



CARRHAE

CARRHAE (Ḥarrān), town in Mesopotamia, where in May 53 b.c. a decisive battle was fought between the Parthians commanded by a member of the Sūrēn (Lat. Surena) family and the Romans under the triumvir M. Licinius Crassus, “without doubt the most celebrated episode of Parthian history” (Bivar, p. 49). Our main source of information on this event is an unknown historian, probably a hellenized Mesopotamian (Tarn, 1951, p. 50, bottom), who witnessed the event and wrote an account used extensively by Plutarch in his “Crassus.” The unknown chronicler’s account is well-informed and impartial and “gives us a better account of the battle of Carrhae and its preliminaries than we possess of most battles of antiquity; also we know what *both* sides were doing” (ibid., p. 51). Livy’s *History of Rome* included a somewhat romanticized chapter on the invasion of Crassus now lost but used by Dio Cassius (40.12-27) and later historians of whose works fragments are extant. There are also notices by contemporary writers (e.g., Cicero, *De divinatione* 2.22, and Seneca, *Epistles* 4.7). These fragments and notices have been listed by Regling (esp. p. 357), Debevoise (pp. 78-79), and others. The most important studies include Rawlinson (pp. 150-78), Mommsen (pp. 341-53), Regling (pp. 357-94), Groebe, Smith, Günther (pp. 14-38), and Debevoise (pp. 70-95).

Causes. The traditional view that this episode was the consequence of Crassus’ incompetence and personal quest for glory (cf. Cicero’s verdict that there existed “no cause for the war” in *De finibus bonorum et malorum* 3.22; cf. K. Schippmann, in *EIr.* II/5, p. 528; further references in Regling, p. 362 n. 1) must



be discarded (Regling, pp. 362f.; Ziegler, p. 32). The course of events had in fact been leading up to a confrontation for a century. On one hand Parthia had resurrected the Persian empire without adhering to a policy of systematic incorporation of neighboring nations (Ziegler, pp. 3ff.); on the other, Rome had expanded eastward in its pursuit of world domination and had subjugated various hellenized Iranians of Asia Minor by means of force, political intrigue, and brinkmanship. When Mithridates VI of Pontus fled before the Romans to his father-in-law, Tigranes the Great of Armenia, Lucullus pursued him. Marching on the Armenian capital Tigranocerta (near Mardin) he approached the Parthian border (Regling, pp. 358ff.; Debevoise, pp. 70f.; Ziegler, pp. 20ff. with refs.) and urged the Parthian king, whom Mithridates and Tigranes had asked for help, to remain neutral. He replied amicably to both sides and proposed to Lucullus that the Euphrates should be recognized as the boundary between Parthia and Rome (Plutarch, "Lucullus," 25ff.; Appian, *Mithridateios* 87; Dio Cassius, 36.1ff.; Sallust, *Histories* 4 frag. 69; further references in Rawlinson, pp. 132ff., 152ff.; Regling, pp. 359ff.; Debevoise, pp. 70-71; and Ziegler, pp. 23ff.). But, while pretending to negotiate, Lucullus planned an attack on Parthia and was dissuaded only by the rebellion of his troops (Plutarch, "Lucullus," 30; Dio Cassius, 36.3; Appian, *Mithridateios* 87; Cicero, *Oratio pro lege Manila* 23-24; Sallust, *Histories* 4 frag. 72). His successors went even further. While in the Caucasus region, Pompey sounded a possible conquest of the East, asking about the distance to India (Plutarch, "Pompey," 36; Pliny, *Natural History* 6.52), and he later invaded Gorduene, a Parthian dependency (Dio Cassius, 37.5.2). Gabinius, whose command included the territories of Syria, Arabia, Persia, and Babylonia (Cicero, *De domo sua* 60, 124; Debevoise, p. 77) lent assistance to Mithridates of Parthia, who had rebelled against his newly-crowned brother Orodes/Hyrodas (Dio Cassius, 39-56; Justin, 42.4.1; Appian, *Syriaca* 51, cf. Plutarch, "Crassus," 21). This interference led to open hostilities between the Romans and the Parthians, who had remained their allies, at least nominally. The Romans considered Parthia to be just another Asiatic state, thereby misjudging its strong national identity, its abundant resources, and the determination of its people to defend their independence. Thus, to the Romans the successful conquest of the East seemed inevitable (Rawlinson, pp. 141ff.; Debevoise, pp.70ff.; Ziegler, pp. 23ff.) and came as a legacy to Crassus, who desired to rival the military achievements of Caesar and Pompey (on Crassus see Marshall). Calling the victories of Lucullus and Pompey "child's play," he declared his aim to be the conquest of the East as far as Bactria and India (Plutarch, "Crassus," 16). The Parthians, on the other hand, had good intelligence of the Roman affairs (cf. *ibid.*, 17-18;



Debevoise, p. 82) and prepared their defense accordingly (Rawlinson, p. 151).

The invasion. Orodes' young and able general of the Surena family (cf. Plutarch's praise of him, "Crassus," 21) quelled the rebellions of Mithradates and Seleucia-Ctesiphon just as the Roman invasion commenced (Debevoise, pp. 79ff.; a somewhat different account in Bivar, pp. 48-55). When Crassus was made governor of Syria in 55 b.c. "everyone knew a Parthian war was intended" (Debevoise, pp. 79-80). It was an unpopular war (Plutarch, "Crassus," 16; Regling, loc. cit., and pp. 359ff.; Ziegler, pp. 32f.), but Caesar supported it, sending some 1,000 of his finest Gallic cavalry under Crassus' own son, Publius, to serve in the invasion (Plutarch, "Crassus," 17). Crassus spent his first year in Syria, expelling a small Parthian garrison, fortifying towns, and probably training his troops; he also plundered native sanctuaries (the temple in Jerusalem, the temple of Atargatis at Hierapolis-Bambyce), incurring the natives' hostility (Regling, pp. 364ff.; Smith, pp. 237ff.; Debevoise, pp. 78ff.; Günther, pp. 14ff.). Early in May 53 he crossed the Euphrates at Zeugma (Plutarch, "Crassus," 19, with Regling, p. 374) with a substantial force of 7 legions (nearly 34,000 men) of heavy-armed infantry, 4,000 horsemen, and some 4,000 light-armed foot soldiers (on the numbers see Günther, pp. 18ff.; Debevoise, p. 33 with refs.). Furthermore, Roman allies pledged support. Abgar of Osrhoene (called Ariamnes by Plutarch, "Crassus," 21) and an Arab leader, Alchaudonius, undertook to lead the Romans through the Mesopotamian desert (cf. Plutarch, "Crassus," 22) across the Balicha (Balīk) river (details in Günther, p. 28 n. 2) and Ḳabūr toward Ctesiphon and to provide him with cavalry (Dio Cassius, 32.2; 40.20; cf. Plutarch, "Crassus," 22). Artabazes/[Artavasdes](#), king of Armenia, however, had promised additional infantry and a considerable force of heavy cavalry, suggesting that Crassus should take the northwesterly route, pass through Armenian hills—where Parthian heavy cavalry would be least effective, and then invade Parthia (Plutarch, "Crassus," 19). This must have been accepted as a sound and feasible strategy given the preparations Orodes made for it (cf. Tarn, 1932, p. 607). His attempts at negotiation having failed (Plutarch, "Crassus," 1618; Dio Cassius, 40.16). Orodes personally led the Parthian army into Armenia and safeguarded that flank (Plutarch, "Crassus," 22), while his brilliant general, Surena, not yet thirty, took his own personal levies of 10,000 horse archers—a thousand of them mailed (on the Parthian army, see [army](#))—and waited in Mesopotamia in case Crassus or his Arab allies should invade from the central sector (Plutarch, "Crassus," 20ff.; Günther, pp. 20ff. with refs.). The Iranians had usually fared badly against well-armed and highly-trained Greek or Macedonian infantry,



and Surena's reliance on cavalry—the force best suited for the Mesopotamian plains—was a “brilliant idea” (Mommsen, p. 328). He realized that “archers were useless without arrows; this does not seem to have occurred to anyone before” (Tarn, 1932, p. 607). So he brought along 1,000 camels loaded with arrows, thereby providing his archers with an inexhaustible supply of missiles (Plutarch, “Crassus,” 25). “For the first time in history, so far as is known, there had appeared a trained professional force dependent solely on long-range weapons and with enough ammunition for a protracted fight” (Tarn, loc. cit.).

Historians (since Plutarch, “Crassus,” 30) have often blamed Crassus for not having accepted Artavasdes' offer and guidance, following instead the advice of his treacherous Mesopotamian allies and taking the shortest route towards Ctesiphon through the Mesopotamian desert. This was the Arab trade route that crossed the Euphrates at Bambyce (Membij), passed to the southwest, crossed the Balicha river between Carrhae and Ichnae, and tilted down towards Babylonia (details of topography in Günther, pp. 22ff.). The duplicity of Abgar and Alchaudonius cannot be substantiated, however, and it is not certain that this desert route would have lacked water in mid-spring, when Crassus was traversing it (Debevoise, p. 85). The Armenian king, too, was probably playing a double game, as the northwesterly direction would have cost much more time. The Roman general, moreover, had left garrisons along the way, and was merely retracing his earlier route. Above all, he had no idea what the Parthians had prepared against him. Basing his views on earlier Roman conquests, he was convinced that he could dominate any engagements or circumstances (cf. Plutarch, “Crassus,” 17ff.; Dio Cassius, 40.16). Keeping to the Euphrates, Crassus reached Bambyce, where his scouts reported enemy tracks suggesting that their cavalry was riding eastward along the Arab trade route. (The following account of the campaign is based on Plutarch, “Crassus,” 20ff., with Regling, Smith, and Günther.) Crassus's quaestor Cassius Longinus advised him to continue the march along the Euphrates, thereby securing supplies of water. But, desiring to pursue and catch up with what he mistakenly believed to be a retreating Parthian force, but what was, in fact, only a Parthian reconnaissance unit, Crassus could not take any other route (e.g., the regular Parthian road from Zeugma to Nicephorium and thence to Seleucia-Ctesiphon) than the Arab trade route with Abgar as his guide. Shortly thereafter Artavasdes' envoys reached him with the news of Orodes' occupation of Armenia. From then on, not only was Artavasdes unable to help Crassus, but also himself urgently needed help from the Romans (Plutarch, “Crassus,” 20-25).



The engagement. Crassus marched on, disregarding his men's tiredness as well as their increasing apprehensiveness as they heard rumors and reports about the power of the Parthian archery. On 6 May he and his tired and hungry men reached the Balicha river south of Carrhae. His officers advocated a night's rest and reconnaissance of the area, but, anxious to catch up with the enemy he halted only long enough to allow his men to eat in rank and then moved southward. At this time his scouts rushed in to say that the Parthian force was upon them. Abgar and Alchaudonius saw that all was lost and they left the field with their mounted warriors, an act that the Roman historians later interpreted as treachery and the cause of the disaster that befell the Romans (cf. Tarn's comments, 1932, pp. 608f.).

Crassus' plan of engagement as described by Plutarch ("Crassus," 23) cannot be correct in all details. His battle formation, according to Regling's and Smith's studies, seems to have been as follows: He intended to group 48 of his battalions (or cohorts) in a hollow square to form a front on any of the four sides as the need arose. A small squadron of cavalry was placed alongside each infantry battalion. Only three sides of the square were completed before the engagement began, however. The left wing, under Cassius, flanked the river; the center was commanded by Crassus, and the right by Publius. Publius's forces included 1,000 Gallic horsemen, 300 additional mounted fighters, 500 light-armed infantry, and a body of 8 battalions remaining out of the square for free maneuvers. The rest of the light-armed men were placed in front, while the baggage-train and other non-fighting attendants brought up the rear. The Parthians seem to have formed two loosely-connected sectors (cf. Plutarch, "Crassus," 23ff.): first came a thousand heavy-armed, mailed cavalry (the cataphracts, see *EIr.* II, pp. 495f.); then the bulk of the army: 9,000 horse archers, whose "compound bow" was stronger than anything known in Europe and whose arrows could penetrate the Roman legionnaire's defensive armor (Plutarch, "Crassus," 24-25, and Brown). A train of one thousand camels loaded with arrows was stationed in the rear.

The bravery, steadfastness, and experience of the Romans were undeniable, but they were prepared for hand-to-hand fighting and expected to face shots only for a short time before closing in (Plutarch, "Crassus," 23-24). They had no experience with the compound bow, however, and, being on foot, were unable effectively to avoid or pursue the Parthian horsemen. The Parthians had all the mobility they needed, and their supply of missiles was immense. In consequence, it was the Parthians who carried the day, despite being



outnumbered one to four by the Romans.

The timing of the battle was critical. It began in the afternoon of 6 May (= 9 June 701 of the Roman calendar), a time of year when it was still not too hot to carry out combat operations in that part of the Mesopotamian plain (details and sources of chronology in Groebe, pp. 315ff.). Bivar's overestimate of the effect of the heat upon the Romans (e.g., *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/1, pp. 52f.) is based on the Roman date, not the actual one.

The Parthians used the rising ground in front of the Romans to approach them unseen (Regling, p. 383). When they first came into sight of the Romans, they covered themselves to hide their armor, but when the line came closer they opened their capes, revealing their glittering margian steel helmets and breastplates (Plutarch, "Crassus," 23-24). They charged the Romans from all sides and began discharging their powerful arrows. Then, retreating, they turned around in their saddles and kept shooting their arrows (the famous "Parthian shot," see Rostovtzeff, pp. 174ff.). Fearful of being outflanked on the right and unable to call a halt to the shooting, Crassus ordered his son to lead his men in an attack on the Parthians. The Parthians pretended to flee, gradually leading him away from the main army, then wheeled around, surrounded him, and shot most of his men. Only his Gallic horsemen were able to withstand or counter-attack the Parthians, but even they were destroyed by the heavy lancers (the cataphracts). Publius and his officers were wounded and committed suicide. Of his entire force of nearly 5,500 there were only five hundred survivors, all of whom were taken captive by the Parthians. A few had escaped earlier and brought the news to Crassus, urging him to rush to his son's aid, but when Crassus moved forward he met the returning Parthians, who exhibited Publius' head on a lance. The Parthians once more surrounded the Romans, continuing to shoot at them until nightfall.

The retreat. Contrary to their normal custom, the Parthians dismounted and camped near the enemy. Many Romans had fallen, and 4,000 were disabled by arrow wounds. The sight of the Parthians next to them frightened the Romans, and they resolved to flee. Crassus had lost heart and was no longer able to take command. His legates, Vargunteius, Octavius, and Cassius, took charge: leaving the dead and wounded behind, they fled north under the cover of darkness, most of them reaching the walled city of Carrhae by dawn. Vargunteius, however, lost his way, and was cut down with his four battalions by Surena on the following day. That day the Parthians spent taking the wounded Romans prisoners. On 8 May they surrounded Carrhae. With no hope of receiving help,



Crassus soon decided to retreat by night to the town called Sinnaca (on this location see Tarn, 1932, p. 610 n. 1) at the foot of an Armenian mountain, where Parthian cavalry could not operate freely. Octavius and his 5,000 men made it, but Cassius and his 500 deserted. Crassus himself, having been misguided by a certain Andromachus (Plutarch), from Carrhae, was surrounded by Parthians when he and his two battalions finally reached the town at daybreak. Octavius rushed to his aid, and Surena offered Crassus peace and safe conduct in order to restore friendship with Rome (Plutarch, “Crassus,” 29). (Though often doubted, it is clear even from Plutarch’s sarcasm that this was his aim: “Crassus,” 28ff., cf. Ziegler, p. 33; Dio Cassius, 40.26, says that “Crassus, without hesitation, trusted” Surena.) Urged on by his soldiers Crassus accepted. He met with Surena, who offered him a horse as he could not negotiate with the enemy leader on foot (cf. the case of Bahrām V and the Roman general Anatolius: Procopius, *Wars* 1.2) and asked for the treaty to be signed on the Euphrates, the boundary between the two empires, “where most of the preceding peace treaties had been signed” (Debevoise, p. 91). Octavius, however, misunderstood the Parthian’s intention, drew his sword, and slew the groom who was helping Crassus mount. A scuffle ensued, ending in a fight, and the Romans perished. Crassus’ head and hand were cut off, the punishment for pact-breakers, and were sent to Orodes. Of the 42,000 Romans who had accompanied Crassus, 10,000 eventually reached Syria and were regrouped by Cassius for the defense of the region; 10,000 were taken captive and settled at Marv; and the rest were destroyed (on casualties and prisoners see Günther, pp. 37-38). Thus “ended one of the worst disasters which the Roman arms ever suffered” (Tarn, 1932, p. 611).

Results (see particularly the important discussion by Timpe, pp. 104ff.). Surena’s extraordinary victory had enormous consequences. It halted Roman expansion, gave Mesopotamia back to the Parthians, and consolidated the Euphrates as the boundary between the two powers. It placed Persia on an equal footing with Rome, making them political rivals for the next seven centuries (see especially Ziegler, pp. 33ff.). But the Romans also learned from their defeat and gradually developed their own cavalry on Parthian models (cf. army i). The Parthians, however, developed no plan of conquest. Their constant domestic conflicts proved too taxing to allow them to exploit their victory fully for further gains. Caesar planned a Parthian expedition, for which he estimated three years of preparation would be necessary, but was murdered before he could carry it out (Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 8.54f.; Dio Cassius, 43.51, 44.46; Suetonius, “Divus Julius,” 44; Plutarch, “Julius Caesar,” 58,



“Pompey,” 56; references and discussions in Günther, pp. 39f.; Debevoise, pp. 102-07; Timpe, pp. 110ff.). Furthermore, “the Palestinian Jews turned their eyes towards Parthia for deliverance from [Roman] oppression” (Debevoise, p. 94), and pro-Parthian Jews attained supremacy over pro-Roman rivals (ibid., p. 95; Neusner, pp. 28ff.). Unfortunately, Surena, the victor at Carrhae suffered the worse fate, for his popularity so increased that Orodes felt threatened by him and ordered him executed (Plutarch, “Crassus,” 33). His deed no doubt continued to leave its mark on oral tradition, and it has been suggested that he might have provided a historical prototype for the hero Rustam (Bivar, p. 51).

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