
Lost Eagles: Character, Ambition, and the Parthian Invasion

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Today, the fields of modern-day Altınbaşak, Turkey, appear undisturbed. In the year 53 BC, however, it was the site of a conflagration between East and West that left tens of thousands of Roman and Parthian troops dead—Marcus Licinius Crassus, one of the First Triumvirate, and his son amongst them. Rome received distressing news of Crassus's disastrous defeat and word that the Parthians had stolen several *Aquila*, Roman standards; to Romans it was a disgrace that compounded upon the already unpopular war, all of which traced back to Crassus himself. Once the wealthiest man in Rome, who commanded legions that he paid out of pocket, and a hero who defeated the likes of Spartacus, Crassus was now disgraced and defeated by the barbarians he sought to subdue. Disgruntled opponents, former allies, and later authors branded Crassus the embodiment of avarice, a man of weak virtues whose failures culminated with the loss of Rome's *Aquila*.

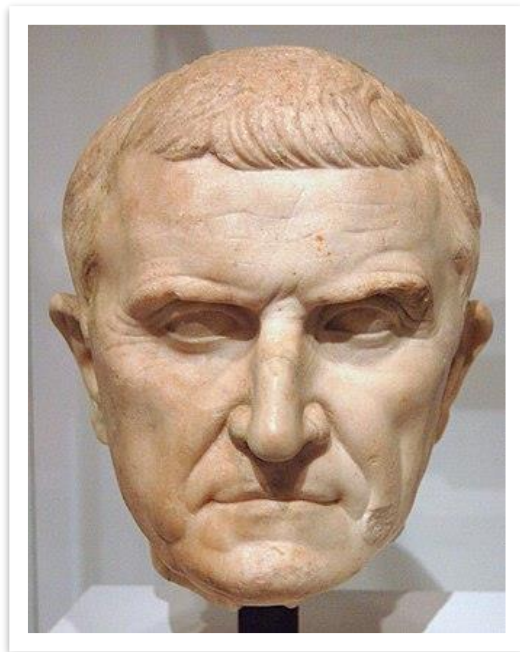
These impressions of Crassus have continued into the modern era; his contribution to the history of the Late Republic has been maligned by the perceived failure of Crassus's character in the face of the invasion of Parthia and his defeat at Carrhae. This, however, is an unjust assault on Crassus's character, an attack that has relegated him unfairly to the status of a minor actor in the overall narrative of the Late Republic. Crassus's deeds may have been backhanded and possibly illegal, but his character and motivations deserve reinterpretation. Marcus Crassus and his invasion of Parthia was not a failure of his character, but rather a reflection of the political atmosphere in Rome and the Roman sentiments toward the East. Crassus, in both ancient and modern sources, has received unjust treatment; detractors painted him as a villainous individual full of deceit and avarice, deserving of his death at the hands of the Parthians. This is just part of the reason behind the need for a new study of Crassus. Those who stick to the orthodoxy and belittle Crassus's character and career lack understanding of the realities of the political landscape of Rome during the Late Republic. Historians who write about Crassus in negative terms rarely look at the political atmosphere and pressures, nor at how the invasion of Parthia could have been a response to that pressure. Ancient sources and historians thereafter dismiss his invasion as merely a result of his greed. They see the invasion as a total failure that rested upon Crassus and his weakness of character. Yet the Roman



French Imperial Eagle, made in the style of Roman *Aquila*, on display at the Louvre des Antiquaries in Paris.

defeat is rarely analyzed in political or social terms; most see it only in tactical terms. This study avoids details of the battle at Carrhae itself, rather it focuses on the political situation and events surrounding Crassus' failed expedition into Parthia.

This study sides with a growing group of revisionist historians who argue for a reappraisal of Crassus. T.J. Cadoux was one of the first to come to the defense of Crassus in his article "Marcus Crassus: A Revaluation" published in 1956. Cadoux stresses that the moralist writers chose to turn Crassus' failure into a cautionary story. Yet evidence did not support their claims. In Cadoux's words, Crassus "had the accomplishments and graces of a gentleman."¹ As a gentleman, he was not



Roman bust of Crassus made during the 1st century BCE, on display at the Louvre in Paris.

the moral scoundrel that everyone believed, and this sparked a select few authors to reevaluate Crassus. With Cadoux stands Allen Ward, whose book *Marcus Crassus and the Late Roman Republic* focused upon the interpretations of Crassus and his character, explaining how Crassus had gotten an unfair assessment due to his violation of aristocratic customs and his disastrous defeat at Carrhae.² Understanding how or why sources are written is important to Ward, as authors such as Cicero, and Plutarch used the character flaws of Crassus as moral lessons. The most well-known author to stand in defense of Crassus is Erich Gruen in his revolutionary work *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*. Gruen notes that the historical tradition "has not been kind to Crassus."³ Instead, he set out to show that the orthodox view of many figures in the Late Republic, including Crassus, was incorrect, and that evidence does not support the arguments being made by moralists and other historians. Following Gruen's line, none of the revisionists present Crassus as neither a great man nor even a good man. Instead, they explore how complex times and particular challenges shaped Crassus's career.

The counterargument to the revisionists (the orthodox line) is championed by authors such as Susan Mattern-Parkes in her article "The Defeat of Crassus and the Just War," where she writes that Crassus' greed and lust for glory drove him into an unjustified and illegal war against the Parthians.⁴ "Moral thinking is more important than strategic thinking in the interpretation of the Battle of Carrhae," writes Parkes.⁵ This is because the sources, namely Cicero, posit Crassus' war as morally wrong. So the counter-revisionists reintroduce a moral perspective. Their argument is mirrored by other works including Neilson Debevoise's book *A Political History of Parthia*, which argues similarly to Parkes that the invasion of Parthia was not only morally wrong, but also a strategic error resulting from a lack of effective tactics and leadership. Debevoise cites numerous instances where Crassus blundered in his handling of the situation in the East, which led to his defeat at Carrhae.⁶ Finally Adelaide Simpson's "The Departure of Crassus for Parthia" is less of a counterargument than an evaluation of the sources. She acknowledges that Cicero and

¹ T. J. Cadoux, "Marcus Crassus: A Revaluation," *Greece & Rome* 3, no. 2 (1956): 160.

² Allen Mason Ward, *Marcus Crassus and the Late Roman Republic* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1977).

³ Erich S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 67.

⁴ Susan P. Mattern-Parkes, "The Defeat of Crassus and the Just War," *The Classical World* 96, no. 4 (2003): 387–396.

⁵ Mattern-Parkes, "The Defeat of Crassus and the Just War," 389.

⁶ Neilson Carel Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

contemporaries saw the war against Parthia as morally objectionable, but, also concedes that some of the events attributed to Crassus and the war were fabricated by later authors decades or even centuries after.⁷ The orthodox line insists that Crassus' personality, his avarice and his lust for power made him susceptible to making poor decisions and invading Parthia. His character flaws were so front-and-center in his decision-making that they eventually led to his defeat at the hands of the Parthians. Much of the evidence harnessed by the counterargument against Crassus is non-contemporary with the events, and therefore colored by the outcome and sentiments of immorality sown about Crassus after his death in 53.

Both this study and orthodox scholarship use the ancient authors as they are available, primarily Plutarch's *Life of Crassus*, Cicero's *Epistulae ad Familiares*, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, and finally Cassius Dio's *Roman History*. These authors, as limited as they are in evidence concerning Crassus, provide the clearest picture of his life and exploits. Yet, even Plutarch and Cassius Dio have their drawbacks, being non-contemporaneous, and Cicero has heavy biases and political leanings that color his judgment. The lack of sources surrounding Crassus can be explained as follows: history does not like losers, so they rarely get a full accounting in the historical record.⁸ No source is perfectly without bias, but this study seeks to compile the evidence and offer the reader a deeper understanding of Crassus, showing that he is not the dichotomous caricature that modern scholarship suggests.

To deal with Crassus's character one must look deeper into the ancient sources and draw on evidence that other historians may choose to leave out. These ancient sources tend to agree that Crassus was a greedy and morally dubious individual whose character conflicted with the morality of the Roman Republic. But, the picture is not as clear as they claim. Take the notion of Crassus as in conflict with the mores of the Roman Republic: it is fairly well noted that he was a career politician and businessman who sought the *via media*, taking advantage of the fragmentation of the aristocracy and traditional power bases. This was the only way a career politician, such as Crassus, could thrive.⁹ Two rival power bases dominated Roman politics at the time: the *Populares*, the people's faction championed by men like Caesar and Mark Antony, and the *Optimates*, the aristocratic faction, represented by men like Pompey the Great and Cato. Both sides wanted to control the Senate for their own gain, each vying for power and privilege through various means. Crassus did not wish to align himself with either. Cassius Dio explains that "he took, as usual, a middle course and said that he would do whatever was advantageous for the Republic" (Dio 39.30.2). Crassus, in his mind, was not trying to rule Rome for power or greed. Rather, he sought what was necessary and advantageous for the Republic he wished to see prosper. It was not personal wealth that he sought; he already had enough to live on quite well for the rest of his years, especially given his modest lifestyle. Instead, he needed to grow his wealth for influence and what he saw as protecting the interests of the Republic.

Reluctance to take a stand with either the *Optimates* or the *Populares* was dangerous during the Late Republic, when mob violence and the opinion of the masses was critical for political success. To counter the political realities and establish his viability as a political leader, Crassus garnered a large following in the Senate by his "readiness to grant loans, free of interest."¹⁰ Granting loans without interest hardly fits the image of a greedy man who only desired to maintain and collect more gold; it sounds instead like a strategic statesman who aimed to hold and cement his power and position within Roman society. As Gruen says, "Money was power... His riches were a means to an end."¹¹ Crassus was not amassing his wealth for no reason; he had tangible political aims that were in

⁷ Adelaide D. Simpson, "The Departure of Crassus for Parthia," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 69 (1938): 532–541.

⁸ Ward, *Marcus Crassus and the Late Roman Republic*, 3.

⁹ Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, 66.

¹⁰ P. A. Brunt, *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic*, New edition edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), 122.

¹¹ Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, 67.

line with his morals and ambitions for the Republic. It was not about owning the most villas or having the most lavish parties; it was about being able to hold power and cement himself in Roman society as a significant player without challenge. Evidence such as this undermines the orthodox understanding of Crassus and begins to broaden the picture that surrounds his exploits.

Crassus sought balance and navigated the political realm of the Late Roman Republic. Another piece of evidence that suggests that Crassus' character was more complex than some would allow is the fact that for the first or second wealthiest man in Rome during his lifetime, he lived in relative modesty. Plutarch mentions that "he built no house for himself other than the one in which he lived; indeed, he used to say that men who were fond of building were their own undoers, and needed no other foes" (Plut. *Crass.* 2.5). His ability to understand the downfall of others and how one can avoid that very same fate is a reason why Crassus was such an interesting figure. From historical tradition, it is easy to believe that he was a miser and only cared about how many talents he held. Yet Crassus appeared more generous than even the aristocracy. His home was not a private affair, but rather was open to the public, and the parties that he threw were modest but frequent.¹² He was able to gain popularity with the masses without having to choose a side. The avarice cited by historians is not found in these quotes; he was not a hedonistic man, who sought only excess and found pleasure in the wealth that he possessed. Rather, his money was always used for a purpose and intent for his vision of the Republic.

Crassus' vision for the Republic and his own ambitions brought him onto the Roman political stage where, by the time of the Parthian invasion, he was already a veteran. Despite claims by some historians that Crassus was seen as the black sheep of the triumvirate and its weakest member up until the late 60's BC, evidence tells a different story. Even some historians will condemn his ambition as yet another character flaw in an ever growing list of failures attributed to him. But, if we condemn Crassus, so must we condemn all Roman aristocrats in this period, from Cicero to Pompey.¹³ As the wealthiest man in Rome, Crassus commanded respect and influence across many facets of Roman society. Beyond that, he was a career politician and a successful general. Crassus started his true political career with Cinna and Marius who marched on Rome. After Crassus' family was blacklisted by the dictators, he fled to Spain (Plut. *Crass.* 4.1-3). During the following civil wars, he joined Sulla, who became a dictator in his own right. But here he won battles and made a name for himself as a military commander. After the civil wars, he dove into politics: "Crassus was most expert in winning over all men" (Plut. *Crass.* 6.7). The political leverage that he held through his influence and from the money that he was willing to spend or lend cannot be understated. His power allowed for men like Caesar and aristocrats from rather obscure families to become prominent. In this way, he was so influential that even the sources that might condemn him later credit Crassus "as a man of *summa potentia* or as *praepotens* or even *rei publicae princeps*."¹⁴ Such reverential titles show that even to the most prominent statesman, Crassus was in a class of his own, a class that held power beyond that of the ordinary aristocrat. Such power did come with the desire to maintain it, and this caused conflict within the political realm, even with those who Crassus meant to keep close at hand.

Caesar and, more specifically, Pompey vexed him, and rivalries brewed. The ancient sources claim that Crassus was angered by the idea of men like Caesar and Pompey surpassing him not only in prestige but wealth as well (Dio 37.56.4). Pompey had returned to Rome after successful campaigns against pirates and against the eastern powers. With the spoils of victory, he supplanted Crassus as the wealthiest man in Rome. To orthodox historians, a quest to be the wealthiest man in Rome motivated Crassus. Yet, considering his political background and his penchant for mediation,

¹² Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, 68.

¹³ Cadoux, "Marcus Crassus," 155.

¹⁴ Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, 67.

it is more likely that he was angered that these men, each of whom represented the main factions of Roman politics, were growing in power, while his own influence was being diminished. In order to maintain his station, he had to find a way to counteract the growing power of Caesar and Pompey.¹⁵ Forming the triumvirate and seeking to rule and steer the direction of the Republic fits Crassus's character, committed to doing anything advantageous for the Republic. A union of the *Populares* and the *Optimates* would secure the political landscape of Rome, and that was good for the Republic. Yet, while he did have bitter internal rivalries with his fellow triumvirs, it was mainly Crassus's opponents who maligned his character so aggressively.

Cicero, a statesman and *Optimate*, had a strained and ever-changing relationship with Crassus, especially leading up to the Parthian Invasion. As a politician, unwilling to choose a side, Crassus was very unpopular with the senatorial class and men like Cicero, who was wary of the growing power of the *Populares*. Despite the mistrust and considerable rivalry, the relationship between the two statesmen usually remained outwardly cordial. Crassus had given Cicero information on the Catilinarian conspiracy, despite he himself being a veteran of Sulla's army. This act alone serves as proof of Crassus' flexibility as a politician, showing that his connection to the Catilinarian Conspiracy was a calculated move to align him with both sides of a conflict until a victor emerged.¹⁶ Such flexibility made Cicero wary and untrusting of Crassus, and, in an oration, Cicero implicated Crassus in the Catilinarian conspiracy; so the relationship between two of the most powerful men in Rome was strained at best (Plut. *Crass.* 13. 2 – 4). In the wake of this tension, it was no surprise that Cicero, Cato, and other prominent *Optimates* came into conflict with Crassus and opposed his plan to invade Parthia. On the surface, it seemed an obvious choice given the position of Rome and Parthia during the Late Republic. Challenges, however, from the masses and senators alike to what they perceived as an unjust war upended Crassus's efforts to garner money and troops for an invasion. As Crassus readied for war and began to levy troops, spurred on by his fellow triumvirs, the opposition grew. Men like Cicero, who had a strained relationship and off-and-on friendship with Crassus, began to turn against him. Bitterness directed at Crassus compounded after his defeat and death when his reputation was sullied by being defeated and losing the *Aquila*. The disgrace of defeat could not be forgiven, and the political enemies of Crassus used it to their advantage. Even Cicero wrote in his post-humous work that the war was *nullo belli causa*, meaning it had no cause and was therefore unjust and illegal. Cicero linked the unjust nature of the war to Crassus's character, bemoaning the entire invasion plan as a failure of its leader's character and a result of his avarice (Cic. *De Finibus* 3.22.75). This war was unpopular due to the levying of troops from Italy earning Crassus opposition in the Senate by Cicero and Cato. While the war was said to be unjust, it was a result of Roman attitudes and assumptions about the East and the role that it held within world politics.

When Romans thought of the East, they had a very different image in their minds than the reality on the ground. Many held images conjured from the stories of Herodotus and Xenophon, who wrote about a bygone era of glorious wealth in the East and an accompanying decadence that made its people soft. The accounts of Alexander the Great steamrolling across the Middle East into Asia and down into places like Egypt colored the perspectives of Romans, who experienced the East only through popular writings, not necessarily first-hand. It is this lack of knowledge and experience that informed a man like Crassus when he prepared for conflict with the Parthians. These popular Roman perceptions of the East have been documented by scholars. What is important here is how these perceptions and assumptions led to the conflict seen in the Parthian Invasion. Sources written in the Principate and Imperial years, provide good evidence of Roman perceptions, and they provide us the clearest evidence we have regarding these attitudes.

¹⁵ Ward, *Marcus Crassus and the Late Roman Republic*, 193.

¹⁶ Ward, *Marcus Crassus and the Late Roman Republic*, 184–185.

One of the main perceptions and ideas that runs true throughout the sources is that Parthians were deceitful and lacking in the Roman virtue *veritas* or truthfulness. Lucan, writing about the Civil Wars of Pompey and Caesar, claimed that Parthians did not fight with honor: “they shot their arrows without trusting only to their iron tips; the buzzing missiles having been soaked in poison” (Luc. 8.303-04). Plutarch wrote similarly, but he claimed that the Parthians employed barbed arrows instead of poison and the barbed arrows cut through arteries and killed many soldiers.

For, in the agonies of convulsive pain, and writhing about the arrows, they would break them off in their wounds, and then in trying to pull out by force the barbed heads which had pierced their veins and sinews, they tore and disfigured themselves the more (Plut. *Crass.* 25.5).

Either by poison or by doctored arrows, the Parthians earned a reputation for deceitfulness, thus Romans viewed them as inferior. Very few Roman authors presented Parthians as equal to the Romans, even though in many respects they were the equals and the true rivals to the Roman Republic. This began to change after the death of Crassus, at which time Parthia rose to an equal or a superior footing against that of Rome in the Mediterranean and in the Parthian lands.¹⁷ The wars between the East and the West would continue through the Late Republic and into the Principate period, when the empire expanded into the east. The supposed Parthian deceitfulness also made Parthians appear easy to defeat, as their character flaws counterbalanced their martial prowess. The Parthians, according to Romans, saw battle as a “skirmish, their war is flight... their soldier is better at retreating than driving an enemy out” (Luc. 8.379 – 81). These kinds of statements show that Roman perceptions were fairly negative regarding the Parthians, and this was part of Crassus’s world. The Romans were led to believe that the Parthians run from battles and could only win through deceitful tactics. Parthians would not fight like Romans, and therefore they were not equal to the Romans. While their accounts cannot be taken as factual, they show the sentiments and ideas that circulated about Parthians, perceptions to which a man like Crassus would have been exposed. The enemies of Crassus cited his avarice; this ties into the general idea of the decadency and hedonism of the East that started with authors like Herodotus and continued throughout antiquity.

The East was, from the time of Herodotus, depicted as a land of wealth and decadence. Romans heard stories of how the gold and finery available to the Persians were beyond that of any Greek. These stories, compounded by the spoils brought back to Rome by men like Pompey, refilled the treasury of Rome and then some, making Pompey more powerful than Crassus, wealth-wise. Plutarch writes that:

In addition to all this the inscriptions set forth that whereas the public revenues from taxes had been fifty million drachmas, they were receiving from the additions which Pompey had made to the city's power eighty-five million, and that he was bringing into the public treasury in coined money and vessels of gold and silver twenty thousand talents, apart from the money which had been given to his soldiers, of whom the one whose share was the smallest had received fifteen hundred drachmas (Plut. *Pomp.* 45.3).

¹⁷ Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*, 93.



Chest piece of Augustus from the Prima Porta statue showing the return of Crassus' Aquila to Rome by the Persians. On display in Braccio Nuovo of the Vatican Museum, Rome.

Rome saw this influx of gold, silver, and spoils from the East as evidence of wealth and prosperity that could be exploited. The East was a source of gold and glory, craved by Crassus and other Roman leaders. This sense of the Parthians as a weak and deceitful enemy, who were wealthy and soft was critical to understanding how a seasoned general like Crassus would seek out war in Persia. To secure himself and to navigate the pressures of Rome, he made a choice that proved to be fatal.

What drove Crassus, beyond gold and glory, was the interest of Rome and the Republic's aspirations to expand, especially to the East. The East was the natural area of expansion for the Republic, as Caesar was pacifying the Gallic territories and Pompey had just added a foothold with Syria following the Mithridatic War. The reality Crassus had to face was that of political necessity: he needed to maintain his position against

Caesar and Pompey. It was ambition not greed that compelled him to invade Parthia.¹⁸ Rome was not looking in the West or the South for expansion; it was looking to the East. Romans sought an alliance with Armenia, a plan it continued to pursue throughout antiquity, until both the Romans and the Persians had new enemies in the Muslim Arabs who spread their religion through conquest. This contested territory meant that those who wished to seek glory and status looked east.

After Crassus' death, his political rivals were able to use him to attack their new opponents as un-roman. In this way, they used the evidence they had to make his story a moral lesson: Crassus was greedy and hubristic, and due to these fatal traits, he lost in battle and lost his life in a futile attempt to be greater than his destiny. That was the conclusion of Cicero in his *de Finibus* where he depicted Crassus as a slave to his own appetites. These sentiments were mirrored in later ancient sources and also in the mainstream scholarship done in antiquity and later rewritten by modern scholars. These authors recycled the negative line, without looking into the political sentiments or reasons behind why the sources were written the way that they were. It is the duty of the historian to question orthodox interpretations and to challenge them when answers seems too obvious.

To suggest that the Battle of Carrhae and the invasion of Parthia was simply the result of the character flaw of one man appears a gross oversimplification. One of the most powerful men in Rome, Crassus had enemies who used his death and the disgrace of losing his *Aquila* to disparage his reputation and turn him into a caricature of a statesman, whose greed drove him to launch an ill-considered invasion of a foreign empire. Harnessing primary evidence, this study sought to show the reader why Marcus Crassus was a complex actor in the Late Republic. He was a career politician who for decades navigated the political world of Rome. His downfall was due to the realities of politics and stereotypes, rather than fatal character flaws.

¹⁸ B. A. Marshall, *Crassus: A Political Biography* (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert, 1976), 146.