Words of power. Latin inscriptions and the Roman borderland in Mesopotamia (2nd-3rd c. CE)

Rocco Palermo

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Our understanding of the Roman presence in the Near East has extensively improved in the last twenty years. Specific works and more generally discussions have focused their attention on the dynamics that were at the base of the Roman interaction in the territories east of the Euphrates. Yet recently several studies brought the analysis of the archaeological record on this agenda, which naturally added previously undocumented evidence as well as reliable datasets to the table.

The Roman presence in Mesopotamia saw the creation of a multicultural scenario, which is evidently observable through the lens of the spoken (and written) languages of that time. Archaeological datasets, in this sense, may contribute to push forward our understanding of this particular context. Although the interest for the periods subsequent to the fall of the Assyrian Empire suffered of an intellectual gridlock (neither Near Eastern archaeologists, nor classical scholars found those phases particularly appealing respectively due to chronology and geography), in more recent years targeted works started to be centred on the Hellenistic, Parthian-Roman and Sasanian period, also contributing to the study of the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire and the struggle between Parthians and Persia.

From the Trajanic period to the second half of the 4th century CE, the impact of the Roman Empire in North Mesopotamia was rather intense (military architecture, road system, social and economic entanglement) and thus resulting in a precise willing to control and manage the steppe-land that constituted the natural barrier between the secured Euphrates region and the contested space of the Upper Tigris area (fig. 1).

This control was specifically expressed through the very impressive dislocation of military personnel and facilities for such a relative small area. Three legions were deployed for the campaigns of Septimius Severus and forts and small guarding posts existed throughout the zone that went from the modern Syrian-Turkish border to the Euphrates-Khabur confluence. Such an intense control of the area implies that the steppe frontier of the Empire was considered part of the Roman commanded territory rather than a defensive zone (a sort of buffer border)
area to defend the Euphrates). The entire region played therefore the double role of defensive area and starting ramp for the (re)affirmation of a dominion.\(^4\) In this framework probably the political and military authority was also manifested through the spatial management of its limits: roads, military outposts and small villages in-between the major centres constituted the network of the Roman dominion in North Mesopotamia.

Inscriptions and milestones, specifically, help to understand this pattern of control and to recognize the territorial extension in the region through time. It is highly unlikely that Roman troops did not exploit pre-existing tracks, and yet it is the fact that these played a major role in the new political contexts denotes the precise will of Rome of making them vehicles of strategy and propaganda. The following text thus will analyse a particular series of inscriptions discovered in the area: the ones in Latin, the language of power that defined the political, economic and social jurisdiction of Rome even

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in these remote areas, whose importance was certainly perceived by the local population and whose propagandistic role was a relevant one in such a contested space. Quantitatively speaking these inscriptions are not numerous (fig. 2). 5

The preference for the use of other languages (Greek, Aramaic) 6 and the paucity of evidence from the area emphasize even more the numerical discrepancy between the western part of the Roman world and the Syro-Mesopotamian area (fig. 3).

5. I did not include the extremely fragmentary inscriptions from Uçtepe in the Upper Tigris basin in Anatolia (AE 1991, 1582; Lightfoot, Healey 1991, p. 8; Yorulmaz 2014) and Tell Barri, along the wadi Jaghjagh in Syria (Pierobon Benoit, in corso di pubblicazione), as well as a further Latin inscription from Amida (Diyarbakir), which does not fit into the chronological range of this paper (CIL 03, 00213 (p. 973) = CIL 03, 06730).

6. The complexity of the Roman world and particularly of the Near East in regards to the written and spoken languages has been assessed in multiple occasions (Adams 2003; Cotton et al. 2009; Clackson 2015).
Between the steppe and the river: The language of power in Roman Mesopotamia

The geographical area under examination here stretches from the area immediately east of the Upper Syrian Euphrates to the Upper Tigris basin from west to east and from South-East Anatolia (Turkish Tigris) to the southernmost fringes of the dry-farming area south of the Jebel Sinjar (fig. 1). This specific region saw the birth of the complex societies in the 5th/4th millennium and the urban revolution of the 3rd mill. BCE, it was part of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (11th-7th cent. BCE) and was eventually included in the Seleucid territories after the conquest of the region by the hands of Alexander the Great. This particular phase also experienced the formation and development of multiple large territorial empires in the region. Such impact is expressed mostly in terms of processes related to colonization, centralization and urbanization, but also the precise willingness of exploiting the rich and fertile landscape of North Mesopotamia (imperial investments).

The Roman occupation thus, came upon the remains of a very long history that affected the society and culture of the region, generating complex phenomena of interactions between different agents (Greeks, Arabs, Parthians, Romans, etc.), which eventually culminated in the creation of an integrated society balanced between processes of Romanization (admittedly very few) and the persistence of local traditions. Such a globalized tendency is becoming more relevant in the archaeological record and the recent investigations in the area east of the Roman frontier (i.e. the Iraqi Tigris) have already proved the importance of the trade activities in the region, even during the troubled years of military confrontations.

Historically, the very first approach of the Roman Empire in North Mesopotamia is dated to the time of Trajan (early 2nd cent. CE), when Rome briefly occupied the area nowadays shared by North-West Iraq, North-East Syria, and South-East Turkey (fig. 1). It is not clear whether the emperor included the territories beyond the Euphrates within the political system of the Empire, but certainly an initial form of political control was applied to the region. Mesopotamia was then a province under Septimius Severus (very end of the 2nd cent. CE), and then definitely ceded to Sasanians in 363 CE. The narration of this article is framed by these dates.

I would like to start this investigation with a lost evidence, whose existence has only been accounted through an indirect analysis, and which in a way might also provide us with the measure of the evidence concerning the Roman presence in these remote lands. In 1973 David Oates received the information from a British engineer in Iraq of the discovery of a Latin inscription that came into his hands while he was working near Mosul (and supposedly along the western bank of the Tigris) approximately thirty years earlier and then subsequently lost. On the basis of what the engineer recalled, the text mentioned the words: *occuli legionum* (?). Later on David Kennedy (invited by prof. Oates) contributed with a short article about this tremendously scanty evidence. The considerations that follow are mostly based on the Kennedy's analysis, with the addition of some remarks on this specific as well as unique evidence.

According to the British engineer, the stone (a possible borne or milestone) featured a carved

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7. On this topic see Angeli Bertinelli 1979; 2000.
eagle on its upper part and the engraved text in the its lower part. The expression *occuli legionum* (?) seems to be a hapax within the corpus of the Latin inscriptions, as it never occurs in the entire Roman world. Assuming that the engineer misunderstood the text (very likely), a tentative explanation might reside in the misread of *occuli* in place of *specul[...]*, which could refer to the *speculatores*, the military scouts that surveyed the land before the bulk of the army arrives.⁹ Although this is a mere speculation, which evidently lacks fundamental evidence for a more accurate reconstruction, few considerations can be nevertheless proposed.¹⁰ The plural *legionum* is an interesting note, for example. Since the time of Septimius Severus, in fact, at least two legions were deployed in the region (at Nisibis and Singara) and a further *cohors* were added no later than the time of Gordian III. The word may thus refer to these detachments. Yet this hypothesis is also a speculative one as it involves the presence, along the Tigris, of a

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10. Chance that the transcription is erroneous is nevertheless extremely probable.
group of *speculatores* which served two legions, in a politically and militarily delicate region.\(^1\)

As regards to the location of the supposed find, it is hard to say more than what we already know from the indirect witness of the man who reportedly discovered the piece. There is no precise localization and the vague indication “near Mosul”, leaves no further room for accurate analyses. The city, still known as Nineveh (or Ninos), had lost its role in the Roman period even if the location retained a primary position as one of the crossing points over the Tigris (the major one was further north, at Eski Mosul, see below for the case of Seh Qubba; fig. 4).

Such particular position somehow counterbalanced the loss of relevance in the complex political scenario of Roman Mesopotamia.

In this framework, according to David Oates, in fact, Mosul could be identified with the site known as *Ad Flumen Tigrim*,\(^1\) which is one of the halt-stations mentioned in the Peutinger Map after Singara (Sinjar) and *Ad Pontem* (most likely the modern Iraqi centre of Tell Afar) along the route towards the Tigris (fig. 5).\(^1\)

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11. In the context of the confrontations between the Romans and the Sasanians it is interesting to remind here the account of Ammianus (18.6.16) who mentions his own capture (together with Ursicinus) of a man who acted as a *speculator* for the Persian troops along the eastern border of the Empire and who, on interrogation, admitted to have sent back accurate reports about the dislocation of Roman troops in Mesopotamia.


13. On the Peutinger Map and its problems see overall Talbert 2010. See also Hauser 1995 for the Mesopotamian section of the Map.
Notwithstanding the issues that such a particular find poses, some speculations might also contribute to kindle the curiosity of future researches on this topic, in particular in regards to the geographical setting. The upper Tigris basin acted as the easternmost limits of the Empire, which was only (and not substantially) under Roman control during the Severan period and, briefly, at the beginning of the 4th cent. CE. Furthermore, the location nearby the modern city of Mosul might also be related to the existence of a small fort/military post, which could have been part of the complex defensive system along the western bank (Roman?) of the Tigris, opposed to the Parthian (and then Sasanian) eastern bank. This could also explain the presence of speculatores (assuming the chance of occuli> [sp]ecul[atores]) as the advanced group of Roman troops in the area, with the precise purpose of providing information on the movements of Parthian (or Sasanian) soldiers in the area.

However, given the very peculiar nature of the record in our hands, nothing more can be added. Despite the uncertainty of the analysis, the insofar provided speculation nevertheless suggests the importance of this area in the context of the relations between Rome and the eastern Empires, and the centrality of the Mesopotamian steppe-land as a contested and shared space.
This very particular case illustrates perfectly the nature of the archaeological and textual records for the Roman period in Mesopotamia. Scattered information are too often put together like pieces of an already partial puzzle, but nevertheless the Roman impact in the land of the Euphrates and the Tigris might be perceived and analysed through the available data. This, although numerically scanty represent a relevant starting point for further considerations.

As already stated such form of territorial control passed through the extensive exploitation of a complex route network, whose core was constituted by pre-existing routes. In this framework the so-called Karsi milestone can help to better define the dynamics that took place in the area at the beginning of the 2nd cent. CE. The inscription (AE 1927, 161) was first published by Cagnat, who received the copy of the text by the hands of P.R. Mouterde, and then studied by David Oates. It was found near the rural village of Karsi, on the Jebel Sinjar, in northwest Iraq (fig. 1). David Oates reported that the location of the inscription was characterized by “tracks that show traces of terracing, which suggests that its easy gradients are the result of deliberate and skilful engineering”.

The milestone was indeed located in a very strategic place, at the major pass in the massif, almost certainly went uphill towards the northern slopes of the mountain and hence to Nisibis.

DACICUS [-]RTHICUS  Dacicus Parthicus
PONTIF [-]RIB [-]  Pontif(ex) (maximus t)ribunicia (potestate)

The text of the inscription clearly indicates its chronology, and as several major roads in the Roman Empire, that it was a military upgrade and therefore to be directly connected to the increasing interests of the Roman imperial power in this specific area.

The location of the milestone on that point of the mountain is also extremely interesting and meaningful. Only later sources mention the provincial organization of Northe Mesopotamia during the time of Trajan and, unfortunately, there is no older reference to such evidence. M.G. Angeli-Bertinelli however, claimed that even if a provincial organization tout court is not observable for the time of Trajan, the region was nevertheless included in a sort of protectorate that served to partly secure the territorial gain of the military campaigns. In this sense, the Karsi pass was decisive. It was evidently used to cross the mountain from the north and connected two major political and strategic hub of the military operations. Even more interesting is the fact that the gap near the modern village of Karsi is still used as the sole truck route to reach the southern slope of the massif coming from Syria (fig. 6). The protectorate Trajan instituted in the region, however, did not last long and Hadrian ceded the territorial gains back to the Parthians few years later.

After this interlude the history of the Roman involvement in the region becomes much more obscure. Although Rome was active in the

17. Eutrope 8.3.2; 8.6.2 and 6, and Festus 14.20. See also Angeli Bertinelli 1976, p. 20.
region with multiple military operations during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (Dura Europos became a Roman city in 165 CE), there is apparently no trace of a real territorial organization in the area of the Upper Khabur basin.

The trend is however inverted in the later years of the 2nd cent. CE, and such gap in the knowledge is at least partly filled in regards to the Severan period. The success of the Parthian campaigns of Septimius Severus brought with them the official institution of the Mesopotamia (with Assyria and Osrhoene) as a Roman province. The area beyond the Euphrates is, for the first time, completely included within the imperial limits, certainly still constituting the easternmost limit of the Empire, but with a strong presence if compared to the earlier attempt of provincial organisation. The integration of the region within the limits of the Empire in the period between the end of the 2nd and the first half of the 3rd cent. CE has been seen, with not much hazard, like the last real power affirmation of Rome along the eastern frontier. The political move of Severus certainly favoured the control of the Euphrates, allowing the Roman economy to enthusiastically exploit the Mesopotamian corridor for its own purposes and to structure a much more consistent political and social presence in these lands. A series of very interesting inscriptions belong to this specific chronological phase and two of these, particularly, might shed a significant light on the Roman organization of the newly conquered lands. The first one is a milestone from the Syrian village of Amouda, close to the modern Syrian-Turkish border, which has been recovered (as frequently happens in these cases) out of context and in a very bad state of preservation. The inscription was already mentioned by Poidebard (see infra) who saw it in the courtyard of the archaeological museum of Al-Hassake (Syria) in the late 1920s. The text:

The chronology of the text is well defined by the presence of the names *Britannicus* and *Germanicus Maximus* as only Caracalla among the members of the Severan dynasty had those appellatives. Poidebard thought of one of the last year of his reign (perhaps the 216 CE). The location of the finding might also indicate the possible existence of a road that linked Edessa, where Caracalla resided and eventually died, to Nisibis via the piedmont area of the Tur Abdin. The existence of such a route has been also speculated by Comfort and I recently suggested elsewhere the identification of this very same road with one of the tracks depicted on the Peutinger Map. Such road was well exploited by Roman troops to connect the secured area of the Euphrates (via the Balikh) with the eastern front in Mesopotamia.

A second inscription (AE 1958, 241 = Mariq 1957), also dated to the Severan period, helps to understand even better the spatial control of Rome in the area of the steppe-land of North Mesopotamia. It is a milestone found circa 5 kilometres (3 Roman miles) west of Singara, below the southern slope of the Jebel Sinjar. It is dated to the period of Severus Alexander and it recalls:

--- MARCO [Imp(erator) Caes(ari)] Marco
--- TANICO Bri]tanico (sic)
--- IMO [Germanico maxim]imo [p(ontifici) m(ax)imo]
--- STATIS [trib(uniciae) pote]statis
--- PROC [imp(eratori)..co(n)s(uli) ..] proc[o(n)]s(uli)

--- IMP CAESAR Imp(erator) Caes(ar)
--- M AURELIUS M(arcus) Aurelius
--- SEVERUS Severus
--- ALEXANDER Alexander
--- PIUS [------] AUG Pius [Fel(ix)] Aug(ustus)
--- PONT MAXIM Pont(ifex) maxim(us)
--- TRIB POT XI Trib(unicia) pot(estate) XI
--- COS III [----] PROC Co(n)s(ul) III, [p(ater) p(atriae)] proc(onsul)
--- A SING[---] A Sing(ara)
--- M P III M(ilia) p(assum) III

The inscription was recovered not far from the modern Iraqi village of Al-Faghdani and the mention of the eleventh *tribunicia potestas* provides a reliable chronological setting for the text, dated with a certain security, to the year 231-232 CE.

What does the location of the milestone tell us? It certainly proves the existence of a road south of the Jebel Sinjar, which led to Singara from the west. This is not surprising: one would have certainly expected that a route existed between the upper-middle course of the Khabur and the Tigris via Singara. What is interesting is the connection between this road and the one marked by the milestone of Karsi. If one assumes that the Karsi road (certainly used in the Trajanic period) was still in use slightly more than a century later (which is also something extremely plausible), then the existence of a second track from the west further confirms the importance of Singara as a strategic nodal point in the region and its role as a converging place of different routes both connecting the region from west to east but also from north to south towards Hatra. The milestone of Al-Faghdani, in addition, testifies one of the last Roman interventions in the area of the Sinjar before the coming of the Sasanians. Both Singara and the fort of Ain Sinu

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(east of the city, between the Jebel Sinjar and the Jebel Ishkaft = “the mountain of the caves”) indeed, were seriously menaced by the Sasanian army in the first quarter of the 3rd cent. CE and Ain Sinu was ultimately destroyed and never re-built afterwards. At this very same period of the Severan involvement in the region is dated another Latin inscription, which has been reportedly found near the modern centre of Mosul (ancient Nineveh). The inscription (AE 1926, 87; PIR V, 86) mentions the existence of a detachment from the Legio I Parthica (instituted by Septimius Severus) in the region.

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[---] [Pro salute]
[---] [Imp(eratoris) Caes(aris) M(arci) Aure]
[-] SEVERI [-] [li] Severi [Alexandri]
PII FEL INVICTI AVG [Pii Fel(licis) Invicti Aug(usti)]
ET IVLIAE [---] et Iuliae [Mamaeae]
AVG MATRIS AVG N [Aug(ustae) matris Aug(usti) n(ostr)]
ET CASTR MIL LEG [et castr(orum) mil(ites) leg(ionis)]
I P SEVER [---] I P(arthicae) Sever(ianae)
[---] [Alexandrian(ae)]
Q MIL COEPERVNT [q(ui) mil(itare) coeperunt]
MESSAL ET SABINO [Messal(a) et Sabino]
COS [co(n)s(ulibus)]
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The text recalls the extension of the Roman control in the area immediately west of the Tigris, presumably in the region between Singara and Ad Flumen Tigrim. \(^{25}\) Another interesting point is the mention of the legion which was created for the specific purpose of deployment along the eastern border by Septimius Severus. The I Parthica most likely had a great mobility within the North Mesopotamian region and soldiers from that legion were possibly sent to guarding posts at the easternmost fringes of the empire, on the west bank of the Tigris. The chronological context of both the inscriptions coincides with the assertion of the firm imposition of the imperial power in the northern Fertile Crescent. Although they served two different aims, both the texts also reflect the historical context of the late 2nd cent. CE. One was a milestone, a mark of territorial organisation that if on a hand primarily served for military purposes, on the other had it laid the foundations for the complete inclusion of these areas within the social and economic aspects of the empire. The second inscription, on the contrary, has a much more official connotation. It confirms indeed that Roman legionaries, under the command of the emperor, were deployed in such a remote area of the Empire.

The conquest of the zones beyond the Khabur also enabled Septimius Severus to make a particular diplomatic move in order to create a new province (Osrheone) from part of the lands previously controlled by the Abgarids of Edessa. Two inscriptions (AE 1984, 919-920) from Kızılburç (“Red Tower”), \(^{26}\) in Turkey, dated respectively to 195 and 205 CE, report the existence of newly arranged limits between the recently established Roman province and the kingdom of Abgar.

AE 1984, 919:
EX AVCTORITATE IMP CAES
L SEPTIMI SEVERI PII PER
TINACIS AVG ARAB ADIAB
PONTIF MAX TRIB POT III

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26. Sinclair (1990, p. 178) reports the existence of a watchtower in the city, which might be connected to the Roman military control in the area.
IMP VII COS II P P C IVL
PACATIANVS PROC AVG INTER
PROVINCIAM OSRHOENAM ET
REGNVM ABGARI FINES POSVIT

Ex auctoritate Imp(eratoris) Caes(aris) / L(uci) Septimi
Severi Pii Per/tinacis Aug(usti) Arab(ici) Adiab(enici) / pontif(icis) max(im) trib(unciae) pot(estate) III / imp(eratoris) VII co(n)s(uis) II p(atris) p(atriae) G(aius) Iul(ius) / Pacatianus proc(urator) Aug(usti) inter / provinciam Osrhoenam et / regnum Abgari fines posuit.

AE 1984, 920:
IMP CAES L SEPTIMIVS
SEVERVS PIVS PERTINAX
AVG ARAB ADIAB PARTH
MAX PONT MAX TRIB POT
XIII IMP XII COS III P P
ET IMP CAES M AVREL
ANTONINVS AVG AVGVSTI
N FIL TRIB POT VIII COS
II ET [[P SEPTIMIVS GETA]]
CAES COS FIL ET FRATER
AVG NN VIAM AB EVPHRATE
VSQVE AD FINES REGNI SEPT
ABARI A NOVO MVNIERVNT
PER L AELIVM IANVARIVM
PROC AVG PROV OSRHOENAM
M P XXXXVIII

Imp(eratori) L(ucio) Septimio Se]vero Pio Pertinaci / [Aug(usto) Arab(ico) Adiab(enico) p]ont(ifici) max(imo) trib(unciae) pot(estate) V / [imp(eratori) X co(n)s(u) III p(atris) p(atriae) / et
Imp(erator) Caes(ar) M(arcus) Aurel(ius) / Antoninus Aug(ustus) Augusti / n(ostris) fil(ius) trib(unicia) pot(estate) VIII co(n)s(u) / II et [[P(ublius) Septimius Geta]] / Caes(ar) co(n)s(u) fil(ius) et frater / Aug(ustorum) nn(ostrorum) viam ab Euphrate / usque ad fines regni Sept(imi) / Ab(g)ari a novo munierunt / per L(ucium) Aelium
Ianuarium / proc(uratorem) Aug(usti) prov(inciae) Osrhoenam (!) / m(ilia) p(assuum) XXXXVII.

Further hints for the organization of the area connected to the military control come from two inscriptions (AE 1984, 917-918) recovered at Eski Hissar (Turkey), not far from both Zeugma and Edessa. Both refer to the edification of a castellum, along the road between the newly acquired Roman territories and the Abgarid kingdom.27

The longest one refers to the edict through which the castellum of the Legio IV Scythica was established in the area, in order to control the transit zone between the Upper Euphrates and the Mesopotamian plains. The reference to the tribunicia potestas indicates the exact chronology of the text (197 CE):

[ ]VERO PIO PERTINACI
[ ]ONT MAX TRIB POT V
[ ]ILL LEG III SCYTH
[ ]NO CASTELLVM FEC

Imp(erator) L(ucius) Septimius Severus Pius Pertinax Aug(ustus) Arab(icus) Adiab(enicus) Parth(icus) / max(imus) pont(ifex) max(imus) trib(unciae) pot(estate) / XIII imp(erator) XII co(n)s(u) III p(ater) p(atriae) / et
Imp(erator) Caes(ar) M(arcus) Aurel(ius) / Antoninus Aug(ustus) Augusti / n(ostris) fil(ius) trib(unicia) pot(estate) VIII co(n)s(u) / II et [[P(ublius) Septimius Geta]] / Caes(ar) co(n)s(u) fil(ius) et frater / Aug(ustorum) nn(ostrorum) viam ab Euphrate / usque ad fines regni Sept(imi) / Ab(g)ari a novo munierunt / per L(ucium) Aelium

The second inscription from Eski Hissar simply reads Leg(ionis) III SCyth(hicae), and it is generally dated to the period 193-211 CE.

On the basis of these textual records, the constitution of Osrohoene as a Roman territory must be viewed in the broader context of the reorganization of the Empire’s eastern frontier as well as also as strictly connected to the creation of the

provincia Mesopotamia, which then became the easternmost limit of the Roman Empire, leaving Osrhoene somewhat in a more secure position between the conflict zones and western Syria.

All the inscriptions mentioned so far are related to a specific sphere, which includes major roads, fortified places and the easternmost limits of the empire. These are strictly connected to the control of the landscape and the consequent spatial organisation of the Roman borderland. And yet, words of power are attested also elsewhere and in a rather different (although still military) context. Latin inscriptions, dated to the Severan period, in fact, have been also unearthed in the city of Hatra, which played a particular role within the context of the Roman presence in North Mesopotamia and generally in the entire region between the 1st and the 3rd cent. CE. Despite the fact that Hatra was never fully included in the Roman control of the region, its strategic importance nevertheless attracted the Roman army. Three inscriptions perfectly synthesize the particular interaction that took place between the roman troops and the hatrene population. These inscriptions have been firstly published by David Oates in 1955 and briefly reviewed and updated by A. Maricq. The three texts (AE 1958, 238-240) were all found in the antecella of the 9th shrine, which was unearthed by the Iraqi Antiquities Department in 1954. The first one (no. 238) is dated, thanks to the mention of the consuls in the text, to 235 CE:

Unfortunately, the initial part of the text was written on the side of the altar, which was eroded at the moment of the discovery and thus the only clue, retrievable from the text, is the chronology, which puts the inscription in the period of Severus Alexander (probably the very last moments of his reign, which ended up in 235 CE). The other inscriptions (nos. 239-240) have been engraved on two different bases of statues (unfortunately lost). They are dedications by a tribunus militum: Q. Petronius Quintianus. Also in this case, among the inscribed lines, the chronology is retrievable. The cohors mentioned in the text bears the title of Gordiana, which most likely refers to the period of Gordian III (238-243 CE).

Inscription no. 239:

DEO SOLI INVICTO Deo Soli Invicto
Q PETR QUINTIANUS Q. Petronius Quintianus
TRIB MIL LEG I PART Trib(enus) mil(itum) leg(ionis) Part(hicae)
TRIB COH IX MAUR Trib(enus) coh(ortis) IX Maur(orum)
GORDIANAE Gordianae
VOTUM RE votum re-
LIGIONI LOCI ligioni loci
POSUIT posuit

Inscription no. 239:

ERCULI SANCT sancto,...
PRO SALUTE DO pro salute do-
MINI NOSTRI AU[---] mini nostri Au[g(usti)
PETRONIUS QU[---] Q.] Petronius Qu[in-
TIANUS DOM [--] tianus, dom(o) [Nico-
MIDIA TRIB MIL midia, trib(unes) mil(itum)
LEG I P TRIB COH IX Leg(ionis) I P(arthicae),
TRIB COH IX MAUR Trib(enis) coh(ortis) IX
GORDIANAE Gordianae
GENIO COH genio coh(ortis)

The inscriptions make reference, respectively, to a Sun-deity, and to Heracles (whose cult, integrated with that of Nergal, was practiced at Hatra, the Nergal Gate in the city was named after the presence of a nearby sanctuary dedicated to the deity), underlining how important was the relation between the city and the Solar cult on a hand and how the Graeco-Roman cultural sphere was also embedded, and adapted, in the hatrene society on the other hand. 29

A further and particularly engaging evidence that needs to be discussed is also the mention, within the lines of the text no. 239, of the Cohors IX Maurorum, which refers to a group of Moorish soldiers. These were most likely employed because of their skills with cavalry and geographical knowledge of the area during the Mesopotamian campaigns. 30 The exact location of the main fort of the cohors is, unfortunately, unknown. In a later phase, Ammianus Marcellinus, mentions that a fortress, called Castra Maurorum, was given back to Persia together with Nisibis and Singara, after a peace-treaty with Shapur II. 31 It is possible that the presence of the cohors (or at least, part of the cohors) at Hatra could be related to the mobility of the troops within the newly conquered area. Quintianus was, in fact, probably at the command of the cohors, besides being also the tribunus of the Legio I Parthica that was probably stationed at that time at Singara. 32

The detachment at Hatra was not isolated. A series of small forts and observation posts were located all along the route from Hatra to Singara, and, although it is less likely, from Hatra towards Assur and the Tigris, along one of the routes that connected Upper Mesopotamia to the central alluvium and the area of Ctesiphon, in one of the Parthian (and then Sasanian) political cores. Once again the flexibility of the political frontier is overpassed by the economic interests.

Yet the chronology of the inscriptions might refer to a peace moment that followed the military campaigns of Severus Alexander (ended circa two years earlier). It is possible that the small detachment of Roman soldiers was sent to Hatra from Singara. The area between these two major centres was dotted with small rural villages which might have served as strategic places for the movements of people, troops, and goods towards the steppe land south of the Sinjar massif. 33 Recent remote-sensing driven works have also established the relevance of this landscape for the military control of this portion of limes. 34

It is also possible to speculate on the existence of a network of small forts south of Hatra, along the route that connected the city, via the wadi Tharthar to the area of Assur and the Middle-Tigris region. Unfortunately, none of these southern forts has been dug up, or, in most cases, even identified. The survey carried out by Sir Aurel Stein identified some of these structures but their chronology still remains a matter of discussion among the scholars since the squared forts may be later in time

34. Scardozzi 2014.
or even early modern. More certain is the Hatra-Singara line, which was also probably much more integrated in this system than the southern sector.

**Conclusions**

The control of a specific territory necessarily comes via the control of the movements that take place within its limits. Managing mobility, both in antiquity and in modern times, means controlling people, goods and trade in a specific territory but also managing the land itself by building roads and bridges, establishing mountain passes, setting up halt stations and places which supply water. Securing the major roads in a contested land such as North Mesopotamia during the Roman imperial period meant primarily being able oversee the movements of people, but also being able to prevent invasions and possible threats. Due to the geographical characteristics of the region, an army invasion in Mesopotamia (both from the Roman and the Parthian/Sasanian perspective) could have followed only certain specific routes in order to guarantee water supplies for both soldiers and animals. This resulted in a frequently matched alignment of wells and routes, and, as a consequence of this, settlements were also distributed in an orderly manner and frequency along these axes.

The proposed overview on the context, use and meaning of the very few Latin inscriptions found in North Mesopotamia emphasizes once more the role of the army within the development of the *ost-politik* of the Roman Empire. The acquisition of the territories beyond the Euphrates led, in fact, to the confrontation with both different dynamics and rivals, which convoyed the Roman frontier policy and its consequent adaptation to the particular setting of North Mesopotamia.

Yet, these few specimens discussed here show a particular character of the Roman imperialism in the region, which is expressed through the *official* language and almost exclusively to indicate the presence of roads and military personnel. Roads, indeed, served the double purpose: they favoured the mobility (= trade) and they facilitated the military strategy in the entire region. Roman period roads hardly were exclusively created for the military expansion and most of the tracks were in fact pre-existent to the imperial period, but the strategic control of these major axes and their inclusion in the repertoire of imperial rules of Rome in Mesopotamia is a crucial aspect for understanding the control of the landscape.

What also emerges from the analysis of these inscriptions is the evocative role of the Latin, which is here used as the language of power to strengthen the correlation between the stone, the words, the letters carved upon it, and the politics that backed the significance of the inscription itself.

Eventually, it is not entirely correct to consider the Roman conquest of North Mesopotamia as a political move to defend the Euphrates and the Western Syria region. Once Rome acquired the area beyond the upper course of the Euphrates, its inclusion within the limits of the Empire was a natural consequence. North Mesopotamia acted therefore as a *normal* province and, at the very same time, to quote Ammianus (25.8.14), as the bulwark of Syria.

35. Kennedy, Riley 1990.

Bibliography


CIL = Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum, Berlin.


Latin inscriptions and the Roman borderland in Mesopotamia

PIR = Prosopographia imperii Romani, Berlin.

Origin of illustrations

Fig. 1 - Northern Mesopotamia within its geographical context (map by the author).
Fig. 2 - Locations of the recovered Latin inscriptions in North Mesopotamia (map by the author).
Fig. 3 - Localisation of the known Latin inscriptions from the Roman world (Epigraphische Datenbank Heidelberg, Clauss-Salby: <http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/epimap.html>). Northern Mesopotamia is encircled (map modified by the author).
Fig. 4 - Seh Qubba as seen from the eastern bank of the Tigris. The site was probably the easternmost fortified place of the Roman limes in Mesopotamia (photo by the author, September 2016).
Fig. 5 - Segment (XI) of the Peutinger Map with the depiction of eastern Syria and Mesopotamia.
Fig. 6 - View of the Karsi gorge on the Jebel Sinjar, northern Iraq (© Creative Commons/Panoramio).
Addenda

On September 2017, I visited the Erbil Museum of Civilization, while carrying out fieldwork in the area with the Erbil Plain Archaeological Survey (Harvard University). That was not the first visit to the museum, but I was surprised to find, truly unexpected, a new object among the displayed treasures. It is a limestone cylindrical borne, tucked between a cement pillar and a glass showcase. Latin letters are carved on the borne, and that attracted my attention immediately. As I proceeded with the reading – not particularly difficult – of the engraved letters, I became conscious that what was displayed in the museum was the milestone of Karsi, the inscription discussed on page 190 in this article. The object was believed to be lost, and now it appeared in a small but very interesting museum. The label used for the description says ‘inscription with Roman letters that marks the border between two countries’. Excited by the fortuitous discovery I had a short conversation with Nader Babakr, the General Director of the Antiquities of Erbil Governorate. I was curious to know the provenance of the inscription, and I also told him that I was almost absolutely sure it came from the Sinjar area. Unfortunately, both Nader and his colleagues were unable to trace back the provenance, as it might have reached Erbil in the troubled years around the fall of the Saddam regime. Nevertheless, the text on the stone left no doubts. It was indeed the Karsi milestone (fig. 1).

The inscription itself is in discrete conditions, with the exception of the awkward piece of cement upon which it has been fixed. A hole at the bottom might be the indication for a secondary use of the stone (anchor?), which is also confirmed by traces of use (a rope?).
along the whole inscription in correspondence of the hole. Cement infiltrations were probably used to consolidate the stone. Letters in the upper part of the artefact are particularly well readable, whereas they become more worn out in the lower one.

In order to have a better understanding of the object, a 3D model of the inscription was generated with AGISOFT Photoscan. The processed model is also available at <http://www.sketchfab/user/roccopal/model_1.html>. The in-depth analysis of the 3D model was useful to partly confirm the reading proposed by Cagnat via the photo provided by Mouterde (fig. 2).

The text:

IMP CAES [...]IV
NERV F [...] NERVA
TRAIANUS OPTIMUS
AUG GERMANICUS
DACICUS [...] RTHICUS
PONTIF [...]  

A more detailed publication of the inscription, in accordance with the General Directorate of Antiquities of Erbil and the Kurdistan Region, is planned in the upcoming months.

Fig. 2 - Enhanced readability of the inscribed words (Photoshop-based image composition of the three sides of the inscription).