

THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE IN ANTIQUITY

Edited by Matthew Adam Cobb

Routledge

THE INDIAN OCEAN TRADE IN ANTIQUITY

POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

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ISBN 978-1-138-73826-3



9 781138 738263

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
routledge.com

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The period from the death of Alexander the Great to the rise of the Islam (c. late fourth century BCE to seventh century CE) saw a significant growth in economic, diplomatic and cultural exchange between various civilisations in Africa, Europe and Asia. This was in large part thanks to the Indian Ocean trade. Peoples living in the Roman Empire, Parthia, India and South East Asia increasingly had access to exotic foreign products, while the lands from which they derived, and the peoples inhabiting these lands, also captured the imagination, finding expression in a number of literary and poetic works.

The Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity provides a range of chapters that explore the economic, political and cultural impact of this trade on these diverse societies, written by international experts working in the fields of Classics, Archaeology, South Asian studies, Near Eastern studies and Art History. The three major themes of the book are the development of this trade, how consumption and exchange impacted on societal developments, and how the Indian Ocean trade influenced the literary creations of Graeco-Roman and Indian authors.

This volume will be of interest not only to academics and students of antiquity, but also to scholars working on later periods of Indian Ocean history who will find this work a valuable resource.

Matthew Adam Cobb is a lecturer in ancient history at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK, and his main area of research focuses on Graeco-Roman participation in the Indian Ocean trade, as well as cross-cultural engagement between the West and East in antiquity.

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First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cobb, Matthew Adam, editor.

Title: The Indian Ocean trade in antiquity : political, cultural, and economic impacts / edited by Matthew Adam Cobb.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018011411 (print) | LCCN 2018033806 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781315184876 (ebook) | ISBN 9781351732451 (web pdf) |

ISBN 9781351732444 (epub) | ISBN 9781351732437 (mobi/kindle) |

ISBN 9781138738263 (hardback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Indian Ocean Region—Civilization. | Indian Ocean Region—Commerce. | Trade routes—Indian Ocean Region—History. | Commerce—Social aspects.

Classification: LCC DS339 (ebook) | LCC DS339 .I56 2018 (print) |

DDC 930/.009824—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018011411>

ISBN: 978-1-138-73826-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-18487-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Keystroke, Neville Lodge, Tettenhall, Wolverhampton

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Donald Atkinson Fund (The Roman Research Trust and the Roman Society), the Classical Association, and the Faculty of Humanities Research Assistance Grant scheme (University of Wales Trinity Saint David) for the generous financial support they offered in facilitating the panel on ‘Indian Ocean Trade in Antiquity’, which was held at the Ninth Celtic Conference in Classics (Dublin, June 2016). Thanks also need to be expressed for the team at Routledge who offered their support and patience in the preparation of the manuscript. Furthermore, our gratitude goes to the reviewers who kindly provided feedback on the chapters in this book. All opinions and all errors, of course, remain our own.

3 Indian Ocean trade

The role of Parthia

Leonardo Gregoratti

This spectacle of the Roman army arrayed on one side, the Parthian on the other, while these two eminent leaders not only of the empires they represented but also of mankind thus met in conference [. . .] it was my fortunate lot to see.¹

With these words the Roman historian Velleius Paterculus describes the meeting (of which he was an eyewitness) between Augustus' adopted son Gaius Caesar and the Parthian King Phraates V, at the Euphrates in 2 CE. The delegates of the two rival super-powers, Rome and Parthia, met on an island in the river to mark the limits of the spheres of their political influence that divided the whole known world.² This passage has many extraordinary aspects to it, and offers an invaluable attestation of the Parthians' historical relevance and of the role that should be acknowledged to them.

In these few words, although written much later, the sincere enthusiasm of a young *tribunus* is palpable (he later became a chronicler of historical events) – sent from Rome into the fabulous East, he was at the limits of his own world. Certainly, his young mind and therefore his enthusiasm and expectations were deeply influenced by the readings he surely had made: by Herodotus' accounts of the ancient Persians and the exotic lands beyond the Euphrates, or maybe by more novelistic stories about Asia and those “far away eastern lands”.

Nonetheless, these few lines represent one of the small number of unbiased portraits of the Parthians, the “barbarians” of the East, showing their relevance as Rome's political rivals for supremacy in western Asia and ideological competitors for the leadership of the whole of humankind.³ After travelling all the way to that island on the Euphrates, as member of Gaius Caesar's retinue, our Velleius found himself in a world at the periphery of the empires, where the Romano-centric point of view adopted by intellectuals in the capital revealed all its artificiality and lack of meaning. He decided then, alone among his contemporaries, to represent that genuine reality, a reality he had experienced living and speaking with the people of the frontier, who lived close to the other “masters of the world”.

Sadly, not so many modern scholars decided to follow in their ancient colleague's footsteps. For many years, the study of the Parthian world, in precarious balance between the disciplines of Classics and Iranian studies, has been relegated to a

marginal place in both disciplines. Studies of this empire have remained deeply affected by an unmistakable Romano-centric point of view.⁴

Fortunately, this peripheral status has begun to change in more recent scholarly studies. The Parthian Empire, a state lasting five long centuries, has in recent years slowly emerged from the shadow of history to regain its cultural and historical identity. In 1996, the conference *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse* organised by Josef Wiesehöfer, which took place in Kiel, Germany, was the starting point for a serious investigation concerning the Parthian Empire and its role in ancient history. The conference affirmed the necessity for a multidisciplinary approach that implies the collaboration of scholars working not only on different fields and disciplines, but also investigating different political and cultural realities within and outside the borders of the Arsacid state.⁵

This is in order to be able to deal with Parthia as a composite reality, a confederation of political and cultural subjects interacting with each other and with the central authority, embodied by the Arsacid Great King. This element promoted the discussion around the idea of the Parthian state as a “network empire”,⁶ allowing the scholars to abandon the traditional “monolithic” conception of a chaotic lesser state always on the brink of collapse. In parallel to this new approach, Charlotte Lerouge in her book, *L'image des Parthes dans le monde greco-romain*, investigated and reaffirmed the necessity of establishing an independent point of view on the Parthians by discussing the role played by western sources in our knowledge of the “eastern barbarians”.⁷ She underlined the need of understanding the prejudices of the western authors by searching for alternative sources to integrate the Graeco-Roman ones.⁸

These two new approaches have completely revolutionized the point of view on the Parthian Empire and led to a sort of “Parthian renaissance”. The reaffirmation of the role of the Arsacids in the history of the whole ancient world, in particular, can also provide some interesting elements to the study of the Indian Ocean trade, the “global topic” par excellence in ancient world studies.⁹ The new point of view on the Parthians can somehow integrate the geo-political scenario around the Indian Ocean trade, proposing a more composite situation where the role of the Arsacids and their political subjects, the so-called “Parthian commonwealth”,¹⁰ or maybe “Parthian federation”,¹¹ can be better defined.

Studies of the Indian Ocean trade in the early centuries of the first millennium CE have for many decades, especially since Wheeler's (and then Casal's) excavations and publication of the finds from Arikamedu, been focused on Indo-Roman trade. It could be argued that a whole new field of studies, focused on mainly the traffic of goods and men between Roman Egypt and India, has developed, and with good reason.¹² In ancient times, this was probably the main route crossing the ocean.¹³ A sort of “sea highway” was able to directly connect Asia, the producer of various goods, with the most powerful empire of the West where the demand for those goods was growing exponentially: Rome.¹⁴ Such a Romano-centric, or maybe better Egyptian-centric approach to the topic is also imposed by the situation of the sources.

The extraordinary wealth of sources and documentation from Graeco-Roman Egypt has played an important role in scholarly understanding of Indo-Roman trade.

Even more significantly, the intensive archaeological exploration of the Red Sea harbours, Berenike and Myos Hormos, has offered rich and detailed information concerning Indian Ocean trade and the relationship between Egypt and other trading places on the shores of the Indian Ocean, such as India, southern Arabia and the Persian Gulf.¹⁵ The materials found in the field have been integrated with the priceless information provided by papyri documents, like the Muziris Papyrus to mention only the most famous example¹⁶ – a type of source that due to its very nature is able to provide impressive data, but is limited to the Red Sea/Egypt geographical area and the routes connected with it.

Furthermore, the well-known fundamental text that constitutes the basis of the discipline, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, was written by someone involved in the trade to and from Egypt in the mid-first century CE.¹⁷ The author was mainly interested in providing useful information about the places along the main Egypt–India “sea highway”, a route he seems to have known best, due to his direct first-hand experience.¹⁸ The text is the product of Egyptian merchant circles and therefore expresses the point of view of businessmen whose interest in other trade routes and other co-protagonists of the Indian Ocean trade, like Parthia for example, was very limited.¹⁹

Also in this field of studies, the research is developing quickly, exploring new geographical areas and adopting new perspectives by relating the results of excavations and surveys at different sites. As the Norwegian scholar Eivind Seland has shown in his very well-documented overview on the topic, new elements of discussion and the availability of new sources and materials, rendered the discipline mature for a multidirectional and polycentric approach that explores the role of other political entities within the Indian Ocean trade.²⁰ This is in order to render the discussion less influenced by the overwhelming “Rome–India trade axis” approach.

It seems clear that both fields of studies – the Parthian Empire and the Indian Ocean – have significantly developed in the last decades adopting new perspectives. In both cases, previous and more limited points of view have been put under discussion in favour of wider approaches that focus on the relationships among different areas and communities. In the case of the Indian Ocean, this led scholars to think in terms of a trans-oceanic network, multiplying the interconnections. In the case of the Parthian Empire, a polycentric view has prevailed, involving examination of the co-existence of different local political subjects within the Parthian political “confederation”.²¹

Perhaps this recent fragmentation of the once quasi-monolithic Parthian world can add another *tessera* in the mosaic of Indian Ocean trade. Most of the studies relating to the materials and sites on the shores of the Indian Ocean demonstrate connections with an area defined generally as Mesopotamia or the Persian Gulf. The recent trend among scholars of reaffirming the role of the Parthian Empire and its subjects in the global history scene can also be applied to Indian Ocean studies in order to establish, as far as the scarce sources allow, what part the Arsacid super-power played in sea trade. The topic is of course extremely vast, as is the geographical scope of the investigation into the Indian Ocean trade. Nonetheless, one of the purposes of this chapter, far from being a comprehensive dissertation on

the matter, is to point out and connect up a series of facts and historical circumstances in order to better define the political subjects involved in the north-western sector of Ocean trade: Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf.

First of all, it is necessary to draw due attention to south Mesopotamian harbours as key terminals for the Indian Ocean routes by putting together some scattered evidence appearing in ancient sources. These traffic points were ruled directly by the Arsacids or belonged to a political entity, the kingdom of Characene, which can be defined as part of the Parthian commonwealth or federation, a network including all the minor autonomous authorities depending to some degree on the Arsacid Great King.²²

Of course when dealing with Indian Ocean connections, it is appropriate to start from the *Periplus*. Even a work characterized by such an Egypt-centric perspective offers a few lines dedicated to the Persian Gulf route: obviously a secondary one in the author's mind, but whose existence could not be omitted entirely. This fact in itself is already telling. It seems clear, from the text that even the more distant destinations, like for example the remote harbours of East Africa, were clearly not of primary relevance for the author, but they nonetheless belonged to his trade horizon and had to be mentioned in his work. A reader of the *Periplus*, a merchant or businessman operating on the main route, would surely have met merchants and goods coming from southern Mesopotamia or directed there. Consequently, in order to provide a complete description of the trade context, such secondary traffic branches could not be left out. What the anonymous author writes is interesting:

Beyond the straits (the Hormuz Straits), that very great and broad sea, the Persian Gulf, reaches far into the interior. At the upper end of this Gulf there is a market-town designated by law, called Apologos, situated near Charax Spasini and the River Euphrates. Sailing through the mouth of the Gulf, after a six-days' course there is another market-town of Persia called Ommana. To both of these market-towns large vessels are regularly sent from Barygaza.²³

The Persian Gulf is in itself a suitable way to reach the interior of the Asian continent and this for the author seems to be the main function of the Gulf in the Indian Ocean traffic system. Crossing the straits and sailing the Gulf meant getting in connection with inner Mesopotamia and its cities, in particular Seleucia on the Tigris, the largest and most populous metropolis outside the Roman borders.²⁴ The places mentioned seem to be instrumental in this role.

The most important trading station in that area is the market-harbour Apologos, close to the river Euphrates where goods can be transferred in order to continue towards the mainland.²⁵ This market-town is explicitly connected with Spasinou Charax, the capital of the Arsacid client kingdom of Characene. Apologos is defined as *emporion nomimon*, a place where trade was regulated by specific laws and where transactions took place under the supervision of representatives of the political authority.²⁶ This fact suggests that Apologos was the only place where international trade activity was authorized, by Characenean kings, by Parthian, or

both, at the time of the *Periplus*, and justifies the fact that it is the only south Mesopotamian harbour mentioned. Other sources, for example, the Palmyrene inscriptions, mention other terminals connected with Spasinou Charax, like Teredon and Forat.²⁷ It is interesting that the harbour of Apologos appears only in the *Periplus*. Perhaps the site and its relevance, connected maybe with its special status, were short-lived and contemporary to the *Periplus* or perhaps Apologos should be identified as one of the other sites mentioned in the Palmyrene texts.

The other market-town of “Persia”, that is, Parthia/Characene, is Ommana on the southern shore of the Persian Gulf. Recent discoveries lead to the place, whose name appears frequently in the writings of western geographers,²⁸ being identified with the site complex ed-Dur-Mleiha-Dibba,²⁹ at the mouth of the Gulf.³⁰ Archaeological excavations at the site of Mleiha, in the hinterland, revealed a wealthy and structured settlement, probably the administrative centre upon which the two other harbours, ed-Dur and Dibba, on the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, depended.³¹ In all these sites, the material evidence and the large presence of imported pottery and objects attest to intense contacts with Parthia, the Mediterranean area and India in the early centuries of our era.³² All these sites, according to the anonymous author, were under the political influence of the Parthian Empire if not part of the Arsacid “confederation”. The Indian imports in particular seem to confirm the anonymous *Periplus* writer’s other words.³³ From Barygaza, a relevant trade centre in north-eastern India, convoys of trade ships regularly sailed for the Gulf, reaching ed-Dur-Mleiha-Dibba (Ommana) and the capital of Characene.

This passage, and the reference to direct contacts from India to Characene, mirrors a much later text from Cassius Dio, referring to the historical events that took place only a few decades after the writing of the *Periplus*. In 116 CE after a series of extraordinary victories and a quick descent along the Euphrates and after conquering Ctesiphon, Seleucia and all Mesopotamia, that is to say the core of Parthian political and economic power, the Roman Emperor Trajan reached the Gulf shores.³⁴ The historian writes:

Athambelus, the ruler of the island in the Tigris, remained loyal to Trajan [. . .] and the inhabitants of the Palisade of Spasinus, as it is called, received him kindly; they were subject to the dominion of Athambelus. Then he came to the ocean itself, and when [. . .] had seen a ship sailing to India, he said: “I should certainly have crossed over to the Indi, too, if I were still young.”³⁵

Cassio Dio’s information is complementary to that of the *Periplus*. The city of Spasinou Charax appears, as well as the centre of the local kingdom of Characene. The Emperor himself is a witness to the fact that ships and goods sailed back to India from northern Gulf harbours. If one of the purposes of the whole Parthian war, as has been suggested, was to lay hands on the terminals of the sea routes that remained outside Roman control,³⁶ then it is likely to think that the traffic through the Gulf involved a not negligible percentage of the movements of goods to and from India. This last text integrates the information given by the *Periplus*: the two

passages combined demonstrate that an active and intense sea route between Characene/Parthia and India, through the Persian Gulf station of Ommana, existed and it ran in both directions. Besides, the texts state clearly that the Parthian and/or Characene political authority ruled over this trade route and its main stations.

A third text can be added to the two already mentioned. It refers to the events which occurred a few years before Trajan's campaigns and the facts narrated by Cassius Dio. Between 91 and 101 CE, with the campaigns to the West operated by the General Ban Zhao, the Parthian Kingdom entered the political scene of the Chinese Han Empire (*Anxi* in the Chinese sources).³⁷ Around 97 CE, Gan Ying, an important Chinese court dignitary was placed at the head of a diplomatic mission with the task of establishing contacts and business relationships with that realm which the Chinese knew well to be the final destination for most of the goods they were exporting to the West: the Kingdom of Da Qin – the Roman Empire. His narration was later collected in the more general historical work, the *Hou Hanshou*, the official annals of the Later Hans.

Gan Ying states that the westernmost place his mission was able to reach was the country of *Tiaozhi*, which most modern scholars identify with Mesene/Characene, on the northern shores of the Persian Gulf.³⁸ The Chinese knew that the Parthian king wanted to avoid direct contacts between the powerful empires.³⁹ A commercial agreement and a direct collaboration between the Romans and Chinese would have deprived the Parthians of the high earnings related to long-distance trade and the Arsacid crown of the substantial revenue derived from the taxation of the transported goods.

Unfortunately for Gan Ying and his explorative mission, upon their arrival in Mesene, the region had been occupied by the Great King's troops.⁴⁰ It is thus likely that the officials and merchants with whom the Chinese mission was in contact were government agents or men properly trained to provide information and answers in line with Arsacid interests. In fact, the report of Gan Ying says:

He reached Tiaozhi next to a large sea. He wanted to cross it, but the sailors of the western frontier of Anxi (Parthia) said to him: The ocean is huge. Those making the round trip can do it in three months if the winds are favourable. However, if you encounter winds that delay you, it can take two years. That is why all the men who go by sea take stores for three years. The vast ocean urges men to think of their country, and get homesick, and some of them die.⁴¹

Apart from the cunning trick adopted to fool the Chinese diplomat and convince him to retrace his steps, if we accept that Gan Ying reached Mesene/Caracene and intended to "cross the sea" to reach Egypt and the Roman Empire, some consideration can be made. One fact is undeniable: a direct connection by sea between southern Mesopotamia/Characene and the Roman Empire, almost certainly Roman Egypt, existed and was used, if Gan Ying upon arriving in Mesene felt the need to gather information about this possibility to reach Roman territory. It is very probable that the Chinese envoy heard about this sea route from the local population or from the merchants and officers he came into contact with during his journey.

He probably did not witness the sailing of a ship from the shores of the Persian Gulf, like Trajan did twenty years later. If he had a direct experience of the harbours' activity and the connected sea route, he would have surely had the chance to recognize the truth. Another possibility is that during the Parthian occupation of Characene and its harbours, in the last third of the first century CE, the traffic on the sea routes departing from Mesene had been reduced. Perhaps this made the role of southern Mesopotamia in connecting Parthian cities, with India on one side and Egypt on the other, less evident for a foreign visitor.

The Chinese seem to be the only source to mention a direct route between Mesene and Roman Egypt, while the Classical texts that we have seen mention almost exclusively direct connections with India. We can assume that in any case the route existed, but was not intensively used in comparison with that for India. The longer distances and the need to cross vast areas of open sea, while the connection with India offered the possibility of navigation along the coast, as well as the need to wait for favourable winds to reach Egypt from southern Arabia and to get back probably dissuaded most Mesopotamian traders from taking that route. In the light of these considerations, the motivations given to the Chinese ambassador do not seem so abstruse. The local merchants probably thus exaggerated the real risks, the same ones that prevented them directly reaching Roman Egypt that way.

Another important element that emerges from Gan Ying's report is the fact that he seems to be aware that he has reached the western frontier of the Parthian kingdom. The sailors he interrogates are "sailors of the western frontier of Anxi (Parthia)"; this would lead one to think that he knew he was close to the border with the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, he did not attempt to travel up the Euphrates to reach the Syrian border, along with Palmyrene caravans. Probably according to Chinese knowledge of the routes or in conformity to specific instructions he received from the court, he was interested in entering the Roman Empire through Egypt and not through any other access point. It may be that the final destination he was trying to reach was not the Roman Empire in general but only Egypt as the main arrival point for the goods from the East. Perhaps in the Chinese concept of the Western world the two geographical entities were not seen as different.

A few other pieces of evidence from Chinese sources indicate that the existence of a sea route between Asia and Rome/Alexandria of Egypt was known.⁴² The Chinese were aware of the relevance in this context of the Egyptian ports. For the pre-Sassanid period, it seems that most of the contacts with Anxi/Parthia were made by land route, but in the case of Gan Ying, the envoy does not seem really interested in the possibility of continuing the journey towards the Roman Near East. For him the most obvious way to reach Rome and Egypt was to travel by land across the Parthian Iranian plateau as far as the Persian Gulf, then sail off and circumnavigate the Arabian Peninsula as far as the Red Sea.

It seems that, beginning with Gan Ying, the idea of a direct connection between Mesopotamia/Anxi/Parthia and Egypt/Da Qin appears frequently in Chinese sources. The reports of the later Chinese chroniclers, who were convinced that most of the trade between Parthia/Anxi and the Roman Empire occurred by sea, should

not be underestimated.⁴³ Being the commercial eastern neighbours of Parthia, the Chinese were mainly interested in the most suitable trade connections and commercial stations; thus their information provides a sort of “Oriental *Periplus*” perspective of western Asia where the Persian Gulf routes plays a fundamental role. From the Chinese point of view, at least after Gan Ying, the Characene/Mesene was a starting point to quickly reach Roman Egypt. The fact that these kinds of sources stress this direct connection by sea lets us think that this was a relevant route from East to West. Another important element is the fact that, as in the case of Gan Ying, southern Mesopotamian harbours were closely connected with land routes to and from Central Asia, which seems to be the main route westwards.

To all these textual sources by historians and chroniclers a different kind of attestation should be added: the voice of the first protagonists of the Indian Ocean trade – that is, the merchants. The Palmyrene traders, since the first century CE, led their caravans deep into Parthian Mesopotamia and reached Mesene/Characene and its harbours, where they established trade colonies. The merchants who returned to the Syrian city used to honour the businessmen and patrons who had made the enterprise and the journey practically and financially possible and successful, commissioning statues and inscriptions to be displayed in the city squares and along the streets.⁴⁴ In a couple of these texts, both dated to the mid-second century CE, a well-known “caravan lord” or “caravan protector”, M. Ulpus Iarhai, is thanked for having supported a group of merchants coming by ship from “Scythia”.⁴⁵ According to the general interpretation, the two inscriptions would prove that Palmyrene merchants reached Barbarikon and Barygaza in the north-east of the Indian continent, and that Palmyrene ships owned or equipped by fellow citizens, sailed regularly in the mid-second century to and from India.

All this scattered evidence contributes to integrate the description provided in the *Periplus* and affirm the Gulf route’s relevance for the Indian Ocean trade. The final destinations of the traffic from the Gulf harbours seem to be the same as that of the main Egypt–India route. The sources collected do not seem to make reference to the role of southern Arabia and its harbours as a regional cross-roads where merchants from the Gulf exchanged their goods. All the considered sources seem to refer to a direct connection between Characene/Parthia and Egypt at one end, and India at the other. Of course, the two systems coexisted, but nothing in our sources allows us to think that the Gulf route was a secondary branch of the main Egypt–India axis and that the purpose of the southern Mesopotamian harbours was to bring merchants and goods only as far as the southern Arabian trading points.⁴⁶

On the other side of the Indian Ocean, new archaeological discoveries in the Indian subcontinent attest to the presence of goods coming from Mesopotamia.⁴⁷ For the first centuries CE, the amount of Mesopotamian findings is not comparable with those of Roman origin. Still, some distinctive kinds of ceramics constitute genuine proof that direct or indirect contacts took place between India and Mesopotamia. The so-called “Torpedo Jars” have been found in many Indian sites: in the north-west and south-east, as well as in the south-west and in Sri Lanka. Although these types of vessels were largely used in Parthian Mesopotamia before and during the Arsacid rule, more of the Indian findings seem to be dated to a period

from the third century until the fifth/sixth century CE, when the Sassanids were already active in building and consolidating their presence in the Persian Gulf, southern Arabia and therefore along the Indian Ocean routes.⁴⁸

The research concerning Parthian-Mesopotamian contacts with India is still just beginning, but some kinds of ceramics, less widespread than the Torpedo Jars, seem to indicate that goods from west Parthia reached India before the Sassanid conquest of Iran. This would provide tangible evidence beyond the texts already taken into account, suggesting that the later well-known and solid contacts the Persians managed to build with the subcontinent and of which the Torpedo Jars are an expression, did not come out of the blue, but were developed from previous contacts during the Parthian rule in Iran. Fragments of “Glazed Pottery”, a variety of pottery widely in use in Mesopotamia for a long period during and after the Arsacid rule have been found in many sites. Like the Torpedo Jars, they have been normally dated to the Sassanid age. Some sherds of pale yellow ceramic with traces of blue-greenish glaze have been found in the citadel of Tissanharama, the capital of the kingdom of Ruhuna (270 BCE–500 CE) in today’s southern Sri Lanka. The earliest fragments are dated according to their archaeological context to the second century CE. These sherds seem to be of the same nature and origin as those found in Parthian Mesopotamia, in the Persian Gulf and in southern Arabia.⁴⁹ Sherds of similar “Turquoise Glazed Pottery” or “Parthian Glazed Ware”, are also attested to in the other Sri Lankan site of Anuradhapura in the northern part of the island.⁵⁰ These considerations on Sri Lankan Turquoise Glazed Pottery can perhaps be valid also for the findings on the continent. At Pattanam/Muziris, a site on the west coast of southern India, famous for its Roman imports, sherds of Turquoise Glazed Pottery have been found which could also pre-date the Sassanian period.⁵¹

“BI-ware”, a glazed ware, characterized by pale yellow clay and a heavy, dark green glaze which is connected with the southern Mesopotamia and Persian Gulf area, is described by Lize Hannestad and has been reported from sites in Gurajat (Junnar, Amreli, Baroda).⁵² The centre of production of this pottery, found in many locations of southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, could be, according to J.-F. Salles who found it on Failaka island, the kingdom of Characene.⁵³

Scattered, still disputed and very limited evidence, in comparison with Sassanian and Roman imports, seem to confirm, with all due caution, the existence of a sea route connecting Parthia/Characene and India, thus integrating the information provided by the texts. Of course these findings would prove only that Mesopotamian goods travelled as far as India, like the Roman imports, and, like the Roman imports, the integration of texts, inscriptions and archaeological data seems to indicate that goods and men crossed the Ocean to and from southern Mesopotamia and India. The Persian Gulf and Characene routes were thus not a mere extension of the main trans-oceanic route. The Mesopotamian traders did not limit themselves to funnelling their goods into the main traffic route, but actively travelled and traded in both directions.

All the texts taken into account make reference to some kind of political authority responsible for the promotion of trade activity in the centres and harbours of

southern Mesopotamia. The *Periplus* mentions the capital city of Spasinou Charax and alludes to an authority in charge of controlling and regulating the trade activity. A few years later, the Chinese diplomat Gan Ying alludes to a military occupation of the area by the king of Anxi/Parthian. Finally, almost twenty years later, Trajan is welcomed by Attambelos, Characene's local ruler, who clearly had deserted the side of the Great King after hearing of the successes of the Roman legions.

From the last years of the second century BCE, as attested by cuneiform documents from Babylon and by Parthian coin emissions in Seleucia on the Tigris, the Arsacids were able to establish a firm rule over the whole of Mesopotamia, including Mesenian harbours.⁵⁴ Are these references to the Great King's direct authority or to the authority of a vassal king dependent on him, enough to put into discussion the stereotyped idea of the Parthians as a mainly continental superpower, that is, central Asiatic horse-riders and therefore not skilled in seafaring or the naval trade? In other words, can we say the Parthians were directly involved in the Indian Ocean trade? The answer to the question is not easy and lies at the very nature of the Parthian rule and on the relationship between Arsacid central power and Characene royal authority.

Since its very beginning, the Parthian kingdom was characterised by a strongly decentralised nature. The Arsacid monarchs conferred their royal prerogatives on local political subjects which were strongly rooted in the territory, in order to assure control of the most important districts. In the domains under the Great King's authority, there were thus local dynasties, endowed with an independent political life and administrative organisation. These "client" kings were bound by the oath of allegiance they made to the Parthian king. Nonetheless, their high degree of autonomy allowed them to develop an individual policy concerning both the international situation and the exploitation of the territorial sources and the trade possibilities their lands offered.⁵⁵

The Characene kingdom, or Mesene, constitutes the better known among these ancient principalities, a "client" monarchy that could date its origins back in time until the last period of Seleucid rule. Its capital and most important city was Spasinou Charax, named after Hyspaosines, a Seleucid governor, self-proclaimed king and founder of the local dynasty.⁵⁶ The same seafaring skills that the Arsacids lacked was the strength of the Characenes, once the Parthians made themselves the new masters of the area. Heir to the Seleucid naval organisation in the Persian Gulf, Hyspaosines had already been able to exert effective control over the sea routes connecting Mesopotamia with the Gulf in the second century BCE, as attested by a Greek inscription from Bahrain.⁵⁷

The Arsacid Great Kings soon understood that such commercial activity could represent a chance for huge income. Thus, instead of directly occupying Characene, the Parthians acknowledged as king of Characene, Apodakos, Hyspaosine's son and successor. He maintained his father's throne as a vassal monarch of the Parthian Great King, with the right to mint his own coins. This is the royal authority the *Periplus* is referring to: a semi-independent kingdom, able to exert a thalassocracy on the Gulf and enjoying significant autonomy, but, nonetheless, perceived of as a direct expression of the Parthian/"Persian" rule by the anonymous author.

A few decades later, according to Gan Ying's report, it seems that the Parthian Great King's control over the country had been enforced. A passage in the *Hou Hanshou* states: "Later on, Anxi (the Arsacid kingdom) conquered, and subjugated Tiaozi (Characene). They have, in fact, installed a Senior General there to supervise all the small towns."⁵⁸ The Chinese report appears to record a precise political situation. The Arsacids seem to have militarily occupied the kingdom, transforming Characene into a Parthian satrapy and nominating an Army official as responsible for the points of major economic interest: the cities and river harbours. The reasons why the Parthian leadership intervened are not clear. It was probably part of Great King Vologases I's policy aimed at reaffirming his authority over all his vassal monarchs (continued by his son Pacoros II). What seems clear is that this solution was temporary: a few years later in fact the local Royal rule was restored.⁵⁹

The Characenean dynasty was not disposed to renounce its autonomist prerogatives, as shown by the episode relating to Trajan, and narrated by Cassius Dio. For Attambelos VII, king in Characene since 113/14 CE, the authority of the Roman Emperor who soon or later would have come back to his distant capital would be preferable than that of the much closer Arsacids. The latter, in fact, for two centuries had been trying to increase their power by enforcing their influence on the government of the most wealthy and important among their "client" kingdoms, Characene.

Thus Attambelos, hearing that Trajan was approaching Mesene with an army and a fleet, without much ado went to his kingdom's northern borders to greet Trajan and offer him submission. But the failure of the invasion and Trajan's death brought about Attambelos' political ruin and the ruin of the Characene local dynasty as well. The Parthians solved the Characenean problem once and for all by putting a member of the Arsacid dynasty on the throne and bringing to an end the Hyspaosinid line of succession.⁶⁰ The next mention of Characenean royalty occurs fourteen years after Trajan's wars (131 CE) in an inscription mentioning a king named Mithridates, the first king of Characene bearing an Iranic Arsacid name.

This, along with other texts, can be taken into consideration in order to shed light on Mithridates' rule and clarify the nature of the tighter control the Arsacids now exerted on the small kingdom and on its harbours and routes after the local dynasty's demise. The mentioned inscription in Palmyrene Aramaic was found in the agora of the Roman caravan city, well beyond both Characene and Parthian borders:

[This is the image of] Yarhai, son of Nebuzabad, grandson of Šammallath, son of Aqqadam, citizen of Hadriane Palmyra, satrap of the Thilouanoi for the king Meherdates of Spasinou Charax. The merchants of Spasinou Charax in his honour, in the year 442 (131 CE), in the month of Xandios (April).⁶¹

Yarhai, son of Nebuzabad, was a citizen of Palmyra, thus a subject of the Roman Empire. He was certainly a pre-eminent figure within the circle of merchants operating in the Mesenian capital city (Spasinou Charax). The presence of

Palmyrene merchants and the existence of a network of Palmyrene trade colonies in Parthian territory and in the harbours of Characene was well-known since the mid-first century CE and had grown in parallel with the increase in the commercial relevance of the Syrian oasis. What differentiates this text from the other so-called “caravan inscriptions” is the reference to the specific office held by Yahrai in the new king’s administration as governor of the district of Tylos, that is to say the present-day island of Bahrain, long a possession of the Characene kings.

Mithridates came to power after many decades of Mesenian independence and struggle to affirm their political identity. He was imposed by a foreign Great King who had punished the traditional dynasty with suppression for its betrayal. It seems understandable that he tried to establish a new state administration, appointing men who proved themselves essential for the implementation of his policy, like Yarhai, to positions of responsibility. He appointed as governor of Tylos, a district vital to the Persian Gulf’s merchant system, one of the leaders of the Palmyrene merchant community whose interests were closely connected with the perfect functioning of the trade routes. In order to maintain the efficiency of the Gulf routes, and assuring the income provided by the taxation of the goods for the Arsacids, the political responsibility over commercial areas was conferred to those people who could benefit from the efficiency of the merchant organisation more than anyone else: the Palmyrenes.

Another interesting element is provided by Mithridates’ royal titulature as it appears on his independent coinage, attested from 143/4 CE: Meredates, son of Pacoros, King of Kings, king of the Ommanes. This proves that King Mithridates was a member of the Arsacid dynasty, son of the former Great King Pacoros II (80–110 CE) and brother of the Great King Vologases II.⁶²

Vologases had to appoint a dynamic monarch, open to collaboration with foreigners, ready to understand and exploit the region’s potential, and capable of protecting his lord’s interests in a region where the Arsacid authority could be contested. That man had to be particularly loyal to Vologases and the Arsacid house in order that he would not to abuse the wide political autonomy implied in his role of commercial mediator between Rome and Ctesiphon. He had to be able to exploit the proficiency of the Palmyrene merchants in the most convenient way for the Crown, providing them with all the government support they needed to carry on their business in the most effective way. One of his brothers, Mithridates, was chosen and a real synergy was put into action in consideration of the large income which all the trading partners, Palmyra and the Romans, on one side, the Characeni and Vologases II on the other, could generate.

The titulature shows that that Characene and Palmyrene merchants maintained control over the whole Persian Gulf as far as Ommana, identified as we said, by modern scholars with the complex of sites of ed-Dur, Dibba and Mleiha, in today’s United Arab Emirates, close to the Strait of Hormuz at the point where the Gulf route met the Indian Ocean “highway”. A third inscription proves that the key kingdom of Characene had become so tightly connected with the Arsacid royal house that assuring its control was an indispensable factor in order to be able to establish a firm rule over the whole of Parthia. The famous inscription on the

Heracles' statue from Seleucia on the Tigris adds more detailed information about Mithridates' fate:

In the year of the Greeks 462 (151 CE) the King of Kings Arsaces Vologases, son of Mithridates king, led a military expedition into Mesene against Mithridates king, son of previous ruler Pacorus, and after king Mithridates had been expelled from Mesene, became the ruler of all of Mesene and of this bronze statue of the god Heracles, which he himself transported from Mesene, placed in this Sanctuary of the god Apollo who guards the Bronze Door.⁶³

Mithridates, thanks to his trade hegemony over southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf, his trade policy and his allies, had become powerful and influential. He had at his disposal an efficient commercial organisation. This situation became unsustainable when Vologases III took power in Ctesiphon, beginning a new Arsacid Dynasty (148 CE). For Vologases III, Mithridates was a dangerous rival, a loyal servant of his predecessor. He solved this problem by conquering the vassal kingdom. Mithridates was deposed and Orabzes II, loyal to the new Great King, and possibly a relative, was appointed in Mithridates' place (151 CE).⁶⁴

This fact did not undermine the synergy established with the Palmyrenes.⁶⁵ Under the new king, with his support and protection – which meant with the support and protection of the new Parthian Great King – the Palmyrene merchant expeditions continued to cross the Arsacids' territory, traverse the Gulf routes as far as Ommana and beyond, spreading Mesopotamian and western goods as far as India. The Characene authorities enjoyed different levels of autonomy from the central Arsacid power. Various forms of direct and indirect control were adopted by the Arsacids, which always resulted in granting the local authorities the necessary independence to manage the long-distance trade. Characene kings, first alone and later in collaboration with their skilled Palmyrene trading partners, actively took part in the Indian Ocean trade, thanks to the powers granted by the Arsacids and the strong bond with Parthian authorities. In the second century CE, with direct Arsacid control of the kingdom, the Characene trade activity became a Parthian trade activity, and the Palmyrene collaboration with Characene, a collaboration with the Arsacids. This was a synergy that only a major conflict could interrupt.

In 157 CE, only four years before the ferocious Parthian invasion of the Roman province of Syria, the Palmyrenes honoured Marcus Ulpius Yarhai, a Roman citizen and caravan prince of Palmyra for the role played in supporting their Indian Ocean trade through the harbours of Characene, now firmly controlled by the Arsacids, a people once considered only “horse riders from central Asia”.⁶⁶

Notes

1 Vell. Pat. II.101.

2 Suet. *Tib.* 12.2; Cass. Dio, 55.10.18–19; Oros. *Adv. Pag.* 7.3.4; Täubler (1904): 46–49; Ziegler (1964): 53–54; Zetzel (1970): 259–266; Romer (1974): 171–173; Angeli Bertinelli (1979): 52; Schippmann (1980): 48–49; Dąbrowa (1983): 43–44; Campbell

- (1993): 224–225; Greatrex (2007): 151–153; Luther (2010): 103–127; Edwell (2013): 201; Overtoom (2016): 137–156.
- 3 Gregoratti (2015a): 731.
 - 4 Partly due to the still fundamental role played by the Classical sources concerning our knowledge of Parthian history and society: for example Debevoise (1938); Verstandig (2001).
 - 5 Wiesehöfer (1998).
 - 6 Gregoratti (2017a).
 - 7 Lerouge (2007).
 - 8 On this idea Gregoratti (2012a); Gregoratti (2012b); Gregoratti (2016a).
 - 9 Seland (2008); Seland (2013).
 - 10 A term with a strong cultural reference – De Jong (2013). Following the parallel investigations and use of the term in Obolensky (1971) concerning Byzantine influence, Fowden (1993) on Arab states, Rapp (2014) who speaks more in general of an “Iranian Commonwealth” of which the Parthian could be part.
 - 11 A possible term that can be used along with “empire” to better highlight the differences with the European ancient empire par excellence: the Roman one. Not to be confused with the later Sasanian-Parthian confederacy, Pourshariati (2008).
 - 12 Wheeler, Gosh and Deva (1946); Wheeler (1955); Begley (1983); Begley (1993); Begley (1996); Begley (2004); Seland (2014).
 - 13 Seland (2011).
 - 14 Autiero (2015): 117–118.
 - 15 For the site of Berenike, see all excavation reports from 1994 to 2001 and from 2008–09 seasons onwards; Tomber (2000): 624–631; Wendrich et al. (2003); Tomber (2008): 74–75; Sidebotham (2011); Sidebotham and Zych (2012); Krishnan and Ballavally (2015): 256–257. For Myos Hormos see Peacock and Blue (2006); Blue and Peacock (2011). See also Schenk (2015): 168; Autiero (2015): 116–117.
 - 16 Casson (1990).
 - 17 Casson (1989).
 - 18 Raschke (1978): 978–981, nn. 1324–1346; Salles (1993); Salles (1995); Casevitz (1996); Salles (2012).
 - 19 On the literary tradition and the cultural milieu which produced the *Periplus* see De Romanis (2016).
 - 20 Seland (2008); Seland (2013).
 - 21 Gregoratti (2017a): 95–98; Gregoratti (2017b): 138–141.
 - 22 Nodelman (1960); Schuol (2000); Gregoratti (2011); Celentano (2016a).
 - 23 *Periplus* 35–36.
 - 24 Strab. 16.1.5, 16; Plin. *HN* 6.122; Flav. Joseph. *Ant. Iud.* 18.372–373; App., *Syr.* 57; Amm. Marc. 23.6.23; On the city under Parthian rule see Gregoratti (2012c).
 - 25 Perhaps the *Apollonia* of Ammianus Marcellinus (23.6.23); Yon 2016: 127–128.
 - 26 Rougè (1987).
 - 27 Plin. *HN* 6.140, 145, 148; Arr. *Parth.* frgm. 16; *69 = FGhR, 156, F 47; Strab. 2.1.26; 16.3.2, 4; Ptol. 5.20.5–6; Amm. Marc. 23.6.11; Yon (2016): 128–130; Celentano (2016b): 37–38.
 - 28 Plin. *HN* 6.149–152; Potts (1990): 308–309; Salles (1992): 92–94; Schuol (2000): 336–338.
 - 29 Haerinck (2003): 199; Jasim and Yousif (2014).
 - 30 Salles (1988): 89–91, 95–98; Potts (1990): 302–303.
 - 31 Boucharlat and Mouton (1993); Boucharlat and Mouton (1994); Jasim (2001).
 - 32 Haerinck (1998); Haerinck (2003); Gregoratti (2011): 216.
 - 33 Haerinck (1998): 294–296; Callot (2004): 82–83; Potts (2009): 42; Potts (2010): 69.
 - 34 Cass. Dio 68.17, 28; Arr. *Parth.*, frgmm., 16; *69–*70; Schuol (2000): 345–346; Gregoratti (2011): 219–220; Gregoratti (2017a): 100–101.
 - 35 Cass. Dio 68.29.1.

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- 36 Guey (1937): 19–26; Lepper (1948): 158–204.
- 37 Chavannes (1906): 216–245; Chavannes (1907): 177–178; Grosso (1966): 157–161; Choïsnel (2004): 147–149, 152–153; Gregoratti (2012d); Gregoratti (2014): 59–62; Gregoratti (2017b): 131–132.
- 38 Grosso (1966): 166; Posch (1998): 361.
- 39 In later works, the Chinese chroniclers indicate that they are aware of the trade between Rome and Parthia and of the large profits involved: *Jinshu*, cap. 97. 2544; *Sanguozhi*, cap. 30. 860–862; Choïsnel (2004): 153–154; Hackl, Jacobs and Weber (2010): III, 498–500.
- 40 Gregoratti (2012d): 113–114; Gregoratti (2017a): 99–100.
- 41 *Hou Hanshu*, chap. 88. 2918.
- 42 Leslie and Gardiner (1982).
- 43 *Hou Hanshu*, chap. 88. 2919; *Sanguozhi*, 30. 861, where a trade connection between Rome and the Parthian states (Characene) is mentioned; *Hou Hanji*, 15. 127b; Hackl, Jacobs and Weber (2010): III, 501, 506, 509.
- 44 *IP*, 34 = PAT 1584; *Inv.*, X, 7 = IGLSyr. XVII/1, 240; *Inv.*, X, 40 = PAT 1376 = IGLSyr. XVII/1, 241 (81 AD); *Inv.*, X, 127 = PAT 1421 = IGLSyr. XVII/1, 225 (86 AD); IGLSyr. XVII/1, 242 (112 AD); *Inv.*, X, 114 = PAT 1414 IGLSyr. XVII/1, 227; *Inv.*, X, 112 = PAT 1412 = IGLSyr. XVII/1, 246 (140 AD); *Inv.*, IX, 14 = PAT 262 = IGLSyr. XVII/1, 25 (142 AD); *Inv.*, X, 124 = PAT 1419 = IGLSyr. XVII/1, 247 (150 AD); Rostovtzeff 1932; Seyrig 1941, n. 21–22, 252–258; Schlumberger (1961); Teixidor (1984); Gawlikowski (1983); Gawlikowski (1996); Gregoratti (2010): 25–32; Gregoratti (2015c); Gregoratti (2016b): 535–536; Seland (2016).
- 45 “This is the statue of Marcus Ulpius Yarhai, son of Hairan, grandson of Abgar, friend of the homeland. The merchants coming up from Scythia (the port of Barbarikon, north-east India) in the ship of Honainu, son of Haddudan, grandson of . . . who eagerly assisted and protected them, set this up in his honour in the month of Dystros in the 468th year (157 CE).” *Inv.*, X, 96 = PAT 1403 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 250 (157 CE); may be a second fragment mentioning Scythia is connected with Iarhai *Inv.*, X, 91 + 95 = PAT 2763 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 250 (157 CE?); Cantineau (1933): 187–188; Delplace (2003): 158–167; Other references to the same “Caravan Lord” and his family: *Inv.*, X, 81 = PAT 1397 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 209 (135 CE); PAT 274 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 313 (155 CE); *Inv.*, X, 111 = PAT 1411 (156 CE); *Inv.*, X, 128 = PAT 1422 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 202 (157 CE); *Inv.*, X, 87–88 = PAT 306 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 248 (157 CE); *Inv.*, X, 90 = PAT 1399 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 249 (157 CE); *Inv.*, X, 77 = PAT 1395 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 255 (157 CE); *Inv.*, X, 78 = PAT 1396 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 256 (157/158 CE); *Inv.*, X, 89 = PAT 307; *Inv.*, X, 107 = PAT 1409 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 251 (159 CE); Yon (1998): 153–160; Yon (2002): 99–102, 111–114, 145–147, 205–206; Gregoratti (2015b): 56–57; Gregoratti (2016b): 535.
- 46 Rutten (2007); Schenk (2007): 65–67.
- 47 Mainly pottery so far. In comparison with Roman findings, the presence of Parthian coins in India and Sri Lanka is incredibly scarce. From southern India, a coin from Elymais and one from the city of Seleucia on the Tigris (Mitchiner (2003): 16–17). Some modern forgeries of Arsacid coins have been reported for Sri Lanka – Walburg (2008): 183–188.
- 48 Tomber (2007): 974, 977–980; Tomber (2008): 152–170; Krishnan and Ballavally (2015): 245.
- 49 Schenk (2007): 62, 70–78; Schenk (2014): 95, 98; Krishnan and Ballavally (2015): 246; Schenk and Weisshaar (2016): 468–471; Mesopotamia: Seleucia on the Tigris, Uruk-Warka, Susa, Larsa and Dura Europos. Persian Gulf: Bahrain Island, Failaka Island, and ed-Dur-Mleiha-Dibba. South Arabia: Qana, Samad and Khor Rori.
- 50 Coningham (1999): 19; Coningham (2002): 102; Coningham (2006): 94, 107; Schenk (2007): 58; Tomber (2007): 981; Krishnan and Ballavally (2015): 243.
- 51 Kennet (2009); Cherian (2011): 139.

- 52 For a description of BI-ware see Hannestad (1983): 14, 78. For finds of this ware at sites in Gujarat see Krishnan and Ballavally (2015): 241–243.
- 53 Salles (1990).
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- 55 Gregoratti (2017a).
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- 57 Kosmin (2013).
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- 59 Gregoratti (2011), 219–220; Gregoratti (2012d): 112–113; Gregoratti (2014): 61; Gregoratti (2017a): 100.
- 60 Bernard (1990): 37; Potter (1991): 281–283; Schuol (2000): 345–348; Gregoratti (2011): 219.
- 61 *Inv. X*, 38; = PAT 1374; Seyrig (1941): n. 21bis, 253–255; Teixidor (1984): 58–59; Gawlikowski (1996): 141; Schuol (2000): 56–57; Gregoratti (2010): 32–33; Gregoratti (2011): 220–223; Celentano (2016b): 38–41.
- 62 Potts (1988): 146–149; Potts (1990): 324–327; Schuol (2000): 352; Gregoratti (2011): 221; Gregoratti (2017a): 100–101.
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- 64 Nodelman (1960): 114–115; Bernard (1990): 40–41; Schuol (2000): 356–362; Gregoratti (2011): 224.
- 65 See n. 46 and *Inv. X*, 29 = PAT 1373 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 196 (161 d.C.); Seyrig (1941): n. 24, 263.
- 66 *Inv. X*, 96 = PAT 1403 = IGLSyr., XVII/1, 250; see n. 46.

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