

ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ (Rev 17.14; 19.16) in Light of the Numismatic Record

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The title βασιλεὺς βασιλέων in the Apocalypse (Rev 17.14; 19.16) has generated a variety of interpretations in regard to its identification, symbolism and background. Commentators regularly note that joining a singular noun with its genitive plural is a common way to express the superlative in Hebrew. Others find special relevance of the phrase to the time of Domitian when it is said ‘he dictated the form of a letter to be used by his procurators, he began: “Our lord and god commands so and so”’ (Suetonius, *Domitian*, 13). The present analysis argues that inscriptions on relevant coinage confirm that the title was a clear allusion to the tradition of the Parthian kings, Rome’s historic enemy. Within the context of the Apocalypse, the title is applied to Jesus Christ, presented triumphantly conquering Rome in the image of Rome’s feared Parthian enemy. Included in the analysis is an extensive tabulation of relevant numismatic evidence.

Keywords: Revelation 17.14, 19.16, king of kings, Parthia, numismatics, Roman coins, lexicography

1. Introduction

Rev 17.14 and 19.16 apply the title βασιλεὺς βασιλέων (‘king of kings’) to Jesus Christ as a victorious epithet, but its significance and meaning has been a subject of much debate. The former passage uses the title within the context of the first act of the judgement on ἡ πόρνη ἡ μεγάλη (‘the Great Whore’) and τὸ θηρίον (‘the Beast’) in 17.1–18.¹ The latter passage applies the title to Jesus, presented

¹ The historical identification of the Great Whore with Rome in Rev 17.1 is strengthened by (a) the polysemy of *lupa* as wolf/whore and the relevant association with the myth of Rome’s founding (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 1.79–87; Livy 1.4–6; Plutarch, *Rom.* 2–10; Ovid, *Fast.* 2.383–422; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 1), (b) the placement of καθήμενης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν (‘sitting on many waters’) in Rev 17.1 (cf. v. 15) and Rome’s location on the Tiber (Cicero, *Rep.* 2.5–10; Virgil, *Aen.* 8.31–5, 62–5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 9.68.2; Suetonius, *Aug.* 37; *CIL* vi.31542), (c) the reference to seven hills in Claudian,

as defeating the forces of wickedness, riding a white horse (Rev 19.11–16). Some commentators suggest that the title derives from the Septuagint of Dan 4.37, ‘where it is a title for God’.² Others argue that the title is especially apposite during the reign of Domitian, of whom it is said: ‘he dictated the form of a letter to be used by his procurators, he began: “Our lord and god commands so and so.”’³ Still others suggest that the title is borrowed from a Babylonian context, and therefore operates as a polemic against Revelation’s latter day Babylon, that is, Rome.⁴ This broad spectrum of scholarly views reveals a fundamental disagreement on the relevant cultural and textual foreground/background of the title in Revelation. The present analysis will explore inscriptions on relevant numismatic material and investigate whether the title in Revelation is indebted to a particular cultural context.

The trajectory of this paper is part of a larger project entitled *Numismatics and Greek Lexicography*,⁵ which explores the implications of the numismatic material for contributions to lexicography, particularly as it pertains to linguistic features of post-classical Greek. The working aim and methodology adopted in both that larger work and this paper can be summarised as follows: to employ dated and geographically legitimate comparative numismatic data in order to refine, illuminate and clarify the relevant semantic domains of New Testament vocabulary, with a particular interest in New Testament exegetical difficulties.

2. The History of ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ

The Greek title βασιλεὺς βασιλέων (‘king of kings’) has a long history. Although J. C. Rolfe states that it is ‘a title originally applied to the king of Persia and transferred to the king of the Parthians’,⁶ Lowell Handy finds earlier attestation. Handy traces the earliest reference of the title ‘king of kings’ (šar šarrāni) to a royal title for king Tukulti-Ninurta I of Assyria who reigned

On the Sixth Consulship of Stilicho 531–36; Gellius, *Attic Nights* 13.14.1–4, 7). Furthermore, the description in Rev 17.9 that the ‘the seven heads [of the beast] are seven mountains on which the woman is seated’, which recalls Rome’s famous location as built on seven hills (Livy 5.54.4; Virgil, *Aen.* 6.783; Cicero, *Att.* 6.5.2; Tibullus 2.5.55; Varro, *Ling.* 5.41, 6.24; *RIC* II.69.442).

2 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 963.

3 Suetonius, *Dom.* 13.

4 T. B. Slater, ‘“King of Kings and Lord of Lords” Revisited’, *NTS* 39 (1993) 159–60.

5 M. P. Theophilos, *Numismatics and Greek Lexicography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

6 Suetonius, *Life of the Caesars*, vol. I: *Julius. Augustus. Tiberius. Gaius. Caligula* (Rolfe, LCL 31) 410 n. a.

1244–1208 BCE.⁷ Within the expanding Assyrian empire, the title was applied literally, that is, the Assyrian rulers installed themselves as rulers over the existing structure of the local city-state kings. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar is referred to in Hebrew as מֶלֶךְ מְלָכִים (Ezek 26.7) and in Aramaic as מֶלֶךְ מְלָכִים (Dan 2.37). These and other attestations establish the phrase as derivative of Semitic background.⁸ However, the title is also regularly employed in a Persian context: ‘Artaxerxes, king of kings (מֶלֶךְ מְלָכִים), to the priest Ezra, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven’ (Ezra 7.12).⁹ Ernst Fredricksmeier tabulates thirty-nine occurrences of ‘king of kings’ in the Persian Achaemenid dynasty inscriptions (553–330 BCE) published by Ronald Kent.¹⁰ The phrase in an Egyptian context is attested by Diodorus of Sicily, the first-century BCE historian, who in a description of a monument of Ozymandias (one of the royal names for Ramses)¹¹ relates: ἐπιγεγράφθαι δ’ ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ· Βασιλεὺς βασιλέων Ὀσυμανδύας εἰμί. εἰ δέ τις εἰδέναι βούλεται πηλίκος εἰμί καὶ ποῦ κεῖμαι, νικάτω τι τῶν ἐμῶν ἔργων (‘Inscribed upon it is: “King of kings Ozymandias I am. If anyone wishes to know how great I am and where I lie, let him outdo me in my deeds”).¹²

3. Numismatic Evidence

The titulature βασιλεὺς βασιλέων was pervasive in many cultures, including prominent attestation in the Parthian kingdom. Silver drachms of Mithradates II (123–88 BCE) depict on the obverse the diademed bust of Mithradates II facing left, and on the reverse an archer seated facing right on a throne, holding a bow,

7 L. K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven: The Syro-Palestinian Pantheon as Bureaucracy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 112. See further E. Weidner, *Die Inschriften Tukulti-Ninurtas I. und seiner Nachfolger* (AfO Beiheft 12; Osnabrück: Biblio, 1970) 18.

8 M. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Yale University Press, 2008) 532.

9 See J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969³) 316 for further Persian references. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 11.123: ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς γράφει πρὸς τοὺς σατράπας ἐπιστολὴν τοιάνδε· Βασιλεὺς βασιλέων Ξέρξης Ἔσδρα ἱερεῖ καὶ ἀναγνώστη τῶν τοῦ θεοῦ νόμων χαίρειν (‘The king, therefore, wrote the following letter, “Xerxes, king of kings, to Ezra, the priest and reader of the laws of God, greeting”).

10 E. Fredricksmeier, ‘Alexander the Great and the Kingship of Asia’, *Alexander the Great in Fact and Fiction* (ed. A. B. Bosworth and E. J. Baynham; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 136–66, at 162. Possibly the most famous attestation of the title is in the multilingual inscription in Old Persian, Elamite and Babylonian by Darius I (522–486 BCE) on a rock relief on the cliff at Mount Behistun (western Iran): see L. W. King and R. C. Thompson, *The Sculptures and Inscription of Darius the Great on the Rock of Behistun in Persia: A New Collation of the Persian, Susian and Babylonian Texts* (London: British Museum, 1907) 84.

11 H. R. Hall, *The Ancient History of the Near East: From the Earliest Times to the Battle of Salamis* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1913) 317.

12 Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History* 1.4.



Figure 1. Sellwood 27.2. Silver drachm. Obverse: Mithradates II, long-bearded bust facing left; reverse: archer seated holding bow. 123–88 BCE. Used with permission.

with the accompanying inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ('king of kings, great Arsaces, the notable') (Fig. 1). Example 27.2 in Sellwood's catalogue is notable for being the first use of the title βασιλεὺς βασιλέων on Parthian coinage.¹³ Part of the reason why he was able to include longer inscriptions on his coinage was the space-effective square arrangement of the legend, which all subsequent Arsacid coinage maintained. Mithradates II is also known for his military success in expelling the rebel Hyspaosines and overstriking his coinage with his own.¹⁴ But this example is the chronological starting point of the most prominently attested legends on the coins of Parthia in the first century BCE. Of the 233 coin-types and variants of Mithradates II, 91 have βασιλεὺς βασιλέων as the first title of the king.¹⁵ Of the 60 coin-types and variants of Mithradates III (57–54 BCE), 25 have βασιλεὺς βασιλέων. For example, Sellwood 41.8 (Fig. 2) is a silver drachm which on the obverse depicts a short-bearded bust facing left, wearing a double-banded diadem and segmented necklace with medallion. The reverse has a beardless archer wearing a hooded cloak, seated facing right, holding a

13 D. Sellwood, *An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia* (London: Spink & Son, 1971) no. 27.2. References to coins included in Sellwood catalogue are given in the form of author's name followed by the relevant catalogue number, e.g. 'Sellwood 27.2'.

14 Sellwood, *Parthia*, 63.

15 This and the following statistics for the coins of Parthia were manually compiled and calculated from the following: Sellwood, *Parthia*; D. Sellwood, 'New Parthian Coin Types', *Numismatic Chronicle* 19 (1989) 162–8; D. Sellwood, 'The End of the Parthian Dynasty', *Spink Numismatic Circular* 98 (1990) 157; D. Sellwood, 'The "Victory" Drachms of Phraates IV', *American Journal of Numismatics*, Second Series 7–8 (1995–6) 75–81; D. Sellwood, 'Parthians and Scythians', *Ex moneta: Essays on Numismatics, History and Archaeology in honour of Dr. David W. MacDowall*, vol. 1 (ed. A. Kumar Jha and S. Garg; New Delhi: Harmon, 1998) 97–102.



Figure 2. Sellwood 41.8. Silver drachm. Obverse: Mithradates III, short-bearded bust facing left; reverse: archer seated holding bow. 57–54 BCE. Used with permission.

bow in his right hand. The Greek inscription reads: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΘΕΟΥ ΕΥΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ ('king of kings, great Arsaces the just, notable god, well-born and friend of the Greek'). Orodes II (57–38 BCE) had 269 types and variants issued, and 206 name him as βασιλεὺς βασιλέων. For example, Sellwood 42.2 (Fig. 3) is a silver drachm which on the obverse depicts a short-bearded bust facing left, wearing a diadem; behind the bust Nike is portrayed as flying left with a wreath. The reverse is similar to 41.8, but the Greek inscription reads: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ ('king of kings, Arsaces, Philopator the just, notable and friend of the Greek'). Of the 26 types and variants Phraates IV (38–2 BCE) issued, 6 include the title ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ. Sellwood 51.9 (Fig. 4) is a silver tetradrachm, which together with 23 other examples has a



Figure 3. Sellwood 42.2. Silver drachm. Obverse: Orodes II, short-bearded bust facing left; reverse: archer seated holding bow. 57–38 BCE. Used with permission.



Figure 4. Sellwood 51.9. Silver tetradrachm. Obverse: Phraates IV, short-bearded bust facing left with wart on brow line, with segmented necklace and diadem; reverse: king seated on throne receiving a palm branch from Tyche, who also holds cornucopia. 38–2 BCE. Used with permission.

(royal) wart on Phraates' brow line on the obverse,¹⁶ as well as a segmented necklace and diadem. The reverse depicts the king seated on the throne, receiving a palm branch from Tyche, who faces left and also holds a cornucopia in her left hand. The inscription reads: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ ('king of kings, Arsaces, benefactor, the just, notable and friend of the Greek'). Indeed, each one of the Parthian kings in the principal line of succession in the first century CE, without a single exception, issued coins with the title βασιλεύς βασιλέων as part of their self-representation¹⁷, as did two of the rival claimants.¹⁸

16 The nodules on the faces on the coins of many of the Parthian kings have attracted much speculation. G. D. Hart, 'Trichoepithelioma and the Kings of Ancient Parthia', *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 92 (2006) 547–9 suggests it could be a trichoepithelioma, K. Liddel, 'Skin Disease in Antiquity', *Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of London* 6 (2006) 81–6 argues that the lesion more likely resembles a basal cell carcinoma, and D. Todman, 'Warts and the Kings of Parthia: An Ancient Representation of Hereditary Neurofibromatosis Depicted in Coins', *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 17 (2008) 141–6 expresses a view with much greater specificity: 'The round nodules ... are of a size and shape that resemble the cutaneous lesions of Neurofibromatosis Type I (NF-1, von Recklinghausen's Disease)' (141).

17 In this and the following footnote I have listed a representative sample of relevant coinage for ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ. Phraataces (2–4 CE), Sellwood 56.1, 57.13, 58.1; Orodes III (6 CE), Sellwood 59.2; Vonones I (8–12 CE), Sellwood 60.2, 60.4; Artabanus II (10–38 CE), Sellwood 61.1, 62.3, 62.8, 62.12; Vardanes I (40–7 CE), Sellwood 64.14, 64.20–7; Gotarzes II (40–51 CE), Sellwood 65.2, 65.4, 65.23; Vonones II (51 CE), Sellwood 67.1; Vologases I (51–78 CE), Sellwood 68.4–8, 68.11; Vologases II (77–80 CE), Sellwood 72.1–2; Pacorus II (78–105 CE), Sellwood 73.2–5, 73.9, 73.10.

18 Vardanes II (55–8 CE), Sellwood 69.1–6, 69.13; Artabanus III (80–90 CE), Sellwood 74.3, 74.6.

Greeks and Romans were also familiar with the title.¹⁹ Plutarch records that Pompey encountered the title during the campaigns against Mithridates VI. When writing to the king of Parthia, he refused his usual title, βασιλεὺς βασιλέων, 'for many leaders and princes and twelve barbarian kings had come to him. Wherefore, to gratify these other kings, he would not deign, in answering a letter from the king of Parthia, to address him as King of Kings, which was his usual title.'²⁰ Dio Cassius 37.6 notes another occasion where Pompey also refused Phraates III, king of Parthia, title by referring to him as only 'king' rather than 'king of kings':

καὶ προσέτι καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐπίκλησιν αὐτοῦ ὕβρισεν, ἥπερ πρὸς τε τοὺς ἄλλους πάντας ἠγάλλετο καὶ πρὸς αὐτοὺς τοὺς Ῥωμαίους, οὗτοί τε αὐτὸ πρὸς ἐκεῖνον ἀεὶ ποτε ἐκέχρητο. βασιλέως γὰρ αὐτοῦ βασιλέων καλουμένου, τό τε τῶν βασιλέων ὄνομα περιέκοψε καὶ βασιλεῖ αὐτῷ μόνον ἐπιστέλλον ἔγραψε.

Furthermore, he showed contempt for the title of Phraates, in which that ruler delighted before all the world and before the Romans themselves, and by which the latter had always addressed him. For whereas he was called 'King of Kings', Pompey clipped off the phrase 'of Kings' and addressed his demands merely 'to the King' when writing.²¹

Immediately after this in the same passage, Dio Cassius notes that Pompey gave the title to Tigranes when he had captured him and was celebrating a triumph over him at Rome, undoubtedly to highlight the greater significance of Pompey's own achievement.²² Appian comes close to affording the title to Pompey when he says, αὐτὸς δ', οἷα δὴ βασιλεὺς βασιλέων, αὐτοὺς περιθέοι καὶ ἐφορῶν μένοντας ἐφ' ὧν ἐτάχθησαν ('while he, Pompey, like a king of kings, should move to and fro among them to see that they remained where they were stationed'),²³ when referring to his pursuit of the pirates in one episode of the Mithridatic Wars in 67 BCE.

19 J. G. Griffiths, 'βασιλεὺς βασιλέων: Remarks on the History of a Title', *Classical Philology* 48 (1953) 145–54.

20 Plutarch, *Lives*, vol. v: *Agesilaus and Pompey. Pelopidas and Marcellus* (Perrin, LCL 87) 214–15.

21 Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, vol. III: *Books 36–40* (Cary and Foster, LCL 53) 108–9.

22 Cf. Appian, *Roman History 11: The Syrian War* §47 (McGing, LCL 3, 196–7): καὶ βασιλεὺς Ἀρμενίας Τιγράνης ὁ Τιγράνου ἐθνη πολλὰ τῶν περιοίκων ἰδίους δυνάσταις χρώμενα ἐλὼν, βασιλεὺς ἀπὸ τοῦδε βασιλέων ἠγεῖτο εἶναι, καὶ τοῖς Σελευκίδαϊς ἐπεστράτευεν οὐκ ἐθέλουσιν ὑπακούειν ('Tigranes, the son of Tigranes, king of Armenia, who had subdued many of the neighbouring nations which had kings of their own, and from these exploits had acquired the title of king of kings, attacked the Seleucidae because they would not acknowledge his supremacy').

23 Appian, *Roman History 11: The Syrian War* §48 (McGing, LCL 3, 196–7).

Other sources from the Roman period indicate the widespread knowledge of the title. Cicero refers to the memory of Agamemnon as the *regum regi* ('king of kings') in his correspondence with Dolabella, dated to 3 May 44 CE,²⁴ as does Velleius Paterculus (19 BCE–31 CE) in recounting, 'Agamemnon, king of kings (*rex regum*), cast by a tempest upon the island of Crete, founded there three cities, two of which were Mycenae and Tegea.'²⁵ Quintus Curtius Rufus's *History of Alexander* includes reference to Darius's eventual demise:

Hunc vitae finem sortitus est ille quem modo contumelia affici putabant, nisi regem regum et deorum consanguineum salutarent; magnoque denuo experimento comprobatum est neminem magis patere Fortunae quam qui, plurimis eius beneficiis ornatus, iugum eius tota cervice receperit.

Such was the end of life allotted to that king whom shortly before men thought to be insulted unless they addressed him as king of kings and kinsman of the gods; and once more it was proved by a striking example, that no one is more exposed to Fortune's changes than one who, having been honoured by very many of her favours, has bowed his neck wholly under her yoke.²⁶

Hellenistic Jews were aware of the title as evidenced in Philo of Alexandria's description of God: παγγέλοιοι γὰρ οἴεσθαι, ὅτι ὁ μὲν νοῦς ὁ ἐν ἡμῖν βραχύτατος ὢν καὶ ἀόρατος ἡγεμὼν τῶν αἰσθητικῶν ὀργάνων ἐστίν, ὁ δὲ τοῦ παντὸς ὁ μέγιστος καὶ τελειότατος οὐχὶ βασιλεὺς βασιλέων εἶναι πέφυκε, βλεπομένων οὐ βλεπόμενος ('For it is quite ridiculous to deny that if the mind in us, so exceedingly small and invisible, is yet the ruler of the organs of sense, the mind of the universe, so transcendently great and perfect, must be the king of kings who are seen by Him though He is not seen by them').²⁷ Strabo's *Γεωγραφικά*, first published in 7 BCE, makes mention of the title in book 13 which pertains to the northern Aegean region:

ἔοικε δὲ ὁ ποιητὴς μικρὰν ἀποφαίνειν τὴν πόλιν ἐν τῷ περὶ Ἡρακλέους λόγῳ, εἶπερ ἔξ οἷης σὺν νηυσὶ καὶ ἀνδράσι παυροτέροισιν Ἰλίου ἐξάλαπαξε πόλιν. καὶ φαίνεται ὁ Πρίαμος τῷ τοιοῦτῳ λόγῳ μέγας ἐκ μικροῦ γεγονῶς καὶ βασιλεὺς βασιλέων, ὡς ἔφραμεν.

... and it appears that the poet, in what he says about Heracles, represents the city as small, if it be true that 'with only six ships and fewer men he sacked the

24 Cicero, *Letters to Friends* 326 (ix.14) (Shackleton Bailey, LCL 230, 94–5).

25 Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History* 1.1 (Shipley, LCL 152, 2–3).

26 Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, vol. 1: *Books 1–5* (Rolfe, LCL 368) 428–9.

27 Philo, *On the Special Laws* 214.19 (Colson, LCL 320, 108–9). See similar use in reference to God in Philo, *On the Cherubim*, 29; *The Decalogue*, 41; *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, 4.76.

city of Ilium'. And it is clearly shown by this statement that Priam became great and king of kings from a small beginning, as I have said before.²⁸

The title βασιλεὺς βασιλέων is also used in the Roman period for recalling heroes in Greek history. Dio Chrysostom (40–115 CE), the Greek orator, used the title in reference to Zeus: ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ οἱ θεοὶ καὶ ὁ δὴ μέγας βασιλεὺς βασιλέων, ἅτε κηδεμῶν καὶ πατὴρ κοινὸς ἀνθρώπων καὶ θεῶν, Ζεὺς ('In like manner do the gods act, and especially the great king of kings, Zeus, who is the common protector and father of men and gods').²⁹

In further attestation of knowledge and use of the title in the Roman world during the first century BCE, Plutarch, *Ant.* 54 has Antony give the title during the Donations of Alexandria:

δεύτερον δὲ τοὺς ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ Κλεοπάτρας υἱοὺς βασιλεῖς βασιλέων ἀναγορεύσας Ἀλεξάνδρῳ μὲν Ἀρμενίαν ἀπένειμε καὶ Μηδίαν καὶ τὰ Πάρθων, ὅταν ὑπαγάγηται, Πτολεμαίῳ δὲ Φοινίκην καὶ Συρίαν καὶ Κιλικίαν.

In the second place, he proclaimed his own sons by Cleopatra Kings of Kings, and to Alexander he allotted Armenia, Media and Parthia (when he should have subdued it), to Ptolemy Phoenicia, Syria, and Cilicia.³⁰

This political act by Cleopatra VII and Antony of the division of land among Cleopatra's children in 34 BCE was ultimately a significant catalyst for the deterioration of Antony's relationship with Rome and a cause of the war between Antony

28 Strabo, *Geography* 13.32 (Hamilton and Falconer, LCL 223, 62–3).

29 Dio Chrysostom, *The Second Discourse on Kingship* 75 (Cohoon, LCL 257, 98–9). A similar use is found in the Greek tragedian Aeschylus' play *The Suppliants* (dated to 470 BCE) and occurs in the context of Pelasgus' departure from the city as the chorus descends from the mound, ἀναξ ἀνάκτων, μακάρων μακάρτατε καὶ τελέων τελειότατον κράτος, ὄλβιε Ζεῦ ('O King of Kings, O most blest of the blest, O power most perfect of the perfect, Zeus giver of prosperity', Aeschylus, *The Suppliants* 524–6 (Sommerstein, LCL 145, 358–9)).

30 Plutarch, *Lives*, vol. ix: *Demetrius and Antony. Pyrrhus and Gaius Marius* (Perrin, LCL 101, 262–3). On this incident, see R. Meyer, *Studies in Classical History and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 57. This use of the phrase is found in Plutarch, *Lives: Lucullus* §14.56 (Perrin, LCL 47, 512–13): ὀλίγων δ' ἡμερῶν ὁδὸς εἰς Ἀρμενίαν ἐκ Καβείρων, καὶ ὑπὲρ Ἀρμενίας κάθηται Τιγράνης, βασιλεὺς βασιλέων, ἔχων δύναμιν, ἣ Πάρθους τε περικόπτει τῆς Ἀσίας καὶ πόλεις Ἑλληνίδας εἰς Μηδίαν ἀνακομίζει καὶ Συρίας κρατεῖ καὶ Παλαιστίνης καὶ τοὺς ἀπὸ Σελεύκου βασιλεῖς ἀποκτινύει, θυγατέρας δ' αὐτῶν ἄγει καὶ γυναῖκας (6) ἀνασπάστους ('And it is only a few days' journey from Cabira into Armenia and over Armenia there sits enthroned Tigranes, King of Kings, with forces which enable him to cut the Parthians off from Asia, transplant Greek cities into Media, sway Syria and Palestine, put to death the successors of Seleucus, and carry off their wives and daughters into captivity.')



Figure 5. RRC 543/1. Silver denarius. Obverse: head of Mark Antony facing right, with Armenian tiara to left; reverse: diademed and draped bust of Cleopatra. 34 BCE. Used with permission.

and Octavian.³¹ Caesarion was honoured above Antony's two sons in the Donations of Alexandria; he received the title 'king of kings' and was recognised as heir to Julius Caesar. A Latin inscription of interest appears on a silver denarius issued after the successful campaign against Armenia in 34 BCE. In Crawford's catalogue of Roman Republican coinage,³² item 543/1 (Fig. 5) depicts, on the obverse, the bare head of Mark Antony facing right, an Armenian tiara to the left and the inscription *ANTONIA ARMENIA DEVICTA* ('Of Antony who conquered Armenia'). The reverse has a diademed and draped bust of Cleopatra facing right, with the inscription *CLEOPATRAE REGINAE REGVM FILIORVM REGVM* ('Of Cleopatra, queen of kings and of the sons who are kings'). The phrase *filiorum regum* is somewhat ambiguous and could also be rendered 'whose children are kings'. This ambiguity permitted Cleopatra to 'simultaneously tout her illustrious heritage, while also highlighting the fact that she had given birth to children with two of Rome's most powerful generals, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony'.³³ The

31 See further Dio Cassius 49.41 (Carey, LCL 82, 424–5): δημηγορήσας τέ τινα ἐκείνην τε βασιλίδα βασιλέων καὶ τὸν Πτολεμαῖον, ὃν Καισαρίωνα ἐπονόμαζον, βασιλέα βασιλέων καλεῖσθαι ἐκέλευσε ('also in the course of his address to the people he commanded that she should be called Queen of Kings, and Ptolemy, whom they named Caesarion, King of Kings'); cf. 50.3; Plutarch, *Ant.* 58. R. Strootman, 'Queen of Kings: Cleopatra VII and the Donations of Alexandria', *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East* (ed. T. Kaizer and M. Facella; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010) 139–58.

32 M. H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) (= *RRC*).

33 J. Schulde and B. Reubin, 'Finding Common Ground: Roman Parthian Embassies in the Julio-Claudian Period', *Arsacids, Romans and Local Elites: Cross-Cultural Interactions of the Parthian Empire* (ed. J. Schulde and B. Reubin; (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017) 65–92, at 75.

genitive singular noun (*reginae*) joined with a genitive plural (*regum*) of the same root is a well attested construction in Latin,³⁴ Greek³⁵ and Hebrew.³⁶

We now turn to a discussion to the phrase βασιλεύς βασιλέων in the east, with particular attention to the Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian titular examples on coinage. A series of gold Bosphoran and Pontic staters of Pharnaces II dated to Pontic Year 245 (53/52 BCE) portray the diademed head of Pharnaces facing right, with luxuriant hair, on the obverse (Fig. 6). The reverse has Apollo enthroned facing left in a relaxed pose, holding in his right hand a laurel branch over a tripod, his left elbow resting on a lyre at his side, and the inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ above, and ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΦΑΡΝΑΚΟΥ below, with date ΕΜΣ to the right.³⁷ The Scythians were originally a nomadic people from Central Asia who made their way into Bactria in the second century BCE, settling north-west of the Bosphoran kingdom. Several distinct groups of Indo-Scythian coin inscriptions preserve multiple attestations and variations of the title βασιλεύς βασιλέων.³⁸ Vonones of Indo-Scythia (to be distinguished from Vonones I

34 In Guillermo Galán Vioque's commentary on Martial 7.70.1 (*tribadum tribas*), he provides the following Latin examples: Plautus, *Capt.* 825: *regum rex*; Plautus, *Trin.* 309: *victor victorum*; Lucretius 3.816: *summarum summa*; Ovid, *Her.* 8.46: *dux erat ille ducum*; Petronius 37.8: *nummorum nummos*; Seneca, *Ag.* 39: *rex ille regum, ductor Agamemnon ducum*; Martial 1.100.2: *mammaram maxima mamma*; Martial 6.4.1: *principumque princeps*; Apuleius, *Metam.* 11.30: *deus deum magnorum potior et potiorum summus et summorum maximus et maximorum regnator Osiris*. G. G. Vioque, *Martial, Book VII: A Commentary* (trans. J. J. Zoltowsky; Mnemosyne Supplements 226; Leiden/Boston/Cologne: Brill, 2017).

35 Lev 16.31: *σάββατα σαββάτων*; Deut 10.17: *ὁ γὰρ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὑμῶν, οὗτος θεὸς τῶν θεῶν καὶ κύριος τῶν κυρίων*; 1 Kgs 8.27: *ὁ οὐρανὸς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ*.

36 Ps 136.2–3: *הוֹדוּ לַאֲלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּי לַעֲלֹם הוֹדוּ הוֹדוּ לַאֲדֹנָי הַאֲדֹנָיִם כִּי לַעֲלֹם הוֹדוּ*.

37 K. V. Golenko and J. P. Karyszkowski, 'The Gold Coinage of King Pharnaces of the Bosphorus', *Numismatic Chronicle* 12 (1972) 25–38, at 35; D. MacDonald, *An Introduction to the History and Coinage of the Kingdom of the Bosphorus* (London: Classical Numismatic Group, 2005) 182; V. Anokhin, *Coins of Ancient Cities of North-Western Black Sea Area* (Kiev: Krajina Mriy, 1989) 177–18.

38 See further J. Allen, *Catalogue of the Coins of Ancient India* (London: British Museum, 1967); M. Mitchiner, *Oriental Coins and their Values: The Ancient & Classical World* (London: Hawkins Publications, 1978); R. Göbl, *Münzprägung des Kusnreiches* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1984); P. L. Gupta and T. R. Hardaker, *Indian Silver Punchmarked Coins: Magadha-Maurya Karshapana Series* (Nashik: Indian Institute of Research in Numismatic Studies, 1985); E. Rtveladze, *The Ancient Coins of Central Asia* (Tashkent: uncertain, 1987); D. P. McIntyre, 'On a Newly Discovered Hoard in India', *Oriental Numismatic Society Occasional Paper* 26, August 1991; B. Kriti, *Seleucid Coins of Bactria* (Lancaster: Classical Numismatic Group, 1996); R. C. Senior, 'Vonones, Maues and the Early Indo-Scythic Succession', *Oriental Numismatic Studies*, vol. 1 (ed. D. Handra; Delhi: Sundeep Prakashan, 1996); American Numismatic Society, *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum: The Collection of the American Numismatic Society*, Part 9: *Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek Coins* (New York: The American Numismatic Society, 1998); S. Goron and J. P. Goenka, *The Coins of the Indian Sultanates* (New Delhi: Munshiram



Figure 6. Pharn. 1. Gold stater. Obverse: Pharnaces II facing right; reverse: Apollo enthroned, facing left in relaxed pose, holding laurel branch over tripod and resting on lyre on side. 53–52 BCE. Used with permission.

(8–12 CE) and Vonones II (51 CE) of Parthia) ruled from 75 to 65 BCE and issued several coins from the Arachosian mint in the Arghandab valley.³⁹ The Vonones family of coins (Vonones with Splahores, Vonones with Spalagadames, Spaliries with Azes, Azes and Azilises) regularly depict, on the obverse, the king mounted on horseback riding to the right, with a spear, with a Greek inscription identifying the individual with titles. The reverse depicts a radiate Zeus standing facing, leaning on a sceptre in his left hand, carrying a thunderbolt in his right hand and a monogram indicating the weight standard (Kandahar or Bannu) at either the right or left, with a Kharoshthi inscription.⁴⁰

Mitchiner's catalogue (*IGISC*)⁴¹ item III.681 (with three sub-varieties based on varying weight standards) is a silver tetradrachm weighing 9.68 g with a diameter of 26 mm (Fig. 7). The obverse, as noted above, depicts the king holding a spear,

Manoharlal, 2001); D. Rajgor, *Punch-Marked Coins of Early Historic India* (California: Reesha Books International, 2001); R. C. Senior, *Indo-Scythian Coins and History* (London: Classical Numismatic Group, 2001); M. Mitchiner, *Ancient Trade and Early Coinage* (London: Hawkins Publications, 2004); W. Pieper, *Ancient Indian Coins Revisited* (Lancaster: Classical Numismatic Group, 2013).

39 J. H. Marshall, *Taxilla: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations Carried out at Taxilla under the Orders of the Government of India Between the Years 1913 and 1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 49.

40 See the examples in A. Cunningham, *Coins of the Indo-Scythians, Sakas and Kushans* (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1971) Plates IV.1–4, 9, 11, 12, V.4, 4a; P. Gardner and R. S. Poole, *The Coins of the Greeks and Scythic Kings of Bactria and India in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1886) plates XXI.7, 8, 10, XXII.1, 3, XVII.9, 10.

41 M. Mitchiner, *Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian Coinage* (9 vols.; London: Hawkins Publications, 1975) (= *IGISC*); also Senior, *Indo-Scythian Coins and History*, no. 65.1T.



Figure 7. IGISC III.681. Silver tetradrachm. Obverse: Vonones mounted on horseback holding spear; reverse: radiate Zeus leaning on sceptre and carrying thunderbolt. 75–65 BCE. Used with permission.

mounted on a horse riding right. The inscription reads: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ ('king of kings, great Vonones'). The reverse depicts Zeus standing facing, holding a long sceptre in his left hand and thunderbolt in his right, surrounded by an inscription in Kharoshthi which reads: *Maharajabhrata dhramikasa Spalahorasa* ('of Spalahores, the king's brother, the just'). It is noteworthy that having two names (Vonones on the obverse and Spalahores on the reverse) is somewhat unusual in that the Greek and Kharoshthi inscriptions are not translations of one another as is the case on most examples of Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian coinage. IGISC III.682 depicts similar iconography and inscriptions as III.681 and its sub-variations, but is a silver drachm weighing 2.42 g.

IGISC III.683 is a rectangular hemi-obol (4 chalkoi) weighing 8.50 g. On the obverse it depicts Hercules standing facing, holding a club and lion skin, with the Greek inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ ('king of kings, great Vonones'). On the reverse it has Pallas standing left, holding a spear and shield, with the Kharoshthi inscription *Maharajabhrata dhramikasa Spalahorasa* ('of Spalahores, the king's brother, the just'). A smaller Di-chalkoi denomination (IGISC III.684) is also attested in rectangular bronze (4.25 g) which has similar inscriptions to III.683 but an uncertain control mark.

IGISC III.686, sub-varieties a and b, is from a slightly later period within Vonones' reign, depicting Spalagadames, son of Spalahores, as viceroy. The obverse has the typical depiction of the king mounted on a horse, holding a spear and riding right, with the Greek inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ ('king of kings, great Vonones'). The obverse depicts Zeus standing facing, holding a long sceptre and thunderbolt, with the Kharoshthi inscription *Spalahora putrasa dhramiasa Spalagadamasa* ('of the son of Spalahores, Spalagadames the just'). As with III.681, III.686 also has

smaller denominations. III.687 (a–c) is a silver drachm with inscriptions similar to III.686, and III.688 (a–b) consists of a bronze rectangular Tri-chalkon (6.38 g) with inscriptions and iconography similar to III.683.

Similar titles are attested on the coinage of King Spalirises during the period 65–40 BCE. IGISC III.694 (a–c) is a bronze hemi-obol weighing 8.50 g, and on the obverse depicts the king walking left, holding an ankus (elephant hook) and bow, with a whip over his shoulder. The Greek inscription reads: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΡΗΑΛΙΡΙΣΟΥ ('king of kings, great Spalirises') (Fig. 8). III.694 and other coins of Spalirises spell his name in Greek with a Scythian-Yeuh Chi, which looks like a rho, but actually attempts to transliterate the 'sh' phoneme. The reverse depicts Zeus enthroned, with his right hand outstretched; the Kharoshthi inscription reads: *Maharajasa mahatakasa Spalirishasa*.

Coinage of the eastern Bactrian provinces continues the chronological trajectory that we have established thus far. Orodes II, ca. 57–38 BCE, minted IGISC 642 with sub-varieties a (from Margiana) and b (from Nyssa). This coin portrays, on the obverse, a diademed bust of the king facing left, with a short beard. The reverse has an archer seated right upon a stool. The inscription on the reverse reads: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΕΠΙΦΑΙΝΟΥΣ ΚΑΙ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ('king of kings, illustrious, friend of the Greeks, Arsaces, Philopator the just'). Another silver drachm of Orodes, IGISC III.643 (a–e) weighing 2.42 g, is similar to III.642, but adds a star (in front of the bust) and a crescent (behind the bust) on the obverse. The reverse maintains the seated archer, but has the following inscription: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ('king of kings, Arsaces, benefactor, the just'). IGISC III.644, a coin of Phraates IV, ca. 38–2 BCE, has an identical Greek inscription to III.642, but depicts the diademed bust facing left, with an eagle behind. It similarly portrays a seated archer



Figure 8. IGISC III.694. Bronze hemi-obol. Obverse: Spalirises mounted on horseback holding spear; reverse: radiate Zeus leaning on sceptre and carrying thunderbolt. 75–65 Kbc. Used with permission.



Figure 9. IGISC VI.737. Silver tetradrachm. Obverse: Zeus standing left with long sceptre; reverse: winged Nike standing right holding wreath and palm. 57–35 BCE. Used with permission.

with a bow on the reverse and includes the following inscription: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ('king of kings, Arsaces').

The Indo-Scythian dynasty of Azes I and Azilises (57–35 BCE) demonstrates a further and widespread use of the title in the first century BCE. IGISC VI.737 (Fig. 9) is a silver tetradrachm (9.68 g), and on the obverse depicts Zeus standing left, holding a long sceptre, with an accompanying inscription, ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ ('king of kings, great Azes'). The reverse has a winged Nike standing right, holding a wreath and palm, with an equivalent inscription in Kharosthi script. IGISC VI.738 has similar iconography and inscription but is the lower denomination of a drachm (2.42 g). Type VI.739 (silver tetradrachm, 9.68 g) has an identical inscription but depicts the king holding a spear and mounted on a horse on the obverse. Copper issues are extant in rectangular penta-chalkons; IGISC VI.740 (Fig. 10) has the same inscriptions but portrays, on the obverse, Poseidon standing facing, with his right foot on a river god and right hand on his knee, holding a long trident in his left hand. The obverse has Yakshi (female pagan nature spirit) standing between vines.⁴² IGISC VI.742 has the same inscription and iconography as 740 but is issued as a rectangular chalkous (2.42 g). IGISC VI.743 portrays the king holding spear, mounted on a horse walking right on the obverse, with the inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ ('king of kings, great Azes'). The reverse has a depiction of the city goddess standing left, holding a palm and lamp, with a Kharosthi inscription. In addition, there are twenty further examples, in varying denominations, with the inscription

42 F. S. Kleiner, *Gardiner's Art through the Ages: Non-Western Perspectives* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010) 16; A. Vishnu, *Material Like of North India: Based on an Archaeological Study, 3rd Century BC to 1st Century AD* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1993) 121.



Figure 10. IGISC VI.740. Silver tetradrachm. Obverse: Poseidon standing facing right with foot on river god and hand on knee, holding long trident in left hand; reverse: Yakshi standing between vines. 57–35 BCE. Used with permission.

ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ on the obverse.⁴³ The joint coinage of Azes I and Azilises adds to this number almost fifty distinct issues (with several hundred sub-varieties) with the inscription on the obverse reading ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΙΛΙΣΟΥ, and with various elements of iconography already discussed.⁴⁴

During the period of the Scythians in the east, in particular throughout the age of the Satraps (1–35 CE), several notable numismatic issues deserve attention. IGISC VII.895 is a silver tetradrachm (9.90 g) issued by Arsakes, ruler of Sakastan (ca. 30 CE), and depicts, on the obverse, the king holding a whip, mounted on a horse and riding to the right. The inscription reads: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΟΝΤΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ('king of kings, Arsakes the just'). The reverse depicts Zeus standing left, holding a winged Nike on his outstretched right hand, and a long sceptre in his left hand. IGISC VII.896 is also a silver tetradrachm (9.90 g), and has the same obverse iconography and inscription as VII.895, but with a longer Kharosthi inscription on the reverse. Both these examples are particularly interesting as they preserve the title as a participle plus noun form. As we will see in our discussion below, the only morphological variation in the New Testament attestation of the title is precisely this, with a substitution of a participle for one of the nouns.

Later coins from the first-century CE period of the Indo-Parthians also attest to similar titulature. From the province of Sakastan there are more than a dozen examples, of which we will highlight only the most salient for our discussion.

43 IGISC VI.743–62.

44 IGISC VI.763, 766–812.



Figure 11. IGISC VIII.1070. Silver tetradrachm. Obverse: bust of Gondophares facing left; reverse: winged Nike standing facing, holding wreath and palm. 20–55 CE. Used with permission.

IGISC VIII.1067 is a silver Attic drachm (3.7 g) of Gondophares minted between 20 and 55 CE. It is iconographically in the Indo-Parthian style, with the bust facing left, wearing a close-fitting undecorated non-radiate cap with posterior cords on the obverse. The reverse has the king enthroned right, being crowned by a winged Nike standing behind the throne. The inscription begins with ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ('king of kings'). IGISC VIII.1068 attests similar iconography on the obverse, with only a slight variation in the latter part of the inscription on the reverse, which does however begin identically, ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ, as do IGISC VIII.1069 and 1070 (Fig. 11). IGISC VIII.1072 (a–b) is an Arachosian silver tetradrachm countermarked for use in Sakastan. The obverse has a bust of Gondophares facing left, with the inscription, ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΎΝΔΥΦΕΡΡΟΥ ('king of kings, great Gondophares'). The reverse depicts a winged Nike standing right, holding a wreath and palm.⁴⁵ Again, there are several dozen relevant examples that support the general picture sketched thus far, namely the widespread Parthian use of the title βασιλεὺς βασιλέων for their rulers. Further evidence is readily available from other many other Indo-Parthian first-century CE numismatic inscriptions (see Table 1).⁴⁶

45 Cf. IGISC IV.508, local Balkh coinage of the Kushite king Soter Megas, ca. 45–50 CE, which depicts, on the obverse, a diademed bust of the king facing right, with a pronounced hooked nose. The reverse has Zeus standing facing, holding a thunderbolt and sceptre, with the inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΣΩΤΗΡ ΜΕΓΑΣ ('king of kings, great saviour'). The coin is a bronze reduced Attic drachm.

46 Coinage of Gondophares (25–35 CE): IGISC VIII.1094, 1095; Coinage of Orthagnes (35–55 CE): IGISC VIII.1073, 1074, 1075, 1096, 1097, 1098, 1099; Coinage of Otannes III (son of Orthagnes, 35–55 CE): IGISC VIII.1076; Coinage of Sorpedonus (60 CE): IGISC VIII.1100; Coinage of Abdagases (55–100/110 CE): IGISC VIII.1077; Coinage of Pakores (100/110–135 CE): IGISC VIII.1078, 1102, 1103.

Table 1. Selective Table of Numismatic Inscriptional Evidence

Reference	Denomination and weight	Inscription
IGISC v.681a, 681b, 681c	silver tetradrachm, 9.68 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ
IGISC v.682a, 682b, 682c	silver drachm, 2.42 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ
IGISC v.683a, 683b, 683c	rectangular bronze hemi- obol (4 chalkoi), 8.50 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ
IGISC v.684	rectangular bronze di- chalkon (2 chalkoi), 4.25 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ
IGISC v.686a, 686b	silver tetradrachm, 9.68 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ
IGISC v.687a, 687b, 687c	silver drachm, 2.42 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ
IGISC v.688a, 688b	rectangular bronze tri- chalkon (3 chalkoi), 6.38 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΟΝΩΝΟΥ
IGISC v.694a, 694b, 694c	rectangular bronze hemi- obol, 8.50 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΡΠΑΛΙΡΙΣΟΥ
IGISC v.642a, 642b	silver drachm, 2.42 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΕΠΙΦΑΙΝΟΥΣ ΚΑΙ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ
IGISC v.643a, 643b, 643c, 643d, 643e	silver drachm, 2.42 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ
IGISC v.644	silver drachm, 2.42 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ
IGISC vii.895	silver tetradrachm, 9.90 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΟΝΤΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ
IGISC vii.896	silver tetradrachm, 9.90 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΟΝΤΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ
IGISC viii.1067	silver Attic drachm, 3.70 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...
IGISC viii.1068a, 1068b	silver Attic drachm, 3.70 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...

Continued

Table 1. Continued

Reference	Denomination and weight	Inscription
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1069	silver Attic drachm, 3.70 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1070	silver Attic drachm, 3.70 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1072a, 1072b	bronze tetradrachm, 8.50 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΥΝΔΥΦΕΡΡΟΥ
<i>IGISC</i> IV.508	bronze reduced Attic drachm, 4.36–3.37 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΣΩΤΗΡ ΜΕΓΑΣ
<i>IGISC</i> VI.737	silver tetradrachm, 9.68 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ
<i>IGISC</i> VI.738	Silver drachm, 2.42 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ
<i>IGISC</i> VI.739	silver tetradrachm, 9.68 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ
<i>IGISC</i> VI.740	bronze rectangular penta- chalkon, 10.89 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ
<i>IGISC</i> VI.742	bronze rectangular chalkon, 2.18 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ
<i>IGISC</i> VI.743–62	various	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΟΥ
<i>IGISC</i> VI.763, 766–812	various	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΖΙΛΙΣΟΥ
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1094, 1095	various	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1073– 5, 1096– 9	various	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1076	silver Attic drachm, 3.70 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1100	bronze tetradrachm, 8.50 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1077	silver Attic drachm, 3.70 g	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...
<i>IGISC</i> VIII.1078, 1102, 1103	various	ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ...

4. Interpretive Implications for the Book of Revelation

We now turn our attention to the implications of the above discussion for the interpretation of the New Testament. Jesus is referred to as the ‘king of kings’ once in the Pastorals and twice in the Apocalypse:

... which he will bring about at the right time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the king of kings (ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν βασιλευόντων) and Lord of lords (1 Tim 6.15)

... they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and king of kings (βασιλεὺς βασιλέων), and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Rev 17.14)

On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, ‘King of kings (βασιλεὺς βασιλέων) and Lord of lords’. (Rev 19.16)

The focus of the current discussion will be on the title in the Apocalypse due to the morphological similarity of its use there with that in the evidence discussed above.⁴⁷

The book of Revelation was composed as an apocalyptic prophetic circular letter (Rev 1.1–3) addressed to churches in Asia Minor in order to encourage Christians who were suffering persecution under the Roman Empire. A key symbol in the work occurs within the vision of the heavenly throne room in chapters 4–5, where Jesus is portrayed as the slain lamb who defeats his enemies by dying for them.⁴⁸ The fall of Babylon in chapters 17.1–19.16 is portrayed as a woman riding a symbol (a seven-headed, ten-horned beast, Rev 17.3) of the rebellious nations who is intoxicated on the shed blood of the followers of Jesus and all the innocent (Rev 17.6; 18.24). She is referred to as ‘Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations’ (Rev 17.5) and personifies the military and economic power of the Roman Empire. The final battle (19.11–20.15) results in the vindication of the martyrs and leads to the arrival of the οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινὴν (‘new heaven and new earth’). Within this thematic presentation the author twice uses the title βασιλεὺς βασιλέων (Rev 17.14; 19.16) for the conquering Jesus.

The Roman emperor was not styled or titled as ‘king’ or its superlative variations.⁴⁹ The Romans, at least for the last six centuries BCE, had been defined by

47 This title for Jesus is then used in sharp contrast to and as a critique of the legitimacy of all others in a polemic fashion.

48 Rev 5.6, 8, 12–13; 6.1, 16; 7.9–10, 14, 17; 12.11; 13.8, 11; 14.1, 4, 10; 15.3; 17.14; 19.7, 9; 21.9, 14, 22–3, 27; 22.1; 22.3.

49 There is no evidence that the Roman emperors ‘claimed the title “king of kings”’ as stated by P. S. Williamson, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015) 281.

their anti-regal stance after the overthrowing of King Tarquinius Superbus by Junius Brutus and the founding of the Roman Republic in 509 BCE.⁵⁰ Most commentators commenting on Revelation 19 therefore view βασιλεὺς βασιλέων in light of Old Testament texts such as Deu 10.17, Dan 2.47⁵¹ or Dan 4.37,⁵² even though the title does not appear verbatim there. J. Massyngberde Ford suggests that it would be especially appropriate in the time of Domitian, ‘our lord and god’ (Suetonius, *Dom.* 13).⁵³ Others interpret βασιλεὺς βασιλέων in Rev 19.16 as expressing the generic idea of ‘ultimate ruler over all kings’,⁵⁴ insofar as the genitive functions as a genitive of subordination ‘with the idea being that the βασιλεύς is superior over the βασιλέων in the genitive (“king over and above all other kings”).⁵⁵ Some, rather dubiously, attempt to retro-translate the phrase βασιλεὺς βασιλέων καὶ κύριος κυρίων into Aramaic (excluding the word ‘and’) and calculate via gematria the number of the letters, which is 777, ‘the victorious counterpart and antidote to 666’.⁵⁶ However, as is extensively documented in our analysis above, the title βασιλεὺς βασιλέων was ubiquitous in the eastern Roman Empire, in particular in Parthia but also among the Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians and Indo-Greeks, so much so that there was not a single Parthian ruler in the first century CE who did not use it on his coinage. Although some commentators do refer to Parthia in their exegetical discussions on Revelation 19, C. R. Koester glosses over the titulature,⁵⁷ David A. Thomas focuses on the Parthian iconography of the diadem without any substantive discussion of the inscriptions,⁵⁸ and most (as noted above) focus on the relevant Old

50 Regents in the provinces were sparingly permitted the title ‘king’ but this was not typical, cf. John 19.15; Matt 14.9.

51 Beale, *Revelation*, 880.

52 G. K. Beale and S. M. McDonough, ‘Revelation’, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 1081–1161, at 1144; Beale, *Revelation*, 963.

53 J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (London: Yale University Press, 2008) 282.

54 J. H. Moulton, W. F. Howard and N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (4 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906–76) II.443.

55 D. L. Mathewson, *Revelation: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016) 268. D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 136 n. 84 further distinguishes between ‘genitive of subordination’ and a ‘par excellence noun’, namely ‘the class of which the head noun is the supreme member’.

56 B. Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 244. See also a similar interpretation in C. H. Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 182 and M. Rissi, ‘Die Erscheinung Christi nach Off. 19.11–16’, *TZ* 21 (1965) 81–95.

57 C. R. Koester, *Revelation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 754.

58 D. A. Thomas, *Revelation 19 in Historical and Mythological Context* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 130–2. Thomas does however provide good evidence in regard to the διαδήματα

Testament passages as background to the interpretation of the phrases. The interpretation that will be argued for presently is that the figure of Christ in both Rev 17.14 and 19.16 is a symbolic depiction of Christ as Parthia, that is, the author uses the symbols and titles of Rome's feared enemy to depict the lamb's victory.⁵⁹ This identification is supported by four lines of evidence.

First, the Parthians were Rome's most notorious military enemy during the first century BCE and first century CE. The Roman-Parthian wars stretched from the 53 BCE to 217 CE. The Battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE saw the Parthian general Surena decisively defeat Marcus Licinius Crassus' seven Roman legions in upper Mesopotamia. Plutarch recounts the encounter in considerable detail: οἱ δὲ Πάρθοι διαστάντες ἐκ μήκους ἤρξαντο τοξεύειν ἅμα πανταχόθεν ('but the Parthians now stood at long intervals from one another and began to shoot their arrows from all sides at once').⁶⁰ Plutarch offers further vivid descriptions of the Parthian archers, 'making vigorous and powerful shots from bows which were large and mighty and curved so as to discharge their missiles with great force'.⁶¹ The only hope the Romans had was that the missiles would eventually be exhausted, 'but when they perceived that many camels laden with arrows were at hand, from which the Parthians who first encircled them took a fresh supply, then Crassus, seeing no end to this, began to lose heart'.⁶² The result was a devastating loss for the Romans, with over 20,000 killed and 10,000 captured,⁶³ one of the most catastrophic defeats in Roman military history. Other significant defeats of the Roman forces by Parthian armies occurred in the Syrian

πολλά ('many diadems') in Rev 19.12, which reinforces the picture which emerges from the inscriptional evidence. He states on pp. 130-1 that 'the diadem became the permanent symbol of regal power for the Parthian monarch ... [it] was an oriental symbol of authority that could not plausibly be associated with the Roman emperor'. See further F. B. Shore, *Parthian Coins & History: Ten Dragons against Rome* (Quarryville: Classical Numismatic Group, 1993) 141-2.

59 The location of the name in Rev 19.16 is ἐπὶ τὸν μηρὸν αὐτοῦ ('on his thigh'), which may draw on the practice of inscribing one or more names on the thigh of a statue of a deity; for example, Pausanias records that, within the sacred precinct of Zeus at Olympia, he saw a statue which had 'an elegiac couplet is written on its thigh: - To Zeus, king of the gods, as first-fruits was I placed here. By the Mendeans, who reduced Sipite by might of hand' (Pausanias 5.27.12 (Jones and Ormerod, LCL 188, 550-1)). The inscription of a name on the rider in chapter 19 contrasts sharply with the representation of the whore riding the beast, who also has names and titles written on her body (Rev 17:3-5). Beale, *Revelation*, 963, notes that the location at the thigh recalls the typical location of the warrior's sword, based on passages such as Exodus 32:27, Judges 3:16, 21, and Psalm 45:3. This effectively replaces the military sword with the sword of his mouth (Rev 19:15).

60 Plutarch, *Lives: Crassus* 24.5 (Perrin, LCL 65, 388-9).

61 Plutarch, *Lives: Crassus* 24.5 (Perrin, LCL 65, 388-9).

62 Plutarch, *Lives: Crassus* 25.1 (Perrin, LCL 65, 390-1).

63 Plutarch, *Lives: Crassus* 31.7 (Perrin, LCL 65, 412-17).

invasion of 40 BCE, in which all the cities of the coast were taken (except Tyre), the Roman client Hyrcanus II was overthrown and Antigonus was installed in his place (40–37 BCE). Despite a compromise between Augustus and Phraataces in 1 CE over the Roman control of Armenia, much of the region continued to be contested by both for decades.⁶⁴ In 36 CE Artabanus II installed his son Arsaces on the vacant Armenian throne, an action which triggered a war. A similar incident occurred on the occasion of the installation of Tiridates on the Armenian throne by the Parthian king (and brother) Vologases I in 58 CE.⁶⁵ Roman forces replaced Tiridates with a Cappadocian prince, which in turn led to a series of Parthian invasions over five years until an agreement was settled on which allowed the Parthian control of Armenia on the condition that kingship was granted by the Roman emperor. Despite the two states agreeing in principle, there continued to be significant conflict between them well into the second century, culminating in Trajan's Parthian campaign (115–17 CE).

Second, two specific geographic references within the Apocalypse support the identification of Parthia as the (symbolic) threat.⁶⁶ After the sixth angel's trumpet blast instructions are given to 'release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates' (Rev 9.14). Similarly, the outpouring of the sixth bowl is described as follows: 'the sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east' (Rev 16.12). Historical memory is preserved by Herodotus, who records that when Babylon was overtaken by the Persians in 539 BCE, they diverted the river Euphrates and marched into the city on the riverbed:

He [Cyrus] posted his army at the place where the river enters the city, and another part of it where the stream issues from the city ... Having so arrayed them ... [he drew] off the river by a canal into the lake, which was till now a marsh, he made the stream to sink till its former channel could be forded. When this happened, the Persians who were posted with this intent made their way into Babylon by the channel of the Euphrates, which had now sunk about to the height of the middle of a man's thigh.⁶⁷

Strabo confirms that the Euphrates marked the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire: 'The Euphrates and the land beyond it constitute the boundary of the

64 M. Sicker, *The Pre-Islamic Middle East* (London: Praeger, 200) 162.

65 Sicker, *The Pre-Islamic*, 163.

66 R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920); M. E. Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989); W. J. Harrington, *Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993); F. J. Murphy, *Fallen Is Babylon: The Revelation to John* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998); G. R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

67 Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* 1.191 (Godley, LCL 117, 238–41).

Parthian empire. But the parts this side the river are held by the Romans.’⁶⁸ The specific motif of the eastern forces crossing the Euphrates boundary in attack is attested in earlier apocalyptic literature. 1 En. 56.5–6, composed in the period 105–64 BCE, has the following in description of the struggle of Israel with her enemies:

In those days, the angels will assemble and thrust themselves to the east at the Parthians and Medes. They will shake up the kings (so that) a spirit of unrest shall come upon them, and stir them up from their thrones; and they will break forth from their beds like lions and like hungry hyenas among their own flocks. And they will go up and trample upon the land of my elect ones and the land of my elect ones will be before them like a threshing floor or a highway.⁶⁹

Revelation too has angels letting foreign forces loose at the Euphrates eastern border. Whereas in Rev 9.14 the hostile forces gather at a ford on the Euphrates, now (16.12) that riverbed is dried up, and the eastern Parthian forces can cross the mighty Euphrates’ bed at any point of their choosing.

Third, other descriptive features also enhance this symbolic Parthian threat. The first of the four riders in Rev 6.2 has been variously understood, including Christ himself and the conquering as the spreading gospel.⁷⁰ One of several issues with this identification is that the rider holds a bow whereas Christ does war with the sword of his mouth (1.16; 2.16; 19.15, 21), or indeed that the riders are best taken as a group, and no interpreter in the major commentaries has seen the plausibility of identifying the other three as Christ-like. More probable is the view that all four horsemen represent the threat of human war and conquest.⁷¹ Adding to this portrayal, the rider of the white horse has a bow and crown (Rev 6.2). As is evident from historical accounts of Parthian military activity, the favoured form of offensive was mounted bowmen, although they obviously did not limit themselves to this single form of attack.⁷² The iconography of the king mounted on a horse in the Parthian coins surveyed above also confirms this

68 Strabo, *Geography* 16.1.28 (Jones, LCL 241, 237).

69 E. Isaac, ‘1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch’, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testament* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983) 5–12, at 7.

70 C. Rowland, *Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998) 82; E. F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John* (trans. M. P. Johnson and A. Kamesar; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 62–4. J. Sweet, *Revelation* (London: SCM, 1990) 139 states: ‘the witness of the church is the means of Christ’s reign on earth’.

71 J. Roloff, *Revelation* (trans. J. E. Alsup; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 133; R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 152–4.

72 Plutarch, *Luc.* 28.2–4; *Crass.* 25.8.

symbolic image, as do the multiple examples of bowmen on the reverse of coins discussed above.⁷³

Fourth, after Nero's demise in 68 CE, there arose speculation as to whether he was actually dead or had departed to the east to raise an army and would return to reclaim his throne. Suetonius records:

He met his death in the thirty-second year of his age, on the anniversary of the murder of Octavia, and such was the public rejoicing that the people put on liberty caps and ran about all over the city. Yet there were some who for a long time decorated his tomb with spring and summer flowers, and now produced his statues on the rostra in the fringed toga, and now his edicts, as if he were still alive and would shortly return and deal destruction to his enemies. Nay more, Vologaesius, king of the Parthians, when he sent envoys to the senate to renew his alliance, earnestly begged this too, that honour be paid to the memory of Nero. In fact, twenty years later, when I was a young man, a person of obscure origin appeared, who gave out that he was Nero, and the name was still in such favour with the Parthians that they supported him vigorously and surrendered him with great reluctance.⁷⁴

Ian Boxall observes that 'this would not have been lost on Roman hearers of the Apocalypse ... Nero was about to return, backed by his Parthian allies.'⁷⁵

5. Conclusion

We began by noting the varied ways in which the titular phrase βασιλεύς βασιλέων has been understood in the secondary literature, governed primarily by differing views of its proposed textual foreground and background (LXX, Babylonian, Roman etc.). Although it was acknowledged that the origin of the phrase derived, according to the earliest primary sources, from a Semitic context (possibly Akkadian), the title was more regularly used of kings from the 'east'. This was demonstrably the case for Babylonia, Persia, Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian and Bactrian states. The title was, however, most regularly attested on the coins of Parthia, both in terms of numerical attestations and consistency of application to the rulers in the first century BCE and the first century CE. As was highlighted in our analysis above, in the first century CE there was not a single Parthian ruler who did not use the title βασιλεύς βασιλέων on his coinage. It was also seen that although Greeks, Romans and Hellenistic Jews were familiar with the title, as evidenced in its use for Zeus and the children of Cleopatra and Antony, the phrase was never adopted and applied to a human ruler.

73 See above, discussion on Sellwood 27.2, 41.8, 42.2; cf. *IGJS* III.694 (a-c), 644.

74 Suetonius, *Nero* 57 (Rolfe, LCL 38, 178–81). Cf. Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.2; 2.8f; Sib. Or. 4.119–24, 137–9; 5.137–52, 361–85.

75 I. Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Continuum, 2006) 108.

Within the book of Revelation Jesus is thus presented triumphantly conquering Rome in the image of Rome's feared enemy; he shares both the title and the form of transport. Ironically, or perhaps quite suitably, the ultimate conqueror of Rome is portrayed in the form of her historic enemy. Koester states that 'the Roman fear of Parthia is often overstated',⁷⁶ citing the occasion on which the brother of the Parthian king formally submitted to Nero in 66 CE in support of his statement. However, Koester (a) underestimates the volatile nature of the Roman-Parthian relations in the final decades of the first century (after all the Parthian conflict in 115 CE under Hadrian did not occur in a vacuum), and (b) seems to overlook the fact that the image in Revelation is drawing on the historic memory of the Parthians rather than on them being an imminent threat, although this should not necessarily be ruled out. In sum, the title and figure of Jesus in Rev 17.14 and 19.16 play on the historic fears and anxieties of a Parthian invasion through the memory of multiple points of reference, but in particular the title given to Jesus as βασιλεὺς βασιλέων.

76 Koester, *Revelation*, 395.