

**A TYRANT ON THE THRONE:
PHOCAS THE USURPER, AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE
EASTERN FRONTIER**

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Abstract. The ambitious and expansionist western-directed policy of Emperor Justinian left his successors with an empty state treasury, a grim financial picture, and hard-to-defend areas against the barbarians in places such as Italy, Carthage and even southern Spain away from the centre. His successors tried to rule the state under these conditions, while at the same time Persians in the east, Avars and Slavs in the Balkans, and Lombards in Italy made the situation worse for them on the frontier. As a successful general, Maurice, who ascended the throne in 582, was a disciplined soldier who knew the financial situation of the empire very well. He signed an agreement that made significant gains for Byzantium with his risky but wise policy against the Sasanians in 591 and focused his military strategy on the Avar and Slavic invaders on the Danube frontier. However, the emperor's over-disciplined character, his desire to fight, and his belief that a winter attack on the Slavs would be successful would bring an end to him. Eventually, a mutiny broke out within the tired and frustrated Balkan army during the preparations for the campaign in the winter of 602. Led by a soldier named Phocas, the rebels left the frontier and marched to the capital. With the help of the Greens, one of the city's hippodrome factions, Phocas easily seized the capital and then captured and murdered Maurice who fled with his family. This study examines how the eastern frontier collapsed during brutal and violent reign of Phocas, who usurped the Byzantine throne between 602–610. A new perspective will be offered from the main sources of the period that connect Phocas' terrorizing eight-year rule in the capital with the unprecedented westward military advancements of the Sasanians against the Romans.

Keywords: Roman, Byzantine, Persians, Sasanians, Phocas, Khusro II

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1. Introduction

The western-focused policy of Emperor Justinian left his successors in Italy and North Africa with remote, difficult-to-defend lands, and an exhausted economy on the verge of collapse. In addition, the first major plague outbreak in the Mediterranean region around 541 CE was another significant challenge that gnawed at the empire from the inside. The Byzantine Empire, which found itself by the late sixth century quite fatigued and weary, was in the hands of Maurice, the commander of the army, who was declared Caesar shortly before the death of Emperor Tiberius in 582. Maurice was originally from Cappadocia and was a skilful soldier as his own writings on warfare and strategy, called the *Strategikon*, give evidence. Maurice had over twenty years of military success (582–602), which included fierce struggles along the borders of the empire.

Furthermore, Maurice ended a period of royal infertility from the time of Emperor Arcadius and baptized a male heir named Theodosius. He reformed the Byzantine administration in Africa and Italy, leaving these regions to a military governor called ‘Exarchos’ (Whitby 1988: 12). Throughout his rule, Maurice followed a successful military strategy against the Sasanians in the east that eventually established a level of military superiority over the Persian army, particularly by making use of the civil war in the region. He made an important agreement along the eastern frontier in 591 that made significant gains for Byzantium. By supporting Khusro II who was overthrown by a young commander named Bahram Chobin, Maurice gave assistance to the exiled Persian king to help him regain his throne. As part of this agreement in 591, Maurice gained the *Arzanene* region in the Upper Tigris, which was very important for the Sasanians. In the West, even if the situation was not as bright, the circumstances in Italy and the Balkans nevertheless proved advantageous in a few respects. While the Lombards were eliminated, the first wave of attacks from the Avars and Slavs in the Balkans were resisted with a measure of success. By the end of the Persian war in 591, the Byzantine forces increased at the border of Danube and the Avars and Slavs were forced to halt their advance.

Although accounts of the success and the decline of Emperor Maurice seem to be highly contradictory, the process leading to his decline is clear. His aggressive military policy across the frontier was not cheap. Imperial finance and tax revenues were no longer able to handle the burden of his wars. Part of the explanation of this weak financial condition was how Maurice intended to pay a part of the soldiers’ wages with various goods instead of money (Theophylact Simocatta: 7.1.8.). According to Mitchell’s research, unlike the loot from the Persians on the border of Mesopotamia, there was no sign of looting in the Balkans and this was already an important source of discontentment within the army (Mitchell 2014: 608). Furthermore, Maurice ordered the troops in Thrace to organize a winter campaign in 602. As he recorded in his tactical handbook *Strategikon*, this winter raid was promising in terms of military

success but offered limited loot and little prestige.¹ Roman soldiers began ignoring the orders of the emperor and they were increasingly showing signs of mutiny. Although the commander asked the emperor for permission to spend the winter back in their homeland, Maurice apparently insisted they press on and the commanders had to desperately continue the campaign. In the meantime, the frustrated soldiers discussed the issue for a few days and subsequently declared a man named Phocas as their new emperor, inaugurating him with the traditional shield ritual (Theophylact Simocatta: 8.7.1-7).

While rumours of rebellion spread among the people, news also came to the capital. The emperor organized a horse race at the Hippodrome and tried to gain both the public's trust and the support of the two main Hippodrome factions called the Blues and the Greens. Meanwhile, Phocas and his soldiers gathered at Hebdomon, just outside the capital. The rebels contacted Theodosius, the emperor's son, and Germanus, Theodosius's father-in-law, and began negotiations. According to the request of the rebels, if Theodosius or Germanus would overthrow Maurice and succeed him, they would be prepared to legitimise him. But this created an additional tension point from the inside that had consequences for the rebels. Earlier, the rebels declared Phocas as their emperor, but when they came to the capital, they were in a sense offering the empire to Maurice's son Theodosius and his father-in-law Germanus. It is clear that there either existed a concern that Phocas himself could not get support from the capital or perhaps there was a lack of confidence in Phocas' leadership that had caused this situation. Thus, the rebels must have wanted to consider better options. Germanus accepted the rebels' offer and when Maurice heard this, he summoned Germanus and ordered him to kill himself. Germanus instead fled to his house on the street of Mese and then to the church of the Virgin Mary. At night Germanus regrouped and his armed men went to the Hagia Sophia. While a huge crowd gathered outside the church, the hippodrome factions joined the crowd and things began to get out of hand. Frightened, Maurice, in disguise with his family, fled to the church of St. Autonomus in the south of Propontis (Sea of Marmara). Then Maurice ordered his sons Theodosius and Constantinus to escape from the region and ask for help from the restored Persian king Khusro II (Theophylact Simocatta: 8.7.8-9.12).

After Maurice's escape, it was unclear who the emperor would be, but the hostility of the Greens to Germanus was effective in determining the new emperor. A delegation from the Greens proclaimed Phocas as emperor on 25 November 602 in the Church of John the Baptist, Hebdomon (modern Bakirkoy). Two days later Maurice and his family were arrested and brought back to Chalcedon. A man, close to Phocas named Lilius, was given the task of executing Maurice and his sons. On November 27, in front of Maurice, first his sons were killed and then Maurice himself was decapitated. Before their bodies were thrown into the sea, their remains were shown to Phocas' soldiers and the people (Theophylact Simocatta:

¹ According to Maurice, the Slavs were becoming more visible in the winter, and therefore they had to be attacked then. *'Still, it is preferable to launch our attacks against them in the winter when they can not easily hide among the bare trees, when the tracks of fugitives can be discerned in the snow, when their household is miserable from exposure, and when it is easy to cross over the rivers on the ice'* (Strategikon: 11.4 (Dennis 1984)).

8.9.13-12.12). Theodosius was the only family member who managed to escape this massacre. However, some sources record that he had returned to the church of Saint Autonomous and was allegedly killed by an officer named Alexander who was sent by Phocas² (Theophylact Simocatta: 8. 13.1-6).

Nevertheless, after the bloody coup and massacre, as his father had hoped, rumours were spreading among the people that Theodosius had managed to escape to Khusro and took refuge in his palace. Even some Armenian and Syriac sources in the east have confirmed this information. Accordingly, Theodosius was welcomed with honour by Khusro, crowned by Nestorian *Catholicos* as the rightful Roman emperor and even given an army by Khusro under his command to invade the Roman Empire and take back his throne (Sebeos: 106, 110, Anon. *Guidi*, 10).

2. On the sources

The end of Theophylact Simocatta's narrative has led to some difficulties in understanding the events, particularly the events following the overthrow of Maurice. The absence of a Byzantine source, which might have included a detailed account of the events that followed Phocas and his rule, effectively interrupts the chronological narrative of the cities that fell one after the other on the eastern border. This is the most important reason why historians prefer the term 'approximate' when explaining the events during this period. Nevertheless, it is possible to compensate for this information gap, as it were, with available eastern sources. The first is a contemporary Syriac source called the *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, also known as the *Guidi's Chronicle*. This work, written by an anonymous Nestorian writer in the country of Persia within the seventh century, looks at events from the perspective of a Nestorian Christian living in Persia in a way that is quite unique.³ The other source called the *Chronicon Paschale* is an important work written by an anonymous Greek author in the capital from the seventh century. However, it focuses on the developments of the later reign of Heraclius rather than the events of the period of Phocas and his rebellion. Apart from the Syriac sources, *Sebeos* stands out from the Armenian side and it is important to mention with respect to the rumours about Theodosius, the son of Maurice. One of the most frequently cited sources for this period is *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, the ninth-century author. In addition to Theophanes, *The Chronicle of 1234* and *Michael the Syrian*, are also important sources for this era, although they are later accounts. According to the recent research conducted by R. Hoyland, the main source of these three works is the *Chronicle of Theophilus of Edessa*, compiled around 750, and

² Simocatta records that the story of his escape was invented by the Persians. Another report was spread among the people that Theodosius had fled to the east and then came to Colchis and ended his life there. Later, Simocatta notes 'he accordingly learned that' Theodosius also shared the same end with his family. However, the fact that Theodosius' head was not exposed to the public leaves questions about some of these reports.

³ The parts of the chronicle about the overthrow of Emperor Maurice and the beginning of Khusro's invasions towards the west were translated into English in Greatrex and Lieu's work (Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 229-237).

Hoyland defined this chronicle as a ‘common Syriac source’ (Hoyland 2011: 7-19 and Hoyland 1997: 400-409, see also Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 183).

3. Rebellions and conspiracies against Phocas

Phocas had very little support outside the capital, especially in the east. Therefore, after the news of the coup had spread, opposition and rebellions against his rule began to take place in various parts of the country. The *magister militum* Narses, who lost control of Dara on the eastern border, was the first to rebel against Phocas. He seized the city of Edessa in 603 and killed the city’s bishop Severus (Sebeos: 106, Chr. 819: 10.23-24, Ps. Dionysios of Tel-Mahre: 148.9-12, Stratos 1968: 59). Some writers, such as Theophanes, have noted that Narses, was the leader of this rebellion against Phocas, and was in alliance with Khusro (Theophanes: A.M. 6095). Theophanes quotes the following events as follows:

“And Khusro, the Persian king, collected a great force and sent it against the Romans. When Germanus heard of this, he was afraid, but began the war under compulsion. When Germanus was wounded in battle, his bodyguards brought him safely to Constantina; and the Romans were defeated. And on the eleventh day Germanus died. Phocas conveyed the forces from Europe to Asia after increasing the tribute to the Khagan, thinking the Avar nation to be at rest. Dividing the armies, he sent against the Persians and the other part to the siege of Edessa, against Narses, under the command of the eunuch Leontius, who was one of his magnates. Khusro collected his forces and came against Dara. Narses departed from Edessa and took refuge at Hierapolis. Khusro met the Romans at Arxamoun and, putting together a fort from (his) elephants, began the war and won a great victory. He captured many of the Romans and beheaded them. When these things had been done, Khusro returned to his own land entrusting his forces to Zongoes. When Phocas learnt of this, he was angered at Leontius and brought him ignominiously to Byzantium in iron fetters; and he appointed Domentziolus, his own nephew, as general, and made him *curopalates*” (Theophanes: A.M. 6096).

According to Theophanes’ narrative, immediately after Khusro’s advancement began, Narses escaped from Edessa under Germanus’ blockade and retreated to Hierapolis, a move confirming their alliance. But Armenian historian Sebeos recorded the relationship between Narses and Khusro from a different perspective. According to Sebeos, while Khusro was attempting to take Dara with a siege, Narses was besieged by a Roman army sent by Phocas. When Khusro heard this, he divided his army and went to Edessa to help Narses. Therefore, contrary to Theophanes’ narrative, Narses did not escape rather he had, you might say, a gift for Khusro:

‘Then king Khosrov divided (his forces) into two parts. One part he left there around the city (Dara); with the other part he himself marched against the army which was besieging Urha (Edessa). Attacking them unexpectedly at dawn, some he put to the sword, some he turned to flight. Some jumped into the river Euphrates and perished⁴; the others were scattered in flight. Then king Khosrov approached the

⁴ Sebeos must have confused Euphrates with Daisan passing through the city of Edessa.

gate of the city so that they might open it for him to enter inside; and they opened the gate. But Narses dressed a youth in royal guard, placed a crown on his head, and sent him to him, saying: "This is the son of king Maurice, Theodos; do you have pity on him, just as his father had on you." With great joy king Khosrov received him, then returned to the city of Dara. He kept (the youth) with him with royal honour' (Sebeos: 107).

According to Sebeos, Theodosius, the son of Maurice who managed to escape, first took refuge in Narses, then continued his journey with Khusro. But the authors of the Byzantine side, especially Theophylact Simocatta, said that Theodosius was not alive and Simocatta argued that this was just a pretext for Khusro to invade Roman territories.

The invasion of Khusro II into Roman territory probably took place in late 603 and most of the events of 604 were recorded by Theophanes. While the major territorial losses on the eastern frontier had not yet begun, rebellion was stirring against Phocas in the capital. According to *Chronicon Paschale*, in 603, during a riot amongst the Hippodrome factions in Constantinople, a fire began on the street of Mese and spread quickly covering large areas from Lausaus' palace to the Forum of Constantine. In the midst of the unrest, the Green leader Ioannis was burned to death (*Chronicon Paschale*: 695). Phocas responded with a violent suppression of his opponents who were loyal to the former emperor. While the entire empire was in turmoil in 605, the widows and daughters of Maurice who were initially confined to the monastery were accused of being involved in a connected conspiracy and were also killed. *Chronicon Paschale* recorded the suppression of this conspiracy and reveals the atrocities of Phocas:

'In this year in the month Daisius, June according to the Romans, on a Saturday, there were beheaded Theodore the praetorian prefect, John *antigraphheus*, Romanus *scholasticus*, Theodosius subadjutant of the *magister*, Patricius *illustris* nephew of Domniziolus who was curator of the palace of Hormisdas, John and Tzittas, *spatharii* and *candidati*, Athanasius comes *largitionum*, Andrew *illustris* who was called Scombrus, and Elpidius *illustris*. Elpidius had his tongue cut out and his four extremities removed; he was paraded on a stretcher and carried down to the sea; when his eyes had been gouged out, he was thrown into a skiff and burnt. The other aforementioned people were beheaded, on the grounds that they were discovered plotting against the emperor Phocas' (*Chronicon Paschale*: 696-697).

In this sense, Phocas deserved the epithet 'tyrant' which was first given by the sources of his period. Another broad narrative of these conspiracy plans is set out in Theophanes' work. According to Theophanes there was another similar incident around 609 regarding the rising anger of the audience against Phocas during a horse race at the hippodrome:

'Phocas held horse-races, and the Greens reviled him: "You are drunk again, and long ago lost your mind." Phocas relied on the city *prefect* Kosmas. The prefect mutilated many people and hung their members in the *Sphendone*.⁵ He decapitated others, and still others he shut up in sacks, flung into the sea, and drowned. The

⁵ The semicircular southern portion of the hippodrome.

Greens gathered together and set fire to the *Praitorion*.⁶ They burned its offices, archives, and jail, whose inmates got out and fled. Phocas was enraged and ordered the Greens to no longer to meddle in politics' (Theophanes: A.M. 6101/297).

4. Collapse of the eastern frontier

The Greens, who had previously encouraged Phocas, had apparently cut their support for him over time, and even became opponents. However, great territory losses began both in the east and the west. In Italy, the Lombards forced *Exarchos* Smaragdus in Ravenna to grant a major concession in 604/5 during the reign of their king Agilulf. Moreover, in the same year when Phocas had to shift most of the Balkan army to the eastern front, the Avars increased the amount of tribute they demanded (Mitchell 2014: 613). The real disaster however was at the eastern border. Earlier when Emperor Maurice decided to support Khusro II against his usurper Bahram Chobin during the Persian civil war in 589, his main goal was to establish peace without giving a tribute to Persia and to recapture most of the lost territories from 363. As a matter of fact, when Khusro II took his throne with the support of Maurice⁷, he delivered, as was promised, the entire Armenian region up to Nisibis – including the *Arzanene* region and the city of Dara, which had been under the control of the Sasanians for a long time (Theophylact Simocatta: V. 15.2, Sebeos: 12. 84, see also Whitby 1983: 205-217). But all these gains on the eastern front disappeared during the reign of Phocas.

When Khusro II attacked Roman territory with Theodosius, the alleged son of Maurice, (albeit a controversial subject) he first besieged the city of Dara, and after a siege of about nine months, the city fell in the summer of 604 (Theophanes: A.M. 6096, Chr. 724: 145/16, Mich. Syr.: X. 25, Chr. Khuzistan: 21, Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 184). With this incident, the Roman commanders in Armenia changed sides and merged with Theodosius's troops. Important fortified sites such as Theodosiopolis and Citharizon fell into the hands of the Sasanians and were left under the control of Theodosius in 607. After the fall of Dara, Khusro ceased to accompany the expeditions and handed over his army to a Persian general named Rasmiozan.⁸

Around 606/7, first Cephass (Hasankeyf) fell, then Marde (Mardin) and Amida (Diyarbakır), and in 609 Resaina (Ceylanpınar) and finally Edessa (Urfa) fell. (Chr. 1234: 86, Mich. Syr.: X. 25, Jacob of Edessa: 324/38). According to Mihael the Syrian, when the news of the loss of Cephass reached the Romans in the garrison of Mardin, the troops there evacuated the castle and desperately left its defence to the monks (Mich. Syr.: X. 25). In spite of all these Persian advances, the biggest reason why the Romans did not show any reaction is best understood by their engagement in the rebellion of Heraclius, the ruler of Carthage in 608, and their preference at

⁶ Located not far west of the imperial palaces, as it was the main government building in city.

⁷ See on the subject: Theophylact Simocatta, V. 7-11, V. 15.1, Sebeos, 11.80, Higgins 1939: 53-54, Whitby 1988: 302-303, Greatrex and Lieu, 174, Daryaee 2009: 33, Pourshariati 2009: 397-414, Mitchell 2014: 597.

⁸ See. Flusin 1992: II, 74. n.32. The name of general also recorded as 'Faruqhan'.

this stage for the Roman armies to remain west of the Euphrates. This war was completely different from the struggles of the 6th century. When the struggles of the 6th century are examined, it becomes evident that in response to any Persian attack, the Roman armies were vigilant to respond quickly from their garrisons on both the east and west of the Euphrates. But by this point in the 7th century, the Romans did not respond to Persian advances, nor did the Sasanians plunder and then retreat. On the contrary, the Persians were systematically seeking to seize each fortress east of the Euphrates, annex the region and gain the support of the people in order to pave the way for further movement west (Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 185). For the first time since its emergence in the 3rd century, the Sassanid dynasty had great territorial opportunities and eventually took control of the entire Upper Tigris basin.

Following Edessa's fall in 609, the strategic cities of the *Osrhoene* region, such as Carrhae (Harran), Callinicum (Raqqa) and Circesium (al-Qardisiya), were also captured by the Persians (Chr. 724: 146, Chronicon Paschale: 698). But more importantly, when the Persians seized Zenobia in 610, it was the first time they passed west of the Euphrates. The fall of Zenobia was the Persian's first step to invade all Asia Minor, Palestine and Egypt from the Euphrates to the Aegean islands (Chr. 724: 146, see also, Stratos 1968: 63, Flusin 1992: II, 74, Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 185). There was a similar situation on the Armenian frontier to the North. The Persians took complete control of the region around 697/8. According to Sebeos, they defeated a Roman army near Karin (Theodosiopolis) and eventually expelled the Romans from Armenia. Moreover, Khusro, who was not content with this victory, deported the people of Theodosiopolis to Persia (Sebeos: 111, see also Garsoian 1999: 368-384, Shahbazi, Kettenhofen and Perry 2012: 297-312).

While discontent with Phocas was evident in various places of the empire, the strongest rebellion against him arose out of Carthage. Heraclius, the ruler of Carthage, and his son, young Heraclius, found support from Egypt, an important economic hub, often called 'the granary of Byzantium'. At this point, Phocas was in a very difficult situation. The young Heraclius sailed across the Mediterranean and arrived in Constantinople in the autumn of 610 with the imperial navy under his command. When the people in the capital saw Heraclius, they assisted the navy in fact to enter the port and ensured that Phocas was eventually captured. Interestingly, the Greens, who years before brought Phocas and his Balkan army into the city in 602 to assist in the rebellion against Maurice, were now assisting in Phocas' removal. Being disappointed and wearied with Phocas and his brutal reign, they opened the harbour to the navy and to Heraclius' troops with hopes again of new leadership. Phocas and his supporters were executed, and their heads and hands were put on poles and displayed to the public on Mese Street (Chronicon Paschale: 700-701).⁹

The overthrow of the tyrant Phocas meant nothing to the Sasanians in the east. Khusro II, looking for a way to benefit as much as possible from the crisis of Byzantium, continued his invasions. While Caesarea, the most important city of Cappadocia, fell in 611, Melitene (Malatya) was also taken from Roman control in 613 (Sebeos: 114, Kaegi 1973: 324-326). Heraclius was engaged in internal affairs

⁹ For the most comprehensive account of the rebellion against Phocas see: (John of Nikiu: 107-109, Mitchell 2014: 613, Morrison 2004: 60).

and consolidation during the first two years of his rule, and the first significant counterattack of the Byzantine armies against the Persians came in 613. Although a Byzantine troop under the command of General Philippicus attacked Armenia and advanced up to Yerevan, they were forced to retreat into Roman territory again because of a defensive move by Khusro II.¹⁰ According to Sebeos, another branch of Byzantine troops about eight thousand well-equipped soldiers clashed with the Persians in the vicinity of Cilicia. Although the Romans prevailed against the Persian army, they had to flee later. Thus, the Persians chased the Romans through the Cilician mountain pass and later captured the city of Tarsus where the people of the region had taken refuge (Sebeos: 115. See also Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 190). This withdrawal of the Romans from Syria to the northwest cut off their line of control with the Palestinian and Egyptian regions to the south. Now open to the Persians, Damascus itself came under the control of the Sasanians by the end of 613 (Chr. 724: 146, Chr. 1234: 91, Mich. Syr.: XI.1, Theophanes: AM 6105, see also Stratos 1968: 107-108, Flusin 1992: II, 79, Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 190). Subsequently, Jerusalem fell after a siege in 614. In sources from that period, the Jews, who constituted the majority of the people of Jerusalem were accused of cooperating with the Persians. In addition, a portion of the Christian population of the city was massacred and a significant portion of them were deported to Persia for resettlement. Moreover, Christian relics like the remains of the true cross were taken to the palace of Khusro II in Ctesiphon (Chronicon Paschale: 614, Sebeos: 115-116, Sivan 2000: 277-306, Foss 2003: 152-153).

The turmoil in Jerusalem occupied an extensive place in the sources describing this period. The fact that the most important city on earth for the Christians came into the hands of the Persians must have increased the determination and courage of the Sasanians. Accordingly, in the summer or autumn months of 614, Shahin, a senior Persian general, left the capital Ctesiphon probably with a large cavalry unit to move toward the Byzantine capital. In early 615, the Sassanid cavalries appeared in Chalcedon just across from Constantinople. It has been discovered by a number of archaeological findings that they plundered and pillaged Asia Minor before arriving in Chalcedon. For example, there is evidence that Ephesus was plundered towards the end of 614 (Chronicon Paschale: 706, Theophanes: A. M. 6107, Sebeos: 123, Tabari: I. 1002, Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 194). There was still no military response by Byzantium against this show of strength. Emperor Heraclius contacted Shahin in Chalcedon and tried by diplomatic means to meet up with him outside the city. The emperor was welcomed by Shahin and he demanded peace (Chronicon Paschale: 706 and Sebeos: 122-123). In addition, three Roman ambassadors were sent by the Senate to the Sasanian palace to extend its diplomatic efforts. Ultimately, the Persian troops in Chalcedon withdrew (Chronicon Paschale: 706, Sebeos: 122-123, Stratos 1968: 115-117, Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 194). However, this retreat was a deception and important cities such as Sardis in western and southern Anatolia were pillaged between 616–617 (See: Foss 1976: 53-54). In this period, the clearest evidence that the Romans left Asia Minor completely to the Sasanians is that the Persians built

¹⁰ Sebeos notes that Philippicus became a monk after death of Maurice, but this skillful commander returned to the army years later by Heraclius' order (Sebeos: 114).

a navy here and attacked Cyprus and the Aegean islands (Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 196, Morrison 2004: 61, Chrysos 1993: 12-13). Although the Persians attacked the city of Salamis in eastern Cyprus, they failed to gain control over the entire island and their main purpose was probably to secure its routes to Egypt. Egypt was the main supplier of the grain for Byzantium and since the land routes through Syria and Palestine were under Persian rule at this time, the only connection between Byzantium and Egypt by sea became very strategic. The Persians knew this and moved quickly to control the sea routes in the eastern Mediterranean. Eventually, the Persian troops advanced from Palestine to Egypt, conquered Alexandria around 619, and subsequently much of the southern regions of Egypt. With the loss of Egypt, famine began in the eastern empire (Nikephoros: 12. 4-8 and Chr. 724, 146/17). The main centre of the empire, Asia Minor and the Near East was completely lost, while in the West the situation was no different. The Avars and Slavs established complete dominance in the Balkans. Moreover, not just Avars and Slavs but also Persians expanded their attacks to the Aegean islands between 619–622. The most important finding that illustrates the activities of the Persians on the Aegean coast is an identified treasure on the island of Samos. Amongst this finding of over 300 coins, 8 were found belonging to Maurice, 144 belonging to Phocas and 148 to Heraclius (Oeconomides and Drossoyianni 1989: 163–175, Metcalf 1962: 14-23).

5. Conclusion

The frustration with Emperor Maurice in the army was first manifested in defiance to his orders in the Balkan region. However, it grew very quickly into open rebellion. Later, with the support of some of the names close to the palace and a significant section of the people in the capital, the rebellion of Phocas turned into a violent and bloody coup. From this point, the coup of Phocas is a very exceptional event in Byzantine history. There was more than one power group within this rapidly developing rebellion. Other important elements of the rebellion were the Hippodrome factions that had been in existence since the establishment of the capital, especially the Greens. The Greens had not played such a substantial political role since the Nika rebellion of 532. Therefore, this coup was an important event showing that the Hippodrome factions were still an effective political force in the imperial capital at the beginning of the 7th century.¹¹

The coup and domination of the ‘usurper’ Phocas had been a period of disaster for Byzantium in every respect. The collapse of the eastern border with the attacks of the Persians at the beginning, encouraged Byzantium’s western enemies, the Avars and Slavs to cross the Danube border and infiltrate much of the region and even up to the Peloponnese peninsula. The lands of Syria, Palestine and Egypt were conquered for the first time by the Sasanians, and the holy city and the holy cross were looted by the Persians. Central and Western Anatolia were systematically plundered by the Persians, thus preventing the possibility of Byzantine resistance. Although Phocas

¹¹ On the Hippodrom factions: Cameron 1976: 265-7, 280-282.

was overthrown by Heraclius in 610, it was not until 622 that Heraclius could show any serious presence against these enemies, as the country's military and financial resources were almost exhausted during the Phocas era.

The biggest territorial losses between the years 602–622 were undoubtedly experienced in the east. After the fall of the cities in the eastern part of the Euphrates, *Chronicle of 724* reported that there was a great migration from the cities and settlements to the west of the Euphrates (Chron 724, 146/17, Greatrex and Lieu, 185). In addition to this, in order to gain the favour of the monophysite inhabitants in the region Khusro II expelled the diophysite bishops and replaced them with anti-Chalcedonian bishops. Also, the policy of the Sassanid king was to ensure that the monophysite clergy who had recently fled to Egypt took refuge among the Persians (Chr. 1234, 89, Mich. Syr. X. 25). While the Persian king was following a gentle and careful policy particularly toward the monophysite communities in Syria, Palestine and Egypt, in Asia Minor he was only looting and plundering. Therefore, he must have been laying the groundwork to make Persian rule permanent in all the conquered regions except Byzantine Anatolia.

Another issue is the question of whether Khusro was attacking Roman territory under pretext for Maurice's death or indeed for revenge. At this point, Syriac sources have extensive records that Khusro truly mourned the death of Maurice when the news came. Even Muslim writer Tabari wrote that Khusro was reported to have attacked Byzantium in order to avenge Maurice (Tabari, I. 1001-2). In *The Chronicle of 1234* and *Michael the Syrian* who used Dionysius of Tel-Mahre as a source, it was recorded that Khusro dressed in black robes for all the Persian nobles in the palace and lamented Maurice for days (MSyr, 10, XXV, Chron. 1234, 220-221). After all, it is unclear whether Khusro used Maurice's massacre as an excuse to disrupt the peace, or if there were genuine emotional reasons why he began this great invasion. Nevertheless, the fact that his attack continued after Heraclius overthrew Phocas indicates that there was more than honour and revenge on Khusro's mind. This was the first time since the establishment of the Sasanian dynasty that they had achieved such great gains against Rome. Naturally, it was unthinkable that they would give up all they had achieved or retreat from all the territorial gains they had made.

Consequently, between the years 602–622, the Sasanian Empire seemed to have approached the boundaries of the former Achaemenid empire centuries before, as in line with the ideology of the founders. From the Persian Gulf in the east to the Mediterranean in the west, from the Black Sea in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south, the Persians were now in control of vast regions which no doubt engendered nostalgic memories of the great Persian empires of the past. Nevertheless, this hegemony would only last for twenty years. Heraclius succeeded in rebuilding Byzantium from 622 onwards. Finally, by 630 the Romans regained all the territories held by the Persians after many fierce struggles. Moreover, the Holy Cross, taken by the Persians from Jerusalem, eventually returned to the holy city along with the Roman prestige and glory that had been lost so dramatically.

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