

SASANIANS AND ROMANS

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The long history of hostility of the Western authors, often interspersed with friendship, between Sasanians and Romans (Byzantine) from the third to the seventh century is hardly known in all its details to us. Even the *Shah-nameh* does not cover it *in toto*. The situation is regrettably pathetic regarding the history of Greco-Persian relations during the Achaemenian period. So I was prompted to address this lacuna as best as my time and resources could allow me as a non-academician in order to apprise the common man of the significant historical facts they may be unaware of, though it is beyond my means or even goal to present their all-inclusive role in history *in toto*. Another reason for making such an attempt is to purge or counter the highly Eurocentric view of the hostilities between Europeans and ancient Persians, though this is not entirely possible as almost all the surviving evidence is essentially European and is more contemporary than the Iranian evidence, which is mostly post-Sasanian, chronicled by Arabic writers.

Rome's claim for world domination was justified by a missionary zeal and pride in Western civilization. It was countered by the Eastern myths and oracles, notably Sibylline (3.3505) which predicted the downfall of the Romans. The Western sources depict chronic prejudices against the Zoroastrian religion, manners, mores and monarchy. They perceived a permanent conflict between a civilized Rome and a 'barbarian' Persia. The Western tendency towards the Easterners often persists to this day. This is regrettable because, as pointed out by Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, "on multiple levels the Sasanians pursued active goals in their dealings with the West, which forced the Romans to be extremely vigilant and evoked strategic as well as political reactive measures on their side. Ironically, pointing to Persian ambitions and ideologies of domination may also be perceived as a Eurocentric perspective, assigning one-side aggression to the East. This is certainly not intended but it is rather the case that the Roman ideological background is much better known to the reader." (*Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity. Neighbours and Rivals*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 2). Therefore, they set out "to illuminate the much less-known Persian position and thereby enable the reader to contrast and compare their relations in a balanced way. The tradition of a 'pro-Roman' historical scholarship with all its ideological nuances and consequences has to be challenged and dismissed." (p. 3) However, the scope of their study do not allow them to analyse or compare the two empires. Their objective is to present their relationship shorn of Eurocentricism.

“Surprisingly, the rulers of both empires did not perceive each other as 'alien counterparts' but formed personal relationships characterized by mutual respect and even affection. In this context the 'legitimacy of kingship' was closely linked with the notion of a 'family of kings'.” (p.5). They frequently quote the Byzantine author and diplomat Peter the Patrician as saying, “It is obvious for all mankind that the Roman and Persian Empires are just like two lamps; and it is necessary that, like eyes, the one is brightened by the light of the other and that they do not angrily strive for each other's destruction,” which however they admit is “wishful thinking” in view of the almost continuous hostility between them culminating in seven wars all which ultimately weakened them both and resulted in their own conquest by the Arabs.

Despite their centuries old hostility and irreconcilable ideological and religious differences, “it is evident that both 'world powers' from early on acknowledged the other's claims to being of equal rank.” (p. 232). Undoubtedly till its very end the Sasanian Empire remained the *NATIO MOLESTISSIMA* – nation which ultimately had to be done away with, the main reason being the Sasanians' refusal to accept the Romans' right for universal rule. However, note Dignas and Winter, “a Sasanian 'King of Kings' could be acknowledged and respected by a Roman emperor as a much honoured equal and this status was not threatened by the universal claims of the world power Rome.” They both reached some understanding, if not acceptance, of the legitimacy of the other's sovereignty which ushered into 'Redolitik', establishing this consensus therefore facilitated the emergence of an international law binding sovereign states on the basis of principles that are still applied today.” (p. 241).