CHAPTER 4

Roman Policy on the Red Sea in the Second Century CE

Dario Nappo

Trajan in the East

In the summer of 116 CE, the emperor Trajan completed his Parthian campaign and reached Spasinou Charax on the shores of the Persian Gulf; when he arrived, he complained that he was not young enough to attempt the conquest of India, as Alexander the Great had done. At least, this is what Cassius Dio tells us in one of the books of his work, which survives only through the epitome of Xiphilinos:

Κἀντεῦθεν ἐπ' αὐτὸν τὸν ὠκεανὸν ἐλθών, τήν τε φύσιν αὐτοῦ καταμαθὼν καὶ πλοίον τι ἐς Ἰνδίαν πλέον ἰδών, εἶπεν ὅτι 'πάντως ἂν καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς Ἰνδοὺς, εἰ νέος ἔτι ἦν, ἐπεραιώθην.' Ἰνδοὺς τε γὰρ ένενόει, καὶ τὰ ἐκείνων πράγματα ἐπολυπραγμόνει, τόν τε Ἀλέξανδρον ἐμακάριζε.\(^1\)

Then he came to the ocean itself, and when he had learned its nature and had seen a ship sailing to India, he said: ‘I should certainly have crossed over to the Indians, too, if I were still young.’ For he began to think about the Indians and was curious about their affairs, and he counted Alexander a lucky man.

This anecdote can be viewed as nothing more than the usual rhetorical *topos* of Roman emperors wishing to emulate Alexander the Great; Trajan was by no means the first to be fascinated by the charismatic Macedonian king.\(^2\)

On the other hand, an echo of Dio’s text might be found in the much later reports of Eutropius, Festus, and Jordanes\(^3\) (also in Hieronymus, though not addressed in this paper), who explicitly tell us of a fleet in the Red Sea established by the emperor (*in mari Rubro classem instituit*) in order to ‘conquer’

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1 Cass. Dio 68.29.1. Transl. by E. Cary LCL, 1925.
3 A comparison recently made by Parker 2008, 222. See also Wilson’s article in this volume.
India. If we compare the three accounts it is easy to recognise their great similarity, since they use almost the same words to describe what happened and are likely taken from the same sources.

[Traianus] usque ad Indiae fines et mare Rubrum accessit atque ibi tres provincias fecit, Armeniam, Assyriam, Mesopotamiam, cum his gentibus, quae Madenam attingunt. Arabiam postea in provinciae formam redegit. In mari Rubro classem instituit, ut per eam Indiae fines vastaret.4

[Trajan] advanced as far as the boundaries of India, and the Red Sea, where he formed three provinces, Armenia, Assyria, and Mesopotamia, including the tribes which border on Madena. He afterwards, too, reduced Arabia into the form of a province. He also fitted out a fleet for the Red Sea, that he might use it to lay waste the coasts of India.5

Carduenos, Marcomedos obtinuit, Anthemusiam, optimam Persidis regionem, Seleuciam, Ctesiphontem, Babyloniam accepit ac tenuit, usque ad Indiae fines post Alexandrum accessit. In mare rubro classem instituit. Provincias fecit Armeniam, Mesopotamiam, Assyriam quae inter Tigridem atque Euphraten sita inriguis amnibus instar Aegypti fecundatur.6

[Trajan] obtained the Carduenians and Marcomedians; received and maintained Anthemusia, Persia's finest region; Seleucia; Ctesiphon; and Babylon; and, after Alexander, even reached the boundaries of India. He established a fleet in the Red Sea. He made Armenia, Assyria, and Mesopotamia into provinces, which, situated between the Tigris and Euphrates, is made equal to Egypt in fecundity by the flooding rivers.7

Traianus pene omnium imperatorum potior regnavit an. xviii m. vi. Hic enim de Dacis Scythisque triumphavit Hiberosque et Sauromatas, Osroenos, Arabas, Bosforanos, Colchos edomuit, postquam ad feritatem prorupissent. Seleuciam et Ctesifontem Babyloniamque pervasit et tenuit. Nec non et in mari rubro classem, unde Indiae fines vastaret, instituit ibique suam statuam dedicavit.8

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4 Eutr., Breviarium 8.3.
5 Trans. by J.S. Watson.
6 Festus, Rerum gestarum populi romani 20.
7 Trans. by Th.M. Banchich and J.A. Meka.
8 Jord., Romana, 267–268.