



ARABIA II. THE SASANIANS AND ARABIA

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ii. The Sasanians and Arabia

Within a few years after the commencement of [Ardašir I's](#) (r. ca. 224-242) program of conquest, the Sasanians undertook military engagements in both northeastern Arabia and Oman. In the late Sasanian period, they conquered Yemen Aden (see [ABNĀ'](#)). Generally, however, the Sasanians seem to have exercised political control in Arabia via their Arab clients.

According to Ṭabari and Ebn al-Aṭir, who copied him, [Ardašir](#) campaigned around 240 in Bahrain (Ṭabari, I/2, p. 820; tr., p. 15; Ebn al-Aṭir, I, p. 384); in Oman, Bahrain, and Yamāma (Dinavari, p. 45; tr., p. 69); or “in the country which lies between” Oman, Bahrain, Yamāma, and Hajar (*Nehāyat al-erab*, fol. 92b, apud Widengren). His adversary was a king in Bahrain named Sanat̄roq (Ṭabari, Dinavari, *Nehāyat al-erab*,) and a king in Oman named ‘Amr b. Wāqed Ḥemyari (*Nehāyat al-erab*, fol. 92b, apud Widengren). The *Nehāyat al-erab* elaborates further, suggesting that unnamed Arab kings wrote to As‘ad b. ‘Amr, king of Yemen, informing him of Ardašir’s attack, and that As‘ad marched with an army of 100,000 including “inhabitants of Tahāma, and those kings who were there among the descendants of Nezār b. Ma‘add and Fehr b. Mālek and Qalammas b. ‘Āmer b. Žāreb” (tr. Piacentini, 1985, p. 63). After killing the kings



of Bahrain and Oman in battle, Ardašir is said to have sent a message to As'ad b. 'Amr with an offer of peace and confirmation of his continued rule in Yemen; a promise was extended also to the kings of the Hejaz (northwestern Arabia) and Tahāma (coastal southwestern Arabia). After this, Ardašir is said to have returned to Eṣṭaḳr (*Nehāyat al-erab*, fol. 92b, apud Widengren).

The historicity of either a very pointed campaign by Ardašir against Bahrain (understood as the northeast Arabian mainland, rather than the island of the same name; see Wüstenfeld, pp. 175-97) or a more extensive one that took in the entire region between Oman and the modern Hofuf oasis (Hajar) has been discussed by scholars since 1879, when Theodor Nöldeke published his translation of that part of Ṭabari which deals with the history of the Sasanians and the Arabs. Whereas some scholars (e.g., Altheim and Stiehl; Widengren, p. 755) have dismissed it as a confusion with Ardašir's conquest of Hatra in northern Iraq (based on the graphic similarity between Hatra in Syriac and Ḥaṭṭā, the name of the coastal strip in northeastern Arabia), others (e.g., Piacentini, 1984; idem, 1985, pp. 64 ff.; Potts, 1985, p. 89; Daryae, in *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, p. 54) have accepted the conquest of eastern Arabia and Oman as plausible, even if the part of the story recounted in the *Nehāyat al-erab* about Neẓār b. Ma'add, Fehr b. Mālek, and Qalammas b. 'Amer embodies "some legendary embellishments and an intentionally epic tone" (Piacentini, 1985, p. 66).

One wonders what motivation Ardašir could possibly have had for launching an attack on eastern Arabia. The answer perhaps lies in the often discussed and equally contentious Parthian or Characene presence (Potts, 1985, p. 89; idem, 1988; idem, 1997) in eastern Arabia, and possibly in the alleged involvement of Arabs (*tāzigān*) and people from Mazun (*mazunigān*, i.e., Omanis) "who [inhabit] on the [Arabian] shore of the [Persian] Gulf" in the army of Haftānboḳt (q.v.), who was defeated by Ardašir in coastal Fars, according to the *Kār-nāmak ī Arsašir ī Pābagān* (sec. 7.12; Asha, p. 33; Bosworth notes that the name "is probably a misrendering of an Achaemenid term for an administrative district, denoting a component part of a province"; see Ṭabari, tr., p. 10, n. 32). In any case, one indication that an Arabian campaign may have taken place is provided by the eighth-century *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (sec. 52), according to which Ardašir "appointed Ōšag of Hagar as margrave (over the) Dō-sar and Bor-gil by the wall of the Arabs" (Daryae, in *Šahrestānīhā*, p. 20). Moreover, Ṭabari says that, in Bahrain, Ardašir founded a new city called Fasā (?) Ardašir or "the city of al-Ḳaṭṭ" (cf.



Syriac Ḥaṭṭā, noted above; Ṭabari, p. 820; tr, p. 16, n. 64; Nöldeke, 1879, p. 20; Frye, 1983, p. 167 and note 3, suggesting instead Pērōz Ardašir, i.e., “victorious [is] Ardašir”).

According to Yāqut (V, p. 122, apud Lammens), Ardašir established the Azd, an important tribal group in Oman, at Šehr on the Hadramawt coast (Lammens, p. 398; Potts, 2008, p. 198). Indirect confirmation of Sasanian control over Mazun in the reign of Ardašir is provided by Šāpūr I’s inscription at *Ka’ba-ye Zardošt* at Naqš-e Rostam near Persepolis, which includes it as one of his provinces (sec. 3.17). The likelihood that it was inherited by Šāpūr from a prior conquest of his father’s is strong, considering the fact that Šāpur himself is never said to have campaigned there (Potts, 2008, p. 200).

According to the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (sec. 25), *Ḥira*, near Kufa, was established by Šāpūr I, and this has been taken by some scholars as an indication that the Lakhmid dynasty there, who later functioned as Sasanian vassals charged with policing the Arab population of northern Arabia, was established at this time (e.g., Rothstein p. 44; Retsö, p. 481). Thereafter the Laḳmids functioned in much the same fashion as the Ghassanids did in northwestern Arabia for the Byzantine state (Nöldeke, 1888; Shahid, pp. 3-46).

A Sasanian presence on the borders of Hadramawt may have been the motivation behind an embassy sent by Šammar Yuhar’iš, king of Saba’, Du Raydan, Hadramawt, and Yamnat, to Ctesiphon in the early 4th century, perhaps on the occasion of the birth of Šāpūr II (Potts, 2008, p. 202). If so, this diplomatic gesture was a success, for when Šāpūr II launched a vicious assault on northern Arabia in 325, he is said by Ṭa’ālebi not to have advanced as far as Yemen “because the kings of this country were his clients” (Widengren, p. 731). According to Ṭabari, the impetus for the campaign was a series of attacks by Arabs from northeastern Arabia “who looked on Fars as their pastureland” (Ṭabari, I/2, pp. 838-39; tr., pp. 54-55; Nöldeke, 1879, p. 53). These prompted Šāpūr II to cross the Persian Gulf to Ḥaṭṭ; advance through Bahrain and Hajar, slaughtering many tribes (Tamim, Bakr b. Wā’el, ‘Abd-al-Qays) as he went; destroy wells in Yamāma; and advance as far as Medina. Šāpūr deported some Tamim tribesmen to Kerman and Ahvaz (Nöldeke, 1879, p. 233), piercing their shoulder blades and binding them, for which, according to several Arab writers, he was termed *Do’l-aktāf*, “lord of the shoulders” (Ḥamza, pp. 51-52; tr. pp. 49-50; K̄vārazmi, pp. 102-3; tr., p. 102; Nöldeke, 1879, p. 57, n. 2; Christensen, p. 235, n.2).



Aside from interactions with their Lakhmid vassals, there is subsequently little evidence of direct Sasanian involvement in Arabia until the reign of **Ḳosrow I Anušervān** (r. 531-79). According to Ṭabari, during the reign of Justin II (r. 565-78), Sayf b. Ḍi Yazan Ḥemyari sought Byzantine assistance in expelling Ethiopian forces from Yemen (cf. the discussion in Rubin, pp. 192 ff.), but when he was rebuffed, he turned instead to the Lakhmid ruler No'mān b. Monḍer, Ḳosrow's governor of Ḥira, and eventually to Ḳosrow. One account has it that an expeditionary force of 800 prisoners awaiting execution were sent out under a commander named Vahrez (a title: cf. Procopius, *De Bello Persico* 1.12.10; Dinavari, p. 65, tr. p. 92: Vahrez, son of Kāmjār; his real name may have been something like Ḳozrad Narsis, according to Omani oral tradition recorded by Miles, pp. 423-24; see also Justi, p. 340; Nöldeke, 1879, p. 223, n. 2) to conquer Yemen (Ṭabari, I/2, pp. 945-49; tr., pp. 235-41 and n. 591; Bal'ami, pp. 1021-34; Dinavari, pp. 65-66; tr., pp. 91-93; Maqdesi, III, pp. 188-94; tr., III, pp. 532-36; Nöldeke, 1879, pp. 220 ff.). Also, earlier in his account, Ṭabari says that Ḳosrow sent an army of Daylamites, who “killed the Abyssinian Masruq in Yemen and remained there” (I/2, p. 899, tr., p. 160). An entirely different account is given by Theophanes of Byzantium, according to whom the Sasanian campaign was led by a general named Miranes (i.e., Mehrān, see Müller, p. 271; cf. Gignoux et al., pp. 99-100) against an Ethiopian king named Sanatourkes (Rubin, p. 190; there is evident confusion here with the Sanaṭroq of Bahrain defeated by Ardašir). Several contradictory sources date the death of Masruq to the 30th year of the Prophet Moḥammad (i.e., 582, thus Ḥamza, p. 136) or the 45th year of Kosrow's life, i.e., 575-76 (Mas'udi, sec. 1019; Ḥāji Ḳalifa, apud Fell, p. 46.). The *yaum al-mošaqqar*, which describes the ambush by Arab tribes of a caravan sent by Vahrez to Kosrow I, may reflect the tradition related by Ṭabari of the substantial booty forwarded to the Sasanian king that had been seized when the army entered Ṣan'a (Potts, 2008, p. 207). Ṭabari also recounts the return of Vahrez to Ḳosrow, preceded by the installation of a Sasanian client, one Sayf b. Ḍi Yazan, charged with collecting taxes, “which he was to send to Kisrā annually as fixed sums” (I/2, pp. 949-50, tr. pp. 241-42).

In another version of the story, Sayf was assassinated, and the Abyssinians returned to power, prompting Vahrez to lead a second expedition and reconquer Yemen, where he remained as viceroy, a position held by his son Marzbān, grandson and great-grandson, until one Bādān was appointed governor. Bādān is said to have ruled until the coming of Islam (Ṭabari, I/2, pp. 957-58; tr., pp. 251-52; Nöldeke, 1879, pp. 236-37). These accounts,



however, appear to conflate expeditions sent out by Ƙosrow I (the original one) and Ƙosrow II Parvēz (the later re-conquest). Probably related to the earlier campaign was the establishment of the fort at Rostāq in the interior of Oman (cf. *rōstāg*, the Mid. Pers. term for an administrative division), known as Borj Kesrā b. Šerwan, and the tradition, relayed in the Omani history known as the *Ƙašf al-ġomma*, that “The Persian monarchs used to send persons who had incurred their displeasure or whom they feared to their army in ‘Omán” (Ross, p. 118).

Like the Lakhmids in the north, the Jolandā rulers of Oman functioned as Sasanian vassals (Wilkinson, 1975). Despite four centuries of interaction, however, relatively little archeological evidence of the Sasanian presence has been found anywhere in eastern Arabia (coins: Potts and Cribb; Potts, 2010; metalwork: Potts, 1993; weaponry: Potts, 1997b; ceramics: Kennet). A few examples of Sasanian glass with cut and polished decoration have been found in Yemen (Whitehouse, p. 11, citing examples illustrated in Roux, p. 209), and a carved column capital from the Hadramawt has been compared with Sasanian architectural decoration (Keall, 1998).

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