

An Overview of the Sassanian Persian Military

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1.0 - Introduction

New translations of ancient texts and evidence from archaeology have made knowledge of many once-obscure peoples and places accessible to the amateur historian. This is certainly the case with the Sassanian (also known as Sassanid) dynasty of Iran, an empire which at one time ruled from the Indus to the Nile, from Yemen to the Caucasus. They overthrew the Parthians by 226 (CE, as all dates) and fell to the armies of Islam by 651. Theirs is one of the most poorly-documented empires in the world; even their Achaemenid forebears of half-a-millennium prior are better understood. Instead, their history was written by their enemies, who proceeded to miscast these Persians as villainous archetypes in the sagas of Rome, Constantinople, and Mecca.

In this article I will take a fresh look at topics of interest to wargamers, namely command and control, the famous cavalry, the hidden infantry, and various allies and vassals. For a general examination of the Sassanian military the recently published Montvert monograph *Sassanian Armies - The Iranian Empire*, by David Nicolle is an excellent resource. For a more detailed examination of the topic I recommend Phil Halewood's excellent series in this journal.

2.0 - Command And Control

Historians agree that the Persia ruled by the first Sassanian shahanshah, Ardashir I (226-240), was not that at the accession of the last Zoroastrian ruler, Yazdagird III (632-651). As with societies in general, one constant was the hegemony of a small number of noble families, several of which carried forward from Parthian times, e.g. the Suren. Their role was to provide candidates for top military and administrative positions in the empire, such as generals and provincial governors, and to supply troops from their large estates. At first, the noble families ruled semi-independent principalities in many parts of the empire, making war on smaller neighboring states, especially in the East. There was little direct involvement of the central government back in the capitol, Ctesiphon, near present-day Bagdad.

With time, power tended to aggregate to the royal court, though this was not an irreversible process. The most sudden shift in power came with the accession of Khusro I (531-579). Iran had suffered a long period of social instability under the influence of Mazdak, a Rasputinesque figure who pushed an extreme proto-socialist doctrine that led to a redistribution of wealth, property, and sometimes wives! On this chaotic cultural landscape, the new shahanshah imposed a new order more responsive to central authority, reformed the bureaucracy, and reorganized the Zoroastrian church.

Instead of a single military hierarchy, Khusro quartered the empire under four regional rulers serving at the pleasure of the shahanshah. With many of the highest families ruined, he was able to distribute land to the neglected lower nobility, the dihqans. These changes, when combined with a more efficient and fair tax policy, created a loyal and wealthy mounted gentry owning villages and small estates. I suspect this bears more than a coincidental likeness to the later Byzantine thematic system.

2.1 - Tactics

The nature of the Sassanian army over time can be inferred from a few Roman and Arabic sources spanning four centuries. On the Persian campaign of the Roman emperor, Alexander Severus (231-233) writes the "barbarians" apparently have no standing paid army. In the next century, Ammianus Marcellinus notes (359-363) the regulation of troops by trumpet and "flame-colored banner".

Skipping ahead, Procopius (527) writes that the Persians at Daras were amazed by the uncharacteristic good order of the Byzantines. At Antioch (540) Khusro as commander-in-chief was "seated on the tower which is on the height" (seen at Nisibis in 350 as well), the Persians use pontooneers to cross the Euphrates. Finally, in 549, Byzantines and Lazi took "all the standards" of the ambushed Persian army. Clearly, Iran's army exhibits a substantial degree of organization.

The Stragikon of Maurice (ca. 570) has much to say regarding the Persians. It notes that they "stress an orderly approach," "join battle with calmness and determination," and "do not attack in a disorderly fashion." The author places the Sassanian army in a category with the Byzantines, as opposed to Turks and other "less civilized" peoples who organized themselves along tribal lines.

Persian military references from the same period include instruction on many points, such as tactics, ambushes, and camp fortifications. Standard (but not exclusive) deployment for large armies was advised to be in five parts: a main battle line, a reinforcing line, a small reserve (the Immortals, elite cavalry), and two cavalry wings. Another tactic saw the cavalry forming a front line while the army advanced, only to retire to the wings and thus surprising with infantry an enemy who had expected to face mounted troops.

The history of al-Tabari has much to say concerning the Persian armies faced by the Muslims, some if it valuable. At the early Conquest battle of al-Madhar, the Persians covered their retreat from the field with ships. At al-Firad (634), the Byzantines "sought help from the nearby outposts of the Persians" and their combined forces unsuccessfully attacked Khalid's army. The Sassanians at Shumiya deployed in five parts as noted above, only to be soundly defeated, one of the casualties their light horse commander.

The sole major Persian victory over the forces of Islam was at al-Qarqus, the Battle of the Bridge. When the Arab commander Abu Ubayd "was hit and the elephant stood upon him, the Muslims fled," an effective if prosaic description. Sassanian forces on that occasion wore a palm tree insignia and are generally described as highly disciplined. The vanquished forces, their backs to a river, suffered heavy casualties.

One oft-repeated and misleading phrase used by al-Tabari refers to "chained" Persian troops. The term silsilah is very likely a poetic device meant to imply soldiers organized into units. The same term is used to refer to both Persian and Byzantine cavalry, neither of which would have been physically tied together in groups! Conrad (1994) believes silsilah was first used to describe the enemy at Yarmuk, and only later became a topos applied with considerable poetic license, and no sense of accuracy, to battle descriptions.

There is no need for yet another account of the two famous Sassanian losses to the Muslims, al-Qadisiyyah (635) and Nihawand (641), but I will examine one enlightening passage. The Persian commander, Rustom, sat on an elevated gilded throne, the better to direct the battle. From this post he was in frequent communication with the imperial palace in Ctesiphon. Several other generals were perched on non-combatant elephants. Presumably this "elevation" of top officers both gave them a gamer's-eye view of the proceedings and kept them from seeking personal glory in the front ranks.

Next to the commander-in-chief the national battle standard, the *drafsh i Kavyan* (or *Kaviani*), was placed on crossed timbers. This was a huge flag perhaps 15 by 22 feet, embroidered in gold, silver, and gems. It apparently was present at most major battles from the dynasty's inception, guarded by a circle of spearmen surrounded by a ring of archers. Despite their efforts, it was captured at al-Qadisiyyah.

2.2 - General Organization

Despite its roots in feudal Parthia, and occasional relapses, the Sassanian military showed an increasing degree of sophistication over the years. From a traveling inspector of cavalry quality, to the elaborate system of unit insignia, their armed forces approached but rarely exceeded the overall "gravitas" of the contemporary Romans. Doubtless they were more organized and professional than any of their other opponents, formidable as those were, in Arabia, the Caucasus, Bactria, India, and the steppes. The battle against feudalism took a major boost with the accession of Khusro I, lapsed somewhat under his successors, and picked up too late under the ill-starred Yazdagird III.

3.0 - Cavalry

The most famous component of the Sassanian military is the mounted arm. The first record of cavalry is literally engraved in stone in a sequence of monumental rock carvings starting from the beginning of the dynasty. Early sculptures of the shahanshahs show armored lancers riding galloping leather- or cloth-armored horses using a two-handed thrust to impale similarly armed opponents. These are likely the successors of the Parthian cataphracts.

Centuries later, Procopius and al-Tabari note that sometimes entire Iranian armies were composed of cavalry, often including mounted contingents from Arab allies, Armenia, and other lands. For example, in 619 a Turk and Hephthalite invasion was defeated by the Persarmenian general Smbat Bagratuni leading a Sassanian imperial army. In 531, at Callinicus in Commagene, an all-mounted force of 15,000 Persians and Arabs attacked Belisarius' 20,000-strong Byzantine army of horse and foot, defeating them through a combination of bow and melee. A small force of heavy infantry led by the dismounted Belisarius held out until the fall of night covered their escape.

3.1 - Equipment

The famous sculpture of Khusro II at Taq I Bustan shows the epitome of heavy cavalry near the end of the empire. He carries a bow in addition to the lance, and rode an armored horse, though only frontally armored with metal in the Byzantine style. As in the Parthian era, we can expect that lighter- armored horsemen substantially outnumbered the heaviest noble. Increased availability of mail probably led to better protection for more riders over time. Throughout our period, eastern cavalry would have made widespread use of leather and felt horse bards - important when facing nomad horse archers.

Another evidence of the wide use of armor is from the artistic depictions and archaeological finds of "ox-headed" maces in the Iranian cultural area. The mace was commonly used against armored opponents in many times and places, and its presence is another symptom of armor in the region. These date from the Parthian and Sassanian periods, and are often iron with sculpted and gilded bronze heads. Three examples are 39, 50, and 53.5 cm in length.

Armored cavalry certainly made an impression on enemies of the Persians. In 363, Ammianus Marcellinus speaks of armored horse archers and claims "all their troops were clad in mail," with leather-armored horses. The *Strategikon* says of the Persians, "They wear body armor and mail, and

are armed with bows and swords ..." At the Battle of the Bridge, al-Tabari relates heavy cavalry "... the horses wearing coats of mail, and the horsemen wearing distinctive emblems ..." which astounded the Arabs - or at least those living far from the borderlands.

Bivar (1972) constructed an influential theory on the development of Sassanian armor stressing force and counterforce. Out of the Parthian era, the Persians keep the mailed lancers. Improvements in armor from about 200-350 AD lead to a decline in horse archery in the area. The Chionite (Hun) invasions of the mid-4th century change this balance, which Arab sources date to about 421, in favor of the higher- powered compound bow. Procopius writing in the 6th century laid great stock in the armored horse archer of his day. Bivar's concept attempts to explain this enthusiasm and the regional changes that lead to it.

3.2 - Types of Cavalry

As in medieval Europe, there was a correlation between social status and equipment. Mitigating this was the establishment of units supported by the shahanshah. The most famous were the 10,000 Immortals intended as the mounted successors to their Achaemenid namesakes. They were employed tactically as a hard-hitting reserve. Other such troops included: the pushtighban, who may have numbered 1000 and seem to have been a guard regiment at court; the gyanavspar, "sacrificers of their lives," who may have been ecclesiastical cavalry (the Iranians ransomed a slave of the church after one battle) or mercenaries; and the Royal Archers, who defended the throne, may have numbered a hundred or more, and often served on foot.

Periodically swelling the ranks of the imperial cavalry (as opposed to those paid by major nobles) were thousands of resettled captives, including Georgians, Alans, and others. Such peoples were resettled and eventually re-equipped, their fighting spirit apparently bolstering the sometimes lackluster attitude of Iranian regiments.

The pool of royal cavalry was expanded by Khusro I. In the course of quelling the social chaos of previous years, he apparently redistributed some large estates and other income-producing properties to the lesser knights, or dihqans. While some Sassanian troops were paid in coin from the early 4th century, these dihqans received land and a stipend in exchange for mounted service. As a class in Iranian society, they were further divided into five ranks, indicated by dress.

While all cavalry had been subject to official inspection and training from the early days of the dynasty, Khusro now promulgated his famous "equipment list" to be obeyed at periodic musters. Unusually, the law placed the Royal Personage under its authority. The shahanshah is fabled to have paid a fine for insufficient equipage at the first muster. This regulation prescribed body and horse armor, sword, lance, two bows, ax or mace, a shield, and paraphernalia.

This indicates two things. First, many of the aswaran (noble cavalry) did not show up for campaigns fully armed and armored. Second, that a strong strain of feudalism must have remained in this otherwise bureaucratic and legalistic empire to require that the top-ranked noble - the shahanshah - acquiesce to a regulation in order to shame the rest into obedience.

We may also note that the Strategikon describes the enemy cavalry as "disturbed" by a "carefully drawn-up formation of infantry," and "they themselves do not make use of lances and shields." Other evidence comes from an Egyptian textile perhaps, dating to the Persian occupation, on which mounted and dismounted troops, both armored and unarmored, attack Arabs and Africans. The mounted are in the open, the foot against enemy fighting from behind rocks. We are seeing here a mix of heavy and light horse archers.

3.3 - Role of Cavalry

Despite their obvious importance, it must be remembered that, except in cases of all-mounted forces, Sassanian armies were usually less than one-third cavalry. For their organization, I refer you to Phil Halewood's articles, while noting that at Nihawand (641) al-Tabari claims the Persians advanced "... like mountains of steel ..." and "in units of seven," while al-Baladhuri says they were drawn up in "... in tens and fives ..." Whichever the case, a high degree of tactical organization is indicated.

Thus the picture of Sassanian cavalry painted by the various sources is one of increasing organization and armor for more troopers generally. Over the centuries, the heaviest armor for the noble cavalry lightens to permit archery, while the clouds of Parthian light horse archers acquire mail, regimentation, and perhaps better bows. Regional variations could also be expected, especially among the locally supported aswaran, depending on the non-Iranians faced across the border: Roman or Alan, Indian or Turk, Abyssinian or Lazican.

4.0 - Infantry And Other Miscellany

Before the Greco-Macedonian occupation of Persia, the land had long produced dismounted troops nearly as famous as their mounted brethren. From the Elamites to Darius III, archery had been a mainstay of the Iranian infantry. Some bow-armed foot from the region were used by Alexander and his successors, but they and the Parthians obviously saw little percentage in arming and training a subject population.

Yet the people were well aware of their history. As a nationalist dynasty, the Sassanians stressed cultural continuity with their Achaemenid ancestors, and as such employed infantry in peace and war.

4.1 - The Early Record

The earliest record of Sassanian foot troops that I have seen is from Dr. Nicolle's recent monograph. His figure 7 includes representations from a Dura Europas wall painting from the early 3rd century, showing distinctively mailed and shielded swordsmen who are neither Roman nor Arab, and so are presumably in Iraqi subjects.

The next record is from the 337 siege of Nisibis, where archers in siege towers fire on the Roman-held walls. At the battle of Singara (343), Libanius writes that the Persians were "... archers, slingers, heavy infantry, cavalry, and armed men from every part, " and that archers and javelinmen were arrayed "... on the peaks and on the wall." At the 350 siege of Nisibis (apparently a popular vacation destination ...), Roman authors claim that over 10,000 Iranian infantry perished, and they refer to bowmen separately from the mounted contingent. From the Acts of the Martyrs of Bezabde, we read that two important officials were guarded by 100 horsemen and 200 infantry escorting the doomed Christians.

These last were likely the local paighan. They were a local militia and police force which likely occupied the social strata below the least dihqans but above the mass of peasantry. These may have formed the bulk of the useful infantry seen in many Sassanian armies, mainly serving in corps of archers behind large shields, under officers called tirbadh.

Ammianus Marcellinus has several illuminating comments to make on the Iranian foot of his day. At the Siege of Amida (359), from which he narrowly escaped, his enemy used sling- and bow-armed skirmishers, while other foot in mail advanced under mantlets in "serried ranks," controlled by

trumpet. He characterizes the Persian infantry by saying, "Their infantry are armed like gladiators, and obey orders like soldiers' servants". He lauds their practice of maneuver and drill.

His famous account of Julian's ill-starred campaign of 363 notes that outside Ctesiphon the Persian heavy cavalry was "supported by detachments of infantry who moved in compact formation carry long, curved shields ..." After their foot skirmishers exchanged missiles, "both sides fought hand-to-hand with spears and drawn swords; the quicker our men forced themselves into the enemy's line the less they were exposed to danger from arrows." Compare this to his tale of the Battle of Maranga:

To prevent the preliminary volleys of the archers from disrupting our ranks he (Julian) advanced at the double and so ruined the effect of their fire ... Roman foot in close order made a mighty push and drove the serried ranks of the enemy before them ... the clash of shields ... whirring missiles.

He later slanders Persian fighting spirit, and states their "aversion to pitched infantry battles."

Taken together, these stories from the 4th century could imply a Persian infantry not unlike the sparabara of their forebears, shielded and perhaps armored spearmen backed by well-drilled ranks of archers. These at times worked in close coordination with the mounted nobility, as missile troops have done for ages. Armored sword-and-shield men - perhaps imitation legionaries - appear to have played a role, along with archers, slingers, and javelinmen skirmishing in terrain and between the opposed battle lines.

4.2 - The Later Record

Skipping ahead to the age of Procopius of Caesarea, we find more descriptions of the Iranian infantry. At the Battle of Daras (527), the Persians deployed

... 40,000 horse and foot, and they all stood close together facing the front, so as to make the front of the phalanx as deep as possible.

As noted earlier, Belisarius had made the Byzantine unusually well ordered, and to his men he said of the Persian foot that it is

... right for you to despise them. For their whole infantry is nothing more than a crowd of pitiable peasants who come into battle for no other purpose than to dig through walls ... and in general to serve the soldiers. For this reason they have no weapons at all with which they might trouble their opponents, and they only hold before themselves those enormous shields ...

This statement is quite an inspiring bit of rhetoric. Surely Belisarius was at least partially truthful in his description or he would have lost his audience. But marching, and especially feeding, the majority of a Persian army on an invasion without providing any offensive arms strains credulity. That many or most of their infantry were siege troops is certain, because Daras was a siege target. However, what was the motivation behind this oft-quoted speech? Were Byzantines likely to be frightened by Persian infantry? Not likely if they were always of the class Belisarius laid out.

The Battle of Daras opened with an archery duel. The Iranians apparently loosed more shafts than their opponents, though a headwind evened the score. Procopius attributes this difference both to style and to tactics. The Persians - as other sources note as well - could deploy half the troops in front, half behind, and these two lines would "fight in constant rotation." Whether he refers to infantry, cavalry, or both is unknown.

After the arrows ran out, both sides used spears. The Sassanian right wing mounted fled, rallying on the infantry. The reserve Immortals shifted, charged, and caved in the Byzantine left, but were in turn cut off and destroyed, their general slain. At this point, the infantry fled and was slaughtered.

Another instructive example is the Byzantine attack at the village of Anglon in Armenia (543), which was opposed by 4000 Persians. These latter were heavily outnumbered, so entrenched the town, blocked streets with carts, and "filled some old cabins with ambushes of infantry." Some Eruli and Byzantines "after a hard hand-to-hand struggle" routed the front lines, and pursued the fleeing Iranians. Their pursuit ran into an ambush, where enemy archery broke them in turn. Chased by Persians, they fled to the rest of their army, causing its rout.

Evidence of this type indicates an infantry component somewhat analogous to the Iranian cavalry in the same period. Some proportion of the infantry appears to have been valuable bow-armed or spear-carrying soldiers, with the rest often peasants enlisted mainly for siege work. Yet Persians still placed infantry at the front and center of battle formations and relied on their performance. Fragmentary Sassanian sources from this later period do stress that one may in some cases "... leave the matter to the infantry."

Muslim battle accounts typically stress the exotic and decadent aspects of the Persian opposition, some glorious single combats, and the obviously dangerous things like heavy cavalry and elephants. But the lowly foot sloggers are also mentioned or implied at battles.

At Shumiya (634), the Persians

... advanced against the Muslims in three lines. Each line had an elephant, with their infantry before their elephant. They came on shouting.

Tabari says of the "polytheists" at al-Qadisiyyah that "... Zad bin Buhaysh, the ruler of Furat Sirya, commanded the infantrymen ..." and "With each elephant were 4000 men." Given a recorded 30 Persian elephants, the arithmetic clearly does not work here, but rather it must be kept in mind that in Arab culture 4000 was a cipher for "a lot."

Another vignette tells of a stereotypical richly-attired Persian who stood "between the lines, and shot an arrow." An Arab attacked and "threw him down in front of him." This archer may have been a well-to-do member of the paighan, perhaps a tirbadh archer, out to make a name for himself. Later, we see the "central part of the Persian horsemen wheeled around, but their infantrymen stood firm." At Bahurasir (636), the Sassanian force was "... infantry and archers ..." which may mean the foot there lacked missile weapons, and horsemen plied the bow.

4.3 - Other Analyses

Regarding the Sassanian infantry, Rawlinson (1876) at least has a fairly high opinion. He estimates they formed at least two-thirds of any Persian army that included any foot. The elites were archers, firing from behind a wall of shields, while ordinary infantry were spearmen, equipped from government armories. He also claims the archers deployed before the spearmen, retiring through them to avoid close combat, with the spearmen being a "fair match" for legionaries.

Christensen makes a somewhat less glowing estimation. He notes Julian's disdain of the paighan, while governors of border provinces were authorized to hire mercenaries to garrison forts.

The overall image of Sassanian infantry is a complex one. At times we see a levy of shielded peasants, of little tactical value except to form a core for the army. Yet at other times they are skirmishing missile troops, or massed archers protected by a shield wall. In most cases, however, they seem to be disciplined, well-drilled, and lower caste.

4.4 - Vassals and Allies

Many other troops were supplied by vassals and allies. An early recorded example of allies taking the field was at the Siege of Amida (359), where the Hunnish Chionites and the Caucasian Albani each supplied a royally-lead contingent, mostly of cavalry.

Records of other early Persian allies are hard to find. It is known that both Arab and Armenian contingents periodically served with the Parthians, and with the later Sassanians, so interpolating across the centuries seems safe. By 428, Constantinople and Ctesiphon had divided and subsumed Armenia, creating "Persarmenians" who were sufficiently militarily integrated to supply generals and loyal troops to the Iranians. The Armenians were highly regarded by the Persians, supplying both cavalry and infantry. The Arch of Galerius (ca. 300) indicates armored and shielded Armenian slingers and spearmen, plus many unarmored foot and cavalry (Nicolle), and their heavy cavalry was renowned. Among the Arab allies to the Sassanian shahs were the powerful Lakhmids of northern Arabia. Khusro II made the mistake of subjugating them in 602, only to lose them entirely in 611 to a tribal confederation.

In the 480s the country was attacked by a Turko-Mongol horde called the Hephthalites (the "H" is sometimes dropped) or the White Huns. They slew shahanshah Peroz in battle, yet at other times were Persian allies. These were based in Bactria from around 430, and helped install Kavad as shahanshah in 498. The Hephthalites were never completely subdued despite the apparent division of their lands between the Western Gok (Blue) Turks and Iran during their alliance from 557 to 568 (see invasion of 619).

The mountain regions of Gilan, Daylam, and Tabaristan south and west of the Caspian Sea were home to petty kingdoms. From a campaign of Shapur I these were nominally under Persian sway. Troops from these areas were armed with sword, spear, and bow. Some Daylami converted to Islam after al-Qadisiyyah, yet maintained their feisty ways as mainly javelin- and sword-armed infantry.

Other peoples and allies are less well known. Ammianus refers to Segestanians, perhaps Saka descendants in Seistan, facing off against the Romans. Procopius lists: the Sunitae, "whose land adjoins that of the Alani"; the warlike Hunnish Sabiri, also denizens of the Transcaucasus; and the Cadiseni, whose mounted charge at Daras shook the Byzantine cavalry.

As might be expected, the Persians had a long history with the Arab peoples. The most important relationship was with the Lakhmid Arabs, a powerful group which were closely allied to the Sassanian throne from the 3rd century onward. Khusro II conquered them by 602, leaving only lesser tribes in league with the Iranian throne. This change in the Arabian power structure was providential for the Prophet Muhamed and his followers in the coming decades.

From 572, Persian aswaran, Daylami troops, and their native "Homerite" allies in Yemen fought and defeated other Yemeni, their Abyssinian overlords, and Byzantine supporters. This struggle between Zoroastrian and Christian eventually made Yemen a client state of Iran, reduced in about 600 to a province.

Another localized military resource came to Khusro II in 615 when the Levant was taken and the True Cross carried off for the pleasure of his Christian wife. The Jewish population, with the boot heel of Byzantine oppression removed, raised a force said to number 26,000 to ravage the countryside. These were mollified by the Sassanian general Shahr-barz, who found them a place in the new order until the Byzantines retook the region in 622.

In the East, the Persians struggled at first with the Kushans in a continuation of the Parthian Suren family franchise. The region of "Kushanshahr" (Bactria) was reduced to a province around 379, only to be overrun by the Hephthalites in the 5th century. Areas of what is now Pakistan were also periodically under Persian control, while still further towards the rising sun Khusro I made the "Yabghu of Tokharistan" his vassal. As this title is Turkic and region was Hephthalite, so some steppe people is indicated.

4.5 - Captives and Mercenaries

Beyond various allies and imperial contingents, the shahanshah had a more direct method of adding fresh manpower to his military: by taking it. Rebellious peoples who were forcibly subdued often were respected for their fighting spirit and relocated to other parts of the empire. Resettled, they supplied a more warlike attitude in the ranks.

An early example is found in an inscription from Shapur I's campaign of 260, wherein he boasts of settling captive Romans in various parts of the empire, in "Persia, in Parthia, in Susiana, and in Assuristan .." and elsewhere. Procopius notes that the Roman defenders of Beroea (540) deserted to the Iranian besiegers, complaining of late wages. Other similar examples could be cited.

While other rulers resettled captive peoples, Khusro I pursued this policy with notable vigor. After one campaign in the Caucasus region, he moved 10,000 Khazars, Alans, and Abkhazians in what is now Azerbaijan. Such peoples, as with the newly-landed dihqans, were reliant on Khusro and not the great nobles, providing a loyal and permanent cadre for the national army.

4.6 - Of Elephants and Ladies

Whether Roman or Arab, Persia's enemies feared the elephants above all. Ammianus Marcellinus and Tabari both note their use at several battles, although Procopius is notably silent on their use. This may have simply been due to prudence on the part of the elephant's masters, who saw little advantage in endangering them in the cooler northern valleys and mountains of the latter author's acquaintance, while the others write of battles on the hot plains of Iraq.

Sassanian elephants seem usually to have been accompanied by large infantry contingents. The pachyderms provided support from the rear of the foot formations. They were also used in conjunction with cavalry, often spooking enemy horses. Elephants were often posted in the rear, likely acting as a reserve because of the difficulty of replacement. As in Southeast Asia, white elephants were valued above all others, one being enumerated among the riches of Khusro II, and another being present as a general's command post at al-Qadisiyyah.

A final remarkable aspect of Sassanian expeditions involved women. Lieu notes that at least in the earliest periods "the presence of substantial numbers of women" is noted by Roman authors. The writer Zonaras (260) said that among the fallen Iranians there were "found women also, dressed and armed like men," some taken alive. At Singara (343) there were noted women "conscripted" as "sutlers in the army." These are not noted after the middle of the 4th century.

5.0 - Conclusions

The examples and analyses presented here indicate that the Sassanian military, like its culture, was neither simple nor static. While as with most ancient warriors conservative in nature, change did come to their soldiery under pressure from Roman, Turk, and Arab.

Why did this dynasty appear to improve with time, while the Parthians had declined over the centuries of their hegemony? This may be due to larger changes in the classical world, but also in part because the historic antecedents of the two dynasties were very different. The Parthian rulers had roots in a relatively unsophisticated steppe culture, while Sassanian rulers could look back to the "glory days" of Cyrus and Darius for inspiration.

Little consideration is usually given to the overall grand tactical nature of these Iranian armies. Early in the Sassanian dynasty, it appears that they lacked the sophistication of the Romans, and yet had already begun to lessen the powers of the great noble families. The turmoil of the late 5th century seems to have paved the way for a concentration of power in the office of Shahanshah and to the increased regularization of the army.

Similarly, the cavalry evolved from the Parthian model - swarming horse archers and a nucleus of armor-plated lancers - to a more capable horseman. This was not mainly a rearming of troops by imperial fiat, but rather was tied to the sometimes slow, sometimes fast, rate of social and economic change in Persia from the 3rd to 7th centuries.

A sense of change is harder to see in the ranks of the foot soldiery, in part due to their lower status and relative anonymity. The Sassanians appear to have attempted a revival of Achaemenid practices overall, and this doubtless extended to the activities of the infantry. The native troops appear to be partly local militia, and partly levied peasants, some with bow, usually presenting a shielded front to their enemies.

Hopefully this quick review has shown the Sassanian military to be a sophisticated and diverse establishment, closer to their Roman than their barbarian neighbors. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Jeff Bolton and the advice of Dr. David Nicolle in producing this document.

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