

To Crown and Not to Crown: Trajanic Representations of Roman-Eastern Relations

Scholarship on Roman foreign policy in the Near East following Augustus focuses on Roman relations with Parthia, encouraging the conception of the region as geopolitically bipolar. Sheldon (2010), Lerouge (2007), and others typically only examine Roman concerns with other Eastern polities in the context of Roman-Parthian affairs. Moreover, ancient historical accounts and Roman coinage produced during these wars are often examined as guides to the strict historical chronology of events (cf., Beckmann 2000, 2007) and rarely to illuminate broader historical issues.

This paper uses Trajan's wars in the East (114-7 CE) to address these problems. Several diplomatic ceremonies narrated by Cassius Dio and two coin types from Trajan's imperial corpus demonstrate imperial concern for areas beyond Parthia, especially Armenia and Mesopotamia. They also demonstrate how Trajan used two different means to subjugate the East: crowning foreign kings and conquering a people militarily. I argue that Trajan represented Rome's shifting relations with these polities to signal different ways of incorporating his new territories into the structure of the Roman empire. I also demonstrate how coins and ceremony became involved in debates over the nature of imperial power and the emperor's role in the world.

I first examine the failed attempt of Parthamasiris to be crowned by Trajan as king of Armenia in 114 (Cassius Dio, 68.19-20). Parthamasiris came to Trajan at the Roman camp outside the Armenian capital of Elegeia assuming that he would be crowned king of Armenia once he performed certain gestures before the emperor. Since Nero, it had been established that Parthia would choose future Armenian kings and the Roman emperor would officially crown them. This agreement permitted the Parthians to maintain a branch of their own dynasty in

Armenia. Trajan, however, publicly rejected this arrangement, and declared that Armenia was no longer tied dynastically to Parthia, but a full Roman province.

This rejected crowning was portrayed to the rest of the Roman empire in a gold *aureus* produced at Rome at roughly the same time as the events at Elegeia (*RIC* II Trajan 263A, 310-2, 699). Parthamasiris, offering his crown to Trajan, stands at left, between some Roman soldiers and the emperor, seated on a tribunal. Parthamasiris kneels before the emperor with his hands outstretched, offering his crown. Yet the coin's legend, *REX PARTHUS*, transforms Parthamasiris' failed bid to become king of *Armenia* into the public submission of a *Parthian* king. Trajan portrayed this scene as a victory over Parthia to imply that Armenia no longer existed as an independent political entity: her submission to Roman rule is shown as the subjugation of Parthia. This type also signified an initial blow against Parthian power. The submission of this Parthian king presaged the victory that Trajan would declare with another set of gold and silver coins following the conquest of the Parthian heartland.

A series of bronze *sestertii* (*RIC* II Trajan 642), minted from early 116, confirmed the full subjugation of Armenia under Roman power, along with the whole of Mesopotamia. Its legend is stated clearly: *ARMENIA ET MESOPOTAMIA IN POTESTATEM P R REDACTAE*. Trajan stands in the center of the reverse, laureate, in full military garb, brandishing a massive spear and *parazonium*. At the edges of the coin, two river gods, Tigris and Euphrates, sit on either side of Armenia reclining in a gesture of defeat. This coin marks the first instance since Augustus where the central Roman state promoted the formal incorporation of Armenia, Parthia, or any eastern state into the Roman empire. The coin also intimated the creation of a single new geographic entity within the Roman empire by associating Armenia with Mesopotamia.

Between 114 and early 116, the (failed) crowning of Armenia sparked two different numismatic images. These alternatively used military domination and crowning a client king to demonstrate imperial control over Parthia, Armenia, and Mesopotamia. While Kneissl (1969) rightly argued for the fundamental importance of military *virtus* to Trajanic ideology, such violence was combined with other tactics to bring hostile polities under Roman control and demonstrate the emperor's power abroad.

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