

In the year 53 B.C. Crassus, one of the triumvirs and proconsul of Syria, launched an invasion into Parthian-controlled Iran in the hope of easy conquest, rich booty, and military glory. He commanded a force of 28,000 legionaries, 4,000 light infantry, and 4,000 of Europe's best Gallic and auxiliary cavalry. Yet, in that year this powerful force suffered one of the worst defeats ever inflicted on a Roman army, all at the hands of a mysterious people known as the Parthians.

The Parthians were a part of the Dahae confederacy (Scythians) who occupied the Trans Caspian frontier between Russia and Iran. At its height the Parthian Empire stretched from Syria to India. Being nomadic horsemen, the Parthians controlled the large plains of their empire through the development of a powerful cavalry. Their army was based on a social structure which closely resembled that of Mediaeval Europe. Parthian society was controlled by a feudal system run by seven great royal families. The seven families were ruled by a king, either elected by a consensus of the seven families or imposed by civil war. Each family ruled its own province (satrapy) and was responsible for maintaining its own army under the lord (satrap) of the province. In times of war each lord would place himself and his vassals at the disposal of the king. Surena, the Parthian commander who defeated Crassus at Carrhae in 53 B.C., was the head of the greatest feudal family.

These feudal armies consisted of light cavalry horse archers (sagittarii) and heavily armoured knights (cataphracti). The sagittarii formed the bulk of Parthian armies and included the lesser gentry and retainers. They wore a loose wrap-around jacket secured by a belt, and very baggy trousers. They carried no shield and fought with a powerful composite bow, knife and handaxe. Sagittarii went bare headed except for a decorated sweat band. These cavalry troops were exceptionally fast and were also experts at hit and run tactics. They would attack in small bodies, shooting at a distance while making a difficult target themselves, then withdrawing to rest their mounts and replenish their arrow supply while the next group took their turn. The slower Roman cavalry and infantry could not adjust to such tactics, and the dust raised by the sagittarii blinded and confused the Romans. On the wide eastern plains the sagittarii found it easy to surround and pin down their Roman antagonists.

The cataphracti were composed of the nobility and lords of the great families. Their bodies were encased in suits of iron armour and they wore iron helmets with three lappets that covered their neck, chin, throat and face. They carried no bow or shield, but were armed with a twelve-foot lance (kontos) and a mace. Their horses were completely covered in bronze armour (which was less adversely affected by corrosion from horse sweat). The cataphracti would charge weak spots in infantry lines or exploit momentary confusion caused by the sagittarii. The Roman cavalry were no match for them at close quarters and found their javelins to be useless against Parthian plate armour. It appears the only solution

that the Gauls could find to this problem was to dismount and stab the Parthian horses in their unprotected bellies or to grab the kontos and wrestle the rider off his mount.

All Parthian troops were organized on the decimal system of tens, hundreds, and thousands. Surena's army in 53 B.C. consisted of his personal retainers and numbered 1,000 cataphracti, 10,000 sagitarii, plus a 1,000 strong camel train carrying spare arrows. Seeing the army of Crassus to be three times his own in size, Surena employed typical Parthian tactics to pin down and destroy the Romans. As Crassus approached Carrhae, the Roman army was surrounded by the Parthian sagitarii and was forced to form a square, preceded by light infantry skirmishers. This slowed down the Romans and made them even better targets for the Parthian bowmen. Surena's cataphracti drove in the skirmishers and then withdrew to let the archers shoot. Crassus' counter-attacking force of cavalry, archers and eight cohorts was lured away from the main army and destroyed by cataphracti and arrows. The Romans were forced to retreat back to Carrhae and then across the desert. They were continually harassed by the sagitarii, intercepted by the rest of the Parthian army, and destroyed. Out of an army of 36,000 men, Crassus and 16,000 were killed, while 10,000 Romans surrendered and another 10,000 escaped across the desert. Parthian casualties, on the other hand, were negligible.

It was by means of these same tactics that the Parthians were to hold off the might of Rome for at least another 200 years. In the end, the Parthians were to be defeated and absorbed by another group of horse warriors, the Sassanid Persians, who were to pose an even greater threat to Rome in the east.