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BELLATOR EQUUS. BETWEEN VICTORY AND AGONY: LATE REPUBLICAN CAVALRY IN THE EAST

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Abstract

One of the greatest challenges for the Roman cavalry in the Late Republic was confronting the Parthian heavy cavalry. The outcomes of conflicts with the Parthians demonstrated that the result of battles depended not only on the skill of the commander but also on the discipline of the troops. The case studies, especially the Battles of Tigranocerta and Carrhae, emphasise that by selecting the terrain and leveraging infantry and cavalry for their specific roles, the course of the battle could be altered, ultimately defeating a formidable enemy.

Keywords: *Rome, Parthia, cavalry, cataphracts, terrain, supplies.*

In April 56 BC, in the town of Luca, the triumvirs decided the fate of Rome and their own. Caesar's command over the Gallic provinces was extended for another five years. Pompey received both Hispanic provinces, and Crassus was allocated Syria, from where they planned the invasion of Parthia. (Although he was almost 60 years old and never possessed the military capabilities of his colleagues). In fact, his demise was the main cause of the dissolution of The First Triumvirate and the start of the Civil War, which, besides the political challenges, was a period during which Roman armies clashed. Regarding foreign relations, a new threat appeared in the form of the Parthian heavy cavalry for the first time after the Punic Wars. The Parthians proved a formidable enemy and "possessed an army which was normally willing to fight in favourable circumstances. Although its effectiveness has been greatly exaggerated, it was a force that was very difficult to defeat decisively and destroy in battle. Being primarily a cavalry force, the Parthian army used "hit and run" tactics, usually aiming to attack weak points and retreat if resistance was strong. This approach was unfamiliar to the Romans, who believed that a retreating enemy was defeated and pursued them, only to be lured into traps and

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defeated. The clashes between these two military concepts had mixed results: while Tigranocerta was a certain Roman victory (69 BC), Carrhae (54 BC) stands as a prime example of disaster and, in the long run, can be linked to the age of Civil War due to its military and political impact. But these are not the only examples (although they are the most spectacular): the actions of Gabinius in Syria (57-55 BC) and Ventidius Bassus (40-38 BC), as well as the failed invasion by Marcus Antonius in 36 BC, are interesting case studies of battle management. These battles left a definitive mark on the evolution of the Roman cavalry. They underscored that in the Late Republic, the Roman cavalry (auxiliaries or citizens) proved to have a decisive impact but could not decide the outcome of the battle alone.

The first battle taken into account is Tigranocerta (69 BC). It is one of the battles that shaped the area's fate, which is why it is worth describing in detail. The political background is given by the failed ambitions of King Mithridates VI Eupator, who, during the Third Mithridatic War, fled to Armenia in an attempt to elude the Roman army. This kingdom was under the rule of King Tigranes, Mithridates's son-in-law. The Roman legions were led by Lucius Licinius Lucullus (118-56 BC), one of the Republic's most well-trained and flexible generals. He once defeated Mithridates at Cyzicus (73-72 BC), "without ever risking pitched battle against his united forces (...). Only an exceptional military genius could have foreseen the strategy of Lucullus, who entirely neglected the usual Roman preference for pitched battles and quick results."[1] Two facts must be noted: Firstly, the rather formal relations between Mithridates and his son-in-law. It seems that Tigranes tried to maintain a level of neutrality toward Rome. Still, the behaviour of Appius Claudius, who demanded the surrender of Mithridates, sped up the development on a military level. Secondarily, "Tigranes had not made himself popular with the Greeks of Syria, transplanting some to other parts of his kingdom and unwisely treating others with great disdain – a situation advantageous to Rome."[2]

In the spring of 69 BC, Lucullus arrived in Armenia "with two legions and 500 horses against Tigranes, who had refused to surrender Mithridates to him. He crossed the Euphrates, but he required the barbarians, through whose territory he passed, to furnish only necessary supplies since they did not want to fight or to expose themselves to suffering by taking sides in the quarrel

[1] Cambridge Ancient History, *Lucullus, Pompey and the East,* Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 238. (*C.A.H.* in the following).
[2] Richard Evans, *Roman Conquests: Asia Minor, Syria and Armenia,* South Yorkshire, Pen&Sword Military, 2011, pp. 86-87.

between Lucullus and Tigranes. No one told Tigranes that Lucullus was advancing, for the first man who brought this news he hanged, considering him a disturber of the good order of the cities."[3] On the other hand, Plutarch gives a larger number of troops: 12,000 infantry and 3.000 cavalry. On the opposite side, Tigranes gathered an army of 250.000 infantry and 50.000/55.000 cavalry. Even if the army's size is questionable, the Romans were outnumbered. In terms of cavalry, Tigranes had (as said before) 50.000/55.000 cavalry made up from cataphract lancers (heavily armoured) as well as archers and slingers.[4] This was, at least theoretically, the greatest menace to the Roman legions because they were less effective against the highly mobile cavalry. The Roman cavalry consisted of Gallic and Thracian auxiliaries and local allies. Lucullus once again proved to be an excellent tactician: he changed the classical triple *acies* formation into *simplex acies* "to present as broad a front as possible to an opponent so strong on cavalry."[5] "A river, (…) one of the tributaries of the Tigris, separated the two sides (…). The river turned west, where it was fordable, and in this direction, Lucullus led his troops. He was the first to cross this stream, intending to wheel around to take the opposition on the flank. Then Lucullus prepared to launch a fast-passed infantry attack to reduce the casualties inflicted by the archers and to bring his legionaries into close combat, in which they excelled. But, in the last moment, he aborted this well-known tactic and ordered that some auxiliary cavalry units harass the cataphracts. Then, with only two cohorts, he charged down the hill in the flank of the Armenian army. Plutarch described how the cataphracts retreated in disarray between the ranks of their infantry and concluded: "Antiochus the philosopher makes mention of this battle in his treatise '*Concerning Gods*,' and says that the sun never looked down on such another. Strabo, another philosopher, in his 'Historical Commentaries,' says that the Romans themselves were ashamed and laughed at one another to scorn for requiring arms against such slaves. Livy also has remarked that the Romans were never in such inferior numbers when they faced an enemy; for the victors were hardly even a twentieth part of the vanquished, but less than this."[6]

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[3] Appian, *Mithridatic Wars 12.84,* Appian, *The Foreign Wars*, Horace White, New York, THE MACMILLAN COMPANY,1899. https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0230%3Atext%3DMith.%3Achapter%3D12%3Asection%3D84 (accessed 26.09.2025)

[4] Ross Cowan, *Roman battle tactics 109 BC-AD 313,* Oxford, Osprey Publishing, 2007, p. 23.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

[6] Plutarch's *Lives*, with an English Translation by Bernadotte Perrin, Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1914, 2.

In the Battle of Tigranocerta, the Roman cavalry fulfilled its classic role: placed on the flanks, it protected the infantry, but its decisive role was in diversion attacks against the cataphracts, which eventually changed the fate of the battle. And again, it proved helpful in the battle's final phases when it protected the advancing legionaries against the counterattacks of the Armenian cavalry archers. It proved that its role in "hit and run" tactics in cooperation with the infantry can be a real game-changer.

The "recipe" of Tigranocerta was successfully applied a few years later. "With Pompey's return to Rome in 62 after his campaigns throughout the Near East, the new province of Syria suffered from continual raids from various Arab tribes (…). The raids became so serious that the senate appointed a proconsul to control the territory, levy troops, and wage war against these aggressive neighbours. Gabinius, who was a consul in 58, successfully transferred his proconsular governorship of Cilicia to Syria to end the raids of the Arab tribes in that region, and under one of the *leges Clodiae*, he received a large military force and grant of money, control of operations against the Arab tribes in all the lands surrounding Syria, and a command of at least three years."[7] Gabinius knew that these Arab tribes were allies of the Parthians and recognised that a war against them would be risky. This is why his expedition in Mesopotamia was slow, and he avoided open conflicts with the Parthians. No spectacular military operations were made, Gabinius employed local Syrian-Iturean cavalry and skilfully used the terrain to his advantage. "It was only on Pompey's orders that he had to turn away from this war and return (…). However, the project was not abandoned, even though it was becoming increasingly clear that Gabinius would no longer be its promoter."[8] His image is somewhat tarnished because of the portrayal made by Cicero, but Gabinius proved to be practical and reactive in his decisions. Even though he stopped the Mesopotamian campaign, his intervention in Egypt facilitated a smooth "transition of power under Ptolemy XII, limiting the length and severity of the crisis. Also, Gabinius used this opportunity to campaign successfully against (…) the Hasmonean Jews and Nabatean Arabs in 55. (…) Gabinius changed his policy from supporting Mithridates IV to supporting

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https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0046%3Achapter%3D28%3Asection%3D7 (acessed 26.09.2025)

[7] Nikolaus Leo Overtoom, *Reassessing the role of Parthia and Rome in the Origins of the First, Romano-Parthian War (56/5-50 BCE),* in "Journal of Ancient History", 2021; 9(2), pp. 248-249.

[8] Pascal Arnaud, *Les guerres parthiques de Gabinius et de Crassus et la politique Occidentale des Parthes Arsacides entru 70 et 53 av.J-C,* in "*Electrum",* Vol. 2, Krakow, 1998, p. 21.

Ptolemy XII because in 55, Egypt and the Levantine coast were more important to Rome than Babylonia."[9]

If Tigranocerta and Gabiniu's intervention were the models of cooperation between infantry and cavalry (of course, under the command of a skilled commander), the battle of Carrhae (53 BC) is exactly the opposite. Carrhae is one of the "most spectacular Roman defeats of all time."[10] Crassus, the "enormously wealthy"[11] member of the First Triumvirate, envious of Caesar's and Pompey's military successes, went to Syria to wage a war against the Parthians. He was accompanied by his son Publius, who at a certain time served with Caesar. Crassus's army consisted of seven legions, four thousand light infantry (probably auxiliaries), one thousand veteran Celtic cavalry and "three thousand other cavalry, most of which were probably from Syria or other eastern provinces. King Artavasdes of Armenia, a Roman client, joined him with six thousand cavalry and promised to provide a further ten thousand armoured cavalry if Crassus would approach Parthia via his own kingdom."[12] Crassus made all the possible tactical errors as if he would willingly provoke the disaster: he arrogantly refused Artavasdes's advice to follow a mountainous route (it was safer to avoid the Parthian heavy cavalry), and to stay close enough to water resources and protection from being encircled. Far from being a Lucullus, Caesar or Pompey, Crassus was led by only one thing: personal ambition. He drove his army deep into the desert without any water or trees. On the other hand, his "despised" enemy was well organised and had all the tactical advantages for a certain victory. "The Parthian Empire was possibly the first truly feudal society. The Parthian society was dominated by seven families that had enriched themselves through military expeditions, land possessions and commercial privileges. These nobles/magnates were so powerful as to be able to challenge the king of kings with their own personal armies. Surena's army of 10,000 horsemen retinue actually cut Crassus' army to pieces at Carrhae."[13] The main tactical advantage of the Parthians was the great mobility of their cavalry and the perfect coordination between different cavalry types (cataphracts and mounted archers). Usually facing closed infantry units, they encircled them in wedge formations and harassed them with arrows. The heavy cavalry usually attacked head-on, being well protected by their armour. "If

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[9] Nikolaus Leo Overtoom, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
[10] Phillip Snidel, *Warhorse. Cavalry in ancient warfare,* London, Continuum UK. 2006, p. 237.
[11] *Ibidem,* p. 237.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 237.
[13] Ilkka Syvanne, *Parthian Cataphract vs. the Roman army 53BC-AD 224,* in "Historia i swiat", nr. 6 (2017), p. 34.

the infantry or cavalry made sorties out of the formation, the Parthian cavalry simply withdrew and shot backwards with the Parthian shot as they fled. The rhombus formation was quite well suited to this tactic. During the action, the mounted archers ideally bunched up the footmen into tight immobile formations, which were then charged by the heavy cavalry pikemen. According to Plutarch, the Parthian lancers could fix two Roman legionaries simultaneously with their pikes. In other words, the combination of the mounted archers and charges of the cataphracts easily broke the Roman lines into pieces, if the latter did not maintain their discipline."[14] This was not the case with Crassus: led by ambition, he could not find a suitable terrain to counter the actions of the Parthian cavalry (unlike Lucullus). Even though the Romans outnumbered the Parthians (48.000 Romans vs. 10-12.000 Parthians), the incapacity of the commander led to disaster. When his scouts reported that the Parthians were closing in, he was undecided: first, he extended his lines, "dividing the cavalry between the wings,"[15] but he realised that he had no natural obstacles (hills, rivers, forests) to anchor his flanks. Then he opted for a hollow square formation, usually used by the Romans against cavalry. To each cohort, a cavalry unit was allocated…and that was the only good thing that Crassus did on a tactical level. "Of particular importance was the small number of light-armed infantry in a situation in which the Romans faced an enemy who concentrated on effectively using mounted archery and cataphracts. It is also probable that the Roman light infantry consisted of a mix of javeliners, slingers, and archers, so the number of light-armed units against the Sacae was even fewer than this. On top of this, the Romans appear to have been unaware that their foes (the Sacae) were using the more powerful long composite bow and/or the so-called Sasanian composite bow, both of which had a much longer range and better penetrative power than the short Scythian composite bow employed by the Romans and their allies. This means that the only long-range weapon in the Roman arsenal able to counter the enemy archery was the sling, and as we have seen, there were far too few slingers in Crassus' army to make any difference."[16] The Romans were also unaware of the real number of cataphracts as they concealed their armour with cloaks (which protected them from the blazing sun) and marched in columns to conceal their real numbers. The battle was a long siege: the cataphracts launched several attacks on the hollow square formation of the Romans, and simulated retreat. The Roman

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 43.
[15] Phillip Sniddel, *op. cit.*, p. 238.
[16] Ilkka Syvanne, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

counterattacks, led by the light infantry, were terminated by arrows. The Roman cavalry was in a desperate situation: on one hand, it seems it was withdrawn into the squares. On the other hand, it also seems that it tried to lead the course of battle into close-quarter combat, in which the Romans excelled. Still, they failed to employ the classical trick of the Parthian mounted archers, the so-called "Parthian shot" (the cavalrymen turned and shot behind). With casualties rising, Publius led a task force of 1300 cavalry and 4000 infantries to break the enemy's formations. They were lured into a trap, and the most dramatic episode of the battle unfolded: The Parthian cavalry archers gave way to the cataphracts equipped with a long lance (*kontus*). The final confrontation was between the Gallic auxiliary cavalry and the Parthian cataphracts. The Roman auxiliary cavalry was disadvantaged due to their much shorter lance. Still, even so, they "fought back fiercely. Some resorted to grabbing the enemy lances with their hands, grappling with the cataphracts, (…) and unhorsing them." Eventually, the task force was defeated, Publius and other officers committed suicide, and only 500 soldiers were taken prisoners. The main Roman force managed to hold the ground until nightfall, and at dawn, several bodies made (or at least they tried) their way to safety. Crassus and his officers, after being trapped, were killed. The Roman casualties were around 20.000, and 10.000 soldiers were taken prisoners. "The impact of Carrhae on the Romans was immediate. They realised that they needed to increase the numbers of cavalry and light infantry to succeed, which is in evidence already in the plans of Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, both of whom planned or used larger numbers of these in their campaigns."[17] Another immediate impact was the elimination of one of the triumvirs, which led to the escalation of the conflict between Pompey and Caesar.

On the military level, after Carrhae, the Parthians were convinced that the combination of mounted archers and heavy cavalry was unbeatable against the Roman infantry. In 51 BC, "a large Parthian force under the command of King Orodes' son Pacorus crossed the Euphrates at Zeugma. Since Carrhae, Rome had neglected the eastern frontier. Syria was still held by Crassus' quaestor C. Cassius with the re-formed survivors of Crassus' army; in Cilicia there were just two under-strength legions; the local populations were ill disposed to Roman rule."[18] Even so, the Parthians failed to conquer Antioch, and on the battlefield, Cassius proved to be more resourceful than the Parthians expected. Cassius

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 46.
[18] *C.A.H.*, p. 417.

defeated the Parthians with their own tactics: he attacked their cavalry with a small force and "pretended to flee, luring the pursuing Parthians into a trap."[19] Dio Cassius in his *Roman history* described the battle: "Meanwhile, Cassius set an ambush on the road along which they were to depart, and confronting them there with a few men, he induced them to pursue, and then, surrounding them, killed a number, including Osaces." Upon the latter's death, Pacorus abandoned all Syria and never invaded it again."[20] This scenario was repeated in 39 BC when Publius Ventidius Bassus "had driven the Parthian's ally, Labienus, out of Asia."[21] At the final confrontation (Mons Amanus), Bassus placed his troops on a rise, making the Parthians, who believed that the Romans were afraid of the heavy cavalry, charge up the slope with the cataphracts in the front rows. The result was the expected one: the Roman heavy infantry repelled the cataphracts. "The Parthians, because of their numbers and because they had been victorious once before, despised their opponents and rode up to the hill at dawn, without even waiting to join forces with Labienus; and when nobody came out to meet them, they actually charged straight up the incline. When they were at length on the slope, the Romans rushed down upon them and easily hurled them downhill. Many of the Parthians were killed in hand-to-hand conflict, but still more caused disaster to one another in the retreat, as some had already turned to flight and others were still coming up."[22] One year later, another Parthian invasion of Syria took place. Bassus didn't oppose the invasion force on open ground, but he remained in his camp on the slopes of Mount Gindarus.[23] This time, the heavy cavalry tried to take Basus's camp by assault, and the outcome was the same as in 39 BC: the legionaries and the slingers inflicted heavy losses on the Parthian cavalry. Like at Tigranocerta, the Roman infantry made a running charge downhill, and with the help of the *funditores,* they massacred heavy cavalry and horse archers alike. The Roman cavalry's role in repelling these invasions was used efficiently according to their primary objectives: reconnaissance, harassing the heavy cavalry and pursuing the enemy after their lines were broken.

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[19] Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Roman army at war. 100BC-200 AD,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 65.
[20] Dio Cassius, *Roman history*, 40.29.3. https://lexundria.com/dio/40.29.3/cy (accessed 02.10.2025).
[21] Goldsworthy, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
[22] Dio Cassius, *Roman history*, 48.39.3 https://lexundria.com/dio/48/cy (accessed -02.10. 2025).
[23] Ross Cowan, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

These conflicts outlined both sides' strengths and weaknesses, forcing them to change their approaches.

On the Roman side, the main strength was the main body of infantry (legions), shield wall and *pilum* barrage, with mobile camps and rampart construction; alongside cavalry, which had two functions: flank protection and pursuit. To these two, fire support, such as slingers, archers, and *cheiroballistra*, can be added less frequently. As for the practical "Parthian-specific" tactics, the most important can be considered: the forced choice of the terrain (high ground, narrow passages and rivers); the attack on the supply caravans with light cavalry; a mixed front line with light cavalry swarming in front of the infantry shield wall to drive off the mounted archers, then retreat behind the main force. Another effective tactic proved to be tying down the heavy cavalry with hit-and-run manoeuvres from the Roman cavalry while the infantry breaks through the lines of the other wing. On the other hand, the campaigns' results emphasised the Romans' weaknesses, such as the lack of cavalry archers in significant numbers and heavy cavalry (the failure of Marc Antony's campaign in 31 BC is an excellent example).

The conflict between Rome and Parthia put great stress on the evolution of the Roman cavalry, but these challenges were not solved in an acceptable manner until Augustus.

Conflict of interest
None to declare

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