Rome and Persia at War, 502-532 – Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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After the death of Julian in 363, the Romans and Sassanians finally came to an agreement that permitted both sides to keep an almost uninterrupted peace during the 140 years to follow. However, on the eve of the 6th c., things changed. Repeatedly rejected demands for money induced the Persian king Kabades to launch an attack in 502. This opened the first of those Roman-Persian wars which continued to strike the Near East intermittently until the Romans nearly, the Persians actually, fell prey to the Arab conquest in the early 7th c.

The first two of these encounters, 502-6 and 526-532, are the subject of Greatrex's book. It "aims to serve a useful purpose by providing a basic, accessible narrative of the war, and by setting it in the broader context of Roman-Persian relations in late antiquity" (p. xi). G. justifies his decision to treat both conflicts together as one interrupted war by pointing to the fact that contemporaries saw it as a single war (p. 1 n. 1); the person of the Sassanian king Kabades and the range of Procopius' *Wars* provide further links between those two conflicts.

The organization of G.'s book is as traditional as it is successful. Part I introduces the reader to the historical background, the Persian perspective and the sources, Part II and Part III deal with the events of 502-6 (including aftermath) and 526-532, respectively. A short appendix is devoted to "The Roman initiative in southern Arabia".[1]

The arrangement of the main narrative is no less careful. Footnotes often cover one third to one half of the page, and the text is accompanied by numerous beautifully drawn, if somewhat unprofessional looking maps. Anyone who has ever tried to peruse a study on Mesopotamian/ Armenian affairs without a specialized atlas at hand knows what this is worth. Plans help elucidate G.'s reconstruction of the movements during the battles of Daras and Callinicum.

Thoughout the book, G.'s command both of the sources and of the modern literature is impressive. Thus his introductory chapters which are meant to provide the reader with a general idea are especially powerful. I know of hardly any other account of the historical and geographical setting which is so brief but so informative. I am less pleased with the "Persian Perspective"; here, above all in the part on the army, G. relies too much for my taste on Ammianus, who wrote, after all, more than 100 years earlier, and on the late Arab tradition (i. e., Tabari). But of course he does state his sources for every point in the footnotes, and so you are free to believe him or disbelieve him on every single item. The sources chapter is again short, clear and convincing. I did miss references to Baumstark's *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* since G. is normally complete on the older literature too.[2]

G.'s Part II describes the Anastasian war of 502-506. Here as well he sets off with a useful introduction to the sources and their problems. Then follows the immediate background to the assault of the Persian king. Kabades entered Roman territory in summer 502. He quickly seized the Armenian cities of Theodosiopolis and Martyropolis, neither of whom even tried to resist. This clearly shows how unprepared the Roman side was for the Persian onslaught. However, the fortress-city of Amida did not yield without siege, which immobilized the Persians during the next months. In the meantime, Theodosiopolis could be recaptured. In early 503, Amida finally fell. This year saw much warfare though without quantifiable results. The Romans attempted an ultimately fruitless siege of Amida while Kabades beleaguered Edessa equally in vain. During the next year, the Romans gained the upper hand. The renewed investment of Amida led to the hand-over of the city. However, this surrender was far from unconditional and the Persians were far from beaten. But no more fighting occurred during the next two years, and, in late 506, a truce whose terms are not too well known was finally agreed upon. Probably it included the restoration of Martyropolis since this city is known to be Roman once more during the post-war period. Unfortunately, we have no definite source statement on the hand-over, and it is pity that G. does not face this problem. In his narrative, too, Kabades captures Martyropolis in 502 (p. 81), but when we next hear about Martyropolis (p. 154), we learn that in 529 a Roman *dux* was based there. [3]

The peace of 506 held for nearly twenty years although originally only a seven year's truce had been agreed upon. Anastasius took advantage of this respite by fortifying Daras as counterpart to Nisibis; the works had already started during the war in 505. After Justin's accession in 518, few things changed. Kabades even asked the Roman emperor to adopt his son, the future Chosroes I. However, Justin refused. So their relations had already deteriorated when it came to conflict once more. This time, the Transcaucasus provided the occasion. Kabades intended to persecute the Christian Iberians. Even if they were Persian subjects, the Roman side could not abstain from interfering. In this context, G. successfully identifies an historical doublet (p. 142ff.): Procopius relates a Roman campaign in Lazica without offering a chronological clue; people wanted to date it before 527 because Procopius mentions the accession of Justinian only in the next chapter of his work. On the other side, a number of chroniclers know of a Lazica campaign as well, but they put this event in 528. This chronogical problem induced other scholars to distinguish *two* Roman enterprises in Lazica. Against this approach, G. rightly stresses Procopius' procedure of arranging his narrative by theatre of war, not by chronology. Therefore, the order in which Procopius narrates the campaign and the accession need not (and in the event, does not) imply a chronological sequence. Since both Procopius and the chroniclers each know of only one Lazica campaign, the identification is quite compelling. Furthermore, Procopius and all the chroniclers (with one insignificant exception, the late Theophanes) agree about the name of one commander, Eirenaios. It follows that there was just one campaign, and this took place in 528.[4]

By then, the war had already started. Since 526, there had been indecisive fighting in the Transcausus region and in Upper Mesopotamia. Events worth mentioning are perhaps the

abandoned Roman siege of Nisibis (527) and Alamundarus' raid in direction of Antiochia (529). The promotion of Belisarius to his first great command as *magister militum per Orientem* proved to be more important for the future than those activities (529). Though initially successful (battle of Daras, 530), Belisarius was defeated near Callinicum in 531, which led to his dismissal. However, Kabades died shortly afterwards, and in 532 the so-called Eternal Peace (which lasted for less than ten years) could be agreed with his successor, Chosroes I, whose interests lay at that time in stabilizing his internal position.

We are very well informed about this second war because Procopius describes it in great detail. Thus there is not much difficult reconstruction work to do nor much room for dissent over facts.[5]

I dare say that other reviewers will censure the limited scope of G.'s work (i. e., 30 years of intermittent warfare) and particularly his total concentration on topographical, chronological, military and diplomatic matters. Indeed, G.'s book is not an original one. However, he wrote exactly what he intended to write, i.e., an account of this war. *Rome and Persia at War, 502-532* is literally an historical monograph: a book on one particular subject that the author has studied to the full.[6]

There have been intermittent calls for a major study of the reign of Justinian.[7]