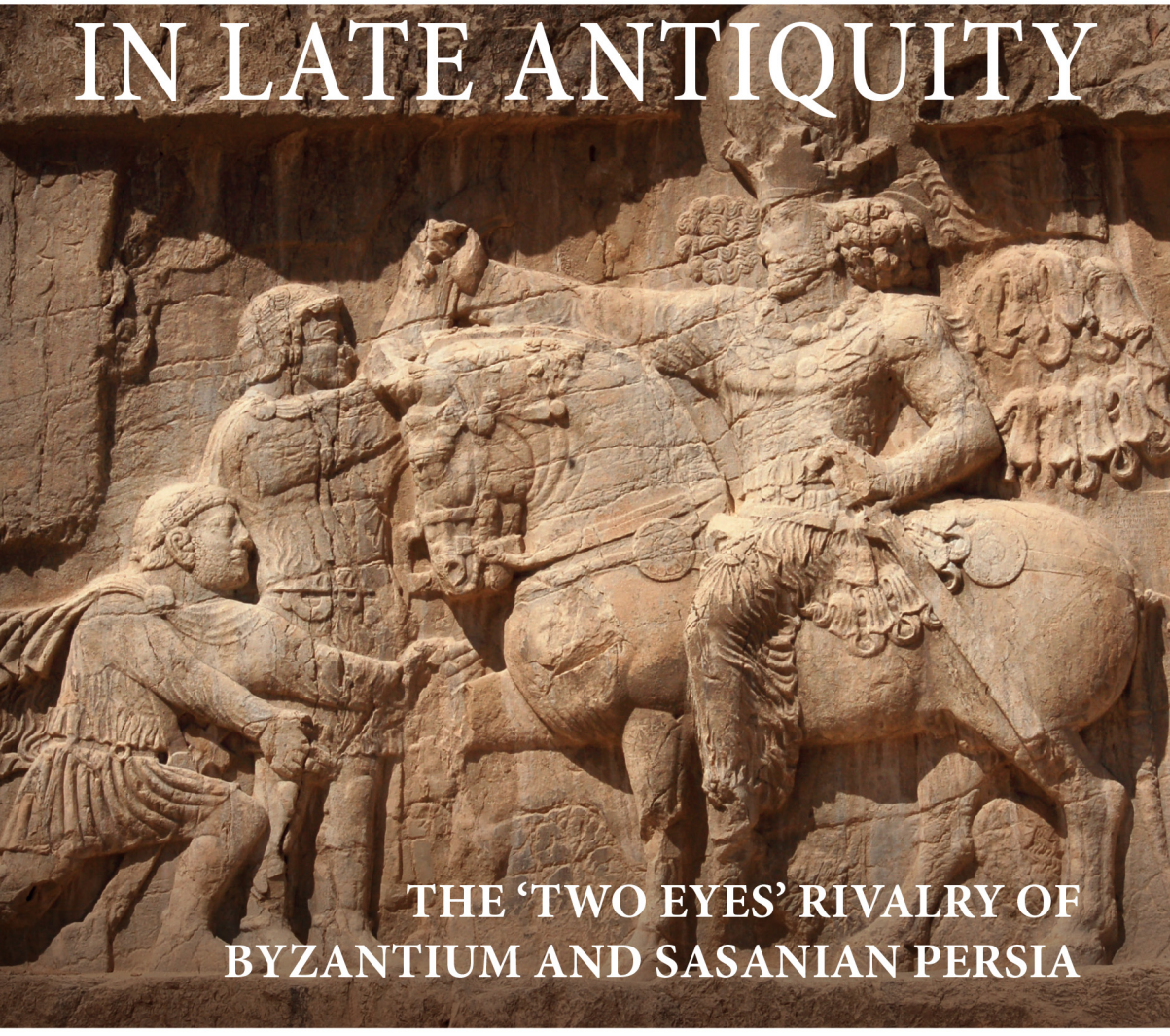
KEVIN BLACHFORD

WORLD ORDER IN LATE ANTIQUITY



THE 'TWO EYES' RIVALRY OF BYZANTIUM AND SASANIAN PERSIA

OXFORD

World Order in Late Antiquity

World Order in Late Antiquity

The 'Two Eyes' Rivalry of Byzantium and Sasanian Persia

KEVIN BLACHFORD

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024940234

ISBN 9780198882138

DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.001.0001

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For my wife, Emek.

Preface

This project began as an attempt to consider historical superpower rivalries at a time when many contemporary commentators have been focused on the rising competition between the United States and China. At first, I believed a historical analogy could be made between Rome and Persia and today's modern rivalry of two great powers who both see themselves as having a special place in the world. Certainly, there are many comparisons to be made between two competing visions of world order coming into contact and shaping one another across rival spheres of influence. The human desire for power and competing imperial claims to greatness are certainly not limited to any one time period of history. But as this project developed, I also began to see how very different the world of antiquity was to our modern understandings of the 'state', the 'international', and a 'states system'. To attempt to view the world through a Roman or Sasanian perspective and to consider a world of 'peoples' and client–patron relations immediately challenges many of the most common assumptions of international relations (IR) as an academic subject. The following work therefore seeks to blur the lines between history, IR theory, and international political thought. The result of this interdisciplinary project is a conscious attempt to challenge the contemporary 'global' IR approaches within IR theory which so often project modern national histories and national understandings of territory back through time to earlier eras.[1]

This work is not intended to be a distinct work of history, and classicists may indeed challenge my approach. I have tried to be consistent with naming practices, although I do make the assumption of treating Byzantium and the East Romans as interchangeable terms. 'Byzantium' is of course in itself a term that is contentious among historians. It is used both to signify the founding of the city of Constantinople in the third century and to denote the 'rump' of the empire that remained after the Arabic invasions in the seventh century.[2]

[1] See, for a critique, Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 8; also see Tarak Barkawi, Christopher Murray, and Ayşe Zarakol, 'The United Nations of IR: power, knowledge and empire in Global IR debates', *International Theory*, 15:3 (2023), pp. 445–461.

[2] For disputes over the term 'Byzantium', see Averil Cameron, 'Byzantium now: contested territory or excluded middle', *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 5 (2019),

I have used the term Byzantium relatively freely because I believe it signifies that there was a shift in power from the west to the east as a Mediterranean system became a Eurasian one in late antiquity. This was a long and multifaceted process of transformation. One of the difficulties of studying late antiquity is that there is no single point at which one could say that the 'Romans' became 'Byzantine'. As Anthony Kaldellis has argued, even medieval Byzantium was still 'Roman' at heart.[3] I am also presumptive in treating the Parthians and Sasanian Persians as in many ways a continuation of an Iranian empire.[4] While different rival dynasties, and with different governance structures, the Sasanian dynasty carried on and built upon long-standing Iranian traditions, as later chapters of this work will touch upon.

The aim of this work, however, is not to provide a narrative account of the history of the Roman and Persian empires. I have certainly had to be selective in my account and do not attempt to cover many of the historical events. The central aim is limited to considering how two imperial polities came to recognize and understand one another as forming a dual hierarchy, as the 'Two Eyes' at the head of a contested world order. The following work also considers this hierarchical and suzerain order not in the familiar terms of an 'international' order but as an 'inter-polity' order.[5] The very term *inter-national* depicts a modern nineteenth-century concept founded on nationalism, which, as the following work will explore, is unable to account for the imperial structures of antiquity. 'Inter-polity' is therefore an attempt to include both the web-like governance structures of pre-modern empires and their relations with nomadic confederations which are often seen as lacking the attributes of a modern 'state'.

In developing this research, I have been fortunate to work at the UK Defence Academy and have benefitted greatly from a talented range of military officers who have listened patiently in seminars to my intellectual detours to include

pp. 91–111; Averil Cameron, 'Late Antiquity and Byzantium: an identity problem', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 40:1 (2016), pp. 27–37; Paul Magdalino, 'Byzantium = Constantinople' in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 43–54; Mark Whittow, 'Early medieval Byzantium and the end of the ancient world', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 9:1 (2009), pp. 134–153; Panagiotis Theodoropoulos, 'Did the Byzantines call themselves Byzantines? Elements of eastern Roman identity in the imperial discourse of the seventh century', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 45:1 (2021), pp. 25–41.

[3] Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (London: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[4] On treating these two different empires as a continuation, see Adrian Goldsworthy, *Rome and Persia: The Seven Hundred Year Rivalry* (New York: Hachette Books, 2023).

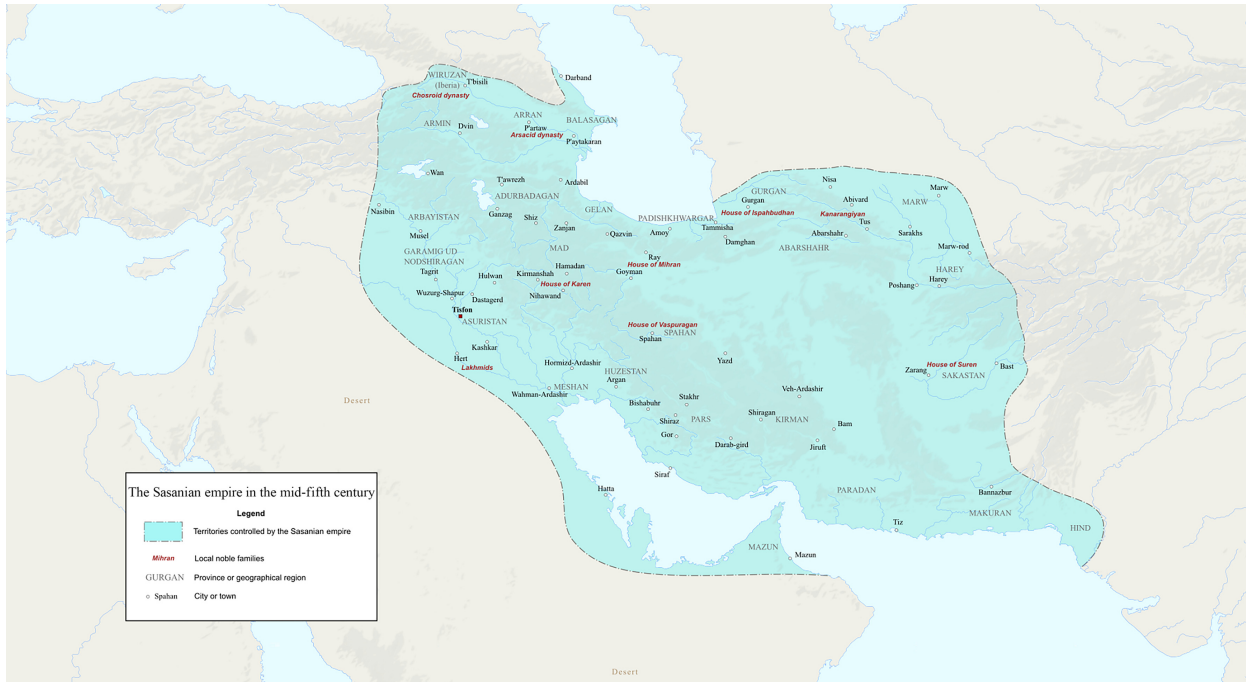
[5] On 'inter-polity' as a term to capture relations between a wide range of political entities, see Barry Buzan, *Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind across Three Eras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 9.

topics on ancient history and strategy. Their insightful comments and critiques have pushed me to consider the everyday practices which constitute geopolitical relations in a way that academics focused solely on theory may often overlook. I am also grateful to my colleagues for their encouraging words of support for this project. Encouragement from Tarak Barkawi, Jason Sharman, Yongjin Zhang, and Andrew Byers has also been invaluable at different stages of this monograph. Finally, I am grateful to the constant support of my mother, Jayne, and in particular the patience of my wife, Emek, who has been an inspiration in developing the ideas behind this work. Her love and kindness and our trips to ancient sites in Turkey inspired many writing sessions and made this work possible.

Contents

List of Maps

Map 0.1 Map of the Byzantine empire. Dimitrios Karamitros/Shutterstock



Map 0.2 The Sasanian empire in the mid-fifth century. Original file by Ro4444/licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International licence

Map 0.3 The Roman–Persian frontier in late antiquity. Cplakidas/Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported licence

Introduction

The East Romans of Byzantium and the Sasanian Persians competed as geopolitical rivals for over four centuries between 224 AD and 628 AD. Across this era of late antiquity, the rivalry between the Romans and the Persians developed from mutual recognition and stability, albeit with bouts of limited conflict, to all-out open warfare leading to the destruction of the Sasanian kingdom and a geopolitical vacuum from which the rise of Islam and the Arab conquests were born.[1] This period of late antiquity is rarely considered within the discipline of international relations (IR), but the geopolitical struggle of Byzantium and Persia presents an under-examined case study of hegemonic order and imperial rivalry.[2] In contrast to modern ideals of sovereign equality between nation states, late antiquity was defined by competing claims to universal rule over the known world. Both the Sasanian Persians and the Romans made universal claims to imperial greatness and professed a divine role in the maintenance of a stable order. As hegemonic empires, they sought to use their predominant power to order the relations of surrounding actors and through a series of intractable conflicts these two great empires would develop a dual hierarchy that sought to divide the world between them.[3] Defined by the Persian shah as the 'Two Eyes' of the Earth, these two imperial powers created a system of inter-polity order which aimed to hierarchically organize those considered as 'barbarians'.[4] Through this competitive yet intertwined relationship, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires would have a role in the construction and maintenance of a hierarchical system as the two equal centres of the world.

The Two Eyes system formed a dual hierarchical order that evolved as a response to the mass movements and turbulent change which characterized late antiquity. The rise of the Germanic kingdoms in the west of the Goths and Franks, coupled with the migrations of nomadic peoples crossing

[1] Tom Holland, *Shadow of the Sword* (London: Little, Brown, 2012).

[2] A rare exception is Hyun Jin Kim, *Geopolitics in Late Antiquity: The Fate of Superpowers from China to Rome* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[3] Hegemony can be defined as a system of vertical relations between the leading and subordinate powers. See Daniel Nexon and G. J. Ikenberry, 'Hegemony Studies 3.0: the dynamics of hegemonic orders', *Security Studies*, 28:3 (2019), p. 411; also see Andreas Antoniades, 'Hegemony and international relations', *International Politics*, 55 (2017), pp. 595–611 and Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Hierarchies in world politics', *International Organization*, 70:3 (2016), p. 624.

[4] Matthew P. Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 1–5.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0001

vast distances from the central Asian steppe, upended the sedentary world of antiquity. The arrival of nomadic barbarians invading Europe has long been seen as a major cause of the fall of Rome and the western Roman empire.[5] But unlike in the west, the East Roman empire centred on Constantinople continued, and with its greatest rivals the Persians sought to manage these new barbarians as clients and tributaries. This period saw the emergence of a bewildering array of new political groupings as successive waves of peoples, such as the Goths, Vandals, Lombards, Avars, Huns, Hephthalites, and Gok Turks, among many others, would drastically reshape the geopolitics of late antiquity and influence the direction of peoples that would over time become the medieval kingdoms of Europe. The Two Eyes system itself would eventually break down in the seventh century and it was the semi-nomadic Arab tribes, who were former clients of the imperial powers, that would rise up and finally bring to an end to the era of antiquity.

The significance of these events within late antiquity to the study of IR might not be immediately apparent. IR as a discipline has often sought to be policy relevant, scientific in its approach, and focused firmly on the present. History prior to modernity is therefore rarely considered within the study of IR. As an academic field of enquiry, IR is centred on the study of modern nation states and their emergence with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 that ended Europe's wars of religion.[6] It is this Westphalian framework of sovereign territorial states that continues to define the dominant understanding of an inter-polity system within IR. Looking to the era of late antiquity therefore challenges many of the core assumptions found within the discipline. The bounded territorial sovereign states commonly seen as a point of reference within IR simply did not exist in late antiquity and relations between polities were explicitly hierarchic and deferential. The relevance of the following study is therefore twofold. Firstly, it can speak to historical IR as a way to expand our understanding of inter-polity relations beyond just the modern nation state, particularly in examining the client–patron relations of imperial polities and in investigating the relationship between sedentary empires and nomadic actors. Secondly, it highlights how many of our modern understandings of the 'international' are challenged by the geopolitics of pre-modern inter-polity relations. In opening up historical investigations of a great imperial rivalry outside of modern European history, this study works to broaden the range of cases for a more

[5] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Classics, [1776] 1996).

[6] Kevin Blachford, 'From Thucydides to 1648: the "missing" years in IR and the missing voices in world history', *International Studies Perspectives*, 22:4 (2021), pp. 495–508.

historically informed and global approach to the study of the rise and fall of inter-polity order.

The geopolitical struggle of Byzantium and Persia presents an under-examined case study on imperial rivalry and the structure of a diverse suzerain system. The following chapters will therefore seek to examine this imperial rivalry between Byzantium and the Sasanian in order to understand why stability emerged. How did the rivalry develop, and what kind of inter-polity order could be found in late antiquity? Finally, what lessons can we learn about historical hegemonic competition and hierarchy within IR theory? But before developing this argument, the following introduction will first outline the context of the Two Eyes system before further elaborating on the importance of pre-modern inter-polity relations for the study of IR.

What Were the Wars of Byzantium and Persia?

The 'fall' of the Roman empire was a turning point in history and a cataclysmic event that ushered in an era known as the 'Dark Ages' in which the development of progress and Western society declined into a period of petty warring successor states. At least, this is the stereotypical notion which has held sway over popular opinion. Yet, this argument rests on cliches and oversimplifications that are entirely Western-centric. Popular imagination may focus on the 'fall' of Rome, but in reality there were multiple 'falls' of Rome as the city itself was racked by a succession of military crises, sackings, and occupations across the late third to the early seventh centuries. Modern historiography has therefore focused less on the 'fall' of Rome and more on the diffusion of power across the empire as the importance of Rome as a city declined; instead, power would shift to the cities of Antioch, Milan, Alexandria, Trier, and Constantinople. This process of transformation and the decline of Rome is in itself a vast subject which many better-qualified scholars have covered elsewhere.[7] For this study, the key issue is that as power shifted away from the city of Rome, Constantinople would eventually emerge as a significant polity in its own right as the East Roman empire of Byzantium.[8]

[7] For recent examples, see Michele Renee Salzman, *The Falls of Rome: Crises, Resilience, and Resurgence in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) and Edward Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Also see Christine Delaplace, *La Fin De L'empire Romain D'occident: Rome et les Wisigoths de 382 à 531* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015); Jeroen Wijnendaele, ed., *Late Roman Italy Imperium to Regnum* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

[8] Paul Stephenson, *New Rome: The Empire in the East* (London: Profile Books, 2021).

The emergence of an East Roman empire was a slow transformational process that signified a shift in power from imperial core to the frontier. The Roman empire had first been divided into eastern and western parts by Emperor Diocletian in 286 AD in an effort to stabilize the large and unwieldy empire. Emperor Constantine the Great would then go on to found the city of Constantinople in 330 AD on the site of a Greek fishing village known as *Byzantion*. This new capital of the eastern Roman empire was the beginnings of what is commonly known today as the Greek-speaking empire of Byzantium. However, while the eastern Roman empire had a separate capital and a different language, the inhabitants of the eastern empire still saw themselves as thoroughly Roman in character and identity. They continued to build upon a Christian and classical Roman inheritance and defined themselves as *Romaioi* in Greek. Even by the medieval era, the Anatolian Turks of the eleventh century would still identify Byzantium as 'Rum', or Land of the Romans.[9] The rise of an eastern Roman polity was therefore a reflection of how power in late antiquity shifted away from the Italian peninsula and the actual city of Rome. In turning to the east, the Romans sought to gain the benefits of the trade from the far eastern silk trade and the lucrative exotic goods of India and China.[10] The rise to prominence of Constantinople and the final split between east and west Rome around 395 AD essentially created a separate East Roman imperial actor as a distinct polity with firm interests in developing relations across Eurasia.[11]

The division of the Roman empire into east and west would create different geopolitical outcomes for both regions.[12] In the west, the city of Rome faced barbarian groups who would later become Europe's medieval kingdoms, but in the east the Romans came up against another great empire, the Persians, and it would be the Persians who presented the greatest challenge to Roman power. Prior to interaction with the Persians, the Romans had become uncontested masters of the Mediterranean in a unipolar system in which *Pax Romana* reigned supreme. Ancient Rome's rivalries with Carthage and the Greek city-states are well known, and while the result of these undoubted struggles was not pre-ordained, Rome eventually emerged as the victor and

[9] Jeroen Wijnendaele, 'Apocalypse, transformation or much ado about nothing? Western scholarship and the fall of Rome (1776–2008)', *Iris: Journal of the Classical Association of Victoria*, 24 (2011), p. 44.

[10] Peter Frankopan, *Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[11] R. C. Blockley, *East Roman Frontier Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992), p. 45.

[12] Torbjorn L. Knutsen and Martin Hall, 'Rome republic, monarchy and empire' in *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations*, eds. Carvalho et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), p. 402.

by the 160s BC Rome had essentially subdued its major rivals within the Mediterranean world.[13] There was little in the Romans' geopolitical experience therefore to deal with another imperial rival 'of significant strength on a permanent basis'.[14] The initial contacts between Rome and Persia did not result in the usual Roman victory as essentially the Romans had stumbled 'blind into Babylon'. Their worldview of status gained through conquest was unprepared to realize that Iranian culture and its imperial power was just too strong and too extensive to be assimilated into the Roman political sphere.[15] As one historian notes, in the west, expanding Roman power was a sign of civilization; in the east, 'it was the Romans who were on the receiving end of civilization'.[16] The Iranians during this period of initial contact were led by the Arsacid dynasty, also known as the Parthians (250 BC–224 AD), whose power stretched from modern Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan in the east. Through a series of conflicts, both empires would face structural changes as the Romans experienced a crisis of rule in the third century, while the Parthian dynasty would succumb to an internal revolt and a new dynasty arose to rule Iran known as the Sasanian.[17] It was this new Sasanian Persian regime established in 224 AD which was able to centralize power and create an even more challenging rival to Roman claims to universal rule. The Sasanian king, known as the *Shahanshah*, proclaimed his dynastic power as 'king of kings' and this rejuvenated Persian power under Sasanian leadership was quick to launch an invasion of the East Roman empire in 230 AD. The stage was therefore set for an intense rivalry between two great imperial powers who each viewed their rule as *imperium sine fine*, as empires without end.

The rise of the Sasanian dynasty, as successors to Parthia, continued the east–west conflict with the Romans and shaped relations of late antiquity for the next four centuries. As the rivalry between the Sasanian and the East Romans evolved, the order of the Two Eyes system developed across three broad periods of conflict and contestation. The first period between 224 and 363 AD saw the rise of the House of Sasan who overthrew the previous Arsacid

[13] Nikolaus L. Overtoom, 'The rivalry of Rome and Parthia in the sources from the Augustan age to late antiquity', *Anabis*, 7 (2016), pp. 137–174. For the comparative advantage Rome had over its rivals, see Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 97.

[14] Brian Campbell, 'War and diplomacy: Rome and Parthia 31 BC–AD 235' in *War and Society in the Roman World*, eds. John Rich and Graham Shipley (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 213.

[15] Rose Mary Sheldon, *Rome's Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (London: Vallentine Mitchel & Co. Ltd, 2010), pp. 230–231.

[16] Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 499.

[17] Lukas de Blois, 'Rome and Persia in the middle of the third century' in *Rome and the Worlds Beyond Its Frontiers*, eds. Daniëlle Slootjes and M. Peachin (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 33–44.

dynasty to become the new rulers of the Persian empire in 224 AD. The Sasanian dynasty was a more militaristic and centralized power which acted aggressively against the Romans in a series of conflicts that saw the Persian shah Shapur I humiliate Roman forces on the battlefield. The Romans during this period equally sought to continue their imperial expansion and aimed at the conquest of Persia. Stable relations would emerge only after the failure of Emperor Julian to conquer Persia in 363.[18] In realizing the futility of seeking outright conquest, the clash of these two great empires turned ancient Mesopotamia into an arena of conflict and competitive relations which rested on a semi-fortified buffer zone stretching from the Caucasus in the north to the deserts of Arabia in the south. Across the eastern Roman frontier, a buffer zone emerged which, although fluctuating between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, nevertheless remained relatively stable until the seventh century. As with other historical examples of buffer zones, the topography and geography of Mesopotamia meant that the frontier between these empires consisted of few natural barriers.[19] The buffer zone therefore developed as an organic outcome from the lack of any clear boundary between imperial claims to rule. While conquest was not always the primary goal, the two empires engaged in competition for influence, tributes, and prestige, which could cause conflict to erupt across the frontier.

The second phase of the Two Eyes order developed between 363 AD and 502 AD which saw the establishment of more regular practices of diplomacy and a period of passivity between the two imperial rivals. Concurrently, both empires would be challenged by the vast migrations of this era as people from the steppe migrated to seek new lands and re-shaped the geopolitics of Eurasia. This era of passivity, akin almost to an era of 'détente', saw both empires go through substantial changes as both powers became more centralized and focused on finding order and stability.[20] The eastern Roman empire became a distinct polity as the western half of the Roman Empire collapsed under the forces of these 'barbarian' invasions. The Sasanians equally lost a significant part of their eastern lands as the provinces around Bactria, now part of modern Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, became subsumed by semi-nomadic groups who displaced the Sasanians in the east. The arrival of nomadic polities, such as the Huns in particular, would put pressure on both empires and create conflict as

[18] As will be explored in Chapter 2.

[19] Nicholas Spykman, 'Frontiers, security and international organization', *Geographical Review*, 32:3 (1942), p. 441.

[20] Vern L. Bullough, 'The Roman empire vs. Persia 363–502: a study of successful deterrence', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 7:1 (1963), pp. 55–68.

well as new incentives for cooperation. Despite facing such nomadic groups which could challenge their very power to rule, both Byzantium and Persia would continue to express ideologies of universal rule and imperial greatness. The Two Eyes existed as dual civilizational centres in which barbarian peoples were expected to recognize the greatness and hierarchical rule of the two sedentary empires. This Two Eyes system rested on a shared language and culture of hierarchy which developed across the fifth and sixth centuries. Together, the emperor and shah would embrace a concept of kingship as a form of shared hegemony in which the two imperial centres would attempt, with varying degrees of success, to order the world around them.

The final phase of the Two Eyes system saw a dramatic increase in both conflict and cooperation. From 502 to 628 AD the two empires would embark on a series of wars which became increasingly acrimonious. It was this final period of conflict that led to the 'Last Great War of Antiquity' between 602 and 628 AD which saw, first, a Sasanian drive for domination before a miraculous Byzantine counterattack in alliance with a people from the steppe known as the Gok Turks, which led to the collapse of the Sasanian Persian empire.[21] The Last Great War was the culmination of a century of rising antagonism and conflict, and yet perhaps counterintuitively the sixth century also saw a simultaneous deepening of relations and more regular standardization of diplomatic practices, particularly in regards to the making of formalized treaties. These diplomatic practices were built on highly ritualized encounters and prescribed rules but still failed to resolve the tensions between the two sides. The sixth century would also see the attempted reconquest of the western Roman empire, by the Byzantine emperor Justinian, which dragged the East Romans into an ultimately futile attempt to conquer Italy that lasted over two decades.[22] The Sasanians during this period, in contrast, went through a series of taxation and administrative reforms which increased urbanization and the power of the shah over his military. Disputes over trade, particularly access to silk from Asia, would also see the Sasanians increase their dominance over the Red Sea and a shift in their interests towards the Persian Gulf.[23] The Byzantines, in response, would seek to circumvent the Persians and access silk directly from the far east. As will be covered in Chapter 6, the appearance of the Turks during this period provided a major catalyst for the collapse of the

[21] James Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[22] For more on Justinian's campaign, see Peter Heather, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[23] Glen Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Two Eyes system as access to the trading of silk became a source of contention between the two empires. It was the arrival of the Turks which would ultimately transform the bipolar rivalry of late antiquity and lead to the collapse of the Sasanian empire.

The development of this brief narrative covers a lot of ground, and the transformation of late antiquity will be covered in more detail within the chapters to follow. But it provides a brief overview of our case study of pre-modern relations that focuses on a dynamic transformation of imperial competition across a four-century period. This is in contrast to the typical focus of IR on inter-polity order arising between modern European nation states.[24] The literature on 'international order' and great power competition within IR is vast, but the only sample point is commonly taken to be the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a particular focus on Great Britain's rivalries with France and Germany, and the post-war American-led 'liberal international order'.[25] As the following explains, the inclusion of late antiquity within the study of IR may appear an eccentric choice, but it can help to temper the ahistorical limitations of modern IR theories centred on the Westphalian model of sovereign states within an anarchic system.

Why Examine Late Antiquity?

The academic discipline of IR is defined by the study of patterned interactions between political units within a condition of political multiplicity. Yet, much of our understanding of historical inter-polity order within IR rests on an ontology of nation states within an anarchy framework, which critics argue has not engaged with the distant human past in any great or meaningful depth.[26] The Westphalian model therefore represents a temporal barrier in IR theorizing in

[24] The literature on this is copious. See, for a recent example, Glenda Sluga, *The Invention of International Order: Remaking Europe after Napoleon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021). However, IR may be reaching a turning point as more scholars look to a wider array of historical examples. See Christopher J. Fettweis, *The Pursuit of Dominance: 2000 Years of Superpower Grand Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[25] For the modern focus of IR, see, for example, Jeffrey W. Legro, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Bear F. Braumoeller, *The Great Powers and the International System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Charles W. Kegley and Gregory A. Raymond, *Great Powers and World Order: Patterns and Prospects* (London: Sage, 2020); and Patrick O. Cohrs, *The New Atlantic Order: The Transformation of International Politics 1860 – 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[26] Iver B. Neumann and Hakon Glorstad, 'Prehistorical international relations: how, why what', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:4 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac055; Peter Halden, 'Heteronymous politics beyond anarchy and hierarchy: the multiplication of forms of rule 750–1300', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 13:3 (2017), p. 277; Sebastian Schmidt, 'To order the minds

which the modern European experience of state actors consolidating power within a distinct territory is used to explain the behaviours and outcomes of all actors which exist in conditions of political multiplicity. The geopolitical competition between formally equal states in an anarchic system is then taken to be the one core idea which distinguishes IR from other social sciences.[27] The relevance of late antiquity and history prior to 1648 therefore is that it can illustrate the limitations of Eurocentric Westphalian conceptions of history which only begin with the Westphalian moment as the birth of the 'international'. In marking the end of Europe's wars of religion, the Westphalian moment of 1648 has come to represent not only the foundation principles of an inter-polity system but also an epistemological barrier between the study of the 'ancients' and the 'moderns'. The year 1648 is then used as a 'benchmark date' to represent the 'big-bang moment' that resulted in the birth of the modern inter-polity system and the conditions necessary for modernity.[28] Despite repeated attempts to dispel the myths of 1648, critics argue that it remains the focal point of the study of IR.[29]

The study of historical inter-polity systems has conventionally focused on trawling through the historical record in order to find examples that superficially resemble the Westphalian model of like-units within an anarchy framework. The result of this is that typical metanarratives look through the historical past for periods which most closely resemble the standard Westphalian system, with a particular focus on the Ancient Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta, the Italian city-states of the Renaissance, and the warring states period of Ancient China.[30] Applying a Westphalian concept universally in this ahistorical manner creates a form of 'modernocentrism' in which the temporal present is both radically different from the past and yet, concurrently, the theories generated by modern experience are used just as equally as a framework with which to project backwards and understand the distant

of scholars: the discourse of the Peace of Westphalia in international relations literature', *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:3 (2011), p. 603.

[27] Edward Keene, *International Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 195.

[28] Barry Buzan and George Lawson, 'Rethinking Benchmark Dates in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 437–462.

[29] Darel Paul, 'Sovereignty, survival and the Westphalian blind alley in international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 25:2 (1999), pp. 217–223; Andreas Osiander, 'Sovereignty, international relations and the Westphalian myth', *International Organization*, 55:2 (2001), pp. 251–287; Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso Books, 2003); Luke Glanville, 'The Myth of "Traditional" Sovereignty', *International Studies Quarterly*, 57 (2013), pp. 79–90. Also see Yongjin Zhang, 'System, empire and state in Chinese international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 27:5 (2001), p. 43 and James Caporaso, 'Changes in the Westphalian order: territory, public authority, and sovereignty', *International Studies Review*, 2:2 (2000), pp. 1–28.

[30] Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1977).

historical past.[31] In projecting the Westphalian model backwards through time to account for the behaviour of earlier inter-polity systems, terms such as 'anarchy', the territorial 'nation state', and 'international system' are used as ahistorical concepts.[32] This approach to historical inter-polity systems therefore creates two contradictory premises in which Westphalia represents both the birth of modernity and a radical break from the past, while still acting as a theoretical lens for examining previous eras. Turning to the pre-modern world therefore shows that what is at stake for IR 'is not only our historical knowledge but also our knowledge about the present'.[33] Moving away from the Westphalian benchmark and delving even further into historical study allows us to step back from our preconceptions about the world and how it works.[34]

Historical metanarratives of the development of IR can often present only a limited number of 'greatest hits' of significant events which typically relate to the Ancient Greek Peloponnesian War, before jumping vastly in chronology to Westphalia, the Concert of Europe, and World War I.[35] If antiquity is considered within IR, it often begins and ends with Thucydides.[36] Virtually all other ancient writers have been overlooked and there is no 'cottage industry' studying the work of classical historians such as Herodotus, Polybius, or Tacitus as there is for Thucydides.[37] Nearly all other wars of antiquity and pre-modern

[31] Jerry H. Bentley, 'Beyond modernocentrism: towards fresh visions of the global past', in *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Honolulu HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), p. 17.

[32] Critics at this point may also raise objections to the way I have loosely used terms such as 'sphere of influence', 'buffer zone', and 'great power', among others. While I can acknowledge this point, the difficulty remains that some common words are needed within a discipline in order to converse with one another. Likewise, there is a challenge in trying to describe pre-modern relations where we simply lack an adequate vocabulary. The language chosen within this work therefore aims to move beyond thinking in terms of nation states, but still retains some modern IR terminology in order to describe conditions of political multiplicity. In recognizing this language difficulty, I hope this work can begin a discussion on how we might conceive of political multiplicity prior to modernity. My own modest attempt is explored in more detail later in this work, particularly Chapters 2 and 3.

[33] Julia Costa Lopez, 'The premodern world' in *The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations*, eds. Mlada Bukovansky, Edward Keene, and Christian Reus-Smit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), pp. 395–409.

[34] Richard Ned Lebow, 'Thucydides and order' in *Thucydides and Political Order: Concepts of Order and the History of the Peloponnesian War*, eds. Christian R. Thauer and Christian Wendt (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 53.

[35] George Lawson, 'The eternal divide? History and international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:2 (2012), pp. 203–226.

[36] Christopher J. Fettweis, 'Restraining Rome: lessons in grand strategy from Emperor Hadrian', *Survival*, 60:4 (2018), p. 123.

[37] Keene, *International Political Thought*, p. 23. There was certainly nothing inevitable about the adoption of Thucydides as the standout classical author for IR; the Venetians, for example, looked to Tacitus. See James Jan Sullivan, 'Hobbes and his contemporaries' in *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides*, eds. Christine Lee and Neville Morley (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), p. 242.

history therefore remain completely outside the bounds of IR theorizing and are left to specialist historians.[38] As one commentator has noted, while we 'all know the name of Thucydides, [t]he same cannot be said of Procopius, the great historian of the wars of Justinian', the eastern Roman emperor from the early sixth century.[39] This problem arises because IR tends to only pay lip service to Thucydides and the Athenian polity before drastically jumping in chronology to the study of Machiavelli before finally beginning the story of the 'international' with Westphalia in 1648. This leap in chronology creates a vast period of 'missing years' within the discipline of IR because pre-1648 polities rarely resemble the Eurocentric and ahistorical conception of nation states with delimited territorial borders.[40] Opening up historical investigations of great imperial rivalries within IR can therefore lead to a broader understanding of the diversity of political actors within pre-modern inter-polity relations.

The selection bias of IR to consider inter-polity systems which resemble a system of Westphalian nation states is particularly surprising considering the significant legacy of Ancient Rome in the modern world. However, the history of Rome is largely seen as 'irrelevant' to the study of inter-polity relations, despite Rome's influence on law, political theory, education, architecture, and administration, which can be seen throughout the modern Western world.[41] Few within IR have sought to investigate Rome's expansion and its relations with foreign powers and this is perhaps due to IR's often whiggish notions that the pre-modern world was essentially static and more simplistic.[42] This may come as a surprise to many contemporary historians who have sought to transcend nationalist silos of history by looking to historical processes which cross modern national borders. Such examples include the study of 'global history', or the study of transnational connections, as with the history of the silk roads, or the study of maritime history across the Atlantic or Indian Ocean. These

[38] However, attempts to widen IR's engagement with history are increasing. See Barry Buzan, *Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind across Three Eras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[39] Jared Morgan McKinney, 'International Relations in Late Antiquity', *International Studies Review*, 21:3 (2019), p. 539.

[40] Blachford, 'From Thucydides to 1648'.

[41] Knutsen and Hall, 'Rome republic, monarchy and empire', pp. 398–407.

[42] Eckstein is a notable exception; see Arthur Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006). For a critique of history as 'static', see Lopez, 'The premodern world'. Such whiggish notions abound but can be seen with the following example: Jacek Więcławski, 'Historical analogies and general theoretical schemes in the study on contemporary international relations: anachronism or opportunity', *International Politics*, 59 (2021), pp. 1210–1231.

approaches to the study of history therefore emphasize the connections across time and space and between disparate areas linking Eurasia, the Americas, and North Africa.[43] What all these approaches have in common is that they highlight the multiple origins of modernity, the complexity of pre-modern life, and the historical flows of goods, ideas, and peoples, thereby presenting a picture of pre-modern systems as far from 'static'. A consideration of late antiquity can therefore illustrate the contingency of historical processes and escape whiggish narratives of development which plague so many theoretical approaches within IR.

A turn to late antiquity also provides an opportunity to widen historical investigations into the transformation of political orders. Contemporary political debates have become engrossed in studying the rise of modern China and the implications for today's American-led international order. The post-World War II era saw the growth of an American-led 'international architecture' that rested on economic integration, multilateral institutions, and collective security organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Often defined as the 'liberal international order', this collection of layered structures rests on American power and influence. As contemporary scholars continue to debate the prospect of challenges to an American-led 'liberal international order', it is worth considering how previous diverse orders grew, adapted, and transformed.[44] The study of inter-polity order in late antiquity highlights how the Westphalian system, as a system of sovereign states, and the Western liberal order of the modern world are 'neither unique nor inevitable'.[45] By its very nature, the study of late antiquity also provides recognition that inter-polity orders are inherently finite and all orders will eventually face either decline, decay, or transformation.[46]

[43] David Armitage, 'The international turn in intellectual history' in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, eds. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 232–252; David Armitage, Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram, eds., *Oceanic Histories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman, *The Atlantic in Global History 1500–2000* (London: Routledge, 2018); David Christian, 'Silk roads or steppe roads? The silk roads in world history', *Journal of Word History*, 11:1 (2000), pp. 1–26; Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, 'Towards a global Middle Ages', *Past & Present*, 238 (2018), pp. 1–44.

[44] G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), pp. 7–23; Patrick Porter, 'A world imagined: nostalgia and liberal order', The Cato Institute, Policy Analysis No. 843.

[45] David C. Kang, 'International order in historical East Asia: tribute and hierarchy beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism', *International Organization*, 74 (2020), pp. 65–93.

[46] Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1.

The Rise and Fall of Inter-Polity Order in Late Antiquity: Structure and Argument

The world of antiquity may appear at first glance to be a lawless period of violent chaos. The Roman empire arose through brutal conquest, which was fuelled by nearly constant aggression, and for some historically orientated IR scholars, this merely demonstrates the 'prevalence of war' and the 'absence of international law' within a warlike 'cruel interstate anarchy'.[47] The ancient world was indeed a period of rife 'militarism, bellicosity, and diplomatic aggressiveness'.[48] It is important to remember, however, that for many periods in history, war has been seen as sometimes beneficial in strengthening the virality and status of a society and the bonds between a community. Certainly, even after facing the loss of the western half of the empire and the ravages of plague, the Romans could still be 'eager for war'.[49] The 'invention of peace', as the military historian Michael Howard showed, was in many ways a product of World War I.[50] No doubt, the ancient world was brutally violent in ways that a modern Christian or liberal humanist morality might not understand,[51] but this should not devolve to progressive confidence that the modern world is somehow inherently more peaceful, less prone to violence, and therefore more progressive and rational than the ancient world.[52] Late antiquity saw the clash of two great empires who struggled to resolve similar problems to today. They equally sought to find ways to achieve a stable political order, prosperity, and predictable relations with adversaries. The rivalry between Byzantium and Persia developed across four centuries and an order of diplomatic and stable relations emerged only slowly through both conflict and cooperation. This broader narrative of order emerging through continual contestation presents a more nuanced account compared to the approach of modern IR which views

[47] Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, p. 1.
[48] Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, p. 3.
[49] Menander, fr. 15.1.
[50] Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace: On War and International Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
[51] See, for example, Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).
[52] As exemplified by whiggish accounts of modern progress. See Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (London: Penguin, 2011); for a critique, see Bear Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Indeed, for Western publics the violence of modern warfare is often out of sight and out of mind such as America's light-footprint warfare. See Kevin Blachford, 'Liberal militarism and republican restraints on power: the problems of unaccountable interventions for American democracy', *Critical Military Studies*, 8:3 (2022), pp. 299–314.

order as arising from the result of decisive hegemonic wars and the imposition of order by the winning power. Contemporary IR scholarship has often taken inter-polity order as static and subject to change only when faced with a hegemonic war or a power transition between a rising and declining great power.[53] The result of this is that structural approaches within IR assume each transformation of inter-polity order is 'easily delineated' as a 'distinct hegemonic order … supplants the one that preceded it'.[54] But as the following explains, the Two Eyes system evolved in a more nuanced manner across a four-century period as a means to order those considered as lesser polities with the shah and emperor acting as co-regents of a hierarchical suzerain order.

When the two great empires of late antiquity first came into contact with one another, they found a rival of equal ambition and power. The geopolitical competition between the Romans and Persians evolved over centuries and through intractable conflict the Persians became Rome's 'bitterest enemy'.[55] In challenging the Pax Romana, the Persians forced the Romans to temper their ambitions and find ways to create predictable relations with their longest and most powerful rival. The centuries-long rivalry between the East Romans and Persia therefore resulted in competing spheres of influence arising across the Mesopotamian region. These spheres of influence saw each imperial power seek to exclude their main rival and manage client actors through both formal and informal levers of power.[56] Imperial polities by their very nature have unclear frontiers and a sphere of influence develops as a means to exert power through such practices of exclusion and control.[57] Such spheres of influence are the almost inevitable product of hegemonic competition as one major power comes up against the interests of another great power.[58] Through the management of these spheres of influence the East Romans and Persians sought to create rules, norms, and standards of predictable behaviour to regulate their inter-imperial rivalry.

[53] The clearest example of this can be found within accounts of the Thucydides trap. See Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (London: Scribe, 2017).

[54] Beverley Loke, 'The United States, China and the politics of hegemonic ordering in East Asia', *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), p. 1210.

[55] Agath IV.26.6–7 in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars ad 363–628: Part II, ad 363–630: A Narrative Sourcebook*, eds. Samuel N. C. Lieu and Geoffrey Greatrex (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 32.

[56] Edy Kaufman, *The Superpowers and Their Spheres of Influence* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p. 11.

[57] Van Jackson, 'Understanding spheres of influence in international politics', *European Journal of International Security*, 5:3 (2020), pp. 255–273.

[58] Iain Ferguson and Susanna Hast, 'Introduction: the return of spheres of influence', *Geopolitics*, 23:2 (2018), p. 279; Filippo Costa Buranelli, 'Spheres of influence as negotiated hegemony: the case of Central Asia', *Geopolitics*, 23:2 (2018), p. 379.

The division of competing spheres of influence in late antiquity was not always consensual or peaceful. Frequent conflicts created a harsh conflictual relationship, but both the East Romans and Persia grew to accept the existence of a rival power, despite their universal claims to rule. Upon their initial contact, the Persians presented an ideological challenge to Roman understandings of world order. The legitimacy of imperial rule rested on a universalist view of Rome as the centre of the world. The strength and depth of Persian power therefore presented a competing vision of political order which Rome could not easily overcome. The benefit of a case study of this kind is that it can examine how inter-polity systems evolve over time and rest on the management and cultivation of order.[59] IR scholars often tend to see modern inter-polity order as largely inert and stable until the system faces a rising challenger, leading to conflict brought about by a great power transition.[60] It is a mistake, however, to view inter-polity orders as existing within an unchanging and settled condition. The English School within IR, and its focus on *longue-durée* history to illuminate the 'deep, organic, evolved ideas and practices that constitute both the players and the game of international relations',[61] provides a useful framework to examine the constant competitive and entangled nature of order in late antiquity. As Adam Watson and other 'international society' scholars have shown, great power relations can lead to a '*raison de system*' in which there is an underlying logic which 'pays to make the system work'.[62] The *raison de system* evolved as each imperial power came to accept that outright conquest was unachievable. Inter-polity order grew out of a common acceptance that the two powers existed in tandem as the 'greatest Kingdoms under the sun'.[63] Their rivalry rested upon a hierarchical order in which they both acted as the 'Two Eyes' who alone could manage the barbarian peoples of the world.

Through their rivalry, institutions—or practices of order building—would develop between the two empires, which included the primary institutions of 'diplomacy' and 'kingship'. These two institutions evolved over time and allowed for a shared understanding of hierarchy, status, and legitimacy.[64]

[59] Christian Reus-Smit, *On Cultural Diversity: International Theory in a World of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 208.

[60] Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, 'Hegemonic-order theory: a field theoretic account', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:3 (2018), p. 663.

[61] Barry Buzan, 'The English School: a neglected approach to international security studies', *Security Studies*, 46:2 (2015), p. 129.

[62] Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 14.

[63] Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII.2.4, trans. William Whiston, University of Chicago [online], available at: https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/index.html.

[64] Institutions of international society, not to be confused with the use of 'institution' as a synonym for 'organization'.

Diplomacy facilitated a period of coexistence between the two empires while kingship defined the client–patron relations between the imperial centre and barbarian periphery. Modern English School scholars view institutions as playing a crucial role in giving a normative direction which defines membership and legitimate behaviour within an inter-polity society.[65] As Buzan notes, institutions pre-date modernity and are not necessarily designed, but evolve over time.[66] Institutions have constitutive effects and across late antiquity the two imperial powers would essentially come to regard their rivalry as 'partners co-operating in the maintenance of world security'.[67]

The rivalry of the Two Eyes shows that order was maintained as much through cooperation as through a conflictual relationship. Inter-polity order building was driven less by common civilizational values and more through competing claims to legitimacy that sought to exclude nomadic rivals, control client states, and hierarchically order peoples outside of the sedentary civilized powers. Both the Romans and the Sasanians understood such relations through the prism of barbarians and civilization. The 'barbarians' were therefore people to be 'managed' by the two great imperial powers who together were the only polities with the legitimate status to shape and direct the accepted world order. The layered and overlapping hierarchies of late antiquity were the result of these conflicting claims to universal rule.[68] As the historian Touraj Daryaee describes, for both the East Romans and the Sasanian Persians, their empires were 'the two and the only two … great centres of the world. All other kingdoms and civilizations were considered to be peripheries that should acknowledge the greatness of the Romans and the Persians'.[69] Yet, despite their claims to imperial greatness and universal rule, neither the Romans nor the Persians were able to fully enforce such claims and the contestation of inter-polity order could be as much bottom-up from the challenges of nomadic groups and barbarian kings as top-down with the wishes of the emperor and shah. The following study therefore presents an analysis which is less focused on the rise and fall of a single great power than on the processes

[65] See Buzan on the importance of institutions as constitutive of international society across history: *Making Global Society*, p. 12.

[66] Buzan, *Making Global Society*, p. 13.

[67] Michael Whitby, 'Procopius and the development of Roman defences in Upper Mesopotamia' in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, eds. D. L. Kennedy and Philip Freeman (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 1986), p. 725.

[68] Jack Donnelly, 'Rethinking political structures: from "ordering principles" to "vertical differentiation" and beyond', *International Theory*, 1:1 (2009), pp. 49–86; Meghan McConaughey, Paul Musgrave, and Daniel Nexon, 'Beyond anarchy: logics of political organization, hierarchy, and international structure', *International Theory*, 10:2 (2018), pp. 181–218.

[69] Touraj Daryaee and Khodadad Rezakhani, *From Oxus to Euphrates: The World of Late Antique Iran* (Irvine, CA: UCI Jordan Center for Persian Studies, 2016), p. xiii.

and continual transformation of inter-polity order. Primarily, this will show that the conflict between the East Romans and Sasanian Persians was not the typical hegemonic conflict considered by IR in which there is a clear power transition from one great power to another. It is a case study that shows how inter-polity order is continually contested and equally constituted through such contestation.

The following work evolves across six chapters in tracing the development of the order of the Two Eyes system. Chapter 1 begins with a re-examination of how we should consider the 'international' as a concept. The *inter-national* as commonly conceived of today, as a system of interacting nation states, would seem a strange notion to the people of antiquity. This chapter therefore seeks to examine how inter-polity relations were conceived of in late antiquity as based on direct and personal connections within a system of client–patron relations. In order to understand how the Romans related to the Persians, this chapter argues that late antiquity was a world of 'peoples' and not 'states'. Existing in a world of peoples, the emperor and shah would act as the 'Two Eyes', which symbolically represented the head of a body, but in practice signified their rightful place as the highest political authority. Chapter 2 then continues this argument by arguing that 'international' order is a misnomer and that the Romans and Persians understood the patterned or structured relationships between actors as a form of 'world order'. In making universal claims to rule, both empires supported ideologies of a divine right to order the world around them. Those considered as lesser polities were expected to be subordinate. But when the two empires came into military contact with one another, a clear ideological impasse presented itself, as the two competing visions of universalism could not both coexist. Chapter 3 therefore explores how the concept of kingship and practices of diplomacy created a set of shared meanings between the two empires who developed a mutual diplomatic language despite professing universal rule. This then leads to Chapter 4 which shows how hierarchy, and not sovereign equality, was the fundamental organizing principle of late antiquity. The two sedentary empires of Byzantium and Persia, as the Two Eyes of the world, used the institution of kingship as a means to impose a 'normative direction' on the inter-polity order of late antiquity and shape the relationships between a diverse range of actors.[70] This ordering of client kings was an attempt to reconcile the universalist beliefs of sedentary empires with the mass movements of nomadic peoples from the steppe

[70] Peter Halden, *Family Power: Kinship, War and Political Orders in Eurasia 500–2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 4.

which characterized late antiquity. However, as Chapter 5 shows, the attempts by Byzantium and Persia to manage client actors and order the world around them were unable to reconcile the problem of paying for shared defences against nomadic invasions. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, the two empires were able to develop sophisticated practices of diplomacy to construct spheres of influence over lesser actors, but shared imperial management of barbarians was limited in its success and proved to be both cooperative and conflictual. Chapter 6 then shows that unlike earlier barbarian arrivals, the emergence of the Gok Turks would intensify the competition between Byzantium and Persia. The Gok Turks were the first actor to exercise hegemony over the central Asian steppe and this allowed for trade to flourish deepening the interaction capacity between east and west. In the competition over trade, the Gok Turks would emerge as a significant third actor in the strategic calculations for both the emperor and the shah. The Two Eyes order of late antiquity was a four-century-long rivalry that would finally end with the Last Great War of Antiquity as questions of legitimacy would see both empires racked by internal turmoil. The defeat of the Persians by Emperor Heraclius, in alliance with the Turks, would then leave both empires in ruin and create a power vacuum from which the Arab conquests would arise, ending the era of late antiquity.

1

The Dual Hierarchy of Late Antiquity

Introduction

The great imperial rivalry between the East Romans of Byzantium and the Sasanian Persians was a long and fractious relationship based on contrasting claims to imperial greatness and universal rule. Across late antiquity, both the East Romans and the Sasanians developed competing geopolitical imaginaries of universal rule that were often unrealizable in practice.[1] In claiming to rule over others, both imperial powers sought to manage their relations with a diverse range of other actors, including nomadic peoples from the central Asian steppe, the minor kingdoms of the Transcaucasus region, client kings in Arabia, and the polities which would become Europe's proto-medieval kingdoms. Within this system of diverse polities, the empires of Byzantium and Persia sought to develop client–patron relations that were explicitly deferential and hierarchical.[2] The dual hierarchy of late antiquity was a suzerain system that took hegemony as a natural part of political order and stands in contrast to modern conceptions of sovereign equality. As Adam Watson argued, in such a hierarchical system of client–patron relations, 'what mattered was loyalty'.[3] The Sasanian Persians and East Romans developed through their rivalry a form of dual hierarchy as part of a suzerain order in which the two great imperial powers acted as the 'legitimate authority', by conferring status on others, and seeking tribute or deference in return.[4]

This chapter therefore begins by showing how the modern statist lens that typically defines the study of international relations (IR) fails to explain the imperial systems of client–patron relations in Roman antiquity. This argument builds upon debates within Roman historiography over to what extent the Roman empire was able to conceive of, and act in accordance with, the

[1] On universal claims to rule, see Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 3.

[2] Meghan McConaughey, Paul Musgrave, and Daniel Nexon, 'Beyond anarchy: logics of political organization, hierarchy, and international structure', *International Theory*, 10:2 (2018), p. 196.

[3] Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 108.

[4] Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1977), p. 23.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0002

concept of grand strategy comparable to a modern state. The second section then details how the lack of cartographic knowledge within antiquity challenges many of the territorial assumptions found within IR theory. This section will set out how the ancient Romans therefore viewed foreign relations in terms of 'peoples', not nation states. Consisting of a world of peoples, barbarian peoples were incorporated within a 'dependent relationship' with gifts of titles, crowns, and diplomatic status reflecting 'membership of the imperial system'.[5] The peoples of late antiquity included a vast array of different groupings as the migrations of people from the steppe and nomadic groups, such as the Huns, Goths, Slavs, Lombards, Avars, and Gok Turks, among many others, would transform the geopolitics of Europe, Mesopotamia, and central Asia. The third section will therefore show how a suzerain inter-polity system can contain a diversity of polities that do not necessarily resemble or be equated to a Westphalian sovereign state. The fourth section then argues how previous examinations of late antiquity by the English School scholar Martin Wight downplayed the role of this diversity by neglecting nomadic groups as political agents. Wight therefore misread the imperial relationship between the East Romans and Persia as lacking the characteristics of an 'international system'. In contrast to Wight, the final section argues that late antiquity was a diverse and surprisingly durable order consisting of a form of dual hegemony in which the two great empires sought to install a 'raison de system' that would prevent nomadic tribes from threatening the stability of the two empires.[6] Known as the 'Two Eyes', this dual hierarchy was based on a shared understanding of kingship and imperial power which created a form of political order centred on finding stability between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the buffer zone between these two rival empires.

The 'International' in Antiquity

The study of pre-modern IR opens up a range of challenges, not least in merely trying to understand how the concept of the 'international' itself, or perhaps more accurately inter-polity relations, can be applied to the era of antiquity. Indeed, even the simple term 'international' is of course a relatively modern invention coined in the eighteenth century by the philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham to distinguish between domestic and international law.[7]

[5] Watson, *The Evolution of International Society*, p. 110.
[6] Watson, *The Evolution of International Society*, p. 14.
[7] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 32.

To study the *inter-national* is to study the interactions of nation states, which reflects a modern conception of the 'nation' as a container of society resting on assumptions of 'autonomy' and 'ethnocentrism'.[8] To begin theorizing with the *inter-national* is therefore to take for granted the strict division between the inside and outside of a bounded territorial nation state, which would seem poorly suited to describe the political heterogeneity and diverse empires of late antiquity.[9] However, if the core question of IR remains centred around the challenges of political order within conditions of multiplicity, then unlike modern ideas of territorial sovereignty and national identity within statehood, the challenge of order within inter-polity systems is obviously much older than the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the invention of nation states. As Barry Buzan and Richard Little have argued, while 'consciousness of international systems emerged only in the last few centuries', it is also important to recognize that the phenomenon itself is 'much older'.[10] The difficulty IR faces, then, is how to examine pre-modern relations between different polities while still avoiding the transposing of contemporary understandings of sovereign nation states onto the past. While it is impossible to avoid bringing modern biases completely, this section aims to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue with historians of Rome that have developed a particular sub-discipline known as 'frontier studies'.[11] Historians who study the frontiers of the Roman empire have similarly sought to understand, like IR, whether the modern idea of a nation state can be transposed onto the past. The debate over frontier studies aims to examine whether the ancient Romans were capable of thinking in terms of territory and defending the empire's frontiers in means familiar to us today as 'national security'. As the following shows, it is a historical debate which aims to consider if the Romans were able to conceive of a frontier and strategically defend such a frontier in the way a modern state might defend its own territorial borders.

The concept of 'national security' is also a familiar subject for students of IR. It is a natural theoretical concern for the study of discrete units within an anarchic system of sovereign states. Resting on a Westphalian framework, the study of national security makes a series of assumptions: firstly, that sovereignty is

[8] Anthony D. Smith, *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 16.

[9] Robert B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[10] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 91.

[11] For example, see Stephen L. Dyson, *The Creation of the Roman Frontier* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Charles Richard Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

understood in terms of exclusive control of territory; secondly, that the state creates a simplistic binary distinction between inside and outside; and finally, that the state acts as a bounded container of a national society.[12] Known as the 'territorial trap', the study of IR and concerns over national security remain tied to a 'geographical compartmentalization' of power and authority over a given territory. The assumptions of the territorial trap result in the reification of the state which make non-territorial spaces 'difficult to imagine' within IR theory.[13] Recognizing these assumptions is not to denigrate the study of national security in a contemporary context, but historians of Roman frontiers have long debated whether such a concept can be applied retrospectively to a time before the existence of modern sovereign states. This debate has caused great controversy, particularly in regards to the question of whether the Romans had any concept of a defensive grand strategy to protect their imperial frontiers against barbarian invasions.[14] The military historian and strategic thinker Edward Luttwak's seminal book *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (1979) is one of the most influential works within this debate and in seeking to understand Rome's geopolitical relations.[15] Luttwak's argument defines the Romans as having a grand strategy which evolved in three distinct phases from the first to the third century AD. According to Luttwak, the Romans developed a grand strategy to secure their frontier which adapted to different external pressures as the empire came into contact with barbarian groups that threatened Roman security. The first system from the Julio-Claudian dynasty (27 BC–63 AD) rested on the management of client states with strategically mobile legionary forces that could also act as a thin perimeter for the imperial borders. The second system from Emperor Vespasian to Marcus Aurelius (69 AD–180 AD) was based on a preclusive frontier defence with a regional deployment of forces. The final system of the third century was one of defence in depth in which the Roman armies were adapted to face the mobile threat of barbarian invasions as nomadic groups increasingly threatened control of the

[12] Jonathan Agnew, 'The territorial trap: the geographical assumptions of international relations theory', *Review of International Political Economy*, 1:1 (1994), p. 43.

[13] Kerry Goettlich, 'The rise of linear borders in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:1 (2019), pp. 204–207.

[14] For the debate on whether 'strategy' itself is even a misnomer, see Beatrice Heuser, *Strategy Before Clausewitz: Linking Warfare and Statecraft 1400–1830* (Oxon: Routledge, 2018). Also see Kimberly Kagan, 'Redefining Roman grand strategy', *The Journal of Military History*, 70:2 (2006), pp. 333–362. Susan P. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate* (London: University of California Press, 1999).

[15] Also see his late work on Byzantium: *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Rhine and the Danube frontier. Luttwak's claim that the Romans had a grand strategy in terms understood by a modern national security approach ignited a long-standing debate on the nature of Rome as a political actor and whether it was able to behave in ways similar to a modern nation state. In taking a military strategist's view to ancient Roman history, Luttwak's thesis opened new ground for strategic studies but also provoked numerous heated debates for historians of the Roman empire.

The claim made by Luttwak that the Romans not only thought in terms of a grand strategy but also that Rome even had the state capacity to organize and enact such a strategy launched numerous rebuttals and counter-arguments which re-invigorated the study of Roman frontiers and Roman military history.[16] Few scholars have had such a large impact across disciplines and no doubt some disgruntled historians felt Luttwak, as an outsider to the study of classical history, was imposing on their turf. Luttwak was certainly right to acknowledge that all Roman emperors were concerned in some way about the frontier. The Romans were also capable of thinking in a strategic manner, such as placing forts along roads and spreading legions out across the frontier, in order to avoid placing too great a burden on the resources of one area. The Roman military succeeded because it was able to adapt the frontier to local conditions and was capable of building significant defensive works.[17] Emperor's such as Hadrian, Diocletian, and Constantine all launched major attempts to reform the frontiers with the development of new roads and the shoring up of imperial defences. But the claim of Luttwak for an overarching Roman 'grand strategy' fails to appreciate the Roman understanding of the world they inhabited and that their view of the inter-polity sphere was not one based on holding territory.

The core argument of Luttwak's grand strategy approach rests on the idea of Rome being able to think and act in the ways and means of a modern nation state. Following Luttwak's example, contemporary security theorists have similarly looked to the Roman empire and its frontiers as a grand strategic attempt to revitalize imperial rule with prudent policies of restraint.[18] Historians, however, have challenged these assumptions by showing that the Roman polity was often reactive in nature, with field armies that tended to be marshalled after

[16] See Isaac as a prominent critic: *The Limits of Empire*.

[17] David J. Breeze, *The Frontiers of Imperial Rome* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2011); Paul Coby, *Forts and Roman Strategy: A New Approach and Interpretation* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2022).

[18] Christopher J. Fettweis, 'Restraining Rome: lessons in grand strategy from Emperor Hadrian', *Survival*, 60:4 (2018), pp. 123–150.

an event rather than as part of any grand strategy of permanent readiness.[19] Frontier forts were often there only to observe an enemy's approach, or to act as an assembly point for campaigns, not as a hard line of defence.[20] Even the forts of the contested Mesopotamian buffer zone could not have acted as a hard defensive line against Persia. As recent archaeological fieldwork has shown, the frontier forts of Mesopotamia were situated along an east–west axis following the course of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, rather than a north–west axis which would be expected if the Romans had a clear line of territorial defence against Persia.[21] The construction of forts across the frontier was therefore less a result of a grand strategy of defending the empire than a result of the fact that the Roman empire was simply at the very limits of its ability to support an army logistically, acting at such a distance from the imperial centre.[22] It should be noted that Rome was primarily a 'Mediterranean power' which relied on sea travel to maintain the system of an agrarian economy.[23] Distance therefore played a significant factor in limiting the Roman's ability to strategically organize the frontier. Imperial administration also lacked the means and processes to strategize for such disparate geographic areas. Roman emperors often had only meagre administrative capabilities and limited aims of governance for their subjects. Even urgent information could be weeks old by the time it reached the emperor and action was often taken without a clear idea if it was 'negotiations' or preparations for 'war' that was needed.[24] Imperial rule was essentially exercised through a 'petition and response' model in which they acted retrospectively in response to local problems raised through petitions rather than directly seeking to be proactive in administering the empire as a grand strategic whole.[25]

[19] Fergus Millar, 'Emperors, frontiers and foreign relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378', *Britannia*, 13 (1982), pp. 1–23; Michael Whitby, 'The Army 420–602' in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 14: *Late Antiquity, Empire and Successors 425–600*, ed. Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 312. For more on the reactive nature of Rome as a polity, see R. Malcolm Errington, *Roman Imperial Policy from Julian to Theodosius* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[20] Anonymous, 'On strategy 9', in *Readings in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, ed. Michael Maas 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 84.

[21] Jesse Casana, David D. Goodman, and Carolin Ferwerda, 'A Wall or a Road? A Remote Sensing-Based Investigation of Fortifications on Rome's Eastern Frontier', *Antiquity*, 97:396 (2023), pp. 1516–1533.

[22] Charles Richard Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 85.

[23] Raymond Van Dam, 'Big Cities and the dynamics of the Mediterranean during the fifth century' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 80–97; Zeev Rubin, 'The Mediterranean and the dilemma of the Roman empire in late antiquity', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 1:1 (1986), pp. 13–62.

[24] Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe ad 350–425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 177–178.

[25] Christopher Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire: Soldiers, Administration and Public Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 146–169.

The Romans also simply lacked the cartographic knowledge which would have been necessary for thinking of imperial defence on such a scale equivalent to a national security strategy.[26] Evidence for this absence of thinking in terms of territory can be seen with accounts that show the Romans lacked simple geographic knowledge of an area even while launching offensives against their enemies. The Roman historian Cassius Dio tells of how the emperor Severus suffered from a lack of information when campaigning in Mesopotamia in 198 AD, a full 200 years after the first Roman campaigns in the region.[27] In antiquity, the visualization of geographical spaces and territory was of a relatively basic nature. The Romans had examples of interpretative images of the world, but they lacked a word equivalent to the modern understanding of a 'map'. Instead, the Romans understood their surroundings in an 'odological' manner, which means in a linear manner of coasts, rivers, roads, and mountain ranges.[28] It was a linear expression of geography that provided directions for travel that were often just itineraries cataloguing the various stages of a journey.[29] This was commonly a series of locations listed either in a sequence from closest to most distant or in an anti-clockwise direction.[30] A modern conception of states defined by territorial space therefore could not be present in the Roman understanding of the world and is unlikely to have guided how they conceived of foreign relations and imperial security.

The Westphalian model and its associated territorial trap assumes sovereignty and political authority is evenly distributed across a 'continuous space within fixed boundaries', but in reality pre-modern empires often expressed authority in a 'highly variegated' and uneven form.[31] The two great imperial powers of the Romans and the Sasanian Persians were agrarian

[26] John C. Mann, 'Power, force and the frontiers of the empire', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 69 (1979), pp. 175–183.

[27] Harry Sidebottom, *Ancient Warfare: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 73. See Cassius Dio, LXXVI.9.4.

[28] Harry Sidebottom, 'International Relations' in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, ed. Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees, and Michael Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 5.

[29] Richard J. A. Talbert, 'The Roman worldview: beyond recovery?' in *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub and Richard J. A. Talbert (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Kai Brodersen, 'Mapping (in) the ancient world', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 94 (2012), pp. 183–190.

[30] Daniel J. Gargola, *The Shape of the Roman Order: The Republic and Its Space* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2017), p. 228; Richard J. A. Talbert, 'Urbs Roma to Orbis Romanus: Roman mapping on the grand scale' in *Ancient Perspectives: Maps and Their Place in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome*, ed. Richard J. A. Talbert (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 230–231.

[31] For territorial authority and pre-modern polities, see James F. Osborne, 'Sovereignty and territoriality in the city-state: a case study from the Amuq valley, Turkey', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 32:4 (2013), p. 775.

empires with layered and overlapping political structures that often had only loosely defined authority over areas with a limited ability to enforce control compared to a modern bureaucratic state.[32] Before modern cartography and modern forms of communication, imperial polities were often 'radial rather than territorial and spread along lines of penetration'.[33] The empires of eastern Rome and Persia were based on dynamic groupings of cities as nodes within a network of interaction which were joined by formal or informal corridors of power projection.[34] Cities therefore acted as 'islands of imperial authority'.[35] It is the modern prevalence of viewing Rome's conquests as shaded areas on a Mercator map projection which provides a misleading understanding of the Roman imperial system. A more accurate understanding of Roman rule would be to view the projection of Roman power over a series of web-like strands linking key points together. This would not be too dissimilar to contemporary media portrayals of the territory controlled by the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group. At its largest extent in 2015, media depictions of ISIS territory showed areas under their control as criss-crossing strands projected over the hard black lines of the national boundaries of Iraq and Syria. This web of lines linking distinct points is comparable to the way pre-modern states were able to operate, with the ability to tax and regulate often determined by control over the major roads that linked cities together.[36]

If empires are considered within IR, it is usually just as a larger form of territorial unit,[37] or within the English School as a distinct type of 'international society' in themselves.[38] Empires can be understood, however, through two key characteristics. Internally, empires are constituted by a 'single hierarchical governance structure', while externally, an empire exercises power in

[32] Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-Imagining International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 24–25.

[33] Watson, *The Evolution of International Society*, p. 38.

[34] Monica L. Smith, 'Territories, corridors and networks: a biological model for the premodern state', *Complexity*, 12:4 (2007), pp. 28–35.

[35] Richard Payne, 'Territorializing Iran in late antiquity' in *Ancient States and Infrastructural Power*, ed. Clifford Ando and Seth Richardson (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 183.

[36] Peter Thoneman, 'A man, a plan: a canard', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5924 (October 2016), pp. 25–26.

[37] Burak Kadercan, 'Territorial design and grand strategy in the Ottoman Empire', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 5:2 (2017), pp. 158–176.

[38] For a critique, see Bjørnar Sverdrup-Thygeson, 'A neighbourless empire? The forgotten diplomatic tradition of imperial China', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 7:3 (2012), pp. 245–267. Examples of this include Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1992), p. 108; Ali Balci, 'Bringing the Ottoman order back into international relations: a distinct international order or part of an Islamic international society?', *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), pp. 2090–2107; Knutsen and Hall, 'Rome republic, monarchy and empire', p. 399.

'a distinctly asymmetric' and 'heterogeneous manner'.[39] The imperial centre is therefore able to exercise power over each periphery point in different ways, thereby creating an uneven status with parts of the periphery each receiving different rights and responsibilities.[40] While the character of empires may also change across time, a key feature appears to be found within this relationship between a dominant core that can exercise power over peripheral parts in a heterogeneous manner, forming a hub-and-spoke pattern.[41] Imperial rule was therefore often practised in an indirect manner through client–patron relations. The Roman empire's ability to control and influence subjects depended upon authority over urban elites rather than direct contact with the vast majority of the empire's population.[42] But the minor cities of the empire could also develop their own forms of peer polity interaction and rivalry tempered through the emperor and the imperial core with contests over imperial titles, honours, and privileges.[43] The Roman empire was therefore 'an empire of cities' and imperial rule should be seen as a network rather than simply a larger form of territorial sovereign state.[44]

Just as peripheral cities within the empire looked to the imperial core, relations between those considered as civilized and those as barbarians were similarly conducted through such status politics of client–patron relations.[45] The personal connections and bonds between rulers and foreign people shaped alliances, clientelism, and foreign relations more broadly. This suggests a world in which power, status, and sovereignty were all interpreted through the lens of the personal honour and glory of the emperor. It is therefore not obvious that the Romans, or even the Persians for that matter, had any coherent concept of strategy as understood by modern debates on national security and grand strategy. Roman strategy was not one of seizing key areas or disrupting lines of communication, but often aimed straightforwardly at

[39] Hendrik Spruyt, 'Empires past and present: the relevance of empire as an analytic concept' in *Empire and Order*, ed. Noel Parker (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 22.

[40] Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 72; John F. Haldon, 'Comparative state formation: the later Roman empire in the wider world' in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 113.

[41] Daniel H. Nexon and Thomas Wright, 'What's at stake in the American empire debate?', *American Political Science Review*, 101:2 (2007), pp. 253–271.

[42] Neville Morley, *The Roman Empire: Roots of Imperialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 50.

[43] Noel Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 153.

[44] Luigi Capogrossi Colognesi, 'An empire of cities' in *Law and Power in the Making of the Roman Commonwealth*, trans. Laura Kopp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 303–316.

[45] Gwyn Davies, 'Amicitia and diplomacy: "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 27 (2014), p. 532.

destroying the enemy's will to resist by heading directly to the enemy's capital and their leadership.[46] As the historian Charles Richard Whittaker has shown, the actions of Roman emperors were shaped on the limited 'parameters of their own worldview', one based on aristocratic values of 'glory, shame, ostentation and revenge'.[47] Rome as a polity therefore sought imperial expansion precisely because aristocratic elites saw their foreign relations through the prism of their own imperial society. The social stratification of Roman society based on an identity of honour meant that Romans would view their relationships with other polities as a 'status competition'. The practices of humiliating captured prisoners, the conquests of new territories with little strategic significance, and the propensity to engage in wars to avenge slights against Rome's honour show how the aristocratic identity of an honour culture informed Rome's imperial relations.[48] In looking at the Byzantine emperor Justinian's attempt to reconquer the western half of the Roman empire in the sixth century, the historian Peter Heather concluded that Justinian was driven not by any grand strategy of national security but by 'a potent mixture of the demands of internal political agendas and immediate opportunism'.[49] Despite the boldness of the East Romans seeking to reunite and conquer with the western half of the empire, Justinian's wars were an ad hoc affair that reacted to events and was dominated by short-term thinking. If the Romans exercised any kind of strategy, it was one built on seeking status, honour, and power over other peoples. It is also certainly not clear that a statist lens of seeking territorial conquest can apply to antiquity. Even diplomatic negotiations between the two empires of Byzantium and Persia can be seen as attempts to settle grievances against one another's 'subjects' rather than attempts to settle questions of ownership over delineated areas of territory. It was the 'unjust and criminal acts' of one subject against another that were seen as the cause of disputes and, as Menander records, the task of diplomacy 'was not to settle boundaries'.[50] In a world of client–patron relations it was lordship over peoples and not territory that was the primary marker of status.

As this section has shown, modern ideas of sovereign nation states and national security are a poor lens through which to understand the politics of

[46] John S. Harrel, *The Nisibis War* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2020), p. 15.

[47] Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers*, p. 30; also see Peter J. Heather, 'Holding the line: frontier defence and the late Roman empire' in *Makers of Ancient Strategy*, ed. Victor Davis Hanson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 228–232. Also see J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[48] Vittorio Nicholas Galasso, 'Honour and the performance of Roman state identity', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8 (2012), pp. 173–189.

[49] Peter Heather, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 323.

[50] Menander, fr. 20.1.

antiquity. The nineteenth-century concept of the 'international' representing relations between sovereign nation states is therefore unable to explain the universalist assumptions and honour-based societies of late antiquity. The Roman and Persian view of foreign relations was not one of sovereign equality, but of a world of status in which peoples were hierarchically ordered, as the following explains.

A World of Peoples

As the previous section has shown, to explain pre-modern inter-polity relations is to recognize that the ancient world lacked many of the understandings and assumptions which modern IR takes for granted. The world of antiquity did not envision inter-polity relations as an anarchical system of states, but as an anarchical world in which imperial ideology viewed foreign relations in terms of civilization and barbarism. It was a perspective built upon the hierarchical ranking of peoples with the Romans and Persians themselves at the pinnacle of the civilizational hierarchy. This section therefore argues that political order in antiquity was conceived of a hierarchy of 'peoples', not 'states', and that both the Roman and Persian empires viewed the inter-polity sphere as an environment centred on conquering 'client kings not client kingdoms'.[51]

The right to rule over foreign peoples was how the empires of Rome and Persia developed their own self-understanding and image of imperial greatness. When Cicero talked of 'imperium', he was speaking of Rome's power to rule over others.[52] Nation states are of course a modern invention, but the term 'nation' itself is derived from the Latin *natio*, a word comparable to *gens*, or people, and it was used to signify the distant peoples outside of the Roman empire.[53] Within numerous ancient texts the discursive focus is on differentiating groups of peoples, not bounded territorial states. Both Thucydides and Homer's the *Iliad* spend considerable time cataloguing all the groups of people involved in the narrative, while the Bible talks of the need to go forth and spread Christian teachings to all the peoples of the world.[54] A sixth-century text, the *Christian Topography*, similarly categorizes the peoples of the world

[51] Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, p. 395; Sidebottom, *Ancient Warfare*, p. 69.

[52] John Richardson, 'The meaning of imperium in the last century BC and the First AD' in *The Roman Foundations of the Law of Nations: Alberico Gentili and the Justice of Empire*, ed. Benedict Kingsbury and Benjamin Straumann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 21–29.

[53] Michel Bouchard and Gheorghe Bogdan, 'From barbarian other to chosen people: the etymology, ideology and evolution of "nation" at the shifting edge of mediaeval Western Christendom', *National Identities*, 17:1 (2015), p. 7.

[54] Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin 1974); Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1992 repr.); Matthew 28:19.

and provides a list of the groups of peoples who had descended from the Genesis narrative of Noah.[55] This understanding of inter-polity order therefore interpreted relations between polities through the division of such groupings of distinct peoples. Crucially, the Roman empire sought to subject and control peoples, not lands. Foreigners and diverse peoples, both those with and without Roman citizenship, were understood in personal terms and in a direct manner within a patrimonial society.

The direct and personal relations of Rome's client–patron relations can be seen with the Roman practices of capturing barbarian kings and inviting clients to parade before the public of Rome, which was designed to demonstrate their subjugation to Roman rule. Client kings would be paraded in Rome as a form of trophy and they were understood as having a personal relationship tied to the Roman empire through marriage, education, or by sending relatives to reside within the city of Rome, thereby adopting Roman standards and norms.[56] The Romans, like the Ancient Greeks, saw peoples outside of their own political sphere as barbarians. But for the Greeks, the term 'barbarian' signified the sound of their language as a 'bar-bar' noise with pejorative connotations that barbarians had no intelligible language.[57] For the Romans, to be a barbarian was based not on language but on cultural identity. The Romans emphasized customs, such as modes of dress, participation in the public sphere, and character, such as oration skills, to distinguish both Roman and barbarian identity.[58] Barbarians, however, could become civilized by adopting Roman customs and the Roman sense of superiority was not one based on racial characteristics but on such cultural standards of civilization.[59] This Roman standard of civilization was also adaptable to local customs and could contain diverse forms of religious worship. It was this ability to assimilate local traditions and project a standard of civilization, which explains the success of Roman expansion and its ability to allow provincial clients to share the ideals of Roman imperialism.[60]

Rome's foreign relations were categorized through civilizational understandings and personal client–patron relations. But the ancient Romans also

[55] Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography*, 2.36–42.

[56] Olivier Hekster, 'Trophy kings and Roman power: a Roman perspective on client kingdoms' in *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East*, ed. Ted Kaizer and Margherita Facella (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2010), pp. 45–55.

[57] Edward Keene, *International Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 24.

[58] Similarly, the Sasanians emphasized the connection between identity and culture; see Richard N. Frye, 'Iranian identity in ancient times', *Iranian Studies*, 26:1 (1993), pp. 143–146.

[59] David A. Parnell, *Justinian's Men: Careers and Relationships of Byzantine Army Officers, 518–610* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 37–40; Rolf Michael Schneider, 'Friend and foe: the Orient in Rome' in *The Age of the Parthians: The Idea of Iran*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 79; Frank William Walbank, 'Nationality as a factor in Roman history', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 76 (1972), p. 156.

[60] Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

followed the Greeks in viewing their environment in terms of the horizontal division of the world into climatic zones.[61] The Romans saw this division of climatic regions as defining the standards of civilization and the hierarchy of peoples. Earlier Greek philosophers like Aristotle had argued how climatic conditions could shape the characteristics of both people and the arrangement of political order. He argued that the northern and colder areas of the world formed people who could be 'full of spirit' but 'somewhat deficient in intelligence and skill'. Such areas would therefore have little political order as such people were 'lacking in capacity to rule their neighbours'.[62] The people of Asia were similarly seen to be intelligent, but lacking in 'spirit', and their natural state was one of 'subjection and slavery'.[63] Such arguments could also be found in later Roman writers; the first century BC Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius argued that people from 'southern nations' were naturally inferior 'for the sun absorbs their animal spirits'.[64] Climatic conditions therefore shaped not only the character of the people but also the possibilities for, and the nature of, political order. The Roman geographer Strabo similarly argued that Rome's place in a 'temperate zone' made it therefore 'naturally well-suited to hegemony'.[65] These climatic zones defined the characteristics of peoples outside of the Roman empire and put a logical limit on Roman expansion. The unconquered areas outside of the empire were naturally regions suitable only for barbarians, who because of their character and their nature were destined to live in barren regions and sterile lands. This division of the world into climatic zones reflected the Roman belief that barbarians who lived in savage and sterile lands were not worth conquering, while those in temperate climates would eventually become incorporated within the empire. It was a view of the world that believed expansion was almost inevitable and 'all that was needed for the conversion [of barbarians] was a unilateral Roman choice'[66] to extend imperial rule. Near Easterners in particular, inhabiting the parts of Syria which would become part of the empire, were seen by the historian Tacitus as of a natural disposition to slavery and invited enslavement by Roman imperium.[67]

[61] Richard J. A. Talbert, 'Urbs Roma to Orbis Romanus', p. 168.
[62] Aristotle, *Politics*, 7.6.1.
[63] Aristotle, *Politics*, 7.6.1.
[64] Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 6.1.10.
[65] Strabo, *Geography*, 6.4.1.
[66] Randall J. Pogorzelski, 'Orbis Romanus: Lucan and the limits of the Roman world', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 141 (2011), p. 155.
[67] Nathanael Andrade, 'Seducing Autocracy: Tacitus and the dynasts of the Near East', *American Journal of Philology*, 133 (2012), pp. 441–475.

The desire to rule over peoples was not unique, however, to the Romans. The worldview of foreign relations as one of client–patron or tributary peoples was also found within the Sasanian empire. The greater the number and diversity of peoples under their rule worked to illustrate the power of the Sasanian shah. When Shapur I (240–272) constructed a boastful inscription of his achievements at a site known as *Naqsh-e Rostam*, a necropolis outside of Persepolis, he used the languages of Greek, Middle Persian, and Parthian to demonstrate his command over people of different backgrounds.[68] The Roman historian and soldier Ammianus Marcellinus also records how Shapur would be followed on the battlefield by a 'great retinue of men of the highest rank and of various nations' to reflect his rule over the diverse peoples of the world.[69] Grand ideological claims to rule over foreign peoples were expressed throughout the period of the Sasanian Persian empire. The Sasanian ideology of kingship was expressed in theological terms in which the shah was defined as the Shahanshah or the 'king of kings'. An example of a Persian diplomatic exchange defined the Persian king Khusro I as 'the godlike, the virtuous father of peace, Khusrau [Khusro] of ancient-lineage, kings of kings, fortunate, pious, beneficent to whom the gods have granted great fortune and a great kingdom formed in the likeness of gods'.[70] Such lengthy imperial titles reflected the Persian king's personal claims to greatness, which included a dynastic claim of direct lineage back to Darius and Cyrus, the eminent Persian kings of classical antiquity.[71] The Persian king's claim to rule was based on demonstrating his power over subject peoples and it was a common practice to formally list the groups of people under the dominion of the shah.[72] The shah Khusro II even referred to himself not just as 'king of kings' but as 'lord of peoples'.[73] The greater the number and diversity of peoples under their rule further worked to illustrate the king's power.

The rule of the Persian king was also intertwined with the religion of Zoroastrian, an ancient religion based on a dualistic cosmology of good and evil in which ritual purification through fire represented the struggle between

[68] Hugh Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 106.

[69] Ammianus Marcellinus, 19.1.3.

[70] As translated by David Frendo, 'Sovereignty, control and co-existence in Byzantine Iranian Relations', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 24 (2010), p. 143.

[71] Peter Frankopan, *Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 32.

[72] Evangelos Chrysos, 'Some aspects of Roman-Persian legal relations', *Kleronomia*, A (1976), p. 8.

[73] Jamsheed K. Choksy, 'Sacral kingship in Sasanian Iran', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 2 (1988), p. 42.

light and darkness. The religion of Zoroastrian 'provided a powerful moral framework' for the imperial rule of the king of kings.[74] Zoroastrianism worked to legitimize a form of sacral kingship which held the sovereign of Persia as a 'divinely designated protector' of the corporeal world.[75] Because the Persian king's rule was based on a claim of both political and cosmological nature, no man could serve as the Persian king if he showed any physical deformities, and the shah was viewed as God's anointed intermediary between the spiritual and corporeal world. The glory and honour of the shah was therefore tightly intertwined with Persian military victories and the Sasanians placed a greater emphasis than the Parthians on the charismatic and military leadership of the king.[76] The Sasanians also embraced a worldview of understanding political order through hierarchy and honour. Reinforcing such ideas of honour was how power and status were expressed. This can be seen with the way military victories were commemorated. After one victory, the Persian king Shapur would rename the local town as 'victorious is Shapur',[77] while in another example, in response to a rebellious uprising in which the town was destroyed and rebuilt, the town in question was renamed as 'Iran's glory [built by] Shapur'.[78] The nature of political order in late antiquity was therefore one of constantly seeking to reinforce the hierarchical status of the shah. This was a common factor throughout antiquity at a time when the personal honour of the king was instrumental in shaping relations with other polities.

The foreign relations of the Sasanian empire with other polities were conducted through the prism of status and hierarchy. In seeking treasure and prisoners from war, the Shahanshah was not seeking territorial conquest but to demonstrate the tributary status of lesser people or those considered barbarians.[79] This desire to be seen to rule over foreign peoples also informed the strategic behaviour of Persian raids upon the Roman empire. Rather than drives for outright conquest, Persian attacks on Roman cities would often be just large-scale raids to extract symbolic ransoms from cities and to deport

[74] Choksy, 'Sacral kingship in Sasanian Iran', p. 33.
[75] Choksy, 'Sacral kingship in Sasanian Iran', p. 38.
[76] Harrel, *The Nisibis War*, p. 64.
[77] Richard N. Frye, 'The political history of the Sasanians' in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 125.
[78] Frye, 'The political history of the Sasanians', p. 136.
[79] Richard N. Frye, 'The Sasanians' in the *Cambridge Ancient History* 12: *The Crisis of Empire ad193–337*, 2nd edition, ed. Alan Bowman, Averil Cameron, and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 469.

prisoners to Persia.[80] The Roman historian Agathias provides an account of this Persian pursuit for tributes:

> When in fact the Persian kings make war on some neighbouring people of considerable size and importance and reduce them to submission, they do not kill the vanquished inhabitants but impose a tribute on them all and allow them to dwell in and cultivate the conquered territory. However, they consign the former leaders of the nation to a most pitiful fate and assign the title of ruler to their own sons, presumably in order to preserve the proud memory of their victory.[81]

Extracting money from cities while on campaigns provided a sign of tributary status in which the Persian king could claim dominion over the people from which he extracted a ransom. Such payments were likely to have been only of a minor significance to the overall Sasanian economy but were by and large of a primary symbolic nature, reinforcing his title of 'king of kings' and his right to rule over a diverse range of peoples.[82] Sasanian raids against Roman areas of the Levant and Mesopotamia also involved the deportation of prisoners to Persian lands. The deportation of peoples was a customary feature of ancient Near Eastern warfare, as can be seen with the well-known Babylonian exile of Jewish people, and such population transfers could be highly symbolic. The Persian king Khusro plundered the Roman city of Antioch in 540 AD and constructed a brand-new rival city on Persian territory with the captured inhabitants. The new city was placed south of the Persian capital Ctesiphon and was renamed as 'Khusro's-Better-Antioch', which may have had a population that rose as high as 30,000 people. The Sasanians clearly believed that the expense of transportation and the construction of new urban centres was a worthwhile cost.[83] The mass deportation of Roman prisoners also formed a valuable resource in the construction of Sasanian irrigation systems and such practices would over time form an influential Christian minority within the Sasanian empire.[84] The desire to capture large groupings of people also

[80] Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity*, p. 108.

[81] Agathias, *The Histories*, 4.7.

[82] Matthew P. Canepa, 'Sasanian Iran and the projection of power in late antique Eurasia' in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*, ed. Michael Maas and Nicola di Cosmo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 63; Frye, 'The Sasanians', p. 469.

[83] Samuel N. C. Lieu, 'Captives, refugees and exiles: a study of cross frontier civilian movements and contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian' in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, BAR International Series, 297, part II, ed. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Ankara: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1986), pp. 475–505.

[84] Karim Alizadeh, 'Borderland projects of Sasanian empire: intersection of domestic and foreign policies', *Journal of Ancient History*, 2:2 (2014), pp. 93–115; Sebastian P. Brock, 'Christians in the Sasanian empire: a case of divided loyalties', *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), pp. 1–19.

reflects the nature of political economy in antiquity. Farming in Mesopotamia required an intense amount of labour for irrigation, meaning that the people themselves were in many ways an important resource.[85] The relocation of captured peoples and the collection of ransoms as tribute demonstrates the political and ideological goals of the Persian shahs to demonstrate their dominion over foreign peoples in a manner which cannot be explained solely through a statist lens of seeking territorial conquest.

The Sasanians, like the Romans, both believed in a hierarchical view of peoples in which their hegemonic rule was intertwined with their understanding of inter-polity order. As this chapter has so far shown, the presentist assumptions of IR have failed to recognize and adequately theorize how premodern polities understood their environment prior to the modern inventions of cartography and territorial state sovereignty. The era of antiquity demonstrates how the imperial power of Rome and the Sasanians developed through a self-understanding of foreign relations consisting of a hierarchical ordering of peoples centred on Rome and Persia as the pinnacle of the civilized world. However, while the Romans and Persians were the two most powerful sedentary empires within late antiquity, they existed alongside a bewildering array of proto-kingdoms, nomadic confederations, and tribal groupings. This diverse inter-polity order developed through claims to universal rule, but such grand assertions in reality were unachievable against such heterogeneity. The inter-imperial struggle between the Romans and Persians was directly shaped by the waves of migration of people from the steppe which began around the fourth century AD. Yet, just as the sovereign state model struggles to explain the empires of antiquity, the following section will show how a Westphalian framework cannot account for the diversity of polities in late antiquity.

Nomads and Diversity in Late Antiquity

The pre-modern world, consisting of hierarchical empires, nomadic groups, and proto-medieval kingdoms, could appear to the modern IR scholar as lacking any societal foundations for the basis of a stable inter-polity order. Part of this challenge arises because there is no consensus within IR on how an inter-polity system, or even its constituent units, can be defined.[86] The logic of a

[85] Van Dam, 'Big cities and the dynamics of the Mediterranean during the fifth century', p. 94.
[86] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 90.

Westphalian model views the pressures of an anarchic system as forcing polities to converge on a single-state model and views other pre-modern polities as superseded by the modern sovereign state.[87] Examinations of inter-polity order therefore only look to the systemic incentives which constrain and compel states to act in certain ways, but crucially take the existence of a sovereign state and a state system as a prior assumption. As the following explores, the suzerain system of late antiquity did not converge into like-units and does not easily fit the ontological model of sovereign states within anarchy.

In seeking to study inter-polity systems across different time periods, Barry Buzan and Richard Little sought to broaden their consideration of the variability of actors included within the study of IR. In challenging the work of structural theorists, Buzan and Little showed how the historical norm in inter-polity relations is a world of 'unlike units'.[88] By looking at tribes, city-states, and empires across history, they argued such actors could be considered as units within a system if they were sufficiently cohesive enough to make decisions which could be differentiated from others.[89] Groups with a sense of 'we-ness', with a capacity to mobilize resources and a degree of institutionalization, should therefore be considered as polities within an inter-polity system.[90] As later chapters will show, the evidence of diplomacy between nomadic peoples and the courts of Byzantium and Persia demonstrates that such tribes could indeed be considered as independent actors. They played a key role in the strategic calculations of each side and shaped the politics of the buffer zone across Mesopotamia. Widening our ontology from a limited state-centric approach also demonstrates the variability of political regimes and inter-polity actors throughout history. To consider the politics of late antiquity, therefore, is to recognize that political communities, and crucially what counts as a political community, varies across time and space.[91]

Late antiquity consisted of a wealth of different actors, ranging from the two great empires of the East Romans and the Persians to the kingdoms they frequently disputed over, such as the kingdoms of Armenia, Iberia, and Lazica (in modern-day Georgia), while city-states such as Palmyra were absorbed by the Romans and the collapse of the western Roman empire gave birth to a range of new polities, such as the Ostrogoths, Franks, and Vandals. Late

[87] Andrew Philips and Jason C. Sharman, 'Explaining durable diversity in international systems: state, company and empire in the Indian Ocean', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:3 (2015), p. 436; David C. Kang, 'International order in historical East Asia: tribute and hierarchy beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism', *International Organization*, 74:1 (2020), p. 89.

[88] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 102.

[89] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 69.

[90] Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach, *Polities: Authority, Identities, and Change* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), p. 34.

[91] Keene, *International Political Thought*, p. 10.

antiquity was also a period involving the great movement of peoples and a bewildering array of new groups emerged as significant actors, including nomadic and semi-nomadic groups such as the Huns, Gepids, Avars, Slavs, Alans, Hephthalites, and Gok Turks. The movement of peoples from the central Asian steppe would re-shape the geopolitics of late antiquity, but within IR nomadic polities remain under-theorized as actors that lack any societal foundation and are viewed as existing only as a transitory phase in the evolutionary development to modern nation states.[92]

The very prevalence of nomadic people during this period challenges Westphalian conceptions of who can count as an actor within an inter-polity system. Nomadic people are commonly seen as having only a limited form of agency and lacking the institutional governance of sedentary societies.[93] Such approaches, however, reflect only the whiggish narratives of teleological progress in which the state acts as a civilizing force and tell us little about how to understand the place of nomads within an inter-polity order.[94] The anarchic pressure of the inter-polity system in late antiquity did not go very far towards creating like-units as the logic of a Westphalian ontology would expect. To understand how the system remained diverse, one needs to consider how nomadic groups were formed and interacted alongside sedentary polities. Nomadic groups have typically been understood within IR as forming 'hordes' consisting of groups that 'bandwagon' around a strong individual due to the military prowess of great leaders such as Genghis Khan or Attila the Hun.[95] But this perspective over-emphasizes the role of a single military leader and neglects the way nomadic groups existed in a co-constitutive relationship with sedentary powers. The historian Thomas Barfield has argued that nomadic tribes can be thought of as 'shadow empires' which thrived through their connections to the prosperity of a sedentary power.[96] Nomadic economies were based on mobile wealth such as animal husbandry and did not tax citizens in

[92] Alan Shiu Cheung Kwan, 'Hierarchy, status and international society: China and the steppe nomads', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:2 (2016), pp. 362–383.

[93] Joseph MacKay, 'The nomadic other: ontological security and the inner Asian steppe in historical East Asian international politics', *Review of International Studies*, 42:3 (2016), pp. 471–491.

[94] Iver B. Neumann and Einar Wigen, 'The importance of the Eurasian steppe to the study of international relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 16:3 (2013), p. 311.

[95] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'The idea of international system: theory meets history', *International Political Science Review*, 15:3 (1994), p. 238; Dani K. Nedal and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Anarchy and authority: international structure, the balance of power and hierarchy', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4:2 (2019), p. 180; Iver B. Neumann, 'Europeans and the steppe: Russian lands under the Mongol Rule' in *International Orders in the Early Modern World before the Rise of the West*, ed. Shogo Suzuki, Yongjin Zhang, and Joel Quirk (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 30.

[96] Thomas J. Barfield, 'The shadow empire: imperial state formation along the Chinese-nomad frontier' in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, ed. Susan E. Alcock, Terence N. D'Altroy, Kathleen D. Morrison, and Carla M. Sinopoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 10–41.

the same way as a city-based agrarian economy; there were therefore different incentives and little requirement to create a centralized bureaucratic state. Instead, nomadic leaders could emerge with the control and patronage over tribute received from sedentary empires who often preferred to sue for peace against the threat of nomadic invasions. Although the threat of military power was always present, nomadic great leaders were able to essentially form 'redistributive chiefdoms' which could ensure group cohesion by controlling access to luxury goods gained from both trading with, and raiding against, sedentary polities.[97] Critics argue Barfield too easily dismisses the ability of nomadic groups to support sophisticated governance structures and economies and it would be a mistake to view such polities as entirely dependent on sedentary imperial centres.[98] But nomads can still be thought of as 'shadow empires' which existed in a co-constitutive relationship with sedentary powers because they sought concessions, tribute, and plunder rather than outright territorial conquest.

Adam Watson described the nomad–imperial relationship as a 'regular and recurring rhythm between communities in a system' as nomadic groups were not aliens to the imperial civilizations but intertwined in their relations.[99] Empires by their inherent nature consist of a frontier and it was nomadic pressure on Rome's frontiers that led to nomadic peoples and semi-pastoral tribes being used as clients, auxiliaries, and a resource with which to recruit within the imperial armies.[100] Both the East Romans and the Sasanians relied upon barbarian tribes and nomadic groups as proxies and the wealth of these two empires played a significant part in drawing nomads into their geopolitical rivalry. The use of subsidies, bribes, and gifts from the imperial centre to manage barbarians worked to attract nomadic people who saw such wealth as an opportunity.[101] Trade would also play a significant factor in developing relations between sedentary polities and nomadic confederations, as large nomadic polities required a regular 'influx of resources' from their urban rivals. It was essentially in the economic interests of nomadic peoples to keep a

[97] Barfield, 'The shadow empire', p. 17.

[98] See, for example, Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, trans. Julia Crookendem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). For criticisms of Barfield, see Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); J. Daniel Rogers, 'Inner Asian states and empires: theories and synthesis', *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 20 (2012), pp. 205–256; Pavel Osinsky, 'The rise and fall of the nomad-dominated empires of Eurasia', *Sociological Inquiry*, 91:3 (2021), pp. 578–602.

[99] Watson, *Evolution of International Society*, p. 129.

[100] Kees Van Der Pijl, *Nomads, Empires, States: Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 76 and 89.

[101] Joanna Kemp, 'Amicitia, gift-exchange and subsidies in imperial Roman diplomacy' in *Reflections of Roman Imperialisms*, ed. Marko A. Janković (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), pp. 92–101.

sedentary polity 'alive' as a source of riches.[102] Trade and access to markets was therefore a key motivation and primary aim of nomadic groups who sought to stabilize the flow of goods from imperial centres.[103] It was the nomadic advantage in speed and manoeuvrability which allowed nomadic tribes to prey upon and enrich themselves from sedentary empires. The ecology of central Asia meant that nomadic groups were able to develop large cavalry-based forces and were able to open markets and extract goods by force.[104] Existing within this symbiotic relationship, the interactions between nomadic groups and sedentary empires therefore did not lead to convergence on a like-unit model as structural IR approaches would expect.[105] Instead, the inter-polity system of late antiquity remained a stubbornly diverse system of multiple types of political actors.

The East Romans of Byzantium and the Sasanian Persians both made grand imperial claims to universal rule within this diverse system and believed such nomadic and semi-nomadic groups should accept a subordinate position within an inter-polity hierarchy. In seeking to enforce such a suzerain order over this diverse system, the Persian shah referred to the dual hierarchy of late antiquity as the 'Two Eyes' of the world. The following section therefore explores how the work of English School scholar Martin Wight can be used as a guide for theorizing the Sasanian and East Roman dual hierarchy.

The 'Two Eyes' Order of Late Antiquity

In examining historical examples of state systems, Martin Wight had previously touched upon the era of late antiquity as an area of scholarly enquiry but had found the period wanting in terms of evidence of an 'international society' based on states with shared cultural understandings. Wight was dismissive of the ability of nomads to act as units in an 'international system' and viewed the cultural relationship and understanding of the two empires of Byzantium and Persia as too insufficient to form any type of stable order. Wight hinted

[102] Hyun Jin Kim, *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 194, n. 12; Richard Payne, 'The making of Turan: the fall and transformation of the Iranian East in late antiquity', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 9:1 (2016), p. 11.

[103] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 188.T

[104] For more on this point about nomadic ecology and cavalry forces, see Jos Gommans, 'Warhorse and post-nomadic empire in Asia, c.1000–1800', *Journal of Global History*, 2:1 (2007), pp. 1–21. For the relationship between nomadic and sedentary societies, see Andrew Phillips and Jason Sharman, 'Conquest, empire and the Eurasian military synthesis' (forthcoming) and *Peter Turchin, War and Peace and War: The Life Cycles of Imperial Nations* (New York: Pi Press, 2006), pp. 31–48.

[105] See Peter Turchin, 'A theory for formation of large empires', *Journal of Global History*, 4 (2009), pp. 191–217.

that the two rivals could be seen as the 'Two Eyes' to rule the world, but as the following explains, Wight's state-centrism prevented him from viewing the Two Eyes system as a form of political order that could manage the inter-polity relations of late antiquity.

Wight's investigation into late antiquity began by noting the superficial resemblance between the bipolar rivalry of the Cold War and the historical rivalry between Byzantium and Persia. The aim of Wight's brief examination into late antiquity was to consider if a Byzantine–Persian suzerain states system could be considered as a 'secondary' type of states system. He noted that despite their 'mortal struggle', the two powers experienced 'periods of high esteem'. Wight therefore sought to understand what kind of relationship and depth of interaction could be found within this bipolar rivalry. In doing so, he looked to correspondence between the Persian king Khusro II and the Byzantine emperor Maurice and quotes a passage at length:

> there are two eyes to which divinity confided the task of illuminating the world: these are the powerful monarchy of the Romans and the wisely governed Commonwealth of the Persians. By these two great empires the barbarous and war-loving nations are kept in check, and mankind given better and safer government throughout.[106]

Wight recognizes this passage as signifying a hierarchical system and highlights how the two empires 'kept in check' the barbarians and the other weaker powers. For Wight, this raised the question of whether the bipolar Byzantine–Persian rivalry could be considered as an early form of a states system. However, ultimately Wight dismisses late antiquity as a states system because he deems the period to be lacking enough actors who could be considered as members of an international society. He also dismisses the relationship of Byzantium and Persia as lacking enough cultural unity and places an emphasis on international society arising from a 'single culture'.[107] However, as this chapter has shown, not only can nomadic actors play a role within an inter-polity system but Wight's essentialist assumptions of culture also neglected the shared language of hierarchy and status between the Byzantines and Persians.

To be able to understand the possibility of forming inter-polity order, the emphasis for IR should not be on the existence of a unified shared culture but

[106] Wight, *Systems of States*, p. 24.
[107] Wight, *Systems of States*, p. 25.

on the possibility of mutual social recognition, which by its very nature shows some acceptance of shared ideas and forms a basis for modern international law and diplomacy.[108] The Roman and Persian empires each had their own forms of cultural identity, but equally their cultures were co-constituted by their interaction and they developed many instances of shared meaning within art, rituals, and diplomacy. The period of late antiquity might be accused of lacking a common civilization, but there are many traces of such shared understandings. For example, both societies laid claim to the political lineage of the age of Alexander the Great and each power saw themselves as descending directly from his Macedonian empire and its subsequent collapse.[109] Late antiquity also demonstrates other forms of shared meaning, such as that both societies could accept that religious texts, even though different, could be used as sources of authoritative power and contained religious truths.[110] Sasanian state reforms to centralize power after 500 AD are also likely to have replicated the administration and governance structures of the Romans, demonstrating a deepening of cultural awareness.[111] Further, the art and rituals of the imperial courts often borrowed and adapted the culture of one another to construct a shared understanding of the rituals and role of kingship.[112] Such was the level of cultural exchange that when the East Roman emperor Justinian closed the neo-Platonic academy in 529 AD, it was the Sasanian shah Khusro I, a man known for his depth of knowledge of classical Greek philosophy, who granted asylum to the fleeing Hellenic philosophers.[113] Even the Euphrates River across the buffer zone of Mesopotamia can be thought of as a line of communication and conduit for trade between the two empires. The Euphrates River therefore acted as a 'road more than a frontier' in developing forms of cultural exchange.[114] Although the Romans often portrayed Persians as a distinctive cultural 'other' and could be dismissive, they also often expressed admiration,

[108] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 105.

[109] M. Rahim Shayegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. xiv; Jake Nabel, 'Alexander between Rome and Persia: politics, ideology, and history' in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great*, ed. Kenneth Royce Moore (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 197–232.

[110] Herve Inglebert, 'Late antique conceptions of late antiquity' in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 6.

[111] Nina Garsoian, 'Byzantium and the Sasanians' in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 568–592.

[112] Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

[113] Garsoian, 'Byzantium and the Sasanians', p. 571.

[114] Michal Gawlikowski, 'The Roman frontier on the Euphrates in Mesopotamia', *Rivista di archeologia, epigrafia e storia orientale antica*, 22 (1987), pp. 77–80.

creating a strange overlap between categories of friend and foe.[115] Ancient Roman writers also often expressed intimate knowledge of their Persian rivals. They were well versed with Persian rulers, generals, provincial governors, and the administrative divisions of the Sasanian empire.[116] Together these cultural exchanges may not have created a unified culture, but they created shared ideas of hierarchy and status in which imperial greatness could be communicated.

Wight's emphasis on a singular culture was overplayed and neglects the entangled and conflicting nature of culture. Cultural diversity is an inherent feature of any inter-polity system and the tensions arising from cultural conflicts may even be 'omnipresent' in shaping human interactions and world history.[117] As Dunne and Reus-Smit have argued, there is 'no such thing' as a non-social inter-polity system.[118] Recognizing how early English School scholars overplayed the singular nature of culture raises new avenues of investigation for understanding inter-polity order in late antiquity. Once we move beyond the state-centric framework which limited Wight's investigation, we can see how nomadic groups can have agency, and that cultural difference is not a barrier to order but is a ubiquitous feature of any political order. If nomadic groups can be key actors within an inter-polity system and cultural diversity is an inherent feature, then the passage between the Persian shah Khusro and the emperor Maurice could be read in a different light. Rather than dismissing nomadic groups as lacking status within an inter-polity society, it was precisely the competition for status from nomads which challenged the two sedentary empires. The management of nomadic groups by the two empires therefore became the 'Two Eyes' of the world, which provided a form of hierarchical governance of the 'barbarous'. The two great empires should therefore be seen as ordering the 'war-loving nations' by constructing a 'better and safer government' of inter-polity order. It is precisely this form of duopoly which could be found as a form of inter-polity order in late antiquity, as the following section explains.

[115] Rolf Michael Schneider, 'Friend and foe: the Orient in Rome', in *The Age of the Parthians: The Idea of Iran* 2, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 50–86.

[116] Craig Morley, 'Beyond the digression: Ammianus Marcellinus on the Persians', *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology*, 3:4 (2016), pp. 10–25.

[118] Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit, *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 31.

A Dual Hierarchy

Inter-polity order in late antiquity was directly shaped through the imperial attempts to manage the invasions of nomads and tribal peoples and to temper the bipolar rivalry between the emperor and shah. The Two Eyes were nominally the guardians of this order and the symbolic leaders, but nomadic tribes were able to field significantly large armies and could certainly challenge their imperial neighbours on the battlefield. A Hunnic group known as the Hephthalites even took the Persian shah Peroz I as a prisoner in the early 480s and would extract tribute from the Sasanians, upending their claims to a superior status.[119] Structural theorists may therefore consider whether late antiquity actually was a bipolar system based on the material distribution of power, but it is important to recognize that it was viewed as a bipolar and dual hierarchical order by contemporaries. The sixth-century historian and diplomat Peter the Patrician details how this bipolar relationship of the two empires was built upon a common recognition of their superior status. He states: 'It is clear to the race of men that the Roman and Persian empires are, as it were, two lamps; as with eyes, each one should be adorned by the brightness of the other, and not be constantly seeking the destruction of each other.'[120]

The seventh-century Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta equally regarded the two imperial rivals as 'two eyes' but also stressed their equal sovereign power. He stated that, 'God effected that the whole world should be illumined from the very beginning by two eyes, namely by the most powerful kingdom of the Romans and by the most prudent sceptre of the Persian state.'[121]

These contemporary descriptions of the Byzantines and Sasanians as 'two lamps', or two 'eyes', portray the two powers as equal in sovereign stature, but crucially as also standing above all other actors within the inter-polity system. The concept of Rome and Persia as the 'two eyes' of the world had been used as early as the third century.[122] At least by Roman understanding, the

[119] On the capture of Shah Peroz, see Chapter 4.

[120] Peter the Patrician (fr. 13) as translated by Michael Whitby, 'Byzantine diplomacy: good faith, trust and co-operation in international relations in late antiquity' in *War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, ed. Philip de Souza and John France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 127.

[121] Theophylact Simocatta, 4.11:2.

[122] Zeev Rubin, 'Diplomacy and statecraft in the relations between Byzantium and the Sasanids' in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, BAR International Series, 297, ed. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Ankara: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1986), p. 678.

nature of society was understood directly in terms of the human body with the head in control of the limbs.[123] The two eyes in the head of the body therefore can be interpreted as the head of a hierarchy able to manage an inter-polity society.

Certainly, the bipolar relations of the two empires were understood as existing in a hierarchical relationship with their greater status and power compared to the perceived lesser nomadic peoples. A fourth-century Christian source saw the relationship as symbolizing the 'two shoulders of the world',[124] again reinforcing a message of standing above others, while the fifth-century anonymous text, the *Epic Histories*, even refers to the rival empires as the 'two mountains' of the world.[125] On describing this duopoly, contemporary Persian ambassadors argued:

> it is impossible for a single monarchy to embrace the innumerable cares of the organisation of the universe, and with one mind's rudder to direct a creation as great as that over which the sun watches. For it is never possible for the earth to resemble the unity of the divine.[126]

The dual hierarchy of the two empires was accordingly justified because 'no single monarchy' was able to unilaterally impose inter-polity order. The Persian ambassadors were therefore not only arguing over why the Byzantines and Sasanians were of an equal hierarchical status, but also making a case for why these two empires should act as managers or guardians of inter-polity order. This hierarchical ordering of other polities is also reflected in a Roman letter to the Persian shah on matters relating to the kingdom of Armenia. The emperor Maurice declared that Armenia was a 'perverse and disobedient nation, who stands between us and disturbs us'.[127] This extract reflects not only the irritable mood of the Byzantine emperor but also the sense of superiority between the head of a hierarchy and those considered as consisting of a lower status. There was an expectation of the two empires acting jointly as the head of a hierarchy to impose order on those considered as actors of a lesser status.

[123] For the Roman view of society as a human body with the head in control, see Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 1.26.

[124] Sebastian P. Brock, 'Christians in the Sasanian empire: a case of Divided Loyalties', *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), p. 7.

[125] Domenico Agostini, 'The perception of Romans (hrōmāyīg) in the Sasanian and Zoroastrian traditions', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 37:1 (2022), p. 5.

[126] Theophylact, 4.13.7.

[127] As quoted by Robert W. Thomson, 'Eastern Neighbours: Armenia' in *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire 500–1492*, ed. Jonathan Shepard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 169.

As Andrew Phillips and Jason Sharman have shown, a suzerain system can support diverse polities in a durable order, but some polities must either choose or are forced to accept a lower status.[128] In late antiquity, the durability of the suzerain order can be seen with the use of Arab proxies by both empires who sought to outsource the defence of their southern frontiers to local clients.[129] By the fourth century AD, the eastern Roman empire was appointing leaders of Arab tribes along the southern frontier as client kings or 'phylarchs' to act as proxies who could maintain security and deter nomadic raiders across the Romans' Arabian frontier.[130] Over time, the Romans incorporated these Arab proxy tribes under the leadership of a single dynasty known as the 'Jafnid' who acted as a counter to the Sasanians' own client Arab proxies known as the 'Nasrid' based around the city of al-Hira.[131] These Arab tribes were important actors that were used by both empires as proxies to further imperial aims. It is important to note, however, that contemporary sources would refer specifically to the individual leaders of these tribes.[132] For Roman authors, the emphasis was always on the individual person of phylarch who was able to unite a tribe and their affiliation to a personal patron.[133] The Arab phylarchs were therefore viewed in terms of subordinate rulers who had a personal relationship to the emperor or shah as clients and were expected to take a deferential role. Such hierarchical relations were a common feature in late antiquity in which deferential relations developed that explicitly sought to define asymmetrical roles and status based on a language of kingship.

The hierarchic structures of late antiquity worked to manage inter-polity order and created both expectations of an actor's role and their place within a

[128] See the role of vassals in the early modern history of the Indian Ocean: Andrew Phillips and Jason Sharman, *International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 133.

[129] Irfan Kawar, 'Procopius on the Ghassanids', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 77:2 (1957), pp. 79–87.

[130] Wolf Liebeschuetz, 'Nomads, phylarchs and settlement in Syria and Palestine' in *Settlement and Demography in the Near East in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Colloquium*, ed. Ariel Lewin and Pietrina Pellegrini (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2007) pp. 131–145.

[131] As with many historical terms, there is no agreement on the naming of these tribes. German scholars of the nineteenth century preferred the terms Ghassanids (Jafnids) and Lakhmids (Nasrids), which has been criticized by modern scholarship. See Greg Fisher, ed. *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 7 and Isabel Toral-Niehoff, 'Late antique Iran and the Arabs: the case of Al-Hira', *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 6 (2013), p. 61.

[132] Robert G. Hoyland, 'Insider and outsider sources: historiographical reflections on late antique Arabia' in *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jitse H. F. Dijkstra and Greg Fisher (Leuven: Brill, 2014); Greg Fisher and Philip Wood, 'Writing the history of the "Persian Arabs": the pre-Islamic perspective on the "Nasrids" of al-Hirah', *Iranian Studies*, 49:2 (2016), pp. 247–290.

[133] See, for example, Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.40–48.

system.[134] Across the era of late antiquity, the rivalry between the East Romans and Sasanians saw both 'competition and emulation' as the two powers sought to order the world around them.[135] It was a relationship based on antagonism and accommodation with diplomatic exchanges between Byzantium and the Persians that frequently made such references to their relationship as existing in tandem comparable to the 'sun and moon'.[136] This allusion to cosmology was directly understood as demonstrating the Persian king's desire to be viewed as an equal rank to the title of Augustus used by the Roman emperors.[137] Together, these two powers in late antiquity had essentially 'divided the world'[138] between themselves and created an inter-polity order that was based on a duopoly of competing spheres of influence over those considered as lesser actors.

Conclusion

This chapter began by showing the limitations of IR's Westphalian model and statist lens in relation to the polities of late antiquity. Existing at a time before nation states, the empires of antiquity sought control over peoples, not territories, in an anarchic environment in which foreign relations were understood through the divide of civilization and barbarism. Both the East Romans of Byzantium and the Sasanian Persians understood relations with other polities through concepts of honour and status which created a hierarchical order. The dual hierarchy of the Two Eyes system was not always peaceful but was a clear attempt to manage a diverse suzerain system consisting of a multiplicity of political actors. The following chapters will trace the rise and fall of the Two Eyes system, beginning with Chapter 2, which outlines how the Romans came to accept the existence of the Persians as a mutual rival that could not be overcome and therefore had to be accepted as an equal imperial power.

[134] On hierarchies, see Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Hierarchies in world politics', *International Organization*, 70:3 (2016), pp. 623–654.
[135] Michael R. Jackson Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2020), p. 179.
[136] On the debate over whether this shows equality, see Domenico Agostini, 'The perception of Romans (hrōmāyīg) in the Sasanian and Zoroastrian traditions', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 37:1 (2022), pp. 1–18
[137] Amm Marc, Book XXIII.VI.5.
[138] Justinus, Epitome 41.1

2

Coming into Contact and the *Iranshahr*

Introduction

The bipolar rivalry between Byzantium and the Sasanian Persians was driven by competing ideological claims to universal rule. Both imperial powers would make grand assertions to rule over the known world as the head of a divinely ordained hierarchy. In making such claims to universal rule, both the Romans and the Persians conceived of political order existing as a form of 'world order'. Both empires would profess to have the power to order the world around them and claim a superior status over those considered lesser actors. Such imperial claims to rule were absolute and stretched further than either polity could realistically hope to enforce. This conception of world order reflects the civilizational beliefs and self-understanding of imperial powers before the invention of nation states.[1] For the Romans, world order was defined as the ecumene, or *oikouménē*, originally a Greek term to define the inhabited world, but for the Romans it meant civilization itself. Outside of the Roman ecumene was a lawless world of barbarians in which Roman rule was neither necessary nor desirable. Similarly, the Sasanian Persians viewed their relations with other polities through their own concept of universal rule, known as the *Iranshahr* (the realm of the Iranians). Inside this realm of *Iranshahr* was a divinely ordered world under the guardianship of the shah, while outside the realm of *Iranshahr* was an antithetical world representing a condition of disordered chaos. Together these visions of world order represent a set of beliefs and practices that shaped not only how the two imperial powers viewed their place in the world but also how they interacted with other polities.

The suzerain systems of both the eastern Romans and Persia were developed from their universalist worldviews in which each power claimed to rule the civilized world, but as this chapter shows, the Roman ecumene was built on an imperial ideology of expanding conquest that was challenged in coming up against a rival of equal power. The East Romans of late antiquity, however, were forced to accept that there was a limit to the Roman world order.

[1] Buzan and Acharya, *Re-Imagining International Relations*, p. 9.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press. © Kevin Blachford (2024).
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0003

After each conflict they grew to believe Persia would 'persist after a treaty terminated and that a state of war did not automatically take its place'.[2] It is the politics of recognition which informs all interactions between inter-polity relations, and for Buzan and Little, questions of political recognition and relative status arise when polities 'come within military range of each other'.[3] The Romans had at first sought to continue their tradition of imposing Roman domination, but after finding Persia too large and too well established for conquest, they had experienced such a question of political recognition. Over time, the Romans learned to accept and recognize Persia as an equal power and that there were in effect two 'worlds'.

The Sasanian world order of the *Iranshahr* was likewise constituted through interactions with Rome. The Persian shah's right to universal rule represents the Sasanians' own form of ecumenism and was a response to the threat of Roman expansionism. Victories on the battlefield and the extraction of tributes from the Romans worked to encourage the Sasanian shah into developing a universal claim to act as the 'king of kings'. To explore the coming together of these two conflicting visions of world order, this chapter begins by looking at how the Roman ecumene, prior to the fourth century AD, was built on a worldview of domination and imperium over others. The second section then looks at how the Roman ecumene was unable to conceptualize diplomatic relations with foreign powers in a modern sense of reciprocal interactions. To illustrate the limitations of diplomacy for classical Rome, the third section will therefore briefly examine Rome's initial contacts with the Parthian dynasty of Ancient Iran (247 BC to 224 AD). Before the rise of the Sasanian dynasty in 224 AD, Persia was led by the Parthians and it was under their rule that the Romans would first come into contact with a great eastern civilization. The Roman–Parthian relationship was one of distance that involved a lower level of interaction than can be found between the Sasanian Persians and East Romans in late antiquity. However, in the initial contact between east and west, the Romans failed to recognize that the Persian empire was too large and too powerful to be overcome. The fourth section then details how the Sasanians superseded the Parthians and created a vision of world order in response to the wars with the Romans. The *Iranshahr* was a development that grew out of the victories of Shapur I over the Romans and can be seen as a counterclaim to world order. The chapter further develops by exploring how the failed invasion of Persia by the Roman

[2] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 210.

[3] Buzan and Little, *International Systems in World History*, p. 93; also see Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit, *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 33.

emperor Julian in 363 AD should be seen as part of a transformational moment which solidified the buffer zone between the two empires and institutionalized a shared recognition of facing an equal great imperial rival. The final section in this chapter will argue that the recognition of an imperial frontier re-shaped the ecumene of the East Romans of Byzantium with the realization that there was a limit to the Roman claim of universal rule.

The Roman Ecumene in Antiquity

The Roman ecumene, and the Sasanian equivalent of the *Iranshahr*, were universalist concepts which defined how the inhabited world could be conceived of and how foreign relations should be ordered and practised. It reflected how each of these two empires sought to structure their relations with other polities in what were considered to be the 'just arrangements' of the 'distribution of power' and the 'commonly accepted rules' of world order.[4] Crucially, such a world order is significantly different to the modern idea of a 'global' order, as the concept does not necessarily relate to the entirety of the Earth but to a regional sphere of imperial power and influence. Essentially, such world orders are constructed by imperial polities who believe their ideas and institutions alone are timeless and universal.

The Roman understanding of the 'whole world' as a relative concept may appear strange to a modern audience, but as the previous chapter has shown, the Romans lacked a modern understanding of cartography and therefore could not envision the division of a geopolitical environment into bounded territorial states. One example to illustrate this can be found with Julius Caesar's famed crossing of the Rubicon, an action that challenged the very basis of the Roman constitution and signified the end of the republic. The 'crossing of the Rubicon' represented a decisive moment signifying the point of no return, but despite the importance of Caesar's actions in crossing the river Rubicon, it is less acknowledged that he also quickly lost his way and needed a guide.[5] Even the most important of actions in antiquity could be limited in regard to geographic knowledge. Because of the lack of modern cartography, the Romans were unable to compartmentalize territories in a modern sense. If the Romans had any concept of boundaries, it was merely based on the division between

[4] Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), p. 9; Buzan and Acharya, *Re-Imagining International Relations*, p. 10.

[5] Charles R. Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 63.

being within the city of Rome or being away from the city on a military campaign. Roman officials and generals, once outside the city, would act with the rule of 'imperium' and with this possession of imperial authority they had the ability to command without restraint beyond the city's boundaries, thereby creating two spheres of 'home' and 'away'.[6] The result was that the Romans lacked 'any sense of passing through a barrier when moving beyond the territories under direct Roman administration'.[7] Essentially, the whole world was understood as existing, or potentially existing if the Romans so chose, under Roman rule.

The lack of visual representations of territory also reinforces that the Roman view of territorial space did not aim to provide an accurate depiction of geography, but was intertwined with expressing a Roman cosmology and worldview.[8] Rome was understood as the 'first and the only' empire 'recorded in all time that ever made the risings and the settings of the sun the boundaries of her dominion'.[9] Yet, despite such claims to world rule, the Romans were certainly aware of the existence of distant foreign peoples. Pliny the elder, an advisor to the emperor Vespasian in the first century AD, had even warned of long-distance trade with India draining the empire of precious metals, at a time when knowledge of the sub-continent was strictly limited.[10] But the Roman empire 'saw no contradictions' between ruling the entire world and the existence of foreign peoples.[11] Rome's position within a temperate climatic zone implied that the Roman *orbis terrarum* extended to all territories within that zone, including those governed by client kings, as well as to barbarian lands.[12] The early empire also showed very little evidence of thinking of their own imperial frontiers as any type of 'physical and static boundaries', which meant, according to Jan Willem Drijvers, that the emperor Augustus could even make claims of imperium over Germania despite Roman soldiers not

[6] Daniel J. Gargola, *The Shape of the Roman Order: The Republic and Its Space* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2017), p. 24.

[7] Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers*, p. 80.

[8] Mark W. Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 27; Kai Brodersen, 'Space and geography' in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies*, ed. Alessandro Barchiesi and Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 827–837.

[9] Dionysius Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1.3.3.

[10] This trade was draining 50 million sesterces a year from the Roman empire, which was even larger than the annual tribute Caesar had imposed on Gaul after his conquest. See Raoul McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 2.

[11] Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 327.

[12] Mariana Castro, *The Function of the Roman Army in Southern Arabia Petraea* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018), p. 9.

actually holding the territory.[13] Certainly, the historian Tacitus complained not of the impossibility of conquering Germania but of the slowness of progress in doing so.[14]

For the Romans, the existence of people outside of Rome did not challenge such universal claims to rule. The ancient geographer Strabo debated, for example, whether ancient Britain could be considered as existing within the inhabitable world.[15] People outside of Rome were merely lower down within a world hierarchy and their place with such an order was perennially understood as potential supplicants to Roman rule. This perspective of cultural chauvinism is even apparent within the Roman cosmopolitan tradition of thought which argues in favour of a 'world city' or cosmopolis. The ideal of cosmopolitanism has inspired many contemporary thinkers who seek to prescribe ideas of world citizenship for a universal cosmopolis. But this is a modern liberal ideal of progressive values celebrating the crossing of national borders. For the Romans, cosmopolitanism was the practice of transcending differences to ensure the viability of imperial administration over heterogeneous and fragmented populations.[16] As Plutarch stated, 'we should not live in poleis' but have 'one way of life and one cosmos'.[17] Roman cosmopolitanism was therefore still firmly fixed on the idea of Rome as the centre of the world and any world citizens would have to adopt Roman customs and language. It is important to remember, then, that the 'whole world' was a relative concept for the Romans. In the modern era, the British found in the eighteenth century that the Chinese emperor equally had such a cosmological understanding of world order—one which was firmly centred on the Chinese emperor's divine right to rule everything under the sun. When the British emissary George Macartney sought an audience with the Qianlong emperor in 1793, he was expecting to begin cordial diplomatic relations based on sovereign equality with the goal of opening new ports and a permanent embassy within China in order to facilitate trade. But Macartney was rebuffed by the Chinese emperor who did not let the knowledge of the more advanced British scientific and consumer

[13] Jan Willem Drijvers, 'The limits of empire in the res gestae of Ammianus Marcellinus' in *Frontiers in the Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 14; also see the limits of Roman control in John W. Rich, 'Augustus, war and peace' in *The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power*, ed. Paul Erdkamp et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 329–357.

[14] Tacitus, *Germania*, 37.2.

[15] Strabo, 2.5.8.

[16] Myles Lavan, Richard Payne, and John Weisweiler, 'Cosmopolitan politics: the assimilation and subordination of elite cultures', in *Universal Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1–28.

[17] Anthony Black, 'Ancient and non-Western international thought', *History of European Ideas*, 41:1 (2015), p. 6; also see Edward Keene, *International Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 52.

products or of other places outside of China undermine his claim to universal rule.[18] Similarly, the Romans would also make such claims to universal rule despite evidence to the contrary. Roman artwork, for example, would often present barbarians as offering gifts to Rome regardless of whether they were actually conquered.[19] The knowledge of other peoples outside of Roman-controlled territory therefore did not invalidate the Roman vision of world order as all-encompassing.

As this section has shown, the language of sovereign equality between bounded nation states would have meant little for the world of pre-modern relations as dominance and hierarchy were the principal means of viewing relations with other polities. The Roman view of world order did not accept the idea of foreign relations based on equality. This therefore leads onto the following section which details how the Roman view of political order was intimately intertwined with a belief that saw conquest as a necessary means to bring peace, order, and civilization.[20]

Conflict and Diplomacy

Before examining how the Romans came into contact with Persia and over time came to accept the presence of an imperial rival, it is worth considering how transformational late antiquity was for the Roman self-understanding and their place in the world. The shift from ever-expanding universalist claims to accepting limits to the Roman world was a psychological shock to the Roman sense of self. Prior to the rise of the Sasanians, the Roman ecumene was an imperial ideology centred on the idea of a Pax Romana. For the Romans, Pax, or peace, was not just the absence of war but came to be associated with complete Roman domination.[21] As the following explains, from the Principate period until the fourth century, the Romans continued to understand their relations with other actors through this worldview of Pax Romana.

The Romans of classical antiquity viewed world order as existing within a condition of Pax Romana, a Roman-enforced peace that viewed Roman dominance as the natural condition of political order. The nature of inter-polity

[18] Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 13.

[19] Rolf Michael Schneider, 'Orientalism in late antiquity: the Oriental in imperial and Christian imagery', in *Ērān und Anērān*, ed. Joseph Wiesehöfer and Philip Huyse (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2006), p. 246.

[20] Neville Morley, *The Roman Empire: Roots of Imperialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), pp. 38–44.

[21] Brian Campbell, 'Diplomacy in the Roman world (500 BC–AD 235)', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 12:1 (2001), pp. 1–22.

relations in antiquity could perhaps be summed up best by the Roman general Vegetius who declared the oft-repeated phrase: 'he who desires peace, let him prepare for war'.[22] Inflicting violence against inferior peoples was essentially the most effective way of ensuring security and status. Conquests and glory on the battlefield therefore drove imperial expansion and provided legitimacy to the emperor.[23] The Roman ecumene emphasized the centrality of Roman power and how stability was the result of a hierarchical political structure centred around the superior status of Roman civilization. Peace was not the absence of war but a product of war in which a Pax Romana was achieved through victory.[24] The idea of peace through Roman superiority was both legalistic and teleological.[25] It grew as a concept from the period after the Roman civil wars in which the rise of Augustus Caesar as the sole political ruler deployed the idea of a Pax Augusta to legitimize his regime after the civil wars of the first century BC. Decades of civil war had shown that the fractious nature of the republic required a stable head in order to bring peace and security.[26] The legitimacy of imperial Roman rule was then founded on claims to a universal peace in which political order was represented by the actual city of Rome and political power was embodied in the person of the emperor. The abilities of the emperor to rule, serve in military campaigns, create new provinces, and receive envoys were all intimately tied to creating a personal identification of Roman political order to his person.[27] The emperor therefore fulfilled a role of bringing stability across the empire and this encouraged the Romans to believe that Pax Romana, or peace, was essentially a gift offered by Rome.[28] Through defeating adversaries it became understood as a state of tranquillity to those parts of the world pacified by the empire.[29]

The Roman view of offering peace to the conquered as a gift would appear alien to contemporary conceptions of peace and diplomacy. For a modern

[22] Publius Renatus Vegetius, *Oxford Classical Texts: Vegetius: Epitoma Rei Militaris*, trans. Michael D. Reeve (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[23] Rose Mary Sheldon, *Rome's Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (London: Vallentine Mitchel & Co. Ltd, 2010), pp. 233–236.

[24] Hannah Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace: Republic to Principate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 195–199.

[25] Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'The problem with peace', *Millennium*, 17:3 (1988), pp. 441–449.

[26] Christopher Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire: Soldiers, Administration and Public Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 88–121.

[27] Stephane Benoist, 'The emperor beyond the frontiers: a double mirror as a political discourse' in *Rome and the Worlds Beyond Its Frontiers*, ed. Daniëlle Slootjes and Michael Peachin (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 45–64.

[28] Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 31.

[29] Roger B. Manning, *War and Peace in the Western Political Imagination from Classical Antiquity to the Age of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 32; also see Greg Woolf, 'Roman peace' in *War and Society in the Roman World*, ed. John Rich and Greg Shipley (London: Routledge, 1983), pp. 171–194.

audience, diplomacy is often taken to be a distinct practice which is the very opposite of war. It is broadly understood to be an 'art' of negotiating differences in an amicable manner in order to reach a peaceful settlement.[30] The world of classical antiquity, however, saw diplomacy as a process which often took place after a conflict and was not necessarily a negotiation but was something to be dictated by the stronger side to the weaker.[31] Barbarians were in fact even expected to initiate diplomacy due to their lower status.[32] The idea of peace itself was understood by the classical Romans of the Principate period as a condition that was 'created through military action' and a Roman victory would therefore merely reflect the divine favour of the gods.[33] To surrender to Rome meant an actor had no status as a legal entity and was incorporated as a subject of the Roman empire.[34] Peace was not something to be negotiated by two sovereign actors in equal recognition. Diplomacy was crucially also not viewed as an alternative to war. Peace itself was therefore a benefit of Roman civilization and was something to be granted by the stronger Roman side to those barbarians who were defeated. As Tacitus famously described, the Romans 'make a desert, [and] they call it peace'.[35] Within such a bellicose environment, foreign relations were understood solely through the practice of dominating others. The ritual humiliation of a barbarian king before the emperor and the public of Rome was therefore a standard practice for Roman peace ceremonies after the successful conclusion of a war. Roman emperors even showed an extreme interest in ensuring that they could capture a barbarian king, often pursuing such a strategy despite frequently exacerbating tensions with barbarians rather than extinguishing the very threat of a barbarian invasion.[36] There was also a sense that diplomatic agreements with barbarians could only ever be temporary and suitable as long as Rome agreed to them. When Romans broke treaty terms with barbarians, held barbarian ambassadors in contempt, or used guerrilla tactics that mirrored the techniques of barbarians which they

[30] Although the ideal may not always entirely match up with reality. See Tarak Barkawi, 'Diplomacy, war and world politics' in *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics*, ed. Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 55–79.

[31] Arthur Eckstein, 'The character of pre-modern interstate diplomacy', *International History Review*, 32:2 (2010), p. 321.

[32] Harry Sidebottom, 'International relations' in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, ed. Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees, and Michael Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 4–12.

[33] Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, pp. 283–284.

[34] Peter J. Heather, 'Foedera and Foederati of the fourth century' in *From Roman Provinces to Mediaeval Kingdoms*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 297.

[35] Tacitus, *Agricola*, 30.4.

[36] Noel Lenski, *Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century a.d.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 145–146.

frequently decried, it was considered a legitimate response to the 'intractable menace' of barbarian peoples.[37] Rather than seeking to negotiate in order to avoid war, the Romans had considered any diplomatic approaches as evidence of submission to Rome. The limitations of this ideology for peaceful diplomatic relations in a modern sense are obvious and the potential for any lasting settlement or meaningful negotiation with other actors was strictly limited for the Romans of the Principate era. The following section will therefore address the Roman's initial interactions with the Parthians. Before the rise of the Sasanian dynasty, it was the Parthians who presented the biggest challenge to Rome's eastern expansion.

Coming into Contact with Parthia

The Romans of the classical age saw little reason to negotiate with other powers as an equal. The stability of the Roman empire and the power of the empire demanded constant expansion as the legitimacy and rule of the Roman emperors was built upon a powerful 'myth of eternal victory'.[38] The ever-increasing expansion over the known world and the incorporation of foreign peoples was seen as the natural order of the Roman world. In expanding eastwards, the Romans came across the Parthians who ruled Iran before the rise of the Sasanian dynasty. The Parthian relationship with the Romans was limited in comparison to the Sasanians in late antiquity, but it was the Parthians who would first challenge Rome's ever-expanding frontier.

The interaction capacity of the Romans in classical antiquity and Parthian Persia was of only a limited means.[39] Rome and Persia's initial contact around 90 BC was followed by a period of thirty to forty years of relative distance and isolation between the two powers.[40] But war between the two powers, which erupted in 54 BC, can be understood as transforming Rome's Mediterranean inter-polity system into a new form of 'Med-Eastern' system.[41] This new Med-Eastern system between Rome and Persia brought the two powers into closer contact with cultural exchange, diplomatic relations, and frequent conflict.

[37] Lenski, *Failure of Empire*, p. 141.

[38] Heather, 'Foedera and Foederati of the fourth century', p. 305.

[39] Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 92.

[40] Arthur Keaveney, 'Roman treaties with Parthia circa 95–circa 64 BC', *The American Journal of Philology*, 102:2 (1981), p. 199; Nikolaus L. Overtoom, 'The rivalry of Rome and Parthia in the sources from the Augustan age to late antiquity', *Anabasis, Studia Classica et Orientalia*, 7 (2016), p. 155.

[41] Overtoom, 'The rivalry of Rome and Parthia in the sources from the Augustan age to late antiquity', p. 140.

Inter-polity order was defined by Hedley Bull and Adam Watson as existing if units within a common inter-polity system view the behaviour of each other as a 'necessary factor in the calculations of others'.[42] After 54 BC, it would have been impossible for Rome and Persia to have not included the other side in their own strategic calculations. Rome's ecumene of universal rule, however, prevented any form of acceptance in recognizing Parthia as a sovereign equal power. The Romans never gave up an expectation that Parthia could itself be incorporated into the empire.

The first significant armed clash between Rome and the Parthian dynasty occurred during the failed campaign of the Roman general Crassus in 54–53 BC. The campaign of Crassus arose over tensions in the kingdom of Armenia with the two powers in dispute over who could sit on the Armenian throne and whether the kingship was a title granted by the Roman emperor. Crassus' invasion and the loss of his seven legions has long been seen by ancient sources as a disaster and humiliating defeat.[43] The failed invasion was also strategically important because it revealed the limitations of Rome's seemingly inexhaustible ability to continue expanding.[44] The initial contact between the two empires created a long, turbulent period of conflict in which the Romans sought to conquer Persia. Julius Caesar had even been planning an invasion of Parthia when he was assassinated and had aimed to extend Roman rule as far as the Oxus River in central Asia.[45] Through frequent conflict, Rome tested the Parthian empire but was never really able to turn any of its successes into lasting gain.[46] Between AD 113 and 217 there were a succession of four major wars, three of which arose from naked Roman aggression and the invasion of the Persian empire. The capital of Ctesiphon was attacked by the Romans and even sacked four times in the second and third century AD,[47] but expansion was limited only to the creation of a new Roman province in northern Mesopotamia (198 AD),[48] and overall, the Romans failed to make any significant lasting major gains.[49]

[42] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 1.

[43] Keaveny, 'Roman treaties with Parthia circa 95–circa 64 BC', p. 212.

[44] Nikolaus L. Overtoom, 'Reassessing the role of Parthia and Rome in the origins of the First Romano-Parthian War (56/5–50 BCE)', *Journal of Ancient History*, 9:2 (2021), pp. 238–268.

[45] Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Silk Routes: The Ancient World Economy and the Empires of Parthia, Central Asia and Han China* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2016), p. 163; Everett L. Wheeler, 'The army and the limes in the East' in *A Companion to the Roman Army*, ed. Paul Erdkamp (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 260.

[46] John S. Harrel, *The Nisibis War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2020), p. 11.

[47] Harrel, *The Nisibis War*, p. 29.

[48] Brian Campbell, 'War and diplomacy: Rome and Parthia 31 BC–AD 235' in *War and Society in the Roman World*, p. 236.

[49] Sheldon, *Rome's Wars in Parthia*, p. 4.

Prior to late antiquity, diplomacy between the Romans and Persians was frequently ad hoc and lacked a coherent strategic sense of forward-thinking to reach a stable agreement. The early forms of diplomacy between the Romans and their rivals in the east were merely a continuation of attempts to prove Roman superiority. For the Romans of classical antiquity, 'there was no need, or even thought, of compromise'.[50] The early Parthian response to Roman expansion had been to try and establish the Euphrates River as a boundary between the two empires. It is possible that they had even sought to contain Roman expansion at the Euphrates as early as the first century BC.[51] In the initial period of contact and conflict between the two empires of Rome and Parthia, the Romans had remained true to their universalist ideology. The Romans continued to see Parthia as a potential target of conquest, as demonstrated by the poet Lucan who had expressed sentiments in his work the *Bellum Civile* that Crassus was left 'unavenged' and that Parthia was merely 'awaiting a Roman triumph'.[52] There was no sense of meeting a geopolitical equal, only the continuing ideology of *imperium sine fine* in which a barbarian people would inevitably become supplicants of Rome. One example of the limitations of early diplomacy during this period can be found with a dispute between the two sides over the spoils of war when the Parthians had captured several Roman imperial standards. The Parthians had captured the imperial standards after the failed invasion by Crassus and this slight to Roman honour was a long-standing source of tension between the two sides. Once the standards were returned through the diplomacy of the emperor Augustus, they became a symbol not of equal diplomatic recognition but of Persia's submission. This again, played into the Roman propaganda of universal rule in which the emperor Augustus portrayed the returned standards as showing the Parthians 'as supplicants'.[53] Within such a context, early relations with the Parthians were unlikely to have established any meaningful form of equal sovereign recognition.

Pre-modern systems and expanding empires inescapably have 'peripheral points of contact with other systems'.[54] In this case, the Roman world came up against an Iranian empire which they inevitably had to recognize as a power

[50] Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe ad 350–425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 175.

[51] Peter Edwell, 'The Euphrates as a boundary between Rome and Parthia in the late republic and early empire', *Antichthon*, 47 (2013), pp. 191–206.

[52] Randall J. Pogorzelski, 'Orbis Romanus: Lucan and the limits of the Roman world', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 141:1 (2011), p. 145.

[53] Cornwell, *Pax and the Politics of Peace*, p. 129; Pogorzelski, 'Orbis Romanus', p. 147.

[54] Joseph Mackay, 'The nomadic other: ontological security and the inner Asian steppe in historical East Asian international politics', *Review of International Studies*, 42:3 (2016), p. 491.

outside of the Roman ecumene. As Rome expanded east and came up against Parthia, both sides had to consider the implications of meeting a rival imperial claim to universal greatness. Through continual conflict, the Roman ideology of Pax Romana was challenged and its power as a claim to universal rule likely made diminishing sense against the defiance of both the Parthians and the later Sasanian dynasty. This *longue durée* process of conflict between the Romans and Iranians would in time provoke a Sasanian counterclaim to world order known as the *Iranshahr*.

Victory and the Sasanian *Iranshahr*

The rise of the Sasanian dynasty and their restructuring of Iranian imperial power created a new dynamic in the balance of power between the two empires of Rome and Persia. The Sasanians are regarded as a more centralized and effective polity than the Parthians and the Sasanian ecumene of divine rule by the 'king of kings' presented both an ideological and physical barrier to Roman expansion. The Sasanian heartland was based at Fars, the fertile region of the southwestern Iranian plateau, and it was Ardashir I who arose from the province of Persis to establish a new dynasty in 224 AD.[55] As this section argues, the Sasanians' own form of world order was a response to the very threat of Roman expansionism.

The rise of the Sasanians can be traced to the collapse of the Parthian dynasty whose wars against an expansive Rome proved costly for both sides. The new dynasty of the Sasanians portrayed themselves as the rightful heirs to the ancient kings of Iran and the counter to the over-Hellenized Parthians who had been corrupted by Rome's Hellenistic culture.[56] The new Persian shah claimed a divine right to rule, and after Ardashir I consolidated his power over the territories of Persia, he soon turned to face the frontier with Rome. The early years of Sasanian rule were highly aggressive towards the Romans, with Ardashir invading Roman territory for the first time between 230 and 240 AD. His invasion captured the major Roman cities of Carrhae, Nisibis, and Hatra and compelled the Romans to launch a series of counterattacks during the reign of Ardashir's son Shapur I (240–272), in which the Romans suffered three

[55] Zeev Rubin, 'The Sasanid monarchy' in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 14, *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600*, ed. Averil Cameron et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 638.

[56] Nina Garsoian, 'Byzantium and the Sasanians' in *The Cambridge History of Iran* 3, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 568. As a counter to the Arsacid dynasty, see Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 5.

major defeats including the deaths of two emperors, while a third, Valerian, was captured by the Persians in 260 near Edessa, whose fate, while unknown, presented an unprecedented loss of honour and a shock to the Roman ideology of Pax Romana.[57] The invasions of the Sasanians equally had further destabilizing effects across the wider region of Roman-held Syria and Egypt as control over the frontier broke down. This saw a period of instability emerge along the Roman frontier as the short-lived breakaway empire of Palmyra, led by Queen Zenobia, rose up in revolt in 270 AD. This brief rebellion was quickly quelled by the Romans but demonstrated that the Sasanian invasions had indeed shaken Rome's control of the Near East as peripheral cities sought to break away from Roman rule.[58]

The success of the Sasanians was also a direct challenge to the Roman empire, with the aristocratic cavalry of the Sasanian army proving more than a match for Roman legionaries. This success on the battlefield also worked to reshape the ideology of kingship within the Sasanian empire. The Persian *Shahanshah* or king had long claimed to be at the head of a divinely inspired hierarchical order and the rule of the shah was based on the support of aristocratic great families from across the Iranian plateau. The legitimacy and authority of the shah rested on ensuring continuous victories on the battlefield with the tributes and plunder this entailed, coupled with providing the aristocratic great families relative autonomy within each of their own respective territories. To further ensure the power of the monarchy, Sasanian shahs would often place princes of the royal family as 'kings' of regions that were of strategic significance. From the previous Parthian dynasty of the Arsacids, the Sasanian monarchy also adopted the title of 'king of kings'. However, this title was for the Arsacids a 'tacit acknowledgement' of the weakness of their rule. While Arsacid kings legitimized claims to supremacy through the title 'king of kings', this also reflected how the regime was dependent on the support of the great families of the Iranian plateau. The Sasanian monarchy was in the same manner dependent on the allegiance of the aristocracy, but Sasanian kings felt secure enough to make further claims of supremacy.[59] The

[57] Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Macmillan, 2005), p. 60; Hugh Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 5; Craig H. Caldwell, 'The Roman emperor as Persian prisoner of war: remembering Shapur's capture of Valerian' in *Brill's Companion to Military Defeat in Ancient Mediterranean Society*, ed. Jessica H. Clark and Brian Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 335–358.

[58] Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and Its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt against Rome* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

[59] Scott McDonough, 'The legs of the throne: kings, elites and subjects in Sasanian Iran' in *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 296–300.

Sasanian shahs interpreted their role as existing at the centre of world order. Coinage from the era of Khusro I depicts the shah with four stars and four crescents, suggesting that the king of kings was 'the king of the four corners of the world' with *Iranshahr* at the centre.[60] After such success against the Romans, however, the Sasanian shahs also legitimized their power not just as 'kings of the Aryan [Iran] kings' but as the 'kings of kings', to include kings of 'the non-Aryans'.[61] This new claim to universal rule had evolved as an 'ideological riposte' in direct response to the Romans' own ideology of *imperium sine fine*.[62] Certainly, the Sasanians had multiple reasons to see themselves as equal to, or greater than, Roman power and the Romans suffered repeated instances of a loss of face against the Sasanian shahs. The rise of the Sasanian dynasty was coupled with Rome's own crisis of leadership in the third century, a period in which the empire nearly collapsed due to conflicting claims to imperial rule.[63] The internal strife to rule the Roman empire was almost certainly exacerbated by the battlefield losses of three emperors while campaigning in Mesopotamia against the Persians. Shapur's victory relief at *Naqsh-e Rostam* shows the captured Valerian, and the emperor Philip the Arab who negotiated peace as supplicants, while Gordian III is portrayed as dead at the feet of the Persian king. All three emperors are portrayed as being humbled by the might of the *Shahanshah* and the rock relief itself was likely inspired by the submission of barbarians that are portrayed as a common motif in Roman artworks.[64]

The *res gestae* rock relief inscription of Shapur I at *Naqsh-e Rostam* was typical of the triumphal monuments of antiquity which were built as structures that could be used for political purposes in displaying art to convey an ideological message. Historical evidence shows that forms of triumphal art were used by both sides. Not only did the triumphal art of late antiquity show forms of cultural exchange but they also demonstrate how each side used political messaging. The triumphal art of the Sasanians even explicitly referenced the artwork of their rivals by showing a mirror image to

[60] Touraj Daryaee and Khodadad Rezakhani, *From Oxus to Euphrates: The World of Late Antique Iran* (Irvine, CA: UCI Jordan Center for Persian Studies, 2016), p. 55.

[61] Evangelos Chrysos, 'Some aspects of Roman-Persian legal relations', *Kleronomia*, 8 (1976), p. 7; Herve Inglebert, 'Late antique conceptions of late antiquity' in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 12; Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 56–57.

[62] M. Rahim Shayegan, 'Sasanian political ideology' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel T. Potts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 806.

[63] Lukas de Blois, 'Rome and Persia in the middle of the third century in Rome and the worlds beyond its frontiers' in *Impact of Empire* 21, ed. Daniëlle Slootjes and Michael Peachin (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 33–44.

[64] Marjorie C. Mackintosh, 'Roman influences on the victory reliefs of Shapur I of Persia', *California Studies in Classical Antiquity*, 6 (1973), pp. 181–203.

Roman triumphal arches.[65] Shapur's *res gestae* is significant for its portrayal of a victory procession that was self-consciously referential to the Roman portrayals of such events. Shapur's victory relief depicts a clear adaptation of the visual ideology used by Rome with the subjugated emperor kneeling submissively with hands outstretched towards the shah on his horse.[66] The use of such political imagery was also a further humiliation for the Romans as the use of such expressions of power was a way to speak directly to audiences familiar with the Roman imagery of triumphal processions, power, and victory.[67] Today, modern international relations scholars often take forms of visual communications as somehow new, but the art of late antiquity shows a richly developed form of politicized imagery which conferred shared meanings.[68] The *res gestae* of Shapur was more than just a boastful proclamation of victory over the Romans; it also demonstrates the Sasanian political ideology and how they understood their interactions with other polities.[69] Shapur's *res gestae* therefore presents the clearest indication of the Sasanian views of world order.

The Persian shah based his rule on claiming divine status from the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda and the king had both a political and mythological role.[70] The ideological claims of the Persian monarchy must therefore be read in the context of the Zoroastrian religion. This also tells us how the Persians understood relations with their Roman rivals. Shapur's *res gestae* states the following:

> And Philip Caesar came to me for supplication, and for their souls gave 500,000 dinars in blood money to me, and he was established as a tributary. And because of this I gave Mishik the name Peroz-Shapur (Victorious-is-Shapur). And Caesar lied again, [and] did harm to Armenia. And I moved against the land of the Romans, and an army of Romans 60,000 strong was killed at Bebalis.[71]

[65] Josef Wiesehöfer, 'From Achaemenid imperial order to Sasanian diplomacy' in *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), p. 131.

[66] Schneider, 'Orientalism in late antiquity', p. 243.

[67] Carly Maris, 'Parading Persia: West Asian geopolitics and the Roman triumph', PhD diss. (University of California Riverside, 2019), p. 162.

[68] Michael C. Williams, 'International relations in the age of the image', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:4 (2018), pp. 880–891; August Danielson and Elsa Hedling, 'Visual diplomacy in virtual summitry: status signalling during the coronavirus crisis', *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 243–261.

[69] Daryaee and Rezakhani, *From Oxus to Euphrates*, pp. 27–28.

[70] Richard N. Frye, 'The Sasanians' in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 12: *The Crisis of Empire ad193–337*, 2nd ed., ed. Alan Bowman, Averil Cameron, and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 464; Josef Wiesehöfer, *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 114; Jamsheed K. Choksy, 'Sacral kingship in Sasanian Iran', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 2 (1988), pp. 35–52.

[71] Shapur I, *Res Gestae (Inscription at Naqsh-e Rustam)*. ToposText [online], available at: https://topostext.org/work/561.

The assertion that the Roman emperor was a tributary who had lied to the Persians was more than just a self-serving claim to legitimize Persian aggression. In the Zoroastrian faith the world is viewed through a binary opposition between light and dark, truth and falsehoods. The *res gestae* of Shapur is therefore portraying Persia as the source of truth and order while the Romans are the source of lies and disorder.[72] The historian Ammianus Marcellinus equally details how Shapur sought to conquer the land of Armenia, but crucially saw the loss of this territory as a result of Roman deceit.[73] Again, reinforcing the Sasanian ecumene of the Persian shah represented order against the disordered world of the Romans.

The *res gestae* of Shapur illustrates how the ecumene of the Persian empire was a reaction to the universalist claims of the Romans. The Sasanian claims to their own form of universal rule were constituted through contact and conflict with the expansionist Roman empire. The following section therefore examines how these competing universalist claims to rule came into contact and how each side came to recognize an imperial rival to universal rule.

Competing Universalisms

As this chapter has so far shown, the Romans believed that their empire was essentially 'coterminous with the world and thus had no frontiers'.[74] The ecumene of Roman superiority, however, was slow to recognize that Persia demonstrated a potential equal claim to greatness. The longevity of imperial rhetoric continued to fuel Roman aggression in the east 'even when the reality' of their imperial power 'was but a shadow of its former self'.[75] The following therefore details how the Romans interpreted the rise of the Sasanian dynasty and how they continued to view Persia as a potential supplicant in the Roman ecumene.

The rise of the Sasanian dynasty was not immediately recognized by the Romans as constituting any significant change in the balance of power between the two rivals. The Romans interpreted the rise of the Sasanians as a continuation of the many conflicts between east and west which could be traced back to the Ancient Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta. For the Romans,

[72] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, p. 7; Lee E. Patterson, 'Minority religions in the Sasanian empire' in *Sasanian Persia between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia*, ed. Eberhard W. Sauer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 184.

[73] Ammianus Marcellinus, 17.5.5–6.

[74] Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire*, p. 45.

[75] David Frendo, 'Dangerous ideas: Julian's Persian campaign, its historical background, motivation, and objectives', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 21 (2007), p. 91.

the Sasanians were viewed as heirs to the Achaemenid empire of Cyrus the Great who had founded the first great Persian empire.[76] The Roman historian Cassius Dio described the rise of the Sasanians in the following terms:

> the situation in Mesopotamia became still more alarming and inspired a more genuine fear in all, not merely the people in Rome, but the rest of mankind as well. For Artaxerxes [Ardashir I], a Persian, after conquering the Parthians in three battles and killing their king, Artabanus, made a campaign against Hatra, in the endeavour to capture it as a base for attacking the Romans.[77]

While recognizing that something had changed within Persia, Cassius Dio further explained how the new Sasanian king was seeking to restore the lands of the Achaemenid empire, and he described him as becoming a threat to Rome. Cassius states:

> [he] had become a source of fear to us; for he was encamped with a large army so as to threaten not only Mesopotamia but also Syria, and he boasted that he would win back everything that the ancient Persians had once held, as far as the Grecian Sea, claiming that all this was his rightful inheritance from his forefathers.[78]

Historians debate whether the Sasanians ever truly sought to restore the Achaemenid empire, but there is good reason to believe that this was true, or at least partially true.[79] Not only was this believed by Romans at the time but the victory reliefs of Shapur were built at the ancient burial sites of the Achaemenid kings and they sought to project a vision of continuing Persian greatness. The Sasanian dynasty, as usurpers of the Parthians, were also keen to assert their continuation of Iranian traditions and that only they were the

[76] Contemporaries even made comparisons between the Sasanian king Shapur II and the Achaemenid leader Xerxes who was notable for his invasion of Ancient Greece in 480 BC. See M. Rahim Shayegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 337 and 364.

[77] Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXX, 3–4.

[78] Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXX, 3–4; also see Touraj Daryaee, 'The construction of the past in late antique Persia', *Historia*, 55:4 (2006), pp. 493–503.

[79] It is likely that the Sasanians had incomplete information on the previous dynasty, as well as incomplete geographical information, but as with modern nationalist movements, imperfect knowledge of the past can still be used as a powerful tool of propaganda. See David Frendo, 'Sasanian irredentism and the foundation of Constantinople: historical truth and historical reality', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 6 (1992), pp. 59–66. For the debate on the extent of Sasanian knowledge, see Ehsan Yarshater, 'Were the Sasanians heirs to the Achaemenids?' in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale sul Tema: La Persia nel Medioevo* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1971), pp. 517–531; John F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 20; Michael J. Decker, *The Sasanian Empire at War: Persia, Rome, and the Rise of Islam, 224–651* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2022), p. 5.

true heirs to an ancient line of Persian kings.[80] The Romans certainly interpreted the rise of the Sasanians as a continuation of a long rivalry between east and west. Crucially, however, Cassius Dio did not view the Sasanians as proving to be an equal imperial power. He argued that 'the danger lies not in the fact that he [the shah] seems to be of any particular consequence in himself, but rather in the fact that our armies are in such a state'. The problem then was fully internal to Rome's own failings. Cassius stated that 'some of the troops are actually joining him and others are refusing to defend themselves' because 'they indulge in such wantonness, licence, and lack of discipline'.[81] Despite the rise of a new powerful dynasty, the Romans continued to see their universal rule as unchallenged and preferred to view the limits of empire as purely an internal problem of army discipline, rather than facing a powerful external rival. Shapur took advantage of internal turmoil within the Roman empire by undertaking expeditions against Armenia and sacked the cities of Antioch and Dura-Europos and, as previously discussed, had humiliated Roman emperors on the battlefield. The losses Rome suffered had therefore been a shock to the imperial psyche but recognizing this change only came slowly.

Successive Persian kings would seek to challenge Roman rule across the Near East, and it was the Persian king Narseh (293–302) who similarly continued this period of Sasanian aggression by threatening Rome's territorial hold on the region.[82] This eventually spurred a Roman attempt to counter the repeated acts of Persian aggression which ended with the defeat of Narseh and even the capture of the shah's harem and royal family in 298 AD. The wars of Shapur had been devastating for the Romans, but the vast resources of the empire had allowed for the Romans to eventually regroup and respond in kind. In defeating Narseh, the eastern Roman emperor Galerius expressed the legend of *Victoria Persica* and imposed upon Persia the treaty of 299, which gave Rome territory within Mesopotamia up to the Tigris and influence over the kingdom of Iberia, and restricted trade to the Roman-held city of Nisibis.[83] The treaty of 299 was a remarkable turnaround from the early losses suffered against Shapur I and was the last settlement that the Romans were able to dictate to the Persians by force. In doing so, the Romans had laid a seed for the future resentment of the Sasanians who could not accept such terms. Shapur II in 358 would express in a letter to the Roman emperor that 'I am bound to recover Armenia and Mesopotamia which were stolen from

[80] Matthew P. Canepa, 'Technologies of memory in early Sasanian Iran: Acahemenid sites and Sasanian identity', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 114 (2010), pp. 563–596.
[81] Cassius Dio, LXXX.21.4.
[82] Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, p. 86.

my grandfather [Narseh] by deliberate double-dealing'.[84] Not only does this letter repeat the common theme of Rome as deceitful and a source of disorder but also the Sasanians could not accept such terms, which saw the loss of traditional parts of their sphere of influence. Their claims to be rightful heirs over Achaemenid territories included lands now under Roman rule across Asia Minor up to the Sea of Marmara. The treaty of 299 was therefore a continuous source of contention between the two sides 'rather than a real peace' of a lasting settlement.[85]

Although no clear victor emerged from the early rivalry of the Sasanians and the Romans, it was unlikely that the two sides would have been able to establish any serious peaceful relations, or lasting settlement of the disputed buffer zone, as long as both sides had expansionary aims and a self-belief in universal rule. The Roman ecumene could not accept any form of equal sovereign power, while the Sasanians sought to restore the territorial claims of the Achaemenid empire. For the Romans, the land of Persia was an 'obsession' in which a series of emperors desired to add the title of 'Parthicus' or 'Persicus Maximus' to signal that they had 'mastered the barbarians in the East' and to emulate the success of Alexander the Great who had conquered the Achaemenid Persian empire.[86] The result of this unceasing discord between the two empires was an unstable and conflict-prone frontier that would spur on the ambitious campaign of the emperor Julian in 363. As the following explains, it was Julian who sought to finally outright conquer Persia and his humiliating failure that led to a more stable settlement which would essentially last for over two centuries.

The Failure of Julian's Campaign 363 AD

Roman attempts to expand and remove the Persian threat reached their culmination against the Sasanians in the fourth century. The Roman emperor Julian, known often today as Julian the Apostate, had sought to reverse the empire's turn to Christianity and return to old principles of outright conquest by extending Roman rule further east. Primarily known by Christians as a disaster whose downfall showed the error of pagan ways, he launched a disastrous campaign in 363 AD to invade the Persian empire which cost him his life and

[84] Blockley, 'The Romano-Persian peace treaties of AD 299 and 363', p. 29.
[85] Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, p. 130.
[86] Herodian, *History of the Empire*, 4.10.1; also see Fergus Millar, 'Empire, community and culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Arabs', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 38:2 (1987), pp. 143–164; Glenn Barnett, *Emulating Alexander: How Alexander the Great's Legacy Fuelled Rome's Wars with Persia* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017).

left a Roman army trapped by the Tigris River deep in Persian territory.[87] Inspired by the heroics of Alexander the Great, Julian had sought to defeat the Persians once and for all and add the title 'Parthicus' to his name.[88] His ambitious campaign was defeated, but the significance for this study is not the details of his campaign but the effect his loss had on the Romans' worldview.

The emperor Julian had risen to power through his success on campaigns in the west of the empire against Germanic tribes. This experience of early success against barbarians is likely to have encouraged his confidence in facing Persia and in turning to the East, Julian conducted a propaganda campaign representing himself as the avenger of the soldiers killed with Crassus at Carrhae in 53 BC.[89] Julian's propaganda invoked a return to 'old-style Roman aggression' with ambitions for a glorious war that would overpower the Persians.[90] He aimed for a direct assault on the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon and headed with a main advance force down the Euphrates with 65,000 men, while a smaller force of 30,000 opened up a second front moving towards the Tigris River. Julian's strategy aimed for an all-out assault on Ctesiphon but, finding the walls too strong, his men became trapped by Persian forces. His subsequent death in battle was rumoured to have been caused by a spear thrown by a Roman, while the failure of his campaign left the remnants of his army retreating along the banks of Tigris and being harassed by Sasanian forces.[91] The retreating Romans were then forced to choose a new leader, with one of the emperor's former bodyguards, Jovian, being proclaimed as the new Augustus by the remaining parts of the army. Jovian's first task was to extradite the army trapped by the Tigris and enter into negotiations with Shapur II. The Persian king allowed for diplomacy and agreed to allow the Roman army to leave Persian territory peacefully, but only after extracting a high list of demands.

The peace treaty of 363 entered into by Jovian was one of the most significant treaties of late antiquity. In seeking to extricate the remains of the army, Jovian had no choice but to agree to a series of stipulations which would overturn many of the gains won by the previous treaty of 299. Jovian conceded five provinces and fifteen fortresses to the shah, but crucially also agreed to hand over the key frontier city of Nisibis. The city of Nisibis had long been a target of

[87] Lenski, *Failure of Empire*, pp. 158–160.

[88] Andrea Gariboldi, 'The birth of the Sasanian monarchy in Western sources' in *The Parthian and Early Sasanian Empires*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), p. 47; Shayegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians Political Ideology in post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia*, p. 362.

[89] Blockley, *East Roman Frontier Policy*, pp. 24–25.

[90] David Hunt, 'Julian' in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 13: *The Late Empire*, AD *337–425*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 73.

[91] Hunt, 'Julian', pp. 74–77.

Persian forces and had even survived multiple sieges in 337, 346, and 350 AD. The loss of Nisibis was a significant blow to the Romans, but unusually the Persians also agreed that the city could be handed over without its population and the Roman residents of Nisibis were given three days to leave.[92] Despite the loss of such a key city, Shapur II did not seek all the lands which had been lost in the treaty of 299 and his 'overriding concern' was of a 'stable and defensible settlement rather than territorial aggrandisement for its own sake'.[93] The historian Michael Whitby argues that the fact that Shapur's claims on cities were only limited compared to the earlier aggression of the Persians suggests that Sasanian ambitions 'had now been moderated by considerations of realism'.[94]

The treaty of 363 is widely seen by modern historians as an agreement which finally brought some stability to the frontier between the two empires.[95] Crucially, the treaty confirmed a limit to the Roman universal claims to rule and created a boundary for the Roman ecumene. The historian Agathias described the situation of Jovian as the following:

> In his anxiety, therefore, to terminate his sojourn in a foreign and a hostile land and to return with all speed to his own country he became party to an ignoble treaty, which to this very day is a blot on the Roman state. By it he confined thereafter the extent of his empire within new frontiers.[96]

Agathias, like many other critics at the time, saw the treaty by Jovian as a humiliation for the Romans and it was seen as shameful precisely because it meant the establishment of a new frontier.[97] The writer Libanius also details how this loss against the Persians was a shock to Roman ambitions. He states in the funeral oration of Julian that:

> We expected the whole empire of Persia to form part of that of Rome, to be subject to our laws, receive its governors from us and pay us its tribute: they would, we thought, change their language and dress, and cut short their

[92] John Curran, 'From Jovian to Theodosius', pp. 78–110 in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 13, p. 79.

[93] Blockley, *East Roman Frontier Policy*, p. 27.

[94] Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 203.

[95] Benjamin Isaac, 'The eastern frontier' in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 13, p. 443; Rubin, 'The Sasanid monarchy', p. 641; Zeev Rubin, 'Eastern neighbours: Persia and the Sasanian monarchy' in *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire 500–1492*, ed. Jonathan Shepard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 148.

[96] Agathias 4.25.6–7.

[97] Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire*, p. 48. Also see Eutropius, *Breviarium X.17.1* in Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II ad 363–630—A Narrative Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 5.

> hair, and sophists in Susa would turn Persian children into orators: our temples here, adorned with Persian spoils, would tell future generations of the completeness of the victory.[98]

As Libanius describes, the Romans took it for granted that expansion and assimilation was a standard practice. The earlier Roman ideology of *imperium sine fine* showed no reason to accept a boundary to Roman rule, but multiple defeats against the Sasanians presented irrefutable proof of a practical geopolitical limit to Roman universal claims.[99]

The treaty entered into by Jovian marks an evolutionary step in the Roman conception of world order. The Christian writer Saint Augustine of Hippo demonstrates how the Roman worldview came to accept limits to universal rule and that Julian's failure showed the redundancy of the pagan gods. Augustine details how the Roman god Terminus, the god of boundaries, was not meant to yield. Writing in the fourth century, he observed: 'It was thus signified, they say, that the people of Mars, that is, the Roman people, would never surrender to anyone a place which they held; also that no one would disturb the Roman boundaries, on account of the god Terminus.'[100]

The failure of Julian and the treaty of Jovian were therefore challenges to the very pagan gods of Rome and previous ways of thinking about the Romans' place within the world. Augustine gave an account of Julian's campaign and described him as 'being slain to pay for his rashness'. Augustine then recognizes that 'the boundaries [*termini*] of the Roman empire had been changed' so that the army could escape Persian territory.[101] The empire of Rome had never before had to define its boundaries by the force of an opponent and the failure of the pagan gods and the yielding of the frontiers to the 'rashness of Julian' and the 'necessity of Jovian' showed a significant step in recognizing boundaries in the later Roman empire.[102] This strategic shock challenged the cultural assumptions of the Romans who had viewed the conquest of Persia as a natural expansion of the empire which was predicated on bringing civilization to foreign lands. The failure of Julain's campaign was therefore a symbolic blow to the Romans' sense of world order and superior status of civilization. After the failure of Julian, and unlike earlier Romans of classical antiquity, the East Romans of Byzantium no longer had 'any expectation of significant

[98] *Libanius' Funeral Oration upon the Emperor Julian*, R.617.

[99] This was a growing trend in the fourth century. Zeev Rubin, 'The Mediterranean and the dilemma of the Roman empire in late antiquity', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 1:1 (1986), p. 17.

[100] Augustine, 4.29.

[101] Augustine, 5.21.

[102] Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire*, pp. 1–2.

territorial gains', but rather than withdraw from the east, they established an organized frontier to project power and mark a boundary with the Persian world.[103]

Between Two Worlds

The period of late antiquity saw a 'definite shift' in Roman ideology which saw ideas of *imperium sine fine* continue, but with a notion that frontiers were now 'defensive barriers', ones that 'are placed against outsiders, and that they demarcate a clear space known as the imperium' of Roman rule.[104] The failure of Julian's expedition was interpreted by the theologian Theodoret of Cyrus, in similar terms to Augustine, as a 'folly … clearly manifested by his death'. Crucially, Theodoret's account notes how Julian had 'crossed the river that separates the Roman Empire from the Persian' and in doing so saw the failure of his campaign as the 'will of God'.[105] The fate of Julian's campaign was interpreted by contemporaries as evidence that his attempt to invade Persia had been an unjust war that failed to recognize Persian dominion within their lands.[106] By late antiquity, the Euphrates had essentially become an 'almost cosmological barrier' between the two sides.[107] The East Romans would also look to Genesis 15:18 in the Old Testament to interpret the division of spheres of influence between Rome and Persia. This particular passage in Genesis refers to the Lord making a covenant with Abraham which distinguishes the great river, the Euphrates, as a boundary.[108] The rise of Christianity in late antiquity could therefore make sense of the new geopolitics of a boundary to Roman rule and a rival power which could not be incorporated within the empire or conquered through force.

As the East Roman and Persian relationship developed, the spread of Christianity in late antiquity would act as both a source of confrontation and constitutive of the frontier between the empires. The status of Christianity within Persia often oscillated between acceptance and persecution.[109]

[103] Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 424.
[104] Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire*, p. 42.
[105] Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.2.
[106] Chrysos, 'Some aspects of Roman-Persian legal relations', p. 24.
[107] Pogorzelski, 'Orbis Romanus', p. 161.
[108] Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire*, p. 71.
[109] The activities of Christian missionaries and the persecution of Christians had been a cause of the flashpoint between the two empires in 421 AD when war briefly broke out before a peace treaty was

The Persian shah Shapur II had persecuted Christians under his rule, but the movement of large-scale population transfers as a result of war meant that Persia itself developed a significant Christian minority population over time, and by the seventh century Shah Khusro II was even married to a Christian woman. While there was undoubtedly some persecution of Christians which could invite the wrath of the East Romans, the Christians also became significantly assimilated within Persia and enjoyed the status of having their own Christian church structure outside of the remit of Constantinople. The Church of the East was established at the Synod of Ctesiphon in 410, which created a refuge for the breakaway Christian sect the Nestorians who were declared heretics by the Roman-controlled Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.[110] Notwithstanding the arcane disputes over Christian doctrine, the crucial point here is that the very establishment of an east Christian church reinforced the geopolitical reality that there was a buffer zone between the two sides.[111] The very existence of Christians in Persia reinforced the separation of the two empires as two distinct worlds.[112]

The rise in Christianity also saw the decline of the classical Roman ideology of seeking unceasing conquest. Whereas once the Romans believed order was constituted through Pax Romana and the gift of imperial peace, the later Romans, as a Byzantine polity in the east, had to accept that the Persians proved to be an imperial equal. The era of late antiquity would therefore see a shift away from the triumphal style of artistic expression of the classical Roman period which often showed a particular battlefield victory over the east. Instead, the image of the emperor was now depicted in a transcendent manner in which 'victory' in relation to the Sasanian king of kings was a maintenance of the status quo rather than a classical-style triumph.[113] In the earlier period of antiquity, the Roman 'orbis' had viewed all lands within a temperate zone to be either under Roman rule or destined to be under Roman rule; but the Persians were now also seen as cast out of the Roman civilized world, as a separate world order. The land of Persia was interpreted as 'where Roman

quickly agreed upon. Also see Zeev Rubin, *Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sasanids in the Fifth Century*, Oxford International Series 297 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1986), p. 680.

[110] Patterson, 'Minority religions in the Sasanian empire', p. 144.

[111] Greg Fisher, 'Rome and the Ghassanids: comparative perspectives on conversion, boundaries and power in near Eastern borderlands', in *The Levant: Crossroads of Late Antiquity*, ed. Ellen Bradshaw Aitken and John M. Fossey (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 273–274.

[112] Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire*, p. 160.

[113] Matthew P. Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 107–108.

dominion was considered to be neither possible nor desired, for it ran the danger of [the Romans] succumbing to the degeneration plaguing the east'.[114] The recognition of this frontier and the acceptance of a rival power can be seen within the writings of the later historian Procopius and his account of the era of Justinian in the sixth century. Procopius describes how the Romans sought to deter the Persians from 'never again' making 'an expedition into the Roman territory'.[115] By the era of Justinian there was a conscious awareness of a frontier to Roman imperialism and Procopius also refers to a statue of the emperor Justinian as symbolically keeping the Persians out of Roman lands. Procopius describes the statue as holding a 'globe, by which the sculptor signifies that the whole earth and sea are subject to him', and yet the statue is recorded as also 'stretching forth his right hand toward the rising sun and spreading out his fingers[;] he commands the barbarians in that quarter to remain at home and to advance no further'.[116] While still continuing Roman claims to universal rule, it was clear after the split between eastern and western Roman lands and the continuing wars with Persia that something had changed. In holding out his hand to keep the barbarian Persians at bay, the symbolism of the statue signified how the Romans of late antiquity came to accept that a rival power existed outside of the Roman ecumene. The East Romans of Byzantium faced a geopolitical equal that caused a fundamental shift in thinking of inter-polity order compared to the earlier Romans of the Principate era. The Romans of late antiquity therefore viewed inter-polity order as being divided between two distinct 'worlds'. The emperor Justinian himself would describe a diplomatic mission to Persia as bringing peace 'between the two worlds'.[117] There was a clear sense, then, that Roman power had limits and that the Persians existed outside of the Roman ecumene.

The narrative detailed within this chapter demonstrates that the bipolar relationship between the two empires evolved over time as they learned to recognize that they could not 'function in a vacuum of isolation' and ideologies of permanent expanding conquest came up against an equal rival power. Through their intense rivalry, the two empires would continue to profess universal claims to rule, but in practical terms they had by necessity developed an awareness of one another's interests and purpose as distinct from their own.[118]

[114] Shayegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians*, p. 335.
[115] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.14.27.
[116] Procopius, *Buildings*, 1.2.11–12.
[117] *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.454.
[118] Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 1.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, the very idea of any sort of boundary to the Roman empire was an alien concept prior to the losses suffered against the Sasanians in the third and fourth centuries. Conflict between the two sides worked to reinforce separate imperial spheres of influence as neither empire was able to break the strategic stalemate over the lands of Mesopotamia. Through such conflict the Romans came to accept the Persian empire's existence and recognized a limit to Roman claims to rule. The Sasanian *Iranshahr*, based on the divine right to rule by the Persian 'king of kings', was in many ways a reaction to Rome's own universal ambitions. As this imperial rivalry developed, two competing visions of world order evolved, with the Roman ecumene and the Sasanian *Iranshahr* evolving in a co-constitutive relationship. The following chapter therefore examines how a *modus vivendi* was formed as both empires came to accept the existence of one another. Although this relationship could be an uneasy one, late antiquity would see a more pragmatic shift in the use of diplomacy from a unilateral act of Roman hegemony to a negotiated process between two political equals.

3

The Institutions of Kingship and Diplomacy

Introduction

Late antiquity saw a shift in Roman practices from embracing *imperium sine fine* to facing the reality of coming against an equal imperial rival and sovereign power in the Persian empire. After Emperor Julian's failed attempt to avenge Crassus and conquer Persia, the East Romans negotiated the settlement of 363 AD which saw a period of stability emerge across the eastern frontier. Between 363 and 502 AD a period of relatively peaceful relations evolved between the two empires, which in turn led to a rise in elaborate and highly formalized practices of diplomacy. The institution of diplomacy would grow across the fifth and sixth centuries as 'frequent embassies' became a standard practice in bilateral relations.[1] This trend culminated in the sixth century which saw the most productive and formalized diplomacy, with treaties made between the two sides in the years 532, 545, 551, 557, and 561/2. While diplomacy between the two sides did not eliminate war or the potential for conflict, it formed a process of inter-polity order building as each side recognized a common interest in dealing with the threat of nomadic peoples and in managing their own imperial rivalry. The successive rounds of negotiations and treaty making showed a willingness to develop a stable political arrangement and a recognition that the two empires, as neighbours, could develop formal relations. Over time, an elaborate and complex system of diplomatic practices evolved between the East Romans and Sasanian Persians based on a hierarchy of contested status and prestige. This was a significant development from the classical period of the Roman Principate (27 BC–284 AD) in which peace and diplomacy was understood to be the result of war rather than an alternative to war. It was through a language of kingship that diplomacy evolved 'from an activity that was used only as an adjunct or epilogue to war into one that had the capacity to act as an alternative to it'.[2] Unlike the foreign relations of the earlier Roman Principate era, the diplomatic practices of late antiquity

[1] Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History of the Church* London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853).
[2] Roger C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: Cairns, 1992), p. 1.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press. © Kevin Blachford (2024).
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0004

sought to establish predictable relations between the two great empires and to reinforce the suzerain order of the Two Eyes system. Such diplomatic relations reinforced the plurality of actors within the Two Eyes system and showed a degree of coexistence between polities, despite continuing claims from both empires to universal rule.[3]

The development of formal relations and diplomacy in late antiquity was facilitated by a 'hybrid' inter-polity 'culture of kingship', which was formed through the interactions between the emperor and the *Shahanshah*.[4] Over time, both powers would come to share similar ideas of kingly status, hierarchy, honour, and glory that were expressed through art, diplomatic language, the use of symbols, and ritualized practices at the imperial and royal courts. The concept of kingship was therefore a shared culture based on an understanding of hierarchy, iconography, and political rhetoric. Each sovereign could recognize in the other similar claims made to status and hierarchy and therefore could interact and deal with one another in mutual terms. However, while the language of kingship made diplomacy possible, this does not mean that relations were always peaceful. The language of kingship was also built on a shared understanding of 'greatness' in which even a conflictual relationship reinforced the notion of glory and kingship.[5] Ideas and beliefs of kingship could therefore bring opportunities for diplomacy, such as when the shah and emperor could refer to one another as 'brother'; but kingship could also be highly conflictual, as a king could commit to war in order to prove his own status or legitimacy as a ruler. To recognize that wars over kingly honour or legitimacy could also act to reinforce the language of kingship is to recognize that the contestation of culture works as 'an engine' of 'social development'.[6] The culture of an inter-polity society is never as uniform or singular as once believed by early English School theorists within international relations.[7] Culture is inherently overlapping, contradictory, and conflicted, and collective beliefs should be recognized as also being a product of such contestation.[8] Wars over kingly honour and legitimacy therefore worked to establish and reinforce such understandings of honour and legitimacy within the Two Eyes system.

[3] Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 1.

[4] Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), p. 3.

[5] Ayse Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 228.

[6] Tim Dunne and Christian Reus-Smit, *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 36.

[7] Dunne and Reus-Smit, *The Globalization of International Society*, p. 26.

[8] Colin Chia, 'Social positioning and international order contestation in early modern Southeast Asia', *International Organization*, 76:2 (2022), pp. 305–336; Dunne and Reus-Smit, *The Globalization of International Society*, p. 37.

Through conflict and cooperation, both the practice of diplomacy and the concept of kingship formed the inter-polity 'institutions' of late antiquity which acted as a source of order. Today, the institutions of an inter-polity society are viewed by the English School as crucial to order building. Such institutions in the modern era are considered to be practices of international law, diplomacy, great power management, war, and trade.[9] But as Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan have recognized, different inter-polity systems will create different fundamental institutions.[10] The nature and type of inter-polity institution are shaped by the cultural environment and identity of the political actors within a society.[11] As this chapter shows, shared understandings of kingship as expressed through diplomacy reflected that the two powers of late antiquity could express certain common interests, values, and rules which are key to forming inter-polity order.[12] The first section begins by showing that the two empires could understand and respond to claims of kingly glory and honour because such expressions of status evolved from the patrimonial nature of both polities. The shared nature of imperial governance relying upon client relations meant that each power could recognize in the other similar practices of rule and expressions of legitimacy, particularly through references to the emperor or shah as mediators between heaven and earth. Diplomatic practices between the two empires further worked as an institution of order building by defining the roles, conventions, and underlying norms for governing behaviour.[13] The second section then examines how diplomacy evolved through highly formalized rituals, particularly within the imperial courts that would reinforce the kingly role as an intermediary for the gods. Through frequent embassies, diplomacy was then able to achieve some stability that counterintuitively could not have happened if the emperor and shah had ever negotiated in person. Formal distance allowed kingly power and status to be communicated without imposing upon and undermining the universalist ideology of the other. The stability of the Two Eyes order would eventually be challenged by internal instability within both regimes as questions of legitimacy became increasingly important in late antiquity. The final section

[9] Christian Reus-Smit, 'The constitutional structure of international society and the nature of fundamental institutions', *International Organization*, 51:4 (1997), pp. 555–589; Tonny Brems Knudsen, 'The institutions of international society' in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), available at https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.547.

[10] Barry Buzan and Yongjin Zhang, 'The tributary system as international society in theory and practice', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5:1 (2012), p. 3.

[11] Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[12] On common interests, see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, [1977] 2002), p. 13.

[13] Martin Hall and Christer Jonsson, *Essence of Diplomacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 25.

will therefore explore how the fall of the Byzantine emperor Maurice in 602 AD demonstrates the evolving nature of kingship and the emphasis on the legitimacy of rule which would lead to the Last Great War of Antiquity.

Kingship as a Cosmic Institution

The polities of late antiquity were defined by their hierarchical nature in which the leadership of each regime was founded on universal claims to rule and legitimacy that derived from the emperor or shah acting as a divinely sanctioned ruler. The concept of kingship not only represented who could act as the sovereign power but also shaped beliefs about the required characteristics of the sovereign, the practices of sovereign relations with their subjects, and, crucially, how one sovereign power could interact with and relate to another sovereign. Both the Byzantine emperor and the Persian shah through their interactions and ritualized practices created a collective imaginary of political order which worked to define ideas of legitimacy. Kingship was not a static institution but evolved over time to determine what forms of authority, status, and membership of the Two Eyes system could be considered as legitimate. As the following explains, kingship in late antiquity blurred the lines between the secular and the sacred, but it was the cosmological role of kings which allowed for a shared diplomatic language of kingship to evolve.

Across the era of late antiquity, the Byzantine emperor and the Sasanian shah developed comparable ideas and justifications to authority and enacted similar rituals and court practices to shape an image of hierarchical rule which structured their relations with both subjects and other polities alike. This resemblance between the Christian emperor and the Persian 'king of kings' reflects how each polity faced comparable constraints and challenges as agrarian empires. The two polities were both patrimonial societies which consisted of an imperial court that had limited state apparatus to control a decentralized power structure. The imperial capital then relied upon an aristocratic society of local elites to conduct much of the practical day-to-day running of the empire. Governance of the empire worked through the co-option of local elites as clients able to be integrated into the imperial system. The imperial capital also worked to draw in ambitious individuals, who in moving to the imperial capital could create patronage networks with family connections across the empire as a means for social advancement.[14] The imperial systems of late antiquity therefore consisted of government officials who used their public positions

[14] Paul Stephenson, *New Rome: The Empire in the East* (London: Profile Books, 2021), p. 64.

as conduits for a network of patronage that saw political power as intertwined with social standing and family connections.[15] The royal or imperial court stood at the centre of these client–patron networks and served to socialize elites and structure relations through developing practices that reinforced the hierarchical role of kingship and the connections of a patrimonial society.[16] Public displays and court ceremonies therefore took on highly symbolic practices that were imbued with semiotic messages to convey status, power, and demonstrations of loyalty. For Byzantium, these practices particularly developed after the rise of Constantinople as the capital of the eastern half of the empire. The Roman emperors of the third and fourth centuries had been relatively mobile, travelling the empire to resolve one crisis after another, but with the rise of Constantinople, emperors of the fifth and sixth centuries became much more sedentary, and the capital provided an imperial centre for clients and envoys to pay homage in elaborate court ceremonies. This reinforced notions of hierarchy as gaining access to the emperor to receive gifts or government appointments worked to show imperial favours while simultaneously pressuring officials into publicly demonstrating their loyalty.[17]

Both empires also placed a considerable emphasis on displaying a hierarchical view of kingship which was influenced by eastern traditions of sacral kingship. The Roman emperor and the Sasanian shah each sought to use religion and a mythological view of kingship in order to express their authority and justify their legitimacy. This followed on from the tradition of mythological kingship first expressed by Alexander the Great who portrayed his own right to rule as sanctified by the gods. Alexander the Great's Macedonian empire had stretched across Greece, Anatolia, and Persia in the fourth century BC and both the Romans and the Sasanian polities were in many ways descendants which arose from the collapse of Alexander's great empire. Following the example of Alexander, the shah and the Byzantine emperor each claimed legitimacy from the gods, and both rulers sought to claim divine providence for their position as the head of a hierarchical world order.[18] Their very understanding of political order was therefore simultaneously political as well

[15] For pre-modern polities and their patrimonial elite, see Peter Fibiger Bang and Karen Turner, 'Kingship and elite formation' in *State Power in Ancient China and Rome*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 14–17.

[16] Bang and Turner, 'Kingship and elite formation', p. 14.

[17] Michael Whitby, 'The role of the emperor' in *A.H.M. Jones and the Later Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 75.

[18] Touraj Daryaee, 'Sasanian kingship, empire and glory: aspects of Iranian Imperium' in *Papers in Honour of Professor Z. Zarshenas*, ed. Vida Naddaf, Farzane Goshtasb, and Mohammad Shokri-Foumeshi (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 2013), p. 15; George Ostrogorsky, 'The Byzantine emperor and the hierarchical world order', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 35:84 (December 1956), pp. 1–14.

as cosmological. The blurring of political and cosmic claims to rule can be seen in particular with the shah, who acted as the head of the Zoroastrian faith. In his role as a cosmic ruler, the shah was 'entrusted to organise human collective action on their behalf'.[19] Because of this, only the shah had the prerogative to build infrastructure and new cities, with the establishment of new urban centres helping to further reinforce the shah's legitimacy and power as the mediator between heaven and earth.[20] The inscription of Shapur's *res gestae* reflects this role for the shah by describing how he is able to achieve greatness with his 'own hands'.[21] Through this 'theological role' in the cosmic order, the shah was not specifically a divine figure but acted as the representative of the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda. Early Sasanian ideology would emphasize how it was through the gods that the status and authority of the shah derived. In overthrowing the previous Arsacid regime of the Parthians, the first Sasanian king Ardashir I was seen to have received *Xwarrah*, or glory, from the gods which legitimated his rule. The concept of *Xwarrah* was crucial to the shah's authority and the loss of such glory could even potentially lead to unrest and revolt against the shah.[22] Because the shah received *Xwarrah* from the gods and could claim lineage to a spiritual power, this also impacted who could become the shah. Rival claimants to the throne were therefore frequently mutilated to prevent their ascension to the throne as any candidates for the position of shah had to be free from all physical deformities.[23] The position of the shah was dependent then on maintaining legitimacy and on showing that the shah alone had the glory of the gods, able to act as a conduit between cosmic rule and earthly power.

The portrayal of the shah's authority as intertwined with religious claims would also be expressed within the Byzantine empire as Christianity emerged to become the official religion of the empire. Just as the shah acted as a conduit between heaven and earth, the Roman emperor acted as a representative of the Christian God's will.[24] The hierarchical status of the emperor and his ability

[19] Richard Payne, 'Territorializing Iran in late antiquity' in *Ancient States and Infrastructural Power*, ed. Clifford Ando and Seth Richardson (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 184.

[20] Domiziana Rossi, 'Sasanian kings as decision-makers: reshaping the Eranshahr' in *Narratives of Power in the Ancient World* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022), p. 265.

[21] Shapur I, *Res Gestae* (inscription at Naqsh-e Rustam), ToposText [online], available at: https://topostext.org/work/561.

[22] Touraj Daryaee, 'The end of Eranshahr' in *The End of Empires* (Wiesbaden: Springer Nature, 2022), p. 257.

[23] Jamsheed K. Chosky, 'Sacral kingship in Sasanian Iran', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 2 (1988), p. 37; 'The image of the Sasanian king in the Perso-Arabic historical tradition', *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2022.2037098.

[24] Antonio Panaino, 'Human history, its aims and its end, according to the Zoroastrian doctrine of late antiquity' in *Wherefrom Does History Emerge? Inquiries in Political Cosmogony*, ed. Tilo Schabert and John von Heyking (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), p. 117.

to order political affairs on earth was seen by the East Romans as a product of God's favour. This sentiment is expressed in a series of laws issued in the sixth century that are today known as 'Justinian's Novels'. One of the preambles to this collection of legal decrees states that just 'as God rules the Empire of Heaven, in order that he may afford good solutions to perplexing questions', then the role of the emperor was to mirror this role by providing solutions, drawing up statues, interpreting laws, and providing a working legal system. Justinian clearly saw this authority as legitimized by God when he declared his role was 'to our subjects, whom God has originally entrusted to our care'.[25] Crucially, the power and authority of the emperor was also described within Justinian's Novels which states that 'the interpretation of the law belongs solely to the sovereign'.[26] In their respective roles as sacred rulers, both the Roman emperor and the Sasanian shah therefore came to adopt roles which blurred the nature of politics and religion as they each made similar claims of acting as divine representatives able to order political affairs. Imagery of kingship from both polities could reflect these shared ideas of authority. Such political messaging could be found in the astrological symbols which were used in the artwork and coinage of the time to illustrate how both monarchs came to be seen as divine organizers of the universe. Symbols of stars, the sun and moon, or crowns showed the mutual influence each royal court had on the other.[27] The two rulers therefore not only made similar claims, steeped in shared ideas of authority, but also shared a language of iconography that depicted the role of kingship as one that could mediate between heaven and earth.

The development of an ideology of the sacred ruler who was able to act as a representative of God had a substantial impact on the development of diplomacy and a less militaristic view of the Roman emperor in particular.[28] The cosmological view of Roman kingship that developed in late antiquity was substantially different from the classical period of the Principate era when Rome was continuing to expand. During the Princeps era of classical Rome, Emperor Augustus had been seen as divine only after his death, in contrast to the east, which had a long tradition of sacred monarchy. By the fourth century, Christianity had 'completed the process of sacralising the Roman emperor' and the emperor was seen as God's representative on earth. In the Latin-speaking

[25] The Enactments of Justinian, *The Novels LXXIII*, trans. Samuel P. Scott (1923), The Roman Law Library [online], available at: https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr.

[26] The Enactments of Justinian, *The Novels CXLIII*.

[27] Andrea Gariboldi, 'Astral symbology on Iranian coinage', *East and West*, 54:1 (2004), p. 32; Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, pp. 67 and 81.

[28] Michael Whitby, 'War and the state in late antiquity: some economic and political connections' in *Krieg-Gesellschaft-Institutionen*, ed. Burkhard Meißner, Oliver Schmitt, and Michael Sommer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005), pp. 355–385.

west, the emperor was known by such titles as 'Imperator' and 'Augustus', and after Diocletian (284–305) the official title became 'Dominus'. In the Greek-speaking east, the rise of Christianity and cultural exchange with the Persians led to a decline of the traditional republican ideology of the Romans and a new emphasis on the emperor having a regal status emerged under the title of 'Basileus', Greek for 'monarch' or 'king'. The title of Basileus was an unofficial title in common use which became formalized only by Heraclius' use of the title in the seventh century.[29] However, this shift towards a regal status demonstrates how the emperors of late antiquity were less the heirs to Augustus and more associated with an imperial role as God's representative on earth.[30]

The turn towards a Christian interpretation of the emperor's role also reflects how emperors became less associated with proving their own individual military prowess.[31] After 395 AD, emperors were firmly situated at the imperial court of Constantinople and rarely campaigned in person; instead, military commands were delegated to the *Magistri Militum* or to a local *dux* (duke).[32] For the historian of Justinian's war, Procopius, imperial power was also intertwined with the virtuous characteristics of kingship. Procopius saw good kingship as resting on an ability to 'observe justice', preserve the 'laws on a sure basis', and protect the land 'from the barbarians', and in the emperor himself attaining 'the highest possible degree of wisdom and manliness'.[33] It was the emperor's ability to provide good governance which therefore became a justification in itself for the Roman's hierarchical rule over their empire. Justinian's Novels also reflect this by stating, 'for it is by virtue of these laws that we have received from God the right of empire'.[34] Christianity and good governance were therefore intertwined with conceptions of kingship in late antiquity. Crucially, however, while emperors would certainly petition Persia about the treatment of Christians, the emperor was not zealously proactive in

[29] Antony Black, *A World History of Ancient Political Thought: Its Significance and Consequence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 187; Matthew P. Canepa, 'Emperor' in *Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History*, ed. Catherine M. Chin and Moulie Vidas (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), p. 161; Michael McCormick, 'Emperor and court' in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 14, ed. Averil Cameron et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 142.

[30] Averil Cameron, 'Images of authority: elites and icons in late sixth-century Byzantium', *Past & Present*, 84 (1979), pp. 3–35.

[31] See, for example, the image of Theodosius II as a good Christian ruler. Tim Greenwood, 'Representations of rulership in late antique Armenia' in *The Good Christian Ruler in the First Millennium*, ed. Philip Michael Forness, Alexandra Hasse-Ungeheuer, and Hartmut Leppin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), p. 203.

[32] Whitby, 'The role of the emperor', p. 78.

[33] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.1.27.

[34] The Enactments of Justinian, *The Novels CXIII*.

converting foreign peoples.[35] According to Anthony Kaldellis, the emperor was 'first and foremost' king of the Romans, not of the Christians.[36] But because the personal prestige of a Christian emperor was no longer attached to his military success, he could then be portrayed as a peacemaker and gained prestige and status through his ability to ensure peace and order.[37] This 'radical ideological' break from classical antiquity meant that diplomacy was given a new form of legitimacy in the era of late antiquity.[38]

The transformation from an Augustinian view of the emperor to a Christian interpretation of kingship helped to facilitate the growth of diplomacy in late antiquity. Similarly, changes within the ideology of Sasanian kingship also shaped the rise of diplomacy between the two sides. Touraj Daryaee identifies the Persian shah Yazdegerd I (399–420) as marking a more cosmopolitan vision of Sasanian kingship, one which saw the shah as leader not just of the Zoroastrian faith but as a leader tolerant of many faiths.[39] The establishment of the Nestorian or Eastern Christian Church within Persia in 410 AD and its recognition within the Sasanian realm allowed the shah to portray himself as a truly cosmopolitan ruler. Yazdegerd I would even adopt the title *Ramsahr*, meaning he who 'maintains peace in his dominion', and by the time of Khusro I (531–579), the Christians were integrated within the elite of Sasanian politics with the leader of the Christians known by the title *Eran Catholicos*.[40] While some persecution of Christians sporadically occurred, by the seventh century Christians were a significant minority within the Sasanian elite and frequently used as ambassadors by the shah. The rise of this Sasanian view of cosmopolitanism, one which could accept Christians as loyal subjects, was the result of the eschatological narratives portrayed in Zoroastrianism. According to the Zoroastrian mythology, the origins of the world could be traced to a conflict between good and evil. In the beginning, humanity was originally united under a mythical realm of Iran, but when that unity was broken, the world had

[35] *Eusebius: Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall, Clarendon Ancient History Series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), IV.9–13, pp. 156–158.

[36] Anthony Kaldellis, 'Did the Byzantine empire have "ecumenical" or "universal" aspirations?', *Ancient States and Infrastructural Power*, p. 277.

[37] Henning Börm, 'Kavad I, Khosrow and the wars with the Roman empire' in *Brill's Companion to War in the Ancient Iranian Empires*, ed. John Hyland and Khodadad Rezakhani (Leiden: Brill, 2023), p. 2.

[38] Audrey Becker, 'From hegemony to negotiation' in *La diplomatie byzantine, de l'Empire romain aux confins de l'Europe*, ed. Nicolas Drocourt and Élisabeth Malamut (Leiden: Brill, 2020), p. 27.

[39] Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 21.

[40] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, p. 27; Touraj Daryaee, 'The construction of the past in late antique Persia', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 55:4 (2006), p. 500; Touraj Daryaee, 'Persia and Rome: the historical and ideological gaze in Persia' in *Persia: Ancient Iran and the Classical World*, ed. Jeffrey Spier, Timothy Potts, and Sara E. Cole (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2022), p. 284.

become divided, with other civilizations becoming cast off from the Iranian realm.[41] Stories such as the epic narrative of Fereydun express this belief by portraying the division of the world into separate realms, with the Persians as descendants of Iraj and the Romans as descending from his brother Salm. The Romans were naturally portrayed as leaving the Iranian realm through deceit, but they were still seen as genealogically linked to Sasanian kings.[42] Such narratives gave an eschatological role for the shah whereby he would eventually reunite the world under Iranian universal sovereignty in a final apocalyptic struggle at the 'end times' for the world.[43]

The Zoroastrian mythology demonstrates how the Sasanians believed in a 'common destiny' told through such epics and myths.[44] The Sasanian shah Khusro I acknowledged this narrative in a message to the Romans which talked of 'the time of the rupture between the two states'.[45] In portraying the world as divided in this manner, the Zoroastrian mythology not only allowed for the Sasanians to accept Rome as outside of the shah's direct rule but also portrayed the two powers as having a possibility of 'fraternal partnership'.[46] It was an ideology which provided a framework for accepting the Romans as partners in shaping world order.[47] Although cast off from the Iranian realm, the Romans still existed as one of the world's civilizations, and because they had originally been part of the Iranian realm, they could still be seen as a legitimate power.[48] The epic narrative of a world divided therefore allowed the Romans to be legitimized as an actor but also created the possibilities of a form of collective sovereignty of all the rulers of the world. The shah, as the king of kings, could then accept the possibility of the Romans as 'partners in universal rule'.[49]

[41] Richard E. Payne, 'Iranian cosmopolitanism: world religions at the Sasanian court' in *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Universal Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Myles Lavan, Richard E. Payne and John Weisweiler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 213.

[42] Greg Fisher, *Rome, Persia and Arabia: Shaping the Middle East from Pompey to Muhammed* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 67.

[43] Chosky, 'Sacral kingship', p. 38.

[44] Zeev Rubin, 'Diplomacy and statecraft in the relations between Byzantium and the Sasanids' in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, BAR International Series 297, ed. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Ankara: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1986), p. 679.

[45] Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.21.

[46] Richard Payne, 'The reinvention of Iran: the Sasanian empire and the Huns' in *Attila and the World around Rome*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 297.

[47] Josef Wiesehofer, 'Eran and Aneran: Sasanian patterns of worldview' in *Persianism in Antiquity*, ed. Rolf Strootman and Miguel John Versluys (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017), p. 387.

[48] George Amanatidis-Saadé, 'Yazdgird the forerunner: early Iranian cosmopolitanism and its effects on Christian society in the Sasanid empire', *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*, 21:1 (2021), p. 4.

[49] Richard E. Payne, 'Iranian cosmopolitanism: world religions at the Sasanian Court' in *Cosmopolitanism and Empire*, p. 213.

As this section has shown, the Roman and Sasanian vision of kingship expressed a hierarchical view of world order that also allowed for the possibility of diplomacy. It was the evolution of the Roman emperor from a more militaristic role to a Christian Basileus which allowed for a view of political order whereby kingly diplomacy was more acceptable.[50] By comparison, the Sasanian mythical narratives of a divided world also allowed for the shah to recognize a Roman Basileus as a fellow king with legitimacy as an actor outside the Iranian realm. Despite both sides expressing universal claims to rule and a divinely ordained hierarchy, the institution of kingship evolved to form a shared language of authority and honour which facilitated the growth of diplomacy between the two sides, as the following section explores.

Kingship and Diplomacy

The word 'diplomacy' is Greek in origin, but writers in late antiquity did not use the term in a modern sense to describe geopolitical relations. Ancient authors instead often referred to the methods, norms, and customs of diplomatic practice.[51] The sixth-century history of Menander the Guardsman, for example, details ideas of oratory, gift giving, treaty making, and public debates.[52] Over time, such practices and customs of diplomacy became firmly established between the two imperial powers and allowed for attempts to develop more stable relations. The diplomatic forms which grew out of these interactions were shaped by the shared understandings of kingship which saw the position of the shah as comparable to the emperor. As the following argues, diplomacy by its very nature 'rests on a norm of coexistence',[53] and political metaphors of 'brotherhood' developed over time which allowed for stability and a diplomatic language to evolve.

The basic form of diplomatic communication during late antiquity was the diplomatic mission; formal letters from a ruler worked to provide guarantees of credibility, but an envoy's speech at the royal court was the primary purpose of such negotiations.[54] The formal development of diplomacy between the two sides can be seen with the custom of sending an embassy on the ascension

[50] Although an ideology of victory could still play a key part in Roman propaganda, now it was possible for the emperor to claim glory on behalf of his subordinates. See A. D. Lee, *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), p. 37.

[51] Ekaterina Nechaeva, *Embassies—Negotiations—Gifts: Systems of East Roman Diplomacy in Late Antiquity* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014), p. 20.

[52] Nechaeva, *Embassies—Negotiations—Gifts*. Also see Men. Prot. 6.1, 9.1, 19.1.

[53] Hall and Jonsson, *Essence of Diplomacy*, p. 28.

[54] Ecaterina Lung, 'Barbarian envoys at Byzantium in the 6th century', *Hiperboreea*, 2:1 (2015), p. 39.

of each new shah or emperor. This involved a detailed series of customs and practices setting out such details as payment for food and lodging, the supply of a baggage train, and the exemption of ambassadors from customs duties.[55] Embassies for a new imperial accession were even sent in times of war and by the sixth century the practice of receiving envoys was highly developed and formalized.[56] Treaties between the two powers even stipulated that ambassadors would be honoured appropriately in accordance with their status and rank.[57] The procedure of greeting a foreign envoy included a reception at the border with strict rules of behaviour that included the Roman *Magister Officiorum* (Master of Offices) providing a written invitation in the form of a passport in order for the envoy to proceed to the capital Constantinople.[58] The status of an embassy could be further divided into the two rankings of a 'greater' or 'lesser' embassy, with such diplomatic missions being sent either to reaffirm treaties or to build upon earlier negotiations.[59] A 'lesser' embassy was simply an envoy being dispatched to submit a formal letter or similar communication, while a 'greater' embassy consisted of an envoy with the ability to negotiate directly and act as analogous to their respective sovereign power.[60] This process could even include subsequent ambassadors sent to give thanks for the reception and friendly treatment of the initial envoy.[61] The presence of Christians within both empires also played a role in facilitating the exchange of ambassadors as bishops were often used as intermediaries by both sides.[62] The sending and reception of envoys was therefore so well established as a practice that Menander could describe the imprisonment of envoys as a 'contravention of the universally recognised rights of ambassadors'.[63] This demonstrates that the frequent use of such negotiations allowed accepted norms of established behaviour to evolve between both sides. Through such interactions the two empires of late antiquity developed a highly formalized set of diplomatic norms far before the once commonly held wisdom which attributes the 'invention' of diplomacy to the ambassadors of Renaissance Italy.[64]

[55] Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy*, p. 157.
[56] Nina Garsoian, 'Byzantium and the Sasanians' in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 574.
[57] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[58] Ioannis Dimitroukas, 'The trip of the great Persian embassies to Byzantium during the reign of Justinian I (527–565) and its logistics', *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 18 (2008), pp. 171–183.
[59] Menander, fr. 20.1.
[60] Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, p. 129.
[61] Menander, fr. 18.6.
[62] Garsoian, 'Byzantium and the Sasanians', p. 573.
[63] Menander, fr. 12.4.
[64] Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955). Also see Raymond Cohen, 'The great tradition: the spread of diplomacy in the ancient world', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 12:1 (2007), pp. 23–38; Jonsson and Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy*, p. 3; and Watson, *Diplomacy*, pp. 73–84.

Inviting foreign visitors for negotiations was often meant to overwhelm them with the imperial court's display of power. A visit by a foreign embassy would include a ritualized parade through the city that symbolized imperial power both to the foreign envoys and to the emperor's own population.[65] The imperial courts were arenas for symbolic display with such practices as rites of investiture and robing ceremonies used to perform a set of political messages, with almost every action at the court imbued with rituals and symbolic meanings. Gift giving was also a key part of any reception and acted as an important source of cultural exchange.[66] In modern thought, rituals can be too easily dismissed as 'anachronistic expressions of tradition' or based on 'supernatural' beliefs, but such performances structured relations between the emperor or Persian shah with other actors and social groups in which the ritual performance and its reception by an audience made the symbols of authority seem more 'real'.[67] Nowhere are this politicized imagery and shared forms of communication more explicit than in the ritualized diplomatic encounter at the imperial court. It is worth quoting at length here a detailed account of a reception of Avar ambassadors in the sixth century to demonstrate how such practices were meant to overwhelm foreign audiences with awe and reinforce the hierarchical status of the Byzantine emperor:

> When the happy emperor had ascended the lofty throne and settled his limbs high up with his purple robe, the master of offices ordered the Avars to enter and announced that they were before the first doors of the imperial hall begging to see the holy feet of the merciful emperor, and he ordered with gentle voice and sentiment that they be admitted. The barbarian warriors marvelled as they crossed the first threshold and the great hall. They saw the tall men standing there, the golden shields, and looked up at their gold javelins as they glittered with their long iron tips and at the gilded helmet tops and red crests. They shuddered at the sight of the lances and cruel axes and saw the other wonders of the noble procession. And they believed that the Roman palace was another heaven … But when the curtain was drawn aside and the inner part was revealed, and when the hall of the gilded building glittered and Tergazis the Avar looked at the head of the emperor shining with the

[65] Audrey Becker, 'Verbal and nonverbal diplomatic communication at the imperial court of Constantinople 5th–6th century', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 72 (2018), pp. 79–92.

[66] Jason M. Schlude and Benjamin B. Rubin, 'Finding common ground: Roman-Parthian embassies in the Julio-Claudian period' in *Arsacids, Romans, and Local Elites: Cross-Cultural Interactions of the Parthian Empire*, ed. Jason M. Schlude and Benjamin B. Rubin (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017), pp. 65–92.

[67] Jorg Kustermans et al., 'Ritual and authority in world politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 35:1 (2021), p. 6.

> holy didem, he lay down three times in adoration and remained fixed to the ground. The other Avars followed him in similar fear and fell on their faces.[68]

The imperial reception of envoys which included the ritual of *proskynesis*, or a physical sign of submission in bowing before the emperor as described here, worked to reinforce the legitimacy of the emperor's rule.[69] The Roman emperor Diocletian and his successors had adapted many of the cultural customs of the Persians, even taking Persian imagery for the design of the emperor's own palace, and tried to imitate the Sasanian court ceremonies.[70] It was the audience hall at the Sasanian court where the cosmological worldview of imperialism was most clearly 'celebrated and performed'. The king of kings played a role in a structured performance of revealing himself from behind a veil to overawe envoys in their meetings with the shah,[71] a practice that also became used by the Romans.[72] The symbolism of the imperial courts would therefore develop shared ideas about the status of regalia and clothes as a mark of distinction, with both sides even interpreting something as simple as 'red shoes' to be a mark of power and the reserve of the emperor and shah.[73] Because the imperial court was the centre of such royal performances, every action could be interpreted as conferring significant meaning. During a meeting between Emperor Justin II and an envoy of the Sasanians, the envoy's cap fell off his head while performing the customary obeisance to the emperor. This instance was widely interpreted by the court as showing the omens were on the emperor's side and it would be a fortuitous moment to attack the Persians.[74] A similar anecdote is also recorded by the Muslim historian al-Tabari of the shah dropping a piece of fruit which was widely interpreted as a bad omen.[75] Entering into the imperial courts was therefore to enter into the cosmological worldview of the shah and Roman emperor, one which defined hierarchical relations and concurrently became a medium for shared cultural interaction.

[68] Corippus, *In Praise of Justin II*, iii.230–243, 254–261 (trans. Averil Cameron), p. 107.

[69] For *proskynesis* and the Sasanians, see Jamsheed K. Choksy, 'Gesture in ancient Iran and central Asia II: proskynesis and the bent forefinger', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 4 (1990), pp. 201–207.

[70] Garsoian, 'Byzantium and the Sasanians', p. 587. Edward Gibbon even believed the Roman court had become corrupted by Persian influences: *Decline and Fall*, vol. 2, pp. 89–91. Also see Anne Hunnell Chen, 'Rival powers, rival images: Diocletian's palace at Split in light of Sasanian palace design' in *Rome and the Worlds beyond Its Frontiers*, ed. Daniëlle Slootjes and Michael Peachin (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 213–242.

[71] Canepa, 'Emperor', p. 167.

[72] McCormick, 'Emperor and court', p. 157.

[73] Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, p. 204.

[74] Menander, fr. 16.1.

[75] See al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari, the Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids and Yemen*, vol. V5 [Clifford E. Bosworth] (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 385–386.

The imperial court for both empires of late antiquity can be seen as a 'socio-political institution' which acted as the centre of royal ideological power.[76] Every element of the court was therefore aimed at reinforcing the hierarchical role of the emperor or shah and the universal claims of their respective empires. Court ceremonies created a 'hierarchy of proximity to the sovereign' as seating positions at court reflected the status of elites. To gain membership in the ranks of the elite at court meant accepting a subordinate status, thereby reinforcing this imperial hierarchy.[77] The highly regimented processes of the court meant that foreign envoys required an extensive knowledge of protocol in order to achieve any positive diplomatic outcome and the limited access allowed for visitors was deliberately designed to disadvantage visiting envoys, further strengthening the hierarchical position of the emperor.[78] Such formalized encounters had a dual purpose in establishing common diplomatic ground but also worked to 'emphasise boundaries' between the civilized imperial centres and those considered as barbarians.[79] The highly structured receptions of a foreign embassy worked to reinforce imperial legitimacy and such rituals worked just like other diplomatic practices, such as treaties or communiques, to codify norms, rights, and obligations and form a medium of communication.[80] Barbarians themselves could also adopt their own courts modelled on the Roman and Sasanian imperial courts which worked to facilitate diplomacy between the imperial central core and peripheral polities.

The Two Eyes suzerain order evolved through such diplomatic practices which created a shared understanding of hierarchy and status. Communications between the two empires could include displays of art, letters of exchange, embassies, and diplomacy, which together formed a 'ritual language'

[76] Rowland Smith, 'The imperial court of the late Roman empire, c. AD.300–c.AD.450' in *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies*, ed. Antony J. Spawforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 161.

[77] Payne, 'Iranian cosmopolitanism', p. 210; Paul Magdalino, 'Court and capital in Byzantium' in *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective*, ed. Jeroen Duindam, Artan Tülay, and Kunt Metin (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 133; Daryaee, 'The end of Eranshar', p. 250.

[78] Andrew Gillett, 'Advise the emperor beneficially: lateral communication in diplomatic embassies between the post-imperial West and Byzantium' in *Ambassadeurs et ambassades au coeur des relations diplomatiques: Rome, Occident Médiéval, Byzance*, ed. Audrey Becker and Nicolas Drocourt (Metz: Centre de recherché universitaire Lorrain d'histoire, 2012), pp. 258–259; Becker, 'Verbal and nonverbal communication at the imperial court of Constantinople', p. 83.

[79] Walter Pohl, 'Ritualised encounters: late Roman diplomacy and the barbarians' in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Mediaeval Mediterranean*, ed. Alexander Beihammer, Stavroula Constantinou, and Maria G. Parani (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 86; Charles Pazdernik, '"How then is it not better to prefer quiet, than the dangers of conflict?": the imperial court as the site of shifting cultural frontiers' in *Shifting Cultural Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke and Deborah Deliyannis (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 99–111.

[80] Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 26.

of kingship.[81] These highly formalized practices of diplomacy in late antiquity worked to form what modern international relations scholars call a 'normative complex'—a set of customs that create shared meanings which work to legitimize political authority.[82] Such traditions also worked to demonstrate and reinforce the superior status of Byzantium and Persia both to their own populations and to other polities. The Roman and Persian relationship of late antiquity was built upon shared meanings of diplomacy and hierarchy, yet this understanding of order developed slowly over time through conflict as well as cooperation. The duopoly of Roman and Persian power emerged only after mutual recognition of kingly authority was achieved, but the most intensive periods of interaction and diplomatic practices happened during one of the most conflictual periods, between Emperor Justinian and Shah Khusro I in the sixth century. This period of regular conflict saw a concurrent rise in highly formalized treaty negotiations. To ensure the integrity and veracity of negotiations, treaties were even concluded with copies made in each language. The treaty of 562 AD between Justinian and Khusro I was concluded with the help of six Greek and six Persian interpreters.[83] But the successful conclusion of treaties in themselves became highly developed in their formality, with each treaty announcement seen as a significant event. After negotiations between the two sides were successfully concluded, the written forms of treaties were ratified by 'sacred letters' in contrast to use of verbal oaths used by barbarian rules.[84] The ability to send letters, engage in treaties, and receive embassies demonstrated a sovereign act and displayed to both domestic and foreign audiences exactly who had the sovereign power in order to produce such an authoritative public act.[85]

The challenge for modern historians has been to understand to what extent this mutual recognition between the two sides could temper their rivalry and lead to meaningful cooperation.[86] Negotiations between the two empires would certainly appear at times to lack the courtesy and civility a modern audience might expect, and the Persians were also routinely portrayed in Roman sources as excessively arrogant. Yet, despite the frequent negative portrayals

[81] Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, p. 1.
[82] Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire*, p. 24.
[83] Daniel Peretz, 'The Roman interpreter and his diplomatic and military roles', *Historia*, 55:4 (2006), p. 468.
[84] A. D. Lee, 'Treaty making in late antiquity' in *War and Peace in Ancient and Mediaeval History*, ed. Philip De Souza and John France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 107–119.
[85] Maria Grazia Bajoni, 'Envoy's speeches at the peace negotiations of 561–562 AD between the Byzantine empire and the Persian kingdom', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 29:3 (2018), pp. 353–371.
[86] Josef Wiesehofer, 'Eran and Aneran: Sasanian patterns of worldview' in *Persianism in Antiquity*, ed. Rolf Strootman and Miguel John Versluys (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017), p. 387.

of Persians and their character, this did not stop diplomacy from being conducted and even mutual respect developing. The historian Menander the Guardsman records his respect for the Persian envoy Sebokhth, a Christian, who he describes as 'a shrewd man' who spoke 'fair and reasonable words'.[87] But modern sceptical commentators have focused on the tensions that would arise during the initial opening exchanges of titles which could often display a zealous bragging of kingly accolades. The opening meeting of envoys would formally begin with such a rhetorical display as a standard practice and these negotiations could become subsumed by what would appear today as a display of mere 'arrogant boasting'.[88] Menander provides an account of how the Persian Chamberlain

> began to boast and exalt king Khosro [Khusro], saying that he was invincible and adorned with many victories; that from the time when he had assumed the tiara, he had conquered about ten peoples and made them tributary; that he had destroyed the power of the Hephthalites and had defeated very many kings; that the barbarians there were in wonderment and awe of him; and that properly and rightly he was proclaimed king of kings.[89]

Formal and grandiose displays such as this were a standard feature of many negotiations. Theophylact even records how 'the Persians like to be called by their titles; as if they consider it unworthy to bear their birth-names'.[90] Some modern historians, however, have interpreted such rhetoric to suggest that any shared language and understanding of communication was simply not possible.[91] But this is to examine such speeches through a modern lens and neglects how formal rhetorical displays were simply part of the prevalent culture of the time, when skills in oration, rhetoric, and dramatized accounts of speeches were a common feature of classical antiquity.[92] Menander even records how after the initial round of boasting the diplomats 'then turned again to business'.[93] Despite modern scepticism, it appears then that the shared language of kingship was built on continually reinforcing the idea of hierarchy and

[87] Menander, fr. 16.1.
[88] Michael Whitby, 'Byzantine diplomacy: good faith, trust and cooperation in international relations in late antiquity' in *War and Peace in Ancient and Mediaeval History*, pp. 132–134.
[89] Menander, fr. 6.1.40.
[90] Theophylact, 1.9.6.
[91] Katarzyna Maksymiuk; 'The Two Eyes of the earth: the problem of respect in Sasanid-Roman relations', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 58 (2018), pp. 591–606; also see Arthur Eckstein, 'The character of pre-modern interstate diplomacy', *International History Review*, 32:2 (2010), pp. 319–328.
[92] Bajoni, 'Envoys speeches at the peace negotiations of 561–562 AD between the Byzantine empire and the Persian kingdom', p. 365.
[93] Menander, fr. 6.1.

the competitive exchange of sovereign titles was therefore simply a 'matter of course' in diplomatic practice.[94]

The ritual gloating of sovereign titles by envoys during negotiations similarly worked to reinforce that the shah and the emperor were each the leading power within their own respective world order. While the two monarchies would never meet in person, they created a series of indirect practices which led to 'an ancient form of shuttle diplomacy'.[95] The practice of conducting diplomacy through such official envoys rather than meeting directly in person helped in a counterintuitive manner to reinforce stability as neither the shah nor the emperor could be seen to outrank one another. By contrast, Roman emperors would explicitly seek to overawe barbarian kings in order to show their own superior status. Barbarian envoys were expected as a matter of course to 'lay prostrate on the ground' before the eyes of the emperor.[96] Ammianus Marcellinus describes how 'the princes of the Saracen nations' came to see the emperor 'as suppliants on bended knees', and in presenting him with a golden crown they paid 'obeisance to him as lord of the world and of its peoples'.[97] Some barbarian envoys, however, challenged this hierarchy, such as the envoys of Attila the Hun who openly mocked the Byzantine imperial court.[98] A meeting of Emperor Valens with the Gothic king Athanaric in 367 AD was a direct ideological and political challenge to imperial rule as the Gothic king sought to portray himself as equal to the emperor. Only by agreeing to the humiliating compromise of meeting mid-stream across a river could the emperor keep up such a pretence of being inherently higher in status.[99] The nature of political order in late antiquity was therefore one of constantly seeking to reinforce the hierarchical status of kingship in which the personal honour of the king was instrumental in shaping geopolitical relations. This raised the ever-present prospect of a breakdown in cordial relations if the honour of the shah or emperor was ever impinged upon. This was particularly problematic in earlier relations between Parthia and Republican Rome. During the first meeting between the Romans and Parthians at the Euphrates River, between the Roman general Sulla, Ariobarzanes, the Roman nominee to the Cappadocian throne, and Orobazes, the envoy of the Parthian king, it was Orobazes who was put to death on his return to Parthia for appearing

[94] Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, p. 124.
[95] Ekaterina Nechaeva, 'Patterns of Roman diplomacy with Iran and the Steppe peoples' in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran and the Steppe, ca. 250–750*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo and Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 358.
[96] Amm. Marc., 17.8.5.
[97] Amm. Marc., 23.3.8.
[98] Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy*, p. 64.
[99] Amm. Marc., 27.5.9.

to be too subordinate to Sulla at the meeting.[100] In late antiquity, the avoidance of a direct meeting between the emperor and the shah therefore helped to create stability with the institution of kingship, as neither the emperor nor the shah could surpass the other in status.[101] Because the ecumenical beliefs of both Byzantium and Persia saw each respective ruler as the centre of their own world order, each monarch could therefore maintain their own 'supreme status' and the use of envoys facilitated parity between the two sides. The maintenance of distance itself 'allowed the rulers to keep a dominant perspective in their respective worlds'.[102] Treaty making was therefore a significant act precisely because it did not involve face-to-face encounters between the emperor and shah.[103] Without the ideological and political challenge that would inevitably result from direct relationships, the two imperial authorities could share a diplomatic language of kingship built on shared status as the Two Eyes of the world.

Such expressions of a shared diplomatic language can be found in the way 'brother' became a frequently used term in written exchanges by both sovereigns.[104] One example of this language comes from a letter by the shah, which states: 'I Sapor [Shapur], King of Kings, partner with the Stars, brother of the Sun and Moon, to my brother Constantius Caesar offer most ample greeting.'[105] The Roman response similarly uses such language by declaring: 'I, Constantius, victor by land and sea, perpetual Augustus, to my brother King Sapor, offer most ample greeting.'[106] This particular exchange of letters was made during a dispute in which diplomacy failed to prevent conflict from occurring, but comparable statements are also exchanged between Kavadh I and Justin I. As Malalas records, the letter makes the same gesture of referring to one another as 'brother' and makes similar allusions to the sun and moon: 'Koades [Kavadh I] King of Kings, of the sunrise, to Flavius Justinianus Caesar, of the moonset.'[107] In this exchange Kavadh is asking the emperor for assistance against Hunnic invasions, coupled with a threat of force if no assistance is received, but despite the tension of this communication it highlights how the

[100] Peter Edwell, 'The Euphrates as a boundary between Rome and Parthia in the late republic and early empire', *Antichthon*, 47 (2013), p. 192.
[101] See Ammianus on meeting barbarian kings: Amm. Marc., 30.3.4–6; Craig Morley, 'Rome and the Sasanian empire in the fifth century A.D.: a necessary peace', PhD diss. (University of Liverpool, 2015), p. 131.
[102] Nechaeva, 'Patterns of Roman diplomacy with Iran and the steppe people', p. 358.
[103] A. D. Lee, 'Treaty-making in late antiquity' in *War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, p. 112.
[104] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[105] Amm. Marc., 17.5.3.
[106] Amm. Marc., 17.5.10.
[107] *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.449.

language of kingship and brotherhood certainly facilitated communication. Such exchanges also highlight the intertwined nature of conflict and cooperation which is seen throughout Byzantine and Persian diplomacy. The act of diplomatic exchange by itself signifies some level of accepting an equal actor and later negotiations would in a similar fashion reinforce this equality by restating that 'they were two brothers according to ancient custom.'[108] This is in contrast to later forms of medieval diplomacy between Byzantium and European kings whereby leaders were adopted into the family of kings as 'sons.'[109] The notion of brotherhood between the emperor and shah therefore worked to symbolize 'equality' in power and reputation.[110]

Through their interactions, the East Romans and Persians developed a relationship which was described by Matthew Canepa as 'a delicate balance of expressions of brotherhood on the one hand, and veiled threats and sublimated violence on the other'.[111] Despite the quarrelsome nature of these diplomatic exchanges, the title of 'brother' as used by both sovereigns demonstrates how even during times of conflict the ideas and practices of the institution of kingship were firmly established. Counterintuitively, because the honour of the king corresponded to the honour of the polity as a whole, when conflict did break out it worked to further reinforce such shared understandings of status, honour, and glory that defined the role of kingship. Evidence of this can be found within the account of the siege of Amida in 359 AD by Ammianus. He records how as night fell both sides would shout praise of their leaders. Ammianus states that the Romans 'praised the power of Constantius Caesar as lord of the world and the universe', while the Persians called Shapur 'Saansaan' and 'Pirosen', which can be interpreted as 'king of kings' and 'victor in wars'.[112] Even during conflict the attributes of kingship would be reinforced, and both sides could recognize in the other similar claims and counterclaims to universal rule and hierarchy. While the diplomacy of kingship and brotherhood may not have conclusively solved tensions over the buffer zone, it did demonstrate that both rulers could at least exist as independent polities and recognize their respective rival as a sovereign imperial ruler of equal status.[113]

[108] *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.76.

[109] See Iver Neumann, 'Sublime diplomacy: Byzantine, early modern, contemporary', *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 34:3 (2006), p. 869, n. 10.

[110] Franz Tinnefeld, 'Ceremonies for foreign ambassadors at the court of Byzantium' in *Byzantinische Forschungen* 19, ed. Walter E. Kaegi (Amsterdam: Verlag Adolf M. Hakkert, 1993), p. 208.

[111] Matthew P. Canepa, 'Distant displays of powers: understanding cross-cultural interaction among the elites of Rome', *Ars Orientalis*, 38 (2010), p. 131.

[112] Canepa, 'Emperor', p. 163. Also see Amm. Marc., 19.2.11.

[113] Jan Willem Drijvers, 'Rome and the Sassanid empire: confrontation and coexistence' in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 450; Josef Wiesehofer, 'From Achaemenid imperial order to Sasanian diplomacy' in *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, p. 133.

But as the following section explains, despite the universal claims to power and the hierarchical right to rule, both the emperor and shah faced a precarious existence where their authority and legitimacy was often attacked by rivals with the ever-present danger of usurpation.

Kingship and Legitimacy

The symbolism and rituals of the imperial court continually reinforced notions of hierarchy, but in reality the all-powerful role of the sovereign in late antiquity was tempered within both empires by the power of aristocratic elites.[114] As patrimonial and agrarian societies, imperial monarchy was not possible without a family, servants, and nobles at court acting as 'brokers' in the governance of the empire.[115] Within such a context, murder was therefore a form of political instrument which was facilitated by a competitive aristocratic class that presented a limitation on the power and authority of kingship in which 'kings could never feel secure'.[116] The eastern Roman empire experienced relative stability between 324 and 602, although this was in stark contrast to the western Roman empire which faced repeated usurpations by generals on the frontier who rebelled and became 'barrack' emperors.[117] The Persian empire also saw periods of stability during particularly long-lived shahs who were able to consolidate their authority. However, the sudden death of a shah could also bring years of political discord as powerful actors competed to fill the vacuum in imperial governance which had arisen from a short-lived shah. Both empires also faced repeated instances of revolts, usurpations, and crises brought on by challenges to kingly authority. The result of this is that questions of legitimacy defined relations between the two empires.[118] It was a challenge to the legitimacy of Emperor Maurice in 602 AD which would lead to the Last Great War of Antiquity, as the following explores.

[114] Perhaps the best example of this is Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. Geoffrey A. Williamson and Peter Sarris (London: Penguin, 2007).

[115] Peter Fibiger Bang, 'The king of kings: universal hegemony, imperial power and new comparative history of Rome' in *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 330.

[116] Joachim Ehlers, 'The birth of the monarchy out of violent death: transformations of kingship from late antiquity to the tenth century', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, 26:1 (2004), p. 20.

[117] Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 257; also see John Michael O'Flynn, *Generalismos of the Western Roman Empire* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983); Michael Whitby, 'The army 420–602' in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 14, ed. Averil Cameron et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 308.

[118] Beate Dignas and Englebert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 236.

Political rule in late antiquity was inherently fragile as the governance structures of agrarian empires were made up of personal connections, kinship ties, and client–patron relations. The instability that could arise from this had long been a problem within the Roman empire, which had faced 103 usurpations between 27 BC and AD 455, around one every four and a half years.[119] Such problems arose because power was concentrated within the emperor, but their ability to actually enforce their rule and directly reform social, economic, or political problems was tempered by the client–patron networks that made up the structures of imperial governance. The slow communications and limited information available also meant that emperors were rarely proactive administrators. Justinian's Novels, as a set of laws and decrees, are remembered precisely because Justinian was a rare exception among emperors in seeking to consolidate his rule and improve imperial governance through root-and-branch legal reform and an extensive building programme, as recorded by the work of Procopius.[120] Imperial governance was usually fundamentally reactive in nature. Administration was based on a petition-and-response model whereby the emperor would receive embassies, hear cases, and pronounce verdicts.[121] The letters of Emperor Julian even record a sigh of discontent as the emperor complains of the numbers of letters and papers he was requested to sign.[122] With no clear way to transfer power, death was often the price of poor governance or political mistakes in the world of late antiquity. Regicide was likely to be almost 'expected' rather than an 'occasional aberration'.[123] As the historian Peter Heather has argued, the strategy and objectives of actors in late antiquity were 'utterly subordinated to the immediate political imperatives of the regime'. It is reasonable to assess then that the priority for rulers in late antiquity was 'overwhelmingly driven' by internal factors rather than any overarching vision of a grand strategic approach to foreign policy.[124] With such a focus on internal rivals and the challenges of governance within a client–patron system, usurpation was an ever-present problem.[125]

[119] Andrastos Omissi, *Empires and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 21.

[120] Procopius, *On Buildings*, trans. Henry B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940); also see McCormick, 'Emperor and court', p. 143.

[121] Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 2001), pp. 537–549.

[122] Julian the Apostate, *Letters*, Letter 58, trans. Wilmer C. Wright, The Tertullian Project [online], available at: www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letters_1_trans.htm.

[123] Omissi, *Empires and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire*, p. 17.

[124] Peter Heather, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 324–325.

[125] Prior to modernity, it seems usurpation was a common theme. See Kevin Blachford, 'The balance of power and the power struggles of the polis', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 17:3 (2021), pp. 429–447.

Although the East Roman empire generally fared better against the problem of usurpation compared to the fall of the western half of the empire, it was still an ingrained problem facing imperial governance. The emperor of the Byzantines may have been God's representative on earth, but in reality his power and authority was often tempered and constrained by the politics of the imperial court. The in-fighting of rival claimants to imperial rule and competing family factions within the court were a constant feature of imperial politics. This was due simply to the nature of the client–patron structures of governance which could see several generations of family members living within the Roman court. This could include multiple people from the dynastic line of the throne ranging from the sons of emperors, nephews, mothers, or dowagers of previous emperors and also included the family of the emperor's wife. Family members such as these not only helped to form an extended network of client–patron relations but could also be appointed as trusted associates to roles in military command or regional governance.[126] Even imperial hostages were a part of this extended network of relations, with hostages of rivals and client kings sent to the palace in order to live under Roman tutelage as a way to install Roman values.[127] With such networks of personal relations between the emperor and a web of court members and elites, power sharing was surprisingly common in late antiquity, especially after Diocletian's system of tetrarchy that saw power split between the emperor and an heir with the title of Caesar.[128] But despite this power sharing, the rule of the emperor himself was often tenuous at best.

The emperor embodied the sovereign power of the empire and his hierarchical status was supreme, yet concurrently his position was under constant threat. Emperor Zeno had held power in the fifth century for over a decade but still spent two years in exile after a courtly conspiracy against him.[129] Even the long reign of Emperor Justinian had to survive the Nika riots in 532 AD which saw a popular uprising in Constantinople threaten his throne.[130] Procopius also recorded plots against Justinian's life and described the fear he had of the 'magnitude and splendour' of the achievements of his leading General Belisarius, which threatened to eclipse his own status as the emperor.[131] In the early period of Roman–Persian relations, the weakness of imperial rule meant that

[126] A. D. Lee, 'Warfare and the state' in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, p. 398.
[127] McCormick, *Emperor and Court*, pp. 141 and 154.
[128] Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 15.
[129] Heather, *Rome Resurgent*, p. 326; Peter Crawford, *Roman Emperor Zeno: The Perils of Power Politics in Fifth-Century Constantinople* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2019), pp. 76–78.
[130] Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, p. 19.
[131] Procopius, *Wars*, 7.31.1 and 7.1.3.

emperors were pushed towards an aggressive stance towards Persia in order to bolster their own regime's security. A victory against the Persians was a way to emulate Alexander the Great and could form a source of legitimacy for the emperor's position.[132] However, in the later period, the shift towards a permanent court at Constantinople meant that emperors were less keen to give their generals free rein against Persia lest they become too powerful and claim the glory of Alexander for themselves.[133] In response to this problem, the division of military commands therefore ensured that no single imperial office was inherently superior, creating a 'polyocracy' of governance.[134] This turn to a less militaristic role for the emperor helped to build stability with the Persians, but it could not alone solve the problem of threats to the imperial throne and the challenges of legitimacy, a problem which was also faced by the shah.

The Sasanian shah provides a similar clear example of the inherent danger of usurpation in late antiquity. The shah may have been defined by the title 'king of kings', but this was also a tacit recognition that the Iranian aristocracy made up of lesser client kings and numerous princes consisted of rival factions whose allegiance 'could be fickle'.[135] The House of Sasan was bound up with, and dependent on, powerful Parthian aristocrats who still held a powerful voice in imperial rule. The Sasanian empire should therefore be seen as a 'confederation' of noble families and the rule of the shah was beholden to extensive family connections with queens and princes who also played a key part in the governance of the empire.[136] The ascension of each new shah could therefore be beholden to the interests of powerful aristocratic factions, and although a new claimant to the throne would be chosen from within the Sasanian dynasty, there was no guarantee imperial rule would smoothly transition to the eldest son. Aristocratic and factional rivals meant that power could also go to younger sons or uncles, and there is even evidence of a daughter being chosen towards the end of the Sasanian dynasty. The supreme power of the shah was therefore limited by the dynamics of aristocratic rivalries within the House of Sasan and the result was that power struggles were an inherent

[132] Henning Börm, 'A threat or a blessing? The Sasanians and the Roman empire' in *Diwan: Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Carsten Binder, Henning Börm, and Andreas Luther (Duisburg: Wellem 2016), p. 621.

[133] Henning Börm, 'Die Grenzen des Großkönigs?' in *Iberien zwischen Rom und Iran*, ed. M. Frank Schleicher, Timo Stickler, and Udo Hartmann (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2019). p. 110; Geoffrey Greatrex, 'Byzantium and the East in the sixth century' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 479.

[134] Whitby, 'War and state in late antiquity', pp. 375 and 378.

[135] Scott McDonough, 'The legs of the throne: kings, elites and subjects in Sasanian Iran' in *The Roman Empire in Context*, p. 296.

[136] McDonough, 'The legs of the throne', p. 300. On Sasanian rule as a confederation, see Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

feature of imperial rule. The loss of royal *Xwarrah*, or glory, meant that the shah had equally lost the legitimacy given to him by the Zoroastrian god and gave cause for revolt against the shah. Any calamity, loss, or strife that faced the Sasanian empire could therefore be associated with an evil ruler which granted both nobles and Zoroastrian Magi significant power to challenge the shah's rule.[137] Numerous shahs therefore faced internal challenges to their rule, including Bahram III (293) who was replaced by Narseh, Ardashir II who may have been overthrown by the nobility (383), Bahram IV who was killed in a suspicious hunting accident (399), and Peroz I who assumed the throne after a civil war against his brother Hormizd III upon the death of their father. Even a shah who managed to retain power could still be challenged, such as Khusro I, who suppressed a revolt by his son Anush-Zad in 542,[138] while Khusro II was unsuccessfully challenged by his uncle until he was killed around 595–596.[139] Internal revolts such as those faced by Yazdegerd I offer another example of a shah who faced unrest due to the increasing power of the Zoroastrian priesthood and Christian zealots. But it was the revolt of Bahram Chobin in 589 AD which had the greatest significance for relations with the Byzantine empire.

Bahram Chobin was a successful Persian general who gained great adulation and respect for his victories against the Gok Turks on the Sasanians' eastern frontier. Seeking further victories and glory, Bahram then turned towards the Caucasus mountains in order to test himself and seek a battle against the Romans, whom he had not previously faced. Yet, despite his confidence, Bahram suffered a minor defeat against the Byzantine army, and the shah Hormizd IV, who was jealous of Bahram's fame and status, used this incident as a chance to humiliate his general.[140] Hormizd sent women's clothing to his general in order to mock him and dismissed him from office. The enraged Bahram then revolted and declared himself shah in 590 AD. As Bahram was not from the House of Sasan, he justified his rise to power through asserting that the first Sasanian shah Ardashir I had wrongly usurped the throne of the Arsacid dynasty and that his actions in usurping Hormizd were a restoration of Arsacid rule. The son of Hormizd, Khusro II, then fled to Roman territory in Syria before moving to the city of Constantia and seeking refuge from the

[137] Chosky, 'Sacral kingship', p. 39.

[138] Or possibly 550 AD.

[139] Daryaee, 'The end of Eranshahr', p. 256; James Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 18; Michael J. Decker, *The Sasanian Empire at War: Persia, Rome, and the Rise of Islam, 224–651* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2022), p. 101; Michael R. Jackson Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2020), pp. 195–196.

[140] Also spelled as Wahrām. See Daryaee, *The Image of the Sasanian King in the Perso-Arabic Historical Tradition*, p. 6.

Romans. Emperor Maurice not only sheltered Khusro II but also supplied him with Roman soldiers to re-take his throne, which Khusro II then did with the help of the Byzantine general Narses in 591 AD. This remarkable support from the Romans for one of their bitterest rivals was a surprising turn which saw Emperor Maurice directly intervene to assist the shah in regaining his throne. Such actions may appear at odds with a more Machiavellian approach that could have taken advantage of the possible end of the House of Sasan, and it seems likely that Bahram Chobin's bid for the throne in 590 would have succeeded without Roman intervention.[141] But Maurice's decision shows the importance of legitimacy for the institution of kingship within late antiquity. The actual events of the Last Great War of Antiquity will be explored further in Chapter 6, but for now it is only important to consider what these events tell us about usurpation and legitimacy. In seeking protection from the Romans, Emperor Maurice became the patron of Khusro II and his guardian. The shah's restored position was reliant on Maurice's support, and this demonstrates that there was a sense of 'mutual obligation and reciprocal legitimation' within a family of kings.[142] Although the practice of guardianship was never fully developed into a formalized norm of Byzantine–Persian relations, it was certainly significant in shaping views of authority and legitimacy and was used as a defence against usurpation.

A precedent for the guardianship of Khusro II by Maurice had first been set by the earlier examples of Yazdegerd and Kavadh. Shah Yazdegerd had become the guardian of Theodosius II (402–450), who was still a child, at the request of Emperor Arcadius (383–408), who was concerned about the child's fate and the transfer of power after his own death.[143] As Procopius records, this action 'continued without interruption a policy of profound peace with the Romans, and thus preserved the empire for Theodosius.'[144] This act of guardianship was not a legalistic obligation involving actual child raising, but a diplomatic relationship that secured the legitimacy of rule.[145] With regime security in both empires often tenuous and dynastic succession unclear and unstable, the practice of adoption was one method used to ensure a smooth transfer of power. Shah Kavadh would later in the sixth century seek to make

[141] James Howard-Johnston, 'The two great powers in late antiquity: a comparison' in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, Volume 3: States, Resources and Armies* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2021), p. 224.
[142] Andrea Piras, 'Apocalyptic imagery and royal propaganda in Khosrow II's letter to the Byzantine emperor Maurice', *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 14 (2021), p. 184.
[143] Decker, *Sasanian Empire at War*, p. 100.
[144] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.2.9.
[145] Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, p. 126.

a similar arrangement for his own son whom he wanted to receive the throne above the claim of his older brother. Procopius records how Kavadh could not pass on the throne to his younger son without an internal challenge from disgruntled nobles and offered to Emperor Justin the prospect of adopting his son Khusro.[146] Justin rejected this proposal despite being personally in favour after the more hawkish elements of the Byzantine senate expressed their own unhappiness at the prospect, believing that the overture was part of a deception aimed to undermine the East Roman empire.[147] Despite the scepticism of the Byzantine senate, perhaps rightly, the desire for assistance with the transfer of power reflects the fragility of regime security during late antiquity. Kavadh had himself been briefly ousted from the throne by his brother and knew of the fragility of rule, while Khusro did eventually become shah even without the Romans' help, but only after a brief power struggle.[148]

When Emperor Maurice was himself overthrown in a coup led by the military officer Phocas in 602 AD, the Persian shah Khusro II was reported as devastated. Al-Tabari recorded Khusro on hearing the news of the death of his patron as becoming 'violently aroused[; he] regarded it with revulsion, and was gripped by anger'.[149] It was the death of Maurice that gave Khusro a pretext to invade Roman territory and in doing so began the Last Great War of Antiquity. He refused to recognize Phocas as the rightful emperor and imprisoned the envoys of the traditional Roman embassy, giving notice of a new emperor in 603.[150] By this stage, relations had completely broken down between the Romans and Persians over the question of kingly legitimacy. These examples show that political power in late antiquity was very personal in nature and shaped by client–patron relations between rulers. Individual leaders could never feel secure of their position when murder, revolt, and usurpation was the common currency of power politics. The prospect of guardianship as a way to smooth the transition of power, however, was never developed as a formal norm of inter-polity kingship. But it was a sign of respect between monarchs, which reflects how assistance against dynastic rivals demonstrates that internal enemies were often a bigger threat than external rivals.[151]

[146] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.11.9; Geoffrey Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War 502–532* (Cambridge: Francis Cairns, 1998), pp. 134–136.

[147] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle: Byzantine and Near Eastern History ad 284–813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 254.

[148] Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War 502–532*, p. 50; Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran*, pp. 144–147.

[149] Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, p. 317.

[150] Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity*, p. 22.

[151] Peter Edwell, 'Sasanian interactions with Rome and Byzantium' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel T. Potts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 853.

Conclusion

The institution of kingship shows that inter-polity relations in late antiquity were built on the 'inter-personal' relationships between two sovereigns.[152] The emperor and shah could recognize in one another relatable claims to hierarchical status and faced similar constraints as rulers with power often surprisingly diffused among extended networks of client–patron relations. Kingship was an institution that allowed the Byzantines and Persians to recognize in the other similar claims to authority and legitimacy. The rise of Christianity allowed for a less militaristic role of the emperor, one open to diplomacy, while the rise of the Kayanid mythology within Sasanian Persia equally allowed for the shah to accept the Roman emperor as an equal within the Two Eyes system. Both diplomacy and conflict could further reinforce the Two Eyes system because even war between the two sides worked to strengthen shared understandings of kingly glory, honour, status, and legitimacy. The inter-polity relations of late antiquity should therefore not be seen as a set of foreign relations between nation states but between the dynastic rule of 'great houses'.[153] In the pre-modern world, imperial polities, such as the East Romans and Persians, were defined by 'household rule'. Imperial governance was run by extended family relations and this in turn could fuel regime instability. Longer-lived emperors or shahs usually created stability, with some warlike leaders even becoming keener for peace with age.[154] When a great house or regal dynasty collapsed, however, this would create a legitimation crisis, with any resulting power vacuum likely to lead to war. It is possible that if Phocas had not overthrown Maurice in 602, then some stability between the two empires may have been found with Maurice as the patron of Khusro II. The following chapter therefore moves on to examine patron–client relations in more detail. The institution of kingship proved a possible mechanism not only to order the great empires but also to hierarchically order the client kings, nomads, and barbarians of the Two Eyes system. Through adopting, appointing, and sponsoring client kings, the Byzantines and Sasanians reinforced their position as the leading powers of late antiquity.

[152] Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*, p. 124.
[153] On the dynastic politics of great houses, see Zarakol, *Before the West*, pp. 76–77.
[154] For example, Khusro I was recorded as having 'lost his taste for war' because of old age. See Menander, fr. 16.1.

4
Client Kings and Barbarians

Introduction

The world of the fifth century was a time of dramatic change, with the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 AD and the final collapse of the western half of the Roman empire in 476 AD. A radical geopolitical transformation occurred with the arrival of new polities, which included groups such as the Huns in eastern Europe, the Vandals in North Africa, and the Hephthalites to the east of Persia in central Asia. The emergence of these new polities presented the sedentary powers of the Two Eyes system with rivals that posed a threat not just to their security but also to the very ideological underpinnings of their legitimacy as imperial sovereign powers with claims to universal rule. The imperial authority and legitimacy of the Two Eyes system were predicated on Byzantium and Persia displaying their own hierarchical status as 'great kings' who were to be surrounded by those considered 'lesser' kings.[1] But the ability of both empires to enforce such a hierarchical ordering was not consistent or uniform across the geopolitical landscape. There was therefore a disparity between the established roles of the Two Eyes system and the actual material distribution of power. While the two sedentary powers claimed a higher status as civilized peoples, in reality it was not entirely clear that they had a particular advantage as either a polity or a military power over nomadic tribes. Indeed, the diplomat Priscus even recorded how some Romans preferred to live among the nomadic people of the Huns, while Procopius complained that Romans would prefer to live under barbarians than pay taxes.[2] Nomadic people from the steppe also challenged the imperial powers through their military prowess, with the devastating power of the Hunnic composite bow, coupled with the speed of their mounted cavalry style of warfare, demonstrating that nomadic groups were more than a match for the traditional infantry-based

[1] Irfan Shahid, 'The Iranian factor in Byzantium during the reign of Heraclius', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 26 (1972), p. 297.
[2] Priscus, 8.99.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0005

Roman armies.[3] As this chapter will elaborate, the divergence between material capabilities and the ambitions of a nomadic leader, such as Attila the Hun, proved to be a key source of disorder as he was not content with a subaltern role in the Two Eyes system.[4] But while Attila was the most infamous of warband leaders, he still sought recognition as a 'king' through adopting the languages and practice of kingship. This demonstrates how the formation of a status hierarchy is 'inherently social' as the status of a polity must be recognized by other actors.[5] The Byzantine and Persian hierarchical claims to kingship could therefore incorporate client kings as suzerain subjects, but this practice was also open to challenge by those attempting to seek equal status. This chapter will therefore show that the Two Eyes institution of kingship was a form of world-ordering arrangement that reinforced a common understanding of hierarchy and status in late antiquity among a diverse grouping of different polities.

As the previous chapter has already shown, the Two Eyes system developed through the institution of kingship which formed a set of practices and a diplomatic language that reinforced shared understandings of glory, honour, status, and authority. This competitive system saw client kings and empires compete for recognition and status as part of a 'status community' in which each actor perceived themselves and understood other polities to be in a state of competition for status and legitimacy.[6] Such questions of recognition and challenges to status also show that hegemonic ordering is continually contested and that hierarchies are far from 'static'.[7] Kingship was an institution based on shared ideas and practices which worked to reinforce this hierarchy, and as David Kang has argued, an inter-polity hierarchy only emerges if a consensus can be formed on 'what the hierarchy is, how it is measured, and who gets to compete'.[8] In late antiquity, only the emperor and shah could express such status and hierarchical position as the Two Eyes of the world. But while hegemonic ordering is traditionally seen as great powers being able to 'lay down the law'

[3] For more on nomadic warfare, see David A. Graff, *The Eurasian Way of War: Military Practice in Seventh-Century China and Byzantium* (London: Routledge, 2016). On the composite bow, see Anatoly M. Khazanow, 'The Eurasian steppe nomads in world military history' in *Nomad Aristocrats in a World of Empires*, ed. Jürgen Paul (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2013), p. 196.

[4] Reinhard Wolf, 'Taking interaction seriously: asymmetrical roles and the behavioural foundations of status', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:4 (2019), p. 1200.

[5] David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 19.

[6] Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 4.

[7] Beverley Loke, 'The United States, China and the politics of hegemonic ordering in East Asia', *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), p. 1210.

[8] Kang, *East Asia before the West*, p. 18.

to lesser polities, in reality such hierarchies also depend on participants being aware of their rank and content with their relative status.[9] This is a relational process involving a negotiation of both top-down and bottom-up practices as hierarchies create expectations of both an actor's role and their status within the hierarchy. To explore this relational dynamic between competing claims for status, the first section begins by explaining the rise of barbarian kingdoms and nomadic polities. Kingship as an institution worked to unify war bands and tribes into recognizable kingdoms which could then enact diplomacy with the imperial centre. Barbarian groupings therefore developed into the proto-medieval kingdoms of Europe through a relational connection to Constantinople. The second section then shows how client kings could be incorporated within the universalist ideology of the Roman ecumene and how actors sought to adopt Byzantine and Sasanian court cultures in order to be recognized within a hierarchy of kings. The third and fourth sections then look at how lesser polities with the Huns and Hephthalites could challenge the hierarchical world order as barbarian kings sought to be treated as equals to the Two Eyes of Rome and Persia.

Barbarians within the Roman Ecumene

To consider the suzerain relations of the barbarian polities with the two great empires of late antiquity, first it is worth briefly considering the transformation which arose from the processes and dynamics that were initiated by the arrival of large groups of nomadic peoples. The mass migrations of late antiquity created a series of knock-on effects which radically transformed the geopolitics of the Roman and Sasanian world and markedly altered the trajectory of European and central Asian history. The arrival of peoples such as the Franks, Lombards, Goths, and Huns brought about the decline of the western Roman world and forced the eastern Roman empire to adapt to a new geopolitical environment. Ever since Edward Gibbon and his seminal work on the fall of the Roman empire, the western Roman empire has often been seen as a victim of these nomadic incursions.[10] However, the eastern Roman empire remained a stable power and did not experience the large settlement of nomadic groups as the west had done. The eastern half of the empire was able to survive despite notable defeats against the Goths, such as at the Battle of Adrianople in 378 AD.

[9] Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 15.

[10] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Classics, [1776] 1996).

This is most likely because, unlike the west, the eastern half of the empire did not suffer the same internal problems of repeated usurpations and civil war. But the sheer magnitude of the debate on the fall of the western Roman empire is too large to be considered within this section and outside the purview of the core focus on the Two Eyes system. The following, therefore, seeks to understand only how the power and wealth of the Roman empire worked to draw in the new nomadic peoples to the orbit of Constantinople.

The arrival of successive groups of 'barbarian' tribes posed a challenge to the sedentary empires of antiquity; yet, while some barbarian peoples had long existed outside of the empire, often as semi-nomadic or pastoralist peoples, they had routinely been incorporated as allies or *foederati* of Rome. For other more distant groups, particularly those such as the Huns, there was initially little understanding of nomadic peoples who came from the central Asian steppe. Prior to late antiquity, the mass movement of peoples had been a common sign of defeat in warfare and the large-scale movement of people was the shameful consequence of being captured.[11] As noted in Chapter 1, the transportation and enslavement of populations had been a well-established practice of ancient warfare. The sedentary empires therefore had little understanding and few ready interpretations in which to recognize and react to the arrival of large nomadic groups from the steppe. The possibility of diplomacy and direct political recognition of confederated tribal groups with whom there could be negotiations grew only slowly over time and even the very act of recognizing nomadic groups as a polity was to also challenge the ideology of the Roman world order and universal rule. It was the arrival of the Huns in the fourth century, however, which saw the most significant transformation of inter-polity order.[12] The arrival in Mesopotamia of the nomadic Huns in 395 AD with raids first across the Caucasus and then into Cappadocia and Syria, before settling in eastern Europe, presaged a definitive shock to the stability of the region. This was not necessarily because of the direct effect the Huns had on the Romans, but the 'indirect effects' their emergence as a polity had on forcing other barbarian groups further west into the Roman empire.[13] The Huns were initially a series of disparate groups with varied and different ethnic backgrounds that

[11] Michael Maas, 'How the steppes became Byzantine' in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250–750*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo and Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 29.

[12] For a brief account of some of the transformations, see 'The late Roman empire in the West' in *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568*, ed. Guy Halsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 63–111.

[13] Michael Whitby, 'War and the state in late antiquity: some economic and political connections' in *Krieg-Gesellschaft-Institutionen*, ed. Burkhard Meißner, Oliver Schmitt, and Michael Sommer (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005), p. 357.

spread over a wide area covering modern Hungary to the Urals. They first reached the western European steppes around 370 AD and their arrival in new lands initiated a series of developments which would reshape the Roman world. The Huns in the east, known as the Kidarites, Chionites, and Hephthalites, established kingdoms to the northeast of modern Iran. In the west, the 'European' Huns moved west to eventually settle on the Hungarian plains. Their arrival in Europe forced other nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples, such as the Goths, even further west to seek refuge across the Danube in the western Roman empire, leading to their eventual settlement within the lands of the empire.[14] Migration and the movement of peoples was a continuous aspect of Roman history, but it was this 'chain reaction' of peoples emerging from the steppe, pushing other groups further towards Rome, that would unsettle the empire.[15]

The barbarian groups which would become medieval Europe's proto-kingdoms had all largely crossed the Roman imperial frontier by around 410 AD, and according to the historian Peter Heather, a 'direct line of cause and effect' can be traced from the barbarian invasions to the fall of the western half of the Roman empire.[16] While these barbarian invasions reshaped late antiquity, historians of the fall of Rome continue to debate to what extent these barbarian peoples had a conscious and direct effect on Roman decline. The debate is normally divided into two categories of 'movers' and 'shakers'; movers are those which attribute the fall of Rome explicitly to the barbarian invasions, while shakers argue that the internal structural pressures of the Roman empire would prove to be the ultimate cause of its downfall.[17] As the previous chapter has shown, usurpation by ambitious generals was certainly an almost routine threat faced by the insecure regimes of late antiquity. The arrival of migrating peoples during this period coincided with successive internal power struggles within the Roman empire itself as the militarized Roman frontier gave rise to a series of powerful generals able to usurp imperial power for their own benefit. The 'shaker' side of the debate argues that these barbarian incursions into the empire were often a 'localised phenomenon' and that they proved to be a less direct threat to the imperial throne than the prospect

[14] Michael Maas, 'Reversal of fortune: an overview of the Age of Attila' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 7.

[15] Iver B. Neumann and Einar Wigen, *The Steppe Tradition in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 98.

[16] Peter Heather, 'The Huns and the end of the Roman empire in western Europe', *The English Historical Review*, 110:435 (1995), p. 5. Also see Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (London: Macmillan, 2005).

[17] The debate between 'movers' and 'shakers' is vast; see Guy Halsall, 'Review article: movers and shakers—the barbarians and the fall of Rome', *Early Medieval Europe*, 8:1 (1999), pp. 131–145.

of an imperial rival arising from the court or from within the Roman army.[18] While the pressures of nomadic peoples no doubt added to the systemic problems within the western Roman empire, it is not entirely clear that this should be seen as an outright overthrow of Rome by a grand strategy of barbarian conquest.[19] It was certainly not a unified attempt to overthrow the Roman empire by a single outside actor intent on victory and there were significant 'pull' factors attracting new peoples which arose from within the empire and its diplomatic practices with barbarian groups.[20]

The Romans had a long history of engagement with those considered barbarians and some of the most significant pull factors which attracted the movement of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples were the wealth, markets, and opportunities provided by the Roman empire. The Roman empire had been steadily interacting with and even incorporating barbarian peoples along the Rhine and Danubian frontiers across the third century AD and the process of settling peoples of Germanic origin within the empire in exchange for military service was long-established. Connections with tribes along the frontier had often developed through client–patron relations that saw Roman emperors display their wealth in showering such client kings with gifts and subsidies. These practices allowed successive emperors to prevent frontier raiding by roving warbands and to display their own status and power, but in doing so, such subsidies to tribes and client kings also created a view of the Romans as a target and source of wealth.[21] The Romans also used barbarians to make up the ever-growing number of forces required by the imperial armies. Barbarian groups proved to be a cheap resource for the imperial armies as they were seen to be better suited to fighting and were paid less than Roman officers, with the added benefit that Roman landlords who did not wish to lose revenue or tenants could be exempted from providing recruits.[22] This 'barbarization' of the Roman army was particularly prevalent for the eastern half of the empire which would see the armies of Justinian in the sixth century composed of a range of groups. This could include peoples such as the Heruls who were given lands along the Danube frontier in exchange for service, but also Armenians from within the Roman-controlled portion of Armenia, while recruitment also

[18] Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 83.

[19] Rey Koslowski, 'Human migration and the conceptualization of pre-modern world politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 46 (2002), pp. 375–399.

[20] Although this is not to suggest this was a peaceful process; see Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[21] Joanna Kemp, 'Amicitia, gift-exchange and subsidies in imperial Roman diplomacy' in *Reflections of Roman Imperialisms*, ed. Marko A. Janković (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), pp. 92–101.

[22] Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe ad 350–425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 136–154.

expanded to include those peoples considered outside of Roman-controlled lands, such as Lombards, Slavs, Bulgars, and Gepids, among others. Recruitment in this manner drew upon a range of disparate groups and, as Michael Whitby has argued, 'essentially any tribal group' within reach of the fiscal power of Constantinople could be recruited for service within the Roman army.[23]

The demand for soldiers was a strong pull factor for migration but those barbarian allies who were most successful would eventually go on to build their own kingdoms on the territory of the western Roman empire.[24] The idea of western Rome being captured and carved up by outsider barbarians into new kingdoms, however, is in many ways a modern invention. A more accurate way of understanding these developments would be to recognize that the dynamics of imperial power worked to draw nomadic peoples into Rome and Constantinople's orbit, but while the western half collapsed, the eastern empire refashioned such practices in order to incorporate the barbarian kings into a new series of client–patron relations. The suzerain system of late antiquity was transformed as the new barbarian kingdoms sought to legitimize their status with direct reference to the ecumene of the eastern Roman empire, as the following section will show.

The Regnalization of Late Antiquity

The Roman empire had long surrounded itself with client kings based on a direct and personal set of client–patron relations in which such clients were seen as existing under Rome's 'guardianship' or 'Roman tutela'.[25] One practice which reflects this is the retaining of hostages at the imperial court as a means to sponsor potential clients and tutor a barbarian into Roman culture and traditions.[26] Gift giving and the payment of subsidies to friendly tribes along the frontier was another favoured practice of the Romans to ensure compliant tribes along the imperial frontier. It is a mistake therefore to presume that the barbarian groups which upended the western half of the empire emerged

[23] Michael Whitby, 'Recruitment in Roman armies from Justinian to Heraclius' in *Late Antiquity on the Eve of Islam*, ed. Averil Cameron (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 277–339.

[24] Walter Pohl, 'Migrations, ethnic groups and state building' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 255.

[25] David Braund, *Rome and the Friendly King: The Character of Client Kingship* (Abingdon: Routledge, repr. [1984] 2014), p. 182; Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 395.

[26] However, such practices could also be a risk in creating Roman-educated hostages that knew how to use such advantage against the Romans themselves, as seen most notably with Theoderic and Alaric. Peter Crawford, *Zeno: The Perils of Power Politics in Fifth-Century Constantinople* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2019), p. 40.

from the forests of Germania or from the steppe with fully formed identities and acted as distinct political actors. Instead, they formed their identities in relation to the Roman ideology of empire.[27] Late antiquity would see strong leaders emerge through a relational development to Constantinople that saw the 'regnalization' of tribal and warband leaders becoming kings within the Roman ecumene, as the following explains.[28]

The fall of Rome was far from a uniform affair across western Europe as some areas saw more social and economic collapse than others. But eventually local elites rose to power through competition and conflict that saw a relational connection develop with Constantinople.[29] The barbarian rulers of the proto-western kingdoms of late antiquity retained many Roman institutions and saw their relations with the emperor in Constantinople in terms of such patronage.[30] This is particularly apparent in the adoption of kingly court cultures. The proto-medieval kingdoms of Europe saw barbarians adopt Roman power structures that involved the centralization of authority around urban centres. This included Toulouse for the Visigoths, Ravenna for the Ostrogoths, Paris for the Franks, Geneva for the Burgundians, and Braga for the Suevi. The centralization of power around an urban capital meant the creation of a royal court which provided the 'means' for Romans and barbarians to interact and develop stronger client–patron relations.[31] While the rise of the new barbarian leaders in the west was certainly not always peaceful, the establishment of royal courts around urban centres facilitated both the development of diplomacy with Constantinople and a hierarchy of status relations.

The new barbarian elites in the west could still be accused of settling on imperial soil without consent of the emperor and they sought legitimacy from recognizing the suzerainty of the Byzantine emperor.[32] Even pretenders to the thrones of the Frankish and Visigoth kingdoms would seek legitimacy for their rival claims to rule by visiting the imperial court at Constantinople,

[27] Walter Pohl, 'Telling the difference: signs of Ethnic identity' in *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); Pohl, 'Migrations, ethnic groups, and state building'.

[28] Evangelos Chrysos, 'The empire, the gentes and the regna' in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut, and Walter Pohl (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 19.

[29] Andrew Louth, 'Justinian and his legacy' in *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire 500–1492*, ed. Jonathan Shepard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 99.

[30] Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 48.

[31] Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe ad 350–425*, p. 43.

[32] Alexander Sarantis, 'Diplomatic relations between the eastern Roman empire and the "barbarian" successor states 527–565', *History Compass*, 16:11 (2018), pp. 1–14.

thereby demonstrating its place at the centre of an imperial hierarchy.[33] Crucially, barbarian kings were not enemies of the 'Roman order'. They may have challenged the Byzantine emperor for direct rule over the actual city of Rome, but they did not seek to challenge his title as emperor of the Romans.[34] This created a relational dynamic in which the status and identity of the barbarian leaders was reflected in their dealings with the eastern Roman emperor, while the emperor himself could then improve his own status by claiming suzerainty over numerous groups of peoples. The Byzantine emperor Anastasius, for example, recognized Theodric as king over the Ostrogoths and Italians when he sent imperial insignia to their capital in Ravenna in 498, while the king of the Franks, Clovis I, was given an imperial title when he converted to Orthodox Catholicism in 496.[35] Groups such as the Franks initially began as an alliance of various tribes that were used by the Romans as a military grouping to defend the northern frontier in the third century AD. The term 'Franks' was itself a catch-all phrase for a range of peoples that may have included groups also known as the Chamavi, Bructeri, Chattuarii, and Ampsivarii, among others.[36] Within this grouping known as the Franks were leaders who could be appointed to a rank within the Roman army as a means to increase their control over barbarian peoples.[37] Eventually this practice would see stronger leaders emerge who were able to unite the Franks into a more coherent polity. The establishment of the Merovingian dynasty with the first king of the Franks, Clovis I, was therefore a direct product of relations with the Romans.[38] In receiving gifts from the eastern emperor, the rulership of Clovis was recognized and this was essentially 'legalising the establishment' of the kingdom of Clovis.[39] The existence of the Franks as a distinct people therefore only makes sense if this gradual transformation into the conquerors of western Europe is seen as part of the Roman experience.[40] The historian

[33] Ecaterina Lung, 'Barbarian envoys at Byzantium in the 6th century', *Hiperboreea*, 2:1 (2015), p. 41.

[34] Walter Pohl, 'Justinian and the barbarian kingdoms' in *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 449.

[35] Sarantis, 'Diplomatic relations between the eastern roman empire and the "barbarian" successor states', pp. 4–7.

[36] Hans-Werner Goetz, 'Gens, kings and kingdoms: the Franks' in *Regna and Gentes*, p. 309.

[37] Examples include figures such as Silvanus, a Frankish general who Ammianus records as being accused of plotting a coup by Emperor Constantius II. See Amm. Marc., 15.5.1–35.

[38] John Vanderspoel, 'From empire to kingdoms in the late antique west' in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), pp. 426–440.

[39] Joachim Ehlers, 'The birth of the monarchy out of violent death: transformations in kingship from late antiquity to the tenth century', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, 26:1 (2004), p. 12.

[40] Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Agathias even describes how the Franks were similar to the Romans in their system of government and administration which were 'modelled more or less on the Roman pattern'. The following extract from Agathias demonstrates the hybrid nature of these polities. He stated how 'for a barbarian people, [they] strike me as extremely well-bred and civilised and practically the same as ourselves except for their uncouth style of dress and peculiar language'.[41] In this statement, Agathias is acknowledging the difficulty in trying to identify the so-called barbarians as a distinct cultural 'other' and recognizing the relational dynamic in forming the identity of the Franks. The fact that barbarian peoples were therefore already often culturally Romanized helped to strengthen imperial claims of suzerainty.[42]

The example of the Franks is just one among many of how the Romans would appoint tribal leaders as a means to make barbarians sedentary and simplify their relations in which a single figure could be held responsible for the actions of a diverse grouping of people. In many ways, this was not too dissimilar to more modern means of imperial rule in which bureaucracies sought to identify and administer diverse ethnic groups.[43] Such practices were a way to manage the imperial frontier, but once created, these new polities had the potential to be more self-assertive and make their own claims for autonomy, land, and resources.[44] By the time of Justinian's attempt to reconquer the western half of the empire, the East Romans could even be viewed as outsiders and foreigners by those in Italy who saw the Byzantines as 'Greeks'.[45] There was therefore a clear sense in late antiquity that something had changed with the arrival of the barbarians and that the west had been lost.[46] Some historians consequently see Byzantine claims to rule over the western half of the empire, despite lacking the material capability to do so, as a 'constitutional fiction' or 'delusion'.[47] But it is the concept of ecumene that explains how the Greek-speaking Byzantines could still see themselves as thoroughly Roman

[41] Agathias, 1.2.3–5.

[42] Sarantis, 'Diplomatic relations between the eastern roman empire and the "barbarian" successor states', p. 10.

[43] See, for example, Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 22–23.

[44] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (London: Yale University Press, 2009, pp. 257–259; also see Patrick J. Geary, *Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[45] Walter Pohl, 'Justinian and the Barbarians' in *Cambridge Companion Age of Justinian*, p. 463.

[46] Peter Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome and the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 127.

[47] Roger C. Blockley, *East Roman Frontier Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: Cairns, 1992), p. 47; Anthony Kaldellis, 'Did the Byzantine empire have "ecumenical" or "universal" aspirations?' in *Ancient States and Infrastructural Power*, ed. Clifford Ando and Seth Richardson (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 277.

and that the empire in the east could still claim legitimacy and hierarchy even without its western half.[48] The ecumenical ideology of the Romans meant that the creation of client kingdoms worked to reinforce the authority of the Byzantine emperor and reflected the universalist beliefs of the empire as even kings with the ability to challenge the empire could still be considered as subordinate to Byzantium.[49]

In receiving regalia and imperial symbols, the new barbarian kingdoms increased their own prestige and status but also acknowledged their subordinate position within the Roman ecumene. The practices of gift giving and seeking legitimacy from the eastern emperor allowed the Byzantines to carry on claims of universal rule and continued classical Roman ideas of embassies coming in supplication to the emperor. Gifts could include imperial portraits, cloaks, crowns, couches, brooches, silk garments, and tunics, along with other forms of regalia.[50] During a time when sumptuary laws were common, gifts of clothing such as silk robes could symbolize power structures and reinforce hierarchical relations and status.[51] The increasing importance of Christianity for the Romans would also see religion become a tool for the adoption of client kings. Barbarian rulers could be given the gift of baptism as a way to incorporate new allies within the Roman ecumene.[52] A Christian baptism was given to two Hunnic leaders known as Grod and Askum who were baptized and became godsons of Emperor Justinian in the late 520s.[53] The king of Lazica was also adopted as a godson by Justinian who was further brought into the Roman client system through marriage to the granddaughter of a patrician.[54] These forms of exchanges represent a type of clientelism in which emperors could sponsor client kings as a means to boost recruitment within the army or gain a defensive ally along the imperial frontier. Clientelism today is often dismissed as a form of cronyism or nepotism within 'domestic politics', but in

[48] Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 14.

[49] George Ostrogorsky, 'The Byzantine emperor and the hierarchical world order', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 35:84 (1956), pp. 1–14; this was true for late antiquity but was challenged by the rise of Charlemagne and the ceding of 'symbolic authority'. See Anne A. Latowsky, *Emperor of the World: Charlemagne and the Construction of Imperial Authority, 800–1229*, p. 239.

[50] Procopius, *Wars*, 3.25.5; Menander, fr. 5.2.

[51] Anna Maria Muthesius, 'Silk, power and diplomacy in Byzantium' in *Textiles in Daily Life: Proceedings of the Third Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America, September 24–26, 1992* (Earleville, MD: Textile Society of America, Inc., 1993).

[52] Edward Arthur Thompson, 'Christian missionaries among the Huns', *Hermathena*, 67 (1946), pp. 73–79; Michael Whitby, *The Wars of Justinian* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2021), p. 118.

[53] Alexander Sarantis, 'Eastern management of barbarian states in the lower-middle Danube frontier zones AD 332–610' in *Grenz/übergänge*, ed. Orsolya Heinrich-Tamaska and Daniel Syrbe (Remshalden: Verlag Bernhard Albert Greiner, 2016), p. 49.

[54] *Mal. Chronicle*, 17.413.

late antiquity such client–patron relations formed an unequal but reciprocal exchange between polities that could strengthen the strategic advantage of the patron and the bargaining position of the client.[55] Gifts, titles, and religious baptisms could also confer legitimacy to the barbarian kings and worked to further an inter-polity language of kingship in which the barbarian leaders gained membership of a Roman and Sasanian cultural sphere.[56]

The cultural sphere of the Two Eyes system demonstrates that stratified 'rankings of honour and prestige' within late antiquity were expressed not just through military or economic resources but also through culture and language.[57] The result of this was that those considered as barbarians would adopt the Byzantine and Sasanian court cultures, thereby taking on the 'symbolic vocabulary' of kingship.[58] Just as the Byzantine emperor would bestow gifts upon clients, so too would the Sasanian shah. Such gifts could include silver vessels, such as cups, plates, and bowls, that often used a traditional motif in Iranian art depicting the shah in a hunting scene. These vessels even featured a certain amount of standardization in size, design, and silver content that suggests some form of centralized control over production. These silver vessels were given by the shah to both nobles within the empire and to barbarian courts serving both as a diplomatic gift and as a symbolic display of power. To reinforce this message, the vessels could even depict the investiture of a client and reinforced notions of royal power and authority.[59] There was also a significant amount of emulation among barbarian courts who would adopt the Sasanian court culture of using ceremonial cushions and pavilions, as well as making use of pearls and crowns similar in style to those popular in Persia.[60] There is evidence that barbarian peoples also adopted the symbols and

[55] Wouter P. Veenendaal, 'Analysing the foreign policy of micro-states: the relevance of the international patron-client model', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 13:3 (2017), pp. 561–577.

[56] Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

[57] Paul Musgrave and Dan Nexon, 'Defending hierarchy from the moon to the Indian Ocean: symbolic capital and political dominance in early modern China and the Cold War', *International Organization*, 72:3 (2018), p. 594.

[58] Matthew P. Canepa, 'Distant displays of powers: understanding cross-cultural interaction among the elites of Rome', *Ars Orientalis*, 38 (2010), pp. 121–154; Richard Payne, 'The making of Turan: the fall and transformation of the Iranian East in late antiquity', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 4–41; also see how other cultures took on the symbols and culture of the Sasanians: Isabel Toral-Niehoff, 'Late antique Iran and the Arabs: the case of Al-Hira', *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 6 (2013), pp. 115–126.

[59] Canepa, 'Distant displays of power', p. 141; Jamsheed K. Chosky, 'Sacral kingship in Sasanian Iran', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 2 (1988), p. 47; Kate Masia-Radford, 'Luxury silver vessels of the Sasanian period' in *Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel T. Potts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 922.

[60] Toral-Niehoff, 'Late antique Iran and the Arabs'; al-Tabari describes how the shah sat on rugs and cushions woven with gold and silken carpets. See al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari, the Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids and Yemen*, vol. 5 [Clifford E. Bosworth] (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 385–386.

iconography used by both Persians and Romans on the faces of coins.[61] So influential was this inter-polity language of kingship that one of the first tasks for any usurper of a royal throne was to mint coins in a style that would communicate their authority and legitimacy as king.[62] The language of kingship would also see minor kings seek to adopt the same styling of titles used by the shah and emperor. One such example can be seen with a Hunnic king from central Asia in the fifth century who boasted his title as 'Lord Ularg, the king of the Huns, the great king of the Kushans, the afshiyan of Samarkand'.[63] Despite perhaps lacking the material basis for comparison to the Sasanian shah, claims to ruling over other people was a way to reinforce legitimacy as a king and to demonstrate their ability to act as a sovereign power. Lesser actors, while lacking the material resources of the two sedentary empires, would therefore seek to express legitimacy through the Byzantine-Persian language of kingship and hierarchy. The hierarchy of late antiquity was repeatedly sustained by this 'ideational and social capital' as gift giving and the recognition of imperial titles worked to enforce a ranking of powers.[64]

For a modern international relations audience, this form of client–patron relations could be seen as a form of 'great power management'.[65] Just as European great powers in the nineteenth century sought to establish common rules and define a core of civilized states, so too did the two great empires of late antiquity.[66] The clearest example of this form of clientelism in late antiquity is found with the adoption by both empires of Arab tribes as subordinate clients who were used as proxy forces in times of conflict. The land of Arabia was a vast area which covered the Arabian peninsula, but also included parts of modern-day Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, with terms such as 'Arab', 'Arabia', and 'Saracen' used very loosely by Roman authors.[67] The emperor Diocletian had sought to secure the imperial frontier with Arabia by building forts and defences in the

[61] Soren Stark, 'Aspects of elite representation among the sixth and seventh century', in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*, pp. 333–356; Richard N. Frye, 'Sasanian-central Asian trade relations', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 7:1 (1993), p. 76.

[62] Domiziana Rossi, 'Sasanian kings as decision-makers: reshaping the Eranshahr' in *Narratives of Power in the Ancient World*, ed. Urska Furlan et al. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022), p. 261.

[63] Richard Payne, 'The making of Turan: the fall and transformation of the Iranian East in late antiquity', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 9:1 (2016), p. 17.

[64] Beverley Loke, 'The United States, China and the politics of hegemonic ordering in East Asia', *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), p. 1212.

[65] The term 'clientelism' is perhaps more apt and avoids the nineteenth-century connotations of European hegemony.

[66] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 1; Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave [1977] 2002), p. 200; Ian Clark, 'Towards an English School theory of hegemony', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15:2 (2009), pp. 203–228.

[67] Greg Fisher, *Rome, Persia and Arabia: Shaping the Middle East from Pompey to Muhammed* (Routledge: London, 2020), p. 3.

south but this gave way over time to relying more on local proxy forces. The Arabian frontier had always been porous, making any kind of rigid border impossible to implement, and as semi-nomadic peoples, Arabs existed both inside and outside the empire.[68] The Roman response to this problem was to adopt Arab clients for defence of the frontier. This was a standard Roman solution to see frontier peoples as clients to be managed. As Theophylact describes, the Arabs were considered as 'most unreliable and fickle, their mind is not steadfast and their judgement is not grounded in prudence'; because of this, they needed to be carefully managed.[69] The Romans and the Sasanians each sought to use Arab clients to guard the frontier, as an auxiliary force in times of war that included sponsoring raids against the enemy, and as a conduit for trade with networks stretching across to southern Arabia and the Red Sea. The direct power of imperial control over Arab clients, however, often had mixed results in terms of effectiveness; as Joshua the Stylite records, Arab forces 'on both sides' saw war as a 'source of profit' and they 'wrought their will upon both kingdoms'.[70] But there was a shared interest from both imperial centres in seeking to impose constraints on their Arab clients. At the end of a brief conflict in 421–422 AD that involved little in the way of major fighting, both empires sought to impose their will and prevent their proxies from acting independently. The fifth-century historian Malchus records how they agreed that 'neither side would accept the Saracen allies (of the other), if any of them attempted to revolt'.[71] This attempt to codify the status of Arab proxies shows a clear aim to ensure that neither side would defect and join the other.

To manage their Arab allies, the Romans initially used an alliance system that relied upon a broad network of different clients, but under Justinian the Romans adapted the Sasanian model of a single client king known as a 'phylarch'.[72] In consolidating many tribes into one grouping, Justinian appointed an Arab leader known as al-Harith as the chief phylarch who led a group known as the Jafnids.[73] Procopius records this by stating how 'Justinian

[68] Mariana Castro, *The Function of the Roman Army in Southern Arabia* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018).

[69] Theophylact, 3.17.7.

[70] Joshua the Stylite, LXXIX.

[71] Malchus, frg. 1.4–7 in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars ad 363–628: Part II, ad 363–630—A Narrative Sourcebook*, ed. Samuel N. C. Lieu and Geoffrey Greatrex (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 42.

[72] Robert G. Hoyland, 'Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in late Roman epigraphy' in *Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, ed. Hannah M. Cotton et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 381; Michael C. A. MacDonald, 'Nomads and the Ḥawrān in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods: a reassessment of the epigraphic evidence', *Syria*, 70 (1993), pp. 368–377.

[73] Fisher, *Rome, Persia and Arabia*, p. 114.

bestowed upon him the dignity of king'.[74] The Jafnids lacked any real urban centre but practised seasonal migrations and were part of trading networks that reached as far as the cities of Nisibis and Dara.[75] The main Sasanian client among the Arab tribes was a semi-nomadic group known as the Nasrids who established themselves around the fourth century in northeastern Arabia, primarily around the city of al-Hira. As with the adoption of clients by the Roman, the Sasanians appointed the phylarch of the Nasrids. The historian al-Tabari records how Khusro II appointed the Nasrid phylarch al-Nu'man by giving him 'robes of honour' along with 'a crown valued at sixty thousand dirhams and set with pearls and gold'.[76] To receive a gift from the emperor or shah signified a barbarian chief's subordinate status within an imperial hierarchy, but it could also work to raise their own status among other barbarian peoples.[77] Archaeological evidence suggests that kings within Arabia even boasted of the titles bestowed upon them by their imperial sponsors by listing the title 'phylarch' on funerary monuments as an achievement, thereby signalling that recognition by the imperial powers was in itself a symbol of their own status and prestige.[78]

The title of phylarch gave local kings a means to develop their own wealth and power, but the title also 'acquired a level of administrative meaning and connotations of authority within the local Roman hierarchy'.[79] Payment of subsidies to Arab kings could also be used to hire troops, furthering their personal position as well as assisting Byzantine security interests.[80] In sponsoring a client phylarch, Arab chiefs could rise up in power, and once they had consolidated their position they could take on significant independence from their imperial patrons. Just as western barbarian chiefs benefitted from imperial sponsorship, so too would the Arab phylarchs. The Arab kingdoms were therefore in many ways 'on a par' with the proto-kingdoms of the Roman West as polities who sought greater prestige within the Roman ecumenical hierarchy.[81]

[74] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.47.

[75] Lawrence Conrad, 'Eastern neighbours: the Arabs to the time of the prophet' in *The Byzantine Empire c.500–c.700*, ed. Jonathan Shepard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 188.

[76] Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari, the Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids and Yemen*, vol. 5 [Clifford E. Bosworth] (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 343.

[77] Ekaterina Nechaeva, 'The sovereign's image abroad: imperial portraits in early Byzantine diplomacy', *Ephemeris Dacoramana*, 14 (2012), pp. 199–213.

[78] James A. Bellamy, 'A new reading of the Namārah inscription', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 105:1 (1985), pp. 31–51.

[79] Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 79.

[80] Fisher, *Between Empires*, p. 98.

[81] Robert G. Hoyland, 'Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in late Roman epigraphy' in *From Hellenism to Islam*, pp. 394–396.

The sponsorship of clients and the distribution of patronage across late antiquity allowed for minor figures to emerge, at first as clients of imperial rule. Over time, with the consolidation of their power, they could even act as alternatives to Roman or Persian rule. Through the adoption of imperial courtly customs, symbols, and clothes, these client kings emerged as hybrid forms of kingship in which Roman and Sasanian culture were often adapted and mixed with local traditions.[82] The clientelism of late antiquity was therefore not a top-down hierarchy in which the Romans and Persians could impose their will but a co-constitutive relationship. The identity of barbarian kingdoms in the west and Arab tribes was constituted through emulation and competition with the two imperial centres.[83] The ranking of powers could even see actors seek to reframe their status and even directly challenge Byzantium and Persia.[84] The rise of Attila and of the Hephthalites provide perhaps the clearest examples of how those considered barbarians could equally challenge the very order of the Two Eyes system. These two barbarian groups defeated imperial armies and sought to extract their own tributes, thereby upending the ecumenical beliefs of both empires. The danger posed by these two groups is that they had the potential to challenge the dual hierarchy of imperial rule, yet the Huns and Hephthalites also needed mutual political recognition and for their status to be legitimized, something which could not be achieved through military strength alone.[85] Just as Attila the Hun would demand his own kingly status, the Hephthalites sought to enforce a tributary status on the Persians. As the following sections will show, these examples demonstrate how status is a positional concept and constantly open to contestation.[86]

The Age of the Huns

Of all the nomadic peoples which shaped late antiquity, it was the Huns who were the first to disrupt the Roman ecumene. While the Germanic peoples

[82] Fisher, *Rome, Persia and Arabia*, p. 82.

[83] Hoyland, 'Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in late Roman epigraphy', pp. 394–396.

[84] On status and hierarchy, see Wohlforth et al., 'Moral authority and status in international relations: good states and the social dimension of status seeking', *Review of International Studies*, 44:3 (2017), p. 528; Karim El Taki, 'Subordinates quest for recognition in hierarchy', *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 50:1 (2021), pp. 55–82.

[85] Audrey Becker, 'From hegemony to negotiation: reshaping east Roman diplomacy with barbarians during the 5th century' in *La Diplomatie: Byzantine, de l'Empire Romain aux confins de l'Europe*, ed. Nicolas Drocourt and Élisabeth Malamut (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 33–34.

[86] Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 38.

from the forests of Europe had long been within the orbit of Roman power, the arrival of horseback warriors from the steppe was initially seen as something alien and brought great confusion to the Roman worldview. Interaction and engagement with nomadic peoples was a slow learning process that evolved over time. In the initial period of Hunnic invasions, the Huns did not act as a single body with a unified set of aims. It was certainly not a grand strategy of conquest but consisted of piecemeal incursions involving a series of raiding parties.[87] One path of invasion included driving south across the Caucasus with the Huns launching raids into Armenia, Syria, Palestine, and northern Mesopotamia in 395–396. These raids deep into Roman territory shook the eastern Roman empire, while the Sasanians also felt threatened by such raids across the Caucasus, as they were equally facing a strong Hunnic presence on their own eastern frontier. As one Roman source describes, nomadic Huns were seen as an 'accursed people' who brought ruin and devastation to both empires.[88] The challenge for both sedentary powers, then, was how to deter and learn to interact with such a powerful new nomadic force, as the following explores.

The arrival of the Huns brought fear and confusion to the people of the Roman empire and the reaction of Roman historians to this new threat was one based on cultural orientalism and an overwhelming sense of dread. The historian Ammianus described how 'the people of the Huns' were 'little known from ancient records', but that they exceeded 'every degree of savagery'.[89] This followed a pattern of classical thought which saw nomadic groups as essentially alien and aroused great hostility within Roman sources.[90] Ammianus further described the Huns as 'the most terrible of all warriors' who were 'faithless and unreliable', subject with 'every feeling to the mad impulse of the moment' which made them act 'like unreasoning beasts'.[91] The speed with which the Hunnic forces could move brought devastation across vast distances and gave the Huns a frequent superiority of strategic surprise that was often able to take advantage of any internal weaknesses among neighbours and rivals. A fourth-century account by Saint Jerome describes how

> news came that the hordes of the Huns had poured forth … speeding here and there on their nimble-footed horses, they were filling all the world with

[87] Heather, 'The Huns and the end of the Roman empire in western Europe', p. 10.
[88] Chr. 724,136.20–137.9 in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, p. 17.
[89] Amm. Marc., 31.2.1.
[90] Brent Shaw, '"Eaters of flesh, drinkers of milk": the ancient Mediterranean ideology of the pastoral nomad', *Ancient Society*, 13–14 (1982–1983), pp. 5–31.
[91] Ammianus, 31.2.9; 31.2.11.

> panic and bloodshed … everywhere their approach was unexpected, they outstripped rumour in speed, and, when they came, they spared neither religion nor rank nor age.[92]

The Roman fear of the Huns was coupled with a distrust of their ability to act as a rational actor—one who would be able to negotiate in good faith. The sixth-century Byzantine guide to military strategy, the *Strategikon*, often ascribed to the emperor Maurice, describes dealing with nomads in similar terms. In describing nomads, the *Strategikon* states: 'They are very superstitious, treacherous, foul, faithless, possessed by an insatiate desire for riches. They scorn their oath, do not observe agreements, and are not satisfied by gifts. Even before they accept the gift, they are making plans for treachery and betrayal of their agreements.'[93]

For the Romans, the nomads were simply barbarians who were 'deceitful and ambiguous in speech' and essentially a 'race of untamed men'.[94] In many ways these responses carried on the ancient Roman attitude of cultural chauvinism in which superior status was demonstrated through adopting Roman cultural standards, while all other peoples were simply dismissed as 'barbarian'. Such attitudes have been a standard feature of nomadic and sedentary relations across many periods of history. The very practice of nomadism has challenged sedentary societies from antiquity to the modern era and contemporary international relations scholars have argued that nomadic peoples threaten the identity and ontological security of sedentary societies. The sheer act of such large-scale movements has long impacted the ability of a central power to exercise authority and control—a challenge for modern states just as much as for the Romans of late antiquity.[95]

The Roman descriptions of nomads repeatedly created an image of the Huns as a society at the 'lowest possible level of social evolution'.[96] But the fear of the Huns and the Roman bewilderment in understanding this new enemy also reflected a concern by the East Romans in learning who among the Huns they could deal with and with whom they could negotiate. It was not until around the year 406 that Roman sources could actually identify a

[92] Jerome, Letter 77.8.

[93] Maurice, *Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984) p. 116.

[94] Amm. Marc., 31.2.12.

[95] Joseph MacKay, Jamie Levin, Gustavo de Carvalho, Kristin Cavoukian, and Ross Cuthbert, 'Before and after borders: the nomadic challenge to sovereign territoriality', *International Politics*, 51 (2013), p. 5.

[96] Hyun Jin Kim, *Geopolitics in Late Antiquity: The Fate of Superpowers from China to Rome* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 25–26.

Hunnic leader by name and the first armistice agreement with the Huns was not achieved until 431 AD.[97] A later anonymous text chronicled the Hunnic invasions by describing just how rapidly the Hunnic menace could appear and withdraw:

> In this year the cursed people of the Huns came into the land of the Romans and ran through Sophene, Armenia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Cappadocia as far as Galatia. They took many prisoners and withdrew to their country. But they descended to the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris in the territory of the Persians and came as far as the royal city of the Persians. They did no damage there but devastated many districts on the Euphrates and Tigris, killed many people and led many into captivity. But when they learned that the Persians advanced against them, they returned to flight.[98]

The speed and scale of the destruction brought by the Huns made it difficult to know how to respond to an enemy who could move on to another area just as quickly as they appeared.

The term 'Hun' is itself a political label and not a description of any ethnic, linguistic, or cultural grouping. The Huns were a confederated tribe of diverse groups and while they reached the peak of their power with the reign of Attila in the 440s, they equally dissolved as a major political force within a couple of decades after his death. The co-constitutive relationship between nomads and sedentary societies also impacted the ability of nomadic leaders to consolidate their followers into larger groupings. Nomadic tribes in late antiquity often coalesced from disparate groups which could collapse very suddenly if sources of tribute or plunder dried up, creating repeated cycles of political centralization and fragmentation.[99] The Byzantine empire even sought to take advantage of these cycles of fragmentation; the first tactic employed by the Romans against the Huns had been to seek to buy off the senior supporters of a Hunnic leader known as Uldins in 408 AD which caused support of his leadership to collapse and forced him to flee.[100] The general instability of Hunnic tribal groupings was probably also a reason behind the Roman's failed attempt

[97] Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 216; Becker, 'From hegemony to negotiation', p. 22; Christopher Kelly, 'Neither conquest nor settlement' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, p. 197.

[98] Michael Maas (ed.), *Readings in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 326.

[99] Giuseppe A. Ricci, 'Nomads in late antiquity: gazing on Rome from the steppe Attila to Asparuch (370–680 CE)', PhD diss. (Princeton, 2015), p. 115.

[100] Christopher Kelly, *Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 52.

to assassinate Attila the Hun in 449 with the hope this would again be a catalyst for the Hunnic force to collapse.[101] It is significant that the Romans were aware of the succession practices of the Sasanian monarchy, and by contrast did not use assassination attempts against any Persian kings. This is likely because it would not have had the same destabilizing effects to the extent that it would have had on the Huns. While the individual rulers of both Rome and Persia could be often weak and vulnerable to the threat of a coup, both polities enjoyed remarkable resilience as political actors, unlike the nomadic groups of late antiquity which easily fragmented.[102] The ability of nomadic leaders to maintain group cohesion was the most pressing political problem they faced. In nearly all accounts of diplomatic relations between the nomadic Huns and the Romans, the chief concern of the Huns was the issue of fugitives who had fled the tribal confederation and the possibility of further deflecting tribes.[103] Despite the relative weakness of Hunnic administrative structures, Attila even used scribes to keep lists of such defectors who had fled to the Roman side.[104] The prospect of individuals or groups 'running' and thereby switching loyalties challenged the very legitimacy of a Hunnic leader.[105] As the *Strategikon* accounts, nomadic tribes 'are seriously hurt by defections and desertions. They are very fickle, avaricious and, composed of so many tribes as they are, they have no sense of kinship or unity with one another. If a few begin to desert and are well received, many more will follow.'[106]

These cycles of formation and disintegration explains how the Huns dissolved so quickly as a military force within fifteen years of the death of Attila. But it was Attila more than any other Hunnic leader who challenged the suzerain hierarchy of the Two Eyes system, as explored below.

In the period around 440 AD the Huns reached the peak of their power with the reign of Attila and his brother Bleda. The Huns were often strategically canny and able to take advantage of any perceived weakness between Byzantium and Persia. Although the fifth century was a period of relative peace between the two great sedentary powers, there were two incidents in 421 and 440 AD of tension between the two sides of which the Huns were able

[101] Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy*, p. 66; on the debate over cohesion of group identity for Huns and Goths see also Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, pp. 241–245.

[102] A. D. Lee, 'Abduction and assassination: the clandestine face of Roman diplomacy in late antiquity', *The International History Review*, 31:1 (2009), p. 14.

[103] I am indebted to the work of Ekaterina Nechaeva on this point. See Ekaterina Nechaeva, 'Patterns of Roman diplomacy with Iran and the Steppe people' in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*, p. 364. For an example, see Priscus, fr. 9.3,2.

[104] Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy*, p. 160.

[105] Procopius, *Wars*, 3.25.1–9, 2.3.32–33, 2.3.39, 2.3–47; Menander, *Protector*, 12.6.27.

[106] Maurice, *Strategikon*, 11.2.

to take advantage. In 421, there was a dispute between Byzantium and Persia over persecuted Christians which saw a peace treaty within a year, while in 440 AD there was again a period of brief tensions between the two sides that was resolved with an agreement to build no new fortifications across the Mesopotamian frontier between the two empires. The Huns, however, were well adapted to taking advantage of such tensions and invaded Thrace in 422, finding the defences there weakened due to the Byzantine tensions with Persia. The Byzantines agreed to pay the Huns off with an annual payment of 350 pounds of gold.[107] Attila and Bleda then emerged as the leaders of the Huns in the 430s and invaded the Balkans again in 442 after seeing tensions between the two great empires, only to be bought off by further tributary payments. Attila would withdraw in 443 and emerged as the sole ruler of the Huns after his brother's death. He then invaded Thrace once again in 447 before turning to western Europe in 451, with contemporaries suggesting he had essentially bled the east dry and sought further riches in the west.[108]

The Huns led by Attila were never able to attack Constantinople directly, but their raids brought devastation and shock across the Roman world. Attila's invasions of the eastern Roman empire were a series of whirlwind raids that attacked weakened defences and took advantage of any opportunities that presented themselves. What is significant for this study, however, is the manner in which Attila sought to negotiate with the Byzantine empire. The historian Priscus provides an account of his diplomatic mission with the Roman envoy Maximinius in 449 AD to the court of Attila. Priscus details how the East Romans would seek to placate Attila with payments of tribute in order to buy off his forces and prevent further attacks.[109] Crucially, Attila is shown as wanting to be treated with the status not of a barbarian but as a kingly equal to the great empires of Byzantium and Persia. Diplomatic protocol of the time involved a practice of ensuring that the highest-ranking members of the senatorial order would act as ambassadors to Persia.[110] Lesser powers would therefore receive lower-ranking ambassadors as reflected by their status. Attila, however, was offended when met with lower-ranking officials and demanded that he should equally receive ambassadors of consular rank, the same as would be sent to Persia. Receiving envoys of a higher rank was a means for Attila to receive inter-polity recognition, but was also a way for him to express his status to his own followers.[111] The expectations of the

[107] Kelly, 'Neither conquest nor settlement' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, p. 197.
[108] Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy*, pp. 59–66.
[109] Priscus, fr. 61.
[110] Nechaeva, 'Patterns of Roman diplomacy with Iran and the steppe people', p. 360.
[111] Nechaeva, 'Patterns of Roman diplomacy with Iran and the steppe people', p. 3562.

Byzantines in late antiquity was that barbarians should adapt to the diplomatic standards of the Roman ecumene, but Attila challenged the very ability of the emperor to define the hierarchical relationship between them.[112] A story told in antiquity reflects how Attila sought to be seen as equal, if not even superior, to the Roman emperors. The story details how Attila, after capturing the city of Milan in 452, saw a painting which depicted 'the eastern and western Roman emperors on golden thrones with steppe nomads lying dead at their feet'. The angry Attila then demanded a new image, one which would show him as 'the man on the throne while servile Roman emperors poured gold coins before him from leather money bags'.[113] Attila rejected the Roman's civilizational beliefs of nomad inferiority and challenged the very legitimacy of the East Roman emperor. Priscus details how the Romans would pretend that they made arrangements of payments to Attila 'voluntarily' because of the 'inordinate fear' which gripped the East Roman commanders.[114] To disguise this position of Byzantine weakness, the subsidy payments were made on the pretence of Attila receiving an official Roman rank and title. The Byzantines gave Attila the title of *magister utriusque militiae* to disguise the fact that payments were actually a form of tribute to buy peace.[115]

The East Roman empire was eventually able to withstand the nomadic threat from the steppes and the Hunnic war band of Attila quickly fragmented after his death. New waves of nomadic peoples, such as the Avars, would emerge in the sixth century as a new barbarian menace; but they presented less of a threat compared to the devastation wrought by Attila. Constantinople's emergence as the centre of an imperial court helped to further stabilize imperial power, and the construction of the Walls of Theodosian, which can still be seen in the city of Istanbul today, helped to secure the safety of the imperial capital. The further construction of the Anastasian walls in the fifth century 64 kilometres east of the city worked to confine barbarian invasions to the bottleneck of the Balkans and ensured a strategically defensive position.[116] The East Roman empire therefore survived while the west fell, but Attila's raids and invasions presented more than just a security threat to the capital city. His demand for status as a barbarian king equal to the Roman emperor

[112] Becker, *From Hegemony to Negotiation*, p. 34.

[113] Michael Maas, 'Reversals of fortune: an overview of the age of Attila' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, p. 3.

[114] Priscus, fr. 5.4–5.

[115] Charles R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 242; Mischa Meier, 'A contest of interpretation: Roman policy toward the Huns as reflected in the "Honoria Affair" (448/50)', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 10:1 (2017), p. 50.

[116] Andrastos Omissi, *Emperors and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 297–299.

was an ideological threat to the Roman ecumene and challenged the very idea of a Two Eyes system. In receiving tribute payments, Attila would mockingly refer to the Byzantine emperor Theodosius as his 'slave'.[117] Attila's very success threatened the Byzantine's status as a great imperial power, which equally put their relations with Persia in peril. If the Byzantines paid tribute to the Huns, then the emperor's own ability to act as the 'brother' or as a counterpart of the 'sun and moon' to the Persian shah could be called into question. This challenge of ensuring equal hierarchical rank was one the Sasanians would also face in the fifth century, as the following explains.

The Hephthalites and the Shah

The Sasanians faced several nomadic groups on their northeastern frontier, which appeared in successive waves. The first Hunnic group known as the Kidarites emerged around 370 AD and they conquered the regions of Bactria, the Kabul valley, and Gandhara in modern-day Afghanistan. This group of people from the steppe were eventually displaced and conquered in turn by a group known as the Hephthalite Huns in the fifth century. The Hephthalites were a major threat against the eastern frontier of the Sasanians until they were finally defeated by an alliance of the Sasanians and a further wave of nomadic peoples known as the Turks in the second half of the sixth century. Just as the East Roman empire lost its western half, the Sasanians equally lost large parts of their eastern empire to barbarian invasions and it was the Hephthalites who would shake the very foundations of the Sasanian empire. It is difficult to know if the Hephthalites were ethnically linked to the Huns entering Europe, but all Hunnic polities from central Asia were polyglot, multi-ethnic peoples with diverse groupings.[118] Unlike in Europe, however, the barbarians of the Hephthalites were only a semi-nomadic people based around Bactria who developed tax-raising powers and produced their own coinage. The Hephthalites, as barbarians, however, challenged the very ideology of the Sasanian empire with the realm of Iranshar as a paradise. For the Sasanians, the barbarian threat best 'encapsulated the Zorastrian struggle between order and chaos', with the Sasanians representing the civilized world while the nomadic world was chaotic and lawless.[119] In response to nomadic threats, the Sasanians built a series of defensive fortifications such as the Gorgan Wall and the Wall of Darband. Such defensive walls were more than just fortifications as they

[117] Priscus, fr. 12.2.
[118] Kim, *Geopolitics in Late Antiquity*, p. 33.
[119] Sarris, *Empires of Faith*, p. 125.

served to mark the boundaries of the civilized world, with those outside as barbarians.[120]

The Hephthalites proved to be a formidable foe for the Sasanian empire and a series of conflicts led by Shah Peroz I (459–484) would end in disaster for the Sasanians. Peroz initially attacked the Hephthalites in 474 to try and stem the flow of their expansion. His invasion ended in defeat and capture, with him eventually being forced to pay a ransom for his release.[121] While in captivity, his Hunnic enemies demanded that the shah perform a ritual of *proskynesis* and prostrate himself before the Hephthalite king. This demand upended the very legitimacy and ideology of the shah's position and rather than show obedience to the Hephthalite king, Peroz performed the ritual sign of obedience but did so by claiming he was prostrating himself before the sun, a symbol of the Zoroastrian god Mithra.[122] To recover from this insult to his legitimacy, Peroz launched a second military campaign against the Hephthalites which had the urgency of attempting to 'restore a cosmologically appropriate relationship with the Huns'.[123] His second defeat resulted in the shah being forced to once again pay a tribute to the Hephthalites and pledge his son Kavadh as a hostage in 482. The tribute paid to the Hephthalite Huns consisted of thirty mule packs of silver drachms, a relatively small amount, yet the demand for tribute was more important for its symbolic than its financial value. The demand by the Huns showed that they were aware of an inter-polity 'language of power' and the symbolic messaging of receiving tribute.[124] Just two years later Peroz would once again seek to restore order to the Sasanian *Iranshahr* and launched a further campaign, only to be killed by the Hephthalites along with four of his sons and four of his brothers.[125]

The final defeat of Shah Peroz in 484 resulted in the submission of the Sasanian polity to a hierarchical relationship with the Hephthalites. His son Kavadh, who by this time was married into the Hunnic royal family, was then installed on the Sasanian throne in 488. The Hephthalites chose to retain a

[120] James Howard-Johnston, 'Military infrastructure in the Roman provinces north and south of the Armenian Taurus in late antiquity' in *War and Warfare in Late Antiquity*, ed. Alexander Sarantis and Neil Christie (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 884; Alfred J. Rieber, *Changing Concepts and Constructions of Frontiers, Ab Imperio*, vol. 1 (2003), p. 28.

[121] Potts, 'Sasanian Iran and its northeastern frontier' in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*, p. 295.

[122] Procopius, 1.3.13; also see Matthew P. Canepa, 'Sasanian Iran and the projection of power in late antique Eurasia' in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*, p. 65.

[123] Richard Payne, 'The reinvention of Iran' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, p. 287.

[124] Josef Wiesehofer and Robert Rollinger, 'The "empire" of the Hephthalites' in *Short-Termed Empires in World History*, ed. Robert Rollinger et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2020), p. 324.

[125] Potts, 'Sasanian Iran and its northeastern frontier' in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*, p. 295.

vassal Sasanian ruler on the throne rather than seek outright conquest, as receiving tributes and demonstrating status was considered to be more important than outright territorial control.[126] The defeat of the Persians also brought further humiliations as Kavadh was himself deposed as shah by an internal power struggle in 496, only to be restored to the throne yet again by the Hephthalites in 499. First, the death of a shah to the barbarians and then the dependence of his successor on their assistance created a 'nightmarish inversion of the cosmic order as intuited by the Zoroastrian faith'. The result of these upheavals was that Kavadh had 'little choice' but to attack Byzantium as a way to pacify his own nobles in order to shore up his legitimacy as a ruler.[127] The Sasanians sought not Byzantine territory but Roman tributes to symbolically restore political unity to a fragmented Sasanian *Iranshahr*.[128]

In attacking the East Romans in 502, Kavadh ended a period of peaceful coexistence between the two sides which had essentially lasted for over a century. Kavadh may have felt it necessary to attack Byzantium to restore his own legitimacy, but this event demonstrates how the hierarchical status of both the Romans and Persians was fragile and susceptible to challenge, and their grand ideological claims could not always be supported by the material reality of limitations to their imperial rule. Attila had humiliated Roman ecumenical claims to order lesser polities, while the Hephthalites similarly challenged the shah's portrayal of nomads as outside the boundaries of civilization. The desire to avoid the cost of major wars on two fronts simultaneously was a major factor in the growth of diplomacy between Byzantium and the Sasanian empire during the fifth century.[129] But the success of nomadic forces against the sedentary empires showed that their hierarchical ordering of the world could be challenged.

Conclusion

Through an ordering process of kingship, the dual hierarchy of the sedentary empires sought to regulate the inclusion or exclusion of lesser actors.[130] Modern liberal thought within international relations often views inter-polity order

[126] Hyun Jin Kim, *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 67; Khodadad Rezakhani, *Reorienting the Sasanians* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 131.

[127] Sarris, *Empires of Faith*, p. 133.

[128] Richard Payne, 'Cosmology and the expansion of the Iranian empire, 502–628 CE', *Past & Present*, 220:1 (2013), p. 17.

[129] Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy*, p. 18.

[130] Christian Reus-Smit, *On Cultural Diversity: International Theory in a World of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

building as a process of inclusion, but the geopolitical world of late antiquity shows an example of ordering that was explicitly exclusive and hierarchical.[131] Those who were included had to adopt the symbolic practices and vocabulary of kingship. As this chapter has shown, practices of gift giving, the use of titles, and symbolic messaging through visual representations of status served to reinforce a hierarchical ordering of polities. Such practices demonstrate how the status of a polity results from social processes in a relational manner and cannot be reduced to material capabilities alone.[132] Even when nomadic actors could challenge the sedentary powers, they still sought to adopt the Two Eyes cultural and symbolic aspects of kingship, therefore reinforcing a common understanding of hierarchy and status.

While both empires made universal claims to rule, in reality their ambitions were tempered in practice and their rhetorical beliefs existed simultaneously with a 'de facto degree of independence for other polities'.[133] The suzerain system established by Byzantium and Persia was also certainly far from peaceful, yet being able to assert a symbolic status of hierarchy was often more important than any concern for territorial gains. It was the universalist beliefs of the Roman ecumene, for example, which allowed for Constantinople to assert its status despite having lost the western half of the empire. But the suzerain system was also fragile and relied on the Romans and Sasanians being able to portray themselves as equal to one another, as 'brothers' in a dual hierarchy of kingly order. The Hunnic threat, both from Attila and the Hephthalites, was a danger simply because it challenged the emperor and shah's very legitimacy within a dual hierarchy. Any damage to the reputation or legitimacy for the Romans or Sasanians risked collapsing the Two Eyes system if either power could not portray themselves as the equal of the other. The question of honour and status therefore will be explored further in the following chapter. This will show how the world-ordering arrangements of the Two Eyes powers sought to define imperial spheres of influence, but this stability could be undermined by questions of honour and status within such a suzerain system.

[131] Kyle M. Lascurettes, *Orders of Exclusion: Great Powers and the Strategic Sources of Restraint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[132] Marina G. Duque, 'Recognizing international status: a relations approach', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:3 (2018), pp. 577–592.

[133] Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 47–48.

5

Diplomatic Practices in the Sixth Century

Recognition and Coexistence

Introduction

The sixth century was a period of a 'Two Eyes' relationship that saw two simultaneous but countervailing developments. On the one hand, the diplomatic relationship between the two powers of Byzantium and Persia became ever more sophisticated with elaborate diplomatic practices for managing relations. Concurrently, the sixth century would also see an increasingly militarized dispute over the frontier that experienced successive wars in the years between 502 and 532, 540 and 562, and 572 and 591, which all proved inconclusive.[1] This chapter will look at two peace treaties in 532 and 561/2 that arose from these inconclusive wars and sought to negotiate a lasting settlement between the two sides. What has become known as the 'Eternal Peace' of 532 and the treaty of 561/2 were both agreements that show how the Romans and Persians were forced to accept one another as an equal empire in the Two Eyes system. The negotiations also demonstrate that, despite their universalist claims to world rule, they had to recognize that each empire had their own legitimate interests. Both empires would also recognize that there was a shared interest in managing the threat of barbarian invasions from nomadic people of the steppe who could launch devastating raids through the Caucasus region, affecting the security of both empires. In seeking to manage this joint menace, there was a certain acceptance by both sides that they were 'destined to share the rule of the world' which made them 'rivals as much as partners'.[2]

The negotiations between Byzantium and Persia also show that despite their universalist aspirations, there was a limit to their claims to rule. The inability to enforce such universalist aspirations resulted in spheres of influence arising between the two empires. Spheres of influence vary across time and space, but

[1] Zeev Rubin, 'The Sasanid monarchy' in *The Cambridge Ancient History* 14, eds. Averil Cameron et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 643.

[2] Nina Garsoian, 'Byzantium and the Sasanians' in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. E Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 591.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press. © Kevin Blachford (2024).
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0006

they are a common feature of imperial politics in which universal claims face geopolitical limits and buffer zones arise between spheres reflecting the practical limitations of such claims.[3] Spheres of influence are commonly viewed today through a normative lens as 'relics of centuries past which have no place in the modern world'.[4] But they reflect the insecurity faced by imperial powers which often have unclear frontiers and limited abilities to match their universalist ambitions.[5] Empires often exist as a loose conglomerate structure with borders that may be ill defined; by their very nature, empires have frontiers which often fluctuate, with expansion and disintegration posing the key challenges to imperial rule.[6] The competing spheres of influence that developed in late antiquity were essentially a permeable boundary between the two empires, and while this remained stable for extended periods of time, it was also the scene of sudden raids, drives for conquest, sieges, diplomacy, and negotiation. Both empires were therefore confronted with the fear that the other side would intervene and overturn the buffer zone and faced a strategic dilemma regarding how to manage this shared frontier when neither side could outright absorb and conquer their rival power.[7]

The turbulent frontier between the Two Eyes powers reflected the tenuous equilibrium in the imperial rivalry, and the inconclusive wars fought in the sixth century show that there were material limits to their universal rule. Negotiations in 532 and 561/2 also demonstrate that while there was a recognition of one another's sphere of influence, stability would break down completely towards the end of the sixth century as their rivalry expanded into new geopolitical areas. This chapter traces the development of the attempts to find a settlement and begins by showing how it was the issue of paying subsidies which most clearly demonstrates the countervailing tendency of increasing negotiations simultaneously with increasing conflict. The Persians sought Roman assistance with paying for the upkeep of defences against nomadic invasions, and while both empires had a mutual interest in these defences, the Romans resented paying any subsidies which had the appearance

[3] Rajan Menon and Jack Snyder, 'Buffer zones: anachronism, power vacuum or confidence builder?', *Review of International Studies*, 43:5 (2017), p. 966.

[4] Lindsey O'Rourke and Joshua Shifrinson, 'Squaring the circle on spheres of influence: the overlooked benefits', *The Washington Quarterly*, 45:2 (2022), p. 105.

[5] Martin J. Bayly, 'Imperial ontological (in)security: "buffer states", international relations and the case of Anglo-Afghan relations 1808–1878', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:4 (2016), p. 817.

[6] Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-Imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese and Islamic Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 24.

[7] Menon and Snyder, 'Buffer zones', p. 965.

of paying tribute to the shah. The second section of this chapter then details the Eternal Peace treaty of 532 as the first significant attempt at resolving tensions across the contested frontier of Mesopotamia. After the 'Eternal' peace was broken just a short eight years later, war would rage sporadically until a second attempt at peace was made in 561/2. The third section then details the treaty of 561/2 as recorded by Menander the Guardsman and argues that this treaty shows that the two imperial rivals learned over time to recognize one another's interests. The success of this treaty, however, was again short-lived. When war broke out once again in 572, the motivation for conflict was driven by the emperor Justin II's desire for honour and status to appease his own imperial court.

The aim of this chapter is not to provide a history of these conflicts but to focus solely on how negotiations developed to respect mutual spheres of influence. It concludes by showing that the Persians sought payment for defences against nomads, but they also desired gold for trade with the east, as the Two Eyes rivalry expanded into new geopolitical areas.

Cooperation and Conflict

The buffer zone that emerged between Byzantium and Persia stretched from the Caucasus in the north to the deserts of Arabia in the south. The development of this buffer zone was in many ways dictated by the geography of the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia where arid regions to the south and mountainous regions to the north meant that clear boundaries were hard to distinguish outside of the more densely populated areas.[8] Across this buffer zone, warfare was generally a form of armed raids along the frontier and rarely involved the mobilization of resources across the whole of the empire. War was therefore sporadic and capturing a city along the eastern frontier would often become a tool for strategic gain as each captured city was used as a 'bargaining counter' in negotiations.[9] Throughout this violent period of late antiquity, the empires of the Two Eyes system had a range of long-running disputes over numerous issues that included the kingdoms of the Transcaucasus region, the role of Christianity, the ability of Arab clients to act independently, and the payment of subsidies for shared defences against nomadic invasions. The three major

[8] David J. Breeze, *The Frontiers of Imperial Rome* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2011), p. 178; Anthony Comfort, 'Roads on the frontier between Rome and Persia: Euphratesia, Osrhoene and Mesopotamia from AD363 to 602', PhD diss. (University of Exeter, 2009), p. 230.

[9] Geoffrey Greatrex, 'Roman frontiers and foreign policy in the East' in *Aspects of the Roman East*, ed. Richard Alston and Samuel N. C. Lieu (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), p. 123.

wars of the sixth century would centre on a range of grievances that arose from these challenges, and tracing the individual causes of these wars is a Herculean task. It is the issue of paying subsidies, however, which most clearly demonstrates the importance of honour and status in shaping the behaviour of both empires. This section therefore explains how the issue of payments and joint management of defences against nomads would repeatedly become a source of contention in seeking a stable order between the powers of the Two Eyes system.

The relationship of Byzantium and Persia could experience both cooperation and intense competition. In seeking stability along the buffer zone, both powers would express an interest in attempting to temper their rivalry, and the management of the frontier can be seen with such examples that include the division of Armenia in 387, the control of trade to key customs posts, and the joint management of client actors such as Arab proxies.[10] There is even evidence of how in managing these client proxies the Persians would apprehend nomadic raiders that breached treaty agreements by raiding the Roman side of the frontier, prompting the Persians to arrest the fugitives at the request of Romans.[11] More significantly, joint management of the frontier also included ways to limit aggression. It was agreed in a treaty in 442 AD that no new defences or fortifications would be built along the frontier as a way to limit escalation between the two sides.[12] But as the fifth-century period of coexistence gave way to a more competitive environment, the key challenge for both empires was how to manage their rivalry in regards to the threat of further nomadic invasions.

The settlement of 363 AD had given territorial advantages to the Sasanians in the Caucasus region but this had then in turn put pressure on the Sasanians to defend the same region from nomadic invasions. The Transcaucasus region contained two passes, known as the Dariel and Derbent passes, which were defended by a series of Sasanian defences referred to in late antiquity as the Caspian Gates. These defences against nomadic invasion required extensive Sasanian commitments, from which the East Romans benefitted, yet the question of whether these defensive responsibilities could be shared would remain a key source of tension between the two sides. The elites within Persian society resented the pressure of defending these passes and felt that the Romans

[10] Hugh Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 89.
[11] Comfort, 'Roads on the frontier between Rome and Persia', p. 243.
[12] Procopius, *Buildings*, 2.1.5; although as noted in Chapter 1, frontier forts should not be seen as a hard line of defence. Forts are likely to have been spread along an east–west axis, reflecting the blurred boundaries of imperial frontiers.

had even caused the coming of the Huns.[13] But both powers certainly had a shared interest in guarding against invasions from the steppe. The two rivals also shared hierarchical understandings of nomads from the steppe as standing outside of the Two Eyes hierarchy. This was a common shared norm in which the lesser kings and peoples outside of the Two Eyes system were continually considered to be of a subordinate nature. In relation to nomadic peoples, the emperor Justin I would write to the Persian shah in 520, arguing that it was necessary 'for us, brothers as we are, to speak out in friendship and not be made the sport of these dogs'.[14] Yet despite the shared disdain for peoples outside of the civilized centres, the two great empires struggled to find a mutually acceptable way of managing the buffer zone between them. Primarily these tensions would occur as the Sasanians frequently sought monetary payments in support of the Caspian Gates. This raised legitimacy and status problems for the Romans who resented the portrayal of these payments as tributes to the Sasanian shah. Unlike other forms of cooperation, the issue of subsidies and tribute payments became an intractable problem.

The Sasanians would argue that the Caspian Gates worked 'to the advantage of both Persians and Romans', but as Procopius records, they would also protest that the Romans were not contributing to the defences, yet they were able to enjoy the 'privilege of inhabiting the land unplundered' and of holding their 'possessions with complete freedom from trouble'.[15] Such complaints were a common feature of diplomatic relations and evidence suggests that the Persians requested assistance with defending the Caspian Gates in 464–465 and 467. While it is not clear when such payments for joint defences originated, it was a regular feature of bilateral relations by the end of the fifth century.[16] Theophanes records that the Romans in the middle of the sixth century were paying '500 pounds of gold' for the Persians to guard the forts 'so that invading tribes would not destroy their respective states'.[17] However, numerous examples show that the issue of such payments was a frequent source of contention, and while the payments were not formalized or routine, they did exist as an ad-hoc response. The expedient nature of these payments from the Romans meant that such practices depended on the willingness of

[13] Zachariah of Mitylene, *The Syriac Chronicle*, trans. Frederick John Hamilton and Ernest Walter Brooks (London: Methuen & Co., 1899), p. 153.
[14] *Mal. Chronicle*, 17.415.
[15] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.16.4.
[16] Roger C. Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy: Rome and Persia in late antiquity', *Phoenix*, 39:1 (1985), pp. 63–66.
[17] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle: Byzantine and Near Eastern History ad 284–813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 362.

each individual emperor to respond favourably. The fifth-century diplomat Priscus provides evidence of how the Romans rejected a Persian request for either money to pay for defences or a contribution of troops to guard a fort at the Caspian Gates.[18] Joshua the Stylite similarly reported that the emperor Zeno, who was more sympathetic to providing subsidies for defence, agreed to send a force for mutual assistance consisting of 300 'able-body men with their arms and horses'.[19] The emperor Zeno's successor Anastasius, however, offered to merely pay a loan to the Persian shah, not a subsidy.[20] Procopius further records how the emperor Anastasius also turned down an opportunity to buy one of the forts at the Caspian Gates.[21] The demands for payments from the Sasanians mixed ideological claims with the necessities of responding to geopolitical challenges. The inter-polity language of kingship in late antiquity saw any payments or subsidies as a mark of tribute and a signifying of hierarchical order. The issue of regular subsidies would have essentially implied that the Romans were indeed tributaries to the Persian shah. Roman authors therefore expressed mixed responses to what were, from a Roman point of view, payments made for practical security reasons against nomadic invasions. The historians Agathias and Menander both saw payments as a useful policy tool, while Procopius believed that such payments were a sign of Roman weakness.[22] Modern historians note with caution, however, that Procopius' account of the payments should be taken as a 'polemic against Persian claims' in which the matter of prestige dominates.[23] Yet, despite the protests of authors such as Procopius, the issuing of payments had long been a standard practice of Byzantine diplomacy. For other contemporary sources, however, such as John the Lydian, payments were described as almost a routine practice. John the Lydian details how Persia demanded 'the much talked about expenses for the Caspian gates', indicating that such debates must have been at the core of imperial court politics.[24] Although the Romans were always wary of subsidies being portrayed

[18] Priscus, *The Fragmentary History*, trans. John Given (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishing, 2014), pp. 57–58, 155; the contribution of troops on another occasion is also referred to in *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.76.

[19] Joshua the Stylite, VIII and X; Theophanes the Confessor, *Byzantine and Near Eastern History*, p. 62.

[20] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle: Byzantine and Near Eastern History* AD 284–813, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 62.

[21] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.16.4.

[22] Agathias, 5.24.2–25.6; Menander, fr. 5.1; Procopius, *Secret History*, 11.3–12; Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', pp. 62–74.

[23] Ian Colvin, 'Comparing Procopius and Malalas' in *Procopius of Caesarea: Literary and Historical Interpretations*, eds. Christopher Lillington-Martin and Elodie Turquois (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 207.

[24] John the Lydian de Magistratibus, 51.7, in *Bureaucracy in Traditional Society: Romano-Byzantine Bureaucracies Viewed from Within*, ed. Thomas F. Carney (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1971), p. 101.

as tributes, 'in reality they were parts of well-balanced diplomatic treaties', and the payment of subsidies was an expedient means of preventing nomadic raids across the frontier.[25]

In response to the Romans' reluctance to pay towards the defence of the Caspian Gates, the Persian shah was certainly willing to threaten and use military force to extract such payments. The fifth-century era of peaceful relations gave way to a more conflictual relationship as the shah sought to increasingly extract tributes.[26] Indeed, Shah Kavadh would launch a campaign against Byzantium in 502 after the Romans withdrew payments, and in response he captured the city of Amida which he then ransomed back to the Romans for 1,000 lbs of gold.[27] The success of Kavadh's invasion forced the Byzantines to revisit their own frontier defences, leading to the construction of the city of Dara in 505 a mere 20 kilometres from the rival Sasanian border city of Nisibis.[28] Dara's construction was a marked shift in frontier relations as its construction was in violation of previous treaties which had limited new fortifications. The new city of Dara was attacked repeatedly during its construction, but nomadic pressure from the east eventually forced the Persians to acquiesce to the new Roman defences. In 502 the Roman defences had been inadequate and little had been done to secure the frontier as it was clear that defences had not been maintained.[29] Dara's construction showed a new militarization of the frontier as no Persian army had been seen in Roman lands since 440 AD.[30] The war of 502–506 therefore marked an end to the fifth-century period of stability but it would be another twenty years before both sides would meet to guarantee the rights of the other and stabilize the frontier. The Anastasian War ended with a seven-year truce until 513, but crucially a state of war did not immediately occur at the end of this truce. The frontier experienced an informal peace lasting another twenty years until fighting broke out once again in the late 520s. Although small-scale border skirmishes first occurred around 526,

[25] Josef Wiesehofer, 'The late Sasanian Near East', in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 140.

[26] Procopius, 1.7.1.

[27] Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', p. 67; A. D. Lee, 'Roman warfare with Sasanian Persia' in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*, ed. Brian Campbell and Lawrence Tritle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 719.

[28] Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 254–255; James Howard-Johnston, 'Military infrastructure in the Roman provinces north and south of the Armenian Taurus in late antiquity' in *War and Warfare in Late Antiquity*, ed. Alexander Sarantis and Neil Christie (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 873–874; Brian Croke and James Crow, 'Procopius and Dara', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 73 (1983), pp. 143–159.

[29] Michael Whitby, 'Procopius and the development of the Roman defences in upper Mesopotamia' in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, BAR International Series 297, ed. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Ankara: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1986), p. 725.

[30] Michael J. Decker, *The Sasanian Empire at War: Persia, Rome, and the Rise of Islam, 224–651* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2022), p. 119.

the historian Geoffrey Greatrex postulated that the first major campaign likely occurred only in 530 AD. It would be disputes over the Caucasus region that would see relations deteriorate once again.[31]

The outbreak of war was again an inconclusive affair, and the two sides failed to make any significant gains. However, just as the sixth century would see increasing levels of conflict, there were also serious attempts to create a lasting settlement between the two sides. The following section looks to the 'Eternal Peace' treaty of 532 which developed out of negotiations between Shah Khusro and Emperor Justinian. The arrival in 531 AD of a new Persian shah, with Khusro's ascension to the throne after the death of Kavadh, paved the way for a new dynamic in relations with the end of conflict and negotiations that sought to resolve longstanding tensions over the payment of subsidies.

The 'Eternal Peace'

The treaty of 532 was the first meaningful attempt to resolve disputes between the two sides as a means to create a longer-lasting settlement. The resulting peace treaty of 532 was an ambitious attempt to resolve the divisions between the two ecumenical worlds of antiquity but was unable to achieve this goal, as the following explains.

The near-simultaneous ascension of new leaders for both empires, with the emperor Justinian in 527 and subsequently Shah Khusro in 531, created an opportunity for a period of reconciliation. The Anastasian War of 502–506 and the Iberian War of 526–532 had both proven to be inconclusive, with conflict resulting in no significant gains for either side. External conditions also favoured a settlement as the emperor Justinian had one eye on the Vandal threat to North Africa and was involved in significant domestic reform with consolidating Roman law, while Khusro would himself be challenged with containing the Hephthalite threat that remained on the Sasanian empire's eastern frontier.[32] The treaty of 532 therefore sought to resolve a range of outstanding issues and saw a serious attempt to define the obligations and responsibilities of each power. Negotiations brought some success in resolving these issues with the matter of population transfers and the return of Iberian refugees.[33] There was also further agreement to return fortresses captured

[31] Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', p. 70.
[32] Peter Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome and the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 145.
[33] Ekaterina Nechaeva, 'Seven Hellenes and one Christian in the Endless Peace Treaty of 532', *Studies in Late Antiquity*, 1:4 (2017), pp. 359–380.

during the war, an action which essentially confirmed the territorial status quo.[34] After years of sporadic fighting, war had achieved little for either side and a return to the status quo ensured an acceptance of distinct spheres of influence. The peace treaty would further reinforce the 'ancient custom' of the emperor and shah referring to one another as 'brothers'. This was a symbolic statement that emphasized the equal status of both rulers. In establishing a peace treaty that was to last for the 'lifetime of both' empires, the 'Eternal' peace was unusual for not being time bound as with earlier agreements.[35] This suggests that the agreement had been a serious attempt to ensure that each empire had their legitimate interests respected and that there was a mutual recognition of a need for coexistence.

The 'Eternal' peace would also revolve around the question of tributes and subsidies to provide for joint defences against the threat of nomadic invasions. In light of their mutual vulnerability to the barbarian threat, the two rulers pledged mutual assistance and that 'if either should lack money or men, the other would supply without argument', but it was the issue of financing that would continue to unsettle the prospect of a permanent peace settlement.[36] The treaty of 532 would see the Byzantines agree to pay a lump sum of 11,000 lbs of gold for the defence of the Caspian Gates.[37] While a significant figure, it was certainly not excessive; in comparison, the Roman's agriculturally rich province of Egypt generated 20,000 lbs of gold per annum.[38] Prior to the negotiations, the Persians had stipulated their position by stating that they would never 'lay down their arms, until the Romans either help them in guarding the gates, as is just and right, or dismantle the city of Dara', with the fortifications of the new city remaining a threatening presence on the Persian frontier.[39] For the Romans, the payment of subsidies was a standard tool used in relation to multiple clients and barbarian actors, but the payment of regular subsidies to their greatest rival would have the appearance of playing a supplicant role of offering tribute. The continual priority of successive Byzantine emperors was to avoid any loss of status associated with paying tribute to the shah. It is therefore likely that as a compromise the agreement of payments was covered in a separate letter and not the actual treaty. This meant that the Romans

[34] Geoffrey Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War 502–532* (Cambridge: Francis Cairns, 1998), p. 215.
[35] *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.477.
[36] *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.477.
[37] Sarris, *Empires of Faith*, pp. 144–145.
[38] Greatrex, 'Roman frontiers and foreign policy in the east', p. 216; also see Colin Douglas Gordon, 'Procopius and Justinian's financial policies', *Phoenix*, 13:1 (1959), pp. 23–30. Henning Börm further argues that these payments should be seen as relatively modest and unlikely to have been a burden for the Roman economy. See Henning Börm, 'Es War Allerdings Nicht So, Dass Sie Es Im Sinne Eines Tributes Erhielton, Wie Viele Meinten …', *Historia*, 57:3 (2008), pp. 327–346.
[39] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.16.8.

were able to save face by decoupling the issue as a separate part of the negotiations.[40] Typically, the Romans had always preferred treaties of a short duration because they limited the possibility of becoming responsible for annual payments in perpetuity, but the peace treaty of 532 was an exception and it appears that there was a genuine feeling the treaty had reached a more permanent settlement.[41] The historian Malalas noted that the treaty had brought to a close the conflicts which had begun since the invasion of 502, and at this stage in the bipolar rivalry there was certainly no reason to believe the buffer zone could not be maintained and that cordial relations could not be re-established.[42]

The emperor Justinian certainly used the peace to optimistically reduce defences in the east and even moved troops for his campaigns in the west to reconquer Africa and Italy. The era of peaceful relations across the fifth century AD had developed enough good faith between the two sides that Justinian seemed willing to trust that the Sasanian shah would abide by the treaty.[43] The emperor Justinian also seemed determined to use the opportunity of peace in the east to restore the fortunes of the Roman empire as a whole. His campaigns against the Vandals in 533–534 saw a rapid re-taking of North Africa, while the period of 535–540 saw an opportunistic attempt to build upon his success by launching an invasion of Italy, which by this period was ruled by the Ostrogoths.[44] The extent and nature of these campaigns are outside the direct concern of the Two Eyes relationship, but the initial successes of Justinian certainly seem to have been noticed by the Sasanian shah. Procopius records how in response to Justinian's victories in the west, the shah Khusro asked 'to receive his share of the spoils from Libya, on the ground that the emperor would never have been able to conquer in the war with the Vandals if the Persians had not been at peace with him'. After a 'present of money', Justinian dismissed the envoys.[45] The 'Eternal' peace would in the end last only a brief eight years and the short-lived peace of the 530s continued to see a range of minor tensions over Armenia, Arab clients, and Khusro's possible need for funds.[46] When war broke out in 540 the Persian sources would emphasize the

[40] Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', p. 71.

[41] Evangelos Chrysos, 'Some aspects of Roman-Persian legal relations', *Kleronomia*, 8 (1976), p. 30; Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War 502–532*, pp. 4, 211–217.

[42] *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.76.

[43] Henning Börm, 'A threat or a blessing' in *Diwan, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Henning Börm et al. (Duisburg: Wellem Verlag, 2016), pp. 628–629.

[44] See Peter Heater, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[45] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.26.3–4.

[46] Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II ad 363–630: A Narrative Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 102.

role played by Arab clients in unsettling the peace.[47] The Sasanian claim was that Jafnid Saracens who were loyal to Rome had attacked the Nasrid clients of Persia.[48] This account is challenged by Procopius who provides a counter-claim that argues the exact opposite—that the Nasrids had sought to invent a pretext for Khusro to break the treaty and invade Roman territory.[49] While we may never know the exact reason why the 'Eternal Peace' treaty was broken, it is significant that the client states of both empires had played a significant part, a factor that will be explored further in the following section. It is also important to keep in mind that explaining any individual or proximate cause for the war of 540 is to consider such a conflict with a modern progressive lens whereby war is something to be rationally explained and morally to be avoided. As shown in Chapter 2, in the world of antiquity, peace was often viewed as an outcome that could only be achieved through war. A modern bias in favour of rational interpretations of war therefore overlooks that in late antiquity, war was taken to be a legitimate response to communicate status and reinforce political order.[50]

The war of 540 AD took the East Roman weakened defences by surprise and saw the shah Khusro launch 'a rampage of extortion' on cities across the region of Syria.[51] The East Romans had become accustomed to existing in a permanent condition of cooperation and rivalry with their neighbour, and their defences in the east had generally been successful until the war of 540. Khusro's campaign of 540, however, was a strategic shock to the Romans.[52] The Sasanians first sacked the city of Sura before extorting a ransom payment from the city of Hierapolis, while the next city of Beroea could not afford to pay and was therefore attacked and set on fire, before, finally, the Persians captured the city of Antioch.[53] This was the biggest blow to the Romans in the east since the wars of Shapur around two centuries earlier, who had also

[47] Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari, the Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids and Yemen* 5 (Clifford Edmund Bosworth) (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 253.

[48] Michael R. Jackson Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2020), p. 183; also see Michael R. Jackson Bonner, 'Eastern sources on the Roman and Persian War in the Near East 540–45' in *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives*, ed. Teresa Bernheimer and Adam Silverstein (Exeter: Gibbs Memorial Trust, 2012), pp. 42–56.

[49] Procopius, *Wars*, 1.2.1–3.

[50] Although Christian morality against war was already emerging, this does not negate the point that war was taken to be a standard feature of political life. See Roger B. Manning, *War and Peace in the Western Political Imagination: From Classical Antiquity to the Age of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[51] Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', p. 71.

[52] Henning Börm. 'Kavad I, Khosrow I and the wars with the Roman empire' in *Brill's Companion to War in the Ancient Iranian Empires*, ed. John Hyland and Khodadad Rezakhani (Leiden: Brill, 2024), p. 12.

[53] Procopius, *Wars*, 2.5.1–2.9.14.

captured the city and threatened the very status of the Romans in the eastern Mediterranean. The historian Agathias even compared Khusro's achievements to those of the Persian rulers Cyrus or Xerxes.[54] However, this was not a permanent war of conquest but a raid to demonstrate the shah's power and legitimacy which saw tributes extracted from a range of threatened Roman cities.[55] As Procopius makes clear, Khusro departed Antioch 'possessed of enormous wealth' and 'carried away ransom in abundance'.[56] Procopius also records a meeting between Roman ambassadors and Khusro on the topic of payments. The Roman ambassadors state their view that 'the Persians desire to have the Romans subject and tributary to themselves'. But Khusro's response was to reject this claim. He then further explained that the Romans should pay for the services of the Persian forces which guarded Roman lands from being plundered just as the Romans already made payments to the Huns and Saracens for their use as proxies.[57]

The years after Khusro's invasion of 540 saw another period of intermittent conflict in which no clear victor emerged and there would be no significant changes in territory. The breakdown in relations and the renewal of war, however, was also coupled with the outbreak of the Justinianic plague, a devastating disease that would strike populations from Egypt to England over recurring periods and would continue to re-emerge until the eighth century. Theophanes the Confessor described repeated bouts of plague which brought devastation, 'so that the living were too few to bury the dead'.[58] Procopius writes of deserted streets, filled tombs, and trades becoming abandoned with those few that remained in good health 'either attending the sick or mourning the dead'.[59] Both the emperor Justinian and Khusro himself would be infected by plague, with Khusro infected in 542, forcing him to retreat to the highlands of Azerbaijan to recover his health.[60] Historians continue to debate the significance and range of mortality of what has become known as the Justinianic plague. Maximalist interpretations of the plague stress the devastation it brought by highlighting the decline of new buildings and inscriptions and suggest that the plague must have created multiple second- and third-order effects that undermined the stability of the Byzantine empire.[61] Minimalist

[54] Agathias, *Histories*, IV.29.6.
[55] Procopius, *Wars*, 2.13.16–29.
[56] Procopius, *Wars*, 2.9.15–17.
[57] Procopius, *Wars*, 2.10.22–23.
[58] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, p. 340.
[59] Procopius, *Wars*, 2.22.9–2.23.17.
[60] Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran*, p. 194.
[61] Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease and the Fate of an Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Kristina Sessa, 'The new environmental fall of Rome: a methodological consideration', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 12:1 (2019), pp. 211–255.

interpretations argue that historians have become overly focused on the hysteria to be found within the contemporary literary sources.[62] However, there is no doubt that this period experienced pressures on recruitment for the Roman army and on finances for the empire.[63] The period of 540–562 therefore saw frequent recurrent conflict and widespread destabilization which meant that both sides had incentives to limit the extent of the war. Further treaties were signed in 545 and 551 AD to establish a truce, with the Romans agreeing to pay 2,000 and later 2,600 lbs of gold. The payment of such tributes was convenient at a time when the empire faced a shortage of troops due to Justinian's wars of reconquest in Italy and the effects of the plague.[64] The flexibility of this diplomacy meant that treaties could also be agreed upon to cover the main areas of contestation along the buffer zone around the Euphrates, while also allowing competition to continue in other areas.[65] The treaty of 551 would bring peace to the region of Mesopotamia but accepted that fighting could continue in the disputed kingdom of Lazica to the north in the Caucasus region.[66] It was not until 561/2 AD that the two empires would agree to once again seek to settle their differences and finalize a settlement between them.

The Treaty of 561/2 AD

The treaty of 561/2 AD was a significant attempt to formally define spheres of interest between the two empires. The negotiations that occurred, as well as the treaty itself, are fortunately recorded in detail by the sixth-century historian Menander the Guardsman. As the following will demonstrate, despite the intermittent conflict that was experienced in the sixth century, the norms and practices of diplomacy were deeply entrenched by this time.

The temporary treaties of 545 and 551 had ensured a period of calm along the east frontier in Mesopotamia and Armenia, but negotiations began with the purpose of creating a 'universal peace' that covered the whole of the buffer

[62] For those against, see Jean Durliat, 'La peste du Vlc siecle, Pour un nouvel examen des Sources byzantins' in *Hommes et richesses dans l'Empire byzantin* (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1989), pp. 107–19. Also see Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity*, p. 268; Merle Eisenberg and Lee Mordechai, 'The Justinianic plague: an interdisciplinary review', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 43:2 (2019), pp. 156–180; Clive Foss, 'Syria in transition AD 550–750: an archaeological approach', *Dumbarton Oak Papers*, 51 (1997), pp. 189–269; Paul Erdkamp, 'War, food, climate change and the decline of the Roman empire', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 12:2 (2019), pp. 422–465.

[63] A. D. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium ad 363 to 565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 296; John L. Teall, 'The barbarians in Justinian's armies', *Speculum*, 40:2 (1965), pp. 294–322.

[64] Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 188.

[65] Michael Whitby, *The Wars of Justinian* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2021), p. 158.

[66] Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', p. 71.

zone between the two empires.[67] In agreeing to a more substantial settlement, the Byzantines sent a man known as Peter who was the *magister officiorum* (master of offices) to the frontier at Dara, while the Persians sent the shah's most senior official, a man known as Zikh, who was the shah's chamberlain.[68] Negotiations at the frontier would begin with customary verbal sparring and displays of rhetorical skill that were standard cultural features of late antiquity, as described in Chapter 3. The initial demands from Persia were for a treaty without a time limit and a fixed amount of gold each year, while for the Romans, the desire was for a short-term peace treaty that did not involve any payments at all. Eventual terms finally agreed that the kingdom of Lazica would be ceded to the Romans in exchange for a fifty-year truce and two payments to cover a demand for ten years' worth of subsidies. This would total 30,000 golden *nomismata*, over 400 lbs of gold per year, with the Romans paying an instalment for the first seven years immediately and a second payment at the end of a seven-year period for the final three outstanding years. The second payment was to be secured by a 'sacred letter' alongside the treaty which was to be given to the Persians that would only be returned after the second payment was completed.[69] The contractual obligation of a sacred letter was a means of holding the Romans to account and ensuring that the second payment would be made, presumably with the idea that the supplementary sacred letter could be used against the Romans as proof in future negotiations if they proved untrustworthy.

The treaty agreed upon thirteen clauses in total. The very first clause of the treaty stipulated that in return for the payment of subsidies, the Persians were to guard the Caspian Gates and to prevent 'barbarians' access to the Roman empire', while the Romans would agree not to send any 'army against the Persians'.[70] Further clauses sought to bring stability to the frontier and de-escalate tensions which had surrounded the building of the Roman fortified city of Dara. Because of its proximity to the frontier, the city of Dara forced the Persians to maintain two armies on their western flank, one to ensure the security of the Caspian Gates and a second to prevent Roman incursions launched from Dara itself. Clause 8 of the treaty therefore pronounced a Persian acceptance of Dara which had caused tension since its construction in 505 AD, but this came with further demands as clause 10 specified that the Romans should remove their forces from Dara and that the local commanding *dux* (duke) could not

[67] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[68] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[69] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[70] Menander, fr. 6.1.

have his headquarters in the city. This forced the Romans to pull back their leading general of the east from that region and essentially de-militarized the city.[71] It was also agreed upon that no new fortifications would be built along the frontier, with clause 8 explicitly recognizing that the intention of banning new fortifications was to ensure that such acts would inevitably break the peace treaty.[72] Other clauses of the treaty sought to resolve a range of issues between the two sides. These included the limiting of trade to specific customs posts, the settlement of local grievances through arbitration at the border, and the protection of the status of ambassadors who also received guarantees for their own personal trading privileges.[73] Alongside the treaty, a separate consideration was given to the protection of religious freedoms, with Persia agreeing not to persecute Christians or force their conversion to Zoroastrianism. The wide range of issues covered within the treaty shows the depth of interaction between the two empires and the sophistication of their diplomacy. The exchange of sacred letters and the multiple clauses of the treaty, along with the exchange of translated copies of the treaty 'written word for word', all work to show that diplomatic practices between the two sides were highly developed even after years of conflict.[74]

The treaty worked to resolve outstanding issues of contention, but negotiations also sought to install distinct spheres of interest between the two empires that could manage their client states. While Lazica was ceded to the Romans, it was also made clear that the peace agreed upon should be adhered to by both sides, as well as their clients within Armenia and Lazica.[75] Such was the importance of managing their clients that control of Arab allies is listed as the second clause of the treaty. Menander records this as 'the Saracen allies of both states shall themselves also abide by these agreements and those of the Persians shall not attack the Romans, nor those of the Romans the Persians'.[76] The Arab tribes were likely a major factor in the outbreak of war in 540 AD and they had shown increasing independence throughout the sixth century. The unruliness of these clients was demonstrated through the continuation of fighting between Arab tribes on the southern frontier even after peace was signed between Byzantium and Persia in 545 AD.[77] The Arab *phylarchs* were certainly keen to stress their own autonomy and had argued that they did not

[71] Menander, fr 6.1; also see Greatrex and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, p. 92.
[72] Menander, fr 6.1.
[73] Blockley notes in Menander, p. 256n53.
[74] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[75] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[76] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[77] Fisher, *Rome, Persia and Arabia*, p. 135.

have to behave in accordance with the 'Eternal Peace' of 532 because no mention of the 'Saracens' had been made in the treaty.[78] Unlike the treaty of 532, the Arab proxies were explicitly included in the treaty of 561/2 with a further stipulation that sought to limit their freedom of movement and opportunity for tax avoidance, or spying, by restricting Arab traders to the frontier cities of Nisibis and Dara.[79] The inclusion of Arab clients within the peace treaty of 561/2 was therefore an attempt to solve the challenge of proxies developing their own initiatives which could upset strategic stability between Byzantium and Persia.[80] Most notably, clause 9 of the treaty further reinforces this logic of seeking to control clients and directly states: 'The forces of one state shall not attack or make war upon a people or any other territory subject to the other, but without inflicting or suffering injury shall remain where they are so that they too might enjoy the peace.'[81] This clause of the treaty is a means of avoiding 'unnecessary conflicts' by ensuring each power recognizes the sphere of influence of their direct rival.[82] The Arab clients were therefore directly identified as what we would today term 'buffer states' which could upset the search for stability along the frontier.[83]

The treaty of 561/2 was the most significant attempt to define the rights and responsibilities of the Two Eyes hierarchy and to formalize distinct spheres of interest. But the issue of Suania, a client people in the Transcaucasus region under the nominal suzerainty of the king of Lazica, was left unresolved. The kingdom of Lazica was itself under the guardianship of the Romans and Lazica was a central part of a new front for geopolitical control between 541 and 562 as Persia sought to extend its influence in the region.[84] The Transcaucasus was a volatile area and a long-running source of dispute between the two sides, but the issue of Suania was left unresolved by the treaty of 562. This is despite the attempts of the Roman envoy to discuss the issue personally with the shah by travelling to the shah's court in Persia. The seemingly endless array of claims and counterclaims over the kingdoms of the Transcaucasus region would fuel long-running disputes throughout the sixth century. But such disputes were nothing new and a constant presence in the Two Eyes

[78] Irfan Kawar, 'The Arabs in the peace treaty of 561', *Arabica*, 3:2 (1956), p. 199.
[79] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[80] Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 120.
[81] Menander, fr. 6.1.
[82] David Frendo, 'Sovereignty, control and co-existence in Byzantine Iranian relations', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 24 (2010), p. 143.
[83] Wiesehofer, 'The late Sasanian Near East', p. 138.
[84] Maria Grazia Bajoni, 'Envoy's speeches at the peace negotiations of 561–562 AD between the Byzantine empire and the Persian kingdom', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 29:3 (2018), p. 354.

rivalry. The relationship between the two empires continued even with the wrangling over the rightful suzerain control of clients, and as the following section explores, the deeper source of contention was not the minor kingdoms of the Caucasus but the shared threat posed by nomadic groups from the central Asian steppe and the defences needed to guard against barbarian invasions.

Tributes, Subsidies, and the East

The sixth century saw repeated bouts of conflict develop concurrently with ever-more sophisticated diplomatic practices between the two empires. The treaties of 532 and 561/2 show that both empires, despite their universalist ideologies, could recognize within their imperial rival an equal, which also had legitimate interests. These treaties worked to reinforce the hierarchy of the Two Eyes system, yet the issue of subsidies and tributes would remain a source of contention as questions of status outweighed all other concerns, to the extent that war was often preferable to broader strategic stability. For the Romans, payments were strictly subsidies paid when there was a mutual interest in securing the Caspian Gates, but for the Persians, Roman payments gave credence to the Sasanian ideology of the shah receiving tributes from a client state.[85] Despite the successes of the treaty of 561/2, the fifty-year peace would once again be broken in short order with peace lasting only until 572 AD. Justinian's successor, the emperor Justin II, would launch an ill-fated invasion of Persian territory in 572 in response to growing tensions. While a border conflict was almost routine by this period, Justin II's invasion was the first since the emperor Julian in the fourth century, in which the Romans had been the primary aggressors.[86] The latter stages of the Two Eyes system would then see fighting almost continuously from 572–591 and 602–628 with the Last Great War of Antiquity. As the following shows, the practice of paying tributes cannot alone account for the terminal decline of the Byzantine-Persian relationship and the end of the Two Eyes system.

The invasion of Persia by Justin II in 572 was the result of the Romans' ever-growing dissatisfaction in paying subsidies to Persia. The practice of providing subsidies, gifts, or stipends was a 'nearly continuous' practice 'from Augustus to the end of the Byzantine Empire' and had long been a feature of Roman

[85] M. Rahim Shayegan, 'Sasanian political ideology' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel T. Potts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 809.

[86] David Frendo, 'Byzantine-Iranian relations before and after the death of Khusrau II: a critical examination of the evidence', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 14 (2000), p. 27.

diplomacy.[87] Ever since the failures of Julian's invasion of Persia in 363 AD, the Romans had generally sought to terminate conflicts on the eastern frontier with Persia as quickly as possible through the use of payments.[88] An example of this can be found in the fifth century, when the Romans had quickly averted the threat of war in 441 by the payment of subsidies before any major battle had even taken place.[89] In many ways, the issuing of payments was nothing new for the Romans. Tensions therefore arose because the payments were portrayed initially as a Persian 'right to request assistance', but this changed across the sixth century, from an occasional payment into a regular, or even 'obligatory', demand for a Roman subsidy.[90] The treaties of 532 and 561/2 had both sought to resolve the issue of payments and the Persians certainly felt past precedent gave legitimacy to their claims for subsidies. Malalas records a letter from the shah Kavadh to the Roman emperor which directly refers to this practice as an established norm. Kavadh declares, 'we have found it written in our ancient records that we are brothers of one another and that if one of us should stand in need of men or money, the other should provide them.'[91] Yet as covered in the first section of this chapter, such demands also aroused resentment from the Romans who feared that the payment of subsidies implied they were 'subject' to the shah. John of Ephesus records the Roman desire to be treated 'on equal terms, kingdom with kingdom.'[92] But as he also summarizes, 'while both sides were anxious for peace, neither would humble itself to the other, nor acknowledge its weakness; and consequently they confronted one another with the appearance of determination.'[93] The determination to confront one another, however, was often driven by regime insecurity or the personal ambitions for status of each individual emperor or shah.

Treaty making was an established practice of Byzantine and Persian relations but the success of diplomacy to resolve tensions between the two sides often relied upon the personality of each emperor in office. Justin II was in a weak position after coming to the throne following his uncle Justinian because there was no constitutional basis within Roman society for hereditary kingship. The fiscal challenges caused by the plague also exacerbated the internal

[87] Colin Douglas Gordon, 'Subsidies in Roman imperial defence', *Phoenix*, 3:2 (1949), p. 60.
[88] Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 253.
[89] Börm, 'A threat or a blessing?', p. 631.
[90] Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', p. 67.
[91] *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.44.
[92] John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, II.24.
[93] John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.12.

problems of the empire and he had to retain the support of the imperial court through demonstrating his right to rule.[94] In classic Roman fashion, this meant legitimacy could be gained through martial victories. Justin II was therefore already thinking of war with Persia on his ascension to the imperial throne.[95] The war of 572 was an opportunistic attempt to seek an advantage that will be covered further in the following chapter. For now, it is important to note only how conflict was driven by regime insecurity. Because each regime was driven by the need for legitimacy and status, the success of diplomacy often rested on the individual position of the emperor or shah. The latter half of the sixth century would therefore see a mixture of attempts at both accommodation and more aggressive confrontation. Emperor Tiberius II (574–582) was one such example of an emperor who was able to seek a more stable settlement with Persia. Tiberius would even decide to return conquered areas to the Sasanians in the interests of reaching a more secure frontier. He recognized that Persia had legitimate interests in the Caucasian regions of Persarmenia and Iberia and therefore sought to ensure a status quo between the two competing spheres of influence.[96] The diplomacy of Tiberius II, however, stands in stark contrast to the shah Hormizd IV (579–590), who, like Justin II, was driven by a willingness for war in the quest for personal glory.[97] Hormizd would even refuse to recognize the standard practice of acknowledging the ascension of a new emperor and arrested the Roman ambassadors. Hormizd was described by John of Ephesus as 'a ferocious and savage youth' and his open desire for war meant that by the latter half of the sixth century repeated conflicts had made the prospect of a stable settlement increasingly unlikely.[98]

While questions of honour, status, and the payment of subsidies all worked to fuel tensions between Byzantium and the Sasanian Persians, it is far from clear that these issues alone can account for the final breakdown of the Two Eyes system early in the seventh century. The treaties of 532 and 561/2 had failed to reach a lasting settlement and Justin II's invasion of Persia in 572 marked a turning point in the deterioration of relations. Historians therefore debate to what extent the questions of payments were the underlying cause of war between the two sides, while Roger Blockley stressed the Persian side's

[94] James Howard-Johnston, 'The Great Powers on the eve of the Islamic conquests' in *Les préludes de l'Islam*, ed. Christian Robin and Jérémie Schiettecatte (Paris: Editions De Boccard, 2013), p. 41.
[95] Corippus, 1.255.
[96] Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', p. 73n50; Menander, fr. 20.2.
[97] Martin J. Higgins, 'International relations at the close of the sixth century', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 27:3 (1941), p. 306.
[98] John of Ephesus, VI.22.

'need' for money from the Romans.[99] However, the payments the Romans made to Persia were not central to the revenue of the Sasanian imperial court. The Sasanian economy was also based on the silver drachm with little gold in circulation, and yet the Sasanian demand for gold was a consistent feature of sixth-century relations with the Romans. The gold that was obtained from Byzantium was therefore likely used to offset an imbalance of trade with the east. The shah's imperial court maintained a monopoly upon maritime commerce which sought silk, spices, and precious stones from the east and in turn exported carpets, cloth, glass, nuts, and dried fruit. This means that the exported commodities were much lower in value, and as Michael Bonner argues, 'we may suppose that the use of gold allowed the merchants of Iran to purchase those expensive imports'.[100] The Roman payments of gold and the increasing insistence of such payments by the Persians therefore can only make sense through a wider geopolitical lens.

The late sixth century would see an expansion of Sasanian trade with the east, and as the following chapter will show, the question of trade with the east would intensify the Two Eyes rivalry.[101] Justin II's invasion of Persia in 572 brought an end to the diplomatic attempts to reach a stable settlement. The invasion had been conducted in alliance with a nomadic people known as the Gok Turks who emerged from the central Asian steppe in the 560s AD. In the latter half of the sixth century, the Gok Turks would become a key link in bringing trade from the east to the Romans and were significant players in the strategic calculations of both emperor and shah. It was the desire for trade from the east that would fuel the rivalry of the Two Eyes powers and which would set the underlying conditions for the collapse of the Two Eyes system.

Conclusion

In the latter half of the sixth century, war would become the 'normal situation in the east' with nearly continuous conflict and brief periods of peace achieved only between the years of 561–572 and 592–602.[102] The buffer zone that developed between the Two Eyes empires was a natural product of the inability of

[99] Blockley, 'Subsidies and diplomacy', p. 71; also see Henning Börm, '"Es war allerdings nicht so, daß sie es im Sinne eines Tributes erhielten, wie viele meinten …": Anlässe und Funktion der persischen Geldforderungen an die Römer', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 57:3 (2008), pp. 327–346.

[100] Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran*, p. 211.

[101] Jairus Banaji, *Exploring the Economy of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 133.

[102] Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War 502–532*, p. 4.

either empire to enforce their will, as all of these conflicts proved inconclusive. Turbulent frontiers are inherent to empires and the buffer zone of late antiquity is comparable to modern buffer states such as nineteenth-century Belgium or Afghanistan.[103] Buffer zones arise from within competing spheres of influence, and while such spheres of influence are normally regarded as morally unacceptable to a modern audience, they are a natural result of material constraints.[104] Neither the Romans nor the Persians were able to impose their will on the other and the negotiations of 532 and 561/2 demonstrate that spheres of influence could create stability as long as each rival recognized that the other empire had vital interests.[105] When such interests were not respected, as with the personal ambitions of Justin II or Hormizd IV, then war would once again be the result.

The sixth century was a turbulent period, with each round of conflict leading to less willingness on both sides to reach a lasting settlement. Concurrently, underneath all the political developments was an unsettling natural phenomenon with the spread of the Justinianic plague and a period of climatic changes that saw conditions favourable to rain in the Arabian peninsula and a decline of temperatures in the northern hemisphere between 536 and 560, which can most likely be attributed to volcanic activity.[106] The exact societal impact of these natural phenomena is hotly disputed and it would be too deterministic to blame the plague and a cooling of the climate solely for political changes that occurred in the sixth century.[107] But it is certainly possible that such environmental changes had less impact on the nomads of Arabia and can account in part for their increasing independence from their imperial patrons in the sixth century.[108] The rise of the plague also brought short-term instability and fiscal pressures, particularly on the Byzantine empire, although its long-term effects are again disputed by historians.[109] The plague was a

[103] Menon and Snyder, 'Buffer zones', pp. 962–986.

[104] On the moralizing of spheres of influence, see Iain Ferguson and Susanna Hast, 'Introduction: the return of spheres of influence', *Geopolitics*, 23:2 (2018), pp. 277–284.

[105] Evan R. Sankey, 'Reconsidering spheres of influence', *Survival*, 62:2 (2020), p. 40.

[106] Buntgen et al., 'Cooling and societal change during the late antique Little Ice Age from 536 to around 600 AD', *Nature Geoscience*, 9 (2016), pp. 231–236; Peter N. Peregrine, 'Climate and social change at the start of the late antique Ice Age', *The Holocene*, 30:11 (2020), pp. 1643–1648; Kyle Harper and Michael McCormick, 'Reconstructing the Roman climate' in *The Science of Roman History: Biology, Climate, and the Future of the Past*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 11–52.

[107] John F. Haldon, Hugh Elton, and Adam Izdebski, 'Managing the Roman empire for the long term: risk assessment and management policy in the fifth to seventh centuries' in *Perspectives on Public Policy in Societal-Environmental Crises: What the Future Needs from History* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 237–246.

[108] Alain Bresson, 'Fates of Rome', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 110 (2020), pp. 233–246.

[109] Heather, *Rome Resurgent*, p. 368.

symptom, however, of the widening and deepening of trade networks which characterize this period. As Procopius identified, the plague 'always took its start from the coast' and was most likely spread through long-distance trade.[110] Contemporaries of the plague first reported its emergence in Egypt and the Red Sea was seen as the likely origin of the disease.[111] Attributing the plague to African origins may have been due to the cultural biases of contemporary Roman authors, and modern speculation posits that the plague probably originated in India and was transmitted to Africa via the Red Sea.[112] Regardless of the plague's exact origins, it is a clear indicator of the expansion of inter-polity society in late antiquity as long-distance trade brought goods, silk in particular, from the east to the Mediterranean world. The following chapter will therefore examine this expansion of an inter-polity society in late antiquity, which fuelled the rivalry of the two empires into new geopolitical areas and saw the emergence of the Gok Turks as a significant player in the balance of power between Byzantium and Persia.

[110] Procopius, *Wars*, 2.22.9.

[111] Peter Sarris, 'The Justinianic plague: origins and effects', *Continuity and Change*, 17:2 (2002), pp. 169–182.

[112] George D. Sussman, 'Scientists doing history: Central Africa and the origins of the first plague pandemic', *Journal of World History*, 26:2 (2015), pp. 325–354.

6

The Rise of the Gok Turks and the Last Great War of Antiquity

Introduction

The later period of the Two Eyes system, around the second half of the sixth century, saw an expansion of the geopolitical environment and a deepening of interconnections between east and west as trade expanded across the Indian Ocean and the steppe region.[1] It was the material of silk and the possibilities of riches from the trade of silk that would act as a catalyst for a widening of the Two Eyes rivalry into new geopolitical areas around the Red Sea, beyond the Caucasus mountains and the Persian Gulf. The latter half of the sixth century was therefore characterized by a more fluid balance-of-power system which was driven by the emergence of new polities, such as the Gok Turks, the Avars, and the kingdom of Aksum in Ethiopia. The Gok Turks were the first significant polity to consolidate power over vast swathes of the central Asian steppe, allowing for trade networks to develop bringing trade between India, China, and Persia to the wider Mediterranean. Prior to the emergence of the Turks, a 'basic stability' had been achieved between Byzantium and Persia as each actor had by this time come to recognize the other as an equal great imperial power within a dual hierarchy. The struggle for control of the silk trade, however, would challenge this stability as the Turks essentially became a 'third great power' and sought to take advantage of the Two Eyes rivalry for greater access to wealth and markets.[2] This was a significant break from the fourth and fifth century when nomadic groups were considered to be lesser polities to be managed through a dual hierarchy. In the sixth century, the nomadic group of the Gok Turks were able to challenge the Two Eyes system by becoming a third balancing power. The Turks first emerged as allies to the Sasanians,

[1] Peter Sarris, 'Centre of periphery? Constantinople and the Eurasian trading system at the end of antiquity' in *Global Byzantium: Papers from the Fiftieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Leslie Brubaker et al. (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 317.

[2] James Howard-Johnston, 'The great powers on the eve of the Islamic conquests' in *Les préludes de l'Islam*, ed. Christian Robin and Jérémie Schiettecatte (Paris: Editions De Boccard, 2013), p. 40.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0007

only to switch sides and create an alliance with Byzantium in order to gain access to the Roman market for silk. The Roman–Turk alliance was a volatile relationship, but the prospect of a barbarian king being an equal with the two 'brothers' of the shah and emperor led to the decline of strategic stability and an intensification of the Byzantine–Persian rivalry.

The arrival of the Turks and their relationship with Byzantium demonstrates that by the sixth century the Romans had learned how to enact diplomacy with nomadic groups as potential allies, not just as a threat to be bribed or proxies to be controlled. Constantinople may have been a 'peripheral' city in terms of geography to the vast Eurasian trading system, but its riches and appetite for exotic goods provided a draw to those seeking profits from the silk trade.[3] For the Sasanians, the silk trade had traditionally benefitted Persia's geopolitical location as a conduit between east and west. The aim of Persia was not to block Romans out of the silk economy completely; instead, they sought to block independent Roman access that would threaten Persia's own merchants.[4] Before exploring how the Byzantines sought to circumvent Persian control of trade to the east, it is important to add some caveats and explain misconceptions which characterize the exotic trade of silks in late antiquity. Firstly, the trade of silks from the east to the west has traditionally been known as the 'Silk Road', although the wording silk 'routes' is perhaps more appropriate. The phrase 'Silk Road' is itself a nineteenth-century invention with disputed validity as there was never a single unified road, but rather a series of routes, including across the steppe and along the maritime sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean bringing silks, spices, and other goods from the east. Although this level of interaction along the silk routes was significant in spreading ideas, particularly religious beliefs, and exotic goods for elites, it would also be a mistake to believe that the trading of these exotic goods was synonymous with a modern globalized economy. Trade was often locally based and spread across central Asia through short-distance chain-links of kinship-based trade networks rather than long-distance caravans.[5] The economies of late antiquity were also fundamentally agrarian and the primary materials involved in local trade would have been basic staples such as wine, olive oil, and wheat.[6] A

[3] Sarris, 'Centre or periphery?', p. 328.
[4] Sarris, 'Centre or periphery?', p. 324.
[5] See Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 113–139.
[6] Grant Parker, 'Ex Oriente Luxuria: Indian commodities and Roman experience', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 45:1 (2002), pp. 74–75; Martin Hall, 'Steppe state making' in *De-Centering State Making: Comparative and International Perspectives*, ed. Jens Bartleson et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), p. 33.

further caveat is that it is important to remember that the Romans did not seek at any point direct diplomatic or trading relations with a distant imperial polity like China.[7] However, despite being primarily limited in terms of material interdependence, the trade of silks from the east certainly generated vast levels of wealth. The riches of cities such as Edessa provide evidence for this, as can be seen with the 50,000 pounds of gold demanded as tribute by Khusro I from the city, while Khusro II would take 112,000 pounds of silver from its churches in 622 AD.[8] At a time when trade was considerably easier to tax than agrarian production, both the Byzantine and Sasanian courts could use the trade of luxury goods to consolidate their own power and centralize control over their imperial subjects.[9]

This chapter offers an interdisciplinary perspective on the decline and transformation of inter-polity order as the rise of the Gok Turks and the struggle over supremacy of trade would ultimately lead to the Last Great War of Antiquity. This details, first, the role of the Gok Turks in creating a more fluid balance-of-power rivalry, before then showing how the Arab conquests of the seventh century were able to take advantage of the resulting power vacuum created by the collapse of Roman and Sasanian power. This chapter takes a *longue durée* approach to inter-polity order, one based on transformation rather than the outright collapse typified by Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.[10] As the chapter will show, it was the arrival of the Gok Turks which opened an opportunity for the Romans to break free from dependence on the Sasanians for access to silk. The significance of this is that the Turks were a nomadic group who were able to be incorporated as allies, not just as an imperial client. This marks a decisive change from the typical clientelist approach seen in late antiquity of the Two Eyes imperial powers and their patron sponsorship of client kings. But before exploring the rise of the Gok Turks, the following section will examine the role played by the expansion of trade in late antiquity.

[7] The Romans only had limited knowledge of China as detailed by Theophylact Simocatta who referred to China as 'Taugast'. See Theophylact, 7.7.10. Also see Qiang Li, 'The image of the Romans in the eyes of Ancient Chinese: based on the Chinese sources from the third century CE to the seventh century CE' in *Reflections of Roman Imperialisms*, ed. Marko A. Janković (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), pp. 346–369.

[8] Jairus Banaji, *Exploring the Economy of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 79.

[9] Richard E. Payne, 'The Silk Road and the Iranian political economy in late antiquity: Iran, the Silk Road, and the problem of aristocratic empire', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 81:2 (2018), p. 242.

[10] Andrew Phillips, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 34–36.

Trade from the East

Trade from the east had been established by the Romans for several centuries and was driven by elite demand for exotic goods. In classical Rome, trade to India had long brought spices and incense across the Indian Ocean and Red Sea through to the caravan cities of Palmyra, Dura Europos, and Petra to the Mediterranean. The first-century geographer Strabo even claimed as many as 120 ships a season were making the voyage westwards from India.[11] With the decline of the pagan religion, however, the trade of late antiquity saw a shift from incense to silk and spices with demand for raw silk being a lucrative business. Silk was a material which defined the status and power of the elite and was worn as a 'political act' to distinguish the ruling class of the Roman empire.[12] To wear dyed purple silk was to display the mark of divine or imperial status. The price of silk was also a vexing problem of Byzantine domestic politics and Procopius records how the profits of silk fuelled corruption and inflation. Emperor Justinian would launch a fruitless attempt to control the price of silk, especially after Roman merchants complained of Persia inflating the costs of silk to excessive levels.[13] The Persians traditionally acted as intermediaries in the silk trade, but the Roman appetite for silk drove Emperor Justinian to seek to bypass Persia entirely. Such was the strength of this ambition that in the 540s, or possibly the 550s, Emperor Justinian sent agents to the east in order to smuggle silkworm eggs directly back to Byzantium.[14] This early attempt to uncover the secrets of silk production demonstrates the desire for the Romans to prevent Persia from having a monopoly over the trade. As Procopius records, Justinian sought to no longer be 'compelled to pay' money over to the 'enemy'.[15] The reliance on Sasanian merchants as intermediaries therefore had larger strategic implications as the Roman appetite for silk was funnelling money into the court of their main imperial rival. Justinian and his successors consequently looked for every opportunity to gain direct access to silk and to bypass the Persians.

[11] Strabo, II.5.12.

[12] Matthew P. Canepa, 'Textiles and elite tastes between the Mediterranean Iran and Asia at the end of antiquity' in *Global Textile Encounters*, ed. Marie-Louise Nosch et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014). p. 3; Julia Galliker, 'Silk in the Byzantine world' in *Global Byzantium*: *Papers from the Fiftieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, eds. Leslie Brubaker et al. (London: Routledge, 2022).

[13] Procopius, *The Secret History*, part III.25.

[14] Mark Whittow, 'Byzantium's Eurasian policy in the age of the Turk empire' in *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity*, ed. Michael Maas and Nicola di Cosmo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 281.

[15] Procopius, 1.20.9.

The Sasanians had first expanded into the Persian Gulf under Ardashir I and had taken over the trade networks of the short-lived Palmyrene empire in the third century AD.[16] The reign of Shapur II would also see further consolidation of Sasanian power over the Gulf coast and by the sixth century the Persians had a hegemony over maritime links to India. The Sasanians dominated maritime trade to India during this period, which was often led by Nestorian Christian merchants.[17] The historian Ammianus talks of the Persian coast as consisting of 'many anchorages and numerous safe harbours, [with] trading cities in an uninterrupted line'.[18] There is also archaeological evidence of settlements involved in Persian–Indian trade along the western coast of India and Sri Lanka, which likely took advantage of the monsoon winds creating good connections for seasonal travel.[19] Persia was also geographically fortuitous in location, able to act as an intermediary both over land and over sea with trade to the east. The journey to bring goods from India was as much as three months shorter for the Sasanians who controlled the Persian Gulf in comparison to Roman merchants travelling to ports further away in the Red Sea.[20] One estimate calculates that the possible value of trade across the Red Sea was as much as 150,000 solidi, and by comparison the tribute the Romans paid to the Persians for a one-year truce in 574 AD stood at 45,000 solidi per annum.[21] The Sasanians are therefore likely to have also suffered a trade balance deficit with the east as gold was the main form of exchange for trade with India, a precious metal that the Sasanians lacked in great quantities.[22] For overland trade across central Asia, the Sasanian silver drachm acted as the currency of choice, but crucially it was the taxation of trade that brought great profits for the court of the shah.[23] The taxation of trade by the Sasanians could have amounted to as much as one third of the imperial court's total

[16] See Chapter 2.
[17] Payne, 'The Silk Road and the Iranian political economy in late antiquity', p. 233.
[18] Amm. Marc., 23.6.46.
[19] Pius Malekandathil, 'The Sasanids and the maritime trade of India during the early medieval period', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 63 (2002), pp. 156–173; Suchandra Gosh, 'Maritime trade between the Persian Gulf and west coast of India (c. 3rd century AD to 7th century AD)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 64 (2003), pp. 132–142.
[20] Payne, 'The Silk Road and the Iranian political economy in late antiquity', p. 233.
[21] Raoul Mclaughlin and Hyun Jin Kim, 'Sogdian ambassadors of the Gok Turks and the eastern Roman empire' in *Rome and China: Points of Contact*, ed. Hyun Jin Kim et al. (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 48; Menander, fr. 18.2.
[22] Michael R. Jackson Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2020), p. 211; Basil Gray, 'Post-Sasanian metalwork', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 5 (1991), pp. 59–64.
[23] Richard N. Frye, 'Sasanian–central Asian trade relations', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 7 (1993), pp. 73–77.

revenue, a significant figure which fuelled the ambitions of successive shahs.[24] The Sasanians therefore quite consciously sought to retain a monopoly over this trade and prevent encroachment by Roman traders. Procopius records how the Sasanians would deliberately purchase whole cargoes in order to prevent direct access for Roman merchants.[25] The Sasanian monopoly over trade in the Persian Gulf and dominance over the silk trade from the east was challenged, however, by the growing power of the Gok Turks over routes crossing the steppe. In the east, Chinese courts used silk as a medium of exchange both as tribute and as a currency with Turkic nomads, creating a surplus that would then become transported to the Mediterranean. The Gok Turks were able to take advantage of this trade and their expansion westwards was driven by a co-constitutive relationship with sedentary powers in which the wealth of Constantinople acted to draw the Turks into the Two Eyes rivalry. Before exploring the Turks' impact on the balance of power, the following section will argue that the rise of the Gok Turks shows that the Romans had by the sixth century learned a great deal about people from the steppe. The opening of relations with the Turks demonstrates that Roman emperors were consciously seeking a steppe ally to balance against the Sasanians and gain access to wealth from the east.

The Rise of the Gok Turks

The Gok Turks are first recorded as coming to the borders of China in the early 540s and formed a khaganate by rebelling against a people known as the 'Rouran' in 552 AD. After breaking away from the Rouran, the Turks rapidly expanded their power across Eurasia and conquered territories from Manchuria, across the steppe to Crimea. The speed of this success by the Turk khaganate and the scale of the distances involved proved too great for the khaganate to remain a coherent unit and saw the Turks divided into eastern and western halves. The western half of the Turks would eventually become a pivotal player in the fall of the Sasanian empire, as the later parts of this chapter will explore, while the eastern half would rise to its peak in the 620s and in doing so even challenged the capital of the Chinese Tang dynasty.[26] Only with

[24] Payne, 'The Silk Road and the Iranian political economy in late antiquity', p. 238.
[25] Procopius, 1.20.12.
[26] Peter B. Golden, 'The entheogenic tales of the Turks', *The Medieval History Journal*, 21:2 (2018), pp. 291–327; Michael R. Dromp, 'Imperial state formation in inner-Asia: the early Turkic empires (6th to 9th centuries)', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 58:1 (2005), pp. 101–111; Denis Sinor, 'The establishment and dissolution of the Turk empire' in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 285–316.

the offer of massive subsidies in tribute was the Tang dynasty able to prevent being conquered by the East Turks.[27] The two halves of the Turk empire would over time become more independent from one another, but initially the Turks were led by a family known as the 'Ashina' and had a diffuse political structure that saw the ruling khagan sharing titles and powers with other members of the family. This caused confusion within ancient sources, but it appears that there was a supreme ruling khagan in the east, while a junior khagan ruled the western Turks.[28] The Gok Turks themselves believed in an origin story in which the people of the Turks had descended from an abandoned child that had been rescued by a she-wolf.[29] As Michael R. Dromp argues, the similarities here with the Romulus and Remus origins of Rome are perhaps too great to be merely coincidental and suggest that the Turks appropriated their founding myth.[30] This sharing of narratives and ideas across Eurasia is indicative of the movements and exchanges that characterized late antiquity and the Turk expansion in particular. The Turks' rapid enlargement across central Asia helped to facilitate the rise of exchange along the steppe as they consolidated power across vast stretches of territory and controlled a series of entrepot oasis cities that linked trade between east and west. The Turks' expansion, however, was not driven by any specific desire to grab territory but rather by a desire for wealth and access to markets.[31] Primarily, the Gok Turks sought to access the flow of trade from sedentary empires, but this created a more intensive competition between Byzantium and Persia. Initially, the Turks' movement west helped to alleviate pressure on the Persians' eastern frontier who had been threatened by the Hephthalites, as explored in Chapter 4. The Turks in a short-lived alliance with the Sasanians would then overthrow and conquer the Hephthalites in the 560s.[32] However, this temporary Persian alliance with the Turks broke down in the late 560s over the question of market access and the selling of silk.[33]

[27] Despite this rapid ascension in power, the eastern half of the Turk empire would eventually be defeated by the Tang Dynasty, possibly in combination with the environmental stress of climatic events between 627 and 629. See Nicola Di Cosmo, Clive Oppenheimer, and Ulf Buntgen, 'Interplay of environmental and socio-political factors in the downfall of the eastern Turk empire in 630 CE', *Climatic Change*, 145 (2017), pp. 383–395.

[28] Michael R. Dromp, 'Infrastructures of legitimacy in inner Asia: the early Turk empires' in *Empires and Exchanges in Late Antiquity*, pp. 302–316.

[29] Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992), p. 118.

[30] Dromp, 'Infrastructures of legitimacy in inner Asia', p. 306.

[31] Robert Haug, 'Shaping the eastern frontier: the Sasanian empire and its eastern neighbours' in *The Eastern Frontier: Limits of Empire in Late Antique and Early Medieval Central Asia*, ed. Benjamin Isaac (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 65.

[32] Michael J. Decker, *The Sasanian Empire at War: Persia, Rome, and the Rise of Islam, 224–651* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2022), p. 163.

[33] Whittow, 'Byzantium's Eurasian policy in the age of the Turk empire', pp. 271–286.

The rapid rise of the Turks as a new regional power across the steppe and their fragile cohesion are characteristic of the confederated nature of such nomadic polities and the chain-reaction movements of people from the steppe in late antiquity. In their rapid expansion across central Asia the Turks had absorbed a client people known as the Sogdians who were known for their role as traders.[34] The Sogdians originated from Transoxiana, a region in lower central Asia which included prominent cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara. They existed primarily as merchants and relied upon a significant diaspora of family connections among fellow Sogdians who traversed along the silk routes facilitating both short- and long-distance trade across the region. It was the unification of inner Asia under the Turks and their subsequent patronage of Sogdian traders which allowed for trade to flourish.[35] Oasis towns in central Asia boomed in the late sixth century due to the intensification of long-distance trade made possible by Turkic suzerainty over the Sogdians.[36] The desire for market access, however, would also be a primary cause in the breakdown of relations between the Turks and Sasanians. Menander states how the Sogdians sent an envoy to the shah in order to seek permission to sell raw silk within Persia. Shah Khusro I was reluctant to grant free access to the Sogdians for fear it would damage the interests of Persian merchants. Khusro then bought the raw silk of the Sogdian envoys in order to burn it in front of them in a show of his displeasure.[37] In reacting to this hostility, the Sogdians then advised their own patron, the western Turk khagan known as Sizabul, to reach out to the Romans and sell the raw silk directly to them, thereby circumventing the Persians entirely.[38] In burning the silk, the Persians were not only rejecting the Sogdian offer but were also acting with the knowledge that Sogdian trade could threaten the frontier with the Romans. The Sogdian desire to trade through Persia would have challenged the convention of limiting trade with the Romans to specific customs posts along the frontier. Limiting trade with the Romans to specific cities, such as Nisibis and Dara, had been a long-standing practice along the buffer zone in order to minimize the possibilities of espionage and to create strategic stability. While the Gok Turks had proved to

[34] See Étienne de La Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 197–226; Xinru Liu, 'Regional study: exchanges within the silk roads' in *The Cambridge World History 4: A World with States, Empires and Networks 1200 bce–900 ce*, ed. Craig Benjamin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 457–479.

[35] Jonathan Karam Skaff, 'The Sogdian trade diaspora in East Turkestan during the seventh and eighth centuries', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 46:4 (2003), pp. 475–524.

[36] Jonathan Karam Skaff, 'Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian silver coins from Turfan: their relationship to international trade and the local economy', *Asia Major*, 11:2 (1998), pp. 67–115.

[37] Menander, fr. 10.1.

[38] Menander, fr. 10.1.

be useful in assisting against the threat of the Hephthalites, the shah saw their desire to expand access to Roman markets as a threat to Persia's position vis-a-vis Byzantium. The arrival of the Sogdian merchants and their rejection by the shah must therefore be viewed in light of the relationship with Byzantium and their imperial rivalry.

The shah's decision to block the Sogdians selling silk was fortuitous for the Romans who had an 'almost insatiable' demand for silk.[39] The Sogdians themselves were aware that the Romans were an attractive market because, as Menander records, the Sogdians knew that the Romans 'made more use of it [silk] than other people'.[40] With the breakdown in Turk–Sasanian relations, the Sogdians quickly sought to open relations with the East Romans. The first Sogdian delegation reached Constantinople in 568 AD with a letter from the Turk khagan and upon meeting the emperor did 'everything according to the law of friendship'.[41] Emperor Justin II was keen to question the Turks on their conquest of the Hephthalites and after a verbal oath swore ties of friendship between the Turks and the Roman people.[42] Almost immediately the emperor sent an embassy in return to the Turks led by the general Zemarchus, who was the *Magister Militum Per Orientem*, the leading Roman commander of the east. As John of Ephesus records, 'never before had a Roman embassy been sent to these numerous and powerful tribes', and in sending an envoy of such a distinguished rank, the emperor was signalling the importance that must have been attached to cultivating a deeper relationship with the Turks.[43] This stands in stark contrast to the earlier fifth-century diplomacy with Attila the Hun in which he aggressively demanded a higher-ranked envoy, a privilege normally reserved only for diplomacy with the Sasanian royal court. The emergence of the Turks and their alliance with Byzantium shows that by the sixth century the Romans had learned a great deal about peoples from the steppe compared to the shock and confusion in encountering Attila and the Hunnic confederation. In the fifth century the Romans had difficulty identifying a leader that they could deal with; by the time of the arrival of the Turks in the sixth century, Byzantium was more willing to send high-ranking envoys and to use nomadic peoples as allies against Persia. The return embassies of the Romans to the Turks provide further evidence that by the sixth century the Romans were well aware of steppe cultures and customs. Persia's location had historically acted

[39] Payne, 'The Silk Road and the Iranian political economy in late antiquity', p. 228.
[40] Menander, fr. 10.1.
[41] Menander, fr. 10.1.
[42] Menander, fr. 10.1.
[43] Mark Whittow, 'Byzantium's Eurasian policy in the age of the Turk empire', p. 272; John of Ephesus, VI.22.

as a barrier to the Romans' knowledge of the central steppe peoples, but the arrival of the Turks gave the Romans a chance to circumvent Persian influence.

The silk routes and the trade between east and west deepened the material interdependence between nomadic and sedentary polities. Together, the Turks and Romans had a shared mutual interest in bypassing the Persian monopoly over this trade. As noted in the previous chapter, they agreed to plan a joint attack against the Persians and launched an invasion of Sasanian territory along two fronts in 572 AD.[44] Little is known of the Turk invasion of Persia, but the allied attack failed to overcome the Sasanians and was a disaster for the overconfident Romans who lost the frontier city of Dara, whose capture reportedly drove Emperor Justin II to insanity.[45] Menander records the sense of hubris behind Justin's strategy. The aim was that 'with the Turks attacking from one direction and the Romans from another, the Persians would be destroyed'. In acting with no restraints and 'aroused by these hopes, Justin thought that the power of the Persians would easily be overthrown and brought to nothing'.[46] As the previous chapter argued, the invasion of 572 showed significant aggression by Byzantium and ended the attempts of both sides to recognize mutual spheres of influence. The diplomacy and joint treaties of 532 and 561/2 had sought to acknowledge one another's interests and find common ground against nomadic barbarians, but in breaking the treaty of 561/2, the war of Justin II made common cause with a barbarian people against their Persian rival. This showed a significant shift from a Two Eyes hierarchy that sought to manage nomadic peoples, to a fluid balance of power in which nomadic people could be used to break the dual hierarchy. The Roman alliance with the Gok Turks, however, failed to achieve any significant inroads into Persia and a further Roman embassy in 576 to reaffirm the friendship was given a cold welcome after the failures of this joint campaign.[47] The Turks themselves would also fall into a succession struggle beginning in 581 which lasted for over two decades. As was common with the fragile coalitions of nomadic polities, battles over succession could cause chaos among nomadic groups. Despite their rapid success and power over huge distances across central Asia, the Turkic confederation suffered the same challenges of group cohesion as other earlier nomadic polities like the Huns. Only in 611 AD would the western Khanate stabilize under a new khagan.[48] These events achieved little at

[44] Menander, fr. 13.5.
[45] Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 253.
[46] Menander, fr. 13.5.
[47] Menander, fr. 19.1.
[48] Whittow, 'Byzantium's Eurasian policy in the age of the Turk empire', p. 272.

first in changing the geopolitics of the Two Eyes system, but they signalled the beginning of a re-shaping of inter-polity order in late antiquity. The aggressive war of 572 by the Romans may have failed in its ambitions, but in joining with the Turks as allies, nomadic groups were no longer just clients to be managed, but significant actors in their own right. As the following section shows, the widening and deepening of the Two Eyes system brought new powers into the rivalry of Byzantium and Persia and created a more fluid balance-of-power dynamic across Mesopotamia and beyond into new geopolitical regions.

The Expansion of the Two Eyes Rivalry

The sixth century AD was a period of the Two Eyes rivalry that was characterized by an intensification of warfare and competition that saw the rise of new polities as key actors that disrupted the bipolar stability of the fifth century. This section aims to explore the growing instability around Byzantium's imperial frontiers as new actors emerged and client states became more involved in the Two Eyes rivalry. It will begin by detailing the rise of the kingdom of Aksum which created an extension of the Two Eyes rivalry into new territories, before then exploring the growing friction over client states in the Transcaucasus region. The kingdoms of Lazica, Iberia, and Armenia had long been a part of the competing spheres of influence of the Two Eyes system, but in the sixth century the role of these clients became more pronounced. This section will also examine the role of the Avars, a breakaway group from the Turks, who the Turks themselves saw as fugitives. The emergence of the Avars would put pressure on Byzantium's western flank and distracted the Romans from the shared buffer zone with Persia. Finally, the latter part of this section will then cover the southern frontier which saw a power vacuum emerge as the system of using Arab client proxies collapsed. This section provides only a broad overview, but together the expansion of the rivalry and the inclusion of a wider range of actors changed the Two Eyes relationship from one of dual hierarchy and clientelism to a more intensive form of imperial competition with repeated open conflict.

To trace the fluid balance-of-power system that arose in the sixth century, we will begin by considering the Aksumite kingdom, a polity which grew out of the city of Aksum in Ethiopia. The kingdom of Aksum rose to power in the mid-fourth century AD across Northeast Africa and South Arabia and through the influence of maritime trade had become a Christian polity.[49] The main

[49] Eivind Heldaas Seland, 'Early Christianity in East Africa and Red Sea/Indian Ocean commerce', *African Archaeological Review*, 31 (2014), pp. 637–647.

rival of the Aksum kingdom was Himyar, a polity located in the southern highlands of Yemen. The Himyar were a competitor to the Aksumites for access to trade and control of routes across the Red Sea, bringing commerce from India. The Romans were also keen to encourage Aksum, as a fellow Christian power, in their rivalry against the Himyars which led Aksum to invade southern Arabia around 525 AD with Roman support. It was claimed that this invasion was in response to the Himyarites having killed Christian merchants and taken their goods.[50] But the justification for defending Christians from persecution had at heart a strong economic rationale.[51] The chronicler Theophanes the Confessor even records how the king of Aksum resented the Himyars for 'preventing Roman traders' from reaching the merchants of Aksum.[52] Roman support for the Aksum empire may also have followed the similar logic of outsourcing frontier security to proxies, just as Emperor Justinian had done by appointing an Arab phylarch. Supporting Aksum in a war against Himyar was a way for Justinian to minimize expenditure and boost profits from trade.[53] Procopius details how Justinian sought common cause with fellow Christians, but also saw an opportunity to encourage the Aksumites to purchase silk from India as a way to bypass the Persian monopoly.[54] The hope was that this new ally could be used to challenge Persian dominance of the silk trade. Although this strategy never proved as successful as the Romans had hoped, after invading Yemen, the kingdom of Aksum developed quickly through its influence over both sides of the southern Red Sea.[55] This expansion into southern Arabia, however, brought the kingdom of Aksum into direct confrontation with the Persian empire.

In response to the growing power of the Aksumite kingdom, the Sasanians invaded Yemen in 570 AD and by 575 had subsumed Himyar as a new province. By the end of Khusro's reign in 578/9, the Sasanians controlled the entrance to the Red Sea and had closed off the Romans' route to the east.[56] The loss of inter-polity trade created an economic crisis within the kingdom of Aksum, leading to its eventual decline as a regional power.[57] For the

[50] *Mal. Chronicle*, 18.433.
[51] Roberta Tomber, *Indo-Roman Trade: From Pots to Pepper* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 2008), p. 170.
[52] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, p. 323.
[53] Timothy Power, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate ad 500–1000* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012), pp. 66–68.
[54] Procopius, 1.20.9.
[55] Procopius, 1.20.12.
[56] David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, 'Sasanian maritime trade', *Iran*, 11 (1973), pp. 29–49.
[57] Gianfrancesco Lusini, 'The decline and collapse of the kingdom of Aksum (6th–7th CE): an environmental disaster or the end of a political process?' in *The End of Empires*, eds. Michael Gehler, Robert Rollinger, and Philipp Strobl (Wiesbaden: Springer Nature, 2022), pp. 321–336.

Sasanians, al-Tabari records how Khusro gained from his conquest 'abundant wealth and many jewels'.[58] The expansion of the Byzantine–Sasanian rivalry into the Red Sea and over Yemen shows a classic geopolitical struggle over trade and material wealth. In supporting the kingdom of Aksum, the Romans had sought to find a low-cost way to balance against Persia and bypass their monopoly on trade with India. The Sasanians also saw an invasion of Yemen and an attack against Aksum as a way to counter the opening of Turk relations with Constantinople. The Sasanians had initially sought to ambush the returning Roman envoys from the Turks in order to prevent an alliance between the two sides.[59] When this failed, the annexation of Himyar in 575 was a direct response to the Romans sending Zemarchus as an envoy to the Turks.[60]

Just as the Two Eyes rivalry spread further into the Red Sea and Africa, the latter half of the sixth century also experienced a more intensive competition over the frontier in the Transcaucasus region with bigger shifts to the regional balance of power. As the previous chapter showed, this region had been a source of both competition and cooperation, particularly over the issue of the nomadic threat from the steppe. By the sixth century, however, cooperation over this region and mutual defence of the Caspian Gates broke down. The Romans had been steadily consolidating their position within this region after the Sasanians had conceded control over the principality of Lazica in the treaty of 562 AD.[61] But at the centre of the Two Eyes rivalry was the kingdom of Armenia which had been divided between the two powers in 387 AD into the Roman-controlled Lesser Armenia and the Sasanian-controlled Persiarmenia, a mutual accommodation that ushered in a period of stability and coexistence along the buffer zone of Mesopotamia. In the fifth century there had been increasing unrest in the region, with Armenian subjects of Persia rebelling against Sasanian attempts to convert the population to Zoroastrianism.[62] However, in 571 AD the subjects of Persiarmenia broke out into an open revolt emboldened by the support of Byzantium. While the Romans sought to protect Christians, the Persians viewed such breakaway subjects as 'slaves'.[63] The Armenians had largely remained loyal to their Sasanian patron in the fourth and fifth centuries, but the prospect of a Christian alliance of Romans,

[58] Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, p. 264.
[59] Menander, fr. 11.5.
[60] Theoph, Byz.3 in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II ad 363–630—A Narrative Sourcebook*, ed. Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N. C. Lieu (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 137.
[61] Peter Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome and the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 229.
[62] Beate Dignas and Englebert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 186–187.
[63] John of Ephesus, 6.11.

Armenians, and the kingdom of Lazi in the sixth century threatened Sasanian power in the region. Yet events in the Caucasus cannot be divorced from the wider geopolitical competition between Byzantium and Persia. After agreeing to an alliance with the Turks, the Romans under Justin II were certainly more willing and confident to press the Persians over the issue of Christians in Armenia.[64] Both Theophanes and Menander viewed the Roman alliance with the Turks as the real motivation behind Justin II's aggression towards Persia.[65] As Menander argues, 'there were many other reasons for the war between the Romans and the Persians, but it was the nation of the Turks which most encouraged Justin to open hostilities against the Persians'.[66] Just as the Two Eyes rivalry spread into the area of Yemen and the Red Sea, the conflict between the two empires also intensified in the Caucasus region in response to the Roman alliance with the Turks.

The southern and eastern frontier of Byzantium similarly saw increased conflict in the sixth century as the western frontier of the Balkans would also experience a more troubled period as the Two Eyes rivalry intensified. While the Romans sought relations with the Turks, they also had to contend with the Avars, a nomadic people who had broken away from the Turks and fled westwards into Europe. Like other steppe peoples, the Avars were a nomadic confederation defined by a caste of elite warriors on horseback that the Romans initially saw as a potential counter-balance to other barbarian groups who were pressurizing defences in the Balkans. The Avars emerged north of the Caucasus through the typical chain-reaction movements of the era in which, having fled the rule of the Gok Turks, they opened relations with the Roman emperor through the intermediaries of a semi-nomadic people known as the Alans.[67] The Avars then sent an embassy to Justinian in 558 AD and were welcomed at first with gifts as potential valuable allies. Their appearance in Constantinople is recorded as having brought crowds out to gaze at the alien appearance of these new people.[68] Initially, the arrival of a new potential client or allied power was welcomed by the Romans as an opportunity to use one barbarian group against another. The Byzantine provinces of the Balkans had come under increasing pressure across the sixth century from disparate groups of barbarians. Procopius complained in his polemic, the *Anecdota*, or the 'Secret History', of these barbarian attacks against Thrace, which had

[64] Greatrex and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, pp. 137–138 and 149; Menander, fr. 16.1.
[65] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, p. 362.
[66] Menander, fr. 14.5.
[67] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, p. 362.
[68] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, pp. 339–340.

turned these Roman lands into a barbarian 'desert'.[69] The emperor therefore sought to use a classic Roman strategy of playing barbarian groups against one another in order to bring some stability to the frontier. Menander records how, for the Romans, 'whether the Avars prevailed or were defeated, both eventualities would be to the Romans' advantage'.[70] Yet, success for the Avars backfired for Byzantium as the Avars made ever-increasing demands for greater riches and subsidies from the Romans. Unlike previous barbarian groups, the horseback warriors of the Avars showed considerable unity and strength as a polity. The Avars then expanded their power rapidly across the Balkans and absorbed other groups such as the Gepids and Slavs, forming their own khaganate that lasted approximately between 568 and 796 AD.[71] The Roman attempt to play barbarian groups against one another failed as the Avars were much stronger than previous nomadic groups and came to dominate the Balkan region.

In viewing the Avars as 'fugitives' from the Turks, Justin II likely underestimated the Avars and was unable to prevent their rapid expansion and hold over the Pannonian basin.[72] While fortified defences prevented a total collapse of Roman influence in the Balkans, the East Romans were unable to prevent the raids of the Avars against their territory.[73] The Romans were also caught in a dilemma of seeking a peaceful existence with the Avars on their western frontier or an alliance with the Turks aimed at Persia on their eastern frontier.[74] Menander records that the initial bonds of friendship between the Romans and the Turks had been made with the expectation of allying against mutual enemies. Menander states how the Turk leader 'Silzibul had declared that the friend of the Romans was his friend and their enemy his enemy and that this should be unbreakable and inviolable'.[75] When Roman envoys met the successor to Sizabul, a man known as 'Turxanthus', they were met by hostility because the Turks feared that the Romans were making agreements with the Avars. Turxanthus confronted the Roman envoys by asking, 'are you not those very Romans who use ten tongues and lie with all of them?'[76] Emperor Justinian certainly did pay subsidies and give gifts to the Avars in the hope of

[69] Procopius, *Secret History*, part III.18.
[70] Menander, fr. 5.2.
[71] Walter Pohl, 'A non-Roman empire in central Europe: the Avars' in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut, and Walter Pohl (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 571–595.
[72] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, p. 340.
[73] Howard-Johnston, 'The great powers on the eve of the Islamic conquests', p. 44; Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, p. 111.
[74] Menander, fr. 4.2; Whittow, 'Byzantium's Eurasian policy in the age of the Turk empire', p. 279.
[75] Menander, fr. 19.1.
[76] Menander, fr. 19.1.

keeping them away from Byzantine territory. His successor Justin II, however, refused to continue this policy and stopped the payment of any subsidies to the Avars. This decision saw the Avars becoming increasingly aggressive to the Romans and brought the two sides into further conflict. The latter half of the sixth century would then see increasing pressure from nomadic groups across the Balkans. In response, the Romans were forced to divert armies away from the Persian frontier and had to campaign further away from Byzantine territory. This forced the empire to focus on two fronts simultaneously, with war with the Persians lasting between 572 and 591, a conflict which is likely to have facilitated the expansion of the Avars. The Romans had at first expressed confidence in using the Avars as a bulwark against other nomadic groups in the Balkans, but this policy failed as the Avars were too powerful for any balancing strategy to be effective.[77]

In contrast to the expansion and intensification of the Two Eyes rivalry in the Caucasus, Balkans, and Red Sea region, the frontier around Arabia would see a dramatic vacuum of imperial power. As the previous chapter showed, the Arab client kings had become steadily more independent throughout the sixth century. They had proved useful proxies for both sides in the war of 540 but by 562 AD, the Two Eyes powers had sought to rein in their clients through the peace treaty detailed by Menander.[78] After 562, both the Jafnids and the Nasrids would arouse the displeasure of their imperial sponsors over questions of independence. For the Romans, the payments to Arab client kings were an increasing issue of concern, but it was debates over Christian theology that would also be a source of contention. The Arab Jafnids supported the Monophysite movement, while Emperors Justinian and Justin II promoted a Chalcedonian doctrine. In supporting a rival interpretation of Christianity, the Arab Jafnids were undermining Constantinople's role as the sponsor and protector of Christian clients. In response to this growing independence, Justin II would then seek to assassinate the Jafnid leader, which turned into a farcical plot that was discovered in 572 AD. Relations between the two sides would be temporarily restored but they would again break down, this time irrevocably, after the failure of a joint Roman–Jafnid expedition against Persia in 580 AD. On the ascension of Emperor Maurice in 582 AD, Maurice, who had himself been the Roman general of this failed expedition, would arrest the Jafnid leader and send him to exile in Sicily, thereby dismantling the confederation of

[77] Walter Pohl, 'Justinian and the barbarian kingdoms' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 471.
[78] Menander, fr. 6.1.

the Jafnids as Roman clients.[79] Similarly, the Sasanians sought to dissolve the Nasrids as a client after the growing independence of their leader al-Nu'man who likely had a personal animosity with the shah.[80] Khusro II would finally dissolve the Nasrids in 602 AD and appoint a Persian governor to rule the Nasrids city of al-Hirah.[81] The willingness of both the Romans and the Persians to dispose of the Arab client kings demonstrates how the geopolitics of late antiquity was certainly conceptualized in terms of client kings and not client kingdoms.[82] The displeasure against both Arab phylarchs was based on personal relationships, with both the emperor and shah seeking to punish insubordinate clients in a direct manner. The collapse of the Arab client system led to a power vacuum from which the Arab conquests arose, but before this could occur the two empires would exhaust their power in a final war for hegemony in which the Turks would have appeared initially to have been the main ascendent power. Eventually, the religious message of Islam would unify the Arabs in a way that the Turks could not maintain, as will be explored later in this chapter.

This section has so far sought to detail the developments which led to a widening and deepening of the Two Eyes rivalry beginning in the sixth century, and these events are intrinsically linked to the emergence of the Gok Turks as a significant power in late antiquity. The ability of the Gok Turks to act on equal terms with sedentary polities challenged the balance of power between Romans and Persians and even saw a competition for status play out at the courts of foreign kings. During the first diplomatic mission by the Magister Militum Zemarchus to the Gok Turks, an event is recorded by both Menander and John of Ephesus in which the Roman ambassadors arrived at the dominion of the Turks only to find a Persian envoy also visiting the court of the Turk ruler Sizabul. The event is significant because it shows an extension of the Two Eyes rivalry into the heart of the court of the khagan of the Gok Turks.[83] The Byzantine envoys first met the Turk khagan at a place recorded as the 'Golden Mountain' and greeted him as he sat on a golden throne with gifts, as was customary of diplomatic practice. The Turks at this time were in preparation for an attack on Persia and the khagan listed a series of grievances

[79] Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 182.

[80] Fisher, *Between Empires*, p. 186.

[81] Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, pp. 358–359.

[82] Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 395; Fisher, *Between Empires*, p. 180.

[83] Michael Whitby, 'Byzantine diplomacy in late antiquity' in W*ar and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, ed. Philip de Souza and John France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 138.

to the Persian envoy as reasons for going to war. As Menander records, while making these accusations, 'the Persian envoy ignored the custom of silence which prevailed amongst them at their feasts and began rapidly to argue back, bravely refuting Sizabul's charges, and those present were astounded at the measure of his rage, since he abandoned custom and used many intemperate expressions.'[84]

By breaking diplomatic custom and displaying his rage, the Persian envoy was clearly incensed both at the charges made against Persia and the Roman presence at the khagan's court. For the Persians, it was contentious that the Turk khagan Sizabul 'treated the Romans with greater esteem' and allowed them to sit at a position of honour within the court.[85] John of Ephesus argued that the Persian shah clearly blamed the East Romans for 'stirring up these tribes against him' and saw the greater honour given to the Roman ambassadors as proof of their intent to use the Turks to attack Persia.[86]

After the failure of the Roman–Turk invasion of Persia in 572, Tiberius II, who was the successor to Justin II, sought peace with Persia. The diplomatic overture, however, failed to achieve a peace treaty comparable to 532 or 561/2. In correspondence with the shah, the emperor argued that they 'should make peace with one another on equal terms', but that if that was not possible, then he would be willing to wage war against Persia. Tiberius II further accused the Persians of making claims to extract tribute from the Romans. He argued that the Persians sought to diminish the status of Romans in front of the Gok Turks. The message of Tiberius is recorded as follows: 'For your ambassadors were so arrogant as to say to the barbarous tribe called Turks, "The Romans are our slaves, and as despicable slaves, pay us tribute." If, therefore, you do not abandon this payment, there can be no peace between us.'[87]

As the previous chapter has shown, the issue of subsidies or tributes was contentious for both empires, but here the question of payments is inexorably linked to the balance-of-power relationship with the Turks. Emperor Tiberius II is attacking the shah precisely because he fears the Persian envoys have diminished the status of the Romans in front of the Turk khagan.

The arrival of the Gok Turks upended the stability of the Two Eyes system and ended attempts at finding a permanent diplomatic solution to the disputed buffer zone across Mesopotamia. The Sasanians had initially benefitted from the arrival of the Turks in allying with them to defeat the Hephthalites.

[84] Menander, fr. 10.3.
[85] Menander, fr. 10.3.
[86] John of Ephesus, 6.23.
[87] John of Ephesus, VI.12.

But the Roman alliance with the Turks under Justin II was a 'radical break' in agreed-upon behaviour in which 'detaching' one another's allies went against the treaty of 561/2 and the societal norm which envisioned a dual hierarchy managing client barbarian actors.[88] But the Roman alliance with the Turks fundamentally challenged the tempered rivalry and coexistence of the Two Eyes order by using a barbarian group as allies to attack Persia.[89] The Romans had initially been overwhelmed and bewildered by the arrival of nomadic peoples from the steppe, but by the time of the emergence of the Gok Turks it is clear that the Romans had evolved in their sense of knowledge of nomadic peoples, their awareness of diplomacy with such groups, and their interest to circumvent Sasanian power to develop trade with the east.

The Last Great War of Antiquity

The emergence of the Gok Turks led directly to Justin II's disastrous war against Persia in 572 that began yet another inconclusive war which lasted for another twenty years. The exhausting stalemate between Byzantium and Persia had by this point lasted for several centuries and the numerous conflicts of the sixth century all failed to resolve the bipolar rivalry of the Two Eyes system. The status quo would finally be broken, however, by Shah Khusro II, who launched an invasion of Roman lands in 603 AD that would upend the world of late antiquity, leading to the eventual destruction of the Sasanian empire and a power vacuum from which the Arab invasions and Islamic conquest would emerge. This period saw the final collapse of the Two Eyes system and a transformation of world order. This section aims not to provide a detailed history of these events, but to detail the role played by the Gok Turks and to examine how the war began as an opportunistic attempt to take advantage of turmoil within the Byzantine empire.

As Chapter 3 has already shown, the Last Great War of Antiquity was a conflict which erupted after a series of coups within both empires that destabilized the strategic stability of the buffer zone. The Sasanians first suffered from a coup in 590 AD after Shah Hormizd IV and his son Khusro II were overthrown by the Sasanian general Bahram Chobin. Khusro II would escape to Roman territory and was restored to the Sasanian throne with the help

[88] The treaty of 561/2 may itself have been influenced by the arrival of the Turks as the existence of a powerful nomadic group on the Sasanian eastern frontier would certainly push them to seek a peaceful western front. See Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran*, pp. 214 and 225.

[89] Howard-Johnston, 'The great powers on the eve of the Islamic conquests', p. 42.

of Emperor Maurice in 591. Despite the wars of the sixth century and the increasingly conflictual relationship of the Two Eyes system, it would seem that the issue of kingly legitimacy was still a vital norm in late antiquity as Maurice chose to support the legitimacy of the shah rather than taking advantage of the situation by supporting the usurper Bahram. However, while the issue of legitimacy was vital for the institution of kingship, it is also likely that there were broader geopolitical concerns underlying Maurice's decision. The Persian book *Shahnama* ('Book of Kings') records that when Khusro fled to Byzantine territory, he was met by a Roman envoy and that Maurice initially rejected the request for assistance against the usurper, and agreed to aid Khusro only after he threatened to seek a conciliation with the Turk khagan if the emperor did not agree to the request.[90] This episode confirms that the Turks were still an integral part of the balance-of-power calculations of both the emperor and shah, despite the turmoil within the Turk khaganate between 581 and 611 AD. Emperor Maurice could not risk losing the Roman connection to the Turks and a vital balancing partner against the Sasanian empire.

In restoring Khusro II to the Persian throne, a brief period of peace ensued before Emperor Maurice would himself then in turn suffer the same fate of a coup against his imperial throne in 602 AD. Regime security in late antiquity was always of a precarious nature and the Roman army rose up against the emperor over questions of pay and serving conditions. Maurice had been campaigning in the Balkans against the Avars and Slavs, and sought to winter his troops north of the Danube as they needed to campaign further and further away from Constantinople in order to limit the rapid rise to power of the Avars in the Balkans. Challenged on two fronts by the Persians and Avars, the Byzantines were strategically overstretched. The choice of wintering the army so far from the frontier, however, was considered unacceptable by his men and led to a coup against Maurice by an officer known as Phocas. The coup against Emperor Maurice is commonly seen by both contemporaries and modern historians as the primary reason, or pretext, for the outbreak of the Last Great War of Antiquity.[91] Khosrau II would launch a war of revenge against Phocas in memory of his patron Maurice and the war of 602–628 AD would see the first significant strategic shifts across the frontier in centuries.

[90] Basil W. Robinson, *The Persian Book of Kings: An Epitome of the Shahnama of Firdawsi* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 133.

[91] Theophilus of Edessa's *Chronicle*, trans. Robert G. Hoyland (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 54–60; Sarris, *Empires of Faith*, p. 242; Adrian Goldsworthy, *Rome and Persia*: *The Seven Hundred Year Rivalry* (New York: Hachette Books, 2023), p. 414; Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran*, p. 278.

The Last Great War began as a typical border conflict that characterized the frequent warfare between the two empires in late antiquity. The intentions of Khusro and his ambitions in launching the war of 602–628 AD are likely to have been modest and aimed only at the restoration of the ousted Roman regime. There were certainly reports at the time of rumours that the eldest son of Emperor Maurice, Theodosius, had escaped to the court of Khusro and that the Persians may have intended to replace Phocas with him. Theophanes the Confessor records this tale as 'lies' spread by Khusro in order to 'take possession of the empire' through deceit.[92] It is impossible to know whether Theodosius actually did escape to the court of Khusro, but a 'real' or 'pretender' to the Roman throne was paraded before Roman cities in an attempt to convince them to capitulate before Persian forces.[93] The claims of a pretender with Theodosius, however, do disappear from the record, but even just as a propaganda tool this gave Khusro the ability to challenge the legitimacy of the regime of Phocas. Such was the upheaval caused by the overthrow of Maurice that a Roman official known as Narses would seize the city of Edessa and invite Khusro's assistance against the usurper of Phocas.[94] At this stage in the war, Khusro's strategy was essentially 'opportunistic' rather than an outright plan for conquest, and was a direct response to the internal instability within the Byzantine empire.[95] He was able to take advantage of the uncertainty of a legitimate succession to Maurice and the discord this brought with the rebellion of the Roman governor Narses. But despite the intensity of this conflict and the disorder within the Byzantine empire, there is little to suggest here that the Last Great War of Late Antiquity was significantly different from any previous conflict. Essentially, the character of the conflict may have changed, with an emphasis on the legitimacy of kingship, but the nature of the bipolar rivalry remained, with material constraints limiting the ability of either empire in their ability to achieve a decisive victory.

In the period between 602 and 610 AD the war was comparable to all the previous conflicts along the disputed buffer zone that saw raiding and violence but few strategic gains for the Persians along the frontier. This stalemate changed dramatically, however, in 610 AD with the emergence of Heraclius, a Roman general from Egypt who marched on Constantinople and overthrew the usurper emperor Phocas. Once again, the Byzantine empire was

[92] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, p. 419.
[93] James Howard-Johnson, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 24.
[94] Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, p. 419.
[95] Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity*, p. 29.

thrown into a state of upheaval as the legitimacy of an imperial ruler was called into question. Phocas was commonly seen by contemporaries as a tyrannical ruler and Syriac sources point to the challenges of internal stability within the empire as Phocas sought to cleanse the court of potential rivals.[96] Despite the unpopularity of Phocas, the emergence of Heraclius was not a smooth transition in power. The province of Egypt had been in civil war between 608 and 610 and violence was also recorded with rebellions and religious conflict in Syria and Palestine as different factions disputed the legitimacy of the new emperor and issues of religious doctrine. This chaotic instability within the Byzantine empire shifted the pace of the war as the conflict transformed from a quintessential frontier struggle to an existential fight for survival. The forces of Khusro took advantage of the instability to break through Roman defences by capturing Antioch, followed by the smaller cities of Apamea and Emesa. In 614 Khusro would also capture Jerusalem and by 618 he had taken Egypt, which had long been the breadbasket of the Roman empire. Khusro's campaign between 602 and 610 had been a series of raids typical of the frontier wars of late antiquity. His success after 610 brought great gains and while opportunistic was also likely to have been assisted by the earlier dismantling of the phylarch system. The loss of the Arab client system meant that Roman territories in Syria, Palestine, Arabia, and Egypt were all more vulnerable, allowing Khusro II to take advantage of the weakened imperial defences.[97]

Emperor Heraclius had sought to negotiate with the Sasanians in light of these struggles as the Romans lost cities and provinces, and sought to end the conflict soon after coming into power. Khusro, however, likely decided around 615 AD against any negotiated settlement to the conflict.[98] The diplomatic efforts of Heraclius begged Khusro to accept him as a 'son' and in doing so were essentially offering the Romans to become a vassal state of Persia. Such a formal acceptance of a subordinate role as the 'son' rather than the custom of 'brotherhood' which expressed equality would have ended the dual hierarchy of the Two Eyes system. But Khusro showed no willingness to compromise and killed the ambassadors sent by Heraclius.[99] After his victories over the

[96] Andrew Palmer and Sebastian Brock (trans.), *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), pp. 116 and 125.

[97] Peter Edwell, Greg Fisher, Geoffrey Greatex, Conor Whately, and Philip Wood, 'Arabs in the conflict between Rome and Persia 491–630' in *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, ed. Greg Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 275.

[98] Howard-Johnson, 'The great powers on the eve of the Islamic conquests', p. 38.

[99] Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby (trans.), *Chronicon Paschale 284–628* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, [1989] 2007), p. 161; Nikephoros, *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople Short History*, trans. Cyril Mango (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), p. 49.

Roman near east and Egypt, Khusro likely believed that the Byzantine empire could be defeated once and for all.[100] The historian James Howard-Johnston even argues that the emergence of the Turks as a significant power may have pushed Khusro to seek to defeat the Romans in order to then be able to turn and face the Turks.[101] This was the shared strategic dilemma of both empires in the Two Eyes system, whereby the shared buffer zone meant that it was difficult to turn away and face threats on other flanks. For the Romans, facing barbarians in the west meant neglecting defences in the east, while for the Sasanians, turning to face the Hephthalites or Turks in the east meant risking invasion from the Romans in the west.[102]

The campaigns of Heraclius to recover the empire became enveloped with religious significance after the fall of Jerusalem and the failure of negotiations. The Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 had turned the conflict into a quasi-religious war and took on a new ideological contest as Heraclius portrayed the Romans as defending Christian civilization. Historians debate the extent to which Heraclius' counter-offensive can be seen as a 'proto-crusade', but the Romans did embrace a propaganda campaign aimed at Christians in Sasanian territory, while Heraclius also made appeals to martyrdom through promising heavenly rewards to those who died fighting the infidel of the Persians.[103] In taking Jerusalem, the Persians removed holy relics from the city, such as a fragment of the True Cross, which became important for its symbolic significance.[104] The motivation to avenge and retake the cross played a key role in Heraclius' campaign, as is evidenced by events after the war in which the Christian victory was celebrated. After the end of the war, the emperor restored the True Cross to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and even changed his formal imperial title to 'Basileus', meaning 'king' or 'monarch' in Greek, to reflect

[100] James Howard-Johnston, 'Heraclius' Persian campaigns and the revival of the East Roman empire 622–630', *War in History*, 6:1 (1999), p. 30; Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 69–82; Dignas and Winter, *Roman and Persia in Late Antiquity*, pp. 44–48.

[101] Howard-Johnston, 'The great powers on the eve of the Islamic conquests', p. 46.

[102] James Howard-Johnston, 'The Sasanians' strategic dilemma' in *Commutatio et Contentio: Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East in Memory of Zeev Rubin*, ed. Henning Börm and Josef Wiesehöfer (Düsseldorf: Wellem Verlag, 2010), pp. 37–70.

[103] Yuri Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross* (Vienna: OAW, 2011); Tia M. Kolbaba, 'Fighting for Christianity: holy war in the Byzantine empire', *Byzantion*, 68:1 (1998), pp. 194–221.

[104] In previous work I have emphasized the role of ideology and religion, but this seems likely to have been a consequence of the war which fuelled the bitter rivalry and intensified the conflict rather than an initial catalyst for the long decline of the Two Eyes relationship. See Kevin Blachford, 'An alternative to the Thucydides trap: the buffer zone of Byzantium and Sasanian Persia', *International History Review*, 44:5 (2022), pp. 1077–1090.

his position as defender of the Christian faith.[105] The defeat of the Sasanians, however, cannot be explained through religious conflict alone. After the fall of Jerusalem and Egypt, the Roman position still looked close to collapse.

The Sasanians remained in a position of strength after the failure of negotiations and the war would continue as the Persians began to raid into Anatolia and the Byzantine heartland. In 626 AD the Sasanians would conduct a siege against the city of Constantinople itself in alliance with the Avars. The siege of Constantinople, however, was not the end of the empire but the beginnings of a miraculous change in fortunes as the tide of the war finally changed in the Romans' favour. The siege of 626 was a bold attack from two fronts but the Avars and the Persians failed in their bid to conquer the Roman capital because of the strength of the city's walls and a lack of supporting naval power.[106] Emperor Heraclius, who had enough confidence in the walls of Constantinople that he was not even present at the siege, then launched a decisive counter-offensive in alliance with the Gok Turks that defeated the Persian army at Nineveh on the eastern banks of the Tigris river in 627, before then marching on the Persian capital of Ctesiphon and agreeing a peace after Khusro was overthrown in a palace coup. This miraculous reversal of fortunes for Emperor Heraclius was due to two main factors: the alliance with the Gok Turks and the regime instability of Shah Khusro II, as the following explains.

While Constantinople was under siege, Emperor Heraclius was based in the Transcaucasus region as he sought to reverse the fortunes of the empire. His choice of location allowed for the Romans to directly connect with the Gok Turks who had recovered from their own internal succession strife after 611 AD. From Lazica, the emperor met a Turk prince, deputy to the supreme khagan, and gave gifts to the Turks in the hopes of renewing their alliance. To court the Turk khagan's favour, the emperor gave gifts of pearls, imperial garments, and even a promise of the emperor's daughter in marriage.[107] Emperor Heraclius would also signal his diplomatic goodwill to the Turks by referring to the khagan as 'my son'.[108] In 627 AD the new alliance broke through into the Sasanian heartlands with the Turks led by General Ziebel and with 40,000 Turk cavalrymen.[109] Heraclius then turned towards

[105] Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross*, pp. 65–66.

[106] Howard-Johnston, 'Heraclius' Persian campaigns and the revival of the East Roman empire 622–630', pp. 19–21; Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, p. 79.

[107] However, the Turk khagan died before this marriage could take place.

[108] Nikephoros, *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople Short History*, p. 57.

[109] Theophilus, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle*, trans. Robert G. Hoyland (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p. 74, Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle*, p. 447.

Ctesiphon and defeated a Persian attempt to limit their advance at the battle of Nineveh.[110] The breakthrough of Heraclius and the Turks into Sasanian heartlands was a 'strategic surprise' which shocked the 'whole Sasanian governing class'.[111] The rapid advance from the Transcaucasus region had bypassed Sasanian forces and aimed directly at the Persian capital. The success of this attack had proven the fears of the Sasanians who had long been alarmed at the prospect of a Turk–Roman alliance since the 570s, and Heraclius' advance had shown the inherent weakness of the Sasanian strategic position.

Such was the speed and shock of Heraclius' advance that the Sasanian shah fell victim to an internal uprising. The Romans' advance from Transcaucasia had led to the incitement of revolts in the northwestern provinces of the Sasanian realm.[112] Coupled with this instability was a much greater mutiny within the Sasanian court. Factions within the Sasanian realm were dissatisfied with Khusro's 'blind pursuit of imperialistic aims' which drained the empire of resources and turned noble Persian families against his regime.[113] Al-Tabari records how in collecting taxes to pay for his conquests, Khusro 'tyrannised' local populations.[114] Part of the reason for this internal instability may have been that Khusro II's campaigns of total conquest were a 'fundamental departure' for a regime that had previously fought only for limited aims.[115] The Sasanian shah in seeking to defeat the Romans once and for all had created a classic case of imperial overstretch as the drive for conquest created an increasingly tyrannical regime inciting revolt at home.[116] Khusro II was then overthrown by his son Kavadh-Shiroe who had his father and eighteen of his brothers killed in an ultimately futile attempt to secure the throne and ensure stability after the collapse of his father's rule.[117] The new shah Kavadh-Shiroe then immediately dispatched envoys to Heraclius to agree an armistice, finally ending the war after over two decades of conflict.[118]

[110] Bonner, *Last Empire of Iran*, p. 303.

[111] Josef Wiesehofer, 'The late Sasanian near east' in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 113.

[112] Mehrdad Ghodrat Dizaji, 'Disintegration of Sasanian hegemony over northern Iran (AD 623–643)', *Iranica Antiqua*, 46 (2011), pp. 315–329.

[113] Dignas and Winter, *Roman and Persia in Late Antiquity*, p. 47.

[114] Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, p. 376.

[115] Richard Payne, 'Cosmology and the expansion of the Iranian empire, 502–628 CE', *Past & Present*, 220:1 (2013), p. 31.

[116] Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p. 456.

[117] Khusro's overthrow is described by the Khuzistan chronicle in Greatrex and Lieu (eds.), *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, pp. 236–237.

[118] Decker, *Sasanian Empire at War*, p. 204; Sarris, *Empires of Faith*, p. 256.

The Aftermath of the Last Great War

The end of the Last Great War also marked the end of the Two Eyes order as the Arab conquest replaced Roman and Persian rule across the near east and Mesopotamia. As the following shows, the end of the Two Eyes system should be seen as a transformation of world order rather than an outright collapse of order in later antiquity.

The end of the Last Great War ended in a treaty in 629 AD that saw the Sasanians agree to peacefully return the fragment of the True Cross and all of the occupied territories, thereby restoring the original frontier of the buffer zone. Even after over two decades of conflict, the geopolitical situation had returned to the status quo. Emperor Heraclius had won a remarkable victory in his rapid march on Ctesiphon but the Persian's main army in Mesopotamia had still not been defeated and Persian forces under General Shahrbaraz were still a significant presence in Roman territory. Peter Heather concludes that despite Heraclius' remarkable campaign, the Last Great War was essentially a draw.[119] Yet, the counter-offensive of Emperor Heraclius and the overthrow of Khusro II was enough to fundamentally de-stabilize the Sasanian empire. After Heraclius' campaign, the Sassanian empire was racked with instability as a succession crisis led to a period of eight different rulers in the years between 628 and 632 AD.[120] This rapid turnover of rulers on the Persian throne reflected the collapsing power of the shah's role and his legitimacy. As was shown in Chapter 3, unstable regimes were a common feature of all polities in late antiquity, but the two sedentary empires of Byzantium and Persia had typically remained coherent and unified polities despite internal struggles, in contrast to the fragile confederations of nomadic polities that frequently collapsed with disputes over succession. But the Last Great War of Antiquity had clearly been a drain on both imperial powers, and the succession struggles of the numerous shahs after Khusro II show that the Sasanian dynasty struggled to maintain their legitimacy. The power of the Sasanian empire fundamentally declined as the Sasanians were forced to abandon first their province of Iraq in 638–639 to the advancing Arab armies, before then finally succumbing to the Arab conquest of Persia between 632 and 654 which forced the last shah, Peroz III, to vacate his throne and flee to safety at the court of the Tang Dynasty in China.

[119] Peter Heater, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 319.

[120] Jan Willem Drijvers, 'Rome and the Sassanid empire: confrontation and coexistence' in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 448.

The Last Great War of Antiquity created a geopolitical vacuum from which the Arab conquests emerged after both empires had been exhausted from years of ultimately futile struggle. The Byzantine empire had itself been brought to its knees despite the miraculous recovery in alliance with the Turks, and over two decades of warfare had left the empire in a weak financial position with limited resources. Emperor Heraclius had taken large funds from the Church to finance his campaign and the Byzantine polity lacked the strength to defend against the subsequent Arab invasions.[121] Roman power therefore collapsed rapidly across Syria, Palestine, and Egypt in the 630s and early 640s. The emergence of the Arab armies as a unified military force that was able to defeat the imperial powers may seem to have been an unanticipated situation, but there was a precedent set at the Battle of Dhu Qar against Sasanian forces in 610.[122] The collapse of the Arab client system had led to a power vacuum on the Arabian frontier and the Battle of Dhu Qar was the first time an Arab army had defeated one of the Two Eyes powers. This rarely noted event did not play a significant part in the Last Great War, but it does show that the Arab armies were certainly no longer mere clients of the two imperial centres. Crucially, for this study on the Two Eyes system, the rise of the Arab conquests is most notable for its evolution from the decline of Roman and Sasanian power.[123] While the message of Islam was wholly unique in uniting the Arab tribes, the decline of the Two Eyes system led to a remarkable transformation of inter-polity order that built upon pre-existing structures. Arab clients had long been part of the Roman near east as porous borders meant that Arab tribes had often existed in an intertwined manner with sedentary societies. As the Arab armies expanded to fill the vacuum left by the devastation of the Last Great War, they were able to take over the Sasanian and Roman governance structures. The transfer of allegiance by local elites in Iraq to Muslim rulers offered a chance for stability after years of conflict and upheaval.[124] As with Roman Syria, there is little evidence of a serious breakdown in administration after the Arab conquests.[125] The defences of the near east had been significantly weakened by war and yet there is strong evidence in 'continuity' as elites surrendered on terms to the

[121] Whittow, 'The late Rome/early Byzantine near east' in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, p. 94.

[122] On the Battle at Dhu Qar, see al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, p. 338. Although little is known of this battle and the exact date is disputed, see Greg Fisher, *Rome, Persia and Arabia: Shaping the Middle East from Pompey to Muhammed* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 159.

[123] The emergence of Islam and the Arab conquests fundamentally changed both the Middle East and the world, but such developments must be left to other more qualified authors to explain. For the Arab success, see Sarris, *Empires of Faith*, pp. 272–274.

[124] Zeev Rubin, 'Eastern neighbours' in *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire 500–1492*, ed. Jonathan Shepard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 155.

[125] R. Stephen Humphreys, 'Syria' in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, p. 506.

new Muslim rulers.[126] This evidence of building upon existing connections is also apparent with the early Islamic expansion of trade networks that was also able to take advantage of previous Sasanian trade flows across the Indian Ocean.[127]

The Arab tribes would conquer the Sasanian empire, while the Byzantine empire was reduced to a rump of its former self centred on the city of Constantinople. It had changed so dramatically that what was left was in many ways a successor state to the Roman empire, just as the western kingdoms of Europe had become successors to Rome.[128] The end of the Two Eyes order saw the emergence of a new Islamic order across the Middle East, but as Robert Hoyland argues, the geopolitical success of the Arab tribes as a nomadic actor that was able to challenge the sedentary empires had a precedent in the Gok Turks.[129] While the Gok Turks lacked the religious message, unity of purpose, or political drive of the Arab conquest, the Turks were a significant nomadic actor that unlike previous nomadic groups of the fifth or fourth centuries had directly entered into the rivalry and calculations over status of both the shah and emperor. Before the Last Great War of Antiquity, it was the confederation of the Gok Turks who had appeared to be the stronger nomadic geopolitical actor and the Turks were too powerful to be mere clients within the dual hierarchy of Byzantium and the Sasanians.

The Gok Turks were the first polity to unite the vast steppe region into a single large client–patron network.[130] Yet, as was common with nomadic confederations, their rule was fragile and could quickly disintegrate. Just as Heraclius was celebrating his triumph and the return of the True Cross, the western Turk confederation would itself collapse and fragment into another succession struggle. Internecine strife was inherent in the confederations of nomadic polities and the Gok Turks suffered a dynastic struggle that broke out in 630 AD which would see the Turks themselves decline as a major power. The eastern Turk khanate would be conquered by Tang China in the 630s, while the western khanate divided into ten further groupings known as the 'Ten Arrows'

[126] Michael G. Morony, 'The Islamic conquest of Sasanian Iran' in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel T. Potts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 983.

[127] Banaji, *Exploring the Economy of Late Antiquity*, p. 222.

[128] See John Haldon, 'The end of Rome? The transformation of the eastern empire in the seventh and eighth centuries CE' in *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 199–228.

[129] Robert Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 3.

[130] Iver B. Neumann and Einar Wigen, *The Steppe Tradition in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 114.

as stable rule collapsed.[131] The influence of the Gok Turks was broken as their power receded back into the steppes, while other Turkic groups would emerge in the familiar cycles of nomadic disintegration and unification, most notably with the Khazar Turks who established themselves as a semi-nomadic polity around Crimea and the Caucasus between 650 and 850 AD. Despite the short-lived nature of nomadic confederations, and their fragile cohesion, the Gok Turks demonstrated an oversized influence over the Two Eyes system that fuelled the rivalry between the great imperial powers and led eventually to the Last Great War.

Conclusion

Across the era of late antiquity, the two imperial powers evolved in their response to the great migrations of nomadic people. While the East Romans of the fifth century had nearly been overwhelmed by Attila the Hun, by the sixth century the Romans were well aware of nomadic customs and politics. It was the arrival of the Gok Turks which led Justin II to believe he could overturn the strategic stability of the Two Eyes system and finally defeat the Persians. The Gok Turks consolidated power over the central Asian steppe, allowing for trade to flourish and creating an incentive for the Persians to block Byzantine access to the lucrative markets for silk. Ultimately, this forced the Byzantines to seek to bypass Persia entirely by allying with the Turks, therefore ending the norm of the Two Eyes acting as great imperial managers of inter-polity order and those considered as lesser barbarians. Hyun Jin Kim argues that the Sasanians should have focused on consolidating their strategic gains around Yemen and cemented their hegemony over maritime and land trade routes.[132] But as the succession disputes, crises of legitimacy, and client–patron relations of late antiquity demonstrate, the two imperial powers of Byzantium and Sasanian Persia existed in a world of 'peoples', not 'states'. The Sasanian strategy was always tied to the individual person of the shah and questions of honour and legitimacy ultimately shaped Sasanian behaviour towards their Roman neighbours. Challenges to the legitimacy of Khusro II led to the invasion of Byzantium and his own final downfall as Persian elites rose up against the shah. The Arab conquests were therefore the result of this turmoil and the collapse of imperial power. Unlike the Gok Turks, the Arabs were able to remain a unified

[131] Golden, *History of Turkic Peoples*, pp. 135–137; Peter B. Golden, *Khazar Studies: An Historico-Philological Inquiry into the Origins of the Khazars* (Budapest: Akadämiai Kiadσ, 1980), p. 39.

[132] Hyun Jin Kim, *Geopolitics in Late Antiquity: The Fate of Superpowers from China to Rome* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 76.

power long enough to assume a hegemony over Mesopotamia. The Byzantine and Persian empires had been accustomed to dealing with bands of nomadic raiders and fragile coalitions of tribes, and not a coordinated group acting as a unified polity.[133] The Arab tribes were therefore perfectly placed to upend the Two Eyes hierarchy and to conquer the lands of their former patrons.

[133] Lawrence Conrad, *Eastern Neighbours: The Arabs to the Time of the Prophet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 194.

Conclusion

Inter-polity order in late antiquity consisted of a world of 'peoples' that took concepts of the body, the household, and the family and applied them to the relations between a diverse group of polities.[1] At the head of this inter-polity system was the Roman emperor and the Persian shah who would act as co-regents to order the world around them, as the Two Eyes of the world. Within a diverse suzerain system of nomadic confederations and proto-medieval kingdoms, inter-polity relations were primarily understood in terms of client–patron relationships in which the key distinction was between barbarism and civilization. Through a process of socialization that evolved over time, the two leading imperial powers of late antiquity would develop a shared set of diplomatic practices and a shared understanding of kingship and hierarchy. Relations between the Romans and Persians were therefore structured by shared practices of diplomatic protocol and of shared understandings of honour and kingship, in which the emperor and shah acted as mediators between heaven and earth. At the head of this hierarchical order, they sought to order client kings and proxies within a stratified political order.

The Two Eyes relationship was one of cooperation and frequent conflict where numerous wars forced each power to recognize a limit to their universalist beliefs, if not in rhetoric, at least in practice. The order of the Two Eyes was far from a peaceful system, as border conflicts, raids for profit and slaves, religious conflict, and quests for personal honour could all lead to war erupting across the buffer zone between the two empires. Today, war is seen as a tragic condition in which rules to limit warfare are understood as a key feature of inter-polity order. There is an 'oddity' with this perspective, however, especially considering modern Europe's own long and violent history.[2] Instead, we should see war as a meaning-creating activity in which war could be a legitimate response in late antiquity to questions of status, the desire to access markets, (particularly for nomads), and enforcing agreements.[3] War clearly

[1] Martin Hall and Christer Jonsson, *Essence of Diplomacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 52.

[2] Hendrik Spruyt, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 53.

[3] Peter Halden, *Family Power: Kinship, War and Political Orders in Eurasia 500–2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 319.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0008

predates the modern states system, yet much of the focus of contemporary international relations as a discipline is on war between European great powers.[4] Within the honour-based society of late antiquity, however, war was an important activity which structured who was 'recognised' as a polity and who was 'allowed to compete for standing' within a hierarchical order.[5] The long and violent history of late antiquity was therefore constitutive of defining the Roman ecumene and the Sasanian *Iranshahr* as two separate 'worlds' in which the two empires would create competing cosmological visions of the world.

The Roman ecumene and Persian *Iranshahr* were concepts of 'world order' whereby each 'world' was a regional political order based on universalist beliefs and a hierarchical view of one's own civilization and culture. While each imperial core would support such cosmological beliefs, they still had to face the geopolitical and strategic reality of external foes. For the Romans, the Persians remained as an immovable rival on their eastern flank which ended the Roman's self-belief of ever-expanding conquest. On the Roman's western flank, the empire was fundamentally transformed by the emergence of the Gothic kingdoms and the arrival of nomadic peoples. Successive Byzantine emperors struggled with the strategic difficulty of facing Vandals in Africa or Goths in Italy, while maintaining peace in the east with Persia. For the Sasanians, the arrival of the Hephthalites and the Gok Turks on their own eastern flank forced successive shahs to face nomadic enemies who challenged the empire in military strength, thereby upending Sasanian claims to stand above barbarian peoples. Wars against nomadic barbarians pushed the Persians to breaking point after the death of Peroz I in the fifth century. But wars across Mesopotamia were always tempered by the need to guard the Caspian Gates and protect against a Roman invasion directed at the capital Ctesiphon, especially after the construction of the Roman fortified city of Dara in 505 AD which forced Shah Kavadh to have two armies stationed along Persia's western flank. This strategic dilemma was recognized by Menander, who records the stark choices facing both empires as described by a Persian ambassador:

> We know well that the Roman empire, which is facing a large number of enemies, is fighting in many parts of the world and has its forces divided in hostilities with almost every barbarian nation, while, it is reasonable to assume, the Romans know that our state is at present at war with no one at

[4] For international relations, war was fundamental to building the modern nation state. See Andrew Phillips and Jason Sharman, 'Explaining durable diversity in international systems: state, company, and empire in the Indian Ocean', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:3 (2015), p. 437.

[5] Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 77.

> all except the Romans. You are at war with many peoples, we with you alone; thus the necessity for the treaty. Just as the Romans would be certain to prevail if they were fighting either a number of tribes or the Persian kingdom alone, so we shall certainly conquer since we have a dispute with no one other than the Romans and since we are committed to only one war.[6]

The difficulty of this balancing act for both empires proved to be an incentive to reach a form of *modus vivendi* along the buffer zone of Mesopotamia, as each empire sought stability, to order their client proxies, and to secure their own frontier.

Empires by their very nature have unclear frontiers, and the spheres of influence which developed across late antiquity were a natural outcome of this situation as neither empire was able to enforce their will or outright conquer the other. Yet, despite the undoubted antagonism and rivalry of these two powers, there is clear evidence of a shared interest of forming a stable political order. While numerous wars did occur, the rivalry between the two empires was not one in which leaders would seek to exploit every opportunity in a Hobbesian state of nature without any societal norms. A few historical instances can illustrate this, where each side had opportunities to undermine the other but chose not to do so. Such an example can be seen with an event in 524/5 when the king of Iberia had asked for Roman protection from a Persian invasion—a request that was ignored by the Romans who placed greater emphasis on stable relations with Persia than the needs of a client king.[7] Similarly, the Persians did not take advantage of an uprising at the strategic city of Dara in 537 AD, an opportunity which surely would have given the Persians a key foothold along the frontier.[8] The Persian shah Khusro I also faced a period of instability after the revolt of his son Anush-Zad in the 540s, who as a Christian could have been a useful Roman ally if the opportunity had been exploited for strategic gain.[9] The example of Emperor Maurice who chose to support Khusro II in returning to the throne, as covered in the previous chapter, further illustrates that the legitimacy of kingship was a higher priority than seeking to exploit Persia's instability after Bahram's usurpation of power. Such brief examples demonstrate a degree of both empires accepting a rival as a permanent presence. The imperial practices of both empires towards

[6] Menander, fr. 26.1.

[7] Hugh Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 256.

[8] Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II ad 363–630—A Narrative Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 101. Also see Michael R. Jackson Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2020), p. 180.

[9] Bonner, *Last Empire of Iran*, pp. 195–199.

barbarian leaders, but not to one another, also indicate an acceptance of the other as a rival within the Two Eyes system. Both empires would proclaim standards of civilization between one another while embracing dishonesty and tricks to assassinate unruly clients or barbarian kings who could be invited for negotiations under false pretences. The Romans attempted plots to assassinate both Attila the Hun and the Jafnid leader al-Mundhir, while the Sasanians plotted to assassinate envoys from the Turks on at least two separate occasions.[10] While such practices seem to have been accepted against lesser barbarians, there does not seem to be any indication in the historical sources that this was ever attempted against the emperor or shah.[11] The different standards of behaviour suggest that behind the universalist rhetoric and cultural chauvinism of the Two Eyes rivalry was a series of practices which demonstrate an acceptance of 'each other's existence as enduring political units', as exemplified through the growth of formalized diplomatic practices.[12]

Contemporary English School scholars within international relations take diplomacy as the 'minimum institution' necessary within an inter-polity society.[13] It is an institution which 'answers an imperative need in any system' of independent polities for ordering 'the affairs of a system' and 'for the management' of inter-polity society.[14] From the fourth to the sixth century, diplomacy evolved as a complex institution of the Two Eyes system in which diplomatic practices, such as translating documents, structured itineraries of an envoy's journey, sacred letters, and courtly rituals all worked to create or confirm a shared sense of meanings of hierarchy and civilization.[15] The treaties which developed from this diplomacy were taken seriously as documents that codified accepted standards of behaviour. Shah Khusro I believed a treaty had been wrongly broken by the Byzantines in 573 AD and in response marched along the Euphrates River with the text of the treaty pinned to a standard in a show of force backed with the legitimacy of having been wronged by the Romans.[16] Diplomacy between the two empires was never able to fully resolve all of the outstanding tensions between the two sides, as even during the most

[10] For the ambush on Turk envoys, see Chapter 6. For an account of poisoning Turk envoys, see Menander, 10.1.

[11] A. D. Lee, 'Abduction and assassination: the clandestine face of Roman diplomacy in late antiquity', *The International History Review*, 31:1 (2009), pp. 1–23.

[12] Michael Whitby, 'Byzantine diplomacy in late antiquity' in *War and Peace in Ancient and Medieval History*, ed. Philip de Souza and John France (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 125.

[13] Ian Hall, 'diplomacy, anti-diplomacy and international society' in *The Anarchical Society in a Globalized World*, ed. Richard Little and John Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 149.

[14] Adam Watson, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 84.

[15] Jonsson and Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy*, p. 42.

[16] Whitby, 'Byzantine diplomacy in late antiquity', p. 140.

detailed negotiations of 562, the issue of the Suanian people had still been left unresolved. The diplomatic practices of late antiquity therefore always demonstrated a certain 'Janus-faced' nature inherent within all forms of diplomacy in that such actions allowed for shared communication and negotiation, but concurrently served to 'define' distinct identities of the Roman ecumene and Sasanian *Iranshahr*.[17] The highly ritualized standards of exchanging envoys and negotiating treaties worked to develop a shared diplomatic culture within the imperial courts and to form shared ideas of status and hierarchy, while simultaneously defining the two empires as two separate worlds. This narrative of the development of the Two Eyes system focuses on how shared meanings were developed directly through contestation. This is contrary to modern liberal international relations theory which often takes contestation as a threat to inter-polity order. The spread of norms is therefore seen as a progressive process, often with a liberal emancipatory element, in which the 'liberal international order' is taken to expand into a vacuum.[18] But as the Janus-faced diplomacy of the Two Eyes system demonstrates, disputes, contestation, and wars also serve to establish which norms and practices are accepted and adopted within an inter-polity order.[19]

This study has sought to understand the Two Eyes order of late antiquity over a *longue durée* period, and in doing so has shown that late antiquity was a diverse suzerain system of client kings and nomadic 'barbarians' which challenges many of our common modernist assumptions within international relations. Firstly, the polities of late antiquity stand in contrast to the 'territorial trap' which underpins much of modern international relations theorizing. A contemporary statist lens of *inter-national* relations presupposes 'forms of territoriality' and ideologies of national identity in which states as unitary actors make 'rational maximizing' decisions in a competitive anarchical system akin to a free market where survival is uncertain. Such systemic pressures then force polities to converge on a like-unit state model.[20] The sheer multiplicity of actors and wide range of polities in late antiquity immediately call into

[17] Hall, 'Diplomacy, anti-diplomacy and international society', p. 160.

[18] Gregorio Bettiza and David Lewis, 'Authoritarian powers and norm contestation in the liberal international order: theorizing the power politics of ideas and identity', *Global Security Studies*, 5:4 (2020), pp. 560–562.

[19] Zachary Paikin, 'Contestation in global international society' in *Rebooting Global International Society: Change, Contestation and Resilience*, eds. Trine Flockhart and Zachary Paikin (Cham: Springer, 2023), p. 42.

[20] Jason Sharman, 'War, selection, and micro-states: economic and sociological perspectives on the international system', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:1 (2015), p. 195; Martin Hall, 'Steppe state making' in *De-Centering State Making: Comparative and International Perspectives*, ed. Jens Bartelson et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), p. 33.

question the validity of these assumptions. The modern structural perspective of international relations also assumes state actors as proactively directing levers of national power, something that would appear alien to the world of late antiquity where leaders were often reactive rather than proactive and acted with incomplete information at a time before detailed cartography.[21] Nomadic polities also challenge the territorial assumptions of international relations, as nomadic actors by their very definition act as a 'moveable' polity. Their ability to move within and outside the geopolitical arena of the Mesopotamian buffer zone demonstrates that nomads did not fight for territorial control but for access to markets and riches which could unify often fragile coalitions. The suzerain order of late antiquity featured a bewildering array of polities which would often form temporarily before collapsing under their own internal contradictions and fragile power structures. For the proto-kingdoms of the Goths and Franks, among others, adopting imperial courts and the practices of the Byzantine empire was a means to be recognized as polities. The adoption of Roman practices at the imperial court allowed for diplomacy and recognition between the imperial centre and the periphery. For the client kingdoms of this period, the imperial centres exercised a form of 'hegemonial diplomacy' which relied on those considered as lesser actors accepting persuasion and giving their consent to support the suzerain authority of the Two Eyes imperial centres.[22] For the more mobile nomadic groups, confederations would form and coalesce around leaders who were able to extract concessions, trade, and access to markets from the two sedentary empires. Contrary to modern structural expectations within international relations, the system did not force nomads to converge as like-units to become similar in form to the imperial powers. There was no attempt at any point of nomadic groups combining in an alliance against sedentary peoples. Instead, nomadic groups were dependent on the sedentary powers and formed a symbiotic relationship.[23]

The rise of the Gok Turks in the 560s was of primary significance for the decline of the Two Eyes relationship. The sixth century saw the recurrence of plague and wars which had already weakened both the Byzantine and Persian empires. But the rise of the Turks, as the first nomadic power to unify the central Asian steppe, led to a shift in relations between sedentary and nomadic

[21] For more on the assumptions of states and the expectation that states do not act in a haphazard way or without full control, see Nicholas D. Anderson, 'Push and pull on the periphery: inadvertent expansion in world politics', *International Security*, 47:3 (2023), pp. 136–173.

[22] Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 42.

[23] This interdependence is noted by Barry Buzan who also highlights how nomad warriors have often become the elites of sedentary societies. See Barry Buzan, *Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind across Three Eras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 76.

empires. Whereas in the fourth and fifth centuries there were clear incentives for the powers of the Two Eyes to manage nomadic groups as a mutual menace to stability, by the sixth century, nomadic groups such as the Turks, and their rival offshoot the Avars, became key actors in the calculations over imperial competitions for status. The rise of the Gok Turks challenged the ability of the emperor and Persian shah to be viewed as equal 'brothers' with mutual status at the head of a dual hierarchy. The arrival of the Turks and the Roman attempts at diplomacy with the Turk khagan created uncertainty and instability within the Two Eyes relationship. To ally with the Turks, or to recognize the Turks as a great imperial power, was to create misperception and conflict over the status of the Two Eyes.[24] This directly affected the ability of the Two Eyes powers to portray themselves as at the head of an inter-polity hierarchy who managed barbarians, if barbarians themselves could now act as equal to the emperor and shah. Ultimately, all inter-polity orders face periods of decline and transformation, but the system of late antiquity transformed once the emperor and shah could no longer claim to be acting as 'brothers' at the head of a Two Eyes hierarchy. The Last Great War of Antiquity would exhaust both empires as their former Arab clients would expand into the resulting vacuum and bring an end to the order of the Two Eyes.

[24] William C. Wohlforth, 'Status dilemmas and interstate conflict' in *Status and World Order*, ed. Thazha Varkey Paul et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 115–140.

Appendix

1 Brief Chronology

224	Ardashir I comes to power and founds the Sasanian dynasty.
230	Sasanian Persia's first major invasion of Roman territory.
240–241	Shapur I captures the city of Hatra.
270	Revolt of Palmyra led by Queen Zenobia.
299	Roman peace treaty with Narses.
330	Founding of Constantinople.
359	Shapur II lays siege to the city of Amida.
363	Julian the Apostate leads a major expedition to Ctesiphon and fails to capture the city, leading to his death and leaving the Roman army trapped. Jovian becomes emperor and negotiates a peace treaty.
387	Partition of Armenia between the two empires. Sasanian Persia receives a larger portion known as Persiarmenia.
395	First raids by the Huns into Roman and Sasanian territory.
410	Goths sack the city of Rome.
445	Vandals sack the city of Rome.
453	Death of Attila the Hun.
484	The shah Peroz is captured by the Hephthalites.
502	Kavadh invades Roman Mesopotamia, ending the fifth-century period of peaceful coexistence.
532	Treaty known as the 'Eternal Peace' is agreed upon.
540	Khusro I launches expedition into Roman territory and sacks the city of Antioch.
541	First outbreaks of the Justinianic plague.
561/2	The Sasanians and Romans negotiate the fifty-year peace treaty.
568	First delegation from the Gok Turks arrives at Constantinople.
572	Justin II's failed invasion of Persia in alliance with the Turks.
573	Persian capture of Dara.
589	Bahram Chobin's rebellion, forcing Khusro II to flee.
591	Khusro II is restored to the Persian throne.
602	Emperor Maurice is usurped by Phocas.
603	Khusro II launches his invasion of Roman territory.
610	Rise of Heraclius who executes the usurper Phocas.
614	Sasanian Persia's conquest of Jerusalem.
626	Persia's failed siege of Constantinople in alliance with the Avars.

628	Khusro II is overthrown in a palace coup.
640–642	Arab armies overrun Egypt.
651	The last shah Yazdegerd III flees, bringing an end to the Sasanian empire.

2 List of Roman Emperors from the Founding of Constantinople to the Last Great War of Antiquity, 306 AD–628 AD

Constantine I 306–337
Constantius II 337–361
Julian the Apostate 361–363
Jovian 363–364
Valentinian I 364
Valens 364–378
Gratian 378–379
Theodosius I 379–395
Arcadius 395–408
Theodosius II 408–450
Marcian 450–457
Leo I 457–474
Leo II 474
Zeno 474–5; 476–491
Basilicus 475–476
Anastasius 491–518
Justin I 518–527
Justinian 527–565
Justin II 565–578
Tiberius II 578–582
Maurice 582–602
Phocas 602–610
Heraclius 610–641
Tiberius II 578–582
Maurice 582–602
Phocas 602–610
Heraclius 610–641

3 List of Sasanian Shahs from the Founding of the Sasanian Dynasty to the Last Great War of Antiquity, 224 AD–628 AD

Names marked with a (?) indicate disputed dates.

Ardashir I 224–241
Shapur I 241–270(?)

Hormizd I 270–271
Bahram I 271–274
Bahram II 274–293
Bahram III 293
Narses I 293–302
Hormizd II 302–309
Adur Narseh 309
Shapur II 309–379
Ardashir II 379–383
Shapur III 383–388
Bahram IV 388–399
Yazdegerd I 399–420
Shapur IV 420
Bahram V 420–438
Yazdegerd II 438–457
Hormizd III 457–459(?)
Peroz I 459–484
Balash 484–488
Kavadh I 488–496; 498–531
Khusro I 531–579
Hormizd IV 579–590
Bahram Chobin 590–591
Khusro II 590; 591–628
Kavadh-Shiroe 628

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Agathias, *The Histories*, trans. Joseph D. Frendo (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1975).

al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir, *The History of al-Tabari, the Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids and Yemen*, vol. 5 [Clifford E. Bosworth] (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

Augustine of Hippo, *City of God against the Pagans*, trans. William M. Green, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

Carroll, Robert and Prickett, Stephen, eds., *The Bible: Authorised King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Corippus, Flavius Cresconius, *In Praise of Justin II*, trans. Averil Cameron (London: The Athlone Press, 1976).

Cosmas Indicopleustes, Christian Topography. The Tertullian Project (1897) [online], available at: www.tertullian.org/fathers/cosmas_00_1_preface.htm.

Dio, Cassius, *Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927).

Eusebius: Life of Constantine, eds. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

Eutropius, *Abridgment of Roman History*, trans. John Selby Watson. The Tertullian Project [online], available at: www.tertullian.org/fathers/eutropius_breviarium_2_text.htm.

Greatrex, Geoffrey and Lieu, Samuel N. C., eds., *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II ad 363–630 – A Narrative Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2002).

Halicarnassus, Dionysius, *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

Herodian, *History of the Empire*, trans. Charles R. Whittaker, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1969).

Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1992 repr.).

John of Ephesus, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History*, trans. R. Payne Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1860).

Josephus, Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVIII.2.4, trans. William Whiston, University of Chicago [online], available at: https://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/index.html.

Joshua the Stylite, *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite, composed in Syriac a.d. 507*, trans. W. Wright (Cambridge: The University Press, 1882).

Julian the Apostate, *Letters*, trans. W. C. Wright. The Tertullian Project [online], available at: www.tertullian.org/fathers/julian_apostate_letters_1_trans.htm.

Justinus: *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' Philippic Histories*, trans. J. S. Watson, 1853 [online], available at: www.attalus.org/info/justinus.html.

Libanius, *Funeral Oration over Julian*, trans. A. F. Norman, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

Maas, Michael, ed., *Readings in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2009).

Malalas, John, *The Chronicle* trans. Michael Jeffreys, Elizabeth Jeffreys, and Roger Scott (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986).

Marcellinus, Ammianus, *The History*, trans. John C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939).

Maurice, *Flavius Tiberius, Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).
Meijer, Fik and Nijf, Onno Van, *Trade, Transport and Society in the Ancient World: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1992).
Menander the Guardsman, *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, trans Roger C. Blockley (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1985).
Nikephoros, *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople: Short History*, trans. Cyril Mango (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990).
Paterculus, Velleius, *Compendium of Roman History: Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, trans. Frederick W. Shipley, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).
Priscus, *The Fragmentary History*, trans. John Given (Merchantville, NJ: Evolution Publishing, 2014).
Procopius, *History of the Wars*, trans. Henry B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914) [online], available at: https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Wars.
Procopius, *On Buildings*, trans. Henry B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940).
Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. G. A. Williamson and Peter Sarris (London: Penguin, 2007).
Scholasticus, Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History (ad431–594)*, trans. E. Walford (1846). The Tertullian Project [online], available at: www.tertullian.org/fathers/evagrius_0_intro.htm.
Shapur I, *Res Gestae (inscription at Naqsh-e Rustam)*. ToposText [online], available at: https://topostext.org/work/561.
Simocatta, Theophylact, *The History*, trans. Michael and Mary Whitby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History of the Church* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853).
Strabo, *Geographies*, trans. Horace L. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
Tacitus, *The Agricola and Germania of Tacitus*, trans. R. B. Townsend (London: Aberdeen University Press, 1894).
The Enactments of Justinian: *The Novels*, trans. Samuel P. Scott (1923), The Roman Law Library [online], available at: https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr.
Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History, New Advent: Fathers of the Church* [online], available at: www.newadvent.org/fathers/27023.htm.
Theophanes the Confessor, *The Chronicle: Byzantine and Near Eastern History ad 284–813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
Theophilus, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle*, trans. Robert G. Hoyland (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).
Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1974).
Vegetius, *Publius Renatus, Oxford Classical Texts: Vegetius: Epitoma Rei Militaris*, trans. Michael D. Reeve (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, trans. Thomas Gordon (New York: Monacelli Press, 2003).
West-Syrian Chronicles, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, trans. Andrew Palmer and Sebastian Brock (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993).
Whitby, Michael and Whitby, Mary (trans.), *Chronicon Paschale 284–628* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press [1989], 2007).
Zachariah of Mitylene, *The Syriac Chronicle*, trans. F. J. Hamilton and E. W. Brooks (London: Methuen & Co., 1899).

Secondary Sources

Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, *Atti del Convegno Internazionale sul Tema: La Persia nel Medioevo* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1971).

Agnew, Jonathan, 'The territorial trap: the geographical assumptions of international relations theory', *Review of International Political Economy*, 1:1 (1994), pp. 53–80.

Agostini, Domenico, 'The perception of Romans (hrōmāyīg) in the Sasanian and Zoroastrian traditions', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 37:1 (2022), pp. 1–18.

Aitken, Ellen Bradshaw and Fossey, John M., *The Levant: Crossroads of Late Antiquity/Le Levant: Carrefour de l'Antiquité tardive* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

Alcock, Susan, D'Altroy, Terence, Morrison, Kathleen, and Sinopoli, Carla, eds., *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Alizadeh, Karim, 'Borderland projects of Sasanian empire: intersection of domestic and foreign policies', *Journal of Ancient History*, 2:2 (2014), pp. 93–115.

Allison, Graham T., *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (London: Scribe, 2017).

Alston, Richard and Lieu, Samuel N. C., eds., *Aspects of the Roman East* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007).

Amanatidis-Saadé, George, 'Yazdgird the forerunner: early Iranian cosmopolitanism and its effects on Christian society in the Sasanid empire', *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies*, 21:1 (2021), pp. 3–22.

Anderson, Nicholas D, 'Push and pull on the periphery: inadvertent expansion in world politics', *International Security*, 47:3 (2023), pp. 136–173.

Ando, Clifford, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

Ando, Clifford and Richardson, Seth, *Ancient States and Infrastructural Power* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

Andrade, Nathanael, 'Seducing Autocracy: Tacitus and the Dynasts of the Near East', *American Journal of Philology*, 133 (2012), pp. 441–475.

Antoniades, Andreas, 'Hegemony and international relations', *International Politics*, 55 (2017), pp. 595–611.

Armitage, David, Bashford, Alison, and Sivasundaram, Sujit, eds., *Oceanic Histories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Arnason, Johann P. and Raaflaub, Kurt A., eds., *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

Bajoni, Maria Grazia, 'Envoy's speeches at the peace negotiations of 561–562 AD between the Byzantine empire and the Persian kingdom', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 29:3 (2018), pp. 353–371.

Balci, Ali, 'Bringing the Ottoman order back into international relations: a distinct international order or part of an Islamic international society?', *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), pp. 2090–2107.

Ball, Warwick, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

Balty, Jean-Charles, Delmaire, Roland, and Bémont, Colette, *Hommes et richesses dans l'Empire Byzantin* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1989).

Banaji, Jairus, *Exploring the Economy of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Barchiesi, Alessandro and Scheidel, Walter, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Barkawi, Tarak, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Barkawi, Tarak, Murray, Christopher, and Zarakol, Ayşe, 'The United Nations of IR: power, knowledge and empire in global IR debates', *International Theory*, 15:3 (2023), pp. 445–461.

Barnett, Glenn, *Emulating Alexander*: *How Alexander the Great's Legacy Fuelled Rome's Wars with Persia* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017).

Bartelson, Jens, Hall, Martin, and Teorell, Jan, *De-Centering State Making: Comparative and International Perspectives* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018).

Bayly, Martin J., 'Imperial ontological (in)security: "buffer states", international relations and the case of Anglo-Afghan relations 1808–1878', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:4 (2016), pp. 816–840.

Becker, Audrey, 'Verbal and nonverbal diplomatic communication at the imperial court of Constantinople 5th–6th century', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 72 (2018), pp. 79–92.

Becker, Audrey and Drocourt, Nicolas, eds., *Ambassadeurs et ambassades au coeur des relations diplomatiques: Rome, Occident Médiéval, Byzance* (Metz: Centre de recherché universitaire Lorrain d'histoire, 2012).

Beckwith, Christopher, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Beihammer, Alexander, Constantinou, Stavroula, and Parani, Maria G., eds., *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Mediaeval Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

Bellamy, James A., 'A new reading of the Namārah inscription', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 105:1 (1985), pp. 31–51.

Benjamin, Craig, ed., *The Cambridge World History, Volume 4: A World with States, Empires and Networks 1200 bce–900 ce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Bernheimer, Teresa and Silverstein, Adam, eds., *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives* (Exeter: Gibbs Memorial Trust, 2012).

Bettiza, Gregorio and Lewis, David, 'Authoritarian powers and norm contestation in the liberal international order: theorizing the power politics of ideas and identity', *Global Security Studies*, 5:4 (2020), pp. 559–577.

Binder, Carsten, Börm, Henning, and Luther, Andreas, eds., *Diwan: Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean* (Duisburg: Wellem, 2016).

Blachford, Kevin, 'From Thucydides to 1648: the "missing" years in IR and the missing voices in world history', *International Studies Perspectives*, 22:4 (2021), pp. 495–508.

Blachford, Kevin, 'The balance of power and the power struggles of the polis', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 17:3 (2021), pp. 429–447.

Blachford, Kevin, 'An alternative to the Thucydides trap: the buffer zone of Byzantium and Sasanian Persia', *International History Review*, 44:5 (2022), pp. 1077–1090.

Blachford, Kevin, 'Liberal militarism and republican restraints on power: the problems of unaccountable interventions for American democracy', *Critical Military Studies*, 8:3 (2022), 299–314.

Black, Anthony, 'Ancient and non-Western international thought', *History of European Ideas*, 41:1 (2015), pp. 2–12.

Black, Antony, *A World History of Ancient Political Thought: Its Significance and Consequence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Blockley, Roger C., 'The Romano-Persian peace treaties of AD 299 and 363', *Florilegium*, 6 (1984), pp. 28–49.

Blockley, Roger C., 'Subsidies and diplomacy: Rome and Persia in late antiquity'; *Phoenix*, 39:1 (1985), pp. 62–74.

Blockley, Roger C., *East Roman Frontier Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: Cairns, 1992).

Bonner, Michael R. Jackson, *The Last Empire of Iran* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2020).

Börm, Henning, '"Es war allerdings nicht so, daß sie es im Sinne eines Tributes erhielten, wie viele meinten …": Anlässe und Funktion der persischen Geldforderungen an die Römer', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 57:3 (2008), pp. 327–346.

Börm, Henning and Wiesehöfer, Josef, *Commutatio et Contentio: Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East in Memory of Zeev Rubin* (Düsseldorf: Wellem Verlag, 2010).

Börm, Henning, Binder, Carsten, and Luther, Andreas, eds., *Diwan, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean/Untersuchungen zu Geschichte und Kultur des Nahen Ostens und des östlichen Mittelmeerraumes im Altertum, Festschrift für Josef Wiesehöfer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Duisburg: Wellem Verlag, 2016).

Bouchard, Michel and Bogdan, Gheorghe, 'From barbarian other to chosen people: the etymology, ideology and evolution of "nation" at the shifting edge of mediaeval Western Christendom', *National Identities*, 17:1 (2015), pp. 1–23.

Bowersock, Glen, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Bowman, Alan K., Cameron, Averil, and Garnsey, Peter, eds., *Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 12: The Crisis of Empire ad193–337*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Brakke, David and Deliyannis, Deborah, eds., *Shifting Cultural Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2012).

Braumoeller, Bear F., *The Great Powers and the International System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Braumoeller, Bear F., *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Braund, David, *Rome and the Friendly King: The Character of Client Kingship* (Abingdon: Routledge, repr. [1984] 2014).

Breeze, David J., *The Frontiers of Imperial Rome* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2011).

Bresson, Alain, 'Fates of Rome', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 110 (2020), pp. 233–246.

Brock, S. P., 'Christians in the Sasanian empire: a case of divided loyalties', *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), pp. 1–19.

Brodersen, Kai, 'Mapping (in) the ancient world', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 94 (2012), pp. 183–190.

Brubaker, Leslie, Darley, Rebecca, and Reynolds, Daniel, *Global Byzantium: Papers from the Fiftieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (London: Routledge, 2022).

Bukovansky, Mlada, Keene, Edward, and Reus-Smit, Christian, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Bull, Hedley, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, [1977] 2002).

Bull, Hedley and Watson, Adam, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

Bullough, Vern L. 'The Roman empire vs. Persia 363–502: a study of successful deterrence', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 7:1 (1963), pp. 55–68.

Buntgen, Ulf, Myglan, Vladimir, Ljungqvist, Fredrik, Charpentier, McCormick, Di Cosmo, Michael, Sigl, Nicola, Jungclaus, Michael, Wagner, Johann, Krusic, Sebastian, Esper, Paul J., Kaplan, Jan, de Vaan, Jed O., Luterbacher, Michiel A. C., Wacker, Jürg, Tegel, Lukas, and Kirdyanov, Alexander V., 'Cooling and societal change during the late antique little ice age from 536 to around 600 AD', *Nature Geoscience*, 9 (2016), pp. 231–236.

Buranelli, Filippo Costa, 'Spheres of influence as negotiated hegemony: the case of central Asia', *Geopolitics*, 23:2 (2018), pp. 378–403.

Buzan, Barry, 'The English School: a neglected approach to international security studies', *Security Studies*, 46:2 (2015), pp. 126–143.

Buzan, Barry, *Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind across Three Eras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Buzan, Barry and Acharya, Amitav, *Re-Imagining International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Buzan, Barry and Lawson, George, 'Rethinking benchmark dates in international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 437–462.

Buzan, Barry and Little, Richard, 'The idea of international system: theory meets history', *International Political Science Review*, 15:3 (1994), pp. 231–255.

Buzan, Barry and Little, Richard, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Buzan, Barry and Zhang, Yongjin, 'The tributary system as international society in theory and practice', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5:1 (2012), pp. 3–36.

Cameron, Averil, 'Images of authority: elites and icons in late sixth-century Byzantium', *Past & Present*, 84 (1979), pp. 3–35.

Cameron, Averil, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2012).
Cameron, Averil, 'Late antiquity and Byzantium: an identity problem', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 40:1 (2016), pp. 27–37.
Cameron, Averil, ed., *Late Antiquity on the Eve of Islam* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).
Cameron, Averil, 'Byzantium now: contested territory or excluded middle?', *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 5 (2019), pp. 91–111.
Cameron, Averil, ed., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, Volume 3: States, Resources and Armies* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2021).
Cameron, Averil and Garnsey, Peter, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 13: The Late Empire, ad 337–425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
Cameron, Averil, Ward-Perkins, Bryan, and Whitby, Michael, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 14: Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, ad 425–600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
Campbell, Brian, 'Diplomacy in the Roman world (500 BC–AD 235)', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 12:1 (2001), pp. 1–22.
Campbell, Brian and Tritle, Lawrence, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
Canepa, Matthew P., *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).
Canepa, Matthew P., 'Distant displays of powers: understanding cross-cultural interaction among the elites of Rome', *Ars Orientalis*, 38 (2010), pp. 121–154.
Cañizares-Esguerra, Jorge and Seeman, Erik R., *The Atlantic in Global History 1500–2000* (London: Routledge, 2018).
Caporaso, James, 'Changes in the Westphalian order: territory, public authority, and sovereignty', *International Studies Review*, 2:2 (2000), pp. 1–28.
Carney, Thomas F., *Bureaucracy in Traditional Society: Romano-Byzantine Bureaucracies Viewed from Within* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1971).
Carvalho, Benjamin de, Lopez, Julia Costa, and Leira, Halvard, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).
Casana, Jesse, Goodman, David D., and Ferwerda, Carolin, 'A wall or a road? A remote sensing-based investigation of fortifications on Rome's eastern frontier', *Antiquity*, 97:396 (2023), pp. 1516–1533.
Castro, Mariana, *The Function of the Roman Army in Southern Arabia* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018).
Chia, Colin, 'Social positioning and international order contestation in early modern southeast Asia', *International Organization*, 76:2 (2022), pp. 305–336.
Chin, Catherine M. and Vidas, Moulie, eds., *Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).
Choksy, Jamsheed K., 'Sacral kingship in Sasanian Iran', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 2 (1988), pp. 35–52.
Choksy, Jamsheed K., 'Gesture in ancient Iran and central Asia II: proskynesis and the bent forefinger', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 4 (1990), pp. 201–207.
Christian, David, 'Silk roads or steppe roads? The silk roads in world history', *Journal of World History*, 11:1 (2000), pp. 1–26.
Chrysos, Evangelos, 'Some aspects of Roman-Persian legal relations', *Kleronomia*, 8 (1976), pp. 1–60.
Clark, Ian, 'Towards an English School theory of hegemony', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15:2 (2009), pp. 203–228.
Clark, Jessica H. and Turner, Brian, eds., *Brill's Companion to Military Defeat in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).
Coby, Paul, *Forts and Roman Strategy: A New Approach and Interpretation* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2022).

Cohen, Raymond, 'The great tradition: the spread of diplomacy in the ancient world', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 12:1 (2007), pp. 23–38.
Cohrs, Patrick O., *The New Atlantic Order: The Transformation of International Politics 1860–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
Colognesi, Luigi Capogrossi, *Law and Power in the Making of the Roman Commonwealth*, trans. Laura Kopp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
Comfort, Anthony, 'Roads on the frontier between Rome and Persia: Euphratesia, Osrhoene and Mesopotamia from AD *363 to 602*', PhD diss. (University of Exeter, 2009).
Conrad, Sebastian, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
Cornwell, Hannah, *Pax and the Politics of Peace: Republic to Principate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
Cotton, Hannah M., Hoyland, Robert G., Price, Jonathan J., and Wasserstein, David J., *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
Crawford, Peter, *Roman Emperor Zeno: The Perils of Power Politics in Fifth-Century Constantinople* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2019).
Croke, Brian and Crow, James, 'Procopius and Dara', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 73 (1983), pp. 143–159.
Curtis, Vesta Sarkhosh and Stewart, Sarah, eds., *The Age of the Parthians: The Idea of Iran 2* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).
Curtis, Vesta Sarkhosh, Alram, Michael, Daryaee, Touraj, and Pendleton, Elizabeth, eds., *The Parthian and Early Sasanian Empires* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016).
Danielson, August and Hedling, Elsa, 'Visual diplomacy in virtual summitry: status signalling during the coronavirus crisis', *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 243–261.
Daryaee, Touraj, 'The construction of the past in late antique Persia', *Historia. Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 55 (2006), pp. 493–503.
Daryaee, Touraj, *Sasanian Persia*: *The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).
Daryaee, Touraj and Jalilian, Shahram, 'The image of the Sasanian king in the Perso-Arabic historical tradition', *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2022.2037098.
Daryaee, Touraj and Rezakhani, Khodadad, *From Oxus to Euphrates: The World of Late Antique Iran* (Irvine, CA: UCI Jordan Center for Persian Studies, 2016).
Davies, Gwyn, 'Amicitia and diplomacy: "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"', *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 27 (2014), pp. 532–535.
Decker, Michael J., *The Sasanian Empire at War: Persia, Rome, and the Rise of Islam, 224–651* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2022).
Delaplace, Christine, *La Fin De L'empire Romain D'occident: Rome et les Wisigoths de 382 à 531* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015).
Di Cosmo, *Nicola, Ancient China and Its Enemies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
Di Cosmo, Nicola and Maas, Michael, *Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran and the Steppe, ca. 250–750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
Di Cosmo, Nicola, Oppenheimer, Clive, and Buntgen, Ulf, 'Interplay of environmental and socio-political factors in the downfall of the Eastern Turk empire in 630 CE', *Climatic Change*, 145 (2017), pp. 383–395.
Dignas, Beate and Winter, Englebert, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
Dijkstra, Jitse H. F. and Fisher, G., eds., *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014).
Dimitroukas, Ioannis, 'The trip of the great Persian embassies to Byzantium during the reign of Justinian I (527–565) and its logistics', *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 18 (2008), pp. 171–183.
Dizaji, Mehrdad Ghodrat, 'Disintegration of Sasanian hegemony over Northern Iran (AD 623–643)', *Iranica Antiqua*, 46 (2011), pp. 315–329.

Donnelly, Jack, 'Rethinking political structures: from "ordering principles" to "vertical differentiation" and beyond', *International Theory*, 1:1 (2009), pp. 49–86.
Drocourt, Nicolas and Malamut, Élisabeth, eds., *La Diplomatie Byzantine, de l'Empire Romain aux confins de l'Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).
Dromp, Michael R., 'Imperial state formation in inner-Asia: the early Turkic empires (6th to 9th centuries)', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 58:1 (2005), pp. 101–111.
Duindam, Jeroen, Tülay, Artan, and Metin, Kunt, eds., *Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires: A Global Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
Dunne, Tim and Reus-Smit, Christian, *The Globalization of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
Duque, Marina G., 'Recognizing international status: a relations approach', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:3 (2018), pp. 577–592.
Dyson, Stephen L., *The Creation of the Roman Frontier* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
Eckstein, Arthur, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).
Eckstein, Arthur, 'The character of pre-modern interstate diplomacy', *International History Review*, 32:2 (2010), pp. 319–328.
Edwell, Peter, 'The Euphrates as a boundary between Rome and Parthia in the late republic and early empire', *Antichthon*, 47 (2013), pp. 191–206.
Ehlers, Joachim, 'The birth of the monarchy out of violent death: transformations of kingship from late antiquity to the tenth century', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London*, 26:1 (2004), pp. 5–34.
Eisenberg, Merle and Mordechai, Lee, 'The Justinianic plague: an interdisciplinary review', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 43:2 (2019), pp. 156–180.
Elshtain, Jean Bethke, 'The problem with peace', *Millennium*, 17:3 (1988), pp. 441–449.
Elton, Hugh, *Warfare in Roman Europe ad 350–425* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
Elton, Hugh, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).
Elton, Hugh, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
Erdkamp, Paul, ed., *A Companion to the Roman Army* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
Erdkamp, Paul, 'War, food, climate change and the decline of the Roman empire', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 12:2 (2019), pp. 422–465.
Erdkamp, Paul, Hekster, O., de Kleijn, G., Mols, Stephan T. A. M., and de Blois, Lukas, *The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
Errington, R. Malcolm, *Roman Imperial Policy from Julian to Theodosius* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
Ferguson, Iain and Hast, Susanna, 'Introduction: the return of spheres of influence', *Geopolitics*, 23:2 (2018), pp. 277–284.
Ferguson, Yale and Mansbach, Richard, *Polities: Authority, Identities, and Change* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).
Fettweis, Christopher J., 'Restraining Rome: lessons in grand strategy from Emperor Hadrian', *Survival*, 60:4 (2018), pp. 123–150.
Fettweis, Christopher J., *The Pursuit of Dominance: 2000 Years of Superpower Grand Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
Fisher, Greg, *Between Empires*: *Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
Fisher, Greg, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
Fisher, Greg, *Rome, Persia and Arabia: Shaping the Middle East from Pompey to Muhammed* (London: Routledge, 2020).
Fisher, Greg and Wood, Philip, 'Writing the history of the "Persian Arabs": the pre-Islamic perspective on the "Nasrids" of al-Hirah', *Iranian Studies*, 49:2 (2016), pp. 247–290.
Flockhart, Trine and Zachary Paikin, eds., *Rebooting Global International Society: Change, Contestation and Resilience* (Cham: Springer, 2023).

Forness, Philip Michael, Hasse-Ungeheuer, Alexandra, and Leppin, Hartmut, eds., *The Good Christian Ruler in the First Millennium* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).
Foss, Clive, 'Syria in transition AD 550–750: an archaeological approach', *Dumbarton Oak Papers*, 51 (1997), pp. 189–269.
Fowden, Garth, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
Frankopan, Peter, *Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
Freeman, Philip and Kennedy, David, eds., *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, BAR International Series 297 (Ankara: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1986).
Frendo, David, 'Sasanian irredentism and the foundation of Constantinople: historical truth and historical reality', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 6 (1992), pp. 59–66.
Frendo, David, 'Byzantine-Iranian relations before and after the death of Khusrau II: a critical examination of the evidence', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 14 (2000), pp. 27–45.
Frendo, David, 'Dangerous ideas: Julian's Persian campaign, its historical background, motivation, and objectives', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 21 (2007), pp. 79–96.
Frendo, David, 'Sovereignty, control and co-existence in Byzantine Iranian relations', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 24 (2010), pp. 129–160.
Frye, Richard N., 'Iranian identity in ancient times', *Iranian Studies*, 26:1 (1993), pp. 143–146.
Frye, Richard N., 'Sasanian-central Asian trade relations', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 7:1 (1993), pp. 73–77.
Fuhrmann, Christopher, *Policing the Roman Empire: Soldiers, Administration and Public Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
Furlan, Urska, Husøy, Thomas Alexander, and Bohun, Henry, eds., *Narratives of Power in the Ancient World* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022).
Galasso, Vittorio Nicholas, 'Honour and the performance of Roman state identity', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8 (2012), pp. 173–189.
Gargola, Daniel J., *The Shape of the Roman Order: The Republic and Its Space* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2017).
Gariboldi, Andrea, 'Astral symbology on Iranian coinage', *East and West*, 54:1 (2004), pp. 31–53.
Gawlikowski, Michal, 'The Roman frontier on the Euphrates', *Mesopotamia. Rivista di archeologia, epigrafia e storia orientale antica*, 22 (1987), pp. 77–80.
Geary, Patrick J., *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
Geary, Patrick J., *Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002).
Gehler, Michael, Rollinger, Robert, and Strobl, Philipp, eds., *The End of Empires* (Wiesbaden: Springer Nature, 2022).
Gibbon, Edward, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Classics, [1776] 1996).
Glanville, Luke, 'The myth of "traditional" sovereignty', *International Studies Quarterly*, 57 (2013), pp. 79–90.
Goddard, Stacie E., *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
Goettlich, Kerry, 'The rise of linear borders in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:1 (2019), pp. 203–228.
Goetz, Hans-Werner, Jarnut, Jörg, and Pohl, Walter, eds., *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
Golden, Peter B., *Khazar Studies: An Historico-Philological Inquiry into the Origins of the Khazars* (Budapest: Akadämiai Kiadσ, 1980).
Golden, Peter B., *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992).

Golden, Peter B., 'The entheogenic tales of the Turks', *The Medieval History Journal*, 21:2 (2018), pp. 291–327.
Goldsworthy, Adrian, *Rome and Persia: The Seven Hundred Year Rivalry* (New York: Hachette Books, 2023).
Gommans, Jos, 'Warhorse and post-nomadic empire in Asia, c.1000–1800', *Journal of Global History*, 2:1 (2007), pp. 1–21.
Gordon, Colin Douglas, 'Subsidies in Roman imperial defence', *Phoenix*, 3:2 (1949), pp. 60–69.
Gordon, Colin Douglas, 'Procopius and Justinian's financial policies', *Phoenix*, 13:1 (1959), pp. 23–30.
Gosh, Suchandra, 'Maritime trade between the Persian Gulf and west coast of India (c. 3rd century AD to 7th century AD)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 64 (2003), pp. 132–142.
Graff, David A., *The Eurasian Way of War: Military Practice in Seventh-Century China and Byzantium* (London: Routledge, 2016).
Graham, Mark W., *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
Gray, Basil, 'Post-Sasanian metalwork', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, 5 (1991), pp. 59–64.
Greatrex, Geoffrey, *Rome and Persia at War 502–532* (Cambridge: Francis Cairns, 1998).
Gwynn, D. W. and Jones, A. H. M., eds., *The Later Roman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
Halden, Peter, 'Heteronymous politics beyond anarchy and hierarchy: the multiplication of forms of rule 750–1300', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 13:3 (2017), pp. 266–281.
Halden, Peter, *Family Power: Kinship, War and Political Orders in Eurasia 500–2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
Haldon, John F., *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
Haldon, John F., Filipkowski, Piotr, and Izdebski, Adam, *Perspectives on Public Policy in Societal-Environmental Crises: What the Future Needs from History* (Cham: Springer, 2022).
Hall, Martin and Jonsson, Christer, *Essence of Diplomacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
Halsall, Guy, 'Review article: movers and shakers – the barbarians and the fall of Rome', *Early Medieval Europe*, 8:1 (1999), pp. 131–145.
Halsall, Guy, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 376–568.
Hansen, Valerie, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
Hanson, Victor Davis, ed., *Makers of Ancient Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
Harper, Kyle, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease and the Fate of an Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).
Harrel, John S., *The Nisibis War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2020).
Heather, Peter, 'The Huns and the end of the Roman empire in western Europe', *The English Historical Review*, 110:435 (1995), pp. 4–41.
Heather, Peter, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (London: Macmillan, 2005).
Heather, Peter, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
Heather, Peter, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
Heinrich-Tamaska O. and Syrbe, D, eds., *Grenz/übergänge* (Remshalden: Verlag Bernhard Albert Greiner, 2016).
Heuser, Beatrice, *Strategy before Clausewitz Linking Warfare and Statecraft, 1400–1830* (London: Routledge, 2017).
Higgins, Martin J, 'International relations at the close of the sixth century', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 27:3 (1941), pp. 279–315.
Holland, Tom, *Shadow of the Sword* (London: Little, Brown, 2012).

Holland, Tom, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).
Holmes, Catherine and Standen, Naomi, 'Towards a global Middle Ages', *Past & Present*, 238 (2018), 1–44.
Howard, Michael, *The Invention of Peace: On War and International Order* (London: Yale University Press, 2000).
Howard-Johnston, James, 'Heraclius' Persian campaigns and the revival of the East Roman empire 622–630', *War in History*, 6:1 (1999), pp. 1–44.
Howard-Johnston, James, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
Hoyland, Robert, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
Hyland, John and Rezakhani, Khodadad, eds., *Brill's Companion to War in the Ancient Iranian Empires* (Leiden: Brill, 2024).
Ikenberry, G. John, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), pp. 7–23.
Isaac, Benjamin, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
Jackson, Van, 'Understanding spheres of influence in international politics', *European Journal of International Security*, 5:3 (2020), pp. 255–273.
James, Liz, ed., *A Companion to Byzantium* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010).
Janković, Marko A., *Reflections of Roman Imperialisms* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018).
Johnson, Scott Fitzgerald, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
Kadercan, Burak, 'Territorial design and grand strategy in the Ottoman empire', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 5:2 (2017), pp. 158–176.
Kaegi, Walter E., ed., *Byzantinische Forschungen: Vol. 19* (Amsterdam: Verlag Adolf M. Hakkert, 1993), pp. 193–213.
Kagan, Kimberly, 'Redefining Roman grand strategy', *The Journal of Military History*, 70:2 (2006), pp. 333–362.
Kaizer, Ted and Facella, Margherita, eds., *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2010).
Kaizer, Ted and Hekster, Olivier, *Frontiers in the Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
Kaldellis, Anthony, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (London: Harvard University Press, 2019).
Kang, David C., *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
Kang, David C., 'International order in historical East Asia: tribute and hierarchy beyond Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism', *International Organization*, 74 (2020), pp. 65–93.
Kaufman, Edy, *The Superpowers and Their Spheres of Influence* (London: Croom Helm, 1976).
Kawar, Irfan, 'The Arabs in the peace treaty of 561', *Arabica*, 3:2 (1956), pp. 181–213.
Kawar, Irfan, 'Procopius on the Ghassanids', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 77:2 (1957), pp. 79–87.
Keaveney, Arthur, 'Roman treaties with Parthia circa 95–circa 64 BC', *The American Journal of Philology*, 102:2 (1981), pp. 195–212.
Keene, Edward, *International Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).
Kegley, Charles W. and Raymond, Gregory A., *Great Powers and World Order: Patterns and Prospects* (London: Sage, 2020).
Kelly, Christopher, *Attila the Hun: Barbarian Terror and the Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Vintage Books, 2009).
Khazanov, Anatoly M., *Nomads and the Outside World*, trans. Julia Crookendem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
Kim, Hyun Jin, *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Kim, Hyun Jin, *Geopolitics in Late Antiquity: The Fate of Superpowers from China to Rome* (London: Routledge, 2018).
Kim, Hyun Jin, Lieu, Samuel N. C., and McLaughlin, Raoul, *Rome and China: Points of Contact* (London: Routledge, 2021).
Kingsbury, Benedict and Straumann, Benjamin, eds., *The Roman Foundations of the Law of Nations: Alberico Gentili and the Justice of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
Kissinger, Henry, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).
Knudsen, Tonny Brems, 'The institutions of international society' in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, eds. Nukhet Sandal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), available at https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.547.
Kolbaba, Tia M., 'Fighting for Christianity Holy War in the Byzantine empire', *Byzantion*, 68:1 (1998), pp. 194–221.
Koslowski, Rey, 'Human migration and the conceptualization of pre-modern world politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 46:3 (2002), pp. 375–399.
Kustermans, Jorg, Svensson, Ted, Lopez, Julia Costa, Blasenheim, Tracey, and Hoffman, Alvina, 'Ritual and authority in world politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 2–30.
Kwan, Alan Shiu Cheung, 'Hierarchy, status and international society: China and the steppe nomads', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:2 (2016), pp. 362–383.
Lascurettes, Kyle M., *Orders of Exclusion: Great Powers and the Strategic Sources of Restraint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
Latowsky, Anne A., *Emperor of the World: Charlemagne and the Construction of Imperial Authority, 800–1229* (London: Cornell University Press, 2013).
La Vaissière, Étienne de, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).
Lavan, M., Payne, R. E., and Weisweiler, J., eds., *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Universal Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
Lawson, George, 'The eternal divide? History and international relations'. *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:2 (2012), pp. 203–226.
Lebow, Richard Ned, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
Lee, A. D., *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007).
Lee, A. D., 'Abduction and assassination: the clandestine face of Roman diplomacy in late antiquity', *The International History Review*, 31:1 (2009), pp. 1–23.
Lee, A. D., *From Rome to Byzantium ad 363 to 565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
Lee, Christine and Morley, Neville, eds., *A Handbook to the Reception of Thucydides* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).
Legro, Jeffrey W., *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).
Lendon, J. E., *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
Lenski, Noel, *Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century a.d.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).
Lenski, Noel, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
Lewin, A. and Pellegrini, P., eds., *Settlement and Demography in the Near East in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Colloquium* (Pisa: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2007).
Lillington-Martin, Christopher and Turquois, Elodi, *Procopius of Caesarea: Literary and Historical Interpretations* (London: Routledge, 2017).
Little, Richard and Williams, John, eds., *The Anarchical Society in a Globalized World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Loke, Beverley, 'The United States, China and the politics of hegemonic ordering in East Asia', *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), pp. 1208–1229.
Lung, Ecaterina, 'Barbarian envoys at Byzantium in the 6th century', *Hiperboreea*, 2:1 (2015), pp. 35–52.
Luttwak, Edward, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century ad to the Third* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).
Luttwak, Edward, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009).
Maas, Michael, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
Maas, Michael, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
MacDonald, M. C. A., 'Nomads and the Ḥawrān in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods: a reassessment of the epigraphic evidence', *Syria*, 70 (1993), pp. 303–413.
MacKay, Joseph, 'The nomadic other: ontological security and the inner Asian steppe in historical East Asian international politics', *Review of International Studies*, 42:3 (2016), pp. 471–491.
MacKay, Joseph, Levin, Jamie, Carvalho, Gustavo de, Cavoukian, Kristin, and Cuthbert, Ross, 'Before and after borders: the nomadic challenge to sovereign territoriality', *International Politics*, 51:1 (2013), pp. 101–123.
Mackintosh, Marjorie C., 'Roman influences on the victory reliefs of Shapur I of Persia', *California Studies in Classical Antiquity*, 6 (1973), pp. 181–203.
Mair, Victor H., ed., *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).
Maksymiuk, Katarzyna, 'The Two Eyes of the earth: the problem of respect in Sasanid-Roman relations', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 58 (2018), pp. 591–606.
Malekandathil, Pius, 'The Sasanids and the maritime trade of India during the early medieval period', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 63 (2002), pp. 156–173.
Mann, J. C., 'Power, force and the frontiers of the empire', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 69 (1979), pp. 175–183.
Manning, Roger B., *War and Peace in the Western Political Imagination from Classical Antiquity to the Age of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
Maris, Carly, 'Parading Persia: West Asian geopolitics and the Roman triumph', PhD diss. (University of California Riverside, 2019).
Mattern, Janice Bially and Zarakol, Ayşe, 'Hierarchies in world politics', *International Organization*, 70:3 (2016), pp. 623–654.
Mattern, Susan P., *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate* (London: University of California Press, 1999).
Mattingly, Garrett, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955).
McConaughey, Meghan, Musgrave, Paul, and Nexon, Daniel, 'Beyond anarchy: logics of political organization, hierarchy, and international structure', *International Theory*, 10:2 (2018), pp. 181–218.
McCormick, Michael, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
McKinney, Jared Morgan, 'International relations in late antiquity', *International Studies Review*, 21:3 (2019), pp. 539–541.
McLaughlin, Raoul, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China* (London: Continuum, 2010).
McLaughlin, Raoul, *The Roman Empire and the Silk Routes: The Ancient World Economy and the Empires of Parthia, Central Asia and Han China* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2016).
McMahon, Darrin M. and Moyn, Samuel, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
Meier, Mischa, 'A contest of interpretation: Roman policy toward the Huns as reflected in the "Honoria Affair" (448/50)', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 10:1 (2017), pp. 42–61.

Meißner, Burkhard, Schmitt, Oliver, and Sommer, Michael, eds., *Krieg—Gesellschaft—Institutionen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005).
Menon, Rajan and Snyder, Jack, 'Buffer zones: anachronism, power vacuum or confidence builder?', *Review of International Studies*, 43:5 (2017), pp. 962–986.
Mihajlović, Vladimir D. and Janković, Marko A., *Reflections of Roman Imperialisms* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2018).
Millar, Fergus, 'Emperors, frontiers and foreign relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378', *Britannia*, 13 (1982), pp. 1–23.
Millar, Fergus, 'Empire, community and culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians, Jews and Arabs'. *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 38:2 (1987), pp. 143–164.
Millar, Fergus, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 2001).
Moore, Kenneth Royce, ed., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).
Morley, Craig, 'Rome and the Sasanian empire in the fifth century A.D.: a necessary peace'. PhD diss. (University of Liverpool, 2015).
Morley, Craig, 'Beyond the digression: Ammianus Marcellinus on the Persians', *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology*, 3:4 (2016), pp. 10–25.
Morley, Neville, *The Roman Empire: Roots of Imperialism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).
Musgrave, Paul and Nexon, Dan, 'Defending hierarchy from the moon to the Indian Ocean: symbolic capital and political dominance in early modern China and the Cold War', *International Organization*, 72:3 (2018), pp. 591–626.
Naddaf, V., Goshtasb, F., and Shokri-Foumeshi, M., eds., *Ranj o Ganj: Papers in Honour of Professor Z. Zarshenas* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 2013).
Nechaeva, Ekaterina, 'The sovereign's image abroad: imperial portraits in early Byzantine diplomacy', *Ephemeris Dacoramana*, 14 (2012), pp. 199–213.
Nechaeva, Ekaterina, *Embassies—Negotiations—Gifts: Systems of East Roman Diplomacy in Late Antiquity* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014).
Nechaeva, Ekaterina, 'Seven Hellenes and one Christian in the Endless Peace treaty of 532', *Studies in Late Antiquity*, 1:4 (2017), pp. 359–380.
Nedal, Dani K. and Nexon, Daniel H., 'Anarchy and authority: international structure, the balance of power and hierarchy', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4:2 (2019), pp. 169–189.
Neumann, Iver B., 'Sublime diplomacy: Byzantine, early modern, contemporary', *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 34:3 (2006), pp. 865–888.
Neumann, Iver B. and Glorstad, Hakon, 'Prehistorical international relations: how, why what', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:4 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac055.
Neumann, Iver B. and Nexon, Daniel H., 'Hegemonic-order theory: a field theoretic account', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:3 (2018), pp. 662–686.
Neumann, Iver B. and Wigen, Einar, 'The importance of the Eurasian steppe to the study of international relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 16:3 (2013), pp. 311–330.
Neumann, Iver B. and Wigen, Einar, *The Steppe Tradition in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
Neumann, Iver B., Sending, Ole Jacob, and Pouliot, Vincent, eds., *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
Nexon, Daniel H., *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009).
Nexon, Daniel H. and Ikenberry,G. J., 'Hegemony Studies 3.0: the dynamics of hegemonic orders', *Security Studies*, 28:3 (2019), pp. 395–421.
Nexon, Daniel H. and Wright, Thomas, 'What's at stake in the American empire debate?', *American Political Science Review*, 101:2 (2007), pp. 253–271.
Noble, Thomas F. X., ed., *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).
Nosch, Marie-Louise, Feng, Zhao, and Varadarajan, Lotika, *Global Textile Encounters* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014).

O'Flynn, John Michael, *Generalismos of the Western Roman Empire* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983).
Omissi, Andrastos, *Empires and Usurpers in the Later Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
O'Rourke, Lindsey and Shifrinson, Joshua, 'Squaring the circle on spheres of influence: the overlooked benefits', *The Washington Quarterly*, 45:2 (2022), pp. 105–124.
Osborne, James F., 'Sovereignty and territoriality in the city-state: a case study from the Amuq valley, Turkey', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 32:4 (2013), pp. 774–790.
Osiander, Andreas, 'Sovereignty, international relations and the Westphalian myth', *International Organization*, 55:2 (2001), pp. 251–287.
Osinsky, Pavel, 'The rise and fall of the nomad-dominated empires of Eurasia', *Sociological Inquiry*, 91:3 (2021), pp. 578–602.
Ostrogorsky, George, 'The Byzantine emperor and the hierarchical world order', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 35:84 (Dec. 1956), pp. 1–14.
Overtoom, Nikolaus L., 'The rivalry of Rome and Parthia in the sources from the Augustan age to late antiquity', *Anabis*, 7 (2016), pp. 137–174.
Overtoom, Nikolaus L., 'Reassessing the role of Parthia and Rome in the origins of the First Romano-Parthian War (56/5–50 BCE)', *Journal of Ancient History*, 9:2 (2021), pp. 238–268.
Parker, Grant, 'Ex Oriente Luxuria: Indian commodities and Roman experience', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 45:1 (2002), pp. 40–95.
Parker, Noel, ed., *Empire and Order* (London: Routledge, 2013).
Parnell, D. A., *Justinian's Men: Careers and Relationships of Byzantine Army Officers, 518–610* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
Paul, Darel, 'Sovereignty, survival and the Westphalian blind alley in international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 25:2 (1999), pp. 217–231.
Paul, Jürgen, ed., *Nomad Aristocrats in a World of Empires* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2013).
Paul, T. V., Larson, Deborah Welch, and Wohlforth, William C., eds., *Status and World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
Payne, Richard, 'Cosmology and the expansion of the Iranian empire, 502–628 CE', *Past & Present*, 220:1 (2013), pp. 3–33.
Payne, Richard, 'The making of Turan: the fall and transformation of the Iranian east in late antiquity', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 4–41.
Payne, Richard, 'The Silk Road and the Iranian political economy in late antiquity: Iran, the Silk Road, and the problem of aristocratic empire', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 81:2 (2018), pp. 227–250.
Peregrine, Peter N., 'Climate and social change at the start of the late antique ice age', *The Holocene*, 30:11 (2020), pp. 1643–1648.
Peretz, Daniel, 'The Roman interpreter and his diplomatic and military roles', *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 55:4 (2006), pp. 451–470.
Phillips, Andrew, *War, Religion and Empire: The Transformation of International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
Phillips, Andrew and Sharman, Jason, 'Explaining durable diversity in international systems: state, company and empire in the Indian Ocean', *International Studies Quarterly*, 59:3 (2015), pp. 436–448.
Phillips, Andrew and Sharman, Jason, *International Order in Diversity: War, Trade and Rule in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
Phillips, Andrew and Sharman, Jason, 'Conquest, empire and the Eurasian military synthesis' (forthcoming).
Pijl, Kees Van Der, *Nomads, Empires, States: Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: Pluto Press, 2007).
Pinker, Steven, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (London. Penguin, 2011).

Piras, Andrea, 'Apocalyptic imagery and royal propaganda in Khosrow II's letter to the Byzantine emperor Maurice', *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 14:1 (2021), pp. 178–195.
Pogorzelski, Randall J., 'Orbis Romanus: Lucan and the limits of the Roman world', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 141:1 (2011), pp. 143–170.
Porter, Patrick, 'A world imagined: nostalgia and liberal order', *The Cato Institute, Policy Analysis No. 843*, (Washington, DC: CATO Institute, 2018).
Potts, Daniel T., ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
Pourshariati, Parvaneh, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).
Power, Timothy, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate ad 500–1000* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2012).
Raaflaub, Kurt A., ed., *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).
Raaflaub, Kurt A. and Talbert, Richard J. A., eds., *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Pre-Modern Societies* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
Renshon, Jonathan, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017).
Reus-Smit, Christian, 'The constitutional structure of international society and the nature of fundamental institutions', *International Organization*, 51:4 (1997), pp. 555–589.
Reus-Smit, Christian, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
Reus-Smit, Christian, *On Cultural Diversity: International Theory in a World of Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
Rezakhani, Khodadad, *Reorienting the Sasanians* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
Ricci, Giuseppe A., 'Nomads in late antiquity: gazing on Rome from the Steppe Attila to Asparuch (370–680 CE)', PhD diss. (Princeton University, 2015).
Rich, John and Shipley, Graham, eds., *War and Society in the Roman World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993).
Rieber, Alfred J., 'Changing concepts and constructions of frontiers', *Ab Imperio*, 1 (2003), pp. 23–46.
Robin, Christian and Schiettecatte, Jérémie, *Les préludes de l'Islam* (Paris: Editions De Boccard, 2013).
Robinson, Basil W., *The Persian Book of Kings: An Epitome of the Shahnama of Firdawsi* (London: Routledge, 2002).
Robinson, Chase F., ed., *The New Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
Rogers, J. Daniel, 'Inner Asian states and empires: theories and synthesis', *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 20 (2012), pp. 205–256.
Rollinger, Robert, Degen, Julian, and Gehler, Michael, eds., *Short-Termed Empires in World History* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2020).
Rousseau, Philip, ed., *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012).
Rubin, Zeev, *Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the Fifth Century* AD Oxford International Series 297 (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1986).
Rubin, Zeev, 'The Mediterranean and the dilemma of the Roman empire in late antiquity', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 1:1 (1986), pp. 13–62.
Sabin, Philip, Wees Hans van, and Whitby, Michael, *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
Salzman, Michele Renee, *The Falls of Rome: Crises, Resilience, and Resurgence in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
Sankey, Evan R, 'Reconsidering spheres of influence', *Survival*, 62:2 (2020), pp. 37–47.
Sarantis, Alexander, 'Diplomatic relations between the eastern Roman empire and the "Barbarian" successor states 527–565', *History Compass*, 16:11 (2018), pp. 1–14.
Sarantis, Alexander and Christie, Neil, *War and Warfare in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

Sarris, Peter, 'The Justinianic plague: origins and effects', *Continuity and Change*, 17:2 (2002), pp. 169–182.
Sarris, Peter, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome and the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
Sarris, Peter, 'Centre or periphery? Constantinople and the Eurasian trading system at the end of antiquity' in *Global Byzantium: Papers from the Fiftieth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, eds. Leslie Brubaker et al. (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 316–331.
Sauer, Eberhard W., *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
Schabert, Tilo and Heyking, John von, *Where from Does History Emerge? Inquiries in Political Cosmogony* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020).
Scheidel, Walter, ed., *State Power in Ancient China and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
Scheidel, Walter, ed., *The Science of Roman History: Biology, Climate, and the Future of the Past* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018).
Scheidel, Walter, *Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019).
Schleicher, F., Stickler, T., and Hartmann, U., eds., *Iberien zwischen Rom und Iran* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2019).
Schlude, Jason M. and Rubin, Benjamin B., eds., *Arsacids, Romans, and Local Elites: Cross-Cultural Interactions of the Parthian Empire* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017).
Schmidt, Sebastian, 'To order the minds of scholars: the discourse of the Peace of Westphalia in International Relations Literature', *International Studies Quarterly*, 55:3 (2011), pp. 601–623.
Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (London: Yale University Press, 2009).
Seland, Eivind Heldaas, 'Early Christianity in East Africa and Red Sea', *The African Archaeological Review*, 31:4 (2014), pp. 637–647.
Sessa, Kristina, 'The new environmental fall of Rome: a methodological consideration', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 12:1 (2019), pp. 211–255.
Shahid, Irfan, 'The Iranian factor in Byzantium during the reign of Heraclius', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 26 (1972), pp. 293–320.
Sharman, Jason, 'War, selection, and micro-states: Economic and sociological perspectives on the international system', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:1 (2015), pp. 194–214.
Shaw, Brent, '"Eaters of flesh, drinkers of milk": the ancient Mediterranean ideology of the pastoral nomad', *Ancient Society*, 13–14 (1982–1983), pp. 5–31.
Shayegan, M. Rahim, *Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
Sheldon, Rose Mary, *Rome's Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (London: Vallentine Mitchel & Co. Ltd, 2010).
Shepard, Jonathan, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c.500–1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
Sidebottom, Harry, *Ancient Warfare: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
Sinor, Denis, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
Skaff, Jonathan Karam, 'Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian silver coins from Turfan: their relationship to international trade and the local economy', *Asia Major*, 11:2 (1998), pp. 67–115.
Skaff, Jonathan Karam, 'The Sogdian trade diaspora in east Turkestan during the seventh and eighth centuries', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 46:4 (2003), pp. 475–524.
Slootjes, Daniëlle and Peachin, M., eds., *Rome and the Worlds beyond Its Frontiers* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
Sluga, Glenda, *The Invention of International Order: Remaking Europe after Napoleon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

Smith, Anthony D., *The Cultural Foundations of Nations: Hierarchy, Covenant, and Republic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
Smith, Monica L., 'Territories, corridors and networks: a biological model for the premodern state', *Complexity*, 12:4 (2007), pp. 28–35.
Souza, Philip De and France, John, eds., *War and Peace in Ancient and Mediaeval History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
Spawforth, Antony J. S., *The Court and Court Society in Ancient Monarchies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
Spier, Jeffrey, Potts, Timothy, and Cole, Sara E., *Persia: Ancient Iran and the Classical World* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2022).
Spruyt, Hendrik, *The World Imagined: Collective Beliefs and Political Order in the Sinocentric, Islamic and Southeast Asian International Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
Spykman, Nicholas, 'Frontiers, security and international organization', *Geographical Review*, 32:3 (1942), pp. 436–447.
Stephenson, Paul, *New Rome: The Empire in the East* (London: Profile Books, 2021).
Stoneman, Richard, *Palmyra and Its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt against Rome* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992).
Stoyanov, Yuri, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross* (Vienna: OAW, 2011).
Strootman, Rolf and Versluys, Miguel John, eds., *Persianism in Antiquity* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017).
Sussman, George D., 'Scientists doing history: central Africa and the origins of the first plague pandemic', *Journal of World History*, 26:2 (2015), pp. 325–354.
Suzuki, Shogo, Zhang, Yongjin, and Quirk, Joel, *International Orders in the Early Modern World before the Rise of the West* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).
Sverdrup-Thygeson, Bjørnar, 'A neighbourless empire? The forgotten diplomatic tradition of imperial China', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 7:3 (2012), pp. 245–267.
Taki, Karim El, 'Subordinates quest for recognition in hierarchy', *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 50:1 (2021), pp. 55–82.
Talbert, Richard J. A., ed., *Ancient Perspectives: Maps and Their Place in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
Teschke, Benno, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso Books, 2003).
Textile Society of America, *Textiles in Daily Life: Proceedings of the Third Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America*, 24–26 September 1992 (Earleville, MD: Textile Society of America, Inc., 1993).
Thauer, Christian R. and Wendt, Christian, eds., *Thucydides and Political Order: Concepts of Order and the History of the Peloponnesian War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
Theodoropoulos, Panagiotis, 'Did the Byzantines call themselves Byzantines? Elements of Eastern Roman identity in the imperial discourse of the seventh century', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 45:1 (2021), pp. 25–41.
Thompson, Edward A., 'Christian missionaries among the Huns', *Hermathena*, 67 (May 1946), pp. 73–79.
Thoneman, Peter, 'A man, a plan: a canard', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5924 (October 2016), pp. 25–26.
Tomber, Roberta, *Indo-Roman Trade: From Pots to Pepper* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 2008).
Toral-Niehoff, Isabel, 'Late antique Iran and the Arabs: the case of Al-Hira', *Journal of Persianate Studies*, 6 (2013), pp. 115–126.
Treadgold, Warren, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).
Turchin, Peter, *War and Peace and War: The Life Cycles of Imperial Nations* (New York: Pi Press, 2006).

Turchin, Peter, 'A theory for formation of large empires', *Journal of Global History*, 4 (2009), pp. 191–217.
Veenendaal, Wouter P., 'Analysing the foreign policy of micro-states: the relevance of the international patron-client model, foreign policy analysis', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 13:3 (2017), pp. 561–577.
Walbank, Frank W., 'Nationality as a factor in Roman history', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 76 (1972), pp. 145–168.
Walker, Robert B. J., *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
Ward-Perkins, Bryan, *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
Watson, Adam, *Diplomacy: The Dialogue between States* (London: Routledge, 1984).
Watson, Adam, *The Evolution of International Society* (London: Routledge, 1992).
Watts, Edward, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
Whitby, Michael, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
Whitby, Michael, *The Wars of Justinian I* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2021).
Whitehouse, David and Williamson, Andrew, 'Sasanian maritime trade', *Iran*, 11 (1973), pp. 29–49.
Whittaker, Charles R., *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).
Whittaker, C. R., *Rome and Its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).
Whittow, Mark, *The Making of Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).
Whittow, Mark, 'Early medieval Byzantium and the end of the ancient world', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 9:1 (2009), pp. 134–153.
Wickham, Chris, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).
Więcławski, Jacek, 'Historical analogies and general theoretical schemes in the study on contemporary international relations: anachronism or opportunity', *International Politics*, 59 (2021), pp. 1210–1231.
Wiesehöfer, Joseph and Huyse, Philip, eds., *Ērān und Anērān* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2006).
Wight, Martin, *Systems of States* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1977).
Wijnendaele, Jeroen, 'Apocalypse, transformation or much ado about nothing? Western scholarship and the fall of Rome (1776–2008)', *Iris: Journal of the Classical Association of Victoria*, 24 (2011), pp. 42–52.
Wijnendaele, Jeroen, ed., *Late Roman Italy Imperium to Regnum* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).
Williams, Michael C., 'International relations in the age of the image', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:4 (2018), pp. 880–891.
Wohlforth, William, Carvalho, Benjamin de, Leira, Halvard, and Neumann, Iver B., 'Moral authority and status in international relations: good states and the social dimension of status seeking', *Review of International Studies*, 44:3 (2017), pp. 526–546.
Wolf, Reinhard, 'Taking interaction seriously: asymmetrical roles and the behavioural foundations of status', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:4 (2019), pp. 1186–1211.
Yarshater, Ehsan, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
Zarakol, Ayşe, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
Zhang, Yongjin, 'System, empire and state in Chinese international relations', *Review of International Studies*, 27:5 (2001), pp. 43–63.

Index