

# Tacitus, the Reign of Tiberius and the Parthian Empire

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## Abstract

The principate of Tiberius (AD14-37) was one of repeated cold and thawed relations with the Parthian Empire. Trade flourished, but so did war. At times, Tiberius gained the ascendancy. At other times, his rival in the East, Artabanus II did. Through the use of nominees and allies, each supported their own imperialist causes and military forces, against each other. In this article, it is shown that these Romano-Parthian relations during the reign of Tiberius were far from static. In fact, they were multifaceted, punctuated by peace, trade, and war. This article addresses the growing field of interest that is the Parthian Empire, in the context of the principate of Tiberius. In doing so, it shall be shown that far from being an incapable ruler, Tiberius was able to diametrically oppose the Parthians with remarkable success.

## Introduction

With Augustus' death, Tiberius became emperor (*princeps*) of the Roman Empire. The principate was still a new regime, but very few Romans remembered the res-publica in its pure form. In the eastern provinces, Tiberius was content to delegate to governors and other diplomatic representatives in place of his own personal presence. These were obliged and required to grapple with what they judged should be conducive to Tiberius' policies and wishes, and successfully carry them out through to implementation. Using these, and nominees for the throne of the Parthian Empire, which stretched

from the Euphrates River to the Indus River, Tiberius was able to contain Parthian aggression to a great extent. In this article, Romano-Parthian relations are explored during the principate of Tiberius, with a focus on military vying, and trade. The provenance of Tacitus' *Annals* is explored, and a brief discussion of Thomas' journey to the East is outlined – in an effort to pinpoint the events contained throughout this article in its historiographical and historical contexts. Ancient literary sources are referred to, as are archaeological studies, through the lens of modern scholarship, in an effort to support critical thinking and analysis. Throughout this article, exploration of the growing field of interest that is the Parthian Empire is embarked upon, especially in the context of its relations with the Roman Empire during the principate of Tiberius. In doing so, this article brings together many sources of information together in one place for the first time in any article form, to reach the conclusion that through the use of political nominees, and military force that included that of Rome's allies, Tiberius was able to contain Parthian aggression with much success.

## Tacitus and Tiberius

Our main ancient source for the principate of Tiberius is Tacitus. Through critique of Tiberius, Tacitus made political statements concerning the imperial regimes of his own lifetime. Syme argued that Tacitus required a return to the militarism under Trajan, rather than Hadrian, under whom he for a time believed Tacitus composed and

published his *Annals*.<sup>1</sup> According to Syme, Tacitus' lengthy Parthian affairs discussions which detail military events were designed to excite and thrill his immediate audience. This was purposed to recreate the intense feelings that existed under Trajan's Parthian War conditions, but which had greatly waned under Hadrian.<sup>2</sup>

However, Barr and Walters counter-argue, positing that Tacitus' critiques of Tiberius were used to highlight Trajan's achievements under whose principate Tacitus actually wrote. In this sense, Tacitus acted much like the Roman satirist Juvenal. Thus, Parthian affairs were included in Tacitus' *Annals* because they were current, and topical to many Romans.<sup>3</sup> According to Tacitus, this negative picture of Tiberius was the legacy of the *princeps'* own contemporary writers, and that although he espoused Tiberius' policy of peace personally, this policy was imprinted upon him by Augustus, and was not a true reflection of what Rome truly needed, or desired.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Tacitus notes, Tiberius had contemporary authors closely monitored, screening their contents, while concurrently reserving the legal right to impose treason laws upon any hostile authors. In AD22, Clutorius Priscus was condemned for treason, as were Gaius Coninius and Aulus Cremutius Cordus in AD 25.<sup>5</sup>

However, it must be said, that these authors were extreme examples – in their writings they had attacked Tiberius' mother's supposed sexuality, the peace of the empire, and showed delight over the death of Tiberius' son Drusus. Therefore, their punishment was more imperative than most others'.<sup>6</sup> However, other contemporaneous authors were far more positive towards Tiberius. Roman historian Velleius Paterculus seemed to have adored him, as did the military he served with under Tiberius – who was once his general – throughout his works,<sup>7</sup> while the Roman astronomer and poet Manilius also admired Tiberius' peaceful approach.<sup>8</sup>

In 1957, Mendell simply wrote that 'The *Annals* were probably "published" in 116, the last of the works of Tacitus to appear.'<sup>9</sup> He provided no further explanation of this statement. This common viewpoint was dismantled one year later, when Syme published his two-volume work on Tacitus, in which Syme argued that the *Annals* were not written under Trajan, but under his successor, Hadrian.<sup>10</sup> Syme believed that this explained why the *Annals* were so negative towards Tiberius' military policy of non-aggression along the frontiers, a veiled criticism of Hadrian's policy to halt all wars of Roman conquest. The *Annals* had many descriptions of battles between Roman and Parthian armies in the Julio-Claudian period. Surely, Syme posited, Tacitus would never have devoted so much time and space to these wars during the last years of Trajan's reign, when Trajan's Parthian War, begun in AD115, proved to be a spectacular failure, only ending with his death in AD117. Syme's answer to this was a resounding 'Of course not.' Tacitus might, however, have included his accounts of those wars as rhetorical exercises, to encourage Hadrian both to forget about his Tiberius-like non-aggression policy, and to emulate other Roman generals in the *Annals*, like Corbulo. This, in turn, might encourage Hadrian to launch a new war of conquest against the Parthians – one more fitting to Rome's military reputation.<sup>11</sup>

Later, Syme revised this theory and hypothesised that, based on *Annals* 2.61 – at the time of writing the Roman Empire extended to the 'Red Sea' or rather, the 'Persian Gulf' – Tacitus' account of Tiberius' principate had to have been completed in AD116. But later books, especially those that deal with Nero, must have been written later on, with Hadrian in mind.<sup>12</sup> Even later, Syme altered this idea as well, arguing that since Suetonius' and Cassius Dio's portrayals of Tiberius were so similar to Tacitus', that his portrayal of Tiberius' reign must

have been historical, and not a diatribe against either Trajan or Hadrian at all.<sup>13</sup>

Today, historians generally agree that Syme's second argument, that Tacitus began composing under Trajan and finished under Hadrian, is probably the more accurate appraisal.<sup>14</sup> However, the period of research that Tacitus employed stretched back much further than Trajan's principate. According to Suetonius, Domitian modelled himself on Tiberius' personal notes and memoirs, which, Syme argued, was reflected in the similar characteristics between the two emperors' principates.<sup>15</sup> Drawing inspiration from Suetonius and Syme, Martin plausibly suggested that by the time of the assassination of Domitian in AD96, Tacitus had already learned the lessons of imperial concealment and intrigue so prominent throughout Tacitus' Tiberian books.<sup>16</sup> Then Bowersock demonstrated that Tacitus' accounts of events in Asia Minor under Tiberius were heavily influenced by his proconsulship there in AD112/3, and by political events over the course of several decades leading up to and including AD112/3. Thus, Tacitus must have composed parts of the Tiberian *Annals* whilst in Asia Minor and other locations, beginning after the completion of the *Histories* in AD109 up to AD113/4, using personal notes dating back to the Flavian era.<sup>17</sup>

The length of time Tacitus patiently took to write the *Annals* did not detract from his efforts to compose a cohesive work and was instead helpful. As O'Gorman points out, Tacitus' description of events from Tiberius' accession to the death of Nero appears to constitute beginning and end points of historical concepts that reflect Tacitus' impressions, feelings, and thoughts that in the main transcend purely Trajanic or Hadrianic storytelling.<sup>18</sup> For, as Ash reminds us, Tacitus was no mere court historian intent upon condemning past rulers. But rather, the *Annals* as a whole set forth a gradual decline under the Julio-Claudians

that prequel the civil wars that open the *Histories*. In this regard, Tacitus followed Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Josephus, each of whom composed preludes to the wars each wished to narrate.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as Gowing notes, the *Annals* were neither purely promotion nor condemnation of Trajan and Hadrian, but rather showed historical rigour and vigour.<sup>20</sup> As a result, as Woodman puts it, far from being courtly affirmation, the *Annals* contained interactions with Trajan that were not exclusively positive or negative, but were nuanced, and engaged and expanded upon Trajan's 'Restored Coinage' of AD112; these depicted the emperors that Trajan considered 'good' – Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius. Thus, the Tiberius of Tacitus had two sides: one positive, the other stern, corrupted, and at times scandalous.<sup>21</sup>

Tacitus' portrayal of the AD17 earthquake and Tiberius' response can help to pinpoint when Tacitus wrote this section of the *Annals*, as well as Tiberius' character as a ruler. Crucially, Tacitus' account closely resembled Cassius Dio's description of the large and destructive earthquake that hit Syrian Antioch in AD115. By cross-referencing Tacitus' description of the AD17 earthquake with Dio's, it becomes abundantly clear that Tacitus drew much of his inspiration from this contemporary event when composing this part of the *Annals* in AD115. One is able to determine that Tacitus lifted the destructive conditions faced during his contemporary earthquake in Antioch in AD115 and foisted them upon the cataclysm of AD17 in Asia Minor. Both events were vast and extremely destructive to the urban centres where they occurred. Tacitus simply used contemporary events to describe a similar event from a century before, in order to stimulate a dramatic response in his audience. They, like Tacitus, knew something about the earthquake of AD115, but little about the AD17 Asia Minor disaster.<sup>22</sup>

## In the East

In the East, the Parthian king Vonones I had been replaced due to war by Artabanus II at the outset of Tiberius' principate, and his support-base was replaced by the new king's more noble supporters. A title he took up for himself on Parthian coinage was 'The Benificent'.<sup>23</sup> Vonones I had been brought up in Rome as a political hostage, and did not share the traditional Parthian pastimes of horse-riding and hunting. According to Tacitus, these nobles espoused he was acting more like a Roman governor than a true Parthian king, and that they were treated more like subjects in a Roman province than the Parthian victors of the Battle of Carrhae in 53BC.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Artabanus II was of royal Parthian Arsacid lineage, and was extremely popular throughout the Parthian Empire. He had lived with the nomadic Dahae, who lived east of the Caspian Sea to the north of the Parthian capital Hecatompylos, and was famous for his horse-riding and hunting prowess. Thus, he appeared far more quintessentially Parthian than Vonones I. In their first battle, Vonones I proved victorious. However, Artabanus II's popularity meant that he was able to mobilise another large military force – perhaps even larger than his initial army. In their second battle, which soon followed, Artabanus II proved victorious in a decisive battle. Tacitus states that Vonones I fled to Armenia where he was conveniently offered the throne over Armenia. He accepted the offer and was crowned king.<sup>25</sup>

Not to be outmanoeuvred, Artabanus II soon deployed for war against Armenia. However, the Roman governor of Syria Quintus Caecilius Metellus Creticus Silanus strategically deposed Vonones I in order to provide a peaceful solution to the escalating tensions, while also retaining him as insurance for a possible counter-attack if Artabanus II should embark upon an aggressive policy at a future date. According to Tacitus, it was at this

point that Tiberius masterfully intervened in the affairs of the East. Germanicus would assume a pivotal role in this endeavour, appearing centre-stage in the East, with pomp and pageantry, and even a royal tour.<sup>26</sup> Underlying Germanicus' goodwill was the threat of war. Diplomacy backed by military threat was a distinct Tiberian flavour during this period, underlining the fact that he was far from being an inactive, or obsolete, ruler.<sup>27</sup>

Prince Zeno was the son of the Pontic king Polemo I. Both of these royal monarchs owed their positions to Rome.<sup>28</sup> In AD17, Tiberius brilliantly and expediently despatched Germanicus and Piso to the East to calm the political instability that existed there. Vonones I had been expelled from Armenia, and king Archelaus Sisinnus in nearby Cappadocia had recently died; as had kings Philopator II of Cilicia and king Antiochus III of Commagene. These kingdoms ran the risk of being overrun by Vonones I. Germanicus toured the kingdom of Pontus, where he met Zeno, the elder brother of Polemon II, king of Pontus, who he warmed to. Upon arrival, Germanicus noticed the nobles of Armenia warmed to Zeno as their installed king. Zeno had been pro-Armenian since childhood, and had adopted many of the national customs, including hunting. This marked him well apart from Vonones I. In Artaxata, the capital of Armenia, Zeno was crowned king by Germanicus, with the new name and title, 'Artaxias' - a name and title he chose for himself in honour of the occasion and city of his coronation – an arrangement Germanicus had overseen and ratified on Tiberius' bequest, and behalf. The reign lasted seventeen years, until Artaxias (Zeno) died in AD34. Germanicus made Cappadocia a Roman province, reducing its level of tribute to Rome, and appointed Q. Veranius there as its first governor. Q. Servaeus was also sent to Commagene as *propraetor*. Commagene was attached to the Roman province of Syria. These arrangements proved effective. Artabanus II was appeased, and wholeheartedly

approved of this, as did Tiberius. As a sign of his own goodwill, Artabanus II offered Germanicus an official meeting on the Euphrates River frontier. Germanicus declined the king's offer, but removed Vonones I further from the area, settling him in Pompeiopolis, a port town of Cilicia by the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>29</sup> According to Tacitus, the removal of Vonones I was as much a concession to Artabanus II as it was an affront to Piso, for Vonones I had won the patronage of Piso, and his wife Plancina, who had accompanied her husband and Germanicus to the East.<sup>30</sup>

### Peace and Trade

Peace reigned until AD34 with Artaxias' death. In the meantime, trade flourished. Throughout the Parthian Empire, riches abounded. Seleucia even began to mint new currency, opening a bronze coinage mint – a sign of stability and prosperity.<sup>31</sup> Under the Julio-Claudians, and into the Flavian era and beyond, trade flourished between Rome through Syria and Parthia and other empires to the east.<sup>32</sup> Syria was a wealthy province, usually recognised as second only to Egypt in terms of provincial wealth. Its huge standing army of Roman legions there, were fed and supplied with all the provisions it could need or want, by local business, corporations, and the Syrian economy, boosted, stimulated, and highly engaged by the ongoing trade of ideas and products with the East. Especially engaged was that trade stretched to Antioch, Tyre and Sidon, and other Syrian cities, which coursed along, up and down, the Euphrates leg of what modern historians call 'The Silk Route', which stretched from Syria to China, via the Parthian Empire, which at the time stretched from the Euphrates to the Indus, just about, and the Kushan Empire, the Bactrian kingdoms of Parthia, Tibet, and northern India.<sup>33</sup>

For Roman gold, materials, food, and wine, the Parthians traded many things, as did the Chinese, Tibetans, Kushans, Bactrians, and Indians.<sup>34</sup> Such

things included steel works of art and armaments, leather works, rhubarb, and other foodstuffs like pistachio nuts and peaches, plus cooking styles.<sup>35</sup> The Syrian governor and his advisers, retinue, and cohorts of employees were responsible for feeding the army stationed there in the province and its massive cities placed a twenty-five percent levy and tax upon products from the east, not to mention the benefits this trade accrued for other provinces throughout the empire including in the west.<sup>36</sup> A handsome profit, in fact, considering the Parthians often acted as middle-men between those empires and the Roman Empire, affording thus to settle on large prices to the West on foodstuffs and other products usually worth much less in their homelands.<sup>37</sup>

Silk from China arrived in Syria and Egypt from the Persian Gulf via the Euphrates River and overland, and the Red Sea. This silk was usually in a raw state when it arrived in Rome's Syrian markets, and was transported to weaving factories in Phoenicia and Egypt, where they would be turned into fashionable garments and clothes, and hangings both for houses and other dwellings, and furniture.<sup>38</sup> In the ancient city of Palmyra, founded by Solomon according to Josephus, which was located in the province of Syria, archaeologists have found ancient specimens of silken fabric still with the trade-hall of the Hunan province in China, still on them. Cashmere has also been found there from the area within and surrounding what is now Afghanistan, in the kingdom of Gundaphar.<sup>39</sup>

The Persian Gulf also acted as a huge Parthian harbour. From its many ports, hoards of gold and silver and bronze Roman coins, were transported along the coasts of the Indian Ocean, as far as east India, especially at the Coimbatore and Karur ports. Amphora (ceramic jars) fragments from the Roman Empire from as far west as Catalan in Spain have been found all along India's shores, especially by its ports, as well. Most of these once carried wine, but

some oil, from the Roman Empire.<sup>40</sup> Parthian and Indian traders traded Roman goods, reworked to suit Indian and Parthian tastes, with markets around the Gulf, and beyond.<sup>41</sup> The major trading hub of India in the western subcontinent was Taxila. Taxila was strategically located, importing and exporting to and from Bactria, central Asia, the Indus Valley, and the Indian Ocean. Finds there include Roman metals, glass, gems, ceramics, and coinage, brought there mostly by Parthian and Indian traders. Taxila received Roman goods, and traded these and many other products with central and eastern Asia.<sup>42</sup> To the east, Bengal's international trade in ancient times peaked during the first century AD – a trade that incorporated Taxila, as well as Sri Lanka, and Arikamedu and other sites of the Chola Empire of southeast India, where Roman coinage and Italian and eastern Mediterranean ceramics from the late-first century BC to the mid-first century AD have been found.<sup>43</sup>

Based upon the ancient evidence, it may be argued that Roman naval fleets tried to contain Parthian expansion throughout the Indian Ocean with limited success during this time from military centers around the Red Sea. For, on the Red Sea's Farasan Islands, there has been discovered an inscription in Latin that commemorates the presence of a vexillation of Legio II from this time, which was usually stationed in Egypt.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, on the horn of Africa, Italian, Syrian and Egyptian ceramics from this period have also been found at Heis and Damo.<sup>45</sup> According to modern historians Casson and Whitewright, similar Roman maritime regimes prevailed down the eastern Somalian coast, where trade was practiced by Romans and Arabians, alike.<sup>46</sup> In fact, Roman coins from this period have been found as far south down the east African seaboard as Tanzania/Zanzibar, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and even as far south as South Africa.<sup>47</sup> In addition, just as it appears that there were sea trade routes

between the Red Sea and eastern Africa, so too were there maritime routes between Africa and the Parthian Empire that were active during this period.<sup>48</sup> However, there have been very few Roman finds around the Persian Gulf, reflecting the ongoing feud between Rome and Parthia.<sup>49</sup>

However, after AD40 the Roman navy may arguably have had more success in containing Parthia's presence around the Indian Ocean, and indeed, heading out of the Persian Gulf. By AD40, according to the Roman tract *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, published around AD60, the secrets of the monsoon winds around the Indian Ocean, guarded centuries by Parthian and Arab sailors, were betrayed by a Greek merchant to the Romans. In a nutshell, prevailing winds drove ships to India from the mouth of the Red Sea during summer, and back again from India to the Red Sea during winter. A round trip usually took at that time ninety-four days, including a three-week voyage down the Red Sea. However, by going 'off the wind', a sailing vessel could sail in a southern direction from the mouth of the Red Sea in a round fashion, bringing the ship easily to the Malabar coast in east India.<sup>50</sup> Some modern historians believe there was a Jewish population at Malabar at this time, which attracted Thomas to there.<sup>51</sup>

According to the Tiberian Roman geographer Strabo, around one-hundred and twenty ships sailed from Egypt to India each year, during the time of the principate of Tiberius. But, the increase in ships once the Romans learnt about the prevailing monsoon wind currents would arguably have been substantial. For, according to Warmington some ships after AD40 weighed two-hundred to three-hundred tonnes.<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, these monsoon winds may have brought Thomas safely to India from Judea and the Red Sea. According to Eusebius:

*Thomas, tradition tells us, was chosen for Parthia, Andrew for Scythia, John for Asia, where he remained till his death at Ephesus.*<sup>53</sup>

Evidence suggests that Thomas left for the East via boat a little over a decade after the death of Jesus Christ, perhaps after a sojourn into the Parthian Empire by land beforehand. Modern historians Gillman, Klimkeit, and James argue that when that occurred, Thomas travelled to Alexandria (in Egypt), perhaps by land, or from the Judean harbour of Caesarea (Maritima), from where he journeyed by land to the Red Sea for sea passage to India. From there, he may have travelled west by land into the Parthian Empire for a time, before returning to India by land. Although, at that time there may have been a port located at the northern extremity of the Red Sea used by Judean and Idumean vessels. Herod 'the Great' was, after all, a great builder, and built the harbour at Caesarea (Maritima), and therefore may also have built another port there, as well.<sup>54</sup>

Our main historical source for the eastern missions of St. Thomas is a Gnostic Christian work, the *Acts of Thomas*. This work appears to have been written by a Gnostic Christian with historical intent, sometime in the early third century AD. According to modern historian Neill, it stands as a genuine attempt to describe Thomas' evangelical mission to India, and historians do not seriously contest his argument.<sup>55</sup> Modern historian Nedungatt, and others, also maintain the 'irreplaceable' validity of the work, pointing out it was written, not in the style of many historical works today, but in the style of the biblical Acts of the Apostles, painstakingly, over a period of time by various hands using different written and oral historical sources and traditions from Parthia and India, somewhere in or beyond the ancient northern Mesopotamian kingdom of Edessa, in a Syriac script.<sup>56</sup> However, given the work's information on India is accurate, and that there have been numerous ancient Eastern

Syriac words and syllables incorporated into the Malayalam dialects of the Malabar regions of southern India, over many centuries, it may be argued that there were other copies of the *Acts of Thomas* in ancient Eastern Syriac dialects that were later to influence the Malayalam language, and that these were the originals, which were later copied and transferred to Edessa and the Roman Empire in the West.<sup>57</sup> The work's immediate audiences were the authors' circles of friends, acquaintances, and networks, within and without their churches; and reading similarly, but in an historical sense, to an ancient Greek novel, the *Acts of Thomas* may have been read widely among noble Christian Roman women, and men, from its publication, and introduction to the Roman Empire in the early third century AD, as argued by Bremmer and Cosgrove.<sup>58</sup>

The scholarly Pope Benedict XVI notes that some still believe that Thomas went to Parthia by land first, then onto western India, and then from there, southern India. However, Benedict XVI argues that the historical traditions in the ancient *Acts of Thomas* are also trustworthy.<sup>59</sup> According to local tradition in India and the *Acts of Thomas* itself, Thomas' first arrival point was on the Malabar Coast in AD50-52. Between his initial departure from Judea and his arrival in India, Thomas may arguably have journeyed east from Judea into western Parthian territories, and travelled back, completing an evangelical mission before he departed by ship for India, upon which sojourn he pressed into the Parthian Empire once again, from the east. Still, the fastest means of travel to India was not by land, but by ship. Therefore, it appears that he did arrive in India by utilization of Indian Ocean monsoon winds, during summer months. When he arrived, he founded seven churches, by the ancient port-city of Muziris.<sup>60</sup> According to the *Acts of Thomas*, Thomas was a carpenter.<sup>61</sup> The first century AD Jewish historian Josephus also states there were 'no lack of carpenters' in Galilee – an area where Thomas was

active during Jesus' ministry – during the first century AD.<sup>62</sup>

### Peace Ends

Artaxias' diplomatic success lied in the fact that although he was pro-Roman, he was also sympathetic to Parthian politics and culture. Furthermore, both Rome and Parthia accepted that it was in their mutual interest to keep him established in place on the Armenian throne as a peace-broker between the two empires, with his kingdom acting as a useful buffer-state.<sup>63</sup> However, Tacitus states that upon Artaxias' death, Artabanus II placed his son Arsaces upon the Armenian throne without consulting either Tiberius or the Roman Senate. The dream of conquering west of the Euphrates River still loomed large, as did the shadows cast by Parthia's Hellenistic and Achaemenid imperialist ancestors who had previously conquered those parts. He began to undermine Tiberius' position in the eastern provinces, and to exert his own there.<sup>64</sup>

Tiberius looked for a nominee to undermine Artabanus II and Arsaces in the East, but that was difficult considering that the king had removed most of the male members of his own royal family, over the course of numerous previous years. So, Tiberius produced Phraates, a son of Phraates IV, who had been sent to Rome as a political hostage during the principate of Augustus. He was despatched by Tiberius to the Parthian Empire with an army in order to invade, conquer, and seize it. However, the invasion was not to be. Upon arrival in Syria, Phraates died, most likely by assassination.<sup>65</sup>

Not to be outwitted or outdone, the politically gifted and educated Tiberius then suddenly produced another royal Parthian Arsacid prince – Tiridates. Armenia was now becoming more and more openly pro-Parthian and anti-Roman. Nevertheless, Tiberius took the initiative and

invited Mithridates, the brother of king Pharasmanes of Iberia to invade Armenia and seize control there from Arsaces, himself. Thus, the use of a foreign power for Roman military purposes appealed to Tiberius. This formed a precedent that future Roman emperors would follow, and employ, in their quests to contain Parthian aggression. According to Tacitus, Mithridates speedily led his army into Armenia, and overran the kingdom. Artaxata was taken, and Mithridates was installed as the new Armenian king.<sup>66</sup> Vespasian employed a similar strategy. Through the agency of M. Ulpius Traianus (father of the future emperor Trajan), who was governor of Syria from AD73/74-76/77, the Alani attacked Parthian territories, reducing its policy of aggression against the Roman Empire. This Syrian governor was awarded *ornamenta triumphalia* for this military victory over Rome's main rival in the East.<sup>67</sup> Hadrian also continued this policy of containment of the Parthians, forging alliances with Armenia, Edessa, and Oshroene to Parthia's west; the Alani, Iberians, and Hyrcanians to its north, and Bactria to its east. The *Historia Augusta* labels these alliances as largely symbolic, but they demonstrate Hadrian's diplomatic strength – keeping them in reserve should need arise.<sup>68</sup> Antoninus Pius also maintained this policy, enlisting the alliances of Armenia, the Pontic kingdoms, and various kingdoms to the east of the Parthian Empire in order to further the cause of the containment of Parthian aggression.<sup>69</sup>

To counter-attack, Artabanus III despatched another son – Orodes – with an army of his own to Armenia. Upon arrival, he began to entice Mithridates' Albani and Sarmatian allies into his own army's rank and file, during his preparations for battle. In the battle that ensued, there were Albani and Sarmatians fighting each other from vantage-points along both battle-lines. According to Tacitus, it was a fiercely contested battle, but Orodes was forced to withdraw, and concede



defeat, when false rumours suddenly swept his whole army that he had been killed in the fighting and that the cause was lost. In desperation, he and his forces were routed, and fled the battlefield. He withdrew back to the territories of the Parthian Empire, and there began to mobilise another army for yet another war against Mithridates<sup>70</sup>.

Mithridates may have had this false rumour spread throughout the enemy's battle-lines in order to recreate a timely passage that took place at the Battle of Carrhae in 53BC. When Marcus Crassus' son Publius led a charge against the Parthians under the command of Suren, in person, he was caught and his head was decapitated by Parthian soldiers, and thrown back at the enemy. Soon after this incident, the Roman forces lost heart and began to withdraw. They lost the battle.<sup>71</sup> A similar tactic was used by the Normans in the eleventh century AD. It may be argued that these were inspired by this battle between Mithridates and Orodes. It is not known if the Normans had access to Tacitus' *Annals*, or a similar contemporaneous source, but it is known that a Norman Renaissance emerged, and took hold, during the twelfth century AD – the seeds of which were sewn in the eleventh century AD – whereupon ancient learning was taught, leading to the establishment of numerous universities throughout France and Britain. Indeed, similar strategies were employed by William and Harold at the Battle of Hastings in AD1066, with devastating effect there as well, when Harold was reputedly struck through an eye by an arrow, killing him, whereupon his army lost heart and gave way, losing that battle as well.<sup>72</sup>

### **The Winds of Change**

The gaze of the eyes of Artabanus II were swiftly turned towards Syria. There, the Syrian governor Lucius Vitellius was commissioned to lead proceedings against Parthia by order of Tiberius. When Tiridates soon arrived, Vitellius escorted him with an army to the Euphrates River. There, he was

met by a retinue of Parthian nobles with a force, who had grown tired of Artabanus II's megalomania. Thus, the conditions in Armenia became of secondary concern to the primary concern in Syria, and along the Euphrates River. Vitellius and these nobles then set about fermenting and inciting unrest among other Parthian nobles against Artabanus III. Cut off from his own support-base, Tacitus states that the king fled for his life, and went into exile. However, he discovered an appealing opportunity to regroup, and counter-attack the Parthian nobility that had turned traitor, kissed him on the cheek goodbye, and seized his power. Finding Hyrcanians and Carmanians amicable to his case, he enlisted their support. Meanwhile, Vitellius returned to Syria, content that Tiridates' popularity among Parthia's nobility was secure, at least for the time being. Indeed, he was even welcomed into the Parthian capital Seleucia with much enthusiasm.<sup>73</sup>

Then, Artabanus II made his next move. Rallying his forces, he then began to incite mutiny against Tiridates and Rome among Parthia's nobles, and military. Clearly, the same sense of Parthian nationalism that had propelled Artabanus II to the kingship still lingered, and became strong once again. He successfully seized power again. Thus, just as Vonones I was deemed unpopular, so too was Tiridates – both on account of them being too pro-Roman. Tiridates withdrew to the west of the Euphrates, and consulted with Vitellius for the possibility of renewed military support. Vitellius refused to commit any Roman legions to Tiridates' cause, surmising that the Parthian king's position was now secured, and established. Disappointed and dejected, Tacitus states that Tiridates remained in Syria, having failed in his enterprise to take the Parthian Empire. Still, if his utility was needed by Rome, he was still available to take a leading or peripheral hand.<sup>74</sup>

Tiberius died on the 16th March, AD37. Artabanus II and Vitellius met by the Euphrates. The Parthian king's son Darius was given to Vitellius as a political hostage, in order to ensure the Parthian king's goodwill towards the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, and the new emperor – Gaius (Caligula) Caesar. Thus, this arrangement of affairs proved a major victory for Tiberius and Gaius over the mighty Parthian Empire. Furthermore, a potential heir to the Parthian throne had been removed from the courts of the aging Artabanus II, and could be produced by a Roman emperor as an attempt to have him take over the Parthian Empire, by which means the emperor would rule it through him.<sup>75</sup>

### Conclusion

It has been demonstrated throughout this article that Romano-Parthian relations were far from static. They were often replete with contention, and at times, imperialist vying that took the shape of war. During times of peace, trade flourished. However, strategic movements still continued in order to usher in, and even enforce, a continuum of peace – specially to contain potential aggression and facilitate trade, on land and on sea. It was this facilitation that allowed Thomas to eventually sail to India, and no doubt others, too. Nevertheless, ascendancy was of paramount importance in a region that featured frontiers between two of the ancient world's largest empires. Obviously, peace fostered economic growth. However, in order to secure that growth in the long term in one empire's favour, each empire fought in order to achieve that favour, often with dire consequences for local populations throughout the Euphrates area. Nonetheless, Tiberius maintained his policy of containment of Parthian aggression in order to keep it replete with respect for Rome, and its provinces. In doing so, he maintained pressure upon Parthia's Empire on a fairly consistent basis in order to support Rome's own interests. By the time

Tiberius died, Rome had secured Artabanus II's own son as a political hostage, indicating that for all his faults, Tiberius has indeed achieved much for Rome in the Near East, and the Roman provinces that habituated the area – providing a sturdy foundation for others to accept, capitalise upon, and even follow as precedent.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Syme (1959): 498-530.
- <sup>2</sup> Syme (1959): 494.
- <sup>3</sup> *Juv. Sat.* 10. 68-81; Barr (1991): 349-353.
- <sup>4</sup> *Tac. Ann.* 1. 11.
- <sup>5</sup> *Tac. Ann.* 3. 47; 4. 30.
- <sup>6</sup> *Tac. Ann.* 1. 69-72.
- <sup>7</sup> *Vell. Pat.* 2. 94, 126; Schmitter (2011): 177-202, esp. 184.
- <sup>8</sup> Manilius, *Astronomica*, 4. 50-58; Goold (1977); Sullivan (1991): 382-386; Volk (2009): 1.
- <sup>9</sup> Mendell (1957): 225.
- <sup>10</sup> Syme (1959): 746-782.
- <sup>11</sup> Syme (1959): 746-782.
- <sup>12</sup> Syme (1970): 129.
- <sup>13</sup> Syme (1974): 481-496.
- <sup>14</sup> Sailor (2008): 256; Mellor (2011): 20; Benario (2012): 101-122; Pagán (2017): 9.
- <sup>15</sup> *Suet. Dom.* 20; Syme (1959): 422.
- <sup>16</sup> Martin (1981): 31.
- <sup>17</sup> Bowersock (1993): 3-10.
- <sup>18</sup> O'Gorman (2000): 126-127.
- <sup>19</sup> Ash (2006): 79.
- <sup>20</sup> Gowing (2009): 17-30, esp. 26.
- <sup>21</sup> Woodman (2010): 31-43, esp. 42. On the "Restored Coinage", Mattingly (1926): 232-278.
- <sup>22</sup> Graham (2019): 1-20, esp. 4-8.
- <sup>23</sup> Sellwood (2000): 293.
- <sup>24</sup> *Tac. Ann.* 2. 1.
- <sup>25</sup> *Tac. Ann.* 2. 1; Syme: (1959): 237.
- <sup>26</sup> *Tac. Ann.* 2. 50; Maranon (1956): 99.
- <sup>27</sup> Levick (1976): 145.
- <sup>28</sup> Smith (1972): 82.
- <sup>29</sup> *Jos. JA.* 18. 53, 96-100; *Tac. Ann.* 2. 42-45, 55-58; 6. 31-35, 42-45; *Dio* 58. 26. 1; *Florus* 1. 40. 27-28; Seager (1972): 82, 103; Levick (1976): 146; Powell (2013): 133-139.
- <sup>30</sup> *Tac. Ann.* 2. 58; Levick (1976): 155; Powell (2013): 139.
- <sup>31</sup> Sellwood (2000): 294.
- <sup>32</sup> Isaac (1990): 140.
- <sup>33</sup> Isidore of Charax, *Parthian Stations*, 1-19.
- <sup>34</sup> For studies on the discoveries of coins and amphorae along the Persian and Indian coasts, see Turner (1989): 139; Tomber (2008): 117-125.
- <sup>35</sup> For rhubarb and the peach, see *Pl. NH.* 37. 128; 15; 44. On steel and leather, see *Pl. NH.* 34. 145. See also Kurz (2000): 559-567.
- <sup>36</sup> Jones (1974): 127-129; Garnsey, Saller: (1987) 55-56, 62.
- <sup>37</sup> Wheeler: (1955) 154; Colledge (1967): 80; Keall (1975): 620-632, especially 620-624; Tao (2007): 87-104, especially 100-101; Tomber (2008): 114.

- <sup>38</sup> Sartre (2005): 242.  
<sup>39</sup> Sartre (2005): 243.  
<sup>40</sup> Tomber (2008): 117-125; Redhakrishnan: (2009).  
<sup>41</sup> Schoff (1912): 151; Casson (1989): 28-29; Tomber (2008): 115.  
<sup>42</sup> Chakrabarti (2004): 285; Tomber (2008): 122-123.  
<sup>43</sup> Jahan (2002): 135; Tomber (2008): 130-133, 145.  
<sup>44</sup> Phillips, Villeneuve, Facey, (2004): 239-250.  
<sup>45</sup> Heis: Ballet (1993): 63-72; Ballet (1996): 823. Damo: Ballet (1993): 66; Casson (1989): 129.  
<sup>46</sup> *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 16; Casson (1989): 120; Whitewright (2007): 77-87; Whitewright (2007): 282-292.  
<sup>47</sup> Horton (1996): 446-448; Tomber (2008): 98.  
<sup>48</sup> Tomber (2008): 99.  
<sup>49</sup> Bharucha-Irani (2002): 69-72.  
<sup>50</sup> Moffett (1998): 31.  
<sup>51</sup> James (2011): 138.  
<sup>52</sup> Strab. 2. 5. 12; Warmington (1928): 6-10.  
<sup>53</sup> Eus. *EH*. 3. 1.  
<sup>54</sup> Gillman, Klimkeit (1999): 160; James (2011): 135-136.  
<sup>55</sup> Neill (1984): 26.  
<sup>56</sup> Myers (2006): 95-112; Tubach (2006): 49-116, esp. 112-113; Nedungatt (2011): 535, 539, 541, 545, 555.  
<sup>57</sup> Frohnmeyer (2004): 284; Turek (2011): 123-130, see 124 n. 37; Nedungatt (2011): 553.  
<sup>58</sup> Bremmer (2001): 74-90; Bremmer (2001): 149-170; Cosgrove (2015): 257.  
<sup>59</sup> Pope Benedict XVI (2007): 93; Nedungatt (2011): 534, 556.  
<sup>60</sup> Ayyer (1926): 13-16.  
<sup>61</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, 1. 1.  
<sup>62</sup> Jos. *JB*. 3. 505.  
<sup>63</sup> On Artaxias' death, see Tac. *Ann.* 6. 28. Maranon (1956) 179.  
<sup>64</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6. 38; Smith (1972): 195.  
<sup>65</sup> Seager (1972): 203.  
<sup>66</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6. 31.  
<sup>67</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 9, 14, 16; SEG 20 112; Debevoise (1938): 201-202; McCrum (1962): 72, no. 237; Levick (1999): 169.  
<sup>68</sup> "Hadrian", *Historia Augusta*, 17, 21.  
<sup>69</sup> "Antoninus Pius", *Historia Augusta*, 9.  
<sup>70</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6. 31-36.  
<sup>71</sup> Plut. *Cr.* 26.  
<sup>72</sup> On the Battle of Hastings, see Wright (1996); Morris (2012). See also Brownworth (2014): 4.  
<sup>73</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6. 36-38.  
<sup>74</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6. 38; Smith (1972): 197; Seager (1972): 205.  
<sup>75</sup> Seager (1972): 205; Levick (1976): 147.

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