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Roman Campaigns and Negotiations in the East, 542–545

Abstract. This article seeks to support the earlier dating of campaigns on the Roman eastern frontier in the 540s. It addresses points made in a recent contribution by Michael Whitby, who argued that the traditional chronology, which places a Roman invasion of Persarmenia in 543 and a Persian siege of Edessa in 544, should be retained. The article seeks to demonstrate that the grounds he offers are inadequate and concludes therefore that the earlier dating, according to which the Romans invaded Persarmenia in autumn 542 and the Persians besieged Edessa in 543, is to be preferred.

Keywords: Procopius, Justinian, Roman campaigns, eastern frontier, 5th century

In a recent article Michael Whitby has marshalled several arguments in favour of a return to the traditional chronology for events on the Roman eastern frontier in the early 540s, events for which we are almost completely dependent on Procopius' work[1]. Simply put, he prefers to suppose that there was a lull in hostilities in 542 following Belisarius' bluff that induced Khusro to withdraw in late spring that year (Procopius, *Wars*, II, 20–1). In the next year, 543, there was a botched Roman invasion of Persarmenia, which was heavily defeated at Anglon (II, 24–5), while the siege of Edessa reported in some detail at II, 26–7 took place in the following year, 544. The revised view, propounded by Ewald Kislinger and Dionysios Stathakopoulos in 1999, argues rather that the Roman attack on Persarmenia took place later in 542 and the siege of Edessa in 543; as M. Whitby notes, their reasoning stems largely from the inference that Khusro retreated from Belisarius because of the onset of the plague. The king headed north-east, they suppose, to escape the pandemic that was arriving from the south-west. The conventional dates, i.e. those supported by M. Whitby, are still to be found in most work on the subject, it should be noted, though I accepted the revised chronology

[1] M. Whitby, *Procopius' Missing Year*, B 91, 2021, p. 413–421. I am grateful to Dariusz Brodka and Rene Pfeilschifter for comments on this paper, as also to the anonymous reviewers.

both in my *Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, *A.D. 363–630* and my more recent commentary on the *Persian Wars*[2].

Michael Whitby advances four arguments for reverting to the orthodox chronology. One focuses on the plague, arguing that it was unlikely that in 542 Justinian would have replaced Belisarius with Martin as *magister militum per Orientem* in mid-campaign. Part of his argument relies on dubious numismatic evidence adduced to demonstrate that Justinian displayed signs of the plague, it should be noted[3]. The second concerns the difficulty of reaching Adarbiganon (Atropatene/Azerbaijan) by late summer 542, while the third relates to the speed with which the plague is likely to have reached this region, where Khusro is situated at *Wars* II, 24.1. Procopius states that the king then withdrew from the region to Assyria (II, 24.12) because of the spread of the plague, which, he says, was not yet endemic in Assyria. M. Whitby argues that the plague was unlikely to have penetrated to Azerbaijan already in 542, from which he infers that the king was there rather in 543 – at the same moment as the Roman invasion of Persarmenia. The fourth concerns the chronology of the negotiations that gave rise finally to a truce in spring 545.

It must be admitted at the outset, as M. Whitby himself acknowledges, that there is no way to resolve this issue definitively: either interpretation is possible, given the limits of the evidence. We can only discuss the balance of probabilities. In this short article I hope to shore up arguments in favour of the revised chronology of E. Kislinger and D. Stathakopoulos[4]. Underlying the whole puzzle is the matter of communication between Constantinople and the front, viz. how long it took for news and for envoys to reach the East from the capital and vice versa. Let us examine the arguments put forward by M. Whitby to see whether they do make the revised chronology implausible.

As the table at the end shows, there is little doubt but that the plague, also now referred to as the Early Medieval Pandemic, reached Constantinople in March

[2] E. KISLINGER, D. STATHAKOPOULOS, *Pest und Perserkriege bei Prokop. Chronologische Überlegungen zum Geschehen, 540–545*, B 69, 1999, p. 76–98; G. GREATREX, S.N.C. LIEU, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, A.D. 363–630*, London 2002, p. 112, 116; PROCOPIUS, *Bella*, vol. I, ed. J. HAURY, rev. G. WIRTH, Leipzig 1964 (cetera: PROCOPIUS, *Bella*), trans.: PROCOPIUS OF CAESAREA, *The Persian Wars*, trans. G. GREATREX, Cambridge 2022 [forthcoming]. More details on the passages discussed may be found in G. GREATREX, *Procopius' Persian Wars. A Historical Commentary*, Cambridge 2022 [forthcoming].

[3] B. POTTIER, *L'empereur Justinien survivant à la peste bubonique*, TM 16, 2010, p. 685–691, against which see M. MEIER, *The 'Justinianic Plague': the Economic Consequences of the Pandemic in the Eastern Roman Empire and its Cultural and Religious Effects*, EME 24, 2016, p. 286, n. 111 (not cited by M. Whitby), offering detailed arguments.

[4] Cf. G. GREATREX, *Recent Work on Procopius and the Composition of Wars VIII*, BMGS 27, 2003, p. 53–55.

or April 542[5]. In the meantime, Khusro had embarked on his spring invasion of Mesopotamia, where the timely arrival of Belisarius – and perhaps news of the new disease – induced him to beat a hasty retreat, albeit not without opportunistically sacking the city of Callinicum[6]. Perhaps around the same time a Persian force threatened Theodosiopolis (Resaina) and Dara but was beaten back by the *dux* John Troglita[7]. It was at this point, according to the revised chronology, that Belisarius was recalled to Constantinople; Martin, who had been serving already in the East since 540, took over from him[8]. There is no need to discuss the issue of the coins apparently depicting Justinian with buboes dating from the 15th and 16th years of his reign: given the uncertainty that surrounds the representation of the emperor, they cannot help us pinpoint the moment at which he contracted the plague[9].

Of greater importance is Procopius' report at *Anecdota* 4.1–12 concerning the Empress Theodora and the generals of the East. According to his account, when news of Justinian's illness reached the eastern command, Buzes and Belisarius when said to have expressed their unwillingness to tolerate the foisting of another emperor on them, should the emperor succumb to the pandemic[10]. More precisely, when the army later learnt that Justinian had recovered, two subordinate commanders, John the Glutton and Peter, hastened to make these allegations – perhaps in a bid to deflect accusations against themselves. Both had good reason to have little love for Belisarius at any rate: it was Peter's insubordination, together with that of another John, John Troglita, that had almost led to disaster outside Nisibis in 541, while John the Glutton had failed to communicate with Belisarius when accompanying an expeditionary force composed mainly of Jafnid allies during the same campaign, prompting a swifter Roman withdrawal than might otherwise have been the case[11]. Apprised of this and incensed,

[5] The bibliography on the plague is constantly expanding. See (e.g.) P. Sarris, *Climate and Disease*, [in:] *A Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*, ed. M. Hermans, Leeds 2020, p. 511–537.

[6] Procopius, *Bella*, II, 20–1, 21.30–3 on Callinicum, cf. p. 573 below.

[7] *Flavii Cresconii Corippi Iohannidos*, I, 68–98, ed. J. Diggle, F.R.D. Goodyear, Cambridge 1970, trans. in G. Greatrex, S.N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier*…, p. 111–112. If Khusro had detached a portion of his army for this offensive, then this would have allowed the rest of his army to move more swiftly: see n. 16 below.

[8] Cf. *PLRE* III (s.v. *Martinus* 2), with Procopius, *Bella*, II, 13.16, 14.9. M. Whitby's arguments therefore about the time needed to send him to the front are irrelevant.

[9] Noted by M. Whitby, *Missing Year*…, p. 417, but see n. 3 above.

[10] I follow the commentary of R. Pfeilschifter and J. Theisz on the *Anecdota* (*A Commentary on Procopius' Anecdota*, Berlin 2022, forthcoming), who note that the phrasing is sometimes misleadingly translated as meaning that they would not endure 'another Justinian' rather than simply 'another emperor'.

[11] Procopius, *Bella*, II, 18.16–26 on Peter, II, 19.15–16, 26–30, on John the Glutton.

Theodora summoned both commanders as well as the two who had reported them. Belisarius was stripped of his command, while Buzes was imprisoned somewhere in the palace, he reports; at any rate, he enjoyed no further commands until after Theodora's death[12]. Now although this passage is rightly drawn into the debate by M. Whitby, he fails to exploit it fully: it is, in fact, probably the strongest argument for the traditional chronology, for we know that both John the Glutton and Peter were involved in the botched invasion of Persarmenia (*Wars*, II, 24.13–15).

It is therefore essential to establish a realistic chronology for movements between the eastern front and Constantinople in 542. In this context it is worth bearing in mind the sequence of events reported by Procopius in 532, leading up to the conclusion of the Eternal Peace in September that year. At the start of this year, probably in February, Rufinus and other Roman envoys were meeting with Khusro in the vicinity of the frontier (*Wars*, I, 22.1), but when the king insisted on the Romans surrending their Lazic fortresses at Sarapanis and Scanda (I, 22.3–6), the ambassadors insisted that Justinian be consulted. Rufinus was therefore despatched; he was allotted seventy days to get to Constantinople and back (I, 22.7–8). When he was on his way back to the frontier, probably in April, rumours reached Khusro that Rufinus – whose family had long been involved in diplomacy with the Sasanians – had been executed by Justinian, no doubt connected to the Nika riot and its aftermath in January the same year (I, 22.9)[13]. Once he arrived, Rufinus was able to assuage Khusro's concerns, but then, after word came from Justinian that he had changed his mind since the envoy's visit to Constantinople and now refused to cede the Lazic fortresses, the ambassador had to secure the return of the large sum that he and his colleagues had already handed over in exchange for peace (I, 22.10–14). His fellow envoys, Alexander, Thomas and Hermogenes, thereupon denounced him to the emperor since they found his success in persuading the king to return the money suspicious (I, 22.15), yet Justinian approved his conduct and then sent him and Hermogenes to conclude the treaty without ceding the Lazic forts (I, 22.16–17).

I have gone over these events in some detail deliberately, partly because there are some similarities to those of 542 – slander among Roman officials – but mainly in order to show just how much toing and froing there could be between the front and the capital over less than a year. Not only does Rufinus travel to Constantinople and back quickly, but we must also allow time for Justinian's missive

[12] See *PLRE* III s.v. *Belisarius* 1 and s.v. *Buzes* with R. PFEILSCHIFTER and J. THEISZ (*A Commentary…*) *ad* Procopius' *Anecdota* 4, 6–12.

[13] On Rufinus and his family's relations with the Sasanians see *PLRE* III (s.v. *Rufinus* 13), with H. BÖRM, *Prokop und die Perser. Untersuchungen zu den römisch-sasanidischen Kontakten in der ausgehenden Spätantike*, Stuttgart 2007 [= OO, 16], p. 319. R. SCOTT, *Diplomacy in the Sixth Century: the Evidence of John Malalas*, [in:] *Byzantine Diplomacy*, ed. J. SHEPARD, S. FRANKLIN, Aldershot 1992, p. 159–165, applies the evidence of the chronicler to this series of negotiations.

indicating his change of heart about the Lazic fortresses to reach the East, then for the accusations of his colleagues to be relayed to the emperor, and then for Rufinus and Hermogenes to proceed to the Persian court to continue negotiations. Much of this took place in the first half of the year, although the treaty itself was only finalised probably in September. There is therefore nothing inherently implausible, particularly when matters are urgent – as issues of potential disloyalty and treachery undoubtedly are – in a compressed chronology[14]. In the case of the events of 542 it is highly likely that rumours of the emperor's illness swiftly reached the army, provoking loose talk among commanders and soldiers alike, perhaps already in late March or April. News of the emperor's recovery will have travelled equally quickly, so that the allegations formulated by John and Peter could have been despatched to Constantinople in May or June. The commanders are summoned to Constantinople; two are dismissed, while John and Peter return to the front, perhaps in August. There is, therefore, no reason why they could not have taken part in the ramshackle invasion of Persarmenia in late summer (*Wars*, II, 24.14–21)[15].

The remaining arguments put forward by M. Whitby can be dealt with more concisely. Khusro withdrew from Roman territory along the Euphrates in 542, sacking Callinicum (II, 21.30–2); Procopius notes the presence of farmers in the city, who may well have been bringing their crops to market, which would place the event in May or early June[16]. Even allowing for the relatively slow speed of the royal court and army, there is no reason to suppose that the king could not have reached Adarbiganon by late summer, despite M. Whitby's arguments. Moreover, it was precisely in the hot summer months that Sasanian (and Achaemenid) kings were in the habit of moving to higher ground even without the menace of a plague[17].

[14] There are useful discussions of the time needed to traverse the distance between the eastern frontier and the imperial capital in M. Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian*, Oxford 1988, p. 256, n. 9, cf. A.M. Ramsay, *The Speed of the Roman Imperial Post*, JRS 15, 1925, p. 60–74. M. Whitby notes that in emergencies it could take as little as ten days, though, *The Emperor Maurice*…, p. 266–267, he emphasises that diplomats often travelled relatively slowly, cf. G. Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War, 502–532*, Leeds 1998, p. 214 and n. 3; E. Nechaeva, *Embassies – Negotiations – Gifts. Systems of East Roman Diplomacy in Late Antiquity*, Stuttgart 2014, p. 150. On the conclusion of the Eternal Peace see G. Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War*…, p. 214 with G. Greatrex, S.N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier*…, p. 96–97.

[15] I am grateful to Rene Pfeilschifter for discussion on these issues of chronology.

[16] Cf. Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, [in:] *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum*, vol. I, ed. J.B. Chabot, Louvain 1927 [= *CSCO.SS*, 43], p. 235–316, trans.: *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, trans. et comm. F.R. Trombley, J.W. Watt, Liverpool 2000 [= TTH, 32], ch. 27 with J.B. Segal, *Edessa, "The Blessed City"*, Oxford 1970, p. 141. M. Whitby, *Missing Year*…, p. 418, dates the sack to June or even July, on the other hand.

[17] See C. Tuplin, *The Seasonal Migration of Achaemenid Kings: a Report on Old and New Evidence*, [in:] *Studies in Persian History. Essays in Memory of David M. Lewis*, ed. M. Brosius, A.T. Kuhrt, Leiden 1998, p. 64–73, 89–90 (on the Achaemenids, whose kings often went to Ecbatana in the summer). I am grateful to Josef Wiesehöfer for this reference. Cf. *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum libri quinque*, IV, 29, 7, ed. R. Keydell, Berolini 1967 [= *CFHB.SBe*, 2], trans.: Agathias, *The Histories*,

Next there is the issue of the spread of the plague: M. Whitby finds it implausible that the pandemic would have struck Adarbiganon already in 542, arguing that it probably did not arrive until the following year, having penetrated here from the Roman empire by sea, probably, and then inland from Lazica. While this scenario for the spread is plausible, it could have happened just as well in the second half of 542 as in early 543. For as M. Whitby himself underlined long ago, communications in the Caucasus, i.e. in this case Armenia and Atropatene, are difficult until late in the spring. Under these circumstances, there is no reason not to suppose that already in summer 542 the plague was crossing the frontier into Persian territory in the Caucasus[18]. Probably towards the end of the summer, apparently not long after arriving in Adarbiganon, Khusro left for Assyria, where, Procopius states, the plague was not yet endemic – but had apparently penetrated to some degree (*Wars*, II, 14.12).

We come at last to the chronology of negotiations paving the way for the truce that was finally agreed in April/May 545. As we already recognised nearly twenty years ago, the revised chronology of E. Kislinger and D. Stathakopoulos opens up a rather lengthy apparent vacuum in our narrative following the siege of Edessa, now placed in spring 543 (rather than 544). Yet as is well attested elsewhere, e.g. at *Wars* II, 29.32, Justinian sometimes let things slip. Moreover, following Khusro's treacherous sack of Callinicum and then his own bungled attempt to exploit Persian weakness in Persarmenia later in 542, the emperor had little incentive to expedite negotiations, even if the situation in Italy was grim[19]. In his article, M. Whitby rehearses the various stages of the negotiations: the Roman envoys Sergius and Constantianus were slow in proceeding to the king (II, 24.3–5) as a result of illness. In his interpretation, however, it is not until 543 that they are even embarking on their journey, a year after Belisarius promised to send them. At the siege of Edessa, furthermore, the Persian generals mention the envoys that Belisarius had promised recently, ἔναγχος (II, 26.46), would come from Constantinople: already by spring 543 the ambassadors were a year overdue. By spring 544 it becomes hard to see how, even allowing for Procopius' often rather approximate dating formulae, Belisarius could be said to have 'recently' promised the despatch

IV, 29, 7, trans. J.D. FRENDO, Berlin–New York 1975 [= *CFHB.SBe*, 2A], reporting Khusro's presence at Tham(a)non in Corduene in summer 578 in the mountains of Corduene, to the south-west of Adarbiganon (Azerbaijan), cf. G. GREATREX, S.N.C. LIEU, *The Roman Eastern Frontier*…, p. 161 and G. GREATREX, *Recent Work*…, p. 54, n. 27. M. WHITBY, *Missing Year*…, p. 418–419, on the slowness of the court, but on occasion, e.g. during the invasions of Roman territory in 540 or 573, the Persians were capable of swift strikes, as M. WHITBY, *The Emperor Maurice*…, p. 257, n. 11, notes himself. In the face of the approaching plague, it is quite possible that Khusro could reach Adarbiganon by late summer.

[18] M. WHITBY, *The Emperor Maurice*…, p. 202, cf. G. GREATREX, *Rome and Persia at War*…, p. 22 and now T.B. MITFORD, *East of Asia Minor. Rome's Hidden Frontier*, Oxford 2018, p. 15–20. See E. KISLINGER, D. STATHAKOPOULOS, *Pest und Perserkriege bei Prokop*…, p. 94–95 and n. 23 below.

[19] Cf. also PROCOPIUS, *Bella*, VII, 32.9, 35.11, for Justinian being distracted from the war in Italy.

of ambassadors. As we suggested some twenty years ago, stasis seems to have set in after the Persians' withdrawal from Edessa. The death of two important Roman generals, Justus and Peranius (*Wars*, II, 28.1), perhaps late in 543, and the need to replace them may have distracted the emperor; one of the replacements was Constantianus, who had been due to take part in the embassy to Khusro, of course (II, 28.2), but he was maintained in his role on the mission, which then at last proceeded (II, 28.3). The envoys found the Persian king in Seleucia-Ctesiphon (II, 28.4) and settled down to arrange the truce. It is quite possible that they did not reach the Persian capital until late in 544, depending on the speed of their advance[20]. There is no reason to suppose, contrary to what M. Whitby asserts, that *both parties appear to have been keen to secure an agreement*: Khusro had good reason to keep his options open, ready to strike at Mesopotamia again, should the occasion arise, or even at Lazica, while Justinian might hope to avenge the Persian incursions, including the most recent attempt on Edessa, and compensate for his army's lacklustre performance in Persarmenia[21]. Once at the Persian court, the Roman envoys could thrash out the details of the terms of the truce, including, for instance, the despatch of the doctor Tribunus to Khusro. The truce itself was concluded in April/May 545: E. Kislinger and D. Stathakopoulos were wrong to place it in the autumn[22].

To conclude, as we stated at the outset, we can only weigh up the balance of probabilities. The assorted variables introduced by M. Whitby, be they the plague or the speed of diplomacy, do not swing the balance one way or the other. We have tried to show that the revised chronology put forward by E. Kislinger and D. Stathakopoulos remains the most plausible, even if it is not altogether clear whether it has now become orthodoxy[23]. It is worth remembering therefore the positive arguments in favour of their version, viz. the inference that Khusro retreated from Belisarius because of the approach of the plague and sought refuge in the less accessible highland region of Adarbiganon[24]. There is one further

[20] See G. Greatrex, *Recent Work*…, p. 53–54, for this, not taken into account by M. Whitby. On the frequent slowness of embassies, M. Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice*…, p. 260–261 and n. 14 above.

[21] M. Whitby, *Missing Year*…, p. 420, for the quotation. It is not clear that Rhecinarius' mission to Edessa (Procopius, *Bella*, II, 27.24–7) or the deal struck to ensure Khusro's departure from the city (27.46) indicates any urgency on either side for the conduct of negotiations.

[22] Cf. M. Whitby, *Missing Year*…, p. 420; G. Greatrex, *Recent Work*…, p. 54, *contra* E. Kislinger, D. Stathakopoulos, *Pest und Perserkriege bei Prokop*…, p. 97.

[23] M. Whitby, *Missing Year*…, p. 415, suggests that it is gaining ground, pointing to G. Greatrex, S.N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier*…, p. 116, but I note that D. Brodka's translation, Prokopiusz z Cezarei, *Historia Wojen*, vol. I, trans. D. Brodka, Kraków 2013, p. 167, n. 123, cf. p. 172, n. 137, while remaining fairly neutral, favours the traditional view.

[24] M. Whitby does attempt to take on this argument, *Missing Year*…, p. 415–416, but his statement that the plague had not yet reached the Tigris valley (Assyria) is not quite correct: Procopius indicates rather that it was not yet endemic, οὔπω ἐνδεδημήκει (II, 24.12), cf.: p. 574 above.

argument in favour of their chronology, moreover, which is to be found at *Wars* II, 26.1, where Procopius begins his chapter on the assault on Edessa by stating *In the following year Khusro, the son of Kavadh, invaded Roman territory for the fourth time, leading his army against Mesopotamia*. Although it is not explicitly stated, the natural inference of this statement is that this is the fourth annual invasion, i.e. in succession. If 543 is reserved only for the Roman invasion of Persarmenia, the statement reads oddly, since, although the siege of Edessa would indeed form part of Khusro's fourth invasion of the Roman empire, it followed two whole years after his previous attack[25]. Our suggestion is therefore that the interpretation propounded in 1999 by E. Kislinger and D. Stathakopoulos be preferred, at least until more cogent arguments are found to refute it.

Date	M. Whitby/conventional chronology	Revised chronology
540	Khusro's first invasion	Khusro's first invasion
541	Khusro invades Lazica	Khusro invades Lazica
542 (March/April)	Plague arrives in Constantinople	Plague arrives in Constantinople Justinian contracts the plague
	Khusro invades Mesopotamia	Khusro invades Mesopotamia
(May–June)	Khusro takes Callinicum (Justinian catches the plague)	Khusro takes Callinicum News of Justinian's recovery reaches the army; accusations made by John and Peter; generals summoned to Constantinople, Martin succeeds Belisarius as *magister militum per Orientem*
(July–August)		Khusro moves to Adarbiganon John and Peter return to the East
542 (late summer–autumn)	(Justinian recovers) Belisarius recalled to CP	Justinian orders the invasion of Persarmenia
542/543 (winter)	Martin succeeds Belisarius as *magister militum per Orientem*	
543 (spring)	Khusro moves to Adarbiganon Roman invasion of Persarmenia	Siege of Edessa
544 (spring)	Siege of Edessa	Start of negotiations
544 (summer)	Start of negotiations	
545 (spring)	Start of five-year truce	Start of five-year truce

[25] So E. KISLINGER, D. STATHAKOPOULOS, *Pest und Perserkriege bei Prokop*…, p. 95. The passage is cited by M. WHITBY, *Missing Year*…, p. 414, but not actually discussed.

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