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## The “Night Battle” of Singara: Whose Victory?

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The “Night” Battle of Singara, as it is often called in literary sources,<sup>1</sup> occurred in AD 344<sup>2</sup> between the Roman and Persian armies to the east of the modern Iraqi town of Sinjar.<sup>3</sup> It was one of the most notable, but for all that one of the most mysterious events in the history of the wars fought between the Romans and Persians during the III–VII centuries AD.

Prima facie, the historical reconstruction of the Battle of Singara does not cause undue troubles<sup>4</sup> because of the relatively copious number of literary sources in which special attention is paid to this event, especially in the panegyrics of Libanius<sup>5</sup> and Julian the Apostate<sup>6</sup> in honor of Constantius II (337-361), also in the writings of Festus,<sup>7</sup> Eutropius,<sup>8</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus,<sup>9</sup> Jerome,<sup>10</sup> Paulus Orosius,<sup>11</sup> Socrates Scholasticus,<sup>12</sup> Jacob of Edessa,<sup>13</sup> Ioannes Zonaras<sup>14</sup> and in “*Consularia Constantinopolitana*”.<sup>15</sup>

Upon further acquaintance with the sources which contain information on the “Night Battle”, however, a scholar is immediately confronted by a paradox: despite the apparent abundance of sources and detailed descriptions of the Battle of Singara, it is impossible to

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<sup>1</sup> The name was given to this battle due to the time when it came to its end.

<sup>2</sup> There is no unanimity among scholars as to the date of the battle. About options of dating the Battle of Singara see: TILLEMONT (1704) 672; BURY (1896) 302 - 305; STEIN (1959) 138; PORTMANN (1989) 2; MOSIG-WALBURG (1999) 330 - 384. I believe that the battle took place in the summer of 344 AD; see: DMITRIEV (2012) 77 - 86.

<sup>3</sup> See: DMITRIEV (2010) 87 - 90.

<sup>4</sup> In this relation N. H. BAYNES even says that “of one battle alone [i.e. Battle of Singara. – V. D.] have we any detailed account”; BAYNES (1911) 57.

<sup>5</sup> Liban. *Or.* LIX.99 - 120.

<sup>6</sup> Iul. *Or.* I.22D - 25B.

<sup>7</sup> Fest. XXVII.1 - 3.

<sup>8</sup> Eutrop. X. 10. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Amm. Marc. XVIII. 5 . 7.

<sup>10</sup> Hier. *Chron.* S.A. 348.

<sup>11</sup> Oros. VII. 29. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Socr. Schol. II. 25. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jac. Edes. *Chron. can.* P. 311.

<sup>14</sup> Zon. XIII. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Cons. Const. P. 236.

give a definite answer practically any question that a historian studying any military event usually raises! One of such questions is formulated in the title of present article.

The answer to the question who was the winner of any given battle is not always obvious due to at least three factors, the latter of which is especially important if we study ancient or medieval military history:

- 1) the vagueness of the term “a military victory”;
- 2) in some cases, the objective uncertainty of the results of the battle; for example, the Battle of Torgau (1760) or the Battle of Borodino (1812);
- 3) insufficient awareness and bias of the sources containing the data on the battle and its outcome.

In addition, the evaluation of the results of any armed conflict (whether a short-term skirmish or a full-scale war) depends on (a) what goals were set by its participants and (b) what the consequences of the conflict for its belligerents were in the foreseeable future.

To determine the winner, the criteria by which we can judge that in a particular case the victory went to one side or another are very important. It is also obvious that the criteria of achieving (or failure to achieve) victory will depend on the nature (in other words – level) of military events which are being analyzed (viz. on the tactical, operational or strategic level). Since the Battle of Singara was a one-off armed conflict (at least not directly related to others), we can assume that it was an event on the *tactical level*. In this connection we can apply to the “Night Battle” the criteria of achieving victory in a single battle applied by Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) who wrote the recognized classic of military theory. He wrote on this issue:<sup>16</sup> “If we now take a look at the conception of victory as a whole, we find in it three elements:

1. The greater loss of the enemy in physical power.<sup>17</sup>
2. In moral power.<sup>18</sup>
3. His open avowal of this by the relinquishment of his intentions”.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, given the specific character of sources, we do not possess sufficient and reliable information allowing us to assess the “physical” and “moral” losses suffered by the

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<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the best English translation of the Clausewitz’s “Vom Kriege” made by O. J. MATTHIJS JOLLES (CLAUSEWITZ K., von. On War / Trans. by O. J. MATTHIJS JOLLES. New York, 1943) is inaccessible for me. In this connection I was obliged to use old English edition of Clausewitz’s work: CLAUSEWITZ (1873).

<sup>17</sup> I.e. loss in men and material resources.

<sup>18</sup> By “loss in moral power” Clausewitz implies “the loss... in order, courage, confidence, cohesion and plan, which come into consideration when it is a question whether the fight can be still continued or not”; CLAUSEWITZ (1873) 128.

<sup>19</sup> CLAUSEWITZ (1873) 131.

belligerents as a result of the Battle of Singara, and, moreover, this information reflects the opinion of only side, viz. the Romans.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, the essential feature which allows us to determine with any certainty whether a victory was achieved or not is the presence of the third element in the Clausewitz's "conception of victory". In its turn, this element can be detected by analyzing the public and political resonance caused by the battle, because, according to Clausewitz, only real victory "acts upon the public opinion outside the army, upon the people and the government in both belligerent states, and upon all others in any way concerned".<sup>21</sup> Personally, partly paraphrasing, partly developing the idea of Clausewitz, I can add that not only current public opinion should be regarded as an important criterion of achieving victory in a battle, but also the perception of the battle's outcome in the historical memory of the nation.

Thus, in order to determine the winner of the "Night Battle" we need to analyze the assessment of its outcome by the most unbiased authors (i.e. certainly not Libanius and Julian who were the authors of *panegyric* orations), and definite priority should be given to those who wrote their works after the death of Constantius II, since only in this case we can hope for the impartiality of these writers in their treatment of the events which occurred during the reign of that emperor. Among all the texts containing information about the Battle of Singara, there are nine which can be assessed as more or less trustworthy, viz. the works of Festus, Eutropius, Ammianus Marcellinus, Jerome, Paulus Orosius, Socrates Scholasticus, Jacob of Edessa, John Zonaras and the "Consularia Constantinopolitana", but the latter three are silent about the results of the "Night Battle", limiting themselves by a simple and concise mention of the event. In the works of the others the outcome of the battle is described as follows:

1. Festus: "However, in the battles at Sisara, at Singara and at Singara a second time (in which Constantius was present), and at Sicgara, also at Constantia and when Amida was captured, the state suffered a severe loss under that emperor. Nisibis was besieged three times, but the enemy suffered the greater loss while maintaining the siege. However at the battle of Narasara, where Narses was killed, we were the winners. But in the night battle at Eleia near Singara, the outcome of all the expeditions would have been counterbalanced if, though terrain and night were adverse, the emperor himself by addressing them had been able to recall his soldiers, excited with their aggression, away from an inopportune time for a battle"<sup>22</sup> (tr. M. H. Dodgeon).

2. Eutropius: "Nor had he [Constantius II. – V. D.] a single successful engagement with Shapur, except that, at Singara, when victory might certainly have been his, he lost it,

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<sup>20</sup> Such a situation is also typical for many other battles and not only of ancient epoch. In this connection Clausewitz pointed out that "the returns made up on each side of losses in killed and wounded, are never exact, seldom truthful, and in most cases, full of intentional misrepresentations"; CLAUSEWITZ (1873) 131; In the case of the Battle of Singara it is especially significant the Julian's patently deceitful phrase in which he asserts that the Romans lost only several men (Iul. *Or.* I. 24D).

<sup>21</sup> Even the quitting the field of battle, which Clausewitz considers one of the most important attributes of victory, in reality can mean nothing; CLAUSEWITZ (1873) 131 - 132.

<sup>22</sup> Fest. XXVII. 2 - 3.

through the irrepressible eagerness of his men, who, contrary to the practice of war, mutinously and foolishly called for battle when the day was declining”<sup>23</sup> (tr. J. S. Watson).

3. Ammianus Marcellinus: “After all these continual wars, and especially the battles of Hileia and Singara, where that fierce combat by night took place, in which we lost a vast number of our men, as if some herald had interposed to stop them, the Persians, though victorious, had never advanced as far as Edessa on the bridges over the Euphrates”<sup>24</sup> (tr. C. D. Yonge).

4. Jerome: “Nocturnal battle against the Persians near Singara in which we lost a highly dubious victory through the stolidity of our forces”<sup>25</sup> (tr. M. H. Dodgeon).

5. Paulus Orosius: “Constans fought nine unsuccessful campaigns against the Persians and Sapor, who had been ravaging Mesopotamia. Finally his soldiers, now out of control, mutinied and compelled him to make a night attack, and he not only lost the victory that had been almost won but was actually defeated himself”<sup>26</sup> (tr. I. W. Raymond).

6. Socrates Scholasticus: “The Persian war was raised against the Romans, in which Constantius did nothing prosperously: for in a battle fought by night on the frontiers of both parties, the Persians had to some slight extent the advantage”<sup>27</sup> (tr. A. C. Zenos).

As we can see, four of the six authors: Festus (albeit in a disguised form), Ammianus, Orosius and Socrates, believe that the Persians won the battle; the two others (Eutropius and Jerome) give a vague interpretation of the result of the battle for the Roman side as the “lost victory”. To put it in another way, *none* of the authors asserts that the Romans were victorious. Thus, “public opinion outside the army” obviously was not on the side of the Romans. Moreover, the mere fact that Libanius and Julian clearly made efforts to prove the idea of the Roman victory does not say much in favor of the Romans: if they were the winners indeed, why was it necessary to prove this? Also, it should be taken into account that we have evidence only from the side of Roman and Byzantine writers, who, of course, can scarcely be suspected of pro-Persian orientation. It is not hard to imagine how much more obvious the victory of Shapur II would sound if there were reports of the Battle of Singara representing the opinion of the Persian side!

Thus we can quite confidently answer the question which is contained in the title of given article: beyond all doubt the winners of the Battle of Singara were the Persians. Libanius’ and Julian’s pro-Roman version of outcome of the “Night Battle” must be rejected: both authors obviously were anxious for emperor’s favor, so their writings, containing utterly flattering assessments as they do, are exceedingly unreliable as sources.

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<sup>23</sup> Eutrop. X. 10. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Amm. Marc. XVIII.5. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Hieron. *Chron.* S.A. 348.

<sup>26</sup> Oros. VII.29. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Socr. Schol. II. 25. 5.

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### Summary

The so-called “Night Battle” of Singara (344 AD) still remains poorly studied historical event because of discrepancies between the sources. The outcome of the battle is

described in them with considerable discrepancies too. The analysis of the sources from the point of view of the “classical theory of war” elaborated by C. Clausewitz, unambiguously demonstrates that the winning side in this battle were Persians.

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