

REASONS FOR THE FALL OF ROMAN AND SASANIAN EMPIRES

Dr. Kersey Antia, Oct 5, 2019

Various authors offer explanation for the reasons of the fall of Roman and Sasanian empires but I find the following far more informative than other ones: Both Romans and Sasanians “began to think more in terms of a “total war” aimed at the extermination of the other,” (Isaac, 1992: 127; Howard-Johnson, 1995: 164). Neither state in its much weakened state was prepared to meet the massive coalition of Arab forces that came out of the Hijaz and struck at the southern faces of both states. There is no evidence that they were even conscious of any special military threat emanating from this direction. In their war preparations, which presumably reflected their mental disposition, they continued to be obsessively concerned with each other, and with the millennium-old frontier that converged on the great fertile crescent that joined northern Syria and Mesopotamia.

“The war system of the late antique Mediterranean and Near East was therefore determined by the resources of the large states. Rome, the power focused on the Mediterranean, was counterpoised to Sasanid Persia, centered on the great land masses of Mesopotamia and the Iranian highlands (Rubin, 1986b). The geopolitical location of these states, and the manner in which they expanded militarily, caused them to leave open frontiers, mainly on their northern flanks and along the narrow land frontier in Mesopotamia where they confronted each other. When the attacks of the Banu Quraysh erupted from the Hijaz and the southern parts of the Syrian desert in 633-640 --- attacks that were aimed no longer just at raiding and pillaging but at land conquest --- the basic shift in the direction and meaning of war was not expected by the major contestants, who had hitherto defined the nature of war in the region. The Arabs came out of a region that had never been considered a serious war frontier of the type shared by Rome and Persia during the preceding half-millennium. Whether centrally organized or not (Landau-Tasserion, 1995; *contra*: Donner, 1981; 1995), the Arab forces easily drove deep into the exposed civil undersides of both states and changed the war system of late antiquity forever. As with the successor states in the Roman west, this was another very successful case of violent parasitism. (See Heather, 1996, chaps. 7-10, for the parallel case of the Goths in the west.) But so little is known about how and why it happened that the conquest is as much a puzzle, and a surprise, to modern-day scholars as it was to the Byzantines and Sasanians when it happened. The same silence of the literary sources that bedevils our

knowledge of war among the ethnic groups beyond the northern frontiers of the Roman empire also leaves us ignorant of the Arabs who achieved this great feat of violent appropriation.

It should perhaps be a matter of some concern that Gibbon himself, not long after the completion of his *Decline and Fall*, had serious misgivings about the division of war that he had offered his readers. He had already become convinced that problems of war internal both to Rome and Persia were as important as the classic battlefield clashes with external enemies (Bowercock, 1977). The whole problem of war, so critical to the making and the unmaking of the ancient world, must be viewed from a panoramic perspective that integrates the oecumens of both the Mediterranean and the Near East, as well as the internal and external aspects of the social orders that were created and destroyed by violent force. Because of the peculiar interests of classical historiographies, ancient and modern, it is a subject on which considerable bodies of fact have been accumulated and analyzed. But the dominant paradigms of thinking have served to obscure a clearer view of the general dynamic of war itself. Despite the great assemblage of data for the Roman part of this story, one has the uneasy feeling that we are only beginning to understand the problematic nature of this "worst of all evils." (G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar, editors, *Late Antiquity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 163-164). A better understanding of this catastrophe is even all the more important today for the cause of world peace.