

Parthia and the Fall of the Republic

The fall of the Roman Republic presents the perfect case study of the failure, due to overexpansion, of a government developed for local city-state rule. A large variety of factors are often quoted as the reasons for the eventual collapse of the Republic. Most significant among these are the "decline of morals" and the "*latifundia*" lines of reasoning. Rarely mentioned in these discussions, however, is the role of foreign diplomacy and conflict in the rise of the Monarchy. Despite this obvious absence in the historiography, the relations between Rome and Parthia should be recognized as having played an integral role in the fall of the Republic. If the Republic (as it may be argued) was doomed to fail, it would have taken many more years without the destabilizing influence of the Roman-Parthian relationship.

Many ancient and modern writers attribute the late Republic's troubles to a gradual – though substantial – decline in the traditional moral values of the Roman elite.¹ We can mark the beginning of this downward slope as 146 B.C., the end of the Third Punic War. No longer exposed to a constant external threat, the Romans relaxed and gave themselves up to such vices as avarice, luxury, and personal ambition. Their "personal craving for glory, honor, and command"² overwhelmed any sense of duty and sacrifice. *Ambitio*, or personal ambition, is the most important element of this argument. But greed and soft living did not lead to cutthroat competition between the nobles. In theory, any number of the aristocracy could have made money and purchased luxury goods. On the

¹ Levick, Barbara. Morals, Politics, and the Fall of the Roman Republic. Pg. 1-2.

² Sallust. *Catiline's War* 11.2

other hand, the affection of the people was fleeting and there were only two consulships available to the leading members of the nobility in any single year.

Latifundia, or large farming estates, were also a major factor in the fall of the Republic. Authors such as Pliny the Elder and Seneca recognized and condemned the dangerous rise of the *latifundia*.³ These estates composed one of the key elements of the social unrest of the late Republic. As the empire expanded, Rome's wars took her armies farther and farther afield, sometimes for years of campaigning. In the absence of their sustaining labor, the farms of many of these citizen-soldiers were sold to the rich. Rome's military commitments continued to increase and larger amounts of Italy's peasantry were driven, landless, to the cities (especially to Rome itself). This situation led to the rise of the private and semi-professional armies that characterized the later years of the Republic. With no property to meet the recruitment qualifications, the urban poor were removed from the conscription pool. The reforms of Marius first institutionalized the practice of forming legions out of this group of men, entire legions that were completely dependent on their generals for wealth and retirement. This new development played a huge role in changing the dynamics of soldier/general/nation loyalty.

Whereas many historians will end their analyses of the Republic's fall with one of the ideas above, I will instead argue that these two themes actually led to a Roman obsession with Parthian wars, one which drove the Republic to its end. Before we review a short history of Roman-Parthian relations, it is important for us to understand a little of the psychology of the generals who committed themselves to war with Rome's neighbor empire. The political scene of the late republic was intensely competitive, with hundreds of nobles vying for a limited number of offices. In order to set themselves apart,

³ Simkhovitch, Vladimir. Rome's Fall Reconsidered. Pg. 1

especially against rivals with more prestigious ancestry and larger fortunes, candidates were forced to rely on famous military exploits and mass bribery. It also helped to have a loyal body of veterans accompany a general back to Rome, for both intimidation and voting. To obtain advantages like these, generals often sought conflict and the plunder that was associated with it. The riches won in these campaigns could be used to purchase the loyalty of soldiers, voters, and juries. At the same time, military glory, or *gloria*, was an essential component of winning over the masses. And so, even while the late Republican period is mourned for its "loss of Roman morals,"⁴ noblemen continued to struggle for the same traditional *gloria*, in order to boost the perception of their *virtus* (roughly, manliness) and *auctoritas* (authority), both critical in the eyes of every Roman. But what led the Romans, driven to seek *gloria*, into conflict with the distant Parthians?

Greed for riches was one of the most compelling incentives that drove Roman generals to Asia. Following the defeat of Antiochus the Great at the beginning of the 2nd century B.C., the Romans became the dominant power in a land famous for its wealth.⁵ What followed was a century and a half of complex diplomacy between Rome and the Asian powers, culminating in the defeat and occupation of the powerful Pontic Kingdom of Mithridates. For two generations of Roman generals, Mithridates represented the optimal enemy. His kingdom was rich, powerful, and a serious threat to Roman possessions in Asia. At one point during the Social War, Pontus seemed to threaten an invasion of Rome's own Italian peninsula. The plunder to be won was very real, and the honor to be gained was very substantial, given the size and discipline of Pontic armies. After the victorious end to the Mithraditic Wars (and Pompey's conquering of much of

⁴ Levick. Pg. 3

⁵ Sanford, Eva. Roman Avarice in Asia.

the Eastern Mediterranean coastal regions), Parthia became Rome's new Asian rival. Parthia, however, was a new kind of enemy for the Romans.

Rome's knowledge of Parthia was very limited during their early contact. Like most of the Hellenized kingdoms of the East, Parthia was viewed as a land of decadent despotism.⁶ The extreme distance to Parthia severely limited Roman knowledge. They seemed to be a mixture of the Scythian nomads, fierce warriors, and the direct descendants of the Persians, infamous in Rome for their luxury.⁷ It would take a full of century of muddled diplomacy and failed military expeditions for Rome to acquire a proper respect of this eastern empire. A long progression of Roman generals interacted with Parthia, each time contributing to the fall of the Roman Republic. The list includes such names as Sulla, Pompey, Crassus, Caesar, Antony, and Augustus.

As proprator in 96, Sulla was in Cappadocia attempting to restore Ariobarzanes to the throne.⁸ His operations brought him to the Euphrates, where he became the first Roman to meet a Parthian embassy. The embassy came seeking a "treaty of friendship and alliance."⁹ For the discussions, Sulla brought out three chairs. He sat in the middle, with Ariobarzanes and the Parthian ambassador on either side of him. Sulla's actions made it clear that Rome intended to be the dominant party in any talks between Rome, Parthia, and the smaller Asian powers. He was later criticized by contemporaries and generations of historians for this example of arrogant ambition.¹⁰ For some thirty years following Sulla's treaty of friendship, the Parthians practiced a foreign policy that was essentially pacific. The Romans realized that Parthia was a substantial power. They were

⁶ Sonnabend, Holger. Egypt and Parthia Through Roman Eyes. Pg. 1

⁷ Id. Pg. 2

⁸ Keaveney, Arthur. Roman Treaties with Parthia Circa 95-Circa 64 B.C. Pg. 1-2

⁹ Plutarch. *Sulla*. Section 5

¹⁰ Id. Section 5

prepared to bully her to achieve their own ends, but they also shied away from open war. This situation would change in the period after Pompey's eastern conquests.

The Lex Manilia of 66 transferred command of the Mithridatic War to Pompey from Lucullus. Pompey, having succeeded in forming an alliance with Phraates of Parthia and ensuring the neutrality of Tigranes, was able to defeat Mithridates for the final time. He then proceeded south to conquer the rest of the Eastern Mediterranean up to Ptolemaic Egypt.¹¹ He made sure to maintain the upper hand in the Roman-Parthian relationship. When Phraates asked that the Euphrates be recognized as the boundary between the two empires, Pompey replied "that the boundary he would respect would be the one that was fair,"¹² implying that the boundary would be one of Rome's choosing. When Pompey returned home, he hoped that the Senate would recognize his great *gloria* and approve of his eastern settlements. When the Senators refused, Pompey was driven into the arms of the First Triumvirate, which included himself, Caesar, and Crassus.

It was at this point in Rome's history that Parthia began to play a much more direct role in the fall of the Republic. Generals, desperate to match the glory of Pompey's conquests, looked around the borders of the empire for a worthy adversary. With Caesar in Gaul for the duration of the 50s, it seemed that the only promising ventures left for an ambitious general were to the east, against Parthia. In 58, Phraates was murdered by his sons Orodes and Mithridates. When the sons quarreled, Mithridates fled to Syria and convinced its Roman governor Gabinius to restore him to the Parthian throne. However, after getting as far as the Euphrates, Gabinius received a large bribe from Ptolemy XI

¹¹ Plutarch. *Pompey*. Section 33

¹² Id. Sec 33

Auletes. Gabinius abandoned the invasion of Parthia and marched on Egypt.¹³ Other than this near-invasion, relations remained peaceful until our next major figure, Crassus, took the stage in the second half of the 50s.

The First Triumvirate was formed in 60, as a response to the conservative faction within the Senate. Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar all sought to expand their own power and they realized that they could help one another by working together. Pompey brought established *gloria* and *auctoritas* to the *amicitia*, while Crassus contributed fantastic wealth and influence among the equites, and Caesar featured legal, military, and political reputation. There was a certain balance of power while the triumvirate existed, with no one man gaining too much clout, as all three had to work together against the likes of the Senate conservatives and Clodius (who appealed to the urban poor). But this stability was in trouble following the consulship of Pompey and Crassus in 55. Crassus received the governorship of Syria and, being as ambitious as any member of the triumvirate, sought to enhance his own *auctoritas* during his rule of the province.

Crassus had seen what could be gained from a successful campaign against wealthy nations. Pompey had accumulated vast wealth and military glory during his wars in the east. With Caesar gaining fame in Gaul, Crassus was quickly becoming the only member of the *amicitia* to be without significant *gloria* (Pompey had stolen much of the credit for Rome's victory in the Servile War against Spartacus). In fact, Plutarch states that Crassus hoped to surpass the military glory achieved by Lucullus and Pompey,¹⁴ an essential step in enhancing his *auctoritas*.

¹³ Keaveney, Arthur. The King and the War-Lords: Romano-Parthian Relations Circa 64-53 B.C. Pg. 3

¹⁴ Plutarch. *Crassus*. Section 16

Crassus was, in fact, so desperate to achieve military glory and expand his wealth that he was preparing to attack Parthia despite a history of pacifism and alliance between the two empires. Not only was there a tradition of peace between Rome and Parthia, but the kingdom had a standing treaty of friendship and alliance with Rome.¹⁵ When knowledge of Crassus's intentions spread, he was widely condemned as a treaty-breaker.¹⁶ Crassus continued with his plan and invaded Parthia with seven legions. He was defeated and killed at Carrhae by a numerically inferior force of horse archers and cataphracts. It seems that Crassus was driven by the political environment of the late Republic to match the military exploits of Pompey and Caesar. *Ambitio*, made war with the powerful Parthians inevitable. Crassus looked to the only power remaining on Rome's borders whose defeat would provide the necessary glory for him to reach the same levels of reputation as his political "amici" (read "rivals"). Only victory over a worthwhile enemy held the potential for this kind of real *gloria*, the triumph could not be a cheap one. And so Crassus was driven to his death by his political ambitions.

The death of a proconsul – even one who had embarked on an unjust war – was considered to be a great blow to the prestige and power of all Rome. The destruction of the army, the seizure of the legions' standards, and the death of a proconsul could only be avenged by a successful war against the enemy. One of the most important types of *iniuria*, or insults, that required major wars of conquest was the great military defeat such as the one suffered by Crassus. This new attitude would influence Roman policy towards Parthia for many decades. With Pontus out of the picture, Romans could finally afford to make enemies of their former Parthian allies.

¹⁵ Keaveney. Pg. 5

¹⁶ Plutarch. *Crassus*. Section 16

The theme of revenge against the Parthians for Crassus's defeat became extremely prominent during the late Republican period and lasted until Trajan's conquests in the Middle East. The main features of this theme emphasized that the issue was the prestige and reputation of the Roman empire.¹⁷ Ancient sources most often focused on the shame of the defeat and its most pathetic attributes, including the loss of Crassus's son in battle, the body of the proconsul lying unburied on foreign soil, the fate of the Roman prisoners still living in Parthia, and the captured standards. A war of Parthian conquest was necessary, argued the Romans, to restore Rome's international honor.¹⁸ The key to regaining Rome's invincible reputation, and the adulation of all Romans, was successful revenge against the Parthians.

Crassus's death against the Parthians in 53, along with the end of the alliance-forging marriage of Pompey and Julia (due to a natural death), Caesar's daughter, marked the end of the First Triumvirate. No longer was there a delicate system of intrigue between the three men to keep the peace. With the death of Clodius in the same year, Pompey and Caesar were the only two major political figures to remain on the scene. These two men naturally became fierce rivals, with Pompey gradually coming to associate himself with the Senatorial cause. With no one left to counterbalance the situation, Caesar and Pompey drifted towards war, which erupted in January of 50.

Caesar's victories at Pharsalus, Thapsus, and Munda left him in a position of unprecedented authority over Rome. By 44, Caesar was consolidating his rule as *Dictator Perpetuus*, or dictator for life. Roman society was still obsessed with seeking vengeance for their defeat at the hands of the Parthians. Because of this, Caesar, hoping to acquire as

¹⁷ Mattern-Parkes, Susan. The Defeat of Crassus and the Just War. Pg. 7

¹⁸ Id. Pg. 7

much legitimacy for his rule as possible, prepared for a punitive campaign against Parthia.¹⁹ Compounding the situation was the contemporary report that a careful examination of the Sibylline books had produced a warning that the Parthians could be defeated only by a king. By March of 44, Caesar was prepared to leave Rome for the war with Parthia. The conservative elements of the Senate knew that they had to force the issue of Caesar's unconstitutional rule and seemingly boundless ambition before he left to obtain potentially unsurpassable amounts of *auctoritas* in his campaign against the Parthians. And so Caesar was killed on the Ides to prevent him from waging war against Parthia.

Rome was again thrust into the violent throes of civil war, ultimately ending in the Second Triumvirate of Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus facing the forces of Brutus and Cassius. The Second Triumvirate was victorious in avenging the death of Caesar, with Brutus and Cassius having committed suicide after defeat at Philippi in 42. The Triumvirs split the empire into three parts, each of them ruling their own provinces. Lepidus, always the junior member, was gradually removed from power, leaving Octavian in control of the west, with his rival Octavian ruling over the eastern half of the empire.

Octavian and Antony then found themselves in a high stakes power struggle for the empire as a whole. Antony hoped to rely on his military prowess to obtain the legitimacy that he sought, and so he prepared to set out on the punitive expedition that Caesar was never able to complete. Such a campaign, however, required huge amounts of money and supplies. Unfortunately for Antony, Brutus and Cassius and stripped the eastern provinces of much wealth while raising their own legions to resist the Second Triumvirate. So in order to finance his campaign, Antony was forced to rely heavily on

¹⁹ Carson, R. Caesar and the Monarchy. Pg. 3

the resources and goodwill of the Egyptian queen, Cleopatra. This reliance actually played a huge role in the ensuing propaganda campaign of Octavian.

In order to defeat Antony and secure the necessary support in Rome for his own rise to power, Octavian had made use of Rome's fear of the Orient. He had posed as the champion of Roman manners and tradition, while playing upon Rome's innate mistrust of all things Oriental. Following Cleopatra's visit to Rome in the company of Caesar, there had been rumors of Egypt, in the person of Cleopatra, capturing the ruler of the city. Instead of an inexorable Roman march across the Mediterranean, fear of Eastern despotism suddenly gripped the Republic.²⁰ After the battle of Philippi, Antony had gone east as the general of Rome to carry out Caesar's plan of a national war of revenge. He had settled himself in Alexandria and, as Octavian made clear to all of Rome, had been acclaimed with Cleopatra as Dionysus and Isis, respectively, gods that would appeal to the Hellenized Orient.²¹ He divided Rome's eastern provinces among his Egyptian children. Worst of all, although forced to be completely reliant on Egypt for finances and supplies, Antony failed in his Parthian campaign. Driven to adopt the mores of the Orient, Antony lost every semblance of Roman legitimacy when he failed to obtain his justification for this apparent betrayal to Rome's traditions. When Antony lost his war against the Parthians, he lost the only factor that would have rectified his Oriental despotism in the eyes of Rome. Octavian made sure to capitalize on Antony's failure.

By 31 the Battle of Actium marked the undisputed ascendance of Octavian. One man now maintained complete control over the empire, though he attempted to continue the old Republican traditions. Octavian, or Augustus, was careful to never call himself

²⁰ Charlesworth, M. The Fear of the Orient in the Roman Empire. Pg. 2

²¹ Id. Pg. 5

King of Rome. The loss of Rome's armies and her standards to the Parthians still weighed heavy on the minds of Romans. It was still of the utmost importance for Rome to regain her prestige. Instead of invading Parthia, Augustus decided in 20 to threaten an invasion from Armenia to extort the return of the standards and spoils acquired from the invasions of Crassus and Antony.²² His focus on the symbols of the defeat implies that the main issue was damage to Rome's image. Augustus was later remembered for finally acquiring the lost standards. He used this as a tool to enhance his own *auctoritas* and legitimacy as princeps. However, the shame and humiliation of the defeat lasted for centuries more.



The Prima Porta statue, shown above, was dedicated to Augustus by the Senate in 20, following his acquisition from Parthia of the lost standards. It was an important element of the propaganda campaign to establish the authority and legitimacy of the princeps. Augustus is shown as an emperor. Military glory remained important to Romans throughout the principate. ("Classic Ground," angelo.edu)

The political timeline of the late Republic, from Pompey onwards, was driven by the ever-present need to gain military glory and honor against the powerful Parthians.

²² Mattern-Parkes. Pg. 7

The Roman-Parthian relationship led to the death of Crassus and the collapse of the First Triumvirate, after which Caesar was able to gain dictatorship over the empire. When Caesar decided to attack Parthia to regain Rome's military reputation, the assassins were forced to act before his departure. Caesar's untimely death led to the rivalry between Octavian and Antony. Because Brutus and Cassius stripped the eastern half of the empire of much of its wealth, Antony was forced to rely heavily on Cleopatra's Egypt to support his own Parthian campaigns, which were undertaken to restore Rome's image and for Antony's own *gloria*. This allowed Octavian, through effective propaganda, to gain the support of the entire west, including Italy. With Rome rallying behind Octavian, he was able to defeat Antony and make his ascendance to the principate. It was the rise of Augustus that finally marked the end of the Republic. Roman-Parthian relations played a key role in rise of the monarchy.

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