

## The Armenian Causes of Justin II's Sasanian War

Late antiquity has in recent years undergone a dramatic reconceptualization, in geographic, temporal, and thematic scope. More attention has been given, for instance, to the Roman-Sasanian wars of the sixth and seventh centuries and the advent of Islam. Thematically, religious history, for example, has been embraced by a wider swath of scholars. These redefinitions have also taken into account the issue of continuity, with artificial lines of demarcation, which the ancient inhabitants of Asia and the Mediterranean world would not have recognized, softened or even erased. A clear example of such continuity can be found in the importance of Armenia in Roman eastern frontier policy. Armenia remained an essential strategic asset in the face of the eastern superpower (first the Parthian Arsacids, then the Persian Sasanians), as well as an important extension of Roman *imperium* on the eastern frontier, from the first century BCE to the seventh CE.

Keeping this state of affairs in mind helps to unravel the series of events that mark the renewal of Roman-Sasanian warfare in 572. There were a number of reasons why the emperor Justin II wanted a war against the old enemy in the East, now led by the aging *shahanshah* (“king of kings”) Khusro I, but Armenia, I believe, played the key role in getting the war started. When investigating these matters, we read of policies and concerns eerily similar to those covered in the pages of Tacitus, Plutarch, and Cassius Dio. Only here we must engage Greek sources such as Theophylact Simocotta (seventh century), Menander Protector (sixth), and Evagrius (sixth); Syriac sources, including John of Ephesus (sixth); and such Armenian authors as Sebeos (seventh) and Stephen of Taron (eleventh).

The hostilities of 572 marked the breakdown of a fifty-year peace treaty between Justinian and Khusro in 561/2, and Theophylact is not shy about attributing the breakdown to

Justin's "folly" (ἀνοΐα), following that with a list of causes stemming from his ambitions, including the status of the Caucasian region of Suania, influence in the Arab regions, Roman diplomacy with the Sasanians' enemy the Turks, Justin's refusal to make any further monetary payments as required by the treaty of 561/2, and the Armenian revolt of 572 (Th. Sim. 3.9.3-11, cf. Men. Prot. F. 16). These causes are generally recognized and certainly played their part in determining the hostile path the two empires would follow (Stein 1919: 20-25; Turtledove 1977: 170-90, 1983: 293-301; Whitby 2001: 91-94). What needs more emphasis is the Armenian factor, in large part for the reasons given above. I believe Justin's bellicosity, attested in Theophylact and others, partly arose from the fact that most of Armenia fell within the Persian orbit and was thus called by classical historians Persarmenia, an arrangement going back to the late fourth century. This gave the Sasanians a strategic advantage, which Justin sought to neutralize as he gave thought to the larger campaign against the Persians.

The revolt of the Armenians came after years of Sasanian attempts to suppress Christianity and impose Zoroastrianism (J. Eph. 2.18-20; Evagr. 5.7; Steph. Tar. 84.23-86.7; Seb. 67-68). Prior to the uprising the Armenians sent a secret delegation to Justin seeking help (Evagr. 5.7), which he was all too happy to provide as they were "coreligionists" (ὁμογνώμονας τὰ εἰς θεόν, Men. Prot. F. 16). Sebeos tells us that Justin's pact with the Armenians was a renewal of Constantine's accord with Tiridates IV, both of whom we might note had recently converted to Christianity. More importantly, Sebeos affirms the direct participation of the Roman army in the revolt, and Stein (1919: 22), followed by Greatrex and Lieu (2002: 280n.19), noted the presence of a man named Justinian, the *magister militum per Armeniam*, at Theodosiopolis, an important Roman stronghold on the border of Persarmenia, on the eve of the revolt. Therefore, I believe Justin did more than simply take advantage of the typically volatile

state of affairs in Armenia but actively pushed Armenia toward open conflict, in the guise of supporting its insurgents, in order both to restore Roman influence in Persarmenia and to secure the Armenian plateau for further aggressions in Mesopotamia, much like Trajan before him, as Justin's Sasanian war widened.

### Bibliography

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