

# 7th Century Byzantine Leadership: Reevaluating Recent Scholarship on Heraclius

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines recent scholarship (2003–2023) on the Roman emperor Heraclius, who ruled the Byzantine Roman Empire from 610 – 641 CE. It reviews the historical consensus surrounding the military, political, and religious decisions that Heraclius made during his civil war with the usurper Phokas that lasted from 603 – 610, his continuing of the war with Persia in response to Phokas' coup from Maurice from 610 to 628, and finally Heraclius' war with Arab forces as the early followers of Muhammad spread through Levantine Rome and Persia from 622 to the death of Heraclius in 641. Throughout the work, I explore the changes that occurred in the empire initiated through Heraclius' decision making as he navigated these threats to Rome, the major textual sources for Heraclius' reign, the problems with dominant scholarly narratives surrounding the 7th Century, and how reevaluating Heraclius' decisions may refine our understanding of his impact.



7th Century Byzantine Leadership: Reevaluating Recent Scholarship on Heraclius

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Dedication page

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## Preface

Though there is a large historical gap between ancient Athens, Sparta, and Corinth to the Roman empire in the 7th century, there is still a big connection. Romans had always been Grecophiles, and as the empire's center of government slowly migrated east, the love of all things Greek became more prevalent. The Greek language had largely replaced Latin, except for the western reconquered lands, such as Italy, Roman North Africa west of Egypt, and Spain. It is also likely that by the end of Heraclius' reign in 641, Greek had replaced Latin as the official government and military language. It is thought that Heraclius was the first to use the term *basileus* to refer to the Byzantine Roman emperor. As I began my research on the 7th century, I noticed how even then, the Christian church was dealing with large scale divergences in its dogma and doctrine, most notably when it came to sects like the Arians and Nestorians. It made me think of the problems that plagued the Latin Church in the early half of the 16th century, causing me to wonder how the Reformation may have gone differently if the pentarchy had still existed, or if the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire had the power over the church that the Byzantine Roman emperor had. These questions are my contribution to the historical argument, as well as my possible answers.

My most overriding question when I began, which is also the core of each subsequent question my thesis addresses, is that if this was the first meeting of Christianity and Islam, why is this not a more sought-after century by western historians? The United States has been involved in the Levant and surrounding regions since right after the realization of our independence from Great Britain. Since World War II, our level of involvement in the Middle East has grown as each decade went by. By the 1970s, the involvement had become more hands on and the violence in the region has increased, and since the 1980s, we have routinely deployed troops to the region,



attempting to assert our authority over the region for political or military gain. We as a nation seem to be fine with spending trillions of dollars and thousands of lives to subdue or control different parts of this region, but we are far less willing to attempt to understand the people, the culture, or the religions that exist there. Even as the United States has become a nation with institutionalized separation of church and state, we are still a western European culture where the basic values that make up many of our laws are based on Christians values. We can arguably be said to view the Levant through a Christian lens, even as we may claim a secular mindset, and many in the Levant could be said to view the United States through a Muslim lens. Both Christianity and Islam were born in this region, and they have grown in prominence side by side for the past sixteen centuries. Why, then is it that we know so little of the first contact of these two mighty religions that dominate so much of the world and so many cultures? Why do we seem to begin our history of these two sibling religions in the Crusades, arguably after the shared hate and animosity had already begun to set in? How are we to know where the original mistakes were made that set these two religions against one another, and what about original successes that could be replicated?

For me, to answer this we need to go back to the beginning, and if Heraclius, the emperor of Byzantine Rome with the capability to influence church doctrine, dogma, and leadership, and Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, were alive at the same time, as they were, and their different decisions were able to affect the other and their followers, as is the case, then why do we not strive to know more about their relationship? Why is this hidden in the depths of academia where only professional and dedicated historians are likely to find this information? Why do we typically teach Republican Rome and Pagan Imperial Rome, but far less often, Christian Byzantine Rome?

When Heraclius began his rebellion against Phokas, he was seen as the savior of Rome by the aristocracy. Twenty-five years later, he was seen as the villain due to his continued and varied changes to the church's wealth and ability for the Church to draw pensions from imperial taxes. He then made himself the enemy of the very people he had just freed from the Sassanid Persians when he began a program of forced conversions to Chalcedonian Christianity when most Romans living in the Levant were Nestorian Christians. Since primary sources of the period are at best circumspect, there should be a more concerted effort to both compare those sources that do exist and to find more. Further study of this period should be continued so that we can better understand ourselves, our religions, and the people of the Levant and their religions, and hopefully use the insight gained to make better decisions. I hope this thesis contributes to the study of Heraclius through evaluating the present state of research on his reign.

## Chapter 1: Heraclius' Inheritance: Rome in the 6th-7th Century

The historical study of Rome<sup>1</sup> is often compartmentalized into eras that describe the major political, cultural, or religious factors that dominated the era. I break them into the pre-republic period, the period of the Republic, the imperial period, and Byzantine or Christian Rome. The emperor Heraclius (610 – 641 CE) was ruler of Byzantine Rome during a tumultuous time in Roman history, one that rivals the Punic Wars (264-146 BCE), the Triumvirate (60-59 BCE), and the reconquest of the West by Justinian (527-565 CE). He was in the service of his father, Heraclius the Elder, who was the Exarch of Roman North Africa when Phokas (602 – 610 CE) overthrew the emperor Maurice (582 – 602 CE) in the first coup in three hundred years.

This coup set in motion the invasion of Rome by Sassanid Persia in 603 CE, which many call the Last Great War of Antiquity. This war went on until 628, during which Rome also fought a civil war between Phokas and Heraclius until 610. With the civil war won, Heraclius had to consolidate his rule, repel Sassanid invaders, and deal with numerous other issues in the empire such as further attempts at independence by the reconquered western regions and mass migrations of Slavic peoples into the Balkans, which was not only seen largely as a suburb of Constantinople, but was the major recruiting region for the army for over three hundred years. The results of this period, the reign of emperor Heraclius, had a profound effect on the Byzantine Roman Empire. In this chapter, I lay out the dominant narrative surrounding the early history of Heraclius' reign, focusing on the 2003 work of Walter Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, along with some of the primary sources and subsequent studies that have complicated this

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I use “Rome” and “Roman Empire” interchangeably for the period of Heraclius' reign.

narrative. I argue that given this framework, Heraclius should be understood as a key figure in Byzantine history but that his legacy is complicated by three key decisions made during his reign, as I will lay out below.

The result of the Punic Wars saw Rome as the ultimate power in the western Mediterranean, which eventually led to its growth into a continental power. The creation of the Triumvirate led to the final demise of republican Rome and ended with the creation of imperial Rome. And the reconquest of the West brought the Roman homeland back under Roman control. All these events had profound effects on the peoples and places involved and they are widely studied. Much more is known of these periods compared to Heraclius and the Byzantine 7th century. The reign of emperor Heraclius and the events that transpired during his time are, in my opinion, events that need further study and understanding in today's world because these events are still directly and profoundly affecting the world we live in today.

Much of this lack of knowledge is because of the lack of primary sources from the time. The *Chronographia*, which was considered the one primary source to survive the near half century of war, destruction, and mass migrations is now no longer seen as such. As Harry Turtledove points out in his 1982 English translation of the document, instead of a piece fully written during the 7th century, it was likely a serial publication that had a series of authors and editors. This observation is made by Turtledove and, he claims, by other scholars<sup>2</sup>, as he points to the anti-Muslim rhetoric that exists in the writing, but because of the newness of proto-Islam during the period, which is being covered, there is not likely to have been such hate or discontent between Christians and the new followers of Muhammad. Each editor seems likely to have made

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<sup>2</sup> Harry Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press. 1982): x-xi.

changes to not only contemporary writings, but also earlier written material, as can be seen in the attempts to write in ancient Greek which was the fashion for histories and chronicles. The Byzantine Greeks did not have complete understanding on how to properly conjugate classical Greek, and the addition of more modern slang and usages of shared koine Greek words are indicators that led Turtledove to his conclusion. This means that nearly all that we know of Heraclius' time period was written three hundred years later, at least. By this time, newer hatreds and animosities that may not have existed when the events of the 7th century transpired have influenced the writings, making the results suspect.

### 1. From Diocletian to Justinian

In 284, the emperor Diocletian (284 – 305 CE) began a series of overhauls of the government and military of the Roman empire. Reform of the government and the military was not something new to the Romans, but the reforms begun by Diocletian and carried out by Constantine I (306 – 337 CE) ensured that Rome would exist for another thousand years.<sup>3</sup> In 326, Constantine completed the reforms by moving the capital from the city of Rome to the city of Byzantium, which the emperor had renamed for himself. Even before then, the city of Rome had ceased to be the center of the empire, though until the official move from Rome to Constantinople, the city of Rome continued to be the physical heart of the empire. Even before then, the emperors before Diocletian and Constantine ruled the empire out of Milan, Ravenna, Aachen, or even out of the saddle. Diocletian himself tended to rule out of one of his many palaces in the Balkans, from what is today Split or Belgrade.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Grant, *From Rome to Byzantium: The Fifth Century A.D.* (London: Routledge): 1-26.

As the government began an eastward shift from Rome to Constantinople, the culture began to shift from a Latin to a Greek focus. Greek had been the trade language or even the official language of many eastern locations of the empire since the time of Alexander, when the Achaemenid Persian Empire was conquered by the Macedonians over 600 years before, in 332 BCE. Diocletian did not institute his reforms of Roman government until 284 CE, administratively splitting the empire into two regions, with two Augustii and two Caesars. Latin language and culture had taken a hold in the west, in what is today Italy, Spain, France, the British Isles, and North Africa west of Alexandria. As the government of Rome moved its administrative centers to the east, so did Greek begin to overshadow Latin as the language and culture of the Roman Empire.

There have been many attempts to quantify when the term Byzantine began to be used when describing the Roman Empire in the east.<sup>4</sup> Not only is the era when the term Byzantine Empire began to be used confusing, attempting to apply the modern definition of Byzantine Empire to the later Roman period is also confusing. The term itself began to be used in the early Middle Ages by the French and German governments that began gaining legitimacy by claiming to be the natural successor of Rome in the more modern era.<sup>5</sup> Authors will claim it was the French in the 1400s or the Germans of the Holy Roman Empire in the 1500s.<sup>6</sup> No one can be

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<sup>4</sup> Grant, *From Rome to Byzantium*, 1-57.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-11.

<sup>6</sup> Laonikos Chalkokondyles, a Greek historian from the 15th century, and Heironymus Wolf, a German historian from the 15th century, have each been given credit at different times for coining the term “Byzantine Empire” to mean the Christian Roman Empire. This term has been attached to various periods of time in Roman history as early as Constantine I (306 – 337 CE). It is my belief that the term was used in the 15th century by Western European polities to claim legitimacy by being heirs of Rome, something they could not do while Rome still existed in the East. Rudolf Dekker (ed), *Egdocuments and History* (Rotterdam University of Rotterdam Press, 2002). Anthony Kaldellis, “The Byzantine Role in the Making of the Corpus Classical Greek Historiography,” *Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 132 (2012): 71-85.

sure when the term began, but many claim it was an attempt to label the Roman Empire in the East as one of many successor states that had grown up out of the corpse of Rome. Today, the term is used to describe the era when Rome began to shift from a Latin-based culture of the West to a Greek based culture of the East, but even this definition has its problems.

The question now is when to apply the term. Does the term begin to apply when Diocletian began his reforms? Or when Constantine completed the reforms? Or when he made Christianity an official religion of the empire? Does the Byzantine Empire begin when Christianity becomes the official religion of the empire? Or when Justinian the Great overhauled Roman law that was to become the basis of European based law codes to this day? Or does the era of Byzantine Rome begin during the reign of Heraclius, when Christian Rome and Zoroastrian Persia made first contact with Islam? It is not the purpose of this thesis to define this, but it is one of my intentions to let the reader know that the Byzantine Empire was a Roman Empire. When and how the Byzantine period of Roman history began is a fluid notion that shifts with the intentions of the individual scholar as they explore this period that for some extent for over eleven hundred years.

In 527, Justinian I became the emperor of the Roman Empire. During his reign, He wrote the Justinian Code, the basis of most codified laws in Europe and European cultures around the world. He also ordered the reconquest of the West which had collapsed a century before, and he and his wife and co-ruler, Theodora, handled various heresies that threatened to tear the Imperial Church apart after it had become a vital part of Roman life.<sup>7</sup> By the time Justinian became

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<sup>7</sup> Prokopios talks of the Nikea revolts (532 CE) that nearly tore the capital city apart, as well as the reconquest of North Africa and Italy by Belisarius (527-565 CE). Here, when he retakes western territory from the Vandals, Belisarius is said to have Arian Christian churches reconsecrated as Chalcedonian Christian churches, new bishops

emperor, the Roman Empire had become a Greek and Christian empire, where the claim to be either Greek, Roman, or Christian was synonymous with one another. Justinian was also the last emperor who spoke Latin instead of Greek as his first language. To compare and contrast Justinian with Heraclius: where Justinian mainly relied on his generals to reconquer the ancestral lands of Rome while he stayed in Constantinople, Heraclius fought and ruled from the saddle nearly his entire reign. Justinian codified and made more intelligible Roman Law, where Heraclius was often forced to alter or make new laws to accommodate a highly fluid Rome where wars and religious descent made things difficult. Justinian was the emperor at a time when Rome in the East had the wealth and the manpower, as well as the desire to reclaim Italy, Spain, and North Africa from the Goths, Visigoths, and Ostrigoths. Arian Churches in the West were rededicated to the Chalcedonian Church in the West, as were Nestorian Churches in the East. This is to say that Rome was still accustomed to the expansion of the border, even if it was merely retaking western Rome, and to religious tensions that were typically well handled by various means at the imperial level. Most means were nonviolent and attempted to compromise and prevent the religion from violent fracture—where the earlier emperor was able to expand the imperial church less violently, Heraclius often had to contend with the Zoroastrian persecution of Christians in occupied lands, the reintegration of Nestorian Romans into the empire and religion, and finally the emergence of Islam as it began to spread through his lands even as he was completing his war with Sassanid Persia.

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appointed, and tithes set before moving on to the next mission. Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, transl. H.B. Dewing, revised and modernized by Anthony Kaldellis (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 33-73.



## 2. Emperor Maurice (582-602 CE)

In 582 CE, Maurice becomes the emperor of Rome. The empire at this time was a thoroughly Christian realm<sup>8</sup> that acted as though it were surrounded by enemies of not only culture and government, but more importantly, of religion.<sup>9</sup> Every war since the reign of Constantine had been called a holy war in the service of the Christian faith and would continue to be so until the end of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. When Maurice took the throne there was nothing different in this equation. In the west, inheritors of the western half of the empire had fallen in 423, and much of it was still in the hands of so-called heretics,<sup>10</sup> though as time went

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<sup>8</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, introduction - 2. Rome went through many changes in its government, culture, and religious outlook during its long history. In the 7th century the Christian religion was by far the dominant religion in the empire. It was often synonymous to call a Roman Christian and a Christian Roman. In other texts this was seen as the primary or secondary cause for the Sassanid invasion of Rome following the coup of Phokas. The Pentarchy and the Patriarchs had much power, and the emperor had an active role in both appointing religious leaders and acting as a final arbiter when dogmatic arguments threatened the empire's stability. Because of the loss of the West two hundred years before, the reconquest and subsequent erosion of western gains, and the near constant border skirmishing with Zoroastrian Persia, it is likely that Regan is attempting to point out that Chalcedonian Christians felt constantly under assault by outside forces. Ironically for Rome of the 7th century, they shared a religion and many cultural attributes with the rapidly latinizing Germanic tribes that had set up kingdoms in the West.

They also seem to have had at this time cultural, and perhaps familial, ties to Persia. Because there has only been one main primary source related to this issue to supposedly come out of the 7th century from the Roman perspective, and the fact that that source has since then been proven less than reliable by more modern scholars, it is impossible to clearly state how Romans during that time felt and reacted to the world around them. This is also a good place to state that nearly all of the scholars who have written of this period claim that only ecclesiastic sources survived the period, but all still reference the *Chronographia*, which was likely written two or three hundred years later, and/ or was part of a serial that had many editors.

<sup>9</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 1-43.

<sup>10</sup> Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, 33-73. See also Donalson "Where did the Romans go...?", 1-4; and Fred Donner, "How Islam Began," Uncommon Core Lecture, University of Chicago, filmed June 3, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RFK5u5lkhA>.

Note that when I refer to Christian heresy in this thesis, I am not making a personal statement of judgment. I am often using the tone of the words that were used by others that I have researched. Christianity in the 7th century had two major sects other than the Chalcedonian or Imperial Church. Arianism that had been transplanted to the Germanic kingdoms in the west, and Nestorianism which had begun in the city of Antioch and seems to have remained very popular in Roman Syria and throughout the rest of the Levant despite attempts by the Roman government to curb its influence. Both of these sects were seen as a threat to the orthodox belief at the time of the 7th century, and in fact I believe that the actions of Heraclius and how he managed or failed to manage his Nestorian populations after his war with Sassanid Persia is the reason he lost the Levant to the emerging threat of the Caliphates and the spread of the newer religion of Islam, which at the time was inclusive of other Abrahamic religions and seems to have welcomed the Nestorian Romans when their own emperor did not.

on, the Germanic tribes that settled in the West would eventually convert to Chalcedonian Christianity and give fealty to Constantinople until roughly 1000. Italy, North Africa, and much of southern Spain were at this time under the administrative control of the empire, but as the years went by, more and more of the local power in the West would shift as Rome's focus was forced to the Balkans and the Levant. In the 590s, Rome began to see tensions on its northern border with what is today central and eastern Europe. Migrating tribes of Slavs, Bulgars, and Avars began attempting to move into the Balkans.

Maurice is seen by many as a strategic and tactical genius and is credited with writing the *Strategikon* (582 – 602),<sup>11</sup> a work that explained the lessons learned throughout the 6th century and before, for conducting war against the Sassanid Persians, Lombards, and many other traditional enemies of Byzantine Rome. Maurice is thought to have gone through imperial records and compiled all the tactics, techniques, and procedures that Rome would use to successfully combat the Persians. Where Maurice had problems was with his financial capabilities, that he as the emperor failed to maintain a budget and was often forced to dip into the military budget to pay for his shortcomings and the many bribes he paid to Slavs, Bulgars, and Avars to keep them out of the Balkans.<sup>12</sup> Eventually the bribe money ran out, and Maurice

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<sup>11</sup> James Gilmer, "Maurice's *Strategikon*," *Medieval Warfare* 4, no. 6 (2014): 10-14. Maurice reigned from 582-602 CE. He was the last of the Justinian Dynasty. He is attributed with writing the *Strategikon*, which was published sometime during his rule. The document is a guide on how to structure your forces and engage the enemy, depending on the type of troops available and disposition of the enemy commander and the battlefield. This book was intended to stop the degradation of the army and the continued rise of *Bucellarii*, which gave military commanders and politicians private armies to be used to ensure their own power. Gilmer claims that the document was used for over three hundred years as it was written and added to later texts that continued to serve as leadership and command primers for Roman-Byzantine generals.

<sup>12</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, 43-53.

was forced to gather the cream of the Roman army in the Balkans and repel the incursions. The war lasted from 594 to 600, and in the end the incursion was halted.

A new problem now arose as Maurice had spent most of his army's budget on bribing the very people he had just fought, and he had no money now to pay his army with. In 602, an army was stationed in the Balkans to prevent the encroachment of migrating Slavs and Bulgars. In that army was a soldier of middle rank (a centurion) named Phokas, who led a revolt, overthrew Maurice, and made himself emperor of Rome.<sup>13</sup> This was the first time since Constantine, nearly three hundred years in the past, that the imperial succession had been decided by coup. The majority of the assembled Roman army would remain in the Balkans, and for the next forty years the cream of Roman military might would be relegated to preventing Slav and Avar incursions, at which they were only partially successful.

### 3. Emperor Phokas (602-610 CE)

By the time of the 6th and 7th centuries, the Roman and Persian cultures and militaries mirrored one another in composition and capability in that they fielded armies that were organized in a similar fashion and an aristocracy that was close.<sup>14</sup> Many of the Persian aristocracy were even Christian, though of the Nestorian sect such that they owed no formal allegiance to the Roman emperor.<sup>15</sup> The aristocracy of both empires were known to intermarry,

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<sup>13</sup> Geoffery Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 43-53; Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 38-57.

<sup>14</sup> Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, 33- 73

<sup>15</sup> See Anastos, "Nestorius was Orthodox," 117-140; Keenan Baca-Winters, *He Did Not Fear: Xusro Parviz, King of Kings of the Sasanian Empire* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press LLC, 2018), 1-6; Haas, "The Arians of Alexandria," 234-245; Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 1-83; and Donner, "How Islam Began."

especially in the families that could trace their lineage to the time of Alexander the Great. In 602 CE, after the coup of Maurice by Phokas (602 CE), the Sassanid Persian emperor invaded the Roman Empire with the pretense of putting a member of Maurice's family back on the Roman throne.<sup>16</sup> Kaegi claims that invasion had two purposes other than reclaiming the throne for Maurice and his family. Instead, the invasion was on one hand to stop the encroachment of Chalcedonian Christianity into Persia,<sup>17</sup> and two, was to hopefully recreate the Persian raids of

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By the 7th century, Christianity had been in the Levant as an organized and subsidized religion for over three hundred years. The vast majority of the Roman population was Christian at this point, and Christianity had spread beyond the borders of Roman Empire. The Arian and Nestorian Sects of Christianity were popular versions, considered heresies within the empire, as neither sect was beholden to the Pentarchy and the emperor. Nestorianism was the most popular form of Christianity in the Levant that had spread throughout the native non-aristocratic population. Nestorianism had its own patriarch who did not answer to Roman imperial authority as the Chalcedonian / Imperial Church did. This had allowed the sect to spread into the western regions of Persia where many of the Persians had become Christian. Nestorians were always seen as a heretic population within the Roman Empire and were often persecuted by the government. The Sassanid Persians too would often persecute their own populations of Nestorians, though Baca-Winters contends that Khosrow's favorite wife was Christian and had begged him to be considerate in his treatment of Nestorian Christians during his invasion and occupation of the Levant during the Roman-Persian war.

This Nestorian population was initially offered reprieve and representation by Heraclius following his victory over the Sassanids in 628, but Kaegi contends that as Heraclius grew older and the pressures on the empires refused to lessen, he decided to begin campaign of forceful conversion to Imperial Christianity within the Levant. I believe that it is this population that allows the spread of Islam throughout the region and ensures that the Romans and Persians lose control over these populations. Islam, as it began to be introduced into the area from 632-641 (staying within the bounds of the rule of Heraclius and not implying that Islam had somehow lessened in appeal later), was inclusive and welcoming to the Nestorian population, more so than the Roman and Persian governments had been. I believe it is this inclusiveness that appealed to the Nestorian population who then flocked to the banners of the followers of Muhammad and the Rashidun Caliphate as they spread through the Levant. This to me also seems to be an often-overlooked possibility by scholars when the discussion of the spread of Islam is mentioned when writing on Heraclius. It is often seen as a mystery how quickly the Levant is converted to Islam; no mention is made of how the Roman population of the region had been persecuted by its own government for years prior to the coming of Islam and the Caliphate. This quick conquest and conversion of the region should also, in my opinion, support the idea that Arabs of the time period along with the Romans and Persians shared some common culture or values as suggested by the rapid conquest and assimilation.

<sup>16</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 83. This may also have been because the emperor Maurice had once offered Khosrow II sanctuary during the Persian succession war (590 CE).

<sup>17</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, 38-53. Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem," 35-48. Foss, "The Persians in the Roman Near East," 149-170. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, 316-317. Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 203-205. Baca-Winters, *He Did Not Fear*, 1-5. The stated goal of the Sassanid invasion of Byzantine Rome in 602 was the restoration of the Justinian line on the throne of Rome in thanks for a similar happening for Khosrow II in 590 when he was forced to flee to Rome because of a coup in Persia. Maurice would help Khosrow finance an army that he used to regain his own throne later that year. There was a second reason, and possibly third reason for the invasion of the Roman Levant, and that was the removal of Chalcedonian Christians from the border area. This is

the Roman Levant of a hundred years before, in which the Sassanid Persian Empire was able to extract great wealth and many skilled laborers from the Roman Empire.

The invasion of the Roman Levant was largely successful, and the Persians were not only able to extract wealth and skilled labor, but they were also able to hold onto the Levant for twenty years or more and extract taxes from the region as well. Three of the holy cities to Christianity, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria, would eventually fall to the Zoroastrian invasion and many of the Chalcedonian population were massacred or forced to flee. Roman Jews often assisted the Persian invaders, acting as insurgents and provocateurs behind the lines.<sup>18</sup> This seeming betrayal in the eyes of fellow Romans would later lead to many of the atrocities against Roman Jews by Christians after the reconquest in the late 620s. This claim of betrayal is made in the *Chronographia*, a document that was once thought to be one of, if not the only primary source to have survived the period, but which has now been called into question by

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because Chalcedonian Christianity was also known as Imperial Christianity which saw the church ruled by the five patriarchs of the Pentarchy cities and the emperor of Byzantine Rome.

There is evidence in the archaeological record of Persians massacring Christians in Levantine cities, such as Jerusalem, possibly assisted by Roman Jews and Roman Nestorian Christians, but the evidence falls short of the numbers listed in historical documents. Baca-Winters also claims that Khosrow's favorite wife was Nestorian Christian and did not want to upset her by removing them from the empire even as Christianity in the western portions of Sassanid Persia was a source of tension with the Zoroastrian priests. The third possible reason for the invasion, and a possible favorite of mine, is that Persia had a habit of aggressive and extended border raids with Byzantine Rome whenever the Byzantines were busy elsewhere. The length and depth of the raids would often depend on how quickly Rome could respond to the Persian raids. Because of the recent coup of Maurice and the continuing threat of encroaching Slavs in the Balkans, and the growing independence movement in Italy, The Byzantine Romans were slow to react to Khosrow II's raid of the Levant that would grow to become a full-on invasion. During the reign of Justinian I, a similar raid had occurred that saw the sacking of Antioch before the Persians were force back across the border. Whether or not extermination of peoples based on faith in the Levant seems to have occurred by the Romans against their own people perhaps more so than by the Sassanids who instead seemed to rather force migrate skilled labor of any religion deep into Persia, Whereas the Byzantine Romans seem to have conducted reprisal killings among both Roman Jews and Roman Nestorian Christians soon after reclaiming Levantine territory. This, in my opinion, is the source of manpower that the early followers of Muhammad would cultivate, and perhaps why many of the Byzantine Roman cities in the Levant seem to have surrendered to the followers of Muhammad between 636-638 CE.

<sup>18</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 79.

scholars such as Harry Turtledove, who translated the work into English in 1982. As mentioned above, in his preface, he contends that the hatred and animosities of the 9th century permeate the document, hatred and animosities that may not have existed in the 7th century.

Phokas' coup against Maurice had been the first since Constantine the Great and for many it was a shock to their Roman core. Within a year of Phokas seizing the throne, he had to contend with two rebellions. The first was a rebellion by the garrisons in Italy, but that was handled with relative ease because of the proximity of Gothic and Lombard warlords waiting to take advantage of Roman weakness and the closeness of the Roman army in the Balkans who backed Phokas.

The second rebellion was purposed and financed by Heraclius the Elder, an experienced officer who had spent much of his career in the East, along the Persian and Armenian border. In 602, he was the Exarch of Roman North Africa, a combination of governor and military commander of the region, with his seat of power located in the city of Carthage. Heraclius the Elder, appointed Exarch of Roman North Africa in 602 CE, after spending the 580s and 590s as a senior officer along the Persian border and in Armenia, was an old man by this time, but he encouraged his son, Heraclius the Younger (608 CE),<sup>19</sup> to lead the revolt and place himself on the throne. The family that the two Heraclii came from was of old provenance: the father was of Armenian descent and married into an ancient Roman family who claimed estates in Cappadocia,

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<sup>19</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 39-52. When the elder Heraclius had claimed himself to be consul in 603, he was in defacto revolt against Phokas. By sending his son, the younger Heraclius and Niketas, as likely nephew to seize Egypt, it was settled. Niketas would be tasked with the land route in the rebellion and Heraclius the sea route.

a province in Anatolia or modern-day Turkey.<sup>20</sup> Heraclius would use many of these connections to keep his troops supplied as they fought their war with Phokas.<sup>21</sup>

For the next seven years, from 603 to 610, Heraclius and his family fought a civil war with Phokas. This meant that Rome was required to fight a civil war, keep the encroaching Slavs and Avars in check in the Balkans, keep the Italian and Spanish provinces from revolting, and fight a Persian invasion that had already claimed the economic heartland of the empire as well as a major portion of its taxable population. In 610, Heraclius finally defeated Phokas and placed himself on the throne. During the civil war, Persia gained more of the Levant and the western provinces gained more autonomy as Heraclius was forced to give what little remained of Roman Spain to the Visigoths, who ruled the rest of Spain in return for peace, and local Latinized Lombards and the Patriarch in Rome were given more local power as the military focus of the empire was drawn to the Levant and Balkans. It would take Heraclius three more years to consolidate his rule over the empire, during which time he would lose even more of the Levant, have Egypt threatened by Persian forces and even losing the city of Alexandria for a time, and be forced to give his remaining provinces in southern Spain independence in exchange for promises of peace in the west.<sup>22</sup>

The rule of Phokas is not looked on kindly by his contemporaries, as the short-lived emperor seems to have been a skilled soldier, but a terrible ruler. As a usurper with no aristocratic blood, he was largely shunned by the wealthy families of Rome and often had to

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<sup>20</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 19-23.

<sup>21</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 25-50.

<sup>22</sup> Foss, "The Persians in the Roman Near East," 149-170; Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 25-50; and Regan, *First Crusader*, 43-50.

resort to violence<sup>23</sup> to ensure their compliance to his rule, using purges of the upper echelons of Roman society. Though Heraclius himself was also a usurper, Phokas had been the first person since the time of Constantine to violently overthrow the reigning ruler of Rome, and Heraclius had overthrown Phokas. Heraclius also had aristocratic ties, and his first wife was from an old, wealthy Roman family in Carthage. He had the connections with the wealthy class of Rome that Phokas did not.

Phokas did manage to keep the Sassanids out of Anatolia, and in large part kept the Slavs and Avars from taking the Balkans, but he could never get the people of Rome behind his rule.<sup>24</sup> Much of this was because of the role the emperor played in Christianity, and the role Christianity played in the Byzantine Roman Empire.

#### 4. The Rule of Heraclius

With the defeat of Phokas, Rome no longer had to worry about civil war, but the threat of revolt in the West would be a constant worry for Heraclius, often forcing him to send some of his brightest military minds to Italy to prevent it from declaring independence. The remaining

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<sup>23</sup> Foss, "The Persians in the Roman Near East," 149-170; Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, 11; and Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem," 35-48. *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, often called the *Chronographia*, has been seen as the only true primary source to from the Roman perspective to have survived the 7th century. Its validity is in question, as Turtledove points out in his 1982 English translation of the document that it is likely a serial that had many authors and editors through at least the 9th century. He points out the animosity and hatred toward certain ethnic and religious groups, as well as the poorly used ancient Greek that the document is written in as proof. Many other works of scholarship have cited this source as they describe the Persian conquest of the Levant, where it tells of Sassanids and local Roman Jews rounding up and massacring the Chalcedonian Christians in the tens of thousands. Evidence recently uncovered in an archeological survey by Gideon used the *Chronographia* as source material when excavating relevant sites in Jerusalem and found that though there is evidence of mass graves, the number of up to forty thousand Romans massacred is not supported by the evidence. It is likely that later bias from the 8th and 9th centuries infiltrated the document, and if there were ever any true primary source material there, it has been contaminated by later editors.

<sup>24</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 39-50; and Regan, *First Crusader*, 43-53.



Roman holdings in Spain would soon be given over to the Visigoths as Heraclius knew that he did not have the men or money to spare to keep or maintain Roman holdings on the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>25</sup>

From 610 to 614, Heraclius consolidated his hold on the Roman government. The greatest formation of experienced Roman troops was tied down in the Balkans keeping the migrating Slavs and Bulgars at bay, and they had backed Phokas during the coup and for the seven years he was on the throne. For this reason, Heraclius would not trust these troops, and his most experienced troops would sit out the war with Persia or had already been expired by Phokas' attempts to stop the Persian invasion by sending detachments of loyal soldiers to the Levant piecemeal. From the 4th century, the Balkans had been the main recruitment area for men entering the Roman army,<sup>26</sup> and so the inability to trust the troops or the populace created another problem that Heraclius had to solve, which he did by recruiting most of his troops from Armenia, and early on North Africa. During this time, Heraclius made another decision that would continue to hamper his reign till the day he died. His first wife had died soon after he had ascended to the throne in 610, but in 613 or 614, Heraclius married the daughter of his sister.<sup>27</sup> This marriage would cause much tension among the Roman aristocracy and the clergy, both groups that Heraclius continually had to fight for the next thirty years.

After Heraclius gained full control over the Roman government and made sure that no other provinces were attempting revolt, he went on the offensive against Persia. In Africa he sent his paternal cousin Niketas to retake Egypt just as he had done during his revolt against Phokas.

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<sup>25</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 19-23.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Whitby, *Rome at War* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21-22.

<sup>27</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 106.

Heraclius meanwhile began a years-long campaign in 624 that took him through Armenia and into the Sassanid Persian Empire where he cut off the Persian army in the Levant from its logistical support and began terrorizing the Persian home provinces, putting pressure on the Persian army commanders to return home. By 628, The Persian Shah Khosrow was overthrown, and the Persian aristocracy was thrown into a disarray that they would never recover from.

By 630, the return of Roman authority into the Levant was complete. The piece of the True Cross was returned to the city of Jerusalem<sup>28</sup> and plans were being made once again to turn the Levant into the tax and production powerhouse it had been for Rome before the war. Unfortunately for Rome, the population of the Levant had been under Persian control for over twenty years in many places and little was remembered of Roman rule by the surviving population of many cities. Chalcedonian Christianity, the official religion of the Roman Empire had been abolished during the time of Persian control, entire populations either deported or massacred. On this point, note that both Foss<sup>29</sup> and Avni<sup>30</sup> talk about the Sassanid capture of Jerusalem in 614. Foss points out that little attempt was made during the Persian occupation to maintain public works. The Roman aristocracy fled to unoccupied areas and skilled labor was deported to Persia. Foss also claims that Jewish Roman collaborators helped the conquering

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<sup>28</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 77 and 206. A splinter of the True Cross, a holy relic supposedly from the crucifixion of Jesus, was among the treasures of the city taken by the Persians when the city was sacked in 614. Heraclius recovers much of the wealth taken from Rome by the Sassanids during his invasion of the Persian heartland, which began in 624 and lasted a little over four years. No author I have read indicates how the splinter of the True Cross first appeared in Jerusalem, likely because they are skeptical of its authenticity, but the traditional story is that the relic was installed in the city by the mother of Constantine the Great sometime after 326 CE.

<sup>29</sup> Clive Foss, "The Persians in the Roman Near East," *Journal of the Royal Society* 12, no. 2 (Jul 2003): 149-170.

<sup>30</sup> Gideon Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem (614 CE): An Archaeological Assessment," *American Schools of Oriental Research* 357 (February 2010): 35-48.

Sassanids to purge the city of Chalcidian Christians. Gideon finds evidence of the destruction and massacres, but not at the levels reported by Theophanes or Strategicus Antiochus.

Those Christians that remained in the Levant had been deemed heretics, belonging to numerous sects that often did not get along with central church and government officials. At first, Heraclius attempted compromise with many of the heresies, appointing a Monophysite patriarch to the city of Antioch and allowing him to remain in control of churches given to them during the Persian occupation. A decade later however, when Heraclius was near death and desirous to resolve as many governing problems as possible before he passed,<sup>31</sup> in 640 or 641, he passed a decree that outlawed all forms of Christianity other than Chalcedonian and began a program of forced conversion among the Roman population in the Levant.<sup>32</sup>

Around 630 to 632, Rome also had its first contact with a new religion coming out of the Arabian Desert, that came to be known as Islam. At first, the new religion was seen as just another Christian heresy and since it was being championed by the historically unreliable and often fractured Arabs, Rome and Persia both gave it little notice. The first raids into Roman territory by the followers of Muhammad were not very successful, even as a war-weary and cash-poor Rome attempted to reassert control over a region it had not ruled for over twenty years. All of this would change in 636 however, when a coalition army of Romans and western Franks was defeated at the Battle of Yarmuk, near the city of Jerusalem. This defeat had catastrophic effects on Rome, as the army lost near Jerusalem was at the time most of Rome's fighting men. Few of the soldiers escaped the Battle of Yarmuk, and fewer still survived to make

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<sup>31</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 203-300; Whitby, *Rome at War*, 61-81.

<sup>32</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 269-276.

it back to Roman controlled lands. Jerusalem and Damascus soon fell into the hands of the followers of Muhammad, largely due to the Nestorian Christian populations feeling repressed by the Roman government, and by 642, Alexandria fell and Egypt with it. Just ten years after Heraclius had regained three of the Pentarchic cities (628 CE), he lost all three of them. Losing three of the five holy cities had a profound effect on Christianity, one that may have led later to the east/ west split that would divide Roman Christianity into two major camps known as Greek Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. By 650, Rome lost most of its provinces in the East outside of modern-day Greece and Turkey, and by 700, Islam had spread to the Atlantic Ocean and was probing the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>33</sup>

Many scholars believe that Heraclius was the creator of the Theme System,<sup>34</sup> as he was forced to drastically change the way the military and its surviving aristocracy related to the rest of the population. In many ways the Theme System was what the feudal system of western Europe was based upon, but if this is true, it was in the prototype phase as Heraclius was hard pressed to hold onto lands recently retaken from Persia, but also Roman North Africa.

Heraclius was emperor of Byzantine Rome during what was likely the most tumultuous time of Roman history since the civil wars fought by Caesar and Pompey (49-46 BCE) that saw the death of the Republic and birth of the empire. He removed from power the first usurper since Constantine the Great, and fought off a civil war, an invasion from the east, and attempts of succession in the West all at the same time. His successful conclusion of all of this on its own

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<sup>33</sup> Raymond Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar* (New York: Da Capo Press 2018), 26-43.

<sup>34</sup> The Theme System was a scheme by which the Byzantine Empire was broken into administrative districts. The aristocrats charged with overseeing each district were responsible for military and political leadership. They were required to field and maintain a force of troops to defend the Theme, as well as to be ready for deployment should the emperor need them elsewhere; Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 236.

should have assured his place in history with all the other great emperors of Rome. But there are three decisions that Heraclius made, and continued to make in many cases, throughout his reign, that complicated his reign and legacy. First, his incestuous marriage of his niece and marriage of one of his sons to another niece that created a social faux pas that he fought throughout his rule of the empire. The second was his mishandling of heresies, as seen in the eyes of the Roman Christians of the time in the form of Nestorianism, in the Levant following a reconquest after twenty years of Persian control. This mishandling would help ensure that the Levantine population did not resist the Islamic invasion and spread of the new religion that today still dominates lands that had been Christian for three hundred years or more when Islam first arrived.

The third was that Rome and Heraclius failed to understand the nature of the followers of Muhammad as they came into Roman lands. Arab tribes had been known and used by Rome as scouts and raiders, as well as the Ghassanid Arabs being used as Foederati formations and as a buffer against non-Christian Arabs for many centuries before that time. They were known to be fractured, that is, disjointed and without a central leader that often saw the Arab tribes fighting among themselves more often than with Roman or Persian forces, and polytheistic which was not viewed well by either the Romans or the Sassanids in the 7th century as both empires were by then monotheistic. Whether he ignored them for this reason or just did not have the lives and treasure to repel them is a question that needs to be examined.

This represents the general outline of Heraclius' inheritance and early reign, as presented by Kaegi and other historians refined over the past twenty years. In the following chapter, I will more closely evaluate scholarship on Heraclius' imperial decision making with respect to the military reality of the 7th century CE.

## Chapter 2: Heraclius' Military Legacy

In this chapter, I survey the changes the Roman army had undergone in the leadup to Heraclius' ascension to the throne, and how he himself contributed to its ongoing evolution. Demographic changes and shifting power dynamics contributed to Heraclius' military challenges and innovations throughout his reign.

When Heraclius agreed to his father's plan to challenge Phokas for the imperial throne, he was forced to find men to fight his war from populations that were not traditionally recruited in large numbers for the army. Even before the 7<sup>th</sup> century the main recruiting center for the Roman army had become the Balkans, but during the beginning of the civil war Phokas had the bulk of the army that had put him on the throne stationed there to continue the task of keeping the migrating Slavs from claiming the area. This meant that except for the few forces that Heraclius was able to take from his father, he was required to recruit from other populations within the empire. There is not much written on where he got his initial force to begin his civil war, other than to say that he took the naval route, stopping at ports along the way from Carthage to Constantinople to bolster his forces and gather supplies and money.<sup>35</sup> Niketas, perhaps his cousin, was given the task of taking the land route through northern Egypt and north up the coast of the Levant, doing similarly as Heraclius. From the beginning of Heraclius' campaign, it

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<sup>35</sup> Heraclius and a relative—either brother or cousin, we are not sure—named Nikitas were given the goal of taking the Roman throne from Phokas by Heraclius the Elder. Heraclius was given the task to take the sea route, stopping at port cities and gathering more men on his way to Constantinople. Nikitas was given a similar task but by the land route, initially marching from Carthage to Alexandria. Little more is mentioned about Nikitas after he takes Alexandria. Phokas supposedly sent his best general, named Bonosos, to stop the land route army. Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 1-45.

enabled him to step out from his father's shadow, since he was required to recruit from wherever he could, but he was also forced to make changes to the traditional force structure when he did not have properly trained men, like the traditional and hereditary Roman army that was at the disposal of Phokas. Later, after Heraclius had secured the throne and consolidated his rule over the empire, he would continue to use non-traditional populations to fill the ranks of his army.

The culture, religion, and political makeup of Rome was in constant change, from the kingdom, the period of the Republic, the early imperial period, and then the Christian period, in which power had shifted from west to east and the many pagan religions were replaced, largely by Christianity. The military too was not a stagnant entity: it was constantly reformed and remodeled to meet the needs of an often expanding and always multi-ethnic empire that adapted when needed by the pressures on the empire from the outside.<sup>36</sup> As the empire expanded out of the Italian Peninsula, Spain, and France, it began to change culturally too. A third area that was in near constant change was the demographic of who and where the average Roman was or came from.<sup>37</sup> In 212 CE, the emperor Caracalla enfranchised<sup>38</sup> all who inhabited lands governed by

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<sup>36</sup> This statement refers to the fact that the idea of what it meant to be Roman was shifting, more so as the empire continued to absorb lands outside of Rome and Spain. As emperors allowed enfranchisement to extend to more groups outside of the original homelands of Italy and Spain, the demographic of not only the civilian and political populations changed, but so too did the military. Sometimes these military changes were more significant than those of the political and civilian demographic, as men from outside groups were increasingly allowed to join the army. All that is meant by the term "ethnic" is that the makeup of the army was not all Italian or Iberian, especially as the power centers shifted out of Italy and into the continent. Whitby, *Rome at War*, 21-23.

<sup>37</sup> Who made up Rome and where they came from was a very fluid idea, perhaps throughout the entirety of what we today call the Roman Empire. As borders moved and populations were enfranchised, it was the culture that defined them. Even after the loss of the West, not once but twice, the conquering peoples of the former western provinces and the people who remained considered themselves Roman. They often used coins issued by the imperial mint and often did not mint anything above bronze coins for themselves. Trade and tribute often still flowed from these "Romanized Barbarian" kingdoms, and it seems that Roman generals had no issue with recruiting from these lands when men were needed to quickly fill the ranks of the army. Malcom Donalson, "Where did the Romans go...?," *Classical Outlook*, 66, no.1 (October- November 1988): 1-4.

<sup>38</sup> David Allen Parnell, "A Prosopographical Approach to Justinian's Army," *Medieval Prosopography* 27 (2012): 1-75.

Rome, thus making all Roman citizens. The idea of ethnicity and what made someone Roman or barbarian was a matter for debate even within the empire. The over-recruiting of traditional regions even during the reconquest of the West meant that Germanic “barbarians” often made up the bulk of the Roman army.

Modern distinctions of ethnic groups also may not have existed at this point, as what made one Roman or barbarian in the 6th and 7th centuries was often how one dressed and spoke rather than where one came from. During the 7th century in Byzantine Rome, when one was referred to by what we would call an ethnic name or title, the Romans often meant it to refer to the geographical location of a person. For this reason, though Romans of the 7th century preferred to recruit from the Balkans for the army, they were a practical people and would often allow men from non-traditional recruiting centers to serve. This practicality can help explain how Heraclius was comfortable with recruiting from outside of these traditional locations both in the earlier civil war period from 603 – 610, when he seems to have drawn his recruits from the African and Levantine provinces and garrisons, and later when he began his campaign in 625 – 628 CE to invade central Persia, when he seems to have recruited heavily from the Armenian populations.

### 1. Changes in Roman military organization

Beginning in the 4th century, the Roman army went through a change in organization. This organization was still largely in use during the 7th century when Rome completed its war with Sassanid Persia (602 – 628 CE) and began the war with invading followers of Muhammad



(632 saw initial raids).<sup>39</sup> The army was no longer the infantry-centric force that had once conquered the Mediterranean basin the force that now the Roman army of the 7th century was a more mobile force, relying on technology and lessons learned from centuries of on-again, off-again warfare with Persia and the porous border with Germania.<sup>40</sup> The Roman army in the beginning of the 4th century was split into four distinct groups, though in times of emergency they could be mixed or moved around as needed. The first group was the *limitanei*, or the border troops. The *limitanei* were the direct descendants of the original Roman infantry legions, and they attempted to retain that historical connection even though they were no longer the main force of the Roman army. These units became sedentary, that is, they were permanently stationed in border towns or logistical locations. Eventually the positions in these units became hereditary and the quality of these troops could vary throughout the empire.<sup>41</sup>

The *climbanarii* were the Roman version of the Persian cataphract. They were heavily armored cavalry that were armed so that they could both charge with lance and sword, or act as mounted archers with heavy bows designed to punch through the same type of head-to-toe mail armor that the *climbanarii* themselves wore. The stirrup had not at this time been invented, so lance charges were not as common, but were still used to break up infantry formations. These formations were often from higher levels of society and were highly trained and skilled in both warfare and horsemanship.

The *comitatus* were expeditionary troops that were often staged hundreds of miles from the borders. These expeditionary troops were a combined arms unit of infantry and cavalry. It

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<sup>39</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 93-106.

<sup>40</sup> Whitby, *Rome at War*, 12-18.

<sup>41</sup> Whitby, *Rome at War*, 21-22.

was a formation of the best trained and equipped forces other than some privately maintained units kept by generals and politicians.<sup>42</sup> They would often be augmented by *Limitanei* and acted as drill instructors and officers for these added formations as the army moved into contact with any enemy threat either within or outside of the empire.

The *bucellarii* were the personal armies maintained by senior army officers and politicians in the Roman Empire. These were the best trained and equipped armies in Rome and acted as the backbone of any formation that went into battle. The size and makeup of a *bucellarii* would depend on the wealth, popularity, and capability of the person who led and maintained it. The Roman general Belisarius who reconquered the West for Emperor Justinian began his campaign in the mid-520s with a *bucellarii* regiment of around five thousand men.<sup>43</sup> By the time of his recall to Constantinople from the Italian Peninsula around 535, he had a *bucellarii* of nearly thirty-five thousand men, many made up from former enemies from North Africa, Italy, and Spain. Both Justinian and Belisarius had themselves served as *bucellarii* before they were themselves leading one.

The Roman army of the 7th century was unlike the Roman army of the past.<sup>44</sup> Before Diocletian, the Roman army tended to be recruited from Italy, Spain, and from the Germanic tribes that populated the north. Around the end of the 3rd century until the reign of Heraclius in 610, the Balkans were the preferred recruiting grounds for the Roman army.<sup>45</sup> Comitatus forces were often recruited from the Balkans until then. After the rebellion of Phokas against Maurice

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<sup>42</sup> Parnell, "A Prosopographical Approach," 1-75.

<sup>43</sup> Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, 33-73.

<sup>44</sup> Whitby, *Rome at War*, 21-22. A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602*, Vols. I and II (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964): 607.

<sup>45</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 1-39, and 69-82.

in 600, when the Balkan armies overthrew the Roman emperor, Heraclius would be more reticent to use the more veteran army forces who had supported the coup.<sup>46</sup> After that, the Roman army was recruited from Latin-speaking and Greek-speaking families in North Africa and from what is modern day Armenia. There is evidence that Heraclius' father was either Armenian, or that because of his years in the army near the Armenian region he had come to trust and rely on Armenian auxiliaries.<sup>47</sup> Because of this, according to Kaegi, Heraclius tended to trust Armenian recruits as he fought first the Persians, and then later the followers of Muhammad as they began claiming lands recently fought over by the Romans and the Sassanids. The Roman troops in the Balkans were no longer trusted and were left in limbo in the Balkans at the end of the civil war between Heraclius and Phokas, there to stop the influx of Slav, Bulgar, and Avar incursions and migrations into Roman territory. Not only did Heraclius not trust the army stationed in the Balkans because of the coup, Phokas had been forced to use these men to fight both Heraclius and Khosrow as well as send detachments to Italy to prevent the local aristocracy from claiming independence. The constant war all throughout the empire and the fact that the Balkans themselves were being invaded also helped lead to the decline of the region as a recruiting base for Rome.

## 2. Demographic and cultural changes

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<sup>46</sup> The editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica, "Phocas," *Encyclopedia Britannica* online (2020).

<sup>47</sup> Little is known of Heraclius the Elder. Kaegi mentions that there is evidence that either he or his wife were from Cappadocia, but he is unsure which one was. There is also evidence that he was close to the Armenians who inhabited an area that Rome and Sassanid Persia had been at odds about for many years. Therefore, Kaegi posits that Heraclius the Elder may have been of Armenian blood himself. Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 22-23.

These military changes were closely related to and affected by demographic and cultural changes. Before the 4th century, Roman citizenship, the culture, and the aristocracy were dominated by Italian/ Latin based culture, with a smattering of Roman-Iberian added to the mix. As the empire expanded out of the Mediterranean basin, the demography of what was Roman began to change. As emperors found the need for more money to continue with their various needs or desires, they had to find new populations to tax. Only Roman citizens could be taxed, so first the Gauls and the Germanics of the empire began to be enfranchised. As the money, wealth, and power of the empire began to shift to the east, so too did enfranchisement. Powerful aristocratic and trading families moved to the East also, following the movement of the Roman seat of power from Rome to Constantinople. With the shift of the wealthy elites and the enfranchisement of eastern peoples and cultures, the definition of what it meant to be Roman began to shift again. By the 7th century, the capital of Rome had been in the East for nearly four centuries and had not been in the city of Rome for longer than that. Cities like Ravenna, Milan, Aachen, and Belgrade had all acted as a capital in the past because the city of Rome was just not well situated to rule an empire expanding away from the sea, into the continent<sup>48</sup>. Emperors had often found the above listed cities offered a better location to position themselves for when they were needed to respond to any crisis that may arise. As the East became more important because of the many trade routes from India, China, and Africa, then so did the rulers of Rome want a to be where the wealth and power was. This shift to the East eventually led to the Greek language and culture overshadowing that of the Latin language and culture.

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<sup>48</sup> Whitby, *Rome at War*, 1-53.

Justinian the Great who began his reign in 525 was the last emperor to speak Latin as a first language.<sup>49</sup> Greek had been the official trade language of the East since the time of Alexander the Great (4th c. BCE). All the successor states that sprang up from his death were led by Greeks. This likely meant that as soon as the Roman capital and aristocracy shifted to the East the Greek language and cultural takeover of the empire was unavoidable. That the Romans had always been Hellenophiles may have lent a hand in this. The people of 7th century Rome never thought of themselves as anything other than Roman, but this was a Rome that looked drastically different than the time of Caesar or Augustus. Many of the ancient titles of government and the military were gone or had lost much of their accompanying authority and gone too were the pagan religions. Christianity dominated social life. Titles such as senator, consul, and legate still existed, and all official government documents were written in Latin even if they were also written in Greek, but none of these positions held the power or prestige they once had before the 4th century. The most powerful men in the empire of the 7th century in Rome were the patriarchs and the emperor himself. That four out of the five Pentarchic cities were in the Greek east with Christianity being the religion of the empire, would add to the Latin west being eclipsed by the Greek east as the majority culture of the empire.

By the 7th century, only Italy spoke Latin while the rest of the empire spoke Greek. Gaul, Germania, and most of Spain had not been reconquered a century before so Latin as the majority language and culture had been lost too. As Heraclius began his civil war with Phokas, not only did he have the long traditions of the Roman army to draw from when assembling his army, but

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<sup>49</sup> John W. Barker, *Justinian and the Later Roman Empire* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 64-82.

he likely also had the practical nature of his predecessors when it came to filling his ranks from non-traditional sources. His wife, Eudokia, was native to Carthage and her family was of old Roman/ Latin descent. They were a family who not only traded with Roman holdings in Italy, but with areas that were no longer under direct Roman control. These areas were still highly Romanized and likely gave Heraclius access to willing fighting men who would have understood the nature of the Roman army and how to best insert themselves into it. Drawing recruits from the garrisons and local populations on his way to Constantinople would have given him both the basic manpower needed in fielding an army, but also in the form of garrison troops and his father's own personal guard, the leadership backbone to turn the recruits into an army and lead them against Phokas.

Because of the fluid nature of ethnicity in the 6th and 7th centuries, it would be impossible to ascribe the makeup of the men who fought for either Phokas or Heraclius. Phokas had control of the army that had helped him overthrow Maurice in 600 that was already in the Balkans during the coup, but if Prokopios is any clue, Belisarius had a difficult time recruiting men there in 527 when he first moved through the area on his way to reconquer North Africa. It is possible that the male population was suffering from over recruiting for nearly three hundred years, coupled with the migration of Slavs and displacement of the Roman inhabitants. This may lead one to surmise that even Phokas had to rely on an army that was made up of non-traditional recruits, possibly Romanized Germans from the west.

Wherever it was that either of these Roman leaders gathered their men to fight one another and the Persians, it was merely the precursor to changes in the military structure that would become more profound at the end of Heraclius' reign in 641. It has been suggested by Kaegi that Heraclius was the first to use a version of the Theme System, which was a radical

reshaping of the military, decentralizing it into feudal like structures. It is also during Heraclius' reign that Latin ceases to be the official language of the army, a possible necessity as more and more men were recruited from non-traditional regions such as North Africa and Armenia, where Greek had long been a common language, but Latin had not. This could be why Heraclius is sometimes spoken of when scholars attempt to define the beginning of the Byzantine period, one last vestige of Latin legacy being removed in the name of expediency during a time of constant warfare when many of the small ceremonial items attached to an armed force in order to foster *esprit de corps* are removed because there is no time to instill them. Once the time presents itself later, there are few left to teach the past to the current generation.<sup>50</sup>

### 3. Heraclius' Military Decision-Making

Once Heraclius had discovered the source of his recruits for his armies, he also needed to discover a source of pay. Phokas controlled the capital and northern parts of the empire while the Sassanids had control over the Levant. Rome seems to have already been struggling in producing currency to pay for needed items, hence the coup of Maurice when he gave the Bulgars the army's pay instead of to the men he trusted to secure the empire for him. Heraclius is said to

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<sup>50</sup> This I do not based on another scholar's writings, but rather my own experiences in the wars of the early 2000s, where I witnessed first-hand this type of phenomenon myself. My own example is that annually U.S. Marines are required to qualify in combat swimming. This is where you must swim the length of an Olympic sized pool with full combat load, including body armor, pack, weapon. From 2003-2009, the deployment schedule was so tight, meaning that a seven-month deployment regularly became 9- 12 months, leaving just 2 to 3 months to retrain for the next deployment once we returned home. Since most of our deployments took us away from our more amphibious roles, we began to remove swim qualification, and eventually living on ships all together from the training cycle. This created a generation of Marines that had no experience in ship to shore movement and added to the seeming divorce of the Marine Corps from the Navy to the point that the Secretary of the Defense for President Obama had to mention the fact that the Marine Corps fulfilling roles as shock troops had caused it to drift from its traditional role of Naval Ground Combat Elements.

have solved this problem by taking precious metals from the church as he came across holy sites and confiscated the wealth inside. He would then have the metals melted down and turned into coins minted at regional sites throughout the empire. Later, after he returned from sacking the Persian heartland in 628, he would repay much of this back to the church. Coins recently found in an archaeological site in Jerusalem showed this.<sup>51</sup> They were gold *solari* that were not within accepted weight ranges set by the imperial mint but did have the imperial stamp of authenticity upon them. Ironically, the team that conducted the survey of the site was also able to point out that the *Chronicles of Theophanes the Confessor* (the *Chronographia*) did not accurately reflect some of these details, and therefore was problematic as a primary source for the period, something that Harry Turtledove had mentioned in his 1982 translation of the work, as discussed above. Unfortunately, this work has been oft cited as the only primary source of the period to have survived. It is now seen by Turtledove as having many editors through the centuries and much of the earlier writings were rewritten often by later editors to reflect the political and cultural realities of the day. These later editors or authors also wrote the work in ancient Greek, and because they did not know how to properly conjugate ancient Greek, much of it is poorly written.<sup>52</sup>

For Heraclius to have been able to assemble, pay, train, and move an army (or two armies if you count the one his cousin/brother marched into Egypt) during this time in Roman history, and from Carthage where Roman rule had been reestablished for less than a hundred years, he

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<sup>51</sup> Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem," 35-48. Doron Ben-Ami, Yana Tchekhanovets, and Gabriel Bijovsky, "New Archaeological and Numismatic Evidence for the Persian Destruction of Jerusalem in 614 CE," *The Israel Exploration Journal* 60, no. 2 (2010): 204-221.

<sup>52</sup> Harry Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes* (Philadelphia, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), Preface x-xi.



had to be a flexible and quick thinker. He would have had to overlook any preconceptions or misgivings he had for any of the resident populations along his route of march as he assembled his army. The Sassanids would accuse him of being a great schemer as he was able to later convince Shabaraz to sit in the conquered Levant when Heraclius invaded the Persian homeland. This though can be attributed to the loss of men during the failed siege of Constantinople in 626 with the assistance a reported eighty thousand Avars,<sup>53</sup> after the Sassanid commander realized the Roman army was too far away to rescue the city. Either way, this feat of assembling, training, and moving an army from Carthage to Constantinople during the civil war, and later in conducting the same feats in invading Persia showed that Heraclius had mind flexible enough to do what needed to be done to end the war. This also shows the practical nature in the Roman way of thinking that allowed Heraclius to continuously create armies out of non-traditional populations, train and support them, and win battles and wars with them. Along the way, the army undoubtedly went through changes. Demographics of the makeup changed, as well as connection to their Roman past through the ending of the use of Latin as the necessity of fielding new armies outpaced the need to foster a connection to the past with Latin.<sup>54</sup>

Heraclius not only made direct changes to the makeup of the Roman army out of necessity, but he also found himself allied with people Rome normally had little use in allying with. Through the 626 – 628 CE invasion of the Sassanid heartland, Heraclius managed to convince Khazar Turks to invade Persia from the northeast.<sup>55</sup> This invasion was little more than a series of raids that did not see Persia lose land, but it did lose much in wealth and people, and

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<sup>53</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 129-136.

<sup>54</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 231-300.

<sup>55</sup> Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, 21-23. Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 124.

army units had to be located and shifted to deal with the new threat even as most of the main Persian army was still in the Roman Levant occupying it, or, as in 626, unsuccessfully laying siege to Constantinople. It is my belief that this invitation to the Turks to invade Persia from the East may have changed their migration pattern. If looking at the traditional migration patterns based on language groups, Indo-Europeans seem to me to trend a more northerly migratory path before shifting west. That the Turks eventually moved through Persia and into the Levant and Anatolia may suggest that this pattern was altered when Heraclius asked them to raid the Sassanid eastern border.

Throughout this research, I keep coming to places that point out just how much we yet do not know of the Roman / Byzantine Empire in the 7th century. Many of the authors I have researched for this project either talk about how much Heraclius did not trust much of the army not under his or his father's control at the outset of his civil war with Phokas. We know that Phokas used these troops to fight the Sassanid invasion, the migrating Slavs and Bulgars in the Balkans, and sent detachments to Italy to prevent a growing idea of independence from Constantinople. Could Heraclius have been able to afford to set aside the skill and proficiency of these forces once he had taken the throne? After all, he had rebelled against the sitting emperor just as Phokas had. Also, when western scholars are writing about Heraclius' later years, specifically his and the empire's interactions with early Caliphate forces, there is much written about how Heraclius struggled to answer the manpower crisis he was in, largely due to the near half century of constant warfare inside the empire itself. They often fail to tie different eras together, as if there was a seam in history that physically separated rulers and times from one another.

This is how I see it: Justinian's reconquest of the West began in the mid-520s CE, and large combat was still happening in the mid-550s, as Roman troops retook the Italian Peninsula from the Ostrogoths and Lombards. They were already experiencing pressure in the Levant with Migrating Slavic and Bulgar people, and constantly fighting skirmishes and small wars with Persia in the East and in Armenia. The preferred recruiting area for the army at this time was the Balkans, and by the 7th century, the local population should have already begun to feel the loss of so many of its men since the late 3rd century to the army. This issue seems to be little explored by scholars, but to me would have been something that all rulers of the empire to deal with. Another issue that has to do with manpower, but which is little touched on is the army of the followers of Muhammad. Most of the Arabian Peninsula is desert, and as such would be unsuitable to field an army that conquers two of the world's longest empires in less than a hundred years, Persia being completely overtaken, and Rome losing the Levant, North Africa, and Spain much in these one hundred years. If the desert cannot provide the manpower to do this, and yet it obviously happened, where did the manpower come from to help early Islamic followers to conquer and hold these lands? I feel that the answer is obvious, that the Nestorian population of the Levant and western Persia was that manpower that fueled this growth, and I believe that they did so willingly. This is due, in my opinion, to the reversal in policy by Heraclius late in his rule concerning the Nestorians in the empire.

I have written before that he had originally promised to leave the Nestorian Christians alone. The empire typically used political and military pressure to prevent Nestorianism from gaining ground within the empire outside of the Levant. Heraclius' decision not to allow them to worship God as they saw fit, his renegeing on church appointments to Nestorian bishops, and the forced conversion to Chalcedonian Christianity is in my opinion why almost all of the cities

taken by Caliphate forces in the 630s and 640s seemed to have been without a fight. Stories of early Islam being inclusive of all Abrahamic religions had to have been welcome to a war weary population that saw Nestorian and Jewish Romans persecuted by their own government but accepted by their invaders. When spoken of at all, the inclusive nature of early Islam is not mentioned in many popular histories of the period. I myself had not researched any mention of this before Dr. Russell sent me a link to a lecture on early Islam by Dr. Fred Donner late in my research and writing process.<sup>56</sup>

In terms of military success and failure of Heraclius, his deeds should be looked at in four categories. The first category would be the civil war period from 603- 610 CE. Here he seems to have met little resistance from Phokas on the field of battle, there being little if anything written about this other than to state he had taken the sea route to Constantinople from Carthage, building his forces until he reached the capital and deposed Phokas. The second category I would set would be from 610- 613 CE. This is the period where Heraclius is consolidating his rule over Rome while at the same time he battled Persia, often having to rely on officers and men who had been loyal to Phokas. Heraclius seems to have suffered most of his defeats during this period, mostly in southern Anatolia where Persian forces were able to prevent him from moving troops into the Levant.<sup>57</sup> This formed a stalemate that seems to have continued until Heraclius entered his final campaign of counter-invasion into Persia that began in 627. This is the third category where Heraclius has revamped the army, replacing officers loyal to the former emperor and finding a new recruiting ground in Armenia. This is his by far his largest military

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<sup>56</sup> Fred Donner, "How Islam Began." Uncommon Core Lecture, University of Chicago, Filmed June 3, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RFK5u5lkhA>.

<sup>57</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 62-68.

accomplishment, as he manages to successfully invade the Persian heartland, destroying all enemy forces sent to stop him, and thus ending Persia as threat to Rome for all time.<sup>58</sup> The fourth and final category would be his response to the growing threat of posed by the followers of Muhammad. I would set this period as beginning in 630 and ending only at the death of Heraclius in 641. During this time Rome is war weary and dealing with many issues that stemmed from the defeat of Persia. There was the removal of the Persian army from the Levant, the resettling of peoples forced to immigrate into Persia by the Sassanids, the management of Nestorian Christians in relation to Chalcedonian Christianity, and the garrisoning of territory recovered after the war with Persia. In each of these cases it seems that Heraclius had seen some form of failure, except for the removal of the Persian army from Roman lands. All these failures combined and culminated into the failure of Rome to properly reestablish control over the Levant, which may have led to the seeming and relative ease to which the followers of Muhammad were able to claim major population centers between 636 to 638. We even see around this time refusal by Roman officers to carry out orders to halt the spread of these early caliphate forces.<sup>59</sup> Kaegi mentions much this in his conclusion about Heraclius, mentioning how easy it seemed for the emperor to accumulate victories early in his reign but then seem to fail time and again against the forces of early Islam. Kaegi claims that Heraclius at this time had PTSD from his years in the saddle and in combat and had lost the stomach for war.<sup>60</sup> Though this could be a good reason for Heraclius' new string of defeats, I feel that Kaegi compartmentalizes much in this thesis. It is likely that Heraclius had some form of PTSD, but then it is likely that most of

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<sup>58</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 142-173.

<sup>59</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 233.

<sup>60</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 237.

the Levant also suffered from this. It is also likely that many of the Romans in the Levant no longer saw themselves as strictly Roman after nearly twenty-five years of Persian rule, both those who had remained in the region and those who were reintroduced after their families had been relocated to Persia so many years before. There was also the religious animosity between the Imperial Church and Nestorianism and the forced conversions to the latter. All of this, and the depleted nature of the Byzantine army, in my opinion all added to Heraclius' inability to maintain control of the Levant.

### Chapter 3: Negotiating Religious Tensions in the 7th Century

The official religion of the Roman Empire in the 7th century was Christianity, or Chalcedonian Christianity, often referred to as Imperial Christianity.<sup>61</sup> The change from pagan to Christian began during the time of Constantine the Great (306-337 CE), when he gave the Christian religion official status in the empire, which allowed the church to apply for tax exemptions and monies from the Roman government. From the 4th century on, the religion grew to become the official religion of the empire.

Christianity in the 7th century was the dominant feature of Roman society. To be known as a Roman was, for the most part, for others to assume you were Christian.<sup>62</sup> Political decisions were made in the name of God, and the emperor played an active role in the administration of the church. In the 7th century the Imperial Church was still ruled by the Pentarchy. The Pentarchy was the five holy cities of the Chalcedonian Church: Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Rome. Each of the holy cities was ruled by a patriarch that created and debated policy and dogma. All the holy cities were in the East except for Rome, and all of them were in

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<sup>61</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, 1-40.

<sup>62</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, 37-40. Regan's claim throughout this monograph is that the Rome from the time of Constantine the Great to 1453 saw itself as a Holy Empire, here on earth to do God's work. He claims throughout that Rome saw itself surrounded by unholy or heretical enemies that needed to be defended against and defeated. He claims that to be known as Roman was to be Christian, and to be known as Christian was to be Roman. This does muddy the waters when Arianism and Nestorianism is considered, as well as the Latin west that though was no longer under direct Roman control in many areas were Christian and did offer some obedience to the emperor using Roman coin in trade and tribute.

He does not say much of the Jewish population of Rome that existed not only in the Levant, but throughout the empire, but does point out that when the Jews were first ordered out of Palestine that the order pertained to all semitic religions. This would suggest to me that Christians no longer saw themselves connected to the Jewish faith, nor does this account for the Ghassanid Arabs, many of them Roman citizens. As the title suggests, Regan is attempting to claim that Heraclius as the first crusader who not only fought off the Zoroastrian Persians, but then went on to fight the emerging Muslim armies.

the Greek speaking regions except Rome, which was in the Latin speaking west. As the holy cities would debate the dogma and ceremony of the Imperial Church, the emperor would often act as the final word on issues that resulted in stalemate.

Patriarchs themselves were appointed by imperial decree, and all church officials were paid by the government in the 7th century. Every war was declared using the rhetoric of a holy war. If fought in the west, then it was often against Arians, if in the east, it was either against Zoroastrians or Nestorian Christian Persians, and in the north and south it was against polytheists of various pantheons. Every event, natural and contrived, was seen as a portent from God. When plague swept through the Roman Empire (573 and 600 CE), followed soon after by the coup of Phokas, invasion by Sassanids, and the civil war with Heraclius, this was seen by many as God's displeasure with the empire. Religious zealots would use these events for the next half decade—as well as the hardships of Heraclius' rule and the health problems of his children due to incest<sup>63</sup>—as examples of God's punishment of a sinful Rome that needed to repent.<sup>64</sup>

### 1. Competing Capitals

Another major issue arose in the Roman world as the 7th century began, rooted in the Christian religion and culture that permeated the empire at the time. Ever since the 4th century, when Constantine officially moved the capital of the empire from the city of Rome to Constantinople, there had existed tension between the two cities. Rome was the mother city. It gave birth to the empire that dominated the Mediterranean for centuries. Its religion had become

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<sup>63</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 106-107.

<sup>64</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, 2-42.



Christian, and its culture was Latin-based, but unlike the new capital on the Bosphorus, it retained its polytheistic roots to the beginnings of the empire. Rome had ceased to be the working capital of the Roman Empire even before the end of the Julian dynasty, as cities like Milan, Ravenna, Aachen, and Belgrade were often used as administrative capitals as the empire became more of a continental power, but the culture was still Latin and largely pagan until the 4th century. As power shifted from Italy to Anatolia, the dominant culture began shifting from Latin to Greek and religion from pagan to Christian. The aristocracy was relocated along with their wealth. This departure of the wealth and the loss of prominence within the empire began the animosity between the two imperial cities. Constantinople would become the New Rome (in 324-330), a kind of symbolic “Rome” of Greek and Christian culture<sup>65</sup> until its fall in 1453.

The elites of the city of Rome likely felt jaded, and as a city it held onto its Latin culture, using the patriarch of Rome to help maintain it throughout the western provinces and former provinces. With the coup against Maurice, the invasion of the Sassanid Persians in the east, and the civil war between Phokas and Heraclius, the people of the city of Rome used the turmoil to gain more autonomy from the emperor and the Chalcedonian Church.<sup>66</sup> Both Phokas and Heraclius were forced to allow the increasing autonomy of the Latin Church in exchange for peace in the Italian Peninsula. Heraclius would also need the Roman patriarch later when he sent out a call to the former western provinces for troops to regain the Holy Land from first the

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<sup>65</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, 12-38.

<sup>66</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 93-97. Heraclius is constantly forced to make compromises throughout the empire outside of the Levant as he struggled to find men and money to fight the war against the Sassanid Persians. Kaegi also points out that Heraclius’ civil war with Phokas may not have been popular with ecclesiastic leaders, though I contend that this may merely be from Heraclius removing wealth from churches to convert into coin to pay his troops, both during the civil war and after. He did return much of the wealth to the Church after his defeat of Sassanid Persia in 628.

Zoroastrian Sassanids and then the early Muslim Rashidun caliphate beginning in 633 and continuing at least to the death of Heraclius in 641. The Germanic Franks, as the Romans called them,<sup>67</sup> would join the Romans in reclaiming “the Holy Land,” and were prominent in the Battle of Yarmuk / Yarmouk in 636 (see below).<sup>68</sup>

## 2. Heraclius and Christian Heresies

Throughout the history of Rome as a republic and an empire there were periodic threats both internal and external to the continent-spanning government. The 7th century was no different and, in many ways, the total sum of threats both internal and external was greater than any other time during Rome’s existence. Starting in the west, the Germanic kingdoms that had been the invaders of the western Roman empire two centuries before were a threat to Rome again in the 7th century. They had converted to Christianity early (likely in the 4th century) and had been Arians who, until the reconquest of the West ordered by Justinian and led by Belisarius, had controlled all the western empire from Ravenna to the Atlantic Ocean. Belisarius managed to retake Roman North Africa, Spain, and Italy. These kingdoms were still in the West in the 7th century and had regained some territories in both Spain and Italy even before Phokas led his coup against Maurice. In the north of Greece, Rome faced migrating incursions from Slavs, Bulgars, and Avars (or Huns). This was the major threat that Rome had been facing during the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*, 16; and Donalson, “Where did the Romans go...?,” 1-4. Even as the western half of Rome had fallen in the mid-5th century, many of the Germanic conquerors were Romanized through marriage into the local population and conversion to Christianity. Many of the Germans were even Christians as they conquered the west. These Gothic, Visigoth, and Lombard kingdoms were therefore tied to Rome through religion, as the emperor was the head of the Church when he acted as arbiter between the Pentarch. They also continued to trade with the east, using Roman coin as common currency.

<sup>68</sup> Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*, 14-24.

coup of Maurice, and the reason that most of the Roman army was in the Balkans when Phokas led his revolt. To the east, Rome faced the Sassanid Persians. This Persian government was the first since the conquest of Alexander the Great to be majority Persian instead of Greek.<sup>69</sup> Despite the replacement of Greek families as the majority in this Sassanid government, there were many ties among the ruling class of Persia and Rome. These ties were one of the supposed reasons to invade the eastern Byzantine Empire<sup>70</sup>—to reestablish the proper aristocracy on the throne of Rome.<sup>71</sup>

All these threats, the Germanic tribes in the west, migrating tribes, and a resurgent Persia, were not new threats to Rome. These all had been issues that the empire had had to deal with for centuries. But a new threat was to present itself to Rome in the 7th century, and history would prove that it was a threat that Rome would not overcome. Starting in the 620s, a leader named Muhammad had begun uniting the many tribes of the Arabian Peninsula behind a single

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<sup>69</sup> Foss, “The Persians in the Roman Near East,” 149-170; and Whitby, *Rome at War*, 24-27. Rome and Persia of the 7th century had centuries of contact through various versions of government spanning through their shared past.

<sup>70</sup> Whitby, *Rome at War*, 24-27; Foss, “The Persians in the Roman Near East,” 149-170; Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 53-89; and Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, 33-73. Khosrow had been given sanctuary as a young man when his family was briefly overthrown. Maurice also helped Khosrow regain his throne shortly after. Soon after the coup led by Phokas, Khosrow would use the claim that he had the son of Maurice and was invading to place him on the throne as a form of repayment for when Maurice had helped him. It is my contention that because Sassanid Persia felt they had historical ties to the Levant, they would use any show of Roman weakness to raid the Levant, and if possible, gain territory. The eventual conquest of the entire region was the goal, but it seems to me that the Persians took the long view and would settle for a little at a time. Because both Rome and Persia had historical claim through conquest of the Levant, the area never seemed to see peace. Justinian’s reconquest of the West had to be interrupted around invasions of the Levant and may have been the reason that both empires began moving into the Armenian region, to flank each other. Even as the Justinian made peace with the Sassanids in 545, it seems that raids and small skirmishes persisted between the two empires, as this is where Heraclius the Elder is said to have made a name for himself, and Kaegi contends in his book that this is how and where the younger Heraclius becomes friendly with the Armenian population who would make up so much of his armies during his term as emperor. I could go further back in history to show that Rome and Persia never fully stopped fighting one another for control of the Levant, but to do so would broaden the scope of this thesis. This seeming never ending war did define Heraclius’ early reign, as he was finally able to not only reclaim the Levant, but he was also able to invade the Persian heartland and ensure that Persia under any rule was no longer a threat to Rome.

<sup>71</sup> Baca-Winters, *He Did Not Fear*, 1-3.

monotheistic religion. Both Rome and Persia had dealings with these tribal groups for nearly as long as they had with each other, but this new reality posed new challenges. As these western cities debated dogma and interpreted the texts and messages of Christianity, different sects were often born or distinguished.

Beginning in 325 with the First Council of Nicaea, church leaders began to label deviations from the established practices of the centralized church as heresies. This formal distinction would become attached to certain ethnic groups or local church practices in the empire and would often become sources of internal stress. One of these, the Nestorian church was dominant in the Levant and into the Sassanid Persian Empire. Nestorianism came about in either 450 or 451 when Nestorius, a member of the church in Antioch began questioning the publishing of documents by the ecumenical council.<sup>72</sup> It would eventually spread to be the first Christian church to reach China.<sup>73</sup>

Another, Arianism, had begun in Alexandria in the 3rd century, became a problem for the Roman government in the 330s (when most of the ecclesiastic authority of Alexandria were members of the sect<sup>74</sup>), and had spread to the Germanic kingdoms during the 5th and 6th centuries, when the patriarch was exiled from the empire for attempting to spread these teachings.<sup>75</sup> Stories of the reconquest led by Belisarius (527-551, though Narsis would replace Belisarius in Italy and complete the conquest) three quarters of a century earlier,<sup>76</sup> contain tales

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<sup>72</sup> Milton V. Anastos, "Nestorius was Orthodox," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962): 117-140.

<sup>73</sup> Anastos, "Nestorius was Orthodox," 117-140.

<sup>74</sup> Arianism had been banned in the empire in 339 CE but was practiced among the Germanic tribes that had taken the Latin West. Christopher Haas, "The Arians of Alexandria," *Vigiliae Christianae* 47, no. 3 (1993): 234-245.

<sup>75</sup> Haas, "The Arians of Alexandria," 234-245.

<sup>76</sup> Prokopios was the personal chronicler of Justinian I, and as Harry Turtledove points out in the preface of his translation of *Chronographia*, there was a major difference between historians and chroniclers during the Byzantine

of the Roman general having Arian churches in North Africa, Spain, and Italy rededicated to the Imperial version as he took possession of them.<sup>77</sup>

Arianism and Nestorianism were two of the most popular, but not the only Christian sects that were marginalized in this period. There were other divisions in the Christian faith, such as the division of the Coptic Church from the rest of the Imperial Church (5th century CE, related to the repudiation of Arianism). The Coptic Church which consisted mainly of the native population of Egypt and was mostly found in the south of the province. Much like the Nestorian Church that had largely become a part of the identity of Syrian Romans, or Roman Latin to describe the western provinces, the Coptic Church had become a descriptor of the native Coptic population of Egypt that had never fully integrated with the Greek population near the Mediterranean coast which had lived there since the time of Ptolemy (305-282 BCE).

Much like the Reformation (beginning in 1521 CE) nearly a thousand years later, the Imperial Church of the 7th century had its schisms. During the 6th century, precedent was set when Justinian and Theodora chose different sides of the debate between Chalcedonian Christians and Nestorian Christians to work towards a compromise to prevent a permanent break,<sup>78</sup> but the different dogmas preached by the various patriarchs in all the five holy cities of

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period. Though both professions were writing histories of the day, chroniclers had to ensure their patronage by using the opinions of their patrons to direct the nature and flow of their writings. This could be the reason for Prokopios' *Secret Histories* that was published only after his death (Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, vii- xvii).

<sup>77</sup> Throughout his conquest of Northern Africa, Italy, and southern Spain, Belisarius had to be careful as to how he treated different sects of Christianity. This is because he often recruited and maintained large portions of defeated Gothic armies under his command as he continued the reconquest of western Rome, and most of these new troops were Arian Christians. Many of these troops would later accompany Belisarius as he was sent to battle the Persians who thought to take advantage of the Roman reconquest of the west to take both Armenia and portions of eastern Rome, much of the same land that Heraclius and the Sassanid Persians would also battle over a hundred years later. Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, 145, 184, 222-319.

<sup>78</sup> Based on lectures in an undergraduate class History of Christianity taught by Dr. Richard Hernandez taken in 2018. He claims that during the reign of Justinian and Theodora that the two would often work together to bring

the Pentarchy ensured that there were always some forms of divergence under the umbrella of the Imperial Church. Nestorianism and other sects were allowed to exist in western Persia and the conquered territories of the Roman Levant during the Sassanid Persian invasion in 602, but Imperial Church adherents were often persecuted or killed, and their lands and property seized by Persian Zoroastrians and Roman Jewish collaborators that often helped the Persian invaders.

The connection between the Roman emperor and the Imperial Church was one of the two stated reasons<sup>79</sup> for the invasion of the Roman Empire by Persia in 608, as Persia claimed that the growing Christian population in the western portions of their empire was a security threat to the Persian government since the Roman emperor often acted as the head of the Imperial Church. As these various sects and heresies became connected to different ethnic groups within the empire, societal tensions formed. When Heraclius first came to power in 610, he championed a policy of tolerance with all forms of Christianity within the Roman Empire. His hold on the empire was tenuous at best until 612, and the Levant and much of Egypt was in the hands of the Sassanid Persians until 628, when Heraclius finally was able to launch a counter-offensive against Persia from Armenia.<sup>80</sup> Even after the final victory in 630, most of the Persian army commanded by Shaz Beraz remained in Roman territory for nearly two years while the final

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ecclesiastic issues to common ground by each championing one side. In this way, they both kept the violence to a minimum.

<sup>79</sup> The Sassanid Persians seem to have had three goals in the invasion of the Levant following the coup of Maurice. They claimed to be harboring a son of Maurice and intended to put him on the throne. It is possible too that the Persians saw the relative weakness of Rome in the area and were taking the chance to raid the Levant, similar to the mid-6th century when much of the Roman army was in the West reconquering North Africa, Spain, and Italy. The third possible reason is the spread of Christianity into western portions of Persia. Though the version of Christianity entering Persian lands was Nestorian and had no official connection to the Pentarchy and the emperor as the head of the church, the Zoroastrian priesthood and the Sassanid government saw them as a potential security threat that needed to be mitigated. Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 65-68. Foss, "The Persians in the Roman Near East," 149-170.

<sup>80</sup> Baca-Winters, *He Did Not Fear*, 1-5; and Foss, "The Persians in the Roman Near East," 149-170.

peace treaty was worked out between the two ancient empires. After the final retreat of Persian forces from Roman land, Heraclius began a program of repression against both Nestorian Christians and Jewish people in the Levant because both groups had been reportedly found to be aiding the Persian invaders in both conquering Levantine land and governing it in the name of Sassanid Persia.<sup>81</sup> Nestorian Christians and Jews were both forced to convert to Chalcedonian Christianity,<sup>82</sup> though most of the Jewish population was treated more violently in retaliation for reported Jewish atrocities against Chalcedonian Christians during Sassanid Persian rule (the so-called Jewish revolt against Heraclius in 614 – 617).

### 3. 7th Century Apocalypticism

For the people of Rome, the 7th century was seen as an apocalyptic time such as those written about in the New Testament of the Bible (canonized during various ecumenical councils between 393 and 405 CE). Priests and patriarchs of all the sects and all the Pentarchy preached of this as a time of punishment of the Roman people by God for the sinful ways of the Roman

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<sup>81</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 180.

<sup>82</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 209- 228. In 632, after Byzantine Roman rule was being reinstated in the Levant, Heraclius promised the Nestorians freedom of worship, even promising them more prestigious appointments. During this same time, the Roman Jewish population was being persecuted and forced to convert or often killed. In 634, Heraclius went back on his word and began a program of forced conversion of Nestorians to the Chalcedonian faith. This seems to be an attempt to tidy up hot spots in the empire, and Kaegi contends that Heraclius knew that he had little time left and was attempting to ensure there were few problems for his son to succeed him after he died. This to me is problematic, as Heraclius II Constantine, the son of Heraclius had already been acting in his father's stead in Constantinople since as early as 628. Kaegi also notes this and states that Heraclius II had been co-ruling with his father for a number of years, mainly because Heraclius found himself either in the field against the Sassanid Persians or remaining out of the city to avoid social struggles caused by his curtailing of ecclesiastic rights under Roman law, or perhaps both his incestuous marriage and the claim that he also encouraged Heraclius II to marry a family member. Either way, the claim to be tidying up imperial messes for the transition of power to his son would need to be taken with a grain of salt, as the son was already exercising imperial power.

society.<sup>83</sup> Two usurpations, back-to-back and for the first time in over three hundred years, civil war and invasions, loss of governmental control of much of the reconquered west, plague in the capital and social unrest were all pointed to as vehicles of God's wrath.

Rome had always been at war with either its neighbors or itself since the beginning of the empire, but possibly not since the Punic Wars (264–146 BCE) was the very base of Roman culture and empire threatened as it was in the 7th century. For the first time since Constantine took the throne, the future of Rome was in doubt. Three of the five holy cities would fall to Persia, and the two remaining were at odds with one another over the title of the center of the empire itself. The succession was broken twice in less than a decade, and the greatest part of the Roman army could not be trusted because they had engineered the first usurpation. This was a time of troubles for Rome and only a strong leader would be able to pull Rome together and save it from its many enemies. For thirty years Heraclius would be that leader.

#### 4. Heraclius' Responses to Religious Change

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<sup>83</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 1-39; Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, introduction - 53. By the 7th century, many Byzantine Romans saw Rome as a holy empire that was surrounded by enemies of not only the empire itself, but of Christianity. It seems that there was a polarizing affect happening in the empire at this time, particularly in the Greek territories that were largely Chalcedonian against the Nestorians of the Levant, the Coptic church of southern Egypt, and the growing strength of the Roman patriarch in the Latin west. Both Regan and Kaegi claim that more and more, as the 6th century gave way to the 7th, and warfare and calamity fell upon Byzantine Rome, that the leaders of the church, of any sect would use the ensuing unrest as proof that God was angry with the Roman people for their sinful ways. It is unclear if any of this preaching of God's wraith is in response to the loss of ecclesiastic power and wealth largely at the hands of Heraclius and his policies, or the Persian invasion of the Levant that saw much church wealth relocated to Sassanid Persia, but it does seem that the church did attempt to use these tumultuous times to sway the Byzantine Romans to be more pious. There is no evidence of increasing violence because of this, even as there is evidence to religious violence tied to both the Byzantine Romans and the Sassanid Persians as a result of the invasion of Levantine Rome by Persia. Most primary sources from the 7th century are today thought to be at least a hundred years older than the actual events being depicted, and so the bias and animosities of the 8th and 9th centuries would need to be considered when reading them and adding them to any piece of modern literature on the subject.



These were the challenges that Heraclius faced, and in some cases he created. He was the first to lead a civil war in three hundred years, and the second to conduct a coup to oust the reigning emperor. He had to build, train, and pay an army, moving it from North Africa to Anatolia to remove Phokas from power. This meant that he likely fought not only fellow Romans, but also the Sassanid Persians along the way. The civil war that he fought from 603 – 610 would give him the experience he needed to then turn around and continue the fight with Sassanid Persia, keep the Slavs out of the Balkans, and hold onto lands in the West that had been reconquered for less than a century. He would be forced to come up with ways to move his army, pay and feed them when traditional modes and methods were already in use by the army under Phokas. Once this was accomplished, he would then have to use these same methods again in the Balkans, as well as find new areas to recruit from; the traditional Balkans were both suspect because of the coup to overthrow Maurice but were also under pressure from Slavic migration and over-recruitment for at least a century.

Because of his seizure of church wealth and his second marriage to his niece (613), Heraclius also had tensions with the ecclesiasts to contend with. He handled this problem by stationing troops in Italy to keep the patriarch and local aristocrats from gaining independence, created new ceremony and positions for the church that were subsidized by the government, and later, after he stripped Sassanid Persia of much wealth, he paid back the gold and silver he had taken early on in his career. Heraclius even attempted to placate the Nestorian sect by first promising it the Patriarchy of Antioch and the basilica of St. Stephan, but he reneged on these

promises soon after making them,<sup>84</sup> likely attempting to stabilize his government as he prepared for his eldest son to take overrule of the empire in his later years.

This going back on his word to the Nestorian population in the Levant is, in my opinion, the biggest mistake Heraclius makes during his time as emperor. His incestuous marriage was handled by the added ceremony and accompanying authority that it gave to the church as well as his returning of the wealth used in earlier years to pay his troops. The change in policy on the Nestorian population, many of whom had been under Persian rule for twenty years or more in some cases, likely caused them to feel betrayed and marginalized by their own government.

When the Rashidun Caliphate was established, it found little resistance among these people as the newly unified Arab forces spread through this war-weary land. It is ironic that Heraclius was the emperor who finally defeated the Sassanid Persians for control of the Levant after centuries of war, through multiple governments and dynasties, only to lose it himself in relatively few years to a new and unknown threat from the new religion from Arabian Peninsula, much of it due to his policy shift from accepting Nestorian Christians to his forceful conversion of the Nestorians to Chalcedonian Christianity. It is likely that the Nestorian population of the Byzantine Romans in the Levant were either relatively passive in allowing Rashidun Caliphate to take control of their cities, or they may have actively in some instances given their cities over to the Caliphate.

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<sup>84</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 209-210.

## Chapter 4: Heraclius and Islam: Competing Memories of Heraclius's Decision-Making

In this chapter I will survey Heraclius's decision-making during and in the aftermath of the Byzantine-Sassanid War, 602 – 628 CE, known today by some as the Last Great War of Antiquity. This ending of a 26-year military struggle saw Byzantine forces encountering the followers of Muhammad and the Rashidun caliphate (632 – 661), as the leadership of Islam continued to evolve and be contested for the next couple of centuries.<sup>85</sup> I will summarize the events and evidence that have shaped our narrative about the last twenty years or so of Heraclius's life and reign. I will consider the reception history of some of the key historical sources that purport to shed light on Heraclius's relationship with the prophet Muhammad, and I will explore the idea that during Heraclius's reign, a temperate consideration of Islam, including reversals in previous ecclesiastic policies, may have aided the growing political and military power of the followers of Muhammad and his successors.

Heraclius finally defeated the Sassanid empire in 628 with an invasion of the Persian heartland from the Armenian frontier, while at the same time inviting Turkish tribes, located at this time to the northeast of Sassanid Persia's borders, to conduct raids into the Persian heartland.<sup>86</sup> This allowed the recovery of much of the treasure and religious artifacts that the

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<sup>85</sup> Donner, "How Islam Began." Islam would not be codified until the 680s. Until then, and possibly soon after, early forms of the religion were very inclusive of other Abrahamic religions and would allow them to coexist and co-worship. Munt explains that even though many of the Byzantine Romans had surrendered to the Arabs as they seized territory in Syria and the Levant, they were not forced to convert, and it was nearly three centuries before the majority of the population did convert from Christianity to Islam. Munt, "No Two Religions: Non-Muslims in the early Islamic Hijaz," 249-269.

<sup>86</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 142. Through my two-plus years of research, I have found few scholars that talk about the Turkish involvement in the latter part of the war. Kaegi speaks of them a bit near the end of his book but leaves much to be desired. Traditional seasonal migration routes that have been traced through their Indo-

Sassanids had taken out of the Levant for the last twenty or more years, and also devastated the Persian heartland, turning the Sassanid people and aristocracy against Khosrow II (reigned 591 – 628). In 630, Heraclius led a triumphant procession through the streets of Jerusalem to deliver a shard of the so-called True Cross that had been taken out of the city by the Sassanids and removed to Persia after the fall of the city in 614.<sup>87</sup> This procession seems to have been a show of both Imperial and Christian authority returning to the pentarchy city after sixteen years of Sassanid rule. It had taken until 630 for the Persian army to retreat from Roman lands, but as soon as they did there was an almost instant power vacuum that was hard for the Romans to fill.

### 1. Reviewing Heraclius' Role in the Byzantine-Sassanid War

All of what is today the modern Middle East (from Iraq to the Mediterranean coast, and from Turkey to Egypt) had been in Sassanid hands. Some of these lands, including the Levant from Antioch (which had fallen in 610) to Jerusalem (which had fallen in 614), had been under

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European language and material culture should have seen the Turks migrate farther north before shifting west. Why does no one point out that Heraclius' invitation to the Turks to raid the Persian lands from the northeast may have profoundly impacted the natural seasonal migration pattern of Indo-European peoples? If this were true, that the emperor's invitation was the reason for the Turks turning to a more westerly migration earlier than they had under his predecessor, then it is safe to assume that Heraclius shaped the future of the region on levels previously unthinkable, and that this change eventually and indirectly would lead to the downfall of Rome/ Byzantium eight hundred years later. It is my belief that few western scholars like to look at the Turkish migration and Heraclius' involvement in their choice of routes, largely because of the contentious nature of the Turkish claim to be the rightful heirs to Rome, a claim that could be reconsidered.

<sup>87</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 206. During this procession, Heraclius is bringing the recovered relics, notably the fragments of the true cross back into the city as a sign that Roman rule has officially returned to the city. This procession is said to have taken place on March 21, 630 CE. It is difficult to verify the dates properly for various reasons, but two major reasons may be the cause. The first is that the Romans of the 7th century used three calendars. There was the Julian Calendar, the Consular Calendar, and the Anno Mundi Calendar. Since most supposed primary sources were either rewritten in the 9th century or not written until then, it is difficult to surmise how these dates were correlated or revised to fit, or if they were again revised when the Gregorian Calendar was later used. To add to the confusion, the Greek Orthodox today use the Julian Calendar while the Catholics use the Gregorian Calendar, and Islam uses a Lunar Calendar called the Hijri Calendar. All of this combined adds to the confusion when attempting to study the 7th century where much of the written record of the time was destroyed due to constant warfare and forced migrations from the constant violence.

Sassanid control anywhere from ten to twenty years. Much of the Roman aristocracy native to these lands had either fled or been killed off early in the war. Skilled labor too had been killed or forced to immigrate to Persian lands<sup>88</sup> until Heraclius' invasion of what is today Iran in 624 – 628.<sup>89</sup> Those Romans who had remained in the occupied territories in the Levant during the war were largely two religious groups, Nestorian Christians and Jews. Both populations had been marginalized and often persecuted by the church and government for years and many of them seem to have had better lives under Sassanid rule.<sup>90</sup> Heraclius recognized this and attempted to placate the Nestorians by giving them key church postings in the Levant and in Roman Armenia. But he would later go back on his word, removing the Nestorians from these postings and forcing the Nestorian populations to convert to Chalcedonian Christianity.<sup>91</sup> This Heraclius did later in his reign to clean up problem areas so that his son, Heraclius Constantine, would have fewer major issues as he began ruling after his father. This seems to have been a major

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<sup>88</sup>Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 70-83, and 207; Foss, "The Persians in the Roman Near East," 149-170. Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*, 9-53. The initial invasion of the Byzantine Empire by the Sasanians was supposedly to place the son of Maurice on the throne, a gesture that Khosrow saw as him returning the favor from when he was a child and a coup forced him to flee to Rome, where Maurice took him in and later helped him raise an army to retake his throne. However, it is highly likely that Phokas had the entire imperial family killed when he seized the throne in 602 CE. It is more likely that Khosrow was following a Persian common practice of raiding the Levant whenever Rome was distracted elsewhere. This practice is described by Prokopios in his histories, and if one is to look at this pattern it would show that even though all-out war likely broke out when the Persians saw how weakly defended the Levant was, and that both empires had been trading off long term raids of this nature for many years, at least as far back as the reign of Justinian's successor, Justin I. As the Sasanians were able to gain territory, they set about a policy to relocate the skilled labor of the Levant to the heartland of Persia. This population would remain in Persia until Heraclius' invasion in 627 CE. It is interesting to note that this group of relocated population could have been living in Persia anywhere from 603 CE to 628 CE. Kaegi mentions the mass migrations following the successful Roman invasion of Sasanian Persia and speaks of much chaos as these Romans who likely may now have thought of themselves as Persian returned to the Levant, even as the Roman government attempted to regain administrative control of the region. He also speaks of government purges of collaborators, such as of the Jewish population and the Nestorian Christians. These reprisals, to me, explain where the early Islamic forces seem to gain many of their recruits and seem to gain ground so easily, as the Roman and Persian populations are both war weary and tired of religious persecutions by their respective governments.

<sup>89</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 77-83 and 203-207.

<sup>90</sup> Baca-Winters, *He Did Not Fear*, 1-6.

<sup>91</sup>Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 208-216.

miscalculation on the emperor's part and would ensure that the former occupied areas never fully reintegrated with the rest of the empire.

In the west, Heraclius had traded what little of Spain was left for the promise of peace<sup>92</sup> upon securing his throne. Italy continued to be a problem as Ostrogothic and Lombard lords gained more power and tended to defer to the pope in Rome more than to the emperor, leaving imperial power on the Italian Peninsula in a constant state of doubt.<sup>93</sup> The Balkans were in a state of chaos as Slavic, Hun, and Avar immigrants arrived, making the capital city of Constantinople vulnerable to attack by these groups. Gone too was the traditional Roman army.<sup>94</sup> Though the changes brought on by Diocletian and Constantine had greatly changed the makeup of the Roman army, it had had, until the late period of the war with Sassanid Persia, an arguably hereditary connection to the armies of the past, when Caesar (100 – 44 BCE) and Pompey (106 – 48 BCE) built the Roman Empire and then warred over it. Through the combinations of the coup of Maurice in 602 CE at the beginning of the century, constant warfare and attrition of skilled and trained troops, the invasion of traditional recruiting sites by migrating Slavs, Bulgars, and Avars in the 6th and 7th centuries and the depletion of available recruits due to war had caused

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<sup>92</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 93. Heraclius was faced with turmoil on many fronts during the early days of his reign that began in 610 CE. Most of the army that had existed before the coup of Maurice had remained loyal to Phokas during the civil war. Much of that army was strung out, from Italy where the army had to ensure no move for independence occurred, the Balkans, which were the traditional recruiting grounds for the army since at least the time of Diocletian in 284 CE as well as being the backyard of Constantinople and the focus of migration for Slavs, Avars, and Bulgars. Phokas had also been forced to fight both the invading Persians and Heraclius. This meant that when Heraclius took the throne, he had to make the decision to let lands in Spain that had been reconquered by Belisarius in the 6th century be sold to the Visigoths who controlled the majority of the Iberian Peninsula.

<sup>93</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 1-50; Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*, 43-53. The bulk of the Byzantine Roman army was in the Balkans in 600 CE, to stop encroachment of Slavs in the region just prior to the coup that was led by Phokas because Maurice had given the money to pay the army to the Slavs and Bulgars instead of paying his troops. When Phokas took the empire, he was forced to spread much of this army out to both keep control of the aristocracy and to fight off the coming Sassanid invasion in 602.

<sup>94</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, 43-53.

Heraclius to look elsewhere for his recruits. In the early days of the war, he had relied on his father's personal army and recruits from Roman North Africa and Egypt.<sup>95</sup> Roman armies at this time were usually made up of ethnic and racial groups that were approved by the empire including populations from the Balkans, Germanic peoples, Goths, Huns, and Armenians.<sup>96</sup> Later, he had begun recruiting mainly Armenians into the army for his invasion of Persia, and by the end of the war they made up most of the men in Heraclius's army. Many of the Roman legions had been either loyal to Phokas (r. 602 – 610) or killed fighting the Sassanids. In 620, under Heraclius's rule, Greek was made the official language of the Byzantine Empire, likely a response to organic changes already occurring among the populace. When Heraclius began consolidating power following the civil war (603 – 610 CE), his army did not include traditional forces prior to him seizing the throne, and it is likely that few survivors of these more traditional units still lived or were on active duty when the war with Sassanid Persia was concluded. The war had gone on for over twenty years and was very costly in terms of the number of men lost both to the civil war and to the invasion by Persia in the Levant (602 CE). The more traditional Roman military units had been stationed in the Balkans just prior to the coup and following civil

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<sup>95</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 1-50; and Whitby, *Rome at War*, 21-22.

<sup>96</sup> Whitby, *Rome at War*, 18-24. In 284 CE, the Roman army began a series of reforms that changed the structure of the force from an infantry centric force to a more mobile force centered around heavy calvary, supplemented by border forces and personal armies armed and trained by the elites of Rome. During this time, the Balkans become the preferred recruiting grounds for the army, though there was a heavy influx of mercenaries and foreigners who were allowed to join the Roman army in exchange for citizenship and a pension. Some cultural or ethnic groups however were rarely considered for enlistment into the Roman army. One was the Copts of Egypt. The Copts were considered indigenous Egyptians, and although the more Greek descendants who had lived in Egypt since the time of Ptolemy were accepted into Roman society, the Copts were not. Another cultural or ethnic group that was not widely used was the Armenian populations. This is likely because Armenia had existed as a buffer between Rome and Persia and the loyalty of the population was often in question. It is curious to note that Heraclius' father who shared the same name as the emperor, may have either been Armenian or had many close ties to the Armenian populations inside out of Rome. Heraclius is known to have recruited from the Armenian population before his invasion of Sasanian Persia in 627 CE, and it is likely that he relied on the Egyptian population during his civil war with Phokas from 603-610 CE.

war, and many of those units had supported Phokas' rise to power. Few of these men were seen as trustworthy by Heraclius as they had backed Phokas and so were unavailable for Heraclius himself to use as troops until he had won the civil war. The surviving troops that had been loyal to Phokas were then either left in the Balkans to contend with a still-threatening Slavic invasion or parceled out to either Italy or the Levant prior to Phokas' defeat.<sup>97</sup>

## 2. Heraclius and Muhammad

This is the backdrop of dynamics that the followers of Muhammad faced. By 630, Muhammad had largely united the people of the Arabian Peninsula under Islam, except for the Ghassanids in the Levant who had long ago converted to Christianity (some as early as the second or early third centuries CE). According to later Islamic tradition, Muhammad sent letters to several heads of state from Medina, including Heraclius. The preserved tradition indicate that Muhammad initially wrote to the Roman emperor to point out their similarities as People of the Book, and to encourage Heraclius to submit to the will of Allah / God. Heraclius was reportedly extremely impressed by the letter, and according to Muslim sources acknowledged Muhammad as the prophet that "they" had been waiting for, possibly referring to Christianity, though ultimately not converting to Islam. However, it now seems clear that later traditions (perhaps 100-300 years after the purported events) invented or elaborated this series of letters between Muhammad and Heraclius, in which the two establish a relationship and Heraclius seems to

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<sup>97</sup> Regan, *First Crusader*, 43-53; and Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 44-83.



admire Islam, considering converting.<sup>98</sup> These letters were likely altered considering later attitudes and needs, as will be discussed below.

El-Cheikh has argued that Heraclius is the most written-about Roman emperor in surviving Islamic texts. He features in the Quran and in works by authors like al-Ṭabari (839 – 923 CE), al-Nuwayri (1279 – 1333 CE), Ibn Kathir (ca. 1300 – 1373 CE) as being the wisest, most learned and cunning emperor to sit on the Roman throne.<sup>99</sup> In al-Tabari’s accounts, Heraclius attempts to convert his generals to Islam, but reverses this idea fearing for his life and throne.<sup>100</sup> The 9th century historian al-Kufi, records (or invents) a letter from Heraclius to his general, Vahan, saying “You have seen that the Arabs have been victorious because they have accepted God’s commandments and consult the wise among them.”<sup>101</sup> In this tradition, Heraclius even quoted from the Quran from time to time when corresponding with successors of Muhammad. Later Muslim historians would use these texts as proof that the wisest emperor of Rome saw that Rome had become corrupt and had strayed from the correct behavior under God /

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<sup>98</sup>Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, “Muhammad and Heraclius a study in Legitimacy,” *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 5-21. In this article, El-Cheikh claims that the correspondence between Heraclius and Muhammad was used as a source of legitimacy for the conquest of the Levant and North Africa. In the letters, Heraclius seems to give conversion from Christianity to Islam a thought, but then claims that he could not because of how entrenched into Roman culture and society Christianity had become. Because of this, the letters are likely propaganda of a later age, 100-300 years later like much other purported primary sources that had been created after the friction between Christianity and Islam had sparked deep suspicion between the faith communities. The more that I delve into the time of Heraclius, it seems unlikely that any actual unaltered primary sources had survived the period.

Al-Tabari. *The History of Al-Tabari*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Albany NY: The State University of New York Press, 1989. In this primary source used by El-Cheikh, on page 967 there is a list of Roman emperors that begins with Rome’s rule over the Levant and continues through to Heraclius. After some of the names listed there are some minor notes, such as Vespasian and his sons, as well as Cassius earlier get more mention than most because of their personal interests in the region. Heraclius has a note as well. He reads simply that Muhammad had written an epistle to the emperor. Using the word epistle instead of letter is of note as well, as it suggests to me some sort of religious or social bias of the English translation.

<sup>99</sup> El-Cheikh, “Muhammad and Heraclius,” 5-21.

<sup>100</sup>El-Cheikh, “Muhammad and Heraclius,” 14, discussing Al-Tabari’s *Turikh al-rusul wa al-muluk*, Prima Series III, 1566-67.

<sup>101</sup> El-Cheikh, “Muhammad and Heraclius” 5-21.

Allah. It is interesting to note that in this tradition, Heraclius himself was noted as being a man worthy of conversion in service to Allah, but as the generations went on, Byzantine emperors mentioned in Islamic texts seemed to stray even further into decadence and away from Allah, ensuring that conquering the empire became an explicit goal.

After 630, Heraclius then began consolidating his power across the empire, filling the power vacuum in the Levant, keeping the Slavs contained, reining in the pope in Italy, and converting Nestorians to Imperial Christianity.<sup>102</sup> Raids by the Rashidun caliphate followed into the Levant, from south of Jerusalem to Damascus, but many of them were beaten back by allied Ghassanid Arabs, who had been long-time Byzantine allies, along with what few Roman troops had now moved in to fill the vacuum left by the retreating Sassanid Persian army.<sup>103</sup> These efforts were successful largely because the Levantine Ghassanid kingdom was able to project power in Syria in the name of the Byzantine Empire, where Rome could not do so itself.

In 632 CE, Muhammad died, and his successors increased the level of military action against both Byzantine and Sassanid empires, the latter of which had fallen into chaos following the 628 CE Roman victory and displacement of the royal family. Coups and countercoups raged

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<sup>102</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 209-237. Beginning in 634 CE, Heraclius begins a program to reconcile the Nestorians with the Chalcedonian Church. He did this by promising the Nestorian Christians, who were the majority of Christian Romans in the Levant, that he would not force them to convert to Chalcedonian Christianity, also known as Imperial Christianity. He also promised them bishop seats in many of the larger area churches throughout the Levant and into modern day Armenia and Georgia, even going so far as to insinuate that they may have a Nestorian patriarch in Antioch. By 638 CE, Heraclius changes course and begins a program of forced conversion to Imperial Christianity. As discussed above, this seems to further alienate the Levantine Christian population from the rest of Rome, and in my opinion may have become an early source of recruits into the early caliphate that was spreading through Roman and Persian lands that largely had no government representation beyond the local level, was war weary and full of forced migrants, and tired of decades of persecution. This decision by Heraclius may be seen as the most important reason that Rome loses the Levant so quickly and thoroughly.

<sup>103</sup> Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*, 11.

across the Sassanid empire, as aristocratic families struggled for power.<sup>104</sup> The Arab expansion into the Levant and Persia began with an invasion of the borderland and Levant, easily sweeping Persian and Roman forces aside. In 634 CE, Damascus falls to the Arab armies, largely due to the native Nestorian population that felt persecuted by the Byzantine government, and who turned over the city without much resistance. In 636, Rome was able to field a large army of over forty thousand men, many of them being Frankish volunteers attempting to save “the Holy Land” (Jerusalem and other coastal Levantine regions) from being taken by non-Christians for the second time in less than half a century.<sup>105</sup> Most of this army was made up of heavy infantry with a small Roman calvary unit that some say was led by either a younger brother or bastard child of Heraclius.<sup>106</sup> On the River Yarmuk / Yarmouk in modern Jordan, this army met the main Rashidun force which was at least a few thousand fewer and consisted of mainly cavalry and light infantry. The battle raged on for many days, with the Byzantine army controlling the field and inflicting major casualties on the invading Rashidun forces.

### 3. The Battle of Yarmuk (636 CE) and Its Aftermath

On the final day of the battle, two events that led to a reversal of fortune on the battlefield. First, on the day before the final day of the battle, the Byzantine cavalry left the field never to return. Historians are conflicted as to why this happened. Some claim that the force commander and the cavalry commander had an argument, and the cavalry left the field in

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<sup>104</sup> Baca-Winters, *He Did Not Fear*, 6-7; and Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 168-203.

<sup>105</sup> Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*, 17; and Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 231-256.

<sup>106</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 244. Kaegi is the only source that I have read that mentions a possible bastard son, though his inability to know for certain is suspect. Because of the lack of proper primary sources during the 7th century, it is hard to tell if Kaegi is taking liberties with his own research.

protest.<sup>107</sup> This may be the case, since by this point in Heraclius' reign, field commanders were frequently disobeying or ignoring imperial orders, just as the Roman general only known as Peter did when he received orders to move his forces from Numidia to engage Rashidun invaders from the west.<sup>108</sup> That this was the same province Heraclius' father (as exarch of Africa) had ruled as governor and from which Heraclius had launched his civil war with Phokas is telling in terms of how little control Heraclius had when not personally leading the army.

The Byzantine army at Yarmuk was not the Roman army of the past. There were no phalanxes of Roman soldiers with swords and spears, there weren't even any of the more modern formations<sup>109</sup> that had been created when Diocletian had reformed the army in 284 CE. This was a composite army of Armenians, Egyptians, and foreign Franks. The cavalry and a small core of Roman infantry were likely the only actual Roman formations in the army that faced the Arab army at the Battle of Yarmuk. It is likely that there was little *esprit de corps*, and there was a

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<sup>107</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 242-243.

<sup>108</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 233. In this passage, Kaegi acknowledges that this is the only time in his research that he had heard of this general only known as Peter. He was the commander of Roman/Byzantine troops stationed in Numidia, a part of Roman North Africa that included the land once governed by emperor Heraclius' father, Heraclius the Elder. I was hesitant to use this passage, but felt it was necessary to show how precarious Heraclius' hold to power was even after his victories over Phokas and Khosrow II.

<sup>109</sup> Whitby, *Rome at War*, 1-25. Though a small book, and likely meant for coffee tables, this work is succinct in pointing to the governmental and military changes brought on by emperor Diocletian which began in 284. To deal with the military's need to be more mobile, Diocletian created new formations which became the way the Roman army war fielded up to the reign of Heraclius. The successors of the Roman legions were called the *Limitanei*. They were border troops stationed along the frontiers of Rome. They tended to be infantry troops that held static positions along the frontier. They would be used to bolster the more mobile forces that had become the focus of the Roman military. The *Comitatus* were the mounted mobile forces of the Roman army and they tended to be stationed in garrisons in more centralized locations that would allow them to respond to threats as they came about. They were also the main forces used when invasion armies were constructed. *Bucellarii* were private armies controlled by Roman elites. These tended to be the best trained and outfitted Roman troops in the empire and would form the backbone of armies for both offense and defense. These formations were the standard of the Roman military until the 7th century, when constant warfare that caused the loss of skilled veterans, Heraclius' inability to trust much of the army that had conducted a coup of Maurice and put Phokas on the throne, and the recruiting of nontraditional ethnic groups inside the empire caused these formations to fall largely out of use.

real language barrier with those forces from the eastern parts of the empire having Greek as a common language, and the Franks having Latin. Other Muslim sources<sup>110</sup> add more to this account of the battle;<sup>111</sup> this early history is written into the Quran (e.g., surah 9, or *at-Tawba*) and is shared in oral tradition. One tradition remembers that for the first five days, Byzantine forces were winning the battle and that morale in the Muslim army was slipping.<sup>112</sup> On the sixth day, a massive dust storm arrived and covered the battle. Few of the men in the Byzantine army facing the Muslims had ever witnessed a storm of this type and were at a loss on how to proceed; the Muslim army though took the storm as a sign from Allah that their opponent had his favor and their morale soured. With the Roman cavalry gone from the field and the infantry unused to the conditions, the Rashidun forces were able not only to defeat the Byzantine army but destroy it.<sup>113</sup>

With the loss of the army in the Levant, Heraclius had no more men that he could spare to send. Small garrisons of troops were still stationed at some towns and cities, but there were no more Byzantine maneuver forces available to send. From 636 to 639 there was a mass migration of Romans loyal to both the empire and the church from the Levant to other parts of the empire. In 638, Jerusalem falls to Rashidun forces and with it all sense of Roman control of the Levant. Heraclius withdrew all his forces from the Levant and sent most to Anatolia where he was forced

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<sup>110</sup> Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*, vii-42. Ibrahim relies heavily on Kaegi, on Sura 9 in the Quran, and the 9th-10th c. historian al-Tabari. Though Ibrahim contends to offer an account of early Islam through the lens of a Muslim, he is very critical towards them. On page 4, he cites Muhammad's Constitution of Medina, in which he talks about believers not slaying other believers, but only the unbeliever (not indicating that Muhammad likely meant all Peoples of the Book).

<sup>111</sup> Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*, xii-xvi, and 22-26.

<sup>112</sup> Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*, 22-24.

<sup>113</sup> Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*, 26.

to again reform the army.<sup>114</sup> It is likely here that the beginnings of the Theme System were born, though it would take more than a century for the kinks to be worked out (see note 34, above).

The Theme System caused problems within a couple of centuries of its establishment, as local commanders would begin using their own forces to exert political and military control on the central government in Constantinople, rather than its intended focus on threats outside the remaining territories of Byzantine Rome.<sup>115</sup>

#### 4. The Death of Heraclius (641 CE) and His Legacy

On the 11th of February 641, Heraclius dies.<sup>116</sup> The Byzantine Empire would continue to suffer major losses of territory for another century before borders began to stabilize, though that too was a mere prelude to war. Italy would eventually begin looking closer to home for military support as the Patriarchy of Rome distanced itself from Constantinople and the emperor of

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<sup>114</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 248-255.

<sup>115</sup> Jessica Whittemore, "The Slow Decline of the Byzantine Empire" on Study.com (<https://study.com/learn/lesson/fall-byzantine-empire-history-causes-importance.html>; 2022). This video helps explain that through a series of outside pressures and the medieval style government fostered by the Theme System had helped cause the weakening of the Byzantine government. Like any empire, it is not likely that one thing caused its downfall, but rather a series of many things compiled together. Some like to point to this military/ political system as a departure for the Byzantine way of government that helped lead to its defeat and downfall by the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1453, with the initial large defeat in 1071 at Mezinkert, where Turks defeated the Byzantine army in near totality and saw the balance of power between the two forces shift for the final time. This way of thinking does not allow that Byzantium was the continuation of Rome, but instead that power shifted to the east. Rome went through many forms of government between 500 BCE to 1453 CE, some of them mere alterations of what had already existed, and some complete departures of what had come before. This thinking that only Rome can defeat Rome also discounts other groups or empires becoming greater than Rome.

<sup>116</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 290. Throughout his book, Kaegi contends that near the end of his life Heraclius was suffering from severe PTSD. On the one hand, he had lost the will to fight for the empire as aggressively against the newly emerging threat of the Caliphate as he did against the Sasanians and immigrating peoples into the Balkans. But on the other hand, he wanted to leave a Rome/Byzantium behind that his children could rule with more ease than he had himself. This is how Kaegi explains many of Heraclius' choices in his last years as he went back on his promise to Nestorian Christians on having their own churches and free worship and instead issued Ekthesis (269) which made all forms of Christianity other than Chalcedonian illegal. This edict was issued in 638 CE and saw the war weary Roman population become distrustful of their government.

Byzantium. The Slavs and Bulgars would continue their migration into the Balkans, many of them converting to Christianity and assimilating. The successors of Muhammad would continue to conquer lands formerly under Roman control, but eventually making it to the Atlantic coast and crossing onto the Iberian Peninsula and even as far as modern-day France. Sassanid Persia would never fully recover from Heraclius' invasions of 626 – 628. Soon after, a puppet government loyal to Constantinople was placed on the throne, successive coups and factional fighting among the Sassanid elites ensured that there was no united front when they too were to meet with the followers of Muhammad or his successors.

The life and death of Heraclius is largely viewed and told in two different ways. In the West it is often told as a cautionary tale about a man who rises to greatness to save his empire from its enemies, only to lose it all because he had angered God and become sinful.<sup>117</sup> In the eastern (Muslim) tradition Heraclius is seen as a wise, learned, and cunning emperor; perhaps the last one to sit on the throne of Rome. He is seen as a worthy and equal adversary to Muhammad, who carried on a correspondence with Heraclius that showed mutual respect and appreciation of each other's plight. It is interesting to me that there is such a divergent view of the same man preserved in these traditions: where historical successors of the empire he ruled seem to snub the

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<sup>117</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 210-216 and 265-269. Rome of the 7th century was largely a Christian empire that saw portents in all things. From natural disasters, invasions, and plagues, the Church would often infer that the empire was suffering due to some transgression against God. Many of Heraclius' decisions shaped his relationship with the leaders of the Church and set the tone on how he was written about. Heraclius often infringed upon the Church, likely in the name of winning war, against Phokas, Sasanian Persia, or early Caliphate forces. He had raided churches for his wealth to pay his troops early in the war, as well as capped the number of ecclesiastic officials who drew pensions from the imperial treasury. Heraclius seems to have had an on-again off-again relationship with the Church for the entirety of his reign, often offsetting ruling against the Church with those rulings for it. He did repay the Church soon after his triumph over Sasanian Persia in 630 with loot taken from the Persian heartland and by returning relics taken by the invading Persians early in the war. Because of this relationship with the Church, and because much of the surviving documents from the 7th century were written by Church, his character is often attacked as much as it is praised for his victory over Persia.

man, his enemies and conquerors see him as equal in many ways to their own prophet and leader in skill and wisdom. Much of the supposed primary sources are now considered not so primary, either written in the 9th century or heavily edited at that time.<sup>118</sup> Western scholarship written during and before the Second World War seems to discount Heraclius, perhaps to blame him for later historical developments. Scholarship since the mid-twentieth century, however, has rehabilitated his narrative.

More recent scholarship of the last few decades seems to be kinder to the Byzantine emperor. Sources in Arabic and Persian are being integrated into our view of his reign, and those texts which had long been seen as primary sources are now being reexamined considering their later reception history and propagandistic uses. Today none of the available first-person accounts or letters seem to be contemporary to Heraclius and Muhammad, but instead were (at the very least) significantly altered by later generations to illustrate a narrative that legitimized changing attitudes towards conquest.

Considering this evidence, I see no reason to think Heraclius was particularly concerned by the followers of Muhammad or the Rashidun caliphate. In the parlance of his times, many political and military outcomes were seen as evidence of the will of God, and so his decision-making was likely informed not just by his military experience and the available human, fiscal, and military resources available to him, but also by his interpretation of god's will. Unfortunately, the state of the extant sources does not seem to permit access to that

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<sup>118</sup> Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*, viii-xi. Turtledove points out that Theophanes was related to the Macedonian dynasty (876 CE - 1056 CE), which already puts the scholarship in the 9th century and makes the writing even more suspect. Rome during the Byzantine period had two professions who wrote histories: there were the historians, who are not dissimilar to historians today and followed a similar way of research and writing; the other type of historiographer was the chronicler, a person employed by someone who often wanted history written in such a way as to make the employer look great, and their work was therefore often political in nature.



interpretation, other than through deductions based on his actions. While we can presume that historians writing in the 300-500 years after his death could not have drawn conclusions wholly at odds with the facts, on the other hand their motivations to tell theologically driven stories about Heraclius likely took precedence, and any new or precise details from these sources must be examined skeptically. As El-Cheikh has argued, “the Muslim sources made Heraclius a character of the Muslim sacred history,”<sup>119</sup> a stimulating antidote to those western sources who viewed him as a failure, but ultimately no more inherently historically accurate than the latter.

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<sup>119</sup> El-Cheikh, “Muhammad and Heraclius,” 21.

## Chapter 5: Reexamining Scholarship on Heraclius

Kaegi (2003) and Regan (2003) both seem to have intended their works as surveys of the life of Heraclius and the version of Rome that he ruled over in the 7th century. Kaegi attempts to be more comprehensive in his coverage of social, military, and religious concerns during this time. Regan seems to focus on the religious aspect of Heraclius' era more, going so far as to describe how Christianity is molded, starting in the 4th century by Constantine and other emperors as popular pagan religions and ideas are folded into Christianity. He then works Heraclius' story around the idea that he was the first crusader king, calling Frankish troops from the former Roman lands to the west, in what is today Western Europe, something Kaegi does not mention, though both books were published in 2003. Ibrahim (2018) seems to have written through a more religious lens as well, though he seems to have focused on the subject through a history of Islam rather than Christianity. He, too, talks of Frankish troops, but this book is interesting (and at the same time becomes less valuable) when the reader realizes that even though Ibrahim seems to write through an Islamic lens, he is not kind to Islam in his description of the religion or its adherents.

The way that history is studied and taught seems to be in flux, changing for the better by the day. The problem with history is not how it is being studied, applied, or even taught in higher levels, but it is at the lower levels—in general historical narratives—that newer, more holistic ways of learning are not commonly in use. Instead, in popular histories and introductory courses one could argue that we are taught in a cellular fashion, each era, epoch, or eclectic leader has their own time in history taught as if it happened in a vacuum that either was not a product of various moments in the past and likewise did not profoundly affect the next cell in the historical

line. Though this is a known fallacy, it is still how history is presented, at least at any level before university. By the time a student gets to that level this kind of research and learning of history is ingrained and difficult to break in the less dedicated.

Kaegi, Regan, Ibrahim,<sup>120</sup> or nearly any of the other secondary sources that I used to conduct my research, did little in my opinion to look even a hundred years in the past from where their research began. This is relevant to me because to me they miss many historical events that could help explain events they themselves were studying. The invasion of the Levant by Sassanid Persia after the coup of Maurice by Phokas in 603 CE is a prime example. I have little doubt that Prokopios was a common read between these authors, and yet there is no mention of the many invasions of the Levant by Kavid, Khosrow I,<sup>121</sup> and others during times of strain in the Roman Empire where the Roman's attention was drawn elsewhere, whether it was the reconquest of the West or riots of sports fanatics in the capital. Prokopios points out this very pattern himself, even if he does not explicitly say so. He lists every time Persia invaded or raided the Roman Levant, and notes that every time Rome was occupied elsewhere, the scope of the raid or invasion seemed to depend on the length of time it took the Romans to respond to the Persian invasion.

## 1. The Challenges with 7th Century Primary Sources

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<sup>120</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*; Regan, *First Crusader: Byzantium's Holy Wars*; and Ibrahim, *The Sword and the Scimitar*.

<sup>121</sup> Prokopios, *The Wars of Justinian*. Kavid is first mentioned on page 11 as becoming heir to the Persian throne in the late 5th century where he quarreled with Rome over Armenia. This series of events led by Kavid's desire for Armenia seems to bring Persia's desire for Armenia and the Levant, which they saw as ancestral lands occupied by the Romans, back to the forefront. It is interesting to note that on pages 5-6 there is talk of the Persian ruler Yazdgird being the guardian of Theodosius III as he first took the throne in 408 CE, citing great relations between the two empires as well as the renowned honor and wisdom of the Persian ruler.

The lack of uncontaminated primary sources for the 7th century in the Levant did not seem to be a concern to many of the historians I consulted. Harry Turtledove, a history professor and popular alternate history/ fantasy writer translated *The Chronicle of Theophanes* in 1982.<sup>122</sup> This is supposed to be a primary source from the Byzantine Roman perspective that detailed the sack of Jerusalem by Sassanid Persians in 614. Turtledove made many observations that he detailed in his introduction to his translation, such as that by the 7th century there were two types of collectors and writers of history in Byzantine Rome. There were the historians, who were highly educated people who used what we today would call the historical method when collecting and cataloging historical data. The others were called chroniclers. Chroniclers tended to be hired by military or aristocratic peoples to write personal histories used to bolster personal or familial status. It is worthy of note that Prokopios himself was a chronicler in the pay of Justinian I, not a historian. It is not clear which Theophanes was, but that is largely a moot point when Turtledove then explains that Theophanes was either a member of the Macedonian Dynasty (875-1056 CE), or closely related to it. This is significant because he also notes that the *Chronicle (Chronographia)*, is laced with hate speech against Muslims and Islam that did not likely exist in the early to mid-7th century, since Islam was not thought to be codified until the latter half of the 7th century. Early followers of Muhammad during the time that the *Chronographia* was written about were thought to be more open and accepting of other

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<sup>122</sup> Turtledove, *The Chronicle of Theophanes*. To me, the introduction written by Turtledove was more useful than the translated material. This is due to the seeming contamination of the writing possible later editors in the 8th and 9th centuries. See also Ben-Ami, Tchekhanovets, and Bijovsky, "New Archaeological and Numismatic Evidence for the Persian Destruction of Jerusalem," 204-221. Avni, "The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem," 35-48. Both publications deal with the Sassanid conquest of Jerusalem in 614. Gideon uses the *Chronicle of Theophanes* to verify the archeological evidence that was uncovered by digs. He notes that though some of the events, such as the massacre of the Christian Romans by the Persian in 614 likely did occur, the numbers purported in the *Chronicle of Theophanes* seem to have been inflated, as they do not match the evidence found.

Abrahamic religions, in contrast to Roman Chalcedonian and the Persian Zoroastrianism. Both latter faiths tended to either regulate other religions to second class status, or purged them with killings and forced conversions, probably due to political connections to the ruling classes in their respective empires.

Gideon Avni also writes of the possible contamination of the *Chronographia* as he details its use in archeological research in Jerusalem. “The Persian Conquest of Jerusalem (614 CE),” published in 2010, argues that the *Chronographia*, if not shown to be illegitimate, is at least exaggerating when it speaks of the massacres committed by the Sassanid Persians when they sacked Jerusalem in 614 CE. Avni points out that though there is evidence that targeted mass killings of Roman Christians in the city, the numbers killed did not match the archeological evidence when mass graves of those massacred were discovered and catalogued. Though Turtledove writes of this in detail in his 1982 introduction, the 2003 books written by Kaegi and Regan do not seem to point out the compromised nature of the primary source. El-Cheikh writes about the supposed correspondence between Heraclius and Muhammad in her article “Muhammad and Heraclius, a study in Legitimacy,” where she states that the (real or fictitious) existence of these letters added legitimacy to the Muslim conquest of Roman lands, not only in the Levant, but also elsewhere, such as North Africa, the Balkans, and Spain.<sup>123</sup>

Though I did not use these Arabic letters as a source directly, I did look at one of El-Cheikh’s primary sources and found something I thought may be interesting, as it shows possible religious or cultural bias. Al-Tabari’s *The History of Al-Tabari*, is a 9th century, 16-volume set of

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<sup>123</sup> Nadia Maria El-Cheikh. “Muhammad and Heraclius: A Study in Legitimacy.” (1999): 5-21. Al-Tabari, *The History of Al-Tabari*, translated by Franz Rosenthal.

books detailing the creation of the earth through the history of the Israelites, the Roman conquest of the Levant, followed by the Muslim conquest of the same lands. It is interesting to me that his understanding of the supposed correspondence between Muhammad and Heraclius is based on one sentence (on page 967 of 8066 in the English translation of this work). In this section, a list of Roman emperors appears, from the incorporation of much of the Levant into Rome to Heraclius. In this section of the history, it says Muhammad had sent an epistle, which is the basis for some to claim the Heraclius and Muhammad exchanged correspondence.

## 2. Problems with the Major Histories of the Period

As mentioned above, the tendency of “cellular” history, as I see it, is evident in nearly all the secondary sources, but especially the general histories of the period like those of Kaegi, Regan, and Ibrahim. When writing of the Byzantine-Sassanid War (603 – 628 CE), these historians do not seem to put much weight into the preceding hundred years or more, other than to mention Justinian and his reconquest. These secondary sources will say that by the time Muhammad and his followers came into the Levant from the Arabian Peninsula, the Romans and Persians were war-weary and financially strained from twenty-five years of war. None give more than passing mention to the reconquest of Italy, Africa, and Spain: for example, how the endeavor had cost the Romans much in men and treasure, or how the Persians had set a pattern of long and extended raids of the Levant or Roman Armenia whenever Rome was distracted elsewhere.

None of the historians I reviewed seem to emphasize the cultural and societal cross-pollination that likely took place between the Romans, the Persians, and the Arabs. That there were likely many similarities between these two old empires and the emerging new one is

overlooked, and the amateur reader who would find any of these books would not likely make the connection. None of these authors make the connection between the early followers of Muhammad and the Nestorian people of both Rome and Persia, which to me is strange as no one seems to have an answer to where Muhammad and his successors got the resource and manpower anyone would have needed to spread as Islam did in those early years to the death of Heraclius in 641 CE.

This is strange because the way secondary sources that are readily available are worded makes it seem that large numbers of early Islamic adherents came pouring out of a desert incapable of supporting large populations of people and took cities from both Byzantine Rome and Sassanid Persia that both empires had been fighting over for centuries, unable to completely defeat one another until this final war. It is likely, according to the centuries-long pattern, that wars would have followed had Islam not spread the way it did. This was not a conquest of the sword, though there were many battles, even decisive ones such as Yarmuk in 636. The Battle of Yarmuk saw the destruction the Roman army as it existed in the Levant at the time, when they were still recovering from the war with Persia, had Slav and Avar encroachment to contend with, and could ill afford to replace any large losses of troops at this time. Rather, this seemed to be a conquest by inclusion and compassion for the Roman Nestorians, which likely saw most of the Nestorian population eventually converting to Islam themselves. This apparently is not a new concept to scholars, but it is greatly overlooked by authors like Kaegi, Regan, and Ibrahim. It is also not a topic that is found in Western histories before the university level. This causes many to wonder about the massive hordes of troops, wealth, and infrastructure required to support a conquering army like that of the Rashidun Caliphate.

### 3. Reevaluating Heraclius' Decision-Making

Heraclius made many decisions that affected his own era and the modern world. I will attempt to list them chronologically discuss their respective impact. Some seem relatively minor when compared to others, but they all had a cumulative effect. The first is early in the war with Phokas. Kaegi writes that in 603, soon after Heraclius' father, Heraclius the Elder had declared himself consul,<sup>124</sup> that itself could have been seen as a sign of rebellion to Phokas' rule. He then instructed both Heraclius and Niketas, a brother or close relative of Heraclius, to lead bodies of troops against the emperor. Heraclius was given the sea route and Niketas the land route, both instructed that whoever reached Constantinople first was to claim the throne. This simple first step seems to have set Heraclius on his path, and Niketas soon disappears from the historical record until it comes time for Heraclius' son from his first wife to marry, then Niketas is resurrected as the father of the proposed bride for Constantine Heraclius, the son of emperor Heraclius.

The second point where Heraclius impacts history is his management of the Christian Church in Rome. This interaction is long, the length of his rebellion against Phokas combined with his rule afterward. This interaction with the church is varied and had varied results. The first was the stripping of wealth from any church Heraclius came across in order to pay his troops as he fought Phokas, and was something he continued in the war against Sassanid Persia, even going so far as to set up imperial mints outside of Constantinople, often outside the accepted

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<sup>124</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 40-41. Only emperors since the time of Justinian I had claimed the title, often giving the title to their chosen heir later in their reigns. For Heraclius the Elder to have claimed the title himself may suggest that he thought of seizing the throne himself just prior to sending Heraclius off to claim it. Heraclius the Elder seems to disappear from the historical record around this time, so there is no account as to how his days ended, if he had then conferred the title to his son, or even how he passed.



weights of officially circulated coin, but with the proper mint markings that later helped establish the authenticity of a large cache found in the Levant.<sup>125</sup> He would also restrict the number of ecclesiastic officials who were eligible to draw pensions from imperial funds in a further effort to find money to pay for his war with Persia. Heraclius did attempt to offset this by creating more ceremonies and lesser duties that gave smaller payments to church officials, but the more aristocratic members had their source of income either removed or greatly reduced. His second marriage to the daughter of his sister was contentious with the church, as was the later marriage proposal of his son Constantine Heraclius to his brother or cousin Niketas' daughter. This most contentious series of decisions probably had the greatest impact.

In 630, as Heraclius is returning from Sassanid Persia, victorious and with much wealth needed to pay his troops and repay the church for his removal of gold and silver decades before, he announces to the Nestorian Christians that he intended to give them the patriarchy of Antioch and Saint Stephan's Basilica—though which Saint Stephan's Basilica he was intending is up for debate—but many point to the church in modern day Georgia. In 632, Heraclius goes back on his word and instead announces a program to force Nestorian Christians to convert to Chalcedonian Christianity. This is likely where the source of manpower comes from that fueled, or at least

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<sup>125</sup> Kaegi, *Heraclius Emperor of Byzantium*, 43-51, 90-91, 110-111, and 126-198. Throughout Heraclius' rebellion and rule of Byzantine Rome he routinely took gold and silver from the church, by cutting pensions to church members and restricting the number of ecclesiastical positions drawing income from imperial taxes, which he minted as coin to pay for his war with Sassanid Persia. His invasion of the Persian heartland via Armenia, along with Kuk Turk (627-628 CE) raids in eastern Persia opened the Persian heartland. By 626 Heraclius is firmly on the offensive, crushing hastily raised Persian armies piecemeal, as their main force was still occupying Byzantine Roman lands in the Levant. In 628, Heraclius had won the war, the heartland of Persia was sacked and stripped of its wealth, much of it supposedly wealth taken from the Levant. Heraclius then uses this regained or taken wealth to repay the church. He has the David Plates (630 CE) created and relics of Christianity returned, most notably the True Cross to Jerusalem (Leader, "The David Plates revisited: Transforming the Secular in early Byzantium" 407-427). Leader further explains that the David Plates were likely a product of imperial largesse, set to imitate art from the 4th century. The depiction of David defeating Goliath is thought to either refer to Heraclius' defeat of a Persian general in single combat or the lifting of the Avar siege in 626 CE.

allows the spread of Islam through active participation or non- aggression towards the followers of Muhammad and the later Rashidun Caliphate. Kaegi claims this was done with the thought of cleaning up problem areas for his son before Constantine Heraclius would succeed his father on the throne. I find some of this explanation problematic, because Kaegi also claims that even before this ruling Heraclius had begun to go to lengths to stay out of the Byzantine capital and that his son Constantine Heraclius had been ruling in Heraclius' name for a few years already. To say that his son was already co-ruling with his father but then that Heraclius was attempting to make succession less tumultuous seems to contradict itself. If Constantine Heraclius had been co-ruling with his father before the ruling on Nestorians, both accommodating and later participating in military or political campaigns to enforce conversion to Chalcedonian Christianity, then it would be safe to infer that the son had already dealings with the Nestorian population and likely already had his own policies in place in terms of how to interact with the sect.

Throughout Heraclius' reign as emperor of Rome (610-641 CE), he presided over many social and ecclesiastic upheavals. Early in his rebellion with Phokas, and throughout the early years of his war with Persia and the Slavs in the Balkans, Heraclius removed items made of precious metals from most churches to be melted down and turned into coin to pay his army, and later pay his bureaucracy. He put a cap on how many ecclesiastic members were able to draw pensions from official means. This upset many church leaders because the Imperial Church in the 7th century often relied on official tax money from the government to pay many of its members. His marriage of his niece in 623 was taboo in Rome and upset many in the aristocracy as well as the church. His attempted reconciliation of the Nestorians at the end of the war with Persia further upset the church, and his renegeing on this reconciliation a year later then upset the

Christian population in Roman Syria. In my opinion, this became the population used by early Islam as it spread through the Levant because the new religion was more inclusive than the Roman Church to those of Abrahamic religions.

Heraclius had to contend with the loss of manpower due to the civil war, war with Persia, and the need to keep troops in Italy to prevent it from becoming independent. The ongoing problems in Balkans with the encroaching Slavs ensured that he had few men to spare when reclaiming lands held by the Sassanids for nearly twenty years. The attempted bribery of the Slavs and the Nestorians suggest that Heraclius was attempting to clean up some political, military, and bureaucratic issues so that his son, Heraclius Constantine (co-ruler 629 CE), did not have these issues further plaguing him when he finally took sole rulership of the empire. The emergence of early Islam around this same time confounded many of these attempted changes, as for the next ten years Heraclius would attempt to reassert control over lands held by the Persians in the Levant, while at the same time persecuting the religious minorities in his own citizenry and losing both land and people to the new religion.

Western scholars have failed to study the eastern neighbors of Rome in the 7th century. Many like to point out the similarities between Rome and its Germanic / European neighbors, but these same similarities are ignored in the East. And yet, as the power and wealth of Rome had shifted to the East nearly completely by the 7th century, I would contend that there was more commonality with both the Persians and the Arabs than with the Germanic kingdoms in the fallen west as well as the immigrating Slavs and Bulgars in the Balkans. It is my opinion that the eventual shared religion of the emerging European populations with the Roman/ Byzantine Empire contributes to this bias and oversight even though the Arabs and Persians had contact for

centuries with the Romans, more than the Germans or Slavs. The modern viewpoint is that German kingdoms and the Slavic people have more in common with Byzantine Rome.

Finally, much of the scholarly work on 7th century Rome and its military seems to attempt to vilify Byzantine Rome. My belief is that this has to do with western successor states needing legitimacy for their own rise, and later, during the colonial period, they needed to show the peoples of Africa and the Levant as lesser and baser than themselves so that they could bring “Civilization” to them. This is much like when I was in Ramadi, Iraq, occupying a building that had been a school for teaching English. In it, I had found a book where it expresses how the British Empire had brought civilization to the backward people of Iraq by building the port of Basra. It was in a “Dick and Jane” style book and made no mention of the various iterations of Persian or Roman states who had ruled the land, nor the Ottomans or any Caliphate rulers, all of which had sophisticated cultures that much of western culture is now based or heavily borrowed from. I feel that a more holistic approach to history seems to be a modern product which has little been applied to scholarly work more than twenty years old. This makes it hard to research a time that already suffers from the lack of primary sources and tends to reinforce personal bias that a researcher or scholar may not even realize they have. This is to say too that the more I research the Byzantine Empire, the more I want to know, and the more I perceive that how much the experts don’t know is glaringly apparent by how they write (or don’t write) about this topic.

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