

Agathias and the Persians



Sasanika Sources

Agathias was a Byzantine lawyer and writer of the sixth century. Of his writings, two are extant: parts of his epigrammatic *Cycle* which have been preserved in the *Greek Anthology* and his *Histories*.¹

In his *Cycle* proem Agathias praises the Byzantine Emperor Justinian and waxes poetic with respect to the Empire's power in the East. He was probably referring either to Justinian the First's peace with Persia in 561 or to Justin the Second's refusal to pay a subsidy to Persia.² The following excerpts from the proem provide insight into Agathias' impressions of and feelings about Byzantine power in the East:³

Let no barbarian, freeing himself from the yoke-strap that passes under his neck, dare to fix his gaze on our King, the mighty warrior; nor let any weak Persian woman raise her veil and look straight at him, but kneeling on the ground and bending the proud arch of her neck, let her come uncalled and submit to Roman justice.

By the ridge of the Caucasus and on the Colchian shore, where once the hard back the iron soil was broken by the resounding hoofs of the brazen bulls, let the Phasian bride, weaving a measure in company with the Hamadryads, wheel in the dance she loves, and casting away her dread of the race of giants, sing the labours of our many-sceptred prince.

Let not the prow of Thessalian Argo any longer boast that the Colchian land, in awe of the exploits of the Pagasaeon hero,⁴ ceased to be fertilized by the seed of giants and bear a harvest of warriors. This is either the invention of fable, or was brought about by unholy art, when the crafty maiden,⁵ maddened by love, set the forces of her magic in motion. But without fraud or the dark hell-broth the Bactrian giant fell

¹ Joseph D. Frendo, introduction to *The Histories by Agathias* (trans. Joseph D. Frendo, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, vol. 2A, Series Berolinensis [Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1975]), ix.

² Averil Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 15.

³ *Greek Anthology* (trans. W.R. Paton in *The Loeb Classical Library*, ed. T.E. Page, et al. [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1916]), IV.3.47-97 passim.

⁴ Jason.

⁵ Medea.



before our shafts. No land is now inaccessible to me, but in the waters of the Caspian and far as the Persian Gulf the vanquished seas are beaten by Italian oars.

Go now, thou Roman traveller, unescorted over the whole continent and leap in triumph. Traversing the recesses of Scythia and the inhospitable glen of Susa descend on the plains of India, and on the road, if thou art athirst, draw water from enslaved Hydaspes.

In vain now would the Tanais in its course through Scythia to the sea of Azof attempt to limit the continents of Europe and Asia.

The five books of Agathias' unfinished *Histories*, begun after the accession of Justin II in 565,⁶ cover the seven-year period of A.D. 552-559 during which Justinian I was emperor.⁷ In his Preface, Agathias states that his purpose is to "relate all the memorable achievements, up to the present time in the Roman and all the greater part of the non-Roman world."⁸

Book 1 and the first half of Book 2 deal with the campaigns of the Byzantine general Narses against the Ostrogoths and others in Italy. The second half of Book 2 deals with the Byzantine-Persian conflict in Lazica⁹ up to the death of the Persian general Mermeroes (Mihir-Mihroe), usually dated A.D. 555.¹⁰ The final pages of Book 2 consist of an excursus on Persian religion and a sub-excursus on the Persian ruler Chosroes I.

Book 3 continues the narrative of the conflict in Lazica, picking up after the death of Mermeroes and ending with the Persian withdrawal after the Byzantine victory at Phasis. Book 4 follows the conflict up to the peace treaty which concluded it.

Book 4 also includes a second excursus on the chronology of the Sasanian dynasty. For this second excursus Agathias used material transcribed from the Persian Royal Annals by the translator Sergius. This is significant because the Royal Annals were the basis of the lost Pahlavi Khvadhaynamagh (Book of Lords) which was, in turn, the basis of the Shahnameh (Book of Kings). The earliest Persian and Arabic evidence for the Khvadhaynamagh tradition dates from the ninth century, but Agathias' sixth-century *Histories* provides a window directly into the original source material.¹¹

Book 5 is concerned primarily with Hun attacks near Constantinople, which are repelled, in part, by the aging general Belisarius. The following excerpts from Agathias' *Histories* contain information about Persia and the Persians.

⁶ Agathias' *The Histories* (trans. Joseph D. Frendo, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, vol. 2A, Series Berolinensis [Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1975]), Preface 20.

⁷ Frendo, x.

⁸ Agathias, Preface 21.

⁹ Agathias uses the archaic term "Colchian" to refer to Lazica and the Lazi. Frendo, xii.

¹⁰ Cameron, Agathias, 143.

¹¹ Averil Cameron, "Agathias on the Sassanians," in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* no. 23-24 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Byzantine Studies, Trustees for Harvard University), 69.

Agathias' Preface

In his preface, Agathias summarizes events covered by Procopius, including several that involve the Persians. These include:

“[T]he death of Arcadius and the appointment of the Persian king Yezgird I as guardian to his son Theodosius, the events of the reigns of Vahram V and Peroz, and how Kavad became king, lost his throne and then regained it, how Amida was captured by him when Anastasius was emperor of the Romans, and the troubles that Justin I succeeded to in connection with this deed.”¹²

“[T]he Emperor Justinian’s wars with Persia fought against Kavad and Chosroes in Syria, Armenia and the borders of Lazica ...”¹³

“[T]he tragic sackings of the city of Sura in Syria, of Beroea and of Syrian Antioch by Chosroes, of the siege of Edessa and of how he was repulsed and retired from there.”¹⁴

And “the exploits of the Roman army against Chorians and Mermeroes and the Persian hordes in the cities of Lazica and the stronghold of Petra.”¹⁵

The Byzantine-Persian Conflict in Lazica

The second half of Book 2 (2.18.1-2.22.6) describes the Byzantine-Persian conflict in Lazica up to the death of the Persian general Mermeroes. Book 3 continues the narrative of the Lazican conflict, picking up after Mermeroes’ death and ending with the Persian withdrawal after the Byzantine victory at Phasis. Book 4 follows the conflict up to the peace treaty which concluded it. Book 5 gives some minor details on the post-conflict situation.

The Lazican conflict described by Agathias was the end of a phase in the long Byzantine-Persian conflict which had begun in 540. The Persians invaded Byzantine-allied Lazica in 541 and fighting there continued until 556 or 557. Two limited truces, in 545 and 551, did not include Lazica.¹⁶ The country remained split between the Byzantines and the Persians in when Agathias’

¹² Agathias, Preface 23.

¹³ Agathias, Preface 24.

¹⁴ Agathias, Preface 27.

¹⁵ Agathias, Preface 29. Petra in Lazica, not to be confused with Arabian Petra.

¹⁶ John W. Barker, *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 119-122.

narrative begins in 554 or 555. Agathias describes three campaigning seasons, but he may have spread the events of only two years over three.¹⁷

In the first season of Agathias' narrative (554 or 555), the Persian general Mermeroes forces the Byzantines to retreat from Telephis and Chytropolia to Nesos. Subsequently Mermeroes dies a natural death and is replaced by Nachoragan. Byzantine conspirators murder the Lazican king Gubazes. After an abortive attack on the Persians at Onoguris, the defeated Byzantines are forced to abandon Archaeopolis, a city which Mermeroes had twice tried and failed to take.

In the second season (555 or 556) hostilities begin again. The Misimians, a people previously subject to the Lazicans, murder a Byzantine general and defect to the Persian side. After an unproductive parley at Nesos, Nachoragan attacks the Byzantines at Phasis. After the Byzantine victory at Phasis, the Persians withdraw. There is a lull in the conflict during which the trial of Gubazes' killers proceeds.

In the third season (556 or 557) the Byzantines set out to punish the Misimians. The Persians make some efforts to occupy and protect the land of the Misimians. In fall or early winter, however, they withdraw and the Misimians are defeated by the Byzantines. After executing Nachoragan for his failure at Phasis, the Persian ruler Chosroes I makes peace with the Byzantine Empire. Some Byzantine troops remain stationed at the Persian border.

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[In 2.18.1, Agathias begins his description of the Byzantine-Persian conflict in Lazica.] 2.18.1 ... But, if I am to give a truly comprehensive account of the period, the scene must move to the land of the Lazi and the wars with Persia.

2 The Romans and the Persians had been at war for a very long time and were continually ravaging each other's territory. Sometimes they resorted to a policy of sporadic fighting and undeclared hostility making frequent forays and incursions, on other occasions they engaged in open and full-scale warfare.

3 Shortly before our period both parties had agreed to a limited truce¹⁸ which covered the eastern territories and the frontiers of Armenia, but did not extend to Colchis. 4 The inhabitants of Lazica were called Colchians in ancient times, so that the Lazi and the Colchians are the same people.

[2.18.5 is a mythical account of Colchian/Lazican origins.]

¹⁷ Cameron, Agathias, 143.

¹⁸ 551 A.D.



2.18.6 Now these Lazi, Colchians, Egyptian migrants or what have you, have become a bone of contention in our day and age, and innumerable battles have been fought for the sake of their land.

The Persian Emperor Chosroes had already appropriated and occupied much of their territory including some of the most strategically important positions. Far from entertaining any idea of relaxing his hold on the place he was intent on completing its subjugation. On the other hand the Roman Emperor Justinian thought it unbearable and quite immoral to abandon Gubazes, the then king of the Lazi, and the whole of his nation, seeing that they were subjects of the empire and linked by a common bond of friendship and religion. Instead he did his utmost to drive out the enemy as quickly as possible.

7 Justinian grasped clearly the alarming implications of a Persian victory resulting in the annexation of the whole area. Should such a thing happen there would be nothing to prevent the Persians from sailing up the Euxine with impunity and probing deep into the heart of the Roman Empire. 8 Accordingly he stationed a large and powerful army there under the command of some of his best generals. Bessas, Martin and Buzes were in charge of the operation, all of them men of first-rate ability and wide military experience. Justin the son of Germanus, who despite his extreme youth was well-versed in the art of war, was sent there too.

19. The Persian general Mermeroes had twice attacked Archaeopolis and had been repulsed twice. After a number of other exploits which I omit to mention here since they have already been adequately recorded by Procopius, he had, at the point where I must pick up the thread of my narrative, reached Muechiris¹⁹ and the stronghold of Cotaïs, determined to press on through the difficult terrain around Telephis and penetrate as far as the river Phasis. In this way he would take the Romans by surprise and, relying on the resultant confusion, would make a bid for the forcible occupation of some of the forts in the area. 2 There was no question, however, of achieving this result if he were to advance and attack openly. Martin was stationed with his army in the fortress of Telephis, and was keeping a strict watch on all approaches to the region. 3 Besides the terrain is inaccessible and almost impassable. Deep gorges and steep overhanging rocks on either side render the path below narrow in the extreme. 4 Nor is it possible to approach the place by any other route. The adjacent plains are a mass of swamps and quagmires, and dense thickets and copses rise up so as to present a formidable obstacle even for one lightly-clad man, let alone for an armed host.

Even so the Romans spare no pains and if they found any spot which was firm enough to walk on they immediately fenced it round with wooden stakes and stone, busying themselves incessantly with these tasks.

5 After some perplexity and a great deal of hard thinking about how to deal with the situation it occurred to Mermeroes that if by some means he could make the Romans relax their vigilance and could gradually divert their attention it would be quite feasible for him to get his forces through. But as long as the enemy kept the area under surveillance it would not be possible for him to tackle simultaneously and overcome both obstacles to his progress. Once they relaxed their vigilance, however, he thought it would not be such an impossible task to deal with the difficult terrain and clear a passage for his troops. 6 With the huge resources of manpower at his

¹⁹ Spring of 554 or 555. The chronology is uncertain.

disposal he hoped to get through without much difficulty by cutting and clearing away the woods and by cutting through and removing any rocks that impeded his progress. 7 In order to secure this objective he devised the following stratagem:

Pretending that he had suddenly fallen victim to a dangerous and incurable complaint he went to bed, where he made a great display of his vexation and discomfiture and loudly lamented his fate. 8 Soon the word spread throughout the whole army that the general was seriously ill and was practically on the verge of death. Those who made money out of betraying their own people to the enemy and passing on secret information were also in the dark about what was really happening, since his plan was kept a carefully guarded secret and was not even disclosed to all his closest friends. Deceived, then, simply by the rumours which were in general circulation they informed the Romans accordingly. The Romans readily believed the report not so much, I think, on its own merits as because that was what they wanted to believe.

20. Immediately they began to relax their vigilance and no longer bothered to take strict precautions. After an interval of a few days, news arrived that Mermeroes had died. He had in fact hidden himself in a room with the result that this belief won the support of even his most intimate associates. 2 Whereupon the Romans felt that there was even less point in their passing sleepless nights and exerting themselves continually. So they suspended operations on the fences and enclosures and began to take life easy, sleeping all night and billeting themselves in the country areas. They did not even send out scouts or perform any other essential task. They thought that, being apparently leaderless, the Persians would never attack them but would go out of their way to avoid them.

3 As soon as he learnt this, Mermeroes abandoned his pretence and showed himself to the Persians just as he was before. He then promptly marched out his entire army. Throwing himself into the task with untiring zeal he removed all obstacles to their progress by the means which he had long been planning and approached the fort.

The Romans were so startled by the unexpectedness of his approach that they were no longer in a fit state to defend themselves.⁴ Martin decided therefore, to abandon the fort at this point before Mermeroes should force his way in and make havoc of the Romans there. Indeed it is hard to imagine how they, a mere handful of men, could have resisted such a vast number of enemy troops without being massacred. And so, outmanoeuvred by the barbarians, they beat an ignominious retreat and hastened to join the rest of their forces. 5 Bessas and Justin and their men were encamped on a plain only seven stades distant from Telephis. There is nothing there apart from a pottery-market, which has given its name to the spot. The place is in fact called Ollaria, a Latin word which means the same thing as Chytropolia does in Greek.²⁰ 6 Once Martin and the bulk of his men had already made it to safety, the generals unanimously decided to stand their ground and wait for the enemy there in order to prevent them from advancing any further.

7 Among the most distinguished of the commanders was a man named Theodore, a Tzanian by birth who had been brought up among Romans and had already lost the barbarian ways of his homeland and become quite civilized. 8 This Theodore, then, stayed on near Telephis with his

²⁰ i.e., "Pottery-Market".



own body of men (no fewer than five hundred of his fellow countrymen accompanied him) having received instructions from Martin not to leave until the enemy were near enough for him to see them all and to gauge, as far as possible, their numbers, their mettle and their intentions.²¹ He proceeded to carry out these instructions with his usual energy and daring. So, when he saw that the Persians had overrun the fortress and realized that they would not stop at that but were only too eager to do battle, he immediately departed.

2 On his way back he discovered that many of the Romans had not gone straight to Chytropolia as they had been told to, but had burst into the houses of the Lazi and were carrying off millet and wheat and other foodstuffs. He tried to drive them away, reproaching them for their irresponsible behaviour and for their failure to realize what trouble they were in.

3 Those who were able to control their rapacity recognized the folly of their ways and marched to safety following his lead. 4 But Theodore had no chance to report in due course to the generals on the approach of Mermeroes. What had actually happened was that the Persians suddenly caught up with some of the soldiers who had carried on plundering regardless, and killed a few of them. The others fled and did not stop running until they had burst into the camp banging and shouting at the top of their voices. So great was the general consternation provoked by the suddenness of their irruption that all were seized with unwarranted panic and began to move out of their quarters.

5 The generals (their forces had not yet been properly marshaled) were infected with a similar panic, fearing that the barbarian would attack them in their present state of unpreparedness. They were ready to scrap their previous plan but they had no alternative to fall back on. Indeed the urgency of the situation and the confused state of their minds precluded even the possibility of reflection.

6 Breaking up camp immediately, therefore, they left the plain. They took all their troops with them as they retreated in an ignoble and undisciplined rout, running non-stop until they reached Nesos. 7 Now Nesos is about five parasangs away from Telephis. So great a marching distance had these brave warriors covered in a single day's fast running! A parasang is, according to Herodotus²² and Xenophon, equal to thirty stades, whereas nowadays the Iberians and the Persians say that it is equivalent to twenty-one stades. 8 The Lazi too have the same units of measurement, but call them by the different and, to my mind, not inappropriate name of "pauses". The reason for this is that their porters stop for a short rest whenever they have travelled a parasang and put down their burdens, relays of fresh men taking them up in turn at each successive stage. They then divide up and measure the distance covered according to the number of times they do this. 9 But whatever way we may choose to reckon a parasang the fact remains that Nesos is one hundred and fifty stade distance from Telephis. The fort is in a strong and inaccessible position, being surrounded by two mighty rivers. 10 The Phasis and the Doconus flow separately from the Caucasus and are a very great distance apart at first, but here the lie of the land exerts its influence and causes them to converge gradually. The Romans had, by digging a canal, contrived to channel the waters of the Phasis into the Doconus, so that the two rivers unite their streams toward the eastern end of Nesos and enclose the spot. 11 After

²¹ The word means "island".

²² cf. Herodotus 2.6.3.



that they describe a number of twists and turns, confining a not inconsiderable section of the plain. They continue to flow until they meet of their own accord towards the west and merge completely into one another, so that all the intervening ground is virtually an island. It was in this place that the Romans had gathered.

22. When he reached Chytropolia Mermeroes decided, after pouring scorn on them for their cowardice and concentrating a considerable amount of invective on people who were not there to hear him, not to advance any further or try to attack Nesos. He had no means of conveying supplies to such a huge army in the middle of enemy territory nor was he in any other respect equipped for a siege. 2 So, since he did not like the idea of marching back to Telephis and the difficult terrain in that region, he set up (over the river Phasis) a bridge of wooden planks and pontoons specially designed for the purpose and conveyed his whole army across without encountering any opposition. 3 Then, after he had reinforced the Persian garrison at Onoguris (which he had established in the district of Archaeopolis as a hostile base against the Romans) putting new heart into the men and making the place as secure as possible, he returned to Cotaïs and Mucheirisis. 4 Afflicted by some disease and reduced to a state of extreme ill-health he left the main body of his army in that region to guard their possessions and set off himself for Iberia.

5 After a painful journey in which he was carried to the city of Meschitha, Mermeroes succumbed to the illness and really and truly breathed his last this time. His had been one of the most distinguished careers in Persian history. A brilliant organizer and an excellent tactician, he was above all a man of intrepid spirit. When he was already an old man and had long been crippled in both feet so badly that he was unable even to ride a horse he displayed the stamina and endurance of a young man in his prime. Nor did he fail to take part in the actual fighting, but borne on a litter he would move about the ranks of battle. Exhorting and encouraging his men and issuing timely and accurate instructions he struck terror into the hearts of the enemy and reaped the fruits of many a victory. Never indeed was there a more striking illustration of the fact that brains and not brawn are the prerequisite of a good general.

6 Mermeroes' servants took up his body, carried it out of the city and, following their ancestral custom, left it uncovered and unattended to be devoured by dogs and by such loathsome birds as feed on carrion.

[2.23-2.32 consists of an excursus on Persian religion and a sub-excursus on Chosroes I. Book 3 continues the narrative of the conflict in Lazica, picking up after the death of Mermeroes.]

2.27.9 At this point I should like to add, for the convenience of the reader, the following clarification: three hundred and nineteen years takes us down to the twenty-fifth year of the reign of Chosroes during which period the fighting in Lazica was in full swing and the death of Mermeroes had occurred. The emperor Justinian had been on the throne for twenty-eight years.

3.1.1 Even if my account of the customs of the Persians and the various changes their way of life has undergone, together with what I felt needed to be said about Chosroes and his genealogy, have taken up rather a lot of space without having any very strict connection with the preceding matter, yet I trust that the whole exercise will appear neither superfluous nor unprofitable but rather that it will be seen to have secured the twin objects of amusement and edification. 2 It is

indeed my most ardent desire, if it is in my power to do so, "to mingle the Graces with the Muses",²³ as the saying goes.

[3.1.3-3.1.6 consists of Agathias' complaint that his work as a lawyer keeps him from writing.]

3.1.7 But lest by indulging in further digressions I give the impression of lapsing into tastelessness I had better resume my previous account of the fighting in Lazica.

2. Chosroes was of course greatly distressed at the news of the death of Mermeroes. To prevent the troops in Lazica from remaining leaderless, however, he immediately appointed as general Nachoragan, a man of considerable distinction and renown. 2 In the time it took Nachoragan to make the necessary preparations for the journey and actually get started on his way some highly irregular proceedings took place in Lazica.

[In 3.2-3.4 some of the Byzantine officers conspire to murder the Lazican king Gubazes. In 3.5-3.6 the Byzantines encamped at Archaeopolis, commanded by Martin, prepare to attack the Persians at Onoguris.]

3.6.1 Meanwhile a Persian who was on his way to the fort was captured by Justin's²⁴ bodyguard. He was taken to the camp and flogged until he gave a true account of what his side were planning. 2 He declared that Nachoragan had already reached Iberia and had sent him to encourage the troops at Onoguris and assure them that the general would very soon be there. 3 "The men stationed at Mucheirisis and Cotaïs will be arriving shortly", he said, "to reinforce their fellow countryman at Onoguris, since they know that you mean to attack them".

[In 3.6.33.6.8 the Byzantines decide to attack Onoguris before the Persian reinforcements arrive.]

3.6.9 Some six hundred horse at the most were sent against the relief-force from Mucheirisis. They were under the command of Dabragezas and Usigardus, two barbarians who were officers in the Roman army. 10 The rest of the men together with the generals went into action and made an assault on the gates. Then they surrounded the wall with the main body of their forces and let fly with their weapons from all sides. 11 The Persians for their part defended themselves by every available means, dashing about on the battlements, raining down missiles and securing themselves against the oncoming ones by suspending canvas mantlets to soften and absorb the blows. 12 The fight was sustained with great fury by both sides and looked more like a pitched battle than a siege. Both sides were worked up to a feverish state of excitement and were showing their mettle with equal determination though for different reasons. In one case it was a struggle for survival in the face of a serious menace, in the other it was the humiliating prospect, once the attack had been launched, of returning without achieving the objective of reducing the fort and ridding Archaeopolis of an enemy presence in its own neighborhood.

7. Meanwhile the Persian relief force consisting of about three thousand horse had left Cotaïs and Mucheirisis and set out for Onoguris. 2 On their way they were suddenly attacked by

²³ A reminiscence of Euripides: Heracles lines 673-4.

²⁴ One of the Byzantine officers under Martin.

Dabragezas and Usigardus and their men. They were not expecting to encounter any opposition and were caught off their guard, with the result that they panicked and fled. 3 As soon as the besieging Romans heard the news they charged more furiously pulled down the mantlets and swarmed up many parts of the wall, confident that they would sweep everything before them, now that the enemy from without had taken to flight and there was no longer anyone to cause them concern. 4 But the Persians soon realized that it was not the whole Roman army that had attacked them as they thought at first, but an insignificant reconnaissance force too few in number even to be considered a detachment of fighting men. So they faced about and charged them with a deafening shout. 5 The Romans were unable to cope with the new situation and hastily exchanged the rôle of pursuer for that of fugitive. The Persians followed hard on their heels, with the result that, as the pursuers rushed to catch up with their victims and the victims to evade their pursuers, both parties reached the Roman lines indiscriminately confused.

6 Not surprisingly the confusion which ensued was appalling. Without giving another thought to the siege and the by-now-imminent prospect of sacking the fort and without even stopping to find out what was happening or to ascertain their own strength and that of their pursuers the entire army together with their leaders were seized with panic and fled in terror.

7 Growing bolder, the Persians pressed their pursuit still harder. Meanwhile those who were inside the fort saw what was happening and rushing out to join in the pursuit made the plight of the fleeing enemy redound still further to their credit. 8 The Roman cavalry raced away at a gallop and easily got out of range of the enemy's weapons. But many of the infantry were killed in the stampede which occurred when they had to cross the bridge over the river called Catharus.²⁵ 9 Unable at that point to cross over simultaneously in large numbers because of the narrowness of the bridge, they kept shoving and jostling one another. Some fell into the river whilst others were forced back into the hands of the enemy. 10 The scene was one of unrelieved horror and would have ended in total annihilation had not Buzes²⁶ realized from their cries of anguish and alarm just how serious the danger was. Turning around with his troops, he faced the enemy and gradually held back the pursuit just long enough to allow them to cross the bridge and get away to safety by the same route as all the others had taken. 11 No one in fact returned to the camp at Archaeopolis. Rushing past it in terror they left their entire stock of foodstuffs and provisions and valuables and escaped to the safety of the interior. They thus afforded the enemy a lucrative as well as a magnificent victory.

8. When the Persians found the plains deserted they dismantled the fortifications and looted the camp. After that they returned rejoicing to their respective camps and occupied once more all the territory they had previously held.

2 Yet who can fail to see that the hand of heaven was at work bringing about the downfall of the Roman army as a punishment for the foul murder which had been committed? That was the reason why they chose the worst possible policy and why, though they numbered some fifty thousand fighting men, they were put to flight most shamefully by three thousand Persians and suffered severe casualties. 3 But those directly responsible for that heinous crime were soon to be punished

²⁵ The word means "clear".

²⁶ One of the Byzantine officers under Martin.

in full, as I shall relate in the ensuing narrative. Meantime winter set in and the whole army dispersed to its various winter-quarters in the towns and fortresses.

[In 3.8.4-3.14 the Lazicans, who know that their ruler has been murdered by Byzantine officers, consider defecting to the Persian side. Arguing for defection, the Lazican Aetes compares the Persians favorably to the treacherous Byzantines saying, “How different are the ways of the Persians! Those whose friendship they have had from the start they go out of their way to treat with unflinching kindness²⁷ ... I think it pays us to join the side whose attitude is more reasonable and whose goodwill towards their allies is not liable to fluctuation²⁸ ... When the Persians learn from us of this decision and realize its implications their hearts will with good reason warm to us and they will fight on our behalf, for they are generous and magnanimous and especially good at divining their neighbours intentions.²⁹”

Aetes is opposed by the Lazican Phartazes who characterizes the Persians as “violent antagonists of the Deity” and who fears that the Persians will “debar us from the practice of our religion and force us to adopt theirs.³⁰”

In 3.14 The Lazicans decide not to defect but send a report of Gubazes’ murder to Justinian. In response, the emperor sends an investigator who imprisons the murderers.]

3.15.1 By the beginning of spring Nachoragan was in Mucheirisis. He mustered his troops at once and made vigorous preparations for war. The Romans for their part concentrated their forces around Nesos and also began to make preparations, with the result of course that the proceedings of the trial were adjourned, since military considerations seemed to take priority over all else.

[In 3.15.2-3.17.3 the Byzantine general Soterichus comes to Lazica with money for distribution “to the neighbouring barbarian peoples according to the terms of their alliance.³¹” In an apparent misunderstanding, Soterichus is robbed and killed by the Misimians, a people subject to the Lazicans,³² who then defect to Persia. The Byzantine forces, however, are preoccupied with the Persians.]

3.17.4 Nachoragan at the head of an army of sixty thousand fighting men was already advancing on Nesos where Martin and Justin the son of Germanus and their troops were assembled.

[In 3.17.5 The Byzantines send Sabir Hun mercenaries to Archaeopolis to delay the approaching Persians.]

3.17.6 When Nachoragan learnt that the Sabirs had been strategically placed with this end in view he selected about three thousand men from the Dilimnite contingent and despatched them against the Sabirs, bidding them like the braggart he was to wipe them out so that there would not be any of them left to ambush his rear while he was marching into battle.

²⁷ Agathias, 3.9.8.

²⁸ Agathias, 3.9.10.

²⁹ Agathias, 3.10.11.

³⁰ Agathias, 3.12.8

³¹ Agathias, 3.15.6.

³² Agathias, 3.15.8.



[3.17.7-3.17.9 is a description of the Dilimnites whom, Agathias says, “are accustomed for the most part to fight alongside the Persians, though not as the conscript contingents of a subject people since they are in fact free and independent ...³³”

In 3.18 The Dilimnites try to ambush the Sabirs, but are themselves lured into a trap and massacred.]

3.19.1 Straight after the failure of this attempt Nachoragan left for Nesos and camping close to the Romans invited Martin to a parley. 2 On Martin's arrival he said: "You are such a shrewd and able general and a person of great influence among the Romans, and yet far from showing any inclination to stop the two monarchs from engaging in a mutually exhausting conflict you have allowed them to persist in the protracted ruination of their respective states.

3 If therefore you are agreeable to the idea of a negotiated settlement, why not move with your army to the Pontic city of Trebizond, whilst we Persians shall remain here? In this way we shall discuss the terms of the armistice at our leisure using trusted messengers to convey our views.

4 If you do not voluntarily withdraw your army from here you may rest assured that you will be driven out by force, for I hold victory in the palm of my hand. And, mark you, I wear her no less securely than I wear this". As he uttered these words he showed him the ring which he was wearing. 5 In answer to this Martin replied: "I do indeed consider peace to be the fitting object of our prayers and a most precious possession and shall help you in your efforts to reinstate her. However, I think it would be better if you were to move with all speed to Iberia while I went to Muechiris. That would enable us to examine the immediate situation. 6 As for victory, you may indulge in boastful talk if you wish and presumptuously imagine that she is up for sale and is there for the taking. But I say that the scales of victory are weighted according to the discretion of divine Providence, and they do not incline towards the boastful and the arrogant but towards those to whom the Architect of the universe nods his approval". 7 After Martin had given this pious and courageous reply and had shown righteous indignation at the blasphemous insolence of the barbarian they parted without any progress having been made towards a peaceful settlement. 8 Nachoragan returned to his camp and Martin to Nesos. Nachoragan felt that there was no point in staying where he was and so decided to go to the town of Phasis³⁴ and lure the Romans there instead. The reason for his decision was that he received intelligence to the effect that the fortress there was especially vulnerable, being entirely constructed of wood, and that the surrounding plains were accessible and suitable for camping in. 9 It is, I suppose common knowledge that the town of Phasis takes its name from the river that flows very close to it and disembogues in its vicinity into the Euxine.³⁵ The town is in fact situated on the coast near to the mouth of the Phasis, and lies at a distance of not more than six parasangs due west of Nesos.

20. Late at night therefore Nachoragan immediately lowered into the river and fastened together the light craft which he had brought with him on wagons and, thus, having constructed a pontoon he conveyed all his troops over to the other side without being observed by the Romans.

³³ Agathias, 3.17.9.

³⁴ Now Poti in the U.S.S.R.

³⁵ The Black Sea.

2 His plan was to reach the south side of the town, from which quarter the waters of the river would not bar his access to the fort since its course runs in the direction of the north side.

3 Towards dawn he set off from the bank of the river and, after making a detour in order to bypass Nesos by as safe a distance as possible, proceeded directly on his way.

4 It was not until late in the morning that the Romans realized, to their alarm, that the Persians had crossed over. Consequently they were most anxious to reach the town before the enemy and manned all the triremes and thirty-oared ships which they had moored nearby. The boats were propelled downstream at a very great speed. 5 But Nachoragan had had a very good start and was in fact already half way between Nesos and the town. At this point he laid a barrier of timber and small boats right across the river, massing his elephants behind it in lines which extended as far as they could wade. 6 Seeing this from a distance, the Roman fleet immediately began to back water. They had a hard job rowing in reverse with the current against them, but they pulled manfully at the oars and managed to back away. 7 Even so the Persians captured two empty boats which their crews had abandoned. When faced with imminent capture the men had courageously chosen to commit themselves to the mercy of the waves. It was in fact a choice between certain and less certain danger and they preferred to take a chance. So they leapt nimbly overboard and after swimming considerable a distance underwater barely reached the safety of their comrades' ships. 8 At this point they left Buzes with his army at Nesos to take charge of everything there and to bring help in case of need. All the others were shipped along and then across the river, after which they marched overland by a different route so as to avoid running into the enemy. When they arrived at the town of Phasis they entered its gates and the generals apportioned among themselves the task of manning the fortifications, since they did not feel strong enough to engage the enemy in a pitched battle. 9 Justin the son of Germanus and his men were stationed in front on the highest point, which faced towards the sea, with Martin and his forces occupying a nearby position. The middle part was held by Angilas with a contingent of Moorish troops armed with shields and lances, by Theodorus and his Tzanian heavy infantry, and by Philomathius with the Isaurian slingers and dart-throwers. 10 At some distance from these a detachment of Lombards and Heruls mounted guard under the command of Gibrus. The remaining stretch of wall which terminated at the Eastern quarter of the town was guarded by the Eastern regiments commanded by Valerian. And this completes the account of the disposition of the Roman forces defending the walls.

21. They had also built a massive rampart in front of the walls in order to withstand the first shock of an enemy attack and to serve as a buttress. They were understandably anxious about the walls in view of the fact that they were built of wood and particularly because they had crumbled and caved in with age in many places. 2 Accordingly a moat had been dug and filled up to the top with water, so that the stakes which had been driven in great profusion were completely hidden. The latter part of this operation had been effected without difficulty by diverting the seaward outflow of the lagoon which flows into the Euxine and is known locally as the "little sea". 3 Large merchantships rode at anchor next to the sea-shore and the mouth of the river Phasis very close to the town with their boats securely suspended about the mastheads and raised aloft at such a height that they overtopped and even dwarfed the towers and battlements of the fortifications. 4 Up in the boats soldiers and the more daring and warlike of the sailors were stationed. They were armed with bows and arrows and slings and had set up catapults loaded

and ready for action. 5 Other ships too had been fitted out in almost exactly the same fashion and then conveyed up the river to the opposite side of the fortifications where Valerian was in command. Their presence at this point meant that any attempt on the part of the enemy to conduct a siege at close quarters would be repulsed, since they would be shot at from a very great height on either side. 6 To ensure that these ships on the river should come to no harm two commanders, Dabragezas the Ant and Elminegeir the Hun, acting on the instructions of the generals, manned with troops from their own contingents ten skiffs of a special kind equipped with for-and-aft rudders, and traveled up the river as far as possible. They kept a non-stop watch on the various crossing-points, sometimes sailing in the middle of the river and sometimes veering towards one or the other of its banks. 7 In the course of this operation they experienced one of war's most pleasant surprises. Even further up the river than they were, the two thirty-oared Roman vessels, whose capture without their crews by the Persians I have already related, now lay in wait moored to the bank of the river and manned by Persians. 8 At nightfall their crews all fell asleep. The current was particularly strong and the cables were stretched by the tilting of the boats, with the result that the mooring on one of them suddenly snapped. Cut adrift and virtually without oars to propel it or a rudder to steer it, it was caught up in the current, swept away and eventually 9 consigned to Dabragezas and his men, who rejoicing at their good fortune gleefully seized their prey. The ship which they had abandoned empty had returned to them full.

22. Meanwhile Nachoragan left camp and advanced on the town with his entire army. He intended to confine himself to light skirmishing and the discharging of missiles from a distance in an attempt to test the Romans' mettle and to see whether they would come out into the open and fight. In this way he hoped to form a clear idea of what tactics to adopt in the next day's battle. 2 As soon as the Persians got within shooting distance, therefore, they immediately began, according to their usual practice to discharge volley upon volley of arrows. Many Romans were wounded, and though some of them continued to defend the walls, others withdrew altogether from the fighting. 3 In complete disregard of Martin's instructions to the whole army that they were to stay each at his respective post and to fight from a position of safety, Angilas and Philomathius and about two hundred of their troops opened the gate in their section of the wall and made a sortie against the enemy. 4 Theodorus the commander of the Tzanian contingent tried at first to restrain them, upbraiding them for their rashness. But when they would not listen to him he fell in reluctantly with the majority decision and set off at once with them to avoid being suspected of cowardice and of seeking to cover up his ignoble ends by an impressive show of prudence and good sense. So, though he had no liking for the enterprise, he resolved to see it through to the bitter end. 5 And in fact they would almost certainly have been annihilated on the spot but for a heaven-sent miscalculation which saved them. The Dilimnites who were ranged in battle-formation at that point, perceiving the small number of the attackers stayed their ground and calmly awaited their approach. 6 When they were already near at hand the Dilimnites brought round their wings and encircled them. Hemmed in on all sides, the Romans had no further idea of harming the enemy. Indeed the mere possibility of escape seemed almost too much to hope for. 7 Forming themselves therefore into a compact body they faced about and suddenly charged with their spears leveled at those of the enemy that were positioned near the town.

When the Dilimnites saw them charging with the fury of despair they immediately opened up their tanks and made way for them, since they were unable to confront men who cared neither for their own lives nor for the consequences of their actions.

8 In this way the Romans were allowed to rush to safety unopposed. Only too glad to get back inside the fortifications, they slammed the gate behind them. The net achievement from such a hazardous exploit was nil - they had risked their lives to save their skins!

23. Meanwhile an army of porters on the Persian side had long been toiling to fill in the moat. Their work was now complete. All gaps had been stopped and all holes had been plugged. In fact they had done such a thorough job that even a besieging army walk over the spot and siege-engines could be brought up with little difficulty. 2 But a disproportionate amount of time had been spent on the operation considering the vast resources of manpower at their disposal. Though they threw in an enormous quantity of stones and earth it did not suffice to block up the moat, and wood was scarce except for what they cut from the forests, travelling far to get it and transporting it with incredible toil. 3 The Romans had in fact already set fire to all the surrounding countryside, burning down even the wayside inns and any other buildings in the immediate vicinity. Their purpose in doing this had been to ensure that the enemy did not have a ready supply of building material from any of these quarters. 4 No other event worth recording occurred on that day, and at nightfall Nachoragan returned to camp with his troops.

5 On the following day Martin, wishing to raise the morale of his troops and to strike dismay into the heart of the enemy assembled the entire Roman army with the apparent object of discussing the immediate situation. Suddenly there stepped into their midst a man covered in dust, who to judge from his appearance must have travelled a great distance, though in actual fact the whole incident had been rehearsed by Martin. His face was unfamiliar and he announced that he had just arrived from Constantinople with a letter from the Emperor. 6 Seemingly overjoyed Martin took the letter, opened it and proceeded to read it not making any secret of what he was doing or reading silently to himself but in a loud clear voice so that everybody could hear him. 7 What that document really contained was possibly something quite different, but the actual words he read out were as follows: "We have sent you a second army no smaller than the one you already have. Yet even if the enemy should happen to be numerically much stronger than you, their superior numbers will never do more than match your superior courage, so that the apparent disparity will cancel itself out. 8 But, to prevent them from boasting even of a superiority on paper, receive this army too and note that it has been sent not in response to any real or pressing need but merely to produce a dazzling and impressive display. Be of good cheer therefore and acquit yourselves with energy and enthusiasm, bearing in mind that we shall play our part to the full". 9 Martin then immediately asked the messenger where the army was. "They are not more than four Lazian parasangs away", he said, adding that when he left them they were setting up camp near the river Neocnus. 10 Whereupon Martin, feigning anger, exclaimed, "Let them turn back and go home as fast as they can. I will not have them here on any occasion. It would be intolerable if, when these men here having for so long shared with me the hardship of so many battles are already on the verge of destroying the enemy and achieving total victory, those others should come long at the eleventh hour when their presence is no longer needed and after having shared scarcely any of the hazards receive an equal share in the glory and have their names linked with the triumphant finish of the campaign. And the greatest

injustice of all is that they would reap the same material benefits as all these here present. 11 Let them stay where they are for just as long as it takes them to pack up and get started on the return journey. These men here will more than suffice for the task of bringing the last stage of a war to a successful conclusion". 12 With these words he turned round and addressed himself to the troops, saying: "May I assume that these are your sentiments too?" Whereupon they voiced their approval with a loud cheer and exclaimed that the general's view was absolutely right. 13 They for their part became more confident and were able to rely on themselves without needing help from any other quarter. The prospect of plunder fired them with ambition and a desire to surpass themselves. They were spurred on still further by their confident anticipation of immediate and unrestricted looting as though they had already destroyed the enemy and their one concern was with how they were going to divide the spoils.

24. Similarly Martin's other aim was also fulfilled. The story of the relief-force soon leaked out and was in general circulation and it was not long before the news that a second Roman army had arrived at the banks of the river Neocnus and that at any moment it would be joining forces with the first one, came to the ears of the Persians themselves. 2 They were all dumbfounded and extremely alarmed at the prospect of having to do battle with fresh enemy reinforcements when they themselves were exhausted by the innumerable hardships of the struggle already sustained. Nachoragan, however, lost no time in sending a not inconsiderable detachment of Persian cavalry to patrol the route along which in his mistaken acceptance of the rumour he imagined they would be passing. 3 When they got there they devoted a great deal of misspent energy and vigilance to the task of securing the main points of vantage and then concealed themselves there and lay in wait for an enemy that was never to appear. Their idea was to fall on them when they were least expecting it and when their line of march was unguarded and to retard their progress until the beleaguered garrison was forced to surrender. 4 In this way a not inconsiderable Persian force was detached from the main body of the army and sent on a fool's errand. Even so Nachoragan, anxious to forestall the arrival of the non-existent relief-force, led out his army forthwith and boldly advanced against the Romans, bragging openly and swearing that he would set fire on the same day to the entire city together with its inhabitants.5 Apparently conceit had so clouded his judgement that he had forgotten that he was marching off to war, where uncertainty reigns supreme, where the scales of victory and defeat incline now one way and now the other and where above all the issue hangs on the predestined purpose of a Supreme Being. He seemed equally oblivious of the fact that in war nothing happens on a small scale, that its repercussions are truly immense, involving as they do on occasion the disruption of countless peoples and numerous cities and shaking the very pillars of human society to their foundations. 6 But his boastful arrogance rose to such a pitch that he actually gave instructions to the labourers and menials, who were scattered about the forest felling trees for firewood or possibly for the repair of siege-engines, to the effect that as soon as they saw smoke rising they were to understand it to mean that the fortifications of the Romans had already been set on fire and that they must down tools immediately and run to join him in spreading the flames. In this way one general conflagration would easily engulf everything. Flattering himself then with such notions he launched the attack.

7 Meanwhile Justin the son of Germanus was suddenly moved by, I think, divine inspiration to go as quickly as possible (he did not know that Nachoragan would be attacking at that time) to a place of worship enjoying peculiar distinction among christians, which was not far distant from

the city, and invoke divine aid. 8 Having collected therefore, the pick of Martin's troop and of his own plus a five-thousand-strong force of cavalry and having armed them for battle, he rode off with them. The standards followed him and the whole operation was conducted in a regular and disciplined manner. 9 Now it so happened that neither did the Persians see Justin and his men setting out nor did they see the Persians advancing to attack. The latter in fact came by a different route and made a sudden assault on the walls. They shot even more arrows than previously, hoping in this way to strike greater terror into the hearts of the Romans and quickly take the place by storm.

25. Missiles were falling thick and fast, volley succeeding volley in such dense profusion that the surrounding air grew dark. The scene was not unlike that of a fierce blizzard or a violent burst of hail. 2 Meanwhile others were bringing up siege-engines, hurling fire-brands or hacking at the wall with axes from under cover of the "wicker roofs" as they are called. The wall being made of wood was of course particularly vulnerable to this kind of attack. Others still were trying to undermine the foundations and bring down the whole edifice. 3 But the Romans manning the towers and battlements offered a spirited and vigorous resistance in their anxiety to prove by their actions that they could dispense with the services of a relief-force. 4 And so the deception practiced by Martin proved in the event to be useful and effective in the extreme. Indeed every man exerted himself to the utmost and they adopted every conceivable defensive measure. 5 They rained down javelins on the enemy, wounding many of them since their missiles fell on an unprotected multitude and could hardly be deflected from their course. Huge stones were rolled down on to the pent houses and went smashing through them while smaller ones were hurled from slings, shattering the shields and helmets of the Persians and forcibly deterring them from coming up too close to the wall. 6 Some of the troops posted in the ship's boats in the manner I have already described used their bows to deadly effect and inflicted heavy casualties, shooting as they did from a very great height. Others of them manipulated the catapults with great skill; and the feathered darts, which were specially designed for the purpose, being shot with tremendous force, had an enormous range with the result that many of the oncoming barbarians were still far away when both men and horses suddenly found themselves transfixed and struck down.

7 Meanwhile the shouting rose to a terrific pitch and the trumpets on either side sounded a martial strain. The Persians banged on drums and yelled louder still in order to cause alarm and terror and the neighing of horses combined with the heavy thud of shields and the noise of breastplates being smashed to produce a harsh and strident din. 8 At this point Justin the son of Germanus who was returning from the church was made aware of what was going on by the sustained and confused noise that assailed his ears. He immediately rallied his cavalry and drawing them up in regular formation gave orders for the standards to be raised aloft and called upon every man to play his part and bear in mind that it was through the workings of Providence that they had ventured outside the town in order that they might terrorize the enemy by taking them unawares and force them to raise the siege. 9 As soon as they had advanced a short distance they saw the Persians storming the walls. Whereupon they raised a sudden shout and hurled themselves at those of them that were drawn up alongside the wall facing the sea, for that was the direction from which they had come. Striking with lances, pikes and swords the Romans cut down all who were in their path, and then made a series of furious charges into the enemy's

ranks thrusting them back with their shields until they dislodged them and broke up their formation.

26. Thinking that this was the army whose imminent arrival they had heard about and concluding that it had eluded the ambush set for it and had reached its destination, the Persians closed their ranks in panic and confusion and began to beat a gradual retreat. 2 Meanwhile the Dilimnites who were fighting near the middle of the wall caught a distant glimpse of the prevailing turmoil. Leaving only a few of their number behind, the rest all set off to relieve those who were being hard pressed. 3 Whereupon the Roman commanders Angilas and Theodorus, whom I have already mentioned, perceiving the scant numbers of those that had remained made a sudden sortie from the town with a fairly large force. The Romans slew the first batch of them and then pressed in relentless pursuit upon the remainder that had taken flight. 4 When the rest of the Dilimnites who were on their way to rescue the Persians from their difficulties saw this, they immediately turned back, determined to confront the Romans and convinced that they ought by preference to be making all haste to relieve their own kinsmen. But they rushed with such frantic and impetuous speed that they looked more like a band of fugitives than an army on the attack. They were, as they felt, rushing to the aid of their fellow-countrymen but there was about them an air of panic rather than of truculence. 5 When that part of the Persian army which was drawn up nearest to them saw the Dilimnites milling about in this apparent confusion and disorder they assumed that they must be running away and since they would not have descended to such a disgraceful course except in the face of overwhelming danger and impossible odds they too took to their heels and fled ignominiously in all directions. The flight which they had for some time been furtively envisaging now became a stark reality. 6 At this point the Dilimnites came to the same conclusion about the Persians and rushed to join them in flight, being themselves both the cause and the victims of a double misunderstanding.

7 While these events were taking place a very large number of Roman troops sallied forth from behind the walls and turned the enemy retreat into a rout, following hard on their heels and cutting down whoever happened to bring up the rear. They also attacked from different directions and fought hard against the part of the enemy which was still holding out and keeping its ranks together. 8 For, though the left wing of the barbarians had manifestly fallen apart, their right wing was still intact and was fighting a vigorous rear-guard action. In addition to serving as a sort of defensive wall their elephants kept charging the Roman infantry and throwing their ranks into confusion every time they formed them. The bowmen riding on the elephants' backs played havoc with the attackers since from their position of elevation they could pick them off with unerring aim. It was an easy task also for the cavalry squadrons to keep rushing out and harrying men who were on foot and impeded by the weight of their armour, with the result that the Romans on that side were already being forced to give ground and beat a hasty retreat.

27. Meanwhile one of their number, a man called Ognaris who was a member of Martin's body-guard, finding himself trapped in a confined space from which no escape was possible took one last desperate chance – the fiercest of the elephants was charging at him and he struck it a violent blow with his spear just above the brow, driving the point right in and leaving the rest hanging. 2 The beast enraged by the blow and driven wild by the sight of the spear dangling in front of its eye drew back suddenly, leaping about and turning in circles. At one moment he was thrashing about with his trunk smiting large numbers of Persians and tossing them up into the air, at



another he was stretching it out and trumpeting. 3 In a split second he threw off the soldiers riding on his back and trampled them to death. Then he proceeded to strike terror and confusion into the whole Persian army, causing the horses to shy as he approached them and rearing and tearing with his tusks whatever came into contact with him. 4 The air was filled with cries of panic and lamentation. The horses terrorized by the ferocity of the beast no longer answered to the reins but raising their front hooves into the air threw off their riders and with much panting and snorting went careering off into the midst of the army. 5 Whereupon the men all began to turn back on themselves jostling and elbowing one another as each one tried to get out of the way before the next man did. Large numbers were killed by their own side as they stumbled against the swords of their comrades and kinsmen. 6 As the confusion grew worse the Romans who had remained behind the walls joined with those who had sallied forth from the fort some time ago, and together they formed a single phalanx whose front line they strengthened as much as possible by holding out a continuous wall of shields. They then hurled themselves against an enemy that was still in complete disarray. 7 The Persians already worn out by their previous exertions were unable to withstand the impact of the charge and fled precipitately. Their flight was an irregular one and they made no attempt to keep in formation or to ward off their attackers, but simply scattered in different directions each man fending off their attackers as best he could. 8 Nachoragan too was as bewildered as anyone else by the startling turn of events and retreated at a gallop, signaling to all with his whip that they must flee as fast as they could, which in fact was what they were already doing. And so his boastful predictions were completely belied by what actually happened. 9 The Romans continued to pursue and kill the barbarians until Martin, feeling that enough had been accomplished, sounded the signal for them to retire and checked their lust for blood. 10 The Persians got back with difficulty to the safety of their camp, having lost not less than ten thousand fighting men in this engagement.

28. On their return from the pursuit the Romans set fire to the wicker-roofs and all the other Persian siege equipment which had been left near the wall. Thereupon a great flame flared up and as soon as the servants and porters on the Persian side who were cutting wood in the forest saw from afar the smoke rising up and ascending in spirals high into the air, the unfortunate wretches set off for the town thinking that what Nachoragan had earlier boasted to them had come true and that the fort was ablaze. 2 Consequently they ran all the way, fearing, I suppose, that the opportunity for action would escape them and that everything would be burnt to ashes before they got there. So they vied with one another in speed little dreaming that the first to get there would be the first to die. They were in fact all captured and killed one after the other by the Romans, as though they had come expressly for that purpose. Well nigh two thousand men met their deaths in this manner. 3 Thus Nachoragan was wholly to blame through the foolish instruction he issued for the fact that such an enormous number of labourers, men with no military training who had never before taken part in armed combat, had rushed unsuspectingly to their deaths. The whole incident is indeed a striking illustration of the baneful consequences of the sin of pride not merely for its practitioners but also for their unfortunate minions. 4 As a result of these events Roman morale was extremely high and there was a general conviction that any attempt at renewing hostilities on the part of the barbarians would result in yet another victory for the Romans. Those who were killed in action (and they did not number more than two hundred) were given an honourable burial and won universal admiration for the valour with which they had acquitted themselves. 5 The enemy dead, however, the Romans despoiled, thereby acquiring a gigantic quantity of weapons and other objects. Some of the dead were wearing on their persons not just shields and breastplates, and

quivers full of arrows but solid gold collars and necklaces and ear-rings and all the other foppish and effeminate ornaments that the more aristocratic Persians bedeck themselves with in order to cut a dash and distinguish themselves from the common people.

6 Since he was running out of provisions and winter was already approaching Nachoragan deliberately created the impression that he was eagerly preparing to mount a fresh offensive. Far from putting such a plan into effect, however, he dispatched the Dilimnite contingent on the following day to take up position at close quarters where he ensured that they attracted the attention of the Romans, and while making it look as though he was about to attack, quietly set off at once with the rest of his troops for Cotaïs and Mucheirisis. 7 When he had already gone most of the way the Dilimnites broke their ranks and withdrew, which they were able to do with the greatest amount of ease being light-armed and moreover hardy and fleet of foot. 8 The other Persian detachment, which had been sent previously to the river Neocnus owing to Martin's ruse as I described earlier on, arrived there too. 9 On learning in fact that the Persians had been beaten and that the Romans were in control of the entire region they set off immediately by a secluded route far from the main thoroughfares and reached Mucheirisis, having played no part in the fighting but sharing still more fully in the ignominy and humiliation of flight. 10 When the whole army had assembled Nachoragan left most of the cavalry there, putting Vahriz a Persian of very high standing in command of the force, and himself returned with a small retinue to Iberia where he intended to spend the winter.

[Book 4 continues the narrative of the conflict in Lazica, picking up after the Byzantine victory at Phasis.]

4.1.1 The Roman victory which marked the conclusion of this stage in the fighting brought with it a sort of armed truce and an immediate lull in hostilities and made it possible to proceed with the judicial enquiry into the crimes previously committed against Gubazes.

[In 4.1-4.11 The trial of Gubazes' killers proceeds. In 4.6.2-4.6.3 Lazican prosecutors characterize Gubazes' relationship with the Persians.]

4.6.2 For who was the man who preferred your friendship to the wealth of the Persians and to all the attractive propositions they made him? Who was the man who set at nought the friendship of Chosroes and who, though the way lay open through defection to immense prosperity and distinction, was happy to remain in a less exalted position and retain his links with you? Who, I ask, was the man who, when his land had long been hard pressed by the Persians and when aid from you was slow in coming, departed suddenly and took to the mountains living on the very peaks of the Caucasus and putting up with inhuman conditions rather than accept the friendly overtures the enemy were making to him and come down from his mountain fastness to live in ease and comfort in his own home? Who was this man then? 3 None other than Gubazes, the man who was afraid to face no danger on your account (oh the injustice of it!), Gubazes the traitor, the rebel, the man who betrayed the Empire to the Persians!

[In 4.12 Agathias picks up the story of the Misimians.]

4.12.1 After these events the Roman legions wintered in the towns and fortresses assigned to them.³⁶ Meanwhile some of the most influential men among the Misimians came to Nachoragan in Iberia and gave him a full account of the way they had dared to deal with Soterichus. But they kept secret their real motives and presented the Persian general with their own version of the facts, according to which they had long been deliberately inclined to favour the cause of Persia and had in consequence met with abuse and opprobrium from the Colchians themselves as well as from the Romans.

[4.12.2-4.12.6 consists of the Misimians' version of the killing of Soterichus.]

4.12.6 When Nachoragan heard this he received them most cordially, applauded their decision to change sides and told them they could leave with the confident expectations of obtaining from Persia all the help they needed.

[In 4.13 the Byzantine generals decide to march against the Misimians in spring.]

4.13.5 Now summer was already advanced when this army reached the territory of the Apsilians. Further progress was prevented by a strong concentration of Persian forces assembled there. The Persians in fact had realized that the Romans were preparing to march against the Misimians so, leaving Iberia and the forts in the neighbourhood of Mucheirisis, they too set out for the country of the Misimians with the object of occupying it in advance of the Romans and protecting it as effectively as possible. 6 The Romans therefore stayed on in the fortresses of the Apsilians and tried to play for time and delay the issue until the end of the summer season, since it seemed a futile and extremely hazardous procedure to take on both the Persians and the Misimians at the same time. Accordingly both armies remained inactive with neither side venturing forth any distance and each one waiting for the other to make the first move.

7 A mercenary force of Sabir Huns was serving with the Persians. The Sabirs are a huge and populous nation. They are also extremely warlike and rapacious. They are always eager to raid strange lands and the lure of pay and the hope of plunder are sufficient incentive for them to fight now for one people, now for another, changing sides with bewildering rapidity. 8 They have often helped the Romans against the Persians and vice versa, changing sides and paymasters in a very short space of time. They had in fact fought on our side in the previous engagement with the Persians and on that occasion killed (in the course of the night-battle which I have already described in detail) many of the Dilimnites who had come to attack them. 9 At the end of that campaign they were discharged by the Romans after they had received the amount of pay agreed upon. Whereupon they offered their services to the very people whom they had but recently been fighting. The men who did this may perhaps have been different Sabirs, but Sabirs they were all the same and they had been sent by their own people to fight in the Persian army.

[In 4.14.1-4.14.3 The Byzantines attack and defeat the Sabirs who are encamped away from the Persians.]

4.14.4 As soon as the Persians received news of what had happened they sent out a cavalry force of about two thousand men to deal with the Romans. The latter, however, satisfied with

³⁶ Winter of 556-7 A.D.

what they had achieved, yielded to superior numbers and retreated at a gallop. Soon they were safely back in camp, jubilant at their success, which was marred only by what had happened to Maxentius³⁷ who was badly wounded by one of the barbarians that had slipped into the wood. He was carried on a litter and almost miraculously conveyed to safety. As soon as he had been wounded his bodyguard lifted him up and beat a hasty retreat with him before the whole enemy-force was upon them. Then when the Persians caught up and were bearing down on them the rest of the Romans fled in a different direction and acted as a decoy to draw the pursuers away. In this way they provided a breathing-space which enabled Maxentius to be carried with less haste inside the fort.

15. Meanwhile Justin the son of Germanus sent one of his commanders, a Hun called Elminzur, from Nesos to Rhodopolis with two thousand horse. Rhodopolis is a city in Lazica but it was in Persian hands at the time. Mermeroes had in fact captured it much earlier on and placed a Persian garrison in it. However, I shall not go into the details of how this happened since it has already been clearly described by Procopius. 2 At any rate when Elminzur got there he was aided by a singular stroke of good luck. It so happened that the Persian garrison was outside of the town and its inhabitants were scattered about in various places. 3 Consequently Elminzur marched into the city and gained possession of it without meeting with any resistance. He also conducted a foray into the neighbouring region and destroyed any Persian detachments he found there. Realizing that the local people had supported the Persians through fear of an external foe rather than through treachery he allowed them to stay in their homes and resume their normal way of life after having taken hostages from them to ensure their allegiance and made all necessary arrangements for the maintenance of security. And so Rhodopolis returned to its former status, keeping its hallowed traditions and remaining subject to the Emperor of the Romans. 4 In the course of this summer no other memorable event occurred. At the first onset of winter the Persians withdrew to Cotaïs and Iberia with the idea of wintering there and left the Misimians to fend for themselves. It is in fact not customary for the Persians to engage in strenuous campaigning abroad at that time of year.

[4.15.5-4.20 describes Byzantine-Misimian hostilities. The Misimians discover that “the Persians had decamped and were not going to protect them as they had agreed ...³⁸” After much fighting and because “the relief force promised by the Persians had not arrived,³⁹” the Misimians agree to a peace settlement that favors the Byzantines. In 4.21.4, during a “lull in hostilities on the Persian front,⁴⁰” Justin is promoted to Commander-in-Chief in Lazica and Armenia.]

4.23.1 The situation in Lazica was as has been described and Justin had been appointed Commander-in-Chief. The Persians made no move to renew hostilities, nor, for that matter, did the Romans take the offensive. Both sides in fact were on the alert trying their best to divine each other’s intentions. Neither side took the initiative in attacking, but both remained inactive, keeping of one accord and, as it were, by common consent, at a respectful distance from each other.

³⁷ One of the Byzantine commanders of the anti-Misimian force.

³⁸ Agathias, 4.16.1.

³⁹ Agathias, 4.20.6.

⁴⁰ Agathias, 4.21.4.

2 On learning what had happened on the banks of the Phasis and that Nachoragan had fled immediately from the scene of battle, the Persian Emperor Chosroes summoned him immediately from Iberia and, following a time-honoured Persian custom, punished him with great savagery. 3 Simply to execute the man was not, he thought, sufficient punishment for his cowardice. Accordingly the skin was torn from his neck, ripped off in one piece right down to his feet, then completely detached from the flesh and turned inside out, so that the contours of the various parts of the body were visible in reverse. After that it was inflated like a wineskin and suspended from a pole, a pitiful and disgusting spectacle of which the infamous Shapur,⁴¹ who had been king of the Persians long before Chosroes, was, I think, the originator.

[4.23.7-4.30.5 is an excursus on Persian history.]

4.30.5 Now that I have acquitted myself of my task let me resume my account of events in Lazica. I had interrupted it at the following point:

6 Because of his cowardice, because of his defeat at the hands of Martin and the Roman forces and of his disgraceful retreat to Iberia, Nachoragan was put to an extremely cruel death the manner of which I have already described. 7 Realizing that he was in no position to fight the Romans in Lazica, since they had control of the sea and so had no difficulty in procuring whatever they needed, whilst he was obliged to send a few scanty supplies to his troops over immense tracts of desert conveying them in incredible difficulty on the shoulders of porters and the backs of pack-animals, Chosroes decided to put an end to the war on all fronts. There seemed to be no point in protracting a faulty and defective peace which was confined only to certain regions and every reason for giving it general and universal validity. 8 Consequently he dispatched a very high-ranking Persian dignitary, a man by the name of Zich, on a diplomatic mission to Constantinople. 9 On his arrival there he met the Emperor Justinian and they had a lengthy exchange of views. Finally, they agreed that both the Romans and the Persians should retain whatever they had acquired in Lazica by right of conquest, whether towns or forts, and that both sides should observe a general armistice and refrain from all forms of mutual aggression pending some more far-reaching and authoritative agreement between the sovereigns of both states.⁴² And so Zich having accomplished his mission returned home. 10 When these terms had been announced to the generals the armies refrained from all further hostilities for a considerable length of time, and a situation which had already arisen spontaneously was officially endorsed.

[Book 5 gives some minor details on the post-war situation.]

5.1.1 And so these great rival powers laid down their arms in accordance with the agreement and remained at peace for a very long time, with neither side employing any kind of force against the other.

[In 5.13.7-5.13.8 Agathias describes Hun attacks near Constantinople and reveals that the Byzantine armies had dwindled to barely 150,000 men spread all over the empire.]

5.13.8 Some of these, moreover, were stationed in Italy, others in Africa, others in Spain, others in Lazica, and others still in Alexandria and Egyptian Thebes. There were also a few near the

⁴¹ i.e., Shapur I (241-272 A.D.)

⁴² Autumn of 557 A.D.

eastern frontier with Persia, not that any more were needed there owing to the rigorous observance of the peace treaty.

Excursus on Persian Religion

[2.23-2.27 consists of an excursus, occasioned by funeral of Mermeroes, on Persian religion.]

2.22.6 Mermeroes' servants took up his body, carried it out of the city and, following their ancestral custom, left it uncovered and unattended to be devoured by dogs and by such loathsome birds as feed on carrion.

23. Persian funeral customs regularly take this form. Thus the flesh is picked away leaving the bones bare to rot scattered and dismembered on the plains. It is strictly forbidden for them to put their dead into any kind of tomb or coffin or even to cover them over with earth. 2 And if birds do not swiftly swoop down on a man's body or the dogs do not straightaway come to tear it up they think that he must have been utterly vicious and depraved and that his soul has become a sink of iniquity reserved as the exclusive haunt of the foul fiend. In that case his relations mourn still more bitterly for him since they consider him to be completely dead and to have no share in a better hereafter. 3 But if a man is devoured on the instant then they bless him for his good fortune and they regard his soul with awe and wonder, considering it to be most virtuous and godlike and destined to ascend to the place of bliss. 4 If any of the rank and file happen to be afflicted with some grievous ailment when out on active service somewhere, they are taken away while still alive and lucid. When a man is subjected to this type of exposure a piece of bread, some water and a stick are set down beside him. As long as he is able to eat and still has some small residue of strength left him he wards off attacking animals with the stick and scares away the prospective feasters. 5 But if without actually destroying him the illness reduces him to a state where he can no longer move his arms, then the animals devour the poor wretch when he is not properly dead and is only just beginning to breath his last, thus robbing him in advance of any possible hope of recovery.

6 There have in fact been many instances of people who recovered and returned home, presenting an appearance of deathly pallor and emaciation which was enough to frighten the life out of any one who would chance to fall in with them and looking for all the world like characters on the tragic stage arriving from "the portals of darkness"⁴³. 7 If anyone returns in these circumstances everybody shuns him and treats his as a pariah since he is regarded as polluted and still belonging to the netherworld. Nor is he permitted to resume his place in society until the stain of pollution incurred by the imminence of death has been purged by the Magi in order that he may, as it were, embrace life anew.

⁴³ An allusion to the Hecuba of Euripides line 1 where the words are spoken by the ghost of Polydorus.

8 It is quite obvious, of course, that each of the various nations of mankind considers that any custom whatsoever which is both universally accepted in their society and deeply rooted in their past cannot fail to be perfect and sacrosanct, whereas whatever runs counter to it is deemed deplorable, contemptible and unworthy of serious consideration. Nevertheless people have always managed to find and enlist the support of reasoned arguments from all quarters when their own conventions are involved. Such arguments may indeed be true, but they may also very well be specious fabrications. 9 So it does not strike me as particularly surprising that the Persians too should try to prove, when accounting for their own customs, that these are superior to anyone else's. What I do find altogether remarkable is that the earliest inhabitants of their land, that is to say the Assyrians, Chaldaeans and Medes, had very different views on the 10 subject, as witness the tombs and sepulchres of men who died long ago which are still to be found on the outskirts of Nineveh and Babylon and also in the district of Media. The form of burial is no different from our own, and whether the bodies are enclosed or just the ashes, as is the case with those who were cremated according to the ancient Greek custom, the fact remains that it is quite unlike anything that is practiced at present.

24. Those early inhabitants then held no such views concerning burial, nor was the sanctity of the marriage-bed violated in the way it now is. Not only do the present-day Persians think nothing of having intercourse with their sisters and nieces, but fathers lie with their own daughters and, horror of horrors, oh! the unnaturalness of it, sons with their mothers. That this particular abomination is a recent innovation is well illustrated by the following story. 2 It is said that the famous queen of Assyria Semiramis once sank to such depths of debauchery that she actually conceived a desire to have intercourse with her son Ninyas and even went so far as to make advances to the young man. 3 He rejected her angrily and finally when he saw that she was determined to force herself on him he slew her and chose to commit the unnatural crime of matricide rather than be guilty of incest. Yet if this type of behavior was socially acceptable Ninyas would not, I think, have resorted to such extreme cruelty in order to avoid it.

4 There is no need, however to confine our examples to the distant past. Shortly before the Macedonian conquest and the destruction the Persian empire Parysatis the mother of Artaxerxes the son of Darius is said to have succumbed to the same passion as Semiramis and to have become enamoured of her son. He did not kill her however, but he angrily rejected her advances and thrust her aside, saying that it was an impious and unnatural act, quite foreign both to their nation's history and to its present way of life.

5 But the present-day Persians have almost completely abandoned their old ways; an upheaval which has been marked by the wholesale adoption of alien and degenerate manners, ever since they have come under the spell of the doctrines of Zoroaster the son of Horemazdes.

6 Now, as far as this Zoroaster or Zarades (he is called by both names) is concerned, it is not possible to fix with any precision the dates of his floruit and the period of his reforming activities. The Persians simply say that he lived in the region of Hystaspes without making it clear whether they mean the father of Darius or some other monarch of the same name.7 Whatever the time of his floruit he was the founder and interpreter of the magian religion and he it was who changed the character of the earlier cults and introduced a motley assortment of beliefs.

8 In ancient times the Persians worshipped Zeus and Cronos and all the other divinities of the Hellenic pantheon, except that they called them by different names. They called Zeus "Bel", Heracles "Sandes", Aphrodite "Anahita" and so on and so forth, according to the testimony of Berossus of Babylon, Athenocles and Simacus who recorded the ancient history of the Assyrians and the Medes. 9 But nowadays their views conform for the most part to those of the so-called Manichaeans, to the extent of their holding that there are two first principles one of which is good and has given rise to all that is fine in reality and the other of which is the complete antithesis in both its properties and its function. They assign barbarous names drawn from their own language to these entities. The good divinity or creator they call Ahuramazda, whereas the name of the evil and malevolent one is Ahriman. 10 Of all the festivals they celebrate the most important is one called the "festival of the slaying of the evil ones" in which they kill huge numbers of reptiles and other wild creatures and denizens of the desert and present them to the magi as a proof of their devotion. They imagine that in this way they are rendering an agreeable service to the good divinity and that they are thwarting and injuring Ahriman. 11 Their veneration of water is so great that they do not even wash their faces in it or handle it in any other way save as a drink and for the purpose of irrigation.

25. They name many other gods, whom they worship, and they perform sacrifices and practice ritual purifications and divination. Fire is considered an object of peculiar sanctity and veneration. Accordingly it is tended in certain remote and sacred chambers by the magi who never allow it to go out. Gazing into it they perform their secret rites and scrutinise the course of future events. 2 I imagine they took over this practice from the Chaldaeans or some other people, since it is something of an anomaly. Such a procedure would of course be very much in keeping with the composite nature of their religion which is a most varied blend of ideas derived from a multiplicity of different peoples. And this state of affairs too is what I should have expected. 3 Indeed I know of no other society which has been subjected to such a bewildering variety of transformations or which through its submission to an endless succession of foreign dominations has failed so signally to achieve any degree of continuity. Small wonder then that it still bears the stamp of many different forms and conventions.

4 The Assyrians are the first people mentioned in our tradition as having conquered the whole of Asia as far as the river Ganges. Ninus appears to have been the founder of the dynasty and was followed by Semiramis and the whole line of their descendants stretching as far as Beleus the son of Dercetades. 5 When with Beleus, the last scion of the house of Semiramis, the family became extinct a man called Beletaran, who was head gardener in the palace, gained possession of the throne in extraordinary circumstances and grafted the royal title on to his own family. The story is told by Bion and by Alexander Polyhistor and takes us down to the reign of Sardanapalus when, as they tell us, the kingdom entered upon a phase of decline and Arbaces the Mede and Belesys the Babylonian wrested it from the Assyrians, killing their king and bringing it under the control of the Medes, some one thousand three hundred and six years or more after Ninus' rise to power. This figure is based on the chronology of Ctesias the Cnidian and accords with that given by Diodorus Siculus.

6 A period of Median domination then ensued in which everything was ordered according to that people's laws and customs. After not less than three hundred years of Median rule, however, Cyrus the son of Cambyses defeated Astyages in battle and brought the country under Persian

control. One could hardly expect him to have done otherwise seeing that he was himself a native Persian and resented the fact that the Medes had fought on the side of Astyages.

7 The Persian kings ruled for two hundred and twenty-eight years but their empire disintegrated completely when it was overrun by the forces of a foreign king. 8 Alexander, the son of Philip slew their king Darius the son of Arsames, annexed the whole of Persia and re-organized the state along Macedonian lines. So outstanding in fact were the achievements of that invincible warrior that, even after death had removed him from the scene, his successors, Macedonians though they were, held sway over an alien land for a great length of time and came to wield very considerable power. Indeed I think that on the strength of their predecessor's reputation they would have remained in power right up to the present day if internal dissensions and frequent wars of conquest directed against one another and against the Romans had not sapped their strength and destroyed the myth of their apparent invincibility.

9 The Macedonian supremacy lasted a mere seven years less than that of the Medes, if we are to accept the testimony of Polyhistor on this matter too. Despite their long period of ascendancy, however, the Macedonians were finally ousted by the Parthians. 10 These members of a hitherto insignificant dependency then became rulers of the whole empire with the exception of Egypt. Arsaces, the leader of the revolt, gave his name to the dynasty of the Arsacids that succeeded him, and it was not long before Mithridates raised the name of the Parthians to great heights of renown.

26. The passage of two hundred and seventy years from Arsaces the first king to Artabanus⁴⁴ the last one marks the inception, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Alexander the son of Mamaea, of the dynasty to which the contemporary Chosroes belongs. It was at this time also that the present-day Persian state took shape.

2 A certain Persian called Ardashir, a man of humble and obscure origins but of great daring and resourcefulness and a born revolutionary, launched an attack with a band of conspirators and killed the king Artabanus. Assuming the diadem of the kings of Persia he put an end to the hegemony of Parthia and restored the empire of the Persians.

3 He was a devotee of the magian religion and an official celebrant of its mysteries. Consequently the priestly caste of the magi rose to inordinate power and arrogance. This body had indeed made its influence felt on previous occasions in the course of its long history, though it had never before been elevated to such a position of privilege and immunity, but had hitherto been officially accorded what in certain respects amounted to an inferior status.

4 Otherwise (to take an example from the distant past) Darius and his supporters would not have been appalled, as they were, at the usurpation of Smerdes after the death of Cambyses the son of Cyrus. Nor would they have killed Smerdes and large numbers of his political and religious sympathizers on the grounds that the magi were not eligible to aspire to the dignity of the imperial throne. Far from considering the killings an outrage they felt that their memory

⁴⁴ i.e., Artabanus V.

should be perpetuated, with the result that a feast was instituted which was named "the Magophonia"⁴⁵ after the coup d'état⁴⁶ and was accompanied by sacrifices of thanksgiving.

5 Nowadays, however, the magi are the objects of extreme awe and veneration, all public business being conducted at their discretion and in accordance with their prognostications, and no litigant or party to a private dispute fails to come under their jurisdiction. Indeed nothing receives the stamp of legality in the eyes of the Persians unless it is ratified by on the magi.

27. The mother of Ardashir is believed to have been married to a certain Papak, a cobbler by profession and a person of no social consequence. He was, however, extremely well-versed in astrology and could divine the future with ease. 2 Now it so happened that a soldier called Sasan was traveling through the region of Cadusia and was hospitably entertained by Papak, who showed him to his humble abode.

3 Somehow or other, presumably through his own prophetic powers, Papak discovered that his guest's offspring was destined to greatness and to singular good fortune. Reflecting that he had neither daughter nor sister nor any close female relative he was troubled and perplexed. Finally he made his wife go to bed with his guest and turning a blind eye to the outrage took future good fortune as the compensation for present humiliation and disgrace.

4 These then were the circumstances of Ardashir's birth. He was brought up by Papak, but no sooner had he grown up and seized the throne than a violent quarrel openly broke out between Sasan and Papak, each one claiming that the boy should bear his name. 5 They eventually agreed however, that he should be referred to as the son of Papak born of seed of Sasan. This at any rate is the account of the genealogy of Ardashir which the Persians maintain to be true, basing this assertion on the claim that it accords with the version given in the royal archives.

6 I shall presently give a list in chronological order of the names of all the descendants of Ardashir who came to the throne with details of the duration of each particular reign. Historians have so far failed to compile such a list; indeed the whole subject has received scant attention. 7 And yet they produce lists of the kings and emperors of Rome which go back as far perhaps as Romulus, or to the still more distant days of Aeneas the son of Anchises, and extend to the reigns of Anastasius and Justin. For the kings of Persia, however, that is to say for those that have reigned since the break up of the Parthian Empire they have not yet drawn up a parallel list setting out the chronology of their reigns, though such a list is still a desideratum.

8 I have therefore made it my business to collect accurate information on the subject from official Persian sources and I feel that a detailed exposé of my findings is especially called for in a work such as the present. Consequently, I shall proceed to give full particulars whenever I think it necessary, even though this will entail the enumeration of long and arid lists of names and barbarian names at that, and even though they will sometimes be the names of personages who have achieved nothing worth recording. 9 At this point I should like to add, for the convenience of the reader, the following clarification: three hundred and nineteen years takes us down to the twenty-fifth year of

⁴⁵ i.e., "Slaughter-of-the-magi".

⁴⁶ viz. that which brought Darius to power

the reign of Chosroes during which period the fighting in Lazica was in full swing and the death of Mermeroes had occurred. The emperor Justinian had been on the throne for twenty-eight years.

[Agathias also makes the following comments on Persian beliefs.]

1.7.5 I am of the opinion that there is no being which delights in bloodstained altars and the brutal slaughter of animals. If there is a being capable of accepting such practices then it could not be beneficent and benign but would in all probability be a malignant, maniacal creature like the vain personifications of the poets such as Terror, Fear, Enyo, Ate and Eris “the irresistible”, as they would call her. You can add the one the Persians call Ahriman to the list, if you like, and all the other bloodthirsty and malevolent phantoms that are supposed to inhabit the underworld.

5.10.5 According to the ancient oracles of the Egyptians and to the leading astrologers of present-day Persia there occurs in the course of endless time a succession of lucky and unlucky cycles.

[Agathias also makes the following mentions of the Achaemenid dynasty.]

1.2.2 Massilia⁴⁷ was colonized long ago by Phocaeans who had been driven out of Asia by the Persians in the reign of Darius the son of Hystaspes.

[2.10.1-2.10.4 describes a Frankish defeat.]

2.10.1 Scarcely, I imagine, have past ages produced another example of such signal and overwhelming victory. And if other men have, in the past, suffered a similar fate to the Franks, closer inspection reveals that they too were destroyed because of their wickedness. Take Datis, for instance, the satrap of Darius, who in olden times arrived at Marathon with a Persian army thinking that he was bound to subdue not just Attica but the whole of Greece. The attack was immoral and unjustifiable and was motivated solely by the territorial ambitions of the Persian monarch Darius. The continent of Asia was, apparently, not big enough for him and he greatly resented the idea of not being master of Europe too. That then is the reason why the Persians suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Miltiades. The story goes that the Athenians promised to sacrifice to Artemis, the Goddess of the Chase, a kid for every man of the enemy slain and that she bestowed her favour upon them so bountifully and they enjoyed such abundant hunting that even when they resorted to sacrificing goats they could not make up the number. So heavy were the enemy’s losses in that battle! Or take the celebrated Xerxes and his marvels,⁴⁸ how else did he come to suffer defeat at the hands of the Greeks than because in his abandoned wickedness he set out to enslave men who had done him no wrong and putting might before right relied rather on force of numbers and equipment than on discretion, whereas the Greeks were fighting in a just cause for their own freedom and, neglecting nothing that it was in their power to do, they took all the appropriate decisions and acted upon them?

⁴⁷ Modern Marseilles.

⁴⁸ Agathias is no doubt thin king of the bridging of the Hellespont and the digging of a canal through the isthmus north of Mount Athos. Both of these incidents became in Greek rhetorical tradition stock examples of human arrogance seeking to subvert the natural order of things.

[5.19.1-5.19.3 compares the Byzantines under Belisarius to the Spartans at Thermopylae.]

5.19.1 Their disciplined courage was, in its humble way, not unlike that exhibited by Leonidas and his Spartans at Thermopylae when Xerxes and his army were already approaching. 2 But the Spartans perished to a man, their fame resting solely on the fact that they did not die like cowards but killed a large number of Persians before they were overwhelmed.

[4.29.6 compares Chosroes I to Achaemenid rulers.]

4.29.6 Indeed it could hardly be claimed that even Cyrus the son of Cambyses or Darius the son of Hystaspes or for that matter the famous Xerxes who opened up the seas to cavalry and the mountains to shipping,⁴⁹ would stand comparison with him.

Sub-excursus on Chosroes I

[2.28-2.32 consists of a sub-excursus on the Persian ruler Chosroes I.]

2.28.1 After first saying a few words about Chosroes I shall return directly to my earlier narrative.

Chosroes has been praised and admired quite beyond his deserts not just by the Persians but even by some Romans. He is in fact credited with being a lover of literature and a profound student of philosophy and somebody is supposed to have translated the works of Greek literature into Persian for him. 2 It is rumoured moreover that he has absorbed the whole of the Stagirite more thoroughly than the Paeonian orator⁵⁰ absorbed the works of the son of Olorus,⁵¹ that his mind is filled with the doctrines of Plato the son of Ariston and that not even the Timaeus, bristling as it does with geometrical theorems and scientific speculations, would elude his grasp, nor for that matter the Phaedo or the Gorgias or any other of the polished and more intricate dialogues, as for instance the Parmenides.

3 Personally, I could never bring myself to believe that he was so remarkably well-educated and intellectually brilliant. How could the purity and nobility of those time-honoured writings with all their exactitude and felicity of expression be preserved in an uncouth and uncivilized tongue?

4 Moreover one may well ask how a man brought up from childhood in the glamorous atmosphere of the court, surrounded by pomp and adulation, and then succeeding to a utterly

⁴⁹ i.e. the bridging of the Hellespont (Dardanelles) and the digging of a canal through the Athos peninsula.

⁵⁰ The orator Demosthenes who belonged to the deme Paeania in Attica.

⁵¹ The historian Thucydides. In plain English, then, the assertion that Agathias is so indignantly rebutting is “that Chosroes was more at home with the complete works of Aristotle than Demosthenes was with the writings of Thucydides.

barbarous type of life of which battles and manoeuvres were a regular feature, could hope to achieve any real competence or proficiency in this branch of learning.

5 Yet if people were to praise him on the score that, in spite of being a Persian and in spite of being weighed down with the cares of empire and the responsibility of governing so many nations, he still showed some interest in acquiring a smattering of literature and liked to be considered something of a dilettante, in that case I should add my own voice to the general chorus and should not hesitate to regard him as superior to the rest of the barbarians. 6 But those who attribute exceptional wisdom to him and call him the rival of all philosophers that have ever lived, claiming that, in the manner of the Peripatetic definition of superior culture, he has mastered every branch of science, thereby disclose the unreality of their pretensions and make it plain to all that they are merely echoing the ill-considered opinions of the crowd.

29. There was in fact a certain Syrian called Uranius who used to roam about Constantinople.

[In 2.29.1-2.29.8 Agathias characterizes Uranius as a charlatan]

9 Though he was the sort of person I have described Uranius once managed to get Areobindus the ambassador to take him to Persia. Being an imposter with chameleon like powers of adaption he had little difficulty in assuming an air of decorum. Donning an impressive robe of the type worn in our part of the world by professors and doctors of literature and with a correspondingly grave and sober look on his face he presented himself to Chosroes. 10 Overwhelmed by the novelty of the sight, Chosroes was greatly impressed and assumed that he really was a philosopher (which was in fact what he was announced as). 11 After giving him a most cordial reception he summoned the magi to join with him in discussing such questions as the origin of the physical world, whether the universe will last forever and whether one should posit a single first principle for all things.

30. Uranius had not one relevant idea to contribute to the discussion, but what he lacked in this respect he made up for in glibness and self-confidence and, as Socrates says in the Gorgias, it was "the victory of ignorance among the ignorant".⁵² 2 In fact the crazy buffoon so captured the king's imagination that he gave him a huge sum of money, made him dine at his own table and accorded him the unprecedented honour of passing the loving cup to him. 3 He swore on many occasions that he had never before seen his equal, in spite of the fact that he had previously beheld real philosophers of great distinction who had come to his court from these parts.

Not long before Damascius of Syria, Simplicius of Cilicia, Eulamius of Phrygia, Priscian of Lydia, Hermes and Diogenes of Phoenicia and Isidore of Gaza, all of them, to use a poetic turn of phrase, the quintessential flower⁵³ of the philosophers of our age, had come to the conclusion, since the official religion of the Roman empire was not to their liking, that the Persian state was much superior. So they gave a ready hearing to the stories in general circulation according to which Persia was the land of "Plato's philosopher king"⁵⁴ in which justice reigned supreme.

⁵² cf. Plato: Gorgias 459b. "then, the man without knowledge will carry more conviction in the company of the ignorant

⁵³ Perhaps Agathias has in mind Pindar: Isthmians VII 18.

⁵⁴ cf. Plato's Republic 473 d.

Apparently the subjects too were models of decency and good behaviour and there was no such thing as theft, brigandage or any other sort of crime. Even if some valuable object were left in no matter how remote a spot nobody who came across it would make off with it, but it would stay put and, without any one's guarding it, would be virtually kept safe for whoever left it until such time as he should return.

4 Elated therefore by these reports which they accepted as true, and also because they were forbidden by law to take part in public life with impunity owing to the fact that they did not conform to the established religion,⁵⁵ they left immediately and set off for a strange land whose ways were completely foreign to their own, determined to make their homes there. 5 But in the first place they discovered that those in authority were overbearing and vainglorious and so had nothing but disgust and opprobrium for them. In the second place they realized that there were large numbers of housebreakers and robbers, some of whom were apprehended while others escaped detection, and that every form of crime was committed.

6 The powerful in fact ill-treated the weak outrageously and displayed considerable cruelty and inhumanity in their dealings with one another. But the most extraordinary thing of all was that even though a man could and did have any number of wives people still had the effrontery to commit adultery. 7 The philosophers were disgusted by all these things and blamed themselves for ever having made the move.

31. The opportunity of conversing with the king proved a further disappointment. It was the monarch's proud boast that he was a student of philosophy but his knowledge of the subject was utterly superficial. There was no common ground either in matters of religion since he observed the practices I have already described. Finally the vicious promiscuity which characterized Persian society was more than the philosophers could stand. All these factors, then, combined to send them hurrying back home as fast as they could go. 2 So despite the king's affection for them and despite the fact that he invited them to stay they felt that merely to set foot on Roman territory, even if it meant instant death, was preferable to a life of distinction in Persia. Accordingly they resolved to see the last of barbarian hospitality and all returned home.

3 Nevertheless they derived from their stay abroad a benefit which was neither slight nor negligible, but which was to secure them peace of mind and contentment for the rest of their days. 4 A clause was inserted in fact in the treaty, which at that time was being concluded between the Romans and the Persians, to the effect that the philosophers should be allowed to return to their homes and to live out their lives in peace without being compelled to alter their traditional religious beliefs or to accept any view which did not coincide with them. Chosroes insisted on the inclusion of this point and made the ratification and continued observance of the truce conditional on its implementation.

5 The story goes that on their return journey they had an extraordinarily impressive and memorable experience. 6 Stopping to rest in a field in Persia they described the body of a man not long dead, flung down unceremoniously without any attempt at burial. Moved to

⁵⁵ Justinian's edict of 529 forbade pagans from teaching and resulted in the closure of the Academy in Athens.

compassion by the sight of such outrageous barbarity and thinking it sinful to remain the passive spectators of an unnatural crime they made their servants lay out the body as best they could, cover it with earth and bury it. 7 That night when they were all asleep one of their number (I cannot be more specific because I do not know his name) dreamed that he saw an old man who, though his face was unfamiliar and his identity could not even be surmised, had an air of dignity and decorum about him and resembled a philosopher in the style of his dress and in the fact that he had a long, flowing beard. Apparently by way of exhortation and advice, he recited the following verses to him in loud voice:

"Bury not the man whom now you see,
the man whom buried not you found.
Mother earth will not receive
the mother-ravisher till he be
by dogs devoured on the ground".

8 Waking up in sudden terror he related his dream to the others. There and then they were at a loss what to make of it, but towards morning, when they got up and set off on their way, they were obliged by the lie of the land to pass by the spot where the improvised burial had been arranged and once more found the dead man lying uncovered on the ground. It was as though the earth had of its own accord cast him up into the open and refused to protect him from being devoured. 9 Astonished at the extraordinary sight they continued their journey without thereafter observing any of their customary rites towards the dead man. A careful consideration of the dream had in fact led them to the same conclusion – namely that the Persians reserved the fate of remaining unburied and being torn to pieces by dogs as the just punishment of those who vent their foul lusts upon their mothers.

32. But in spite of the fact that Chosroes had had personal experience of these men he had greater regard and affection for Uranius. The reason for such an attitude is, in my view, something inherent in human nature. Whatever is more or less on a par with ourselves we tend naturally to have a high and affectionate regard for, whereas we shun and eschew that which is beyond us.

2 When Uranius returned home Chosroes sent him the most delightful letters in which he showed him all the respect of a disciple for his master. After that he became insupportable, bragging about his friendship with the king and, whenever he was in company or at a party, he would drive all and sundry to the point of exasperation by perpetually harping on the subject of the honours Chosroes had showered upon him and the discussions the two of them had held.

3 Indeed the fellow returned home a bigger fool by far than he had been before, as though he had travelled such an immense distance with that sole end in view. Yet, even though the man was both a knave and a fool he managed, by dint of singing the praises of the barbarian king, to convince the general public with his portrayal of him as a man of leaning.

4 Those in fact who combined extreme gullibility with a weakness for strange and marvelous tales were easily hoodwinked by his boastful and bombastic assertions, since they never stopped



to ask themselves who was doing the praising, who was being praised and what he was being praised for.

5 One would indeed be fully justified in admiring Chosroes for his brilliant generalship and for his indomitable spirit which never broke under the strain of battle, never yielded to fear and never succumbed to sickness and old age. But when it comes to literature and philosophy he must rank no higher than one may reasonably place an associate and disciple of the notorious Uranius.

Excursus on Sasanian History

[4.23.7-4.30.5 is an excursus on Sasanian History.]

4.23.3 Simply to execute [Nachoragan] was not, Chosroes thought, sufficient punishment for his cowardice. Accordingly the skin was torn from his neck, ripped off in one piece right down to his feet, then completely detached from the flesh and turned inside out, so that the contours of the various parts of the body were visible in reverse. After that it was inflated like a wineskin and suspended from a pole, a pitiful and disgusting spectacle of which the infamous Shapur,⁵⁶ who had been king of the Persians long before Chosroes, was, I think, the originator.

4.23.7 However, though Shapur was a most unjust and bloodthirsty man, quickly and easily roused to anger and cruelty and slowly and reluctantly moved to compassion and restraint, even so I cannot definitely exclude the possibility that this foul act might have been perpetrated at an earlier date on some other victim or victims. But, that when he defeated the Roman Emperor Valerian in battle, he captured him alive and took this cruel revenge upon him is vouched for by the testimony of several historians. 8 And from all accounts the very first of those who seized the Persian throne after the collapse of the Parthian empire, namely Ardashir and Shapur were both monsters of wickedness and injustice, seeing that one of them murdered his suzerain and usurped the throne by violent means and that the other set such a dreadful precedent of vindictive cruelty and obscene brutality.

24. Since I have once more had occasion in the course of my narrative to mention Ardashir it would not be inappropriate at this point to fulfill my earlier promise and give an account in chronological order of the monarchs who succeeded him. The parentage of Ardashir and the manner in which he assumed the diadem of the kings of Persia have already been described by me in some detail. I have nothing more to add with regard to him except that he seized the throne of Persia in the manner I described earlier, in the fourth year of the reign of Severus Alexander,⁵⁷ five hundred and thirty-eight years after Alexander the Great⁵⁸ and that he reigned for fourteen years and ten months. 2 His successor was the infamous Shapur who lived for a

⁵⁶ i.e., Shapur I (241-272 A.D.)

⁵⁷ 222-235 A.D.

⁵⁸ Used loosely by Agathias for “after the beginning of the Seleucid Era (i.e. 312 B.C.), so that the year in question begins 1 Oct. 226 A.D. and ends on 30 Sept. 227 A.D

total of thirty-one years after his accession, during which time he did untold harm to the Romans. 3 Convinced that once he had slain their Emperor there would be nothing to check his victorious progress he advanced ravaging Mesopotamia and the adjoining region, then Cilicia and Syria, and finally penetrating as far as Cappadocia. The carnage was so terrible that he actually filled in the mountain gorges and ravines with the corpses of the slain and leveled the sloping summits of the hills and rode over them, crossing mountain ridges as though they were level plains. 4 On his return journey he was so elated by his impious success that his insolence knew no bounds, but it was soon checked by Odenathos of Palmyra,⁵⁹ a man whose previous obscurity and insignificance were more than offset by his glorious exploit against Shapur which won him a lasting place in the pages of history.

5 On the death of Shapur, his son Hormizd succeeded to the throne. His reign was a very short one,⁶⁰ lasting one year and ten days, in the course of which he achieved nothing worth recording, nor did Vahram I who succeeded him and reigned for three years.⁶¹ 6 But Vahram's son, who had the same name as his father reigned for seventeen years.⁶² Vahran III tasted sovereignty for a mere four months.⁶³ He was given the title Saghanshah which he received not, I think, idly or without good reason but in accordance with an ancient ancestral custom. 7 When in fact the Persian kings make war on some neighbouring people of considerable size and importance and reduce them to submission, they do not kill the vanquished inhabitants but impose a tribute on them all and allow them to dwell in and cultivate the conquered territory. However, they consign the former leaders of the nation to a most pitiful fate and assign the title of ruler to their own sons, presumably in order to preserve the proud memory of their victory. 8 Now since the Segestani were subdued by his father Vahram II it was only natural that the son should be given the title Saghanshah, which is Persian for "king of the Segestani".

25. After the speedy demise of Vahram III Narsah immediately assumed the crown and ruled for seven years and five months.⁶⁴ He was succeeded by his son Hormizd II who was heir not only to his father's throne but also to a reign of identical duration. Strange though it may seem the fact is that both of them reigned for exactly the same number of months and years.

2 They were succeeded by Shapur II who enjoyed an exceedingly long reign the length of which coincided exactly with the length of his life.⁶⁵ Indeed when he was still in his mother's womb the future offspring was called to the throne.

Since it was uncertain whether the queen would give 3 birth to a male or a female child the nobles proposed a special reward for the magi if they would foretell the future. Accordingly they brought out a mare in the last stages of pregnancy and told the magi to predict what they thought would happen in its case. In this way they would be able to find out in a few days whether in the event the prediction had come true, which would enable them to form an estimate of the chances of fulfillment of whatever would be foretold in the case of the human being. Now I cannot say

⁵⁹ On his return march Shapur was attacked and defeated by him and lost part of his booty.

⁶⁰ 272-273 A.D.

⁶¹ 273-276 A.D.

⁶² 276-293 A.D.

⁶³ 293 A.D.

⁶⁴ 293-302 A.D.

⁶⁵ 309/10-379 A.D.

exactly what was the precise nature of the prediction in the case of the mare, since I have not received accurate information on that point, but, whatever it was, it proved correct. 4 When the nobles realized that the magi knew their art to perfection they urged them to expound their knowledge of future events with regard to the woman also. When the magi said that a male child would be born they no longer delayed, but putting the diadem around the mother's womb they proclaimed as Emperor the foetus conferring upon it the distinction of a name and a title when, I suppose, it had just reached that stage of development at which it was capable of making a few slight jumping and throbbing movements inside the womb. 5 Thus they took for granted what in the natural order of things is uncertain and obscure, though they were not wide of the mark in their expectations, which were fulfilled to the letter and beyond it. Soon after in fact Shapur II was born. Possessed of the royal title at birth, he grew up on the throne and he grew old on it, living to the ripe old age of seventy. 6 In the twenty fourth year of his reign the city of Nisibis⁶⁶ fell into the hands of the Persians. It had long been subject to the Romans and it was their own Emperor, Jovian, who surrendered and abandoned it. The previous Emperor, Julian, had penetrated into the heart of the Persian Empire when he died suddenly and Jovian was proclaimed Emperor by the generals and the troops. 7 Hampered by the recentness of his accession and by the prevailing confusion engendered no doubt by the state of emergency that had brought him to power and finding himself, moreover, in the middle of enemy territory, he was in no position to effect a leisured and orderly settlement of affairs. In his anxiety, therefore, to terminate his sojourn in a foreign and a hostile land and to return with all speed to his own country he became party to an ignoble treaty, which to this very day is a blot on the Roman state. By it he confined thereafter the extent of his Empire within new frontiers, whittling away its far-flung corners. 8 However, the events of that period have been recorded by a host of earlier historians, and I have no time to dwell on them but must stick to my previous subject.

26. Shapur II was succeeded by his brother Ardashir who reigned for four years and then died. The son of Ardashir was also called Shapur⁶⁷ and he reigned for a total of five years. His son Vahram IV reigned for eleven years. He was given the title Kermanshah. 2 I have already explained the reason for this kind of title. Kerman was perhaps the name of a people or a place and no doubt Vahram acquired the title after they or it had been reduced by his father in much the same way as was the case with the earlier Roman practice, whereby an individual assumed a special name connected with the name of some other nation which he had conquered as for example "Africanus" and "Germanicus". 3 The next reign was marked by the accession to the throne of Persia of Yazdgerd I⁶⁸ the son of Shapur,⁶⁹ a man whose memory has remained something of a legend among the Romans. It is indeed commonly reputed that when the Emperor Arcadius was on the point of death and was making his last will and testament he designated Yazdgerd as guardian and custodian of his son Theodosius and of the entire Roman state. 4 This story has been handed down from generation to generation and preserved on the lips of men and is still repeated at the present time by both the upper classes and the common people. But I have not come across it in any document or in the works of any historian, not even in those which give an account of the death of Arcadius, with the single exception of

⁶⁶ Agathias' chronology is wrong. Nisibis was ceded to Persia by Jovian in 363 A.D

⁶⁷ i.e. Shapur III.

⁶⁸ 399-421 A.D.

⁶⁹ It is not altogether clear whether Agathias means Shapur III or Shapur II.

Procopius.⁷⁰ And I do not find it at all surprising that Procopius, who with his encyclopedic knowledge had read practically every historical work ever written, should have found a written version of this story in the works of some earlier historian which has so far eluded me who know next to nothing, if indeed I know anything at all. 5 What I do find extremely surprising is that Procopius does not confine himself at this point to a straightforward account of events but applauds and extols Arcadius for what he regards as the extraordinary wisdom of his decision. He says in fact that Arcadius though endowed with little discretion in other respects proved in this one matter to be particularly shrewd and far-sighted. 6 But whoever expresses admiration for this decision is, in my opinion, judging it in the light of later events and not by the logic of the original situation, since it hardly could have made sense to entrust one's nearest and dearest to a foreigner and a barbarian, the ruler of a bitterly hostile nation, a man who in matters of honour and justice was an unknown quantity and who on top of everything else was the adherent of a false religion. 7 If the infant came to no harm and if, thanks to the care and protection of his guardian, his throne was never in jeopardy though at the time he had not yet even been weaned, then one ought rather to praise the honesty of Yazdgard than the action of Arcadius. But these are questions which the reader must decide for himself according to his own criteria.

8 At any rate Yazdgard reigned twenty-one years during which time he never waged war against the Romans or harmed them in any other way, but his attitude was consistently peaceful and conciliatory either through coincidence or out of genuine consideration for the boy and concern for his duty as a guardian.

27. On his death he was succeeded by his son Vahram V who made an incursion into the territory of the Romans but when he met with a friendly and courteous reception from the generals stationed at the frontiers he withdrew swiftly and returned to his own imperial domain, having neither waged a war on his neighbors nor damaged their land in any other way. 2 After a reign of twenty years⁷¹ he handed over the throne to his son Yazdgard II who reigned for seventeen years and four months.⁷² 3 The next reign was that of Peroz⁷³ an exceedingly daring and warlike man. His mind was filled with grandiose ambitions, but his judgement was far from sound and he possessed a great deal more valour than discretion.

4 Consequently he lost his life in an expedition against the Ephthalites not so much, I imagine, through the strength of his opponents as through his own recklessness. Though he should have taken all the necessary precautions and reconnaissance measures to safeguard his advance into enemy territory against ambush he fell straight into a trap, a series of carefully camouflaged pits and trenches that stretched over the plain for a very great distance. He perished there together with his army in the twenty-fourth year of his reign, outmanoeuvred by the Huns – an ignominious way of ending his life. The Ephthalites are in fact a Hunnic people. 5 His brother Valash who succeeded him to the throne was not conspicuous for any military achievements not only on account of his mild and gentle disposition and natural aversion to violence but also because his reign was a very short one, amounting in fact to a mere four years.⁷⁴ 6 He was succeeded by Kavad the son of Peroz, who waged many wars against the Romans and won many

⁷⁰ Procopius: History of the Wars, I.2.6 sq

⁷¹ 421-438/9 A.D.

⁷² 438/9-457 A.D.

⁷³ 459-484.

⁷⁴ 484-488.

victories over the neighbouring barbarian peoples. His reign was indeed a period of unceasing turbulence and strife. 7 In his dealings with his subjects he was harsh and cruel, showing no respect for the social order, introducing revolutionary innovations into the body politic and subverting their age-old customs. He even reputed to have made a law that wives should be held in common not, I imagine, with a view to any of the utilitarian ends suggested by the hidden meaning of Socrates' words in the Platonic dialogue⁷⁵ but merely in order to facilitate concubinage and allow any man who felt so inclined to sleep with any woman of his own choosing, even if she happened to be somebody else's wife.

28. And, so, as this legally-sanctioned outrage grew rife the nobles could bear the disgrace no longer and began to voice their anger openly. It was in fact this law which was the principal cause of the conspiracy against him and of his subsequent downfall. In the eleventh year of his reign the nobles all rose in a body against him and deposed him, casting him into the "Prison of Oblivion".⁷⁶ 2 Zamasp was then invested with the royal power. He too was a son of Peroz and apart from that enjoyed a reputation for great gentleness of character and justice. In this way they thought that they had settled everything to their satisfaction and that henceforth they would be able to live in peace and quiet. 3 But it was not long before Kavad escaped either aided and abetted by his wife who chose to die for his sake as Procopius tells us⁷⁷ or by some other means. At any rate the fact remains that he did escape from prison to the land of the Ephthalites where he threw himself on the protection of their king. 4 Mindful of the vicissitudes of fortune the king received him with great kindness and never ceased to comfort him and alleviate his distress of mind, showing him every consideration, addressing him words of encouragement which were calculated to raise his spirits, feasting him at his table and frequently making him drink from his own cup, dressing him in costly garments and in fact omitting none of the niceties of hospitality. Not long afterwards he gave his daughter's hand in marriage to his guest and having entrusted him with a sufficiently large army to ensure his return sent him back home to crush all opposition and regain his former prosperity. 5 There is a natural tendency for things to work out very differently from what people expect, often upsetting and completely belying their calculations and what happened on that occasion was a case in point. In a very short space of time the pendulum of Kavad's fortunes had swung 6 from one extreme to the other and back again: he had exchanged the state of a king for the lot of a convict, escaped from prison to become a refugee and a suppliant in a strange land, and then, after having been a suppliant and a guest, had become the close relation of a king. Then on his return home he regained his throne without effort or danger, finding it vacant and as it were waiting to receive him, for all the world as though he had never been deprived of it. 7 Zamasp in fact voluntarily abdicated, wisely making a virtue of necessity and preferring, after having enjoyed four years on the throne, to renounce the pride of office and the pomp of power in exchange for a safe retirement.

8 Kavad, now more restrained⁷⁸ than he had formerly been, ruled for another thirty years in addition to the previous eleven so that his reign embraced a total of forty-one years.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ cf. Plato: Republic Bk. V 457 c. sq.

⁷⁶ According to Procopius (History of the Wars I, V, 8) the place was so named because it was forbidden under pain of death to make any mention of those imprisoned there.

⁷⁷ Procopius: History of the Wars I VI 1-9.

⁷⁸ The Greek is ambiguous and could mean "more powerful" and has been rendered thus by previous translators. However it is a fact that after his restoration Kavad eventually broke with the revolutionary



29. Past generations of historians have written full and detailed accounts of the events of both parts of Kavad's reign. There is one point, however, and I think it is worth making, which they have not dealt with, namely the startling coincidence that at that time much the same thing happened in both the Roman and the Persian Empire, that as though by some strange quirk of fate disaster fell almost simultaneously upon the monarchs of both states. Shortly before in fact the Emperor of the Romans, Zeno the Isaurian, whose original name was Tarasicodissa, was the victim of a plot by Illus, Basiliscus and Conon aided and abetted by Verina and was dethroned and driven out, barely escaping to Isauria in time. But he returned later, put down the usurper Basiliscus who had reigned for not more than two years, regained complete control of affairs and remained on the throne until his death, which, however, occurred not very long afterwards.⁸⁰

3 At the same time the Western Emperor Nepos⁸¹ met with similar or rather even greater misfortunes. As a result of the intrigues of Orestes he was obliged to flee from Italy and lost the Imperial throne which he never regained. He died a private citizen.⁸² 4 Such, then, were the extraordinary vicissitudes to which by some strange coincidence the major powers were at that time subjected. Let those critics whose practice it is to analyse and account for events of a problematic nature seek to explain these events, and they may as far as I am concerned suggest whatever explanation they wish. However I must return to the subject of my earlier excursus.

5 On the death of Kavad, which occurred in the fifth year of the Roman Emperor Justinian, the famous Chosroes, whose reign brings us into our own day and age,⁸³ succeeded his father to the throne. His exploits were many and various. Some of them have been previously recorded by Procopius and of those that have not some have already been dealt with by me, whereas others will receive a proper treatment in due course. 6 But in order to maintain a strict chronological sequence I shall confine myself to the time being to pointing out that his reign lasted some forty-eight years in the course of which he won many brilliant victories. His reign in fact marks a pinnacle of success and outstanding achievement reached by no previous Persian monarch, not at any rate if one is to make an over-all comparison of individual reigns. Indeed it could hardly be claimed that even Cyrus the son of Cambyses or Darius the son of Hystaspes or for that matter the famous Xerxes who opened up the seas to cavalry and the mountains to shipping,⁸⁴ would stand comparison with him. 7 Yet his unhappy and inglorious end was in the starkest contrast to the greatness of his past life. He was sojourning at the time in the village of Thamnon in the Carduchian hills, (he had moved there for the summer, since 8 the region was favoured with a temperate climate) when Maurice the son of Paul who had been put in command of the forces in the East by the Roman Emperor Tiberius I Constantine made a sudden irruption into the adjoining district of Arzanena. And, as though that were not enough, Maurice then proceeded to ravage and plunder the whole area. Soon he had crossed the river Zirna and was still advancing,

Mazdakite movement

⁷⁹ 488-498/9 A.D. and 498/9-531 A.D.

⁸⁰ Agathias' chronology seems to have gone wildly astray. Zeno fled from Constantinople in the August of 476. He died on the 9th April, A.D. 491. It seems that Agathias has confused the revolt of Illus (484-488) with the earlier conspiracy in which Illus was also implicated

⁸¹ 28th August 475 A.D.

⁸² In 480 A.D.

⁸³ 531-579 A.D.

⁸⁴ i.e. the bridging of the Hellespont (Dardanelles) and the digging of a canal through the Athos peninsula.

burning and plundering everything that lay in his path. 9 While Maurice was engaged on this work of wholesale destruction and devastation Chosroes, who being near enough to get a clear view already of the smoke rising up found the spectacle of enemy fire, which he had never seen before, too much for him, and was so stunned and dismayed that he took no action whatsoever either offensive or defensive. Instead he gave himself up to excessive grief at what had happened and was seized immediately by despondency and despair. 10 Accordingly he was conveyed with great speed on a litter to his palaces in Seleucia and Ctesiphon. It was more of a flight than a retreat. Not long after that he ended his days.

30. However, I seem somehow to have allowed myself to get carried away and have, I think, become so enthralled with these fascinating events as to skip the whole intervening period and embark gaily on a recital of what happened at a much later date. But now that I am fully conscious of the nature and extent of my digression I had better postpone the discussion of such matters for the present. They will be dealt with in the course of my narrative of the period to which they belong. Meanwhile I shall resume the thread of my earlier account.

2 I have kept my promise and given a complete chronological record of the reigns of the kings of Persia. It is, I think, a true and an accurate one since it is based on Persian sources. 3 Sergius the interpreter managed in fact during a stay in Persia to prevail upon the keepers of the royal archives to grant him access to the relevant literature. He did so, as it happens, in response to frequent requests from me. Fortunately, when he stated that his sole purpose was to preserve even among our nation the memory of what they, the Persians, knew and cherished, they immediately obliged, thinking that it would enhance the prestige of their kings if the Romans too were to learn what kind of men they were together with their numbers and the order and manner in which the succession has been maintained. 4 What Sergius did then was to take the names and dates and principal events and put them into good Greek, a task for which he was peculiarly well-fitted being much and away the best translator of his day, so much so that his talents had won him the admiration of Chosroes himself and made him the acknowledged master of his subject in both Empires. After having made what must have been an extremely accurate translation he was as good as his word and most obligingly brought me all his material, urging me to fulfill the purpose for which it had been entrusted to him. And that is exactly what I have done. 5 Consequently even if there are some discrepancies between my account of the reign Kavad and Procopius' version of it we must follow the authority of the Persian documents and credit their contents with greater veracity. Now that I have acquitted myself of my task let me resume my account of events in Lazica.

Entered by Warren Soward
Californian State University, Fullerton