

TRAJAN'S PARTHIAN WAR AND THE FOURTH-CENTURY PERSPECTIVE*

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I. INTRODUCTION

No contemporary account of Trajan's Parthian War survives, nor were any monuments set up to commemorate his exploits in the East in the same way that Trajan's Column in Rome and the trophy at Tropaeum Traiani (Adamclisi) do his Dacian Wars. We rely almost entirely on the excerpts of Dio Cassius' *History* preserved by Xiphilinus, together with a few fragments of Arrian's *Parthica*, in order to reconstruct the causes, objectives and strategy of the war. Because of the scant nature of the sources, all three aspects remain the subject of much scholarly discussion and dispute. Here, however, an attempt is made to address the problems raised by Trajan's eastern campaigns from a different perspective. References in fourth-century sources shed light not only on the purpose and execution of the war itself, but also on the way Trajan was perceived in late antiquity as a valuable paradigm for contemporary events and figures.

The Romans first advanced beyond the Euphrates during the Third Mithridatic War (74–63 B.C.). Thereafter, the campaigns of Crassus (53 B.C.) and Mark Antony (39–36 and 34 B.C.), and the war against the Arsacid rulers of Parthia and Armenia during Nero's reign (A.D. 55–66) again took Roman armies into Armenia and Mesopotamia. In A.D. 114–17, however, Trajan succeeded in acquiring territory in these lands with a view to annexation, something which had not seriously been attempted before. His Parthian War, therefore, marks a deliberate change of policy and a shift of emphasis in the 'grand strategy' of the Roman Empire. Although Hadrian abandoned all of Trajan's conquests beyond the Euphrates, the trend was not to be reversed. Further wars of annexation followed under Lucius Verus (A.D. 163–66) and Septimius Severus (A.D. 197–99). The mid-third century saw a series of crises within the Roman Empire and calamitous defeats at the hands of the Sasanian Persians, who had usurped the position of the Parthians as rulers of Iran, but Galerius' victory over the Persian king Narses in A.D. 298 restored Roman morale and ensured that the eastern frontier was to remain the focus of military activity throughout the fourth century. There is, consequently, a direct link of cause and effect between Trajan's aggressive acts and events that played a major part in the history of the later Roman Empire. The fact, it would seem, was not lost on contemporary fourth-century observers.

Since both the chronology and topography of Trajan's Parthian War remain unclear, it would be as well first to consider the whole course of his eastern campaigns.¹

II. TRAJAN'S CAMPAIGNS

The First Campaign, A.D. 114

Trajan arrived at Antioch at the very beginning of the year.² He came from Rome by ship, via Athens and along the coast of Asia Minor to Seleucia (Dio LXVIII. 17. 2–3). Antioch is not the obvious point from which to launch an attack on Armenia and the only explanation must be that he wished to avoid crossing Anatolia during the winter. He was thus prepared for an early start to the campaign, but it can hardly have

* The two figures were prepared by Pervin Bilgen at the Institute in Ankara.

¹ See R. P. Longden, 'Notes on the Parthian campaigns of Trajan', *JRS* XXI (1931), 1–15; J. Guey, *Essai sur la guerre parthique de Trajan (114–117)* (1937); and

F. A. Lepper, *Trajan's Parthian War* (1948).

² Malalas supplies a precise date—7 January (*Chron.* 11. 272). For discussion of Malalas' dates, see M. I. Henderson, Review of F. A. Lepper, 'Trajan's Parthian War', *JRS* XXXIX (1949), 122–4.

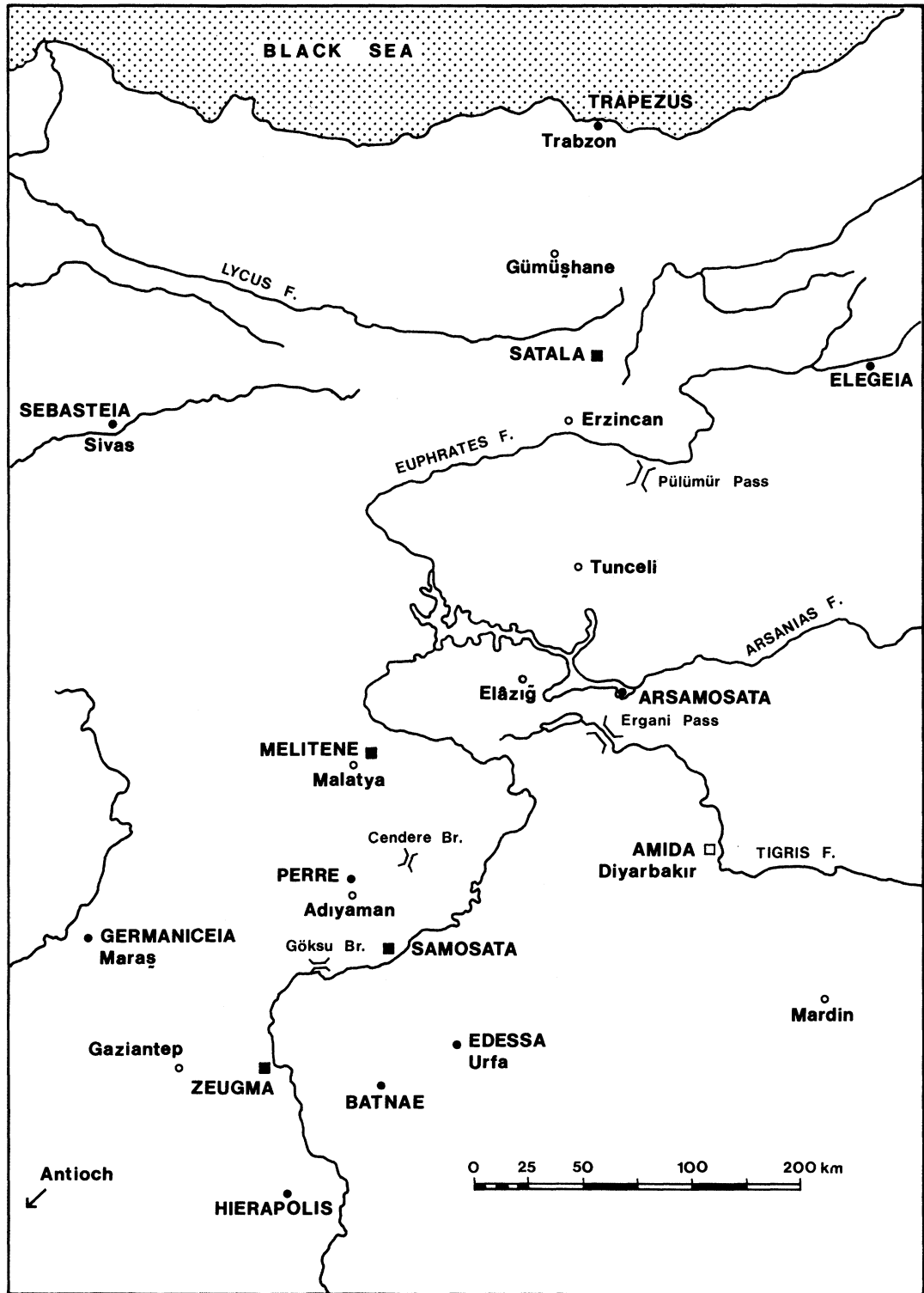


FIG. 1. SKETCH MAP OF THE EUPHRATES LIMES

got under way much before April.³ His first objective was to reach Satala, where he was to be met by reinforcements from Cappadocia and the Danube.⁴ A reference in Dio Cassius to [Ar]samosata (LXVIII. 19. 2) has been the subject of considerable discussion.⁵ On the one hand it has been stated that Arsamosata was not on the direct route between Antioch and Satala, while on the other it has been argued that Dio cannot mean Samosata because he speaks as if Trajan took possession of an enemy stronghold: καὶ ἀμὰ αὐτὰ παραλαβών. A note in Procopius states that Trajan raised Melitene to the rank of a municipium (*Aed.* III. 4. 17). If the occasion for this was the imperial visit in A.D. 114, as seems most likely, then his route will probably not have taken him to Samosata but on the direct route between the bridges over the Göksu (Singas) and Cendere Suyu (Chabinas), via Perre. The emendation of Dio's text to *Arsamosata* is thus more attractive. From Melitene it has always been assumed that Trajan led his army up the Euphrates along the limes road, a route that is by no means easy.⁶ The modern traveller wishing to get from Malatya to Erzincan has two options; either he makes a long detour to Sivas in order to join the main north-east highway that leads to Erzurum and Iran or he takes the more direct route via Elâzığ and Tunceli. In Trajan's day such a route would have brought him to the Arsanias (Murat) river very close to Arsamosata.⁷ There is no reason to think that Trajan kept behind the Roman frontier until his advance from Satala to Elegeia. Indeed, the reference in Dio, stating that he did not meet with any opposition at Arsamosata, implies that he had already crossed into enemy territory.⁸ An obvious conclusion is to have Trajan march from Melitene eastwards into Armenia and then from Arsamosata northwards through the Pülümür Pass into the valley of the Upper Euphrates.

Whichever route Trajan took to reach Satala, it must have taken him a considerable amount of time, especially if the ageing emperor marched on foot with his troops (Dio LXVIII. 23. 1). The distance between Antioch and Satala is no less than 760 km, so that at an average speed of 15 km a day the journey would have taken him approximately 51 days.⁹ He then went on to Elegeia, where he met with and effectively deposed the Armenian king Parthamasiris (Dio LXVIII. 19. 2–20. 4). It is likely that the Armenian campaign continued to occupy Trajan for some time thereafter.¹⁰ However, many scholars wish to see him moving on before the end of the same campaigning season to northern Mesopotamia, where Nisibis and, later, Batnae were captured (Dio LXVIII. 18. 3). This is indeed possible, especially if Trajan made a very early start to the campaign. So, for example, if he left Antioch at the beginning of April, he could have arrived at Elegeia in early June. He could then have spent nearly two months in Armenia and need not have left there until the end of July in order to reach Nisibis by mid-September.¹¹ This would still have given him time to occupy

³ Julian, it is true, set out from Antioch on his ill-fated Persian campaign on 5 March A.D. 363, but he was heading south towards warmer, drier climes, not north across the Taurus mountains.

⁴ T. B. Mitford, 'Cappadocia and Armenia Minor: historical setting of the limes', *ANRW* 2/7. 2 (1980), 1196–8.

⁵ See M. G. Angeli Bertinelli, 'I Romani oltre l'Euphrate nel II secolo d.C. (le province di Assiria, di Mesopotamia e di Osroene)', *ANRW* 2/9. 1 (1976), 12–13 n. 49.

⁶ So Mitford, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 1196 n. 65. Those members of the Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire Colloquium, held in Ankara in September 1988, who participated in the subsequent tour could, I am sure, vouch for the mountainous nature of the terrain. For this route, see D. H. French, 'New research on the Euphrates frontier: Supplementary notes 1 and 2', in S. Mitchell (Ed.), *Armies and frontiers in Roman and Byzantine Anatolia* (1983), 84–6, fig. 7. 1.

⁷ For the location of Arsamosata, see S. Mitchell, *Asvan Kale, Keban rescue excavations, Eastern Anatolia* (1980), 10.

⁸ See also Dio LXVIII. 18. 2.

⁹ The only comparable evidence on which I have been able to draw is that for Julian's expedition. He covered the journey from Antioch to Hierapolis, a

distance of some 220 km, in five days. This indicates to me that he was riding poste-haste along good roads to meet the army, which had already mustered at Hierapolis, rather than that he was marching 'with a force of some eighty to ninety thousand men' (G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (1978), 108). From Hierapolis Julian's progress slowed considerably and he only reached Callinicum (after a detour to Carrhae) on 27 March. This makes a round trip of about 225 km in 16 days, or 14 km per day. It is from this last figure that I have derived my rough estimate of 15 km or just over 9 miles per day for Trajan's rate of march. Since the army had to negotiate formidable mountain ranges in order to reach Satala, I have deliberately made this slower than Casson's private traveller, whom he expected to do about 15 to 20 miles a day on foot 'in normal terrain, with no toilsome slopes to negotiate' (L. Casson, *Travel in the ancient world* (1974), 189).

¹⁰ See Henderson, *op. cit.* (n. 2), 124, *contra* Mitford, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 1198.

¹¹

Dep. Antioch	1 April	
Arr. Satala	21 May	c. 760 km—51 days
Dep. Satala	23 May	
Arr. Elegeia	3 June	c. 180 km—12 days
Dep. Armenia (?)	31 July	
Arr. Nisibis	15 Sept.	c. 690 km—46 days

the city (and Batnae) before retiring to Edessa for the winter.¹² There is, however, little agreement about the direction of Trajan's march; both of the main passes between Armenia and northern Mesopotamia, the Ergani and the Bitlis, have been suggested.¹³ Meanwhile the troops that had been left behind in Armenia continued to carry out operations late into the campaigning season; so, at least, it would seem from a fragment of Arrian's *Parthica* (fr. 85 Roos) that refers to the wintry conditions and deep snow encountered there by C. Bruttius Praesens, legate of legion VI Ferrata.¹⁴

Freya Stark astutely remarked: 'By pushing out a great promontory (i.e. by the annexation of Armenia), that automatically put the Tigris in place of the Euphrates, he [Trajan] made the conquest of Mesopotamia essential ...'.¹⁵ This remark, succinctly put, explains the reason behind the long and tiring campaign of A.D. 114. Having deposed and murdered the Armenian king and having subjected his kingdom to the ancient equivalent of the blitzkrieg, Trajan forced his army to march south again in order to secure the passes across the eastern Taurus and gain a foothold in Mesopotamia before the Parthians could rally to its defence. Nisibis appears to represent, as it was to again in the fourth century, the nodal point for routes across the north Mesopotamian plain, not just those running east-west but also those leading northwards.¹⁶

The Second Campaign, A.D. 115

The following year has presented considerable problems, especially for those who do not place the advance to Ctesiphon in this year.¹⁷ On the one hand, Trajan received four imperial salutations during the course of A.D. 115 but, on the other, it is difficult to find evidence in the sources for sufficient activity to justify these salutations and to fill the whole of the campaigning season.¹⁸ Dillemann, however, is too quick in dismissing Guey's suggestion that the year was principally taken up by an expedition across the Tigris. There are good grounds for thinking that it was so. Nisibis was already in Roman hands, but it is unlikely that the territory to the east as far as the Tigris had also been captured in A.D. 114. This area was in the first century part of the kingdom of Adiabene and, in addition to Nisibis, Singara and Hatra are believed to have belonged to the kingdom.¹⁹ Lusius Quietus is said to have led an expedition against Singara (Dio LXVIII. 22. 2); Adenystrae also fell into Roman hands at this time (Dio LXVIII. 22. 3), while a portrait head found at Hatra and attributed to Trajan suggests a brief period of Roman occupation.²⁰ Trajan, once eastern Mesopotamia had been occupied and, perhaps more importantly, his right flank to the south had been secured, advanced to the Tigris. He ordered the construction of boats, for which timber had to be brought from the Ṭūr 'Abdīn in the vicinity of Nisibis since none was available along the Tigris.²¹ These boats were used for making a pontoon bridge across the river, although they have sometimes been regarded wrongly as the river fleet that accompanied Trajan on his march to

¹² So Lepper, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 208.

¹³ See Angeli Bertinelli, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 14 and n. 54. Dillemann even proposed an intermediate pass over the Anti Taurus (L. Dillemann, *Haute Mésopotamie orientale et pays adjacents* (1962), 283 and fig. 36).

¹⁴ On the evidence of Themistius (*Or.* xvi. [250]), Lusius Quietus is also accorded an expedition against the Mardi (see Dillemann, *op. cit.* (n. 13), 278).

¹⁵ F. Stark, *Rome on the Euphrates* (1966), 209.

¹⁶ For the strategic importance of the Roman fortress at Nisibis before A.D. 363, see C. S. Lightfoot, 'Facts and fiction—the third siege of Nisibis', *Historia* 37/1 (1988), 106.

¹⁷ Recently, the Ctesiphon campaign has again been attributed to A.D. 115 (D. Kennedy and A. Northedge, 'Ana in the classical sources', in A. Northedge *et al.*, *Excavations at 'Ana* (1989), 7).

¹⁸ Lepper, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 44; Henderson, *op. cit.* (n. 2), 124; and Dillemann, *op. cit.* (n. 13), 281–2.

¹⁹ J. Teixidor, 'The kingdom of Adiabene and Ha-

tra', *Berytus* 17 (1967–8), 4–6.

²⁰ See Angeli Bertinelli, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 14–15. The location of Adenystrae is most uncertain. Dillemann (*op. cit.* (n. 13), 285) rejected an earlier identification of the site with Dunaisir, south-west of Mardin, and instead equated it with Ad Herculeum, which Sir Aurel Stein placed at Jaddalah. However, recent excavations of the site at Jaddalah have cast serious doubt on this identification; see S. Gregory and D. Kennedy, *Sir Aurel Stein's limes report* (1985), 399. J. M. C. Toynbee, 'Some problems of Romano-Parthian sculpture at Hatra', *JRS* LXII (1972), 106–7 and pl. 5/1–2; see also M.-L. Chaumont, 'A propos de la chute de Hatra', *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 27 (1979), 227 f.—an article which I have been unable to consult in Ankara.

²¹ Dio LXVIII 26. 1; see J. G. Taylor, 'Travels in Kurdistan, with notices of the sources of the eastern and western Tigris, and ancient ruins in their neighbourhood', *Journ. Royal Geographical Soc.* 35 (1865), 56.



FIG. 2. SKETCH MAP OF CENTRAL MESOPOTAMIA

Ctesiphon.²² Of course, if the latter was so, the boats must have been taken out of the Tigris and transported back overland to a point where the Khabur is navigable and thence floated down to the Euphrates.²³ Otherwise there would be little sense in the accounts which speak of Trajan's attempt to build a canal between the Euphrates and Tigris.²⁴

It is impossible to tell from the available sources how far the Roman forces penetrated into Adiabene after the opposed crossing of the Tigris, although it has often been assumed, on the basis of Dio LXVIII. 26. 4, that the whole of the kingdom was overrun.²⁵ The reference in Book 13 of Arrian's *Parthica* (fr. 13 Roos) to the Ἡφαίστου νῆσοι may be taken to indicate that the Romans advanced as far as Kirkuk.²⁶ Dio (LXVIII. 27. 1) also mentions Trajan's visit to the tar pits used in the construction of the walls of Babylon. Although numerous surface deposits and seepages of bitumen are recorded in the area between the Tigris and the Zagros mountains, the exact location of the *Hephaesti insulae* is not known.²⁷ It may be the same place as that visited by Alexander, as described by Quintus Curtius Rufus (v. 1. 16). The spot is there called Mennis and is said to lie three days' march south of Arbela (i.e., Gaugamela). According to an older tradition, however, the wells that supplied bitumen for the walls of Babylon lay not in Adiabene but near Hit on the south bank of the Euphrates (Herodotus I. 179). These seem to have been much more important in antiquity than the tar pits to the north around Kirkuk.²⁸ Indeed, Ammianus remarks on a bitumen spring which Julian's army passed between Hit (Diacira) and Trajan's tribunal at Ozogardana (Amm. Marc. xxiv. 2. 3). It may be, therefore, that the isolated passages from Arrian and Dio refer to Trajan's march down the Euphrates in the following year. What is certain, however, is that these references cannot be taken as proof that the Romans advanced far into Adiabene or that they marched from there down to Babylon and so on to Ctesiphon.

The Third Campaign, A.D. 116

After the completion of the expedition across the Tigris, Trajan retired to Antioch for the winter of A.D. 115/6. There, despite a major earthquake which struck the city and almost caused the emperor to lose his life (Dio LXVIII. 24. 1-25. 1; Malalas XI [275]), plans were laid for a third season of campaigning, and it was from there that Trajan set out down the Euphrates in the following spring. It is likely that he visited Dura-Europos, as is shown by the triumphal arch that was built there in his honour and, according to Ammianus (xxiv. 2. 3), his tribunal was still to be seen in Julian's day at Ozogardana, a town farther down the Euphrates.²⁹ By contrast with the previous year, the campaign of A.D. 116 was a notable success and enabled the Romans to overrun the whole of lower Mesopotamia. It culminated in the capture of the Parthian capital, Ctesiphon, an event that was marked by Trajan's acceptance of the title *Parthicus* and by the issue of coins with the legend *PARTHIA CAPTA*. Trajan then enjoyed his last, brief moment of glory, looking out across the Persian Gulf in the direction of India, and we are told that he lamented the fact that he was no longer young enough to follow in Alexander's footsteps (Dio LXVIII. 29. 1). If the Roman emperor did indeed have such thoughts, they were but daydreams. Unlike Alexander, Trajan had not yet won a decisive battle against the Great King. The Parthian army remained intact; there are signs that these forces had at last begun to rally, and revolts broke out in northern Mesopotamia and Armenia.³⁰ In addition, Trajan must now

²² This episode has for long struck me as strange, since I find it impossible to believe that the Jaghjagha (Çaçak Dere) was navigable in antiquity. The idea that a fleet was constructed at Nisibis in order for it to sail down to the Euphrates is quite fanciful.

²³ So Lepper, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 210.

²⁴ Dio LXVIII. 28. 1; Amm. Marc. xiv. 6. 1; see Longden, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 14 and below (n. 41).

²⁵ So, for example, S. Gould, 'The triumphal arch', in P. V. C. Bauer, M. I. Rostovtzeff and A. R. Bellinger, *The excavations at Dura-Europos, preliminary report of the fourth season of work, October*

1930-March 1931 (1933), 61.

²⁶ So Longden, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 14, n. 2.

²⁷ R. J. Forbes, *Studies in ancient technology* Vol. 1 (1955), 32-5.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 37.

²⁹ For the arch, see Gould, *op. cit.* (n. 25), 56-65. Fragments of Arrian's *Parthica* name other sites along the Euphrates which may mark stages in the advance of Trajan's army in A.D. 116 (Phalga fr. 8, Naarda fr. 10, and Anatha fr. 64 Roos).

³⁰ See Lepper, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 211.

have received news of the Jewish uprisings that had occurred in many of the eastern provinces.³¹ So, the emperor turned for home and, although his generals, notably Quietus, were successful in stemming the tide of revolt in the new territories, his death at Selinus in Cilicia in August A.D. 117 marked the end of the Parthian War.

III. TRAJAN'S NEW PROVINCES

One of the more perplexing and controversial aspects of the events that took place during the Parthian War is the formation of a Roman province called Assyria. The creation of an *Assyria provincia* by Trajan has generally been regarded as an historical fact, although it has proved impossible to find any hard evidence for its organization or to achieve a consensus of opinion regarding its precise location and extent.³² A strong case has been put forward for identifying the province with the territory conquered during the Ctesiphon campaign of A.D. 116; that is, *Assyria provincia* corresponds to Babylonia and is to be located between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in central Iraq.³³ Certainly, it is clear that the name Assyria was used by Persian sources to denote not the historical homeland of the Assyrians but an area further south between the Euphrates and the Tigris. So, for example, in the third century the Sasanians applied the term *Āsūristān* to the whole of lower Mesopotamia, whereas northern Mesopotamia was known to them as *Arabistān*.³⁴

Numerous other scholars, however, prefer to see the province as including lands to the east of the Tigris between the Greater and Lesser Zab in an area correctly known to western sources as Adiabene.³⁵ Still others have argued that Trajan's territorial ambitions in the Parthian War were strictly limited and that he sought merely to incorporate the kingdom of Armenia and secure a defensible limes in northern Mesopotamia.³⁶ The existence of Assyria has, therefore, been seriously questioned in some quarters.³⁷ This possibility deserves closer scrutiny.

The Trajanic province of Assyria is only attested in two late Roman sources, the historical epitomes of Eutropius and Festus:

Usque ad Indiae fines et mare Rubrum (Traianus) accessit atque ibi tres provincias fecit, Armeniam, Assyriam, Mesopotamiam, cum his gentibus, quae Madenam attingunt ...

He (Trajan) advanced as far as the fringes of India and the Red Sea (i.e. the Persian Gulf). He also created three provinces, Armenia, Assyria and Mesopotamia, including those tribes whose lands stretch as far as Madena (Media) ... (Eutrop. VIII. 3. 2)

Qui (Hadrianus) Traiani gloriae invidens statim provincias tres reliquit, quas Traianus addiderat, et de Assyria, Mesopotamia, Armenia revocavit exercitus ac finem imperii esse voluit Euphraten.

He (Hadrian), envious of Trajan's military glory, immediately abandoned the three provinces that Trajan had added and recalled the armies from Assyria, Mesopotamia and Armenia, wanting the imperial frontier to be the Euphrates. (Eutrop. VIII. 6. 2)

³¹ See A. Fuks, 'Aspects of the Jewish revolt in A.D. 115-117', *JRS* LI (1961), 98-104.

³² For example, Th. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*. Band 5. *Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian* (1894), 400; Angeli Bertinelli, op. cit. (n. 5), 17-20; Mitford, op. cit. (n. 4); H. Devijver, 'Equestrian officers from the East', in P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (eds.), *The defence of the Roman and Byzantine East* (1986), 115, 198, 210.

³³ A. Maricq, 'Classica et orientalia 6. La province d' << Assyrie >> créée par Trajan. A propos de la guerre parthique de Trajan', *Syria* 36 (1959), 257-60; see also F. Millar, *The Roman Empire and its neighbours* (1970), 117.

³⁴ See A. Maricq, 'Classica et orientalia 5. Res gestae divi Saporis', *Syria* 35 (1958), 304-5; E. Kettenhofen, 'The Persian campaign of Gordion III and the inscription of Sāhpuhr I at the Ka'be-ye Zartošt', in Mitchell, op. cit. (n. 6), 155; and S. N. C. Lieu, 'Captives, refugees and exiles: a study of cross-frontier civilian movements and contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian', in Freeman and Kennedy, op.

cit. (n. 32), 477-8. Eastern Mesopotamia was already known to Xenophon, if mistakenly so, by the latter name. (F. M. Donner, 'Xenophon's Arabia', *Iraq* 48 (1986), esp. 3-4, 13).

³⁵ S. Fraenkel, s.v. Adiabene, *PW* I (1893), 360; Longden, op. cit. (n. 1), 13-4; Henderson, op. cit. (n. 2), 125; D. Magie, *Roman rule in Asia Minor* (1950), 608; Dillemann, op. cit., (n. 13), 288-9; M. A. R. Colledge, *The Parthians* (1967), 54-5; M.-L. Chaumont, 'L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran I. De l'avènement d'Auguste à l'avènement de Dioclétien', *ANRW* 2/9. 1 (1976), 140; E. N. Luttwak, *The grand strategy of the Roman Empire* (1976), 108, 110; W. Eilers, 'Iran and Mesopotamia', in E. Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge history of Iran* 3 (2). *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian periods* (1983), 496; and Gregory and Kennedy, op. cit. (n. 20), 118, 140 n. 1.

³⁶ Lepper, op. cit. (n. 1), 112-22, 206; A. D. H. Bivar, 'The political history of Iran under the Arsacids', in Yarshater, op. cit. (n. 35), 88.

³⁷ So Lepper, op. cit. (n. 1), 152-3.

Et per Traianum Armenia, Mesopotamia, Assyria et Arabia provinciae factae sunt ac limes orientalis supra ripas Tigridis est institutus. Sed Hadrianus, qui successit Traiano, invidens Traiani gloriae, sponte sua Armeniam, Mesopotamiam, Assyriam reddidit ac medium inter Persas et Romanos Euphraten esse voluit.

Armenia, Mesopotamia, Assyria and Arabia were made into provinces by Trajan, and the eastern frontier was established on the banks of the Tigris. But Hadrian, who succeeded Trajan, being jealous of Trajan's military glory, gave up Armenia, Mesopotamia and Assyria of his own accord, wanting the border between the Persians and the Romans to be the Euphrates. (Fest. XIV)

Provincias fecit Armeniam, Mesopotamiam, Assyriam, quae inter Tigridem atque Euphraten sita inriguis amnibus instar Aegypti fecundatur.

He (Trajan) created the provinces of Armenia, Mesopotamia and Assyria, which lies between the Tigris and Euphrates and is made fertile, like Egypt, by perennial streams. (Fest. xx)

There seems little doubt that the two writers are referring to the same geographical region, and other references in their works have been used to show that they regarded Assyria to be the same as the Persian province of Āsūristān.³⁸ A similar definition is found in Ammianus Marcellinus, another fourth-century writer.³⁹ In his excursus on the Sasanian Empire he describes Assyria in such a way that there is no mistaking he is talking about lower Mesopotamia (Amm. Marc. xxiii. 6. 15). For Assyria he lists three major cities—Babylon, Ctesiphon and Seleucia (Amm. Marc. xxiii. 6. 23), whereas he refers to Adiabene as 'Assyria priscis temporibus vocitata' (Amm. Marc. xxiii. 6. 20) and names Ninus (Nineveh) as its principal centre (Amm. Marc. xxiii. 6. 22). His grasp of local geography was doubtless based on knowledge gained during his participation in Julian's Persian expedition in A.D. 363 (cf. Amm. Marc. xxiii. 3. 1).

Two other references to Assyria in Ammianus repay closer scrutiny. Among the many virtues that Ammianus includes in his eulogy of Julian are his qualities of leadership: '... exhortatum eum simplici contione militem Gallicanum ..., peragratis spatiis regionum extentis, per tepentem Assyriam ad usque confinia traxisse Medorum' (Amm. Marc. xxv. 4. 13). The word *tepentem* must have been used here to suggest the oppressive climate of lower Mesopotamia and was much more appropriate as such than as a description of the hill-country to the north. Indeed, Assyria must be taken to mean central Iraq, for Ammianus could hardly claim that Julian had led his army into Adiabene. The second reference can now offer a new interpretation of the possible lines of retreat that were discussed when a council of war was held near Ctesiphon (Amm. Marc. xxiv. 8. 4). Julian had already ruled out the possibility of returning along the Euphrates by the same route as that by which the army had come (Amm. Marc. xxiv. 8. 2). Two options remained, either to march northwards to the east of the Tigris or to attempt to re-cross the river and head towards Hatra, as Septimius Severus had done in A.D. 198.⁴⁰ The latter was rejected; Ammianus does not dwell on the reason, but this was painfully obvious since he had just described the folly of burning the fleet (Amm. Marc. xxiv. 7. 4–5; 8). Julian's army was, as Ammianus implies (Amm. Marc. xxiv. 8. 5: 'ut omni spe meliorum succisa'), cut off in hostile territory. The fear that this provoked amongst the troops is evident and, after Julian's death, they could no longer be restrained from crossing back onto the west bank of the Tigris (Amm. Marc. xxv. 6. 11–13). So, after Ctesiphon it would seem that a major rift developed within the Roman camp. The emperor, Jovian as well as Julian, sought to keep on the offensive (as it were) to the east of the Tigris, perhaps in the hope of inflicting a decisive defeat on the Persian king's forces (cf. Amm. Marc. xxiii. 5. 19: 'abolenda nobis natio molestissima'), while the common soldiery lost all heart for the fight and wished to disengage from the enemy by withdrawing *per Assyriam*. Finally, an additional note is provided by Julian himself.

³⁸ Maricq, *op. cit.* (n. 33), 260.

³⁹ For the close relationship between Eutropius, Festus and Ammianus, see R. Syme, *Ammianus and the*

Historia Augusta (1968), 105.

⁴⁰ A. Birley, *The African Emperor Septimius Severus* (rev. ed., 1988), 130.

He refers to ὀρύγματα τὰ Ἀσσύρια (*Or.* II. 83c; cf. *Or.* III. 126d), works that he would later witness near the Naarmalcha, the waterway linking the Euphrates and Tigris near Ctesiphon.⁴¹

The late Roman sources, therefore, concur with the Persian location of Assyria, while further evidence that in the third and fourth centuries the two regions of Assyria and Adiabene were quite distinct not just in the minds of the Persians but also of the Romans is shown by the titles that were taken by numerous emperors from Septimius Severus to Constantius II.⁴² If Adiabene had indeed been part of Assyria, one would expect the title *Assyriacus* in place of *Adiabenicus*, for a vainglorious Roman emperor would not have undervalued his victories by taking the name of the subordinate district. *Assyriacus*, however, is completely unattested.

It matters little whether the Romans and Parthians in Trajan's own time made the same distinction between Assyria and Adiabene. One must remember that Eutropius and Festus were writing for an audience far removed in time from the events surrounding Trajan's Parthian War. Their terminology reflects the conditions that prevailed in the fourth century, not in the early second. So, in order to prove that these sources used the term Assyria to refer accurately to the state of affairs in the early second century, some additional evidence is required as proof for the existence of *Assyria provincia*. But this, too, is altogether lacking.

The annexation of Armenia and Mesopotamia is proclaimed on coins of the Rome mint with the legend ARMENIA ET MESOPOTAMIA IN POTESTATEM P.R. REDACTAE S.C., dated A.D. 116.⁴³ The foundation of *Assyria provincia*, however, is not celebrated on the coinage of Trajan; Maricq's attempt to explain the absence of such coins by saying that those with the legend PARTHIA CAPTA are in fact proclaiming the annexation of Assyria is very much a case of special pleading.⁴⁴ This coinage records the capture of Ctesiphon and thereby the conquest of the Parthian province of Assyria, but it does not lend any support to the theory that Trajan established a Roman province in its place. One only has to look at the numismatic evidence relating to the Dacian Wars to see how clearly a distinction was drawn between those coin legends which celebrate the victory or conquest and those which mark the annexation.⁴⁵

While the name of Trajan's governor in Armenia is known, there is no record of any Roman official appointed to Assyria.⁴⁶ A milestone of Trajan, reported from the village of Karsi on the route from Nisibis to Singara, bears witness to the beginning of Roman organization in Mesopotamia.⁴⁷ At Tell Barri, north of the Jebel Sinjar, quantities of Eastern Sigillata have been found together with Parthian and coarse wares. Consequently, one period of occupation at the site has been dated between the first century B.C. and the second century A.D.; a solitary coin of Trajan was also found.⁴⁸ But, although Nisibis formed part of the kingdom of Adiabene in the late first century A.D., the area north of the Jebel Sinjar stretching as far as the Tigris must have constituted the province of Mesopotamia. No inscriptions or archaeological remains of any sort remain to demonstrate a similar Roman presence in Assyria. There is, in fact, no evidence of Roman occupation under Trajan anywhere along the Euphrates below the city of Dura-Europos. Recent excavations at sites such as Kifrin and Bijan have shown that occupation belongs to the first half of the third

⁴¹ Amm. Marc. xxiv. 2. 6-7; see Bowersock, *op. cit.* (n. 9), 113.

⁴² Compare *ILS* 418 and 732; see P. von Rohden, s.v. *Adiabenicus*, *PW* I (1893), 360.

⁴³ *BMCRE* vol. 3 (1966), 221-2, nos. 1033-40.

⁴⁴ Maricq, *op. cit.* (n. 33), 257.

⁴⁵ Compare ... DAC[IA] CAP[TA] with DACIA AUGUST. PROVINCIA S.C. (*BMCRE*, *op. cit.* (n. 43), 82-4, nos. 381-93 and 204, nos. 960-3).

⁴⁶ L. Catilius Severus, consul in A.D. 110 and 120 (*ILS* 1041). Another inscription (*ILS* 1338), which mentions the post of *procurator Augusti Armeniae Maioris*, is attributed to T. Haterius Nepos and dated

to the same period. For other evidence for the Roman establishment in Armenia, see Chaumont, *op. cit.* (n. 35), 138-9; J. Crow, 'A review of the physical remains of the frontier of Cappadocia', in Freeman and Kennedy, *op. cit.* (n. 32), 80-1, with *CIL* III. 13627a.

⁴⁷ R. Cagnat, 'Inscription romaine du Sindjar au nom de Trajan', *Syria* 8 (1927), 53 (the inscription is now lost).

⁴⁸ P. E. Pecorella and M. Salvini, *Tell Barri/Kahat 1, Relazione preliminare sulle campagne 1980 e 1981 a Tell Barri/Kahat, nel bacino del Habur* (1982), 93; N. Parmegiani, 'The Eastern Sigillata in Tell Barri/Kahat', *Mesopotamia* 22 (1987), 113-28.

century.⁴⁹ Similarly, in Mesopotamia excavations to the south and east of the Jebel Sinjar have failed to reveal any trace of Roman occupation in the early second century. So, for example, the coin evidence at Ain Sinu (Zaguræ) clearly indicates that Roman occupation was limited to the Severan period, while the surface pottery at Tell Ibra (Vicat) is also attributed to the time of the Severi.⁵⁰ The foundation of the fortified site at Khirbet Jaddalah is dated no earlier than A.D. 141/2 on the evidence of Aramaic inscriptions found *in situ* and, in any case, control of the settlement is closely associated with the Hatrenes, not the Romans.⁵¹

If a province of Assyria was established by Trajan, it has to be admitted that it was so transitory that it has left no trace in contemporary records. The revolt that swept through the newly acquired territories in A.D. 116–17 forced the Romans to abandon the province immediately. The subsequent attempt to install a Roman nominee, the Parthian royal fugitive Parthaspates, as a client king at Ctesiphon may be seen as a stop-gap alternative.

No further reference is made to a Roman province of Assyria, either during the eastern wars of Lucius Verus (A.D. 163–6) or during the campaigns of Septimius Severus and his successors in the first half of the third century. In the Persian War of A.D. 296–8 the Caesar Galerius inflicted a crushing defeat on the Sasanian king, Narses. According to Aurelius Victor (*Caes.* xxxix. 36), his victory might have added a whole new province to the empire but for the temerity of his senior colleague, Diocletian. Since Osrhoene and Mesopotamia were already provinces and Armenia was held by the pro-Roman king Tiridates IV (the Great), one possible conclusion is that Aurelius Victor has some such area as Assyria in mind, and it is known that Galerius advanced as far as Ctesiphon in the immediate sequel to his victory. However, it should be noted that Galerius' victory titles included *Medicus*, *Adiabenicus* and *Persicus*, not *Assyriacus*. Hence, it is more likely that Aurelius Victor's comment relates to lands east of Tigris.

Likewise, the references in Eutropius and Festus to Assyria may, perhaps, be regarded as a misconceived reference to Adiabene. As suggested above, one campaigning season, A.D. 115, was devoted principally to manoeuvres against the king of Adiabene, Mebarsapes. There was, however, no unequivocal celebration of the campaign in Adiabene. Despite the capture of certain cities west of the Tigris (Nisibis, Singara, Hatra) most of the kingdom remained in enemy hands. The successful river-crossing may well be the occasion of one of the salutations that Trajan received in that year, but east of the Tigris little was achieved in real terms. There was, in short, no opportunity to proclaim 'Adiabena capta', and this may in turn explain the silence of our sources and the lack of archaeological evidence.

It is, however, best to discount altogether the historicity of Trajan's Assyrian province and to seek a different explanation for the claims made by the two fourth-century authors.

IV. THE FOURTH-CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

Dio, in a justly famous passage (LXXV. 3. 2–3), pronounced a wholly negative judgement on the conquest of Mesopotamia by Septimius Severus. That it was the source of constant wars and became a great financial burden to the Roman economy is borne out by subsequent events, right up until the area was finally lost to the Arabs in the seventh century. It may be assumed that Dio's view of Trajan's Parthian War and his attempt to annex territories to the east of the Euphrates would also have been adverse. This is not, however, the opinion expressed by fourth-century writers.

⁴⁹ A. Killick and M. Roaf, 'Excavations in Iraq', *Iraq* 45/2 (1983), 208; M. Gawlikowski, 'Bijan in the Euphrates', *Sumer* 42 (1985), 16, 20–21; A. Invernizzi, 'Kifrin and the Euphrates limes', in Freeman and Kennedy, *op. cit.* (n. 32), 369; and E. Valtz, 'Kifrin, a fortress of the limes on the Euphrates', *Mesopotamia* 22 (1978), 88–9.

⁵⁰ D. and J. Oates, 'Ain Sinu: A Roman frontier post

in northern Iraq', *Iraq* 21 (1959), 217; D. Oates, *Studies in the ancient history of northern Iraq* (1968), 79; see also B. Campbell, 'The Roman pottery from Seh Qubba, North Iraq', in D. H. French and C. S. Lightfoot (eds), *The eastern frontier of the Roman Empire* (1990), esp. 54–5.

⁵¹ J. K. Ibrahim, 'The excavation of Khirbet Jaddalah 1977–1978', *Sumer* 39 (1983), 230, 233.

Ammianus, for example, refers to the successes of Trajan's eastern campaigns: '... cum glorioso Marte Mediam urgeret et Parthos' (Amm. Marc. xiv. 13. 8). Indeed, the surviving books of his *History* are sprinkled with complimentary or purely neutral references to Trajan, frequently in connection with Ammianus' own hero, the emperor Julian (cf. Amm. Marc. xviii. 1. 11). At one point Ammianus praises Julian as 'bellorum gloriosus cursibus Traiani simillimus' (Amm. Marc. xiv. 1. 4), while he puts into the emperor's mouth a speech, delivered immediately after the Roman army had crossed into Persian territory in A.D. 363, in which Julian classed Trajan with Lucius Verus and Septimius Severus as returning 'victores et tropaeati' from the East (Amm. Marc. xxiii. 5. 17). Direct comparison is made between the two emperors, not only in their military exploits, but also in their personal habits (Amm. Marc. xxiv. 3. 9). The impression thus gained is that Julian himself, or at least his contemporaries, regarded Trajan as a fit model, and in their eastern ambitions both, of course, were inspired by Alexander the Great.⁵²

Trajan's example, however, goes beyond Julian.⁵³ The ambition to avenge the reverses of the third century and to establish complete supremacy in the East is a leitmotif running through the history of the fourth century. It starts with Galerius (see above); Constantine, too, harboured plans to invade Persia;⁵⁴ and, after Julian, the mantle was taken up by Valens. It has recently been argued that Festus wrote his *Breviarium* in anticipation of the latter's planned eastern campaign. Festus' intention in choosing a bipartite format for his book is seen as an attempt to create a contrast between the ease and success of Roman conquests in the West and the uncertainties and failures that were encountered in the East.⁵⁵ Festus had succeeded Eutropius as *magister memoriae* to Valens; both looked forward to the renewal of hostilities with Persia, indignant at the surrender of Nisibis by Jovian (Festus xxix; cf. also Amm. Marc. xxv. 7. 13; Eunapius, *Brev.* x. 17). It is in the light of such sentiments that their references to Trajan's three new provinces should be considered. It may well be the case that Festus and Eutropius were using him as a model in order to encourage Valens—or to reflect imperial wishes—not only to restore the province of Mesopotamia to its former limits, but also to undertake the annexation of Armenia and Assyria.⁵⁶ Ammianus explicitly states that preparations for the Persian campaign included three separate armies (Amm. Marc. xxx. 2. 6). It may not, therefore, be idle to speculate that Valens intended to follow a strategy similar to that successfully carried out by Verus' generals two centuries earlier.⁵⁷

V. CONCLUSION

The content of this paper has necessarily been diverse. It has attempted to show, first and foremost, that the interpretation of historical events must take into consideration a broad perspective. Traditions and precedents played a significant role in antiquity both in men's actions and in their writings. The task of the present-day historian is consequently that much more difficult and complex. Even such familiar events as Trajan's Parthian War remain open to several divergent interpretations, although some of the uncertainties and misconceptions can be avoided if a wider view is taken of the facts. History looks in both directions, both to the past and to the future. So, in this case, an examination of events in the early second century A.D. has also served to illuminate those of the fourth. This is not an unexpected corollary, for the world of late antiquity was steeped in its own history. It was, however, also an age of major social and cultural change. Peter Brown has drawn attention to the

⁵² Dio LXVIII. 17. 1; 30. 1; see Bowersock, op. cit. (n. 9), 15, 101. For Trajan's portrayal in the *Caesares*, see B. Baldwin, 'The *Caesares* of Julian', *Klio* 60 (1978), 461.

⁵³ For Trajan's pre-eminence in fourth-century eyes and his equation with Theodosius, see R. Syme, *Emperors and biography. Studies in the Historia Augusta* (1971), 91-4, 101-3, and 110-11.

⁵⁴ See, most recently, T. D. Barnes, 'Constantine and the Christians of Persia', *JRS* LXXV (1985), 130-2. Barnes draws attention to the fact that in his campaigns

north of the Danube Constantine 'was comporting himself like a new Trajan'.

⁵⁵ M. Peachin, 'The purpose of Festus' *Breviarium*', *Mnemosyne* ser. IV, 38/1-2 (1985), 156-8.

⁵⁶ For events in Armenia after A.D. 363, culminating in the murder of the king, Pap, at Valens' instigation, see Amm. Marc. xxvi. 4. 6; xxvii. 12. 1-18; xxx. 1. 1-22.

⁵⁷ See A. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius. A biography* (rev. ed., 1987), 128-9, 140.

prominent position of Mesopotamia in this 'revolution'.⁵⁸ Trajan's attempt to push the frontiers of the empire eastwards beyond the Euphrates thus not only signals a change of emphasis in the military establishment but also marks an important stage in the beginning of the cultural shift towards the East.

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⁵⁸ P. Brown, *The world of late antiquity* (1971), 20, 164–5; see also Fergus Millar, 'Empire, community and culture in the Roman Near East: Greeks, Syrians,

Jews and Arabs', *Journ. Jewish Studies* 38 (1987), esp. 146–7, 164.