

Landscapes of Interaction(s)

The Archaeology of Borderland and Economy in Roman Mesopotamia

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Introduction

The impact of Rome at the edges of its empire varies abundantly across time and space, and this particularity generates complex scenarios, that in turn impacted on social, economic and political phenomena. Studies carried out on the German and Northern *limes* have highlighted how the imperial strategy of Rome was adapted and—in some cases—converted and modified to fit into the particular socioeconomic and cultural texture of these liminal zones.¹ Regional variability and different urbanization patterns impacted greatly on the economic landscapes of Roman borderland areas, and datasets for the Rhine *limes* or northern England have enabled historians and archaeologists to draw extremely interesting conclusions about population growth, economic impact, and settlement dynamics.²

As a negative counterbalance to this (relative) abundance of records, evidence from the eastern frontier of the empire is very limited and with a low degree of comparability. Survey data collected between the 1980s and the early 2000s in North Mesopotamia focused only marginally on the Roman period—there was (is?) a totally understandable major interest in the Bronze and Iron Ages—with little or no systematic data processing attached. This has inevitably resulted in a disproportionately small number of available records between the pre-classical and the classical world for a very important region for Roman political, military, and economic activities, particularly in connection with global and trans-imperial connections.³

1 Elton 1996; Young 2001; Whittaker 2004; Parker 2010.

2 Verhagen 2019; Franconi and Green 2019.

3 Discussion in Palermo, Ur, and de Jong 2022.

In Syria, where most efforts were directed toward the construction of military architecture and infrastructure, as well as into the establishment of an urban administrative and taxation system through *coloniae*, the structures of the empire—administration, economic, and military control—were in place, and where soldiers were documented, records of *Roman* official presence (public buildings, baths, Latin inscriptions, etc.) is also documented. This is not the case for Roman Mesopotamia, where the archaeological visibility of the Roman Empire and its impact—both militarily and economically—is more nuanced and not easily discernible. For this reason, in the following pages I aim to reconsider the economic and political role of North Mesopotamia in the period between the second and the fourth centuries CE. I will explore the impact of major centers on the economic landscape of the imperial borderland, the peculiar social milieu of the communities living and exploiting the territory, and the role of the route network as a mean to increase mobility and economy, also implementing the relationship between cities and villages (including nomadic communities).

Setting the Stage: Borderlands and the Geography of Roman Mesopotamia

Borderland areas present a perfect framework for the exploration of phenomena of interaction and engagement between different groups and communities, and their relative agencies. Often, in such zones, there are establishing examples of bilateral interplays and mutual approaches. Modern scholars have discussed borderlands as areas where no major power imposes a solid political and economic dominion over the other (or others).⁴ Equal processes are recognizable in several peripheral areas of the ancient world, where the elusiveness of the imperial central power gave birth to the non-mediation of the authority, which outsourced the control of such areas to local elites. Borderlands are, indeed, particular spaces of communication, cooperation, and negotiation that can take the form of military confrontation, economic and state dependence/collaboration, and religious conflicts/hybridization. In the complex panorama of the Roman Empire and its related expansion in the Near East, these specific borderland phenomena assumed a particular role, and one that needs a fuller attention. The idea itself of a *limes* in North Mesopotamia and trans-Euphratene region is challenging, and its interpretation—if any—relates to what Isaac pointedly highlighted

4 See Parker 2006, 77–104 for a detailed discussion of the topic, particularly in regard to borderlands in the greater Near East.

some decades ago.⁵ He claimed that the term *limes* never indicated structures like walls, forts, and camps (e.g., Hadrian's Wall is never referred to as a *limes*), but rather, and especially from the first to the third centuries CE, it is simply employed to define a border area with no reference to military organization or physical boundaries (i.e., rivers, mountains, etc.). With the worsening of the frontier politics in the later Roman Empire and the increase of building activities to secure these borderland areas, the physical aspects of the *limes* regained a prominent role; and yet the absence of a real physical barrier and the lack of a systematic defensive system are the main features of Roman Mesopotamia. Until and after the Augustan period, the Euphrates was seen as the natural border between the Roman and the Parthian Empires. With the military advancement towards the eastern steppe under Trajan and—more substantially—in the Severan Age (late second–early third centuries CE), the physical aspect of the barrier (again, if any) became more evanescent, fluctuating in a wider buffer zone between the upper Khabur river in Syria and the western bank of the Tigris in Northern Iraq. Here, cities with long pre-Roman tradition, Aramaic-speaking communities, and non-sedentary groups shared and negotiated space among themselves. In such a complex panorama, geography and space, and especially the management of the fragile landscape of north Mesopotamia itself, thus represented key aspects for the co-existence in this area, where social and cultural overlaps occurred on a daily basis both at urban and regional level.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the economic and social landscape of the easternmost territory of the Roman Empire, it is therefore necessary to briefly set the spatial stage properly. By “Northern Mesopotamia” I mean the region currently comprising northeastern Syria, northwestern Iraq, and part of southeastern Turkey. Defining its limits is not straightforward, but it can be understood in general terms as the land located between the area east of the upper courses of the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers below the Anatolian plateau, together with the northern margins of the Syrian Desert between Syria and Iraq (Fig. 1). At certain points in the Roman period, this large area encompassed part of the province of Syria Coele, a part of the territory under the control of the kingdoms of Osroene and Armenia (to the west and north, respectively) and part of the kingdom of Adiabene to the East.⁶ This political fragmentation probably was the result of a later *accommodation* of pre-Roman polities dominating their own territory, whose co-option—by the hands of Rome—for the control of the steppe lands beyond the Euphrates was taken care of, throughout the whole period of Roman presence, with alternate fortunes and outcomes (Fig. 1).⁷ The area that will become a province under Septimius Severus is, therefore, roughly

5 Isaac 1988.

6 Marciak 2017.

7 See Millar 1993, 437–488; Edwell 2008.

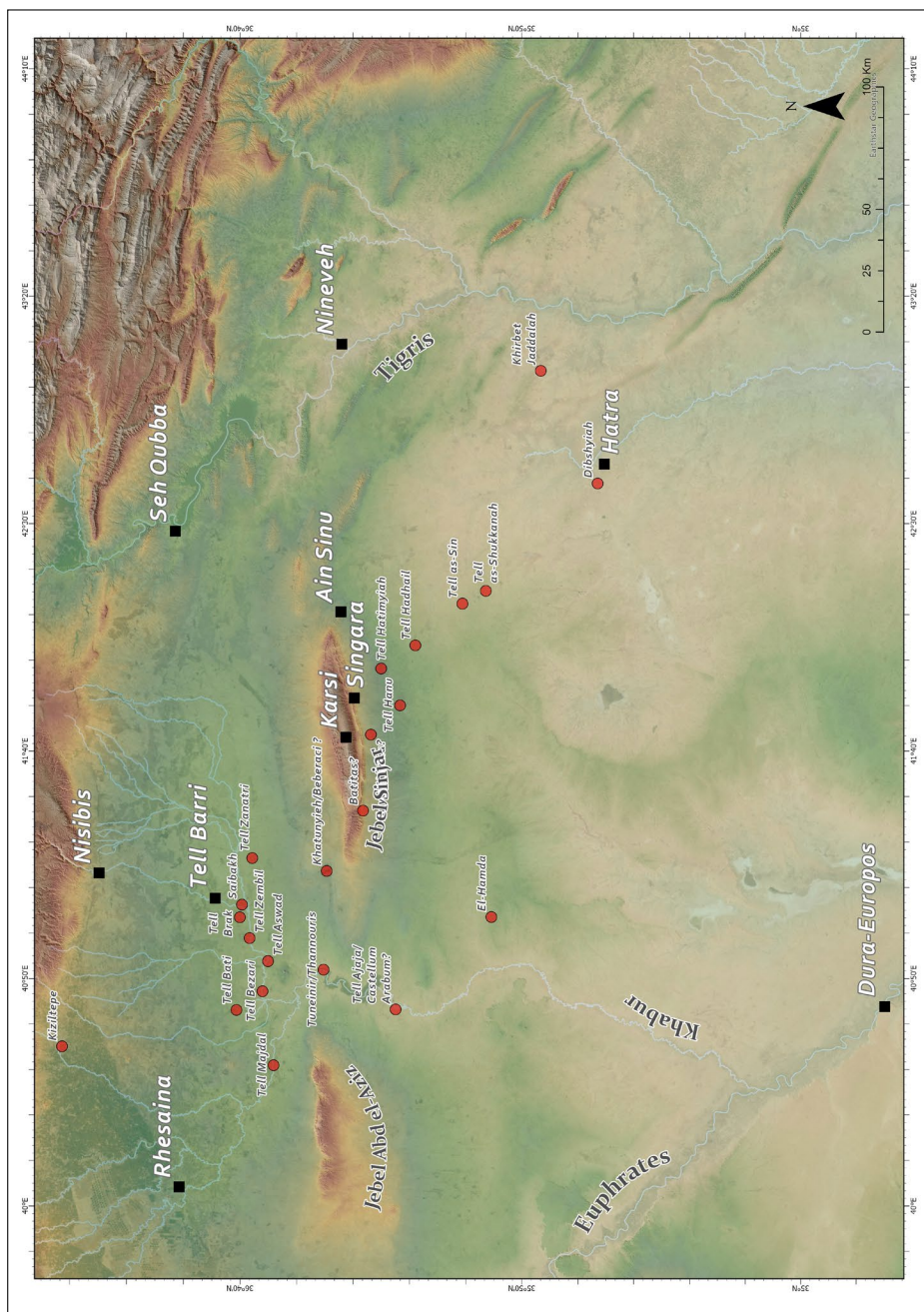


Fig. 1 Map of Northern Iraq.

defined by the limits of this geographic shelf, which also correspond to the 200-mm rainfall line, below which agriculture is possible only with artificial irrigation and labor investments. All major settlements (Rhesaina, Nisibis, Singara) lie above this line and within the northern, extended basin of the Khabur river, the major tributary of the Euphrates in the region (the other, shorter and with a more seasonal character, is the Balikh at the west).⁸ This is a crucial aspect to take into account, as the whole of North Mesopotamia is a climatic zone where the interannual rainfall variability oscillates greatly, thereby considerably affecting harvest practices, with great consequences for both political and social mechanics.⁹

Urban Economy: Cities on the Fringe

Major studies on the Roman presence in the steppe-lands of North Mesopotamia have mostly concentrated on the historical and literary evidence, with the archaeological record only minimally included into the discussion.¹⁰ This is partly due to the fact that an effective set of archaeologically reliable data is indeed missing, but also to the scholarly tradition that has somewhat relegated the study of the easternmost frontier of Rome to being within the larger discussions on the Roman Near East, with Mesopotamia being de facto a small and very much peripheral area of the vast Roman Eastern Mediterranean. The evolution of settlement patterns in the Roman period and late antiquity has rarely been explored for the broad region, and, with the sole exception of exploration carried out by David Oates in the 1950s at Ain Sinu and Singara, detailed urban landscape studies have been only recently approached for the Roman (and Parthian) period.¹¹

On such premises, the definition of the Roman imperial space and landscape in North Mesopotamia seems to be difficult to tackle. Survey projects carried out in northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq since the 1980s have somewhat failed to delineate the transformation of the landscape of settlements in the Hellenistic, Roman, and later periods. If, on the one hand, this was due to the limited interest of many projects in the so-called *post-Assyrian* periods (roughly from the sixth century

8 With the exception of Rhesaina, which is situated at the spring of the Khabur (modern Arabic name is Ras el-Ain, “the head of the spring”), all other major centers are located far from major waterways but in close proximity to *wadis* (seasonal rivers) or natural springs.

9 Eklund, Thompson 2017; Weiss et al. 1993.

10 Millar 1993; Ball 2000; Butcher 2004; Edwell 2008.

11 Oates 1968 on the excavations at Singara and Ain Sinu. Palermo 2014 on Nisibis and its archaeological remains, Regional-scale studies: Brancato 2017; Palermo 2019. See also Foietta 2018 on Hatra and its landscape.

BCE to the rise of Islam), on the other hand, the scanty available records to be used in a comparative perspective with surface-collected evidence must have discouraged those interested in the reconstruction of the Seleucid and Roman involvement in the urbanization/ruralization processes in the region. This difficulty in examining and analyzing data has also generated confusion with regard to the terminology employed for the period that covers the early centuries of the first millennium CE. Terms such as “Parthian–Roman,” “Hellenistic–Roman,” or even “first millennium AD” [sic!] were largely used in publications and field reports, creating undiscernible groupings of archaeological material that, if they ever could be, cannot be differentiated anymore.¹² This lack of interest in the Classical Age in Mesopotamia has evidently significantly impacted the full comprehension of both historical and archaeological dynamics, resulting too often in a confused patchwork of information that requires time and too much of a speculative approach in the absence of reliable datasets. This scientific impasse has so far almost completely dominated; however, new projects operating in the greater area of North Mesopotamia are revolutionizing our perception of the extended eastern borderland of the Roman Empire and its role as a zone of interaction between multiple imperial agents.¹³

It is a truism, however, that the definition itself of *Roman* settlement in the region is challenging. On the base of such premises, I will now discuss the available evidence for the rural and urban scenario of Roman Mesopotamia, with a particular focus on the economic phenomena as retrieved in textual and archaeological data.

The starting point is the definition of *main* and *minor*, as well as *urban* and *rural*, as these can be applied to the contested landscape of Roman Mesopotamia. A main center, usually an urban site, can be defined as a relatively large city that must have played a significant role in military, economic, and social processes, represented by the concentration of trading activities, different craftsmen, and its predominant role in the regional and trans-regional route network. According to these categories, the major centers are three: Nisibis, Rhesaina, and Singara.

Besides these urban centers, small villages, hamlets, isolated farms, and other rural communities also populated the Mesopotamian landscape, along with seasonal camps of non-sedentary groups. All these categories must have interacted—on a rather mutual level—with large cities, and yet the social and economic dependencies of these sites need further explanation. Did these rural communities occasionally interact among themselves by somehow bypassing the major center(s)? The answer is probably in the affirmative, as many rural communities in antiquity acted along a double channel, sustaining at the very same time both the major center(s) and themselves. On the other hand, supplies coming and going from a rural area did not all reach the urban

12 De Jong and Palermo 2018, 244–245.

13 Palermo 2016; Palermo, Ur, and de Jong 2022.

centers, and in the same way, not all goods available in the community arrived from designated cities. Thus, the exploitation of the rural landscape functioned relatively equally as a major benefit for the smaller communities within the political and economic orbit of the largest and most important cities.

In terms of social stratification, major cities tended to be populated by “globally” oriented societies that defined themselves through broader value systems, created market economies, and managed the majority of the economic processes of both the local and regional spheres. On the other hand, the countryside’s response to the market-oriented major centers generated a series of economic specializations that fostered the importance of the rural zones in relation to the major urban areas.

Unfortunately, in North Mesopotamia, there is not sufficient evidence to precisely suggest what kind of social milieu was dominant in the major centers, but some suggestions can be made nevertheless. Was Nisibis, for example, once it had become a *colonia*, a “Rome-oriented” center? To what extent was the administration of Nisibis influenced, again, by political interests along the *limes*? At what level was the impact of Rome recognized by local communities and traceable in the available evidence from the major centers?

Urban areas, although limited in number if compared to other eastern regions, constituted the core of the *consensus* within the limits of the eastern borderland. This is displayed in the adoption—alongside the persistence of local traditions—of certain values of external origin in terms of religion, architecture, economy, and administration that mingled well with the local substrate in order to create the sociocultural panorama of Roman Mesopotamia. The negotiation of these values shaped the social and physical features of each city; taking place at different levels, this particular mediation is visible through major categories of evidence such as environmental factors, politics, strategic relevance, and the economy.

All three major centers, Nisibis, Rhesaina, and Singara, lie in a steppe-land area that covers a substantial part of North Mesopotamia, and therefore, they share a common geographical setting that includes the presence of waterway(s), springs, and arable land in their immediate proximity. The common ecological features are reflected in their rather similar importance in terms of political control. Rome’s influence in the Mesopotamian borderland was particularly visible in this roughly triangular area whose vertices were the major urban centers. These acted as key points for the maintenance of imperial control, and their role as trading points and commercial hubs also affected the economic landscape on a regional scale.

After the peace treaty of 292 CE between Narsai and Diocletian, for example, only Nisibis was granted the permission to establish trade exchange with Persia (and beyond), a fact that reflects both the relevance of the city itself and the particular



Fig. 2 Detail of the Arch of Septimius Severus, Rome.

role that the urban hubs had in the developing economy of Roman Mesopotamia.¹⁴ Prior to this phase, Nisibis and Rhesaina, not too distant from each other, interacted in terms of economic interests, territorial control, and strategy within the political context of Rome's influence in the area.

In terms of the impact of empire—expressed, for example, through the presence of substantial architectural features—major cities of the region acted differently from other cities of the Roman Near East. We can assume that, perhaps because of the particular political scenario of the region, they must have looked like (even more) fortified cities. Indeed, among the large cities of the region, only at Nisibis is there no clear trace of its massive defensive walls, but one can certainly infer their existence—as depicted, for example, on the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome (Fig. 2). The overimposition on the supposed ancient site of the modern centers of Al-Qamishli (Syria) and Nusaybin (Turkey) has certainly contributed to the obliteration of the majority of the archaeological remains.¹⁵ Fortified citadels, reinforced gates, and military quarters also characterized the Mesopotamian cities of this period, as did hydraulic engineering works that must have contributed to the water supply for their population (see the case of the late Roman/Byzantine cisterns at Dara, not far from Nisibis itself).¹⁶ However, unlike cities in western Syria, which were also adorned with temples, palaces, public squares, and rich private dwellings, a proper architectural program is not very well visible in Roman Mesopotamia. At Nisibis, the provincial capital from Severus' time until the mid-fourth century CE, there are few archaeological remains dated to the Roman period. Corinthian columns are still visible in the no man's land between Syria and Turkey, and they have been interpreted (also in association with a very fragmented Latin inscription) alternately as part of a possible circus located south of the city center¹⁷ or, less likely, as part of the forum.¹⁸ The city started to host—especially from the fourth century CE onwards—a vibrant Christian community, and the remains of the baptistery of Mar Yaqub in the modern city center of Nusaybin (on the Turkish side of the border) bear witness to this phase. Thanks to a very detailed inscription, it is possible to date the monument to 359 CE, a mere four years before the peace treaty of 363 that marked the end of the Roman presence in the region.¹⁹

14 Palermo 2019, 52. The *Expositio totius mundi* (22, ed. Rougé = p. 156) mentions that, because of this particular status, cities like Nisibis (and Edessa) were populated by wealthy communities.

15 Early twentieth c. travelers failed to recognize imposing architecture in the area, a sign that speaks to an even earlier obliteration and is possibly connected to the re-use of stone-cut materials in early modern and modern building activities. Gertrude Bell, in 1911, mentioned the remains of what she interpreted as a “Roman bridge” over the *wadi* Jaghjagh.

16 Ousterhout 2019, 165–166. On the water management in the Near East during the Roman period see also Kamash 2013.

17 Lightfoot 1988, 110. See also de Jong and Palermo 2018, 254.

18 Lightfoot 1988.

19 Palermo 2019, 74.



Fig. 3 Cuirassed statue, likely late second century CE from Ras el-Ain (Syria).

West of Nisibis, the favorable position of Rhesaina, on the road that connects the Euphrates region to the Khabur valley and, hence, to the Tigris (via Nisibis), was extremely important to the strategic purposes of the Roman Empire in Mesopotamia. Its location in a fertile land, rich in water and springs, contributed to the development of the civilian settlement and served to support the military fortress. The elevation of the city to the status of *colonia* reflects its relevance in terms of territorial control, but it also mirrors the politics of the Severan period, which aimed to “officialize” the Roman presence in the region in consequence of the new territorial acquisition. Rhesaina, like Nisibis, Singara, and Edessa, thus became a civic mint in the area, thereby directly increasing its own economic impact on the region. Military personnel stationed in the city may have forced the reconfiguration of the urban space. Part of the Roman-period

city walls has been unearthed at in the modern city of Ras el-Ain (Syria),²⁰ and the incredible finding of a cuirassed statue—dated probably to the end of the second century CE—confirm the enormous political relevance of the city (Fig. 3).²¹

Singara, corresponding to the modern Iraqi city of Sinjar (or Beled Sinjar; Kurdish: Shingal) has preserved large part of its late-Roman-period city walls with U-shaped towers and monumental gates. Unlike Nisibis and Rhesaina, excavations carried out by D. Oates in the late 1950s have permitted a much clearer sense of the ancient urban space and the extent of the fortified town and its supposed citadel.²²

Considering this evidence, and taking into account that a significant military presence was attested in these centers in various occasions, one can postulate that, despite the absence of significant documentation, both textual and archaeological, it would not be

20 McEwan 1958. Some evidence about the Roman and Byzantine levels at Tell Fecheriye is also present at <http://www.fecheriye.de/de/ausgrabung-2007/> (accessed December 2021).

21 Palermo 2019, 93–94. See also Cadario 2020.

22 Oates 1968, 97–106.fO.

too hazardous to suggest that the dynamics of military/civilian interactions, extensively known from Dura Europos, were probably similar in Rhesaina, Nisibis, and Singara.

Demography and the Agricultural Economy in Roman Mesopotamia

An interesting element to determine the economic impact of a *colonia* at the very end of the Roman Empire is to potentially reconstruct the demographic pressure that the city applied to itself and the surrounding territory. As many of the ancient economic processes were prevalently dictated by agricultural revenues, the ratio between demography and a city's potential catchment area is a useful way to assess the spatial (and socioeconomic) impact over the landscape.

Several studies have focused on the calculation of demographics and urban demographics particularly, with a substantial number of them dedicated to the Roman world.²³ Research conducted within the framework of the Oxford Roman Economy Project shows that an estimated population for nucleated settlements (villages) ranged between 150 and 250 persons per hectare.²⁴ It has also been observed that in Bronze Age Mesopotamia, for example, this range could have varied between 100 and 200 persons per hectare.²⁵ This is largely based on comparative observations of modern rural communities, where building techniques (adobe, mostly) and household components (enlarged families) have not changed too much from ancient times.²⁶ Eventually, by combining a Mediterranean model with the Near Eastern one, one can assume that a range of 100–200 persons/ha can be also applied to later periods of Mesopotamian history. And yet, the space within a city was not entirely occupied by private dwellings (public buildings, roads, market squares, and open areas were all part of the urban layout), and for this reason, a lower figure would be much more realistic in determining demographic quantities.²⁷

23 See the extensive biography on the topic, which is available at https://oxrep.classics.ox.ac.uk/bibliographies/ancient_city_populations_bibliography/ (accessed December 2021).

24 Witcher 2011, 43.

25 Wilkinson 2003, 39–51. This theory was borrowed from Carol Kramer's ethnoarchaeological study of rural communities in Iran (Kramer 1982). There is, however, no certainty in reconstructing scenarios using these numbers, and on more than one occasion, an attempt to assess population figures by employing excavation data has yielded much higher figures for Mesopotamia (see, e.g., Postgate 1994).

26 Kramer 1982.

27 On the reconstruction of ancient demography in the Near East, see Kramer 1980 and Wilkinson 1994.

As said, Nisibis, Rhesaina, and Singara were primarily civilian settlements that were adapted to host military quarters, and the case of Dura Europos provides a useful archaeological comparison.²⁸ In this sense, a precise estimation of the settled area is affected by the fact that part of the internal space of the cities was occupied by military structures that might have increased the average person/space ratio. The military quarter at Dura Europos, for example, occupied approximately one third of the walled space in the northern part of the city, covering an area of approximately twenty hectares. Population figures for the military quarter have been estimated by Simon James at 3,000–6,000 units.²⁹ If compared to the general numbers hypothesized for the civilian part of the city (10,000–15,000),³⁰ this evidence suggests a considerable presence of Roman soldiers (and associated families) at Dura. It is not a surprise, then, that the involvement of Roman officials in economic transactions and social (mutual) cooperation with local and regional communities was particularly intense.

Turning to Roman Mesopotamia proper, I will briefly use a similar methodology to assess population figures and catchment areas. I will employ Singara as the test case here, as its archaeological remains can be used to suggestively determine the size of the ancient city in a better and more complete way than Nisibis or Rhesaina. The walled area of Singara covers an approximate area of seventeen hectares, which means that, considering the low range test parameters, it could have hosted approximately 1,700 inhabitants, a number that seems relatively low for a “city,” whereas if one assumes the highest parameter, the population of Singara might raise to circa 3,400, which fits particularly well—proportionally—with the calculation already proposed for Dura Europos. Starting from the very end of the second century CE, Singara became the headquarter of the *I Parthica*, one of the two legions deployed in Mesopotamia by Septimius Severus.³¹ This evidence suggests that the population could have increased by *at least* 4,000 units—but higher numbers are more likely. Considering that there is no evidence of an external fort/camp at Singara, one must think that Roman soldiers were hosted within the city walls, following the model that I have already illustrated for Dura Europos. At this point, Singara would have been populated by a potential of ca. 6,000 people (lower figure) or, in the case of the higher estimation, 7,500. These

28 The recent volume by S. James (2019) provides a substantial historical and archaeological overview of the military camp at Dura.

29 James 2019, 300.

30 Baird (as *pers. comm.*) in James 2019, 300. Previously, Baird 2014, 121 suggested lower figures: 5,000–6,000.

31 *I Parthica* and *III Parthica* were effectively deployed in the region. The *II Parthica*, although created for the eastern campaigns, was headquartered at Albanum (Palermo 2019, 81–82). Singara would host the *I Parthica* and the *I Flavia Constatina* during the Sasanian siege of the 344–348 AD (Palermo 2019, 83).

figures are very well within the scale of a mid-to-large settlement in pre-industrial societies, as rightly pointed out by A. Bowman and A. Wilson.³²

Eventually, this increase in population was necessarily tied to a stronger pressure on the potential agricultural catchment area, whose effective exploitability must have represented a great impact on the general economic life of the city.

Indeed, demography—and particularly demography in the ancient world—is considered a key element for the understanding of multiple and complex economic processes.³³ Usually, significant intensifications in economic activities during the classical/late antique period in Mesopotamia can be directly correlated with an increase in the size of settlements.³⁴ And indeed, archaeological surveys carried out in the large area from the Upper Khabur basin to the Tigris have demonstrated that the “Age of the Territorial Empires” (the Assyrians, Seleucids, Romans, Parthians, and Sasanians) went hand in hand with a steady intensification of urban and non-urban settlements, despite the natural curves and the inevitable periods of political instability.³⁵

Naturally, each major center of the ancient world was not isolated or detached from its own regional landscape, and assuming that the parameters used to estimate the supposed population of the large centers of Roman Mesopotamia are valid, the next step is to define their possible catchment areas. These zones represent the expendable agricultural potential of each city. A model to calculate the extension of a city’s agricultural sustaining area in the fragile landscape of North Mesopotamia has been formulated by the late T. Wilkinson.³⁶ This is based on the assumption that a single person eats approximately one hectare’s worth of grain or cereals per year (on the basis of a fallowing regime, which can be adapted to the particular ecological context of North Mesopotamia).³⁷ According to these figures, the catchment area of Singara, for example, could have extended at least as far as seventeen square kilometers if one considers a low estimate for its population, or thirty-four square kilometers if using the highest parameters (Fig. 4). The adjoined military population raises these numbers considerably. Unfortunately, no systematic survey has been carried out in the close proximity of Singara, and one cannot fully establish to what extent a potential overlapping of catchment areas between the city and the surrounding villages in the

32 Bowman and Wilson 2011, 13.

33 Jongman 2009, 116.

34 Lawrence et al. 2016.

35 On the surveys carried out in the region, see, in particular, Wilkinson and Tucker 1995; Wright et al. 2002; Morandi Bonacossi and Iamoni 2015; Palermo 2016; Ur et al. 2020; Palermo, Ur, and de Jong 2022.

36 Wilkinson 1994, 483–520.

37 This model has been based on ethno-archaeological evidence from modern Iraq (Adams 1965). Adams calculated that, excluding the area of Baghdad, the sustaining area for half a million people in the Diyala basin averaged 1.4 hectares per year (Adams 1965, 23 ff.). See also Kramer 1982, 188–189 for other regional figures.

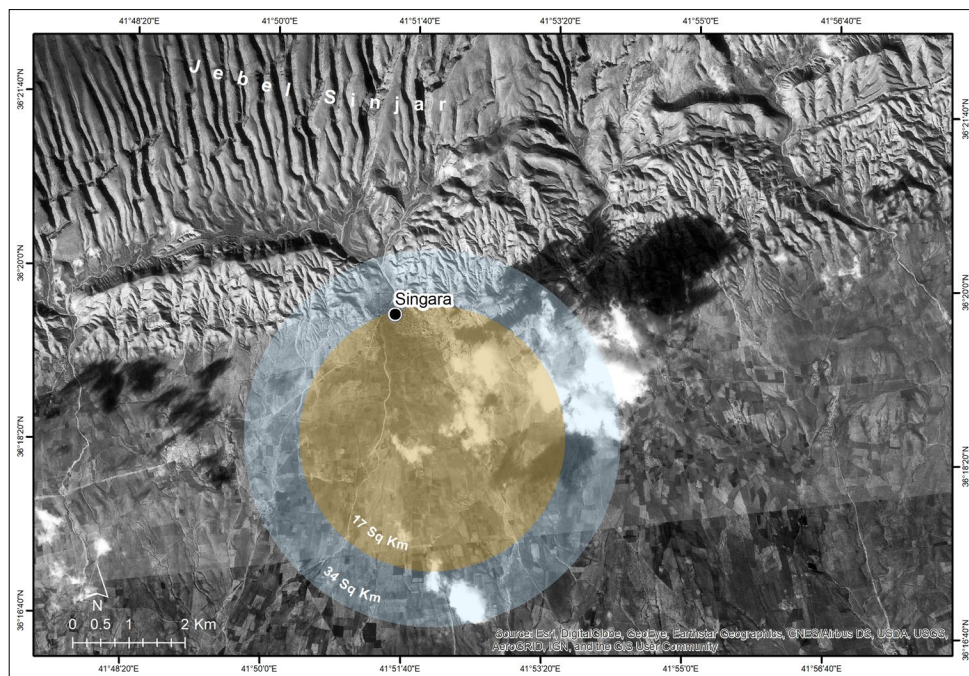


Fig. 4 Possible catchment areas of Singara, 17 sq. km (yellow); 34 sq. km (blue).

countryside might have affected the agricultural and economic scenario. I do believe, however, that—as in the case of early imperial Italy³⁸—the landscape of settlements around major cities of Roman Mesopotamia acted within an integrated market economy, rather than being independent and economically isolated.³⁹ Small and rural sites, indeed, participated actively in the continuous transaction between agricultural surplus and manufactured goods which defined the urban–rural relationship. There is no apparent reason to believe that this process was not in place also at the very end of the Roman territory, and particularly when the region was firmly in Roman hands, between the end of the second and the mid-fourth centuries CE.

If a demographic analysis can be tentatively suggested for the urban centers, the rural population does not fall into the discussion so easily. Survey data for the Roman, Parthian, and early Sasanian periods are too scant and occasionally imprecise (see above). Projects carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s in northeastern Syria have somewhat

38 Horden and Purcell 2000, 270–277.

39 The strict correlation between major cities and their sustaining countryside in the Near East during the Classical Age has been also postulated for the Seleucia hinterland (van der Spek 2008).

failed to draw conclusive data on this period, and the lack of reliable stratigraphic evidence with which to compare surface collections hinders further consideration. However, a partial discussion can be based on data such as site numbers and distribution, as they were identified by small- or large-scale surveys across northeastern Syria and northwestern Iraq. I have discussed the data elsewhere,⁴⁰ and here I want to propose some summarized and preliminary observations with regard to the landscape of villages and secondary centers in Roman-period Mesopotamia. It is almost certain that a slow, but consistent, growth is observed from the Hellenistic period onwards, which somewhat contrasts with the troubled political scenario of the region. Some areas seem to have been more densely populated than others. A quite visible alignment of sites along a NW–SE axis from Nisibis towards the Jebel Sinjar (and from there to the Tigris) might indicate the existence of a traveled commercial axis between two of the major cities of Roman Mesopotamia (Nisibis and Singara) and the upper Tigris basin (whose western bank was in Roman hands—although with alternating fortunes—until the mid-fourth century CE) and, perhaps, the economically strategic city of Hatra. Sites recovered are usually small and often range between <1 and 3 hectares, undoubtedly indicating the rural character of the region. Surface-collected evidence reflects, perhaps, a local imprinting and the persistence of a regional material culture, with strong roots into the pre-Roman period. Arretine ware, *sigillata*, and other Roman ceramics have been seldom collected, whereas the relative abundance of the so-called “brittle ware” might indeed indicate extraregional connections with western Syria and the Upper Euphrates.⁴¹ The absence of long-traveling objects might, on one hand, be easily connected to the partial evidence deriving from the sole consideration of surface material or, on the other hand, might once more point to the overwhelming economic role of major centers as trade and commercial hubs, as well as of places where the village–city relation, in terms of marked integration and exchange, took place. Contrary to Roman-period Mesopotamia, however, recently analyzed datasets from the Upper Tigris basin in Northern Iraq have demonstrated that the Parthian period (roughly from the late second century BCE to the early third century CE) was a phase for intense population growth in the area, which was only barely impacted by military operations.⁴² I have postulated elsewhere that such growth might have derived from the close proximity of the area to the core of the Adiabene region, whose rulers perhaps put in place a policy of regional economic support.⁴³

40 Palermo 2019, 190–209.

41 On the so-called “brittle ware” as a particular index fossil in Northern Syria, see Amodio 2008; Vokaer 2010; 2011.

42 Ur et al. 2013; Palermo 2016; de Jong and Palermo 2018.

43 Palermo, Ur, and de Jong 2022.

Rural Economies: Villages and Mobility

Considering the data discussed so far, it might seem quite evident that a proper Roman economic and social impact in this area is not easy to fully tackle and that—unlike cities of western Syria, the Levant, and Palmyra—our understanding of the economic dynamics of Roman Mesopotamia is, as seen, partly limited. The panorama described so far does, indeed, reflect a common model for the northern Mesopotamian landscape of settlements in the Classical Age: on the one hand, the very small number of sizable cities, generally defined by their prominent role in both regional and wider contexts, mirrors the troubled situation of the region, in which walled centers offered security and sociopolitical relevance; on the other hand, there is a clear persistence of a long-standing tradition of a rural-oriented region dotted with small communities orbiting around those very same large cities. In such a critically balanced relation, the social component of this interaction (urban vs. rural communities) came to play a decisive role.

Major cities hosted a mixed population of soldiers and local people, whose level of integration and mutual cooperation must have been a common trait throughout the entire area. Small settlements and isolated villages most likely retained their local traditions, with large groups of Aramaic-speaking communities exploiting the surrounded land while economically—at least partly—tied to major centers. Members of external elites (i.e., Roman officials) occasionally resided and dealt with trading and economic activities in the villages. This special (and spatial) relationship between cities and villages is, therefore, a key factor for the understanding of these very same activities and social connections in such a borderland area. In particular, these phenomena are very well witnessed in the textual evidence (graffiti and papyri) from Dura Europos as well as in the corpus of the so-called *papyri* of the Euphrates.

These documents bear witness to multiple transactions, agricultural activities, and the involvement of Roman officials in the economic scenario of the eastern borderland. The deployment of Roman soldiers in the region contributed to bringing another type of agency to the economic life of Dura and the Middle Euphrates, but there is also reason to believe that, most likely, the economic structures that were in place prior to the arrival of Rome did not undergo such a radical transformation. Graffiti evidence from Dura Europos points at the involvement of local “non-Roman” elites in commerce and trading between the urban center and the surrounding medium-sized-to-small settlements located mostly upstream on the Khabur river—perhaps in a territory that was much more controlled and secure for the movement of people and goods.⁴⁴ Other documents and, in particular, data from the House of the Archives at Dura Europos (or the Archive of Nebuchelos) are also particularly useful to reconstruct

44 Ruffing 2016.

the economic life of the city.⁴⁵ Nebuchelos was most likely a member of the Durene elite who must have gained Roman citizenship after the 212 CE reform. In the transactions preserved in his archive—sales of lands, vineyards, orchards—both the local population and Roman soldiers were actively involved, pointing at a strong level of mutual interest and collaboration. Indeed, Roman soldiers (mostly veterans) stationed in the region became land owners in the proximity of Dura, perhaps in the fertile Euphrates floodplain. For example, in *P.Dura* 26, a certain Iulius Demetrius (from *Cohors III Augusta Thracum*) is recorded as being the purchaser of a “land with trees” from a local man (Otarneus) in 227 CE. The land was located in a village approximately twenty-five kilometers upstream along the Khabur. The purchasing act was witnessed by other five individuals, and we know of another Roman soldier, Aurelius Salmanes, who signed on behalf of the local vendor, presumably because he was an illiterate man.⁴⁶

This level of interaction is also visible outside the urban context of Dura, in the so-called documents from the Middle Euphrates. This set of twenty-one texts (papyri and parchments), written mostly in Greek (with the exception of two in Aramaic), was probably part of a household archive from the village of Beth Phurin, tentatively located along the lower Khabur river, not far from the Euphrates confluence, in the district of Appadana (in the region of *Sphoracene*), which might have encompassed the area between the modern city of Al-Hassake and the Euphrates-Khabur confluence in eastern Syria, around Circesium (mod. Al-Busayreh) (Fig. 5). Out of the twenty-one texts, nineteen of them were judged as readable—and, hence, publishable—by the editors.⁴⁷ The majority of the documents has been dated to the period between 232 and 252. The last document, thus, pre-dates the Sasanian attacks on Dura Europos and the military campaigns of Shapur I in the area, which most certainly overturned the economic importance of the region.

The analysis of texts highlights a well-integrated economic scenario, which contributed to foster regional mobility (as I will discuss later), as well as good levels of interaction between different social groups and economic agents. An interesting example of such comes from *P. Euphr.* 9, a sale contract from the town of Beth Phurin in which a certain Aurelios Oualeg [-] is mentioned as a centurion of the *I Parthica*

45 Ruffing 2007, 399–411.

46 James 2019, 308.

47 The papyri were edited in three different articles (Feissel and Gascou 1989; 1995; Feissel, Gascou, and Teixidor 1997). The texts have been thoroughly analyzed from different angles (historical geography, legal implications, prosopography), and the literature has steadily increased in numbers over the years. Among the major works, see Gnoli 1999, 321–358; Mazza 2002; Gnoli 2007, 71–84; Merola 2012; Zerbini 2016. The name Appadana (Old Persian *appadana* and Parthian *pdn*) means “palace,” and it might be indicative of the political and economic role of the settlement within the regional context.

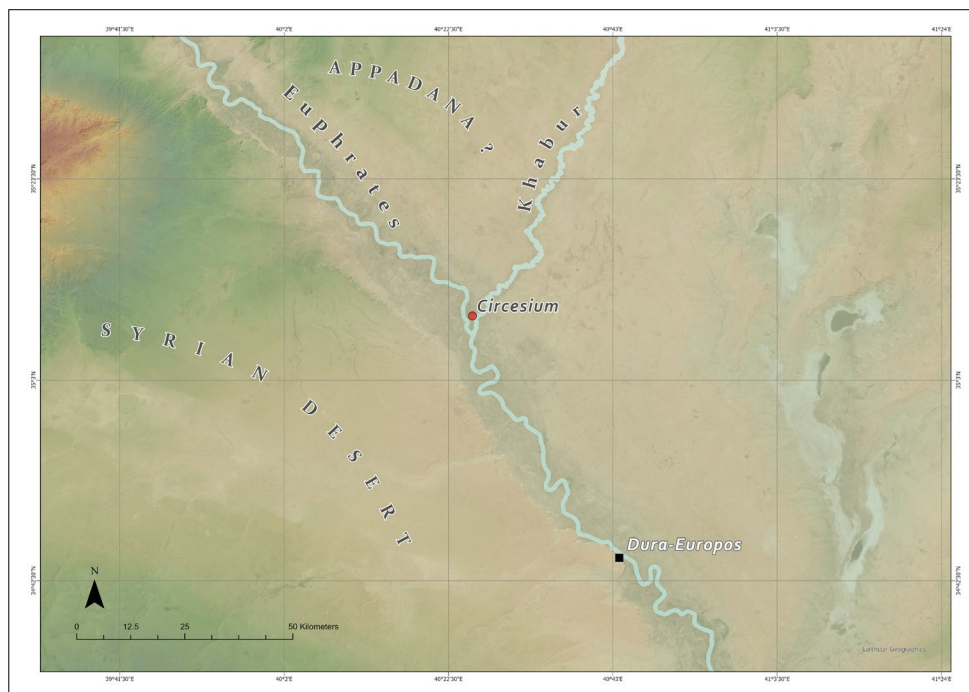


Fig. 5 Site of Circesium (mod. Al-Busayreh) and surrounding region at the Euphrates-Khabur confluence, eastern Syria.

in 252 CE (οίκουσα δέέν Νεσιβειν, συνπαρόωτος αύτη Αυρ(ηλίου) Ουαλεγ(εώνος) α Π(αρθική) (έκατοντάρχου) πριμοπίλουάνδρος αύτής). Aurelios is listed as the husband of a woman who owned a slave, which the document reports as being sold in Nisibis. A similar transaction is also mentioned in *P. Euph.* 8. In both the texts, individuals from different villages of the *Sphoracene* establish economic activities at Nisibis (here defined as *Septimia* and *Metropolis*). The involvement of a Roman centurion in these economic transactions is an additional sign of the role Roman officials had in the social and administrative panorama of Mesopotamia. I agree with T. Gnoli, who rightly claims that there is no doubt that Aurelios was in charge of some administrative task in the provincial capital and that his wife was also somewhat involved in the urban economy.⁴⁸ In addition, the date of the document—252 CE—fits perfectly well with the apex of Roman control at Nisibis and the trans-Euphratene in general, right before the mid-third century CE Sasanian invasion that caused, among other things, the sack of Dura and a long period of instability in the area. Data from Dura Europos and the

48 Gnoli 1999, 341.

Middle Euphrates region highlight how the Roman presence—through the agency of veterans and soldiers—profoundly modified the economic scenario of the region. People from Dura and the Euphrates valley participated in a well-integrated network of long-distance and regional trade, also indicating the relevance—for the Roman Empires—of controlling the Khabur river valley, a crucial region that connected Dura with Nisibis to the North.

Mobility and Trade Routes: Singara as a Crossroad

P. Euphr 8 and *P. Euphr 9*—as in many other cases from either the Middle Euphrates or Dura's corpus—also denote the high degree of mobility of people, traders, and intermediaries that were implicated in commercial activities. People traveled for economic reasons from villages to regional centers and to capitals—both close ones like Nisibis and more distant ones like Antioch.

Indeed, mobility was a key feature of the Classical Eastern Mediterranean, and the movements of people and goods were highly incentivized by local and wider economic opportunities. In addition, a common marker of the economic interaction along and beyond the borders of the Roman Empire is the central role the route network had in its success. Initially built to sustain the movement of large numbers of troops while advancing from place to place, the complex network of Roman roads at the edge of the empire ended up assuming a relevant position in multiple economic processes. In fact, in the Roman Near East, the correlation between economic hubs and routes—many of which pre-dated the Roman presence in the region—is evident and assumes a central role when discussing the economic potential of such a borderland zone. Some of the most famous cases in this regard are the *Via Traiana Nova* and the *Strata Diocletiana*, respectively in Jordan and Syria.⁴⁹ Although—and perhaps at an initial stage—differently conceived, these roads connected crucial areas of eastern provinces, assuring the double role of military and economic links. Both the roads, however, exploited pre-Roman caravan routes but became important backbones of the Roman expansion and territorial control in the Near East. Thus, the spatial distribution of these routes, and the related organization of urban and military settlements along them, is a central aspect for the understanding of mobility on the fringes of the Roman Empire.

In such a context, the Peutinger Map (PM) is an incredibly helpful tool, despite the issues that the document poses.⁵⁰ The map is a parchment roll (6.94 m × 0.33 m)

49 On the urban development in connection with the *Via Traiana Nova*, see Segal and Richardson 1988. On the *Strata Diocletiana*, see Kennedy and Riley 1990, 181–183.

50 Talbert 2010, 73–84.

depicting the whole known world from Britannia to Sri Lanka, covering ca. 70,000 miles of Roman roads. It is known by the name of the humanist Konrad Peutinger, who first possessed the document in the sixteenth century CE. On the basis of palaeographic analysis, the current document is usually dated to the thirteenth century CE and was possibly a copy redacted in Swabia, the southern region of Germany that borders Switzerland, and possibly inspired by a fourth-century-CE document.⁵¹ The chronology is largely based on the figurative prominence (walled and towered representations) of certain cities that assumed a certain relevance in the period between the fourth and fifth centuries CE (i.e., Aquileia and Ravenna in Northern Italy, or Ancyra and Nicomedia in Anatolia).⁵² Not many years ago, R. Talbert dedicated an enormously important work to the PM (one that adds up to his previous literature to the topic), also enriched with redrawn digital maps and online repositories.⁵³

This brief excursus serves to demonstrate the enormous relevance of the PM for the reconstruction of a historical geography of the late Roman Empire, and one that can contribute to the rediscovery of specific aspects of mobility and urban hierarchy in overlooked regions. As such, the importance of the document for the tentative reconstruction of the route network of Roman Mesopotamia is certainly beyond doubt. The region is represented on Segment X, and although it appears extremely compressed—due to the format of the map itself—it shows all major centers of the area, with a more accurate depiction of the northern piedmont zone, perhaps reflecting Rome's primary region of interest or the area that was better known—directly or indirectly—to the mapmaker (Fig. 6).

I have discussed the major routes of the PM in Northern Mesopotamia in detail elsewhere,⁵⁴ but here I want to assess the economic relevance of these routes in connection with the major cities of the region.

Rhesaina, Nisibis, and Singara are all marked with the two-house symbol, which indicates the importance of a stop point,⁵⁵ and Singara in particular seems to have played—in the commercial and military route system of Northern Mesopotamia during the Roman period—a role of fundamental importance. The city acted as a major nodal point for civilians and soldiers' movements, contributing to the creation of a relevant hub used alternately for trade and military operations. On the PM, Singara is marked as a station post between Baba (or Bara) and Zaguræ (modern

51 Salway 2002, 123–125.

52 There are other characteristics that Salway has used to determine the date and provenance of the PM. Here, I point to his 2005 article for further reference and details.

53 Talbert 2010. A map viewer is available at <http://peutinger.atlantides.org/map-a/#?z=1&xy=161.30556%2C17.06111&l> (accessed December 2021).

54 Palermo 2019, 210–230.

55 In the interest of comparison, two-house symbols are used to represent Palmyra, Aleppo (Beroea), and Apamea, to remain in the macro-regional context only.

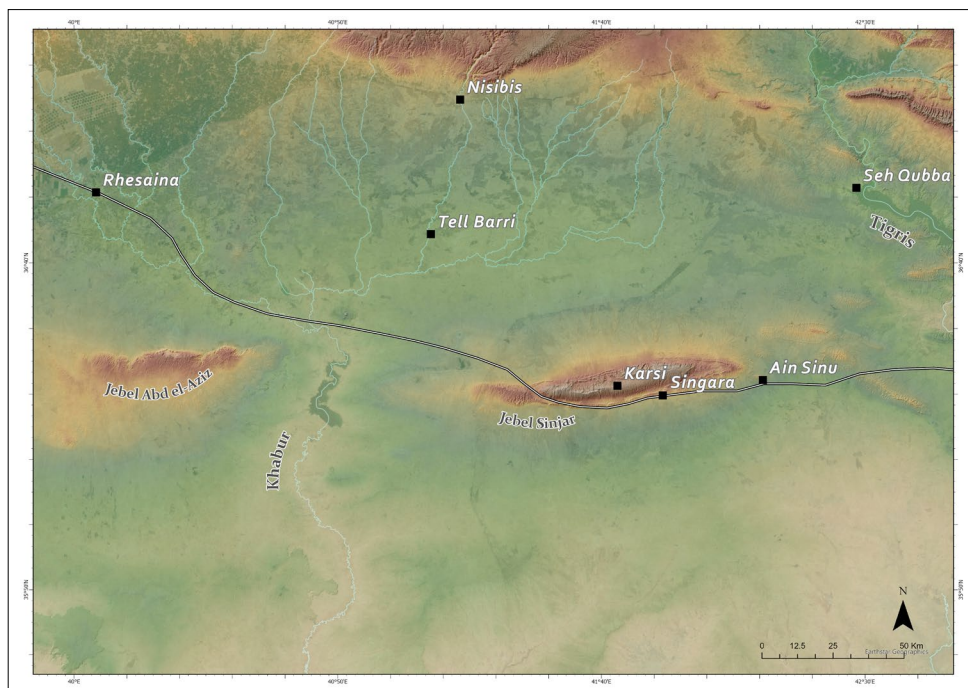


Fig. 7 Map showing relationship of Rhesaina, Nisibis, and Singara.

Ain Sinu), respectively thirty-three Roman miles westwards (ca. fifty kilometers) and twenty-one Roman miles eastwards (ca. thirty-one and a half kilometers). A second road reached Singara from the West, passing through the station of Sihinnus (thirty Roman miles westwards, corresponding to ca. forty-five kilometers) and joining the road from Bara halfway between Bara itself and Singara, somewhere in the proximity of Tell Hayal (Fig. 7).

Here, D. Oates reported the presence of a large squared structure that he believed might have been erected during the Roman period.⁵⁶ A third road arrived at Singara, apparently from the north after having passed the station of Arcamo(?), thirty Roman miles north of the settlement. A Roman milestone, discovered five kilometers southwest of the modern center of Sinjar, not far from the small village of Faghdani and along modern asphalt that connects Sinjar with the Syrian–Iraqi border, testifies to the existence and the use of a road during the period of Severus Alexander.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Oates 1968, 78–79.

⁵⁷ Oates 1968, 71. The milestone was found in a modern house, as reported by Cagnat 1927, 53, but was unfortunately lost at the moment David Oates visited the city. I (re)discovered the borne in

The document bears the following inscription:

Imp(erator) Caesar / M(arcus) Aurelius /Severus /Alexander / Pius [fel(ix)]
 Aug(ustus) /Pont(ifex) maxim(us) / Trib(unicia) / pot(estate) XI / Co(n)s(ul)
 III, [p(atriciae), proc(onsul) / A Sing(ara) / M(ilia) p(assum) / III

The mention of the eleventh *tribunicia potestas* provides an accurate chronology for the inscription, which can be dated to 231/232 CE, but we can also assume that the road was repaired at that time. A second milestone, found at Karsi (or Kursi), a small village guarding a narrow gorge in the Jebel Sinjar, north of Singara, provides further interesting information (Fig. 8).

Here I provide the transcription of the text:

Imp(erator) Caes(ar) [di]vi / Nervae f[i]l(ius) Nerva / Traianus Optimus /
 Aug(ustus) G[er]manicus / Dacicus [Pa]rthicus / pontif(ex) [max(imus) t]
 rib(unicia) [potes]/[tate] -----

This inscription specifically mentions the title *Parthicus*, a reliable indication with regard to the chronology that should be looked for in the last years of the Trajanic campaigns in Mesopotamia, when the emperor obtained the title following his achievements against the Parthians. The presence of such a document in the midst of Jebel Sinjar allows us to speculate about two different hypotheses. Assuming that the milestone was not significantly moved from its original position, one should suppose the existence both of a pass through the mountain west of Bara (the only accessible passage to cross the mountain) and also the presence of a second road linking Singara to the north—and, hence, to Nisibis—which cut through the plain, perhaps also following the Jaghjagh upstream. The road probably linked the area of Nisibis with Singara, and from here it continued towards the region of Hatra. Other possible routes went from the Tigris towards the Jaghjagh/Khabur confluence, and then along the river up to Circesium and the junction with the Euphrates.⁵⁸ There is no evidence that this last road was purposely built for the Trajanic campaigns, or rather, and most likely, was a pre-existent track, but its exploitation—and perhaps maintenance—for the strategic movements of troops remains a very strong possibility.

a small room of the Erbil Civilization Museum in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2018, and I have discussed its historical importance elsewhere (Palermo 2018).

58 Millar 1993, 101. On the creation of a road to *Circesium*, see Gschwind 2009, 1600. This route was part of a wider network dated to the Severan period, linking the Lower Khabur with Nisibis and the Euphrates near Sura (see also Konrad 2001).



Fig. 8 Milestone found at Karsi (Kursi), north of Singara.

In this way, the city controlled both the road below Jebel Sinjar, which connected the Upper Khabur valley with the Tigris to the east, and a second road from the north coming from the Jaghjagh basin and the Upper Khabur area. In the general framework of Roman military operations in North Mesopotamia as well as trade and commercial activities, these two axes were most probably the primary routes to follow in order to reach the eastern limits of the empire from western Syria or Central Anatolia. Singara was also the departing point for a southern route towards Hatra and an eastern one that touched the site of Ain Sinu/Zaguræ⁵⁹ before reaching the Tigris not far from the modern center of Tell Afar, in Northern Iraq. The former route seems to have passed through the villages of Tell Hatimyah and Tell al-Hadhail, two large *tells* that were probably also settled during the Parthian and Roman period, when they may have been regular stopping points along this route. Indeed, several possible tracks (hollow ways) have been spotted between these sites, and generally all of them in the region

59 On the excavations carried out at the camp of Ain Sinu, see Oates 1968 and Palermo 2019, 131–145.

are aligned along a northwest–southeast axis that roughly coincides with the direction from the Jebel Sinjar towards the region of Hatra.⁶⁰

This complex route network must have benefited many communities and favored the cross-borders connections with multiple economic agents. The permeability of the eastern frontier and the role major cities and market centers played in the regional context is thus accompanied by the involvement in the economic processes of long-distance trade by local elites (small villages) and nomadic tribes (non-dwellers). Both groups functioned as a critical part of the urban–rural economic mechanism, which was evidently encouraged by such a high degree of mobility.

Conclusions

Roman soldiers and their interaction with local elites and communities played a significant role in the region's economic life. On the basis of the data discussed so far, the involvement of Roman officials and the extent of Roman period infrastructures must, indeed, have greatly fostered the economy.

Multiple activities and the need to economically dialogue between different social agents (and those from different backgrounds) were based on the common benefit for the parties involved, and this process is particularly visible in the organized interaction on a mere geographical scale. The role of cities as hubs and market centers, strictly connected to villages and the regional context, speaks for a structured economic scenario, which was—at least until the mid-third century CE—only partly affected by the regional liminality.

Textual data from Dura and the papyri of the Euphrates might thus be interpolated with the proofs of existence of (caravan?) routes in the eastern part of Mesopotamia. The economic mobility of the various social agents in the Middle Euphrates and the Khabur valley was indeed permitted and incentivized by a likely similar route network. Routes from Dura to Nisibis have been seldom explored archaeologically, with a preference for the famous caravan trade route from Palmyra to the Euphrates and, hence, towards Southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf,⁶¹ but they might have asserted a similar function. The economic transactions that are mentioned in the textual records discussed above suggest that the Middle Euphrates region in the early third century CE saw the province of Mesopotamia as an area of opportunities and

60 Edwell 2008, 153. On the route network between the Singara area and Hatra, see Altaweel and Hauser 1993 and Palermo 2019, 103–105.

61 Seland 2016.

that cultural connections and mutual interest were carried out along the Euphrates–Khabur axis all the way up to Nisibis.

This scenario points at the recognition of the Dura and the Khabur–Euphrates confluence area from one side, and northern Mesopotamia proper on the other, as zones of long-distance economic interventions, being connected, respectively, with Palmyra and the lower Euphrates, and Western Syria and the Parthian Empire. Such an interconnected area contrasts with the traditional approach to exchange and interaction at the edges of the Roman Empire, but it fits perfectly within the pre-Roman context of the region, where different communities—each of them controlling specific economic structures—mutually benefited from each other, with little or no geographic or political impediments.

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Fig. 2, 8 Photos by the author

Fig. 3 Courtesy of Peter Bartl

Fig. 6 © Richard J. A. Talbert, 2010

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