In 330 BCE, Alexander the Great destroyed the Persian imperial capital at Persepolis. This was the end of the world’s first great international empire. The ancient imperial traditions of the Near East had culminated in the rule of the Persian king Cyrus the Great. He and his successors united nearly all the civilised people of western Eurasia into a single state stretching, at its height, from Egypt to India. This state perished in the flames of Persepolis, but the dream of world empire never died. The Macedonian conquerors were gradually overthrown and replaced by a loose assemblage of Iranian kingdoms. The so-called Parthian Empire was a decentralised and disorderly state, but it bound together much of the sedentary Near East for about 500 years. When this empire fell in its turn, Iran got a new leader and new empire with a vengeance.

The third and last pre-Islamic Iranian empire was ruled by the Sasanian dynasty from the 220s to 651 CE.
Map of the Sasanian Empire.

Silver coin of Ardashir I, struck at the Hamadan mint.
(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silver_coin_of_Ardashir_I,_struck_at_the_Hamadan_mint.jpg)
This period was arguably the heyday of ancient Iran – a time when Iranian military power nearly conquered the eastern Roman Empire, and when Persian culture reached its apogee before the coming of Islam. The founder of the Sasamian dynasty was Ardashir I who claimed descent from a mysterious ancestor called Sasan. Ardashir was the governor of Fars, a province in southern Iran, in the twilight days of the Parthian Empire. Ardashir overthrew the last Parthian king and replaced him in the early 220s. From that moment on, with only one brief exception, Iran was ruled by Ardashir’s family.

The Sasanian state was more centralised than its predecessors. Its organised system of dynastic power can be contrasted with the Roman failure to evolve either a royal family or a smooth method of succession. This gave the Sasanian empire great ideological strength, but made its politics fragile, so that when the Sasanian family was gone the state was extinct.

Older scholarship presented the Sasanian state as a weak, sparsely populated ‘Asiatic despotism’ without a standing army, and which was no match for Rome. This is completely wrong. Sasanian silver coinage, which remained pure for more than 400 years, massive fortifications in sensitive areas, and state-sponsored agriculture suggest a powerful central government. Far from being weak and loosely organised, the Sasanian army matched the Romans blow for blow, and several Roman emperors died or were taken captive in battle with Iran. Famously, the 3rd-century emperor Valerian, was supposedly skinned, taxidermied, and put on display in the Persian capital in order to intimidate Roman embassies.

Roman historians claim that the Sasanians were aiming to recreate the first Persian empire of Cyrus the Great. This meant pushing the Iranian border with Rome further and further
west. Unsurprisingly, Rome and Iran were nearly constantly at war. The two powers competed for even the smallest advantage along an ill-defined and porous frontier running south from the Caucasus into Arabia. Each war was worse than the last, and conflict spread southward as far as Ethiopia, with Iran and Rome eventually contesting control of the India trade through the Red Sea. The 6th-century Roman emperor Justinian could not break the Persian monopoly there, so he and his successors tried to dominate the overland silk trade from China.

This evolved into a world war when the Turks got involved. In the 6th century the Turkish nomads of Inner Asia were the foremost military power of the age. They had overthrown the Huns who menaced Iran from the east, and had built an empire stretching from the borders of China to the Caspian Sea. With Roman backing, the Turks aimed to disrupt the Persian monopoly on the India trade by flooding Iranian markets with cheap Chinese silk which they had received as tribute from rival Chinese dynasties. Iran retaliated, and the armies of the Persian king Hormizd IV fought Roman and Turkish troops on multiple fronts and emerged victorious – further proof that the Iranian war machine was more than match for its rivals.

Long before the Roman adoption of Christianity, Sasanian Iran was the world’s first major confessional state. Ardashir I was supposedly descended from a line a Zoroastrian priests, and he and his family made Zoroastrianism the ideology of state. The Sasanian Empire had an uneasy relationship with other religions at first. Fear that Iranian Christians might side with Rome provoked persecutions. But in the early 4th century, the Persian king Yazdgard I granted toleration to his Christian subjects, and was even rumoured (falsely) to have converted. Other kings were not always as generous, but Iranian Christians became more and more numerous, and by the end of the 6th century they were holding high office at the court of king Khusro II.

Naqsh-e-Rostam relief, Iran, Sassanid Period. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naqsh-e-Rostam_(Iran)_Relief_Sassanid_Period.JPG)
To this day Khusro II is a gigantic figure. It was Khusro's conquest of nearly the entire eastern Roman Empire in the early 6th century that provoked the meditations on the end of the world that we find in the Qur’an and contemporary apocalyptic literature. For a moment in 620s, 800 years of Roman civilisation hung in the balance as Iranian armies and their nomadic allies closed in on the Roman capital at Constantinople. Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Asia Minor had already been conquered over the previous two decades. The fall of Constantinople was to be the final stroke that would extinguish Iran's western rival. At this moment the great king Khusro II might have contemplated re-establishing the patrimony of Cyrus, and ruling from the Nile to the Hindukush. Nothing, as it seemed, stood in the way of many more centuries of Sasanian supremacy.

But it was too good to be true. The Roman emperor Heraclius led a counterattack through Armenia, and formed an alliance with the Turks. The Turks smashed through Iranian defenses in the Caucasus, while Heraclius took the fight into the vicinity of the Persian capital at Ctesiphon, not far from modern Baghdad. The regime of Khusro II came under pressure, and the king's own son led a putsch against him and had him murdered on the night of 28 February, 628. Some efforts were made to restore peaceful relations after this. But the two powers were so badly weakened that they were easy prey new conquerors.

The Arabs, motivated by a new religion, suddenly began to raid the southern frontier of Iran. This quickly evolved into a conquest which swallowed Iran whole, and left only a Roman rump centred on Constantinople. The last Sasanian king, Yazdgard III, abandoned his capital
and fled for his life. He was killed before he could reach the Asiatic steppe, but his sons managed to reach China where they were welcomed at the Tang court at Chang’an.

*The Last Empire of Iran* tells the story of the Sasanian dynasty from beginning to end. It covers some of the most important events in human history, including the establishment of Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam as world religions, the migrations of the Huns and the Germanic peoples, the appearance of the Slavs and Turks in recorded history, and the collapse of an old order and the birth of new one. The Sasanian era deserves much more attention than it gets.

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