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The Victory of Turan and the Fall of *Ērānšahr*:
Turks and Iranians in the Last Great War of Antiquity

By

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Introduction

The reductionist model of the “decline and fall” has been applied to nearly every empire, and the Iranian Empire (commonly called the Sasanians¹) are no exception. At the center of any such reading lies the war between the Iranians and the Romans (or Byzantines), which stretched from 602 to 628 CE.² Often called the “Last Great War of Antiquity,” this massive conflict has long been recognized as a pivotal moment in world history, a necessary precondition for the Islamic conquests of the Near East. Even so, that war is often wrongly perceived as solely a Roman and Iranian one. The other participant was the Western Turk Khaganate, whose forces entered in the last years of the conflict in alliance with Heraclius and the Romans. Owing to the greater number of classicists and the general preference for literary source producing settled peoples, the Turks have been traditionally neglected by scholars, despite recent work equipping us with a deeper understanding of their own empire and its relationship with Iran. The aim of the present study is to examine the Turks’ participation in the war at a greater resolution, and to attempt to reconstruct how that role affected the Iranian empire in this ultimately terminal period of its history.

The Iranian Empire’s defeat in the so-called “Last Great War of Antiquity” is inextricably tied to the narrative of its collapse, and it is frequently considered merely as a chapter of a larger narrative than read on its own. Often, the war is treated Rome’s ultimate victory in the closing chapter of the wars with the Iranians, paying very little attention to the Turks’ presence and only

¹ Following the style of Richard Payne, “Cosmology and the Expansion of the Iranian Empire 502-628 CE,” *Past and Present* 220 (2013): 6-7, the term “Iranian Empire” is favored over “Sasanian” both in deference to the emic terminology and to stress the uniquely ethnic framework of its governance more fully. “Sasanian,” when used, will refer only to the ruling dynasty itself.

² All following dates are in the common era, unless otherwise specified.

deeply engaging with the Iranian's own worldview when relevant to Roman affairs.³ When not part of the greater Roman narrative, the terminal period is approached retrospectively by scholars of Early Islamic history, which introduces its own problems. A relevant example, still incredibly influential in field, is Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub's *Two Centuries of Silence*, in which the Arabs appear as unified warriors whose "vileness and savagery" allowed them to conquer an Iranian world already in "decay" and hamstrung by the "intrinsic hypocrisy and divisions of the Iranian ruling elite."⁴ The portrayal of the terminal Iranian period as a sort of generalized morass of decadence is hardly unique to Zarrinkoub, and it represents the point from which any reading of the period must depart.

The reigning revisionist titan of the topic is Parvaneh Pourshariati's *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: the Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*. As befits the Gibbonian title, Pourshariati offers a grand synthetic thesis for the end of the Iranian empire. pushing back at the established idea of a highly centralized Sasanian state, she posits instead a quasi-feudalistic Sasanian-Parthian confederacy dependent on a military aristocracy; the loss of support from these "great houses" led to the collapse of the ruling dynasty and empire. In her narrative, the war with the Romans and Turks marks a decisive turning point in the relationship between this confederacy and the Shahanshah, in which the fissiparous Great Houses finally revolt from the increasingly autocratic Khusro II.⁵ Her reading relies much more

³ An example of this approach is found in Bette Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115-18, which hardly mentions their presence at all.

⁴ Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub, *Two Centuries of Silence: An Account of Events and Conditions in Iran During the First Two Hundred Years of Islam, from the Arab Invasion to the Rise of the Tahirid Dynasty*, trans. Paul Sprachman. (Irvine, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2017), 34-35; a summary of its influence, particularly in the Persian-speaking scholarship, can be found in Touraj Daryaee, "The Fall of the Sasanian Empire to the Arab Muslims: From Two Centuries of Silence to Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Partho-Sasanian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 239-254.

⁵ Parvaneh Pourshariati, *The Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 140-160.

on internal factors than the external defeat itself, which provided the opportunity for longer-brewing tensions to come to the surface.

Pourshariati's narrative has been challenged. To consider the Iranian Empire purely as a confederacy of great houses is to disregard a great deal of evidence that it had a highly effective administrative structure and a state aristocracy that had remained remarkably loyal to the House of Sasan and the Iranian political project.⁶ What is more, she relies on a traditional assumption of a strong separation and antagonistic relationship between king and nobility that is not itself supported by the evidence.⁷ At the end of the day, her image of a dissolute, faithless nobility has more than a little in common with the blanket "decadence" ascribed by Zarrinkoub. But more than any flaw in her particular thesis, the biggest issue for Pourshariati's image of the Last Great War is the fact that it is totally subsumed into that thesis, rather than considered on its own. That is, one must embrace her (quite controversial) broader thesis to embrace her explanation of the war. Pourshariati's most relevant contribution to the present study lies in her approach: shifting focus away from the Arab "conquest narratives" to search for internal developments as the main agents of change. With that comes a commitment to native sources, both contemporary and as preserved in the epic tradition, and her deployment of these sources is highly illuminating.

Because of his more ecumenical approach, James Howard-Johnston's treatment of the "Last Great War" is a rare exception to the rule. His strong grounding in the events themselves is a welcome step in the right direction, but his analysis is not without flaws. Howard-Johnston explicitly denies the efficacy of looking to "ideological cloudscapes of [Roman and Iranian] thought-worlds or *imaginaires*, seeking out flaws which might have diminished the resolve of

⁶ The means and continual success of royal control are profiled and compared positively to the Roman system Henning Börm, "Das Königtum der Sasaniden - Strukturen und Probleme. Bemerkungen aus althistorischer Sicht," *Klio* 90 (2008): 438-42.

⁷ This point is raised by Payne, "Cosmology and the Expansion," 5-6.

one side,” preferring instead to prioritize political events and individual actions.⁸ While this provides a welcome corrective to the overly structural (and often teleological) readings commonly proffered in the study of imperial decline, his approach fails to situate his events and actors into their context. If, as he says, “the thoughts and plans of individuals” drove the war,⁹ it becomes even more imperative to locate those *imaginaires* in which they were conceived and to understand their emic perspective to the greatest extent possible. Put another way: we cannot simply accept *a priori* that a defeat in a given battle is definitive – fighting to the last man is a theoretical possibility. “Resolve” is a factor, and to trace it we must turn to ideology. When approached from this perspective, the already significant role Howard-Johnston’s hard-nosed realism gives to the Turks becomes even greater.

Methodologically, the following study owes much to Howard-Johnston, especially in its preference to more contemporary sources and careful attention to the Iranians’ emic articulation of their empire. But to understand how any given empire or regime collapsed, it is vital to understand what was holding it together in the first place – which seems to be exactly those thought-world that he disparages. Fortunately, a whole body of scholarship has developed around explaining the imperial structure of the Iranians in this period, one which especially emphasizes the connection with Zoroastrian cosmology and the generation of an Iranian ethnic identity among its ruling classes as a rallying point.¹⁰ Particularly relevant for the discussion of the Turks is the importance of the idea of Turan as an oppositional force to Iran, which imbued conflicts with the Turks (and other northeastern groups) with a cosmic significance. But the imperial

⁸ James Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 372.

⁹ Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 372.

¹⁰ Though the ideas go back as far as the venerable and still indispensable Arthur Christensen, *L’Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1936), 136-73; important recent examples include Payne, “Cosmology and Empire”; Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: the Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009) provides a synthesis that takes this perspective, esp. 39-67.

theatre of war could easily be turned against Iran, if the *shahanshah* failed to live up to the mythic standard.

That Iran's eastern frontier was equally if not more important than the western one is no longer a controversial conclusion, and it is repeated in more recent contributions to the literature, even by those with a western focus.¹¹ Relatively rarely, however, do scholars follow through on this assertion and reckon with the presence of the east in grander narratives. This is largely a problem of evidence, as the dearth of narrative sources in the east creates lacunae which will likely never be completely filled, even as the ever-expanding archaeological and numismatic evidence has strengthened our understanding. The numismatic evidence is especially important in terms of establishing a coherent sequence of political powers in the region, a prerequisite for understanding their military and political interaction with Iran.¹² Despite this newfound foundation, the predilection for literary sources has often caused scholars to overlook the evidence for Iran's interaction with the east, which is just as plentiful as their interaction with the Romans, even as it does not adhere to the ethnographic models most comfortable to classicists. Further, the Turk invasion of northwest Iran during the war provides us with a rare opportunity to see this eastern power in action in western sources, even if those sources (especially those in Armenian) are still "eastern" from a classicist's perspective.

The succeeding section will take the premises established in the first and apply them to the case of the Last Great War of Antiquity and its aftermath, producing a novel reading of the

¹¹ E.g., "the Empire of Rome and the west generally meant far less to the Sasanians than our Roman sources imply," Warwick Ball, "The Sasanian Empire and the East: A Summary of the Evidence and its Implications for Rome," in *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* ed. Eberhard Sauer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 173.

¹² The most comprehensive collection of Western Turk currency is provided by Klaus Vondrovec, *Coinage of the Iranian Huns and Their Successors from Bactria to Gandhara (4th to 8th Century CE)* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2014), 509-696; designed to enhance the older book Robert Göbl, *Dokumente zur Geschichte der iranischen Hunnen in Baktrien und Indien*, 4 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1967).

primary sources by integrating the knowledge of the context and ideological backdrop. This reading will reveal a newfound importance for “Turan’s” presence as a particularly traumatic aspect of the war, one with direct cosmic implications for the Iranian ethno-class. The fall of Khusro, often linked to personal motivations or imprecise war exhaustion, can be interpreted as a logical response to his failure to defend against Turan, and the incompatibility of these events with Zoroastrian cosmology. In fact, the Turk intervention during the war damaged the very ideological foundations of the empire itself, playing a profound role in the breakdown of central authority before and during the Islamic conquests. That said, the conquests themselves will be bracketed off, and the period will be approached on its own terms, not merely as a prelude to this world-shattering event.

Like Howard-Johnston, the present survey will not engage with the question of Iranian collapse as such and makes no attempt to situate the war with the Turks into a broader thesis of decline and/or fall. While keeping one foot firmly aground in the context of 6th and 7th century Iran, it examines the defeat by the Turks as a contingent event in its own right. That it had a devastating effect on Sasanian legitimacy which may well have contributed to imperial dissolution before and during the Islamic conquests is worth noting and will be explored. However, that *telos* should not be taken as the basis for extrapolating any preexisting decline or painting the Iranian world as “moribund.” If the present work has any perspective on the terminal phase of the Iranian Empire, it is that it fell victim to a set of contingent events (not least of which is the defeat by the Turks) which led to profound internal divisions which left the empire open to complete destruction – one duly meted out by the Islamic invasions.

I: Iran and Turan in the Seventh Century

At the outset, it is important to lay out the two parties involved. First comes the Turks, whose power must be established before any subsequent coverage of their involvement in the Last Great War. The precise details of the Turks' rise need not detain us, and it suffices to say that, from the founding of the Khaganate in 552, they quickly expanded from modern Ukraine to the Pacific.¹³ In the 7th century, the Turk Khaganate had split into Western and Eastern halves, and it is the Western half which will be relevant to the following discussion.¹⁴ The Western Turk Khaganate had come to rest primarily on the steppes of modern Kazakhstan and Russia as well as the highly urbanized, fiscally valuable, and trade-heavy regions of East Iran (Sogdiana, Bactria, etc.).¹⁵ Combined with a significant tax base, which we have evidence the Turks made use of,¹⁶ and the social and monetary benefits of controlling long distance trade routes, and it is hard to imagine such a polity not being a major player on the world stage, as had its predecessors in its geopolitical niche. In a sort of synthetic process, the empires of this region (including the early Hun groups whom the Turks had conquered), developed very strong states emerging from the military superiority of steppe warriors and buttressed by the administrative resources and personnel of some of the most politically complex urban societies in the world.

¹³ Despite subsequent advances in scholarship, the best overview of early Turk history remains Peter B. Golden, *Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 115-54; for material culture, see Sören Stark, *Die Alttürkenzeit in Mittel- und Zentralasien. Archäologische und historische Studien* (Ludwig Reichert Verlag: Wiesbaden 2008).

¹⁴ As Denis Sinor notes, there is a tendency to overemphasize this division, "The Establishment and Dissolution of the Turk Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 305; however, the typically confusing and often overlapping titles and tendency toward power sharing in the empire mean that we cannot be too hasty Michael R. Drompp, "Supernumerary Sovereigns: Superfluidity and Mutability in the Elite Power Structure of the Early Turks (Tu-jue)," in *Rulers from the Steppe: State Formation on the Eurasian Periphery*, eds. Gary Seaman and Daniel Marks (Los Angeles: Ethnographics Press, University of Southern California, 1991), 92-107.

¹⁵ E.g., Sogdiana and its bureaucrats, for which see Étienne de La Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), esp. 112-116; and Stark *Altürkenzeit*, 289-314.

¹⁶ Most especially in Bactria, *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan I: Legal and Economic Documents*, 2nd ed., trans. and ed. Nicholas Sims-Williams (London: Nour Foundation, 2012), 74-77.

However, the Turks were far from a mere successor state. Indeed, they represent an unprecedented power, especially on the western and central steppes. For one thing, the scale of their influence far surpassed any prior imperial project in the region, arguably becoming the first truly “Eurasian” steppe empire. But they also created and expanded a set of institutions that made them far more able to leverage the political resources at their disposal. Particularly relevant here is the thorough integration of the Sogdians into the governance of the empire. A complex network of social ties, most especially through the mechanisms of elite intermarriage, served to bind together the Sogdian and Turk aristocracies, on both the local level and in the court of the ruling khan. Sören Stark has convincingly demonstrated that this is not merely a local phenomenon, used as an element of control in Sogdian territory; the Sogdians are found throughout the Turk *ordu*, and their influence is effectively coterminous with the Turks’.¹⁷

The ability to leverage this apparatus was perhaps the key differentiating feature in the Turks’ regime, one that made them an even greater threat to Iran. The Sogdians provided a battery of administrators, ambassadors, and bureaucrats who were enmeshed in and creating local and trans-regional networks that made available fiscal and diplomatic resources that were lacking in prior empires in the region.¹⁸ And as Sogdian institutions expanded, so too did their control over trade (and likely craft production¹⁹), ensuring a near complete dominance over trans-Eurasian trade. For an institution that ultimately relies upon a class of elite warriors who demand rewards in the form of portable wealth, such control over trade is as a critical tool for establish legitimacy.²⁰ Prestige goods had long been the appurtenances of a successful nomadic

¹⁷ Stark, *Alttürkenzeit*, 255-64, 303-14.

¹⁸ Stark, *Alttürkenzeit*, 296-98, 302-08.

¹⁹ Stark, *Alttürkenzeit*, 289-91

²⁰ Sören Stark, “Luxurious Necessities: Some Observations on Foreign Commodities and Nomadic Polities in Central Asia in the Sixth to Ninth Centuries,” in *Complexity of Interaction Along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, ed. Jan Bemmann and Michael Schmauder (Bonn: Vor- und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 2015), 463-502.

warrior, and the Turk system proved consistently capable of delivering them, thereby ensuring that the militarized population “bought in” to their political project.

As Michael Drompp rightly stresses, there is a pronounced tendency to overstate the “natural advantage” of steppe empires, essentially reproducing the essentializing narratives of settled writers whose main consideration was the nomads’ wars with their respective states.²¹ Of course, the well-trained horsemen created through steppe lifeways were a significant military resource. However, the Turks were far from the only power with access to these troops – indeed, the frequency with which the settled empires hired mercenaries ensured that they were not even exclusive to steppe powers. Rather than deferring to some sort of preordained advantage, we should turn to the methods of leveraging the military potential of their population, using the same approach as one would for Rome, Iran, or China, while acknowledging the specific technologies of power available to the Turks.²² And by that metric, the Turk system proves highly successful.

Our sources often understand the Turks merely as brutal nomadic raiders, failing to draw a clear distinction between them and earlier groups on the western steppes. But outside of the literary topoi stipulated by genre and tradition, the evidence reveals an incredibly sophisticated system that was able to maximize and mobilize the military potential of nomadic horsemen. Admittedly, the centralization of that system waxed and waned with the charismatic authority of its leader(s), and civil wars were almost always a component of succession (a fact which will prove relevant to their involvement in the Last Great War of Antiquity). Nevertheless, the Turks represented a highly organized empire every bit the equal of the Romans or Iranians and a genuine military threat to both.

²¹ Michael R. Drompp, “Infrastructures of Legitimacy in Inner Asia: The Early Türk Empire,” 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), 304-05

²² Drompp, “Infrastructures,” 305, 312-16.

The Iranian Empire, *Ērānšahr*, is our other principal player, and its equally unique organization also requires some explanation. The organizing principle of the empire was the “Idea of Iran” a unique ethnic identity forged at the beginning of the Sasanians’ rule but drawing together multiple earlier traditions from the memory of the Achaemenids and established Zoroastrian concepts.²³ This governing ideology brought together the ruling aristocrats of various great and minor houses that had long held power on the Iranian Plateau, and who made up the militarily and politically relevant population of the region. The land they ruled was *Ērānšahr*, the territory of the Iranians, and the empire explicitly existed to serve them, the most cosmically good and Ohrmazd-favored people in the world. Their leader, the *Shahanshah*, was charged with bringing glory and favor to the Iranians, and organizing the conflict against the chaotic outside world and the evil Ahrimanic forces it represented.²⁴ Nobles and their armies were invited to participate in this political project, for which they were rewarded with a great many material and cosmological benefits, from matters as practical as ensuring succession to matters as esoteric as ensuring a good position in the eschaton.²⁵ They became “Iranians,” not a universal term for the people within the empire, but a specific ethnic identifier strongly associated with the ruling class.

Who were the Turks to this Iranian ethno-class? The Iranian world lacks the surviving ethnographic record present in the Greco-Roman and especially the Chinese world. For all the problems these sources entail, they are immensely useful for evincing the ethnographers’ view of their subjects. In all likelihood, there was something akin to it in the lost *Čihrdād nask*, which purportedly contained an the genealogies of all the Earth’s peoples and descriptions of their

²³ Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on its Origin*, (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il medio ed estremo oriente, 1989), 137-162

²⁴ Daryae, *Sassanian Persia*, 42.

²⁵ Richard Payne, “Sex Death and Aristocratic Empire: Iranian Jurisprudence in Late Antiquity,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58 (2016): 525-27.

individual aspects.²⁶ The details that do survive (likely drawing on the same tradition, if not the *nask* itself) appear more as references within larger works, relying upon shared assumptions and beliefs about peoples without revealing them to a modern readership. They also attest more fully to the mythic and religious significance of external peoples than to Iranians' thoughts about their society per se. Another problem of understanding the Iranian conception of the Turks is one shared with most native sources for the period: their final redactions occur in the Islamic period.²⁷ While this is an issue in nearly every field that relies on these sources, it is particularly pronounced in the case of the Turks, whose relationship with Iran changed fundamentally in Islamicate times.

The pre-Islamic records that do survive reveal several possible labels, each with their own significance and implicit judgements. While "Turks" was one possible label, one specifically associated with an ethnicity, it was far from the only one available. Of course, the very fact that there is such an array of different, overlapping, and potentially contradictory classifications for Turks should not be surprising, nor should it detract from their importance in the Iranian world. We are dealing here less with fixed, "scientific" categories of ethnicity and more with an expansive web of connections and conceptions, capable of holding multiple meanings and shifting in different contexts. It is that web, more so than any modern classification of the Turks that defined and shaped the Iranian experience with their eastern neighbors, and any attempt to extricate the real Turks as a category of analysis misses something important. Gaining

²⁶ Bruce Lincoln, "Human Unity and Diversity in Zoroastrian Mythology," *History of Religions* 50 (2010): 9-10, which also contains a translated summary surviving in the *Denkard*; Yarshater "Iranian National History," 416-18

²⁷ This is especially true of the Pahlavi Zoroastrian texts compiled and/or translated in the ninth and tenth centuries, J. P. De Menasce, "Zoroastrian Pahlavi Writings," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: Seleucid Parthian*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 1166-69

a solid understanding of how Turks fit within the Iranians' conception of the world is necessary before we consider the Iranian reaction to them in the 620s.

Of these alternative terms “*Xyōn*” was among the most common ways to refer to the Turks. *Xyōn* was the contemporary term for Hun, although its roots are Avestan, referring to an enemy group who fought against Vishtaspa and the righteous Zoroastrians in a famous chapter in the national tradition.²⁸ In several sources, they are listed alongside Turks or Turanians as a separate people.²⁹ Nevertheless, a strong ethnographic distinction between “*Xyōn*” and “*Turk*” seems to come only in the Islamic period, and Turks are frequently described as a subtype of *Xyōn*, often associated with “broad headedness.”³⁰ This is similar to the case of the Hephthalites, whose ambiguous position vis-à-vis the Huns is preserved is famously reproduced by Procopius.³¹ As its Avestan origins suggest, *Xyōn* is not a neutral term, and it implicitly aligns anyone labelled with it as anti-Iranian and in league with Ahriman.³² It thus positioned the Turks within a broader historical context, in which they were understood as primordial enemies of Iran, just as their Hunnic predecessors in the region had been.

The other major category into which the Turks fall is Turan, a sort of generalized descriptor for Central Asia that is the antithesis of *Ērānšahr*. Turan is a nigh omnipresent fixture of Middle Persian literature, sometimes used in contexts not related to the Turks, but always including them within this broader label. As befits Zoroastrian dualism, where Iran is the land associated with goodness and Ohrmazd, Turan is associated with evil and Ahriman.³³ The

²⁸ Carlo G. Cereti, “Xīiaona and Xyōn in Zoroastrian Texts,” in *Coins, Art and Chronology, vol. 2: The First Millennium C.E. in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands*, edited by Michael Alram et al. (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2002), 60-63.

²⁹ Cereti, “Xīiaona and Xyōn,” 65-67.

³⁰ Cereti, “Xīiaona and Xyōn,” 67.

³¹ Procop. *Bell.* 1.3.

³² Richard Payne, “The Reinvention of Iran: The Sasanian Empire and the Huns,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 290.

³³ Yarshater, “Iranian National History,” 396

context of these descriptions is almost always apocalyptic, though that may equally be a function of the general apocalyptic bent of Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature. The *Bundahishn* provides a good example, mentioning a coming of a Roman and then a Turko-Hunnic conquest of Iran that precedes the complete collapse of Iran and the Arab conquest.³⁴ Given that the Greater *Bundahishn* was last edited in the ninth century at the earliest, it should not be surprising that a reference to the Arab conquest is interpolated into the tradition.³⁵ But it is likely that the earlier parts of the prophecy represent a historical memory of the actual invasions of Iran at the end of the empire, related to the apocalyptic tradition that surrounds Bahrām Chōbīn.³⁶

Turan is a frequent component of the mythohistorical epic tradition that coalesced into the purported *Khwadāy-Nāmag*, the lost Middle Persian history upon which subsequent Arabic histories and the *Shahnameh* were based. This source was first comprehensively identified by Theodor Nöldeke, and subsequent studies have convincingly reconstructed its contents.³⁷ Though Nöldeke places the final edition to the reign of Yazdegerd III,³⁸ the exact text is less important than the circulating stories and historical traditions that presumably lay behind it. If the *Shahnameh* is any indication, the conflict between Iran and Turan was one of the animating of this history, most especially during the Kayanian dynasty.³⁹ The later Sasanians' special connection to this mythical dynasty has been long recognized, and the addition of *Kay* to the royal titlature is the clearest demonstration of that fact.⁴⁰ Most of the surviving narratives of the

³⁴ *Bundahishn* 33.31; trans. Domenico Agostini and Samuel Thorpe, *The Bundahishn: The Zoroastrian Book of Creation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 174.

³⁵ Agostini and Thorpe, *Bundahishn*, xx.

³⁶ Agostini and Thorpe, *Bundahishn*, 171; see also below on Bahrām Chōbīn's relevance to the Turks.

³⁷ Theodor Nöldeke, *Das iranische Nationalepos* (Berlin: Vereinigung Wissenschaftlicher Verleger, 1920); which has been expanded upon by Ehsan Yarshater, "Iranian National History," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, ed. E. Yarshater, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 359–478.

³⁸ Nöldeke *Das iranische Nationalepos*, 13–15.

³⁹ Yarshater, "Iranian National History," 367.

⁴⁰ Arthur Christensen, *Les Kayanides*, (Copenhagen: Andr Fred Høst & Søn, 1931).

Kayanians foreground their struggle with Turan, and thus the association would have placed the Sasanians within that tradition of eastern warfare, leading the great houses in unity against the evil forces along their northeastern frontier.⁴¹

Can we be certain that the Turks were regarded as Turanians? Certainly, by the Islamic period, the Turks and Turan had become thoroughly assimilated, to the point that the two terms were used synonymously. Rather than a specific term for a political or ethnic grouping, “Turk” became simply a generic reference to people northeast of Iran, carrying with it all the negative associations and stereotypes traditionally attributed to Turan.⁴² The problem of these texts’ final recensions thus rears its head again, as we often cannot know whether these references are authentic to the pre-Islamic period. However, the logic that rendered them was certainly in play. Myth and history were tied explicitly to places, as is made evident by the *Shahrestānīhā ī Ērānshahr*, which frames each of the cities it describes in terms of its mythological founder and any relevant tales about that city. It refers to the founder of several eastern cities as “Afrasyab the Turanian (*Frāsiyāk i Tūr*),” and references various Khagans of the Turks (though without using the word “Turk”) and kings of the Xyons.⁴³ Interestingly, considering the events of the Last Great War of Antiquity, the northwestern city of Ganzak “in the direction of Ādurbādagān” is also founded by Afrasyab, son of Tur, suggesting an existing recognition that Turan could reach through the Caucasus as well.⁴⁴ Given that the Turks were the first great eastern state to span both regions,⁴⁵ it suggests that the idea of Turan had become associated with the Turk Khaganate.

⁴¹ Payne, “Reinvention of Iran,” 292-93.

⁴² This is the practice of the *Shahnameh*, for example.

⁴³ Touraj Daryaee, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānshahr: A Middle Persian Text on Late Antique Geography, Epic, and History: With English and Persian Translations and Commentary*, (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2002), 17-19.

⁴⁴ Daryaee, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānshahr*, 21.

⁴⁵ While lacking the state structures of the Hun states in the east, the steppe peoples north of the Caucasus had long been troublesome for the Sasanians, see Paolo Ognibene, “Beyond the Gate: Alans, Sasanians and the Caucasus,” *Sasanian Studies: Late Antique Iranain World*, vol.1, ed. Shervin Farrdnejad and Touraj Daryaee (Wiesbaden: Harasowitz Verlag, 2022), 207-12.

Furthermore, the Turks and their imperial subjects certainly recognized the identification, reappropriating it to their own ends. The art of the Iranian-aligned parts of the Turk empire reveals a consistent deployment of imagery and narratives borrowed from the Iranian national tradition, but with a shifted focus toward Turan.⁴⁶ This process had already begun under the prior Hun rulers of the region, but the Turk period shows just as much if not more reappropriation. Rostam was a particularly highly-regarded figure in this environment, being an ambiguous figure who could be conceptualized as a Turanian as much as Iranian.⁴⁷ But even more striking was the Turks' apparent adoption of Afrasyab, the most archetypically evil, anti-Iranian king of Turan, as a mythical hero and ancestor.⁴⁸ In the Iranian tradition, Afrasyab's purpose is to be a constant thorn in Iran's side and to be ultimately defeated by the forces of Kay Khusro, the namesake of the later *shahanshahs*.⁴⁹

Given that the Turks were able to portray themselves in this way, it is a perfectly sound inference that the Iranians could perceive them as Turanians as well, and that the deep association between Turk and Turan can be pushed back into the pre-Islamic period, with all the resultant mythological significance. The degree to which Iranians were aware of and responding to this usurpation of their *Nationalepos* is unclear, although proximity and fluidity along the border leaves no doubt that some Iranians were aware of it. No direct or indirect response has been singled out in the surviving literature. But to claim the mantle of Afrasyab was to place the Turk polity in direct opposition to Iran, unmistakably signaling the rise of a new political order violently opposed to *Ērānšahr*.⁵⁰ That is, the imagined idea of a unified, warlike Turan carrying

⁴⁶ Richard Payne, "The Making of Turan: The Fall and Transformation of the Iranian East in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 9 (2016): 27-28.

⁴⁷ Payne, "Making of Turan," 28-29.

⁴⁸ Payne, "Making of Turan," 30.

⁴⁹ This story dominates a major section of the *Shahnameh* (trans. Dick Davis, 372-453); a summary (with notes for other references to the story) is provided by Yarshater, "Iranian National History 373-376.

⁵⁰ Payne "Making of Turan," 30; Yarshater, "Iranian National History," 441-43.

out a blood feud with Iranians had become a political reality. Or it may be better to say that the narratives of the past were in an ongoing process of construction that was aware of the practical resonances in the mythic history. The process of identifying the actual people(s) who were called Xyon (or Chionites) with the Avestan Xiiaona, which must have come from the pre-Islamic period, provides a useful analogue, and is proof positive that Iranians were thinking in this way about the real peoples on their borders.

This mythohistorical tradition is more than a mere fable. In the Iranian world, such myths were political capital – long since used to justify and reinforce the political order and the ethno-class that ruled it.⁵¹ Here, a bit of skepticism from the revisionist approach to the empire is helpful. Far from the imagined oriental despotism that often still worms its way into modern scholarship, the practical position of the Sasanian dynasty and the *shahanshah* was that of *primus inter pares*, whose ability to unilaterally exercise their authority was severely limited by the power of the great houses and premodern communication technology (especially in the terrain of the Iranian plateau).⁵² But contrary to the image presented by Ze’ev Rubin (later picked up by Pourshariati), this does not represent a powerlessness of central authority in the face of recalcitrant aristocratic families, because it existed alongside a unique and incredibly successful means of inspiring loyalty to the Iranian political project.

These narratives were so critical because of the cosmological character of the Iranian empire, which depended as much upon the eschatology of Zoroastrian conflict between good and evil as the present, material world.⁵³ *Ērānšahr*, of course, was on the side of Ohrmazd, standing

⁵¹ Ze’ev Rubin, “The Sasanid Monarchy,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 14: *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600*, edited by Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵² Rubin, “Sasanid Monarchy,” 651-54.

⁵³ Payne, “Cosmology and Expansion,” 8.

against its Ahrimanic foes. Wars were not just means of acquiring or defending booty, resources, and territory, but grand stages for the performance of cosmological kingship that validated the *shahanshah* as head of *Ērānšahr* and the good religion.⁵⁴ This dimension to Iranian warfare is what Howard-Johnston's approach fails to reckon with. *Ērānšahr* was the master of the world – conquering and extracting tribute was the primary means of demonstrating that claim.⁵⁵ As Payne notes, since the narrative of *Ērānšahr* and Ohrmazd's struggle against the divided world and Ahrimanic forces plays out from the beginning to the end of time, "accounts of past kings provided the parameters of successful rulership" and defined the horizon of possibilities for kingship.⁵⁶

Mythical and cosmological invocations of the past are universal in the Iranian empire, remaining an important support from its foundation to its ultimate collapse. But by the seventh century, the opposition of Turan had crystalized into its central focus, largely in response to the reality of hostile, highly organized Hun and Turk polities to the north and east.⁵⁷ This conceptual hardening coincides with a hardening of the physical border, including the loss of lands previously within *Ērānšahr*.⁵⁸ Though many simply assume that the Romans were the fundamental enemies of Iran, Turan is far more prevalent and unambiguously Ahrimanic in the Persian sources.⁵⁹ After the fifth century, Rome is instead portrayed as the junior partner of Iran in the grand conflict with Turan, recognizing Iranian authority even as they are "brothers."⁶⁰ Obviously, this status must have changed when Khusro turned to the outright domination of the

⁵⁴ Payne, "Cosmology and Expansion," 20, here speaking of the Romans, though by the seventh century, the Turanians were even more cosmologically evil and worthy of defeat.

⁵⁵ Payne, "Cosmology and Expansion," 14-15.

⁵⁶ Payne, "Cosmology and Expansion," 32.

⁵⁷ Richard Payne, "The Reinvention of Iran," 283-86.

⁵⁸ Payne, "The Reinvention of Iran," 293-96.

⁵⁹ Payne "Reinvention of Iran," 289-90.

⁶⁰ Payne, "Reinvention of Iran," 296-98; Daryaei "Tripartite Vision," 63, 71-75.

Romans during the war, but there is no reason to suspect that Turan was deemphasized. It is highly suggestive that Khusro's unprecedented western expansionism coincided with the need to counterbalance the growing strength of the Turks – that is, Turan – and the loss of fiscally important regions in the east to a potentially aggressive neighbor.⁶¹

The presumed shift in Khusro's ideological approach to the Romans raises the question of how the official ideology was shaped by the war. One of the most studied aspects of the Last Great War of Antiquity is the Heraclian “propaganda campaign,” and his construction of an ideology to justify and motivate the Romans against Iranians. His leveraging of Christianity as a motivator, shown especially through the emphasis on the retrieval of the True Cross, has been frequently pointed to as an origin point for the Christian concept of holy war that would see its greatest manifestation in the crusades.⁶² In attempting to understand Iranian ideology during the war, we are faced with a severe dearth of sources, which often leads us to defer to larger-scale trends over the individual articulations of one king or another. Such is the case with Khusro II, and we are thus forced to infer from more general propositions about Sasanian kingship and tendencies in self-promotion.

Coins, one of the most important vectors for imperial ideology, offer little specific accounting for his wartime media program, as Khusro's coins remain remarkably consistent in themes throughout his reign; though they are divided stylistically into three periods, the third

⁶¹ Khodadad Rezakhani “The End of Sasanian Rule: The Center and Periphery of Ērānšahr in the Seventh Century,” in *Studi sulla Persia sasanide e suoi rapporti con le civiltà attigue* ed. Touraj Daryaee and Matteo Compareti (Bologna: Paolo Emilio Persiani, 2019), 229-31, who proposes a wider “grand strategy” from the rise of the Hephthalites.

⁶² See Peter Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500-700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 226-74; Daryaee explicitly calls this “the first Crusade” *Sasanian Persia*, 33; This idea has even penetrated popular history in Geoffrey Regan *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2003).

period covers 601-628, with no differentiation between wartime coins and earlier ones.⁶³ The legitimist themes which made his coinage distinctive were still in play throughout the war, most especially Khusro's emphasis on his increasing the *xwarrah*, the royal glory, a term loaded with cosmic, Zoroastrian significance.⁶⁴ While this is a common theme for all *shahanshahs*, Khusro seems to emphasize it even more strongly than his predecessors, and it must be imagined that this was connected both to his mythohistorical namesake⁶⁵ and perhaps to his actual victories in battle.

One might also expect Khusro to draw parallels with the mythohistorical tradition. Indeed, the very fact that the Romans and Turks had allied would have had an especial significance to an Iranian audience inculcated in the epic traditions, owing to its similarity to the story of the sons of Fereydun. This story is most fully recorded by the *Shahnameh*, although there are many references to it in the other *Khwadāy-Nāmāg* descendants and the independent Middle Persian corpus.⁶⁶ In it, Fereydun, the king of the world and victor over the demon Zahhak, decides to split his kingdom between his three sons. He gives the West to Salm (progenitor of "Rome"), the north and east to Tur (progenitor of Turan) and the best part of his kingdom to his favorite son Iraj (progenitor of Iran). The elder sons are jealous of the better portion having gone to Iraj, and Salm incites Tur to murder him, beginning the first in a series of wars between Iran and Turan that dominate the coming section of the national epic. As in all such wars, Iran is ultimately victorious, with Iraj's grandson Manuchehr ultimately killing both Salm and Tur and succeeding Fereydun as king of Iran.

⁶³ Touraj Daryaee, "The Use of Religio-Political Propaganda on the Coinage of Xusro II," *American Journal of Numismatics* 9 (1997): 43-44

⁶⁴ Daryaee "Use of Religio-Political Propaganda," 44-49.

⁶⁵ Daryaee "Use of Religio-Political Propaganda," 49.

⁶⁶ Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, trans. Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 36-61; Yarshater "Iranian National History," 428-29

The trope of a king dividing a kingdom among three sons is a common one in Indo-European mythology and may well have deeply ancient origins.⁶⁷ However, it is also highly specific to the Iranian worldview of the later Sasanian centuries. This story has a clear etiological function, explaining the endemic conflict between the respective regions. In particular, the focus on Tur and his killing of Iraj sets up the primordial conflict between Iran and Turan, earned through the vile crime of fratricide, which brings malice (*kēn*) that can never be quenched.⁶⁸ The fact that Iraj is given the best portion of the world (Iran) is heavily emphasized as the motivation for Salm and Tur's jealousy, and it thus fits in well with the broader Zoroastrian religious geography.⁶⁹ We have no real way of knowing how widely disseminated the story was, nor how it was received by a 7th century audience. The many references to it certainly suggest that it was relatively well-known, at least in the circles of Zoroastrian literature. If Khusro ever referred to the story in his media program, it has been lost to time, but it is difficult to imagine that the ruling class of the Iranian empire would have missed the connection.

Whether he acknowledged it or not, Khusro II was reenacting the great, foundational legend of Iraj and Manuchehr, and his failure to live up to his epic models served as a potent symbol for his inability to lead and protect *Ērānšahr* from its greatest enemies. In a political environment in which the Sasanians had long depended on kinship and emulation of earlier, mythical kings, the parallels would have been even more significant. Effectively, the Iranian nobility had been trained to read present events through mythohistorical parallels, and to understand their own place within politics and especially war as animating these past episodes.

⁶⁷ Yarshater "Iranian National History," 428-29.

⁶⁸ Touraj Daryaee "The Tripartite Sasanian Vision of the World," in *Sasanian Iran in the Context of Late Antiquity: The Bahari Lecture Series at the University of Oxford* ed. Touraj Daryaee (Irvine, CA: Jordan Center for Persian Studies, 2018), 74.

⁶⁹ Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, trans. Davis, 37-41

Khusro's thorough defeat reversed all the justifications that he and his predecessors had claimed for their rule. No longer could he claim to bring *xwarrah* to Iran.

The practical importance of demonstrating *xwarrah* and reaffirming the role of *Ērānšahr* is perhaps best demonstrated by the Bahrām Chōbīn episode at the beginning of Khusro II's reign, the first time the throne of Iran was usurped by a non-Sasanian candidate. Pourshariati sees this as a critical moment in which her Parthian dynasts first cast off the yoke of Sasanian oppression, presaging the coming ruin of the ruling dynasty.⁷⁰ David Frendo's reading adopts a rather less sanguine approach, seeing Bahram as a general backed into a corner who only claimed the royal title as a last resort.⁷¹ The degree to which Bahram's usurpation had any sway among the Iranian nobility is not entirely clear, and in any case the outcome was clearly more decided by Maurice's intervention than any internal Iranian factor.⁷² Regardless, it demonstrates that there was a language of legitimate revolt against a ruling *shahanshah*, and, in extreme cases, even against the dynasty. As Payne notes, Bahram did not create some entirely new political schema, or seek to overturn the entirety of Sasanian ideology.⁷³ He rather expanded and intensified the ideology that was already in place, replacing the summit with himself instead of a Sasanian candidate. That is, even when the great nobility actively revolted against the Sasanian dynasty, they still couched that rebellion within Iranian eschatological and mythohistorical terms.

Much of Bahram's appeal to the nobility was earned through his victory over the Turks, with his own media program apparently leveraging various apocalyptic elements in the tradition which foretold a Turanian invasion and prophesied a savior figure.⁷⁴ The *Zamasp-Namag* records

⁷⁰ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 397-414.

⁷¹ David Frendo, "Theophylact Simocatta on the Revolt of Bahrām Chōbīn and the Early Career of Khusrau II." *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 3 (1989): 82-84.

⁷² Frendo, "Theophylact," 84; at the very least, his unanswered call to the Armenians, preserved in Ps.-Sebeos 76-78 indicates that it fell on at least a few deaf ears.

⁷³ Payne, "Cosmology and Expansion," 25-26.

⁷⁴ Payne "Cosmology and Expansion," 24-27.

several of the prophecies, and demonstrates how interlinked the claim to kingship was with the ability to defeat Turan.⁷⁵ In particular, his extraction of treasures from the Turks is heavily emphasized in all our sources, probably related to an apocalyptic tradition that he claimed to fulfill.⁷⁶ Bahram was able to claim that he was the true Kayanian descendent and that he now brought *xwarrah*, which was demonstrated by his victory over the Turks.⁷⁷ That is, just as performative warfare served to confirm the Sasanian's claim to leadership, it could confirm someone else's when the Sasanian failed to perform. Even the account of Theophylact preserves something of this idea, when "Bindoes the Persian" cites the fact that the ruling Hormizd IV cannot fairly claim have made the Turks tributaries: "your deeds do not match your words."⁷⁸ All this indicates that the Sasanian dynasty and the court sources did not have a monopoly on the narrative of *Ērānšahr*, and the ideology they espoused was not merely a post-hoc justification of their rule. The cosmological idea of *Ērānšahr*, and its great opposition to Turan, was believed widely enough that it had real effects on the empire, and the nobility were actively thinking in its terms, including interpretations of that idea that were not necessarily favorable for the Sasanian dynasty.

That the defeat of the Turks looms in the background of Bahram's revolt is certainly evocative of their importance to the imperial ideology of the day. Furthermore, Bahram's leveraging of victory against Turan to apocalyptic ends indicates just how critical the careful positioning of the ruler vis-à-vis Turan was to internal Iranian politics. Bahram's status as the victor over Turan sharply contrasts with Khusro II's defeat by them. How would the ruling

⁷⁵ H.W. Bailey, "To the Zamasp Namak II," *Bulletin of The School of Oriental Studies*, Vol. 6, (1931), 581-86.

⁷⁶ Ps.-Sebeos 73-74; Bailey, "To the Zamasp Namak II," 584-85.

⁷⁷ Czeglédy Károly, "Bahrām Chōbīn and the Persian Apocalyptic Literature," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, Vol. 8 (1958), 25-28.

⁷⁸ Theophylact, 4.5.9-11.

ethno-class react if the *shahanshah* not only failed to live up to the example of his mythic predecessors, but suffer an even greater defeat? Having thoroughly explored the mentality and ideology of the empire's ruling class, we can now return to the narrative of the Last Great War of Antiquity, with an especial attention paid to how the Iran-Turan dynamic plays out in the narrative. With this new lens applied to the sources, a clearer image of the collapse of Khusro and *Ērānšahr* emerges. Iran's defeat by the Romans has been recognized as "vitiating [its] claims to world domination."⁷⁹ But the defeat by Turan was an even more pointed symbol of *Ērānšahr*'s failure, one which not only compromised Khusro, but the whole Iranian political enterprise

⁷⁹ Payne, "Cosmology and Expansion," 31.

II: The Turks in the Last Great War of Antiquity

Having established the context for Turco-Iranian relations, we now turn to the events of the Turk involvement in the war itself, to test whether the sources indicate that they held the importance the Iranian imagination warranted. Movses Dasxuranc'i's *History of the Caucasian Albanians* provides the most detailed account of the Turk invasion, even as he refers to them as "Khazars."⁸⁰ Unfortunately, this is also among the most complex and contradictory sources of the period, with the relevant being comprised of at least three different accounts that are interpolated whole and with little regard for consistency between them.⁸¹ James Howard-Johnston's admirable efforts in *Quellenforschung* have reconstructed a purported *History of 682* that comprises most of the second book of Movses' *History*.⁸² As the name implies, the source is dated to about 682, making it just as contemporary a source as the more widely used Pseudo-Sebeos, and, if Howard-Johnston is correct, one built from eyewitness testimony to the events.⁸³

The *History* paints an outright apocalyptic image of the Turk invasion of Albania. The narrative is punctuated by explicit biblical references, and liberally deploys language evocative of scripture.⁸⁴ This clear framing might dissuade us from taking his account as fact, and it is unlikely that it was truly the great apocalypse it is portrayed as. If this is an eyewitness account, it is nevertheless tempered by a certain amount of literary affectation. It is, however, difficult to

⁸⁰ Movses Dasxuranc'i, *History of the Caucasian Albanians*; trans. C. J. F. Dowsett (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 2.11: pp. 81-82; Subsequent references to Movses will be provided by book/chapter and the page number from the standard Dowsett translation in parentheses. The reference to the Khazars may not be anachronistic, *per se*, because there could well have been people calling themselves "Khazars" within the greater Turk confederation. But they should not be understood as synonymous with the later state in the region.

⁸¹ James Howard-Johnston "Armenian Historians of Heraclius: An Examination of the Aims, Sources, and Working-Methods of Sebeos and Movses Dashkurantsi," in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation*, eds. G.G Reinink and B.H. Stolte (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 49-56.

⁸² Howard-Johnston, "Armenian Historians," 55-57.

⁸³ Howard-Johnston, "Armenian Historians," 57.

⁸⁴ Movses 2.9 (75-76), is the most apocalyptic passage, with explicit biblical references found at 2.16 (106), 2.11 (84-85), etc.

imagine that the *History of 682* would simply invent whole cloth the idea that this invasion was devastating and uniquely traumatic in the Albanian consciousness. The treatment of Turks is overwhelmingly negative, despite the positive treatment of their Roman allies; Turks are uniformly savage, avaricious, and carrying all the stereotypes attributed to steppe peoples in both the Roman and Iranian traditions.⁸⁵ However, the *History* also shows a remarkable level of knowledge of Turk titles and organization, which indicates some good information was available to them.⁸⁶ In any event, its narrative is largely confined to Albania, and the degree to which his account can be extrapolated to other regions that the Turks may have attacked (such as Atropatene) is unclear.

The other major source that details the Turk invasion is the chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. As with Movses Dasxuranc'i, Theophanes' work is more akin to a file of various sources than a single, synthetic narrative, and, as his leading translators rightly suggest, any attempt to study his work must begin by defining those sources, many of which are now lost.⁸⁷ He most likely draws his coverage of the Turks from the completely unknown "official" Heraclian source (or sources), which have been suggested as a set of Heraclius' military dispatches.⁸⁸ Clearly, this source is adjacent to the court, and thus reflect an account favorable to the Romans and Heraclius, that likely emphasized his own role in the war and the Christian elements of his campaign. But they also put Theophanes at a single level of removal from contemporary sources in a good position to convey an accurate impression of the Roman side of

⁸⁵ Movses describes them as an "ugly, insolent, broad-faced, eyelashless mob in the shape of women with flowing hair," and "like shameless and ravenous wolves," 2.11 (trans. Dowsett 83-84).

⁸⁶ Especially *shad* and *tudun*, which are widely attested elsewhere as administrative titles in the Turk world: Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 243.

⁸⁷ *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Clarendon: Oxford, 1997), lxxii

⁸⁸ James Howard-Johnston, "The Official History of Heraclius' Persian Campaigns," in *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*, ed. Edward Dąbrowa (Krakow: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1994), 76-87.

events. Further, their focus on strategy and *realpolitik* provides a helpful corrective to the often florid and imaginative histories found in the other sources (and elsewhere in Theophanes).

Synthesizing the two accounts is difficult, especially given their composite nature and Theophanes' tendency to be somewhat confused in terms of chronology.⁸⁹ As with much of the seventh century, the chief issue is absolute dating. Theophanes is the cause, as his date of 624/5 for the Turk invasion stands at odds with the one given in the *History of 682*, which dates it to 626.⁹⁰ Since we know that Theophanes commits many errors of absolute dating elsewhere, the later date provided in the *History of 682* is to be preferred, especially given its stronger focus on the topic. But this too is complicated by the *History's* insertion into Movses, as many of its parts have been shuffled around in their relative chronology by later editors, possibly including Movses himself.⁹¹ Of course, there is no way of knowing whether the chronology was presented as straightforwardly in the original *History*, but most of its absolute dates can be verified by other accounts, particularly that of Pseudo-Sebeos, which the author seems to have had access to.⁹² Theophanes seems to have simply collapsed the whole narrative of Turk involvement into the entry under the initial negotiation in 624/5, misunderstanding or ignoring the temporal scope of the invasion. Perhaps this is a reflection of his depending on one less annually-organized source (like a war dispatch summing up the events), or it is merely a simplification by an author quite distant from and not especially interested in the minutiae of these events.

Following the dating of the *History of 682*, we can say that the first Turk incursions into Iranian lands came shortly after the negotiation of an alliance between them and the Romans in

⁸⁹ James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World in Crisis* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2010), 279-84.

⁹⁰ Theophanes 316; Movses 2.12 (trans. Dowsett 86-87).

⁹¹ Howard-Johnston, "Armenian Historians," 49-56; the best proof of this is that 2.11 concerns the response to the Turk invasion, which does not happen until 2.12.

⁹² The suggestion of access in based less on borrowed elements than the elision of certain important events that are mentioned in ps.-Sebeos, which has led Howard-Johnston to suggest that the original *History of 682* was intended as a companion piece: Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World in Crisis*, 124.

626. Under the forces of the Khagan's nephew, referred to by his title *Shad*, a significant number of Turks invaded Iranian territory, striking first at Albania and then moving into Ādurbādagān (modern Āzarbāyjān, in northwest Iran).⁹³ From there, they established themselves at a base along the Araxes and sent an ultimatum to the Iranian court.⁹⁴ Howard-Johnston suggests that the ultimatum preserved in the *History* is legitimate, owing to its similarities to other such letters and a possible provenance through a companion of the Catholicos Viroy.⁹⁵ In any case, it is exactly what would one would expect to have been said, confidently asserting the authority of the Turk khagan and demanding the return to *status quo ante* in the Roman war.⁹⁶ If indeed the letter is legitimate, it is striking in its explicit reversal of Iranian claims, with the Khagan proclaiming himself “lord of the whole world” and “king of kings” and referring to the *shahanshah* merely as the “governor of Asorestan.”⁹⁷

By itself, this was a devastating blow to the Iranian war effort. Khusro's reaction was apparently one of rage and fear, worsened after his failed attempt to buy the Turks off.⁹⁸ Howard-Johnston theorizes that the principal aim in the campaign was economic, continuing the depredations of the northwestern regions begun by Heraclius' earlier campaigns in the region.⁹⁹ This seems quite plausible, and the material impact of these invasions should not be understated. However, given the damage already inflicted on the northwest, one suspects that this was more a worsening of an existing situation, rather than a new factor. Instead, the greater damage was likely what this attack symbolized. For one thing, it was the opening of a new front, quite poorly

⁹³ Movses 2.12 (86-88).

⁹⁴ Movses, 2.12 (88).

⁹⁵ Howard-Johnston *Witnesses*, 120-23.

⁹⁶ Movses, 2.12 (88).

⁹⁷ Movses, 2.12 (88).

⁹⁸ Movses 2.11 (81-82).

⁹⁹ Howard-Johnston *Last Great War*, 299.

timed considering the Iranian abortive overextension to the walls of Constantinople.¹⁰⁰ But on the other hand, it signaled the entry of Turan into the conflict, raising the cosmic stakes and drawing parallels to the legend of the sons of Fereydun. What is more, it no doubt raised memories of the last Turkic wars, where the Iranians had defeated the Turks only after they had reached Isfahan, and the one before that, which ultimately opened the Bahrām Chōbīn incident.¹⁰¹ All this while still fighting the Romans. This would be Khusro's greatest test, and he was already starting off on the back foot.

The *shad's* invasion seems only to have been an initial foray, and the threats of the khagan were soon realized when he arrived with a larger army the next year.¹⁰² From this point, Theophanes' narrative (chronology aside) rejoins the account, though the *History of 682* still provides much more detail during this invasion's initial phases. This greater army of the Turks first attacked the fortress at Darband (following the less popular pass through the Caucasus), utterly overwhelming the Iranian garrison with vastly superior numbers and brutality.¹⁰³ Having broken through the Caspian Gates, the Turks were free to ravage and plunder throughout the Albanian countryside, soundly defeating whatever local and/or imperial resistance they found and establishing themselves in strategic chokepoints that gave them full control over the region.¹⁰⁴

In the *History*, the Turk conquest of Albania meets very little resistance, and Albanians are clearly positioned as victims, not agents. While it mentions an Iranian governor sent to manage the defense, it mentions little in the way of provisioning of troops or other support from

¹⁰⁰ Walter Kaegi, *Heraclius, Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 133-41 for a summary and broader implications.

¹⁰¹ For Bahrām Chōbīn, see above; on the second war see the account in ps.-Sebeos 102-3; explored in Pourshariati *Decline and Fall* 136-40.

¹⁰² Movses 2.11 (83).

¹⁰³ Movses 2.11 (83-84).

¹⁰⁴ Movses 2.11 (83-85).

Ctesiphon.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the sole defensive measure mentioned in the text (the securing of the people in walled cantons) is presented as a bad choice, having done little more than allow the Turks to progress even further into the country.¹⁰⁶ Howard-Johnston voices skepticism at the idea that Albania could truly be so poorly defended,¹⁰⁷ and it is certainly true that the *History of 682* had reason to exaggerate for greater dramatic effect. However, the fact that the region was apparently *perceived* as being undefended is itself significant. If our goal is to study the reaction to the events of the war, this perception is more relevant than the realia of border defenses. Admittedly, there is no way of knowing whether this understanding of events was truly contemporary, as even our most contemporary sources that show it (like the *History of 682*) date from a half-century after the events. But Heraclius struck at this area likely indicates some sense of its lack of defensibility being known.

Having thoroughly ransacked Albania, the Turks moved into Lazica, rendezvousing with the Romans at Tbilisi while apparently wreaking less havoc than they had in Albania.¹⁰⁸ The siege of Tbilisi ultimately ended before the city was captured, but the breaking of this siege was less a rout than a strategic withdrawal. We are faced with confusion in the sources between the breaking of the siege of Tbilisi and Heraclius' march to Mesopotamia. Likely, it is a victim of falling between the dramas of the siege of Constantinople and Heraclius' invasion of Mesopotamia, and the fact that Albania was already ravaged means that the *History of 682* is not there to fill in any gaps. The *History* has Heraclius departing for his invasion in summer,¹⁰⁹ whereas Theophanes heavily emphasizes the fact that the campaign started in September, an

¹⁰⁵ Movses 2.11 (83).

¹⁰⁶ Movses 2.11 (84).

¹⁰⁷ Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 297.

¹⁰⁸ Movses 2.11 (85)

¹⁰⁹ Movses 2.11 (86).

unorthodox move designed to take the Iranians by surprise.¹¹⁰ Given how strongly he emphasizes it and the strangeness of beginning a campaign so late in the year (not to mention his purported official sources), Theophanes likely is correct, and the author of the *History* was merely assuming a more traditional schedule.

We have thus likely lost a few months here that we can never fully recover. Apparently sometime thereafter, the Turk army returned north. One implicit disagreement with the sources is the independence of the Turk army. For the *History*, the Turks seem to remain more or less an independent army throughout the narrative; even as they heavily coordinate with Heraclius' forces, they all return to the steppe together with the khagan.¹¹¹ Theophanes, by contrast, describes a sizable army of Turks being “given” to Heraclius in alliance after the siege of Tbilisi,¹¹² though they eventually trickled out of the ranks before the offensive into Mesopotamia.¹¹³ Our sources are in agreement on two basic propositions: that the khagan left after the siege of Tbilisi and that there were no Turks in the forces of Heraclius that marched into Mesopotamia. Both can be regarded as historical. But whether all the Turks left at once or steadily is up for debate, and one can easily imagine Turk troops returning more slowly and extracting more booty on the way out. Theophanes' compression of events has Ziebel invading into Ἀδραγῖαν, likely meaning Ādurbādagān.¹¹⁴ While it is possible this is merely a conflation with the earlier incursion under the Shad, it may also reflect another movement into that area. Regardless, the damage to the Iranian northwest was substantial, and Mesopotamia's flank was now left open for Heraclius' invasion of the empire's fiscal and administrative center.

¹¹⁰ Theophanes 317.

¹¹¹ At the very least, he fails to mention any contingent left behind, *Movses* 2.11 (85-86).

¹¹² Theophanes 316: χιλιάδας μ' ἀνδρῶν γενναίων ἔδωκε τῷ βασιλεῖ πρὸς συμμαχίαν

¹¹³ Theophanes 317.

¹¹⁴ Theophanes 316.

Just as important as the material, strategic gains in Transcaucasia was the image the campaign projected. Howard-Johnston astutely observes that one of its key successes was its clear demonstration of the Turco-Roman alliance and, as a corollary, of Iran's inability to defend itself from it.¹¹⁵ In many ways, the centerpiece of the campaign was not the siege of Tbilisi, but the alliance-making theatre that was performed outside the walls. Sources differ as to what exactly this entailed. Theophanes, speaking with the most pro-Heraclius reading of events, has the Turks and Ziebel making obeisance to Heraclius in a grand proskynesis.¹¹⁶ It is difficult to imagine a Yabghu Khagan performing such a degrading action, which has fed into the argument over whether Ziebel truly was the Tong Yabghu of the eastern source.¹¹⁷ But the greater likelihood this account is exaggerated, either by Theophanes himself or the military dispatches designed to play well back in Constantinople. Other sources mention a marriage alliance between the two as being established at this meeting – an unprecedented move by the Romans that clearly signaled a recognition of the Turks as equals.¹¹⁸ In any event, the message was clear: the Romans and the Turks were strong allies, and the balance of power was now even, if not tilted in their favor.

Affairs in the east are much more difficult to reconstruct. The narrative that survives in Moses seems to indicate that the focus was firmly in the west, and most of the sources are clear that the Khagan himself was in the west campaigning with Heraclius. Given the “headlessness” of nomadic imperialism, it is perfectly likely that there were smaller-scale individual raids occurring in the east, which escaped the purview of our western-minded

¹¹⁵ Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 300-2.

¹¹⁶ Theophanes 316.

¹¹⁷ See Etienne de la Vaissière, “Ziebel Khagan Identified,” in *Constructing the Seventh Century*, ed. Constantin Zuckerman (Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance: Paris, 2013), 741-48.

¹¹⁸ Nikephoros *Short History*, 12.16-43, though he also mentions Ziebel's (here merely “lord of the Turks”) proskynesis; Howard-Johnston, “Heraclius' Persian Campaigns and the Revival of the East Roman Empire,” *War in History* 6 (1999): 24, n.75.

historians and left behind no archaeological and documentary traces. The story of the Iranian east in this period appears to be one of steady consolidation by the Turks, steadily establishing their control of territory directly or indirectly controlled by the Iranians. Certainly, regional Turk leaders consolidate their rule and become entrenched even further south during this period.¹¹⁹ The timelines are roughly in alignment, and some have floated the suggestion that the war with Rome had distracted the Iranians and enabled Turk conquests, though without any direct evidence.¹²⁰ However, there is nothing definitive besides coincidence to suggest that there was a major offensive on the eastern frontier, certainly not as a part of the alliance with the Romans, given its absence in any sources covering the alliance.

¹¹⁹ See, e.g., the consolidation under the Yabghu of Bactria, who minted coins from Zabulistan, Vondrovec *Coinage*, 527-30., though Rezakhani *ReOrienting the Sasanians*, 164, notes the need for further research to be done to synthesize the political history in this period.

¹²⁰ J. Harmatta and B.A. Litvinsky, "Tokharistan and Gandhara under Western Turk Rule," in *History of Civilizations in Central Asia*, vol. 3, *The Crossroads of Civilizations AD 250-750*, eds. B.A. Litvinsky et al. (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1990), 370.

III: Responses and Aftermath

So much for the narratives of the invasion. Charting the response to this invasion is equally mired in source issues and differing interpretations, and determining when exactly the internal tide turned against Khusro is trickier than it might first appear. There are smatterings of evidence to suggest that rebellions had begun in earnest well before the climactic moments of the war. Pourshariati suggests an earlier rebellion in 626/7 by the leader of the Ispahbudhān, Zād Farrukh.¹²¹ This puts the beginning of the breakdown before the climactic battle of Nineveh and contemporary with the Turk invasion. Though it is often cited as an early example of breaking away from Khusro, the idea of an early rebellion by Shahrvaraz has been convincingly disproven by David Frendo.¹²² Nevertheless, our sources attribute a sense of doom to the army that marched against Heraclius at Nineveh, a seeming certainty that the battle would be lost.¹²³ Movses' juxtaposition of the Turk invasion with the waning of resolve and the beginning of the conspiracy against Khusro is interesting in this context. This is easily dismissed as mere mangling of his original source, but perhaps it demonstrated an implicit connection between the two concepts and was in fact original to the *History of 682*.

These sources are admittedly speaking with the benefit of hindsight and may be projecting their own knowledge of the outcome onto their subjects. But if this is a legitimate reflection of the mood of the army, then it certainly suggests that their resolve had already been fatally compromised. While Nineveh is often treated as the decisive moment, it appears that dissent was in the air from the first Roman/Turk counteroffensive. This is not to imply that Nineveh is completely unimportant – the timing is simply too close for it to be a pure

¹²¹ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 149-60.

¹²² 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): 27-45

¹²³ Movses 2.12 (89-90); Ṭabarī 1, 1004.

coincidence, and of course a major defeat in a pitched battle is a potent symbol to rally around. Nevertheless, the pump seems to have been primed by the Turk invasion, and all the ideological foundations it subverted.

Khusro's complete downfall can be securely dated to early 628. Our sources are universal in describing a coup followed by an assassination. The most contemporary source is the letter sent by Kavād II upon his succession, preserved in the final pages of the *Chronicon Paschale*.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, these pages are severely damaged, to the point that later parts of the letter become unreadable, and the presumed reply of Heraclius is totally lost. While admirable work has been done in reconstructing it, it remains tentative.¹²⁵ Even if it were whole, as an official source, it does not reveal many of the details inimical to the regime. Luckily, those details are preserved in the more traditional histories, though they carry the expected cautions against sensationalism.

What was the make-up of the conspiracy? Those works drawing upon the *Khwadāy-Nāmāg* tradition are universal in identifying the high nobility as the principal party. Based on supplemental evidence from the Arabic historians and the *Shahnameh* (and thus, the argument goes, from the *Kwaday-Namag*), Pourshariati identifies several of the noble families involved in the conspiracy, most especially the Ispahbudhān, Bagratuni, and Nimruzi.¹²⁶ The Bagratunis seem the odd ones out, given that they are Armenian, and it bears mentioning that ps.-Sebeos, otherwise very concerned with the Bagratunis, does not mention their participation. The role of Shamta bar Yazdin, a Christian aristocrat who appears as a central figure in the Christian accounts and Ṭabarī, may well be inflated by an emphasis on a Christian figure in the story.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ *Chr. Pasch.* 735.

¹²⁵ A thorough reconstruction is found in Nikolaos Oikonomides, "Correspondence between Heraclius and Kavād-Siroé in the Paschal Chronicle (628)" *Byzantion* 9 (1971): 269-81

¹²⁶ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 149-60

¹²⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, 1, 1061; Philip Wood, "The Christian Reception of the *Xwadāy-Nāmāg*: Hormizd IV, Khusrau II and Their Successors." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26, no. 3 (2016): 419-21

Ṭabarī's emphasis is certainly interesting, but, as Philip Wood notes, this section of Ṭabarī is rife in Christian themes, adopting a “distinctly different attitude towards Khusrau” that emphasizes his sacking of Jerusalem and conflict with “the divinely favoured Heraclius.”¹²⁸ Thus, it seems that this section of Ṭabarī hews closely to one of his Christian sources, which explains the expanded role of Samta.

One expects that the *Khwadāy-Nāmag* would foreground noble contributions – it is, after all, the “Book of Lords.” But given the way that political power in the empire was distributed, it makes perfect sense that they played a leading role. By every indication, the nobility was the politically active element of Iranian society (unlike in the Roman world), and it is to them that we should turn to explain political events. If all these accounts are taken seriously (and we have no real means of disputing them), the group that organized the coup against Khusro is quite diverse. The common denominator is their nobility, and with it a participation in the elite Iranian ethno-class. The position of Armenian nobility in *Ērānšahr* is debated and seemed to have regularly shifted; this flexibility is precisely the benefit of this sort of ethnicized imperialism.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, they are clearly exposed to and participate in the vectors of Iranian-ness. It is, after all, not as if Christians are *completely* locked out of the Iranian ethno-class, at least as far as they considered themselves. The classic example is the martyrdom of Mar Qardagh, which shows a Christianized version of the Iranian ethnic ideal.¹³⁰ But we have also already seen how ps.-Sebeos deploys elements of the *Khwadāy-Nāmag* tradition, and other Christian sources

¹²⁸ Wood, “Christian Reception,” 418; Ṭabarī gives the litany of charges in 1, 1046-48.

¹²⁹ This highly complex topic, far beyond the scope of the present work. For questions of parallel nations see Touraj Daryaee, “Armenia and Iran: The Birth of Two Nations in Late Antiquity,” *Electrum* 28 (2021): 59-67. for a juridical approach finding much overlap in the Sasanian and Armenia legal traditions, see Tim Greenwood, “A Contested Jurisdiction: Armenia in Late Antiquity,” in *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia*, ed. Eberhard Sauer (Edinburgh, I.B. Tauris, 2017), 205-16.

¹³⁰ Joel Walker, *Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), esp. 121-61.

commonly reappropriate and interpret elements of this decidedly Iranian tradition, one of the major vectors of the shared imperial ideology.

Al-Tha'alibi provides us with the most straightforward version, attributing the conspiracy to pure war exhaustion, most especially the fact that soldiers were kept from their wives and children.¹³¹ Ṭabarī also cites this as a major factor, although his accuracy is rendered suspect by the inclusion of the taking of the True Cross as one motivator, which makes little sense for non-Christian plotters.¹³² Of course, such a complaint about the soldiery was equally true in the twenty-fourth year of the war as it was in the twenty-sixth; there must have been some more immediate trigger, namely the loss of justification for keeping those soldiers on the field. Put in the simplifying terms of cost-benefit analysis, continuing the war must no longer have seemed worth it. That the idea of exhaustion appears immediately after Turan successfully invaded and defeated the Iranians in Albania is perhaps suggestive here. The Iranians were now losing to Rome and Turan, and the cosmic incentives for continuing to fight disappeared. Far from participating in the grand theatre of Iranian victory, the Iranian ethno-class were participating in a theatre of defeat to the greatest enemy. They thus had no reason *not* to return to their country estates, drink wine, and compose poetry, and if Khusro had to be removed to achieve that, then so be it. Of course, the opportunities for political advancement were also much better with Khusro out of the way, particularly by collaboration with his successor.

The overwhelming majority of our sources give Shiroe (the future Kavad II) the leading role in the conspiracy, which seems quite reasonable given what he stood to gain and the

¹³¹ Al-Tha'alibi, *Histoire des rois des Perse*, trans. H. Zotenberg (Imprimerie Nationale: Paris, 1900), 721-24. Given the complex mechanisms for ensuring that families were cared for and reproducing when men were away in war, Payne "Sex, Death, and Aristocratic Empire," 534-40, there may be room to doubt the severity of this issue, although simple affective ties cannot be discounted.

¹³² al-Ṭabarī 1, 1047; he also includes various elements from later Romance traditions, see Philip Wood, *The "Chronicle of Seert": Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 216.

longstanding precedent in the Sasanian dynasty of expediting succession when necessary.¹³³ There are slight deviations in just how self-serving Shiroe was, even as nearly all of them condemn this as an ignominious end for a great king.¹³⁴ These sources are hardly independent, and indeed conform to general patterns of villain-making within their respective historical traditions. There is thus room to question the attribution of leadership. Howard-Johnston, for one, prefers the *Chronicon Paschale*'s dissenting version (that is, Heraclius' official version given to be read in public), which instead names one Gourdunaspa, a general, as the leader.¹³⁵ Movses also references a "governor" as providing "planning and guidance," though Kavad is still the actor, and Theophanes definitively portrays Kavad giving commands to "Goundabousas."¹³⁶ Who really took the initiative is thus rendered muddy. Howard-Johnston's preference is based on the idea that a military defeat would be particularly disconcerting for a military man, characteristically considering military affairs in a vacuum, away from the rest of society.¹³⁷ It should be emphasized again that a general in the Iranian empire was almost certainly a member of the Iranian ethno-class – the line between "military man" and Iranian aristocrat was far thinner than Howard-Johnston's partitioning would suggest.

If instead we consider the full ideological consequences of the defeat by the Turks, we no longer need to confine its effects to the military sphere. It provided a potential motivation for the entire ruling ethno-class to break with Khusro, and made the conspiracy possible, if not tacitly encouraged. Stepping beyond the individualizing tendencies of our ancient historians, we need not construct an unfalsifiable motivation for one individual or another to turn against

¹³³ This was, after all, how Khusro II had gained the throne: ps.-Sebeos 73-74, Theophylact 4.6.1-7.11.

¹³⁴ E.g., Tha'alibi sees this as a naked arrogation of power, *Histoire des rois*, 724-28; For Tabarī, he is mostly a pawn 1, 1045-46; and in the Syriac sources Shamta is the sole kingmaker: Wood, *Chronicle of Seert* 216-17; In Sebeos, Kavad II eagerly accepts the deposition after it is carried out by the nobility 127.

¹³⁵ Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 315-17; Chr. *Pasch.* 731-32.

¹³⁶ Movses 2.12 (89-90); Theophanes 325-26.

¹³⁷ Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 315.

Khusro, even as we admit that it is likely that Shiroe and Gourdunaspa were leading figures. The rapidity of the coup evinces a lack of opposition which was far more critical to its success than any one hand within it. Of course, if Pourshariati's reading is correct, then we have even more evidence for a general turn against Khusro within the aristocracy. Further, the fact that the traditional power bases of these houses were in the north and east may suggest that the threat of the Turks was more acute than that of the Romans.¹³⁸ But the motivator need not be so individual, as Khusro's failure in the face of Turan would have shattered the entirety of the Iranian aristocracy, not just those directly in the Turks' path.

Furthermore, the Turk invasion was not merely a memory – it was an ongoing process. Most suggestive of all is the Movses' portrayal of Albania in the aftermath of Khusro's defeat. Rather than returning to the steppe for good, the Shad returned in 628/9, this time establishing firm control in the region. The story of Catholicos Viroy's submission is particularly striking, indicating that the Turks had firmly established themselves as rulers of Albania, complete with *tuduns*, attested elsewhere as tax collectors.¹³⁹ Howard-Johnston quite rightly suggests that the presence of Turk armies south of the Caucasus hung over the peace negotiations between the Romans and Iranians, and that the "surgical precision" of the Turk's conquest was a devastating blow to Sasanian prestige.¹⁴⁰ In the absence of a diplomatically connected historian like Menander Protector or Prokopios, we lack a complete peace treaty from the Greek historians. There are many references to the treaty in various sources, but none of them claim to be representing the treaty holistically.¹⁴¹ Indeed, it is not entirely clear whether the Turks would or

¹³⁸ The Ispahbudhān's power base was in Ādurbādagān Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 129, 149-153; and the Nimruzi in Sistan, Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall* 157; the Bagratuni are of course Armenian.

¹³⁹ Movses, 2.14 (101-2); Golden, *Introduction*, 135.

¹⁴⁰ Howard-Johnston *Last Great War*, 340

¹⁴¹ An analysis and concordance of the sources is provided in Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 148-51.

could be bound by any peace treaty with the Romans, and the lack of mention they are given perhaps suggests that they were not at the same table as Heraclius and Kavad II (if they were ever brought to the table at all). Whenever the Turks withdraw, it is not due to the efforts of a restored Sasanian presence, but due to internal issues within the Turk Khaganate, ones which are independently attested by the Chinese sources as well.¹⁴²

The sources' description of the Turk armies returning to the steppe relies on rather common tropes of nomadic peoples' inability to survive in settled lands and tendency to disappear back into *terra incognita*, phrasing in the recognizable terms of a nomadic raid.¹⁴³ But, read another way, the Turks' approach does not sound so different to the sort of seasonal warfare that is common to all ancient armies, Romans and Iranians included. Most likely, it was logistically impossible for the Turk army to operate this far from the center of power for this long, and especially to cross yet another mountain range into Mesopotamia. And given that Heraclius won without them, it seems they were no longer needed by the Romans. However, this hardly shows the lack of resolve attributed to them by Theophanes.¹⁴⁴ The continuing presence of the Turks after the collapse of the Sasanian regime, especially the presence of tax collectors mentioned in the story of Viroy, suggests that the Turk invasions were far more than mere raids or mercenary obligations to Heraclius. This was an out-and-out annexation.

That the bulk of Turk troops returned north does not indicate that they had lost control of the region or were not especially concerned with incorporating it. The absence of other armies (Roman or Iranian) in the region speaks volumes – from at least the second invasion of Albania, the Turks were its rulers. The terms of the agreement are given in the *History of 682*. Albania is

¹⁴² Movses 2.16 (105-06); Denis Sinor "Establishment and Dissolution," 308-310.

¹⁴³ Movses invokes the hot climate as untenable for the Turks to survive in 2.11 (86).

¹⁴⁴ Theophanes 317.

now the “patrimony” of the Yabghu Khagan, to serve as base from which to attack neighboring regions, and Viroy promises to serve the Turks “as they served the Sasanians.”¹⁴⁵ In this narrative, it is Viroy himself who suggests to the Turks that they send officials, ostensibly to protect from the depredations of Turk troops.¹⁴⁶ The *History* passes the establishment of the tax/tribute officials quickly, seemingly appearing fully formed in the midst of his narrative.¹⁴⁷ There are two ways to make sense of this: either governance had been steadily established in the background or the Turks had come prepared to put down roots, which would require them to have already prepared the field by establishing dominance in the region. The process of annexing Albania thus likely began even earlier than we can confirm it in 628/9.

Beyond mere acquisitiveness, the Turks had very good reasons to incorporate the region. Albanian lands would have been highly attractive to a nomadic polity, as they were for the later Turkic groups who later conquered the region. The natural advantages of the Albanian river valleys are difficult to overstate, featuring both pastureland for Turk troops and arable land suitable for taxation. What is more, the power structures of Albania were already familiar to the Turks from their conquests of Eastern Iranian lands and the resulting “Turanian” synthesis. Acting under the command of the Yabghu Khagan, the *shad*’s initial strategy is indeed to attempt to incorporate the regional nobility, allowing them to remain in place in exchange for fealty to the Turks.¹⁴⁸ In other words, he tries to reach the same settlement reached in Eastern Iranian lands of Sogdiana and Bactria. As written, it is only after the nobles refuse and leave Albania that the Catholicos takes the leading role as representative of the people.¹⁴⁹ The Turks’ push into

¹⁴⁵ Movses 2.14 (100).

¹⁴⁶ Movses 2.14 (100).

¹⁴⁷ Movses 2.14 (101-02).

¹⁴⁸ Movses 2.14 (98-100).

¹⁴⁹ Movses 2.14 (98-99).

Albania, then, is explicable in terms of the strategy the Turks demonstrate farther east. Like Bactria, it represented a region which combined the opportunity for expanding taxation with the ability to rule from horseback and was a natural target for expansion.

Mehrdad Ghordat-Dizjali convincingly suggests that effective Iranian control over Ādurbādagān ceased c. 623, with Heraclius' first invasion, continuing to lie beyond Ctesiphon's control until the Islamic period.¹⁵⁰ Though he sees "Khazar raids" merely as "evidence" for this collapse,¹⁵¹ given the comparative evidence in Albania, we might suggest that their continuing intervention was actively reinforcing this loss of control. This overlaps with a more general pattern in the more peripheral regions of the empire over the following centuries, in which peripheral areas increasingly broke away from the metropole under their own regional warlords.¹⁵² In measuring the loss of prestige of Khusro and his successors, the apparent loss of Albania and quite possibly the surrounding provinces must be factored in alongside the losses to the Romans. Indeed, given the unprecedented nature of these losses and their proximity to the Iranian heartland, it may well be the case that their loss was even more acute than the often-contested regions of the upper Euphrates.

That the Iranians were conscious of these events is suggested by the sources. The *History* describes Shahrvaraz arguing to dispose of the Sasanians to better deal with the Turk invaders, who "have set their hearts upon inheriting the glories of the land of the Aryans."¹⁵³ After his coup, he sent an army to fight them, which failed catastrophically and suffered mocking disfigurement of their bodies.¹⁵⁴ If Shahrvaraz had premised his usurpation on his ability to fight

¹⁵⁰ Mehrdad Ghordat-Dizjali, "Disintegration of Sasanian Hegemony over Northern Iran (AD 623-643)," *Iranica Antiqua* 46 (2011): 315–16.

¹⁵¹ Ghordat-Dizjali, "Disintegration of Sasanian Hegemony," 323.

¹⁵² Rezakhani "The End of Sasanian Rule", 229-55; McDonough, "Warrior of the Lords," 238-39.

¹⁵³ *Movses* 2.16 (104-05).

¹⁵⁴ *Movses* 2.16 (105).

the Turks, that point had been proven moot. We should hardly be surprised that he did not last long afterwards. Pourshariati sees the post-Khusro II period as an all-out war between the great houses, and there is certainly some truth in that, as each tried to wrangle their own way into power.¹⁵⁵ But even in these circumstances the threat of the Turks was recognized, and, more to the point, the symbolic capital that could be gained from defeating the Turks was also recognized as a critical support for a *shahanshah*. The failure to acquire it (along with the impossibility of fighting the Romans) was no doubt important in diminishing any contender's legitimacy.

Not all our sources are so conducive to a Turk-focused reading. Perhaps the single greatest point of evidence against emphasizing the Turks' role in the war is the fact that Pseudo-Sebeos, one of the most comprehensive sources of the period, does not so much as mention them. Ps.-Sebeos' account is otherwise remarkably comprehensive, and he dives deeply into the events of the war and its aftermath in the classical-inspired manner of the Armenian tradition pioneered by Movses Khorenatsi.¹⁵⁶ To seek an explanation for his curious silence, one should first turn to his sources. As with Movses, Howard-Johnston is the doyen of ps.-Sebeos *Quellenforschung*, and his meticulous work allows us to explore how ps.-Sebeos received his information. ps.-Sebeos' exact relationship to the Heraclian media program is not fully understood, although few would dispute that he was drawing upon official, pro-Roman sources to some degree.¹⁵⁷ Certainly, he repeats many themes present in Heraclian media, most especially the emphasis on the recovery of the true cross and the strong Christian element with which Heraclius justified the war. The influence of the *Khwadāy-Nāmag* has also been convincingly suggested,¹⁵⁸ but the loss of the original work precludes us from explaining how ps.-Sebeos uses

¹⁵⁵ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 173-89, though this also abuts her controversial redating of the Islamic invasions.

¹⁵⁶ Thomson, Howard-Johnston, and Greenwood, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, xl-xliii.

¹⁵⁷ Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World in Crisis*, 80-81.

¹⁵⁸ Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World in Crisis*, 82-85.

its account and how closely he adheres to its themes. As even a brief comparison of Ṭabarī and Ferdowsi should demonstrate, the *Khwadāy-Nāmag* was flexible enough to accommodate many different readings and emphases (not to mention the difficulties in reconstructing what was in it).

But quite apart from any questions of his sources, the very structure and themes of ps.-Sebeos' history run contrary to the inclusion of the Turks in his narrative. Quite unlike Movses, ps.-Sebeos does not simply copy and paste sections of earlier histories but uses them to actively construct a narrative; it is exactly this quality that makes him so attractive to historians and classicists. ps.-Sebeos' narrative prioritizes individual action, *mard o mard* combat, and great feats that bear more than a passing resemblance to the Armenian epic tradition.¹⁵⁹ And the two central heroes of this section are Heraclius and Khusro, both of whom are treated with a certain amount of mythic reverence. The picture that emerges from Movses and the other scattered references does not contain the sort of heroic pitched battle that would be fodder for ps.-Sebeos' epically tinged narrative. The main army's movements are well accounted for elsewhere in the history, and they remain decidedly west of the Turks. Instead, the Turkic incursion appears to have avoided a major battle entirely, meeting only the limited resistance of the garrisoned troops. This follows a rather common model of Inner Eurasian warfare, one that best utilized their chief asset – mobility. Further, the narrative of the Turk invasion seems to lack a strong central figure that ps.-Sebeos' could render in epic. The lack of a pitched battle between Khusro and the Turk khagan does not mean that the Turks were unimportant, but it does mean that our sources may well overlook them.

Ps.-Sebeos, in common with our other sources, lacks a strong, Thucydidean explanation for the arc of the war, presenting instead sets of events rarely tied together thematically, but not

¹⁵⁹ Thomson, Howard-Johnston, and Greenwood, *Armenian History*, 178–89; Joel Thomas Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, 158–60.

explicitly causally. This effect is magnified in the many chronicles (Theophanes, Theophylact, *Paschale*, etc.) that dominate our study of the period. To the degree that there is an underlying thesis, it is divine providence, not the military historian's concern for troop numbers or morale.¹⁶⁰ We must acknowledge that any grand explanatory framework we choose is a modern imposition onto this history, including the traditional Romano-centric version. Why not take the Iranians' word for it, and instead read the events through the lens best rooted in the sources of Iranian society? A major Turk invasion, then, is perfectly positioned to be both catastrophic for the Iranian war effort and somewhat underrepresented in the sources. But once we introduce the body of sources not directly relating the events of the war, these events can be restored to a more likely importance. If the purpose of *Ērānšahr* was to defeat Turan, it had failed, and its relevance was thus called into question. Of course, the abandonment was not universal. The very fact that our sources continued to be reproduced and expanded indicates that *Ērānšahr* still held some meaning to them, even as it became more distant and mythological. But something had changed, and it was now possible to see *Ērānšahr* as a failed project, something that had outlived its usefulness to its participants.

Often, the collapse of the Iranian empire has been read as one of dynastic weakness, centering on the fall of the Sasanian dynasty as synonymous with the Iranian empire. But the example of Bahrām Chōbīn demonstrates that *Ērānšahr* could be conceptualized without its Sasanian rulers, even as his failure suggests that it was no easy task. Dynastic weakness, especially after Kavad's purges, was a factor, but it alone cannot account for the end of Iranian empire. There is also reason to question how detrimental Kavad's purges were to the dynasty.

¹⁶⁰ As noted in Thomson, Howard-Johnston, and Greenwood, *Armenian History*, lxii, his political history often interpolates biblical prophecies and supernatural forces. Though they describe his apocalyptic worldview as contained by "editorial restraint: lxxvi, it is difficult not to see this eschatological sense of history as the central thesis – it is, after all, how he begins his history, ps.-Sebeos, 72.

After all, one of the main strengths of the Iranian ethnic package was the ability to ensure the survival of dynasties through various means of maximizing female fertility and replacing males who died prematurely.¹⁶¹ Again, a reading which sees only decontextualized political events misses how ideology effected the actual governing of the empire. An extirpation of the male line was not necessarily a death blow unless there were other factors at play. Contingency certainly plays some role here. Had Kavad not died to the plague, he might have become a strong ruler, and his fratricides would likely be remembered as a shrewd policy that prevented civil war. Perhaps, then the collapse of the Iranian empire was merely due to poor timing. Had the Islamic conquests not occurred, we cannot definitively state that the Iranian empire was doomed. But the loss to the Turks, along with the devastation left in the wake of the war, seems to have led to a more profound collapse of imperial ideology.

There is evidence of this deeper collapse to be found in the aftermath of Khusro's reign, which witnessed a major fragmentation of the formerly coherent empire. The broad trend of fragmentation into regional warlords, often of "barbarian" extraction, has been a feature of Iranian decline-and-fall narratives.¹⁶² But even if it had precedents, fragmentation truly exploded after the death of Khusro. Numismatics are especially vital for showing this, given the dearth of sources and the obvious tendentiousness of those few Islamic conquest narratives that deal with the period. It reveals a full-scale collapse of the centralized minting system outside of Mesopotamia, presumably indicating the demise of a fiscal regime from Ctesiphon.¹⁶³ Coins, as vectors for both taxes and imperial ideology, are critical source of both fiscal and symbolic

¹⁶¹ Payne, "Sex, Death, and Aristocratic Empire," 538-41.

¹⁶² Christensen, *L'Iran*, 494-96; Scott McDonough, "The 'Warrior of the Lords': Smbat Bagratuni at the Center and Periphery of Late Sasanian Iran," *Iranian Studies* 49:2 (2016): 237-39.

¹⁶³ Stefan Heidemann, "A Hoard from the Time of the Collapse of the Sasanian Empire," *Numismatic Chronicle* 173 (2013): 414-422, reveals the geographic restriction of Ardashir III's coins to Mesopotamia and southern Iran.

power, and the loss of Sasanian and “Iranian” control over these resources is a major negative development. Again, a comparison with Bahrām Chōbīn – here useful as the best-documented and remembered rebel – illustrates the change. During his rebellion, there is seemingly no hint of breaking away from the model of *Ērānšahr*, in fact, he presented himself as a better Sasanian than the Sasanians themselves. Then, the empire did not disintegrate into feuding, regionally confined warlords, and the “Idea of Iran” remained essentially unquestioned. After 628, many such questions arose.

The case of the Albanians is part of the wider abandonment of *Ērānšahr* that also serves as a useful counterpoint to the phenomena within the Iranian aristocracy. The apocalypticism of the *History of 682* is not merely a literary pretense to be stripped away in order to reveal the truth, it is itself an articulation of another sort of reaction to the failure of Khusro II and the invasion by Turan. The Albanians were enmeshed in the Iranian political project, even as their Christianity set them apart from the Iranian ethno-class proper – as much is evident from the considerable praise heaped upon Khusro in the *History*. That Albanian writer was able and indeed compelled to draw this biblically tinged, decidedly non-Iranian framework for these events suggests that the previous frameworks had failed. This goes hand in hand with the general narrative arc of the *History*, which features the failure of the Iranians to defend Albania from the “savage” northern invaders and foregrounds Catholicos Viroy’s role in shepherding the Albanians under Turk rule. In the telling of the *History of 682*, then, this is a moment for articulating a different, decidedly local political formulation in light of the failure of the Iranian one.

The analogous (though not independent) process among Iranians differed in its specifics, especially in its Zoroastrianism, but its contours are broadly similar. And when one reexamines

the evidence with these contours in mind, analogous situations become visible. This is especially true of the rebellion in Ādurbādagān. Despite its mention in numerous sources, precise details are somewhat lacking. As Poushariati highlights, it is further complicated in that the identities of the principle figures – Zad Farrukh, his father Farrukh Hormizd, and even Shahrvaraz – become entangled in the historical record, often in different combinations in different sources such that it is difficult to assign actions to one specific figure.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, the question of whether the rebellion of Farrukh Hormizd and his family should be dated before or after 628 is riddled with difficulties, and considering the evidence, a consensus is unlikely to emerge.¹⁶⁵ But despite these difficulties, it serves as an example of the Iranian aristocracy abandoning the Iranian regime.

The importance of this rebellion has been recognized. For Pourshariati, it is an example of an old Parthian family bucking against the ruling dynasty, in the process turning the tide of the war and signaling the effective end of the Sasanians – in many ways the culmination of her book’s central thesis.¹⁶⁶ However, this longer trend is not necessary to explain the events of the rebellion – they make perfect sense as a response to the more specific failure to uphold cosmological order, rendered especially pertinent by their newfound proximity to the Turanians. There is no record of how such rebellion was articulated, but its leaders had clearly begun to act more like regional warlords than participants in the wider political project. For a great noble like Farrukh Hormizd, the Iranian project seemed to offer little advantage to defending his home region, and we should hardly be surprised that he turned to independent adventurism in

¹⁶⁴ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 148-52.

¹⁶⁵ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 152 n. 815, argues against the assertion that the claim for an early rebellion was “Roman disinformation” in R.W. Thomson, James Howard-Johnston, and Tim Greenwood, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 223. However, given that the sources are not independent, the pure numerical advantage is not itself convincing, and the claim does indeed serve Roman interests. More troublingly, the debate rests on the similarly problematic question of Shahravaz’ rebellion. For present purposes, either dating scheme could work, although the fact that the *terminus post quem* is 624, it is still possible that it predated the Turk invasion.

¹⁶⁶ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 153.

Armenia.¹⁶⁷ Whether or not one agrees with Pourshariati's claim that Farrukh Hormizd later claimed the throne, and is to be identified with Hormizd V known from numismatic and literary sources,¹⁶⁸ he had clearly broken from the ideal of Iranian cooperation. Such a decision is perfectly comprehensible in light of the Turk invasion, and the failure of Iran that it represented.

To be clear, the Iranian system did not disappear overnight, and the imperial core continued to produce Iranian media and even maintained the Sasanian dynasty, even if it was no longer through the paternal line.¹⁶⁹ Coins, the best and often only source for understanding the last of the Sasanian rulers, show an appeal to the continuing legacy of Khusro II, even as their failure to assert themselves as truly effective *shahanshahs* calls into question just how much mileage was in such appeals.¹⁷⁰ Yazdegerd III is the most problematic in this respect, as the question of how much effective control over the empire he held is still debated.¹⁷¹ Such continuances of the Iranian system are not fatal flaws in the argument. After all, the contestation is not that the damage to the legitimacy of *Ērānšahr* was an unqualified deathblow that made it *impossible* to continue the Iranian project. Rather, it opened the discourse to other possibilities. It was now possible to articulate alternative political formulations, but we could hardly expect every single Iranian to drop their entire ethnopolitical identity overnight, especially the

¹⁶⁷ Ps.-Sebeos 132.

¹⁶⁸ Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 205-06. Despite her claim that "all evidence corroborates" that the two Hormizds are the same, Ps.-Sebeos definitively identifies him as a grandson of Khusro (II), 130. While ps.-Sebeos is not without his inaccuracies elsewhere, more work should be done to overturn his testimony.

¹⁶⁹ Christensen, *L'Iran*, 491-503; Daryaei *Sasanian Persia*, 34-37.

¹⁷⁰ Āzarmīgduxt was particularly keen to emphasize her connection with her father, see Touraj Daryaei "The Last Ruling Woman of Iranshahr: Queen Azarmigduxt," *International Journal of the Society of Iranian Archaeology* 1 (2014): 77-81; see also Stefan Heidemann Josef Riederer, and Dieter Weber, "A Hoard from the Time of Yazdgerd III in Kirmān." *Iran* 52 (2014): 79-124, which shows continual usage of Khusro II's dies even during the conquests.

¹⁷¹ Compare the very different syntheses of Howard-Johnston *Last Great War*, 382-85; with Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, 219-81.

descendants of Khusro and those in Ctesiphon with a biological and/or affective bond to the family.¹⁷²

Heraclius is the specter that looms over this discussion, as his continued interference in Iran constantly reinforced and accelerated the process. Howard-Johnston thus attributes the collapse of the empire to Heraclius, who, on his reading, is a great strategic genius that devised a perfect strategy for permanently disarming the Romans' traditional enemy.¹⁷³ Aside from the general aversion to this mode of "great-man history," this picture is more complicated than he suggests. Of course, we cannot know just how well Heraclius understood the mentality of his opponents, though the Roman penchant for collecting foreign generals and princes may well have produced solid informants.¹⁷⁴ Viewing him as a mastermind at the center of a vast web of conspiracy and manipulation fails to account for the continuing agency of the nobles within Iran. Roman interference in Iranian politics was a fixture – it is, after all, how Khusro II gained the throne in the first place. And any internal weakening requires collaborators inside the empire, whose own motives and goals are just as important as Heraclius. Furthermore, Heraclius was far from the only player. The Turks, too, were consistently meddling in Iranian affairs, their continued presence a reminder of Khusro's defeat.

Something had fundamentally changed, and there is little that could have better motivated a sea change than a disastrous loss to Turan and the ultimate subversion of Iran's cosmological superiority. As a final addendum, it bears emphasis that Zoroastrian cosmology was almost always eschatological, that is, it predicted the future as much as it narrated the past and present.

¹⁷² The importance of such affective bonds is emphasized by Payne "Sex, Death, and Aristocratic Empire," 537-40, and should be understood as a counterweight to the collapse of support for the ruling dynasty.

¹⁷³ Howard-Johnston, *Last Great War*, 362-66.

¹⁷⁴ See, e.g., A. D. Lee, "The Role of Hostages in Roman Diplomacy with Sasanian Persia," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 40, no. 3 (1991): 366-74; see also the case of Varaztirots' in ps.-Sebeos for a more willing example: 132-33.

It was a basic fact that the cosmologically superior Iran *was going to win*, just as Ohrmazd would ultimately win his struggle with Ahriman. As Turk armies came rushing into *Ērānšahr*, the Iranian ethno-class was faced with circumstances that seemed apocalyptic, but the eschaton was not going their way. What could be a stronger vitiation of the idea of Iran? All the predictions and forecasts had not only failed to materialize – they had materialized inverted. The Iranian world, quite literally, was turned upside down by the failure to assert their cosmological superiority over the evil Turanians. What did this mean for all the cosmological incentives that built the consensus in the first place? What meaning did the promised rewards have? From a rational perspective, it was time to start shopping around for alternatives to Iran.

Conclusion

The intervention of the Turks played a crucial role in the defeat of the Iranian empire, both in the immediate terms of the war and in the longer term of the subsequent years. This victory of Turan was perfectly positioned to demolish the aristocratic consensus on which the empire was built and sustained over the last centuries. From the first invasion of Albania, the stage had been set for the largest-scale reenactment of mythohistory, but the players did not follow the script. That Turan, the great antithesis of Iran, would not only defeat a *shahanshah*, but actively prove themselves superior to the Iranians at every turn as such a shock to the correct cosmic order that the system could no longer sustain itself. Fortunately for modern historians, much of the cultural background persisted in the realm of literature and the Zoroastrian clergy. But its political relevance was no longer an unquestioned fact, and in the coming centuries the memory of the Iranian political project would become little more than intangible cultural heritage.¹⁷⁵

It is vital not to reduce this reading back into a traditional decline-and-fall narrative which looks for internal weaknesses and failings of the imperial system. This is not a matter of an inherently flawed system of governing an empire, doomed to failure by the later Sasanians acting like overweening oriental despots. Rather, it is a matter of a set of contingent events delivering a devastating blow to the ideological edifice of the Iranian empire. As is often the case with the decline-and fall-narrative, a reading emphasizing decline or the loss of civic virtue ignores the centuries of Iranian success and the remarkably resilient nature of imperial ideology throughout that period. As a theoretical point, it is difficult to imagine any imperial power structure without some “weakness” – every strategy has costs, benefits, and risks, cases where it

¹⁷⁵ Gnoli, *Idea of Iran*, 183.

will be effective and cases where it will not. The events of 626-8 could hardly have been predicted or prepared for by the participants within that imperial ideology, and it is patently unfair to consider them decadent or foolhardy for an ingenious system that faced a set of events for which it was unsuited. The performance of the cosmic relationship between Iran and Turan had proven to be hugely effective in binding together the Iranian aristocracy. But when the Iranians lost control of the performance, that strength became a weakness, and the reversal of that relationship led to an equal reversal in its legitimating quality.

The question of whether that reversal was itself lethal to Iran looms over this discussion, even as it remains ultimately unanswerable. Because determinism and teleology has been so potent a force in the historiography, it is tempting to defer to complete contingency, with the Iranian Empire remaining fundamentally the same until its final moments, simply falling prey to a run of bad luck. This is especially tempting considering Iran's tendency to collapse into civil war upon succession. The events of Bahram Chobin's usurpation provide a parallel, with an aristocratic coup and assassination of a previous ruler. One might suggest that the collapse is little more than another period of routine instability that happened to coincide with the rise of Islam. Such a highly contingent reading is preferable to overt determinism, but it is incomplete.

To dismiss the collapse after Khusro as yet another example of succession instability is to discount evidence that leads us in the direction of a more profound change. As is so often the case, practically all our sources are retrospective, and cannot be assumed to represent the perspective of Iranians and their subjects at the time. This is especially problematic given the occluding effect of the Islamic invasion, which stands out as a greater trauma over the longer term. However, the fact that the author of the *History of 682* can retrospectively count the apocalypse of the Turk invasion as a step toward the all-out apocalypticism of his Islamic

invasion could indicate that their defeat of Khusro was understood to be world-altering at the time. Given what we know of the Turks' continuing presence and their unique position vis-à-vis Iranian imperial ideology, there is no reason not to take them at their word. Previous periods of instability, like that of Bahram Chobin's usurpation, take on these same apocalyptic qualities. But in those cases, the status quo is ultimately reinforced, and the victor gains prestige and charisma by their successful restoration of the right order. After the Turks, there was no such figure. We cannot know whether one would have emerged in time, but their job would likely have been more difficult than their predecessors'. The Iranian Empire was not destined to collapse after the victory of Turan. Instead, the victory of Turan created a set of conditions that, when combined with later events, ultimately resulted in the complete collapse of the empire.

That said, this change was a specific reaction to a specific set of events, not steady degradation toward the *telos* of Iranian collapse. While it depended upon the context and the frameworks of Iranian imperial ideology, it was not the natural result of them. Monocausality is rarely defensible, and one certainly cannot claim that the Turks were the only factor in the collapse of Khusro II and *Ērānšahr*. Indeed, it is the correlation of this exogenous ideological shock with the actual breakdown of the Iranian central government and military that made it so powerful – the two reinforced each other. Blows to prestige are not new to the Iranian world, and there are weak *shahanshahs* throughout their history. But never before had there been such a potent reversal of ideology, nor had it been combined with a powerful “Turanian” state willing and able to continually assert themselves in the region. Nor should this argument be taken to exclude Heraclius and the Romans from the conversation entirely. After all, the Romans brought the Turks into the war into the first place, making major sacrifices (including the nearly unprecedented step of marrying off an imperial daughter) to achieve it. While the reading of

Heraclius as an all-seeing mastermind demands more of the evidence than it provides, it is certainly clear that the Romans were constantly aiding in the ideological collapse of their rival, whether they fully understood it or not.

Recent scholarship has shown an increased inclination toward “Eurasian” readings of late antiquity, extending the paradigm further and greater integrating the by now well-established world of the Eastern Mediterranean with their interlocutors in the north and east.¹⁷⁶ There are few more strikingly Eurasian episodes than the Last Great War of Antiquity, drawing in the forces of three huge empires whose interests spanned all three continents. But it has seldom been approached as such, and, when it has, it is merely from the military angle – attributing the Turks’ greater importance to their military power alone. A more careful analysis with a greater sensitivity to Iranian imperial ideology reveals that the connection to the Turks runs far deeper than mere raid-and-trade or the legendary “Silk Road,” and that understanding Eurasian interaction is critical to understanding the Iranian collapse. For all that the Iranians themselves likely saw the Turks as the greatest existential threat, their power rather quickly dissipated, and the khaganate was shattered by the 630s. Nevertheless, their influence was a huge factor in the seventh century, which ultimately proved to be a pivotal moment in world history.

By way of a conclusion, let us turn briefly to the actual existential threat – the Islamic conquests, which have been intentionally excluded from the foregoing analysis. While the fragmented nature of their Iranian opponents has long been recognized, the major focus of scholars of early Islam has been on the believers themselves, searching for what gave them the cohesion to conquer. The influential reading of Fred M. Donner is a perfect example, attributing

¹⁷⁶ Nicola di Cosmo and Michael Maas, “Introduction,” in *Empires and Exchanges in Late Antiquity: Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250-750*, ed. Nicola di Cosmo and Michael Maas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-2.

the rapid conquests to the strength of the believers' movement and suggesting that the conquered empires only *appeared* weak by comparison.¹⁷⁷ But an equally important counterpoint is provided by the collapse of the longstanding cohesion of Iran, the most resilient ethno-political identity in antiquity. The *umma* ultimately provided the alternative political community that the collapse of *Ērānšahr* had left, one in which Iran was no longer the center of the world. It is difficult to imagine that it would have been as successful, had the political system of the Iranian Empire survived intact. As with the Romans, this point should not be taken to exclude the believers from the picture, and the Turan-induced collapse is perfectly compatible with a reading of Islamic strength. However, the potential of the Turanian element at the end of Iranian antiquity must be acknowledged and incorporated into the grand narrative of Eurasian history.

¹⁷⁷Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 8-9.

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