

The First Meeting of the Roman and Parthian Empires—Geopolitical Context and Consequences

Frank K. Strk, BA Hons

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis focuses upon the first meeting between the Roman and Parthian Empires in the first decade of the First Century BC. It places that meeting within its wider geopolitical context and considers its consequences for Romano-Parthian relations over the following decade.

Near Eastern history of this period is confused, relying upon sparse textual evidence; as a consequence it is known as the Parthian Dark Age. This study addresses this shortfall in our evidence by reassessing the translations of Classical sources, employing Babylonian cuneiform texts, interpreting archaeological research and reinterpreting numismatic evidence.

This thesis argues that the early development of Romano-Parthian relations was a product of wider geopolitical forces to an extent that has not been considered by previous scholarship. It argues that Parthia's passivity towards Rome's increasingly aggressive incursions into the Near East was a consequence of profound political and social upheaval within the Parthian Empire, hinted at in our primary sources. It argues further that Parthia's preoccupation with this internal discord, which included attempts at secession by various constituent kingdoms, allowed first King Tigranes of Armenia and then Rome to cement a foothold in the Near East south of the Taurus Mountains, at the expense of the Seleucid dynasties and Parthia's interests.

This thesis employs a broader understanding of Near and Far Eastern sources than has been seen in previous studies and therefore addresses a gap in scholarship concerning the overall geopolitical picture of the Near East in the early First Century BC, and the roles Rome and Parthia played in shaping it. It closely examines the crucial preliminary period in Romano-Parthian relations in the vicinity of the Euphrates River—a landmark that formed their frontier for three hundred years. Current scholarship has tended to focus on the later phase of Romano-Parthian interaction, particularly after Rome's annexation of Syria, and the more extensively documented Imperial period. This thesis aims to redress this imbalance.

This study concludes that a broader examination of the relevant primary sources is required in order to illuminate the history of the Parthian Dark Age, and to make the Parthian Empire's interactions with Rome and its western neighbours more comprehensible. In addition it concludes that Parthia's crisis in the East explains its passivity towards Roman expansion into Asia Minor and the Near East in the first decades of the First Century BC.

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