

Ammianus Marcellinus

Book 17

5. *Fruitless negotiations between Constantius and Sapor by letters and envoys (A.D. 358).*

In the consulship of Datianus and Cerealis, while the whole administration of Gaul was being conducted with vigour tempered by caution, and the memory of past reverses kept raids by the barbarians in check, the Persian king Sapor was still engaged with the peoples on his farthest borders. He had concluded a treaty of alliance with the Chionitae and Gelani, the fiercest fighters of all, and was about to return to his capital, when he received the letter from Tamsapor which contained the news that the Roman emperor was begging for peace. Believing that such a proposal must be a sign that the strength of the empire was impaired, Sapor opened his mouth wider, and while accepting peace in principle accompanied it with harsh conditions. He sent a certain Narses to convey presents and a letter to Constantius. The tenor of this, which showed no abatement of his native arrogance, I understand to have been as follows:

‘From Sapor, king of kings, partner of the stars, brother of the sun and moon, to my brother Constantius Caesar, greetings.

‘I rejoice and am well pleased that you have at last returned to the right way and acknowledge what a perfect justice requires, having learnt by experience what disasters have often resulted from an obstinate greed for the possessions of others. Since therefore the language of truth should be uninhibited and free and it becomes those in high places to speak as they feel, I shall express my intention succinctly, remembering that I have often repeated in the past what I am about to say. That the rule of my ancestors once extended to the Strymon and the borders of Macedonia is a fact to which even your own ancient records bear witness, and it is right that I should demand this territory, since (with due modesty be it spoken) my splendour and the catalogue of my illustrious qualities surpass those of the kings of old. But the rule of right is ever dear to me; I have been wedded to it from my youth up, and have never committed any action which I have had cause to repent. So now I owe it to myself to recover Armenia and Mesopotamia, of which my grandfather was deprived by deliberate deceit. Never will I accept the principle which your everweening pride leads you to enunciate, that all is fair in war that brings success, whether it be achieved by force or fraud. In a word, if you will be guided by good advice let go this small area, which has always been a source of trouble and bloodshed, and reign in peace over the rest of your realm. Have the wisdom to reflect that those who practice medicine sometimes cauterize and cut and even amputate parts of the body in order that the patient may enjoy the healthy use of the rest. Even some animals do the same; when they realize what it is that makes men eager to capture them, they abandon it spontaneously in order to live thereafter free from fear. This I emphatically declare, that if my envoys return empty-handed I shall at the end of winter mobilize all my forces and advance as far as prudence permits, relying for success on fortune and the justice of what I propose.’

To this latter the emperor after long deliberation sent in plain terms, as they say, the following considered reply:

‘From Constantius, victor on land and sea, perpetual Augustus; to his brother, king Sapor, greetings.

‘I am glad to hear of your well-being and am ready if you wish to be your friend, but I strongly reprobate your greed, which never abates and is always spreading over a wider area. You lay claim to Mesopotamia, and Armenia as well, and you advise me to lop off some members of a sound body to ensure its health hereafter. I must totally reject such a suggestion, which can never win my assent. Listen then to the plain unvarnished truth, which is not to be shaken by empty threats. My praetorian prefect, believing that he was acting in the public interest, used two insignificant intermediaries to enter into negotiations for peace with your general, without consulting me. We do not disown or repudiate his initiative, provided that it is consistent with dignity and honour and involves no breach of the respect due to our majesty. For us, at a time when a series of various achievements has shed glory on us (may no jealous ear be offended by this), when the usurpers have been destroyed and the whole Roman world is at our feet, it would be absurd and foolish to abandon possessions which we long held intact, even when we were confined within the narrow limits of the East. Let there be an end, pray, to the threats which it is your habit to launch at us. It is beyond all doubt that it is self-restraint, not lack of spirit, which has sometimes led us to accept rather than provoke battle, and to defend our territory, whenever we are attacked, with courage inspired by a clear conscience. Both experience and reading have taught us that, though Rome has on a few rare occasions suffered a reverse in a particular battle, it has never emerged the loser from an entire war.’

Entered by Behrad Hosseinzadeh