



The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies

Carrhae, Battle of

Date: June, 53 BCE

Locale: Near Carrhae, Mesopotamia (later Haran, Turkey)

Related civilizations: Republican Rome, Parthia

Significance: The Battle of Carrhae revealed the Roman legion's inability to effectively resist the tactics of mounted archers in open terrain; the death of the general Crassus ended the First Triumvirate.

Background: Following the reconciliation in 56 BCE of Rome's First Triumvirate--Julius Caesar, Pompey the Great, and Marcus Licinius Crassus--Crassus received the governorship of Syria. Two years later he initiated an unwarranted invasion of the west Asian kingdom of Parthia.

Action: In northwestern Mesopotamia near the town of Carrhae (KAR-ee), the Parthian general Surena, with an army of some 10,000 cavalry and mounted archers, intercepted seven Roman legions under Crassus. The 40,000 Romans, exposed on open terrain, were encircled by the mobile Parthian cavalry and subjected to sustained fire from the bowmen. All Roman efforts to relieve the situation through offensive action by light infantry failed, and a strong sally by a mixed formation of 6,000 Roman cavalry and foot soldiers ended in complete disaster when the force was surrounded and destroyed. The shattered remnants of the legionary army initiated a withdrawal toward the Euphrates River. During this final retreat, the Romans were exposed to constant daylight attacks by their more elusive opponent.

An effort to negotiate a surrender resulted only in the murder of Crassus. Only 10,000 Romans survived the flight to Syria. The Parthians captured several legionary standards, a significant humiliation to the Roman army; they were lost for decades until Augustus negotiated their return in 19 BCE. Legend has it that the Parthians poured molten gold down Crassus' throat to mock his famous wealth, and then cut off his head and used as a prop in a production of Euripides' play *Bacchae*.

Consequences: The death of Crassus at Carrhae disrupted the delicate balance of power shared among members of the First Triumvirate, thereby accelerating the political forces that eventually led to civil war

between the remaining triumvirs in 49 BCE.

See also: Caesar, Julius (10.3331/CWEP_0541); Crassus, Marcus Licinius (10.3331/CWEP_0576); Parthia (10.3331/CWEP_0142); Pompey the Great (10.3331/CWEP_0718); Rome, Republican (10.3331/CWEP_0738); Triumvirate (10.3331/CWEP_0770).

—Donathan Taylor & Hannah Rich

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