



CICERO

CICERO, as a source for Parthian history. In 51 b.c.e., two years after the Parthian destruction of the Roman legions at Carrhae, the Roman statesman and political philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 b.c.e.), was chosen governor (formal title *proconsul*) of the province of Cilicia and unwillingly took up the post for a one-year term. Letters that he exchanged with friends and colleagues preserve a virtually unique contemporary extra-Iranian source on Parthian military and diplomatic activities and the Roman response to them, particularly during the military-campaign season of 51-50 b.c.e. Cicero's trepidation over the stability of Roman rule in the face of previous persistent imperial mismanagement emerges as his foremost concern (*Epistulae ad familiares* 15.1.5).

Cicero's letters may be divided into two groups: those to his old friend Titus Pomponius Atticus (*Epistulae ad Atticum*) and correspondence to and from members of his household and colleagues (*ad familiares*). Within the latter group are included public reports about the frontier issued by Cicero as governor (*ad familiares*); private reports (15.3, 4); letters to Cicero (15.5: Cato's response to 15.3, 4; 8.10: Caelius's report on Roman public reaction to news of Parthian advances); and discussions of and allusions to now lost documents (15.1.1: the report made by the governor of invaded Syria).

Parthian operations, 51-50 B.C.E. Parthian forces crossed the Euphrates frontier into Roman Syria beginning in August 51 and conducted a series of raids extending westward into the neighboring province of Cilicia. The invasion was nominally led by Pacorus, son of Orodes (r. 57-37 b.c.e.), assisted



by the experienced general Osaces; the army consisted of large numbers of cavalry, supported by Arab allies (*ad familiares* 15.1, 15.3, 15.44; *ad Atticum* 5.18, 5.20; cf. Dio, 40.28, esp. 40.28.3: Was the young Pacorus being trained within the context of easy raids on militarily weak Roman positions?).

The force established a base at Tyba in Syria (*ad familiares* 15.1) and then split up. The main army moved through the smaller Iranian kingdom of [Commagene](#) into Cyrrhastica, the part of Syria nearest Cilicia (*ad Atticum* 5.18; *ad familiares* 8.10). At that point Bibulus, governor of Syria for the year 51, had not yet taken up his post, and the province was still in the hands of his subordinate Cassius, who was stationed in Antioch, the provincial capital (*ad Atticum* 5.18). A portion of the Parthian force invaded eastern Cilicia but was driven off at Epiphaneia; this event was the only military encounter with the Parthians in which forces under Cicero's command took part (*ad familiares* 15.4.7). News of this Parthian movement caused Cicero to continue his eastward movement in defense of the passes into Cilicia (*ad familiares* 15.4).

But Parthian forces raided Antioch and its environs, then withdrew (*ad familiares* 15.4.7; *ad Atticum* 5.20.34, 5.21.2; cf. the more detailed account in Dio, 40.28-29). Cassius gave chase and wounded Osaces (who later died; *ad Atticum* 5.21.2). Pacorus returned to winter quarters in Cyrrhastica (51-50 B.C.E.; *ad Atticum* 5.21.2, 6.1). Then Bibulus arrived to govern Syria, in time to have missed all operations (*ad familiares* 15.4.7; *ad Atticum* 5.21.2).

Raiding continued early in the 50 b.c.e. campaigning season. Smaller Roman forces under Bibulus took no major offensive action (*ad Atticum* 6.4-5, 6.8, 7.2). By mid-July (*ad familiares* 2.17) Cicero, though silent on his colleagues' diplomacy, which had effected "peace" (cf. Dio, 40.30; and the somewhat confused account of Justin, 42.4.5), reported the Parthian threat removed.

Although Cicero's marginal involvement with the Parthians led to his recording somewhat marginal information, his letters do preserve significant data on Parthian diplomatic and military activities in the west and foreigners' perceptions of them. The extension of Arsacid influence may be seen in intermarriage between Parthian and Armenian royalty: Pacorus was brother-in-law to King [Artavasdes](#) (*ad familiares* 15.3.1). The supposedly loyal Galatian chieftain Deiotarus was connected with Armenian royalty as well (*ad Atticum* 5.21.2). Rome's lack of allies, bemoaned by Cicero (*ad familiares* 15.1.6), serves as a further index of Parthian success in the region.



Both sides supplemented their own forces with Arab tribes (Rome: *ad familiares* 15.1.2; Parthia: 15.4.7). Possible Arab adoption of Parthian weaponry may be alluded to in *ad familiares* 3.8.10 (from October 51), though the passage seems intended to denigrate Cicero's colleagues in Syria.

Cicero's account of operations makes clear that sources of information for Roman officers on the front were variable in nature and trustworthiness; there were delays in assessing them before deciding upon action and advice to the authorities in Rome (*ad familiares* 15.1.2). Rumors arrived first (travelers' reports: *ad Atticum* 5.16.4), then reports from local heads of state enjoying contact with both Rome and Parthia (e.g., Antiochus of Commagene, who was not too trustworthy; *ad familiares* 15.3, 15.1.2; and the trustworthy Arab chief Iamblichus, as well as dynasts Tarcondimotus and Deiotarus, *ad familiares* 15.1.2; *ad Atticum* 5.21). Intelligence was also received from other, unspecified sources (*ad familiares* 15.1.3, 15.2.1-2, 15.4.7).

All these messages served to create uncertainty and even panic in the provinces and at Rome. Cicero frequently expressed his own and others' opinion that the invading Parthians would be cause for black celebration in both 51 and 50 b.c.e. (cf. Caelius, in *ad familiares* 8.5.1). He feared active participation by the Armenians in support of Pacorus (*ad familiares* 15.3; cf. 15.2.1-2). Reports reaching Cicero from Rome in 51 B.C.E. (*ad familiares* 8.10.2) indicated that policy making was disorganized, and it was expected that Cassius in Syria would provide falsified intelligence. A serious war supposedly loomed for 50 b.c.e. (*ad familiares* 8.7.1, *ad Atticum* 5.21, 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5), during which Cicero expected a showdown between the Parthian king Orodes and General Pompey, whom Cicero considered Orodes's Roman counterpart (*ad Atticum* 5.21, 6.1). The failure of such a war to occur, at least while Cicero had what he considered the misfortune to be governor, gave rise to his personal expression, a "Parthian stroke of luck" (*ad Atticum* 6.6, 7.26, 8.11).

In contrast to Cicero's uncertainty and erroneous expectations were his boasting and constant belittling in private letters of his colleagues in Syria, who bore the brunt of Pacorus's operations (*ad Atticum* 5.20-21, 6.1, 6.8, 7.2; as late as 46 b.c.e. in *ad familiares* 12.19.1), but he justified all his own military moves as shows of force designed to cow Parthia and its supposed allies (*ad familiares* 15.1.3, 15.2.1-2).

Cicero's sources of information, his reactions to them, and his views about his colleagues raise some questions useful for other researchers to consider and in



connection with other Arsacid campaigns, as well. Did the Parthians announce their operations as something more than they were actually intended, in order to weaken the opposition? To what extent were the Parthians aware of ill feeling between Roman officers and able to exploit it? To what extent were Parthian officers and their allies subject to the same types of conflicting reports on frontier activities as Cicero? Did they, like Cicero, attempt to gauge the trustworthiness of reports and reporters before formulating actions?

Other references in Cicero. Later, when Cicero was in Italy, he made a few allusions in his correspondence to continued frontier warfare during the reign of Orodes (Pacorus's success in exploiting Roman dissension: *ad familiares* 12.19; *ad Atticum* 13.27, 13.31, 14.9). Of even less value are allusions to the Parthians in the remainder of Cicero's works (*De divinatione* 2.110; on the events of 54-53 b.c.e.: *Oratio pro M. Scauro* 3.1; *ad familiares* 1.9, 5.8; *ad Atticum* 4.13.2; *De domo sua* 60,124: Parthians, called Persians, in a list of peoples designed to make a point about internal Roman situations).

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