

## A Review of Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals


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### Abstract

*Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals* is more than just a history of wars; it opens new windows and challenges some of the most common views regarding Roman-Persian relations. By emphasizing Iranian sources, Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter avoid reconstructing historical events from a Roman point of view and instead present a balanced outlook free of common anti-oriental prejudices. Their work covers a wide range of topics and explains how the Romans and Persians despite many wars attempted to secure their national interests via channels of negotiations and complex diplomacy. The Roman-Persian rivalry seems “modern” in many respects and this character of their relation is nicely demonstrated in this book.

**Keywords:** Persia; Rome; Iran; Arabia; Armenia; Caucasus; Warfare; Diplomacy.



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**Introduction:** In this section, the authors explain their aims, methodology, a brief reference to notable earlier works, and what makes their book different from others. Dignas and Winter explicitly reject the view of Roman-Persian relations as part of the eternal rivalry between West and East. Similarly, they refuse to accept the dominant view among numerous Western scholars in considering Rome as the superior civilized power and Persia (Iran) as the inferior and Barbarian one.

**Part I, Chapter 1: *Rome and Iran to the Beginning of the Third Century AD.*** This chapter is a concise history of Roman-Parthian relations. It compares the ideologies of the Romans and Parthians and emphasizes Roman ambitions to dominate the world. The chapter is mostly written from a Roman point of view as discusses the policy of different Roman emperors toward the Parthians and concludes with a comparison between the Sasanian and Parthian views regarding the Romans.

**Part I, Chapter 2: *Rome and the Sasanian Empire: A Chronological Survey.*** Following the previous chapter, this chapter examines the Roman-Sasanian wars with a chronological approach. Several subjects raised here are discussed in more detail later. The chapter is an introduction to Roman-Sasanian wars and illustrates a general picture of the main reasons for conflicts.

**Part II, Chapter 1: *Political Goals.*** This chapter is mainly about the territorial claims of the Sasanians based on their Achaemenian heritage. Although some historians question the authenticity of Sasanian claims regarding their Achaemenian predecessors (see Yarshater, 1971: 517-529; cf Shabazi, 2001: 63-69 and Daryaei, 2006: 493-503), Dignas and Winter use both Roman and Iranian sources to imply that the Sasanians were aware of the extent of the former Persian Empire. They correctly point out the correspondence of the Iranian and Roman evidence in this regard. However, there is a gross mistake in this chapter: the identification of Tabari, the well-known Iranian historian, as an Arab. This is because Tabari composed all his works in Arabic, the scientific language of his time in the Middle East. The same error is repeated on page 116.

**Part II, Chapter 2: *Warfare.*** This chapter is a brief discussion of Sasanian's military tactics, weaponry, and strategy. The information provided here is scant and the authors have only used two Roman works: *Authipica* and *Strategikon*. The lack of use of Iranian and Islamic sources has strongly damaged this chapter and made it preliminary. In the Persian and Arabic sources compiled after Islam, a lot of information is collected about the Sasanian warfare, and the quantity and quality of these data is such that it saves the historian from relying solely on Roman sources. Unfortunately, most Western scholars who are concerned with the Sasanians underestimate the importance of this post-Sassanian evidence. Employing works such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Ibn Qutaybah's *Uyun al-Akhbar*, Masudi's *Al-Tanbih wa l-ishraf*, and Tha'alibi's *Ghoror al-seyar* could have helped the quality of this chapter significantly.

**Part II, Chapter 3: *Military Confrontations.*** This chapter completes the second chapter of the first part, as not only discusses the wars between the two empires and the reasons behind their conflicts, but also describes the works, reliefs, paintings,

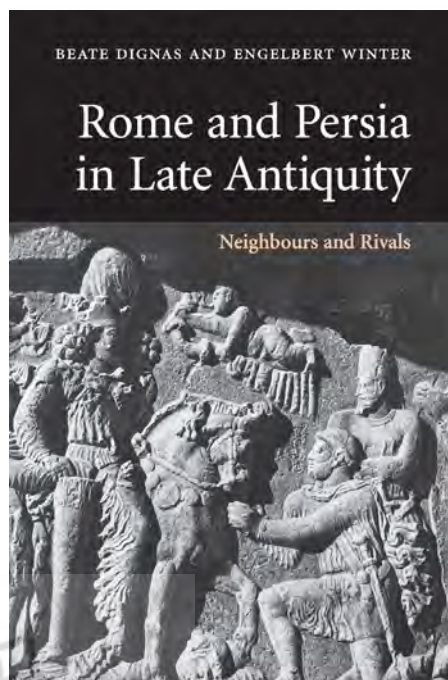
medallions, and illustrations regarding the wars and how both powers used their victories to enforce their propaganda. The authors use several ancient Roman sources to explain the Roman perspective of the wars. In the meantime, their usage of Iranian evidence enables the readers to understand how on several occasions Roman historiography has tried to decrease the Roman defeats, blame the Persians for the outbreak of wars, and glorify minor Roman victories.

**Part II, Chapter 4: *The Diplomatic Solutions*.** One of the most fascinating chapters of the book as its subject has received less attention, and it is necessary for studying Roman-Persian wars. Examining the peace negotiations allows the readers to comprehend the reasons for confrontations and the consequences of those treaties. Dignas and Winter successfully fulfill this task and their detailed investigation shows us how “modern” were the Romans and Persians in their foreign affairs.

**Part II, Chapter 5: *Arabia Between the Great Powers*.** The significance of Arabia and Arabs for the Persians and Romans is one of the most repetitive subjects throughout the book, however, the authors

have paid special attention to this topic in this chapter. The readers realize that the role of the Arabs was so vital in Roman-Persian wars that sometimes they were the ones who changed the course of wars. Dignas and Winter have also pointed out the importance of trading centers such as Hatra and Palmyra in the wars between the two powers and how both empires tried to extend their rule into the land of Arabia. Unfortunately, the chapter does not concern the possible effect of the Roman-Persian wars on the rise of Islam in Arabia or how these wars paved the way for the spread of Islam in the Middle East (see Crawford, 2007).

**Part II, Chapter 6: *Shared Interests: Continuing Conflicts*.** This is one of the most important chapters of the book as investigates the mutual interests of both powers which were also the main reasons for conflict. The chapter starts with Armenia. Armenia was so important in Roman-Persian relations that the authors could even dedicate a separate chapter to it (like Arabia). Nevertheless, the authors successfully use ancient sources, especially Armenian ones to describe the situation in Armenia. After



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Armenia, the chapter shifts its focus to the Caucasus, a region adjacent to Armenia and significant in both international trade and warfare. The Caucasus was a gate for nomads who threatened both empires and its defense was a principal concern for the Persian and Roman rulers. Unfortunately, Dignas and Winter do not provide much information about the nomads beyond the Caucasus and only study the impact of their invasions. The last part of the chapter is titled *Economy and Trade* but it is mainly focused on trade. The authors explain why certain cities like Nisibis were important for both empires and how with the rise of the Sasanians, trade became a crucial issue in the relations between the two nations. However, the readers find virtually nothing regarding other aspects of the economy of the empires. It would have been much better if the authors could also examine other sources of income for the empires or even compare them in this regard. Which empire was wealthier? Why did the Sasanians demand high amounts of money from the Romans in many of their invasions? Dignas and Winter rightly refer to the superiority of the Sasanians in trade, but they are silent about other fields such as agriculture, mining, and industry.

**Part II, Chapter 7: Religion: Christianity and Zoroastrianism.** This chapter focuses on the role of religion in Roman-Persian relations. Although the primary concern has been Zoroastrianism and Christianity, it also provides valuable information about the status of other religions like Manichaeism and Roman Paganism. It is noteworthy that Dignas and Winter do not evaluate the Sasanians as zealous Zoroastrians who wanted to impose their religion on their subjects; instead, they explore the religious policy of almost every Sasanian monarch to explain how the political circumstances of their time influenced their religious policy. The chapter also explains how Christianity and Zoroastrianism became the state religions of Rome and Persia, and how in the course of this process the two empires affected each other. The issue of the Christians in the Persian Empire is dealt with in detail however, the authors do not have much to say about the conditions of the Zoroastrians in Rome (see Boyce and Grenet, 1991: 220-308; 312-314; 354-357; Lee, 2000: 169-173). The authors also do not study the essential differences between Zoroastrianism and Christianity, mainly the national character of the former and the universal nature of the latter. This is one of the main reasons why the number of Christians in Persia was much more than the Zoroastrians in Rome. Accordingly, the authors do not discuss why Christianity only spread among the Syrians, Arameans, Arabs, and Armenians of Persia, and not the Iranians themselves. The term "Persian Christians" in this chapter thus needs more explanation. The Persians, Medes, Parthians, and other Iranians of the Persian Empire remained mainly Zoroastrians while Christianity only gained populace among the non-Iranians who lived close to the western borders of the country. A more detailed comparison between the Sasanians and their Roman counterpart would improve the quality of this chapter, as many readers may not know that the religious tolerance in Persia was much more than the Christian Rome (see Payne, 2015: 23-58).

**Part II, Chapter 8: Emperor and King of Kings.** This chapter wraps up a topic less investigated by many historians. The notions of legitimacy and royal blood played a vi-

tal role in the ideology and propaganda of the Roman and Persian rulers. The authors explain how the Sasanians were able to introduce themselves as the rightful monarchs of Persia and more interestingly how they used it to bargain with the Romans. By using ancient sources, Dignas and Winter show how the character of certain rulers such as Yazdgird I and Maurice had great impacts on the relations between the empires. They are also right in emphasizing the significance of the concept of a “brotherhood of kings” that led rulers of both empires to see each other as equals. This understanding was necessary for both countries to maintain or make peace or even aid each other against common foes.

**Part II, Chapter 9: *Exchange of Information Between West and East.*** The last chapter is dedicated to probably the most important aspect of Roman-Persian relations, the exchange of information and knowledge. It begins with emphasizing the wrong assumption of the different degrees of civilization in Rome and Persia. Ancient sources do not demonstrate a one-sided process, but rather as Dignas and Winter point out, they refer to “excahnge”. Considering this fact, the authors continue to analyze the channels via which this process took place. Most of the chapter, however, is about how the Romans affected the Persian Empire and the authors go as far as to claim that “the use of Roman prisoners contributed considerably to improving the infrastructure of the Sasanian Empire”. Although the authors at the beginning of the chapter say that “the Sasanian Empire functioned as a mediator of cultural possessions from the Far East and India” they do not explain this anymore. The existing evidence indeed leans to show that Persia was more inclined to acquire Western ideas than vice versa, but this chapter has nothing to say about the effect of the Persians or Persian culture on Rome. Another enfeeblement of the chapter is its total silence concerning the exchange of military strategies, weapons, and war machines. It is evident that since the time of the Parthian Empire, both powers were constantly affected by each other's tactics and way of warfare.

## Conclusion

Rome and Persia were not antagonists constantly at war. They were neighbors who saw each other as equals and heads of the West and East. To demonstrate this, Dignas and Winter quote Peter the Patrician at the end of their work as a concise conclusion for the whole book: “It is obvious for all mankind that the Roman and Persian Empires are just like two lamps; and it is necessary that like eyes, the one is brightened by the light of the other and that they do not angrily strive for each other's destruction”. The universal aspects of Roman-Persian relations and their impact on the lives of many other ancient peoples are also nicely explained in the book. The authors have used many ancient recorders and their critical approach toward these sources along with the employment of Iranian evidence adds to the value of the book. However, most of the post-Sasanian evidence including works compiled by the Persian and Arabic authors after Islam has been neglected. *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals* thus proves itself a beneficial work, especially for Sasanian studies or schol-

ars who are concerned with the Iranian world. The comprehensive appendixes and the rich bibliography of the work also opens the way for more studies regarding Late Antiquity. Furthermore, the book is organized in a good order, it follows a rational chronological pattern and its smooth prose makes it beneficial not only for serious scholars but also for non-specialists.

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