

PARTHIANS & SASANIANS

Ted Kaizer (Durham)

Forget about Gauls and Africans, Britons and Germans: from their first encounter in 92 BC – when a tête-à-tête between the Roman general Sulla and the Parthian envoy Orobazus took place – Parthia and its King of Kings swiftly came to be represented by Latin and Greek authors as Rome’s most mighty enemy. Over the next 300 years, the two superpowers of the ancient world would regularly clash, especially over the mountainous region north of Syria known as Armenia, a famous breeding land for horses, and hence a potentially beneficial protectorate for both Parthians and Romans. Unfortunately, there are virtually no indigenous Parthian texts available to us, and we are therefore to a hazardous degree dependable upon Classical sources referring to Rome’s eastern neighbour, so that we have to study the Parthian empire above all through the eyes of its adversaries.

Ultimately replacing the residue of the once mighty Seleucids (one of the main successor empires to that of Alexander the Great) in Mesopotamia, the Parthians had their actual origins elsewhere. As the tribe of the Parni, part of a much larger nomadic confederation known as the Daha, they moved from the steppe area east of the Caspian Sea into the lands known as Parthava, in northeastern Iran, which had been known under that name as a satrapy of the Achaemenid empire since at least the later part of the 6th century BC. The original invasion of ‘Parthia’ by the Parni was traditionally set in 247 BC, under the chieftain Arsaces, after whom the Arsacid era and the Arsacid dynasty were later named, although this date is now heavily disputed. The campaigns by the 2nd-century kings, especially Mithridates I (171–139 BC), helped to install Arsacid rule over manifold territories which had their own cultural traditions and their own ruling families, and at its zenith the Parthian realm stretched from the Euphrates to the Indus. In less than a century and a half, the Arsacids had been truly transformed from nomads overrunning large parts of eastern Iran into world rulers, and in 113 BC Mithridates II took over the ancient Persian title ‘King of Kings’, proudly reflecting his domination over a patchwork of minor kings. However, the very presence of these vassal states, and the occasional efforts by their rulers to gain a larger degree of independence, made the Parthian empire vulnerable, especially

in times of dynastic conflict, to which the house of the Arsacids seemed particularly prone.

A good example of the fluctuations in relations between the central Arsacid residence at Ctesiphon, situated on the Tigris in southern Mesopotamia, and the peripheral kingdoms elsewhere within the Parthian world is Hatra, a stronghold in the north-mesopotamian Jazirah steppe. Hatra gained some notoriety for imposing losses on the Roman emperors Trajan and Septimius Severus, who both failed to take the city on different occasions (Severus even attempted it twice). The material remains of Hatra's sophisticated culture only appear in our evidence in the late 1st century AD, when the city was ruled by a series of indigenous 'lords', some of whom seem to have overlapped. But in the second half of the 2nd century AD, this system of lordship was replaced by the installation of a royal house, and Hatra's rulers were henceforth known as 'King', or more specifically 'King of Arabia' and 'King over the Arabs', whatever that may have meant. The background to this important change in titulature is unfortunately unknown, but it clearly implies that the Parthian overlords permitted the creation of a notionally new kingdom within the boundaries of their empire, or perhaps they were simply forced to accept it.

Our search for Parthian institutions and for typically 'Parthian' elements in their society and culture is often frustrated by the lack of sufficient evidence. This is well illustrated by the example from Dura-Europos, a small-town on the Euphrates known amongst scholars as 'the Pompeii of the Syrian desert', due to its exquisite and important archaeological discoveries. **[SEE FEATURE BOX ON DURA-EUROPOS]** The documentary evidence from Dura clearly shows that the Parthians did not make major changes to the administrative and societal structures that they had taken over from the previous regimes. They did have their own language (Pahlavi), but Aramaic, the official language of the Achaemenid Persian chancellery, and Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Hellenistic world and later of the Roman East, remained more popular amongst the population of their empire. The impression gained is one of an increase in decentralization and of opportunism on the part of the Parthian overlords. Their empire flourished through trade, and both Parthian and local merchants acted as intermediaries between the Roman world and the Far East. From China and India they carried a rich assortment of colourful textiles and fragrant spices overseas to the vassal kingdom of Characene at the Persian Gulf, from where they travelled up the Euphrates, disembarked at Hit (from where the river was no longer navigable

upstream) and finally set out for the dangerous desert crossing to the famous caravan centre of Palmyra in the middle of the Syrian steppe –still described by Pliny as an independent city in the 1st century AD, ‘as it were isolated by Nature from the world, having a destiny of its own between the two mighty empires of Roma and Parthia, and at the first moment of a quarrel between them always attracting the attention of both sides’. In the 1st century AD, Isidore of Charax produced, typically in Greek, a list of fortresses and strongholds situated in the Parthian realm, including Dura-Europos. Although his *Parthian Stations* has sometimes been viewed as an itinerary following the Parthian trade route, it is in fact a description of the ancient royal road which was maintained in the first place for administrative and military purposes, and the itinerary ends where Arsacid control ends, hence excluding the Far East.

Although opportunists themselves, the Romans would never truly appreciate the Parthian ability to adapt to more or less convenient circumstances and situations. Whereas Rome ultimately wanted to occupy as much territory as was feasible, the Parthians seem to have viewed their empire more in terms of a collection of peoples answerable to the King of Kings, regardless of their level of independence. To what degree the Parthians understood their realm as an ‘empire’ in the way Romans did remains therefore unclear. Some scholars have argued that Parthia was, in essence, similar to the Hellenistic kingdoms, while others prefer to follow the attitude of the Roman poet Horace, whose phrase ‘Phraates has been restored to the throne of Cyrus’ explicitly presents the Arsacids as rightful heirs to the Achaemenid Persians. In the end, perhaps the most lasting – and in any case the most visible – Parthian legacy was the peculiar dress code, which stood in sharp contrast to Rome’s toga and tunic. The typically Parthian costume that became the mode over most of the Levant consisted of the famous baggy trousers that are often depicted on sculptures and frescoes, and local notables at cities such as Palmyra could appear on one and the same monument both in western and in eastern dress.

FROM SULLA TO SEVERUS

The story of Rome vs Parthia gets under way in 92 BC, when Sulla met with the Parthian envoy Orobazus in the presence of the Cappadocian nobleman Ariobarzanes, for whom the Roman commander acted as a patron. Three chairs were prepared, and Sulla is said to have given audience while seated in the middle, between his client Ariobarzanes and the Parthian. For this apparent act of complacency - openly

acknowledging Roman superiority - Orobasus was put to death on his return to Parthia by the King of Kings. The next important episode is the invasion by Sulla's former lieutenant Licinius Lucullus of some of the lands across the Euphrates in 69 BC, the first time ever Roman troops had crossed the river. This event, taking place in the context of the Third Mithridatic war that Rome fought against the powerful monarch Mithridates VI of Pontus and his son-in-law Tigranes II of Armenia (who had himself annexed Parthian territories), was hailed by some as 'the greatest victory the sun had ever seen', as Plutarch records it later. But only 16 years later, in 53 BC, the unthinkable happened: no less than seven Roman legions were routed at the ancient city of Carrhae, also known as Harran and famous for its temple of the Moon, by Parthian opposition. The Roman commander Marcus Crassus – famous both for his secret alliance with Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great (often incorrectly referred to as the 'First Triumvirate') and for the enormous fortune that he had reputedly acquired through speculative purchases of property following public calamities - got caught in a trap and lost his life at the battle. Twenty thousand of his soldiers are said to have died with him, another ten thousand were deported by the Parthians, and the imperial army shamefully lost its eagle-standards. Crassus' biographer, Plutarch, gives a vivid account of the horrendous end to the great man's life. He describes how the Parthian commander Sillaces arrives at the royal court with the decapitated head of Crassus, at the very moment that Euripides' *Bacchae*, which was being performed on the night in the presence of the king, had reached the point in the play when the head of Pentheus, king of Thebes, is supposed to be shown by his frenzied mother Agave, who had been made by Dionysos to slay her own son because the latter had not recognised the god's divinity. Plutarch poignantly states how Crassus' expedition therefore closed 'just like a tragedy': 'While the actor was receiving his applause, Sillaces stood at the door of the banqueting hall, and after a low obeisance cast the head of Crassus into the centre of the company.' The final act of Crassus' life thus also illustrates how the Parthian court proved to be populated by connoisseurs of Greek tragedy, which is a far cry from the stereotypical image of the 'barbarian' generally encountered in Classical sources.

The recovery of the lost standards of Crassus' army came to play a major role in the early Principate. Whereas in 36 BC the triumvir Mark Antony was unsuccessful in retrieving the eagles, Augustus could proclaim in the *Res Gestae*, his posthumously published list of achievements: 'I compelled the Parthians to restore to me the spoils

Comment [TA1]: Could you explain a bit more the significance of this? It is not clear why the sitting in particular chairs was so bad, nor how this is connected to the next sentence about Licinius Lucullus' invasion, so the significance of the story is lost. Many thanks I HAVE CHANGED THE SENTENCES A BIT, WHICH I HOPE CLARIFIES THE MATTER. PLEASE NOTE THAT THE EVENTS FROM 69 BC AND 53 BC (SEE YOUR BOX BELOW) ARE *NOT* LINKED WITH THE CHAIR INCIDENT!

Comment [TA2]: Again, it is not immediately clear how this event, 16 years after the previous sentence, is connected with the chair incident and the invasion. SEE THE COMMENT BOX ABOVE

and standards of three Roman armies and to ask as suppliants for the friendship of the Roman people. Those standards I deposited in the innermost shrine of the temple of Mars the Avenger.’ When Augustus was in the East from 22 to 19 BC, he settled the Armenian situation by installing as king a member of the indigenous royal house who had been for a while a resident at the imperial court and who could therefore be expected to be loyal to Rome. Augustus’ stepson, the later emperor Tiberius, delivered the candidate to the empty throne in person, and in 20 BC a diplomatic agreement was reached with the Parthian king Phraates IV, who accepted the Armenian solution in exchange of Rome’s promise not to interfere in Parthia itself, and who also handed back the eagles lost by Crassus at Carrhae. Despite the diplomatic solution, the return of the standards was presented in Rome as a victory in arms, and the event became one of the cornerstones on which the ideology of the new principate was founded. In the *Secular Hymn*, commissioned by Augustus especially for the ‘Games of the Century’, celebrating Rome’s entering a new age in 17 BC, the poet Horace writes how ‘Now Parthia fears the fist of Rome, the fasces potent on land and sea!’ State coinage referred to the recovered eagles by portraying kneeling Parthians, a triumphal arch was built on the forum to celebrate the occasion (it is now lost, but we know it from imagery on coins), and on Augustus’ return from the East in 19 BC the Senate consecrated an altar of Fortuna Redux, the good fortune bringing soldiers home, in his honour. Perhaps most famously, the return of the standards is shown on the cuirass which Augustus wears on a statue from Livia’s villa at Prima Porta. A bearded Parthian hands over the eagle to a Roman soldier (or perhaps Tiberius) with the gods looking on in approval: the sun god in a *quadriga*, Caelus holding the firmament, the personifications of Dawn and Dew, the divine twins Apollo (Augustus’ main deity) and Diana, and the earth goddess Tellus with a horn of abundance as symbol of prosperity.

When the rivalries began to resurface in Armenia around twenty years later, Augustus sent his grandson (and adopted son) Gaius Caesar to the East, where the young crown prince met with the Parthian king Phrtaaces, the bastard son of Phraates IV, on an island in the Euphrates. We have an eyewitness account by Velleius Paterculus, who wrote his *History of Rome* under Tiberius: ‘On an island in the Euphrates, with an equal retinue on each side, Gaius had a meeting with the king of the Parthians, a young man of distinguished presence. This spectacle of the Roman army arrayed on one side, the Parthian on the other, while these two eminent leaders not only

Comment [TA3]: Could we make a paragraph break here? Currently this paragraph is a bit too long. DONE

of the empires they represented but also of mankind thus met in conference - truly a notable and a memorable sight – it was my fortunate lot to see early in my career as a soldier, when I held the rank of tribune. [...] As for the meeting, first the Parthian dined with Gaius upon the Roman bank, and later Gaius supped with the king on the soil of the enemy.’ The Euphrates had once again acted as the symbolic frontier between the two Roman and the Parthian empires, but the mutual hosting as a sign of respect and friendship, as described by Velleius, notwithstanding, the image projected at Rome was again different, and the cuirass worn by Gaius on a posthumously erected statue (he died in Lycia in AD 4, on his way back to Rome, from wounds suffered at the siege of Artagira in Armenia) is decorated with the heads of the bearded ‘barbarians’.

The fear of the Arsacids remained present in the Roman psyche, even if after the 40s BC the military power of the Parthians was in fact hardly sufficient to allow offensive action into the now Roman-dominated lands of Syria and Anatolia. The great Roman historian Tacitus records how the Parthian king Artabanus II, ‘despising [the emperor] Tiberius’ old age as defenseless’, threatened the Romans by ‘bragging of the old boundaries of the Persians and Macedonians and that he would invade the lands once possessed by Cyrus and later by Alexander.’ The Senator Cassius Dio, who wrote his Greek history of the Roman empire at the beginning of the 3rd century AD, described how the Parthians had always been considered a match for Rome: ‘They are really formidable in warfare, but nevertheless they have a reputation greater than their achievements, because, in spite of their not having gained anything from the Romans, and having, besides, given up certain portions of their own domain, they have not yet been enslaved, but even to this day hold their own in the wars they wage against us, whenever they become involved in them.’ In his discussion of the Parthian equipment of arms and method of warfare, Dio gives the following information: ‘The Parthians make no use of a shield, but their forces consist of mounted archers and pikemen, mostly in full armour. Their infantry is small, made up of the weaker men; but even these are all archers. They practise from boyhood, and the climate and the land combine to aid both horsemanship and archery. The land, being for the most part level, is excellent for raising horses and very suitable for riding about on horse-back; at any rate, even in war they lead about whole droves of horses, so that they can use different ones at different times, can ride up suddenly from a distance and also retire to a distance speedily.’ **[SEE FEATURE BOX ON ‘THE PARTHIAN SHOT’]** The Romans not only learned from the surprise movements of the Parthian riders, but

they also managed to take over many of their opponents' tricks into their own curriculum by actually incorporating native troops as auxiliary units in the imperial army, clearly distinctive from the regular Roman legions. Such units, filled with indigenous soldiers who continued to fight with their own weapons, were often employed far from their homeland. A 'cavalry unit of Parthians and Arabians' (*ala Parthorum et Arabum*) is known for example from the tombstone of an officer from the 1st century AD that was found in Mainz.

In the second century AD emperors still sought fame through war against the Parthians. Trajan created a series of new Roman provinces across the Euphrates (all of which were abandoned immediately after his death, on the succession of Hadrian) and state coinage shows how the Parthian king receives his diadem directly from Trajan, with a legend saying *REX PARTHIS DATUS*, 'a king is given to the Parthians'. From AD 162 to 166, Marcus Aurelius' co-emperor Lucius Verus took nominal command of a military campaign in the East, although he is said to have left the actual fighting to his generals while he himself enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle in the cities of Roman Syria instead. Wars between West and East seem to have resulted – like in more modern times – in an avalanche of historical publications attempting to satisfy a more general audience. In a wonderful piece called *How to Write History*, the famous satirist Lucian, himself of Samosata (formerly the royal capital of Commagene, another of those kingdoms situated between Rome and Parthia in the centuries immediately before and after the beginning of our era), criticized the way in which incapable writers hurriedly brought out books about Verus' Parthian war that were full of inaccuracies: 'Every single person is writing history; nay more, they are all Thucydideses, Herodotuses and Xenophons to us. Yet most of them think they don't even need advice for the job any more than they need a set of rules for walking or seeing or eating; no, they think it is perfectly simple and easy to write history and that anyone can do it if only he can put what comes to him into words. [...] I have heard of one who even included the future in his history: the capture of Vologesus, the killing of Osroes – how he was going to be thrown to the lions, and to cap everything, the triumph we have longed for so much – in such a prophetic state was he as he hastened to the end of his competition.' In any case Ctesiphon was conquered in AD 198 by Septimius Severus, who created (like Trajan, but this time lasting) the province of Mesopotamia and took the victorious title *Parthicus Maximus*.

THE EMPIRE OF ARDASHIR AND SHAPUR

The 2nd-century Roman campaigns weakened the Parthian power, which was further subject to infighting. But if the combination of war with Rome and dynastic conflicts was insufficient to bring the Parthians to their knees, ultimately their empire proved to be too vulnerable to rebellions and struggles for independence by its vassal states. Around 475 years of Arsacid rule over large parts of the Middle East came to an end in AD 224, when a regional governor called Ardashir (or Artaxerxes, as Classical sources name him) revolted against his Parthian overlords, defeated Artabanus IV, and in the process established the neo-Persian empire of the Sasanians. Named after Ardashir's ancestor Sasan, they soon would make Rome long for the days of the traditional rivalry with their Parthian sparring partners. The Sasanians were far more aggressive and powerful than their predecessors on Rome's eastern borders. Any deeper awareness on the part of the Romans of what the developments on their eastern borders implied in practice is reflected in the tradition that the young emperor Severus Alexander sent letters to the Sasanian ruler to 'halt the invasion and check his expectations'. In the words of the 3rd-century historian Herodian, himself from the Near East: 'In these letters he told Artaxerxes that he must remain within his own borders and not initiate any action; let him not, deluded by vain hopes, stir up a great war, but rather let each of them be content with what already was his. Artaxerxes would find fighting against the Romans not the same thing as fighting with his barbarian kinsmen and neighbours. Alexander further reminded the Persian King of the victories won over them by Augustus, Trajan, Verus and Severus. By writing letters of this kind, Alexander thought that he would persuade the barbarian to remain quiet or frighten him to the same course.' The emperor's prose did not, however, have the desired effect.

Ardashir's son Shapur followed in his father's aggressive footsteps and benefitted handily from the 3rd-century crisis in the Roman imperial system, where a series of so-called soldier-emperors reached the purple in rapid succession, more often than not following the murder of the incumbent. In AD 244 the teenage emperor Gordian III died of his wounds following his army's defeat near Ctesiphon, and was succeeded by his praetorian prefect Philip, who was born in the Syrian Hauran region and has become known to posterity as 'Philip the Arab', and who was forced into a

peace-treaty with Shapur. In a second campaign, in AD 252, the armies of the King of Kings overran large parts of Syria, including the major city of Antioch, and in 260 the emperor Valerian was taken captive by the Sasanians. This was the first time that a Roman emperor had ever been captured, and it resulted in a power vacuum in the East. Valerian eventually died in a Persian prison, having spent the remainder of his life as a footstool to Shapur. For the Christian apologist Lactantius the King of Kings clearly acted as an instrument of God's punishment of the impious emperor, and he describes in detail the humiliation Valerian had to undergo in a pamphlet called *On the Death of the Persecutors*: 'He was made prisoner by the Persians and lost not only the power which he had exercised without moderation, but also the liberty of which he had deprived others. He squandered the remainder of his days in the abject form of slavery: for whenever Shapur, the King of the Persians, who had made him prisoner, chose to get into the carriage or to mount on horseback, he commanded the Roman to stoop and present his back; then, placing his foot on the shoulders of Valerian, he said, with a smile of reproach, "This is true, and not what the Romans depicted on their tablets and walls".'

Comment [TA4]: This is the first time a Roman emperor had ever been captured – do you think this is worth mentioning to emphasize how serious this was? DONE

We have the unique and invaluable reaction of Shapur himself in a trilingual inscription, written in Arsacid Pahlavi, in the Middle Persian of the Sasanians and in Greek. It is inscribed at Naqsh-e Rostam, north of Persepolis, where the Achaemenid kings had found their final resting-place, and is commonly labelled by scholars, in a witty reference to the famous *Res Gestae* of Augustus, as the 'Achievements of the Divine Shapur': 'I, the Mazda-worshipping Lord Shapur, King of Kings of Iran and non-Iran, whose lineage is from the gods, son of the Mazda-worshipping divinity Ardashir, King of Kings of Iran, whose lineage is from the gods, grandson of King Papak, am ruler of Iranshahr, and I hold the following lands:' After thus introducing himself Shapur goes on to give the neo-Persian perspective on the consecutive wars: 'When at first we had become established in the empire, Gordian Caesar raised in all of the Roman empire a force from the Goth and German realms and marched on Babylonia against the empire of Iran and against us. On the border of Babylonia at Misikhe, a great frontal battle occurred. Gordian Caesar was killed and the Roman force was destroyed. And the Romans made Philip Caesar. Then Philip Caesar came to us for terms, and to ransom their lives, gave us five hundred thousand denars, and became tributary to us. And for this reason we have renamed Misikhe Peroz-Shapur.' Shapur's second campaign is said to have been a reaction to further

Comment [TA5]: Could you perhaps paraphrase this second quotation (beginning 'After thus...') as this paragraph is nearly all direct quotation, which ideally we would like to avoid. Thank you
NO. I THINK THE PRECISE FORMULATION BY SHAPUR, AS GIVEN IN THIS UNIQUE DOCUMENT, IS ABSOLUTELY PRICELESS. I AM CERTAIN THE READER WILL APPRECIATE THIS.

Roman falsehood: 'And Caesar lied again and did wrong to Armenia. Then we attacked the Roman empire and annihilated at Barbalissos a Roman force of 60,000 and Syria and the environs of Syria we burned, ruined and pillaged all.' His third campaign, in which Valerian was captured, is described as follows: 'A great battle took place beyond Carrhae and Edessa between us and Caesar Valerian and we took him prisoner with our own hands as well as the other commanders of the army, the praetorian prefect, senators and officials. All these we took prisoner and deported to Persis. We also burnt, devastated and pillaged Syria, Cilicia and Cappadocia.' As if this priceless document is not enough, we also have two exquisite visual representations of the events, which merge Shapur's three campaigns into one. A rock-cut relief at the same site of Naqsh-I Rostam shows the victorious King of Kings with two figures who have commonly been interpreted as Philip the Arab and Valerian, the one seemingly handing something over to Shapur and the other kneeling. A similar relief, at Bishapur, shows the King of Kings, again on horseback, with no less than three Roman emperors: Gordian III is trampled under Shapur's horse, Philip the Arab is depicted as a suppliant, and Valerian stands captured.

The fact that both the relief and the inscription at Naqsh-I Rostam were cut in the rocks at the same place where the tombs of the Achaemenid kings were located is a good indicator of the length to which the Sasanians went to present themselves as the legitimate heirs to the 'old' Persians. Nevertheless, the claims by some Roman historians, namely that the Sasanians from the outset intended to take possession of all the lands once occupied by the Achaemenids, must be taken with a pinch of salt, even if both Ardashir and later Shapur were on the attack as soon as they were in power. The degree to which the Sasanians owed part of their legacy to that of the Arsacids is debatable, but their policy seems certainly to have been more aggressive than that of the Parthians, and their attitude as regards religious freedom became less tolerant over time. The most famous victim of this aspect of their rule was the prophet Mani, the founder of a gnostic world religion known as Manichaeism, which combined a dualistic system according to which the powers of Light had to fight the powers of Darkness with elements directly taken over from Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Born in the final years of Arsacid rule, he travelled to India once Ardashir had established himself as the first Sasanian King of Kings, possibly because Ardashir refused to provide proper patronage. On his return to the Sasanian empire, Mani found a protector in Shapur. A 10th-century Arab author describes their first

meeting as follows: ‘The Manichaeans said that when Mani came into his presence, there were on his shoulders two lights resembling lamps. And when Shapur saw him he was impressed and Mani grew in his estimation.’ Shapur may well have seen Mani’s preaching, which incorporated elements from different cultural backgrounds, as a way to glue together, in a religious mould, the manifold lands that were ruled by the Sasanian dynasty. His successor Hormizd, who only reigned for one year, also supported the prophet, but Vahram I, who became King of Kings in AD 274, showed a very different attitude towards Mani. Influenced by the Magians, the Zoroastrian priests whose lifestyle was directly opposed to much of what Mani taught (above all asceticism, including a condemnation of the great Persian pastime hunting), Vahram disliked him from the start. Mani was imprisoned and eventually executed.

Their more aggressive political and military approach is clear from Shapur’s various incursions into Roman provincial territory. The fear that his soldiers could instil in their opponents is reflected by the novelist Heliodorus of Emesa (present-day Homs in Syria), who records, in the ninth book of his *Ethiopian Story*, the shock experienced by the Roman soldiers when they first laid eyes on the eastern enemy: ‘Even from afar the pomp and show of Persia compelled the attention of every eye. From their gold and silver weapons lightning flashed and flickered over the plain, for the sun was not long risen and was shining full on the Persians’ faces, so that their armour shone back with its own inherent brilliance, broadcasting an awesome coruscation into the furthest distance.’ The historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who had firsthand experience of the unsuccessful Persian campaign of the last pagan emperor, Julian ‘the Apostate’, was full of similar praise of the Sasanian army: ‘Their military training and discipline, and their constant practice of manoeuvres and arms drill [...] make them formidable even to large armies. They rely especially on their cavalry, in which all their nobility and men of mark serve. Their infantry are protected like gladiators and obey orders like slaves.’

PALMYRA BETWEEN ROME AND THE EASTERN POWERS

Important developments within the Roman empire had taken place after the capture of Valerian. His son Gallienus had made the Palmyrene notable Odaenathus his official deputy in the East, with the new title of *corrector totius Orientis*, in order to create stability in the region. Palmyra, the caravan city that had originally been situated between Rome and Parthia and had long managed to play the two superpowers off

against each other, was fully integrated into the Roman provincial system from the 1st century AD onwards. In 130 the emperor Hadrian visited the oasis in person, and in the early 3rd century Palmyra had acquired the prestigious status of a Roman colony. In the 250s Odaenathus came to the fore as the leading citizen, who also made it big time as a Roman senator and eventually consul.

Comment [TA6]: Could we make a paragraph break here? OK

According to the 6th-century imperial diplomat Petrus Patricius, Odaenathus was hoping to strike a deal with Shapur at the time of the second Sasanian campaign (when, as far as the trilingual inscription from Naqsh-I Rostam is concerned, Palmyra indeed seems to have escaped being pillaged), but the nature of this late Roman source must make this scheming rather doubtful. In any case, together with his son Herodian, Odaenathus won a famous victory over the Sasanians in 260. As is shown by an inscription on an arch at Palmyra, the son (and we can therefore assume also the father) now took on the traditional royal title of the major power in the East: ‘This statue was set up for Septimius Herodian, King of Kings, crowned near the Orontes with the diadem of royalty for his victory over the Persians.’ In the late 4th century, Festus described Odaenathus, who had ‘collected a band of Syrian country folk and put up a spirited resistance’, as Rome’s avenger, who even managed to capture Ctesiphon. The enigmatic, and obviously later written, Thirteenth Sibylline oracle, ‘predicted’ Odaenathus’ victory over Shapur in more poetic language: ‘At which time will reign over the mighty Romans two men, swift lords of war. One will have the number 70 [i.e. Valerian] and the other 3 [i.e. Gallienus]. And then a haughty bull, digging the earth with its hoofs and lifting the dust with its two horns, will do much harm to a dark-skinned reptile, dragging its coil by its horny scales. But he will perish with it. [...] Then shall come one who was sent by the sun [i.e. Odaenathus], a mighty and fearful lion, breathing much flame. Then he with much shameless daring will destroy [...] the greatest beast - venomous, fearful and emitting a great deal of hisses [i.e. Shapur].’

In any case, the late 4th-century and often untrustworthy *Augustan History* misrepresents the flow of events when it states that Odaenathus had ‘seized the imperial power after the capture of Valerian, when the strength of the Roman state was exhausted’. There is no evidence whatsoever that the Palmyrene leader usurped the position of emperor and the title of Augustus, and it is indeed telling that the honorific inscription quoted above which accompanied a statue of his son Herodian was set up by two leading officials of the Roman colony that Palmyra now was. The

appropriation of the title King of Kings is of course a different matter, and following their victory over Shapur, Odaenathus and his son considered themselves the rightful heirs to the royal diadem of the Sasanians. A mosaic that was recently discovered at Palmyra seems to echo the episode. The Greek mythological hero Bellerophon, on his winged horse Pegasus, is shown (dressed in Parthian trousers) as killing the monstrous chimaera, while two eagles fly above him carrying a wreath, symbolizing victory. A second image, seemingly depicting an innocent hunting scene, has a horseman (dressed in the same way as 'Bellerophon') engaged in a fight with Persian tigers, again accompanied by an eagle with a wreath. Following the ingenious explanation of the archaeologist who discovered it, the mosaic – combining Greek mythology with local iconographic detail – is no less than an allegory for the victory of the Palmyrenes over the Persians, which earned Odaenathus and Herodian the title 'King of Kings'.

Following the untimely death of both father and son under suspicious circumstances, Odaenathus' widow Zenobia ruled for their underage son Vaballathus and extended the Palmyrene kingdom (or should that be called an empire too?) over large parts of the Roman East. It was not to last for long, as the emperor Aurelian defeated Zenobia's troops and finally crushed Palmyra's power, bringing it back firmly in the bosom of the Roman empire. Rome's success rate on its eastern frontier would continue to ebb and flow, and the treaty with the Sasanians that followed the emperor Galerius' victory over them, in 298/9, resulted in Rome's greatest-ever extension of its territory across the Tigris. Nevertheless, the neo-Persian empire would finally come to an end only centuries later, following the Arab conquest of Mesopotamia and Persia.

'The Parthian shot'

The Parthians gained a reputation as extremely skilful mounted archers. In his account of the battle of Carrhae in 53 BC, Plutarch describes how, while pretending to flee, they would suddenly turn around on their horses to shoot their arrows into their surprised pursuers: 'For the Parthians shot as they fled, being, indeed, more adept at this than anyone else except the Scythians; and it is certainly a very clever manoeuvre – to fight and to look after one's own safety at the same time, so that there is no dishonouring in running away' (*Life of Crassus* 24). It is clear that superb competence in the saddle was required to pull off the trick: with the horseman's hands holding on

to his bow and arrow, he had only the pressure of his legs left to guide the animal. Graffiti from Dura-Europos and drawings from later periods depict the action clearly. This so-called ‘Parthian shot’ has become proverbial, distorted later into a ‘parting shot’, as the final insult hurled while departing. The 17th-century satirical poet Samuel Butler, in his *Hudibras*, has the protagonist writing to his lady ‘You wound, like Parthians, while you fly, and kill with a retreating eye’.

Dura-Europos

Dura-Europos, originally founded as a Seleucid fortress on the Euphrates river, came to play a key role as a stronghold for the Parthians in their western frontier zone from the 2nd century BC. The small-town remained under Arsacid control until AD 165, when it was captured by the imperial forces of Lucius Verus. Perhaps surprisingly, there is very little evidence for actual ‘Parthian’ culture in the centuries that Dura was under nominal control of the King of Kings. The main languages in use in the town were Greek and an Aramaic dialect, but there are hardly any traces of Parthian writing. The domestic and temple architecture of this period went back to ancient Near Eastern precedents instead. Durene reliefs and murals, often labelled with the modern misnomer ‘Parthian art’ on the basis of resemblances in style with sculptures from other places that once formed part of the Parthian world, were characterised by a frontality which cannot be linked with cultural developments in the Parthian heartland, but instead seems to coincide with the arrival of the Roman empire in the Near East. Even the Greek governmental structures of the town continued from its pre-Parthian past, and it is only the dating formula used in a number of Greek papyri and parchments, ‘the year X as the King of Kings reckons’, that hints at the fact that Dura actually formed part of the Parthian world. By the time the Arsacids gave way to the neo-Persian Sasanians the small-town had long since been integrated in the Roman provincial system, and it were these same Sasanians that eventually heralded the end of Dura’s existence. The Roman troops now defending Dura-Europos thickened the walls and filled the adjacent street and its houses with sand and rubble to the effect that the buildings situated here – amongst which the famous synagogue and Christian baptisterium – preserved their wall-paintings for posterity in a unique state. The defence system notwithstanding, the Sasanians broke through the walls after a siege in 256 and the town was left to disappear under the desert sands until its accidental discovery by British soldiers in 1920.