

## **Constructing Crusades: Remembering the Persian Martyrs in the Late-Antique Near East**

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After Constantine's conversion to Christianity, the long-standing antagonism between Persia and Rome was steadily transformed into a religious conflict. Roman emperors projected themselves as protectors of Christians in Persia; Persian Great Kings ordered persecutions of their Christian subjects; and Christian relics helped Roman armies against their Persian enemies.

The imposition of this new religious narrative on the political landscape of the Near East was a difficult and contested process. In order for it to replace the traditional, secular view of Roman-Persian relations, significant ideological investments were required. In this paper, I look at the contribution to this process made by the martyr acts commemorating the victims of persecutions of Christians in Persia under Shapur II; my aim is to confront them with the competing secular account of Roman-Persian relations advanced in Ammianus Marcellinus' *Res Gestae*.

After the death of Constantine during the preparations for a war to liberate the Christians in Persia, Shapur II ordered a persecution of his Christian subjects. The victims were commemorated in martyrologies written in Syriac. In these texts, for Persian persecutors the Christian god is above all the 'God to whom Caesar prays.' Conversely, Zoroastrian priests act in close concert with the Great King and state officials. The martyrologies construct a world in which religious and political loyalties are intimately intertwined.

The polytheist historian Ammianus Marcellinus, writing around 390 in Rome, came from the region and had participated in the war against Persia in the 350s. In his account of the conflict between Constantius II and Shapur II, he denies the impact of religion on the war (except for the obstructions caused to the Roman war effort by devout Christians). However, read more closely, it becomes clear that the Christian version of events was known to Ammianus. Not only later Christian sources, but also the Roman government in the fourth century claimed that the war against Persia was a holy war. The secularised nature of Ammianus' narrative is not then the result of any lack of interest in religious issues. Rather, it constitutes a defiant critique of the new Christian vision of a union between Christianity and Rome: in a deliberate and striking ideological manoeuvre, Ammianus consciously empties the war of any religious meaning. As is often the case, it is the historian's silences which really matter.

But the martyr acts too must be understood in their wider ideological and social contexts. After the acts were translated into Greek and included in synaxaries and menologies, the Persian martyrs were celebrated on their name days in churches across throughout the Eastern Roman Empire. Through a complex of repeated rituals, the memory of the Persian martyrs was inscribed into the social memory and onto the imagined landscape of the Near East. Only through such constant redeployment of religious meaning in text and ritual was the late-antique Near East eventually transformed into a world torn apart by religious conflict.