



SECOND EDITION

ROME IN THE EAST

THE TRANSFORMATION OF AN EMPIRE

WARWICK BALL

Rome in the East

The Transformation of an Empire

Second edition

This new edition of *Rome in the East* expands on the seminal work of the first edition, and examines the lasting impact of the Near Eastern influence on Rome on our understanding of the development of European culture. Warwick Ball explores modern issues as well as ancient, and overturns conventional ideas about the spread of European culture to the East. This volume includes analysis of Roman archaeological and architectural remains in the East, as well as links to the Roman Empire as far afield as Iran, Central Asia, India, and China. The Near Eastern client kingdoms under Roman rule are examined in turn and each are shown to have affected Roman, and ultimately European, history in different but very fundamental ways. The highly visible presence of Rome in the East – mainly the architectural remains, some among the greatest monumental buildings in the Roman world – are examined from a Near Eastern perspective and demonstrated to be as much, if not more, a product of the Near East than of Rome.

Warwick Ball presents the story of Rome in the light of Rome's fascination with the Near East, generating new insights into the nature and character of Roman civilisation, and European identity from Rome to the present. Near Eastern influence can be seen to have transformed Roman Europe, with perhaps the most significant change being the spread of Christianity. This new edition is updated with the latest research and findings from a range of sources including field work in the region and new studies and views that have emerged since the first edition. Over 200 images, most of them photographs taken by the author, demonstrate the grandeur of Rome in the East. This volume is an invaluable resource for students of the history of Rome and Europe, as well as those studying the Ancient Near East.

Warwick Ball is a Near Eastern archaeologist who has excavated in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Libya and Ethiopia, and travelled extensively in most other countries in the region in his professional capacity. He has held posts with the British Institute of Afghan Studies in Kabul, the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. The first edition of *Rome in the East* was *Choice* Outstanding Academic Book in 2000 and was awarded the James Henry Breasted Prize in 2001. Author of many other books on the history and archaeology of the region, Mr Ball now lives in Scotland.



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Second edition

Warwick Ball

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**In memory of Palmyra
A city twice sacked**



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Contents

<i>Photographic acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>List of plates</i>	xiii
<i>List of figures</i>	xx
<i>List of family trees</i>	xxv
Preface	xxvii
<i>East or West?</i>	xxvii
<i>Constraints and considerations</i>	xxix
Sources, perspectives and evidence	xxix
The limitations of epigraphy	xxx
Terminology	xxxiii
Geographical limits	xxxv
<i>Objectives</i>	xxxv
Genesis	xxxvi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xlii
1 Historical background	1
<i>To the Euphrates</i>	1
Rome and Iran	1
Hannibal and Antiochus the Great	2
Pompey the Great	3
Crassus, Carrhae and the Parthians	5
<i>Beyond the Euphrates</i>	8
Trajan and the ghost of Alexander	8
Septimius Severus and Mesopotamia	10
The end of the beginning	14
<i>The long retreat</i>	15
Iran restored: Alexander and Artaxerxes	16
Shapur I, Valerian and the disaster of Edessa	17
Shapur II, Constantius and the disaster of Amida	17
Julian and the loss of the Tigris provinces	18
Justinian the peasant's son and Khusrau of the Immortal Soul	20
Endgame: Heraclius, Khusrau Parviz and Muhammad	21

2	The Princely States: Near Eastern states under Roman protection	28
	<i>Rome and the Arabs</i>	29
	<i>Emesa and the Sun Kings</i>	30
	The kings of Emesa	32
	The cult of Emesene Baal and its great temple	35
	Was Baalbek Emesene?	38
	<i>Judaea, Herod the Great and the Jewish Revolt</i>	49
	The rise of Herod	51
	The successors of Herod	58
	The Jewish Revolt	59
	<i>Arabia and the Nabataeans</i>	64
	The rise of the Nabataeans	65
	The Nabataean achievement	69
	The cult of the dead	74
	<i>Palmyra and Queen Zenobia</i>	79
	Origins of Palmyra	79
	Palmyrene trade	81
	The rise of 'Udaynath	84
	Zenobia	84
	The revolt	86
	Aftermath of the revolt	88
	Palmyrene civilisation	90
	<i>Edessa and the coming of Christendom</i>	93
	Origins	95
	The kings	97
	Religion at Edessa	99
	Edessa and Christianity	101
	<i>The Tanukh and Queen Mawiyya</i>	103
	'King of the Arabs'	104
	Queen Mawiyya's revolt	105
	Aftermath	107
	<i>The Ghassan and the coming of Islam</i>	108
3	Rome east of the frontiers	125
	<i>Military campaigns</i>	125
	Mark Antony and Iran	125
	Aelius Gallus and Yemen	128
	<i>Roman prisoners of war</i>	132
	Crassus' lost legions?	132
	Survivors of Edessa	133
	<i>Roman trade</i>	141
	Rome in India	141
	Rome in Central Asia and China	150
	<i>'Romano-Buddhist' art</i>	156

4	The towns and cities	173
	<i>Antioch, the imperial city</i> 174	
	Origins 174	
	Eastern city or foreign implant? 176	
	Antioch as an imperial city 177	
	<i>The Macedonian heartland of the north</i> 179	
	Seleucia and Laodicea 180	
	Apamea 183	
	Aleppo 187	
	Cyrrhus and Chalcis 187	
	<i>The Euphrates and Mesopotamia</i> 189	
	Halabiya 190	
	Rasafa 191	
	Dura Europos 191	
	Mesopotamia 197	
	<i>The Phoenician coast</i> 198	
	Aradus, Antaradus and Marathus 199	
	Byblos 199	
	Beirut 201	
	Sidon and Tyre 202	
	Caesarea 204	
	<i>The Decapolis</i> 207	
	Damascus 209	
	Qanawat and Si‘ 213	
	Jerash 216	
	Amman 220	
	Other Decapolis cities 222	
	<i>Roman Arabia: Bosra and Shahba</i> 226	
	Bosra 226	
	Shahba 234	
	<i>Conclusions</i> 239	
5	The countryside	244
	<i>The Dead Cities</i> 244	
	The settlements and their setting 247	
	The houses 256	
	Public buildings 260	
	Christian buildings 262	
	Economy 274	
	Date 275	
	Explanations 275	
	<i>Other areas</i> 278	
	Elsewhere in north Syria 278	
	The desert fringes 279	
	Cilicia 281	

The Negev	281
Jordan	282
<i>The Hauran</i>	283
Villages and their settings	285
Public buildings	288
<i>Conclusions</i>	289
6 Secular architecture: imperial stamp or imperial veneer?	294
<i>The urban layout</i>	295
Planned towns	295
Sacred and processional ways	304
Colonnaded streets	310
The four-way arch	326
Other ornamental arches	334
Dedicatory columns	336
Nymphaea	342
The <i>kalybe</i>	343
Forums	346
Oval and circular plazas	348
<i>Buildings for leisure</i>	354
Baths	355
Entertainment	356
<i>Military architecture</i>	357
Occupation	358
Defence	359
7 Religious architecture: the resurgence of the East	372
<i>Temples</i>	372
The temenos temple	373
Temple propylaea	380
Eastern temple origins	383
Exterior altars	389
Temple sanctuaries	390
Circumambulatories	394
High places	399
<i>Early Christian architecture</i>	408
The basilica	408
The martyrium	410
Funerary architecture	412
Pyramids, temples and columns	413
Tower tombs	417
Underground tombs	420
Tomb façades	421
<i>Fabric and styles</i>	427

Building material	427
The trabeate style	429
The 'baroque' style	433
The 'Syrian niche'	441
<i>Conclusion</i>	445
8 The transformation of an empire	451
<i>The Arabs and the West</i>	451
<i>India and the West</i>	452
<i>Rome's Arab half-century: Julia Domna and the Arabs who ruled Rome</i>	456
Septimius Severus and Julia Domna	457
Caracalla and Geta	460
Elagabalus and Baal	462
Severus Alexander and the end of a dynasty	466
Aftermath	468
<i>Philip the Arab</i>	468
<i>Lepcis Magna: Roman city in Africa and the orientalisation of Europe</i>	470
<i>From Paganism to Christianity</i>	483
Religion in pagan Rome	483
From slave to master	484
From Iran to Rome	485
From Anatolia to Rome	489
From the Semitic East to Rome	490
From East to West	491
The oriental revolution	495
<i>East and West</i>	496
Character and prejudice	496
The view from the East	498
Triumph of the East	500
<i>Bibliography</i>	510
<i>Index</i>	540

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Plates

1.1	Modern Harran in south-eastern Turkey, site of the Battle of Carrhae	7
1.2	The Euphrates in Turkey with the walls of Diyarbakır (ancient Amida) in the distance. The extant walls are mainly Seljuk, but on Roman foundations	9
1.3	Hatra	11
1.4	Seh Qubba overlooking the Euphrates in northern Iraq, probably the site of the Roman fort of Castra Maurorum, the easternmost Roman site excavated	12
1.5	The church of Mar Yakub at Nisibis	13
1.6	Remains of the Roman gate at Sinjar in northern Iraq	13
2.1	The Samsigeramus inscription at Baalbek	34
2.2	‘Jupiter Optimus Maximus Heliopolitanus’ inscription at Baalbek	40
2.3	The columns of the Temple of Jupiter at Baalbek, with part of the fallen cornice in the foreground	41
2.4	The courtyard and sanctuary stairs of the main temple at Baalbek	41
2.5	The ‘Temple of Bacchus’ at Baalbek	42
2.6	The so-called Temple of Venus at Baalbek	42
2.7	One of the twin pillars at Baalbek; ‘IOMH’ inscription in the foreground	43
2.8	The quarry at Baalbek, with one of the monoliths used in construction. The six columns of the Temple of Jupiter in the background	44
2.9	The ‘Trilithon’ in the platform of the Temple of Jupiter	44
2.10	Raking cornice at Baalbek	45
2.11	Foundations of the temple of Elagabalus in Rome	48
2.12	The Temple of Augustus at Sebaste	53
2.13	The colonnaded street at Sebaste	54
2.14	The aqueduct at Caesarea	54
2.15	Model of Herod’s Temple in the Holy Land Hotel, Jerusalem	57
2.16	The Haram ash-Sharif in Jerusalem	57
2.17	The menorah on the Arch of Titus in Rome	61
2.18	Petra: the main colonnaded street towards the ‘Royal Tombs’	66
2.19	The Khazneh at Petra	67
2.20	The Nabataean Temple at al-Qasr	68
2.21	The ‘Urn Tomb’ at Petra	69
2.22	The ‘Palace Tomb’ at Petra	70
2.23	Openings in the forecourt wall of the Urn Tomb	71
2.24	The Khazneh portico. Note opening immediately above door	72

2.25	The Deir	73
2.26	The central area at Petra dominated by the Temple of Dushara (Qasr al-Bint)	73
2.27	The Nabataean settlement of Mampsis in the Negev Desert	74
2.28	Detail of the high place of al-Madhbah at Petra	75
2.29	The ‘Roman Soldier’ Tomb at Petra	78
2.30	Relief of Palmyrene archers in the Palmyra Museum	80
2.31	Relief of a Palmyrene camel caravan in the Palmyra Museum	81
2.32	Palmyrene ship in the Palmyra Museum	82
2.33	Palmyra Tariff inscription in the Hermitage	82
2.34	Palmyrene funerary monument at South Shields, England	83
2.35	The monumental arch (destroyed in 2015) and main colonnaded street at Palmyra	91
2.36	The Temple of Nabu at Palmyra	91
2.37	Courtyard of the Temple of Bel at Palmyra. Note the foundations of the large altar in the middle distance	92
2.38	Palmyrene funerary scene in the Palmyra Museum	93
2.39	Modern Urfa, ancient Edessa, with the two columns on the citadel, possibly forming a part of Abgar’s palace	95
2.40	‘Fish pools of Abraham’ at Urfa	96
2.41	Statue of an Edessan man (Urfa Museum)	97
2.42	Copy of the Doctrina Addai in the Corlu Museum, Turkey	101
2.43	St Thaddaeus Church in Iran	102
2.44	Ghassanid tower at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi	111
2.45	The Ghassanid extramural hall at Rasafa	111
2.46	The North Gate at Rasafa	112
2.47	The underground cisterns at Rasafa	112
2.48	The church and palace at Qasr Ibn Wardan. The remains of a barracks in the foreground	113
3.1	Takht-i Sulaiman in Iran, ancient Shiz, the object of Heraclius’ campaign as well as possibly Mark Antony’s (as ancient Praaspa)	127
3.2	The walls of Marib, scene of Aelius Gallus’ siege	131
3.3	The Temple of Anahita at Bishapur in Iran, probably built by Roman prisoners	135
3.4	Victory column at Bishapur	135
3.5	Remains of the Roman bridge at Shushtar	136
3.6	Shapur’s great victory relief at Bishapur (no. 3), depicting Roman prisoners and the Emperors Valerian, Philip and Gordian	137
3.7	Detail of the Bishapur 3 relief depicting the presentation of booty, possibly the black stone of Emesa, to Shapur	137
3.8	The Emperor Philip the Arab kneeling before the mounted figure of Shapur at Bishapur (no. 1), who is placing his hand on the captive Emperor Valerian. The Emperor Gordian lies trampled underneath Shapur’s horse	138
3.9	The Emperor Philip the Arab kneeling before the mounted figure of Shapur at Naqsh-i Rostam near Persepolis. The Emperor Valerian stands in the background	138

3.10	Excavated remains of a probable Nestorian church at Siraf on the Persian Gulf	148
3.11	Roman glass beaker from Begram depicting a gladiator (photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée Guimet, Paris)/Thierry Olivier)	154
3.12	Fragment of a Gandhara sculpture in the Lahore Museum	157
3.13	A Roman sarcophagus sculpture in the Antalya Museum	157
3.14	Gandharan Buddha statue compared with a statue of Emperor Augustus	159
3.15	Bust of a bodhisattva from Hadda, Afghanistan (photo © RMN-Grand Palais (musée Guimet, Paris)/Thierry Olivier)	160
3.16	Gandharan relief of the Indian goddess Hairiti with children from northern Pakistan (photo © British Museum)	161
3.17	Gandharan relief depicting a scene from Buddhist mythology (photo © British Museum)	162
3.18	The Trojan horse on a Buddhist stupa (photo © British Museum)	162
3.19	Big Goose Temple, Xian, where the pilasters and entablatures are distantly derived from Classical architecture via Gandhara	165
4.1	Rock-cut channel at Seleucia	181
4.2	Tombs at Seleucia	181
4.3	The Tetrapylon at Latakia	183
4.4	The main colonnaded street at Apamea	186
4.5	Votive column at Apamea, marking the intersection of two streets	186
4.6	Roman arch incorporated into the Tutah Mosque in Aleppo	188
4.7	Cyrrhus, with the theatre in the foreground	189
4.8	One of the floor mosaics from Zeugma, now in the Gaziantep Museum	190
4.9	The Halabiya ‘praetorium’	191
4.10	The city walls of Rasafa	193
4.11	Rasafa Church of the Holy Cross	193
4.12	Dura Europos, overlooking the Euphrates	195
4.13	The synagogue at Dura reconstructed in the National Museum in Damascus	196
4.14	Some of the cisterns at Dara	197
4.15	A short stretch of the restored Roman colonnaded street at Byblos with the Bronze Age ramparts in the foreground	200
4.16	Excavations of the Roman remains in Beirut, possibly of the celebrated Law School	201
4.17	The monumental arch at Tyre	203
4.18	The Tyre hippodrome	204
4.19	The East Gate at Damascus. Note the Doric order and arceate street colonnade attached to it	211
4.20	The enclosure wall and corner tower of the Temple of Jupiter-Hadad at Damascus	213
4.21	Decorated entrance to a probable temple in the ‘Seraglio’ complex at Qanawat	214
4.22	The prostyle ‘Temple of Zeus’ at Qanawat	214
4.23	The reconstructed entrance to the temple of Si‘ in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin	216

4.24	Jerash from the Temple of Zeus	217
4.25	The tank at Birkatayn	218
4.26	The theatre and forum at Amman	221
4.27	View along 'Valley Street' at Beth Shean, towards the monumental centre	224
4.28	The civic centre and excavations at Pella, from Tell Hosn	225
4.29	The theatre and site at Umm Qays, ancient Gadara	226
4.30	The Nabataean Arch at Bosra	230
4.31	The palace at Bosra	230
4.32	The West Gate at Bosra	231
4.33	The central arch at Bosra dedicated to the III Cyrenaica Legion	232
4.34	The surviving columns of the nymphaeum at Bosra	233
4.35	The side column of the <i>kalybe</i> at Bosra	234
4.36	The theatre at Bosra	235
4.37	The civil basilica at Bosra	235
4.38	Bosra cathedral	236
4.39	The <i>kalybe</i> façade at Shahba	238
4.40	Interior of the 'Philippeion' at Shahba	238
4.41	Mosaic of Venus from Shahba (now in the Suwaida Museum)	239
5.1	View of part of the Dead Cities region from Burj Baqirha, with ruined settlements of Baqirha, Dar Qita and Ba'udeh below	246
5.2	View of part of the Dead Cities region from St Simeon Stylites, with ruined settlements of Deir Sim'an and Rafada below. Note ancient field boundaries	246
5.3	Al-Bara, ancient Kapropera, in the Jebel Zawiya. Note the olive groves surrounding	250
5.4	The monastic complex of Dayr Sobat	250
5.5	Ancient field patterns and roads between Serjilla and Rabi'ah	251
5.6	Serjilla, with the so-called 'tavern' in the foreground	251
5.7	Two storey house at Jarada in the Dead Cities surrounded by a high wall	253
5.8	One of the towers at Jarada	253
5.9	The monastery at al-Braijj	254
5.10	Roman road near Tell Aqibrin	255
5.11	Bab al-Hawa arch	255
5.12	A courtyard house in Jerada. Note animal trough	256
5.13	A row of porticoed houses at Serjilla	257
5.14	View along a porticoed street at Jerada	258
5.15	Geometric mosaic Ma'rat (believed destroyed)	258
5.16	Ma'rat naïve mosaic (believed destroyed)	259
5.17	The Maryamin music mosaic (formerly in the Hama Museum)	260
5.18	The baths at Serjilla	261
5.19	Temple of Zeus at Burj Baqirha	262
5.20	The church at Mushabbak	264
5.21	Sitt ar-Rum	264
5.22	Propylaeum to the sacred way up to St Simeon Stylites	267

5.23	Main entrance to St Simeon Stylites	268
5.24	Exterior of St Simeon Stylites	268
5.25	St Simeon monastery	269
5.26	A religious complex incorporating a hospice and monastery at Deir Sim'an, ancient Telannisos	269
5.27	A church at Deir Sim'an, ancient Telannisos	270
5.28	The church at Kharaba Shams	270
5.29	The tower at Qasr al-Banat	271
5.30	Jebal Barisha church string course	272
5.31	The church at Qalb Lauzah	272
5.32	The church at Ruwayha	273
5.33	The village of Ba'udeh between al-Bara and Serjilla	277
5.34	Roman temple at Isriya	280
5.35	Remains of the late Roman settlement at Kanlidivane in Cilicia	282
5.36	Three storey building in Umm al-Jimal	286
5.37	Example of corbelling in the Hauran at Umm al-Jimal	286
5.38	A stone door at Qanawat	287
5.39	A 'villa' at Inkhil	288
6.1	Ancient Gorgippia, modern Anapa, on the Taman Peninsula in Russia	297
6.2	The main colonnaded street at Palmyra	306
6.3	View along the main colonnaded street at Jerash towards the Temple of Zeus	307
6.4	The Temple of Artemis processional way and propylaeum at Jerash	309
6.5	View along the sacred way at Cyrene towards the Sanctuary of Apollo	310
6.6	The reconstructed Processional Way and Ishtar Gate of Babylon in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin	311
6.7	The sacred way at Luxor, the 'Sphinx Avenue'	311
6.8	Colonnaded street at Pompeiopolis in Cilicia	313
6.9	Colonnaded street at Timgad in Algeria	313
6.10	Street arcades at Italica in Spain	315
6.11	The original Ionic Cardo at Jerash	317
6.12	The Umayyad colonnaded street and tetrapylon at Anjar	318
6.13	The traditional Iranian covered bazaar, the equivalent of the roofed colonnaded streets	320
6.14	Rows of shops behind the main colonnade at Apamea	320
6.15	Colonial street at Braidwood, New South Wales, where the streets are traditionally – in effect – 'colonnaded'	322
6.16	A canopied traditional bazaar street at Istalif in Afghanistan	326
6.17	A tetrapylon tomb at Dana in north Syria	327
6.18	The North Tetrapylon at Jerash under restoration	330
6.19	The restored tetrapylon at Palmyra	330
6.20	The South Tetrapylon at Jerash	331
6.21	The Sasanian <i>chahartaq</i> at Niyasar	333
6.22	The <i>chahartaq</i> marking the intersection of two bazaar streets in Kerman	334

6.23	The Arch of Hadrian at Jerash	335
6.24	The restored South Gate at Jerash, a copy of the Arch of Hadrian	335
6.25	The foundations of the gateway to Darius' palace at Susa	337
6.26	The Gate of All Nations at Persepolis	337
6.27	Column of Constantine in Constantinople	339
6.28	Votive first-century BC Commagene funerary column at Karakush	340
6.29	Funerary columns at Sarmuda in north Syria	341
6.30	Tower at Umm ar-Rasas in Jordan	342
6.31	The nymphaeum at Jerash	343
6.32	The Oval Plaza at Jerash	347
6.33	The 'agora' or 'caravanserai' at Palmyra	349
6.34	Semi-circular colonnade around the theatre at Palmyra	350
6.35	Part of the semi-circular plaza in front of the propylaeum at Baalbek	350
6.36	The oval enclosure of the Temple of 'Ilmuqah at Marib	352
6.37	The circular enclosure in front of the Deir at Petra	354
6.38	The West Baths at Jerash	355
6.39	The Jerash Hippodrome looking towards the partly restored <i>carceres</i> and the Arch of Hadrian	357
6.40	Roman siege camps and circumvallation at Masada	361
6.41	The fortifications of Halabiya on the Euphrates	364
7.1	The temple of Husn Sulaiman	375
7.2	The Temple of Artemis at Jerash	377
7.3	The temenos wall at Husn Sulaiman. Note size of masonry blocks	378
7.4	The sanctuary of the Temple of Bel at Palmyra (destroyed in 2015)	379
7.5	The Temple of Zeus at Jerash, with the temenos in the foreground	379
7.6	The temenos wall at Baalbek	381
7.7	The Artemis Propylaeum at Jerash	384
7.8	The Temple of Melqart at Amrit	389
7.9	Qal'at Faqra, with the altar in the foreground and tower in the background	391
7.10	The interior adyton of the Temple of Bel at Palmyra	395
7.11	Interior of the temple at Niha	396
7.12	Interior dais of the Nabu Temple at Nimrud (destroyed in 2015)	396
7.13	The Madhbah high place at Petra	405
7.14	The ziggurat at Ur	406
7.15	Hexagonal tomb with a pyramid roof at Cyrrhus	414
7.16	Pyramid roof tomb at al-Bara	414
7.17	The temple tomb at Palmyra	416
7.18	The temple tomb at Ruwayha	416
7.19	Tower tombs at Palmyra	417
7.20	Interior of the Tomb of Elahbel at Palmyra (destroyed in 2015)	418
7.21	The <i>al-maghazil</i> tombs at Amrit	419
7.22	The <i>burj al-bazzaq</i> tomb at Amrit	419
7.23	The necropolis at Ghirza in Libya	420
7.24	The Hypogeum of Borpha and Bolha at Palmyra	422

7.25	First category of tomb façades at Petra	424
7.26	The ‘Renaissance’ Tomb at Petra	424
7.27	The Bab as-Siq Triclinium and Obelisk Tomb at Petra	425
7.28	‘God-blocks’ at the entrance to Petra	431
7.29	Propylaeum to the Temple of ‘Ilmuqah (<i>Awvam Bilqis</i>) at Marib in Yemen	432
7.30	Ibex frieze at Sirwah in Yemen	432
7.31	‘Syrian niche’ on the Artemis Propylaeum at Jerash	434
7.32	Colonnade at Apamea combining a Doric frieze with Corinthian columns	436
7.33	Spirally fluted colonnade at Apamea	437
7.34	Hybrid Ionic-Corinthian order on the Temple at Suwaylim	437
7.35	Column shafts and bases at the Apamea agora	438
7.36	Entablature without an architrave from the Zeus Temenos at Jerash	438
7.37	Baroque house façades adorning the Umayyad Mosque at Damascus	439
7.38	Votive stupas at Taxila in Pakistan. Note rows of niches, Classical entablatures and Corinthian derived pilasters	440
7.39	Detail of the Stupa of the Two-Headed Eagle at Taxila: a Mauryan arch framed in Corinthian pilasters and entablature	440
7.40	The Parthian palace façade from Ashhur in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin	442
7.41	Decorative niches used to flank the Sohail Gate in the sixteenth-century fort of Rohtas in Pakistan	443
7.42	Sasanian palace façade at Ctesiphon	444
7.43	Abbasid palace façade at Samarra	445
8.1	Palmyrene funerary stele and inscription at South Shields	453
8.2	The Roman fort of ‘Arabs’ (Arbeia) at South Shields	454
8.3	Portrait tondo of Emperor Septimius Severus and his family: Julia Donna, Septimius Severus, Geta and Caracalla (© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin)	457
8.4	Bust of Emperor Septimius Severus in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	458
8.5	Bust of Julia Domna in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	459
8.6	Bust of the Emperor Caracalla in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin	461
8.7	Bust in the Cyrene Museum, Libya, attributed to Emperor Elagabalus	463
8.8	Statue of Julia Sohaemias in the Antalya Museum	463
8.9	Bust of Julia Mamaea in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna	467
8.10	Bust of Emperor Philip the Arab in the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg	469
8.11	Numidian royal tombs buried under the Roman forum at Chemtou, Tunisia	472
8.12	The Numidian mausoleum of Ateban at Dougga, Tunisia	472
8.13	The Severan Arch at Lepcis Magna	476
8.14	Relief of the Severan family on the Arch at Lepcis Magna	477
8.15	Processional relief on the Arch at Lepcis Magna: the Emperor with Caracalla and Geta (whose features are erased) behind	477
8.16	The Severan nymphaeum at Lepcis Magna	480
8.17	The Severan Forum at Lepcis Magna	481

Figures

P.1	General map to illustrate Rome in the East. Shaded area shows approximate limits of the Empire at its greatest extent	xxvi
2.1	Map to illustrate the Kingdom of Emesa. Shaded area indicates approximate limits at greatest extent	31
2.2	The Temple of Emesene Baal, taken from a coin of the ‘Emperor Uranius’	36
2.3	Perspective reconstruction of Baalbek (After Ward-Perkins)	37
2.4	Plan of the temple complex at Baalbek (After Ragette)	38
2.5	The Temple of Elahgabal in Rome, taken from a medallion of Severus Alexander	48
2.6	Map to illustrate the Kingdom of Judaea. Shaded area indicates approximate limits at greatest extent	50
2.7	Herod’s Temple (After Busink)	55
2.8	Jerusalem at the time of Herod (After Roller)	56
2.9	Map illustrating the Nabataean Kingdom. Shaded area indicates approximate limits at greatest extent	64
2.10	Plan of Petra. 1: Deir. 2: Turkmaniyah Tomb. 3: Conway Tower. 4: Moghar an-Nassara. 5: Tomb of Sextus Florentinus. 6: Palace Tomb. 7: Corinthian Tomb. 8: Silk Tomb. 9: Urn Tomb. 10: Khubtha High Places. 11: Temple of the Winged Lions. 12: Qasr al-Bint. 13: Temenos Arch. 14: Unfinished Tomb. 15: Great Temple. 16: Colonnaded street. 17: Nymphaeum. 18: Pharaoh’s Pillar. 19: Umm al-Biyara summit. 20: Broken Pediment Tomb. 21: Renaissance Tomb. 22: Roman Soldier Triclinium. 23: Roman Soldier Tomb. 24: Garden Temple. 25: Lion Fountain. 26: Madhbah High Place. 27: Theatre. 28: Street of façades. 29: Tomb of Unaiшу. 30: Khazneh. 31: Siq. 32: Arch. 33: Obelisk Tomb. 34: God Blocks.	71
2.11	The al-Khubtha high place at Petra (top, after Browning) compared to the Kuh-i Rahmat astadans in Iran (bottom, after Huff). Not to scale	76
2.12	Plan of the Urn Tomb at Petra showing the arcosolia. (After Khouri/Qsus)	78
2.13	Map to illustrate Palmyrene trade (After Gawlikowski)	80
2.14	Plan of Palmyra. 1: Temple of Bel. 2: Temple of Baal-Shamin. 3: Temple of Nabu. 4: Temple of Allath. 5: Theatre. 6: Tetrastylon. 7: Monumental arch. 8: Baths of Diocletian. 9: houses. 10: caravanserai. 11: Diocletian Camp. 12: Tombs. (After Mikhailowski)	90

2.15	Map to illustrate the Kingdom of Edessa	94
3.1	Map illustrating Mark Antony's campaign. Shaded area shows approximate limits of the Armenian kingdom	126
3.2	Map illustrating Aelius Gallus' campaign. Dotted line indicates approximate route	129
3.3	Map illustrating Roman traces in Iran	133
3.4	Map illustrating Roman related sites in India	142
3.5	Map illustrating Indian Ocean trade routes	143
3.6	A votive stupa from Taxila (After Marshall)	158
4.1	Plan of Antioch (After Downey/Cimak)	175
4.2	The main pre-Seleucid (Babylonian-Persian period) settlements in northern Syria. Given the state of our archaeological knowledge for this period, the real number of settlements is probably much higher	178
4.3	Plan of Roman Latakia (After Sauvaget)	182
4.4	Plan of Apamea (After Balty)	185
4.5	Plan of Roman Aleppo. A: Tell. B: High Place. C: Temple (After Sauvaget)	188
4.6	Plan of Rasafa (After Karnapp)	192
4.7	Plan of Dura Europos (After Hopkins)	194
4.8	Sketch plan of Tyre based on aerial photographs	203
4.9	Plan of Caesarea (After Porath and Zeik/Roller)	206
4.10	Plan of Sebaste. 1: West Gate. 2: Colonnaded street. 3: Basilica. 4: Forum. 5: Theatre. 6: Temple of Augustus. 7: Temple of Kore. 8: Stadium. (After Segal/Crowfoot)	207
4.11	The area of the Decapolis	208
4.12	Roman Damascus (After Sauvaget)	210
4.13	The Temple of Jupiter-Hadad at Damascus (After Watzinger)	212
4.14	Plan of the Si' temples (After Burns/Butler)	215
4.15	Plan of Jerash (After Pillen)	219
4.16	Plan of Roman Amman (After Politis)	221
4.17	Plan of Beth Shean, with the monumental centre inset (After Foerster and Tsafirir)	223
4.18	Plan of Umm Qais (After Bablick, Hagen, Reidel)	225
4.19	Nabataean and Roman Bosra. A: Bab al-Hawa. B: Oval Plaza. C: Tetracylon. D: Bab Qandil. E: Nabataean Arch. F: Palace. G: Reservoir. H: South Baths. I: Theatre. J: Hippodrome. K: Caravanserai. L: Nymphaeum. M: Kalybe. N: North Gate. O: Spring. P: Legionary Headquarters. Q: Basilica. R: Nabataean streets. S: South Cathedral. T: Roman street. U: city walls. V: North Cathedral. W: Bishop's Palace. X: depression. Y: enclosure. Z: Cryptoportico. (After Meinecke/Peters)	228
4.20	The palace at Bosra (After Butler)	229
4.21	Plan of Shahba. 1-4: City gates. 5: Hexastyle Temple. 6: Kalybe. 7: Philippeion. 8: Theatre. 9: Baths. 10: Hippodrome. (After Freyberger)	237
5.1	Map of the Dead Cities region (After Peña)	245

5.2	Map of the Jebel Barakat-Jebel Sim'an Dead Cities group	247
5.3	Map of the Jebel Zawiya Dead Cities group	248
5.4	Plan of Serjilla (After Krautheimer/Butler)	249
5.5	House types in the Dead Cities. A: Taqleh. B: Banaqfur. C: Serjilla. D: Behyo. E: Dalloza. F: Serjilla. G: Ba'uda. (After Tchalenko)	252
5.6	Types of towers in the Dead Cities (After Tchalenko)	252
5.7	Baths in the Dead Cities. 1: Barad. 2: Serjilla. (After Tchalenko)	261
5.8	Magharat al-Mallaab high place (After Peña)	263
5.9	Reconstruction of the monastery complex of Turmanin (After Tchalenko)	265
5.10	St Simeon Stylites (After Tchalenko)	266
5.11	Church plans in north Syria. A: Ruwayha. B: Qalb Lauzah. C: Rasafa.	281
5.12	Qasr Ibn Wardan	281
5.13	Map of Nabataean and Roman sites in the Hauran and surrounding region	284
5.14	The 'praetorium' at Mismiya, drawn in the nineteenth century by De Vogüé	290
6.1	Hippodamos' plan of Miletus (After Owens)	298
6.2	The Sumerian colony of Habuba Kabira on the Euphrates (After Stromenger)	299
6.3	Harappan city plans: Mohenjodaro and Kalibangan (After Wheeler/Thapar)	300
6.4	The ideal city according to Kautilya (After Rajarangan/Allchin)	301
6.5	The ideal fortified camp according to Kautilya (After Rajarangan/Allchin)	302
6.6	Zernecki Tepe (After Burney)	303
6.7	Comparative processional ways. A: Petra. B: Bosra. C: Jerash. D: Palmyra. Not to scale	305
6.8	The Artemis processional way and temple at Jerash (After Segal)	308
6.9	The colonnaded street and tetrapylon at Thessalonike (After Ward-Perkins)	314
6.10	Colonnaded streets. A: Antioch. B: Hellenistic Apamea. C: Palmyra. D: Roman Apamea (After Lassus, Balty, Gabriel)	316
6.11	Part of the eleventh-century bazaar at Lashkari Bazar in Afghanistan (After Le Berre/Schlumberger)	318
6.12	The colonnaded palace façade at Ebla (After Matthiae)	321
6.13	Reconstruction of a Bosra street colonnade, with the sidewalk roofed (After Butler)	323
6.14	The Jerusalem street colonnades depicted in the Madaba mosaic, with the sidewalks roofed (After Avigad/Segal)	324
6.15	The Amman colonnaded street, with detail inset. Note the absence of a sidewalk (After Butler)	324
6.16	Reconstruction of the Jerash Cardo. Note the absence of a sidewalk on the right	325
6.17	Sketch section of part of the Jerash Cardo, showing what form it would have taken if roofed	325
6.18	Reconstruction of the North Tetrapylon at Jerash	328
6.19	Comparative tetrapylon plans. A: Tripoli. B: Lepcis Magna. C: Jerash North Tetrapylon. D: Jerash South Tetrapylon. E: Palmyra. F: Bosra. Not to scale	329

6.20	The evolution of the Iranian chahartaq. A: Gaga Shahr; B: Susa (Achaemenid). C: Kuh-i Khwaja; D: Qal'a-i Zohak (Parthian). E: Qasr-i Shirin; F: Niyasar; G: Ateshkuh (Sasanian). H: Bukhara; J: Ardistan; K: Qazvin (Islamic). Not to scale	332
6.21	Kastron Mefaa as depicted in the Church of St Stephen mosaic. Note votive column (After Piccirillo)	338
6.22	<i>Kalybe</i> style monuments. A: Bosra. B: Shahba. C: Shahba 'hexastyle temple'. D: Amman (After Butler, Segal). Not to scale	344
6.23	Reconstruction of the <i>kalybe</i> at Amman (After Butler)	345
6.24	Sketch plan of the Deir complex at Petra	353
6.25	The Camp of Diocletian at Palmyra. 1: Principia. 2: Temple of Allath. 3: Gateway. 4: Tetracylon. 5: Horraeum. 6: Oval plaza (After Mikhailowski)	359
6.26	The Dux Ripae at Dura Europos (After Ward-Perkins)	360
6.27	Herod's palaces. A: Herodion. B: Jericho. (After Roller)	361
6.28	Legionary camps at Layjjun and Udruh (After Bowersock)	362
6.29	Fortifications system associated with the Strata Diocletiana (After Kennedy and Riley)	363
7.1	Temenos temples with sanctuaries in the centre. A: Husn Sulaiman. B: Bel Temple at Palmyra. C: Artemis Temple at Jerash. D: Heracles Temple at Amman. E: Shaikh Barakat. F: Nabu Temple at Palmyra. Not to scale	374
7.2	Temenos temple with sanctuaries at the end or one side. A: Baalbek. B: Zeus Temple at Jerash. C: Dushara Temple at Petra. D: Mushannaf. E: Seia. F: Qal'at Faqra	376
7.3	The Amman Propylaeum (After Butler)	382
7.4	The Baalbek Propylaeum (After Wiegand)	383
7.5	The Sun Temple complex at Hatra (After Andrae/Herrmann)	385
7.6	The Temple of Anahita at Kangavar. A: former interpretation (according to Herzfeld). B: new interpretation (according to Kambakhsh Fard)	386
7.7	The evolution of the sacred courtyard. A: Khafaje. B: Ur. C: Baalbek. D: Jerash. E: Umayyad Mosque at Damascus. Not to scale (After Darby, Hawkes, Ragette, Segal, Creswell)	388
7.8	The great altar at Baalbek (After Collart and Coupel)	390
7.9	Peripteral temple sanctuaries. A: Palmyra-Bel. B: Palmyra-Nabu. C: Baalbek. D: Petra-Great Temple. E: Jerash-Zeus. F: Qanawat-Helios	392
7.10	Prostyle temple sanctuaries. A: Qanawat-Zeus. B: Husn Sulaiman. C: Qal'at Faqra. D: Seia. E: Isriya. F: Shaikh Barakat. G: Burj Baqirha. H: Amman. J: Kedesh. Not to scale	393
7.11	Prostyle in antis temple sanctuaries. A: Petra-Dushara. B: Rabbah. C: Diban. D: Sur. E: Slim. F: Mushannaf. Not to scale	394
7.12	Uncolonnaded temple sanctuaries. A: Shahba. B: Dmayr	395
7.13	Interior of the 'Bachus' Temple at Baalbek (After Wiegand)	397
7.14	Tripartite temple sanctuaries. A: Petra-Dushara. B: Jerash-Zeus. C: Qanawat-Zeus. D: Qanawat-Seraglio. E: Kedesh. F: Tawwan. G: Rabbah. H: Diban. J: Dmayr. K: Slim. L: Sanamayn. Not to scale	398

7.15	Bronze Age tripartite temple sanctuaries. A: Tell Achana. B: Ur. Not to scale	399
7.16	Circumambulatory temples. A: Hasan Madbur. B: Seia Baalshamin. C: Seia Dushara. D: Petra Winged Lions. E: Petra Great Temple. F: Khirbet Tannur. G: Sur. H: Sahr. J: Sahir. K: Khirbet edh-Dharih. L: Rumm. Not to scale	400
7.17	Parthian period circumambulatories. A: Hatra. B: Kuh-i Khwaja. C: Surkh Kotal. D: Taxila-Jaulian. Not to scale	401
7.18	Sasanian circumambulatories. A: Bishapur. B: Tepe Hisar. C: Kunar Siah. D: Chahardeh. E: Farashband 2. F: Takht-i Sulaiman. Not to scale	402
7.19	Achaemenid and Uartian circumambulatories. A: Susa. B: Altintepe	403
7.20	Temple sanctuaries with spiral staircases. A: Taxila Jaulian. B: Jerash Zeus. C: Isriya. D: Dmayr. E: Petra Dushara. F: Slim. G: Palmyra Bel with conjectural reconstruction. Not to scale	403
7.21	Temple façades with high places flanking a pediment. A: Si'. B: Dmayr. C: Damascus. D: Baalbek. E: Jerash (After Butler, Klimkott, Dussaud, Wiegand, Browning). Not to scale	404
7.22	The evolution of the pedimented façade flanked by towers. A: Si'. B: Ruwayha. C: Angoulême (After Butler, Bannister Fletcher). Not to scale	407
7.23	Centrally planned churches. A: The Anastasis Rotunda in Jerusalem. B: Antioch St Babylos. C: St Simeon Baptistry. D: al-Andarin. E: Ezra'a. F: Bosra. G: Seleucia. H: Apamea. J: Rasafa martyrrium. K: Qasr Ibn Wardan. L: Constantinople SS Sergius and Bacchus. Not to scale	411
7.24	The third-century BC Buddhist caitya hall at Bairat in India (After Piggot) compared to the fourth-century AD rotunda at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (After Corbo/Krautheimer). Not to scale	412
7.25	Pyramid-roof tombs. A: Cyrrhus. B: Barad. C: Dana (north). D: Qal'at Kalota. E: Khirbet Khass. F: Dana (south). G: Jerash. (After Tchalenko, Butler, Seigne). Not to scale	413
7.26	Pillar tombs. A: Sarmada. B: Sitt ar-Rum. C: Qatura. (After Tchalenko)	415
7.27	Hypogeum of the Three Brothers at Palmyra (After Browning)	421
7.28	First category of Nabataean tomb façades (After Browning)	423
7.29	Cantilevering techniques at Umm al-Jimal (After De Vries)	428
7.30	Baetyls carved into a cube in the Siq at Petra (After McKenzie)	430
7.31	Interior façade of Tomb 36 at Palmyra (After Schmidt-Colinet)	434
7.32	The Temple of 'Diana' at Baalbek (After Ward-Perkins)	435
7.33	Mauryan decorative niches. A: Bharhut. B: Sanchi (After Reed/Michel)	441
7.34	The Parthian palace façade at Ashhur (After Andrae/Reuther)	444
8.1	Central area of Lepcis Magna (After Ward-Perkins)	474
8.2	The Severan monumental quarter at Lepcis Magna (After Ward-Perkins)	479
8.3	The circular plaza and nymphaeum at Lepcis Magna (After Ward-Perkins)	479
8.4	Restored view of the Severan Forum and Temple at Lepcis Magna (After Ward-Perkins)	481

Family trees

2.1	The dynasty of the Emesene kings	32
2.2	The family of Herod the Great	52
8.1	The family of Julia Domna	464

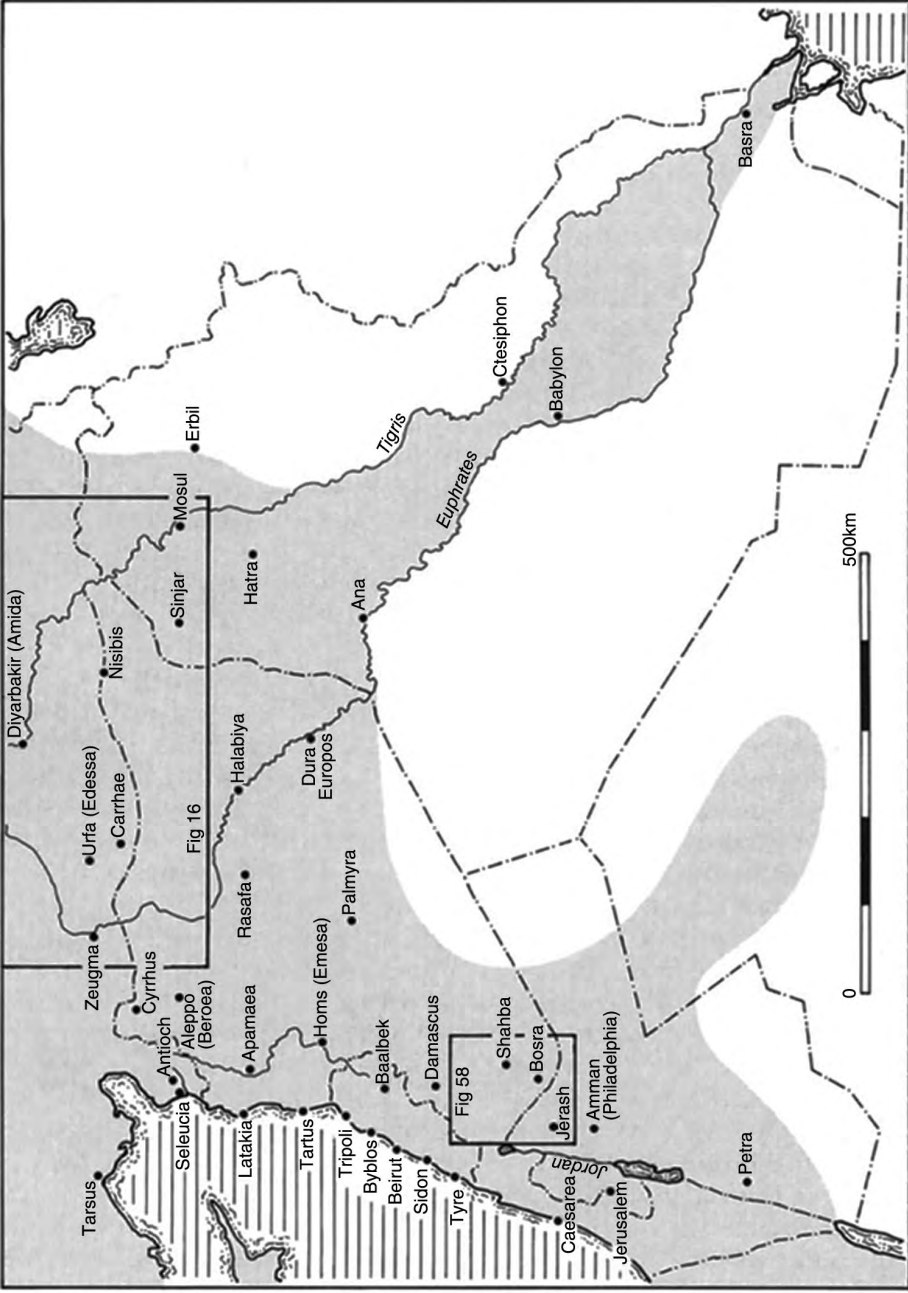


Figure P.1 General map to illustrate Rome in the East. Shaded area shows approximate limits of the Empire at its greatest extent

Preface

Coming to Roman studies as an outsider (I am a Near Eastern archaeologist, one whose experience furthermore has been mainly in areas east of the Roman frontiers), Classical Studies appears an awesome beast.¹ Greece and Rome lie at the heart of European civilisation and have formed, moulded, dominated and defined almost every aspect of Europe: its character, its identity, its ways of thought, and its buildings. Greece is usually acknowledged as the beginning of European civilisation, and Rome turned that civilisation into an empire. Europe has lain under its shadow ever since. This is as true for European nations that lay outside the Roman frontiers as those within: emperors of Bulgaria, Germany, Austria, Russia, Britain and Turkey styled themselves ‘Caesar’,² Poland and Ireland style their religion ‘Roman’, and most European capitals are adorned with triumphal arches, commemorative columns, colonnaded façades and other trappings of Imperial Rome. When Europeans spread beyond their borders, the forms of Greece and Rome were taken with them: both New Delhi and Washington, for example, the one a former imperial capital the other a current one, are expressed in Neo-Classical terms. Neo-Classical buildings are still being built, and science-fiction films portray inter-galactic capitals in a style instantly identifiable with ancient Rome. Is it really possible for anyone from this background – anyone forming a part of broader European culture, in other words – to be entirely objective about Greece and Rome? Perhaps only, say, a Chinese, Ugandan or Arab author can write truly objectively about the Romans (one would at the very least be curious of their viewpoint). But there again, the Chinese erect Neo-Classical public buildings in their new futuristic boom cities and the Ugandans practice Roman law – and Arabs lay under the Roman Empire longer than most of western Europe.

This makes the present subject: Rome in a non-European environment, specifically, the area of the Near East that was a part of the Roman Empire, all the more pertinent. It also makes the subject even more culturally loaded: any discussion of Rome in the East must not only address Rome from the perspective of the two thousand years of cultural baggage that a European author of necessity brings with it, but also the even larger cultural baggage of the Near Eastern environment where Rome found itself a newcomer.³ For we are faced with the conundrum that Rome ruled in the Near East longer than in most parts of western Europe, yet today Roman influence is more evident in, say, Australia than it is in, say, Jordan. This means that the history, epigraphy and material remains of the region come under minute scrutiny for evidence of Roman versus indigenous character.

Any book about Rome in the East, therefore, is ultimately as much concerned with modern issues as ancient, even when not consciously intended: the whole history, nature and morality of western involvement in the Middle East is one of the more important issues at stake in world politics as I write. In the words of Fernand Braudel, ‘To the historian, understanding the past and understanding the present are the same thing. A passion for history can hardly be expected to stop short at a respectful distance from the present day.’⁴

We look to Rome, therefore, for our own European cultural roots. But Rome itself looked East (Figure P.1). The Roman East had an impact upon Europe in a way that no other part of the empire did. Christianity is the most obvious legacy, but there were many other ways, more subtle but equally important, in which the East influenced Rome from the beginning of its imperial expansion. The East was Rome's greatest source of wealth. In the East was the only other great power – Iran – that ever matched Rome, both culturally and militarily. After contact with eastern royalty Rome itself became a monarchy. From mythological origins in Troy to Syrian emperors of Rome to oriental religious, intellectual and architectural influences, the East transformed Rome. Through this contact, Near Eastern civilisation transformed Europe. The story of Rome is a story of a fascination for the East, a fascination that amounted to an obsession. This is the story of that fascination.

East or West?

Alexander's conquests opened up the Mediterranean world, and ultimately Europe, to the ancient civilisations of the East. From this interchange Europe received a revolutionary new idea that would change the course of its history: Christianity. Alexander's conquest is often viewed as the end of the ancient Near East, but it was also a new beginning.⁵ Near Eastern civilisation lived on under Macedonian and subsequently Roman domination – indeed it remained a vital force.

Pompey the Great annexed the Seleucid Empire in 64 BC, and so the eastern idea of empire conquered Rome:⁶ Rome itself soon became an empire with an emperor to rule it. But the sophisticated world of the Near East where these rather raw republican Roman soldiers and administrators first found themselves was immeasurably older than Rome – far older, even, than the world of Greek civilisation to which the Romans felt they were the heirs. The Near East had seen great empires come and go for thousands of years before the Romans: Persian, Babylonian, and Assyrian, not to mention Egyptian, Hittite, and Mitanni empires before them and the first outward expansions of the Sumerian, Akkadian, and Phoenician cultures 5,000 and more years ago.

More important than these empires were the civilisations they bequeathed, alongside which our brash Romans must have appeared awkward backwater rustics. Ancient Near Eastern civilisation was a very homogeneous one. There was always a thread of cultural continuity that lasted an extraordinarily long time from its origins in the still little-understood fifth millennium BC until its eventual transformation and dissemination by the Romans. Indeed, these events marking the end of this Near Eastern continuum are nearer to our own times than the shadowy events over 7,000 years ago that marked its beginning. It was onto this stage – ultimately to be transformed by it – that the Romans stepped.

By the year AD 116 a soldier from Spain who was one of Rome's greatest emperors – Trajan – stood on the shores of the Persian Gulf, the first time that a ruler from Europe had straddled the waters of both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. By the year 200, most of the antique lands of the Near East – from the Black Sea in the north to the Red Sea in the south, from the Mediterranean in the west to the foothills of Iran in the east – lay under Rome. At times, Roman arms even penetrated deep into the highlands of Iran and across the deserts of Arabia to Yemen; caravans carried Roman goods even further east to Central Asia, while merchant ships carried them across the seas to India and the Far East. The Atlantic had brought Rome to a full stop in the West, but the East seemed unlimited: the spread of Roman influence throughout the East appeared unstoppable.

Or was it rather the opposite: the spread of eastern influence to Rome? By the time of Rome's greatest extent, emperors whose origins lay in the East were beginning to rule Rome: the emperors Caracalla and Geta were half Punic, half Syrian, while Elagabalus, Severus Alexander, and Philip the Arab were wholly Syrian. Under the priest-emperor Elagabalus, the cult of Syrian Baal was proclaimed supreme in Rome, to the horror of the conservative Roman establishment. Of course, the cult of Baal did not catch on, but another 'oriental cult' would soon be triumphant.

Such Near Eastern influence at the heart of the Roman world helped change European history in two fundamental ways. Although not necessarily Christians themselves, such Syrian emperors and their entourages – and their popularisation of eastern cults – nonetheless made the spread of another eastern religion, Christianity, more acceptable. Moreover, from the time of the Syrian emperors Rome increasingly turned its back upon its ramshackle empire in Europe and looked more towards the East. In the end, Rome became more of a Near Eastern than a European power: Rome itself moved to the East, with the foundation of the New Rome at Byzantium ensuring the continuation of the Roman Empire for a further 1,300 years at the cost of leaving Europe to the barbarians (apart from Justinian's brief but ultimately unsuccessful attempt). It was finally extinguished in 1453 with the conquest of Constantinople by a people whose origins lay on the borders of China.

Constraints and considerations

Sources, perspectives and evidence

In describing Rome's fascination with the East, several considerations immediately present themselves. Books on Rome in the East are, for obvious reasons, usually written by Romanists; the history and remains are viewed from a perspective rooted in the Classical world – from Italy looking outwards, as it were. Such a perspective is perfectly valid, but a Near Eastern perspective is just as valid, indeed under-represented. Benjamin Isaac's admirable study is one of the few to remark on anti-oriental prejudice in modern scholarship when dealing with the Roman East, and Irfan Shahid's series of studies are among of the few to be written from the Near Eastern viewpoint. It is perhaps both significant and salutary that the one authority is an Israeli and the other an Arab.⁷ It might be forgivable for Gibbon, writing several hundred years ago, to contrast 'the valour of the west' with the 'decadence of the east' or to write that 'the troops of Europe asserted their usual ascendant over the effeminate natives of Asia'.⁸ But ever since the 1978 publication of Edward Said's famous (albeit controversial) work *Orientalism*, the field has lost both its innocence and its complacency. There are now many books that offer a corrective to Eurocentrism: the work of John M. Hobson or the several works by Jack Goody, for example, or my own recent quartet.⁹ The field generally is now more balanced than when this book was first published.

However, bias persists. One recent academic study sets out to subordinate much of history to a perceived Manichaean struggle between East and West. The Graeco-Persian Wars are described as 'titanic struggles between East and West' and all subsequent history is viewed both as a continuation and a confrontation. Roman history (whose empire is extravagantly described as stretching all the way to India!) is interpreted as supposedly continuing this epic struggle: Hannibal's invasion of Italy from North Africa, for example, is described how 'once again, Asia stood poised, as it had at Marathon, to enslave Europe' and the victory at Actium (Augustus' battle against Antony and Cleopatra) was 'one in which the future of a free and virtuous West had been preserved from extinction at the hands of a tyrannical

and corrupt East'.¹⁰ In Roman studies, one important specialist work on the Roman Near East constantly labours the lack of native 'character' – hence civilisation? – compared to Graeco-Roman cultural hegemony, elsewhere reasserting that 'this Empire [the Roman Near East] had been unambiguously Greek even before Constantine's conquest [*sic*] of the East in 324'.¹¹ In one admirable collection of source material for the Roman eastern frontier, a reservation is expressed about a major Persian source as 'solely expressing the Persian point of view', a reservation not expressed about the overwhelming amount of Greek and Latin sources (which, of course, express the Roman point of view).¹² Elsewhere in the same work, the western campaigns of Shapur I are dismissed as plundering raids and 'razzias', an archaic and derogatory term with overtones of raids by mere semi-civilised nomads. A Classicist would not dismiss, for example, Trajan's campaigns into Mesopotamia as 'razzias'.¹³ In another work, reservations are expressed about the one major non-Roman source that we do have, Josephus, as 'one-sided', reservations which are rarely expressed about our (usually one-sided) Roman sources when recounting Near Eastern events.¹⁴ Elsewhere, ritual prostitution is assumed to have taken place in the temple at Heliopolis merely because Eusebius (hardly the most unbiased source for paganism) says so, whereas Tacitus' account of ritual cannibalism on the part of the early Christians has long been rejected.¹⁵ The works cited, it must be emphasised, are not those of 'popular history' pandering to the prejudices of a mass audience, but are specialist works written by established scholars and published by academic and university presses. The viewpoints and opinions are not necessarily incorrect, but they do nonetheless underline the importance of offering a Near Eastern corrective.

The limitations of epigraphy

Much of the debate surrounding the position of Rome in the East and elsewhere stems from perceived 'identities', a subject that now comes in for increasing scrutiny.¹⁶ The over-importance attached to Greek inscriptions is perhaps the greatest source of misunderstanding of the nature of the Near East in the Roman period. Written sources – inscriptions and literature – are minutely combed through for Greek names and Greek terms, hence evidence of Hellenisation;¹⁷ Latin, Celtic, Hebrew and Viking names in Britain, for example (occasionally combined in just one person's name) hardly detract from the British 'character' of modern-day Britain, and Indonesians bearing Arabic names would be astonished at being labelled 'Arab'.

To some extent, western bias might be attributed to a perceived lack of native literary sources for the East. This is exaggerated. One of the greatest Latin language historians, Josephus, was a native of Palestine, while Ammianus Marcellinus, described as 'the last great Roman historian, whose writings stand comparison with those of Livy and Tacitus', was a native of Antioch. Herodian, Libanius and John Malalas were also from Antioch, Dio Cassius and Strabo from Anatolia, Procopius and Eusebius from Caesarea, to name but a few of the more important historians who hailed from the Near East.¹⁸ The eastern Roman world boasted as great a literary pedigree as European Rome did. Classical literary and historical traditions can generally be traced back to Homer and Herodotus – both, it must be noted, natives of Asia, not Europe – and to the Phoenician historical traditions of the end of the second millennium. The historian Sanchuniathon (or Sakkunniaton), for example, wrote an eight-book history of the Phoenicians which survived in summary form.¹⁹ Sanchuniathon was a part of a long tradition of Phoenician historiography that probably had its origins in Ugaritic literature much earlier and in Mesopotamian historiography earlier still. The 'Classical' Near Eastern historians, such as Josephus, Ammianus and Eusebius, were as much a part of these eastern traditions as western.

Epigraphy is the source of much of the history of the Roman East. It is equally the source of much modern bias. The evidence of Greek inscriptions in the East has in many ways created more problems than it has solved.²⁰ It has resulted in a tendency to load too much on the evidence of a single Greek inscription – and distort the result. For example, an enquiry that was recorded in Greek on an inscription at Dmayr near Damascus has been taken as evidence that everybody concerned actually spoke the language.²¹ It does not necessarily follow that anyone, apart from the person who carved the inscription, actually ‘spoke’ it (and the mason might merely have copied it without understanding, let alone speaking it). Other Greek inscriptions in the Near East are regarded as evidence for the Greek ‘character’ and culture of an entire city or region. But the converse, Palmyrene inscriptions in Britain, Numidia or Dacia, is merely taken as evidence that ‘such soldiers could (at least) have access to persons who could compose brief texts in Palmyrene, and then have them inscribed’.²² Apart from the implied prejudice (most Greeks by definition were literate, a mere Palmyrene needed a scribe?) the fact that Greek inscriptions in the Near East might equally have been written by a small minority of ‘persons who could compose brief texts . . . and then have them inscribed’ is not considered. A mere mention of Ana on the Euphrates in a Greek document from Dura prompts the statement that ‘it is probable that Greek was also used, at least as an official language, at Anath(a) itself’, while western Mesopotamia is confidently stated as ‘bilingual and bicultural’ on the evidence of a *single* inscription. On the evidence of a few scraps of parchment and graffiti, the Jewish community at Dura Europos is pronounced ‘fully bilingual’.²³

But the inscriptions are merely evidence that Greek was used as a *lingua franca* (and then only by an elite) throughout an area where other languages were spoken, such as Nabataean, Arabic, Palmyrene, Aramaic, Phoenician, Hebrew, and doubtless many others which have left no trace. To administer such an area, an acceptable *lingua franca* would have been essential; Aramaic, the former *lingua franca*, would have been unacceptable to the administrators themselves. In any case, an indigenous *lingua franca* might have been unacceptable to rival regions (the Hebrews, for example, would not have countenanced Nabataean). The situation is comparable to India, where English is both a *lingua franca* and a unifier of diverse linguistic rivalries, and the Near East ‘no more “Greek” or even “Macedonian” than India became “British” in the nineteenth century’.²⁴ In the Roman East, the use of Greek was just this. It in no way implies any Greek ‘character’ or even much Greek culture or colonisation in the region, let alone the extinction of indigenous languages.

Ultimately, what does the evidence of comparatively few Greek documents amount to? The answer has to be very little. After all, the actual quantity of documents – inscriptions, some graffiti, and a few parchments – that has come down to us through the accident of survival is tiny. It does not remotely compare, either in quantity or quality, to the amount of documentation that has survived, for example, from the earlier Mesopotamian and Syrian civilisations. Here, in the cuneiform tablets, we have virtually entire state archives and a mass of other documentation at our disposal, from census records and epic literature to business transactions, private correspondence and school exercises. Such literacy was equally a feature of those parts of Syria that later came under the Roman Empire as well, as the archives of Ugarit and Ebla demonstrate. Indeed, even much of the Hellenistic history of the Near East is preserved in cuneiform documents, offering an important contrast (and often corrective) to the Greek accounts.²⁵ When compared to other periods and other places in Near Eastern history, therefore, the Greek documents are not adequate to enable such bold statements of language, culture or identity to be made.

In this context, it is worth comparing the situation of the over-used Greek inscriptions in the Near East with that of the lesser known native inscriptions for the same period: Aramaic, Palmyrene, Safaitic and Thamudic – and one should also remember the wealth of Hebrew literature as well (often overlooked). Inscriptions in native languages during the period of

Roman rule in the Near East vastly outnumber those in Greek and Latin (mostly the Safaitic ones, but there are others too: some 8,000 in Nabataean, for example).²⁶ The Safaitic inscriptions alone, numbering a remarkable 18,000 or so, are found mainly in the deserts of southern Syria and northern Jordan, with occasional finds as far away as Dura Europos, the Lebanese coast, western Iraq and even Pompeii. They cover a broad date roughly between 500 BC and AD 500, with the bulk between the first and the fourth centuries AD, precisely the period of most of the Greek and Latin inscriptions. They are found almost entirely in the desert areas and only rarely in settled parts (although one must be wary of attaching too much to this: it may only reflect a greater preservation of material remains in a desert environment, rather than any real distribution in antiquity). Their content is almost entirely related to nomadism, so it is difficult to escape from the conclusion that they may well have been written by nomads. A large number are graffiti, mainly giving onomastic and tribal information that sheds considerable light on personal genealogies, tribal treaties and religious invocations. Many give information on pasturing, animal husbandry and migrations. For quality of information they can be compared with the information from the Greek inscriptions. In quantity, they greatly outnumber the extant Greek and Latin inscriptions from the Near East.²⁷

This fact can no longer be ignored, even by those who only wish to acknowledge the Greek and Latin inscriptions. Even so, the Arabs (in the Safaitic inscriptions) are described pejoratively as having ‘used writing almost exclusively for genealogies, invocations to the gods, or ritual expressions of hope and prosperity, and displayed very little capacity for innovation or expression of complex ideas’.²⁸ Almost exactly the same can be said for the Greek and Latin inscriptions. The fact remains that most inscriptions in the Near East in the Roman period are in local languages, not Greek, and this was a mark of both continuity and strong indigenous character. The population spoke a Semitic language before the Macedonian and subsequent Roman conquests and there is every reason to suppose they continued using it in everyday life. Libanius in the fourth century AD writes of monks coming into Antioch from the country who spoke only native languages, and even in the far more Romanised provinces of North Africa, Septimius Severus in the second century found his own sister’s lack of Latin an embarrassment; St Augustine as late as fifth century bemoans how his local parishioners spoke only ‘Canaanite’ (Phoenician). In Egypt Greek lingered on until the eighth century, and then disappeared. The very rapidity and thoroughness of the spread of Arabic, closely related to Aramaic, immediately following the Muslim conquest is evidence in itself that the Semitic languages never disappeared and that Greek was merely superficial. ‘Aramaic remained the language of the people from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. And so the shock of Muslim conquest had been sufficient to blot out, within a couple of generations, all linguistic trace of a millennium of Greek rule.’²⁹ There is virtually no linguistic survival of Greek and even less of Latin after the end of the Roman Empire in the East, unlike in Europe – there is no eastern equivalent of the Romance languages, and most Graeco-Roman place-names reverted almost overnight to their original Semitic versions (those in Judaea being a notable exception).³⁰

Like the use of English throughout the world today, the use of a particular foreign language carries a certain cachet, as a language of fashion, of internationalism.³¹ Similarly, Greek inscriptions referring to Greek civic institutions are cited as evidence for Hellenisation/Romanisation. Yet such institutions hardly differ from native institutions except in name: a *boule* is a *majlis* is a *qiriltai* (Greek, Arabic and Mongol words respectively). In other words, such evidence is more limited than it appears. The foundation myths of cities tracing their origins back to Greek mythology are nothing more than that: myths. In any case it is but a tiny proportion (1 per cent? 5 per cent? half of 1 per cent? – we have no way of knowing) of Hellenised administrators pandering to Roman vanity. Did the average Aramaean,

Phoenician, Jewish, Nabataean man or woman in the street really think that (or care whether) they were descended from Io? All this ‘evidence’ therefore is only dealing with an outer veneer of Romanised citizens. It does in any case ignore the vast amount of material evidence that points to both continuity from the pre-Classical period and to local indigenous character. In discussing Palmyra and Petra, for example, one important study emphasises that ‘Both superficially appeared to be cities rooted in Greece or in Rome, with details to support such an impression. On closer inspection both retained strong and decisive elements from their Arabian roots. Both resisted – that is, did not fully include – the full range of Hellenistic and Roman features. To the Roman or Greek traveller in antiquity, both must have seemed “oriental”. The degree of Romanization in the architecture and urban design was limited in both cases.’³² Or to take a modern parallel, a European traveller in the overwhelmingly neo-Classical surroundings of British Calcutta in the early twentieth century – or French Algiers or Portuguese Macau or Goa – would have felt no doubts about being in a wholly oriental environment.

Classical epigraphic and literary sources have been used, therefore, not only too uncritically, but too exclusively. This has distorted the true picture. One authority, for example, emphasises: ‘... how far our understanding is limited by what our sources happen to be interested in saying’ and that ‘Above all, the notion that there was a “Syrian” culture, embracing equally the zone of Syriac literature and Roman Syria, goes beyond our evidence’.³³ But the bulk of ‘our evidence’ is neither epigraphic nor literary sources. It is the material remains. Nowhere is this more so than in the Roman East, which has more material remains than any other part of the empire, with the possible exception of North Africa. Material remains have often been relegated to mere illustrative material by historians. But they reflect a more holistic picture of a society – and can considerably alter the historical picture provided by the more conventional sources. The suggestion of the Greek ‘character’ of the Near East during the Roman period is nothing more than modern wishful thinking.

Of course, it cannot be denied that centuries of Macedonian and (mainly) Roman rule left an indelible mark on the Near East: a Corinthian column is as unambiguous as a Greek inscription. That there was Romanisation is not in doubt, and Hellenism continued into Islam. But it is a mistake to become obsessed with gauging the degree of ‘Romanisation’ as if it was some measurable quantity: it was not a chemical formula. ‘Romanisation’ was in constant flux, it developed and continually changed; most of all, it was never a one-way flow.

The need, first, for an eastern viewpoint and second, to use the material remains as a source, are the two prime considerations in the present work. Only in this way can the main objective be achieved: to examine Rome’s involvement in the East and its ultimate transformation.

Terminology

The terms ‘Greek’ versus ‘Macedonian’, ‘Persian’ versus ‘Iranian’, and ‘Byzantine’ versus ‘Roman’ require clarification.

The over-use of the term ‘Greek’ to describe both the Seleucid Empire and much of the character of the Roman period in the East as well must be treated with the utmost caution.³⁴ The term ‘Graeco-Roman’ has rapidly gained almost universal acceptance to describe the Near East from Alexander to Muhammad. This is only partly valid. To begin with, such assumptions minimise the Macedonian element: ‘Macedonian’ soon becomes equated with ‘Greek’ in a haste to trace civilisation back to a semi-mythic Athens.³⁵ To continually characterise the resulting Seleucid successor state, as well as Roman rule in the East, as ‘Greek’ and ‘Graeco-Roman’ does an injustice both to Greek and Macedonian culture (not to mention

Roman and Near Eastern). The problem stems, presumably, from the use of the Greek language for inscriptions; the term is then taken out of context and continually used to describe the character of the period, the place and the culture as 'Greek'. Even 'Hellenistic' does not quite fit: it is a moot point whether the initial Macedonian conquests can be described as 'Hellenic', and the ensuing Seleucid state is characterised as much by Persian elements as Hellenic.³⁶ Hence, the terms 'Seleucid' or 'Macedonian' are preferred.

The terms 'Parthia' and 'Persia' are also problematic. Adopting the usage of the sources, most modern histories refer to Iran during the period we are dealing with as, successively, 'Parthia' and 'Persia'. From an eastern standpoint, both terms are unsatisfactory. 'Parthia', strictly speaking, corresponds only to the region east and south-east of the Caspian; to an Iranologist – or an Iranian – referring to parts of Mesopotamia as 'Parthia' (as many Classical sources do) is misleading. Similarly, 'Persia' is just that part of Iran which corresponds to the region adjacent to the Persian Gulf: modern Fars Province. The empires of both the Parthian and Persian (Sasanian) dynasties were multicultural, and neither dynasty used 'Parthian' or 'Persian' in a supra-national sense in the way that 'Rome' and 'Roman Empire' were used. To the Iranians, their empire was *Eranshahr*, 'Land of Iran', while to the Romans their empire was 'Rome'. For the Romans, the empire was defined by the capital; for the Iranians, the capital mattered little, the empire was defined by the land.³⁷ In addition, there was a strong element of continuity between the Parthian and Sasanian dynasties. Both used the royal title *Shahinshah*, 'King of Kings', both were Iranian nationalist in character, they shared linguistic and artistic traits, and both claimed continuity from the ancient Achaemenid kings.³⁸ Both 'Parthia' and 'Persia' are western appellations for the whole country and political structure; for the Iranians themselves the country has always been 'Iran' or 'Eranshahr'.³⁹ For these reasons, the term 'Iran' is generally preferred, although 'Parthian Empire' and 'Sasanian Empire' are also used where appropriate.

The terms 'Byzantium', 'Byzantine' and 'Byzantine Empire' also pose problems. The term 'Byzantine Empire' was coined comparatively late in European history to describe the eastern Roman Empire ruled from Constantinople as distinct and separate from the western Roman Empire ruled from Rome.⁴⁰ Scholars have debated about when the Roman Empire became 'Byzantine' ever since. In this way, the 'Byzantine Empire' was disinherited from the Roman legacy and mainstream European history, the origins of which are identified so much with Rome. The reasons were mainly religious, to assert the primacy of the Roman Church. 'Byzantine' rapidly became a pejorative term standing for everything that was degenerate, corrupt, 'oriental' – in other words, the perceived antithesis of 'Roman'. But it is important to remember that the Byzantine Empire never existed as an institution: it was always officially the 'Roman Empire' right down until the fifteenth century, ruled by Roman emperors in a continuous institutional line from Augustus to Constantine Dragases. Of course, it cannot be denied that long before the fifteenth century the character of the Roman Empire had changed fundamentally, but both the area and the period covered in this book is marked by continuity: the empire of the sixth century in the Near East was still much more like that of the second than, say, that of the Comnenids in the eleventh. Any division between 'Roman' and 'Byzantine' empires would introduce a note of artificiality. 'Roman Empire', therefore, is preferred.

There are a few more minor points of terminology that need to be noted. The term 'east' I have used imprecisely, but usually in the modern sense of east of the Bosphorus generally, with 'Roman East' more specific to the parts of the Near East ruled by Rome (with the above geographical caveats noted). Generally, native versions of Near Eastern personal names are preferred to the Greek or Latin. This is to underline their essentially Near Eastern character, which the Greek or Latin versions of their names have tended to obscure or to deny. Hence,

Palmyrene ‘Udaynath and Wahballath instead of Odaenathus and Vaballathus; Nabataean Maliku and ‘Obaydath, instead of Malichus and Obodas; Arab Mawiyya and al-Mundhir instead of Mavia and Alamoundaros, etc. However, when a Near Eastern name is far more familiar under its Latin version, I have used this. Hence, Zenobia instead of Zabba, Domna instead of Dumayma, Herod instead of Hairan, etc.

At the risk of inconsistency, I have also generally used the more familiar modern place names rather than the ancient versions. Hence, Jerash rather than Gerasa, Bosra rather than Bostra, Aleppo rather than Beroea, Jerusalem rather than Aelia Capitolina, etc. However, Laodicaea rather than Lattaqiya. I also generally use the Latin forms rather than the Greek: Posidonium, for example, instead of Posidonion, Seleucus instead of Seleukos. However, Dura Europos instead of Dura Europus. At the risk of offending purists, I have generally but not consistently used English plurals for Latin and Greek words: forums instead of fora, nymphaeums instead of nymphaea, tetrapylons instead of tetrapyla, etc. I hope purists are not offended, and that such inconsistencies do not detract from the overall theme.

Geographical limits

Strictly speaking, the ‘Roman East’ included the entire eastern Mediterranean, particularly Anatolia, one of the most important regions in the empire, as well as Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Egypt and Cyrenaica. For the purposes of this work, however, only the Near East is included – roughly the Arab countries of today as well as Israel – corresponding broadly to the Roman provinces of Syria, Palestine, Arabia and (briefly) Mesopotamia. Somewhat reluctantly, Anatolia is excluded (apart from occasional references). But limits must be imposed: such is the wealth of Roman remains in Anatolia that including it here would make this work impossibly long and would better form the subject of a separate study.⁴¹ The Near East forms a fairly self-contained unit, as much in modern terms as ancient (Herodian, for example, puts the dividing line between East and West not so much at the Bosphorus but at the Taurus Mountains).⁴² Egypt is also not included for much the same reasons.

Objectives

This is a work of synthesis, a general study of the history, architecture and archaeology of the Near Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, of Roman penetration beyond the frontiers, and of the ensuing eastern influences that brought about Rome’s own transformation. The period covered is from the conquest of the Near East by Pompey in 63 BC to its loss by Heraclius in AD 636. The historical process is first outlined to provide a basic framework upon which the remainder of the book can be hung. This is of necessity relatively brief with many events glossed over, but essential to highlight some of the main themes of the book; the reader can be guided to the more detailed histories indicated in the references.⁴³ Much of the East that Rome entered comprised a patchwork of client kingdoms that were only indirectly ruled by Rome, a system of proxy rule (and occasionally proxy war) that proved very effective. The main ones were Emesa, Judaea, Nabataea, Palmyra, Edessa and later the tribal confederations of the Tanukh and Ghassan. All these states, while very different from each other, were in separate ways to have an important effect upon Rome. While usually tiny and invariably subservient to Rome, many were ruled from impressive capitals whose monuments were some of the greatest in the empire: Jerusalem, Petra and Palmyra, for example. The influence of Rome was felt east of the frontiers too, through military campaigns, trade, or artistic influences. Hence, the book also incorporates material from as far away from Rome as Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, India and China.

Outside the client states, Roman rule was exercised most directly through the towns and cities, most notably the capital of Antioch. Many of these cities contain some of the most spectacular remains in the entire Roman world: Apamea, Rasafa, Caesarea, Tyre, Jerash. The pattern of settlement, rule and influence in the cities is contrasted with that observed in the countryside. Impressive though the remains of cities are, the countryside of the Roman East probably contains a greater concentration of ancient remains than anywhere else in the Mediterranean.

Finally, the resurgence of the East under Roman rule and the gradual influence of the East over Rome is examined. Much of this is apparent from a closer study of the material remains. This reveals fundamentally eastern influences at work that can be traced back deep into the cultural traditions of the ancient Near East, Iran and even India. In analysing eastern Roman architecture from within its eastern context, the nature of much of imperial Roman architecture as a whole is called into question. Ultimately, the Roman cultural presence in the East is demonstrated to be more superficial than is usually appreciated.

In understanding the strengths and domination of native culture under Roman rule, the gradual extension of Near Eastern culture into Europe becomes more explicable. The movement of peoples – and with it their ideas – from East to West is viewed as a part of this process and the rise of emperors of Rome from the East a logical outcome. This culminated in an oriental revolution in the Roman Empire: the adoption of an oriental religion and the move of the capital to the East. This ‘oriental revolution’ is one of the central facts of European history: it laid the foundations for the ensuing development of a ‘European’ culture and ‘European’ identity. The entire book can be viewed as the background to this central fact.

Genesis

A request for a second edition of a book is both a compliment and an opportunity: a compliment that it is still valid and a rare opportunity to review and refresh: a second bash. But also an opportunity to answer one’s critics – and ignore others. To correct some of the worst howlers – and doubtless introduce a few more. To feel satisfaction over arguments substantiated – and acute embarrassment over those proved wrong.

The first edition was written to provoke, hence its reception has proved gratifyingly varied. Soon after it came out it was viewed in some quarters in the USA as feminist (I was as astonished as I was flattered); it received a history prize in the USA, it was cited as *Choice* ‘academic book of the year’, and my discussion on the transition from Paganism to Christianity was cited in a Church of Scotland sermon. Even ten years later it formed the subject of an editorial in a major Australian newspaper.⁴⁴ Academic reviews gave equally varied but more detailed responses. Both Geoffrey Greatrex and Benjamin Isaac rightly criticised my loose terminology, the former for the misuse of the term ‘Syrian’, the latter for the misuse of ‘Semitic’. Michael Whitby found my overall approach to be ‘suspect’ (although reassuringly also found Millar’s parallel work to be just as suspect). Both Eberhard Sauer and David Kennedy found it ‘thought provoking’, but ‘unsettling’ (Kennedy) albeit ‘well worth reading’ (for Christmas; Sauer); for Jan Willem Drijvers the book evoked ‘irritation’; Kai Ruffing found it ‘tendentious’. A French reviewer faulted the work (rightly) for not using enough French sources, and then (to my delight!) described it as a ‘very bad’ book, warning that it might corrupt the young. (I was flattered at the – presumably unintended – comparison to Socrates).⁴⁵

As in all research based on the evidence of the material remains, subsequent field work can show one’s conclusions wrong, right or still debateable. Of the former, for example, my dating of the Gurgan Wall across north-eastern Iran to the Parthian period, based as it was on the earlier field-work of Kiyani, and my ensuing speculations have been proved conclusively

wrong by the remarkable new researches by Eberhard Sauer and his team.⁴⁶ On the other hand my suggestion that the very permanence of the stone structures of the limestone massif of northern Syria – the Dead Cities – gave a false impression of the settlement densities in the area was proved right by new field work on the Antioch Plain.⁴⁷

More controversial was my suggestion that Baalbek was the ‘long lost’ Temple of Emesene Baal. This prompted a satisfying debate. G. R. D. King, for example, concluded on the basis of recent archaeological investigations at the citadel mound at Homs that ‘while the current excavations do not prove him right, nor do they yet prove him wrong’. G. K. Young in another discussion concluded that ‘However attractive it might be to identify the missing temple/s with the suitably magnificent temple complex at Baalbek, the literary and epigraphic evidence simply does not allow us to do so.’ On the other hand, Alberto González García, the most recent entry into the fray, affirms that ‘the textual, archaeological and epigraphic evidence actually supports Ball’s thesis’.⁴⁸ Other opinions appear similarly equally divided between wrong, right and don’t know. I still stand by my argument, and hope that my re-examination of the evidence in the following pages strengthens it – or at least continues the debate.

Where possible, I have considered new archaeological investigations and historical studies and have adjusted some of my conclusions where appropriate. But on my own basic premise, that Rome in the East, its material remains and the Roman Empire as a whole can only be fully appreciated by incorporating the eastern perspective, I remain unreformed and wholeheartedly reaffirm. I hope the following pages consolidate this. The viewpoint is, perhaps, an extreme one – albeit a much-needed and long overdue one – and critics are doubtless right to point this out. But in being perhaps guilty of overstatement, it has only been made so by the necessity to offer a corrective. This is not merely a facile claim that ‘everything good comes from the east’, which some have levelled at this work and others written subsequently (meant both as a criticism and a misguided complement). On the contrary it is worth re-stating my conclusion, where I write that ‘Rome was the world’s most successful Empire, but in order to understand Rome and appreciate it fully, it is necessary to see it in all of its breadth and richness, not just as a “European” or “Western” civilisation. The influence of Rome on the East was profound, and it would be a mistake of the first order to underestimate that influence. But the process was invariably a two-way one. A failure to understand this process and this influence is a failure to appreciate Rome itself. Ultimately, it is a failure to appreciate the legacy of Roman civilisation. This legacy is as much eastern as western, as much oriental as occidental, both to Europe and the world as a whole.’

The initial work had a long gestation. The inspiration probably first came when working on Roman remains at Jerash in Jordan in the mid-1980s. After many years of the familiar shapes, forms and norms of Near Eastern archaeology and architecture, I suddenly found myself confronted by the far less familiar forms of that rather intimidating subject, Classical Architecture – and imperial Roman to boot. As well as the technical problems of producing a ‘new’ monument out of an apparently meaningless mass of rubble, there was the academic problem of working out what this Roman building looked like – and why. Here at least I was on familiar ground: the main building type I was studying, a tetrapylon or four-way arch, I knew from Iran, the *chahartaq* or Persian equivalent being one of the most fundamental ‘building blocks’ of Persian architecture. From there, I began to look at the other buildings at Jerash not as the Roman buildings they appeared to be, but as buildings in a Near Eastern context, simply to find some common ground with my own architectural knowledge. This applied in particular to that most ubiquitous feature of Roman cities in the East, the colonnaded street, when those long daunting lines of very Roman colonnades simply melted away to appear as something I had been familiar with for years: eastern bazaar streets. The rest followed.

At that time in the 1980s there was no single work on the Roman architecture in the East, some of the most impressive in the Roman world. The only general work that covered them was the relevant chapters in John Ward-Perkins' masterly *Roman Imperial Architecture* (still an invaluable study today). It was apparent, therefore, that a general overview of Rome in the East was long overdue. At first I intended it to be a straightforward work of synthesis aimed at an informed lay audience, intended to summarise and discuss the relationship between the historical evidence and the material remains of the eastern bounds of the Roman Empire and beyond. The material remains alone of this area deserved a higher place in the orbit of Roman architecture, being some of the most extensive and spectacular in the Roman world. Susan Raven's earlier excellent *Rome in Africa* (also published by Routledge) was the initial model (and also inspired my title). A secondary aim was archaeological: to let the material remains tell the story as much as possible, rather than the usual historical sources (such as A. H. M. Jones' classic *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*). Then, soon after beginning the work in 1993, a third imperative quickly became apparent: in that year Fergus Millar's scholarly *The Roman Near East* was published. In some ways this seemed to anticipate my own book (indeed, I found it invaluable in writing mine), but I felt the overly Eurocentric perspective to be flawed: both the history of Rome in the East and its remains are better understood from a *Near Eastern* perspective.⁴⁹ Soon after it appeared, David Kennedy wrote in a review article of Millar that 'questions will arise, not just on points of detail and interpretation, but on the larger issues of the nature of the evidence, the possible approaches, and the validity of the whole. Challenge is inevitable and necessary.'⁵⁰ Kennedy's review appeared after my own 'questions' and 'challenge' of Millar's formidable work – the first edition of this book – was already in press. Ultimately, admiration of the undoubted scholarship of this (and other) works is tempered by the underlying bias it displays.

As work progressed, therefore, it soon became apparent that there were things that needed to be said about the presence, role and character of Rome in the East. In particular, much of the material remains had no counterpart in the Roman West (where there are no colonnaded streets, for example) and so could only be satisfactorily explained from a Near Eastern archaeological viewpoint, rather than the more usual Classical and western. This in turn seemed to demand an eastern perspective for Rome in the East as a whole, and with it a resulting reappraisal and new emphasis. In reassessing the interaction of Rome and the East and its legacy, it further became apparent that much new comment could usefully be made on the legacy of Roman civilisation as a whole and the beginnings of Europe. In some ways this represents a challenge to previous views, in other ways it presented new evidence for old theories (and new theories of old evidence), but it is only another perspective.

The work was then written, largely in snatched 'moments' when work priorities elsewhere and unrelated to this were demanding greater attention in the last years of the last century. Parts of it were inflicted upon long-suffering extramural classes in the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews, and their feedback was invaluable. An even more long-suffering growing family at the time was neglected as I disappeared for longer periods to work on the book (when they would be told that their father was 'roaming the east' – literal as well as literary as often as not).

Benjamin Isaac's earlier award winning *The Limits of Empire* (1990) was probably the first general work to focus solely on Rome in the Near East, followed soon by Fergus Millar's *The Roman Near East* (1993). Since my own book appeared there has been, if not quite a flood, many more works on the subject. Chief of these are probably Kevin Butcher's *Roman Syria and the Near East* (2003), Maurice Sartre's *The Middle East under Rome* (2005) and Michael Sommer, *Der römische Orient* (2006), but there are many others on more specific aspects.⁵¹ There has been a rash of books simply on Zenobia and a similar number on Julia Domna

providing long overdue insights into the feminine.⁵² At the time of going to press, a glance at a new archaeology book catalogue revealed some eight new titles all directly relevant to the issues covered in this book.⁵³ And there is the far larger number of articles in journals, not to mention more specialist studies, and the now increasing online resources, together representing a formidable body of scholarship. Clearly, while not exactly a genre, the subject is certainly a growth industry. Equally clearly, if one were to take on board all such works, this book would never be finished: as with any work of scholarship nowadays, it becomes outdated the moment it appears.

Much of my work on Rome in the East came to a head between 2008 and 2011 when I was invited to participate in the production of a major new exhibition at the Royal Academy in London on Syria. The exhibition was intended to be a ‘blockbuster’, on a similar major scale to previous Royal Academy exhibitions (such as their *Turks* in 2000) to display art treasures, drawn mainly from Syria itself but also from museums all over Europe and North America, to the British public – probably the greatest display of Syrian art treasures ever assembled under one roof and one of the biggest art treasure exhibition to be seen in London for many years. The periods covered were to be from the Bronze Age to the late Islamic; my own curatorial role was for the ‘Graeco-Roman’ period (with considerable discussion what to call that period from a Syrian perspective). The exhibition was due to open in the autumn of 2013 but was aborted in the summer of 2011 due to the civil war in Syria. It is a tribute to the Syrian antiquities authorities that on an official Academy visit in 2011 they agreed, within reason, to nearly all our requests – their greatest treasures coming to London. As a consequence of the Syrian War, the public may now never be able to view these artefacts. The quite appalling ongoing human and cultural destruction in Syria at the time of writing suggests that sadly such an exhibition might now never be possible.⁵⁴ But preparing for the exhibition, and revisiting the huge wealth of art treasures from the Roman period in Syria, reminded me just how much the ancient Mediterranean world as a whole owes to Syria and the Near East. The aborted exhibition was intended to emphasise this, as I hope the following pages do.

In preparing this new edition, I have tried to take into account the comments, corrections and recommendations from readers, colleagues and reviewers, as well as the publisher’s own anonymous reviewers. Of Routledge’s anonymous reviewers, one commented that a new edition should incorporate material from Greece, Anatolia and Egypt as well as the Near East, all of which was ‘the East’ to the Romans. In an ideal world this would be highly desirable, but also well-nigh impossible at least in a single volume, single author work. I have stuck, therefore, to my own area of expertise. Others require the new edition as an essential source book to be used by students. That it has been used by nearly all of Routledge’s academic reviewers as required reading in universities comes as both a surprise and a compliment. The book was not intended as a source in the first place, being written essentially as an extended essay rather than as a guide or source, and the new edition remains precisely that.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, I have incorporated as much new published material as possible. Even so, the huge amount of new material is utterly daunting as each new publication consulted points to a score more that ought to be taken into account.⁵⁶ The limitations of time and resources has meant that some essential new publications have not been consulted or only superficially so; I hope not too many. I can only apologise in advance therefore to those I might appear to have inadvertently ignored. No bibliography can ever be fully comprehensive or up-to-date, such is the sheer quantity and rate of new material that pours out on any subject now. I am therefore forced to be selective, concentrating on major studies, which students can then follow up in their bibliographies if necessary. Even so, the bibliography in this edition is nearly double that of the first.

To those acknowledged in the first edition, it is a pleasure to add the names of Wendy Ball, John Boardman, Ross Burns, Georgina Herrmann, Farès Moussa, Michael Roaf and

Eberhard Sauer for advice, discussions, comments and answers to specific questions. I would also like to thank Routledge's anonymous reviewers for advice and recommendations for the new edition. And to all, I can only apologise for advice ignored and mistakes that are solely my own. And finally, thanks to Amy Davis-Poynter, Elizabeth Thomasson, Lola Harre, and their colleagues at Routledge for their patience in dealing with my many queries and delays, and for seeing the work through press, as well as to Maria Whelan and Adam Bell for meticulous copy-editing and proof-reading.

Notes

- 1 Although not 'in charge of several sites . . . from Afghanistan to Jordan' as Sartre (2002) flatteringly states; I wish I had been.
- 2 Kaiser, Tsar and 'Qaysar-i Hind', to give Queen Victoria's correct Indian title. 'Kaysar' was also one of the titles of the Ottoman Sultans – indeed, when Ivan IV proclaimed himself Tsar (the first Russian to do so, adopting it from the Bulgarians) the Sultan refused to recognise it, claiming a monopoly on the title having inherited it from the Romans.
- 3 Or at least 'European' in a cultural sense: I am originally from Australia, albeit living by far the greater part of my life outside it.
- 4 Braudel 1981–4, 2: 231.
- 5 E.g. Roaf 1990: 214.
- 6 Although the Seleucids were European in origin, their idea of empire was almost wholly inherited from the Achaemenids.
- 7 Isaac 1992: 20–1; Shahid 1984a, 1984b, 1989. For an eastern perspective on the Seleucids, see for example, Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993.
- 8 Gibbon 1 (1900: 116, 118), the latter in the context of Septimius' campaign against Niger – although Gibbon can still be read with profit – and certainly enjoyment! – today.
- 9 Hobson 2004; Goody 1996, 2006, 2010; Ball 2009, 2010, 2012, 2015.
- 10 Pagden 2008: 3, 56, 62, 66, 76.
- 11 Millar 1993; 2013: 19.
- 12 Dodgeon and Lieu 1991: 5, referring to the Shapur inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam.
- 13 Dodgeon and Lieu 1991: 2. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'razzia' (deriving from Arabic) as 'A raid, a foray; *spec. (Hist.)* a hostile Moorish incursion for purposes of conquest, plunder, capture of slaves, etc.' Butcher (2003: 53) is perhaps consciously answering my challenge when I criticised the use of this in the first edition when he writes of 'the razzias of Trajan, Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus [against the Parthians]'.
- 14 Smallwood in Williamson and Smallwood 1981: 144.
- 15 Millar 1993: 218.
- 16 See, for example, Mattingly 2011; Baird 2014: Chapter 5; the entire 1998 issue of *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11; Smith 2013: 7–13; Wood (ed.) 2013.
- 17 In this context, note the cautionary evidence in Birley's (1988a) seminal article on Latin names at Lepcis Magna. See also Kennedy's (1999: 103) cautionary note on the over-interpretation of Greek personal names.
- 18 W Hamilton and A. Wallace-Hadrill in the Penguin Classics edition of his work.
- 19 Aubet 1993: 23–5.
- 20 See Macdonald's (1998) cautionary remarks on the limitations of epigraphy and of 'epigraphists who indulge in fantastic philological gymnastics' (177), and of consequent perceptions of ethnicity in the Roman East.
- 21 Millar 1993: 318.
- 22 Millar 1993: 329.
- 23 Millar 1993: 449, 462, 471.
- 24 Boardman 2015: 63 referring to the Seleucid east. Isaac (2009: 45) also draws this parallel.
- 25 Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993. A careful re-reading by Potts (2005) of the cuneiform sources for Cyrus, for example, has resulted in a completely different (if controversial) interpretation from that based on the Greek sources alone.
- 26 Graf in Politis (ed.) 2007: 180.

- 27 A point emphasised by Graf 2001: 469. See also Trimmingham 1979: 92; Al Khraysheh 1992; MacDonald 1992; 1993. For Pompeii see Gysens in Cimino 1994: 79.
- 28 Sartre 2005: 294.
- 29 Ostler 2005: 377; see also 534–5 and Chapter 3 *passim*.
- 30 See in general Cotton *et al.* 2009.
- 31 I was struck, for example, on my first visit to St Petersburg at the sight of a bill-board advertising a German insurance company but entirely in English – aimed at a Russian audience.
- 32 Richardson 2002: 75. See also Boardman’s (2015: 162–4) cautionary remarks on the nature of Roman remains in the east.
- 33 Millar 1993: 201, 493.
- 34 E.g. Millar 1993 throughout.
- 35 Note the cautionary remarks on this subject in Boardman 2015: 52–5.
- 36 See Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993. It is out of place here to discuss whether Alexander was a Hellenophile or Hellenophobe, but while the first interpretation is the most popular, the latter is equally likely.
- 37 Wiesehöfer 1996: 183–91.
- 38 Even Ardeshir I’s much vaunted Sasanian claim that Rome should restore its western Achaemenid satrapies had its Parthian precedent under Artabanus III – see Herodian 6. 2; Dio 80. 3; Tacitus *Annals* 6. 31. There is much controversy concerning how much later Iranian dynasties identified with the Achaemenids. See Frye 1967: 249–50; Frye 1984: 278; Whitby 1994: 234–5; Wiesehöfer 1996: 130–6, 165–71; Roaf in Curtis *et al.* 1998.
- 39 Frye 1963: 23.
- 40 Although Procopius refers to ‘Byzantium’ and ‘Byzantines’, but never to the ‘Byzantine Empire’.
- 41 E.g. Mitchell’s (1993) magnificent two-volume study.
- 42 Herodian 3. 1. 4.
- 43 In particular the large number of works now covering the wars between Rome and Iran in the latter part of this history: e.g.: Dogeon and Lieu 1991; Blockley 1992; Greatrex and Lieu 2002; Howard-Johnston 2006; Dignas and Winter 2007.
- 44 Slattery 2010.
- 45 Greatrex 2001; Isaac 2002; Whitby 2001; Sauer 2005; Kennedy 2007: 19; Drijvers 2002; Ruffing 2004; Sartre 2002.
- 46 Sauer *et al.* 2013.
- 47 Casana 2004.
- 48 King 2002: 44–5; Young 2003; García 2013.
- 49 An approach ‘with a host of confused and half-formed preconceptions about the “Orient”’ as Patrich (in Politis (ed.) 2007: 79) comments. See also Kennedy 1998: 39 and 1999. Millar’s overly Eurocentric bias is reasserted in his latest (2010) work, e.g. pp. 13, 14.
- 50 Kennedy 1999: 78. See also Raja’s (2013: 31) remarks on the opposite approaches of myself and Millar.
- 51 E.g.: Young 2001; Ross 2001; Zahran 2001; Richardson 2002; Greatrex and Lieu 2002; Dignas and Winter 2007; Levick 2007; Edwell 2008; Fisher 2011; Segal 2013, to name just some of a far longer list. To some extent viewpoints are implicit in book titles: ‘The Middle East *under* Rome’ implies subservience, just as ‘*Roman* Syria and the Near East’ and ‘The *Roman* Near East’ or ‘*Roman* Orient’, the titles of Sartre 2005, Butcher 2003, Millar 1993 and Sommer 2006 respectively (italics added), imply possession – Roman character implied before opening the books, as opposed to ‘Rome *in* the East’, implying an outsider. This can be taken too far of course, but such impressions count.
- 52 Zahran 2003; Hemelrijk 2004; Levick 2007; Southern 2008; Winsbury 2010; Langford 2013.
- 53 Blomer *et al.* 2015; De Romanis and Maiuro 2015; Dijkstra and Fisher 2014; Galor and Bloedhorn 2015; Kemezis 2014; Liebeschuetz 2015; Lusnia 2014; MacDonald 2015.
- 54 This was written against the background of the destruction at Palmyra and the beheading of its site director.
- 55 In the same way that my earlier 1982 *Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan* (currently in preparation for a new edition) was.
- 56 See note 50, above.

Abbreviations

AAAS	Les Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes
ADAJ	Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan
AJA	American Journal of Archaeology
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischer Welt
ARAM	Journal of the Aram Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies
BEO	Bulletin d'études orientales
BSOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
CHI	Cambridge History of Iran
CRAI	Comptes-rendu de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres
Dam. Mit.	Damaszener Mitteilungen
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
IFAPO	Institut français du Proche-Orient
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JRA	Journal of Roman Archaeology
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
Meditarch	Mediterranean Archaeology
MEFRA	Les Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Antiquité
PEQ	Palestine Exploration Quarterly
SAS	Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies
SHAJ	Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan
ZDPV	Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins
ZPE	Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphic

1 Historical background

To the Euphrates¹

The ghost of Alexander seems always to haunt those who venture east, the Romans no less than the Crusaders no less than Napoleon.² The Romans too considered themselves heirs to Hellenism. But they also suffered an inferiority complex. It was towards the east that conquerors cut their teeth: Alexander had, as it were, defined the very concept of conquest and empire. After the Punic Wars an empire almost by definition had to be eastern. From Pompey to Heraclius the road to glory lay eastwards, some like Pompey or Trajan achieving it, others like Crassus or Julian coming to grief. The East was also the source of wealth above all others, and the endless round of civil wars in the Roman Republic was costing money that the eastern coffers could recoup. Above all, the East was the only area which held another great power that could match Rome: Iran.

Rome and Iran

The history of Rome in the East was dominated by Iran more than any other single factor, first the Parthian then the Sasanian Empires. Iran was the greatest power to oppose Rome, so there is understandable Roman preoccupation with eastern policies. But the reverse was probably not as true for Iran, which – particularly under the Sasanians – faced great powers to the east as well, where it actually conquered a great empire: the Kushan. Sasanian–Kushan relations, therefore, where we have scarcely any documentary sources, were probably just as important a preoccupation for them as Sasanian–Roman relations are to us, where we have copious sources. The East was probably of more concern to Iran than Rome ever was: the Parthians established contacts with China, for example, before they did with Rome. The information that we have about the history of pre-Islamic Iran shows an overwhelming concern for the East – ‘Turan’ of the epics – rather than for the West.³ Much of the ancient Iranian perception of the Romans has survived in the imagery of medieval poetry. Here, ‘Rome’ – *Rum* in Persian – is merely a stock image for the exotic, for distance, for the barbaric, occasionally for mystery. In other words, it is similar to the medieval and later European imagery for the ‘Orient’.⁴ The foundation of Constantinople was seen as a direct consequence of Roman defeats by the Iranians. When Roman emperors are mentioned, it is usually in relation either to Jewish history (for example, Vespasian and Hadrian, who destroyed Jerusalem) or to Islamic history (for example, Heraclius, who lost the East to Islam). In both al-Tabari and al-Biruni the whole of the history of the Roman Empire from Tiberius to Heraclius is summarised with a mere king-list, as little more than a footnote to the story of Christ and a preface to the coming of Muhammad. One is left with the impression that, for Iran, Rome was simply a minor – even tributary – power.⁵

2 *Historical background*

The Romans may have had no ‘grand strategy’.⁶ But there were ‘grand preoccupations’ that were at times obsessive, and strategic considerations would follow from these. The East was the greatest of these preoccupations. For Iran was the only power in the ancient world that matched the Romans, defeating Rome on a number of occasions. Several authorities emphasise that in the frequent Rome–Iran wars, it was almost invariably Rome that was the aggressor. Indeed, the earliest Parthian overtures to Rome were peaceful.⁷ But apart from being a preoccupation that often amounted to aggression, the Romans rarely showed curiosity towards their great neighbour as the Greeks did: there is no Roman equivalent of Herodotus or Xenophon. No attempts were made at gaining worthwhile intelligence.⁸ Mark Antony’s disastrous campaign into Iran is a prime example, while Julius Caesar’s ‘grand strategy’ for an invasion of Iran displayed such colossal ignorance that, had it been implemented, it would have been as disastrous as Antony’s.

With the notable exception of Strabo and one or two other natives of the East, the Romans on the whole display ignorance of Iran. It is, for example, often indiscriminately called Persia, Parthia or even the anachronistic Media regardless of which dynasty is in power, and there is frequent confusion between the Aral, Caspian and Black Seas. Ammianus Marcellinus, who is otherwise one of the main Roman authorities on the East, seems to make no differentiation between Mede, Persian or Parthian. The *Chronicon Paschale* in the seventh century refers to Shapur as ‘Pharaoh’ and even as late as the eleventh century, Michael Psellus was still referring to Iran under the Seljuks as ‘Parthia’, while the Abbasids of the tenth century were called the ‘Assyrians’ and the Caliph at-Ta’i’ is referred to as ‘Chosroes’ the ‘Babylonian’.⁹ Nor did Rome ever develop any sound, consistent policy towards Iran other than the vague notion that one must clobber it every now and then when opportunity came one’s way. Even those attacks when they came – distinguished as often by disastrous defeats as by inconclusive victories – were markedly lacking any soundly thought-out strategy or war aims, let alone a policy to follow in the event of a total victory (i.e. what would one do on suddenly annexing territory that stretched to the Jaxartes and the Indus?)¹⁰

Hannibal and Antiochus the Great

The first act in Rome’s eastern involvement was also the last in its wars against Carthage. For it was Hannibal who, in encouraging the Seleucid Empire to defeat his sworn enemy, unwittingly brought Rome to the East for the first time – with his own and the Seleucid’s ultimate downfall as the outcome. In itself, it may be of minimal historical relevance, but it does at least serve to illustrate how entwined Rome and the East were from the very beginning of Rome’s imperial expansion.¹¹

Asia’s expansion into Europe began much earlier than Europe’s into Asia. During the course of this Asian expansion we see Phoenician merchant venturers charting the coast of Britain and Phoenician scribes bequeathing to Europe what is arguably one of the greatest single assets of its civilisation: the alphabet. Hannibal’s campaigns in Spain and Italy were the last episode in this long history. Rome’s Punic Wars first thrust Rome onto the broader Mediterranean stage and the eventual road to eastern expansion. With his armies defeated and his capital occupied, Hannibal was forced to flee eastwards. He sought sanctuary at the court of the only other major power in the Mediterranean that could resist Rome: the Seleucid kingdom of Antiochus III.¹²

Antiochus III, known as the Great, was a descendant of Seleucus Nicator, the Macedonian warlord who founded the Seleucid Empire following the death of Alexander. In many ways,

Antiochus' achievements were not far short of those of Alexander himself. The army that he built up, developed from both Macedonian and Persian models, was the first in the Hellenistic world to make cavalry a significant element. He campaigned as far as India in 209 BC, and in 204 he turned his war machine against the Seleucid kingdom's old rivals and fellow Macedonians, the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt, inflicting a crushing defeat on them at the Battle of Paneas at the headwaters of the Jordan. Antiochus was proclaimed conqueror of the East, the new Alexander and defender of Hellenism. Hannibal could find no truer champion against his own enemy. He warned Antiochus of the new threat from the West and urged him to turn his might against Italy. The combination of two of the ancient world's great generals together – the victor of Cannae and the conqueror of India¹³ – was a heady one that seemed to spell doom for the new power of Rome.

It was not to be. Despite Antiochus' efforts to restore Seleucid fortunes, the Seleucid kingdom had long begun its decline. Antiochus, despite Hannibal's urgings, was cautious: he had no wish to set his sights beyond Greece. Rome had already been making inroads into Greece, defeating Antiochus' forces at the historic battlefield of Thermopylae in 191 BC, and occupying most of Greece with little effort. Then in 190 Roman soldiers for the first time set foot in Asia. An army commanded by Rome's two greatest generals, the Scipio brothers, crossed the Dardanelles. With foes of the calibre of Antiochus and Hannibal, Rome put its greatest into the field. The two armies met at the Battle of Magnesia in Asia Minor in 189 BC, the Seleucid army of 75,000 opposed by a Roman army numbering only some 30,000. It was an historic battle between new and old legends: Roman legion met Macedonian phalanx. Both sides also fielded elephants: Rome's African versus the Macedonians' Asiatic. Despite the odds and some brilliant cavalry tactics by Antiochus, the Seleucid army was routed.¹⁴ Rome had arrived in Asia.

*Pompey the Great*¹⁵

It was Pontus and Armenia that brought Pompey eastwards. Adopting the old Iranian royal title of 'King of Kings' – as well as much of its mantle – King Tigranes of Armenia had expanded his kingdom over much of Anatolia and Syria at the expense of the declining Seleucids after 95 BC.¹⁶ As well as a challenge to Rome's new presence in the region following the Battle of Magnesia, Armenia – and the neighbouring kingdom of Pontus under Tigranes' father-in-law Mithradates – offered refuge for disaffected elements. Pontus and Armenia encouraged piracy on a large scale, and 'pirate' raids from Armenian and Pontic bases in Anatolia extended as far as Ostia (although those involved are only referred to as pirates by the Roman authors: when the Romans did it, it was, of course, legitimate maritime business and naval expeditions).

At first, Rome sent Lucullus, 'the first Roman to cross the Taurus with an army for warfare', to face this new challenge.¹⁷ He defeated Mithradates in 72 BC in a battle on the Granicus (where much was made of its being the site of an earlier defeat of Asiatics by Europeans, being Alexander's first victory over the Persians) when the Romans are said to have slaughtered some 300,000 soldiers and camp followers. He then defeated Tigranes in 69 BC in battle near the Armenian capital of Tigranocerta amidst further slaughter (and perhaps the world's first recorded use of chemical warfare).¹⁸ Lucullus defeated the Armenians again in 68 BC in a bid to capture the other Armenian capital of Artaxata. Indeed, it seems possible that this underrated general might have completely overrun Anatolia and forestalled Pompey's later conquest of Syria – he even briefly contemplated Iran – if he had not been recalled to Rome the following year.

4 *Historical background*

Lucullus' recall was possibly at the jealous instigation of Pompey (or at least the Roman moneylenders whose rapacious activities he had curtailed in Anatolia), who succeeded Lucullus as commander of the East. Pompey was invested with such power – 'Never did any man before Pompey set forth with so great authority conferred upon him by the Romans'¹⁹ – that his position was tantamount to that of an absolute monarch: the demands of the East had already embedded the concept of emperor in the Roman consciousness. With a massive force at his disposal, his first task was to clear the seas of pirates. This he achieved with astonishing success and little fighting (perhaps due partly to a deal struck with the pirates). Lucullus accused Pompey of simply being a bird of prey coming upon the carcass when others had slain the dead. Indeed, when the two rivals met in Galatia, Lucullus stooped to open personal abuse.²⁰ Pompey swept on to defeat Mithradates, first in a night-time battle and then, more decisively, in 66 BC. Tigranes surrendered to Pompey, but the humiliation forced him to commit suicide three years later – a sad end for a king who, more than any other, established a sense of Armenian pride which still survives to this day.²¹

Syria was the next to fall. It was not difficult for Pompey. Tigranes' previous conquest had rendered the Seleucid state largely meaningless. The Maccabean revolt and the subsequent Hasmonaean kings had robbed it of Palestine; the rise of the Nabataean kingdom in the south had robbed it of its trade; claims for the throne by rival members of the Seleucid family had robbed it of any leadership; local Arab dynasties asserted independence in Edessa, Chalcis and Emesa. In the end, Pompey did not even extend token recognition to the last Seleucid claimant, Antiochus XIII, as a client king. The rump Seleucid Empire became the Roman province of Syria overnight. 'In this way the Romans, without fighting, came into possession of Cilicia, inland Syria and Coele-Syria, Phoenicia, Palestine, and all the other countries bearing the Syrian name from the Euphrates to Egypt and the sea.'²² What was arguably the greatest single territorial acquisition in Rome's history fell without even a blow. Nor did it attract much notice: neither Dio nor Plutarch devote more than a single line to it, mentioning the annexation simply as a footnote to Pompey's Anatolian campaigns.²³ Judaea was added the following year. Thus, Pompey's arrival in Antioch in the summer of 64 BC marked the end of one empire and the beginning of another. The end of an empire that had once stretched all the way to India founded by the ancient world's greatest hero, Alexander of Macedon. The remainder of Alexander's successor states soon also crumbled: Ptolemaic Egypt fell to Octavian in 30 BC and the last Greek kingdom in India fell to the Indo-Parthians in about 28 BC. But of all the successor states, the Seleucid kingdom was the one that incorporated the bulk of Alexander's conquests. With its end, the Romans became the heirs of Alexander.

Pompey has always been overshadowed by his rival and eventual destroyer, Caesar. Caesar, it is true, added an important province to Rome, but Pompey added a sophisticated empire. Caesar's rustic tribes from the north could not be compared to the roll-call of nations that were inscribed on Pompey's triumph which, even allowing for exaggeration, was the greatest that Rome had yet seen: 'Pontus, Armenia, Cappadocia, Paphlagonia, Media, Colchis, the Iberians, the Albanians, Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia, together with Phoenicia and Palestine, Judaea, Arabia, and all the power of the pirates subdued by sea and land.'²⁴ In the days when the writing was on the wall for Republicanism in Rome, it was Pompey who pointed the way forward: Empire. Rome conquered an eastern empire; as a result the eastern concept of empire conquered Rome. Pompey, likened to no less a hero than Alexander, was hailed 'Imperator' by his army and proclaimed 'King of Kings', the ancient Persian title for an emperor. Ultimately, it was Pompey, not Caesar, who was awarded the epithet 'the Great'.²⁵

*Crassus, Carrhae and the Parthians*²⁶

In the heady first days after acquiring an eastern empire, blinded by the spectacular wealth that it brought in, Rome ignored the great power that loomed beyond: Iran. For it was no longer the humiliated Iran that Alexander left in the ashes of Persepolis, but a new power dominated by the last of the major Indo-Iranian tribal confederations to migrate westwards from Central Asia. These were the Parthians, ruled by the Arsacid dynasty.

Like the Medes and Persians before them, the Parthians were initially little more than a tribal confederation, until in about 238 BC they seized control of the trans-Caspian territories of the Seleucid Empire. Building up a power-base in what is now Turkmenistan, they were at first a Central Asian power with their capital, Nysa, not far from modern Ashkhabad. By the middle of the second century the Parthians were ready to invade Seleucid Iran. This culminated in Mithradates I being crowned King of Kings of a new Iranian empire in the old Iranian capital of Babylon in 141 BC. An 'Iranian Revival' was dawning.²⁷

The Parthian Empire is a shadowy one. We know remarkably little about it – surprising for an empire that lasted for nearly 500 years, the longest dynasty in Iranian history and the only serious challenger to the Romans. The Parthian period has been long neglected: scholarship has usually favoured the Sasanians – even modern Iranians tend to look upon the Parthians as merely an interregnum between the Achaemenids and Sasanians. There is, of course, a serious lack of documents, not only Iranian but also Roman. The little Roman literary evidence that we do have is heavily biased, without even the exuberant curiosity of Herodotus for the Iranians (and it is often forgotten that Herodotus grew up as a citizen of the Achaemenid Empire) or the admiration of Xenophon. But the Romans by no means had a monopoly on anti-Parthian bias: the Sasanians themselves suppressed Parthian history in their efforts to identify with a pre-Parthian past. The Parthians, therefore, are lost behind centuries of bias from both sides. To some extent modern scholarship also tends to look on the Parthian Empire only in terms of its relations with Rome. But for the Parthians themselves, the Romans were probably their least concern. Parthia was in origin a Central Asian power, and Central Asia remained in many ways both its heartland and its prime concern, even after the capital was transferred to Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia. For most of Iranian history, the greatest threats came from the east, not the west.

It may have been a shadowy empire, but it was a very vigorous one. While it has left us few historical sources, it has left a wealth of art that is almost as revealing. Parthian sculptures convey an aggressive image: proud-looking warriors, barely removed from their Central Asian steppe roots, sporting beards and long hair, clad in trousers and armed with broadswords.²⁸ Such an art conjures up images of warlords and campfires rather than the poetry and rose-gardens more often associated with Iranian culture. Such vigour re-established the self-confidence of Iranian civilisation after its humiliating setback at the hands of the Macedonians.

The achievements of the Parthian state were impressive. They soon re-established most of the old Persian Empire and extended their rule into India. Members of the Parthian royal house established separate dynasties elsewhere in the East: in Seistan, from which the Rustam cycle of the Persian epic poem the *Shahnameh* emerged; in India, where they ousted the Scythian successors to the Greek kingdom in Gandhara; and notably in Armenia (hence the cause of confrontation with Rome) where they outlasted the parent dynasty in Iran itself. The Parthians successfully fended off several Seleucid attempts to regain their lost territories, most notably that by Antiochus III in the second century BC, whose gains the Parthians recovered after his death. It was Mithradates II (the Great) more than any other

6 *Historical background*

Parthian king who established the Empire on a firm footing. He was the first king of Iran since the Achaemenids to resurrect the ancient Persian title of King of Kings, or *Shahinshah*, he re-established Iranian rule in Babylonia and Seistan following revolts after the death of Mithradates I and established contacts with China.

Mithradates also sent his special envoy, Orobazes, to establish relations with the Roman Empire and offer an alliance. Orobazes met Sulla in Cilicia in 92 BC. It was an historic meeting, the very first between Roman and Iranian. The Chinese emperor had had the wisdom to send Iranian envoys back to Mithradates with gifts and messages of friendship. Sulla treated Orobazes with contempt offering merely vassal status to Rome. The affront sowed the seed of centuries of discord between the two powers.

Thus, with power, prestige, wealth – and hurt pride – it was a new Iran that faced Rome. Two new superpowers flexing their outward muscles, one claiming the mantle of Alexander, the other the mantle of Cyrus, both meeting at the Euphrates which formed their border. It only required a spark to ignite the inevitable. This was provided by the arrival in Syria of the avaricious Crassus, the Roman triumvir who was appointed proconsul of Syria in 55 BC. A combination of greed and a desire to emulate Caesar's conquests in Gaul prompted Crassus to set his sights on Iranian conquest. Ignoring both a treaty of friendship recently signed between Rome and the Parthian Empire and the true strength of the Parthian army, Crassus crossed the Euphrates and entered Mesopotamia.²⁹

Opposing Crassus was the Parthian General Suren, a commander of high calibre as well as one of the more remarkable men to dominate the period. Suren was a general who could choose his own ground, recognise the weaknesses of his enemy and use the distinctive tactics of his Iranian cavalry to complete advantage. But despite the personal description of Suren that has survived in Plutarch, he remains an enigma: we do not even know his name. 'Suren' (or 'Surenas') was the family name of a dynasty of princes from Seistan in south-eastern Iran, not a personal name. It has been suggested that the 'Suren' of Carrhae was none other than the greatest of all Iranian heroes: the legendary Rostam, hero of the *Shahnameh*, who also originated from Seistan. Such an explanation might explain the otherwise complete absence of Suren in Iranian sources, an astonishing lacuna for one of ancient Iran's greatest generals. The figure of Suren and his family certainly cast a long shadow over the subsequent centuries in the Near East: St Gregory the Illuminator, patron saint of Armenia, was supposedly a descendant, and many of the noble families of medieval Armenia traced their descent from him.³⁰

Rome and Iran collided in 53 BC, only eleven years after the Romans had entered Syria, at the open plains of Carrhae (modern Harran in south-eastern Turkey; Plate 1.1). Here, Iranian intelligence, through its agent the Arab king Ariamnes, had lured the Romans out of the protective covering of the hills into tailor-made cavalry country.³¹ Plutarch has left us with a vivid account of the battle, where we first learn of the famous 'Parthian shot' which has since passed into our language. Suren had a thousand heavy cavalry and several thousand light cavalry as well as a thousand baggage camels, altogether a force of some ten thousand. Crassus' army, at 40,000, easily outnumbered Suren's. But despite numerical superiority, the Roman army was mainly infantry, with little cavalry. This could little withstand both the merciless hail of arrows and the repeated cavalry charges of the Iranians when full combat came. The Roman army was annihilated, suffering its greatest defeat since Hannibal's wars. Crassus himself was killed in the mopping up operations³² along with 20,000 of his army. Ten thousand were taken off into captivity to the eastern fringes of the Parthian Empire. Iran had won its greatest victory since the great days of Darius.

Emperor Orodes' son, Pakores, ruled Mesopotamia on his father's behalf and later succeeded Suren as army commander. Pakores had the longer-term strategic vision that Suren



Plate 1.1 Modern Harran in south-eastern Turkey, site of the Battle of Carrhae

lacked, being able to follow up military victory with political consolidation, taking most of Syria from the Romans two years later. Crassus was succeeded in Syria by Cassius, who withdrew to Antioch. But Pakores' success excited suspicion from his jealous father, and Orodes withdrew Pakores back to Mesopotamia. The Romans, for their part, were by then distracted by the Civil War between the two surviving triumvirs, Pompey and Caesar.

Carrhae may have been the end of Crassus and tens of thousands of Roman lives, but it was not the end of the Parthian War. Rome had to respond – to retrieve captured standards as much as wounded pride. With Pompey now dead, it was left to the third triumvir, Julius Caesar. He came through Syria in 47 BC, following his Egyptian campaign. Apart from conferring a few administrative changes, he returned to Rome. From there Caesar pondered his own deification and, in 45 BC, proposed the grandly ambitious idea of invading Iran through Armenia, sweeping on past the Caspian to the Caucasus up through southern Russia and so back to Rome, picking off Germany and Gaul on the way. His assassination put paid to such an unrealistic plan. In the ensuing Civil War, there was even an extraordinary suggestion that, after Antony and Cleopatra's defeat at Actium, Antony might shift the theatre of operations from the eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Cleopatra had actually assembled a fleet in the Red Sea ready to transport her forces there, only for it to be burnt by the Nabataeans at the request of the governor of Syria.³³

In the meantime, the Iranians returned in force to Syria under the joint command of Pakores – now reinstated in his father's favour – and the Roman renegade Labienus, a former associate of Brutus and Cassius. Parthian rule in the west was on the whole a benevolent one, contrasting with the early years of Rome's rule. The Syrians, smarting under Roman

8 *Historical background*

taxes, welcomed the Parthians. They thrived under Pakores' rule, feeling 'unusual affection for Pakores on account of his justness and mildness, an affection as great as they had felt for the best kings that had ever ruled them'.³⁴ Such accommodation from the population made Pakores' campaign an easy one. While Labienus' division was easily defeated by a force dispatched from Rome, Pakores was able to capture most of Syria, all of Palestine and large parts of Anatolia. Just as Orodes was proclaiming his son conqueror of the Romans, however, Pakores was killed in 37 BC in a trap set for him by the Roman General Ventidius, perhaps in alliance with the Judaeans.³⁵

Orodes abdicated in favour of his son Phraates IV, who consolidated his reign by promptly murdering his father and thirty of his brothers – as well as his own eldest son and a few leading families – thus plunging Iran into civil war. Mark Antony's subsequent disastrous Iranian campaign in 36 BC (discussed in Chapter 3) quickly reversed any advantage the Romans might have gained from Pakores' death and the ensuing Iranian weakness. However, Phraates IV returned the Roman standards captured from Carrhae to Augustus in 20 BC, together with as many Roman prisoners of war from Crassus' and Antony's debacles as could be rounded up.

Peace was established at a great ceremony on an island in the Euphrates in AD 1. The Iranian delegation was led by the half-Italian Emperor Phraates V, the son of Phraates IV.³⁶ The Roman delegation was led by Augustus' nominated successor and adoptive son, Gaius. Watched by the two armies drawn up on either bank, the two imperial delegations crossed over to the island in no-man's land and formally ended over half a century of war between the two powers. Thus, fifty-four years and tens of thousands of lives after Carrhae, the frontier between the Roman and Iranian empires reverted to where it had been in the first place: the Euphrates. It was as though Carrhae had never happened.³⁷

Beyond the Euphrates

After the Augustan peace, Roman borders in the Near East remained more or less static for over a century as the Roman and Parthian Empires enjoyed a period of stable, even friendly, relations. We even read of the Parthian ambassador to Rome urging Nero to change his capital. While there is only a single source for this anecdote, the story is a believable one, for the Iranians frequently changed theirs.³⁸ In the end, the capital remained at Rome and Nero simply burnt it down, but in the long term, the Iranians' recommendations were to prevail. Subsequent years were to see many more battles and some major wars fought in the East. It was in the East that Octavian brought to a final end the round of civil wars that had marked the last years of the republic. In the course of this we see Octavian, the republican general, both extinguishing some eastern monarchies and confirming others: the house of Ptolemy in Egypt, for example, came to an end, while that of Herod the Great in Judaea was given a new lease of life. In doing so, he returned home an emperor. Other major wars were to be fought, most notably the Jewish War fought by Vespasian and Titus (Chapter 2). But there was no expansion of any significance until the time of Trajan at the beginning of the second century AD.

Trajan and the ghost of Alexander

Annexing Arabia was perhaps inevitable after the annexation of Palestine. For the key to Palestine's security lay not in controlling the coasts – Rome's initial reason for entering Palestine – but in its hinterland beyond the Jordan. Control of the lands beyond the Jordan had a powerful economic as well as strategic attraction too, for beyond lay the wealthy Nabataean state with the trans-Arabian trade routes that it controlled (Chapter 2).

Trajan also needed to safeguard his territory before embarking upon a more ambitious campaign: Iran. Up until AD 114, the Romans were content to leave the Euphrates (Plate 1.2) as the boundary between the two empires. After 114 this policy changed. The main reason – apart, of course, from mere aggression – was the need to preserve the friendly client kingdom of Armenia as a buffer.³⁹ Whenever the balance in Armenia was upset – or looked like being upset – there would be war between the two great powers, with Armenia being divided on several occasions. Armenia’s position was similar to that of Afghanistan in ancient history’s ‘Great Game’ – not to mention that of Poland in the number of times it was partitioned.

Iran’s replacement of an Armenian king by one more sympathetic to its interests in AD 113 first brought Trajan eastwards, and he fought several campaigns in Armenia and Adiabene in 114 and 115.⁴⁰ He marched down the Euphrates in AD 116, capturing Ctesiphon. Here, he placed a puppet Parthian king on the throne, then continued down the Euphrates to the shores of the Persian Gulf. Gazing at a merchant ship about to embark for India, he thought enviously of Alexander’s opportunities and youth. Trajan reluctantly turned back, pausing at the ruins of Babylon and to offer sacrifice to Alexander’s memory in the room where he supposedly died. Trajan thus laid the ghost of Alexander, and turned his face westwards, leaving behind two new Roman provinces in upper Mesopotamia.⁴¹

Although Trajan’s advance into Iranian territory was one of the most successful campaigns by a European in the East since Alexander, it achieved little in the short term. His eastern conquests – apart from the Nabataean state – were relinquished by his successor Hadrian in the face of instability elsewhere. Or perhaps, given the inadequacy of our sources for the reign of Hadrian, the Romans were simply forced out of Mesopotamia by the Parthians.⁴² After all, Iran’s client remained on the Armenian throne, and the Parthians themselves



Plate 1.2 The Euphrates in Turkey with the walls of Diyarbakır (ancient Amida) in the distance. The extant walls are mainly Seljuk, but on Roman foundations

10 *Historical background*

remained just as large a threat to Roman power as before. For while Rome could annex parts of Iranian territory and even occupy the capital of Ctesiphon, the roots of Iran's power lay further to the east, in the Iranian plateau and beyond to the original Parthian homeland east of the Caspian. The Iranians could always absorb the loss of their capital: they had others. Trajan's occupation of Mesopotamia made little difference to Iranian power. Trajan himself probably realised, when he thought longingly of emulating Alexander, that to conquer Iran it had to be all the way to India or nothing. Sensibly, Trajan turned back.

While Trajan's advance achieved little in the short term, there were major longer-term ramifications. To begin with, it created a precedent: in removing the Euphrates as a barrier in the Roman mind – more a psychological than a physical barrier (Plate 1.2)⁴³ – it made the eastern boundaries of the empire effectively open. To the west, the Atlantic halted further expansion, while the forests of the north and the deserts of the south made further expansion in those directions pointless. The Euphrates formed a useful line on the map; its removal meant that the East remained open.

Trajan's campaigns also brought a Roman emperor to the East on a semi-permanent basis, 'marking an important stage in the beginning of the cultural shift towards the East'.⁴⁴ Trajan resided in the East for three years, administering the rest of the empire quite effectively during the time. Antioch was his main imperial residence and in effect became the second capital of the Roman Empire. Successive emperors, both real and pretender, proclaimed themselves in Antioch (Chapter 4). This first followed Trajan's death when his successor Hadrian was proclaimed emperor there. After Trajan, therefore, Rome looked increasingly to the East: as the only place where real expansion still lay, as a natural heart of their own empire, as an alternative to Rome as a headquarters. The eventual transformation of Rome into an eastern empire had begun.

After Trajan, there were more and more incursions across the Euphrates, and even the establishment of short-lived Roman provinces. There was another war with Iran in AD 161–5 after the accession of Marcus Aurelius, again caused by the Romans refusing to accept a pro-Iranian king on the Armenian throne. This time Marcus Aurelius' co-emperor, Lucius Verus, took charge in the East, basing himself at Antioch for four years. For the first time Rome had an emperor for the East, ruling from an eastern capital. Once again Ctesiphon was taken, Seleucia on the Tigris sacked, and Iranian territory laid waste. But the apparent completeness of this and other Roman victories against Iran must be questioned as exaggerated: after all they appeared to have had little effect on real Iranian power and they resulted in few permanent gains for the Romans. In the end, we have only the Roman word for their victories – and the very vagueness and spuriousness of many Roman accounts of these campaigns (which even have Romans crossing the Indus at one point!) leave much to be questioned.⁴⁵

The real hero of the Parthian War was Avidius Cassius, a Syrian from Cyrrhus, rather than the indolent Lucius Verus.⁴⁶ The career of Avidius Cassius was to have important later ramifications. After the end of the Parthian War he was proclaimed emperor in AD 175 following premature reports of Marcus Aurelius' death. Avidius Cassius lasted only three months and his murder appears to mark the end of what seems to be only a footnote (although, significantly, he gained the allegiance of both Syria and Egypt and was immensely popular in Antioch).⁴⁷ But the matter did not end there: Lucius Verus had set a precedent for a Roman eastern emperor; Avidius Cassius set the precedent for a native of the East to become emperor of Rome.⁴⁸

*Septimius Severus and Mesopotamia*⁴⁹

Pescennius Niger in AD 193 was the next to be proclaimed emperor from Antioch by the Roman army in Syria. Again, Antioch became an imperial capital, and Niger received

delegations from all over the East, including Iran.⁵⁰ Unlike Avidius Cassius, Pescennius Niger was not a native of the East, but the man who eventually defeated him had the strongest associations of any emperor yet with the East.⁵¹ This was the North African of Phoenician descent, Septimius Severus, the Phoenician connection reaffirmed with his marriage to a Syrian princess (Plate 8.4 Chapter 8). He had already served in Syria as a rising young officer, and it was Niger's proclamation as emperor in 193 which brought Septimius Severus back there the following year. Now emperor himself, Septimius Severus was quick to suppress Niger's revolt. The two armies met first at Nicaea then more decisively at Alexander's historic battlefield of Issus. Herodian describes the outcome as the same as when Alexander defeated Darius there half a millennium before: the West defeated the East.⁵² Herodian's dramatic ironies aside, it seems clear that the idea of eastern and western empires was already beginning to form in Roman consciousness. Syria was definitely characterised as 'eastern' rather than 'western', even when the 'West' was commanded by a Libyan and the 'East' by an Italian. Indeed, remnants of Niger's defeated army fled to Iran, where they were able to teach some Roman military expertise which was quickly put to good use in new Iranian battle techniques.⁵³

Septimius Severus stayed on in Antioch to begin his long-cherished invasion of Mesopotamia, using Iran's support of Niger as a pretext. 'It was commonly said that Septimius Severus' motive for the Parthian War was a desire for glory, and that it was not launched out of any necessity.'⁵⁴ After suppressing another rival emperor in Britain (Clodius Albinus) he launched his invasion in 197. Like Trajan before, Septimius Severus failed to capture Hatra in a near disastrous siege the following year (Plate 1.3).⁵⁵ But he did capture Ctesiphon, taking the Parthian king by surprise – implying perhaps that there was a truce at the time. The city was looted and plundered by the Romans following their attack, and Herodian writes, 'Thus, more by luck than good judgement, Septimius Severus won the glory of a Parthian victory.'⁵⁶ Rome had arrived on the banks of the Tigris to stay (Plate 1.4).



Plate 1.3 Hatra



Plate 1.4 Seh Qubba overlooking the Euphrates in northern Iraq, probably the site of the Roman fort of *Castra Maurorum*, the easternmost Roman site excavated

Septimius Severus established his new conquests as the Roman province of Mesopotamia with its capital at Nisibis (Plate 1.5). In addition, he divided the old large province of Syria into two: Coele Syria and Syria Phoenice. Contrary to what one is led to expect by these new provincial names (Syria Phoenice refers to the coast and Coele or ‘Hollow’ Syria presumably refers to the rift valley inland), the divisions were north–south rather than east–west, with Coele Syria to the north. The reasons for this were not so much administrative as strategic, the need to limit the forces available to any single provincial commander.⁵⁷ With so many real and would-be emperors, from Vespasian to Niger, being proclaimed from a Syrian power-base, Septimius Severus wanted to ensure that no threats would arise to his own rule. He finally left Antioch in 202 after having spent seven of the ten years he had reigned so far in the East.

With the establishment of the limits of the empire on the Tigris, we see for the first time the beginnings of substantial Roman material remains east of Aleppo. Remains of the Roman garrison town at Singara (modern Sinjar in northern Iraq; Plate 1.6) are still extant, and more have been found further east. These include a military camp at ‘Ain Sinu and a milestone of Alexander Severus between Singara and the river, while remains at Seh Qubba on a bluff overlooking the Tigris probably represent the remains of the outpost of *Castra Maurorum* (Plate 1.4), the easternmost Roman site so far excavated.⁵⁸ More substantial Roman military remains have been excavated at Dura Europos (Figure 4.7, Plate 4.12), and the semi-desert areas that make up the present borderlands of Syria, Jordan and Iraq are covered with a complex system of Roman roads, frontier forts and border settlements (Figure 6.29).⁵⁹ While these mostly date from the later years – especially the military reforms of Diocletian – it is clear that with the crossing of the Euphrates by Septimius Severus, the Romans had come to stay.



Plate 1.5 The church of Mar Yakub at Nisibis



Plate 1.6 Remains of the Roman gate at Sinjar in northern Iraq

Septimius Severus' Mesopotamian conquests were followed in 216 by those of his son Caracalla, who defeated the unsuspecting Parthian king, Artabanus, outside Ctesiphon while pretending to be a suitor for his daughter.⁶⁰ Artabanus, having been twice tricked by both father and son, was determined not to be caught unawares again, and launched a massive invasion. The subsequent murder of Caracalla, however, deprived Artabanus of his satisfaction. In the face of the advancing threat from the wrathful Artabanus and his huge army, the Roman army hastily proclaimed the ill-prepared lawyer Macrinus as emperor.⁶¹

There followed a second great battle between Romans and Iranians on the fateful battlefield of Carrhae (Plate 1.1), with a result almost the same as the first, and the Romans looked like facing defeat once more at Carrhae.⁶² Doubtless the fate of Crassus was on Macrinus' mind, so he hastily sued for peace. Macrinus pointed out that Artabanus' grudge was a personal one against Caracalla, who was now dead, rather than the Roman Empire as a whole. Artabanus accepted the truce.

Thus, both sides retired from Carrhae. Two Roman leaders had met their end there, Crassus and Caracalla. It was the site of the first battle that the Parthians had fought against the Romans – and the last. Within a few years Artabanus and the Parthians were overthrown by a vigorous new Persian dynasty from the same heartland of ancient Persia whence hailed the Achaemenids: the Sasanians under their founder Ardashir.

The end of the beginning

One should not, of course, view Rome's acquisition of its eastern empire overly in terms of the personalities involved and it is perhaps a mistake to condemn the vacuous Crassus or the unscrupulous Orodes too harshly. Rome's pursuit of its vendetta against Hannibal no doubt played its part, but Rome would still have come east without Hannibal. Personal ambition by the conquering founders – Lucullus, Pompey, Crassus, *et al.* – no doubt played a part too. But so did the importance of maintaining and ruling the growing Roman state sensibly. Pompey's extinction of the house of Seleucus without allowing it even the grace of client status was not so much Pompey's personal aggrandisement but sound policy in not allowing a token Seleucid court to act as a magnet for disaffected factions. Crassus may have been old and venal and Suren young and energetic, but in the end it was better arms, better supplies, better tactics, better intelligence and better command that won Carrhae. Lucullus may have been a better military commander than either Pompey or Crassus, but Lucullus lacked one thing that the others possessed: status. Pompey and Crassus were triumvirs – effectively co-emperors (or rather 'proto-co-emperors'). Hence, Pompey's appointment to the eastern command almost at the beginning of the eastern empire set a precedent that marked its end: so important did the eastern empire become that it needed an eastern emperor, eventually culminating in the division of the Roman Empire. In a sense, Pompey anticipated the eastern emperors. Similarly, Crassus' appointment as proconsul of Syria was more than mere avarice. The importance of Rome's eastern frontier was such that nobody of lesser status than triumvir and proconsul could fill the post. Rome may have blundered over Carrhae, but neither initial nor long-term policy in Syria lacked wisdom or foresight: its strategic position and wealth were too important to entrust to mere client kings or field commanders; only Rome's highest citizens would suffice.

For Iran's part, the pragmatic Orodes was right to concentrate more on tying a major land power like Armenia to his empire than a seaboard province like Syria – and to withdraw back behind the Euphrates after his headstrong son took Syria.⁶³ Syria would have been too distant for a people whose heartland lay east of the Caspian. For a land power, the Syrian deserts made a more defensible frontier than the Mediterranean. Most of all, from the Iranian

viewpoint the Roman invasion was merely an incident, probably perceived as nothing more than raids by barbarians on their western borders. Iranian sources are silent about Carrhae. Parthian sources were suppressed, it is true, by the Sasanians, but the little that has indirectly survived shows concern almost wholly with their eastern and northern borders, not the west.⁶⁴ The Parthians had little conception of the Romans as a great power, even less as a civilised one, and any perception they had would simply have been as raiders from across the distant western sea. Wars with the West, even a victory such as Carrhae, would barely rate a mention.

When compared to the massive expansion of Roman building activity from the second century onwards, Rome has left surprisingly little trace of the first century and a half of its rule there.⁶⁵ Few monuments survive and the archaeological evidence suggests a general decline, even depression, in the Near East for this period. In assessing the initial impact of Rome in the East in these early years, therefore, one must be wary of overestimating its importance, as the literary sources imply. Rome played a large part, it is true, but it probably had very little effect on either the character or the culture of the region. Rome's initial rule was characterised by exploitation, rapaciousness and avarice. The Romans came as conquerors, not civilisers, and their occupation was brutal and unpopular.⁶⁶ True, Judaea was the only place in the East to revolt on a large scale in this period, but the resentment was real, and the Iranians, as we have noted, were welcomed. Roman economic prosperity and cultural wealth, and with it the material remains, was not to come until later. The first centuries of Roman rule in the East, therefore, appear to have been a material decline.

Pompey had brought back from the East more than an empire: he brought the idea of an emperor. The West had no counterpart to the eastern concept of emperor. Hitherto the West had only kings, there was no precedent for any status above that, a 'super-king' or 'king of kings'. Iran had bequeathed to the East its ancient royal title of *shahinshah* or 'king of kings', as well as the tradition of royal purple. In the East, furthermore, the title went even beyond the concept of a mere king of kings, for he was a god as well: emperors were deified (a lesson not lost on Alexander some three centuries previously, and formalised by the Ptolemies and Seleucids). Both the colour purple and the title that went with it was taken over by the Parthian royal house as well as by Tigranes of Armenia, Pompey's main adversary.⁶⁷ Nor was the observation lost on the Romans. One of the first Romans to be hailed as 'Imperator' by his troops, Pompey was soon also to be hailed 'a king of kings' and the purple was to become synonymous with Roman imperium.⁶⁸ Herod's courting of Octavian after the Battle of Actium may have been mere sycophancy, but it emphasised an important message to Octavian: Herod was one of the most opulent of the monarchs of the East. Even though it was republican Rome that had made him king, the message of royalty did not escape Octavian. There would be no more Mariuses, Sullas or Gracchi: henceforth, Rome too had to have a monarch, an emperor to rule an empire, and the emperors were to become gods.⁶⁹

Following the death of Caracalla and the second Battle of Carrhae, Macrinus remained in Antioch, which he used as his capital to rule the empire. In taking up residence in the East, Macrinus also became more 'oriental', adopting oriental dress with studded cummerbunds and other eastern trappings that filled his entourage with misgivings.⁷⁰ Thus, Rome's first period of expansion into the East began with a Republican dictator bringing back the eastern concept of emperor; it ended with an emperor adopting a fashion that was ultimately to prove addictive.

The long retreat

The campaigns of Septimius Severus near the end of the second century represented the last major eastward expansion of the Roman Empire. While there would still be the occasional

Roman gains at the expense of the Iranians and even some great victories, the beginning of the third century was the beginning of a slow retraction of Rome's eastern empire. The next four centuries would be a long retreat culminating in the final evacuation of Rome's Near Eastern provinces in the face of the advancing Muslim Arabs in the seventh century.

But the victorious Muslims merely delivered the death blow to an eastern empire that was diminishing long before. For the intervening centuries saw the rise and fall of a new dynasty in Iran that did even more than the Parthians to restore Iranian might.

*Iran restored: Alexander and Artaxerxes*⁷¹

Parthian victories against Rome and Parthian vigour in general had re-established the self-confidence of Iranian civilisation, paving the way for a new dynasty of Iranian kings. These were the Sasanians. Members of the Parthian royal family lived on as rulers of Armenia in the west and Seistan in the east, but it was the Sasanian royal family who, originating in the same heartland of Persia as the ancient Achaemenid kings, consciously proclaimed a renaissance of Achaemenid civilisation.⁷² Their first ruler was Ardeshir I. He is occasionally referred in the sources as Artaxerxes (of which the name Ardeshir is a later variation), perhaps a conscious archaism in referring back to the ancient Achaemenids.⁷³ Although the Sasanians were a dynasty of warrior emperors, their foundation was religious: Ardeshir hailed from a line of high-priests who were hereditary priests of the important temple of Anahita at Istakhr in southern Iran.⁷⁴ Ardeshir overthrew the last Parthian king, Artabanus V, in 224, to proclaim a new empire that was to last for the next 430 years. The event sent shock-waves to Rome.

Ardeshir was not the only emperor descended from eastern high-priests. So was his counterpart in Rome. For Emperor Severus Alexander was descended from the high-priests of Baal at Emesa, a Syrian family that had been brought to the forefront of Roman politics by his grandmother Julia Maesa and her sister Julia Domna (Chapter 8). The wars of the previous generations between the Romans and Parthians had ended in stalemate, with a truce between Macrinus and Artabanus following Carrhae. But the truce meant nothing to Artabanus' usurper, and the Romans even less. Ardeshir viewed the Romans as occupiers of lands that were Iranian by historic right. Accordingly, he overran the Roman province of Mesopotamia and demanded the return of all of Rome's Near Eastern possessions.⁷⁵

Rome was stunned. In an impassioned speech in Rome Severus Alexander characterised the threat as one of the most serious that a Roman emperor had ever had to face. Rome was in an uproar as it bade goodbye to its beloved emperor – one of the mildest that Rome had had the good fortune to experience since the Antonine golden age. He took leave of his adoptive city expecting never to see it again. The Roman Emperor Alexander sailed to his native Syria to answer the new Iranian challenge.

Thus, two emperors faced each other, a new Artaxerxes facing a new Alexander, both natives of the East, both descendants of priests.⁷⁶ Severus Alexander planned a major, three-pronged invasion of Mesopotamia. It was disastrous. One army 'suffered a staggering disaster; it is not easy to recall another like it, one in which a great army was destroyed', another was 'almost totally destroyed in the mountains; a great many soldiers suffered mutilation in the frigid country, and only a handful of the large numbers of troops who started the march managed to reach Antioch' while the third did not engage the enemy.⁷⁷ Having triumphed, Ardeshir disbanded his army. Severus Alexander eventually paid the ultimate price for defeat, when a disaffected army faction killed him on campaign on the Rhine and proclaimed the Thracian Maximinus emperor in his place.

Shapur I, Valerian and the disaster of Edessa⁷⁸

The war between Severus Alexander and Ardeshir was a dress rehearsal for the wars fought by Ardeshir's successor, Shapur I, perhaps the greatest of the Sasanian emperors (Plate 3.9). Shapur saw himself as the heir to Cyrus the Great: he re-established much of the ancient borders of the Achaemenid Empire, he reformed and reorganised the administration, he encouraged religious toleration but at the same time reaffirmed Zoroastrianism as the state religion. But it was Rome, not Iran, that renewed the war with the aggression of the Emperor Gordian III in 243, although both he and his army were destroyed by the Sasanians in a battle in northern Mesopotamia in 244.⁷⁹ The army hurriedly elected an Arab officer, Philip (Plate 8.10), as emperor, who requested Shapur for terms. An enormous indemnity was imposed, and a shaky peace returned to the Near East.

It did not last long. Citing Roman meddling in Armenia as an excuse, Shapur invaded Syria once more in 252, renewing a war that was to last for almost another ten years. Antioch was captured twice, in 256 and again in 260.⁸⁰ Large numbers of its citizens, particularly those with technical expertise, were deported to the new city of Gundishapur in Iran (Chapter 3). But the Syrians still remembered the previous time that Iranians had occupied Roman Syria under Pakores: the account by Peter Patricius of the occupation of Antioch implies that the common folk – the native Syrian population – welcomed them as deliverers once more.⁸¹ This suggests that the Syrian founders of Gundishapur followed their captors willingly – they were certainly allowed religious freedom in Iran and Shapur's toleration and mildness encouraged a minor Syrian 'renaissance' at Gundishapur.

The war brought a Roman emperor eastwards once again, this time the Emperor Valerian. Again, the armies of Rome and Iran met in a momentous battle, at Edessa in 260 – ironically not far from the field of Carrhae some 300 years earlier. Again, a Roman army of 70,000 was utterly defeated: Roman prisoners of war were taken into Persia, including the greatest prize of all: the Roman Emperor Valerian himself, who was captured and brought in chains to kneel before Shapur. The event is celebrated in a series of rock-reliefs in southern Iran that depict the humiliated Valerian (Plates 3.6, 3.8 and 3.9).⁸²

Never before had Iran been greater, and the subsequent centuries of Sasanian history would see success after success, often at Rome's expense. In contrast, Rome never seemed weaker. For in addition to Shapur's invasion there had been Gothic invasions and the revolt of Palmyra.

Shapur II, Constantius and the disaster of Amida

But fortunately for Rome, Shapur died in 272 and the Emperor Aurelian was able to restore order to the empire (Chapter 2). Towards the end of the century the decline was halted by the administrative and military reforms of Diocletian. In Iran, the warrior king Bahram II or Bahram Gur (276–93) might well have continued Iran's western expansion, but he was distracted by problems in the eastern borderlands – always of more concern to Iran than its western borders. Seizing their chance, the Romans invaded Mesopotamia under Emperor Carus in 283. They advanced to the outskirts of Ctesiphon and Rome regained the province of Mesopotamia for a short time, but both Carus and his son Numerianus lost their lives during this campaign. Bahram's successor, Narseh, was able to retake Mesopotamia and defeat Diocletian's co-emperor Galerius. A peace – the so-called 'Forty year Peace' – was re-established in 298 by Diocletian and the entire eastern defences reorganised.⁸³

In 309 an infant ascended the Sasanian throne.⁸⁴ This was Shapur II, whose victories against Rome were destined to almost match those of his great namesake, and his reign of