

# The Roman Frontier with Persia in North-Eastern Mesopotamia

Fortresses and roads around Singara

Anthony Comfort

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Père Antoine Poidebard and of Sir Aurel Stein, pioneers in the field of aerial archaeology, and to David Kennedy who has done much to bring the attention of scholars to their work.



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This book is a study of the historical geography of north-east Mesopotamia during the period when it was a centre of conflict between the Roman empire and its only true rivals in Late Antiquity: the Parthians and then the Sasanian Persians. It is the outcome of a personal interest in Rome's eastern frontier dating back many years. In 1995 the writer began visiting and working with a Franco-Turkish archaeological team around Zeugma, firstly a large Hellenistic and then a Roman city on the Euphrates, which became the main crossing point of the river for the Seleucid kingdom (from 312 to 63 BCE) and then an important link between Rome and Parthia. He conducted a broad one-person survey of the areas to be inundated by the dams at Birecik and Carchemish (completed in 2000), as a member of the team then excavating the sites of Zeugma on both banks of the river.<sup>1</sup> David Kennedy was a mentor and inspiration for this work which made use of Russian satellite photography, then easily available.

Because of the recent impossibility of visiting south-east Turkey, north-east Syria and much of northern Iraq as an archaeologist – and even of obtaining recent aerial photographs – for the moment the study of the historical geography of these areas has to rely on satellite imagery. Archaeologists are fortunate now to have easy free access to the satellite photos on Google Earth but especially to the Corona series of black and white photos taken from space in 1967 and 1968 (see box at end of this chapter).

The Birecik dam inundated much of the ruins of the city of Zeugma itself (which was preceded by the twin Hellenistic cities of Seleuceia and Apamea, located respectively on the east and west banks of the river), but also many other remains from antiquity, including several other crossing points of the river Euphrates and especially that at Ayni. The latter had probably once been known as 'Capersana' during the Roman period and is located some 30 kilometres north of Zeugma.<sup>2</sup>

The results of the author's work on the Euphrates were published in *Anatolian Studies* (2000; Comfort and Ergeç 2001) and led to a strong personal interest in the ancient roads and fortresses of the region, especially to the east of the river Euphrates. When he later conducted research for a doctorate at Exeter University, supervised by Stephen Mitchell (Comfort 2009<sup>3</sup>), it was natural that these would be the focus of the thesis. To collect material for this he was at that time able to travel widely in south-east Turkey, especially the upper Tigris valley, and also visited Cyrrhus and the northern sections of the Euphrates valley in Syria. These visits made possible a series of articles on fortresses of the Tur Abdin and on roads and bridges of the region, which built on research conducted on the ground for the doctoral thesis.<sup>4</sup> Very regrettably the completion in 2020 of the Ilisu dam on the Tigris, near the point at which

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<sup>1</sup> See Zeugma 1 to V, Istanbul and Lyons. Also Wagner 1976, Kennedy 1998, Aylward 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Following Dussaud 1927: 459-460

<sup>3</sup> The date of this thesis has been referred to by other scholars as 2008 but it was not in fact approved until 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Comfort 2011, 2017, 2018, 2021



Map 1. Setting, showing area of concern

Turkey's frontier joins those of Syria and Iraq, has now inundated much of the upper Tigris valley too.

After his work in south-east Turkey, in 2016 the writer participated in the 'Eastern Habur Archaeological Survey' conducted by the University of Tübingen.<sup>5</sup> This provided an opportunity to investigate remains from classical antiquity in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. A book, co-authored with Michal Marciak, discusses the remains along the Tigris valley

<sup>5</sup> The eastern Habur is a tributary river of the Tigris whose lower reaches form the current border between Turkey and Iraq. It has to be distinguished from the western Habur – or Khabur – which is the river that is central to much of this book and joins the Euphrates at Circesium (Busairah).

north of Mosul, including the sections of the valley in south-east Turkey around Diyarbakir and up to its source in Lake Hazar (Comfort and Marciak 2018).

These visits to the region did not include tours of the sites in northern Mesopotamia south of the Syria/Turkey frontier, that is, on the west bank of the Tigris in eastern Syria and in northern Iraq. The security conditions in these regions still make travel very hazardous and even in south-east Turkey the security situation has made it difficult for archaeologists to visit and obtain permits.

Nevertheless, in recent years this part of the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire has begun to attract the attention which it deserves. Mitford recently published the results of a lifetime studying the frontier in eastern Turkey (2018). Various studies of the region to the south, especially in eastern Syria and northern Iraq, had already made use initially of aerial photographs - and more recently of satellite imagery. The collection of aerial photographs taken by Poidebard in the 1930s,<sup>6</sup> and also those used by Van Liere and Lauffray, are no longer accessible, although a large number of Stein's aerial photographs stored at the British Academy have recently been made available online by APAAME.<sup>7</sup> Further aerial surveys have not been possible in the wider region of the Near East, except to a limited extent in Jordan.<sup>8</sup> However, satellite photography available from Google Earth, but especially the Corona imagery of the 1960s (now made easily accessible via the website of the University of Arkansas<sup>9</sup>), have compensated to some extent for the impossibility of obtaining more aerial photos.

Most archaeological studies of this region of north-eastern Mesopotamia have been concerned primarily with sites of the Bronze Age, but some general studies have recently been published which have elucidated the history of the region in the later Roman empire, up to the military expansion of the Arabs following their unification by the prophet Muhammad. The battles of the Yarmuk and Qadisiyya (both in 636 CE) put an end to the Roman presence in Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as entirely eliminating the Persian Empire of the Sasanians. The Arab invasions thus constitute a simple way of bringing the study of Roman Mesopotamia and the frontier with Persia to an end.

This book addresses the most eastern parts of the Roman empire south of Armenia and in particular those bordering the frontier with Persia. It concentrates on the area around Singara, a military outpost on or near this frontier which became a small city and a Roman colony under the emperor Septimius Severus - or possibly as early as the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Singara is now situated in northern Iraq; this book thus complements the study of those roads and fortresses along the Romano-Persian frontier in south-east Turkey, which were the main object of the writer's doctoral thesis (Comfort 2009).

The fortress-city of Singara was surrendered to the Persians by Jovian, following the disastrous outcome of the emperor Julian's expedition to Ctesiphon, capital of the Sasanian empire, in

<sup>6</sup> The photographic plates published in the second volume of this work (but not yet the text in the first volume) may be consulted at <http://digital.library.stonybrook.edu/cdm/ref/collection/amar/id/155083>.

<sup>7</sup> [www.apaame.org](http://www.apaame.org) and <https://www.flickr.com/photos/apaame/albums/72157652009016911> - accessed 31/01/2022

<sup>8</sup> Poidebard 1934, Gregory and Kennedy 1985, Riley 1986, Kennedy and Bewley 2004. Some of Stein's photos are included in an archive of Stein material at the British Academy. These have been scanned by APAAME and are available on-line.

<sup>9</sup> <https://corona.cast.uark.edu/>. It should be noted however that the resolution of some Corona imagery is poor.

363 CE. It was again captured by the general Maurice in 578 CE shortly before he became emperor,<sup>10</sup> but after 363 it had lost its significance as a crucial element of the Roman frontier.

Thus, the book concerns principally the period from Trajan's invasion of Persia in 115 to 363 CE, although the subsequent years up to the Arab conquest of Syria and Mesopotamia are also part of the story. It seeks to review existing studies of the frontier but also to provide some new information about the roads and fortresses of the area. Because of the difficulties associated with travel in the region it too relies on the aerial photographs of Poidebard and Stein and on satellite imagery to illustrate the places discussed. The Peutinger Table is also used extensively to situate routes and various places of importance during the conflict between Rome and Persia in this region of northern Mesopotamia.

Although travel has become difficult or impossible in recent years various early writers in Arabic have described north-east Mesopotamia, known to them as the Jazira, in summary fashion; these include Ibn Shaddad, Ibn Hawqal (born in Nisibis), al-Maqdisi, al-Qazwini and Ibn Battuta. Yaqut states that it was the birthplace in around 1086 CE of Sultan Sinjar (or Sanjar), son of Malik Shah and one of the greatest Seljuks.<sup>11</sup> (This writer does not speak Arabic and has relied for the most part on Le Strange's summary of 1905). European travellers did visit the region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in some cases their accounts are of value for understanding its ancient history and geography. In particular, Forbes (1839); Layard (1853); Sachau (1883); Von Oppenheim (1899, 1900: Vol II); Sarre and Herzfeld (1911-1920). In the mid-twentieth century visitors specifically interested in the region's archaeology included Mallowan (1936a, b), Lloyd (1938), Oates (1956, 1968, Oates and Oates 1959) and Ibrahim (1986). Hauser has recently discussed the road network around Hatra (1995, Hauser and Tucker 2009) and for this reason this paper treats Hatra only briefly. (Its relationship with Rome in the years before its destruction by Shapur I in 240/241 CE remains obscure.)

Other writers on the historical geography of the region whose work has been important in the preparation of this book include Chapot (1907), Dussaud (1927), Dillemann (1962) and, for later periods, Honigsmann (1935). Recent works include Wheeler (2007), Edwell (2008), Cameron (2018) and Palermo (2019 – especially Chapter 3). *'Roman Military Architecture on the Eastern Frontier'*, Shelagh Gregory's doctoral thesis, published by Hakkert (1995), together with her article in *'The Roman Army in the East'* (1996), have also been an important source of information for some of the fortresses of the region as have both the text and the photos published in *'Rome's Desert frontier from the air'* (Kennedy and Riley 1990). Harrel's recent study entitled *'The Nisibis War; the defence of the Roman East AD 337-363'* is a valuable addition to the material available for that period (2016) although there is room for doubt about several events which he portrays as certainties.

Earlier studies of roads in northern Mesopotamia have concerned the region of Hatra, 110km to the south-east of Nisibis (Altaweel and Hauser 2004, also using Corona satellite imagery) and the Jaghjagh valley, 80kms to the north-west (Palermo 2015). This book concerns only

<sup>10</sup> Theophylact Simocatta iii.16.1

<sup>11</sup> However the Jazira was defined in the 13th century CE by Izz ad Din ibn Chaddad (or Shaddad) as a wide region including the Diyar Modar (Harran and Rakka), the Diyar Rabi'a (Nisibis, Ras el- Ain, Cizre and Sinjat), as well as the Diyar Bakr (Amid/Diyarbakir, Mayarfarqin/Silvan, Hisn Keyf, Arzan and Mardin (Cahen 1937). In this book it is thus only the Diyar Rabi'a which is concerned.

north-eastern Mesopotamia as far north as the Tur Abdin whose escarpment runs east-west some 4 to 30km north of the Berlin to Bagdad railway (which constitutes the current border between Turkey and Syria for over 300km). It seeks to offer a new approach to studies of Rome's eastern frontier by presenting and illustrating the known sites, some of which have already been discussed in Kennedy and Riley 1990, a book which includes many interesting reproductions of photos taken especially by Poidebard and Stein.

The author thanks in particular Eberhard Sauer for his invaluable comments and support and also Chris Lightfoot and Peter Edwell for their observations on an early version of this book, which was more especially directed to the study of the road network. There will certainly remain errors and omissions for which of course the author is solely responsible.





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This book is dedicated to the memory of Père Antoine Poidebard and of Sir Aurel Stein, pioneers in the field of aerial archaeology, and to David Kennedy who has done much to bring the attention of scholars to their work.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This book is a study of the historical geography of north-east Mesopotamia during the period when it was a centre of conflict between the Roman empire and its only true rivals in Late Antiquity: the Parthians and then the Sasanian Persians. It is the outcome of a personal interest in Rome's eastern frontier dating back many years. In 1995 the writer began visiting and working with a Franco-Turkish archaeological team around Zeugma, firstly a large Hellenistic and then a Roman city on the Euphrates, which became the main crossing point of the river for the Seleucid kingdom (from 312 to 63 BCE) and then an important link between Rome and Parthia. He conducted a broad one-person survey of the areas to be inundated by the dams at Birecik and Carchemish (completed in 2000), as a member of the team then excavating the sites of Zeugma on both banks of the river.<sup>1</sup> David Kennedy was a mentor and inspiration for this work which made use of Russian satellite photography, then easily available.

Because of the recent impossibility of visiting south-east Turkey, north-east Syria and much of northern Iraq as an archaeologist – and even of obtaining recent aerial photographs – for the moment the study of the historical geography of these areas has to rely on satellite imagery. Archaeologists are fortunate now to have easy free access to the satellite photos on Google Earth but especially to the Corona series of black and white photos taken from space in 1967 and 1968 (see box at end of this chapter).

The Birecik dam inundated much of the ruins of the city of Zeugma itself (which was preceded by the twin Hellenistic cities of Seleuceia and Apamea, located respectively on the east and west banks of the river), but also many other remains from antiquity, including several other crossing points of the river Euphrates and especially that at Ayni. The latter had probably once been known as 'Capersana' during the Roman period and is located some 30 kilometres north of Zeugma.<sup>2</sup>

The results of the author's work on the Euphrates were published in *Anatolian Studies* (2000; Comfort and Ergeç 2001) and led to a strong personal interest in the ancient roads and fortresses of the region, especially to the east of the river Euphrates. When he later conducted research for a doctorate at Exeter University, supervised by Stephen Mitchell (Comfort 2009<sup>3</sup>), it was natural that these would be the focus of the thesis. To collect material for this he was at that time able to travel widely in south-east Turkey, especially the upper Tigris valley, and also visited Cyrrhus and the northern sections of the Euphrates valley in Syria. These visits made possible a series of articles on fortresses of the Tur Abdin and on roads and bridges of the region, which built on research conducted on the ground for the doctoral thesis.<sup>4</sup> Very regrettably the completion in 2020 of the Ilisu dam on the Tigris, near the point at which

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<sup>1</sup> See Zeugma 1 to V, Istanbul and Lyons. Also Wagner 1976, Kennedy 1998, Aylward 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Following Dussaud 1927: 459-460

<sup>3</sup> The date of this thesis has been referred to by other scholars as 2008 but it was not in fact approved until 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Comfort 2011, 2017, 2018, 2021





Map 1. Setting, showing area of concern

Turkey's frontier joins those of Syria and Iraq, has now inundated much of the upper Tigris valley too.

After his work in south-east Turkey, in 2016 the writer participated in the 'Eastern Habur Archaeological Survey' conducted by the University of Tübingen.<sup>5</sup> This provided an opportunity to investigate remains from classical antiquity in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. A book, co-authored with Michal Marciak, discusses the remains along the Tigris valley

<sup>5</sup> The eastern Habur is a tributary river of the Tigris whose lower reaches form the current border between Turkey and Iraq. It has to be distinguished from the western Habur – or Khabur – which is the river that is central to much of this book and joins the Euphrates at Circesium (Busairah).

north of Mosul, including the sections of the valley in south-east Turkey around Diyarbakir and up to its source in Lake Hazar (Comfort and Marciak 2018).

These visits to the region did not include tours of the sites in northern Mesopotamia south of the Syria/Turkey frontier, that is, on the west bank of the Tigris in eastern Syria and in northern Iraq. The security conditions in these regions still make travel very hazardous and even in south-east Turkey the security situation has made it difficult for archaeologists to visit and obtain permits.

Nevertheless, in recent years this part of the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire has begun to attract the attention which it deserves. Mitford recently published the results of a lifetime studying the frontier in eastern Turkey (2018). Various studies of the region to the south, especially in eastern Syria and northern Iraq, had already made use initially of aerial photographs - and more recently of satellite imagery. The collection of aerial photographs taken by Poidebard in the 1930s,<sup>6</sup> and also those used by Van Liere and Lauffray, are no longer accessible, although a large number of Stein's aerial photographs stored at the British Academy have recently been made available online by APAAME.<sup>7</sup> Further aerial surveys have not been possible in the wider region of the Near East, except to a limited extent in Jordan.<sup>8</sup> However, satellite photography available from Google Earth, but especially the Corona imagery of the 1960s (now made easily accessible via the website of the University of Arkansas<sup>9</sup>), have compensated to some extent for the impossibility of obtaining more aerial photos.

Most archaeological studies of this region of north-eastern Mesopotamia have been concerned primarily with sites of the Bronze Age, but some general studies have recently been published which have elucidated the history of the region in the later Roman empire, up to the military expansion of the Arabs following their unification by the prophet Muhammad. The battles of the Yarmuk and Qadisiyya (both in 636 CE) put an end to the Roman presence in Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as entirely eliminating the Persian Empire of the Sasanians. The Arab invasions thus constitute a simple way of bringing the study of Roman Mesopotamia and the frontier with Persia to an end.

This book addresses the most eastern parts of the Roman empire south of Armenia and in particular those bordering the frontier with Persia. It concentrates on the area around Singara, a military outpost on or near this frontier which became a small city and a Roman colony under the emperor Septimius Severus - or possibly as early as the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Singara is now situated in northern Iraq; this book thus complements the study of those roads and fortresses along the Romano-Persian frontier in south-east Turkey, which were the main object of the writer's doctoral thesis (Comfort 2009).

The fortress-city of Singara was surrendered to the Persians by Jovian, following the disastrous outcome of the emperor Julian's expedition to Ctesiphon, capital of the Sasanian empire, in

<sup>6</sup> The photographic plates published in the second volume of this work (but not yet the text in the first volume) may be consulted at <http://digital.library.stonybrook.edu/cdm/ref/collection/amar/id/155083>.

<sup>7</sup> [www.apaame.org](http://www.apaame.org) and <https://www.flickr.com/photos/apaame/albums/72157652009016911> - accessed 31/01/2022

<sup>8</sup> Poidebard 1934, Gregory and Kennedy 1985, Riley 1986, Kennedy and Bewley 2004. Some of Stein's photos are included in an archive of Stein material at the British Academy. These have been scanned by APAAME and are available on-line.

<sup>9</sup> <https://corona.cast.uark.edu/>. It should be noted however that the resolution of some Corona imagery is poor.

363 CE. It was again captured by the general Maurice in 578 CE shortly before he became emperor,<sup>10</sup> but after 363 it had lost its significance as a crucial element of the Roman frontier.

Thus, the book concerns principally the period from Trajan's invasion of Persia in 115 to 363 CE, although the subsequent years up to the Arab conquest of Syria and Mesopotamia are also part of the story. It seeks to review existing studies of the frontier but also to provide some new information about the roads and fortresses of the area. Because of the difficulties associated with travel in the region it too relies on the aerial photographs of Poidebard and Stein and on satellite imagery to illustrate the places discussed. The Peutinger Table is also used extensively to situate routes and various places of importance during the conflict between Rome and Persia in this region of northern Mesopotamia.

Although travel has become difficult or impossible in recent years various early writers in Arabic have described north-east Mesopotamia, known to them as the Jazira, in summary fashion; these include Ibn Shaddad, Ibn Hawqal (born in Nisibis), al-Maqdisi, al-Qazwini and Ibn Battuta. Yaqut states that it was the birthplace in around 1086 CE of Sultan Sinjar (or Sanjar), son of Malik Shah and one of the greatest Seljuks.<sup>11</sup> (This writer does not speak Arabic and has relied for the most part on Le Strange's summary of 1905). European travellers did visit the region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in some cases their accounts are of value for understanding its ancient history and geography. In particular, Forbes (1839); Layard (1853); Sachau (1883); Von Oppenheim (1899, 1900: Vol II); Sarre and Herzfeld (1911-1920). In the mid-twentieth century visitors specifically interested in the region's archaeology included Mallowan (1936a, b), Lloyd (1938), Oates (1956, 1968, Oates and Oates 1959) and Ibrahim (1986). Hauser has recently discussed the road network around Hatra (1995, Hauser and Tucker 2009) and for this reason this paper treats Hatra only briefly. (Its relationship with Rome in the years before its destruction by Shapur I in 240/241 CE remains obscure.)

Other writers on the historical geography of the region whose work has been important in the preparation of this book include Chapot (1907), Dussaud (1927), Dillemann (1962) and, for later periods, Honigmann (1935). Recent works include Wheeler (2007), Edwell (2008), Cameron (2018) and Palermo (2019 – especially Chapter 3). *Roman Military Architecture on the Eastern Frontier*, Shelagh Gregory's doctoral thesis, published by Hakkert (1995), together with her article in 'The Roman Army in the East' (1996), have also been an important source of information for some of the fortresses of the region as have both the text and the photos published in 'Rome's Desert frontier from the air' (Kennedy and Riley 1990). Harrel's recent study entitled 'The Nisibis War; the defence of the Roman East AD 337-363' is a valuable addition to the material available for that period (2016) although there is room for doubt about several events which he portrays as certainties.

Earlier studies of roads in northern Mesopotamia have concerned the region of Hatra, 110km to the south-east of Nisibis (Altaweel and Hauser 2004, also using Corona satellite imagery) and the Jaghjagh valley, 80kms to the north-west (Palermo 2015). This book concerns only

<sup>10</sup> Theophylact Simocatta iii.16.1

<sup>11</sup> However the Jazira was defined in the 13th century CE by Izz ad Din ibn Chaddad (or Shaddad) as a wide region including the Diyar Modar (Harran and Rakka), the Diyar Rabi'a (Nisibis, Ras el- Ain, Cizre and Sinjat), as well as the Diyar Bakr (Amid/Diyarbakir, Mayarfarqin/Silvan, Hisn Keyf, Arzan and Mardin (Cahen 1937). In this book it is thus only the Diyar Rabi'a which is concerned.

north-eastern Mesopotamia as far north as the Tur Abdin whose escarpment runs east-west some 4 to 30km north of the Berlin to Bagdad railway (which constitutes the current border between Turkey and Syria for over 300km). It seeks to offer a new approach to studies of Rome's eastern frontier by presenting and illustrating the known sites, some of which have already been discussed in Kennedy and Riley 1990, a book which includes many interesting reproductions of photos taken especially by Poidebard and Stein.

The author thanks in particular Eberhard Sauer for his invaluable comments and support and also Chris Lightfoot and Peter Edwell for their observations on an early version of this book, which was more especially directed to the study of the road network. There will certainly remain errors and omissions for which of course the author is solely responsible.