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Edward Gibbon Edited By J.B. Bury

Excerpt

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THE HISTORY
OF THE
DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE
CHAPTER XLV

Reign of the Younger Justin—Embassy of the Avars—Their Settlement on the Danube—Conquest of Italy by the Lombards—Adoption and Reign of Tiberius—of Maurice—State of Italy under the Lombards and the Exarchs of Ravenna—Distress of Rome—Character and Pontificate of Gregory the First

DURING the last years of Justinian, his infirm mind was devoted to heavenly contemplation, and he neglected the business of the lower world. His subjects were impatient of the long continuance of his life and reign; yet all who were capable of reflection apprehended the moment of his death, which might involve the capital in tumult and the empire in civil war. Seven nephews¹ of the childless monarch, the sons or grandsons of his brother and sister, had been educated in the splendour of a princely fortune; they had been shewn in high commands to the provinces and armies; their characters were known, their followers were zealous; and, as the jealousy of age postponed the declaration of a successor, they might expect with equal hopes the inheritance of their uncle. He expired in his palace after a reign of thirty-eight years; and the decisive opportunity was embraced by the friends of Justin, the son of Vigilantia.² At the hour of midnight his domestics were

Death of
Justinian.
A.D. 565,
Nov. 14

¹ See the family of Justin and Justinian in the *Familiæ Byzantinæ* of Ducange, p. 89-101. The devout civilians, Ludewig (in *Vit. Justinian.* p. 131) and Heineccius (*Hist. Juris Roman.* p. 374), have since illustrated the genealogy of their favourite prince.

² In the story of Justin's elevation I have translated into simple and concise prose the eight hundred verses of the two first books of Corippus, *de Laudibus Justini*, Appendix *Hist. Byzant.* p. 401-416, Rome, 1777. [See Appendix 1. For day of Justinian's death, Nov. 14, see Theophanes, *ad ann.* 6057 (a false reading—^{1a} for ^{1b}—appears in Clinton's citation of the passage, *Fast. Rom.*, *ad ann.*.)]

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awakened by an importunate crowd, who thundered at his door, and obtained admittance by revealing themselves to be the principal members of the senate. These welcome deputies announced the recent and momentous secret of the emperor's decease; reported, or perhaps invented, his dying choice of the best beloved and most deserving of his nephews; and conjured Justin to prevent the disorders of the multitude, if they should perceive, with the return of light, that they were left without a master. After composing his countenance to surprise, sorrow, and decent modesty, Justin, by the advice of his wife Sophia, submitted to the authority of the senate. He was conducted with speed and silence to the palace; the guards saluted their new sovereign; and the martial and religious rites of his coronation were diligently accomplished. By the hands of the proper officers he was invested with the Imperial garments, the red buskins, white tunic, and purple robe. A fortunate soldier, whom he instantly promoted to the rank of tribune, encircled his neck with a military collar; four robust youths exalted him on a shield; he stood firm and erect to receive the adoration of his subjects; and their choice was sanctified by the benediction of the patriarch, who imposed the diadem on the head of an orthodox prince. The hippodrome was already filled with innumerable multitudes; and no sooner did the emperor appear on his throne than the voices of the blue and the green factions were confounded in the same loyal acclamations. In the speeches which Justin addressed to the senate and people, he promised to correct the abuses which had disgraced the age of his predecessor, displayed the maxims of a just and beneficent government, and declared that, on the approaching calends of January,³ he would revive in his own person the name and liberality of a Roman consul. The immediate discharge of his uncle's debts exhibited a solid pledge of his faith and generosity: a train of porters laden with bags of gold advanced into the midst of the hippodrome, and the hopeless creditors of Justinian accepted this equitable payment as a voluntary gift. Before the end of three years his example was imitated and surpassed by the empress Sophia, who delivered many indigent citizens from the weight of debt and usury: an act of benevolence the best entitled to gratitude,

Reign of
Justin II. or
the younger.
A. D. 568, Nov.
15 [14]—A. D.
574, December

His consul-
ship, A. D.
566, January

³ It is surprising how Pagi (*Critica in Annal. Baron. tom. ii. p. 639*) could be tempted by any chronicles to contradict the plain and decisive text of Corippus (*vicina dona, l. ii. 354, vicina dies, l. iv. i.*), and to postpone, till A. D. 567, the consulship of Justin.

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since it relieves the most intolerable distress ; but in which the bounty of a prince is the most liable to be abused by the claims of prodigality and fraud.⁴

On the seventh day of his reign, Justin gave audience to the ambassadors of the Avars, and the scene was decorated to impress the barbarians with astonishment, veneration, and terror. From the palace gate, the spacious courts and long porticoes were lined with the lofty crests and gilt bucklers of the guards, who presented their spears and axes with more confidence than they would have shewn in a field of battle. The officers who exercised the power, or attended the person, of the prince were attired in their richest habits and arranged according to the military and civil order of the hierarchy. When the veil of the sanctuary was withdrawn, the ambassadors beheld the emperor of the East on his throne, beneath a canopy or dome, which was supported by four columns and crowned with a winged figure of victory. In the first emotions of surprise, they submitted to the servile adoration of the Byzantine court ; but, as soon as they rose from the ground, Targetius,⁵ the chief of the embassy, expressed the freedom and pride of a barbarian. He extolled, by the tongue of his interpreter, the greatness of the chagan, by whose clemency the kingdoms of the South were permitted to exist, whose victorious subjects had traversed the frozen rivers of Scythia, and who now covered the banks of the Danube with innumerable tents.⁶ The late emperor had cultivated, with annual and costly gifts, the friendship of a grateful monarch, and the enemies of Rome had respected the allies of the Avars. The same prudence would instruct the nephew of Justinian to imitate the liberality of his uncle, and to purchase the blessings of peace from an invincible people, who delighted and excelled in the exercise of war. The reply of the emperor was delivered in the same strain of haughty defiance, and he derived his confidence from the God of the Christians, the ancient glory of Rome, and the recent triumphs of Justinian. "The empire," said he, "abounds with men and horses, and arms sufficient to defend our frontiers and to chastise the barbarians. You offer aid, you threaten hostilities : we

Embassy of
the Avars.
A.D. 566

[Nov. 20]

⁴ Theophan. Chronograph. p. 205 [ad ann. 6059 ; the date is a year wrong ; see last note]. Whenever Cedrenus or Zonaras are mere transcribers, it is superfluous to allege their testimony.

⁵ [Ταργίτιος and Ταργίτης in Menander, fr. 28 ; but *Tergazis* in Corippus, iii. 258.]

⁶ [Cp. Appendix 2.]

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despise your enmity and your aid. The conquerors of the Avars solicit our alliance : shall we dread their fugitives and exiles ?⁷ The bounty of our uncle was granted to your misery, to your humble prayers. From us you shall receive a more important obligation, the knowledge of your own weakness. Retire from our presence ; the lives of ambassadors are safe ; and, if you return to implore our pardon, perhaps you will taste of our benevolence."⁸ On the report of his ambassadors, the chagan was awed by the apparent firmness of a Roman emperor, of whose character and resources he was ignorant. Instead of executing his threats against the eastern empire, he marched into the poor and savage countries of Germany, which were subject to the dominion of the Franks. After two doubtful battles he consented to retire, and the Austrasian king relieved the distress of his camp with an immediate supply of corn and cattle.⁹ Such repeated disappointments had chilled the spirit of the Avars, and their power would have dissolved away in the Sarmatian desert, if the alliance of Alboin, king of the Lombards, had not given a new object to their arms, and a lasting settlement to their wearied fortunes.

Alboin, king
of the Lombards—his
valour, love,
and revenge

While Alboin served under his father's standard, he encountered in battle, and transpierced with his lance, the rival prince of the Gepidæ. The Lombards, who applauded such early prowess, requested his father with unanimous acclamations

⁷ Corippus, l. iii. 390. The unquestionable sense relates to the Turks, the conquerors of the Avars ; but the word *scultor* has no apparent meaning, and the sole Ms. of Corippus, from whence the first edition (1581, apud Plantin) was printed, is no longer visible. The last editor, Foggini of Rome, has inserted the conjectural emendation of *soldan* ; but the proofs of Ducange (Joinville, Dissert. xvi. p. 238-240) for the early use of this title among the Turks and Persians are weak or ambiguous. And I must incline to the authority of d'Herbelot (Bibliothèque Orient. p. 825), who ascribes the word to the Arabic and Chaldean tongues, and the date to the beginning of the xith century, when it was bestowed by the caliph of Bagdad on Mahmud, prince of Gazna and conqueror of India. [This judgment on Foggini's conjecture is sound, though *sultan* is read by Partsch, the latest editor. It is doubtful whether the lines do refer to the Turks.]

⁸ For these characteristic speeches, compare the verse of Corippus (l. iii. 251-401) with the prose of Menander (Excerpt. Legation. p. 102, 103 [fr. 28, in F. H. G., iv.]). Their diversity proves that they did not copy each other ; their resemblance that they drew from a common original. [John of Ephesus says that Justin called the Avar envoys dogs, and threatened to cut off their hair and then their heads ; vi. 24.]

⁹ For the Austrasian war, see Menander (Excerpt. Legat. p. 110 [fr. 14, F. H. G., iv. p. 219]), Gregory of Tours (Hist. Franc. l. iv. c. 29), and Paul the Deacon (de Gest. Langobard. l. ii. c. 10). [This passage in Paul refers to the *first* invasion of the Merovingian dominions of the Avars, which took place in A.D. 562, and is recorded by Gregory in iv. 23. The date of the *second* invasion, recorded by Gregory in iv. 29 and by Menander, is probably A.D. 566.]

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that the heroic youth, who had shared the dangers of the field, might be admitted to the feast of victory. "You are not unmindful," replied the inflexible Audoin, "of the wise customs of our ancestors. Whatever may be his merit, a prince is incapable of sitting at table with his father till he has received his arms from a foreign and royal hand." Alboin bowed with reverence to the institutions of his country, selected forty companions, and boldly visited the court of Turisund king of the Gepidæ, who embraced and entertained, according to the laws of hospitality, the murderer of his son. At the banquet, whilst Alboin occupied the seat of the youth whom he had slain, a tender remembrance arose in the mind of Turisund. "How dear is that place—how hateful is that person!" were the words that escaped, with a sigh, from the indignant father. His grief exasperated the national resentment of the Gepidæ; and Cunimund, his surviving son, was provoked by wine, or fraternal affection, to the desire of vengeance. "The Lombards," said the rude barbarian, "resemble, in figure and in smell, the mares of our Sarmatian plains." And this insult was a coarse allusion to the white bands which enveloped their legs. "Add another resemblance," replied an audacious Lombard; "you have felt how strongly they kick. Visit the plain of Asfeld, and seek for the bones of thy brother; they are mingled with those of the vilest animals." The Gepidæ, a nation of warriors, started from their seats, and the fearless Alboin, with his forty companions, laid their hands on their swords. The tumult was appeased by the venerable interposition of Turisund. He saved his own honour, and the life of his guest; and, after the solemn rites of investiture, dismissed the stranger in the bloody arms of his son, the gift of a weeping parent. Alboin returned in triumph; and the Lombards, who celebrated his matchless intrepidity, were compelled to praise the virtues of an enemy.¹⁰ In this extraordinary visit he had probably seen the daughter of Cunimund, who soon after ascended the throne of the Gepidæ. Her name was Rosamond, an appellation expressive of female beauty, and which our own history or romance has consecrated to amorous tales. The king of the Lombards (the father of Alboin no longer lived) was contracted to the grand-daughter of Clovis; but the restraints of faith and policy soon yielded to the hope

¹⁰ Paul Warnefrid, the deacon of Friuli, *de Gest. Langobard.* l. i. c. 23, 24. His pictures of national manners, though rudely sketched, are more lively and faithful than those of Bede or Gregory of Tours.

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of possessing the fair Rosamond, and of insulting her family and nation. The arts of persuasion were tried without success ; and the impatient lover, by force and stratagem, obtained the object of his desires. War was the consequence which he foresaw and solicited ; but the Lombards could not long withstand the furious assault of the Gepidæ, who were sustained by a Roman army. And, as the offer of marriage was rejected with contempt, Alboin was compelled to relinquish his prey, and to partake of the disgrace which he had inflicted on the house of Cunimund.¹¹

The Lombards
and Avars
destroy the
king and
kingdom of
the Gepidæ.
A. D. 568
[567]

When a public quarrel is envenomed by private injuries, a blow that is not mortal or decisive can be productive only of a short truce, which allows the unsuccessful combatant to sharpen his arms for a new encounter. The strength of Alboin had been found unequal to the gratification of his love, ambition, and revenge ; he condescended to implore the formidable aid of the chagan ; and the arguments that he employed are expressive of the art and policy of the barbarians. In the attack of the Gepidæ he had been prompted by the just desire of extirpating a people whom their alliance with the Roman empire had rendered the common enemies of the nations and the personal adversaries of the chagan. If the forces of the Avars and the Lombards should unite in this glorious quarrel, the victory was secure, and the reward inestimable : the Danube, the Hebrus, Italy, and Constantinople would be exposed, without a barrier, to their invincible arms. But, if they hesitated or delayed to prevent the malice of the Romans, the same spirit which had insulted, would pursue the Avars to the extremity of the earth. These specious reasons were heard by the chagan with coldness and disdain ; he detained the Lombard ambassadors in his camp, protracted the negotiation, and by turns alleged his want of inclination, or his want of ability, to undertake this important enterprise. At length he signified the ultimate price of his alliance, that the Lombards should immediately present him with the tithe of their cattle ; that the spoils and captives should be equally divided ; but that the lands of the Gepidæ should become the sole patrimony of the Avars. Such hard conditions were eagerly accepted by the passions of Alboin ; and, as the Romans were dissatisfied with the ingratitude and perfidy of the Gepidæ, Justin abandoned that incorrigible people to their fate, and remained the tranquil spectator of this un-

¹¹ The story is told by an impostor (Theophylact. Simocat. l. vi. c. 10) ; but he had art enough to build his fictions on public and notorious facts.

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equal conflict.¹² The despair of Cunimund was active and dangerous. He was informed that the Avars had entered his confines ; but on the strong assurance that, after the defeat of the Lombards, these foreign invaders would easily be repelled, he rushed forwards to encounter the implacable enemy of his name and family. But the courage of the Gepidæ could secure them no more than an honourable death. The bravest of the nation fell in the field of battle ; the king of the Lombards contemplated with delight the head of Cunimund, and his skull was fashioned into a cup to satiate the hatred of the conqueror, or, perhaps, to comply with the savage custom of his country.¹³ After this victory no farther obstacle could impede the progress of the confederates, and they faithfully executed the terms of their agreement.¹⁴ The fair countries of Walachia, Moldavia, Transylvania, and the parts of Hungary beyond the Danube, were occupied, without resistance, by a new colony of Scythians ; and the Dacian empire of the chagans subsisted with splendour above two hundred and thirty years.¹⁵ The nation of the Gepidæ was dissolved ; but, in the distribution of the captives, the slaves of the Avars were less fortunate than the companions of the Lombards, whose generosity adopted a valiant foe, and whose freedom was incompatible with cool and deliberate tyranny. One moiety of the spoil introduced into the camp of Alboin more wealth than a barbarian could readily compute. The fair Rosamond was persuaded or compelled to acknowledge the rights of her victorious lover ; and the daughter of Cunimund appeared to forgive those crimes which might be imputed to her own irresistible charms.

The destruction of a mighty kingdom established the fame of Alboin. In the days of Charlemagne, the Bavarians, the Saxons, and the other tribes of the Teutonic language, still repeated the songs which described the heroic virtues, the

Alboin undertakes the conquest of Italy. A. D. 567 [568]

¹² [The negotiations between Avars and Lombards, described by Menander, fr. 24 and 25 (F. H. G. iv. p. 230), belong to A. D. 566 at earliest, and most probably ; the destruction of the Gepidæ is most naturally placed in 567.]

¹³ It appears from Strabo, Pliny, and Ammianus Marcellinus that the same practice was common among the Scythian tribes (Muratori, *Scriptores Rer. Italic.* tom. i. p. 424). The *scalps* of North America are likewise trophies of valour. The skull of Cunimund was preserved above two hundred years among the Lombards ; and Paul himself was one of the guests to whom duke Ratchis exhibited this cup on a high festival (l. ii. c. 28). [The same barbarity was practised by the Bulgarians. The skull of the Emperor Nicephorus I. was made into a cup by the Bulgarian sovran Crum. See below, c. lv.]

¹⁴ Paul, l. i. c. 27. Menander, in Excerpt. Legat. p. 110, 111 [*loc. cit.*].

¹⁵ [See Appendix 2.]

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valour, liberality, and fortune of the king of the Lombards.¹⁶ But his ambition was yet unsatisfied, and the conqueror of the Gepidæ turned his eyes from the Danube to the richer banks of the Po and the Tiber. Fifteen years had not elapsed since his subjects, the confederates of Narses, had visited the pleasant climate of Italy; the mountains, the rivers, the highways, were familiar to their memory; the report of their success, perhaps the view of their spoils, had kindled in the rising generation the flame of emulation and enterprise. Their hopes were encouraged by the spirit and eloquence of Alboin; and it is affirmed that he spoke to their senses by producing, at the royal feast, the fairest and most exquisite fruits that grew spontaneously in the garden of the world. No sooner had he erected his standard than the native strength of the Lombards was multiplied by the adventurous youth of Germany and Scythia. The robust peasantry of Noricum and Pannonia had resumed the manners of barbarians; and the names of the Gepidæ, Bulgarians, Sarmatians, and Bavarians, may be distinctly traced in the provinces of Italy.¹⁷ Of the Saxons, the old allies of the Lombards, twenty thousand warriors, with their wives and children, accepted the invitation of Alboin. Their bravery contributed to his success; but the accession or the absence of their numbers was not sensibly felt in the magnitude of his host. Every mode of religion was freely practised by its respective votaries. The king of the Lombards had been educated in the Arian heresy; but the Catholics, in their public worship, were allowed to pray for his conversion; while the more stubborn barbarians sacrificed a she-goat, or perhaps a captive, to the gods of their fathers.¹⁸ The Lombards and their confederates were united by their common attachment

¹⁶ Ut hactenus etiam tam apud Bajoariorum gentem, quam et Saxonum sed et alios ejusdem linguæ homines . . . in eorum carminibus celebretur. Paul. l. i. c. 27. He died A.D. 799 (Muratori, in Præfat. tom. i. p. 397). These German songs, some of which might be as old as Tacitus (de Moribus Germ. c. 12), were compiled and transcribed by Charlemagne. Barbara et antiquissima carmina, quibus veterum regum actus et bella canebantur scripsit memoriæque mandavit (Eginhard, in Vit. Carol. Magn. c. 29, p. 130, 131). The poems, which Goldast commends (Animadvers. ad Eginhard. p. 207), appear to be recent and contemptible romances.

¹⁷ The other nations are rehearsed by Paul (l. ii. c. 6, 26). Muratori (Antichità Italiane, tom. i. dissert. i. p. 4) has discovered the village of the Bavarians, three miles from Modena.

¹⁸ Gregory the Roman (Dialog. l. iii. c. 27, 28, apud Baron. Annal. Eccles. A.D. 579, No. 10) supposes that they likewise adored this she-goat. I know but of one religion in which the god and the victim are the same.

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to a chief, who excelled in all the virtues and vices of a savage hero; and the vigilance of Alboin provided an ample magazine of offensive and defensive arms for the use of the expedition. The portable wealth of the Lombards attended the march; their lands they cheerfully relinquished to the Avars, on the solemn promise, which was made and accepted without a smile, that, if they failed in the conquest of Italy, these voluntary exiles should be reinstated in their former possessions.

They might have failed, if Narses had been the antagonist of Disaffection and death of Narses the Lombards; and the veteran warriors, the associates of his Gothic victory, would have encountered with reluctance an enemy whom they dreaded and esteemed. But the weakness of the Byzantine court was subservient to the barbarian cause; and it was for the ruin of Italy that the emperor once listened to the complaints of his subjects. The virtues of Narses were stained with avarice; and in his provincial reign of fifteen years he accumulated a treasure of gold and silver which surpassed the modesty of a private fortune. His government was oppressive or unpopular, and the general discontent was expressed with freedom by the deputies of Rome. Before the throne of Justin they boldly declared that their Gothic servitude had been more tolerable than the despotism of a Greek eunuch; and that, unless their tyrant were instantly removed, they would consult their own happiness in the choice of a master. The apprehension of a revolt was urged by the voice of envy and detraction, which had so recently triumphed over the merit of Belisarius. A new exarch,¹⁹ Longinus, was appointed to supersede the conqueror of Italy, and the base motives of his recall were revealed in the insulting mandate of the empress Sophia, "that he should leave to *men* the exercise of arms, and return to his proper station among the maidens of the palace, where a distaff should be again placed in the hand of the eunuch". "I will spin her such a thread, as she shall not easily unravel!" is said to have been the reply which indignation and conscious virtue extorted from the hero. Instead of attending, a slave and a victim, at the gate of the Byzantine palace, he retired to Naples, from whence (if any credit is due to the belief of the times) Narses invited the Lombards to chastise the ingratitude of the prince and people.²⁰ But the passions of the people are

¹⁹ [There is some doubt whether Longinus bore this title. The first governor who certainly was "exarch" is Smaragdus, the successor of Longinus, A.D. 585.]

²⁰ The charge of the deacon against Narses (l. ii. c. 5) may be groundless; but the weak apology of the cardinal (Baron. Annal. Eccles. A.D. 567, No. 8-12) is

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furious and changeable, and the Romans soon recollected the merits, or dreaded the resentment, of their victorious general. By the mediation of the pope, who undertook a special pilgrimage to Naples, their repentance was accepted; and Narses, assuming a milder aspect and a more dutiful language, consented to fix his residence in the Capitol. His death,²¹ though in the extreme period of old age, was unseasonable and premature, since *his* genius alone could have repaired the last and fatal error of his life. The reality, or the suspicion, of a conspiracy disarmed and disunited the Italians. The soldiers resented the disgrace, and bewailed the loss, of their general. They were ignorant of their new exarch; and Longinus was himself ignorant of the state of the army and the province. In the preceding years Italy had been desolated by pestilence and famine, and a disaffected people ascribed the calamities of nature to the guilt or folly of their rulers.²²

c. A.D. 573]

Conquest of a
great part of
Italy by the
Lombards,
A.D. 568-570

Whatever might be the grounds of his security, Alboin neither expected nor encountered a Roman army in the field. He ascended the Julian Alps, and looked down with contempt and desire on the fruitful plains to which his victory communicated the perpetual appellation of **LOMBARDY**. A faithful chieftain and a select band were stationed at Forum Julii, the modern Friuli, to guard the passes of the mountains. The Lombards

rejected by the best critics—Pagì (tom. ii. p. 639, 640), Muratori (Annali d'Italia, tom. v. p. 160-163), and the last editors, Horatius Blancus (Script. Rerum Italic. tom. i. p. 427, 428) and Philip Argelatus (Sigon. Opera, tom. ii. p. 11, 12). The Narses who assisted at the coronation of Justin (Corippus, l. iii. 221) is clearly understood to be a different person. [The only evidence, deserving consideration, for the charge against Narses consists in: (α) the statement of the biographer of Pope John III. (Lib. Pontif. lxiii.), who wrote, as the Abbé Duchesne has established, c. 580-590, A.D.; the statement of Paul the Deacon, cited above, is copied from this biography; (β) the statement of Isidore of Seville (Chron. 402, ed. Mommsen in Chron. Min. ii. p. 476). This evidence does not establish a presumption of his guilt, but shows that very soon after the event it was generally believed that he was in collusion with the invaders. The story of the distaff appears in an earlier writer than Paul, namely "Fredegarius" (3, 65), who makes Sophia send Narses a golden distaff. So Euelthon, king of Cyprian Salamis, gave a distaff and wool to Pheretime of Cyrene, when she asked him for an army (Herodotus, 4, 162). And we shall presently see the same symbol used for insult by a Persian prince (below, p. 46).]

²¹ The death of Narses is mentioned by Paul, l. ij. c. 11; Anastas. in Vit. Johan. iii. p. 43; Agnellus, Liber Pontifical. Raven. in Script. Rer. Italicarum, tom. ii. part 1, p. 114, 124. Yet I cannot believe with Agnellus that Narses was ninety-five years of age. Is it probable that all his exploits were performed at four-score?

²² The designs of Narses and of the Lombards for the invasion of Italy are exposed in the last chapter of the first book, and the seven first chapters of the second book, of Paul the Deacon.