



BEYOND MADNESS: A RE-EVALUATION OF THE STRATEGIC RATIONALE BEHIND THE BYZANTINE-SASANIAN WAR OF 572*

Deliliğin Ötesinde: 572 Bizans-Sâsânî Savaşının Arkasındaki Stratejik Gerekçenin Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

Süha KONUK  [0000-0001-6589-8323](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6589-8323)

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Erzincan Binali Yıldırım Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Tarih Bölümü, Erzincan / TÜRKİYE
skonuk@erzincan.edu.tr • ROR: <https://ror.org/02h1e8605>

Rümeysa DEMİRKUTLU  [0009-0004-8443-1779](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8443-1779)

Uzman, Erzincan Binali Yıldırım Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Erzincan / TÜRKİYE
rumeysademirkutlu24@hotmail.com • ROR: <https://ror.org/02h1e8605>

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ABSTRACT

The reign of Emperor Justin II (565–578) is commonly overshadowed by that of Justinian I and is frequently portrayed in traditional historiography as an irrational and hubristic interlude, largely because of the war launched against the Sasanian Empire in 572. This article reconsiders that judgement by reassessing the strategic rationale behind Justin II’s decision and the factors that shaped the war’s trajectory. It argues that the outbreak of conflict cannot be reduced to personal ambition or diplomatic incompetence alone but must be situated within a geopolitical conjuncture that appeared to favour Byzantium: the unexpected diplomatic alignment with the Göktürk Khaganate on the Sasanians’ eastern frontier and the Armenian uprisings in the Caucasus, prompted by religious and administrative pressures under Sasanian rule. Within this context, Justin II pursued an ambitious “two-front pressure” strategy aimed at exploiting perceived Sasanian vulnerabilities.

The study further suggests that early setbacks stemmed less from an inherently flawed grand strategy than from operational fragilities, including logistical deficiencies and discord within the Byzantine command structure. A key contribution concerns the emperor’s mental deterioration. Rather than treating the fall of Dara in 573 as the sole trigger of a sudden breakdown, the comparative reading of Greek, Syriac, and Oriental sources indicates that signs of instability emerged earlier and progressively impaired decision-making at critical moments of the campaign. In conclusion, the study characterises the disaster of 572–574 not as a strategic miscalculation, but rather as a consequence of the emperor’s rapidly deteriorating mental health following the outbreak of war. Justin II’s legacy is thus repositioned: rather than representing the failure of an irrational ruler, it is recast as the tragic collapse of a rational strategy, brought about by an unforeseeable deterioration in governance.

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Keywords: Justin II, Byzantine-Sasanian Wars, Khosrow I, Turkish (Göktürk) Khaganate, Frontier Studies.

ÖZ

Bizans tarihinde İmparator II. Ioustinos'un (565-578) hükümdarlığı, genellikle selefi I. Ioustinianos'un gölgesinde kalmış ve 572 yılında Sâsânîlere karşı başlattığı savaş nedeniyle geleneksel tarih yazımında rasyonellikten uzak, kibirli bir dönem olarak nitelendirilmiştir. Ancak bu çalışma, II. Ioustinos'un savaş kararının ardındaki jeopolitik rasyonaliteyi ve stratejik planlamayı yeniden değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Mevcut literatürün aksine, imparatorun savaş ilanının salt bir kişisel hırs ürünü olmadığı; Sâsânîlerin doğu sınırında yükselen Göktürk Kağanlığı ile kurulan diplomatik ittifak ve Kafkasya'daki Ermeni isyanları gibi Bizans lehine gelişen uluslararası konjonktüre dayandığı ileri sürülmektedir. Çalışma, Ioustinos'un "iki cephe baskı" stratejisinin teorik olarak tutarlı bir askerî plan olduğunu, ancak bu stratejinin uygulama safhasında lojistik aksaklıklar ve komuta kademesindeki uyumsuzluklar nedeniyle sekteye uğradığını göstermektedir.

Araştırmanın en özgün bulgularından biri, imparatorun literatürde sıklıkla Dara'nın düşüşüne (573) bağlanan zihinsel çöküşünün, aslında savaşın daha erken evrelerinde başladığına dair verilerdir. Birincil Grek, Süryani ve Doğu kaynaklarının karşılaştırmalı analizi, imparatorun ruh halindeki bozulmanın stratejik karar alma mekanizmalarını savaşın kritik anlarında felç ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak çalışma, 572-574 felaketini bir strateji hatasından ziyade, savaş başladıktan sonra imparatorun hızla kötüleşen ruh sağlığının bir sonucu olarak tanımlamaktadır. Böylece II. Ioustinos'un mirası, irrasyonel bir hükümdarın başarısızlığı olarak değil; rasyonel bir stratejinin, idaredeki öngörülemeyen bozulmayla trajik bir şekilde çöküşü olarak yeniden konumlandırılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: II. Ioustinos, Bizans-Sâsânî Savaşları, I. Hüsrev, Göktürkler, Sınır Araştırmaları.

INTRODUCTION

After the Roman-Sasanian conflicts in Lazica and Transcaucasia and with the truce of 557 towards the end of Emperor Justinian's reign, a search for a comprehensive peace that would extend across the eastern frontier had begun.¹ To this end, Roman and Sasanian envoys came together in the border city of Dara and began a long negotiation. The Byzantine historian Menander, who was well-educated and had access to official records, reported all the details of this thirteen-point agreement that eventually came together in 562. The peace agreement detailed trade issues, relations with vassals, the security of the borders, and the protection of the Khazar gates.² As a result, peace between Romans and the Sasanians continued until the death of Emperor Justinian. However, this respite on the eastern frontier would only last for about ten years. On 14 November 565, after the death of the emperor Justinian, Justin II ascended the throne, intending to reverse the policies of his predecessor. Justin II, whose reign was overshadowed by the eventful reign of Justinian, is not well remembered by contemporary scholars and has attracted little academic attention from modern historians.³ The fact that he began to lose his mental stability in the last years of his reign and handed over the rulership to Empress Sophia and Caesar Tiberius may have contributed to this. But his reign covers a very interesting period of strategic but speculative foreign policy as the political and military dynamics began to shift and take on new dimensions.

¹ See Agathias, *The Histories*, trans. J. D. C. Frendo, De Gruyter, Berlin 1975, frag. IV. 30. 9, p. 134.

² For details of the treaty see Menander, *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, trans. R. C. Blockley, Francis Cairns, Liverpool 1985, frag. 6. 1, pp. 70-74; Geoffrey Greatrex – Samuel N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, Part II: AD 363-630*, Routledge, London and New York 2002, pp. 132-133. See also: Beate Dignas – Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 138-148.

³ The panegyric poems of Corippus on the early career of Justin II are of considerable importance. See Flavius Cresconius Corippus, *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, ed. Averil Cameron, London 1976; Corippe (Flavius Cresconius Corippus), *Éloge de l'Empereur Justin II*, ed. Serge Antes, Paris 1981. See also Averil Cameron, "Corippus' Poem on Justin II: A Terminus of Antique Art", *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, Serie III*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1975, pp. 129-165. It is also known that another, less voluminous eulogy survives through Dioscorus of Aphroditto: L. S. B. Mac Coull, "The Panegyric on Justin II by Dioscorus of Aphroditto", *Byzantion*, Vol. 54, 1984, pp. 575-585. In addition, Menander, Evagrius, Theophylact Simocatta, and John of Ephesus contain the most detailed records of the reign of Justin II. For modern studies of the period of Justin II in general, see Sihong Lin, "Justin under Justinian: The Rise of Emperor Justin II Revisited", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 75, 2021, pp. 121-142; Ernst Stein, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Reiches, vornehmlich unter den Kaisern Justinus II u. Tiberius Constantinus*, J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Stuttgart 1919; Harry N. Turtledove, *The Immediate Successors of Justinian: A Study of the Persian Problem and of Continuity and Change in Internal Secular Affairs in the Later Roman Empire during the Reigns of Justin II and Tiberius Constantine*, PhD thesis, California 1977; Peter Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam 500-700*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, pp. 226-232; Michael Whitby, "The Successors of Justinian", *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 14, Cambridge 2008, pp. 86-94.

Before Justin II provoked war with the Sasanians, there was a dispute between Rome and the Sasanians over the region of Suania. There was no clarity in the treaty of 562 on the status of this region which stretched from the eastern shore of the Black Sea to the Caucasus. The Romans claimed, based on the treaty, that since Lazica belonged to the Romans so did Suania, while the Sasanians insisted on putting forward new conditions if they were to withdraw.⁴ Theophanes of Byzantium records that Khosrow broke his promise and did not give Suania to the Romans. Menander, however, who offers the clearest and most detailed information about the negotiations on Suania, does not provide any records that indicate that the Suania issue reached any conclusion.⁵ The final meeting on the Suania issue was discussed with the Sasanian envoys who came to Justin's court. The embassy, headed by Mahbodh, also included a group representing the Lakhmid Arabs, led by Amr, who demanded that Justin continue to pay the tribute that the emperor Justinian had already been paying the Arabs.⁶ Justin was outraged by this request. Neither Mahbodh nor Amr got what they wanted from the Byzantine emperor.

1. Common Interest with the Turks

Meanwhile, there were other political changes happening in Asia. The Turkish Khaganate (or Göktürks), which had recently risen as a new power in Central Asia, united with the Sasanians against their common enemy, the Hephthalites. In 557, the Turkish Khaganate armies attacked from the north and east, and the Sasanians from the west and destroyed the Hephthalite state.⁷ Thus, the two states began to share a border. Istemi Yabgu (Sizabul/Σιζάβουλος) even married his daughter to the Sasanian Shāhān Shāh and established a kinship between the two rulers.⁸ As the Sasanians, who had been paying tribute to the Hephthalites, were now paying it to the Turkish Khaganate, not much had changed for them. However, Sasanian attempts to interfere with the silk trade of the Khaganate and the ill-treatment of the Khaganate delegations created motivation for the Khan to consider contacting Byzantium, which he knew was hostile to the Sasanians.

In early 569 (or perhaps late 568),⁹ Turkish Khaganate envoys sent by Istemi Yabgu arrived in Constantinople, led by the Sogdian Maniakh (Μανιάχ).¹⁰ According to Menander's records, the Turkish delegation complained about the conduct of the Sasanians and aimed to improve relations and establish friendly terms with the Romans. However, Justin wanted to satisfy his curiosity about some things first. For this reason, the emperor's initial questions to the Turkish delegation were not about the Sasanian problem, but about the fate of the Hephthalites, the Avars in the west, and the community to which this envoy belonged.¹¹ It seems that Justin was suspicious of the similarities between the Avars, who had recently invaded Byzantium's Balkan territories, and this new community he had just come to know, and was curious about the relationship between them. However, the agenda of the Turks was simply to gain the support of the Byzantine emperor against the Sasanians. In the end, according to Menander's detailed account, after the envoy completed the oath-taking ceremony, the Byzantine-Turkish alliance against the Sasanians was established.¹²

Following this official delegation, relations between the two states improved rapidly. Justin II successfully formed this new alliance to divert the attention of the Sasanians and redirect their focus

⁴ Harry Turtledove, "Justin II's Observance of Justinian's Persian Treaty of 562", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 76, 1983, p. 294.

⁵ Theophanes of Byzantium, *Fragmenta Historiorum Graecorum*, IV, ed. Karl Müller, Paris 1851, p. 270; Photius, *Bibliothèque I*, ed. R. Henry, Paris 1959, pp. 270-271; For the embassy negotiations on Suania: Menander, frag. 9.1-9.3, pp. 97-111. See also; Greatrex – Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, pp. 135-136.

⁶ Menander, frag. 9.3.29-123, pp. 106-110.

⁷ On Sasanian-Turkish Khaganate relations see Peter Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 37-40; René Grousset, *The Empire of Steppes*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey 1970, pp. 82-85; Lajos Ligeti, *Bilinmeyen İç Asya*, trans. Sadrettin Karatay, Milli Eğitim Basımevi, İstanbul 1970, pp. 59-63.

⁸ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, trans. C. E. Bosworth, The State University of New York Press, New York 1999, V, p. 160; Ahmet Taşağıl, *Gök-Türkler*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara 2012, p. 39.

⁹ According to Menander, this occurred early in the fourth year of Justin's reign. Menander, frag. 10.1, pp. 110-111.

¹⁰ The historian Menander began by describing how the Turkish Khaganate embassy led by Maniakh had been humiliated by the Sasanians on two previous occasions. See Menander, frag. 10.1.1-8, pp. 111-113.

¹¹ Menander, frag. 10.1, pp. 114-115. On the arrival of the Avars in Europe see: Theophanes of Byzantium, *Fragmenta Historiorum Graecorum*, IV, ed. Karl Müller, Paris 1851, p. 270; Peter B. Golden, "War and Warfare in the Pre-Chinggisid Western Steppes of Eurasia", *Warfare in Inner Asian History 500-1800*, ed. Nicola Di Cosmo, Brill, Leiden 2002, p. 112; Walter Pohl, *Die Awaren: Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa 567-822 n. Chr.*, C. H. Beck, Munich 1988, pp. 40-41. Concerning the relations of the Avars with Byzantium during the reign of Justin II see Georgios Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars 6th-9th Century AD: Political, Diplomatic and Cultural Relations*, Brill, Leiden 2019, pp. 13-19; pp. 25-37.

¹² 'As they were speaking, Maniakh and those with him raised their hands on high and swore upon their greatest oath that they were saying these things with honest intent. In addition, they called down curses upon themselves, even upon Sizabul and upon their whole race, if their claims were false and could not be fulfilled. In this way, the Turkish people became friends of the Romans and established these relations with our state.' Menander, frag. 10.1, pp. 116-117.

eastward. Later, the Byzantines sent their own delegation of twenty people led by Zemarchus of Cilicia to the country of Istemi Yabgu to meet with the Khan himself. It is also known that they even participated in an expedition organized by the Turks against the Sasanians. According to Menander, during this campaign, when the Khaganate army reached the city of Talas, an unplanned Turkish Khaganate–Roman–Sasanian triple summit took place in the presence of Istemi Yabgu with the arrival of Sasanian envoys. Menander describes some of the noteworthy interactions during this meeting:

«When they arrived, Sizabul (Istemi Yabgu) treated the Romans with greater esteem and had them recline on the more honourable couch. Moreover, he made many complaints against the Persians, saying that he had suffered wrongs at their hands and on this account was going to war against them. While Sizabul was vehemently making his accusations, the Persian envoy ignored the custom of silence which prevailed amongst them at their feasts and began rapidly to argue back, bravely refuting Sizabul's charges, and those present were astounded at the measure of his rage, since he abandoned custom and used many intemperate expressions. Under these circumstances they departed, and Sizabul prepared his attack on Persia.»¹³

As Istemi Yabgu favoured the Byzantines and insulted the Sasanian envoys, the Sasanians must have realized for the first time the seriousness of this newly formed alliance against them. However, the Sasanians did not directly respond to these developments because peace with the Romans was still in progress. In order to indirectly harm the Romans, the Sasanian king Khosrow chose to attack their allies and organized a campaign against the Christian Himyarites, who were based in Yemen, in the south of the Arabian Peninsula. According to the records of Procopius, the alliance between the Himyarites and Rome was established during the reign of Emperor Justinian, and the defence agreement made at that time attracted the attention of the Sasanians.¹⁴ During this expedition, the Himyarite king was captured and his cities were plundered.¹⁵ For the first time since the peace agreement of 562, the Romans and the Sasanians began to position themselves against each other and were on the eve of war.

2. Revolt on the Frontier: A Unique Opportunity

Another event that strengthened Emperor Justin's hand against the Sasanians, in addition to the distant ally he had gained, was the revolt of the Armenians living in Persarmenia. Khosrow also began to put pressure on the Christian Armenians in Persarmenia, whom he saw as natural allies of the Romans. The Sasanians implemented a policy of forcing the Armenians to worship fire. While not unusual, the enforcement of this oppressive policy seems to have increased from 570 onwards. Eventually, the Armenians could not tolerate this religious oppression and revolted under the leadership of Vardan II Mamikonean. The rebellion began with the murder of the Sasanian marzban Suren.

«He waited for a suitable occasion and struck Surēn marzpan with a sword and stretched him out dead on the ground, in the forty-first year of the reign of Khosrow, which is the seventh year of the reign of Justin, in the 22 areg [day] of the month, which is February a Tuesday. And the Armenian princes all rebelled against the Persians; they gave assistance to the Greek [forces], resisting with them in a violent campaign. Then Vardan took his family, and the other nobles took flight and escaped to the country of the Greeks, to the royal city of Constantinople.»¹⁶

The Armenian historian Stephen of Taron (or Stepanos Taronetsi) recorded that the rebellion started first and then Vardan took refuge in Byzantium, but Evagrius has a different record. In his words, just before the rebellion started, Armenians contacted Justin and killed the Sasanian *marzban* with his support:

«While this man was in his first year of directing the bishopric, men came from what of old was referred to as Great Armenia, but subsequently Persarmenia - this was formerly subject to the Romans, but when Philip the successor of Gordian betrayed it to Sapor, what was called Lesser Armenia was controlled by the Romans but all the rest by the Persians. They professed Christianity and, since they suffered ill-treatment from the Persians, and particularly as concerned their own belief, they secretly sent an embassy to Justin to beg to become subjects of the Romans, so that they might without fear perform their honours to God, with nobody being an impediment to them. After Justin admitted them, and certain

¹³ Menander, frag. 10.3, pp. 122-123; On Zemarchus and the Byzantine embassy delegation see Menander, frag. 10.2, pp. 116-117; frag. 10.5, pp. 126-127.

¹⁴ Procopius, *History of the Wars*, trans. H. B. Dewing, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1914, II. 3. 40-42, pp. 280-283. See also Geoffrey Greatrex, *Procopius of Caesarea: The Persian Wars, A Historical Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022, p. 401.

¹⁵ Theophanes of Byzantium, pp. 270-271.

¹⁶ Stephen of Taron, *The Universal History of Step'anos Tarōnec'i*, trans. Tim Greenwood, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, frag. II. 2, (691), p. 152. See also: Sebeos, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, trans. R. W. Thomson, eds. and commentary J. Howard-Johnston – Tim Greenwood, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 1999, VIII, (67), pp. 5-6.

matters had been agreed in letters by the emperor and confirmed by solemn oaths, the Armenians murdered their rulers and *en masse* attached themselves to the Roman realm, together with their neighbours, both kinsmen and those of a different race, with whom they were allied; Vardanes was pre-eminent among them in birth and reputation and military experience.»¹⁷

The inconsistency between the sources brings two questions to mind: Was the Armenian rebellion manufactured by Byzantium, or did Justin merely intend to use the simmering discord and subsequent revolt for his own purposes? In this case, the second answer appears more consistent because Sasanian persecution of the Armenians and discontent among people had been a persistent occurrence since the 540s.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the fact that Khosrow increased this repressive policy shortly after the Sasanian envoys witnessed the Göktürk-Byzantine alliance in the presence of Istemi Yabgu cannot be a coincidence. Eventually, this escalation resulted in the murder of the marzban in February 572 and caused an uprising of the Armenians together with other Caucasian communities.¹⁹ As a result, Justin's hand was strengthened.

After the revolt flared up in Persarmenia, a Sasanian embassy led by Sebokht was sent to Constantinople in 572. Their mission was to receive the third instalment of the tribute, which the Romans had previously paid in two instalments of seven years and three years, and to make sure that the Romans were still loyal to the peace agreement. It is quite likely, however, that they were concerned whether the Romans, who had directly supported the rebellion, would make this payment.²⁰ Menander provides a detailed recording of the interview.²¹ The humiliating situation for the envoy during the first meeting seems to have aroused the confidence of Justin, who thought that he had the Sasanians cornered by the Turks from the east and the Armenians from the west. The details recorded here by Menander suggest that Justin first tried to draw out an explanation from the Sasanian embassy by pretending to have little knowledge of the events in Persarmenia and that the envoy in turn attempted to conceal the extent of the rebellion. After Justin's assurance that he would protect the Christians, the anxious efforts of the ambassador to persuade Justin not to break the peace suddenly gave the emperor the impression that the Sasanians were afraid of war and unprepared. Under these circumstances, the psychological advantage had passed to Byzantium. The Sasanian envoy, who encountered a very confident emperor in Constantinople, left the capital under these conditions and without receiving the tribute they had come to receive. Soon afterward, Justin officially launched his long-intended war.²² After this point, the accounts of Evagrius and John of Ephesus are important for understanding the dynamics of the war, along with notable quotations from Theophylact Simocatta (based on John of Epiphania).

3. War in the Shadow of Illness

In autumn 572, Emperor Justin sent Marcian, his *magister militum per Orientem*, to the east. After this point, according to the parallel accounts of Theophylact Simocatta and John of Epiphania, Marcian first came to Osroene and with a force of three thousand men entered and plundered Arzanene, which had been in Sasanian hands since the treaty of 363. After capturing many prisoners and booty, they quickly withdrew.²³ This was the first message that the war had begun, but the Romans did not launch another attack because

¹⁷ Evagrius, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, trans. Michael Whitby, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2000, V. 7, pp. 263-264.

¹⁸ The *magister militum per Orientem* Justinian, who was in Theodosiopolis at the time, may have supported the start of the revolt. See Greatrex – Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, p. 138; p. 280 n.19.

¹⁹ After Vardan had brought the marzban's head to the general Justinian in Theodosiopolis, he fled to Constantinople. John of Ephesus, *The Third Part of the Ecclesiastical History of John of Ephesus*, trans. R. Payne Smith, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1860, II. 21, pp. 124-125; Ernst Stein, *Studien zur Geschichte des byzantinischen Reiches*, p. 24. On the Iberians: Theophanes of Byzantium, p. 271.

²⁰ According to Blockley, if Sebokht was sent immediately after the marzban's murder, he must have arrived in Constantinople in early summer. See Menander, *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, p. 271, n. 181. See also Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988, p. 252.

²¹ Menander, frag. 16.1. According to Bleckmann, in this passage Menander indirectly praises Maurice, whom he considers humble, by emphasising Justin's arrogance and self-confidence. See Bruno Bleckmann, *Die letzte Generation der griechischen Geschichtsschreiber*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 2021, pp. 47-48.

²² The unconventional war had already begun. After the murder of the Sasanian marzban, the Armenians took control of Dvin. Although they lost control again shortly afterwards, in 572 the Armenians, united with the Romans, under the command of the general Justinian, managed to expel the Sasanians from the city once again, causing great damage to the city. According to Sebeos, even the church of St Gregory, which the Sasanians had long used as a warehouse, was burned by the Romans during the siege. In the final battle outside the city, the Sasanian army was decisively defeated and Mihran fled. See Sebeos, VIII, 68, p. 6. Sebeos does not give any information after this point about the war in the south. See also Greatrex – Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, pp. 149-150.

²³ Theophylact Simocatta, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, trans. Michael Whitby, Mary Whitby, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1986, III, 3. 10.2-3, p. 87. John of Epiphania, *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, ed. Karl Müller, Paris 1851, IV p. 274. Located north of the Tigris River and east of the Garzan (Nikephorion) River, the main city of the Arzanene region is Chlomarion, and the region is noted for its wealth in contemporary records. See Ps. Zachariah Rhetor, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor*, ed. Geoffrey Greatrex, trans. Robert R. Phenix – Cornelia B. Horn, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2011, IX, (97), pp. 325-326.

of the incoming winter. In the spring, when the Roman army stationed at Dara under Marcian marched towards Nisibis, Khosrow initiated his first response. The Romans defeated the Sasanians in the battle at Sargathon, which was located between Dara and Nisibis. Marcian then turned south and besieged Thebetha (Thebothon/Tell Taban), southwest of Nisibis. After a siege of about ten days with no results, the siege was lifted and the army returned to Dara on 8 April 573 to prepare for the next campaign.²⁴ Marcian's intention in taking the fortress of Thebetha before besieging Nisibis must have been to establish an early warning system against a possible Sasanian attack during the siege and to cut the road to Nisibis. Although this initial plan failed, Marcian was determined to lay siege to Nisibis. A successful victory here would mean prestige in the eyes of both the army and Justin. Therefore, the Roman army stationed in Dara eventually marched in the spring of 573 to besiege Nisibis, which was about a day's journey away. John of Ephesus, who does not give any information about the battle of Sargathon and the siege of Thebetha, gives details about this siege. On the second Sunday after Easter, after surrounding the city, Marcian and his troops launched an attack on Nisibis.

At this point, the sources deviate about the details of the siege of Nisibis. There are partial differences between the accounts of Evagrius, Theophylact Simocatta, and John of Ephesus. According to John of Ephesus, the Romans, having attacked the walls of the city with various siege engines, were preparing to make a final and decisive attack, while the Sasanian garrison and the inhabitants inside were on alert and began to fear that the city would fall. But just then Acacius Archelaus, sent by the emperor Justin, came to the field to dismiss the general Marcian.

«And the illustrious Marcian, who had been assiduously making his preparations, and was upon the point of capturing Nisibis, on hearing the orders, said to Acacius, "You see how great labour we have taken for the purpose of capturing this city; and now, wait a little, and grant us a delay of two days only, and then do what you have been commanded; for the king has a right that what he orders should be done." But he [Archelaus] was angry with him, and insulted him, and in hot wrath laid hands upon him in the presence of all his officers, and pulled him about, and threw him down, and cut his girdle, scoffing at him, and even, as was said, he struck him on the cheek.»²⁵

According to John of Ephesus' account, Marcian's attempt to get Archelaus to briefly postpone the order was unsuccessful, and the ill-treatment of the general in front of his army was the only reason for the failure of the siege of Nisibis. The Roman troops, angered and outraged by the way their general was treated, protested the situation, lowered their battle standards and banners, abandoned the siege, and began a disorganized and chaotic retreat. The Sasanian garrison, observing what was happening from the walls of Nisibis, took advantage of the situation by attacking a retreating infantry division and nearly destroyed them. Thus, the siege of Nisibis ended hastily and abruptly. In his narrative, John of Ephesus praises Marcian and essentially blames the emperor Justin for the failure of the siege. Evagrius and Theophylact Simocatta, who give relatively little information about the siege, wrote an account partly parallel to John of Ephesus. But according to Evagrius, Marcian's siege of Nisibis was not the flawless operation that John of Ephesus describes. In his account, Emperor Justin had sent Marcian and his army in such an unprepared manner that neither the number of troops nor their weapons and logistical supplies were sufficient. Seeing Marcian approach Nisibis in this condition, the enemy troops in the Sasanian garrison were said to have mocked the Romans and did not even feel the need to close the city gates.²⁶ Theophylact Simocatta gives no details of the siege and, in line with the other two authors, blames Acacius and thus Justin throughout his summary.²⁷ The most important point that separates the account given by Evagrius from the other sources is that he recorded Justin's ignoring of intelligence information from the frontier. Specifically, the bishop of Nisibis had informed Gregory, the bishop of Theopolis (Antioch), of everything that occurred on the other side of the frontier and that Khosrow was advancing on them.²⁸ Although Gregory passed on this information to

²⁴ John of Epiphania, *Fragmenta*, p. 274; Theophylact Simocatta, *The History*, III. 3. 10.4, p. 87. See also Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian*, p. 256.

²⁵ John of Ephesus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 2, p. 368.

²⁶ Evagrius writes: 'As general of the East he sent out Marcian, who was related to him [Justin], giving him neither an army fit for battle nor any other equipment for war. He reached Mesopotamia, for the manifest peril and ruination of everything, trailing after him a very few soldiers, and those unarmed, having also some farm workers and herdsmen who had been drawn from the tax-payers. And so he had a few engagements against the Persians near Nisibis, since the Persians were not yet prepared either. Gaining the upper hand he invested the city, though the Persians did not judge it necessary to shut the gates, but rather hurled extremely shameful insults at the Roman army.' Evagrius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, V, 8, p. 265.

²⁷ Theophylact Simocatta, *The History*, III. 11.1, p. 88.

²⁸ Paul, bishop of Nisibis, came to Constantinople in 562, where he participated in theological debates and made several contacts. His friendship with Gregory, bishop of Antiochia, may also have originated here. See A. Doug Lee, "Evagrius, Paul of Nisibis and the Problem of Loyalties in mid-sixth Century", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 1993, pp. 576-577. According to a record in the Chronicle of 1234, in 572 the Sasanian marzban expelled the Christians from the city in preparation for a siege. See *Chronicon Annum Anonymum ad. Annum Christi 1234 pertinentes*, ed. J. B. Chabot, Louvain 1937, p. 159.

the capital as quickly as possible, Justin did not pay any attention to this intelligence and did not take any measures, and on top of that, he unreasonably dismissed Marcian, who was about to capture the city.²⁹

The Sasanian response to Rome came from two directions in mid-573. Khosrow, having recovered from the initial shock, must have prepared during the winter to respond to the Roman attack on Arzanene months before and to defend against a siege of Nisibis.³⁰ There are different records of Khosrow's counterattack, and the chronology of the campaign of his general Adarmahan, whom he sent to sack the cities of Syria along the Euphrates, is not clear.³¹ However, according to the records of John of Ephesus and Evagrius, when Khosrow besieged Dara and the Romans did not respond, he was encouraged by this and ordered Adarmahan to advance on the Roman cities in Syria.³² Putting chronological differences aside, what is certain is that Adarmahan's forces advanced through the Roman territory in Syria without encountering any resistance and obtained considerable spoils. Evagrius also records that Adarmahan advanced as far as Antioch and even sacked the region around its outskirts.³³ John of Ephesus, on the other hand, recorded the following words by comparing it with previous events from the past, to emphasize the potential tragedy of trusting one's enemy.

«Now, upon a previous occasion, the Persian king, after capturing Antioch [referring to the 540's event] had once before laid siege to Apamea, and pressed it so hard, that finally it capitulated; and the king in person entered the walls, and was a spectator of an equestrian entertainment in the Hippodrome, and because he then destroyed none of the buildings, nor set fire to anything, they now felt equal certainty that the Marzban on the present occasion would do them no harm. In this confidence, therefore the princes of the city and the bishop went out to meet him and carried him a dress of honour. And he treacherously said to them, 'inasmuch as your city is now ours, open unto me the gates, that I may enter in and inspect it'. And they trusting in him, and not expecting that he would do them any injury, opened the gates and admitted him within the walls. But no sooner had he entered than he seized the gates and began to lay hands on and bind men and women and spoil the city. And they brought out the prey, and all the people of the city, and put them outside the walls, and utterly spoiled Apamea, which was full of the accumulated wealth of many years, and rich beyond most of the cities of the east; and when they had thus placed all the population, and the bishop with them, and all the booty outside the walls, they set fire to it, and burnt the whole of it from one end to the other. Having thus completed their work of destruction, they took with them their captives and the spoil both of Apamea and the other towns, and returned to the king, who was still sitting before Dara. And the captives were counted in the king's presence, and their number was two hundred and ninety-two thousand; and they were divided among the troops and taken into the Persian territories.»³⁴

Having thus weakened the Roman control of Syria, Adarmahan's forces joined Khosrow's main army, which was then blockading the Roman retreat to Dara and besieging the city itself. According to John of Ephesus, Adarmahan was able to easily plunder through Syrian territory without encountering any resistance because the leader of the Ghassanids, al-Mundhir, who was an ally of the Romans in the region, remained neutral in the war. The Christian Ghassanid Arabs had long been vassals of the Romans in the region and were rivals of the Lakhmid Arabs. Since the Lakhmids were subject to the Sasanians, the Roman-Sasanian struggle in the region was often fought through these two tribes acting as proxies. According to the detailed account of John of Ephesus, when the Ghassanid leader al-Mundhir demanded gold from Justin in order to continue his struggle against the Lakhmids and thus the Sasanians, Justin was enraged by this demand and prepared a deceptive plan against them. He sent two letters, one to Marcian and one to al-Mundhir. The letter sent to al-Mundhir asked him to meet with Marcian. In the letter to Marcian, Marcian was told that al-Mundhir was ordered into a trap and that Marcian was to take his head. But the messengers confused the two letters and delivered them to the wrong people. Learning that his reward for his services

²⁹ Evagrius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, V, 9, p. 268.

³⁰ See Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian*, p. 257; Greatrex – Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, pp. 146-147.

³¹ Theophylact Simocatta, *The History*, III. 10.8-9, p. 88.

³² John of Ephesus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 6, p. 385. Whitby also pointed out that the chronology of Evagrius and John of Ephesus is correct. See Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian*, p. 257.

³³ Evagrius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, V. 9, p. 266.

³⁴ John of Ephesus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 6, pp. 385-386. This policy of relocation, which the Sasanians had practiced in the past, was apparently also applied during the reign of Justin II. In 502, after the siege of Amida, it is known that the qualified survivors were taken to Iran and settled in Veh-az-Amid-Kavadh (Arradjan). See Ps. Zachariah Rhetor, *The Chronicle*, VII, (30), p. 242. Geoffrey Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War 502-532*, Francis Cairns, Leeds 1998, p. 93; Michael Morony, "Population Transfers Between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire", in *La Persia e Bisanzio, Atti dei Convegni Lincei 201*, Rome 14-18 October 2002, ed. Antonio Carile, Rome 2004, pp. 161-179. Likewise, after the capture of Antiochia in 540, according to Procopius, a new city was built a day's journey from Ctesiphon, called Weh Antioch Khosrow, in which the captives captured from Antiochia were settled, and he took care to ensure that they lived in prosperity to prevent their return. See Procopius, *Wars*, II. 14, 1-7, pp. 380-383. Procopius, *Wars*, II. 9. 16, pp. 340-341. John of Ephesus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 6, p. 387. Süha Konuk, *Roma-Sâsânî Mücadelesinde Yukarı Dicle Havzasının Tarihi Coğrafyası*, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, Ankara 2002, pp. 151-155.

to Rome was to be killed, al-Mundhir immediately rallied his army and retreated into the desert, paving the way for the Sasanians and Lakhmids to advance freely into Syria.³⁵ Al-Mundhir's anger at the Romans and the efforts of the Romans to persuade him to return continued for two or three years. After many attempts, al-Mundhir finally met with the patrician Justinian and eventually agreed to cooperate with the Romans again. Shortly afterward he organized a successful campaign against the Lakhmids in Hirah.³⁶

The most detailed account of the siege of Dara, which was already in progress during Adarmahan's Syrian campaign, is recorded by John of Ephesus. Other Syriac chronicles in the following centuries, such as the *Chronicle of 1234* and Michael the Syrian, seem to follow his basic account with a few nuances.

«... for no sooner had the Persian king heard of Marcian's fall, and the breaking up of the armies before Nisibis, than he determined to take full advantage of the mismanagement of his enemies, and assembling a powerful force, arrived rapidly at that town, and found the engines and machines which Marcian had erected still standing before it. And with these he forthwith commenced the siege of Dara, having removed thither all Marcian's engines of war, and applied them to his own use, for which purpose he had brought all kinds of artificers with him. (...) He further set up against the city all the engines which Marcian had constructed against Nisibis, and invested it, and used every device of war for its capture during a period of six months.»³⁷

According to John of Ephesus, the Byzantine generals who undertook the defence of the city were John, son of Timus Esthartus, Sergius, son of Shaphnai, and lower-ranking commanders. However, Sergius was killed by an arrow during the first phase of the battle. After the two wooden siege towers built by the Sasanians were set on fire by the Romans and destroyed, Khosrow decided to set up his tent at the foot of the mountain that surrounded the city from the north and to lead the siege from there. The strength of the fortifications to the south of the city and the resistance of the Romans drove Khosrow to the north, where the defences were weaker.³⁸ He must have realized that the weakest point of the city wall was where the Cordis stream entered the city from the north as it had been repaired several times due to floods. In addition, from this high position in the north, everything that happened in the city could be easily observed. Nevertheless, as John of Ephesus points out, the main reason for the fall of the city seems to have been the weakening resistance of the Romans after the prolonged siege and the autumn cold, which in this context is similar to the siege of Amida in 502. Furthermore, John of Ephesus's anecdote about the reason for the massacres that followed the fall of Dara is noteworthy. Accordingly, the Sasanian king, despairing for a moment, sent a message to the city and offered to lift the siege in return for a ransom (five talents). However, Cometes, a man known for his wealth, whom the people of the city chose to negotiate with Khosrow, hid Khosrow's offer from the people of the city in order to not compromise his wealth. Eventually, after the fall of Dara and the subsequent massacre, Khosrow summoned the inhabitants of the city and asked them why they had not paid the ransom since it was less than one percent of the spoils he had now captured. Immediately the surviving citizens of the city realized that Cometes had given them no such information. Khosrow initially wanted Cometes to be killed but then ordered only his eyes to be removed.³⁹ Both the *Chronicle of 1234* and the account given by John of Ephesus narrate the fierce fighting that took place during the capture of each part of the city by the Sasanians. According to the *Chronicle of 1234*, 98,000 people died during the siege, excluding those taken prisoner.⁴⁰ Considering the borders of the city walls, such a large population is not possible; however, it is still an important indicator for understanding the dense population of the city and the intensity of the conflict.⁴¹

³⁵ John of Ephesus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 3-4, pp. 370-379. Whitby suggests that al-Mundhir may have received bribes from the Sasanians, but John of Ephesus gives no such information. See: Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian*, p. 257.

³⁶ John of Ephesus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 4, pp. 372-379.

³⁷ John of Ephesus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 5, p. 379.

³⁸ Procopius stated that with the fortifications and repairs made by Justinian in the city, the height of the walls reached eighteen meters and the bastions reached thirty meters with three levels. See Procopius, *Wars*, II, 13. 17, pp. 376-377. However, he noted that the soil softened towards the south of the city and for this reason, in the event of a siege, a crescent-shaped ditch was dug and filled with water in order to prevent the enemy from destroying the walls by digging tunnels. See Procopius, *On Buildings*, trans. H. B. Dewing, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1971, II, 1. 24-5, pp. 106-109.

³⁹ John of Ephesus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 5, p. 384. Michael the Rabo, *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo*, ed. Matti Moosa, Gorgias Press, New Jersey 2014, X. 10, p. 395.

⁴⁰ See Greatrex – Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, p. 148. On the other hand, Michael the Syrian gives more exaggerated numbers. According to him, the Sasanians took 90,000 captives and the dead totaled 150,000. See Michael the Rabo, *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo*, X. 9, p. 393.

⁴¹ See also John of Epiphania, *Fragmenta*, IV, p. 275; Theophylact Simocatta, *The History*, III. 11.1-2, p. 88.

CONCLUSION

Although Justin II was heavily criticized by his contemporaries for this military failure against the Sasanians, he was in fact trying to seize a historical opportunity that his predecessors had missed. Since the mid-6th century, Byzantium had needed to end the large tribute it paid to the Sasanians in order to finance armies capable of resisting the Slavic and Avar invasions. At first sight, opening a new front on the eastern frontier seemed an extremely risky decision, since Byzantium was already fighting the Avars in the west, and the Lombards had by then seized most of Byzantine Italy. However, the offer of an alliance with the Turks against the Sasanians was too tempting to refuse. Such an alliance would remove the Sasanian threat to Byzantium and allow Justin II to focus on the west, while the Sasanians remained occupied with Turkish attacks from the east. This plan would also become easier with the support of the Christian Armenians in Persarmenia. According to the plan, the Armenians would revolt in the west with Byzantine support, while the Turks pressed the Sasanians from the east and north. This would help Byzantine forces advance along the Sasanian border. The emperor likely hoped that this two-sided strategy would quickly force the Sasanians to accept a settlement, ending the annual tribute and completing the no-tribute policy he had pursued since taking the throne. This would also let him concentrate more fully on the Avar threat in the west. However, things did not go as planned, and instead of gaining this advantage, Byzantium lost the city of Dara.

The traditional historical reconstruction asserts that the fall of Dara was such distressing news for the emperor that it caused Justin II to lose his sanity.⁴² However, Justin's madness appears to be the result of an illness that began much earlier and gradually increased in severity. One of the initial symptoms of his disease may have been recorded in a story told by Theophanes. On 6 October 572, Theophanes recorded the following about some erratic behaviour of Emperor Justin II:

«In this year on 6 October the emperor fell ill and became vexed with his own brother Badouarios, whom he insulted to the utmost, commanding the *cubicularii* to eject him during a *silentium* while pummelling him with their fists. Badouarios was *comes* of the imperial stables. When Sophia learned about this, she was distressed and upbraided the emperor. He repented and went down to Badouarios immediately, entering the stable with the *praepositus* of the *cubicularii*. On seeing the emperor, Badouarios fled from corner to corner in fear of the emperor. The emperor cried out, 'My brother, I beseech you by God, wait for me'. And running forward, Justin grabbed him, embraced and kissed him, saying, 'I wronged you, my brother, but do accept me as your eldest brother and as your emperor. For I know that it was through the work of the devil that this has happened.'»⁴³

This information clearly shows how unstable Justin's mental state was about a year before the fall of Dara and his sudden behavioural changes. According to Kroll and Bachrach, Justin's manic-depressive condition began several years before Dara's fall and became increasingly severe over several years, with the news of Dara's fall being the final straw, dramatically worsening his illness and leading to acute psychosis.⁴⁴ While this approach may initially appear speculative, it becomes consistent when considered alongside the event recorded by Theophanes on 6 October 572. The progressive decline in Justin's mental health over fourteen months might also account for the abrupt and irrational conclusion of the siege of Nisibis, which Marcian was poised to succeed. This episode underscores the collapse of an otherwise well-conceived strategy in a battle where Byzantium held every advantage: the worsening of Justin's mental condition at a pivotal juncture.

From that point on, the emperor Justin completely lost control and his illness, which had been apparent for some time, entered an acute phase. Tiberius, who had earlier been proclaimed Caesar, and the empress Sophia took over, and a truce was immediately signed with the Sasanians. As a result of the alliance, the Turks exerted great pressure on the Sasanians, and the Sasanians suffered serious setbacks in the Caucasus. After the Turkish offensive, the Kuban River basin in the north of the Caucasus and the regions of modern-day Azerbaijan came under Turkish rule for a short time.⁴⁵ However, the Byzantine failure to

⁴² See Averil Cameron, "An Emperor's Abdication", *Byzantinoslavica*, Vol. XXXVII, 1976, p. 161; Michael Whitby, "The Successors of Justinian", *The Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. XIV, eds. Averil Cameron – Bryan Ward-Perkins – Michael Whitby, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 94; Greatrex – Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, p. 151.

⁴³ Theophanes Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, trans. Cyril Mango – Roger Scott, with the assistance of Geoffrey Greatrex, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, AM. 6065, p. 364.

⁴⁴ Jerome Kroll – Bernard Bachrach, "Justin's Madness: Weak-Mindedness or Organic Psychosis?", *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, Vol. 48, 1993, p. 67.

⁴⁵ See Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, Vol. V, pp. 298–300, Ebû Hanîfe ed-Dîneverî, *el-Ahbârü't-Tivâl*, Ankara Okulu Yayınları, Ankara 2017, pp. 133–137, Michael R. J. Bonner, *The Last Empire of Iran*, Gorgias Press, New Jersey 2020, p. 229; Taşağıl, *Gök-Türkler*, pp. 40–41; Ligeti, *Bilinmeyen İç Asya*, pp. 70–71; Rümeysa Demirkutlu, *Bizans Kaynaklarının Gözünden II. Iustinos Devri (565–578) Bizans-Sâsâni Mücadeleleri*, Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University Institute of Social Sciences, (Unpublished Master's Thesis), Erzincan 2025, p. 54.

achieve any military success in Mesopotamia and the Upper Tigris halted the Turkish advance, and this would later cause a rift between Byzantium and the Turks. From the Byzantine side, it can be concluded that Justin acted hastily by not providing enough soldiers under Marcian's command at the beginning of the conflict. But the most important event was Marcian's humiliating dismissal in front of his army. This was the most crucial and devastating part of the chain of mistakes that brought an end to Justin's Sasanian adventure. After the defeat at Nisibis, his army was besieged in the city of Dara and given no opportunity to recover. In addition, Adarmahan's advance to Antioch in Syria without encountering any resistance must have reminded Byzantium that al-Mundhir's friendship had important strategic value. The Sasanian war, which Emperor Justin II had initiated with great hopes, thus ended in defeat for Byzantium. In conclusion, rather than the common perception that the emperor Justin II was an incompetent emperor who succeeded Justinian, more consideration should be given to the conclusion that he theoretically built a strategy that could have significantly advanced Byzantine interests, but that his inconsistent behaviour due to his advancing illness led to the collapse of Byzantium on the eastern front.

GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Giriş

İmparator II. Ioustinos dönemi (565–578), Bizans tarih yazımında sıklıkla geçiş dönemi niteliğinde ve yeterince incelenmemiş bir konumdadır. I. Ioustinianos'un (527–565) yayılmacı dönemi ile daha sonraki Maurikios ve Herakleios dönemlerindeki askerî yeniden yapılanma arasında yer alan II. Ioustinos'un iktidarı, akademik literatürde ağırlıklı olarak kurumsal gerileme, diplomatik istikrarsızlık ve imparatorun nihai zihinsel yetersizliği ile karakterize edilmiştir. Geleneksel görüşler, onun 572 yılında Sâsânî İmparatorluğu'na karşı savaş başlatma kararını büyük ölçüde irrasyonel bir kibrin tezahürü ya da 562 tarihli "Elli Yıllık Barış Antlaşması" ile tesis edilen istikrarı bozan stratejik bir hesap hatası olarak yorumlamışlardır. Bu geleneksel çerçeve içerisinde II. Ioustinos, Geç Antik Çağ'ın iki baskın gücü arasındaki dengeyi gereksiz yere bozmakla ve çatışma sırasındaki tutarsız davranışlarıyla ortaya çıkan krizi derinleştirmekle suçlanır. Stratejik açıdan hayati öneme sahip Dara kentinin 573'teki düşüşü ve ardından imparatorun zihinsel gerilemesine dair anlatılar, bu olumsuz değerlendirmeyi daha da pekiştirmiştir.

Ancak bu tür yorumlar, dönemin jeopolitik gerçeklikleri ve Ioustinos'un saltanatının ilk yıllarını karakterize eden elverişli uluslararası konjonktürle yeterince bağ kuramamaktadır. Bu çalışmada ele alınan temel sorunsal, 572 savaşını yalnızca kişisel irrasyonellik merceğinden açıklamanın yanlışlığıyla ilgilidir. Daha kesin bir ifadeyle çalışma, savaşa girme kararının doğası gereği irrasyonel bir eylem mi teşkil ettiğini, yoksa Sâsânî zafiyetlerinin gerçekçi bir değerlendirmesine dayanan, hesaplanmış ve yüksek riskli bir stratejik hamle mi olduğunu sorgulamaktadır. Mevcut literatür, Bizans üzerindeki dış baskıları kabul etmekle birlikte, imparatorun zihinsel durumunu tutarlı bir stratejinin uygulanmasını kademeli olarak bozan bir değişken olarak ele almak yerine, politikanın birincil belirleyicisi olarak konumlandırma eğilimindedir. Makale, Sâsânîlerin doğu sınırında yer alan Göktürklerle kurulan diplomatik ittifak ile Kafkasya'daki Ermeni ayaklanmalarının kesişimini inceleyerek; II. Ioustinos'un, Sâsânî zayıflıklarından yararlanmak üzere tasarlanmış, kavramsal olarak sağlam ancak operasyonel olarak kırılan, sofistike bir "iki cephe baskı" stratejisi izlediğini savunmaktadır.

Metodoloji

Birincil kaynaklar üç farklı gruptan oluşmaktadır. Menandros ile Evagrius ve Theophylaktos gibi daha sonraki derleme geleneğini içeren Grekçe kaynaklar, resmî Bizans anlatısını ve saray merkezli perspektifi sunmaktadır. Bunlar, II. Ioustinos'un politikaları ve savaşın sınır bölgelerindeki yerel sonuçları hakkında farklı bir bakış açısı sunan Süryanice kaynaklarla, özellikle de Efesli Yuhanna ile sistematik olarak karşılaştırılmaktadır. Ayrıca, Sâsânî geleneğinin unsurlarını muhafaza eden daha sonraki Arapça kronikler, Bizans-Türk stratejik ittifakına yönelik Sâsânî tepkisini anlamak için incelenmiştir.

Çalışma, karşılaştırmalı metin analizi yöntemini kullanmaktadır: Birincisi, savaşın diplomatik ve askerî hedeflerinin altında yatan stratejik tasarımı izlemek; ikincisi ise dönem kaynaklarında tanıklık edildiği üzere imparatorun zihinsel gerilemesinin kronolojisini yeniden inşa etmektir. Bu ikinci yol, Dara'nın düşüşünü ani ve topyekûn bir psikolojik çöküşle açıklayan yerleşik anlatıyı sorgulamaya yöneliktir. İmparatorun seferin erken safhalarındaki tutumu, askerî emirlerin verilmesi ve komuta atamalarının yönetimi dahil, zihinsel çöküş belirtilerinin Dara'nın kaybından önce gelip gelmediğini belirlemek amacıyla kaynak kanıtlarıyla birlikte incelenmektedir. Dahası, Göktürk elçiliğine ilişkin diplomatik kayıtlar, bazı klasik metinlerde bulunan taraflı nitelemelerin ötesine geçerek bu ittifakın gerçekçi stratejik beklentilerini değerlendirmek üzere eleştirel analize tabi tutulmaktadır.

Bulgular ve Sonuç

İnceleme, 572 Savaşı'na ilişkin hâkim akademik değerlendirmenin kısmen yenilenmesini gerektiren birkaç bulgu ortaya koymaktadır. İlk bulgu, savaşa girme kararının rasyonelliğiyle ilgilidir. Dönemin şartları göz önünde bulundurulduğunda bu kararın fevri olmadığını, aksine tarihi bir jeopolitik fırsatın ürünü olduğunu göstermektedir. Sâsânîlerin doğu sınırında Göktürk Kağanlığı'nın ortaya çıkışı ve Göktürklerin Konstantinopolis ile diplomatik temas kurması, Sâsânîlerin stratejik olarak kuşatılması için uygun koşulları oluşturmuştur. Eş zamanlı olarak, Sâsânîlerin Hristiyan nüfusa Zerdüşt dinî uygulamalarını dayatma girişimlerinin tetiklediği 571/572 Ermeni İsyanı, Bizans'a hem meşru bir casus belli (savaş nedeni) hem de doğu sınırı boyunca belirgin bir operasyonel avantaj sağlamıştır. Bu bağlamda, II. Ioustinos'un Sâsânîlere yapılan yıllık haraç ödemelerini askıya alması, fevri bir kibir eylemi değil, Sâsânîlerin aynı anda iki cephede savaşı sürdüremeyeceği varsayımına dayanan stratejik bir niyetin ifadesi olarak yorumlanmalıdır. Tahta çıktığından beri diğer devletlere haraç ödemeye karşı olan imparatorun eline, Sâsânîlere ödenen yıllık haraca son vermek için bundan daha iyi bir fırsat geçemezdi. Teoride, doğudan ve kuzeyden Göktürk taarruzlarına, batıdan ise Bizans desteği alan Ermenilerin isyanına dayanamayacak olan Sâsânî devleti, kısa sürede Bizans ile bir anlaşma yapacak ve haraç almaktan vazgeçecekti. Böylece Bizans, hem büyük haraç külfetinden kolaylıkla kurtulacak hem de batıdaki esas problem olan Avarlara karşı daha organize ve yoğun seferler yürütebilme kabiliyeti kazanacaktı.

İkinci bulgu, erken dönem askerî hareketin yürütülmesiyle ilgilidir. Kanıtlar, ilk Bizans saldırısının genel kabul görenden daha etkili olduğunu göstermektedir. Arzanene'deki ilk askerî manevralar ve Ermeni isyancı güçlerle koordinasyon, Sâsânî kuzey kanadını istikrarsızlaştırmada başarılı olmuştur. Ancak belirleyici başarısızlık stratejik tasavvurda değil, operasyonel icrada yaşanmıştır. Nisibis (Nusaybin) kuşatmasının çöküşü, lojistik yetersizliklerden ve Bizans komutanları arasındaki anlaşmazlıktan kaynaklanmıştır. Bu durum, imparatorluk merkezinden verilen ve giderek tutarsızlaşan emirlerle doğrudan ilişkilendirilebilir.

Üçüncü ve en önemli bulgu, imparatorun zihinsel gerilemesinin kronolojisiyle ilgilidir. Kasım 573'te Dara'nın düşüşünün II. Ioustinos'un topyekûn psikolojik çöküşü için yegâne katalizör işlevi gördüğüne dair yaygın olarak tekrarlanan anlatı, yakından incelendiğinde geçerliliğini yitirmektedir. İlgili kaynak metinlerin karşılaştırmalı okunması, bilişsel istikrarsızlık ve tutarsız karar alma göstergelerinin seferin daha erken safhalarında fark edilebilir olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bulgu önemli sonuçlar doğurmaktadır: İmparatorluk komuta yapısının savaşın en kritik noktasında zaten işlevsel olarak bozulmuş olduğunu ve belirleyici anlarda yetkin komutanların görevden alınmasının bu gerilemenin doğrudan bir sonucu olduğunu göstermektedir.

Sonuç olarak, 572-574 felaketi, kusurlu bir stratejik vizyonun sonucu olarak açıklanamaz. Bilakis II. Ioustinos'un Sâsânîlere karşı Bizans-Türk diplomatik ittifakı yönündeki girişimi, altıncı yüzyılın iddialı dış politika girişimlerinden birini temsil ediyordu. Fakat neticede yaşanan başarısızlık taktiksel olmaktan ziyade sistemikti: Bizans imparatorluğunun merkezîyetçi komuta yapısı, tüm stratejik girişimi imparatora bizzat bağımlı kılıyordu. Savaş başladıktan sonra imparatorun zihinsel durumu kademeli olarak kötüleştiği, seferin operasyonel tutarlılığı çökmüştür. Bu nedenle bu çalışma, II. Ioustinos'un mirasını yetersiz bir hükümdarın başarısızlığı olarak değil; operasyonel olarak başarısız olsa da stratejik olarak rasyonel bir politikanın, imparatorun hastalığının baskısı altında çöküşü olarak yeniden çerçevelenmektedir.

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