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KING OF KINGS ARDASHIR I AS XERXES IN THE LATE ANTIQUE LATIN SOURCES

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Abstract: The last ruler of the Severan dynasty, Emperor Severus Alexander had to face an entirely new threat in Mesopotamia, because in 224 AD the Parthian royal house of the Arsacids, which had ruled in the East for nearly half a millennium, was dethroned by the Neo-Persian Sasanian dynasty and the new rulers of Persia were extremely hostile to the Roman Empire. The vast majority of the late antique Latin sources (Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Festus, Jerome, Orosius, Cassiodorus, Jordanes) call the first Sasanian monarch, Ardashir I (reigned 224–241 AD), who was at war with Rome between 231 and 233 AD, Xerxes, although the Greek equivalent of the Middle Persian name Ardashir is Artaxerxes, as used by the Greek sources. In the Latin textual tradition we can find the correct Greek name of Ardashir only in the *Historia Augusta*. The paper seeks answers to the question of why Ardashir was usually called Xerxes by late antique Latin sources.

Keywords: King of Kings Ardashir I, Sasanian (Neo-Persian) Empire, Roman-Persian wars, late antique *breviaria* and chronicles, imperial propaganda, King of Kings Xerxes

At the beginning of the 3rd century, Ardashir, vassal king of Persis and the grandson of Sasan, a high priest from the temple of Anahita in Istakhr, took advantage of the fraternal war in the Parthian Empire fought between Artabanos IV and Vologeses VI and organized a revolt against the rival Parthian monarchs. In April 224 AD, the rebel, who was supported by the Inner Persian territories, fought the decisive battle of the war at Hormozdgan against the troops of Artabanos IV and Ardashir won a glorious victory over his enemy. After the battle – according to al-Tabari’s tradition – the triumphant trampled the head of the slain Parthian despot into the muddy ground and assumed the title of King of Kings.¹ A few years later Ardashir also defeated Vologeses VI, the brother of Artabanos IV and became the first monarch of the Sasanian (Neo-Persian) Empire, which borders extended from the Indus to the Euphrates.²

¹ al-Tabari, *Tarikh* 818–819. (Ardashir became *šāhānšāh*, *rex regum*.)

² Daryaei 2009, 2–4; Dodgeon 1994, 8–13; Frye 2005, 464–467; Ghirshman 1985, 262–263; Solyom 2021, 94–96.

After 228 AD, Ardashir turned his troops westwards and launched several campaigns against the Asian provinces of the Roman Empire ruled by Emperor Severus Alexander. Of these early Roman-Sasanian clashes, the war between 231 and 233 AD was by far the most significant,³ as reported by several Greek and Latin sources. It should be emphasized, that these texts never use the Middle Persian name Ardashir in connection with the first Sasanian ruler, but refer to the King of Kings by his Greek name. As long as however the Greek historians (Cassius Dio, Herodian, Agathias, Zonaras) use the correct form, Artaxerxes⁴ for Ardashir,⁵ the Latin historical works usually call the Persian monarch mistakenly Xerxes. Let's examine the ominous Latin sources one by one in chronological order!

Around 361 AD, the governor of Pannonia Secunda, Aurelius Victor wrote the following about the Roman-Sasanian clashes between 231 and 233 AD in his *breuiarium* entitled *Liber de Caesaribus*:

“Straightway the power of Augustus was conferred upon Aurelius Alexander,⁶ who was born in Syria in the town with the double name Caesarea and Arce, with the support also of the soldiers. He, although a young man, nevertheless possessed an intellect beyond his age, and he immediately made large-scale preparations and commenced a war against Xerxes, king of the Persians. After the latter had been defeated and put to flight Alexander very quickly marched into Gaul...” (Aur. Vict., Caes. 24,1–2. – Bird, Harold W. transl.)⁷

Around 369 AD, the *breuiarium* of Eutropius (*Breuiarium ab Urbe condita*) summarized the war between Ardashir and Severus Alexander even more succinctly than the work of Aurelius Victor. The connection between the two Latin narratives from the 360s AD is that both Victor and Eutropius call the first Sasanian ruler Xerxes:

“Aurelius Alexander succeeded him, a very young man, who was designated Caesar by the army, Augustus by the senate. He undertook a war against the Persians and defeated their king, Xerxes, with great glory.” (Eutr., 8,23. – Bird, Harold W. transl.)⁸

³ McHugh 2017, 176–220.

⁴ Schmitt 1986, 654–655. “Artaxerxes”

⁵ Dio, 80,3,2; Herod., 6,2,7; Agath., *Hist.* 4,24,1; Zon., 12,15.

However Georgios Pisides, a Greek *auctor* from the 7th century, calls Ardashir Artaser. (Georg. Pisid., *Heracl.* 2,173–177.)

⁶ After 14 March 222 AD, Emperor Severus Alexander's full imperial titulature was “Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander Pius Felix Augustus”. (Kienast 2017, 171.)

⁷ “Statimque Aurelio Alexandro Syriae orto, cui duplex Caesarea et Arce nomen est, militibus quoque amittentibus Augusti potentia delata. Qui quamquam adolescens, ingenio supra aevum tamen confestim apparatu magno bellum adversum Xerxem, Persarum regem, movet; quo fuso fugatoque in Galliam maturrime contendit...”

⁸ “Successit huic Aurelius Alexander, ab exercitu Caesar, a senatu Augustus nominatus, invenis admodum, susceptoque adversus Persas bello Xerxen, eorum regem, gloriosissime vicit.”

Around 370 AD, Festus replaced Eutropius in the court position of *magister memoriae* in Constantinople and – like his predecessor – wrote a *breviarium* dedicated to Emperor Valens (*Breviarium rerum gestarum populi Romani*). The historical work – like the texts of Aurelius Victor and Eutropius – briefly discusses the Roman-Sasanian wars and also calls King of Kings Ardashir Xerxes:

“Aurelius Alexander, born as if by some destiny for the destruction of the Persian race, took the helm of the Roman imperium while still a youth. He gloriously conquered Xerxes, noblest king of the Persians.” (Fest., 22,1. – Banchich, Thomas M. and Meka, Jennifer A. transl.)⁹

Around 380 AD, the translator of the *Vulgata*, Hieronymus (St. Jerome) completed his chronicle, which was a fundamental work during the Middle Ages. Although this historical *opus* is concise too, it also reports on the war between the Persians and Emperor Severus Alexander. The name of Ardashir in Hieronymus’ chronicle is Xerxes:

“Alexander most gloriously defeated Xerxes, king of the Persians.” (Hieron., Chron. Ann. Abr. 2239. – Pearse, Roger transl.)¹⁰

Around 417 AD, the Hispanic priest Orosius encouraged by Augustinus (St. Augustine) wrote his historical work from the creation of the world to his own time (*Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*). The large-scale Christian work refers only in one sentence to the Roman-Sasanian wars of the 230s AD and – like the *breviaria* of the 4th century and the chronicle of Hieronymus – calls the first Sasanian monarch Xerxes:

“Alexander at once launched an expedition against the Persians and defeated their king, Xerxes, in a great battle.” (Oros., 7,18,7. – Fear, Andrew T. transl.)¹¹

⁹ “Aurelius Alexander, quasi fato quodam in exitium Persicae gentis renatus, iuuenis admodum Romani gubernacula suscepit imperii. Ipse Persarum regem nobilissimum Xersem gloriose uicit.”

¹⁰ “Alexander Xerxem regem Persarum gloriosissime uicit...”

Hieronymus first translated Eusebius’ Greek *Chronicle* into Latin, second supplemented the work with his own information, third extended it until his age, 379 AD. The *Chronicle* of Eusebius has survived entirely only through an Armenian translation, but in this version – according to the German translation of Josef Karst – there is only one sentence about the reign of Severus Alexander, the line about the assassination of the emperor in Mainz: “Alexandros ward getötet zu Mogontiakon.” (Euseb., *Chron. Ann. Abr.* 2252)

Hieronymus’ text on the Roman-Persian clashes of the 230s AD is copied without change by the 5th-century *Chronicle* of Prosper Tiro Aquitanus, so the name Xerxes can also be found in the first half of Prosper’s work (*Epitome Hieronymi*).

¹¹ “Nam statim expeditione in Persas facta Xerxen regem eorum maximo bello uictor oppressit.”

The chronicle of Cassiodorus was written around 520 AD. The *magister officiorum* of Theoderic the Great's Ostrogothic court in Ravenna writes only briefly about the Roman-Persian clashes of the 230s AD, and – like the examples so far – refers to King of Kings Ardashir as Xerxes:

“Under these consuls Alexander defeated Xerxes, king of the Persians.” (Cass., Chron. 914. – Procee, Bouke transl.)¹²

Around 552 AD, the Gothic historian, Iordanes finished his historical work, *Romana (Liber de origine mundi et actibus Romanorum ceterarumque gentium)* in Constantinople. The source reports not only on the defeat of the first Sasanian ruler called Xerxes, but also on the post-war triumphal procession of Emperor Severus Alexander:

“Alexander, the son of Mama, ¹³ coming from low fortune, took control of the state while still young and soon, taking up arms against Xerxes, king of the Persians, triumphed magnificently with the spoils of the Parthians.” (Iord., Romana 280. – Regan, Brian T. transl.)¹⁴

What is the reason behind the phenomenon that all the mentioned late antique Latin historical works erroneously call the first Neo-Persian monarch Xerxes, instead of Artaxerxes? Is it a simple mistake, or a deliberate error?

In 1884, a German ancient historian, Alexander Enmann set up a hypothesis after realizing that late antique Latin historical works contain many analogous data and even analogous errors and mistakes, although the studied *auctores* could not use each other as a source. The historian hypothesized that Aurelius Victor's *Liber de Caesaribus*, Eutropius' *Breviarium ab Urbe condita*, Festus' *Breviarium rerum gestarum populi Romani*, the *Scriptores historiae Augustae* and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* drew their information from a 4th-century imperial biography of unknown title and this supposed common source stands behind the similarities found in the aforementioned historical works.¹⁵ The German researcher entitled the totally lost biography as *Kaisergeschichte* (Imperial history),¹⁶ as to the modern historiography, it usually refers to the hypothetical work as *Enmann's Kaisergeschichte* (EKG), however we have to note that many historians, for example Willem den Boer,¹⁷ deny the existence of this supposed source. Thus, if King of Kings

¹² “His cons. Alexander Xerxem regem Persarum vicit.”

¹³ Iulia Avita Mamaea (Kienast 2017, 174.)

¹⁴ “Alexander Mamae filius ignobilis fortunae existens adhuc iuvenis regni moderatione suscepit moxque contra Xersen regem Persarum arma arripiens mirabiliter de Parthorum spoliis triumphavit.”

¹⁵ Enmann 1884, 337–501; Burgess 2003, 166–192; Rohrbacher 2002, 44–45; Schlumberger 1974, 172–182.

¹⁶ Enmann 1884, 337–501.

¹⁷ den Boer 1972, 21–22.

Ardashir's wrong name is just a simple involuntary mistake in the late antique Latin historical works, then that error must be rooted in *Enmann's Kaisergeschichte*. However, in the light of the *Historia Augusta's* text, I think the possibility of an involuntary mistake is less likely, because this collection of imperial biographies mentions the correct Greek name of Emperor Severus Alexander's Neo-Persian opponent, which is a very unique way compared to the other late antique texts that use the *Kaisergeschichte* as a source:

“And so, having set out from there against the Persians with a great array, he [Severus Alexander] defeated Artaxerxes, a most powerful king. In this battle he himself commanded the flanks, urged on the soldiers, exposed himself constantly to missiles, performed many brave deeds with his own hand, and by his words encouraged individual soldiers to praiseworthy actions. At last he routed and put to flight this great king, who had come to the war with seven hundred elephants, eighteen hundred scythed chariots, and many thousand horsemen.” (SHA Severus Alexander 55. – Magie, David transl.)¹⁸

Furthermore, what is striking is that while the Latin sources report without exception on a glorious Roman victory in connection with the Roman-Sasanian wars of 231–233 AD,¹⁹ the lines of a contemporary Greek source, Herodian's history put the outcome of the war in a different light:²⁰

“But no sooner had Alexander made this calculation than dispatch-carriers and their communiques demoralized him and threw him in a greater state of anxiety. The message from the governors in Illyria was that the Germans were on the march across the Rhine and Danube, devastating the Roman Empire, over-running the garrisons on the river banks, and also the cities and villages, with a large force and putting the Illyrians who bordered Italy as neighbours in considerable danger. Therefore, they said, the presence of Alexander and the entire army he had with him was essential. This news dismayed Alexander and caused distress to the soldiers transferred from Illyricum. They felt they had suffered a double tragedy, first in their misfortunes of the Persian war and then in the reports they received individually about the destruction of their families by the Germans. They turned their anger on Alexander, blaming him for his betrayal of their cause in the East through his negligence

¹⁸ “Magno igitur apparatu inde in Persas profectus Artaxerxen regem potentissimum vicit, cum ipse cornua obiret, milites admoneret, subiectus telis versaretur, manu plurimum faceret, singulos quosque milites ad laudem verbis adduceret. Fuso denique fugatoque tanto rege, qui cum septingentis elephantis falcatisque mille et octingentis curribus ad bellum venerat et equitum multis milibus.”

¹⁹ The *Historia Augusta* even tells the fictive victory speeches of Emperor Severus Alexander. (SHA Severus Alexander 56–57.)

²⁰ Kemezis' commentary also states that the outcome of the Roman-Persian war in Herodian's narrative is a complete failure due to the acts of Emperor Severus Alexander: “The soldiers will mostly do their jobs, and the Persians will be at a disadvantage, but Alexander himself will fail miserably and cause the ruin of the expedition. (6.5.5–10)” (Kemezis 2014, 255.)

or cowardice and his hesitant procrastination over the northern crisis.” (Herod., 6,7,2–3. – Whittaker, C. R. transl.)²¹

It should be emphasized, therefore, that in contrast to the victory propaganda of the late antique Latin sources, a contemporary source, Herodian’s history is the most authentic narrative of the Roman-Sasanian clashes between 231 and 233 AD, and Herodian considers the war of Severus Alexander completely unsuccessful: the Greek *auctor* reports on minor victories and great defeats, highlights furthermore that the emperor has lost territories in the East.²² The late antique Latin sources thus tell a propaganda narrative of the first large-scale Roman-Sasanian clash. Can the false Greek name of King of Kings Ardashir in the aforementioned sources also be imperial propaganda? I think this is clearly the case.

Besides other sources, we know from al-Tabari’s historical work²³ that the Sasanian dynasty’s royal propaganda depicted the Kings of Kings of the Achaemenid dynasty, who ruled Persia between 559 and 330 BC, as blood-related ancestors of the Neo-Persian monarchs, so Ardashir’s court canon represented the once lived ancient Persian monarchs, Cyrus the Great, Cambyses, Darius, Xerxes and Darius III, who had been defeated by Alexander the Great, as the forefathers of the ruling *šāhānšāh*. Because of the aforementioned relation of the Neo-Persians to the ancient Persians and the created continuity between the Achaemenids and the Sasanians, Ardashir and his descendants placed the ancient Persian tradition and the Zoroastrian religion (Mazdaism) at the center of the Sasanian Empire’s daily life. They also wanted to resurrect the Achaemenid Empire and this aspiration was the reason behind the extremely aggressive Sasanian foreign policy towards the Roman Empire.²⁴

²¹ “αἰφνιδίως ἄγγελοι τε καὶ γράμματα ἐτάραξε τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον καὶ ἐς μείζονα φροντίδα ἐνέβαλεν, ἐπιστειλάντων αὐτῷ τῶν ἐμπεπιστευμένων τὴν Ἰλλυρίδος ἡγεμονίαν ὅτι ἄρα Γερμανοὶ Ῥῆνον καὶ Ἰστρον διαβαίνοντες τὴν Ῥωμαίων πορθοῦσιν ἀρχὴν καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ ταῖς ὄχθαις στρατόπεδα ἐπικείμενα πόλεις τε καὶ κόμας πολλῇ δυνάμει κατατρέχουσιν, εἴη τε οὐκ ἐν ὀλίγῳ κινδύνῳ τὰ Ἰλλυρικὰ ἔθνη ὁμοροῦντα καὶ γεινιῶντα Ἰταλία: δεῖσθαι τοίνυν τῆς αὐτοῦ παρουσίας καὶ τοῦ στρατοῦ παντὸς ὃς ἦν σὺν αὐτῷ. δηλωθέντα δὴ ταῦτα τὸν τε Ἀλέξανδρον ἐτάραξε καὶ τοὺς ἐκ τοῦ Ἰλλυρικοῦ στρατιώτας ἐλύπησε, διπλῆ δοκοῦντας κεχρηῆσθαι συμφορᾷ, ἕκ τε ὧν πεπόνθησαν Πέρσαις μαχόμενοι, ἕκ τε ὧν ἐπυνθάνοντο τοὺς οικείους ἕκαστοι ὑπὸ Γερμανῶν ἀπολωλότας, ἡγανάκτουν οὖν, καὶ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον εἶχον ἐν αἰτίᾳ ὡς τὰ ὑπὸ ταῖς ἀνατολαῖς δι’ ἀμέλειαν ἢ δειλίαν προδεδοκῶτα, πρὸς τε τὰ ἀρκτῶα μέλλοντα καὶ ὀκνοῦντα.”

²² Karl Hönn’s *vita Severi Alexandri* commentary already states that the most authentic source of the Roman-Persian war between 231 and 233 AD is not the *Historia Augusta* but Herodian. (Hönn 1911, 60–61.)

²³ Besides the Persian al-Tabari, who wrote his historical work in the beginning of the 10th century, other Iranian sources also mention that the rulers of the Sasanian dynasty regarded the Achaemenid Kings of Kings as their ancestors. In this regard, see Shahbazi 2001, 61–73.

²⁴ al-Tabari, *Tarikh* 813–814. “Ardashir, son of Babak [Papak] Shah, King of Khir, son of the younger Sasan [...] seeking, as he alleged, to avenge the blood of his paternal ancestor, Dara [Darius III], son of Dara on whom Isfandiyar [Alexander the Great] had made war and had killed

When the Greek and Roman sources write directly about the *origo* of the first Sasanian monarch, contrary to al-Tabari's text, they don't trace back the origin of Ardashir to the Achaemenid dynasty,²⁵ but report on the low birth of the King of King's closest paternal relatives. It is also worth noting that Western sources portray Papak as Ardashir's stepfather and Sasan as the King of Kings' real father, but this information is embedded in a propagandistic, false story, because Roman historians sought to tarnish the reputation of Rome's ancient enemy, the Sasanian dynasty. According to Agathias, a historian from the 6th century, a common soldier, Sasan fathered Ardashir, after the King of King's stepfather, Papak, who was a childless Persian leatherworker well versed in astrology and foresight, handed over his marriage bed and his wife to Sasan, who came to visit him as a wanderer.²⁶ The historian Synkellos, who composed at the beginning of the 9th century, tells the story of Agathias about the origin of the Neo-Persian Sasanian dynasty with minor modifications, and calls Ardashir an ignoble Persian mage of unknown origin.²⁷ The Greek and Roman sources thus sought to refute the propaganda of the Sasanian dynasty about the bright *origo* of Ardashir. However, when Western *auctores* write about Severus Alexander's Mesopotamian campaign and victories, when the Latin historians report on the Eastern successes of Rome during the 230s AD, they take over the Persian royal propaganda and the first Sasanian monarch appears between the lines as the Achaemenid Xerxes, the King of Kings, who once posed an extremely great threat to the Hellenic world. Thus, Emperor Severus Alexander's enemy, Ardashir is called

two of the latter's chief commanders. As he said, he wished to recover the royal power for its rightful holders and for those who had held it continuously in the previous time of his predecessors and forefathers, before the «Party Kings» and wished to gather it together again under one head and one monarch." (Bosworth, C. E. and Hahn, István transl.)

²⁵ However, there are indirect references to the Persian narrative, first of all Cassius Dio (Dio 80,4,1.) and Herodian (Herod., 6,2,1–2.) from the 3rd century, then Libanios (Lib., *Orat.* 59,65.) and Ammianus Marcellinus (Amm., 15,5,3–10.) from the 4th century, finally Zonaras (Zon., 12,5.) from the 12th century.

²⁶ Agath., *Hist.* 2,27,1–5. However, the relations of Ardashir's closest relatives are not always as clear in the Eastern sources as we can read in al-Tabari's work. According to Firdausi's *Shahname* (*Book of kings*), a historical work from the 11th century, Sasan was the father of Ardashir, while the daughter of Papak, Sasan's wife was the mother of the first Sasanian ruler. The *Shahname*'s story thus gives a kind of mixture of Agathias' and al-Tabari's narratives. On the other hand, the stone inscriptions of King of Kings Shapur I (reigned 241–272 AD), son of Ardashir leave the Papak-Ardashir-Shapur lineage for posterity and Sasan's name is mentioned only incidentally. (According to these 3rd-century inscriptions the name of Ardashir's mother is Rudak.) The Middle Persian *Bundahishn* depicts Papak as the father of Ardashir, while Sasan is Papak's father-in-law and Ardashir's maternal grandfather in this source. (Frye 2005, 464.) I think the information of the *Bundahishn* may be the closest to reality, but we cannot rule out the possibility that Sasan is just a mythical ancestor.

²⁷ Sync., *CSHB* pp. 677,11–678,7. (In Synkellos' text Papak's name is Pambekos, who is a shoemaker well versed in astrology.)

Xerxes in the late antique Latin sources for propagandistic reasons, because Xerxes was the toughest Achaemenid opponent of that Greek civilization, which is regarded by the Latin *auctores* as Rome's model and forerunner in a cultural sense.²⁸

In connection with the problem it is also necessary to talk about the phenomenon of *imitatio Alexandri*, the Roman reception of King Alexander III's figure. Alexander the Great, the legendary ruler, who overthrew the Achaemenid Empire, from the 1st century BC to the 4th century AD, from the time of Pompeius Magnus to the reign of Emperor Iulian, was considered an exemplar for the Roman emperors,²⁹ so on the one hand the idealized figure of the good *imperator* fused with the memory of the Macedonian conqueror, on the other hand Persia became synonymous with the "great opponent" due to the phenomenon of *imitatio Alexandri*. Dozens of Roman emperors tried to imitate and even surpass the Eastern campaign of Alexander the Great and the deeds of the Macedonian phalanxes, but the figure of the Macedonian monarch influenced the Emperors' portraits and numismatic iconography as well, so not only the generalship of the conqueror was admired and idealized during the Roman imperial period, but also his appearance.³⁰ The phenomenon of *imitatio Alexandri* increased even more during the Severan dynasty,³¹ Severus Alexander's name, Alexander is for example just a changed name, which refers to Alexander the Great, since the young *imperator* was originally called Alexianus. The last Severan emperor was the only Roman ruler, who bore the name of the Macedonian king.³² The young monarch thus fought his Eastern war with Ardashir as Alexander the Great according to his royal propaganda, but it is interesting that the Sassanid opponent was not Darius III, but Xerxes in the Roman interpretation of the conflict.

In late antiquity, defeating a Xerxes was certainly a greater glory than triumphing over an Artaxerxes or a Darius. The Achaemenid Xerxes owed his dubious reputation in Western sources to his great European campaign of 480 BC, during which – as the father of history, Herodotus writes in his work – he sacked and burned down

²⁸ As the famous lines of Horace say: "Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium." / "*Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latio.*" (Hor., *Epist.* 2,1,156–157. – Fairclough, H. Rushton transl.)

²⁹ Kühnen 2005, 7–13; Nabel 2018, 208–212.

³⁰ Kovacs 2015, 47–84.

³¹ Kemezis 2014, 76–78; Kühnen 2005, 203–226. The *Epitome de Caesaribus* writes about Emperor Caracalla as follows: "After he viewed the body of Alexander of Macedon, he ordered himself to be called 'the Great' and 'Alexander', having been drawn by the intrigues of flatterers to the point that, with fierce expression and neck turned toward his left shoulder (which he had noted in Alexander's face), he reached the point of conviction and persuaded himself that he was of very similar countenance." (*Epit. de Caes.* 21.4. – Banchich, Thomas M. transl.)

³² Dio 80,17,2–3; Herod., 5,7,3; *SHA Severus Alexander* 5–13.

Athens.³³ Even 800–1000 years later several late antique sources commemorate the tragic Persian attack on Athens and the formidable army of the Persian despot, so we can find shorter or longer references to the Greco-Persian war of 480 BC in the *Chronicle* of Hieronymus (St. Jerome),³⁴ in an *oratio* of Libanios,³⁵ in Ammianus Marcellinus' large-scale *Res Gestae*,³⁶ in Claudius Claudianus' invective against Rufinus,³⁷ in priest Orosius' historical work,³⁸ in Vegetius' military-themed treatise,³⁹ in a *panegyricus* of Sidonius Apollinaris,⁴⁰ in Zosimos' history,⁴¹ in Iordanes' *Getica*⁴² and in Agathias' *opus* from the late 6th century.⁴³ The Achaemenid Xerxes was considered Europe's most dangerous enemy ever by the late antique historians.

When the Latin *auctors* of the 4th–6th century, Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Festus, Hieronymus, Orosius, Cassiodorus and Iordanes narrate the victory of Emperor Severus Alexander over Xerxes (Ardashir), they actually take a revenge on the Sasanian Empire for the Persian sack of Athens in 480 BC. The quoted passages are excellent examples of the late antique imperial propaganda: the aforementioned *auctors* not only falsify the name of the enemy's King of Kings in order to increase Rome's *nimbus*, but they also depict the failed campaign of the 230s AD as a great success. This historical attitude is well illustrated by the lines of Festus' *breuiarium* to Emperor Valens:

“In a few, you will discover the enemy, as a result of stealth, to have rejoiced; however, you will judge the Romans always to have been revealed victors as a result of genuine courage.” (Fest., 15,1. – Banchich, Thomas M. and Meka, Jennifer A. transl.)⁴⁴

³³ Hdt., 8,51–53.

³⁴ Hieron., *Chron. Ann. Abr.* 1536–1538.

³⁵ Lib., *Orat.* 59,51. and 59.65.

³⁶ Amm., 23,3. and 23.6.

³⁷ Claud., *In Ruf.* 2,120–124.

³⁸ Oros., 2,9–11. (Orosius' work gives the longest late antique narrative of Xerxes' campaign. Besides the sack of Athens, the source also reports on the battles of Thermopylae, Salamis and Plataia. However, the numbers of the Persian army are exaggerated in the work, because the Christian priest writes about 1 million hostile soldiers.)

³⁹ Veg., *Epit.* 3,1.

⁴⁰ Sid. Apoll., *Carm.* 5,452–455.

⁴¹ Zos., 1,2. (Zosimos was the last pagan historian. His work gives the longest late antique Greek narrative of Xerxes' campaign, which is a more accurate, more precise summary than the text of Orosius.)

⁴² Iord., *Get.* 64. (Orosius' text was the source of Iordanes' work, but according to the Gothic historian, Xerxes didn't attack Athens with his 1 million soldiers, but the Goths.)

⁴³ Agath., *Hist.* 5,19,1. (According to Agathias, in the time of Emperor Iustinian, Belisarius' soldiers fought as bravely against the Sasanians as the hoplites of Leonidas at Thermopylae.)

⁴⁴ “*Furto hostes in paucis inuenies esse laetatos, uera autem uirtute semper Romanos probabis exstitisse uictores.*”

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