

Persian Occupation of Egypt 619-629: Politics and Administration of Sasanians

Saeid Jalalipour

California State University, Fullerton



e-Sasanika
Graduate paper 10
2014

The last great war of Late Antiquity was fought between the Persians and the Romans in the beginning of the seventh century.¹ After the death of the Roman emperor Maurice by the usurper Phocas in 602 C.E., the Persian king Khusro II attacked the Byzantine Empire to avenge the death of his benefactor.² Even though the usurper was killed by the new Roman emperor, Heraclius in 610 C.E., the Persians kept advancing into the Roman territory and conquered and pillaged it. Antioch, Damascus, Jerusalem and Egypt all fell into the hands of Sasanians.³ Finally, Heraclius organized an army and set out and defeated the Persians by 628 C.E. The Persian king, Khusro II, was slain by his own son Kavad II and the new king sued for peace and gave back all the conquered territories of Anatolia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt to the Romans.⁴ The last Great War between the Persians and the Romans was over and both empires were exhausted and weak which made the Arab conquests much easier a few years later. Even though short lived, by the end of 619, the Sasanians were at the height of their power, and they expanded their western borders all the way to Anatolia and Egypt. The Persian conquest of Egypt was significant, because it was the second time that the Persians were able to occupy that land for over a decade.⁵ It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the reasons for the occupation of Egypt by the Persians, and to look at the political and military history of the region and also to depict the relation between the Egyptians and the Persians.

In studying the Persian Occupation of Egypt from 619-629 C.E., we encounter different sorts of evidence. The first group of evidence are the literary sources, which are mostly papyri texts and letters in Greek, Coptic and Middle Persian. Many of these papyri are military Middle Persian texts, such as; list of orders, list of provisions, and etc which have survived to this date. Greek and Coptic papyri on the other hand tend to depict particular incidents in which Egyptians had dealings with the Persians or were in some way affected by the coming of the

¹ Ruth Altheim-Stiehl, "The Sasanians in Egypt - Some Evidence of Historical Interest," *Bulletin de la société d'archéologie copte* 31 (1992): 87.

² Andreas N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: 602-636*, trans. Marc Ogilvie-Grant (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert Publisher, 1968), 1:58.

³ Gene R. Garthwaite, *The Persians* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵ Touraj Daryaee, "Middle Persian Papyri from the Sasanian Occupation of Egypt in the Seventh Century (I)," California State University, Fullerton (2003): 1.



Sasanians. These documentary sources provide a great insight into the daily lives of people in that time period, and also depict the way that the Sasanian administration functioned in Egypt. Documentary evidence also give an unbiased and honest view of the both Persians and the Egyptians in most cases, and with these evidence, the modern scholars could better portray the mindset of people of Egypt and the conquering Persians. Another group of sources are the literary evidence and chronologies. Chronologies provide some valuable information such as the starting date of the conquest along with the details on the fall of Alexandria. The Nestorian Syriac chronicle known as *Khuzistan Chronicle* gives us a valuable detailed narrative of the conquest. This chronicle was written in early 7th C.E., and as a result it is very close to the time of the occupation. Other literary sources which are close to time of the conquest are the Armenian history of Sebeos written in 7th C.E., the Byzantine Chronicle of Theophanes written in early 9th C.E., and the Syriac Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius, written in late 8th C.E. Later literary sources include the famous History of al-Tabari written in early 10th C.E., the Syriac Chronicle of Bar Hebraeus written in 13th C.E., Syriac chronicle by Michael the Syrian written in 12th C.E., and the Coptic history of Severus written in 10th C.E. All these literary sources provide some details about the occupation, however most of the Greek and Coptic sources remain silent on the matter and explain the whole conquest in one sentence. One of the reasons for this could be that, Chronicle of John of Nikkio, which was written in the second half of the 7th century, lacks the account between the years 610-640 C.E. Therefore, latter sources which tended to write from this main Greek source, lacked details in this matter. The Armenian and Syriac sources however, provide a good amount of information about the conquest. Literary evidence could be sometimes confusing since the dates are in contradiction with each other and there are some instances in which the events do not match together. They are also mostly biased views and they tend to exaggerate in support of a particular side. Greek and Coptic sources depicted Persians as savages and murderers, while Syriac and Armenian sources show very limited amount of violence only in the initial phases of the conquest. However, with the mixture of documentary sources with literary evidence, scholars could understand the time period much better.

The main reason Khusro attacked the Byzantine Empire and conquered Egypt was to avenge the death of his benefactor Maurice. On the other hand he saw that the Roman Empire was on its knees and the moment was ripe for the Persians to extend the borders of their empire and defeat their old enemy once and for all. When the Persian king, Hormizd IV, was killed by his son, Khusro II, also known as Khusro Parviz, he sat on the throne in 589 C.E. However one of the generals of the Persian army, by the name of Bahram Chubin opposed Khusro in 590 C.E., and the Persian king had to flee and take refuge with the Roman emperor, Maurice.⁶ Khusro asked for Maurice's military aid to restore his throne.⁷ Maurice helped the Persian king, even though it was against the will of the Roman Senate and his people. Al-Tabari mentions that "Mawriq (Maurice) agreed to this, and the things went so far that he gave

⁶ Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronology of Gregory Abu'l-Faraj 1225-1286: The Son of Aaron, The Hebrew Physician Commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus, Being the First Part of His Political History of the World*, trans. Ernest A. Wallis Budge (Amsterdam: APA - Philo Press, 1976), 1:85.

⁷ Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Sasanids, The Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, trans. C. E. Bosworth (New York: State University of New York Press, 1985), 5:311.

Abarwiz (Khusro) his daughter Maryam in marriage... Furthermore, he sent to Abarwiz his brother Thiyadhus (Theodosius) with an army of sixty thousand warriors."⁸ Khusro was able to regain his throne thanks for the Roman emperor. Khusro gave many gifts to the Romans and the emperor Maurice.⁹ Bar Hebraeus and Theophanes both mention this incident too and cite a similar description of what happened between the two kings. After this event, there was a short peace period between the two empires and both the Roman emperor and the Persian king respected each other highly. However, In 602 C.E. the Byzantine army in the Balkans revolted against the Roman emperor and their captain, Phocas claimed the Roman throne and killed Maurice along with his five sons.¹⁰ When Khusro became aware of the death of his patron, he became angry and vowed to revenge Maurice's death. Bar Hebraeus states that "When Kesru (Khusro), the king of the Persians, heard that Mauricius and his sons had been killed, he and his nobles put on black apparel, and they made a house for weeping in."¹¹ Sebeos and Theophanes also mentioned the severity of Khusro's anger by hearing the news of Maurice's death. Khusro vowed to take vengeance on Phocas, therefore, Khusro had a perfect pretext to attack the Roman Empire and fight against the usurper that killed his benefactor, Maurice and restore the rightful emperor of the Byzantine Empire, Theodosius. Theodosius was the alleged son of Maurice who had fled to Khusro for help.¹² Khusro was determined to exploit this chaotic situation in the Roman Empire and expand the borders of his kingdom.

In 604C.E., the Sasanians successfully defeated the Byzantine army and advanced into Armenia, Mesopotamia and Syria.¹³ The Persian army crossed the Euphrates and continued to advance west. The Byzantine Empire was in chaos and the usurper Phocas was not able to defend the empire properly. That's when Heraclius the elder who was the Exarch of Africa, along with his son rebelled against Phocas. He and his son, also by the name of Heraclius, sailed from Carthage in 608 C.E. and entered Constantinople and defeated Phocas in 610 C.E.¹⁴ Heraclius the younger came to power and became the new Roman emperor. Heraclius sent messengers to Khusro and asked for peace, "saying, 'Because Phocas killed Mauricius your friend, we have killed him', and he imagined that by means of flatteries of this kind, amity [between them] would come into being."¹⁵ Khusro refused Heraclius's offer to negotiate a peace, even though the usurper had been dethroned. The Persian king was ambitious to retain more territories and to expand his empire even further. Jerusalem was conquered in 614 C.E. and much of Anatolia in 615 C.E. and finally Egypt was conquered in 619 C.E.¹⁶ The Sasanians had reached the height of their power and even with Heraclius numerous offers of peace, the Persians continued to advance in order to topple their old enemy once and for all.

⁸ Ibid., 312.

⁹ Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronology*, 85.

¹⁰ Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3(1):167.

¹¹ Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronology*, 86.

¹² Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.

¹³ Garthwaite, *The Persians*, 110.

¹⁴ Stratos, *Byzantium*, 34.

¹⁵ Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronology*, 87.

¹⁶ Garthwaite, *The Persians*, 110.

The importance of Egypt for the conquerors had always been for its great wealth and its rich agriculture. Egypt was unquestionably the richest province of the Roman Empire. Each year a fleet sailed from Alexandria with a cargo of grain for Constantinople. The main concern of the Governor of the Egypt was to see to its collection. Before it was sent, it was the Governor's personal responsibility to see that no other cargo of grain left Egypt.¹⁷ Therefore the loss of Egypt was a severe blow to the Roman Empire. Also for the Sasanians, conquering Egypt meant the control of the Near East and the trade routes to India and Europe.¹⁸ Egypt had always been primarily an agricultural society which was dependant on the Nile flood waters and it had harnessed the river by an extensive network of local canals.¹⁹ Even though Egypt was so rich, it was not well protected. The army in Egypt consisted mostly of native troops whose main mission was to guard the country from any invasion and above all to maintain order. The majority of them had no idea or experience of military life. In fact the whole army which had no war value was simply a police guard.²⁰ This made it much easier for the Persians to conquer Egypt with not much resistance and there is no record of an armed opposition against the Persians except in capital city of Alexandria.

The conquest of Alexandria was the start of the conquest of Egypt (617 C.E.) and by June of 619 C.E. the city fell. The Persians gradually extended their reach to southern parts of Egypt and by 620-621 C.E. the whole province of Egypt was in their hands.²¹ The account in which the fall of Alexandria is mentioned is in a Nestorian Syriac chronicle, known as the *Khuzistan Chronicle*, which was written in 7th C.E. The Khuzistan chronicle states:

Then the Persian troops besieged Alexandria, which is enclosed by walls and surrounded by the water of the Nile and has weighty doors. Alexander built it on the advice of his teacher Aristotle. For a while they (the Persians) fought against it but were unable to capture it; then a certain man, Peter by name, went over to them. He had (earlier) come down to Alexandria from Qatar, so that he might be instructed in philosophy; and he said to the Persian commander, 'I will hand over the city to you'. This Peter had one day found at the bottom of some book in the public archives of the city (a passage) written thus: 'When affliction arises for Alexandria, (the city) will be seized from the west gate which looks towards the sea.' The Persians prepared themselves, and seized (some) small fishing vessels, and embarked in them. With the fishermen, they entered the city in the early morning while it was (still) dark, protected by the fishing (vessels). They killed the guardians of the gate, opened (the gates) to their allies, and announced victory the victory of Khusro on the wall. All the men were seized by fear; and the wind took hold of many ships onto which had been loaded the treasures of the Church and the nobles (of the city), so that they might be taken

¹⁷ Stratos, *Byzantium*, 25.

¹⁸ Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 118.

¹⁹ Carl F. Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt: Islamic Egypt, 640-1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1:2.

²⁰ Stratos, *Byzantium*, 26.

²¹ Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N. C. Lieu, eds., *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II AD 363-630, A narrative sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 196.



to sea for safety, and brought them to the camp of the Persians. They sent the (treasures) to Khusro, along with the keys of the city.²²

The reason for the fall of Alexandria seems to be treachery. Other Greek and Egyptians sources such as Theophanes, which was also written in 7th C.E. and Severus, which was written in 10th C.E., do not go into details about the fall of Alexandria and just describe the whole conquest as in one sentence that Alexandria was conquered. It is also reported that the governor and patriarch of Alexandria fled the city when the Persians came. When Alexandria was about to be delivered over to the Persians, Nicetas, the governor, took ship for Byzantium in company with John the Almoner, the patriarch.²³ The administrators and the Roman officials who had ties with Constantinople mostly fled to the capital of the Roman Empire and some other parts of Africa, while most of the local official and Egyptians nobles remained, since they didn't have good relations with the Romans anyway.

Another chronicle by Severus however, reports that all the monasteries and churches around the city of Alexandria were all destroyed and pillaged by the Persians. He states that "Nearly every man within them was put to the sword, only a very small remnant escaping by hiding in holes and corners. All the treasure and all the furniture in monasteries was taken as plunder: churches and building were broken down or set on fire, and so fell into ruins, which remained visible till long after the invasion of Arabs."²⁴ Severus depicts the initial phase of Persian conquest as very bloody and destructive. Severus also mentions that:

When the tidings of the destruction of the monasteries and the slaughter of the monks reached Alexandria, the inhabitants in a mad panic opened the gates of the city. The Persian Salar, or commander-in-chief, had had a dream in which some mighty personage appeared, promised to deliver the city into the hands of the Persians, and cautioned him not to treat the city leniently and not to let any of the inhabitants escape, as they were heretics and hypocrites. Thereupon the Salar, or Shahin as we may call him, made all the able-bodied men, from eighteen to fifty years of age, come out of the city on the pretence of giving them two gold pieces a head; and when they were all gathered together and their names were written down, he ordered his soldiers to fall upon them, to the number of eighty thousand."²⁵

It was probably awfully gory and devastating but when Severus mentions about what the Persians did once they conquered the city, it seems that he is overstating. Brutal as Persians were, they were not savages and there was no reason or profit for them to kill all the able bodies. The Syriac Khuzistan chronicle does not mention the massacre of all male population of the city of Alexandria, along with Theophanes, Sebeos and other later sources. In any case,

²² Ibid., 235.

²³ Alfred J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt: and the Last Thirty years of the Roman Dominion*, ed. P. M. Fraser, 2nd ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978), 79.

²⁴ Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, trans. B. Evetts (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907), 2: 241.

²⁵ Ibid., 267.

there were massacres and initial periods of violence in Alexandria especially when places resisted to the conquest. Sebeos mentions that Khusro advised Shahrbaraz, the Persian General about the way to treat the people of conquered regions and said "Receive in a friendly way those who submit, and keep them in peace and prosperity. But put to the swords those who may offer resistance and make war."²⁶ This version of the Syriac account sounds more credible than Severus's account and it shows that there were accounts of murder and violence, but these were only during the early phases of the conquest and it was restricted to small incidents.

Some chroniclers and authors argue that the Persian invasion of Egypt was a pure violent and destructive force, which devastated the Egyptian region. Many of the Greek and Coptic documents refer to particular incidents in which the Persians were shown as merciless barbarians. In one letter from a servant to his master, he mentions the brutality of the Persians. It follows as:

My good lord should know that I have suffered much distress...the Persians. They came to Tinis, and on their arrival carried me off to a the camp and beat me with pieces of wood and stone on my mouth and nose, until was dead, like one in the tombs. But after three hours breath returned to me, and I found they had gone, leaving me to the north of Letopolis; by God's aid I escaped from their hands, and came to Arsinoe, where I fell sick. While I was sleep the Persians took away my children, and so I came here alone.²⁷

Another letter talks about the same hardships caused by the Persians. It is from a man named Serenus to his master when he mentions the Persians. "I write first of all to venerate and salute you my master, and to inform you of the situation. Please attend to the collection and carrying for me, until I load this burden and come, since you Excellency knows that I am in the hand of the Persians."²⁸ These documents give us more than just a glimpse into the individual experiences of normal people, but they also provide us with information about the way the Egyptian people thought of the conquerors. It is true that the Egyptians felt no loyalty towards the Roman government but as Butler mentions the Egyptians did not welcome the occupation of the Persians either.²⁹ In another Coptic letter, a widow from the region of Djeme writes to Pisentius, the bishop of Hermonthis and asks for help since "the Persians had murdered her son. they had robbed her of well-night all her livestock. Now she is unable to pay her taxes, and as a result is in serious danger of being evicted from her home."³⁰ These accounts show that people were having difficulties and pain during the conquest, as it is normal with any other conquests. People of Egypt faced many financial and traveling hardships as well. The Coptic document Ep 433 is a letter from a woman to the abbot asking him "what to do about the

²⁶ Clive Foss, "The Persians in the Roman Near East (602–630 AD)," *JAS* III.13, no. 2 (2003): 169.

²⁷ Edward R. Hardy Jr, "New Light on the Persian Occupation of Egypt," *Journal of the Society of the Oriental Research* 13 (1929): 185-186.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁹ Butler, *The Arab Conquest*, 563.

³⁰ Altheim-Stiehl, "The Sasanians," 90.



Persians, for they are coming."³¹ in another document Ep32 the writer asks someone to write to the Persian official in Thebes for travel documents.³² The writer of Ep 300 says, "Before the Persians came south, my late husband gave the priest grain, and I still haven't been paid".³³ These documents show that people feared the coming of the Persians and also had difficulties in traveling internally in Egypt. The Persians regulated the travel of people to keep an eye on the movement of Egyptians and posted garrisons in strategic cities of Egypt in case the Romans decided to retake Egypt. Many of the Christian monks and bishops were fearful of their fates under the Persians who they believed were fire-worshippers. Bishop Pistentios in a letter to his diocese says "Because of our sins God had abandoned us; he has delivered us to the nations without mercy."³⁴ He referred to the invasion of the Persians, and the bishop was alarmed by the stories of their barbarity. The thought of submission to Persians or befriending them never crossed the bishop's mind and therefore he fled. This shows that that not all Copts welcomed the invasion of Egypt by the Persians.

On the other hand most recent scholars argue that only the beginning of the conquest was violent and by the time the Persians settled in, the normal life of the country continued. After the initial phases of the conquest, the Egyptians lived their lives as if not much had changed. There are documents that show business still happened between the Persians and the Egyptians. In a Coptic papyrus which is dated to 626 C.E., it states that "Fourteen villagers declare that they have received from their lord - who clearly has a Persian name, Peres Kosroi, that is Peroz Xusraw - 36 gold *solidi* as the price for 1980 *phorai* of flax, and they promise that the merchandise will be delivered within two weeks, 'by God and the good fortune of the King of Kings'".³⁵ The business owners adopted to this change of rule. There is a papyrus that dates from 621 C.E. which indicates that items were bought and given to Persians. It mentions "purchases of mirrors for the baths owned by the estate, and of ropes for its camels, expenses of servants carrying letters to the other parts of Egypt in which estate owned property."³⁶ The locals had no issue doing business with the Persians and life went on. After the conquest, the monasteries and churches were left to heal from their wounds and there is evidence that suggests that the public buildings of Alexandria and monasteries inside the walls were for the most part left uninjured.³⁷ Also the Persians did not force their religion of Zoroastrianism on the people of Egypt. They tolerated most religions and that even gave the Monophysite Christians more freedom. The Persians persecuted the Byzantine Church and supported the Monophysite Church of the Egyptians. The Copts exploited the situation and took over a large number of Orthodox churches. In general the Persians helped the Copts and left them free to practice their religion.³⁸ Another example would be the life of Sophronius who was a native of Damascus and traveled a great deal in Thebaid or Upper Egypt and fled with John the Almoner when he heard

³¹ L. S. B. Mac Coull, "Coptic Egypt During the Persian Occupation: The Papyrological Evidence," *SCO* 36 (1986): 312.

³² *Ibid.*, 312.

³³ *Ibid.*, 312.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 313.

³⁵ Andrea Gariboldi, "Social Conditions in Egypt under the Sasanian Occupation," *La parola del passato : rivista di studi antichi* 64 (2009): 339.

³⁶ Hardy, "New Light," 188.

³⁷ Butler, *The Arab Conquest*, 90.

³⁸ Stratos, *Byzantium*, 284.



of the coming of the Persians. However, about the year 620 C.E., when the peaceable practice of their religion had been restored to the Christians under Persian rule, Sophronius went back to Palestine, and in due course published the volume which still survives under the name of 'Spiritual Pastures.'³⁹ This shows that the Persians tolerated most Christian faiths and allowed people to do their business mostly unaffected. The religions and lives of people mostly went back to normal during the occupation of the Persians.

The Persians inserted themselves into the administration of the Romans and started to collect taxes and provisions for the King of Kings and their army. Based on Middle Persian texts, there were many Persian installations throughout Egypt in Elephantine, Herakleia, Oxyrhynchus, Kynon, Theodosiopolis, Hermopolis, Antinoopolis, Kosson, Lykos, Diospolis, and Maximianopolis.⁴⁰ All these post were to collect taxes from collect agents and also to gather provisions for the army. There are various papyri documents showing the collection of taxes by the Persians. The Persians used the same system of the Roman rule for collecting taxes. An official letter dated to October 623 C.E. (P. Oxy. LI 3637), mentions the shipment of 3962 gold *solidi* to the King of Kings, it states "in respect of the first installment for the twelfth indiction...Because we wish to make the invoice of the gold to our lord the king of kings"⁴¹ There are also two other papyri that refer to the same indiction, P. Oxy. XVI 1843 dated to November of 623 C.E., indicates "the receipt of further 2016 *solidi*, divided in equal parts between Oxyrhynchus and Cynopolis."⁴² The third papyrus, P. Oxy. LV 3797 is another receipt for the taxes which was "a part of the State taxes in gold to most glorious and wisest, presents the payment of 5040 *solidi* for the third installment of the 12th indiction (May 624 C.E.), divided into two parts, in respect of Oxyrhynchus 4032 *solidi* and in respect of Cynopolis again 1008 *solidi*."⁴³ There is not enough evidence to exactly calculate the amount of taxes that were taken every year, but it shows that the collection of taxes was under way in parts or in all of Egypt. This exhibits another continuity in the way of Egyptian life, which was not disrupted much by the invasion of the Persians.

The papyri documents give us very interesting perspectives that other primary chronicles could not provide. They give an insight into the official records of administration, and they also provide an unbiased and honest view of the history from the mindset of the writers. The Middle Persian papyri which are limited to the period of the occupation of Egypt, count for a total of 950, a remarkable number for such a short period of time.⁴⁴ These Pahlavi texts give us an interesting point of view of the Persians. Most of these texts deal with the personal matters between the Persians present in Egypt along with other matters such as finance, commerce and administration.⁴⁵ Most of the statements found on these documents are only words and phrases and it is very hard to translate and interpret these papyri. The

³⁹ Butler, *The Arab Conquest*, 97.

⁴⁰ Altheim-Stiehl, "The Sasanians," 90.

⁴¹ Gariboldi, "Social Conditions," 341.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 341.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 341-342.

⁴⁴ Roger S. Bagnall, ed., *The Oxford handbook of Papyrology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 419.

⁴⁵ Evangelos Venetis, "The Sassanid Occupation of Egypt (7th Cent. A.D.) According to Some Pahlavi Papyri," *Graeco-Arabica IX-X* (2004): 405.



passing of time has also destroyed many of these texts.⁴⁶ Most of these texts are very hard to read because of cursive and stylized scripts.⁴⁷ The Pahlavi texts include secular and military orders, list of provisions, some private letters and a few sale contracts. One of the private papyri is a letter between a Persian and his sister (CII, P. 18) which suggests that the Persian occupants of Egypt were not entirely male and some families probably followed with the soldiers.⁴⁸ There is not much information from this papyri and we could not say with certainty where it was written from. Greek and Coptic texts on the other hand rarely mention the Persians and refer mostly to the matters of taxes, lease and debt contracts. These papyri texts also suggest that there had been a few word borrowings between the two languages. For example; the name of the Persian officer *Salār* (Official) passed into Greek and appeared in many of the Greek and Coptic documents as *Sellarioi* especially in the archive of Theopemptos and Zacharias.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the Persians also borrowed Greek words such *laganag* 'a liquid measure'.⁵⁰ Even though limited, these texts show that by studying these papyri, one could get a better understanding of the relationship between the Persians and the Egyptians.

Based on the papyri documents the administration of Egypt was put in the hands of a high Persian official named Sahralaneozan. There are various documents where his name is mentioned as the person of authority. It is also clear from these documents that there were various forms of cooperation between the Persian occupants and the former Byzantine administrative staff. Sahralaneozan seemed to be the highest authority of the Persians in Egypt recorded thus far.⁵¹ It is recorded that Generals Shahrbaraz or Shahin took Egypt by their armies, but the administration of the region was left to the figure of Sahralaneozan. He carried the title of *karframan-idar* or the "steward of the court".⁵² In the papyrus P. Oxy. LI 3637, the Persian official is "our lord the most renowned Sahralanyozan", which indicates that he was in charge of collecting taxes from a large region that included Arsinoites nome, Oxyrhynchus and Cynopolis, and actually the whole province of Arcadia and perhaps the whole country.⁵³ In P. Oxy. 3797, which is a receipt of the taxes paid in gold, was issued by a person with the title of curator or procurator of Saralaneozan, 'administrator of the Saralaneozan'.⁵⁴ This indicates that he was a person of importance and he had his own personal assistance and officials under his command. He is mentioned in both Pahlavi and Greek documents and Weber interprets his name by separating it into two parts of *sahr* 'empire', and the noun of *alan-yozan*, which translates into '(the one) who combats the Alans'.⁵⁵ Papyri sources suggest that he was the supreme lord of Egypt. It is likely that he was put on the administrative duty of Egypt by the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 405.

⁴⁷ Bagnall, *The Oxford*, 419.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 419.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 421.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 421.

⁵¹ Patrick Sanger, "The Administration of Sasanian Egypt: New Masters and Byzantine Continuity," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 51 (2011): 654.

⁵² Ibid., 654.

⁵³ Gariboldi, "Social Conditions," 342.

⁵⁴ Sanger, "The Administration," 656.

⁵⁵ Gariboldi, "Social Conditions," 342.

famous general, Sahrwaraz (Shahrbaraz).⁵⁶ Sahralanzeon was probably living in Fayyum because a papyrus cites that goods are to be delivered into his kitchen. The list mentions "sheep, lambs, pigs, chickens and pigeons, a furniture of aromatic vinegar with *garum*, hides, and even a camel."⁵⁷ He seemed to be very wealthy and well supplied and this indicates his high position in the region and in the whole country. Another papyrus states oils for the lamps of his house and salaries for his weavers.⁵⁸ Saralanzeon was in charge of the other parts of Egypt as well and various papyri documents show it clearly, such as 6 texts coming from Thebais. They all mentions Saralanzeon and they are about the requisitions of grain and fodder.⁵⁹

In another Pahlavi document, Saralanzeon is shown traveling the country with an army force, which indicates that not only he was in charge of taxation of Egypt, but he was probably in charge of the army that stayed in Egypt too. The text is translated into German by Weber and to English by Gariboldi. It follows as:

Homage to the lord (*xwaday*) Yazdangird.
[...Welfare and health and peace
and all] fortune for our gladness,
and there is satisfaction, always,
for the lord in the increase (*abzon*)
that] be. To the information of the lord,
I write that Sahralanyozan
tomorrow, in the day of *aneran* (30th), the village,
of Twart he will pass through, the lord
and] the officers (*gundsardalan*) and the nobles (*azadan*)
and the horsemen (*aswaran*)
...] tomorrow, in the day of *aneran*, sheep (?)
...] from the village of 'plh'm
...] from the district as is necessary (?) [...⁶⁰

In the following document, Sahralanyozan is expected to pass through a village followed by a hierarchic order of military formations. This suggests the fact that he was more than a tax collector of the Persians in Egypt and that he was probably in charge of the military too. General Shahrbaraz was also not present in Egypt during 623 to 626 C.E, which support the theory of Sahralanzeon's military leadership as well.⁶¹ Among his other duties were also the inspection of the goods that traveled through Egypt, and issuing passes and cover letters.⁶² A Pahlavi document in the Vienna collection (P.373a) was sealed "*pad muhr i Sahralanyozan*, 'by

⁵⁶ Ibid., 344.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 344.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 345.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 345.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 345.

⁶¹ Ibid., 346.

⁶² Sanger, "The Administration," 658.

the seal of Sahralanyozan'" which suggests the validity of his judicial documents.⁶³ All these show that the Sasanians inserted themselves successfully into the Roman administrative system and continued the normal collection of taxes in order to gather provisions for their army. The Persians left the raising of the taxes in the *nomes* (sub-national administrative division of Egypt) to the local dignitaries and nobles and then the locals delivered the sums to the Sasanian authorities.⁶⁴

Eventually the tides started to shift and Heraclius the Roman emperor was filled with divine zeal and planned to move against the Persians.⁶⁵ Heraclius led his army into Anatolia and defeated the Persian army in 622 C.E. and again in 623 C.E.⁶⁶ At the time of the last campaign of the war (627-628 C.E.) Heraclius advanced within a few miles of Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital and gained victory over Khusro II.⁶⁷ Khusro was murdered by his son, Shiroe, also known as Kavad II.⁶⁸ Khusro wanted to blame the recent losses of the Persians on one of his generals and did not accept Heraclius's offer of the peace, even though the Persians were in disadvantage. With the support of the nobles and the military, Kavad II captured and executed his father in February 628 C.E., therefore ending the last war between these two empires. One of the main reasons for the loss of the Persians was the mutiny of the general Shahrbaraz. Modern scholars Kaegi and Cobb have argued that the things went sour between the Persian king, Khusro and General Shahrbaraz probably late in the year 626 C.E. or early in 627 C.E.⁶⁹ Bar Hebraeus mentions how things went wrong between the two. He says:

It was said to Kesro, 'Shahrbaraz laugheth at thee, and saith that the victory concerning which thou art boasting thyself is his and not thine'. Therefore Kesro sent Kardigan to take the head of Shahrbaraz. The envoy was captured by the Rhomaye. And when Heraclius learned [this] he sent secretly to Shahrbaraz, and with oaths [concerning his Safety] had him brought to him. And when he went in and saw the envoy and the letter, and was certain about the matter, he acted cunningly and altered the letter, to which he added [the order] that 'three hundred nobles were to be killed with Shahrbaraz'. And he took the letter, and went out and read it before Kardigan and before the troops. And he said into Kardigan, 'Doth it please thee to do this?' and the chiefs (or nobles) were filled with wrath, and they scoffed at Kesro. And they made a compact with Heraclius, and they also gave him their sons as hostages for the conformation of the conditions of the peace, and departed on their way.⁷⁰

⁶³ Gariboldi, "Social Conditions," 347.

⁶⁴ Sanger, "The Administration," 658.

⁶⁵ Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813*, trans. Cyril Mango, and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 435.

⁶⁶ Garthwaite, *The Persians*, 110.

⁶⁷ Clive Foss, "The Persians in Asia Minor and the End of Antiquity," *The English Historical Review* 90, no. 357 (1975): 727.

⁶⁸ Garthwaite, *The Persians*, 110.

⁶⁹ Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009), 141.

⁷⁰ Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronology*, 88.



Kavad II, son of Khusro II also died after couple of month of his reign and even though he had asked, Shahrbaraz to evacuate the occupied lands, Shahrbaraz remained in Egypt even after the end of the war. Heraclius had no choice but to negotiate with Shahrbaraz and as a result they had a meeting at Arabissus in the Antitaurus in July 629 C.E. and they made the final agreement for the evacuation of the conquered lands in return for Byzantine assistance in his own attempt to seize the Persian throne.⁷¹ So the final Persian forces evacuated Egypt by the end of 629 C.E., and they crossed the Euphrates back into the Persian territories in 630 C.E.⁷²

One of the issues in the study of the Persian occupation of Egypt is that it is not clear who really lead the army that conquered Egypt. Al-Tabari clearly mentions that "The commander was called Shahin and was the Fadhusban of the West. He proceeded onward until he captured Egypt and Alexandria and the land of Nubia, and sent back to Kisra the keys of the city of Alexandria in the twenty-eighth year of his reign."⁷³ On the other hand Bar Hebraeus and Michael the Syrian mention Shahrbaraz as the commander of the Egyptian invasion. Bar Hebraeus mentioned that "In the fourth year of Heraclius Rumizan, the captain of the host, who was nicknamed 'Shahrbaraz', that is to say 'Wild Pig', subjugated Darmasuk (Damascus)...One year later he captured Jerusalem and slew ninety thousand men in it...The following year Shahrbaraz went to Egypt and took it, and he opened up Alexandria, and he subjugated Lybia as far as the frontier of Kushites (Nubians)."⁷⁴ One can clearly see that the literary sources do not agree and it is strange that the works of al-Tabari, Bar Hebraeus and Michael the Syrian give different information, even though they have links to the same textual tradition. Even the modern scholars have been divided over this issue as well. Butler argues that it was Shahin who lead the invasion of Egypt, basing his belief on the reliability of al-Tabari.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Stratos argues that it was Shahrbaraz that lead the invasion of Egypt, because Shahin at that time was busy in Asia Minor.⁷⁶ Most of the modern authors agree with Stratos's argument based on Sebeos, and the Khuzistan Chronicle. It seems more likely for Shahrbaraz to have had the geographical responsibility of Egypt and Shahin was probably busy with other campaigns. It is also possible for both generals to have conquered Egypt together.⁷⁷ However, it seems that Shahrbaraz could be the best bet as the commander of the Egyptian conquest, but absolute certainty cannot be fully achieved.

Another issue in the study of Persian occupation of Egypt is the problem of dating and the exact date of the conquest. There are many different dates from various chroniclers going around and a precise date is hard to reach. Altheim-Stiehl argues that Al-Tabari, Theophanes, Bar Hebraeus and Michael the Syrians all dated the conquest of Egypt too early and based on a

⁷¹ Foss, "The Persians in Asia Minor", 727.

⁷² Evangelos K. Chrysos, "The Date of Papyrus SB 4483 and the Persian Occupation of Egypt," *Dōdōnē; epistēmōnikē epetēris tēs Philosophikēs Scholēs tou Panepistēmiou Iōanninōn* (1975): 346.

⁷³ Al-Tabari, *The History*, 318-319.

⁷⁴ Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronology*, 87.

⁷⁵ Butler, *The Arab Conquest*, 70.

⁷⁶ Stratos, *Byzantium*, 114-115.

⁷⁷ James Howard-Johnston, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity: Historiographical and Historical Studies* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Variorum, 2006), 11.

Syrian chronicle and evidence of Greek papyrus the conquest of Alexandria should be around July of 619.⁷⁸ On a similar note, Stratos argues that since Bar Hebraeus tells us that the conquest of Egypt took three and a half years and we have papyri evidence that indicate by 618 Upper Egypt had not been captured yet and Persians evacuated in 629, it is a good estimation that the occupation must have started by the end of 616 and was complete by 620.⁷⁹ However, there are still those who disagree and refer to 617 or 618 as the final date of conquest, but 619 seems like a very good plausible date based on both papyri evidences and primary narratives.

In conclusion, the Persians seemed to behave very harshly at first when they conquered Egypt. They laid the countryside to waste and pillaged the churches and the monasteries and violated and killed many people. But as soon as the conquest was done, the Persians acted peacefully and governed with great tolerance. Following the destruction which accompanied the invasion, a period of peace and even reconstruction followed. The Persians used the same system of taxation and administration, and they only replaced the top positions with their own forces. The Persians limited themselves and relied on the existing institutions for running the country. The Egyptians were devastated with the Persians' initial invasion and did not help them in any ways. However, once the Persians settled down, commerce and daily life continued normally just like before the conquest. Persian tolerated the religious groups and helped the Copts freely practice their religion. The continuity of culture, knowledge, religion and arts was not broken and the occupation had no negative long term effects on Egypt, but quite the opposite. For most of the Egyptian population, the Persian were not worse than the Romans. All evidence, from primary chronicles and Papyri to modern interpretations of scholars lead to the direction of continuity and peace after a short period of violence and conquest. By the time Islam appeared, the Sasanian Empire as well as the Roman Empire were exhausted and in turmoil because of this long war. This led the way for the downfall of Sasanians only a few years later, as well as the defeat of the Romans and the conquest of Egypt this time by Arab Muslims.

⁷⁸ Altheim-Stiehl, "The Sasanians," 87.

⁷⁹ Stratos, *Byzantium*, 114.

Works Cited

Primary Sources:

Al-Tabari. *The History of al-Tabarī: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen*. Edited by Ehsan Yarshater. Translated by C.E. Bosworth. Vol. 5. New York: State University of New York Press, 1985.

Bar Hebraeus. *The Chronology of Gregory Abu'l-Faraj 1225-1286: The Son of Aaron, The Hebrew Physician commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus, Being the First Part of His Political History of the World*. Translated by Ernest A. Wallis Budge. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: APA - Philo Press, 1976.

Michael the Syrian. *Texts and translations of the Chronicle of Michael the Great*. Vol. 1. Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2009.

Pseudo-Dionysius. *The chronicle of Zuqnān. Parts III and IV : A.D. 488-775, translated from Syriac with notes and introduction*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999.

Sebeos. *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*. Translated by Robert W. Thomson. Commentary and assistance by J. D Howard-Johnston, and Tim Greenwood. Vol. 1. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999.

Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa. *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*. Translated by B. Evetts. Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907.

Theophanes. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near East History, AD 284-813*. Translated by Cyril Mango and Roger Scott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Secondary Sources:

Altheim-Stiehl, Ruth. "The Sasanians in Egypt - Some Evidence of Historical Interest." *Bulletin de la société d'archéologie copte* 31 (1992): 87-96.

Bagnall, Roger S., ed. *The Oxford handbook of Papyrology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

- Butler, Alfred. J. *The Arab Conquest of Egypt and the Last Thirty Years of the Roman Dominion*. Edited by P. M. Fraser. 2nd ed. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1978.
- Compareti, Matteo. "The Sasanians in Africa." *Transoxiana* 4 (2002): 1-17.
- Chrysos, Evangelos K. "The Date of Papyrus SB 4483 and the Persian Occupation of Egypt." *Dōdōnē; epistēmōnikē epetēris tēs Philosophikēs Scholēs tou Panepistēmiou Iōanninōn* 4 (1975): 342-348.
- Daryaei, Touraj. "Middle Persian Papyri from the Sasanian Occupation of Egypt in the Seventh Century (I)." California State University, Fullerton (2003): 1-7.
- Idem. "Sasanian Persia (ca. 224-651 C.E.)." *Iranian Studies* 31 (1998): 431-461.
- Digans, Beate, and Engelbert Winter. *Rome and Persia In Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Foss, Clive. "The Persians in the Roman Near East (602–630 AD)." *JAS* III.13, no. 2 (2003): 149-170.
- Idem. "The Persians in Asia Minor and the End of Antiquity." *The English Historical Review* 90, no. 357 (1975): 721-747.
- Idem. "The Sellarioi and Other Officers of Persian Egypt." *Zeitschrift Für Papyrologie Und Epigraphik* 138 (2002): 169-172.
- Gariboldi, Andrea. "Social Conditions in Egypt under the Sasanian Occupation." *La parola del passato : rivista di studi antichi* 64 (2009): 335-350.
- Garthwaite, Gene R. *The Persians*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Greatrex, Geoffrey, and Samuel N. C. Lieu, eds. *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II AD 363-630, A narrative sourcebook*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Hardy, E. R. Jr. "New Light on the Persian Occupation of Egypt." *Journal of the Society of the Oriental Research* 13 (1929): 185-89.
- Howard-Johnston, James. *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity: Historiographical and Historical Studies*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Variorum, 2006.
- Mac Coull, L. S. B. "Coptic Egypt during the Persian Occupation: The Papyrological Evidence." *SCO* 36 (1986): 307-329.

- Nikitin, A. B. "Middle Persian Ostraca from South Turkmenistan." *East and West* 42 (1992): 103-129.
- Petry, Carl F., ed. *The Cambridge History of Egypt: Islamic Egypt, 640-1517*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Pourshariati, Parvaneh. *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*. New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009.
- Sänger, Patrick. "The Administration of Sasanian Egypt: New Masters and Byzantine Continuity." *Greek, Roman & Byzantine Studies* 51 (2011): 653-665.
- Stratos, Andreas N. *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: 602-636*. Translated by Marc Ogilvie-Grant. Vol. 1. Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert Publisher, 1968.
- Venetis, E. "The Sassanid Occupation of Egypt (7th Cent. A.D.) According to Some Pahlavi Papyri." *Graeco-Arabica IX-X* (2004): 403-412.
- Yarshater, Ehsan., ed. *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*. Vol. 3(1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.