

EAST ROME, SASANIAN PERSIA AND THE END OF ANTIQUITY

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Each article has been given a Roman number in order of appearance, as listed in the Contents. This number is repeated on each page and is quoted in the index entries.

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning to the end of what we term the classical phase of ancient history, the Mediterranean world and its continental hinterland to the east formed a geopolitical and cultural continuum. Polities, great and small, competed with each other in a many-layered segmentary system, competition all too often taking the form of warfare. Immaterial cultures, manifesting themselves in language, belief-systems, traditional norms of behaviour as well as in the material realities of dress and adornment, structures and artefacts, expanded, contracted, evolved, intermingled in fluid patterns. At the highest level, two powers, each with its own increasingly well defined culture, one rooted in the west, in Mediterranean lands, the other in the east, in Iran, confronted one another.

Those powers might be evenly or ill matched. There might be dramatic swings in fortune, as in the fifth century BC when Achaemenid expansion was halted by the city-states of Greece, or in the late fourth century when Alexander temporarily united the whole developed world of western Eurasia. But Alexander could be seen, as he was by the last of the classical historians of antiquity, Theophylact Simocatta, as a mere plaything of fortune and his enterprise dismissed as doomed to failure. Simocatta spoke through Persian ambassadors, who addressed the court in Constantinople and argued that it was impossible for a single monarch to embrace the innumerable cares of the organisation of the universe. For the subsolar world was flawed and unstable. Political division was inherent.¹

From the third century BC to the early seventh century AD, the rival players – Seleucids, Ptolemies, Parthians, Romans and Sasanians – were grand polities with imperial pretensions, which had been able to establish and secure stable territories transcending regional divides. To the north lay a fluid, outer world of nomad and sedentary peoples, who might attack and cause damage but who could not pose a serious enduring threat. From continental Europe beyond the Alps, in the west, to the Urals, in the east, and the steppes which run on towards the Altai mountains, the northern world was drawn into the gravitational field

¹ *Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae*, iv.13.7–8, 11–12, ed. Carolus de Boor, rev. Peter Wirth (Stuttgart, 1972), trans. Michael and Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta* (Oxford, 1986), 121–22.

of southern powers. It was a binary world order which prevailed in western Eurasia for most of the classical period.

In the sphere of international relations, late antiquity may be said to have begun in the early third century AD, that century when, had they been able to observe events across the whole of Eurasia, church historians would have seen the hand of God at work in the political sphere more clearly than ever before. From its outer limits fronting the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans to its centre in the heart of Asia, the continent was shaken like a kaleidoscope. Huns brought the Han phase of unitary history to an end in China and, within a hundred and fifty years or so, were beginning to apply unprecedented pressure on the great powers of the west. In central Asia, Sogdians replaced Bactrians as prime organisers of long-distance commerce overland. In Iran, a new Persian dynasty, that of the Sasanians, rose from the fastnesses of the southern Zagros, swept aside the Arsacid rulers of the loosely organised Parthian empire, and bound together highland Iran, its eastern and western outliers (Khurasan and Azerbaijan), and the revenue-rich alluvial lands of Mesopotamia into a cohesive whole by engaging in a fierce war of aggression against the Romans. The Roman empire itself, battered by northern Germanic peoples as well as Persian armies, displayed extraordinary resilience but was forced to undergo a programme of fundamental institutional reform in order to survive.

The first of the pieces republished in this volume deals with the late antique phase of east-west relations in western Eurasia, when the refurbished Roman empire centred on the east Mediterranean confronted a revitalised Persian empire. A rough parity is documented, which lasted into the seventh century. Although Roman resources, in terms of manpower, agricultural and industrial production, assuredly exceeded Persian by a considerable margin, a balance of military power was achieved through the higher military gearing of the Sasanian state. That state showed its managerial capability in the sphere of large-scale agricultural infrastructure developments as well as in warfare. Apart from certain passages in Armenian historical texts which compensate for the absence of contemporary indigenous written sources by throwing thin shafts of light onto the Sasanian court and administrative system, the organisational capability of Iran in late antiquity can only be observed through its scattered material remains, whether large (excavated monuments, sites and irrigation schemes) or small (coin legends and mini-texts on official clay sealings). These latter sources, when aggregated, both demonstrate the existence of a network of provincial mints, under effective central direction, which sustained the monetary system necessary for efficient taxation and for the remuneration of officialdom and the military, and document the governing apparatus' ability to manage the localities via a layered system

of provincial government made more responsive to the centre by a system of checks and balances.²

Much less is said about the east Roman empire, mainly because its principal structural features are better known. The central role played by the city and its elite in local government has long been recognised, as have (1) the rise of the bishop as a rival locus of power to the civic aristocracy in the provinces, (2) a general tightening of the fiscal administration, and (3) the successful co-option of leading elements of provincial society into a deliberately expanded central apparatus of government, first as postholders, then as country members of the much enlarged Senate. Important aspects of fourth- to seventh-century history on either side of the frontier are also neglected. It is taken as read that Christianity was consolidating its position in east Roman society and was steadily tightening its grip on the minds of intelligentsia and people alike, and that the leading Iranian element in the Sasanian empire was infused with Zoroastrianism, as well as awareness, vague and deformed perhaps but nonetheless inspiring, of a distant, grand imperial past. Ideology, both religious and secular, was an essential vitalising and unifying force in both empires, exerted through a hierarchically ordered priesthood as well as through the court and the secular administration. It is also assumed – although this is much more contentious – that complex economies, with developed manufacturing sectors and ramified networks of long-distance exchange, underpinned both state structures.³

The paper on the great powers is concerned primarily with the structures and functioning of the two imperial states, their administrative capability, their fiscal downreach, their ability to project power abroad. Since their territories were not merely defined but defended, since permanent frontier installations enabled them to economise on manpower and recurrent expenditure in normal times and to concentrate their forces in chosen theatres at times of crisis, the defensive systems of both sides are described sector by sector. Both Romans and Persians can be shown to have had a preference for defence-in-depth, for

² Rika Gyselen and Ludvik Kalus, *Deux trésors monétaires des premiers temps de l'Islam* (Paris, 1983), 143–55; Hodge Mehdi Malek, 'A Seventh Century Hoard of Sasanian Drachms', *Iran* 31 (1993), 77–93, at 86–90; Rika Gyselen, *Nouveaux matériaux pour la géographie historique de l'empire sassanide: sceaux administratifs de la Collection Ahmad Saeedi*, *Studia Iranica* 24 (Paris, 2002).

³ Important recent contributions: Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley–Los Angeles, 2005); Peter Heather, 'New Men for New Constantines: Creating an Imperial Elite in the Eastern Mediterranean', in Paul Magdalino, ed., *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th Centuries* (Aldershot, 1994), 11–33; Peter Sarris, *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2006); J. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia* (London, 1996); Sean Kingsley and Michael Decker, ed., *Economy and Exchange in the East Mediterranean during Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2001).

the development of fortified forward zones which could also act as platforms for offensive actions. But each was ready to adapt their strategy to suit the particular topographic features and climatic characteristics of different regions.

The second and third pieces home in on a small, but vital section of their common frontier, the valley of the Arsaias river (the modern Murat Su) in south-west Armenia. The river draws its waters from a long, fan-shaped basin (the modern Ağrı plain, medieval Bagrewand) set in a landscape of volcanoes and lava flows, and then threads its way west from plain to plain, skirting the territories of Manzikert, Taron, Asthianene, Balabitenne, Sophene and Anzitene, until it meets the Euphrates north-east of Melitene. A wide belt of open hill country to the north formed an inviting route for attack by either great power at the beginning of the sixth century, when the frontier was not fortified and movement across it could not be regulated. It was an arbitrary frontier, transecting as it did a broad natural thoroughfare and dividing a culturally homogeneous, although fractious, Armenian cultural zone into Persian and Roman sectors. Paper II describes Anastasius' regional fortification programme and locates the new fortress of Citharizon in Asthianene, where it was well placed both to control east-west movement across the frontier and north-south movement over the Armenian Taurus to the south and around the western edge of the lowering mass of the Bingöl Dağ to the north. Note is also taken of the development, in the second half of the sixth century, of a proper system of defence-in-depth, when intermediate sites, between Asthianene and Anzitene, were fortified. Anzitene itself is subjected to yet closer scrutiny in the third piece, which makes a foray into the tenth century, when it was disputed between Byzantium and the Hamdanid emirate of Aleppo.⁴

Why, the reader may ask, is so much space devoted to so small a region? There is a first antiquarian reason. It is useful to describe as precisely and fully as possible the physical framework of human history, since human activities are constrained by terrain, by the geographical disposition of potential resources (arable and pastoral), by the alignment of routes and location of obstacles to movement. Man's impact on landscape is also worth documenting: cities, towns and smaller settlements, forts and castles, palaces and cult centres, places of all sorts named in texts must be fixed on the ground if extant historical narratives are to be followed closely and the principal structural features of states and societies analysed. Any addition to knowledge, however restricted, is a boon. In this case, though, the identifications proposed matter rather more, because of the strategic importance of south-west Armenia in late antiquity and the middle ages. Its configuration was transformed, first by large-scale investment in military

⁴ See also T.A. Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey: An Architectural and Archaeological Survey*, 4 vols. (London, 1987–90) and Robert H. Hewsen, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas* (Chicago, 2001).

infrastructure by Romans and, presumably, Persians (but there is no evidence about the latter's countermeasures), and second by a benign effect of sustained economic growth in the Abbasid Caliphate, the urbanisation of a remote frontier region by the tenth century. Chance (along with inertia, a prime historical force) has also played a part. It so happens that three extant sources transmit detailed, document-based information about this particular region – Procopius' account of Justinian's building programme (written probably in the early 550s), George of Cyprus' late sixth-century revision of an earlier administrative geography which lists, *inter alia*, new fortresses and settlements, and, on the far side of the dark period which follows, detailed Arab campaign narratives dating from the middle of the tenth century which enumerate and classify settlements. It also so happens that I travelled in the region in the 1980s, a period of unprecedented local security, and thus was able to gain direct, autoptic knowledge of the landscape and to seek out key sites on the ground.⁵

There were many classical analogues of the dispatch which, it has been postulated, underlay the extant concise prose narrative of Sayf al-Dawla's lightning raid into Anzitene and Sophene in 956. In bureaucratic societies such as the late Roman and Sasanian, management of the flow of information was a vital task of government. It was much facilitated by use of writing, which could convey data, without corruption, over large distances. Written communications kept postholders of all sorts, in all parts of both empires, informed of court events and government policies, and, yet more important, enabled both emperor and *shahanshah* to watch over the activities of provincial authorities, diplomatic missions and military commanders in the field. We should envisage circulars, communiqués, dispatches and reports of all sorts continuously winging their way from centre to periphery and vice versa. All were undoubtedly carefully composed. No serving officer or official was likely to advertise his failures. Similarly the imperial and royal authorities could be expected to play up successes, pass over embarrassments, and gloss failures. But hard data were conveyed and they are to be treasured by latter-day historians.

Three pieces (nos. IV–VI) probe extant texts in Greek, Armenian and Arabic for such hard data, which may then be used for the reconstruction of the most dramatic phase of great power relations in the first third of the seventh century. The texts have to be appraised as edited wholes, if they are to be used safely. Each is therefore subjected to a general examination. Such information as survives about author and circumstances of writing is gathered together. The sources used are identified, insofar as this is possible when there is little to go on apart from the finished works themselves. The texts are scoured for evidence about

⁵ James Howard-Johnston and Nigel Ryan, *The Scholar and the Gypsy: Two Journeys to Turkey, Past and Present* (London, 1992).

the author's working-methods, the criteria used to select material, the extent to which it was reworked, the principles of arrangement adopted, and the intended scope. Two general conclusions can be drawn from this pernickety work: (1) that, despite belonging to three distinct historical traditions, all the authors under consideration were discreet and refrained from impressing their own character and views upon the materials which they had assembled, preferring to transmit it with minimal modification (chiefly abbreviation) to their future readers; and (2) that they strove to find sources of demonstrable worth from which to extract material – original documents (which include dispatches, letters, fasti fleshed out with summary official notices), contemporary and near-contemporary biographies (laudatory in tone), dispatch-based campaign narratives, and an official account of Persian history, the *Khwadaynamag* or 'Book of Lords'. The last cannot stand comparison with the others. For it presented a carefully filleted version of the past and was transmuted in the course of transmission to later authors. Nonetheless it preserves much of value and enables us to view events from an Iranian perspective.

Historians, it can be argued, became more scholarly at the very end of antiquity, less preoccupied with literary veneer, more concerned to record than to entertain and impress. Even a writer as gifted as George of Pisidia was content to recycle the Emperor Heraclius' dispatches from the field, confining his own additions to a number of short poems which highlighted the emperor's personal contribution by word and deed to ultimate victory. The Armenian authors of the *History of Khosrov* (Heraclius' great adversary Khusro II Abarvez, 590–628) and the *History to 682* likewise acted as conduits for the material which they had gathered, and limited themselves to occasional linguistic retouching. The most scholarly was al-Tabari, the leading theologian and legal theorist of his day, who took care to cite all the Arab tradents used to supplement his main source, the *Khwadaynamag*.

Relations between the great powers were stormy at the outset, when the young Sasanian dynasty sought to impress its authority on the heterogeneous peoples of Iran, Transcaucasia and Mesopotamia and to assert itself *vis à vis* the Roman empire. But once a rough parity had been achieved and acknowledged, once awareness grew of the increased danger from the north posed by the Huns, the first Altaic nomads to gain control of the steppes west of the central mountain spine of Eurasia, the two sides composed their difference and were able to co-exist in reasonable amity, except for two fleeting moments of crisis, for well over a hundred years. But relations deteriorated at the end of the fifth century. Peace was brusquely thrust aside in autumn 502, when the Persians crossed the frontier in Armenia in massive force, marched south, besieged and captured the great city of Amida in the upper Tigris basin. This inaugurated a new era of

increasingly troubled relations, in the course of which five wars were fought, the intensity and scale of fighting growing with the passage of time.⁶

If an ultimate cause is to be sought for this breakdown in Roman-Persian relations, it is probably to be found in a basic structural feature of the Sasanian empire, in the friability of landscape and society. An essential constituent of Iran and its dependent outer territories was what a great French sociological historian of the Middle East termed the *terre d'insolence*. He was referring to relatively wild, refractory tracts of land, lightly populated if populated at all – swamps and tangled sub-tropical forests, mountain ranges, bare lava flows, sand desert and salt desert, semi-desert and steppe – which enveloped discrete, sometimes widely separated, blocks of cultivable and cultivated land, each block normally supporting a single central place. With but few exceptions – the alluvial plain of lower Mesopotamia, the north-western section of the Iranian plateau and Khurasan on its north-eastern margin – there were no regions capable of sustaining continuous agriculture over hundreds kilometres, where a pyramidal settlement structure might be built up in the course of time, from small village to large, from large village to market town, from market town to city, and from city to regional metropolis. The landscape consisted rather of a chequer-board of developed territories, each centering on a market town or city, and of void or semi-void areas, *terres d'insolence*.⁷

There was consequently a brittleness inherent in the structure of the Sasanian state which was not paralleled in its Roman counterpart, rooted as the latter was in temperate lands fringing the Mediterranean (although the Romans had *terres d'insolence* of their own, on the desert frontage of Palestine and Syria, in the mountains of Anatolia and in the western Balkans). The Persians also had to rely on land rather than sea communications to bind together the culturally (and geographically) heterogeneous components of their empire. More effort, ideological and administrative, together with more vertical social bonding between gentry, aristocracy and royal dynasty, was required to hold the Sasanian state together in normal times. At a time of crisis – and there was no crisis more serious than that engendered by utter defeat at the hands of nomad Hephthalites in 484 – the state was liable to fly apart and the established order to be disrupted. Dynastic instability, a radical religious movement, and what could be construed as social revolution characterised the two decades following the death of the *shahanshah* Peroz in the steppes in 484. Iran was in a febrile state and Peroz's son Kavad, who lost and regained his throne, had little choice but to resort to

⁶ Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, Part II AD 363–630: A Narrative Sourcebook* (London, 2002).

⁷ X. de Planhol, *Les fondements géographiques de l'histoire de l'Islam* (Paris, 1968).

a foreign war to consolidate his position and once again to bind together the diverse peoples of his far-flung realm.

With hindsight, events unfolded with grim inevitability after Kavad's surprise invasion of Roman Armenia in massive force in autumn 502. The Romans fought back, deploying perhaps the largest army they had ever fielded in a single theatre of war in 504. A twenty-year interlude of uneasy peace (505–26) saw successive Roman regimes prepare the ground for a war of revenge. That war, when it came in 527–32, proved inconclusive, but provoked, in due course, a reciprocal attack by Kavad's successor Khusro I Anushirvan, who succeeded in amassing an immense stock of prestige as well as booty, by breaking the recently agreed 'Endless Peace' and attacking in 540 at a time of exceptional Roman overstretch. The wheel seemed to be turning full circle. This third war was to drag on for twenty years (540–61). The fourth and fifth would be fought yet more ferociously, on a scale and with an intensity reminiscent of the first round of Sasanian aggression in the middle of the third century. Had any early Islamic historian been capable of taking a detached, global view of events a century later, he would surely have detected God's hand at work in the decades immediately preceding and following the Prophet's birth around 570. The binary world order was being shaken more and more violently. Something new and unprecedented was in gestation.

The *coup de grâce* to the old international system was delivered by Justin II, heir of Justinian, in the winter of 568–9, when he welcomed a diplomatic approach from the Turks who had built up a transcontinental empire, stretching from the inner Asian frontiers of China to the Caspian, in little more than a decade. The north had now generated a nomad power capable of matching either of the two long-established sedentary empires of the south. In this case, the Turks seem to have been playing off Romans against Persians, offering to ally with the former and thereby triggering a bitter war (573–91) which was to last until both sides began to crack under the strain. The Roman field army in the east instituted in 588 a soft mutiny (retaining its formations and holding its positions but refusing to accept imperial orders), until, after a year, it was induced to resume normal operations. The Persians were worse affected: the Sasanian *shahanshah*, Hormizd IV, was overthrown by a rebel aristocratic general in the east, and his son, Khusro Abarvez, was forced to flee west and to rely on Roman arms to recover his throne (591).⁸

The Turks and another formidable nomad power, the Avars who controlled eastern Europe, were drawn into the last and greatest of these Roman-Persian wars. The sound of what amounted to a long, rolling thunderstorm in human

⁸ Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford, 1988), 286–304.

affairs could also be heard far to the south, in the recesses of Arabia, where Muhammad was beginning to speak, in compelling language, about the rapid approach of the end of time, about the divine judgement which would follow, when individuals, plucked from their kinship groups, held responsible for every thought, word and deed, would appear before a single, awesome divinity. In a first phase of large-scale attritional warfare (603–10), the Persians forced their way step by step across heavily fortified Roman frontier zones, north and south of the Armenian Taurus, and temporarily destroyed the conventional fighting capability of the Roman army. There followed a phase of swift advance (610–21), in which Persian forces overran and occupied the rich provinces of Syria, Palestine and Egypt, before, in a third and final phase (622–28), the *shahanshah* Khusro II strove to annihilate the east Roman empire, by trapping and destroying the expeditionary force which its ruler, described by Khusro as a mere brigand, was leading on an apparently forlorn counterattack, as well as by capturing its nerve centre (Constantinople). The climax of the war in 624–8 forms the subject of the last three pieces, which discuss (1) the siege of Constantinople in 626 by a huge and well-equipped Avar-led army with Persian backing (VII), (2) the two bold counteroffensive campaigns of 624–6 and 627–8 commanded by the Emperor Heraclius in person (VIII), and (3) the devastating effect of those campaigns and of Turkish successes in Transcaucasia on Khusro's political standing and the virtually bloodless *putsch* which deposed him on the night of 23rd–24th February 628 (IX).

A durable peace was patched together in 630. Heraclius set about the difficult task of reconciling the hostile confessions within Christendom, while a new ruler, Yazdgerd III, fended off rival claimants and gained firm control over the Sasanian empire. All too soon, though, a fourth force was to declare itself, this time from the south. United by Muhammad, empowered by faith, the Arabs would overwhelm the armies of both imperial powers in what can only be likened to a human *tsunami*. A new era opened.

JAMES HOWARD-JOHNSTON

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The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: a Comparison

THIS PAPER presents some provisional conclusions reached by an outsider who has made a number of forays into the history of the Sasanian empire, Rome's great eastern rival in late antiquity. Much of the expertise which ideally should underlie such a paper – knowledge of Pahlavi and Arabic, archaeological training, and wide-ranging travels over Iran which alone can give the historian of institutions, policy-making and policy-outcomes a real understanding of his subject – is lacking in this case. All that the outsider can claim in compensation for these grave defects are the advantages which come from a position of detachment, a willingness to question received opinion within the field and attention to the general rather than the particular. If positive contributions can be made by a Byzantinist who reaches back into the late Roman period, they will come from fresh scrutiny of those Roman (and Armenian) texts which throw light on Sasanian institutions and from an appreciation of the performance of the Sasanian empire in foreign affairs, principally (because of the bias of the surviving evidence) in its relations with the east Roman empire.

After giving a preliminary outline of Sasanian history and great power relations from the fourth to the early seventh century, concluding with a comparison of their military resources (section I) and an

unavoidably selective survey of the extant source material and its failings (section II), the paper concentrates on the fifth and sixth centuries. Rather than probing the prolonged internal crisis in its various political, social and religious manifestations, which was triggered by disaster in the steppe in 484 and Turan's temporary hegemony over Iran (a subject strictly for professionals, who are as yet far from devising a definitive interpretation),¹ attention is directed at the periods of relative calm which frame it and an attempt is made to outline the main enduring structural features of the Sasanian empire. Close examination of the reforms of Kavād I and Khusro I has been undertaken by Zeev Rubin; it will be suggested here that there was probably more institutional continuity than has sometimes been supposed.

The agitated surface of events is largely disregarded, including the final climactic conflict in the first three decades of the seventh century (since this still awaits its historian). Instead, sketches are given of the geopolitical strengths and weaknesses of the Sasanian state (section III), its level of economic development, city life being taken as the best indicator (section IV), and the apparatus and techniques devised and applied by the centre to manage the empire (section V).²

I

The revolution which transformed the relatively loose-knit and peaceable Parthian empire of *ca.* 200 A.D. into a militaristic and expansionist power by 230 can only be traced in outline, on the basis of late, mutant versions of Sasanian dynastic history presented by al-Ṭabarī in his great historical compendium (put together in the early tenth century) and Firdawsī's massive epic poem, the *Shāhnāma* (completed under Ghaznavid patronage in A.D. 1010). Although general corroboration is provided by the *Res Gestae* of Shāpūr I and by numismatics, much remains and will remain

¹ An important recent contribution is that of P. Crone, "Kavad's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt", *Iran* 29 (1991), 21-42.

² I am immensely indebted to three scholars for inducting me into different aspects of this vast topic. Zeev Rubin provided, in numerous conversations, a basic grounding in Sasanian history. Jean-François Salles opened up exciting vistas into the archaeology of the Gulf and the economic history of the Indian Ocean. St. John Simpson provided an extensive and much-needed archaeological commentary on the draft presented to the Workshop. Several participants at the Workshop also made valuable suggestions, which have been gratefully received (especially the characteristically forthright comments of Patricia Crone). None of them, of course, should be held responsible for the errors of fact or interpretation which may be detected in what follows.

uncertain about the relationships of the chief protagonists, individual episodes, the sequence of events and their absolute chronology. However, a reconstruction on the following lines has won more or less general acceptance.³

Defeat in the west, the third in less than a century, was the catalyst for change. The victorious advance of Severus's forces into the heart of Parthian Mesopotamia and the annexation of strategically important territory in the north (where the provinces of Osroene and Mesopotamia were created in A.D. 197 and 199) seem to have dealt a fatal blow to the prestige of the Arsacid dynasty.⁴ Power now leaked away on an increasing scale to a multitude of local principalities. A deferred succession crisis which began *ca.* A.D. 213 and was never resolved gave a final boost to secessionist tendencies in the vast, geographically diverse territories of Iran.

It was from the remote, relatively rich, southeastern end of Persia proper, from the heartland of the Achaemenid empire around Iṣṭakhr, that the Sasanians made their successful bid for power.⁵ It seems to have been founded on a prominent position in the local Zoroastrian hierarchy (the high priesthood of the temple of Anahita at Iṣṭakhr inherited by Pāpak from his father Sāsān) and tenure of the governorship of the district of Dārābjird to the south (held by Pāpak's son Ardashīr). The start of the Sasanian era in A.D. 205-206 probably marks the first open rebellion by father and son, which began rapidly to gather momentum. It appears to have been a classic case of a dynamic process of power accumulation in a world of competing local leaderships.

³ K. Schippmann, *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidischen Reiches* (Darmstadt, 1990), supplemented where necessary by G. Herrmann, *The Iranian Revival* (London, 1977).

⁴ T.B. Mitford, "Cappadocia and Armenia Minor: Historical Setting of the *Limes*", in H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds., *ANRW* II. vii. 2 (Berlin-New York, 1980), 1169-1228.

⁵ Broken relief isolates such valleys as there are in the main Zagros range along its whole length from its northwest extremity rooted in the mountains of Kurdistan as far as the wild country of the upper Khirsān, Mehrān and Zuhrān rivers above the Gulf coast. From this point, at the northern margin of the heartland of Fārs (Persia), the ridges of the Zagros splay out as fingers of upland within a plateau, leaving a number of substantial arable basins and facilitating communications. The first relatively easy route crossing the Zagros and linking Mesopotamia with Iran south of that from Baghdad to Hamadān via the Diyālā valley, runs in a great loop to the southeast past Bishāpūr, then turns north and follows the Shāhpūr valley past Shīrāz (an Arab foundation) and Iṣṭakhr (Shīrāz's predecessor as regional capital), until it reaches the great interior plateau (W.B. Fisher, "Physical Geography", *The Cambridge History of Iran* I. *The Land of Iran* [Cambridge, 1968], 17-29).

The Sasanians started from a position of advantage within their local region, able as they were to draw on both religious and secular power-bases, and seem to have capitalised on their initial local successes by projecting themselves both as earthly protagonists of Zoroastrianism and as heirs of the Achaemenid dynasty, thereby implying that they could restore Iran to its rightful position of hegemony in western Asia and the Near East.⁶ Each success, first the consolidation of their authority around Iṣṭakhr, then its extension south to Jūr and east into the plateau region as far as Kirmān, then northwest over the rugged, inaccessible terrain of the main Zagros range to the borders of Mesopotamia, increased the resources at their disposal and, no less important, enhanced their prestige in surrounding regions.

By April, A.D. 224, with the whole of Persia now under his control, Ardashīr (Pāpak had died, perhaps as early as 208) was able to confront and defeat the more successful of the two rival Arsacid rulers. With the massive increase in prestige which this victory assuredly brought him, there was a sharp acceleration in the rate of expansion of his power thereafter: first he overran the districts of Hamadān, Qum, and Rayy in the northwest sector of the plateau; then he entered Atropatene, traditional heartland of Zoroastrianism, centering on the great fire temple at Takht-i-Sulaymān, and established his authority there; and, finally, he invaded the densely settled, revenue-rich lowlands of Mesopotamia, disposed of the senior but weaker of the two Arsacid claimants, and was crowned King of Kings in his stead in the capital, Ctesiphon, in September, A.D. 226.

The first task confronting Ardashīr now was to begin the long, slow process of consolidating his hold on Iran proper, by intensifying gradually his authority over the semi-independent principalities and naturally refractory highland regions of which it was composed. But it was also essential for the usurper to demonstrate before too long the new dynasty's superiority over its ousted predecessor by taking to the field against the principal adversary of Iran, the Roman empire, and winning striking victories or successes which could be presented as such. The westward campaigns opened in 230 with attacks on Roman frontier districts, in the

⁶ Cf. G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth. Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993), 27-34.

course of which a determined attempt was made to take Nisibis, the greatest Roman city of the frontier region. Although this offensive was contained without too much difficulty by Alexander Severus's forces, partly because it had been signalled in advance by a propaganda barrage, partly because the Romans faced as yet no serious distractions elsewhere, substantial successes were achieved within a few years. Nisibis and Carrhae were captured, perhaps as early as 235-36, and Hatra, a well-defended city in a strategic position south of the Euphrates, which had gone over to the Romans by 235 (? a sign of the increased threat perceived from the Sasanians), fell in its turn in 240-41.

Ardashīr's son and successor, Shāpūr I (241/2-270/3), showed the Romans that the nascent Sasanian empire was a far more formidable rival than the Parthian had been. The shattering of Gordian's major counteroffensive down the Euphrates at Misiche in February 244 was the first of three decisive victories in the field, which secured Iran a position of parity in western Eurasia. The second came in 253 when Shāpūr's army attacked up the Euphrates, crushed the Roman field army at Barbalissus, captured Hierapolis, devastated northern Syria and captured Antioch. The third was even more impressive, since Shāpūr, advancing this time up the Tigris valley, defeated and captured the Emperor Valerian near Edessa in 260; he followed this up by crossing the Euphrates at Samosata and dispersing his forces so as to extend the swathe of destruction to Cilicia and Cappadocia as well as Syria.

These are the three principal items in the catalogue of his achievements which Shāpūr recorded in the long inscription carved on the "Cube of Zoroaster", an Achaemenid tower at Naqsh-i-Rustam, a necropolis of Persepolis. They were also commemorated in rock-reliefs at Naqsh-i-Rustam and Bishāpūr, and by the foundation of cities in Iran and Mesopotamia (including Pērōz-Shāpūr at Misiche). There were two other successes, however, which added greatly to the geopolitical strength of his empire – his intervention in Transcaucasia in 253 which extracted Armenia and Iberia from the Roman sphere of influence, and his activities (? military as well as diplomatic) which pushed Sasanian influence beyond the eastern frontiers of Iran and which probably occupied much of the decade 262-72 when there was little prospect of danger from a Roman empire beset from within and without.

Several generations were to pass before the Romans were prepared to acknowledge the unpalatable truth that the Sasanians were their equals.⁷ Massive expenditure on military installations in frontier zones, two rounds of localised combat in northern Mesopotamia (337-50 and 359-61), much diplomatic manoeuvring in Transcaucasia, three more invasions targeted at Mesopotamia (those of Carus, Galerius and Julian in 283, 298 and 363 respectively), and disaster (both in the east, in 363, and in the north, in 378) were required before the Romans finally committed themselves to a policy of co-existence. This had been openly advocated by the Sasanians in negotiation in 299, had been tacitly followed by Shāpūr I after 260 (there is no other plausible explanation for his failure to exploit the gathering crisis of the Roman empire in those years), but received its strongest backing from the north in the 370s, when the Roman empire first felt the full power of Turan with the coming of the Huns to eastern Europe.

The new co-operative spirit was first manifested, when, probably in 387, Theodosius I agreed to a partition of Transcaucasia which was highly unfavourable to the Romans (the lion's share of Armenia, all of Iberia except for Lazica, and the whole of Albania being allocated to the Sasanian sphere of influence). This deal opened a stable phase in the relations of the two great powers. Awareness of the danger which threatened them both from the great nomad powers of the north and east (supplemented by a realistic appreciation of the effectiveness of each other's heavily fortified frontier zones) overlaid an underlying antagonism, which had its roots in the fundamental opposition of monotheism and dualism as well as in an inherently unstable geopolitical conjunction (with artificial frontiers cutting across both the Fertile Crescent and the Armenian causeway which connected the lowland and highland territories of the two powers). In the century following the partition of Transcaucasia, there were only two crises which led to war, in 421-22 and 441, each of which was rapidly defused. If anything, these conflicts served to extend and solidify the peace agreements, by identifying the most contentious issues and introducing compromises acceptable to both sides. Official treatment of Christians within the Sasanian empire was perhaps the most important of these issues, followed by rivalry for beduin clients in the desert to the south where there were no clear lines of demarcation, and competing fortification

⁷ Authoritative recent accounts of Sasanian-Roman relations are to be found in R.C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy. Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds, 1992) and L.M. Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian* (Oxford, 1988), 197-218.

programmes in border regions. Successive peace agreements were extended to regulate each of these matters.

That the commitment of the Romans was genuine is made plain by the restraint they showed either under extreme provocation (for example, their non-intervention during the crack-down on Christianity in the Sasanian sector of Armenia and the general uprising which it provoked in A.D. 449-51) or in the face of tempting opportunities to exploit Sasanian difficulties (for example, their inaction during the prolonged crisis which followed Pērōz's defeat and death at the hands of the Hephthalites in 484). Although the Sasanians were tempted into launching an attack in 441, when the Romans were distracted by Attila's first major invasion of the Balkans, they too showed restraint on other occasions when aggression might well have paid off (for example, at the height of the Visigoth and Ostrogoth crises).

This phase of good relations ended abruptly in autumn 502, when Kavād I launched a surprise attack in full force and with considerable initial success against Roman frontier territory in western Armenia and northern Mesopotamia. The cause is probably to be sought in the internal destabilisation of Iran in the preceding two decades, Kavād's principal object being to complete his re-assertion of royal authority by leading all the fractious regional interests of his empire on a common foreign enterprise. By the deployment of force on what was probably an unprecedented scale over the next two campaigning seasons (there were no significant distractions on other fronts), the Emperor Anastasius succeeded in reversing the Sasanians' initial gains. It was not so easy, however, to restore the political *status quo*. Indeed the Romans made no effort to do so for a generation. It was only after the failure of their own carefully prepared counteroffensive in 528 and the large-scale but inconclusive fighting which followed (not to mention the enticing prospect of garnering prestige elsewhere, in the Mediterranean), that they set about negotiating a durable peace.

Two fateful first steps, however, had already been taken. An act of aggression by one side had been answered by the other. The awareness of their common interests had been occluded, their commitment to peaceful co-existence diminished. Three more acts of aggression (those of Khusro I in 540, Justin II in 573 and Khusro II in 603), each intended to bring about a strategically significant shift in the balance of power without upsetting, let alone destroying the established binary system of government,

inaugurated three new rounds of warfare, each longer than the last. Both régimes probably still saw themselves as playing the great game, manoeuvring for advantage both in the theatres of war and in the diplomatic arenas on their flanks, gathering prestige wherever they could, preferably at their rival's expense. But the game itself had become destabilising, with the gains unevenly distributed geographically, the Romans making significant advances in Transcaucasia while the Sasanians acquired a decisive advantage in Arabia. Worse still, the growing determination of both sides to extract every ounce of advantage from each other's entanglements in other spheres (even to the extent of countenancing an alliance with Turan against Iran, in the case of Justin II in 569) showed that they were prepared to disregard the partnership which both had implicitly acknowledged. And, of course, the bitterness induced by prolonged conflict made its own, far from negligible contribution to the souring of relations. The final breakdown came with Khusro II's public disavowal of the old order in 615-16 and his decision to liquidate the Roman empire.⁸ The twelve years of uncontrolled warfare which followed ultimately ruined both the combatants.

The principal beneficiaries were not, as might have been expected, the organised nomad powers of the north but the beduin tribesmen of the south and their Muslim leadership. Opinion remains divided as to whether the fragmented world of pre-Islamic Arabia posed a serious potential threat to the neighbouring settled lands in preceding centuries and as to whether that threat was perceived and countered in a coherent fashion by the great powers. The largely inarticulate evidence of Roman investment in military infrastructure on the margins of the desert and reports of the attention paid by the Sasanians to the management of their beduin neighbours by means of a preferred and reliable client suggest that both sensed the military potential of the Arabs and sought consistently to prevent the formation of

⁸ *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn, 1832), 707-709, reproduces the text of the letter in which the Roman authorities sued for peace on humiliating terms in 615. It was evidently rejected by Khusro II and operations continued unabated in 616, preparing the way for the invasion of Egypt. For commentary, see Michael and Mary Whitby, *Chronicon Paschale, 284-628 AD* (Liverpool, 1989), nn. 442-44.

independent regional nexuses of power.⁹ Be that as it may, the resources of Arabia temporarily united by the *umma* in its formative phase proved superior to those of the old empires, and within thirty years of Khusro's decision a new world order was established. Within another ten, all organised Iranian resistance ceased and Iran was swallowed whole into the Caliphate.¹⁰

This familiar, cautionary tale has been retold to establish two basic facts – first that the Sasanian empire was, from the first, the military equal of the Roman empire, and second that, after a delay for mental adjustment, its parity was recognised and accepted by the Romans. This first comparison of the two powers' performance over nearly four centuries shows that the Sasanian governmental system was capable of extracting from its resource base military forces which matched those of the Romans along their common frontier.

Although figures given by ancient and medieval sources for armies are notoriously unreliable, a minority inspires rather more confidence and indicates the order of magnitude of the forces which could be deployed. A solid point of comparison can be obtained from the late eighth century. There is a reliable document-based record of the size of the army which invaded Anatolia in A.D. 782 under the nominal command of the young Hārūn al-Rashīd. It comprised a total of 95,793 men, and had to be divided for operations into three independent corps. Since it was drawn from all the resources of the Caliphate in its heyday, it probably represents the upper limit for a manageable force deployed by a great power.¹¹

⁹ The brief period of Palmyrene regional hegemony (260-72) gave both great powers a foretaste of what was to come. D.F. Graf, "Zenobia and the Arabs", in D.H. French and C.S. Lightfoot, eds., *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire*, BAR Int. Ser., 553 (Oxford, 1989), I, 143-67, detects positive evidence of the widespread beduin support which common sense suggests must have underlain Palmyra's rise. See, however, B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire. The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford, 1990), 68-74, 76-77, 91-97, 220-28 and 235-49 who argues the contrary case about the Arabs in general and about Palmyra in particular.

¹⁰ H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London-New York, 1986), 50-72.

¹¹ The information is given by the *Annals* of al-Ṭabarī, tr. E.W. Brooks, "Byzantines and Arabs in the Time of the Early Abbasids", *English Historical Review* 15 (1900), 737-39. To judge by the details supplied about payments made and the careful glossing of an enterprise that very nearly ended in disaster, it is a summary version of an official account.

The only occasion in late antiquity on which an army of comparable size is securely recorded was Anastasius' counteroffensive of 503-504.¹² Again a documentary source is available (at one remove), probably an official, published report on the campaigns, which was plundered extensively by Joshua the Stylite for the relevant section of his chronicle. In the first campaigning season 52,000 troops were deployed in two independent armies and consumed a total of 630,000 *modii* of bread (produced at Edessa, which was turned into a huge military bakery). Massive reinforcements arrived for the second campaign. Although their numbers are not recorded, the scale of the increase (perhaps as much as a doubling) can be gauged from that of the bread production which they required (a total of 850,000 *modii* from Edessa, supplemented by an unspecified but far from negligible amount from Alexandria which the Patrician Apion was deputed to organize). The *magister officiorum* Celer, who was given the supreme command, gained a good press for his skill in co-ordinating the operations of this huge army (conducted by at least five subordinate commanders) and in achieving his objective, the extrusion of the Persians from Amida.¹³

It is impossible to form an idea of the size of the opposing Sasanian forces, since no totals are reported, but they were clearly able to match the Romans up to the end of the A.D. 503 campaign. A total of the order of 50-60,000 may perhaps be suggested therefore for Kavād's forces in each

¹² Julian's expeditionary army of 363 was probably of the same order of magnitude, but the documentation is less satisfactory. Ammianus Marcellinus gives an impressionistic account of the enormous logistical effort required to field it, and fails to put a figure on it. The only figure which he does give (30,000), for the northern diversionary force under the command of Procopius and Sebastianus (XXIII.3.5), does not correspond to the 18,000 "hoplites" reported by Zosimus (III.12), which are probably additional to the 65,000 cavalry and infantry reviewed by Julian at Carrhae (Zosimus, III.13).

¹³ *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*, tr. W. Wright (Cambridge, 1882), 43-66. The wealth and precision of the information supplied about dates, the movements of the various units operating on both sides, negotiations, logistics as well as troop levels point unequivocally towards an official source. If, as seems likely, this mass of detailed data was integrated and shaped into a lucid military and diplomatic narrative before it reached Joshua, the source probably took the form of an official report on the whole campaign. Anastasius' regime had every incentive to sponsor such a work, to publicise its achievements as widely as possible. This document, or possibly a set of the dispatches upon which it was based, may be postulated as the ultimate source for the set of long and uncharacteristically lucid notices devoted to the war by Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1883), I, 144-49 = A.M. 5996.

of the two years.¹⁴ Confirmation that the Sasanians could mobilize troops on this scale on their western frontiers can be obtained from Procopius' narrative of the operations of 530, when the Sasanians launched their ripostes in both the Mesopotamian and Armenian theatres of war to the initial Roman offensives of 528. Procopius gives figures, which suggest that Kavād, in extreme old age, was making a supreme effort to emulate the achievement of Anastasius (40,000 horse and foot, soon reinforced by 10,000 from Nisibis, deployed against Dara which was defended by Belisarius with 25,000 troops; 30,000 men, many of them foreign auxiliaries, dispatched to take Nicopolis, in north-east Anatolia). There is no reason to suppose that Procopius has tampered with these figures, which he was well-placed to obtain.¹⁵

Further corroboration of this upper limit of around 60,000 for Sasanian field armies in the west is provided by an apparently well-informed account of the final engagement between Khusro II and the usurper Bahrām Chōbīn in Atropatene in 591. Although Khusro had received invaluable military as well as political backing from the Emperor Maurice, a substantial part of his 60,000-strong army was drawn from loyalist Sasanian elements (including the garrison of Nisibis). The opposing army of Bahrām numbered 40,000 men. If the figures for the Iranian forces serving on both sides are put together, a total of at least 60,000 can probably be obtained.¹⁶

For the Sasanian, as for the Roman side, account must also be taken of the many other demands falling on their armed forces on their mutual frontier. The larger cities doubled as heavily fortified military bases. They had to be garrisoned along with other more specialised military installations. Then there were the dangers which the Sasanians faced on other fronts, especially in the north and east where they continued settled Iran's unceasing struggle for survival against nomad Turan, not to mention

¹⁴ As also for the army commanded by Shāpūr I on the two occasions when he defeated major Roman expeditionary forces in 253 and 260 (reported by his *Res Gestae* to have numbered respectively 60,000 and 70,000 men) – E. Honigmann and A. Maricq, *Recherches sur les Res Gestae Divi Saporis*, Académie Royale de Belgique, Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques, Mémoires, ser. 2, 47 (1953), 12 and 14.

¹⁵ Procopius, *BP* I.13. 23; 14. 1; 15. 1, 11.

¹⁶ Theophylact Simocatta, *Hist.* V.9.3-4, ed. C. de Boor, rev. P. Wirth (Stuttgart, 1972). His source for the flight and restoration of Khusro II was the lost history of John of Epiphania, at the time a lawyer in the service of Gregory, patriarch of Antioch (Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian*, 222-24). F. Macler, tr., *Histoire d'Héraclius par l'évêque Sebêos* (Paris, 1904), 21 mentions a force of 8,000 Persian cavalry serving on Khusro II's side with his uncles Bindōē and Bistām.

the demands of internal security, especially in the great cities of Mesopotamia. It will be argued below (section III) that the defence burden shouldered by the Sasanians was of the same order as that of the Romans in the fifth and sixth centuries. Since Sasanian rulers were able to ensure the security of Iran and to maintain their own standing through offensive actions, with the single striking exception of Pērōz, it follows that their total military establishment was on a par with that of the Romans. What figure should be put upon it is a matter for speculation. The total of approximately 350,000, which can be calculated for the east Roman empire around A.D. 400 on the basis of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, may well err on the high side, since the actual strengths of units often probably fell some way below their establishment on paper.¹⁷ On the other hand, Agathias's total of 150,000 for Roman forces in A.D. 559 appears to be on the low side, and cannot be accepted without demur since it accords all too well with the thrust of his argument at this point.¹⁸ In any case, allowance should be made for the effects of the plague of 541-42 and its recurrences. My guess is that no more than a quarter of their total available forces could ever be deployed by either great power on one frontier. It would follow that both their military establishments in the pre-plague era ran to a quarter or a third of a million men. Although the surface area of the Sasanian empire corresponded roughly to that of the east Roman empire (excluding the western conquests of Justinian, which no-one except the hawks in Khusro I's regime has envisaged yielded a net return), its endowment in agricultural land was much poorer and its economic development (as is argued in section IV below) lagged well behind.¹⁹ Again resort has to be had to conjecture, based on little more than intuition, to compare the total resources of the two great powers. But it is surely not too incautious to suggest that the Sasanians disposed of no more than half of the material resources and manpower available to their Roman rivals. It follows that a much higher percentage of resources was extracted

¹⁷ A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1964), II, 682-83. Jones' total is made up of 104,000 *comitatenses* (which may, in his view, be an underestimate) and about 250,000 *limitanei*. Neither subtotal allows for inefficiency in drafting recruits to replace losses through war and retirement, nor for corruption which might result in an inflation of reported establishments (the sums surplus to actual needs subsequently received being available for other purposes).

¹⁸ Agathias, *Hist.*, V.13.7-8.

¹⁹ The central desert basins of the Great Kavīr and the Southern Lūt occupy over half the territory of modern Iran, and much of the remainder consists of rugged mountains. Outside Mesopotamia with its vast compact area of rich alluvial land, where city life had developed in the prehistoric past, the agricultural resources of the Sasanians were dispersed in better-watered inland basins, mountain valleys and the Caspian coastal plains.

by the authorities for the army and a larger proportion of the able-bodied population was recruited for military service. The central task of this paper is to understand how the Sasanian state succeeded in extracting men, material and provisions on this scale from its subjects. Part of the explanation is undoubtedly to be sought in social attitudes. A general awareness of the vulnerability of Iran, propagated above all by Zoroastrianism, helped sustain a military ethos, which is amply attested in what survives of Sasanian literature.²⁰ But co-ordinated action by the state on an impressive scale was required to maintain this degree of military strength, after the first dynamic phase of expansion had spent itself. This implies in turn that the apparatus of government, administrative, fiscal and military, both at the centre and in the provinces, reached a relatively advanced stage of development early in the Sasanian era of Iranian history.

II

To venture into Sasanian historiography is almost as perilous as to set off across the Great Kavīr dominating the northern half of the interior plateau of Iran, its apparently smooth salt crust concealing the *shatt*, deep channels through which slide slow, viscous streams of ooze and into which whole groups of unwary voyagers can vanish.²¹

The *Annals* of al-Ṭabarī (A.D. 839-923) have long been recognised as the principal source for the Sasanians' own history of their past. The relevant section has long been accessible to the non-specialist thanks to Nöldeke's translation, and the accompanying commentary is the foundation upon which modern Sasanian historical scholarship is built.²² It is to al-Ṭabarī that Nöldeke's successors, Christensen, Altheim and Stiehl, Widengren, Lukonin, Frye, Schippmann and many others turn in the first instance for information on all aspects of Sasanian history, save the wars in the west.²³ And it is the historians' Ṭabarī-based reconstruction which has

²⁰ Above all in the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsī (discussed in the next section).

²¹ *Cambridge History of Iran* I, 93-95.

²² Th. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden. Aus der arabischen Chronik des Tabarī* (Leyden, 1879).

²³ A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 2nd. ed. (Copenhagen, 1944); F. Altheim and R. Stiehl, *Ein asiatischer Staat. Feudalismus unter den Sasaniden und ihren Nachbarn* (Wiesbaden, 1954); G. Widengren, "Iran, der grosse Gegner Roms: Königsgewalt, Feudalismus, Militärwesen", in H. Temporini and W. Haase, eds., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.9. 1 (Berlin-New York, 1976), 219-306; V.G. Lukonin, "Political, Social and Administrative Institutions: Taxes and Trade", *Cambridge History of Iran* III. 2 (Cambridge, 1983), 681-746; R.N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (Munich, 1984); Schippmann, *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidischen Reiches*.

provided in turn the framework for archaeological investigation of the Sasanian period, a framework which acquires particular importance in the analysis of ceramic data recovered by surface reconnaissance (discussed in section IV below).

It comes therefore as a surprise to anyone with some knowledge of the historiographical debate now preoccupying Islamicists, and certainly to any participant in the first Workshop of the Late Antiquity and Early Islam Project, that the Sasanian material in al-Ṭabarī has been handled so uncritically. It is taken for granted that all or almost all of the apparently sober historical material can be trusted. It may co-exist with entertaining but evidently largely fictional anecdotes, but the latter, it is implied, can be separated out and discarded, leaving a residue of solid historical evidence.²⁴

This approach would not win much support from those Islamicists, who envisage the anecdotal material, *akhbār*, introduced and gradually elaborated by story-tellers, as entering and increasingly deforming the traditions about Muḥammad's deeds and the following heroic period of conquest.²⁵ If this could happen on a greater or lesser scale to the material about early Islamic history transmitted to later generations, when there were two countervailing factors to control it (the stake which competing families, clans and tribes had in their shared past, and the deep impression evidently made by the formative events in the history of Islam on the collective memory), how much more distortion, suppression, invention is to be expected in the version of Sasanian history which reached al-Ṭabarī. In this case, there was an additional factor likely to encourage the resort to *akhbār*, namely the penchant of Sasanian readers and listeners for anecdotes, which ensured that the political record was already enriched with such material before it entered the Islamic historical tradition, thus providing many more triggers for fanciful elaboration by story-tellers.²⁶

²⁴ Altheim and Stiehl lead the field with their unquestioning confidence in al-Ṭabarī's account of the reforms of Khusro I.

²⁵ S. Leder, "The Literary Use of the *Khabar*: a Basic Form of Historical Writing", in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East. I. Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, 1992), 277-315.

²⁶ See, for example, Mary Boyce's remarks in the introduction to her translation of *The Letter of Tansar* (Rome, 1968), 1-2, 4 and 18-19, on the minstrel poetry of pre-Islamic Iran, the orally transmitted short stories which eventually evolved into collections such as the *Thousand and One Nights*, and the mutability of all transmitted materials in a culture which largely confined writing to the official business of government, secular and religious.

The potential destructive effect of these processes on the Iranian historical tradition can best be illustrated from the *Shāhnāma*, “Book of Kings”, of Firdawsī. This was based on one of three collections of historical and legendary material produced in the course of the tenth century when interest was reviving in the Iranian past. These were modelled on a late Sasanian *Shāhnāma*, which was itself translated into Arabic at roughly the same time.²⁷ Anecdote has run wild in Firdawsī’s version. The stories, mainly romantic and heroic, are captivatingly told and reveal a Herodotean interest in human character, in wiles and subterfuges, in exotic places. Extended anecdotes dominate the poem, history being reshaped to fit around them. Pockets of authentic material can be identified (for example, the terms of Shāpūr II’s treaty with Jovian, the lists of individual shahs’ urban foundations, and the emphasis on conservation of the social order as a prime object of policy), but an enormous amount has either been extruded or mangled almost out of recognition. Thus the whole of Khusro II’s Roman war has disappeared, Mani has been transformed into an iconophile from China, and the career of Shāpūr II, whose unremitting military efforts secured his empire against both its eastern and western enemies, has been reduced to a fairy-tale escape from painful captivity in Rome with the help of an attractive girl of Iranian descent, a punitive raid into Arabia and two campaigns against the Romans, which appear to be conflations of his own with those of Shāpūr I.²⁸

It is impossible to determine the extent to which the poet may have reworked and embellished his material (it is noticeable, though, that he makes no attempt to fill the reigns left void by the tradition as it reached him), but it may be postulated that his epic is representative of the main traits of the *Books of Kings* in circulation in the tenth century and hence of the Arabic translation of their Sasanian precursor. If so, the anecdotal element had run wild in the raw material from which al-Ṭabarī worked, and his principal task was to cut it back and extract as much straightforward narrative of war and politics as he could. A comparison with the Persian version of al-Ṭabarī by Bal’amī yields clear evidence of such clearance activity. For Bal’amī (at work between 963 and 974),

²⁷ *EJ*², II, 918-21, art. “Firdawsī”; Z. Rubin, “The Reforms of Khusro Anushirwan”, below, documents the ultimate dependence of the *Shāhnāma*, as also of al-Ṭabarī and the *Nihāyat l-arab*, on the Sasanian royal annals, which were transmitted to them through many different channels.

²⁸ J. Mohl, tr., *Le livre des rois par Abou’lkasim Firdousi* (Paris, 1876-78), V, 339-79 (Shapur II), 379-81 (Mani), and VII (Khusro II), 1-288.