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**Alexios G.C. Savvides. *The Cross and the Sacred Fire: Byzantium and the Sassanids (4<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> Centuries)* – An Overview of Relations between the Eastern Graeco-Roman Empire and Pre-Islamic Persia, Athens, Hêrodotos, 2022, 270p.+xlii, ISBN 978–960–485–422–6.**

The Sassanian Empire was the third of the Pre-Islamic Iranian empires to arise in the Ancient World. For over four-hundred years this state, called Eranshahr by its rulers, flourished and became one of the great Eurasian empires. During its existence, the Sassanians were the most formidable opponent faced by the Roman/Byzantine Roman Empire, and the only other state considered to be their equal. Over the course of the third to the seventh centuries, the two states, while recognising the other as a great power, co-existed uneasily with periods of peace breaking into broader warfare. It is in the complex relations of the Byzantine Roman Empire with the Sassanian Empire that author Alexios G.C. Savvides sets out to chart in this work.

Dr. Alexios G.C. Savvides is the Emeritus Professor of Medieval & Byzantine History at Peloponnesos University, after previously being a Professor of History at Aegean University. A student of the great Byzantinists Aikaterina Christophilopoulou, Speros Vryonis, Jr., Donald M. Nicols, and Iohannes Karayannopulos in his undergraduate thru doctoral studies; Savvides has been a prolific contributor to Byzantine Studies since the publication of his first monograph *Byzantium in the Near East* in 1981.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Savvides has also published works in both Greek and English on Byzantine-Turkic relations, the Byzantine Pontus, and Byzantine Prosopography. He has co-authored the introductory textbook *Introducing Byzantine History: A Manual for Beginners* with the late Benjamin Hendrickx and is the co-editor of the *Encyclopaedic Prosopographical Lexicon of Byzantine History and Civilization*.<sup>2</sup> With *The Cross and the Sacred Fire*, Savvides continues his publications of works for beginning students designed as introductions to major components of Byzantine Studies.

*The Cross and the Sacred Fire* is divided into a preface with six chapters; I–Introduction & Notes, II – Early Centuries to Late 5<sup>th</sup> Century; III – The Anastasian War of A.D. 502–506 and Justinianic era’s Defensive Wars (A.D. 527–561/562), IV – Byzantine Counter-offensive and Retreat (A.D. 565–610), V – The Early Medieval Hellenic-Roman World Prevails over Persia, and VI – Aftermath: Islam’s Onslaught (630’s – early 640’s). Rounding out these chapters are the supplementary materials including: Lists of Romano-Byzantine and Sassanian rulers, a Bibliographical Appendix, List of Abbreviations, Additional Bibliography, Greek Summary, the Index, and an unnumbered map section.

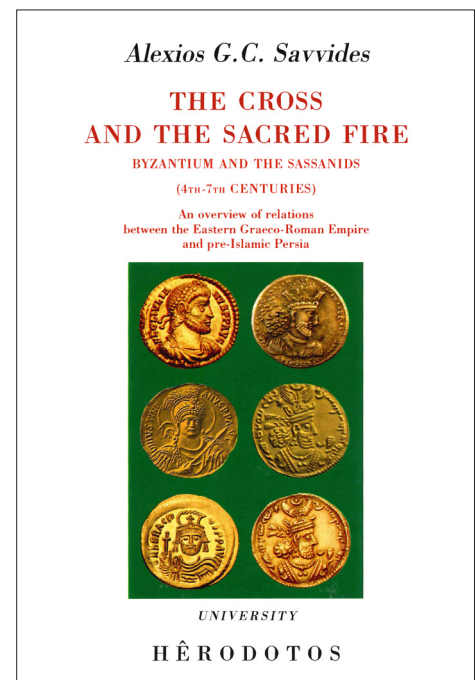
<sup>1</sup> SAVVIDES 1981.

<sup>2</sup> SAVVIDES/HENDRICKX 2001; SAVVIDES/HENDRICKX 2007-.

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In his preface Savvides notes the importance of the Sassanian Empire as the Byzantine Roman Empire's most menacing opponent, one with whom the empire had numerous periods of warfare and peace throughout Late Antiquity. Savvides then has a brief discussion of the Sassanians in Greek historiography, highlighting the fact that while the Sassanians are not a main point of investigation, Greek historians have been providing academic and popular histories on the Sassanians for nearly a hundred years. Savvides notes that his interest in the Sassanians and their relations with the Byzantine Roman Empire began as an undergraduate with Aikaterina Christophilopoulou and Speros Vryonis, Jr. at Athens University, and continued into his M.Phil studies at University of London, after he discovered a copy of George Rawlinson's *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy or The Geography, History, and Antiquities of the Sassanian or New Persian Empire*.<sup>3</sup> His longstanding interest was furthered by attendance at several seminars and lectures at the School of Oriental Studies in London; as well as the coverage of relations between the Sassanians and the Byzantine Roman Empire in several textbooks and articles on Byzano-Sassanian relations.<sup>4</sup> Savvides lays out the main purpose of his monograph, which is to provide an overall survey of Byzantine Roman and Sassanian relations across political, diplomatic, religious, and cultural contacts. Within his survey Savvides intends to discuss older and more recent views of main events, while providing detailed "exhaustive" footnotes for scholar and student alike. He highlights the importance of not only paying respect to older scholarship but not excluding older scholarship in researching a topic simply because it was not published in the last few decades. While older theories and approaches may have been replaced in part or full, it does not change the importance of the older theory in prompting research and discussion over the years. More than many scholars, Savvides has always been extremely cognisant of his debts to past research and the importance of providing a rich bibliography for other researchers and students. A trait that he carries forward into this volume.

With *Chapter I: Introduction and Notes on Some Contributions* Savvides briefly surveys a number of international Byzantinists and Late Antique scholars who reaffirm his basic premise: that in Late Antiquity the Sassanian Empire of Iran was the major adversary of the Byzantine Roman Empire. After an excursus on who has used which various transliteration of Sassanid or Sassanian or Sassanian, Savvides notes that the major Byzano-Roman/Sassanian Wars have been covered by older works of synthesis. He directly cites the English works of Gibbon, Bury, and Oman before looking at more recent works. In the pages that follows Savvides provides essentially an annotated discussion of the major works on the Sassanians and their relations with the Byzantine Roman Empire over the course of the

20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, Savvides provides a prospectus to the remaining chapters of the book.

With *Chapter II: Early Centuries (Until the Late 5<sup>th</sup>)* Savvides starts his survey of relations with an overview of several scholars (T.C. Lounghis, N. Oikonomides, R.N. Frye, F. Lot, and P.N. Ure) who highlight the fact that the Sassanian Empire was the other acknowledged Eurasian power that the Byzantine Roman Empire recognised during the period of Late Antiquity. Over the long centuries of their co-existence, elaborate diplomatic conventions showcased this regard, highlighting the way the Emperor at Constantinople or the Shāhanshāh in Ctesiphon considered the opposite the "brother" and equal in a world of lesser states. However, Savvides also emphasises the undercurrent of bitter competition between the two states. Savvides connects Constantine I's foundation of Constantinople as his capital, and burgeoning administrative centre, with Diocletian's policy of transferring his seat to Nicomedia to supervise the Eastern frontier, that his focus was on the Sassanian Empire as a potential opponent. While Constantine blundering attempts at gain support from Christians within the Sassanian Empire were a failure, he fully recognised the importance of building up his cavalry strength against the ciberanii and cataphractoi of the Sassanian Spah. Ultimately, Constantine I's death in 337 CE cut short any plans he had to campaign against the Sassanians. Instead, his successor in the two eastern prefectures, Constantius II, would over the course of the 330's to the 350's face successive attacks against key fortress cities in Mesopotamia by Shāpūr II. However, even with the arrival of Chionite forces allied with the Sassanians, Shāpūr II was only able to take two cities after twenty plus years of intensive war. Unlike the cautious Constantius, who utilised a defensive strategy against Shapur II, his cousin and successor, Julian launched a traditional Roman campaign straight into the heart of Sassanian Mesopotamia.<sup>5</sup> Aiming for the Sassanian capital complex of Ctesiphon, Julian and his field army scored some initial victories, but were unable to take Ctesiphon. During the retreat back up the Euphrates, Julian was killed in a battle under questionable circumstance leaving the Byzantine Roman field army to elect a successor, Jovian, who was forced to conclude an unfavourable treaty to extract the army. S. highlights that this treaty effectively reversed the Byzano-Sassanian treaty of 299 CE, regaining territories for the Sassanians previously lost to the Byzantine Roman Empire under Diocletian. While low level conflicts would continue between the Sassanians and the Byzantine Roman Empire during the reign of Valens, a more lasting treaty was signed in 387 CE that stabilised relations between the two superpowers, albeit at the expense of an independent Armenia.<sup>6</sup> While two small

<sup>3</sup> RAWLINSON 1876. While available online in numerous print-on demand editions of varying quality, Gorgias Press has reissued Rawlinson's Sassanian volume with that of the Parthians as a two-in-one edition. See RAWLINSON 2002 which is still available for purchase.

<sup>4</sup> See SAVVIDES-DERIZIŌTES 2001 and SAVVIDES 2021 for the two textbooks. For reprints of his articles see SAVVIDES 2006. All textbooks and articles are published in Greek. As of this writing none have been translated into another language.

<sup>5</sup> Julian is known traditionally as Julian the Apostate for his renunciation of Christianity and his moves to roll back their advances as the dominant religion in the Byzantine Roman Empire. An outsized bibliography of work is available on Julian, in contrast to the limited number of works on his longer reigning cousin Constantius. A WorldCat search on "Julian, Emperor of Rome, 331–363" in OCLC's World Cat First Search yielded 1,659 entries. Even excluding reprints or title variations, that is a large amount. Compare this with the 157 for Constantius. On Julian, most recently see: FREEMAN 2023 and TEITLER 2017. On Constantius see: BAKER-BRIAN 2023 and CRAWFORD 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Jovian died on the march back to Constantinople, leading the army to

conflicts broke out in 421–22 and 441, Savvides notes the continuing diplomatic contacts between the two powers that kept them mostly at peace. The most famous instance of this was when the Shāhanshāh Yazdgerd I, at the request of the dying Emperor Arcadius, personally safeguarded Theodosius II until he reached his majority; sending a trusted eunuch servant to Constantinople for the guarding of Theodosius. In more cultural matters, S. notes that it is in the 5<sup>th</sup> century that Nestorian Christianity begins to expand into Sassanian territory, particularly after the creed was banned in the Byzantine Roman Empire. The result would be that the well organised Nestorian Church would be the only officially sanctioned form of Christianity in the Sassanian state. While peace is maintained between the Sassanians and the Byzantine Roman Empire, the latter half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century will see the Sassanians faced increasing pressure on their north-eastern border, as the Chionites and Kidarites of the 4<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> century were replaced by the far more formidable Hephthalite Huns. Conflict between the Sassanians and the Hephthalites would reach their peak in 484 CE when Shāhanshāh Pērōz launched a campaign against them that resulted in the complete destruction of Pērōz's army, and the death of Pērōz and the majority of his sons. The short reign of Pērōz's brother Balāsh saw the Sassanians reduced to vassals of Hephthalites, paying tribute to them well into the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century. Savvides highlights that, in addition to the catastrophic defeat by the Hephthalites, relations with the Byzantine Roman Empire were steadily worsening as the emperor Zeno would suspend gold payments stipulated by a treaty in 442 CE, in part due to suspected Sassanian support for Isaurian rebels. Tensions would only continue to rise between the two powers, leading to increased warfare in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

In *Chapter III: The Anastasian War of A.D. 502–506 and the Justinianic Defensive Wars (A.D. 527–561/562)* Savvides examines how the worsening relations between the Sassanians and the Byzantine Roman Empire led to outright warfare in 502 CE. At this time Shah Kavād I launched a surprise attack against Byzantine Roman positions in the Oriens Prefecture, due to the refusal of Anastasius I to pay the gold tribute agreed upon in the 442 CE treaty. Catching Anastasius and his generals off guard, the Sassanians were initially quite successful, but by 506 CE had suffered enough reverses to agree to a truce/treaty with Anastasius I. Geopolitically, the Sassanian success at the beginning of the war persuaded Anastasius to build a new strongpoint in Mesopotamia at Dara. Savvides highlights however, that despite the truce the Byzantine Roman Empire faced a slowly growing social problem with the minority Miaphysite and to a lesser extent Jewish population. The growing alienation of the miaphysite populations in Egypt and Syria grew as a result of the split on the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon (451CE), a split that even a new ecumenical council in 553 CE was not able to resolve. After an excursus to

elect Valentinian as Emperor. Valentinian took command of the West, while his brother Valens would rule in the East. On Valens, and to a lesser extent Valentinian, see: HUGHES 2013 for a strictly chronological biographical and military history approach. For a wider view placing Valens, and his policies, in the context of Byzantine Roman state and society see instead LENSKI 2002.

the 7<sup>th</sup> century on Mohammed's dispatch of letters rulers of all neighbouring kingdom Savvides returns his focus to the warfare between the Sassanians and the Byzantine Roman Empire. After a twenty-year truce, warfare returned between the two powers around 527 CE, beginning what Savvides calls a series of protracted (intermittent) wars lasting until 561/62 CE. The first phase of warfare was primarily waged in Mesopotamia and Lazica in the Caucasus Mountain region, as both powers considered the broad regions of commercial and strategic importance, and the Sassanians had been operating in Georgia against its princes since the beginning of Justin I's reign. After five years of desultory fighting, a peace treaty between the Sassanians and the Byzantine Roman Empire was signed in 532 CE. This treaty, known as the 'Eternal Peace' saw the Sassanians annex portions of Armenia and Western Georgia that had been under Byzantine Roman control. Capping this treaty was a provision for an expensive annual tribute from the Byzantine Roman Empire to the Sassanians. Savvides notes that this tribute, despite the high cost, was paid as Justinian needed a peaceful eastern front while conducting wars of reconquest in the western Mediterranean. The second phase of warfare begins in 540 CE with the surprise breaking of the 'Eternal Peace' by Khusrau I Anūshīrvān through a massive invasion of the Byzantine Roman Empire's Syrian provinces that saw the important city of Antioch seized and burned. While Justinian recalled Belisarius from the Western front to combat Khusrau's forces. While Khusrau was initially successful, Byzantine Roman defences at Dara and Edessa survived his sieges, and despite the removal of Belisarius under charges in 542 CE the imperial forces were able to withstand the Sassanian spah. However, Savvides highlights that Justinian needed a truce with Khusrau I by 544CE in order to shift military forces to Italy, and that both the Byzantine Roman and the Sassanians were suffering from the effects of the arrival and reoccurrence of Bubonic Plague.<sup>7</sup> The final phase of this series of wars between the two powers is again in the Caucasus Mountains in what is sometimes known as the Lazic War, before finally concluding in the peace treaty of 561/62 CE (or the Fifty-Year Peace). This treat set the borders of the two states in both Lazica and Armenia, secured toleration of Christians in Sassanian territories, and set Nisibis and Dara as the main commercial control points for goods traded between the two empires. Savvides concludes the chapter examining the "client-troops" of the Ghassanids which the Byzantine Roman Empire used as auxiliary troops against the Sassanian clients, the Lakhmids. S. uses extracts from D. Obolensky, C. Amantos, J. Karagiannōpoulos, and Y. Kordātos to highlight Justinian's habit of using a divide and rule approach with the enemies of the Byzantine Roman Empire.

<sup>7</sup> The Justinianic Plague first appeared in Egypt in 541CE, reaching the capital at Constantinople by the Spring of 542 and from there spreading across the trade routes of the Mediterranean. While 541–545CE marks the first continuous period of the disease appearing in the Mediterranean and Southwest Asia, a serious outbreak hit again in 558CE, and periodic reoccurrences of the disease would happen until the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century. For narrative overview see TREADGOLD 2020, 65–73 & with integrated discussion on social effects pp. 79–86. In addition to the sources cited by Savvides see also SARRIS 2002 on the origins, controversy over the effects, and the cultural response to the plague at the time of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

Over the course of *Ch. IV: Byzantine Counter-Offensive & Retreat (565–610)* Savvides examines how the fifty-year peace signed with Justinian in 562 CE barely lasted ten years. The violation of the treaty and the outbreak of war occurred early in the reign of Justin II, and primarily caused by this emperor's rash diplomatic decisions. Namely refusing to renew the agreed annual tribute (a term of the 562 CE peace treaty), assistance to the enemies of the Sassanians, and Justin II's intervention in Persoarmenia.<sup>8</sup> Justin II had also been conducting diplomatic negotiations with the Oghuz (Gök) Turks, the new power dominating the Steppe World since the late 550's, to possibly secure an alternate route for silk caravans, as well as an ally to the rear of the Sassanian Empire. These negotiations failed, rather dramatically, as the Gök Turks correctly divined that the Byzantine Roman Empire was also negotiating with the Avars, whom the Turks considered escaped slaves.<sup>9</sup> Savvides highlights the protracted nature of the conflict as early Sassanian victories, most notably in taking Dara, in the 570's were countered by Byzantine Roman victories in the 580's.<sup>10</sup> The final end to this round of warfare between the two powers came in 591 CE under surprising circumstances. Khusrau II, who had only been placed on the throne in 590 CE after his father was removed by an aristocratic cabal, was overthrown in a successful revolt by the General Bahrām Chobīn, after the general secured the support of the Sassanian aristocracy. Khusrau II then turned to the one power capable of providing the military support necessary to reclaim his throne – the Byzantine Roman Empire under the Emperor Maurice. In exchange for extensive territorial concessions in Mesopotamia and Armenia, Maurice agreed to provide Khusrau II the funds and troops he would need to contest Bahrām VI Chobīn for rule of Eranshahr. With the forces provided by the Byzantine Roman Empire, as well as with the support of some 15,000 cavalry from the nobility of Armenia, Khusrau II was able to defeat Bahrām VI Chobīn's forces and regain the Imperial throne of Eranshahr.<sup>11</sup> With Khusrau's restoration to the throne, and his delivery of the concession territory, led to amicable relations between the

<sup>8</sup> For a concise overview of the chain of events leading to the breaking of the 561CE Treaty, based on the extant primary sources see TURTLEDOVE 1983.

<sup>9</sup> The Gök Turks had previously been allied with the Sassanians in the late 550's to early 560's. Together the two powers had destroyed the Hephthalite state that had dominated the Transoxiana for most of a century, only to fall out over trade issues. For the Hephthalites see GOLDEN 1992, 79–83 for brief introduction, KYZLASOV 1999, 316–318, and LITIVINSKY 1999, 128–165 for greater details. On the development of the Gök Turks see GOLDEN 1992, 127–131; SINOR/KLYASHTOMY 1999, 322–328.

The Avars appear to have been a remnant of the Jou-Jan Khaganate, who the Turks had rebelled against and destroyed in the 550's, who fled westward towards the Pontic Steppe, absorbing smaller steppe tribes along the way. Under Justinian I the Byzantine Roman Empire used them as *foederati* against other steppe tribes threatening the Danube frontier. Ultimately, the Avars will establish themselves on the Pannonian Plains until their destruction by Charlemagne in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century. For complete history of the Avars see POHL 2018, on their interaction with the Byzantine Roman Empire see KARDARAS 2018.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed examination of Justin II and Tiberius II Constantine's internal and foreign policies, with significant translated extracts from the primary sources see: TURTLEDOVE 1978.

<sup>11</sup> For the Armenian contributions see the discussion in ARESHIAN 2013 and the relevant portions of the Armenian History attributed to Sebos in SEBOS 2021, 33–39.

two powers for a decade. However, upon the overthrow and brutal execution of Maurice and his sons by the usurping Phokas ushered not only period of civil war and instability in the Byzantine Roman Empire; it also gave Khusrau II the *casus belli* for a massive decades-long conflict between the two empires. For the Byzantine Roman Empire the period from 602–610 CE was an ongoing nightmare. In the east a series of invasions by the Sassanian spah slowly begins peeling through imperial defences in Syria, overran portions of Armenia, and even makes its way to Chalcedon opposite the capital of Constantinople. On their northern frontier, it also sees imperial control over their Danubian border and the Balkans disintegrate as the Avars raided widely over the region, and their Slavic vassals began slowly settling the area. For Khusrau II and the Sassanian state, the successes of the Sassanian Spah would mark the highest point of their power since the early days of Shapur I. For both states this war, the economic and military costs, and the sheer length would have catastrophic repercussions.<sup>12</sup>

With the penultimate chapter of the book, *Ch. V: Early Mediaeval Hellenic-Roman World Prevails over Persia: Waning and Fall of the Sassanids (A.D. 610/622 to 629/630)*, Savvides examines what noted British historian James Howard-Johnston has called “The Last Great War of Antiquity” which engulfed both great powers in warfare.<sup>13</sup> For S. this period constitutes the final phase of the Byzantine Roman – Sassanian confrontation that had extended over five centuries by this point. Savvides emphasises how the great Sassanian generals Shahrbarāz and Shahin overran Byzantine Roman territory for Armenia/Mesopotamia to Syria/Palestine, seizing Jerusalem and the relic of the True Cross. By 618 CE Sassanian armies had pushed thru once again to the south-western Anatolian littoral where raids continued during the war. S. highlights the contributions of Clive Foss towards realising the destructive impact of the Sassanians on Sardis and the Anatolia in the course of their raids and campaigns. Another Sassanian force was encamped opposite Constantinople in Chalcedon by 615 CE and in 619 CE Khusrau II's generals had taken the granary of the Byzantine Roman Empire, Egypt. Savvides touches on the fact that, in addition to the Sassanians, Herakleios was also contending the Avar Khaganate campaigning in the Balkans, in fact nearly capturing him at one truce. After being talked out of moving the capital from Constantinople to the distant Carthage in the African Exarchate, plus receiving a substantial loan from the Church in the form of gold and silver plate, Herakleios began his counter-offensive against the Sassanians. Savvides takes time to illustrate the effects of nearly two decades of Sassanian occupation and control had on the Byzantine Roman territories they seized during the war, and note how this loosened the bonds holding these provinces to the Byzantine Roman Empire, making

<sup>12</sup> While all surveys of Byzantine Roman history cover the Byzano-Sassanian War in greater or lesser detail; see KALDELLIS 2024, 347–372; STATHAKOPOULOS 2023, 55–59; TREADGOLD 2020, 77–79, 97–99, and GREGORY 2010, 166–176 for the most recent concise or full-length survey texts; for the definitive history of what has been called “The Last Great War of Antiquity” see now HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Brief examination in HOWARD-JOHNSTON 1999; source analysis in HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2010 with the full narrative and analysis of the conflict in the aforementioned HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2021.

it easier for the Arabs to seize the same provinces in their great expansion in the 630's CE. After briefly dipping into the controversial establishment of the themes; were they the work of Herakleios, his immediate successors, or a drawn out gradual process over centuries; Savvides refocuses on both Herakleios' counter-offensive and his reputation as the First Crusader.<sup>14</sup> He highlights, but does not comment on both older sources and historians comparing Herakleios to Alexander the Great, over covering the conflict as yet another East/West confrontation. In his counter-offensive Herakleios took a small crack for into Armenia via the port of Trebizond on the Pontic coast, remaining in the field even during the great joint siege of Constantinople by the Sassanians and their Avar allies. The failure of the siege led Shahrbarāz to retreat to Syria. Herakleios, reinforced with troops from his new Turkish allies – the Khazars from the Transcaucasian region struck into Northern Iran, targeting important Zoroastrian Fire Temples in Media Atropatene. Savvides uses extracts from both the *Chronographia* of Theophanes and the *Historia Syntomos* of Nikephoros, along with quotations from other Byzantine Roman historians, that illustrates the creation of the alliance between the Khazars and the Byzantine Roman Empire.<sup>15</sup> In 627 CE, Herakleios, with his Khazar allies, swept southwards into the northern Mesopotamian territories of the Sassanians to decisively defeat Khusrau II's forces at the Battle of Nineveh. From there Herakleios's forces destroyed the Sassanian palace at Dasdagerd and moved south again to encamp outside Ctesiphon. With the startling reversal of fortune, and the Byzantine Roman field army at the gates of the capital, Khusrau II was overthrown in a palace coup and his son Kavād II Shirūya signed a treaty in 628 CE returning the frontiers between the two powers to their position in 591 CE. Taking, for the time, the title of *Basileus*, Herakleios triumphantly reinstalled the True Cross in Jerusalem, returning to Constantinople in victorious while the Sassanian Empire experienced fratricide and essentially civil war between 628–633 CE. Only in 633 CE

would Yazdgerd III consolidate his control over the throne, and by then it would be too late for the Sassanians to recover.

In the final chapter of his book, *Ch. Vi: Aftermath – Islam's Onslaught (630's – early 640's)* Savvides quickly moves through the short-lived excitement of the Byzantine Roman victory and the enormous impact the sudden expansion of the Rashidun Caliphate of Islam, and later the Umayyad Caliphate would have on the Near and Middle East. Quoting extensively from other notable Byzantine Roman, Sassanian, and Islamic historians Savvides builds the picture of the collapse of Byzantine Roman control in Syria, Palestine and the Egypt following their first great defeat at the Battle of Yarmouk in 636 CE. While the Byzantine Roman Empire would lose Palestine and Egypt for the remainder of their existence (portions of Syria would be reconquered in the 10<sup>th</sup> century), seeing the beginning of their more compact medi-aeval existence, for the Sassanians things were far worse.<sup>16</sup> The armies of the Rashidun Caliphate decisively defeated the Sassanian armies at the Battle of Qadisiya in 637 CE, capturing the capital of Ctesiphon in 638 CE. While Yazdgerd III fell back to Media to raise another army, without Ctesiphon and the treasury, he lacked the resources to be able to mount an effective resistance. After the defeat of his army at the Battle of Nahavand in 642 CE, Yazdgerd III was forced to retreat again and again, until finally he was murdered by a miller near the city of Merv in 651 CE. His descendants fled eastward to request the aid of the T'ang Empire under the Emperor Kao-t'sung, where they would eventually become part of the T'ang administration of their Western Regions.<sup>17</sup> Savvides rounds out this short chapter by an examination of the cultural impact that the Iranian culture of the Sassanians would have on the Umayyad and especially the Abbasid Caliphates, essentially creating a cultural fusion between Islam and what will later become known as the Persianate culture.

Following the final chapter, Savvides includes multiple appendices covering a parallel listing of Byzantine Roman and Sassanian rulers from the 4<sup>th</sup> century to the death of Yazdgerd III in 651 CE; a twenty-five page bibliographic appendix on specialised topics of interest concerning both the Byzantine Roman's and the Sassanians; a twenty-three page list of abbreviations/work cited; a six page bibliographical supplement of works also consulted in writing the book; a summary in Greek, multiple indices, and an eleven page map collection round out the supporting apparatus of *The Cross and the Sacred Fire*.

Overall, when examining *The Cross and the Sacred Fire*, the book accomplishes Dr. Savvides aim of providing students and readers with an introduction to the relations between the Byzantine Roman Empire and the Sassanian Empire of Iran. However, there are areas that the reviewer feels would have strengthened the book, clarified material, or made it more reader friendly.

<sup>14</sup> The issue of the themes is the largest minefield in Byzantine Roman history by far. For the most part the mid–20<sup>th</sup> century position that the creation of the Anatolian themes were the work of Herakleios has been abandoned. See CHRISTOPHILOPOULOU 1993, 345–350 for an examination of this theory and concurrent gradualist theories of the period. Another group of historians dates the creation of the original thematic establishment to the reign of Constans II, based on the disappearance of the crown lands and certain fiscal reforms of the period. See TREADGOLD 2005, 68–82 for the best summary of this position, and HALDON-BRUBAKER 2010, 723–771, for the most recent gradualist position that puts the first actual reorganisation of the themes into a combination of civil/military responsibilities.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the reliability of the notices in both Nikephoros and Theophanes for the period, see both HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2010 and TREADGOLD 2013 for discussion. Both Nikephoros and Theophanes are available in English translations. While both NIKEPHOROS 1989 by Cyril Mango and NIKEPHOROS 1994 by Norman Tobias & Anthony Santoro are available for Nikephoros, Mango's translation is much more precise and his commentary more in-depth. Theophanes has two easily available translations: THEOPHANES 1982 by H.N. Turtledove, which starts in the year 602 CE, and THEOPHANES 1997 by Cyril Mango & Roger Scott with Geoffrey Greatrex. The Mango/Scott/Greatrex translation is of the complete work, but has been exorbitantly expensive (list price of \$450) for the past fifteen years. The Turtledove translation, though only half of the complete *Chronographia*, is still a generally accurate translation and is regularly available with a list price of \$25.

<sup>16</sup> For the best short account of the Islamic conquest of both the Byzantine Roman provinces in the East, as well as the Sassanian Empire, see HOWARD-JOHNSTON 2010, 461–487.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed military history of the fall of the Sassanians see FARROKH 2007, 261–275. Presumably due to the chaos and warfare that had engulfed the Sassanians from the 630's CE forward, by the 640's CE the T'ang Dynasty had established protectorates in Central Asia, Transoxiana, and briefly as far south as Kabul. For a brief introduction see SHUN-YING/YAO 1999, 343–350, in-depth coverage of T'ang foreign policy in PAN 1997.

First, and largest issue seen with the book is the decision to start the narrative in 324 CE after Constantine I's defeat of Licinius with his refoundation of Byzantium as Constantinople. While this is a traditional starting date for the Byzantine Roman Empire, it does not work well for the Sassanian Empire. The origins of the Sassanians lay not in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century with rebellion of Ardashir I, son of Papak against his erstwhile master Ardashir IV the Arsacid shāhanshāh. While the origins of the house of Sassan lie in mystery and legend, Ardashir is firmly attested in the historical record through references in Roman sources such as Cassius Dio and Herodian, as well as the Sassanian rock engravings at Firuzabab and Shāpūr I's great trilingual inscription on the Ka'be-ye Zardost at Naqsh-e-Rostem.<sup>18</sup> Many of the strategic decisions made by Shapur II over the course of his long reign in the 4<sup>th</sup> century require the context of the events of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century to fully make sense, as Shapur II was attempting to reverse the territorial losses the Sassanians had sustained in a treaty made with the Byzantine Roman Empire in 298 CE. This treaty in turn marked a reversal of several decades of Sassanian victories under Shapur I in the 240's CE – 260's CE over the Roman Empire. After a century of constantly defeating the increasingly decentralised and ineffective Arsacid Parthian empire in campaigns under Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, and Septimus Severus, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the Roman Empire would be brought to their knees by the Sassanians under Shāpūr I. Roman forces under Gordian III would be defeated in battle, leading to the death of Gordian III, and forcing his successor Philip I to negotiate a humiliating treaty with the Shapur. Roman Mesopotamia and Syria will be overrun by Shāpūr I in the 250's CE (essentially a preview of Khusrau II's campaigns in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century) culminating with his defeat and capture of the Emperor Valerian at Edessa in 260 CE. Not having a clear understanding of these 3<sup>rd</sup> century events in the establishment of the Sassanians as THE other great power of the Mediterranean – Near Eastern world leaves the reader unclear on why Shāpūr II was so determined to regain Mesopotamia, or how these wars were part of a large pattern of interaction between the two great powers.<sup>19</sup>

Second, there needs to be far greater discussion and examination of the military capabilities of both the Byzantine Roman and Sassanian states. Savvides does briefly discuss the importance of the Sassanian cavalry, and the use of the later Byzantine Roman military manuals, especially the *Strategikon* of Maurice from the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, in providing a picture of Byzantine Roman and Sassanian tactics. However, there is not any real look at what those tactics are, the types of units used by both powers, or how the equipment would change and evolve as a result of five centuries of interaction. Savvides also shows a tendency to privilege the Byzantine Roman sources on the capabilities of the Sassanian forces, for example that of Procopius on the Iranian cavalry

<sup>18</sup> For the text of Shapur I's trilingual inscription see either FRYE 1984 or SPRENGLING 1953. For the monumental rock sculptures of the first Sassanian rulers see: GHIRSHMAN 1962.

<sup>19</sup> For a concise introduction to the beginnings of the Sassanian dynasty, establishment of the empire, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century campaigns, see MARSH 2024. A more in-depth narrative and discussion can be found in FARROKH 2007, 176–197; DARYAEI 2008, 7–41, and JACKSON BONNER 2020, 20–49.

archers in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. While literary sources are few and far between a number of Sassanian historians in the last twenty years have studied the archaeological, numismatic, and monumental stone works of the Sassanians to build a far more detailed picture of the Sassanian military.<sup>20</sup> Given the ongoing warfare between the two powers in the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, giving the reader a better grounding in the capabilities of both the Byzantine Roman Empire and the Sassanian Empire, as well as how they fought, is a crucial piece in understanding the complicated diplomatic relationship between the two powers.

Third, while the 6<sup>th</sup> century is divided between two chapters, and the first quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century receives its own chapter, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries are combined together. There needed to be greater depth to the coverage of both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. While it is hinted at, the long reign of Shapur II, was followed by increasing conflict between the Shahanshah and the nobility of the Sassanian Empire. The conflict between a nobility trying to extend their privileges and the Shahanshah attempting to maintain their authority would play out in the relationship between Shapur III, Bahram IV, and Yazdegerd I. Additionally, having an entire chapter for the 5<sup>th</sup> century would allow a greater amount of focus to be put on increasing attention the Sassanians had to give to their eastern frontier as the Chionites and Kidarites nomadic confederations of the 420's to 440's CE were replaced by the far more powerful and formidable steppe empire of the Hephthalite Huns.

On the structural side of the book there are some problems that make the book less reader friendly. While I wholeheartedly agree with Dr. Savvides on the importance of consulting and respecting older scholarship, the methods of citation used in *The Cross and the Sacred Fire* make it a difficult work to read. Dr. Savvides employs not only footnotes, but in-text citations as well, usually for primary sources. However, those in-text citations are usually directly after the name of the source cited, frequently in the middle of the sentence. This leads at times to an entire paragraph's worth of in-text citation dividing portions of a sentence and paragraph, causing the flow of the work to become disjointed and increasingly hard to follow in places. If a second edition of *The Cross and the Sacred Fire* is produced, I would highly recommend having separate endnotes for the citations found in the footnotes, and moving the in-text primary source down to become footnotes. The impact of having sentences and paragraphs disrupted by in-text citations is high enough that I would hesitate to use *The Cross and the Sacred Fire* as a text for undergraduate students with no knowledge of the Byzantine Roman or Sassanian Empires. The use of in-text

<sup>20</sup> Kaveh Farrokh was the first of the new group of historians of Ancient Iran to publish on the Sassanian military with FARROKH 2005, followed by his narrative military history of the Achaemenids, Arsacid Parthians, and the Sassanians, FARROKH 2007. He provided the first in-depth examination of the units, weaponry, tactics, and development of the Sassanians with FARROKH 2017. Katarzyna Maksymiuk provided a much-needed geographical grounding in the warfare and campaign of the Sassanians in MAKSYMUK 2015, and has collaborated with Dr. Farrokh, as well as Dr. Karamian and Dr. Svanne on Sassanian military research as well. While he approaches Sassanian warfare from a cultural standpoint, Khodadad Rezakhani has highlighted the importance of eastern Iran in the history of the Sassanians in REZAKHANI 2017 and is co-editor on an in-depth examination of Iranian warfare in *longue durée* HYLAND/REZAKHANI 2025.

citations in the Bibliographic Appendix also is problematic for the same reasons as before – it becomes hard for the reader to follow the annotations the Dr. Savvides is giving on these works. While ten pages of maps are provided at the end of the book, these are reproductions of maps found in the first edition of Colin McEvedy's ancient and medieval history atlases for Penguin. While they are reasonably accurate for the Byzantine Roman Empire, there was considerably more fluctuation in the borders of the Sassanian Empire, particularly in the East, and the boundaries given in the first edition are particularly inaccurate down to 562 CE. The best maps to show the changes in the Sassanian Empire's boundaries over the course of its existence are those found on Dr. Ian Mladjov's Resources – Historical Maps webpage. Dr. Mladjov has mapped: Sasanid Persian Empire c. 300–500, Sasanid Persian Empire c. 500–590, and Sasanid Persian Empire c. 590–628.<sup>21</sup>

Regardless of the above critiques of *The Cross and the Sacred Fire*, it is clear that Dr. Savvides has produced a labour of love in this book, borne from his study of the Sassanian Empire over the course of a fruitful academic career. Many Greek publications are not translated into English or other languages, leaving students disconnected from the scholarship being produced by Greek historians of the Byzantine or Iranian worlds. Dr. Savvides has through his quotations, and citations, provided a rich annotated bibliography of research stretching back decades that would otherwise be unavailable to students/readers unable to read Greek. The reviewer commends the publisher, Hérodotos, for publishing an English language edition of this work and hopes that they will consider publishing translations of Dr. Savvides other introductory works on the Byzantine Roman Empire in English as well. While having some areas that could be improved or expanded, Dr. Savvides has provided a needed narrative introduction to the diplomatic and military relations between the Byzantine Roman and Sassanian Empires. *The Cross and the Sacred Fire* sits easily alongside Michael Decker's recent work as an advanced introduction to the topic, one that expands on R.C. Blockley's classic *East Roman Foreign Policy*. Recommended for graduate students, recommended with caution for upper-level undergraduates.

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<sup>21</sup> MLADJOV 2025.

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