

The need for a *third space*, geographical and political spaces at the periphery of the Parthian and Roman empires: some preliminary remarks

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Abstract

A proposal for a new approach to the study of the Roman-Parthian frontier is presented. Since the 1st century BC the two large empires of Rome and Parthia had faced each other for supremacy in western Asia. Along the frontier, from the Persian Gulf to the Caucasus, a series of minor, formally independent political subjects, kingdoms and autonomous cities existed. There the people of the frontier developed peculiar social and political systems. There different cultural elements met and mixed. There the frontiersmen met and established contacts with authorities officially connected with the other empire. Through focusing on similar characteristics shared by these political entities, both Roman and Parthian, a sort of *third space* will be individuated, where the political belonging will remain in the background. The new approach consists in focusing primarily on these middle-ground states as a micro-world in itself. The investigation of this contact region will be instrumental in improving the dialogue between different disciplines of historical research.

Introduction

This contribution aims to present, through a series of notes, some ideas concerning a new approach¹ to a well-known topic: the eastern Roman frontier and the relationship between Rome and the Parthian empire. These notes constitute a sort of methodological summary, or better an attempt to give shape to questions, doubts and problems that arose during the several years of past and during present research, in order to establish a starting point and a theoretical guideline for future work.

A modern frontier

The author of the present contribution has spent some years investigating the Arsacid empire, particularly the semi-autonomous political realities within its borders and also similar entities of the Roman Near East. This gave him the chance to look at the frontier from both points of view and with a different ‘panorama’ in the background. These years of parallel work on Parthia, the Roman frontier zone

1. The author is, of course, well aware of Michael Sommer’s innovative work published in *Roms orientalische Step-pengrenzen* (Sommer 2005/2018) concerning the reality of the frontier and in particular the Romanization of the frontier regions. Sommer’s work has been a source of inspiration for my whole research on frontier realities for his innovative attempt to connect cultural elements on both banks of the river. Sommer borrows from anthropological studies the concept of ‘third space’ and uses it along with other concepts like ‘globalization’ and ‘creolization’ to investigate the interaction between Greek, Roman and Oriental cultural elements mainly in Palmyra, Dura-Europos, Hatra and Osrhoene (Sommer 2005, 27-28; 2018, 28-30). I decided to use the same expression, as unfortunately not so many different expressions exist to define what is de facto an alternative space, but in order to indicate something fundamentally different: a real geopolitical space between the two empires, not directly connected with the problems of Romanization.

and the eastern Roman Empire made evident to the author of the present contribution the fact that the border between Roman provinces and Parthia, interpreted by ancient authors as the marking line between two different and incompatible worlds, is still present in modern scholarship. Iranian studies and Classical history studies, apart from a few exceptions tend to remain two separate and distant disciplines, two detached and far away worlds unable to communicate or to establish any long-lasting form of exchange, in contrast to what the ancient men of Rome and Parthia themselves managed to do in the past.

In ancient times, in fact, it was the men of the frontier, and the Palmyrenes are among the best-known cases of this,² who actively sought a dialogue with their neighbours and managed to build bridges across the border. Therefore it is the opinion of the author that the 'frontier', that is, the people who lived close to it and the political structures they created, can still offer a useful contribution in order to overcome modern scholarly borders. The study of these realities projected beyond the border, in particular of those that, like Palmyra, are rich in local epigraphical and archaeological sources, suggests a different approach to the study of the frontier and the political entities that arose close to it.

In this regard the work of present and future scholars dealing with the Roman-Parthian or, more generally, the Roman-Iranian frontier can be fundamental.³ Unlike their colleagues who, as required by their field of research, tend to divert their attention from the border regions to focus on the core of the ancient states, the *specialists of the frontier* are well aware of the importance for their research of keeping an eye on both worlds, Iran and Rome: no serious investigation involving a frontier situation can be properly achieved without a good knowledge of what took place beyond the border.

More relevantly, frontier scholars can use this knowledge to spot similarities and points of contact, not to mention any form of exchange, both cultural and material, across the border. Finding similarities and contacts between realities belonging to different cultural and political spheres, which had strong ties with the centres of their respective structures of power and were geographically close despite being separated by a border, could be the starting point of a new approach to the subject. This approach should start from the regional level establishing connections between local frontier realities with the purpose of gradually enlarging the perspective both eastwards and westwards to spot connections between macrostates. Such an approach would be extremely useful for bringing closer two apparently distant worlds and promoting interdisciplinary dialogue.

Building on the work of scholars who have dealt with the area of the 'desert frontier' (or *Steppengrenze*, in the words of the important study by Michael Sommer⁴), the main innovative idea consists in abandoning the distinction between Roman and Parthian/Iranian peripheries in the first phases of the investigation in favour of an approach that considers all minor political frontier subjects as a whole no matter their political appartenance.

2. Gregoratti 2010.

3. Since Millar's cornerstone monograph (Millar 1993), Roman Near East and Eastern Frontier studies have gained the status they deserve in Roman history and played a role that is respectful of the cultural and political complexity of the region. Many followed Millar's steps, namely Butcher, Edwell, Dirven, Kaizer, Sartre and several others, to mention only the authors of major works. In many cases the extreme complexity of the Roman Near East rendered it almost impossible to engage in depth with the comparative complexity of the Parthian empire, aggravated by the lack of local sources. Thus in most cases the Arsacid empire appears to be a mere 'supporting actor' in Roman foreign policy or comes partly into play only when it constitutes a crucial element of the specific subject of investigation as in the works by Kaizer (Kaizer 2016) and Dirven (Dirven 1999), among others, on Dura or Dirven (Dirven 2013) on Hatra.

4. Sommer 2005; 2018. Sommer's monograph constitutes the first investigation concerning different cultural realities across the border. His cultural research is aimed at spotting similarities among a selection of frontier subjects (Dura, Palmyra, Hatra and Osrhoene) independently from the empire they actually belonged to.

The third space

This approach will lead to individuating a sort of geopolitical ‘third’ space, including the ‘client states’ of both empires struggling for supremacy in the East, i.e. Rome and Parthia, a space distinct, but not detached from the two empires.

The investigation of the *third space* will take into account the entire political and social setting of these peripheral political entities, taking into consideration the nomadic element, both inside and outside the society, an element shared by the *desert frontier* realities that have enjoyed most of the attention so far, as only one feature amongst the many particular ones that determined the grant of autonomous powers to local authorities.

Other, no less relevant elements contribute to the particularity of these frontier societies. Therefore it will be necessary to investigate the relations between local authority and central power both within the Roman and the Arsacid borders. How was Roman and Parthian presence (military or civilian) organized in these peripheral territories and which geographical and political spaces did it occupy? Which officers were in charge of the soldiers or of the garrison, if there was one? What were they supposed to accomplish in terms of surveillance and taxation? How was the *central* presence connected with the local political systems and did it interfere with local authorities’ specific jurisdiction or particular expertise? Can we detect a shift in responsibility over time, from local authorities to a central power? Comparison with client states like Armenia, Judaea and Caucasian Iberia, but also Characene, can help to verify common patterns of intervention by the imperial authority.

A second set of questions concerns the role of the nomadic population in the formation of frontier societies. Studies dealing with the Arab element in the Near East have tried to explain the relationship between central powers and nomads. Remaining in the frame of the local political space, attention must focus on the connections between settled and nomadic Arabs in the light of the dimorphic conception of societies as postulated by M.B. Rowton.⁵ What connected urban space with the surrounding territory? In what way could local authorities grant control over this territory? Local politicians were obliged to deal sensitively with the Arab tribes in order to ensure an effective control over the chieftains and their territories. Civic elites exploited common Arab origins to find an agreement with nomads, a responsibility often conferred on those town clans sharing an affinity with them. They operated in between the two worlds, with their political power deriving both from their institutional role and from their reputation or *charismatische Herrschaft* achieved among the nomads.⁶

As is evident from the above series of questions, the distinction between Parthia and Rome should remain in the background. The key idea of the proposed new approach is in fact to deal primarily with local political entities and with their similarities and differences independently from their belonging to one or other of the two big empires.

It does not seem so easy to overcome the need to ascribe the frontier political realities to one or other of the two empires. The literary sources in fact tend to take the ‘big division’ between the Roman and Parthian worlds for granted. Epigraphy and archaeology, the local ‘frontier’ sources, on the other hand, speak a different language and open alternative perspectives. Only proper integration of literary, epigraphic (Greek, Latin, Aramaic) and archaeological sources can provide answers to some of the important questions posed and help to establish an interdisciplinary dialogue.

The dichotomy between literary and local sources is evident. In a well-known passage, in fact, Velleius Paterculus says:

‘This spectacle of the Roman army arrayed on one side, the Parthian on the other, while these

5. Rowton 1973a; 1973b; 1976a; 1976b.

6. Aggoula 1995; Briquel-Chatonnet 1995; Hauser 1998; Macdonald 2015 with bibliography; Segal 1986; Teixidor 1987.

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.⁷

In these words the young enthusiastic military tribune described the meeting (of which he was an eyewitness) between Augustus' grandson and adopted son Gaius Caesar and the Parthian Great King Phraates V at the Euphrates in AD 2. Under his eyes the delegates of the two rival powers, Rome and the Parthian Empire, divided the whole known world. They met on an island in the Euphrates river, as the limit of the respective spheres of their political influence.⁸ The point of view of Velleius, who later became the chronicler of these historical events, reflects the imagination of a Roman citizen coming from the heart of the Empire: a simple line drawn on a map, in accordance with the will of two monarchs, was able to distinguish what was Roman and what was not, to separate friend from stranger, an ally of Rome from *the other*—a point of view sometimes shared by modern scholarship as well.

In spite of later diplomatic resolutions aimed at reaffirming the original agreements, such a conception of the frontier space could not be spread beyond the political milieu of the far away capital. To the *frontier* men such a partition must surely have seemed unnatural. Over the centuries these populations had gradually developed a transversal network of commercial relations across the River Euphrates, which consolidated regardless of the geopolitical situation, and which remained basically unaffected by the settling of the new political frontier through the joint decision of two powerful rival emperors.⁹

For the population of these Syrian and Mesopotamian frontier lands, 'the other', stereotyped by imperial ideology and propaganda, was an advantage. Shared economic goals and common ethno-religious characteristics made this 'other' a very suitable trade partner for the people living inside Roman and Parthian borders.

The ideal organization as conceived by the two monarchs had to deal with the actual political and economic reality at the peripheries of their empires. In those areas far away from the main centres of political authority, environmental conditions rendered social life and political development more difficult. For the same reasons the control of land and of trade in the steppe areas proved extremely difficult for both Rome and the Parthian capital Ctesiphon. As a consequence, new political entities appeared, such as Palmyra, Edessa and Hatra, which all gained rather extraordinary self-governmental prerogatives.¹⁰ Places such as these formed, in fact, a peculiar geopolitical space different from the macro-regional partition as described above: in the world of such places, an affiliation to either of the two main macrosystems was a subordinate element in comparison with the safeguard of the economic and diplomatic relationships necessary for their survival.

The increasing importance of the caravan trade, originating in the exponentially growing demand for Oriental goods in the Roman Empire, went together with the rapidly deteriorating political situation caused by the collapse of the Seleucid kingdom. Merchants' expeditions were forced to cross vast desert areas that came gradually under the control of Arab sheikhs, chiefs of the nomadic tribes. They wielded their power through robbery and the imposition of tributes on merchant caravans. Sums were paid in exchange for protection and for permission to cross tribal territories as well as to exploit their water supply points.¹¹

At the beginning of a gradual process of sedentarization in Osrhoene, in the Palmyrene region and later in upper Mesopotamia, that is, on both sides of the frontier, eminent and influential Arab

7. *Quod spectaculum stantis ex diverso hinc Romani, illinc Parthorum exercitus, cum duo inter se eminentissima imperiorum et hominum coirent capita ... mihi visere contigit*: Vell. Pat. 2, 101. 2-3.

8. Cass. Dio, 55, 10. 18-19; Suet., *Tib.*, 12. 2; Dąbrowa 1983, 43-44; Greatrex 2007, 151-153; Schippmann 1980, 48-49.

9. From the enormous bibliography concerning trans-border contacts I mention only the recent Sommer 2018, with its exhaustive bibliography, and the titles mentioned in Gregoratti 2010, Gregoratti 2011, Gregoratti 2015 and Gregoratti 2016.

10. Sommer, 2005; 2018.

11. Strabo, 16, 1. 27. Sommer 2018, 205-226 with bibliography.

leaders found it more useful to find an agreement with settled merchant communities, establishing at the same time an effective control over nomadic clans and their territories.

It is generally thought that this process of internal organization triggered by the dialogue with the trade subjects and the sedentary communities resulted in the foundation of more complex social subjects. Very soon the passive exploitation of the caravan trade was abandoned in favour of the offering of services and structures that actively supported the movement of men and goods.¹²

Thus nomadic groups developed into settled societies, determining the formation of important economic centres along the trade routes. In a few decades simple supply points placed on a trade route were thus able to develop into well-structured cities: cities like Palmyra, but also like Hatra.

In the first half of the 2nd century AD this process of sedentarization in the Palmyrene had long been concluded. Palmyra was a city now able to provide a vast range of services in relation to long-distance trade.¹³ The organization of the commercial expeditions, the choice of the caravan leaders (the 'synodiarchs') and the itineraries, and the supply of the necessary equipment and the armed escort were activities in which the experience of the Palmyrenes soon became irreplaceable. More relevantly, along the routes they set up a system of territorial control, which enabled them to watch over the land and protect the caravans from any possible nomadic threat.

The inscriptions indicated that they also negotiated with the nomad chieftains and entered into agreements with them, buying their cooperation and, where necessary, forcing them into obedience.¹⁴ The economic power of Palmyra could not exist without the firm control of the extra-urban territory granted by very few powerful family leaders: the well-known *caravan protectors*.¹⁵

Among the most well known, thanks to a few detailed inscriptions, is the famous Soados bar Bo-liades.¹⁶ In 132 AD, when his name appears for the first time in the epigraphic record, he was already a powerful man.¹⁷

His activity and influence seem to have been exerted in the Palmyrene *comptoir*, or commercial colony, of Vologesia, a Parthian merchant centre founded by the Great King Vologases I in the second half of the 1st century AD in central Mesopotamia, far beyond the Roman border and the limits of the area controlled by Palmyra. There he appears to have enjoyed a prominent authority both for the merchants who lived there and for his fellow citizens travelling to Mesopotamia with the caravans.

In an inscription drawn up in 144 AD and found in the sanctuary of Allat in Palmyra, it is explicitly stated that Soados had at his disposal a military force and the power to use it in order to ensure the safety of the commercial expedition.¹⁸ In his later inscription (144/5 AD) the power Soados exerts is explicitly referred to with the term *dynasteia*.¹⁹ It seems clear that Soados' power/*dynasteia* implied a strong control over a portion of desert steppe and its inhabitants between Palmyra and Parthian Mesopotamia. Soados was a businessman, the chief of a commercial colony and also a military leader.

Similar phenomena of specific figures in charge of territorial control in peripheral areas can be found among political subjects whose origins and development were analogous to the Palmyrene, but

12. Seland 2014; Sommer 2018, 205-226 with bibliography; Will 1957.

13. Yon 2002, 99-118.

14. As attested, for example, in the Soados inscription from the Allat temple (144 AD). Kaizer 2002, 62-64.

15. Gregoratti 2015; Will, 1957.

16. *Inv.*, 10,114 ; PAT 1062. *Mouterde and Poidebard* 1931, 101-115; Schlumberger 1961, 256-260; Seyrig 1941, n. 22, 255-258; Teixidor 1984, 47.

17. IGLSyr., 17.1,150 = PAT 197; Dunant 1971, n. 45; Gawlikowski 1973, 29-30; Gregoratti 2015; Gregoratti 2016, 531-532; Kaizer 2002, 60-62; *Teixidor* 1979, 36-39.

18. IGLSyr., 17.1, 127; Kaizer 2002, 62-64; Millar 1998, 133.

19. PAT 1062; Andrade 2012; Gregoratti 2015; Kaizer, 2002, 63-64 and 150-151; *Mouterde and Poidebard*, 1931, 101-115.

placed on the Parthian side of the border. In those same years, close to the eastern borders of the Osrhoenian kingdom, the existence of a *šlyt' d' rb* is attested in upper Parthian Mesopotamia: probably a sort of 'governor of Arabia'.²⁰

The beginning of the Osrhoene kingdom is marked by the settlement of the *Orrhoei* Arabs mentioned by Pliny in the territory of Edessa, a city founded by the Seleucids.²¹ After the collapse of the Hellenistic kingdom a process of gradual sedentarization also began here. This brought about the rise of those chiefs whose authority was acknowledged by all other clans. In Osrhoene this role was assumed by the Abgarid dynasty, which promoted the development towards more complex forms of government.²²

The *mary'*, or lords, of Edessa were responsible on behalf of the Parthian Great King for a territory at the westernmost periphery of the Arsacid kingdom facing Rome's empire at Seleucia Zeugma, the most important crossing point on the Euphrates. From there several routes departed. They ran eastwards crossing Osrhoene and northern Mesopotamia. As in the Palmyrene, Edessa was at the centre of a region involved in intense commercial traffic, but also populated by many Arab tribes. Each political power interested in controlling the trade and traffic would have to deal with these Arabian tribes, imposing its rule by force, or most probably through diplomacy and donatives, in order to guarantee the safety of the trading expeditions.²³

An example of such effort is provided by the epigraphic *corpus* from the site of Sumatar Hara-besi, 50 kilometres south-east of Edessa, in the Tektek mountains, a sort of natural boundary between the Osrhoene plain and the nomad lands. The inscriptions were carved on the rock next to a religious site at the very periphery of the Abgarid kingdom—probably an important halting point along the transhumance routes of the nomads. The inscriptions there make explicit reference to the Edessene court and its officers.²⁴

In several different texts no fewer than four different persons are described as commander of *'rb*, that is, the 'governor of Arabia'. According to the information provided by the texts, in the middle of the 2nd century AD at the eastern periphery of Osrhoene a detailed administrative system existed. Civic and military officers collaborated with religious authorities in order to ensure the Crown's control over nomadic territory east of the Tektek mountains and its trade routes.

Also here, as in the eastern Palmyrene, an officer was given extraordinary powers in order to enable him to solve the problems with the nomads and ensure the efficiency of the trade activity: the governor of Arabia.

A few decades later, a *rby't dy' rb*, that is, a Steward of Arab, is similarly documented in Hatra, a Parthian vassal kingdom in northern Mesopotamia.²⁵

Like Palmyra and Edessa, Hatra was not an island in the desert. Recent research conducted in the territory between Babylonia, the southernmost slopes of the Jebel Sinjar and the River Khabur shows that Hatra was not an isolated stronghold. It constituted a vital centre in the heart of the region, from which several routes depart in all directions.²⁶

One of the most important routes connected Hatra with Assur, at that time an urban centre in the neighbouring kingdom of Adiabene.²⁷ Two more routes led southwards descending towards Ctesi-

20. Drijvers and Healey 1999, As 36 and Add 3, 104-107, 249-250; Healey 2009, n. 48, 228-230.

21. Plin., *N. H.*, 5. 85-86; 6.25; 117 and 129; Cass. Dio, 78, 12. 24; 78, 18.

22. Edwell 2017; Laude 2003; Ross 2001; Sommer 2010.

23. For example, in Inv. 3, 28 = PAT 294 = IGLSyr. 17.1, 87 (193 AD).

24. Drijvers and Healey 1999, As 36-37, 104-114; Gregoratti 2016, 532-533; Healey 2009, 48-49 and 50-51, 228-235.

25. H 223, 224, 364 and possibly H 133; Aggoula 1991, 109-110, 117, 125 and 132; Dirven 2013; Gregoratti 2016, 533-534; Hauser 1998.

26. Gregoratti 2013, with bibliography; Wilkinson 1993, 548-562.

27. Aggoula 1991, 175.

phon and the core of Parthian Mesopotamia. A lot of roads meant a lot of traffic of men and goods that had to be protected.²⁸

As at Palmyra and in Osroene, the epigraphic texts are able to provide useful information. Several texts closely connected with the monarchs of Hatra mention a dignitary bearing the title of ‘Steward of Arab’. Like the Edessa kings and the Palmyrene families, the monarchs of Hatra had decided to choose among the court nobles and dignitaries a man who, due to his close relationship with the nomadic world and prestige among the Arab tribe chiefs, was more suitable for the task of controlling the territory in the peripheral areas of the kingdom.

Under the Arsacids’ or Rome’s influence, the *Orrhoei* Arabs, the Palmyrenes and the Hatreenes settled in correspondence of key points along the trade routes towards the East, gradually building a complex and structured state. They were forced to face the same problem shared by all Near Eastern sedentary societies in history: how to deal with those nomadic tribes that, unlike them, continued to consider the desert steppe their home, and they all behaved in a very similar way.

This example clearly shows that similar societies that operated in similar environmental conditions and were forced to deal with the same problems, no matter whether they were loyal to the Roman *princeps* or to the Great King, developed similar solutions in the form of specific administrative structures.

Conclusions

These cases show how elements of similarity existed between political subjects lying on different sides of the border. As we have seen, considerable work has been done to analyse the frontier realities as part or neighbours of the Roman or Parthian empire. So far, in fact, these realities have been approached by modern scholars from the centre of the empires. Most times this was done in order to establish how these entities were or were not politically and/or culturally part of one of the macro-states, usually the Roman Empire. Thus Velleius’ ‘big division’ has remained a fundamental criterion in modern scholarship as well.

The existence of common elements shared by different realities of the frontier may suggest a new way of approaching the topic. It would be useful to set aside the traditional centre/periphery point of view, and therefore the Rome/Parthia dichotomy, in order to focus on the frontier realities themselves, that is, on the idea of a dialogue and a close connection between periphery and periphery. The complex of minor political subjects along the Romano-Parthian frontier, i.e. the vassal or client kingdoms or states, should thus be seen as a network of political entities that shared common political and administrative elements. These elements should be the starting point and the main focus for future investigations of political realities, where the presence of the central authority was ‘discreet’ and the belonging to one or the other empire blurred.

This approach had already been suggested by Pliny the Elder in his famous depiction of the caravan city of Palmyra: ‘Palmyra has a destiny of its own between the two mighty empires of Rome and Parthia, and at the first moment of quarrel between them always attracts the attention of both sides’ (tr. H. Rackham).²⁹ In Pliny’s words, Palmyra is seen as existing by itself, independently from the major superpowers of Rome and Parthia.

Pliny’s words show the existence of a third political space, as an alternative to both major systems. This *third space*³⁰ included a series of minor geopolitical entities, which were, of course, politically

28. Altaweel and Hauser 2004.

29. *Palmyra, privata sorte inter duo imperia summa Romanorum Parthorumque est, prima in discordia semper utrimque cura*, Plin., *N.H.* 5.88.

30. A *third space* different, as we saw, from Sommer’s one. The author is aware that this word choice can create confusion, however it is hard to find an alternative expression that can fit equally well the concept presented.

related to the great empires, but also enjoyed enough autonomy to preserve their individuality. Their geographical position and the vital role they played in international trade allowed them to develop a particular system of land control, directly connected with the social processes that were the basis of their formation. Such territorial organization was an addition to the traditional forms of imperial control and was therefore given specific, if not exclusive, geographical and political spaces of activity.

It is a firm conviction of the author that the idea of a *third space*, a space not belonging exclusively to one or other of the two empires, but closely connected to both at the same time, and an investigation along the lines explained above, which focuses primarily on the frontier realities themselves and not on their political and cultural affinity, can provide a good chance to bring into contact the worlds of Rome and Parthia/Iran. This will have the final purpose of promoting a regular dialogue between two fundamental disciplines in the history of the ancient world that have for too long stood watching each other from the opposite banks of the Euphrates like the armies of Rome and Parthia in Velleius' narration.

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