

INTRODUCTION

The role of the last Sasanian Persian-East Roman/Byzantine war (603-628), customarily seen as the last great war of antiquity, in setting the stage for the sweeping political, religious, social and cultural transformations which by the end of the seventh century affected most of the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East cannot be overestimated. The various political, military, religious and cultural facets of the war continue to attract intense scholarly attention and periodic reassessments¹ triggered by reevaluations of the provenance and textual history of the written sources for the war and the expanding investigation of the archaeology of seventh century Asia Minor, Transcaucasia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt where most of military operations took place.

The written sources for the war (on a number of occasions supported by archaeological evidence) allow for the reconstruction of its general course and phases, although inevitable uncertainties and obscurities surround various details, localities and sub-stages of a military conflict which was extensive both in scope and time. Taking advantage of the political instability in Constantinople in the wake of the dethronement and execution of Maurice in 602 (who had helped him to regain his throne), the Sasanian ruler Xusraw II Parwez (590-628) exploited the imperial *coup d'état* as a fitting *casus belli* and intervened militarily in the subsequent political struggles. His intervention was to evolve eventually into a large-scale invasion of imperial territory, encroaching upon Byzantine Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Anatolia. The enthronement of Heraclius (610-641), son of the *exarchos* of Carthage, as a new emperor, following another *coup d'état* that

¹ For earlier studies of the conflict, see, for example, Gerland 1894; Baynes 1904; Pernice 1905; Baynes 1912; Baynes 1912a; Baynes 1912-1913; Christensen 1936:447-450; Frolow 1953; Ostrogorsky 1957:92-106; for more recent studies and summaries of the war cf. Stratos 1968:56-66, 103-117, 135-234; Oikonomidès 1971; Pertusi 1971; Oikonomidès 1975; Stratos 1979; Cameron 1979; Altheim-Stiehl 1992; Flusin 1992:2:67-93, 129-181; Haldon 1990:32-34, 41-47; Howard-Johnston 1994; Carile 1994:47-68; Howard-Johnston 1995; Frendo 1995; Howard-Johnston 1996; Haldon: 1999:19-21; Carile 2000; Frendo 2000; Russell 2001; Howard-Johnston 2002; Zuckerman 2002; Kaegi 2003: chs. 2-5; Foss 2003; Howard-Johnston 2004; Shahîd 2004; Sivan 2004; Howard-Johnston 2006; Dignas – Winter 2007:115-119; Mitchell 2007:410-416; Gariboldi 2009; Luttwak 2009:393-409; Ekkebus 2009; Howard-Johnston 2010:ch.14.1, 436-445. A valuable selection of translated extracts from relevant primary sources can be found in Greatrex – Lieu 2002:182-238.

brought down the usurper Phocas (602-610) initially failed to turn the tide of the Persian invasion: after conquering Damascus in 613 and Jerusalem in 614, the Sasanian troops pressed on with the occupation of Egypt between 616 and 621. Advancing through Asia Minor the Persian forces eventually approached the Bosphorus, setting the stage for a direct frontal assault on Constantinople, a threat made all the more dangerous as it was planned in alliance with the Turkic Avar khaganate. The Avar power base lay to the north of the Danube, but concurrent with the Persian advance Avar forces had been pursuing far-ranging incursions across the imperial Danube frontier and deep into the Balkans towards Constantinople.

These plans for a joint attack on and siege of Constantinople, however, proved abortive, and the complete fiasco of a Persian-Avaro-Slav military offensive against the imperial capital in 626 resulted not only in the withdrawal of Persian and Avar forces, but also signaled a turning point in the long war. By that time Heraclius' increasingly effective tactic of outmanoeuvring Persian armies in Asia Minor and (with the crucial assistance of the forces of his ally, the Western Turkic Khaganate) Transcaucasia, as well as expanding his campaigns deep into Sasanian territory, was beginning to change the course of war. After defeating a Persian army at Nineveh in late 627 Heraclius began threatening manoeuvres in relatively close proximity to the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon, pillaging the area and the deserted royal castles there. As political turmoil in Persia began to mount, Xusraw II was deposed and executed and amid the ensuing lasting Sasanian dynastic crisis Heraclius was able to procure a victorious truce, providing for the Persian evacuation of the occupied imperial territories and to start negotiations for the exact delineation of the Byzantine-Sasanian frontiers.

The prolonged conflict between Heraclius' and Xusraw's armies represented the concluding violent stages of four centuries of political and military rivalry that erupted periodically into bitter hostilities between the Sasanian and Roman, and later, the East Roman and Byzantine empires. This inter-imperial rivalry had a characteristic religious dimension which was to become more prominent during the exhausting and wide-scale Byzantine-Sasanian wars between 603 and 628. Following the Persian invasion of Byzantine Palestine in 614 Christian communities in the Byzantine empire and its Persian-occupied territories found themselves the recipient of

disturbing news and circulating stories of the Persian seizure and sack of Jerusalem in May of the same year, alongside reports of the apparent desecration and burning of churches and monasteries within and around the Holy City, including the Holy Sepulchre itself. Apart from the deportation of large groups of Jerusalem Christians, led by the Jerusalem Patriarch Zachariah to Ctesiphon, the Persian expatriation of church treasures and relics to the Sasanian capital, including the reliquary of the “True Cross” on which Jesus was supposed to have been crucified and whose discovery was commonly attributed to St. Helena (and by then associated by Christians and non-Christians alike with Roman Christian imperial victory ideology), were inevitably highly traumatic for Christian sensitivities.

The Persian capture of Jerusalem and the reported destruction and profanation of its paradigmatic Christian shrines was seen in contemporaneous (especially Byzantine) Christendom as an unparalleled calamity, provoking much soul-searching as the devastation of the “Holy Places of Christ” needed to be accounted for within some kind of Christian providential framework and salvation plan of history. Late Roman Christian reactions to natural and political cataclysms or military defeats were commonly based on a theodicy which attributed these adversities to divine punishment of the depravity or fatal flaws of the particular emperor during whose reign they occurred, or of the sins of the citizens of the empire who could not always live up to the elevated ideal of the Christian Roman empire as the “new Israel”. Amid the spiritual turmoil provoked by the fall of Jerusalem, the “Holy City of Christ”, the calamity could be blamed on the sins of its inhabitants generating contamination which could be “purified” only by the fire and sword of the invading Persians.² The imperial political and ecclesiastical elites must have been aware and apprehensive of Christian reactions which predictably could lay the blame for the calamity on some kind of culpable breaches and transgressions of Christian norms and piety at their highest levels.³

² Strategios, *Expugnatio* (Arabic version C), 6:9-11 (ed. Garitte 1974: vol. 2, t. 26, 120; Lat. transl. Garitte 1974: vol. 2, t. 27, 80).

³ See, for example, the summary of contemporaneous Christian reactions of the fall of Byzantine Jerusalem to the Sasanian army in Kaegi 2003:78-80. Cf. Wheeler 1991:77-80, 83-85; Wilken 1992:216-233; Olster 1998:79-84; Stemberger 1999:261-64.

Christian attitudes to and interpretations of the Persian conquest of Jerusalem could also fall back on the rhetorical strategies of Christian biblical typology as developed in the various genres of Byzantine literature, which viewed the fortunes of the empire and its imperial and ecclesiastical figures through the prism of paradigmatic Old Testament events and their protagonists. Christian Jerusalem could be thus re-discovered as the navel of the earth (Ezekiel 5:5), its Persian capture seen as the realization of the divine punishment to be unleashed on the city on account of its “abominations” pronounced in Ezekiel 16, whereas the travails of its Christian inhabitants could be depicted as being presaged by Israel’s Babylonian captivity and bondage in Egypt.⁴

The Byzantine counter-offensive in Sasanian-controlled territory resorted to some (ostensibly retaliatory) destruction of Sasanian secular and religious complexes, including one of the three principal fire temples of Sasanian Zoroastrianism, Adur-Gusnasp, at Takht-e Soleyman in north-western Iran.⁵ Byzantine campaigning was also accompanied by sustained anti-Sasanian religio-political propaganda targeting (particularly in Transcaucasia) the Christian subjects of the Persian state. Following the successful conclusion of the war in 628, the recovery of Jerusalem and the Holy Land was naturally to be seen in Byzantium as a sign of divine forgiveness and another indication of the divinely-ordained destiny of the “New Israel,” following on and confirming the trajectory of the anticipated restoration of Christian imperial order. After its negotiated restitution, along with other church relics abducted from Jerusalem, the True Cross was restored to the Holy City and reinstalled in the Church of Holy Sepulchre by Heraclius (reportedly in March 630) in what appear to have been carefully staged solemnities, replete with symbolic and ideological significance. The rescue and exaltation of other sacred relics from the Holy Land such as the Holy Sponge and Holy Lance had already been staged at an earlier period of the war in Constantinople, while Heraclius himself had undertaken a triumphant return to the imperial city during which, for the first time in the history of the Christian Roman empire, liturgical procedures were incorporated into the

⁴ For articulations of these notions, see Sophronios, *Anacreontica*, 14, 20 (ed. Gigante 1957:102-107, 123-128); Strategios, *Expugnatio* (Arabic version C), 18:8-11 (ed. Garitte 1974:vol. 2, t. 26, 135; Lat. transl. Garitte 1974:vol. 2, t. 27, 91).

⁵ Nikephoros, *Breviarum Historicum*, 12:41-43 (ed. Mango 1990:55); George of Pisidia, *Heraclius*, 2.167-230.

traditional victory parades.⁶ This sequence of ceremonial displays showed that the warrior-emperor and his court publicists intended to fortify and embellish his growing stature as a defender of Christendom and vehicle of divine will and salvation, as Heraclius' restitution of the True Cross clearly marked the symbolic climax of his Persian campaigns, portrayed as a victory for Roman/Byzantine Christianity. Heraclius' famed *restitutio crucis*, which later both in Eastern and Western Christendom was to be seen as the high point of his reign, appears also to have been the vital element of a religio-political programme underpinned by the evolving synthesis of late Roman/Byzantine eschatology and imperial ideology.

The purpose of this monograph is to explore the roots of some of the crucial elements of this religio-political programme which were conceptualized in reaction to the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and its repercussions for Byzantine political theology and Christian ideology of warfare.⁷

⁶ See the analysis of the incorporation of liturgical processions in Heraclius' victory celebrations in Constantinople in McCormick 1986:70-73, 391-92.

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