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A forgotten war
The Roman-Persian war in the second half of the 230s

Zapomniana wojna
Rzymsko-perska wojna w drugiej połowie lat 30. III w.

Abstract: Not much is known about the conflict between the Roman Empire and Persia in the second half of the 230s. It is reported that the Persians conquered Hatra, where a Roman garrison was probably stationed, and seized a major part of the Roman province of Mesopotamia. Despite such facts, this particular war is practically overlooked in the works of many Roman and Byzantine historians. There may be several possible reasons: the emperor did not participate in the conflict personally; the loss of the Roman Mesopotamia was temporary; the Byzantine authors misidentified similar conflicts, putting them in a wrong chronological order, duplicating or combining such historical events, while Roman historians would focus on the situation in Europe rather than on the Middle East.

Keywords: Persia, Roman Empire, Mesopotamia, Shapur I, Maximinus the Thrax, Gordian III

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Streszczenie: Niewiele wiadomo o konflikcie między Cesarstwem Rzymskim a Persją w drugiej połowie lat 30. III w. Persowie podbili Hatrę, gdzie prawdopodobnie stacjonował rzymski garnizon, i zajęli większą część rzymskiej prowincji Mezopotamii. Mimo to ta wojna jest właściwie pomijana w pracach wielu historyków rzymskich i bizantyjskich. Przyczyn może być kilka: cesarz osobiście nie brał udziału w konflikcie, utrata rzymskiej Mezopotamii była chwilowa, autorzy bizantyjscy błędnie identyfikowali podobne konflikty, umieszczając je w niewłaściwym porządku chronologicznym, powielając lub łącząc takie wydarzenia historyczne, historycy rzymscy skupili swoją uwagę na sytuacji w Europie, a nie na Bliskim Wschodzie.

Słowa kluczowe: Persja, Cesarstwo Rzymskie, Mezopotamia, Szapur I, Maksymin Trak, Gordian III

In 242, the young emperor Gordian III set out on a campaign against the Persians. Before his departure from Rome, however, it is reported that he opened the gates to the temple of Janus Geminus, in accordance with the ancient Roman custom. This particular event is mentioned in several works by Latin authors.[1] As the gates of this temple were opened/closed on very rare occasions,[2] the question is why such an archaic rite was revived

[1] Aur. Vict. 27, 7: "Eoque anno lustri certamine, quod Nero Romam induxerat, aucto firmatoque in Persas profectus est, cum prius Iani aedes, quas Marcus clauserat, patentes more veterum fecisset"; Eutr. 9, 2, 2: "Gordianus admodum puer cum Tranquillinam Romae duxisset uxorem, Ianum Geminum aperuit et ad Orientem profectus Parthis bellum intulit, qui iam moliebantur erumpere"; Hist. Aug. Gord. 26, 3: "Sedato terrae motu Praetextato et Attico conss. Gordianus aperto Iano gemino, quod signum erat indicti belli, profectus est contra Persas cum exercitu ingenti et tanto auro, ut vel vexiliis vel militibus facile Persas evinceret"; Oros. 7, 19, 4: "Gordianus admodum puer in orientem ad bellum Parthicum profecturus, sicut Eutropius scribit, Iani portas aperuit: quas utrum post Vespasianum et Titum aliquis clauserit, neminem scripsisse memini, cum tamen eas ab ipso Vespasiano post annum apertas Cornelius Tacitus prodat". See: P. Dufraigne, *Aurelius Victor, Livre des Césars*, Paris 1975, p. 147; H. W. Bird, *Eutropius: Breviarium*, Liverpool 1993, p. 85; idem, *Aurelius Victor: De caesaribus*, Liverpool 1994, p. 124; F. Paschoud, *Histoire Auguste, Tome 4, 1 Vies des deux Maximins, des trois Gordiens, de Maxime et Balbin*, Paris 2018, p. 262.

[2] According to the Roman tradition, the temple of Janus was founded in the time of Numa Pompilius' rule (Liv. 1, 19; Plin NH. 34, 33; Varro, Ling. 5, 165). The doors of the temple were closed as a sign of peace and opened during wartime. According to Varro, the gates of Janus had been opened as early as the time of Numa Pompilius' rule and

during the reign of Gordian III.[3] An answer could be found in the political situation of the Roman East in the period before the emperor's invasion of Mesopotamia. Paradoxically, if during the decade (strictly speaking, 12 years) between Emperor Severus Alexander's invasion in 231[4] and

closed again only in 235 BC (Varro, Ling. 5, 165). It should be noted that Varro may have confused the consuls as Manlius held the consulship in 241 as well (R. Syme, *Problems about Janus*, "The American Journal of Philology" 1979, vol. 100, p. 188). The absence of any mentions referring to the closures of the gates to the temple of Janus in the era of the Roman Republic may suggest that the practice was not universally recognized at that time and that it would have been revived/invented by the antiquarians in the later years of the Roman Republic or by Augustus himself; see R. M. Ogilvy, *A commentary on Livy: Books 1–5*, Oxford 1965, p. 93–94; R. Syme, op. cit., p. 188; P. A. Brunt, J. M. Moore, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti The achievements of the Divine Augustus*, Oxford 1983, p. 54. The gates were closed again after the victory at Actium (Mon. Anc. 42–44) and this was repeated three times during Augustus' reign (Suet. Aug. 22; Flor. 2, 33, 64; Cass. 51, 20; 53, 26; 54, 36; Oros. 6, 20, 1; 6, 20, 8; 6, 21, 1; 6, 21, 11; 6, 22, 1–2). The sources for the time following the death of Augustus make only some occasional references to this particular religious ritual, for the last time before Gordian III, during Marcus Aurelius' reign, when the gates to the temple of Janus were reportedly closed (Aur. Vict. Caes. 27, 7). According to Procopius of Caesarea, the Romans ceased opening the gates during wartime ever since they converted to Christianity (or started to respect the new religion) (Proc. bell. 5, 25, 23). At this point, it is of secondary importance how many of those ceremonies may have actually taken place. In my opinion, the sporadic nature of revisiting/referring to those rituals would attest to the historicity of the practice in the time of Gordian III's reign. Such an extraordinary rite was worth mentioning and reinventing the forgotten one far from trivial.

[3] Miguel P. Sancho Gómez points out that the opening of the Temple of Janus occurred at the time of the religious transformations brought with the advent of the 3rd century; see M. P. Sancho Gómez, *Gordiano III y las puertas del templo de Jano: ¿pervivencia o renacimiento de la religión tradicional romana*, "Florentia Iliberritana" 2010, vol. 21, pp. 371–392. Also, let us note here that several years after the death of Gordian III, Emperor Decius ordered the inhabitants of the Empire to offer religious sacrifices to the Roman gods.

[4] Expedition of Severus Alexander to Persia see G. Kerler, *Die Aussenpolitik in der Historia Augusta*, Bonn 1970, pp. 124–132; R. L. Cleve, *Severus Alexander and the Severan women*, Ann Arbor 1982, pp. 286–299; A. B. Ertel, *The life of Severus Alexander*, Vancouver 1986, pp. 84–94; D. S. Potter, *Alexander Severus and Ardashir*, "Mesopotamia" 1987, vol. 12, pp. 147–157; G. Winter, *Die sāsānidisch-römischen Friedensverträge des 3. Jahrhunderts – ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der außenpolitischen Beziehungen zwischen den beiden Großmächten*, Frankfurt am Main–Bern–New York–Paris 1988,

Gordian III's campaign in 243[5], some military confrontations between the Roman Empire and Persia had taken place, there are only very few details

pp. 45–68; D. S. Potter, *Prophecy and history in the crisis of the Roman Empire*, Oxford 1990, pp. 21–23; P. M. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia. The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman control*, London–New York 2008, pp. 149–167; C. Betrand-Dagenbach, *Le triomphe de Sévere Alexandre*, "Ktema" 2013, vol. 38, pp. 341–346; R. Wójcikowski, *Kawaleria perska w okresie wczesnosasanidzkim. Aspekty społeczne i militarne*, t. 1, Oświęcim 2014, pp. 187–192; R. Suski, *Wyprawa Aleksandra Sewera przeciwko Persom w świetle późnorzymskiej i bizantyjskiej historiografii*, in: *Armia, systemy obronne i ideologiczno-religijne aspekty wojny w imperium rzymskim*, eds. H. Kowalski, P. Madejski, Lublin 2015, pp. 195–212; K. Królczyk, *Expeditio Persica i triumf cesarza Sewera Aleksandra nad Persami (231–233 r.)*, in: *Wojna i wojskowość w świecie starożytnym*, ed. S. Sprawski, Kraków 2015, pp. 137–156; I. Syvänne, K. Maksymiuk, *The military history of the third century Iran*, Siedlce 2018, pp. 69–73; J. McHugh, *Emperor Alexander Severus: Rome's age of insurrection, Ad 222–235*, Barnsley 2017, pp. 188–218; L. de Blois, *Image and reality of Roman imperial power in the third century AD*, London–New York 2019, pp. 54–55; T. Sińczak, *Wojny Cesarstwa Rzymskiego z Iranem Sasanidów w latach 226–363*, Oświęcim 2019, pp. 26–36.

[5] Gordian III's Expedition to Persia see M. Sprengling, *Shahpuhr I, the Great on the Kaabah of Zoroaster (KZ)*, "The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures" 1940, vol. 57, pp. 360–364; A. T. Olmstead, *The mid-third century of the christian era*, "Classical Philology" 1942, vol. 37, pp. 255–256; W. Ensslin, *Zu den Kriegen des Sassaniden Schapur I*, Münich 1949, pp. 5–17; M. Sprengling, *Third century Iran, Sapor and Kartir*, Chicago 1953, pp. 79–84; S. I. Oost, *The death of the emperor Gordian III*, "Classical Philology" 1958, vol. 53, pp. 106–107; B. H. Stolte, *The Roman emperor Valerian and Sapor I, king of Persia*, "Rivista Storica dell'Antichità" 1971, vol. 1, pp. 157––162; R. Göbl, *Der Triumph des Sasaniden Sahpur über die Kaiser Gordianus, Philippus und Valerianus*, Wien 1974, pp. 16–17; X. Loriot, *Les premières années de la grande crise du IIIe siècle de l'avènement de Maximin le Thrace à la mort de Gordien III*, in: ANRW, II, 2, Berlin–New York 1975, pp. 770–775; L. de Blois, *The reign of the emperor Philip the Arabian*, "Talanta" 1978–1979, vol. 10–11, pp. 12–13; D. MacDonald, *The death of Gordian III, another tradition*, "Historia" 1981, vol. 30, pp. 502–508; E. Kettenhofen, *Die römisch-persischen Kriege des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. nach der Inschrift Sahpuhrs I an der Ka'be-ye Zartošt (skz)*, Wiesbaden 1982, pp. 31–37; idem, *The Persian campaign of Gordian III and the inscription of Sapuhr I at the Ka'be-ye Zartošt*, in: *Armies and frontiers in Roman and Byzantine Anatolia. Proceedings of a colloquium held at University College Swansea 1981*, ed. S. Mitchell, Oxford 1983, pp. 151–171; E. Winter, *Die sasanidisch-römischen Friedensvertrage des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Ch.*, Frankfurt am Main 1988, pp. 80–83; D. S. Potter, *Prophecy and history…*, pp. 184–212; F. Millar, *The Roman near East, 31 B.C.–A.D. 337*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 151–153; U. Hartmann, *Das Palmyreni-*

on this particular war, especially as the conflict caused a temporary aggravation in the Roman Empire's position in the East. Despite this, we know very little about the Roman reaction to the (successful) Persian attempt to capture Hatra, which, after all, allowed the aggressors to make a propitious incursion into the territory of the empire. In this text, I would like to answer two questions. First, why do we know so little about Roman-Persian relations in the second half of the 1930s? For what reasons was the war that took place at that time practically forgotten by Roman and Byzantine historiography? However, in order to pose such a question, it is necessary to consider the course of that war. Only this will enable us to state whether the fact that this war was forgotten is of little consequence or whether it requires a comment. This, of course, depends on the reconstruction of the course of the war and its consequences. So having reconstructed this turn of events, I would then wish to consider whether forgetting this war tells us anything about the mentality of Roman historians.

It is important to note that very few sources referring to the war waged in the second half of the 230s come from the actual period when this particular event took place. The first references are Greek inscriptions found in various places such as the House of Nebuchelos located in the centre of

sche Teilreich, Stuttgart 2001, pp. 69–70; D. S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay 180––395*, London–New York 2004, pp. 234–236; J. F. Drinkwater, *Maximinus to Diocletian and the crisis*, in: *The Cambridge ancient history*, vol. 12, eds. A. K. Bowman, P. Garnsey, A. Cameron, Cambridge 2005, pp. 35–36; K. Maksymiuk, *Polityka Sasanidów wobec wschodnich prowincji Cesarstwa Rzymskiego w III w. n.e.*, Siedlce 2005, pp. 55–56; B. Dignas, E. Winter, *Rome and Persia in late antiquity: Neighbours and rivals*, Cambridge 2007, p. 22; K. Farrokh, *Shadows in the desert: Ancient Persia at war*, Oxford 2007, pp. 186–187; P. M. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia…*, pp. 168–177; K. Mosig-Walburg, *Römer und Perser. Vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr.*, Gutenberg 2009, pp. 32–34; M. J. Olbrycht, *Iran starożytny*, in: *Historia Iranu*, ed. A. Krasnowolska, Wrocław 2010, p. 226; R. Kosiński, *Państwo Sassanidów od 224 roku do końca V wieku i jego relacje z cesarstwem*, in: *Świat rzymski w IV wieku*, eds. P. Filipczak, R. Kosiński, Kraków 2015, p. 194; K. Maksymiuk, *Geography of Roman-Iranian wars*, Siedlce 2015, pp. 32–34; I. Syvänne, K. Maksymiuk, op. cit., pp. 79–82; L. de Blois, *Image and reality…*, pp. 62–63; T. Sińczak, op. cit., pp. 43–45; R. Palermo, *On the edge of empires, North Mesopotamia during the Roman period (2nd–4th c. CE)*, London–New York 2019, pp. 47–48; P. M. Edwell, *Rome and Persia at war, imperial competition and contact, 193–363 CE*, London–New York 2021, pp. 75–78.

Dura Europos, near the Agora, the House of Frescoes, in the vicinity of the Temple of Zeus Theos, as well as the Temple of Gad.[6] The graffiti refers to the Persian attack on the 13 day of the month of Xandikos, in the 550th year of the Seleucid Era, i.e., on 20 April 239.[7] Two other inscriptions (in Latin) dating from more or less the same period have been found at Hatra, both of them by the Roman officer and *equituus* named Petronius Quintianus. Discovered in the antecellum of Temple IX, the first inscription is a dedication to Hercules,[8] while the other one is dedicated to the Invincible Sun (*Sol Invictus*).[9] It is uncertain when those inscriptions may have been carved. The army detachments of the above-named officer carried appellations relating to Gordian, which would mean that they were bestowed during Gordian III's reign. Therefore, the inscriptions would have been made no earlier than in the summer of 238, when he received the title *Augustus*.[10]

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[6] J. A. Baird, *Private graffiti? Scratching the walls of houses at Dura-Europos*, in: *Inscriptions in the private sphere in the Greco-Roman world*, eds. R. Benefiel, P. Keegan, Leiden 2016, pp. 22–26; eadem, *Dura-Europos*, London 2018, pp. 79–80.

[7] *SEG* 7 (1934) 743b, 17–19: "ἔτους νφ′, μηνὸς Ξανδικοῦ λ′ κατέβηέφ' ὑμῶν Πέρσης".

[8] *AE* 1958, 240: "Erculi Sanct(o) pro salute domini nostri Au[g(usti) Q.] Petronius Qu[in]tianus, dom(o) [Nico]midia, trib(unus) mil(itum) leg(ionis) I P(arthicae), trib(unus) coh(ortis) IX Gordianae, genio coh(ortis)." Discussion about the birthplace of Petronius Quintianus see S. Mazzarino, *La tradizione suite guerre tra Shäbuhr I e l'impero romano: «prospettiva» e «deformazione storica*, "Acta antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae" 1971, vol. 19, pp. 59–60; W. Eck, *Geschichtsschreibung und epigraphische Quellen bei Santo Mazzarino*, "History of Classical Scholarship" 2021, vol. 21, p. 184.

[9] *AE* 1958, 239: "Deo Soli Invicto Q. Petr(onius) Quintianus trib(unus) mil(itum) leg(ionis) I Part(hicae), trib(unus) coh(ortis) IX Maur(orum) Gordianae, votum religioni loci posuit."

[10] The timeline of the events taking place in the year 238 is not certain and we are confronted with some controversial issues here. It is difficult to find some common ground among the various epigraphic, numismatic, and papyrological pieces of evidence, and it is not obvious when the celebration (holiday) crucial to the determination of the chronology should have taken place. Gordian III succeeded to power in May–June 238 or early August 238 (R. W. Burgess, *Roman imperial chronology and early fourth century historiography, the regnal durations of the so-called Chronica urbis Romae of the Chronograph of 354*, Stuttgart 2014, p. 72). The first hypothesis is supported by an inscription found at Shaqqa, i.e., the ancient city of Maximianopolis, which was funded by the centurion Iuvenalius Proclus, the son of Taurinus, on 27 May 238 (M. Sartre, *Dies impe-*

After the replacement of the Arsacid dynasty by the Sassanids, Hatra continued to remain in opposition to Ardashir I. The Persian army made two attempts to seize the city,[11] eventually succeeding between April 240 and April 241.[12] In view of this fact, the inscriptions funded by Petronius Quintianus must have been carved between August 238 and the year 240/241.

rii de Gordien III (le): une inscription inédite de Syrie, "Syria" 1984, vol. 61, pp. 49–61; D. Kienast, W. Eck, M. Heil, *Römische Kaisertabelle Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie*, Darmstadt 2017, p. 187), but the emperor's name is removed. X. Loriot argues that Gordian III was proclaimed *Augustus* in June 238 (X. Loriot, *Les Fasti Ostienses et le dies imperii de Gordien III*, in: *Mélanges d'histoire ancienne offerts à William Seston*, ed. J. Tréheux, Paris 1974, pp. 297–312; J. S. Strasser, *La chronologie de la crise de 238*, "Revue des Études anciennes" 2016, vol. 118, pp. 125–173). Based on the papyrological evidence, it is clear that Gordian III was proclaimed *Augustus* prior to 29 August 238 (D. Rathbone, *The dates of the recognition in Egypt of the emperors from Caracalla to Diocletianus*, "Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik" 1986, vol. 62, pp. 110–111; M. Peachin, *Roman Imperial titulature and chronology, A.D. 235–284*, Amsterdam 1990, p. 29). M. Peachin argues that the proclamation took place in August (M. Peachin, *Once more 238*, "Athenaeum" 1989, vol. 67, pp. 594–604). However, it should be emphasized that the news would have reached Egypt with some considerable delay and it is fair to assume the date of the event in question on the basis of the relevant inscription. I am in favour of the view that the difference of several months (May – June – August) between the possible dates of being elevated to *Augustus* and the probable reconstruction of the timeline of the year 238 is rather insignificant here.

[11] For the dating of the first siege of Hatra, see K. Maksymiuk, *The capture Ḥaṭrā in light of military and political activities of Ardašīr I*, "Historia i Świat" 2017, vol. 6, p. 91; I. Syvänne, K. Maksymiuk, op. cit., p. 39; J. McHugh, op. cit., p. 180; B. Isaac, *Hatra against Rome and Persia: From success to destruction*, in: *Empire and ideology in the Graeco-Roman world*, ed. B. Isaac, Cambridge 2017, p. 349; M. Sommer, *Hatra. Geschichte und Kultur einer Karawanenstadt im römisch-parthischen Mesopotamien*, Mainz am Rhein 2003, p. 22.

[12] According to the papyrus of Cologne (found in Egypt), Mani received his second revelation on 23 April 240, when he was 24 years old; in the same year, Ardashir I captured Hatra and Shapur I was crowned (P. Colon. 4780). On the fall of Hatra, see M. L. Chaumont, *A propos de la chute de Hatra et du couronnement de Shapur Ier*, "Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae" 1979, vol. 27, pp. 207–237; S. R. Hauser, D. J. Tucker, *The final onslaught: The sasanian siege of Hatra*, "Zeitschrift für Orient-Archäologie" 2009, vol. 2, pp. 106–139; S. R. Hauser, *On the significance of the final siege of Hatra*, in: *Hatra: Politics, culture and religion between Parthia and Rome*, ed. L. Dirven, Stuttgart 2013, pp. 119–139; K. Jakubiak, *The last days of Hatra: The story behind the city's downfall*, in: *Ad Fines Imperii Romani*, *Studia Thaddaeo Sarnow-*

Those inscriptions and a Roman helmet found within the temenos of the Great Temple at Hatra attest to the presence of a small Roman garrison in the city during the final years of its existence. Most likely, it suffered the same fate as the inhabitants of the city.[13]

The author of the *Historia Augusta* also recounts that some soldiers wanted to assassinate Maximus (i.e., Pupienus) and Balbinus, when Maximus was involved in the preparations for an expedition against the Parthians (Persians), while Balbinus was simultaneously engaged in preparing one against the Germanic tribes. According to this author, the soldiers revolted against the Senate and what they perceived as the senators' attempt to maintain control over the military. On their part, Pupienus and Balbinus exercised their authority in moderation, to the satisfaction of the Roman people and the Senate. It is reported that the both rulers introduced just laws and allowed many affairs of the state to be considered by the Senate.[14] Unfortunately, the author does not explain why the emperor had been preparing for a war with Persians. As his work is generally not a reliable source, it is difficult to determine to what extent his transmission may be fiction. In regard of this passage, it is certain that the author of the *Historia Augusta* wished to convey the image of the two assassinated emperors as ideal rulers, involved in co-operation with the Senate and successful in exercising control of the army. In theory, he may have credited the emperors with efforts to prepare the campaigns which, in actual fact, they had not been planning for. After all, the ideal emperor should be belligerent, always ready to defend the borders of the state or endeavour to expand them, while the Per-

ski septuagenario ab amicis, collegis disciplinique dedicata, ed. A. Tomas, Warszawa 2015, pp. 469–475; K. Maksymiuk, *The capture Ḥaṭrā…*, pp. 89–95.

[13] K. Jakubiak, op. cit., p. 474.

[14] Historia Augusta, Max. Balb. 13, 3–5: "His auditis milites gravius saevire coeperunt, in senatum praecipue, qui sibi triumphare de militibus videbatur. Et Balbinus quidem cum Maximo urbem cum magna moderatione gaudente senatu et p. R. regebant; senatui plurimum deferebatur; leges optimas condebant, moderate causas audiebant, res bellicas pulcherrime disponebant. Et cum iam paratum esset, ut contras Parthos Maximus proficisceretur, Balbinus contra Germanos, puer autem Gordianus Romae remaneret, milites occasionem quaerentes occidendorum principum, cum primo invenire vix possent, quia Germani stipabant Maximum atque Balbinum, cotidie ingravescebant."

sians and the Germanic tribes had been the foremost opponents of the *Imperium Romanum* in the course of the 3rd–4th centuries. It is difficult to believe that the Roman Empire would have started to wage two different military campaigns at once. Therefore, on the basis of such information, it is practically impossible to formulate a conclusive opinion on whether the author of the *Historia Augusta* might have really been aware of any military confrontation between the Roman Empire and Persia in the 230s.

Most of the details on the Roman-Persian conflict during the second half of the 230s can be found in the works of two Byzantine authors. The earlier one, Syncellus, in his account of Gordian III's campaign against Persia, refers to the emperor's regaining of the two Mesopotamian cities, Carrhae and Nisibis, both of which previously lost during the reign of Maximinus the Mysian (i.e., Maximinus Thrax).[15] The transmission found in Syncellus is reiterated in Zonaras. There is only a very slight (and insignificant) difference between these two authors as Zonaras does not refer to Maximinus as "Mysian".[16] As some scholars argue, Dexippus may have served as a common source for both Zosimus and Syncellus.[17] Should we believe the details transmitted by the above-mentioned authors, the two cities must have already fallen during the reign of Maximinus Thrax (i.e., before mid-April) or before the beginning of June 238.[18] Those pieces of information can be compared with two passages in Herodian. In the first one, it is reported that Severus Alexander, after his failed campaign against Ardashir I, proceeded to gather his troops at Antioch before receiving news of the Persians dispersing their forces. Herodian goes on to comment that the Persians would not resume any hostile action or take up arms for as long as three or four years.[19] In the other passage, he recounts how Maximinus Thrax, in his speech following the usurpation of Gordian I and his son, reminded the soldiers of the previous victories over the Germanic

[15] Sync. p. 443.

[16] Zon. 12, 18 (581).

[17] X. Loriot, *Les premières années…*, p. 717; E. Kettenhofen, *Die Eroberung von Nisibis und Karrhai durch die Sāsāniden in der Zeit Kaiser Maximins, 235/236 n. Chr.*, "Iranica Antiqua" 1995, vol. 30, p. 160.

[18] R. W. Burgess, op. cit., p. 68.

[19] Herod. 7, 6, 6.

tribes, pleading the Sarmatians for peace, and the Persians who had earlier invaded Mesopotamia but, at the time of his statement, continued to remain peaceful.[20] The former mention would suggest some fighting between the Romans and Persians, taking place in 235 or 236, while according to the latter, there was peace between the two empires during the winter of 238. Based on such details, some scholars have attempted to propose the dates of the loss of Carrhae and Nisibis by the Romans, namely the first of the dates mentioned,[21] or the year 238, already after the deaths of Gordian I and Gordian II.[22] The latter hypothesis would have been supported by the above-mentioned inscription from Dura Europos. Moreover, there is some epigraphic evidence for the cognomen *Parthicus Maximus* used in reference to Maximinus Thrax.[23] Perhaps, the founder of that inscription may have believed that the emperor would assume the title on account of the campaign fought in Mesopotamia. It is significant that the inscription was made in 237.

In view of all the evidence available, it would be difficult to determine the exact dates of the loss of Carrhae and Nisibis. The inscription and Herodian's transmission would suggest the year 235–236, but the same passage in Herodian's work could also suggest that he might not have considered the Persian assault as anything very serious. The whole situation may have been even more complicated. The initial clash between the Romans and Persians may have taken place at the beginning of the reign of Maximinus Thrax, but the fighting would only escalate in 238 and the loss of Carrhae and Nisibis would have very likely occurred at that time. How-

[20] Herod. 7, 8, 4.

[21] E. Kettenhofen, *The Persian campaign of Gordian III…*, pp. 154–155; idem, *Die Eroberung von Nisibis und Karrhai…*, pp. 159–177; K. Mosig-Walburg, op. cit., p. 29.

[22] W. Ensslin, op. cit., p. 9; A. Maricq, *Classica et Orientalia 2. Les dernières années de Hatra: l'alliance romaine*, "Syria" 1957, vol. 34, p. 295; X. Loriot, *Les premières années…*, p. 759; J. Wiesehöfer, *Die Anfänge sassanidischer Westpolitik und die Untergang Hatras*, "Klio" 1982, vol. 64, p. 447; D. S. Potter, *Prophecy and history…*, p. 35; B. Bleckmann, *Die Reichskrise des III. Jahrhunderts in der spätantiken und byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung. Untersuchungen zu den nachdionischen Quellen der Chronik des Johannes Zonaras*, München 1992, pp. 64–65.

[23] CIL XIII 8863.

ever, some historians remain sceptical about the loss of the two cities during the reign Maximinus Thrax. According to this particular hypothesis, the capture of the fortified cities by the Persians had been preceded by the fall of Hatra.[24] Yet the transmission found in Zonaras and Syncellus is very clear on this point.[25] The capture of those two cities in the Roman province of Mesopotamia must have taken place before the fall of Hatra.

Even more controversial is a certain mention found in the *Historia Augusta*. According to the author, Gordian III regained Carrhae and Nisibis, which would imply that the two fortified cities might have been lost before. Still, this mention is far from certain and the emperor is also reported to have retaken Antioch.[26] Yet no other author makes any reference to Shapur I's invasion in 242 or Syria being captured by the Persians at the time[27]. Such statements are simply implausible and unlikely. If the Persians had already seized Antioch during Gordian III's reign, it would have been surely recorded in many sources. Of course, the Persians did capture Antioch in the 3rd century, but this happened ten years later, during the reign of Trebonianus Gallus. It is hypothesized that Dexippus may have been a source for the *Historia Augusta* in this passage with some complementary content invented by the author of the latter work.[28] As a result, this source confirms the details known from Syncellus and Zonaras on the one hand, but on the other, it provides some completely implausible information, very difficult to be taken in earnest. The *Historia Augusta* makes no suggestions as regards the loss of the two cities and it is impossible to say if the author

[24] S. R. Hauser, *On the significance…*, p. 138.

[25] K. Mosig-Walburg, op. cit., p. 29.

[26] Hist. Aug. Gord. 26, 5–6: "Inde per Syriam Antiochiam veni, quae a Persis iam tenebatur. Illic frequentibus proeliis pugnavit et vicit ac Sapore Persarum rege post Artaxerxen summoto, et Antiochiam recepit et Carras et Nisibin, quae omnia sub Persarum imperio erant."

[27] Discussion of the alleged presence of Emperor Gordian III in Antioch in AD 239, see: H. Brandt, *Ein numismatischer Mythos: Ein Ostfeldzug Gordians III. 239/240 n. Chr.*, „Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik" 2020, 213, pp. 301–304.

[28] F. Paschoud, *Histoire Auguste, T. 4, 1, Vie des deux Maximins, des trois Gordiens, de Maxime et Balbin*, Paris 2018, p. 263.

of this work would have identified it with the reign of Maximinus Thrax or, perhaps, with Gordian III.

According to S. R. Hauser, it is not very likely that the Persians would have taken hold of Carrhae and Nisibis without capturing Singara and Rheisana in the first place.[29] None the less, we should be aware of the brevity in the transmission found in Syncellus and Zonaras. They would not need to mention all the cities conquered by the Persian forces. The fact that only those two localities are mentioned might have attested to their relative significance in the history of the Roman Empire. Carrhae was associated with the place of Crassus' defeat and death. As regards Nisibis, the defenders managed to resist the siege laid by the forces of Shapur II, but later on, the city was ceded by Jovian. It should be said that S. R. Hauser may have been correct, at least in part, here. If Shapur I had captured Carrhae, he would have most likely taken over a major part of the Roman province of Mesopotamia as well.[30] It is only a matter of speculation what part of the province may have remained under Roman control. Likewise, there is no direct evidence for the capture of Edessa by the Sassanids.[31] The lack of any mention, in Syncellus and Zonaras, with reference to this particular city may be significant; the locality (situated north-west of Carrhae) became famous as the probable place of Emperor Valerian's capitulation. In addition, a political upheaval occurred in the city in 239 or 240. Aelius Septimius Abgar, the son of Ma'nu and a descendant of one of the old local dynasties, came into authority in the city.[32] There is nothing to suggest that he may have exercised his power against the Romans' will. If the Persian cap-

[29] S. R. Hauser, *On the significance…*, p. 137.

[30] K. Mosig-Walburg, op. cit., p. 29.

[31] S. K. Ross, *The last king of Edessa: New evidence from the Middle Euphrates*, "Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik" 1993, vol. 97, p. 190.

[32] J. Teixidor, *Les derniers rois d'Edesse d'après deux nouveaux documents syriaques*, "Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik" 1989, vol. 76, pp. 219–222; W. Ensslin, op. cit., p. 130; M. Gawlikowski, *The last kings of Edessa*, in: *Symposium Syriacum VII*, ed. R. Lavenant, Rome 1998, pp. 421–428. Osrhoene did not enjoy its period of independence for very long as it was re-annexed by the Roman Empire most likely already in the years 241–242; see W. Ensslin, op. cit., p. 131; S. K. Ross, *Roman Edessa. Politics and culture on the Eastern fringes of the Roman Empire*, London–New York 2001, p. 75.

ture of the cities east of Carrhae during this conflict is quite likely, Edessa may have remained under Roman control in the late 230s. On the other hand, a certain change in the status of the city would have taken place in connection with the loss of a major part of the province of Mesopotamia by the Romans.

On the basis of all the relevant mentions in the sources, it is possible to propose a reconstruction of the events. The Persians attacked Hatra, where a small Roman garrison may have been stationed, but the conflict was not limited to (or concentrated on) the city itself. It was not very long before the fighting would spread over the Roman province of Mesopotamia. However, details on the actual course of the military confrontation remain unknown. Although the Persians failed to capture Dura Europos, their advances in the war were unquestionable in view of the fact that a major part of the province was conquered and the city of Hatra finally captured and destroyed. Yet it should be stressed that all we know about this conflict, as found in the Latin and Byzantine narrative sources, is no more than three sentences from three authors (but apart from the confusing transmission in the *Historia Augusta*, even two sentences from two authors, both of them dependent on a common source).

Finally, we should also address the question of our very limited knowledge in regard of this conflict. It is difficult to say with certainty if there is any ancient historian who may have written about this war in more detail. Unfortunately, the works by Asinius Quadratus, dealing with the history of Rome and the wars waged against the eastern neighbour of the Roman Empire, are entirely lost. According to the *Suda*, his *Chilieteris* covered a period up to the reign of Severus Alexander, but it is not certain to which specific point in time his *Parthica* may have extended.[33] It is less likely that the events of the late 230s would have been described by two other authors whose writings are lost: Nicostratus of Trebizond, who recounted the

[33] On this historian, see G. Zecchini, *Asinio Quadrato storico di Filippo l'Arabo*, in: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. II.34.4, Berlin 1998, pp. 2990––3021; P. Janiszewski, *The missing link: Greek pagan historiography in the second half of the third century and in the fourth century*, Warsaw 2006, pp. 27–39, 85–91; B. Bleckmann, J. Groß, *Historiker der Reichskrise des 3. Jahrhunderts I*, Paderborn 2016, pp. 3–7.

events from the reign of Philip the Arab up to Emperor Valerian's defeat and death in captivity,[34] and Philostratus, describing the history of the Roman East from the Persian wars under Shapur I to the fall of Zenobia.[35] Although the starting point for the both authors' accounts are the events chronologically later than the conflict under consideration, they may have possibly referred to the earlier occurrences as well. As I have noted before, Dexippus might have written about it, but none of the extant fragments of his works concerns the events in the East. In turn, in the extant work by Herodian (reaching up to the year 238), there is practically no mention of the East, beginning from Severus Alexander's departure for the West in 232, except for the previously mentioned two allusive remarks. Unfortunately, the work of the enigmatic historian Eusebius is almost completely lost[36] and there are only some excerpts preserved from Peter the Patrician's work.[37] As far as no definitive propositions can be formulated here on account of the fact that most of the above-mentioned works is lost, this particular conflict is almost completely erased from memory across the later historiographical tradition. It is clear that a major part of the Late-Roman and Byzantine Greek-speaking authors as well as Latin historians (except for the enigmatic author of the *Historia Augusta*) pass over this almost completely forgotten war.

It is obvious that Roman (and Byzantine) authors may have perceived the conflict as a relatively insignificant affair due to the fact that the fighting occurred in a peripheral province of the Empire, with only the local Roman force involved, and the emperor did not participate in the military confrontation. Still, it should be emphasized here that the outcome of the fighting was, most probably, the loss of a vast part of the province and, in consequence, a large-scale response by the Romans. Although Roman historians were able to ignore the defeats and losses suffered by the major Ro-

[34] Cf. D. S. Potter, *Prophecy and history…*, p. 71; P. Janiszewski, op. cit., pp. 92–96; B. Bleckmann, J. Groß, op. cit., pp. 67–73.

[35] Cf. P. Janiszewski, op. cit., pp. 97–109; B. Bleckmann, J. Groß, op. cit., pp. 77–81.

[36] Cf. B. Bleckmann, J. Groß, op. cit., pp. 145–148.

[37] On Peter the Patrician, see Th. M. Banchich, *The lost history of Peter the Patrician. An account of Rome's imperial past from the age of Justinian*, London–New York 2015, pp. 1–16.

man forces, in particular when not under the emperors' direct command (such as the battle at Barbalissos), we do have accounts of the conflicts when only some municipalities or cities within the Roman Empire were captured and sacked. The case in point could be such disastrous occurrences as the incursions into Greece and Asia Minor by the Goths,[38] but also some vividly depicted (though less significant strategically) events such as the capture of Syracuse by the Franks.[39]

There are also two other hypotheses which would account for the obscurity of the probable loss of most of the Roman province of Mesopotamia. Firstly, a number of various conflicts and wars with similar characteristics and circumstances occurred in the course of the 3rd century. As a result, many later historians would have a problem with distinguishing one conflict from another.[40] It was difficult to be certain of how much time would have elapsed between one and the other. For instance, the Byzantine authors regarded Shapur I's second campaign against the Roman Empire (252) as the first phase of the Persian's third campaign (259 or 260), as indicated in Zosimus and Syncellus.[41] According to the perspective held by some Late-Roman and Byzantine authors, the fighting taking place in the 230s may have occurred as just a prelude to Gordian III's campaign several years later. It is also important to notice that the loss of Mesopotamia was temporary as Gordian III successfully retook Carrhae and Nisibis.[42] This particular fact (a major part of Mesopotamia regained) may have contributed, in a longer perspective, to the perception of the war in the late 230s as a conflict of very little significance. Secondly, it is fair to venture a hypothesis that the authors from the Roman Empire may have perceived the

[38] For the Gothic invasions, see M. Salamon, *The chronology of Gothic incursion into Asia Minor in the IIIrd century A.D.*, "Eos" 1971, vol. 59, pp. 109–139.

[39] Zos. 1, 71, 2. Cf. Paschoud, *Zosime: Histoire Nouvelle: Tome I: Livres I Et II*, Paris 2000, p. 187.

[40] On the chaotic character of many descriptions of the Gothic raids and incursions in the 3rd century, see A. Alföldi, *The sources for the Gothic invasions of the years 260–270*, in: *The Cambridge ancient history*, vol. 12, eds. S. A. Cook, F. Adcock, J. B. Bury, Cambridge 1939, pp. 721–723.

[41] Zos. 1, 36, 1–2; Sync. p. 466.

[42] Sync. p. 443; Zon. 12, 18 (581).

events unfolding in the East as more "exotic" and thus less important than those taking place in the Balkan provinces or Italy. Such a perception is poignantly expressed by Herodian, as he describes Emperor Severus Alexander's decision. As he recounts, Italy was separated from Persians by a vast terrain and the sea, while the Romans had known their Eastern adversary only from what they may have heard about Persians. On the other hand, the Balkans were geographically closer and the Germanic tribes had been almost neighbours of Italy.[43]

An attempt to find answers to the question why the Roman (and Byzantine) historiography had forgotten the Roman-Persian conflict in the late 230s cannot be conclusive or resolved definitively at this point. In the present text, a couple of hypotheses have been offered with the aim of explaining this issue. It is possible that the accumulation of several factors may have contributed to the situation where the near-complete loss of the province of Mesopotamia in the 230s failed to survive in the Roman historiographic memory.

[43] Herod. 6, 8.