

Hamish Cameron, *Making Mesopotamia: Geography and Empire in a Romano-Iranian Borderland (Impact of Empire – 32)*, Brill, Leiden–Boston 2019, 375 pp. + 27 maps;  
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One might expect that the Romans would have had extensive knowledge of the physical, political and cultural geography of Mesopotamia. After all, for many centuries Rome neighboured with the Parthian state governed by the Arsacid dynasty, and during numerous conflicts between the two states the Roman armies frequently invaded Mesopotamia, sometimes incurring as far as the waters of the Persian Gulf. The information obtained through diplomatic contacts, and in particular during military actions, should therefore have been present in Roman historical and geographical literature, since reports of some campaigns against the Parthians were widely publicised for propaganda purposes by contemporary authors, who were either participants in the events themselves, or wrote about their protagonists. In his book *Making Mesopotamia: Geography and Empire in a Romano-Iranian Borderland*, Hamish Cameron attempts to prove that this issue is much more complex, presenting his own ideas on the extent of the Romans' knowledge about the region at various times.

Cameron sets himself the task of finding the answer to a series of questions: “how did the Romans imagine the Mesopotamian Borderland? How did they represent the physical reality of this geopolitical space in words? What did they choose to describe, to emphasise, to suggest, to omit? How did they construct their narratives to best explain, justify, rationalise or ignore this edge of Roman power? How did they make ‘Mesopotamia’?” (p. 1). His main sources in the quest for answers are Strabo, Pliny the Elder, Ptolemy, Ammianus Marcellinus and the anonymous author of *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*—these works contain a collection of data that allow him to compare the changing knowledge of the area in question and to track the ways they were perceived by Roman authors in the period from the 1st century BCE to the 4th century CE (pp. 42–43).<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that although the author is interested in the Romans' notion of Mesopotamia, he generally uses a different term—“Romano-Iranian Borderland,” which essentially comprises a more geographically limited area: “the Mesopotamian Borderland includes the territories that would eventually be encompassed by the Roman provinces of Osrhoena and Mesopotamia as well as adjacent regions of Commagene

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<sup>1</sup> “Chronologically, my study area is defined by Roman victories in the first century BCE and Sasanian victories in the fourth century CE” (p. 38).

and Adiabene, whose histories were intertwined with the frontier in a fundamental way” (pp. 7–8). The author uses this concept for methodological reasons, as it is useful in analysing sources, and undoubtedly helps readers to follow his arguments.<sup>2</sup> According to Cameron, this concept is useful because, owing to the similarity of the geographical community and cultural traditions, the area it defines constitutes a certain whole.

The book consists of eight chapters. In the first (“Introducing the Borderland,” pp. 1–44), the author defines the categories and concepts he uses in his enquiry, outlines his research methods, and describes his source base. The six remaining chapters comprise the core of the book. Four of them (“Knowing,” pp. 47–81; “Naming,” pp. 82–127; “Narrating,” pp. 128–201; “Moving,” pp. 202–228) make up Part 1 of the volume (“Tradition and Narrative”), while Part 2 (“Movement and Power”) consists of the other two (“Carrying,” pp. 231–280; “Ruling,” pp. 281–324). The last chapter, the eighth (“Epilogue: Connecting,” pp. 325–330), contains a concise summary of the research findings. The titles of the individual chapters convey the fundamental problems that the author is focusing on very well. In Part 1, Cameron analyses the geographical tradition on which the aforementioned authors based their work, noting how they described the lands that constituted “the Romano-Iranian Borderland.” He is interested in the geographical terms they used, ethnonyms and ethnographical descriptions. There is no doubt that the geographical ideas of the region changed considerably over the years. The first Roman authors made abundant use of the achievements of Hellenistic learning. Rome gained first-hand knowledge only when its army began to reach the area of northern Mesopotamia, but then too it remained superficial, even if the Roman military penetration of areas lying beyond the line of the Euphrates should have resulted in a considerable increase in knowledge of their geography. However, Pliny the Elder’s account of Mesopotamia, based on the diaries of his contemporary commanders operating in the area, Corbulo and L. Licinius Mucianus, suggests that these works appear to have had little impact on increasing Romans’ geographical knowledge about the region. The likely reason for this is that the generals’ recollections paid more attention to descriptions of the battles they led than to remarks on the geography of the areas where they took place. It is therefore obvious that the main source of knowledge about Mesopotamia in Rome continued to be the treatises of Hellenistic authors.

In the chapters in the second part of the book, the author concentrates on two important problems concerning the role and significance of “the Romano-Iranian Borderland” for economic and cultural contacts between the Roman and Iranian world and its place in Roman policy. The latter question is important because before Rome conquered northern Mesopotamia, a number of political centres could be found there that were the subject of Roman interest, expressed in mutual political relations with their rulers. Cameron thinks that the presentation of these issues by Roman authors is not always transparent and detailed, and above all, it is from a Roman point of view. These sources show clearly,


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<sup>2</sup> Cf. “. . . ‘the Mesopotamian Borderland’ is my own analytical category placed over this geographical area and its textual representations. The purpose of this category is to help us better understand the texts in question and what they tell us about the cultural, political and ideological contexts of their production” (p. 8).

though, that “the Romano-Iranian Borderland” played an extremely important role in relations between the Roman and the Iranian worlds.<sup>3</sup>

This book can undoubtedly be recommended to scholars dealing with Roman Eastern policy in the first centuries CE, with the exception of its purely military aspects, which were not the subject of the author’s research. Hamish Cameron’s multi-faceted perspective on the place of northern Mesopotamia in the works of Roman authors provides readers with a better understanding of the reasons for Rome’s interest in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> “. . . it is clear that geographical writers conceived of Mesopotamia as playing a central role in that truly global inter-imperial space, and that Mesopotamia’s role as a space within the Roman Empire was fundamentally linked to that broader view” (p. 329).