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978-0-521-84925-8 - Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals
Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter

Excerpt

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*Introduction: West and East, friend and foe,
counterpart and mirror image . . .*

Relations between Romans and Persians in late antiquity were bound to be turbulent, to say the least. We are looking at those who conquered the possessions of the heirs of Alexander the Great versus those who claimed to be the heirs of the Achaemenid Empire, which was conquered by Alexander the Great. ‘Heritage’ and its claims often foreshadow war, in this case centuries of warfare that lasted throughout the existence of the relationship between the two powers, i.e. the third to the seventh century AD. On both sides war was accompanied by complex attempts to justify their respective goals, in both active and reactive ways. Rome’s claim for world domination was accompanied by a sense of mission and pride in Western civilisation; it was met by Eastern myths and oracles prophesying the downfall of the Western power.¹ Our sources reflect strong Roman ambitions to become a guarantor of peace and order.² Simultaneously, they reflect long-standing prejudices with regard to the Eastern power’s different customs, religious structures, languages and forms of government. As a consequence, a wide gap separated the two cultures and negative attitudes that stemmed from existing political, military and economic rivalries were constantly reinforced. In the company of most ancient – and often Western – observers, it is tempting to associate our theme with an ‘everlasting’ conflict between West and East, between a ‘civilised’ Roman world and a barbarian enemy, and hence to describe the struggle between the two super powers as a clash of fundamentally alien cultures.³

This approach is a phenomenon that applies not only to antiquity but also to the present day, possibly more than ever before. The world of the

¹ See e.g. *Or. Sib.* 3. 350–5; on these examples of the Sibylline oracles, which originated in a Jewish context from the second half of the first century onwards, see Gauger 1998: 440–51; for references on the intellectual context of this source see *ibid.* 543–4; cf. also Potter 1990; Fuchs 1964.

² Winter 1998: 46–65.

³ On the evolution and tradition of the term *barbaros* see Speyer 1992: 811–95; Hall 1989 and on the latter Metzler 1992/3: 215–23; on the tendency towards Eurocentrism in classical scholarship see Hauser 2001b: 83–104.

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'Oriental' appears alien to those of us who represent the 'Occident' and its tradition. However, in the face of progressing technology, new forms of communication and an increasing globalisation in the social, political, cultural and economic realms, the necessity and willingness to welcome the 'other' has taken on new dimensions. The attempt to understand the character and characteristics of a different culture has to include the ability to relieve tensions in a peaceful way, by way of dialogue and negotiation, explanation and reflection. This cannot happen unless the relations between West and East are based on a foundation that shows respect for the history of the East and does not shape this history according to Western needs. By adopting this wider perspective, i.e. by looking beyond a Graeco-Roman antiquity, we avoid an approach that makes us juxtapose supposedly relevant and irrelevant, central and peripheral cultures.

These prerogatives bear on a study that focuses on the relations between Rome and the Sasanian Empire founded in 224. Deliberately, the following chapters do not only convey information regarding Roman–Sasanian contacts and conflicts but also examine the role the Sasanians played in the history of the eastern part of the ancient world. The nature of our source material favours an emphasis on Roman history and often leads us to notice historical developments in other regions only insofar as they bear on Roman interests. However, apart from the fact that from the third century onwards the history of Rome was mainly shaped by the relations with its Eastern neighbour it is necessary to address social and political developments outside the Roman sphere of influence in their own right. Moreover, it is not justified to limit one's focus on armed conflicts and to assume that an Eastern perspective on Roman–Sasanian relations did not exist beyond aspects of military strategy, or that it cannot be assessed.⁴ Rome and Persia interacted consistently and shared many points of interest with regard to trade, the protection of the frontiers, cultural and religious policies. These frequent and intensive contacts characterised the relations between the two throughout the period. On multiple levels the Sasanians pursued active goals in their dealings with the West, which forced the Romans to be extremely vigilant and evoked strategic as well as political reactive measures on their side. Ironically, pointing to Persian ambitions and ideologies of domination may also be perceived as a eurocentric perspective, assigning one-sided aggression to the East. This is certainly not intended but it is rather the case that the Roman ideological background is

⁴ See e.g. Wirth 1980/1: 306–7.

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much better known to the reader. It is the goal of this book to illuminate the much less-known Persian position and thereby to enable the reader to contrast and compare in a more balanced way. The tradition of a 'pro-Roman' historical scholarship with all its ideological nuances and consequences has to be challenged and dismissed.⁵ Aware that we are examining a period and topic that are not only under-studied but also loaded with sensitive actuality, we address both the 'unaware' as well as the 'too-aware' reader.

The scope of this study does not allow for a general analysis of or comparison between the two powers. Excellent works for background and further reading have been written, of which we suggest but a few. A. H. M. Jones' and A. Cameron's surveys of the later Roman Empire,⁶ P. Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity*⁷ and now S. Mitchell's *A History of the Later Roman Empire AD 284–641. The Transformation of the Ancient World*⁸ provide the best outline of the whole period. The essays in the guide to *Late Antiquity* edited by G. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar⁹ inform the interested reader on topics that are of much relevance for our context. The alphabetically listed entries in the second part of the same volume can be used as a reference work for specific terms and themes, people, places and institutions – much more exhaustive and detailed than the brief glossary at the end of this volume. For the period between 180 and 395, D. Potter's *The Roman Empire at Bay*¹⁰ assesses the Roman situation well, focusing both on the structures of government and the Persian challenge in particular. For background reading on the history of Byzantium, the works of W. Treadgold¹¹ are highly recommended. On the Sasanian side the works by Wiesehöfer and Frye are outstanding introductions.¹² The Sasanian source material is well presented in Wiesehöfer, Yarshater 1983b and Howard-Johnston 1995b. In his excellent contribution to Cameron's *Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*¹³ J. Howard-Johnston compares the structures of both empires (with a closer focus on the Sasanian background).¹⁴ The proceedings of an international colloquium on the relations between the Sasanian Empire and the Mediterranean World have now been published and include many important contributions.¹⁵ For good discussions of the Roman East the

⁵ J. Wiesehöfer's work represents this new approach in an exemplary way; see now his pointed analysis of the 'traditional Romanocentrism' in Gruen 2005: 105–20.

⁶ Jones 1964; Cameron 1993a. ⁷ 1971. ⁸ 2006. ⁹ 1999. ¹⁰ 2004.

¹¹ 1997 and 2001. ¹² Above all Wiesehöfer 2001; Frye 1984. ¹³ 1995.

¹⁴ 1995b: 157–226; the chapter also provides an excellent overview of the Sasanian source material. See now also Howard-Johnston 2006.

¹⁵ Wiesehöfer and Huyse 2006.

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reader may also be referred to the works by Millar, Ball and Humphrey, as well as the relevant volumes of the *CAH* and the *CHI*.¹⁶

With regard to its theme, scope and focus on the source material, our book is closest to H. Dodgeon and S. Lieu's *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226–363. A Documentary History*¹⁷ and its successor by G. Greatrex and S. Lieu (*Part II. AD 363–630*).¹⁸ As it distinguishes itself from these superb sourcebooks in many ways, it complements and is complemented by them. The present volume intends to be neither a comprehensive sourcebook nor an analytical study of Sasanian Iran. We believe that the exemplary character of carefully selected passages and historical commentary make the material accessible to a wider readership and allow the readers to survey the relations between the two empires over a long period of time. Our detailed introductory and explicatory comments to each passage aim to assist an undergraduate and non-specialist audience, who, as we believe, are often not familiar with the majority of the quoted authors and texts, nor with the historical context. However, we are hoping that specialists on the subject also find the volume usable and readable from 'cover to cover'.

'The Fascinating Enemy' is the title of A. Nünnerich-Asmus' editorial preface in a recent issue of the *Antike Welt*¹⁹ that focuses on 'Persia and Rome'. The expression captures the rich texture of Roman–Sasanian relations. An examination of not only the textual but also the visual evidence explains how the fascination with and competitive nature of the 'other' created a 'likeness' that influenced the relationship as much as one-sided concepts of cultural superiority. The many illustrations in our volume serve to illuminate the multi-layered character of self-representation and cultural exchange. The triumphal reliefs on both sides, to give but one example, are very similar in nature; although they are meant to convey a stark contrast between the respective victorious rulers and their enemies, they utilise the same techniques and share crucial symbols. As both pieces of art and means of political propaganda, these material sources form an essential part of our subject. The large number of maps are included to assist the reader with an immediate understanding of the events. They also remind us that

¹⁶ Millar 1993 and 2006, with an emphasis on the Graeco-Roman presence in the East; Ball 2000, with its focus on the importance of Eastern influence reacting in part to Millar; Humphrey 1995–9; on the Roman East see also Alcock 1997.

¹⁷ 1991. ¹⁸ 2002. ¹⁹ Heft 1/2006: 1.

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Romans and Sasanians were neighbours and rivals whose competition for supremacy affected not only two peoples but all those within and between the two empires. In addition, maps and their shifting geographical centres are a means to manifest that modern scholarship is moving away from eurocentric views.

The following study consists of two main parts. The first part begins with a brief survey of Roman–Parthian relations in order to set the stage for questions of continuity and change. After that, the chronological narrative sets out the development of the relationship between Rome and the Sasanians from the third to the seventh century. As episodes of peace and war characterised the relations, above all the military conflicts between the two empires are analysed and form the core of the narrative. The longer, second part presents a wide range of source material, which is placed in its context and illustrates patterns and structural premises. Throughout the book, cross-references link both parts. ‘Sources and Contexts’ starts with assessing the political goals of the two sides, which, if they amounted to a programmatic foreign policy, would have determined relations from the beginning (II 1). In order to set the stage for the discussion of the military confrontations (II 3), a short discussion of Sasanian warfare precedes this chapter (II 2). ‘Diplomatic solutions’ (II 4) are expressed in the numerous peace treaties that concluded the many wars fought between Rome and Persia from the third to the seventh century. However, Part II also points to the close diplomatic relations between West and East that existed at all times, and to the numerous contacts that emerged through common interests between the two powers. Chapter II 5 focuses on the special role of Arabia. After that, Armenia, an area that was of particular interest to both sides, trade and economy, and the protection of the frontiers are examined (II 6). The religious life in both empires and the role played by Christianity and Zoroastrianism in their political and ideological confrontation form another important theme (II 7). Surprisingly, the rulers of both empires did not perceive each other as ‘alien counterparts’ but formed personal relationships characterised by mutual respect and even affection. In this context the ‘legitimacy of kingship’ was closely linked with the notion of a ‘family of kings’, two concepts that are discussed in chapter II 8. Apart from wars, all these factors shaped and intensified relations tremendously throughout the course of late antiquity. The final chapter discusses the disposition and actual channels that facilitated an exchange of information between East and West (II 9), a process that was far from one-sided and included multiple agents and every aspect of life.

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More than once the Byzantine author and diplomat Peter the Patrician will be quoted in this study. In his view, 'It is obvious for all mankind that the Roman and the Persian Empires are just like two lamps; and it is necessary that, like eyes, the one is brightened by the light of the other and that they do not angrily strive for each other's destruction.' Wishful thinking, one may say, if one looks at the almost continuous sequence of wars fought between Rome and Persia, and at the actual downfall of both empires. For us, however, it may be an inspiration.

In order to express the phonetic value of the languages involved, we are using a few diacritical or phonetic signs when transliterating Persian, Arabic, Syriac or Armenian names, titles and places.

With regard to the Persian material, the most frequent transliterations are č for a pronunciation 'ch' (as in *chill*), ġ for 'j' (as in *jeans*) and š for 'sh' (as in *shell*). 'X' (which is rendered as 'ch' in many other modern works) should be pronounced in the same way as the 'ch' in Scottish *loch*. S is sharp as in *loss*, whereas z has a pronunciation as in *size*. ' renders an explosive glottal sound, whereas ' implies a glottal sound that stops the flow of air. It is extremely difficult to spell names, titles and places in a consistent way as Latin, Greek or modern familiar forms of some names and places exist which do not correspond to the general phonetic transliterations of the original languages. In these cases we have used the more familiar version at the expense of consistency. This also applies to Greek names, places and terms, which, unless their Latinised (such as Ephesus or Heraclius) or Anglicised (Constantinople or Maurice) forms or versions are more familiar, are transliterated on the basis of the Greek sounds and endings. The translations of the sources follow the original text as close as possible but also try to be readable and understandable.

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PART I

Narrative

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CHAPTER I

*Rome and Iran to the beginning of the
third century AD*

Around the middle of the third century BC the kingdom of the Parthians emerged in the Eastern parts of the Seleucid kingdom. Originally the nomadic tribe resided in the area between the Caspian and the Aral Seas.¹ Around 250 BC Arsaces I, who was to become the first Parthian king (247–217 BC) and who became the first representative of the ‘dynasty of the Arsacids’, led the Parnians, as they were called, into the province of Parthava, which was situated east of the Caspian Sea and was part of Seleucid Iran.² Although at first this campaign amounted to no more than one of the frequent insurrections against an unstable Seleucid rule in one of the Eastern provinces, after a few setbacks the Arsacid kings managed to take firm hold of these areas. When the Parthians embarked on their Western expansion during the second century BC, the Seleucid kingdom, which was among other things confronted with the new world power of Rome in the West, was not able to stop them.³ During the reign of the most significant Parthian king, Mithradates II (124/3–88/7 BC), the Arsacids succeeded in extending their rule into Armenia and Mesopotamia.⁴ This was the beginning of an ‘international role’ for the Parthian kingdom, a phase that also entailed contacts with Rome.⁵ Favoured by the decline of the Hellenistic kingdoms and driven by an immense desire for expansion during the first two centuries BC, the Romans extended their rule not only into Asia Minor but throughout the entire Eastern Mediterranean world.⁶

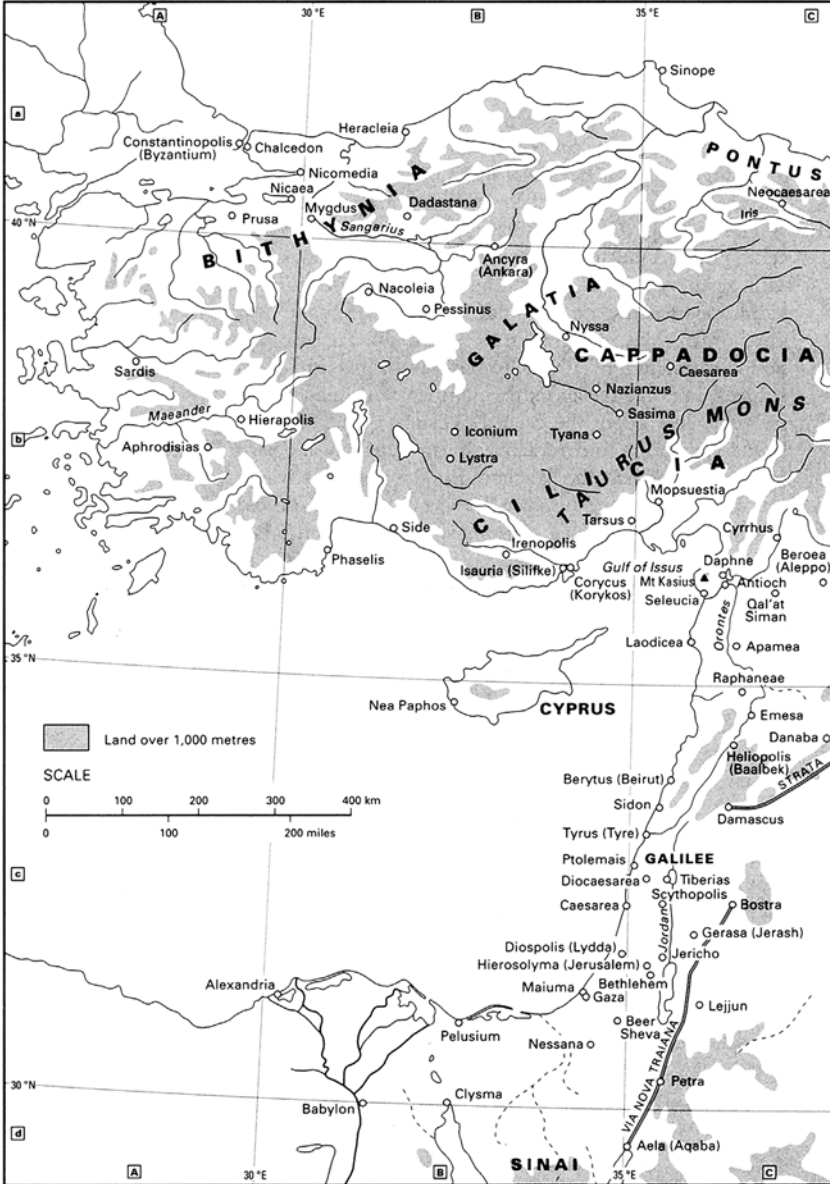
¹ For the history, culture and sources of the Parthian Empire see Schippmann 1980; Bivar 1983b: 21–99; Wolski 1993; Wiesehöfer 1996: 115–49, 1998a and 2001: 163–204; Frye 2000: 17–22; Wolski 2003.

² For the beginning of Parthian rule, the foundation of the Arsacid Empire and the chronology of events see Brodersen 1986: 378–81; Boyce 1994: 241–51; Olbrycht 1998: 51–76 and 2003: 69–103; Drijvers 1998: 279–93 and 1999: 193–206; Lerner 1999.

³ Wolski 1969: 188–254 and Dobbins 1974: 63–79. ⁴ Arnaud 1987: 129–46.

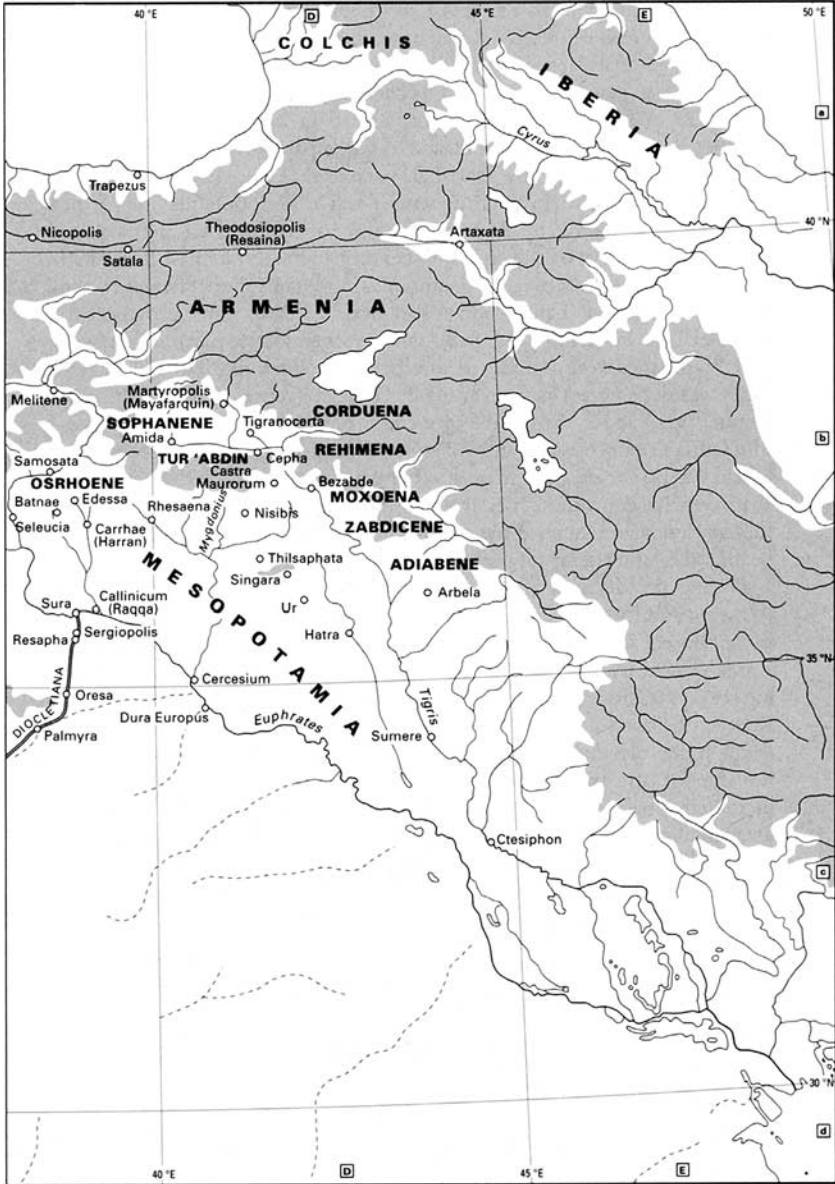
⁵ For Parthian–Roman relations in general see Ziegler 1964; Keaveney 1982: 412–28; Dabrowa 1983; Campbell 1993: 213–40; Millar 1996: 127–47; Kennedy 1996a: 67–90; Isaac 1992: 19–53; Butcher 2003: 32–78.

⁶ On the expansion of Roman rule in the eastern Mediterranean see Gruen 1984 and Sherwin-White 1984; also Millar 1996: 19–53.



Map 1: Asia Minor and the Roman Eastern provinces

1 To the beginning of the third century



Map 1: (cont.)