The War of the Three Gods
Romans, Persians and the Rise of Islam

PETER CRAWFORD
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All Maps, Plans and Diagrams were drawn by Faye Crawford (www.fayecreative.designbinder.com).

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Chapter 1
The Participants and Their Road to 600

From Gibraltar to Gaza, the inhabitants shared with the eastern provinces a common loyalty to the Roman emperors, a common piety, a common idiom in ornament, a common stable coinage.

Brown (2006), 158

The Persian nation is wicked, dissembling, and servile, but at the same time patriotic and obedient. The Persians obey their rulers out of fear, and the result is that they are steadfast in enduring hard work and warfare on behalf of their fatherland.

Mauricius, Strategikon XI.1

For it yields very little and uses up vast sums.

Cassius Dio, Roman History, LXXV, 3.2–3
(on the Romano-Persian conflict)

The Roman Empire in 600
The map of the Roman Empire had changed remarkably little between the first and fifth centuries CE. It stretched from Mesopotamia to the Atlantic and the highlands of Scotland to the sands of the Sahara. However, the reality was very different. Despite appearing to be united, there was a growing divide between East and West. Each had their own capital and senate, at Constantinople and Rome respectively, and after 395 each had its own emperor in Arcadius and Honorius. The Empire had been run by multiple emperors before but, as both the new Augusti were youths – Arcadius was 17 and Honorius was 10, it was left to their ministers to take command. With the East coming to rely more on a civilian government and the West being more under the sway of the military, these fraternal halves began to view each other as a rival.

This left the Romans less capable of dealing with the unfolding chaos beyond its frontiers sparked by the arrival of the Huns in Europe. While the East was far from immune, the West was particularly vulnerable, with its extended Rhine and Danube borders, to the ‘migration of peoples’ known as the Völkerwanderung. While the collapse of the Roman West is beyond the purview of this work and far more complicated than it being washed away by the barbarian tide, by the end of the fifth century Roman rule in the West was at an end. Britain was a battleground between Britons, Angles, Saxons and Jutes; Spain was home to Suebian and Visigothic kingdoms; Gaul was dominated by Franks
The Roman Empire in 600.
and Burgundians; Africa had fallen to the Vandals; and Italy was controlled by the Ostrogoths.

However, so large had the empire been that, even with these losses, the eastern half still represented the largest and most advanced state of the ancient world. Strong political leadership at Constantinople held the military largely at bay. Diplomacy and bribery were to be the new defensive weapons, along with the Great Walls of Constantinople and other cities, rather than an enlarged army. Despite the unpopularity of such a passive and un-Roman strategy, it helped the Eastern Roman Empire resist the ‘turmoil of semi-serious wars, feints, intrigues, attempted coups, treaties, betrayals and counter-betrayals’ that came with a resurgence of the military and the activities of the Ostrogoths and the Isaurians throughout the second half of the fifth century. This solid base was built upon by the ‘economic ingenuity’ of the emperor Anastasius I, who, through tax remissions and abolitions, efficiency drives to reduce waste and professional reforms, nursed the Empire’s tax base back into good health. By 518, it was claimed that Anastasius left the treasury with a reserve of 320,000 lb of gold.

The man to take most advantage of this financial and military stability was the emperor Justinian. Across the empire, he embarked on a building programme of monumental scale. Whether it was San Vitale in Ravenna with its famous mosaic of the emperor himself, the churches dotted across the Mediterranean from Morocco to Jerusalem, the cutting-edge technology applied to frontier fortresses, or the Sangarius Bridge in Bithynia, all demonstrated the continued brilliance of Roman art and architecture. However, it was upon his capital that Justinian lavished the most attention. He commissioned the rebuilding of the Church of the Holy Apostles and the Great Palace, while the Column of Justinian was erected to celebrate the substantial victories achieved in his name. However, the most awe-inspiring of his buildings was the Church of the Holy Wisdom of God, better known as Hagia Sophia. Designed and constructed by a mathematician and a physicist, it was to be the biggest church in the world for nearly a millennium. Its grandeur continues to astonish even in the modern day, particularly the immense pendentive domes that were also to be unmatched in scale until the Renaissance. Even Justinian himself seems to have been overawed by the accomplishment of his architects, declaring: ‘Solomon! I have outdone thee!’

However, Justinian did not use his Anastasian inheritance just to beautify the Empire. He spent vast amounts of cash in building an army capable of achieving his military ambitions. After testing it against the Persians, Justinian turned his attention to the barbarian kingdoms that had carved up the Roman West. The first target was the Vandal kingdom of Africa. Providence shone on the Romans as Belisarius won the Battle of Ad Decimum, captured Carthage and then defeated a second Vandal army to deliver the entire kingdom by 534. Such an unexpectedly swift conclusion saw Justinian allow himself to be
dragged into war with the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy. Once again, through good fortune and strong leadership from Belisarius, by 540 all of Italy south of the Po River was under Roman control.\(^7\) A decade later, part of southern Spain was lifted from the Visigoths, virtually restoring the Mediterranean as a Roman lake.

However, while Justinian’s conquests had gotten off to an impressive start, their consolidation was more testing. The resources they required were only sustainable so long as there was peace elsewhere. Once war with the Persians broke out in 540, priorities changed drastically. Belisarius was recalled before finishing off the Goths and it would be another twelve years before Italy was subdued, and, while Vandal resistance had ended in 534, fighting continued against indigenous tribes until 548 and the Visigoths wasted little time in challenging Roman Spain. On top of that, the Kutrigur Huns were putting increasing pressure on the Danube frontier.

The Empire of 540 might have dealt with these problems were it not for Fate dealing a cruel hand. In 541, at the height of the Empire’s military deployment, bubonic plague erupted in the Mediterranean. Appearing first at the Egyptian port of Pelusium but likely originating in the upper reaches of the Nile or even further south, once it reached the flea-laden rodents of the Roman grain ships, it spread like wildfire.\(^8\) Before the end of the year, it was playing a part in the lack of a decisive battle between Belisarius and Khusro I in the east. By early 542, it had reached Constantinople where Justinian himself became infected; by 543 it was in Italy and Gaul and had perhaps reached Ireland by 544. The horror story of Constantinople demonstrates the intensity of the pandemic as ‘the tale of dead reached 5,000 each day, and again it even came to 10,000 and still more than that’ with over-flowing cemeteries and mass graves.\(^9\) To make matters worse, 541 was only the beginning of an infection cycle that was to repeat every generation for the next two centuries. Such prolonged reoccurrences may help explain the failure of the Roman and Persian Empires to stem the tide of Islam, for it is suggested that the plague left Arabia and its population relatively untouched.

**In the Shadow of Justinian**

Despite the outbreak of plague, with its achievements in architecture, technology and literature through the works of men like Procopius and the legal system with the publication of the *Codex Justinianus*, the age of Justinian is certainly one of the most colourful periods of Late Antiquity. Despite this, it is its military conquests in the western Mediterranean that really stand out. However, whether they represented a strengthening of the Roman Empire is an altogether different matter. They did not represent the establishment of a lasting peace in either Spain or Africa, as the Visigoths and Berbers began encroaching on Roman territory almost immediately. In Italy, the long war...
with the Goths had left much of its urban and rural infrastructure and its population as a whole in a rather sorry state. As war continued with the Persians after 540, Justinian’s government had little time to invest in rebuilding the defences and infrastructures of these regained provinces. This in turn left them unable to look after themselves financially or militarily, so quickly becoming substantial drains on imperial resources. And once those resources were diverted to the core eastern provinces, unpaid wages saw to it that military effectiveness in these areas dwindled and mutinies became increasingly frequent. And worse was to come.

While the Goths, Vandals and Persians had been dealt with, the Danube erupted into chaos with the arrival of the Avars in the 550s. Who exactly these people were is disputed but it is likely that they were a polyethnic group of Mongolian, Turkic and Hephthalite tribes fleeing the emerging Turkic Khaganate of Central Asia. Justinian quickly employed them to subdue those Huns and Slavs who had been raiding the Balkans before encouraging them to intervene in the conflict between the Gepids and Lombards. The subsequent Avar victories over both left them as the undisputed masters of the Danube and the biggest threat to the Roman Balkans since Attila the Hun. However, the more immediate Roman problem was the reaction of the Lombards. Unwilling to accept the Avar yoke, they migrated to Italy in 568, where the Romans had no army that could defeat them. This led to Italy rapidly degenerating into a quagmire of continuous fighting that proved to be a ruinous black hole of imperial manpower and resources.

The diplomatic skills of Justinian might have stabilised the situation but he died in 565 before the true extent of the Avar/Lombard debacle had come to fruition. That is not to say that Justinian’s successors were duds but it became increasingly obvious as the sixth century wore on that Justinian had not only been diplomatically gifted, he had also been fortunate to be able to call upon a large cadre of skilled generals and administrators throughout most of his reign – Belisarius, Narses, John Troglita, Germanus, John the Cappadocian and Tribonian to name a few. As the stream of skilled bureaucrats and generals dried up, Justinian’s successors found that there was little imperial infrastructure to fall back upon. Mauricius and Heraclius soon had to campaign in person and rely on members of their own families and the imperial court to govern the Empire, regardless of whether they were suited to the job or not.

The military difficulties along the Danube, in Italy and against the Persians, as well as the strains of government, seem to have cost Justin II his sanity. Tiberius and Mauricius quickly prioritised the eastern frontier and, while the bulk of the imperial army was deployed successfully in Mesopotamia, local forces in Italy and the Balkans were left to fend for themselves. This allowed the Lombards to carve out not just a kingdom in northern Italy but also two independent dukedoms in the centre and south of the peninsula, while the
Visigoths reduced Roman Spain to a coastal strip. Most alarming though was the collapse of the Danube frontier. By the accession of Mauricius in 582 the Avar threat had been firmly identified and largely contained by annual tribute. However, what the Romans could not deal with was the vast southern movement of the Slavs. Escaping the control of their erstwhile Avar masters, the Slavs spread throughout the Balkans in such numbers that the Illyrian and Thracian armies had no chance of stopping them.

Thoroughly distracted by Avars, Slavs and Persians, Mauricius took decisive action with regards to the western provinces in establishing the Exarchates of Italy and Africa in 584 and 590, respectively. These were essentially devolved governments with their rulers, the exarchs, acting as the emperor’s representatives at Ravenna and Carthage in both civil and military matters. The extent of these exarchate powers was something of an admission that the central government at Constantinople was unwilling or unable to provide prolonged assistance to its outliers. However, there was to be at least one positive to emerge from these exarchates as the son of the Exarch of Africa would lead a rebellion that was to change imperial fortunes in the seventh century.

There is Only One – Late Roman Religion

In the sphere of Roman religion, the fourth century saw the triumph of monotheistic Christianity over its polytheistic pagan rival. The pace of this victory was remarkable for at the outset of the century the Christian Church was still a small minority and faced concerted imperial persecution. However, with the victory of Constantine at Milvian Bridge in 312 and his attributing of it to the support of the Christian God, everything changed. Suddenly Christianity was not just legalised but promoted as the faith of the ruling Constantinian dynasty. By the end of the century, it was unimaginable that the emperor would be anything other than a Christian. In many ways, the organisation of the Christian Church mirrored that of the Empire itself, as is still seen today with the use of Roman terms in the Catholic hierarchy such as vicar, diocese and curia. The Bishop of Rome was essentially a religious emperor at the top of a hierarchy of bishops spread throughout the provinces. However, as power disseminated throughout the Empire, the Church hierarchy had to adapt accordingly. By the late-fourth century, with the divide of imperial power between East and West, the Pope was forced to accede to a similar arrangement. In 381, the patriarch of Constantinople was elevated to a position second only to the Pope and, by the time of Justinian, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem were recognised as part of a Pentarchy that provided governance for the Roman Church.

However, this arrangement did not put an end to the power struggles involving the Church. As Rome and Italy declined in temporal importance, Constantinople continued its ascent in religious affairs backed by the presence of the emperor. By the sixth century, Justinian was not only building numerous
churches across the Mediterranean and attempting to force religious unity upon heretics, Jews and pagans, he was also imposing what he saw as the right of the emperor to influence church doctrine. Should a Pope decide to go against imperial wishes, he could find himself deposed by force and the Papacy became a pawn of Constantinople. However, as the Lombards eroded imperial power on the Italian peninsula, the Pope found himself with increasing independence.

Christianity itself was also far from a united faith. There were various views dissimilar to the official Nicene/Chalcedonian Creed, with most stemming from the dispute over the nature of the Trinity and in particular about how Jesus of Nazareth could be both the divine Son of God and the human son of Mary. The major controversy of the late-sixth century was Monophysitism, which held that Jesus had only one divine nature in opposition to the official Christology, expressed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which stated that He held two natures within His one person. All of this seems unnecessarily pedantic to the modern reader but throughout late antiquity such disputes enflamed religious passions. It was therefore potentially very dangerous for an emperor or the Church to attempt to force Christological uniformity across the Empire, as it would almost certainly antagonise large sections of the Roman population. This was especially true of Monophysitism, which had numerous followers across Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Armenia; areas that provided the vast proportion of the Empire’s manpower and tax bases. Indeed, Heraclius and his successors would find out just how divisive and disruptive such doctrinal disputes could be, particularly in Egypt and Armenia, with the attempted enforcing of the compromise doctrine of Monothelitism, which stated that Jesus had a dual nature within His single being but only a divine will throughout the first half of the seventh century.

However, there were other religious groups within the Roman Empire. Under the guidance of their Patriarch at Tiberias, the Jews represented a rather large proportion of the Roman population. The Diaspora and the Christianisation of the Empire saw the Jews treated with a suspicion that was to become all too common and unjustified as the centuries wore on. Influenced by past revolts, Romans saw these Jewish communities as a potential ‘fifth column’ always on the verge of rebellion and one that ‘openly rejoiced at the calamities of the empire’. As a result, Jews were not allowed to marry Christians, make a will, inherit, testify in court and were ‘barred from seeking entrance to the imperial service’, and there is some evidence of forced conversion on a local level. However, the Romans did have some justification for their wariness towards the Jewish community. While the insidious nature of the Diaspora was illusionary, the potential trouble posed by those Jews who remained in Palestine was not. Roman fears would be somewhat borne out in the seventh century as the Jews invited the Persians to take Palestine, joined them in the siege of Jerusalem, and later welcomed the Muslims.
The brief reign of Julian the Apostate and the lack of long-term consequences proved just how far the collection of cult superstitions that came under the umbrella of paganism had fallen behind Christianity. However, even with imperial opposition and Justinian relegating them to the same legal position as Jews and heretics and subjecting them to heavy confiscations and even exile, paganism continued to exist. This survival within the Empire was aided by the paganism of many of its neighbours, such as many pre-Muslim Arabs, Berbers, Avars, Slavs, Huns, Bulgars and Turks. However, it is difficult to find evidence of Roman pagans causing as much trouble or disruption as heretical Christians or Jews; disruption that could affect their military deployments.

### The Late Roman Army

As the Roman Empire had changed over the centuries, its army had too. Reforged in the cauldron of the third century and reinforced by the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine, the classic 5,000-strong Roman legion was replaced by divisions of 1,000 men. Supported by specialist cavalry and auxilia units raised from non-Roman tribes, this new model army rebuilt and defended the Empire throughout most of the fourth century. However, by the turn of the fifth, the large-scale casualties incurred through civil wars and against barbarian tribes and the increasing unwillingness of the citizenry to enlist made it increasingly difficult to fill the ranks with Roman-trained infantry. This led to the army relying more on barbarian soldiers, who grew increasingly independent as their numbers grew. While that alone did not cause the end of the Western half of the empire, it did contribute heavily.

Geography, civilian government and a smaller army allowed the East to avoid a similar fate. The overall composition of the Eastern army remained remarkably consistent from the fourth to the seventh century. It continued to be made up of field armies in Thrace, Illyricum and the East, and two in the presence of the emperor at Constantinople, with additional field forces in Armenia, Africa, Italy and Spain being added under Justinian. These armies maintained a largely Roman core, bolstered by allied barbarian tribesmen and supported by the limitanei deployed on the frontiers. Much of the equipment, organisation, tactics and logistics of the army also remained recognisable to that of the past. Martial emperors like Tiberius II, Mauricius and Heraclius did command the army in person but it was more usually members of the imperial family or talented non-imperial individuals like Belisarius and Philippicus.

The lack of detailed information on Roman manpower makes drawing any firm conclusions about the size and composition of the army at the turn of the seventh century difficult. It is possible that the field armies in the eastern provinces remained of a similar size. The Notitia Dignitatum, a document that recorded the Roman military establishment in both East and West in the late-fourth/early-fifth centuries, suggests 104,000 field troops for the East
while the army of the mid-sixth century contained 95,000 men. The Eastern army of the early 530s was very similar to that of the Notitia and the Illyrian army of 548 was 15,000 strong and around 17,500 in 395. Furthermore, given the conquests of Justinian and the stationing of extra field armies within them, the field forces of the mid-sixth century may have been larger.

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<td>Total</td>
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These figures were almost certainly reduced by the attacks of Lombards, Goths, Avars and Slavs; although the recruiting of a 15,000-strong force called the Tiberiani may have replaced many of those lost forces. Therefore, the Roman field armies at the turn of the seventh century may have been made up of a similar figure as that at the end of Justinian’s reign – 150,000. However, such figures should only be seen as a paper strength and most likely did not reflect the forces on the ground. This is further borne out by the recommendations of Mauricius, who thought that an army of 5,000–15,000 was well proportioned and 15,000–20,000 to be large. Few numbers are known for the 590s aside from the Roman force of perhaps 30,000–40,000 that was sent to help Khusro II regain the Persian throne.

There was also change in the tactical make-up of these armies. The organisation of the Roman army had always been complex but perhaps that of the Strategikon, with its appreciation that ‘all nations do not fight in a single formation or in the same manner, and one cannot deal with them all in the same way’, was the most elaborate yet. Its combined-arms theory also highlighted the changes in ancient warfare. Perhaps the biggest change was the decline in effectiveness of infantry, particularly against the powerful bows and manoeuvrable steeds of the steppe peoples who had become increasingly prevalent since the end of the fourth century. In response, the Romans began to hire steppe nomads and train their own horse-archers; however, the continued opposition of the Persians and Germanic tribes, the need to take fortifications and the rugged terrain of Italy, the East, and the Balkans meant that disciplined infantry still had a prominent role to play. To that end, whilst the
The war of the three gods began with the rise of cavalry and other specialist forces, providing Romans with the necessary flexibility and striking power. Still, infantry remained the core of the Roman army, even if it had been 'long neglected and almost forgotten in the course of time'.

The infantry of the Strategikon was divided into three separate types – heavy, light, and missile. Each soldier sported short hair, a cloak and tunic, and shoes with thick nail-studded soles for greater durability. This successor of the legionary was armed with a sword, spear, short javelin, and lead-pointed darts, and armoured with a helmet and large oval shield. Mail and greaves were required for those who occupied the exposed front and flanks of the formation. The light infantry were similarly equipped and armed with small javelins, spears, lead-pointed darts, and slings, although they were less well armoured. The infantry also contained a large proportion of archers, trained in the bow or crossbow. However, their training in the use of a shield, javelin, and sling suggests that they were as much a skirmishing arm as a static missile battery.

The infantry also continued to be heavily subdivided tactically. The basic unit was a lochagiai of sixteen men. Four of these units made up a sixty-four-strong allaghion; two allaghia and two bekatonarchiai an arithmos. On the battlefield, these 256-strong arithmoi would be deployed in a square sixteen by sixteen. The Strategikon encouraged the infantry to be divided into three or four groups as well as altering the proportion of light to heavy infantry depending on the size of the force. If it was over 24,000 strong then up to half of the infantry was advised to be light-armed troops. If it was under 24,000 then the ratio was to drop to a third. On top of that, one of every nine heavy infantry was to be set aside to provide a reserve force. The reformed cavalry served in a bandon of 300 soldiers and was subdivided into three bekatonarchiai of 100 men each; each bekatonarchia into two 50-strong allaghia and each allaghion into five decharchia of 10 men. That there were mechanisms in place for groups of up to 21,000 cavalry demonstrates the increased role of cavalry by the seventh century.

As well as tactical formations, divisions within the army could represent different sources of recruits. Not only did the army recruit Romans from across the Empire, it also recruited non-Romans to serve directly in 'Roman' units or be grouped together as foederati. Originally tribesmen serving under treaty obligations that implied submission, by the sixth century the foederati were described as those who served not because they had been conquered by the Romans but on the basis of complete equality. With that, foederati infantry and cavalry were seen as a permanent fixture in the Roman army, paid and trained as regular soldiers. Another class of soldiers were the bucellarii, who were originally the bodyguards of non-imperial individuals — the name, meaning 'biscuit-eater,' came from the idea that the employer would provide...