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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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The Hunnic attack on Persia: Chronology, context, and the accounts of Priscus and Thomas

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The fragments of the 5th century historian Priscus of Panium describe an attack by the Huns upon the territory of Sasanian Persia led by two otherwise unknown Hunnic leaders named Basich and Kursich. This attack is otherwise mentioned only by a 7th century Syriac chronicle that scholars now attribute to an author named Thomas. When did this attack take place? The currently prevalent theory is that of Otto Maenchen-Helfen, who presented the Hunnic attack on Persia as an extension of their better documented attack on several Eastern Roman provinces in 395. Alternate theories, though, would place the Persian campaign as late as 425. A reexamination of the evidence will here suggest a new interpretation that both separates the attack on Persia from the Hunnic/Roman war of 395 and rejects attempts to place it much later in the 420s. The evidence is most consistent with dating the war to 396 and with disassociating it from any military action that directly involved Roman forces.

The so-called “Iranian Huns” beyond Persia’s Eastern Frontier, the Kidarites, Alkhans and Hephthalites, would pose long-term challenges for the Sasanians, as several recent studies have discussed.¹ The Hunnic attack described by Priscus and Thomas is, however, the only known military encounter between the Persians and the Huns whom Attila would later rule, who came from the Pontic steppe to the North of the Western part of Sasanian territory. The attack was a major military expedition for the Huns, and thus the

1- Rezakhani 2017; Vondrovec 2014.

Persian repelling of that assault was a correspondingly impressive defensive response. It is, though, one that is sadly absent from surviving Persian historical traditions. That the story survives at all is a product of its place in the political themes of the two Western authors who mention it.

Priscus of Panium accompanied an embassy to the Huns in 449, which was conducting negotiations on behalf of the Eastern Roman Empire with the then-dominant Hunnic ruler Attila. Priscus had no official standing, being part of the embassy merely through his friendship with the ambassador, but his account records much of value about the Huns.² The text survives only in fragments, which I cite here from the edition of Blockley³ and using his numbering system of the fragments.

At one point, Priscus describes a meeting that his diplomatic group had with Romulus, a Roman count and an experienced ambassador from the Western Roman Empire who was also traveling to meet with Attila. As with any conversation reported in a Roman source, there is no way to know how faithful Priscus' account of the conversation is to the actual events, and he may well be spinning the story to advance his particular agenda, though there is also no *a priori* reason to doubt that some version of the conversation took place. Priscus traveled in Eastern Roman diplomatic circles, and the readership of his book would have included people familiar with the Western diplomat Romulus, so Priscus is unlikely to have invented meeting him.

As Priscus presents the conversation, Romulus describes the great power and ambition of Attila, and suggests that the Hunnic king hoped ultimately to conquer Sasanian Persia. In advancing this argument, Romulus tells the story of an earlier Hunnic attack on Persian territory to illustrate that the Huns (whom Priscus often called "Scythians") controlled territory close enough to Persia to make a further attack by Attila seem possible. Romulus sets the story in time with a vague "long ago," but clearly it is before the time of Attila:

When a certain one of those of our group asked us what road [Attila] could travel to reach Persia, Romulus said that the territory of Medes was not separated by a large gap from that of Scythia; for the Huns were not unacquainted with this road, but long ago they traveled on it when a famine was afflicting their land and the Romans were not coming against them because of a war in which they were engaged. Basich and Kursich, men of the Royal Scythians, commanders of a huge multitude who later traveled to Rome for an alliance, reached the territory of the Medes. And those who have come over say that, having gone through a desolate land and crossed some lake, which Romulus thought was Maeotis, they passed after fifteen days through some mountains and drove into Media. While they were plundering and ravaging the land, a Persian force assaulted them, which filled the air above them with their arrows, so that, consumed by fear, they drew back from the danger and retreated across the mountains, carrying little booty, for most of it was taken away by the Medes.⁴

As Romulus is trying to make Attila seem invincible, it might seem odd that this story describes a Hunnic defeat in which the Persians forced them to flee and leave behind their war booty, but the point of

2- Blockley 1981: 48-70

3- Blockley 1983: 221-400; cf. Carolla 2008.

4- Priscus 11.2.596-611; my translation.

Romulus' speech is simultaneously to suggest continuity with the past and to present a strong contrast. There is continuity in the role of the Huns and their leadership. Whatever exact relationship might have existed between the otherwise unknown "Royal Scythian" leaders Basich and Kursich and the later Hunnic kings of Priscus' main focus (Attila himself and his uncle Rua), the passage is in general terms presenting Attila as the long-term political heir of Basich and Kursich. That is, the Huns ruled by Attila were (or at least included) the Huns that attacked Persia under Basich and Kursich, so that actions of the latter could foreshadow the potential actions of Attila. There is also a point of geographic continuity. However much Attila had expanded on the territory of his predecessors, the passage makes little sense if the Huns did not still control in Attila's time the territory east of the Roman Empire from which they launched their attack on Persia. The logic of Romulus' argument depends on Attila still possessing his predecessors' route of access to Persia.

Beyond these points of continuity, however, Romulus' speech offers a substantial contrast of potential that favors Attila. Basich and Kursich may have had the necessary geographic proximity to think of attacking Persia and even the daring to attempt it, but they lacked the power to bring it off successfully. Priscus' Romulus presents Attila as a power of a different magnitude: "No one ever of those ruling Scythia or any other land had achieved so much in so short a time" (11.2.590-592), he says, noting Attila's ability to force concessions from the Romans. He concludes his discussion of a possible Persian campaign saying, "And so he would make the Medes, the Parthians, and the Persians submit and force them to pay tribute" (11.2.616-618). Thus, the story of Basich and Kursich becomes the "before" in a "before and after" comparison. Once the Huns were merely bold; now they are unstoppable. Another visitor to Priscus' group, Constantiolus, whom Priscus describes as a resident of Hunnic controlled Pannonia, then goes on to predict that Attila will someday force the Romans to call him their "king," pushing the contrast of potential to its ultimate extreme (11.2.631-634). More subtly, Priscus also makes another contrast by including the detail that Basich and Kursich later visited Rome seeking a treaty. In 449, it was the Romans who were traveling to Attila to seek peace, not the reverse, and that was true of both the Western Romans represented by Romulus and the Eastern Romans represented by Priscus' party.

Priscus thus uses the story of the earlier Hunnic attack on Persia to set up an illustration of the rhetoric surrounding Attila's alleged invincibility in the late 440s. Although he is portraying events in 449, however, Priscus was actually writing his book later in the late 470s, well after Attila's death in 453.⁵ Thus, Romulus' contrast between the Huns of Basich and Kursich and those of Attila becomes just one component of Priscus' own even greater contrast between the hype surrounding Attila in his lifetime and the ultimate failure of Attila's kingdom to be more than a temporary threat. Certainly, the claims of Attila planning to conquer the Persians never came to pass, as Attila never attacked them at all. The distance between Romulus' rhetoric about Attila and the reality of what actually happened would have been all too obvious to Priscus' original readers.

The question remains, though, when did Basich and Kursich's attack on Persia take place? It is possible that Priscus did not intend the passage to be as free-floating in time as it now appears. It is a sorry reflection on our surviving sources that the visit of the Hunnic leaders Basich and Kursich to Rome—the only known visit of any Hunnic leader to Rome—is not mentioned in any source from the Western Empire in which

5- Blockley 1981: 50.

the visit took place. It is only mentioned in this one passage from the fragments of an Eastern Roman text. The wording suggests that the visit was better known than our sources now allow it to be and Priscus seems to be using it as a point of reference, as if the visit of the Huns to Rome was more famous than the story of their attack on Persia. Maenchen-Helfen, noting that Priscus says the embassy went to Rome and not the actual Western Roman capital at Ravenna, suggested a date for the embassy of either 404 or 407, both years when the emperor Honorius visited Rome, but there is no way to confirm that suggestion.⁶

Priscus calls Basich and Kursich “Royal Scythians.” Nine hundred years before Priscus, Herodotus (*Histories*, 4.20–22) had used “Royal Scythian” as an ethnic term, that is, to designate a separate group from the other Scythians. There is no indication that Priscus is adopting the same convention. He calls Attila a “Royal Scythian” at 11.2.77, but earlier at 2.28, Attila and his brother are just “Scythians,” and Attila’s subjects are “Scythians” frequently throughout the fragments. There is no place in the surviving fragments where Priscus unambiguously uses “Royal Scythian” for someone who is not a member of the Royal family. So, “Royal Scythian” here means “Hunnic Royalty.” Again, though, the lack of useful sources prevents us from answering basic questions about what that might mean specifically. Was this the same ruling family that later produced Attila or was the political continuity of Priscus’ story of a general enough nature to include changes in the ruling dynasty? Were Basich and Kursich both part of the same political entity, or were they merely cooperating like Attila and his brother Bleda in the 430s and early 440s, when they ruled separate territories but worked together in several wars and in negotiations with the Romans?⁷ Again, these questions are unanswerable, and we have only two actions attributed to them by name, the unelaborated negotiation at Rome, and the earlier attack they led against Persia.

At the least, one can note the possibility that Basich and Kursich were not the only Hun rulers of their period. The absence of any reference to Basich or Kursich in any source relating to the rule of the Hunnic king Uldin, who controlled an area near the Danube around the year 400 and had well-attested dealings with the Eastern Romans, is consistent with the theory that the Huns were not fully unified until the early 5th century and that there was more than one center of Hunnic power under separate leaders. This article is not the place to offer a reassessment of the specific chronology of Hunnic unification suggested by Thompson (1948) or the chronology of Hunnic migration toward the Danube offered by Heather (1995), but one can accept as plausible the basic premise of both scholars that Hunnic activities in the late fourth and early fifth centuries had multiple centers of leadership. Basich and Kursich’s apparent authority in an area of the Pontic steppe does not require them to be part of a larger polity that already included the Middle Danube region. As already noted, though, Priscus does imply that the later and geographically more extensive kingdom of Attila had roots in Basich and Kursich’s power.

When, though, did Basich and Kursich rule? On the date of their attack against Persia, Maenchen-Helfen⁸, and, more recently, Greatrex and Greatrex⁹ have argued that a Syriac chronicle not only recorded the same attack as Priscus but tied it chronologically to a better documented Hunnic attack on the Romans in 395. Maenchen-Helfen referred to this chronicle as the *Liber Chalipharum* [“Book of the Caliphs”], a

6- Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 55.

7- Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 85–86.

8- Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 52–59.

9- Greatrex and Greatrex 1999.

name given it by its early editor J. P. N. Land.¹⁰ The later and now standard text of E. W. Brooks, with a Latin translation by I.-B. Chabot¹¹, called it *Chronicon Miscellaneum ad Annum Domini 724 Pertinens* [“Miscellaneous Chronicle extending to AD 724”]. Both of these modern Latin titles refer to the work’s final section, a list of Arab Caliphs to the year 724. Andrew Palmer has shown that this list of Caliphs is a later addition and that the main text was completed in 640. He also tentatively identifies the author as one Thomas “from the Mountain of Mardīn, in the region of Rhesaina” in Roman Mesopotamia.¹² I will therefore call the author Thomas and the text *The Chronicle of 640*.

Thomas writes:

They [the Huns], moreover, went down to the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris in the area under Persian control, and they reached the royal city of the Persians. They caused no damage to that place but devastated many villages near the Euphrates and Tigris, and they killed very many and led away very many captives. When, however, they heard that the Persians were advancing against them they decided to flee, and the Persians pursued and killed one group of them and took from them all the spoils that they had plundered and freed from them captive people who were 18,000 in number.¹³

Maenchen-Helfen is right to see a considerable resemblance here to Priscus’ story, too much so to be coincidence. As with Priscus’ story, Thomas’ Hunnic attack on Persia appears as an exceptional event, worthy of inclusion in a chronicle that only occasionally mentions the Persians and even more rarely mentions Huns. As in Priscus’ account, the Huns make a substantial incursion into Persian territory and capture much booty, but are forced to abandon their loot when they are pursued and successfully intercepted by a Persian army.

The Chronicle of 640 thus provides independent confirmation of Priscus’s story by way of a Syriac chronicle tradition. There is no suggestion in any other passage that Thomas might have been familiar with or be relying upon Priscus’ book, and Thomas goes on to say explicitly that the source of his story came from Christians who were interested in the later fate of the prisoners Persia had recovered from the Huns and from those prisoners themselves. By contrast, Priscus credits the source of his informant Romulus as Huns who had come into Roman territory.

Maenchen-Helfen assigned the date 395 to the Hunnic attack on Persia because, in Thomas’ account, it follows immediately after a description of another more datable event involving Huns after the death of the Eastern emperor Theodosius:

Theodosius grew ill on his own bed and died in the year 706 [= AD 395]. Theodosius reigned, moreover, for 17 years, and he died, and his sons took over his imperium. And in this same year, the accursed people of the Huns went into the territory of the Romans and penetrated into Sophene, Armenia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Cappadocia all the way to Galatia; They carried away

10- J. P. N. Land (1862: 1: 2-24 [Syriac] and 1: 103-122 [Latin trans.]).

11- E. W. Brooks and I.-B. Chabot 1903, *Textus*, 77-156 [Syriac]; *Versio*, 61-119 [Latin].

12- Palmer 1993: 5-12, quote from 6.

13- Thomas 136-137, my translation from Chabot’s Latin; cf. the very similar version of Greatrex and Greatrex 1999: 67.

many captives, and they turned back and returned to their own territory.¹⁴

The Hunnic rampage through multiple Eastern Roman provinces in 395 is among the best documented of all actions involving the Huns prior to the 430s (Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 17-19). Other authors who mention it include the poet Claudian (*In Rufinum* 2.28-35), St. Jerome (*Epistulae* 60.16), the poet Cyrillona (*On the Scourges*, 276-279), the Syriac *Euphemia and the Goth* (4.46), the chronicles attributed to Joshua the Stylite (243.2-8) and Pseudo-Dionysius (1.187-188), the church histories of Socrates (6.1), Sozomen (8.1), and Philostorgius (9.8), as well as the *Chronicle of Edessa* (40), which dates it most precisely to July of 395. This Hunnic attack did not go entirely unchallenged, as Roman forces successfully intercepted one group of Hunnic soldiers when they were attempting to cross the Euphrates. This limited victory did not, however, stop a much broader Hunnic penetration into Roman territory in which they attacked towns in Armenia, Roman Mesopotamia and Syria, driving deep enough to the south to threaten Antioch, while also marauding in Asia Minor as far west as Galatia.¹⁵

One should stress, though, that while Thomas places this Hunnic attack on the Romans in 395, he does not explicitly say that the Hunnic attack on Persia took place in the same year. Indeed, his wording argues against it. He says that after the attack on the Roman provinces, the Huns “returned to their own territory.” So, the attack on the Persians must be a separate event, for which the Huns would have had to again venture out from their own lands. It would have been extremely—and, one might suggest, implausibly--ambitious for the Huns to have attacked both of their most powerful neighbors, the Romans and the Persians, in the same year in separate major attacks. There is simply no reason to assume from Thomas’ account that the two expeditions were all part of the same campaign, as he simply presents them as consecutive events that both involved Huns.

Further arguments against treating the two Hunnic expeditions as the same war come from R. C. Blockley in the commentary to his edition of Priscus’ fragments. Blockley does not discuss the content of the *Chronicle of 640*, but he rejects Maenchen-Helfen’s placement of the Hunnic/Persian conflict in the year 395 on the basis of the Priscus’ own wording when describing the conversation between Priscus’ party and the Western ambassador Romulus. Blockley notes that Priscus suggests “the attack in question is not one well known to the Eastern Empire”.¹⁶ This point seems difficult to dispute. Priscus presents his embassy from the Eastern Empire as unaware of any earlier conflict between the Huns and Persians and curious about the route by which the Huns made their attack. The problem is that the Hunnic attack on the Eastern Roman Empire in 395 was extremely well known and mentioned by at least eleven surviving sources, of which only Claudian is from the Western Empire. If the Hunnic/Persian conflict was part of the same war, it seems odd that the Eastern Roman diplomats visiting the Huns with Priscus would not have known about it. Priscus says that Romulus learned the story from Huns who had “come over”—perhaps defectors or just Huns that entered Roman territory on diplomatic missions—but he does not suggest the war was broadly known in either of the two Roman Empires. Likewise, it seems odd that none of the many sources for the Hunnic/Roman conflict of 395 mention that the Huns attacked the Persians at the same time. Only one—Thomas’ *Chronicle of 640*—mentions the Hunnic/Persian conflict at all, and, as noted

14- Thomas 136, my translation.

15- Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 52; Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 18-19.

16- Blockley 1983: 386, n. 66.

above, he presents it as an event that took place after the Huns had returned home from their attack on the Roman provinces. Blockley's argument thus strengthens the case for viewing the Hunnic/Persian war as subsequent to the events of 395.

Unfortunately, Blockley's suggested solution to the chronological problem has its own difficulties. Priscus says the Hunnic attack on Persia was at a moment when "the Romans were not coming against them because of a war in which they were engaged." Blockley suggested that the war in question was the conflict between the Eastern Empire and Persia in 420-422, but this timing would create other problems.¹⁷ Blockley had objected that Priscus presented the Hunnic/Persian war as something unknown to the Eastern Romans. If, though, the war was in 420-422 when the Romans were themselves fighting Persia, then the Romans ought to have been paying particular attention to Persian affairs at that moment. It does not seem plausible that they would have failed to be aware that Persia was fighting another opponent at the same time.

More importantly, the logic of Priscus' statement that "Romans were not coming against them" requires the Huns to have been afraid that the Romans would intervene to help Persia. If the Romans were fighting the Persians themselves, then they would hardly have had a reason to want to stop a Hunnic attack on Persia, nor would the Huns have had a plausible reason to fear Roman intervention. The logic of Priscus' story requires the Eastern Romans and Persians to be in a state of good relations at the time of the war, so that the possibility of Rome intervening to help Persia would have been a reasonable Hunnic concern. The earlier suggestions of C. D. Gordon¹⁸ that Priscus was referring to "423-425, when Rome and Constantinople were in conflict over the usurper Joannes," and of E. A. Thompson¹⁹ that the Hunnic attack on Persia "seems to have taken place about the period 415-20 or a little later" both have the same problem as Blockley's suggestion. These were periods of high Roman tension with the Persians, either right before or right after the Eastern Romans were actually fighting them. The Romans would then have had no motive even to consider intervening to stop a Hunnic attack on Persia, and the Huns no reason to fear it. A date in the 410s or 420s does not therefore fit Priscus' information.

Let us return then to Thomas' *Chronicle* and his story that the Persians recovered 18,000 captives from the Huns. The number may well be inflated, but Thomas' discussion of the fate of these prisoners provides additional chronological information:

And [the Persians] took them to their own cities Selok and Kaukaba, which are called Ardashir and Ctesiphon, where they were for many years. The king of the Persians assigned provisions to them: bread, wine, sicera [an alcoholic drink], and olive oil. From these 18,000 only a few remained...[gap in text]...one group of a thousand at first. And the Persians released them so that they could return to their own homeland. When, however, the king of Persia Yazdgerd reigned, he sent back again into their own homeland 1330 from these captives. 800 captives remained, however, in Persia. All the rest died from the disease of dysentery resulting from the distress and deprivation which they had suffered from the despicable Huns. The captives told all these things to us. Christians and ascetics also told us. And the junior clergy themselves

17- Blockley 1983: 386, n. 66.

18- Gordon 1960: 202, n. 54.

19- Thompson 1948: 31.

reported about the benefits which the captives said were done for them and about their gratitude to the good and merciful Yazdgerd, a Christian and blessed among kings. Let his memory be praised and his end be more famous than his beginning, who in all his days did noble things for the needy and wretched.²⁰

One could note first what these quotations illustrate about Thomas' writing methods. As Palmer has stressed when discussing Thomas' coverage of later 7th century events, one should be cautious about assuming that there is no logical pattern to his story's organization.²¹ His *Chronicle* follows story threads to their conclusions even when that means deviating from strict chronological order. The sequence in the text is that (as quoted earlier) he begins with the death of Theodosius I in early 395 and the succession of his sons. Then, he puts the Hunnic attack on the Romans "in this same year." Then, he continues with the Hunnic attack on Persia. Then (in the passage just quoted), he recounts the fate of the recovered prisoners both before and after the accession of King Yazdgerd I. Then, he makes some broad generalizations about Yazdgerd that seem to include in their scope the king's entire reign (AD 399-420). The sentence that follows next, however, will return to the death of Theodosius and his successors, "Arcadius and Honorius, sons of the elder Theodosius, reigned 29 years," followed by some discussion of religious developments in their reigns. So, there is a sequence of story threads that shifts repeatedly following a sequence of associations: from the succession of Roman Emperors, to the Huns fighting the Romans, to the Huns fighting the Persians, to Persian conduct after fighting the Huns, and then back to the succession of the same Roman Emperors where the earlier story left off. Each strand continues to a stopping point, even if that spans several years. There is no reason to take it all as governed by the "in this same year" of 395, and indeed it could not be. So, Thomas' format supports the implication that the Hunnic/Persian conflict is an event separate from and subsequent to the Hunnic/Roman conflict and not restricted by the "in this same year" that refers only to the Hunnic/Roman conflict.

Thomas' announcement of the reign of Yazdgerd interrupts the story of the fate of the prisoners, so the Hunnic attack on Persia must have been prior to the beginning of Yazdgerd's reign in the era of his predecessor Wahrām IV (388-399). Thus, a date decades later, as suggested by Blockley or Gordon, is again untenable. A corrupt line in the text makes the exact sequence of events unclear, but the Persians took the prisoners to their capital, where they seem to have divided them in some way, with some being sent home at the time while others were there "for many years" until Yazdgerd sent another sizeable group home after his accession in 399.

There is also no reason to think that the former Hunnic captives that the Persians were sending home were Romans, as Greatrex and Greatrex suggested, for that possibility depends entirely on equating the Hunnic/Persian conflict with the assault on the Romans in 395, a view here rejected.²² If, as Thomas said, the Huns went home prior to their war with Persia, then there is no reason they would have had Roman prisoners with them in Persia and the prisoners must be Persian subjects. Neither Priscus nor Thomas suggest any return of prisoners or booty across the Roman border. That Thomas presents Christians as having concern about the fate of the captives is an interesting detail and could suggest that some of the

20- Thomas 137, my translation.

21- Palmer 1992; 1993: 5-12.

22- Greatrex and Greatrex 1999: 68.

prisoners were Christians, but even that interpretation may not be necessary. The wording (“The captives told all these things to us. Christians and ascetics also told us”) seems to differentiate between the captives and the Christians. It may just be that, in a period when Christians seem to have been relatively in favor in Sasanian Persia under Yazdgerd I, contemporary Christian authors in Persia seized upon the Yazdgerd’s resolution of the captive situation as an occasion to praise the king for having a benevolence toward the “needy” that they could present as being Christian-like. This praise would then underlie Thomas’ account.

Presumably, Thomas’ presentation of Yazdgerd as “a Christian and blessed,” while certainly not literally true, reflects Yazdgerd’s pattern of actions in parts of his reign to accommodate and coopt the Persian Empire’s Christians into his base of support. These actions included some financial support for church building and the recognition in 410 of the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon as the leader of the “Church of the East,” the independent Christian church of Persian territory.²³ Thomas extends Yazdgerd’s pro-Christian stance to the end of Yazdgerd’s life, but other sources accuse Yazdgerd himself of persecuting Christians in the final years of his reign.²⁴ Surviving Roman Christian histories from the 5th century suggest that a later author like Thomas might have had strongly contradictory sources to choose from when it came to Yazdgerd’s reputation. The Christian historian Socrates (7.8) claimed Yazdgerd wanted to convert to Christianity and was prevented from doing so only by his death, while Theodoret (5.38) presents him as a ruthless persecutor. If Thomas was familiar with the latter negative tradition, he clearly preferred the former.

Thomas’ account places the date of the Hunnic/Persian conflict between 395 and Yazdgerd’s accession in 399. Another event narrows the range of dates further. Eutropius, the influential eunuch advisor to the Eastern Emperor Arcadius, personally led an army to defeat a Hunnic attack in Armenia, an event probably best dated to 398. Maenchen-Helfen takes the date as 397,²⁵ which is an arguable possibility based on the vague wording of our source, but Liebeschuetz places the war convincingly in the Eastern Roman political context of 398.²⁶ The Western Roman poet Claudian is the only source for the war and his mentions of it (*In Eutropium* 1.241-258; 2, preface 55-56; 2.114-115) are opaque and imbedded in attacks on the Eastern Roman eunuch Eutropius, whom Claudian hated. It is clear, though, that Claudian is trying to minimize a significant Eastern Roman victory over the Huns. It seems unlikely, therefore, that this war in 398 took place in the same year as the Hunnic attack on Persia, as both wars were Hunnic defeats. Either the Huns would have had to go from a defeat at the hands of the Romans to attack the other major power in the area, or to go from having lost all their war booty to the Persians to launch a campaign against the powerful Romans. Neither seems a likely scenario. The Hunnic attack on Persia would thus have to be earlier in 396 or 397.

If one cannot decisively eliminate the possibility of 397, there is a text that gives a reason to prefer 396, Cyrillona’s Syriac poem, “On the Scourges.” The poem, written for a Feast of All Saints observance in the Spring of 396, describes a series of hardships including drought, locusts and earthquakes, but notably including attacks by the Huns. Little can be said for certain about the author. His name (sometimes written “Cyrillonas”) is a scholarly guess based on a garbled manuscript reading, and his location cannot be pinned

23- Payne 2015: 13, 44, 99; Daryaei 2008: 58-60.

24- Payne 2015: 25-26; 44-49.

25- Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 56-57.

26- Liebeschuetz 1991: 99; cf. also Albert 1979; Braund 1994: 266-267.

down more specifically than somewhere “in Syria or Northern Mesopotamia”.²⁷ Carl W. Griffin’s new edition and commentary of the text offers the following translation of lines 260-303:

The North is in distress/ and full of wars,
and if you turn away, O Lord,/ again they shall lay waste to me.
If the Huns/ conquer me, O Lord,
then why take refuge/ with the martyrs?
If their swords/ lay waste to my sons,
then why hold fast/ to your great cross?
If you hand my cities/ over to them,
where is the glory/ of your holy church?
Not yet a year/ has passed/
since they came out to lay waste to me/
and take captive my children,
and see now/ a second time/
they have assaulted our country/ to vanquish it.
O Lord, do not deliver/ the lambs to leopards/
and the sheep/ to filthy wolves!
May the hand of the wicked/ not rule/
over a kingdom/ that honors you!
May kings who fear/ your kingdom/
not be trodden down/ by infidels—/
may those rather be trodden/ under the feet of the kings who tread/
the gates of your church!
Stay your chastisement,/ for such is our communion with you/
that if I am stricken,/ you have wounded yourself.²⁸

The poem refers back to the major Hunnic attack of 395 the previous year. By itself, the sentence “now a second time they have assaulted our country to vanquish it” would imply an ongoing second attack at the time of the poem’s performance in 396. Both the translator Griffin²⁹ himself and Maenchen-Helfen³⁰ stress the absence of any evidence of a Hunnic attack on the Roman East in 396, in contrast to the abundantly documented attack of the previous year. If there was a Hunnic attack on Roman territory at all in 396, it must have been quite minor. It might be better to see the reference to a current attack as part of the author’s overall rhetorical strategy in the poem to present various categories of “scourges” as immediately relevant. Elsewhere in the poem Cyrillona presents droughts, past attacks by locusts and even a retelling of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel by switching at times into the first-person present tense, as if he was personally and currently experiencing the events.

27- Griffin 2011: 1-78; quote from 76.

28- Griffin 2011: 500-502.

29- Griffin 2011: 66-68.

30- Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 56-57.

The overall argument of Cyrillona's passage about the Huns looks forward to potential future damage from the Huns, not an attack that has already occurred. Directing his rhetoric at God, the poet argues that it is in God's own interest to prevent the Huns from devastating Christian (Roman) territory, as any such victory by non-believers would discredit God's church. That danger, though, would occur "if you turn away, O Lord," "if the Huns conquer me, O Lord," "if their swords lay waste to my sons," and "if you hand my cities over to them," all conditional expressions about possible future events, not something that has already happened. Griffin comments, "Context makes clear that a second Hunnic invasion has not yet touched his own land, but is regarded as a serious threat."³¹

Since Cyrillona presents the danger as a future potential from a vantage point of a year after the attack of 395, it seems reasonable to conclude that the poet had some basis for a fear of a second major attack, and that he had heard some report or rumor of Hunnic activity consistent with the Huns preparing for a new major strike. If, though, that strike did not involve Roman territory, or did so only to such a minor degree as not to interest the many authors who mention the attack of 395, then where did the major strike that the poet fears fall? The timing would be consistent with the Hunnic attack on Persia.

Priscus' above-quoted account of the Hunnic/Persian conflict sets two conditions for Roman behavior at the time. One, the Huns were afraid of the possibility of Roman intervention against them, suggesting the Romans and Persians were on sufficiently good terms that the Romans would not prefer to help the Huns against them. Two, Priscus portrays the Hunnic fear of Roman intervention as being answered by Roman preoccupation with another conflict that prevented any such action. The year 396 would fit both of these conditions. In that year there was no active conflict between the Eastern Romans, ruled by Arcadius (395-408), and the Persians, ruled by Wahrām IV (388-399). The recent division of Armenia into two zones dominated by the Romans and Persians respectively had resolved a major point of dispute. This most likely took place at the end of the reign of Šābūhr III (383-388) in 387.³² The Eastern Roman Emperor at the time was Theodosius I (379-395). Theodosius later threatened the stability of this agreement by making some efforts to intervene in Armenia in the early 390s, but Wahrām had resolved these issues and effectively restored the original agreement before Theodosius' death in early 395.³³

In 396, the Romans had a serious grievance against the Huns because of the successful Hunnic attack on Roman territory in 395. Moreover, the military situation had changed. The Eastern Roman army that the previous emperor Theodosius had taken into the Western Roman Empire to fight the usurper Eugenius in 394 had remained in the West through the time of the Hunnic attack in July, 395. It had, however, returned to Constantinople in November of 395.³⁴ So, the Eastern Romans now had an army with which they could battle the Huns, as indeed they would prove later in the aforementioned victory of Eutropius over the Huns in 398. The good relations between Rome and Persia only complicated the situation for the Huns. If they wished to attack Persia, they faced the possibility that the Romans, viewing Persia as a less serious threat than the Huns at that moment, might intervene against them or even try to pin Hunnic forces between the Roman and Persian armies. An attack on Persia would only be possible if the Eastern Romans were otherwise distracted.

31- Griffin 2011: 74.

32- Greatrex 2000; Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 28-30.

33- Greatrex 2000; Klima 2016; section 5.C of Chaumont 2011.

34- Liebeschuetz 1991: 92.

In 396, the distraction for the Eastern Empire came in the form of a two-prong threat. Alaric and his Visigoths had left the territory that the emperor Theodosius had earlier given them in Roman Moesia and had been plundering in Eastern Roman territory since 395. Meanwhile, the Western Roman Empire's military commander Stilicho was using the excuse of fighting Alaric to penetrate Eastern Roman territory with his army with possible designs of asserting Western Roman control over the Eastern Emperor. The Eastern Romans would, in effect, kill two birds with one stone by coopting Alaric and his forces. They appointed Alaric with a Roman military command and used his forces to block incursions by Stilicho's Western Romans, who were ravaging Greece in 396. As the Eastern Romans had no control over the result of the war they engineered between Alaric and Stilicho, and little control over Alaric in practice anyway, it was prudent to keep the main Eastern Roman army near the capital in 396.³⁵ The option of intervening in a war between the Huns and Persians that did not directly involve the Romans would not have been tenable under the circumstances. Roman retaliation against the Huns could wait for another day (in 398, as it happened).

Thus, in favor of the date of the Hunnic attack on Persia being in 396, one could say:

- 1) The timing is consistent with the *Chronicle of 640*'s evidence that the attack was after the Huns returned home from their 395 attack on the Romans and before the accession of Yazdgerd I in 399.
- 2) The timing fits the implication of Priscus' story that the war took place at a moment of good relations between Persia and the Eastern Romans.
- 3) The timing agrees with Priscus' statement that the Romans were distracted by another conflict, in this case involving Alaric and Stilicho.
- 4) The timing addresses better than alternate chronologies the objection of Blockley that Priscus' wording shows the event was not widely known. A date of 396 would make it an event over fifty years before the time Priscus portrays that also did not directly involve Roman forces or territory.
- 5) The timing is consistent with the war being prior to the Roman victory over the Huns in 398.
- 6) The timing is consistent with Cyrillona's expectation of an imminent and major Hunnic action in 396 (when none is known involving Roman territory).

One cannot absolutely eliminate the possibility of the year 397, but, on the available evidence, 396 is the date most consistent with our sources.

Finally, one could note the oddity that an article such as this is necessary to establish the date of the Hunnic/Persian conflict, and what that shows about the limits of our sources. The Persian victory over the Huns, successfully driving them out of Persian territory, and recovering both booty and prisoners, must have been a major event for the Sasanian King Wahrām IV, perhaps the biggest success of a rocky reign that ended with Wahrām's eventual assassination. There is no Persian version of the event though, or depiction in Persian art, or even a record of it in the later Arabic Muslim historical tradition that looks back to Sasanian times. We know it only from Priscus and Thomas.

As noted, Priscus' motive for including it seems to be to set up a contrast between the exaggerated rhetoric of Attila's invincibility in the 440s and the later failure of the Hunnic king to live up to his

35- Burns 1994: 148-182, especially 154-159.

reputation. Thomas says he is drawing on Christian accounts of Yazdgerd's reign. Why, though, did he include the story at all when he does not discuss internal affairs in Persia often and mentions the Huns so rarely that the entire reign of Attila is absent from his chronicle? The answer may be found in the echoes the stories of the Hunnic attacks on the Romans and Persians had with contemporary events. Thomas was writing in 640. Within recent decades, the Persians—not the Huns—had penetrated deep into Eastern Roman territory. Xusrō II's army "devastated many cities and carried away many captives," but, after this initial success, they had ultimately been repelled by the forces of the Emperor Heraclius. Like the Huns, Heraclius would himself then penetrate into Persia. Heraclius "laid waste to the region and carried away many captives." Unlike the Huns, though, Heraclius was not forced to give his captives back, and Thomas portrays Heraclius building a church to celebrate peace instead.³⁶

In 640, the Arab Muslim forces of Caliph Umar were overrunning both the Eastern Roman provinces and Persian territory. Palmer notes that Thomas strongly disapproved of Heraclius' theological position in regard to Christology, and so he was no cheerleader for the emperor.³⁷ Still, he had no religious grounds to prefer an invasion by the Muslims either, and the war was still going on. In 640, the Muslim Arabs had already captured Thomas' homeland in East Roman Mesopotamia and were invading Egypt, but the stronghold of Alexandria had not fallen. Heraclius had a strong record of past victories in the face of initial adversity.³⁸ So, *The Chronicle of 640* may have told the story of the Hunnic attack on Persia to set up a particular reading of Heraclius' career. In telling his story of Heraclius, with its verbal echoes of his earlier stories of the Huns carrying off captives, Thomas shows how Heraclius had beaten the Persians in a way that even the Huns failed to do. Indeed, Thomas showed that Heraclius could play the role of the Persians of 396, when Persians were playing the role of the defeated Huns. One could then hope for Heraclius to have a similar performance against the Arabs. Even the somewhat incongruous portrait of Yazdgerd I as the ideal Christian may play into the metaphor of Heraclius playing the role of the Persians of the 390s. That is, Thomas was expressing the hope that the emperor, who was still the defender of the empire at the time of authorship but also in Thomas' view a heretic, might adopt the best qualities of the Persian kings, combining Wahrām IV's military prowess against the Hunnic invaders and Yazdgerd's (alleged) Christian qualities. To set up the metaphor, though, Thomas had to tell the story of the Hunnic wars of the 390s at what might, in such a short chronicle, otherwise seem to be inordinate length.

As for the Huns, even if a drought contributed to their initial motives as Priscus says, one could see their actions as a short-lived burst of military adventurism. They followed a highly successful attack on the Romans in 395, with a much less successful incursion into Persia in 396, in which the Persians drove them away and reclaimed their booty. They followed that with an even less successful return to attack Roman Armenia in 398, which led to an outright defeat. It seems reasonable to conclude that the diminishing returns of these expeditions brought about a change in policy, culminating in the diplomatic visit of Basich and Kursich to Rome that Priscus mentions. No Roman author, however, connects the dots in this manner as an overall pattern of activity. Indeed, with neither Priscus nor Thomas mentioning the war of 398, no one source mentions all three Hunnic attacks.

The question of whether there was further Hunnic and Persian interaction is also unanswerable, though

36- Thomas, 145-147.

37- Palmer 1992; 1993: 11-12.

38- Kaegi 2003.

intriguing. One could note that the Huns, even if they never again took an army to Persian territory, would have been close enough to trade with Persia. Priscus pointed out that Hunnic territory was not excessively far from Persian territory and he claimed that Hunnic proximity to Persia remained the same over a period from (at least) the 390s through Attila's reign. The statement suggests the possibility of much more Hunnic and Sasanian interaction at an economic or cultural level than we can now recover from our sources.

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