

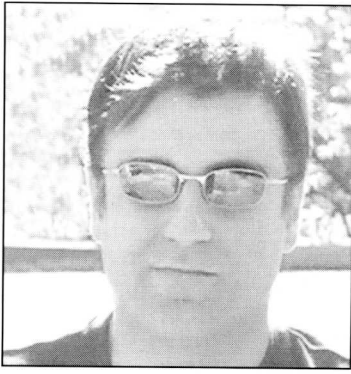
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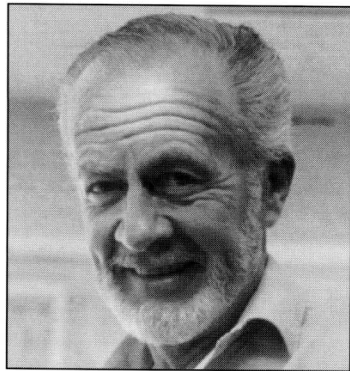
# Sassanian Elite Cavalry AD 224–642



Dr Kaveh Farrokh • Illustrated by Angus McBride



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# SASSANIAN ELITE CAVALRY AD 224-642

## ORIGINS OF THE SAVARAN

**W**hen the Sassanians overthrew the Parthians at Firuzabad in AD 224, they endeavored to recreate the Achaemenid superstate that encompassed Iranian-speaking peoples from Central Asia to the Kurds, Medes, and Persians of the Near East. Despite their overthrow by Alexander the Great in 333 BC, the Achaemenids had laid the technological and tactical foundations of the future Sassanian elite cavalry, the Savaran knights.

The failed invasions of Greece under Darius I and his son Xerxes resulted in major changes in the equipment of infantry and cavalry. By the time of Alexander's conquests, Persian cavalry were described by Herodotus as being equipped with bronze cuirasses, scale armor and helmets, thigh pieces, maces, javelins, daggers, the *kopis* slashing sword, quivers holding 30 arrows, bows, and, by the end of the empire, javelins and lances. Horses also had bronze armor comprising frontlet, breast armor and thigh protection. This technology first developed among Iranian peoples in Central Asia, specifically Chorasmia (modern Uzbekistan). It was here that the concept of "heavy" cavalry was developed and brought to the Near East by the Achaemenids of Persia. The agriculturally settled Chorasmo-Massagetae peoples had developed a weapon to counter steppe cavalry. Heavy cavalry (with armor for man

and horse) was an early tactical answer to the fast and agile mounted bowmen of the steppes. Chorasmian heavy armored cavalry may have used the tactics of close order attack (see Michalak, 1987, p.74). This early heavy cavalry was the Iranian counterpart to the classical Hellenic infantry phalanx. These cavalrymen wore scale armor, and carried what appears to be a long lance. Their horses also had armored protection.

How much influence did the Massagetae have on their Iranian kinsmen in Achaemenid Persia? Later Achaemenid heavy cavalry certainly adopted the armor technology of the Massagetae and classical sources do refer to Massagetan cavalry among the Achaemenids. Nevertheless, a local "Persian" force rapidly appeared. These were recruited from the ranks of the "Azata" or upper nobility who were of "Aryan" descent. Xenophon's *Kyropaidia* notes that the early Persians had few cavalry however by the time of the Greek wars, Persia fielded large numbers of effective

A gigantic eagle gently lifts a woman with its claws, on a late 6th- to early 7th-century metalwork plate. The eagle motif was one of the standard symbols of the Savaran. (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)



Chorasmian-inspired cavalry. The “two-handed” lance is first seen in lightly armed northern Iranian Chorasmian horsemen. Its adoption by the heavy cavalry of the Achaemenids was the first true representation of the prototype “knight.” Persian Azat knights often settled their disputes with cavalry and it was here that the Zoroastrian concept of *Farr* (divine glory) and north Iranian warfare evolved into the man-to-man joust. Rebels and members of the royal house often settled disputes by way of the joust as corroborated by Greek sources. The relatively brief Hellenic interlude of Alexander the Great and the Seleucids did not eradicate this Iranian culture.

However, heavy cavalry in Achaemenid Persian armies never developed into the main striking force that they were to become in the later Parthian and Sassanian armies. A very important implication of the Persian-Hellenic wars was that lightly armored troops could not withstand the excellent training and leadership of the standard Greek hoplite or Macedonian phalanx formation. Heavy cavalry units did achieve fleeting local successes, but could not compensate for the weaknesses of the Achaemenids against Hellenic armies. More importantly, Alexander had perfected the tactic of a truly integrated combined arms force, in which infantry and cavalry operated closely together. Nevertheless, the meteoric scale of Alexander’s victories largely overshadowed the future dangers of a revived Persia in the form of professional armored cavalry, a warning voiced earlier by Xenophon.

The post-Alexandrian Seleucids also inherited Achaemenid-style heavy cavalry units. Units of these were operating with Antiochus III in his wars with the Romans. The Parthian *cataphractii* in turn defeated the Seleucids in western Iran and Mesopotamia in the 2nd century BC. Parthian cavalry had developed much of its tactics to successfully counter Macedonian heavy infantry and tactics. They were similar to the north Iranian Saka and earlier Massagetae. The Parthians did much to bring the styles of their north Iranian kin to Persia. Their battle tactics were simple and effective. Lightly armed horsemen came equipped with their chief weapon: the bow. They were adept horse archers who supported the armored knights who employed spear and sword on their famous Nisean chargers. The Parthian cavalryman typically wore a strong cuirass and a helmet with faceguard, and his horse was protected by an armored coat.

By the early 3rd century AD the Iranian peoples of the empire no longer trusted Parthian abilities in safeguarding Persia against Roman incursions. When Ardashir and his son Shapur overthrew the Parthians in AD 224, Iranian highlanders (Medes, Kurds, northern Iranians), Persians, and eastern Iranians joined the Sassanian banner. Many Parthian families such as the Mihran and Suren followed suit. The

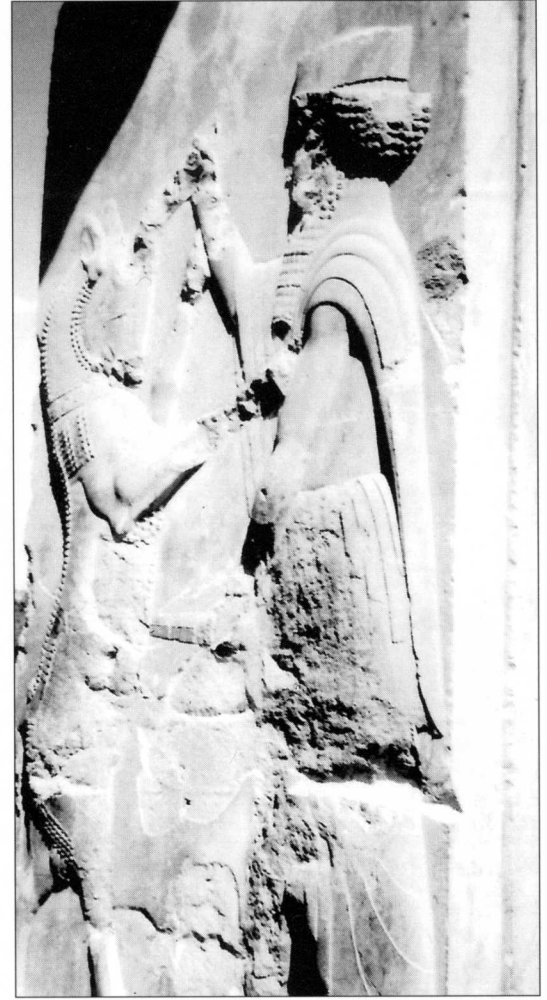
**Persian (right) and Mede (left) Achaemenean noblemen at Persepolis. The Sassanians endeavored to recreate a pan-Iranic empire with the Savaran as its elite military arm. (Khademi, Modares University)**



Sassanians inherited the Parthian military tradition of having cavalry as the mainstay of the armed forces. However, they were to introduce major tactical and technological changes to the heavy armored knight throughout their reign.

A strategic problem faced by the Parthians and then the Sassanians was the constant threat of a two-front war: one in the east, the other in the west. On the western front stood first the formidable Romans and then the Byzantines. The east was menaced by Hun and Turkic warriors. The logical strategy was the development of a highly mobile and professionally trained cavalry force able to deploy at short notice at any potential front. The Parthians had wisely chosen not to rely on infantry formations against the Roman legionaries as they were possibly the world's best trained heavy close-combat infantry. In any event, infantry was practically useless on the open steppe spaces of northeastern Persia and Central Asia against the deadly and agile nomadic cavalry.

The Sassanians were the "other superpower," east of the Romans. In almost every battle with Rome, the Savaran cavalry were present. Their military machine proved to be Rome's equal, an "unpalatable truth" which the Romans were eventually forced to accept (see Howard-Johnson, 1989). Scholars, popular imagination, and the media are excited by the likes of Alexander, Caesar, Hannibal, Attila, and Napoleon, but few know of Shapur I (241–72), who defeated three Roman emperors in his lifetime, or the death of Julian the Apostate in Persia, an event which ensured Christianity's survival in the West. Sassanian elite cavalry were key in preventing Rome from absorbing Persia and reaching the borders of India and China. Very few today realize the awe and fear that the Savaran inspired in their opponents. Libianus comments on the Romans who "...prefer to suffer any fate rather than look a Persian in the face" (Libianus, XVIII, pp.205–11). The Sassanian Savaran in turn left their imprint on the Romans (and through them, the Europeans in general), as well as the Arabs and the Turks. The Savaran did much to avenge Alexander's conquests centuries before, leaving behind an impressive legacy, which today is all but forgotten.



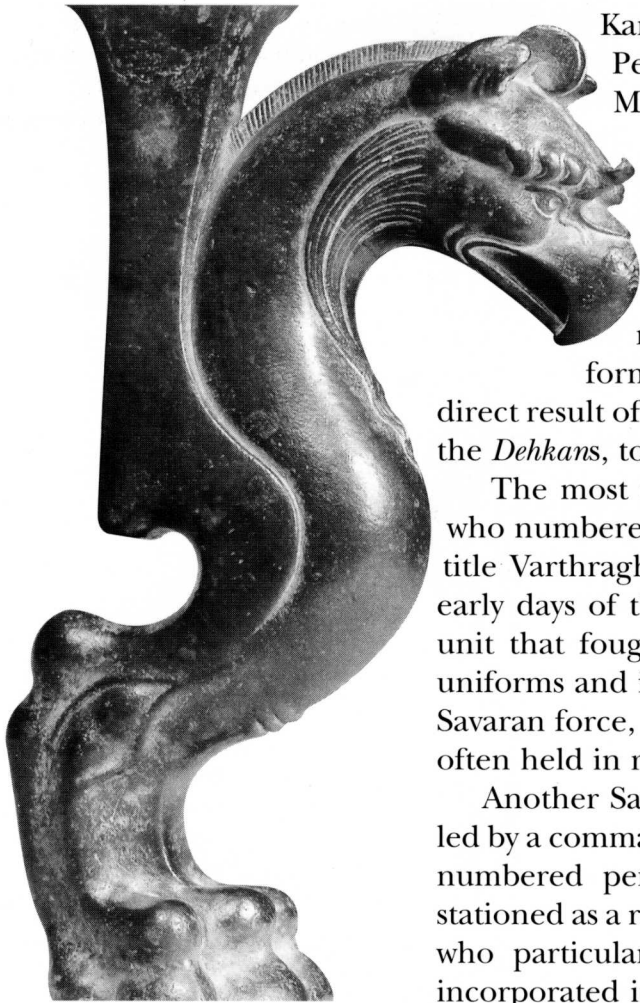
**Darius the Great battles an incarnation of evil. The Sassanians revived much of the symbolism and regalia of the Achaemenid dynasty, which had been destroyed in the 4th century BC by Alexander the Great. (Author's photo at Persepolis)**

## **SASSANIAN ARMY ORGANIZATION AND REFORMS**

### **The Savaran**

Sassanian society was broadly ordered into *Arteshtaran* or warriors, scribes, priests, and commoners. Of the warriors, it was the elite cavalry or Savaran who held the position of honor. Each Savaran unit seems to have had its own *Drafsh* (banner). Membership in such units and other important posts was generally reserved for individuals of Aryan ancestry. These encompassed three general categories.

First of these were the members of the seven top families of Persia, the first of which was the House of Sassan. The other six had Parthian roots. These were the Aspahbad-Pahlav (Gurgan region, northern Persia),



Leg of a throne shaped into a griffin. (Louvre Museum, Paris)

Karin-Pahlav (Shiraz), and Suren-Pahlav (Seistan, southeast Persia), Spandiyadh (Nihavand region, close to Kurdistan), Mihran (Ray, close to modern Tehran), and Guiw.

The second category comprised the *Azadan* upper nobility. Confused by Greek sources with “freemen,” the *Azadan* were descendants of the original Aryan clans that had been settled in the Near East since the times of the Medes or earlier. They could be traced back to the Azata nobility of Achaemenid times. It was the *Azadan* who formed the core of the Savaran. The third category was the direct result of Khosrow I’s reforms, which allowed for the lower nobility, the *Dehkans*, to enter the ranks of the Savaran.

The most famous of the Savaran were the Zhayedan (Immortals), who numbered 10,000 men and were led by a commander bearing the title Varthragh-Nighan Khvadhay. This unit was in evidence from the early days of the Sassanians and was a direct emulation of the similar unit that fought for Darius the Great. It is highly probable that the uniforms and insignia of this unit reflected Achaemenid tradition. As a Savaran force, their task was to secure any breakthrough, and they were often held in reserve, entering battles at crucial stages.

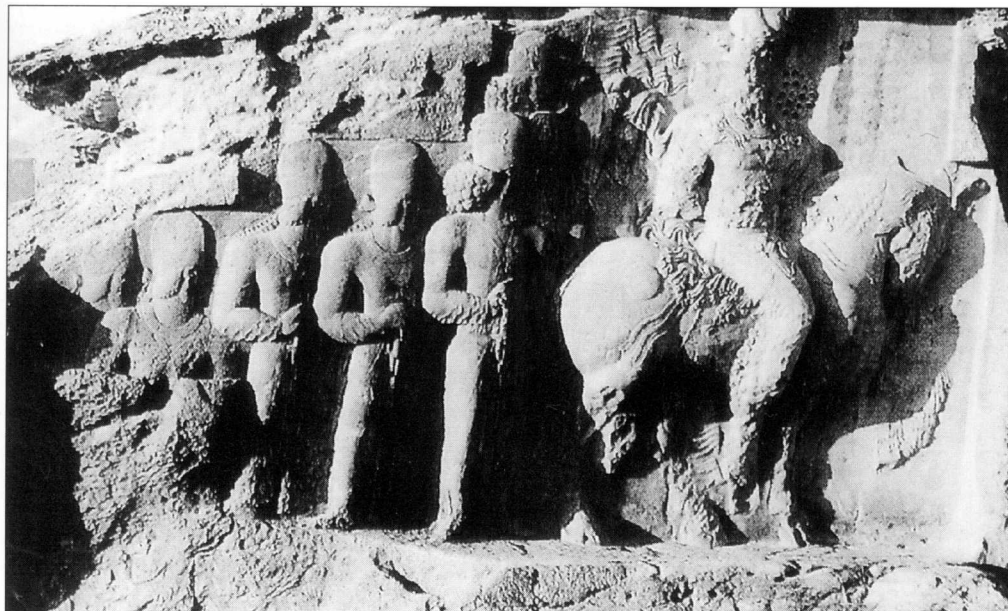
Another Savaran prestige unit was the Royal Guard or Pushtighban, led by a commander with the title of Pushtighban-Salar. The Pushtighban numbered perhaps 1,000 men. In peacetime, the Pushtighban was stationed as a royal guard regiment in the capital, Ctesiphon. Cavalrymen who particularly distinguished themselves by bravery in battle were incorporated into the Gyan-avspar (those who sacrifice their lives), also known colloquially as the Peshmerga.

By the time of Khosrow II (r. AD 590–628), a number of other prestige Savaran units had appeared. Two of these were the Khosrowgetae (Khosrow’s Own) and the Piroozetae (The Victorious Ones), who were apparently royal guard units. An interesting account in the *Khuzistan Chronicle* notes that during the siege and conquest of Dara in 604, Khosrow II was rescued from a potential trap, a noose which was cut by one of his elite bodyguards named Mushkan, who was most likely a member of the Khosrowgetae or Peroozetae. These units are again mentioned in the wars of 603–28 when Khosrow II sent the Khosrowgetae and Peroozetae to General Shahrplakan in Caucasian Albania (present-day Republic of Azerbaijan). Another prestige unit contemporary to Khosrow II was a large *Spah* (army) of 50,000 Savaran known as the Golden Spearmen, supplied to General Shahin by his colleague Farrokhan Shahrbaraz (Theoph. A.M. 6117, 315.2–26).

Finally, it would seem that officers leading other branches of the army may themselves have been members of the cavalry elite. The infantry forces that invaded Yemen were led by a Savaran officer by the name of Vahriz.

### Organization

The Sassanians inherited the Parthian system of military organization; however, their system was to become far more sophisticated than its predecessors’. The early Sassanian *Spah* (standing army or military) had much in common with its Parthian equivalent. In general, three designations were used: (1) *Vasht* (Parthian *Wast*), a small company;



**Shapur I. The four warriors behind the king are most likely from a royal Savaran unit. (Author's photo at Naghsh-e-Rajab)**

(2) a larger unit of perhaps 1,000 men known as a *Drafsh*, with its own banner and system of heraldry; and (3) a large regular division known as a *Gund*. The *Gund* was led by the Gund-Salar or general. A corps in Parthian times seems to have numbered 10,000 men, as seen by the forces of general Surena who defeated Crassus' Roman legions at Carrhae in 53 BC. The size of a regular Sassanian army was probably 12,000 men. The pride of the Sassanian *Spah* were the Savaran.

In Parthian times, the proportion of heavy lance-armed cavalry in comparison to horse archers was one to ten – this proportion was to radically shift in favor of lancers by the early Sassanian era. This meant that the importance of the lancer increased such that by the rise of the early Sassanians, the heavy armored lancer had become the dominant feature of Iranian warfare, with horse archery in decline.

Unlike their Hellenic adversaries, the Achaemenids used the decimal system to organize their *Spada* (Achaemenid for army). It is highly probable (though not certain) that the Sassanians used the decimal system as well, this being suggested by titles such as *Hazarmard* (thousand-man) and *Hazarbad* (chief of a thousand) or references such as "Gusdanaspes who was captain of a thousand men in the army of Shahrbaraz" (Theoph. A.M. 6118, 325.10).

### **Military titles**

The *Vuzurg-Framandar* (Great Commander) managed the affairs of state, headed by the monarch. When the monarch was away in battle, the *Vuzurg-Framandar* would take over state functions in Ctesiphon. He could become the commander in chief and was entrusted to engage in diplomatic negotiations, especially after a war or battle. The regular commander in chief of the army and Minister of Defense was the *Eran-Spahbad*, who was also empowered to conduct peace negotiations. He also acted as *Andarzbad* or counsel to the king. The posts of commander of the Savaran, known variously as *Aspbad* and Savaran *Sardar*, and of chief instructor of the Savaran, known as *Arzbad-e-Aspwaragan*, were also held by members of the elite. The post of Savaran *Sardar* was held by a member of the Mihran-Pahlav family during Julian's invasion in 362.



A Sassanian Ram symbol.  
(Louvre Museum, Paris)

It is difficult to specifically relate actual family names to other important military posts, however the Suren and Mihran names occur frequently. Roman sources would sometimes mistake the names of nobility with actual military titles. A typical example of this is the Roman reference to “the Suren” during Julian’s invasion of Persia, when in fact “Surena” referred to one of the seven major families.

There is some confusion between the terms *Spahbad*, *Marzban*, *Kanarang*, *Paygospanan*, and *Istandar*. A *Spahbad* was an army general who could also be a military governor. His assistant was known as the *Padgospan*. The *Spahbad*’s officers were the *Padan*. Battlefield commanders were designated as *Framandar*. It is not exactly clear how to distinguish the *Spahbad* from the *Marzban*.

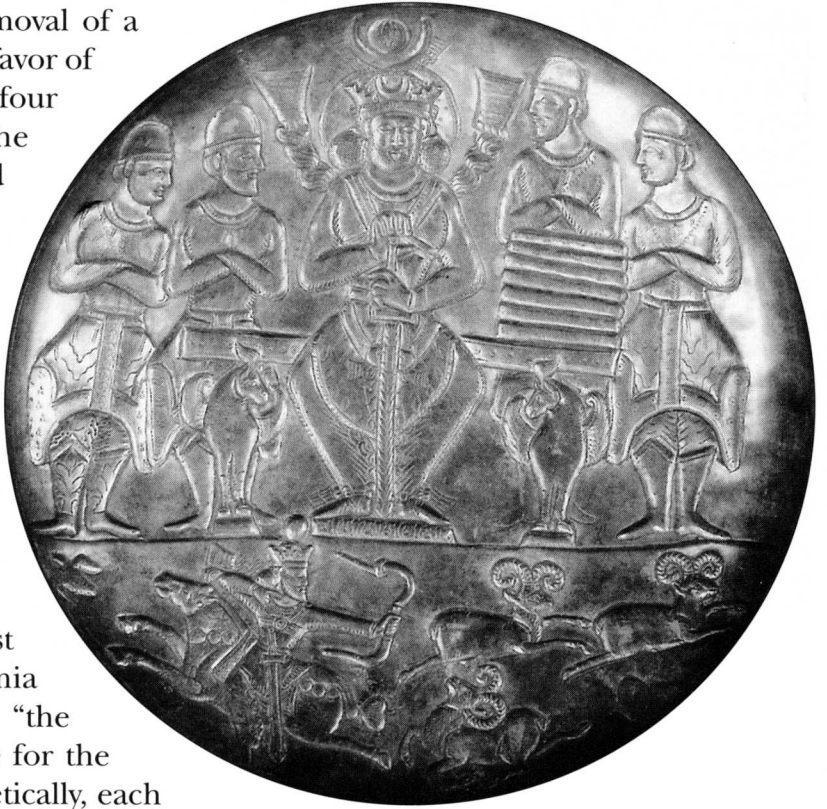
Some accounts blur the distinctions between the two, while others suggest that the *Spahbad* was a general-diplomat empowered to conduct negotiations by the king when so ordered, and the *Marzban* was strictly military, as implied in his role of frontier marches commander or ruler of an important border province. *Kanarang*, an east Iranian term, is least clear, apparently the title of the *Marzban* of Abarshahr in Central Asia. The term *Paygospanan* seems to refer to provincial military commanders. The *Istandar* was the leader of an *istan* (province or district/area within a province).

A number of other Achaemenid-type military terms appeared by the mid-Sassanian era. A term reserved for warriors displaying great bravery in battle is *Arteshwaran-Salar* (Chief of Warriors), a term of Achaemenid origin. Warriors honored with such a ranking include General Siyavoush and Bahram Gur. *Argbadh* was the highest military title and was held by royal family members. A less defined title is the rank of *Rasnan*. Certain Azadan families were entrusted with specific duties, such as the *Artabid*, who crowned each new monarch. A group of *Vuzurgan* or grand nobles would also be present at coronation ceremonies. The Zoroastrian Magi (*Moghan*) and priests (*Mobadan*) played a very important role in society and they accompanied the soldiers to battle. The chief of the clergy or *Mobadan Mobad* was a very important personage at court. Rock reliefs often show Magi accompanying the king and his warriors.

### **The reforms of Khosrow I**

The reforms attributed to Khosrow I (r. AD 531–79) led to four major changes. First, the lesser nobility, the *Dehkans*, were admitted into the ranks of the Savaran, resulting in a larger manpower base for the cavalry forces. Second, the domestic ranks of light cavalry, especially horse archers, dramatically decreased. Foreign contingents were actively recruited to fulfill the latter role. The Savaran were now treated as state officials and were to receive a regular salary as well as subsidies. In addition, they were to receive their armaments, equipment and horses directly from the state. Third, official inspections evident since the early days of the dynasty now became more thorough, at times lasting up to 40 days. Even the king was not exempt from this process.

The fourth and final change was the removal of a single commander in chief (*Eran-Spahbad*) in favor of four field marshals or *Spahbads*. The previous four *Marzbans* were now subordinated to the respective *Spahbads*. Each *Spahbad* was to guard one sector of the empire. The *Spahbad* of the east guarded Khurasan, Seistan (Sakastan), and German (Kerman). The southern *Spahbad* watched over Persis, Susiana, and Khuzistan as well as the long coastline of the Persian Gulf. The northern *Spahbad* defended Media, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, and Arran, as well as vital passes of the Caucasus (e.g. the Derbend Pass). The *Spahbad* of the west was entrusted with the defense of the most important economic, trade, and agricultural area, the one most vulnerable to Roman attack: Mesopotamia (modern Iraq; from Iranian *Arak* meaning “the lowland”). Each *Spahbad* was also responsible for the recruitment and levying of his troops. Theoretically, each *Spahbad* would have one quarter of the entire army at his disposal, but in practice this probably did not take place.



This metalwork plate shows Khosrow I surrounded by nobles of the elite. (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)

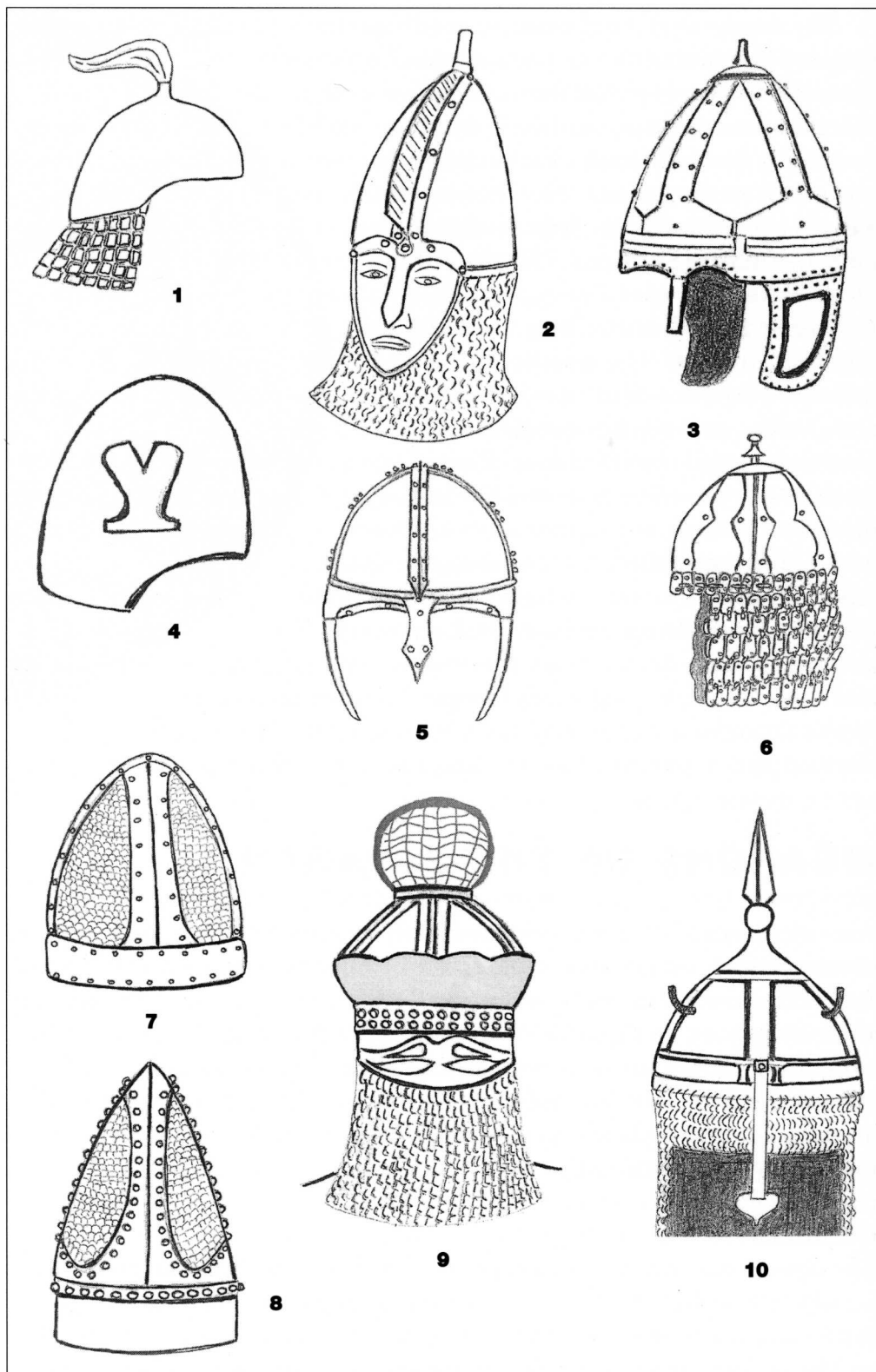
## WEAPONS OF THE SAVARAN

It is often noted that the early Sassanian military machine had much in common with its Parthian predecessor and this is true in the general sense. However, this observation overlooks the fact that the Sassanians were already in possession of different sword and armor technologies compared to the Parthians they overthrew at Firuzabad in AD 224. Later military clashes with Hephthalite Huns and Turkic groups forced the adoption of new technologies such as the Avar and/or Turkish two-point sword suspension system.

### Helmets

The Sassanians inherited sophisticated helmet construction techniques such as the *Spangenhelm* from Iranian peoples such as the Sarmatians. Rome may have been induced to adopt this technology as a result of military experiences with the Sarmatians, Ostrogoths and the Sassanian Empire. However, early rock-reliefs show no helmets of the *Spangenhelm* type. At Bishapur, Sassanian cavalry with Shapur appear to wear a mix of one-piece helmets and ceremonial headgear. This has led to some recent speculation that the early Sassanians did not know of or use *Spangenhelm* helmets. This is unlikely as the available technology did not allow mass production of one-piece helmets. The *Spangenhelm* was invented to provide large numbers of troops with an iron helmet. The helmet of the early Sassanian trooper found at Dura Europos was of the two-piece type, also known as the ridge helmet. The height of this helmet was approximately 25–26cm and its width 16cm. The two half-skull pieces were joined together by two riveted iron bands and mail

**Helmets:** (1) Late Parthian at Firuzabad, early 3rd century AD. (2) Sassanian ridge helmet, Dura Europos, early 3rd century (original drawing by James). (3) Germanic *Spangenhelm*, 6th century (original drawing by Granscay). (4) Early Sassanian helmet or felt cover at Firuzabad, early 3rd century. (5) Romano-Sassanian ridge helmet, early 4th century. (6) Mongolian (13th century) and Tibetan (17th century) *Spangenhelm* (see original drawing by Granscay and Men-at-Arms 105: *The Mongols*). (7) Sassanian *Spangenhelm*, possibly 4th–early 7th centuries. (8) Sassanian “Conical” *Spangenhelm* from Nineveh, late 6th–early 7th centuries. (9) Late Sassanian *Spangenhelm* at Tagh-e-Bostan, late 6th–early 7th centuries. (10) Shah Abbas the Great (17th century). (Kaveh Farrokh, 2004)



hung down from the lower edge. This model was quickly adopted by the Romans after the 3rd century AD (Peterson, 1992, p.35). It has been suggested that this was used mainly by combat infantry, however this does not rule out cavalry use. The reliefs at Firuzabad, Naghsh-e-Rustam and Bishapur are only two-dimensional showing the faces and heads of the warriors in profile, and giving the impression of one-piece helmets. Finally, a 4th-century terracotta from Tepe Yahya portrays a Sassanian warrior with a four-part *Spangenhelm*. By the reign of Shapur II, Heliodorus reports metallic face masks used by Shapur II's super-heavy Savaran units.

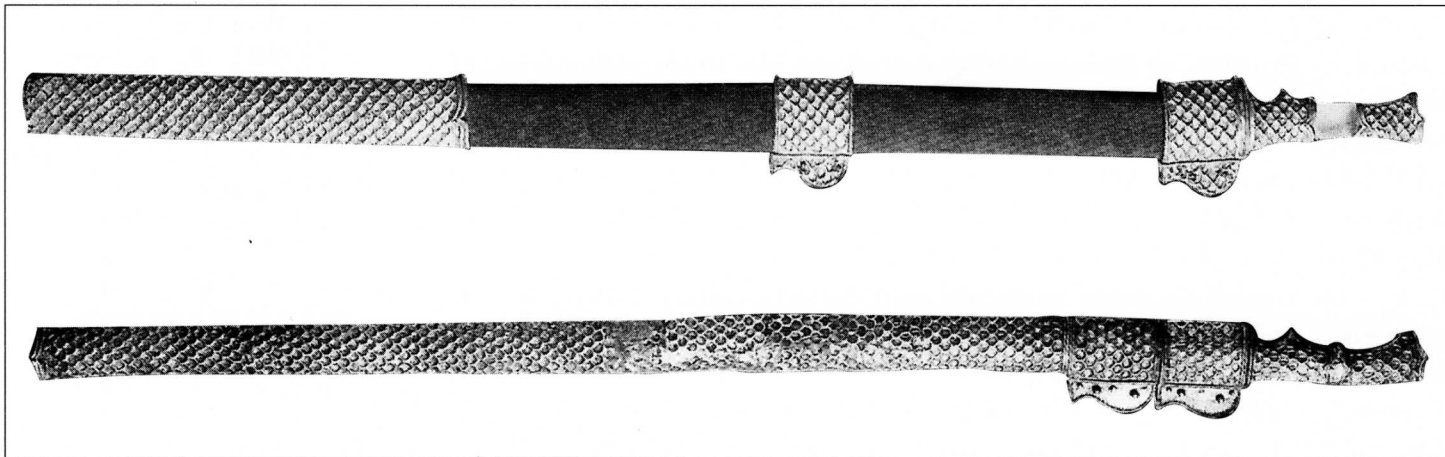
The *Spangenhelm* continued to be developed in Persia. Essentially, the Sassanian tradition of *Spangenhelm* construction was to use a frame and a headband to join four or six metallic pieces by means of rivets. A typical Sassanian four-part *Spangenhelm* was approximately 22–24cm in height, and about 20cm in width. These were generally constructed of four iron segments and metallic bands fastened together with bronze rivets. The Sassanian *Spangenhelm* seems to have been of the higher cone *Bashlyk* type, very typical of finds in Persia and Mesopotamia. The four iron segments of the helmet could be overlaid by silver or gold sheets (0.1–0.2mm thickness). Decoration on these were usually in the form of *Varanga* (the *Varanga* was an ancient Iranian bird like a griffin) or *Simurgh* feather designs. It is interesting that late Sassanian swords sport the same type of feather decoration design motifs.

The latest model of a Sassanian *Spangenhelm* helmet is that worn by the heavy cavalryman (Khosrow II) at Tagh-e-Bostan (see illustration (9) opposite). Close examination of this helmet indicates a different design. The front of the helmet has shaped eye-slits, above which are metal “eyebrows.” In contrast to the early Sassanian helmet found at Dura Europos, mail also protects the face. Note that the mail extends to the shoulders. The helmet now appears to be more hemispherical than conical. It is also elaborately decorated with an object resembling a jewel, which rests in the center of the forehead. From this extends two rows of pearls. A globe sits on top of the helmet; ribbons can be seen extending from this.

## **Swords**

Early Sassanian swords were similar to their Parthian predecessors. They had broad guards, long and straight blades, and were hung by scabbard slides. Early Sasanian swords show many Sarmatian features: sword suspension, globe-shaped pommels and wide sword guards. Early reliefs also show daggers strapped to the thigh, another common northern Iranian feature. This Sarmatian influence may have been transmitted by the Kushans. It is likely that these types of long iron swords were first introduced by the Kushans into Parthian Persia. The Sassanians then increased the length of the Parthian sword to a length of 1–1.1m, and width of approx. 5–8.5cm, resulting in a relatively large weapon, which was (in general) longer and slimmer in comparison to Parthian swords, and had a “Sarmatian” appearance. Early Sassanian sword guards were usually broad but could also be smaller, in the Han Chinese style. A Persian influence may also be ascribed to the sword guards at Bishapur and Naghsh-e-Rajab where the pommels have ends with spherical bulbs or ends that seem to be flaring outwards. Even Roman influence can be seen in the heart-shaped scabbard tip.

Early Sassanian long swords were suspended vertically from the belt by means of the scabbard slide. The sword was suspended vertically from a metal slide mounted on the scabbard, and could be moved along the belt. These vertically suspended swords were suitable for cavalry. The depiction of Shapur I at the Naghsh-e-Rustam site shows that early Sassanians suspended the scabbard-slide sword as to have ready access to the hilt. Shapur is seen resting his left hand on the hilt tilting the sword by 45 degrees to the right. The scabbard rests on the flank of the horse just behind Shapur’s leg. This method seems to have been popular in



**Late Sassanian swords from Dailaman, 6th–7th centuries. (Louvre Museum, Paris)**

the early part of the dynasty, the latest evidence for use comes from the reign of Shapur II (AD 310–79) or perhaps his successor, Ardashir II (AD 379–83).

Infantry could not efficiently use the scabbard slide since the sword would drag on the ground when on the march, unless constant pressure was applied to the hilt. This changed with the advent of the two-point suspension system. By the 4th century non-Iranian peoples had largely displaced Iranian speakers in Central Asia and had introduced new military technologies. The two-point or double-locket system was of Turkish or Avar origin, and may have been first encountered by the Sassanians after their disastrous wars with the Hephthalites in the 5th century. The new system suspended the sword from a belt by two straps, each of which went through a “P”-shaped attachment on the scabbard edge. The length of each strap was adjustable to alter the angle of sword tilt. It has been suggested that the ability to adjust the angle of sword suspension allowed the user to draw out his sword much faster than with a scabbard-slide sword, and this dramatically improved cavalry performance. Field experiments and observations by Karasulas (2003) however dispute this, and it is important to note that cavalry did not necessarily find themselves in a “fast sword draw” situation during combat. The two-point system meant that the sword no longer hung parallel to the legs of a foot soldier and therefore did not interfere with motion, allowing the tough Dailamite infantry to carry longer swords efficiently. It is interesting that by the later Sassanian period, daggers are also suspended by the two-point system as shown at sites such as Panjikent, Balalyk Tepe (near Termez) or at Varakhshah.

The older vertical sword continued to be used in ceremonies. This can be seen in the investiture of Khosrow II by the goddess Anahita and Ahura-Mazda at Tagh-e-Bostan. The two-point swords can also be seen at Tagh-e-Bostan, however these were probably viewed as “too barbaric” (Lerner, 2002, p.102) for important religious ceremonies. The use of both the outdated vertical sword (for religious and ceremonial duties) and the more practical two-point system can be found in Iranian-speaking Central Asia such as Soghdiana and Pianjekent (Lerner, 2000).

Later Sassanian swords are interesting in that the hilt has two indentations on it: a shorter one for the index finger and a longer one for the remaining three fingers. Unlike the earlier swords, there are no guards for the hilts, which were made of wood. The hilts also seem to have a “pistol shape,” set at an angle to the blade and with a downward-

curved hilt, bringing the blade's weight more forward, allowing for the delivery of a more powerful strike. Sword blades were iron, however surviving examples are too decomposed to accurately ascertain weight or whether they were designed primarily for cutting or thrusting. Iron for swords came mainly from India as well as from ironworks within the empire, most likely Kurdistan. The Iranian plateau was deficient in high-grade iron, as well as the wood needed to treat it.

Sword and scabbard reached an average length of 105.5cm. The scabbard generally narrowed slightly from mouth to tip (approx. 4.4–3.5cm). The tips of these scabbards were usually enclosed by a "V"-shaped decorative plate. Late Sassanian swords seem to have hilts and scabbards decorated with thin plates of gold and silver. A sheet would be folded around the scabbard, and along the back of the scabbard; where the edges of the sheet met, a flat strip was attached to strengthen the join. The back of the scabbard was usually decorated with "Celtic" style spirals. The front of the scabbard was decorated in the *Varanga* feather pattern as on the *Spangenhelm* helmet.

### **Spears, lances, maces, axes, and whips**

The lance was the Sasanian's main weapon of attack from early Sassanian times. The Parthian spear, which the Sassanians inherited, was of immense penetrating power and is described by Heliodorus as being able to impale two men simultaneously. This capability was most likely due to a combination of the weight of the spear itself (Shahbazi, 1986, p.495) as well as the momentum of the charging cavalryman. During the charge, the Sassanian lance was carried by two hands usually at waist level. Rock reliefs such as Naghsh-e-Rustam show the lance at the right side of the horse's neck. This technique was part of a wider Iranian cultural milieu; the Bosphoran rider at Kerc is engaged in the same maneuver. As noted by Heliodorus, the spear was fastened to the horse. This suspension device helped keep both lance and rider balanced, especially during the charge. The late Sassanian knight at Tagh-e-Bostan is no longer shown carrying the lance "two handed." Instead, he carries his weapon with his right arm only, a task made possible perhaps by the introduction of improved saddles and perhaps stirrups.

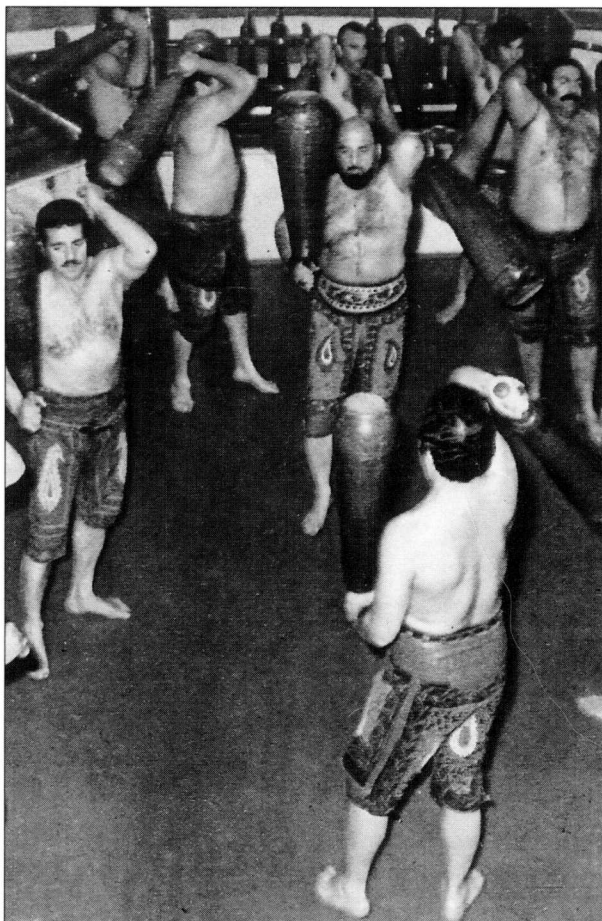
The mace was most likely used to shatter the armor of the opponent. These were made of iron and ranged from 40cm to 55cm in length. It is possible that the Turks acquired the mace as a weapon from their military and trade contacts with the Sassanians. The whip is mentioned often in the *Shahname* when describing Sassanian warriors, therefore it must have served a battlefield function. Most likely it was used to ensnare an opponent's neck and drag him off his horse. Iranian Steppe peoples such as the Sarmatians are known to have used lassos in a similar fashion.

### **Archery**

The Sassanians, like their Parthian predecessors, used bows based on the Central Asian model, a composite of horn, wood and sinew (for more on bow construction see *Men-at-Arms 175: Rome's Enemies (3) Parthians and Sassanid Persians*, pp.13, 21). The bow would usually be carried in the left hand, and shot by the right. Nevertheless, bowmen who could shoot with either hand were highly prized.



**Side view of Parthian chaps showing a dagger on the hip. (Khademi, Iran Bastan Museum)**



**A Zoorkhaneh, “House of Power,” traditional martial arts training gym. The trainees (also known as “Pahlavans”) exercise with meels (long wooden shafts), each weighing up to 75lb, and measuring up to 5ft. The word “meel” may be derived from mace and heavy sword training. (Courtesy of Moradi)**

Karasulas’ recent paper on Central Asian archery (2002) has important implications for popular views of classical archery. He makes an important distinction between effective (penetration) range and accuracy. Deadly penetrations could be achieved at 175m, the effective range of the weapon. For specific accuracy, the range was 50–60m. When missiles were shot over the 60m range, the intention was to fire for effect, and in a group to shower the opponents with a massive number of arrows. Although the arrows were still deadly, they were shot as part of a larger barrage of missiles rather than for pinpoint accuracy.

The Sassanian manner of drawing the bowstring of the compound bow involved using the middle and ring fingers. The index finger was stretched along the arrow shaft. It would seem that the little finger played no role in the “Persian draw,” and the role of the thumb is not completely clear; it may have acted in combination with the index finger to keep the arrow firmly nocked on the bowstring. The *Ayin-Namah* provides specific instructions on how to grasp the bow with three fingers of the left hand, supporting the arrow by the thumb and forefinger of the right hand.

Sassanian archers wore fingertip guards and recent examples of these have been excavated. Overlaet (1998)

has suggested that finger-caps were used to facilitate the drawing of the string of the heavier compound bows. These would help reduce the wear on the fingers by the bowstring. A small chain prevented the fingertip guards from falling in the heat of battle, it passed around the wrist, crossed on the back of the hand and the two ends attached to the middle fingers.

Curiously, it would appear that the Sassanians never adopted the Mongolian draw, which used the thumb to draw the bowstring. Bivar (1972) has suggested that the Sassanians may have regarded this type of draw as barbaric; however, if this is true, it is hard to explain why the Sassanians adopted the “barbaric” two-point sword suspension system. Perhaps it was simply that the Sassanians were not convinced of the superiority of Central Asian archery. For the Sassanians, the four criteria for archery success were penetration power, speed of delivery, volume of arrows launched, and shot accuracy.

To ensure greater speed and volume, a device was invented known as the *panjagan* (five device), allowing the knight to fire five shots with a single draw. This made archery particularly deadly, since an archer could fire five more arrows before the first set had reached its target. This implies that the arrows must have been prearranged for rapid access in groups of five in the quiver, contrasted to the regular Sassanian way of holding three arrows in the same hand as the bow. However, it is important to note that speed and volume of delivery were not the sole intentions of this weapon. Focused fire was another. It is likely that the *panjagan* allowed for the volley to spread over an intended area, creating localized “kill zones.” This allowed fewer people to concentrate “focused fire” on the enemy. No known actual samples of the *panjagan* have survived.

Roman sources speak highly of Sassanian accuracy in archery. An example is that of an amazing feat from Bahram Gur's boyhood whilst hunting with an Arab king by the name of Manzar. Bahram and Manzar saw a lion about to kill a wild ass. Bahram shot his arrow in such a way as to have it penetrate through the lion and the ass and slay them both. It is no coincidence that Bahram's nickname was Gur (wild ass).

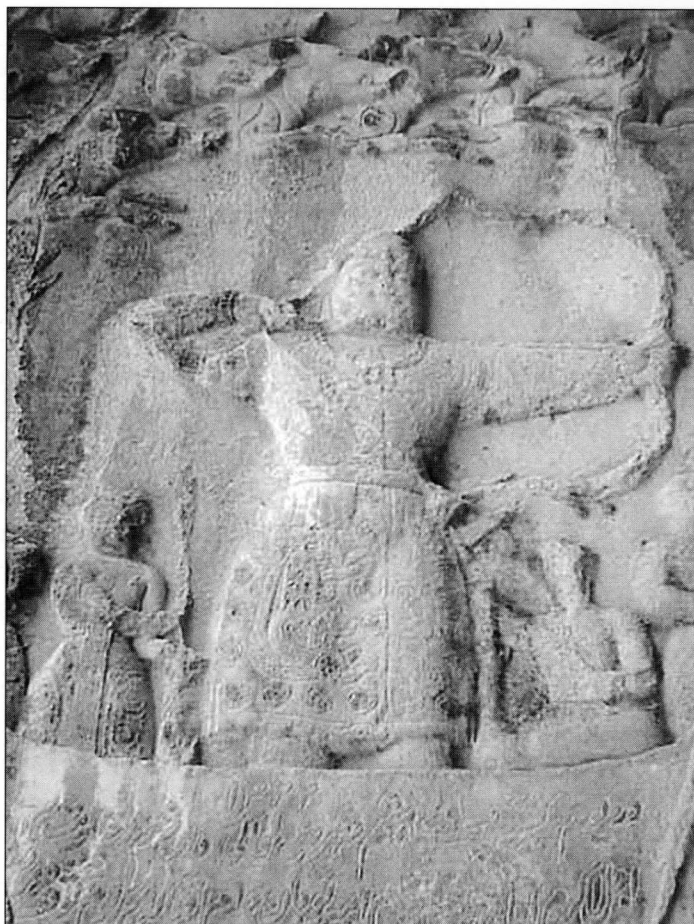
As in Achaemenid times, arrow shafts were made of wood and fletched with three vanes. A reed joint was cut for the nock. The arrow reached a total length of around 80–85cm. A variety of arrow types were used and these certainly were applied for different purposes on the battlefield. Arrow heads are variously described as falcon-winged, iron-bladed, horn-handled, gold-notched, lead-poisoned or vulture-feathered (Mehr Yasht, X, 129). The *Shahname* describes a double arrowhead for penetrating the eye sockets of the opponent. This would seem to be simply a poetic expression, rather than a practical weapon. Plate art shows that a two-headed weapon did exist, but only for hunting smaller wild game. The total number of arrows carried in the quiver was thirty, a tradition harking back to the ancient Avesta (Vendidad, XIV, 9).

The earlier Scythian-style *gorytos* (combined bow and quiver) of the Parthians soon gave way to the separate *kamandan* (bowcase) and *tirdan* (quiver) of the early Sassanians. Later Sassanian knights carried these by the same Central Asian suspension system for carrying swords. The figure of the armored knight at Tagh-e-Bostan is shown with two belts. The first is a garment belt, and beneath it a functional second belt, which as well as having a sword suspended from it, also has the quiver and bowcase attached to it. His quiver is slung on his right side. This is consistent with early Sassanian knights who suspended their quivers on their right side and their swords to the left.

### Shields

For early Sassanian knights, shields were an unnecessary impediment, mainly because they interfered with the handling of the lance, which required both hands. In addition, shields would have provided little protection against another lance-armed opponent. It is possible that the early Savaran may have judged the contemporary state of their armor as providing enough protection in the battlefield.

Nevertheless, shields were used by heavy infantry, *Paighan* siege workers and foot archers. Shields of heavy infantry found at Dura Europos in the 1930s were surprisingly similar to those of the Achaemenids almost 500 years before. The Persian shield was constructed of a



**Khosrow II draws his bow while standing in a boat during the royal hunt. (Chamanara at Tagh-e-Bostan)**

**A depiction of Bahram Gur hunting accompanied by Azadeh, 7th century. (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)**



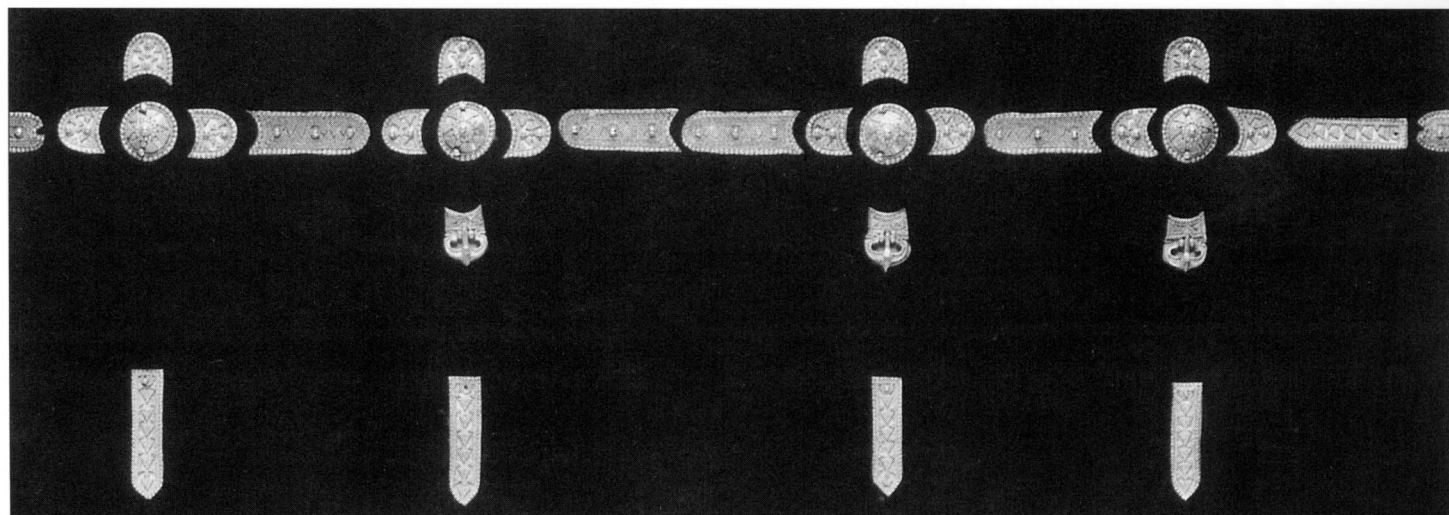
one-piece leather hide in which notches were cut in a “W” or “V” shape. Osiers were inserted through the notches. The shield was then soaked and dried, slightly shrinking it. The end result was a strong yet lightweight shield. Paighan siege workers used the Kilikia shield, which was long and thick, made of goat’s wool. This was used to provide both defense as well as concealment of sapping activities (Ammianus, XX; Procopius, I, 17). Foot archers are reported by Procopius (I, 1) as carrying a buckler that hangs on the shoulder so as to protect his face and neck. By later Sassanian times, there was a resurgence of the large wickerwork shields made of tough rawhide. These would be erected for protection as the foot archers discharged their missiles.

By later Sassanian times, Savaran were also seen with shields, as described by later Muslim sources. The late Sassanian knight in Tagh-e-Bostan is seen with a small round buckler attached to his left forearm. This may have been designed to deflect powerful Avar-Hun or Byzantine missiles as well as provide protection for the head and neck in close quarter melees.

### **Armor and mail**

In general, four types of Sassanian armor can be identified: lamellar, laminated, scale, and mail armor. Lamellar armor, of Central Asian origin, was built of small rectangular plates, of iron, bronze or leather, laced together vertically and horizontally. This type of defense can be seen in the Sassanian reliefs of the 4th century, which show a short-sleeved lamellar cuirass, worn as a form of outer defense, and could presumably be worn over a coat of mail. The later Byzantines adopted this, especially for their light cavalry. Another type of lamellar armor was made of long plates sewn or tied together onto a backing in order to form protection for torso, arms or legs. Laminated armor was constructed of metal strips fashioned into circular bands, mounted, overlapping horizontally, on a leather sleeve. This form of armor was used for leg and arm defense and was adopted by the Romans. Laminated armor was used by the Sassanians up to the end of the dynasty. Scale armor was constructed of small metal scales laced horizontally onto a backing material so that the scales would overlap. The finds at Dura Europos show bronze scales of different shapes and sizes. Larger scales protected the particularly vulnerable parts of the body, whereas the smaller ones allowed more movement.

**Late Sassanian belt decorations.**  
(Louvre Museum, Paris)



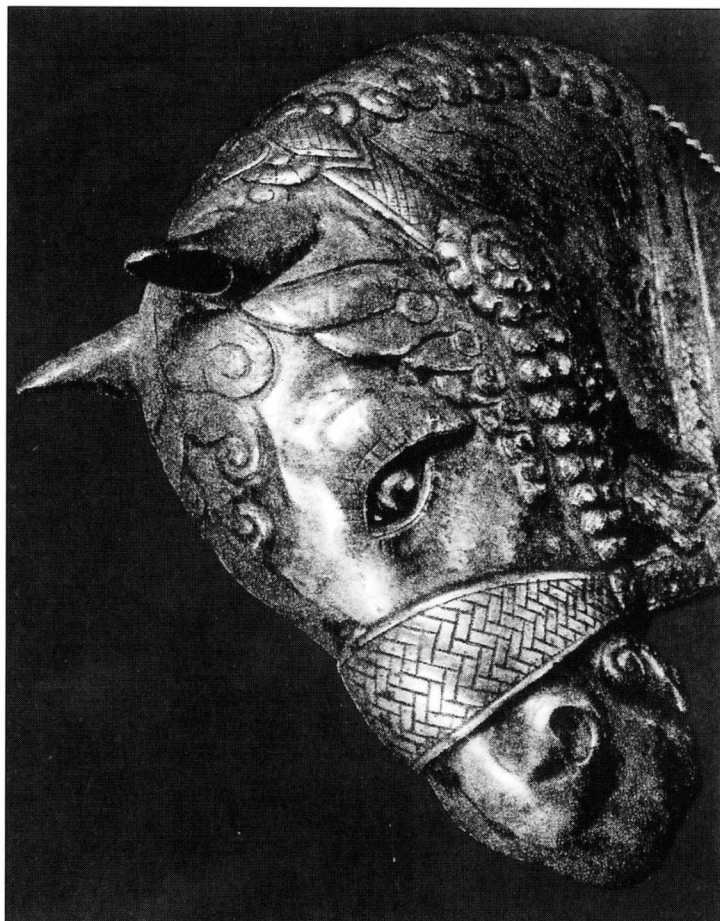
Mail armor was built up of interlinked metal rings. An example of a corselet of armor was found at Dura Europos. Mail seems to have been in full production in Persia by the time of Ardashir I. Although more difficult to produce than other types of armors, mail had a significant number of advantages: greater strength, durability and flexibility. The links in mail also allowed for excess heat to escape, an important feature in hot climates. Mail afforded effective protection for vulnerable and "open" areas such as joints. The main weakness of mail was that it was unable to successfully deflect or absorb the kinetic energy of arrows by itself. However, mail was very effective when worn in combination with other types of armor. The Firuzabad jousting scene in which Ardashir is depicted overthrowing Artabanus V (c. AD 255) strongly suggests that the early Sassanians used a variety of armor styles such as breastplates, vambraces, and mail body armor. Bivar (1972, p.275) and Shabazi (1986, p.496) have noted that one of the reasons for the Parthian defeat at Firuzabad was that they relied mainly on lamellar armor in contrast to the Sassanian elite cavalry, who in addition to other styles of armor, used mail. The "combination" system of armor was designed in such a way as to retain freedom of movement as much as possible. Greater personal mobility in Sassanian armor may indeed explain the Parthian defeat at Firuzabad. Such "combination" armor continued to be popular up to at least the later 3rd century. By the time of Julian's invasion of Persia in AD 362, super-heavy Savaran knights are described as being consistently covered by mail, and subsequently being "lifted up [onto the saddle] by others because of his weight" (Heliodorus, IX, 14, 5). Weight of armor did not pose a problem once the warrior was on horseback, and the powerful Nisean horse was easily able to transport his rider.

The final representation of Sassanian mail is seen in the Tagh-e-Bostan relief of the late heavy Sassanian cavalryman depicting Khosrow II. The warrior is now wearing a long mail coat that reaches down to the knees. The mail coat is a close fit on the upper body with a looser skirt below the waist, a style similar to that used in eastern Iranian and Central Asian regions. It is also likely that the Sassanians retained the use of the Parthian *Bazpan*, an armored glove for hand protection. A Sassanian *Bazpan* has been found in the Amlash region.

### **Horse equipment and armor**

The frame saddle was most likely a Sarmatian invention. It was developed to allow a heavier, armored rider to balance with a heavier and more powerful lance. The pommels allowed the rider to steady himself, and were most likely developed to help the lance charger keep his balance at the moment of impact. Mounted warriors also maintained their balance by knee pressure on the horse's flanks. The rock relief at Sarpol-e-Zohab is the earliest Persian representation of the horned saddle. The relief is very worn, but it is still possible to distinguish a "bulb" close to the rider's knee.

By the 3rd century AD, a four-horned saddle was being used. With the Sassanians one even sees the front horn extended and curving around the thigh. This extended front horn acted as a more powerful brace for the rider. The saddle horns provided firm support for both the spine and thighs of the rider, and in affording better balance they acted somewhat like stirrups. The rider was able to lean low when



**Frontal view of Sassanian steed, early to mid-Sassanian period. (Louvre Museum, Paris)**

slashing with the sword or lean forward when charging with the lance without discomfort or loss of balance.

By late Sassanian times, a new type of saddle had appeared. The “horns” disappear and instead a “raised bow” appears on the front. This new bow-front saddle was placed on a saddle-cloth, known to Iranian peoples since the Scythians. As before, straps under the belly and around the chest kept the saddle in place. The impetus for this change was presumably to create a more effective armored knight. The saddle may have been part of an overall scheme to increase the rider’s power and momentum with the lance. However, the Sassanian bow-front saddle seems counterintuitive: the bow at the front offers stability, but the back no longer has “horns” for support. Herrmann (1989) notes that the lack of support at the back of the saddle implies the simultaneous introduction of another new technology, most likely stirrups. Michalak has suggested that the introduction of saddles with stirrups provided the rider with a more stable platform. The general consensus has been that the Sassanians did not use stirrups, however it is

possible that stirrups were in use by the end of the Sassanian era. Stirrups were certainly not unknown to the Iranians, as the wall paintings in Soghdiana (Penjikent) show. Unfortunately, close examination of most the figures at Tagh-e-Bostan is inconclusive as the feet and legs are damaged. Herrmann, however, points to the final Sassanian reliefs at Tagh-e-Bostan of a boar and stag hunt where the feet of riders all have the foot in the “forward” versus the typical “ballerina” (foot pointed downwards) position. Perhaps this is an indication of stirrups in use, but the evidence is inconclusive. In addition, Sassanian plate art shows late monarchs riding without stirrups in the “ballerina” style. One example of this is an unidentified Sassanian king hunting lions (5th–7th century) in the British Museum (Inv.BM.124092). The only Sassanian-style plate art showing the stirrup is that of Pur-e-Vahman (see page 28), which is actually post-Sassanian and outside of Persia proper. All this being said, Herrmann is correct in noting a change in both saddle technology and leg/foot positioning. Furthermore, Herrmann’s question of how the new bow-front saddle could afford greater stability and security is valid, and it can be said that another innovation must have accompanied the new saddle, possibly stirrups.

The *Bargostvan* or lamellar armor for horses developed out of the logical requirement to protect them from enemy missiles. This necessity led to the eventual invention of the horse trapper by the Iranians and adoption by their ethnic kin in Persia. The Dura Europos finds indicate that the Parthian horse was protected by a coat of scale armor of bronze or steel scales on a leather backing, with an opening for the saddle. The horse had protection for its head (*chamfron*), neck (*crinet*) and legs (*greaves*). It is not altogether clear if the Dura Europos find can be

attributed to early Sassanian horses. There is little evidence of very early trappers, except the horses of Ardashir, Shapur, and an unknown nobleman (or prince) at Firuzabad. The situation evidently changed by the mid-4th century as Heliodorus (IX, 14, 4) describes Sassanian horses as being fully armored in addition to *estivals* and *chamfrons*. The final display of Sassanian horse armor is seen on the horse of Khosrow II at Tagh-e-Bostan. What is interesting is that horse armor is now “partial” in that it affords lamellar protection only to the head, neck, and frontal chest area. This was done to lighten overall weight and increase the steed’s mobility in the frontal assault.

## **COSTUMES, INSIGNIA, AND COATS OF ARMS**

### **Uniforms and costumes**

There has been a consistent pattern of costume and dress among Iranian peoples since antiquity. The typical Iranian riding costume of trousers, leather boots, tunic, and cap has shown a remarkable continuity across time and geography. The same basic pattern provided the basis for the Iranian costumes of the Central Asian Scythians and Sarmatians, as well as the Parthians and Sassanians of Persia. In Sassanian Persia, the traditional riding costume became almost synonymous with ceremonial attire. This meant that in addition to battlefield dress, there were possibly a variety of court costumes worn by the Savaran, noblemen, and military officials. These would most likely vary according to rank and clan.

Uniforms had been a standard aspect of the armies of Persia since the Achaemenean Empire. Sekunda (1992) has noted that uniforms for armies were first introduced in Achaemenean Persia and were only later adopted by the classical Greeks. For the design of uniforms, the early Sassanians looked to the ancient Achaemenians for inspiration. This is confirmed by Julian (III, 11–13.30, pp.132–8, Bidez), who notes that Sassanian warriors “imitate Persian fashions...take pride in wearing the same...raiment adorned with gold and purple...their king [Shapur II?] ...imitating Xerxes.” Members of the upper Aryan nobility (*Azadan*) wore distinctive badges of honor and specialized dress that were marks of their status.

There was a great deal of continuity between Parthian and Sassanian times in terms of costume. This is because many of the noble clans of the Parthian era continued to be well represented, with many of their articles of dress continuing into Sassanian Persia. One example is the Parthian tunic, which was Scythian in style, with the right tunic breast laid over the left, a “V”-shaped neck line and long sleeves. The north Iranian and Parthian embroidered trousers and tunics with long sleeves were adopted in Europe by the later Roman army as well as by eastern Germanic tribes (Boss, 1993, p.56).

Among the Parthians and early Sassanians colors of trousers had usually been blue, red, and green. Since the Sassanians were keen to



**Front view of a carving of Sabdiz, the royal steed of Khosrow II at Tagh-e-Bostan, showing the armor protecting the chest. (Chamanara)**



Sassanian-style kaftan found in the Caucasus, late to post-Sassanian period. (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)

emulate the fashions of the Achaemeneans, colors such as brown, red, crimson, and varieties of purple became increasingly common. A typical European portrayal of Iranian costume is that of the mosaic of San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna which shows the Three Wise Men, or Magi, of Persia. They wear tight Persian trousers with cape-like coats. These types of costume continued up to the reign of Khosrow II, by which time a strong Central Asian influence becomes evident in Sassanian dress.

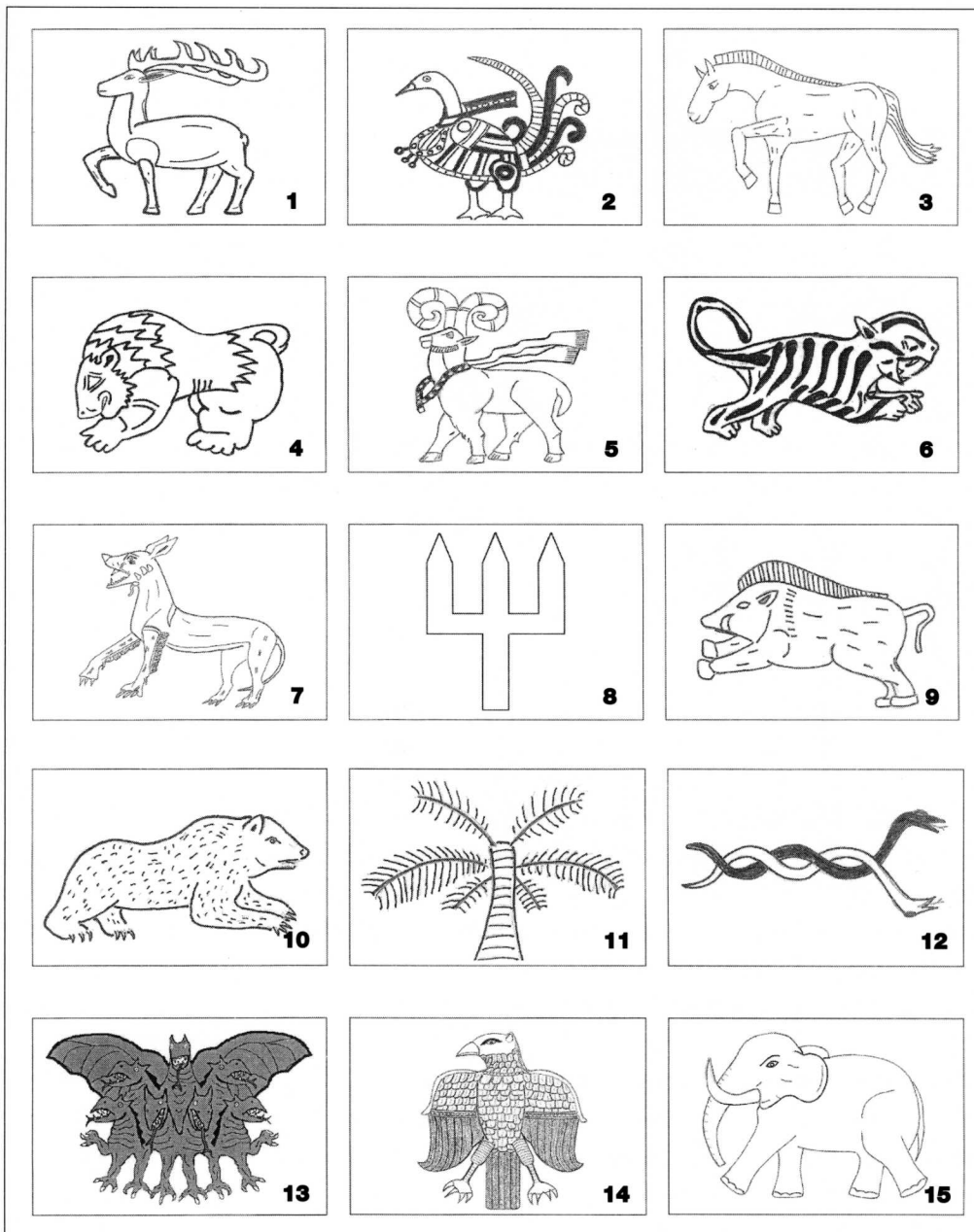
Much of Byzantine dress shows eastern or Persian influence, especially in the color and pattern of costume designs. It is possible that Diocletian introduced the Persian style of gem-studded costume to the imperial court of Byzantium (Arberry, 1953). Kondakov (1924, p.11) has noted that the Byzantines borrowed much of their system of uniforms from the Sassanians. Ironically this may have mainly occurred close to the end of the Sassanian era during the catastrophic Byzantine-Sassanian wars of 602-22.

### Drafsh

Each Savaran and elite unit had its own battle standard and coat of arms known as the *Drafsh*. *Drafsh* could either be flown as banners or worn as insignia by the troops. Since Achaemenean times, field armies in Persia had been using a type of *tamga* system. The Sassanians directly inherited the Parthian *Drafsh* system, and many of these were retained as battle standards by the Parthian noble houses. *Tamga* (symbolic, clan or family signs) were also used extensively by Iranian nomadic peoples such as the Alans and Sarmatians (see Men-at-Arms 373: *The Sarmatians 600 BC-AD 450*).



Medallions: (1) Frashamurw. (2) Waralz or Baraz. (3) Warrag. (4) Senmurv. (Kaveh Farrokh, 2004)



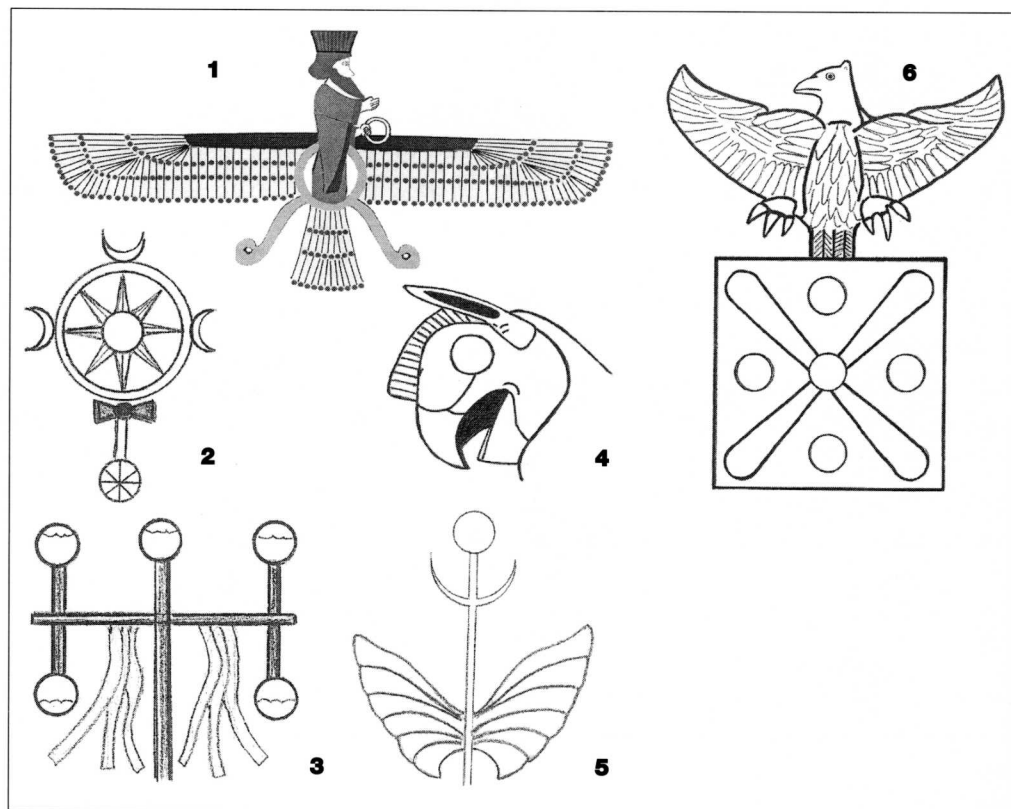
Coat of arms insignia: (1) Ahug or Gawazn. (2) Tardarw. (3) Asp Ziball. (4) Shaigr. (5) Warran. (6) Babr. (7) Gurg. (8) Tritha Zarduxsht. (9) Waralz or Baraz. (10) Xirs. (11) Draxt. (12) Garzag. (13) Haftan-bokht. (14) Humay. (15) Pill. (Kaveh Farrokh, 2004)

Knowledge of Sassanian heraldry is derived mainly from examples of Sassanian rock reliefs and some Roman references (e.g. Persici Dracones). The post-Sassanian *Shahname* epic of Firdowsi provides a vivid description of various types of *Drafsh*, which are noted by Christensen (1944, p.211) as being derived from Sassanian sources. A recent find east of the Aral Sea has yielded at least 18 seal stones, which provide additional sources of information.

The most prestigious national banner was the *Drafsh-e-Kaviani*. Legend ascribed the banner to a certain blacksmith known as Kaveh who united and liberated the Aryans by overthrowing their evil serpent-worshipping oppressor, Zahak. In actuality, this banner most likely originated in Parthian times as a royal battle standard. The largest version of this standard, which was richly embroidered with jewels, silver, and gold, measured roughly 16 by 23ft.

There were a very large number of *Drafsh* designs with boars, tigers, gazelles, wolves, as well as mythological beasts. The Draco (dragon) flags were especially popular, as they were among northern Iranian (Sarmatian) peoples. It is also known that as an attack was to begin, a

Banners: (1) Zarduxsht. (2) Possible Mithras symbol – Pahlavi term unknown. (3) Possible commander in chief – Pahlavi term unknown. (4) Bashkuch. (5) Possible Parthian banner – Pahlavi term unknown. (6) Drafsh-e-Kaviani. (Kaveh Farrokh, 2004)

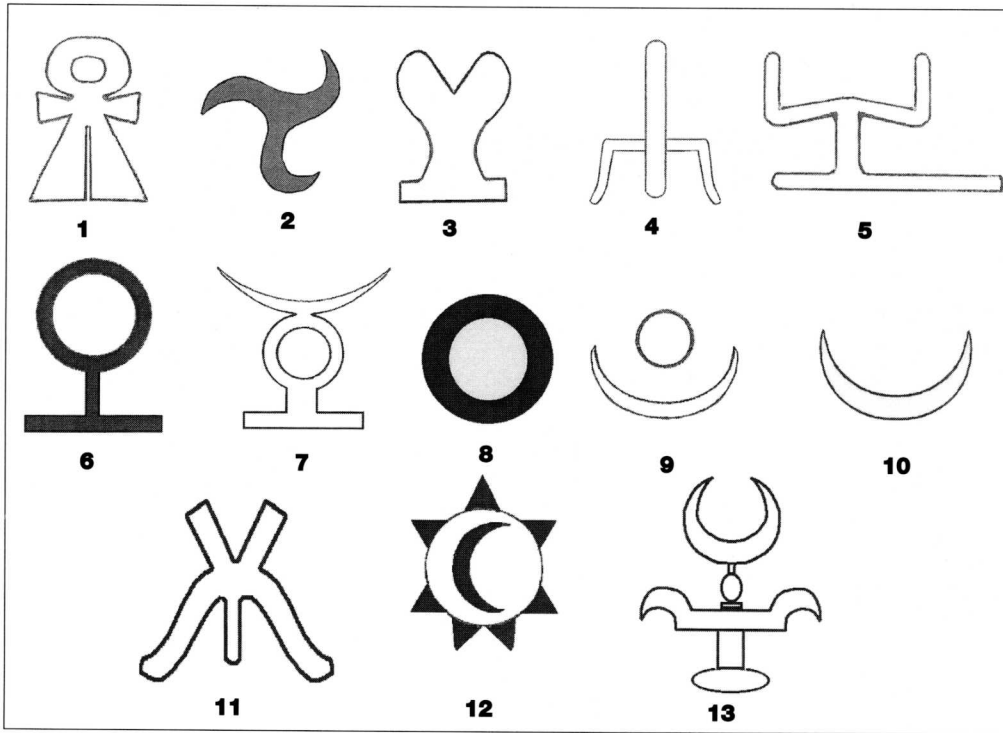


*Drafsh* the color of fire (or possibly of flame design) would be displayed (Ammianus, XX.VI.3.). The Savaran would display their *Drafsh* on a cross-bar or pole, however tunics and shield bosses could also display these. An example is the 4th-century Shir-Eiran (Lion of Persia) shield boss in the Museum of London.

### Military decorations and *Neshan*

As mentioned before, the seal has its origin in the north Iranian *tamga*, which was evident in Achaemenian times. The *tamga* became the *neshan*, or seal, in Persia. Seals were worn by Savaran, military personnel, and nobility. Each noble family seems to have had its own *neshan*. These could be worn as medallions, or branded on horses. The *neshan* of the House of Sassan can be seen consistently from the rise of the dynasty with Ardashir I (AD 180–239) to Khosrow II. Rock reliefs of the aforementioned rulers at Firuzabad and Tagh-e-Bostan show their horses branded with these *neshans*. Various other unique *neshan* also seemed to appear, such as the wild boar of Khosrow I or the *neshan* of Princess Boran. Important court officials often carried symbols of their functions. Examples included the squire of a knight who carried a bow, a cavalry regiment commander with a horseshoe, or the polo-master with a polo stick. In time these came to be represented more symbolically. The Persian term *rang* was used to designate rank, status, or position.

Shoulder-type military decorations are also seen among the Sassanians. Colored shoulder tufts are described in Maurice's *Strategikon* and "have a Persian ancestry" (Boss, 1993, p.66). Late Sassanian costumes in Tagh-e-Bostan show surprisingly modern-looking rectangles reminiscent of epaulettes on the shoulders of today's military officers. Colors also signified rank, status, and perhaps religious affiliation. Color combinations such as yellow and green or black and red can be traced as far back as Achaemenid times (see Elite 42: *The Persian Army 560–330 BC*).



**Neshan:** (1) Ardashir I, Firuzabad. (2) Unknown clan or military unit (see Christensen). (3) Royal knight, Firuzabad. (4–5) Unknown Sassanian clans or military units (see Christensen). (6) Ardavan, Firuzabad. (7) Shapur, Firuzabad. (8) Xwar (sun) disc on flagpoles and swords. (9) Nobleman, Naghsh-e-Rustam. (10) Unknown Sassanian clan or military unit (see Christensen). (11) Hormuzd II. (12) Possible Mithras symbol. (13) Shapur I. (Kaveh Farrokhi, 2004)

## SUPPORT AND AUXILIARY TROOPS

### **Paighan**

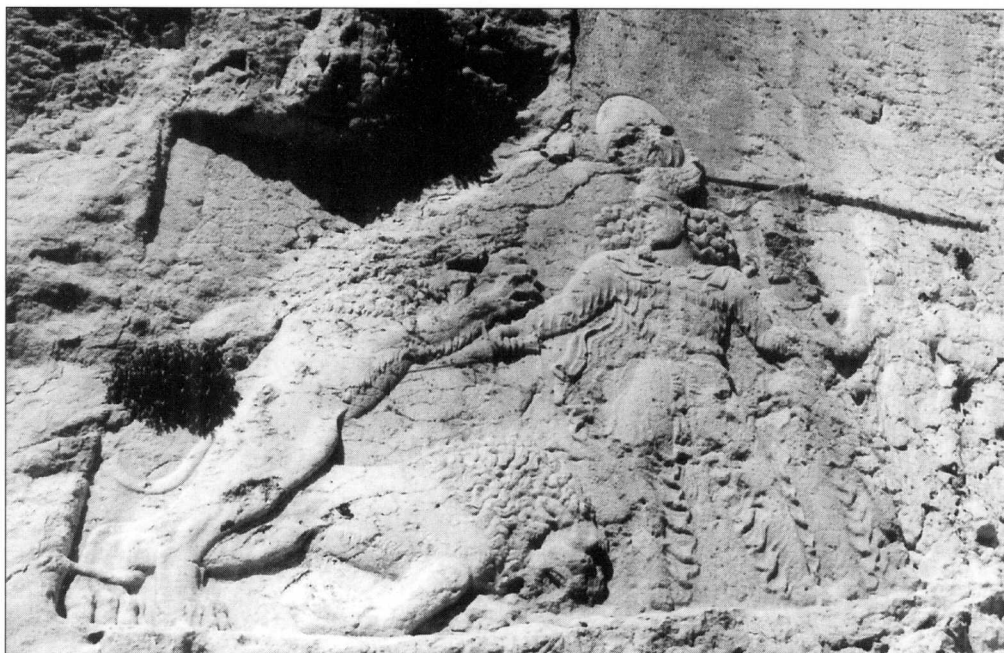
The *paighan* were recruited from peasant populations. Each *paighan* unit was commanded by an officer called Paighan-Salar. *Paighan* were used to guard the baggage train, serve as pages for the Savaran, storm fortification walls, undertake entrenchment projects, and excavate mines. They were mainly armed with the spear and shield. In battle they would typically cluster close to each other for mutual protection. Their military training, combat effectiveness, and morale were generally low. Their numbers actually swelled the army when siege warfare was involved. The *Chronicon Anonymum* (66, 203.20–205.7) reports Khosrow Anoushirvan's forces as being composed of a total of 183,000 men. The majority (120,000) were *paighan*: farmers and laborers recruited to do siege work. There were 40,000 combat infantry and only 23,000 cavalry.

### **Heavy infantry and Medes**

The Medes were one of the first Iranian peoples to enter and settle the Near East. Their descendants include Kurds, as well as the now Turkic-speaking Azerbaijanis (known to the Romans as Media Atropatene). Though Mede cavalry is depicted in Assyrian reliefs, the Medes' infantry played a prominent role in battles against the Assyrians. The Medes were an essential and integral part of Persia both culturally and militarily; however, their most spectacular victory has gone unnoticed by most historians. A mixed Parthian and Median force defeated the Roman general Marc Antony near Tabriz in Media Atropatene. In 36 BC Marc Antony crossed the Euphrates and arrived in Media Atropatene with a force of 100,000 men. According to Plutarch, Antony lost close to 40,000 men in the subsequent battle.

The Medes supplied high-quality slingers, javelin-throwers, and heavy infantry for the Sassanian *Spah*. The *Spah* made use of heavy infantry

**Bahram II slays lions defending his queen, Shapurdukhtat. Kartir stands between Bahram and the queen. (Author's photo at Sar Mashad)**



from the early days of the dynasty. Referring to Ardashir's attack on Roman Mesopotamia, Herodian (VI, 2, 56) notes that the Sassanians "overran and plundered Mesopotamia with both infantry and cavalry." The Roman opinion of Sassanian infantry is negative, viewing them as a mass of poorly equipped and incapable serfs. This may not be accurate since the Romans may have been mistaking the *paighan* with the separate regular combat infantry.

The typical Sassanian infantryman of the early period would most likely be equipped in the manner seen at Dura Europos with a two-piece ridge helmet, long coat of mail, and the Achaemenean-style leather-osier shield. By the time of Julian's invasion of Persia, Persian heavy infantry are described by Ammianus Marcellinus as highly disciplined and "armed like gladiators." By this time, it is possible that the Sassanians were trying to copy the Roman legionary or trying to revive the Achaemenean infantry tradition. Spearmen are sometimes reported as capable of facing Roman legionaries. In battle, the heavy infantry initially stood behind the foot archers who would fire their missiles until their supplies were exhausted. The archers would then retire behind the ranks of the heavy infantry, who would engage in hand-to-hand fighting.

It is interesting that the infantry were seen as reliable enough to be placed in the center behind the Savaran. In practice, heavy infantry could advance in coordination with the Savaran. Nevertheless, the Sassanian infantry, as a whole, could never fully match the Romans and later Byzantines. The Hellenic and Roman tradition of this combat arm was more extensive than the Sassanian; the Iranians excelled at cavalry warfare and archery.

### **Dailamites**

By the later stages of the dynasty, a new breed of heavy infantry appeared from Northern Persia: the Dailamites. These became Sassanian Persia's finest infantry. Roman sources have spoken highly of the Dailamites' skill and hardiness in close-quarter combat especially with the sword and dagger (see Agathias 3.17). They often went face-to-face against the best of Rome's legionaries. They also gave a good account of themselves in

an invasion of Yemen, in which 800 of them were led by a Savaran officer by the name of Vahriz.

Weapons of the Dailamite included the battle-axe, sling, dagger, and heavy sword. The late Sassanian Dailamite infantry may well have used the same "P"-mount suspension for their swords as the Savaran. A large number of finds in Northern Persia have been of swords of the late Sassanian type with the *Varanga* feather decoration. Bows were also used effectively, as attested to by a relatively rich find of archer fingercaps in northern Persia. Another interesting missile weapon was a short two-pronged spear. This could be used in hand-to-hand combat or be hurled in the manner of the Roman javelin. Shields were brightly painted, in accordance with a Dailamite tradition which survived into Islamic times.

The invading Arabs of the 7th century proved unable to subdue the Dailamites. Whenever Dailamites joined the Islamic cause, they were welcomed eagerly by the Arabs into their ranks, who would often pay them more than Arab troops.

### Foot archers

Foot archers were highly regarded. Archery was seen as key to winning battles and training in archery was heavily emphasized. Foot archers were used in both siege work and set-piece battles. In siege warfare, towers were often erected against enemy forts. Archers would climb the ladders and fire into enemy strongholds, while archers on the ground would pour withering fire onto the defenders, reducing their ability to repel an assault.

On the battlefield, powerful volleys of arrows would be launched until supplies of arrows were exhausted. Foot archers had one main function: softening up the enemy before the decisive strike of the Savaran. Specifically, they were to support the Savaran by releasing, with deadly precision, as many volleys of missiles as possible. The objective was to damage enemy formations of archers and infantry so that they would be unable to withstand the Savaran attack. In defense, archers were entrusted with stopping enemy infantry or cavalry attacks.

The Romans learned to offset Persian archery by making a determined rush into Sassanian ranks, where they could bring their excellent close-in fighting skills to bear. Although not always effective, this tactic sometimes achieved success. The main contest here was between the speed of the Romans' charge versus the quantity of missiles Sassanian foot archers could fire before the Romans closed the gap.

Each archery unit was led by a *Tirbad* officer. The *Tirbad* organized archers into companies so that one group would relieve the other while still maintaining a rapid rate of fire. In the 18th century this tactic was adapted by the Lurs of western Persia to rifle technology when they defeated Pathan invaders from southeastern Afghanistan.

The large rawhide wickerwork shields of late Sassanian foot archers were reminiscent of Achaemenean days. The foot archers' tactic was almost identical to the Medo-Persians of old: advancing together and producing a deadly and overwhelming hail of arrows. Another tactic may have been to



Sassanian medallion. (Louvre Museum, Paris)

advance close to Roman lines with the Savaran in escort. This would allow them to get closer to Roman lines and be afforded the safety of their heavy cavalry. Interestingly, the foot archers could shoot backwards when retreating, resembling the Parthian shot of the horse archers. Finally, mention must be made of a very small elite contingent of royal foot archers of 100 men, whose task was to defend the throne to the death.

One battle in which the foot archers distinguished themselves was at Anglon, Armenia, in AD 542. A Byzantine force of 30,000 troops was soundly defeated by a force of 4,000 Sassanians under Nabed. Nabed lured the Byzantines into the town after they broke through a weak screen of defenders. A Stalingrad-style ambush awaited the huge Byzantine force. Archers hiding in cabins and other carefully prepared positions poured volleys of missiles from multiple directions at the pursuing Byzantines. It is very likely that the archers included a number of dismounted cavalry. The speed, accuracy, and volume of arrows made a proper counter-response virtually impossible. The Byzantine attack transformed into a panic flight toward the frontier. Many of the fleeing soldiers were captured. The end result was a resounding Sassanian victory, inflicting heavy losses on the Byzantines (Procopius II.25.1–35).

### **Armenian elite cavalry**

Armenians were accorded a status equal to the elite Savaran (see *Men-at-Arms* 175). In fact, the equipment and regalia of Armenian cavalry were identical to the Savaran. Pro-Sassanian Armenian cavalry units fought under Sassanian banners and were allowed to enter the royal grounds of Ctesiphon. The king would then send a royal emissary to inquire about the state of Armenia – this was repeated three times. The day after, the king would honor the Armenians by personally inspecting their troops in a military review. The Armenian general Smbat Bagratuni was accorded particular honor by King Khosrow II. Due to his astounding victory over the Turks in 619, Bagratuni was given a special robe decorated with gems, and the command of a number of the king's royal guards. As a special honor, Khosrow II raised Bagratuni to third in rank among the nobles of the court. Armenians also supplied valuable light cavalry and excellent infantry, who were especially proficient in using slings to repel enemy cavalry, as well as spears for hand-to-hand combat.

### **Light cavalry**

Lightly armed cavalry were highly proficient with the bow; however, many foreign contingents would fight with other weapons such as javelins. Light cavalymen were recruited from Iranian-speaking peoples such as the Alans of Arran/Albania (modern-day Republic of Azerbaijan), Gelanis of northern Persia, Kushans of Central Asia, and the Saka settlers of Afghanistan and eastern Iran. Many non-Iranian contingents such as Chionites, Hephthalites, and Turkic Khazars were also recruited. Like the Lakhmid Arabs (see below), an important function of warlike allied troops on the frontiers was to keep an invasion force in check until the arrival of the main Savaran forces.

### **Lakhmid Arabs**

Arab units were primarily efficient in desert warfare and proved invaluable in guarding the empire's southern borders against marauding

fellow Arabs in search of plunder. They were also very adept at scouting and raiding and proved invaluable to Shapur II during Julian's failed campaign of 362.

The Sassanians sent Savaran units to bolster various Arabian allies in the Arabian peninsula such as Oman. The most effective and famous of these allies were the Lakhmids, who became the Sassanians' chief Arab ally from the 4th century AD. They were equipped and fought like the Savaran, guarding the southern frontier against Arab tribes. They proved their worth as excellent warriors and supported the Savaran well, as at Callinicum (see page 50). Perhaps one of the empire's greatest blunders was the dismantling of the Lakhmid kingdom by Khosrow II. The absence of these allies was a major military factor in facilitating the subsequent conquest of Persia by the Arabs from 637.



Silver Drachm of Bahram II with Queen Shapurdukhtat and one of the crown princes. (Copyright British Museum)

### Camel-borne troops

The role of camel-borne troops among the Sassanians is unclear, however Roman accounts do report them among the Parthians (see Herodian 4.28, 30). Camels stood higher than horses, which gave a significant advantage in archery. Although not as "glamorous" as the horse, the camel is more robust, resilient, and able to transport tremendous weight. The most famous depiction of a Sassanian warrior on a camel is that of the legendary Bahram Gur shooting arrows while accompanied by the petite figure of a female Byzantine companion (see page 15).

## SAVARAN DEVELOPMENT, DEPLOYMENT, AND TACTICS

### Development of the Savaran

There were three stages in the tactical development of the Sassanian army. The first stage was "Parthian," in that there were units of heavy cavalry supported by lightly armed *Sagittari* horse archers (see Men-at-Arms 175). When fighting the Romans, the role of the Savaran was to disrupt and "bunch up" the Roman infantry in order to provide targets for horse archers. Later, horse archers seem to have declined in importance, especially after Shapur I.

By the time of Shapur II (310–79), there was a doctrinal shift to super-heavy cavalry. References to Sassanian heavy cavalrymen come to us from Ammianus Marcellinus, Julian's *Orationes* and Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. In general, they are described as wearing helmets with face masks with small holes for the eyes and nose. Shapur II is described as endeavoring to "make his cavalry invulnerable...he [Shapur] did not limit their armor to helmet, breastplate and greaves...nor even to place bronze plates before the brow and breast of the horse...the man was covered in chain mail from his head to the end of his feet, and the horse from its crown to the tip of its hooves...they entrusted their body to the protection of iron mail" (Libianus, LIX, 69–70). Beneath the mail was worn a combination of laminated and lamellar armor. Heliodorus (IX, 15, 3) remarks that the



**A comparison of early and late Sassanian equipment. On the left is a 4th-century plate of Shapur II hunting lions, which shows early Sassanian equipment, while the plate on the right shows Pur-e-Vahman hunting lions and boar, 7th–8th century. Shapur draws an arrow with his right hand whilst Pur-e-Vahman uses the Mongolian draw, but both warriors use their index finger to “point” in the direction of the arrow. Shapur has a scabbard-slide sword whereas Pur-e-Vahman uses the Central Asian locket system. Pur-e-Vahman uses stirrups, whereas Shapur does not. (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)**

armored protection of the super-heavy cavalry was “proof against any missiles, and is a sure defense against all wounds.” This may suggest that armor had become so highly developed that the super-heavy Savaran did not consider Roman archery as a threat. The range of weapons increased to include weapons such as axes, maces, and darts. In practice the super-heavy cavalry concept was not entirely successful against Julian or the later Hephthalite Huns. These shortcomings resulted in changes in the Savaran battle doctrine and equipment and may have encouraged the later reforms of Khosrow I.

The third stage saw the appearance of the universal cavalryman, in which the trooper was proficient with both bow and lance. This type of universal warrior was now widespread across Central Asia, Persia, and Byzantium. Central Asian influence was evident in swords and perhaps by late Sassanian times, stirrups. The Tagh-e-Bostan warrior is seen with a long mail shirt, spears, sword, quiver, and bows. Al-Tabari provides a complete description of the late Sassanian knight. The warrior wore a helmet (with two spare bowstrings behind it, it is not clear in what fashion), a shirt of mail extending below the knees, a breastplate, arm-guards, thigh-guards, greaves, sword, lance, lasso, mace (attached to girdle), axe, a quiver with 30 arrows, a bow case with two bows, and in contrast to his earlier Savaran predecessors, a shield. The latter was probably used to deflect missiles as well as for protection in close-quarter combat. Inter-cavalry fighting could see the use of not only swords, but axes and maces.

Finally, a distinction must be drawn between Turkic Central Asian warfare and that of the Sassanians. In reality, the cavalry traditions of the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia were themselves of Central Asian origin; the Medo-Persians of old hailed from Central Asia. The original Iranian peoples of Central Asia influenced the early Achaemenids and later Parthians, who in turn passed on their traditions to the Sassanians. The main difference between the two traditions is in the way this system developed in Persia. Armor technology evolved as a result of contacts with Central Asia and Rome, as well as by indigenous developments.

While the cavalry of Persia maintained a symbiotic relationship with Central Asia, the Byzantine cavalry was heavily influenced by their experiences with Sassanian and Central Asian Steppe peoples. Central Asia, in turn, combined its own rich traditions with that of China and Persia.

### **Battlefield formations**

A standard battle tactic was to divide the army into five units: a main line of cavalry (Savaran), a reinforcement line of heavy infantry behind the main line, two flanks (usually cavalry), and a small reserve of the best Savaran units (e.g. Gyan-avspar Peshmerga). The main line and the reinforcement formed the center and was known as the “two main parts” or the “heart.” The two main parts acted as a node between the left and right flanks. It was imperative for these “parts” to hold under all circumstances, to prevent either flank from collapsing in case of heavy losses. Placing these “parts” on a slope was meant to provide greater protection against enemy thrusts. Elevated places for the center were always recommended.

Behind the reinforcement line were reserves, usually composed of prestige units such as the Zhayedan (Immortals). Savaran were usually located on the right flank, although they could be on the left flank depending on the commander’s strategy. Theoretically, the Savaran always fought at the front; however, this was not always the case in practice. Byzantine observations of Sassanian tactics are consistent with the before-stated Sassanian battle order consisting of three portions: right, center, and left (Maurice, *Strategikon* XI.1, pp.354–60). It is also noted “they [Sassanians] try to draw up the cavalymen in each company in the first and second line or phalanx...” (Maurice, *Strategikon* XI.1, p.356).

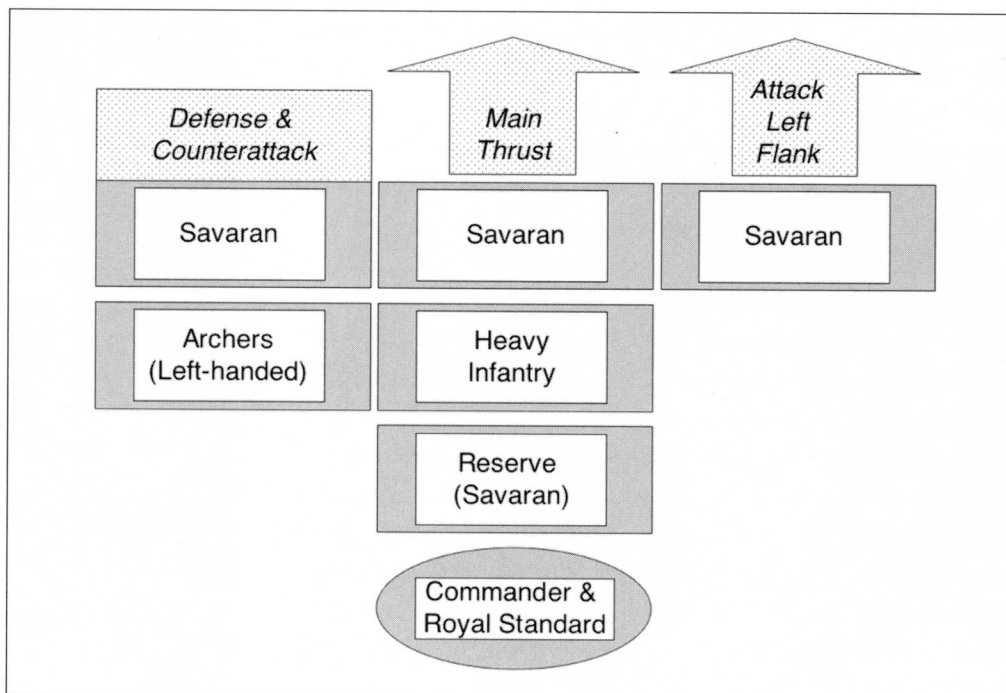
In battle, both Sassanians and Romans tried to outflank each other by attacking their respective left wing by way of their right flanks. An example of this is noted by Ammianus (XXV, 3, 4), describing a battle in which the Sassanians forced the Roman left flank back and proceeded to surround them. They then resorted to using missiles and spears.

The left flank was to adopt a defensive posture and would enter action only in extreme circumstances. It could attack if it felt itself in imminent danger of being attacked. The left flank also acted as a strategic reserve, but could attack at the commander’s discretion. Even when allowed by the army commander to attack, the left flank was to then return to its original defensive position. Depending on circumstances, the left flank’s counterattacks could be supported by the right flank and center as determined by the commander. The main reason why the left flank was not favored for the attack was because using a shield on the left generally did not allow for the heavy infantryman to attack efficiently to the left. As a result of this perceived weakness, the left flank was actually given stronger forces as well as



**Head and body of an enormous, 26ft-tall statue of Shapur I, dating from the 3rd century. The statue is in a cave near Bishapur. (Khademi, Modares University, Tehran)**

**A standard Sassanian battle order.**



left-handed archers. Left-handed bowmen were viewed as being equally capable of effectively shooting from both left and right sides. The Sassanians, however, would sometimes depart from their own established “right flank attack” rules to achieve success, an example being the battle of Callinicum (see page 50).

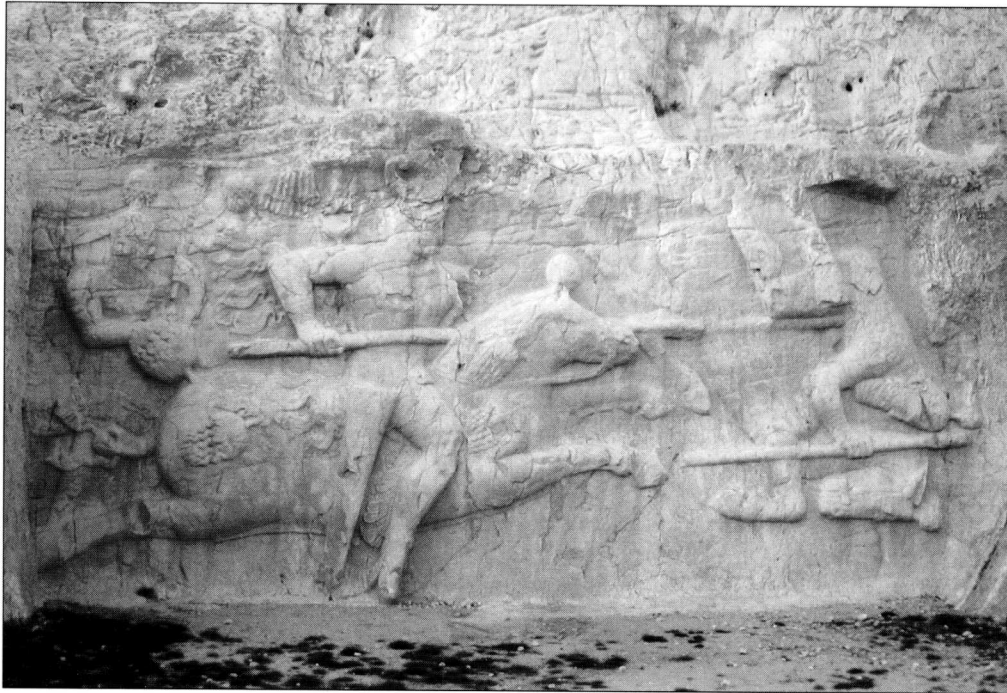
**Strategies of the Savaran**

The Sassanian doctrine required cavalry to be placed at the front or vanguard. Much of early Sassanian strategy was Parthian, which was itself a product of classic nomadic steppe warfare. Heavy cavalry (*cataphracts*) would close in with their heavy lances while mounted bowmen launched missiles from a distance in support. In practice, these strategies included hit-and-run tactics 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. The famous Parthian shot, in which an apparently retreating horseman would unexpectedly turn back to shoot his missile, continued under the Sassanians. From the Roman perspective, Sassanian tactics became far more sophisticated and dangerous than those of the Parthians.

One example of this increasing sophistication is the complex three-wave attack, which required much training, discipline, and coordination to achieve success. Julian (III, 11–13.30, pp.132–38, Bidez) noted that at a battle in Singara in 350, the Sassanians first charged with the Savaran, followed by archers, followed by another wave of Savaran. The archers were most likely horse archers since they had another wave of Savaran riding rapidly behind them. The first wave of elite cavalry would force the defenders into defending their ranks against the lancers. As the defenders “bunched up” they became perfect targets for the

**Shapur I hunting wild game; note the Sassanian grip on the sword. (The British Museum)**





**Hormuzd II (303–09) unhorsing an unknown enemy, perhaps a Roman officer. (Chamanara, Kouchesfahani, Kial, Maddadi at Naghsh-e-Rustam)**

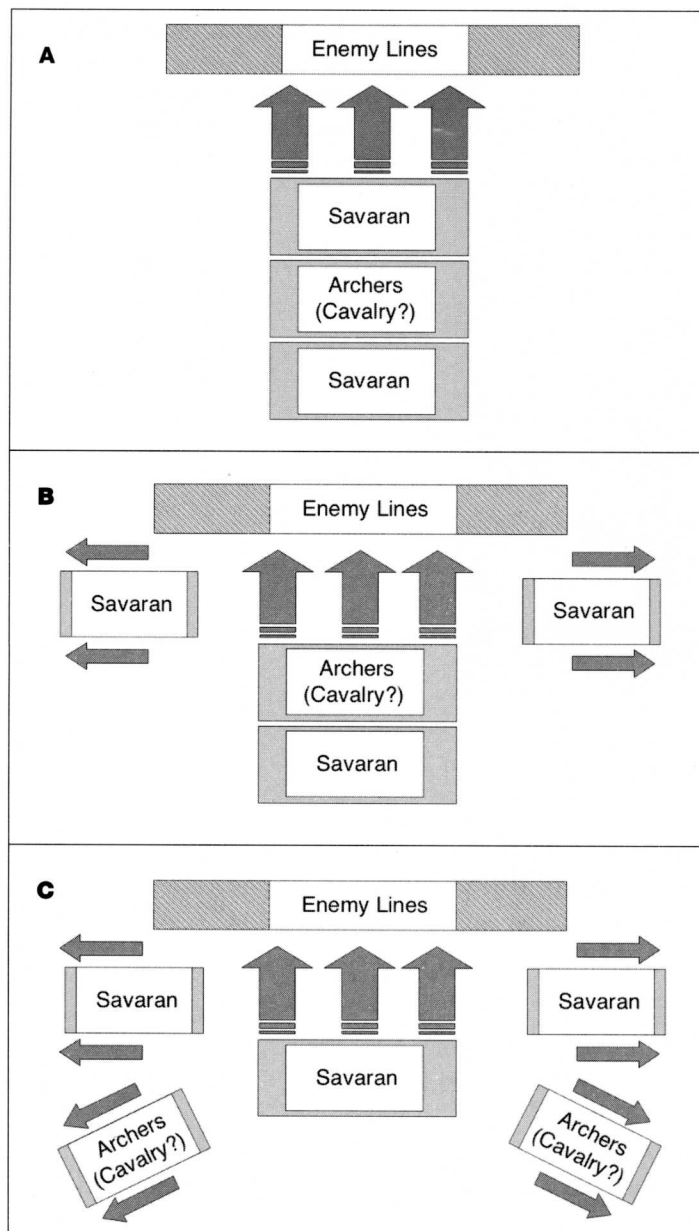
follow-up wave of horse archers, who would weaken their lines with their missiles. The “softened-up” defenders would then be more vulnerable to the third wave of lance-wielding Savaran. The effectiveness of this technique was that it allowed for an uninterrupted lance-missile-lance attack, confusing defenders as to the type of countermeasures to use.

As noted by Ammianus (XXV, 1.18), Sassanian cavalry units were formidable, but lacked long-term endurance in battle. This partly confirms the notion that Sassanian elite cavalry forces were intended as shock units to break open and/or to disorganize enemy lines. This quality was to prove useful against Julian’s invasion of Persia in 362.

For the Sassanians the battle was usually decided by the shock of a single powerful thrust by the Savaran using lances. This meant that the logical focal point and power of that thrust was at its front. It is interesting that Romano-Byzantines fleeing before Sassanians were recommended not to counterattack them frontally due to the high risk that they would “suffer injury on running into their well-ordered ranks” (Maurice, *Strategikon*, XI.1, 354–60).

By the late 3rd century, Roman infantry had learned to withstand the shock of the Sassanian cavalry charge by literally standing as one unit in a wall with shields locked together. This tactic could be successful if the infantry stood their ground and maintained discipline. An example occurred at Lazica in 549, where Romano-Byzantine cavalry, instead of engaging their Sassanian counterparts, dismounted and joined their infantry in successfully blocking Sassanian cavalry thrusts.

In response to Romano-Byzantine tactics, the Sassanians seem to have developed certain countermeasures. One such tactic is reported in the *Chronicon Anonymum*, XXXVI. This tactic required the Savaran to conduct their usual charge at the front (ahead of the main army). As soon as the Savaran were about to reach the Roman lines, they would retire to the left and right wings. This would allow the heavy infantry, who were following the Savaran charge, to close in and engage the enemy. This would surprise an enemy expecting to engage cavalry.



**The Savaran and archer assault.** In A, the first wave of Savaran assaults enemy lines. They are followed by a second wave of archers and a third wave of Savaran. Then, in B, the first wave breaks off the assault and disengages, and the second wave of archers attacks. The third wave of Savaran follows behind the archers. Finally, in C the archers break off the assault, disengage, and allow the final wave of Savaran to attack.

so manipulated, the enemy was to have the plains and lower lands.

An incorrect observation in the *Strategikon*, and by a number of Western historians, has been that the Sassanians preferred to campaign in hot weather. This may be based on stereotypical perceptions of Iran's climate. Although the climate of much of the interior and south is similar to that of neighboring Arab regions, such as Mesopotamia, many parts of northern and northwestern Persia have a very "European" climate, including harsh cold winters; these areas also have lush forests. The Sassanians could and did campaign effectively in extreme summer heat or in the cold of winter. A number of successful Sassanian campaigns were conducted in the bitter cold climates of the Caucasus. The *Kitab al-Ayin* (1. 4-5, Ibn Qutayba, 1964, p.114) states specifically: "It is best to give battle when it is very cold during the winter and very hot during the summer."

### Vanguards, reconnaissance, ambushes, and traps

Vanguards were to pass over flat terrain and take position on elevated heights. Great emphasis was placed on reconnaissance. Scouts would first examine the terrain on which the battle was to be fought. Traps were laid in strategic and undetectable locations in case of a night ambush.

### The commander

During battle, the king or commander was placed on an elevated position. He entered the battle only in situations of extreme necessity. In such cases, the *Ayin Nameh* recommends that the commander attempt to extend the battle until the end of the day. In front of the commander stood a royal guard who were to defend the throne to the death. Behind the king was placed the royal standard (Drafsh-e-Kaviani) guarded by archers and infantrymen. The prestige units of Savaran (e.g. Khosrogetae) were most likely close to the commander's position and kept in reserve. From here the commander not only had a better view of the battle, but was able to issue orders quickly to the center and flanks. The Magi always accompanied the commander into battle. An example of this can be seen at the Naghsh-e-Rustam rock relief, where one of the Magi (with a pointed finger) stands behind Shapur, who receives Valerian's surrender.

### Water supplies and climate

An enemy army in close proximity to water was not prevented from reaching it by the Sassanians. The idea was that a thirsty enemy would make for a more tenacious foe than if he were satiated. One's own camp was to ideally be in a covered and wooded place, plentiful in water. The army was to be arranged so as to have the wind and sun to its rear and to avoid taking unnecessary or excess baggage. This tactic was recommended by Maurice's *Strategikon* as well. If situations could be

SHAPUR AND THE SURRENDER OF VALERIAN

- 1: Shapur I
- 2: Emperor Valerian
- 3: Roman Senator
- 4: Saver of the Suren Clan
- 5: Female Sardar



SAVARAN IN TRAINING, LATE 3RD CENTURY AD

- 1: Arzbad-e-Aspwaragan
- 2: Young Savar trainee
- 3: Elite knights in Zur-Shemsher training



Arzbad-e-Aspwaragan \*

TURKISH WARS

- 1: Late Sassanian Savar-Framandar
- 2: Kanarang of Abarshahr
- 3: Paygospanan-Banu
- 4: Turkish Gok warriors



DEATH OF JULIAN, JUNE 26, AD 363

- 1: Pushtighban – Royal Body Guards
- 2: Emperor Julian
- 3: Roman commander
- 4: Roman troops
- 5: Gyan-avspar Peshmerga
- 6: Yazata Mobad





6

5

4

Angus McBride

INVESTITURE AND KNIGHTING OF BAHRAM CHOBIN, 6TH CENTURY

1: Bahram Chobin

2: Mobad Shapsheraz

3: Priestess of the Temple of Anahita

4: Savar officer of Rayy





KING KHOSROW II AND QUEEN SHIREEN, EARLY 7TH CENTURY

1: Khosrow II "Parveez"

2: Queen Shireen

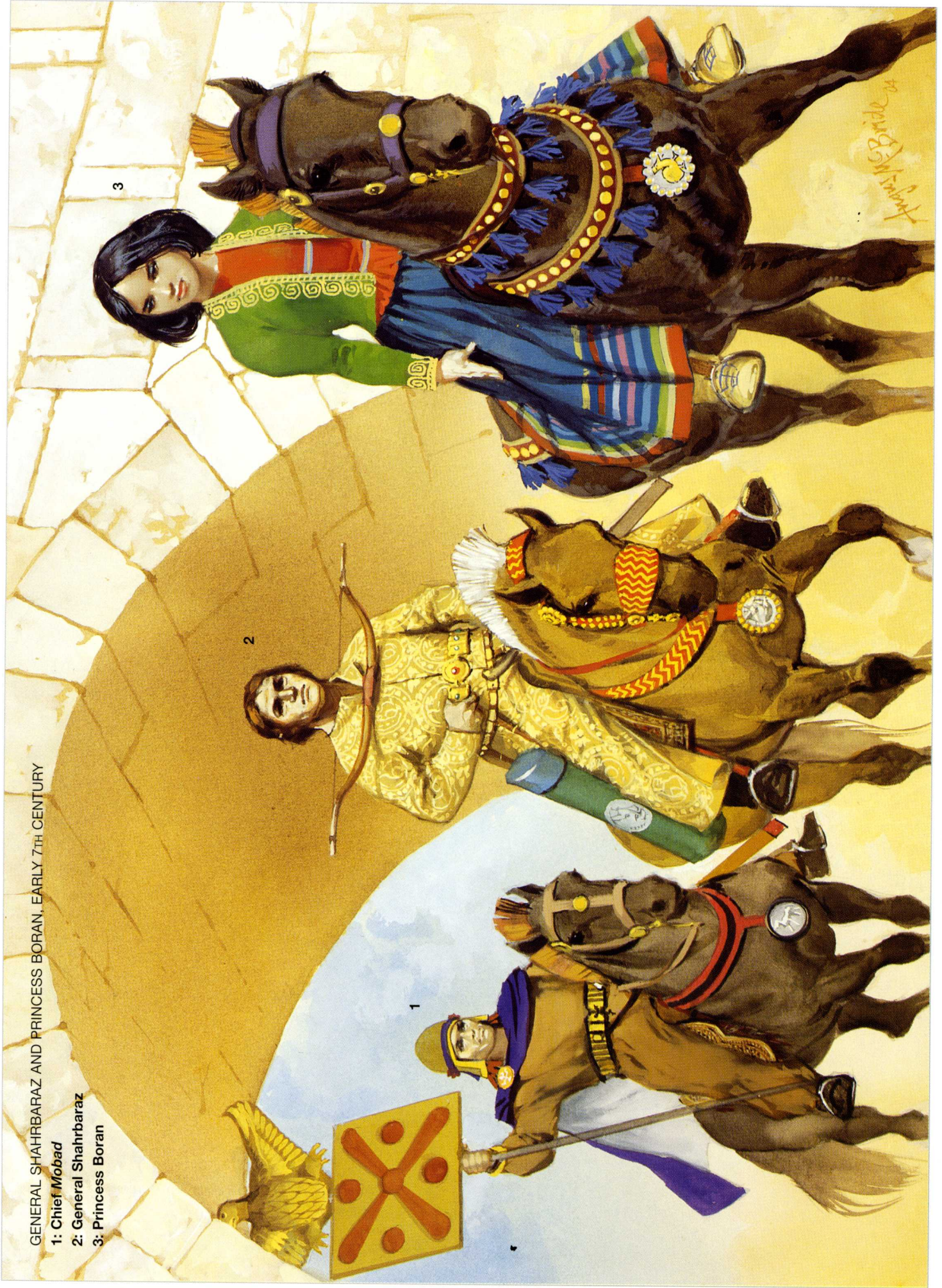
3: Guiw nobleman

4: Smbat Bagratuni

*Shireen*

GENERAL SHAHRBARAZ AND PRINCESS BORAN, EARLY 7TH CENTURY

- 1: Chief Mobarad
- 2: General Shahrbaraz
- 3: Princess Boran



3

2

1

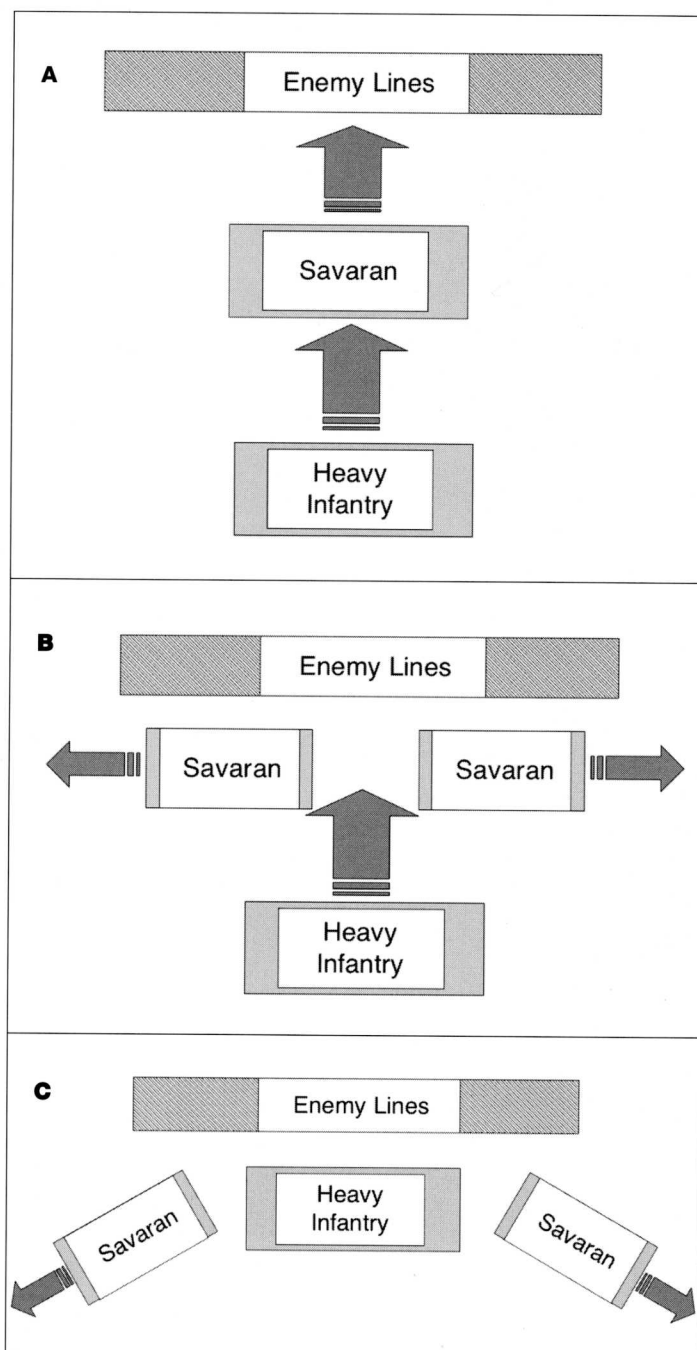
Instructions for ambushes suggested using natural sounds, such as the noise of a river or wind, to mask the sound of one's approach. Other means of masking an ambush included attacking at midnight or the darkest hour of night. In the ambush, the first action was a rapid assault on the enemy's center, immediately followed by the rest of one's force surrounding the enemy's remaining forces. There was heavy emphasis on planning and assigning each soldier a specific task. Speed and precision were key; searching for spoils was to be avoided.

The Sassanians were also famous for their use of ditches as traps. Belisarius' forces were ensnared and defeated in a Sassanian stratagem in 528 in the desert at Thannuris. The Sassanians dug ditches among their trenches and concealed them. Belisarius ordered his troops to attack the Persian positions with full speed, resulting in many soldiers falling into the hidden traps where they were quickly slain by the Sassanians. Surviving forces fled with Belisarius from the battlefield (Zachariah, *Historia* IX.2 [92.25–93.27]).

### Mobile frontier defense and Central Asia

It has been suggested that the Sassanian system of forts resulted in a "Maginot-line" mind-set. While this may be partly true regarding the Derbent Wall on the Caucasus, the fortress system along the Roman, Arabian, and Central Asian frontiers was part of a defense-offense strategy. An example is Nisibis, which was an important city-base, able to accommodate a large army; however, its function was not purely defensive. In fact, it was an important forward assembly area for offensive operations against the Romans. Nisibis was one of the main staging areas of the forces of Khosrow II in the all-out attack on Byzantium in 603.

By the 5th century AD, many of the original Iranian-speakers of the Central Asian frontier had been displaced by Turco-Hun or Turanian groups. Defense of the Turanian frontier was based on a three-tier system. The strategy was to initially allow the enemy to penetrate into imperial territory. The tiers were designed to channel the invaders into designated kill zones. Invaders caught between the tiers of forts and defenses would be trapped. The base itself was positioned strategically so that the forces assembled there would be able to pick their direction and location of counterattack. The forces entrusted for the counterattack were the highly mobile Savaran. The main base in which the elite cavalry assembled against Turanian threats from Central Asia was Nev-Shapur (Nishapur). Bahram Chobin's successful offensive against the Turks emanated from this area (see page 53).



**The Savaran and heavy infantry assault. In A, the Savaran proceed to enemy lines, pretending to attack. Heavy infantry follows behind. When the Savaran near the enemy lines (B), they disengage and split from the middle, allowing heavy infantry to follow through. In C, the Savaran withdraw, and heavy infantry attack enemy lines.**

This system of defense was very Central Asian in that it derived from the steppe cavalry tradition of the feigned retreat followed by counterattack. The Sassanians successfully incorporated their outstanding fortress technology with the proven methods of steppe warfare. This system was both meant to dissuade invaders as well as to provide the Sassanians with assembly areas for the option of attacking beyond Sassanian territory.

### **Experience, numerical factors, and rotation in battle**

If troops were experienced, then the commander would allow the enemy to attack first. If troops were inexperienced, then it was deemed wiser to attack first. When attacking enemy territory, it was advised to have a three- to four-fold advantage; when defending in enemy territory, a minimum one- to one and a half-fold advantage was recommended. In practice, however, these proportions could not always be applied due to the empire's chronic manpower shortage. The manuals do state, however, that the army could fight at a numerical disadvantage when the enemy was invading imperial territory.

Often, sources refer to half of the troops fighting at the front, with the other half situated behind. The front was then rotated with the back row, who proceeded with the fighting. Most likely, the sources are referring to heavy infantry as well as foot archers. As noted before, the Savaran had a breakthrough role, and prestige contingents like the Piroozetae would be committed at the crucial stages of battle.

### **The declining role of horse archery**

The rock reliefs of Firuzabad and Naghsh-e-Rustam show elite cavalry in action with lances, but no depiction of archery in combat. This has led to the suggestion that horse archery was in decline (or had even disappeared) in Persia by the time the Sassanians rose to power. More likely is the possibility of a Parthian model in early Sassanian armies; elite lance-armed charging cavalry were the main core with horse archers in support. However, the Sassanian horse archers seem to be different from their Parthian predecessors. Early Sassanian horse archers were more organized, and unlike their Parthian predecessors, wore mail for protection. The failure of Alexander Severus' forces against Ardashir in Ctesiphon in AD 233 was most likely due to a combination of repeated lance charges by elite cavalry, who forced the Roman infantry into smaller and more compact formations, allowing the horse archers to discharge their deadly volleys against them. This is corroborated by Herodian (5, 1–6, 9) who noted that the Sassanians "trapped the Romans like a fish in a net; firing their arrows from all sides at the encircled soldiers, the Persians massacred the whole army." Nevertheless, by the time of the Khosrow–Belisarius wars (or perhaps earlier), there appeared the composite cavalryman who was proficient in the use of both bow and lance. The disasters of King Peroz with the Huns in 484, and later battles with Turkic warriors, were certainly a major factor in the reintroduction of the bow as a primary battlefield weapon. For light bow- and javelin-armed horsemen, the empire came to rely on allied auxiliary units.

### **Supply, logistics, and care of horses**

There was an elaborate supply and logistics system designed to provide high-quality sustenance to the troops while on campaign. Troops were to

be equitably provided with ample supplies of beef, milk, and bread while on campaign, and both men and horses received higher portions on days of battle (*Dinkard* VIII. 26. 10. & 12.). In times of peace, armaments would be kept in specified magazines (*Ambaragh*) and arsenals (*Ganz*). When war was to commence, the extraction and distribution of weapons from these sites would be the responsibility of the minister of magazines or *Eiran-Ambaraghbad*. The health and vitality of the horses of the Savaran were the responsibility of the *Stor-Bezashk* (*Dinkard* VIII. 26. 11.), who was an equestrian veterinarian with a thorough knowledge of herbs. The *Stor-Bezashk* was expected to ensure the delivery of healthy steeds to the cavalymen before campaigns commenced.

### **Accounting for battlefield losses**

Arrows were used to assess battlefield losses, a system most likely derived from mythical archery traditions as recounted in Zoroastrian *Avesta* texts. Before the battle a military review took place before the king in which each warrior placed a single arrow into a large royal basket. The basket was then enclosed with a royal seal. After the battle, the seal was broken and each soldier retrieved an arrow from the royal basket. Remaining arrows would account for battlefield losses. The king would then confer with his commanders to assess and evaluate the costs of the battle. The northern Iranian Scythians used a similar technique to obtain population estimates (Herodotus IV.81).

### **Recruitment and manpower problems**

Although accurate statistics are unavailable, some estimates propose that the Sassanians possessed only half the manpower and resources of Rome. Shortage of quality manpower was a chronic problem, in contrast to the Roman and later Byzantine empires, which had access to ample numbers of tough Celtic, Germanic, Balkan, and Anatolian settlers. By the early 400s, the Turcification of Central Asia meant that Persia no longer had a vast Iranian manpower base to draw from. The Sassanians could field a large number of support, auxiliary, and allied troops, but these could never match the elite Savaran in military quality.

It would seem that the Sassanian military mainly relied on a relatively small number of highly trained professional soldiers, most of them presumably being elite cavalry. In fact, the total complement of professional warriors in AD 578 was 70,000. The Sassanians, however, could never bring all their resources to concentrate on a single theater due to constant distractions from other fronts. Although the Sassanians were able to produce perhaps some of the classical world's best cavalry, small numbers meant that huge battlefield losses were difficult to replace.

### **Weaknesses**

There were three major weaknesses in the Sassanian battle order. The first was the aversion of many auxiliary troops, especially the *paighan*, to hand-to-hand fighting. The second weakness was the result of the Savaran's greatest asset, their frontal charge. The powerful frontal focus



**A nobleman saluting with his right hand, 3rd century. (Louvre Museum, Paris)**



**Gordian III (r. AD 238–44), the first Roman emperor to fail against Shapur I. After his death, he was succeeded by Philip the Arab. (Louvre Museum, Paris)**

of the charge came at a price; later Savaran were tactically vulnerable at their flanks and rear. Third and perhaps most seriously, was the tendency of soldiers to flee the field when their commander was slain.

## **THE SAVARAN IN BATTLE**

### **Shapur I versus Gordian III, Philip the Arab, and Valerian**

Despite the bombastic and triumphant tone of some Roman sources, as well as the somewhat biased views of certain contemporary historians, modern scholarship and examination of primary sources and other evidence reveals the Sassanians to have been an adversary on par with the Romans.

Ardashir's overthrow of the Parthians at Hormizdagan signaled to Rome the rise of a new and vigorous dynasty in Persia. In response, Roman Emperor Alexander Severus (222–35) attacked the new empire in 231–33, with inconclusive results. When Ardashir's son, Shapur I, became king in 241, Rome continued the attempt to crush the new menace from Persia. Emperor Gordian III (238–44) proceeded to attack the empire of Shapur, and was successful at first in 243, and by 244 had advanced as far as Misiche

(present-day Anbar), north of Ctesiphon. The opposing armies joined battle there and the Romans were defeated. It is unclear whether Gordian was killed in battle against Shapur or assassinated afterwards by his own officers. Philip the Arab (244–49) was then proclaimed emperor of Rome. He quickly made peace with Shapur and agreed to pay him a large ransom. Roman incursions into Armenia provided Shapur with the pretext to resume hostilities. Shapur thrust his army deep into Roman Mesopotamia and joined battle at Barbalissos (*c.* 253), this time destroying a large Roman army of 60,000–70,000 troops. This defeat led to the capture of Antioch and Dura Europos in Syria, *c.* 256.

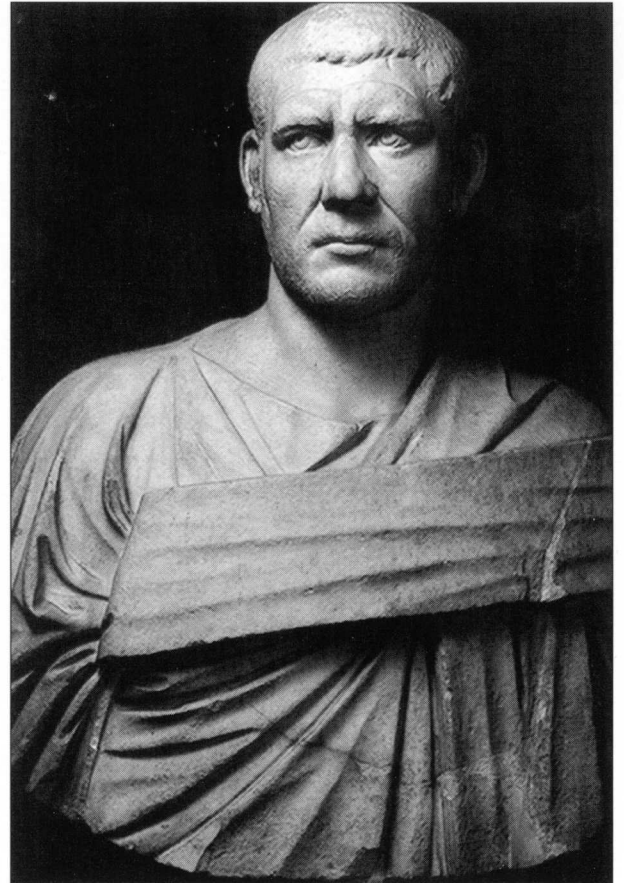
Rome was determined to avenge the defeat of its arms and regain its prestige, and endeavored to vanquish Shapur and the new Sassanian kingdom once and for all. This final campaign was led by Emperor Valerian (253–60) at the head of 70,000 troops. At first, Valerian was successful, driving the Sassanians out of Antioch (*c.* 256). In response, Shapur seems to have besieged Edessa and Harran (Carrhae). This action forced Valerian to move against him there. Shapur defeated the Romans decisively (*c.* 260), as indicated by the following inscription: "Valerian Caesar came upon us having with him...a force of seventy thousands...and Valerian Caesar with our own hand we made captive. And the rest, the Praetorian prefect, senators and generals, and whatever of that force were officers, all we made captive and away to...the Aryan Empire..." Notwithstanding the failures of Gordian III and Philip the Arab, the Valerian disaster was perhaps one of Rome's greatest military defeats. The capture of an emperor along with members of his entourage came as a powerful shock to the Roman Empire.

Rome paid dearly for these defeats. Extrapolating from the inscriptions, Rome may have lost nearly 150,000 troops (including all of the losses incurred by Gordian III, Phillip the Arab and Valerian). This would indeed have been disastrous when taken in the context of Whitby's cited strength of the Roman army of the 3rd century AD at upwards of 350,000 troops (see *Essential Histories 21: Rome at War AD 293–696*). Rome had also lost a good proportion of its professional soldiers – troops who were needed to confront European (i.e. Gothic) threats to its western and northern borders. Shapur had forced the reluctant Romans to accept the Sassanians as monarchs of an empire very much the equal of Rome.

Very few primary historical details are available regarding the tactics of Sassanian cavalry in the battles of Misiche, Barbalissos, and Carrhae-Edessa. Examination of Shapur's inscriptions do provide an interesting clue by stating that "Caesar from all of Rome, of Goth and German kingdom, assembled a force and came against...the Aryan Empire..." The Romans may have used Germanic auxiliaries because of their experience and knowledge of heavy cavalry warfare, such as the use of armor for mounted troops and lance fighting, against the Sarmatians in Ukraine (see *Men-at-Arms 373*). The Roman use of Gothic troops may have been intended to offset the fighting qualities of the Savaran. The use of Gothic cavalry by Gordian III was for all practical purposes a "disaster" (Bivar, 1972, p.279), which indicates that the Savaran dominated the Goths in lance warfare and maneuver. Persian armor at this time was a combination of mail, lamellar, and laminated armor, and provided greater protection than the Sarmatian-style armor worn by the Gothic warriors.

As for the Romans, the major portion of their forces during Shapur's wars was infantry (see Cedrenus, i, p.454, 3–6). It is unclear why their tough and well-disciplined infantry forces were unable to defeat attacks by the Savaran. Rome had had plenty of experience of Iranian cavalry methods of warfare from fighting the Parthians and Sarmatians. In response to the threat of Iranian heavy cavalry and mounted archers, traditional Roman tactics had changed to incorporate auxiliary forces of cavalry, archers, and heavy infantry familiar with Iranian tactics.

This may indicate that Sassanian tactics and armaments were more sophisticated than those used by their Parthian predecessors and that the Romans were simply unaccustomed to them at the time. This may be especially true with respect to the armor of the Sassanian cavalry elite. Roman archers, as part of the Roman battle order, were certain to fire missiles at charging Sassanian cavalry. Like the Parthians in AD 224, the Romans may have been unpleasantly surprised to see the minimal impact their missiles had against Sassanian armor. In such circumstances, lance-armed charging cavalrymen would have been able to maintain formation and reach the Roman lines intact. In addition, mounted (and infantry) archers could also overwhelm the Romans with arrows. The "softening up" of Roman lines with repeated lance charges



**Philip the Arab (244–49),  
the second Roman emperor  
defeated by Shapur's Savaran.  
(State Hermitage Museum,  
St Petersburg)**

**Shapur I, on horseback, receives the surrender of Emperor Valerian, who kneels before him. The standing figure is most likely the Helleno-Roman general Cyriades. (Chamanara, Kouchesfahani, Kial, Maddadi at Naghsh-e-Rustam)**



and archery volleys may have even allowed the regular Sassanian armored infantry to attempt to go hand-to-hand against the well-trained Roman infantry.

Loroit (1975, p.773) postulates that the main tactical error of Gordian III was in putting the Roman army in a position in which the well-trained Savaran were able to deploy to maximum effect. It is also a mystery why Valerian would chose to deploy his army on the open plains of Carrhae and Edessa, which would maximize the advantages of the Savaran. This was almost a repeat of the mistake of Marcus Crassus at the doomed battle of Carrhae in 53 BC (see *Men-at-Arms* 175).

What is interesting is that despite Shapur's brilliant successes against Rome's best legions, he was unable to subdue the forces of the small but powerful Arab kingdom of Palmyra. The Palmyrans had adopted Iranian riding costume and their cavalry forces were similar to those of the Sassanians, in that they used armored cavalry and lance-fighting techniques. Odenathus successfully attacked Shapur's baggage train in Syria in *c.* AD 260/261 and pushed the Sassanians back into Persia. The successes of the Palmyrans against the Sassanians have been exaggerated by contemporary Roman, and some contemporary Western and Arab historians; Odenathus was not able to destroy the Sassanian military machine, or capture the capital Ctesiphon, nor did he succeed in freeing the recently captured Valerian from captivity. Nevertheless, the Sassanians proved unable to subdue the Palmyrans; they campaigned indecisively against them until AD 265. From the Sassanian perspective, however, this was a minor setback in comparison to the overwhelming victories against Rome's best field armies. It was the elite lance-armed charging Savaran who proved decisive in the battles of Misiche, Barbalissos, and Carrhae-Edessa. It is interesting that Roman sources are mostly silent about these defeats (except regarding Valerian), a fact attributed to the Romans' "tight control over media coverage" (Dodgeon and Lieu, 1991, p.355).

Rome did recover (see *Warrior 72: Imperial Roman Legionary AD 161–284*) and learned important lessons from these defeats. It is possible that the Savaran were used as a model by Emperor Constantius

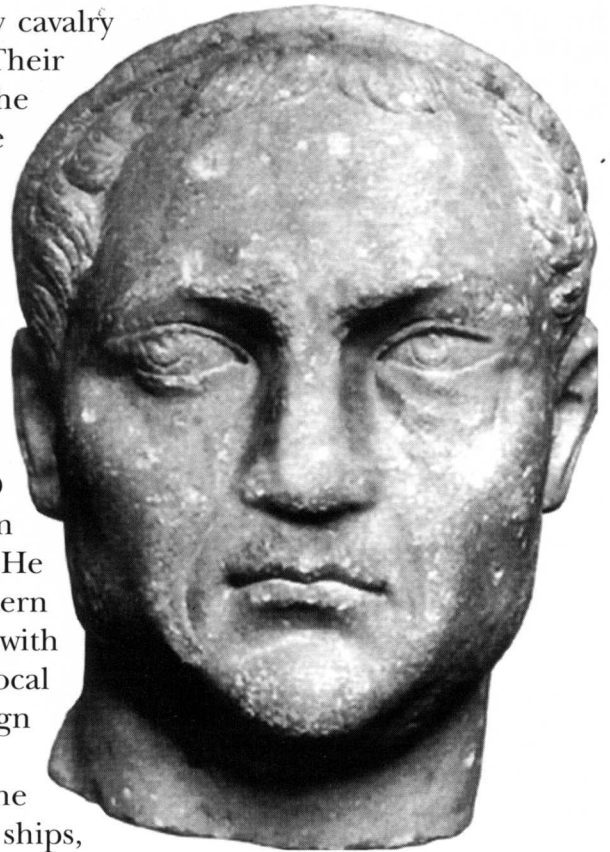
(337–61) in the formation of “Persian style” Roman heavy cavalry (Warrior 15: *Late Roman Cavalryman AD 236–565*, p.54). Their use of mail and laminated armor is almost identical to the knights at the Firuzabad and Naghsh-e-Rustam sites. The *Historia Augusta* even mentions the remodeling of Roman cavalry on the lines of the Sassanian Savaran. A cavalry force of Persian deserters led by their commander Kobad was welcomed into the army of the Armeno-Byzantine general Narses, and Procopius records Iranian cavalry in Byzantine service in the 6th century.

### **Shapur II versus Julian the Apostate (AD 363)**

Shapur II nearly lost his throne and empire to Julian (AD 361–63). Julian became Roman emperor in 361, and soon abjured his Christian faith in favor of pagan beliefs. He proceeded to attempt to eliminate the threat to Rome’s eastern frontier: Sassanian Persia. Julian invaded Persia in 362 with 65,000 men, a combination of mobile army units and local frontier troops. He split his army in two and his campaign began with success.

The emperor took 35,000 troops southeast down the Euphrates toward Ctesiphon. An amazing number of ships, reputedly 1,000, were built to support Julian’s advance along the Euphrates. General Procopius led the second army with 30,000 men into northern Mesopotamia. In theory, Procopius was to link up with the Armenians. This would allow him to block Shapur from moving against Julian’s rear. In hindsight, it might have been wiser not to divide the army since Julian proved unable to maintain proper coordination and communication with Procopius. This led to disaster for Rome. Another fundamental flaw in Julian’s strategy was the assumption that the Sassanians would give battle with their entire army in front of Ctesiphon, which would fall after the anticipated Sassanian defeat. A fierce engagement in front of Ctesiphon was successful for Julian, but did not achieve much. The defeated troops simply retired intact into the city. Ctesiphon proved too strong to capture and the bulk of the Savaran were not in the capital. Julian had violated the classical axiom of warfare of destroying the enemy’s army and avoiding his capital.

Shapur held his best troops in reserve, looking with his generals for opportunities to strike without entering a set-piece battle. The super-heavy Savaran were used as shock troops or “Panzer” with the intention of inflicting as much damage to Roman materiel and morale as possible. As soon as Roman resistance stiffened, the cavalry would simply retire. Julian was in a dilemma: storm Ctesiphon, suffer heavy losses against its defenses while the Savaran were still on the loose, or abandon Ctesiphon to locate and destroy Shapur and his Savaran. Up to this point Julian had not suffered a defeat and his army was still intact. In a meeting with his generals Julian decided to march east into Persia to finally defeat Shapur. The ships on the Euphrates were destroyed to avoid them falling into Persian hands. The absence of Procopius’ forces was fully felt when Julian marched into the Persian heartland. Like Napoleon’s forces more than 1,300 years later in Russia, Julian found his opponents devising a scorched-earth strategy.



**Valerian (253–60), the only Roman emperor in history to have been captured alive. (Courtesy Littleton Coin Company)**

A Roman delegation, including senators, surrenders to Shapur I. (Khademi, Modares University, Tehran)



Even as Shapur made an appearance with his army, he refused to enter into a set-piece battle. The battle in front of Ctesiphon convinced Shapur that the Roman army was too strong and well trained to defeat in a face-to-face battle. Persia's defense now rested solely on the actions of the Savaran. The Savaran would charge with their lances against the Roman columns at their most vulnerable points. The attacking formation most likely had the super-heavy knights placed in the center, with the regular Savaran at the flanks. The latter presumably carried bows, in contrast to their more heavily armored comrades. The fact that the Savaran were able to resort to these tactics indicates that Roman archery was unable to blunt or disrupt the Sassanian lancers. Another factor that may have damaged Roman morale was the Sassanians' use of war elephants. These were also used in "shock" charges in coordination with the Savaran. The Romans had seen elephants in Hannibal's time, but that was centuries ago and these beasts were a new phenomenon to Julian's generation of legionaries. Their use alongside the heavy cavalry certainly added power to Sassanian cavalry raids.

Close-in fighting with Roman infantry was apparently avoided as much as possible. Not only were the Romans very dangerous when faced in close-quarter combat, they had also found an ingenious way of coping with the Savaran assaults. A very effective tactic was to dive under the horses of the Savaran as soon as they approached their lines and try and injure the horses from beneath. This forced the regular Savaran to disengage and use their bows from a distance. The super-heavy Savaran were left without support, and the tiny eye slits of their face masks restricted their ability to see the legionaries in their proximity.

Julian finally had his battle, on June 22, 363, at Maranga. A crescent-type formation was used by the Romans to avoid envelopment by the Savaran. The Savaran formed in the center with armored horse archers in support on their flanks. Elephants stood in the rear. Sassanian archery was certainly deadly; however, the Romans countered this by rushing the archers as fast as possible to reduce the effects of their missiles. Crassus

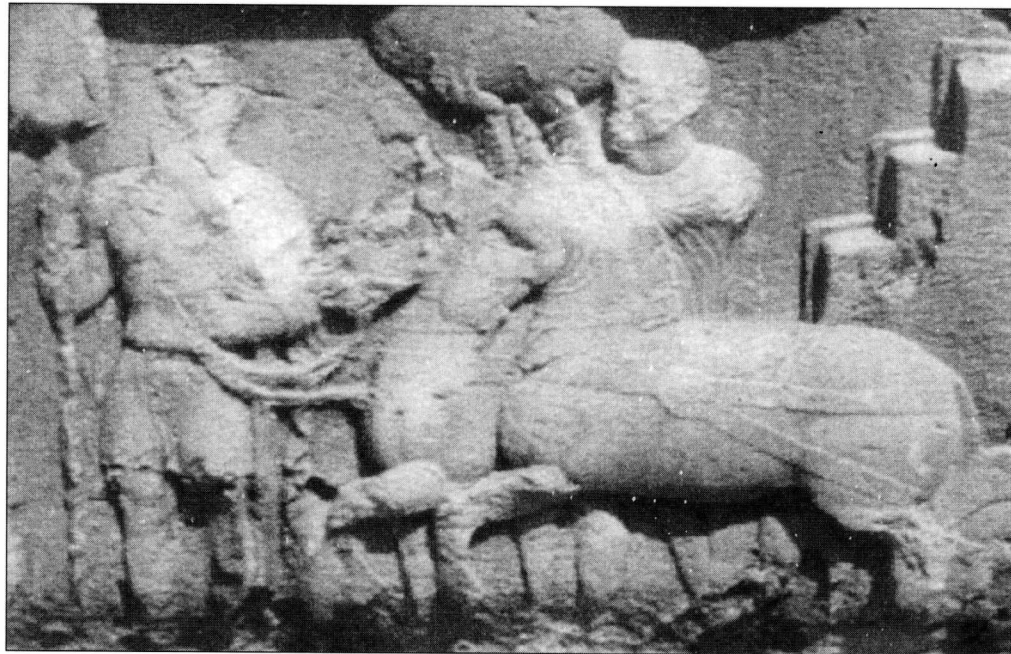


Defeated foes bring tribute to Shapur II. (Khademi, University of Tehran)

had tried the same tactic at Carrhae, without success. Julian's success may be due to his forces encountering Sassanian foot archers. These troops did not have the cavalry's capabilities of rapidly retiring before a Roman infantry charge. It is unclear as to how the armored mounted archers were countered; perhaps their horses lost discipline as a result of the unexpectedly rapid Roman charge. It is also unclear how the Sassanian lancers were stopped; it is likely that the speed of the Roman infantry charge placed them in such close proximity to Sassanian lines that the Savaran were unable to deliver their deadly punch. When caught at close quarters, the elite cavalry would no longer have the "runway distance" to gather enough momentum for an effective lance charge. The technique of forcing the Sassanians to fight at close quarters rewarded the Romans with a tactical victory. However, the "victory" was a Pyrrhic one: the bulk of the Sassanian army remained intact and their troops withdrew in good order. The Romans were now running short of supplies and their casualties could not be replaced.

To conquer Persia, Julian needed to destroy the Sassanian military machine, and to achieve this, the Savaran had to be crushed. Maranga failed to achieve this. The Savaran remained at large to harass the Romans from any direction at their leisure. This is corroborated by Roman sources reporting that the Roman column was attacked variously at the "front...rear...flanks" (Festus, *Breviarium* 29) and that "from all sides the enemy was attacking the [Roman] soldiery...to such an extent did the Persians have them [Romans] in their grip" (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, IV.29). These references to Roman failure contradict Ammianus (XXV.7.5). In support of these actions, armored horse archers harassed Roman lines by shooting arrows from a distance and retiring. Some light Arab cavalry with spears also joined Shapur's army in support. As a result, the longer the Romans stayed in Persia, the weaker they became. Shapur's generals realized that the battles and raids were exhausting and weakening the Roman ranks, making them even more vulnerable to Savaran attacks.

**Emperor Valerian's chariot captured by Sassanian troops, Bishapur site. (Khademi, University of Tehran, Tehran)**



Four days after Maranga, Julian pushed further toward Samarra. The Savaran were waiting and attacked again with lances drawn. The attacks on the column were seemingly contained, except for the right wing where they were defeated (Zonaras, XIII, 13, 15). This crisis caused Julian to appear there, foolishly, without his armor. As the Sassanian lance charge was being engaged, a lance struck Julian. He died from his wounds that day. It is still unclear as to who threw the spear: a Sassanian or a disaffected Christian in Julian's camp. Shortly thereafter, the Romans under Jovian were forced by Shapur to sign a humiliating treaty and surrender strategic cities such as Nisibis in return for safe passage out of Persia.

The Roman defeat resulted from Julian's failure to focus first and foremost on breaking apart the nucleus of Sassanian power: the Savaran. Shapur knew that by repeatedly attacking Roman columns he would be able to wear the Romans down, if not actually defeat them in a set-piece battle. Roman infantry certainly inflicted heavy casualties on the attacking Sassanian cavalry, however they proved unable to pursue and destroy them. It would seem that the Roman cavalry was not up to the task either, and did a poor job of protecting their infantry against Savaran attacks. If Roman cavalry were to enter the fray, the Sassanian mounted horse would simply retire.

#### **Azarethes versus Belisarius at Callinicum (AD 531)**

In AD 531, Belisarius was informed of a Sassanian thrust in the Commagene area (present-day northeastern Turkey), across the Euphrates, and possibly into Syria. Belisarius moved against the Sassanians and forced them to make their stand at a site near Callinicum before they could retreat into Persia and draw the Byzantines into a trap. The all-cavalry Sassanian Savaran force of 10,000 was led by Azarethes, along with 5,000 highly effective allied Arab Lakhmid cavalry under the command of Al-Mundhir. Belisarius' forces of 20,000 contained a mix of infantry and cavalry, consisting of Byzantine and auxiliary forces.

Both armies drew up against each other with the Euphrates River flowing along the eastern edge of the battlefield. The ground rose as it

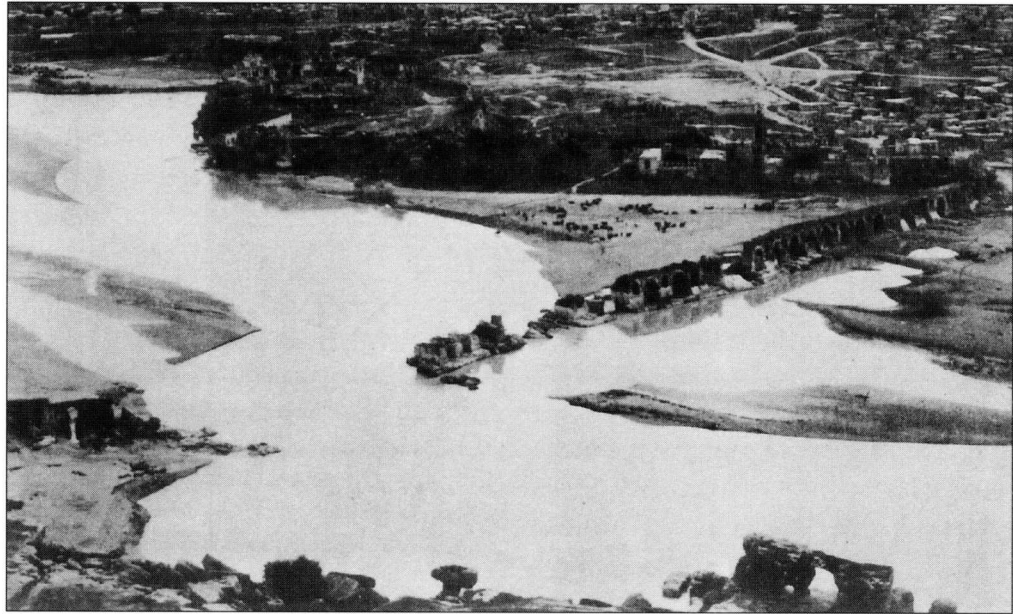
stretched west, and it was here that the battle was decided. The best of the Savaran were deployed with Azarethes in the center. The Sassanians dug a trench in front of their positions. To counter Azarethes, Belisarius placed his own best cavalry in the center. To his extreme right flank, Belisarius placed his 5,000 Arab Ghassanid cavalry to face Azarthes' Lakhmid allies. Lycaonian (Phrygian highlander) infantry stood next to the Ghassanids. They and the Ghassanids proved to be the weak links in Belisarius' line. Next to the Lycaonians were cavalry led by Ascan. To his left stood the formidable Huns led by Simmas and Sunicas. The flank next to the Euphrates, or Belisarius' left, was defended by tough Byzantine infantry.

The battle opened with a massive archery duel, in which the Sassanians did better, due to a combination of expertise and wind direction, which added to the power and propulsion of their missiles. To make matters worse, Persian archery was faster, which meant more arrows fired. There then followed Central Asian-style cavalry duels against the Huns. This distracted the Romans to Azarethes' real intentions. Azarethes had shifted the best of the Savaran to the left wing, next to Al-Mundhir. Before Belisarius realized what was happening, his right wing started to unravel. Al-Mundhir's Sassanian-style cavalry crushed their Ghassanid rivals in short order, allowing the Savaran next to them to gain command of the high ground. The Lycaonian infantry and Ascan's cavalry were now exposed to Persia's finest warriors. Despite valiant efforts, Ascan was doomed and he and his force were crushed. On seeing this, the Lycaonians broke and ran toward the Euphrates, with only a few offering meek and fleeting resistance.

The Byzantine and allied Hun infantry proved unable to halt the charge of the Sassanian horse. Belisarius reacted quickly. He immediately ordered his remaining troops to realign 90 degrees with their backs now facing the Euphrates. Had this not been done, the Savaran would have continued slicing into what remained of Belisarius' Byzantine forces. Belisarius prevented total annihilation by having his infantry stand in close formation to resist the Savaran. The leading Byzantine infantry locked their shields together and the row behind them placed their shields over their heads. Up to this point, the Sassanians had probably suffered light casualties, however this soon changed.

The remaining Roman infantry stood their ground. Byzantine bowmen may have started to fire as the Savaran made their final charge, in order to scatter their attack. It is here where trained and disciplined foot archers, if present, would have had the potential to inflict the most damage. The Savaran were now charging into a deadly, and unexpected, wall of missiles. They suffered heavy losses and were apparently unable to deliver the final coup de grace. Had the Sassanians deployed foot archers in this battle, they may have prevented some of the losses among the Savaran. Repeated charges by the Sassanian horse failed to crush Belisarius' last line of defense, and allowed him to escape across the Euphrates with his surviving infantry. Although Procopius claims that Belisarius was successful in holding the Savaran, Zachariah (*Historia* IX.4, 95.4–95.26) contradicts this by noting that the Romans “turned and fled before the Persian attack. Many fell into the Euphrates and were drowned, and others were killed.” It is not clear whether this is in reference to the situation before Belisarius' “90 degree” order or after.

**Bridge built by captive Roman engineers at Shushtar, south-west Iran. (Khademi, University of Tehran)**



Though successful, Azarethes' victory was costly with little booty to show to King Kavad (499–531). Belisarius himself was dismissed from his post after an inquiry commission probed into the reasons for this defeat by Sassanian arms.

#### **The Hephthalite Hun wars of Peroz (AD 484)**

Up until the 5th century AD, the steppes of Central Asia were dominated by Iranian nomads with strong linguistic and cultural links to their ethnic cousins in Persia. By the middle of the 4th century, Hun and later Turkic expansions began to occur in the area. They were Altaic peoples and eventually came to dominate Central Asia. Sassanian wars against the Turks and Huns are vividly recalled in Firdowsi's *Shahname*. Much of the history of these wars has not been recorded; however, the few surviving accounts portray a series of desperate and bloody battles. These wars were not simply political in nature – they were part of the larger contest of Turko-Hun expansion in hitherto Iranian-speaking Central Asia, and even into the eastern realms of the Sassanian Empire itself. The first Hun invasion of Persia through the Caucasus advanced as far as Mesopotamia, however a Sassanian army routed this force in 395. By the mid-470s the situation worsened for Persia. King Peroz (r. AD 457/9–84) fought a number of disastrous battles with the Hephthalite Huns and was killed fighting them in 484. This nearly led to the empire's destruction.

It is likely that one of the reasons for Hephthalite success lay in horse archery. A key element in that success may have been their possible use of stirrups. Stirrups were most likely developed in Central Asia to provide a more stable platform for mounted archers. If true, it is likely that the heavy lance-armed charging Savaran could have lost their cohesion as a result of more accurate and powerful archery. This would have resulted in individual Savaran losing contact with their formations. The quick and nimble horse archers could then isolate and destroy them with missiles. Horse archers were certainly vulnerable to heavily armored lancers at close quarters; however, this may have been offset with the traditional horse archery tactics of fluidity, flexibility, rapid unpredictable movements, the feigned retreat, and the shot from the

rear (Parthian shot). The Sassanian lancers would have had great difficulty, being unable to concentrate on a focused and clearly defined target. The horse archers would have simply kept their distance and then dispersed, only to rapidly re-form at the sides and rear of the Savaran. The Iranians had been applying this kind of warfare against the Romans for a long time, and were now victims of it themselves.

In the early Sassanian era in Persia, horse archery techniques stagnated in terms of technical development. The heavily armored Savaran may have had a rude awakening on the battlefields of Central Asia. The Sassanian response to the Turco-Hun threat was to transform the super-heavy knight into the more composite or universal cavalryman (see page 28). Armor certainly continued to develop and Central Asian influences in weapons also appeared. The humiliation wrought by the Hephthalites was avenged by Bahram Chobin almost a century after Peroz's death.

### **The Defeat of the Huns and Turks by Bahram Chobin (AD 588) and Smbat Bagratuni (AD 619)**

Khosrow I allied with the western Turkish khanate to crush the Hephthalites in *c.* 558. The region north of the Oxus went to the Turks and the south fell under Sassanian rule. The peace did not last long. By the early 580s, the Turks in Central Asia began to disrupt Sassanian income from the Silk Route and threatened the Sassanian Empire from the northeast. In 588, the Hephthalites, now as Turkish vassals, attacked the empire once more. The Sassanian *Spah* rapidly held a military conference and Bahram Chobin, a brilliant general of the Mihran family of Rayy (near modern Tehran) was elected to battle the Hephthalites and Turks. Shahbazi reports 12,000 "hand picked" Savaran as being selected for Bahram's forces (1989, p.520). Bahram and the Savaran set out from Nev-Shapur and battled with the western Turks and their Hephthalite vassals, defeating them in April 588 and capturing the city of Balkh. The Turks were again defeated near Herat in 589. The Oxus River was then crossed, the eastern Turks conquered and much booty fell to Bahram's forces. It is reputed that an arrow shot by Bahram slew the eastern Turkish Khagan, known as Ch'u-lo-hou by the Chinese (see Shahbazi, 1989).

Nearly 30 years later, the Turkish-Hephthalite forces attempted to reverse their fortunes by taking advantage of the bloody Khosrow-Heracles wars. They attacked the empire in 619 as Shahrbaraz was capturing Egypt. The Armenian general Smbat Bagratuni, along with 2,000 Armenian Savaran, led the Sassanian army to confront this new threat from the east. The first battle took place near Tus where Bagratuni was victorious. A very small force of 300 men under the Sassanian prince Datoyan was left behind. Although the events are unclear, the Turks and Huns requested help from the northern Khaghan, who is reported by Sebeos as having sent 300,000 troops (Sebeos, 1999, ch. 28), most likely an exaggeration. This force soon overran Datoyan and the eastern territories up to Rayy and even Isfahan. After their plunder and raids, the Turks and Huns withdrew. Smbat rapidly reorganized the eastern Sassanian forces and crushed the Turks and Huns, slaying their leader in a personal hand-to-hand battle. The death of their leader seems to have broken Turkish morale. The Turks appear to then have disintegrated into a disorderly flight. The Savaran and their Armenian allies now engaged in pursuit, routing many of the fleeing



**A member of the Zoroastrian Magi. Many Aryan doctrines expected the Magi to accompany Savaran warriors into battle. (Author's photo at Naghsh-e-Rajab)**

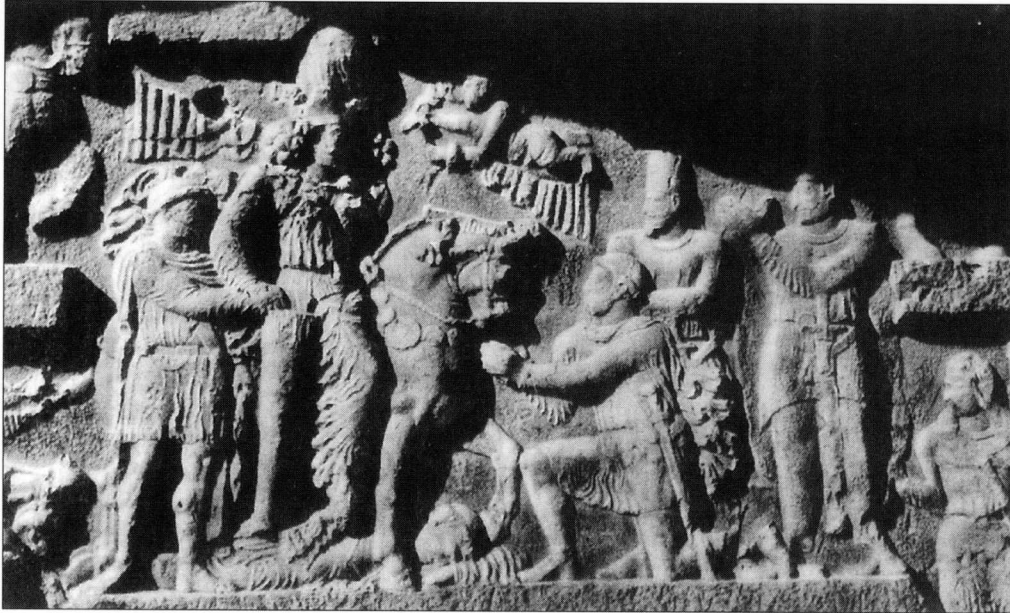
Turks and Huns. The actions of Bahram Chobin and Smbat Bagratuni effectively pacified Persia's northeastern frontier until the arrival of the Arabs.

The successes of Bahram and Bagratuni may be attributed to the advent of the new and fast composite cavalryman who was able to fight with both lance and bow. Central Asian styles and equipment were also evident. Unlike the super-heavy trooper of the earlier Savaran, the composite cavalryman was able to react flexibly against Central Asian mounted troops. The *Panjagan* may have been developed for warfare on this frontier. The rapid succession of arrows over a limited target area would do much to diminish the Central Asian cavalryman's great skill and agility in maneuver.

### **Triumph and tragedy, AD 603–28: the wars of Khosrow II**

Khosrow II owed his throne to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice (r. AD 582–602), who had provided him with troops to overthrow the enigmatic Bahram Chobin, who had usurped the throne. Khosrow II became the monarch of the Sassanian Empire in 590 or 591. In gratitude for Maurice's support, Khosrow made generous territorial concessions to Byzantium. Maurice's assassination by Phocas in 602 provided Khosrow with the pretext to recover those territories he had lost to the Byzantines as tribute. (The complete narrative of this conflict is discussed in *Men-at-Arms* 175 and *Greatrex and Lieu*, 2002.)

Sassanian forces successfully attacked Byzantium in 603, virtually eliminating the Byzantine presence in Mesopotamia by 610. A Byzantine civil war was at its height, seriously hampering an effective response to the Sassanians. From 604, the command of the Sassanian army fell to the enigmatic general Farrokhan "Shahrbaraz" (The Boar of the Realm). General Shahin defeated the Byzantines in Theodosiopolis, secured Armenia by 611, and captured Caesarea at Cappadocia. In 613 Emperor Heracles, his brother Theodore, and another Byzantine general, Nicetas, joined forces to stop Shahrbaraz. Their armies were defeated by Shahrbaraz, in Syria; Damascus and Antioch were captured. Heracles retreated north to the Cilician Gates and was again defeated by Shahrbaraz who had pursued him. Many prisoners were taken and Cilicia fell. The Byzantine Empire was now cut in two. Shahrbaraz defeated the Byzantines again and captured Jerusalem in 614. The True Cross was removed and sent to the Sassanian heartland. The elaborate and decorated armor of Heracles was also captured and sent to Ctesiphon, where it remained until the arrival of the Arabs in 637. Egypt fell in 619. Shahin struck out from Ctesiphon in 614 to reach Chalcedon at the Bosphorus (615), Sardis (616), and Ancyra (modern Ankara) (622). Even Salamis may have been attacked by a Persian fleet in 617, and Rhodes actually fell to a naval assault in 622.



**Bishapur representation of Shapur's triumph. Shapur I, on horseback, holds Valerian's hand, while Philip the Arab kneels before him. (Khademi, Modaress University, Tehran)**

The successes of the Sassanians in the first and second phase may be explained by two factors. First, the dangerous northeastern frontier had been largely pacified, thanks to Bahram's victories over the Turks. This allowed the Sassanians to concentrate large numbers of high-quality troops on their Byzantine frontier. Although the Turks resumed their attacks in 619, at the height of Persia's war with Byzantium, they were again defeated by Smbat Bagratuni. Khosrow and his general staff may have thought that by being able to concentrate a single powerful force on a single front, they would be able to alter the strategic balance permanently in favor of Persia.

Second, the Byzantine armies may not have had adequate countermeasures to avoid or deflect the powerful frontal charge of the Savaran. The Savarans' frontal charge was considered by the *Strategikon* to be most powerful and dangerous at its front, but potentially vulnerable at its sides and rear. It is possible that the Sassanians had learned of Byzantine countermeasures against their frontal charge, and found ways to neutralize them. Royalist Sassanian troops and Maurice's contingents had fought side by side in support of Khosrow II against Bahram (see *Khuzistan Chronicle*, Part 1) and the opportunity existed to study Byzantine tactics against Sassanian troops more closely. It may be possible that the Savaran had perfected their frontal charge by executing it with greater speed and cohesion. Their flanks remained potentially vulnerable, however.

Heracles arrived in Armenia by July 622 and won the first Byzantine victory of the war. This did not reverse the strategic situation, but the Byzantines had regained their confidence. Shahrbaraz and General Shahrplakan joined forces in order to crush Heracles before a third force under Shahin arrived. The decisive battle to come was the beginning of the end for Khosrow's ambitions. Heracles camped in a grassy plain and hid his forces on a wooded hill. In the ensuing battle, the Byzantines burst out of the hill, taking the Sassanians completely by surprise. The Byzantines may have successfully taken advantage of the vulnerabilities of the Sassanian Savaran charge their flanks and rear. It is possible that as the Sassanians charged forward, a hidden Byzantine cavalry force waited for leading Savaran elements to charge past it. Then

the Byzantines may have lunged straight into the flank and some elements may have even attacked the rear. Shahrablakan is reported as being killed by a sword at his back.

Shahrbaraz lived to fight another day, and with new troops successfully thrust all the way again to Constantinople. He made his peace with Heracles and withdrew from Constantinople in 627, after being informed that Khosrow wanted him assassinated. This removed an important and dangerous Sassanian army for the remainder of the war. When the forces of Shahin and Razutis were destroyed, no Sassanian army was left to block Heracles' advance into Persia. Meanwhile, Shahin was defeated by the emperor's brother, Theodore. Details of this battle and the role of the Savaran are not clear. The only reference seems to be "a storm of hail fell unexpectedly on the barbarians and struck down many of them..." (Theoph. A.M. 6117, 315.2-26). It must be assumed that the decisive charges of the Savaran were decisively routed using the *Strategikon* guideline of avoiding the front and attacking the flanks and rear.

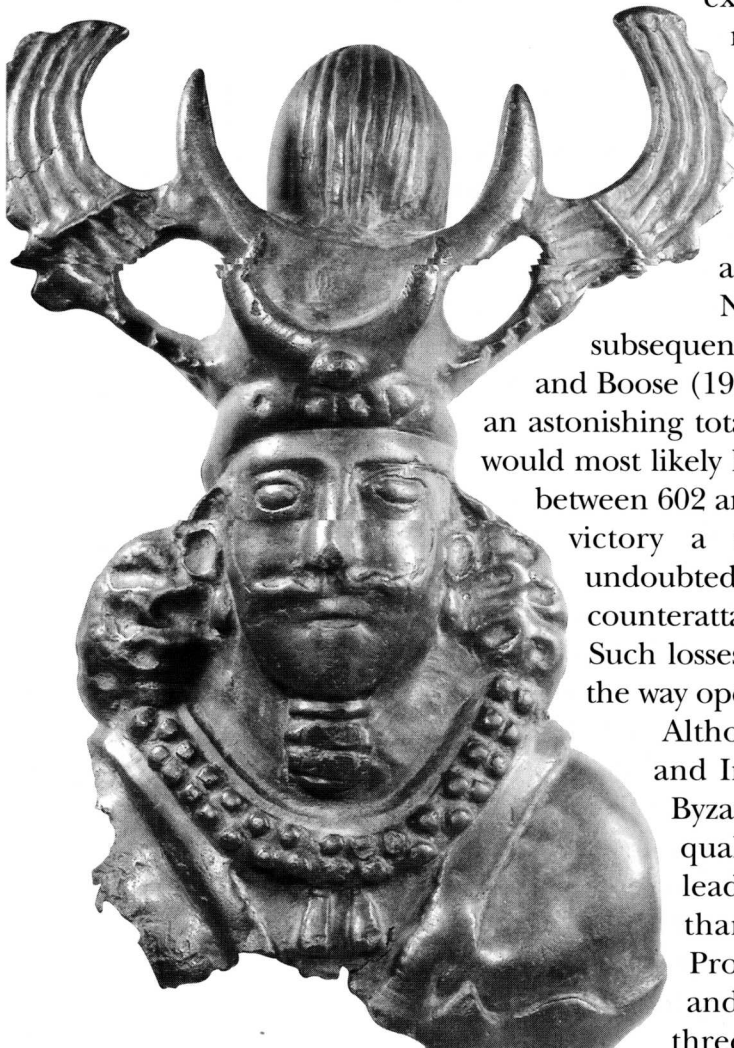
In 627-28 the final Byzantine counterattack took the form of a large-scale invasion of Persia via Caucasian Albania and Azerbaijan aided by the Turkic Khazars, who later withdrew. A large force led by Razutis was destroyed (see Men-at-Arms 175). This defeat led to the capture of the Dastigerd palace and fire temple at Shiz. Khosrow was overthrown by a palace coup, and by June 630 Princess Boran had ascended the throne and signed the formal peace with Heracles.

The Byzantine success was at the tactical and strategic level. The excellent generalship of Heracles, especially in his reconstruction of the shattered Byzantine army's strength and morale, may have accompanied a change in battlefield tactics. The Byzantines may have developed a "counter" to the Savaran lance charge by consistently striking their vulnerable flanks and rear. Training and drill were intense, and civilians were pressed into service.

Nevertheless, the 25-year war and Heracles' subsequent triumph were to cost Byzantium very dearly. Gabriel and Boose (1994) estimate that the losses to Byzantine armies were an astonishing total of 200,000 fighting men. The bulk of these losses would most likely have been endured in the initial sieges and disasters between 602 and 622. The scale of these losses made this Byzantine victory a decidedly pyrrhic one. Sassanian losses were undoubtedly as great, especially during the major Byzantine counterattacks which defeated Shahin in 627 and Razutis in 628. Such losses mortally weakened both empires militarily, leaving the way open for the Arab invasions less than ten years later.

Although generally not acknowledged by some Western and Iranian historians, Arab generals who defeated the Byzantines and Sassanians were of exceptionally high quality. This is because the Arabs developed a war leadership system that was more flexible and adaptable than the empires of Byzantium and Persia. The Prophet Muhammed's habit of listening to suggestions and soliciting the opinions of his companions had three major effects on Islamic military affairs. First was

**Nobleman from northern Persia, Ladjevard in Mazandaran, 5th-7th century. (Louvre Museum, Paris)**



the delegation of authority, which gave a military leader in the heat of battle a high degree of autonomy. In addition, although the principle of obedience was stressed, orders could be questioned if the army was put in unnecessary jeopardy. Second, military leaders could be elected by consultation by members of the Muslim *Umma* or community, and if circumstances so dictated, joint command or *Tasanud* could also occur. This meant that persons with military merit had a greater chance of rising up through the ranks than they could in the more conservative Byzantine and Sassanian empires. Third, expertise was highly valued and respected. An example of this is the siege of Medina by the Meccans in 627, when the Prophet Muhammed heeded the advice of Salman the Persian to have the Muslims dig a ditch from which they could then fire arrows at their attackers.

Khosrow II made the gross strategic blunder of deposing the Lakhmid king Nu'man in 602 and abolishing the dynasty. Instead of these tough, well-trained Arab warriors, another Arab by the name of Iyas Ibn Qabisa was appointed alongside a Sassanian official. There was now no longer an effective allied Arab buffer force to face the future armies of Islam that were to come from the deserts of Arabia. The defenses of southern Iraq were now virtually nonexistent since little had been done to repair, maintain, or strengthen the Khandak Shapur (a canal from Hit on the Euphrates to an area near modern Basra) ever since Shapur II had it built. Of great concern was Persia's inability to replenish its ranks with trained professional manpower after the bloody Khosrow-Heracles wars; like Byzantium, many skilled Sassanian veterans had been lost during those wars. The ultimate price for this failure was the fall of the empire in the epic battles of Qadisiya (637) and Nihavend (641).

King Yazdegird III (r. AD 632-651) fled eastward to Khorasan in an attempt to rally resistance, but was murdered by his own people in Merv in 651. This marked the end of the Sassanian dynasty. Sassanian civilization, with its arts, riches, knowledge, and statecraft, was incorporated into the Ummayyad Caliphate. Hamblin also notes that the impact of Sassanian military theory and practice on subsequent Islamic armies has been at times "overlooked or underestimated" by contemporary historians (Hamblin, 1986, p.99). Sassanian troops were highly regarded and those that joined the Islamic cause were often paid more than Arab troops. This included both Dailamite infantry and Savaran (see Men-at-Arms 255: *Armies of the Muslim Conquest*, p.14). Vast quantities of high-quality Sassanian weaponry fell into Muslim hands, which further aided the Muslim conquests. Al-Tabari quotes a certain Qutayba Ibn Muslim who obtained permission to distribute arms from Persian armories to his troops.

Despite their resounding victories over the Goths of Spain and the Byzantines in the Near East, and their overthrow of the Sassanian Empire, the Arabs failed to subdue northern Persia, the homeland of the Dailamites. The later Abbassid Caliphate only managed to occupy the area for approximately 100 years from 771, after which an independent local dynasty gained power and was supported by the Saffarids of Afghanistan and Central Asia from the 880s. Many facets of Sassanian culture and the Savaran survived in the region up to the early 20th century.

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## THE PLATES

### **A: SHAPUR AND THE SURRENDER OF VALERIAN**

#### **A1: Shapur I**

Shapur wears loose ceremonial dress, suitable for riding. He wears an early Sassanian jewelled necklace. Shapur's steed has decorated harness, with two golden emblems before and behind the saddle. Shapur rests his hand on the sword handle, tilting the weapon. (Sources: Naghsh-e-Rajab in situ; Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; Bishapur in situ; Christensen; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Goldman; Trousdale; Overlaet)

#### **A2: Emperor Valerian**

Valerian was the last of the Roman emperors defeated by Shapur I. Evidence from the Bishapur and Naghsh-e-Rustam sites reveal Valerian in the kneeling position. Valerian wears a purple cloak with a golden clasp, a symbol of kingship common to both Rome and Persia. Valerian's sword is hypothesized as being of the Legio XX type. On his feet are Roman sandal boots. His purple cap is adorned with pearls. (Sources: Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; Bishapur in situ; Museum of Rome; Christensen; Barker; Peterson)

#### **A3: Roman senator**

The huge contingent of captured Romans contained a large proportion of senior dignitaries such as senators and military commanders. Evidence from the Bishapur site does not depict the senators with weapons. The capture of Valerian along with so many high-ranking Roman dignitaries was a powerful setback for Rome. (Sources: Bishapur in situ; Museum of Rome; Barker; Peterson; Williams)

#### **A4: Savar of the Suren Clan**

This knight from the Suren clan wears a ceremonial helmet, shaped like the *Varanga* seen at Bishapur. The top of his tunic is decorated with early Sassanian circular designs (of possible Parthian or northern Iranian origin). The scabbard-slide sword, remarkably similar to the Ghandaharan Kushan swords, is suspended in the middle. This sword would often have been six inches longer and an inch wider than the one shown. His loose "Cossack" trousers are designed for riding and laminated armor is worn beneath. (Sources: Bishapur in situ; Ghirshman; Christensen; Herrmann; Goldman; Trousdale; Overlaet; Iran Bastan Museum)

#### **A5: Female Sardar**

Women are described by Roman sources as being in the battle order of the early Sassanians. They wore scabbard-slide swords, donned helmets and wore armor like other cavalry elites. This *Sardar* wears a tunic with the trident emblem on the front and holds her Dura Europos-style helmet. This helmet has been linked with Sassanian infantry, but may have been used by the Savaran as well. She has a shirt of mail beneath her tunic extending to just above her knees. Her red trousers are of the tight-fitting "Persian" style. The soft leather riding boots she is wearing are still in use among certain tribes of Lurs in western Iran. (Sources: Bishapur in situ; Christensen; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Poursartib; Goldman; Trousdale; Iran Bastan Museum)

## **B: SAVARAN IN TRAINING, LATE 3RD CENTURY AD**

These Savaran are training for war in a gymnasium of typical Sassanian Ctesiphon architectural style.

### **B1: Arzbad-e-Aspwaragan**

The *Arzbad* (chief instructor) of the Ard-Alan clan is a member of the Savaran elite and a veteran of past wars. The ceremonial Sarmatian-style sword highlights his Alanic origins. The emblem on his headgear could be a Sassanian military symbol, or signify clan membership. His costume is western Iranian with a long loose cloak with no buttons, and fastened at the top with a metallic clasp. His boots are made of soft leather and his riding trousers are loosely fitted. On his feet are boots with decorative disks. The instructor holds his sword hilt to avoid dragging it on the ground. (Sources: Bishapur in situ; Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; Arberry; Christensen; Frye; Goldman; Ghirshman; Trousdale)

### **B2: Young Savar trainee**

Training in riding and archery began from a very early age among Iranian peoples. Rudimentary horse furniture is consistent with the Sassanian doctrine of training in challenging circumstances. The relatively small horse is derived from the breeds of Central Asia. The young rider shoots with his finger pointed toward the target. By the mid-4th century, horse archery had declined in importance in the Sassanian army. (Sources: Bishapur in situ; Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; Ghirshman; Christensen; Goldman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Trousdale; Iran Bastan Museum)

### **B3: Elite knights in Zur-Shemsher training**

The ancient concept of *zur* (power) training with heavy swords (*Shemsher*) became particularly valued when facing the tough and well-trained Romans and Byzantines. The broadswords are of the heavy Sarmatian type with large heavy blades. In practice, the Savaran relied on the massed lance charge and cavalry tactics to break Roman lines, but would engage in close fighting as required by battlefield circumstances. (Sources: Bishapur in situ; Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet)



## **C: TURKISH WARS**

### **C1: Late Sassanian Savar-Framandar**

The final example of the evolution of the Savaran is found at Tagh-e-Bostan. Late Savarans were well versed in archery, close-quarter combat, and lance fighting. The sword is of the Turco-Avar two-point suspension type and decorated with Sassanian honeycomb feather patterns. The *Spangenhelm* helmet is in the Tagh-e-Bostan style (Khosrow II) as is the mail shirt extending to the knees. The trigger weapon is a conjectural form of the *Panjagan*, a device for rapid and successive firing of five arrows. No examples of this weapon have survived. His decorative belt indicates military rank. The shield's emblem is the lion, a common Sassanian battle standard. The bow case shows the ancient Iranian yellow sun. His steed is armored at the front only, a potential weakness that may have been exploited by the Byzantines in the late 620s. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan in situ; al-Tabari; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Ziapour)

### **C2: Kanarang of Abarshahr**

This warrior of Kushan descent wears Tagh-e-Bostan-style attire. The epaulettes signify military rank, according to the Sassanian color code or *rang* (rank) system. The vest design became standard across Persia and continued to survive among the nobility until the early 20th century. The sword is relatively large and heavy, a feature of the original Iranian peoples of Central Asia as noted in the *Shahname* epic. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan in situ; Iran Bastan Museum; State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; al-Tabari; *Shahname*; Arberry; Christensen; Frye; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Ziapour)

### **C3: Paygospanan-Banu**

This *Banu* (lady) provincial military commander (*Paygospanan*) wears attire found among Iranian and Turkic peoples of Central Asia in late Sassanian and early Islamic periods. Her attire is in Pur-e-Vahman style with high Central Asian boots, decorated belt and northern Iranian loose-fitting riding vest. She has struck a Turk's sword hand, denying him the chance of stopping her arrow with his blade and is drawing her second fatal missile. The medallions adorning her steed are typical of elite Savaran cavalry. Savaran emblems continued to survive in Europe, Central Asia, and the Islamic world. Women in Persia continued to appear in important administrative and military positions up to the 18th century. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan; al-Tabari; *Shahname*; Ziapour; State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)

### **C4: Turkish Gok warriors**

These warriors of the celestial (Gok) kingdom are ancestors of the Oghuzz-speaking Turks who invaded Arran, Azerbaijan, and Anatolia in the 11th century. Their helmets, swords, and armor show strong Iranian, Turco-Hun, and Chinese influences (especially the coat of lamellar armor). The Turks never fully recovered from the devastating defeats inflicted upon them by Bahram Chobin. Later Turkish efforts at taking advantage of the Khosrow-Heracles wars led to them being crushed again by a small number of elite Savaran led by Smbat Bagratuni. Turkish expansion into Central Asia,

**Post-Sassanian Banu of Ray (modern Tehran). Women continued to appear in military leadership roles in Persia long after the Sassanians collapsed in the 7th century AD. (Khademi and Iran Bastan Museum)**

the Middle East, and Anatolia had to await the downfall of the Sassanian Empire in 637–651. (Sources: Military Museum, Istanbul; Atabaki; Newark; Ziapour)

**D: DEATH OF JULIAN, JUNE 26, AD 363**

**D1: Pushtighban – Royal Body Guards**

Super-heavy cavalry was developed by Shapur II to counter the best of Rome's legions. Heliodorus, Ammianus, and Julian provide excellent descriptions of these troops. They are covered entirely in mail with protective lamellar and laminated armor underneath as well as *Bazpan* armored gloves. The winged helmets are based on near-contemporary royal bodyguards and kings such as Bahram II (the *Spangenhelm* technology portrayed is conjectural). Note the tight-fitting face mask with holes and slits for nose and eyes as well as protective mail behind and around the neck. Each knight carries a heavy sword, mace, axe, and heavy lance. The lance is based on the Achaemenean "Apple Bearers": the lance head reflects metalworks found in Luristan. The horse has heavy armored protection for its legs and torso. Elite Sassanian knights are described as strong enough to impale two Roman warriors simultaneously. (Sources: Sar Mashhad in situ; Ammianus Marcellinus; Julian's *Orations*; Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet)

**D2: Emperor Julian**

The mortally wounded Emperor Julian is pulling out a javelin from his ribs and has abandoned his sword. It is a mystery why Julian entered the battle without wearing any armored protection; a sign perhaps of overconfidence in his ability to defeat the Persians. The style of tunic he wears is similar to tunics worn by Roman soldiers since at least the time of



**Bahram Gur hunting boar, 4th century. (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)**

Claudius. The emperor's horse is based on Persian depictions of Roman cavalry at Bishapur. (Sources: Bishapur in situ; Christensen; Barker; Ferrill; Peterson)

**D3: Roman commander**

The Germanic commander is a "western" soldier (e.g. *Milites Litoris Saxoni*) of the late 3rd and early 4th centuries; however, Sassanian inscriptions do report troops from "Goth and German kingdom" in Julian's army. The helmet is based on Peterson's reconstruction of a "ridge"-designed helmet; its non-Christian symbols typify Julian's apostasy from Christianity. The buckled attachment and cheekguards are conjectural. The tunic is from Peterson's reconstruction of a junior officer in the Piazza Armerina mosaic in Sicily, but may have a distant Parthian or Alanic influence. The shield is also from the Piazza Armerina mosaic. The commander is armed with the long *Spatha* sword. His unsuccessful attempt to dive underneath the Pushtighban's steed has resulted in his impaling. (Sources: Barker; Bunson; Ferrill; Peterson)

**D4: Roman troops**

Roman soldiers here are depicted with the characteristic deep skull and sloping neck guard. They are armed with *Spatha* swords and rely on Dura Europos-style shields, complete with a central grip and a pointed boss. The Piazza Armerina mosaic provides a model for the four-color system and the boar motif. Erratum: Soldiers of this period would almost certainly have worn mail rather than the *lorica segmentata* seen here. (Sources: Barker; Bunson; Ferrill; Peterson)

**D5: Gyan-avspar Peshmerga**

The Gyan-avspar Peshmerga resembles earlier Sassanian warriors in that he sports mail, lamellar armor, armored glove, and a decorative vest. What makes him different from his predecessors is the medallion strap on his chest and his *Spangenhelm* helmet. The sword handle is based on one of Shapur I's swords; the sheath derives from Bishapur depictions. Having lost his lance in an earlier assault, he now thrusts his heavy broadsword forward using the Sassanian grip (known today as the "Italian" grip).

The sword thrust is meant for shock and short engagements; he will then retire and discharge missiles. The bow and missiles in the left hand will be deployed from at least 65ft away. The quiver is modeled on that of King Peroz. (Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; New York Metropolitan Museum; British Museum; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet)

**D6: Yazata Mobad**

This warrior exhorts his comrades in this desperate assault, waving a Sassanian banner. His costume and headgear are typical early to mid-period Sassanian riding

dress. The cape, a symbol of authority and status, was later to appear in northern European societies. The sword is modeled on metalwork depicting Shapur II. An almost identical costume is found in a depiction with Mithras, in present-day Frankfurt am Main, Germany. (Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet)

### **E: INVESTITURE AND KNIGHTING OF BAHRAM CHOBIN, 6TH CENTURY**

The investiture and knighting is taking place at one of the entrances of Bahram Gur's Sarvistan palace.

#### **E1: Bahram Chobin**

Bahram Chobin's victories against the Turks in Central Asia make him an Iranian folk hero to this day. His tunic reveals northern Iranian influence. The strap design may have first appeared in western Persia by the mid-Sassanian era. Circular designs on the straps and trousers are typically Persian. The soft riding boots are reminiscent of earlier Iranian peoples such as the Saka. The belt buckle is based on a golden prototype found at Nahavand. (Sources: *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Ghirshman; Overlaet; Shahbazi; Widengren; Ziapour)

#### **E2: Mobad Shapsheraz**

This reconstruction is based on the Mithras figure at Tagh-e-Bostan. The *Shapsheraz* (he who brandishes the sword) features his ceremonial sword in court and religious functions. The Savaran often engaged in Zoroastrian or other Aryan rites with the Magi before battle. The costume is western Iranian, contemporary variations in Iran are seen among the Mamasani, Kurdish, and Luri tribes. The headgear represents the power and divinity of the sun. The significance of the shoulder decoration is not as clear, but may indicate status or clan membership. Pockets of the Mithras clan survive among the Kurds. Most Kurds of Kermanshah were at this time fairer than this *Shapsheraz*. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan in situ; al-Tabari; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Ziapour)

#### **E3: Priestess of the Temple of Anahita**

The priestess is handing Bahram the symbol of *Farr* or divine glory. Her crown indicates an important status within the Anahita cult. The costume is western Iranian with Romano-Hellenic influences. Her shoes, as attested by the *Avesta*, are golden. Spataro notes that the hairstyle of the Roman goddess Kore is identical to that of Anahita. Women were integral to Zoroastrian religious and ceremonial duties, as well as more ancient cults. At Tagh-e-Bostan, Khosrow II is seen flanked by Anahita to the right and the great god Ahura Mazda to the left. (Sources: Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; *Shahname*; Christensen; Peck; Spataro)

#### **E4: Savar officer of Rayy**

This officer's costume design may indicate membership in a particular regiment or elite unit. The Spangenhelm helmet is conical, based on the Nineveh finds. Note its similarity of shape to the "infantry" Dura Europos helmet. The officer is engaged in the ancient Iranian ceremony of thrusting a broadsword into the earth; a rite observed by Europeans such as Herodotus and Marcus Aurelius. This ceremony may have been introduced to Celtic Britain by the Alans. (Sources: Ulansey; Christensen; Goldman; Nickel; Widengren; Ziapour)

### **F: KING KHOSROW II AND QUEEN SHIREEN, EARLY 7TH CENTURY**

#### **F1: Khosrow II "Parveez"**

Khosrow II wears a crown with *Varanga*-style bird wings, and a large disk inset with pearls and crescents. Round his neck he wears an elaborate neck decoration with jewels, particularly rubies. His costume is Central Asian in inspiration, but with Iranian motifs; note the ancient Iranian "Celtic cross" designs. The decorative belt is adorned with jewels; there are four straps (each with five gold disks attached) on each side of the belt, which are indicators of status. On the bottom of his tunic and on his ankles are representations of the Simurgh mythological bird, facing outward. His shoes are traditional Sassanian. The kingly broadsword pose dates from the early days of the dynasty. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan in situ; Iran Bastan Museum; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Widengren; Ziapour)

#### **F2: Queen Shireen**

Queen Shireen's costume is late Sassanian and is extrapolated from both Tagh-e-Bostan and local western Iranian sources. Headgear is seen among noblewomen accompanying the Khosrow's hunting party at Tagh-e-Bostan. The decorative pattern below the collar is distinctly western Iranian. The costume is decorated with honeycomb-style designs, each inset with a circle. Note the decorative short riding boots. The Nestorian cross indicates Shireen's Christian faith. Christianity was widespread in western Persia (Media, Kurdistan, Khuzistan) on the eve of the Islamic conquests. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan in situ; Iran Bastan Museum; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Widengren; Ziapour)

#### **F3: Guiw nobleman**

This early Sassanian costume was typical of Medes, Kurds, Aturpatekan (modern Iranian Azerbaijan), Dailamites, and Persians. The "bell bottom" trousers have the same hatch line designs seen on parts of the tunic, but applied uniformly on the pants. Footwear resembles the modern Iranian tribal *Geeveh*, a fabric shoe that reaches up to ankle level. The band below the left shoulder extending onto the left arm may be a military decoration. The shorter scabbard-slide sword was at this date used solely for ceremonies, and was now out of date on the battlefield. Littleton and Malcor have recently speculated that the name of the Guiw clan may be related to the English-Celtic "Gawain." (Sources: Persepolis in situ; Iran Bastan Museum; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Widengren; Ziapour)

#### **F4: Smbat Bagratuni**

The "Belisarius of the East," Smbat Bagratuni was perhaps one of the classical world's best generals. Of Armenian origin, his skill and prowess in battle earned him a special status in the court alongside clans such as the Guiw or Spandiyars. His tunic is decorated with Iranian floral circular "bowtie" designs, bird motifs, and "claw" markings on the arms, and pearls and expensive jewels are worked into the tunic's design. There are two belts. The top one is decorated with jewels, the belt is decorated in gold, and from it is suspended the Turco-Avar-style sword. He wears boots in the Pur-e-Vahman style, and the top of the boot is decorated with pearls. Uniforms like these may have been worn by officers of Khosrow's royal guards such as the Piroozetae and Khosrowgetae. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan in situ; Iran



Bastan Museum; State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; *Shahname*; Christensen; Goldman; Trousdale; Ghirshman; Herrmann; Overlaet; Widengren; Ziapour)

**The cube of Zoroaster, a sacred site for the Savaran. Zoroastrianism, as well as other Aryan cults, were to flourish among the Savaran. (Chamanara, Kouchesfahani, Kial, Maddadi at Naghsh-e-Rustam)**

## **G: GENERAL SHAHRBARAZ AND PRINCESS BORAN, EARLY 7TH CENTURY**

### **G1: Chief Mobad**

This warrior priest wears classic western Iranian costume of "Parthian" style, common among today's Kermanshah Kurds and Dehloran Lurs. The cloak is fastened by a golden clasp with a Sassanian emblem. Northern Iranian peoples were instrumental in transmitting variations of these cloaks (the *Kandys*) to the Ostrogoths. Note the *kaftan*, Parthian-style cap, and the ceremonial scabbard-slide sword. The Mobad carries a variation of the empire's royal standard known as *Drafsh-e-Kaviani* (the Banner of Kaveh), the royal eagle motif which appeared regularly among the elite Savaran. The dog motif on the medallion round the horse's neck is a Zoroastrian symbol for loyalty, friendship, and safe passage to the afterlife. (Sources: Naghsh-e-Rustam in situ; *Shahname*; Goldman; Trousdale; Christensen; Widengren; Ziapour)

### **G2: General Shahrbaraz**

The tailoring of the Tagh-e-Bostan uniforms are said to be influenced by Central Asia, however the motifs and designs are Persian or northeastern Iranian. The Simurgh pattern on General Shahrbaraz's uniform derives from the Sassanian coat found by Russian excavators. The medallion on his bow

case sports the *Baraz* (Boar), a tribute to Shahrbaraz's success in driving the Byzantines out of the Middle East, laying siege to Constantinople in the early 600s, and nearly destroying the Byzantine Empire. Shahrbaraz carries a handsome two-point suspension sword and (like the *Mobad* and Princess Boran) is shown using stirrups. The bow carried round the neck indicates the general's very high status and prestige. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan in situ; *Shahname*; Goldman; Trousdale; Christensen; Widengren; Ziapour)

### **G3: Princess Boran**

Boran's costume is derived from northern Iranian Mazandarani dress. The Dailamites successfully repelled Arab attempts at expansion into northern Persia, resulting in many Sassanian fashions surviving to recent times. The colored stripes on the lower portion of the costume may indicate rank or status. Boran is portrayed riding with stirrups. Boran signed the peace treaty with Byzantine Emperor Heracles, officially ending the devastating wars of the early 7th century. (Sources: Tagh-e-Bostan in situ; Ziapour; Kasraian; Nyrop)

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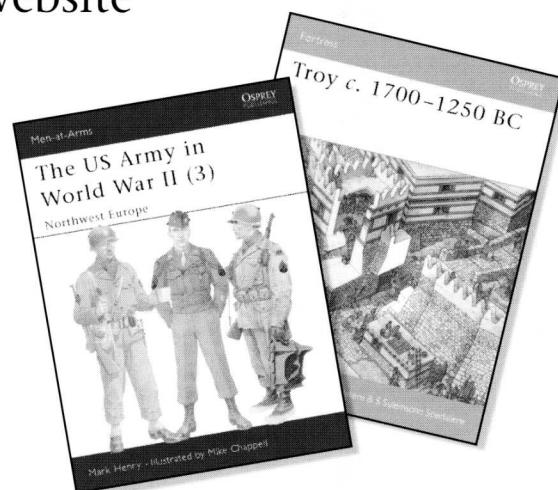
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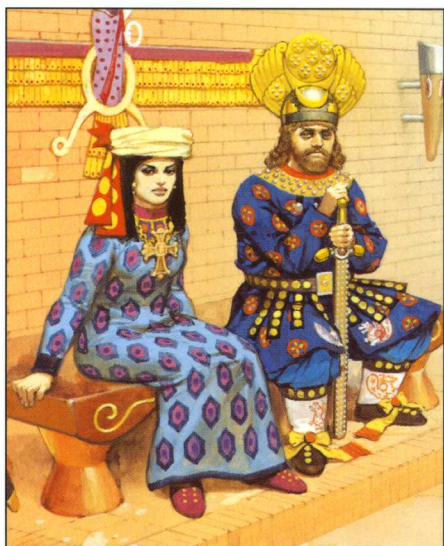
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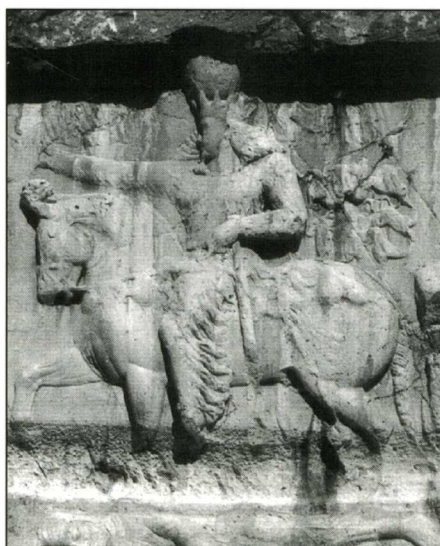
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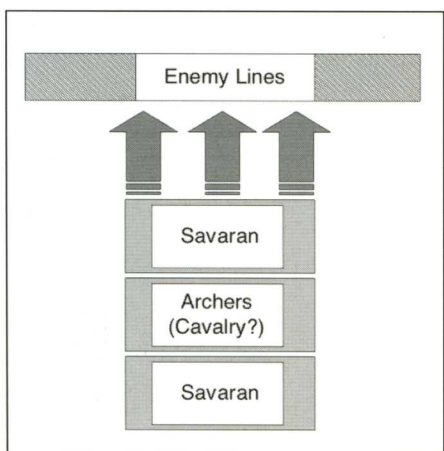
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