

Excerpts from Procopius. History of the Wars: Books I – II. Trans. H. B. Dewing. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1914.

Book I, Chs. 1-4 transcribed by Morgan Mullins, California State University, Fullerton.

(I. i. 17)

And the history of them will begin some distance back, telling of the fortunes in war of the Romans and the Medes, their reverses and successes.

(I. ii. 5.)

And he was equally disturbed by the attitudes of the Medes, fearing lest these barbarians should trample the youthful emperor and do the Romans irreparable harm.

(I. ii. 7.)

For in drawing up the writings of his will, he designated the child as his successor to the throne, but appointed as guardian over him Isdigerdes, the Persian King, enjoining upon him earnestly in his will to preserve the empire for Theodosius by all his power and foresight.

(I. ii. 8-9.)

But Isdigerdes, the Persian King, when he saw this writing which was duly delivered to him, being even before a sovereign whose nobility of character had won for him the greatest renown, did then display a virtue at once amazing and remarkable. For, loyally observing the behests of Arcadius, he adopted and continued without interruption a policy of profound peace with the Romans, and thus preserved the empire for Theodosius.

(I. ii. 11.)

When Theodosius had grown to manhood and was in the prime of life, and Isdigerdes had been taken from the world by disease, Vararanes, the Persian King, invaded the Roman

domains with a mighty army; however he did no damage, but returned to his home without accomplishing anything.

( I. ii. 12-15.)

Anatolius, General of the East, had, as it happened, been sent by the Emperor Theodosius as ambassador to the Persians, alone and unaccompanied; as he approached the Median Army, solitary as he was, he leapt down from his horse, and advanced on foot toward Vararanes. And when Vararanes saw him, he enquired from those who were near who this man could be who was coming forward. And they replied that he was the general of the Romans. Thereupon the king was so dumbfounded by this excessive degree of respect that he himself wheeled his horse about and rode away, and the whole Persian host followed him. When he had reached his own territory, he received the envoy with great cordiality, and granted the treaty of peace on the terms which Anatolius desired of him; one condition, however, he added, that neither party should construct any new fortification in his own territory in the neighborhood of the boundary line between the two countries.

(I. iii. 1.)

At a later time the Persian King Perozes became involved in a war concerning boundaries with the nation of the Ephthalitae Huns, who are called the White Huns, gathered an imposing army and marched against them.

(I. iii. 2.)

...their territory lies immediately to the north of Persia; indeed their city, called Gorgo, is located over against the Persian frontier, and is consequently the centre of frequent contests concerning boundary lines between the two peoples.

(I. iii. 6.)

...they observe right and justice in their dealings both with one another and with their neighbors, in no degree less than the Romans and the Persians.

(I. iii. 8.)

Perozes, marching against these Ephthalitae, was accompanied by an ambassador, Eusebius by name, who, as it happened, had been sent to his court by the emperor Zeno.

(I. iii. 10.)

So Perozes, with no thought at all of treachery, and forgetting that he was marching in a hostile country, continued the pursuit without the least caution.

(I. iii. 12 – 22.)

When the Medes began to realize all this (for they now began to have a glimmering of their peril), though they refrained from speaking of the situation themselves through fear of Perozes, yet they earnestly entreated Eusebius to urge upon the king, who was completely ignorant of his own plight, that he should take counsel rather than make an untimely display of daring, and consider well whether there was any way of safety open to them. So he went before Perozes, but by now means revealed the calamity which was upon them; instead he began with a fable, telling how a lion once happened upon a goat bound down and bleating on a mound of no very great height, and how the lion, bent upon making a feast of the goat, rushed forward with intent to seize him, but fell into a trench exceedingly deep, in which was a circular path, narrow and endless (for it had no outlet anywhere), which indeed the owners of the goat had constructed for this very purpose, and they had paced the goat above it to be a bait for the lion. When Perozes heard this, a fear came over him lest perchance the Medes had brought harm upon themselves by their pursuit of the enemy. He therefore advanced no further, but, remaining where he was, began to consider the situation. By this time the Huns were following him without any concealment, and were guarding the entrance of the place in order that their enemy might no longer be able to withdraw to the rear. Then at last the Persians saw clearly in what straits they were, and they felt that the situation was desperate; for they had no hope that they would ever escape from the peril. Then the king of the Ephthalitae sent some of his followers to Perozes; he upbraided him at length for his senseless foolhardiness, by which he had wantonly destroyed both himself and the Persian people, but he announced that even so the Huns would grant them deliverance, if Perozes would consent to prostrate himself before him as having proved himself master, and,

taking the oaths traditional among the Persians, should give pledges that they would never again take the fields against the nation of the Ephthalitae. When Perozes heard this, he held a consultation with the Magi who were present and enquired of them whether he must comply with the terms dictated by the enemy. The Magi replied that, as to the oath, he should settle the matter according to his own pleasure; as for the rest, however, he should circumvent his enemy by craft. And they reminded him that it was the custom among the Persians to prostrate themselves before the rising sun each day; he should, therefore, watch the time closely and meet the leader of the Ephthalitae at dawn, and then, turning toward the rising sun, make his obeisance. In this way, they explained, he would be able in the future to escape the ignominy of the deed. Perozes accordingly gave the pledges concerning the peace, and prostrated himself before his foe exactly as the Magi had suggested, and so, with the whole Median army intact, gladly retired homeward.

(I. iv. 1 – 35.)

Not long after this, disregarding the oath he had sworn, he was eager to avenge himself upon the Huns for the insult done him. He therefore straightway gathered together from the whole land all the Persians and their allies, and led them against the Ephthalitae; of all his sons he left behind him only one, Cabades [Kavad] by name, who, as it happened, was just past the age of boyhood; all the others, about thirty in number, he took with him. The Ephthalitae, upon learning of his invasion, were aggrieved at the deception they had suffered at the hands of their enemy, and bitterly reproached their king as having abandoned them to the Medes. He, with a laugh, enquired of them what in the world of theirs he had abandoned, whether their land or their arms or any other part of their possessions. They thereupon retorted that he had abandoned nothing, except, forsooth, the one opportunity on which, as it turned out, everything else depended. Now the Ephthalitae with all zeal demanded that they should go out to meet the invaders, but the king sought to restrain them at any rate for the moment. For he insisted that as yet they had received no definite information as to the invasion, for the Persians were still within their own boundaries. So, remaining where he was, he busied himself as follows. In the plain where the Persians were to make their irruption into the land of the Ephthalitae he

marked off a tract of very great extent and made a deep trench of sufficient width; but in the center he left a small portion of land intact, enough to serve as a way for ten horses. Over the trench he placed reeds, and upon the reeds he scattered earth, thereby concealing the true surface. He then directed the forces of the Huns that, when the time came to retire inside the trench, they should draw themselves together into a narrow column and pass rather slowly across this neck of land, taking care that they should not fall into the ditch. And he hung from the top of the royal banner the salt over which Perozes had once sworn the oath which he had disregarded in taking the field against the Huns. Now as long as he heard that the enemy were in their own territory, he remained at rest; but when he learned from his scouts that they had reached the city of Gorgo which lies on the extreme Persian frontier, and that departing thence they were now advancing against his army, remaining himself with the greater part of his troops inside the trench, he sent forward a small detachment with instructions to allow themselves to be seen at a distance by the enemy in the plain, and, when once they had been seen, to flee at full speed to the rear, keeping in mind his command concerning the trench as soon as they drew near to it. They did as directed, and, as they approached the trench, they drew themselves into a narrow column, and all passed over and joined the rest of the army. But the Persians, having no means of perceiving the stratagem, gave chase at full speed across a very level plain, possessed as they were by a spirit of fury against the enemy, and fell into the trench, every man of them, not alone the first but also those who followed in the rear. For since they entered into the pursuit with great fury, as I have said, they failed to notice the catastrophe which had befallen their leaders, but fell in on top of them with their horses and lances so that, as was natural, they both destroyed them and were themselves no less involved in ruin. Among them were Perozes and all his sons. And just as he was about to fall into this pit, they say that he realized the danger, and seized and threw from him the pearl which hung from his right ear, - a gem of wonderful whiteness and greatly prized on account of its extraordinary size - in order, no doubt, that no one might wear it after him; for it was a thing exceedingly beautiful to look upon, such as no king before him had possessed. This story, however, seems to me untrustworthy, because a man who found himself in such peril would have thought of nothing else; but I suppose that his ear was crushed in this disaster, and the pearl disappeared somewhere or other. This pearl

the Roman Emperor then made every effort to buy from the Ephthalitae, but was utterly unsuccessful. For the barbarians were not able to find it although they sought it with great labor. However, they say that the Ephthalitae found it later and sold it to Cabades.

The story of this pearl, as told by the Persians, is worth recounting, for perhaps to some it may not seem altogether incredible. For they say that it was lodged in its oyster in the sea which washes the Persian coast, and that the oyster was swimming not far from the shore; both its valves were standing open and the pearl lay between them, a wonderful sight and notable, for no pearl in all history could be compared with it at all, either in size or in beauty. A shark, then, of enormous size and dreadful fierceness, fell in love with this sight and followed close upon it, leaving it neither day nor night; even when he was compelled to take thought for food, he would only look about for something eatable where he was, and when he found some bit, he would snatch it up and eat it hurriedly; the overtaking the oyster immediately, he would ate himself again with the sight that he loved. At length a fisherman, they say, noticed what was passing, but in terror of the monster he recoiled from the danger; however, he reported the whole matter to the king, Perozes. Now when Perozes heard his account, they say that a great longing for the pearl came over him, and he urged on this fisherman with many flatteries and hopes of reward. Unable to resist the importunities of his monarch, he is said to have addressed Perozes as follows: “My master, precious to a man is money, more precious still is his life, but most prized of all are his children; and being naturally constrained by his love for them a man might perhaps dare anything. Now I intend to make trial of the monster, and hope to make thee master of the pearl. And if I succeed in this struggle, it is plain that henceforth I shall be ranked among those who are counted blessed. For it is not unlikely that thou, as King of Kings, wilt reward me with all good things; and for me it will be sufficient, even if it so fall out that I gain no reward, to have shown myself a benefactor of my master. But if it must needs be that I become the prey of this monster, thy task indeed it will be, O King, to requite my children for their father’s death. Thus even after my death I shall still be a wage-earner among those closest to me, and thou wilt win greater fame for thy goodness – for in helping my children thou wilt confer a boon upon me, who shall have no power to thank thee for the benefit – because generosity is seen to be without alloy only when it is displayed towards the dead.” With these words he departed. And

when he came to the place where the oyster was accustomed to swim and the shark to follow, he seated himself there upon a rock, watching for an opportunity of catching the pearl alone without its admirer. As soon as it came about that the shark had happened upon something which would serve him for food, and was delaying over it, the fisherman left upon the beach those who were following him for this service, and made straight for the oyster with all his might; already he had seized it, and was hastening with all his speed to get out of the water, when the shark noticed him and rushed to the rescue. The fisherman saw him coming, and, when he was about to be overtaken not far from the beach, he hurled his booty with all his force upon the land, and was himself soon afterwards seized and destroyed. But the men who had been left upon the beach picked up the pearl, and, conveying it to the king, reported all that had happened. Such, then, is the story which the Persians relate, just as I have set it down, concerning this pearl. But I shall return to the previous narrative.

Thus Perozes was destroyed and the whole Persian army with him. For the few who by chance did not fall into the ditch found themselves at the mercy of the enemy. As a result of this experience a law was established among the Persians that, while marching in hostile territory, they should never engage in any pursuit, even if it should happen that the enemy had been driven back by force. Thereupon those who had not marched with Perozes and had remained in their own land chose as their king Cabades, the youngest son of Perozes, who was then the only one surviving. At that time, then, the Persians became subject to the Ephthalitae, until Cabades had established his power most securely and no longer deemed it necessary to pay the annual tribute to them. And the time these barbarians ruled over the Persians was two years.