



ḲOSROW II

ḲOSROW II, the last great king of the Sasanian dynasty (590-628; [Figure 1](#), [Table 1](#)).

Ḳosrow II (Khosrow II) was the last great king of the Sasanian dynasty. He is a giant figure who towers over the Middle East in the last few decades before the coming of Islam. The principal extant history of the period, written in Armenia in the early 650s, was appropriately entitled *The History of Khosrow* (Ps.-Sebeos, p. 72; cf. Howard-Johnston 2002, pp. 43-44). Ḳosrow was held personally responsible for the destruction of the old world order. He lost his throne, then recovered it with Roman help, and, a decade later, went on to emulate the feats of the Achaemenids, conquering the rich Roman provinces of the Middle East, including Egypt, before a sudden vertiginous fall at the very apogee of his career. He is rightly accorded a great deal of space in the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsi, over six times as much as [Ardašir I](#), founder of the Sasanian dynasty, and not much less than the great sixth-century reforming ruler, Ḳosrow I Anōšīravān (531-79).



Figure 1. Dinar of Ḳosrow II (Slg. Deutsche Bundesbank, Inv.-Nr. 39/04); obverse: bust of Ḳosrow II; reverse: bust, nimbated. (Courtesy of Deutsche Bundesbank, Frankfurt)

Both Ps.-Sebeos and Ferdowsi recycle material from the *Khwadāy-nāmag* tradition, which dealt in detail with high politics at the start and close of Ḳosrow's reign: his flight to Roman territory, his restoration, the rebellion of his uncle Bestām (see [BESTĀM O BENDŌY](#)), the last harsh phase of his rule, his deposition and execution. Similar material was picked up from the many versions of the tradition in circulation by the tenth century (in Arabic translation as well as Pahlavi) by a number of great Muslim historians, including Dinawari, Ebn Qoṭayba, Ya'qubi, Ṭabari and Mas'udi (all writing in Arabic), as well as Bal'ami who introduced additional *Khwadāy-nāmag* material into his Persian version of Ṭabari's *Annals* (Rubin 2009). It has been argued that the Roman war was passed over in virtual silence in the indigenous Persian historical tradition (Rubin 2005), but this seems unlikely, given the intertwining of foreign and domestic coverage evident in the non-Muslim sources which also drew on the tradition (Ps.-Sebeos, the west Syrian historical tradition which goes back to Theophilus of Edessa [d.785], the *Annals* of [Eutychius](#), the *Chronicle of Seert*, and the *History of Caucasian Albania* by Movsēs Daskhurants'i), and the requirement that something should explain the change (stressed in the Muslim versions) in the behavior and fortune of Ḳosrow towards the end of his reign.

A wide range of non-Muslim texts, lives of saints as well as histories, dating

from the seventh-tenth centuries, written in Greek, Armenian, Syriac, Latin and Arabic, provide more detailed information on military operations and diplomatic dealings, as well as helping to flesh out domestic history (Howard-Johnston 2010). Much might be expected from the Pahlavi papyri emanating from Egypt under Sasanian rule (619-29), but such is the difficulty of the cursive script that only tantalizing glimpses can be gained of the occupation forces and administration (Hansen 1937; Perikhanian 1961; Weber 1992).

Early years. Ḳosrow II Parvēz was the grandson of Ḳosrow I Anōšīravān and son of [Hormozd IV](#) (579-89), whose rigid sense of justice and autocratic ways soon alienated his leading subjects. His paternal grandmother, Kayēn (Qāqīn), was the daughter of the khagan (*kāqān*) of the [Hephthalites](#), whose realm was destroyed in 557 by Ḳosrow I in alliance with the new great power of central Asia, the Turkish khaganate. His mother belonged to one of the great aristocratic families, the Aspābad (see [ASPBED](#)) from Parthia. Her brothers, Bendōy and Bestām, were to play a notable part in his early life (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 72-3, 75). His birth should be placed around 570 at the earliest, since he is repeatedly described as a boy or very young man (*manuk*) in 590-1 by Ps.-Sebeos (pp. 75, 76, 81, 82). This makes him an almost exact contemporary of the Prophet Mohammad.

Ḳosrow's first appearance was at P'artaw, capital of the Aḷuank' (Caucasian Albanians) in the reign of his father Hormozd. A significant success is credited to his governorship. When Bakur, king of Iberia (Georgia), died, leaving children who were minors, Ḳosrow's jurisdiction was enlarged to include two Iberian districts, Ran and Movakan, which neighbored Albania. From this bridgehead he opened negotiations with the Iberian nobility, the *erist'avis*, and, by offering inducements and guaranteeing their hereditary rights, secured the formal submission (manifested in tributary payments) of all Iberia, apart from two highland areas held by the two branches of the royal family. Within a very few years, as Iran was gripped by crisis, fighting on two fronts against the Romans in the west and the Turks in the north-east, he was recalled from Albania to his father's side. At this the Iberian *erist'avis* transferred their allegiance to the Romans and invited them to appoint a client-ruler of their choice (*Georgian Chronicles*, pp. 217-18). Unless Ḳosrow's governorship was nominal, these events should be dated to the second half of the 580s (*contra* Toumanoff 1963, pp. 381-86, who puts Bakur's death in 580).

By the end of 588 the military crisis had been surmounted. The Romans had been fought to a standstill (a mutiny halted all offensive operations in 588).



The commander-in-chief in the east, Bahrām Čōbin (see [BAHRĀM. vii. Bahrām VI Čōbin](#)), a member of another of the great aristocratic families (the Mehrān), had defeated the Turks and re-asserted Sasanian authority as far as the Oxus river and the city of Balkh in Bactria. But a new, yet graver crisis broke, when Bahrām rebelled, incensed at Hormozd's perfunctory acknowledgement of his achievements. He had no difficulty in gaining the support of his troops, whom, he claimed, Hormozd meant to deprive of all the spoils of victory (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 73-4; *Georgian Chronicles*, p. 220; Ṭabari, pp. 992-93; cf. Simocatta 3.6.9-8.14).

Accession and flight. While little is known of the early life of Ƙosrow, information is relatively plentiful about the circumstances of his accession. The three principal sources, Armenian (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 74-76), Roman (Simocatta 4.1.1-12.7) and Persian (the *Khwadāynāmag* as transmitted by Ṭabari, pp. 993-99) are largely independent of each other and relatively forthcoming. Uncertainty, however, surrounds Ƙosrow's precise role in the events surrounding the deposition, blinding and later execution of his father. Sasanian sources dating from his reign could not be expected to be candid about so sensitive a matter. Simocatta, writing at the climax of his later war against the Romans, was far from objective.

Bahrām marched across Iran, presumably along the northern edge of the plateau, repulsed a Roman-sponsored attack by Iberians and others on Azarbaijan (Ādurbādagān, Atropatene; see [Azarbaijan. iii](#)), and suffered a minor reverse at the hands of a Roman army operating in Transcaucasia (*Georgian Chronicles*, pp. 219-20; Simocatta 3.6.6-7.19). He then turned south towards Media where Sasanian kings customarily spent the summer months. When Hormozd slipped away to the south, he continued his march, going west to the Great Zāb, where he could cut communications between Ctesiphon and Persian forces on the Roman frontier. At this the troops camped outside Nisibis, the main Persian city in northern Mesopotamia, rebelled and made common cause with Bahrām. Loyalist forces sent north against them were bombarded with rebel propaganda. Hormozd's position became untenable when they mutinied, killed their commander, and dispersed. He decided to cross the Tigris and take refuge in [Hira](#), capital of the Lakhmid client-kingdom (Ps.-Sebeos, p. 74; Simocatta 4.1.1-3.3). But within three days of his arrival at Ctesiphon, he was overthrown in an apparently bloodless palace revolution. The leaders were his brothers-in-law, Bendōy, who was released from prison, and Bestām. At a formal court assembly, Bendōy presented a damning



indictment of Hormozd and then, after removing him from the throne and divesting him of the crown, ordered that he be detained. At that point or very soon afterwards Hormozd was blinded. The official version of these events, as transmitted by the *Khwadāynāmag*, places Ƙosrow in Azarbaijan at the time of the coup, thus distancing him from the mutilation of his father. He had, reportedly, come under suspicion when Bahrām declared that he should replace Hormozd, possibly going so far as to issue coins in his name from the mint at Ray. An alternative account, picked up by Simocatta's source, John of Epiphania, likewise has him flee to Azarbaijan but out of fear of what the conspirators might do, only agreeing to return when Bendōy guaranteed his safety. Back in Ctesiphon, Ƙosrow was enthroned and crowned in the presence of the court (Ps.-Sebeos, p. 75; Ʀabari, pp. 993, 995-96; Simocatta 4.3.4-6.5, 7.1-4; *Seert Chronicle*, pp. 465-66).

Not long afterwards—it was merely a matter of days according Ps.-Sebeos—Bahrām marched south to the Nahrawān canal on the left bank of the Tigris. A brief phase of diplomacy had ended with his summary rejection of an offer from Ƙosrow of the post of supreme army commander. On reaching the canal, he began to probe the defenses. Ƙosrow's troops were, without doubt, greatly outnumbered but managed to hold their own in a series of small engagements. Royal propaganda made much of Ƙosrow's involvement in the fighting and attributed feats of valor to him. But morale began to drop. Treachery was suspected at one point. It became increasingly plain that his cause was lost, that eventually an assault would succeed. The decision was taken that he should leave and seek asylum in the Roman empire. The story of his flight, accompanied by a thirty-strong retinue, his wives and his two maternal uncles, was subsequently transformed in the *Khwadāynāmag* into a dramatic chase, with Bendōy volunteering to act as decoy to hold up the pursuers. Ƙosrow and the rest of his party escaped and made their way up the Euphrates to [Circesium](#) on the frontier. He was received hospitably by the Roman commandant and was allowed to write to the Emperor Maurice (582-602) appealing for aid (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 75-76; Ʀabari, pp. 993-94, 996-99; Simocatta 4.7.5-10.8, 12.1-2).

There was only one legitimate claimant to the throne by this stage. Hormozd had been put to death after his blinding, with at least the tacit consent of Ƙosrow (Ʀabari, p. 998). Bahrām, who was eventually to have himself crowned in Ctesiphon, could justifiably be dismissed as a usurper, as he was in Ƙosrow's letter to Maurice. Ƙosrow may well have been little more than a



puppet in the hands of his uncles but his Sasanian descent gave him an undeniable claim to rule (Ps.-Sebeos, p. 75; Ṭabari, pp. 998, 999; Simocatta 4.7.2-3, 12.3-7).

It is hard to establish the chronology of the complex political, diplomatic and military events before and after Ḳosrow's flight from Ctesiphon. There is only one firm datum: Ḳosrow's reign lasted thirty-eight years and he was crowned after the beginning of the Persian civil new year on 27th June 590, since the first drachms officially issued in his name date from 590-1 (Tyler-Smith 2004, pp. 43-44). From this it follows that Bahrām built up his power in a slow and methodical fashion before making his bid for the throne. He probably spent most of 589 consolidating his position on the eastern marches of the empire and extending his authority over the Iranian plateau. He may also have secured Turkish backing, if there really were three kinsmen of the khagan in his entourage (Ṭabari, pp. 994, 997, 998). The second (military) phase of the rebellion must have been deferred until 590. He marched west, dealt with Iberian and Roman incursions in the far north-west, forced Hormozd to retreat south towards Ctesiphon when he approached Media, crossed the Zagros and established himself on the Great Zāb. Hormozd's deposition, following the failure of his last military effort, and Ḳosrow's installation took place at the earliest in mid-summer. There is, however, a telling reference in a mollifying letter sent by Ḳosrow to Bahrām before fighting began on the Nahrawān canal to the coming of autumn ("at the present time the trees have shed their raiment," Simocatta 4.8.7). So it may well be that Bahrām stayed in the east until early summer 590 and only reached the Great Zāb late in the campaigning season. The confrontation on the Nahrawān canal does not seem to have lasted long—it is presented as a matter of days rather than weeks (Ps.-Sebeos, p. 75; Simocatta 4.9; Ṭabari, pp. 993-94, 996-98). Bahrām's coronation was delayed for several months while he built up political support for the formal proclamation of a non-Sasanian king, until the celebration of Nowruz at the beginning of the religious new year on 9th March 591 (Simocatta 4.12.3-6; Higgins, pp. 8-10 [with the year emended to 591]).

Restoration. Ḳosrow appealed to Maurice for help first as a fellow-ruler who would naturally be disturbed at the sight of a rebel destroying the established order in the neighboring empire, and second on the grounds that the Romans needed the Persians to manage their sector of the outer world lest 'the fierce, malevolent tribes' might take control of Persia and 'thereby in the course of time gain irresistible might, which will not be without great injury to your

tributary nations as well'. This letter (reproduced by Simocatta 4.11) was forwarded to the capital by Comentiolus, senior Roman general in the region, together with a report of his own. Ḳosrow was invited to come to Hierapolis, where Comentiolus had his headquarters. It was from Hierapolis that he sent a delegation to present his case to the emperor and the Senate. He offered generous terms in return for Roman political and military backing: by calling himself Maurice's son, he had already acknowledged a degree of political subordination to the Roman empire; he agreed to return Persian gains in northern Mesopotamia, but his main territorial concessions were in Transcaucasia—the traditional balance of power in favor of the Persians would be redressed, Maurice being offered a roughly equal share both of Armenia and Iberia but Ḳosrow saving face by retaining the provincial capitals, [Dvin](#) and Tiflis (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 76, 84; Simocatta 4.11.11, 13.24).

Ḳosrow moved to Constantia, one of the two main military bases in Roman Mesopotamia, when he received the emperor's favorable response, and set about undermining Bahrām's regime. His uncles Beṣṭām and Bendōy, the latter of whom managed to escape from prison, rallied support in Azarbaijan, under the watchful eye of John Mystacon, the regional Roman commander, who was mobilizing troops in Armenia. Before long the garrison of Nisibis changed sides and Martyropolis surrendered, events that gravely weakened the northern defenses of Persian Mesopotamia. By the beginning of spring, troops were massing against Bahrām north and south of the Armenian Taurus. The strategic direction of operations was entrusted to Narses, who had replaced Comentiolus as the regional Roman commander in the south, at Ḳosrow's insistence. Ḳosrow was in nominal command. Narses advanced slowly towards the Tigris, taking control of Mardin and [Dārā](#) on the way, paused, then crossed the river and pushed on south-east at a slow and deliberate pace as far as the Lesser Zāb. This was a feint on a grand scale, intended to detain Bahrām in Mesopotamia until the point at which the Roman army could strike north-east and reach Azarbaijan before him. It also distracted attention from the approach of a small fast-moving Persian force, dispatched by Ḳosrow from Dārā past Singara and down the Euphrates, which took over the metropolitan region as soon as Bahrām hurried north. The northern army, under the joint command of John Mystacon and Bendōy, managed narrowly to elude Bahrām by Lake Urmiya before joining the main army. Bahrām, his troops now outnumbered, was forced to retreat south-east, deeper into Azarbaijan. After failing to win over the leaders of the Armenian forces with a promise of increased power and territory for a restored



Armenian monarchy, he was engaged in battle near [Ganzak](#). The fighting was fierce and lasted all day, ending in a decisive victory for the Romans and a close pursuit of the broken remnants of Bahrām’s army. The death toll was high. Many prisoners were taken, along with a rich haul of booty and all the elephants that had survived the battle. Bahrām himself escaped to the east, to Balk (Balkh), where he was later assassinated on Ḳosrow’s orders.

Ḳosrow’s formal restoration to power—after the victory at Ganzak—is datable to the early months of his second regnal year by coin issues. Drachms, on which his crown was now surmounted by two large wings representing Verethraghna, god of war and victory, were issued in large quantities from thirty-two mints (Tyler-Smith 2004, p. 45). His arrival on Roman territory cannot be dated with precision, but followed his armed confrontation with Bahrām, which is datable, as has been seen, to autumn 590. This leaves a period of some six months or so for negotiations, military preparations and subversion of Bahrām’s regime. Bahrām’s countermeasures, designed to shore up his position in northern Mesopotamia, can be dated to the very beginning of 591, since Ḳosrow had intelligence of them when he petitioned St. Sergius for help on 7th January 591. This is recorded in the inscription on a cross that he dedicated at the shrine of St. Sergius outside Sergiopolis (Simocatta 5.13.4-5). The same inscription records that the head of one of two trusted officers sent north by Bahrām was brought to Ḳosrow on 9th February (Simocatta 5.13.6). By this date the phase of negotiation was over and preparations for war were under way, since Ḳosrow had already moved to Constantia (Simocatta 4.14.5, 5.2.1). The advance from Constantia to Mardin, which opened the campaign, is dated, not unexpectedly, to the beginning of spring (Simocatta 5.3.1). It follows that Simocatta has made a mistake when he also gives the beginning of spring as the time when the second phase of detailed negotiations began (4.13.3). [Table 1](#) summarizes the established chronology.

Consolidation of power (592-602). Ḳosrow remained on good terms with the Romans for the first eleven years of his reign. A Christian from Khuzestan (Ḳuzestān), Širin (Shirin) was represented in public as the most influential of his wives. She it was who acted as the main conduit through which royal favor flowed to Christians in Mesopotamia. She was responsible for the construction of a church and associated monastery close to the palace in Ctesiphon and for the allocation of funds by the treasury for the salaries of the clergy and their vestments. Ḳosrow himself acknowledged St. Sergius’ help, not only in the civil



war but also in enabling Širin to conceive, by making public dedications at his shrine in Sergiopolis. The pagan Lakhmid kings, who managed the Arab tribes fronting Mesopotamia from their capital at Ḥira, were able to convert to Nestorian Christianity without objections from the Sasanian court. Far to the north, a neat solution was found to the problem of inter-confessional disagreement in Armenia, Ḳosrow acting as protector of the Monophysite catholicos at Dvin in the Persian sector while the Romans installed a rival Chalcedonian catholicos at Theodosiopolis in their sector. In these various ways, Ḳosrow not only mollified the Romans but also showed that he was mindful both of his Nestorian subjects, a very powerful interest group in Mesopotamia, and of the Monophysites who were entrenched in Transcaucasia and were growing in influence and numbers in Mesopotamia. He was even able to refuse a Roman request for the extradition of the relics of the Prophet Daniel (see [DĀNIĀL-E NABI](#)) from Susa, citing the strong feelings of his Christian subjects and the evident displeasure of the prophet himself (Ps.-Sebeos pp. 85-6, 91; Simocatta 5.13-14; *Seert Chronicle*, pp. 466-67, 468-69, 478-81).

The good relations between the *šāhānšāh* and his benefactor Maurice were most evident in their handling of the delicate issue of Armenia. The specter of Armenian independence had been raised by Bahrām Čōbin. There was also the perennial problem posed by cross-border movement. In the 590s it was mainly nobles and their followers from the Roman sector who asked for asylum with the Persians when the Romans sought to conscript them for service in their difficult Balkan war. Given the open character of the border, there could be no bar on Ḳosrow's receiving migrant nobles and giving them preferment, but, when they showed signs of taking up arms and seeking foreign help, as they did in Azarbaijan in 595, the Persian authorities cooperated whole-heartedly and effectively with their Roman counterparts to suppress the danger. Faced with a united front, the Armenians had no choice but to submit to one or other of the great powers. Ḳosrow then took care to weaken those who plumped for Persian service, by taking the nobles off to Ctesiphon and cantoning their followers at Isfahan. Sixty years later, Ps.-Sebeos could imagine that the two rulers had hatched a Machiavellian plot to destroy Armenia, by siphoning off all able-bodied males for service on distant fronts (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 86-88, 94).

For Ḳosrow, however, the most pressing task was to disengage from the political embrace of his maternal uncles, Bendōy and Beṣṣām. They had played



a vital part in thwarting the ambitions of Bahrām Čōbin and securing the throne for him. They were undoubtedly the chief men in his new regime, Bendōy taking charge of the government at the center and Beṣṭām being assigned the most important army command, as *spāhbed* of Khorasan. But Ḳosrow, young though he was, was not suited to the role of figurehead. He bided his time but then, five years on, staged what was in effect a coup in his own favor. Orders were issued for the arrest and execution of both his uncles as well as other nobles implicated in the killing of his father. Bendōy in Ctesiphon was easily disposed off, but Beṣṭām managed to escape to Gilān, after getting wind of what was in store for him as he journeyed to the capital on the royal summons. This was the beginning of a dangerous rebellion that gathered momentum swiftly and was to last for eight years (595-602).

Beṣṭām gathered supporters from all over the Sasanian empire and, in 596, ventured down into the open country around Ray, dispatching raiding forays south across Media. He was, it may be conjectured, hoping to trigger a general rising in north-west Iran. Prompt action by Ḳosrow scotched this plan. Nervous that the Armenian nobles, whom he had, in effect, interned, might be tempted to join in, he arranged for their liquidation, their deaths in most cases being attributed to natural causes. He mobilized a large army, including the now leaderless Armenian units stationed at Isfahan and a Roman contingent, marched north and inflicted a crushing defeat on Beṣṭām's forces near Ray, forcing Beṣṭām himself back into his mountain fastness in Gilān. Beṣṭām now adopted a more cautious policy and built up support step by step over the next four years. He won over the troops stationed in his home region of Kōmiš (Ar. Qumes, Lat. Comisene; see [DĀMGĀN](#)) far to the east on the northern edge of the plateau, and was joined there by the Isfahan Armenians. Finally, in 600, he succeeded in raising four of the provinces on the fringes of the Alborz mountains in rebellion—Rōyān and Zalēkhān south of Gilān, Āmul and Ṭabarestān on the shores of the Caspian across the mountains from Kumeš. Ḳosrow responded by appointing a distinguished Armenian general, Smbat Bagratuni (see [BAGRATIDS](#)), *marzbān* of Gorgān, with instructions to deal with the rebel provinces. This he did, once again penning Beṣṭām back into the Alborz. Beṣṭām now looked for help to Turān. Two rulers from the east, from lands once ruled by Kushans (1st century BCE—middle of 3rd century CE), were induced to join his forces in a bold thrust into the interior of Iran from the eastern marches in 601, but the danger was averted when one of the 'Kushan' rulers was suborned by Ḳosrow and had Beṣṭām assassinated. At this Beṣṭām's army broke up, the Gilān contingent withdrawing immediately to



‘the strongholds of their own land’, the Armenians to Kumeš where they defeated the force pursuing them. So it was left to Smbat in 602 to deal with the last spasm of rebellion. Mobilizing his own forces in Gorgān, he marched into Ṭabarestān and defeated the remaining rebel forces that had united to make a last stand (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 94-99 with Historical Note 18; *Khuzistan Chronicle*, pp. 8-9; *Seert Chronicle*, pp. 481-82).

Roman war, phase I (603-615). As summer yielded to autumn in 602, Kōsrow was at last the undisputed master of his empire, eleven years after his restoration. But before he could take stock and determine the general direction of policy at home and abroad, a new crisis broke. This time it originated in the Roman empire. A mutiny of the Roman army on the Danube rapidly escalated into a full-blown rebellion which culminated in the seizure of power by Phocas, a middle-ranking army officer, on 23rd November and the execution of the Emperor Maurice and five of his six sons on the 27th. Theodosius, his eldest son and designated heir, who had been crowned co-emperor in 590, managed to escape. This was made plain, despite official denials from the new regime, by the gruesome gallery of severed heads displayed to the population of Constantinople, from which Theodosius’ was missing (*Chronicon Paschale*, p. 694; Theophanes, pp. 290-91). He made his way eventually to Kōsrow’s court where he was warmly received, and, in a replay of the events of autumn 590, was promised help by Kōsrow. His status as Roman emperor was formally acknowledged by Kōsrow in a coronation ceremony staged in Ctesiphon (*Khuzistan Chronicle*, pp. 15-16). Roman propaganda naturally portrayed him as an impostor. It is, however, unlikely that both those who saw him in [Edessa](#) in 603 and the delegation of notables from Theodosiopolis who came out to meet him in 608 were deceived by an impostor (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 107, 111).

Persian forces were mobilized north and south of the Taurus, ready for action at the beginning of the campaigning season in 603. Kōsrow himself took command of operations in the south, which was much the more promising theatre. The regional commander Narses, whom he knew well from their joint campaign in 591 and who was still in post, had rebelled on hearing the news of Phocas’ coup. Kōsrow laid siege to Dārā, the outer bulwark of the Roman defensive system, and marched on with part of his army to help Narses who was under attack in Edessa from troops loyal to Phocas. After winning a decisive victory outside Edessa, he entered the city, where, in a carefully choreographed ceremony, Narses formally placed Theodosius under his



protection. In spite of the disruption caused by Narses' rebellion, Roman forces achieved considerable success, both in Armenia where they fended off a Persian attack and inflicted heavy losses (603) and on the north Mesopotamian front, where Dārā held out for a year and half and Narses was trapped and killed at Hierapolis (604/5) after being forced out of Edessa. Ḳosrow's commitment to Theodosius was tested by this hard fighting, but significant gains were made. Dārā fell in 604, and, in the north, the Romans were driven back to the old, pre-591 frontier on the Araxes-Euphrates watershed in the course of 604 and 605. Ḳosrow then halted large-scale operations, in order to conduct a recruiting campaign in 606 and to achieve clear numerical superiority on both fronts (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 107-10 with Historical Notes, 27-29; Theophanes, pp. 291-93).

Over the following nine years (607-15), the pace of the Persian advance gradually quickened. Key gains were Theodosiopolis, which capitulated once Theodosius was recognized as legitimate claimant in 608, and Edessa, which was captured in 609. Taking advantage of political divisions on the Roman side which climaxed in Heraclius' usurpation at the beginning of October 610, Persian forces breached the Romans' innermost line of defense on the Euphrates, taking and holding Caesarea of [Cappadocia](#) in the north (611), capturing [Antioch](#) and pushing on to the Mediterranean coast in the south (612). They may have been extruded from Cappadocia (in 612), but in the south they defeated a field army commanded by Heraclius in person in 613, occupied Syria and northern Palestine, intervened in Jerusalem to stop a pogrom (614), and were able, in 615, to advance across Asia Minor and appear on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus within sight of Constantinople (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 110-16, 122-23 with Historical Notes, 30-34, 37; *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 706).

There is no reason to suspect any wavering in Ḳosrow's commitment to Theodosius in the course of this long war of attrition. It may be conjectured that he had insisted on substantial cessions of territory as a *quid pro quo* for the aid he was offering, so that the war upon which he embarked held out the prospect of major gains as well as the repaying of a debt to a great benefactor. His determination was not in question at any point in this first phase of the war. It is also clear that he soon became confident of the outcome. For, at a date which cannot be fixed more precisely than the first decade of the seventh century, he abolished the Lakhmid monarchy through which successive *šāhānšāhs* had managed their Arab clients since the third century. This was an extraordinary act of state, quite inexplicable save as preparation for a



prospective extension of Sasanian authority over a new segment of the Fertile Crescent. The traditional unipolar system of client-management would have to be reconfigured to cope with new Arab clients who traditionally belonged to the Roman sphere of influence. When Kōsrow took this radical step, he was evidently confident of achieving a military breakthrough and confident too that Theodosius would fulfill his side of their agreement, as he himself had done in 591. The deterioration in personal relations between Kōsrow and the Lakhmid king, No'mān, of which much is made in the sources, should be seen as a consequence rather than a cause of this policy change, like the predictable tribal disturbances in the course of which forces loyal to the Sasanians suffered a reverse at Dhu Qār (*Seert Chronicle*, pp. 539-40; Ṭabari, pp. 1015-37). There was no question of Kōsrow's recognizing Heraclius' regime, when an embassy came, probably early in 611, to present the new emperor's credentials. Heraclius might have disposed of Phocas, thus avenging the murder of Maurice, but he too had usurped the throne which was properly Theodosius'. Kōsrow made it very clear that he would have no truck with an upstart, by the simple expedient of executing the three ambassadors from Constantinople (Ps.-Sebeos, p. 113). This was a second extraordinary act, in defiance of well-established convention, which, by removing any possibility of negotiation, was intended to prevent diplomacy ever supplanting brute force in his dealings with Heraclius.

Roman war, phase II (615-26). Nonetheless, within a few years, in 615, a second Roman delegation did set off for the Persian court. This time, the ambassadors, two senior ministers and a representative of the patriarch, were acting on behalf of the Senate, the only authority which Kōsrow would recognize as empowered to speak for the Roman state. The appearance of a Persian army within sight of Constantinople had prompted the Romans to sue for peace without preconditions. Heraclius had opened negotiations, by going in person across the Bosphorus and communicating directly with the Persian commander, Šāhēn (Shāhin), from a ship offshore, after sending over supplies and a donative. He had made it plain that he was ready to stand down in return for peace and that the Romans would accept whomsoever Kōsrow chose to nominate as their ruler. Šāhēn had then agreed to help transmit what was in effect an offer of Roman obeisance to Kōsrow. Ambassadors were selected for what was without question a dangerous mission, and a formal letter was drafted, groveling in tone, which made no mention of the unpleasant fate of the previous embassy but simply pleaded for decent treatment of those who were coming now. Heraclius' offer took the form of a statement of the Senate's



willingness to accept a client-ruler chosen by Κοςrow, with a rider putting forward Heraclius' name as a worthy candidate *qua* avenger of Maurice. Since this was the initial negotiating position, the Senate was plainly ready to make massive territorial concessions and to accept tributary status. It was evidently reconciled to paying almost any price for peace (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 122-23; *Chronicon Paschale*, pp. 706-9).

Κοςrow had gained far more than he could have dreamed of when he attacked in 603. He had reduced the Roman empire to the status of abject petitioner. The Senate had opened the way for the formal restoration of Theodosius. He had thus achieved his principal declared war aim and there was much more there for the taking. But in the end he disregarded the Senate's offer and had the ambassadors interned. There was presumably considerable debate before the change of policy was agreed, since it entailed the dumping of Theodosius (who is never heard of again) and a prolongation of the war with the aim of dismembering the Roman empire. No insight into Κοςrow's reasoning is given by any of the extant sources, even those which drew on the lost *Khwadāy-nāmag*. But it was probably the menacing presence of a great power in the north and the east, which shaped his thinking. A rump Roman state could pose no serious danger on its own, but it would be a continuing distraction to the Sasanian empire as it confronted its steppe rival. The sedentary peoples of western Eurasia would have to be united under a single political authority, if they were to hold their own in a confrontation with the steppe empire of the Turks. A reminder of Turkish military capability came in 615, when the 'Kushan' rulers in the lands fronting Khorasan called on the Turkish khagan for help and Turkish forces proceeded to defeat the army commanded by the elderly Smbat Bagratuni, who had been called out of retirement, and followed up their victory by raiding deep into the interior of Iran, as far west as Ray and Isfahan (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 100-2).

It is just possible to see the shape of Κοςrow's grand strategy in this second phase of his western war, when his ultimate aim was the destruction of the Roman empire. He made full use of the advantage of inner lines which had been gained in 612 when his forces took control of northern Syria and a corridor to the sea beyond Antioch, thereby cutting the land routes connecting Asia Minor to southern Syria, Palestine and Egypt. Over the decade 615-624, the direction of Persian offensive thrusts oscillated between the north-west and the south. Palestine replaced Asia Minor as the target in 616, direct rule being established over the whole region, including its desert frontage, with



little or no fighting (Flusin, pp. 177-80). The main operations of the year were taking place far away to the east, in Bactria, where Smbat Bagratuni defeated the principal Kushan ruler (apparently a Hephthalite) who had called in the Turks in 615 (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 102-3). Asia Minor was targeted again in 617, when two armies invaded and met up in Pisidia (Ps.-Sebeos, p. 113)—a campaign probably intended to give the impression that Kōsrow was giving a higher priority to the conquest of Asia Minor than of Egypt. In 618 there was a pause, as Persian land forces were redeployed and concentrated in southern Palestine, for an attack in massive force on Egypt. Both Kōsrow's leading generals, Šahrwarāz and Šāhēn, took part in the 619 campaign, in the course of which Alexandria was taken (*Chronicle to 724*, pp. 17-8). By the end of 620 the whole of Egypt was under firm Persian control, and Kōsrow could switch his attention back to Asia Minor (Altheim-Stiehl 1992).

There was no possibility of disguising the direction of his next attack in force, but something could be done to distract the Romans' attention. For just as Kōsrow had to concern himself with his north-eastern, steppe frontier while engaged in warfare in the west, so the Romans had to be assured of security in the Balkans if they were to commit most of their forces to the defense of Asia Minor. This meant that they had to keep on good terms with the nomadic Avars, the great power of central and eastern Europe, who had been gradually pushed back to the Danube once Roman troops were released from the east in autumn 591. Phocas halted Maurice's long, hard-fought Balkan war, which had proved so unpopular both in Armenia and with the field army, and, within a year or so of his seizure of power, evidently succeeded in concluding a formal peace with the Avars, since he was able to transfer substantial forces to the eastern front in 604 (Michael Whitby, pp. 80-191). Attacked as they had been in their heartland, the Carpathian basin, and stripped of their subject Slav tribes south of the Danube, the Avars made no attempt to break the peace until 622, when they attacked in force and besieged Thessalonica—unless they had a hand in stirring up the Slav tribes who attacked the city two years earlier (*Miracula S. Demetrii*, 2.1-2). Offensive action by the Avars in 622 was so well-timed from the Persian point of view, that it is tempting to attribute it, at least in part, to Persian initiative. The Avars certainly lay inside the Persians' diplomatic horizon, since, four years later, they joined in a carefully coordinated attack against Constantinople. There could be no ideological objection to seeking a nomad ally against the Romans since the Romans had done so some fifty years earlier, putting Iran in great peril when they attacked in concert with the Turks.



It seems more likely than not then that the important role of the Avars in the final stage in Ḳosrow's war of conquest in the west was one consciously allocated to them by Ḳosrow and his policy-planners. If so, Ḳosrow's own plan of action can be seen in a new light, designed to pull the Romans first east (in 622), then west (622-3), before the final hammer blow was to be struck in the east in 624. His forces invaded Asia Minor in 622. While advance units monitored Roman military exercises which were being conducted by Heraclius in Bithynia and guarded the passes leading to the plateau, the main army undertook the laborious task of imposing Persian authority locality by locality on north-east Asia Minor. Defensive operations initiated by Heraclius at the conclusion of the exercises achieved some success, but petered out in August when he hurried back to Constantinople to deal with the new crisis in the west. In 623, while Heraclius was preoccupied with the Avar problem (temporarily solved by the promise of massive tributary payments but only after long, fraught negotiations, in the course of which he was nearly captured and the suburbs of Constantinople were raided), Ḳosrow's forces made significant advances both by land, pushing west across northern Asia Minor as far as Ancyra which they captured, and by sea, taking Rhodes, which commanded the south-eastern approaches to the Aegean, and a number of other islands. Ḳosrow himself planned to direct operations in 624, taking command of a large reserve army which was to be mobilized in relative safety, in Azarbaijan. The plan was evidently to overwhelm such forces as the Romans could field, and to complete the conquest of Asia Minor, thereby stripping Heraclius and the Senate of their main resource-base.

The plan went wrong almost from the start. Before the mobilization was complete, a small, swift-moving Roman expeditionary force, commanded by Heraclius, appeared within striking distance of the Persian army, to the consternation of the high command. A counterattack had been expected, once Heraclius was free to return to Asia Minor, but the Roman choice of Caesarea as assembly-point indicated that the target lay across the Taurus and Anti-Taurus to the south-east, in [Cilicia](#) or northern Syria. Surprised, Ḳosrow's great army scattered and Ḳosrow himself fled into the Zagros and made his way south to safety. With the strategic initiative temporarily in his hands, Heraclius caused extensive devastation as he marched through Persian territory. The sack of the great fire temple of [Ādur Gušnasp](#) at [Takt-e Solaymān](#) and the pollution of its sacred pool were particularly damaging blows. Worse was to come, when the Turkish khaganate agreed to come to the Romans' aid, in response to an embassy sent by Heraclius from his winter-quarters not far



from P'artaw in Albania. Heraclius and his troops proved elusive and dangerous in the following year (625), when three Persian armies were deployed against them in Transcaucasia. But, despite suffering two defeats, the Persian generals succeeded eventually in circumscribing his movements, forcing him first north, back to Albania (where the Laz and Abasgian contingents left for home), and then south-west to the region of Lake Van where both pursuers and pursued wintered. A surprise night attack in mid-winter on the headquarters of the senior Persian general, Šahrwarāz, caused confusion, netted some rich booty, but did not disrupt preparations for the following year's campaign.

The grand offensive deferred from 624 was scheduled to take place in 626. Such losses as had been suffered in the two intervening years were more than made good. A new army was raised and placed under the command of the second of Kōsrow's great generals, Šāhēn. The Avars were also to be brought into play, Persian diplomats having persuaded them to break the treaty they had agreed with the Romans in 623 with an alluring offer: once Roman resistance had been overcome, the rump Roman empire would be partitioned; the Avars would occupy the Balkan provinces, including Constantinople, while the Persians took Asia Minor, a great western bastion, like Egypt, from which they could project their power west over the Mediterranean (Howard-Johnston 1999).

As soon as winter eased, in March 626, Šahrwarāz drove Heraclius from Lake Van, first south over the Armenian Taurus, then west through northern Syria and Cilicia, and finally north over the Taurus on to the Anatolian plateau. He then marched on towards Constantinople (which he reached in the middle of July), ignoring Heraclius when he left the main diagonal road across Asia Minor and veered north to Sebasteia. Šāhēn, meanwhile, was leading the new army, reinforced by troops seconded from Šahrwarāz's command, across Transcaucasia. The outcome of the war was decided by two engagements fought that summer. In the first, a battle fought near Amaseia on the northern edge of the Anatolian plateau, a Roman army (presumably that commanded by Heraclius, who only returned to Constantinople in late summer or early autumn), intercepted and destroyed Šāhēn's. Kōsrow had Šāhēn's body (he died after the battle) embalmed and brought to him for posthumous punishment. The second engagement took the form of a fierce ten-day siege of Constantinople by a huge Avar host (numbering some 80,000 men), in the course of which twelve siege-towers and Chinese lever artillery were deployed



against the city. There was also an ever-present danger that Šahrwarāz would manage to ferry troops over to aid the attackers. Had Constantinople fallen, Kōsrow would undoubtedly have achieved his second, ambitious war-aim. However, the city had been well prepared, both materially and psychologically, and morale was boosted on the eve of the siege by the arrival of a detachment of hardened soldiers sent by Heraclius. A flotilla of fast cutters also proved their worth, first by making it difficult for Persians and Avars to liaise, then by intercepting and destroying a Persian force, as it was being shipped across the Bosphorus. Siege operations climaxed in a general assault which began on 6th August, continued through the following night and was broadened on the 7th to include an amphibious attack across the Golden Horn. The failure of this supreme effort led to restiveness in the besieging host and its hasty withdrawal. Powerless on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus, Šahrwarāz could do nothing but follow suit not long afterwards (Howard-Johnston 1995).

Kōsrow's regime never recovered from these two serious setbacks. They tore from his grasp the victory which would have compensated for many years of hard fighting, for heavy losses, for massive expenditure. A third blow was struck in the north, when a Turkish raiding army, commanded by the *shad*, a nephew of the khagan, intervened in support of the Romans, crossing the Caucasus and rampaging freely over Albania and Azarbaijan while Kōsrow's field armies were engaged in the west. Kōsrow replied haughtily to the ultimatum which he received from the khagan, but the tone of lofty disdain in which he was addressed by 'the king of the north, lord of the whole world, your king and the king of kings' and the curt demand for the evacuation of Roman territory and the release of Roman prisoners-of-war (as well as the fragments of the True Cross, which had been taken from Jerusalem in 614) assuredly filled him and his advisers with despondency. The war was now likely to be prolonged indefinitely, and there was no guarantee of ultimate success (Movsēs Daskhurants'i, pp. 81-82, 87-88).

Domestic affairs (602-26). Like the greatest of the early Sasanian kings, Kōsrow was above all a war-leader. Government for him consisted primarily of the direction of military forces, first against internal enemies, then against Iran's long-standing imperial rival in the west. After twenty-four years of conflict with the Romans, the strain was beginning to tell. Different interest groups began to voice complaints: for military families, who included much of the landed gentry, it was the losses suffered and the long years of service on



distant fronts; for senior post-holders and the aristocracy, it was the increasingly autocratic behavior of the crown; for the mercantile classes it was the growing impediments to the free movement of goods; for all it was the ratcheting up of taxation (Movsēs Daskhurants'i, pp. 89-90). This, however, is not the image of Ḳosrow presented in the *Šāh-nāma*, by far the most influential version of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* to have been handed down to posterity. Once he has secured his throne against the challenge of Bahrām Čōbin and disposed of his uncles, Ferdowsi's Ḳosrow reigns in peace. Iran prospers, its territory shielded by four frontier armies.

Neighboring rulers dispatch deferential embassies. They send tribute, slaves and precious gems. The Roman emperor addresses Ḳosrow as 'lord of the world' and, in addition to the 'tribute of his country,' gives forty gold tables with coral legs, jewel-encrusted gold and silver statues of wild animals, silk brocade and furs. Ḳosrow responds graciously by ranking him above the rulers of China, India and the steppes, but does not grant his request for the return of the True Cross. No explanation is given for the presence in Iran of this most venerated of Christian relics. Ḳosrow's power and wealth are unsurpassed. His seven treasuries are full. His court is magnificent, as are the stables associated with it and the royal menagerie of birds of prey and exotic animals. He is an equitable ruler, who insists that the grand have regard for their inferiors and sets an example with his generosity to the poor.

The omission of Ḳosrow's western war of conquest must surely have been deliberate. For it featured in Ferdowsi's source, an amplified version of the *Khwadāy-nāmag*, albeit with coverage limited to the opening offensive campaigns and the final phase, when there was a dramatic change in fortune and Heraclius led his army deep into Iran. Apart from an elliptical reference to Ḳosrow's acquisition of the True Cross and an incidental appearance of Roman forces, commanded by the emperor, in his narrative of Ḳosrow's fall, Ferdowsi says nothing about this dominating concern of Ḳosrow's reign. His Ḳosrow is already master of the world. So it is the peacetime pattern of Ḳosrow's life upon which he dwells. In place of battles, long marches and fraught negotiations, he holds forth about Ḳosrow's reunion with his great love, Širin, after many years of separation, about Širin's successful intrigue against another of his wives, the Roman Maria (made out, falsely, to be Maurice's daughter), and her sidelining of Maria's son Qobād Širōy, about his first encounter with [Bārbad](#) the musician, about the great throne which he restored and the palace which he commissioned, after a competition, from a Roman



architect. Careful surgery was required to sever the account of Ḳosrow's fall from the Roman military action which precipitated it. Instead he attributes it entirely to the machinations of two disaffected magnates, a powerful minister at court and the general in command of the Roman frontier. The Roman emperor's attack is mentioned, but he only acts after a request from the general and is deceived into withdrawing before he has crossed the frontier.

Ferdowsi thus took considerable trouble to suppress all mention of the last and greatest of Persian-Roman wars, filling out his narrative of the reign with entertaining material taken from the Romance of Ḳosrow and Širin (see [KOSROW O ŠIRIN AND ITS IMITATIONS](#)) which had been incorporated in his version of the *Khwadāy-nāmag*. As for his motives, it may perhaps be conjectured that he was taking care not offend the sensibilities of his patron, Maḥmud of Ghazna, the dominant ruler in the eastern half of the Islamic world, by expatiating on glorious Roman military achievements in the past, when the rising power in the western reaches of the contemporary Middle East was the Roman successor state, Byzantium, and its fighting forces were widely feared.

In one respect Ferdowsi did not mislead his readers. Širin was the most influential of Ḳosrow's wives. She did succeed in ousting Qobād Širōy from the court and in securing the promise of the succession for her son, Mardānšāh. Acting in concert with a cabal of Christian court doctors, she also promoted the reformed Nestorianism (closer to the compromise formulae of the Council of Chalcedon) advocated by Henana of Adiabene, head of the theological school at Nisibis. With her help, when the catholicosate fell vacant in 605, they managed to substitute Gregory of Prat for Ḳosrow's preferred candidate, Gregory Metropolitan of Nisibis, who was Henana's chief opponent. They tried to job in another candidate of their choice, when Gregory of Prat died in 609, but this time were blocked by the orthodox Nestorians. After the failure of an attempt to break the impasse in 612, the post of catholicos remained vacant for the rest of Ḳosrow's reign (Flusin, pp. 102-4, 106-10).

It appears that Ḳosrow was less concerned with restoring harmony among the Nestorians than with establishing good relations with the Monophysites who were in the majority in the Roman Levant and Egypt, as well as growing in importance on Sasanian territory. While there was a catholicos in post (so before the death of Gregory of Prat in 609), he organized a conference attended by delegates from the three monotheist faiths with substantial followings among his subjects: Jews, Nestorians and Monophysites. It was

chaired jointly by two highly placed Christian laymen, a Monophysite (Smbat Bagratuni) and a reformist Nestorian (the chief court doctor, Gabriel of Singara). As it is presented in a later, far from disinterested Armenian account, the conference—from which the Jewish delegates were ejected at an early stage—was the setting for a doctrinal debate between Nestorians, who had traditionally enjoyed royal favor, and the up and coming Monophysites, the outcome being a clear victory for the Monophysites (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 148-61- cf. Thomson 1998, and Garsoïan, pp. 355-84). In reality, it was probably an exercise in public relations, Ḳosrow seeking to carry Christian opinion with him as he prepared to authorize Monophysite episcopal appointments on annexed Roman territory and to transfer to the new bishops churches currently in Chalcedonian hands. Besides improving the prospect of his winning the support of Roman Monophysites, the conference also provided him with an independent justification for a new policy of even-handed treatment of the two leading Christian confessions within his realms (Flusin, pp. 111-18).

At no stage, despite considerable provocation from the Romans, did Ḳosrow abandon the long-established policy of religious toleration (on condition that Christians refrained from proselytizing). Propaganda spewed out from Constantinople, which was reworked and lifted on to a high literary plane in the public verse of George of Pisidia, sought to transform the war into a cosmic clash between good and evil, between a Christian empire, duly authorized by God, and a bloodthirsty regime of impious people who worshipped created things (Mary Whitby 1994). Whatever its impact on Romans (in particular on the troops serving with Heraclius, who were offered the crown of martyrdom if they were killed on campaign [Theophanes, pp. 307, 310-11]), this propaganda does not seem to have stirred the emotions of Ḳosrow's Christian subjects. It failed to tarnish his image as a beneficent ruler, who attended to their concerns. His appropriation of the True Cross, which was ceremonially brought into Ctesiphon in 614, was a well-judged counter-move (Flusin, pp. 170-72).

To the very end of the war, he made little effort to enforce the law against the conversion of Zoroastrians. Only three cases are recorded. Two involved members of the elite: First, Mehr Māh Gošnasp, member of an aristocratic family, who, after his baptism (at a discreet distance from Ctesiphon at Ḥira) in 595/6, lived for many years in obscurity in a monastery on the Tur Ābdin (across the Roman frontier) but was recognized and denounced when he came



to court with a delegation of bishops and monks to lobby against the appointment of a Henanian catholicos in 612; and Second, Māhanōš, son of a judge in [Adiabene](#), who did not conceal his change of faith and was denounced to the authorities around 605. Mihr Māh Gošnasp, who had taken the Christian name of George, was only executed after his obduracy was made plain though a written statement of his Christian faith, fourteen months after his initial arrest. Māhanōš was given many opportunities to recant. He was released after a first, short period in detention. Then, when he was arrested again, he was held in loose custody for fifteen years, during which he was allowed to receive many visitors and was invited to renounce Christianity at periodic appearances before different local judges. It was only in 621/2, after the failure of these efforts, that the case was transferred to the royal tribunal at Ctesiphon and he was condemned to death (Flusin, pp. 118-27). The third case was the most spectacular, in the sense that it was picked up and broadcast widely by Christian propagandists. It involved a cavalryman of humbler origin from Ray, who deserted after the Chalcedon campaign of 615 and, some years later, made his way to Jerusalem where he was baptized and tonsured, taking the name Anastasius. Inspired by his reading to emulate the feats of the early Christian martyrs, he went to Caesarea in 627 and flaunted his apostasy, leaving the Persian authorities no choice but to arrest him. By adamant refusals to compromise, he forced them to repatriate him and eventually to sentence him to death, a sentence which was carried out on 22nd December 627 not far from Ḳosrow's palace at Dastgerd (Flusin, pp. 221-63 who dates his execution a month later).

Within a general policy of toleration shown towards Christians of all denominations and Jews, Ḳosrow brought about some discreet shifts in the balance of favor. They had to be discreet to avoid provoking public opposition from powerful, long-established Jewish and Nestorian Christian constituencies at home. An initial tilt in favor of Jews, allowing them the right to settle in Jerusalem, after the capture of the city in 614, had to be reversed within two years because of growing Christian opposition in Palestine (Ps.-Sebeos, pp. 116-18, with Historical Note 35). Official favor was shown, as has been seen, towards Monophysites in the occupied Roman provinces, but it was not extended to Sasanian territory. There is no evidence of any toughening of policy even late in the reign. Sasanian Persia remained a poly-ethnic, pluralist society as the war approached its climax, twenty-four years on, despite the strains induced in the body politic and the economy.

Expenditure had inevitably grown – as can be seen from documented increases in the volume of drachms issued. Even allowing for dislocation in the monetary system and less recoinage in the two decades following Kōsrow's death, which allowed a higher than usual percentage of Kōsrow's later issues to remain in circulation, hoard evidence shows that there was a sudden jump in aggregate mint output in Kōsrow's 25th regnal year (614/5), on the eve of the definitive decision to liquidate the Roman empire, and a further rise to a higher level sustained through regnal years 33-37 (622/3-626/7) when the final assault was launched on Asia Minor (Gyselen 1990). Revenue, however, had also grown, as more and more tax-yielding Roman provinces were brought under Sasanian control and were required, *inter alia*, to provide large quantities of silver bullion, thus relieving Persian tax-payers of part of the increased burden. Kōsrow himself remained confident of the outcome of the war as he reached out for ultimate victory. This confidence had been made manifest earlier, in special issues of drachms dating from regnal years 23 (612/3) and 26-8 (615/6-617/8), on which Kōsrow's bust appeared twice, crowned and full-face (unlike the usual right-turning profile) on the obverse, likewise looking out full-face on the reverse but bare-headed and surrounded by a flaming nimbus. These coins were almost certainly celebrating victories or prospective victories in the west, as is made plain by their triumphalist legend ('Kōsrow, King of Kings, has increased royal glory, has increased Ērān, [he is] well-omened/of good religion'). The confidence was still there in 625/6 and 626/7 (years 36 and 37), when drachms of the same type and with an identical legend, were issued (Göbl, pp. 20, 53-54; Gyselen 2004, pp. 64-65, 86-87, 126-27).

Kōsrow also made preparations to his celebrate his forthcoming victory in public on a monumental scale. Among the sites chosen were [Bisotun](#) in southern Media and [Naqš-e Rostam](#) in Fārs, the main venues for the commemoration of the achievements of Achaemenid and early Sasanian kings. At both, he commissioned reliefs which would dwarf those already in place. In the event none of them was finished. The panel prepared at Bisotun was huge (nearly 200 meters across). It was to be the focal point of a royal complex, comprising a massive viewing platform, a palace below, a bridge over the river immediately to the east, and, on the far bank, a new approach road. The great panel was, however, left blank, its surface still in the process of being gouged out and rendered smooth. Work had progressed further on the somewhat smaller panel at Naqš-e Rostam. The surface had been planed flat but the screen so formed remained bare of reliefs. Similar evidence of sudden



abandonment of projects is to hand at two other sites, both not far from Bisotun. At Harsin, a small royal complex was built (a palace and, nearby, a rock-cut panel fronted by a narrow terrace and artificial pool) but there too there is no trace of carving on the prepared surface. Only at Tāq-e Bostān, where an *ayvān* was cut into the rock and three out of four planned reliefs were finished, can some idea be obtained of the iconography which might be used to convey the majesty of the *šāhānšāh* to the onlooker. The dominating figure is that of Kōsrow, in the center of an investiture scene carved in deep relief in the upper register on the rear wall of the *ayvān*. An air of military menace hangs over the heavily armored and helmeted horseman who stands motionless in the lower register and who probably represents Kōsrow's *fravaši* (tutelary spirit, see [FARR\[AH\]](#)). These central images of Kōsrow's majesty and might are flanked by scenes of hunting. On the left, in a well-planned and intricately carved scene, the action takes place in the marshlands of lower Mesopotamia, where the prey is wild boar. Kōsrow (magnified compared to the other figures) stands in a boat and pulls his bow. To the right a deer hunt is in progress, taking place in a royal park under Kōsrow's gaze, but the relief is far from finished—men, animals and equipment have been carefully outlined, but the sculptural work proper, of shaping and surface detailing, has not begun. Here too work must have stopped abruptly, when the tide of war turned and Kōsrow's regime collapsed (Howard-Johnston 2004, pp. 94-96).

Deposition and death. The general outlook was grim, but not yet desperate at the end of 626. Kōsrow could expect Heraclius to move on to the offensive in 627. Given the ultimatum that they had issued, an attack by the Turks, in greater force than in 626, was a virtual certainty. Transcaucasia was likely to be their target, but Khorasan could not be ruled out. After the losses of 626, Sasanian forces were now stretched thin, having to maintain control of the occupied Roman provinces as well as to secure outer regions against attack. Their stance had to be defensive. So cities and fortresses of strategic importance were reinforced and readied to withstand long sieges. In Transcaucasia the strongholds assigned key defensive roles were [Darband](#), the principal military base on the long wall blocking the [Caspian Gates](#), and P'artaw, capital of Albania. A field army was also deployed, to hamper enemy movement and to offer some prospect of relief to besieged garrisons. In the event the commanding general, Rāhzād, was unable to play a significant part in operations until very late in 627, presumably because his troops were outnumbered.



The 627 campaign was disastrous from K̄osrow's point of view. A large Turkish army was mobilized from all over western Eurasia, and the *yabghu khagan* himself took command. Such was the shock of the appearance of the Turks and the ferocity of their assault, that Darband was swiftly stormed and P'artaw surrendered without a fight, leaving the whole of Albania exposed to attack. Nothing is reported of Roman actions in the first half of the campaigning season, but it may be inferred from their later movements that they too were in or near Transcaucasia (probably prizing loose the Persians' grip on Lazica). Both armies then converged on Tiflis, capital of Iberia, leaving little time for reinforcement of the garrison (a thousand troops were rushed in at the last moment). A summit meeting between Roman emperor and *yabghu khagan* was staged outside Tiflis, a ceremonial display of amity which was to be sealed by a marriage alliance between the two ruling families. The two armies then settled down to a siege, which seems to have been designed not so much to take the city as to mask widespread raiding operations in Iberia. Much damage was done, not least to K̄osrow's prestige, but the danger abated at the approach of autumn. For the two armies abandoned the siege and parted, the Turks withdrawing east and then north across the Caucasus while Heraclius set off south, intent apparently on devastating hitherto untouched parts of Azarbaijan, before turning west and heading home. K̄osrow could look forward to a breathing space that winter, in which to re-organize and boost the defenses of his empire (Movsēs Daskhurants'i, pp. 82-86; *Georgian Chronicles*, pp. 223-24; Theophanes, p. 316; Nicephorus chap.12).

Such hopes were dashed all too soon. Heraclius continued his march south, past Lake Urmiya, and, after a week's rest on the northern edge of the Zagros, set off on 16th October and pushed on through the mountains, devastating the upland basins at the heart of what is now Kurdistan as he passed. A month or so later, he reached the open country of Adiabene between the Lesser Zāb and the Great Zāb. There was a palpable sense of crisis in Ctesiphon. Yet another fertile region was open to depredation, and the capital was in range of attack. K̄osrow sent an urgent message Rāhzād, who had followed Heraclius south down the swathe of destruction left by his troops. He was ordered to move against Heraclius and to bring him to battle, once reinforcements, a crack force of 3,000 guardsmen, arrived from the capital. As the only available field commander, he had the vital task of driving the Roman army out of the soft interior of the Sasanian empire, or, if Heraclius chose to attack, of blocking the route south to Ctesiphon. Heraclius' plans became clearer, when, on 1st December, he crossed the Great Zāb and marched north. It looked as if he was



taking the prudent course of withdrawing towards Roman-held territory. But then he halted and camped near Nineveh. Rāhzād continued to shadow him. The promised reinforcements had not arrived. So he watched the Roman army from a safe distance. When Heraclius resumed his march north, he set off in pursuit, only to find that Heraclius had chosen the ground on which to fight and that his troops were advancing out of the morning mist in battle array.

The battle of Nineveh, fought on 12th December, was a decisive engagement. Not that Heraclius, the victor, succeeded in destroying his adversary. The Persians fought hard and suffered heavy losses. Rāhzād and many of his senior officers were killed. But their fighting formations did not break up and they did not withdraw from the battlefield until the small hours of the following night, when they took up defensive positions in the foothills of a nearby mountain range. The way south, however, was now open. Heraclius could, if he chose, march on the metropolitan region. For the moment, though, he stayed put, apparently waiting for the reinforcements to join the battered remnants of Rāhzād's army. Once they had done so on 21st December, he moved swiftly to the Great Zāb and sent a detachment ahead to seize the four bridges over the next river to the south, the Lesser Zāb. He then marched on towards the metropolitan region. At the news that he had crossed the Lesser Zāb (on 23rd December), Ḳosrow, who was at Dastgerd, his favorite palace in Mesopotamia, hastily prepared to leave, evidently having little faith in its formidable defenses. All the treasure there was loaded on to elephants, camels and donkeys, ready for transport to the capital under armed escort. He ordered what remained of Rāhzād's army (somewhat bolstered by the guards troops from Ctesiphon) to march south at high speed. It was to do its utmost to overtake the Romans. That same day (the 23rd) he and his immediate family slipped out by a secret tunnel. When they were five miles away, the order was issued to begin the evacuation of Dastgerd. Three days later he reached the capital (Theophanes, pp. 317-20, 322-23; Ps.-Sebeos, p. 126 with Historical Note 42; Movsēs Daskhurants'i, p. 89).

The rump field army from the north managed to overtake the Romans, when they halted for three days to rest and celebrate Christmas. But it was in no condition to fight, as became all too apparent when it abandoned the bridge which it was holding over the Diyala river at the Romans' approach. Its only success was achieved by deception. Heraclius ordered a day's halt on 1st January, convinced by false intelligence that a strong force was holding the line of the Ruz canal just to the north of Dastgerd. When he resumed the



march the next day, he moved cautiously and at a measured pace, punctuated by a pause of several days when he reached Dastgerd. This slow but remorseless advance was probably intended to heighten tension in Sasanian governing circles, while a final offer (made from Dastgerd) to negotiate an end to the war ‘before the fire consumes everything’ (swiftly rejected) was calculated to exacerbate divisions. The opposition to Kōsrow was gaining in strength and preparing to take action. The key figure was a retired high-ranking general (Gurdanaspā in Greek), with close ties to Qobād Širōy (he is called his tutor in one version of the *Khwadāynāmag*). He initiated a conspiracy which took shape during December and January, developing two distinct foci. A military grouping was built up by Gurdanaspā, centering on the court in Ctesiphon and reaching into the officer corps. An aristocratic coterie, of young men from magnate families, gathered around Qobād Širōy, who was living, we are told, outside the capital. He was subsequently portrayed as the prime mover behind the conspiracy, determined to prevent the designation of a younger half-brother, Mardānšāh, son of Širin, as Kōsrow’s successor. The two parties liaised via an intermediary, who is described as Qobād’s milk-brother (*Chronicon Paschale*, p. 728; Theophanes, pp. 320-22, 324-26; Movsēs Daskhurants’i, p. 90).

Meanwhile Kōsrow did what he could to strengthen the defenses of the capital. The depleted field army arrived with several days to spare and was deployed, together with two hundred elephants, along the Nahrawān canal. The additional manpower needed to hold so long a defensive perimeter was obtained partly by combing the households of the governing elite as well as the court for able-bodied men who could be drafted into service, but came in the main, it may be conjectured, from a local urban militia. Orders were given to cut the bridges at the approach of the Romans. These measures proved effective. Heraclius, who appeared late on 9th January, was deterred from making any attempt to cross the canal. But there was no easing of the military and political pressure. For the fertile Diyala valley, the capital’s bread-basket, was defenseless, a prime candidate for systematic degradation by military action. By early February, when the Roman army had turned its attention to devastating the large upland basin of Šahrazur on the main road north to Azarbaijan, the failure of Kōsrow’s ambitious foreign policy was all too plain. The army which had conquered the Roman Near East was too far away to intervene. A sense of helplessness was reinforced when a story (probably manufactured by the Romans) began to circulate that Šahrwarāz, commander-in-chief in the west, had come to an agreement with Heraclius (Theophanes,



pp. 323-24; *Seert Chronicle*, pp. 540-41; Ṭabari, pp. 327-30). The conspiracy against Ḳosrow now came to a head. Twenty-two senior officers (called counts by Theophanes) were involved by this stage, as well as two sons of Šahrwarāz and the son of a high-flying, recently deceased Christian finance minister. The plotters were ready to stage a coup, but first they needed to make sure that peace proposals would not be rejected by Heraclius. A small delegation, of four army officers and two civilian officials, was sent to Šahrazur. They informed Heraclius of what was afoot, including the date chosen for the coup. Having obtained the assurances they sought as well as some advice, they returned, leaving their leader, a *hazārbed* whose name is given as Gusdanaspa, as a point of contact with Heraclius. For his part Heraclius stayed put in Šahrazur until the planned date of the coup, presumably to distract attention.

On the night of 23rd-24th February the plotters went into action. Qobād Širōy left the palace to which he had been confined and entered Veh Ardašir after dark. Troops privy to the conspiracy then secured the Veh Ardašir end of the bridge over the Tigris, thus isolating Ḳosrow in Ctesiphon. A herald proclaimed Qobād Širōy king. The gates of the main prison were opened and the prisoners, who included Roman prisoners-of-war, were released. Horses were spirited out of the royal stables in Ctesiphon and used to mount some of the prisoners. They broadcast news of the coup, galloping round Veh Ardašir and brandishing their broken chains. Many of the palace guards in Ctesiphon now slipped across the bridge and joined the rebels. Ḳosrow, alerted by the sound of shouting and trumpets, discovered belatedly that a coup was taking place. All he could do was to slip out of the palace and into the garden next door where he attempted to hide. He was soon found when the rebels surrounded the palace and searched the grounds. He put up no resistance when he was arrested. Indeed the plotters seem to have encountered no resistance at any stage. No one, it appears, was ready to fight for so discredited a *šāhānšāh* (*Chronicon Paschale*, p. 728, 731; Theophanes, pp. 325-26; Ps.-Sebeos, p. 127; Movsēs Daskhurants'i, pp. 90-92; *Khuzistan Chronicle*, p. 29).

Ḳosrow was taken under armed guard to a nearby town house, from which he was moved to the new, fortified treasury-building which he had constructed. There he was held for four days, fed on bread and water. Senior ministers were allowed to pay visits, in the course of which they justified the coup by rehearsing the opposition's charges (which Ḳosrow rebutted at length according to the *Khwadāynāmag*). Qobād Širōy was formally crowned and proclaimed *shāhānshāh* on 25th February. His public image was that of a



peace-loving king who was determined to ease the burdens imposed by Kōsrow on his subjects. In private he was ruthless. He ordered the execution of all his brothers and half-brothers, beginning with Kōsrow's favorite son and preferred successor, Mardānšah. He was taken to Kōsrow's prison so that Kōsrow could see the execution. On 28th February it was Kōsrow's turn. The *Khwadāynāmag* includes a brief evocation of the scene (*Chronicon Paschale*; Theophanes, pp. 326-27; Ps.-Sebeos, p. 127; Movsēs Daskhurants'i, p. 92; Ṭabari, pp. 1045-60).

The death of Kōsrow opened the way for peace negotiations with Heraclius, who had managed to reach Ganzak in Azarbaijan just before heavy snowfalls blocked the Zagros passes in early March. The negotiations dragged on for two years. The Sasanians' bargaining position improved when the Turks unexpectedly withdrew of their own accord from Transcaucasia in 629, but this was more than outweighed by domestic political instability. All Kōsrow's wartime gains had to be relinquished before a final peace treaty was eventually signed in 630. By that date, the reigns of Qobād Širōy and his young son, Ardašir III, were over, Shahrwarāz had staged a coup only to be assassinated forty days after formally assuming power, and Bōrān, one of Kōsrow's daughters, was on the throne. Two more years of political turbulence were to follow, before a grandson, Yazdgerd III, established a firm grip on power. Yazdgerd was to prove a redoubtable adversary to the rising power of Islam, making good use of the formidable fighting forces which had so nearly conquered the east Roman empire.

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