

“An ordinary Roman general”



Prologue

From the top of a dune, a man is looking at the wide stretches of sand in front of himself. He is richly dressed, his face is painted, his long hair is divided by a parting. He looks like a high-ranking courtier, but he is a military commander: facing the Roman legions approaching along the lowland is his task.

Behind him, there are long rows of armoured horsemen armed with spears. The scales of their armour are like “bird feathers”. Their armours and spears are wrapped in leathers and blankets in order they do not reflect the sunrays. A little bit further back, thousands of archers are waiting the order to move forward. They are Parthians Arsacides, masters of Mesopotamia.

Not far from the armoured horsemen and from the archers, hundreds of camels are standing motionless under the weight of their loads. They are not carrying scents or food, precious dresses or golden pottery: they are carrying thousands and thousands of deadly barbed-tip arrows.

Two not ordinary men.

The commander of the Parthians belongs to an ancient and noble family, the Suren family. His name is Rostam Surena-Pahlavi. According to Plutarch, he is a no ordinary man. He is young, rich, fine, powerful; he enjoys huge privileges at King Orodes' court. He has got lands everywhere, thousands of servants, gold, women, a personal army of ten thousand horsemen. When he moves, two hundred carts carry his concubines and one thousand camels carry the supplies for his troops and for his entourage.

Also the Roman commander belongs to an ancient family. His name is Marcus Licinius Crassus. Like Surena, he is filthy rich. He has become rich thanks to the building speculation, to the exploitation of some silver mines, to his land properties and to the confiscations followed to Sulla's proscriptions.

In Rome he is a very powerful man: every influential person asks him something, every influential person owes him something. When his name is mentioned about the "Catilina affaire", nobody wants troubles and his name quickly disappears and it is not mentioned anymore. Also his political foes avoid him. He, they say, is an "ox with some hay on its horns."¹

Crassus is popular, flattered, eloquent, successful. He is stingy, but, paradoxically, hates who is stingy. Taking a big risk, he does not hesitate to get closer to an untouchable virgin vestal, owner of a beautiful villa, on which he got his eyes. He has a lot of workforce on his payroll: masons, architects, carpenters. They have the task to refer him what houses to buy- for a low price- in the neighbourhoods of Rome hit by frequent fires.

He is not snotty and annoying like Pompey is; he does not act as if he despised the ordinary mortals, but, on the contrary, he appears in public, has a word for everybody, does not show his luxury, is moderate. He offers sacrifices to the Gods and wheat to the plebs. He has crowds of clients; to his friends, he lends free-interest money, but he is uncompromising about the expiries of the loans. He likes to repeat: Is not rich enough, who cannot pay an army with a year annuity. He, obviously, can.

He has got everything. But, deep down, he misses something: the glory in battle. It is true: some years before, he had been the architect of Sulla's victory at Porta Collina during the civil war², overturning the outcome of the battle. But now, in Rome, are very few those who remember that fact. He subdued Spartacus' riot (a slave-gadiator, dangerous like a rattlesnake, but not properly a king or a prince), but Pompey had taken the full credit of that victory. And what about Caius Julius Caesar? In Gallia he is going from victory to victory, in Rome his popularity is sky-high. That chronic penniless, that rampant guy to whom, time before, he, Crassus himself, had guaranteed for him and for his debts, allowing him to leave as pro-praetor to Spain, is the man of the moment. Nor it is useful to be ironic about how much Pompey be " Big/Great"³: only a resounding victory in battle can give him glory and prestige and fill the gap with his two colleagues. Will he be able to take the opportunity, if and when it will come?

But, if the opportunity does not come, it can be created. And creating an opportunity is not very difficult in those times, since Pompey, Caesar and Crassus himself are who have the political power in Rome. And they have the power despite the Roman laws, the Republican customs, the Senate, the opponents Cicero and Cato. With a private agreement (in history known as "The first triumvirate"), they have shared the power: they hold offices, move money, share favours. And in this game of giving and taking, Crassus obtains, in 55 BC, the government of Syria, his long-awaited opportunity.

He is sixty and, according with a malicious Plutarch's annotation, he looks older. Seen his own age, he can not fail.

“This operation must not be done”

The Roman province of Syria borders on the Kingdom of Parthians. Masters of Mesopotamia, very skilled riders and formidable archers, they look eastwards, control the “Silk Road”, trade with China and, for the moment at least, they are not at war with the Romans: thanks to the good offices of Pompey the Great, they have signed a treaty with the Romans about the controversial issue of the borders.

So, when Crassus’ intentions to go to war against the Parthians become clear, in Rome there is someone who tries to prevent it. Gaius Ateius Capito, one of the sacred and inviolable tribunes of the plebs, insists about the inopportunity of a military operation in the eastern part of the Roman dominions. He claims: the Parthians have not acted anything wrong against Rome, the mandate given to Crassus by the Senate does not speak to go to war against them: why should we attack them?⁴

The protest grows; crowds more and more numerous gather in the streets; Crassus lives a bad moment, because of the riots of the plebs he is afraid he must give up his dream to reach, after having defeated the Parthians, the Bactriana⁵, India and the ocean that “circles the earth”. But in the day appointed for his leaving from Rome, the only presence by his side of the “Great” Pompey is enough for calming the plebs. So Crassus can leave Rome and get the port of Brindisi. Followed, however, by the powerful Ateius’ curses.

Whose first effects are not late to occur. In Brindisi the sea is rough, the weather is poor. Crassus, however, decides to take the sea anyway and before reaching Durres in Illyria, loses some ships and the men onboard of them. Once reached Syria, the Roman army crosses the river Euphrates and, after having defeated the satrap Sylaces at Ichnis, takes control of many cities. Most of the time without any fight: the Mesopotamian cities and towns open their doors to the conquerors.

Some of them, in truth, try to withstand. At Xenodochia, for example, a hundred Roman soldiers were ambushed and many of them killed by the inhabitants of the town. Crassus reacts immediately: he takes the town, incorporates its wealth, sells its inhabitants as slaves. After Xenodochia, Crassus was praised *imperator* by his soldiers, he is, in other terms, praised as the architect of a *decisive* victory. Putting the victor of Xenodochia on the same footing of the victor of Zama takes some courage⁶. Or an overdose of confidence.

Legions and dragoons

In truth, the confidence is not completely unjustified. Crassus can count on seven legions, four thousand auxiliary troops, four thousand horsemen. Forty thousand men, in all. There are a lot of recruits with scarce experience of combat, it’s true, but they are well armed, well trained, well led. Crassus’ *legati* (officers) are experienced, brave, tough. From Gallia, along with one thousand horsemen, is arriving Publius Licinius Crassus, son of the commander, young man with a lot of qualities, appreciated both by Caesar and by Cicero. And what about *quaestor* Cassius Longinus? He knows when it is necessary to be prudent and when it is necessary to dare. In short, he knows his job very well. And also others know their job very well: Octavius, Vergunteius and dozen of the junior officers. Perhaps the most evident flaw of Crassus’ army is the cavalry: the horsemen are few, in particular if compared with Parthians’ cavalry. But from always the Roman legions base their strength on the infantry, on the close combat, on the manoeuvre in close-order. But also Surena knows how the Romans are used to fight.

Surena has ten thousand men under himself. They are organized in ten battalions named “dragoons”⁷. His nobles form a special “dragoon”. They are armoured riders, armed with spears and mounting mighty war horses. Then there are the archers. They ride the fast and

strong ponies of the steppe, handle a curve bow, throw arrows able to pierce armours and shields. They are fast like the wind, tireless, deadly. But they have got a limitation: once finished their arrows, they become if not useless, at least vulnerable. But for remedying at this limitation, Surena has ordered to load thousands of arrows on his camels.

To many mistakes

Praised *imperator*, Crassus stops his military campaign and comes back to Syria to spend the winter and to wait for his son coming from Gallia. According to Plutarch, it is a huge mistake. The hugest one, after the first and most important mistake: that one of having wanted at all costs the Syrian campaign.

In Syria, in their winter quarters, the legionaries stay idle: no training, no exercises, no manoeuvres. Day by day they become weaker and weaker. The enemy, on the contrary, takes advantage of the situation and reorganizes himself. Crassus seems only engaged in grabbing money. He obtains the delivery of the treasure of the shrines; imposes forced recruitments, but exonerates who gives him money in return. Or, at least, this is what Plutarch reports in his work *Life of Crassus*.

Did things go really in this way? Really did Crassus keep in idleness his legionaries? Really did not he take care of their training? This is difficult to believe. And, in fact, many contemporary scholars do not believe it. Be that as it may, according to Plutarch, Crassus did not have the favour of the Gods. An example? He comes out from the shrine dedicated to a local goddess and slips in a bad way, falling on his son, fallen in front of him and before him. A bad, very bad omen. Is it because of Ateius' curses?

When the winter is over, the operations start again. Some King Orodes' ambassadors arrive to the Roman camp. They are well-informed. They say: are you here to fight in the name of the Roman people? In this case, we will fight against you with all our might. But if you are here to fight a private war, not authorized by the Senate, things are different. Because of the advanced age of your commander, we won't fight. More: we will allow you to leave Mesopotamia safely. Do you agree? Crassus, at this point, plays the role of Pompey: "I will reply, but not now: you will have my answer once I will be in Seleucia" is his answer.

"Proconsul", the ambassador replays, showing to Crassus the palm of his hand "You will sooner see some hair growing in the palm of my hand, than you will see Seleucia." Crassus takes the hit without blinking an eye.

In the meanwhile, some officers of the garrisons guarding the towns and the villages conquered in the previous year report to Crassus about massive cavalry movements, bloody struggles, very fast and uncatchable enemies, arrows able to pierce armours and shields. The Parthians have taken the offensive, they are attacking the Roman garrisons and are winning back the most part of the territory lost in the previous year.

Hearing this news, the legionaries become very concerned. Only the arrival of the King of Armenia, Artawazd, contributes to make higher their morale: he promises soldiers (thirty thousand heavy horsemen) and give Crassus more than one advise. The wisest one: come with me to Armenia and attack the enemy from the north. On a rough terrain, the Parthians have more than one trouble, their cavalry loses its strength. And in addition, you would have at your disposition food, drinkable water, safe places for camping. But Crassus has decided: thanks, but nothing to do. I accept the troops, not your advise.

It is his second mistake since when he has reached Syria. A very serious mistake, this time.

Bad omens

Also the Gods try to make Crassus aware that he is making too much blunders. When the Roman army crosses the river Euphrates at Zeugma, for example, big storms blow up,

stormy winds blow, lightnings fall on the places chosen for the camp. A Crassus' war horse, sumptuously harnessed, disappears into the waves along with its groom. The first silver eagle, (the eagle was the symbol of the legions), lifted by the legionaries, turns around on the contrary side, as it were pushed by an invisible hand. When rations are served, the legionaries find lentils and barley flat breads, believed food for dead.

And Crassus makes matters worse. He says: the bridge over the river will be pulled down: nobody will come back from here. He meant to say: we will come back not from here, we'll come back through Armenia, but he forgets to specify it. When, later, he celebrates the ritual sacrifice before moving, the bowels of the victim fall from his hands. A symptom of senility, he jokes. But in the opinion of the legionaries those are bad omens and for this reason they are more concerned than before.

Marching towards inland.

Also Cassius Longinus—officially *quaestor*, but in practice, the second in command-- is concerned. Let's wait, he says. Let's stop and see how many the Parthians are, what are their intentions, who is in command. Do not you want to wait? Do you want start the campaign? Do you want to reach Seleucia in a hurry? All right, let's go, even if the augurs disagree. But let's we march close to the river Euphrates: we will have water and we will be supplied by the boats. Even this is a good advise, but even this is not listened by Crassus.

The responsible of Crassus' decision are Abgar Ariamnes and, indirectly, king Artawazd. Abgar Ariamnes is an Arabic chief, king of Osroene. Pompey holds him in high regard; he is considered a friend and an ally of Rome. He has the gift of the gab but, above all, he is a double-dealer. He reaches the Roman *castra* (fortified camp), praises Crassus and his army and scolds his hesitation, according to him, exaggerated. He says: having an army like this, it is guilty to wait further. The Parthians are confused, nobody knows where their king is: attack them now and victory will be yours.

According to Plutarch, it is, obviously, a huge trick. King Orodes is neither confused or who knows where. He is in Armenia with the bulk of his army. He wants to punish Artawazd for having helped the Romans. But in order to do it, he needs that Crassus be kept engaged. For this reason he sent Suren and Sylaces southwards, in order they stop Crassus, avoiding the junction of his legions with the army of the Armenian King.

As soon as possible, Artawazd informs Crassus. Orodes – he says- has invaded Armenia. I need all my men here. I can not send you the soldiers I promised. And he adds: come and help me. But, if you can not or if you do not want to do it, remember: avoid the open and flat places.

Crassus reacts badly. For him the Armenian king is a kind of felon or perjury, he threatens to give him a lesson, and, pulled perhaps by the hurry or by the impetuosity, he falls into Abgar's trap: he orders to leave the river Euphrates and to march inland. Another mistake. The third. The gravest one.

The Roman legionaries march in flat, sandy, wasted, dry places. They suffer thirsty and Abgar's mockeries; they have few and confused news about the enemy. Crassus is impatient, Cassius is worried, Abgar, on the contrary, is more than satisfied: he brought to an end his mission: now he can leave(feigning to move against the enemy) and give the place to Surena.

According with Orode's plans, the main game has to be played in Armenia. Surena's intervention is, according with these plans, a diversion, a "holding action", if we want to use a today military term. But the young and ambitious commander has no intention to act a secondary role in that issue. He has spent the winter collecting information; he has shared and exchanged opinions and ideas with those who has already fought against the Romans; he is convinced to know their weaknesses and their strength.

He has got no infantry, only cavalrymen. And the reason is easy to be understood: fighting against the Romans a pitched battle is a kind of suicide. But the mobility, the sudden and continuous attacks, the arrow and the spear can create many troubles to them. And for keeping his own plan hidden, he has ordered, as we have seen, his soldiers to wrap with blankets and leathers their armours and their weapons, in order they do not reflect the sunrays.

For their part, the Romans advance at a fast pace, as if they were in a hurry to arrive in contact with the enemy and to put that issue to an end. But they are thirsty, fatigued, worried, too. They have no information about the enemy forces (Cavalry only? Cavalry and infantry?). Their morale is low.

Also the Gods seem to look elsewhere. One morning, Crassus wore by mistake –even though only for a short time - a black cloak instead of the purple cloak of the Roman commanders; upon leaving, a couple of eagles (the signs of the legions) have been removed with difficulty from the ground. Those are, for the legionaries, bad omens. But Crassus apparently does not care of them.

But he cannot ignore the reports of his scouts. We have been attacked- some of them report to him- many of us have been killed, the bulk of the enemy is marching against us, now. Heard this news, the legionaries lose heart and Crassus falls into confusion. Taking Cassius' advice and in order to avoid being outflanked, he orders his men be deployed in a sole line, with the cavalry at its wings. But almost immediately, he changes his mind and deploys the legions in square formation, with eight cohorts⁸ on every side and mounted units amidst them. Cassius and his son Publius are the commanders of the wings, Crassus himself commands the centre. It is June, 6, 53 BC.

Deployed in this formation, they reach the river Balissus (today Belik river). It is hot and water of the river is scarce. But it is sufficient to mitigate the thirsty of the legionaries. Cassius' advice is to stop and spend the night there. Crassus, however, ignores this advice: the legionaries are ordered to move by forced marches and to eat their rations during the march.

The curved bow.

When, in the morning of June, 9, the Parthians are spotted near Carrhae (today Haran, in Turkey), the legionaries take heart: enemy is not much numerous (or, at least, he looks as he is not much numerous), there is no infantry. Then a sudden, dark, threatening, relentless, deafening drums roll fills the plain. The armours and the iron made weapons not more hidden by leathers or blankets, reflect the sun rays and spread sinister glares. Also Surena, majestic and regal, has appeared on the battlefield. It is a majestic and at the same time, terrible show, made still more terrible by the obsessive roll of the drums.

Surena moves first: the armoured horsemen low their spears and charge frontally. The legionaries close the ranks and erect a wall of shields. The horsemen, then, stop their charge, withdraw and leave place to the mounted archers. They arrive, galloping, from all the sides, string their powerful curved bows, throw their deadly arrows and do not stop doing that not even when they ride away. They cannot fail. The Romans are too much amassed, their ranks are too much thick and they are a perfect target. The casualties increase. But the legionaries erect a wall of shields and bravely and stoically, withstand. They are thinking: the arrows, sooner or later, will finish. And when the enemy will have finished his arrows, we could counterattack.

But it seems that the arrows never finish. Emptied their quiver, the archers ride until the rear lines that are very close to the front. There they are waited by the camels with their burden of arrows. The archers load their quiver again and ride back immediately to the battlefield.

This move could change the face of the battle. Crassus is aware of it. In order to stop the deadly carousel of the enemy archers, to avoid being outflanked, to gain time to reorganize his troops, he orders his son Publius to attack the enemy cavalry. The young commander gathers one thousand and three hundred horsemen (including the horsemen given to him by Julius Caesar), five hundred archers and about four thousand infantrymen and moves towards the enemy.

It is a slaughter. Lured farther and farther from the bulk of the legions, made blind by the clouds of dust raised intentionally by the enemy horsemen, outflanked, isolated and forced into a narrower and narrower space, hit by the arrows of the archers and by the spears of the armoured horsemen, the Romans fall one after another in atrocious torments. The barbed arrows of the Parthians penetrate in depth and they can be removed only by lacerating the flesh. The Romans fight like lions before being overwhelmed; imitated by other officers, Publius refuses to get to safety and orders a servant of his to kill him.

In the meantime, Crassus, attempting to aid his son, has made advance the legions. Seeing the cut head of the young Publius stuck on a spear and hearing the offences of the Parthians towards Crassus lower the morale of the legionaries. By winning his unspeakable personal despair, Crassus tries to encourage them: *"Mine, O Romans, is this sorrow, and mine alone; but the great fortune and glory of Rome abide unbroken and unconquered in you, who are alive and safe. And now if ye have any pity for me, thus bereft of the noblest of sons, show it by your wrath against the enemy. Rob them of their joy; avenge their cruelty; be not cast down at what had happened, for it must needs be that those who aim at great deeds should also suffer greatly"* And he concludes: *"For it was not by good fortune merely that the Roman state reached its present plenitude of power, but by the patient endurance and valour of those who faced dangers in its behalf."*⁹

Few listen to him, almost nobody is at his side. The legionaries' war scream is a cry of a child if compared with the high and ringing Parthians' war scream. The enemy arrows fall more and more numerous on the Romans; the deadly carousel of the archers does not stop for a minute; the Roman sorties become suicide missions. At nightfall, the Parthians withdraw; they give Crassus the time for thinking about the events and for mourning the death of Publius. Crassus is devastated, he does not want to see someone, and he is suffering because the death of his son and, perhaps, because having wasted the opportunity to match Caesar's and Pompey's deeds.

At this point, it is Cassius Longinus who takes care of the situation. He summons the unit commanders and orders them that the camp be left in a hurry. The most seriously injured are abandoned. The legionaries are tense and almost scared to be attacked by the enemy. Their march is slow. It is not an easy withdrawing. Three hundred Roman horsemen under a certain Ignatius, get in sight of Carrhae around midnight and report to Caius Coponius, commander of the garrison, about a battle between Crassus and the Parthians and then, without adding other information, continue their march.

Though he has uncertain news, Coponius guesses that something is not working. He makes his troops go out from the town in order of battle, reaches Crassus and what remains of his troops and escorts them inside the town. The following morning, the Parthians begin the pursuit again. They slaughter the Roman wounded who had been abandoned the previous night; they annihilate four cohorts under command of Bergantinus, sparing however twenty men as a sign of respect of their bravery and then they arrive under the walls of Carrae.

They say they are ready to discuss a truce or an armistice, but what they really want is not to make escape their prey. They are aware they are not able to organize and manage a siege and for this reason they try to gain time speaking about truce, hoping to force Crassus to make a mistake.

Mistake which, punctually, occurs. The Romans decide to leave Carrhae relying on a certain Andromachus and on his reassuring words: the Parthians do not fight at night.

Follow me and we will be able to get to safety. But Andromachus is cut from the same cloth of Abgarus: he leads the Romans along winding roads and in inhospitable places. The Romans waste valuable time. Cassius sniffs the deception and with five hundred horsemen goes back to Carrhae and from here to Syria. Five thousand men, under Octavius' command, reach the mountains before dawn and get the safety. Crassus, instead, loses the contact with Octavius and is forced to stop on a small height far about two kilometres from Octavius. Along with him there are, according to Plutarch, four cohorts of infantrymen, some horsemen and "five lictors".

When the Parthians arrive, Octavius acts immediately and quickly: he gathers some units and with them he comes to aid his commander, soon imitated by other legionaries. Their task is to withstand until the night and then escape with the favour of the darkness.

But the deceptions are not over. Surena does not want that his prey can escape. He is afraid to find a rough resistance, he wants to avoid lengthening the fighting until nightfall; he is aware that with the favour of the darkness the Romans could escape; he knows that on the mountains his cavalry is ineffective. Risking everything, he arrives in front of the position occupied by Crassus, loosens the rope of his arch and says he is ready to negotiate an armistice.

For the Roman legionaries, Surena's words sound as a pure music. They scream and ask aloud Crassus to accept Surena's proposal. Do not you want to accept it? Lead us, then, if you want to fight. Crassus tries to convince them: do not believe Surena, it is a deception. We have to wait for the darkness, if we want to escape. With the favour of the darkness, we can get the mountains where the enemy cavalry is ineffective. We have to withstand until the night: we will escape and we will be safe.

Nothing to do: the legionaries do not give up. Crassus, then, resigns himself to accept Surena's proposal. Before leaving, he addresses Octavius and another officer, the tribune Petronius, noble words. If you will escape, report to Rome that Crassus fell because deceived by the enemy, not because betrayed by his soldiers.

When he meets Crassus, Surena is good at dissimulating: King Orodes wants peace, he says. Let's cross the river and write down our agreements. Why must we sign the agreements, you are asking? Because you Romans are often used to forget them.

And at this point, the situation worsens. Crassus wants his own horse in order to reach the place of the meeting beyond the river; Surena offers him a horse of his. Crassus is put on the saddle, the squires prod the animal in order to make faster its race. Petronius, Octavius and the other Roman officer, smelling or guessing a danger, try to stop the horse by grabbing its bridles. A fight breaks. Octavius grabs the sword of a squire and kill him before being killed; Petronius falls fighting. According to Plutarch, Crassus was killed by a Parthian named Exartes. His head and his right hand, cut off from the body, are sent as trophies to Orodes, who in the meanwhile has signed a peace agreement with Artawasd.

Epilogue

In this way, victim of his own mistakes and of his own ambition, died Crassus, the "ox with some hay on its horns", the rich patrician holder of a fortune of seven thousands talents (about current hundred fifty million dollars), "the ordinary Roman general"¹⁰ eager of glory, the father lacerated by the sorrow, the commander exposed in woman dresses to the mockery of the enemy during the macabre ceremony of Surena's triumph in Seleucia¹¹, the man into whose mouth molten gold was poured and whose head cut off was showed during the banquet that celebrated the reconciliation between Orodes and Artawasd.

His death did not change the situation in the Roman province of Syria, from which, in a first time Cassius Longinus and then Ventidius kept away the Parthians, defeating them more than a time. But Crassus' death changed the things in Rome. With Crassus' death

the disagreements became more intense, the political struggle turned into civil war: the Republic was close to its end.

And Surena? He had a few time to enjoy fame and glory. Envied of his successes, Orodes made him assassinate before being assassinated in turn by his own son Fraates.

The circle had closed. In blood, as it had begun.

¹ It was a Roman habit to put some hay bundles on the horns of the aggressive oxen or bulls, in order to alert the wayfarers. As time went by, “to have some hay on the horns”, became a manner of speaking to indicate a dangerous person. The expression “*Foenum habet in cornu*” is used by the Roman poet Horace (*Satyrarum Libri*, I,4,34) to indicate people to be avoided because of their dangerous attitude or behaviour..

² The battle was fought at the gates of Rome (November, 1-2, 82 BC) between Sulla’s soldiers and those ones of the pro-Marius faction. It was a very hard struggle and, for a long time, uncertain. Several times Sulla risked to be defeated. It was Crassus who decided that battle, by breaking through the right wing of the enemy deployment.

³ In Rome Pompey was called *Magnus*, Great. He had gained this appellative because of some brilliant military campaigns crowned by success. But, as we know, in Latin the adjective “*magnus*” (*a, um*) is used also to indicate physical qualities of a person, as the height, the physical prowess, the impressiveness. Once Crassus - it is Plutarch who reports it – hearing amidst the crowd somebody exclaiming “Look! Pompey the Great (*Magnus*) is arriving”, burst laughing , and with a clearly ironic intention, he asked: “ Ad how much is big(*magnus*) Pompey?” playing on the double signification of the adjective “*magnus*”: excellent(Great) , but also tall and big.

⁴ Was the military campaign against the Parthians a legitimate campaign authorized by the Roman Senate? According to some scholars, it it was legitimate, according to others it was not. However, still before Crassus, the Roman Senate had thought to bring a military expedition against the Parthians.

In the year 58 BC, king Fraates the Third had been assassinated and his sons, Mitridates and Orodes, both involved in the conspiracy, had fought for the power and for the throne. Mitridates had asked – and obtained- Rome’s support and the Roman proconsul in Syria, Aulus, Gabinius, was ordered to intervene in arms at the side of Mitridates. But Gabinius’s expedition had been temporarily stopped because an urgent question in Egypt had to be fixed. So, while the Roman legions restored Ptolemaeus to the throne of Egypt, Mitridates was attacked and killed by Orodes. In this way, Rome suffered a whammy and a backlash to her own international credibility. It is likely, then, that the idea to move war against the Parthians – idea originally determined by economic reasons (control of the “Silk Road”, trades with the Far East) - not only were never left by the Senate, but it became more necessary in order to recover the lost international prestige.

⁵ The ancient Bactriana, region situated between the mountain chain of Hindu Kush and the river Amu Darja, corresponds, more or less, to the northern part of the actual Afghanistan .

⁶ Plutarch writes (*Life of Crassus*, 17,3): “he allowed his soldiers to salute him as Imperator, thereby incurring much disgrace and showing himself of a paltry spirit and without good hope for the greater struggles that lay before him, since he was so delighted with a trifling acquisition.”

⁷ According to the author Lucianus (who writes in Greek) , in the Parthian army the basic unit was called “ dragoon”.

⁸ The cohort was a military Roman unit and counted - depending on the historical periods- from four hundred to six hundred men. Every legion was, generally, formed by ten cohorts.

⁹ Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 26, 6, 7, 8 . Here [Plutarch • Life of Crassus \(uchicago.edu\)](http://www.uchicago.edu) the translation from Greek.

¹⁰ It was Karl Marx who, in a letter addressed to Friedrich Engles, called Crassus in this way.

¹¹ Plutarch writes,(*Life of Crassus*, 32, 1-3): “Surena now took the head and hand of Crassus and sent them to Orodes in Armenia, but he himself sent word by messengers to Seleucia that he was bringing Crassus there alive, and prepared a laughable sort of procession which he insultingly called a triumph. That one of his captives who bore the greatest likeness to Crassus, Caius Paccianus, put on a woman's royal robe, and under instructions to answer to the name of Crassus and the title of Imperator when so addressed, was conducted along on horseback. Before him rode trumpeters and a few lictors borne on camels; from the fasces of the lictors purses were suspended, and to their axes were fastened Roman heads newly cut off; behind these followed courtesans of Seleucia, musicians, who sang many scurrilous and ridiculous songs about the effeminacy and cowardice of Crassus.”

This post is an automatic translation of another post written in Italian entitled “ *Un ordinario generale romano*” and published on my blog . Obviously to write it, a bibliography in Italian was consulted.

Anyway, numerous are on the web the sites and the blogs, that under “ Battle of Carrhae”, “Caius Licinius Crassus” etc. talk in English about this issue.

Two are the primary sources, both very important, that should be consulted: *The life of Crassus*, by Plutarch and the book XL, 13-40, of the *Roman history* of Cassius Dio.