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BOOK REVIEWS

On the edge of the empire: northern Mesopotamia in the Roman period

By Rocco Palermo. 288 pp. London and New York, Routledge, 2019.

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While the Roman presence in Mesopotamia has not been a principal focus of many near eastern archaeologists, the topic has not actually been neglected and the past few decades have seen a steady stream of monographs on related subjects—Fergus Millar's *The Roman Near East* (1993), for example, Warwick Ball's *Rome in the East* (2000), Kevin Butcher's *Roman Syria and the Near East* (2003), and Peter Edwell's *Between Rome and Persia: The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control* (2008). While each of these works has constituted a major step forward, until now there has been no modern study of Roman activities in Mesopotamia specifically, whether considered as a region or as the formal province of the empire. It is against this background that Rocco Palermo has set himself the task of remedying this deficit in this ground-breaking new work. Research into this subject is not easy—the material is patchy, damaged, and scattered, and bringing it together and presenting it in a commentated synthesis is a much-needed and hugely welcome contribution to the field.

The work opens with a consideration of some of the key theoretical issues pertinent to the study of empires—analysis of the interplay between the ideological, political, military, and economic forces governing empires, and how these shaped the interactions of governor and governed, core and periphery, the periphery and the world beyond the *limes.* This necessitates an evaluation of what is actually meant by hegemony, and how it can be imposed. The resourcing and fielding of a military presence is only possible with the imposition of a bureaucracy, but what was the nature and extent of this bureaucracy, how far did it permeate into the society, what was the balance between coercion, incentive, and interest?

Chapter 2 starts from a different point of the spectrum, looking at the geography and climate of the region, working out from this to consider how these factors shaped, or indeed determined, the historical trajectory. The role of water is paramount and was clearly a decisive factor channelling and constraining the physical manifestation of Roman rule to a far greater degree than in many other parts of the empire. On to this must also be laid an understanding of how the millennia of migrations, incursions, and invasions have turned Mesopotamia not just into a melting pot, nor even just a palimpsest, but a region whose cultural, ethnic, and religious characteristics make it a tinderbox.

Chapter 3 moves on to an overview of how the history of Roman intervention in Mesopotamia has been understood to date. This is based not just on the traditional historical sources but also on the evidence from inscriptions, coins, and archaeology. The

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remit set by the work is the study of the period of direct Roman intervention in Mesopotamia, here essentially defined as from the invasion of Trajan (114 AD) to the evacuation of the region and the ceding of the Roman province of Mesopotamia to the Sasanians in 363 AD. The author does give (p.25) a very brief resumé of previous Roman involvement in the region (notably the campaign of Crassus in 53 BC), but a little more on the context of preceding relations between Rome and Parthia (for instance, the treaties with Parthia that were successively concluded by Sulla (96 BC), Lucullus (68 BC), and Pompey (65 BC), and the aggressive actions of Pompey) would have been beneficial; interesting in this context is a destruction layer in a fortified manor at the site of Qalatga Darband[1] in Iraqi Kurdistan dated to the first century BC, the most plausible cause of which is a Roman campaign.

Palermo draws out the logic of Trajan's invasion, and that it was not simply a thirst for glory in the manner of Crassus or Caracalla. In general terms, control and protection of trade was a major issue, but there was a more specific reason in terms of the geopolitical dynamic: securing Mesopotamia was essential for guaranteeing the safety of Nisibis, itself a strategic necessity for launching the campaign into Armenia. There is some archaeological corroboration for this operation: a destruction layer at the site of Tell Barri in the Habur in Syria attributed to this campaign on the basis of numismatic evidence, and, outstandingly, Palermo has located (pp.29–30) a previously lost milestone dating to the reign of Trajan,[2] originally found near Jebel Sinjar and evidently marking the road from Nisibis to Singara—quite how it came to be in Erbil Museum is anyone's guess! Also worth mentioning is the thick layer of ash discovered running all the way across the exposure in the recent excavations on the citadel of Erbil, dated by radiocarbon to the early second century AD and likewise interpreted as a destruction layer from the time of Trajan.[3] If correct, this is an event not mentioned in the texts. With regard to the new provinces of Assyria and Mesopotamia allegedly formed by Trajan (p.28), opinions differ on the extent to which these actually materialised: from the maximalist, that they covered upper and lower Mesopotamia respectively; to the more restrictive, that Mesopotamia covered northwest Mesopotamia up to the Khabur (therefore equating with the later province of Mesopotamia), while, if there really was a province of Assyria, it must have corresponded to the territory of Adiabene; to the minimalist, that there was in fact no province of Assyria, this being an invention of historians in the fourth century.[4] Whatever the truth, it cannot be ruled out that Trajan really did intend to organise Mesopotamia into Roman provinces, and may even have put the first wheels into motion, though it is certain they can never have had the time to have become fully fledged up-and-running entities.

Whatever the intention, these Mesopotamian possessions were in any case relinquished by Hadrian on his succession at the death of Trajan. There followed a period of some decades with little (known) interaction between Parthia and Rome, until punctured by the conflict of 161–166 AD which, in response to Parthian aggression in Armenia, saw the Roman general Avidius Cassius advancing down the Euphrates as far as Ctesiphon and Seleucia until, his army ravaged by plague, he too was forced to withdraw. While it is difficult to pinpoint any direct archaeological trace of the campaign itself, the subsequent

[1] For the site, see J. MacGinnis et al., 'Excavations at the Darband-i Rania pass, Iraqi Kurdistan: report on the 2016 and 2017 seasons', *Iraq* 82 (2020).

[2] See D. Oates, *Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq*, 2nd edn (London, 1968; reprinted 2008), p. 71.

[3] See D. Al-Yaqoobi, M. Shepperson and J. MacGinnis, 'Excavations on the fortifications of the Citadel of Erbil', in *Proceedings of the 10th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, (eds) B. Horejs et al. (Wiesbaden, 2018), Vol. 2, pp. 452–454.

[4] For more detailed references, see J. MacGinnis, 'Hellenistic rule and Roman operations in Babylonia and Assyria', in *The Oxford Handbook on Hellenistic and Roman Syria* (Oxford, in press), n. 18.

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Roman occupation of Dura Europos[5] and of islands in the Euphrates such as Ana and Kifrin was a legacy of this episode.

The actual and lasting creation of a province of Mesopotamia was a result of the campaigns of Septimius Severus undertaken in order to eliminate his rival to the throne, Pescennius Niger. The first campaign (195 AD) saw the defeat of Pescennius Niger's ally Osrhoene, the kingdom centred on Edessa (modern Urfa), at which time it was turned into a province of the same name. The province of Mesopotamia appears to have been created after Severus's second eastern campaign (197 AD). Palermo, working largely from inscriptions from elsewhere in the empire, presents what can be reconstructed of the organisation of these provinces (pp.36–41). At first separate provinces, Osrhoene and Mesopotamia were merged some time around 222 AD, the capital probably at Nisibis. This, however, did not last long and probably no later than the middle of the third century they were split again into two separate provinces (pp.40, 41). Within this history must also be considered (p.48) the fact that Mesopotamia was lost to Shapur I in 224 AD, briefly regained by Gordion III in 243 BC, then ceded to the Persians in 244 until finally recaptured by Philip the Arab in 245 BC.

The regime change that took place in Persia in 224 AD with the replacement of the Parthian by the Sasanian dynasty did not lead to any cessation in the cycle of hostilities, which resumed with the campaign of Severus Alexander. In terms of the archaeological record, Palermo (p.48) questions Oates' dating of the abandonment of Ain Sinu to 244 AD (suggesting it could be later), and notes Invernizzi's interpretation of the numismatic evidence from Kifrin (disputed by Valtz) that the island must have been ceded to Shapur I after 244 AD (p.50). A *nadir* for the Romans was the capture of the emperor Valerian by Shapur in 260 AD. And so the vicissitudes continued, a lengthy spell of peace following the treaty negotiated between Diocletian and Narseh eventually giving way to hostilities in the reigns of Constantine, Constantius II, and Julian. For the present narrative, the tale ends in 363 AD with the emperor Jovian's ceding of the province of Mesopotamia (among other possessions) to Shapur II.

The preceding chapters form the framework against which the core study of the work—understanding the impact of the Roman Empire in and on Mesopotamia in the second to fourth centuries BC—can proceed. Palermo approaches this by exploring a tripartite division of the imperial territory—main centres, minor settlements, and the rural landscape—through the twin lenses of the historical narrative and the archaeological record. Actually, outside of the major centres and forts (see below), the imprint of the rule of Rome on her Mesopotamian holding is not so obvious: Roman ceramics are sparse, inscriptions even more so, Roman architectural features rare. Of course, the major centres had a direct impact on the countryside. In terms of sustenance, for example, Palermo, following parameters laid out by Wilkinson, demonstrates (pp.69–70) that the catchment area of 'expendable agricultural potential' of Singara must have been somewhere between 17 and 34 square kilometres.

In Chapter 4 Palermo focuses on the dominant urban centres of Roman Mesopotamia, in which he includes Nisibis, Singara, Rhesaina, and Hatra. After a discussion of issues such as the relationship of the urban centres with the countryside, the impact on the environment, demographic differentials, and the persistent problem of not being able to identify places known from written sources with sites on the ground and vice versa, the chapter then gives in-depth studies of these four centres, reviewing in each case the mosaic of data available from archaeological, historical, epigraphic, iconographic,

[5] See now J. A. Baird, *Dura-Europos* (London, 2018) and S. James, *The Roman Military Base at Dura-Europos, Syria: An Archaeological Visualisation* (Oxford, 2019).

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numismatic, and overhead imagery sources.[6] While Palermo's grasp on the last is not in doubt, the efficacy of his argument is undermined by the quality of the images as reproduced (see below). That aside, the presentation and elaboration on the evidence is very good. The role of these locations as administrative headquarters, trading centres, hubs of communication, and military garrisons is very well explored. Palermo addresses (p.73; p.109, n.58) the question of where the legions I and III Parthica were based (II Parthica being, rather oddly, stationed in Italy), making the proposal that I Parthica moved to Nisibis after the ceding of Singara to the Sasanians in the treaty of 363 BC.

Chapter 5 examines minor settlements, small forts, and camps. Identifying Roman forts is not as easy as one might hope. The rectangular features visible in overhead imagery—the most common lead to locating such sites, studied from the time of Poidebard onwards—are a good start, but neither the dating nor the imperial attribution (i.e. Roman or Parthian/Sasanian) can be determined from imagery alone (pp.145–147, also p.202). Even excavation will not necessarily answer this problem—it may indeed clarify the dating of an occupation, but may still not give a definitive answer as to the political affiliation. Of some interest in this regard is the site of Seh Gubba, located 90 km north of Mosul on the west bank of the Tigris. Ceramics (including brittle ware) date the site to the second–third century, and a sounding conducted in the course of the Saddam (Mosul) Dam rescue campaign found a well-made floor apparently covered with a mosaic, but, as Palermo rightly points out, without more extensive excavations and/or epigraphic evidence, the attribution of this site remains uncertain. Nevertheless, Seh Gubba certainly lies in a location where we would expect a Roman fort, and the tentative identification of the site with *castra maurorum*, an installation known from Ammianus to have been ceded to Shapur II along with Nisibis and Singara, is plausible. Palermo also mentions (p.122) an alternative proposition for the identification of *castra maurorum*, a small square fort southeast of modern Qamishli, near the village of Qubur al Bid: but such a location strikes me as far too close to Nisibis. In terms of large-scale centres, the site of Bezabde, another Roman base of major importance, particularly in the fourth century, is tentatively identified with the remains at Eski Hendek, 15 km northwest of Cizre (now in modern Turkey). In terms of medium-size establishments, Palermo considers Tell Tuneneir, in the Habur southeast of Hasake, taken to harbour the remains of the administrative centre of Thannouris known from the *notitia dignatatum*; and Ain Sinu, 30 km east of Beled Sinjar, excavated by David Oates in the 1950s and identified by him as the Zagurae of the Peutinger Map. The chapter concludes with a review of a number of other possible forts in the north Mesopotamian theatre.[7]

Chapter 6 is devoted to Tell Barri, a large mound with a lower town on the Jaghjagh just north of Tell Brak. While, as expected for a large site in the region, Tell Barri has occupations going back millennia (including important remains from the Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian periods), it is unique in being the only site in north Mesopotamia with important levels dating to the Roman occupation which were not just excavated in modern times (1980–2010) and with modern methods, but which were specifically targeted as part of the project research objectives. The remains include a fortification wall built with baked brick foundations and a mudbrick superstructure (possibly destroyed by Trajan), a (probable) administrative building, houses, and workshops. These remains give a so far unique insight into daily life under Roman rule. Palermo approaches this through the

[6] An additional important work, evidently in press at very much the same time as the present work, is J. M. Schlude and B. B. Rubin, *Arsacids, Romans and Local Elites* (Oxford, 2017); the chapter by Edwell is particularly valuable for the numismatic evidence.

[7] With regard to the Upper Tigris, one can add that the excavations at Ziyaret Tepe, 60 km east of Diyarbakir, revealed an occupation dated by numismatics from the third to sixth centuries AD: see, for now, T. Matney et al., 'Excavations at Ziyaret tepe, Diyarbakir Province, Turkey, 2011–2014 seasons', *Anatolica* 41 (2015), pp. 141–145.

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ceramics, specifically by analysing the different quantities of various ceramic types in the levels of the first to fourth centuries AD. He is able to draw a number of interesting conclusions. These include the correlation of glazed ware with domestic quarters, and demonstration of the 'spatial rebooting' (p.181) of Area E at the site, transformed from a bustling area of domestic quarters prior to the passing of Trajan to a more open use, perhaps characterised by workshops. With regard to 'brittle ware', Palermo is of the opinion that it 'indicates a broader ceramic horizon, more common to western Syrian than Mesopotamia, but it does not serve as an ethnic indicator or political marker' (p.186). A little later on this is modulated, with the statement that 'the presence or absence of brittle ware suggests some form of interaction or relation with Rome' (p.202). Actually these views are not contradictory: it is fair to say that brittle ware is a manifestation of areas controlled by Rome, though not as a direct political indicator. Most likely the spread is the result of a more oblique process, manufactured and sold by a more informal network of logistic support (one might say camp-followers). Hitherto (and actually still) knowledge of Roman period (and actual Roman) ceramics in northern Mesopotamia has been virtually non-existent, limited almost exclusively to materials recovered in survey which have, nevertheless, been used as diagnostic in a very nearly circular process entailing a huge level of inaccuracy and misunderstanding. The material from Tell Barri is, therefore, of exceptional importance.

Chapter 7 turns to the subject of the landscape. The primary tool for research here is surface survey. Palermo discusses theoretical and practical challenges facing such surveys, then gives an overview of the many surveys which have taken place in northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and Iraqi Kurdistan over the past three-and-a-half decades. This is a very useful summary. Considering the data from these different surveys, Palermo is able to note decreases in settlement intensity from the Hellenistic to the Parthian period and to reconstruct the ancient route systems. He goes on to show (p.200) how the route network as recovered from survey data can, at least partially, be mapped on to the network presented in the Peutinger Map. This appears to work particularly well with the road which came south from Nisibis through the Jebel Ishkaft pass to meet the main east-west road skirting the south side of Jebel Sinjar.

Chapter 8 builds on this to further explore the Roman route system in Mesopotamia. The chief lines of evidence are (1) the data from surveys, (2) hollow ways, generally recognised from satellite imagery, but whose dating is often problematic, and (3) the Peutinger Map. Five or six major routes traversed Mesopotamia. Palermo examines each of these in detail, and makes many suggestions for correlations between stops noted in the Peutinger Map with sites on the ground. At least one of the routes would not necessarily have been postulated without the testimony of this (p.225). One interesting observation thrown up is that there is no particular evidence for roads from the lower Habur to the Euphrates or from Hatra to the middle Tigris basin. In the case of the Peutinger Map, this is surely a reflection of the milieu of the time of its composition, a clue that it must have been drawn up after the Roman retraction of 363 AD.

Up to this point the focus has been on the fixed apparatus of the landscape—the provincial centres, forts, routes, the access to water, the locations of the legions. Chapter 9 by contrast deals with an aspect which was constantly changing and never in stasis: nomads, and their relations with the Roman regime. The interaction between mobile groups is an issue faced by all civilisations. The encroachment of settled civilisation on lands which were also part of the nomadic territorial repertoire, combined with the lure of the cultivated, was always a recipe for conflict. This is directly attested from at least the late third millennium BC, when the Ur III state strove to resist the incursions of the Amorites. While there has been a tendency to think of nomads in terms of their ethnic affiliation, Palermo stresses that a more meaningful understanding is according to their economic strategies

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(above all, what type of animals they exploited) and their environmental domains; the two are of course closely related. But while the differing interests of nomads and states can lead to conflict, in Syria, at any rate, the nomads benefited from the stability brought by the Roman annexation and actually became part of the integrated system of control along the *limes* (p.234). The evidence for this is primarily the classical authors, though supplemented by sources such as the papyri from Dura Europos and the middle Euphrates; archaeological traces, however, are next to impossible to establish. Strabo distinguishes between the Skenitae—'ten-dwellers'—chiefly located in the Jezireh, and the Arabs who were to be found in 'Parapotamia', along the banks of the Euphrates. According to Pliny and Dio, the territory occupied by the Arabs was considerably more extensive, from Jebel Sinjar across to Adiabene, and indeed from Babylonia up to Edessa. These sources touch upon the relationship of these peoples with the Roman *imperium*, but of course they interacted with both empires, Parthian-Sasanian and Roman, and thereby formed something of a bridge between the two. Hatra, where inscriptions tell of an Arab kingdom, assumed a role of central importance, both politically and as a religious capital, to both nomads and Arabs.

In Chapter 10 Palermo gives an overall assessment of the impact of Roman rule in Mesopotamia. Overwhelmingly, this is visible in the major centres. Minor settlements appear to have been affected only to a very small degree. It is true that the amount of research into such sites on the ground has not so far been great—this is certainly one of the challenges and opportunities for future fieldwork—but in the salient exception where excavations have taken place, Tell Barri, the material evidence for Roman rule is very restricted. This does not mean that rural settlements did not come under the Roman taxation system—they clearly must have done—but that this was administered through indigenous mechanisms maintained in place and utilised by the Roman administration. Even so, while formal contact with Roman officials may have been largely restricted to the local elite, the wider population of the countryside cannot have entirely avoided running into the Roman infrastructure in the province (roads and forts): so there must have been contact, but the degree of cultural cross-fertilisation appears to have been minimal. As Palermo puts it (p.252), minor cities were 'left undisturbed by all the thriving processes that can be observed elsewhere in the Roman Near East and generally throughout the empire'. In this far-flung corner the Roman 'civilising' mission ran out of steam: Rome did not establish deep roots in Mesopotamia. This 'failed integration' in the countryside was real, and is not just a product of the meagre archaeological data. Unfortunately, the nature and extent of the social and political processes that materialised in the cities are also severely obscured by lack of data, which is not to say that they did not take place.

I cannot close this review without some words on the quality of the actual production. There are a number of shortcomings. First, the work would really have benefited from having at least a few more images. In the case of coins it would, for example, have been useful to illustrate the coin of Philip the Arab (p.59) and exemplars of coins from the mints of Singara, Osrhoene, and the other regional mints (p.82). It is a shame that the spectacular fibula of Hercules killing the Nemean lion (p.182) is similarly not illustrated. Secondly, the quality of the photographic reproduction is not always good. This is particularly true with some of the satellite images, which in places are very hard to decipher. In the section dealing with major centres, while Corona images of Sinjar, Rhesaina, and Hatra are shown, the reproduction is too small,[8] and Nisibis is missing. In all cases the corresponding images would have very neatly filled a whole page. With

[8] A minor point: the caption to Figure 5.3 should state that this is a Corona satellite image, not a photograph taken from the east side of the Tigris.

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the image of Hatra (p.98), it is surprising that the siege wall is not pointed out (and indeed surprising that this is not discussed at any length in the text). On the other hand, the provision of the many maps, which Palermo has clearly gone to great effort to create, is excellent—it is one of the real strengths of the work. I would just point out that in the case of the distribution map of minor settlements (p.117), the small lettering in white makes it virtually unreadable. Similarly, the diagrams illustrating ceramic frequencies (pp.178–179), which are important, would have benefited from being redrawn in a programme such as Illustrator.

The other problem is the quality of the binding: by the time I had finished reading the book it had fallen apart. These shortcomings are regrettable. But they are soluble, and it is very much to be hoped that in any future edition of the work they will be remedied. They distract, but do not detract, from the value of this work. In due course a second edition could give both a more extensive selection of images, including in colour, as well as addressing these issues of production quality. But on the scholarly side, Palermo can be justly proud of this excellent monograph, which will clearly be indispensable to Mesopotamianists, near eastern archaeologists, and historians of the Roman Empire for many years to come. He has established himself as the interpreter of the archaeology of Roman Mesopotamia for his generation.

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The Last Muslim Conquest: The Ottoman Empire and Its Wars in Europe

By Gabor Agoston. pp. xv, 664. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021.

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Gabor Agoston's *The Last Muslim Conquest: the Ottoman Empire and its Wars in Europe* is a highly detailed account of Ottoman military expansion into the Balkans and the subsequent conflict with the Hungarian kingdom and the Habsburgs of Vienna. Its greatest strength is in its simultaneous incorporation of the Ottoman, Hungarian, and Habsburg archives and secondary scholarship hitherto underused in English language scholarship.

Agoston intends in Part One, "Emergence," to show how "Ottoman conquest shaped European history, especially that of southeastern and central Europe, the main theater of Ottoman expansion." (p. 6). This part of the book was originally intended to be a short introduction the Ottoman-Habsburg borderlands but Agoston later decided it should be a broader study (p.7). He begins with a chapter on the Early Ottomans in which he discusses the beginnings of the Ottoman state growing from a war band surrounding a successful leader to a small frontier principality. Agoston emphasizes the importance of both religious motivations—*ghaza*, or raiding for the faith—and booty as motivating factors for Ottoman expansion in this period. Although he brings up historian Paul Wittek's focus on *ghaza* as the motivation for the early Ottomans and the subsequent literature complicating that idea, Agoston does not deeply engage with this important debate on the

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