

East of Asia Minor: Rome's Hidden Frontier

Timothy Bruce Mitford

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Most Americans and Europeans see the Roman Empire as centered on Greece, France, Britain, and Spain. Relatively little thought is given to Rome in North Africa and the Near East, and even less to conquests in eastern Anatolia and beyond the Euphrates and Tigris and to Rome's footholds in Transcaucasia.

With over a half century of personal exploration and research on hand, Timothy Bruce Mitford has given Rome-in-the-East its much deserved equal billing, opening up fascinating new vistas of rugged Anatolia that go far beyond scholarly interest. Romans in the field and holding territory are his primary concern—advancing, road-making, fortress-building, aqueduct-creating, and surviving. In every activity, Roman soldiers and local auxiliaries were dedicated to the vital task of securing Rome's physically challenging eastern hinterlands against Parthian and Persian incursions.

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Mitford has built upon an unsurpassed scholarly foundation; he cites virtually every known Greek and Roman source on the region, and also many later commentaries, up to the Ottoman period. He clearly delineates the expansionist or hold-fast policies of successive emperors and follows the advances of individual legions, posted for long service far from home. Integral to his text is discussion of what can be termed the “farthest reaches”—Rome in the Caucasus, offering the fascinating story of Rome on the eastern Black Sea coast, at the foot of the Caucasus mountain passes, even soldiers leaving “We were here” rock-cut inscriptions close to the Caspian shore.

The non-specialist reader gains added benefit from Mitford's quotations from numerous and always rewarding Greek and Roman historians—the acute insights of Tacitus, the descriptive writings of Cassius Dio, the histories of Diodorus Siculus—to say nothing of the very readable works of Xenophon, Plutarch, and Pliny. Mitford continuously leavens his military-topographical route-and-fortress sections with much of immediate human interest—military medicine, transportation logistics, honey and cheese in the Roman diet, among them, with asides on famines, feasts, ferries, festivals, feuds, fevers, fire brigades, and floods, to offer a random sampling.

This is a scholarly work of encyclopedic comprehensiveness that bursts with information of human interest. Both of the two large volumes contain a generous color plate section, including twenty-eight specialized maps, and the set has over 350 illustrations, including photographs and line drawings of fortresses, bridges, and aqueducts. This magnificent, highly illustrated work far transcends its scholarly readership in presenting the lost world of Rome's most challenging frontier. In every way, Mitford's achievement is superlative, as is the set's physical production.

PETER SKINNER (January/February 2018)

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