

dabj̄r

Digital Archive of Brief notes & Iran Review

Vol.01

NO.02.2016



JORDAN CENTER
FOR PERSIAN STUDIES

www.dabirjournal.org

ISSN: 2470-4040





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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

The Digital Archive of Brief notes & Iran Review (DABIR)

ISSN: 2470-4040

www.dabirjournal.org

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University of California, Irvine
1st Floor Humanities Gateway
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Digital Archive of Brief notes & Iran Review

Vol.01

No.02.2016

ISSN: 2470 - 4040

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University of California, Irvine

Victorious: The “Arrogance” of Šāhanšāh Xusrō Parvīz

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Xusrō II (r. 590 CE-628 CE) was the last mighty *šāhān šāh* of *Ērānšahr*. The hallmark of his reign is his near conquest of the Roman Empire, the ancient foes of the Iranians. Most of the Roman-Sasanian War of the seventh century (602 CE-628 CE) was a boon for *Ērānšahr*. In quick succession, the Romans lost Amida (609 CE), Edessa (610 CE), Theodosiopolis (610 CE), Jerusalem and the cross of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion (614 CE), Egypt and the grain it provided the rest of the empire (618 CE) (Nikephoros 1990, 48), and Anatolia (617 CE), which put the Iranians within striking distance of Constantinople, the Roman capital.

By 626 CE Xusrō II’s power seemed to be limitless (James Howard-Johnston 2004, 93). His army, along with his Avar allies, besieged Constantinople. The Roman Empire was atrophying from the loss of tax revenue, while the Iranian treasury began to swell with captured Roman booty (Al-Ṭabarī 1999, 394). It must have seemed to Xusrō II that he was on the cusp of figurative immortality. The defeat of the Romans was imminent, and Xusrō II was about to rule not only *Ērānšahr*, but also the Roman Empire, which was comprised of parts of Italy, North Africa, Egypt, Asia Minor, and the Levant.

The Roman-Sasanian War of the seventh century was an important event and has received a lot of attention in the ancient sources. These authors also focused on Xusrō II’s supposed arrogance and greed and how the two went hand in hand. This note explores why these sources were fixated on how Xusrō II was arrogant and greedy, and why these sources were not necessarily wrong to depict him as

such. While Xusrō II himself was a complex man who was influenced by things other than the war of the seventh century (my forthcoming dissertation explores other aspects of his personality), his achievements did have an effect on how he viewed the world.

The best example we have of Xusrō II's egotism is a letter in the *History* of Pseudo-Sebeos. After Heraclius (r. 610 CE-641 CE) obtained the emperorship, he wrote to Xusrō II asking him to cease hostilities. Xusrō II's response is dramatic and full of insults. He wrote that he is special to the gods and that Heraclius was just a stupid servant whose empire at that point was all but Xusrō II's. He asked if Heraclius prayed to Jesus Christ to save the Roman realm and pointed out that Jesus could not save himself from crucifixion by the Jews. Xusrō II then "forgave" Heraclius and "all his trespasses" (Sebeos 1999, 79). Then according to Nikephoros, another ancient author, Xusrō II constructed a palace and had a mural of himself depicted as a god, seated among the sun, moon, and stars, along with a contraption that simulated lightening and thunder (Nikephoros 1990, 56). Theophylact Simocatta also demonstrated Xusrō II's hubris and pleonexia by writing that Xusrō II's father, Hormīzd IV (r. 579 CE-590 CE), warned the Iranians that Xusrō II's arrogance knew no bounds (Theophylact Simocatta, 1986, 109). The Middle Persian source *Māh ī frawardīn rōz ī hordād* also described Xusrō II's love of treasure (*Māh ī frawardīn rōz ī hordād* 27). Lastly, Al-Tha'ālibī corroborated that Xusrō II was avaricious and included a dossier on how much treasure Xusrō II owned (Al-Tha'ālibī 1900, 687-689, 698-711).

The interesting thing about al-Tha'ālibī is that according to him, Xusrō II got all of his treasure from the Roman Empire, and he thanked God for allowing that to happen (Al-Tha'ālibī 1900, 701). The is important as al-Tha'ālibī linked Xusrō II's possessions with his success against the Romans. As Xusrō II's armies seized more and more Roman territory, the Sasanian treasury swelled with goods and precious metals. Coupled with the knowledge that the majority of the war of the seventh century went well for Xusrō II, it is not difficult to see that Xusrō II's pride would swell as the Iranians annexed more Roman territory, and more Roman treasure came into Ctesiphon. Movsēs Kałankatuac'i corroborates this assertion by stating that Xusrō II became arrogant because of his gains in the war of the seventh century CE (Movsēs Dasxuranci 1961, 11). Thus, we have two authors who had linked Xusrō II's behavior with his success against the Romans. This is the crux of why Xusrō II was arrogant.

While all the sources discussed here need deeper analysis to understand why they portrayed Xusrō II the way they did, it sometimes behooves historians to accept certain things for face value. One, Xusrō II posed one of the greatest threats the Roman Empire had ever faced. For a young *šāhān šāh*, this was remarkable considering the Romans and Iranians had had hostile relations for centuries prior to the war of the seventh century. Xusrō II's invasion marked the first time one realm threatened the existence of the other. Two, success undoubtedly went to Xusrō II's head and he probably began to think that since the war had gone well for him for so long, things would continue to go well for him. Thus it is not difficult to see him penning an insulting letter to Heraclius or massing exotic goods in his palaces and gloating about it.

Because Xusrō II accomplished so much in his life as *šāhān šāh*, he more than likely became haughty with his successes, which is why the sources suggested that he was immodest and covetous. Xusrō Parvīz was a conqueror, and he acted like one.

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