



Teachers' Notes EAGLE OF THE EAST

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Teachers' Notes written by L.S. Lawrence

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INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Carrhae is over. Forty thousand Romans lie dead on the battlefield, a plain between ranges of low hills at the headwaters of the Euphrates River, near the borders of modern Turkey and Syria.

Ardavan is an orphan of fourteen who was brought up in the Parthian camp, the son of an unknown warrior, his mother a Roman captive. He learned to speak Latin from her. He is stripping the Roman dead when he gets into a fight with Nartazes, another camp orphan, a bigger, stronger lad. Surena, the Parthian commander, and Broca (his man), who is in charge of the baggage train, arrive and separate them. Surena informs Ardavan that he needs his language skills, and warns Nartazes not to bother Ardavan again, on pain of horrible death.

Surena needs Ardavan to talk to a Roman commander. A small number have escaped the slaughter and are encamped on a hill which they have fortified. Tribune Marcus Drusus Pontus negotiates a Roman surrender with Surena through Ardavan. In return for their lives, the Romans agree to serve the Great King (the ruler of Parthia) as mercenaries for seven years.

Ardavan, who has impressed Surena, is detailed to accompany the Romans as an interpreter. Ardavan marches with the Romans, first to the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon, then on the long road out to the eastern border of the Parthian Empire in central Asia (the region now known as Turkmenistan) where they will be posted as far from Rome as possible. Surena goes with them – he has also been exiled, because the Great King regards him as a dangerous rival.

On the way, Ardavan is twice attacked by a mysterious opponent, and is saved on both occasions by the Romans. He becomes fascinated by Roman practices and ideas. He learns sword fighting from the Prior, the senior centurion, and Pontus gives him a sword that he had meant for his own unborn son, dead with his mother, back in Gaul.

In central Asia, the travellers meet the horse-nomads over whom Surena must consolidate Parthian rule. The Romans prove instrumental in crushing a budding insurrection and killing its leader. To everyone's surprise, this man's sister, Shara, comes to Surena's camp and begs her brother's body for proper burial, pledging

that there will be peace – for *she* is chieftain now. Pontus persuades Surena to comply.

At the funeral, Pontus defuses tension and foils the attempts of the rival chieftain Tajik and his son Pakur to foment trouble and promote a marriage of Shara to Pakur. Ardavan, for his part, wins the fencing at the funeral games, embarrassing Pakur.

The Romans come to the end of their journey, and winter descends. With the spring comes disastrous news. Tajik is dead and Pakur is claiming that Surena had him poisoned. Surena tries to avoid a revolt, arranging a meeting with Pakur on the open steppe. But he is murdered – by the treacherous Broca, who rode at his side.

It is up to Ardavan to put the pieces of the puzzle together. What is Broca's motive – and who could be using him?

The answer is shocking, and the Romans with Ardavan must march again. So must Shara. The only escape is eastwards, over the deserts and the ranges to the land of silk, beyond the reach of the Great King.

The story is historically valid. It's based on fact. It's not certain how they did it, but one group of Romans, captured at Carrhae, ended their days as citizens of the Han Empire, having marched to what is now called China. Theirs must have been a remarkable story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.S. Lawrence was born in 1953 in London, and emigrated to Australia in 1977, having gained a degree in History from University College. He taught in Australian secondary schools and two universities for many years, obtaining a Master's degree in the process. Now semi-retired, he has returned to his first love, historical fiction and the ancient world. *Eagle of the East* is his first published novel. His second book, *Escape by Sea*, opens in Carthage, 206 BCE, and tells the story of a young woman escaping a Roman siege.

WRITING STYLE

L.S. Lawrence is passionate about history, and his fiction is based on historical events. His style is characterised by well-researched descriptions that are subtly woven into wonderfully poetic passages. So vivid and compelling is his recreation of the ancient world that readers are drawn in from the outset. Strong, charismatic characters are typical of his work, and his books are sure to find an audience with both male and female readers.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

The Battle of Carrhae was fought in the year 53 BCE. It was the result of an attempt by one of the First Triumvirate, Marcus Licinius Crassus, to invade Parthia, which was then a great empire in its own right, stretching from Syria to central Asia.¹ The other two Triumvirs, Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great, were seasoned generals with long records of military success. Crassus was attempting to bolster his military prestige, but he was ignominiously killed and his army virtually exterminated by Surena, the Parthian commander.

Some Romans did manage to surrender, however. The number given varies, but Pliny the Elder says that they were taken by the Parthians to the region now called Turkmenistan, around Merv, about 900 km east of the southern edge of the Caspian Sea, to act as frontier guards. There they disappear from formal history. Surena was later killed: murdered by his own king.

Professor Homer Dubs, an American scholar, discerned in the Chinese analects (c AD 200, but containing abridged abstracts of earlier documents) a reference to mercenaries using Roman military methods, and in the city of Liqian in western China, he appeared to find evidence of Roman civic architecture. He proposed that the Romans from Crassus's army had managed to reach China, probably because they fled after Surena's murder. The evidence is scanty; all the same, it is not impossible.

Roman military methods were as described in the text, and there are some things about armies that never change. Romans did train with swords, although there is no evidence that there was a formal system of fencing. Several richly decorated

¹ Triumvirate: A group of three men who were responsible for public administration or civil authority in the government system of ancient Rome.

swords have been found, testifying to a belief that a sword was more than just an efficient butchering tool. It's not a stretch to imagine that there was a specialised vocabulary and training system.

Not much is known of the central Asian nomads of those times, but they should not be too closely likened to the Mongolians nearer to our own. For one thing, from their grave-goods they appear to have shared a characteristic with horse-tribes that the Greeks came into contact with north of the Black Sea – that is, they included women warriors and even female leaders. For another, the nomads of Turkmenistan were in contact with Greek-influenced city-dwellers, and with the Han Chinese. There were actual Greek cities still extant on the vast plains, and Greek culture lingered longer there than is commonly supposed. As late as this date, coins with debased Greek inscriptions were still being minted in Merv and Samarkand, testimony to Alexander's long shadow in the region.

Pontus's remarks on the status of Roman women – and Ardavan's observations of his own mother – are accurate. So, oddly enough, are the former's statements about the legionary diet and regulations concerning legionaries marrying. The legionary number and title in the text are imaginary, for no legions of this date are known by number and title except for those mentioned in Caesar's book 'Gallic War', and all legions were (at this time) temporary formations, nominally raised for a particular campaign. This, of course, does not mean that there were no professional soldiers.

Pontus is called 'Tribune' throughout. Most legionary tribunes were young men of the elite patrician class, who only served with the army long enough to qualify for civil office and an eventual seat in the Senate. Tribunes, therefore, were normally staff officers, but Pontus is a plebeian tribune, of which there was one per legion. He might also be a promoted centurion, and thus stood, or could stand, in direct line of command of troops. He would be considerably older than a patrician tribune – well into his thirties, at least.

The Prior is, or was, one of the *primi ordines* of his legion, a centurion with field command of a maniple (a sub divisions of a legion), and now the senior surviving centurion. He is here taken as a senior ranker; a warrant officer is the nearest modern equivalent.

BEFORE READING THE TEXT

1. This novel is based on a little-known piece of history that has recently been in the news. Residents of Liqian, a small town in far western China, are being tested for DNA that might be Roman in origin. There have always been stories of the soldiers who came from the west, and it would seem that many people have quite un-Chinese features – prominent noses, blond hair. The town is on the Silk Road, a meeting-point for east and west since Alexander's time.

Ask your class how true is history? How can general beliefs and anecdotal evidence challenge recorded facts? Can students think of other examples of oral history eventually being proved right?

2. Talk to your class about historical fiction. Do they think there are any limitations when writing in this genre? Do readers have certain expectations when they read this type of fiction? Do your students expect events and facts to be accurate? Do they think the author has an obligation to tell the truth? How much research do they think is required for writing such a book?

3. Ask your class to research the Silk Road. Have them find out which countries it crossed through. Ask them to locate a map of the Parthian Empire (53BCE) so that they will have a reference when reading the novel.

READING THE TEXT

Ask your students to keep a journal detailing their progress. This could include a list of characters as they appear in the book, names of places, and a short description of chapters and events.

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

The following questions can be answered individually or can be used as discussion starters.

Chapter 1: What has taken place before this chapter opens? Identify the characters introduced in this chapter and speculate about their roles in the narrative. Ardavan and Nartazes are removing weapons and armour from the dead. Do you consider this thieving, or do you think that they are being practical?

Chapter 2: What do we learn about Parthian customs in this chapter? How does Roman fighting differ from Parthian combat? What important information do we learn about Ardavan?

Chapter 3: What do we learn about the nature of war and the soldiers who fight wars? What is tamarisk?

Chapter 4: Why do you think Surena intends to pass Ardavan off as his son?

Chapter 5: The Romans accept defeat over death. Did they do the right thing? Is it honourable to work for your enemy? Can you think of a modern equivalent of this moral dilemma?

Chapter 6: Why does the Tribune caution Ardavan for his hastiness to accuse Nartazes of attacking him? Why do you think justice is important to the Romans? Is there an obvious difference in how the Roman and Parthian armies operate? List reasons why you think the Romans run their armies the way they do. Do you support this method of discipline?

Chapter 7: What is the Roman argument for not using a bow in warfare? Why do you think the Tribune lent Ardavan his sword?

Chapter 8: Why does Pontus think the Great King has commanded them to undertake their service on the eastern marches? What happens in this chapter that shows us Ardavan is loyal to the Romans?

Chapter 9: Why do you think the Romans are so accepting of Ardavan? Why would they teach him to fight? Ardavan calls the horse-nomads 'barbarians'. Do you think this is fair, considering what we know about Parthian warfare and customs? How are the Romans victorious in this chapter?

Chapter 10: Shara, the first female character to appear in the novel, is a chieftain of a tribe that Ardavan refers to as barbarians. How is she portrayed in this chapter? Do you think this portrayal is influenced by male ideas of femininity? What happens that suggests it is? How does Pontus save Shara?

Chapter 11: What does Tajik want from Shara? What do we learn about Shara's character in this chapter? Do you think Shara's acceptance of Pontus is realistic, given that he played a part in her brother's death?

Chapter 12: Despite Shara's expertise on the horse, she needs Pontus and Ardavan to ensure Pakur won't win. What does this say about the role of men and women?

Chapter 13: What does Ardavan notice about Broca and Nartazes in this chapter? What do you think it signifies? What do you think Nartazes means when he tells Ardavan that the Romans and Surena won't be able to protect him forever? What is a caravanserai?

Chapter 14: What do you think Pontus wants to say when Prior comments that they will leave it all behind when they go home? Do you agree, like Ardavan, that there is a rationale behind the Roman laws about soldiers taking wives? What do we learn about Roman women in this chapter?

Chapter 15: Loyalty and allegiance are highly valued among the different people in this book. Why is this? How do Ardavan, Pontus and Shara trick Broca?

Chapter 16: Are you satisfied with the ending? Do you think Shara's leaving shows us that she is disloyal to her people? What do you think it means to Ardavan to be called a Roman?

CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

The following activities are for students to complete individually.

- 1.** We hear very little dialogue between Pontus and Shara during the novel. Create a comic strip of a conversation between them that may have occurred before or after an event.
- 2.** Choose a character, and from their point of view write a journal entry about an event in the story.
- 3.** *Eagle of the East* purports to tell the story of what really happened to the Roman legion, and the story could be said to be filmic. In your opinion, would it

make a good film? Why, why not? Imagine you are the director. Who would you cast for the roles?

4. The story opens on a battle scene. In your opinion, does this scene make the book more of a 'boy book'? Write 500 words using an alternative beginning that you think would appeal more to girls.

5. The Silk Road is mentioned as a setting in the book. Research the Silk Road using the internet and any other sources you can find. Write 500 words arguing why the author's choice of the setting was a good or bad choice.

6. Write an alternative blurb for *Eagle of the East*. Try and make it both informative and appealing.

AFTER READING THE TEXT

The following questions can be answered individually or they can be used as discussion starters.

1. The Roman Empire sought to dominate other cultures through war. Do the Roman soldiers learn anything from their captors? Do the Parthians learn from the Romans? Can you think of a modern equivalent of two very different cultures learning to live together peacefully?

2. Much of the vital action of *Eagle of the East* is understood. That is, it happens offstage, and can only be surmised from later events witnessed by Ardavan, the viewpoint character. What would have been the effect on the narrative if he had somehow witnessed the conversation between Broca and the Great King when Broca agreed to betray Lord Surena? What if the witness had been someone else who reports the conversation to Ardavan later?

3. Other vital events happened long before the narrative opens. Who was Ardavan's mother, and what do we learn about her? The identity of his father is never revealed. Does the text benefit from this uncertainty? Is Ardavan affected by it, and does it explain anything about him and his actions?

4. Is it possible to sympathise with Broca, or the Great King, or Nartazes? If not, would it be possible to sympathise with them if the events were told from

their points of view? The Prior, on the other hand, is very sympathetic. Would it be possible to find him unsympathetic? Consider him, for example, from the point of view of one of the troops he commands – say, the unnamed soldier who painted the walls in the Tribune's quarters.

5. One theme of the novel is allegiance. Surena claims Ardavan's allegiance. Does he deserve it? Ardavan later changes his allegiance. On what basis does he do this? Is he right to do so? At what point does this happen? What are the steps in the process? Broca betrays his allegiance. What causes that? Can it be explained, sympathetically, from his point of view? And finally, the Romans break their own oaths. They swore to serve the Great King, and now they will desert. Are they right to do that? What, if anything, justifies it? Is there any general principle that might be invoked here? What does loyalty mean? What did it mean to a Roman? What does it mean to us?

6. Though there are few female characters in the novel, those that appear have significant roles. Ardavan's mother is the most important influence on his life, even though she never appears. Shara, chieftain of the Khirgi, is a powerful woman who speaks to men as an equal. She is a shrewd politician and a strong and successful warrior. Does her eventual involvement with Pontus detract from that? To what extent is she defined simply in terms of male power? Does this confirm feminist thought that even strong female characters, even those who lead, are often depicted either as mere adjuncts to men, or still worse, as if they were men themselves?

7. In the beginning of the novel Ardavan is identified as the son of a Roman. He is not a Parthian, though he has grown up in the Parthian Empire. It is not until the end of the novel that Ardavan considers himself Roman, and even then, it is not him, but Pontus, who voices it. When people like the Parthians, build empires, they colonise other nations and cause a displacement of identity. Ardavan may be considered a Roman, but he has never been to Rome. Consider how much of your identity is tied to where you live. How do you characterise your identity? What would happen to your identity if you were uprooted from your homeland?

8. *Eagle of the East* is set in a time where war over land is common. When you consider the world we live in today, how much has really changed? What motivates people to go to war? Are there ever any valid reasons? If not, why do

you think war still occurs? People often cite religion as a reason behind conflict. In the novel, the Romans and Parthians share some similar beliefs, but they also have differing customs and philosophies. Do you think they would have still been at war if they had the same values? What does this say about war and our part in it?

9. How reliable is history? How much can we actually accept as true? The Romans might, or might not, have marched to China. Is it legitimate simply to posit that they did, and write a novel based on that idea? Is this text, then, a 'historical' novel, or is it a 'counterfactual' – a novel based on history that never happened?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- 1.** Pontus gifts Ardavan with his precious sword, and on learning of the sword's significance, Ardavan treasures the item. Think of something you value highly and use it as the basis for a piece of artwork. Research Roman art and imitate the style in your piece.
- 2.** *Eagle of the East* is historical fiction. This means the author has based his story on historical fact. This does not mean that it is a true story, however. Choose a real-life event – this could be something that has happened to you or something you have read about or heard – and write a short fictional piece about it.
- 3.** In modern times, fencing is regarded as a sport. Investigate the benefits of this activity, and through research, ascertain how this skill has evolved over time.
- 4.** *Eagle of the East* is based on historical events. Choose a period in time that you think would make a suitable background for a story. Research the time frame, and using the information you discover, create an idea for a book. In 500 words, pitch the idea to a publisher.
- 5.** In groups, choose a scene from the novel that you can perform to the class. Write a short script, setting the scene in a different time. For example, you could position it in today's world, 19th century America, or the future. Select props and costumes appropriate to the new setting.

6. Select an action scene, and rewrite it in first person from the point of view of Ardavan.

7. Create a profile of one of the main characters, based on the questions:

- Who do you like most and why?
- Who do you sympathise with most and why?
- How has the author developed your involvement with the characters?

EXTENDED READING

Read other historical novels to compare with *Eagle of the East* such as *Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Silver Branch* and *The Lantern Bearers* written by Rosemary Sutcliff, *Escape by Sea* by L.S. Lawrence; *The Pearl Hunters* by Kim Wilkins. An annotated list, that covers various historical periods, can be found at <<http://lexicon.ci.anchorage.ak.us/guides/kids/booklists/historicalfiction/>>