
This book started out as a source collection used in conjunction with Samuel N.C. Lieu’s course on Roman Mesopotamia and Syria at Warwick University. Its scope, extending beyond Latin and Greek sources to Syriac, Palmyrene, Armenian, Persian, Hebrew and Arabic, will make it a useful means of reference for all students of this period. The subtitle ‘a documentary history’ is an exaggeration, if a pardonable one: only brief notes at the beginning suggest the comparative value of the sources quoted, and the initial basic narrative occupies barely three and a half pages (pp. 1-4). The editors attempt a chronology only for 353-363 (pp. 211-14 and 231-7).

The earlier chapters leave a reader’s despair about the sources for third century history almost intact. Again and again, in Part I of this collection, the SHA offers the longest, most coherent, most readable account of a point. At p. 6 the editors warn of the dangers, speaking of ‘running the risk of presenting probable fiction as palpable fact’. The inexperienced reader might have got a better impression of the situation if the editors had applied the adjectives in that sentence the other way round.

Here contrast the SHA with Herodian on Alexander Severus’ Persian campaigns, A.D. 231-3 (pp. 23-32). Herodian makes Alexander responsible for a major defeat. The SHA reverses the result of the battle, then gives Alexander a victory speech before the Senate. The writer specifies an exact date for the speech (25 September 233), and has Alexander give numbers for the Persians defeated: 700 elephants, 1800 scythed chariots, 120,000 cavalry. Later the Senate’s acclamations are recorded—‘Alexander Augustus, may the gods keep you!’ and so on. Unusually, the SHA admits there is another version (Sev. Alex. 57.2; p. 32). More often, the stories are told with a straight face.

Part II of the book deals with the decade from 353—where Ammianus’ extant account begins—to 363, when Jovian made peace after the death of Julian the Apostate. The sources quoted form a backup to a reading of Ammianus, whose account is not reproduced. The longer extracts here are mostly from Libanius, Julian and Ephrem Syrus. Five appendices deal with: (1) Arabic and New Persian sources; (2) Armenian sources; (3) Dura
Europos documents; (4) Eastern victories in imperial titulature; and (5) frontier units in the *Notitia Dignitatum*.

So Dodgeon and Lieu have produced a good handbook to an area of Roman history which has been in general poorly known—despite a large amount of detailed work listed in the Bibliography. This useful collection will help scholars and students towards giving Roman-Persian relations and the question of the Roman Empire’s eastern frontier the attention their real importance demands.

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