



'Epic history as it is
meant to be written!'

Simon Sebag
Montefiore

ADRIAN
GOLDSWORTHY

THE EAGLE AND THE LION

Rome,
Persia and an
Unwinnable
Conflict



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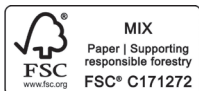
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Foreword

History fascinates me, and while I can readily get excited by almost any era or topic, the Romans have always had a particular draw for me – as those familiar with my writing will know. In one sense this is another book about the Romans because there is so much to learn and understand about their story, piecing together the surviving literature, the fragments of texts, and the inscriptions, coins, and archaeological remains of this lost era. I have been studying the Romans for all my adult life and I am still learning, and not simply because new discoveries are made all the time.

This is also a book about another empire, that of the Parthians and Sasanian Persians, and for a change some of the story can be told from a different point of view from the Roman sources. The Parthians appeared in the third century BC, carving out a great kingdom that included what is now Iran and Iraq, most of Syria, and at times some of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as wielding influence beyond, notably in the Arabian Peninsula. For more than three hundred years the Parthians were neighbours and rivals of the Roman empire, and when the Parthian dynasty fell in 224 they were supplanted by the Sasanians, who ruled for four more centuries over what was for all intents and purposes the same empire. Neither the Parthians nor Persians were ever conquered by Rome, and both inflicted some devastating defeats on Roman armies.

Although this is a story of imperial competition which often led to war, it is also a story of coexistence and peace between these two empires. At its height the Roman empire was far larger

than the Parthian-Persian empire, not only in sheer size but in population and wealth. Yet the Parthian-Persian empire was still bigger by a considerable order of magnitude than any other state or people nearby. China was an exception, but it was too distant from Parthia-Persia for substantial contact and even further away from Rome. Parthia-Persia was also more sophisticated than any other neighbour when it came to government, economy, and military efficiency. Fairly early on, the Romans realized that the Parthians had to be treated differently from other states and granted them more respect as a result. The Parthians, and later the Persians, realized the same about the Romans.

For more than seven centuries the rival empires lived side by side, and it is vital to understand what happened from the Parthian-Sasanians' point of view as well as the Romans'. As important is the part played by all the other states caught up in the competition between the empires. All were active players; even small states often did their best to turn the rivalry between the great powers to their own advantage. For all their might, neither the Romans nor the Parthians-Sasanians were ever in full control of their allies, let alone other leaders and groups beyond the frontiers.

Seven centuries represents an immense span of time. If thirty years is taken to represent a generation, then some two dozen generations passed from the first encounter between Roman and Parthian representatives to the sudden fall of the Sasanian empire and the shrinking of Roman power in the face of the Arab conquests. Going back a similar period from today would take us to the medieval world before it was ravaged by the Black Death. Inevitably, one book cannot recount in detail everything that happened in seven centuries, or even all the encounters between the two empires. Sometimes it is necessary to summarize, sometimes to simplify, unless the subject is critical to our understanding. On the whole, I have omitted names of people and places, as well as technical terms, whenever these are not essential. The works cited in the references will help the interested reader to explore some of these topics in more detail and discover more about the structures of the Roman and Parthian-Persian states and armies.

The aim has been to make the story clear and simple, while still understanding what happened and why. Narrative history is important, and I have done my best to cover as much as possible and have gone into considerable detail for certain key events. Narrative history is not fashionable in academic circles, but it acts as a check on any thematic approach to a subject, let alone any theoretical analysis. Any idea, any theory, any insight can only be valid if it fits with what the evidence suggests is most likely to have happened – a test that many elegant academic theories fail, which is why so few of their advocates embrace it. Only once the story is fully understood is it valid to search for lessons. Understanding this story – or any other episode in human history – requires an appreciation of the human beings, both the individuals and the groups, who played their parts in all that happened.

There is a good deal of warfare in the pages that follow. The Romans and the Parthians-Sasanians spent far more time at peace than fighting each other, but inevitably sources tell us far more about the great and dramatic events, including wars, than the quiet times when no stirring or terrible deeds were done. Yet there were still plenty of wars and some periods of prolonged warfare. With a handful of possible exceptions, neither empire ever brought all its resources to bear in a life-and-death struggle against the other. Although they fought on many occasions, this was always in the expectation that the other would still exist at the end of hostilities. In the past, the Romans in particular were inclined to persist in a war until the enemy was absorbed or permanently neutralized, becoming a loyal ally or ceasing to exist as a political entity. This did not happen with Parthia or Persia, and there is little sign that the Romans ever tried to make it happen. This does not mean that the Romans or their opponents did not fight these wars with immense determination. Victory remained important, but the ambitions for what victory meant were more modest than the total and permanent defeat of the other side. The striking thing about these wars is their limited nature – in scale, duration, and consequences.

In the West there is now a tendency to expect warfare to be decisive. Partly this is a legacy of society becoming less and

less military, so that few commentators or leaders seem to have much idea of what armies and military force can and cannot achieve. Even more, it is because of the ongoing fascination with and influence on memory of the world wars, and especially the Second World War. The Great War is often seen as somehow pointless because it led to another global conflict twenty-one years later. In the popular mind, not only was the First World War not the war to end war as proclaimed, but the Allies did not really win – which ironically enough is close to what Hitler claimed. National Socialist Germany and Imperial Japan then launched a war which produced savagery, death, and destruction on an unprecedented scale, but this time the Allies did the job properly. Roosevelt declared his intention to fight until the unconditional surrender of the enemy, and that is what the Allies did. Japan and Germany (admittedly only part of Germany at first) were turned into peaceful democracies, in no position to go to war again. Both countries continued to exist – if, in the case of Germany, partitioned for several decades.

The extent of change in Germany and Japan was more drastic than the consequences of most wars in human history, just as the world wars were different in their scale and rapidly evolving technology. Sometimes a markedly stronger, more ruthless society has destroyed or, more often, absorbed a weaker community. Peoples have been conquered, sometimes permanently, sometimes only for a few decades. Yet organized states have tended to go to war with the same opponents over many generations, as geography turned them into competitors and rivals. The roots of the European Union came from a desire to make it hard, even impossible, for Germany and France ever to go to war again by linking key aspects of their economy. Before that, France and various German states had fought each other many times over the centuries. Occasionally they were allies, when they joined forces against other states around them jockeying for position. A war might destroy a regime – for instance Napoleon's empire in 1814 and again after his return in 1815 – but it was not intended to destroy a country. France remained, deprived of some territory but still largely the same and very powerful. Most wars throughout

history have been limited wars, fought not to extinction but to a less permanent outcome, usually in the form of a negotiated settlement. Advantage was sought to make this agreement as favourable as possible and shift the balance of power in the longer or shorter term.

Sadly, at the time of writing, the war in Ukraine has been going on for several months, reminding those who preferred not to think of such things that wars still happen in the modern world, and can even happen in Europe. One of the many surprising aspects of the initial reaction to the war in Ukraine was how quickly many commentators and politicians seem to have forgotten the conflicts following the breakup of Yugoslavia, which produced a dreadful death toll even if the terrain and forces involved gave less sense of massed battle. At the moment, Russian forces are making slow but steady progress in eastern Ukraine, in circumstances where they can gain more advantage from the destructive power of their artillery and other supporting arms and fight in a way that better suits their strengths than the initial operations of the war.

The United States and its NATO allies, and to a lesser extent the EU, have imposed economic sanctions on Russia and are assisting the Ukrainian forces with weapons, equipment, money, training, and apparently intelligence, while stating that they will not join directly in the fighting. Yet different voices in different countries make various claims about objectives, and if there is more unity than the months before the war suggested was likely, there is also a good deal of division. Russia has responded with economic measures of its own, leading to soaring costs of fuel in Europe, while the consequence of a war involving two of the world's largest grain producers has forced up the price of food and may well lead to shortages, even famine, in countries thousands of miles from the war zone.

This is a limited war, most obviously because Russia possesses a large arsenal of nuclear weapons, none of which have been used and hopefully will not be used. It is also a war which Russia had hoped would swiftly be resolved in its favour with little or no fighting, following on from the 2014 occupation of Crimea and

other districts. Western leaders are acting on the basis that they can impose sanctions on both Russia as a country and individual Russians, and give major military assistance to the Ukrainians, while remaining spectators, not directly involved and not suffering too many consequences. The perspective is naturally different for states further away than for those bordering Russia or Ukraine, most of them former Soviet republics. Another major factor in all that is happening is the personality of the various leaders involved, as well as the domestic politics in which each one operates. No one yet knows how well the enthusiastic support for Ukraine will endure in the face of high costs and likely shortages of energy over the coming winter – although by the time this book is released, these months will have become history, and everyone will know what has happened.

All of this offers a reminder of how the events of history play out, including those so many centuries ago about which we know far less. History never stops, and human nature has not fundamentally changed since the Stone Age. People are as smart and stupid, kind and callous, generous and mean, courageous and timid, efficient and incompetent as they have always been, just as leaders are capable or not, realistic or not, lucky or not. Other factors remain constant, such as the weather, which determines if the ground is hard enough to permit off-road movement, or the state and extent of the road infrastructure itself.

History is valuable because it helps us to understand our own world a little better. It would be absurd to claim that studying the rivalry between Rome and Parthia-Persia shows us exactly how to interpret a conflict in the twenty-first century. Yet it may help a little to understand human nature, and it is certainly a good principle when trying to learn lessons from the past to examine as much history as possible. The fascination with the Second World War tends to mean that at times like this every leader is labelled as either a Churchill or a Chamberlain. Similarly, talk of the dangers of appeasement is common, if less often accompanied by reasoned proposals of what to do instead. Not every situation is fundamentally the same as the late 1930s, and not every leader perceived to be hostile is a Hitler, let alone one with the military

and industrial might of National Socialist Germany behind him. That does not mean that threats need not be taken seriously. It only means that each situation must be looked at as what it actually is, not as a simple replay of one or two familiar episodes in the past. There is much to gain from examining many more eras of history.

In the case of the Romans and the Parthians and Sasanians, there are loose parallels in the restrictions placed on warfare by both empires. This was a mixture of respect for – even fear of – the enemy’s potential power and a sense of how broad a conflict was really advantageous, even in the best possible circumstances. These were self-imposed restrictions on ambition and behaviour – including the deterrent created by the acceptance that the enemy might prove very dangerous if pressed too far. These limits worked, most of the time at least, so that conflicts were fought without turning into life-or-death struggles between the rival empires. One of the great uncertainties at the moment is that none of those involved in the conflict in Ukraine are quite sure what the rules are and what limits should be placed on their actions if the war is not to escalate in ways none of them want. There is a particular mental adaptation for those wedded to the idea of ‘a rules-based international system’ (or similar concepts) to accept that such things work only when everyone understands and accepts the same rules, which is far from guaranteed when there is no means of enforcing them. After all, making murder a crime has never meant that there are no more murders, and it requires other measures, including investigation and punishment, to make the act as rare as possible. Even efficient measures of controlling such crimes reduce rather than eradicate them.

The Romans, the Parthians, and the Persians lived long ago and were products of very different societies and cultures from our own. Yet they were still human beings like us, both flawed and wonderful. To study them is to help understand ourselves and our world.

Introduction

This is the story of ancient Rome and its rivalry with the Parthian and Sasanian Persian dynasties that presided over an empire with its heartland in modern Iran. Nowhere else did the Romans share a border with a state anywhere near as large or sophisticated for such a long period of time. Rome's earlier confrontation with Carthage spanned a century or so and ended in the latter's political extinction. In contrast, the Romans first encountered the Parthians at the start of the first century BC, and although the Parthian line of kings was eventually overthrown in the third century AD, it was replaced by the Sasanian dynasty that lasted into the seventh century. The ruling family changed, as did some aspects of government, but this was essentially the same Iranian empire, bringing together the same regions and peoples. There was more continuity than change, and if the two dynasties are considered phases in the history of the same entity, then this empire lasted for well over eight hundred years. For some seven centuries, the Parthians-Persians were in direct contact with the Romans, sometimes at war and sometimes at peace, always wary of each other and in competition. This book is about that long rivalry, which with hindsight seems to have achieved very little and was brought to an end by the sudden emergence of a new, unexpected factor, when Arab warriors appeared under the banners of Islam to challenge both empires. Within a couple of decades, they had conquered the Sasanian empire as well as most of the remaining provinces of the eastern Roman empire. Seven centuries of confrontation were over and the world had changed, suddenly and profoundly – so much so that the story

of the preceding rivalry is rarely told and is unfamiliar to most people today.

Yet this is strange, for this was a major episode in Roman history, and Rome and its empire continue to fascinate us in a way that no other ancient culture ever quite manages to match, even those better remembered than the Parthians-Sasanians. Egypt of the pharaohs comes closest in popularity to Rome, judging from the quantities of books, articles, and most of all television documentaries to appear each year. By comparison, there is far less on the Greeks or the other peoples of Europe (unless we move later to the Vikings), and very little indeed on the cultures of the rest of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The Romans score even better when it comes to drama, largely because the evidence we have for the pharaohs offers far less material for such stories. Cleopatra VII is the exception for a reason, though she was at best tenuously connected with what most people think of as truly ancient Egypt. She lived closer to us in time than she did to the building of the great pyramids, and her story was dominated by Rome and bound up with the stories of famous Romans like Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. For all its drama, Cleopatra's career ended in failure, and neither the queen nor her Egypt had much of an influence on subsequent history.

By contrast the story of Rome is one of staggering success, and Greco-Roman culture played a central role in shaping the development of the Western world, whether in matters of ideas, government and law, architecture, or simply the symbols of power – eagles and triumphal arches and the rest. Popular memory portrays the Romans as very advanced, as great engineers who built towering aqueducts, immense monuments, practical things like the extensive network of all-weather roads, and indulgent and expensive luxuries like bathhouses. It is a sign of a society's wealth and stability that it can devote so much ingenuity and resources to things that do no more than make life comfortable or entertaining. All in all, the Romans' achievements were many and impressive, their history filled with larger-than-life characters and deeds both great and terrible. Alongside all the

admiration is the sense of a darker side, of the mad and bad emperors and a world of slavery, gladiatorial games, repression, and crucifixion.

The sheer scale of Roman success is undeniable. In 160,* the elderly Antoninus Pius ruled an empire stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Rhine and Danube, from the north of Britain to the Sahara desert and the Euphrates. Even by a cautious estimate, some sixty million people lived within this territory, making up perhaps a fifth of the entire population of the world at that time. These people were not all alike, for there was a good deal of diversity from region to region, and province to province, in terms of language, beliefs, and rituals, often based on traditions stretching back before the arrival of Rome. Yet everywhere this was obviously the Roman empire, with its currency, laws, institutions of government (however distant), and many aspects of a common culture which extended even to fashion in art, food, clothes, and hairstyles. This was a vast state – all the more so in an age of slow communication – and it lasted a very long time before it declined and fell. At the end of the fourth century, the greater part of the lands ruled by Antoninus Pius remained under Roman rule, if in some cases only just, and it was now an empire divided into eastern and western halves. One hundred years later, the western Roman empire was gone. The eastern empire survived for another thousand years, albeit eventually much reduced in size. Understanding how and why the Roman empire eventually fell is an important question because it had been so successful for so very long.

Roman success meant the destruction or absorption of many other states and regimes. Some, like the Carthaginian empire or the Hellenistic kingdoms, were large, and many were far smaller. Because the Romans won, we will never know how the world might have developed had things been different, for instance if Hannibal had broken the Roman Republic. The impact of Rome on subsequent history remains so great and so multifaceted that we can never get any real sense of what might

* All dates are AD unless specifically given as BC.

have happened if it had failed early in its rise. The Romans left their mark on Western Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, not necessarily making everyone Roman in any strict sense but changing them nonetheless. Greek culture morphed into Greco-Roman culture, while the Christian Church, most of all in its Catholic and Orthodox forms, was shaped by Roman society.

The Roman empire that did all this was created and maintained by military might. That did not mean that everyone who ended up under the Romans' rule had first fought against them. Many leaders saw the growing power of Rome as something they could harness and employ against closer rivals, who were perceived as much more threatening. Cleopatra's family, the Ptolemies, allied with Rome's republic at an early stage and never fought against the Romans; her bad luck was to end up on the losing side in a Roman civil war. There were plenty of other communities and leaders who saw the encroachment of the Romans as an opportunity to strengthen their own position, and more who were pragmatic and judged that they could not hope to protect themselves from an aggressor as strong as the Romans and so had better accept their dominance. In each case, some would change their mind when faced with the reality of a permanent Roman presence, while others from the start were determined to resist whatever the cost. Julius Caesar, who conquered Gaul in eight years of bloody warfare, saw this as entirely justified for the good of the republic and himself. At the same time, he accepted that it was natural for the Gauls to fight for their freedom against him.¹

The Romans were usually at war somewhere, although as the empire expanded campaigns were fought far away from Rome itself. The Pax Romana was a reality for much of the empire, especially in the first and second centuries, in the sense that Italy and most of the provinces were almost free from warfare for generations at a time. Yet there was nearly always fighting somewhere on or beyond the frontiers. Years when the Roman people were not formally at war with anyone, anywhere in the world, were so rare that they were marked by the ceremonial closing of the doors of the Temple

of Janus in Rome.* This ritual was only performed on a handful of occasions, but with such a vast empire, one or several conflicts could rage without directly touching the lives of the overwhelming majority of the population.

Wars were common but tended to be local affairs, and the enemies were tribes, states, or kingdoms whose resources were dwarfed by those of the empire. These were not wars between well-matched powers in the wider sense, which did not mean that they were necessarily easy or foregone conclusions, since one tribe never had to fight against the entire might of Rome. Antoninus Pius had in theory some 350,000 military personnel at his command, so that soldiers and sailors represented around 1 in 170 of the overall population (if the estimate for the empire's population is more or less right). Conflicts requiring even a tenth of this force to be committed to the theatre of operations were rare indeed, and larger-scale operations truly exceptional. Most campaigns involved far smaller numbers of troops. In 60, a major rebellion in Britain was defeated in a battle where the Roman commander had barely ten thousand men in his army (although admittedly he had hoped to gather more). The Romans were good at fighting, which, combined with a talent for dominating and controlling others, made their empire possible. They did not always win every war, let alone every battle, but they did win most battles and the vast majority of wars.

The Romans were conquerors, but after the death of the Emperor Augustus in 14, new conquests were rare. Although Britain (which Augustus had decided was not worth taking) was invaded in 43 and most of the island subsequently occupied, the Romans never established a permanent presence in the very north over much of what became Scotland. The tribes of Ireland were left unmolested altogether. Augustus had created a German province stretching as far east as the river Elbe, and then lost it when three legions and their commander were ambushed and

* Janus was depicted with two faces, one looking to the front and one behind. The month of January was named after him since it was the beginning of the political and religious year.

slaughtered in 9. It was never recovered, and centuries later tribes from this area were among the German-speaking peoples who broke into the western Roman empire and dismembered it.

Greco-Roman literature and history dominated education in the modern West until very recently, and plenty of powers have liked to see themselves as successors to all that they felt was best about the Roman empire and Roman civilization. Connections with the Romans were greatly prized, which was one of the driving forces behind the growth of archaeology in the nineteenth century. Alongside this pride in the distant past, some found particular pleasure in the thought that 'they' had stood up to the might of Rome, whether the Scots because the Romans had never conquered all of what became Scotland or the Irish because the Romans did not even try to conquer them. In an ugly form, the claim that Germans were different from other Europeans because they had thrown off the Roman yoke was a common theme for the leaders pressing for German unification in the second half of the nineteenth century, carrying with it a sense of racial uniqueness and superiority that would bear ghastly fruit under the Nazis. The narrative relied heavily on Roman perceptions of the Germanic tribes as distinct from the Gauls and other peoples and on their stereotypes of simple, virtuous barbarians – exaggerated for political and literary reasons, if they reflected reality at all. It was also the Romans looking from the outside who saw these tribes as related to each other, developing the idea of *the* Germans, or for that matter *the* Gauls or *the* Britons. Unity in any sense, let alone political, was not a feature of Iron Age peoples at this level. Thus, most of the time, the neighbours in contact with the Roman empire were divided into many different tribes and communities, with many individual leaders.²

The Parthians and Sasanians were different. Their ruler was called the king of kings, because within his empire there were distinct kingdoms ruled by lesser, regional kings. Sometimes these local leaders resisted central authority, fuelling civil war, but this was always the exception rather than the rule. For most of the period of contact with Rome, the Parthian-Sasanian empire covered essentially the same area, stretching from the Caspian

Sea in the north to the Arabian Gulf in the south, from what is now Afghanistan in the east to the Tigris and Euphrates in the west. Much of it was defined by mountain ranges, with the Caucasus in the very north, the Elburz and Zagros ranges to the east, the edge of the Hindu Kush in the Far East, and the Taurus range in the west. These mountains were not all the same. Some blocked communication, some not, while others channelled it along particular routes; trade and especially campaigning armies had to go with the grain of the landscape, a constant factor in all that follows. Within this wider area were extensive stretches of desert, high plateaus, mountain valleys, and wide areas of steppe land where cultivation was easier. To the north and east it touched the great steppes of Eurasia reaching all the way to China.

At the time of Antoninus Pius, the Han emperor of China may well have presided over territory as populous and extensive as his Roman counterpart. The Parthian-Sasanian empire was smaller, although still far, far larger than any other state in contact with Rome. There was some distant diplomatic contact between Parthians-Sasanians and the Chinese, although it was limited and varied as the fortunes of Chinese emperors waxed and waned and the distance between their lands widened or shrank. The Romans and Chinese were aware of each other's existence, but too far away for any significant political contact.

Unlike the Roman empire, which grew around the Mediterranean, a central sea was not a feature of the Parthian-Sasanian state. For all the variety of landscapes and climate encompassed in the Roman provinces, there were greater, more extreme contrasts in the lands subject to the king of kings. Populations can only grow in proportion to their capacity to generate food, which in turn depends on availability of water to grow plants, whether as fodder for animals or food for people. In the desert areas, this was extremely limited. Pastoralism tends to be more practical in arid conditions than farming, but it is the latter that allows communities to grow in size. Agriculture was easiest where there was sufficient natural rainfall, although this put farmers at the mercy of the weather, as too little or too much rain at the wrong times had a drastic impact on the harvest. Greater effort,

organization, and resources were required to draw water from the rivers to irrigate as wide an area of land as possible. Although more expensive and difficult, this had the advantage of creating a predictable water supply, making it easier to support a larger population in the long term.

Cultivating the soil – like civilization, organized government, and indeed empire – had far more ancient roots in many of the lands ruled by the king of kings than it did in most of the Roman provinces (with the exception of Egypt and some other lands in the east). Under the Parthians and especially the Sasanians irrigation systems were extended over wider areas than ever before, while the relative stability created by these regimes, as with earlier empires like the Achaemenid Persians, helped to foster population growth. There were many cities, some very old indeed, some new foundations, and some very big. Yet they tended to concentrate in particular regions, and large swathes of the Parthian-Sasanian empire could not support and feed such densely inhabited communities.

In contrast, the Roman empire was a world of cities, for it controlled far more land where climate and other conditions helped agricultural production. To put it simply, more of their provinces had plenty of rainfall and less extreme heat in summer and cold in winter. If the Roman empire at its height was double the size of its Parthian-Sasanian neighbour, the difference in population was significantly greater, although even rough precision is impossible. The estimate of sixty million for the age of Antoninus Pius reflects scholarly consensus and a good deal of guesswork, which may or may not be correct. There is even less evidence for the Parthians and Sasanians, but the same sort of estimation might suggest a range of nine to fourteen million – with the possibility that it was somewhat less or more, and may have varied considerably over the period.³

The Roman empire was larger than the Parthian-Sasanian empire, and its wealth and resources of manpower and most raw materials was much greater. When the western empire collapsed in the fifth century, this advantage was reduced to a smaller margin, although still not to parity. Resources and size were never

the whole story, since by their nature each empire had many other commitments and ambitions and could not devote everything to competition with the other. The two powers would fight many wars, but with a few possible exceptions these were not wars to the death, intended to destroy the enemy. At no point was there the remotest possibility of a Parthian or Persian army driving deep enough into Roman territory to reach Italy or Rome. Only at the very end of our period did a Sasanian Persian army come within sight of Constantinople, and it proved unable to cross the Bosphorus into Europe in any strength. In contrast, successive Roman armies went down the Euphrates and Tigris valleys to sack the great Parthian and Sasanian royal cities of the region. Yet the Romans never stayed there for long, and the eastern Iranian heartlands of the rival empire never saw a legion under arms.

Rome was larger and stronger, an aggressive imperial power which had conquered a large part of the three continents known to the Greeks and Romans. Yet it did not conquer the Parthian-Sasanian empire or destroy it as it had destroyed Carthage, and alongside some much trumpeted Roman victories came humiliating defeats. The Parthians killed Caesar's associate Marcus Licinius Crassus and humbled Mark Antony. The Sasanians captured the emperor Valerian in 260 – the only time a Roman emperor was ever taken prisoner by a foreign enemy. They also sacked Antioch in Syria – after Rome and Alexandria, the largest city in the empire – on multiple occasions, as well as many other cities large and small. There was glory and humiliation on both sides, without either securing a big enough advantage to dominate the other permanently, let alone to conquer or destroy it.

There was also a good deal of peaceful coexistence between these rival, aggressive empires, even if this figures less prominently in our sources than the inherently more dramatic disputes and conflicts. This book is about the contact and rivalry between the two empires, but it must also be about the many leaders and communities of the wider region caught up in their competition. These were no mere pawns in the greater struggle – nor simply pro or anti Roman or Parthian-Sasanian – but active participants with ambitions of their own. Both empires relied heavily on allies,

even though they could prove difficult to control and at times were willing to play the Romans and Parthians-Sasanians against each other for their own advantage. There is much more to this story than simply the competition between the great powers.

Seven centuries of imperial competition and its context is a big topic. Inevitably, as with any aspect of the ancient world, the surviving sources of information are limited and often inadequate. As already noted, there are no truly reliable figures for populations, and in the same way there are no reliable statistics to reveal the economies of either empire or the impact of epidemics, natural disasters, and other phenomena mentioned in the literary accounts. All literary evidence reflects the authors' knowledge, which might be faulty, and to a greater or lesser extent their prejudices, as well as what they felt their readers wanted to know. For most aspects of Classical history there are only Greco-Roman voices to tell the story, since the peoples who fought against the Romans left no accounts at all.

For a change this is less true for the Parthians-Sasanians. While written narratives from the Roman side still provide the vast majority of the sources, there are other traditions – for instance, from Armenia and Arabic histories written much later under the Muslim dynasties but covering earlier periods. The fullest narratives are medieval, making it difficult to judge how much reliable information was still available. One interesting feature is that the Sasanians had managed to suppress memory of their Parthian predecessors so effectively that much less was known about them, while the list of their rulers was reduced in the literary tradition and the four and a half centuries of their dominance shortened to barely a third of this time.

There is some sense of the Parthian-Sasanian perspective, but even so this remains a story told predominantly through Roman evidence because otherwise it could not be told at all. It helps that the Parthians and Sasanians produced coins, which help to trace the rule of successive monarchs, and that some monuments and inscriptions survive, giving glimpses of how rulers wished to present recent events to their subjects. More generally archaeology provides information about settlements, fortifications, trade, and

industry, while the names and titles on clay seals that once held official documents provide glimpses into Sasanian administration. Over time, more will be learned and more data gathered to give at least a little more confidence to the reconstruction of settlement patterns and population levels from period to period and region to region. Yet all this evidence is patchy, reflecting the chance of discovery and the levels of work possible given the physical and political environments in different countries. As an example, far more is known about the Roman civilian and military settlements in Israel than in Turkey or Syria, simply because more survey and excavation has occurred there. This means that even on the Roman side there are substantial gaps in our knowledge, whether because of lack of fieldwork in a region or because the literary accounts are few and unreliable. Much remains unknown, and it can be difficult to judge how far information from an inscription or literary account can be seen to reflect a wider experience.

There will be places where it is impossible to be sure just what happened, and most of the story must be told from Roman sources, which to a greater or lesser extent saw the Parthians and Sasanians as foreign and often as enemies. It is not difficult to find dismissive comments and generalizations about Asians or easterners in Greek and Roman literature or similar stereotyping in art. Yet it would be dangerous to see everything as part of the wider history of rivalry between east and west, which invariably focuses on the last few centuries and projects back assumptions according to an individual's preconceptions and politics. Greeks and Romans alike were equally disparaging about all other outsiders, such as the 'barbarians' to the west, north, and south – and about each other. This changed only a little as the empire grew and an ever higher proportion of the population became legally Roman citizens or more generally identified themselves as Romans. Stereotypes of Gauls, Germans, Syrians, Egyptians, former slaves and their descendants, rural peasants, and urban poor all remained strong, even when people from all these groups rose to high office.⁴

There is no reason to believe that the Parthians and the Sasanians did not have a similar sense of their own superiority

over all foreigners and plenty of groups within the empire. They certainly did not think of themselves as ‘easterners’ – any more than Romans thought of themselves as ‘westerners’ in any strong sense. Zoroastrian religion encouraged the Sasanians in particular to see themselves as at the centre of the world, physically as well as spiritually and morally. Once again, this is the natural belief of most peoples, not least great empires. The Romans and the Parthians-Sasanians were imperialist, aggressive powers who cherished military glory and conquered and controlled many other peoples, suppressing by force – often brutal force – any challenges to their rule. They also both brought stability, peace, the rule of law, and prosperity over wide areas for long periods.

The historian must aim to understand the past, to piece together as well as possible what happened and why. Rushing to judge an era, a state, or a leader and to depict them as good or evil, as victims or oppressors, rarely helps in this process. If it must be done, then it must follow analysis of what actually took place. This requires examining all of the available evidence, treating it with care, and weighing as carefully as possible its likely accuracy. Admitting what is not known is as important as stating what is known, and making clear the likely levels of doubt or certainty in each case. Some may not care for a narrative that at times is tentative, even cautious, but anything else would be dishonest and likely to lead to conclusions that are dubious at best. The aim is to treat both sides in the same way, to view these empires as equals, asking the same questions about their intentions, capacity, strengths, and weaknesses and treating evidence from either side with matching care. These questions are worth asking even when there cannot be a definitive answer, because they show the issues at stake.

Since the focus is on the rivalry between two great empires, this book cannot hope to be a full history of either the Roman or Parthian-Sasanian empire. It would be possible to write a book of this length on the theme of any single chapter – and in some cases, such works exist and are listed in the notes. Also, for reasons of space, not all of the story can be described in the same detail, even when fuller accounts exist, and anything that is not central to the theme can receive no more than cursory treatment – for

instance, religion when it did not impinge directly on foreign relations. Far more could be written about Zoroastrianism, and the difficulties of understanding its development and role under the Parthians and greater prominence under the Sasanians than is possible here. Similarly, the theological disputes and schisms within the Christian Church after Constantine made it the faith of the empire, and in particular the bitter disagreements over how to define the Trinity and Christ's specific nature, are mentioned only when they affected the politics of an era. Such topics are highly complex; the Latin craving for legal precision collided with Greek enthusiasm for the abstract and tradition of philosophical debate, all fuelled by a sense of urgency since getting to the truth was seen as essential to proper worship, faith, and hence eternal life. Describing these developments would have required considerable space while adding nothing to the overall theme; hence it is better to be as brief as possible. The same is true of political, administrative, and military structures, where only the essential points can be covered.

Yet one of the advantages of taking such a long perspective and following the competition between the two empires over so many centuries is that some of the great debates between scholars working closely on aspects of the period soon fade in importance. The Romans encountered the Parthians when both were well-established, expansionist powers. Thus, there is less need to explain the development and reasons behind either side's imperialism – something discussed with great passion in the case of the Romans. Leading on from this is an equally heated debate over the question of how the Romans viewed their frontiers: whether their intentions were predominantly or ever defensive, and whether they were more concerned with future aggression or maintaining control of the existing provinces. Official pronouncements, and the more enthusiastic poets, spoke of empire without limit or end and of Rome's right and destiny to rule. Certainly, conquest could often be seen by many Romans as an unambiguously good and desirable thing.⁵

Stepping back and studying what happened over such a long period immediately encourages caution about assuming that

attitudes were simple and unchanging. A major weakness of these debates is that they have tended to speak of *Roman* imperialism and *Roman* frontiers while ignoring the part played by other states. The Romans were often aggressors, but sometimes they were not, and wars began when they were attacked. Nor was their aggression constant or always of the same nature. There were plenty of occasions, even during the great periods of expansion, when they chose not to seize territory or even to wage war when a pretext existed. Most of all, despite so many centuries of competition, they made very little effort to conquer the Parthians and the Sasanians. Some territory was taken and held for a long period, but this stopped far short of the Romans' ruthless determination to destroy Carthage as a rival – a conflict which only gathered momentum in the buildup to the final clash in 149 BC and reflected Roman insecurity rather than Carthage's actual power at the time. If the Romans are viewed as determined to dominate and expand wherever possible, always seeking empire without limit, then the central question becomes: Why did they fail in the east? Explanations are sought on the political and especially the military side, ranging from low-level tactics to strategy.

Yet is the question the right one to ask? Once again, it is focused solely on the Romans and assumes, firstly, that they were driven to conquer at every opportunity and, secondly, that they were only prevented from doing this by their own limitations. From the start, the Parthians and Sasanians are reduced to a passive role, simply resisting Rome rather than having aims of their own. Beginning with such fixed assumptions about what should have happened is never wise. Instead, the aim is to trace what actually occurred and only at the end return to such big issues. As importantly, every situation must be viewed from the Parthian-Sasanian standpoint as well as the Roman one, as well as from the point of view of everyone else involved, while bearing in mind the simple yet all too easily forgotten truth that no one knew what was going to happen.

More than seven centuries of contact, confrontation, and negotiation makes for a long and complex story, involving many actors, places, and regions. Detail is needed at many points,

since it is essential to understand the narrative on which any conclusion is based and the doubts that surround it. Therefore, there is a lot of information and qualifications based on the strengths and weaknesses of our sources. I have done my best to make the chapters as easy to follow as possible, avoiding too many names of individuals or places and of details that are not essential. Unfortunately, that does mean passing over many remarkable characters and incidents. Some may find certain passages repetitive, as the rival empires wage yet another limited war in much the same area. In the later chapters, cities like Nisibis, Amida, and Dara will figure again and again. The very repetition, of contest after contest for the same key locations, is at the heart of the story, and needs to be done in order to understand the nature of most of the rivalry and especially the warfare.

This is a book about Rome's empire* and the only power large and strong enough to be a serious rival over many centuries. The Parthians and the Sasanians were among the most successful dynasties in antiquity, and the scale of their power and longevity is too often forgotten. The story of their encounters with Rome helps to give some sense of their success, while presenting the Romans in a different manner from more familiar studies of the empire. Two great powers – one stronger than the other, but not to such an extent that the encounter was unbalanced – lived alongside each other for an immensely long time. How this happened, how the balance was maintained, and how the experience changed each side and those around them is our theme. To understand all this means tracing the entire history of contact – something not done in any detail before – and following a path through some unfamiliar territory and leading to more than a few surprising conclusions.

* Throughout the book I will refer to Rome and the Roman empire, extending this to include the eastern empire with its capital at Constantinople which continued after the fall of the western empire in the fifth century. Although it has been conventional to describe this entity as the Byzantine empire, its leaders and inhabitants thought of themselves as Roman – as did neighbours, including the Sasanians.