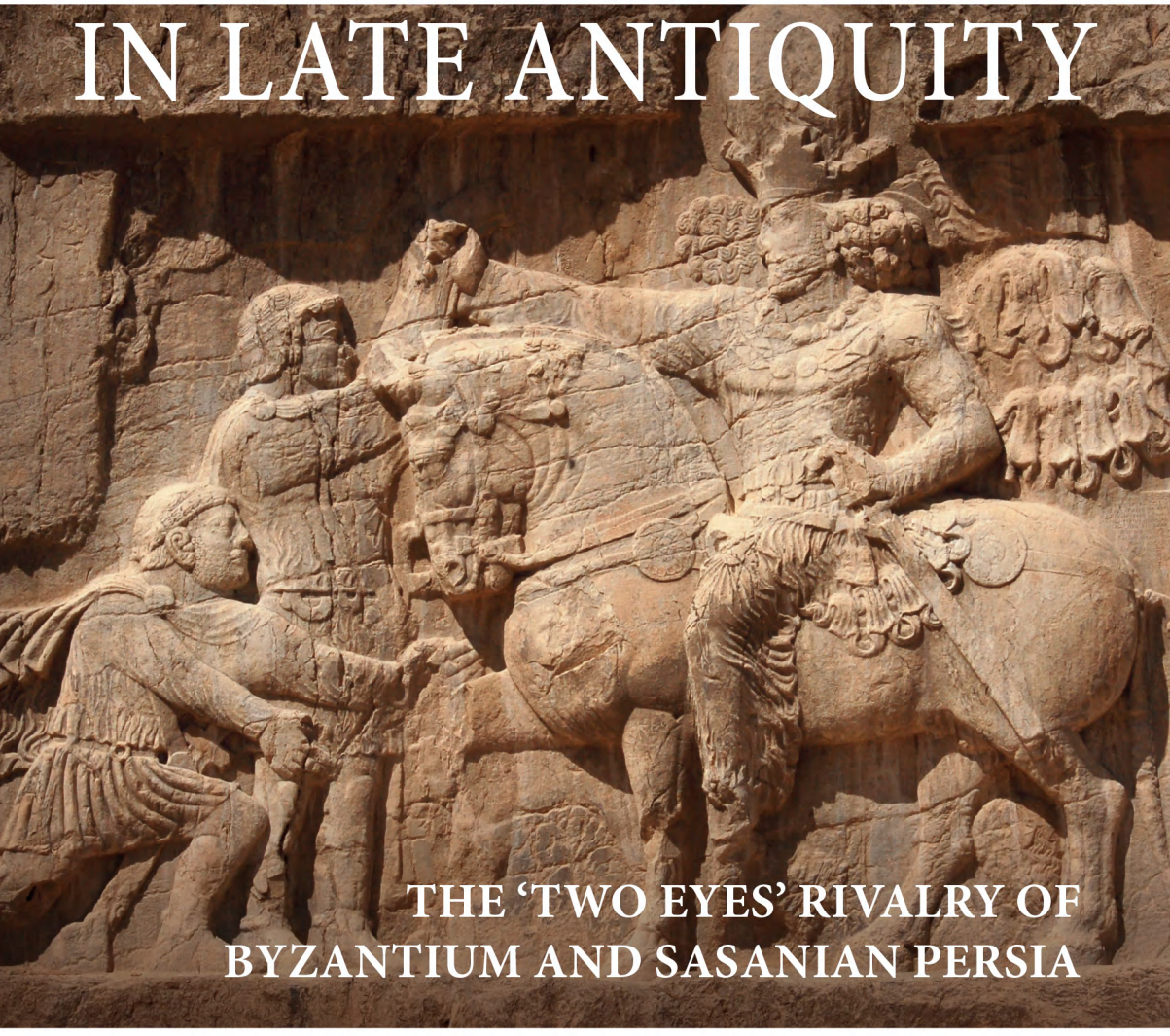
KEVIN BLACHFORD

WORLD ORDER IN LATE ANTIQUITY



THE 'TWO EYES' RIVALRY OF BYZANTIUM AND SASANIAN PERSIA

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024940234

ISBN 9780198882138

DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.001.0001

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

For my wife, Emek.

Preface

This project began as an attempt to consider historical superpower rivalries at a time when many contemporary commentators have been focused on the rising competition between the United States and China. At first, I believed a historical analogy could be made between Rome and Persia and today's modern rivalry of two great powers who both see themselves as having a special place in the world. Certainly, there are many comparisons to be made between two competing visions of world order coming into contact and shaping one another across rival spheres of influence. The human desire for power and competing imperial claims to greatness are certainly not limited to any one time period of history. But as this project developed, I also began to see how very different the world of antiquity was to our modern understandings of the 'state', the 'international', and a 'states system'. To attempt to view the world through a Roman or Sasanian perspective and to consider a world of 'peoples' and client–patron relations immediately challenges many of the most common assumptions of international relations (IR) as an academic subject. The following work therefore seeks to blur the lines between history, IR theory, and international political thought. The result of this interdisciplinary project is a conscious attempt to challenge the contemporary 'global' IR approaches within IR theory which so often project modern national histories and national understandings of territory back through time to earlier eras.[1]

This work is not intended to be a distinct work of history, and classicists may indeed challenge my approach. I have tried to be consistent with naming practices, although I do make the assumption of treating Byzantium and the East Romans as interchangeable terms. 'Byzantium' is of course in itself a term that is contentious among historians. It is used both to signify the founding of the city of Constantinople in the third century and to denote the 'rump' of the empire that remained after the Arabic invasions in the seventh century.[2]

[1] See, for a critique, Ayşe Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 8; also see Tarak Barkawi, Christopher Murray, and Ayşe Zarakol, 'The United Nations of IR: power, knowledge and empire in Global IR debates', *International Theory*, 15:3 (2023), pp. 445–461.

[2] For disputes over the term 'Byzantium', see Averil Cameron, 'Byzantium now: contested territory or excluded middle', *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 5 (2019),

I have used the term Byzantium relatively freely because I believe it signifies that there was a shift in power from the west to the east as a Mediterranean system became a Eurasian one in late antiquity. This was a long and multifaceted process of transformation. One of the difficulties of studying late antiquity is that there is no single point at which one could say that the 'Romans' became 'Byzantine'. As Anthony Kaldellis has argued, even medieval Byzantium was still 'Roman' at heart.[3] I am also presumptive in treating the Parthians and Sasanian Persians as in many ways a continuation of an Iranian empire.[4] While different rival dynasties, and with different governance structures, the Sasanian dynasty carried on and built upon long-standing Iranian traditions, as later chapters of this work will touch upon.

The aim of this work, however, is not to provide a narrative account of the history of the Roman and Persian empires. I have certainly had to be selective in my account and do not attempt to cover many of the historical events. The central aim is limited to considering how two imperial polities came to recognize and understand one another as forming a dual hierarchy, as the 'Two Eyes' at the head of a contested world order. The following work also considers this hierarchical and suzerain order not in the familiar terms of an 'international' order but as an 'inter-polity' order.[5] The very term *inter-national* depicts a modern nineteenth-century concept founded on nationalism, which, as the following work will explore, is unable to account for the imperial structures of antiquity. 'Inter-polity' is therefore an attempt to include both the web-like governance structures of pre-modern empires and their relations with nomadic confederations which are often seen as lacking the attributes of a modern 'state'.

In developing this research, I have been fortunate to work at the UK Defence Academy and have benefitted greatly from a talented range of military officers who have listened patiently in seminars to my intellectual detours to include

pp. 91–111; Averil Cameron, 'Late Antiquity and Byzantium: an identity problem', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 40:1 (2016), pp. 27–37; Paul Magdalino, 'Byzantium = Constantinople' in *A Companion to Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 43–54; Mark Whittow, 'Early medieval Byzantium and the end of the ancient world', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 9:1 (2009), pp. 134–153; Panagiotis Theodoropoulos, 'Did the Byzantines call themselves Byzantines? Elements of eastern Roman identity in the imperial discourse of the seventh century', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 45:1 (2021), pp. 25–41.

[3] Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (London: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[4] On treating these two different empires as a continuation, see Adrian Goldsworthy, *Rome and Persia: The Seven Hundred Year Rivalry* (New York: Hachette Books, 2023).

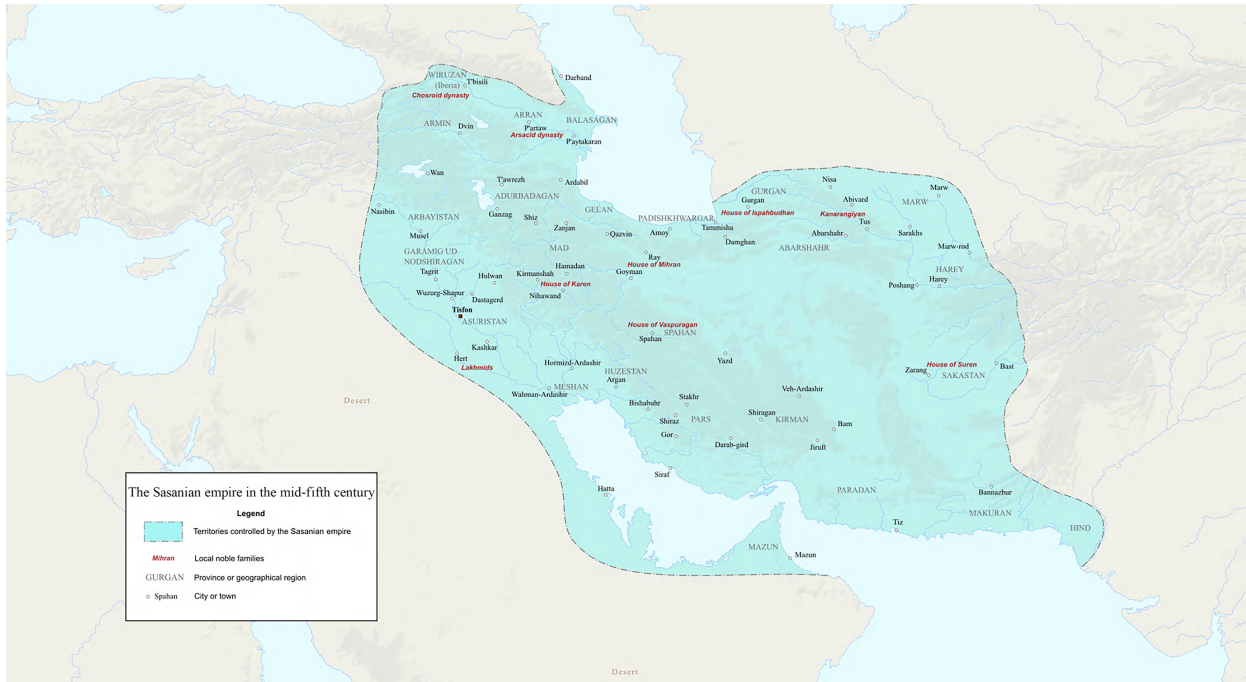
[5] On 'inter-polity' as a term to capture relations between a wide range of political entities, see Barry Buzan, *Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind across Three Eras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 9.

topics on ancient history and strategy. Their insightful comments and critiques have pushed me to consider the everyday practices which constitute geopolitical relations in a way that academics focused solely on theory may often overlook. I am also grateful to my colleagues for their encouraging words of support for this project. Encouragement from Tarak Barkawi, Jason Sharman, Yongjin Zhang, and Andrew Byers has also been invaluable at different stages of this monograph. Finally, I am grateful to the constant support of my mother, Jayne, and in particular the patience of my wife, Emek, who has been an inspiration in developing the ideas behind this work. Her love and kindness and our trips to ancient sites in Turkey inspired many writing sessions and made this work possible.

Contents

List of Maps

Map 0.1 Map of the Byzantine empire. Dimitrios Karamitros/Shutterstock



Map 0.2 The Sasanian empire in the mid-fifth century. Original file by Ro4444/licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International licence

Map 0.3 The Roman–Persian frontier in late antiquity. Cplakidas/Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported licence

Introduction

The East Romans of Byzantium and the Sasanian Persians competed as geopolitical rivals for over four centuries between 224 AD and 628 AD. Across this era of late antiquity, the rivalry between the Romans and the Persians developed from mutual recognition and stability, albeit with bouts of limited conflict, to all-out open warfare leading to the destruction of the Sasanian kingdom and a geopolitical vacuum from which the rise of Islam and the Arab conquests were born.[1] This period of late antiquity is rarely considered within the discipline of international relations (IR), but the geopolitical struggle of Byzantium and Persia presents an under-examined case study of hegemonic order and imperial rivalry.[2] In contrast to modern ideals of sovereign equality between nation states, late antiquity was defined by competing claims to universal rule over the known world. Both the Sasanian Persians and the Romans made universal claims to imperial greatness and professed a divine role in the maintenance of a stable order. As hegemonic empires, they sought to use their predominant power to order the relations of surrounding actors and through a series of intractable conflicts these two great empires would develop a dual hierarchy that sought to divide the world between them.[3] Defined by the Persian shah as the 'Two Eyes' of the Earth, these two imperial powers created a system of inter-polity order which aimed to hierarchically organize those considered as 'barbarians'.[4] Through this competitive yet intertwined relationship, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires would have a role in the construction and maintenance of a hierarchical system as the two equal centres of the world.

The Two Eyes system formed a dual hierarchical order that evolved as a response to the mass movements and turbulent change which characterized late antiquity. The rise of the Germanic kingdoms in the west of the Goths and Franks, coupled with the migrations of nomadic peoples crossing

[1] Tom Holland, *Shadow of the Sword* (London: Little, Brown, 2012).

[2] A rare exception is Hyun Jin Kim, *Geopolitics in Late Antiquity: The Fate of Superpowers from China to Rome* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[3] Hegemony can be defined as a system of vertical relations between the leading and subordinate powers. See Daniel Nexon and G. J. Ikenberry, 'Hegemony Studies 3.0: the dynamics of hegemonic orders', *Security Studies*, 28:3 (2019), p. 411; also see Andreas Antoniades, 'Hegemony and international relations', *International Politics*, 55 (2017), pp. 595–611 and Janice Bially Mattern and Ayşe Zarakol, 'Hierarchies in world politics', *International Organization*, 70:3 (2016), p. 624.

[4] Matthew P. Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 1–5.

World Order in Late Antiquity. Kevin Blachford, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/9780191991271.003.0001

vast distances from the central Asian steppe, upended the sedentary world of antiquity. The arrival of nomadic barbarians invading Europe has long been seen as a major cause of the fall of Rome and the western Roman empire.[5] But unlike in the west, the East Roman empire centred on Constantinople continued, and with its greatest rivals the Persians sought to manage these new barbarians as clients and tributaries. This period saw the emergence of a bewildering array of new political groupings as successive waves of peoples, such as the Goths, Vandals, Lombards, Avars, Huns, Hephthalites, and Gok Turks, among many others, would drastically reshape the geopolitics of late antiquity and influence the direction of peoples that would over time become the medieval kingdoms of Europe. The Two Eyes system itself would eventually break down in the seventh century and it was the semi-nomadic Arab tribes, who were former clients of the imperial powers, that would rise up and finally bring to an end to the era of antiquity.

The significance of these events within late antiquity to the study of IR might not be immediately apparent. IR as a discipline has often sought to be policy relevant, scientific in its approach, and focused firmly on the present. History prior to modernity is therefore rarely considered within the study of IR. As an academic field of enquiry, IR is centred on the study of modern nation states and their emergence with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 that ended Europe's wars of religion.[6] It is this Westphalian framework of sovereign territorial states that continues to define the dominant understanding of an inter-polity system within IR. Looking to the era of late antiquity therefore challenges many of the core assumptions found within the discipline. The bounded territorial sovereign states commonly seen as a point of reference within IR simply did not exist in late antiquity and relations between polities were explicitly hierarchic and deferential. The relevance of the following study is therefore twofold. Firstly, it can speak to historical IR as a way to expand our understanding of inter-polity relations beyond just the modern nation state, particularly in examining the client–patron relations of imperial polities and in investigating the relationship between sedentary empires and nomadic actors. Secondly, it highlights how many of our modern understandings of the 'international' are challenged by the geopolitics of pre-modern inter-polity relations. In opening up historical investigations of a great imperial rivalry outside of modern European history, this study works to broaden the range of cases for a more

[5] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Classics, [1776] 1996).

[6] Kevin Blachford, 'From Thucydides to 1648: the "missing" years in IR and the missing voices in world history', *International Studies Perspectives*, 22:4 (2021), pp. 495–508.

historically informed and global approach to the study of the rise and fall of inter-polity order.

The geopolitical struggle of Byzantium and Persia presents an under-examined case study on imperial rivalry and the structure of a diverse suzerain system. The following chapters will therefore seek to examine this imperial rivalry between Byzantium and the Sasanian in order to understand why stability emerged. How did the rivalry develop, and what kind of inter-polity order could be found in late antiquity? Finally, what lessons can we learn about historical hegemonic competition and hierarchy within IR theory? But before developing this argument, the following introduction will first outline the context of the Two Eyes system before further elaborating on the importance of pre-modern inter-polity relations for the study of IR.

What Were the Wars of Byzantium and Persia?

The 'fall' of the Roman empire was a turning point in history and a cataclysmic event that ushered in an era known as the 'Dark Ages' in which the development of progress and Western society declined into a period of petty warring successor states. At least, this is the stereotypical notion which has held sway over popular opinion. Yet, this argument rests on cliches and oversimplifications that are entirely Western-centric. Popular imagination may focus on the 'fall' of Rome, but in reality there were multiple 'falls' of Rome as the city itself was racked by a succession of military crises, sackings, and occupations across the late third to the early seventh centuries. Modern historiography has therefore focused less on the 'fall' of Rome and more on the diffusion of power across the empire as the importance of Rome as a city declined; instead, power would shift to the cities of Antioch, Milan, Alexandria, Trier, and Constantinople. This process of transformation and the decline of Rome is in itself a vast subject which many better-qualified scholars have covered elsewhere.[7] For this study, the key issue is that as power shifted away from the city of Rome, Constantinople would eventually emerge as a significant polity in its own right as the East Roman empire of Byzantium.[8]

[7] For recent examples, see Michele Renee Salzman, *The Falls of Rome: Crises, Resilience, and Resurgence in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) and Edward Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Also see Christine Delaplace, *La Fin De L'empire Romain D'occident: Rome et les Wisigoths de 382 à 531* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015); Jeroen Wijnendaele, ed., *Late Roman Italy Imperium to Regnum* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

[8] Paul Stephenson, *New Rome: The Empire in the East* (London: Profile Books, 2021).

The emergence of an East Roman empire was a slow transformational process that signified a shift in power from imperial core to the frontier. The Roman empire had first been divided into eastern and western parts by Emperor Diocletian in 286 AD in an effort to stabilize the large and unwieldy empire. Emperor Constantine the Great would then go on to found the city of Constantinople in 330 AD on the site of a Greek fishing village known as *Byzantion*. This new capital of the eastern Roman empire was the beginnings of what is commonly known today as the Greek-speaking empire of Byzantium. However, while the eastern Roman empire had a separate capital and a different language, the inhabitants of the eastern empire still saw themselves as thoroughly Roman in character and identity. They continued to build upon a Christian and classical Roman inheritance and defined themselves as *Romaioi* in Greek. Even by the medieval era, the Anatolian Turks of the eleventh century would still identify Byzantium as 'Rum', or Land of the Romans.[9] The rise of an eastern Roman polity was therefore a reflection of how power in late antiquity shifted away from the Italian peninsula and the actual city of Rome. In turning to the east, the Romans sought to gain the benefits of the trade from the far eastern silk trade and the lucrative exotic goods of India and China.[10] The rise to prominence of Constantinople and the final split between east and west Rome around 395 AD essentially created a separate East Roman imperial actor as a distinct polity with firm interests in developing relations across Eurasia.[11]

The division of the Roman empire into east and west would create different geopolitical outcomes for both regions.[12] In the west, the city of Rome faced barbarian groups who would later become Europe's medieval kingdoms, but in the east the Romans came up against another great empire, the Persians, and it would be the Persians who presented the greatest challenge to Roman power. Prior to interaction with the Persians, the Romans had become uncontested masters of the Mediterranean in a unipolar system in which *Pax Romana* reigned supreme. Ancient Rome's rivalries with Carthage and the Greek city-states are well known, and while the result of these undoubted struggles was not pre-ordained, Rome eventually emerged as the victor and

[9] Jeroen Wijnendaele, 'Apocalypse, transformation or much ado about nothing? Western scholarship and the fall of Rome (1776–2008)', *Iris: Journal of the Classical Association of Victoria*, 24 (2011), p. 44.

[10] Peter Frankopan, *Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[11] R. C. Blockley, *East Roman Frontier Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992), p. 45.

[12] Torbjorn L. Knutsen and Martin Hall, 'Rome republic, monarchy and empire' in *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations*, eds. Carvalho et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), p. 402.

by the 160s BC Rome had essentially subdued its major rivals within the Mediterranean world.[13] There was little in the Romans' geopolitical experience therefore to deal with another imperial rival 'of significant strength on a permanent basis'.[14] The initial contacts between Rome and Persia did not result in the usual Roman victory as essentially the Romans had stumbled 'blind into Babylon'. Their worldview of status gained through conquest was unprepared to realize that Iranian culture and its imperial power was just too strong and too extensive to be assimilated into the Roman political sphere.[15] As one historian notes, in the west, expanding Roman power was a sign of civilization; in the east, 'it was the Romans who were on the receiving end of civilization'.[16] The Iranians during this period of initial contact were led by the Arsacid dynasty, also known as the Parthians (250 BC–224 AD), whose power stretched from modern Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan in the east. Through a series of conflicts, both empires would face structural changes as the Romans experienced a crisis of rule in the third century, while the Parthian dynasty would succumb to an internal revolt and a new dynasty arose to rule Iran known as the Sasanian.[17] It was this new Sasanian Persian regime established in 224 AD which was able to centralize power and create an even more challenging rival to Roman claims to universal rule. The Sasanian king, known as the *Shahanshah*, proclaimed his dynastic power as 'king of kings' and this rejuvenated Persian power under Sasanian leadership was quick to launch an invasion of the East Roman empire in 230 AD. The stage was therefore set for an intense rivalry between two great imperial powers who each viewed their rule as *imperium sine fine*, as empires without end.

The rise of the Sasanian dynasty, as successors to Parthia, continued the east–west conflict with the Romans and shaped relations of late antiquity for the next four centuries. As the rivalry between the Sasanian and the East Romans evolved, the order of the Two Eyes system developed across three broad periods of conflict and contestation. The first period between 224 and 363 AD saw the rise of the House of Sasan who overthrew the previous Arsacid

[13] Nikolaus L. Overtoom, 'The rivalry of Rome and Parthia in the sources from the Augustan age to late antiquity', *Anabis*, 7 (2016), pp. 137–174. For the comparative advantage Rome had over its rivals, see Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 97.

[14] Brian Campbell, 'War and diplomacy: Rome and Parthia 31 BC–AD 235' in *War and Society in the Roman World*, eds. John Rich and Graham Shipley (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 213.

[15] Rose Mary Sheldon, *Rome's Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (London: Vallentine Mitchel & Co. Ltd, 2010), pp. 230–231.

[16] Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 499.

[17] Lukas de Blois, 'Rome and Persia in the middle of the third century' in *Rome and the Worlds Beyond Its Frontiers*, eds. Daniëlle Slootjes and M. Peachin (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 33–44.