



EGYPT IV. RELATIONS IN THE SASANIAN PERIOD

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Sasanian occupation of Egypt. The occupation of Egypt, beginning in 619 or 618 (Altheim-Stiehl, 1991), was one of the triumphs in the last Sasanian war against Byzantium. Kōsrow II Parvēz (Abarwēz; 590-628, with interruption) had begun this war in retaliation for the assassination of the emperor Maurice (582-602) and had achieved a series of early successes, culminating in the conquests of Jerusalem (614) and Alexandria (619). A Byzantine counteroffensive launched by Heraclius in spring 622 shifted the advantage, however, and the war was brought to an end by the fall of Kōsrow on 25 February 628 (Frye, pp. 167-70). His son and successor, Kavād II Šērōe (Šērōy), who reigned until September, concluded a peace treaty returning territories conquered by the Sasanians to the eastern Roman empire.

Chronology. Greek papyrus documents provide some termini for the arrival of the Persian conquerors in particular districts of Egypt. These termini show that Nomos Arsinoites was occupied some time after 21 July 618 (*Ägyptische Urkunden*, no. 725) and Nomos Oxyrhynchites some time between 5 July 619 (Kalbfleisch, III, no. 49) and 12 January 620 (*Oxyrhynchus* LVIII, no. 3959). The evidence from an anonymous Jacobite Syriac chronicle, in which the Sasanian



conquest of Alexandria is assigned to June 619, is consistent with the mentioned termini (“Chronicon Miscellaneum,” p. 146 ll. 25-27). The information from later chronographies, in which the conquest of the whole of Egypt is dated to the 6th or 7th year of Heraclius’ reign, is thus incorrect (Boor, p. 301 ll. 8-11; Chabot, 1910, p. 404, col. 2 ll. 13-19; idem, 1920, p. 227 ll. 3-5; Bedjan, p. 94 ll. 21-27). In the anonymous Syriac chronicle the withdrawal of Sasanian troops from Alexandria is dated to a period corresponding to June 629 (“Chronicon Miscellaneum,” p. 146 ll. 28-30). New evidence can also be expected from the excavations at Abū Mīnā (Grossmann, pp. 182-85).

Documentary evidence. The survival of many Middle Persian papyrus documents attests the presence of Sasanian occupation forces in Egypt through language, script, and use of the Zoroastrian calendar. In addition, there are more specific indications. For example, in one papyrus Persian military stations are listed (Weber, 1992, no. 55; for a dated Sasanian papyrus from Egypt, see Blois). Greek and Coptic documents also include references to particular incidents. For example, the father of a family who had fled before the Persians to Arsinoë in the Fayyūm wrote in Greek on papyrus to his master, complaining that the Persians had abducted him from his home, tortured him into unconsciousness, and then robbed him of his children (Zereteli, app., pp. 99-105). In a Coptic letter on papyrus found in the monastery of Epiphanius in western Thebes a woman asked a revered person for instruction in the matter of the Persians (Crum, 1926a, no. 433). Another Coptic letter from the same monastery, written on a potsherd, presupposes the Sasanian occupation of Thebes (Nē); the writer mentions someone called “(the) Persian that is in Nē,” presumably the Sasanian chief official there (Crum, 1926a, no. 324). In a Coptic letter on a sandstone fragment a widow from Jēme sought help from Pisentius, bishop of Hermonthis: The Persians had murdered her son and taken all her livestock, so that she was unable to pay her taxes and was in serious danger of being evicted from her home (Drescher). In a Coptic letter on a potsherd from Thebes a man and his family are said to have been forced to flee before the Persians (Crum, 1939, no. 67). A Coptic papyrus from Nomos Hermopolites was addressed by fourteen villagers to their lord, whose name, Perēs (?) Kōsrōi, was presumably Persian (MacCoull, p. 311); they promised “by God and the good fortune [*k^varraḥ*; see FARR(AH)] of the king of kings,” to deliver a fixed quantity of flax in fourteen days. The date of this document corresponds to 8 November 625 (Till, no. 48). In a Greek papyrus letter a person named Serenus reported to his lord that he could not do his work because he had fallen into the hands of the Persians (Kalbfleisch, II, no.



22). Three Greek papyri from Oxyrhynchus include references to large sums of gold that were to be sent to the Sasanian “king of kings”; in two of them instructions issued about the matter by a person named Šahr-Ālānyōzān are also mentioned (Weber, 1991). These documents are dated respectively 19(?) October 623, 6 November 623, and between 26 April and 25 May 624 (*Oxyrhynchus* LI, no. 3637; XVI, no. 1843; LV, no. 3797).

Literary evidence. There is little information on the Sasanians in Egypt from literary sources. In the only surviving Ethiopic translation of the chronicle of John, bishop of Niciu, written in the second half of the 7th century, there is a gap between 610 and 640. Some of the more credible reports are the following. As the conquerors approached Alexandria John III, patriarch of the Chalcedonian church of Egypt, along with the imperial magistrate and commander, Nicetas, fled by boat (Festugière, pp. 402 l. 22-405 l. 14). There had been much tumult in the city, and, when news of the capture of Niciu and Babylon arrived, a Cypriote monk and his compatriot, a deacon, embarked for home as quickly as possible (Ven, pp. 81 l. 3-82 l. 9). According to a Nestorian Syriac chronicle attributed to Elias, bishop of Merv (?), Alexandria was taken by treachery. The traitor was a Christian Arab who came from the Sasanian-controlled northeastern coast of Arabia (Bēt Qaṭrāyē). The booty and the keys to the city were sent to Yazdīn, minister of finance (*vāstaryōšānsālār*) of the Persian empire, and through him to the Sasanian “king of kings” (“Chronicon Anonymum,” pp. 25 l. 22-26 l. 15). Severus b. al-Moqaffa’ (10th century) knew of a palace in Alexandria called Qaṣr Fāresī (Persian castle; Evetts, 1904, p. 485 ll. 8-10). He also reported that in Alexandria every man between the ages of eighteen and fifty years had been brutally massacred (Evetts, 1904, pp. 485 l. 10-486 l. 3). The Coptic patriarch Andronicus remained in the country, experiencing and witnessing suffering as a result of the occupation (Evetts, 1904, p. 486 ll. 8-11). His successor in 626, Benjamin I, remained in office well beyond the end of the occupation; during his time the Sasanians moderated their policy to a certain extent. When the Persian conquerors approached Coptus, the bishop Pisentius abandoned his episcopal see; with his disciple and biographer, John, he sought refuge at Jēme and later joined the community of Epiphanius in western Thebes (Gawdat, pp. 314-19).

The preceding information is consistent with reports of pillaging and the destruction of Coptic monasteries in Lower Egypt, for instance, at Pelusium (Evetts, 1895, pp. 71 l. 22-72 l. 4). A group of prosperous monasteries not far from Alexandria was ravaged and the monks murdered or exiled (Evetts, 1904,



p. 485 ll. 1-5). The monastery of Canopus escaped only because it was difficult for the Persian troops to reach it (Evetts, 1904, p. 487 ll. 3-6). The vacant Coptic bishopric of Latopolis (Isnā) was taken over by the bishop of Hermonthis “because the Persians did not permit the ordination of new bishops,” evidence that the Sasanian conquerors meddled in the administrative affairs of the Coptic church (Forget, p. 345 ll. 11-13).

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