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# Perceptions of classical Armenia: Romano-Parthian relations, 70 BC-AD 220

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PERCEPTIONS OF CLASSICAL ARMENIA:  
ROMANO-PARTHIAN RELATIONS, 70 BC-220 AD

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by  
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## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Abstract . . . . .   | iii |
| Introduction . . . . .   | 1   |
| Chapter  |     |
| 1. Origins of the Romano-Parthian Conflict . . . . .               | 4   |
| Review of Literature . . . . .                                     | 6   |
| <i>Luxuria et Avaritia</i> . . . . .                               | 9   |
| <i>Gens et Patria</i> . . . . .                                    | 11  |
| Lucius Licinius Lucullus . . . . .                                 | 14  |
| Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus . . . . .                                   | 21  |
| Marcus Licinius Crassus and Mark Antony . . . . .                  | 25  |
| Conclusion . . . . .   | 28  |
| 2. Parthia and Armenia under the Julio-Claudian Emperors . . . . . | 30  |
| Parthia in Roman Literature . . . . .                              | 32  |
| Caesar Augustus . . . . .  | 34  |
| Tiberius . . . . .   | 39  |
| Caligula and Claudius . . . . .                                    | 43  |
| Nero . . . . .   | 45  |
| Conclusion . . . . .   | 50  |
| 3. Trajan's Parthian Campaign . . . . .                            | 53  |
| Optimus Princeps . . . . .   | 56  |
| The Case for Premeditation . . . . .                               | 61  |
| The Fall of the Arsacids . . . . .                                 | 67  |
| Conclusion . . . . .   | 74  |
| Epilogue . . . . .   | 76  |
| Bibliography . . . . .   | 77  |
| Appendix   |     |
| 1. List of Rulers . . . . .  | 80  |
| 2. Maps . . . . .  | 83  |
| Vita . . . . .   | 85  |

## Abstract

Relative to its importance, little research has been done on the Romano-Parthian rivalry that existed during the first two centuries AD. By extension, even less has been written concerning the kingdom of classical Armenia, which often served as the focal point of that bitter conflict. The absence of such research is regrettable, for it was this very rivalry that dictated how the Empire's eastern border would be defined. According to many modern scholars and several of the classical authors, Romans feared the looming threat of the Parthian state. Although such panic was unfounded, this fear supposedly then prompted the Empire's prolonged obsession with the territory of Armenia, which both the scholarly and primary sources look upon as a military buffer state. Yet in reality, Roman action in the East was not the result of a collective decision of all Roman citizens, but rather brought about by the individual wants and desires of Rome's leaders. These leaders regarded Armenia not as a buffer state, but as a staging ground for their various campaigns against Parthia. It was their personal ambitions, rather than Rome's collective fear, that drew Armenia under the veil of Roman hegemony. This project intends to examine Armenia's role in the Romano-Parthian conflict and hopes to prove that Roman imperialism was not defensive, as some scholars assert, but rather the end product of the ambitions of individual Roman leaders.

## Introduction

The Roman Republic's acquisition of the kingdom of Pergamum in 133 BC marked the beginning of a long era of military occupation and political interference in Asia Minor.<sup>1</sup> The Third Mithridatic War (c. 74/73-71) in particular led Roman forces beyond Anatolia to the very borders of Armenia. There, the campaigns of L. Licinius Lucullus and Gn. Pompeius Magnus brought Rome into direct conflict with the Armenian monarch Tigranes II. Over the course of the next three centuries, several major campaigns and countless smaller expeditions would be conducted in the territory of the Upper Euphrates. Diplomacy and court intrigues would result in the seemingly endless rise and fall of Armenian kings, some clients of and others hostile to Rome. At the death of Tigranes in 55 BC, however, Armenia became at best a second rate power in the Near East. Why then, considering the resources expended during such endeavors, did the Romans seek so desperately to maintain either military or political control of this rather unproductive and often inhospitable territory?

One theory points to the threat that the Parthian Empire began to pose during the latter half of the first century BC. This explanation proposes that the Romans regarded Armenia as a defensive 'buffer' state, shielding the more vital imperial provinces of Asia Minor and the Near East.<sup>2</sup> This fact is not in dispute, for the Romans themselves, as the literature will show, did indeed believe this territory to be such a bulwark. The

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<sup>1</sup> Strabo 13.4.2.

<sup>2</sup> For references to Armenia as a 'buffer' state see Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 24; and Adrian N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Foreign Policy in the East: 168 BC-AD 1* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 337; For references to Rome's defensive policies see Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome* Vol. II, Trans. by William Dickson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), 520-22 et passim; and Tenney Frank, *Roman Imperialism* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1925), 8-9 et passim.

biographer Suetonius criticized the Emperor Tiberius for allowing “the Parthians to overrun Armenia – a negligence as dangerous to the Empire as it was dishonorable.”<sup>3</sup>

It should be, though, no surprise that the perceptions of the Roman authors and reality did not necessarily coincide. Such a theory depicts Rome as being on the defensive, resisting the constant assaults of an aggressive Parthia. Regardless of what the ancient writers assert, however, this was simply not the case.

Roman generals, who led armies into Armenia following the campaigns of Lucullus and Pompey, were, in fact, doing so in order to obtain glory and plunder, not from that territory, but from its fierce and wealthy neighbor Parthia. The Third Mithridatic War did, indeed, have repercussions far beyond anything that the Romans had originally intended. It introduced them to the opportunities and wonders available from the Middle and Far East. The Parthian Empire, which bestrode several famous trade routes to India and China, flourished during the centuries in question by becoming the middleman of the classical world. Thus, it is understandable why it also became the object of so many Romans’ ambitions.<sup>4</sup>

Armenia was, in fact, therefore a defensive ‘buffer’ zone, though not for the Romans. For when we examine in detail the military and political history of this territory, as this paper intends to do, it is not the Roman Empire that appears on the defensive. Regardless of what the sources, which are predominately Roman, suggest, few Parthian armies ever mobilized that seriously endangered the imperial provinces. It was rather Rome’s perpetual interference in Armenian and sometimes Parthian politics that continually threatened the stability of the region. The territory of Armenia must,

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<sup>3</sup> Sue. *Tib.* 41.

<sup>4</sup> M. P. Charlesworth, *Trade-Routes and Commerce of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), 58.

therefore, be viewed less as a 'buffer' state and more as a staging ground. The Roman Empire must be regarded, not as a noble defender of its provinces and allies, but as a relentless aggressor, bent on expansion.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to reshape modern views of ancient Armenia. It will examine in detail the eastern campaigns and policies of Rome's generals and emperors. Although its scope will span nearly three centuries, 70 BC – AD 220, it intends to show an overall pattern of Roman belligerence and militancy. Still, this pattern should not be mistaken for an overarching strategy. Despite some historians' attempts to prove otherwise, Roman expansion in the East proceeded on a case by case basis. The fires of Roman aggression were thus stoked not according to some grand master plan, but according to the personal wants and desires of prominent Roman figures like Pompey, Caesar Augustus, and Trajan. Their private lusts for glory and plunder sustained Rome's preoccupation with Armenia, not for its own sake, but for the sake of what lay beyond. Parthia was, for many Romans, the greatest prize – and Armenia, but a steppingstone.

## Chapter 1 Origins of the Romano-Parthian Conflict

By 70 BC, the Third Mithridatic War between the Roman Republic and the Kingdom of Pontus was winding to an indefinite conclusion. Despite having routed the army of the Pontic king Mithridates IV Eupator, the Roman general L. Licinius Lucullus had been unable to capture the king himself, who had fled eastward seeking protection at the court of his son-in-law Tigranes II the Great of Armenia. Lucullus was prevented from an immediate pursuit by prolonged sieges at Sinope and Amisus and tribal uprisings of the Chaldaei and Tibareni. Although Pontus was now firmly under Roman control, the escape of Mithridates must have made any such victory seem hollow and unfulfilling.<sup>5</sup>

The Pontic king had, for nearly thirty years, been the undoing of Rome's policies concerning its Asian provinces. Besides being a constant threat to the Roman client kingdoms of Bithynia and Cappadocia, his diplomatic maneuverings and military incursions had already drawn Rome into two previous wars. If Lucullus was to accept a triumph for his successes in Asia, such a display had to include the vanquished, broken figure of Mithridates himself. Only then would Rome know that the power of Pontus had been checked once and for all.<sup>6</sup>

To secure the king's person, Lucullus sent his legate Appius Claudius to Armenia. Tigranes the Great was, however, unable or perhaps unwilling to hold a timely audience with the Roman emissary. Only after a lengthy journey throughout the territory was Appius finally received by Tigranes at Antioch, at which meeting the rather

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<sup>5</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 19, 23; App. *Mithr.* 83; and Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 171-73.

<sup>6</sup> Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 171-73.



cavalier demands of the Romans were presented. Appius ordered Tigranes either to produce his father-in-law Mithridates or to expect a declaration of war from the Romans. It is unknown whether or not such a lack of diplomacy reflected Lucullus' true position or merely that of an agitated, travel-weary Appius. Left no room for proper negotiation or compromise, however, Tigranes had no choice but to deny the Romans their prize. Thus in 69, Lucullus launched the first Roman invasion of Armenia.<sup>7</sup>

Such a story is noteworthy not only because it marks a turning point in the history of Rome's eastern expansion, but also because it provides crucial insight into the motivations behind those ambitions. Most ancient authors propose that Roman expansion was 'defensive.' In Cicero's *De re publica*, the younger C. Laelius boasts, "Our people has now gained power over the whole world by defending its allies."<sup>8</sup> In similar vein, Polybius implies that all the Romans wanted was to protect themselves from their 'frightening neighbors.'<sup>9</sup> Rome did, indeed, in some cases see itself as being offended or even assaulted by those peoples on its borders. The sources attest as much. Yet, although diplomatic affronts and hostilities warranted a military response in some instances, in others they certainly did not. Such insults sometimes merely provided a necessary pretext for Roman aggression. Appius' confrontation with Tigranes, which will be discussed later in greater detail, demonstrates that these 'incidents' could be easily manufactured. What then were the real motivations for this expansion and from where did they derive?

This very question has served as the basis for much recent scholarship. Great effort has been made to disprove notions of 'defensive' imperialism. Chapter 1 will

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<sup>7</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 21; App. *Mithr.* 83.

<sup>8</sup> Cic. *Rep.* 3.23.

<sup>9</sup> Polyb. 1.10.

review this modern literature and then attempt to elicit the true motivations behind Roman expansion. It will also be necessary to examine the Armenian and Parthian campaigns of Lucullus, Pompey, Crassus, and Mark Antony. Their eastern expeditions laid the groundwork for Rome's future relationship with Parthia and established precedents that would be carried well into the third century AD.

### **Review of Literature**

Scant research has been done specifically on the territory of classical Armenia. Scholars more often choose to incorporate its history into broader works concerning Rome's eastern provinces and affairs. This topic is also made more difficult by the fact that the literary evidence which has survived concerning Armenia is disseminated throughout such a wide range of primary source materials. Thus, this project must first credit several texts which have proved invaluable for both their critical insight and guidance through such a complicated topic. These works include: Adrian N. Sherwin-White's *Roman Foreign Policy in the East, 168 BC-AD 1*, Neilson C. Debevoise's *A Political History of Parthia*, and F. A. Lepper's *Trajan's Parthian War*. However, despite their usefulness, these texts are but merely the most recent interpretation of an argument which has spanned nearly a century.<sup>10</sup>

Debates among historians concerning Roman expansion and notions of defensive imperialism first arose at the end of the nineteenth century. Interest in this topic, no doubt, stemmed from contemporary efforts to explain or perhaps justify modern European colonialism. Theodor Mommsen and Tenney Frank are the best known authors of Roman defensive theory. Based both on literary evidence, such as

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<sup>10</sup> Sherwin-White *Roman Policy*; Neilson C. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938); and F. A. Lepper, *Trajan's Parthian War* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1948).

those aforementioned quotations from Cicero and Polybius, and on other textual references to longstanding Roman traditions, such as the fetial ceremony, this theory suggests that Rome's expansion was the result of its natural response to outside aggression. So persuasive were Mommsen and Frank that such thinking has dominated the field of Roman history for much of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

Only in recent decades have historians begun to question and reevaluate these ideas. William V. Harris' *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome: 327- 70 BC* seeks to refute defensive imperialism by emphasizing Rome's obvious other motivations for expanding. Besides various economic incentives, Rome's generals and emperors longed for any opportunity to further their quests for glory and honor. Harris proposes, therefore, that Roman expansion was not the latent result of defensive measures, but rather the aftereffect of a conscious effort to acquire wealth and prestige.<sup>12</sup>

Other scholars have attempted to attribute an over-arching strategy to the growth of the Roman state in order to show that its progression was not random or haphazard as defensive theory asserts. The groundbreaking work that first put forth this idea was Edward Luttwak's *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*. In it, Luttwak argues that the development of the Roman frontier can be divided into three distinct phases: an early period of client states under the Julio-Claudians, an era of 'scientific' or preclusive borders founded by the Flavians and Antonines, and finally a defense-in-depth strategy adopted during the crises of the third century.<sup>13</sup>

Although initially persuasive, there are problems with this theory. The two most recent attempts to refute or to revise Luttwak's thesis have been Benjamin Isaac's *The*

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<sup>11</sup> Mommsen *History of Rome* 520-22; Frank *Roman Imperialism* 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> William V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327-70 BC* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 54-67, 105-130.

<sup>13</sup> Luttwak *Grand Strategy* 1-7.

*Limits of Empire* and Susan P. Mattern's *Rome and the Enemy*. One glaring criticism of Luttwak is that his theory is too generalized. If, in fact, there was a Roman strategy, how could that single strategy be applied to an empire so large and diverse? Isaac's work thus focuses specifically on Rome's Asian and Near Eastern frontiers. He differs from Luttwak by asserting that there were no definitive borders in the east. He suggests rather that "the political boundary of the empire was irrelevant as a concept, and the military boundary was never organized as a 'line of defense'."<sup>14</sup> The function of Roman legions stationed in Asia Minor, Syria, and Judea, according to Isaac, was to serve as a police force. The local Roman magistrates relied on the army not only to quell potential rebellions, but also to enforce the collection of tribute. Therefore, these legions were garrisoned in towns and cities, where they might be more effective for these purposes, and not on some remote frontier along an imaginary line in the sand.<sup>15</sup>

Critics of Luttwak also argue that the Romans may have even been incapable of thinking in terms of geographical or political borders. Mattern points out that Romans formulated most of their perceptions of other peoples through ethnographic literature. They spoke of their enemies in terms of tribes and kings, and not as states or kingdoms. A Roman map, known as an *itinerarium pictum* or a *periplus*, usually depicted at best a crude representation of the Mediterranean basin. Armies or merchants typically compiled these itineraries to record distances between cities. Mattern suggests that the Romans, hampered by such inaccurate tools, were unable to clearly define their borders or to contrive any workable strategies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 3-5, 43-45, 385-86.

<sup>16</sup> Susan P. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 1-3, 21-23, 24-26, 42-43.

This paper sides with Isaac and Mattern in rejecting Luttwak's theory of a grand strategy. However, it also dismisses notions of 'defensive' imperialism, agreeing with Harris and others. Generals and emperors who acted in the East did so on an *ad hoc* basis, and not in accordance with some master plan. Rome's eastern commanders were often given free rein concerning frontier policy. Left to their own devices, they pursued the two things dictated most important by their culture, wealth and glory. It would be prudent here to examine these particular motivations in greater detail.

### ***Luxuria et Avaritia***

Despite its staunchly conservative values of stoicism and military preparedness, Roman society was not shy about its growing affluence. This fact is evident from the fervent reactions of such noted moralists as Cato the Elder, who advocated a return to traditional Roman values. Although Cato himself approved of expansion, he feared that the constant influx of wealth would make his countrymen soft and ill prepared to deal with their enemies. He had witnessed firsthand the *luxuria* and *avaritia* brought about by the Punic Wars and loathed the ostentation and sumptuousness in which the Romans reveled.<sup>17</sup>

Still, Cato's warnings went unheeded by most Romans who looked upon expansion as a vast untapped enterprise. For warfare in the ancient world, as long as one was victorious, benefited nearly all levels of a society. Officers and common soldiers that made up the conquering army naturally received a portion of the booty. Yet, a vast amount of the gold and silver plundered was also reserved for the state. The transport of this bullion, in addition to captives and slaves, was delegated to merchants, whose class also produced and distributed military supplies. Resident

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<sup>17</sup> Livy 34.2-4.

Romans, especially members of the equestrian class, living among conquered peoples also grew wealthy as moneylenders, tax-farmers, and slave-traders. Romans must, therefore, have seen expansion and the accumulation of wealth as being inextricably connected.<sup>18</sup>

Treasure stores and slaves were not, furthermore, the only things of value to be gained from warfare. Since the late first century BC, Rome had been in indirect contact with Far Eastern states in India and China. These contacts developed eventually into extensive trading networks; and, by the first century AD, Rome was, indeed, engaged in costly trade with the Far East. Pliny the Elder lamented: “And by the lowest reckoning India, China, and the Arabian peninsula take from our empire 100 million sesterces every year – that is the sum which our luxuries and our women cost us; for what fraction of these imports, I ask you, now goes to the gods or to the powers of the lower world?”<sup>19</sup> The emperor Tiberius too noted this growing trend when he complained of “the feminine specialty – the export of our currency to foreign or enemy countries for precious stones.”<sup>20</sup> Hoards of early Roman coinage have been discovered in southern India where pearls and spices were sold to western traders. The anonymous *Periplus Maris Erythraei* provides lists of the many goods transported across the Indian Ocean to the covetous markets of the Roman Empire. Such lists included not only gems and spices, but also silks, ivory, tortoise shells, and slaves.<sup>21</sup>

Any hindrance posed to this trade by Parthia and other rival states must have influenced Roman policy concerning its eastern boundary. Interference there

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<sup>18</sup> William V. Harris *War and Imperialism* 56; Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 15-17; and Tenney Frank, “Mercantilism and Rome’s Foreign Policy,” *American Historical Review* 18 (1912-13): 249-52.

<sup>19</sup> Plin. *HN* 12.84.

<sup>20</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3.52.

<sup>21</sup> Charlesworth *Trade-Routes* 58-63; *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton: Lionel Casson, 1989), 39-43.

threatened not only the supply of luxury goods, but also the very livelihood of the Roman aristocracy – the class that not only dictated, but also carried out Rome’s international policies. To support its sumptuous lifestyle, the senatorial class, which had long relied on its large landed estates, also became involved in maritime trade. The Roman elite had, therefore, a vested interest in eastern affairs. From his research on Roman foreign relations during the Republican Period, Harris concludes that the Senate annexed territory whenever “it was possible and profitable to do so.”<sup>22</sup>

The Roman aristocracy was, thus, conscious of the economic benefits of warfare and did not hesitate when given the opportunity to expand both its borders and its fortunes. But was this pursuit of wealth the sole driving force behind the imperial war machine? To think so does seem premature, for in the funeral eulogy of L. Caecilius Metellus “acquiring great wealth” is deemed only acceptable when done so “by good means.”<sup>23</sup> It would seem then that there was both a right and a wrong way to pursue one’s fortune, and that Roman values were not strictly defined by economics alone. Roman morality did have its part to play in the saga of imperial expansion. It is to this topic that we now turn.

### ***Gens et Patria***

The Roman moral code demanded strict allegiance to both one’s family and fatherland. Every Roman aristocrat did, after all, owe his privileged status to these two institutions. Bringing honor to one’s household and glory to the state were considered the greatest of Roman virtues. One could achieve such praise not only by succeeding in business ventures, but also by winning political elections and securing military

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<sup>22</sup> Livy 21.63; Harris *War and Imperialism* 105-7.

<sup>23</sup> Plin. *HN* 7.140.

appointments. Dedication to the *gens* and *patria* was ingrained in the Roman psyche. It defined who the Romans were; it motivated them to excel.

Roman *gentes*, or clans, cooperated and negotiated with each other by means of complicated marriage alliances. Securing a propitious union for one's son or daughter could result in lucrative business opportunities or useful political connections. Opulent dowries also accompanied the most favorable brides. But such prizes were not easily won by a *gens* without power and prestige of its own. Thus, young Romans, whether in politics or in the military, were encouraged to seek public renown, for with fame came honor and often the best offers of marriage. In a letter describing a suitable husband for the niece of his friend Junius Mauricus, Pliny spends most of the correspondence praising the political accomplishments of the potential bridegroom's uncle, Publius Acilius, who "passed with the greatest credit through the offices of quaestor, tribune, and praetor."<sup>24</sup>

A successful political or military career benefited not only one's living relatives, but also one's descendants. Roman honor was passed from one generation to the next. Having even a distant ancestor who was once made consul or commander of a legion could increase a family's prestige. The greatest of the *gentes* traced their lineage to the very heroes of Rome's early history. Romans paid homage to these forebears by displaying images of each household's most distinguished ancestors.

However, the reliance on ancestry as the defining mark of one's nobility and class did not lead to lethargy among the elite. Immense pressure was placed on Roman youths to equal or to surpass the accomplishments of their forefathers. In a well-known story depicting proper Roman matronhood, the adolescent grandsons of

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<sup>24</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 1.14.



Scipio Africanus, the acclaimed hero of the Second Punic War, are berated by their mother Cornelia for not yet having become as famous as their grandfather.<sup>25</sup> Behind the drive for imperial expansion is this very notion of one-upmanship. Rome's generals and emperors sought to honor their *gentes* by winning more battles, conquering more territory, and plundering more treasure stores than any other Roman had before them.

In addition to honoring the *gens*, the successful expansion of the Empire also signified the triumph of the *patria* and of Roman ideals. Many Romans reveled in the idea that they were somehow superior to those peoples that they had conquered, and that this superiority justified Roman hegemony over the entire world. Numerous references to the *fines imperii* are found in public prayers, official prophecies, and honorary inscriptions.<sup>26</sup> One such inscription, commissioned by Pompey in 61, claims that he had extended the imperial frontiers to the ends of the earth.<sup>27</sup> In his speeches against the conspirator Catiline, Cicero declares, "Our empire ends not in any region of the earth but in the heavens."<sup>28</sup>

The very cultural atmosphere of Rome seems then to have promoted expansion. This fact should not be surprising considering the warlike character of the Roman people. They did, after all, entertain themselves with the blood sports of gladiatorial shows and chariot races. But to say that imperial expansion was merely the result of some sort of bloodlust would be too simplified. Roman honor was based on a complex relationship between the individual, the *gens*, and the *patria*. By winning praise in the Senate or on the battlefield, a Roman brought honor not only to himself, but also to his family and fatherland. Both Harris and Sherwin-White agree that, although economic

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<sup>25</sup> Plut. *Tib.* 8.5.

<sup>26</sup> Harris *War and Imperialism* 118-25.

<sup>27</sup> Diod. Sic. 40.4.

<sup>28</sup> Cic. *Cat.* 3.26.

factors did play their part in extending the frontiers, it was this insatiable pursuit of honor and glory that actually drove Roman expansion. It would be useful here to discuss several of the Late Republican generals who best exemplify such ambitions.<sup>29</sup>

### **Lucius Licinius Lucullus**

It was perhaps Rome's conflicted policies towards its new Asian province that allowed Mithridates Eupator his initial victories. Beginning in 91, the Pontic king shrewdly annexed Bithynia and Cappadocia with little or no Roman reprisal. His armies then proceeded into western Anatolia, all the while slaughtering resident Romans and Italians. These massacres resulted in the First Mithridatic War (89-85), during which Pontic forces reached as far as Athens before being halted by L. Cornelius Sulla's five legions. Mithridates surrendered at Dardanus and was permitted to return to Pontus. The Second Mithridatic War (c. 83-81) pitted the Pontic king against Sulla's lieutenant L. Licinius Murena. However, this conflict was confined to raids and border skirmishes and was soon abandoned by both sides. Then in 76/75, Nicomedes IV of Bithynia died suddenly and, as Attalus of Pergamum had done, left his kingdom to the Roman people. Mithridates again mobilized for war. At the same time, several factions in Rome were pushing to renew hostilities with Pontus. The Third Mithridatic War initiated by Pontus' invasion of Bithynia in 74/73, may thus be regarded as a preemptive strike. Mithridates was well aware that, however haphazard it might seem, left unchecked, Roman expansion would eventually threaten his own kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

In 74, both Roman consuls were dispatched to Asia to prepare for the coming war with Mithridates, although only one, M. Cotta, had originally been selected for this

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<sup>29</sup> Harris *War and Imperialism* 56; Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 15-17.

<sup>30</sup> Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 93-121, 149-52.

purpose. The other consul, L. Lucullus, who had been allotted Cisalpine Gaul, conspired with his co-consul to secure instead the Asian province of Cilicia. Both men undoubtedly knew that an eastern war would provide them with more opportunities for glory and plunder than any pacified western province ever could. This is not to say, however, that there were not other conflicts elsewhere. Besides the looming problems in Asia, to which four legions had already been delegated, the empire also had to contend with tribal revolts in Macedon, rampant piracy throughout the Mediterranean, and civil war in Hispania. The difference is that these other troubled regions essentially required police actions and did not provide the same opportunities for prestige. Resolving civil or tribal disputes could not nearly match saving the state from Mithridates, whom most Romans regarded as a despotic megalomaniac.<sup>31</sup>

The first phase of the war commenced, as mentioned, in 74/73 with Mithridates' invasion of Bithynia. At Chalcedon, the Pontic king confronted Cotta, whom he quickly defeated. He then laid siege to the port city of Cyzicus, hoping to establish naval supply shipments via the Black Sea from his other holdings in Colchis and the Crimea. Lucullus, arriving too late to assist his co-consul at Chalcedon, encircled Mithridates' army and began a counter-siege. The Romans avoided a pitched battle, while incessantly harrying their foe's overland supply lines. Unable to immediately take Cyzicus, the Pontic forces were eventually beset by hunger and disease. That winter, Mithridates withdrew to Pontus with but a fraction of his original army.<sup>32</sup>

Following Mithridates' retreat, several Roman proconsuls met at Nicomedia to discuss their strategy. Although the conservative element at this meeting favored a

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<sup>31</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 5.1-6.5.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 8.6-8, 9.2-5; App. *Mithr.* 72-76.

diplomatic end to the war, Lucullus and his associates insisted on pursuing Mithridates. Perhaps Lucullus felt that he had not attained the glory he duly deserved because there had been no definitive battle.<sup>33</sup>

In the summer of 71, Lucullus launched his Pontic campaign with the intention of capturing Mithridates and ending Rome's troubles in Asia. However, the second phase of the war proceeded very much as the first had. Lucullus maneuvered swiftly through Pontus attacking communication lines and besieging cities. Mithridates, seeing that he had already lost the advantage, decided to fall back even further into Lesser Armenia. Although the sources concerning this episode are vague, it seems that, at some point, Mithridates' army broke down, and what had begun as a withdrawal turned quickly into a rout. Mithridates and his companions abandoned the field and escaped to Armenia. With their enemy's army in such chaos, the Romans moved in to disperse the remnants and thus, without a single battle, took control of Pontus. Despite his victory, Lucullus was, most likely, disheartened by these events, for he had lost Mithridates not once, but twice.<sup>34</sup>

Lucullus' disappointment most probably prompted not only Appius' mission to Tigranes, but also the harsh terms that were presented to the Armenian monarch. There is no reason to suspect that Tigranes, once allowed some opportunity to save face, would not have handed over Mithridates. They were, of course, in-laws; however, most of the Asian kingdoms were then connected in some way by marriage. Family ties did not necessarily always assure political alignment, especially with the threat of Roman aggression looming overhead. The sources emphasize, furthermore, that

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<sup>33</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 14.1; App. *Mithr.* 78

<sup>34</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 8.6-8, 9.2-5, 11.2; App. *Mithr.* 72-76.

during the preceding war Tigranes remained neutral and lent no aid whatsoever to his father-in-law. The Armenian monarch had been otherwise occupied consolidating the northern Mesopotamian territories of Gordyene, Sordene, and Adiabene, which he had recently captured from the Parthian Empire. An extended conflict with the Romans was the last thing that he needed or desired.<sup>35</sup>

Nor may we blame Lucullus' Armenian invasion simply on the careless arrogance of the legate Appius. Even if his subordinate had demonstrated poor judgement, Lucullus was not completely bound by this mistake, for he had, if he wanted, an 'out' available to him. He had been given no authority to declare war on Tigranes. Any punitive expedition that would proceed would do so without the approval of the Roman Senate. It seems unlikely, therefore, that Lucullus would have risked all merely to uphold the word of a rash young officer. If he had not wished to make good on Appius' threat, he had but to point to Roman law, losing no honor in doing so.

Therefore, it may be assumed that the impetus for this conflict lay with the appetites of Lucullus himself. Besides the obvious prestige of being the first Roman general to march beyond the Taurus and Euphrates, Lucullus may also have been tempted by the unimaginable wealth that awaited any conqueror in the numerous storehouses of the Armenian king. Tigranes the Great, until the age of forty, had lived as a hostage at the Parthian court of the Arsacid ruler Mithridates II Megas. Being a full descendant of the Artaxiad dynasty, he was, however, later ransomed (c. 95 BC) in order that he might assume the Armenian throne. Although he continued to serve as a vassal of Mithridates II until that king's death in 88, he eventually became the most

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<sup>35</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 14.6, 8, 21.2, 23.7, 27.7, 29.7, 30.1; Dio Cass. 37.5.3-5; App. *Mithr.* 78; Memnon 43.2; Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 174-76; and Richard D. Sullivan *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome, 100-30 BC* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 97-99.

powerful monarch in the Near East, and ruled the only significant empire the Armenians would know in the ancient world. Internal disputes among the Parthian nobility allowed Tigranes to seize first the aforementioned Mesopotamian territories. Soon thereafter, he also overran Commagene, Cilicia, and Syria. His unrivaled success and boldness led even to his adoption of the old Persian title 'King of Kings.' A victory for Lucullus over Tigranes would be, therefore, no small thing, even if we ignore the potential prominence he could attain by also capturing Mithridates Eupator.<sup>36</sup>

The Armenian campaign, which began in 69, was the first instance in which Roman forces marched onto the Tigris plateau in southern Armenia. Once there, Lucullus wasted no time advancing on Tigranes' capital of Tigranocerta. Unlike the previous war, however, he was met in battle by a sizable force commanded by both Tigranes and Mithridates. Although outnumbered, the Romans managed to turn back the great, oriental army. Yet once again, Mithridates eluded capture, and fled with Tigranes into the mountains of northern Armenia. Perhaps out of disgust, Lucullus then proceeded systematically to dismember the very empire of the Armenian king. He first ordered Tigranocerta completely dismantled and freed the various peoples Tigranes had enslaved there. He also liberated several northern Mesopotamian territories from Armenian rule. This last action was, in itself, significant, for doing so marked the first case in which the Romans involved themselves in the politics of Parthia. Prior to Tigranes' occupation, these territories had been vassal states of the Parthian king. Fortunately for Lucullus, Parthia was then in no condition to oppose him.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 21.2, 27.7, 29.7, 30.1; Dio Cass. 37.5.3-5; and Sullivan *Royalty and Rome* 97-99.

<sup>37</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 25.4-7, 26.1, 27.5-28, 29.1-5; App. *Mithr.* 67, 84-87; and Dio Cass. 36.1.1.

The Parthians' reluctance to confront the Romans did not prevent them from receiving Tigranes' envoys. This embassy may have even offered the Parthian king Phraates III the Mesopotamian territories in question in exchange for an alliance against the Romans. However, the certainty of this allegation may never be known because upon hearing of these negotiations Lucullus sent his own ambassadors to Phraates. Following the arrival of the Roman legates, Parthia assumed a 'watchful neutrality.'<sup>38</sup>

Most of the sources confirm this series of events, with the exception of Plutarch. In his retelling, Lucullus foregoes all diplomatic channels and instead plans an outright attack on the Parthians. Plutarch cites Lucullus' desire for glory as the reason for his pugnacity. Yet this attack never occurred because his troops refused to venture any further into unknown territory. But should we lend any credence at all to this version? Sherwin-White does not. He argues that Lucullus would never have intentionally marched on Parthia, which would have left Tigranes and Mithridates at his rear.<sup>39</sup>

Although this essay too rejects Plutarch's rendering of events, it does so on wholly different grounds. Lucullus had already bested Tigranes' great army and put Mithridates to flight on three separate occasions. He, therefore, had no reason to fear, or even to suspect, that they would pose any immediate trouble. Plutarch's recounting too coincides more closely with descriptions of Lucullus' character. Sallust, although critical of Lucullus, notes, "He was thought outstanding in every way, except for his extreme desire for extending the empire."<sup>40</sup> Plutarch's interpretation is dubious because, of the four ancient authors who deal with this subject matter, his is the only one in which Lucullus does not attempt to resolve the situation diplomatically. Still,

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<sup>38</sup> App. *Mithr.* 87; Dio Cass. 36.1-3; Memnon 58; and Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 181.

<sup>39</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 30.1-4.

<sup>40</sup> Sall. *Hist.* 4.70.

although Plutarch's account might not accurately reflect the chain of events, it provides us with some insight into Lucullus' personality and motivations. It is not inconceivable that Plutarch, in confusing the details, might have fashioned the story around the man.

Apart from this episode, however, there is little doubt as to the events that followed Lucullus' victory at Tigranocerta. After resolving the Parthian question, the Roman army turned again to northern Armenia and Tigranes' second capital of Artaxata. Lucullus sought to capture Tigranes and Mithridates themselves, perhaps for some future triumph he imagined himself receiving. Yet the mountainous terrain of the region and the guerrilla tactics of the enemy proved too difficult for the Romans. Unable to reach Artaxata, Lucullus withdrew to southern Armenia where he besieged and took Nisibis. While the Romans wintered there, Mithridates managed to raise a small army of his own and marched back to Pontus. He surprised the local Roman commanders who, like Lucullus, may have never expected to see the Pontic king again. Mithridates capitalized on this advantage and, at Zela, slaughtered the equivalent of two and a half Roman legions. He then fell back to the citadel of Talaura in Lesser Armenia to await Median reinforcements led by Tigranes. Upon hearing the news of this bloodbath, Lucullus broke camp and prepared to advance against Mithridates. This time, however, his troops balked. Refusing to proceed as Lucullus commanded, the officers agreed instead to withdraw to Galatia where they assumed a defensive position. Unhindered, Mithridates ventured forth from Talaura and retook Pontus. The Roman Senate, which had not previously interfered, voted to recall Lucullus. His replacement, the famous Gn. Pompey, was appointed the following year to lead Rome's eastern armies.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Plut. *Luc.* 31-5; App. *Mithr.* 87-89; and Dio Cass. 36.4.2-13.1.



## Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus

In 66 BC, Gn. Pompey was commissioned with the task of subduing both Pontus and Armenia once and for all. He first assembled troops from the various Anatolian provinces and combined them with the remnants of Lucullus' army. Therefore, his campaign force may have numbered some forty-five thousand at the outset.

Mithridates, who had yet to recover fully from his previous confrontation with Rome, most likely, was able to muster no more than thirty thousand infantry and two or three thousand cavalry. Although the sources are unclear, the final battle between these two armies seems to have taken place in the upper Lycus valley near Nicopolis. The ease with which Pompey's legionaries routed Mithridates' hastily built army demonstrates the superiority Rome exercised in Asia at this time. Despite this military supremacy, Pompey was, as Lucullus had been, unable to capture the elusive Mithridates himself, who fled once again eastward into Lesser Armenia.<sup>42</sup>

After securing his rear, Pompey rallied his troops, supposedly to pursue the Pontic king. Ignoring rumors of Mithridates' presence in Colchis, he proceeded instead directly to Artaxata. Tigranes, who was then still residing there, rode out to meet the Roman army as it approached and surrendered in ceremonial fashion to Pompey. Lucullus' policies and subsequent withdrawal from southern Armenia the previous year had created a void of power in that region. Tigranes had been unable to reassert his influence there and was forced, consequently, to defer to the Parthian monarch Phraates. Thus pressured on all sides, Tigranes felt that the most prudent act was to ally himself with Rome. His gamble succeeded because Pompey, although stripping

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<sup>42</sup> Plut. *Pomp.* 28.1, 32.1-12; App. *Mithr.* 96-100; Dio Cass. 36, 46.1, 48.2; and Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 190-92.

him of most of his provinces, allowed him to retain his throne, and thereby become Rome's first Armenian client-king.<sup>43</sup>

As an incentive for his loyalty, Pompey turned over to Tigranes the northern Mesopotamian territory of Gordyene. Unbeknownst to the Armenians, however, Pompey had entered into earlier negotiations with Phraates, promising him that same province. To worsen matters even further, the Parthian army had wasted no time in occupying it. Upon learning of the Romans' sudden reversal, Phraates issued an immediate protest. Yet Pompey was unwilling to debate. He dispatched his lieutenant, Gabinius, who expelled the Parthians from the region and then, to add further insult, led a raiding party across the Tigris. Since Parthia had long recognized the Euphrates as its westernmost boundary, Gabinius' actions were considered equivalent to an act of war. Although outraged, Phraates could do little, for he did not yet have the military capability to oppose the Romans. Still, Pompey's slight would not be soon forgotten.<sup>44</sup>

Once the situation had been resolved to his satisfaction, Pompey renewed his 'pursuit' of Mithridates. Leaving a garrison in Armenia, he marched north into Trans-Caucasia and wintered 66-65 in the lower basin of the Kur valley. This region, now present-day Azerbaijan, was then occupied by two tribes, the Albani and the Iberi. After minor combat, Pompey forced both these peoples into treaties. The Iberi, in particular, became 'friends' to Rome and, eventually, would prove themselves to be important allies. Although Mithridates was known to be at Dioscurias in Colchis, Pompey turned next to the east as if planning to march to the very shores of the Caspian. However,

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<sup>43</sup> Plut. *Pomp.* 33.2-5; App. *Mithr.* 104-6; Dio Cass. 36.52.1-4; and Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 193-95.

<sup>44</sup> Plut. *Pomp.* 33-38; Dio Cass. 36-37; *Sherwin-White Roman Policy* 218-26; Malcolm A. R. Colledge, *The Parthians* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 37-38; and A. Keaveney, "The kings and the war-lords: Romano-Parthian Relations circa 64-53," *American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982): 246-48.

within only three days of this objective, he halted and returned to Albania. Mithridates made use of this window of opportunity to escape by sea to the Crimea. Despite some criticism from Rome, Pompey broke off his 'pursuit' and retired first to Armenia and then Asia Minor.<sup>45</sup>

Plutarch insists that Pompey's activities in Trans-Caucasia, specifically his subjugation of the Albani and Iberi, were necessary steps in his advance on Mithridates. David Magie, among others, argues against any such possibility for, as he asserts, there is no evidence to suggest that these tribes ever intended to ally themselves with the Pontic king. Magie proposes, instead, that the real motivation behind Pompey's campaign was to consolidate the former provinces of Tigranes and to bring Roman hegemony to the region. In addition to Magie, Sherwin-White claims that Pompey, unlike Lucullus, was never really obsessed with the capture of Mithridates. His victory at Nicopolis may have seemed less than gratifying because of the ease with which it was achieved. Everyone knew, after all, that it was not Pompey, but Lucullus, who actually reined in Mithridates. Therefore, chasing the Pontic king may have seemed to Pompey as unworthy of his attention. If he was looking for glory in the east, he would not find it by sifting through Lucullus' leftovers. He set about, therefore, extending the imperial frontiers and in doing so gained his fame and prestige.<sup>46</sup>

Following his withdrawal from Trans-Caucasia, Pompey spent the next several years reorganizing Rome's Asian provinces. In Pontus, he appointed a client-prince and founded no less than seven new communities. Five of these townships, Nicopolis, Diospolis, Magnopolis, Neapolis, and Pompeiopolis, were situated along the much-

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<sup>45</sup> Plut. *Pomp.* 34-36; Dio Cass. 36.53

<sup>46</sup> David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 358-59; Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 195-200.

frequented coastal trade route from Bithynia to Armenia. The other two, Zela and Megalopolis, lay on the important commercial road which ran from the Black Sea, through Amaseia, to Tomisa on the Euphrates. Pompey may have been attempting to tap into the lucrative trading networks of Mesopotamia. This then raises the question of Armenia's economic importance. Did Pompey and subsequent Roman commanders regard the territory as a necessary link to the commerce of the Far East?<sup>47</sup>

Sherwin-White thinks this possibility unlikely. According to Isidorus of Charax's *Parthian Stations*, the Silk Road arrived at Seleucia, traveled up the Euphrates to Zeugma, and then extended overland to Antioch. From Syria, goods were then distributed throughout the Roman Empire by way of the Mediterranean. Therefore, this route, which does not venture any farther northwards, would seem to place most Armenian cities too far afield to be viable commercially. Furthermore, in addition to the Silk Road, Far Eastern goods were transported by ship across the Indian Ocean and Red Sea to ports in Egypt or Arabia. This southern route too makes any Armenian alternative seem, at first, unnecessary.<sup>48</sup>

But this view does not reflect a consensus among scholars. Both Charlesworth and Debevoise argue that the internal strife within the Parthian state and the outward hostility of the Nabataean kingdom of Arabia led Rome to desire its own passage to India and China. Securing Armenia and territories in Trans-Caucasia may thus have been an attempt by the Romans to end their commercial dependence on other troubled regions. Strabo does, after all, make mention of a trade route that ran north of the Caucasus from the Caspian Sea to the Azof.<sup>49</sup> Although the evidence for such a theory

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<sup>47</sup> Magie *Roman Rule* 370.

<sup>48</sup> Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 200-3; Charlesworth *Trade-Routes* 58; and Isidorus *Parth.* 1.

<sup>49</sup> Strabo 11.5.8.

is sparse, it would at least partially explain why the Romans became so obsessed with the Armenian territory.<sup>50</sup>

Still, most of the political disruption within Parthia and Arabia which Charlesworth and Debevoise refer to occurred during the first and second century AD, well after Pompey's campaign. It seems, therefore, unreasonable to ascribe these particular economic motivations to his actions. As Magie and Sherwin-White suggest, Pompey was more likely interested in furthering his reputation and expanding the Empire for glory's sake. In doing so, however, he established dangerous precedents that eventually led Rome to question its seeming invincibility and led other men, like M. Crassus and M. Antony, to ruin.

### **Marcus Licinius Crassus and Mark Antony**

While his political partners, Pompey and C. Julius Caesar, were embroiled in the affairs of Italy and Gaul, M. Crassus sought to win fame for himself farther abroad. In 56, he thus secured the proconsulship of Syria. From this province, he intended to launch an invasion of Mesopotamia and, as Plutarch recounts, hoped to conquer "as far as Bactria and India and the Outer Sea."<sup>51</sup> Due to a lack of cavalry, however, Crassus' first expedition across the Euphrates was limited to the capture of several small cities. Consequently, he returned to Syria where he spent the winter of 54.<sup>52</sup>

In the spring of 53, one thousand cavalry reinforcements arrived from Gaul under the command of Crassus' son Publius. These reserves, along with those offered by Artavasdes II, who was then the King of Armenia and the son of the aged Tigranes, gave Crassus a sizable force. He thus set out undaunted for the Parthian capital of

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<sup>50</sup> Charlesworth *Trade-Routes* 105-7; Debevoise *History of Parthia* 163-64, 204.

<sup>51</sup> Plut. *Crass.* 16.2.

<sup>52</sup> Plut. *Crass.* 15.5-17.4.

Ctesiphon. The course of his march, through southern Armenia into Media Atropatene, had been adopted after consulting Artavasdes, who himself chose to remain at Artaxata to defend the eastern front. Meanwhile, the Parthian monarch Orodes II dispatched his most experienced general, a nobleman known only as the Suren, to intercept Crassus, while a larger Parthian army led by the Great King himself advanced on Armenia via the Araxes valley.<sup>53</sup>

The armies of Crassus and the Suren met near Carrhae. Despite the Romans' advantage in number, however, they were not able to turn back the Parthians' cavalry lancers, or cataphracts. Thirty thousand Roman legionaries were lost on the first day of battle and several thousand more were slain or captured during the disorderly retreat. Artavasdes, who claimed to have engaged Orodes' army, failed to send help. Crassus was himself killed after being lured away from his camp during peace negotiations. His head and right hand were cut off and sent as trophies to Orodes in Armenia.<sup>54</sup>

Scholarly opinions vary as to the underlying reason for Crassus' failure. Sherwin-White cites the Suren's innovative tactics. By using mounted archers in concert with his cataphract units, he denied the Roman infantrymen an opportunity to retaliate. On the other hand, Sullivan paints Artavasdes as the betrayer of Crassus. For soon after Carrhae, the Armenian king entered into a marriage alliance with the Parthians whereby his daughter was betrothed to Orodes's eldest son Pacorus. Since it was Artavasdes who first suggested Crassus' course through Media Atropatene, Sullivan suspects some form of collusion between the two kings.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 17.7, 19.1-2, 21.5; Dio Cass. 40.16.2.

<sup>54</sup> Plut. *Crass.* 23.7-27, 31-32.1; Dio Cass. 40.21.2-4.

<sup>55</sup> Sherwin-White *Roman Policy* 288-89; Sullivan *Royalty and Rome* 288-89.

Yet if blame is to be assigned for the Roman debacle at Carrhae, Crassus himself must receive the lion's share. Prior to his expedition, the Parthians were favorably inclined to Rome.<sup>56</sup> His unjustified attack can be, therefore, attributed to no other motivating factor than his desire for fame and fortune. Plutarch notes that Crassus sought "to make the campaigns of Lucullus against Tigranes and those of Pompey against Mithridates seem mere child's play."<sup>57</sup> Instead of besting his predecessors, however, Crassus succeeded only in tainting Romano-Parthian relations for decades.

In 37, Marc Antony's legate Canidius marched into Armenia with four legions and secured once again the dubious allegiance of Artavasdes. The Romans then subdued the Iberians and Albanians in Trans-Caucasia, presumably to prevent them from causing later trouble. The following year the Parthian King Orodes, lamenting the death of his first son Pacorus, abdicated his throne in favor of another of his sons, Phraates IV. Although there was no legitimate reason to suspect so, Phraates must have still felt his new position tenuous, for he immediately ordered the murder of his father and remaining brothers. Many among the Parthian nobility fled, horrified that they would be next.<sup>58</sup>

One such nobleman, Monaeses, escaped to Syria and once there convinced the Romans to lend him aid. Antony, who was then shoring up Rome's eastern authority, welcomed the opportunity to win back Crassus' battle standards. Due to a strong enemy presence at Zeugma, however, the Romans were compelled to march first through Armenia. Artavasdes himself offered to guide the Romans into Parthia.

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<sup>56</sup> Strabo 16.1.28.

<sup>57</sup> Plut. *Crass.* 16.2.

<sup>58</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 34.10, 37.1-2; Dio Cass. 49.23.1-24.1.

Antony, who was probably unaware of the particulars concerning Crassus' fate, unknowingly accepted. Ironically, once again, Artavasdes chose the course through Media Atropatene.<sup>59</sup>

Instead of marching immediately to Ctesiphon, Antony first besieged Phraaspa. While the Romans were thus occupied with the city's defenses, the Parthians began to harass Antony's scouting parties and supply lines. The enemy's strategy proved at first effective, for the mounting casualties prompted Artavasdes' quick retreat back to Armenia. Antony, who was not dissuaded by these initial losses, chose instead to engage the Parthian army head-on. Although his tactics were as flawed as Crassus' had been, his defeat did not quite mirror the disaster at Carrhae. Still, after a day of pitched battle and no significant gains, Antony called for the withdrawal to Artaxata. However, on the march to Armenia, the Romans suffered terrible losses due to Parthian forays and famine. Of Antony's original seventy-seven thousand men only thirty-two thousand survived the harried retreat.<sup>60</sup>

In 34, as part of the 'Donations of Alexandria,' Antony returned to Armenia and installed Alexander Helios, his young son by Cleopatra, as king. Artavasdes was imprisoned and later executed; what became of his two sons, Tigranes and Artaxias, is unknown. But for the next two years, Armenia remained under Roman hegemony ruled by a military governor.<sup>61</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The first century BC witnessed both the rise and fall of Armenia's only significant empire in the ancient world. The kingdoms of Tigranes the Great and Artavasdes

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<sup>59</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 37.1-2, 39.1; Dio Cass. 49.23-25.1.

<sup>60</sup> Plut. *Ant.* 38-50.1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 50.6, 54.7-8; Dio Cass. 49.39-44.2.



represent the 'Golden Age' of Armenian autonomy. However, these monarchs could not overcome their country's great geographical handicap, its unfortunate positioning between the ancient superpowers of Rome and Parthia. As that struggle intensified, Armenia had no choice but to try to ally itself with the stronger of the two. After Carrhae, that choice seemed obvious. But Artavasdes' decision to back Parthia would be Armenia's undoing.

Neither the Armenians nor the Parthians truly understood the mechanisms of Roman society – their tenacity and inclination for one-upmanship. Besides being inherently warlike, Romans were conditioned to believe that there was nothing greater than winning honor and fame. The failures of Crassus and Antony only made Parthia all the more attractive to upcoming glory-seekers and fortune hunters. Artavasdes failed to understand that Carrhae signaled not an end, but a beginning.

## Chapter 2 Parthia and Armenia under the Julio-Claudian Emperors

The Roman Civil Wars (49-31 BC) allowed Parthia an opportunity to make inroads into not only Armenia, but also Syria. However, its occupation of these territories was brief. By the end of the first century BC, the Roman emperor Augustus had reclaimed his Syrian province and had installed a client-king on the Armenian throne. As per the terms of his treaty with Rome, the Parthian king Phraates IV returned the Roman battle standards lost by Crassus at Carrhae. This symbolic triumph proved even more advantageous than Rome's actual reoccupation of Syria. Augustus' propaganda machine portrayed his recovery of the standards as his greatest success yet. His triumphal arch depicts a kneeling Parthian presenting him with Crassus' standards and eagles. The cuirass of Augustus' Prima Porta statue too conveys a similar scene; it is, in fact, a common theme throughout the iconography of his reign.<sup>62</sup> In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus even recalled, "I compelled the Parthians to return the spoils and standards of three Roman armies and humbly to beg the friendship of the Roman people."<sup>63</sup>

But why did Augustus choose to negotiate the return of the standards rather than to fight for them? Both Crassus and Antony had seemed so intent on sacking Ctesiphon itself. Why was Augustus so easily contented simply with an Armenian puppet regime and a Parthian truce? Augustus' response to Parthia's incursions into Syria and Armenia does, at first, seem uncharacteristic of the typical Roman reprisal. It

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<sup>62</sup> Dio Cass. 54.8; Mattern *Rome and the Enemy* 186-87; and Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (University of Michigan Press, 1988), 183-92.

<sup>63</sup> Augustus *Res Gestae* 29.

seems, however, less so once one considers his overall policy concerning the imperial borders. One reason for the success of the early Principate was its consolidation of the overextended frontier. With only twenty-five legions at his disposal, Augustus had to develop a method to manage more efficiently remote provinces. He, therefore, established client-kings in areas such as Thrace, Mauretania, and the Caucasus. His similar treatment of Armenia may have been part of this same policy.<sup>64</sup>

This explanation is, however, specious, for it assumes that Augustus and his fellow Romans regarded Armenia as just another subjugated territory. This is simply not the case. Armenia was uniquely situated between Rome's restless eastern provinces and the rising star of Parthia. Roman literature from this period does, in fact, portray Parthia less as a mere nuisance and more as a nemesis. The poet Horace writes even of the "Parthians, now threatening Latium."<sup>65</sup> The general Roman populace viewed Armenia increasingly as necessary for the defense of the Empire. But was Rome's growing fear of Parthia justified or was that perceived threat merely the result of popular hysteria? And, in either case, was it this fear or perhaps some other factor that prompted Rome's interference in the politics of Armenia?

Chapter 2 will attempt to demonstrate that, despite such literature and speculation, Rome was in no immediate danger from the Parthian state. It will also make an effort to show that the Julio-Claudian emperors, although more cautious, were no less eager to win glory and plunder for themselves in the East. It was their ambitions, and not Rome's collective fear, that drew the Empire into the affairs of Armenia and Parthia. Yet due to the debacle at Carrhae and a mounting resentment in

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<sup>64</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 4.5; Luttwak *Grand Strategy* 20-30.

<sup>65</sup> Hor. *Carm.* 1.12.53.

Rome for such potentially wasteful endeavors, this period is characterized more as one of political posturing than actual military conflict. The Armenian throne, the key to hegemony in the region, was of course oftentimes the focus of these diplomatic maneuverings and intrigues. Yet even in the political arena, Rome's leaders were more often than not the aggressors and initiators. The advent of the Principate may have changed the nature of the game, but the prize was undeniably the same.

### **Parthia in Roman Literature**

Many Romans regarded Carrhae as a great military blunder and an unnecessary loss. It was, nevertheless, seen initially as a mere setback on the distant frontier and nothing more. Antony's failed expedition into Mesopotamia raised further concerns about the Parthians at Rome, but these concerns were soon overshadowed by the ongoing Civil War. A real Roman awareness of the supposed Parthian threat arose only after Augustus' victory at Actium in 31 BC. As stability returned to the Roman state, many people were surprised to find that that empire no longer included large portions of Asia Minor or the vital economic province of Syria. Rome's attention turned, therefore, to a new potential danger on its eastern horizon.

Although Augustus soon afterwards recaptured these occupied territories, the psychological damage had already been done. Romans no longer felt as safe as they once had under the Republic. For if the Parthians could take Syria, a major Roman province, then why could they not also invade Western Anatolia, or Greece – or Italy, for that matter. Horace's exaggeration of the danger Parthia posed is, in this sense, better understood. He and his fellow Romans were becoming keenly mindful of the fact that they were not all-powerful or invincible on the battlefield. Similar opinions and fears, although some less extreme, are prevalent throughout the literature of the period.

This growing Roman consciousness of Parthia and of the East is evident in the poetry of the Early Principate. Besides Horace, both Virgil and Ovid make numerous references to Parthia, Media, Bactria, and India. Stock phrases, such as the Parthian bow, the Armenian tiger, the Hyrcanian dog, and many more, persist not only in their works, but also well into the poetry of the second century AD.<sup>66</sup> Propertius mentions repeatedly Augustus' possible expedition in the East.<sup>67</sup> And Seneca and Lucan still utilized in their day many of the same catchwords and stock phrases introduced by the Augustan poets.<sup>68</sup> Such specific references to the East must reflect the general public's increased awareness of and interest in Rome's oriental affairs.

Roman writers, furthermore, had a long tradition of labeling those peoples outside the Empire as inferior and barbarian. Beginning in the era of the Augustan authors, however, there is an abrupt change. References to Parthia as 'a Roman rival' and as 'another world' arise. Strabo reports: "... and now they rule over so much land and so many peoples, that in a way they have become rivals of the Romans in the size of their empire."<sup>69</sup> Although not a contemporary of Strabo, Dio Cassius too mentions, in regards to the Parthians, that "they finally advanced so much in glory and power that they then made war even on the Romans, and ever since have always been considered rivals."<sup>70</sup> In addition, Dio Cassius, as well as Lucan, convey the sense that the Parthians had become invincible in their own territory.<sup>71</sup> Many Romans would have

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<sup>66</sup> Hor. *Carm.* 1.2, 1.12, 7.9; *Epist.* 1.18.56; *Sat.* 2.1.15; Verg. *Ecl.* 1.62, 10.59-60; *G.* 2.126-36, 2.440, 2.466; *Aen.* 4.367; Ov. *Am.* 1.2.47, 2.5.40; *Met.* 2.248, 4.21.

<sup>67</sup> Prop. 3.1.16, 3.4.1-19, 3.5.48.

<sup>68</sup> Sen. *Herc. fur.* 909; *Troades* 11; *Medea* 373; *De cons.* 8.3-4; *Epist.* 4.7, 12.8, 71.37; Lucan 1.230, 1.328, 3.236, 4.64, 4.680.

<sup>69</sup> Strabo 2.9.2.

<sup>70</sup> Dio Cass. 40.14.3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 40.15.4; Lucan 8.368-371.

considered these suggestions laughable only a generation earlier when the Republic was at the height of its power and arrogance.<sup>72</sup>

The disaster at Carrhae, Antony's failure to avenge Crassus, and Parthia's brief occupation of Syria all fostered feelings of alarm and trepidation in Rome concerning the East. These feelings were exacerbated by a ubiquitous Roman tendency for xenophobia and a general sense of anomie, which is not uncommon during periods of widespread civil strife. Most Romans now believed that they were on the defensive, beset by the Parthian hordes. But were they? In hindsight, the answer seems obvious. Of course, they were not. Following the Syrian invasion of 20 BC, no other oriental army severely threatened the Eastern frontier until the early third century. But does this striking lack of an outright military conflict necessarily mean that no rivalry existed? The modern Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union did not, after all, erupt into a full-scale confrontation. Can this twentieth-century model be applied to the Romano-Parthian situation in the first century AD? To answer such a question, we must examine more closely the reigns of the Julio-Claudian emperors, their policies towards Parthia, and their efforts to secure the much-disputed territory of Armenia.

### **Caesar Augustus**

Shortly after the return of Crassus' standards in 20 BC, Augustus sent the Parthian king Phraates IV an Italian slave girl named Musa for his harem. The sources seem to suggest that this girl was intended as a gift and represented an act of good faith on Augustus' part. However, Debevoise is more suspicious of Musa, speculating

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<sup>72</sup> Other examples of Parthia as 'rival' and as 'another world' include: Manilius 4.674-675: "and the Parthians, a sort of other world"; Lucan 8.290-307: "The Euphrates separates a huge world with its waters, and the Caspian gates divide off immense recesses; and a different axis turns Assyrian days and nights ... The fates that move the Medes are too similar to our own fates"; and Pompeius Trogus 41.1.1: "the Parthians, who now rule the east, having as it were divided the world with the Romans."

that she may have been a Roman spy sent to influence Phraates. Such a theory is not wholly unreasonable once one considers some of Musa's later actions as Phraates' consort.<sup>73</sup>

By 10 BC, Musa's son Phraates V, also known as Phraataces, had become old enough to contend for the Parthian throne. Musa managed, therefore, to persuade her husband to send his other children to Rome for safe keeping, leaving her son as the only potential heir. Four of Phraates' sons, Seraspadanes, Phraates, Rhodaspes, Vonones, two of their wives, and four of their sons were handed over to the Roman governor of Syria. They were then escorted to Rome where they and their descendants resided for the next half century, enjoying all the luxuries and privileges given to any of Rome's royal hostages. This exiled group of Parthian royalty formed a convenient pool from which the Julio-Claudian emperors later drew their candidates for the Armenian throne.<sup>74</sup>

In Armenia, meanwhile, Roman hegemony had become quite tenuous. A party of Armenian nationalists had driven out the last of Antony's Roman garrisons there and had accepted an alliance with Phraates. The current rulers, Tigranes IV and his sister-wife Erato, were briefly deposed in 5 BC by a Roman army under the command of Augustus' stepson Tiberius. A Median prince, named Artavasdes III, was installed in their place. Had Phraates lived any longer Artavasdes' throne might have remained secure; however, in 2 BC, Musa murdered her husband, making her son the sole ruler of the Parthian state.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Joseph *AJ* 18.39-40; Debevoise *History of Parthia* 143.

<sup>74</sup> Joseph *AJ* 18.41-42; Tac. *Ann.* 2.1; Dio Cass. 51.18; Sue. *Aug.* 21.

<sup>75</sup> Joseph *AJ* 18.42-43; Tac. *Ann.* 3-4; Dio Cass. 55.10.

If Musa had originally been a Roman agent, she was one no longer, for prior to Phraataces' accession, she convinced the Armenian nobility to rise up against Artavasdes. In the ensuing revolt, Tigranes was once again crowned as king of Armenia. Augustus was, nevertheless, soon alerted to these events and dispatched his grandson Gaius to the eastern frontier. Phraataces, however, was not prepared to go to war. He met the approaching Roman army in person at the Euphrates and acquiesced to all of Gaius' terms. He agreed to drop Parthia's claim to the Armenian throne and to allow his stepbrothers to remain as hostages at Rome, a stipulation that was most probably not altogether heartbreaking for Phraataces or his mother.<sup>76</sup>

Having secured Phraataces' consent, Gaius then pressed northwards into Armenia where he arranged for Artavasdes III to resume the throne. Gaius' army remained in the territory for nearly two years, besieging the Parthian-held stronghold of Artagira and searching for Phraataces' treasure stores. The sources do suggest that this Armenian expedition may have been the precursor for a full-scale campaign against Parthia itself. Seneca notes that Augustus sought to expand the eastern border beyond the Euphrates.<sup>77</sup> But any such plans were abandoned when, in AD 3, Gaius agreed to parley a truce with the satrap of Artagira. Their meeting, which was intended as a trap, ended in a fracas in which Gaius was mortally wounded. His death effectively halted any plan Augustus had to invade Parthia.<sup>78</sup>

Had Gaius not died, Augustus would have surely added the Parthian kingdom to his long list of conquests, for it was then in no condition to oppose him. In AD 2, Phraataces married his mother Musa and thus became guilty, at least in the eyes of his

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<sup>76</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3-4; Dio Cass. 55.10.

<sup>77</sup> Sen. *De cons. ad Polyb.* 15.4, *De brev. vit.* 4.5; Ov. *Ars am.* 1.177, 1.199.

<sup>78</sup> Dio Cass. 55.10.



subjects, of not only patricide, but also incest. This act, along with his lingering status as an outsider due to his mother's Italian stock, soon rallied the Parthian nobility against him. By AD 4, he had either been assassinated or driven to exile in Syria. His successor, an Arsacid prince named Orodes III, reigned only briefly until AD 6 when he too was murdered by his own disgruntled nobility. Upon his demise, the Parthians sent word to Rome, requesting the return of Vonones, the eldest son of Phraates IV. Since Vonones had now been living in Rome for nearly sixteen years and was practically a Roman himself, Augustus was more than willing to oblige them.<sup>79</sup>

Vonones' western manners and habits, his disdain for horses and hunting for example, of course, soon made him unpopular with the Parthian nobility. As early as AD 9, another Arsacid, Artabanus II,<sup>80</sup> who was then the king of Atropatene, began mustering support to overthrow his distant cousin. Although the first attempt to oust Vonones failed, a second revolt in AD 12 proved more successful. Artabanus seized Ctesiphon and drove Vonones first to Armenia, where he reigned briefly after Artavasdes' death, and then finally to exile in Syria. Parthia's new king wasted no time installing his own son Orodes on the vacant Armenian throne. However, there was uncharacteristically no immediate Roman reprisal since Artabanus' coup d'etat in both Parthia and Armenia occurred some time after Augustus' death in AD 14.<sup>81</sup>

It is, of course, debatable whether or not Augustus would have succeeded in annexing Parthia if Gaius had lived. What seem less questionable were his intentions. Although no such expedition was ever actually launched, Seneca and Ovid make clear

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<sup>79</sup> Joseph *AJ* 18.42-47.

<sup>80</sup> Scholars and translators have often reported this person as Artabanus III; however, recent numismatic evidence suggests that it was, in fact, Artabanus II. See David Sellwood, *An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia* (London: Spink and Son Ltd., 1980), 196-206.

<sup>81</sup> Joseph *AJ* 18.47-52; Tac. *Ann.* 2.1-4.

the idea that one was planned.<sup>82</sup> Besides this textual evidence, common sense would seem to suggest that Augustus' constant jostling for position in Armenia also supports the theory of a possible Parthian campaign. At the outset of his reign, Augustus was unwilling to risk such an endeavor for fear that it would result in another Carrhae. He was content to recover Crassus' standards and to overplay their significance.<sup>83</sup> By the early first century AD, however, Parthia was in political disarray, several members of the Arsacid royal family were held hostage at Rome, and the Armenian throne was secure with Artavasdes III as king. Such favorable conditions, no doubt, made Augustus reconsider a Parthian invasion. Parthia was now, after all, Rome's only significant rival. Its conquest would have certainly loomed large before Augustus as potentially his greatest achievement.

Of course, no such victory was forthcoming after Gaius' death in AD 3. This setback may have even contributed to Augustus' later decision to halt imperial expansion altogether. Still, his earlier efforts in the East had already set the tone for the rest of the Julio-Claudian Era. Augustus' successors continued to plot to have their own candidates placed on the thrones of both Armenia and Parthia. These candidates were often the sons or grandsons of Phraates IV whom Musa had sent to Rome, perhaps under the direct orders of Augustus himself. Rome's first princeps had been unable to conquer Parthia itself; however, policies and protocols that he established quickly became the model on which the later Julio-Claudian emperors based their actions in the East.

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<sup>82</sup> Sen. *De cons. ad Polyb.* 15.4, *De brev. vit.* 4.5; Ov. *Ars am.* 1.177, 1.199.

<sup>83</sup> Zanker *Power of Images* 183-92.

## Tiberius

By AD 18, Tiberius, Augustus' adopted son and heir, was secure enough in his position as the new emperor to challenge once again Parthia's claim to the Armenian throne. He, therefore, dispatched his own adopted son, Germanicus, to the East with a sizable Roman army. Artabanus' son Orodes, who was then serving as the king of Armenia, most likely fled from his capital at Artaxata as Germanicus' force approached. Under Roman auspices, his crown was awarded to the son of Pontus' king Polemon, a young prince who soon became known as Artaxias III.<sup>84</sup>

Germanicus then marched back to Syria where he received Artabanus' ambassadors, who did not contest the regime change in Armenia. Instead, they offered to become allies with the Romans in exchange for the silencing of Vonones, who had been attempting to raise an army in Syria ever since his exile from Armenia. Germanicus did not officially accept Artabanus' terms; however, he did forcefully remove Vonones to Pompeiopolis in Cilicia. Although Vonones managed to escape in AD 19, he was quickly recaptured and soon afterwards mysteriously assassinated. In that same year, Germanicus fell ill and died near Antioch, supposedly poisoned by his rival Gn. Calpurnius Piso, the governor of Syria.<sup>85</sup>

In retrospect, Germanicus' mission to the East does seem to have been one of détente. Rather than provoking the Parthians by reinstalling Vonones on the Armenian throne, he chose to support a less controversial candidate, Artaxias. Of course, neither he nor Tiberius could openly agree to an alliance with Artabanus. Parthia was still, after all, Rome's greatest enemy. Doing so would have likely invited much criticism from the

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<sup>84</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.43, 2.56.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 2.58, 2.68-70; Sue. *Gaius* 2.

Roman aristocracy. They chose, therefore, to bide their time and to do nothing. This policy seems to have been successful, for more than a decade of eastern peace ensued after Germanicus' death. From AD 19 to 32, Tiberius sent only one short-termed governor to Syria. He did, nevertheless, receive some criticism at home from Romans who believed that he was neglecting the frontier. Had the Parthians advanced into Syria or attempted to retake Armenia during this period, such remarks might have had some merit; however, this does not seem to have been the case.<sup>86</sup>

Yet Tiberius' casual policies towards the eastern frontier were by no means a permanent solution. In AD 32, Artaxias died, leaving the Armenian throne vacant once more. Artabanus, who had spent the last decade consolidating his own empire, occupied the territory and installed his eldest son Arsaces as king. Artabanus had been, no doubt, encouraged by his recent victories against several hostile tribes and by the Romans' seeming torpidity. Tacitus reports that he now considered "Tiberius as old and unwarlike."<sup>87</sup> The Parthian king was even so audacious as to send an embassy to the Romans demanding that they return to him the treasure left by Vonones in Syria and Cilicia. This new found arrogance on Artabanus' part disturbed not only Tiberius and the Romans, but also many among the Parthian nobility, who regarded such posturing as unproductive and dangerous.<sup>88</sup>

However, there were no Arsacids left in Parthia who could rightfully challenge Artabanus' claim to the throne. After nearly twenty years as Parthia's king, he had managed to kill or exile anyone who had even remotely rivaled his authority. The disaffected party in Ctesiphon, therefore, turned to Tiberius for assistance, requesting

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<sup>86</sup> Sue. *Tib.* 41.

<sup>87</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6.30.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* 6.30-31; Dio Cass. 58.26.

that Prince Phraates, the youngest son of Phraates IV, be sent to Syria. Tiberius acquiesced; yet Phraates, who was now nearly fifty years old, was already too ill to make the journey successfully. The aged prince died *en route* to the East. Undaunted, Tiberius next dispatched Tiridates, a grandson of Phraates IV, and appointed L. Vitellius governor of Syria to assist the Arsacid prince on his mission. By AD 35, both men had arrived at the Euphrates and were preparing to march against Artabanus.<sup>89</sup>

Meanwhile, Tiberius had also secured a secret arrangement with Pharasmanes, the king of the Iberians, the Trans-Caucasian tribe which lived on Armenia's northern border. In exchange for his allegiance to Rome, Pharasmanes was allowed to depose Artabanus' son Arsaces in Armenia and to seize Artaxata for himself. After expelling the Parthians, he left his brother Mithridates there as king. A Parthian army commanded by Artabanus' other son Orodes soon afterwards attempted, but failed, to retake the territory. Incited by Vitellius' agents, the Alani, another Trans-Caucasian tribe, flooded into Mesopotamia unopposed by the Iberians. Vitellius and Tiridates also chose at this time to advance. Foreseeing Artabanus' eventual defeat, many Parthian nobles quickly defected to Tiridates' camp. Beset by both the Alani and the Romans and strategically crippled by mass desertions, Artabanus had no other option but to withdraw. He abandoned Ctesiphon and fled to Parthia's eastern border.<sup>90</sup>

Phraates IV's grandson reigned briefly over the Parthian Empire as Tiridates III. Like Vonones, however, Tiridates' western leanings soon irritated the fickle Parthian nobility, who turned once again to Artabanus. The former Parthian king, who had been living as a native in Hyrcania, quickly took advantage of his renewed popularity and

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<sup>89</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6.31-32; Dio Cass. 58.26.

<sup>90</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6.33-37; Dio Cass. 58.26; Joseph *AJ* 18.96-100.

amassed an army of loyal supporters. Tiridates sent word to Vitellius in Syria, but no aid was to come from the Romans. Tiberius had grown weary of the whole ordeal and, late in AD 36, ordered his provincial governor to reestablish peaceful relations with Parthia. Without his Roman allies to rely on, Tiridates was unable to defend his new capital. In a seeming reversal of earlier events, it was now Tiridates who fled to Syria before the approaching Artabanus.<sup>91</sup>

After recapturing Ctesiphon, Artabanus met with Vitellius at the Euphrates. Although the exact terms of their truce are unknown, not long after this conference, the Parthian king's son Darius was sent to Rome as a hostage. It seems probable that this deference on Artabanus' behalf was part of a renewed Romano-Parthian peace agreement. As for Armenia, the sources do not mention any further regime change during the last year of Tiberius' reign. It can be gathered, however, that Mithridates remained in control there since both Tacitus and Dio Cassius later relate an episode in which the Emperor Caligula removes him from the Armenian throne. It is not outlandish to believe that the Romans would have left the Iberians in power in Armenia because, ever since Pompey's invasion of Trans-Caucasia in the first century BC, that tribe had been considered 'friends' of Rome.<sup>92</sup>

Although the Romans were now no worse off than they had been, we can not say the same of Parthia. From the beginning of the Christian era to AD 40, the quick turnover of Parthian kings and internal strife incited by the nobility had left the country in a poor economic state. During this period, there are several intervals in which it seems that no royal coins were minted (AD 7-9, 21-23, and 32-36). In AD 35, in response to

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<sup>91</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6.43-44; Joseph *AJ* 18.100.

<sup>92</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 11.8; Dio Cass. 60.8; Joseph *AJ* 18.100-4.

the volatile economic situation, the commercial entrepot of Seleucia rebelled against the Arsacids. This city, which was in some ways more vital to the Parthian state than Ctesiphon, remained in revolt for the next seven years. Arguably, Artabanus' long reign did much to alleviate some of the economic hardships; however, any such beneficial effects were quickly undone during his confrontation with Tiridates.<sup>93</sup>

### **Caligula and Claudius**

Neither Tiberius nor Artabanus lived long enough to ensure another lasting peace. By AD 38, both men had been succeeded by less competent leaders. At Rome, the Emperor Caligula became involved in numerous scandals and sordid affairs, some so outrageous that even his sanity was called into question. On the other hand, Artabanus' heir, a Hyrcanian named Gotarzes II, upon his accession, murdered one of his brothers and drove the other, Vardanes, into exile. Vardanes' hastened return the following year sparked a prolonged civil war in Parthia which lasted nearly a decade. With such chaos brewing in both the West and the East, it should not be surprising then that Armenia was soon once again caught up in the troubles of its more powerful neighbors.<sup>94</sup>

Although the sources do not mention for what reason, Armenia's king Mithridates was eventually recalled to Rome by Caligula and imprisoned there. During his absence, Armenia was occupied by a Parthian contingent. Upon Caligula's assassination in AD 41, however, his successor Claudius released Mithridates, who returned to his kingdom and with the help of his brother, the Iberian king Pharasmanes, regained his throne. Still, even after Artaxata was recaptured, Lesser Armenia remained in revolt for some

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<sup>93</sup> Tac. 11.9; Robert McDowell, *Coins from Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1935), 188; and Warwick Wroth, *Catalogue of the Coins of Parthia* (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni, 1964), xlv-xlvi.

<sup>94</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 11.8; Joseph *AJ* 20.69.

time and was only finally subdued with great difficulty. Such continued resistance to Mithridates' restoration, no doubt, contributed to the timbre of his later reign, which was often cruel and oppressive.<sup>95</sup>

Armenia's distraught nobles, therefore, sent a proposal to Parthia. In exchange for overthrowing Mithridates, they would be willing to accept a Parthian as their king. Rather than take advantage of this opportunity, Gotarzes and Vardanes chose instead to disagree and thereby launched a new round of violence in their ongoing civil war. However, their protracted conflict did not go unnoticed by Claudius, who ordered C. Cassius Longinus, the governor of Syria, to cross the Euphrates with several Roman legions. Claudius hoped that the unstable political situation in Parthia would allow him to install another Mithridates, the son of Vonones I and grandson of Phraates IV, as king there. Unfortunately, by the time the Roman expedition reached the northern boundary of the Parthian Empire, Vardanes was dead, leaving Gotarzes in command of a unified front. The pretender and his Roman allies were defeated near the Corma River around AD 50. In order to prevent Mithridates from ever again challenging him, Gotarzes had his adversary's ears clipped so that he might never wear the Parthian crown.<sup>96</sup>

Gotarzes reigned uncontested only briefly following his victory at Corma. In AD 51, he died either of some unknown disease or as the result of a plot against him. His successor Vonones II, who was also the king of Media, ruled Parthia only months before passing the crown to his son or brother, Vologases I. Under Vologases, Parthia would find a renewed sense of stability and vigor. Rather than struggle hopelessly with Seleucia and other discontent commercial elements, he established rival entrepots,

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<sup>95</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 11.8; Dio Cass. 60.8.

<sup>96</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 11.10-11, 12.12-14.



such as Vologasia/ Vologesocerta. With a rejuvenated Mesopotamian economy also came, however, a revitalized military machine and a sense that Parthia finally had the means to take the offensive against Rome. At no other time during the Julio-Claudian dynasty would Armenia be so embroiled in its neighbors' affairs. It is to this confrontation, between Vologases and his Roman adversary, the Emperor Nero, that our story now turns.<sup>97</sup>

### **Nero**

By AD 52, Mithridates' harsh rule in Armenia had also alienated him from his brother Pharasmanes, the Iberian king. Since the Parthians had been unable to take the initiative in that territory, Pharasmanes sent his son Rhadamistus to wrench control of Armenia from his tyrannical sibling. Mithridates' forces quickly proved ineffective, and he and his family were soon besieged at a fortress near Artaxata. Although a Roman garrison, commanded by the prefect Caelius Pollio, had been stationed there to protect the Armenian king, Mithridates was unable to match the bribe offered to his defenders by the Iberians. After several days, Pollio's greed got the better of him. He handed over his charge to Rhadamistus, who murdered his uncle and thus seized Armenia for himself. Ummidius Quadratus, the Roman legate of Syria, made several half-hearted attempts to recapture the territory, but he eventually withdrew to preserve the peace once Vologases took the throne in Parthia.<sup>98</sup>

Vologases had, on the other hand, few reservations about invading Armenia. His first expedition, which began about AD 52, drove Rhadamistus into hiding and captured the important Armenian cities of Artaxata and Tigranocerta. However, the Parthians

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. 12.14; Debevoise *History of Parthia* 204.

<sup>98</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.44-49.

were ill-prepared for the bitter Armenian winter. Vologases thus withdrew his forces to Mesopotamia until the following year when he launched another campaign into Armenia, now better provisioned. This second expedition too met with little resistance; and, at Vologases' behest, his brother assumed the Armenian throne as Tiridates I. However, news of these events in Armenia did not reach Rome until late in AD 54.<sup>99</sup>

By then, the Emperor Claudius was already dead, poisoned by members of his own household. His adopted son, Nero, although young, was soon hailed as the new Princeps. Nero's advisors recommended that he take quick and decisive action in resolving the situation in Armenia. He, therefore, appointed Cn. Corbulo, one of Rome's most experienced generals, as commander of the Empire's eastern frontier. Corbulo arrived in Syria several months later where he met Quadratus and inspected the legions there. He found Rome's eastern army in disarray, unready for the protracted conflict that he anticipated. He began widespread training exercises and restructured the cohorts. By late in AD 57, Corbulo felt that his troops were prepared to proceed into Armenia.<sup>100</sup>

Tiridates, who knew that he could not succeed in pitched battle against the Romans, dispatched cavalry units to harry Corbulo's army as it entered the Armenian highlands. However, neither these raids nor that year's difficult winter broke the Romans' resolve. As Corbulo approached Artaxata, Tiridates fled, probably to Vologases' court at Ctesiphon. So that his adversary might have nothing to return to, Corbulo then ordered the Armenian capital burned. Despite this loss, Tiridates soon reappeared at the command of a meager Parthian army and attempted to retake his

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 12.51-52.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 13.10-12, 34-35.

kingdom. Yet his earlier fears proved true, and he was beaten back by the Romans with ease. By AD 60, Corbulo was in complete control of the territory. Nero thus made Tigranes V, a grandson of Cappadocia's monarch, Rome's new client-king in Armenia. Corbulo meanwhile returned to Syria where he replaced Quadratus as provincial governor.<sup>101</sup>

Vologases received much criticism in Parthia for not offering more aid to his deposed brother, despite the fact that he had been otherwise occupied with tribal revolts in Hyrcania at the time. He thus used Tigranes' invasion of Adiabene in AD 61 as an excuse to renew hostilities in Armenia. His forces quickly overwhelmed Tigranes' native troops and cornered the Armenian king at Tigranocerta. Corbulo, who was a better logistician than Quadratus, was nevertheless prepared for these events. He instantly dispatched two legions to assist Tigranes, refortified Rome's various outposts on the Euphrates, and sent word to Nero requesting an additional eastern commander. Realizing that he was outmatched, Vologases broke off his siege of Tigranocerta. However, refusing to abandon his objective, he sent ambassadors to Rome formally requesting the reinstatement of his brother as Armenia's king. Nero, of course, almost immediately denied his request and instead appointed L. Caesennius Paetus as governor of Cappadocia to aid Corbulo.<sup>102</sup>

Paetus, who would ultimately prove to be Rome's undoing in the East, crossed into Armenia around AD 62 with the intention of taking the offensive against Vologases. He first secured Tigranocerta, then proceeded south along the Arsaias River, a tributary of the Euphrates. Although Paetus had foolishly left many of his best cohorts

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 13.36-41, 14.23-26.

<sup>102</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.1-6; Dio Cass. 62.20.

in Cappadocia, his true failings as a field commander were yet to come. His inept timetable forced him to camp for the winter at the nearby town of Rhandeia. During these months, his casual attitude towards training and the harsh winter weather weakened the resolve of his soldiers. As the weather improved, rather than resume his march, Paetus lingered unnecessarily at Rhandeia.<sup>103</sup>

Prompted by the Romans' faltering, Vologases commenced with a preemptive strike of his own. He launched simultaneous attacks against both Syria and Armenia. Corbulo, who was already well positioned at the Euphrates crossing of Zeugma, only narrowly prevented the Parthians from advancing into his province. Paetus was meanwhile roused to action and took the field against Vologases' general Monaeses in southern Armenia. However, the poorly prepared Roman forces were no match for the crack Parthian troops. After being badly beaten, Paetus retired to Rhandeia with the remnants of his army. He then further exacerbated the situation by misrepresenting the severity of his defeat to Corbulo, who therefore did not deem it necessary to send reinforcements.<sup>104</sup>

Vologases, on the other hand, was well informed about the weakened Roman position in Armenia. Upon receiving word of Monaeses' victory, he abandoned his push to capture Syria and turned the brunt of his attack instead towards Paetus' force. Paetus now had little choice but to swallow his pride. He sent a message to Corbulo explaining the seriousness of his situation and requested immediate assistance. Corbulo wasted no time and set out swiftly with several legions. However, his forced march from Zeugma would be for naught, for within only three days from Rhandeia, he

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<sup>103</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.9; Dio Cass. 62.20-21.

<sup>104</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.6-10; Dio Cass. 62.20-21.

received news that Paetus had come to terms with the Parthians. These terms were, of course, unfavorable for the Romans, who were required to withdraw from Armenia.<sup>105</sup>

Later in 63, both sides met to discuss a more permanent armistice. Corbulo agreed to remove Rome's fortresses on the Euphrates if the Parthians would abandon their claim to Armenia. Vologases consented and, for the moment, the question of Armenia's throne remained unresolved. However, a Parthian embassy, which appeared before Nero in Italy, soon presented him with an interesting arrangement. If Nero would accept an Arsacid candidate in Armenia, Vologases would allow the man to be crowned by the emperor himself at Rome. Although tied by heredity to the Parthian state, this man would effectively be a Roman vassal. While the idea was much debated, Nero finally accepted the Parthian offer and eventually approved Vologases' brother Tiridates for the position. As a gesture of good will, Tiridates then appeared in Corbulo's camp in Syria. He paid homage to a statue of Nero, which was there, removed his diadem and placed it at the effigy's feet.<sup>106</sup>

In 66, Tiridates departed for Italy with a retinue of three thousand guards and attendants. His overland journey, which lasted nine months, was financed by the Roman treasury at the staggering cost of 800,000 sesterces per day. Many of the local towns along his route through Asia Minor and Illyricum held festivities in his honor. But Tiridates was cautious not to let his celebrated status get the better of him. When he met Nero at Neapolis, he did obeisance to the Emperor, who rewarded him with a gladiatorial exhibition. The pair then traveled to Rome where, before a huge crowd of onlookers, Tiridates proclaimed Nero his master and god. Nero, in turn, replaced the

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<sup>105</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.11-17, Dio Cass. 62.21-22.

<sup>106</sup> Tac *Ann.* 15.18, 24-32; Dio Cass. 62 (63.1-7); Sue. *Nero* 13.

diadem which Tiridates had willingly removed and named him as Armenia's king, granting him the regalia of his new office. He then bestowed his new vassal with gifts, which Dio reports were valued in excess of 200,000,000 sesterces. After several days of revelry, Tiridates left Rome with Nero's blessing and began the long journey home, where he used much of the emperor's munificence to rebuild his capital at Artaxata.<sup>107</sup>

Nero's acknowledgement of Tiridates as Armenia's legitimate ruler was unprecedented. For nearly a century, Rome and Parthia had been unable to agree on a single candidate for that throne. Even throughout periods of relative peace, such as during Artaxias' lengthy reign from AD 18 to 32, either one side or the other would remain adamant, refusing to endorse Armenia's monarch. Nero's acceptance of a Parthian candidate, and an Arsacid one at that, is therefore nothing less than a watershed in the story of Romano-Parthian relations. And although the aftereffects of Nero's decision will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter, it is important here to note that, following Tiridates' long reign, Rome's preferred course of action in the region – which, since Augustus' time, had been politics and diplomacy – became the outright use of military force.

### **Conclusion**

Modern scholars are sometimes mistaken when they too quickly credit the Roman writers with a keen understanding of the classical world. Such is the case when we examine Romano-Parthian relations during the Early Principate. In several instances, Roman authors expressed legitimate fears about Parthia's potential for conquest. The poet Horace even took time to warn his audience of the threat that Parthia posed to Italy. However, it should be clearer now that such concerns were not

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<sup>107</sup> Dio Cass. 62 (63.1-7); Sue. *Nero* 13.

grounded in the facts and resulted instead from popular hysteria, which arose following Crassus' and Antony's shocking defeats in Mesopotamia.

Throughout the Julio-Claudian Period, Parthia was hardly the looming danger that Rome's writers penned it to be. Due to the fickleness of its nobility, its leadership was often in shambles; and the constant chaos of its political environment, in turn, brought its economy to ruin. Even Artabanus' long reign proved fruitless in the end once he chose to entangle himself in the affairs of Armenia. Of the numerous kings who ruled Parthia during this period, only Vologases was able to win any lasting concessions from Rome. And even then, Armenia could hardly be considered prized real estate.

Still, the absence of any real Parthian threat does not alter in any great fashion our modern understanding of Roman expansion in the East. After all, a perceived danger could just as easily have elicited a similar response. If the Romans just believed that they were beset by Parthian hordes, they would have acted accordingly. However, what is important to remember is the fact that individual Romans dictated frontier policy and not the Empire's citizenry as a whole. It was the ambitions of Rome's emperors, and not the collective fears of its people, that led to its constant interference in the politics of Armenia and Parthia. That collective fear, real or imagined, merely showed Rome's leaders where best to win honor and glory for themselves.

It is difficult then to equate Rome's actions in Armenia and Parthia with notions of defensive imperialism. Despite the caveats of its writers, Rome was in no immediate danger from the East. A more likely reason for its military endeavors in the region seems then to be those same personal wants and desires discussed in Chapter 1.

Augustus may have officially halted imperial expansion and in doing so defined the borders of the Roman Empire, but he could not as easily immure Roman ambition.



## Chapter 3 Trajan's Parthian Campaign

In AD 72, L. Caesennius Paetus, the Roman governor of Syria, informed the emperor Vespasian of a potential alliance between Antiochus of Commagene and Vologases against Rome. Since such an arrangement would threaten the longstanding Neronian peace, Vespasian authorized Paetus to invade and to depose the Commagenian monarch. Although Antiochus' two sons, Epiphanes and Callinicus, managed to rally a small army against the Romans, their forces were soon overwhelmed. Meanwhile, Antiochus, who did not share in his sons' misplaced confidence, fled to Parthia. Yet because he had not actually taken up arms himself, he was allowed to surrender to the Roman authorities and to live out the remainder of his days in Sparta with a considerable stipend.<sup>108</sup>

This incident prompted Vespasian to abandon the Neronian *détente* and to adopt once again a hard-line approach to the eastern frontier. Rather than install a new monarch on the throne of Commagene, he chose to annex the territory and along with it western Armenia. This audacious move on the part of the Romans elicited no objection from the Parthians, who were otherwise occupied defending their northern borders from marauding hordes of Alani tribesmen. By AD 75, in an ironic twist of fate, Vologases even requested aid from Rome against these invaders, who had already overrun Hyrcania and Media Atropatene, deposing there the Parthian king's brother Pacorus. In response, Vespasian sent troops to assist the Iberian king Mithridates and to fortify his strongholds at Metskheta and Tiflis. Vologases hoped that the emperor's sons, Titus

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<sup>108</sup> Joseph *BJ* 7.219-43.

and Domitian, would then be dispatched to confront the Alani, but no such expedition materialized.<sup>109</sup>

The Parthian king's ongoing struggle against these northern invaders eventually made his throne vulnerable to both political and military rivals. Although the literary sources concerning this period are silent, numismatic evidence suggests that, sometime around AD 79, Vologases was replaced by someone named Pacorus II. However, the accession of this new king did not return stability to the Parthian state. Both continuing pressure from the Alani and the appearance of another contender for the throne named Vologases III resulted in two lengthy periods (AD 84-93 and 95-105) when no royal coins were minted for Pacorus at Seleucia or Ctesiphon. Furthermore, Pacorus' brother or brother-in-law, a nobleman known as Osroes, began producing coinage bearing his own image ca. AD 109/10. Eventually Pacorus disappears almost altogether from the sources, leaving Vologases III and Osroes in a heated contest for the Parthian throne.<sup>110</sup>

The internal squabbling of the Parthian leadership did not go unnoticed at Rome. Towards the end of his reign, Domitian made preparations to invade Mesopotamia. He, no doubt, hoped to take advantage of Parthia's fractured political situation. Yet his plans did not come to fruition, for in AD 96 his unpopularity at Rome resulted in a household plot against him. However, his death granted Parthia only a temporary reprieve. His successor, Nerva, paid little attention to the eastern frontier while he attempted to restore order in Italy and the western provinces. It was perhaps for this reason that, in AD 110, Osroes felt the moment right to dethrone the Armenian king

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 7.244-51; Sue. *Vesp.* 8.4, *Dom.* 2.2; and for Roman activity at Metskheta and Tiflis see Berolini, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, III, no. 6052 and Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae selectae*, no. 8795, respectively.

<sup>110</sup> Wroth *Coins of Parthia* 193-216.

Tiridates, the aged Arsacid appointed by Nero himself, and replace him with Axidares, one of Pacorus' sons. This act would be portrayed by Nerva's heir, the emperor Trajan, as a defiling of the pact established long ago under Nero. Since Osroes had made no effort to seek Roman approval for his Armenian appointee, Trajan was able to use this incident as an excuse to launch his own invasion of Armenia and Mesopotamia.<sup>111</sup>

Trajan's Parthian War is, in many ways, the climax of our story. It is the culmination of nearly two centuries of political posturing and bitter rivalry. Yet it is also, at the same time, part of our larger theme of Roman aggression, Parthian disunity – and, indeed, unfulfilled plans. For although Trajan was the first emperor to carry out an invasion of Mesopotamia itself, he was not the only Roman leader to dream of such a conquest. Crassus, Antony, Caesar Augustus, Nero, and Domitian all had made similar plans. Yet, like those of his predecessors, Trajan's grand scheme for Armenia and Mesopotamia would ultimately be cut short by unforeseen circumstances – in this case, his own untimely death.

Chapter 3 will examine Trajan's campaign, its motivations, and its aftereffects. It will attempt to portray this particular conflict as merely another instance of Roman avarice and glory-hunting. Yet it will also draw conclusions from the two preceding chapters, making a case for on-going Roman aggression throughout the first two centuries AD. Why, after all, did the Romano-Parthian conflict come to a head here and now in the second century under Trajan's watch? And what were the lasting results of that endgame?

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<sup>111</sup> Statius *Silvae* 5.1; Dio Cass. 68.17.1; and Arrian *Parthica* frs. 37 and 40.

## Optimus Princeps

In the fall of AD 113, Trajan departed Rome by ship for the East, sailing first to Athens. There, he was met by Parthian legates, who informed him of Osroes' desire to avert war. In an effort to mollify Trajan, the Parthian king had deposed Axidares, whom he now formally requested be replaced with Parthamasiris, another of Pacorus' sons. However, if Osroes hoped that this last-ditch act would deter a confrontation with Rome, he was wrong. Trajan made no attempt whatsoever to acknowledge the Parthian olive branch, choosing instead to proceed straight to Antioch where he continued his war preparations.<sup>112</sup>

That winter, Trajan drew up several legions and auxiliary units from Egypt and Pannonia. These troops, along with those legions traditionally stationed in Syria, Judea, and Commagene, made up the brunt of his expeditionary force. In the spring of AD 114, with his army thus assembled, he advanced to Melitene and, from there, marched unopposed into Lesser Armenia. At Satala, numerous tribal leaders from the Caucasus region appeared to welcome Trajan and to declare their allegiance to him. The Roman emperor exchanged gifts with Anchialus, the king of the Heniochi and Machelones, and held audiences with the rulers of the Iberians, Sarmatians, and Colchians.<sup>113</sup>

Since Trajan's arrival in Athens, Parthamasiris too had been attempting to secure a meeting with the Roman leader. When his request was finally granted, he presented himself to Trajan at Elegia. In a memorable scene, the Armenian king removed his diadem and placed it at Trajan's feet, no doubt hoping to reenact the ceremony of Tiridates' investiture by Nero. However, Trajan did not replace the diadem as Nero

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<sup>112</sup> Dio Cass. 68.17.2-3.

<sup>113</sup> For the specific legions utilized by Trajan for his campaign see R. P. Longden, "The Wars of Trajan," *Cambridge Ancient History* 11 (1936): 241-42 and Debevoise *History of Parthia* 219-21; Procopius *De aedificiis* 3.4.15; Dio Cass. 68.19.2; and Eutrop. *Brev.* 8.3.

once had done. Instead, the Roman emperor took Parthamasiris' act as a sign of his surrender and declared Armenia henceforth a Roman province. Parthamasiris, who could do little more than protest, was escorted from Trajan's camp by a Roman cavalry detachment and slain.<sup>114</sup>

Trajan then proceeded to consolidate his new province. He appointed a procuratorial governor, whom R. P. Longden and Debevoise have identified with difficulty as either L. Catilius Severus, C. Atilius Claudius, or T. Haterius Nepos. All three men were prominent officials in the early reorganization of Armenia. Trajan also dispatched Lucius Quietus against the Mardi, a hostile tribe which supposedly lived east of Lake Van. According to Arrian, Quietus first destroyed this tribe and then garrisoned an area near the 'Caspian Gates.' With the successful subjugation of Armenia and the surrounding territories, Trajan felt the moment right to accept, at the Senate's behest, the appellation 'Optimus,' a title which he would prize above all others as a reflection of his character.<sup>115</sup>

Despite having thus conquered Armenia, Trajan was not yet ready to abandon his eastern campaign. He next proceeded southward into Adiabene, intending to besiege the fortress of Adenystrae, the principle stronghold of Adiabene's ruler Mebarsapes. Because Mebarsapes was sympathetic to Parthia, this siege might have delayed Trajan some time had not a captured Roman centurion named Sentius rallied his fellow prisoners against the fortress's garrison. As it was, however, due to Sentius' revolt, the Romans easily occupied Adenystrae, forcing Mebarsapes to flee. From

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<sup>114</sup> Dio Cass. 68.19-20; Arrian *Parthica* frs. 38-39; and Eutrop. *Brev.* 8.3.

<sup>115</sup> Longden, "Notes on the Parthian Campaigns of Trajan," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 21 (1931): 10; Debevoise *History of Parthia* 225; Themistius *Orationes* 16; Arrian *Parthica* frs. 86-87; Dio Cass. 68.23; and Harold Mattingly and Edward A. Sydenham, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, II (London: Spink and Son, Ltd., 1968), 235.

Adiabene, Trajan then advanced to the region near Edessa, where he similarly hoped to rein in the vacillating Abgarus VII. Although Abgarus had been called earlier to an audience with Trajan, he had failed to appear. His loyalty to Rome was thus questionable, and so Trajan felt that a display of force was necessary. Once the full Roman panoply appeared before Edessa's walls, Abgarus had little choice but to comply. He immediately sent out gifts of weapons and troops to Trajan as a sign of his fealty. Although the emperor returned most of these offerings, he did confirm Abgarus as Edessa's phylarch.<sup>116</sup>

Having thus secured the allegiance of Abgarus, the Romans then moved rapidly, capturing the cities of Nisibis and Batnae. For these victories, the Senate awarded Trajan the title of 'Parthicus' and issued coins bearing the inscription ARMENIA ET MESOPOTAMIA IN POTESTATEM P. R. REDACTAE. Despite such encouragement from Rome, Trajan could not risk proceeding any further during the winter months. He, therefore, garrisoned Nisibis and returned to Syria to await the spring. Interestingly enough, however, this decision to retire resulted in the closest call Trajan would have during the entire campaign; for in the winter of 115, a devastating earthquake struck Antioch, destroying most of the city. Trajan sought shelter in the hippodrome and, by doing so, only narrowly escaped death.<sup>117</sup>

In the spring, Trajan returned to Nisibis and began preparations to restart the campaign. He first inspected a fleet of boats, which he had ordered his soldiers to construct during his absence. This fleet was then carried overland from Nisibis to the Tigris where it was used to cross the river. Trajan quickly recaptured Adiabene, which

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<sup>116</sup> Dio Cass. 68.22; Arrian *Parthica* frs. 42-48.

<sup>117</sup> Dio Cass. 68.23-25; Mattingly and Sydenham *Roman Imperial Coinage*, II, 289.

had recently fallen to Osroes, and officially converted the territory into the new Roman province of Assyria. All evidence then points to a long Roman march down the Euphrates River during which Trajan visited Phaliga, Dura-Europus, and Tyre. A fleet similar to the one constructed at Nisibis sailed alongside the advancing army. Just north of Ctesiphon, this flotilla was transferred to the Tigris in preparation for Trajan's attack on the Parthian capital.<sup>118</sup>

However, these elaborate maneuvers proved unnecessary, for Ctesiphon fell without much resistance. Osroes, who was then in control of the city, had fled prior to the Romans' arrival, leaving behind not only his famous golden throne, but also his daughter. On February 20, 116, Trajan entered the city as a true conqueror amidst the cheers of his soldiers and commanded that a heavy tribute be imposed on his new subjects. His victory was honored by the Senate, which issued coins displaying his image and the inscription PARTHIA CAPTA. Although no mention is made of nearby Seleucia, numismatic evidence suggests that Pacorus was still in power there. Debevoise speculates that Trajan may have reached some agreement with the divested Parthian monarch. Perhaps Trajan spared Seleucia because he intended to use Pacorus in his later restructuring of the Parthian kingdom.<sup>119</sup>

Such a line of inquiry is, however, a moot point, for dramatic events which followed Ctesiphon's fall soon overshadowed any plans Trajan may have had to rebuild the war torn kingdom. That winter, Trajan sailed down the Tigris and occupied the cities of Akra, Oratha, and Apamea. He journeyed to the Persian Gulf and, on his return voyage, stopped at Babylon where he visited the supposed room in which Alexander

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<sup>118</sup> Dio Cass. 68.26; Eutrop. *Brev.* 8.3; and Arrian *Parthica* bk. 10 frs. 8 and 64.

<sup>119</sup> Dio Cass. 68.28; Mattingly and Sydenham *Roman Imperial Coinage*, II, 267; and Debevoise *History of Parthia* 233.

the Great had died. While at Babylon, Trajan first learned of widespread rebellion in northern Mesopotamia. Most of these revolts were local uprisings prompted by Osroes' brother Mithridates, who had recently recaptured large tracts of Roman territory. Although Mithridates was soon killed in an equestrian accident, his son Sanatruces continued to defy Roman authorities and to incite further pro-Parthian resistance.<sup>120</sup>

Trajan dispatched his generals Appius Maximus and L. Quietus to quell these revolts. Although Maximus died while fighting somewhere near the Taurus, Quietus succeeded in reconquering most of central Mesopotamia. Besides retaking Nisibis, he also razed Edessa, which once again had taken up the Parthian banner. He put down its rebelling Jewish population and drove the traitorous Abgarus into exile. However, Quietus' tenuous position in the upper Euphrates valley was still vulnerable to Sanatruces' counterattack. Osroes thus sent a large Parthian army commanded by his son Parthamaspates to reinforce his nephew. Yet fortunately for Quietus, this Parthian prince was more pragmatic than loyal. He struck a deal with Trajan, offering his allegiance in exchange for the Parthian throne. Thus, Parthamaspates and Quietus combined their forces and together defeated the remnants of Sanatruces' struggling army.<sup>121</sup>

However, resistance to Roman occupation continued to plague Trajan even after the collapse of Sanatruces' rebels. In Armenia, Sanatruces' son Vologases III orchestrated a successful revolt against that province's local administrators. Since Trajan was otherwise occupied besieging the Parthian stronghold of Hatra and had no more manpower to spare, he granted Vologases a considerable portion of Armenia in

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<sup>120</sup> Arrian *Parthica* bk. 16 frs. 15-16, 69, and 75; Dio Cass. 68.29-30 (75.9).

<sup>121</sup> Dio Cass. 68.30; Euseb. 4.2.1; and HA *Hadrian* 5.4.



return for amicable relations. When a dearth of supplies then forced him to quit his siege, Trajan decided to recall all but his northernmost troops from Mesopotamia. He intended to return the following year to shore up his newly won provinces and to restart the campaign wherever necessary; however, his health, which had been steadily deteriorating for several months, soon forced him to abandon any such plans. While preparing to sail home to Italy in August of 117, his chronic illness finally overcame him.<sup>122</sup>

### **The Case for Premeditation**

Our account of Trajan's Parthian campaign is derived primarily from two classical texts – Arrian's *Parthica* and Dio Cassius' *Roman History*. However, despite their incalculable historic value, both sources possess a key fault which cannot easily be overlooked. The relevant passages in Arrian's and Dio's works, which were preserved mainly due to the efforts of the tenth-century Byzantine culturist Constantine VII, exist today only in the form of fragments and epitomes. Consequently, our picture of Trajan's Parthian war is, at best, an incomplete one. Yet the scanty evidence available has not deterred scholars from attempting to extrapolate the true causes of the war. It behooves us now to examine some of these theories, their merits, and their relevance to our overall theme of Roman aggression.

In his 1931 paper titled "Notes on the Parthian Campaigns of Trajan," R. P. Longden reviewed Pliny's *Bythinian Letters*, hoping to disprove popular notions that Trajan had long planned to invade Mesopotamia. Longden's fellow academics<sup>123</sup>, who desperately sought to ascribe premeditated motives to Trajan's actions, had previously

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<sup>122</sup> Dio Cass. 68.30 (75.9)-31, 33.

<sup>123</sup> Perhaps the best known advocate of the premeditation theory is Dr. O. Cuntz, "Zum Briefwechsel des Plinius mit Traian," *Hermes* 61 (1926).

used passages in Pliny to these ends. In *Epp.* xxvii and xxviii, for example, Pliny grants his procurator Maximus an extraordinary amount of grain for distribution among his soldiers. Proponents of a case for premeditation suggest that this extra grain might have been used to feed troops mobilizing for a large-scale campaign. And since these letters are dated as early as AD 111, it might seem as though Trajan was planning a preemptive strike against the Parthians. However, as Longden points out, drawing this conclusion from such circumstantial evidence is not only dangerous, but also foolish. The additional food stuffs could just as easily have been intended for storage in the provincial granaries.<sup>124</sup>

Furthermore, in *Epp.* lxiii, lxiv, and lxvii, Pliny relates an incident in which an imperial freedman named Lycormas requested that an embassy from the kingdom of Bosphorus be detained in Bithynia until his arrival. Although some scholars have interpreted this episode as a race between Lycormas and the Bosphorans to report urgent news from the eastern frontier to Trajan, Longden thoroughly dismisses such an explanation. Instead, he suggests that Lycormas had somehow fallen out of favor with the Bosphoran king, who was attempting to relay the freedman's indiscretion to Roman authorities. And finally, in *Ep.* lxxiv, Pliny apologizes to Trajan for delaying a messenger named Callidromus, who had learned that the Dacian king Decebalus was sending gifts to the Parthian court. Advocates of the premeditation argument claim that this correspondence proves Trajan had good reason to contemplate an invasion of Parthia. Although Longden agrees, he is careful to point out that the letter does not include the emperor's response to this disturbing news. Perhaps upon hearing of Decebalus' possible alliance with Parthia, Trajan did, indeed, begin planning his future conquest of

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<sup>124</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 27-28; Longden "Parthian Campaigns of Trajan" 19-20.

Mesopotamia; or, as Longden suggests, perhaps he did nothing at all. Without that crucial piece of information, this letter cannot be used to either prove or disprove a case for premeditation.<sup>125</sup>

Longden's rejection of so-called 'premeditated' evidence in Pliny's *Bithynian Letters* eventually gave rise to what has become known as the frontier theory. According to this view, Trajan never intended to invade Mesopotamia. Originally, he merely sought to retake Armenia and to restore Rome's eastern borders. Only after doing so, did he eventually realize his folly, for he suddenly came to regard Parthia as a continual threat to Roman security. For lack of any evidence to the contrary, Longden thus sees Trajan's Mesopotamian campaign as an impromptu undertaking and not as the result of a purposed war. Yet such a theory, while tempting, does not take into account our modern understanding of the Roman psyche or our knowledge of Trajan's personality. Just because Longden found no concrete evidence proving premeditation, are we really to assume that Trajan only realized the danger Parthia posed after his recapture of Armenia? To think so would certainly seem to be giving Trajan less credit than he deserves.<sup>126</sup>

In 1937, however, J. Guey published his paper "Essai sur la guerre parthique de Trajan (114-117)," in which he attempted to explain the war as the result of Trajan's excessive greed. Guey proposes that, following the Dacian war, the emperor needed a new source of wealth to continue his elaborate building projects, such as his forum in Rome. This economic view of the war also suggests that Trajan may have been trying to commandeer Parthia's all-important trade routes to the Far East. He had, after all,

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<sup>125</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 63-64, 67, 74; Longden "Parthian Campaigns of Trajan" 20-21.

<sup>126</sup> Longden "Parthian Campaigns of Trajan" 25-29.

already annexed the Nabataean kingdom in 106, probably for these same purposes. But if this theory is correct, then Guey would need to demonstrate that Trajan intended all along to invade Parthia. Therefore, his paper takes up once again the challenge of proving premeditation.<sup>127</sup>

Unfortunately, Guey relies heavily on Pliny's letters, yet does not offer much to refute Longden's arguments. Instead, he introduces other evidence of troop deployments to buttress his own theory of premeditation. For if it could be shown that Trajan dispatched a large number of soldiers to the eastern front prior to the beginning of the war in 113, then there would be no question about his ultimate intentions. He would have done so only if he had planned to engage a substantial force during the course of a prolonged campaign. As proof, Guey cites an inscription from Ancyra, which describes the prestigious career of Tiberius Julius Severus, a local man who became a prominent public official during the reigns of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. The closing lines of the inscription mention that Roman troops wintered at Ancyra during a 'Parthian war,' which Guey claims could have only been Trajan's. Although there is no evidence pinpointing an exact date, he insists that this quartering must have occurred before 113. A similar inscription from Thyateira also records Roman troop deployments, possibly in Galatia, during the second century. Guey argues that the specific legions mentioned in the inscription were only utilized during Trajan's campaign, but there is no real proof that these forces were not also used later in either Hadrian's Jewish war or L. Verus' own Parthian expeditions.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Zbigniew T. Fiema, "The Roman Annexation of Arabia: A General Perspective," *The Ancient World XV* (1987): 35; and for Guey's argument reference Lepper *Trajan's Parthian War* 158-63.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 164-83.

On the other hand, F. A. Lepper's *Trajan's Parthian War* (1948) does not completely endorse either Longden or Guey's views. Lepper sees the frontier theory as too simplistic and believes that it fails to take into account the Roman predilection for glory-hunting and plundering. Yet, on the other hand, he regards the economic theory as equally flawed, for he does not consider the evidence convincing enough to support Guey's conclusions. Lepper seems instead to favor the opinions of more contemporary writers, such as Dio Cassius and Dio Chrysostom, who insist that Trajan invaded Mesopotamia primarily for the purpose of winning fame and prestige.<sup>129</sup>

Lepper is careful to point out that Trajan was, prior to his Parthian campaign, rarely accused of egoism or vainglory. Of the numerous titles voted to him by the Senate, he prized 'Optimus' above all the rest specifically for its non-military connotations. So why then does Dio Cassius say, in regards to Trajan's eastern war, that his "real reason was a desire to win renown," even though such a statement blatantly contradicts everything that is known about the emperor's character? Most modern scholars simply dismiss Dio's comment as an unfounded accusation disseminated later by Hadrian's administration to show Trajan's conquests as a mistake. However, Lepper proposes that Dio's remark, although inconsistent, may in fact be true, once we take into account Trajan's failing health and mental state. The emperor's symptoms, a loss of strength, dropsy, and partial paralysis as the result of a stroke, do after all suggest the onset of heart failure, perhaps even accompanied by mental impairment.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 156-57, 188-94.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 197-200; Dio Cass. 68.17.1

Lepper's theory is further corroborated by the remarks of Dio Chrysostom, who, in his fourth kingship oration, plainly compares Trajan to Alexander the Great. Chrysostom boldly accuses Alexander, and thus Trajan himself, of being a 'slave to glory' and, as Lepper suggests, 'burning to conquer Babylon and Persia.' We know that Trajan held the Macedonian conqueror in high esteem, for after his trip to the Persian Gulf he took time to visit Alexander's death-chamber. However, the fact that this speech may have been performed for Trajan on his birthday in 103 or 104 has led scholars, such as J. Moles, to believe that critical remarks such as these were most probably added in at some later time. Yet, regardless of whether or not the Emperor was privy to these specific comments, the implications are obvious. Chrysostom, like Dio Cassius, probably looked upon Trajan as a glory-hunter, someone overly concerned with his reputation and legacy.<sup>131</sup>

But are we simply to ignore suggestive statements in Pliny's letters or inscriptions, such as those cited by Guey, just because they cannot be easily substantiated elsewhere? Lepper certainly does not think we should. In fact, he freely admits that Trajan may have had other secondary motivations for conquering Parthia, including those proposed by Longden and Guey. His argument is able to allow for such possibilities because his theory does not hinge on the idea of premeditation. Perhaps Trajan long planned to invade Mesopotamia; or perhaps he only chose this course following the collapse of resistance in Armenia. In either case, Lepper sees the pursuit of glory ultimately as the driving force behind Trajan's actions.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Dio Chrysos. *Or.* 4.49, 60; Lepper *Trajan's Parthian War* 194-97; and J. Moles, "The date and purpose of the fourth kingship oration of Dio Chrysostom," *Classical Antiquity* II (1983): 251-78.

<sup>132</sup> Lepper *Trajan's Parthian War* 201-4.

However, our purpose in reviewing these theories is not to debate further Trajan's motivations. Obviously, due to the absence of new evidence, any additional discussion of the topic would, at best, be only speculative. Our intent is rather to emphasize the general lack of responsibility for the war that modern scholars ascribe to Parthia. Despite the fact that Osroes was technically guilty of breaking the Neronian peace, none of the historians mentioned here seem to blame him for the war itself. How could they, considering that the Parthian embassy which met Trajan at Athens tried so desperately to dissuade him from engaging in further hostilities? Osroes was then still trying to consolidate his own powers and defeat his rivals, Pacorus and Vologases III. Why would he have, at that moment, risked everything by intentionally provoking Rome? Indeed, what is interesting here about Longden, Guey, and Lepper's theories is not their differences, but rather their one particular similarity. For whatever reason they might choose, each author places the lion's share of blame for the war wholly on Trajan's shoulders. Such a consensus would seem then to support our broader argument that Rome was, in fact, the aggressor, and not simply defending its territory from an impending Parthian threat.

### **The Fall of the Arsacids**

Despite the Senate's perpetual adulation, not all Romans favored Trajan's campaigns in the East. Some critics warned that, by establishing provinces in far off Mesopotamia, Trajan had succeeded only in dangerously overextending the effective range of the Roman military. Trajan's adopted son and successor, Hadrian, seems to have shared this opinion, for he soon withdrew completely from Mesopotamia, abandoning all provincial claims to the region. In its weakened state, the Arsacid dynasty was unable to recover fully from the sudden power vacuum that this withdrawal

created. Its enemies, which were now quite numerous, continued to harass the beleaguered kingdom, detaching from the empire crucial territories such as Bactria. During the next century, several Roman emperors, such as Lucius Verus, Septimius Severus, and Caracalla, further contributed to this process by mounting their own 'Parthian' expeditions. We will now examine briefly their campaigns and the collapse of the Arsacid state.<sup>133</sup>

The ongoing struggle for power in Parthia between Osroes and Vologases II continued through much of the remainder of Hadrian's reign. During this period, Armenia held ostensibly a semi-independent status, after Vologases' departure from that territory following the Roman withdrawal. However, in 128/29, Osroes was finally defeated, clearing the way first for Vologases and then for his successor Vologases IV to take the throne. During the rule of the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161), this Vologases seems to have done little worthy of record, for the classical writers make few references to Parthia at this time. Debevoise suggests that Pius may have even used his influence to secure some type of truce in Mesopotamia. If so, then this would explain why Pius' death in 161 so emboldened Vologases, who quickly dispatched troops to Armenia to reestablish Parthian hegemony there. Had the Parthians stopped then at Armenia, there might not have been any immediate Roman reprisal, for the empire was in a state of transition. However, the crushing defeat of the Roman legate C. Severianus only further encouraged Vologases' general Osroes, who wasted no time marching his army across the Euphrates into Syria.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> The *Historia Augusta* reports (*Hadrian* 21.14) that the king of Bactria sent envoys to Hadrian seeking friendship, which would seem to suggest that the territory had gained some measure of self-autonomy.

<sup>134</sup> Sellwood *Coinage of Parthia* 257-60, 268-77; Debevoise *History of Parthia* 245; Dio Cass. 71.2.1.



Pius' successor Marcus Aurelius could not allow such an outrage to go unpunished. He, therefore, sent his co-emperor Lucius Verus to the eastern front with the authority to launch a full-scale campaign against Parthia. In 163, Verus, who directed most of this operation safely from Antioch, ordered his general Statius Priscus into Armenia. Priscus' forces were made up not only of Rome's various oriental contingents, but also of several legions transferred from the Rhine and Danube. Vologases' troops in Armenia proved no match for such a formidable Roman army and surrendered Artaxata without much resistance. Priscus then installed the Roman client-king Sohaemus on the Armenian throne.<sup>135</sup>

A year later, Verus also dispatched another of his generals, Avidius Cassius, to Mesopotamia. After several hard-fought battles, Cassius reached Ctesiphon and Seleucia, which he besieged and then razed. However, unfortunately for the Romans, an epidemic soon spread throughout their ranks, killing many and forcing them to withdraw. By 166, the Parthians had apparently retaken much of their lost territory, for the Roman appointee in Armenia Sohaemus was driven to exile in Syria. Although Verus launched a brief counter-offensive, which recaptured Edessa and Nisibis, his plans to occupy all of Mesopotamia were soon abandoned.<sup>136</sup>

Although Verus' Mesopotamian campaign fell far short of its projected goal, we must not view it as a complete Roman disaster. For while it is indeed true that Verus' legions suffered terrible losses, we must not forget too that Parthia's armies were also greatly depleted. Yes, of course, Vologases narrowly managed to retain his throne, but at what cost? After 166, Parthia would never again hold territory west of the Khabur

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<sup>135</sup> HA *Marcus Antoninus* 9.1, *Verus* 7.1; Dio Cass. 71.3.

<sup>136</sup> HA *Verus* 8.1-4; Dio Cass. 71.2.

River, and cities such as Edessa, Nisibis, and Carrhae would fall even more under Roman influence. Verus' war, although fleeting, marks a crucial step in the decline of Arsacid Parthia.<sup>137</sup>

Parthia's troubles were further compounded by the poor decisions of its next ruler, Vologases V, who had usurped his namesake's throne in 191. Two years later, when Marcus Aurelius' son and heir Commodus was assassinated, Vologases chose, along with several of Rome's eastern vassals, to back Pescennius Niger of Syria in his contention for the emperorship. This decision proved to be disastrous for Parthia, for Niger was soon defeated by the African Septimius Severus, who wasted no time mounting a punitive expedition against the 'treasonous' Vologases. By 196, Severus had captured much of northern Mesopotamia and was poised for an attack on Parthia itself, when news arrived of a widespread revolt in Gaul. He, therefore, garrisoned Nisibis and return westwards to deal with the rebelling province.<sup>138</sup>

In 197, Severus returned to Mesopotamia with three newly-formed legions: the I, II, and III Parthica. He relieved Nisibis' commander Laetus, who had won great fame among the soldiers after repelling several Parthian assaults against the city. During Severus' absence in Gaul, the Parthians had seized much of the surrounding territory and may have even, if we are to believe Herodian, retaken Armenia. However, whatever boldness Vologases had found was soon lost upon Severus' return, for the Parthians quickly dispersed before the Romans' advance. Perhaps in imitation of

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<sup>137</sup> For evidence of Roman influence in Edessa specifically see Steven K. Ross, *Roman Edessa: Politics and Culture on the eastern fringes of the Roman Empire, 114-242 CE* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 36-45.

<sup>138</sup> Sellwood *Coinage of Parthia* 281-85; Dio Cass. 75.1-3, 6-8; and D. L. Kennedy, "The garrisoning of Mesopotamia in the late Antonine and early Severan period," *Antichthon* 21 (1987): 57-66.

Trajan's campaign, Severus had his armies construct a fleet of swift boats, which they then used to navigate down the Euphrates, capturing Seleucia and Babylon.<sup>139</sup>

Dio reports that Severus next unleashed his troops on Ctesiphon solely for the purpose of plundering the capital. Severus, who it seems had no intention of establishing a permanent Roman presence in Mesopotamia, did not even bother to pursue Vologases, who had fled prior to the Romans' arrival. Instead, with much of Ctesiphon ablaze, he ordered a general withdrawal, leaving Parthia's great cities in ruin. But before leaving, Severus also tried to besiege Hatra, perhaps hoping to succeed where Trajan had failed. Like Trajan, however, Severus was unable to force the city into submission and succeeded only in losing many men and supplies.<sup>140</sup>

But much like Verus' campaign, Severus' expedition can be viewed as a success in a roundabout way. It is, of course, true that the Romans failed to capture Vologases or even to acquire any new territory; but, as we have seen, this was most probably not their intention. Rather, Severus sought to punish the Parthians for their ill placed faith in Niger. It is, in these regards, that Severus most surely succeeded, for any political or economic ground Vologases had regained during his reign was once again lost. Parthia's capital was wrecked; much of its population either slaughtered or enslaved. And with its infrastructure in shambles, many of the kingdom's vassals took the opportunity to assert their independence.

In ca. 207/8, Abgarus IX of Osroene broke from his Parthian vassalage and began expanding his kingdom's territory. However, his bid for independence was ill conceived, for he mistakenly assumed that Parthia, rather than Rome, was still his

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<sup>139</sup> Dio Cass. 76.9.1-3.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 76.9.4-13.2.

immediate sovereign in the region. When he appeared before Rome's new emperor Caracalla to discuss their countries' mutual affairs, he was seized and imprisoned. Thus, Caracalla brought Osroene completely under Roman sway, further paring down Parthia's once-great empire. When Khusrau I, the king of Armenia, tried similarly to affirm his state's independent status, Caracalla used the same ruse to capture that kingdom's royal family. Unlike Osroene, however, the Armenians did not submit, forcing the emperor to dispatch his general Theocritus. Yet the Armenians, perhaps more inspired than demoralized by the loss of their beloved king, proved too much for the Romans, who were sorely defeated.<sup>141</sup>

Meanwhile, in Parthia, Vologases was succeeded by his son, the sixth of the same name. Yet a rift soon developed between Parthia's new king and his brother, Artabanus V, the ruler of Media. This fraternal dispute was soon brought to the attention of Caracalla, who needed just such an opportunity to redeem himself after the debacle in Armenia. As Parthia prepared for another prolonged civil conflict, Caracalla sent a message to Media's capital Ecbatana, demanding that Artabanus' daughter be given to him in marriage. Dio reports that this supposed attempt at an alliance was merely intended as a pretext for war, which was quickly demonstrated by the fact that Caracalla soon began ravaging portions of northern Mesopotamia. Herodian's version of events, although less plausible, is certainly more dramatic, for he records an episode in which Caracalla's proposal is at first accepted. The emperor's entourage then travels to Artabanus' court where they partake in an elaborate wedding feast. However, during this celebration, the Romans ambush the Parthian guests, who are of course too inebriated to defend themselves. But while Herodian's story is most probably fictitious,

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 78.12, 21.

it is likely that Caracalla spent some time laying waste to Media and its surrounding territory until his assassination in 217. Coins from this period, bearing the inscription VIC(TORIA) PART(HICA), seem to corroborate such events.<sup>142</sup>

Caracalla's expedition into Mesopotamia marks the last Roman invasion of Arsacid Parthia. By 220, the kingdom's long history of civil strife and repeated foreign occupation had taken its toll. Many of the Arsacid dynasty's vassals no longer had confidence enough in Vologases or Artabanus to warrant their continued support. A movement for new leadership, initiated by Ardashir of Persis, soon arose which grew rapidly among Parthia's disgruntled nobility. In 222/23, Ardashir's coalition defeated Vologases and took control of Seleucia and Ctesiphon. Five years later, Artabanus was also slain, making Ardashir the sole ruler of all Parthia.<sup>143</sup>

The Sassanid dynasty, which Ardashir founded, proved to be a much more formidable opponent for Rome. In the years to come, Ardashir and his son Shapur I reconquered nearly all of Mesopotamia. In 258/59, Shapur even managed to capture the Roman emperor Valerian in battle near Edessa. At Naqsh-e Rostam and Bishapur, this scene is depicted by carvings which show the subjugated Valerian kneeling before his conqueror. Although the Armenian evidence is sparse concerning this period, Moses of Khorene records an episode in which the Sassanid ruler, who was most probably Shapur, orchestrates the assassination of Armenia's king. A Sassanid was then placed briefly on that kingdom's throne. And we can further assume, from the continual pressure that Shapur and his successors place on the Roman provinces of

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<sup>142</sup> Sellwood *Coinage of Parthia* 286-89; Dio Cass. 79 (78.1); Herodian 4.11; and Mattingly and Sydenham *Roman Imperial Coinage*, IV, 257.

<sup>143</sup> Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 124-32.

Syria and Asia Minor, that Rome had little time and few resources necessary to concern itself any longer with such remote territories, as Armenia.<sup>144</sup>

### **Conclusion**

There is much speculation about why Trajan invaded Mesopotamia. As Guey suggests, perhaps he sought viable trade routes to the Far East; or as Dio Cassius asserts, perhaps he intended only to win fame and glory for himself. In any case, no historian, either classical or modern, blames Parthia's king Osroes specifically for inciting this round of conflict. Thus Trajan's Parthian war can be seen as just another instance of unjustifiable Roman imperialism.

But it can also be viewed as the culmination of nearly two centuries of political posturing and military rivalry. Ever since Crassus' defeat at Carrhae, Rome's generals and emperors had dreamt of reining in Parthia. Because of the ever-growing fear at Rome of the impending Parthian threat, no other act could win for them such renown. Their constant interference in Parthia's internal politics crippled the kingdom's infrastructure, weakening the resolve of its military and undermining the authority of its ruling dynasty. By Trajan's era, the Parthian state had already endured countless civil disputes and barbarian raids, such as those of the Alani. Thus the kingdom was ripe for the taking.

Furthermore, Armenia's part in these Roman conquests should now be clearer, for nearly all of Rome's campaigns into Mesopotamia began with the subjugation of that territory. Pompey, Crassus, and Antony each occupied it before proceeding with their respective expeditions. The Julio-Claudian emperors all conspired to have client-kings placed on its throne. And Trajan, who immediately recognized its strategic importance,

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid. 124-32.

even attempted to provincialize it. Armenia was the gateway to the riches of the Parthian kingdom; and it therefore became the staging ground for Roman leaders who sought to win triumphs for themselves in the region.

## Epilogue

The Emperor Marcus Aurelius laments in his *Meditations*, “Time is a violent torrent; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place.”<sup>145</sup> His insight fittingly describes not only Armenia’s unstable political situation during the first two centuries AD, but that of the entire Near Eastern world at this time. Thus, the rise of the Iranian Sassanids ushered in yet a new era for both Rome and Armenia, although not how we might assume. For although the Arsacids had been ousted from Mesopotamia, they continued to rule in Armenia until the mid-fifth century, winning for that kingdom an autonomy unknown since the reign of Tigranes the Great. The success of the Arsacids in Armenia only further supports our thesis, for it suggests that they were not inherently bad rulers. Their poor performance as Parthia’s kings stemmed not from any innate lack of ability, but from the constant interference of Rome.

Yet Aurelius’ portent would eventually be as true for Rome as it was for the Near East, for the Empire would not weather the third century well. Besides the looming Sassanid threat, Rome’s emperors also had to deal with barbarian invasions, rampant inflation, and incessant plots against the throne. All things more characteristic of the Parthian state only a century earlier. The Roman psyche, its predilection for one-upmanship, had indeed won the Empire a venerable place in history. But that same psyche, inundated by paranoia and greed, would also be the cause of Rome’s undoing. Armenia, Parthia, and the rest of the Near Eastern world were but casualties of the Roman Empire’s stellar rise and fall.

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<sup>145</sup> M. Aur. *Med.* bk. 4, sect. 43.



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## Appendix 1: List of Rulers

### Armenian Kings

#### The Artaxiad Dynasty:

|                       |              |  |
|-----------------------|--------------|--|
| Artaxias I            | 190-159      | Founded first Armenian dynasty   |
| Tigranes I            | 159-123      |  |
| Artavasdes I          | 123-95       |  |
| Tigranes II the Great | 95-55        | Rules Armenia's only empire in the ancient world; Defeated by Lucullus and Pompey but allowed to retain his throne |
| Artavasdes II         | 55-34        | Tigranes' son; acts as advisor for both Crassus and Antony   |
| Artaxias II           | 33-20        |  |
| Tigranes III          | 20-10        |  |
| Tigranes IV and Erato | 10-5 and 4-1 | Pro-Parthian leanings lead to their brief deposition under Augustus but reinstated by Parthian king Phraataces     |
| Artavasdes III        | 5-4          | Rules during Tigranes' absence   |
| Ariobarzanes          | 3-1          | Installed by Augustus' general Gaius; rules in contest with Tigranes   |

#### Non-Artaxiad or Arsacid kings:

|                              |               |  |
|------------------------------|---------------|--|
| Artavasdes III (reign cont.) | 1 BC-AD 12/13 | Ariobarzanes' son; Ruled previously during Tigranes' deposition; reassumes throne after his father death                             |
| Vonones                      | 12/13?-13/14? | Son of Parthian king Phraates IV; Becomes Armenian king after being ousted from Parthian throne                                      |
| Orodes I                     | 14/15?-18     |  |
| Artaxias III                 | 18-32         | Installed by Tiberius' general Germanicus; rules during period of Romano-Parthian détente  |
| Arsaces I                    | 32-35?        | Son of Parthian king Artabanus III; his installation provokes yet another round of Roman interference in Parthia's internal politics |
| Mithridates                  | 35?-52        | Brother of Iberian king Pharasmanes; assumes throne with Rome's consent  |
| Rhadamistus                  | 52            |  |

|                           |         |   |
|---------------------------|---------|---|
| Tiridates I               | 53-60   | Brother of Parthian king Vologases I; first installed as king during Vologases' invasion of Armenia   |
| Tigranes V                | 60-62   | Appointed as king by Nero after Corbulo's successful campaign against the Parthians; but eventually ousted after Paetus' defeat at Rhandeia |
| The Arsacid Dynasty:      |         |   |
| Tiridates I (reign cont.) | 62-75   | Crowned by Nero at Rome; first instance of Rome approving a Parthian candidate for the Armenian throne                                      |
| Sanatruk                  | 75-110  | Nephew of Parthian king Osroes; his installation served as Trajan's excuse to campaign against Parthia                                      |
| Axidares                  | 110-113 |   |
| Parthamasiris             | 113-114 | Brother of Axidares; murdered by Trajan   |
| Parthaspates              | 116-117 | Son of Parthian king Osroes; betrayed his father and allied with Trajan to defeat Parthian rebels in Mesopotamia                            |
| Valarsh                   | 117-140 | Captured by Caracalla   |
| Aurelius Pacorus          | 161-163 |   |
| Valarsh II                | 180-91  |   |
| Khusrau I                 | 191-217 |   |
| Tiridates II              | 217-52  |   |

Note: Although outside the scope of this project, Arsacid kings continued to rule in Armenia until the mid-fifth century. Their rule was finally abolished in AD 438 due to pressure from the Iranian Sassanids.

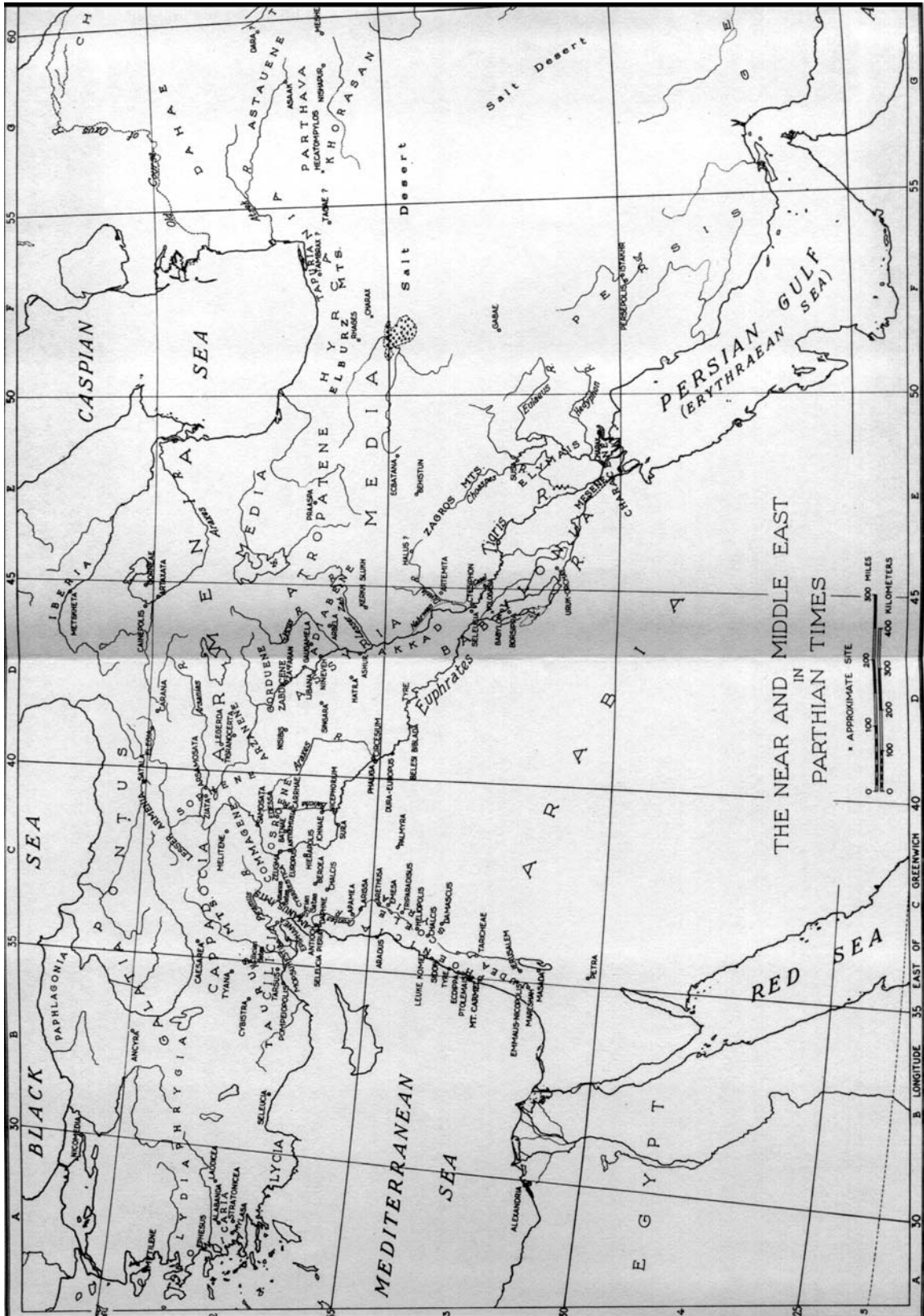
### Parthian Kings

|                         |                |                |                   |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Arsaces                 | ca. 250-248    | Orodes III     | 4-ca. 6/7         |
| Tiridates I             | ca. 248-211    | Vonones I      | 7/8-12            |
| Artabanus I             | ca. 211-191    | Artabanus III  | 12-ca. 38         |
| Priapatius              | ca. 191-176    | Tiridates III  | ca. 36            |
| Phraates I              | ca. 176-171    | Gotarzes II    | ca. 38-51         |
| Mithridates I           | ca. 171-138/37 | Vardanes       | ca. 39-47/48      |
| Phraates II             | 138/37-ca. 128 | Vonones II     | ca. 51            |
| Artabanus II            | ca. 128-124/23 | Vologases I    | 51/52-79/80       |
| Mithridates II          | ca. 123-88/87  | Vologases II   | 77-80             |
| Gotarzes I              | 91-81/80       | Pacorus II     | 78-115/16         |
| Orodes I                | 80-76/75       | Artabanus IV   | 80-81             |
| Sinatruces              | 76/75-70 or 69 | Osroes         | ca. 109/10-128/29 |
| Phraates III            | 70 or 69-58/57 | Parthamaspates | ca. 117           |
| Mithridates III         | 58/57-55       | Vologases III  | 105/6-147         |
| Orodes II               | ca. 57-37/36   | Mithridates IV | 128/29-147        |
| Pacorus I               | died in 38     | Vologases IV   | 148-192           |
| Phraates IV             | ca. 38-2       | Vologases V    | 191-207/8         |
| Tiridates II            | ca. 30-25      | Vologases VI   | 207/8-222/23      |
| Phraataces (Phraates V) | 2 BC-AD 4      | Artabanus V    | ca. 213-227       |
|                         |                | Artavasdes     | ca. 227-228/29    |

### Roman Emperors

|                        |             |                       |         |
|------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|---------|
| Augustus               | 27 BC-AD 14 | Trajan                | 98-117  |
| Tiberius               | 14-37       | Hadrian               | 117-138 |
| Caligula               | 37-41       | Antonius Pius         | 138-161 |
| Claudius               | 41-54       | Marcus Aurelius       | 161-180 |
| Nero                   | 54-68       | Lucius Verus          | 161-169 |
| Galba, Otho, Vitellius | 68-69       | Commodus              | 180-192 |
| Vespasian              | 69-79       | Julianus and Pertinax | 193     |
| Titus                  | 79-81       | Septimius Severus     | 193-211 |
| Domitian               | 81-96       | Caracalla             | 211-217 |
| Nerva                  | 96-98       |                       |         |

## Appendix 2: Maps







## **Vita**

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