

## General Surena, The Hero of Carrhae

By: Shapour Suren-Pahlav

**E**ran Spahbodh Rustaham Suren-Pahlav, son of Arakhsh (Arash, pers.) and Massis, was born in 84 BCE. The name under which he appears in the western classical sources was apparently no more than his hereditary title, that of Suren, which continues to appear as well in the record of Iranian history far into Sasanian times.

His glorious name is preserved amongst the throne, of epic heroes whose deeds are recalled in the Kayanian section of the Shahnameh. In the Iranian national epic, the record of the Arsacids was suppressed at their true chronological point, the instance of Gotarz (Goudarz) has shown that some at least of its spectacular episodes were transferred to the legendary period of Key-Kavous, and incorporated there. The feat of arms performed by Suren was certainly the most celebrated of the whole Ashkanian era, was not vanished entirely. Thus in some ways the position of great Suren in the historical tradition is curiously parallel to that of Rostam the hero of the Shahnameh. His figure has been endowed with many features of a historical personality of the Rostam. The latter he was always represented as the mightiest of Iranian paladins, and the atmosphere of the episodes in which he features is strongly reminiscent of the Ashkanian period.

Plutarch Describes the great Suren as:

*... For Suren was no ordinary person; but in fortune, family and honour the first after the king; and in point of courage and capacity, as well as size and beauty, superior to the Parthians of his time. If he went only on an excursion into the country, he had a thousand camels to carry his baggage and two hundred carriages for his concubines. He was attended by a thousand heavy-armed horse, and many more of the light-armed rode before him. Indeed his vassals and slaves made up a body of cavalry little less than ten thousand. He had the hereditary privilege in his family of putting the diadem upon the king's head, when he was crowned. When Orodes was driven from throne, he restored him; and it was he who conquered for him the great city of Selucia, being the first scale the wall, and beating off the enemy with his own hand. Though he was not then thirty years old, his discernment was strong, and his counsel esteemed the best.*

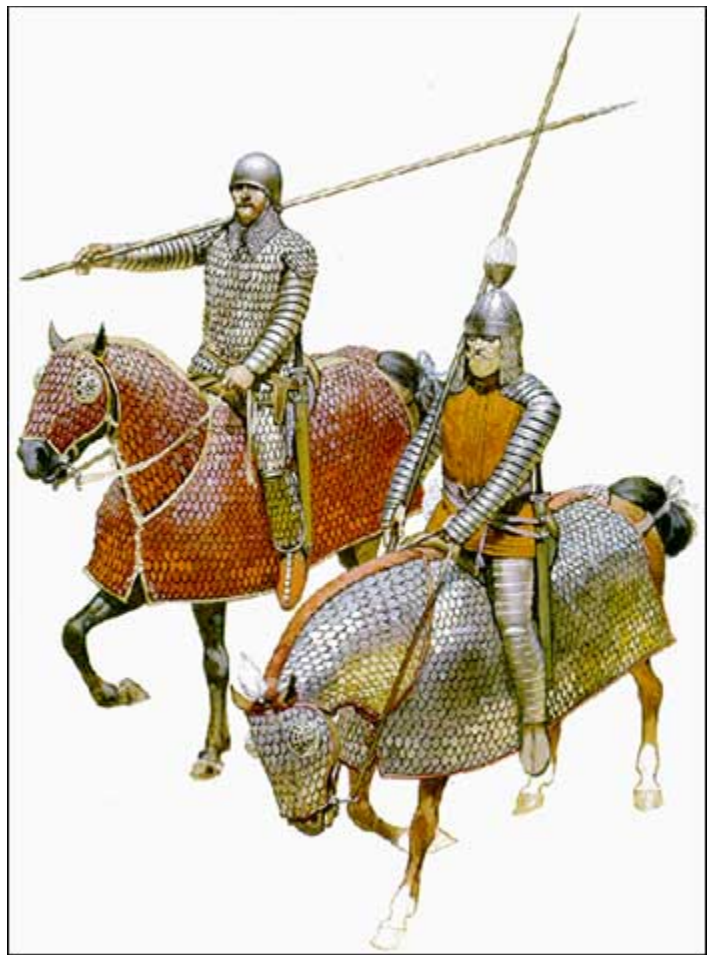
### **The Battle of Carrhae**

The feudal and decentralized structure of the Parthian Empire may help to explain why, though founded on annexation and perpetually menaced by hostile armies both in the east and in the west, it never took a strong offensive after the days of Emperor Mithradates II. Iran tended to remain on the defensive. The wars between Iran and Rome therefore were initiated not by the Iranians -- who deeply injured though they were by the encroachments of Pompey--but by Rome itself. Rome considered itself obliged to enter upon the inheritance of Alexander of Macedonia and, from the time of Pompey, continually attempted the subjection of the Hellenistic countries as far as the Euphrates River and had ambitions to go even farther eastward. With this objective, Marcus Licinius Crassus, the Roman triumvir in 54 BCE, took the offensive against Iran.

Such then were the protagonists in the decisive battle that was about to develop. With regard to the strength of the two armies, that of the Romans was greatly superior in sheer numbers, but ill adapted to the open terrain. According to the most reliable account, that of Plutarch, "Crassus commanded a force of seven legions, of which the total effective strength was estimated by Tarn at twenty-eight thousand heavy infantrymen". Other commentators have given somewhat higher estimates. In addition, the Roman force included four thousand cavalry, a quarter of whom were Gaulish troops lent by Julius Caesar; and a similar number of light-armed infantry. At the minimum estimate, the army of

Crassus would thus have numbered thirty-six thousand men.

The Iranian force lead by Commander of Iranian forces, Suren, which they were opposed consisted, as the account shows, of a thousand fully armored lancers, the cataphracts, who formed the bodyguard of the General. Nine thousand horse-archers formed the main body, and the baggage-train of a thousand camels was available to bring up extra stocks of arrows. The entire force was mounted, and highly mobile under desert conditions. At a superficial reckoning, the Roman force may have seemed sufficient for the task in hand. The event showed, however, that in two critical respects the Romans had underestimated the Iranian forces. The power of horse-archers' arrows to penetrate the legionary Armour had not been appreciated, perhaps because the Roman commanders were unaware that the compound bow which the Iranians employed was a more powerful weapon than the lighter bows found at that time in Rome. Again, the Romans had anticipated that the Iranian cavalry would quickly exhaust their stock of arrows; but the camel train of the General Suren made it possible for him to bring up stocks of arrows as the quivers of his men were emptied. But for these two miscalculations, the Roman legionary square might have been expected to hold its own against the Iranian cavalry. Yet the heat, and vast distances of the Mesopotamian plain (for the battle took place in June) would have put Roman infantry at a disadvantage due to lack of experience to meet such a stoutest military in the East. Moreover, the Roman means of retaliation against their adversaries were ineffective, since the range of the Roman javelin was obviously limited, and the Gaulish cavalry relied on for a counter-attack were provided only with short javelins, and were lacking in defensive Armour.



Parthian Cataphracts (Fully Armoured Parthian Cavalry)

Before the Romans march began, Crassus had been advised by a Roman ally, Artavasdes, king of Armenia, to lead his forces through the mountains of that country, for the sake of shelter from the Iranian cavalry. However, he declined this advice, being anxious to incorporate the substantial Roman garrison posted during the previous season in the towns of Mesopotamia. And again, after crossing the Euphrates at Zeugma, he rejected the plan of his legate Cassius, that he should follow the course of the river to Babylonia. Instead Crassus followed the guidance of a Tazi (Arab) chief, whose name is given by Plutarch improbably as Ariamnes, but whom other sources name as Abcar or Abgar, and whom commentators have identified as the chief of the city of Edessa. This guide, suspected by the historians of collusion with the Suren, led the Romans away from the river into the desert, to the direct proximity of the main Iranian force, and, when the battle was imminent, made a pretext to ride away.

At first the Romans prepared to advance to the encounter in extended line. Then Crassus formed the legions into a square, and so advanced to ford the River Balissus (Balikh). Contrary to the opinion of his officers, he decided not to camp by the water, but hurried the troops across, and before long came in sight of the advance-guard of the Iranians. The strength of their main body was at first concealed. Then the thunder of drums burst on the ears of the Romans. The mailed cavalry of the Suren's bodyguard uncovered their Armour, and the sun glittered on their steel helmets. The first attack was a charge by the lancers of the bodyguard, led in person by the towering figure of the General Suren. Then, seeing the steadiness of the Roman legionaries, the horse-archers began their work. What followed was more like a massacre than a battle.

As often, the Romans had tried to remedy their weakness in cavalry by using light infantry mixed with their

Gaulish horsemen. But such makeshift tactics were of little avail against the finest cavalry in the world. The legionaries were soon hard pressed and all but surrounded, so that Crassus was reduced to ordering his son, Publius, who commanded one of the wings, to attempt a charge - with his force, and so perhaps create a diversion.

The force which the Crassus' son Publius, led into the attack consisted of thirteen hundred horse, five hundred archers, and eight cohorts of the infantry, the latter totaling some four thousand men. At first the Iranians retired in front of them; but when they were separated from the main force they were quickly surrounded, offering an all but help-less mark to the rain of arrows. The threat of a charge by the Cataphracts forced the Romans into close order, and thereby reduced their chances of escape. Though the Gauls caught hold of the Iranian lances to pull down the riders, and ran under the horses of their enemies to stab them in the belly, these were no more than tactics of desperation. Soon the young Crassus was disabled, and the remnant of his force retired to a mound to make their last stand. The young and naïve commander ordered his Armour-bearer to end his life, and five hundred of his soldiers survived to be taken as slave.

This agonizing diversion had temporarily relieved pressure on the main Roman force. But the magnitude of their disaster became clear when the Iranians rode back with the head of Publius Crassus on a spear. Thereafter the main body had to defend themselves as best they could for the rest of the day under the constant hail of missiles. Only when it grew too dark to shoot did the Iranians draw off, leaving the Romans to pass a melancholy night, encumbered as they were with wounded, and anticipating their final destruction on the following morning. By this time the Crassus himself was prostrated with despair. But Octavius and Cassius, his lieutenants, cowardly resolved that their only hope was to escape under cover of darkness, and seek shelter behind the walls of the city of Carrhae. Thus they slipped away silently from their camp in the darkness; but those of the wounded who could be moved obstructed their march, and the majority, who had to be abandoned, raised the alarm with their cries. Understandably, retreating in the dark, the Roman column fell into disorder. But a party of cavalry reached the city at midnight, and warned Coponius, commander of the garrison there, merely that Crassus had fought a great battle with the Iranians, before turning west to make their escape across the Euphrates. Another detachment of two thousand under the Roman officer Varguntius lost their way in the dark, and were found by the Iranian forces in the morning established on a hill. Of these, only twenty made their escape. But at Carrhae, Coponius suspected a mishap, and called his men to arms. Then he marched out, and conducted Crassus and the main body into the city.

There were no supplies in Carrhae for standing a long siege, nor hope of relief from the outside, since Crassus had concentrated for his army all the forces in the Roman East. The Roman commander therefore determined to break out on the second night, and make his way to safety in the shelter of the Armenian hills. Once again, his guide, Andromachus, was a Parthian sympathizer, who indeed was later rewarded after the expulsion of the Romans with the governorship of the city. It is said that he misled the Roman column in the dark, so that by dawn the main body was over a mile from the shelter of the hills. The quaestor Cassius, another great of Roman commander with five hundred horsemen, escaped to Carrhae and later by a different route to safety in Syria. Octavius, another of the Roman officers, had reliable guides who took refuge in the mountains. At daybreak, Crassus and his force had occupied a spur connected by a low ridge to the main mountain range. When they came under attack, Octavius and his men moved down from the heights to their support. At this moment the Suren rode forward to offer a parley over terms of peace and forgive their lives. It is not clear whether Crassus accepted voluntarily, or under pressure from his men. But he and Octavius, with a small group, went down to meet the Iranians, who mounted Crassus upon a horse, to take him away for the signing of the treaty. Octavius, by mistake suspected a foul play, seized the bridle of the horse, and, when a scuffle broke out, drew his sword. In the melee that followed, all the Romans in the party were slain; and their leaderless troops either surrendered or scattered, though very few were successful in making good their escape. Of the entire force, twenty thousand are said to have been killed; ten thousand were captured, and deported to distant Margiana for hard labor and slavery. Thus ended the disastrous Roman campaign of Carrhae. The Euphrates was firmly established as the boundary between the two.

Despite the crushing defeat of Romans, the Iranians made no attempt to follow up their victory to invade Rome. Romans after Carrhae learnt from Iranians to introduce cavalry into their army, just as nearly a thousand year earlier the first Iranian to reached the Plateau introduced the Assyrians to a similar reform, but the upshot of the debacle was to win unquestioned recognition for Iran as a superior to Rome and return of Iranian Empire.


The Success of the great Suren had excited the jealousy of his sovereign, which soon after Carrhae he was executed, and Iran was thus not only deprived of a capable general, but created difference and bitterness between the House of Suren-Pahlav and the ruling House of Ashkan, which subsequently later, made the Suren-Pahlavs to help king of Kings Ardeshir I, of the Persian House of Sasan, to overthrow the Ashkanian Dynasty.

\*\*\* Note: This article is the courtesy of CAIS at SOAS.



### See Also

 **Parthian Army**

 **Parthian Script**, The official script of the Parthians

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