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Persians in Egypt

JEAN-LUC FOURNET

Egypt was a rich country, and the Persians had coveted it for more than a millennium. It had been conquered twice by the Achaemenids (525–404 and 343–332 BCE, until Alexander's conquest), but the stable and powerful Ptolemaic kingdom, and then the Roman Empire, kept away Persians from Egypt for much of the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine periods. But the expansionist designs of the Sasanian King Chosroes II Parwēz (590–628), taking advantage of a troubled period on the Byzantine side, allowed Persians under the command of Shahrbaraz to conquer Egypt once again (among other parts of the Near East), for a short period (619–629).

Little is known about this last Persian occupation. Except for some literary sources which recount only the bare facts, it is attested by the documents left by the Persians (written in Pahlavi), and by those of the Greco-Egyptians. The former, often fragmentary and difficult to read, are nearly all of a military nature (lists of provisions for soldiers, orders, itineraries). The latter rarely refer to Persians, and tell us almost nothing about the administration of Egypt and the relationship between the conquerors and the conquered during this period – except for a few allusions to occasional clashes. This relative silence is due not only to the language barrier and the rejection of the Persians by the Greco-Egyptians, but also because the internal

situation in Egypt changed little with the Persians who, limiting themselves to a military presence, relied on existing networks and institutions to administer the province. The most obvious trace left by this conquest is probably the fashion for Iranian-patterned fabrics.

SEE ALSO: Achaemenid Dynasty; Chosroes II; Herakleios, emperor; Persian, Persians; Sasanians.

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