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CHAPTER 8
WRITING A LANDSCAPE OF DEFEAT: THE ROMANS IN PARTHIA
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1 Introduction

This chapter deals with Roman literary representations of Parthia as a 'landscape of defeat' during the principate. I investigate how Roman authors’ depictions of the spaces and landscape of Parthia relate to the traumatic military campaigns of the late republic (especially Crassus's disastrous defeat at Carrhae) and to the uneasy diplomatic accommodation between the two superpowers during the early empire. I argue that by writing Parthia as a 'landscape of defeat', Roman authors show how established modes of understanding, conquering and controlling landscapes failed in Parthia.

I focus on the literature of the principate, specifically on the period from Augustus’s Parthian treaty up to the renewed (and, for a short time, successful) attempts at conquering Parthia under the emperor Trajan. In the first section of this chapter, I argue that Roman authors reflect on military setbacks in Parthia by questioning Roman understanding of Parthian terrain, geography and ethnography. I argue that they suggest, in different ways, that inadequacies of intellectual control over the area are directly related to the failure of Roman military control. In the second half of the chapter, I consider how Roman authors envisage the lasting effect of Roman defeat on the landscape of Parthia – in other words, Rome’s failure to control the landscape in symbolic terms.

2 Geographies of victory and defeat

In ancient Rome, political power was closely tied to geographical knowledge, in a practical sense, since such knowledge facilitated military victory and conquest, but also intellectually, as a way of communicating and staking out territorial control and military might. One of the best-known book openings of all time, the first sentence of Caesar’s De Bello Gallico, is emblematic of this relationship. Starting with his famous opening sentence (Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres... , BGall. 1.1), Caesar ties geographical control to military conquest. His very ability to describe Gaul in terms of ‘geographic space’ is presented as a result, and a symbol, of his own successful subjugation of the region. The

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1 Dueck (2012: 16).
2 For a detailed and sophisticated analysis of the stratagems of this opening section, see Riggsby (2006: 28–32).
3 The categories of geographic, tactical and strategic space are adapted from Rambaud by Riggsby (2006: 24–8).
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ethnographic chapters of his work fulfil a complementary function to this mapping of subjugated spaces: for example, Riggsby calls Caesar’s ‘aggressive naming’ of the different Gallic and German tribes ‘a gesture of possession’. These literary strategies are emblematic of the perceived relationship between certain types of knowledge and military success in the Roman world. Geographical and ethnographical knowledge were required for gaining such success, but could also serve as an effective and powerful way of communicating them, by putting Rome at the centre of a mapped, controlled and comprehended empire. I argue that in literary depictions of Parthia in Roman texts, we see the reverse of this same coin. Frequently, Roman defeat in Parthia is conceptually tied to failures of understanding the geography of this vast territory and the nature of its unruly inhabitants.

Our assessment of actual Roman geographical understanding of Parthia in our period is hampered by the loss of a number of works which were read and consulted in imperial Rome. We chiefly rely on sections of Strabo’s Geography and of Pompeius Trogus’s Philippic Histories (the latter only preserved in an epitome of Justin), and a few chapters in Pliny the Elder. On the basis of these and related accounts of Parthia, scholars of ancient geography have argued that the Roman contribution to the geographical understanding of the region was comparatively modest. Roman military expeditions across the Euphrates had indeed provided a better idea of the very west of the Parthian territory, but for the remainder of the vast territory, topographical understanding was vague, and Roman knowledge about the extension and structure of the Parthian domain relied almost entirely on much older conceptions of the ‘East’ as the realm of the Achaemenids, Alexander or the Seleucids. Where more precise information seems to have been available, it usually relates to cities, and tellingly, those cities about which geographic writers offer more than only their names are mostly Achaemenid or Hellenistic foundations (such as Ekbatana, Hekatompylos or Seleukia). Information about what lay between those cities, and specifics of terrain and climate in the different regions of the vast empire, remain vague and often contradictory in Roman accounts.

The step from ‘what geographers wrote’ to ‘what the Romans knew’ is, of course, anything but straightforward: if Strabo, for example, seems to underestimate the

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5 For a detailed study of Roman geographical ideas about Parthia, see Lerouge (2007), esp. ch. 6 and Cameron (2019: passim). Lost are, for example, Hellenistic accounts based on Alexander’s campaigns in the region (which took place long before the rise of the Arsacids, but would presumably have contained important information about scale and terrain of the region), or the ‘Parthika’ of Apollodorus of Artemita, a Greek in the Parthian empire, whose work Strabo appears to have consulted: Drijvers (1988: 281).
6 Lerouge (2007: 238) concludes that Roman authors’ accounts of Parthia, even where they are roughly contemporary, differ widely from each other, lacking both a developed tradition and real familiarity with the area. See also Traina (2011–12), Sonnabend (1986: esp. ch. 3.1) and Drijvers (1998) on Strabo.
7 Sonnabend (1986: 270), and Lerouge (2007: 239–41), who suspects that some cities were known to the Romans as lying along trade routes, but remained ‘nothing but names’ (240).
8 Sonnabend (1986: 270–1). About the ‘genuinely Parthian’ cities, the Romans seem to know much less. Other known cities are those in the far west, which the Romans had encountered during campaigns, such as Nicephorion, Carrhae or Anthemusia.
9 Recently, Cameron (2019) has shown extensively how Roman geographical writings about Mesopotamia serve to articulate ideas about space and imperial power.
extension of the original territory of the Parthians, and depicts it, somewhat exaggeratedly, as a mountainous wilderness, does he know no better, or does he aim to sharpen the contrast between the humble beginnings of the Parthians and their present empire, and to offer an explanation for their harsh characteristics? And if Pliny describes Parthia as *undique desertis cincta*, is his point perhaps not geographic exactitude but the inaccessibility and inhospitality of both country and people? Nonetheless, the considerable factual differences between different late-republican and Augustan accounts of Parthia, their comparative brevity and vagueness all suggest that a well-defined, unified image of the geography of Parthia did not yet exist in Rome during the late republic and early empire. I suspect that it is an awareness of this insufficiency that a number of Roman literary authors, in the early empire and later, reflect on and narrativize in the texts I now turn to.

3 Lost in Parthia

In a passage in the fifth book of Ovid’s *Fasti* dedicated to the twelfth of May and Mars Ultor, Ovid praises the return of the standards that the Romans had lost at Carrhae (a diplomatic feat achieved by Augustus in 20 BCE). The shame of their loss has apparently now been avenged. In this context, the Parthians are described as follows (Ov. *Fast.* 5.581–2):¹⁰

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gens fuit et campis et equis et tuta sagittis
et circumfusis invia fluminibus
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There was a people, protected by its plains, its horses and arrows, and inaccessible because of rivers which flow around it.

Besides offering further support for the ‘vague geographies’ of Parthia current in the Roman empire (the only significant river border of the Parthian territory was the Euphrates in the West), this passage also contains a crucial trope of the Parthian ‘landscape of defeat’. The *campi* presumably refer to the Mesopotamian plains, which are, like horses and arrows, weapons that the Parthians are imagined to possess and to be able to wield against the Romans. This idea of the ‘landscape as a weapon’, here expressed very concisely, pervades literary portrayals of Parthia and the Parthians ranging from brief mentions to extensive narratives.¹¹

Such an extended narrative, in which this theme is developed at much greater length, is the Parthian section of Plutarch’s *Life of Crassus*. Plutarch describes how in 53 BCE, Crassus

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¹¹ Fabrizi (in this volume: 54–7) discusses the moral questions attached to making use of specific terrain in war. Östenberg (2018: 251–2) stresses that in Roman accounts the theme of the successful use of landscape as a weapon is especially prevalent when cunning barbarian enemies are fighting Romans on their own terrain, while ‘in the areas closer to Rome, both armies are in principle on par when it comes to handling the terrain’ (252).
crossed the Euphrates at Zeugma with an army of about 42,000 infantry and 4,000 cavalry, attended by a daunting array of bad omens. The treacherous Arab chieftain Ariamnes, in league with the Parthians, then leads the Romans away from the Euphrates valley and into the open plain (Crass. 22.1–2, discussed below). After this (according to Plutarch) disastrous decision, the Parthians continue to wield their native terrain as a weapon once the fatal engagement at Carrhae has begun: against the detachment of Crassus's son Publius, they use the very dust of the plain, enveloping the Romans in a cloud of sand, thereby robbing them of sight and speech, and thus making them an even easier target for the surrounding Parthian archers. When Publius's troops, exhausted by heat and thirst, withdraw to a hill, they offer the Parthians another possibility for using the terrain to their advantage: ranged on elevated terrain, the soldiers make an even easier target for the Parthian archers. Finally, the elder Crassus's attempted escape from the city of Carrhae by night is foiled by yet another deceiving guide, Andromachus, who leads the fugitives into an area full of treacherous marshes, where they lose their way and miss their opportunity of escape by night.

The Parthian campaign in the Life of Crassus is characterized by a sequence of episodes which all show the Romans failing to understand – and thereby control – the Parthian terrain: they end up thirsty in the desert, blinded by the dust, lost in the marshes, or exposed on a hill. As Plutarch would have it, it is not the hostile terrain of the Parthian steppe as such, but rather the decisions the Romans make once they find themselves there, their insufficient strategic understanding of the terrain and spaces in which they operate, that leads to their defeat. Plutarch emphasizes this point by depicting several situations in which Crassus explicitly rejects an alternative strategy which is presented as geographically informed and therefore more advantageous.

An entirely different and yet complementary reflection on the Roman understanding of Parthian spaces and their navigation can be found in Propertius’s Elegy 4.3.35ff. Propertius’s Elegy 4.3 takes the form of a letter sent by a young wife, Arethusa, to her husband Leucotas, who is far from home on military service. Arethusa is tortured by her husband’s absence and jealously questions his faithfulness to her. In the opening lines of the poem, Arethusa provides a list of (exotic) locations where Leucotas has seen military service. Of these locations, ‘Parthia’ is the first (Prop. 4.3.7–10):

\[
\text{Te modo viderunt intentos Bactra per arcus,} \\
\text{te modo munito Persicus hostis equo,}
\]

12 *Crass.* 25.4–5. On moments of obscured sight in battle and their significance in Roman historiography, see especially the chapters by Feldherr and Fabrizi in this volume.

13 *Crass.* 25.9–10, also with emphasis on the devastating effects of the harsh climate on the battle-hardened Gauls.

14 E.g. Crassus’s rejection of Artabazos’ offer, who explicitly stresses the advantages of the landscape during a northern approach (19.2), and of Cassius’s advice (20.2) of following the river so that the terrain might offer supplies and protect them from being surrounded by the enemy.

15 For the MSS’s *hericus*, Fedeli, Dimundo and Ciccarelli (2015) print *Sericus* (explaining their rationale on 526–7); Heyworth, *ferreus* (see also Heyworth (2007: *ad loc.*)); and Hutchinson (2006), *Persicus*, thus according the Parthian campaign two lines instead of one.
hibernique Getae, pictoque Britannia curru,
ustus et Eoa decolor Indus aqua.

‘Now you were seen by Bactra amid drawn bows, now by the Persian foe mounted
on his mailed charger, by the northern Getans, by Britain with its painted chariots
and the swarthy Indians burnt by orient waves.’

It becomes clear in the course of the poem that Leucotas’ current campaign is imagined
to be the Parthian one – confirmed also by the final appeal of the poem (Prop. 4.3.63–72):

Ne, precor, ascensis tanti sit gloria Bactris,
raptave odorato carbasa lina duci,
plumbea cum tortae sparguntur pondera fundae,
subdolus et versis increpat arcus equis;
sed tua, sic domitis Parthae telluris alumnis,
pura triumphantes hasta sequatur equos.
Incorrupta mei conserva foedera lecti!
Hac ego te sola lege redisse velim;
armaque cum tulero portae votiva Capenae,
subscribam salvo grata puella viro.

Let not the glory of scaling Bactra’s walls, I pray, be worth too high a price, or the
snatching of linen robes from some perfumed potentate, when leaden missiles are
discharged from the whirling sling and the treacherous bow twangs from a horse
that flees. Above all – so may the headless spear follow your triumphal chariot
when the sons of Parthia have been vanquished – keep inviolate the pledge of my
marriage bed! Only on this condition should I desire you to return; and when I
offer up your arms at the Capene Gate, I shall write below: from a grateful girl on
her man’s safe return.

The mention of Bactra and of the characteristic fighting techniques of the Parthians,
who, in Roman texts, always shoot arrows backwards from horses over their shoulders,
makes it clear that Leucotas is now imagined to be fighting the Parthians.

With this in mind, we turn to a central section of the poem, which depicts Arethusa’s
activities in the absence of her husband (4.3.33–40):

Noctibus hibernis castrlesia pensa laboro
et Tyria in chlamydas vellera secta suo;

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17 Translations of Propertius are taken from Goold (1999).
18 The gusta pura was a distinguished military decoration. See Hutchinson (2006: ad loc).
19 Roman authors regularly consider Bactra not only part of the Parthian empire, but even use it, as Propertius
does here, as a stand-in for Parthia as a whole, demonstrating the extent to which Romans envisaged the
Parthian empire in terms of Alexander’s conquests hundreds of years earlier. See Hutchinson (2006: ad loc.)
for examples.
et disco, qua parte fluent vincendus Araxes,
quod sine aqua Parthus milia currat equus;
conor\textsuperscript{20} et e tabula pictos ediscere mundos,
qualis et haec docti sit positura dei,
quae tellus sit lenta gelu, quae putris ab aestu,
ventus in Italia qui bene vela ferat.

On winter nights I work at camp garb for you, and I sew together lengths of Tyrian wool to make a military cloak; I learn where flows the Araxes that you are to conquer, how many miles a Parthian horse can cover without water; and I try to find out from a map the worlds painted on it and the manner of this arrangement by the wise creator, what lands are sluggish with frost, what crumbling with heat, what wind will bring sails safely back to Italy.

Propertius depicts Arethusa creating a ‘cognitive collage’ of Parthia from the materials she studies.\textsuperscript{21} She seems to be combining a variety of media which can offer her access to the kinds of information she desires. It is difficult to imagine quite what is meant by the \textit{tabula} that contains \textit{pictos mundos}. It is almost certainly not a scale map of the region.\textsuperscript{22} Propertius may be thinking of a schematic representation of the entire world.\textsuperscript{23} Arethusa also appears to be also consulting a written work on Parthian geography (telling her about the different climatic zones and winds, and even about local fauna) and possibly also an \textit{itinerarium} – the most important means of navigation for military purposes, easily copied and consulted, and sure to feature landmarks such as the Araxes as well as distances.\textsuperscript{24}

Arethusa is imagined by Propertius as a sophisticated and, entirely in character, slightly paranoid viewer-reader of this geographic material, who asks all the right (and uncomfortable) questions. While \textit{itineraria}, if they were available, could easily tell one how many miles (\textit{quot milia}) point A might be distant from point B, Arethusa is astute enough to realize that this information is not sufficient for the Romans: they also have to understand the terrain and the people and animals who live in it, in order to use


\textsuperscript{21} On the ‘cognitive collage’ see further Minchin (in this volume). On this passage, cf. also Janan (2001: 65–8).

\textsuperscript{22} On (the absence of) maps in the ancient Roman world, see Brodersen (1995). Others have assumed that Arethusa is actually looking at a map (Janan 2001: 65–6). See further Fedeli, Dimundo and Ciccarelli (2015: \textit{ad loc.}). If \textit{chlamydes} is an accurate conjecture, Arethusa’s sewing may even be a sophisticated play on her mental ‘creation’ of a world at home, since geographers like Eratosthenes and Strabo described the world as chlamys-shaped (Zimmerman (2002)) – a suggestion which I owe to John Oksanish.

\textsuperscript{23} Brodersen (1995: 101–2) on this particular scene (‘Schemabild’).

\textsuperscript{24} One \textit{itinerarium} of Parthia, Isidor of Charax’s \textit{Stathmoi Parthikoi}, survives from the Augustan period, but should almost certainly be dated well after the publication of Propertius’ fourth book. On the \textit{Stathmoi Parthikoi} (FGrHist 781 F 2, 1–19), see Hackl, Jacobs and Weber (2010: 2.190–8) and Kramer (2003). Since Arethusa explicitly mentions \textit{pictos mundos}, she may be looking at an \textit{itinerarium pictum} – in which different spaces and landmarks (such as the Araxes, or stations and fortified towns) were not drawn to scale, but connected by routes with information on the distance between different stations: Brodersen (2001: 16–19).
information about distances productively in interactions with the enemy. How long would it take not a Roman but a Parthian horse, not speeding along a Roman road but trekking through waterless terrain, to cover a particular distance?

Another emphasis of Arethusa’s studies – different climates – is similarly astute. The shift from Parthian topography (37) to climatic zones (39) has seemed to some editors so incongruous that the couplet has sometimes been moved or even deleted altogether.25 But as Plutarch’s Crassus found to his cost, and as we shall see in more detail below, ‘climate’ is a crucial factor in properly understanding and navigating the challenges of Parthia – or in failing to do so. Arethusa, home alone with only a dog for company, is constructing the kind of intellectual control that the Roman armies ‘on the ground’ had signally failed to establish. The slightly paranoid personality with which Propertius endows her allows her to put her finger on the specific challenges facing the Romans on Parthian terrain, and her studies painfully contrast with the reality of Roman strategic management of these spaces in the recent past.

4 Failing ethnographies

Closely related to this sense of insufficient geographical understanding is a similar (perceived) failure to grasp the nature of the people who inhabited this unruly land. In Ovid’s Fasti 5.581–2, cited on p. 179 above, Ovid suggests a fusion between people and land, by calling not Parthia but the gens inhabiting it invia, drawing on the basic ethnographic trope of the close connection between the characteristics of a particular terrain and the people who live there. In the case of the Parthians, I argue, this close relationship is conceived of as working to the Romans’ disadvantage: fail to understand the land, and its people, too, may surprise you.

In Plutarch’s Life of Crassus, we encounter an episode which questions Graeco-Roman ethnographic tools (and their applicability to Parthia) very effectively. As mentioned above, Plutarch has the double-crossing Arab chiefain Ariamnes lead the Romans away from the Euphrates and into the plains (Plut. Crass. 22.1–2):

Τότ’ οὖν ὁ βάρβαρος, ὡς ἔπεισεν αὐτόν, ἀποσπάσας τοῦ ποταμοῦ διὰ μέσων ἔγε τὸν πεδίων ὄρον ἐπική καὶ κούφην τὸ πρῶτον, εἶτα μοχθηρά, ἀμμοῦ βαθείας ὑποδεχομένης καὶ πεδίων ἀδένδρων καὶ ἀνύδρων καὶ πρὸς οὐδὲν οὐδαμῆ πέρας ἕρησεν αἰσθήσει παυομένων, ὅστε μὴ μόνον δίψει καὶ χαλεπότητι τῆς πορείας ἀπαγορεύειν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ τῆς ὄψεως ἀπαραμύθητον ἀθυμίαν παρέχειν οὐ φυτὸν ὅρωσιν, οὐ ῥεῖθρον, οὐ προβολὴν ὄρους καθιέντος, οὐ πόαν διαβλαστάνουσαν, ἀλλ’ ἀτεχνῶς πελάγιόν τι χεῦμα θινῶν τετελεύτησεν τὸν στρατόν.

25 Lines 37 and 38 are moved by Fedeli, Dimundo and Ciccarelli (2015) to after 34. Heyworth (2007) excises 37–8 altogether (see Heyworth (1999: 74–5)).
At this time, accordingly, after the barbarian [i.e. Ariamnes] had persuaded Crassus, he drew him away from the river [Euphrates] and led him through the midst of the plains, by a way that was suitable and easy at first, but soon became troublesome when deep sand succeeded, and plains which had no trees, no water, and no limit anywhere which the eye could reach, so that not only did thirst and the difficulties of the march exhaust the men, but also whatever met their gaze filled them with an obstinate dejection. For they saw no plant, no stream, no projection of sloping hill, and no growing grass, but only sea-like billows of innumerable desert sand-heaps enveloping the army.\footnote{Contrary to what Plutarch suggests, the route taken by Crassus and his army was in reality the most sensible one, and it also corresponds to the route set out in the late-Augustan \textit{itinerarium} of Isidor of Charax (\textit{Stathmoi Parthikoi}): see Kramer (2003: 123) for the early stations of the \textit{Stathmoi Parthikoi}, on which see also n. 24 above. Th e Euphrates valley itself is fertile, but the surrounding area is not, and the valley would not have been able to support so large an army. The chosen route led towards the Belikh river (a tributary of the Euphrates), rather than into an entirely waterless desert: Sampson (2008: 109–10).}

In Plutarch’s narrative, it is Ariamnes who persuades the Romans to leave the proximity of the river and thereby weakens the army because of the difficulty of the terrain and the lack of water.\footnote{Translations of Plutarch are taken from Perrin (1916).} The Parthian landscape, focalized through the eyes of the Roman legionaries, is marked entirely by the \textit{absence} of what, to them, constitutes a ‘normal’ landscape: trees, water, a stream, grass, hills. The world in which the Romans find themselves is a strange ‘otherworld’, which frightens and disheartens them. Ariamnes recognizes the weakness that lies in the soldiers’ response to their unfamiliar and harsh surroundings, and he taunts them as follows (Plut. \textit{Crass.} 22.5):

\begin{quote}
ὁ δὲ βάρβαρος ἀνήρ ὦν ποικίλος ἐκείνους μὲν ὑποπίπτων ἐθάρρυνε καὶ παρεκάλει μικρὸν ἐτί καρτερῆσαι, τοὺς δὲ στρατιώτας ἃμα συμπαραθέων καὶ παραβοηθῶν ἐπέσκωπτε μετὰ γέλωτος· ‘Ὅμεις δὲ διὰ Καμπανίας ὁδεύειν οἴεσθε κρήνας καὶ νάματα καὶ σκιάς καὶ λουτρὰ δηλαδὴ καὶ πανδοκεῖα ποθοῦντες; οὐ μέμνησθε δὲ τὴν Ἀράβων διεξιόντες καὶ Ἀσσυρίων μεθορίαν;
\end{quote}

But the Barbarian, who was a subtle fellow, tried to encourage them with all servility, and exhorted them to endure yet a little while, and as he ran along the side of the soldiers and gave them his help, he would laughingly banter them and say: ‘Is it through Campania that you think you are marching, yearning for its fountains and streams and shades and baths (to be sure!) and taverns? But remember that you are traversing the border land between Assyria and Arabia.’

Ariamnes stresses the difference between the harshness of the Mesopotamian plain and the pleasant landscapes of Campania, which, in \textit{his} version, feature not only all the characteristics of a \textit{locus amoenus} (such as a stream and shade) but an additional layer of
culture: baths and even taverns. Through the figure of Ariamnes (both a βάρβαρος and ποικύλος), Plutarch challenges a well-worn ethnographic topos: the influence of the climate and terrain on a people’s characteristics.\(^\text{28}\)

In Graeco-Roman ethnographic discourse, the hot climate of the East was often related to the supposedly soft and degenerate nature of its inhabitants.\(^\text{29}\) With relation to Parthia, this idea is, for example, expressed at some length in Book 8 of Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*. After the battle of Pharsalus, Pompey considers fleeing to the Parthians to ask them for help against Caesar. This suggestion is rejected by his loyal advisors, and the senator Lentulus stresses the flaws of the plan in a chilling speech, in the course of which he dwells on the Eastern climate and the Parthians’ resulting ‘Oriental’ characteristics at some length (Lucan, *BC* 8.363–76):

\[
\text{omnis, in Arctois populus quicumque pruinis nascitur, indomitus bellis et mortis amator: quidquid ad Eoos tractus mundique teporem ibitur, emollit gentes clementia caeli. illic et laxas uestes et fluxa uirorum uelamenta uides. Parthus per Medica rura, Sarmaticos inter campos effusaque plano Tigridis arua solo, nulli superabilis hosti est libertate fugae; sed non, ubi terra tunebit, aspera conscendet montis iuga, nec per opacas bella geret tenebras incerto debilis arcu, nec franget nando uiolenti uerticis amnem, nec tota in pugna perfusus sanguine membra exiget aestiuum calido sub puluere solem.}
\]

Every native of the northern snows is vehement in war and courts death; but every step you go towards the East and the torrid zone, the people grow softer as the sky grows kinder. There one sees loose garments and flowing robes worn even by men. In the smiling land of Media, amid the plains of Sarmatia, and in the level lands that extend by the Tigris, the Parthian cannot be conquered because he has room for flight; but, where earth rises in hills, he will never climb the rough mountain ridges, nor fight on through thick darkness, when crippled by the failure of his bow, nor stem a river in fierce eddy by swimming; nor, when every limb is drenched in blood of battle, will he endure the long summer day beneath the stifling dust.\(^\text{30}\)

\(^{28}\) Hartmann (2008: 428) claims that Plutarch himself shows ‘kein ethnographisches Interesse an den Parthern’, but I would argue that his silence on the Parthians’ characteristics is rather part of his portrayal of the Romans’ ethnographic and geographic uncertainty.

\(^{29}\) The ‘scientific’ rationale can already be found in the Hippocratic *Airs Waters Places*. See Sonnabend (105, with n. 69) with further background.

\(^{30}\) Translations of Lucan are taken from Duff (1928).
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Lentulus here applies the ethnographic principle that a warm climate has a direct effect on the nature of the people who inhabit it. The Parthians, not steeled by mountains, snows, rivers and rains, must therefore be soft and cowardly, and do not even count as a gens virorum (385).

The inadequacy of such a simplistic categorization of the Parthians was already apparent to Roman geographers and ethnographers. Lerouge points out that the portrayal of the Parthians in Rome is characterized by a certain ‘doubleness’, since they are often depicted as uniting or oscillating between the characteristics of ‘degenerate Persians’ and ‘hardened Scythians’.

Ariamnes doubly demonstrates the inadequacy of Roman ethnographic understanding of Parthia and its inhabitants. First, he cruelly highlights the absurdity of the ‘soft Easterners’ topos by contrasting the harshness of the Parthian terrain with gentle, cultured Campania. By dwelling on Campania’s manifold attractions, he implies that it is in fact the Romans who have been weakened by their native climate and surroundings. Second, the Romans’ lack of knowledge of Parthia and its inhabitants contrasts painfully with the ‘barbarian’s’ own superior understanding of the features of the Italo-Campanian landscape: he seems to have an uncanny understanding of what Campania is like (i.e. home to luxury villas and chic vacation resorts), what pleasures the Romans are yearning for, and how this affects their fighting spirit. Through the figure of the Arab chieftain, Plutarch reflects on the inadequacy of the Romans’ understanding of the people and their terrain.

5 Parthia as another world

So far, I have attempted to analyse the conceptual relationship that Roman authors construct between geography, ethnography and Roman military defeat in Parthia. This relationship closely relates to the rise of a particular image of Parthia during the early empire: Parthia as an alter orbis, a different world, divided from Rome by the Euphrates, and often endowed with its own oceanus, its own climate, skies, stars, etc. Lucan explores

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31 See Lerouge (2007: 174–94) and Sonnabend (1986: 272–88). Ash (2018: 12) points out that this ethnographic doubleness is also touched on in the Life of Crassus: ‘Plutarch, depicting one Parthian, Surena, tries to unite the two strands so that Surena’s effete Persian appearance is said to mask formidable military talent (Crass. 24.1–2).’

32 We are already prepared for this inadequacy in Crass. 18.4, where the Roman soldiers realize that what they have been led to believe about the nature of the Parthians is incorrect.

33 His intellectual superiority is brought home by the word διεπαιδαγώγησε ‘he guided them like children’ which sums up the scene (Crass. 22.6). Campania was indeed seen as a moral ‘weak spot’ of the hardened Romans due to its beauty, pleasant climate and fertile terrain: see e.g. Sonnabend (1986: 105–6) on Cic. Leg. Agr. 2.95.

34 See e.g. Manil. 4.674–5 (Parthique vel orbis alter) and 4.802–5; Sen. Suas. 2.7; Sen. QNat. 5.18.10; Tac. Ann. 2.2–3, (petitum alio ex orbe regem), and Lucan, BC 8, passim (Mayer (1981: 191–2)). This idea is related to, though subtly different from, the conception of a divisio orbis between the two powers, as expressed, for example, by ‘Troigus: Parthi, penes quos, velut divisse orbis cum Romanis facta, nunc Orientis imperium est (Just. Epit. 41.1.1). See Sonnabend (1986: 202) on this and further passages and the conceptions behind them.
(and problematizes) this ‘two worlds’ concept in the greatest detail. When Pompey, after Pharsalus, dispatches King Deiotarus as an emissary to the Parthians, he tells him (Lucan, BC 8.211–14):

‘quando’ ait ‘Emathis amissus cladibus orbis, qua Romanus erat, superest, fidissime regum, Eoam temptare fidem populosque bibentis Euphraten et adhuc securum a Caesare Tigrim . . .’

‘Since’, he said, ‘the world, so far as it was Roman, has been lost by the disaster of Pharsalia, it remains, O most loyal of my kings, to test the allegiance of the East, of the nations who drink the Euphrates and the Tigris, as yet unmolested by Caesar.’

Pompey’s rationale for sending Deiotarus in devia mundi (8.209) is unexpected: because of the battle at Pharsalus, the Roman world has been lost, which leaves only the option of flight to a different orbis: the East, the land of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Those rivers remain mercifully undisturbed (securum) by the world war’s contamination, unlike the rivers of the orbis Romanus: only a few lines earlier, Pompey’s ship had passed the mouth of the Peneus, dyed red by the Pharsalian slaughter, and now in turn infecting the sea: litora contigerat, per quae Peneius amnis | Emathia iam clade rubens exibat in aequor – ‘He [Pompey] had reached the shore where the river Peneus, already red with the slaughter of Pharsalia, passed out into the sea’ (8.33–4). For Pompey, Parthia is not a hostile landscape or a weapon in the hands of the Parthians, but a world untouched and uncontaminated by civil war and something like a safe haven.35

The ‘other world’ idea is spelled out even more clearly in Pompey’s later speech to the senate in Cilicia (Lucan, BC 8.289–94):

quare agite Eoum, comites, properemus in orbem. diuidit Euphrates ingentem gurgite mundum 290 Caspiaque inmensos seducunt claustra recessus, et polus Assyrias alter noctesque diesque uertit, et abruptum est nostro mare discolor unda Oceanusque suus.

Therefore, my companions, let us be up and hasten to the Eastern clime. The waters of the Euphrates shut off from us a mighty world, and the Caspian Gates hide boundless solitudes; in Assyria a different hemisphere makes the changes of night and day; they have an Ocean of their own, and a sea severed from ours and unlike in the colour of its water.

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35 Pompey’s plans do not go down well with the senate. Lentulus, in his forceful reply, picks up on Pompey’s depiction of Parthia as a different world, but uses it to illustrate the absurdity of seeking protection there (8.335–7): quid transfuga mundi; | terrarum toto tractus caelumque perosus, | aserosque polos alienaque sidera quaeris . . . (‘Why do you fly from our world, and shun whole regions of earth and sky? Why seek a heaven turned from ours, and foreign stars . . .’).
Pompey explicitly casts Parthia as a kind of ‘Gegenwelt’, an entire world explicitly ‘other’ (alter, 292), with its own polus and Oceanus, and the Euphrates as the dividing line between the two worlds. In the early imperial period, depicting the Parthians as inhabiting a world of their own was a way of coming to terms with the fact that further extension of the empire towards the East had, at this point, proven impossible and impracticable. While the logic of Roman expansionism encompasses the entire orbis, this logic is not compromised if the unconquerable Parthians do not actually inhabit this world, but a different one. And imagining Parthia as fundamentally ‘other’ is a further means of rationalizing defeat: the crisis of confidence in the geographic and ethnographic grip on this part of the world can be resolved by conceiving of Parthia as a topsy-turvy otherworld, where normal rules do not apply. In their world, the Romans continue to be invincible, and their military supremacy remains beyond doubt. The image of Parthia as an alter orbis can be considered the ultimate rationalization of defeat in geographic terms.

6 Roman traces in the Parthian landscape

So far we have considered the Romans’ narratives of their own failure to control Parthian territory intellectually, in terms of geography or ethnography. I now turn to another, complementary way in which Romans conceived of Parthia as a landscape of defeat. By focusing on lasting memorials of Roman defeat in the landscape of Parthia, Roman authors explore another way in which symbolic control of Parthian landscapes had failed.

The Romans were masters at expressing and communicating the conquest of landscape in symbolic terms – by erecting trophy monuments that visually dominated large areas, by founding cities and colonies, resettling inhabitants or renaming cities. But in the case of defeat, the reverse was also possible. In Caesar’s Gallic War, an emissary of the Helvetii warns Caesar to take care ‘so that the place where they were standing should not acquire a name, from the disaster of the Roman people and the destruction of their army, or transmit the memory (thereof to posterity)’ – the exact fate of Carrhae,

36 Mayer (1981: ad 290–4): ‘Pompey argues that Parthia is in effect a world of its own, and to carry his point he lists its constituent elements …’ See also his appendix on Parthia (pp. 191–2): ‘[A]ll four [lines 217, 292, 315, 337] allude to the fundamental otherness of Parthia and its fancied complete isolation from Mediterranean lands. The manner of the expression is linked by two common features: either the otherness is named outright with words of the al- root, or Lucan employs astronomical terminology.’


39 See e.g. Hölischer (2006).

40 Caes. B.Gall. 1.13.5: Quare ne committeret ut is locus ubi constitissent ex calamitate populi Romani et internecione exercitus nomen caperet aut memoriam proderet. See also Clark (2014: 32, n. 60).
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the site of Crassus’s defeat. For example, Pliny the Elder’s list of Arabian and Mesopotamian cities in Book 5 of the Natural History contains the following section (NH 5.86):

Arabia supra dicta habet oppida Edessam, quae quondam Antiochia dicebatur, Callirrhoen, a fonte nominatam, Carrhas, Crassi clade nobile.

Arabia above mentioned contains the towns Edessa, which was formerly called Antiochia, Callirrhoe, named from its spring, and Carrhae, famous for the defeat of Crassus there.

Besides turning the name of Carrhae into a byword for defeat, the Romans also left ‘monuments’ on the plains of Mesopotamia, as, for example, Propertius points out. Elegy 4.6, the elegy for Actian Apollo, ends with a poets’ symposium, during which the participants are imagined to sing the Roman deeds of war. After the Sygambri and Meroë, Parthia features, with Propertius suggesting as a suitable subject for a fellow-poet this double-edged praise for the recent diplomatic accommodation reached with the Parthians (Prop. 4.6.83–4):

Gaude, Crasse, nigras si quid sapis inter harenas:

ire per Euphraten ad tua busta licet.

Rejoice, Crassus, if any consciousness be yours amid the grave’s black sands: now we may cross the Euphrates to your tomb.

Ironically, as a sign of their great victory, the Romans are now free to visit the tomb of Crassus: a monument that recalls the murder of a Roman commander and one of the greatest defeats of Roman history.

This vision of Parthia as a landscape indelibly marked by Rome’s ignominious defeat is explored most fully in Lucan’s Bellum Civile. After Pompey has sketched his version of Parthia as a separate, alternative world, a safe haven as yet untainted by Caesar’s crimes, Lentulus’s reply conjures up quite a different vision of Parthia (Lucan, BC 8.431–41):

non tibi, cum primum gelidum transibis Araxen,
umbra senis maestis Scythicus confixa sagittis
ingeret has uoces? ‘tu, quem post funera nostra
ultorem cinerum nudaes sperauimus umbrae,
ad foedus pacemque uenis?’ tum plurima cladis
occurrent monimenta tibi: quae moenia trunci
lustrarunt ceruice duces, ubi nomina tanta

41 The lines play on a motif from sepulchral epigrams, which often wonder whether there is consciousness in Hades. In Propertius’s lines, Parthia takes the place of the Underworld: see Hutchinson (2006: ad loc.) with examples. For connections between these lines and Prop. 2.10 see Wissemann (1982: 102). Cf. Lucan, BC 8.822 and 851–8 for Roman travellers at Pompey’s tomb in the (Egyptian) sand.
In Lentulus’ mind, everything about the Parthian landscape screams ‘defeat’ and therefore ‘revenge’. In his speech, the Parthian landscape is the opposite of the ‘blank slate’ that Pompey imagined: the ghost of Crassus, which has haunted characters of the BC throughout, would welcome Pompey on the other side of the Araxes, the very walls of a city recall that Roman leaders were apparently dragged around them, and the rivers of Parthia are choked with dead after all – the mysterious underground channel from the Euphrates to the Tigris, described in Book 3, has transported the bodies of the fallen Roman soldiers of Carrhae. Lentulus calls the walls and river clads monimenta: the Roman defeat has turned the very cities and rivers of Parthia into the kinds of monimenta that no Roman ever wanted to leave behind. The Romans have left their mark on Parthia, but in a cruel reversal of the usual Roman ways of claiming and controlling landscapes, Carrhae has become a byword for Roman defeat, a major sight of Mesopotamia is the tomb of the murdered Crassus, and the very fabric of the landscape has turned into monumenta of defeat.

42 The unburied Crassus makes his first appearance already in line 11 of the poem (umbra... erraret Crassus inulta, BC 1.11). See further Szelest (1979). In this scene, Pompey seems to be entering the Parthian territory not from the West (by crossing the Euphrates), but from Armenia in the north, by crossing the Araxes.
43 On Lucan's use of lustre here see Mayer (1981: ad loc.), who compares Aen. 11.190 and BC 5.416.
44 In 3.261ff. the Tigris with its underground course features in a catalogue, on which see Bexley (2014: 362–7).
45 This scene recalls the Allia episode in Livy's AUC 6.28.5, where the Allia is also called a monumentum clads (these are the only two instances of the phrase in classical Latin). The Praenestini expect that the site of the Allia will terrify the Romans, but instead it encourages them to purge their earlier defeat. The scenario Lentulus sketches may be picking up on this scene, or in any case the situations can profitably be compared: like Livy's Romans, Pompey should be incited to war and revenge by the sight of the monumenta clads, but instead, perversely, he wants to, in full view of these monumenta, enlist the Parthians' help and support against fellow Romans. On scenes of return to earlier battlefields in Roman literature, see Reitz-Joosse (2019). The Parthian monumenta also concentrate and refract other scenes from the past and the future of the epic and the epic tradition. Most notably, they foreshadow the death of Pompey, who will end up as a headless corpse (Mayer (1981: ad loc.)) and at the same time look back to the dragging of Hector around the walls of Troy. Through Hector, the scene also points forward to the visit of Caesar to the site of the 'real' Troy, another monument of defeat and tomb of his Trojan ancestors.
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7 Conclusion

A number of themes and ideas about Parthia as a landscape of defeat in early imperial Rome have crystallized from this juxtaposition of texts from different genres and periods. Roman authors tend to depict the Parthian landscape as defying normal Roman modes of intellectual and symbolic control. Roman strategic and geographic understanding fails to comprehend Parthia, traditional ethnographic tools cannot reliably distill from the landscape the nature of its inhabitants, and as a result of failed physical and intellectual control, Roman monuments in Parthia communicate and commemorate not Roman conquest but ignominious defeat. Ultimately, the Parthian empire has to be consigned to an alter orbis in order to rationalize Rome’s failure to establish control over this perplexing landscape of defeat.

Bibliography


