

6 The buildup to the confrontation

Khusraw II Parvīz and the rise of the Arabs

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Islamic historical memory bears witness to the unraveling of the Sasanian state under Khusraw II Parvīz (r. 591–628), the last effective sovereign of the Sasanian dynasty. In this context, I commence this chapter by examining the account of Parvīz's rescue by Iyās b. Qabiṣa, chief of the Ṭayyi' tribe, when the young king was fleeing the rebel Bahrām Chūbīn. I then discuss how, in the Islamic historical tradition, the allure of power and luxuries caused the king to become oppressive of his subjects, decadent, and avaricious for the wealth of others, thus making him the model of the stereotypical monarchical tyranny conceived by Muslim critics of Iranian civilization. It is against the background of the generation of Parvīz's character occurring later in his reign that I will examine the reports of his subsequent dealings with the Arabs, for whom he showed contempt. The first case of such accounts describes the last Lakhmid king, al-Nu'mān III b. al-Mundhir's (r. 580–602) visit to the Sasanian court, and the follow-up embassy of Arab notables sent by the Lakhmid ruler in response to the ill treatment he had received from Parvīz during his trip. The second is the account of the Battle of Dhū Qār, which is portrayed in the Islamic tradition as a result of Parvīz's liquidation of the Lakhmid state. Moreover, the narrative of this battle underlines the bravery of the Arabs in the classic style of the *qyyām al-'Arab* genre of literature, while depicting Dhū Qār as a forerunner to the Islamic conquest of Iran. I will conclude by analyzing the depiction of the ominous events occurring towards the end of Parvīz's reign, as well as Parvīz's ignominious deposal and execution, which both heralded the fall of the Sasanian dynasty and the rise of the Arabs under the banner of Islam.

An Arab chieftain's hospitality to a Persian king

The account of Parvīz's early years describes the difficult ascent of a young king striving to maintain his rule. The Islamic narrative tends to be sympathetic to the youthful Parvīz, portraying him in a heroic light in a power struggle for which the odds were stacked against him. It details the treacherous blinding and murder of his father Hormuz IV (r. 570–590) by his uncles Biṣṭām and Binday, and his having to contend with the rebel general Bahrām Chūbīn,¹ who took control over Ctesiphon, forcing Parvīz to flee to Byzantium where he hoped to acquire the

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support of the emperor Mawriq (Maurice) to regain his throne. In the narrative of Parvīz's flight from Bahrām Chūbīn, the reader comes across the description of Parvīz's momentous encounter with an Arab chief. Bal'amī and the *Nihāyat al-irab* provide virtually identical accounts of this meeting.² It is also described in somewhat less detail by Firdawsī, and referenced in other chronicles as well.³ It is related that after a narrow escape from the usurper Bahrām, Parvīz and only ten of his companions traveled three days and nights, and were suffering from fatigue and hunger. When they reached the bank of the Euphrates, they encountered a lone Bedouin (*i'rābī*) mounted on a camel. Parvīz, who is reported to have spoken some Arabic and to have known the Arabs' genealogies, asked the Arab who he was. He responded that he was Iyās b. Qabiṣa of the Banū Ṭayyi'. (In the *Shāhnāma*, he is Qays b. al-Hārith.) When Iyās found out that he was talking to the king, he dismounted to pay him homage, and invited him to stay with his tribe, telling him that it would be his honor to *ḥāvē* the king as his guest.

The remainder of this anecdote serves as a conspicuous illustration of the Arabs' proverbial hospitality. The small Iranian party was greeted by the notables of the tribe, who gave them straw mats to sit on. Growing impatient and fearing that they would be discovered by Bahrām's forces, Parvīz pleaded with Iyās to just give him and his group some food and they would be on their way. However, Iyās insisted on providing hospitality to his guest. He reassured the king that they were safe, and called for fresh milk and dates to be given to the refugees. He then prepared some bread by cooking dough in a hole in the ground, which was the custom of camel drivers and shepherds, so the reader is informed. He also had a lamb slaughtered and roasted for his guests. However, Firdawsī only mentions the cow Qays had slaughtered for Parvīz and his men. Satisfied but exhausted from their travails, the Iranians then fell asleep.

The magnanimous character of the Arab Iyās is shown, however, most clearly by what occurs next in this account. Parvīz and his entourage arose after their siesta wishing to leave, but the concerned Iyās informed them that it was a three-day journey through the desert, and to make it they would need adequate food, a guide, and fresh horses. Iyās assured the king that he would provide all these things in the morning and invited him to spend the night with his tribe. While Qays sent the group with a guide in the *Shāhnāma*, in Bal'amī and the *Nihāyat*'s accounts, Iyās personally accompanied Parvīz and his men on his journey. When they reached their destination, Parvīz said to Iyās,

You have proven your kindness toward me, and have attached me to yourself with links of kindness. When I return from the court of the Romans, and when I recover my kingdom, you must come to my palace, so that I can recompense you.⁴

Bal'amī and the *Nihāyat* diverge on how Iyās responded. In the *Nihāyat*, he simply says, "I will if God most high wills it [*in shā' Allāh ta'ālā*]."⁵ However, Bal'amī reports that, feeling slighted by Parvīz's suggestion, Iyās proudly