

## The Parthian-Roman bipolarism: some considerations for a historical perspective.

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### ABSTRACT:

During the 1st-3rd centuries AD the Euphrates's River was the so-called Latin *Limes* of the late Roman Empire (Isaac 1988: 124-147; Frezouls 1980: 357-386, 371; Gray 1973: 24-40; Mayerson 1986: 35-47; Invernizzi 1986: 357-381; Valtz 1987: 81-89), understood as a dynamic geo-political and cultural border with both military and trading function, where the interfaced cultural areas were defined by the coexistence, interaction and conflict of several ideologies which are at the basis of the fights between Romans and Parthians aiming to the control of the territories on the Middle-Euphrates's area. Rome occupied Dura Europos during the AD 165 obtaining the control on the Euphrates area and during the AD 194-195 and AD 197-199 Septimius Severus enlarged the extension of the areas controlled by Rome, overlapping on the limit of the Euphrates, therefore determining the Parthian giving ground on the Middle Euphrates (Oates 1968: 67-92). The strategic advantage obtained by the Romans allowed them also to build the fortified post of Kifrin (Valtz 1987: 81-89), seen from a political and military point of view as a means to enforce and to advance the eastern frontier of the empire on the pre-existent settlement.

**KEYWORDS:** 3rd century AD, Middle Euphrates, Romans, Parthians, Septimius Severus.

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## Introduction

When Seleucia became the new capital city of the central region of Mesopotamia (305 BC), it fully modified the historical and social setup of the Iranian world, leaving a deep imprint on the Near East. The Euphrates's valley preserved its geo-political features of firm and flourishing region which allowed a homogeneous diffusion of the Hellenistic culture, *in primis* thanks to the use of the Ancient Greek as an official language until the Parthians' arrival on this area during 141 BC. The so-called Mesopotamian “*iranisation*” started after the coronation of Mithridates I, adopting cultural and ideological patterns which evocate the Achemenid past and the Mazda tradition<sup>2</sup>; even if the resistance was so hard in Mesopotamia and in Media regions, the Parthian empire was consolidated under Mithridate II (123-91 BC), who started the conflict between the Parthian and the Roman interests after his entry in Armenia.

Historical sources are not available because of the perishability of the typical literature of the Aramaic writings, but a statement can be done that after the late Assyrians frequenting the area<sup>3</sup>, the Middle-Euphrates's area preserved its interfacing function between the Babylon and Media regions. The Neo-Babylonian sources mention the previous Assyrian toponym<sup>4</sup>; since the Seleucid period, several inferences are attested in the ancient texts regarding the Middle-Euphrates's area, as for example in the itinerary of Isidore of Charax (I Cent. BC / I Cent. AD), listing the Royal Parthian route stations, presenting a general picture of the Parthian territories in function of the most relevant commercial trading stations dated on the late Hellenistic timeline (as certainly Anqa, Ana, Telbis e Bijan<sup>5</sup> are included into the list). Later on, the area avoided the Seleucid patrolling<sup>6</sup> aimed to the protection of the caravan routes<sup>7</sup>. M. Rostovtzeff<sup>8</sup> has delineated this aspect in his historical and territorial pattern, later repropose by P. Leriche<sup>9</sup>, with the assumption of

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<sup>2</sup> See Panaino 1996: 110.

<sup>3</sup> To consider the historical and the territorial evaluations of the continuing frequentation of the area during the Assyrian, the Hellenistic and the Parthian periods, see Clancier 2006: 247-280.

<sup>4</sup> See Zadok 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Into the text there is no mention of the toponym referred to the fortified settlement of Kifrin, the *Becchufrein* attested on the *XX Cohors Equitata Palmyrenorum* archives of Dura Europos which seems to be founded after the I Cent. AD; see Welles 1955: 26-46.

<sup>6</sup> Chaumont 1984: p.71; Dillemann 1962: 142.

<sup>7</sup> Clancier 2006: 263-264 but see also Sartre 2001: 129-130. The Middle-Euphrates's caravan route increased its popularity maybe due to the Roman menace insisting on the northern region of Mesopotamia, especially when Armenia decided to support a more pro-Roman political trend.

<sup>8</sup> Id. 1938: 99-106, repropose by E. Will see Id. 1957: 266 and following.

<sup>9</sup> Id. 1997: 194.

a continuing frequentation of the already fortified sites in the area, because of its location, coherently placed into a defensive network of communication routes on the desert<sup>10</sup>.

After the Parthians' arrival, who became part of the environment to control the interfaced area between Western world (characterized by an Hellenistic-Roman background) and the Eastern one, a new ethnic graft<sup>11</sup> on the Euphrates's river banks<sup>12</sup> took place which was the only way to arrive to Southern Mesopotamia, safe from the nomadic incursions<sup>13</sup> which instead were localized especially in the Babylonian region<sup>14</sup>. If Dura was conquered by the end of the II Cent. BC (113 BC) and it was incorporated into the Parthian empire<sup>15</sup> for about three centuries, it was during the Arsacid leadership that it stood on the firing line, along the territorial strip which soon fell under the Roman trading influence; later on, Dura became an important control junction for the Middle-Euphrates area thanks to the caravan routes which vouched for middle-long distance connexions; it soon lost its preeminent military function and culturally enrichment thanks to the syncretic contributions of the Semitic and Iranian backgrounds to the next flourishing urban context. So the entire Middle-Euphrates strip became an important administrative and commercial junction for the entire area as far as the Balikh river confluence. Since the trading phase between the Parthians and the Romans, with a correlation with some important centres as Palmyra and with the Nabatean trade<sup>16</sup>, the Middle-Euphrates's area soon became the alternative way to the caravan land-routes being better defendable than the north Mesopotamian one, thanks to the Dura control on the region since the end of the II Cent. AD; Its so evident communication role was thus preserved *in primis* because of the good river transit - as it is attested by the insular settlements on the Euphrates river.

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<sup>10</sup> M.Sartre states the foundation of the city in the desert is determined because of several pre-existing causes, as it happened for the case of Dura Europos; anyway, it seems that the relevant reason of the foundation was the nomadic chance to control the so-called "international" caravan trade. Another historical and territorial significant evaluation is determined considering that the attraction for the trade control was one of the most relevant reasons which encouraged the nomads moving to the towns (Gawlikowski 1994: 32). About the military and the trading function of the Euphrates river, understood as a dynamic borderline of the ancient *Limes* see also Frezouls 1980: 357-386, 371.

<sup>11</sup> See Sall., *Epist.* VI 16, 19 for the most common literary motifs of the I Cent BC, or the Parthian cultural identity as founded on the Persian memoires – to whom they used to be partially associated, and their war skills.

<sup>12</sup> Strab., 16, 1, 28. About the geo-political role of the Euphrates river, understood as a Parthian-Roman cultural interface see Lerouge-Cohen 1973: 199 and following.

<sup>13</sup> See Clancier 2006: 270 and following.

<sup>14</sup> The papyrus P.Dura n. 34, dated on the 116 represents the *terminus* which can date the end of the Seleucid period on the entire area: see Clancier 2006: 265, note 87.

<sup>15</sup> See Welles 1956: 469.

<sup>16</sup> See Frezouls 1980 : 377, note 65.

After 92 BC, when Sulla received a Parthian diplomatic delegacy along the Euphrates's banks<sup>17</sup>, the following Arsacid agreement, at first with Lucullus and later with Pompeus<sup>18</sup> (69 and 66 BC), arranged the Euphrates as the borderline between the Parthian and the Romans, but the creation of the Syrian province (65 BC) passed the Romans all political problems of its frontier area. The events which carried Rome to some strong defeats against the Parthians can be dated during such critical phases: the defeat of M. Licinius Crassus in Carre (53 BC) signed a heavy failure marked by the confiscation of the Roman banners<sup>19</sup> and its echo reflected significantly on the Roman internal policy because of both the implications and the results of the powerful crisis after the tottering governance of the Roman empire<sup>20</sup>. After the following Parthian strategic attack, which led the Iranian people to the invasion of the Roman Syria<sup>21</sup> (40 BC), there came the sure response to the *quaestio* (39-38 BC) when Ventidius Bassus threw the Parthian invaders out the Roman borderlines of the Syrian province, forcing the enemies to retire on the other side of the Euphrate's bank<sup>22</sup>. Antony the Triumvir, emulating Caesar's dream to dominate the Parthia<sup>23</sup>, planned a military attack, strongly influenced by the big exploits of Alexander the Great<sup>24</sup>, but the plan revealed itself fallacious<sup>25</sup>. Later on, Augustus gained back the Roman military banners so miserably lost by the *militiae* during Carre's battle (20 BC) from Phraates IV (38-33 BC), and the Arsacid restitution of the Roman still living captives<sup>26</sup>. The aim of this was to raise control thanks to a diplomatic strategy after the establishment of the Roman power on the Armenian region and the imposition of a pro-Roman local king.

<sup>17</sup> Titus Livius alludes to this episode (*Per. LXX*); also see Vell. Pat. II, 24, 3; Plut., *Sulla*, V, 8; Frezouls 1980 : 355.

<sup>18</sup> Cass. Dio, XXXVI, 45, 3

<sup>19</sup> Plut., *Crass*, XVII, 1 and following; Cass. Dio, XL 12,2.

<sup>20</sup> The defeat of Carre induced Rome to fend for a while. During the years of the precautionary policy of Augustus, followed by the failure to subdue the Parthians, Armenia acted as a buffer with Palmyra which was becoming a strategic junction so determinant to define the leaderships of both the Parthian and the Roman hegemonies.

<sup>21</sup> Strab., XII 574; XIV 660, Cass. Dio, XLVIII 24,3 and following.

<sup>22</sup> The Syrian area remained divided into two geo-political strips: the northern one, which had a frontier role and the southern one which remained under the Arsacid influence for about the following three centuries.

<sup>23</sup> Suet., *Divus Iul*, 44; Plut., *Caesar*, LVIII, 6.

<sup>24</sup> The aim to the universal empire and the imitation of the Alexander the Great's *gestae* is such a frequent *topos* during the Eastern Roman provinces' history, as Cass. Dio refers when speaking about Trajan (LXVIII, 29,1).

<sup>25</sup> Strab. XI, 523-524; XVI 748; Plut., *Ant.* 37 and following; Cass. Dio, XLIX 23 and following.

<sup>26</sup> Plut., *Crass.*, XVIII-XXXIII; Cass. Dio, XL, 16-27.

**(I Cent. AD)**

The later Roman-Parthian pact<sup>27</sup> following these events saved the Roman honour but it seemed an implicit recognition of both the Roman and the Parthian coexistence as a basilar statement; since this historical phase, the afore-mentioned pact represented a limit to both the expansion and the containment of the Roman domination policy. Even if some disagreements are attested on the area because of dynastic affairs<sup>28</sup>, Rome continued to make interferences with its diplomatic policy, as a useful tool to support the favourite royal candidates to become local kings as pro-Roman governors. The no-care Roman governance, so venal and not in political *concordia*, carried again the Roman empire to lose the control on Armenia and to the contraction of the territorial domain in Syria<sup>29</sup>. If during Nero's kingdom the Romans aimed to a hostile policy against the Parthians<sup>30</sup>, the war in 53 is determined because of the ancient hegemonic legitimacy (as Tacitus suggests<sup>31</sup> because of the Parthian claim on the Armenia region), and because of the role of Tiridates who was the only Arsacid prince without a throne. Perhaps Vologases, Tiridates's brother, considered the Armenian control as legitimately lawful *in primis* because of historical reasons and the dynastic crisis in Armenia probably should be read according to this: The Parthians and the Romans raised a fight because of both the military and political prestige on the area. While Antony worked to establish inter-dynastic familiar relationships with the Armenian king before and after Augustus, using the fleeting successful diplomacy aiming to a wider thickness of his military victory, Nero, answering to the Vologase's intervention, sent his general Domitius Corbulo. The latter, understanding the real reasons behind the Armenian conflict, suggested a compromise which failed during AD 55, when the Romans tried a fallacious negotiation aiming to preserve the local kingdom in favour of the pro-Roman Tiridates. During AD 64 the following war finished with a pact between the Romans and the Arsacids which disposed for Tiridates to be the local Kingdom as Nero's consent, permitting to preserve both their political and military triumph images, because it represented the lawful Parthian dynastic rights and the local governance approved by the Romans<sup>32</sup>. On the Roman side, the no-caring political evaluation of the Parthian affair and

<sup>27</sup> Aug. *res gest.* 29; Vell. Pat. II 91; Suet., *Aug.* 21,3; *Tib.* 9,1; Cass. Dio, LIV 8,1-3; Iust., XLII 5,10 and following.

<sup>28</sup> See Lerouge-Cohen 1973: 133-134.

<sup>29</sup> On the Armenian affair see Lerouge-Cohen 1973: 129-130.

<sup>30</sup> See Cass. Dio, 62 (19-23), 4, 63 (1-7); Tac., *Ann.* 12 (44-51), 13 (6-9); 13 (34-41), 14 (23-26), 15 (1-18), 15 (24-31); but see in Lerouge-Cohen 1973: 130 and following.

<sup>31</sup> Tac. *ann.* XII 50

<sup>32</sup> See Tac., *Ann.* 15, 27, 2; Cass. Dio, 62, 22-23 but see also Chaumont 1978: 71-194, in particular 123 and also see Campbell 1993: 213-239, in particular 231-232.

the discontinuous strategy, so frequently contaminated by personal interests like Crassus's and Antony's ones, were the preliminary steps introducing Augustus's diplomacy which defined a matter of principle for a reciprocal acknowledgment between the Roman and the Parthian states, the latter being under suzerainty to the first one<sup>33</sup>. If the Parthians preserved their land-trading control along the eastern routes to India and China<sup>34</sup> and the western ones towards the eastern Mediterranean coasts<sup>35</sup>, the Arabian peninsula remained under the rule of Arab people having a strong managerial power on the trading traffic, like on the Red Sea, interposing themselves as barrier mediators by use of trade obligations on their goods. The Euphrates river signed a natural border line between Rome and Parthia since the I Cent. AD, and its environmental separating role between the Roman West and the Persian East was maintained until the end of the III Cent. AD, even if discontinuously when the conflict against Rome on the area's control was continued by the Sasanians. So, if the Middle-Euphrates region preserved its strategic function, it could also maintain the cultural contacts and the trading exchanges between West and East on the same territory.

## (II Cent.AD)

Trajan's leadership period (AD 98-117), characterized by the imperial<sup>36</sup> resumption of the expansionistic policy<sup>37</sup>, aimed to a new strategic policy<sup>38</sup>; after the Dacian<sup>39</sup> (101, 106) and the Arabian<sup>40</sup> targets, the Emperor moved against the Parthians<sup>41</sup>, aiming to occupy

<sup>33</sup> Augustus acknowledged a formal limit to the Roman domain on the *Limes* area and during the following years this strategy conditioned and addressed the Roman territorial policy on the Middle-Euphrates area.

<sup>34</sup> See Angeli Bertinelli 1979: 59, note 90.

<sup>35</sup> During the mid I Cent. BC the Nabateans became Rome's "vassals" protecting the caravan routes crossing their territory and they also probably obtained some privileged conditions on the trading activities. During 25 BC, the Sabeian area was interested by some contacts with Rome and during Nero's period the coastal Red Sea countries were included into the Roman network. After the end of the I Cent. BC, the trading development improves the caravan routes which allow to connect the Romans with the all entire known world of that time aiming to search for luxury goods, raw materials, natural or half-worked products (and of course slaves).

<sup>36</sup> The Flavian dynasty aimed to a policy interested in the safety of border lines of the Roman frontier.

<sup>37</sup> Lerouge-Cohen 1973: 165.

<sup>38</sup> On the historical sources about the relationships between Rome and Parthia during the II Cent. AD. see Angeli Bertinelli 1976.

<sup>39</sup> Trajan organized two military campaigns to conquer the region, aiming to put the imperial borders on the left Danubian bank safe and to take possession of remarkable quantity of gold.

<sup>40</sup> Once the Dacian military campaign was over, Trajan occupied the Nabatean region (northern Arabia) and instituted a new province which preserved its strategic controlling role of the communication routes towards Egypt and the Red Sea regions.

<sup>41</sup> The tensions in Armenia might have given Trajan the opportunity to interfere with local issues which, according to Cassius Dio, were aimed to personal designs and lust for richness (Cass. Dio, LXVIII 17,1).



their territory placed on the new Roman *Limes*<sup>42</sup> and so the entire northern strip of the Arabian peninsula (between the Euphrates and the Red Sea) entered the Roman empire. During 114, Trajan moved from Armenia against Nusaybin, accepting the submission of the Osrhoene region, later conquering the Sinjara region; between 115 and 116, Trajan moved to the Mesopotamian region<sup>43</sup> attacking Ctesiphon<sup>44</sup> and occupying Dura<sup>45</sup>, but the political difficulties in the Cyrenaic region turned into riots which extended their influence to Mesopotamia<sup>46</sup>; the emperor was forced to give ground, and the repression of the rebellions discouraged Trajan from conquering the Lower Mesopotamia<sup>47</sup> as well. The military operations guaranteed the Roman control on the Assyrian<sup>48</sup> and the Central Mesopotamian areas<sup>49</sup>, as far to Babyon<sup>50</sup>. In this historical while, Trajan created the Roman provinces of Assyria, Mesopotamia and Armenia<sup>51</sup>, producing the exaltation of the interventionist policy on the contemporary literature<sup>52</sup> like an affirmation of the restored imperial prestige during the II Cent. AD. After Trajan's military campaign, military and political vacation followed because of the giving ground of the Roman troops<sup>53</sup>, thus determining the return of Dura under the Parthians and the entire Middle-Euphrates's area being permeated by the Palmyrans infiltrations, attested perhaps since AD 132 and which probably controlled the area as far as the region of Hit<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> Trajan intervened in the war considering the Parthian intromission into the Armenian affairs inappropriate, according to Nero's pact, which established the Roman *pacet* on the local dynastic successions, thus creating the assumption to move the war eastward (Cass. Dio LXVIII 68,14,5).

<sup>43</sup> Cass. Dio, LXVIII 18-22, in particular LXVIII 21,1. About Trajan's military expeditions against the Mesopotamian region see Angeli Bertinelli 1976: 14-15.

<sup>44</sup> Cass. Dio, 68, 26, 4; 68, 28

<sup>45</sup> For the AD 113 datation with the numismatic evidence see Edwell 2008: 101 and following.

<sup>46</sup> Cass. Dio, LXVIII, 29, 4

<sup>47</sup> Cass. Dio, LXVIII, 29

<sup>48</sup> See Eutrop., VIII 3 and 6.

<sup>49</sup> At the beginning of the II Cent. AD, the Roman Eastern policy turned to the conquest strategy aiming to the territorial annexation of the Parthian domains; Rome improved its military control on the area enforcing the Euphrates's border thanks to the annexation of some smaller states aiming to counter-balance the loss of the Armenia region and placing also fortresses on the *Limes*. See Cass. Dio, LXVIII 21,1; 18,3; 23,2; 21,1; 22,2; LXVIII 26-28,2. About the military conquest on the Central Mesopotamia (Seleucia, Ctesiphon and Babylon) see Eutrop., VIII,3.

<sup>50</sup> Cass. Dio, LXVIII 30,1. It is likely, on the other hand, that the Roman domain over the Parthians was ephemeral actually in the Northern area of today's Iraq, where the Parthian territory as considered would begin from the central Babylon area; sources could reveal themselves as a mere propagandistic and/or celebrative means used by Rome. See in Lerouge-Cohen 1973: 165.

<sup>51</sup> Eutrop., VIII 3,2 e 6,2; Cass. Dio, LXVIII, 19, 3- LXVIII, 20, 3

<sup>52</sup> Plin. *Paneg.* 14,1

<sup>53</sup> Rome was soon to be engaged in restraining a number of riots (Cass. Dio, LXVIII 32-33,1), while Adrian's politics showed his indifference towards the Middle-Mesopotamic area, thus causing a withdrawal of the *Limes* (Eutrop., VIII 6,2), which once again overlapped with the Euphrates's banks.

<sup>54</sup> The historical problem about the indirect Roman control on the area thanks to the Palmyran intervention based on the Roman-Palmyran pact is not clear; anyway it is unlikely that the Palmyrans were on the area in place of the Arsacids because of an agreement with them.

Later on the area, the historical Roman events arose intensively during the diarchy of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (161-180)<sup>55</sup>, witnessing a successful military period<sup>56</sup>: in 163 Avidius Crassus, one of Lucius Verus's generals, moved to Armenia at first, later taking over Edessa (164), Ctesiphon (165) and, after the Parthian advance<sup>57</sup>, the Roman siege of Dura permitted to conquer back the Middle-Euphrates area, and its return under the Roman political influence, replacing the *Limes* further the southern side of Kifrin, while Edessa and Nusaybin were keeping long under the Roman control<sup>58</sup>. If Nusaybin became a frontier outpost on the *Limes* area, understood as an interfaced zone with the Parthian empire, how is underlined by M.G. Angeli Bertinelli<sup>59</sup>, the military expeditions were a Roman answer to the Parthian provocations, breaking because of the plague on the Tigris and Euphrates's regions<sup>60</sup>. The temporary power vacation into the Roman diarchy gave the Palmyrans the chance to control the region for a while, thus guaranteeing the safety of the caravan routes on the Euphrates river<sup>61</sup>, which once again became the environmental border line of the Roman empire. After the Roman conquest of Dura, in the town regular troops of Palmyran archers<sup>62</sup> are attested who perhaps were just occasionally located there<sup>63</sup>. The Roman overlay was determined on the collection of custom duty on the goods transiting across those zones. Dura gradually lost its trade importance because of the economic competition of the other northern Mesopotamian towns under the Roman influence, even if the area was not influenced by the Roman presence and indirectly

<sup>55</sup> Lucius Verus died on AD 168 and Marcus Aurelius took on the imperial authority *in toto*.

<sup>56</sup> Antony's policy was different from Trajan's one; the control of the Euphrates's border was guaranteed along the banks thanks to some fortified settlements placed also on the eastern river side.

<sup>57</sup> Cass. Dio, LXXI,2

<sup>58</sup> On the historical considerations based on the numismatic evidence see Oates 1968: 72.

<sup>59</sup> Id. 1976: 23.

<sup>60</sup> Fronto (*Principia Historiae*, II) is the main historical source of these events even if referred to short essays without chronological connections but sporadic informations are referred in Cass. Dio, LXXI 1-3, in Eutrop., VIII 10,2 and in Ammian., XXIII 6,24.

<sup>61</sup> The goods were transported from the frontier towns to the Mediterranean ports of the coastal Syria and were shipped under taxation, but the Parthians asked a transit tax, especially on those key areas of obligated transit at the borders with the Roman *Limes*.

<sup>62</sup> Since the Republican period, the Romans discovered they needed to improve and strengthen their cavalry to cope with the new standards the wars against enemies fighting according to different schemes had put; so they decided to introduce archer special auxiliary corps, the so-called *sagittari equitati*, enlisted in Syria, who took part into the war on Pompeus Roman side (See Caes, *bell.civ.* III 4-5). Just during the Flavian period some regular military units of cavalry-archers were created and placed on the eastern *Limes*.

<sup>63</sup> Palmyra had a contact with the Parthians and on the other side with the Romans; the trading relationships mediated into the area thanks to the Roman influence became a necessary means, which is documented thanks to the several Greek and Aramaic inscriptions found in Palmyra. Isaac underlines that the Palmyran military presence is attested because of the indirect Roman control, depending not exclusively on moving caravans protection but perhaps on a permanent role, occupying the key sites using regular troops properly trained to conform to the Roman standards: see in Isaac 1990: 155.



controlled by the Romans thanks to the auxiliary army consisting of Palmyran specialized troops, along the southern Euphrates's bank of Dura<sup>64</sup>. Specific political, military-strategic and financial-economical interests of the Romans in the Near East were the reason the particular attention to the problem of the relationships with the Parthians: from a non-interventionist diplomatic pattern (typical of Augustan period), the Romans moved to the interventionist side<sup>65</sup>, aiming to control the caravan routes and to consolidate the *Limes*, to guarantee the safe transit of products and goods<sup>66</sup>.

### (II-III Cent. AD)

During the chaotic period of the political fights between several Roman factions supported by fringe groups of the Army<sup>67</sup>, the favoured military corps of the Praetorian cohorts, so skilled on influencing the imperial court and the Roman policy, was dissolved and its function was replaced as a provincial troop, before the arrival of Septimius Severus in Asia<sup>68</sup>; Rome's policy, arrived at a turning point<sup>69</sup> thanks to their Emperor<sup>70</sup>, led to a

<sup>64</sup> The settlement of Kifrin probably took a relevant strategic and trading function on the Middle-Euphrates area it maintained during the entire Roman frequentation; so, Kifrin was the most important fortified town on the Eastern river bank of the Euphrates, outstretched to the Jazira's routes in direction of Hatra and the northern Mesopotamia: see Sommer 2005.

<sup>65</sup> See Angeli Bertinelli 1976: 5. The Trajan expansionistic targets, fed on the idea of a more defensive fortification of the Eastern *Limes* area, were supported by the economic and the financial demand. The creation of the Armenian, Mesopotamian and Assyrian provinces moved the Eastern *Limes* into an advanced post aiming to the homogeneous frontier from the Red Sea to the Asia Minor and the Black Sea. Trajan's plan was at first to extend the Roman control on the areas crossed by the rich trading traffics with the result to rule out the Parthians from the northern routes to contain the commercial flow suitably into the Mesopotamian area. The few historical sources of Arrian (*Partikà*) are very fragmentary (*Parth.* frg.5-17, 32-85, 99, 105) in the quote of Stephanus of Byzantium; the other sources are the *Principia Historiae* of Fronto and the Roman History of Cassio Dio (Cass. Dio, LXVIII, 17-32) but other references on Trajan's expeditions are available thanks to Eutropius's sources (VIII, 3). on minor sources see also Angeli Bertinelli 1976: 6.

<sup>66</sup> In particular on Trajan's politics, historical sources express strongly opposed opinions on Trajan's firm political idea pursuing personal glory. See Cass. Dio, LXVIII, 17,1.

<sup>67</sup> During AD 191 the Syrian province was nominated to Pescennius Niger and, after the death of Pertinax (AD 193), the governor proclaimed himself emperor in Antiochia, ruling on the Eastern Roman provinces. Septimius Severus, on the Western side, took the power in Rome with the Senate's agreement. So, Pescennius came to fight with Septimius Severus. After both the defection of some legions and the first heavy defeat of his general Asellius Emilianus in Cyzicus (AD 193), Pescennius was defeated in Nicaea (AD 194) and later in Issus; later on, he escaped towards Antiochia as a refugee. He got trapped, captured and killed.

<sup>68</sup> Septimius Severus stayed in Asia for two years aiming to make the Roman control safe on this critic section of the *Limes*

<sup>69</sup> Septimius Severus came back to Syria (AD 194), after being a *Legatus* of the *Legio IV Shythica* in Zeugma, to fight against the unlawful emperor Pescennius Niger. Even if Parthian kings of the Oshroene region and Hatra were on Pescennius Niger's side, it seems that they tried to extend their political influence on the area taking advantage from the Roman inner fights. This was perhaps the earliest fact which moved Septimius Severus against Hatra and the Parthians. See Edwell 2008: 26.

separation of the Roman Syria into two provinces, thus creating the *Syria Coele* from a strip of the *Syria Phoenice* to better control the entire zone. Septimius Severus moved against the Parthians to ensure the withdrawal of the enemy lines<sup>71</sup>. During the II Cent. AD Palmyra flourished as an important town on a strategic geographical position close to the desert borders and placed on the intersection point of several caravan routes, which permitted to its inhabitants to control the town and the main part of the trading traffic of the eastern area of the Roman empire<sup>72</sup>. The Palmyran merchants could move on large territories, across Dura as far as the Persian Gulf, with a free access to the several Parthian towns on the Tigris and on the Euphrates; here they probably had some trading posts. During this period Palmyra had its troops so organized and efficient as to patrolling the caravan routes and the wells on the Roman and the Parthian territories, protecting caravans and caravansaries from any sudden nomadic attacks<sup>73</sup>. The campaigns of Septimius Severus (AD 194-195 and AD 197-199) enlarged the extension of the areas controlled by Rome, overlapping on the limit of the Euphrates, therefore determining the Parthian giving ground on the Euphrates<sup>74</sup>. The strategic advantage obtained by the Romans<sup>75</sup> allowed them also to build the fortified post of Kifrin, seen from a political and military point of view as a means to enforce and to advance the eastern frontier of the empire on the pre-existent settlement<sup>76</sup>. Thanks probably to its geographical position, the site of Kifrin was

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<sup>70</sup> On Septimius Severus's wars see Cass. Dio, LXXV 1-3, 9-12, Herod., III 1,2-3; III 5,1; III 9,1-12; mentions in Eutrop. VIII 18,4; Ammian., XXIII 5,17; XXIV 6,1; XXV 8,5.

<sup>71</sup> Septimius Severus was connected to the Syrian cultural background thanks to his relatives' links, as M.G. Angeli Bertinelli underlines (see Id. 1979, *Roma quote*, p.95), Septimius's policy was feeding on the reaffirming of the Roman domains thanks to an expansionistic strategy. The new set of the frontier advanced as far to the northern Tigris (AD 195) was planned on the institution of the Roman provinces of Osroene and Mesopotamia (Cass. Dio, 75, 1-3), enlarging its influence of the vassal states of Armenia, Adiabene and Southern Mesopotamia. A safety policy conditioned the choice of a mixed border line which could use natural barriers (rivers and mountains), and to arrange military posts in the northern Mesopotamia positioned in the background of the Roman defensive system, but featuring more frontal pikes (like in Sinjara and Hatra); see Angeli Bertinelli 1979: 96, note n.200 but see also Id. 1976: 43.

<sup>72</sup> According to historians, the occasion is not set yet for Palmyra to be annexed to the Roman Empire; annexation, though, which occurred gradually and likely peacefully, without any particular or severe social, political, or military traumas. In the II Cent. AD Palmyra was already part of the Roman empire, and became a free city under Adrian II; the centre gained the status of "colonia romana" during Severus's era.

<sup>73</sup> The Palmyran contingent was constituted by horse-riding archers of camel troops and it was placed in Dura; it was a regular part of the Roman army with a specific function along the Euphrates's banks. The Romans overlaid the fortified posts on the previous ones by renovating and converting them to the Roman use. The Palmyran troops patrolled the area since the I Cent AD until the period when Septimius Severus included the entire area into the defensive system of the Roman *Limes*.

<sup>74</sup> Cass. Dio, LXXV 2,1; 9,3-5; Herod., III 9,9-11. The arrival of the *Cohors XX Palmyrenorum* probably is dated AD 211-212 when the military garrison was enlarged.

<sup>75</sup> See Angeli Bertinelli 1979: 78-79.

<sup>76</sup> About the Severian strategy of foundation and "re-foundation" of fortified posts, to be understood as the will of a durable Roman presence see Frezouls 1980: 375.

the expression of an Arab-Syriac cultural background into a civilizing environment influenced by the western culture; these syncretic cultural factors were the basis of the overlay and the fusion of several and different cultural contributions thanks to different civilizations. The discovery of many *ostraka* with Aramaic and Greek inscriptions (but also Latin inscriptions) shows a cultural mix into the Middle-Euphrates's area which probably is also expressed into the religious syncretism (in Kifrin, around the monumental area, ruins were found perhaps referred to a Parthian *iman*<sup>77</sup>). It seems a striking image that the Roman army contributed on the *Limes* area to an economic development of the eastern regions of the empire<sup>78</sup>: it stands out that the Roman presence into the East improved a complex and great system of trading and financial activities and locally the soldiers (especially the Roman high-officials represent a specific committee of several products<sup>79</sup> and *luxury goods*).

The Eastern empire became a modern “province” according to nowadays interpretation of the meaning of province, understood as an integrated part of the central Roman administration when Caracalla extended the Roman *civitas* to all free men. This happened thanks to the Citizenship Edict during AD 212, thus finishing the romanization of the provinces (215-217) begun during Septimius Severus's period. The useful and favourable result was taxation of all the new citizens of the empire, increasing the public revenue to pay the soldiers<sup>80</sup>. As a consequence, the II Cent. AD represented a political evolution from the coexistence between Romans and Parthian to the Roman conquering's aim which showed its main expression with the military campaigns of Trajan and Septimius Severus; during the II Cent. AD the eastern *Limes* menaced by the Parthians and the area was an interfaced zone with a considerable political role and both an economic and a strategic value, at first, on the Roman side. The evidence of these several interests was the

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<sup>77</sup> See Valtz 1985: 111-20.

<sup>78</sup> For a long time there was the historical supposition that the Roman army was the reason for the financial instability and for the anarchy during the III Cent. AD; it was supposed that the financial instability was determined by the heavy increment in the military outgoings (e.g., soldiers' wages), the way Septimius Severus had planned them. Therefore, the emperor aiming to these costs devaluated currency with the result of an inflation process.

<sup>79</sup> The imperial policy aimed to preserve the soldiers from the inflation's effects with the increase of their currency; from this point of view, the military outgoings seem not to be the cause of the inflation but just a way the Emperor used to keep control on a sturdy military structure, being the army considered the bridgehead protecting the central political power of the Roman managing class. The people, on the other hand, was more and more subject to heavy taxation, and could rely on a far less significant monetary power.

<sup>80</sup> During Caracalla's reign a readjustment of the military logistics is attested and the troop's operations moving to the East were limited to the Adiabene area of the Roman domain on the Eastern side of the Tigris river.

Roman fight against the Arsacids because of the Armenian affair<sup>81</sup>. The superiority of the Roman strength represented a moment of its power's affirmation over the Euphrates's border. As M.G. Angeli Bertinelli underlines<sup>82</sup>, the Romans have soon understood their impossibility to solve the Parthian affair on a definitive basis. The discontinuous historical phases between settling and siege which maintained the *status quo* of the *Limes* basically unvaried were interrupted little time before the mid of the III Cent AD: Rome lost the control of the area because of the Sasanian advance<sup>83</sup>, and the territory was abandoned before the arrival of enemy after one of Severus Alexander's campaigns (231-233), or during the incursions against Dura (239); it can be possible it happened during the advance against Hatra (240-241)<sup>84</sup> when the Middle-Euphrates area became a transit zone both for the Romans and the Sasanians<sup>85</sup>.

### Conclusions

On the Middle Euphrates area the Parthian period finished thanks to not at all clear historical dynamics: when Severus Alexander organized a number of military expeditions moving to the front of Armenia and Media, northern Mesopotamia and Middle-Euphrates strip<sup>86</sup>, also Hatra was included into the Roman defensive network against the common Persian enemy. If K. Butcher<sup>87</sup> says that it cannot be the supposition of an alliance or a pact between Rome and Hatra since the Septimius Severus's period *a priori* excluded, it could be

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<sup>81</sup> How M.G. Angeli Bertinelli underlines (Id. 1979: 81: (...) *gli Armeni sotto il profilo etnico erano una popolazione indigena composita, intatta da forti influssi della civiltà greco-ellenistica, con affinità di strutture sociali ed istituzionali di tipo feudale, con legami religiosi e culturali effetto di secolari relazioni che la univano alle genti iraniche. Il processo di "iranizzazione" del Paese, che traeva incentivo dai vincoli di parentela tra i re armeni e la dinastia arsacide si rifletteva anche nella terminologia pubblica statale (...)*. So, the Armenians of course (according to their nature and tendencies) were better included into the Parthian cultural influence and interests. The strategic function of Armenia represented a Roman military target during the re-organization of the Roman Eastern *Limes*; the control on the region was aimed to protect the provinces located in Asia Minor and Syria from both the Parthian and Caucasian invasions. Armenia also had an economic function because of its clearing role for the goods travelling along the ground caravan routes

<sup>82</sup> Id. 1979: 102.

<sup>83</sup> At the beginning of the III Cent. AD the Persian province of Fars arose against the Parthians under the leadership of Ardashir.

<sup>84</sup> The abandon of the Roman fortress of Kifrin is still a misunderstood issue: the list of the towns which were captured by Shapur begins with the name of "Ana" (conquered in AD 253) but not one toponym seems to be related to Kifrin. It is unlikely, on my accord, that Ana may have fallen at the time Kifrin was still in use.

<sup>85</sup> The Sasanians had both the military and the political controls over the Iranian regions after the Ardashir victories (AD 223-224) but in Armenia a policy oriented to the Parthian culture and to the Arsacid dynastic horizon was likely, sure of the Roman support until the time when the reign was divided between Rome and Persia (AD 387).

<sup>86</sup> The Roman presence in Hatra could be dated back at the period when the Army had the patrolling role on Mesopotamia and in *Syria Coele*. On the historical sources see Angeli Bertinelli 1979: 109, note 239.

<sup>87</sup> Butcher 2003: 55 and following.

a suggestive chance of revision of this part of history that is still little known due to the scarce amount of data available, which, on the other hand, cannot produce a significant and evident confirmation on the matter.

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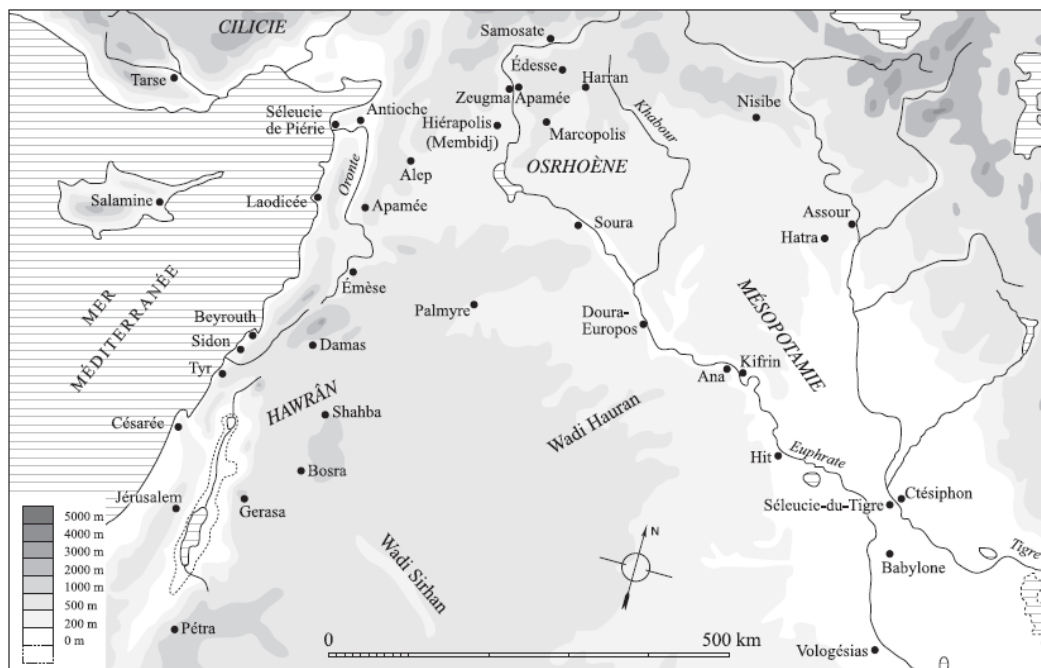
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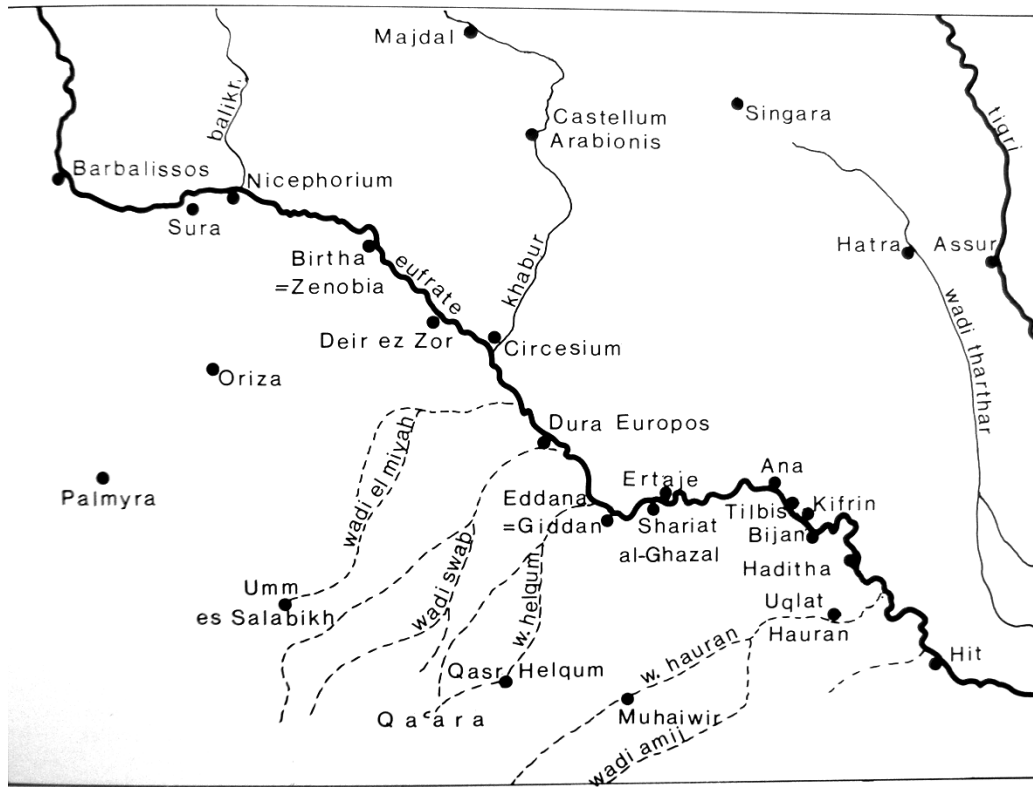
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