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ANCIENT HISTORY

TRACING THE ROOTS OF A STRATEGIC MISTAKE IN SASANIAN TRADE POLICY; A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE APPROACHES OF SHAPUR I AND BAHRAM I TOWARD PALMYRA

Abstract: Palmyra (Tadmor) in the third century CE was more than a commercial city-state; it was an economic ecosystem that commanded the network of caravan routes between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. The city's geographical position had made it a determining factor in the power equations between Iran and Rome—a factor that could both serve as a buffer to reduce border pressures and become a conduit for wealth flowing toward either power. This article, utilizing a historical-comparative method and case studies of two critical junctures, seeks to trace the roots of the Sasanians' failure to capitalize on this strategic opportunity. The research findings indicate that both Shapur I in his encounter with Odaenathus and Bahram I in confronting Zenobia shared a common error in assessing the region's geopolitics: an inability to grasp that Palmyra was not a dependent state, but an independent actor with a vital role in the interconnection of economy and politics. This error manifested as the pride of victory during Shapur's reign and as structural passivity during Bahram's reign, ultimately leading to the fall of Palmyra and the collapse of the region's trade network. The consequence of these two errors was not merely the loss of a potential ally, but the transformation of the western frontiers into a direct and costly line of confrontation with Rome.

Keywords: *Sasanian, Palmyra, Shapur I, Bahram I, Trade Policy.*

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INTRODUCTION

Border policy has always been one of the most crucial pillars of stability and endurance for states in the ancient world. This significance becomes twofold regarding the Sasanian Empire, which ruled over a territory encompassing the most diverse and sensitive geopolitical regions of its time. From the Euphrates shores to the Indus coasts, and from the Caucasus passes to the Persian Gulf ports, Iran's frontiers were not merely defensive lines, but complex arenas of exchange, competition, and sometimes cooperation with neighboring powers.¹ In such a landscape, the manner of interaction with commercial city-states that played a vital role in the flow of goods and wealth

¹ SOLTANI JOLFAN 2014, 55-74; SOLTANI JOLFAN 2016, 75-94.

between the two superpowers of East and West became one of the most important measures of the Sasanian Empire's diplomatic and economic maturity.

Among these city-states, Palmyra (Tadmor) held a special place. This desert city, situated on the caravan trade route from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, had managed during the second and third centuries CE to attain enormous wealth and a unique position by exploiting the rivalries between the Parthians and Rome. Palmyra was not a military power, but an economic ecosystem; a network of routes and markets whose survival depended on peace and whose presence could represent both a profitable opportunity and a potential threat to each of the two powers.² The Sasanian encounter with this new phenomenon constituted a decisive test of their understanding of the ancient world's commercial geopolitics.

This article endeavors, through historical-comparative method and utilizing primary sources and authoritative research, to trace the roots of a strategic error in Sasanian trade policy. The main research question is why the Sasanians, at two critical junctures within three decades, failed to benefit from the opportunity for cooperation with Palmyra, and what were the roots and consequences of this failure? The research hypothesis posits that this error arose not from military incapacity or political weakness, but from a flawed cognitive pattern in confronting the phenomenon of commercial city-states; a pattern that, during the reign of Shapur I due to pride born of successive victories over Rome, and during the reign of Bahram I due to structural passivity and failure to grasp the depth of the region's economic interdependencies, was repeated and intensified.

The aim of this research, beyond narrating events, is to dissect this historical error and demonstrate the inseparable links between economy and politics in the ancient world. To this end, the theoretical framework of the research concerning the importance of commercial buffer states is first explained, then Shapur I's encounter with Odaenathus and its consequences are examined, followed by an analysis of Bahram I's approach toward Zenobia, and finally, in the conclusion, the roots of this shared error and the lessons the Sasanians derived from it for formulating their subsequent policies are scrutinized. The research method in this article is comparative-analytical, based on a case study of two specific periods of Sasanian history, and data collection has been conducted through library research and reference to primary historical sources and modern scholarship.

SHAPUR I AND THE FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH PALMYRA; THE PRIDE OF VICTORY AND THE PRICE OF A MISJUDGMENT

After consolidating power internally, Shapur I turned his gaze toward the western frontiers. In Mesopotamia, a city like Hatra, which had once frustrated Ardashir, now fell to his son. The fall of Hatra in 240 CE³ was not merely a military

victory but the unlocking of routes that led through the desert to wealth. A city that Herodian had deemed impregnable⁴ now opened its gates to the Sasanian army, and thus, the first step toward dominance over the commercial network of northern Mesopotamia was taken. This significant event occurred during a period when Ardashir had relinquished the throne to his son and withdrawn.⁵

But Shapur's military successes did not end there. In the east, the Kushans, who had grown wealthy through international trade and posed an economic challenge to Iran, were forced into retreat. Shapur advanced as far as Peshawar, added the Indus Valley to his realm, and crossed the Oxus.⁶ These campaigns, though outwardly military in nature, were inwardly efforts to contain commercial rivals and open new routes. The Kushan dynasty, which Kanishka the Great had founded, was extinguished,⁷ and Shapur removed the economic challenge of this rival on Iran's eastern frontiers.⁸ As a result, Kushan maritime trade with Rome also began to decline.⁹

In the west, war with Rome stretched for three years (241–244 CE)¹⁰ and ultimately led to a peace treaty whereby Rome agreed to pay for securing the Caucasus passes and ceded Armenia to Iran.¹¹ The city of Misiche, renamed „Piruz-Shapur” after the victory,¹² stood at the crossroads of the ancient world's major trade and military routes,¹³ testifying that Shapur well understood that conquering cities without controlling trade routes remained incomplete. Yet, what has received less attention amid these victories was Shapur's encounter with a new phenomenon: Palmyra. Palmyra, or Tadmor, was a city in the heart of the desert whose wealth came not from agriculture but from the passage of caravans. Caravans that rose from the Persian Gulf unloaded their goods at Gerrha, and the Palmyrenes transported these wares as far as Dura-Europos, from where they reached Antioch, Damascus, and the Mediterranean coasts.¹⁴ Palmyra commanded a network of routes linking the Syrian shores to Asia and India,¹⁵ and in the shadow of the exhausting wars between Parthians and Romans, it had managed, as a buffer state, to remain safe from the harm of both powers while profiting from trade between them.¹⁶

Odaenathus, the ruler of Palmyra, witnessing the shifting equations in the region, chose a new path. Seeing the Sasanian uprising and the collapse of Hatra and Dura-Europos, he realized that the policy of neutrality was no longer viable. Therefore, he wrote a letter and, accompanied by a caravan of camels bearing precious gifts and offerings, sent it to Shapur.¹⁷ This correspondence, whether born of

⁴ HERODIAN 1970, V.3, 112.

⁵ DARYAEE 2021, 19; SARFARAZ/CHAYCHI AMIRKHIZ/SAEIDI 2014, 44.

⁶ GHIRSHMAN 2020, 349; ORIAN 2013, 70.

⁷ FRYE 1998, 344–345; GHIRSHMAN 2020, 349.

⁸ FRYE 1998, 344–346.

⁹ DIAKONOV 1967, 200.

¹⁰ PIGOLEVSKAYA 1993, 229.

¹¹ FRYE 2010, 226; WINTER/DIGNAS 2019, 102; ZONARAS 2009, 32–34.

¹² ORIAN 2013, 70–71.

¹³ MOHAMMADI MALAYERI 2000, V.1, 191.

¹⁴ MILLAR 1971, 12; SALEM 2012, 149–150; SEYRIG 1950, 1–3.

¹⁵ SALEM 2012, 150; SEYRIG 1950, 2–3.

¹⁶ FRANK/BROWNSTONE 2018, 182; WINTER/DIGNAS 2019, 144.

¹⁷ ZARRINKOOB 2013, 430; SYKES 1956, 545.

² FRANK/BROWNSTONE 2018, 182; SALEM 2012, 142–146; MILLAR 1971, 1.

³ LUKONINE 1971, 81.

prudence or fear, was undoubtedly the first step toward breaking free from Roman subjugation and a calculated turn toward Iran.¹⁸ Odaenathus well knew that Palmyra's economic life depended on routes now in Sasanian hands, and without aligning with them, his caravans would go nowhere.¹⁹

But Shapur's response was not what Odaenathus had expected. Sources recount that Shapur, angered by the letter's tone, which hinted at independence, ordered the gifts thrown into the Euphrates and said: „Who is this Odaenathus, and from what land does he come, that he dares to write such a letter to the presence of his lord? Now, if he seeks mitigation of his punishment, he must come bound to our court, weeping and begging forgiveness”.²⁰ If we consider this response within the context of its time, it is not so surprising. Shapur was at the peak of victory. He had captured the Roman Emperor Valerian,²¹ conquered Antioch, and his name shone from east to west.²² In such a position, accepting a local ruler as an equal partner was difficult, perhaps impossible for him. But what Shapur overlooked in that moment was the special nature of Palmyra. He saw Palmyra through the eyes of a tribal chieftain, not a commercial city-state whose survival depended on peace and whose presence could serve as a buffer between two powers.

Shapur's negative response compelled Odaenathus to return to Rome's embrace. Not only did he turn away from Iran, but his forces pursued the Sasanian troops, reached the war spoils, and sought to make possible Valerian's release.²³

Although these efforts did not lead to the emperor's freedom, they brought such prestige to Odaenathus that the Romans called him „Dux Orientalis” (Commander of the East)²⁴ and entrusted him with governance of the empire's eastern regions.²⁵

If we wish to judge fairly, we cannot accuse Shapur of an unforgivable error. He lived in a world where power was measured by the sword and the status of states by the extent of their territory. But the reality is that in this encounter, he failed to separate economics from politics and to see Palmyra not as a „commercial rival” but as an „economic ecosystem.” Palmyra needed routes that passed through Sasanian territory, and the Sasanians needed an intermediary to deliver their goods to the Mediterranean.²⁶ These two could have complemented each other, but Shapur was so captive to the pride of victory that he did not see this natural connection.

Moreover, amidst the multitude of cities he had conquered, Shapur perhaps considered Palmyra insignificant. He had taken Antioch, conquered Hamah and Aleppo,²⁷ and

captured Dura-Europos, Palmyra's commercial support.²⁸ It seemed natural for him to think that a city in the heart of the desert, now having lost all its supporters, had what value to sit with him at the negotiating table? But what remained hidden from Shapur's eyes was that Palmyra's value lay not in its supporters, but in its geographical position. Palmyra stood on a route that could not be profited from through conquest of cities, but only through agreement.²⁹

Shapur's response to Odaenathus may be regarded as a decisive moment in shaping Sasanian policy toward Palmyra — an approach arising not from hostility, but from a failure to recognize a newly emerging form of power in the ancient world: the power of commercial polities, which could neither be subdued by force nor profitably engaged through disdain. This strategic miscalculation reappeared three decades later during the reign of Bahram I, this time with heavier consequences, as Palmyra — which might have served as a useful ally — was transformed into a devastated territory and a disrupted commercial network.³⁰

BAHRAM I AND THE REPETITION OF A STRATEGIC ERROR IN CONFRONTING PALMYRA

Although Bahram I ascended the Sasanian throne in the early 270s CE,³¹ he inherited borders shaped by his predecessors. The geopolitical landscape west of Iran was now witnessing a remarkable transformation: Zenobia, the Queen of Palmyra, following the death of her husband Odaenathus, not only inherited his realm but, with rare audacity, gathered a territory stretching from Egypt to Anatolia under the banner of an independent Palmyrene state.³² This newly assertive city-state, which not so long ago had sought dialogue with Shapur I, now found itself in an unprecedented position: it could either act as a balancing weight between the two superpowers or transform into an independent regional power in its own right.

Zenobia, unlike Odaenathus who had pursued a policy of accommodation toward Shapur I, now chose a different path. Perceiving Rome's temporary weakness and recognizing the Sasanians' need for an ally on their western frontiers, she extended a hand of cooperation toward Bahram I, requesting that he dispatch forces to guarantee Palmyra's independence against Rome.³³ This request, from a broader perspective, constituted a test for the Sasanian Empire: Had they learned from the bitter experience of three decades earlier? Had they truly grasped the strategic significance of Palmyra?

Bahram I's response to this request, however, demonstrated that the cognitive error of Shapur I's era had not only remained uncorrected but had become, in a sense, institutionalized. By dispatching a symbolic and negligible force,³⁴ he effectively conveyed two contradictory messages simultaneously: on one hand, he signaled his desire to

¹⁸ NADARI GHARABABA/MOUSAVI/DALIR 2009, 151.

¹⁹ SALEM 2012, 141.

²⁰ SYKES 1956, 545.

²¹ SCHIPPMANN 2011, 25-26; FRYE 2017, 475-476.

²² SARFARAZ/CHAYCHI AMIRKHIZ/SAEIDI 2014, 50; ZARRINKOOB 2013, 429.

²³ GIBBON 1991, 313; SYKES 1956, 546.

²⁴ HITT 2015, 162.

²⁵ WINTER/DIGNAS 2019, 145.

²⁶ ALTHEIM 1990, 98; FRANK/BROWNSTONE 2018, 182.

²⁷ SCHIPPMANN 2011, 24-25; SARFARAZ/CHAYCHI AMIRKHIZ/SAEIDI 2014, 48-50.

²⁸ KAMERANIFAR/GHOLIZADEH/YEGANEH 2021, 354.

²⁹ SALEM 2012, 150; FRANK/BROWNSTONE 2018, 182.

³⁰ FRYE 2017, 471-472; FRYE 1998, 303-343; WINTER/DIGNAS 2019, 145.

³¹ GHIRSHMAN 2020, 352-353; MASHKOUR 1984, 396.

³² DOLANDLEN 2015, 276; SALEM 2012, 142-143.

³³ PIRNIA 2012, 172.

³⁴ ZARRINKOOB 2013, 436.

preserve Palmyra, and on the other, he deprived himself of the necessary capability or will to provide serious support. This ambiguous approach neither convinced Zenobia to count on Iran nor deterred Rome from attacking Palmyra.

But where should we seek the roots of this decision? Historical evidence suggests that the Sasanian political apparatus at this juncture had still failed to perceive Palmyra as more than a „rebellious trading city” or a „client state of Rome.” They remained incapable of grasping this profound truth: that Palmyra was not merely a local actor, but an „economic-security ecosystem”; a region whose trade caravans channeled the wealth of the East to the Mediterranean, and whose existence as a buffer between the two superpowers guaranteed border stability.

The consequences of this miscalculation were not long in manifesting themselves. The fall of Palmyra to Aurelian in 272 CE³⁵ not only eliminated a potential ally but fundamentally transformed the region’s security architecture. The buffer wall that had once absorbed the initial shocks of Romano-Iranian confrontations had now collapsed, leaving the two powers face to face. The regional trade network, which coursed like blood through the veins of its economy, did not remain unscathed from this collapse.³⁶ The subsequent attempt by Firmus, a wealthy Egyptian merchant, to seize Alexandria and revive trade routes³⁷ itself testified to the power vacuum that had emerged after Palmyra’s fall. The wealth that once flowed through Palmyra’s markets had either evaporated or become spoils of war.³⁸

But what deserves deeper reflection here is not merely the loss of an opportunity, but the persistence of a flawed cognitive pattern. If Shapur I, in confronting Odaenathus, fell captive to the pride born of successive victories over Rome and could not accept him as a potential partner, Bahram I, in facing Zenobia, fell victim to a kind of structural passivity. It was not personal pride that cost him this historic opportunity, but an inability to redefine national interests. This time, it was not personal arrogance at play; it was an „institutional immaturity” in the arena of economic diplomacy. The Sasanian foreign policy apparatus had yet to learn how to interact with intermediary actors—such as Palmyra—who were neither open enemies nor allied friends, but rather links in the chain of the regional economy.

From this perspective, the era of Bahram I cannot be simply regarded as a „repetition” of Shapur I’s era, but rather as an „intensification” of the same error under new circumstances. Shapur I lost the opportunity for alliance with Palmyra at the peak of his power; Bahram I lost the opportunity to save it on the eve of its collapse. In both cases, Palmyra turned into an enemy or a victim, and in both cases, the Sasanians were deprived of the economic fruits of cooperation with this commercial city-state.

This bitter experience, however, imparted a great lesson to Bahram I’s successors: the western frontiers could not be safeguarded by fortifications and armies alone; intelligent

diplomacy, profound understanding of economic interests, and the ability to interact with intermediary actors were as vital for border security as swords and strongholds. Neglect of this truth was a price the Sasanians paid twice, within the span of three decades.

CONCLUSION

A comparative examination of two historical junctures in Sasanian trade policy toward Palmyra presents a clear picture of the roots and persistence of a strategic error. What at first glance appear as two separate and unrelated events, upon historical deep analysis, reveal themselves as links in a continuous chain of immaturity in confronting a newly emerged phenomenon in the geopolitics of the ancient world: the rise of commercial city-states whose power lay not in the number of their soldiers, but in the extent of their caravan routes and the wealth that flowed through these pathways.

The reign of Shapur I marked the Sasanians’ first serious test against this phenomenon. Shapur, at the peak of successive victories over Rome, having captured Valerian and conquered Antioch, could not perceive Odaenathus as anything more than a local and dependent ruler. His sharp and humiliating response to Odaenathus’s proposal stemmed not from statesmanship, but from the pride of victory. In that historical moment, Shapur regarded Palmyra not as an economic ecosystem dependent on peace and trade, but as yet another minor state along the way that could be overcome with the sword or disregarded with contempt. He remained incapable of grasping this profound truth: that Palmyra stood on a route that could not be profited from through conquest of cities, but only through agreement.

Three decades later, Bahram I, in a different situation but with the same flawed pattern of assessing geopolitical realities, confronted Zenobia. This time, it was not the pride of victory at play; it was structural passivity and an inability to redefine national interests. Bahram I, who could have transformed Palmyra into a beneficial ally for Iran by supporting Zenobia, dispatched a symbolic and negligible force, neither convincing Zenobia to count on Iran nor deterring Rome from attacking Palmyra. Once again, Palmyra, which could have served as a buffer between the two powers and a conduit for wealth flowing toward Iran, turned into a devastated territory and a shattered trade network.

Where should we seek the root of this shared error? The findings of this research indicate that both kings, though under different circumstances, suffered from a „flaw in discernment”: an inability to understand a new form of power that could not be measured by the sword nor profited from through plunder. The Sasanian foreign policy apparatus at this juncture had yet to learn how to interact with intermediary actors (such as Palmyra) who were neither open enemies nor allied friends, but rather links in the chain of the regional economy. During Shapur I’s reign, this institutional immaturity manifested as personal pride, and during Bahram I’s reign, it persisted as structural passivity.

The consequences of this error extended far beyond the fall of a single city. With the collapse of Palmyra, the buffer

³⁵ FRYE 1998, 272-343.

³⁶ FRYE 2017, 485.

³⁷ GIBBON 1991, 217-218.

³⁸ WINTER/DIGNAS 2019, 150; FRANK/BROWNSTONE 2018, 182.

wall that had once absorbed the initial shocks of Romano-Iranian confrontations disappeared, leaving the two powers face to face. The regional trade network, which coursed like blood through the veins of its economy, disintegrated, and the wealth that once flowed through Palmyra's markets either evaporated or became spoils of war. Although this heavy cost could not be fully compensated by the Sasanians at that historical juncture, it at least imparted this lesson for subsequent generations: the western frontiers could not be safeguarded by fortifications and armies alone; intelligent diplomacy, profound understanding of economic interests, and the ability to interact with intermediary actors were as vital for border security as swords and strongholds.

What emerges from linking the two periods of Shapur I and Bahram I is not merely the repetition of a mistake, but the persistence of a flawed pattern in confronting new geopolitical realities. A pattern rooted in a purely military view of borders and an inability to grasp the inseparable link between economy and politics. Palmyra could have been for the Sasanians not a threat, but a unique opportunity; an opportunity to access the Mediterranean through peaceful means and to transform competition with Rome into a form of profitable cooperation. But this opportunity, on two occasions and in two different forms of error, was lost.

It might be said that the Sasanians paid a heavy price for this immaturity in discernment; a price that manifested itself not only in the loss of Palmyra, but also in the continuation of exhausting wars with Rome and the instability of the western frontiers for many decades. Yet, history is always an arena of trial and error, and what can be learned from these two historical junctures is not merely the condemnation of errors, but the understanding of their roots and contexts; an understanding that might perhaps illuminate the analysis of many strategic errors in other historical periods as well.

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