

Priscus



Sasanika Sources

Priscus of Panium was born in Thrace around 410 CE.¹ Priscus studied rhetoric, philosophy, and practiced law in Constantinople.² Priscus accompanied envoys sent by Theodosius II to meet with Attila and provided many details about the journey. It should be noted that Priscus' work survive only in quoted form in other writers' works. The works that contain Priscus' writings are the *Excerpta de Legationibus Iussu Imperator Constantini Prophyrogenti Confecta* (which contains Priscus' account of the Roman embassy to Attila), the *Suda*, Evargius' *Ecclesiastical History*, Procopius' *Wars*, Theophanes' *Chronicle*, Jordanes *Romana et Getica*, John of Antioch's *Chronicle*, and Malalas' *Chronicon*.

While more focused on the happenings of the Western Roman Empire, Priscus slipped in some interesting observation about the Sasanians. For one, he refers to the Sasanians as Persians or Parthians, but at times demonstrated knowledge of the different tribes of Iran. See, for instance, Priscus' assertion that Attila would take Persia, Media, and Parthia if he were to take his army east to confront the Sasanians. Moreover, Priscus also demonstrated his dislike of the Sasanians. After he listed the parts of Iran Attila could conquer, he prayed that Attila would destroy the Sasanians, but only then included a report of a companion saying that if Attila destroyed the Sasanians, he would be more powerful than the Romans and would no longer be there equal. Thus the Romans would have a larger problem on their hands.

Another manner in which Priscus portrays the Sasanians is how he demonstrates the efforts of the Sasanians to get the Romans to guard the Caspian Gates against Hunnic incursions. The Sasanians, according to Priscus, felt they kept the Huns at bay, and had the job of protecting both the empire of the Iranians and the Roman Empire. The Romans, of course, refused to send money or men to help keep the Huns out of Iran. Priscus, although this was probably not his aim, revealed the equal footing of both Iran and the Roman Empire. Here were two empires, both equal in strength, trying to assert dominance over each other.

Of course Priscus' writings are all about the Romans and Sasanians being equally strong.

Priscus also suggested that the Sasanians were only able to fight against the Kidarite Huns using treachery, and they were not even successful doing that. Then, when Sasanians successfully crush the Kidarite Huns, Priscus wrote that they boasted about it in a "barbarian" fashion because they wanted to demonstrate to the Romans their large fighting force. Priscus, in this manner, is an example of a Roman's mistrust and dislike of the Sasanian Empire, the rival to the Roman Empire.

For further reading, see:

Warren Treadgold. *The Early Byzantine Historians*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007
R.C. Blockley. *The Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*:

¹ Warren Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 96.

² Treadgold, *The Early Byzantine Historians*, 97.



Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus. 2 vols. Francis Cairns: Liverpool, 1983.

All selections are taken from R.C. Blockley's *The Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus*. Vol. 2. Francis Cairns: Liverpool, 1983.

Fragments 10 (pp. 241-243), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus*. 4:

When the treaty was in force, Attila again sent envoys to the eastern Romans demanding the fugitives. They received the envoys, honoured them with many gifts and sent them away saying that they had no fugitives. Again, he sent others, and, when they had been enriched, he sent a third embassy and a fourth after it. For the barbarian, mindful of the Romans' liberality, which they showed out of caution lest the treaty broken, sent to them those of his retinue whom he wished to benefit, inventing new reasons and discovering new pretexts. The Romans headed his every bidding and obeyed whatever order their master issued. They were not only weary of starting a war with Attila, but they were also afraid of the Parthians who were preparing for hostilities.

Fragments 11.2 (pp. 277-279), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus*. 3:

When we express amazement at the unreasonableness of the barbarian, Romulus, an ambassador of long experience, replied that his very great good fortune and the power which it had given him [Attila] had made him so arrogant that he would not entertain just proposals unless he thought that they were to his advantage. No previous ruler of Scythia or of any other land had ever achieved so much in so short a time. He ruled the islands of the Ocean and, in addition to the whole of Scythia, forced the Romans to pay tribute. He was aiming at more than his present achievements and, in order to increase his empire further, he wanted to attack the Persians.

When one of those amongst us asked what road Attila could take to reach Persia, Romulus replied that the land of the Medes was not a great distance from Scythia, and the Huns were not ignorant of the route. They came upon it long ago when famine was sweeping their land and the Romans did not oppose them on account of the war in which they were involved...

Those Huns who have gone over to the Romans sat that, having come into a desert land and having crossed a lake... after fifteen days they passed over some mountains and entered Media. As they were overrunning and plundering the land, a Persian army confronted them and filled the air above them with missiles, so that they had to retreat from their immediate danger and retire across the mountains. They gained little plunder, since the Medes took most of it from them.

Thus they know that Scythia is not far from Media and, if Attila wished to go there, he would neither have much toil nor a long journey. And so... he would subdue the Medes, the Parthians, and the Persians and force them to pay tribute.

When we prayed that he would go against the Persians and direct the war against them, Constantiolus said that he feared that when he had easily subdued the Persians, he would return as a master rather than a friend. At present, gold is brought to him because of his rank. However, if he were to subdue the Parthians, Medes and the Persians, he would not continue to endure a Roman state independent of himself... Constantiolus said that after the Medes, Parthians, and Persians, Attila would reject the title by which the Romans wished to call him.

Fragments 33.1 (p. 337), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus* 8:

[After making war against Lazica] the Emperor's advisors prepared for a second campaign and deliberated whether in pursuing the war they should travel by the same route or through Armenia close to Persian territory, having first sent an embassy to win over the monarch of the Persians... Gobazes [the king of Lazica] himself sent envoys to the Persians and also to the Romans. Since the monarch of the Parthians was involved in a war with the so-called Kidarite Huns, he rejected the Lazi who were fleeing to him.

Fragments 41.1 (pp. 345-347), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus* . 15:

[After an embassy arrived from Italy in Constantinople]. An embassy also arrived from the Persian monarch which complained to the Romans both about the Persians who were fleeing to the Romans and about the Magi who had lived from old in Roman territory. The embassy alleged that the Romans, wishing to turn the Magi from their ancestral customs, laws and forms of worship, harassed them and did not allow the fire, which they call unquenchable, to be kept burning according to their law. It also said that the Romans, through a contribution of money, should show interest in the fortress of Iouroeipaach, situated at the Caspian gates, or they should at least send soldiers to guard it. It was not right that the Persians alone should be burdened by the expense and the garrisoning of the place, since if they did not make these expenditures, the neighbouring peoples would easily inflict damage not only upon the Persians but upon the Romans also. The Romans replied that they would send someone to discuss all these issues with the Parthian monarch. They claimed that there were no fugitives amongst them and that the Magi were not harassed on account of their religion, and said that since the Persians had undertaken the guarding of the fortress of Iouroeipaach and the war against the Huns on their own behalf, it was not right that the demand money from the Romans. Constantius... was sent to the Persians.

Fragments 41.2 (p. 347), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus* 11:

Constantius... was sent to the Persians... but Constantius waited at Edessa, a Roman city close to Persian territory, since the Parthian monarch delayed receiving him for a long time.

Fragments 41.3 (p. 349), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus* 12:

When Constantius the envoy waited for a while at Edessa... the Persian monarch gave him admittance to this territory. He asked Constantius to come to him while he was engaged not in the cities but on the borders between his people and the Kidarite Huns. With these a war had begun, the cause of which was that the Huns were not receiving the tribute monies which the former rulers of the Persians and Parthians had paid. The father of the monarch had refused the payment of the tribute and had undertaken the war, which his son had inherited together with the kingdom. As a result the Persians were being worn down by the fighting and wished to end the dispute with the Huns by guile. So Perozes (for this was the name of the current Persian king) sent to Kunchas, the leader of the Huns, saying that he welcomed peace with him and wished to make a treaty of alliance and betroth his sister to him, for he happened to be very young and not yet the father of children. However, when Kunchas had accepted these proposals, he married not the sister of Perozes, but another woman dressed as a princess, whom the Persian king had sent, having told her that if she did not reveal the trick she would enjoy royal status and affluence, but if she told of the deceit she would suffer death as the penalty, since the ruler of the Kidarites would not endure to have a maidservant to wife instead

of a noblewoman.

Having made the treaty on these terms, Perozes did not long profit from his treachery towards the ruler of the Huns. For the woman, fearing that at some time the ruler of the people would be told of her status by others and would put her to a cruel death, revealed what had been done. Kunchas praised the woman for her honesty and continued to keep her as his wife. But, wishing to punish Perozes for his trick, he pretended that he was at war with his neighbours and had need, not of fighting men (for he had an enormous number of these), but of generals to direct the war. Perozes sent him three hundred of his leading captains, and of these the ruler of the Kidarites killed some and mutilated the rest, sending them back to Perozes with the message that this was the punishment for his treachery. Thus the war between them was rekindled, and there was heavy fighting. Therefore, Perozes received Constantius in Gorga... and having treated him generously for a few days, dismissed him without a satisfactory reply to the embassy.

Fragments 44 (p. 353), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus* 16:

Gobazes [the king of Lazica] came with Dionysius to Constantinople, dressed in Persian style and with a bodyguard in the Median manner.

Fragments 47 (pp. 353-355), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus* 19:

The Saraguri, having attacked the Akatiri and other peoples, invaded Persia. First, they came to the Caspian gates, but when they found that the Persians had established a fort there, they took another route, by which they came to Iberia. They laid waste this country and overran Armenia. As a result the Persians, apprehensive of this inroad on top of their old war with the Kidarites, sent an embassy to the Romans and asked that they give them either money or men for the defence of the fortress of Iouroeipaach. They repeated what had often been said by their embassies, that since they were facing the fighting and refusing to allow access to the attacking peoples, the Romans' territory remained unravaged. When the Romans replied that each had to fight for his own land and take care of his own defence, they again returned having achieved nothing.

Fragments 51.1 (pp. 359-361), from the *Excerpta de Legationibus* 22:

[The Suani have captured some forts from the Sasanians and the Suani sent an embassy to Constantinople to ask the Romans for help but the Suani dismissed the reinforcements sent by the Romans due to the Sasanian force being diverted from the conflict. Then the Sasanians returned in force]. As a result, when the Persians returned against him, he again called upon the Romans.

When the Romans had replied that they would send help and a man to command it, an embassy arrived from the Persian which announced that they had crushed the Kidarite Huns and had taken their city of Balaam. They reported the victory and in barbaric fashion boasted about it, since they wished to advertise the very large force which they had at present. But when they had made this announcement, the Emperor straightaway dismissed them, since he was more concerned about the events in Sicily.

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