

Ehsan KHONSARINEJAD\* (Iran)

Sorour KHORASHADI\*\* (University of Tarbiat Modares, Tehran, Iran)

## King Peroz's last stand: Assessing Procopius's account of the Hephthalite-Sasanian War of 484

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2021.10.03>

**Abstract:** *In Procopius's account of the Hephthalite-Sasanian War of 484, the Sasanian defeat is attributed to an overextended and camouflaged ditch. Over the time, some other ancient historians have retold these events with alternative and occasionally controversial details. The authors have found these narratives problematic, and based on ancient military and historical facts have questioned the historicity of the ditch story. The authors propose that the Sasanian army was either ambushed or was soundly defeated in a pitched battle. As a result, the battle survivors and the Sasanian state may have spread disinformation about the deadly ditch for lifting the lost prestige of their military machine and to keep the empire intact as its very foundation was already shaken.*

**Key words:** Procopius; Sasanians; Hephthalites; Peroz; *Spāh*

### Introduction

The authors have conducted this research in order to assess Procopius's account of the Hephthalite-Sasanian War of 484. This is a fundamental research and a historical study in terms of classification and method. The authors have also used the library research method with a descriptive-critical-analytical approach.

Since the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., mainland Iranian states faced ever escalating threats from the steppe armies. Cimmerians are the first known of the steppe stock that invaded Iranian states.<sup>1</sup> In the following centuries, governments that controlled Iranian territories fought other nomadic people such as Scythians, Kushans, Huns, various Turkic tribes and Mongols.<sup>2</sup> The timeline of the nomadic incursions shows that every time a threat was neutralized, the same people or other tribes would eventually resume

---

\* ORCID iD 0000-0001-6452-0038. ehkh70@yahoo.com

\*\* ORCID iD 0000-0002-2085-5968. s.khorashadi@modares.ac.ir; Assistant Professor of Archaeology, Department of Archaeology.

<sup>1</sup> KRISTENSEN, 1988: 92-131.

<sup>2</sup> GROUSSET, 1970: 8-10, 29-32, 67-70, 82-89, 141-170, 179-182, 236-247, 259-264, 426-435, 481-488.

hostilities. Even if a tribe or confederation succeeded in occupying Iranian territories, it was vulnerable to raid and invasion by other nomadic tribes.

Although the steppe warriors reigned over Eurasia for thirteen centuries, they could still be stopped by military means, especially by the nations that introduced or adopted superior military technologies. Indeed, it was artillery that finally marked the end of the superiority of mounted archers of the steppe.<sup>3</sup> The expansionist Sasanians were also usually keen on keeping their military machine updated with the advent of new technologies. There are a number of military reforms that appear to have been adopted as a result of the failures against the Hephthalites. A part of these reforms was the adoption of new military equipment.<sup>4</sup> Contact with the Hephthalites may be seen with aspects of the Sarmatian swords being integrated by the Sasanians. One of these is the curving hilt that may be seen on the sword that has a short, asymmetrical hilt with no pommel on the plate from Nizhne Shakharovka.<sup>5</sup> The Sasanians may have adopted the two-point sword suspension system (aka lappet or P-shaped mounts system) after their encounters with the Hephthalites and stop using the scabbard slide as a result.<sup>6</sup> This suspension system was later also used for bows and quivers after the reforms implemented in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Following these reforms, Sasanian bows acquired more Hun-Avar type features such as shorter ears, longer and perhaps wider limbs.<sup>8</sup> Farrokh believes that the super-heavy cavalry concept was abandoned because of their poor performance against the Hephthalites in the 480s. This meant that the armor for both rider and horse was generally reduced. According to Farrokh, super-heavy cavalry was eventually replaced with the ‘composite’ cavalry that was proficient in both archery and lance combat.<sup>9</sup>

Peroz (r. 459-484 A.D.) launched three campaigns against the Hephthalites and all had catastrophic results. These setbacks were extremely costly for the Sasanian state. After the first war, Emperor Zenon paid an enormous ransom because the Eastern Roman Empire and the Sasanians had an agreement. But Peroz was forced to muster and pay the second war reparations, which he could barely afford.<sup>10</sup> The second campaign is not described by Procopius but according to the author of the Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua (probably written shortly after the end of the Anastasian War in 506 A.D.), “his [Peroz’s] entire army was routed and put to flight, and he himself captured alive”, which may point to a pitched battle or an ambush as the cause of the Sasanian defeat in the second war (476-77 A.D.).<sup>11</sup> The first campaign

---

<sup>3</sup> GROUSSET, 1970: 625.

<sup>4</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 23, 37, 194, 294.

<sup>5</sup> MASIA, 2000: 212, 215-126, 225, 278.

<sup>6</sup> TROUSDALE, 1975: 94-96; GUNTER & JETT, 1992: 217-218.

<sup>7</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 65.

<sup>8</sup> KHORASANI, 2006: 291.

<sup>9</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 72, 104-105, 195, 197, 203-204.

<sup>10</sup> Yeshu’ the Stylite, 8-11; KURBANOV, 2010: 165-167; MAKSYMIUK, 2016: 151.

<sup>11</sup> Yeshu’ the Stylite, 10.

(474-75 A.D.), has many resemblances to the third. Procopius's narrative of the third war has been called into question on account of its similarity to Herodotus's description of the resistance of the people of Phocis to the Thessalians (480 B.C.) and foreshadowing Belisarius's use of ditches at the battle of Dara (530 A.D.).<sup>12</sup> Kaldellis has also pointed to the parallels between this part of Procopius's Wars and Herodotus's account of Darius's disastrous expedition against the Scythians (513 B.C.).<sup>13</sup> In the first war, the army of Peroz was lured into a deep gorge at the end of which there was a dead end. The bulk of the Hephthalites were hidden in ambush while the Sasanians pursued a small band that feigned retreat on the road leading to the valley tin. One of the entourage, the Eastern Roman ambassador Eusebius, warned Peroz about the trap and the army came to a halt. But it was too late as the escape route was cut off by the ambush. Thus, the Sasanian army had been locked in the valley and surrendered to the Hephthalites.<sup>14</sup> According to Procopius (c. 500- c. 565 A.D.), Eusebius told a fable to Peroz in order to persuade the king to stop advancing further:

He began with a fable, telling how a lion once happened upon a goat bound down and bleating on a mound of no very great height, and how the lion, bent upon making a feast of the goat, rushed forward with intent to seize him, but fell into a trench exceedingly deep, in which was a circular path, narrow and endless (for it had no outlet anywhere), which indeed the owners of the goat had constructed for this very purpose, and they had placed the goat above it to be a bait for the lion.<sup>15</sup>

There are four elements in this fable that match those of the third war (the second war in Procopius's account). The lion is the Sasanian army, the goat stands for the retreating band (although this time the goat is bound and not luring the lion into the trap), the owners of the goat are a metaphor for the Hephthalite command and the deep trench is the deadly ditch itself. Regardless of this fable, Peroz is described as an incompetent and ignorant army leader in the historical accounts who does not learn from his first blunder and falls twice for the same trick. To make matters worse, he is portrayed as more cautious in the first war. In Procopius's account, he orders the *Spāh* (army in Middle Persian)<sup>16</sup> to stop after that he is warned by Eusebius: "He therefore advanced no further, but, remaining where he was, began to consider the situation".<sup>17</sup> But in the third war, he gallops to his death by falling into the ditch and his entire army and entourage follow him as well. The authors note that

---

<sup>12</sup> GREATREX, 1994: 63

<sup>13</sup> KALDELLIS, 2004: 71.

<sup>14</sup> KURBANOV, 2010: 165.

<sup>15</sup> Procopius, I 3. 13.

<sup>16</sup> SHAPUR SHAHBAZI, 1986: 494.

<sup>17</sup> Procopius, I 3. 14-15.

this issue contradicts the standard Sasanian military policies and practices. According to contemporary literary sources, these were usually very sophisticated as the king and his council planned campaigns carefully before embarking on any expedition. First of all, they formed objectives to achieve after which they analyzed what would be the best way to achieve these.<sup>18</sup> As noted by Farrokh, however, a king could reject the advice of his council. Khosrow I once insisted on waging war on the Hephthalites despite the advice of his council to refrain from launching a military expedition. According to Farrokh:

This clearly demonstrates that the war council was uncertain of the spah's ability to prevail in an all-out war against the Hephthalites. While Khosrow's military reforms had certainly been significant, these still required time to achieve full implementation – which may explain the council's hesitancy.<sup>19</sup>

The fear of Hephthalites is also reflected in Ghazar (Lazar) P'arpets'i's (born c. 441-43 or 453 A.D.) account of the war of 484. According to P'arpec'i, the Sasanian military men were so scared that were even unable to see a Hephthalite, or hear the name Hephthalite and “they marched as if condemned to death and not as warriors setting out to battle”. The nobility also shared the same views and they tried to dissuade the king, but Peroz would not hear their pleas. P'arpets'i has also stated that the panicked battle survivors spread the news of the “grievous events which caused all the nobles and the rest of the populace in Vrkan [Hyrcania] to flee to Asorestan”. The terrorized nobles then demanded an emergency session for finding a “way to save... the land of the Aryans”.<sup>20</sup> If the aforementioned reforms are indeed implemented after the *Spāh*'s failed anti-Hephthalite expeditions, we should inquire about the nature of the setbacks. In other words, if the *Spāh* had been defeated by treachery (i.e. the gorge trap and the deadly ditch), did the Sasanians really need to reconsider and change some of their typical and approved military equipment and methods of warfare in order to get the upper hand against the Hephthalites?

### **The cunning scheme of the Hephthalites**

According to Procopius:

He [Kushnavaz] sent forward a small detachment with instructions to allow themselves to be seen at a distance by the enemy in the plain, and, when once

---

<sup>18</sup> SYVÄNNE & MAKSYMIUK, 2018: 63.

<sup>19</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 216.

<sup>20</sup> Ghazar P'arpets'i, 85. 156.

they had been seen, to flee at full speed to the rear, keeping in mind his command concerning the trench as soon as they drew near to it.<sup>21</sup>

In this instance, the Hephthalite king is described as planning one of the oldest military tactics, which was known among horse-archers of nomad tribes on the steppes of Eurasia about 2,700 years ago and is called the ‘feigned retreat’. The principle is to draw an enemy out of his defensive positions by pretending to be defeated, running away, and then ambushing the pursuers.<sup>22</sup> This task was usually given to lighter troops, especially light cavalry as these could outrun the heavier units with ease. The only chance of success for heavier troops lay in the possibility of driving the light horsemen against some obstacle, like a river or defile, which would prevent further flight. But on the terrains like level plains, the light cavalry could withdraw for days and never be cornered.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the authors assume that the task of luring the *Spāh* into the fatal trap was given to a small band of light cavalry, but as Coulston has noted:

Steppe armies were less likely to have fallen tactically into clear-cut light horse-archer and heavy archer/lancer types. A shading off between the two, perhaps based more on age and experience than on wealth and class status, would have produced much looser and more mobile cavalry formations, coalescing and opening up with changing battlefield circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

Feigned retreat, however, was also well-known among the Sasanians as the armies of their predecessor Parthians, who had steppe origins, was essentially an all-cavalry force. The bulk of the Parthian cavalry consisted of lightly armored horse-archers.<sup>25</sup> Parthian horse archery was based on tactics of skirmishing, harassment and feigned retreat.<sup>26</sup> The application of these tactics proved devastating to the unwary Romans at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C.<sup>27</sup> The Sasanians inherited the Parthian all-cavalry concept, although the battle doctrine of *Spāh* was different from their predecessor as it deployed varied combat arms such as infantry (of various types), war elephants and engineering units. The Sasanian cavalry also became more varied and included javelineers and other forms of light cavalry alongside the traditional heavy lancers and horse archers.<sup>28</sup> The Sasanians, like their Hephthalite adversaries were masters of cavalry warfare, as much of their strategies included hit-and-run tactics

---

<sup>21</sup> Procopius, I 4. 10.

<sup>22</sup> KEEGAN, 1993: 213; ALEXANDER, 2002: 94-95; SIDNELL, 2006: 328.

<sup>23</sup> ALEXANDER, 2002: 102, 106.

<sup>24</sup> COULSTON, 1986: 70.

<sup>25</sup> KARASULAS, 2004: 50-51; McDONOUGH, 2013: 681; FARROKH, 2017: 46-47, 62, 75-76, 120, 194.

<sup>26</sup> COULSTON, 1986: 68.

<sup>27</sup> SAMPSON, 2008: 114-147; SHELDON, 2010: 36-38.

<sup>28</sup> FARROKH & KARAMIAN & MAKSYMUK, 2018: 11.

with lightly armed bowmen, rapid and powerful charges by heavy cavalry, the feigned retreat, and the use of overwhelming archery to reduce and destroy the opponent. Sasanians also developed tactics that were far more sophisticated and dangerous, such as the complex three-wave attack that was executed by an uninterrupted lance-missile-lance attack.<sup>29</sup> They were also aware of the overall fighting style of these people as a result of previous encounters. The Sasanians also employed numerous auxiliary cavalry forces such as Turkic warriors, Chionites, Khazars, Kushans and even Hephthalites.<sup>30</sup> Ghazar P'arpets'i has mentioned that "Non-Aryans" were present in the army of Peroz, but does not elaborate on their ethnicity.<sup>31</sup>

According to Procopius:

[the Persians] Gave chase at full speed across a very level plain, possessed as they were by a spirit of fury against the enemy, and fell into the trench, every man of them, not alone the first but also those who followed in the rear. For since they entered into the pursuit with great fury, as I have said, they failed to notice the catastrophe which had befallen their leaders, but fell in on top of them with their horses and lances... among them were Perozes and all his sons.<sup>32</sup>

As discussed above, the Sasanians were familiar with cavalry maneuvers like skirmishing, harassment and feigned retreat and therefore it is highly unlikely that they would pursue the small retreating Hephthalite unit with their entire army 'at full speed'.

The authors remind that the manner of charging also contradicts the standard battle formation and tactics of the *Spāh*. The standard battle tactic of the Sasanians was to divide the army into five units: a main line of heavy cavalry, a line of heavy infantry as reinforcement behind the main line, two flanks (usually cavalry), and a small reserve of the best heavy cavalry units such as the Immortals. The main line and the reinforcements formed the center.<sup>33</sup> In addition to this division, every unit was also organized into defenders and attackers. The attackers would usually leave their formation and advance in open order, while the defenders remained behind in closed order. When the attackers threw the enemy back, they pursued them, while the defenders followed slowly and in an orderly fashion, while maintaining their formation. The commander only ordered a general advance of his lines in the final stages of a battle, either to encourage the routing of a wavering enemy, or as a last

---

<sup>29</sup> FARROKH, 2012: 30-31.

<sup>30</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 19-22, 28, 61-65, 72-119, 133, 199-203.

<sup>31</sup> Ghazar P'arpets'i, 85. 156.

<sup>32</sup> Procopius, I 4. 12-14.

<sup>33</sup> FARROKH, 2012: 29.

resort against a resisting enemy.<sup>34</sup> Like their predecessor Parthians, the Sasanians were constantly struggling with shortages of professional military manpower, notably armored lancer cavalry and they could ill afford heavy casualties. Therefore, commanders were expected to be proficient at minimizing casualties. Even victorious generals could be penalized if their victories were deemed costly.<sup>35</sup> It seems very implausible for Peroz to simply disregard the standard battlefield formations, tactics and chronic problems of *Spāh* and to order an all-out offensive before the commencement of a battle, only to pursue one unit of cavalry with relatively small numbers.

The Sasanian cavalry troopers were highly professional soldiers and they were subject to rigorous military training alongside intellectual education from an early age.<sup>36</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, who personally saw the Sasanian cavalry in action in multiple encounters has described their discipline in some passages of his historical narration such as:

From the rising of the sun to its setting, the enemy's lines stood immovable, as if rooted to the ground, without changing a step or uttering a sound; nor was even the neigh of a horse heard; and the men having withdrawn in the same order as they had advanced.<sup>37</sup>

and “part of them who were prepared to fight with pikes stood immovable, so that you might have fancied they were held in their places by fastenings of brass”.<sup>38</sup> The author of the *Strategikon* describes the Sasanian armies as having “well-ordered ranks” and asserts that “the Persians do not attack in a disorderly fashion as the Scythians do in pursuing, but cautiously and in good order”.<sup>39</sup> The authors note that describing the Sasanians as “cautious” and maintaining “good order” when perusing is worth noting as Procopius relates that they “had no means of perceiving the stratagem” and “failed to notice the catastrophe which had befallen their leaders”. Furthermore, Sasanian military police known as *dezghan* officers were tasked with keeping watch on the troopers and to impose harsh measures against those warriors who had been judged as performing poorly during battle.<sup>40</sup> As a result, we can sum up that it was highly unlikely for the cavalry units to break ranks or charge without orders, lest chasing an enemy unit “at full speed” before the commencement of an engagement. However, it was always possible that some troopers would eventually take the bait and charge

---

<sup>34</sup> ALOFS, 2015: 15-17.

<sup>35</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 20, 36, 141, 187, 218, 227, 298-299.

<sup>36</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 38-45.

<sup>37</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, XIX 2. 5

<sup>38</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, XXV. 1. 13.

<sup>39</sup> *Strategikon*, 115.

<sup>40</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 187-188.

the mounted bowmen.<sup>41</sup> Since the *Spāh* fielded varied combat arms, the possible candidates for the chase should be nominated.

The lance charging cavalry were well-trained and equipped for close-quarters combat, but these warriors were mainly intended as shock troops meant to dislocate enemy lines or break through them.<sup>42</sup> In other words, their primary role was to deliver the decisive first strike by charging with their greatest impact at their front.<sup>43</sup> Armored lancers formed the backbone of the cavalry force. They were wealthy noblemen, who were able to pay for excellent armor. They were men of consequence, and their safety and individual effectiveness in action was of utmost importance to the commanders.<sup>44</sup> Their arms and armors were considered precious military equipment, since the Iranian plateau was deficient in high-grade iron, as well as the wood needed to treat it.<sup>45</sup> The Sasanians were not the only ones that faced this problem, as metal was too costly for equipping the ordinary soldier, who continued to wear only padded or quilted fabric for protection. This was the custom wherever metal armor was used.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the Sasanian lancers were a heavy cavalry corps and they could not pursue lighter troops because of the weight of their panoply. Procopius, however, mentions that these were simply following the front line and “they failed to notice the catastrophe which had befallen their leaders, but fell in on top of them with their horses and lances”.

It is known that when the king was present in the battlefield, his throne was erected on a hill or at least positioned in the center of the army surrounded by his servants and guards and beyond them ranged infantry and archers were placed.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the king would only undertake certain tasks, such as overseeing battle and siege developments and encouraging the troops in order to boost their moral. This tradition could be traced to Achaemenid times. It was rare for a king to get personally involved in the fight.<sup>48</sup> The same was true for a commander if the king was not present in the battlefield. A commander was not expected to react to the events on the battlefield by issuing the appropriate commands. He rarely intervened in the course of battle and if such an intervention is mentioned at all, it shows the direness of the situation. The well-being of the commander had the utmost importance because if he died, the army was decapitated and ceased to function.<sup>49</sup> While several early Sasanian kings were regularly involved in major campaigns,<sup>50</sup> Peroz is the only one that is killed in action. The cause of death for Peroz and his sons is attributed to falling into

---

<sup>41</sup> GROUSSET, 1970: 224-225; KARASULAS, 2004: 51.

<sup>42</sup> FARROKH, 2017: 180.

<sup>43</sup> FARROKH & KHORASANI, 2009: 298.

<sup>44</sup> BIVAR, 1972: 279.

<sup>45</sup> FARROKH, 2012: 13.

<sup>46</sup> GRANCSAY, 1963: 255.

<sup>47</sup> NICOLLE, 1996: 19.

<sup>48</sup> WHITBY, 1994: 240-241.

<sup>49</sup> ALOFS, 2015: 6-7.

<sup>50</sup> WHITBY, 1994: 232.

the ditch, which indicates that they were also attending the chase at full speed. This part of the story raises yet more questions. If we accept that Peroz was so enraged that he ignored the traditions and the duties of a king and recklessly pursued the retreating band, why would he take his sons with him? Even in the final stages of an almost won siege or pitched battle this action would have been a huge blunder as it would jeopardize the future of the ruling faction or even the Sasanian dynasty. It must be noted, however, that the sources are not in agreement regarding the total death toll of Peroz's offspring.<sup>51</sup>

A potential candidate for the chase were Sasanian armored horse archers, but as Karasulas has noted, these were precious elite soldiers and fielding armored horse archers was an extremely costly investment. They could acquire and maintain the various skills needed for their kind of warfare only by constant exercise. They were well-armed and they rode costly warhorses also covered in armor. Sasanian commanders usually employed these troopers carefully and thriftily as heavy losses could only be replenished after a generation.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the authors assume that the chase was done by units of light cavalry, especially light horse archers as these could perform frontal horse archery and shoot the fleeing unit at the same time as pursuing. This style of mounted archery, shooting forward, is displayed in ten known Sasanian metalwork plates,<sup>53</sup> on the Sasanian reliefs at Rag-i-Bibi and Taq-e-Bostan,<sup>54</sup> several graffiti from Dura-Europos<sup>55</sup> and a carved alabaster plaque.<sup>56</sup> The Hephthalites, however, already knew about the presence of horse archers (armored and light types) in the advancing Sasanian army, not necessarily as the result of the previous encounters, but by reconnaissance.

Reconnaissance was always a feature of steppe warfare. The highly mobile scouts of the steppe armies, either alone or in small bands, could gather intelligence on the whereabouts, activities and enemy numbers, without raising any alarm.<sup>57</sup> These scouts indeed kept the Hephthalite command updated on the movements of *Spāh* and their camping locations.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the band that acted as a bait only had to show itself at a safe distance and then turn back swiftly and feign retreat. However, even this maneuver could be troublesome as performing the Parthian shot was the usual defensive tactic of the retreating horse archer. Most horse archers turned to their right while shooting, with their bows in their left hands. If the pursuers got close and maneuvered themselves into the dead ground of the pursued, behind them on their

---

<sup>51</sup> Dīnawarī, 62; Procopius, I 4. 2, 4. 34; Movsēs Dasxuranc'ī, 26; Ghazar P'arpets'I, 85. 156; Vardan Arewelc'i, 29; Theophanes, 123; Sebeos, 5; Ṭabarī 873, 886-887, 879-880; Ferdowsi, 1417, 1422-1423.

<sup>52</sup> KARASULAS, 2004: 10.

<sup>53</sup> FARROKH & KHORASANI & DWYER, 2018: 95.

<sup>54</sup> NICOLLE, 1996: 28-29; FARROKH & KARAMIAN & MAKSYMIOUK, 2018: 54.

<sup>55</sup> NICOLLE, 1996: 15; JAMES, 2004: 39-40, 194.

<sup>56</sup> NICOLLE, 1996: 22.

<sup>57</sup> KARASULAS, 2004: 54-55.

<sup>58</sup> Procopius, I 4. 9-10.

right, it was difficult for the pursued to defend themselves. An archer carrying his bow in his left hand can only shoot to his left, from right in front of him to straight behind him. As a result, some of the archers wheeled to the left, with their bow in their right hand, to cover the retreat of the archers turning to the right.<sup>59</sup> However, the Hephthalite king ordered the band to cross the ditch as follows: “Once they had been seen, to flee at full speed to the rear” and that “they should draw themselves together into a narrow column and pass rather slowly across this neck of land” since the passageway was narrow and could only “serve as a way for ten horses”.<sup>60</sup> As the troops are described as executing the feigned retreat exactly according to the plan, the pursuing units would have enough time to observe the slowing down of the fleeing unit before crossing the passageway as they were master horseman themselves and were accustomed to perform quick maneuvers. Even if the pursuing units failed to turn back in time and indeed fell into the ditch, it would only cause minor casualties for the *Spāh* as it is unlikely that other units (i.e. other cavalry units and infantry) also joined the chase.

### **The deadly ditch**

Procopius has described the ditch as follows:

In the plain where the Persians were to make their irruption into the land of the Ephthalitae he [Kushnavaz] marked off a tract of very great extent and made a deep trench of sufficient width; but in the center he left a small portion of ground intact, enough to serve as a way for ten horses.<sup>61</sup>

Dewing has interpreted this description as thus: “The trench crossed the plain in an approximately straight line”.<sup>62</sup> Agathias (c. 530- c. 582 A.D.) has pointed to “a series of carefully camouflaged pits and trenches that stretched over the plain for a very great distance”.<sup>63</sup> Ferdowsi (c. 940- c. 1019 A.D.), has mentioned that the ditch was circular and it encircled the Hephthalite army.<sup>64</sup> However, it must be considered that *Shāhnāmeḥ* (i.e. the book of kings) is a work of epic poetry and as a result details are sometimes altered for the sake of Arab/Persian poetic regulations and the overall epic narration of stories. Despite this known fact, it is noteworthy that prior to Peroz’s fall into the ditch, there is mention of a battle and a fatal barrage of arrows that resulted in the “spilling of streams of blood” from both sides.

---

<sup>59</sup> ALOFS, 2015: 20-22.

<sup>60</sup> Procopius, I 4. 8-11.

<sup>61</sup> Procopius, I 4. 7-8.

<sup>62</sup> Procopius, p. 23, n. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Agathias, IV 27.

<sup>64</sup> Ferdowsi, 1416.

According to Dīnawarī (815-96 A.D.), the ditch that was dug by the Hephthalites measured “20 cubits deep and 10 cubits wide”, and was “camouflaged with weak sticks, reeds and soil”.<sup>65</sup> Ṭabarī (839-923 A.D.), has also provided the same description: “Akshunwar [Kushnavaz] ordered a trench to be dug behind the lines of his own army, ten cubits wide and twenty cubits deep. He had light branches of wood laid over it and then had it covered with earth”.<sup>66</sup> Since a considerable number of different “cubits” were in common use in the Islamic World,<sup>67</sup> the task of converting these dimensions to modern measurements is problematic as Dīnawarī and Ṭabarī do not specify which cubit they are referring to. For instance, if we use the ‘black’ cubit measurements (fixed at 54.04 cm), which was in common use during the Abbasid times,<sup>68</sup> the depth and width of the ditch would be approximately 10.8 m and 5.4 m respectively. Regardless of which cubit we use, the conversion results would point to the vast dimensions of the ditch. We must consider the fact that these Arab authors were writing almost 4 centuries after the actual event and do not cite an earlier literature. Therefore, the overall accuracy of these dimensions can be questioned. The ditch described by the author of the *Strategikon* is wider (“fifty or sixty [feet] wide”) than that of Dīnawarī and Ṭabarī, but much shallower (“eight or ten feet deep”), but his account is vague as to whether he is definitely referring to this engagement or not.<sup>69</sup> However, the near contemporary Procopius describes the ditch as having “very great extent”, “depth” and “sufficient width”. On the whole, if we accept that the ditch had such vast dimensions, a number of questions are raised. Since Kushnavaz devised the plan after receiving the intelligence that *Spāh* was already on the move,<sup>70</sup> can it be accepted that the Hephthalites had the time, to excavate such a long, wide and deep ditch in the middle of a plain? How did they hide the enormous earthworks in a “very level plain”? And how did they cover an overextended ditch in such a manner that even the Sasanian scouts and vanguards did not notice anything?

Digging ditches and pits are old defensive stratagems, but they seem to have been a feature of battlefields since at least the early Middle Ages. These were either dug along the flanks or in front of the foot soldiers. In all cases, they either disrupted a cavalry charge or narrowed its length preventing any flanking of a defending line.<sup>71</sup> The steppe armies, however, were mostly composed of cavalymen.<sup>72</sup> The power of the horsemen lay in motion and the cavalry had to maintain its freedom of movement. Their physical and psychological impact upon an enemy was multiplied by their

---

<sup>65</sup> Dīnawarī, 61.

<sup>66</sup> Ṭabarī 879.

<sup>67</sup> LEWIS & PELLAT & SCHACHT, 1991: 231-232.

<sup>68</sup> LEWIS & PELLAT & SCHACHT, 1991: 231-232.

<sup>69</sup> *Strategikon*, 53; GREATREX, 1994: 63.

<sup>70</sup> Procopius, I 4. 1-10.

<sup>71</sup> DEVRIES, 1996: 193.

<sup>72</sup> SINOR, 1981: 137.

superior speed as it greatly increased the power of their attack. They could take the initiative in as much as they could decline combat by riding away. Always attacking rather than waiting to receive an attack was one of the fundamental principles of cavalry tactics. Horses make vulnerable targets when stationary, as a stationary horse was a large and vulnerable target.<sup>73</sup> A horseman could solve this problem by dismounting to fight on foot like the Roman equites, but this was an usual tactic.<sup>74</sup> But the steppe warriors had to play by the universal cavalry rule as they literally lived on horseback and could not fight effectively if they were forced to fight on foot.<sup>75</sup> According to Dewing, “The army of the Ephthalitae were drawn up behind it [the ditch], facing the advancing Persians, while a few of them went out beyond the trench to draw the attack of the Persians”.<sup>76</sup> If this was the case indeed, the pursuing horse archers would sight the Hephthalite static cavalry lines and turn back before getting too close.

Although some armies used artificial and natural ditches and pits as defensive obstacles in several battles of the Medieval era (in some cases effectively), the personnel of no attacking army were entirely wiped out by blindly falling into these traps.<sup>77</sup> Nöldeke has pointed to the fact that digging ditches could only be effective in certain circumstances and has rejected the historicity of the ditch stories.<sup>78</sup> Although the author of the *Strategikon* has pointed to a more practical and effective version of ditch ambush set-up, he has asserted that: “This type of ambush, however, requires a good deal of time and many laborers, and it can easily be discovered by the enemy through deserters or scouts”.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, it was highly unlikely for the cavalry-based Hephthalite army to dig an over extended ditch and deploy behind it in static lines. If their alleged scheme to lure the Sasanians into the trap failed, what was their alternative plan? An infantry-based army could still use the ditch as a valuable defensive obstacle, but with all the nimble cavalry units and their methods of warfare, how could the Hephthalites fight with such a long ditch in front of them? They sure would not bypass it in order to fight the *Spāh* as they were accustomed to all sorts of rapid maneuvers like hit and run tactics and the ditch at their back could prove fatal.

The Sasanians valued reconnaissance and military intelligence gathering.<sup>80</sup> They employed undercover military or civilian agents abroad. Most of these agents were disguised as merchants or envoys. There were probably two types of agents; those dispatched by the central government for some specific purpose and those who were

---

<sup>73</sup> SIDNELL, 2006: 17, 40, 141, 155, 176.

<sup>74</sup> McCALL, 2002: 53, 55, 63-64, 67-68, 72, 76; SIDNELL, 2006: 141, 155, 176.

<sup>75</sup> SINOR, 1981: 137.

<sup>76</sup> Procopius, p. 23.

<sup>77</sup> VERBRUGGEN, 1997: 47, 147, 198-203, 260-275; DEVRIES, 1996: 32-57, 66-85, 137-154, 193; BROWN, 2008: 115-133.

<sup>78</sup> NÖLDEKE, 1879: 129.

<sup>79</sup> *Strategikon*, 53.

<sup>80</sup> INOSTRANCEV, 1969: 56-57, 74-75.

operated by military officers along the frontiers. The kings sometimes operated their own spies.<sup>81</sup> The *Spāh* also used vanguards that advanced ahead of the main army and were tasked with the reconnaissance of select territories prior to the passage of the main armies.<sup>82</sup> The commander of the vanguard used special elite forces such as spies and scouts to reconnoiter enemy positions and capture prisoners for interrogation.<sup>83</sup> Excavating such an overextended ditch required much time and labor and would involve many people and a good deal of equipment. Therefore, the Sasanians spies and scouts would probably know about the ditch and pass the intelligence to Peroz. However, since the Hephthalites are reported to work in a plain, the spy networks of the Sasanians may have failed to notice the developments. Even in that case, the vanguards of the *Spāh* would observe the Hephthalite army and the great ditch that was dug in front of them. The Sasanians were lured into a trap during the first war and had the Hephthalite scouts annihilated or captured the vanguards, they would be alerted, come to a halt and survey the area.

Ghazar P'arpets'i has related that the Hephthalites dug the ditch, but does not provide more information on the matter.<sup>84</sup> Agathias's version of the event is not consistent with the account of Procopius, although he must certainly have known Procopius's account:<sup>85</sup>

Consequently he [Peroz] lost his life in an expedition against the Ephthalites not so much, I imagine, through the strength of his opponents as through his own recklessness. Though he should have taken all the necessary precautions and reconnaissance measures to safeguard his advance into enemy territory against ambush he fell straight into a trap, a series of carefully camouflaged pits and trenches that stretched over the plain for a very great distance. He perished there together with his army in the twenty-fourth year of his reign, outmanoeuvred by the Huns — an ignominious way of ending his life.<sup>86</sup>

Ironically, Agathias has pointed to “a series of camouflaged pits and trenches” instead of a single overstretched ditch. The passage also does not refer to the pursuit or any sort of engagement. Therefore, it may be assumed that Peroz and his army fell into the traps while marching into the enemy territory. The author of the *Strategikon* has provided a more detailed version ditch ambush set-up, and has mentioned that the Hephthalites used the same stratagem:

---

<sup>81</sup> SYVÄNNE, 2016: 126-127.

<sup>82</sup> INOSTRANCEV, 1926: 14.

<sup>83</sup> SYVÄNNE, 2016: 127.

<sup>84</sup> Ghazar P'arpets'i, 85. 156; GREATREX, 1994: 63

<sup>85</sup> CAMERON, 1969: 153.

<sup>86</sup> Agathias, IV. 27.

Some commanders have dug a trench eight or ten feet deep, fifty or sixty wide, and extending a good distance. They covered this with light pieces of wood, with hay and earth, so it looked just like the ground around it, and there was no way you could tell the difference. The excavated earth was removed from the site, so that it would not look at all strange. At various places in the middle of the trench they left some solid crossings of firm ground, well-marked and made known at the proper time to their own army. Near the trench on both sides they placed troops in ambush under cover where they could not be seen, and they drew up the rest before the trench. When battle was joined, the men drawn up before the trench simulated defeat, retiring safely back over the solid sections known to them. The enemy began an unrestrained, impetuous pursuit and fell into the trench. Then the soldiers posted in ambush suddenly charged out, and the men who had feigned retreat turned back. Most of the enemy perished, some falling into the trench, others while fleeing in disorder because of the unexpected disaster. It was by this stratagem that the Hephthalites defeated Peroz, King of the Persians.<sup>87</sup>

The *Strategikon* is praised in military circles as it is one of the most extensive treatises on military tactics and strategies before the early modern period.<sup>88</sup> The aforementioned stratagem is described in the “ambushes from both sides” section of the 4<sup>th</sup> book. Although the overall description is in agreement with the narrative of Procopius, it is more elaborate and plausible. Certain details, however, such as the number of solid sections<sup>89</sup> and the manner of feigned retreat also differs from Procopius’s version. The author of the *Strategikon* has first described the stratagem and then refer to the war of 484 as an example and his account is vague as to that whether he is definitely referring to that war or not.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, he fails to mention that whether the Hephthalites used the exact stratagem or it was altered for their cavalry-based army. The author may have contradicted himself by stating that “so it [the ditch] looked just like the ground around it, and there was no way you could tell the difference” and then saying that “it can easily be discovered by the enemy through deserters or scouts”. However, he does not specify that whether the ditch could be easily discovered or the whole ambush.

Theophanes the confessor (c. 759/60-818 A.D.), who mistakenly puts the battle in 475/76 A.D., has provided the same account as Procopius.<sup>91</sup> Although the version provided by Dīnawārī has many similarities to that of Procopius, it has some obvious differences. In that version, the Hephthalites first dug the ditch and camouflaged it,

---

<sup>87</sup> *Strategikon*, 53.

<sup>88</sup> OLSTER, 2013: 6418; RÓŻYCKI, 2017: 109-113.

<sup>89</sup> GREATREX, 1994: 63.

<sup>90</sup> GREATREX, 1994: 63.

<sup>91</sup> Theophanes, 122-123; Yeshu’ the Stylite, 11.

then sallied forth and fought the Sasanian for an hour. After that, they feigned retreat via the routes that they were familiar with and Peroz pursued them with his entire army. When the Hephthalites arrived at the ditch, they suddenly turned on the Sasanians and “killed them with stones!”.<sup>92</sup> Ṭabarī has narrated three inconsistent accounts, although he reminds that he has received them from different sources. The first version is a concise account of the war: “He attacked the Hephthalites, but they killed him in battle, together with four of his sons and four of his brothers, all of whom bore the title of king”. In the second version:

Akhshunwar had dug a great trench between his own and Fayruz's territory. When Fayruz came to this, he threw bridges across it and set up on them banners which would be guiding markers for him and his troops on the way back home, and then crossed over to confront the enemy. When Akhshunwar came up to their encampment... Each one of them addressed his opponent in lengthy speeches, but in the end, they became enmeshed in the toils of war... Fayruz was routed, mistook the place where the standards had been set up [as markers], fell into the trench, and perished.

In the third version:

Akhshunwar ordered a trench to be dug behind the lines of his own army... Then he retired with his troops to a spot not too far away. Fayruz received news of Akhshunwar's departure... and had no doubt that this meant Akhshunwar's withdrawal and flight. He... rode out at the head of his troops in pursuit of Akhshunwar and his followers. They rushed forward impetuously, heading directly toward that trench. But when they reached it, they rushed blindly on to the trench's covering. Fayruz and the whole mass of his army fell into the pit and perished to the last man.<sup>93</sup>

Ṭabarī's third version is much more consistent with that of Procopius.<sup>94</sup> Although all of these versions point to the notorious ditch, they reveal the fact that by the 9<sup>th</sup> century, several varied and contradictory narratives had been introduced.

Interestingly, the authors note that there is no mention of a ditch in the version of events provided in the history that is attributed to Sebeos. Although this work of history is known for impetuous descriptions of campaigns and often confusing the progressive chronology of the narrative as a whole.<sup>95</sup> According to that account:

---

<sup>92</sup> Dīnawarī, 61-62.

<sup>93</sup> Ṭabarī 873, 876-877, 879.

<sup>94</sup> GREATREX, 1994: 63

<sup>95</sup> THOMSON, 1999: xxxix.

Now although Peroz the Persian king wished to gather another army to attack Armenia, yet he did not have an opportunity; for news of the enemy gave him no respite in the area of the Kushans<sup>96</sup> and that frontier, since the king of the Kushans himself was marching against him with a large army. Then, gathering his troops, he went to oppose him in great haste... Marching rapidly, he arrived to confront the enemy in the east. There was a terrible battle. They defeated and destroyed the host of the Persian army, so not a single one of them escaped or fled. King Peroz also died in the battle with his seven sons.<sup>97</sup>

In the Zoroastrian cosmogonical book called *Bundahišn*, the whole affair is only briefly described: “Then Xašnawāz, the Hephthalite lord, came and killed Pērōz”.<sup>98</sup> There is also no mention of a ditch or a cunning scheme in this text. However, for most of the events, only a concise view is provided in this book. We must take note that in both of these sources, the king of the Hephthalites is portrayed as the aggressor and Peroz is the defender. The author of the Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua also does not point to a ditch or any other cunning stratagems. According to that narrative:

[the armies] Were locked in combat, his [Peroz’s] whole army was destroyed, and when he was sought, he could not be found. To this day it is not known what became of him, whether he was buried under dead bodies, or threw himself into the sea, or hid in a cleft in the ground only to perish from hunger, or in a forest only to be devoured by wild animals.<sup>99</sup>

It is worthy of note that even Procopius has expressed doubt about certain parts of the story:

And just as he [Peroz] was about to fall into this pit, they say that he realized the danger, and seized and threw from him the pearl which hung from his right ear... in order, no doubt, that no one might wear it after him; for it was a thing exceedingly beautiful to look upon, such as no king before him had possessed. This story, however, seems to me untrustworthy, because a man who found himself in such peril would have thought of nothing else; but I suppose that his ear was crushed in this disaster, and the pearl disappeared somewhere or other.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>96</sup> It should be noted that the Armenian historians used the term ‘Kushan’ in very broad meaning, KURBANOV, 2010: 147.

<sup>97</sup> Sebeos, 5.

<sup>98</sup> *The Bundahišn*, 173.

<sup>99</sup> Yesu’ the Stylite, 11.

<sup>100</sup> Procopius, I 4. 14-16.

Procopius is also skeptical of another story concerning the pearl: “The story of this pearl, as told by the Persians, is worth recounting, for perhaps to some it may not seem altogether incredible”.<sup>101</sup> In spite of these criticisms, Procopius seems persuaded about the ditch story as a whole. He goes further and points to a law that was related to the ditch incident:

As a result of this experience a law was established among the Persians that, while marching in hostile territory, they should never engage in any pursuit, even if it should happen that the enemy had been driven back by force.<sup>102</sup>

These complementary stories may indicate that the source for the account of Procopius were the Sasanians, especially their civilians. As for the law, it only bans acts of pursuit and does not point to ditches or any sort of traps. If the law was related to any cunning schemes, it could have put some emphasis on reconnaissance and oblige the military leaders to survey the battle terrain very carefully before issuing an all-out offensive. The law may be related to the first war as the *Spāh* was also lured into a trap while pursuing a Hephthalite band. All in all, the authors propose that the idea of the overextended ditch and the annihilation of the entire Sasanian army by falling into it seems implausible. But if there was an alternative course of events, where did Procopius’s version originate?

An interesting example of a defeat attributed by some historical accounts to attacking troopers falling into ditches is the Battle of Courtrai (1302). A professional French army (albeit rather small in size) that relied much on the prowess of its armored knights, was soundly defeated by a large infantry-based Flemish army that was mostly composed of townsmen. The most terrible element for the French was the fact that the townsmen slew the noblemen rather than taking them as prisoners. Disgraced by their failure, the French knightly circles and royal entourage attributed it to the ditches and holes that were dug in a cunning and treacherous manner by the Flemings. In reality, the power of the Flemings lay in their organization, morale and, above all, their strength of numbers, although two streams and their marshy banks also aided the Flemish.<sup>103</sup>

As for the present case, Nöldeke and Kurbanov have pointed to certain falsifications created for lifting the lost prestige of the Sasanian state after the crushing defeat.<sup>104</sup> A part of this propaganda which is reflected in Arab-Persian sources, narrates that after the defeat, the representatives of the noble houses Karen and Mihran raised a new army. Then they defeated the Hephthalites and forced them to return Peroz’s possessions. Another story is retold by Ferdowsi. In this version, the Hephthalites

---

<sup>101</sup> Procopius, I 4. 17-18.

<sup>102</sup> Procopius, I 4. 32-33.

<sup>103</sup> VERBRUGGEN, 2002: 42-45, 79-82, 100-101, 107-108, 113-116, 127-150, 226-242, 247, 249.

<sup>104</sup> NÖLDEKE, 1879: 130; KURBANOV, 2010: 170-171.

captured Kavād. A powerful marzban collected 100.000 warriors and raised objections to the enemy. As a result, they freed Kavād from captivity and returned the treasure and set the Oxus River as a border between the states. Kurbanov has pointed to Sasanian coins with legends in the language of the Hephthalites that were issued in the years of Balash, Kavād (r. 488-531 A.D., with a break) and at the beginning of the reign of Khosrow I (r. 531-579 A.D.). Furthermore, the mints of Kavād's silver drachms are absent in Merv during the first two decades since the beginning of his reign. They appeared only in the 22<sup>nd</sup> or the 24<sup>th</sup> year of his rule and then continued without interruption until the end of the reign of Khosrow II.<sup>105</sup> Thus, Balash was forced to pay annual tribute, which Sasanians stopped, probably, only in the time of Khosrow I.<sup>106</sup>

## Conclusion

It must be noted that the historical texts and narratives are often influenced by ideological bigotry, inconsistencies due to the intervals between the actual date of the events and the time of their recording, errors emerging as a result of years of hand copying, and distortions due to oral or folklore traditions. These issues urge us to evaluate and challenge the historical texts. As for Procopius's account of the Hephthalite-Sasanian war of 484, there are certain aspects that need to be verified. Procopius's narrative has two key points; the Hephthalite stratagem and the ignorance and military incompetence of the Sasanians. The stratagem is also substantially based on two factors; the feigned retreat of the Hephthalites and the deadly ditch. The feigned retreat was an essential and lethal tactic of the steppe armies, but it was not the first time that the Sasanians faced such adversaries. In fact, the Sasanians had inherited the Parthian military doctrine and they generally used the same cavalry tactics of the steppe armies. As a result, the feigned retreat was well-known among the Sasanians, whose cavalry-based armies always deployed various units of horse skirmishers (regulars or auxiliaries), especially cavalry archers. Procopius relates that the entire Sasanian army pursued the small retreating Hephthalite unit 'at full speed', but this is highly unlikely. The Sasanians, who faced chronic shortages of professional military manpower, were conservative on their standard battlefield formations and tactics and would not order a general advance before taking everything into consideration. Furthermore, the Sasanian cavalry troopers were highly professional soldiers and the military leadership of *Spāh* did not tolerate poor performance and indiscipline from their soldiers. Although we must not totally ignore the possibility that some troopers might have broken ranks and charge the mounted bowmen, we should bear in mind that many units of the *Spāh* like foot soldiers were

---

<sup>105</sup> KURBANOV, 2010: 170-171.

<sup>106</sup> de la VAISSIÈRE, 2005: 111; KURBANOV, 2010: 171.

unsuitable for chasing lighter cavalry units. The lance charging cavalry troopers' social and military status, primary combat role, cumbersome and costly equipment also barred them from committing these actions. The same was true for the armored horse archers. The chase could have been executed by light horse archers, but these troopers were poorly equipped for close combat and as a result always kept a relatively safe distance from the enemy. The described passageway was also narrow and the small retreating band (who were also most likely horse archers) had to slow down and carefully pass through, thus providing enough time for the pursuing unit to observe the ditch. Even if the pursuing units indeed failed to turn back in time and fell into the ditch, it would only cause minor casualties for the *Spāh* and alert the rest of the army. Procopius also states that Peroz and all his sons were attending the chase and perished in the ditch. But it is known that the Sasanian kings did not partake in these sort of actions. Moreover, the Sasanian royal family were zealous about keeping the throne exclusively and would not easily risk the lives of the nearly entire line of succession. By the 9<sup>th</sup> century, several varied and contradictory narratives of the war of 484 had been introduced. There is no mention of a ditch or any sort of cunning plans in the history that is attributed to Sebeos, Bundahishn and the Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua, but the works of Procopius, Ghazar P'arpets'i, Agathias, the author of the *Strategikon*, Theophanes, Ṭabarī and Dīnawarī point to the ditch. Ghazar P'arpets'i's description is very vague and Agathias has pointed to "a series of camouflaged pits and trenches that stretched over the plain for a very great distance", but does not provide more information on the nature of these traps. According to Procopius (who is skeptical on certain parts of his narrative), the overextended, wide, deep and camouflaged ditch was dug in the middle of a plain. Following this account, other historians have provided measurements for the ditch, but the high numbers make it hard to believe that the cavalry-based army of the Hephthalites whose soldiers literally lived on horseback, had the time to excavate such a ditch in the middle of a plain and cover it in such a manner that did not even raise alarm for the Sasanian scouts and vanguards. Ditches, trenches and pits were mainly used for protecting foot soldiers from cavalry charges and such obstacles were not suitable for the fighting style of the highly mobile Hephthalite troopers who were unaccustomed to unmounted warfare. The Sasanians were also adept at using reconnaissance and military intelligence gathering by employing spies and vanguards. Therefore, it was unlikely for Sasanians to fail observing the overextended ditch or become suspicious of all the Hephthalite cavalymen standing in static lines. Additionally, there is no verified record of the personnel of an attacking army being entirely annihilated by blindly falling into such traps. There are, however, historical instances that disgraced military personnel have blamed their failure on the treacherous pits and ditches that were dug and concealed by the enemy. Interestingly, scholars like Nöldeke and Kurbanov have pointed to certain falsifications regarding the catastrophic expedition of 484 that was created for lifting the lost prestige of the Sasanian state. In fact, the Sasanians

continued to fear the military prowess of the Hephthalites and were forced to pay annual tribute for a very long time. They were probably uncertain of the *Spāh*'s ability to defeat the Hephthalites until the reign of Khosrow I and may have adopted a number of military reforms in order to overcome them.

On the whole, the authors propose that the army of Peroz was either ambushed or was decisively defeated in a set-piece battle against a tactically superior Hephthalite army (perhaps in a manner similar to the second war?) and sustained high casualties. As they probably had pushed deep inside hostile territory, most of those that survived the engagement were tracked down and massacred by the Hephthalites. Since the Eastern Roman Emperor Zenon paid the first enormous ransom and Peroz could barely muster and pay the second war reparations, the Hephthalite may have deemed the Sasanian royal treasury empty and executed the wounded and the prisoners of war. In the aftermath, the ultimate survivors probably invented the deadly ditch scenario which was accepted by the Sasanian military and civic nobility. Ghazar P'arpet's'i has indeed stated that these panicked survivors spread the news of the 'grievous events'. Prior to being twice humiliated by a nomadic king, the Sasanians had a glorious military history. Therefore, they set out for revenge, but ended up losing their king and crown prince, most of the royal family, many nobles and an entire army. It was their darkest hour as their treasury was depleted, the royal family nearly annihilated, the nobility weakened by their losses, and their military reputation tarnished. They just could not spread the news that they were simply bested by the Hephthalites. If they did so, it meant that the *Spāh* was inferior to the armies of the Hephthalites and the empire was prone to lose more territory in case of new incursions from the north-east. In order to prevent the empire's descent into chaos and to keep their martial ardor fervent, they needed two scapegoats for developing a cover up story. So the Sasanians introduced Peroz as the one responsible for the ill-advised and ill-fated expedition, and a cunning scheme as the reason for the military fiasco.

## Bibliography

### Sources

Agathias. *The Histories*. tr. J. D. FREND, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1975.

Ammianus Marcellinus. *Complete Works of Ammianus Marcellinus*. tr. C. D. YONGE, Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2016.

Dīnawarī, Abū Ḥanīfah Aḥmad ibn Dāwūd. *Kitāb Al-akhbār Al-ṭiwāl*. ed. V. F. GUIRGASS. Leiden: Brill, 1888.

Ferdowsi, Abul-Qasem. *The Shahname*, A reprint of Moscow Edition. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Tehran: Hermes Publishers, 2007.

Ghazar P'arpet's'i. *The History of Lazar P'arpec'i*. tr. R. W. THOMSON. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991.

*Maurice's Strategikon; Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*. tr. G. T. DENNIS. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984.

Movsēs Dasxuranc'i. *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*. tr. C. J. F. DOWSETT. London: Oxford University Press, 1961.

Procopius. *History of the Wars, Volume I: Books 1-2. (Persian War)*. tr. H. B. DEWING. London: Harvard University Press, 1914.

*The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos, Part 1. Translations and Notes; with historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston and Tim Greenwood*. tr. R. W. THOMSON. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press., 1999.

*The Bundahišn: The Zoroastrian Book of Creation*. tr. D. AGOSTINI, S. THROPE, New York: Oxford University Press., 2020

*The History of al-Ṭabarī (Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk)*. Vol. 5. *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*. tr. C. E. BOSWORTH, Albany: State University of New York, 1999.

Theophanes. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor, Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813*. tr. C. MANGO, R. SCOTT. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Vardan Arewelc'i. *The Historical Compilation of Vardan Arewelc'i*. tr. R. W. THOMSON. Princeton: Dumbarton Oaks Publications Office, 1989.

Yeshu' the Stylite. *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*. tr. F. R. TROMBLEY, J. W. WATT. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000.

## Literature

ALEXANDER, B. (2002) *How wars are won : the 13 rules of war– from ancient Greece to the war on terror*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

ALOFS, E. (2015) 'Studies on Mounted Warfare in Asia II: The Iranian Tradition – The Armoured Horse Archer in the Middle East, c. Ce 550–1350', *War in History* 22.1: 4-27. doi: 10.1177/0968344513518333

BIVAR, A. D. H. (1972) 'Cavalry Equipment and Tactics on the Euphrates Frontier', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 26: 271-291. doi:10.2307/1291323

BROWN, M. (2008) *Bannockburn: The Scottish Wars and the British Isles, 1307-1323*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

CAMERON, A. (1969) 'Agathias on the Sassanians', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23/24: 67-183. doi:10.2307/1291291

COULSTON, J. C. (1986) 'Roman, Parthian and Sassanid tactical developments', in *The Defense of the Roman and Byzantine East*, eds. P. FREEMAN, D. KENNEDY, Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 59-75.

de la VAISSIÈRE, É (2005) *Sogdian traders: A history*. Leiden: Brill.

DEVRIES, K. (1996) *Infantry Warfare in the Early Fourteenth Century: Discipline, Tactics, and Technology*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd.

FARROKH, K. (2012) *Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing.

FARROKH, K. (2017) *The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military.

FARROKH, K., KARAMIAN, G., MAKSYMUK, K. (2018) *A Synopsis of Sasanian Military Organization and Combat Units*. Siedlce: Publishing House of Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities.

FARROKH, K., KHORASANI, M. M. (2009) 'Arms, Armor and Tactics of Sassanian Savaran', *Journal of the Iranian Studies* 8.15: 289-305.

FARROKH, K., KHORASANI, M. M., DWYER, B. (2018) 'Depictions of Archery in Sassanian Silver Plates and Their Relationship to Warfare', *Revista De Artes Marciales Asiáticas* 13.2: 82-113. doi:10.18002/rama.v13i2.5370

GRANCSAY, S. V. (1963) 'A Sasanian Chieftain's Helmet', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 21(8): 253-262. doi:10.2307/3257947

GREATREX, G. (1994) *Procopius and the Persian Wars*. PhD diss., University of Oxford.

GROUSSET, R. (1970) *The Empire of the Steppes; a History of Central Asia*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

- GUNTER, A. C., JETT, P. (1992) *Ancient Iranian Metalwork in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- INOSTRANCEV, K. A. (1926) 'The Sassanian military theory', *The Journal of the CAMA Oriental Institute* 7: 7-52.
- INOSTRANCEV, K. A. (1969) *Sasanidskie et'udy [Studies regarding the Sassanians]*. Tehran: Bongahe Tarjome va Nashre Ketab.
- JAMES, S. (2004) *Excavation at Dura Europos: 1928-1937: Final Report VII, The Arms and Armour and Other Military Equipment*. London: The British Museum Press.
- KALDELLIS, A. (2004), *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, history, and philosophy at the end of antiquity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- KARASULAS, A. (2004) *Mounted Archers of the Steppe: 600 BC - AD 1300*. Oxford: Osprey.
- KEEGAN, J. (1993) *A History of Warfare*. New York: Vintage Books.
- KHORASANI, M. M. (2006), *Arms and armor from Iran: The bronze age to the end of the Qajar period*. Tübingen: Legat Verlag.
- KRISTENSEN, A. K. G. (1988) *Who Were the Cimmerians, and Where Did They Come from? Sargon II, the Cimmerians, and Rusa I*. Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab.
- KURBANOV, A. (2010) *The Hephthalites; Archaeological and Historical Analysis*. PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin.
- LEWIS, B., PELLAT, C., SCHACHT, J. eds. (1991), *The Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition (C-G)*. 4th ed., vol. II. Leiden: Brill.
- MAKSYMIUK, K. (2016) 'Die finanziellen Abrechnungen in den persisch-römischen Kriegen in den Zeiten der Sasaniden', *Historia i Świat* 5: 149-157.
- MASIA, K. (2000) 'The Evolution of Swords and Daggers in the Sasanian Empire', *Iranica Antiqua* 35: 185-289. doi:10.2143/IA.35.1.519101
- McCALL, J. B. (2002) *The Cavalry of the Roman Republic; Cavalry Combat and Elite Reputations in the Middle and Late Republic*. London: Routledge.
- McDONOUGH, S. (2013) 'Part III: Military and Society in Sasanian Iran', in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*, ed. J. B. CAMPBELL, L. A. TRITILE. New York: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195304657.013.0031
- NICOLLE, D. (1996) *Sassanian Armies; the Iranian Empire Early 3rd to mid-7th centuries AD*. Stockport: Montvert Publications.
- NÖLDEKE, T. (1879) *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden: Aus der arabischen Chronik des Tabari übersetzt und mit ausführlichen Erläuterungen und Ergänzungen versehen, Volume 1*. Leiden: Brill.
- OLSTER, D. (2013) 'Strategikon of Maurice', in *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History 13 Volume Set (1st Edition)*, ed. R. BAGNALL, K. BRODERSEN, C. CHAMPION, A. ERSKINE, S. HUEBNER. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. doi:10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah03227
- RÓŻYCKI, Ł. (2017) 'The Strategikon as a source – Slavs and Avars in the eyes of Pseudo-Maurice, current state of research and future research perspectives', *Acta Archaeologica Carpathica* 52: 109-131.
- SAMPSON, G. C. (2008) *The Defeat of Rome in the East: Crassus, the Parthians, and the Disastrous Battle of Carrhae, 53 BC*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military.
- SHAPUR SHAHBAZI, A. (1986) 'Army i. Pre-Islamic Iran', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Vol. II/5, ed. E. YARSHATER, New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, 489-499.
- SHELDON, R. M. (2010) *Rome's War in Parthia: Blood in the Sand*. London: Vallentine Mitchell.
- SIDNELL, P. (2006) *Warhorse: Cavalry in Ancient Warfare*. London: Hambledon Continuum.
- SINOR, D. (1981) 'The Inner Asian Warriors', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101(2): 133-144. doi:10.2307/601755
- SYVÄNNE, I. (2016) 'The Eyes and Ears: The Sasanian and Roman Spies ca. AD 222-450', *Historia i Świat* 5: 107-131.

SYVÄNNE, I., MAKSYMUK, K. (2018) *The Military History of the Third Century Iran*. Siedlce: Scientific Publishing House of Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities.

TROUSDALE, W. (1975) *The Long Sword and Scabbard Slide in Asia*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

VERBRUGGEN, J. F. (1997) *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages: From the Eighth Century to 1340*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.

VERBRUGGEN, J. F. (2002) *The Battle of the Golden Spurs: (Courtrai, 11 July 1302); a Contribution to the History of Flanders' War of Liberation, 1297-1305*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.

WHITBY, M. (1994) 'The Persian King at War', in *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East; Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at the Jagiellonian University*, ed. E. DĄBROWA, Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 227-263.

**To cite this article:** Khonsarinejad, E., Khorashadi, S. (2021). King Peroz's last stand: Assessing Procopius's account of the Hephthalite-Sasanian War of 484. *Historia i Świat* 10, 71-93, DOI: 10.34739/his.2021.10.03



© 2021 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.