

**James Howard-Johnston, *The Last Great War of Antiquity*.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 480. \$174. ISBN: 9780198830191.

From its emergence under Ardashir I in the early third century until its demise in the seventh century, the Sasanian Empire had a complicated and changeable relationship with Rome. There were extended periods of peace, but just as often the “two eyes of the earth” were at war. While Rome fared well enough in some of those conflicts, there were others in which they suffered significant setbacks, like the capture of Valerian in the third century, and the death of Julian in the fourth century. Of all those Romano-Persian wars, no conflict represented more of an existential threat to the Roman Empire than that waged in the first quarter of the seventh century CE, Howard-Johnston’s “last great war of antiquity”. In this long-awaited book, published by Oxford University Press, James Howard-Johnston provides what is not only the first, but also what will now be the authoritative narrative and analysis of this important conflict. This war has been the subject of many of Howard-Johnston’s publications for decades, and so this book serves, at least from the perspective of this reviewer, as the culmination of all that work. Although the book is at times slow going, weighed down by the abundance of names, places, and the “adventures” those characters have, far more often this book is exciting, insightful, and thought-provoking. The breadth of Howard-Johnston’s coverage and his command of the literary sources, in a variety of languages (Greek, Latin, Armenian, Arabic, etc.), stand out. This book deserves an audience comprising not only late antique military historians, but also those interested in the end of the ancient world, Romano-Persian relations, late antiquity more broadly, and much more besides.

The book, in many respects a traditional military history, includes eleven chapters including the conclusion, plus the introduction, three appendices, and several maps, and colour plates. After setting the scene in the introduction, Howard-Johnston launches into “Khosro’s [II] war of revenge” in chapter one, which includes discussion of the background, particularly the political intrigue that rocked the end of Maurice’s reign, Phocas’ seizure of power. In response, the Persians, who were coming to the end of a period of unrest of their own, prepared for war to avenge Maurice’s assassination and Rome’s decision to ally with the Turks. They launched their campaign, and despite some Persian success, Phocas was not in a bad position. Chapter two turns to what HJ calls the “Heraclian revolution”, and it covers Heraclius’ rebellion, the overthrow of Phocas, and the battle between the two for supremacy in Egypt. Here HJ touches on, among other things, the varied troops used during the campaigns and the changing regnal formulae that appear in the documentary material. What is less clear here is what made Heraclius’ rebellion a revolution, *per se*.

In chapter three, HJ turns to the Persian breakthrough, and he notes that despite Phocas’ efforts at staving off Heraclius’ usurpation, he did not shift troops away from the frontiers, so leaving Roman defences in a solid condition. Despite this, once Heraclius turned his attention to Phocan forces in Constantinople in 610, Shahan’s

armies advanced into Syria and Asia Minor. HJ gets into the famed assault on Jerusalem in 614; he goes through the many different accounts of the siege, as well as the evocative material remains including the mass burial by the pool of Mamilla, among other things. In chapter four, HJ turns to Heraclius' desperate pleas for help, and the Constantinopolitan senate's remarkable response to Khusro regarding the emperor's concessions, found in the *Chronicon Paschale*. HJ's detailed exposition of this extraordinary episode highlighted the danger in which the Romans found themselves. Persian successes were aided, in part, by the Turks' activities in China. The Bedouin raids of 614 and beyond in Palestine, as well as the Persian efforts to bring them to a close, also elicit thorough exposition. Ultimately, the lack of imperial support paved the way for a relatively swift Persian conquest.

Chapter five focuses on the state of affairs in the Middle East in the 620s. HJ provides a good discussion of the physical evidence for change in Asia Minor, as well as the difficulty in finding traces of decline more broadly in the archaeological record. That said, some evidence for the impact of the invasion exists, with the numismatic record particularly strong in this regard. After the Persian takeover, there was little in the way of administrative changes, which would not come until some decades later in the aftermath of the Arab conquest. As far as Egypt goes, the only extant evidence we have for the Persian occupation comes from the 350 or so published Pahlavi papyri. What material we have leaves little indication of the presence of any dissidents, which is something of a surprise given the many centuries of Roman rule. Next HJ turns to affairs in the Sasanian Empire, and in a rich discussion he covers everything from the militarization of the elite and the various costs that came with victory to the Persian commitment to Khusro's goals and the real belief in the prospect of the destruction of the Roman state. In the end, it would be Khusro's hubris which brought him down.

In chapter six, the tables turn, and the Romans begin their battle for supremacy. With the shift to the Roman advances, the evidence of George of Pisidia becomes especially prominent. Indeed, the poet features prominently in the discussion, and rightfully so, from here on out. The absence of an English translation of his work (there are at least two Italian translations) means that the important work of this well-regarded poet is not reaching the kind of audience that he deserves. To get back to the warfare, Balkan affairs feature prominently, though he finds no evidence for Avar and Persian collusion before the siege of Thessaloniki. In chapter seven, HJ notes the importance of the post-Avar incursion peace to freeing up resources for Heraclius to focus on Persia. Here he includes a fascinating discussion of the emperor's research efforts, all centred on finding a way to overcome the Persians. A rigorous training regimen based on these efforts had a significant bearing on Rome's fighting capabilities. Heraclius also steps up a propaganda campaign, an additional tool in the emperor's arsenal, one which also had a marked impact on Roman efforts. Heraclius' devastating attacks in Media and Atropatene read like the adventures of Heraclius, though HJ also makes it clear that his movements were complicated and varied.

Despite this remarkable string of successes, in chapter eight HJ turns to the challenges Heraclius and the Romans faced in the 620s, particularly the coordinated attacks on Constantinople. This includes Heraclius' march in late winter 626 through deep snow into north Mesopotamia. Coming off the second snowiest winter in Winnipeg's history (2021–2022), I can personally attest to the challenges of trudging through deep snow. Doing so for hours on end over several days is incredible. The details of the years 626–627 are a bit muddy, owing in part to the misinformation put out by the Romans themselves (i.e. the propaganda), and HJ does a fine job of bringing order to the confusion. The siege of Constantinople and Roman advances in Asia Minor round out the chapter.

Chapter nine covers the Roman march into Mesopotamia and towards the Persian capital. We read about Khusro's flight with his family from Dastagerd and the dysentery which he suffered. Heraclius' attention is focused squarely on Persian imperial palaces, and he launches a string of successful operations. Opinion in Persia starts to turn against Khusro, and a coup is planned for late February 628. Ultimately, Heraclius' clever campaign to discredit Khusro over a long period of time works. In chapter ten, HJ documents the peace negotiations. Khusro Siroe, Khusro's successor (and son), attempts to re-establish the old-world order (two eyes – equal partners), but the results are mixed owing, in part, to general Shahrbaraz's hesitation at handing over to the Romans all Persia's hard-won territories. Nevertheless, Heraclius celebrates his success, which includes the big celebrations involving the True Cross in Jerusalem, set for March 21, an important date for its Christian and Zoroastrian connections. In chapter eleven, the conclusion, HJ goes over the ramifications of the war, especially in light of the subsequent Arab conquest. In the end, he concludes that Rome, at least (Persia was in a more precarious place), was not as worn out by this long war as is often argued.

This dense book is full of insights, is engagingly narrated, and its author is intimately familiar with the sources. One of the most significant challenges that HJ faced was the difficult evidence, which is far from consistent in its coverage and so leaves some sizable gaps, at least in part. That HJ was able to marshal this material into a coherent whole is no mean feat. And, for all that this is now, and will be, the definitive study of the subject for years, even decades, to come, the book elicits all sorts of questions about the war's participants, its ramifications, and more besides. To give but one example drawn from my own niche interests, below the surface of the book is the story of the transformation of the Roman military in the aftermath of Heraclius' usurpation and the Persian conquest of the Middle East. While most scholars see the reign of Justinian (if not earlier) and/or the aftermath of the Arab conquest as the periods of significant reform in the late Roman military, subtly, over the course of the book, HJ makes a case for big changes during this Romano-Perso war, and he raises lots of questions in the process. On the one hand, HJ regularly discusses the Roman soldiers and units involved in the conflict, for obvious reasons. Some of the language he uses draws on Maurice's *Strategikon*, the most important military manual from the ancient world. Early on he refers to senior officers as taxiarchs (p. 13), later we read about Nicetas' "regular

soldiers” (p. 57), and later still about the excubitors under Phocas’ son-in-law Priscus (p. 65). So, we have a mixture of the general (regular soldiers), Maurice’s language (taxiarch), and contemporary organizational vocabulary (excubitors). The last term comes directly from the *Chronicon Paschale*, while the former (taxiarch), as noted, stems from Maurice. On the other hand, it is unclear how accurately the armies of Maurice reflect the permanent Roman military of the end of the sixth century (p. 220), or something more ephemeral, specific to an individual campaign (p. 50, 55, 194-195), and so not the language in use empire wide. There are questions too about what happened to the troops garrisoned across the Middle East after the Persian conquest (p. 62), or where the new troops, after the Roman victory, came from, both topics HJ raises without explaining. The truth is, the evidence for troops during this war is hard to find, and HJ does well to find them in unexpected places, like in the establishment of temporary mints (p. 124). Just in this one incidental area, an important, but small, part of his book, HJ has brought to light a considerable number of supplementary questions that one hopes will elicit future work.

There are issues here and there that one might quibble with. Was the army that came to Constantinople under Theodore in 626 actually a phantom army, and were Heraclius’ reforms really a revolution? Given all the places and events named throughout, campaign maps, interspersed in the narrative, would have been welcome. Occasionally, there are some surprising omissions in the citations too (Kaegi’s work did not feature as much as I might have expected, for instance). All that said, this is a great book, at times gripping, which provides as balanced a perspective on Rome and Persia as could be expected with the evidence we have. HJ’s book deserves a wide audience and should spur all sorts of exciting new research on this relatively neglected subject.

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