

NISIBIS AT THE BORDER OF ROMANS AND SASANIANS BETWEEN THE THIRD AND FIFTH CENTURIES AD.

ROMA VE SASANİLER ARASINDA BİR SINIR KENTİ,
NUSAYBİN (MS III.-V. YY.)

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Abstract

Owing to its geostratejic importance as being the only main trade center in its region, Nisibis became the typical of a city in the limes where the Roman and the Sasanians, the two great powers of their time, confronted each other. Though heavily fortified, it occasionally changed hands. The Romans, having extended their borders to the Upper Tigris Valley and Mesopotamia, pioneered the eastern territorial aspirations of the West, this time against the Sasanians. As a border city, Nisibis was a significant anchor for them, not only socio-economic but also from a military point of view. Until its surrender to the Sasanians in 363, Nisibis was not only the headquarters of the commander of Mesopotamia (dux Mesopotamiae) but also often served as the forward mustering-point for the mobile forces of Master of the Soldiers for the East (the magister militum per Orientem). The Parthians represented the Eastern power at the time until the appearance of the Sasanians in 224. With the fresh energy of the new Sasanian dynasty, Ardashir I or Shapur I conquered Nisibis in 238 or 241. Then the Sasanians were driven out of Nisibis by Gordian III and took the city back in 244. In 298, by making a treaty with Narseh, the town of Nisibis was acquired by the Roman Empire. It was besieged three times

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during the reign of Constantius II, yet Shapur II was not able to conquer it. In 363 Nisibis was ceded back to the Sasanians after the defeat of Julian. In this study, we shall concentrate on the struggles between Rome and the Sasanians by striving to enlighten the economic, socio-cultural and the political reasons of their struggles.

Key words: *Nisibis, Romans, Sasanians, Christianity, Trade.*

Özet

Nusaybin (Nisibis), bölgesindeki tek ana ticaret merkezini oluşturduğundan jeostratejik önemine binaen döneminin iki büyük gücü olan Roma ve Sasani devletlerinin sınırda karşı karşıya geldikleri bir kent olma özelliğine sahiptir. Kent sağlam bir şekilde tahkim edilmesine rağmen, zaman zaman iki taraf arasında yer değiştirmiştir. Romalılar, sınırlarını Yukarı Dicle Vadisi ve Mezopotamya'ya kadar genişlettikten sonra, bu sefer Sasaniilere karşı Doğu-Batı çatışmasının da ortaya çıkmasına sebep olmuşlardır. Bir sınır kenti olarak Nusaybin, sadece ekonomik ve sosyo-kültürel değil askeri açıdan da önemli bir bağlantı noktası olmuştur. 363 yılında Sasaniilere teslim oluncaya kadar, sadece Mezopotamya'daki Roma liderliğinin (dux Mesopotamiae) karargah merkezi olmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda Doğu Orduları Komutanlığı (magister militum per Orientem)'nin hareketli güçlerinin ileri toplanma noktası konumundadır. Parthlar 224 yılında Sasaniilerin ortaya çıkışına kadar Doğu gücünü temsil etmişlerdir. I. Ardaşir veya I. Şapur, Sasani hanedanlığının taze enerjisiyle birlikte, Nisibis'i 238 veya 241 yılında fethetmiştir. Gordianus II burayı ele geçirmiş, ancak 244 yılında tekrar Sasaniilerin kontrolü altına girmiştir. Nisibis ve bölgesi, 298 yılında Narseh ile yapılan anlaşma sonucunda Roma İmparatorluğu'na bağlanmıştır. Özellikle II. Constantius döneminde 337, 346 ve 350 yıllarında üç defa kuşatılmış, ancak II. Şapur burayı ele geçirmeyi başaramamıştır. 363 yılındaki Iulianus'un yenilgisinden sonra tekrar Sasaniilere geri verilmiştir. Biz bu çalışmamızda Roma ve Sasaniilerin Nusaybin kenti üzerindeki çekişmelerinin ekonomik, sosyo-kültürel ve siyasi sebepleri üzerine odaklanacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Nusaybin, Romalılar, Sasaniiler, Hristiyanlık, Ticaret.*

Modern Nusaybin (Nisibis) is a town belonging to Mardin district in South Eastern Region of Turkey (Figure 1). The history of the city goes back to Neolithic times.¹ While describing the geographical aspects of Nisibis,

¹ Qamishli (Kamışlı) mound near Nisibis, which could have provided main materials for the ancient history of the city, has not yet been excavated as it is covered with mines at the border between Syria and Turkey. On the other hand Gırnavaç Mound, which is still excavated, shows that the region was strategically important from the Neolithic times onwards and it appears that the settlement was in a later period moved to Nisibis not much further South (Figure 4). Unfortunately today we are not much able to enlighten the ancient history of the city, as the modern city is situated on the ancient site. The exact configurations and the extent of the fortress remains unknown as no proper survey or

two main aspects attract the attention. One is the Mardin-Midyat plate which separates Eastern Anatolian Region of Turkey from the plains of Mesopotamia. Its western part is called as Mazı Mountain (as covered by Mazı trees and during the ancient and middle ages called as Izalla) and its Eastern part was named as Tur Abdin during the Middle Ages. This name has been often used nowadays.² The other main geographical aspects of Nisibis was the Mygdonius River (Çağ Çağ Suyu, named as Harmis in Assyrian texts). It was an important feature in the topography of the town (Figure 2). White (Beyaz) and Black (Kara) Waters stemming from the middles between Nisibis and Midyat, join together after a while and form the Mygdonius River passing through Nisibis.³ Next, it is connected to Euphrates (Fırat) River by means of Habur Stream. The Mygdonius River is important for Nisibis as it enriches the territories surrounding it. In modern times an extensive irrigation system has existed across the plain surrounding the city, whose origins may be of great antiquity. Its valley also provides a road combining the Mezopotamian plain to Upper Tigris Valley throughout the Tur Abdin. In fact the main stratejic significance of the city was that, from the Assyrian times onwards, it held the key location at the crossroads between Mesopotamia and Anatolia (Figure 3). It was on the way of important trade routes leading towards Edessa, Reshaina, Singara, Amida, Hatra and eastwards to Nineveh and Mosul.⁴

As Nisibis was strategically a very important border city, the Romans occasionally confronted first with the Parthians and then with the Sasanians since the beginning of their territorial expansion as far as this city and its arounds. After Nisibis' capture from the Parthians by the army of the co-emperor Lucius Verus in 165, it gradually took on the appearance of a typical Roman garrison town. Septimius Severus raised Nisibis to the rank of *colonia*.⁵ It quickly began to mint its own coins and, in the reign of Severus Alexander, it enjoyed the privilege of adding the title *metropolis* to its name.

archaeological excavations have ever been carried out at Nisibis itself. All signs of the city walls have now disappeared, and even Early European travellers to Nisibis rarely speak of its walls. The only extant and accessible building of any great age in Nisibis is the church of Mor Yakup (St. Jacop), the nucleus of which dates back to the 4th century. Apart from a small group of marble columns and an inscribed block of marble, there must be other architectural structures under the ground representing both a Classical Greek and a Roman city (Buckingham 2012, 443-4).

² It had been named as Kasieri in Assyrian texts (Demir 2011, 43 ff).

³ For the river Mygdonius as an important feature in the topography of Nisibis see Ephr.Syr. *Carm.Nisib*.I.1; Zon. XIII.7; Theodor. *Hist.Eccles.* II.26 and *Hist.Rel.* col.1304, line 22; Bar Heb.Chron.vol.1, p.60; Possekel 1999, 15.

⁴ Possekel 1999, 14-5; Stein 1938, 63-6; Nicholson 1985, 664-667; French 1998, 18-9.

⁵ Possekel 1999, 15.

It was near Nisibis that one of the last great battles between Rome and Parthia was fought in the summer of 217. Caracalla's murderer and successor, Opellius Macrinus, having no military experience and wishing to avoid a battle, had tried to reach an agreement with Artabanus V before the battle, offering to return all prisoners. Artabanus did not agree, wishing financial compensation, the rebuilding of the destroyed towns and the cession of the Roman provinces of northern Mesopotamia, which had been conquered by Septimius Severus. As a result of the battle, Macrinus was forced to make a peace, paying the Parthians a huge sum and abandoning the invasion of Mesopotamia that Caracalla had begun a year before.⁶ After the Sasanians under the leadership of Artabanus I, who had established a new dynasty, dominated over the Persian geography, they aimed to extend their borders towards the West. At this point he invaded Roman Mesopotamia. He challenged to Rome by sieging Nisibis in 230⁷ and also minted his own gold coins. The reason for the siege was naturally because of the fact that Nisibis was at the crossroads of trade and also had the strongest castle at the border between the two powers, the Rome and the Sasanians. Controlling Upper Mesopotamia meant to take over of Nisibis. This siege of Nisibis was the first encounter. Yet there is not much evidence about this siege which seems to have ended in failure. Meanwhile the Roman armies which counter-attacked from different directions were not successful enough to bring about a definite victory against the Sasanians.⁸

After Alexander Severus died in 235, the last representative of Severus dynasty in Rome, the Roman Empire began to enter into a chaotic period. Artabanus I took this opportunity and occupied Upper Mesopotamia between the years, ca.237-239. In the course of this occupation, Nisibis and Carrhae (Harran) were taken over by the Sasanians for the first time, perhaps in 238 or in 241 during the co-regency with Shapur I.⁹ Shapur I ascended to the throne while his father was alive and continued to make raids into Eastern Anatolia in order to recover the previous territories of his empire. He has elicited for the eastern campaign of Gordian III between the years 242-244 after the fall of Hatra. He ordered to retake Carrhae and Nisibis and succeeded in 244. Roman coins were minted at Nisibis under Gordian III.¹⁰ Later on, the two armies encountered at Mishiche, at the North of Ctesiphon.

⁶ Scott 2008, 65 *ff.*

⁷ Herod. VI. 2. 1.

⁸ Kohn 1999, 403.

⁹ Brosius (2006, 142) gives the possible date of 238. Also see Wiesehöfer 1982, 437-47. It is also claimed that Carrhae and Nisibis was taken for the first time just after the surrender of Hatra to the Sasanians by the co-regent Shapur I (Blois 2016, 38).

¹⁰ Townsend 1934, 128; Ross 2001, 71.

The Romans were defeated by the Sasanians and the name of this place was changed as Peroz Shapur (Glorious Shapur) and Gordian III himself was killed.¹¹ Nisibis is claimed to have been sieged again in 252 by Shapur I during the Sasanian-Roman wars (252-264).¹² It became a bone of contention between the two states until 262 when it was sacked by the Palmyrene prince Odaenathus, the emperor Gallienus' virtual viceroy in the East because of pro-Persian attitudes.¹³

After 262, Nisibis does not appear much in the ancient sources. Diocletian's army reforms after 284 greatly increased the overall manpower of the Roman army, the legions continued to be stationed along the frontiers of the empire. Unfortunately, our knowledge of their deployment on the Mesopotamian *limes* is very limited, and there is no clear proof that a legion was stationed at Nisibis during the first half of the 4th century. Nevertheless it seems unlikely that such an important and strategic fortress did not serve as a legionary base.

In the course of Narses' reign (293-302), there occurred two wars between Rome and the Sasanians. We do not have detailed evidence about these wars. At the first war, the Roman army under the command of Galerius was defeated at Callinicum (Racca) by the Sasanians. At the second war, Galerius, supported by the Emperor Diocletian, defeated Narses in Armenia in 297/8.¹⁴ Then Narses was forced to retreat. Galerius captured the wife and the children of Narses as prisoners. Narses wished to make a peace treaty in order to rescue his wife and children. This treaty also included a term concerning the condition of Nisibis as shall be explained below.

Our main source for the peace treaty of 298 was the account of Peter the Patrician (ca. 500-564). We must bear in mind that his account is not a copy of the actual agreement but a commentary. We ought to quote the first sentences of the commentary of this agreement, as it gives us a fascinating insight into relations between Rome and the Sasanian Empire:

"[13] As Apharban, who was a very close friend of the Persian king, Narses, had been sent as ambassador, he approached Galerius in supplication. When he had the opportunity to speak he said 'It is obvious for all mankind that the Roman and Persian Empires are just like two light and

¹¹ Brosius 2006, 144.

¹² Tabari refers to this in his *Chronicle of Se'ert*, but this is reflected nowhere else in the literature and because of chronological flaws, it is difficult to use it as evidence (Edwell 2008, 185).

¹³ Zos. I. 39. 1; Blois 2016, 38, fn. 17; Blois 1975, 7-23.

¹⁴ Ermatinger 2004, 89.

it is necessary that, like eyes, the one is brightened by the light of the other and they do not angrily strive for each other's destruction. For this is not held as a virtue but rather a levity or weakness. As they believe that later generations will not be able to help them they make an effort to destroy their opponents... ”.

Upon this peace offer, as brought forward by the ambassador Aphauban, Galerius and Diocletian met together in Nisibis and made an assessment of the situation. After this assessment, they agreed to send Sicorius Probus, an archival clerk, from Nisibis to Narses as an ambassador. Narses ordered him to give an account of his embassy, especially with proposals for the regulation of the Tigris frontier (Millar 1982, 6). Peter the Patrician narrates this account as in the following:

*“ [14] The main points of the ambassador's message were the following: that in the eastern region the Romans should receive Ingilene together with Sophene, Arzene together with Karduene and Zabdikene and that the river Tigris should be the boundry line between the two states, that the fortress of Zintha, which was located on the border with Media, should mark the border of Armenia, that the king of Iberia should owe his royal status to the Roman, and that the city of Nisibis, which lies on the Tigris, should be the place of trade. Narses listened to these points and – as his present situation did not allow him to refuse any of this- agreed to all of them; with the exception, so that he would not seem to be forced to comply with everthing, that he rejected the condition that Nisibis should be the only place of exchange”.*¹⁵

The proposals of the specific terms of this treaty can only be reconstructed through a careful comparison with other sources. Yet these sources are extremely scarce. The reason that Narses insisted on refusing to accept Nisibis as the only trading center was most likely due to the fact that he wished to prevent Rome from controlling all of the border trade through Nisibis. As a result of this term, “Romans would garner all the income from taxes on the lucrative eastern trade”.¹⁶ However, Narses did not have the power to reconsider this item of the treaty, since his family was being held as hostage at the hands of the Romans. He accepted all the conditions of the treaty and his family was returned to him. As a result of this treaty, Nisibis became the exchange station of commercial goods between the two great powers as long as the peace lasted.

¹⁵ FHG IV. Frag.13-14, pp.181-191; for the details of this treaty, also see Dodgeon-Lieu1991, 133.

¹⁶ Blockley 1984, 33.

After this peace treaty in 298, the Romans re-established their control over the whole region. Thereafter Nisibis became the capital of a newly-reorganized province stretching from the Habur River to the Tigris frontier. We do not have sufficient information about the Roman-Sasanian relations during the reigns of Hormizd II (302-309) and Adanarses (309). The silence of the sources must derive from the fact that the two powers did not engage in any conflict in accordance with the above-mentioned peace treaty which lasted 10 years.

The process that led to the confrontation of these two powers re-started with the beginning of the reign of Shapur II in 309. Clearly dissatisfied with the geopolitical situation created by the Nisibis treaty since 298, he did not only wish to conquer the whole of the Mesopotamia but also the Armenia. Not only the aggressive behaviour of Shapur II to revoke the humiliating treaty of Nisibis, but also an internal development at Rome speeded up the process of a new confrontation between these powers. This internal development at Rome was the legalization of the Christianity by Constantine in 313. From this time onwards, Constantine felt obliged to protect the Christians within the borders of the Sasanians and even sent a letter to Shapur II, drawing king's attention to the Christians who had previously fled there.¹⁷ However, Shapur II oppressed the Christians as he saw them as natural allies of the Romans.¹⁸ Constantine started to make preparations for a military expedition against the Sasanians, which came to the halt when Constantine died in 337.

After the death of Constantine, the Roman Empire was administratively divided into three parts among his sons. The East was given to Constantius II who was going to confront Shapur II for a period of 24 years. The aim of Constantius II in the East was to hold the strategic places at the border in his hands by building stronger fortresses. On the other hand, Shapur II was decisive in his policy of extension towards the West. His decisiveness is seen in the letter he sent to Constantius II. In this letter he states that he has the right of extending claims to the territories even up to the river Strymon in Macedonia once upon a time conquered by his Achaemenian ancestors.¹⁹ As a king he thought he was better than his predecessors and deserved to annex these territories. This meant that his reign was going to witness continuous wars between Rome and the Sasanians. During the reign of Shapur II, there happened to be nine conflicts with Rome. The three of these conflicts were

¹⁷ Vivian 1997, 164-9.

¹⁸ Mehr 1995, 77.

¹⁹ Marcellinus (XVII. 5. 3-8) writes that he does not copy the letter verbatim but summarizes its sense.

related to the siege of Nisibis. From a strategical point of view, Nisibis was still retaining its key position at the border and as we shall explain below it was besieged even three times during the reign of Constantius II.

The first conflict occurred when Shapur II attacked Armenia as a result of which the Armenian king Chosrow took refuge in Rome temporarily and sought Roman protection.²⁰ After this, Shapur II marched into Northern Mesopotamia and especially focused on planning to capture Nisibis. Little is known of this first siege, which may probably have started in summer of 337 and lasted almost seventy days.²¹ It is referred to mainly in the works of Christian hagiographers, due to which it is legendarily narrated. During this siege, the mission of the protection of the city seems to have been given to the famous bishop of the city, St. Jacob.²² Theodoret of Cyrus (393-457), the Christian Historian, while bringing forward these extraordinary and memorable miracles of St. Jacob, describes the siege as such:

“Nisibis, sometimes called Antiochia Mygdonia, lies on the confines of the realms of Persia and of Rome. In Nisibis Jacob whom I named just now was at once bishop, guardian, and commander in chief. He was a man who shone with the grace of a truly apostolic character. His extraordinary and memorable miracles, which I have fully related in my religious history, I think it superfluous and irrelevant to enumerate again.

One however I will record because of the subject before us. The city which Jacob ruled was now in possession of the Romans, and besieged by the Persian Army. The blockade was prolonged for seventy days. Helepoles and many other engines were advanced to the walls. The town was begirt with a palisade and entrenchment, but still held out. The river Mygdonius flowing through the middle of the town, at last the Persians dammed its stream a considerable distance up, and increased the height of its bank on both sides so as to shut the waters in. When they saw that a great mass of water was collected and already beginning to overflow the dam, they suddenly launched it like an engine against the wall. The impact was tremendous; the bulwarks could not sustain it, but gave way and fell down. Just the same fate befell the other side of the circuit, through which the Mygdonius made its exit; it could not withstand the shock, and was carried away. No sooner did Shapur see this than he expected to capture the rest of the city, and for all that day he rested for the mud to dry and the river to

²⁰ Brosius 2006, 149.

²¹ Barnes 1985, 133.

²² Jacob of Nisibis died in the Seleucid year 649 after taking an active part in the defence against Shapur's first siege (Barnes 1985, 133, fn. 54).

*become passable. Next day he attacked in full force, and looked to enter the city through the breaches that had been made. But he found the wall built up on both sides, and all his labour vain. For that holy man, through prayer, filled with valour both the troops and the rest of the townsfolk, and both built the walls, withstood the engines, and beat off the advancing foe. And all this he did without approaching the walls, but by beseeching the Lord of all within the church. Shapur, moreover, was not only astounded at the speed of the building of the walls but awed by another spectacle. For he saw standing on the battlements one of kingly mien and all ablaze with purple robe and crown. He supposed that this was the Roman emperor, and threatened his attendants with death for not having announced the imperial presence; but on their stoutly maintaining that their report had been a true one and that Constantius was at Antioch, he perceived the meaning of the vision and exclaimed their God is fighting for the Romans. Then the wretched man in a rage flung a javelin into the air, though he knew that he could not hit a bodiless being, but unable to curb his passion. Therefore the excellent Ephraim (he is the best writer among the Syrians) besought the divine Jacob to mount the wall to see the barbarians and to let fly at them the darts of his curse. So the divine man consented and climbed up into a tower but when he saw the innumerable host he discharged no other curse than to that mosquitoes and gnats might be sent forth upon them, so that by means of these tiny animals they might learn the might of the Protector of the Romans. On his prayer followed clouds of mosquitoes and gnats; they filled the hollow trunks of the elephants, and the ears and nostrils of horses and other animals. Finding the attack of these little creatures past endurance they broke their bridles, unseated their riders and threw the ranks into confusion. The Persians abandoned their camp and fled head-long. So the wretched prince learned by a slight and kindly chastisement the power of the God who protects the pious, and marched his army home again, reaping for all the harvest of the siege not triumph but disgrace”.*²³

Theodoret here presents a vivid picture of St. Jacob’s contribution to the defence of the fortress. He is described as the *strategos* of the city and the result of the siege is attributed to the divine powers of St. Jacob. The name of Ephraem the Syriac, the student of St. Jacob, also appears in the above-quoted text. As for Ephraem, St. Jacob did not only take active part in the first siege but also after his death and burial within the walls, his holy sanctuary is said to have provided the city with divine protection against the subsequent attacks. As specifically narrated by Ephraem, the citizens of

²³ Theodor. *Hist.Ecless.* II.26. For the other ancient sources on the first siege of Nisibis, see Dodgeon-Lieu 1991, 146-151.

Nisibis asked St. Jacob to ascend the walls of Nisibis to pray for them and curse the Persians, characteristic of a holy man who intermedate with God on behalf of his city and its people.²⁴ As a result of his prayings, everywhere was covered with a swarm of gnats and flies which severely afflicted the horses, elephants and other animals and led to chaos within the ranks of the Sassanian army. As a result of this disaster, the Sasanian army retreated.

Although this event was attributed to the divine powers of St. Jacob by Theodoret, the method used against the siege, as also applied by other states, is familiar. It is possible that these flies were already there at the hands of Nisibenes, used against the siegers. A similar event is also attested by Ammianus Marcellinus. During a Roman withdrawal after the death of Julian in 363, Marcellinus (XXV.1.15) states that the soldiers held knives in their hands in order to kill the elaphants in case of the attacks of flies, “remembering the disaster which befell them at Nisibis” in 337. In this case, the soldiers were ordered to kill the elephants to prevent chaos and thurmoil among the army ranks.

This kind of specific strategies may have been used during the sieges in antiquity. Yet this does not mean that the described events in general were true in this case of the siege of Nisibis. Since the narrative of Theodoret accommodate mythological aspects, it is open to criticism in some respects. This is apparent from the fact that Theodoret melds the elements of the first and the third sieges as shall be explained below, which leads one to assume that he may have invented these accounts as regards to the miracles of St. Jacob. The legends play important role for the history of the peoples. St. Jacob, being an important character or the leader of Nisibis, appears to have obtained an important position in the history of the city. However, Nisibis fortress had very strong walls and a very good defence system. It was very difficult to capture this fortress. Therefore, Nisibis possibly did not need a miracle of St. Jacob to be able to get rid of a siege.

After the unsuccessful siege of 337, Constantius II was welcomed in Nisibis in May, 345.²⁵ Later on Shapur II attacked Nisibis second time in 346. This second siege had left even less trace in the historical record. This might result from the fact that the siege did not last longer and was not effective. The only certain fact known about it is its date and duration. It is said to have lasted three months (Jerome) or seventy-eight days (Theophanes), but again ended in failure.²⁶

²⁴ Justice 2008, 2.

²⁵ Ephr.Syr. *Carm.Nisib.* XIII.4-6.

²⁶ For these few ancient sources, see Dodgeon-Lieu 1991, 168-9.

The third siege began in 350. By contrast the third siege pointing out to a strong resistance to the Sasanian attacks, had more account. As such, the events and circumstances surrounding the siege deserve a closer search. Moreover, it forms an episode that is not only remarkable in the history of siege warfare but also contains some significant implications for the literary and religious studies of the period.

There are five principal sources about this siege which, despite their various difficulties and discrepancies, provide us with an abundance of detailed information. The first of two distinct traditions in dealing with the evidence for the siege of 350 is based on the eye-witness accounts of local Christians, written in Syriac. Ephraem was again present at Nisibis throughout the siege as he was already teaching at the school of Nisibis.²⁷ He refers to the siege at some length in two works that were composed nearly a decade later after the siege. As these works are in form hymns and contain religious and didactic texts, they show only brief and unconnected allusions to the siege. Although Ephraem's sermons were made for his fellow-citizens who must also have witnessed the siege, he may have wished to invent some of these early local traditions on the basis of religious feelings to motivate the people against the forthcoming sieges of the Sasanians. Therefore, we can assume that the details he narrates may not have completely reflected the historical matters. The next detailed reference to the events appears in the works of Theodoret. These bring forwards a further difficulty as Theodoret apparently brings together the elements of the first and third sieges, as mentioned above. It has also been assumed that his account derived from the Syriac biographies of Ephraem who had participated in the second siege. Apart from these sources, the mid 7th century *Chronicon Paschale* is thought to have been quoted from another Syriac text. This was namely a letter written by Vologaeses, the bishop of Nisibis, during the 350's. It similarly ascribed the success of Nisibis in defeating the invaders by divine intervention.²⁸

The second tradition appears in the works of authors who were educated men from the higher ranks of society. As a pagan author, Julian seems to have delivered one speech about this siege at the imperial court in Milan in 355 and his other speech was written in Gaul in 358/9. The date of these speeches is closer to the siege of 350 and might reflect the truth. However, these speeches are autobiographic in nature. Since Julian makes the selective and uncoherent use of material as a part of the struggle to conquer the city,

²⁷ Frothingham 1884, 207.

²⁸ Harries 2012, 216. For *Chronicon Paschale*, see Dindorf 1832.

this gives rise to serious doubts about Julian's highly rhetorical speeches as a historical source. Despite this, parts of these accounts may to some degree have depended on reliable contemporary reports, either in the form of official dispatches or personal memoirs. Finally, Zonaras wrote a shortened version of the siege in the twelfth century, which may partially reflect the accounts now lost.²⁹ As regard to this siege, we shall especially make use of the second tradition, Julian and Zonaras.

Having analyzed the relevant ancient sources, we first ought to show touch on the political developments in Rome before the third siege. Constantius II had zealously guarded the eastern frontier throughout the 340's. Yet the year 350 marks a point of crisis in the reign of Constantius II. It coincided with a major threat to the internal stability of the Empire and it continued existence of the Constantinian Dynasty. In the mid-January Constantius II's younger brother and co-emperor, Constans, was murdered and Magnentius was proclaimed emperor by the Gallic troops in Trier. This was a revolt against the Roman Emperor. Constantius II started to make preparations for a military expedition against Magnentius in the west.³⁰ He appears to have moved from Edessa to Antioch ready departing for Italy. Meanwhile Shapur II showed no sign of abandoning his campaign in Mesopotamia. In the early spring, he again led his army across the Tigris into Roman territory. The preparations for this offensive must actually have been made long before the internal weakness in the Roman Empire. Constantius II himself did not decide to get involved in the wars in front lines, as it was his defensive strategy to allow the Sasanians to waste their energy on lengthy sieges while keeping the Roman casualties at minimum.³¹ He assigned Lucillianus to the command of the Sasanian war. We do not know much how Lucillianus conducted the war, as it is only mentioned by Zosimus (II. 45. 2; III. 8. 2) that he was assigned to the command of war.

Since the Roman Emperor was absent and fighting against Magnentius,³² Shapur II must have hoped for a greater success in the coming campaign including his siege of Nisibis. He set his troops to capture the city and prepared for a protracted siege in the knowledge that Constantius II was

²⁹ For these ancient sources about the third siege of Nisibis, see Dodgeon-Lieu 1991, 170 *ff.*

³⁰ For the internal struggle between Constantius II and Magnentius between the years 350-353, see Syväne 2015a, 139 *ff.*; Zos. II. 43 *ff.*

³¹ Wienand 2015, 426.

³² It is reported by Philostorgius (III. 22) that he was in Edessa at the time of Constans' death. On the other hand, it appears that the fictitious existence of the Emperor on the walls of Nisibis was used as a supernatural phenomena by the other Christian sources. By this, the idea of the savior-ruler is given a distinct Christian character and he is even attributed god-like virtues (Lightfoot 1988, 122).

in no position to come to the relief of the defenders. Julian (361-363) describes us the siege and the preparations of the Romans against it as in the following:

*“So they [The Sasanians] mustered all forces, every age, sex, and condition, and marched against us, men and mere boys, old men and crowds of women and slaves, who followed not merely to assist in the war, but in vast numbers beyond what was needed. For it was their intention to reduce the cities, and once master of the country, to bring in colonists in spite of us. But the magnitude of your preparations made it manifest that their expectations were but vanity”.*³³

As understood from this above-quoted text, Shapur II was decisive to conquer Nisibis and settle there, since he seems to have brought the colonists along with his army. He believed that he could manage this as the Emperor was absent during the siege. His soldiers were also earnest in conquering the city. As an important trade center, Nisibis offered more booty and revenue. Also controlling Nisibis meant controlling Syria.³⁴ The Sasanians had lost their trade benefits due to the previous treaty of 298 and so they were trying to gain back these benefits by recapturing the city.

Julian in his second speech continues to tell us the siege of the city in detail as such:

“They began the siege and completely surrounded the city with dykes, and then the river Mygdonius flowed in and flooded the ground about the walls, as they say the Nile floods Egypt. The siege-engines were brought up against the ramparts on boats, and their plan was that one force should sail to attack the walls while the other kept shooting on the city’s defenders from the mounds. But the garrison made a stout defense of the city from the walls. The whole place was filled with the corpses, wreckage, armour and missiles, of which some were just sinking, while others, after sinking from the violence of first shock, floated on the waters. A vast number of barbarian shields and also ship’s benches, as result of the collision of siege-engines on the ships, drifted on the surface. The mass of floating weapons almost covered the whole surface between the wall and the mounds. The lake was turned to gore, an all about the walls echoed the groans of barbarians, slaying not, but being slain in manifold ways and by all manner of wounds.

³³ Jul. Or. 1. 169-170.

³⁴ Especially from 363 onwards Nisibis as the Persian border town served as an important center of Roman-Persian trade and Roman officials met Persian embassies over there (Nicholson 1985, 664). For its customshouses along with Dara and Callinicum see Kavar 1956, 186.

*Who could find suitable words to describe all that was done there? They hurled fire down onto the shields, and many of the hoplites fell half-burned, while other who fled from the flames could not escape the danger from the missiles. But some while still swimming were wounded in the back and sank to the bottom, while others who jumped from the siege-engines were hit before they touched the water, and so found not safety indeed but an easier death. As for those who knew not how to swim, and perished more obscurely than those just mentioned, who would attempt to name or number them? Time would fail me did I desire to recount all these in detail ”.*³⁵

Julian (*Or.*1.173 *ff*) goes on comparing these events during the siege with the invasion of Greece during the reign of Xerxes in around 480 BC. In view of Julian, the historic boastings of the Medes (or the Persians) turned out to be empty arrogance by their failure to take Nisibis. Here the intention is clearly to praise Constantius II by implying that the defeat of Shapur II’s army at Nisibis was a great achievement just as the defeat of Xerxes in 480 BC. Moreover, the whole of this second oration presents a comparison between the achievements of Constantius II and the deeds of the Homeric heroes. It appears that Julian intended the siege of Nisibis to stand as proof of Constantius II’s supreme guidance and protection of the empire, due to which Julian seems to have distorted the historical facts. Within this conjecture, Julian emphasized the unparalleled nature of the siege by defining how hard the Sasanian king tried to capture the city as well as by stressing the resistance of the Roman garrison and the magnificent outcome of their efforts.

Julian’s main concern is the use of the waters of the Mygdonius to overcome the stubborn resistance of the defenders. As for him, the tactic of Shapur II was to build a dam in the Mygdonius river and then to ruin this dam in order to flood the city walls.³⁶ If not successful, the city walls were

³⁵ Jul. *Or.* 1.170-173.

³⁶ The flood scheme reminding the Noah legend is also confirmed by the sentences of Ephraem (*Carm.Nisib.*1.1 *ff*), which he mentions no less than twenty-three times. Zonaras (XIII.7) offers a rationalized account of this project by placing the location of the dam at some distance above Nisibis where the river ran through a gorge. It must have been due to this distance that the torrent was not strong enough to destroy the walls. Fortunately, Theodoret (*Hist.Ecless.* II.26) gives us a more detailed account, explaining how the river was damned. On the other hand, it is impossible to derive from the sources an obvious picture of the size and the location of the Persian earthworks. It appears that Julian does not concentrate on the description of the siege-works, towers and sapping. But the other sources such as Theodoret, the Chronicon, Zonaras appear to have accurately reflected all of these. Although these five sources differ markedly in detail, they all agree that the river was involved and resulted in some kind of flood during the siege.

going to be surrounded with a sort of lake where he could easily carry his siege-engines on ships and attack the city walls. Yet this major construction project necessitated a considerable time and much labour. As a matter of fact, exactly how the Mygdonius river was used during this siege is a complex question despite the fact that the use of such a strategem was known to the Persians or the Sasanians. However, Julian's version of the siege as regard to the use of ships receives no confirmation from any of the other sources. In particular, the ships are wholly absent from the works of Ephraem. Therefore, it is possible that the ships and lake which appear so prominently in the works of Julian's account is fictional.

As described by Julian the siege had witnessed a fierce fighting between the two sides. Although Shapur II had suffered many casualties for four months (Yet the sources differ about the exact duration of this siege, the Chronicon for a hundred days, Theodoret for seventy days), he was not able to find any way to enter into the city. However, there had occurred an opportunity to capture the city, as "part of the dyke gave way and the water flowed in full tide, carrying with it a portion of the wall as much as a hundreds cubit long", which is also confirmed by other four sources. It appears that the Mygdonius breached the walls of Nisibis like a battering-ram. Julian imagines a breach in only one sector of the defenses. The other sources as well clearly imply that there was only one breach in the walls.

On the other hand, Christian writers like Ephraem and Theodoret differ from other sources in some respects. Ephraem referring to this occurrence no less than sixteen times emphasizes that there were three breaches.³⁷ As for Theodoret (*Hist.Eclless.* II.26), there was a two-fold breach at the points from where the river entered and got its exit from the city. Yet it is unlikely that the Mygdonius river made a two-fold breach and flowed through Nisibis. It appears that both Ephraem and Theodoret possibly intended to exaggerate this occurrence in order to use it particularly for Christian symbolism. As we shall explain below, owing to the need to emphasize on the unsuccessful attempt of attacks through the breach, there must not have been more than one breach.

The collapse of the part of the fortifications was the next major stage in the siege of 350. All five of the sources point at a large-scale assault on the breach. It is Julian that provides the most detailed account of the fighting. As for him, Shapur II ranged the besieging army in the Sasanian fashion as in the days of Xerxes. Their elephants came from India and carried iron towers, full of archers. First came the cavalry who wore cuirasses, and the archers,

³⁷ Ephr.Syr. *Carm.Nisib.*II.5.

and then the rest of the cavalry in huge numbers. The Sasanians advanced to attack the wall in their splendid accessories, men and horses, supported by the Indian elephants. They were confident that they would at once take it by assault. However, the dykes they had made earlier to dam the mouth of Mygdonius and the mud thereabouts was very deep. Moreover, there was in that place a wide moat that had been made long ago to protect the town and become filled up with a swamp of considerable depth. The enemy was not able to cross it. As a result of the counter attack from the city walls by means of stones and arrows, many of the besiegers were slain and their horses were in flight while some of the elephants were wounded and perished by sinking into mud.

There are resemblances between the sources of Julian and the *Chronicon Paschale* as regard to these developments. The *Chronicon Paschale* describes how the Persians were about to enter the fortress through the breach, placing armed elephants nearby and compelling a mass of troops to disperse. It is also stated that the Sasanians had severe difficulties as a result of the floodwater and suffered heavy casualties when they attacked as the defenders were able to use their artillery effectively, even shooting some of the elephants. Ephraem states that the Sasanians attacked with mounted troops and elephants at this critical point in the siege, while the valiant defenders were attacked by a bombardment of missiles. On the other hand, Theodoret and Zonaras make only brief and indirect reference to this fighting. Instead they focus on the rebuilding of the wall that they place before the assault. Although they state that there was an overnight delay between the collapse of the wall and the Persian assault, there must have been an immediate attack when the wall collapsed.

Upon the failures, Shapur II decided to wait until the mud dried away. But he did not want the rift to be closed. He ordered the archers to use arrows in order to prevent this from a far. But this did not work. The rift was repaired by the people of Nisibis at that night under the protection of soldiers. Ephraem also mentions this shortly. He suggests that the wall collapsed on a Saturday and was rebuilt on the Sunday. Zonaras, Theodoret and Julian regard the rebuilding of the wall as marking the turning point of the siege. The *Chronicon Paschale*, on the other hand, dismisses this episode and stresses on a heaven-sent storm, which frightened the Sasanians.

In these sources it is claimed that Shapur II and his army were utterly disappointed by the decisive resistance of the Roman garrison and that the besieged had shown a remarkable degree of resistance, both physical and psychological, to the Sasanian attack. However, we assume that Shapur II might have been forced to leave the siege. Roman and Syriac sources do not

mention about the northern threat that Shapur II faced. As for the Chronicon, he decided to destroy and burn all his siege equipment before leaving. Julian claims that he put to death many of his chief officers and advisers because of the failure. As a matter of fact, he could not dare to do this, as he must have needed them in both the northern and the eastern borders. The news of unrest in these borders must have come to his ears during the siege. He probably had to leave the siege urgently due to this unrest. So it should also be taken into account that the reason in abandoning the siege might have resulted from the threat posed by the Eurasian tribes to the Northern borders of the Sasanians. It appears that this threat was a serious one, as Shapur II exerted his military efforts to protect his kingdom from the Eurasian tribes for a period of eight years rather than fighting against the Romans. The failure of the siege of Nisibis and the losses he sustained left Shapur II glad to keep the peace for the time being, hoping only that Constantius II would be too busy to deal with him and take the vengeance.³⁸

The reason that the Roman and Syriac sources strove to exaggerate the valiant defence of the city might have resulted from the fact that these sources, as a means of continuous influence, were written to appeal to the hearts of beleaguered, hard-pressed forces of Christians and to motivate them in the defence of the Eastern Roman Empire. As relevant to this, Ephraem (*Carm.Nisib.* II.19) makes the following exaggerated comments on the abortive siege of Nisibis:

“And your enemy wearied himself, striving to smite by his wiles, the wall that encompassed you, a bulwark to thine inhabitants. He wearied himself and availed not; and in order that he might not hope, that if he broke through. He should also enter and take us captive, he broke it through and not once only; and was put to shame, nor was that enough, even unto three times, that he might be shamed thrice in the three”.

Having defended and secured his northern border against the Eurasian tribes successfully, Shapur II resumed to achieve his territorial aspirations over the territories controlled by the Romans. In April 358, he wrote a letter to Constantius II that he would go to war, if the Romans did not cede to him Mesopotamia and Armenia. As response to this, Constantius II dispatched two envoys to solve the border issue and make a peace deal, but they were no more successful. Shapur II did not consent to a peace deal unless the rearrangement of territories at the border was going to be made.³⁹ Claiming

³⁸ Seager 1997, 262.

³⁹ Gillet 2003, 19.

Mesopotamia possibly meant that part of eastern Mesopotamia, including the fortress of Nisibis.

As a result of these developments, in 359, renegade Antonius, the advisor of the Sasanians, urged Shapur II to overrun Roman Mesopotamia. It is clear that Rome's aim was merely to repel this threatening Sasanian invasion (Amm. Marc. XVIII. 6. 6). When the news of the Sasanian preparations arrived, the first thought was to prepare Nisibis for a siege, since it had been the prime target of the Sasanian attacks as shown above.⁴⁰ However, the Sasanian plan of assault was to avoid the border fortresses such as Nisibis, which they had so far not been able to conquer, and to move straight upon all over Syria to plunder the rich and defenceless cities of that region (Amm. Marc. XVIII. 6. 3). On the other hand, the Sasanians had not given up their usual strategy of attacking the frontier defences of Roman Mesopotamia. The conflict between Rome and the Sasanians was focused on the fortresses of Northern Mesopotamia and continued periodically throughout Constantius II's reign. In subsequent campaigns, Shapur II deliberately avoided Nisibis and attacked other major fortresses such as Amida, the major fortress of the area north of the Tur Abdin mountains. After 73 days of siege he captured Amida and destroyed it.⁴¹ Yet the conquest of Amida cost Shapur II so much time and manpower that he was forced to withdraw (Amm. Marc. XIX. 9. 1). As long as Nisibis remained in Roman hands, Shapur II was unable to take full advantage of his successes elsewhere as in the case of Amida.

The attack on Amida pushed forward the war between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Sasanians. Rome had to make an expedition against the Sasanians, but there occurred an internal struggle for throne between Constantius II and his cousin Julian. Without a direct confrontation, Constantius II died on a natural cause and Julian accessed to the throne in 361. Julian was a pagan emperor. When he took over the throne, he did not

⁴⁰ Marcellinus says that Ursinicus was placed in charge of the war (XVIII. 6. 5) and was in command of the forward lines of fortresses. He toured the major strongpoints, clearly thinking the possibility of the usual kind of war of sieges. Given past experience, it was hardly surprising that the defence of Nisibis against a Persian surprise attack was Ursinicus' first priority (Seager 1997, 256). Ursinicus went to Nisibis and observed that bands of raiders were operating from the Tigris right up to the city (Amm. Marc. XVIII. 8. 9) and then returned back to Amida (Diyarbakır).

⁴¹ Marcellinus makes himself prominent as an actor in the events (XVIII. 6. 9-16; 20-7. 2; XVIII. 8. 4-14; XIX. 8. 5-8), but his narrative concerning the siege of Amida is touching rather than precise and is inclined to melt into ambiguity under detailed analysis. His main purpose is to explain the failures of the Romans in the war, which resulted in the destruction of Amida (Blockley 1988, 249-50).

accept to his presence the ambassadors who came from Nisibis to get support against the Sasanians. He also told to them that he would not visit Nisibis until they became paganist.⁴²

In time it seems that Julian tended to challenge against the Sasanians and wanted to take revenge for the Sasanian aggression in the years before his accession to the throne.⁴³ So he began an expedition against them in 363. At Carrhae Zosimus (III. 12. 3) states that Julian chose the route via Circesium rather than via Nisibis. He (III. 12. 4) only puts emphasis on the need to protect Nisibis. Later, it is apparent that Julian achieved to win an important battle near Ctesiphon, 35 kilometers south of Baghdad, within the borders of Sasanian territory. After this victory, while he was advancing along the banks of Tigris in order to join to the reinforcements, he was killed by a spear of a Sasanian soldier during an engagement between the two sides.⁴⁴

After the death of Julian, Jovian became the Roman Emperor. Jovian did not plan to make war against the Sasanians and wished to return to Roman territories immediately, though he was also attacked by the Sasanians. While the Roman armies were trying to escape, the Sasanians were following them. Meanwhile, it seems that Jovian felt at comfort when Shapur II dispatched his ambassador for a peace deal with the Romans. Upon this, a peace treaty was signed between the two sides in 363, which lasted for 30 years (Figure 5). According to this treaty, to the east of Tigris, the regions of Arzanena, Moxoeona, Zabdikena, Rehimena and Corduene (the five Transtigritane regions) and along with these regions, the fifteen fortresses and the cities of Nisibis, Singara and Castra Maurorum were given to the Sasanians.⁴⁵ According to the original treaty, the Sasanians were to retain Nisibis for one hundred and twenty years, until the year 483, after which it was to be returned to Rome.⁴⁶ But as shall be explained below, in 483 the Sasanians refused to give up the fortress.

Actually it is an important question whether Julian, who led an unsuccessful campaign and got himself killed,⁴⁷ or Jovian who actually

⁴² Sozom.*Eccles.Hist.* V. 3; Thompson 2009, 54-5.

⁴³ Amm. Marc. XXII. 12. 1-2; Lib.*Or.*XVII. 19; XVIII. 164.

⁴⁴ Ridley 1973, 318-9.

⁴⁵ Amida, Martyropolis, Edessa, Constantia and Resaina remained in Roman hands (Bullough 1963, 58).

⁴⁶ Ps.-Josh. *Chron.*7. Yet this supposed article at the treaty of 363 as claimed by Pseudo-Joshua is nowhere evidenced and is doubtful of historicity (Trombley-Watt 2000, 8, fn.33).

⁴⁷ Ephraem wrote his hymns "Against Julian" in Nisibis in the very year of Julian's death after he himself actually saw the emperor's corpse lying in state before the city's gates.

surrendered Nisibis, was the more to blame for these latest troubles. Marcellinus (XXV. 7. 10) criticizes and accuses of Jovian that none of the emperors before him had given up any inch of the Roman territory, but at the very outset of his reign he had surrendered the bulwarks of provinces. Marcellinus' outrage might imply that the Sasanians actually had wanted more territory, which was at dispute since 299. The surrender of Nisibis to the Sasanians was seen by the ancient Roman writers in general as the greatest humiliation suffered by Rome in the whole of its history.⁴⁸

By the mid-IVth century, having an ecclesiastical infrastructure, Nisibis was an important center for the Christians to wage their war against the pagans in the East and so had a considerable influence on the outcome of the struggle with Shapur II. It appears that its inhabitants had shown exemplary courage and loyalty to the Roman cause. Especially the Christians in the city were ashamed by this peace treaty. Marcellinus (XXV. 8. 13-14) tells us these feelings after this treaty as such:

“[13] Meanwhile rumour, the swiftest messenger of sad events, outstripping these messengers, flew through provinces and nations, and most of all struck the people of Nisibis with bitter grief; when they learned that their city had been surrendered to Shapur, whose anger and hostility they feared, recalling as they did what constant losses he had suffered in his frequent attempts to take their city. [14] For it was clear that the entire Orient might have passed into the control of Persia, had not this city with its advantageous situation and mighty walls resisted him. Nevertheless, however much the unhappy people were tormented with great fear of the future, yet they could sustain themselves with one slight hope, namely, that the emperor would, of his own accord or prevailed upon by their entreaties, keep the city in its present condition, as the strongest bulwark of the Orient”.

As Ammianus writes here, it was generally agreed that the Sasanians could have secured control of the entire eastern world if Nisibis had not resisted them. Nisibis is described as the strongest bulwark of the Orient.

Rather than Jovian's treaty, he blamed the emperor Julian's paganism, shared by the army, and even by some citizens of Nisibis for the surrender of Nisibis to the Persians (Griffith 1987, 238, 258). As late as the sixth century, the Christian historian Agathias seems to have manipulated Julian in order to blame Jovian (Baldwin 1978, 204).

⁴⁸ Historians of the fourth century and after, describe the terms of this treaty as a disgrace (Eutr. IX. 17. 1-2; Fest. *Brev.* 29; Amm. Marc. XXV. 7. 10; Zos. III. 31-2. 8; Millar 1982, 20). Festus' *Breviarium* was composed after 363. His narrative concludes with this surrender of Nisibis to the Persians. Concerning this surrender, Festus is as angry as Ammianus (Baldwin 1978, 198). It is possibly because of this that he gives a good deal of space to Julian (Baldwin 1978, 204).

Ammianus confirms the defensive function of Nisibis when he indicates (XXV. 9. 8) that ever since the time of Mithridates, the king of Pontus Kingdom, during the first century BC Nisibis had resisted the occupation of the East by the Sasanians. It appears that the actual surrender of Nisibis was a sort of a shock for the Roman citizens of the region, as especially the Christians at the city feared future Sasanian retaliations. They had fought hard against Shapur II to hold it at their hands. This time they were afraid of the outrage of Shapur II. When Jovian approached the city they expected him to enter it, but he did not. It was because he thought it dishonourable to surrender the city when the emperor was in.

When Jovian preferred to camp near the city (Amm. Marc. XXV. 8. 17), a Sasanian nobleman, Bineses came to receive the city. He reminded the emperor of the treaty and asked him to settle his own people in the city (Amm. Marc. XXV. 9. 1). Ammianus (XXV. 9. 2 ff) continues to inform us the details of the departure of the Roman citizens and the locals as well. 12.000 families were brought from the Sasanian territories and were settled there. In course of the departure, the city was covered with the moanings of these people and there happened to be some difficulties in transporting their goods. Such that the people had to leave their goods in the city because of the lack of pack animals. Having left the city, the people of Nisibis advanced towards Amida, but some of them went further to establish a new settlement called as a Minor Nisibis.

It appears that the Sasanians took over Nisibis after 65 years of longing. Jovian, in ceding Nisibis, provided no counterbalance to it on his own border. The Romans were forced to make Constantina their principal base in the region. Since this town is situated about seventy miles from the border and Nisibis only eleven, it indicates that the Sasanians always held the advantage in the frequent plundering expeditions so feature of border wars (Higgins 1941, 301-2). Meanwhile Rome was obliged to generate new plans for its eastern border. First of all, Amida was raised to the *metropolis* of Mesopotamia and Cepha (Hasankeyf) was made the military headquarters of Arzanene region. Many city centers were formed in the East, especially in the Upper Tigris Valley. More discernible boundary between the two states was formed and led to the opposing spheres of influence, Edesa and Nisibis as being more favorable trade positions on the side of Sasanians. Roman defensive system of Eastern Mesopotamia was weakened. Commercial regulations also came under tightly control over this border.⁴⁹ After the loss

⁴⁹ Lieu 1992, 124-5; T. Kaçar, "Mezopotamya'da Roma - Sasani Çatışmaları: Nusaybin'in Düşüşü", *I. Uluslararası Mardin Tarihi Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, İstanbul 2006, s. 131-136.

of Nisibis, the lucrative east trade was more controlled by the Sasanians. The Roman monopoly of the income from the trans-border trade via Nisibis came to a stop. Having dominated Mesopotamia, Shapur II transformed the part around Nisibis into an administrative zone and the city remained at the hands of Sasanians until the Islamic conquest.

It appears that the sources turn out to be silent about the history of Nisibis after 363. This must be because of the fact that there were no longer Roman, Greek or Syriac sources concerning the history of Nisibis, as it was in the hands of the Sasanians. There was no option of a Sasanian source on the scene. Despite these facts, as the city was in the border of conflicts between the two powers and was a trade center, we see that Nisibis appears in some of the Roman sources shortly.

During the domination of Nisibis by the Sasanians, the first development that led Nisibis to appear in the historical sources correspond to the time when the Roman Empire had been divided. Sasanians had to conduct their relations with the Eastern Roman Empire. A treaty was signed during the reign of Yazdegerd I (399-421). Actually the information about this existing treaty with Persia comes from the Codex Iustinianus. It appears that during the reigns of Theodosius II and Honorius, in a law of 408 or 409 (Cod. Just. 4.63.4), Nisibis, Artaxata and Callinicum were named as the three cities where commercial exchanges with Persia were to be carried out. We have nothing of the context, which had brought about this law.⁵⁰ What can merely be inferred from this text is that the exchange districts of the trade goods had been determined as Rakka (Callinicum) on Euphrates, Artaxate on the North and Nisibis in Mesopotamia. Apart from this contract, there did not occur any conflict or relation between the two powers during the reign of Yazdegerd I. On the other hand, after this contract, Nisibis seems to have lost its importance as the only trade center between the two empires in the East.

Afterwards, there happened to be a conflict between the two sides during the reign of Bahram V (421-439), the successor of Yazdegerd I. Bahram V displayed an oppressive attitude towards the Christians living within the Sasanian territories. This was the main reason, which led to the confrontation between the years, 421-422. The Romans set out for an expedition towards Armenia. Bahram V challenged to this by starting an expedition from Nisibis. As a result of his intervention, the Romans were not

⁵⁰ Millar 2006, 70.

able to achieve a victory. As none of the sides were able to defeat each other, both emperors agreed to sign a treaty supporting the freedom of religions.⁵¹

The sources concerning the history of Nisibis after this period appears much later in the *Chronikon* of Ps.-Joshua, written in the period between the years 494-507. Yet the texts do not provide us with detailed information and includes a few references, which would merely enable us to make two comments. Even so, his work is important in providing valuable informations concerning the struggle between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Sasanians.

The first to come to our knowledge at this point is that Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno wanted to take over Nisibis as previously agreed in the treaty of 363, but the Sasanian king confronted to this. As for Ps.-Joshua, this gave rise up to the war.⁵² But there is no clear indication that there really occurred a war between the two sides because of Zeno's demand. Perhaps Ps.-Joshua's account is a garbled version of a Roman offer of money in return for Nisibis.⁵³ Ps.-Joshua (*Chron.* 20) also states that near the start of Anastasius' reign (ca. 491) Kawad demanded from the Roman emperor a payment as customary, but was turned down on the ground that the Sasanians had not given Nisibis back. This demand was reiterated in a later period while Anastasius was engaged in war with Isaurians (491-498).⁵⁴ Upon this, Kawad proposed a loan, which Anastasius did not accept.⁵⁵ As seen, the Eastern Roman Emperors still saw Nisibis as a significant outpost that should be held in hands.

Yet having understood that they could no longer capture this place, the Romans served an alternative plan, the establishment of a new fortress at 18 kilometers west of Nisibis. They thought that they could not be more successful against Nisibis without a nearer base for supplies and reinforcements, and refuge too when necessary; they also needed a new fortress further east of Amida and Constantina as the Sasanians had captured Amida

⁵¹ For the discussion of the texts of rare historical sources about the war and subsequent peace treaty, including Moses Chronesatsi, Socrates and Georgian Chronicles, see Syväne 2015b, 78 ff.

⁵² Ps.-Josh. *Chron.*7, cf.18; Kaçar, *a.g.m.*, s. 136.

⁵³ It is not attested that the Sasanian kings Firuz (459 to early 484) or Valash (484-488) are reminded of any alleged obligation under the claimed terms of the treaty of 363; it is said that Zeno used this a pretext for refusing to maintain the Caucasus defense payments as he argued that the Sasanians had the taxes from Nisibis which rightfully belonged to Romans (Bullough 1963, 61; Trombley-Watt 2000, fn.34).

⁵⁴ Ps.-Josh. *Chron.*23.

⁵⁵ For discussion see Blockley 1985, 67.

in January 503. So Anastasius took the decision in 505 to turn the small village of Dara into a large, fortified and well-provided city which would assume the role of a forward base for future Roman campaigns against the Sasanians (Oğuz Village, Figure 6).⁵⁶ The Sasanians did not wish this outpost to be founded. They made several attacks to prevent its establishment, but it was of no avail. Upon this development, Nisibis was no longer the only outpost at the Roman-Sasanian border. On account of this, the Roman army not only became capable of manoeuvring and securing the border but also intervening at the border disputes when required. After the foundation of Dara, the importance of Nisibis seems to have waned. Nisibis is mentioned in the ancient sources only as a city whereabouts the military conflicts occurred and as the military maneuvering centre of the Sasanians against the armies of Eastern Roman Empire at Dara.

Conclusion

The modern city of Nusaybin is situated on the ancient site of Nisibis. Because of this there has not been made archaeological excavations so far and so there is a lack of archaeological evidence that could be used in highlighting the ancient history of the city. Nisibis held the key location at the crossroads between Mesopotamia and Anatolia. It played an important role, especially not only in organizing the border trade between Rome and the Sasanians but also in constituting a strategic point militarily. In other words, holding Nisibis in hands meant controlling Upper Mesopotamia. For this reason, the Romans and the Sasanians, the two great powers of the region, exerted great efforts in controlling this city. After the capture of Nisibis by the Romans in 165, it raised to the rank of *metropolis* under the reign of Severus Alexander. Later on it was first sieged in 230 and then taken from the hands of the Romans in 238 or 241 by Ardashir I. Gordian III retook the city in 244. The condition of Nisibis was one of the terms of the Peace Treaty of 298 between Narseh and Diocletian. Although Narseh insisted on refusing to accept Nisibis as the only trade center as stated in this treaty, he was forced to accept this term and so it became the center in controlling trade at the border by the Romans. After this treaty, the Romans also were able to re-establish their domination over the whole region. The process that led to the confrontation re-started with the beginning of the reign of Shapur II in 309, who tried to seize Nisibis three times in 337, 346 and 350. Little is known of the first siege in 337. Since the described events of this siege come from the works of Christian hagiographers such as Theodoret, they seem to be unhistorical. It is likely that Nisibis did not need a miracle of St. Jacob to nullify the siege of Nisibis, since it had strong

⁵⁶ For the foundation of Dara, see Croke-Crow 1983.

walls. The second siege of 346 seems to have left even less trace in the historical record. This might derive from the fact that this siege did not last longer and was not powerful. The detailed accounts, on the other hand, are related to the siege of 350. There are five principal sources about this siege. The first of two distinct traditions is based on the eyewitness accounts of local Christians such as Ephraem, Theodoret and Chronicon Paschale. They ascribe the success of Nisibis in defeating the invaders to the divine intervention, which is questionable. The second tradition appears in the works of authors who were educated men from the ranks of society, including Julian and Zonaras. These accounts are more historical. Yet again Julian makes the selective use of material in order to exaggerate Constantius II's supreme guidance and the protection of the empire; especially the ships and lake scenes which appear so prominently in his works are likely to be a pure fiction. Although in almost all of these sources it is claimed that Shapur II and his army were utterly disappointed by the decisive resistance of the Roman garrison both physical and psychological along with the beleaguered Christians whose hearts were appealed and motivated, the main reason of Shapur II's withdrawal might be that he had been compelled to leave the siege on account of the more urgent threat from the Eurasian tribes to the Northern borders of the Sasanians.

As long as Nisibis remained in the Roman hands, Shapur II was unable to take full advantage of his successes elsewhere as in the case of his capture of Amida in 359. The access of Julian to the throne in 361 provided a great opportunity for Shapur II, as Julian was a pagan emperor and did not like the Christians. Even it is told that he would not visit Nisibis until they became paganist. Although Julian intended to fight against the Sasanians in Mesopotamia, he suffered a heavy defeat in Ctesiphon near Baghdad and even killed during his retreat. As a pagan, he probably did not get the full support of the Christians of the region in defending the border garrisons. After his defeat, Jovian agreed to surrender Nisibis to the Sasanians by the peace treaty of 363. According to the original treaty, they were to keep Nisibis in their hands for one hundred and twenty years until 483 when Zeno seems to have agreed to leave Nisibis in return for tax-bargaining with the Sasanians. Especially the Christians were ashamed by this peace treaty, but of no avail. 12.000 families were brought from the Sasanian territories and were settled in Nisibis. As a result of this, the Roman defensive system of the Eastern Mesopotamia was weakened and commercial relations came under the strict supervision of the Sasanians. To counterbalance the surrender of Nisibis, the Romans wisely decided to establish a new post near Nisibis in 505, called as Dara. After this period onwards, the strategical and commercial importance of Nisibis is claimed to have declined.

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