

Eutropius and the Persians

Eutropius (b. ca. 320) was a high-level official in the Byzantine government.¹ Completed around 369, his *Breviarium* was written as a “Reader’s Digest” version of Roman history for less-educated administrators and military officers.² The main sources for the *Breviarium* were an Epitome of Livy and a lost series of imperial biographies known as Enmann’s *Kaisergeschichte*.³ This was supplemented by Eutropius’ personal experiences in the East. For example, he had probably been there in 363 when the Emperor Jovian surrendered a number of Byzantine towns and fortresses to the Persians.⁴ Generally, Eutropius emphasizes Rome’s victories over the Persians, perhaps in support of the Emperor Valens’ unrealized plans to recover the lost territory.⁵

The following excerpts from Eutropius’ *Breviarium* contain information about Persia and the Persians. Footnotes have been abbreviated from the commentary by H.W. Bird.

[In describing events of the Mithridatic War ca. 71 B.C. Eutropius mentions:]

6.8 ...Tigranes, the King of Armenia ... had often defeated the Persians and had occupied Mesopotamia and Syria and part of Phoenicia.

6.18 ... in the six hundred and ninety-seventh year after the founding of the city, Marcus Licinius Crassus, the colleague of Gnaeus Pompey the Great, who was in his second consulship, was sent against the Parthians and, when he had fought near Carrhae contrary to the omen and auspices, was defeated by Surena, the general of King Orodes, and finally killed together with his son, a most noble and outstanding young man. The remainder of the army was saved by the quaestor, Gaius Cassius, who, with singular resolve retrieved their losses with such great courage that, on his return across the Euphrates, he defeated the Persians in frequent battles.⁶

7.5 ... Lucius Ventidius Bassus in three battles defeated the Persians who were bursting into Syria. He killed Pacorus, the son of King Orodes, on the very day on which Orodes, King of the Persians, had slain Crassus through the agency of his general Surena. He was the first to celebrate a most legitimate triumph at Rome over the Parthians.⁷

¹ Eutropius, *The Breviarium Ab Urbe Condita* (trans. with introduction and commentary by H.W. Bird, *Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 14 [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993]), viii.

² *Ibid.*, xii, xix.

³ *Ibid.*, xlv-xlvii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xxii, xviii, xlix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xx, xxii, xliv.

⁶ In 55 Pompey and Crassus were consuls and the latter received Syria as his province for five years. In 54 he raided Mesopotamia, then wintered in Syria. The following year Crassus crossed the Euphrates at Zeugma and marched south into an ambush which resulted in heavy Roman losses. Near Carrhae Crassus was defeated, his son killed, and his army surrounded. During the ensuing negotiations, Crassus was also killed. His quaestor, C. Cassius Longinus, extricated the Roman forces and retreated to Antioch where he defeated the Parthians in late 52 or early 51.

⁷ By the end of 40 Roman forces loyal to Brutus and Cassius, led by Q. Labienus and Parthians led by Pacorus, son of King Orodes, had seized most of Rome's eastern possessions. P. Ventius, Anthony's

7.6 [Antony] himself also fought against the Persians. In the first battles he defeated them, however he suffered from famine and pestilence and, when the Parthians pressured him as he retreated, he himself withdrew as if he had been defeated.⁸

7.9 [Octavian Augustus] recovered Armenia from the Parthians and the Persians gave him hostages, which they had given to no one previously. He also restored the Roman standards which they had taken from Crassus after defeating him.

7.10 The Scythians and Indians, to whom the name of the Romans had previously been unknown, sent presents and envoys to him.⁹

[In describing Nero's reign:]

7.14 The Parthians seized Armenia and sent Roman legions under the yoke.¹⁰

8.3 [Trajan] recovered Armenia, which the Parthians had occupied, after killing Parthomasiris who controlled it¹¹

8.3 [Trajan] took possession of the Cardueni, the Marcomedi and Anthemusium, a large region of Persia, Seleuci, Ctesiphon and Babylon; he defeated and retained control of the Messenii.¹² He advanced as far as the frontiers of India and the Red Sea and he created three provinces there, Armenia, Assyria and Mesopotamia, including those tribes which border on Madena. Arabia he afterwards reduced to the status of a province. On

general, drove the Parthians and their allies out of Syria and killed Pacorus. The triumph was celebrated in 38.

⁸In 36 Antony invaded Parthia with an army of over 100,000 men and penetrated Media Atropatene but failed to capture its chief city Phraaspa (near Tabriz). He retreated through Armenia with severe losses and was unable to resume the offensive until 34 when he overran Armenia and dethroned King Artavasdes. In 33 he again reached Atropatene but was forced to turn back to deal with Octavian.

⁹Under Augustus . . . an agreement was reached with Parthia which saw the restoration of Crassus' lost standards (May 12, 20) and the establishment of a Roman protectorate in Armenia.

¹⁰L. Caesennius Paetus surrendered to the Parthians at Rhandaia in A.D. 62. after Cn. Domitius Corbulo had subdued Armenia and placed Tigranes on the throne as their client king. The report that Paetus' army was sent under the yoke is dismissed by Tacitus but accepted by Suetonius, Eutropius and Orosius.

¹¹In c. A.D. 110 Chosroes of Parthia deposed Tiridates of Armenia and installed Axidares as king. Unwilling to accept a Parthian puppet on the Armenian throne Trajan set out from Rome in October, A.D. 113 to restore Roman prestige. At Athens Chosroes' envoys met him, informing him that Axidares had been deposed and asking that the latter's elder brother, Parthamasiris, be granted the throne. Trajan refused to decide and in A.D. 114 captured Arsamosata in Armenia and met with Parthamasiris, but instead of crowning him, proclaimed Armenia a Roman province. Parthamasiris was dismissed and died mysteriously soon afterwards.

¹²In A.D. 114 Trajan seized Upper Mesopotamia with the fortress cities of Nisibis and Singara. The following year he accepted the submission of the Cardueni (Gordiene) and the Marcomedi (Media Atropatene) and annexed Anthemusia. Two Roman armies then pushed down the Euphrates and the Tigris. In A.D. 116 the Romans marched south along the rivers to capture Assyria (Adiabene) and Babylonia, and seize both Seleucia and Ctesiphon, forcing Chosroes to flee. The Messenii were either the inhabitants of Mesene in Babylia or those of an island at the mouth of the Tigris.

the Red Sea he established a fleet, so that he might ravage the (outlying) territories of India with it.¹³

8.5 However, after [Trajan] had acquired immense glory in war and at home he died of diarrhoea at Seleucia in Isauria as he was returning from Persia.¹⁴

8.6 Because [Hadrian] envied Trajan's reputation he immediately surrendered three provinces which Trajan had added, recalled the armies from Assyria, Mesopotamia and Armenia and decided that the Euphrates should be the boundary of the empire.¹⁵

8.10 [Marcus Antoninus Verus and Lucius Annius Antoninus Verus] waged war against the Parthians, who had then rebelled for the first time since Trajan's victory. Verus Antoninus marched out for that purpose and he, while operating at Antioch and on the Armenian front, achieved many substantial successes through his generals. He captured Seleucia, the most famous city in Assyria, together with forty thousand men, and won a triumph over the Parthians, which he celebrated with his brother who was also his father-in-law.¹⁶

8.12 In fact, under [Marcus Antoninus Verus] there was such a terrible outbreak of the plague that, after his victory over the Persians, at Rome and throughout Italy and the provinces a very great proportion of the inhabitants and almost all of the troops died from the enfeebling disease.¹⁷

8.18 [Septimus Severus] defeated the Parthians, the Arabs of the interior and the Adiabeni. The Arabs he crushed so severely that he even created a province in their territory. For that reason he was given the titles Parthicus, Arabicus and Adiabenicus.¹⁸

¹³Trajan sailed down the Tigris to the Persian Gulf (not the Red Sea). If Trajan did establish a fleet to ravage India it must have been proven short-lived for he was forced to hurry back in A.D. 117 by rebellions and Parthian counter-attacks in Mesopotamia, Armenia and Adiabene, and Jewish revolts in Cyrene, Cyprus and Egypt. Arabia Nabataea (Petraea) was annexed In A.D. 106, but Eutropius refers here to the Skenite Arab kingdom of Manus.

¹⁴ Trajan died of a stroke at Selinus, later Trajanopolis, in Cilicia probably on August 8th, A.D. 117 after reigning nineteen years, six months and fifteen days. In Trajan's day Isauria was part of Cilicia but was separated from the latter by Diocletian. The emperor was probably sixty-three at his death, as Eutropius states.

¹⁵Hadrian surrendered Assyria, Mesopotamia and Armenia soon after his accession and made Parthamaspates ruler of Osrhoene. This action, however, was based upon a sober assessment of the situation and the rulers of these states became clients of Rome so that Roman influence in the area was greater than before Trajan's campaigns.

¹⁶In A.D. 161 Vologaes III of Parthia seized Armenia and defeated two Roman armies. Verus arrived at Antioch early in A.D. 163, but it was his generals Statius Priscus, who recovered Armenia in A.D. 163 and placed a Roman nominee on the throne, and Avidius Cassius, who captured Seleucia and Ctesiphon two years later and made Mesopotamia a Roman protectorate. Before A.D. 166 Verus returned to Rome to celebrate a triumph with M. Aurelius.

¹⁷A virulent plague (A.D. 164-180) often called Galen's plague because Galen left a description of it, was brought back from the East by Verus' army.

¹⁸ In A.D. 197 Severus attacked Parthia for its support of Niger and captured its capital Ctesiphon at the end of January A.D. 198. He failed to capture Hatra and hostilities probably continued into the following year,

8.20 [Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Bassianus (Caracalla)] died at Edessa in Osdroena, as he was undertaking an expedition against the Parthians in the sixth year and the second month of his reign, having barely passed his forty-third year.¹⁹

8.23 [Aurelius Alexander] undertook a war against the Persians and defeated their king, Xerxes, with great glory.²⁰

9.2 When Gordian, who was just a boy, had married Tranquillina at Rome, he opened the Temple of Janus Geminus, set out for the east and waged war against the Parthians who were at that time attempting to invade.²¹ He did, indeed, manage this war successfully and humiliated the Persians in momentous battles. As he was returning he was killed not far from the Roman frontier, through the treachery of Philip who ruled after him. The soldiers built a tomb for him at the twentieth milestone from Circesium, which is now a Roman fortress overlooking the Euphrates, conveyed his remains back to Rome and saluted him as a god.²²

9.7 Valerian, while waging war in Mesopotamia, was overcome by Sapor, the king of the Persians, was subsequently captured, and grew old in ignominious servitude among the Parthians.²³

[During the reign of Gallienus:]

9.8 ... the Parthians occupied Mesopotamia and had begun to claim Syria for themselves.

but he did carve a province out of the territory of the Skenite Arabs with Nisibis as its capital and defeated the Adiabeni whose territory lay east of the Tigris, thus earning the titles given by Eutropius.

¹⁹ In A.D. 216 Caracalla marched through Adiabene into Media, destroyed several fortresses, then withdrew to Edessa for the winter. On April 8th of the following year, as he was approaching Carrhae to worship at the temple of the Moon he was assassinated by Martialis, a praetorian, at the instigation of the Praetorian prefect, M. Opellius Macrinus.

²⁰ In A.D. 231 M. Aurelius Severus Alexander moved east to repel an invasion of Mesopotamia by the Persians who had recently overwhelmed the Parthians and seized their empire. Their king was Artaxerxes (Ardashir). Eutropius mistakenly cites him as Xerxes.

²¹ In A.D. 241 Gordian married Furia Sabinia Tranquillina, daughter of C. Furius Sabinus Aquila Timesitheus, whom he appointed praetorian prefect. The Persians (not Parthians) had captured Carrhae and Nisibis probably soon after Maximinus' accession, then proceeded to overrun Mesopotamia and invest Hatra. In A.D. 241 Sapor (Shapur), son of the ailing Ardashir, seized and razed Hatra. The following year, after Ardashir's death Sapor conquered Osroene and threatened Syria. That year Gordian opened the gates of the Temple of Janus and marched out against the Persians.

²² In A.D. 243 Timesitheus recovered Carrhae, Resaina and Nisibis, retook Mesopotamia and marched on Ctesiphon before dying of a disease that autumn. His place as praetorian prefect was taken by M. Julius Philippus, an Arab, who, after creating an artificial shortage of supplies, for which he blamed Gordian, had the emperor killed near Zaitha in February or March, A.D. 244. Gordian's deification is mentioned only by Eutropius, the H.A. and Ammianus. The Persians claimed he died in battle.

²³ P. Between A.D. 253 and 258 the Persians captured Dura, Syrian Seleucia and even Antioch. Valerian was in the east in A.D. 254 or 256, but accomplished little and was finally captured by Sapor at Edessa in A.D. 259 or 260, ending his days in captivity.

9.10 ... in the east the Persians were defeated by Odenathus, Syria was defended, Mesopotamia was recovered and Odenathus penetrated as far as Ctesiphon.²⁴

9.18 ... while [Carus] was waging a war against the Sarmatians news came that the Persians were causing a disturbance, so he set out for the east and achieved some notable exploits against the Persians. He routed them in battle and captured Coche and Ctesiphon, very famous cities. But while he was encamped on the Tigris he was killed by a divinely inspired bolt of lightning.²⁵ His son, Numerian, too, whom he had taken with him as Caesar to Persia, a young man of outstanding ability, while being conveyed in a litter because he had been stricken with a disease of the eyes, was killed through a plot instigated by Aper, who was his father-in-law.²⁶

9.19 Meanwhile Carinus, whom Carus, when he was setting out against the Parthians, had left as Caesar in Illyricum, Gaul and Italy, had disgraced himself with all kinds of crimes.

9.19 ... the victorious army on its way back from Persia, since it had lost Carus, the Augustus, through lightning and Numerian, the Caesar, because of a plot, made Diocletian emperor ...²⁷

9.22 Thus, when the whole world was in disarray, Carausius was rebelling in the British provinces, Achilleus in Egypt, the Quinquegentiani were causing disturbances in Africa and Narses was making war on the east, Diocletian promoted Maximianus Herculius from Caesar to Augustus and made Constantius and Maximianus Caesars.

9.24 Galerius Maximianus at first suffered a defeat against Narses when he engaged him between Callinicum and Carrhae, although he had fought rashly rather than

²⁴Septimius Odaenathus was a nobleman from Palmyra, an oasis city situated between Syria and Babylonia which controlled the caravan traffic from Syria to the east. After the capture of Valerian Odaenathus took the title of king and with his local troops severely defeated Sapor in A.D.260. Gallienus made him *dux* and he then suppressed the pretender Quietus at Emesa. Between A.D. 262 and 267 he commanded the Romans' eastern forces and his own Palmyrene troops and reconquered Mesopotamia and marched as far as Ctesiphon. In A.D. 267 he and his eldest son were assassinated.

²⁵M. Aurelius Carus was Probus' praetorian prefect and military commander in Raetia and Noricum. He probably rebelled in August, A.D. 282 and upon receiving news of Probus' death in September, he announced to the senate his acclamation and the fact that he had made his sons Caesars. Leaving Carinus as governor in the west he marched east to confront the Persians and on the way defeated the Sarmatians and Quadi who were plundering Pannonia. In the east he defeated the Persians under Vahram II, recaptured Mesopotamia and subsequently took Coche (Veh Ardashir), which Artaxerxes (Ardashir) had built c. A.D. 230-240 to replace Seleucia which had been destroyed in A.D. 165. It stood over the west bank of the Tigris across from Ctesiphon. Carus afterwards crossed the Tigris and captured the Persian capital Ctesiphon, but was then, in the summer of A.D. 283, probably the victim of a plot headed by Dioclitian (Diocles).

²⁶ M. Aurelius Numerius Numerianus allegedly contracted trachoma on the march back from Ctesiphon to the Danube and was murdered, probably at the beginning of November A.D. 284, some distance south of Chalcedon. His father-in-law, the praetorian prefect L. Flavius Aper, was made the scapegoat, but it is more likely that Diocletian, commander of the imperial bodyguard, was the ringleader of the plot.

²⁷ C. Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus, as he was subsequently known, was acclaimed emperor near Nicomedia on November 20th, A.D. 284.

without spirit, for he joined battle with a very small force against an extremely numerous enemy. He was defeated, therefore, and set out to join Diocletian. When he met him on the road it is reported that he was received with such great insolence that he is said to have run beside Diocletian's chariot for several miles, clad in his purple robe.²⁸

9.25 Subsequently, however, after he had collected forces throughout Illyricum and Moesia, he fought again with Narses, the grandfather of Hormisda and Sapor, in Greater Armenia, this time with great success, with no less planning and at the same time with bravery since he even undertook the task of reconnaissance with one or two of the cavalry. He routed Narses, plundered his camp, captured his wives, sisters and children, in addition to a vast number of the Persian nobility and a huge amount of Persian treasure, and drove the king himself into the remotest deserts of his kingdom. Consequently, when he had returned in triumph to Diocletian, who was then waiting in Mesopotamia with reinforcements, he was welcomed with great honour.²⁹

9.27 ... [Diocletian and Herculus] each exchanged his imperial insignia for the dress of a private citizen, Diocletian at Nicomedia, Herculus at Milan, after a magnificent triumph, which they had celebrated at Rome over numerous nations with a majestic procession of exhibits, in which the wives, sisters and children of Narses were led before the chariots.

10.8 8 As [Constantine] was preparing for war against the Parthians who were already harassing Mesopotamia he died in the state villa at Nicomedia in the thirty-first year of his reign and the sixty-sixth year of his life.³⁰

10.10 ... [Constantius] suffered many serious setbacks at the hands of the Persians. His towns were often captured, his cities besieged, his armies cut to pieces, and he had no successful engagement with Sapor except that at Singara he lost a certain victory through the headstrong bravery of his soldiers who, contrary to the practice of war, mutinously and foolishly demanded to fight when the daylight was already failing.

10.15 ... Julian was made Augustus ... and set out to seize possession of Illyricum while Constantius was occupied with campaigns against the Parthians. The latter, after learning of this, turned back to take up the civil war but died on the way

²⁸ In A.D. 293 Narses, son of Sapor, became king of Persia and made an unsuccessful sortie against the Romans. In 296, however, he invaded Armenia, recaptured the areas of Mesopotamia which Vahram had ceded to Rome in 287 and invaded Syria. In the spring of 297 Galerius and his Armenian allies were defeated near Callinicum south of Carrhae.

²⁹ Galerius gathered a new army of Danubian troops and Gothic and Sarmatian mercenaries during the remainder of A.D. 297. The following year he avoided the Mesopotamian plains, which aided the Persian cavalry, and marched into Armenia. Narses followed and was utterly defeated. Galerius then proceeded to overrun Media and Adiabene and eventually to capture Ctesiphon. Peace was made in 299 and lasted nearly forty years. Roman territory was regained and enlarged, parts of Armenia were annexed and Nisibis became a Roman city.

³⁰ Sapor II attacked Mesopotamia in A.D. 335 and probably the following year invaded Armenia and installed a Persian nominee on the throne. Constantine declared his nephew, Hannibalianus, 'King of Kings' and sent him to Caesarea in Cappadocia, and had Constantius Caesar fortify Amida on the Tigris in Upper Mesopotamia. In 337 he was preparing to campaign in person against the Persians when he died on May 22nd outside Nicomedia.

between Cilicia and Cappadocia in the thirty-eighth year of his reign, the forty-fifth of his life ...³¹

10.16 ... Julian took possession of the state and after vast preparations waged war against the Parthians. I was also a member of this expedition. He accepted the surrender of or forcibly seized several of their towns and fortresses, devastated Assyria, and for a time established a permanent camp at Ctesiphon. As he was returning victorious and mingling too rashly in the battles he was killed by the hand of an enemy on the twenty-sixth of June in the seventh year of his reign and the thirty-second of his life and was enrolled among the gods.³²

10.17 In the current confusion, as the army was also suffering from lack of provisions and [Jovian] had been defeated by the Persians in one or two battles, he made what was, in fact, a necessary but shameful peace with Sapor, for he was punished territorially and surrendered a certain portion of the Roman empire.

³¹ Julian and Constantius spent the campaigning season of 361 settling affairs in their respective regions and making preparations for the imminent civil conflict. In October, Constantius set out from Antioch towards Constantinople. At Tarsus he contracted a fever and died on November 3rd, at Mopsucrene in Cilicia.

³² Julian arrived at Antioch on July 18, A.D. 362 and probably was accompanied by Eutropius from Constantinople. Here the emperor added western troops to the already substantial eastern army and had a fleet of a thousand cargo ships, fifty warships, fifty bridge-building ships and a mass of siege equipment constructed. On March 5th, 363 he left Antioch and a month later crossed the Khabur near its confluence with the Euphrates and entered Persian territory. By the second half of May the Romans, after some stiff fighting, were within striking distance of Ctesiphon and at the end of the month they defeated the army defending the city. Nevertheless King Sapor's main army was closing in and the Roman senior officers persuaded Julian not to get caught between it and the city. Ctesiphon was abandoned, and on July 16th Julian was compelled to retreat, possibly to link up with the covering army in Assyria. On the way back the Romans were continually harassed by contingents of the large Persian army and ran short of supplies. Finally, on June 26th, in one such skirmish on the left flank, Julian was mortally wounded. He died in the eighth year of his reign at the age of thirty-one or thirty-two.