



# Hatra

Politics, Culture and Religion  
between Parthia and Rome

Edited by Lucinda Dirven

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# HATRA

## POLITICS CULTURE AND RELIGION BETWEEN PARTHIA AND ROME

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Edited by Lucinda Dirven

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## IN THE TWILIGHT HATRA BETWEEN ROME AND IRAN

*Michael Sommer*

‘Next he came into Arabia and began operations against the people of Hatra, since they, too, had revolted. This city is neither large nor prosperous, and the surrounding country is mostly desert and has neither water (save a small amount and that poor in quality) nor timber nor fodder.’<sup>1</sup> What Cassius Dio describes here, is - according to him - the beginning of the end of Trajan’s ambitious project of conquering what Richard Fowler has once called ‘the Parthian Near West’.<sup>2</sup> However, what matters for the present is not so much Trajan’s ultimate failure to capture Hatra, but Dio’s description of the place as ‘neither large nor prosperous’.

Some eighty years after Trajan’s attempt to assault the walls of Hatra, Septimius Severus undertook the same - twice and with an identical outcome. Our main source of information is again Cassius Dio:<sup>3</sup> ‘Severus now crossed

1 Cass. Dio 68. 31, 1: μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἐς τὴν Ἀραβίαν ἦλθε, καὶ τοῖς Ἀτρηνοῖς, ἐπειδὴ καὶ αὐτοὶ ἀφειστήκεσαν, ἐπεχείρησε. καὶ ἔστι μὲν οὔτε μεγάλη οὔτε εὐδαίμων ἡ πόλις· ἢ τε περίξ χώρα ἔρημος ἐπὶ πλείστον ἔστι, καὶ οὐθ’ ὕδωρ, ὃ τι μὴ βραχὺ καὶ τοῦτο δυσχερές, οὔτε ξύλον οὔτε χιλὸν ἴσχει. καὶ πρὸς τε αὐτῶν τούτων, ἀδύνατον τὴν προσεδρείαν πλήθει ποιοούντων, πρὸς τε τοῦ Ἥλιου, ᾧ πέρ που καὶ ἀνάκειται, ῥύεται· οὔτε γὰρ ὑπὸ Τραϊανοῦ τότε οὔτε ὑπὸ Σεουήρου ὕστερον ἦλω, καίτοι καὶ καταβαλόντων μέρη τινὰ τοῦ τείχους αὐτῆς - - - Τραϊανὸς δὲ τοὺς τε ἰππέας πρὸς τὸ τεῖχος προπέμψας ἐσφάλῃ, ὥστε καὶ ἐς τὸ στρατόπεδον αὐτοὺς ἐσαραχθῆναι, καὶ αὐτὸς παρῖπεύσας βραχυτάτου ἐδέησε τρωθῆναι, καίπερ τὴν βασιλικὴν στολὴν ἀποθέμενος ἵνα μὴ γνωρισθῆ. τῆς δὲ πολιᾶς αὐτοῦ τὸ γαῦρον καὶ τὸ σεμνοπρεπὲς τοῦ προσώπου ἰδόντες ὑπετόπησάν τε εἶναι ὅς ἦν, καὶ ἐπετόξευσαν αὐτῷ, καὶ ἰππέα τινὰ τῶν συνόντων οἱ ἀπέκτειναν. ἐγίνοντο δὲ βρονταί, καὶ ἱριδες ὑπεφαίνοντο, ἀστραπαὶ τε καὶ ζάλη χάλαζά τε καὶ κεραυνοὶ τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις ἐνέπιπτον, ὅποτε προσβάλοιεν. καὶ ὅποτε οὖν δειπνοῖεν, μυῖαι τοῖς βρώμασι καὶ τοῖς πάμασι προσιζάνουσαι δυσχερείας ἅπαντα ἐνεπίμπλων.

2 Fowler (2005), p.128.

3 67. 10: καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο ὁ Σεουήρος τὴν Μεσοποταμίαν διαβάς ἐπειράθη μὲν καὶ τῶν Ἄτρων οὐ πόρρω ὄντων, ἐπέρανε δ’ οὐδέν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ μηχανήματα κατεκαύθη καὶ στρατιώται συχνοὶ μὲν ἀπώλοντο πάμπολλοι δὲ καὶ ἐτρώθησαν. ἀπανεστή οὖν ἀπ’ αὐτῶν καὶ ἀνέξευξεν ὁ Σεουήρος. ἐν ᾧ δὲ ἐπολέμει, δύο ἄνδρας τῶν ἐπιφανῶν ἀπέκτεινεν, Ἰούλιον Κρίσπον χιλιαρχοῦντα τῶν δορυφόρων, ὅτι ἀχθесθεὶς τῇ τοῦ πολέμου κακώσει ἔπος τι τοῦ Μάρωνος τοῦ ποιητοῦ παρεφθέγγετο, ἐν ᾧ ἐνήν στρατιώτης τις τῶν μετὰ Τούρνου τῷ Αἰνεῖα ἀντιπολεμοῦντων ὀδυρόμενος καὶ λέγων ὅτι "ἵνα δὴ τὴν Λαουινίαν ὁ Τούρνος ἀγάγηται, ἡμεῖς ἐν οὐδενὶ λόγῳ παραπολλύμεθα". καὶ τὸν κατηγορήσαντα αὐτοῦ στρατιώτην Οὐαλέριον χιλιαρχὸν ἀντ’ αὐτοῦ ὁ Σεουήρος ἀπέδειξεν. ἀπέκτεινε δὲ καὶ τὸν Λαῖτον, ὅτι τε φρόνημα εἶχε καὶ ὅτι ὑπὸ τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἠγαπάτο καὶ οὐκ ἄλλως στρατεῦσεν ἔλεγον, εἰ μὴ Λαῖτος αὐτῶν ἡγοῖτο. καὶ τούτου τὸν φόνον, διότι οὐκ εἶχε φανερὰν αἰτίαν εἰ μὴ τὸν φθόνον, τοῖς στρατιώταις προσήπτεν ὡς παρὰ γνώμην αὐτοῦ τοῦτο τετολημκόσιν. αὐτὸς δὲ πάλιν ἐπὶ τὰ Ἄτρα ἐστράτευσε, πολλὰ μὲν σιτία παρασκευάσας πολλὰ δὲ καὶ μηχανήματα

Mesopotamia and made an attempt on Hatra, which was not far off, but accomplished nothing; on the contrary, his siege engines were burned, many soldiers perished, and vast numbers were wounded.’ But so easily no Roman emperor caves in. Septimius Severus duly launched a second attack on the desert city, besieging it for 20 days.<sup>4</sup> This time, Dio’s account is much more detailed. Again, he points to the loss of men and material the siege involved; at length, he describes the fierce resistance of the *Atrenoi*, their efficient use of nomadic cavalry and their tactic of preventing the Roman forces from foraging.<sup>5</sup> This time, Hatra is por-

έτοιμασάμενος· καὶ γὰρ δεινὸν ἐποίειτο, τῶν ἄλλων κεχειρωμένων, μόνην ταύτην ἐν μέσῳ κειμένην ἀντέχειν. καὶ ἀπώλεσε καὶ χρήματα πλείστα καὶ τὰ μηχανήματα πάντα, πλὴν τῶν Πρισκείων, ὡς ἀνωτέρω ἔφην, καὶ σὺν τούτοις καὶ στρατιώτας πολλούς. συχνοὶ μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἐν ταῖς προνομαῖς ἐφθείροντο, τῆς βαρβαρικῆς ἵππου (φημί δὴ τῆς τῶν Ἀραβίων) πανταχοῦ ὀξέως τε καὶ σφοδρῶς ἐπιπιπτούσης αὐτοῖς· καὶ οἱ Ἀτρηνοὶ ἐξικνοῦντο μὲν καὶ ταῖς τοξείαις ἐπὶ μακρότατον (καὶ γὰρ ἐκ μηχανῶν βέλη τινὰ ἐξέκρουον, ὥστε πολλοὺς καὶ τῶν τοῦ Σεουήρου ὑπασπιστῶν βαλεῖν, σὺνδύο τε αὐτῶν βέλη ὑπὸ τὴν αὐτὴν ρύμην ἰέντων, πολλαῖς τε ἅμα χερσὶ καὶ πολλοῖς τοξεύμασι βαλλόντων), πλείστον δὲ ὁμως ἐκάκωσαν αὐτοὺς ἐπειδὴ τῷ τείχει προσέμιξαν, καὶ πολὺ πλείον ἐπεὶ καὶ διέρρηξάν τι αὐτοῦ· τὰ τε γὰρ ἄλλα καὶ τὸ νάφθα τὸ ἀσφαλτῶδες ἐκείνο, περὶ οὗ ἄνω μοι γέγραπται, ἀφιέντες σφίσι τὰ τε μηχανήματα καὶ τοὺς στρατιώτας πάντας, οἷς ἐπεβλήθη, κατέπρησαν. καὶ αὐτὰ ὁ Σεουήρος ἀπὸ βήματος ὑψηλοῦ ἐθεώρει. πεσόντος δὲ πη τοῦ ἔξωθεν περιβόλου, καὶ τῶν στρατιωτῶν πάντων προθυμουμένων ἐς τὸν λοιπὸν ἐσβιάσασθαι, ἐκώλυσε αὐτοὺς ὁ Σεουήρος τοῦτο πράξει, τορῶς πανταχόθεν τὸ ἀνακλητικὸν σημανθῆναι κελεύσας· δόξα τε γὰρ τοῦ χωρίου ὡς καὶ ἀμπόλλα τὰ τε ἄλλα χρήματα καὶ τὰ τοῦ Ἥλιου ἀναθήματα ἔχοντος μεγάλης ἦν, καὶ προσεδόκησεν ἐθελοντὶ τοὺς Ἀραβίους, ἵνα μὴ βία ἀλόντες ἀνδραποδισθῶσιν, ὁμολογήσειν. μίαν γοῦν διαλιπὼν ἡμέραν, ὡς οὐδεὶς αὐτῷ ἐπεκηρυκεύσατο, προσέταξεν αὐθις τοῖς στρατιώταις τῷ τείχει, καίπερ ἀνοικοδομηθέντι νυκτός, προσβαλεῖν· καὶ αὐτῷ τῶν μὲν Εὐρωπαϊῶν τῶν δυναμένων τι κατεργάσασθαι οὐδεὶς ἐτ’ ὀργῇ ὑπήκουσεν, ἕτεροι δὲ δὴ Σύροι ἀναγκασθέντες ἀντ’ αὐτῶν προσβαλεῖν κακῶς ἐφθάρησαν. καὶ οὕτω θεὸς ὁ ῥυσάμενος τὴν πόλιν τοὺς μὲν στρατιώτας δυνηθέντας ἂν ἐς αὐτὴν ἐσελθεῖν διὰ τοῦ Σεουήρου ἀνεκάλεσε, καὶ τὸν Σεουήρον αὐτῷ βουλευθέντα αὐτὴν μετὰ τοῦτο λαβεῖν διὰ τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐκώλυσε. οὕτως γοῦν ὁ Σεουήρος ἐπὶ τούτοις διηπορήθη ὥστε τινὸς τῶν ἀμφ’ αὐτὸν ὑποσχομένου αὐτῷ ἕαν γε αὐτῷ δώση πεντακοσίους καὶ πεντήκοντα μόνους τῶν Εὐρωπαϊῶν στρατιωτῶν, ἄνευ τοῦ τῶν ἄλλων κινδύνου τὴν πόλιν ἐξαιρήσειν, ἔφη πάντων ἀκούοντων “καὶ πόθεν τοσοῦτους στρατιώτας ἔχω;” πρὸς τὴν ἀπείθειαν τῶν στρατιωτῶν τοῦτο εἰπὼν. For this, there is a parallel source (Herodian. III. 9, 4-6). Herodian’s account, fabulous and ill-informed as it may be, contains some additional information: it constructs a connection between Hatra’s support for Septimius Severus’ rival Pescennius Niger in 193 (ibid. III. 1, 3) and Severus’ attack. According to Herodian, the siege was aborted due to the *Atrenoi*’s ‘vigorous defending’ (γενναίως ἀπεμάχοντο). Little solid information is conveyed about the city itself (III. 9, 4): though it probably had ‘enormous strong walls’ (τείχει μεγίστῳ καὶ γενναίῳ) and was ‘teeming with archers’ (ἀνδρῶν τοξοτῶν ἀκμάζουσα), Hatra was certainly not ‘at the very top of a precipitous ridge’ (ἐπ’ ἄκρας ὑψηλοτάτης). On Herodian’s account on Hatra Sommer (2003a), p.20.

4 The chronology here is completely confused. Both attacks on Hatra may have happened during Severus’ second campaign against the Parthians, which was launched after the defeat of Clodius Albinus (this is what Millar (1993), p.121, concludes; Millar (1964), p.143, dates both sieges ‘probably’ to 198; Sartre (2005), p.149, mentions only one siege and dates it to 198, too).

5 Cass. Dio 67. 11.

trayed as a place that ‘enjoyed great fame, containing as it did a vast number of offerings to the sun god as well as vast sums of money.’<sup>6</sup>

Dio’s narratives raise a number of questions. First, how can Hatra’s stunning development from a place of little wealth and significance into the important city it was by the end of the second century CE be explained? Second, why was Hatra so important to the Romans that they attempted repeatedly – in vain, but mobilising enormous resources – to gain control of the place? And, thirdly, why did – and how could – the Hatrenes offer resistance so efficiently, that they withstood three Roman attempts to capture their city? In order to go about such questions, we will approach Hatra from three different angles: first, we will try to establish what importance the city had for the Roman Empire; second, we will take a Parthian point of view and explore, how Hatra fitted in the political structure of the Arsacid kingdom; third, we will attempt to adopt a local perspective in order to investigate what options the political climate left to the Hatrenes.

#### CONQUEST AND TRIUMPH – THE ROMAN PERSPECTIVE

At least three Roman attempts to capture Hatra by force were abortive. The narrative sources establish plausible motives both for Trajan and Septimius Severus to besiege Hatra. In the case of Trajan, we learn through Cassius Dio that the revolt of Hatra in CE 116–17 formed part of a general insurgency in the back of the Roman army that had just completed the conquest of Mesopotamia.<sup>7</sup> As countless other conflicts in and over Mesopotamia prove, the danger of being trapped in a hostile environment was real for a Roman army. This being the case, it was strategically imperative for Trajan to recapture fortified places, which otherwise could have been used by the enemy to cut off the Romans from their supplies. The fact that Trajan himself oversaw the siege of Hatra, while he entrusted other places to his lieutenants, most notably his Moorish general Lusius Quietus, suggests in itself that the city in the eastern Jezirah was pivotal for his strategic planning.<sup>8</sup>

According to Herodian, Hatra’s king Barsemios had, on Pescennius Niger’s request, dispatched archers to support the Roman pretender against Septimius Severus in CE 193.<sup>9</sup> Herodian does explicitly refer to revenge as a motive for Severus’ attack on Hatra,<sup>10</sup> and there may indeed be a connection. If, as Cassius Dio’s chronology suggests, Severus attacked Hatra twice, such a connection becomes even more verisimilar. The most plausible explanation for Severus’ stub-

6 Ibid. 67. 12, 2.

7 Ibid. 68. 29-30 (on the revolt); *ibid.* 31. 1 (on Hatra).

8 Isaac (<sup>2</sup>1992), p.58, points to the fact that revolts in recently established provinces were a well-known phenomenon and rather the rule than the exception. In this case, however, the revolt coincided with the Jewish revolt of 115, which made it potentially more dangerous (Pucci [1981]). On Lusius Quietus: Gebhardt (2002), p.94–95.

9 Herodian. III. 1, 2-3.

10 *Ibid.* III. 9, 1.

bornness with regard to Hatra is that the emperor wanted to get rid of a king who had, most annoyingly, supported his opponent in an inner-Roman power struggle.

Trajan's and Severus' attacks on Hatra were prompted by enemy action and served short-term strategic objectives. Did they form part of any wider, longer-term strategic framework? The narrative sources usually credit the emperors' pursuit of glory with their military adventures.<sup>11</sup> According to Herodian, Severus invaded the Parthian kingdom, because 'he wanted to win a reputation for himself not just for winning a civil war over Roman armies [...] but also by raising monuments for victories against the barbarians.'<sup>12</sup> For Cassius Dio, Severus acted simply 'out of a desire for glory'.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in Dio's account, Trajan's 'real reason' for going to war 'was a desire to win renown', although he acted 'on the pretext that the Armenian king had obtained his diadem, not at his hands, but from the Parthian king'.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Severus' and Trajan's Parthian wars, Dio presents the campaign led by L. Verus (CE 163–66) as a war imposed on the Romans by a Parthian aggression against Armenia.<sup>15</sup>

Strife for honour and glory is certainly a widespread topos in Roman imperial historiography, used to characterise not only tyrants, but also those generally counted among the good emperors. Cassius Dio's critical view on Trajan may have been owing to an anti-Trajanic tradition going back to Hadrian's reign. It may also be a projection of events that happened during the historiographer's own lifetime into the past: Dio would then have been guided by his rejection of Severan expansionism in the east. But does this mean that we should discard pursuit of glory as a motive – the prime motive – for making war on the Parthians?<sup>16</sup>

11 H.A. Tr. 16, Eutr. VIII. 18 and Aur. Vict. 20 do not provide any reason for Severus' Parthian War.

12 Herodian. III. 9, 1.

13 Cass. Dio 75. 1, 1. According to Dio (ibid. 3, 1) Severus 'used to declare that he had added a vast territory to the empire and had made it a bulwark of Syria.' The historiographer disapproves the campaigns and their motivations (ibid. 3, 2): 'On the contrary, it is shown by the facts themselves that this conquest has been a source of constant wars and great expense to us. For it yields very little and uses up vast sums; and now that we have reached out to peoples who are neighbour of the Medes and the Parthians rather than of ourselves, we are always, one might say, fighting the battles of those peoples.'

14 Ibid. 68. 17, 1. The critical perspective on Trajan, which becomes apparent in Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta's* Hadrian book, has been investigated by Seelentag (2004), p.492, who concludes: 'Betrachtet man die Parallelen in den Darstellungen Suetons, Cassius Dios und der *Historia Augusta*, so scheint sich hier eine alternative Tradition womöglich schon kurze Zeit nach dem Tod des Princeps abzuzeichnen, die einen interessanten Kontrast bildet zu den von mir untersuchten Taten und Tugenden Trajans, jenen Aspekten der kaiserlichen Herrschaftsdarstellung.'

15 Ibid. 71. 2, 1.

16 A sub-motive of the emperor's striving for glory is the *imitatio Alexandri*, also employed by Dio (68. 29). Dio's and Herodian's explanations are largely accepted by Isaac [1992], p.162; Isaac [1998]. Now also, based on a broad range of evidence, (Lerouge [2007], p.162: 'Si les empereurs mettent un tel accent sur leurs expéditions parthiques, c'est en partie parce qu'elles sont plus faciles que les autres et permettent d'obtenir de la gloire à bon compte.' Similarly, Potter (2004), p.228.



Was there a coherent, cogent political rationale behind the anti-Parthian aggressions of the second century, as some scholars have suggested – diplomatic, strategic or economic?<sup>17</sup> None of such ‘strategies’ has the slightest reflection in the evidence. This does not mean that a political rationale was absent altogether, but it makes the supposed targets less likely candidates for a ‘prime objective’. In spite of this being a risky undertaking, we have to filter the emperors’ motivations from their actions. As Trajan’s Mesopotamian project was abortive, our information concerning the envisaged shape of an extended Roman Near East is scant. According to Dio, Trajan, after his conquest of Armenia, treated some of the kings, who had voluntarily submitted, ‘as friends’, whereas others were deposed without the use of force.<sup>18</sup> Later, Abgar of Osrhoene becomes ‘his friend’, too (ibid. 22, 2). Finally, after the insurgency has broken out, ‘fearing that the Parthians, too, might begin a revolt’, Trajan appoints Parthamaspates a king by grace of Rome, setting a diadem on his head (ibid. 30, 3).

All this suggests that Trajan had aimed for a mixture of direct and indirect rule in a new, larger Roman Near East. Originally, he seems to have envisaged a maximalist solution, with Babylonia under direct and several loyal kingdoms further north under indirect rule. In principle, this was consistent with Roman practice of government in the Near East since Pompey’s conquest of Syria in 64 BCE: new territories were first attached to Rome as client kingdoms and then annexed as provinces. The Flavians had brought to a conclusion the annexation of client kingdoms in Syria, Trajan had annexed the Nabataean kingdom, now it was time to create new client kingdoms further east, at the expense of the Parthians. However, when the revolt broke out, the maximalist solution proved impracticable, and Trajan switched to a more modest settlement, with a Parthian client king in charge of the Mesopotamian south.<sup>19</sup>

Before the revolt, Trajan had, in all likelihood, aimed at absorbing Hatra as a client state into the Roman power structure, similar to Edessa, whose ruler had become a *rex amicus*. This would then have been a preparative stage for direct rule and full incorporation into a Roman province. Septimius Severus may have had similar plans, as he extended the zone of Roman direct rule in northern Mesopotamia; this would have been in line with Rome’s previous policy of push-

17 Francis Lepper, in his monograph on Trajan’s war, assumed that the emperor, by conquering Mesopotamia, wanted to gain a diplomatic token (Lepper [1948], p.129–131); others, like Edmond Frézouls, David Kennedy and - with particular emphasis - Edward N. Luttwak have pointed to the empire’s urge to establish a “scientific” frontier behind the river - i.e. a frontier that could be defended more easily than the Euphrates frontier (Frézouls [1979]; Frézouls [1980]; Kennedy [1987], p.267–268, and for the ‘scientific frontier’, Luttwak [1976], p.108); again others have suggested that it was the economic and commercial importance of Mesopotamia that had attracted the Romans (Guey [1937]; Longden [1931]; Maricq [1959]).

18 Cass. Dio 68. 18, 3.

19 On the importance of indirect rule and client kingdoms for the Roman imperial periphery Cimma (1976) and now the contributions in Kaizer & Facella (2010b), in particular Kaizer & Facella (2010a) and Hekster (2010). For the Parthian side Fowler (2010). The gradual advancement and intensification of Roman rule in the Near East is still best covered by Millar (1993), p.27–222.

ing forward indirect influence into central Mesopotamia. When Hatra, after the fall of the Arsacids, ultimately risked a *renversement des alliances*, joining the Romans in their struggle against the Sasanians, it factually became a client kingdom, with probably at least a cohort of the *legio I Parthica* deployed in the city or its vicinity.<sup>20</sup>

All this suggests that Roman policy aimed at maximising control over territory. Behind the individual emperors' actions loomed an unequivocal *Primat der Außenpolitik*, and this *Außenpolitik* was uncompromising, triumphalist and aimed at winning glory. Devolution of power to local dynasts was acceptable as long as it served as a temporary tool for implementing Roman power, but it was not employed in the long term, as a tool for reducing strains within the empire. For the Romans, suzerainty was, invariably, the pre-stage of sovereignty. However, the Parthian concept of empire was radically different. In the case of Hatra, the Roman client kingdom was short-lived. When, in 240 or 241, Persian forces captured Hatra, the city was destroyed, to be settled never again.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE STRENGTH OF INDIRECT RULE: THE PARTHIAN PERSPECTIVE

The arrival of the Parthians in Mesopotamia took place against the background of Seleucid decline towards the middle of the second century BCE. The process of Seleucid loss of power was not linear, nor was it isotropic. Rather did portions of the empire break away as central power dwindled. The late and post-Seleucid power vacuum was filled by local dynasties or rulers (such as the Orontides in Commagene, the Hasmonaeans in Jerusalem, the Abgarids in Edessa or Hyspaosines in Charakene), often former Seleucid satraps, and some mobile or semi-mobile tribes just about to enter their period of ethnogenesis (like the Ituraeans and Emesenes and possibly the Palmyrenes in Syria).<sup>22</sup>

20 AE 1958, 238-240, from the reigns of Maximinus and Gordian III. On the inscriptions and Roman presence in Hatra in the 230s Millar (1993), p.129. For the historical background see Wiesehöfer (1982).

21 Indirect rule as an explicit strategy of government goes back to Lugard (1893), the first theoretical treatise on the subject. On the importance of indirect rule in history Doyle (1988); Geiss (1991); Geiss (1994); Geiss (1996); Münkler (2005); Sommer (2009), p.68-71. On Hatra's fall Luther (2008), p.503; Winter & Dignas (2001), p.40. According to Luther, Hatra was the last 'Bollwerk für die Provinzialgebiete jenseits des Euphrats'.

22 For a general overview Sherwin-White & Kuhrt (1993) and, very briefly, Errington (2008), p.112-114; Wiesehöfer (1993), p.155-56; Wiesehöfer (1999), p.77. A possible approach to indirect rule in the Seleucid Empire is outlined by Sommer (2000). How the Seleucids lost control over Iran and the east is described in Wiesehöfer (1996). For the various local dynasties in the post-Seleucid Near East: Schuol (2000), p.291-300 (establishment of the kingdom of Charakene); Facella (2006), p.199-205 (Orontides in Commagene); Ross (2001), p.9 (Abgarids in Osrhoene); Bringmann (1980); Bringmann (2005), p.101-125; Shipley (2000), p.307-312 (revolt in Jerusalem). The ethnogenesis of the Ituraeans is the best-known example for a nomadic group taking over a portion of Seleucid territory: Aliquot (1999/2003);

The Seleucid Empire in its agony, decomposition and fragmentation provided, as it were, the model for Parthian rule over western Asia. Instead of flattening the post-Seleucid principalities and kingdoms, the new masters merely imposed treaties of vassalage on the local rulers. How this could happen, is best exemplified by the kingdom of Charakene at the estuary of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, whose ruler, Hyspaosines, started to expand against neighbouring Babylonia in the wake of the collapse of Seleucid rule in Mesopotamia, shortly after 140 BCE. In 126/25, Babylonia was captured, by force, by the Parthians and slightly later, in 122/21, Hyspaosines had to accept the suzerainty of the Arsacid kings. The Parthians refrained from annexing Charakene, partly because their resources were absorbed by more imminent threats on their eastern frontier.<sup>23</sup>

The Parthian ‘Near West’ was thus a jumble of states and territories, ruled by indigenous rulers of different rank, importance and prestige. Pliny the Elder mentions 18 *regna* between the Red and the Caspian Seas – probably territories not necessarily ruled by kings, but also by local dynasts of sub-royal rank.<sup>24</sup> Other territories, Tacitus (ann. VI. 42, 4; XI. 8) calls them *praefecturae*, were ruled by ‘satraps’ – ‘governors’, whose positions were not hereditary, but who were appointed *ad personam* by the Arsacid kings. What proportion of the empire’s surface the directly ruled *praefecturae* and the indirectly ruled *regna* respectively accounted for, is difficult to establish, but the provincial core was probably rather small, whereas the territory ruled by *reges* must have been vast. Hardly anything is known about the degree of autonomy given to the local rulers (and in what ways it differed), and the relationship between them.

An illustrative text that sheds some light on an otherwise obscure matter is Josephus’ account of two brothers, Asinaios and Anilaios, who, of humble origin, rise to rulers of Parthian Babylonia. The brothers, two orphaned Jewish boys from Neardea, a city in Babylonia, have been trained as weavers. When they repeatedly come late to work and are threatened with punishment, they run away and turn to banditry. As other outlaws join them, they become so powerful that the satrap turns on them with an army. Surprisingly, the brothers manage to defeat the satrap’s force. When the king – Artabanos II – learns about their victory, he summons them to court, where – mistrusting the king’s guarantees of safe conduct – they appear only one by one. The king, however, heaps gifts on them and commits to them ‘the land of Babylonia in trust, that it may, by your care, be preserved free from robbers, and from other calamities.’<sup>25</sup>

Schottruff (1982); Sommer (2001). Only little information is available on early Palmyra and the Emesenes.

23 Schuol (2000), p.299: “Sicher waren die Kämpfe Artabanos’ I. im Osten ein entscheidender Grund, vorerst von einer völligen Unterwerfung des Hyspaosines abzusehen.”

24 Plin. nat. VI. 112. Wieschöfer (1993), p.198, counts among them: Persis, Elymais, Charakene, Hatra, Osrhoene, Adiabene, Media Atropatene and (‘vermutlich’) Hyrcania. The RGDS also mention Segan, Virozan, Armenia, Balasagan, Gelan, Kerman, Makran, Turgistan, Hind, Sakastan, Marv and Choresmia.

25 Ios. ant. Iud. XVIII. 337: παρακαταθήκην δέ σοι δίδωμι τὴν Βαβυλωνίαν γῆν ἀλήστευτόν τε καὶ ἀπαθῆ κακῶν ἐσομένην ὑπὸ τῶν σῶν φροντίδων.

Josephus provides us with a list of reasons why the Parthian king took the unorthodox step to appoint two brothers of obscure background to one of the Empire's most important jobs – to rule Babylonia, one of the Parthians' core territories. First, he 'wanted to curb his own governors of provinces by the courage of these Jewish brethren, lest they should make a league with them; for they were ready for a revolt, and were disposed to rebel, had they been sent on an expedition against them'<sup>26</sup>, and secondly, he was 'afraid, lest when he was engaged in a war, in order to subdue those governors of provinces that had revolted, the party of Asinaios, and those in Babylonia, should be augmented, and either make war upon him, when they should hear of that revolt, or if they should be disappointed in that case, they would not fail of doing further mischief to him.'<sup>27</sup>

As a matter of course, this narrative bears all the markings of Jewish eschatology, loaded with *topoi* and designed to explain the disaster that struck the Babylonian Jewry with a massacre in Seleucia in around CE 40. However, the chronological and institutional framework makes sense. Josephus disposed of some reliable sources on the events in the Parthian empire. Artabanos' reasons for appointing the Jewish brothers are, by and large, convincing. The rise of Asinaios and Anilaios took place against the background of increasing unrest in Artabanos' empire, including a conspiracy among aristocrats and satraps (c. CE 30–32). It was thus in Artabanos' best interest to bid for the support of the substantial Jewish community in Babylonia. In order to preserve power, it was imperative for the great king, to play off against each other the various factions. The text does not name explicitly the status the brothers acquired with their assignment. Apparently, they were not appointed satraps. Their scope of action and their provisions during their joint reign of some 15 years suggest that the brothers enjoyed a substantial autonomy. They have fortresses built in order to secure their territory against rivaling satraps and maintain their own army, for which they headhunt Parthian officers. Anilaios marries the widow of one of these officers, a Parthian general – an obvious attempt to launch dynastic politics. Finally, Anilaios' alleged defection from Judaism, instigated by his wife, and his actions in the wedding's aftermath imply that the brothers have previously promoted Judaism in their territory quite aggressively.<sup>28</sup>

26 Ibid., 330: ἔπρασεν δὲ ταῦτα βασιλεὺς χηρῶν ἐνστομισμάτων τῆ ἀρετῆ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἀδελφῶν εἰς φιλίαν κτήσασθαι τῶν ἐκείνου σατραπειῶν ἐν ἀποστάσει τε οὐσῶν καὶ διανοίᾳ τοῦ ἀποστησομένου μέλλων ἐλάσειν ἐπ' αὐτούς.

27 Ibid., 331: ἐδεδίει γάρ, μὴ καὶ περιεχομένου πολέμῳ τῷ ἐκείνῃ κατὰ χεῖρωσιν τῶν ἀφεστηκότων ἀνξήθῶσιν ἐπὶ μέγα οἱ περὶ τὸν Ἀσιναῖον καὶ τὴν Βαβυλωνίαν ἦτοι γε συστήσονται ἐπ' ἀκροάσει τῆ αὐτῶν ἢ καὶ τούτου γε ἀποτυχόντες τοῦ κακῶσαι μειζόνως οὐ διαμάρτοιεν.

28 Fortresses: *ibid.*, p.338; army: *ibid.*, p.341; marriage of the widow: *ibid.*, p.343; defection from Judaism: *ibid.*, 345–349. On the passage, which is rarely consulted, see Goldblatt (1987), p.616–619; Rajak (1998), p.314–317; Rajak (2001), p.278–282 and now Fowler (2007). On the better known story of Izates, the king of Adiabene, also included in Josephus' work (*ant. Iud. XX. 17–96*), Fowler (2010).

From this emerges the picture of an empire with an extraordinarily complicated architecture of power, founded on personal ties between the great king and the local rulers of various rank. In order to prevail, the great king is forced to keep in a balance his account of political capital – and thus at bay the various centrifugal tendencies within his empire. His most important assets in this game are vacant satrapies, kingships and principalities, which he can transform into political capital conferring them on men who have proven their loyalty or whose loyalty still remains to be proven. He can change the status of territories, as he does in the case of Babylonia, which he upgrades from a satrapy to an autonomous territory under the leadership of the Jewish brothers. By promoting lower-rank rulers to kings, he can gain in political capital. Deposing satraps or kings and adopting an overtly bossy style of government cost the great king valuable political capital, as do insurgency and lost battles. The worst-case scenario in case of a negative political capital balance is a broad coalition of local rulers against him. If this happens, the great king is – politically and physically – as good as dead.<sup>29</sup>

This does not mean that a system of government that largely depended on indirect rule, interpersonal relations and informal political capital was inherently weak. It is, on the contrary, the first choice for polities having to cope with a considerable degree of social diversity – throughout history and everywhere.<sup>30</sup> And Mesopotamia was indeed a patchwork of different ethnicities, modes of production and models of social organisation.<sup>31</sup> Whoever wanted to establish an imperial overlordship over the political jungle that was Mesopotamia, had no alternative but to approach it with the instruments of indirect rule. The Parthians were no exception and they did, altogether, very well: for more than 350 years was Mesopotamia ruled by Arsacid kings of kings, much longer than the Achaemenid and Macedonian rulers had prevailed between the Euphrates and the Tigris – and longer than most parts of Mesopotamia were under Roman control.

#### IN THE TWILIGHT: HATRA AND THE LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Finally we need to establish what Hatra's role was in the wider framework of Romano-Parthian and Mesopotamian politics. The following considerations are

29 For the concept of political capital Bourdieu (2001).

30 Paradigmatic examples are British Nigeria with its various sub-regions (the Muslim Sokoto Caliphate in the north with its Fulani and Hausa components as well as tribal societies in the south) and British India. On British rule in Africa, Marx (2004), p.162–169. The notion of Parthian 'weakness' is also rejected by Fowler (2010), p.76, according to whom it 'is perhaps not misleading to consider that in the Parthian empire there was greater "horizontalty" in the structuring of power than in the Roman world.'

31 For a superb introduction to the complexities of pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamian society, economy and culture see Liverani (1988). On indirect rule applied by the first Mesopotamian empire, Agade, *ibid.*, 243–244. The 'dimorphic' character of tribalism in the eastern Jezirah has been first exposed by Dijkstra (1990). Dijkstra's model is closely followed by Hauser (1998); Hauser (2000); Sommer (2003a); Sommer (2005b).

This makes Ammianus' *Vitaxa* a likely relic of the Parthian period. As a Parthian title of Iranian origin for sub-royal rulers of territories over which the Arsacid king held suzerainty, the term *padishah* – βάρησα makes perfect sense. My suggestion is that we are grasping here the Iranian title of our local *mry*'. For the Parthians, the *strategos* of Dura was a βάρησα – and so was the *mry*' from Edessa, Assur or Hatra: *strategos* – *mry*' – *padishah* are all equivalent titles. They are terms for the same rank, merely in different languages: Greek, Aramaic and Iranian.

Now, why did the Parthians promote the kings of Hatra to the rank of king – *mlk*'? The question is closely connected to the timing of the elevation, on which we have no precise information. It is possible that the advancement of the 'lords' of Hatra simply reflected their city's expansion, its booming economy and growing importance as a religious centre – we find all this reflected in the archaeological record.<sup>36</sup> But there may be more to it: within the time frame the sources give for the elevation lies the Parthian War of 163–166, for which Lucius Verus was nominally responsible. This campaign, during which the Romans conquered even Ctesiphon for some months, changed the political landscape of Mesopotamia for good: the Parthians had to cede a large portion of upper Mesopotamia to the Romans; the eastern Jezirah became a border district.<sup>37</sup> To the Arsacid king, Vologaeses IV (147–191), the defeat meant a major loss in political capital. Against all odds, the sources do not report any unrest or rebellions within the Parthian Empire. This relative peace after a disastrous military setback requires explanation. It can best be explained if we accept that Vologaeses managed to keep his account of political capital balanced. As we have seen, one way of doing this was by promoting local rulers. Hatra's new frontier position made its ruler a particularly valuable ally and the city the cornerstone in the Parthian defence system. This makes the aftermath of Lucius Verus' Parthian war the most likely moment for the promotion of Hatra's ruler to the rank of 'king'.<sup>38</sup>

Finally: what were the local rulers' options in the empires' scramble for Mesopotamia? The choice between Rome and Parthia was a tough one in times of war. Did a local king opt for the wrong side, could he easily be deposed and killed. So it happened to Mannos and Manisaros, two rulers in the 'Arab' frontier zone of northern Mesopotamia, when Trajan approached their region in late 114.

36 Undoubtedly, Hatrene society was rapidly changing during the second century CE. The great temple compound (the Bait Alaha) was built in the second century, a section of the temenos wall dating to CE 137/38. It is hardly likely that the complex was erected in the early imperial period, as claimed by Freyberger (1998), p.89–101, on the grounds of an assessment of the architectonic style. Most of the temples were probably completed during the first half of the second century (Bertolino [1995], p.39–49; Hauser [1998], p.505; Sommer [2005a], p.359). The impressive circular city wall that replaced an older fortification was built before the middle of the second century (Gawlikowski [1994b]).

37 On the outcome of Lucius Verus' ill-documented war Fündling (2008), p.87–89; Millar (1993), p.111–114; Strobel 1994).

38 Already Hauser (2000), p.191: 'In this situation, the elevation of the status of the local ruler should be seen as a sensible response by the Arsacid central authority.' See also Sommer (2003b), p.397; Sommer (2003a), p.33; Sommer (2004), p.240.

They failed to declare their loyalty towards the Roman leader in good time, and so they were ousted, their territories occupied. So it probably also happened to Abgar, the king of Osroene, who had sided with Trajan, after Hadrian had retreated from Mesopotamia.<sup>39</sup>

With a mighty Roman army approaching his kingdom, Abgar had hardly any choice but to declare himself for Trajan. But if the odds were even, the Parthians could usually rely on their local lieutenants' allegiance. Mannos, Manisaros and Sporakes sent envoys to Trajan only when it was too late; they rather sent auxiliary forces to another ruler, Mebarsapes, the king of Adiabene, who offered resistance. Staying with the Arsacid great king and enjoying the benefits of Parthian indirect rule seemed preferable to the perspective of becoming Roman client kings, only to see their kingdoms annexed by Rome at the next opportunity. The fierceness with which the Hatrenes defended their city against first Trajan's and later Severus' sieges can be explained along the same lines. Only when the Parthians were replaced by the Sasanians, who ran an even tougher policy towards their periphery than the Romans, an alliance with the great power of the west suddenly appeared to be the lesser evil.<sup>40</sup>

This raises serious doubts about both, the Romans' and the Sasanians' ability of not just conquering, but also effectively controlling, in the long run, the Mesopotamian steppe frontier. As a matter of fact, the disappearance of several urban centres in Mesopotamia in the course of the third century contributed substantially towards the development of a new trouble spot on the imperial fringes. The nomadic groups of the steppe were now bereft of the dimorphic social framework and their integrated tribalism, which had contained them. Hatra, the city of the sun god, had played its part in stabilising the steppe frontier. Its failure meant the failure of the model of urban sedentariness on which empires depend. It was the writing on the wall for both, Rome and Persia.

39 Cass. Dio LXVIII. 21–22. On Abgar and the events in Edessa, see Drijvers (1977), p.875; Luther (1999b), p.191; Ross (2001), p.30–37; Sommer (2005a), p.237.

40 See above p.38.

based on three assumptions: (1) that the shift from the title *mry* ('lord') to *mlk* ('king') for the rulers of Hatra bears political significance; (2) that it happened between CE 137/38 and 176/77; (3) that it implies a 'promotion' of the local rulers on behalf and by order of the Parthian kings of kings. There is no doubt that the title of *mlk* was superior in rank and prestige to the preceding title of *mry* and that the elevation happened at a clearly defined – although unknown – moment. The promotion of a 'lord' to a 'king' was by no means unprecedented in the Parthian Empire: Until the late first century, the rulers of Osroene held the title of *mry*; from that time onwards, once again a period of major unrest in the Parthian realm, they were called 'kings'.<sup>32</sup>

This leads us to some further questions. First: what was the empire's institutional framework for the titles held by local rulers? Second: why did the Arsacid kings promote the rulers of Hatra? And third: what options did the Hatrenes have in the great game between the two major powers? That the distinction between *mry* and *mlk* really was reflected in the official *nomenklatura* of Parthian local rulers, is suggested by the fact that the title of *mry* occurred not only in Hatra, but also elsewhere in Parthian Mesopotamia.<sup>33</sup>

Further evidence comes from a much later source: Ammianus Marcellinus mentions, in a digression on the Persian (Sasanian) Empire and its provinces three officials in charge of the empire's territorial units: *sunt enim in omni Perside hae regiones maximae, quas Vitaxae, id est magistri equitum, currant, et reges et satrapae*.<sup>34</sup> The comparison with late Roman *magistri militum* obviously refers to the military function of *Vitaxae*, but more importantly they formed a third category of men in charge of *regiones*. *Vitaxa* is the latin form of the Greek word βίσταξ, which in turn is a transliteration of Persian *padishah*, meaning 'great lord'. By the Sasanian period, the word had evolved into an epithet for the Iranian great king, the *shahanshah*. But obviously, here something different is meant. Ammianus' *Vitaxa* is the ruler of a *regio*, and as such, we come across a *Vitaxa* in one of the papyri from Dura-Europos. The papyrus from CE 121 mentions a certain Manesos, who forms part of the Parthian imperial elite and holds the title of βάρησα. Manesos was, in the 120s, *strategos* of Dura-Europos – the local ruler of a territory called *Mesopotamia kai Parapotamia*, roughly the middle Euphrates region around Dura.<sup>35</sup>

32 The author of this paper has repeatedly argued in favour of such an interpretation (Sommer [2003b], p.28–30; Sommer [2003a], p.390–394; Sommer [2004], p.238–240; Sommer [2005a], p.376–383). Similarly Hauser (1998), p.502–503; Hauser (2000), p.191. On Osroene Luther (1999a), p.452. On the various forms of kingship in the Romano-Parthian frontier zone Gnoli (2007b), p.41–79.

33 Besides Osroene also in Assur: Aggoula (1985a), A 1, p.11 and 16.

34 Amm. XIII. 6, 14.

35 P. Dura 20, 1-6. See Sommer (2005a), p.296–298. On Ammianus' Persian digression, possible sources and its dependence on Ptolemy's *Geography* Drijvers (2006), p.59–65. It is therefore likely that material from Ammianus' own period got contaminated with older information.



Hatra is the richest archaeological site in the Parthian Empire known to date and has great potential for a better understanding of this enigmatic empire and its relationship with Rome. After an introduction to this little known site, seventeen contributions written by leading experts in the field provide the reader with the latest insights into this important late-Parthian settlement. They touch upon three themes. The first section, "Between Parthia and Rome" contains three articles that discuss the relationship between Parthia and Rome on

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