

Historical Evidence without Archaeology?

Trevor Palmer's Questionable Recourse to the Consistency of Primary Sources of the First Millennium

by

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Abstract: The present paper responds to Trevor Palmer's critique of a “re-writing” of the chronology of the first millennium AD. This response shows that Palmer's criticism does not affect Heinsohn’s thesis, because Palmer (a) rejects Heinsohn's stratigraphic evidence – as well as his art and technology historical observations – without examination and because (b) Palmer believes in a consistency of the primary sources of the first millennium that does not exist in this form. He even calls this imagined consistency “*historical evidence*” and thinks mainstream chronology would have to be the result of a worldwide conspiracy if it turned out to be incompatible with stratigraphic findings. In this paper I argue that the supposed consistency of the primary sources is in fact an illusion produced by secondary literature. I prove this argument with Palmer's key witness against Heinsohn, the ancient historian Herodian. For Herodian not only contradicts other key witnesses of Palmer's, but is also apparently an author who invents history.

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First, we express our thanks to Trevor Palmer. Palmer, himself not a historian but a biologist emeritus², writes a paper that should have been submitted by professional historians long ago: namely, a paper that seriously addresses criticisms of the chronology of the first millennium.³ So far, academic historians have – ever since the appeal of the medievalist Michael Borgolte to hush up Illig⁴ – either not reacted at all to chronology criticism from Illig or Heinsohn, or with the irony of the better-knowing declared the representatives of these supposedly long-disproved theories to be more or less of unsound mind. Thus it is that we now have non-historians such as Franz Krojer, Thomas Schmidt, Ronald Starke, and now Trevor Palmer, who have written the most well-founded critiques of chronology criticism to date.

The aforementioned gratitude to Palmer should be emphasized here, not least because it could be forgotten by the criticism of his remarks, which is to be made at all levels in the following paper. Palmer does not meet us with the arrogance or ignorance of most opponents, but with the respect that we wish for and that we also owe to him – as well as to every professional historian who does not treat us as a priori refuted. Accordingly, Palmer has taken the trouble not only to respond to chronology critics Illig, Heinsohn, Fomenko, Steve Mitchell and Zoltán Skoda ("Hunnivari"), but to do so with a work of diligence that is worthy of note, because it brings together and partly reports on numerous widely scattered ancient and medieval written sources.

However, and unfortunately, this recognition of Palmer's work must not be at the expense of a necessary rebuttal. For Palmer's objections to the Heinsohn thesis remain a shot in the dark. Palmer does not hit the attacked person, who does not even have to duck. I will show this by referring mainly to Palmer's chapter 5, the *Overall Conclusions*. I am concentrating on this chapter because the previous chapters present material that is largely familiar to anyone who is studying the first millennium in detail.

² The Velikovsky Encyclopedia (2019).

³ Palmer (2019).

⁴ See Illig (1999), p. 398 f.

1. Palmer's conspiracy argument and the alleged *historical evidence*

I had previously criticized Palmer for associating the Heinsohn thesis with conspiracy theories.⁵ The conspiracy argument, in the contexts in which it is normally used, is a thought-terminating cliché, used to counter unwelcome criticism so that it does not need to be answered. Palmer is certainly aware of this. However, he had used the argument in a previous paper against Heinsohn – no doubt only in a suggestive way, but suggesting is an effective tactic. In the meantime, Palmer has become more cautious and seems to exclude Heinsohn from the circle of the accused. But the conspiracy accusation is still aimed at Illig, Hunnivari and Fomenko, with whom Heinsohn is ultimately lumped together.⁶

This tendency to treat all chronology critics equally brings Palmer's argumentation in Heinsohn's case again close to the conspiracy theory accusation. For by putting serious and less serious approaches that criticize the mainstream on the same level, it creates the impression that theories that are actually well-founded are no better than those that are only weakly founded. One more step down and we would find ourselves next to flat-earth theorists and Last Thursdayists. We are already "revisionists" to Palmer, as we are to so many critics of our work. This predicate makes us comparable to the Auschwitz deniers, which at least is what the German critics are trying to do. In the English-speaking world, however, this may be different, so Palmer is not to be reproached in this respect.⁷ Here it is all about equalizing the differences between the approaches, which Palmer also continues to pursue with the term "revisionism".

Palmer's equal treatment of chronology critics leads him to practically ignore the respective authors' own arguments. Thus Heinsohn argues archaeologically-stratigraphically. With Illig, the calendar argument is in the foreground. Fomenko refers

⁵ Beaufort (2014).

⁶ See for example Palmer (2019), p. 100: „Yet, Heinsohn has argued that, Similarly, if, as suggested by Illig, Hunnivari and Fomenko ...”

⁷ See the two *Wikipedia* articles (2019d) and (2019e). Quote from the German *Wikipedia*: "In the German-speaking world the term refers to intentional and pseudo-scientific falsifications of history." (Wikipedia 2019d, my translation)

to astronomical and statistical observations. These lines of argument, peculiar to the respective authors, are largely ignored by Palmer, and their reasons are not properly presented.⁸ Only the common contradiction to traditional chronology counts for him. Such an undifferentiated approach, which does not give due credit to the opposing arguments, would not necessarily have to be taken seriously in itself. However, because professional historians provide an even sadder picture and Palmer at least offers us the opportunity to speak out in a public debate on our topic, we should not be too angry with him.

Palmer can make a conspiracy accusation all the more easily because he believes that the authors critical of chronology have hardly dealt with the preserved written source material of the first millennium: "Apart from the identification of perceived gaps or anomalies, historical sources had been largely disregarded by the challengers ..."⁹ Palmer therefore believes that he has to hold the collected written source material in front of us like a solid block in order to tell us: "Look at this wall, which you have not yet noticed. You bump into it like the blind and the lost. You think it's a cardboard wall, but it's not." Palmer even speaks in this context of *historical evidence* – whatever that may be¹⁰ – and holds it up to chronology-critical models. With his approach Palmer claims to investigate whether the evidence mentioned could be intentionally or unintentionally misleading: "Where a model appears to be incompatible with the historical evidence, the possibility of this evidence being unintentionally misleading or having been deliberately falsified will be considered, with an assessment the degree of plausibility of possible explanations."¹¹

How evidence of any kind can be misleading would perhaps need further explanation. Instead of "historical evidence", it would probably be better to speak of "seeming

⁸ For Heinsohn this will be shown in the next section.

⁹ Palmer (2019), p. 4.

¹⁰ What is *historically evident* is probably in the eye of the beholder. See for example University of Cambridge, Faculty of History (2019): „Sources only become historical evidence, however, when they are interpreted by the historian to make sense of the past. The answers they provide will very much depend on the sorts of questions historians are asking.“

¹¹ Palmer (2019), p. 5.

evidence" - if such a contradiction in terms is permitted. It would be even better to dispense with the term "evidence" altogether in connection with the written sources, for in the end it is only about the impression that the texts create or attempt to create. We will argue later (in section 3) that Palmer nowhere undertakes the source checking or criticism required to make his claim come true, but instead relies on secondary literature, whose assessments and dating he adopts without question. Perhaps this is the reason why Palmer expresses himself more cautiously in his last chapter, where he no longer assumes that the authors themselves, who are critical of chronology, but rather their potential readers, are not taking the written source material into account (see section 2 below).

2. Palmer's Suppression of the Heinsohn Arguments

Palmer writes in the last chapter on Heinsohn's thesis: "Gunnar Heinsohn accepted the authenticity of the surviving sources, but maintained that they presented a confused account of history."¹² This summarizing statement is not correct. Heinsohn in no way claims that traditional history is confused or inconsistent. Heinsohn is of the opinion that the traditional picture of the first millennium arose after a mega-catastrophe in the 10th century, and that the overall picture that emerged then cannot be the history that really happened. According to Heinsohn, today's picture of the first millennium arose out of a confusion, out of ignorance after the catastrophic loss of numerous sources, but it is by no means itself confused.¹³

So why can the post-catastrophic picture of the first millennium according to Heinsohn not be correct? Answer: Because it cannot be reconciled with the stratigraphy of antique, late antique and early medieval excavations. Heinsohn has shown this in

¹² Palmer (2019), p. 96.

¹³ On p. 5 of his paper Palmer was more precise: "In Heinsohn's view, the artificial stretching of the first millennium was not a consequence of the deliberate invention of false histories but of the chaos caused by a major catastrophic event." By the way, Palmer generously ignores the massive loss of antique sources, which is also known to traditional historians (see section 3 below).

numerous papers since the first formulation of his thesis in 2011, while at the same time searching for ways of understanding this contradiction and reconstructing history accordingly.¹⁴ Not a single one of these papers is given due consideration by Palmer. One could also say: Palmer, contrary to his credibly declared intention, does not take Heinsohn seriously.¹⁵

By ignoring Heinsohn's arguments, Palmer does not perceive the contradiction between archaeology and written sources; he disregards it completely. Palmer does not see the problem at all, or he does not want it to be true. He writes: „The various revisionists mentioned above generally dismissed the historical evidence as unreliable and based the claims for their theories mainly on, for example, their own interpretations of geological and archaeological findings, statistical analysis of manipulated data and astronomical retro-calculations. It is beyond the scope of this work to assess their arguments, but it should be pointed out, for instance, that Hunnivari claimed support from astronomy for his theory, whereas Scott has argued that astronomy provides ‘virtually conclusive proof’ of Illig’s model, whilst conventional scholars maintain that astronomical retro-calculations confirm the orthodox chronology.“¹⁶ So Palmer thinks it is only about Heinsohn's "own interpretation of archaeological findings", not about these findings themselves. Palmer claims this, as I said, without properly discussing Heinsohn's papers and without substantiating his claim by means of the Heinsohn texts.

In fact Heinsohn almost never provides his own interpretations, but quotes the astonishments and perplexities of the scholars in charge. Archaeologists, for example, cannot explain why people around 900 live in completely intact houses out of 200 (typically Zurich or Spoleto, for example¹⁷), that building techniques do not change for 700 years, that basilica floor plans remain unchanged for 700 years¹⁸, that millefiori

¹⁴ See Heinsohn (2011) to Heinsohn (2019).

¹⁵ That means that there is a discrepancy between what Palmer says and believes he does and what he actually does.

¹⁶ Palmer (2019), p. 99.

¹⁷ Heinsohn (2016b), p. 19.

¹⁸ For example Heinsohn (2018d), p. 22 f.

glasses and glass drinking cups from 100 are again the latest fashion in 800¹⁹, etc. Philologists puzzle, for example, about why Latin and Greek between 200 and 900 are without evolution and yet highly alive.²⁰ Heinsohn then asks the specialists whether the 900 dated finds are stratigraphically many layers above finds that are dated 200. Only when they deny this does he come up with his "own interpretation" of simultaneity.

Palmer does not really care, because it was „beyond the scope of this work to assess their [of the chronology critics, jb] arguments“. And: „Clearly, the details of each of the arguments, including the assumptions involved, need to be examined carefully.“ If a historian had written that, it would be tantamount to an admission of complete failure. But since Palmer has the good fortune not to be a historian, the question arises as to what the purpose of his compilation of texts is. Honestly, he shares his thoughts with us: „More generally, it should be apparent that almost any argument can seem plausible if only evidence which can be made to appear to support it is presented. A convincing case presented by one author can look very different when another author brings additional information into consideration. Hence, anyone who wishes to carry out an assessment of any of these theories is advised to read works by a number of authors expressing a range of views. Here, the main priority has been to summarise, as objectively as possible, the relevant historical evidence.“

So Palmer writes here that he is not addressing the chronology-critical authors he is discussing themselves, but instead is targeting an anonymous audience that could engage with these authors ("anyone who wishes to carry out an assessment of any of these theories").²¹ He believes that this audience will be better able to evaluate the chronology-critical approaches thanks to his help. So Palmer is not arguing here as a scientist, but as an educator who believes he knows his protégés and must warn them. Contrary to his honest intentions, he argues a little sneakily: he avoids open debate and

¹⁹ For example Heinsohn (2013b), p. 6 und Heinsohn (2014c), p. 19.

²⁰ For example Heinsohn (2018b), p. 34 und Heinsohn (2018c), p. 19.

²¹ As opposed to his Introduction, see above, Section 1, where he reproaches the authors critical of chronology themselves for their lack of consideration of the written sources.

at the same time gives the impression that the chronology critics have not completed their historical workload.

3. After all Heinsohn himself, but without Source Criticism

To the extent that Palmer finally deals superficially with the criticized authors themselves, he does so in the last chapter, the *Overall Conclusions*. So what should have been the middle part of the work is here appended very summarily. And thus Palmer brings against Illig, Fomenko and Hunnivari the aforementioned conspiracy argument, which he had aimed in an earlier version of his paper at Heinsohn²²: The consistency of the written sources means that a huge conspiracy is to be assumed if the authors are right.

Whether or not the argument of the consistency of written sources is correct is a matter of debate: more on this below (see Section 4). In any case, it is gratifying that Palmer no longer brings the conspiracy objection directly against Heinsohn. He recognizes that Heinsohn accepts the authenticity of the preserved sources: Heinsohn does not assume phantom times, but rather sees a simultaneity of three periods – the years from 1 to 230 AD, 290 to 520 AD and 701 to 930 AD – which are erroneously listed consecutively in the history books.

However, Palmer then notices a contradiction which he sees as a problem for the Heinsohn thesis: The ancient authors who write about the first 230 years since the turn of the eras – Palmer names Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio and Herodian – suggest that the entire Roman Empire from Britain to the Orient was ruled by pagan emperors. In contrast, authors of Late Antiquity (Palmer mentions Eusebius, Jerome, Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, Orosius, Prosper and Cassiodorus) know of such a pagan empire for the past, but the present sees an increasingly Christian empire ruled by emperors in

²² Palmer (2014).

Constantinople and in Milan or Ravenna. Finally, authors of the third period such as Beda, Theophanes, Fredegar, Paulus Diaconus, Regino of Prüm and others describe a Christian Roman Empire that is now limited to the East only, while Muslims, Visigoths, Franks and Lombards control large areas that were formerly part of the Roman Empire.²³

I will discuss this argument in more detail in the next section. Here it should be noted that Palmer, as usual, does not mention a word about the evidence that led Heinsohn to his assumption that the three periods were simultaneous. So here again Palmer is not really dealing with Heinsohn, but is hiding behind the assumed consistency of the written sources. The fact that nowhere are the layers of the three periods (Antiquity, Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages) found on top of each other²⁴ is not an issue for Palmer. He is unaware of the polyphonic amazement of historians and archaeologists that in the Early Middle Ages, payment was made with centuries-old coins of imperial antiquity.²⁵ The fact that all Roman towns in the High Middle Ages were in ruins and that in many places an undefined layer of *dark earth* covers these ruins does not interest him. The fact that such a layer is also found outside the Roman Empire in northern and northeastern Europe and lies there above old Viking settlements, which according to archaeologists perished in the tenth century, is of no importance to Palmer.

While Palmer thinks that here a soft Heinsohn interpretation of such findings stands against his own hard evidence of the written sources, in reality the relationship could be exactly the opposite: In that case, it would not be an interpretation of stratigraphic findings against the evidence of written sources, but evidence of the findings against interpretations of written sources.²⁶ This need not be the case a priori, that is certainly debatable, but Palmer fails to recognize the one-sidedness of his argumentation and the methodological necessity to reflect on the relationship between archaeological findings and written sources.

²³ Palmer (2019), p. 96.

²⁴ Cf. Heinsohn (2014g).

²⁵ Cf. Theuws (2001).

²⁶ See section 2 above.

What if the archaeological findings contradict the written sources? Palmer has no answer to this question. He avoids the problem by relying on the alleged consistency of the written sources. Palmer does so, however, without any source criticism, and without any research of his own into the origin and transmission of the sources. To the extent that he is concerned with this at all, he takes over the data from *secondary literature* on the writing of the texts, on the authors' motives, on the presence or absence of originals²⁷, on the origin of the copies, on the motives of the copyists, on possible subsequent editing and on the interdependence of the sources. Palmer's asserted consistency of written sources thus becomes the perceived consistency of today's *secondary literature* about written sources. Palmer does not know how the consistency of today's secondary literature has developed over the course of a millennium, nor does he investigate it.

Such an argumentation falls short. If Palmer were to accept the archaeological findings, he might come to completely different interpretations of the primary sources. He would not have to take away their authenticity, but he would read them with different eyes. He would perhaps consider that different perspectives on the Roman Empire by authors from widely divergent parts of the empire do not *per se* prove a chronological sequence. While Palmer's work now gives the impression, not explicitly but between the lines, of a crude rejection of Heinsohn's thesis without any appreciation of Heinsohn's arguments²⁸, Palmer would have *questions* if the archaeological findings were taken seriously. The written sources would no longer be self-evident confirmations of a traditional view of history, but would first have to be *examined* for their truthfulness. The sources would have to be *read* again: That is definitively not declaring them all false or products of a gigantic conspiracy. The latter possibility is the only conceivable one for Palmer, should there actually be a contradiction to stratigraphy. Palmer does not see the other way, that of re-reading the old texts. He leaves source criticism to others, and the archaeological findings collected by Heinsohn do not interest him.

²⁷ The fact that we do not have any originals from ancient sources is probably known to Palmer, but he does not mention it anywhere. See for example Wikipedia (2019c).

²⁸ See section 2 above on this discrepancy.

4. Herodian and the Alleged Consistency of the Written Sources

Palmer specifies his criticism of Heinsohn by focusing on the government of Septimius Severus.²⁹ He refers to page 25 of his work, where he states that the Chronograph of the year 354, Aurelius Victor, Eutropius, the Eusebius-Hieronymus Chronicle, the anonymous Epitome de Caesaribus, Orosius, Prosper, Cassiodor, John Malalas, the Gallic Chronicle a. 511, Isidor, the Chronicon Paschale, Beda, and Synkellos all date the Severans half a century before Diocletian. How could Severus then, as the Heinsohn thesis suggests, have been a contemporary of Emperor Zeno, who ruled almost two centuries after Diocletian? Severus also ruled over the whole empire from Spain to Persia, while Zeno's empire was limited to the East: The Western empire had long since fallen.

A "key historical source" is for Palmer Herodian, who writes that he lived through the time of Severus himself and whose work breaks off 17 years after Severus' death. Herodian reports about Severus' opponent Niger, who entrenched himself in Byzantium, and about Severus' conquest, destruction and rebuilding of the city and its walls. However, Marcellinus Comes, who wrote shortly after Emperor Zeno, is silent about these events, which should still be fresh in his memory. Or we read in Herodian about Severus' campaign in Britain, which according to Heinsohn must have taken place in the late 9th century. But Beda already has a knowledge of this campaign, which he could not yet have, because Beda himself dates his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* to the year 741. Therefore, according to the Heinsohn thesis, not both Herodian on the one hand and Marcellinus and Beda on the other hand can be right. Because previously consistent sources suddenly contradict each other, the Heinsohn thesis is in need of explanation.

Palmer then dedicates two sentences to archaeology after all: for it confirms the three authors quoted above about Severus, in that a large number of traces of Severan

²⁹ Palmer (2019), p. 96 f.

building activity can be found in Rome, Leptis magna, Britain and Turkey.³⁰ The fact that this abundant presence of Severan buildings only proves the geographical extension of the Severan empire as attested by the sources, but does not say anything about the chronology without further details, is not to be of concern here. What is important is that with the remarks on Heinsohn quoted here and in the previous section the Heinsohn thesis is settled for Palmer, because in the further course of the chapter *Overall Conclusions* he is only dealing with Illig, Fomenko and Hunnivari and the phantom period they claim, against which he asserts the conspiracy accusation.

To sum up Palmer's argumentation towards Heinsohn, he points out first (cf. section 3 above) that, according to the concurring statement of the primary sources, the Roman Empire developed from a pagan empire to a Christian Eastern empire in the three periods set in parallel by Heinsohn: a development that would be omitted if the Heinsohn thesis were to be accepted. And secondly, Palmer illustrates this objection by juxtaposing Herodian's Severus report, which is assigned to the first period, with the accounts of Marcellinus Comes and Beda, which belong to the second and third periods respectively; taken together, they contradict the Heinsohn thesis.

Palmer's criticism, pointed to the dating of the Severans, focuses on a supposed weakness of the Heinsohn thesis.³¹ As already noted, he does not go into the strengths of the approach, he may not see them. He is indifferent to the reasons that speak for a catastrophic downfall of the Roman Empire. An important point of the Heinsohn thesis: the simultaneity of the emperors Augustus and Diocletian, remains unmentioned by Palmer. Equally disregarded, for example, is Heinsohn's discovery of the strata of

³⁰ „...furthermore, archaeological evidence has shown that the accounts of the reign of Septimius Severus given in the sources are credible. For example, there is abundant evidence in Rome and Leptis Magna (in Libya) of buildings and monuments from his reign, including a triumphal arch in the Roman Forum celebrating his victories over the Parthians; also, archaeological findings consistent with the accounts of his activities have been found in Britain; and a bridge across the Cendere River in Eastern Turkey incorporates inscriptions in praise of Severus and his family.” (Palmer 2019, p. 97)

³¹ It should not be concealed here that especially the dating of the Severans almost since the beginning of the internal debate about the Heinsohn thesis has been repeatedly problematized. Recently it has been the subject of controversial discussion, since my version of the Heinsohn thesis attempts to radicalize it and brings not only the Severans, but also the Nerva-Antonine dynasty before the turn of the eras. See also below in the text section 7.

Aachen inhabited by Charlemagne and his contemporaries, which historians have so far been unable to find.³² The same applies to the discovery of the strata for the hitherto homeless Alfred the Great in Venta Belgarum.³³ Instead, Palmer believes that in Herodian he has found a key witness, "a key historical source", with whom Heinsohn can be easily refuted. "Heinsohn should first show that Herodian contradicts other authors or that he has invented stories, then we'll see!", Palmer seems willing to tell us.

Herodian is an important author for Palmer when it comes to Heinsohn. Earlier, on page 20, Palmer had quoted Herodian. There it was about the date of the catastrophe which, following the Heinsohn thesis, ended the ancient Roman Empire in the West as well as in the East. In the West, according to Heinsohn, it probably occurred not long after Severus Alexander's death. Herodian however, according to Palmer, does not report a word about this catastrophe, although he was a contemporary. The fact that Herodian died only three years after Alexander's death and thus may have been a victim of the catastrophe is a possibility that Palmer is not considering. But that is not what this is all about, it is rather about the credibility of Palmer's main witness. For is it really true that Herodian does not contradict other authors? And does he really not invent stories?

I will speak about Herodian's invention of history in section 6. First of all, the alleged consistency of the lore will be discussed. Analogous to Palmer's approach, I pick out an example to show how wrong he is on this point. For two other important witnesses are for Palmer Aurelius Victor and Eutropius. According to Palmer, these pagan authors prove, among other things, that the handed-down history of the first millennium cannot be a construct of authors with a religious (Christian) rather than a historical agenda.³⁴ Eutropius is mentioned by Palmer sixteen times, Aurelius Victor fifteen times.

³² Heinsohn (2014b).

³³ Heinsohn (2014h).

³⁴ Palmer (2019), p. 13: „Several revisionists have suggested that a false chronology of the first millennium has been created by writers following a religious (i.e. Christian) agenda rather than a historical one. ... The pagan historians were Eutropius and Aurelius Victor, both of whom were imperial bureaucrats ...“ Actually, the author of the present text is one of those scholars who think exactly that: that the story of the first millennium still told today is a religious construct, comparable to the *mappae mundi* in the geographical field – see Beaufort (2014).

According to Palmer, Victor and Eutropius on the one hand and Herodian on the other should not contradict each other, or if they do, then only on insignificant points. The question is then whether it is unimportant when the former mention a grandiose victory of Emperor Severus Alexander, where Herodian speaks of a historic defeat.

For what does Eutropius write in the *Breviarium* about the campaign of the young Severus Alexander against the Persians? We read: „To him [Elagabal, j]b] succeeded Aurelius Alexander, a very young man, who was named Caesar by the army, and Augustus by the senate. Having undertaken a war with the Persians, he defeated their king Xerxes with great glory.“³⁵ And Victor in his *Liber de Caesaribus*: "Although this emperor was still in his youth, he possessed a mind far beyond his years. He had barely ascended the throne when, after great armament, he took up arms against the Persian King Xerxes, defeated him completely and then hurried to Gaul ... "³⁶ Similarly, Rufus Festus, *magister memoriae* under Emperor Valens, a historian not mentioned by Palmer, writes in his *Breviarium*: „Aurelius Alexander, born as if by some destiny for the destruction of the Persian race, took the helm of the Roman imperium while still a youth. He gloriously conquered Xerxes, noblest king of the Persians.“³⁷ To this we must add the *Historia Augusta* in its biography of Severus Alexander: „And so, having set out from there against the Persians with a great array, he defeated Artaxerxes, a most powerful king. In this battle he himself commanded the flanks, urged on the soldiers, exposed himself constantly to missiles, performed many brave deeds with his own hand, and by his words encouraged individual soldiers to praiseworthy actions. At last he routed and put to flight this great king, who had come to the war with seven hundred elephants, eighteen hundred scythed chariots, and many thousand horsemen. Thereupon he immediately returned to Antioch and presented to his troops the booty taken from the

³⁵ Eutropius, *Breviarium* 8,23: „Successit huic Aurelius Alexander, ab exercitu Caesar, a senatu Augustus nominatus, invenis admodum, susceptoque adversus Persas bello Xerxen, eorum regem, gloriosissime vicit.“ (Ruehl 1887)

³⁶ Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus* 24,2: „Qui quamquam adolescens, ingenio supra aevum tamen confestim apparatu magno bellum adversum Xerxem, Persarum regem, movet; quo fuso fugatoque in Galliam maturrime contendit ...“ (Gottwein 2019)

³⁷ Festus, *Breviarium* 22,1: “Aurelius Alexander, quasi fato quodam in exitium Persicae gentis natus, iuvenis admodum Romani gubernacula suscepit imperii. Ipse Persarum regem nobilissimum Xerxem gloriose vicit.“ (Fiedler 1833, p. 302)

Persians, commanding the tribunes and generals and even the soldiers to keep for themselves the plunder they had seized in the country. Then for the first time Romans had Persian slaves, but because the kings of the Persians deem it a disgrace that any of their subjects should serve anyone as slaves, ransoms were offered, and these Alexander accepted and then returned the men, either giving the ransom-money to those who had taken the slaves captive, or depositing it in the public treasury. After this, returning to Rome, he conducted a most splendid triumph ...³⁸

Four historical sources thus report unanimously (consistently!) about a fantastic victory of Alexander in the fight against the Persians. In Rome this victory was even celebrated with a magnificent triumph. The one author who contradicts this must have been mistaken, the majority of the sources must have the *historical evidence* (see above, section 1) on their side. Or?

The problem is that the one recalcitrant author we are dealing with here is none other than Herodian. And Herodian is not talking about just any defeat, but about a historical one.³⁹ And he does not just write a few lines about it, like the four "consistent" sources, but he describes the downfall of the Roman army in every detail. Now who is right: Palmer's chief witness Herodian or his two other main witnesses Aurelius Victor and Eutropius? Palmer could make his own considerations to answer these questions. But he could also draw on secondary literature that has known about this inconsistency for centuries. If he does the latter, he will find many speculative attempts to conceal the

³⁸ Thayer (2019a), *The Life of Severus Alexander* 55 f: „Magno igitur apparatu inde in Persas profectus Artaxerxen regem potentissimum vicit, cum ipse cornua obiret, milites admoneret, subiectus telis versaretur, manu plurimum faceret, singulos quosque milites ad laudem verbis adduceret. fuso denique fugatoque tanto rege, qui cum septingentis elephantis falcatisque mille et octingentis curribus ad bellum venerat et equitum multis milibus, statim Antiochiam rediit et de praeda, quam Persis diripuit, suum ditavit exercitum, cum et tribunos ea quae per vicis diripuerant et duces et ipsos milites habere iussisset. tumque primum servi Persae apud Romanos fuerunt, quos quidem, quia indigne ferunt Persarum reges quempiam suorum alicui servire, acceptis pretiis reddidit pretiumque vel iis qui manu ceperant servos dedit vel in aerarium contulit. Post hoc Romam venit triumphoque pulcherrimo acto ...“

³⁹ „The Romans suffered a staggering disaster; it is not easy to recall another like it, one in which a great army was destroyed, an army inferior in strength and determination to none of the armies of old.” (Echols 1961, p. 163; cf. section 6 below)

obvious contradiction and instead provide a harmonizing narrative. However, secondary literature is also sometimes honest:

Thus we read in a footnote by the Frankfurt historian Karin Mosig-Walburg: "In Winter's opinion, the testimony of the sources which report a brilliant victory for the emperor must not be ignored. Kettenhofen ... points out that the official tradition of a victory by Severus Alexander had been formed early on and had found its expression in the so-called *Enmann's Kaisergeschichte*; this was used by the Latin authors Winter refers to. Kettenhofen rightly considers it questionable from a methodological point of view if Winter attaches great importance to the number of precisely these authors who represent a victory of Severus Alexander".⁴⁰ The Münster historian Matthias Haake points out the contradiction that although a victory of Alexander over Ardashir is reported, Alexander nevertheless did not bear the title Persicus (Maximus). Haake titled the chapter in question *A Triumphator without a Victory Title: Severus Alexander's Triumph over the Sassanids between History and Fiction*.⁴¹

5. Digression on the *Historia Augusta*

"Fiction" may be the key word for the next section. But before that, one of the four "consistent" sources with the account of Severus Alexander's victory must be briefly examined in more detail, for Palmer's judgement of it is another example of his uncritical handling of the written sources and their inconsistencies. What is meant here is the *Historia Augusta*, that strange text that has left the entire research community baffled. Bill Thayer, the editor of the well-known website *Lacus Curtius*, writes about it: "The *Historia Augusta* poses special problems to the modern reader or researcher: if – either perusing the biographies in it at some length or seeking to mine the work for as

⁴⁰ Mosig-Walburg (2009), p. 28, my translation.

⁴¹ Haake (2017), p. 359 ff., my translation.

little as a single small piece of information – you are not familiar with these problems, it is critically important that you become so before you put your foot in it.”⁴²

For Jona Lendering, editor of the otherwise very helpful website *livius.org*, the *Historia Augusta* is just a good joke, but not "completely worthless": „ ... a lovely game of hide and seek ... Ancient readers must have loved these mirror images, and may have smiled when the author of the Life of Heliogabalus accused other authors of making up charges to discredit the emperor, and used them all the same. ... All this does not mean that the work is, for a historian, entirely worthless.”⁴³ Lendering may forgive me for smiling when I read this: not about the *Historia Augusta*, but about his belittling interpretation ...

Against Lendering's trivializing interpretation of the work, the German *Wikipedia* may stand for the traditional judgement of the text: "For the study of the high imperial period, however, it [the *Historia Augusta*, jb] is one of the most important historical sources due to the lack of literary representations of it, although its reliability is disputed, as illustrated by an extensive research literature and a series of research colloquia devoted exclusively to the *Historia Augusta*. Despite the questionable or demonstrably erroneous nature of many of the details, the work also provides a great deal of credible information and, if used with appropriate care, represents an important source for the high Roman Imperial period. But also for the intellectual climate of its time of origin and the reception of the past in Late Antiquity, the text, which remains enigmatic in many ways, is an important testimony".⁴⁴

Palmer sees the *Historia Augusta* as "a collection of biographies in which historical details were blended with fanciful stories".⁴⁵ Despite the fantastic narratives and the problematic nature of the work, which has been recognized by numerous historians, he lists it among the texts which, for him, attest to the traditionally assumed imperial

⁴² Thayer (2019a).

⁴³ Lendering (2019).

⁴⁴ Wikipedia (2019a), my translation.

⁴⁵ Palmer (2019), p. 19.

succession from Septimius Severus to Maurice. Palmer writes about these texts that they are all consistently giving the same imperial succession with the same reign-lengths: "... consistently giving the same sequence and the same reign-lengths ..."⁴⁶ A possible interdependence of the texts is not further investigated by Palmer. Consequently, the question that was raised within Heinsohn's research group, whether the *Historia Augusta* does belong to those texts that are at the beginning of the respective tradition regarding the succession of emperors from Septimius Severus to Constantine the Great⁴⁷, is not further considered by Palmer.

The *Historia Augusta* deserves much more attention than Palmer gives it. Anyone who is of the erroneous opinion that the handed-down history of the first millennium has no inconsistencies should take a closer look at the contradictions – as an antidote, so to speak. A start could be made by reading Hermann Dessau's famous essay *On Time and Personality in Scriptorum Historiae Augustae*, where Dessau speaks of falsification and mystification, because in reality not the alleged six authors but only one author is responsible for the writing.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the numerous anachronisms, i.e. inconsistencies, of this text, many of which are borrowed from the Republican period, should be studied.⁴⁹ Such anachronisms may be dismissed by Palmer as fantastic tales or by Lendering as harmless jokes. But this does not explain anything, and it certainly cannot serve to confirm the consistency of the tradition.

Finally, it should be mentioned here that not only modern historians, but also Antiquity itself, and indeed just the *Historia Augusta*, knew about the inconsistency of the reports about Severus Alexander's war against the Persians. For immediately after a pompous speech of Alexander before the Senate was quoted (or invented) in the text of the *Historia*, it says: „All this we have found both in the annals and in many writers. Some assert, however, that he was betrayed by one of his slaves and did not conquer the king

⁴⁶ Palmer (2019), p. 20.

⁴⁷ Together with, among others, Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, as well as the merely deduced, non-existent or at least never found so-called *Enmann's Kaisergeschichte*.

⁴⁸ Dessau (1889), p. 392.

⁴⁹ For example Burgersdijk (2009).

at all, but, on the contrary, was forced to flee in order to escape being conquered. But those who have read most of the writers are sure that this assertion is contrary to the general belief. It is also stated that he lost his army through hunger, cold, and disease, and this is the version given by Herodian, but contrary to the belief of the majority.⁵⁰ So the author knows Herodian's objection and nevertheless agrees with the majority of the sources!

When the text that reports by far the most detailed about this battle, i.e. Herodian's *Roman History*, speaks of a historical defeat, while four other, much less revealing sources mention a victory, then something is fundamentally wrong. But then, from a methodical point of view, it is permitted (if not even necessary) to think of quite different possibilities and contexts than those suggested by the sources. The Heinsohn thesis opens up just such an alternative perspective when it backdates Ardashir by 284 years.⁵¹

6. Herodian's Account of a Historical Defeat: History, Fiction or Both?

Let us now turn to Herodian, Palmer's chief witness against Heinsohn. Herodian reports about a devastating defeat of Alexander, which is almost unequalled in the history of Rome: "The Romans suffered a staggering disaster; it is not easy to recall another like it, one in which a great army was destroyed, an army inferior in strength and determination to none of the armies of old."⁵² Nevertheless, this defeat has an astonishing parallel in a much earlier Roman defeat against the Parthians. This parallel has never been seen by historians. This is understandable, for they never looked for it. Being able to recognize it required a consideration of the kind that was only possible on the basis of the Heinsohn thesis. This will be briefly explained here:

⁵⁰ Thayer (2019a), *The Life of Severus Alexander* 57.

⁵¹ At least so Ewald Ernst and the author. Heinsohn himself is more sceptical here and tends to the usual late dating of Ardashir I and Shapur I.

⁵² Echols (1961), p. 163.

Fairly soon after Heinsohn had first formulated his thesis, a possibly significant connection was made between the artificial succession of ancient and late ancient emperors and the period of 284 years with which Dionysius Exiguus had moved back the beginning of the Christian era. The consideration was that both actions – the extension of the chronology and the extension of history – were connected in such a way that the history of the city of Rome had been shifted backwards by 284 years compared to the history of Constantinople or Byzantium. In order to reverse this artificial shift, year 1 of the Diocletian era would have to be equated with year 1 of the Christian era. Diocletian would then have come to power in the 26th year of the reign of Emperor Augustus in the Roman border provinces ('Augustan provinces').⁵³

Heinsohn followed this consideration in part, but, due to the priority he gives to stratigraphy, clearly limited its validity to the archaeological evidence. Together with Ewald Ernst, a recently deceased associate of Heinsohn's and mine, I have pursued this approach more consistently. When the question had to be clarified as to how the barracks emperors were to be classified chronologically, Heinsohn largely stuck to his original view, according to which they were a symptom of the imperial crisis of the third century⁵⁴, to be paralleled with the sixth century, the Justinian era of catastrophes⁵⁵. Only the barracks emperors from Aurelian onwards were to remain before Diocletian, according to Heinsohn.

Ernst and I made the cut earlier, so that the Persian Sassanids Ardashir I and Shapur I, as well as the simultaneous barracks emperors came before Diocletian, and that means also before the turn of the eras.⁵⁶ The backdating of Ardashir by 284 years then raised the question whether the events of the early third century AD could be reconciled with those of the middle first century BC. Consequently, it was also necessary to look

⁵³ Cf. Beaufort (2014).

⁵⁴ According to the well-known thesis of Andreas Alföldi and Géza Alföldy, see Heinsohn (2014e).

⁵⁵ Cf. the relevant book by Mischa Meier (Meier 2003).

⁵⁶ That I now go even further and see not only all soldier emperors, but also the Severans and the Nerva-Antonine dynasty, at least tentatively, in a distant past in which they operated on the borders of the Roman Empire from the early 2nd century B.C. simultaneously with generals of the Republic, may be mentioned here in passing, in case the debate should continue.

whether there was a counterpart for the defeat of the year 232 against the Persians reported by Herodian 284 years earlier, that is, in the year 53 BC. To our surprise we found it there: For in 53 BC the triumvir Marcus Licinius Crassus suffered a traumatic defeat at Carrhae against the Parthians, which made it into the Roman history books and was painfully remembered decades later.⁵⁷

But the real surprise was not this encounter, which could easily be dismissed as coincidence, but the similarity of the events and the course of the respective battles. It will be shown here briefly:

According to the report of Herodian (quoted here in the appendix) Severus Alexander divides his army into three units. He commands the middle one himself. The Persians used the bow and the horse as their main weapons in war. Ardashir first moves north against Armenia to stop the Roman northern army. This leaves the centre and the southeast flank unprotected. While Alexander hesitates in the middle, the southern army advances quickly. The consequence is that it becomes careless ("the Romans were advancing much too carelessly because they had met no opposition"). Meanwhile Ardashir hurries southeast with his main forces to stop the Roman southern army there. Due to Alexander's restraint the southern army faces a superior force. It is lured into a trap and encircled by Ardashir's troops ("The king attacked it unexpectedly with his entire force and trapped the Romans like fish in a net"). The archers attacking from all sides destroy it down to the last man ("... firing their arrows from all sides at the encircled soldiers, the Persians massacred the whole army"). The Romans suffer a devastating defeat that is not easily matched in history. ("The Romans suffered a staggering disaster; it is not easy to recall another like it, one in which a great army was destroyed, an army inferior in strength and determination to none of the armies of old.")⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See for example Overtoom (2017).

⁵⁸ Herodian, *Roman History* 6,5, see Appendix I.

The Battle of Carrhae is mentioned by numerous ancient authors, for it "ended in one of the greatest defeats in Rome's history".⁵⁹ We know more about its course thanks to Plutarch⁶⁰, and a little bit also to Cassius Dio.⁶¹ Plutarch describes how Crassus also divided his army. The north wing is led by Cassius Longinus⁶², the southern right wing by Crassus' son Publius. Crassus himself takes command of the main force. The Parthians' most dangerous weapon are the mounted archers. Part of their army moves to Armenia.⁶³ The others manage to halt Crassus' march. Crassus then orders his son to advance and attack the enemy from the south. There the Parthians retreat to lure Publius into a trap. This succeeds and Publius' troops are destroyed.

Although there are significant differences in the representations of Herodian and Plutarch, the sum of the similarities is astonishing: the location of the battle in northern Mesopotamia; arrows and horses as the main weapon of the enemy; his advance into Armenia; the division of the Roman army into three units; a troop operating in the north, which has nothing to do with the later course of the battle; a central main power, commanded by the army commander himself, which at some point does not move on; the rapid advance of the southern unit, which becomes reckless; the enemy's trap, the encirclement and annihilation of the southern army as the decisive event of the battle; the assessment of the defeat as historical.

If then the chronological connection is also correct (battle between Ardashir and Alexander exactly 284 years after the Battle of Carrhae), doubts hardly seem necessary, at least from the perspective of the Heinsohn thesis: Here and there we are talking about the same battle. While Herodian's judgement about the historical significance of the defeat must come as a surprise – no other source knows anything about such a dramatic

⁵⁹ Wikipedia (2019b). On Plutarch's *Life of Crassus* itself see Stewart Long (1892a), p. 36-88.

⁶⁰ See the summary of this account in the German Wikipedia (2019b), cited here in the appendix.

⁶¹ See Thayer (2019b), XL 3-5.

⁶² The future Caesar murderer.

⁶³ This is not mentioned in the summary of the German *Wikipedia*, but by Plutarch himself: "For Hyrodes had at first divided his forces into two parts, and he was himself ravaging Armenia to take vengeance on Artavasdes ..." (Stewart Long 1892a, p. 68) Hyrodes was a Parthian king, but the main opponent of the Romans was the commander Surenas (see below in the text).

failure of Severus Alexander –, it pertains only too precisely to the Battle of Carrhae. For the Battle of Carrhae wrote Roman history: a doctoral thesis on the subject rightly bears the title *The Long Shadow of Carrhae*.⁶⁴ Even more than thirty years later, Emperor Augustus wishes back the *signa* lost in the Battle of Carrhae, and the success of his efforts is celebrated abundantly in Rome.

For the differences between the representations of Herodian and Plutarch, which undoubtedly also exist, there are too many conceivable explanations to be discussed now. Here further research is needed. For example, Crassus' opponent is not called Ardashir, but sometimes Hyrodes (in Plutarch), sometimes Orodes (in Cassius Dio and others). Since the name Ardashir is probably to be analyzed as Arda-shir (Arta-xerxes), it could possibly be a matter of similarity of name or even personal identity. It is more likely, however, that the Persian ruler is hiding behind Orodes' commander Surenas. He was the one who decided the battle in favour of Orodes. Plutarch writes about him that he was the second man in the state after the Parthian King. As far as courage and abilities as well as shape and beauty are concerned, he was even the most distinguished among the Parthians. He had the right to be the first to put the diadem on a new Parthian king. For Orodes, who had been driven out by his own brother, he conquered Seleucia.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Weggen (2011).

⁶⁵ Cf. Plutarch himself: „For Surenas was no person of mean estate: in wealth, birth, and consideration, he was next to the king; but, in courage and ability, the first of the Parthians of his time; and, besides all this, in stature and beauty of person he had no equal. He used always to travel, when he was on his own business, with a thousand camels to carry his baggage, and he had following him two hundred carriages for concubines; and a thousand mailed horsemen, with a larger number of light cavalry, escorted him; and he had in all, horsemen, clients, and slaves, no less than ten thousand. Now by hereditary right he had the privilege of first placing the diadem on the head of him who became king of the Parthians; and this very Hyrodes, who had been driven out, he restored to the Parthian empire, and took for him Seleukeia the Great, being the first to mount the wall and to put to flight with his own hand those who opposed him. Though he was not yet thirty years of age at that time, he had the first reputation for prudent counsel and judgment, by which qualities particularly he caused the ruin of Crassus ...“ (Stewart Long 1892a, p. 68 f.) Surenas was most likely the name for descendants of the noble Suren family (Shapur Shabazi 1990). Lendering (2014) knows about this family: „When the Parthian empire came to an end and the Sasanians started their rule, the Surenas family switched sides and continued to serve as royal commanders.“ According to this, Surenas could have been Ardashir himself or his general. Three centuries after Surenas' victory at Seleukia, Ardashir conquered Ctesiphon. On a rock relief in Bishapur a Surenas might be depicted (Lendering 2009).

Both Severus Alexander and Crassus first gathered their troops in Italy and then moved via Illyria to Antioch, where further war preparations were made. There, both received visits from an enemy delegation, which came with proud demands (Herodian) or offers (Plutarch) and was rejected with even more pride.⁶⁶

Crassus' motives for the campaign have never been understood. His war plans met with strong opposition in Rome.⁶⁷ Research has largely adopted the negative judgement of domestic political opponents about Crassus. Even the German *Wikipedia* writes: "In ancient tradition, Crassus' motives are called glory and the prospect of rich and above all easy booty ...".⁶⁸ Crassus had wanted to draw level with the other two triumvirs, Caesar and Pompeius, who both enjoyed an excellent military reputation.

At least one other motive is discussed today: Orodes II had just won the power struggle against his brother Mithridates, who was a friend of Rome, so the balance of power in the Parthian empire had changed to the disadvantage of Rome.⁶⁹ This motive is much clearer in the story of Ardashir, which is set 284 years later: Ardashir had conquered Ctesiphon in 226 and extended his dominion more and more. Cassius Dio writes: "This man became terrible to us, because he threatened not only Mesopotamia but also Syria with a strong army, and announced that he had to get back everything his ancestors, the old Persians, had possessed in former times, i.e. the whole country up to the Greek sea."⁷⁰ So here too new political and military developments in the Parthian empire that are dangerous for Rome.

⁶⁶ According to Herodian the ambassadors were arrested, Plutarch has them sent back by Crassus with the famous words: "I will answer in Seleucia".

⁶⁷ Cf. Plutarch, Stewart Long (1892a), p. 59 f. The Romans could not understand why war should be waged against a people that lived in peace with Rome and had treaties with it. Also in Herodian's report, Severus Alexander had to make convincing speeches in order to enforce his intention in the army and the senate (Echols 1961, p. 158 f.).

⁶⁸ Wikipedia (2015b), my translation.

⁶⁹ Wikipedia (2015b), cf. also Weggen (2011).

⁷⁰ Cassius Dio's *Roman History* 80,4 (Thayer 2019b, p. 1851). So also Herodian, *Roman History* 6,2 (Echols 1961). By the way, Cassius Dio's story of the battle is found in the curious, seemingly appended book 80, of which Cassius himself says: "Thus far I have described events with as great accuracy as I could in every case, but for subsequent events I have not found it possible to give an accurate account ...". (*Roman History* 80.1)

Is the Herodian account of the battle between Alexander and Ardashir history or fiction? The answer, in my view, should be that Herodian depicts the real battle, but it actually did not take place in 232 AD, but 284 years earlier, in 53 BC. Also, not only Alexander and Ardashir were facing each other, but on the opposing side the Parthian king Orodes fought, while with the Romans the actual command on the battlefield may not have been in the hands of the 23 year young Emperor Severus, but of the Roman general Crassus.

By the way, there is an ancient source that explicitly records the connection between Severus Alexander's campaign and the Battle of Carrhae: just the *Historia Augusta*. Of course, it denies the identity of both events by declaring Alexander the victor. Consequently, it contrasts victory and defeat; for in his speech to the Senate, recorded in the *Historia Augusta*, Alexander calls out to the *patres conscripti*: "Artaxerxes, the most powerful of kings, in fact as well as in name, we have routed and driven from the field, so that the land of the Persians saw him in full flight, and where once our ensigns [the *signa* of Crassus, jb] were led away in triumph, there the king himself fled apace leaving his own standards."⁷¹

7. Summary and Outlook

(a) Summary

The present text tried to make plausible that the written history of the first millennium is not a monolithic, inherently consistent block against which any suspicion can be rejected a priori without consideration of the reasons given. Thus, when Gunnar Heinsohn collects and presents such reasons in dozens of papers, a response that consists in the assertion of the consistency of that history only offers limited progress.

⁷¹ Thayer (2019a), *The Life of Severus Alexander* 56,7.

However, representatives of Heinsohn's thesis should be grateful to Trevor Palmer for his diligent work, for not only does Palmer formulate a presumption that many academic contemporaries share with him – the far-reaching consistency of the written history of the first millennium is only doubted by historians behind closed doors – and not only was a paper that clearly expresses this prejudice long overdue, but Palmer also offers us the opportunity to confront it publicly.

We must, of course, take a critical approach in this debate. And so in the first section I showed how Palmer still implicitly, though no longer explicitly, turns the conspiracy theory accusation against Heinsohn by putting Heinsohn's thesis on a par with the approaches of Illig, Fomenko and Hunnivari: The difference is briefly mentioned, but otherwise Heinsohn's very own stratigraphic as well as art and technology historical reasons are just as little discussed as the reasons of the other chronology critics. According to Palmer, the believed consistency of the written sources and their *historical evidence* speaks as much against Heinsohn as against the other rebels.

The second section showed how Palmer, by blanking out the Heinsohn arguments, does not see the real *problem*. His confidence in the written sources blurs his awareness of the problem. Palmer refuses to get involved with Heinsohn's thesis, does not weigh up the pros and cons, does not consider how the contradiction between archaeology and written sources could be resolved. Palmer admits this himself and even writes in his last chapter that he is not addressing Heinsohn directly, but Heinsohn's possible readers. These readers should be on their guard and look at the written sources before they judge Heinsohn.

The third section was devoted to Palmer's criticism of Heinsohn in his final chapter, the *Overall Conclusions*. Here Palmer catches up a little on what should have been done in the main body of the work: He makes two arguments against Heinsohn, one general and one specific. The general argument points out that writers of the three periods distinguished by Heinsohn – Antiquity, Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages –

each paint a very different picture of the Roman Empire, so the periods cannot be brought into line. Palmer confronts Heinsohn with the primary literature of this period, but he does so completely uncritically and without asking how this literature came to us, what hands it passed through, what mutual dependencies exist, who edited the texts on the way and who dated them. Nor does he consider possible alternative interpretations of the content of the sources themselves. This means that Palmer ultimately relies not on primary literature but on contemporary secondary literature and its believed consistency. This consistency, as far as it exists, has evolved over the course of a millennium, but Palmer does not investigate how.

The fourth section was about Palmer's specification of the above argument: Palmer demonstrates the consistency of the written sources using the example of texts about Septimius Severus. The key witness is Herodian, because he was a contemporary of Severus and reports in detail about him. Such a key historical source should of course not contradict other important sources. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to find such a contradiction in the case of Herodian: Because the crushing defeat of Severus Alexander against Artaxerxes, as Herodian claimed, is celebrated as a victory by all other sources. What does this mean for Herodian's credibility? Is there an explanation for his differing report?

The fifth section was a brief digression on the *Historia Augusta*. For there are not only inconsistencies between the respective texts, but also inconsistencies within the individual written sources themselves. Palmer does not take a closer look at such a difficult text as the *Historia Augusta*; he sees here a historical work with novel-like insertions. The text itself, of course, does not see itself as a novel, and Palmer can explain neither this contradiction nor the numerous anachronisms, i.e. inconsistencies, in the writing. Against the perplexity of the historians stands the view of the author of these lines, according to which the *Historia Augusta*, just like all texts related to the so-called (non-existent) *Enmann's Kaisergeschichte*, are writings in which the

chronological extension with the succession of Rome and Constantinople is tested for the first time.

The last section was about Herodian himself. His account of the defeat of Alexander against Artaxerxes corresponds in detail to the course of the Battle of Carrhae, 284 years earlier. So is the account fiction or real history? From my point of view, it is real history, which, however, happened almost three centuries earlier than Herodian pretends. Perhaps Palmer will give us his perspective in a reply.

(b) Outlook

My paper could conclude with this criticism of Palmer, which was primarily aimed at his disregard of Heinsohn's arguments, the unquestioned adoption of the judgments of the secondary literature on the presumed primary sources, and the failure to recognize inconsistencies in the primary texts. However, some additional remarks to explain my own position may be permitted, which could be useful for a further course of the debate:

For the above criticism of Palmer's attempt in no way means that the Heinsohn thesis does not face a lot of still unsolved problems or that there will not be controversial discussions on the basis of the Heinsohn thesis. It would not be science if it were otherwise. For example, a controversial point is the dating of Justinian, who appears to be a survivor of a catastrophe because of many preserved buildings, but also a pre-catastrophic emperor because of many destroyed buildings. Disputed here is the question of which catastrophe Justinian survived: Was it a catastrophe in the time of Marcus Aurelius with plague crisis and Antonine Fires (according to Heinsohn himself⁷²)? Or was it the doomsday catastrophe that brought about the end of the antique-late antique-early medieval world (according to Ernst and Beaufort)?

⁷² See Heinsohn (2019a).

Another topic on which there are different opinions among the participants in the internal debate of the Heinsohn thesis is the question of the historicity of Jesus. Those who affirm this historicity will prefer to keep many persons and events after Jesus' birth which, in the view of the Heinsohn thesis, could also be dated before the turn of the eras. Those who, on the other hand, like the author, follow the considerations of the so-called theological radical criticism⁷³, reckons with the possibility of a "pre-Christian Christianity", i.e. a Christianity before the time into which Jesus is usually dated. He can then for instance also see the Decian persecution of Christians before Diocletian and Augustus. The Heinsohn thesis, which is limited to the stratigraphically evident, allows both possibilities, so it is necessary to continue research in both directions.

Almost since Heinsohn's first publications on his thesis in 2011, a question has been discussed that arises from the alleged simultaneity of Augustus and Diocletian: namely the question of which emperors should remain pre-Diocletian and which post-Augustan. Inevitably, a cut has to be made here, which was or is set either directly before Aurelian (Heinsohn), or before Valerian (Ernst), or before the Gordians (my position for a long time), or before the Severans (also supported by me for some time) or finally before the Nerva-Antonine Dynasty (my current attempt).

Either way, the Heinsohn thesis must assume a splitting of the Roman Empire into a Byzantium-controlled border empire and a central empire ruled from Rome, which corresponds roughly to the division of the empire into Senatorial and Augustan provinces. The historiography of these two empires has paid little attention to the respective other part of the empire, which is why two parallel strands of history emerged, which could easily be dated one after the other later.

Today, the author sees this splitting between republican-minded, traditionalist Romans and Roman emperors (Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasty) on the one hand and Hellenophile, modernist border emperors (Nerva-Antonine and Severan dynasty,

⁷³ Cf. the website and books of Hermann Detering, who died last year (Detering 2018) and my text *Arianer und Aliden*, Beaufort (2009).

barracks emperors, Tetrarchy and Constantine dynasty) on the other. The high imperial period from Nerva onwards would thus have to be parallelized with the late Republic, from the time of the expansion of the empire beyond the borders of Italy. This view has the advantage that the "Severan problem" addressed by Palmer no longer arises. The disadvantage is, of course, that the quite unusual or even adventurous idea of border emperors, who from the second century BC onwards operate alongside republican commanders, must now be discussed in detail. Initial internal debates on the subject, however, produced astonishing possibilities and confirmations.

Certainly, as soon as we go beyond the stratigraphically verifiable, we can only proceed tentatively, i.e. experimentally, on the basis of the Heinsohn thesis, since we are entering completely new historical territory here. Nevertheless, it seems possible and sensible to take the new research direction opened up by Heinsohn as far as it leads. A public debate on Heinsohn's work is to be welcomed, and it is Palmer's great merit that he is leading it in place of the historians' guild, which has so far been largely silent.

Bielefeld, 7 January 2020

Appendix

I. Herodian, *Roman History* 6.5: *Alexander's Persian War*⁷⁴.

“After thus setting matters in order, Alexander, considering that the huge army he had assembled was now nearly equal in power and numbers to the barbarians, consulted his advisers and then divided his force into three separate armies. One army he ordered to overrun the land of the Medes after marching north and passing through Armenia, which seemed to favor the Roman cause.

He sent the second army to the eastern sector of the barbarian territory, where, it is said, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at their confluence empty into very dense marshes; these are the only rivers whose mouths cannot be clearly determined. The third and most powerful army he kept himself, promising to lead it against the barbarians in the central sector. He thought that in this way he would attack them from different directions when they were unprepared and not anticipating such strategy, and he believed that the Persian horde, constantly split up to face their attackers on several fronts, would be weaker and less unified for battle.

The barbarians, it may be noted, do not hire mercenary soldiers as the Romans do, nor do they maintain trained standing armies. Rather, all the available men, and sometimes the women too, mobilize at the king's order. At the end of the war each man returns to his regular occupation, taking as his pay whatever falls to his lot from the general booty. They use the bow and the horse in war, as the Romans do, but the barbarians are reared with these from childhood, and live by hunting; they never lay aside their quivers or dismount from their horses, but employ them constantly for war and the chase.

Alexander therefore devised what he believed to be the best possible plan of action, only to have Fortune defeat his design.

⁷⁴ Echols (1961), p. 161 f.

The army sent through Armenia had an agonizing passage over the high, steep mountains of that country. (As it was still summer, however, they were able to complete the crossing.) Then, plunging down into the land of the Medes, the Roman soldiers devastated the countryside, burning many villages and carrying off much loot. Informed of this, the Persian king led his army to the aid of the Medes, but met with little success in his efforts to halt the Roman advance.

This is rough country; while it provided firm footing and easy passage for the infantry, the rugged mountain terrain hampered the movements of the barbarian cavalry and prevented their riding down the Romans or even making contact with them. Then men came and reported to the Persian king that another Roman army had appeared in eastern Parthia and was overrunning the plains there.

Fearing that the Romans, after ravaging Parthia unopposed, might advance into Persia, Artaxerxes left behind a force which he thought strong enough to defend Media, and hurried with his entire army into the eastern sector. The Romans were advancing much too carelessly because they had met no opposition and, in addition, they believed that Alexander and his army, the largest and most formidable of the three, had already attacked the barbarians in the central sector. They thought, too, that their own advance would be easier and less hazardous when the barbarians were constantly being drawn off elsewhere to meet the threat of the emperor's army.

All three Roman armies had been ordered to invade the enemy's territory, and a final rendezvous had been selected to which they were to bring their booty and prisoners. But Alexander failed them: he did not bring his army or come himself into barbarian territory, either because he was afraid to risk his life for the Roman Empire or because his mother's feminine fears or excessive mother love restrained him.

She blocked his efforts at courage by persuading him that he should let others risk their lives for him, but that he should not personally fight in battle. It was this reluctance of

his which led to the destruction of the advancing Roman army. The king attacked it unexpectedly with his entire force and trapped the Romans like fish in a net; firing their arrows from all sides at the encircled soldiers, the Persians massacred the whole army. The outnumbered Romans were unable to stem the attack of the Persian horde; they used their shields to protect those parts of their bodies exposed to the Persian arrows. Content merely to protect themselves, they offered no resistance. As a result, all the Romans were driven into one spot, where they made a wall of their shields and fought like an army under siege. Hit and wounded from every side, they held out bravely as long as they could, but in the end all were killed. The Romans suffered a staggering disaster; it is not easy to recall another like it, one in which a great army was destroyed, an army inferior in strength and determination to none of the armies of old. The successful outcome of these important events encouraged the Persian king to anticipate better things in the future.“

II. Summary of Plutarch's account in the German *Wikipedia*⁷⁵:

"Under this overall military situation, which developed unfavourably for the Roman side, Crassus led his army across the Euphrates near Zeugma in the spring of 53 BC. According to Plutarch, the Roman army consisted of six legions, 4,000 horsemen and 4,000 lightly armed men; on the basis of these figures, a total strength of between 36,000 and 43,000 men can be concluded. Crassus first followed the Euphrates and then, with a swing through the sandy desert to the east, he took action against the Balikh River. Crassus is said to have made this swing, on which the Roman officers were not in agreement, on the advice of an Armenian prince, Abgar of Osroene, and thus fell into the trap of Surena. He had avoided any meeting with the Roman forces and lured them into the desert without woods or water. After the Roman vanguard had come into enemy contact, Crassus had his army form a square, each side consisting of twelve cohorts and the corresponding cavalry. While Crassus took position in the centre, Gaius Cassius

⁷⁵ Wikipedia (2019b), my translation. See for Plutarch himself Stewart Long (1892a), p. 36-88.

Longinus commanded the left wing and his son Publius Crassus the right wing. Finally, in this formation, the battle took place 30 kilometres south of Carrhae in early June 53 BC.

Surenas, who had hidden his main forces behind the advance divisions all the time, had his heavy cavalry attack frontally. The Parthians tried to break through the Roman lines but were beaten back. As if fleeing, the heavy cavalry retreated, while the light cavalry tried to avoid Crassus on the right flank and enclose him. To prevent this, Crassus ordered his cavalry to take action against the Parthian horsemen, but the Roman cavalry was forced to retreat under the hail of arrows from the Parthians. Now the Roman commander gave his son Publius the order to proceed against the enemy with a force of 1300 horsemen, 500 archers and eight cohorts. In the face of this attack by the young Crassus, the Parthians withdrew and thus lured the Roman unit further and further away from the bulk of the army, in order to then encircle and destroy it. Publius Crassus, seriously wounded during this battle, had his own servant kill him. Spurred on by this success, the Parthians continued their attacks on the Roman army with even greater vigour. All the time the Roman army was shot at with arrows, separated parts of the army were attacked with heavy cavalry. The Parthians even succeeded in encircling the Roman units. The Romans' hope that the enemies would soon have exhausted their stock of arrows proved to be unfounded, as the Parthians, with a corps of 1000 camels, were constantly supplying new arrows. Only when night fell did the Parthians abandon their enemy. While Crassus, who had lost 10,000 men that day through death or wounding, had become apathetic, the Roman commanders called a war council. Since a continuation of the offensive was no longer conceivable due to the great loss of cavalry, it was decided to march off immediately under cover of night to Carrhae, while about 4000 wounded had to be left behind.“

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