Chapter One

An Age of Transition
From the Fall of the Roman West to
The Early Middle Ages

During the 5th century, Roman siege abilities passed to the successor kingdoms through a variety of means. Client armies drifted into and out of Roman service and control, especially during civil wars. Invaders appropriated the personnel and infrastructure of Rome. Roman elites, often in collaboration with invaders or usurpers, took over military administration, including the recruitment, pay and maintenance of troops, based on vast estates that had long been obliged to shoulder similar burdens under the Roman state. Much of the infrastructure needed for warfare in general and sieges in particular also passed under magnate control, as their military retinues and urban or rural dependents were recruited from, or acquired skills that had been monopolized by, the Roman army. Otherwise the necessary resources were provided through the militarization of traditional civic burdens and voluntary civic munificence, such as the obligation to repair infrastructure and competitive monumental construction. While all successor kingdoms utilized these administrative techniques to a greater or lesser extent, at least some of the new ruling élites originated as Roman field armies taking on new identities, a process that partly occurred in the East as well. Successor fighting methods remained the same. Not only did they keep the traditional Roman knack for breaking down or defending walls; sieges became more prevalent in the 5th century than they had been in the 4th.

1.1 From Late Roman to “Barbarian” Poliorcetics

The terrifying realities of siege warfare in late antiquity have been well attested by the finds at Dura-Europos in Syria, where the Sassanid Persians besieged the Romans in 256 AD. The city fell and the population was massacred or deported, leaving behind a ghost town with no-one to clear the debris. This has allowed modern archaeologists to explore the spectacular remains of the siege, which include evidence of complex engineering skills
on both sides.¹ A Persian siege ramp led up to the breastwork, internal Roman terraces supported the wall against battering and artillery, Persian saps undermined a corner tower and a long stretch of the adjoining wall, while Roman counter-mines intercepted the Persian siegeworks. One of these counter-mines was used in an attempt to undermine the Persian ramp. Another was directed against the Persian sappers undermining the tower. Evidence of what happened when the Romans intercepted the Persian sappers is dramatic in the extreme: when the Romans broke into the Persian sap, a brutal under-ground struggle ensued, resulting in the deaths of at least one Persian soldier and several Romans when the mines collapsed.² The Persians subsequently blocked off their mine with stones to prevent further Roman penetration. The fighting over ground was no less dramatic: a great number of artillery projectiles have been found around the walls, indicating fierce artillery duels as the Persians tried to overpower the Roman defenders on the ramparts in order to cover the Persian siegeworks or before attempting to storm the walls. These remains are clear evidence of Persian as well as Roman siege skills.³ Yet no literary descriptions of the siege are extant.

1.1.1 Late Roman Siege Warfare

Roman siege practices and their supporting infrastructure in the following century and a half are well known from the works of Ammianus and Vegetius in particular, and have received some measure of attention in modern scholarship, although conclusions are mixed.⁴ The engineering skills so

¹ Excavations have taken place since 1920 with extensive, but incomplete reports published in the following decades. There is still vigorous publication, including on military affairs. Here I follow the survey of the siege by Leriche 1993.
² S. James 2011 has proposed that the Persians used poisonous gas to kill the Romans: when the Persian sappers heard the Romans approaching, they prepared a trap of sulphur and bitumen that was ignited by a sole Persian soldier just when the Romans were about to break through. The effect would have been instant, as the gas rose quickly into the higher Roman tunnel, killing the Romans in seconds. The Persian soldier probably lingered too long to make sure that the mix ignited and was killed himself.
³ Further on Persian siege skills, see chapter 7.1.2 below (as well as chapters 2, 5 and 6 passim). For a survey of Roman siege warfare during the Republic and Principate, see e.g. Kern 1999: 251-351.
⁴ See most recently Elton 1996: 257-263 for a positive assessment on Late Roman methods of siege warfare in general; Rihll 2007: 251f is positive and argues for continued innovation by 4th century military engineers. Similarly Nicasie 1998 passim, but his focus lies elsewhere. Southern and Dixon 1996: 148 argue for an increase in the incidence of sieges and technological advances, but their treatment is mostly based on well-known anecdotes from Ammianus, Procopius and Vegetius. Marsden 1969: 195-98 is more dismissive of late Roman siege skills.