disciplined and purposeful activity, it had obvious attractions for these two social groups, the more so in an empire that until recently had threatened to become engulfed in chaos and anarchy. Closely related to this phenomenon is the establishment by Aurelian of an official cult of the sun with a view to fostering ever-closer ties of loyalty and solidarity throughout the Roman world to both emperor and empire.<sup>25</sup>

At the lowest end of society, on the other hand, among slaves and the urban poor, hopes of a personal salvation from this world were demanding more, and Christianity fell on ready ground in the cities of the empire not least among the city proletariat of Rome itself. Given the economic importance of the cities of the Roman Empire as centres of commerce, administration, small-scale manufacture and conspicuous consumption, their Christianization was to have widespread and far-reaching consequences.<sup>26</sup>

The essentially utilitarian nature of Greco-Roman polytheism, whereby a multiplicity of local deities and cults cohabited under the umbrella of an empire-wide officially sponsored state religion, is best seen in the development of a body of arcane and minutely prescribed rules of conduct in the performance of sacrificial ritual and other aspects of the cult of Rome's ancient and, initially, indigenous, deities. The prime objective of this code of practice was to secure what later came to be

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. P. Salway (1984), 711.

<sup>25</sup> See E. Cizek (1994), 176-178. Note in particular coin legends such as *Sol Dominus Imperii Romani, Soli Invicto* and *Soli Conservatori*.

<sup>26</sup> For a useful discussion of this important subject, J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz (2003), 30-63. The following observation is worth quoting: "among the smaller cities, the Cilician port of Korykus is remarkable for the number of its inscriptions. They are overwhelmingly funereal. A high proportion are late imperial and Christian, dating from the fourth to sixth centuries, and they provide us with something like the social profile of a small late Roman town. Among 591 inscriptions no fewer than 408 commemorate craftsmen, with the great majority working in trades providing for the subsistence of their fellow townsmen" (55).

termed the *pax deorum*.<sup>27</sup> But the maintenance of this ideal state of affairs, in which the greatness and prosperity of Rome was guaranteed as the reward sent by the gods for Roman piety, was, at best, precarious. The gods could withdraw their favour and protection for a variety of reasons ranging from such morally neutral actions, as a technical flaw in the performance of a sacrifice, or failure to ascertain the will of heaven by the art of divination and take appropriate action to appease the anger of a particular deity (thus averting the evil consequences of a threatening omen) to the breach of a treaty obligation and sworn oath in which the gods had been invoked as witnesses to punish whichever party had decided to break faith.<sup>28</sup> The essentially mechanistic approach inherent in the implementation of this time-honoured body of religious ritual and prescription is well illustrated by the practice known as *instauratio* whereby, even if the tiniest slip of wording or enactment occurred in the public utterance of prayers, offering of sacrifice, or celebration of the festivals of the various gods, the whole process had to be repeated all over again.

Oddly enough, it was the same utilitarianism, underpinning the complex of superstitious practices and religious beliefs that had given rise to the *pax deorum*, which eventually was destined through a series of remarkable contingencies to supplant and destroy, together with their cult objects, cults and places of worship, these same gods whose favour and protection had been so assiduously canvassed. But the explanation of how such a thing could come about is inseparable from the narrative of the rise of Constantine, starting from his proclamation as emperor by the army in Britain after the death of his father, Constantius Chlorus at York on the 25th of July, 306, and culminating in his assumption of the position of sole ruler of the Roman Empire after the defeat and deposition of his last remaining opponent, Licinius, in September, 324. Only the barest outline of the most significant events will concern us here. Before his victory in 312 at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, which ended with the defeat and death of his rival, Maxentius, Constantine, according to

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<sup>27</sup> The earlier form *pax deum* is attested in a number of formulaic expressions, for which see G. Wissowa (1912), 390, n. 3.

<sup>28</sup> For this last, morally reprehensible, instance, cf. G. Wissowa (1912), 387-388.



the version of events which he confided in his old age to the Christian Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, had turned for supernatural assistance on the advice of a vision which he had received from the Supreme Deity of the Christians.<sup>29</sup> In the following year, Constantine set about restoring their property to the churches of Africa making generous contributions to them from the imperial treasury,<sup>30</sup> and granting immunity from curial duties to the Christian clergy. The reason which the emperor gives in a document addressed to the proconsul of Africa and preserved by Eusebius) is: “in order that they (i.e., the Christian clergy) may not be distracted by some error or sacrilegious slip from the service that is owed to the Deity, but rather that they may serve their own law without any kind of disturbance. For, when they perform the greatest worship to the Deity, they will, I think, bring incalculable benefits to the State”.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, Constantine’s initial patronage of the Christian religion was driven by his concern to ensure the continuing favour of the God/god of the Christians, already a small but fateful step away from the traditional forms of polytheism, even though it was expressed instinctively and opportunistically in the functional and utilitarian language of the *pax deorum*.

But we must resume our narrative outline<sup>32</sup> and concern ourselves chiefly with the often unintended consequences of the struggle for supremacy that ensued, after the breakdown and temporary reinstatement of Diocletian’s system of quadripartite rule or Tetrarchy, at that point where disagreement between the two senior emperors,

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<sup>29</sup> Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.28-29. Heikel’s edition of 1902 (G.C.S. 7) was replaced by F. Winkelmann (1991), where the relevant passage runs from 29.23 to 30.15 of the 1991 2nd revised edition. In support of the essential veracity of this version, see J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz (2001), 278-279. But, what matters here is the widespread currency of such ideas in what was a universally credulous age.

<sup>30</sup> It should perhaps be noted that Constantine’s recourse to a new and untried deity was not without precedent. At a critical juncture in the war against Hannibal in 205 B.C., the cult of Cybele was introduced by the senate after consultation of the Sibylline Books, for which, see G. Wissowa (1912), 317-318.

<sup>31</sup> Eusebius 464-465. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>32</sup> A detailed critical account of these events can be found in T.D. Barnes (1981), 66-77.

Constantine and Licinius, over the future succession of their respective infant sons, led (in October, 316) to war.

Although victorious in two major battles, Constantine was outmanœvred when trying to finish off his opponent, which allowed Licinius to sue for peace. In the resultant settlement (1st of March, 317), Licinius lost most of his territory in Europe and was obliged to transfer his capital and his court from Sirmium to Nicomedia, where he was to reside until an uneasy peace gave way to the final confrontation resulting in his defeat and death at the hands of Constantine. Significantly, Licinius had turned during this seven-year interim to a policy of increasing intolerance and eventual persecution towards the Christians living in the territories under his control, thus making it easy for the victor's propaganda to paint a vivid and plausible picture of Constantine and his army marching under the protection of the *Labarum*, the imperial standard carrying the monogram of Christ, and of the forces of Licinius, as they joined battle, bearing the emblems of the pagan gods. It was an image which, by dint of repetition, must have left its mark on the minds of many. Not surprisingly, Constantine initiated a series of repressive measures against paganism, which were implemented with equal ferocity and extended scope by his immediate successors.<sup>33</sup>

In the next sixteen or so years, Constantine extended his patronage of the Christian Church, of which he finally became a member by receiving baptism towards the end of his life. He died of natural causes on the 22nd of May, 337, before he could set out on his long-projected campaign against Persia.

But, twenty-three years later, the apparent permanence of the new order was seriously threatened from an unexpected quarter in a remarkable series of events. Swept up in a military rebellion at Paris in

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<sup>33</sup> Towards the end of 241, pagan sacrifices were forbidden (cf. *C.Th.* 16. 10. 2), and by an enactment dated 1st November, 342 (cf. *C.Th.* 16. 10. 3) pagan worship was abolished, but temples outside the walls of cities were left untouched in view of their being the traditional starting point for the inauguration of games, chariot races or athletic contests. In January, 357, all forms of divination were forbidden on pain of decapitation (*C. Th.* 9. 16. 4), and nocturnal sacrifices also were prohibited, for which cf. *C.Th.* 16. 10. 5 (dated November, 353).

February, 360, and proclaimed *Augustus* by his troops,<sup>34</sup> Julian, who until then had held the subordinate position of *Caesar*, sought to gain official recognition for this *fait accompli* from the reigning emperor, his cousin Constantius. After protracted and predictably unsuccessful negotiations, however, Julian, following an audacious and carefully constructed plan, set off eastwards with his army in July, 261, for the ensuing and by now inevitable confrontation. But then there occurred one of those events which not infrequently help shape the course of history and defy all but prophetic insight. Constantius, on his way back from the Persian front and resolved at last to engage the forces of his rebellious cousin, died unexpectedly of natural causes at Mopsuestia in Cilicia on the 3rd of November at the age of 44.

Towards the end of the same month, news of this extraordinary turn of events (together perhaps with the report that Constantius had named Julian as his successor) was brought to Julian, who had been biding his time at the confines of Dacia, uncertain what to do next and fearful of the consequences of advancing any further. Emboldened by this bloodless victory and even more convinced that he was under the protection of the ancient gods,<sup>35</sup> Julian made his way to Constantinople, which he entered on the 11th of December in order to attend his cousin's funeral and to take up the reins of government. It was not long in fact before Julian ordered the reopening of the temples, the resumption of sacrificial worship, and the restoration of the cult of the ancient gods.<sup>36</sup> This move was the prelude to a series of legislative enactments and administrative

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<sup>34</sup> There is a detailed account of these events in *Ammianus Marcellinus*, 16-29. But *Ammianus* may have been economical with the truth, and there is a distinct possibility that what happened at Paris may have been stage-managed by Julian and the inner circle of his friends, an interpretation which has been argued for cogently by G.W. Bowersock (1978), 46-54.

<sup>35</sup> According to *Ammianus*, 34-35, Julian had confided to his close friends the night before he was proclaimed *Augustus* that the *Genius Publicus*, the guardian spirit of the Roman State, had appeared to him urging him to accept the increase in rank it was striving to secure for him.

<sup>36</sup> A law of Constantius, dated December 1st, 356, had ordered the closure of pagan temples and the cessation of sacrificial worship (*C. Th.* 16. 10. 4) under pain of death and confiscation of property for those who failed to comply.

reforms all aimed at furthering the realization of Julian's grand design to reverse the legacy of Constantine and replace Christianity by an aggressive form of philosophical paganism under the umbrella of which the various traditional manifestations of polytheism with their once popular appeal might be restored, protected and reinvigorated. It was a vision which came into conflict with contemporary reality, as it is by now well known.

Julian also had, for his part, already begun to think in terms of extending indefinitely Rome's territorial control over the area which had once constituted Alexander's empire in the east.<sup>37</sup> But such designs, however vague and imprecise they might have been, could not fail to conflict with deep-rooted Iranian notions of hereditary sovereignty and territorial control, as events would soon show.

Embittered by the unenthusiastic and even hostile reaction of the Antiochenes to his repeated attempts to wean them away from their allegiance to Constantine and devotion to Christianity, Julian left Antioch and, in an air of growing unreality, set out for his disastrous Persian Campaign against an enemy that was better informed, more experienced and better equipped to confront the real challenges that lay ahead. The normal categories of historical interpretation break down when applied to the sequence of actions and events described in *Ammianus' narrative*. Julian was in fact a visionary, the clarity of whose vision bore no relation to the confused reality that surrounded him, and his policy and actions appear to have been conditioned by the painful experiences of his early life. The single-minded goal of reversing the legacy of Constantine and his sons was to generate not clarity, but confusion. His failure to implement one part of his programme at Antioch, where he displayed a remarkable propensity for driving himself into an impossible corner, was replicated by his conduct of military operations in Persia. It is pointless, therefore, to attempt to analyse the objectives of that campaign; all that can safely be said is that from the start they must have been grandiose and imprecise. As the campaign progressed, they must have become

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<sup>37</sup> Such a policy had indeed been regularly pursued *vis-à-vis* the Parthian empire as long as the Roman emperors continued to organize their devastating invasions from the unassailably distant western portion of their empire, for which cf. the remarks of K. Güterbock (1906), 4. But, changed circumstances demand changed policies!

more so. As for his motivation, that was indissolubly bound up with his grand design of restoring and justifying the worship of the ancient gods and further complicated by the reluctant awareness of the scale of the obstacles to its implementation which had been forced upon him during his stay in Antioch. Yet, there are rational explanations for some of the weaknesses on the Roman side, which probably precluded the possibility of realizing any scheme of conquest or territorial aggrandizement. Though, admittedly, it is somewhat misleading to describe as “a grand design” Julian’s backward-looking vision of reverting to an idealized past in which Roman invincibility was guaranteed by the assiduous worship of the gods and, perhaps even more unrealistically, of reverting ostrich-like to a policy of obstinately refusing to recognize the existence of an empire whose territories stretched from the Euphrates to the Oxus.

The turning point, however, after which the fate of the expedition was sealed, was probably the realization that the defences of Ctesiphon were so strong, that the city could not be taken by storm before the arrival of Shapur with the bulk of the Persian army. After that, things went from bad to worse, and a rapidly deteriorating situation was further aggravated by Julian’s often rash and foolhardy decisions.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the random savagery directed at times by Julian and his army against the unarmed and defenceless civilian population may have helped to stiffen Persian resistance.<sup>39</sup> Finally, when Julian rushed into battle for the last time, apparently forgetting to put on his coat of mail, was mere impetuosity the cause or an unconscious death wish?<sup>40</sup>

Certainly, his death from a wound received in battle left him with his honour intact and spared him the need to choose between the painful

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<sup>38</sup> All these points emerge clearly from *Ammianus’* detailed and dramatic narrative of events in book 24. 7 – 8.

<sup>39</sup> See for example, *Ammianus* 24.2.3 and 24.25. Just how far the Persians were prepared to go and at what cost to themselves to impede the advance of Julian’s invading army is well illustrated by the following extract from *Ammianus’* narrative: “Next, after covering a distance of fifteen miles, we reached a place where the fields are made fertile by an abundance of water. But the Persians, having learned in advance that we intended to use this route, had removed the sluice-gates and allowed the water to flow in all directions.” (*Ammianus* 24.3.10). A similar account is to be found in *Zosimus* 3.19.3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ammianus* 25.3.6.

alternatives of retreating with his army after having to negotiate with the Persians from a position of weakness or risking at some later stage the annihilation of his forces and his own defeat and/or death. By the manner of his death and by the way it has been recorded for posterity, Julian's memory soon entered the realm of two opposing legends, which between them offer a serious and permanent distraction to anyone attempting to set the historical record straight. Thus, it was perhaps out of the confused inheritance that Julian bequeathed to posterity that there arose two essentially different modes of regarding the outside world, one cautious and pragmatic with an instinctive capacity for adaptation, the other visionary and detached to the point of wilful self-deception.

But, if Julian's dying words reflect his belief that he was about to join the exalted company of the stars,<sup>41</sup> the leaders of his army were left with the less exalted task of dealing with the gross but pressing realities of the sublunary world! After some initial disagreement, a consensus was reached whereby the popular but relatively untried Jovian, commander of the household troops and a Christian, was chosen to succeed Julian. Jovian's army, constantly harassed by the Persians, continued its retreat into the fifth day (27th of June – 1st of July) both sustaining heavy losses and exacting a similar toll from their pursuers. Then, unexpectedly, as far as the Romans were concerned, Shapur made the first move and sent two prominent Persians as envoys to establish the framework for peace negotiations. The terms of the treaty, which the Persians were virtually able to dictate, and which the Roman Emperor had no option but to accept, were: the return of five provinces on the far side of the Tigris together with fifteen fortresses in addition to Nisibis, Singara and the important stronghold of Castra Maurorum. Accordingly, a peace treaty of thirty years was solemnly subscribed to by both sides with proper observance of the relevant formalities and diplomatic procedures. But, before he could establish himself in the imperial capital, Jovian's life was cut short in unexplained circumstances on his way to Constantinople. He died on the 27th of February at the age of thirty-three.

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Ammianus 25.3.22: "et flentes inter haec omnes qui aderant, auctoritate integra increpabat, humile esse, caelo sideribusque conciliatum lugeri principem dicens."

Despite the near universal condemnation incurred by Jovian's territorial concessions in the extant Greco-Roman literary tradition,<sup>42</sup> it must be stressed that their outcome marks an entirely new phase in the relations between the two neighbouring states, and may perhaps not unreasonably be seen to signal the growing realization on either side of the need to avoid and resolve potential areas of conflict wherever possible by diplomacy and negotiation. But now the relentless ticking of the clock makes it imperative to take a final leap in time through two and a half centuries and turn briefly to the reign of Justinian when diplomacy reached a level of sophistication and rationality unparalleled in past history. It is also one of the best documented periods in Late Roman and Early Byzantine history.

The Byzantine-Persian treaty of 561/562 is particularly noteworthy in view of the remarkable degree of constructive and intelligent collaboration achieved by the contracting parties in drafting, recording, authenticating and preserving for posterity the contents of this important document, of which the sixth-century historian and continuator of Agathias, Menander Protector, has left an extremely full account. According to this account, the original treaty documents were written in Persian and in Greek, subject

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<sup>42</sup> The late-fourth century Christian Latin poet, Prudentius ( 451 ff.), contrasting the emperor's achievements with his impiety, had praised Julian as "ductor fortissimus armis / conditor et legum, celeberrimus ore manuque / consultor patriae sed non consultor / habendae Religionis amans ter centum milia divum / Perfidus ille Deo quamvis non perfidus orbi." (A leader most valiant in arms, a lawgiver too, renowned for eloquence and action, defender of his country's interests but no defender of the Faith, for he loved a plethora of gods. He broke faith with God but not with the Empire). The devout Christian Agathias, who composed his *Historiae* in the late sixth century, writes: "In the twenty-fourth year of his [i.e. Shapur's] reign, the city of Nisibis fell into Persian hands. It had long been subject to the Romans and it was their own emperor, Jovian, who surrendered and abandoned it. The previous emperor, Julian, had penetrated into the heart of the Persian Empire, when he died suddenly and Jovian was proclaimed emperor by the generals and the troops. Hampered by the recentness of his accession and by the prevailing confusion engendered no doubt by the state of emergency that had brought him to power, and finding himself, moreover, in the middle of enemy territory, he was in no position to effect a leisured and ordered settlement of affairs. In his anxiety, therefore, to terminate his sojourn in a foreign and hostile land and to return with all speed to his own country, he became party to an ignoble treaty, which to this very day is a blot on the Roman state. By it he confined thereafter the extent of the Empire within new frontiers, whittling away its far-flung corners." Such was the longevity and persistence of the costly rhetoric of empire even when the reality was but a shadow of its former self.

to close scrutiny, approval and formal ratification by both emperors. They were then placed side by side, carefully compared and brought into line by two teams of translators, six Persian and six Greek, so as to leave no possible loophole for misunderstanding on either side. After which, the Greek and Persian ambassadors affixed their respective seals to both sets of documents whilst facsimiles of these were retained and reserved for the official records of both states. Of the thirteen clauses that make up the treaty as it has come down to us, clause nine is particularly important since it attempts to define respective spheres of influence with a view to avoiding unnecessary conflicts. It reads as follows: "The forces of one state shall not attack or make war upon a people or any other territory subject to the other, but without inflicting or suffering injury they shall remain where they are so that they too might enjoy the peace".<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, this happy state of affairs did not long survive the death of Justinian in 565. His successor, Justin II, showed himself from the outset to be both indifferent to a worsening economic situation at home and determined to undo the work of his predecessor.<sup>44</sup> He also embarked on large-scale preparations for war. "For", as the Christian Latin verse panegyrist, Corippus, puts it, "already the thought of war was dominating his mind. Already standards and generals have been disposed, fleets, battle lines, forces, arms determined according to a new policy and silently made ready."<sup>45</sup> In the event, it took Justin just seven years to commit himself finally and irreversibly to war with Persia. In the summer of 572, an embassy, which Khusrau I had sent under the leadership of Sebokht, a Persian Christian, reached Constantinople. Both Khusrau's choice of ambassador and the conduct of negotiations on

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<sup>43</sup> See Menander, 62-72.

<sup>44</sup> One of Justin's first acts on making his public appearance in the Hippodrome was to placate the bankers who had lost a great deal of money following the deaths during the great plague of A.D. 542 of many wealthy debtors. Although Justinian had decreed that their heirs should pay the outstanding sums, Justin paid all these debts from the treasury, a move clearly intended to benefit the more affluent citizens, for which, see Corippus, 381-404. He also found money to give lavish rewards to his friends out of the public purse.

<sup>45</sup> See Corippus, 258-261: "... nam pectore toto / bellorum iam cura fuit. Iam signa ducesque / dispositi, classes, acies, exeritus, arma / consilio moderata novo taciteque parata." The translation used in the text is that of Averil Cameron.



the Persian side indicate a conciliatory approach aimed at averting an unnecessary war, if at all possible. Yet, Justin not only refused to pay the first annual subsidy due under the terms of the treaty, but threatened to intervene militarily on behalf of the Christians of Persian Armenia who, under the leadership of Vardan Mamikonean, had rebelled in 570 – 572 against Persian rule. When the Persian ambassador sought both in his official capacity and as a fellow Christian to dissuade the emperor from taking precipitate action, reminding him among other things that any invasion of Persian territory would, owing to the geographical distribution of that country's population, bring him into immediate conflict with his co-religionists, Justin retorted by threatening to march into Persia, slay Khusrau and himself place a king on the throne of Persia.<sup>46</sup>

Before concluding, however, it might prove helpful to consider briefly the nature of Byzantine-Iranian relations during the period in which they occurred. After eleven wars fought between the two empires in the space of less than two hundred and forty years (338 – 572), it was the twelfth, the only one in which Byzantium figured as the principal aggressor, that was to set in motion a series of events destined to destroy the precarious balance of prudent diplomacy and military force upon which the survival of both states depended. When the Armenian revolt spread to the neighbouring kingdom of Iberia, Justin embarked on a pre-emptive strike against Iranian territory. After a few short-lived successes, the Persian counter-attack neutralized the element of surprise and resulted in a series of disasters for Byzantium, culminating in the loss of Dara on the 15th of November, 573, the news of which finally tipped the scales of the deluded emperor's precarious mental balance. The empress Sophia,

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<sup>46</sup> *Menander*, 51-57. Incidentally, the following detail in the fragment just referred to illustrates the mood of near-hysteria and jingoistic overconfidence prevailing in the capital at the time: "Now, Sebokht was not accorded much of a reception by Justin when he made his way into the emperor's presence, especially since, when he went in to do the customary obeisance to the sovereign and prostrated himself on the ground, it so happened that the traditional Persian cap he was wearing fell off his head on to the ground. Interpreting this occurrence as a favourable omen, the officials and the people turned the emperor's head with their flattery, saying that Persia would soon submit to him. And so Justin was buoyed up with hopes of imaginary successes, was convinced that his dreams would come true. Accordingly, when Sebokht announced the purpose of his mission, the emperor treated him with studied disdain."

acting in concert with the *comes excubitorum*, Tiberius, took over the government and managed by a payment of 45,000 *solidi* to secure a one-year truce in the east, excluding Armenia. On the 7th of December, 574, during an interval of lucidity, the now clinically insane Justin was persuaded to nominate as *Caesar* Tiberius, who from this point onwards became the effective ruler of the empire, succeeding Justin officially as *Augustus* upon the latter's death in 578. Tiberius' policy of combining a strong hand with readiness to negotiate might have succeeded in bringing an end to hostilities and in restoring the *status quo ante* for Byzantium but for the death in 579 of the Persian emperor Khusrau I and the adoption of a more bellicose stance by his successor Hurmazd IV. Instead, the war dragged on, for the most part, inconclusively, throughout the rest of the reign of Tiberius I Constantine (578 – 582) into that of his successor Maurice (582 – 602). But, sometime in the second half of August, 589, there occurred an event which was not only remarkable *per se* in the history of Sasanian Iran, but was destined to have a sequel that was unthinkable in that highly centralized dynastic monarchy whose popular appeal and religious mystique were built around the notion of a single irreplaceable royal house: Bahram Chobin, on being dismissed and publicly humiliated by his sovereign Hurmazd IV on account of a defeat which he and his army had suffered in Caucasian Albania, rebelled with the overwhelming support of his troops. Bahram's initial intention may well have been to march against Hurmazd, depose him and replace him by his son Khusrau. But in the meantime, Hurmazd was deposed as the result of a palace conspiracy. This left Bahram no longer in the position of a potential kingmaker, but in that of a rebel, fearful for his own safety and unwilling, perhaps with good reason, to treat with his sovereign. Events had moved fast and would continue to do so. On the 15th of February, 590, Khusrau had been crowned king,<sup>47</sup> not more than four days, later Hurmazd had been murdered, and, by the 20th of February,<sup>48</sup> Bahram and his army were only a few miles distant from Ctesiphon. Bahram had

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<sup>47</sup> For the date, see M.J. Higgins (1939), especially 26-27, but the discussion to be found on 1-31 is vitally important. Hurmazd was deposed on the 6th of February, 590, for which date cf. M.J. Higgins (1939), 26, first paragraph.

<sup>48</sup> For the date, see M.J. Higgins (1939), 30.

little difficulty in defeating Khusrau's hastily assembled forces on the 28th of February,<sup>49</sup> but he was to face an insuperable obstacle on the 9th of March<sup>50</sup> when, unable to secure the collaboration of the nobles and the Zoroastrian clergy, he placed the diadem on his own head attempting to overthrow by the single act of self-coronation one of the mightiest pillars of Sasanian society, the principle of dynastic legitimacy. Khusrau, together with a small retinue, had fled on the 1st of March and eventually made his way to the Byzantine frontier to seek the protection of the emperor, Maurice, and his help in an effort to regain his throne. With only a few trusted advisers and lacking all experience in such matters, Khusrau was ill-equipped for the months of hard bargaining that were to follow. It was not until late autumn that Maurice officially promised aid to Khusrau in return for ceding Dara and Martyropolis to the Romans and relinquishing all claims to Armenia.<sup>51</sup> It must have looked as though Justin II's foolish boast was about to be made good, albeit in circumstances altered beyond anything that even the wildest conjectures might at the time have envisaged. But the man who restored Khusrau to his throne was himself destined to lose his own. Twelve years later, as the result of a rapidly deteriorating military and economic situation, a revolt broke out among the army on the Danube, which chose the centurion Phocas as a rival candidate for the imperial throne. Simultaneously, in the capital, the Blues and the Greens both rose up against the imperial government. Maurice was overthrown and Phocas was acclaimed emperor.

When, shortly after his accession, Phocas had Maurice put to death, Khusrau was afforded for the first and last time in his life the opportunity of combining self-interest with virtuous conduct: the murder of his friend and benefactor, Maurice, was clearly pretext enough for an invasion of Byzantine territory. In 605, the Persian army broke through the frontier defences, took the fortress of Dara, swiftly penetrated into Asia Minor itself, and captured Caesarea in Cappadocia. By 610, the whole of Armenia

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<sup>49</sup> M.J. Higgings (1939).

<sup>50</sup> Discussion of the date, M.J. Higgings (1939), 28 – 31.

<sup>51</sup> For a detailed discussion of these events and their general significance for Sasanian and Byzantine history, cf. D. Frendo (1989), 77-88.

had fallen, and a Persian army was poised in readiness for the conquest of Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt. The same year saw the overthrow of Phocas. The exarch of Carthage, Heraclius, had rebelled against an increasingly oppressive regime and, after Egypt had thrown in its lot with him, he sent a fleet to Constantinople under the command of his son, also named Heraclius. On the 3rd of October, the younger Heraclius' fleet appeared before Constantinople. Two days later, Phocas was mutilated and put to death and, on the same day, Heraclius received the imperial crown from the hands of the patriarch.

When, in Gibbon's memorable phrase, Heraclius had "punished a tyrant and ascended his throne,"<sup>52</sup> Khusrau's position became more complicated. The customary embassy sent by Heraclius to the Persian court to announce his accession was summarily dismissed and its members put to death; the embassy sent five years later by the Byzantine Senate in the hope of legitimizing Heraclius' position in the eyes of the Sasanian monarch fared no better. A few more years of ever more dazzling victories proved sufficient to convert Khusrau's view of constitutional niceties from refusal to recognize Heraclius as the legitimate successor of Maurice to refusal to recognize the Byzantine State's continued right to exist.

The principle events of the reign of Heraclius read like a catalogue of disasters. In the autumn of 613, Damascus fell, and early in 614, Caesarea and the other cities along the coast of Palestine. At the beginning of spring in the same year, Jerusalem surrendered on terms and received a Persian garrison. While a little more than a month later, the Christian population of the city, and the surrounding countryside, confident that help from Heraclius would soon be forthcoming, drove out the Persian garrison, but it was not long before the Persian general Shahrbarāz got wind of what had happened. He hastily assembled his forces, then moved against Jerusalem and laid siege to it. Resistance was stubborn but futile. After nineteen days of sustained assault, the walls were breached and a general massacre of the Christian population ensued. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was robbed of its treasures and set on fire, and the

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<sup>52</sup> E. Gibbon (1898), 174. For the date of the rebellion of the elder Heraclius, see A. Pernice (1905), 27.

most treasured relic of Christendom, the Holy Cross, was carried off to Ctesiphon. But worse was yet to come: the conquest of Egypt, the richest province of the empire, began in the spring of 619 and was soon completed, thus seriously imperilling the grain supply of the capital.

Nevertheless, and despite a climate of severe economic hardship, a bold and desperate move, which would mark a turning point in the course of events, was made in 621 with the acquiescence of the clergy and the active co-operation of the patriarch Sergius. All the sacred vessels and other precious objects of gold and silver were melted down and turned into money to be used in Heraclius' war effort. In the autumn of 627, the final Byzantine counter-offensive began, with Heraclius advancing south into the heart of the Persian Empire. At the beginning of December, the Byzantines halted at Nineveh and the most decisive battle of the war was fought. The Persian army was practically wiped out. Heraclius continued his victorious advance and, at the beginning of 628, occupied Dastagerd, the King's favourite residence, from which he had been forced to beat a hasty retreat. In the spring of 628, Khusrau was deposed and murdered,<sup>53</sup> and his son and successor, Kavad Sheroe, immediately came to terms with Heraclius. But, when seen in retrospect, it is clear that Heraclius' victories and short-lived successes were to cost a great deal more than the

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<sup>53</sup> According to Th. Nöldeke (1879), 357, n.3, 372, ll. 8-9 and especially, 382, n.2. Khusrau was deposed on the 25th of February, 628, and was put to death on the 29th of February, 628. Nöldeke prefers these dates, extracted from the Iranian tradition to those offered by the contemporary *Paschal Chronicle*, namely the 24th and 28th respectively of February, 628. To explain the discrepancy of a single day between the two sets of figures, he suggests that either Heraclius or his informant used a conversion table that failed to take account of the (previous) leap year (i.e. 624), thus starting the year a day earlier than was really the case. This ingenious hypothesis, however, is based on its own table of correspondences between the Persian New Year and the Julian calendar (cf. Th. Nöldeke {1879}, 436) and the postulate upon which his entire reconstruction rests (Th. Nöldeke {1879}, 406 {not, 407, as Bickerman [1983] states}), namely, that the Sasanian year was never intercalated has been called into question by E. Bickerman (1983), 787-788. Another, perhaps simpler, hypothesis with regard to the dates supplied by the *Paschal Chronicle* has apparently never been suggested. Perhaps on a particular day quite close to the events in question, Heraclius' informant told him: "Khusrau was deposed x days ago and executed y days after that" and Heraclius, knowing what day it was, using the Julian calendar and being capable of doing simple arithmetic, would have had little difficulty in furnishing his victory dispatch with the two dates that have been preserved in the *Paschal Chronicle*. None of which precludes the possibility that such an informant may have been a day out in the date which he gave Heraclius.

treasures of St Sophia: on the 20th of August, 636, the Byzantine army in Syria was virtually annihilated at the Yarmūk by Muslim forces under the command of Khālīd b. al-Walīd,<sup>54</sup> and late in the same year, Heraclius was compelled to evacuate Syria in order to regroup his forces and strengthen the defences of Anatolia. Directed as it now was against two empires that were fatally weakened and extensively ruined, the momentum of the Arab Conquests soon became unstoppable. On the last day of May or the 1st of June, 637, a numerically much superior Persian army commanded by Rustam, the administrator of the Empire, was defeated by Sa'd-ibn-abi-Waqqāṣ' six-thousand-strong Arab contingent at al- Qādisiya. Finally, the last surviving member of the Sasanian Dynasty, Yazdgard III, was defeated after a series of defeats culminating in yet another Arab victory at the battle of Nihāvand in 642. Yazdgard fled to Marv but was overtaken and murdered in 651, thus bringing the Sasanian Dynasty to an end.<sup>55</sup> The eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire fared no better and on the 12th of September, 642, Egypt was surrendered to the Arabs.

Suddenly, the foolish boasts of Roman invincibility and Hellenic intellectual superiority no longer carried the same weight as they had done in previous centuries. Indeed, as the Syrian astronomer monk, Severus Sebokht, writing in A.D. 662, was to point out: "I shall not now speak of the knowledge of the Hindus,... of their subtle discoveries in the science of astronomy – discoveries even ore ingenious than those of the Geeks and Babylonians – of their rational system of mathematics, or of their method of calculation which no words can praise strongly enough – I mean the system using nine symbols. If these things were known by the people who think that that they alone have mastered the sciences because they speak Greek, they would perhaps be convinced that men of a different tongue know something as well as they do."<sup>56</sup> A whole world was in the process of being made, unmade and remade.

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<sup>54</sup> There is a full and useful discussion in W.E. Kaegi (2003), 239-243.

<sup>55</sup> See *C.H.I.* 3.1.172.

<sup>56</sup> See A. L. Basham (1954), vi. The translation is that of A. L. Basham. For a fuller English translation of this interesting passage from the Syriac treatise of Severus Sebokht, see S. Brock (1997), 222-223.

\* David Frendo was Head of the Department of Ancient Classics, University College, Cork, Ireland, and external examiner at the University of Malta.

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