

# Sneaker's Corner presents

Is there something very  
Sasanian about Abd al Malik's  
idea of Islam as **Submission**?





The story of Emperor Valerian's final days gives us more than a hint of the origin of the Islamic idea of total submission to the Caliphate.



# Sebeos, chapter 36:

*The letter of the Ishmaelite king to the Byzantine emperor Constans.*

- "Send the multitude of your troops away from you, back to their own places. I shall make you a great prince in that region. I shall send ostikans to your city, examine all the treasures, and order them divided into four parts. Three parts will go to me, one part to you. I will give you as many troops as you need, and take as tribute as much as you are able to give. Otherwise, **how can that Jesus whom you call Christ**—who was unable to save himself from the Jews—possibly save **you from me?**"

# Sebeos, chapter 36:

*The letter of the Ishmaelite king to the Byzantine emperor Constans.*

- Notice how personal the threat is from Mu'awiya to Constans. It is not just a threat to the emperor's armies, but the person of the emperor himself at the hands of Mu'awiya.
- **“how can that Jesus whom you call Christ—who was unable to save himself from the Jews—possibly save you from me?”**
- If it sounds cocky, it is for good reason, because it recalls a cautionary tale from **Sasanian** history.

## Emperor Valerian

- Reign 253-260.



## Shapur I, Shahanshah of the Sasanian Empire

- Reign 240-270



# Valerian heads east

Valerian's first act as emperor on October 22, 253, was to appoint his son Gallienus caesar. Early in his reign, affairs in Europe went from bad to worse, and the whole West fell into disorder. In the East, Antioch had fallen into the hands of a Sassanid vassal and Armenia was occupied by Shapur I (Sapor). Valerian and Gallienus split the problems of the empire between them, with the son taking the West, and the father heading East to face the Persian threat.

# Emperor Valerian was a ruthless persecutor of Christians

While fighting the Persians, Valerian sent two letters to the Senate ordering that firm steps be taken against Christians. The first, sent in 257, commanded Christian clergy to perform sacrifices to the Roman gods or face banishment. The second, the following year, ordered the execution of Christian leaders. It also required Christian senators and equites to perform acts of worship to the Roman gods or lose their titles and property, and directed that they be executed if they continued to refuse.

# Valerian and Shapur

By 257, he had recovered Antioch and returned the province of Syria to Roman control. The following year, the Goths ravaged Asia Minor. In 259, Valerian moved on to **Edessa**, but an outbreak of plague killed a critical number of legionaries, weakening the Roman position, and the town was besieged by the Persians.



# A decisive defeat despite possessing 70,000 troops?

“In a great battle fought beyond Carrhae and Edessa, the Sasanian won a resounding victory, capturing the entire Roman army and deporting it to his homeland in Persia, along with its emperor-commander and substantial quantities of booty. All this Shapur tells us in his *Res Gestae*.” Trevor Bryce, *Ancient Syria*, p. 269

# Zosimus offers us a very different take on what happened

“According to Zosimus, Valerian, his army greatly reduced by plague, did not confront Shapur in battle but tried to buy him off, sending him envoys with an appeal to conclude hostilities, and a large gift of money as an adducement. Shapur refused to deal with the envoys and sent them back empty-handed. He insisted that he would discuss terms of peace with none but the emperor himself, who should come to him for this purpose.” *ibid.*

# Zosimus offers us a very different take on what happened

“And that is what Valerian foolishly did, taking with him only a small escort. On his arrival, he was seized by the enemy and ended his days as *a slave in Persis*, to the great disgrace of the Roman empire.” *ibid.*



## BLACK HAWK DOWN

# The worst possible scenario for the Romans..

- For the Romans, having their emperor captured alive and kept as a POW, was worse than losing a battle or even the emperor dying in battle. This was like the Romans' Black Hawk Down moment, except no one came to rescue the Emperor, he was left to his fate.

# Christian writer Lactantius

According to Lactantius, Valerian was used by Shapur as a footstool for mounting his horse and his carriage.



# Christian writer Lactantius

He says he was degraded in various ways up to his death. He was finally flayed alive and his skin dyed vermillion (red), stuffed with straw and put on display in one of the local Temples, as a warning to future visitors.



## p168, The works of Lactantius

plaster.” **Valerian** lived for a considerable time under the well-merited insults of his conqueror; so that the Roman name remained long the scoff and derision of the barbarians: and this also was added to the severity of his punishment, that although he had an emperor for his son, he found no one to revenge his captivity and most abject and servile state; neither indeed was he ever demanded back. Afterward, when he had finished this shameful life under so great dishonour, he was flayed, and his skin, stripped from the flesh, was dyed with vermilion, and placed in the temple of the gods of the barbarians, that the remembrance of a triumph so signal might be perpetuated, and that this spectacle might always be exhibited to our ambassadors, as an admonition to the Romans, that, beholding the spoils of their captived emperor in a Persian temple, they should not place too great confidence in their own strength.

# Shapur was happy to broadcast to the world Valerian's disgrace

A bas relief of Emperor  
Valerian standing at the  
background and held  
captive by Shapur I  
found at Naqsh-e  
Rustam, Shiraz, Iran.





What happened as regards Valerian's decree to persecute Christians?

Executions (included):

257 AD: St Prudent at Narbonne.

258 AD: Pope Sixtus II, St Romanus Ostiarius, St Lawrence, St Denis in Paris, Cyprian in Carthage and Eugenia in Rome.

In 259 Saint Patroclus was executed at Troyes.

In 260, Valerian was captured. His son Gallienus became emperor and the **decree was rescinded.**

# Islam means Sasanian-style Submission

When Abd al Malik inaugurated the new State Religion, I believe that his ruthless demand for total submission was inspired by the notorious example set by Shapur. Peace would only come through complete submission to the Caliph.

