

# ROMAN VERSUS PERSIAN ATTITUDE FOR TERRITORIAL CONQUESTS

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 6, 2020

In *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1994), C.R. Whittaker shows in detail the Roman abhorrence for the others who were only barbarians to them—first the Iranian tribes of Scythians, Getae, and Sarmatians and later the Goths, Franks, Germans and all: “In Roman minds Germans were still perpetual drunkards.” In 419 A.D. They “threatened to execute those who betrayed the arts of ship building to the barbarians”, despite the fact that the Scythian Borani had subjected the empire to devastating sea attacks in the mid-third century. “The classical ideology of the Roman Empire from the Republic onwards,” he adds, “was quite simply that Rome ruled the world, rather directly in the provinces or indirectly by political influence. Rome prided itself in rooting out the Frankish tribes “from the very homes of their origins and from the farthest shores of barbarism.” Constantine's imperial coins depict a prostrate and weeping Francia, a Gallic orator, as quoted by Whittaker, “praised Theodosius because the terror of his name had reached India, Arabia and the icy north.” Trajan, Severus and Constantine dreamt about following Alexander the Great's ambition for conquering Persia and Julian's public claim to be invading Persia only for revenge was an excuse for proceeding beyond Persia like Alexander the Great. There is an ideological tension between the concept of an empire protected “from the irredeemable savagery of the barbarian exterior and the more Roman vision of universal rule.” The utter loathing of barbarians by conservative Romans was evident when Jovian had to concede the Armenian city of Misibis to the Persians after Julian's humiliating defeat, especially as it was the first ever territorial loss suffered by the Romans. Whittaker argues that even Christianity did not bring about a significant change in the Roman attitude towards the barbarians. For instance, Ambrose, a bishop of Milan, encouraged the sale of wine to barbarians in order “that they may dissolve in drunkenness and thus be weakened” since “to him barbarians, whether Christian or not, were the enemy.” (pp. 195-199).

Contrary to the Roman aggressive ideology, Whittaker asserts that “Persia, the only really unified force that might have launched a coherent attack on the Romans, was content to keep a relatively low profile. An important recent study has concluded that it is impossible to prove that the Persians had any general aggressive intent to occupy Roman territory.” In support he cites B. Issac's *The Limits of Empire*:

*The Roman Army in the East*, Oxford, 1990, chapters 1 and 4, which I, too, have quoted. However, he adds: "But the same was not true of the Arabs," and supports it by factual data. (p. 13).

Whittaker detects an ultimate stalemate on the Persian frontier because "after the experiences of Constantius and Julian, there was no real possibility of Rome's regaining the initiative in Mesopotamia or Armenia." (pp. 228-9). Whittaker holds Persia as "the only centrally organized power to compare with Rome and therefore in Roman eyes always to be feared. But despite some punishing disasters inflicted by Persian armies, it is difficult how to be sure Rome did not greatly exaggerate the long-term Persian threat and again quotes Isaac, 1990, 28-31, to buttress it. (p. 134).