

SETTING THE STAGE FOR MUHAMMAD AND ISLAM

By Paul Stenhouse

This is the second of a series of seven articles

WHEN EMPEROR THEODOSIUS I died in 395 AD, Arcadius [395-408], his older son, inherited the Eastern Byzantine Empire, and ruled from Constantinople; Honorius [393-423] the younger son, inherited the Western Empire, and ruled from Milan, and then from Ravenna in northern Italy. Both were minors. Honorius was under the guardianship of Stilicho, a brilliant commander who ably defended Italy against the invading Goths. The last Western Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was to die in 476. From that time the Roman Empire was ruled from the East, from Constantinople.

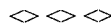
IN 405 AD ALARIC, leader of the Visigoth [Western Goth] hordes, was advancing towards Italy from the East.

What if ... the young and inexperienced Western emperor Honorius had not authorized the withdrawal of all the legions on Rome's northern border along the Rhine river in 402/403? Having done so, in the unusually cold winter of 406 when the Rhine was deeply frozen over, hostile Germanic tribes – the Alans, Suebi and Vandals – were able to cross it, passing unchallenged by the many unmaned Roman forts.

Perhaps more to the point, what if ... the same emperor Honorius hadn't listened to malicious gossip from jealous courtiers and allowed his most capable general, his mentor and his father-in-law Flavius Stilicho, to be arrested and executed in August 408? Having done so,

Honorius found Stilicho's loyal troops defected in large numbers to Alaric.

Had Honorius done none of those, would Aleric the Visigoth and his horde still have succeeded in 410 AD in doing the unimaginable? Would they – for the first time in eight hundred years – have been able to besiege and sack *Roma Pulcherrima*, 'Rome most beautiful,' as Virgil described her, and *lux orbis terrarum et arx omnium gentium* 'light of the world, and refuge of all peoples,' in the words of Cicero?¹



Years ago I read with interest 'If Don John of Austria had married Mary Queen of Scots' by G. K. Chesterton; and 'If Louis XVI had taken the advice of Anne Robert Jacques Turgot his brilliant Finance Minister and instituted the reforms he recommended,' by André Maurois. Both were published in 1932. Along with an article by Winston Churchill 'If Lee had not won the battle of Gettysburg.'²

History is littered with these 'What if ...'s.

This is as true of the history of Muhammad and the rise of Islam as it is of the fall of the Roman empire; or of the beheading of Mary Queen of Scots for treason based on largely circumstantial evidence; or of the fall of the Bourbons in France after more than 500 years, with the beheading of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.



HAGIA SOPHIA, the cathedral built in Constantinople by Emperor Justinian between 532-537. It is now a museum in Istanbul. The disc on the right has the name 'Uthman, the 3rd Caliph after Muhammad. The disc on the left has the name 'Ali – the 4th Caliph. In the background, the disc on the right reads Allah, and the one on the left reads Muhammad.

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A war to spawn countless wars

In 502 AD war broke out between the Eastern Roman – the Byzantine – Empire and the Parthian/Sasanid Empire of Persia. Emperor Kavad I needed money to pay off the Hephthalites, known as the White Huns, who had helped him regain the throne of Persia. When the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I refused to pay the subsidy demanded, Kavad declared war.

That war was to wage, on and off, for one hundred and twenty-six years.

It would prepare the way for the rise of Political Islam that, in the words of Reinhart Dozy, would unleash untold centuries of war that 'would drench Spain and Sicily, the deserts of Atlas and the banks of the Ganges with blood'.³

When the war between Ctesiphon and Constantinople ended in 628 AD both empires would be exhausted financially and militarily. Riven by

internal dissension neither empire would be prepared for the fierce assaults from an unexpected quarter – nomadic Arab Muslim forces from the Hijaz in north western Arabia.

Damascus would fall in 635 AD, and the whole of the Roman province of Syria would be lost from north to south by 636. Ctesiphon the Persian capital, and the once mighty Persian empire, would cease to exist by 637. Baghdad would be built from Ctesiphon's ruins.

Constantinople would hold on for another eight hundred years, until 1453, but by then the city of 'New Rome' built by Constantine the Great between 324 and 330 AD, would be all that was left of the once vast Byzantine Empire.

It would be steadily gnawed away by Persians, Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, Turkomans, Huns, Vandals, Avars, Alans, Visigoths and Ostrogoths and all manner of Muslim forces. Impregnable Constantinople, the pearl in the vanished empire's crown, would fall to the Turks on Tuesday May 29, 1453. But that all still lay in the future.

Byzantine and Persian Empires: What might have been

In 581 AD Flavius Mauricius Tiberius Augustus was crowned Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. He inherited a bankrupt empire that on and off for more than a century had been obliged to pay untold thousands of pounds of gold each year to successive Parthian/Sasanian emperors of Persia as tribute for an uneasy peace between the two empires.

Then, in 590, Persian balance of power shifted. The Sasanian king of Persia Hormizd IV was deposed, blinded and killed. His son, Khosrau II, was proclaimed king in a coup organized by two of Khosrau's Parthian uncles, Vinduyih and Vistahm – his mother's brothers.

The young king was quickly deposed in his turn by his own military commander-in-chief Bahram Chobin, and fled to Syria, or, according to some, to Constantinople,

with his uncles. Against the advice of his Senate, Byzantine emperor Maurice decided to help the young Persian prince regain his throne.

In 591 a combined Byzantine-Persian army won a decisive victory over the usurper, and Khosrau II was restored to the throne of Persia in Ctesiphon. He would occupy it for the next thirty-seven years, until 628.

So far so good. Or ... was it?

Khosrau II rewarded Maurice by granting him western Armenia up to lakes Van and Sevan, and a number of cities, including Martyropolis and Yerevan.

The Byzantine Empire had never been so powerful. The peace between Ctesiphon and Constantinople meant that no tribute needed to be paid. An unprecedented Golden Age seemed to be looming.

A series of regrettable and avoidable bad judgements over the next ten years by 'the two monarchs which balance the world; the two great luminaries by whom it is vivified and adorned,'⁴ put an end to that dream. And set the stage, as we shall see, for much else besides.

Mis-steps by Emperor Maurice

For long-term security from sudden military incursions by enemies, Byzantines and Persians alike depended on friendly Arab clans whose encampments dotted the deserts, and the fringes of towns and cities of both empires.

Not all Byzantine commanders were brilliant strategists like the Bulgarian-born General Flavius Belisarius who died in 565 AD. He defeated Persians, Vandals and Ostrogoths by using military strategies employed by the Eastern Empire's fiercest enemies, the Huns and the Goths.

Few Byzantine commanders were as flexible as Belisarius. The Persians, on the other hand, were skilled in adjusting to desert conditions and cooperating with their Arab allies who knew the terrain and how to turn it to their advantage, better than they.

Byzantine emperors were no less clumsy than their military

commanders in dealing with their Arab 'allies'.

In 573 Mundhir, sheikh of the powerful Ghassani Arab clan, learnt by chance, of a plot to kill him that involved Emperor Justin II. Mundhir renounced his allegiance to Constantinople and allowed Arab forces loyal to the Persians to attack Byzantine territory. After some time the situation was normalised, but deceit and mutual mistrust were rife.⁵

In 580, before Maurice became emperor, he was commander of a combined force of Byzantine and Ghassani forces aiming to capture Ctesiphon. The attack had to be called off when it became clear that the Persians had been alerted to their plans. Maurice shifted blame onto sheikh Mundhir who was accused of treason, and exiled to Sicily.

His four sons and the whole Ghassan clan responded by pillaging Byzantine towns and military

settlements and laying siege to Bosra in southern Syria. Mundhir's eldest son negotiated with Maurice, and under a guarantee of safe-conduct went to Constantinople where he was treacherously packed off to join his father in Sicily.

In 599 or 600, apparently strapped for cash, Maurice – then emperor – refused to ransom 12,000 of his soldiers who had been captured by fierce Avars – nomadic mounted warriors of Scythian origin, cousins to the dreaded Huns. The prisoners were executed by their captors and a subsequent Byzantine military delegation headed by an officer called Phocas was humiliated and ignored in Constantinople.

In 602, again perhaps because of lack of money to pay his soldiers, Maurice ordered the army to winter beyond the Danube. The army protested and eventually mutinied, demanded that Maurice abdicate and nominated Phocas as emperor.

The Shroud of Turin

THERE ARE two possibilities, the scientists write, on how the sheet of the Shroud was placed around the corpse: placed above and below (not in full contact with the whole body stiffened by rigor mortis) or pressed on the body and tied in order to be in contact with almost the entire body surface. 'The first method is supported by the fact that there is a precise relationship between the intensity (gradient) of the image and the distance between the body and the cloth. Furthermore, the image is also present in areas of the body not in contact with the cloth, such as immediately above and below the hands, and around the tip of the nose. The second method is less likely because the typical geometric deformations of a three dimension body brought into contact in two dimension sheet are missing. Moreover, there is no imprint of body hips. Consequently, we can deduce that the image was not formed by contact between linen and body'. It is this observation, 'coupled with the extreme superficiality of the colouring and the lack of pigments' that 'makes it extremely unlikely that a shroud-like picture was obtained using a chemical contact method, both in a modern laboratory and even more so by a hypothetical medieval forger'. 'There is no image beneath the blood stains. This means that the traces of blood were deposited before the image was. Therefore, the image was formed after the corpse was laid down. Furthermore, all the blood stains have well-defined edges, no burrs, so it can be assumed that the corpse was not removed from the sheet. 'There are no signs of putrefaction near the orifices, which usually occur around 40 hours after death. Consequently, the image is not the result of putrefaction gases and the corpse was not left in the sheet for more than two days'.

⁵ *The Holy Shroud, New research from ENEA on the sacred Linen kept in Turin, by Marco Tosatti, Rome.*

Maurice fled to Chalcedon, and was captured. On November 27, 602, he was forced to watch five of his sons being killed before he was himself beheaded. Theodosius, his heir, had fled towards Ctesiphon – reminiscent of youthful Khosrau II's flight in 590 – was apprehended, and then beheaded in Nicea. Maurice's wife Constantina, and her three daughters were beheaded at Chalcedon sometime in 605.

Mis-steps by King Khosrau II

In the meantime in Persia, Khosrau II had grown suspicious of his conspiring uncles to whom he owed his throne. He had rewarded them with positions of power. Realising his mistake, he quickly had Vinduyih executed, but Vistahm rebelled in 594/5 when he heard of his brother's fate and the battle for power between nephew and uncle – actually between Sasanian and Parthian – dragged on for seven crippling years. Even after Vistahm was assassinated, his troops fought on and the rebellion was not quelled until 602.

In 602 Kosrau II miscalculated again by setting a trap for an Arab ally whom he thought to be an enemy. He enticed him to Ctesiphon with a letter that said, 'the King has business with you'.⁶ He arrived and was imprisoned in a Sasanian fortress at Khaniqin to the north east of Ctesiphon, where he died. This, however, was no ordinary Arab enemy.

He was a powerful Arab king, Nu'man IV who ruled the Lakhmid dynasty whose centre was Hira, on the west bank of the Euphrates, not far from Ctesiphon. His Arab subjects were mainly Christian. Since the late 4th century the clans that made up this powerful Arab kingdom had alternated between supporting the Byzantines,

and the Persians in the ongoing wars between the two empires.

Nu'man had evidently refused to help the young prince Khosrau II in his fight with Bahrām back in 590 and Khosrau still nursed a grudge. He put a puppet on the throne of Hira – Iyās ibn Qabiṣa who had helped him when he was fleeing Bahrām.

Khosrau, had foolishly cut his nose off to spite his face. His empire would not long survive his removing the last Lakhmid king loyal to the Persian throne. For centuries the Lakhmids had been a feared and respected buffer against nomadic Arab infiltration of Persia's borders. With Nu'man a

victim of



A gold coin of Khosrau II, emperor of Persia 590-628 AD

Khosrau's duplicity, Persia lost its most powerful defence on its south western flank, and would prove to be helpless against the hostile Muslim Arab forces that would build up within twenty-eight years in north western Arabia.⁷

When news had reached him of the coup in Constantinople, Khosrau II was probably genuinely offended by the shameful murder of his patron and his sons in November that year. But, just as probably, was he anxious

to re-possess the Armenian territory he had granted to Maurice in 691. He reclaimed that lost territory, and then his armies invaded Syria. In 608 they were heading towards Constantinople.

The Emperor Heraclius

In 610, a thirty-six year old soldier with red-gold hair and almost excessive personal courage – Flavius Heraclius Augustus – rebelled against emperor Phocas, killed him and was crowned Byzantine emperor.

He tried to make peace with Khosrau II but the latter had lost patience with Byzantine double-talk. He had the unfortunate ambassadors Heraclius sent for this purpose, killed.

Heraclius was to reign until 641.

He would live to see Islam arise as self-proclaimed heir presumptive to the thrones of Zoroastrian Ctesiphon and Christian Constantinople. But that was still in the future.

Jerusalem falls to the Persians

In 614 – probably in spring or summer as this was the time that ancient societies went to war⁸ – the Persian army under command of General Shahrbaraz, laid siege to Jerusalem.

After twenty-one days the city fell, tens of thousands of Christians were killed, and many more thousands enslaved, many churches were destroyed, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was set on fire, and the Holy Cross was taken to Ctesiphon as spoils of war.⁹

The Persians conquered Egypt in 618. Meanwhile the Byzantines were disrupted by internal disputes and rebellions, and were under pressure from hordes of Avars who were moving from their camps in Hungary, through Thrace, to attack Constantinople. With Palestine, Syria and Alexandria lost, Constantinople 'was hemmed in by the Mongols on the land and the Persians on the sea'.¹⁰

Heraclius defeats Khosrau II

Heraclius, however, was biding his time. What seems to have re-motivated him was a blasphemous and insulting letter written by Khosrau II attacking Heraclius's honour and his faith. It was yet another of Khosrau's miscalculations. The letter was read from the pulpits of all the churches:

'You claim to put your confidence in God; then why has he not saved Caesarea, Jerusalem and Antioch from my hands? If I desire it can I not destroy Constantinople in exactly the same fashion? As for your Christ, do not deceive yourself by reposing vain hopes in Him: He was not even capable of Saving Himself from the hands of the Jews who crucified Him.'¹¹

Between April 6, 622 – the same year that Muḥammad with some of his followers fled from Mecca to Medina – and 626, Heraclius waged a number of successful campaigns against Khosrau II.

Finally, The Byzantines moved against the Persian capital Ctesiphon in 627. After the Battle at Nineveh in December that year, Persian resistance was shattered, and Khosrau II fled to the mountains seeking help from Satraps there.

In 628 Heraclius forced the brother-in-law of Khosrau II, Parthian General Shahrbaraz, to retreat from Anatolia when the latter attempted to capture Constantinople with the help of Avar forces.

The Persian army rebelled and Khosrau was captured and imprisoned. Kavad II – Khosrau's son by the Byzantine Princess Maria, daughter of the emperor Maurice, Khosrau's former protector – proclaimed himself king of the Sasanian/Persian Empire. He ordered all his brothers and half-brothers – seventeen in all¹² – to be killed.

On the fifth day of his father's imprisonment – February 25, 628 AD – Kavad ordered that Khosrau be beheaded by Mihr Hurmuz whose father had been ill used by Khosrau.¹³

Pyrric Victory

Then Kavad II made peace with Heraclius who did not make exorbitant demands on the now dangerously

unstable Persian kingdom. Kavad was to out-live his murdered father Khosrau II by only eight months, dying of the plague.¹⁴

By the time Muḥammad died in Medina in 632, the throne of Ctesiphon had been occupied 'by nine candidates who disputed with sword or dagger the fragments of an exhausted monarchy'.¹⁵ Anarchy and factionalism infested the Persian empire and the whole region.

The Byzantines, however, recovered all their territories as well as their soldiers who had been captured. They received war damages, along with the True Cross and other relics taken from Jerusalem in 614.¹⁶ It was only after this victory that Heraclius and his successors adopted the official title of *Basileus* as equivalent to the Persian title *Shahanshah* which meant 'King of Kings'.

But it was too late. None of this compensated for what the long drawn-out war had cost. It was more than a century too late for Heraclius and the Persians to take seriously what Greek King Pyrrus of Epirus said when he was congratulated on his victory against the Romans at Asculum in Italy in 279 BC: 'Another victory like this one, and we are ruined'.¹⁷ They were ruined. And an enemy was waiting in the wings to benefit from their ruin.

The Holy Cross Restored

The date of the restoration of the True Cross to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre is traditionally given as September 14, 629. Heraclius bore the sacred relic on his own shoulders, and divested himself of diadem and purple – the symbols of worldly authority and power – out of respect for the holy ground which Jesus had walked, and where he died.¹⁸

Amid the rejoicing, storm clouds were gathering unbeknown to the exultant throng of worshippers, soldiers, diplomats and members of the Imperial Court.

In February 629,¹⁹ while the Christian world was celebrating Heraclius's restoration of the relic of the True Cross to Jerusalem, his troops beyond the Jordan were reporting that

a force of 3,000 Arab warriors had easily been repelled when they entered some villages south east of the Dead Sea called Mashārif and Mu'ta, before fleeing into the desert.

It was assumed that the force had been sent to avenge the killing of an envoy from a nomadic Arab chieftan by a Ghassanid tribesman Shurahbil bin 'Amr. The imperial troops decided not to pursue the fleeing nomads.²⁰

Had the imperial troops known that the murdered envoy was Al-Harith bin 'Umair,²¹ and that he had been sent by Muḥammad bearing a letter to the Ghassani Prince of Bosra – capital of the Roman Province of Arabia, and today a town in southern Syria – inviting him to convert to Islam, would they have pursued the Arab fighters? We shall never know. But had they pursued and defeated them the course of history would almost certainly have been changed.

Led by Muḥammad's adopted son Zaid ibn-Hārithah, these Muslim tribesmen had been sent to avenge the killing,²² but also to collect coveted Mashrafiyah swords manufactured in Mashārif and Mu'ta, to be used in Muḥammad's attack on Mecca in 630.²³

Khalid ibn al-Walid led the shattered force back to Medina where their fellow-Muslims treated them as cowards for running away.²⁴

Later to be known as *Saifallah* 'the Sword of Allah,' Khalid ibn al-Walid was to lead the Muslim forces that would capture Damascus in 635, and in 636, at the Battle of Yarmūk, would capture the whole of Roman Syria from south to north. Heraclius is supposed to have exclaimed on that occasion: 'Farewell, O Syria: and what a wonderful country this is for the enemy'.²⁵

By 637 Ctesiphon had fallen, and by 647 the Persian empire would cease to exist. In 651 its last Sassanian emperor Yazdajird III, aged 27, would be slain treacherously as he fled from the Muslim army pursuing him. And emergent militant Islam – an unfamiliar power-broker on the world's political stage – confronted the ever-dwindling Byzantine empire of Heraclius.

What if ... ?

What if ... heresies like Arianism, Nestorianism and Monophysitism had not split the unity of Christians ?

What if ... the words of Isaiah [58, 9-10] had been taken more to heart by the Christian rulers of the Byzantine empire, and the sheikhs and kings of the Christian Arab tribes:

IF YOU CEASE to pervert justice,
to point the accusing finger
and lay false charges,
if you feed the hungry from
your own plenty
and satisfy the needs of the
wretched,
then your light will rise like
dawn out of darkness
and your dusk be like
noonday.

Next Month: *Islam, the Sword or the Tax.*

1. Publius Vergilius Maro aka Virgil, *Georgics* Book IV, ll.532-534; Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Oratio IV in L. Catilinam*, VI, 11.
2. *If ... it had Happened Otherwise*, ed. J. C. Squire, Longmans, Green and Co, London, 1932, pp.21ff; 49 ff. Maurois was the pen-name of Emile Herzog. 1885-1967.
3. Reinhart Dozy, *Spanish Islam*, London, 1913 p.68
4. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Ward, Lock & Co. London, undated, vol.ii, p.254.
5. J. Spencer Trimington, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, Longmans, 1979, pp.185-188.
6. *The History of Al-Tabari*, State University of New York Press, 1999, vol. 5, p.355.
7. *ibid.* p.359. See also J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, Longman London, 1979. p.200.
8. 2 Sam 11,1.
9. Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, Macmillan 1968, pp.264-265.
10. H. Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Dark Ages*, J. M. Dent and Sons, London, 1959 pp, 315-316.
11. *ibid.* p.316.
12. Sic ! Al-Tabari, *vol.cit.* p.398; Gibbon, *vol.cit.* p.280. says 'eighteen'. Other sources read 'twenty-four' or 'fifteen'.
13. Al-Tabari *vol.cit.* pp.396-398.
14. Al-Tabari, *vol.cit.* p.399. The Byzantine historian Theophanes claims that he was poisoned by his step-mother Shirin according to A Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 2nd enlarged ed. Copenhagen, 1944, p.497. note¹.
15. *vol.cit.* p.280
16. Al-Tabari *vol.cit.* pp.404-405] records a tradition that would have the Holy Cross returned by Buran, daughter of Khosrau II who was the third successor as ruler of Ctesiphon after the death of her brother Kavad II. She reigned for one year and four months.
17. *Plutarch's Lives*, by John and William Langhorne, Ward, Lock & Co., London, undated, 'Pyrrhus,' p. 284.
18. Daniel-Rops, *op.cit.* p.317.
19. Jumada 1, AH [after the Hijra] 8.
20. Ibn Ishaq, in the edition of ibn Hisham: *As-Sira an-Nabawiyah*, Dar Ehia al-Tourath al-Arabi, Rue Dakkkache, Beirut, Lebanon, vol.4, pp. 25-26. See also pp. 20ff. Cf. also David Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*, ed. by CosimoClassics, New York, 2006, p.377.
21. Margoliouth, *op.cit.*, *loc.cit.*
22. *ibid.*
23. Hitti, *op.cit.* p.147.
24. Ibn Ishaq, *ed.cit.* p.30.
25. Hitti. *op. cit.* p.152.