

THE ARSACIDS OF ROME: ROYAL HOSTAGES AND ROMAN-PARTHIAN
RELATIONS IN THE FIRST CENTURY CE

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August 2017

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THE ARSACIDS OF ROME: ROYAL HOSTAGES AND ROMAN-PARTHIAN
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Cornell University 2017

This is a study of Julio-Claudian Rome's relations with Parthia, one of the great empires of ancient Iran and an imperial rival of the Principate. In contrast to previous scholarship that treats Rome and Parthia as monoliths clashing in war or coexisting through diplomacy, "The Arsacids of Rome" shows how their relationship changed through interconnection at the highest levels of imperial power. Its approach centers on a group of people whose careers spanned both empires: the Parthian hostages who lived in the city of Rome. These men and women were members of the Arsacid family, Parthia's ruling dynasty. Shipped abroad by the reigning Arsacid monarch, they lived for extended periods in the city of Rome before returning to their native land. Through their influence, it is argued, internal and external affairs in both empires were linked together. Hostages enmeshed and entangled the interests of kings, emperors, aristocrats, and governors on both sides of the Euphrates, creating coalitions and constellations of power across the political boundary that divided Parthian territory from Rome. Their careers show how Rome and Parthia confronted one another not as two solitudes, but as two porous and permeable entities that were interconnected even in the realm of high politics.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jake Nabel earned a BA in Philosophy and Classics from Bard College in 2007 and completed the Post-Baccalaureate Program in Classics at the University of Pennsylvania in 2010. His research focuses on the relationship between the Greco-Roman Mediterranean and the empires of ancient Persia. He has published and forthcoming work on Roman-Parthian relations, Latin poetry, Seleucid history, and the reception of Alexander the Great in ancient Iranian traditions. In 2017/18, Jake will be a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, where he will join a group of scholars working on the theme “The Classical World in Context: Persia.”

For my parents and my grandmother

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For the past several years, I have had the supreme privilege not only to study the ancient world, but to do so under the guidance of advisers and colleagues who helped me do better work than I could ever have done alone. I'm happy to have a chance to thank them here.

At Cornell, I was lucky to count a brilliant group of PhDs as my peers, colleagues, and *commilites*, especially Dave Blome, Mike Esposito, Perri Gerard-Little, Katie Jarriel, Katie Kearns, Sam Kurland, Jeff Leon, Samantha Sanft, Tim Sorg, and Conner Wiktorowicz. It's difficult to express my intellectual and personal debt to their friendship. In all of them I found inspiration in matters both academic and not.

Cornell faculty in the Departments of Classics, History, Near Eastern Studies, and Government have also helped my academic development in a range of fields from classical philology to international relations theory. I'd especially like to acknowledge Fred Ahl, Annetta Alexandridis, Caitlín Barrett, Charles Brittain, Michael Fontaine, Peter Katzenstein, Athena Kirk, Jonathan Kirshner, Nathan Pilkington, Hunter Rawlings, Courtney Roby, Jeffrey Rusten, Robert Travers, and Michael Weiss.

The Cornell Library was home for many years, and I owe much to the incredible breadth of its collections and the outstanding management of its staff. Along with Cornell's Society for the Humanities, the Library's Digital Humanities Collective supported my creation and maintenance of parthiansources.com, an online collection of Parthian texts that underpinned much of my dissertation research. I'm particularly grateful to Mickey Casad, Virginia Cole, and Susette Newberry for their generous help and encouragement.

My proficiency as a researcher of ancient Iran benefitted immensely from my semester in residence at Christian-Albrechts-Universität in Kiel, Germany, where I enjoyed many fruitful discussions with scholars in the Institut für Klassische

Altertumskunde. Above all I must thank Josef Wiesehöfer, an ancient historian whose achievements in the study of pre-Islamic Iran are matched only by his warmth, generosity, and collegiality. My gratitude also to Andreas Luther, Rüdiger Schmitt, Sabine Müller, Milinda Hoo, Raphaël Weyland, Eltje Böttcher, and Marie Oellig for many productive conversations in Kiel; to Gunnar Dumke and Stefan Pfeiffer for inviting me to present my dissertation research at Martin–Luther–Universität in Halle; and to Vesta Curtis and Helen Wang for allowing me to study the Parthian coin collections in the British Museum.

In 2013 I drove from Ithaca to the ASOR Annual Meeting in Baltimore and fortuitously caught the panel on Roman-Parthian relations headed by Jason Schlude and Benjamin Rubin. Jason and Ben very kindly invited me to present on the panel the following year, and the papers would eventually come to fruition as an edited volume. I am indebted to them for the opportunity. Thanks are also due to the other members of the panel, especially Matthew Canepa and M. Rahim Shayegan, who have generously offered their thoughts on my work.

At every stage of the writing process my dissertation committee has led me in the right direction, even (perhaps especially) when I couldn't see the way forward. I owe Lori Khatchadourian deep gratitude for many years of guidance – most of all for helping me address the limitations of Greco-Roman sources for the writing of Iranian history, but also for inviting me to join Project ArAGATS and introducing me to the practice of Near Eastern archaeology. Sturt Manning's wide knowledge of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East vastly improved the project, as did his suggestions for readings in comparative history and ancient interstate relations. Éric Rebillard has read every page with a care and critical rigor that saved me from countless missteps; I am profoundly grateful for the closeness of his readings and the depth of his consideration, as well as his scholarly acumen and intellectual precision.

My greatest debt is to my adviser, Barry Strauss, whose support has been invaluable throughout every stage of my graduate education. Barry's books drew me to the study of antiquity many years ago, and his scholarship continues to furnish a banner example of ancient history that speaks to other disciplines, wider audiences, and big ideas. As with so many other aspects of my academic career, this study profited immensely from his patient guidance and trenchant criticism.

As privileged as I've been to lead a life of study these past few years, I've been even luckier to spend them with Jennifer Carrington – a fellow student of the ancient world, but also my partner in everything, and the best heart and mind I know. Her faith in me, and her love, has meant the world.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Bill and Susan Nabel, and to the memory of my grandmother, Krystyna Nabel. I can never hope to repay the years of encouragement, devotion, and support that my family has given me; but I hope at least that here and elsewhere in my scholarship I've done good work, and made them proud.

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INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the first century CE, the ancient Mediterranean and Near East were dominated by the two great powers of Rome and Parthia. Both states were empires – vast in extent, diverse in population, and practiced at political and military methods of coercion. Both were headed by autocrats with extensive reserves of military manpower at their disposal. And both had a long history of conquest and annexation – a history that had brought their borders steadily closer together as the territories of the Hellenistic kingdoms were divided between them.

This international environment represented a new status quo. The acceptance of another empire of comparable size, strength, and stability was an unprecedented concession for both Rome and Parthia, a departure from the decisive military reckoning that both powers had sought against their enemies in earlier periods. The arrangement was not only novel but also durable, lasting until the end of the Parthian empire in 224 CE and setting the stage for Rome's subsequent relations with the Sasanians. Though dynasties changed and conditions on the peripheries shifted, the divide between the Roman Mediterranean and the Iranian-dominated Near East would be a crucial dynamic in the ancient world for over six centuries, a steady geopolitical condition from the end of the Hellenistic period to the Arab conquest.

What did Roman-Parthian interaction look like, and what shaped the engagement between the two powers? Broadly speaking, the existing scholarly literature approaches this question from the foreign policy perspective of great power rivalry. It looks at Rome and Parthia as two superpowers in a vacillating relationship of cooperation or, rather more frequently, competition. Studies in this vein emphasize the coherence and agency of the Roman and Parthian states; the trials of war and the triumphs of diplomacy; and the structural pressures of a contest

between imperial peers. It is a tale of two giants eyeing each other uneasily from either bank of the Euphrates or, in Armenia, shadowboxing and occasionally coming to blows. Rome and Parthia were two monoliths, now clashing, now coexisting, but always facing off as two distinct and separate worlds.

Departing from the war and diplomacy school, this study takes a new approach to Roman-Parthian relations. It puts forward a different view of interaction between the two empires by focusing on a group of people whose lives transcended the boundary that divided them: the Arsacid hostages of the Roman empire, also referred to here as the Arsacids of Rome.¹ These men and women were members of the Arsacid family, Parthia's ruling dynasty. They were sent by the reigning Arsacid king to the Roman emperor, who held them in captivity for an extended term – years, decades, or even their entire lives. But some of them went back to Parthia, when summoned, to claim the throne that was their birthright. Three released hostages briefly held the Arsacid kingship, changing at a moment's notice from the prisoners of one empire into the rulers of the other.

The Arsacids of Rome were intermediaries between Rome and Parthia, and they had an ambiguous and fraught relationship with state power in both empires. They crossed and re-crossed the Euphrates on journeys that carried them from Ctesiphon to Rome and back again – voyages that took them beyond the domain of foreign affairs and into the fray of Parthian and Roman domestic politics. Through their influence, internal and external affairs in both empires were linked together. Hostages enmeshed and entangled the interests of kings, emperors, aristocrats, and governors on both sides of the Euphrates, creating coalitions and constellations of power across the political boundary that divided Parthian territory from Rome.

¹ A discussion of the appropriateness of the term “hostage” to describe the Arsacids of Rome can be found below, p. 16–9.

But despite their border-crossing careers, the Arsacids of Rome sparked a paradoxical development that would leave a profound mark on the Roman-Parthian relationship: they deepened the very demarcation that their lives had done so much to efface. Political actors within Parthia and Rome turned the figure of the Arsacid hostage into a caricature of the empire on the opposite shore of the Euphrates. The Romans represented them as the barbarous inhabitants of an *alter orbis*, a different world; the Parthians repudiated their kingships, and perhaps even accused their former countrymen of acculturation to the mores of their Roman captors. Arsacid hostages were the negatives from which the imperial image of Parthia and Rome developed. They themselves connected, but the reaction against them divided.

The effect of forging a connection on the ground but a division in the realm of ideology was the legacy of the Arsacids of Rome. While the Arsacid dynasty is the primary focus of this study, the dynamics that shaped the lives of this family's hostages highlight broader patterns in the conditions of negotiation between different empires, cultures, and civilizations. Go-betweens like the Arsacids of Rome are a key variable for understanding how political boundaries can be both transcended and entrenched by the same group of people, and how the state seals itself off from the outside world through face-to-face confrontations with those who move across its borders. Such intermediaries show the limitations of looking at the world as a set of discrete states – but they also illustrate how those same states reify and perpetuate themselves in response to forces that wear away at their cohesion.

The State of the Field: Foreign Policy and Border Studies

By and large, studies of Roman-Parthian interaction fall into two groups. The first adopts the perspective of great power rivalry and investigates the foreign policies through which Rome and Parthia engaged one another as states. The second concentrates on the border regions at the

nexus of the Roman and Parthian spheres of influence, a land of dynamic encounters between different political powers and cultural groups. Both orientations have supported rich contributions to the academic literature on Roman-Parthian relations. Both have limitations, however, that a shift of focus to the Arsacids of Rome can help address.

The first group of studies proceeds from the assumption that the encounters that mattered most to the Roman-Parthian relationship were either military or diplomatic. Taking its cues from modern scholarship on international affairs, this approach to the topic foregrounds the traditional themes of great power conflict. It asks why the Romans and Parthians sometimes fought battles or, in the absence of armed conflict, why they preferred to conduct negotiations and settle their disagreements through mechanisms like treaties or alliances. Studies of this sort try to explain war, peace, and the tools the two empires used to pursue these ends.

This orientation situates Roman-Parthian engagement firmly in the domain of foreign policy, a branch of politics conceptually distinct from internal or domestic affairs. To a certain extent, this dichotomy grew out of ancient Greco-Roman thought. While no contemporary Iranian evidence survives to reconstruct Parthian divisions of political activity, Latin terms like *domi militiaeque* suggest that the distinction between foreign and domestic had some currency in the ancient Mediterranean.² But the notion is also distinctly modern, the product of an age where governmental bodies, legal doctrines, and academic fields sharply distinguish between the people who live within a political unit and the foreigners beyond its borders.

The idea that war, diplomacy, and foreign policy are key to understanding the interactions between ancient polities has deep roots in scholarship on the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. The field's traditional focus on military encounters stems partly from the abiding

² Drogula 2015: 47–56.

influence of Thucydides, a formative thinker who continues to exert a major influence on the modern understanding of political history.³ Moreover, the centrality of war to Greco-Roman historiography furnishes ample evidence of the importance of armed conflict to ancient interstate affairs. According to the influential historian Michael Rostovtseff, “in the ancient world, generally, the natural attitude of one state towards another was that of potential and actual enmity. Hence war, not peace, was the foundation of international relations.”⁴ On this logic, to investigate war is to investigate the primary mode of engagement between ancient polities.

These ideas are deeply embedded in the scholarly literature on Roman-Parthian relations. The emphasis on military conflict and great power rivalry goes back at least as far as Theodor Mommsen, who opined that “for the entire Principate, the relationship between Rome and Iran was a continuous feud for the left bank of the Euphrates, interrupted only by truces.”⁵ For George Rawlinson, a contemporary of Mommsen and the author of a seminal work on Parthia, the Arsacid empire was “a rival state dividing with Rome the attention of mankind and the sovereignty of the known earth.” Rawlinson saw in the Parthian kingdom an ancient equivalent of the Ottoman empire of his own time: an “Oriental” power that closely matched its European counterparts in conquests and military strength.⁶ This background of confrontation between the imperial giants of East and West laid the foundations of Rawlinson’s monograph and much of the work that came after it.

The focus on great power antagonism persists in more recent studies. In Edward Luttwak’s landmark work on Roman grand strategy, Parthia is described as “the only ‘systemic’

³ Strasburger 1954. On Thucydides’ influence on the realist tradition of political science, see Crane 1998: 63–78 with further literature at 64 n.59.

⁴ Rostovtseff 1922: 35.

⁵ Mommsen 1885: 357: “darum ist das Verhältnis zwischen Rom und Iran durch die ganze Kaiserzeit eine nur durch Waffenstillstände unterbrochene ewige Fehde um das linke Ufer des Euphrat.” Throughout this study, all translations of both ancient texts and non-English scholarship are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Rawlinson 1873: v (“rival state”), 427 (comparison with Ottomans).

threat to Rome,” a military challenge to be dealt with through the tactical disposition of legions, the judicious deployment of client kings, and the erection of frontier defenses.⁷ To be sure, some scholars have found this assessment of the Parthian threat to Rome to be exaggerated and prefer an inverse formulation: it was Parthia, not Rome, that was forced into a defensive posture. “In a political sense,” finds Tim Cornell, “Rome did not have a Parthian problem; but it is abundantly clear that Parthia had a Roman problem.”⁸ But while such treatments offer differing assessments of Roman and Parthian belligerence, they share a focus on war as the central feature of relations between the two powers. These authors may disagree on the particulars, but the “state of permanent conflict between Rome and Persia” is not in dispute.⁹

Other historians prefer to highlight the achievements of diplomacy rather than the casualties of war. Karl-Heinz Ziegler’s important study of Roman-Parthian relations foregrounds the role of treaties, an instrument of negotiation that, in the author’s view, laid the foundation for a system of international law among sovereign and coequal states.¹⁰ While Ziegler’s work has been criticized for overemphasizing the importance of legal norms and downplaying power politics, other scholars have taken up his interest in the role of interstate agreements.¹¹ In addition to treaties, some historians have also pointed to the high-profile Roman-Parthian conferences on the Euphrates river as triumphs of diplomacy. Brian Campbell, for instance, has highlighted Augustus’ use of such conferences “to achieve an accommodation over Armenia and

⁷ Luttwak 1976: 19.

⁸ Cornell 1993: 145. The view is more starkly expressed in Isaac 1992: 28–33.

⁹ Quotation: Isaac 1992: 33.

¹⁰ Ziegler 1964. Ziegler identified ten treaties throughout Roman-Parthian history: see 1964: 19–32 (Sulla, Lucullus, Pompey), 48–50, 54–7 (Augustus), 58–64 (Tiberius/Germanicus, Vitellius), 73–7 (Nero), 114–5 (Marcus Aurelius), 132 (Severus), 134 (Macrinus).

¹¹ For this critique of Ziegler, see Wheeler 2002. On treaties see also Keaveney 1981; 1982; Sherwin-White 1983: 218–26; Krämer 1973a. Winter 1988 covers Roman-Persian treaties during the later Sasanian period; cf. Dignas / Winter 2007. On ancient treaties in general see Bederman 2001: 137–206, though coverage of the ancient Iranian world is minimal.

establish mutual spheres of interest, in effect, a balance of power that could still be presented as a great Roman triumph.”¹² Diplomacy’s occasional breakdowns, these scholars argue, should not be allowed to obscure what was, in many ways, a surprisingly pacific relationship between two otherwise militant empires.¹³

But whether scholars emphasize the belligerent or the conciliatory aspects of the Roman-Parthian relationship, nearly all approach the topic with a common assumption: interaction between the two empires belonged to the realm of foreign policy, a distinct branch of politics that deals with the interactions between states rather than the developments within them. In keeping with modern conceptual divisions of political life, historical investigations of foreign policy tend to center on a relatively consistent set of concerns: the interests and objectives of the states involved; the means (whether peaceable or forceful) that they used to achieve their ends; the nature of the boundaries between them; and the international system in which they contended. Domestic factors – regime type, for instance, or the economic structure of society – are considered secondary or even ignored altogether. This framework constitutes the default mode of analysis for most scholarly treatments of Roman-Parthian relations.¹⁴

To be sure, a handful of studies have attended to the interplay between domestic and foreign politics in either Rome or Parthia. On the Arsacid side, Edward Dąbrowa’s *La politique de l’Etat parthe à l’égard de Rome* stands out for its analysis of the empire’s internal political conditions and their connection to its military efforts in Armenia.¹⁵ For Rome, Matthäus Heil’s *Die orientalische Außenpolitik des Kaisers Nero* explores how the domestic agenda of the

¹² Campbell 1993: 222.

¹³ See also the emphasis on successful diplomacy in Schlude 2009; Schlude / Rubin 2017.

¹⁴ In addition to the literature above (nn.5–13), see Wirth 1980; Wolski 1993: 122–94; Schmitt 1997: 56–72; Ferguson 2005; Sampson 2008; Edwell 2013; Overtom 2016.

¹⁵ Dąbrowa 1983; cf. Dąbrowa 1989; Olbrycht 1998b.

Neronian regime affected its management of war with Parthia.¹⁶ And studies of political ideology, while not focusing on Roman-Parthian *interaction* per se, help explain the place that Rome and Parthia held in the worldview of their imperial counterpart.¹⁷

These works have enriched the literature on Roman-Parthian relations, but they have limitations. For the most part, they envision the two empires as monolithic political units either clashing in war or coexisting through diplomacy. On this logic, interaction happened not in the power centers of Ctesiphon and Rome but on the battlefields of Carrhae, Rhandaia, and Nisibis or at the conferences on the Euphrates river. Where the interplay of domestic and foreign politics is discussed, the horizon of the study tends to be confined to one empire – either Rome or Parthia, but not both. The domestic arena extends no further than the boundaries of the two empires, and it is treated separately from forces that originate beyond the borders. Division and confrontation are central; connections are secondary.

A few brief treatments have been dedicated to the Parthian hostages of Rome, but their analyses have not fully explored the depth of these connections or their profound consequences for internal affairs in both empires. Dąbrowa's article "Les premiers 'otages' parthes à Rome" surveys the major hostage transactions of the Augustan period and looks at the Arsacid background, perceptively noting the divisions in Parthian politics that underlay these events.¹⁸ Meret Strothmann has discussed Augustus' reception of Arsacid princes and their integration into the familial structure of his new imperial order.¹⁹ And Leonardo Gregoratti has considered hostages alongside other Parthian "refugees" who might have improved Rome's knowledge of

¹⁶ Heil 1997, esp. 195–200. On the relationship between Roman domestic and foreign policy more generally, see Wendt 2008: 185–91.

¹⁷ See esp. Sonnabend 1986; Wiesehöfer 2005; Lerouge 2007; Shayegan 2011.

¹⁸ Dąbrowa 1987, esp. 66–7.

¹⁹ Strothmann 2012; cf. Nedergaard 1988a.

the empire to its east.²⁰ Yet the literature still lacks a comprehensive treatment of the Arsacids of Rome that integrates both Roman and Parthian perspectives on the trans-imperial impact of their careers. To look at Arsacid hostages through either Roman or Parthian eyes is to see only half the picture.

The other major strand in the literature does focus on connections, but on a local rather than imperial scale. Broadly speaking, two types of studies fall into this category. The first deals with “client kingdoms,” the smaller territories like Armenia, Commagene, and Adiabene that were caught between the Roman and Parthian spheres of influence.²¹ The rulers of these states developed meaningful relationships with political leaders in both empires, and their kingdoms composed a key border region where the relationship between the two powers took shape. The second type of study is narrower in scope and explores individual sites like Hatra, Dura Europos, or Edessa. Often archaeological in nature, such work has shown an array of local responses to complex processes of cultural transfer in places that were crossroads not only between different empires, but also between diverse cultural groups.²²

High-resolution studies of this sort provide a nuanced and detailed picture of Roman-Parthian interaction on the ground, but their scope is more regional than those that take a foreign policy approach. While the political dynamics they investigate often dovetail with larger issues, they are more interested in the peripheries of Roman-Parthian power than the centers.

Connection is important in this framework, and exchange is more rigorously investigated than in

²⁰ Gregoratti 2015.

²¹ See e.g. Chaumont 1976 on Armenia; Facella 2005; 2010 on Commagene; Marciak 2014a; 2014b and Luther 2015 on Adiabene; Schlude / Overman 2017 on Judaea under Herod the Great; and Hartmann 2015 generally.

²² On Dura Europos and Edessa, see Sommer 2005, esp. 271, noting the divergences between political and cultural borders. A section of a recent edited volume on Hatra highlights the “peaceful interaction, transcultural exchange, and acculturation” that occurred when the city was not threatened by Roman-Parthian wars (Dirven 2013: 17). For other studies of cultural exchange in local contexts, see Fowler 2005; Blömer / Winter 2011; Anderson 2017. See also Edwell 2008 on Mesopotamia and Palmyra, though more political than cultural in focus.

studies with a war or diplomacy focus. But the primary object of analysis is cultural transfer and its impact on areas of social life like religion, art, and architecture. Politics does not entirely disappear from view, but it often takes a backseat to topics more easily investigated through the material record.

The present study charts a course between the grand themes of war and diplomacy and the high-resolution study of border territories. It emphasizes the permeability not only of the cities and kingdoms along the Euphrates, but also of the seats of power in Ctesiphon and Rome. It maintains a focus on high politics, but its themes are connection and interpenetration rather than confrontation and division. It traces a pathway that led from the Parthian to the Roman domestic political arena – and then back again. For approximately one century from c. 30 BCE–66 CE, that pathway was regularly traversed by one group of people: the members of the Arsacid royal family of Parthia, here called “the Arsacids of Rome.”

The Arsacid Family between Rome and Parthia

The history of the Arsacids of Rome can shed light on a feature of the Roman-Parthian relationship that previous studies have left largely unexplored. The evidence for these figures is collected in the following tables, which contain all known cases of Arsacid dynasts either submitted to or released from Roman custody.

Table 1: Arsacids from Parthia to Rome

Name(s)	Date	Sources
Son of Phraates IV	c. 30 BCE	Cass. Dio 51.18.2–3, 53.33.1–2; Just. 42.5.6–9; cf. <i>Mon. Anc.</i> 32.1
Vonones, Phraates, Seraspadanes, Rhodaspes, two wives, four sons	c. 19–10 BCE	<i>Mon. Anc.</i> 32.2; Vell. Pat. 2.94.4; Strab. 6.4.2, 16.1.28; Joseph. <i>AJ</i> 18.42; Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 2.1.2; Suet. <i>Aug.</i> 21.3; Just. 42.5.11–2; Fest. <i>Brev.</i> 19.4; Oros. 6.21.29; Eutrop. <i>Brev.</i> 7.9; <i>CIL</i> 6.1799; cf. Ausonius <i>Epist.</i> 23.6
Darius; other Arsacids	c. 36/7 CE	Joseph. <i>AJ</i> 18.96, 101–5; Suet. <i>Calig.</i> 14.3; <i>Vit.</i> 2.4; Cass. Dio 59.27.2–3
Several Arsacids	55 CE	Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 13.9.1
Daughter of Tiridates; other Arsacids	63 CE	Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 15.30.2; Cass. Dio 62.23.4
Several Arsacids	66 CE	Cass. Dio 63.1.2; cf. Plin <i>HN</i> 6.23

Table 2: Arsacids from Rome to Parthia

Name(s)	Date	Sources
Son of Phraates IV	c. 23 BCE	Cass. Dio 51.18.2–3, 53.33.1–2; Just. 42.5.6–9; cf. <i>Mon. Anc.</i> 32.1
Vonones	c. 8 CE	<i>Mon. Anc.</i> 33; Joseph. <i>AJ</i> 18.46; Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 2.2.1
Phraates	35 CE	Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 6.31.2; Cass. Dio 58.26.2
Tiridates	35/6 CE	Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 6.32.2–3; Cass. Dio 58.26.2
Meherdates	49 CE	Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 11.10.4, 12.10–1

As a result of this process of hostage submission and release, the Arsacid family was not coterminous with the Parthian empire itself. Throughout the Julio-Claudian period, Parthia's ruling dynasty spilled over the borders of the state that it governed in a way that would transform not only its own political features, but those of its imperial peer to the west. The forces that shaped Arsacid history thus cannot be understood by way of reference to any one state. Investigating the nature and character of Arsacid rule in the first century CE requires an assessment of developments not just within Parthian territory, but within Rome as well.

A paradox underlies the story of Arsacid hostages, one that is only evident in a perspective that incorporates the internal dynamics of both empires. On the one hand, hostages forged a connection between Parthian and Roman domestic politics that made these two arenas interconnected and, to an extent, interdependent. The impetus behind Parthia's submission of Arsacids to Rome came primarily (though not entirely) from the Parthian domestic political arena: it was in the first place an initiative undertaken by the reigning Arsacid king to insure that his political enemies among the nobility had no suitable dynast who could be used to supplant him. In effect, the king used the Roman emperor as a tool to reduce Arsacid dynastic strife and to strengthen his political position within the Parthian empire. But the king's aristocratic enemies subsequently found a way to turn the institution of hostageship to their own advantage by petitioning the emperor for the release of a hostage to return to Parthia and take the throne. In short, multiple factions used the institution of hostageship to further their own agenda within Parthian internal affairs.

In Rome, too, Arsacid hostages were a feature of the domestic political arena. From Augustus to Nero, the Julio-Claudian emperors used their Arsacid wards as showpieces in elaborate public displays: the Parthian dynasts were exhibited in grandiose spectacles to Roman or Italian audiences. The figure of the hostage became an indispensable part of how the Caesars crafted an image of Roman dominance over Parthia. And when delegations from the Parthian nobility arrived to ask for the release of a hostage to serve as their king, this too redounded to the emperor's glory: he could now celebrate the *rex datus*, "the king given" by Rome to its eastern imperial counterpart. In sum, the procurement and release of Arsacid hostages were less tools for changing the Roman-Parthian status quo than a means for the emperor to articulate and shore up his power in front of a domestic audience.

The connection forged by Arsacid hostages therefore closely intertwined domestic politics in both Parthia and Rome through the institution of hostage submission. Through the Arsacids of Rome, political actors in both empires would use one another to accomplish domestic goals, an illustration of how “the availability of partners in political coalitions is not necessarily limited by national boundaries.”²³ The cross-border movement of Arsacid royalty broke into internal affairs on both sides of the Euphrates, binding the interests of kings, emperors, and aristocrats in shifting and complex constellations that cut across the boundary between the two empires.

But the more Arsacid hostages tied Parthia and Rome together on the level of domestic politics, the more they deepened the division between the two empires in the realm of ideology. In Parthia, the Arsacids who returned from Rome to claim the throne made enemies who attacked and discredited them by undermining their royal status. They did this by redefining what was “Arsacid” in contradistinction to what was “Roman,” a rhetorical move that effectively disqualified returning hostages as candidates for the kingship by tarring them with the brush of Romanization. In the search for new models for Arsacid kingship, the enemies of the Arsacids of Rome drew increasingly on Parthia’s Iranian heritage, turning away from the legacy of Hellenism that might otherwise have served as a middle ground between their own empire and that of Rome. This development may have been an important first step toward what, in the Sasanian period, became an entrenched division between *Ērān ud Anēran* – Iran and not-Iran.²⁴

Across the Euphrates, Arsacid hostages offered the Julio-Claudian emperors a way to negotiate between long-held Roman pretensions to universal rule on the one hand and the reality of Parthian autonomy on the other. The result was the ideology of the *divisio orbis*, a world

²³ Keohane / Nye 1977: 34.

²⁴ ŠKZ 1. On Sasanian divisions of political space, see Payne 2013; Canepa 2009.

divided between Rome in the west and Parthia – wild, barbarous, and unruleable – in the east.²⁵ By relegating the Parthians to a world different from that of Rome and ungovernable by Roman power, the Julio-Claudians tried to reconcile the termination of their empire at the Euphrates with cherished notions of *imperium sine fine*, empire without end.²⁶ Comparison with Parthia offered a way to articulate what Rome was and what Rome was not – and the Romans saw Parthia largely through the lens of the Arsacid hostage.

So while the Arsacids of Rome were connectors in the realm of politics, they were dividers in the realm of ideology. Hostages were the whetstones on which Rome and Parthia sharpened their imperial identities in contradistinction to one another. They were part of how Rome determined what was Parthian and the Parthians what was Roman – and, by extension, how both sides determined what they themselves were not.²⁷ As intermediaries and negotiators between great powers, they had a paradoxical effect: they deepened the very gap that their careers had bridged as domestic actors on both sides manipulated them for internal political benefit. Even as they forged a connection, they prompted further division by offering an avenue of attack to those who benefitted from the construction of a foreign enemy. On both sides of the Euphrates, exposure to outside elements led to a powerful rejection of what lay beyond the borders.

In contrast to the focus of the war and diplomacy school, the history of the Arsacids of Rome suggests that an analysis of ancient interstate relations in terms of foreign policy can sometimes obscure more than it elucidates. The Arsacids of Rome were surrendered, confined, released, and manipulated by political actors and factions in Parthia *and* in Rome; imperial

²⁵ Just. 41.1.1 (above). On the *divisio orbis*, see Chapter 6, p. 198–211.

²⁶ Verg. *Aen.* 1.279.

²⁷ Cf. Metcalf 2005: 10 on “representational go-betweens.”

boundaries were no impediment to the circulation of hostages. As a result, internal affairs in both empires were shaped by the flow of Arsacid captives back and forth across the Euphrates. This interpenetration illustrates how Rome and Parthia exerted influence not only *on* one another, but also *through* one another. They intermingled and were bound together through the mechanism of hostage submission and release.

A history of the Arsacids of Rome also makes an original contribution to the existing literature that does focus on transfer and connectivity between Rome and Parthia, which primarily investigates questions of cultural receptivity and exchange. The “border studies” approach to Roman-Parthian relations improves our understanding of cross-cultural interactions in frontier regions like Armenia and Mesopotamia, and it clarifies the role of local rulers in negotiating between the Roman and Parthian spheres of influence. The Arsacids of Rome, however, foreground a different dynamic, and they illustrate how even the realm of high politics was characterized by entanglement and interpenetration. Hostages reveal how Rome and Parthia as political formations did not just fray and bleed into one another at the edges; the interconnection extended all the way to the very core of both empires.

Some studies of political intermediaries like the Arsacids of Rome are tales of canny negotiators able to skillfully play two sides for their own benefit.²⁸ This one isn’t. The history of Arsacid hostages is largely one of manipulation *of* them rather than manipulation *by* them. They mediated not through their own agency, but through the interactions that led to their surrender and repatriation. While some scholars have weighed in on how these Parthian dynasts changed in

²⁸ See e.g. Frances Karttunen’s account of Doña Marina, consort and translator for Hernán Cortés, and of Sacajawea (1994: 1–45); Duffy / Metcalf on Hans Staden, a 16th century German captive of the Brazilian Tupinambá Indians (2012: 55).

Roman custody – some say they Romanized, some that they remained proudly Parthian²⁹ – the truth is that their actual experiences have been mostly drowned out by self-serving Roman and Parthian propaganda about what they “really” were. The evidence supports little speculation about how they viewed their own predicament and where their loyalties truly lay. Instead, the historical record of the Arsacids foregrounds how they were used, exploited, and manipulated by actors on both sides of the Euphrates for their own political advantage.

Hostages?

It is important to confront at the outset a question of terminology with extensive implications: were the Arsacids of Rome “hostages”? Granted, labels of identification are, to a certain extent, of secondary importance. The purpose of this study is to analyze the effect of the Arsacids of Rome on the Roman-Parthian relationship, not to prove that they were or were not hostages according to any particular definition. But the matter is not merely one of semantics. In languages both ancient and modern, the words used to describe these dynasts reflect implicit judgements of power relations and cultural assumptions about how a captor treats a prisoner. Most scholars persist in calling the Arsacids of Rome hostages, a practice that is followed here, mostly for lack of a better alternative. But the term is not a neutral or unproblematic one, and its shortcomings require scrutiny.

Modern scholars take their terminology from ancient Greek and Roman authors who called Rome’s Arsacid residents ὄμηροι or *obsides* – words only imperfectly translated by the English word “hostage.”³⁰ In modern European languages, the word implies collateral: a captor takes a hostage to impose demands on a third party, with the understanding that the hostage will

²⁹ Romanized / forgetful of Parthian customs: Debevoise 1938: 151; Levick 1976: 145. Proudly Parthian: Wiesehöfer 2010: 191–2.

³⁰ Or German *Geisel*, French *otage*, Italian *ostaggio*, and Spanish *rehén*.

be injured or killed if the demands are not met. In principle, a ὄμηρος or an *obses* could fulfill this function in the ancient Mediterranean. In practice, they rarely did. Out of the hundreds of hostages interned among the Romans, for instance, the sources preserve only a few cases of punitive execution, some of which are of dubious authenticity.³¹ All things considered, “hostage” is probably a better translation than the alternatives “pledge” or “surety,” words that English speakers rarely apply to human beings. But the term must be understood in a particular sense absent some of its usual connotations.³²

To complicate matters further, the Greco-Roman literary sources occasionally contend that the Parthian kings took advantage of the Roman understanding of hostageship in order to send Arsacid dynasts to Rome for their own reasons. Their view adds another layer of difficulty to the question of terminology: some of our primary sources for the study of these Arsacids reckoned them hostages in name but not in reality. For Strabo, Josephus, and Tacitus, close scrutiny of Arsacid hostageship revealed that the Parthians were subverting Roman expectations of the institution, pursuing their own agenda at the expense of their imperial counterparts.³³ Even for ancient observers, then, the Arsacids of Rome could be imperfect examples of ὄμηροι or *obsides*, though they were better described by these words than by other designations.

No surviving sources speak directly to how the Parthians themselves would have categorized the Arsacids of Rome. A piece of later epigraphic evidence from Sasanian Persia may supply relevant vocabulary. The inscription of the Sasanian king Narseh I (r. 293–303 CE) at Paikuli praises local rulers who have submitted hostages to the recently enthroned king; the

³¹ See Chapter 2, p. 66 and n.68.

³² On the insufficiency of “hostage” as a translation for ὄμηρος or an *obses*, see Braund 1984: 12–3; Allen 2006: 17–22.

³³ See Strab. 16.1.28; Joseph. *AJ* 18.39–42; Tac. *Ann.* 2.1.2, 13.9.1. See the discussions of these passages in Chapter 3, p. 90–6 and Chapter 4, p. 125–31.

Parthian word employed is *nyp'k* / *nēpāk*.³⁴ These hostages were submitted in a domestic Sasanian political context, as guarantees of loyalty between rulers of varying ranks.³⁵ The Arsacids and their subjects might have shared this understanding of hostageship, but there is no way to know that they would have applied the term *nēpāk* to the members of the family that were sent into Roman captivity. Chapter 2 of this study deals in depth with the Near Eastern sources that can shed light on the Arsacid point of view, but the relevant evidence does not suggest any one label, Iranian or otherwise, that may be neatly applied to the Arsacids of Rome.

There is also evidence from ancient China that pertains to the matter of terminology, though it may raise more questions than it answers. Antonino Forte has collected passages from a wide range of biographies, genealogies, and rhyme dictionaries that refer to the arrival at the court of the Han Chinese emperor in the second century CE of a man named An Shigao, a son of the king of *Anxi* (安息), or Parthia.³⁶ This An Shigao evidently served the emperor as a *shizi*, a term that historians of ancient China translate as “attending prince” or “hostage.”³⁷ As with some of the evidence from Rome, the Chinese designation of An Shigao as a hostage may simply represent the perspective of an empire with pretensions to universal rule.³⁸ But the possible presence of an Arsacid dynast in Han China suggests that the Arsacids sent out members of their family in a wide variety of circumstances and for a complex set of reasons – even to states on the very fringes of their world.

³⁴ NPi 94 = Skjærvø 1983: 73, 114. See the discussion in Chapter 2, p. 52–5.

³⁵ The fragmentary nature of the text makes it difficult to reconstruct with confidence here, but in the Middle Persian text *np'(k)* seems to be in apposition to a word that Skjærvø (1983: 73, 114) restores *p[t]st[w](k'n*, which means “promises” or “guarantees.” Cf. MMP-Pa *pdyst'w* in Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 273.

³⁶ On the literary and epigraphic evidence from China pertaining to An Shigao the hostage, see Forte 1995: 1–63; on the sources, cf. Zürcher 1998: 174. What Zürcher refers to as the “secular” evidence differs markedly from a Buddhist tradition which does not remember An Shigao as a hostage: see Forte 1995: 65–90. On the identification of *Anxi* (安息) as Parthia, see Leslie / Gardiner 1996: 251 and nn.2–3.

³⁷ See e.g. Forte 1995: 15, a passage from the 6th century CE *Wei shu*. On the terminology, cf. Yang 1952: 509.

³⁸ Golze / Storm in Hackl et al. 2010: 3.484. On the Sinocentric worldview under the Han and successive dynasties, see Rawski 2012, esp. 234–5.

While this study adopts the term “hostage” as a matter of convenience, then, it also attends to the diverse ways that hostageship could be interpreted by ancient observers in the Mediterranean and on the Iranian plateau. The ambiguity that surrounded the Arsacids of Rome and their significance for Roman-Parthian relations was a crucial part of their legacy, and the meaning of their trans-imperial careers was by turns debated, reimagined, and contested not just between Rome and Parthia, but within the two empires as well. The term “hostage” cannot capture the full range and breadth of their experiences; it is only a place to start.

Outline

Chapter 1 (Evidence) discusses the extant evidence for the study of Roman-Parthian relations, a situation that is characterized by extreme imbalance. In the absence of detailed literary narratives by ancient authors living within Parthian territory, the Greco-Roman literary evidence is the main guide to the careers of the Arsacids of Rome. The parameters of the Roman literary tradition regarding Parthia therefore need to be identified, and the limitations of writing a history of Roman-Parthian relations with evidence that comes mostly (though not entirely) from one side need to be outlined. The scattered and fragmentary sources from Parthian territory supply important context against which the lives of the Arsacids of Rome can be viewed, but such evidence rarely offers an opportunity to directly confirm or reject the narratives of the Roman literary texts.

Chapter 2 (Backgrounds East and West) situates the institution of hostageship in its ancient Mediterranean and, crucially, its Near Eastern historical context. Evidence from Achaemenid and Sasanian Persia as well as pharaonic Egypt and the Assyrian empire suggests that ancient Near Eastern royal hostageship overlapped with fosterage, the rearing of a child by non-biological parents. This background can inform the attempt to reconstruct the Parthian

understanding of Arsacid-Roman hostage submission and to see these transactions through Parthian eyes. The chapter also surveys the contentious issue of hostage acculturation, a theme that is taken up at length in Roman historiography but is not well represented in Iranian sources. In the absence of relevant Near Eastern evidence, it is crucial to recognize the literary foundations of the acculturation motif in the Greco-Roman texts.

Chapter 3 (Arsacid Hostages and Parthian Politics) examines Arsacid hostage exchange from the Parthian point of view from c. 30 BCE to 51 CE – in Parthian terms, from the reign of Phraates IV to Gotarzes II. It surveys the major developments in Arsacid-Roman hostage submission primarily through the testimony of Tacitus, Josephus, and Strabo, though reference is made, where relevant, to the view of Near Eastern hostageship established in Chapter 2. Several Roman sources support the idea that Arsacid hostageship during this period was largely initiated by the Parthian king himself, and that it addressed domestic political problems internal to the Arsacid empire. But the Parthian nobility also took advantage of Arsacid hostageship when its members began to petition the Roman emperor for the release of individual hostages, whom they then attempted to install on the throne. These transactions effectively made the emperor into a participant in Parthian domestic politics, since he could favor the king or the nobility as he found expedient.

But even when the nobility did secure the release of a hostage, none of these repatriated Arsacids lasted long as king. In the conception of the Greco-Roman sources, the former hostages failed partly because they looked like the puppets of the Parthian nobles who installed them, and partly because they were perceived as foreigners who had undergone Romanization. Their unsuccessful kingships set in motion the increasing tendency of the Parthians to define what was “Arsacid” in contrast to what was “Roman” – a process that was driven by the Parthians’

experience with hostages who had returned after decades or even entire lifetimes of captivity at Rome. The negative example of the hostage-kings meant that a successful Arsacid monarch had to define himself as an anti-Roman, a ruler whose power and authority derived from sources not to be found in the west.

That, at least, is the picture that emerges from the Parthian narratives of Tacitus and Josephus, and Chapter 4 (Hostage Historiography) undertakes a more rigorous investigation of these authors as sources for Arsacid hostageship and Parthian history more generally. Arsacid hostages are considered alongside other figures from Greco-Roman historiography who mediated between the civilized Mediterranean and the barbarian peoples on its periphery. The literary representations of such intermediaries were shaped by traditions with deep roots in historiography and related genres, and it is against this background that the Parthian narratives of Tacitus and Josephus – rife as they are with tales of Arsacid acculturation, reeducation, and alienation from their heritage – must be considered.

Yet while a literary analysis shows the distinct limits of the Roman authors as observers of eastern affairs, their interpretations of Arsacid history are not necessarily without merit. Comparative evidence can illustrate how the dynamics of hostageship foregrounded in Tacitus and Josephus are represented in other historical contexts. Throughout pre-modern Eurasian history, royal hostageship has often been associated with the exacerbation of dynastic infighting, the susceptibility of a kingdom to foreign influence, and the unwanted effects of cultural exchange. The Parthian narratives of Tacitus and Josephus may owe more to the rhetorical conventions of Greco-Roman historiography than to research into the Arsacid empire, but there is still value in their assessment of hostageship and the types of problems that it could create.

Chapter 5 (The Reign of Vologaeses) turns to the kingship of Vologaeses I (r. 51–78 CE), a ruler whose reign is often seen as a pivotal moment in Parthian history. Vologaeses brought the Parthian nobility to heel and reestablished the preeminence of the Arsacid monarch. His accomplishments rested partly on shrewd dynastic politics: the king filled certain satrapal positions and local kingships with his own family members. Ironically, although Roman-Parthian hostage exchange ended after Vologaeses, the king curbed the nobility by submitting hostages himself. Vologaeses dealt with the civil discord that racked his kingdom at the beginning of his reign by sending several Arsacids to the Roman commander Corbulo in Armenia, permanently removing them from the line of succession.

But the king's dynastic management also entailed the development of a new ideology, one that took its cues from the traditions of the Iranian plateau. Vologaeses presided over what some scholars have called an "Iranian revival" during his reign, drawing upon the Iranian past and forging a relationship to it in ways that earlier Parthian kings had not. The Parthian language began to replace Greek on coins. A closer alignment between the Parthian king and the religious traditions of Zoroastrianism is evident. And a new foundation myth seems to emerge, one that links the Arsacid family with the Achaemenids, the ancient masters of Iran. The chapter situates this revival against the recurring intervention of Arsacid hostages in Parthian domestic politics throughout the first half of the first century CE, and it suggests that reengagement with the empire's Iranian heritage allowed Vologaeses to redefine Arsacid kingship in a way that delegitimized his kin across the Euphrates.

Chapters 6 (Arsacid Hostages in Augustan Rome) and 7 (The Arsacids of Rome under the Later Julio-Claudians) look at hostages from the Roman perspective. Chapter 6 examines the lives of the Arsacids of Rome during the reign of Augustus. Parthian hostages were essential to

the Augustan representation of the Roman-Parthian relationship, since they allowed the emperor to display his power over the distant east in the absence of a campaign of conquest against the Arsacid kingdom. Calls for such campaigns to avenge the Roman losses at Carrhae were legion during the first years of Augustus' rule, and the princeps had to demonstrate that prudent diplomacy backed by force could be just as effective a means of achieving Roman goals in the east. The return by Phraates IV of the prisoners and standards from Crassus' army helped, but the receipt of hostages gave the emperor a propaganda symbol that a Roman audience could easily understand as a marker of Roman military supremacy.

At the same time, however, Augustus used the Arsacids of Rome to foster a new way of thinking about the Parthians as partners in peace, and not simply imperial rivals. Once Augustan propaganda had relegated the Parthians to their own section of a divided world, Romans and Parthians could be seen as holding up that world together, each keeping to their own respective spheres of influence. Such an ideology countered but also coexisted uneasily with Roman pretensions to universal rule as reflected, for instance, in the Virgilian phrase *imperium sine fine*.³⁹ On the whole, though, the vision of the *divisio orbis* won out in the Augustan period, in large part because the emperor was able to use his possession of hostages to show that Parthia was better kept at bay rather than ruled directly.

Chapter 7 traces the reception of Augustus' *divisio orbis* policy under the successive Julio-Claudian emperors. The Arsacids of Rome continued to figure prominently in the imperial propaganda that dealt with the east. Two grand spectacles paralleled earlier Augustan practice: first, the Arsacid Darius' participation in Caligula's bridge display at Baiae (39 CE); and second, the coronation of Vologaeses' brother Tiridates by Nero (66 CE), an event that may have marked

³⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 1.279.

the final Arsacid hostage submission to Rome. Even after the death of Augustus, hostages from the Arsacid family shored up the emperor's demonstrations of power over the Parthian east; the physical presence of these dynasts in Italy shaped Roman representations of Parthia as well as imperial policy towards it.

The Conclusion considers the question of why Arsacid hostage submission appears to have ended after the Julio-Claudian period, and summarizes the primary findings of the study.

CHAPTER 1

EVIDENCE

Even by the standards of ancient history, the Parthians are obscure. Among pre-Islamic Iranian dynasties they come last, judged a pale shadow of the Achaemenids, their supposed forebears, or a primitive version of the Sasanians, their conquerors.¹ In their own period they suffer neglect in comparison with their contemporaries. While Rome and China “became long-lasting reference points for later empire-builders,” Parthia did not.² The kingdom is often seen as an interlude between the end of Hellenistic rule in the Near East and the rise of the Sasanian dynasty – when finally, after a long hibernation, Iranian history resumed.³

A number of factors have contributed to this traditional undervaluation of Parthia: Sasanian propaganda, Eurocentric classicism, and Iranian nationalism have all conspired to keep Arsacid history in obscurity. But the primary problem remains the lack of evidence. In comparison with other ancient states, the record of the Parthians is sparse. There is no extant Parthian literature, a result of the predominantly oral culture of ancient Iran as well as later editing by the Sasanians, who seem to have reworked Persian tradition to minimize the legacy of their dynastic predecessors.⁴ Epigraphic and papyrological evidence too is relatively meager. There is no Arsacid equivalent of Darius’ Behistun inscription or the *Res Gestae* of Shapur I; only a handful of brief documents shed light on the imperial strategies of Parthia’s ruling

¹ For the Sasanians as an “improved” version of the Parthians, see Debevoise 1938: 269.

² Burbank / Cooper 2010: 4; cf. Gregoratti 2012b: 110.

³ On the unenthusiastic reception of the Parthians among scholars, see Invernizzi 1998: 47. For Peter Heather, Persia only emerged as “the second great superpower of the ancient world” after the advent of the Sasanian dynasty (2007: 386).

⁴ Boyce 1983; Wiesehöfer 1993: 184–6. On the relationship between oral and textual tradition in Iran, see Shayegan 2012: 73–108.

family.⁵ Archaeological study of the Arsacid period has made progress in recent years.⁶ But it still lags behind the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods, and modern Iran's ambivalence about the period between Darius III and Ardashir means it is likely to remain so.⁷

The meagerness of primary sources from Parthian territory means that, for the purposes of this study, the Greco-Roman literary texts come to the fore. The only extant narrative histories of Parthia were composed by authors writing in Greek and Latin and living in territories controlled by the Roman empire, although they sometimes drew on texts composed by Greeks living in Parthian lands, as discussed below. These authors recorded what they saw as the major events in Arsacid politics – first and foremost Parthia's dealings with Rome, but also developments within the kingdom and its relations with its neighbors to the east. They also supply almost all the information to hand about the Arsacids of Rome. The most important methodological question for this study is the value of their testimony, its relationship to a history the Parthians themselves would have recognized, and how it should be understood.

The lay of the literary land should not be flattened out too much. Some scholars reduce the ancient accounts to “hostile” authors whose residence in Roman territory led them to malign their empire's eastern rival.⁸ Such an assessment goes too far and is too simplistic. The geographic origins, cultural backgrounds, and political experiences of Rome's authors were varied; to label them all jingoistic propagandists homogenizes a diverse set of opinions and agendas. Tacitus was far more concerned with criticizing the Caesars than the Arsacids despite his senatorial rank; Velleius Paterculus served in the armies of Gaius Caesar and Tiberius but

⁵ Fowler 2005: 128–9.

⁶ See e.g. Invernizzi / Lippolis 2008 for the Italian excavations at Nisa; Potts 1999: 392–406 for Parthian Elam; Ellerbrock / Winkelmann 2012: 84–104 for architecture and city planning; Nemati et al. 2011 for burial traditions.

⁷ Brosius 2006: 79–80. For a discussion of pre-Islamic history's place in Iranian national identity, see Mozaffari 2014: 27, with the Achaemenids and Sasanians mentioned but the Arsacids omitted.

⁸ Brosius 2006: 80; Pourshariati 2008: 22; Ellerbrock / Winkelmann 2012: 29. A more measured assessment is Dąbrowa 2012: 164–5.

could still call a contemporary Arsacid king a “most illustrious leader.”⁹ To be sure, Greek and Latin literature on the Parthians frequently draws on a host of derogatory clichés and half-truths about the inhabitants of the Arsacid kingdom. But to assume that all such writing amounts to narrow political invective on behalf of Rome oversimplifies a complex body of work by authors who took various positions on Parthia, as they did on Rome itself.

There are few reasons to take a positive view of the value of Greco-Roman literature as evidence for Parthian history. In some cases, it is true, Greek and Roman authors had good sources, especially Greeks living in Arsacid territories. The late second/early first century BCE Greek author Apollodorus came from Artemita / Artamita, a city to the east of the Tigris river under Parthian control.¹⁰ His *Parthica* dealt with Parthian history and ethnography as well as the natural history of the lands the Arsacids ruled; its contents survive only in a handful of references in Strabo and one in Athenaeus.¹¹ As an inhabitant of the Parthian realm, Apollodorus probably relied on a combination of oral and written traditions gleaned at least partially through travel within the empire. He may have had access to Parthian administrative documents in Greek and in other languages, though the absence of any Arsacid “archives” in the material record leaves it unclear precisely what sort of information would have been contained in such repositories.¹² Some scholars have assumed Apollodorus “biased” in favor of the Parthians; others stress his objectivity.¹³ In the absence of his text there is little basis for judgment, but he does seem to have

⁹ Vell. Pat. 2.101.2; cf. Chapter 6, p. 200.

¹⁰ The dates of Apollodorus’ life and literary career are debated. Tarn 1997: 51 put his authorship between 130–87 BCE; Drijvers 1998: 281 at c. 100 BCE. Other scholars have dated his literary career to after the battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE: see Nikonorov 1998: 118–9. See now Müller 2017a: 59–61.

¹¹ Apollodorus = *BNJ* 779. His *Parthica* at least four books long: Athen. *Deip.* 15.29, 682c–d. For ancient testimonia on Artemita, see Isidore of Charax *BNJ* 781 F 2; Plin. *HN* 6.117; Tac. *Ann.* 6.41. For a speculative reconstruction of the place of Parthia in Strabo’s lost historiographic work, see Malinowski 2017: 346.

¹² The Armenian author Moses Khorenats’i (1.8–9 = Thomson 1978: 82–3) mentions a Parthian archive in Nineveh with documents in Greek and Chaldean.

¹³ See Nawotka 2017: 49, with references.

been widely read enough to attract “followers,” and Strabo does praise his work.¹⁴ The *Parthica* may have been a source for other authors writing in Roman territory during the Julio-Claudian period like Pompeius Trogus and Pliny, though neither cites it explicitly.¹⁵ Apollodorus may well have gotten closer to the Arsacid point of view than his fellow historians across the Euphrates. Even so, his perspective may not have interested them much.

To Apollodorus can be added Poseidonius of Apamea and Isidore of Charax, two eastern Greeks with unique perspectives on the Arsacid kingdom. Poseidonius (c. 135–51/0 BCE) was born in Syrian Apamea but later settled in Rhodes.¹⁶ His wide-ranging *Histories* in 52 books dealt with (among other topics) the losses of his native Seleucid kingdom to the encroaching forces of Arsacid imperialism – historical developments that may have prompted him to include an ethnography of Parthia in the work.¹⁷ Isidore’s background is not entirely clear, but his surname *Characenus* suggests that he was an inhabitant of Spasinou Charax, a town in the kingdom of Characene in southern Mesopotamia that was (with varying degrees of autonomy in different periods) part of the Parthian empire.¹⁸ Isidore’s *Parthian Stations* was a geographic description of Parthian territory with an emphasis on trade stations.¹⁹ It is possible that the emperor Augustus commissioned the work as a sort of intelligence gathering exercise prior to

¹⁴ Followers: Strab. 2.5.12 mentions “a group of people around Apollodorus of Artemita who write on Parthian history” (τῶν τὰ Παρθικὰ συγγραφάντων τῶν περὶ Ἀπολλόδορον τὸν Ἀρταμιτηνόν). Nikonorov (1998: 109) links these followers with the οἱ δὲ Παρθυαῖοι mentioned at Strab. 1.2.1, but cf. D’Hautcourt 2015 with a different reading of the latter passage. Strabo’s praise of Apollodorus: 2.5.12. On the relationship between Apollodorus and Strabo, see further Engels 2017.

¹⁵ Nikonorov 1998: 109–11.

¹⁶ For the dates and the background on Poseidonius’ life, see the discussion in Bar-Kochva 2010: 339.

¹⁷ For the political events behind Poseidonius’ Parthian digression, see Dowden 2015: “the ethnography was triggered (i.e., the Parthians first appeared in the narrative) by Demetrios’s invasion of Parthia (Justin 36.1.1–4) and capture by Arsakes VI Mithridates I.” Engels (2011: 182–5) discusses Poseidonius’ engagement with Seleucid / Syrian history. But cf. Bar-Kochva 2010: 340–2, who warns against reading too much into the author’s Seleucid background; and Malitz 1983: 7, 258, 279, who highlights Poseidonius’ apparent contempt for Syrians. On Demetrios II’s imprisonment among the Parthians, see Shayegan 2003; Dąbrowa 2011a; 2011b; Nabel 2017: 31–4.

¹⁸ On the history of Characene under Parthian rule, see Schuol 2000: 291–378.

¹⁹ For a thorough discussion of Isidore’s geography, see Hauser 2017.

Gaius Caesar's campaign in Armenia, though this point is controversial.²⁰ Isidore recorded some points of historical interest if they happened to pertain to the area under description, but these are limited and few in number.

In the case of Josephus, additional source material probably came from Jewish communities in Parthian Mesopotamia. In addition to Arsacid domestic affairs, Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* deals with several events in Jewish history internal to the Parthian empire: the exploits of the "robber barons" Anilaios and Asinaios in Mesopotamia; the persecution of Jews in Babylon and Seleucia on the Tigris; and the conversion to Judaism of the ruling house of Adiabene.²¹ These events had happened within living memory, and the movement of Jews from Mesopotamia to Judaea probably furnished Josephus with both oral and textual sources that shed light on Arsacid politics.²² It is further significant that Josephus claimed to have written for an audience within Arsacid territory: the Aramaic version of his Jewish war was sent "to the barbarians in the interior," which meant, among others, the Parthians.²³ Scholars disagree on how this claim should be taken: was Josephus' Aramaic history a warning to Parthia and its Jews not to make trouble for Roman power, or was the author merely exaggerating his prospective readership?²⁴ But even if the latter is the case, Josephus' involvement and engagement with communities in Parthian territory is clear.

²⁰ See now the discussion in Hartmann 2017: 109–17. This possibility rests upon an emendation of Plin. *HN* 6.141, which tells of a geographic description of the east commissioned by Augustus for Gaius' campaign. But the name of the author is in some manuscripts *Dionysium* rather than *Isidorum*, on which point see Schoff 1989 [1914]: 17; Schuol 2000: 107 and n.160.

²¹ Anilaios and Asinaios: Joseph. *AJ* 18.310–79. Persecution in Seleucia: *AJ* 18.372–8. Judaism in Adiabene: *AJ* 20.17–96. Cf. Fowler 2017: 371–3.

²² See Rajak 1998: 314–23, esp. 321: "Jewish texts which incorporated a real sense of Parthian matters seem to have been available to [Josephus]."

²³ Joseph. *BJ* 1.3: τοῖς ἄνω βαρβάροις. It is later clarified at *BJ* 1.6 that this group includes Πάρθους μὲν καὶ Βαβυλωνίους Ἀράβων τε τοὺς πορρωτάτω καὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ Εὐφράτην ὁμόφυλον ἡμῖν Ἀδιαβηνούς τε. Cf. Rajak 2002: 175; Gruen 2017: 224.

²⁴ Josephus' *Jewish War* a warning to Parthian Jews: Laqueur 1920: 126–7; Rhoads 1976: 11, noting Judaeans hopes for bringing Parthian Jews into the revolt (Joseph. *BJ* 2.388, 6.341–3). Exaggeration of readership: Rajak 2002: 174–84, esp. 181; but cf. Rajak 1998: 310–1. For Josephus' relationship to the Flavians and imperial Rome in

To a certain extent, then, the existence of Greek and Jewish populations on both sides of the Euphrates meant that knowledge about Parthian history, ethnography, and geography could make its way across the river. This circulation meant that people and texts with real insight into Parthian domestic politics were available in Roman territory and might be consulted by authors whose works touched upon Arsacid affairs. Those authors would then adapt the material to their own purposes, of course, and doubtless much was lost in translation. But Romans who wanted to learn about Parthia had at least some resources to draw on.²⁵

Whether Roman authors actually availed themselves of such information is another question. There are reasons to answer in the negative. Much Greek and Latin literature of the late Republic and early Empire described the Parthians with language plucked from earlier classical accounts of eastern barbarians. Fifth-century BCE Greek clichés about the barbarity, treachery, decadence, and softness of the Achaemenid Persians gained new currency as the Romans cast the Arsacids as the inheritors of the empire of Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes.²⁶ In other cases, the central Asian background of the Parthians occasioned their designation as “Scythians,” savage but formidable barbarians who lived in the saddle and were masters of the bow.²⁷ The Achaemenid identification explained the shape and the extent of the empire of the Arsacids, who after all held many of the same lands as the earlier Persians. The Scythian connection explained the military prowess of a people that had won victories against Rome in large part through the skillful use of mounted archers and through feigning retreat.²⁸

general, see Den Hollander 2014.

²⁵ Cf. Momigliano 1975: 140: “The evidence shows an intensive study of Parthian history and geography by Greeks who lived in Parthia and also indicates that the Romans exploited it to get to know the Parthians.”

²⁶ Sonnabend 1986; Schneider 2007; Lerouge 2007.

²⁷ Lerouge 2007: 174–85. This “nomadic heritage” may have been more Roman invention than historical reality. See the opposing views of Olbrycht 1998b, who argues for the authenticity of Parthian nomadism, and Hauser 2005, who finds it to be mostly Roman myth-making.

²⁸ Lerouge 2007: 285–305.

Most Greek and Roman historiography falls somewhere in the middle on this spectrum, mixing useful historical and ethnographic data with caricatured portraits stemming from ignorance, prejudice, or contempt. Such a mixture is present in Justin's epitome of Pompeius Trogus' *Historiae Philippicae*, originally a forty-four book universal history of the succession of empires that ended with Rome. Trogus himself was a Gaul from a family connected to Julius Caesar; he wrote under Augustus or Tiberius.²⁹ The forty-first book of his history dealt with the origins and rise of the Parthians, whom he understood to have come from Scythian stock. Trogus' conception of the Parthians as Scythians colored his assessments of their language, arms, and military tactics.³⁰ Although convinced of Roman supremacy, Trogus' view of a *divisio orbis* seems to imagine a world divided between Parthia in the east and Rome in the west, although some scholars read this comment as a later interpolation by Justin.³¹ His Parthian ethnography contains some accurate information, but also casts aspersions on what the author sees as the "national character" of the Parthians. Trogus' remarks on Parthian polygyny are probably correct, for instance: they are confirmed both by several other Greco-Roman literary sources and by papyrological evidence from Parthian territory.³² And his description of Parthian burial practice – dilanation of the corpse by exposure to birds and beasts – accords well with practices prescribed in Zoroastrian literature, especially the moral and ethical regulations collected in the *Vendīdād*.³³ But the author also attributes characteristics to the Parthians that

²⁹ Trogus' father had served as a member of Caesar's staff: Just. 43.5.11.

³⁰ Just. 41.2–3.

³¹ Justin's career has been variously dated from the second to the fifth centuries CE: see Syme 1988; Yardley / Heckl 1997: 8–14; Bartlett 2014: 264–6. For a discussion of whether *divisio orbis* is Trogus' or Justin's phrase, see Chapter 6, p. 199 and n.31.

³² Just. 41.3.1. The Avroman parchments (Minns 1915: 28–32) confirm polygyny at least among the Arsacid kings: the names of several wives are listed alongside the king's in order to provide a dating formula for the document. For the Avroman texts, see further below, p. 43.

³³ Just. 3.1.5; see de Jong 1997: 432–9. As de Jong notes, however, archaeological evidence suggests that dilanation was just one of several funerary practices employed within Iranian territories.

seem to come from Greco-Roman clichés about eastern barbarians rather than research: slavishness, lustfulness, treachery, fickleness.³⁴

Other historians are quick to fall back on these characteristics to explain developments in Parthian history. Josephus (c. 37–100 CE) came from a land that saw not only Roman but also Parthian imperial incursions, and as discussed above had access to people and texts that came from Parthian territory. But he too draws on the *topos* of the fickle barbarian to explain Arsacid politics: the rejection of the former hostage Vonones as king is attributed partly to the tendency of such barbarians to quickly change their minds.³⁵ To be sure, Josephus then goes on to explain *why* Vonones' opponents acted against him – an explanation that offers valuable insight into Parthian internal affairs.³⁶ Reasoned analysis of Arsacid history appears alongside and shades into stereotypes and clichés about eastern barbarians – a mixture typical not only of Josephus, but of other classical authors, as well.

A similar tension characterizes the work of the other Greco-Roman historians who wrote on Parthia. The geographer and natural historian Pliny included accounts of Parthian territories in his work; like Tacitus, he claimed Domitius Corbulo as a source whose recent writings had greatly expanded Roman knowledge about the Arsacid empire.³⁷ Suetonius includes valuable details about the lives of the Arsacid hostages in Rome, although only insofar as they concerned the biographies of the Julio-Claudian emperors. Plutarch's *Lives* touch on Arsacid interaction with prominent Romans during the late Republic, especially Crassus and Antony. He is a particularly important author for gauging Parthia's relationship with Greek culture and the

³⁴ Just. 41.3.7–10. On the Parthians in Justin, see further Alidoust 2016; Müller 2017b.

³⁵ Joseph. *AJ* 18.47: ταχεῖα δ' ἀνατροπή τοὺς βαρβάρους ὕπαισιν ἅτε καὶ φύσει σφαλεροῦς ὄντας.

³⁶ For further discussion of this passage, see Chapter 3, p. 100, and Chapter 4, p. 135–6.

³⁷ Plin. *HN* 6.23; see the discussion in Chapter 7, p. 250–1.

Hellenistic history of the Near East.³⁸ Dio provides an almost continuous narrative of Roman-Parthian affairs from the late Republic to the fall of the Arsacid family, though the fragmentary survival of his text means that many events are transmitted only in their barest outlines.³⁹ Other authors like Appian of Alexandria, Flavius Philostratus, and Lucian of Samasota offer valuable testimony on the Parthian kingdom, though little that bears directly upon this study. Arrian's *Parthica* in seventeen books unfortunately survives only in fragments, though what remains seems to emphasize long-standing Roman-Parthian enmity culminating in the campaigns of Trajan.⁴⁰

A handful of inscriptions from Roman territory offer contemporary evidence on the lives of the Arsacids of Rome.⁴¹ One was almost certainly composed by the hostages themselves: the Latin epitaph of Seraspadanus and Rhodaspes has been found in Rome. Another Hadrianic inscription from Nemi seems to refer to an original dedication by an Arsacid at the site, though unfortunately the text is extremely fragmentary. Augustus refers to his procurement of a group of Arsacids and to the release of the hostage Vonones in the *Res Gestae*, a text that devotes much attention to the emperor's management of the Parthian east.⁴² Vonones also appears in the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*, a bronze inscription describing the Senate's trial of Germanicus' rival Piso.⁴³ Finally, several epitaphs survive that record the fates of Parthians taken to Roman territory in captivity. While not all of these figures were hostages, their inscriptions

³⁸ On the Parthians and Greek culture, see esp. Wiesehöfer 2000; Olbrycht 2014; 2017.

³⁹ On the preservation of Dio, see Millar 1964: 1–4. All citations of Dio in this study refer to Cary's Loeb edition.

⁴⁰ On Arrian's *Parthica*, see Stadter 1980: 135–144. For a detailed source study of Trajan's campaigns drawing on the fragments of the *Parthica*, see Lepper 1948.

⁴¹ See the collections in Gardthausen 1906; Hackl et. al 2010: 2.435–91 (Thommen).

⁴² Lerouge 2007: 105–12.

⁴³ Eck et al. 1996. See Chapter 7, p. 229–32.

provide comparanda on how inhabitants of the Arsacid realm adapted to a life in Roman territory that often began in captivity.⁴⁴

To historiography can be added the verses of Rome's poets, many of whom are important sources for Roman ideology concerning the Parthian east. The Arsacids occupy pride of place in discussions of non-Roman peoples in Augustan poetry.⁴⁵ Virgil, Horace, Propertius, and Ovid were all fascinated by Parthia's remoteness, size, strength, and rivalry with Rome.⁴⁶ Some of their references to the Arsacid kingdom are stock tropes about faraway places; others mention contemporary events. Anticipation for a symbolic or actual Roman conquest of Parthian territory fills many of their verses.⁴⁷ The alignment between such poems and the official policy of the Augustan regime continues to be a fraught question, though it attracts less attention from philologists than it used to. While the poets may be used as evidence for Roman attitudes towards the Parthians, it cannot be assumed that they were propagating an ideological program at the behest of the Augustan regime. Indeed, there are moments, especially in Horace, where the poet expresses frustration with Roman inaction in the Parthian east.⁴⁸ Relevant passages should be analyzed individually; there was no direct correspondence between poetry and policy.

For the later Julio-Claudian period, the poetry of Lucan contains a wealth of evidence about conflicting attitudes towards the Arsacid kingdom at a fraught moment in Roman-Parthian affairs. Lucan composed his epic during the only war in the first century CE that saw Roman and Parthian troops clash.⁴⁹ His eighth book dramatizes a debate between the late Republican strongman Pompey Magnus and the consular Cornelius Lentulus over the advisability of fleeing

⁴⁴ See Chapter 6, p. 215–9.

⁴⁵ For the Parthians in Augustan poetry, see Debevoise 1938: 207–11; Meyer 1961: 52–3; Wissemann 1982.

⁴⁶ See Chapter 6 for discussion.

⁴⁷ Chapter 6, p. 192–8.

⁴⁸ On tensions between Horace and Augustus over Parthia, see McKay 1966: 33–6; Seager 1980; 1993; Nabel 2015.

⁴⁹ On the war between Nero and Vologaeses, see Chapter 5, p. 171–87.

to Parthia.⁵⁰ Other authors do report that Pompey considered taking refuge in the Arsacid kingdom after Pharsalus, so there is some historical basis for the scene.⁵¹ But Lucan's paired speeches can also be read as a contemporary reflection on the possibility of rapprochement with Parthia. Lucan committed suicide in 65 CE, two years after the general Corbulo came to terms with the Arsacids over their seizure of Armenia.⁵²

Finally, many depictions of Parthians are found in the art, monuments, and coins of the early Principate. The most famous case is the centrally-placed Parthian on the breastplate of the Prima Porta Augustus. Augustus' coinage also featured Parthians along with the standards he had recovered from them, sometimes gracing newly erected monuments like the Temple of Mars Ultor or the emperor's Parthian arch. Neither survives, but the numismatic and literary evidence combined with archaeological remains aids in reconstruction. The Ara Pacis arguably contains a depiction of a Parthian hostage, though the point is much debated.⁵³ Artistic evidence also survives from the reign of Nero, whose coinage and monuments looked back to those of Augustus. Nero too had a Parthian arch; it is not extant, but it can be reconstructed from coins, and a surviving relief fragment with a depiction of a bearded Parthian may have belonged to it.⁵⁴

Far and away the most important source for this study is Cornelius Tacitus, who as a contemporary of Trajan lived and wrote in a time that saw many Roman eyes turned toward the Parthian east because of that emperor's campaign.⁵⁵ In the *Annals*, 78 chapters of which touch on Parthian affairs, Tacitus includes three lengthy passages about the fate of the Arsacids released

⁵⁰ For Lentulus' role in the poem, see Fucecchi 2011: 244–6.

⁵¹ For Pompey's thoughts of seeking refuge in Parthia after Pharsalia, cf. Plut. *Pomp.* 76.4–6; App. *B Civ.* 2.83; Vell. Pat. 2.53.1; Cass. Dio 41.55.4, 42.2.5 (who rejects that Pompey would have considered it); Caes. *B Civ.* 3.82.5; discussion in Gelzer 1959: 241; Seager 2002: 167–8.

⁵² On Lucan's relationship to Nero and the date of his death, see Ahl 1970: 35–47; cf. 1984: 207.

⁵³ On the Ara Pacis, see esp. Rose 2005: 38–44. On the Augustan media mentioned in this paragraph, see Chapter 6.

⁵⁴ See Chapter 7, p. 255–7.

⁵⁵ Composition of Tacitus' *Annals* against the backdrop of Trajan's Parthian campaign: Potter 1991: 287–90.

by Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius.⁵⁶ His narratives of the clashes between returning hostages, Parthian nobles, and reigning Arsacid kings are indispensable; there is very little additional evidence that offers a window onto these events. These accounts are not limited to direct Parthian interaction with Rome – Arsacid internal affairs are given their own treatment, and a glimpse is afforded into the Parthian world beyond the Roman horizon. But the author’s descriptions of what goes on in that world are not always rooted in research. Like Josephus, Tacitus sometimes resorts to hackneyed descriptions of Parthian fickleness or weakness that seem to replace in-depth analysis of the events he is describing.⁵⁷

An even more concerning point is Tacitus’ tendency to use the Parthians as mouthpieces for his own views, and especially for his own critique of the emperor and the imperial court. The author is always on the lookout for ways to expose the early Principate as corrupt, spineless, and enervating, and he does not hesitate to have the Parthians do it for him.⁵⁸ When he has a member of the Parthian nobility upbraid a returning hostage as “effeminate,” for instance, the insult seems less a feature of Parthian political discourse than an indictment of a Principate that robs its foreign wards of their *virtus*.⁵⁹ In another instance, a speech in the mouth of the Arsacid king Gotarzes directly echoes the vocabulary of a Claudian oration from a few chapters earlier, exposing the emperor’s rhetoric as shallow and baseless.⁶⁰ The case clearly shows that Tacitus used the Parthians as tools to criticize the aspects of Roman imperialism that he viewed with distaste.

⁵⁶ On the percentage of the *Annals* that deal with Parthia, see Heil 2017: 260.

⁵⁷ E.g. Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.1–2, 12.14.1. See further Chapter 4.

⁵⁸ On Tacitus’ mostly but not entirely negative view of the early Principate, see Syme 1958: 28, 547–50; Benario 1964; Mehl 2001: 121–6; Mellor 2011; Pelling 2012: 292.

⁵⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.3; see Gowing 1990: 320; and Chapter 4, p. 138–9.

⁶⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.3; see Koestermann 1963–8: 3.132–3.

It is a critical question whether Tacitus' account captures aspects of Parthian political discourse or simply reflects a Roman's view of Rome. As Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg has argued in the context of Greek literature on the Achaemenids, "Persians on Greeks are really Greeks on Persians and therefore Greeks on Greeks."⁶¹ The same problem applies to the study of Parthian history with Roman sources, and above all with Tacitus.⁶² The Roman authors who wrote on Parthia may have used the Arsacids simply as a means of highlighting what Rome was not; they were less concerned with constructing a positive image of Parthia than throwing Rome into relief through the development of a negative. Tacitus is a prime example, but the same tendency is evident, to varying degrees, in the texts of other Greco-Roman historians and poets.

There is no question that this dynamic is an inextricable part of the textual sources. It remains to ask whether the literary texts and especially Tacitus provide any basis for understanding events and processes internal to the Arsacid empire. Unfortunately, the matter admits of no certain conclusions, since Tacitus' sources for Parthian affairs are generally unknown, and no Parthian texts survive with which the historian's narrative might be compared.⁶³ The limitations of the evidence are distinct. But there is at least other information that can be brought to bear to enrich the interpretation of Tacitus' account – not as a means of establishing historical truth, but as a way of considering his text from different angles and gaining a fuller understanding of his historiographical project.

First, Tacitus used at least one source who had to deal with Arsacid dynastic politics. The historian could have gained insight through the testimony of the general Domitius Corbulo,

⁶¹ Sancisi-Weerdenburg 2001: 340.

⁶² Wiesehöfer 2007: 127–8; Heil 2017.

⁶³ Ehrhardt 1998: 297. On Tacitus' use of literary and documentary sources for writing Roman history, see Syme 1958: 176–90, 271–303; Devillers 2003; Martin 1981: 199–213; Potter 2012: 128–9.

whose compositions he cites as a source for eastern affairs.⁶⁴ While the genre of Corbulo's writings is a matter of some debate, the commander kept records of his Armenian campaign against the Arsacids that were intended for publication.⁶⁵ These wars brought Corbulo into direct contact with the dynastic wrangling of the Arsacid family and the inner workings of their empire. At one point, he held a number of Arsacid hostages in his camp; at another, he communicated with the Hyrcanians – a population within the Parthian empire – about coordinated action against the Arsacid king Vologaeses I.⁶⁶

Corbulo's works do not survive, and in the absence of extensive summaries by other authors their original content can only be matter of speculation. But Caesar's *commentarii* may offer a point of comparison. Like Corbulo, Caesar composed in the field against a foreign enemy that he had to explain to his Roman audience. Caesar's *Gallic War* is not simply a blow-by-blow account of his battles against the Gauls. It also contains ethnography of the Gauls and Germans and explanations of the political feuds among them.⁶⁷ Such excurses provided essential context – the reader could not fully understand Roman-Gallic affairs and, by extension, Caesar's accomplishments without it. Corbulo was in a similar position with respect to the Arsacid house, and it is likely that some explanation of Parthian internal affairs was necessary to make his memoirs intelligible to his audience.⁶⁸ Like Caesar, Corbulo surely wrote with an agenda, and Tacitus had to treat aspects of his account with caution.⁶⁹ Still, the general was in a unique

⁶⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.16.1–3.

⁶⁵ The nature of Corbulo's compositions is debated; see Levick 2013: 541–545; Malloch 2013: 264 n.159. The campaigns lasted from c. 55–63 CE; for chronology, see Wheeler 1997. On Corbulo's career in general, see Syme 1970.

⁶⁶ Corbulo with Arsacid hostages: Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.1–3. Pliny (*HN* 6.23, 40) cites hostages connected to Corbulo's campaigns as a source of information for eastern geography. Talks with Hyrcanians: Tac. *Ann.* 14.25.2; cf. 13.37.5, 15.1.1; discussion in Schottky 1991: 119; Olbrycht 1998b: 181–3.

⁶⁷ On the interrelationship between Caesar's military and literary initiatives, see Osgood 2009.

⁶⁸ See e.g. the discussion of Tac. *Ann.* 15.27.2.

⁶⁹ See Tac. *Ann.* 15.16.3, where Tacitus considers the possibility that Corbulo distorted the truth to besmirch the reputation of his colleague Paetus. Cf. Ehrhardt 1998: 298.

position to supply information about Arsacid dynastic struggles and the domestic political environment within Parthia. Tacitus' history could have benefitted.

Second, comparative evidence can inform our reading of Tacitus' account of the clashes between Rome's Arsacids and their political enemies in Parthia. As will be discussed, a pattern reoccurs in all these cases: the Arsacids of Rome are derided as Romanized quislings; they are denied their Arsacid heritage; and their disenfranchisement is justified on the basis of their supposed connection with the Romans.⁷⁰ Such descriptions owe much to the literary conventions of Greek and Latin historiography. Greek and Roman historians often dramatized the acculturation of the hostage and other such intermediaries between two worlds.⁷¹ They were interested in how these figures changed, or appeared to change, on their journeys away from home – how they “went native,” embracing the cultural forms of their foreign hosts. Another subject ripe for dramatization was the go-between's return to his or her homeland, where accusations of treachery awaited them.

Ancient historiography is rife of stories of such go-betweens who fall prey to the rumor or accusation that they have acculturated to the ways of their hosts. In Herodotus, the Scythian royalty Anacharsis and Scyles are both executed for their adoption of Hellenic rites.⁷² Philip of Macedon was supposedly exposed to Pythagoreanism while a hostage with Epaminondas in Thebes.⁷³ A German originally named Agenarich was renamed “Serapio” by his father, who had been initiated into the cult of Serapis while serving as a hostage in Gaul.⁷⁴ Jovinianus, a hostage

⁷⁰ See Chapter 3.

⁷¹ Allen 2006: 9, 149–77.

⁷² Hdt. 4.76–80; cf. Diog. Laert. 1.101–2. On the pair, see further Armstrong 1948; Hartog 1988: 62–84; Sherwin-White / Kuhrt 1993: 145–7 (with explicit comparison to the Arsacid hostage Vonones); Braund 2008: 352–6. For the story of Scyles, see also the late 6th / early 5th century BCE signet ring with the inscription ΣΚΥΛΕΩ and the coins bearing his name: Dubois 1996: 12; Vlassopoulos 2013: 114–5.

⁷³ Diod. 16.2.3.

⁷⁴ Amm. 16.12.25; cf. Lee 1991: 368–9.

from Corduene, received a liberal education among the Romans in Syria and as a result, at least according to Ammianus, favored the Roman cause over the Sasanian.⁷⁵ In the Seleucid realm, Antiochus IV was plagued by accusations of trying to import Roman cultural forms into Antioch after his hostageship in Rome, and Demetrius II earned a reputation for “Parthian cruelty” after a decade in captivity at the Arsacid court.⁷⁶ These examples shed further light on the trope of acculturation: why it was used, when it was deployed, and how ancient authors understood it.⁷⁷

Finally, there is evidence from within Parthian territory that cannot be used to write a detailed historical narrative or to confirm the reports of the classical texts, but which does supply important context against which Tacitus’ account and the other Greco-Roman literary sources can be read. The eastern evidence is meager and scattered, and it is important not to attach mountains of significance to molehills of evidence. Still, taken as a whole, the record from Parthian territory can help historians evaluate changes in Arsacid political ideology under the kings who confronted the real or potential threat of hostage rivals returning from Rome.

The most important primary sources for the reconstruction of Arsacid political ideology are the coins. Many Parthian royal issues came to light in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and made their way into western collections. Unfortunately, relevant archaeological context is hardly ever available, as relatively few specimens have been found through scientific excavations. Moreover, the dating and attribution of Parthian coins can be contentious. All kings took the throne name of “Arsaces” upon accession, so it is never a straightforward matter to distinguish one monarch’s coins from another’s. But while some periods are still mired in confusion, on the whole a basic chronology and attribution scheme has found broad agreement

⁷⁵ Amm. 18.6.20. For discussion, see Matthews 1989b: 56–7 and n.18; Kagan 2011: 168–9.

⁷⁶ Nabel 2017.

⁷⁷ See further Chapter 4, p. 139–43.

among scholars.⁷⁸ The standard reference remains David Sellwood's *Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia*, though in some places Sellwood's identifications have been superseded by specialist articles.⁷⁹ A new effort to comprehensively republish the coins is underway through the *Sylloge Nummorum Parthicorum*, an effort involving several Parthian numismatists. Only one volume is available at the time of this writing, but it handles the issues of Vologaeses, the last Arsacid king covered by this study. Accordingly, all coins are cited by Sellwood number and, where applicable, by *SNP* number, as well.

Continuity was the name of the game in Arsacid coinage: images and epithets could remain unchanged for centuries, while innovations in coin iconography tended to be gradual. Where there are changes, these can be significant, and this study highlights the issues of two kings in particular. The first of these is Artabanus II, who battled two former Roman hostages for the throne. On one tetradrachm type, a unique forward-facing bust replaces the far more common left-facing portrait. For some scholars, this change exemplifies the frontality that becomes an essential characteristic of Parthian art starting in the first century CE.⁸⁰ On other coins, Artabanus omitted the common epithet *philellen*. This too was a break from tradition, and it is possible to read the omission as a comment on Artabanus' relationship with the Greek populations inside the Parthian empire – a relationship that was influenced not just by internal Parthian politics, but also Arsacid interaction with Rome.⁸¹ An inscription in Greek that preserves a royal edict from Artabanus to the residents of Susa speaks further to the king's dealings with his Greek subjects.⁸²

⁷⁸ A "dark period" in the early first century BCE, for instance, remains obscure: see Shayegan 2011: 188 n.563, with references.

⁷⁹ Sellwood 1980. One example of supersession applies to the issues of the usurper Tiridates I, for which see now Callataÿ 1994.

⁸⁰ Sellwood 63.1; Frye 1984: 246; Colledge 1977: 143–4; but cf. Sinisi 2014: 17, 36–50.

⁸¹ Sellwood 1980: 185; Sinisi 2012b: 286; cf. Curtis 2000: 24. For discussion, see Chapter 3, p. 110–1.

⁸² Cumont 1932; Thommen in Hackl et al. 2010: 2.486–90.

Artabanus' iconographic innovations were taken further by Vologaeses I, a leader whose kingship has rightly been seen as a turning point in Parthian history.⁸³ Vologaeses was the first king since the founder of the Arsacid dynasty to use any language but Greek on his coins.⁸⁴ On later drachms, an abbreviation of his name appears in Parthian to the right of his diademed bust. On the other side of these coins the Greek legend is blundered and illegible, having become a pictorial element rather than a textual one.⁸⁵ To be sure, these were the beginnings of gradual changes rather than a dramatic break – the issues of Vologaeses' successors sometimes display legible Greek inscriptions, and their use of Parthian was not ubiquitous. On the whole, though, the numismatic innovations introduced under Vologaeses would become increasingly prevalent over time.

Non-Arsacid coinage also says a certain amount about the autonomy of local kings under the Parthian yoke. On the basis of numismatic evidence some scholars have argued for reduced autonomy in the first century CE for the client kingdoms of Characene and Elymais, where the apparent cessation of local dynastic coinage might point to a tighter imposition of Arsacid control.⁸⁶ But the existence of local issues does not necessarily imply a lesser degree of integration or a weak Arsacid central authority. In some cases, it appears that client dynasties were not just permitted but even required to mint their own coins. In the absence of other evidence for local revolts, care must be taken when drawing a line from the numismatic evidence to the political structure of the Arsacid empire.⁸⁷

⁸³ A full account of Vologaeses' kingship is found in Chapter 5.

⁸⁴ Arsaces I made use of the Aramaic title *krny* on some of his drachms: Sellwood 3.1, 4.1. The office is attested in Achaemenid administrative documents (see Naveh / Shaked, 2012: 190–1) and may be connected with Greek *κάρωνος*; see further Wiesehöfer 1993: 96; Briant 2002: 340; Hyland 2013; Rung 2015; Sinisi 2014: 12.

⁸⁵ The legend reads *wl*, short for *wlgšy* / *Walgaš* / Vologaeses: *SNP* type IVc/4a.α(1c.α) = Sellwood 71.1. Some (e.g. Debevoise 1938: 196; Boyce 1975: 103) have thought that Vologaeses depicted a Zoroastrian fire altar on his issues, but the element in question is probably a mint monogram: Potts 2006: 272 n.18. See Chapter 3, p. 160–3.

⁸⁶ See Dąbrowa 1991: 143–5; Keall 1975: 624–5; Schuol 2000: 339; cf. Hauser 2005: 196 n.115.

⁸⁷ Hauser 2006: 307–8.

Papyrological evidence from Mesopotamia sheds some light on linguistic preferences within the empire. The Avroman documents offer some limited support to the idea that the importance of the Parthian language increased in the first century CE.⁸⁸ This is a set of three parchments, found in present-day Kurdistan, that record legal transactions concerning the sale of a vineyard. The parties involved in all three documents have Iranian names. Avroman I and II date to the first century BCE (88/7 and 22/1, respectively) and are written in Greek.⁸⁹ But Avroman III, which dates to 53 CE, is written in Parthian.⁹⁰ The sample set is extremely small, but taken alongside the numismatic evidence it seems to suggest that the Greek language was losing ground to Parthian in contexts where it had previously dominated.

There is also Zoroastrian religious literature that, though not committed to writing until centuries after the Arab conquest, nevertheless reflects a long pre-Islamic history. These texts rarely offer direct testimony for the Parthian period, since they did not achieve their current form until the 9th century CE or later. The Avesta and the Zand – the central text of Zoroastrianism and its exegesis – have a very long trajectory, having been shaped and reshaped in oral tradition since the Bronze Age or even earlier.⁹¹ These texts hold little historical interest for this study, but the tenth century CE *Dēnkard*, an account in Middle Persian of the transmission of the Avesta, does preserve a rare reference to a king named “Vologaeses the Arsacid” (*Walaxš ī Aškānān*).⁹² Another Vologaeses is mentioned in the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, a Middle Persian apocalyptic text.⁹³ These references are obscure but valuable, since the Zoroastrian memory of the Arsacids

⁸⁸ Wiesehöfer 2015: 339.

⁸⁹ Minns 1915.

⁹⁰ Hackl et al. 2010: 2.566–7 (III.2.4).

⁹¹ See Boyce 1979: 18 on the date of Zoroaster, which she tentatively puts between 1700–1500 BCE.

⁹² Dk. 412.5–11.

⁹³ ZVYt. 3.25–6.

was largely erased under the succeeding Sasanian dynasty. The ruler mentioned in these passages may have been Vologaeses I, the last practitioner of Arsacid hostage submission to Rome.⁹⁴

A handful of reliefs from the Parthian period survive in western and southern Iran, though nothing to match the detail or preservation of Achaemenid and Sasanian rock art. Some panels may tentatively be linked with Arsacid kings, though in every case the identifications are contentious.⁹⁵ It is tempting to connect these reliefs with major events in Parthian political history, especially when their figures are accompanied by inscriptions with names recognizable from the Greco-Roman sources. But this instinct is usually best avoided. The inscriptions on the reliefs tend not to match Arsacid royal titulature as it is known from coins and papyrological evidence, and much of the artwork has been severely worn. Many cannot be independently dated on stylistic grounds.

In a few cases, evidence for Parthian interaction with China under the Han dynasty offers an opportunity to situate Roman-Parthian relations in a broader global context. Nothing from Parthian territory survives that attests to encounters with the Han, but Chinese historiography and documentary texts mention the people and geography of the land of *Anxi* (安息), the Chinese transcription of *Aršak*, or Arsaces.⁹⁶ Surviving records deal with issues such as the reception of Han envoys, the exchange of diplomatic gifts, and Parthian coinage.⁹⁷ As with the Roman evidence, these texts view the Parthians from an outsider's perspective, and such reports are imbued with the Sinocentrism of the Han worldview.⁹⁸ Still, the Chinese sources provide an

⁹⁴ See Chapter 5, p. 167–70.

⁹⁵ See Fowler 2005: 138–41 for a brief survey of the reliefs of Mithradates, Gotarzes, and Vologaeses. On Parthian reliefs in general see Herzfeld 1920; Kawami 1987; 2013; Vanden Berghe / Schippmann 1985; Curtis 2000.

⁹⁶ The evidence is collected and discussed by Uta Golze and Kerstin Storm in Hackl et al. 2010: 3.482–512 (III.8) with German translations; see also the collections in Leslie / Gardiner 1996; Sampson 2008: 198–9; Hirth 1885. On the identification of *Anxi* as Parthia, see Leslie / Gardiner 1996: 251 and nn.2–3.

⁹⁷ See e.g. Leslie / Gardiner 1996: 33–45. On gift-giving in ancient China, see Lewis 2009: 121–31.

⁹⁸ Golze / Storm in Hackl et al. 2010: 3.484. On the Sinocentric worldview under the Han and successive dynasties, see Rawski 2012, esp. 234–5.

indication of the extent of Parthian power, and they remind historians that the Arsacid empire's relationship with Rome was not its only interstate concern.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUNDS EAST AND WEST

This chapter supplies a general background to hostageship in the ancient world and identifies the features of the institution that were most pertinent to the Arsacid experience. The focus is on the Iranian plateau and the Roman Mediterranean, since Parthian hostages divided their lives between these two regions. The Persian world is given priority in a discussion that attempts, wherever possible, to reconstruct ancient Iranian hostageship through indigenous sources, limited though these may be. Contemporary Parthian documents are virtually non-existent, but comparative Near Eastern evidence can support an examination of the institution that does not rely on the Greco-Roman literary texts – a perspective that previous treatments of the Arsacids of Rome have neglected.

The following survey highlights two features of ancient hostageship that will figure prominently in this study's subsequent analysis of the Arsacids of Rome. First, the term hostage, while admittedly a legal status in some Greco-Roman texts, was nevertheless a slippery category.¹ The institution was not merely a component of interstate agreements; it connected to and overlapped with other areas of social life. One important overlap was with fosterage, the rearing of a child by non-biological parents. Among ancient royal families, the bonds forged by fosterage could be a key factor in interstate relations, and while the kinship dimension is better represented in the Near East than in Rome, it is nevertheless evident in both contexts. For Roman-Parthian relations in the first century CE, the connections between hostageship and fosterage can help show how the language of kinship and foster-relations might have affected the lives of the Arsacids of Rome.

¹ Wheeler 2007.

Second, the integration of ancient Near Eastern evidence shows that the problematic issue of hostage acculturation looms large in the Greco-Roman literary texts, but has less basis in the extant Near Eastern evidence. To be sure, it may be reasonable to assume that royal children raised at the court of a foreign ruler were profoundly affected by these periods of residence, some of which lasted for many years. It is further possible that such an upbringing alienated them from their homelands, at least in the eyes of their countrymen. But while Greco-Roman authors found rich narrative material in the domestic strife that these situations could produce, the extant Near Eastern evidence does not foreground the dynamic in the same way. Iranian sources may be scarce, but they can help illustrate just how different Arsacid hostage submission might have looked from the Parthian side of the Euphrates.

The Iranian Background

No contemporary sources from Parthian territory refer to the foreign internment of the Arsacids of Rome. In fact, the only piece of indigenous evidence that directly concerns them is a single coin series minted by Vonones I on his accession to the Arsacid throne.² The coins make no mention of Vonones' approximately twenty-year Roman hostageship, which is known only from Greco-Roman literary texts. In the almost complete absence of Parthian sources, how can the Arsacid conception of "hostage" submission be understood, or even approached?

While Parthian sources are lacking, a survey of the ancient Near Eastern evidence for hostageship can help counterbalance the predominant role of the Greco-Roman literary sources for the events of the first century CE. Long before the Achaemenid Persians arrived on the scene as an imperial power, hostageship already had deep roots. In Egypt, the pharaoh's court hosted many young princes from lands like Syria-Palestine, Nubia, and Libya that were subject to his

² On these coins, see Chapter 3, p. 102.

rule, if to varying degrees. These boys “would be raised from childhood in the Egyptian palace, exposed to Egyptian culture, religion, and loyalty to the pharaoh,” an upbringing meant to mold them into reliable clients.³ Nor were their parents always opposed to the practice, which helped them insure access to the pharaoh and maintain the stability of their local rule.⁴ Scholars generally take the view that the institution benefitted the Egyptian state, though in some cases a repatriated hostage might be rejected by a local population.⁵ Egyptian sources sometimes call these young elites “children of the nursery,” a designation that used the language of paternalism to describe the pharaoh’s relationship to them and to the lands they would rule.⁶ The pharaoh was the overseer and sometimes the captor of his young wards, but in another sense he was a father figure, as well.

This intersection between hostageship and kinship tallies well with an aspect of ancient Near Eastern politics that many scholars have discussed: the tendency of interstate relations to be couched in the language of family relations. As Robert Cohen explains, “when Great Kings called each other ‘brother,’ appealed to past and present family ties, and negotiated dynastic marriages, this was literally the way they understood the working of the international system.”⁷ Cohen traces this conceptual understanding in the Amarna letters, a document cache of correspondence between the greater and lesser powers of the 14th century BCE, but other scholars have shown its broader prevalence throughout ancient Near Eastern history.⁸ In this environment, hostageship could take on certain characteristics of fosterage: the king who raised a foreign prince or princess assumed the role of pro-parent. Like honorary brotherhood or dynastic

³ Darnell / Manassa 2007: 145; cf. Ahlström 1993: 232.

⁴ Darnell / Manassa 2007: 145; Morkot 2013: 946.

⁵ Wilson 1956: 183; Darnell / Manassa 2007: 109–10, 145. See further Chapter 4, p. 144–5.

⁶ Darnell / Manassa 2007: 109–10.

⁷ Cohen 1996: 21.

⁸ Liverani 2001: 135–8; Podany 2010: 28–36. On the Amarna letters, see further the essays in Cohen / Westbrook 2000.

intermarriage, the giving and receiving of hostages was an element of interstate politics that could be understood and represented in kinship terms.

The paternal overtones of hostageship are also well attested for the Assyrian empire (c. 2500–600 BCE). It was common practice for the Assyrians to take as hostages the sons and daughters of local kings whom they had recently conquered or re-conquered in the wake of a rebellion.⁹ Unlike mere prisoners of war, these dynasts were treated with honor and enjoyed personal contact with the king.¹⁰ Karen Radner has argued that the maintenance of these hostages at court aimed at “pro-Assyrian indoctrination” – that is, at the cultivation of royal clients who, once released, would serve as reliable agents of Assyrian empire at the local level.¹¹ Impressionable children seem to have been ideal candidates, and paternalistic descriptions are found in the epigraphic evidence. When the Assyrian king Sennacherib defeated the rebellious king of Babylon in 703 BCE, for instance, he installed in his place Bēl-ibni, “a scion of Šuanna (Babylon), who had grown up like a young puppy in my palace,” as one of his inscriptions relates.¹² In a recent discussion, Seth Richardson links such initiatives to a larger program of Assyrian indoctrination; its “purpose was, of course, to develop an international class of imperial elites marked not only by loyalty, but by cultural affinity.”¹³

It seems reasonable to assume that the Achaemenid Persians (c. 550–330 BCE) were influenced by these antecedents, though the evidence for the direct transmission or even creative adaptation of the tradition is not especially robust. Another Assyrian inscription records that one “Kuraš, king of the land of Parsumaš” submitted his oldest son to the king Aššurbanipal in c. 646

⁹ See the survey of inscriptional evidence in Zawadski 1995.

¹⁰ Zawadski 1995: 456.

¹¹ Radner 2012: 473–4.

¹² Sennacherib 1: 54; text and translation in Grayson / Novotny 2012: 36. See also Luckenbill 1924: 54.

¹³ Richardson 2016: 53.

BCE. This Kuraš can perhaps be identified with Cyrus I, the grandfather of the Cyrus who founded the Achaemenid empire. The point, however, is contentious.¹⁴ Moreover, while Achaemenid royal inscriptions share certain thematic similarities with their Assyrian antecedents – the boasting of tribute collection, for instance, or the listing of conquered territories – they do not mention the submission of royal children or the seizure of elite hostages.¹⁵ If Assyria taught the Achaemenids how hostageship could create a cohesive ruling identity, the available evidence is surprisingly quiet on the issue. While Assyriologists see hostageship forging an “international class of imperial elites” united by “cultural affinity,” the Iranian sources simply do not attest such a role for the institution in the empires of ancient Persia.

For their part, the sources that do date back to Achaemenid times are mostly silent on hostageship or the fosterage of royal children. The little that is known of elite Persian child-rearing comes from Greek authors, and even they do not say much about the institution. To be sure, Xenophon writes that children of the nobility were educated at the Achaemenid king’s court.¹⁶ But he also gives the impression that the Persian nobles themselves were usually in attendance, as well, so this is no indication that children would have been separated from their biological parents.¹⁷ It is perhaps significant that Akkadian and Aramaic texts preserve the title “Son of the House,” which apparently extended the language of kinship to important office-holders who were not directly related to the Achaemenid family.¹⁸ Perhaps fosterage was one

¹⁴ For text and translation of the Aššurbanipal inscription, see Weidner 1931: 4. On the identification of Kuraš with Cyrus I and of Parsumaš with Persia, see Young 1988: 26–7; Zawadski 1995: 458; Briant 2002: 17–8, 878.

¹⁵ On the similarities and differences between Assyrian and Achaemenid royal inscriptions and their treatment of conquered peoples, see Kuhrt 1983, esp. 94–5; van der Spek 2014, both on the Cyrus Cylinder. Cf. the boast concerning tribute in Darius’ inscription at Behistun: DB §7 = Schmitt 1991: 50.

¹⁶ Xen. *Anab.* 1.9.3; *Cyr.* 8.8.13; the verb in both passages is παιδεύω. See further Briant 2002: 327–30; Klinkott 2005: 286 and n.29.

¹⁷ Xen. *Cyr.* 8.1.6, 16, 20.

¹⁸ Benveniste 1966: 22–26; Briant 2002: 310. For illustrative examples, see the Aramaic letters from Egypt sent by the satrap Aršāma/Arsames in Grelot 1972: 300–9 (*DAE* 62–4, 66), where Aršāma is referred to with this title.

institution through which such imagined kinship was created. But this is no more than speculation, and hard evidence for the practice is lacking.

While indigenous Achaemenid sources are similarly silent on the matter of hostageship, evidence from Greek literature may indicate that the Great King's retention of aristocratic wives, children, and other family members at his court was a safeguard against rebellion – or so one scholar has argued. “In a way,” Pierre Briant says, “the relatives of the satraps... served as hostages to ensure the satraps’ faithfulness.”¹⁹ The claim is worth consideration, though it ultimately rests on just two passages.²⁰ The first is Ctesias’ account of the revolt of Megabyzus, whose wife Amytis seems to have stayed at the court of Artaxerxes I even in her husband’s absence; it might be noted, however, that her detention by Artaxerxes evidently did not prevent Megabyzus’ rebellion.²¹ The second comes from the history of Diodorus, where Memnon of Rhodes sends his wife and children to the Achaemenid Darius III on the assumption that “he could provide well for their safety having handed them over to the king; at the same time, he figured that [Darius] would entrust him more readily with the supreme command now that he had good hostages (ὀμήρους).”²² While Diodorus’ appraisal of Memnon’s motive should be handled with caution, it does appear that the latter’s submission of his family to the Great King aimed at establishing a bond of trust. But this episode provides little basis from which an Achaemenid hostage practice might be extrapolated, and the Persian vocabulary for any such

¹⁹ Briant 2002: 327.

²⁰ Briant also adduces Cyrus the Younger’s detention of the families of his Greek mercenary commanders (Xen. *Anab.* 1.4.8). But these commanders were not satraps, nor Cyrus a king.

²¹ Ctesias F 14.40 = Stronk 2010: 342–3. Ctesias also writes that Megabyzus had earlier complained about Amytis’ adultery to Xerxes I, her father (F 13.32 = Stronk 2010: 334–5). It is not at all clear that her stay at Artaxerxes’ court was any sort of concession for Megabyzus, or for Amytis, who was an Achaemenid dignitary herself. For a full discussion of the passage, see Waters 2017: 94–100.

²² Diod. 17.23.5: κατὰ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν καιρὸν Μέμωνων μὲν τὴν τε γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα πρὸς Δαρεῖον ἔπεμψε καὶ τούτῳ παραθέμενος ἅμα μὲν ὑπέλαβε τῆς ἀσφαλείας αὐτῶν καλῶς πεπρονοησθαι, ἅμα δὲ τὸν βασιλέα καλοῦς ὀμήρους ἔχοντα προθυμότερον ἐμπιστεύσειν αὐτῷ τὴν τῶν ὄλων ἡγεμονίαν: ὅπερ καὶ συνέβη γενέσθαι. Memnon’s wife was Barsine, who later became the lover of Alexander the Great; see Heckel 2006: 70.

practice remains unknown.

While Arsacid evidence for hostageship is almost non-existent outside of the Greco-Roman literary sources, valuable glimpses of the practice survive in the historical record of the Sasanians (224–651 CE), the imperial successors of the Arsacids on the Iranian plateau. One Sasanian inscription at least offers a way to examine the vocabulary of hostageship in an ancient Iranian context. In 293 CE, the Sasanian dynast Narseh marched from Armenia to Iran in a successful effort to supplant his grand-nephew as king of kings.²³ At the site of Paikuli, Narseh commemorated his victory with a bilingual inscription in Parthian and Middle Persian. Its closing lines preserve the Parthian word for hostage. The text as it appears in P. Oktor Skjærvø's edition reads:

W MNW BNPŠE OL BBA ZY LNE YATWN 'yny' plys[tky] W d'sny W npyky
W **np'(k)** [*Parthian version: nyp'k*] p[t]st[w](k'n ? OL BBA ZY [LNE ŠDRWN-
OLE ? hws?][w]byhy W CBW ZY AHRN gwnky YHSNNt²⁴

And he who came to our court himself or sent envoys, gifts, letters, and **hostages** as promises of loyalty to our court, he received fame and other kinds of things.

Narseh describes a variety of means through which one might acknowledge his new kingship: a personal visit to his court, or the sending of a messenger (*plystky*), gift (*d'sny*), letter (*npyky*), or hostage (*np'k*; Parthian *nyp'k*).²⁵ Grammatically, these four terms seem to be apposition to a word that Skjærvø restores as *ptstwk'n*, which means “promises” or “guarantees.”²⁶ Those who offer such promises to the king, the text says, will be rewarded.

While the fragmentary state of the text precludes certainty, the inscription and its

²³ For the political background, see Daryaee 2009: 10–3.

²⁴ NPī 94 = Skjærvø 1983: 1.73, 2.130. I reproduce the Middle Persian text here, since the Parthian version of the pertinent section (as for the whole text) is highly fragmentary. As indicated, however, the reading of the Parthian “*nyp'k*” is clear. The translation is my own.

²⁵ According to Henning (1965: 248 and n.37), the word means both “hostage” and “pawn” in Sogdian. The word *nb'g* is found in Manichaean Middle Persian with the meaning “relative;” see Sundermann 1973: 16.

²⁶ Cf. Manichaean Middle Persian *pdyst'wg* and Manichaean Parthian *pdyst'w*: Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 273.

historical context seem to illustrate two connotations of the Parthian word *nyp 'k* (in transcription, *nepāk*). The first is that this sort of hostage furnished a pledge or guarantee. If Skjærvø's restoration is correct, the close textual relationship between “hostage” and “promise” shows that considerations of trust and loyalty motivated the exchange. The surrendering party used their hostage to show good faith to Narseh's newly installed regime. This does not necessarily mean the hostage acted as collateral to be killed or harmed in the event of betrayal; after all, the text says nothing about what would happen if the promise of loyalty were broken. But the submission of a hostage was, all the same, a demonstration of fidelity.

Second, the inscription does not make clear the power relationship between Narseh and the people who submitted hostages to him. The wider context of the passage quoted above illustrates just how ambiguous the matter is. The immediately preceding chapters (92–93) record a long list of kings and rulers who “stayed by [Narseh's] advice and counsel,” perhaps the same dignitaries who sent envoys, presents, letters, and hostages to the king after he took the throne.²⁷ Importantly, these are *not* the great noble families of Persia and Parthia, who elsewhere in the inscription are explicitly called the king's “subjects” (*OBDky*).²⁸ Instead, they represent a large number of geographically dispersed potentates whose precise connection to Narseh is not always clear. Some of those listed no doubt belonged to the Sasanian empire proper, but some probably did not, and scholars have debated the geographical location and political status of the various figures. Ultimately, however, what is most striking is the ambiguity of the text. All that is said of the relationship is that these dignitaries abode by Narseh's “advice and counsel” – hardly an

²⁷ NPī 92–3 = Skjærvø 1983: 1.70–3. The phrase in Middle Persian is “PWN pndy W p'dysy ZY LNE YKOYMWNd.” In section 93 the phrase only partly survives, but can be restored by comparison with section 21, where the Parthian version is also preserved: Skjærvø 1983: 1.36; Weber 2012: 204.

²⁸ Weber 2012: 203. In NPī 16 and 32, Persian grandees are named as Narseh's “subjects” (*OBDk(y)*), and their submission of messengers (*plystky*) is mentioned as well; see Skjærvø 1983: 1.33–4 for the text and 2.38–49 for commentary.

unequivocal expression of his power over them.²⁹ Moreover, the inscription groups hostages with other means of diplomatic communication like envoys or letters. The dispatch of an ambassador to a foreign power is of course not a token of political submission; neither, necessarily, was the dispatch of a hostage.³⁰

The Paikuli inscription thus seems to show that, in the Sasanian conception, hostageship was a flexible institution that could govern different kinds of political relationships. The submission of a hostage established goodwill and a bond of trust and loyalty between two kings or local rulers. But the hostage submission in and of itself did not necessarily determine the power relationship between the giver and receiver. It may well have been the case that most hostages were sent by a subordinate to his superior, and perhaps Narseh did receive some hostages of this sort. But the geographic distribution of the dignitaries mentioned in sections 92–93 of his inscription suggests that hostages could also be sent from beyond the Sasanian realm – as an expression of goodwill, but not necessarily as a token of submission.

Narseh's inscription does not specify what happened to a *nepāk* upon his or her arrival at court, but a work of Sasanian literature might offer useful testimony on the matter. That work is the *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān* (The Book of the Deeds of Ardashir), a Middle Persian text that tells the story of the Sasanian dynasty's founder. The *Kārnāmag* is more romance than history. As with most founders of ancient dynasties, the historical details of Ardashir's life have fused with myth, legend, and embellishment, and few scholars would put much stock in the *Kārnāmag* narrative of his birth and early career. All the same, the text reflects the late Sasanian and early Islamic milieu in which it was composed and redacted, and as such it can illustrate how

²⁹ See Skjærvø 1983: 2.120, with references to previous discussions: "... as far as I can see, the text itself does not define the status of the rulers beyond the statement just quoted."

³⁰ Compare, for example, *Mon. Anc.* 31, where Augustus boasts of receiving ambassadors from India (*ex India regum legationes*) – a land that was not, in any meaningful sense, subordinate to the Roman empire.

the circulation of children shaped the relationship between kings and subordinates in late antique Iran.³¹

While its author never uses the word *nepāk*, the *Kārnāmag* speaks to the conditions under which a local Iranian potentate might send his children to the court of the king of kings who ruled over him. At the beginning of the story, Ardashir is born and raised at the house of Pabag, a provincial governor of Pars under Artabanus IV, the last Arsacid king. When Artabanus hears of Pabag's distinguished adopted son, he insists that the boy be sent to his court:

Ka Ardaxšēr ō dād ī pānzdāh sālag rasīd, āgāhīh ō Ardawān mad, kū Pābag rāy pus-ēw ast ī pad frahang [ud] aswārīh frahixtag [ud] abāyīšnīg. U-š nāmag ō Pābag kard, kū amā ēdōn ašnūd kū ašmā rāy pus-ēw ast ī abāyīšnīg, pad frahang [ud] aswārīh abēr frahixtag, u-mān kāmag, kū ōy dar [ī] amā frēstē ud nazdīk *ī amā āyēd, tā abāg frazandān [ud] wāspuhragān bawēd, u-š pad frahang ī-š ast bar [ī] pādašn framāyēm. Pābag, az ān čiyōn Ardawān mas kāmgārtar būd, juddar kardan ud ān framān bē spōxtan nē šāyist. U-š, andar zamān, Ardaxšēr ārāstag, abāg dah bandag ud was čiš [ī] abd wēšist [ud] sazāgwār ō pēš Ardawān frestīd.³²

When Ardashir reached the age of fifteen years, Artabanus learned that Pabag had a son who was skilled and accomplished in matters of learning and horsemanship. He wrote a letter to Pabag, which said: “We have heard that you have a son who is accomplished and very skilled in matters of learning and horsemanship, and it is our will that you send him to our court and that he be near us, so that he may associate with our children and I may order profit and reward for him in accordance with his learning.” As Artabanus was very great and powerful, Pabag was not able to do otherwise or reject this command, and he immediately sent Ardashir well-equipped with ten servants and many wonderful and marvelous things for the acceptance of Artabanus.

There is no one word in the text to describe what Ardashir's role will be once he reaches the court of Artabanus, so it is difficult to label the social institution that the passage describes. Here, however, the power relations are clearly articulated. Artabanus is the superior, a “very great and powerful” king whose commands Pabag cannot disobey. The ruler who sends his son – or, in this

³¹ For discussions of the literary and historical nature of the *Kārnāmag*, see Yarshater 1983: 365; Cereti 2001: 192–200; Stoneman 2012: 12–4. For a historical investigation of Ardashir's career, see Huff 2008.

³² *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān* 2.5–9; text from Grenet 2003: 58–60.

case, his adopted son – is unambiguously the subject of the ruler who will serve as the child’s host.

What was the social and political logic behind this exchange? The key seems to lie in Artabanus’ explanation for his request: he wants Ardashir at his court so that the boy can “be near” him, associate with his children, and receive favors commensurate with his abilities. In other words, Artabanus wants to control Ardashir’s advancement within the ranks of the Parthian empire’s administration. The talented young Ardashir’s road to power and prestige must run through the Arsacid court. Rank and advancement are royal favors that the king, at his discretion, bestows on the deserving or withholds from the unworthy. Meanwhile, through his association with Artabanus’ children, Ardashir will bond with the dynasts who will be his peers in running the Arsacid empire – and, in the case of Artabanus’ eldest son, with the boy who will one day reign as king of kings. This expectation explains Artabanus’ anger when Ardashir subsequently quarrels with the presumptive heir: the incident shows that Ardashir’s socialization as an Arsacid client ruler is not proceeding apace.³³

The *Kārnāmag* passage suggests that ancient Iranian hostageship might have overlapped with another practice that was related but distinct: fosterage, broadly defined as the rearing of a child by people who are not its biological parents. The anthropologist Esther Goody has distinguished between *kinship fosterage*, where a child is raised by relatives or close kin, and *alliance fosterage*, where “a patron-client bond expressed in terms of quasi-kinship... [is] used to establish reciprocal claims on loyalty and support.”³⁴ Peter Parkes further divides alliance fosterage into *cliental fosterage*, where a child is raised by pro-parents of subordinate political

³³ *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān* 2.13–21 = Grenet 2003: 60–2.

³⁴ Quotation from Goody 1982: 114; cf. Lallemand 1988: 31.

status, and *patronal fosterage*, where it is raised by superiors.³⁵ Historical and contemporary examples of both types exist in a range of different cultural contexts.³⁶

While the submission of Ardashir in the *Kārnāmag* would appear to be a case of patronal fosterage – Artabanus, the pro-parent in this case, is Pabag’s lord and master – yet another piece of Sasanian evidence suggests that the circulation of children could go in the opposite direction. The source is the *Res Gestae* of Shapur I (ŠKZ), a trilingual inscription in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek at Naqsh-e Rostam in Iran (c. 262 CE).³⁷ The end of the text includes a list of dignitaries who lived during Shapur’s reign and administered the empire as his subordinates; among them are two foster-sons. The Parthian version of the inscription reads:

s’sn BRBYTA ME pty prdkn HHSNt AHRN s’sn BRBYTA ME pty ktwkn
HHSNt³⁸

... Sasan, the prince who was brought up in (the house of) Farragan; another
Sasan, the prince who was brought up in (the house of) Kadugan.

The operative word here is the Arameogram HHSNt, the past participle of the Parthian verb *derdan*, “to have.”³⁹ The verb has a particular meaning in this context, since the Greek text describes the two Sasans as, respectively, τοῦ <εἰ>ς Παρικαν τραπεύοντος and τοῦ εἰς Κιδουκαν ἀνατραπεύοντος, “reared in the house of Farragan” and “brought up in the house of Kadugan.”⁴⁰ In other words, the inscription specifies that these two noble youths were raised by pro-parents who were not, it would appear, biologically related to them.

The specified rank of the two figures also seems to indicate that their fosterage was cliental rather than patronal – in other words, that their upbringing was delegated to a

³⁵ Parkes 2003: 743. Parkes prefers the term *allegiance fosterage* to *alliance fosterage*; cf. Parkes 2004a: 588.

³⁶ See Parkes 2003; 2004a; 2004b; Charles-Edwards 2013: 298.

³⁷ On the date, see Huyse 1999: 10–4.

³⁸ ŠKZ 45; text from Huyse 1999: 57. Cf. *d’šty* in the Middle Persian text.

³⁹ Gignoux 1972: 52.

⁴⁰ Both τρέφω and ἀνατρέφω were used for child-rearing in ancient Greek: Griffith 2010: 301.

subordinate. Both foster-sons are described as BRBYTA (*wispuhr*) in the Parthian and Middle Persian texts and as τοῦ ἐγ βασιλέων (“those near the kings”) in the Greek – that is, as princes.⁴¹ The designation allows for a more in-depth look at their political status. Based on the inscriptional evidence from the ŠKZ and elsewhere, scholars have found that the Sasanian nobility was organized into four tiers. At the top were the kings (*šahrdārān*), below them the princes (*vāspuhrāgān*), and in the third and fourth ranks the greater and lesser nobles (*vuzurgān* and *āzādān*, respectively).⁴² The two Sasans of ŠKZ 45 both belonged to the second tier, that of the princes. But what of their foster-parents? The Kadugan are mentioned nowhere else in the inscription, but members of the Farragan are found in two other passages, which reveal that the family played a prominent role in the Sasanian empire since its inception.⁴³ They are not, however, identified as members of the first two tiers, and it therefore seems that they belong to the third or fourth – a great noble family, but not at the apex of Sasanian society.⁴⁴

This passage from the Shapur inscription thus shows the use of cliental fosterage among the Sasanian ruling classes – an indication that ancient Iranian royalty might sometimes be raised by families who were politically subordinate to their own. Judging by their identification as “princes,” the two Sasans were members of the royal family or closely related to it (though not direct descendants of Shapur himself).⁴⁵ Their foster-parents, meanwhile, were prominent members of the nobility, but not royalty. As with the story of Ardashir in the *Kārnāmag*, the institution of fosterage seems to have been used to forge a connection between the ruling clan and the various noble families who held power throughout the empire. In this case, however, the

⁴¹ The feminine form BRBYTE also occurs in ŠKZ 37.

⁴² Lukonin 1983: 698–9; Wiesehöfer 1993: 228–9; Hauser 2005: 193–4. The terms here are provided in Middle Persian. On the organization of the Sasanian nobility, see also Chapter 3, p. 80.

⁴³ ŠKZ 40, 43. The former passage attests that one Farrag was already an important figure under King Pabag, father of the dynasty’s founder Ardashir.

⁴⁴ Lukonin 1983: 705.

⁴⁵ Cf. Lukonin 1983: 703.

transfer of a child ran in the opposite direction: not from a lesser lord to his king, but from the royal family to a lesser lord.

An assortment of later sources support the impression that cliental fosterage was practiced in the Sasanian era, though their historical contexts are far less secure than the Shapur inscription. In Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*, the Sasanian king Yazdgerd gives his son Bahram to an Arab named Monzer to bring up; in the text, Monzer unequivocally identifies himself as the “servant” of both king and prince.⁴⁶ The practice is also alluded to in the *Fārs-nāma*, a historical geography of the Fars province written in Persian during the Seljuk period, and perhaps also in Syriac Christian literature that dates to the late Sasanian period.⁴⁷ The 6th century CE Greek historian Procopius also refers to the fostering of a young Sasanian dynast by a noble family.⁴⁸ The passage uses the word τρέφω – the same verb that appears in the Greek version of the Shapur inscription. These sources are centuries later than the Sasanian inscriptions discussed above, but they do give a sense of the embeddedness of fosterage as an institution over the *longue durée* on the Iranian plateau.

One final body of evidence for ancient Iranian cliental fosterage comes from Armenia rather than Persia, but it directly concerns the Arsacid family. Late antique Armenian sources contain oblique references to the institution of *dayeakut' iwn*, a form of fosterage whereby a child of noble birth was reared by foster-parents outside of his or her clan. The fosterer was called a *dayeak*, a word of Iranian origin whose root meaning is “wet-nurse” or “nurturer”; by analogy, the term could be extended to a male fosterer.⁴⁹ Robert Bedrosian has catalogued the references

⁴⁶ Ferdowsi, *Šāh-nāma* = Khaleghi-Motlagh / Omidasalar 2005: 366–7, lines 74–81. Monzer identifies himself as the “servant” (بندۀ) of Yazdgerd and Bahram on lines 74 and 79, respectively. See Davis 2007: 601–2.

⁴⁷ Widengren 1969: 74–6.

⁴⁸ Proc. *Wars* 1.23.7. For discussion, see Pourshariati 2008: 111–2. On the Persians in Procopius generally, see Börm 2007.

⁴⁹ Bedrosian 1984: 23; cf. Bedrosian 1996. On the word in Iranian languages, see Omidasalar / Omidasalar 1996.

to the institution in Armenian literary histories of the fifth century CE that discuss, among other subjects, the reign of the Arsacid dynasty over the kingdom (c. 63–428 CE). The texts reveal that youths of the Arsacid clan were sometimes raised by the noble Armenian families who were, at least in theory, subordinate to the Arsacid king. The following example from the chronicler P‘awstos Buzand (Faustus of Byzantium) is representative. The passage describes a struggle between the noblemen Bat Saharhuni and Mushegh Mamikonean for influence with the new Arsacid king, Varazdat (reigned 374–378 CE).

Bat, the *nahapet* of the *azg* of the Saharhuni *tohm*,⁵⁰ was the *dayeak*-nurturer of king Varazdat. He wanted to appropriate for himself Mushegh’s position of general-*sparapet*. Consequently he began to slander [Mushegh] to his *san* [foster-child], king Varazdat... [People] were constantly provoking the king with such words secretly, until [Varazdat] agreed with their wishes.⁵¹

The passage reveals two features of *dayeakut’iwn*. First, an Arsacid dynast – even the heir-apparent – could be raised by a nobleman outside of his immediate clan who was at least nominally his subordinate. Second, the *dayeak* / *san* relationship was an important bond with real political implications; P‘awstos’ text suggests that Bat Saharhuni was able to leverage his influence as Varazdat’s *dayeak* to supplant his rival as *sparapet*, an Armenian title for supreme military commander.

The practices of Sasanian Iran and Arsacid Armenia surely had deeper roots in Persian history, but it cannot simply be assumed that they reflect Arsacid precedents, to say nothing of Achaemenid ones. “Already in Achaemenid Iran,” says Peter Parkes, “political fosterage (*dāyāk*) was extensively practiced: infant princes were normally sent to be nursed and raised by subordinate rulers and nobility, as attested in the epic *Shahnama* of Firdawsi and early chronicles

⁵⁰ I.e. chief of the noble family of the Saharhuni. As Bedrosian notes (1984: 25 n.5), “the classical Armenian sources... contain a welter of terms for ‘clan’ and/or ‘family’ such as *azg*, *azgatohm*, *tohm*, etc., the precise nuances of which are no longer fully understood.”

⁵¹ P‘awstos Buzand 5.35; translation by Bedrosian 1984: 33.

of Tabari.”⁵² But Tabari and Ferdowsi are not reliable sources for the history of the Achaemenids, a dynasty about which they knew practically nothing, and at any rate their texts hardly attest an “extensive practice” for such a remote period. It is true that these authors hint at the importance and continuity of fosterage, but their testimony applies to the early Islamic milieu in which they wrote, not the Achaemenid period. As a means of reconstructing earlier Persian history, Sasanian and Islamic sources offer certain advantages over the Greco-Roman texts, to be sure. But that is not to say that they represent the entirety of the pre-Islamic Iranian past.

To sum up the Iranian background: hostageship is poorly documented in the indigenous evidence from ancient Persia, but the few glimpses that survive point to an institution meant to forge bonds of trust and loyalty between different royal families. The use of the Parthian word *nepāk* in the Paikuli inscription shows that the submission of a hostage was an expression of good faith between two rulers, but it did not necessarily determine the power relationship between them. Other evidence for the circulation of dynasts among ancient Iranian ruling families suggests that hostageship may have overlapped with the institution of fosterage, since both seem to have involved the sending of a representative to another elite household. To use the parlance of modern anthropological studies, such fosterage could be either patronal (as in the *Kārnāmag*) or cliental (as in the case of the ŠKZ and the Armenian Arsacids). An elite family might foster the child of their political subordinates *or* superiors.

Since no contemporary Parthian evidence is available, it is impossible to know whether any of the practices reviewed here were of ultimate importance in the case of Arsacid-Roman hostage submission. But while the source situation precludes certainty, the Near Eastern background offers a way to contextualize the Arsacids of Rome in the wider sweep of ancient

⁵² Parkes 2003: 749, citing Omidasalar / Omidasalar 1996, which contains no such argument.

Iranian history. The evidence reviewed here suggests that Iranian hostageship was less a matter of obtaining human collateral than a tool for networking among elite families. That perspective cannot explain the entirety of Roman-Parthian relations in the first century CE, but it can broaden and inform the narrative that otherwise emerges only from Greco-Roman texts.

From Persia to Rome

Before proceeding to the Roman Mediterranean, it is useful to consider whether the Iranian and Roman worlds shared any common ground when it came to the circulation of hostages and other royal children. The earliest recorded contact between Rome and Parthia dates to the early first century BCE, and the Arsacids of Rome began their travels during the Julio-Claudian period. Is it possible that the two empires began their relationship with shared assumptions about hostage submission and exchange? If so, where did such assumptions come from?

Greece, Macedon, and the Hellenistic kingdoms were geographically situated between Rome and Persia, and they may have created some common expectations of how hostageship worked. Hostage-taking in classical Greece is abundantly attested as a guarantee of treaties, alliances, and other less formal agreements.⁵³ Moshe Amit identifies an important distinction between the hostageship of classical Greece and the Hellenistic world, however: while hostages among the *poleis* of the mainland were often influential elites, they were not royalty, as were the hostages of Macedon and the other kingdoms on the periphery of the Greek world. It was the latter group, in Amit's view, that had a greater influence on the nature of the practice during the Roman period.⁵⁴ Still, hostageship could be a medium of cultural transfer and exchange even in the classical period. Philip II himself spent time as a hostage among the Thebans – a period of

⁵³ Amit 1970: 131–43; Pritchett 1991: 308–12.

⁵⁴ Amit 1970: 143.

captivity that, at least according to later Roman sources, was vital to his education and future military success.⁵⁵ When Philip returned home, Macedon's relationship with Thebes remained close, at least in the short term. Once crowned as king, Philip had to protect his throne against rival claimants backed by Athens and Thrace, and Thebes proved a useful ally.⁵⁶ His Theban captivity thus exhibited many of the features – education, foreign influence, and family rivalry – that would characterize hostageship under the Romans, including the Arsacids of Rome.

Some historians have seen Macedon as an important intermediary between the cultural spheres of Achaemenid Persia and classical Greece, and indeed one of the Argead monarchy's court institutions was a mechanism to establish control over young elites. The “royal pages” (βασιλικοί παῖδες) were the children of Macedonian nobles who, at the king's command, attended court to wait on him.⁵⁷ Dietmar Kienast has argued that this institution was modeled on an Achaemenid court practice, though Pierre Briant disagrees.⁵⁸ Briant may have the stronger case – as seen above, the evidence for elite children at the Achaemenid court is limited – though discussion is likely to continue, since the matter is part of a much larger debate on cultural transfer between Persia and Macedon.⁵⁹ Whatever the institution's origins, however, its use of fosterage as a political instrument is clear. Mark Golden observes that these children functioned “either as means to strengthen ties between the king and the Macedonians who ranked beneath only him or as thinly disguised hostages.”⁶⁰ These two possibilities need not be mutually

⁵⁵ Diod. 16.2.2–3; Plut. *Pel.* 26.5; Just. 6.9.7, 7.5.3; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 49.5. On the strength of these ancient interpretations, see Worthington 2008: 17–8; Hammond 1997: 356 *contra* Aymard 1954: 34–5. On the question of whether Philip began his hostageship among the Illyrians, see Borza 1990: 189 n.28.

⁵⁶ Hammond 1994: 24; Worthington 2008: 20.

⁵⁷ The ancient sources are collected in Hammond 1990: 261–4.

⁵⁸ Kienast 1973: 264–6; Briant 2002: 924–5. Hammond (1990) argues that the institution had a Macedonian origin that long predated Philip II.

⁵⁹ Some scholars see Persia as a major influence on Macedon: see Kienast 1973: 15–32; Badian 1996; Borza 1990: 251, 279–80; Olbrycht 2010: 367. Lane Fox (2007: 269–70) offers an opposing view, arguing for “broad parallelism, not actual derivation.”

⁶⁰ Golden 2009: 49.

exclusive. By acting at least notionally as a foster-parent, the Macedonian king could at once bind an upcoming generation of Macedonian office-holders to the Argead monarchy and gain leverage against potentially rebellious nobles.

After Alexander's campaigns brought the Achaemenid empire under Macedonian control, the family of Seleucus Nicator ruled a large kingdom that stretched from Asia Minor to Central Asia until, over the course of the second century BCE, the dynasty began to succumb to both Roman and Parthian encroachment. In the west, Rome interned several Seleucid dignitaries as hostages, including the future kings Antiochus IV and Demetrius I; in the east, Parthian military successes allowed them to take several reigning Seleucid monarchs as captives. Both Greco-Roman sources and modern scholars advance the interpretation that these captives played a role in Parthian and Roman imperial expansion, though their efficacy as agents of empire is questionable.⁶¹ However one views this issue, however, it seems likely that the mutual engagement of Rome and Parthia with the Seleucids established common ground on which Arsacid hostage submission would later be built. The Seleucid family was not the only dynasty with which Rome and Parthia dealt, but its power, geographical position, and importance to both Roman and Parthian history meant that its influence – even in decline – provided a basis for later relations between its conquerors.

Yet there seems to have been one salient difference between Seleucid-Roman and Seleucid-Parthian relations: hostageship and captivity were congruent with royal marriage in the Hellenistic east, but not, it would appear, in the Roman-dominated Mediterranean. In Arsacid captivity, the Seleucid king Demetrius II was forced to marry Rhodogune, an Arsacid princess.⁶²

⁶¹ See e.g. Moscovich 1983; Shayegan 2003; Nabel 2017.

⁶² Just. 36.1.6, 38.9.3; App. *Syr.* 67–8; discussion in Hartmann / Huber 2006: 500. On the apparent contradiction between Justin and Appian as to the giver of the Arsacid princess, see Shayegan 2003: 85.

That case closely parallels the Arsacid engagement with the Artaxiads of Armenia, of whom Tigranes II was raised as an Arsacid hostage, while his son Tigranes the Younger was married to a daughter of the Arsacid king Phraates III.⁶³ In the case of Parthia's westward expansion, then, the kinship structures of the Arsacid family opened to integrate members of other Hellenistic dynasties, whether through the foster dynamics of hostageship or the establishment of marriage bonds. But marriage between Roman elites and foreign hostages was not common in the Republic and Empire, at least for those at the highest levels of power.⁶⁴ In Arsacid Parthia, the extension of kinship to captive dynasts complimented intermarriage as another instrument of royal family networking. Kinship dynamics still played a role in the Roman west, as discussed below, but the connections they forged were less concrete.

The Roman Background

In contrast to the Iranian source tradition, literary and documentary texts in both Greek and Latin preserve hundreds of cases of hostage submission from Rome's legendary early history through late antiquity.⁶⁵ Many of these texts were composed against the backdrop of Roman conquest and expansion throughout the Mediterranean; as a result, the hostages they attest were usually submitted from a foreign power to Rome, and seldom in the opposite direction. To be sure, there are numerous cases of hostage-taking in which the Romans do not figure, especially in sources that deal with the history of Greece in the classical period. On balance, however, the growth of the Roman empire cast a long shadow over ancient Mediterranean hostageship and its

⁶³ Hostageship of Tigranes II: Just. 38.3.1; cf. Sachs / Hunger 1996 no. -95 C 'obv.' 5'-7'; no. -95 C 'rev.' 12'; no. -95 D 'obv.' 11' (= pp. 418-23). Marriage of Tigranes the Younger to a daughter of Phraates III: Cass. Dio 37.6.4; Plut. *Pomp.* 33.6.

⁶⁴ Dixon 1985; Herrin 2013: 304.

⁶⁵ See e.g. Appendix 1A in Walker 1980, who collects upwards of 250 cases for the Roman Republic alone.

representations in literary and epigraphic evidence.⁶⁶

The English word “hostage” is probably the best translation for the Greek ὄμηρος and the Latin *obses*, but there are important differences between the ancient and modern terminology that should be kept in mind. In modern domestic and international law, a hostage is a person seized by a criminal or criminal organization in order to compel a third party to carry out a certain action. In the event of non-compliance, the hostage either remains in detention, or is harmed or killed.⁶⁷ Ancient Mediterranean practice differed in two crucial respects. First, hostage-taking was not criminalized, either by law or by custom; in fact, as discussed below, it frequently featured in formal agreements between states. Second, as Joel Allen has shown, ὄμηροι and *obsides* were rarely harmed or killed by their captors. Out of hundreds of known hostages, only a few reports of executions survive in the literary sources, and even these are far from straightforward.⁶⁸ When Rome’s hostages from Thurii and Tarentum were tossed from the Tarpeian Rock in 212 BCE, for example, their punishment seems to have been a reprisal for their own escape attempts rather than the misbehavior of their native cities.⁶⁹ Other executions present similar problems of interpretation or historicity. While a modern observer expects hostages to pay for failed bargains with their lives, such drastic measures were apparently rare in the ancient Mediterranean.

⁶⁶ See Elbern 1990: 131; Álvarez Pérez-Sostoa 2012: 385 on the scarcity of Roman hostages in the ancient sources.

⁶⁷ For United States domestic law, see U.S. Code Title 18 Part I Chapter 55 § 1203, online at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/1203>. For international law, see the United Nations International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages, Article 1.1 (*Treaty Series* Vol. 1316, I-21931: 207, available online at <http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/docs/conventions/Conv5.pdf>).

⁶⁸ See the three episodes discussed in Allen 2006: 52–4, with additional cases on 53 n.50 (Amm. 31.16.8, discussed in Speidel 1998; and a Syriac account of the martyr Maʿīn, discussed in Fiey 1971; Brock 1982: 10; Lee 1991: 372) and 57 n.64 (Polyae. *Strat.* 8.55). For hostage executions in medieval Europe, compare the appendix in Kosto 2012: 49–52.

⁶⁹ Liv. 25.7.10–4. Allen (2006: 53) argues that the executions were an answer to the hostages’ own escape attempt. But if the Tarentine Phileas was in Rome as an official representative of his state, then the blame for his efforts to abscond with the hostages might have fallen on Tarentum itself; cf. Bederman 2001: 116.

Even if executions were the exception rather than the rule, of course, the *potential* for harm may still have been an important part of the logic behind hostage-taking. In some passages, captors make explicit threats to kill the hostages in their care; in others, fear of a hostage's execution is described as a powerful check on the actions of his or her countrymen.⁷⁰ The historicity of such cases is not necessarily important. When Plutarch writes in his biography of Theseus that Minos' son Deucalion threatened to execute Athenian hostages, the value of the passage as evidence for Bronze Age politics is minimal.⁷¹ All the same, it shows that Plutarch's readers during the early Roman empire would have recognized the threat of lethal force as a feature of hostage transactions. Rome's hostages were seldom executed, but the ability of their captors to do so may have been an important component of hostageship as it was conceived in the ancient Mediterranean.⁷²

If hostages were meant to serve as collateral, at least in part, what sort of transactions did they guarantee? In an important article, Stefan Elbern discussed what might be called the Roman legal framework, interpreting the hostage as a mechanism of international law. Elbern found that the transfer of hostages could back up several kinds of international agreements, from unconditional surrender to temporary armistice. Rome was usually the recipient, though not always; Carthage's detention of hostages from the tribes of Spain, for example, shows that other Mediterranean powers used the practice as well. The specifics of hostage submission – the number sent, their age and gender, and the duration of their captivity – varied with the type of the agreement and the political constitution of the surrendering party. Generally speaking, the loosely-organized tribes of Gaul and Spain might submit hundreds of hostages, while the

⁷⁰ See Allen 2006: 55–7.

⁷¹ Plut. *Thes.* 19.5.

⁷² Allen 2006: 57.

Hellenistic monarchies of the eastern Mediterranean sent only a handful of royal status.⁷³

For Elbern, the Arsacid hostages of Rome belonged to a category of international agreements called *foedera aequa*, treaties between two states on equal terms, a judgment influenced by Ziegler's work on formal Roman-Parthian settlements.⁷⁴ The notion that Rome considered Parthia a sovereign peer or near-equal is certainly defensible, and it will be examined in greater detail later in this study.⁷⁵ However, this legal category has distinct shortcomings as a way to understand Arsacid-Roman hostage submission. For one thing, ancient authors do not use the phrase *foedus aequum* in a technical sense, and some scholars doubt that it corresponded to a clear legal category.⁷⁶ For another, there are no detailed descriptions of the Roman-Parthian treaties until the very end of the Arsacid period; reconstructions of their terms can therefore be no more than speculation.⁷⁷ The Arsacids of Rome might have been surrendered in accordance with a formal *foedus*, but the nature of the literary and documentary evidence precludes certainty on this point.

While Elbern is surely right to ground the submission of hostages in the military and diplomatic proceedings that followed the conclusion of a war, the social, cultural, and political dimensions of Roman hostageship deserve consideration no less than the legal foundations. Treaties were important, but so too was the broader interaction between hostages and Roman society: where they lived, with whom they associated, under what conditions they appeared before the public, and how they affected Roman perceptions of their home countries. While many aspects of their lives remain unclear and receive minimal treatment in the surviving

⁷³ Elbern 1990: 98–103 (types of agreements), 101–2 (Carthage's Spanish hostages), 103–9 (choice of hostages). See also Ndiaye 1995: 162–5.

⁷⁴ Elbern 1990: 99 and n.17. On Ziegler's work on Roman-Parthian relations, see the Introduction, p. 6.

⁷⁵ See Chapter 6.

⁷⁶ See Gruen 1984: 14–5, 52; Burton 2011: 82 n.18. As Louise Matthaei pointed out long ago, there is usually scant information in the sources as to which treaties were *aequa* or *iniqua* (1907: 183).

⁷⁷ Wheeler 2002: 289.

evidence, it is nevertheless apparent that hostages did not simply languish in obscure imprisonment until the relevant treaty obligations were fulfilled. Instead, they played a key role in Roman relations with foreign populations, serving as crucial intermediaries between the imperial core and its peripheries.

Three aspects of Roman hostageship help contextualize the experience of the Arsacids during the reign of the Julio-Claudians. The first pertains to domestic display. The taking, detention, exhibition, and even the release of hostages could boost the profile of an office holder in the realm of Roman domestic politics. During the Middle and Late Republic, hostages sometimes featured in the triumphal processions that capped a general's victorious campaign against a non-Roman enemy.⁷⁸ The triumph was in many ways the high point of a Republican political career, an indication that the *triumphator* had reached the acme of power and prestige. The people and objects on display needed to dazzle; the more ostentatious the spectacle, the more it redounded to the commander's glory. When available, hostages were prime attractions.⁷⁹ There is also epigraphic and literary testimony from the pens of the commanders themselves that commemorates the feat of hostage-taking for their readers – an achievement that merited inclusion in the self-presentation of even the most accomplished generals.⁸⁰ Whatever the importance of hostageship to foreign policy or international law, then, the practice also played an important role within Roman domestic politics. A commander who took hostages obtained a valuable political resource that advanced not just the Roman empire, but also his career within

⁷⁸ Examples include the triumph of Quinctius Flaminius in 193 BCE (Liv. 34.52.9; Eutrop. 4.2.3; Oros. 4.20.2) and Pompey's in 61 BCE (Plut. *Pomp.* 45.4; App. *Mith.* 117).

⁷⁹ On hostages in the Roman triumph, see Östenberg 2009: 128–67; cf. Beard 2007: 107–42. On the display of captives as tools of imperialism, see Khatchadourian 2016: 73–4.

⁸⁰ Authorial hostage-taking: the inscription of Scipio Barbatus (*CIL* 6.1285); various references in Caesar's *Gallie War* (see Moscovich 1979 for references); Cicero on his campaign against Tebera in Cilicia (*Fam.* 15.4.10); Augustus on Parthia (*Mon. Anc.* 32); and the epitaphs of Tampius Flavianus (*CIL* 10.6225) and Tiberius Plautius Aelianus (*CIL* 14.3608).

it.⁸¹

The second feature pertinent for the Arsacid case was the use of the language of kinship to describe the hostage's relationship to his or her hosts and captors. According to one tradition, this dynamic had deep roots in Roman history: Dionysius of Halicarnassus preserves the foundation myth that Aeneas surrendered Romulus and Remus as hostages to Latinus, who subsequently made him successors (διάδοχοι) and left them a share of his kingdom.⁸² In the second century BCE, Polybius has the hostage Demetrius of Macedon draw on the language of fosterage in an oration before the Senate. The Antigonid describes Rome as his "fatherland and nurturer" (πατρίδα καὶ τροφὸν), calling the senators his fathers and their sons his brothers.⁸³ Livy's description of Demetrius' return to Macedon foregrounds the kinship dynamics of hostageship as well, above all in its suggestion that Flaminius had usurped Philip's place as Demetrius' father.⁸⁴ As will be discussed in Chapter 3, Tacitus employs similar language in the parts of his narrative that deal with the Arsacids of Rome, especially in his use of the words *altor* (foster-father) and *alumnus* (foster-son / ward). Both words derive from the verb *alere*, to nourish, and they extend the vocabulary of parental care to non-biological children.⁸⁵

Such language was figurative rather than literal; it did not mean that hostages were nurslings or even young children, because fosterage and adoption offered ways to integrate adolescent or even fully grown men and women into a Roman family. Some sources for Republican treaties mention hostage clauses with age stipulations, the outer ranges of which were 12 to 45 years.⁸⁶ Demetrius of Macedon was ten years old when his hostageship began, but

⁸¹ Allen 2006: 96–7.

⁸² Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.73.2.

⁸³ Polyb. 31.2.5.

⁸⁴ Liv. 40.11.2; cf. Chapter 4, p. 139–40.

⁸⁵ Dixon 1999: 225; Nielsen 2013: 289; 1987: 143, citing Servius *Comm. Aen.* 11.33 and Isid. *Orig.* 10.3.

⁸⁶ Elbern 1990: 108 n.68.

there is little further evidence that the Romans sought out pre-pubescent hostages.⁸⁷ Unlike its correlates in the modern West, however, Roman fosterage and adoption did not apply only to young children. Adoption more frequently involved adults, though this legal mechanism was meant for citizens, and there is no evidence for a foreign hostage's formal adoption.⁸⁸ Fosterage, however, was a more flexible practice, and it could apply to men and women of various ages and social statuses.⁸⁹ The institution also encompassed more types of relationships than adoption did: an *alumnus/a* could be a student or apprentice of the fosterer, an inheritor of their estate, or simply the object of a parental sort of affection.⁹⁰ *Alumnus/a* was a legal status, and some regulations in legal texts concern their inheritance of property or manumission in cases where the *alumnus/a* was a slave.⁹¹ But fosterage also established a connection that was personal and emotional rather than legal, a bond that reflected the relationship between parent and child.

The third issue, and one connected to the hostage's status as a notional foster-child, is the much-discussed matter of systematic acculturation and its usefulness as a tool of empire. Scholarly discussions of this topic have tended to revolve around two related questions. First, did the Romans consciously implement a program for the indoctrination of their foreign hostages? Second, if such a program indeed existed, how successful was it? Did the cultural conditioning of elite hostages allow Rome to shape the broader Mediterranean and Near East in accordance with its wishes, and was it a useful alternative to military force?

On the first question, it is best to distinguish evidence for the education of hostages from a coordinated indoctrination program. To be sure, some suggestive passages in the literary

⁸⁷ Demetrius' age at the start of his hostageship: Liv. 40.6.4.

⁸⁸ On the age of adoptees, see Dixon 1992: 112; 1999: 221; Golden 2009: 47. For its applicability only to citizens, see Gardner 1999: 69 and n.22. See further Huebner 2013.

⁸⁹ Nielsen 1999: 252–3.

⁹⁰ Nielsen 1987.

⁹¹ Nielsen 1987: 148–57.

sources do allude to the schooling of hostages. Suetonius' biography of Caligula mentions hostages "abducted from a grammar school" by the emperor.⁹² Plutarch's Sertorius – a rebel from Rome at the time, it should be remembered – sets up a school of Greek and Roman learning for young Spaniards, "making them hostages in reality under the guise of educating them."⁹³ Some scholars have seen a similar initiative in Agricola's school for young Britons, though Tacitus' text leaves it unclear whether these noble children were hostages.⁹⁴ Finally, Ammianus Marcellinus says that Jovinianus, satrap of Sasanian Corduene, secretly supported Rome because he had been "detained as a hostage among the Syrians and seduced by the charm of liberal studies."⁹⁵ Ammianus was in a good position to evaluate Jovinianus' sympathies, because he knew Jovinianus personally and visited him to gather intelligence about Shapur II's operations in Mesopotamia.

Do these passages collectively support the idea that there was an "imperial policy for the Romans to offer their hostages a formal, controlled education," as Joel Allen suggests?⁹⁶ That formulation may be too stark, and it raises major questions which the evidence cannot answer. It remains unclear, for instance, whether hostages were educated differently from Roman citizens or provincials; whether their teachers would have tried to extinguish the elements of their upbringing that were considered non-Roman; and how such elements would have been identified in the first place. Moreover, even if the passages in the preceding paragraph could support the idea of a hostage reeducation program, the authors do not seem to have figures like the Arsacids

⁹² Suet. *Calig.* 45.2: *obsides quosdam abductos e litterario ludo.*

⁹³ Plut. *Sert.* 14: ἔργῳ μὲν ἐξωμηρεύσατο, λόγῳ δὲ ἐπαίδευεν.

⁹⁴ See Tac. *Agr.* 20.3, 21.2, with *obsides* mentioned in the former passage and the education of *principum filii* in the latter. Ogilvie / Richmond (1967: 33) take these as the same group of children and call them "half students and half hostages." Allen (2006: 150 n.4) says that "context allows for that conclusion." But cf. Wheeler 2007 *contra* Allen: "Tacitus' hostages at 20.3 become the students of 21.2 through special pleading."

⁹⁵ Amm. 18.6.20: *obsidatus sorte in Syriis detentus et dulcedine liberalium studiorum inlectus.*

⁹⁶ Allen 2006: 149.

in mind. Their mentions of schooling apply to the western provinces rather than to Rome, where the Parthians were housed.⁹⁷ Moreover, the youths who would have been educated in a *ludus litterarius* would probably have been between 7 and 11 years of age.⁹⁸ As discussed above, the Romans do not, as a rule, seem to have sought out hostages this young, although the relevant clauses in the preserved treaties mostly concern eastern Mediterranean populations rather than the western provinces.⁹⁹ To be sure, the Arsacids who came to Rome included not only the children but also the grandchildren of the reigning Parthian king, who presumably were in their formative years. But while it is possible that education played some role in the Arsacid experience, it goes too far to say that they were the targeted subjects of a systematic program.

It may be more beneficial to look at the matter of education in a less academic sense, and to consider hostages alongside other royal youths whose experience in Rome was not about schooling so much as association and acquaintance with Roman elites. In Livy, Ariarathes IV tells the Senate that “he had sent his son to Rome to be brought up, in order that right from his childhood he might gain familiarity with Roman customs and Roman men,” a passage with marked similarities to Tacitus’ description of a Parthian embassy.¹⁰⁰ Suetonius writes of Augustus’ relationship with Rome’s client kings that the emperor “brought up many of their sons and educated them alongside his own.”¹⁰¹ The passage does not explicitly mention hostages or the Arsacids of Rome, but Suetonius and his audience may well have seen marked similarities between Rome’s Parthian detainees and the numerous non-hostage dynasts who lived in the city

⁹⁷ The *litterarius ludus* in Suet. *Calig.* 45.2 was “apparently close to the Rhine” (Braund 1984: 15).

⁹⁸ On the age structure of Roman education, which usually began at 7 but was probably flexible, see Bonner 1977: 14, 35; Booth 1978; Maurice 2013: 2–19.

⁹⁹ Above, nn.86–7. Cf. Moscovich 1983: 299, who identifies acculturation as a goal of hostage policy in the west, but not the east.

¹⁰⁰ Liv. 42.19.4: *regem educendum filium Romam misisse, ut iam inde a puero assuesceret moribus Romanis hominibusque*. On the identity of this child, see Briscoe 2012: 216–7. On the Parthian embassy, see Chapter 3, p. 116–7.

¹⁰¹ Suet. *Aug.* 48: *plurimorum liberos et educavit simul cum suis et instituit*.

during the Julio-Claudian period – members of the Herodian dynasty of Judaea, for instance, or Juba II of Mauretania, or the Cheruscan prince Italicus. These dynasts did not come to Rome for pedagogical reasons. The purpose of their residence was to strengthen their dynasty's connections with the holders of power in Rome – the emperor and his circle above all – in order to bolster their family's control over its kingdom with the power of Roman backing.¹⁰² If the Roman “education” of young dynasts is understood as inculcation into a political order rather than academic instruction, another dimension of hostageship comes into clearer focus: Rome immersed its hostages in a world where familiarity with Roman office-holders was the conduit to power and security.

While scholars have variously appraised the programmatic nature of hostage acculturation, the efficacy of such a program is less controversial: most would agree that the acculturation of royal hostages guaranteed neither the political quiescence of their kingdoms nor the cultural transformation of wider populations.¹⁰³ Hostages from the Hellenistic kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean did little to advance Roman interests, as the case of the Seleucid Antiochus IV shows. Despite his supposed adoption of Roman customs, Antiochus pursued a traditional Seleucid agenda once he gained control over his father's kingdom, launching imperialist forays into Egypt and even violating the terms of the Treaty of Apamea.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, the (admittedly limited) archaeological evidence from Hellenistic Antioch does not support the notion that Antiochus embarked on Roman-inspired building projects; if the king's cultural preferences inclined toward Rome, this affinity left little mark on his subjects or their society.¹⁰⁵ In other cases – the Arsacids of Rome included – literary sources give the impression

¹⁰² Braund 1984: 10.

¹⁰³ Aymard 1961: 141–2; Walker 1980: 208; Allen 2006: 177.

¹⁰⁴ Nabel 2017: 30–1.

¹⁰⁵ Allen 2006: 168–9.

that the Roman connections of repatriated hostages were a liability rather than an advantage: the hostage was compromised by his or her association with an overbearing foreign power, a perceived flaw that could lead to fierce opposition from domestic enemies.¹⁰⁶ This is not to say that the Romans completely failed to advance their empire through the royal youths who spent time in the city. But they were best used as a means to destabilize and disrupt the control of a foreign dynasty, and not as a means of subordinating it to Rome. Released hostages were good at fomenting dynastic strife, but ineffective at forging a new imperial order.¹⁰⁷

The acculturation of royal hostages and other dynasts like them is made more difficult to assess by the nature of the evidence, predominantly literary and produced by elites far closer to Rome's core than its peripheries. When a Greek or Latin author writes of a hostage-king's failure to gain the support of his people, does his account accurately represent the dynamics of a local struggle against the encroachment of Roman imperialism? Or is he engaging in what Eric Adler calls "Roman self-criticism" – that is, the problematization of Roman power through the mouthpiece of a barbarian?¹⁰⁸ If the latter, the author need not be familiar with local responses to Romanized dynasts in Macedon, Germany, or Parthia; this is an insider's critique of Roman imperialism, not an authentic portrayal of foreign grievances. While scholarly assessments of such historiographical issues have varied, most classicists now prefer this reading to the notion that ancient authors were well informed about non-Roman foreigners.¹⁰⁹ In some cases, an individual author's background may have given them unique insight into external affairs; as a Judaeon, for example, Josephus is likely to have had access to information about Parthia that

¹⁰⁶ See e.g. the fate of the Antigonid Demetrius (Liv. 40.12.6); Antiochus IV (Nabel 2017: 30 and n.23).

¹⁰⁷ Moscovich 1983: 299.

¹⁰⁸ Adler 2011: 5.

¹⁰⁹ For discussions of Roman writing on barbarians as commentary on Rome, see O'Gorman 1993; Dench 2007: 498; Feldherr 2009: 303; Adler 2011: 7.

Tacitus lacked. In the main, however, the “foreign” critiques of hostage acculturation in the extant literary sources are inextricably bound up with internal discourses about the pitfalls of Roman imperialism.¹¹⁰

In sum, when compared with the evidence for hostageship from ancient Persia and the wider Near East, the Roman material evinces one key similarity and one key difference. The common ground relates to fosterage. In both Rome and Persia, a royal child detained at the king or emperor’s court could be a hostage, a fosterling, or a combination of the two. The evidence suggests that, on both sides of the Euphrates, these categories were not always sharply delineated, but overlapped and blended together. To a modern observer, it may seem surprising that a coerced prisoner could be integrated into the family of his captors, even if such integration was only figurative. But while ancient hostageship was sometimes about guaranteeing a treaty through the threat of force, this coercive feature was only one aspect of a multi-faceted institution. No less important was the use of hostageship to establish good faith between royal families through the extension of the bonds of kinship.

The key difference is the Greco-Roman focus on the hostage’s education, acculturation, and especially his alienation from his native land, though the relative absence of this theme from the historical record of the Near East may simply be due to the nature of the evidence. While some scholars have identified the acculturation dynamic at work in ancient Egyptian and Assyrian hostageship, neither the Achaemenid nor the Sasanian sources betray any trace of it. Moreover, the motif of hostage rejection, so dramatically depicted in Greco-Roman historiography, is not well represented in the Near Eastern evidence. Its absence could be related to the scarcity of literary texts from the Persian east, since no contemporary narrative histories of

¹¹⁰ See Chapter 4, p. 131–44 for further discussion.

pre-Islamic Iran have survived. But that is no more than conjecture. Given the state of the sources, then, the matter of hostage acculturation must be situated within the framework of Greco-Roman historiography and its representations of the barbarian peoples on the periphery of the Roman empire. The hostage narratives of authors like Tacitus and Josephus are invaluable, but they are shaped by a uniquely Roman worldview that is, in the final analysis, incapable of seeing through foreign eyes.

CHAPTER 3

ARSACID HOSTAGES AND PARTHIAN POLITICS, 30 BCE–51 CE

All the emperors of the early Principate belonged to the Julio-Claudian family, but much blood was spilled deciding precisely which of its members would sit the throne. Arsacid affairs were no different. In every epoch of Parthian history, the king had to come from the line of Arsaces, the founder of the Arsacid dynasty and the progenitor of all its kings. But the question of which prince would accede to the kingship was decided through palace intrigues, civil wars, and factional strife. The combatants in these contests for the throne included various members of the Arsacid family, but also the great houses of the Parthian nobility and local rulers from every region of the empire. Both rival Arsacids and discontented nobles could challenge a king's reign, and an alliance between the two groups could pose an even graver threat.

At the end of the first century BCE, these contests took on a new dimension: the hostageship of Arsacid dynasts in Italy thrust Rome into the picture not only as a rival of the Parthian empire, but as a constituent part of its domestic struggles. As factions variously composed of Arsacid royalty and Parthian nobles vied for power within their own empire, they found useful allies in the Roman emperors, senators, governors, and client kings across the Euphrates. The link that brought them together was the Arsacid king's submission of hostages to the Caesar in the west. From c. 30 BCE–51 CE – in Parthian terms, from the reign of Phraates IV to that of Gotarzes II – the circulation of the Arsacids of Rome would be a crucial factor not only in Roman-Parthian relations, but also in the high politics of the Parthian empire.

The Greco-Roman literary sources are the only detailed guide to the events of this period, and their accounts highlight two contradictory effects of Arsacid hostageship. Initially, the submission of Arsacids to Rome made the emperor a participant in Parthian domestic politics

and even, in a sense, a member of the Arsacid family. An Arsacid king gained an immediate advantage through hostage submission: he could control the pool of Arsacid rivals for his throne by sending his sons to the Roman emperor – a transaction that, our evidence suggests, might have been explicable in the framework of royal fosterage. But if a faction from the Parthian nobility subsequently became disaffected with the reigning king, it could petition Rome on its own initiative for the release of a replacement Arsacid. As a result, the Romans who controlled the Arsacid hostages became a force *within* Parthian domestic politics, and not just *on* them.

By the end of the period under discussion, however, Arsacid hostageship had unleashed ideological forces that began to drive a wedge between Rome and Parthia. Hostage kings returning to Parthia from Rome to claim the throne invariably had enemies, and over the course of the first few decades CE these enemies began to adopt an ideology that rejected hostages as viable candidates for the kingship. Their strategy rested on redefining what was “Arsacid” in contradistinction to what was “Roman.” By changing the parameters of who counted as an Arsacid to exclude returning hostages from Rome, these actors began to push Parthia towards the implementation of an ideology that conceived of Rome and Parthia as opposite and irreconcilable worlds.

Parthian Domestic Politics: King and Aristocracy

The history of Arsacid hostage submission played out against the central backdrop of Parthian domestic politics: the recurrent struggle for power between and among the Arsacid family and the Parthian aristocracy. There is broad agreement in the scholarly literature that this dynamic was deeply embedded in the structure of the empire.¹ The right of the Arsacid family to supply

¹ On the centrality of this conflict to Parthian politics, see Wiesehöfer 1993: 193–4; Lukonin 1983; Pourshariati 2008; Lerouge 2007: 252; Hauser 2005; 2006 *contra* Wolski 1989.

the king of kings seems never to have been questioned in Parthia.² But the nature and extent of this king's power was the subject of frequent negotiation and renegotiation with the noble families who would sometimes seek concessions from the reigning king or even try to supplant him – for various reasons, in various coalitions, and sometimes with the assistance of other members of the Arsacid family.

The extant evidence sheds little light on the structure of the Parthian nobility. The Greco-Roman sources speak of a Parthian συνέδριον or *senatus* composed of political and religious elites.³ But details about the composition of this assembly are scarce. Analogy with the later organization of the Sasanians may help somewhat. Epigraphic evidence shows that the Sasanian ruling class, collectively referred to as the *Āzāt*, was divided into four tiers: the kings (*šahrdārān*), the princes (*vāspuhrāgān*), and the greater and lesser nobles (*vuzurgān* and *āzādān*).⁴ But the assumption that such an organization existed in the Parthian period is hypothetical, and these terms do not map neatly onto the designations of the Greco-Roman authors. There may be a rough equivalence of *šahrdārān* with βασιλεῖς or *reges*; of *vāspuhrāgān* with οἱ ἐκ βασιλέων; and of *vuzurgān* with a number of terms used to refer to the nobility.⁵ But given the absence of contemporary Parthian evidence and the imperfect understanding of the Greco-Roman authors, it is best not to assume a schematic correspondence.⁶

² Strab. 16.1.28; Joseph. *AJ* 18.44; cf. Amm. 23.6.6. See further Hauser 2005: 189; Heil 2017: 271 and n.84 with relevant passages of Tacitus.

³ Strabo 11.9.3: τῶν Παρθυαίων συνέδριόν φησιν εἶναι Ποσειδώνιος διττόν, τὸ μὲν συγγενῶν τὸ δὲ σοφῶν καὶ μάγων, ἐξ ὧν ἀμφοῖν τοὺς βασιλεῖς καθίστασθαι. Cf. Just. 41.1.2, 42.3.1 on the Parthian *senatus*.

⁴ Lukonin 1983: 698–9; Wiesehöfer 1993: 228–9; Hauser 2005: 193–4. The terms come from the inscription of Shapur I at Haḡgiābād, for the text of which see MacKenzie 1978.

⁵ E.g. *megistanes* (Suet. *Calig.* 5); οἱ γενναϊότατοι (Joseph. *AJ* 18.44); *primores* (Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.1); *principes* (*Mon. Anc.* 33); *optimates* (Just. 42.5.2).

⁶ Cf. Heil 2017: 265, on Tacitus' imprecise terminology for the Parthian nobility.

On the other hand, it is clear that coalitions of aggrieved Parthian aristocrats could and did replace unsatisfactory monarchs with other members of the Arsacid family.⁷ Arsacid kings were accordingly as wary of their own kin as they were of the nobility, and the assassination of family members was a regular and recurring feature of Parthian domestic politics.⁸ However horrified the Greco-Roman sources claimed to be by this behavior, such bloody dynastic wrangling was not unusual for the ancient world, particularly in kingdoms with a tradition of polygyny and large royal families.⁹ As with many other dynasties, kin-slaying was a reality of Arsacid dynastic politics. A king who was not on guard might find one of his own sons at the head of an uprising with a host of powerful nobles behind him.

Unfortunately, neither Roman nor Parthian sources offer much insight into the exact coalitions that king and nobility would have formed over the course of Arsacid history. For the first century CE, Marek Olbrycht has reconstructed two factions that he calls the “Hyrcanian-Dahaeans” and “Phraatids,” the latter of which, in his view, included the noble families of the Suren and Karin and routinely sought to install the Arsacids of Rome on the Parthian throne.¹⁰ But these terms lack foundation in the ancient sources, which do not support such a clear schematization. There is no evidence, for instance, that the Suren and Karin ever fought on the same side in the civil wars of this period; Tacitus mentions the Suren’s support for one of the Arsacids of Rome (Tiridates), and the Karin’s for another (Meherdates), but no author attests

⁷ Hauser 2006: 305–6.

⁸ Some examples: Orodes II: Cass. Dio 39.56.2; cf. Just. 42.4.1–4. Phraates IV: Plut. *Crass.* 33.5; *Ant.* 37.1; Cass. Dio 49.23.3–4; Just. 42.4.16, 5.1–2. Artabanus II: Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2. Gotarzes II: Tac. *Ann.* 11.8.2, 12.10.1. On the hostility of the nobility to Arsacid kin-slaying, see e.g. Just. 42.5.2, where the nobility becomes angry at Phraates IV for this reason. Cf. Dąbrowa 1983: 75; Ehrhardt 1998: 298; Bigwood 2004: 45–6.

⁹ Justin (42.4.14), for example, claims that Orodes II had 30 sons among his various concubines. On royal polygyny, see further Scheidel 2009: 272–95.

¹⁰ Olbrycht 1997: 81–98; 1998c: 138–45; 2012: 215–6.

regular collaboration between the two families.¹¹ Long-term political coalitions are a possibility, of course, but so too are ephemeral alliances that shifted frequently in the fray of politics.

Olbrycht is right, however, to highlight a point that the “war and diplomacy” school of Roman-Parthian relations has often overlooked: neither the Parthian nobility nor the Arsacid family was monolithic, and their fragmentary nature had real consequences for Parthia’s dealings with Rome. As king, noblemen, and various members of the royal family jockeyed for influence within Parthia, internal affairs could shape the empire’s engagement with the states beyond its borders. This was the political environment that gave rise to Arsacid-Roman hostage submission, and it is against this backdrop that the history of the Arsacids of Rome must be situated.

The Tiridates Episode, c. 30 BCE

Phraates IV took the Arsacid throne in 38 BCE, but he had ruled only a few years when a rebellion against his reign began under the leadership of a man named Tiridates.¹² After suffering a defeat in the resulting civil war, Tiridates fled to Roman Syria along with a son of Phraates IV whom he had taken captive. Augustus received them in Syria. Envoys from Phraates IV demanding the return of his son were ignored. This captive child then became the first Arsacid hostage to spend time in the city of Rome at the emperor’s court.

The ancient sources for this episode are a muddle and make it difficult to establish a secure chronology of Rome’s first Arsacid hostage. Dio records two appeals for aid from Tiridates to Augustus in the parts of his narrative that deal with the events of 30 and 23 BCE.¹³

¹¹ See below, p. 110–1 (Suren’s support of Tiridates), 118 (Karin’s support of Meherdates).

¹² Little is known about this figure. He may have been a member of the Arsacid family or a renegade general: Sullivan 1990: 317. Tarn (1932: 835–7) identified him with Monaeses, Antony’s Parthian collaborator.

¹³ Cass. Dio 51.18; 53.33.1–2. Most take this to mean that Tiridates made two attempts on the Arsacid throne and fled to the Romans twice: Ziegler 1964: 46; Timpe 1975: 158; Rich 1990: 171; Sherwin-White 1983: 322–3. It is also possible, though, that the second passage simply refers back to early events, which would mean that Tiridates fled to Augustus only once: Debevoise 1938: 136 n.44.

Justin has Tiridates fleeing to Augustus while the latter was waging war in Spain;¹⁴ this must mean the emperor's war against the Cantabrians, which dates to 26/5 BCE.¹⁵ The numismatic evidence shows that Tiridates minted coins in Seleucia in 27/6 BCE, though he appears to have lost control of the city by the end of 26.¹⁶ After 23 BCE Tiridates vanishes from the historical record. All that can be said for certain is that his bid for the Parthian throne was ultimately unsuccessful.¹⁷

One feature of this obscure but important episode was a bellwether of later developments: Parthia first confronted Rome in this period not as a unitary state, but as two different factions with competing claims over an Arsacid hostage. Augustus was immediately compelled to negotiate between two sides in an internal Parthian conflict. If he wanted to align with Phraates IV, then he needed to remove the son from Tiridates' custody and return him to his father. But if the emperor decided to underwrite Tiridates' war against Phraates IV, he needed to ignore the latter's demand and allow Tiridates to employ the child as he saw fit. In sum, Augustus' control over the hostage son of Phraates IV immediately brought the emperor into Parthia's internal affairs. This dynamic would prove central to Arsacid hostage submission for all successive cases.

Prisoners, Standards, and a Set of Arsacid Hostages, c. 20–12 BCE

Some historians connect Augustus' return of Phraates IV's son with the Arsacid king's subsequent restoration of Rome's prisoners and military standards in 20 BCE. But others associate the latter event with a different case of Arsacid-Roman hostage submission: the installation of four sons of Phraates IV along with their families at the imperial court in Rome.

¹⁴ Just. 42.5.6: *ad Caesarem in Hispania bellum tunc temporis gerentem confugit*; text from Seel 1985: 288.

¹⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 20, 29.3; Cass. Dio 53.22.5–26.1; Flor. 2.33; Oros. 6.21.1–11; cf. *Mon. Anc.* 26. For the chronology, see Magie 1920.

¹⁶ Bigwood 2004: 42 n.26. On the dating of the numismatic evidence, see Sellwood 1980, 1995/6; Callataÿ 1994.

¹⁷ For a full discussion of the episode see Nabel 2015, with references.

The precise relationship between these episodes is a matter of confusion in the ancient sources and of debate in modern scholarly literature. But the connections between the events matter, since they clarify the logic of Arsacid hostage submission to Rome.

First, was there a direct connection between Augustus' return of Phraates IV's son and Phraates' restoration of the Roman standards and prisoners? This seems to be Dio's view, although his ambiguous wording means that the nature of this connection is not entirely clear.

τὸν μὲν Τιριδάτην τῷ Φραάτῃ οὐκ ἐξέδωκεν, τὸν δ' υἱὸν αὐτῷ, ὃν πρότερον παρ' ἐκείνου λαβὼν εἶχεν, ἀπέπεμψεν ἐπὶ τῷ τοὺς τε αἰχμαλώτους καὶ τὰ σημεῖα τὰ στρατιωτικὰ τὰ ἐν τε τῇ τοῦ Κράσσου καὶ ἐν τῇ τοῦ Ἄντωνίου συμφορᾷ ἀλόντα κομίσασθαι.¹⁸

[Augustus] did not turn Tiridates over to Phraates, but he did send back the son he had received from him on the condition that [Phraates] return the prisoners and the military standards taken in the disasters of Crassus and Antony.

It is debatable whether ἐπὶ τῷ in this passage means “on the condition that” or “with the result that,” and the statement is difficult to reconcile with Justin's comment that the child was sent back to Parthia without any conditions attached (*sine pretio*).¹⁹ The testimony of the other ancient sources does little to resolve the problem. In the *Res Gestae*, Augustus says that he compelled the Parthians to restore the standards and prisoners, though he does not specify the nature of the compulsion.²⁰ Strabo echoes Augustus in identifying the Parthian pursuit of Roman friendship as a motive.²¹ Suetonius merely says that the standards were returned to Augustus “when he demanded them back.”²² Florus and Orosius, much later sources, have the Parthians

¹⁸ Cass. Dio 53.33.2.

¹⁹ Just. 42.5.9. ἐπὶ τῷ with an infinitive seems to have a variety of meanings in Dio; cf. 11.43.26, 37.36.3. For the view that Phraates IV gave the prisoners and standards back as a direct result of Augustus' return of his son, see Dessau 1924: 372; Timpe 1975: 164; Taylor 1936: 163; Nedergaard 1988a: 106; Luther 2010: 104. For the argument against such a contractual arrangement, see Ziegler 1964: 46; Allen 2006: 85 n.53.

²⁰ *Mon. Anc.* 29.2: *Parthos trium exercitu<u> Romanorum spolia et signa re[ddere] mihi supplicesque amicitiam populi Romani petere coegi*; text from Cooley 2009: 94.

²¹ Strab. 6.4.2, 16.1.28.

²² Suet. *Aug.* 21.3: *resposcenti*. Cf. Suet. *Tib.* 9.1.

returning the standards voluntarily (*ultra*).²³ Other historical accounts mention the episode but say nothing that bears upon the problem.²⁴

The most serious objection to Dio's view of a contractual arrangement is a matter of chronology. While it is impossible to know precisely when Augustus gave back Phraates' son, Dio reports his return in 23 BCE. Phraates did not restore the Roman prisoners and standards until 20 BCE, when Augustus was in Syria, and this gap of several years between the two events has led some scholars to reject an explicit link between them.²⁵ Two considerations are relevant here. First, it must be remembered that Augustus was returning one hostage, while Phraates was returning thousands of prisoners. Plutarch, the only source to report the number of captives taken by the Parthians in the wake of Carrhae, puts the figure at 10,000.²⁶ Not all of these soldiers would have survived until 20 BCE, but some would have, and their number might have been increased by additional prisoners taken in the Parthian victories against Decidius Saxa and Antony.²⁷ Moreover, Pliny reports that the survivors of Carrhae were transported to the city of Merv on the Oxus river (modern Turkmenistan) after their capture – a relocation that would have left the soldiers thousands of kilometers away from Syria.²⁸ The organization, provisioning, and transportation of these men would have been a time-consuming operation. Dio also says that

²³ Flor. 2.34.63; Oros. 6.21.29.

²⁴ Liv. *Per.* 141; Vell. Pat. 2.91.1; Eutrop. *Brev.* 7.9. Van der Vin (1981: 119) cites Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.2) on the Arsacid surrender of the prisoners and standards, but in this passage Tacitus is clearly discussing Phraates' later submission of hostages.

²⁵ See the literature cited above, n.19.

²⁶ Plut. *Crass.* 31.7.

²⁷ Sampson (2008: 96 and n.146, 182) contends that Crassus' soldiers were generally young men, a view that is plausible if not explicitly grounded in the ancient sources (Plin. *HN* 2.147; Hor. *Carm.* 3.5.5–12). If so, presumably many were still alive in 20 BCE. Dio (54.8.1) says that “a few” (ὀλίγων) had either killed themselves out of shame during the intervening years, or could not be found.

²⁸ Plin. *HN* 6.47: *in hanc* [sc. *urbem*, i.e. Merv] *Orodes Romanos Crassiana clade captos deduxit*. On Merv (also called Alexandria or Antiocheia Margiana) cf. Isid. *Char. Mans. Parth.* 14; Fraser 1996: 116–8. An additional resource is University College London's Ancient Merv Project, available online at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/merv/>.

some prisoners escaped detection by hiding out in the country, which suggests that merely rounding the Romans up may have been a complex task.²⁹

Second, the transfer of the prisoners and standards had to wait until Augustus himself could be in Syria to take possession of them. Their recovery was presented in Augustan propaganda as the restoration of Roman honor after the humiliating losses of Crassus, Saxa, and Antony; the episode therefore provided a considerable boost to Augustus' prestige.³⁰ This was not a task to be delegated to a subordinate.³¹ Augustus was preoccupied with the war in Spain until 24 BCE and with many administrative matters thereafter, so perhaps 20 BCE was simply his first opportunity to tend to the Parthian situation in person. His trip to Syria may have additionally projected his willingness to use force against Phraates if the Arsacid reneged on their earlier agreement.³²

There is no reason, then, to deny the existence of a contractual arrangement between Augustus and Phraates on chronological grounds. Augustus returned Phraates his son, and in 20 BCE Phraates – perhaps grudgingly and only under the implicit threat of force – held up his end of the bargain. The sources support little speculation as to what the deal looked like on Phraates' side. His concessions had been symbolic rather than material, although he may have incurred the loss of some prestige in returning the standards. Strabo states that the Parthians had set up the captured standards as trophies,³³ and references in Horace and Propertius suggest that they were

²⁹ Cass. Dio 54.8.1: κατὰ χώραν λαθόντες.

³⁰ Rose 2005: 22–3.

³¹ Suetonius is the only source to assert that Augustus had Tiberius recover the standards (*Tib.* 9.1; cf. Eck / Takács 2007: 126), yet he omits this information in his life of Augustus (*Aug.* 21.3). This has led some to doubt the report in Tiberius' life: see Krämer 1973b; Woodman 1977: 98 n.2; Van Der Vin 1981: 120–1; Gruen 1990: 397 n.5; but cf. Seager 1977. In any event, Augustus's presence in Syria meant that he could and did take personal credit.

³² Cass. Dio 54.8.1; Just. 42.5.10. Cf. Syme 1989: 118: “to enforce Parthian compliance needed Caesar's own presence in Syria.”

³³ Strabo 6.4.2: τὰ τρόπαια ἔπεμψαν εἰς Ῥώμην ἃ κατὰ Ῥωμαίων ἀνέστησάν ποτε. The same phrase reoccurs with minor variations at 16.1.28.

displayed in Parthian temples.³⁴ Their return might have been an unpopular move. Still, Phraates had scored successes of his own. Just as Augustus could claim in the *Res Gestae* that the return of the standards was a sign of Phraates' submission, so too Phraates would have been able to boast that Augustus had complied with his request in returning his son to him.

Assuming that the exchange of Phraates' son for Rome's prisoners and standards was a reciprocal arrangement, it is necessary to explain the connection of these events to the next instance of Arsacid-Roman hostage submission: Phraates' dispatch of four of his sons along with their families to Augustus at some point between 19 and 10 BCE.³⁵ Strabo provides several names. Phraates' "legitimate sons" were Seraspadanus, Rhodaspes, Phraates and Vonones; two wives and four sons of these men accompanied them.³⁶ The literary sources report nothing more about Seraspadanus and Rhodaspes, but they must have died in captivity; a Latin inscription, apparently their epitaph, has been found at Rome.³⁷ These Arsacids were installed in the city, where they were to live for many years.³⁸

Does a close chronological relationship between the settlement of 20/19 BCE and Phraates' hostage transfer necessarily entail a direct connection between them, as C. Brian Rose has argued?³⁹ The notion is not borne out by a close reading of the evidence. First, contemporary

³⁴ Hor. *Epist.* 1.18.56: *sub duce qui templis Parthorum signa refigit*; *Od.* 4.15.6–8: *et signa nostro restituit Iovi / derepta Parthorum superbis / postibus*. The second passage, with its emphasis on "our Jove," suggests that the Parthians had dedicated the standards to Ahura Mazda: Thomas 2011: 263; Van der Vin 1981: 119. Cf. Prop. 3.4.4.

³⁵ The date cannot be established with complete confidence. Much depends on Strabo's comment (16.1.28) that Phraates had handed over his family members to Marcus Titius, who was governor of Syria at the time. But the dates for Titius' governorship are debated. An important clue comes from Josephus (*AJ* 16.270), who reports a meeting between Titius, Archelaus of Cappadocia, and Herod the Great; this must have been before Herod's last trip to Rome in 12 BCE. For discussion, see Corbishley 1934; Taylor 1936; Syme 1989; Schürer 1973: 256–7; Ziegler 1964: 51; Schippmann 1980: 47; Rose 2005: 36–7.

³⁶ Strab. 16.1.28. On the female Arsacids, see also Suet. *Aug.* 21.2, who says that Augustus' request for female hostages was unique; cf. Aymard 1961: 137. On Arsacid royal women generally, see Hartmann / Huber 2006; Bigwood 2004; 2008.

³⁷ *CIL* 6.1799 = *ILS* 842 = Hackl et al. 2010: 2.436 (III.1.3.A.2).

³⁸ On the Roman lives of these hostages, see Chapter 6, p. 211–24.

³⁹ Rose 2005: 37.

sources tended to handle the two events separately. They are treated in different chapters of Augustus' *Res Gestae*.⁴⁰ Velleius Paterculus likewise discusses the return of the standards and the submission of hostages in two different sections of his text.⁴¹ There are two relevant passages in Strabo, another contemporary of Augustus. In one, the events are lumped together, but in the other, the author mentions that the Roman governor Titius received the hostages at a conference in Syria – a detail that he does not apply to the return of the standards.⁴²

Second, several literary sources mention *either* the recovery of the standards *or* the hostage transfer, but not both. Although Livy's account of the event survives only as an epitome, there is no mention of hostages in it.⁴³ Josephus does not discuss the return of the standards or the Roman prisoners of war at all in his account of Phraates' submission of his "legitimate" children to Augustus as hostages.⁴⁴ Tacitus too mentions the hostages alone.⁴⁵ In Dio, the reverse is the case: the historian's account of the standards and prisoners contains no reference to the hostages.⁴⁶ Although Dio mentions the presence of Phraates' children at the Roman court later in his account, he never discusses their original reception by Augustus.⁴⁷ For these sources, the story of the hostages was fully detachable from the earlier return of the standards and prisoners.

⁴⁰ The return of the prisoners and standards is mentioned at *Mon. Anc.* 29.2; the submission of hostages at 32.2.

⁴¹ The return of the standards and prisoners: 2.91.1. The submission of hostages: 2.94.4. Velleius served with Gaius Caesar and was a knowledgeable observer of eastern affairs: see Woodman 1977: 101.

⁴² Strab. 6.4.2, 16.1.28: ὁ δ' ἐκεῖνον διαδεξάμενος Φραάτης τοσοῦτον ἐσπούδασε περὶ τὴν φιλίαν τὴν πρὸς Καίσαρα τὸν Σεβαστὸν ὥστε καὶ τὰ τρόπαια ἔπεμψεν ἅ κατὰ Ῥωμαίων ἀνέστησαν Παρθυαῖοι, **καὶ καλέσας εἰς σύλλογον Τίτιον τὸν ἐπιστατοῦντα τότε τῆς Συρίας**, τέτταρας παῖδας γνησίους ἐνεχείρισεν ὀμηρα αὐτῷ.

⁴³ Liv. *Per.* 141. Syme (1989: 117–8) thought the compiler of the *Periochae* mistook *signa* for *obsides*; this contention is convincingly refuted by Rose 2005: 37.

⁴⁴ Joseph. *AJ* 18.42.

⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.1.2.

⁴⁶ Cass. Dio 54.8.1–2.

⁴⁷ Cf. Cass. Dio 55.10.20, 58.26.2.

Finally, there are sources who mention the two events in the same breath but do not specify the chronological relationship between them. Suetonius' testimony furnishes an instructive example:

*Parthi quoque et Armeniam vindicanti facile cesserunt et signa militaria, quae M. Crasso et M. Antonio ademerant, reposcenti reddiderunt obsidesque **insuper** optulerunt...*⁴⁸

The Parthians, too, both readily yielded to him when he claimed Armenia and returned the military standards that they had carried off from Crassus and Antonius; **on top of that**, they also offered hostages...

The only adjective in Suetonius' text that links the return of the standards with the submission of hostages is *insuper*. Chronologically, this word tells the reader nothing; Suetonius makes no claim about the temporal relationship between the two events. Instead, his point concerns the extent of Parthia's submission. First, the Parthians yielded to Augustus in the matters of Armenia and the standards. They then sent hostages *on top of this*, taking their submission to another level. Suetonius is making a statement about how thoroughly Augustus humbled Parthia. He says nothing about the time it took to do so. The same applies to Justin's account, as well; while the hostages are mentioned immediately after the return of the standards, no information about the chronological relationship is provided.⁴⁹

The conclusion suggested by the ancient sources is that Phraates' submission of his children as hostages was unrelated to his return of the military standards, even if the two episodes were chronologically close to one another. To be sure, in some sources like Suetonius, Justin, and Orosius the events were depicted as two sides of the same coin. But this was because, from a Roman point of view, they both represented instances of Parthian submission to the

⁴⁸ Suet. *Aug.* 21.3.

⁴⁹ Just. 42.5.11–2. Cf. Yardley in Yardley / Heckl 1997: 5: "These two events are conflated by Justin but were, presumably, recorded separately by Trogus."

dominance of Augustus, not because they were different components of the same event.⁵⁰ The arrival of Phraates' children at Rome should not be interpreted as a mere coda to the recovery of the standards and prisoners. Phraates' submission of hostages to Augustus was instead a separate decision that arose from a different set of considerations.

An Arsacid King's Motives

The most striking feature of this second hostage transaction is the fact that it seems to have happened largely – though not entirely – on Phraates' initiative.⁵¹ This interpretation is found in three of the Greco-Roman literary sources. Phraates' motives are most directly addressed by Strabo, who goes into ample detail concerning the Arsacid king's reasoning.

καὶ καλέσας εἰς σύλλογον Τίτιον τὸν ἐπιστατοῦντα τότε τῆς Συρίας, τέτταρας παῖδας γνησίους ἐνεχείρισεν ὄμηρα αὐτῷ, Σεραспаδάνην καὶ Ῥωδάσπην καὶ Φραάτην καὶ Βονώνην, καὶ γυναῖκας τούτων δύο καὶ υἱεῖς τέτταρας, δεδιὼς τὰς στάσεις καὶ τοὺς ἐπιτιθεμένους αὐτῷ: ἦδει γὰρ μηδένα ἰσχύσοντα καθ' ἑαυτὸν, ἂν μὴ τινα ἐπιλάβῃ τοῦ Ἀρσακίου γένους διὰ τὸ εἶναι σφόδρα φιλαρσάκας τοὺς Παρθυαίους: ἐκποδῶν οὖν ἐποίησε τοὺς παῖδας, ἀφελέσθαι ζητῶν τὴν ἐλπίδα ταύτην τοὺς κακουροῦντας.⁵²

Having called a conference with Titius, who was then administering Syria, [Phraates] put into his hands four of his legitimate sons as hostages – Seraspadanēs, Rhodaspēs, Phraates, and Vononēs, along with two of their wives and four of their sons – out of fear of seditions and those who plotted against him. For he knew that no one could gain the mastery over himself unless they had someone of Arsacid stock, since the Parthians were exceedingly devoted to the Arsacids. So he got his children out of the way, seeking to remove this hope from evildoers.

The author highlights the dynamics of Parthian domestic politics as a decisive factor in the king's decision to send away his sons and their families. Phraates uses his connection with Augustus to address an internal political issue. To be sure, this explanation conflicts with what

⁵⁰ Nedergaard 1988a: 106.

⁵¹ Cf. Taylor 1936: 162; Ziegler 1964: 52; Cooley 2009: 254.

⁵² Strab. 16.1.28. On the necessity of the Parthian king's being an Arsacid, see also Joseph. *AJ* 18.44.

Strabo says in his other discussion of these events, where the dispatch of hostages is mentioned alongside the return of the standards and prisoners as initiatives to win the friendship of the Romans.⁵³ For Strabo, then, both domestic and international issues may have been at play.

Tacitus echoes Strabo in presenting both the submission of hostages and the Parthian-Roman friendship more generally as measures designed to shore up Phraates IV's reign against internal dissension. He depicts Phraates' *amicitia* with Augustus not as a fawning submission to the Romans, but as a tool to buttress the king's own power among the Parthians.

*partemque prolis firmandae amicitiae miserat, haud perinde nostri metu quam fidei popularium diffisus.*⁵⁴

[Phraates] had sent some of his offspring to strengthen the friendship, not so much because he was afraid of us, but because he mistrusted the loyalty of his people.

Like Strabo, Tacitus sees this case of hostage submission as an attempt on the Arsacid king's part to use the Romans to deal with a domestic problem. To be sure, the sentence exhibits Tacitus' propensity to advance his own interpretations and critiques through his non-Roman characters, and the rhetorical basis of such passages will be investigated in the next chapter. It misses the mark to say that Tacitus "lets the Parthians express their view of the event," as one scholar puts it.⁵⁵ It can at least be said, however, that his understanding of Phraates' motives overlaps with Strabo's in key respects.

According to Josephus, Phraates sent his sons and their families to Augustus at the behest of his wife Thea Musa.⁵⁶ Musa was an Italian concubine whom Augustus had given to Phraates

⁵³ Strab. 6.4.2; on the contradiction, see Lerouge 2007: 113.

⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.1.2.

⁵⁵ Nedergaard 1988a: 108. More often, Tacitus lets barbarians express *his* view of events: see Ehrhardt 1998: 295; Allen 2006: 224–44; Adler 2011: 119–39. See further the discussion in Chapter 4.

⁵⁶ On Thea Musa, see esp. Bigwood 2004; Strugnell 2008; Gregoratti 2013; 2015: 732. Josephus (*AJ* 18.40) gives her name as Θεσμοῦσα. But her name appears on coins as ΘΕΑΣ ΟΥΡΑΝΙΑΣ ΜΟΥΣΗΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ (Sellwood 58), so perhaps "Thea" was a title rather than part of her proper name.

as a gift.⁵⁷ She rose quickly in the Arsacid court from a concubine to a legitimate wife and full queen. Soon she gave birth to a son, Phraataces. Wishing to clear the way for her child's accession, Musa apparently convinced her husband to send the other contenders for the throne to Rome as hostages to make Phraataces the sole candidate.⁵⁸

Some elements of this account are plausible. Though it may have fallen short of the reports of incest that Josephus mentions, the close political and personal connection between Musa and Phraataces receives some corroboration from coins that bear both their portraits.⁵⁹ But there are reasons to doubt his attribution of the hostage submission to Musa alone. The story follows established Greek historiographical patterns for the depiction of scheming eastern queens.⁶⁰ While Musa could certainly have played a role in the decision to send the hostages, Josephus may go too far in imputing the deed to her alone. At any rate, the agencies of Phraates IV and Musa need not have been mutually exclusive.

Augustus himself foregrounds the absence of military force behind Phraates' decision to send his family members to Rome.⁶¹ This is in stark contrast to the section of the *Res Gestae* that mentions the return of the standards and prisoners. In that passage, Augustus emphasizes that he “forced” (*coegi*) the Parthians to comply with his wishes – a word with military overtones, even though no campaign had taken place. His report of the hostage submission, however, is clear that war played no part in Phraates' decision:

⁵⁷ The manuscripts of Josephus name Julius Caesar as the giver of Musa, but this must be an error: see the discussion in Bigwood 2004: 38–9.

⁵⁸ Joseph. *AJ* 18.39–44.

⁵⁹ Josephus distances himself from the report of incest: *AJ* 18.42: ἢ [i.e. Musa] δὴ καὶ συνιέναι λόγος εἶχεν αὐτόν. For the coins, see above, n.56. They are unique in that Musa was the only Arsacid queen ever depicted and named on a coin: Bigwood 2004: 47.

⁶⁰ Other examples are Semiramis and Atossa: Bigwood 2004: 46–7; Allen 2006: 147; Gregoratti 2013: 184; cf. Gruen 2017: 231–2.

⁶¹ Cf. Nedergaard 1988a: 108: “He has chosen his words with care to create a positive atmosphere around the event.”

*Ad [me re]x Parthorum Phrates, Orod[i]s filius, filios suos nepot[esque omnes] misit in Italiam non bello superatu[s], sed amicitiam nostrum per [libe]ror[um] suorum pignora petens.*⁶²

To me Orodes' son Phraates, the king of the Parthians, sent all his sons and grandsons into Italy, not because he was conquered in war, but seeking our friendship by using his sons as pledges.

Augustus attributes the hostage submission to Phraates' desire for friendship and alliance (*amicitia*) with the Roman people. The claim evokes the imperial might of Rome and its preeminence among eastern kings; it also reminds the reader that Augustus accomplished without a war what previous commanders, especially Antony, failed to do at the head of Rome's legions.

But the phrase *non bello superatus* is telling, and – intentionally or not – it allows Phraates an active role in the hostage transfer. In the passage that recounts Phraates' return of the standards and prisoners Augustus himself is at the fore, both as grammatical subject and political actor; the first person singular *coegi* impresses the reader with the emperor's control of affairs. Here, though, Phraates is the subject. The king may have been overawed by Roman might, but his decision to send his family members to Rome was nonetheless made of his own volition, not under military compulsion. Even the Roman emperor's official account of this hostage submission, then, acknowledges the agency of the Parthian ruler as a primary cause of the event. While the *Res Gestae* does not delve into internal Arsacid affairs, it is not incompatible with the accounts that locate the impetus for the transaction within Parthian domestic politics.

The only contemporary source to posit a different motive is Velleius Paterculus, who associates this act of hostage submission with Phraates' fear of Augustus. After describing Tiberius' activities in Armenia in 20/19 BCE, Velleius attributes the Arsacid king's dispatch of

⁶² *Mon. Anc.* 32.2; text from Cooley 2009: 96.

his sons to the awe that the Roman emperor's reputation inspired: "The king of the Parthians even sent his sons as hostages to Caesar in fear of the reputation of such a great name."⁶³ The emphasis on the fear inspired by a ruler's name is a common motif in Latin literature.⁶⁴ But this in itself is no reason to dismiss the explanation, and the passage suggests that Phraates' fear of Rome cannot be completely ruled out as a factor in his submission of hostages. Velleius' statement should perhaps be read alongside Tacitus' *haud perinde nostri metu*, which means "not so much through fear of us" – allowing a role for fear, though not a primary one. There is no reason to reject Velleius' testimony: Phraates may have sent his sons to Augustus in part to avoid the threat of future Roman military intervention.⁶⁵

On the whole, though, the Greek and Roman authors attribute much of the impetus for this second hostage submission to Arsacid domestic politics. Phraates dealt with an internal Parthian problem through international channels. He used the connections he had established with Augustus during the Tiridates episode to address an issue that frequently plagued the Arsacid court and threatened his own grasp on power: the struggle between the Arsacid king and recalcitrant members of the Parthian nobility. By sending his progeny to Rome, Phraates IV solidified his own power in the absence of other viable contenders for the throne. His submission of his children was not simply a matter of international politics, or of avoiding war through the use of diplomacy. It was also domestic maneuvering dressed up as foreign policy.

This new tactic contrasted with Phraates' earlier reliance on assassination to clear the field of rivals. Hostage submission could accomplish the same ends as outright murder while

⁶³ Vell. Pat. 2.94.4: *Rex quoque Parthorum tanti nominis fama territus liberos suos ad Caesarem misit obsides*. Text from Woodman 1977: 59.

⁶⁴ Maguinness 1932: 56; Woodman 1977: 102, with references. Cf. Just. 42.5.12: *plusque Caesar magnitudine nominis sui fecit*.

⁶⁵ Cf. the discussion in Lerouge 2007: 105–12.

avoiding the opprobrium that came from kin-slaying. Several sources mention the nobility's disgust at such murders when the reign of a new Arsacid king began.⁶⁶ Recalcitrant members of the nobility may have seen that Phraates' submission of hostages limited their options in the event of a revolt, but the princes' dismissal from the court may have occasioned less controversy than the bloodier measures so often used in the past.

The dearth of contemporary Parthian sources makes it difficult to evaluate this hostage transaction from the Arsacid point of view, but evidence from adjacent periods of ancient Near Eastern history suggests that fosterage and kinship relations would have been part of the Parthian calculations. As established in Chapter 2, Sasanian sources show that the dispatch of a royal child to a foreign ruler could regulate a wide variety of relationships, and that royal children on the Iranian plateau could be fostered by political superiors or inferiors. Nor was this dimension a Sasanian innovation; it had much deeper roots in ancient Near Eastern history that dated back to the Assyrian empire and pharaonic Egypt. This background suggests an idea that is not well represented in the Greco-Roman literary sources, at least for the Augustan period: through the dispatch of his children and grandchildren to Rome, Phraates might have created a kinship bond between the royal families of Arsaces and Caesar, with the latter serving as foster-father to the children of the former. To Parthian eyes, the sending of hostages may have looked less like political submission and more like the extension of Arsacid family bonds to the empire's powerful western neighbor. For Phraates' reign the Roman sources are silent on the fosterage dimension, but it is attested in Tacitus for later hostage transactions, as discussed below.⁶⁷

At this point, Phraates' use of hostage submission rested on the assumption that the Roman emperor could be counted on as a reliable host of his Arsacid wards. But subsequent

⁶⁶ See the passages cited above, n.8.

⁶⁷ See below, p. 113–4, 117–8.

events would show that this assumption was faulty. Soon the Parthian nobility would show that they, no less than their king, could employ Arsacid hostages and their Roman hosts for their own ends.

Vonones Returns, c. 6–19 CE

An event from the reign of Phraataces (c. 4 BCE–4 CE) illustrates how hostage submission soon changed from a tool of the Arsacid monarch to a potential threat to his position. Phraataces' refusal to acknowledge Roman suzerainty in Armenia led to one of the many clashes between Rome and Parthia over this territory. In a letter to Augustus, Phraataces made the return of his hostage brothers a condition for Parthian non-interference in Armenian affairs and the re-establishment of peace.⁶⁸ Augustus refused. In the event, war was avoided and a diplomatic solution achieved with the conference between Gaius Caesar and Phraataces at the Euphrates river.⁶⁹ This conference essentially reestablished the *status quo ante*, in spite of the fact that Phraataces' demand for the return of his brothers was not met.⁷⁰ Why, then, had he asked for them in the first place?

The answer is likely that Phraataces saw his kin across the Euphrates as potential rivals.⁷¹ The situation recalls the demand of Phraates IV that Augustus return the son whom Tiridates had captured and handed over to the Romans as a hostage. As with that case, the danger to the reigning king may have been the potential return to Parthia of a rival Arsacid. Phraataces, who like his father Phraates IV before him had murdered his father to attain the throne, was surely

⁶⁸ Cass. Dio 55.10.20: τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ἐπὶ εἰρήνῃ ἀπαιτῶν. Cf. Wiesehöfer 2010: 189.

⁶⁹ Vell. Pat. 2.101; Cass. Dio 55.10a.4; cf. Plin. *HN* 6.141; Plut. *Mor.*207e. Strab. 1.1.17 may also refer to Gaius' campaign: see Drijvers 1998: 290.

⁷⁰ Cf. Debevoise 1938: 148; Ziegler 1964: 54; Luther 2010.

⁷¹ Luther 2010: 106: "... sicher weniger motiviert durch brüderliche Liebe als vielmehr durch die berechtigte Sorge, sie könnten seiner eigenen Herrschaft gefährlich werden."

sensitive to the tenuousness of an Arsacid king's power.⁷² Unlike his predecessor, however, Phraataces did not have a history of good relations with Augustus, and he could not rest assured that the emperor would continue to hold his half-brothers in captivity. Phraataces was likely worried that Augustus would foment civil war in Parthia by dispatching one or more of Phraates' other sons.⁷³

Some have argued that Augustus demanded Phraataces' renunciation of the royal title because he recognized one of the Arsacids of Rome as the rightful heir to the Parthian throne.⁷⁴ Perhaps he did, but if so he never acted on this conviction. Gaius had a sizeable army with him in the east, and in 2 BCE a new Roman-Parthian war would have looked like a distinct possibility. A rival Arsacid claimant like Vonones would have made a sensible addition to such a campaign, where he might have served as a rallying point for internal Parthian resistance to Phraataces' regime.⁷⁵ Yet there is no evidence that any hostage left Rome during this period. If Augustus viewed one of them as the rightful Parthian king in theory, in practice he moved towards an accommodation with the reigning Arsacid.

Yet events soon transpired that would put the hostages in the spotlight once again. Phraataces had proved acceptable to the Romans, but certain Parthian nobles were evidently unhappy with his kingship. According to Josephus, the only source to discuss the end of Phraataces' reign, the king incurred intense dislike for murdering his father and for his incestuous relationship with his mother; the fact that Musa was originally a concubine (and an

⁷² Phraataces' murder of his father: Joseph. *AJ* 18.39–43. Cf. Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.195–8 (*Hostis ab invito regna parente rapit*) with Hollis 1977: 77–8.

⁷³ Cf. Karras-Klapproth 1988: 211: "Zu vermuten ist, daß dies nicht aus edlen Motiven geschah, sondern daß er versuchte, die Möglichkeit auszuschließen, daß der römische Kaiser in die innerparthischen Angelegenheiten eingriff und einen der in Rom lebenden Prinzen als Gegenkönig einsetzte..."

⁷⁴ Gardthausen et al. 1891: 1132; followed by Ziegler 1964: 53 n.59. Augustus' demand that Phraataces renounce his title is reported in Dio (55.10.20).

⁷⁵ Compare, for instance, the later presence on Julian's Persian campaign of Hormizd, brother of Shapur II and rival claimant for the Sasanian throne: Amm. 24.1–2, 24.5.1; Lib. *Letters* 1402.3.

Italian at that) seems also to have caused resentment.⁷⁶ An insurrection arose in 4 CE, apparently headed by members of the Parthian nobility.⁷⁷ Phraataces was expelled from his kingdom and died not long afterward.⁷⁸ The nobility brought in an Arsacid named Orodes to take his place, but he too was murdered in 6/7 CE.⁷⁹ Parthia needed a new king.

It was at this point that the Parthian nobility took advantage of Augustus' possession of a pool of hostages who were eligible contenders for the Arsacid throne. The earliest attestation of this event comes from Augustus himself, who boasts of the occasion in the *Res Gestae*:

*a me gentes Parthorum et Medoru[m per legatos] principes earum gentium reges pet[ī]tos acceperunt: Par[thi Vononem, regis Phr]atis filium, regis Orodis nepotem, Medi Arioba[rzanem], regis Artavazdis filium, regis Ariobarzanis nepotem.*⁸⁰

The peoples of Parthia and Media received kings from me, **whom they had sought through envoys, the foremost men of their people**: the Parthians took Vonones, the son of king Phraates, grandson of king Orodes; the Medes Ariobarzanes, son of Artavasdes, grandson of Ariobarzanes.

The text claims that Parthian aristocrats played a key role in the return of Vonones to his native land. The literary sources add pertinent details. “Having sent ambassadors to Rome, [the Parthian nobles] asked for a king from among the hostages,” Josephus says, “and Vonones was sent, as he was preferred to his brothers.”⁸¹ Tacitus reports that “the first men among the Parthians” sent

⁷⁶ Joseph. *AJ* 18.42–52. The accusations of incest may well have been invented or exaggerated by Phraataces' Parthian enemies, Josephus' sources, or Josephus himself, though a kinship marriage is not unthinkable in an Iranian royal family: for discussion, see Bigwood 2004: 43–7; Strugnell 2008: 292–5. On the question of Arsacid kinship marriage, see further Chapter 5, p. 169. Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.2) says merely that internal strife killed Phraates IV and “the following kings” (*Post finem Phraatis et sequentium regum ob internas caedis*).

⁷⁷ Cf. Joseph. *AJ* 18.44. After the deposition of Phraataces the Parthian nobles (οἱ γενναιότατοι Πάρθων) were in a position to select a new king, which suggests that they were the king's opponents in the civil war.

⁷⁸ Some (e.g. Ziegler 1964: 56) have identified the flight of Phraataces with Augustus's reception of a *supplex* Phraates of the *Res Gestae* (*Mon. Anc.* 32), but this identification is far from certain; see Nabel 2015: 312.

⁷⁹ Sellwood types 59.1–2 are the only known issues of this Orodes. They date to the year 317 of the Seleucid era, or 6/7 CE: Debevoise 1938: 151 n.37.

⁸⁰ *Mon. Anc.* 33; text from Cooley 2009: 98.

⁸¹ Joseph. *AJ* 18.46: πρεσβεύσαντες δὲ εἰς Ῥώμην ἤτοῦνον βασιλέα τῶν ὀμηρεούντων, καὶ πέμπεται Βονώνης προκριθεὶς τῶν ἀδελφῶν.

these envoys, a phrase that matches well with Josephus' οἱ γενναιότατοι Πάρθων; he also adds that Vonones was the preferred choice since he was the eldest of the hostages.⁸²

Augustus' release of Vonones shows how actors from the Parthian nobility appropriated hostage submission for their own ends.⁸³ Phraates IV had used Augustus' hospitality as a way to shield his kingship from rivals like Tiridates who enjoyed the support of Parthia's noble families. But now members of the nobility, having deposed both Phraataces and Orodes – the latter a king of their own choosing – found that their overtures to the emperor could succeed no less than those of the Arsacid monarch. The original movement of hostages from Parthia to Rome had benefitted the king; now the return of one of their number would benefit the noblemen who took the initiative to petition the Roman emperor. Hostages could work in their favor, the nobles found: if the reigning Arsacid could be killed or driven into exile, a suitable replacement could be obtained across the Euphrates. Parthia's aristocrats now had a new means of resistance against the rule of an unpopular king.

With the return of Vonones, Arsacid hostage submission had drawn Rome into the internal affairs of its imperial neighbor and effectively made the emperor into a participant in Parthian domestic politics. As discussed above, the power struggle between the Arsacid king, the other members of his family, and aristocratic factions was a permanent feature of the Parthian empire's political landscape.⁸⁴ Now, however, this struggle took on an interstate dimension: the presence of Arsacid hostages in Italy drew their Roman hosts into this perpetual conflict. By receiving hostages from the Arsacid king, the Romans helped secure his power; Parthia's ruler

⁸² Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.1: *venere in urbem legati a primoribus Parthis, qui Vononem vetustissimum liberorum eius accirent.* Cf. Joseph. *AJ* 18.44. Debevoise (1938: 151, citing Suet. *Tib.* 16) connects this legation with the one instructed by Augustus to appear before Tiberius in Germany; cf. Schippmann 1980: 49; Karras-Klapproth 1988: 211.

⁸³ The Greco-Roman sources for this episode present the Parthian nobility as a monolithic group, but this is likely an oversimplification: cf. Fowler / Hekster 2005: 21.

⁸⁴ See above, p. 79–82.

could rest easier in the absence of Arsacid rivals behind whom intransigent nobles could rally. But by releasing chosen hostages like Vonones to return to Parthia and take the Arsacid throne, Rome armed the nobility against their reigning king with a suitable candidate for his replacement. Through the circulation of hostages, Rome had become entangled in the internal politics of its imperial counterpart.

Despite this initial connection between the two empires, though, the return of hostages to Parthia unleashed forces that would drive a wedge between them. While Vonones seems to have enjoyed an enthusiastic reception upon his accession in 8 CE, aggrieved Parthians soon turned against him.⁸⁵ The sources do not specify whether this adverse reaction arose among the nobility alone or the wider population. They report two complaints against Vonones. The first, as Josephus represents it, is that the Parthians found it insulting to have a king who was perceived as a Roman pawn:

ταχεῖα δ' ἀνατροπή τοὺς βαρβάρους ὕπαισιν ἅτε καὶ φύσει σφαλεροὺς ὄντας πρὸς τε τὴν ἀναξιοπάθειαν, ἀνδραπόδω γὰρ ἀλλοτρίῳ ποιήσῃν τὸ προστασσόμενον οὐκ ἠξίουσιν, τὴν ὀμηρεῖαν ἀντὶ δουλείας ὀνομάζοντες, καὶ τῆς ἐπικλήσεως τὴν ἀδοξίαν: οὐ γὰρ [ἄν] πολέμου δικαίῳ δεδόσθαι τὸν βασιλεύσοντα Πάρθοις, ἀλλὰ, ὃ τῷ παντὶ χεῖρον, εἰρήνης ὕβρει.⁸⁶

But a quick change of heart came over the barbarians, being fickle by nature, both at the indignity – for they thought it wrong to carry out the commands of a slave of foreigners, considering “hostage” to be synonymous with “slave” – and at the ill-repute of the title, since in their view the man had been given to the Parthians as a king not by the verdict of war but as an insult in a time of peace, which was worst of all.

According to Josephus, the Parthians decided that Vonones’ tenure as a hostage at the court of Augustus made him a Roman quisling. The newly crowned king’s detractors equated

⁸⁵ The date of Vonones’ arrival in Parthia can be established only by the numismatic evidence. His earliest issue (Sellwood type 60.1) dates to 8/9 CE, and most scholars accept this year as the beginning of his reign. For an overview of the different chronologies see most recently Gonnella (2001), who accepts 8/9 CE as the date of Vonones’ ascension. For Parthia’s initial reception of Vonones, see Joseph. *AJ* 18.46; Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.1.

⁸⁶ Joseph. *AJ* 18.47.

hostageship with slavery. Because Vonones spent so many years in captivity at the emperor's court, the argument went, he must surely be subservient to him. It was an insult for such a man to rule over the Parthians.

Tacitus echoes the idea: having a former hostage as a king gave the Parthians the impression that “the kingdom of the Arsacidae was possessed and given away as though it were merely one among the Roman provinces.”⁸⁷ The text links the position of the Arsacid king with the prestige and reputation of Parthia as a whole; Vonones is found unequal to the legacy of Arsaces in spite of his blood membership in the ruling family. For Tacitus' Parthians, Vonones' return from Rome with Augustus' blessing was surely an indication that the hostage remained under the thumb of his former host. As in Josephus, the experience of hostageship is inexorably linked to political subordination.

A second accusation leveled at Vonones further highlighted his subservience to the Romans: he had gone native. A hostage at Rome for two decades or more, Vonones had acquired certain Roman habits that, from a Parthian point of view, were strange at best and intolerable at worst. Vonones was uninterested in hunting, horses, and banquets; he travelled by litter; he surrounded himself with Greeks.⁸⁸ According to Tacitus, “he in his very difference from the ways of his ancestors was inflaming [the Parthians] in their indignation.”⁸⁹ Vonones' supposed adoption of Roman cultural forms is said to have laid the basis for a rebellion against him. His hostageship in Rome changed him in ways that rendered him incapable of fulfilling the traditional role of an Arsacid king.

⁸⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.2: *iam inter provincias Romanas solium Arsacidarum haberi darique.*

⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.3. Hunts and banquets (called here *patriae epulae* by Tacitus) were more than just diversions and amusements among the Parthians; they were occasions on which important business was transacted; cf. Just. 41.3.3; Suet. *Calig.* 5; discussion in Wiesehöfer 2002a: 295; 2010: 190. At Tac. *Ann.* 2.68.1, Vonones escapes his Roman handlers under the pretext of hunting. Note also Polyb. 31.14.1–3; the historian seems to have been a hunting partner to the Seleucid hostage Demetrius I.

⁸⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.3: *accendebat dedignantem et ipse diversus a maiorum institutis.*

In connection with this passage some scholars have pointed to Vonones' short hairstyle on his drachms (Fig. 1) – the only piece of evidence that directly reflects the agency of the former hostage himself.



Fig. 1: Drachm of Vonones I, c. 8–12 CE. Sellwood 60.5. Photo courtesy of Ira and Larry Goldberg Auctioneers; available online at http://images.goldbergauctions.com/php/lot_auc.php?site=1&sale=83&lot=438.

To be sure, the iconography shows significant departures from other Arsacid issues. With few exceptions, Arsacid kings wore long hair on their coins, and it is possible that Vonones' self-presentation reflects the adoption of a Roman style.⁹⁰ Moreover, the drachm's legend "King Vonones, having conquered Artabanus" is a reference to a recent event – also a rarity in Arsacid coinage.⁹¹ But the coin was minted at Ecbatana, a city far from Parthia's border with Rome, and not an obvious place for a king to advertise his Roman connections.⁹² The unusual iconography is not incompatible with the accounts of Josephus and Tacitus, but it cannot be used to confirm them. Despite its direct reflection of Vonones' self-image, the coin raises more questions than it answers.

⁹⁰ Sellwood 60.5; Sellwood 1980: 193; Allen 2006: 176–7; Sinisi 2012b: 286: "the king is characteristically depicted short-haired, fitting a westernized ruler who in fact grew up in Rome."

⁹¹ Sellwood 60.5: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ / ΟΝΩΝΗΣ / ΝΕΙΚΗΣΑΣ / ΑΡΤΑΒΑΝΟΝ; see further below, n.101.

⁹² Wheeler 2007.

The central accusation of Vonones' political enemies is similarly characterized in both Josephus and Tacitus: Vonones was not an Arsacid but a Roman. His hostageship had fundamentally changed him from a member of Parthia's ruling family into a creature from another world. In Josephus' words, Vonones is reviled as an ἀνδράποδον ἀλλότριον, which may mean either "the slave of another person" or "a foreign slave." Stronger still is the formulation in Tacitus: Vonones "had been sought from another world" (*alio ex orbe*).⁹³ The fact that the hostage-king was born and raised in the Parthian empire before his submission to Augustus seems to have counted for little. His years of captivity at the Roman court had transformed him into the inhabitant of an empire so distant and so different from Parthia that it was reckoned to be another world entirely.

To be sure, the two authors are here using Vonones' detractors to comment on Rome as much as Parthia. This is particularly true of Tacitus, who often uses foreigners like the Parthians, Britons, and Germans to express his own disgust with the decadent and enervating effect that the emperor's court has even on the originally pure and unsullied.⁹⁴ Hostages especially are grist for his mill.⁹⁵ The historian undoubtedly has other priorities in this passage aside from an accurate description of Parthian grievances.⁹⁶ The later cases of Tiridates in 36 CE and Meherdates in 49 CE follow much the same pattern. Accusations of corruption and degeneration must therefore not be taken at face value, and the usefulness of the Roman literary texts as sources for Parthian internal affairs will be taken up in greater detail in the next chapter.

⁹³ Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.2: *petitum alio ex orbe regem*.

⁹⁴ Adler 2011; Ehrhardt 1998; Wiesehöfer 2010: 190.

⁹⁵ Compare especially the cases of Italicus (not technically a hostage, but a member of the Cheruscan royal family living at Rome: *Ann.* 11.16; Keddie 1975) and Tigranes (*Ann.* 14.26.1).

⁹⁶ Wiesehöfer (2002: 295; 2010: 190) rejects the report of cultural "degeneration" as a product of Tacitus' *Prinzipatskritik*, though he finds it plausible that the Parthian nobility perceived Vonones as a tool of Augustus.

For the present purposes, a closer reading of Tacitus' account is necessary to establish his own view of Arsacid affairs. First, a distinction must be drawn between what Tacitus says and what he has his characters say.⁹⁷ The accusations against Vonones are leveled not by the historian himself, but by the former hostage's domestic enemies. Tacitus knew that political rhetoric distorts the truth. The invective against Vonones should be read as such: speech with a political point that is intended to persuade, not to accurately represent reality. Moreover, it is significant that Tacitus himself does not pass judgment on Vonones in his own voice, since he does do this in the case of another hostage. Later in the *Annals*, he comments that the Cappadocian hostage Tigranes had "sunk down into a slave-like subjection" after a number of years living in Rome.⁹⁸ The fact that the historian does not personally vouch for Vonones' acculturation means that the identity and the agenda of the slanderer must be taken into account.

Second, the historicity of Vonones' Romanization is less important for the present purposes than his vulnerability to an *accusation* of Romanization. The reality of his acculturation has attracted much scholarly attention.⁹⁹ But aside from Tacitus and Josephus, Vonones' coins are the only evidence that bear upon the matter. As discussed above, the numismatic evidence is not necessarily incompatible with the literary accounts – but it also cannot be used to confirm them. A far more pertinent issue is the rhetorical use of "acculturation" as a weapon in political discourse. There can be no certainty without corroborating evidence from Parthian territory, but it is plausible that Vonones' detractors tried to delegitimize his kingship with the argument that a long hostageship at the emperor's court turned an Arsacid into a Roman, and therefore into a foreigner unfit to rule.

⁹⁷ Cf. Isaac 2004: 376 n.35 *contra* Ehrhardt 1998: 302.

⁹⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 14.26.1.

⁹⁹ Acceptance of Vonones' Romanization: Debevoise 1938: 151; Levick 1976: 145; Moscovich 1974: 425 n.37; Gregoratti 2012a: 129. Challenges to the idea: Wiesehöfer 2010: 191–2.

This logic set the stage for a critical development. The incipient rebellion against Vonones demanded that what was “Arsacid” be defined in contradistinction to what was “Roman.” By tarring Vonones with the brush of Romanization – by naming him a quisling, an alien, and slave – the king’s enemies justified their rebellion against a ruler who was, in fact, unimpeachably Arsacid by blood. The rhetorical contrast between Arsacid legitimacy and Roman servitude would have real implications for the face of the Parthian monarchy, especially when successive Arsacids of Rome returned later in the first century CE in their own campaigns to seize the position of king of kings.

The enemies of Vonones sought a replacement. The rebels settled on the Arsacid Artabanus, who according to Tacitus had grown up among the Dahae in eastern Iran; Josephus calls him the king of Media.¹⁰⁰ Vonones repulsed Artabanus’ armies at first, defeating his opponent in a pitched battle and commemorating his victory on his coins.¹⁰¹ But his success was temporary. Artabanus rallied, and while Vonones seems to have controlled some parts of the empire until 15 CE, after that date he gave up the throne and fled to Armenia.¹⁰² Josephus says that Vonones contended unsuccessfully for the kingship there, while Tacitus has him taking the Armenian throne before later being deposed under pressure from the Armenians, Parthians, and Romans.¹⁰³ Most modern scholars have followed Tacitus here,¹⁰⁴ perhaps wrongly: if a recent numismatic study correctly dates the end of Vonones’ reign to 15 CE, and if (following Josephus

¹⁰⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.1; Joseph. *AJ* 18.48. On the Dahae, see Bivar 1983: 26–7.

¹⁰¹ Sellwood type 60.5: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ / ΟΝΩΝΗΣ / ΝΕΙΚΗΣΑΣ / ΑΡΤΑΒΑΝΟΝ; Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.1; Joseph. *AJ* 18.48. For the legends typical of Arsacid coinage, see Sinisi 2012a: 53–4. See also above, n.91.

¹⁰² Joseph. *AJ* 18.50; Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.1. Gonnella (2001: 71) discusses two of Vonones’ tetradrachms that may be dated to 15 CE, suggesting the mint at Seleucia was still under his control at that time.

¹⁰³ Joseph. *AJ* 18.50–2; Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.2–3.

¹⁰⁴ Debevoise 1938: 153; Ziegler 1964: 57; Karras-Klapproth 1988: 212; Nedergaard 1988a: 110.

and Tacitus) Vonones left Armenia for Syria during Creticus Silanus' governorship in 16 CE, Vonones may never have had time to assume the Armenian kingship.¹⁰⁵

Meanwhile, the Romans severed ties with their former hostage. So far as is known, Augustus supported Vonones neither militarily nor financially in his war against Artabanus.¹⁰⁶ His successor Tiberius went further, actively taking steps to neutralize Vonones' influence at the request of the new Arsacid king. Both Josephus and Tacitus record that Vonones' flight from Armenia to Roman territory in Syria was partly a result of Roman pressure.¹⁰⁷ Josephus says that Vonones "handed himself over to Silanus" (παραδίδωσιν αὐτὸν Σιλανῶ), using a verb that often denotes surrender to hostile parties; Tacitus has Vonones "summoned" (*excitum*) by Tiberius' administration.¹⁰⁸ In Suetonius, Vonones goes to Syria as a refugee but is later ill-treated by the Romans.¹⁰⁹ Artabanus' threats were a significant factor: both Josephus and Tacitus make clear that Tiberius' treatment of Vonones was prompted by the new Arsacid king's demands.

Not long after Vonones' return to Syria, Tiberius' adopted son Germanicus would further limit Vonones' freedom in order to strengthen relations with Artabanus – although he would meet with considerable resistance from one of his subordinates in his attempts to do so. During Germanicus' tour of the east in 18/19 CE,¹¹⁰ Parthian ambassadors arrived to renew the treaty of friendship between Rome and the Arsacid kingdom. In Tacitus' words, these envoys also

¹⁰⁵ Gonnella 2001. See Joseph. *AJ* 18.52; Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.3.

¹⁰⁶ Ziegler 1964: 57. To be sure, Vonones received funds from Augustus prior to his departure from Rome (Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.1: *magnificum id sibi credidit Caesar auxitque opibus*). But there is no evidence that these donations continued into his reign over Parthia.

¹⁰⁷ Ignored by Dando-Collins 2008: 56, who depicts Vonones' stay in Syria as purely that of a refugee seeking sanctuary.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph. *AJ* 18.51–2; Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.3. On the verb παραδίδωμι with submission to hostiles, cf. Herod. 1.45.1, 3.13.3; Thuc. 7.86.4; Andoc. 3.11.

¹⁰⁹ Suet. *Tib.* 49.2. On Suetonius' claim that Vonones was despoiled of a treasure by Tiberius cf. Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1.

¹¹⁰ Germanicus had been dispatched to the east by Tiberius in 17 CE in order to settle Armenian affairs; his authority during this command was higher than that of the provincial governors and subordinate only to Tiberius himself: *SCPP* 29–35; Tac. *Ann.* 2.43.1.

conveyed Artabanus' request that "Vonones not be held in Syria, nor be allowed to drag the nobility into rebellion through local messengers."¹¹¹ Artabanus evidently still feared Vonones' ability to recruit local elites to his cause.¹¹² The Arsacid king sought to head off this possibility by having Vonones removed from Syria, where his influence would be most volatile.

Germanicus complied. As a result of the meeting Vonones was moved to Pompeiopolis, a city in Cilicia.¹¹³ Not long afterward Vonones bribed his guards and attempted to flee to Armenia, but he was caught and put to death. Tacitus reports the possibility that his murderer, a soldier named Remmius who was one of his guards, killed Vonones to cover his own complicity in the escape attempt.¹¹⁴

Vonones' second captivity thus furnishes a clear example of the Roman emperor aiding the Parthian king through his control over an Arsacid of Rome – a further demonstration of how the movement of Arsacids between Rome and Parthia brought together political partners from across state boundaries. Tiberius and his representative Germanicus sided with the new Parthian king against Vonones, in spite of the latter's Roman connections. Tiberius transported Vonones from Armenia to Syria; Germanicus moved him from Syria to Cilicia. Both relocations were undertaken at Artabanus' request. To aid the Parthian nobility, Augustus had sent them a hostage; now, to aid the Arsacid king, Tiberius took him back. Vonones had drawn two successive emperors into the arena of Parthian domestic politics.

¹¹¹ Tac. *Ann.* 2.58.1: *petere interim ne Vonones in Syria haberetur neu proceres gentium propinquis nuntiis ad discordias traheret*. Goodyear (1972–81: 2.370) sees the *amicitia ac foedus* between Rome and Parthia in this passage as a reference to the agreement between Augustus and Phraates IV.

¹¹² The testimony of the *SCPP* means the elites referred to here were likely Armenians; see Chapter 7, p. 229–32.

¹¹³ Tac. *Ann.* 2.58.2.

¹¹⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.68.2: *unde maior fides conscientia sceleris et metu indicii mortem Vononem inlatam*. Shotter (1974: 237) suggests that Cn. Calpurnius Piso may have "connived at" Vonones' escape attempt.

Artabanus and Tiridates II, 35 CE

After many years of quiet along the Euphrates, Artabanus seized an opportunity to extend Arsacid influence into Armenia. After the death of the Armenian king Artaxias III in 35 CE, Artabanus installed his eldest son Arsaces on the Armenian throne.¹¹⁵ The king's western policy may have been even more ambitious: according to Tacitus, Artabanus aimed at nothing less than the reestablishment of the boundaries of the Achaemenid and Macedonian empires: "At the same time, he was bragging of the old borders of the Persians and the Macedonians, boasting and threatening that he was going to invade the lands held first by Cyrus and then later by Alexander."¹¹⁶ Dio reports that Artabanus "made an attempt on Cappadocia," a report that supports the notion of an Arsacid expansionist policy.¹¹⁷

Even in the face of this invasion, however, Tiberius took no action until approached by a group from within Parthian domestic politics. Dio reports that Artabanus "was treating the Parthians in a rather arrogant manner."¹¹⁸ The statement does little to clarify Parthian grievances against the Arsacid king, but it is clear that some among the Parthian nobility were again seeking to overthrow their monarch. Tiberius received a visit from Sinnaces and Abdus, two Parthian nobles who claimed to be acting on behalf of a broader faction.¹¹⁹ As before, the purpose of this delegation was to petition the emperor for the return of an Arsacid hostage to assume the Parthian throne. Tacitus has Sinnaces and Abdus asking specifically for Phraates, one of the four

¹¹⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1; Joseph. *AJ* 18.96; Cass. Dio 58.26.1. Cf. Philost. *Vit. Apoll.* 2.2, who mentions an Armenian king named Arsaces (βασιλεὺς μὲν δὴ Ἀρμενίας τότε ἦν Ἀρσάκης).

¹¹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1: *Simul veteres Persarum ac Macedonum terminos, seque invasurum possessa primum Cyro et post Alexandro per vaniloquentiam ac minas iaciebat.* For a discussion of this passage and Arsacid political ideology, see Chapter 5, p. 164–5.

¹¹⁷ Cass. Dio 58.26.1: τῆς τε Καππαδοκίας ἐπείρα; cf. Olbrycht 2012: 217–8. See also Wiesehöfer 1986: 180 and n.22 for possible references to this invasion in Hamza Isfahani and Tabari, later Persian and Arabic sources.

¹¹⁸ Cass. Dio 58.26.1: ὑπερηφανώτερον καὶ τοῖς Πάρθοις ἐχρήτο.

¹¹⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1–2. Tacitus says that the two were acting *adscitis et aliis primoribus*, "with others too from among the nobility having been received as allies." Cf. Dąbrowa 1983: 107–8.

sons of Phraates IV mentioned by Strabo; Dio simply says that “they asked for a king from among those serving as hostages.”¹²⁰ Tiberius consented. Phraates left for Syria but died along the way; a suitable replacement was found in Tiridates II, a grandson of Phraates IV.¹²¹

Tiridates’ subsequent march on Ctesiphon once again saw Roman eastern policy intimately entwined with Parthian domestic politics. Despite Artabanus’ overturning of the status quo in Armenia, Tiberius did nothing until the embassy of Sinnaces and Abdus gave him the opportunity to achieve his own ends in concert with the Parthian nobility. In Tacitus’ description, Tiberius “managed foreign affairs by plots and stratagem and kept force at a distance.”¹²² The comment is a fair interpretation of the emperor’s approach, and some scholars use it to point to a more general Roman strategy of using hostages to destabilize Parthia.¹²³ But this view ignores the fact that Tiberius was largely following the initiative of a Parthian faction. Earlier in his reign, Tiberius imprisoned and then relocated Vonones at Artabanus’ request; now he dispatched Tiridates to aid Artabanus’ enemies among the nobility. The circulation of the Arsacids of Rome variously aligned their Roman hosts with different actors within Parthian domestic politics. Because of hostages, Rome did not confront Parthia as a unitary state; it maneuvered between different Parthian factions depending upon the circumstances.

Tiberius’ new allies from the Parthian nobility soon proved useful partners. Tiberius and then-governor of Syria Lucius Vitellius persuaded the tribes of the Caucasus to invade Armenia and confront the Parthian forces there.¹²⁴ This arrangement was effected at least in part by cash

¹²⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2; Strab. 16.1.28; Cass. Dio 58.26.2: βασιλέα σφίσιν ἐκ τῶν ὄμηρευόντων αἰτοῦντες.

¹²¹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.2–3; Cass. Dio 58.26.2; see also Schippmann 1980: 51.

¹²² Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.1: *destinata retinens, consiliis et astu res externas moliri, arma procul habere.* Cf. *Ann.* 2.26.3.

¹²³ Momigliano 1961: 60; Frézouls 1995: 494; Allen 2006: 136; Lerouge 2007: 133.

¹²⁴ Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.33) has the Iberi, the Albani, and some Sarmatians fighting for the Roman cause. Josephus (*AJ* 18.97) says that the Iberi and Albani turned Vitellius down, but allowed the Alani to traverse their territory to invade Armenia. Dio (58.26.3–4) notes the Roman agreement with the Iberi, but does not mention any of the other tribes. For discussion, see Täubler 1904: 30–3. On Vitellius’ appointment, see Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.3.

payments to the tribes; by the same token, certain members of Arsaces' staff were bribed to murder their leader.¹²⁵ Another son of Artabanus named Orodes was unsuccessful in retaking Armenia,¹²⁶ and Artabanus seems to have traveled to the area personally to take command of the Parthian campaign.¹²⁷ At this point Vitellius spread a rumor that a Roman invasion of Mesopotamia was imminent. Like all good rumors, it was rooted in truth: Vitellius had indeed assembled legions.¹²⁸ The ruse had the desired effect. Artabanus retired from Armenia to counter the presumptive Roman threat, a retreat that seems to have caused a crisis of confidence in his leadership. His army evidently dispersed, and Parthia's nobility – their desertions perhaps helped along by further bribes from Vitellius – withdrew their support. Artabanus fled to the eastern edge of the Parthian empire, where he would lie low and bide his time.¹²⁹

The time was ripe to deploy Tiridates. Vitellius led his legions to the bank of the Euphrates, where sacrifices were made. Once across the river, Tiridates received the submission of several Parthian nobles, who put their military forces and financial resources at his disposal.¹³⁰ Chief among these was one Abdgaeses, father of Sinnaces.¹³¹ Tacitus reports that the first wave of cities to go over to Tiridates were Greek, chief among whom were the inhabitants of

¹²⁵ Joseph. *AJ* 18.97; Tac. *Ann.* 6.33.1: *reperitque corruptores ministros Arsacis multo auro ad scelus cogunt*. The sentence does not explicitly say that Arsaces was murdered, but this reading seems necessary given the subsequent statement that “[Artabanus] prepared his son Orodes as an avenger” (6.33.2: *filium Oroden ultorem parat*).

¹²⁶ Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.35) says that Orodes was wounded in a battle to recover Armenia, after which he drops out of the narrative. Josephus mentions the death in battle of an unnamed son of Artabanus, presumably Orodes (*AJ* 18.98: καὶ τοῦ βασιλέως ὁ υἱὸς ἐκ τουτωνὶ τῶν μαχῶν ἔπεσε). Dio says that Tiberius wanted Mithradates (an Iberian leader) to invade Armenia “so that Artabanus would depart his own territory in order to assist his son” (58.26.3: ἵνα ὁ Ἀρτάβανος τῷ υἱεὶ βοηθῶν ἀπὸ τῆς οἰκειᾶς ἀπάρῃ); it is unclear whether this refers to Arsaces or Orodes, since the latter is not mentioned by name in Dio's account.

¹²⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.1: *mox Artabanus tota mole regni ultum iit*; cf. Cass. Dio 58.26.3.

¹²⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.1: *ni contractis legionibus Vitellius et subdito rumore tamquam Mesopotamiam invasurus metum Romani belli fecisset*. Cf. Levick 1976: 146–7.

¹²⁹ Joseph. *AJ* 18.99–100; Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.2–4.

¹³⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.1–4.

¹³¹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.2, 37.3. Some scholars (e.g. Karras-Klapproth 1988: 10) have concluded on the basis of *Ann.* 6.42.4 that Abdgaeses was the Surena who crowned Tiridates in 36 CE.

Seleucia.¹³² Tacitus has these city-dwellers contrast Tiridates' humaneness with the savage nomadism of Artabanus' "Scythian" background. Whether this was truly a motive for the Seleucians is uncertain; Tacitus may simply be indulging in typically Roman derision of Parthia's supposedly Scythian heritage, and his depiction of the Seleucians is in some respects modeled on a passage in Thucydides on Theban Medizing.¹³³ But the support Tiridates enjoyed among Parthian Greeks is clear enough.¹³⁴ Artabanus had been the first Parthian king in many years to omit the common epithet "Lover of Greeks" (*philellen*) from his coins. This was a dramatic break from tradition, and an indication of his contentious political relationship with the Greek populations inside the empire.¹³⁵ Against this background, Seleucia's support of Tiridates was a canny political move, as was their extolling of Tiridates' Arsacid credentials over those of Artabanus.¹³⁶

Tiridates proceeded to Ctesiphon, where he was crowned by the Surena in accordance with Parthian tradition.¹³⁷ Yet he had reigned for only a few months when certain members of the Parthian nobility turned against him. Tacitus tells of two such men, Hiero and Phraates, who sought out Artabanus not long after Tiridates' coronation.¹³⁸ The historian's description of their

¹³² Tac. *Ann.* 6.41.2.

¹³³ On the *topos* in Greek and Roman historiography of the Parthians as nomadic and its relationship to reality, compare Hauser 2005; 2006 *contra* Olbrycht 1998b; 2003; see also Lerouge 2007: 174–85. On the passage's indebtedness to Thucydides 3.62, see Woodman 2017: 261.

¹³⁴ Cf. Lukonin 1983: 720.

¹³⁵ Sellwood 1980: 185; Sinisi 2012b: 286; cf. Curtis 2000: 24. As Wiesehöfer (2015: 338) notes, however, Artabanus' omission of *philellen* from his coins was a response to a contingent political problem, not a blanket rejection of all Greek culture.

¹³⁶ Tacitus has the Seleucians berate Artabanus as "an Arsacid on his mother's side, but otherwise degenerate" (*Ann.* 6.42: *materna origine Arsaciden, cetera degenerem*).

¹³⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.4: *multis coram et adprobantibus Surena patrio more Tiridaten insigni regio evinxit*. Plutarch (*Crass.* 21.7) also asserts that this was the right of the Surena.

¹³⁸ This Phraates may be the figure mentioned in a letter of Artabanus to the city of Susa, preserved in a Greek inscription. If so, he was satrap of Susiana: Cumont 1932: 249, accepted by Lukonin 1983: 720. On this inscription see also Engers 1938.

grievances against Tiridates is crucial to understanding of the broader impact of Arsacid hostage submission on the Roman-Parthian relationship:

*tum Hiero pueritiam Tiridatis increpat, neque penes Arsaciden imperium sed inane nomen apud imbellem externa mollitia, vim in Abdagaesis domo.*¹³⁹

Then Hiero upbraided Tiridates' youth, saying that the empire was not in the hands of an Arsacid; instead, a meaningless title was held by one who was unwarlike in his foreign effeminacy, while the real power resided in the house of Abdgaeses.

As in the section of his account that deals with Vonones, Tacitus once again has the Parthians accuse their hostage-king of transforming in captivity from an Arsacid into a degenerated foreigner – specifically, a Roman. Tiridates' kingship meant that it was no Arsacid who now ruled the Parthians; that the position of the Arsacid king now amounted to an empty title; and that the king had lost his warlike qualities because of his time in Roman captivity.¹⁴⁰

Tacitus also inserts a new variable into this passage: the perception that Tiridates was a mere puppet of Abdgaeses, another Parthian nobleman. For Hiero, through whom Tacitus speaks, submission to an Arsacid king was much less galling than acknowledging the *de facto* supremacy of a peer. Petitioning the Roman emperor for the release of a hostage had given certain nobles a means of overthrowing unpopular kings. Now, however, the installation of an Arsacid of Rome had produced winners and losers among the aristocracy. The nobles who felt themselves shortchanged under the rule of Parthia's new hostage-king adopted the same rhetorical strategy that Vonones' detractors had used some two decades ago: rejecting the Arsacid legitimacy of the hostage precisely because of his Roman captivity, an imprisonment that had reduced him to a debased foreigner. Once again, the return of a hostage-king sharpened

¹³⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.3.

¹⁴⁰ On the accusation of effeminacy, see further the discussion in Chapter 4, p. 138–9.

the distinction between “Arsacid” and “Roman” as a faction hostile to the hostage sought to delegitimize his reign by denying him, regardless of his ancestry, a place in the Arsacid family.

Josephus and Dio both deal with the ensuing campaign in one sentence, reporting that Artabanus recovered the throne with the help of central Asian allies from the east of Parthia’s empire.¹⁴¹ In Tacitus’ account, Abdgaeses persuades Tiridates to retreat to the east to gather allies from Armenia and Elymais – a devastating misstep that resulted in the disintegration of Tiridates’ army in the face of Artabanus’ rapid recovery. Tiridates fled to Syria. After this point, he drops out of Tacitus’ account and the historical record altogether.

Tiridates’ ephemeral kingship further demonstrates how the political connection between Rome and Parthia spurred a division in the realm of ideology. Artabanus and the Parthian nobles who lost out when Tiridates became king needed a way to discredit the former hostage. They did so by contrasting Arsacid power with Roman power. An Arsacid who had spent years in Roman captivity was necessarily tainted by Roman influence – and therefore was no true Arsacid at all. This rhetoric robbed Tiridates of the legitimacy that he needed to sit the throne. And since Artabanus and his followers won on the battlefield, their vision for Arsacid kingship was the one that gained ground within Parthia. Where hostages had brought the Romans into the internal struggles of Parthian domestic politics, their influence now provoked a reaction designed to keep Rome out.

One final detail from Tacitus’ Tiridates narrative is significant for its points of contact with ancient Near Eastern fosterage. When Vitellius escorts Tiridates to the Euphrates, his final exhortation to the youth is “that he remember his grandfather Phraates and his foster-father

¹⁴¹ Joseph. *AJ* 18.100: καὶ πολλὴν μετὰ ταῦτα στρατιὰν ἀθροίσας Δαῶν τε καὶ Σακῶν καὶ πολεμήσας τοὺς ἀνθεστηκότας κατέσχε τὴν ἀρχὴν; Cass. Dio 58.26.3: ὁ γὰρ Ἀρτάβανος Σκύθας προσλαβὼν οὐ χαλεπῶς αὐτὸν ἐξήλασε. Josephus never mentions Tiridates by name.

(*altor*) Caesar, and the good qualities of each of them.”¹⁴² The words show that, at least for Tacitus, Tiridates’ relationship to the emperor could be described using the language of kinship. Moreover, the historian has Vitellius proclaim a double lineage for Tiridates: the young prince has both Arsacid and Caesarean heritage, both of which have something to offer him. To be sure, Tacitus’ text does not necessarily mean that Tiridates saw himself as part of the Julio-Claudian family. But, as discussed above, the fosterage component of hostageship had deep roots in the ancient Near East and on the Iranian plateau, where it was common practice to raise the children of another ruler. Vitellius’ speech suggests that the Romans could understand Arsacid hostageship in the same way. Foreign dynasts like Tiridates were not merely high-level captives. In a figurative but still meaningful sense, they were part of the emperor’s family.

Artabanus Sends His Son Darius to Rome, 36 CE

Once he had retaken the throne, the chastened Artabanus proved willing to readopt the Euphrates settlement that Augustus and Phraates IV had concluded in 19 BCE. Tiberius instructed Vitellius to conclude a peace, and a bridge of boats was thrown over the Euphrates. Vitellius and Artabanus met in the middle, each flanked by a retinue of bodyguards. When the negotiations were over, Vitellius departed with a number of gifts and a son of Artabanus named Darius.

The date of the meeting is difficult to determine, though ultimately late 36 or early 37 CE seems most likely.¹⁴³ Josephus, Suetonius, and Dio all discuss it.¹⁴⁴ Josephus mentions only one hostage, Artabanus’ son Darius; Dio references a number of children without providing any names.¹⁴⁵ Presumably these joined the other Arsacids at Rome. There is evidence that Darius, at

¹⁴² Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.4: *Phraatis avi et altoris Caesaris quaeque utrobique pulchra meminerit.*

¹⁴³ For discussion, see Täubler 1904: 33–40; Dąbrowa 1983: 107.

¹⁴⁴ Joseph. *AJ* 18.96, 101–5; Suet. *Calig.* 14.3; *Vit.* 2.4; Cass. Dio 59.27.2–3. It is possible that Tacitus wrote on this conference as well, but if so the report was in a section of the *Annals* that has not survived.

¹⁴⁵ Joseph. *AJ* 18.103; Cass. Dio 59.27.3: *καὶ προσέτι καὶ παῖδας αὐτοῦ ὁμήρους λαβών’*

least, was received in Campania by Caligula. That he continued on to Rome is speculation, but plausible in light of the evidence for the other Arsacidae in the city.¹⁴⁶

The sending of hostages by Artabanus has been interpreted as a sign of Parthian submission, however grudging, to their Roman “conquerors.”¹⁴⁷ The king was in a weak position, and it does seem probable that he felt pressured to concede to Rome’s demands. But the submission also aimed at shoring up Artabanus’ hold on power in a domestic context.¹⁴⁸ The king had lost his throne because of Tiberius’ action in concert with a group from the Parthian nobility. Artabanus’ hostage submission may have aimed at heading off such alliances in the future. His move was a gamble – he ran the risk of Darius returning one day at the head of another rebellion. But Tiberius had made it clear that he would recognize Artabanus’ kingship in exchange for a hostage. Assuming the Roman emperor could be appeased, the Arsacids of Rome would be kept out of play.¹⁴⁹ Artabanus was compelled to trade long term security for short term gain, but the exchange paid off. He lived out the rest of his life without facing another rival from Roman territory. The problem fell to his successors.

Gotarzes II and Meherdates, c. 49 CE

Under the emperor Claudius (r. 41–54 CE), the Parthian nobility made another request for the repatriation of a hostage to serve as the Arsacid king – the last such petition in the Julio-Claudian period. Artabanus’ reign had ended, and in the wake of his death a war between the contenders Gotarzes II and Vardanes was eventually decided in favor of the former.¹⁵⁰ Gotarzes’ rule was

¹⁴⁶ For Caligula’s bridge procession, see Chapter 7, p. 236–45.

¹⁴⁷ Lee 1991: 367; Seager 2005: 204–5.

¹⁴⁸ Dąbrowa 1983: 111–2; cf. Ziegler 1964: 62.

¹⁴⁹ Artabanus’ adoration of Rome’s standards and statues may have further indicated compliance (Suet. *Calig.* 14.3; *Vit.* 2.4; Cass. Dio 59.27.3). But Artabanus may have gotten something else out of the deal when Caligula removed a Roman appointee from the Armenian throne: Osgood 2011: 239.

¹⁵⁰ Josephus (*AJ* 20.69–73) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 11.8–10) supply brief and on some points contradictory accounts of the succession struggles that followed the death of Artabanus; for treatments in modern scholarship, see Debevoise

unpopular. If the account in Tacitus (admittedly given from the perspective of Gotarzes' enemies) can be believed, the king made frequent use of assassinations, even of pregnant women and small children.¹⁵¹ It seems likely that rival Arsacids were the victims of at least some of these purges; the text speaks of the murders of "brothers, relatives, and distant kin."¹⁵² Given the frequency of such assassinations in previous Arsacid history, Gotarzes may have been resorting to open murder to maintain his hold on power – a strategy that usually spurred the nobility to action.¹⁵³

Once again members of the Parthian nobility appealed to Rome for the return of a hostage to supplant their current king. Their selection was Meherdates, a son of Vonones and grandson of Phraates IV.¹⁵⁴ Tacitus' testimony offers an important window onto the motives of both Romans and Parthians. The historian reports the arguments of the Parthian embassy in indirect speech:

*ideo regum liberos obsides dari ut, si domestici imperii taedeat, sit regressus ad principem patresque, quorum moribus adsuefactus rex melior adscisceretur.*¹⁵⁵

[They said] the whole reason that the sons of kings were given as hostages was that, if they grew weary of their domestic sovereign, there might be recourse to the *princeps* and the senators, from whom a king might be adopted who was better for his habituation to their customs.

It is impossible to know how accurately Tacitus has depicted the content of the embassy's message. That said, the passage represents a view of Arsacid hostage submission that may

1938: 166–71; Schippmann 1980: 53; Olbrycht 1997. Vardanes is in power at Babylon in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (1.21).

¹⁵¹ Tacitus may also use his account of the conflict between Vardanes and Gotarzes to foreshadow the imminent strife between the brothers Nero and Britannicus: Keitel 1978: 463.

¹⁵² Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.1: *iam fratres, iam propinquos, iam longius sitos caedibus exhaustos.*

¹⁵³ On Arsacid family assassinations, see above, n.8. For Gotarzes' early reign, see also Dąbrowa 1983: 118–21.

¹⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.4, 12.10.1. Meherdates might have been one of the hostages whom Phraates had handed over to Augustus in the second decade BCE; he might also have been born at Rome, and thus spent his entire life there.

¹⁵⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.2. The text here follows Heubner 1983; for discussion of the textual problem with *liberos obsides*, see Koestermann 1963–8: 3.124.

plausibly have belonged to the Parthian nobles who give voice to it. Arsacid hostage submission to Rome, in their eyes, is a tool of the aristocracy. The hostages reside at Rome so that the nobility may resort to them in case they become dissatisfied with the reigning Arsacid. This claim is, of course, a half-truth at best: the discussion above has shown that the initiative of the Arsacid king himself was a crucial factor. Still, it is entirely possible that the sentence reflects a Parthian noble's view of what he thought the purpose of such submission *should be*. As for the speakers' claim that Rome's Arsacid hostages made for better kings due to their adoption of Roman culture, it seems unlikely that this was an actual Parthian view.¹⁵⁶ But that is not to say that the statement is necessarily a Tacitean invention: such flattery may have been part of a charm offensive to secure Meherdates' release.

Claudius' decision to repatriate Meherdates shows the emperor's continued entanglement in Parthian domestic politics in the later Julio-Claudian period. Tiberius' willingness to come to terms with Artabanus in 36 CE by receiving hostages had given way to Claudius' willingness to aid a faction of the aristocracy by returning one.¹⁵⁷ Once again, the initiative of Parthian aristocrats was the primary impetus behind the release of an Arsacid hostage. The emperor did not face a Parthian incursion in Armenia; there was no security crisis on his eastern frontier. Claudius was working with certain Parthians, not against the empire as a whole.¹⁵⁸ Meherdates' release was the work of an alliance between a Parthian faction and the Roman emperor, a coalition that came together across state borders.

The speech that Tacitus writes for Claudius at this point in the text furnishes another indication that the language of kinship underpinned Arsacid-Roman hostage transactions. "Then,

¹⁵⁶ See further Chapter 4.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. Dąbrowa 1983: 122, emphasizing Rome's selective preference for actors within Parthia.

¹⁵⁸ *Contra* Levick 1990: 159: "Claudius had another opportunity to inflict a crushing humiliation on the Parthians at no cost by deploying a claimant to their throne." See further Chapter 7, p. 245.

turning to the ambassadors,” Tacitus says, “[Claudius] extolled with praise the city’s foster-son (*alumnus*).”¹⁵⁹ The word *alumnus* (foster-son) corresponds to *altor* (foster-father), a term that Tacitus has previously used to describe Tiberius’ relationship with the Arsacid hostage Tiridates.¹⁶⁰ To be sure, Claudius calls Meherdates the foster-son of the city, not himself, but the dynamic of fosterage is evident nonetheless. In this case, Claudius’ direct address of the Parthian legates assumes that they will share the emperor’s view of the family relation. As discussed above, Near Eastern evidence indeed suggests that fosterage was closely related to hostageship, especially in Sasanian Persia. While it remains an open question how applicable this later evidence is to the Arsacid empire, Claudius’ speech further supports the idea that imagined kinship figured in both the Parthian and Roman understandings of hostage transactions.

Meherdates was dispatched to Syria, where the governor Cassius Longinus escorted him to the bank of the Euphrates. There the Arsacid was joined by certain Parthian nobles (*inlustres Parthi*); among them Tacitus mentions a “Carenes,” which indicates that the powerful Parthian noble family of the Karin had joined the rebellion on Meherdates’ side.¹⁶¹ These supporters turned out to be fair weather friends at best, and actively treacherous at worst. Meherdates suffered defections from key allies shortly before his decisive battle with Gotarzes and in defeat fell into his enemy’s hands. Tacitus’ description of Gotarzes’ mockery of his fallen opponent is a fitting cap to the career of Parthia’s last hostage-king:

*atque ille non propinquum neque Arsacis de gente, sed alienigenam et Romanum increpans, auribus decisis vivere iubet, ostentui clementiae suae et in nos dehonestamento.*¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.11.3: *hinc versus ad legatos extollit laudibus alumnum urbis.*

¹⁶⁰ Above, p. 113–4.

¹⁶¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.3. On the Karin family, see Lukonin 1983: 704; Wolski 1989: 226; Hauser 2006: 306.

¹⁶² Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.3.

And [Gotarzes], upbraiding him as no relative of his nor a man of the Arsacid clan but rather a foreigner and a Roman, commanded that he live with his ears cut off as a sign of his own clemency and as an insult to us.

Gotarzes describes his defeated foe in terms that explicitly contrast the Arsacid family with the foreignness of Rome. Gotarzes and Meherdates cannot be related because Meherdates does not truly come from the blood of the Arsacids. Instead, he is a foreigner and a Roman. This rhetorical strategy has appeared before in Tacitus' account, first among Vonones' unnamed detractors and second among the nobility who opposed the return of Tiridates. Now, however, it is the Arsacid king himself who denies the Arsacid heritage of the hostage and tars him with the brush of Romanization.

In connection with this battle some scholars have pointed to a rock relief in Behistun (near Kermanshah in modern Iran). Although the monument is extremely worn, it appears to feature three mounted combatants as well as a riderless horse.¹⁶³ One rider is attended by a winged Nike and wears a mustache, beard, and ornamental headgear; this warrior seems to have struck an opponent with his lance. Above him is an inscription in Greek that reads ΓΩΤΑΡΣΗΣ ΓΕΟΠΠΟΘΡΟΣ, "Gotarzes, son of Gev" or "Gotarzes, [from the family of] Givputhr."¹⁶⁴

It has been suggested that the relief depicts Gotarzes' victory over Meherdates.¹⁶⁵ If that identification were correct, it would be interesting that the victorious Arsacid chose to commemorate his victory near the Behistun inscription – a site that, although imperfectly understood by the Arsacids, nevertheless evoked memories of a deep Iranian past.¹⁶⁶ The cliffs would also be an appropriate spot to commemorate the defeat of a pretender. According to

¹⁶³ Kawami 2013: 753–4; cf. Fowler 2005: 139–40.

¹⁶⁴ Compare the readings of Herzfeld 1920: 40–1; Schottky 1991: 88–91; Curtis 2000: 28. On the relationship of the inscription to the relief, see Olbrycht 1998c: 169 *contra* Kawami 1987: 42.

¹⁶⁵ See the literature cited in Mathiesen 1992: 174–5 n.5.

¹⁶⁶ Fowler 2005: 134–40, esp. 137. Note that acknowledging the antiquity of the site would not have been the same as a "conscious self-identification with the Achaemenids."

Tacitus, Gotarzes cut off Meherdates' ears as an act of delegitimation. It is interesting to note that the Achaemenid king Darius used the same punishment on two rebels, as he himself says in the Behistun inscription.¹⁶⁷ There are other instances of the practice in ancient Iranian contexts.¹⁶⁸ Perhaps Gotarzes tried to justify his punishment of Meherdates by way of reference to ancient Persian traditions for how to handle traitors.¹⁶⁹

Unfortunately, the identification is not secure and may well be wrong. There is no indication in the inscription that the relief's Gotarzes is an Arsacid or even a king at all. There are other figures of the same name who might be represented, including a legendary figure mentioned in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, Meherdates was captured and not killed, so it would be surprising to see him depicted as a slain foe. When the Sasanian king Shapur captured Valerian alive, for example, his relief showed the Roman emperor as a living prisoner in chains.¹⁷¹ Gotarzes could have made a different artistic choice, to be sure. But ultimately the case against linking Gotarzes II with the relief is probably stronger than the case for it.¹⁷²

Meherdates' release provoked further ideological differentiation between Rome and Parthia as Gotarzes looked for ways to discredit his Arsacid rival. The king's speech in Tacitus shows how the former hostage was derided as a Roman and a non-Arsacid; the shearing of his ears underlined for an Iranian audience that this man was no proper ruler. The parameters of who counted as an Arsacid continued to shift as a reaction against Arsacid hostages returning from Roman territory.

¹⁶⁷ DB 32–3; Schmitt 1991: 60–1; cf. Briant 2002: 123.

¹⁶⁸ For other examples of ear mutilation in ancient Persia, see Hdt. 3.69 (Smerdis), 3.118.2 (Intaphrenes); and Nawotka 2010: 272, with references (Alexander's execution of the rebel Bessus).

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Ziegler 1964: 66 n.150.

¹⁷⁰ Kawami 1987: 37–43, 157–9; Olbrycht 1998c: 170–1; Curtis 2000: 27.

¹⁷¹ ŠKZ 22; Frye 1984: 301.

¹⁷² For opponents of the identification with Gotarzes II, see also Chaumont 1971: 156–7; von Gall 1996: 70.

Conclusion

From 30 BCE to 51 CE, Arsacid hostages had two distinct and contradictory effects on Roman-Parthian relations. The first was the implication of the Romans in the central conflict of Parthian domestic politics: the struggle between the reigning Arsacid king on one side and hostile factions from the nobility on the other. Both parties sought to use hostage submission to the Romans for their own ends. The king managed the pool of Arsacid competitors by sending hostages; the nobility sought replacements for an unsatisfactory monarch by securing their release. The Roman hosts of these peregrine Arsacids were courted and petitioned by both parties, aligning themselves differently at different times according to their perceived interests. They thereby became, whether knowingly or not, participants in Parthia's internal order. They were forces *in* Parthian politics, not simply *on* them.

As the first century CE wore on, Arsacid hostages blurred the lines between foreign and domestic affairs on both sides of the Euphrates in novel and unanticipated ways. One effect of their circulation was the intertwining of Arsacid and Julio-Claudian family structures. Tacitus's text shows that, for Roman observers, Arsacid dynasts were the *alumni* of their Caesarian *altor*, a connection that gave them figurative membership in Rome's ruling clan. While the scarcity of indigenous sources leaves much unclear about the Arsacid understanding, the prevalence of royal fosterage in ancient Persia suggests that this kinship dimension had currency in Parthia as well. The Arsacids of Rome had in this sense a unique dual lineage; their father figures included both the Arsacid king and the Roman emperor.

Other entanglements were political rather than familial: the fierce competition of Parthian internal affairs brought together Roman and Parthian political figures across state lines and in unprecedented ways. The Roman aristocrat Piso came under fire for his support of Vonones, a

hostage once sent back to Parthia by Augustus himself. The Arsacid king Artabanus fought one hostage who returned from Rome, only to send his son to Tiberius when the fighting was over. Discontented blocs from the Parthian nobility three times sought the emperor's assistance in obtaining a new Arsacid king, while other members of the same group supported rebellions that dethroned the hostage returnee. Arsacid hostageship made Roman-Parthian relations not a clash between two monolithic empires but a tangle of shifting factions composed of actors from both sides of the Euphrates. The circulation of the Arsacids of Rome aligned political actors in Rome and Parthia in constellations that cut across imperial boundaries.

But the political reaction in Parthia against the Arsacids of Rome meant that, in the conception of the Greco-Roman literary sources, hostages began to reinforce the sharp ideological division between the two empires that their careers had done so much to blur. In Tacitus and Josephus, the opponents of the returning hostages Vonones, Tiridates, and Meherdates fight not only with weapons but also with words. Their rhetorical strategy hinges on defining "Arsacid" and "Roman" as conflicting and incompatible terms, tarring the Arsacids of Rome as cultural traitors alienated from their Parthian heritage. Josephus attributes this logic to Vonones' detractors; in Tacitus, it is found first in the opposition to Vonones; then among the Parthian nobles who felt themselves shortchanged by Tiridates' reign; and finally in the speech of Gotarzes, the reigning Arsacid king himself. When the hostage-kings lost on the battlefield, the sources suggest, they simultaneously lost the rhetorical contest to define Arsacid heritage as compatible with Roman hostageship.

How much insight, however, can Tacitus and Josephus really offer into the distant realm of Parthian domestic politics? The next chapter turns to a more thorough evaluation of these

authors as sources for Parthian history, and asks how well they represent the issues that royal hostageship raised.

CHAPTER 4

HOSTAGE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Since the events discussed in the last chapter are known only through Greco-Roman literature, it is necessary to consider the historiographical conventions that shaped the Parthian narratives of authors like Strabo, Josephus, and above all Tacitus. The relevant passages are divided here into two types of scenes: first, the submission of the Arsacids to Rome by the reigning king, and second, their subsequent repatriation at the Parthian nobility's request. Both scenarios afforded opportunities for ancient authors to explore Rome's relationship with the Parthian east and with foreign barbarians more generally. Their depictions of the Arsacids of Rome were shaped by deeply rooted literary traditions about the engagements between the Greco-Roman Mediterranean and the peoples on its periphery. The shape of these traditions is crucial to delineate, because it left an indelible impression on the evidence for the Arsacids of Rome.

Two pathways are followed here to gain a fuller understanding of the value of the classical texts as sources for Parthian history. The first is a literary analysis of the relevant authors – Tacitus most of all, but also Josephus and Strabo – in the wider context of Greco-Roman representations of the barbarian world in historiography and other genres. The second is the exploration of comparative evidence for dynastic hostages, fosterlings, and prisoners from other pre-modern historical settings. These approaches show the distinct limitations of the Roman sources, but also their points of contact with broader historical patterns: while many features of the historiographical texts are attributable to the rhetorical conventions of imperial literature, their accounts may still reflect dynamics of royal hostageship that rest on firmer historical footing.

To weigh the classical authors against comparative evidence from the Near East and beyond is not to establish their historicity but to explore the diverse ways that Arsacid-Roman hostage submission might have been understood by ancient observers, especially those in the Arsacid kingdom. Where the Romans saw hostages as the prizes of conquest, tokens of submission, and guarantees of loyalty, Parthian eyes might have seen things differently. The evidence is mixed and supports a range of conclusions. For the Parthians, the dispatch of royal children to Rome might have been a nod to the superior power of the empire to their west. But the Arsacids could also have seen the Roman emperor's fosterage of their princes as a sign of their own strength, not weakness, and creative misunderstandings may even have worked to the mutual advantage of both parties. Closer scrutiny of the literary texts and their intersections with non-Roman evidence can help establish the viability of these interpretations.

Submission

Three Roman authors saw the initiative of the Parthian king as a primary explanation for Arsacid hostage submission. The earliest of these authors, Strabo, presents two different interpretations of the Arsacid king's motives in his *Geography*. In one passage, Phraates' pursuit of Roman friendship seems to be the main cause of his hostage submission to Augustus, but in another Strabo emphasizes the pressures of Parthian domestic politics.¹ Josephus situates the exchange against the backdrop of Musa's machinations to secure the succession for her son, Phraataces. And Tacitus dismisses the notion that Phraates acted out of fear of Rome. Instead, in the author's view, it was the potential treachery of his own people that spurred him to action. Later in the

¹ Strab. 6.4.2, 16.1.28.

Annals, Tacitus will similarly interpret the motives of Vologaeses I, who submitted royal Arsacids to Nero's commander Corbulo.²

In these assessments Joel Allen detects a “historical trope... that the least favorite heirs were given as hostages by enemies of Rome.” Allen emphasizes the rhetorical function of such passages, which allow Josephus and Tacitus “to develop the characters in their stories in accordance with a foregone agenda.”³ For Josephus, Allen argues, this agenda is characterized by an animus against Musa, who is depicted as a stereotypical wicked queen in the eastern barbarian mold.⁴ For Tacitus, the interpretation is a way to challenge the conventional Roman understanding of the value of hostages,⁵ and perhaps also to advance the *Prinzipatskritik* that underlies much of his work in the *Annals* and elsewhere.⁶

One problem with Allen's view that such interpretations constitute a trope is the absence of similar explanations of hostage submission elsewhere in Greco-Roman literature. To be sure, Allen can point to other cases from ancient Mediterranean history where a ruler sent some of his children away to a foreign court while retaining a favorite heir. He adduces Philip II of Macedon, Demetrius the Antigonid, the Seleucid Antiochus IV, and the sons of Herod the Great.⁷ But no ancient source for any of these examples interprets their submission as an act of dynastic management as Strabo, Josephus, and Tacitus do for the Parthians.⁸ In fact, Allen's discussion of

² See Chapter 3, p. 90–2, and Chapter 5, p. 173.

³ Allen 2006: 145–7.

⁴ See the literature cited above, Chapter 3, p. 92 and n.60.

⁵ Cf. Allen 2006: 224–44.

⁶ Cf. Ehrhardt 1998; Wiesehöfer 2010: 190. On Tacitus' relationship to the Principate more generally, see the literature cited in Chapter 1, p. 36 n.58.

⁷ Allen 2006: 140–4.

⁸ Allen's discussion of Philip II is especially problematic. He writes that “Philip II was chosen as the hostage to be sent to Thebes by Amyntas in 369 BCE because he was the youngest son” (2006: 144), citing Diod. 15.67.4; Just. 7.5.2–3; Plut. *Pel.* 27.3. But none of these authors say that Philip was chosen because of his age, and all of them identify Philip's brother Alexander II – not his father Amyntas – as the hostage submitter. For the sources on the submission of Antiochus IV, see Nabel 2017: 27.

the Hasmonean sons of Herod reaches quite a different conclusion: he finds that Herod's sending of Alexander and Aristobulus to Augustus made them *more* likely to gain Herod's throne, not less.⁹ If the Parthian narratives of Strabo, Josephus, and Tacitus draw on an established hostage submission trope, it is surprising that this trope should be found only in their accounts, and only in the sections that concern Parthia.

On the other hand, Allen's emphasis on the rhetorical qualities of these passages rightly draws attention to how Josephus and Tacitus reuse, within their own accounts, their explanations of Phraates IV's motives. As noted above, Tacitus describes Vologaeses I's submission of seditious Arsacids to Corbulo in similar terms later in the *Annals*. For his part, Josephus applies the same interpretation to the Jewish dynast Izates, the ruling king of Adiabene, who sent hostages to both Rome and Parthia.¹⁰ This internal repetition of the dynastic management explanation of hostage submission raises an important question: did Tacitus and Josephus have separate and distinct sources of information for each of these cases, or did they merely apply the same interpretation to episodes that seemed analogous? What appear to be separate analyses may be more accurately described as the strategic reuse of a type scene. Such scenes may not be well represented in other ancient texts, but it can still be argued that, as aspects of Tacitean and Josephean historiography, they should be understood in rhetorical and literary rather than historical terms.¹¹

In the case of hostage *submission*, however, the emphasis that Strabo, Josephus, and Tacitus place on the initiative of the hostage-giver is observable in other ancient Near Eastern

⁹ Allen 2006: 142; cf. Joseph. *AJ* 15.343; *BJ* 1.454.

¹⁰ Joseph. *AJ* 20.37; cf. 20.71. Other references to the Adiabeniens in Josephus are found at *BJ* 2.520, 4.567, and 6.356–7, where Titus takes further hostages from their royal family. See further Marciak 2014a: 68–9, 113–5. On the Judaism of Adiabene's ruling dynasts, see Neusner 1964; Marciak 2014a (with an extensive literature review at 16–9); 2014b.

¹¹ Edwards (1992: 275) describes the type scene as “a recurrent block of narrative with an identifiable structure.” Historiography inherited it from epic: Damon 2007: 449.

historical contexts. For pharaonic Egypt, Robert Morkot has contended that the pharaoh's collection of elite children at his court was "probably also highly desired by the elites themselves, as a means of distinguishing themselves, increasing their status, and consolidating their political power."¹² Assyriologist Karen Radner's discussion of the 8th century BCE dynast Balassu supplies another relevant case. Balassu was a ruler from the Chaldean tribe of Bit-Dakkuri who ruled Babylon under the suzerainty of the Assyrian king Sargon II.¹³ When a rival usurped the Babylonian throne, Balassu fled with his son and daughter to Sargon, submitting his children as hostages. Balassu died not long after, but Sargon took care of the royal children, eventually reinstating them at Borsippa.¹⁴ From the episode, Radner concludes that "on occasion, foreign dynasts saw the Assyrian court as a safe haven for their children, especially in times of upheaval back home."¹⁵ The logic that Radner identifies is similar to the "dynastic management" explanations offered by the Greco-Roman historians of Parthia, but with a key difference: the ruler's submission of his children to a foreign court as hostages is undertaken to protect them from domestic conflict, not to simply eliminate them as rivals. To be sure, the cases are not entirely analogous: Balassu had to contend with a challenger from outside his family, and he himself was driven from the throne. Still, Radner's discussion shows how an ancient Near Eastern ruler could use hostageship for internal ends: on her reading, Balassu's submission of his children was more about Babylonian domestic politics than foreign affairs with Assyria.

The Armenian practice of *dayeakut' iwn* offers further comparative material for the question of dynastic management. As discussed in Chapter 2, this institution is attested in late

¹² Morkot 2013: 946; cf. Darnell / Manassa 2007: 145.

¹³ See the entry Balāssu (6) in Radner 1999: 256.

¹⁴ SAA 17 001 = CT 54 241 (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/saa17/P239171/html>); SAA 17 073 = ABL 0886 (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/saa17/P237836/html>).

¹⁵ Radner 2015: 87; cf. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/sargon/essentials/diplomats/royalmarriage/>.

antique Armenian literary sources, which show that the Armenian Arsacids sometimes sent away their children to be fostered by noble families.¹⁶ What was the purpose of these exchanges? In

Robert Bedrosian's judgment,

it was concern for clan survival which initially led to the institution of *dayeakut'awn* among the lords. For if a *naxarar's* [i.e. elite family's] little sons lived in distant parts of the country, a massacre directed against the center of the *naxarardom* might cause great loss of life, but the children (and thus the future clan) would be safe.¹⁷

On this logic, a ruler has his children raised by geographically dispersed lords as a survival strategy. If an attack were made on the seat of the family's power with its dynasts killed *en masse*, the younger members away from court would survive and might, one day, reclaim their ancestral rights. The nobles who raised these young dynasts were fellow Armenians and not foreign rulers, which differentiates the case from the Roman-Parthian one. But the sources mention that *dayeaks* sometimes fled to Byzantine or Sasanian territory with their Arsacid wards, so the practice could take on an international dimension.¹⁸

While *dayeakut'awn* represents late antique fosterage rather than first century CE hostageship, the overlap between these two ancient practices makes it an important reference point for earlier Arsacid history. In both cases, the Arsacids are shown managing their dynasty through the circulation of royal children. Where the Greco-Roman sources for Arsacid hostageship describe a technique to combat political sedition, Bedrosian sees a survival tactic. By distributing the family's numerous offspring across a wide geographical and political expanse, the ruling king could both cultivate relationships with local potentates and protect his clan from extermination. In late antique Armenia, fosterage allowed the Arsacids to put down

¹⁶ See Chapter 2, p. 59–60.

¹⁷ Bedrosian 1984: 26.

¹⁸ See Agat'angeghos 36–7, translated by Bedrosian 1984: 27.

roots in multiple areas, making the family that much harder to eradicate. Perhaps this dynamic was part of their earlier hostage submissions to Rome, as well.

The Near Eastern evidence also supplies an alternate viewpoint on another crucial matter: the question of power relationships. Various Greco-Roman authors hold that the submission of Arsacids to the Caesars amounted to an acknowledgement of Roman supremacy.¹⁹ From a Roman perspective, this interpretation makes sense; Rome's steady conquest of the Mediterranean led to hostage submissions from an array of subjugated peoples who were eventually incorporated into the empire. From the Arsacid perspective, however, the matter is more complicated. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sasanian sources suggest that royal children could be fostered by their political inferiors *or* superiors. In the *Kārnāmag*, the last Parthian king Artabanus invoked a royal prerogative to bring up and educate Pabag's son Ardashir at his court – a clear example of patronal fosterage. If any such reasoning motivated Phraates, Artabanus, or Vologaeses to send their children to the Roman emperor, then the Roman triumphalist views encountered in some of the classical sources would not be far from the mark. On this logic, the Parthian kings would have recognized the Romans as their masters.

But there is also Near Eastern evidence for cliental fosterage in Sasanian Iran and Arsacid Armenia which would throw a different light onto the events of the first century CE. The inscription of Shapur I twice mentions young Sasanian dynasts reared by political subordinates from Iranian elite families, while the institution of *dayeakut'awn* in late antique Armenia saw Arsacid dynasts raised by the nobles who at least nominally served the Arsacid monarch.²⁰ If these exchanges had deeper roots in Iranian history, the Arsacids of the first century BCE and CE might have had a radically different understanding of what the Romans called hostage

¹⁹ See Chapter 3, p. 87–90.

²⁰ See Chapter 2, p. 56–61.

submission. To them, the Julio-Claudian emperors who received their children may have looked like inferior clients rather than triumphant conquerors. Perhaps the Romans and Parthians both profited through a fruitful misunderstanding – the former happy to have obtained hostages, the latter to have found distinguished fosterers. Perhaps both sides came away from these exchanges convinced of their own supremacy over the other.

Ultimately, since the evidence from the east is late, meager, and mixed, there is no basis for a definitive interpretation of how the Arsacids understood the dispatch of their young dynasts to Rome, and it is best to keep a range of possibilities in mind. As the previous discussion of Narseh's inscription from Paikuli has suggested, the exchange of hostages and royal children in ancient Iran mediated relations between rulers of many different statuses. Doubtless much was ambiguous and open to interpretation, even in antiquity.²¹ On the Roman side, the literary evidence preserves different explanations in different sources – where Tacitus thought the emperors had been duped into accepting the Arsacid family's seditious undesirables, Velleius Paterculus, for instance, saw an obsequious act of capitulation to Roman authority. This diversity of assessments might have existed on the Parthian side as well.

Release

To assess the return of the Arsacids of Rome requires a fuller investigation of the Greco-Roman sources in their literary milieu. Aside from the coins of Vonones – a crucial but ambiguous piece of evidence, as discussed above – no Iranian or Near Eastern material answers the allegations of acculturation, reeducation, and betrayal that characterize hostage narratives in the literature of the Roman Mediterranean. These motifs of hostage repatriation had deep roots in Greco-Roman

²¹ Cf. Chapter 2, p. 54.

historiography, and they indelibly shaped how the classical sources understood Rome's relations with the foreigners across the Euphrates.

Classical authors took a keen interest in figures who mediated between the civilized and barbarian worlds. An early example comes from Herodotus' account of Anacharsis and Scyles, two royal Scythians who allegedly adopted Greek customs.²² Anacharsis was exposed to Greek practices on his travels, while Scyles had a Greek mother who taught him her native language. The Scythians, led in both cases by the dynast's brother, killed Anacharsis and Scyles for their Hellenizing; Herodotus concludes the passage with the observation "thus do the Scythians protect their own customs, and these are the sorts of penalties they inflict on those who introduce the customs of foreigners."²³ François Hartog has shown how Herodotus uses the episodes to establish the cultural boundaries between Greece and Scythia, and to illustrate the dangers of crossing them: "To travel and to be bilingual come down to the same thing: both are dangerous, for they lead to forgetting the frontier and thus to transgression."²⁴

Other ancient authors discuss the fate of Anacharsis, and the specifics of their accounts illustrate how the literary depictions of such cultural intermediaries drew on stock elements that could be detached from their original contexts and reused elsewhere. From the Hellenistic period onward, many authors crafted scenes in which Anacharsis' outsider wisdom reveals the illogic behind certain Greek practices like wine consumption, athletics, and commercial trade.²⁵ But in the account of Diogenes Laertius, one key detail has shifted: now Anacharsis has a Greek mother and is bilingual, whereas Herodotus says this of Scyles.²⁶ Diogenes does cite earlier authors as

²² Hdt. 4.76–80; cf. 4.46.1.

²³ Hdt. 4.80.5: οὗτω μὲν περιστέλλουσι τὰ σφέτερα νόμια Σκύθαι, τοῖσι δὲ παρακτωμένοισι ξεινικοὺς νόμους τοιαῦτα ἐπιτίμια διδοῦσι.

²⁴ Hartog 1988: 64. On the construction of the barbarian Other in Greek literature, see also Hall 1989; Madreiter 2012.

²⁵ For sources and discussion, see Kindstrand 1981; Schubert 2010; Romm 1992: 74–6; Armstrong 1948.

²⁶ Diog. Laert. 1.101: μητρὸς δὲ Ἑλληνίδος: διὸ καὶ δίγλωττος ἦν.

authorities for Anacharsis' life, so perhaps different historians preserved conflicting traditions about his birth and parentage.²⁷ But the Scythian's bilingualism seems less like a historical detail and more like a literary marker of his intermediary status. Bilingualism and mixed parentage, in other words, are the sorts of characteristics that an ancient author might assign to a traverser of cultural frontiers. They need not be historically accurate details.²⁸

Greco-Roman depictions of Scythian intermediaries matter to the historiography of Roman-Parthian relations, and not just because Mediterranean authors saw a major Scythian component in Parthia's heritage.²⁹ Details in certain Parthian narratives seem to echo those in the various Anacharsis traditions. In a fragment from Dio's account of Tiridates' visit to Neronian Rome, for instance, the Arsacid dynast watches a *pankration* match and protests when he sees a contestant striking his fallen opponent: "The fight is unfair! It's not fair to hit a man who's down."³⁰ This is precisely the kind of objection that Anacharsis raises with Solon in Lucian's *Anacharsis*, where the two sages discuss athletics.³¹ As Jason König suggests, Anacharsis was an interesting subject for writers of the Second Sophistic because "his story could be made to stand for processes of cultural encounter which were central to the experience of many members of the Roman empire elite in this period."³² Dio uses the Arsacid dynast Tiridates in much the same way. In a similar vein, Tacitus reports that the Arsacid king Vologaeses was – just like Herodotus' Scyles – the child of a barbarian king and a Greek mother.³³ Tacitus does not say where he learned of Vologaeses' parentage, but it is clear that the comment fits into a much

²⁷ Diog. Laert. 1.101; the cited sources are Sosicrates and Hermippus.

²⁸ On the historical value of the sources for Anacharsis, see Kindstrand 1981: 6–16. As Kindstrand notes, it is telling that Herodotus, the earliest source for the sage, could not verify his information with Scythian sources (4.76.5).

²⁹ See Chapter 1, p. 30.

³⁰ Cass. Dio 63.7.1a: ἄδικος ἡ μάχη: οὐ γὰρ δίκαιον τὸν πεσόντα τύπτεσθαι.

³¹ See esp. Lucian *Anach.* 3. On the place of Scythia in Lucian's writings, see Anderson 1976: 82.

³² König 2005: 94; cf. Remijsen 2015: 253.

³³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.44.2.

wider discourse in Greco-Roman literature about the “semi-Greek” nature of the Arsacids, a theme that is well represented in other authors.³⁴ In other words, the information about the Parthians that is preserved in the classical sources is not necessarily the product of informed research into the history or customs of the Arsacid empire. It is drawn, at least in part, from tropes and motifs that were used to describe the peoples on the periphery of the civilized world as well as the intermediaries that moved across its boundaries.

As one such group of intermediaries, hostages were liable to characterization by means of the same motifs. Just as Herodotus’ Anacharsis and Scyles adopted Greek customs and were reviled for it by their fellow Scythians, other hostages too were accused of “going native.” As discussed in Chapter 2, Philip II of Macedon’s hostageship at Thebes is described in the Roman period sources as an education in military strategy and Pythagorean philosophy.³⁵ The Hellenistic dynasts Demetrius and Antiochus encountered these sorts of accusations, as did the German Agerich and the Syrian Jovinianus during late antiquity.³⁶ There is even an example of acculturation to Parthian rather than Roman mores: as discussed below, the Seleucid Demetrius II (admittedly a royal prisoner rather than a hostage) supposedly exhibited “Parthian cruelty” after his return to Syria from captivity at the Arsacid court.³⁷

It is in this context that one must read Tacitus and Josephus on the cultural transformation of the Arsacids of Rome. For Tacitus, it is important to note that, as with the matter of hostage submission, his narratives of Arsacid return follow a pattern that is repeated elsewhere in the *Annals*; an explanation is again repurposed and repackaged within his account. The twinned passage is Claudius’ dispatch of the Cheruscan prince Italicus in 47 CE, an episode that echoes

³⁴ On the Arsacids as semi-Greek, cf. Plut. *Crass.* 31; Liv. 38.17.10.

³⁵ For sources, see Chapter 2, p. 63 n.55.

³⁶ See Chapter 1, p. 39–40.

³⁷ Just. 39.1.3; cf. Nabel 2017: 33.

the Arsacid narratives very closely, even if Italicus was not a hostage. Like Vonones, Italicus was “enhanced with riches” by the emperor.³⁸ His initial reception among the Germans was “happy,”³⁹ but this success soon turned to failure when his opponents argued that he was “infected” by Roman customs and practices.⁴⁰ Tacitus also says that Italicus possessed “affability” (*comitas*), a quality he also attributes to Vonones.⁴¹ These parallels run deeper than the mere repetition of a type scene; they redeploy the same words and phrases to homogenize the experiences of barbarian dynasts who spent time at Rome and then returned to their home countries. Moreover, these vignettes take place in foreign lands absent any Roman observers – a scenario ripe for the use of *inventio*, as Rhiannon Ash has pointed out.⁴² There is reason to believe, then, that these parts of Tacitus’ narrative are shaped by his dour view of Romanization rather than real insight into Parthian or German affairs.

While Josephus’ long residence in Judaea put him in much closer proximity to Parthia, his own Vonones account also seems to draw on Roman *topoi* about the Parthians rather than original research. In his discussion of Parthia’s rejection of Vonones, Josephus refers to the “fickle nature” of barbarians to explain why the Parthians turned against their recently installed king.⁴³ The *topos* of the fickle barbarian is used often in Greco-Roman literature not only of Parthians, but of other peripheral peoples as well.⁴⁴ This quality also figures in Tacitus’

³⁸ Koestermann 1963–8: 3.58. Compare 11.16.1 (*auctum [Italicum] pecunia*) with 2.2.1 (*auxitque [Vononen] opibus*).

³⁹ Malloch 2013: 247–8. Compare 11.16.2 (*ac primo laetus Germanis adventus*) with 2.2.1 (*et accepere barbari laetantes*) and 6.42.3 with Woodman 2017: 262.

⁴⁰ Compare 11.16.3 (*infectum alimonio servitio cultu, omnibus externis*) with 2.2.1 (*hostium artibus infectum*); 6.43.3 (*imbellem externa mollitia*); 12.14.3 (*alienigenam et Romanum increpans*).

⁴¹ Ash 2007: 207. For further verbal parallels, see Keddie 1975: 53–4 with n.8, 16.

⁴² Ash 1999: 115–6. Cf. Woodman 2009: 1, who points out that Tacitus’ Arminius uses a phrase from Virgil in a similar dialogue with his fellow German Maroboduus (*Ann.* 2.45.3; cf. Verg. *Georg.* 3.544–5).

⁴³ Joseph. *AJ* 18.47: φύσει σφαλεροὺς ὄντας. But cf. Gruen 2017: 238, who notes that Josephus’ use of such stereotypes is largely confined to this passage.

⁴⁴ For fickle and/or tricky Parthians, see Wheeler 1993: 33 and n.100; Lerouge 2007: 310–3. For other fickle barbarians, see Gruen 2011: 142; Barclay 2007: 184; Bernard 2015: 39–40.

Meherdates narrative, where the author speaks of the “national fickleness” (*levitas gentilis*) of the Parthians.⁴⁵ As an analysis of Parthian behavior in this specific historical moment, in other words, the value of Josephus’ discussion is in some respects distinctly limited. Despite his Jewish heritage and his unique relationship to Parthian affairs, Josephus here shows himself to be not far from Tacitus in his assessment of this eastern people; as Richard Fowler emphasizes, the Josephus of the *Jewish Antiquities* “had long since thrown in his lot with Rome and was, at least to all appearances, a committed and influential member of the Flavian elite.”⁴⁶ Here, too, the narrative of the hostage’s return is shaped by stock Roman depictions of barbarians. The author’s actual knowledge of internal Parthian affairs remains unclear, especially in the absence of any sort of source citation.

To question the reliability of Tacitus and Josephus in these passages is not to deny that the Arsacids would have engaged with Roman culture during their captivity. The epitaph of Seraspadanus and Rhodaspes from Rome is composed in Latin and suggests that the hostages at least learned the language of their captors.⁴⁷ Moreover, as discussed above, there is a certain amount of evidence from Roman territory for the education of hostages in local schools, though the relevant passages cannot support the notion of a systematic indoctrination program.⁴⁸ Finally, the sheer duration of the Arsacids’ captivity is sure to have transformed those who spent their youth at the Arsacid court, while those born at Rome will have been raised at great geographical and cultural remove from Parthia. The evidence examined above cannot support a precise dating, but Vonones spent some two decades at Rome, Phraates around five, and Tiridates and Meherdates their entire lives, or close to it. Some degree of alienation from Parthian social life

⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.1.

⁴⁶ Fowler 2017: 368.

⁴⁷ See Chapter 6, p. 213.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 2, p. 71–3.

would have been inevitable, and it is certainly possible, as Tacitus suggests, that returning hostages would have differed from other Parthians in conspicuous ways.

But neither Tacitus nor Josephus is a sure guide to *how* the Arsacids transformed, because the Parthian narratives of both authors are heavily indebted to formulaic depictions of the barbarian east and its relationship to Rome. Two examples further illustrate the matter. First, Tacitus says that Vonones developed a distaste for hunting during his hostageship, and that the Parthians looked askance at his refusal to participate in hunts. It is of course possible that Tacitus encountered this information in a source, and that it has a historical basis, though the absence of any citation makes further investigation of the point impossible. What can be said with more certainty is that Greco-Roman authors viewed the hunt as a characteristically Persian activity; authors from Herodotus to Ammianus all attest to its ubiquity among the elites of the Iranian plateau.⁴⁹ For Tacitus, Vonones' lack of interest in hunting is a vivid indication of his loss of Parthian identity – an inevitable consequence of his proximity to the enervating and corrupt Julio-Claudian court. Tacitus' own account even seems to contradict the notion that Vonones avoided the sport; the Arsacid began his later escape attempt in c. 19 CE by pretending to go off on a hunt – hardly a useful pretext for a king who supposedly disliked the activity.⁵⁰ Moreover, the notion that hostageship among the Romans was incompatible with recreational hunting is directly contradicted by the case of the Seleucid Demetrius I, who frequently hunted during his Roman captivity, as the contemporary eyewitness Polybius attests.⁵¹ In short, Vonones' disinterest in hunting figures in Tacitus' account not because it is a historical detail but because of its instant recognizability as a sign of alienation from Parthian society.

⁴⁹ See the passages discussed in Shahbazi 2004, to which add Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.2.

⁵⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 2.68.1: *specie venandi*.

⁵¹ Polyb. 31.14.1–3.

Second, Tacitus again operates in this vein when he has Hiero condemn the “foreign softness” of the returnee Tiridates.⁵² *Mollitia* as a characteristic of eastern barbarians was a common trope in late Republican literature, though the Scythian heritage and military success of the Parthians meant that they escaped accusations of effeminacy, at least for the most part.⁵³ But for authors who saw a degeneration in Roman manly virtue under the Empire, the trope could be reversed: exposure to Roman decadence could render effeminate even the most vigorous and unfettered of barbarians.⁵⁴ Juvenal’s verses about the Armenian hostage Zalaces are illustrative:

*sed quae nunc populi fiunt victoris in urbe
non faciunt illi quos vicimus. et tamen unus
Armenius Zalaces cunctis narratur ephebis
mollior ardenti sese indulsisse tribuno.
aspice quid faciant commercia: venerat obses,
hic fiunt homines. nam si mora longior urbem
indulsit pueris, non umquam derit amator.
mittentur braciae, cultelli, frena, flagellum:
sic praetextatos referunt Artaxata mores.⁵⁵*

The people we conquer don’t do what the people in the victor’s city now do. And yet one Armenian, Zalaces, softer than all the other young men, is said to have indulged himself with a desirous tribune. Look at what commerce brings: he came as a hostage, but here they become civilized men.⁵⁶ If these boys stay any longer in the city, no one will ever lack a lover. Trousers, knives, bridles, and whips will be cast away; thus they take Rome’s obscene ways back to Artaxata.

Juvenal’s Zalaces is an *obses* from Arsacid Armenia whose captivity at Rome renders him homosexual, effeminate, and overly refined – exactly the kind of characterization of Tiridates that Tacitus puts into the mouth of Hiero.⁵⁷ The irony would not have been lost on a reader of the

⁵² Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.3.

⁵³ Isaac 2004: 378. But note Lentulus’ comment in his speech on Parthia in Luc. 8.365–6: *Quidquid ad Eoos tractus mundique teporem | Ibitur, emollit gentes clementia caeli.*

⁵⁴ Gowing 1990: 329–30.

⁵⁵ Juv. 2.163–70.

⁵⁶ On the meaning of *homo* in this passage, see Habinek 1997: 33 n.37.

⁵⁷ Armenia had come under Arsacid control by the time Juvenal was writing; on the date of Satire 2, see Syme 1984: 1135–57; Braund 1996: 16. An Armenian hostage from this period might, therefore, have been an Arsacid. See Wheeler 2002: 290; Ferguson 1987: 249. The items of dress mentioned in line 169 were part of Armenian and Parthian attire: Courtney 2013: 125.

early empire. Such passages inverted older Republican stereotypes about the soft, effeminate, and decadent nature of eastern barbarians. Rome had so degenerated under the Principate that eastern dynasts, far from learning manly virtue during their time in the city, were corrupted there, and bore their corruption back to their native lands.

Other passages from hostage historiographies reveal the pervasiveness of these themes throughout classical literature. One close echo is found in Livy's account of the Antigonid Demetrius, who became a Roman hostage after his father Philip V's defeat at the Battle of Cynoscephalae.⁵⁸ When Demetrius returned to Macedon in 191 BCE, he quarreled with his brother Perseus.⁵⁹ This part of Polybius' account is lost, and while Livy likely drew on it, the Augustan historian's text is the only source to investigate the feud in detail.⁶⁰ Livy's version is a richly elaborated family drama that closely associates Demetrius' Roman hostageship with the insidious eastward march of Roman power. This theme is most evident in Perseus' acrimonious harangue, where he accuses Rome of corrupting all who visit it:

*T. Quinctius nunc est auctor omnium rerum isti et magister; eum sibi te abdicato patre in locum tuum substituit... qui hinc integri et sinceri Romam eunt, Philippum regem se habere credentes, imbuti illinc et infecti Romanis delenimentis redeunt.*⁶¹

Titus Quinctius is now [Demetrius'] adviser and teacher in everything; Demetrius renounced you [Philip] as father and put Quinctius in your place... Those who go to Rome pure and unstained, believing Philip to be their king, they return tainted and **infected with Roman allurements**.

⁵⁸ Polyb. 18.39.5; Liv. 33.13.14, 30.10; Plut. *Flam.* 9.5; *Arat.* 54.2; App. *Mac.* 9.2; Dio 18.60. A mention of Demetrius' hostageship is also found in the anonymously authored *De viris illustribus* (51). On the question of when Demetrius left Flamininus' camp for Rome, see Walker 1980: 97–9; Allen 2006: 3 n.8. On the political and military background to Cynoscephalae, see Hammond 1988; Pfeilschifter 2005: 91–111; Gruen 1984: 382–98; Green 1990: 308–9; Eckstein 2008: 230–70.

⁵⁹ Demetrius' return to Macedon: Polyb. 21.3.3, 21.11.9; Liv. 35.31.5, 36.35.13, 37.25.12; Diod. 28.15; Plut. *Flam.* 14.2; App. *Mac.* 9.5; *Syr.* 20. For discussion, see Pfeilschifter 2005: 128–30. In a passage dealing with events in the year 182 BCE, Livy (40.6.4) puts Demetrius' age at 25, which means he was 10–16 during his hostageship at Rome.

⁶⁰ On Livy's possible uses of Polybius for this episode, see Walbank 1938: 59–62; Briscoe 2008: 378–82.

⁶¹ Liv. 40.11.2–3.

The passage contains many of the ingredients that Tacitus will draw on in the sections of the *Annals* that pertain to foreign princes, and there is even a verbal echo in the word *infecti*.⁶² Like Tacitus, Livy uses the episode to mount a critique of Rome through a non-Roman speaker. Perseus' *ad hominem* attacks on Demetrius are accompanied by more general indictments of Roman habits, customs, deeds, leaders, and even the physical appearance of the city itself.⁶³ These elements are deployed elsewhere in Livy's account of Rome's entry into the Greek east, where states hostile to Roman power inveigh against "foreigners more different in language, customs, and laws than they are distant by sea and land" and declare that "Greeks are and always will be at war with foreigners and barbarians."⁶⁴ In short, Livy's Demetrius narrative connects the institution of hostageship with the problematic diffusion of Roman culture through imperial conquest.

Another comparandum suggests that, in the eyes of Roman historians, royal captives were susceptible to foreign influence in Parthia no less than in Rome. In 139 BCE, the Seleucid Demetrius II Nicator marched east to confront the Arsacids, who were expanding rapidly at the Seleucids' expense.⁶⁵ After some initial success, he was taken prisoner by Mithradates I.⁶⁶ Almost immediately, Mithradates integrated the royal captive into the Arsacid family by marrying him to his daughter Rhodogune. Demetrius would spend ten comfortable years in

⁶² See above, p. 135 and n.40.

⁶³ Liv. 40.5.7: *ibi cum alii mores et instituta eorum, alii res gestas, alii speciem ipsius urbis nondum exornatae neque publicis neque privatis locis, alii singulos principum eluderent.*

⁶⁴ Liv. 31.29.12: *alienigenae homines, plus lingua et moribus et legibus quam maris terrarumque spatio discreti*; 31.29.15: *cum alienigenis, cum barbaris aeternum omnibus Graecis bellum est eritque.* The speakers are Aetolians pushing for a war against Rome in 200 BCE. For discussion, see Gruen 1984: 325–34; Champion 2004: 47–57.

⁶⁵ On the motives behind Demetrius' eastern campaign, see Shayegan 2003: 86; Ehling 2008: 182–4, with references. For the beginnings of the Seleucid *anabasis* tradition, see Goukowsky 1978: 125–31.

⁶⁶ Sources for Demetrius' capture by Mithradates: Just. 36.1.1–6, 38.9.2–3; Sachs / Hunger 1996 no. -137 'Rev.' 8'–11' (= pp. 160–1); Joseph. *AJ* 13.184–6; App. *Syr.* 67; 1 Maccabees 14.1–3; Euseb. *Chron.* 117.1–124.5 Karst = Porphyry *BNJ* 260 F 32 = *FrGH* 260 F 32.16; Diod. 33.28; Oros. 5.4.18; Moses Khorenats'i 2.2 (= Thomson 1978: 131–2). It is not clear how, exactly, Demetrius fell into Parthian hands: Justin has him ambushed during a peace conference, while Josephus and 1 Maccabees say he was captured after losing a battle. For discussion, see Dąbrowa 2011a; 2011b; Ehling 2008: 182–6; Shayegan 2003: 84–7.

Hyrkania, during which time he had children with his new wife.⁶⁷ He was eventually released by Mithradates' successor Phraates and embarked on a disastrous second kingship. In accounting for Demetrius' unpopularity after his return from Parthia, Justin's epitome of Trogus draws on the acculturation motif to paint a picture of a king rendered cruel and barbarized through his Arsacid captivity:

*Sed dum aliena affectat, ut adsolet fieri, propria per defectionem Syriae amisit, siquidem Antiochenses primi duce Tryphone, execrantes superbiam regis, **quae conversatione Parthicae crudelitatis intolerabilis facta erat**, mox Apameni ceteraeque civitates exemplum secutae per absentiam regis a Demetrio defecere.*⁶⁸

But while Demetrius was grasping for the possessions of others, he (as is wont to happen) lost his own through the defection of Syria. First to defect from him were the Antiochenes under Tryphon's leadership, **who upbraided the haughtiness of the king, which had become intolerable because of his association with the cruel Parthians**. Soon the Apameans and the rest of the cities followed their example in the absence of the king.

Justin has the Antiochenes complain that Demetrius' nature had changed due to his years of imprisonment among the Arsacids; he had taken on their cruel disposition, and the change made him unfit to rule. It is difficult to place this passage in a firm historical context: the date of Justin is not secure, and Trogus' original text no longer survives to reconstruct his epitomator's fidelity, or lack thereof.⁶⁹ But the episode suggests that, at least for Justin, Romanization was not the only sort of acculturation that royal prisoners could undergo. Justin takes the Livian and Tacitean view of Rome as the incubator of royal prisoners and deploys it in a new way. Here Parthia, too, has the power to acculturate and transform the dynasts who reside there.

⁶⁷ Demetrius' generous treatment and marriage to Rhodogune: Just. 36.1.6, 38.9.3; App. *Syr.* 67–8; discussion in Hartmann / Huber 2006: 500. On the apparent contradiction between Justin and Appian as to the giver of the Arsacid princess, see Shayegan 2003: 85.

⁶⁸ Just. 39.1.3.

⁶⁹ On Justin's relationship to Trogus, see Yardley / Heckl 1997: 15–9.

Even later historiographical parallels come from late antiquity, though in these cases the authors had personal access to the captives whose lives they detailed. The historian Ammianus was a personal acquaintance of Jovinianus, a Sasanian satrap who had been a hostage in Roman Syria in his youth. In Ammianus' account, Jovinianus had spent his hostageship engaged in liberal studies, and had so enjoyed them that, as an adult, he secretly favored the Roman cause over the Persian – a instance of “competition between cultural and political identity,” as Kim Kagan puts it.⁷⁰ Ammianus also records the bitter invective hurled at Hormisdas, a Sasanian dynast in exile who joined Julian's invasion of Persia in 363 CE.⁷¹ At the city of Pirsabora, the besieged inhabitants “attacked [Hormisdas] with abuse and reproach on the grounds that he was he was a traitor and a deserter.”⁷² Such accusations of betrayal may have stemmed from Julian's intention, as one source suggests, of installing Hormisdas on the Sasanian throne.⁷³ There is no hint in Amminanus of acculturation on Hormisdas' part, but the prince was clearly willing to use foreign military assistance in his ongoing dynastic feud with Shapur II, the reigning Sasanian king. Finally, the 5th century CE Roman diplomat and historian Priscus relates his conversation with a Greek trader who had been enslaved to the Hunnic leader Onegesius, a deputy of Attila the Hun. The man won his freedom after years of faithful service and took a Hunnic wife. In his discussion with Priscus, the trader mounts a vigorous defense of the Hunnic lifestyle, which he

⁷⁰ Amm. 18.6.20; Kagan 2011: 168; see also Chapter 2, p. 72. On the Sasanians in Ammianus, see Drijvers 2006.

⁷¹ Hormisdas' escape to Roman territory: Zosimus 2.27.1–4; John of Antioch fr. 178 *FHG* 4 p. 605; Suda s.v. ‘Μαρσύας’ (Adler mu,230); Zonaras 13.5.25–33. The sources are collected in Dodgeon / Lieu 1991: 130–2; cf. Banchich / Lane 2009: 160, 212–3. John alone has Hormisdas received by the emperor Licinius; the others say it was Constantine. The story was evidently told in a lost section of Ammianus' history; cf. Amm. 16.10.16; Cameron 1989: 426–7; Barnes 1998: 203–4, 214–5. For discussion of the tradition surrounding Hormisdas' escape, see Mosig-Walburg 2000: 74–106; Warmington 1999: 169–70.

⁷² Amm. 24.2.11: *probris atque conviciis ut male fidum incesebant et desertorem*; cf. Zosimus 3.18.1. On further tensions between the Persians and Hormisdas, see Amm. 24.4.26, 24.5.4; Zosimus 3.23.4 (abuse from Nabdates); Amm. 24.2.4; Zosimus 3.15.4–6 (assassination attempt on Hormisdas by the Persian Surena).

⁷³ See Libanius *Ep.* 1402.3 (Loeb 109.3): ἐλπίς τε ἤξειν τὸν βασιλέα τὸν μὲν νῦν ἄρχοντα ἄγοντα, παραδόντα δὲ τῷ φεύγοντι τὴν ἀρχήν. For discussion, see Blockley 1992: 25–6; Renucci 2000: 498–503; Potter 2004: 517; Frendo 2007; Seager 1997 (with further literature at 263 n.26).

now sees as superior to Rome's.⁷⁴ The passage is an apt demonstration of the power of captivity and confinement to effect cultural change, as well as “the tendency for some prisoners simply to go native.”⁷⁵

These three examples from late antique historiography show that, for Greco-Roman historians, hostages and prisoners remained potent case studies in acculturation, a vivid way for authors to explore the theme of cultural contact between the Roman and barbarian worlds. Yet there is a crucial difference between these episodes and those recounted by Livy, Tacitus, Josephus, and Justin: Ammianus and Priscus had personal contact with their subjects. Tacitus's Parthian and German dialogues are richly elaborated scenes set in distant lands where few if any Roman observers would have set foot. By contrast, Ammianus and Priscus based the passages above on first-hand experience and eyewitness testimony. This does not mean that their accounts are any less rhetorical, or that these authors were any less prone to the conventions of Greco-Roman historiography. They were, however, in a better position to gauge the effects of hostageship and captivity, and to evaluate barbarian responses to acculturation, whether real or perceived.

While literary analysis does not speak explicitly to questions of historical accuracy, it does show the limitations of Tacitus and Josephus and the embeddedness of their accounts in their literary and cultural milieu. Above all, it suggests that that certain aspects of their Arsacid hostage narratives are likely to stem from Greco-Roman literary discourses rather than careful investigation into Parthian history. The basic picture that Tacitus and Josephus paint is that of a Parthian society divided against itself, with some supporting the returning Arsacid and some opposing him. That picture may well be accurate, but the specific arguments attributed to the

⁷⁴ Priscus fr. 11.2; Given 2014: 62–5.

⁷⁵ Lenski 2011: 191.

dissenters – that the Arsacids of Rome were too sedentary, too effeminate, or too beholden to their Roman captors – are crafted with rhetoric that came from the Mediterranean, not the Near East. It is possible that such rhetoric reflected actual political discourse within the Parthian empire, but that cannot be verified. What can be said with more certainty is that Tacitus and Josephus use Parthian voices to speak Roman words.

The Arsacids in Context: Comparative Evidence from the Pre-Modern World

Since the hostage narratives in the Greco-Roman literary texts cannot be controlled by contemporary Parthian sources, comparative evidence from other historical contexts offers a way to approach the acculturation question from a broader perspective. As discussed in Chapter 2, no extant sources from the ancient Persian world betray a concern with the political allegiance or cultural affinities of returning hostages, royal captives, or dynastic foster children. But the absence of indigenous evidence that speaks to this theme cannot support a positive argument that such anxieties had no place in Parthia's internal affairs. If the return of royal hostages, captives, and fosterlings triggered fears of cultural and political destabilization in other historical settings, then perhaps the dynamics represented in the accounts of Tacitus and Josephus – albeit in the vernacular of Greco-Roman historiography – represent a broader historical pattern. Comparative evidence cannot confirm that this pattern played out in the Arsacid empire in the first century CE, but it can put the classical sources on a firmer historical footing. The issues can be more fully explored with a range of cases up until the 16th century CE, after which point the role of hostageship in interstate relations markedly decreased.⁷⁶

Colleen Manassa's discussion of one pertinent case from pharaonic Egypt shows how a population might reject a young ruler who had been fostered abroad and installed at a foreign

⁷⁶ On the eclipse of hostageship in the modern period, see Walker 1980: i; Kosto 2012: 220–6.

king's discretion. During the reign of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses III (1184–1153 BCE), the Libyan tribes to the west had a contentious relationship with Egypt. In an attempt to subordinate them to his reign, Ramesses took a young prince from Tjemehu (a part of Libya) into his court. An Egyptian inscription boasts of the pharaoh's installation of this prince over the Libyans: "His majesty brought a young man of the Tjemehu, as a child [protected] by his two strong arms, appointed to be ruler for them in order to establish their land."⁷⁷ But the appointment backfired when the Libyans revolted against their new sovereign and launched an invasion of Egypt. "As one would imagine," Manassa and John Darnell conclude, "the indoctrination of foreign princes with Egyptian values was not always successful and could create backlash among the native population."⁷⁸ While pharaonic Egypt enjoyed more successes than failures in its fosterage of local dynasts, there was always a danger that its appointees could draw the ire of their subjects if the latter were unwilling to submit to Egyptian suzerainty.

The sources for hostageship in medieval Europe are often less detailed than the narratives of classical historiography, but here too some scholars have identified cases where the question of a hostage's political and cultural allegiance caused anxiety and unrest. Adam Kosto discusses the case of Duncan of Scotland, a dynast held hostage by the English from 1072 to 1087 CE. After his hostageship ended, Duncan "seized the Scottish throne in 1094 with English support – support that was resented by those who quickly deposed him, insisting that his successor not introduce further Normans and English into the land."⁷⁹ A similar episode took place when the Denian king Mujāhid al-ʿĀmirī, a Muslim, unsuccessfully attempted to conquer Sardinia in 1015 CE. Mujāhid's son ʿAlī was taken hostage by the Christian Pisans after the failed campaign; he

⁷⁷ Text and translation in Manassa 2003: 101–2. "His majesty" refers to Ramesses; "them" to the Libyans.

⁷⁸ Darnell / Manassa 2007: 110.

⁷⁹ Kosto 2012: 81.

spent the next 16 years in Christian custody at the court of Henry II, the Holy Roman emperor, and in the house of Ildeberto Albizone, a Pisan merchant. In the end, he returned home and succeeded his father, but his hostageship had left its mark. While a 12th century Latin text says that the families of ‘Alī and Ildeberto were subsequently linked by a fraternal bond, Travis Bruce points out that “Arabic sources state that ‘Alī remained for some time among the Christians, casting occasional doubts on his religious convictions.”⁸⁰

Maribel Fierro has discussed two cases from Ummayyad Corduba that illustrate the perceived dangers of hostage acculturation in the eyes of both hostage and captor. In his 10th century history of the Muslim conquest of Andalusia, the author Ibn al-Qūṭīyya tells the story of an Ummayyad administrator inspecting the education of young hostages from a Spanish tribe.⁸¹ To the administrator’s dismay, the hostages are reciting heroic odes, which he fears will not teach them to be docile subjects. “You have gone to demons who have sorely grieved the emirs and taught them poetry, which will give them an insight into real courage,” he exclaims.⁸² He suggests that the hostages learn only drinking songs and other trifling compositions, which he deems educational material more suitable for underlings. Fierro notes that “the process of acculturation – unavoidable and desirable as it was – had to take place in a controlled way so as to avoid any backfiring.”⁸³

Fierro’s other case concerns a Christian boy named Pelagius (d. 925/6 CE), a hostage at the court of ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān III, emir and later caliph of Ummayyad Corduba. Christian sources tell a lurid tale of ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān’s lust for his young hostage, whom he attempted to both seduce and convert to Islam. Pelagius resisted on both counts and was martyred. The available

⁸⁰ Bruce 2006: 138; cf. 2009: 22; 2010: 202–5.

⁸¹ The tribe is the Banū Qasī, on which see Coope 2016: 144–54.

⁸² Translation from James 2009: 121.

⁸³ Fierro 2012: 78.

texts, which were composed within 50 years of Pelagius' death, are of little historical value, and function primarily as "the vehicle for increasingly over-bearing lessons, both patriotic and religious."⁸⁴ All the same, the various accounts exhibit a distinct unease with hostageship's potential to compromise, corrupt, and alienate the hostage from the mores of his upbringing – in this case, his Christian faith and refusal to yield to homosexual desires. For Fierro, Pelagius' hostageship and its discussion in the 10th century sources foreground "the temptation of power and of illicit love from the religious other," a temptation overcome in this story only by the young hostage's remarkable piety and fortitude.⁸⁵

The ability of hostageship to produce reliable imperial clients is a prominent theme in the story of Radu and Vlad Dracul (better known to history as Vlad the Impaler), two Wallachian dynasts who became hostages of the Ottoman sultan in 1444 CE.⁸⁶ The brothers were held together in Anatolia, where they were educated and learned Turkish.⁸⁷ Vlad took the Wallachian throne in 1448 with Turkish help, but his brother Radu remained in captivity. When Vlad proved to be a less than compliant Ottoman vassal, the sultan Mehmed II deployed Radu against his brother. The hostage allowed Mehmed to covertly interfere in Wallachian affairs while avoiding the appearance of foreign meddling; Radu gave the sultan a way "to confuse the Wallachians and avoid the impression of a national war against a common foe."⁸⁸ Bitter dynastic infighting followed, but Radu eventually bested Vlad and ruled Wallachia as "a loyal vassal of the Ottomans."⁸⁹ While both Vlad and Radu served as Ottoman hostages, then, their subsequent

⁸⁴ Jordan 1999: 23.

⁸⁵ Fierro 2012: 83.

⁸⁶ On Ottoman hostage-taking, see also Gürkan 2010: 6; Graf 2017: 178–9; and Casale 2016 on the Safavid hostage Haydar Mirza.

⁸⁷ Florescu / McNally 1973: 36–40.

⁸⁸ Florescu / McNally 1973: 104.

⁸⁹ İnalçık 1994: 290.

relations with the empire differed completely: Vlad pursued a fiercely independent course that ran counter to Ottoman interests, while his brother proved himself a reliable agent.

Vlad's story neatly parallels that of another Ottoman hostage, the Albanian national hero George Kastrioti, also known as Skanderbeg. Kastrioti arrived at the court of the sultan at the age of nine, became a Muslim, and served the Ottomans for nearly twenty years. In 1443, however, he revolted from the empire, abandoned Islam, and stubbornly defended Albanian territory from Ottoman incursions for nearly a quarter century. His resistance earned him the status of Christian hero in the eyes of Pope Nicholas V, as well as a place of honor in the history of Albanian nationalism.⁹⁰ The cases of Vlad and Skanderbeg show that Ottoman hostageship did not always produce obedient vassals: the effects of political and religious indoctrination to the Ottoman order could be overcome.

While Mehmed II was able to use his royal hostages to intervene in local dynastic politics, other Ottoman sultans saw the same technique used against them by European states. As historian Cemal Kafadar observes,

The holding hostage (or “hosting”) of Ottoman princes by rival powers exploited a major fault line in Turkish political life, the legitimate right of all princes to compete for the throne. Byzantine and Venetian statesmen routinely encouraged bids by various Ottoman princes – not all hostages and not all authentic – which was sometimes a highly effective way to keep Ottoman aggression at bay.⁹¹

The Ottoman dynast Mustafa Çelebi, for instance, spent nearly his entire life fighting for the kingship with varying degrees of foreign assistance. Originally captured and interned in Samarkand by Tamurlane, Mustafa was released in 1415 and tried to wrest the throne from his brother Mehmed I. He failed and fled to the Byzantines, who “could not resist the temptation to use the False Mustafa... to weaken the [Ottoman] empire as much as possible.” Bolstered by this

⁹⁰ İnalçık 2012.

⁹¹ Kafadar 1994: 592.

Byzantine support, Mustafa launched another rebellion against Mehmed's successor Murad II in 1421, though it too was unsuccessful.⁹² In addition to their military operations, Mustafa's opponents fought him with propaganda; they branded him with the moniker *Düzme Mustafa* (Mustafa the False) in an effort to overturn his claim to membership in the Ottoman royal house.⁹³ Mustafa's residence abroad and his various attempts to claim the sultanate with external assistance were thus linked to the question of legitimacy; his enemies resisted his incursions with the argument that his royal heritage was fabricated.

A similar Ottoman expatriate was Cem Sultan, whose life served as a focal point for representations of European Christianity in 16th century Ottoman literature. In 1481 CE Cem lost a decisive battle for the throne to his brother Bayezit II and fled Anatolia. Over the next fourteen years he would be a refugee in Mamluk Egypt and Christian Rhodes, a papal prisoner in Italy, a hostage in France, and a subject of frequent negotiations between the Ottoman sultan and the rulers of Christian Europe.⁹⁴ The political and religious border-crossing of the prince's life is well represented in two literary works in Turkish perhaps written by a member of his staff, one a biography of Cem, the other a dialogue between him and Pope Innocent VIII.⁹⁵ Christine Isom-Verhaaren has noted that the former work foregrounds, among other topics, "the unitary nature of sovereignty in the Ottoman empire, the threat of foreign intervention by external powers that a succession struggle made possible, and by implication the law of fratricide."⁹⁶ The dialogue between Cem and the pope stoutly defends Cem's devotion to Islam; according to Tijana Krstić, its author was "someone for whom interreligious rivalry was a burning concern and who was

⁹² Quotation from Shaw 1976: 44; see also Howard 2017: 41–2. On the Byzantine politics that led to the decision to support Mustafa, see Necipoğlu 2009: 34–5.

⁹³ McCarthy 1997: 59.

⁹⁴ Shaw 1976: 70–9; Isom-Verhaaren 2011: 82–113.

⁹⁵ On these works see Flemming 1991; Isom-Verhaaren 2011: 91–113; Demiri 2015.

⁹⁶ Isom-Verhaaren 2011: 94.

anxious to demonstrate that Cem Sultan did not betray his faith despite finding himself in a precarious position and under pressure to convert to Christianity.”⁹⁷ These literary works vividly capture the themes that often dominated the lives of hostage royalty: the role of external actors in dynastic politics, the pressure of foreign interference on kinship structures, and the possibility of acculturation to the mores – in this case, the religion – of the hostage’s captors.

Relevant comparanda also come from eastern Eurasia, where hostages were one important conduit of cultural and political relations between the sedentary states of pre-modern China and the peoples of the central Asian steppe. In a recent monograph on China under the Sui and Tang dynasties (580–800 CE), Jonathan Karam Skaff finds that Turko-Mongol rulers were willing and sometimes even eager to submit royal sons and brothers to China as hostages and pages. Such rulers wanted their hostages to receive training in Chinese law and letters; they “recognized the benefits of education” and “valued retainers who could handle diplomatic correspondence in Chinese and other languages.” Returnees could even enjoy a boost in status, as their foreign connections made them adept and powerful intermediaries between the Chinese and Turkic worlds.⁹⁸

The cultural transfer that could attend hostage submission was not always welcome, however. Skaff describes one episode of diplomatic correspondence between Wendi, the Sui emperor of China, and the Turkic ruler Ishbara Qaghan in 585 CE. These negotiations involved the matter of hostage submission.

Ishbara’s letter took the form of a memorial in which he retained his Turkic title... but acknowledged himself as a Sui official... Ishbara offered to guard the frontiers, send a hostage-page to the Sui court, and proffer annual tribute of fine horses. On the other hand, he requested retaining traditional Turkic dress, hairstyle, language, law, and customs. Wendi’s verdict accepted these terms... The patron, Wendi, would not interfere with Ishbara’s domestic affairs (law,

⁹⁷ Krstić 2011: 84–5.

⁹⁸ Skaff 2012: 130–1; cf. 198–200.

customs, etc.), but the two would cooperate militarily. A hostage and annual tribute would symbolize Ishbara's inferior position.⁹⁹

As Skaff's discussion shows, the Turkic ruler Ishbara was at pains to ensure that his hostage submission and tributary status did not amount to an imposition of Chinese law and culture. There is here an implicit admission that sending a hostage left the giver vulnerable to cultural encroachment; hostage submission and the spread of Chinese customs are seen as two sides of the same coin.

Finally, an episode of royal hostage-taking from 15th century Mongol-Chinese relations offers further illustration of how hostage-taking could exacerbate the tensions of dynastic politics. The Ming emperor Zhu Qizhen began his rule over China in 1435 CE, but his reign was soon troubled by a Mongol invasion of the north under the commander Esen Taishi. In a disastrously conceived and executed military campaign, Zhu Qizhen took the field against the Mongols himself and was captured by Esen, who held him as a hostage.¹⁰⁰ Rather than ransom the emperor, the Chinese court hastily elevated his brother Zhu Qiyu to the throne. This abandonment of the hostage Zhu Qizhen gave China room to maneuver in the short term, but, as Denis Twitchett and Tilemann Grimm explain, it also

left a legacy of problems. That, in a crisis, political and strategic national needs had been allowed to override ritual order and propriety in a succession case to some degree upset the dynasty's stability and claim to a legitimate line of succession. This was exacerbated by the fact that the former emperor survived.¹⁰¹

Esen released Zhu Qizhen, having realized that his hostage would be of no further use. Upon Qizhen's return to court, tensions emerged. Zhu Qiyu held onto power and designated his own son as his heir in a troubling departure from the rules of succession. Matters finally came to a

⁹⁹ Skaff 2012: 199.

¹⁰⁰ Porter 2016: 67.

¹⁰¹ Twitchett / Grimm 1988: 327.

head in 1457, when Zhu Qizhen was reinstalled in a coup d'état in a "grave violation of ritual propriety." The emperor's Mongol hostageship had unleashed a wave of infighting and domestic turmoil that eroded dynastic norms, tore at the fabric of the Ming family, and subjected China to "a flood of profiteering and office seeking."¹⁰² Little wonder, then, that there is "nothing in the eight years of the Tianshun era [Zhu Qizhen's second reign] that the Chinese imperial tradition looks back to with pride."¹⁰³

Taken together with the cases from classical historiography, the comparative evidence supports two conclusions about royal hostageship in the pre-modern world. The first point is a purely political one: royal families that were scattered across political borders through hostageship or imprisonment were extremely vulnerable to dynastic infighting and foreign interference. In the cases of Vlad and Radu, Mustafa Çelebi, and Zhu Qizhen, foreign powers managed to weaken a dynasty by pitting its members against one another. Moreover, when a prince returned home after an extended internment abroad, his foreign connections – whether real or perceived – could draw the ire of his countrymen. Because of his hostageship in England, for example, the Scots saw the reign of Duncan II as tantamount to English and Norman infiltration; the Libyans appear to have rallied against Egyptian influence when the pharaoh Ramesses imposed on them a client prince that he had raised himself. In short, the circulation of dynasts beyond the borders of a royal family's kingdom placed tremendous strain on the politics of succession, and it could leave the family's territory vulnerable to interference from external powers.

Second, the foreign hostageship or captivity of royal princes could open the door to cultural transfer between profoundly different empires, religions, or regions. Sometimes such

¹⁰² Quotations from Twitchett / Grimm 1988: 339.

¹⁰³ Brook 2010: 97.

exchanges were welcome, as they were on the central Asian steppe when young pages returned from China as useful intermediaries skilled in Chinese law and letters. But the matter of hostage acculturation could also raise anxieties for both captors and captives. The cases from medieval Spain and the Ottoman empire, for instance, show that religious conversion could figure prominently in the lives of hostages and prisoners – a feature of their captivity that often inspired unease in both Muslims and Christians.¹⁰⁴ Nor was religion the only bone of contention. Royal hostages learned new languages, laws, and habits during their residence in foreign lands. These new aspects of their identities could elicit fear or hatred in their countrymen, who might see them as an external assault on their way of life.

While comparative evidence cannot remove the limitations of the classical literary sources as witnesses of Parthian history, it does suggest that the Roman accounts reflect certain dynamics of royal hostageship that reappear in other historical contexts. Tacitus and Josephus tell dramatic stories of Arsacid dynasts who are seduced by Roman allurements, alienated from their native heritage, rejected by their countrymen, and supplanted by other contenders from their own family. The raw material of these stories is drawn from a rich Greco-Roman literary tradition about the conflict between civilization and barbarism, but the main themes – family rivalry, foreign infiltration, and the dangers of intercultural exchange – resonate beyond the confines of the ancient Mediterranean. Tacitus and Josephus may not have had much information about the Parthian political discourse that surrounded the return of the Arsacids of Rome. But they may have hit upon some of its main features nonetheless.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Lenski 2011: 195–6.

CHAPTER 5

THE REIGN OF VOLOGAESES

The preceding chapters established that Arsacid-Roman hostage submission had profound consequences for the traditional power struggles between and among the Arsacid king and Parthian noblemen. The former could send his children to the emperor in a quasi-fosterage arrangement to manage the pool of competitors for the crown. For their part, the nobles could now petition Rome to obtain a replacement Arsacid if they became dissatisfied with the one who ruled, and on three occasions certain coalitions were temporarily successful in installing a repatriated hostage on the throne. But the opponents of these hostage-kings delegitimized them with accusations of Romanization, alienation from their Arsacid heritage, or servitude to the nobles who had installed them. The repatriation of the Arsacids of Rome produced winners and losers in Parthian domestic politics, and the losers fought back by articulating a vision of Arsacid monarchy that was antithetical to Roman power.

This chapter situates these developments in the context of broader political and cultural changes within Parthian territory during the first century CE, especially those connected to the kingship of Vologaeses I (c. 51–78 CE). Scholarly consensus holds that the first century in Parthia marked a turning point.¹ A shift towards Iranian cultural forms became more pronounced, perhaps at the expense of the Arsacid monarchy's traditional Hellenistic underpinnings. While the evidence is varied and diverse and debate on many issues persists, there is reason to believe that the face of Arsacid kingship was changing during this period in ways that altered the trajectory of Parthian history. As discussed below, much of this change is

¹ See the literature cited below, n.3.

associated with the reign of Vologaeses. That does not mean that a cultural program was simply imposed from above by an omniscient monarch; Parthia's transformation involved broad and complex processes far beyond the purview of any one ruler. But Vologaeses ruled for a long time, and several long-term trends seem to have come to a head during his kingship.

Parthia's history of hostage submission to Rome was part of these broader political and cultural changes, and it helps explain them in a way that has so far escaped discussion in the literature. Vologaeses took the throne at the end of a half-century in which reigning Arsacid kings were repeatedly forced to defend their positions against the Arsacids of Rome. According to the Roman sources, the enemies of Vonones, Tiridates, and Meherdates attacked these kings with the argument that captivity among the Romans entailed a loss of Arsacid status. Vologaeses followed the enemies of the hostage-kings in associating Arsacid legitimacy with sources of power that were divorced from the Romans to the west – and also, significantly, from the legacy of Hellenism, which the Romans of this period were claiming for themselves.² The search for new foundations for Arsacid power may have spurred engagement with the Iranian traditions of the empire which, though always a part of Parthia's history, were nevertheless invested with new significance during Vologaeses' reign.

The trans-imperial conflicts of the Arsacid family cannot explain everything about Parthia's transformation in the first century CE. But the impact of the Arsacids of Rome on Parthian domestic politics may have fed into and accelerated the profound cultural changes that would reconnect the Arsacid monarchy with the Iranian features of its heritage, turn it away from its Hellenistic past, and position it in ideological opposition to Roman power in the west. In this sense, Parthia's internal history was also driven by external forces – namely, the circulation of

² On Rome's relationship to and appropriation of the Greek past, see Chapter 6, p. 205–7; Chapter 7, p. 236–45, 254–5.

Arsacid hostages between Parthia and Rome and the influence that these figures exerted on Parthian domestic politics.

This chapter proceeds in two sections. First, it traces the shape of Parthia's transformation in the first century CE, especially through evidence internal to the Arsacid territories. Second, it looks at the pressures that Vologaeses faced as a consequence of Arsacid hostage submission to Rome, and it discusses how his response to the resultant challenges contributed to an epochal shift in Parthian history.

The Divided World from the Parthian Shore

There is broad agreement in the scholarly literature that the early and middle first century CE in Parthia was a time of renewed engagement with the empire's Iranian heritage.³ Terms like "Neo-Iranism" and "Iranian revival" have been used to describe a period when the Arsacids placed a renewed emphasis on the Iranian traditions which, though always present to some extent, now assumed a new importance in political ideology.⁴ Some scholars also speak of the coincident eclipse of Greek culture as Iranian elements came to the fore.⁵ This idea must be handled with caution: political action on the part of the Arsacid kings against the empire's rebellious Greek populations is not equivalent to a blanket rejection of Greek culture. Still, there may be some validity to the notion that the Iranian revival among the Arsacids came at the expense of the dynasty's historical connections to the legacy of Hellenism.

³ The changes of the first century CE are highlighted in several reference works and surveys of (ancient) Iranian history (Wiesehöfer 1993: 185; Frye 1993: 211; Axworthy 2008: 40; Fowler 2012: 4; Dąbrowa 2012: 174–5) as well as in more detailed studies of the Arsacid kingdom (Debevoise 1938: 196; Neusner 1963; Wiesehöfer 2015: 339; Schottky 1991; Olbrycht 1998c: 173–9; Kennedy 1996: 88).

⁴ Neo-Iranism: Wolski 1993: 151. Iranian revival: Herrmann 1977; Curtis 2007b.

⁵ On the fading of Greek culture in the Parthian empire, see Debevoise 1938: 196; Sellwood 1980: 220; Sinisi 2012a: 19–20.

The numismatic evidence offers essential testimony on these matters, since it directly reflects the priorities of the Parthian kings in the construction of their royal image. Two coins from either end of the period under consideration illustrate the changes that took place. The first is one of the issues of Tiridates I, opponent of Phraates IV in the Parthian civil war of c. 30–24 BCE (Fig. 2).⁶ The coin was struck at the Seleucian mint in May of 26 BCE, a period when Tiridates was presumably in control of the city.



Fig. 2: Tetradrachm of Tiridates I. Sellwood 55.9 variant. Photo from Wroth 1903: plate 23, no. 9; available online at http://www.parthia.com/coins/pdc_20438.jpg.

Some elements of the coin take their cues from long-established Parthian numismatic traditions. The reverse of the coin features a seven-line Greek inscription: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ / ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ / ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡ / ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ, “[of] the king of kings, Arsaces, the benefactor, autocrat, the illustrious, lover of Greeks.” The title ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡ was relatively unique to Tiridates (not having been used since the coins of Arsaces I, the founder of the Arsacid dynasty), and was a recent substitution for the more conventional ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ, “the Just.”⁷ All the other epithets, however, are well represented on the

⁶ For discussion of Tiridates’ rebellion, see Chapter 3, p. 82–3.

⁷ ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡ: see Timpe 1975: 156; Rezakhani 2013: 767. ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ was used on all of Tiridates’ coins before 26 BCE: Sellwood 55.1–6.

coins of other Arsacid kings.⁸ The imagery too is typical. On the obverse, the king's bust faces left, a regular feature of Parthian coins from this period; on the reverse, a figure that appears to be *Tyche* (Fortune) hands a palm to the king, who is seated, looking right, and holding a scepter.⁹

Yet some features depart from tradition, as well. Tiridates does not bear the royal wart, an iconographic innovation begun under Orodes II (ruled c. 57–38 BCE) and used by several predecessors to emphasize their legitimacy as members of the Arsacid dynasty.¹⁰ Most importantly, though, the coin displays an epithet that was unique to Tiridates, never used by a Parthian king before and never to be used again.¹¹ The word is ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΥ, “Roman-lover.” On one level, the epithet reflects the agenda of a king looking for allies against his enemy, Phraates IV. It must be understood in the context of Tiridates’ flight to Augustus and his subsequent canvassing for Roman military support. Tiridates likely expected at least some Romans to see that he was using his coins to advertise his good will. It is possible that he did so with an eye towards receiving assistance against Phraates IV, who was still at large. Justin records a promise from Tiridates to Augustus that “Parthia would be under the power of the Romans if he were able to hold his kingdom as a gift from them.”¹² Augustus did not help Tiridates regain power, but perhaps the Parthian was still angling for Roman support in his quest to permanently defeat Phraates IV on the battlefield. The word ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΥ might have signaled his readiness to accept something like client-king status in exchange for military aid.

But the coin also had a domestic audience within Parthia, and its significance went beyond the political circumstances that surrounded one civil war. What did a resident of the

⁸ The formulation ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ was standard for Arsacid kings from the mid-first century BCE onward: Sellwood 1983: 290; Rezakhani 2013: 770.

⁹ This is a common configuration on Parthian coins: see Rezakhani 2013: 767.

¹⁰ Wroth 1903: 76; Sellwood 1980: 120; Tanabe 1988: 377–80.

¹¹ There were, however, previous usages by the dynasts of Cappadocia and Commagene: see Timpe 1975: 157 n.11.

¹² Just. 42.5.8: *iuris Romanorum futuram Parthiam adfirmans, si eius regnum muneris eorum fuisset*.

Parthian empire think when they saw the title ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΥ? While a Roman might interpret the epithet as a sign of submission to their empire, a Parthian probably would not. After all, for centuries the coins of Parthian kings had featured the epithet ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ – and this in no way signaled the submission of the Parthians to the Greeks. On the contrary, the use of the title helped reconcile the Greeks of the former Seleucid empire to Parthian rule.¹³ It was a propaganda tool of the stronger party, not the weaker. ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ first appeared on the coins of the Arsacid king Mithradates I (ruled c. 171–138/7 BCE), the ruler whose conquests in Media and Mesopotamia made the Parthian empire into a great power.¹⁴ Mithradates' campaigns added large Greek populations to the empire, especially the key mint center of Seleucia on the Tigris. The monarch's coins display other Hellenizing features, like the abandonment of the satrapal tiara or *kolah* in favor of a diadem and the substitution of a Greek *omphalos* for the earlier full throne.¹⁵ These numismatic innovations were, in part, a way of integrating the Greeks of Mesopotamia into a new imperial order.

Although Mithradates I and Tiridates reigned under different circumstances, the significance of the former king's example for the latter's coins should not be overlooked. The residents of the Parthian kingdom were as likely to read Tiridates' ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΣ epithet and see a sign of strength as they were a sign of weakness. The objects of the Parthian king's love – in this case, the Romans instead of the Greeks – were his inferiors, not his masters. The Greeks of Mesopotamia who saw ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ on a Parthian coin understood that their place within the Arsacid empire was special enough to warrant the use of such an epithet by the king. But it

¹³ Wolski 1983: 155–6; Invernizzi 2012: 94. But note also the position of Wiesehöfer (1986: 179; 2015: 335), who warns against viewing the “Philhellenism” of the Arsacids as pure propaganda.

¹⁴ Rezakhani 2013: 768.

¹⁵ Shift from *kolah* to diadem: Curtis 1998: 61–2 (noting also that there are precedents for the Hellenistic diadem in Assyrian art; cf. Calmeyer 1976: 53). Substitution of *omphalos* for throne: Curtis 2007a: 418; Rezakhani 2013: 769.

would be wrong to say that the “Lover of Greeks” title represented an abasement of the king before his Greek subjects. When that same audience looked at a coin that bore the title “Lover of Romans,” then, their understanding of the power relationships involved would have been considerably different from the picture that emerges from Dio and Justin, the two Greco-Roman literary sources who discuss Tiridates’ rebellion.

The ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΣ coin represents a Roman-Parthian relationship that might have been. It hints at the possibility of an ideology in which the Euphrates was no more impermeable a barrier than the Tigris, an ideology in which Roman connections might help an Arsacid king obtain, consolidate, and legitimize his power. The idea that an affiliation with the Romans could make an Arsacid king more impressive, not less; the idea that the Romans had a part to play in the maintenance of Parthian royal authority; the idea that a Parthian ruler could love the Romans in the same way that his predecessors had loved the Greeks: all these possibilities were contained in this tetradrachm. The coin captures a moment in time that would soon be lost, a moment in which a Parthian king could proclaim that his power had roots on both sides of the Euphrates.

The second coin is a drachm of Vologaeses I, probably struck at Ecbatana late in the king’s reign (Fig. 3).¹⁶ On the obverse, the king faces left. His diadem is represented by four horizontal lines, typical of Vologaeses’ coinage and the issues of other Parthian kings as well. Behind his head his hair descends in five rows of curly locks. The king’s brow shows the royal wart of the Arsacid line. He also wears a necklace represented by three lines, as well as a round earring.

¹⁶ Sellwood 71.1; Sinisi 2012a: type IVc/4a.α(1c.α).



Fig. 3: Drachm of Vologaeses I. Sellwood 71.1; Sinisi 2012a: type IVc/4a.α(1c.α). Photo by Doug Mudd, Smithsonian Catalog no. 1979.1216.0186; courtesy of Chris Hopkins / Parthia.com, available online at http://www.parthia.com/coins/pdc_16798.jpg.

The coin's most unique feature is evident to the upper-right of the king's bust. A Parthian inscription in Aramaic letters reads *wl*, an abbreviation of "*Walaxš*," the Parthian rendering of Vologaeses' name. Though the use of the Parthian language on Arsacid coins would later become a regular feature, Vologaeses' innovation was almost unprecedented at the time.¹⁷ To be sure, the Aramaic title *krny* appeared on the issues of Arsaces I, the founder of the Arsacid dynasty.¹⁸ But these coins date to the third century BCE, and after Arsaces no Parthian king had used any language but Greek on his coins. Vologaeses could conceivably have had his forefather's example in mind. But an explanation is still required. Why did the king resurrect the use of Parthian on coins in the face of centuries of precedent for the exclusive use of Greek?

¹⁷ Lukonin 1983: 684.

¹⁸ Sellwood 3.1, 4.1. The reading of the word *krny* is widely accepted, though the legend is difficult to make out: Abgarians / Sellwood 1971: 113. The meaning of the word is likewise not entirely clear. It was apparently a military or administrative title under the Achaemenids, as its attestation in Aramaic documents from Bactria seems to indicate: Naveh / Shaked 2012: 190. Some scholars see a connection between the word and the noble family of the Karen (Abgarians / Sellwood 1971: 113; Naveh / Shaked 2012: 191; cf. Bivar 1961: 123 n.5), but a connection with the Greek *κάρανος* is also possible (Hyland 2013: 2). See further Rung 2015.

Just as noticeable is a feature on the reverse of the drachm. Here the diademed king sits atop a throne; the *omphalos* featured on the coins of earlier rulers was by this time little in use.¹⁹ He grasps a bow with his right hand. The item underneath the bow was taken by some scholars to represent a fire altar, which would have made this the first coin to feature an element that was later frequently employed by the Sasanians.²⁰ But this interpretation has now been conclusively rejected. The item is actually the monogram for the Ecbatana mint, which, while smaller, is evident on other coins as well.²¹

At first glance, the seven-line Greek legend that surrounds the portrait of the king looks similar to the standard Parthian formula: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ, “[of] the king of kings Arsaces, Benefactor, the Just, the Illustrious, Lover of Greeks.”²² But a closer look reveals a blundered and illegible text. A simple square now stands in place of the letters that were formerly betas, and the omegas in the phrase ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ have apparently been replaced by lambdas. Other words have been so badly misspelled as to be unrecognizable. The Greek legend is no longer really Greek. The die engravers seem to have treated it as a pictorial element rather than a linguistic one.²³

These two features of the coin – the Parthian inscription and the degradation of the Greek legend – point to broad changes in the Parthian empire in the first half of the first century CE, and they present a stark contrast with the ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΣ coin of Tiridates. Vologaeses’ use of the Parthian language broke with centuries of Parthian numismatic tradition and put a new face on the Arsacid dynasty. This was a different kind of coin for a new moment in Parthian history.

¹⁹ Frye 1984: 214.

²⁰ Neusner 1963: 47; Boyce 1975: 103. For the fire altar on Sasanian coins, see Gyselen 2010.

²¹ Potts 2006: 272 n.18.

²² On the frequent recurrence of this formula from the mid-first century BCE, see above, n.8.

²³ Sinisi 2012a: 139.

The *philoromaios* coin of Tiridates had played to an audience that spoke Greek and was receptive to a warm relationship with the Romans. By contrast, Vologaeses' coin made Parthian a new language for the expression of Arsacid power and turned away from the empire across the Euphrates, rather than towards it.

The degradation of the Greek legend on the coin is part of this story as well. Why would an Arsacid king in the middle of the first century CE regard this design as an acceptable final product? Eight examples of this coin are recorded in the *Sylloge Nummorum Parthicorum*, a sample size that is comparable to that of other types.²⁴ It is therefore unlikely that the coin is simply a defect or that its features are accidental. Since this series was probably minted at Ecbatana, it is reasonable to assume that knowledge of the Greek language among residents of the Iranian plateau had been on the decline in the years before the coin was struck. But more importantly, those who did speak Greek mattered less to Parthian politics. The Greeks who looked at this coin would have seen the word ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ – a title that had historically emphasized their special position among Arsacid subjects – reduced to blundered and illegible gibberish. The implication would have been clear: their importance was declining.

To be sure, Vologaeses' drachm represents changes that were gradual, not sudden. Some of his Arsacid successors minted coins with legible Greek inscriptions, and there are later issues that do not use Parthian. Generally speaking, however, these two trends – the use of Parthian and the disuse of Greek – become more pronounced in later Arsacid coinage. Vologaeses' coin heralded a change in Arsacid political ideology that would only gather momentum and strength. An Iranian language had assumed paramount importance in a vital medium of Arsacid political

²⁴ Sinisi 2012a: 306–7.

communication – a development that may have helped usher in a new phase of engagement with the empire’s Iranian traditions.²⁵

Parthian numismatics may also reveal a gradual Arsacid reconnection to their Achaemenid “heritage,” whether real or imagined. The use of the title “king of kings” (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ) increases in frequency on Arsacid coinage from the mid-first century BCE onwards. By the middle of the first century CE, Vologaeses and his two immediate predecessors used the title almost without exception on their drachms and tetradrachms. Since “king of kings” was an Achaemenid title and not used (so far as is observable from the surviving evidence) by the Seleucids, some scholars interpret the revival of the title as a conscious effort on the part of the Arsacid monarchs to claim the mantle of the Achaemenids, whom they may have imagined as their ancient forbearers.²⁶ Some caveats are necessary here. The title does not appear on the smaller *chalkoi* of Vologaeses, though this may be due to size constraints.²⁷ And as seen above, the title appears on some of his drachms in blundered Greek. Moreover, one might reasonably question whether the use of “king of kings” necessarily reflects Achaemenid influence: while the Seleucids did not use the title, it is attested among the Ptolemies and the Artaxiads, for instance.²⁸ The long-term trend, however, is clear.

The notion of an Achaemenid revival *may* receive further support from Arsacid appeals to Achaemenid heritage as represented in the Greco-Roman literary sources, though the matter is much debated. Tacitus relates that Artabanus II sent a missive to Tiberius in which the Parthian king laid claim to the “old borders of the Persians and the Macedonians, boasting and threatening

²⁵ Lukonin 1983: 691–2; Wiesehöfer 2005: 133; Sinisi 2012b: 287.

²⁶ Neusner 1963. For a detailed discussion of the Arsacid rediscovery of this title, see Fowler 2005: 141–3; Shayegan 2011: 41–247.

²⁷ Chalkoi of Vologaeses I: Sinisi 2012a Type VI/5, VI/6, VII/7a, VII/7b; Sellwood 70.14–23.

²⁸ Fowler 2005: 143. Pharnaces II of Pontus also used the title: see Sullivan 1990: 156 with n.39.

that he was going to invade the lands held first by Cyrus and then later by Alexander.”²⁹ Several scholars have suggested that this passage amounts to more than a mere attribution of Roman ideas to an Arsacid king; rather, it may reflect a growing Parthian awareness of the Achaemenid and Hellenistic past, and an increasing tendency to deploy the legacy of the their imagined ancestors in their political ideology.³⁰ Others urge caution, however, and stress that there is no unequivocal evidence for the memory of the Achaemenids in indigenous Persian sources for the Parthian or Sasanian periods.³¹ While debate on this subject will continue, for the present purposes it is significant that Artabanus’ alleged claim to Achaemenid heritage dates to the early first century CE, the period when the circulation of Arsacid hostages was at its height.

Another possible indication of the Arsacid rediscovery of the Achaemenid past may be visible in the emergence of a new dynastic foundation myth, though once again Greco-Roman literature provides the only relevant evidence. Three surviving sources tell the story of Arsaces I, the founder of Parthia’s ruling dynasty: Strabo, Justin (epitomizing the Augustan author Pompeius Trogus), and Arrian, fragments of whose *Parthica* are preserved in Byzantine excerpts.³² Strabo and Trogus both wrote during the Augustan period, while Arrian’s *Parthica* was composed after Trajan’s campaigns against the Arsacids in Armenia and Mesopotamia.³³ There are major differences among the three accounts, which has made it notoriously difficult to

²⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1: *Simul veteres Persarum ac Macedonum terminos, seque invasurum possessa primum Cyro et post Alexandro per vaniloquentiam ac minas iaciebat*. Later appeals by Sasanian kings to Achaemenid heritage in Greco-Roman historiography are modeled on Tacitus’ description here: Dio 80.3–4; Herodian 6.2.2; cf. 6.4.5 (Ardashir); Amm. 17.5.5 (Shapur II); discussion in Wiesehöfer 1986: 181–5; Shayegan 2011: 293–4.

³⁰ Wolski 1966; 1983: 152; Shayegan 2011: 293–307; Fowler 2017: 361. Note also the observation of Fowler 2005: 126 *contra* Isaac 1992: 21.

³¹ de Jong 2017: 37–8. For further discussions of this topic that deal with the Sasanian relationship to the Achaemenids, see Yarshater 1971; Kettenhoffen 1984; Wiesehöfer 2002b; Huyse 2002; 2008: 152–3; Daryaee 2006.

³² On the transmission of Arrian’s *Parthica*, see Lepper 1948: 1–27 and the recent discussion in Lerouge-Cohen 2017. See also below, n.37.

³³ Over half of the seventeen-book *Parthica* dealt with Trajan’s war: Stadter 1980: 137.

arrive at a satisfactory explanation of how the Arsacid line originally established itself in the Seleucid province of Parthia.³⁴

For the present discussion, however, the historical reality behind the rise of the Arsacids is less important than the existence of different versions of the story at different times. In Justin's epitome of Trogus, Arsaces is "a man of uncertain origin."³⁵ Strabo knows two accounts of his background: in one, Arsaces came from the nomadic tribe of the Dahae; in the other, he was a Bactrian exile.³⁶ In the fragments of Arrian's account, however, a new story emerges. Arsaces and his brother Tiridates were descendants of the Achaemenid king Artaxerxes II. Along with five companions, these brothers rose in rebellion against the Seleucid satrap to avenge an insult against Tiridates.³⁷

In contrast to the Augustan accounts of Pompeius Trogus and Strabo, then, Arrian, writing in the early second century CE, understood the Arsacid family to be descendants of the Achaemenids. It is impossible to say whether his text preserved a story that the Arsacids told about themselves, or an origin tale produced by the Roman imagination. As discussed in subsequent chapters, the Romans developed a long and venerable Persian wars tradition that portrayed the Arsacid kings as the heirs of Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes, so an *interpretatio Romana* cannot be ruled out.³⁸ If the story did originate in Parthian territory, though, it may be an indication that a new foundation myth had taken hold among the Parthians that claimed an

³⁴ On this problem, see Wolski 1993: 37–65; Lerner 1999; Hauser 2005; 2006.

³⁵ Just. 41.4.6: *Erat eo tempore Arsaces, vir sicut incertae originis*. This version of the story was later followed by Ammianus (23.6.2).

³⁶ Strab. 11.9.2–3.

³⁷ Arrian's account is preserved both by the Byzantine Photius (58), who names this satrap Pherecles; and by Syncellos, who calls him Agathocles: Hauser 2005: 172 n.32. Syncellos alone mentions the putative descent of the brothers from Artaxerxes. The inclusion of five additional companions in the rebellion of Arsaces and Tiridates echoes the story of the Achaemenid Darius' overthrow of Smerdis/Gautama with six Persian nobles (Hdt. 3.70). On the putative Arsacid descent from Artaxerxes II see further Debevoise 1938: 10; Wiesehöfer 1993: 183; Plischke 2014: 209.

³⁸ See Chapter 6, p. 205–7; Chapter 7, p. 236–45, 254–5.

Achaemenid pedigree for the Arsacid dynasty.³⁹ Over the course of the first century CE, then, the Arsacids may have begun to legitimize their power through their putative descent from the ancient rulers of Iran.

Yet another dimension of Parthia's Iranian revival seems to have taken place in the realm of religion: Vologaeses may have attempted to align royal and religious power by consolidating the traditions of Zoroastrianism that were scattered throughout Iran. The textual preservation of Zoroastrianism's overwhelmingly oral traditions was not complete until the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods, by which point both time and Sasanian revisionism had done much to obliterate the role of the Arsacids in the history of the religion. But a valuable piece of evidence survives in the *Dēnkard*, an account of the transmission of Zoroastrianism's holy texts that was committed to writing in the ninth or tenth century CE. The text records several initiatives on the part of Iranian dynasts to preserve the teachings of the Avesta and its exegesis, the Zand.⁴⁰ One such effort is attributed to an Arsacid king:

*Walaxš ī Aškānān Abestāg ud Zand čiyōn abēzagīhā andar āmad ēstād hammōg-iz ī aziš harw čē az wizend ud āšuftkārīh ī Aleksandar ud ēwār ud rōb ī Hrōmāyān andar Ērānšahr pargandagīhā abar nibištāg tā čē uzwān abespārīšnīg pad dastwar mānd ēstād andar šahr čiyōn frāz āmad ēstād nigāh dāštan ō šahrīhā ayādgār kerdan framūd.*⁴¹

Valakash the Arsacid commanded that a memorandum be sent to the provinces [instructing them] to preserve, in the state in which it had come down in [each] province, whatever had survived in purity of the Avesta and [its] Zand, and also every teaching deriving from it which, scattered by the havoc and disruption of Alexander, and by the pillage and looting of the Macedonians [lit: Romans], had survived, whether written or in authoritative oral transmission.⁴²

³⁹ Neusner 1963: 44–5; Hauser 2005: 176–7.

⁴⁰ On the *Dēnkard*, see Boyce 1968: 43–5; De Menasce 1983: 1170–2. On the transmission of the Avesta generally, see Hintze 1998; Hoffman / Narten 1989.

⁴¹ DkM 412.5–11. Text from Shayegan 2011: 297. For the text, see further Shaki 1981: 115.

⁴² Translation: Boyce 1979: 94; see also Boyce 1984: 113–4.

The Arsacid Vologaeses (*Walaxš ī Aškānān*) mentioned here was a steward of Zoroastrianism concerned with the purity of the works at the heart of the faith. His piety forms a stark contrast with the sacrilegious depredations of Alexander the Great.⁴³ Alexander and his armies are here called Romans (*Hrōmāyān*). The recasting of Macedonians as Romans is not unique to this text; others composed during the Sasanian period have the same feature.⁴⁴ Given the late date at which the *Dēnkard* achieved written form, it is by no means clear that this identification was part of the *ipsissima verba* from Vologaeses' original memorandum, since it may well be a later interpolation. Nevertheless, the passage may show the beginning of a process that turned Zoroastrianism's enemy Alexander into a Roman – and, by extension, turned the Romans into enemies of their faith.

Another mention of a *Walaxš* in Zoroastrian literature reinforces the impression that a ruler named Vologaeses achieved a place of unique prominence in Iranian religious tradition. This second reference comes from the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, a Middle Persian apocalyptic text that names him alongside other Iranian kings like the Achaemenid Artaxerxes II and Ardashir, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty.⁴⁵ The text calls this Vologaeses (at least in some manuscript traditions) a leader “who will remove from the world the schisms which will exist.”⁴⁶ The king's reign is held to represent an entire epoch, and constitutes one of the seven ages “prophesied” by an inspired Zoroaster. As with the passage from the *Dēnkard*, the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*

⁴³ For the reception of Alexander in Zoroastrian literature, see Shayegan 2011: 295–307.

⁴⁴ E.g. KAP 7.6; Bd. 33.14; Awn i.1–7. The *Shahnameh* too contains references to Alexander as a Caesar, e.g. Š-KhM, V.524, ll. 110–1 = Khaleghi-Motlagh 1997: 524.

⁴⁵ On the date of the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, see Sundermann 1988. Assessments vary, but the text may contain a Hellenistic core that was later expanded and elaborated upon to extend the chronology to the Sasanian period.

⁴⁶ ZVYt. 3.25–6. The translation is that of Boyce 1984: 91–2, but note the differences between her translation and the text of Cereti 1995: 87, 135. On the passage, see also Daryae 2015; on the text in general, see further Boyce 1968: 49–50; Cereti 1995: 1–29; Vevaina 2011.

remembers an Arsacid king named Vologaeses as the most important king of his dynasty and a leading luminary of the Zoroastrian faith.

One important caveat is necessary here: it is uncertain to which “Vologaeses” these texts refer. Several successive Arsacid kings went by the same name, so it cannot be established with certainty that either the *Dēnkard* or the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* refer to Vologaeses I rather than one of his successors. Still, many scholars see the identification as a distinct or even the most likely possibility, and Vologaeses I’s long and successful reign in some ways makes him a more probable candidate than the later Arsacids who bore his name.⁴⁷ If this interpretation has merit, then the two texts may indicate that the first century CE was an important moment in the history of the Zoroastrian religion, and that Vologaeses I played a key role in the developments of this period.

To be sure, Zoroastrianism had never disappeared from ancient Persia, and Vologaeses did not invest the religion with significance *ex nihilo*.⁴⁸ The embeddedness of Zoroastrian religious practice in Parthian life before the first century CE is evident in a number of sources: the use of the Zoroastrian calendar, as attested in the ostraka inscriptions from Nisa; the maintenance of sacred fires at various sites throughout the Iranian plateau; the continuation from the Achaemenid period of *xwēdōdah* (i.e. next-of-kin or within the family) marriages; epigraphic evidence attesting to the continued worship of Zoroastrian *yazatas*, as the Hercules from Mesene shows; and perhaps the Parthian use of the burial practice of exposure, though this is a contentious point.⁴⁹ While the material and documentary evidence leaves much unclear about

⁴⁷ See Debevoise 1938: 196; Boyce 1975: 103; Sinisi 2012a: 20; 2012b: 287; Wiesehöfer 2015: 339; Wolski 1993: 174; Olbrycht 1998c: 185.

⁴⁸ See Wiesehöfer 1993: 204.

⁴⁹ Zoroastrian calendar: Lukonin 1983: 687. Fire temples: Isidore of Charax *Mans. Parth.* 11; cf. Boyce 1979: 85–90. *Xwēdōdah*: de Jong 1997: 424–32. Inscriptional evidence for Parthian worship of Verethragna, a *yazata* identified with the Greek demi-god Heracles: Pennachietti 1987. Zoroastrian burial practice, esp. exposure: Boyce 1979: 90–2; de Jong 1997: 432–44.

Zoroastrian religious practices, there is enough to establish a degree of continuity from the Achaemenid period into the Parthian one.

But the passages from the *Dēnkard* and the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* may suggest a renewed engagement with the religion's core texts in the lands of the Parthian empire. Since this initiative was associated with the kingship of Vologaeses, it would appear that Arsacid political power became more closely intertwined with Zoroastrian belief during his reign. Moreover, there is some anecdotal support for this notion in the Greco-Roman sources. Pliny calls Vologaeses' brother Tiridates a *magus*, or Zoroastrian priest, while Tacitus and Dio note his aversion to sailing – an observation fully in keeping with the Zoroastrian belief that such travel would defile the element of water.⁵⁰ The same scruples seem to have applied to Vologaeses himself.⁵¹ Whether the engagement of these Arsacids with Zoroastrian practices was purely religious, purely political, or – as seems most likely – somewhere in between, Vologaeses may have connected his family's power with Zoroastrian traditions to a degree that his predecessors had not.

The cultural changes in Parthia during the first century CE did not happen overnight, nor were they centrally directed initiatives imposed from the top down by an omnipotent monarch. The growth in importance of the Parthian language; the eclipse of Greek and the political decline of the Arsacid subjects who spoke it; the possible reconnection to the Achaemenid past; the alignment of royal power with the Zoroastrian religion – all of these developments had complex trajectories that were centuries long and guided by processes beyond the control of any individual ruler. Vologaeses and his predecessors cannot have been the only agents of change,

⁵⁰ Plin. 30.16; Tac. *Ann.* 15.24.2; discussion in Cumont 1933; Griffin 1984: 216–7 and n.49. Dio indeed notes that Tiridates traveled to Italy on horseback, though he sailed on the return trip: 63.1.3, 7.1. On the Zoroastrian reverence for water in Greco-Roman and Zoroastrian literature, see de Jong 1997: 416–7.

⁵¹ Cass. Dio 63.7.2; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1.

and the Arsacid monarchy would have been shaped by wider cultural conditions no less than it actively shaped them.

But Vologaeses' reign may nevertheless have been a moment when a number of long-term political and cultural trends converged, and diverse bodies of evidence suggest that his kingship was a pivotal moment. If so, why was the mid-first century CE a turning point? The turbulent history of Arsacid hostage submission to Rome is part of the answer. Vologaeses faced profound and recurrent problems as a result of this history, and his response to these challenges fed into Parthia's broader transformation in the first century CE.

Vologaeses and the Arsacid Family

While the Iranian evidence speaks to gradual processes that took place over centuries, a more detailed political history of Vologaeses' reign must rest above all on the later books of Tacitus' *Annals*, where Nero's war with the Parthians over Armenia occasions several chapters that consider Arsacid affairs. Since the war provides the background, Tacitus is largely interested in military developments and in the performance of Nero's commanders. But his narrative also touches on Parthian domestic politics and, though distinctly limited in many respects, it can support real insight into developments internal to the Arsacid empire in the mid-first century CE.

In this section of the *Annals*, a recurring theme is Vologaeses' preoccupation with dynastic management – a concern that can be read as a reaction to the violent history of Arsacid hostageship. Tacitus' depiction of Vologaeses is that of a king intensely concerned with the proper ordering of his family: he uses hostage submission to punish dissidents, but he also rewards and promotes the Arsacid dynasts who show loyalty to him. By the same token, however, Tacitus' Vologaeses also makes the case that Arsacid kingship is diametrically opposed to Roman power – an argument that would have deprived the Arsacids of Rome of their

royal legitimacy and undermined their right to sit the throne. Tacitus' limitations as a source for first century Parthian history have already been explored, and as usual the arguments that he attributes to Vologaeses owe their shape to the conventions of Greco-Roman historiography. In one sense, however, they are worth consideration as a feature of Arsacid political discourse: such rhetoric makes sense as a response to the preceding half-century in Arsacid history, a period when three Arsacids of Rome had returned to Parthia and triggered devastating civil wars. When read against the Parthian evidence surveyed above, moreover, Tacitus' account reinforces the impression that the face of Arsacid kingship was transforming in the mid-first century CE, and that Vologaeses was one of the major engines behind the change.

In one respect, Tacitus' account shows, Vologaeses' dynastic strategies resembled those of his predecessors: he too sent Arsacid dynasts to Rome. His decision to do so seems to have been connected to domestic unrest. Vologaeses had been in power for four years when, in 55 CE, a rival member of the Arsacid family rebelled against him.⁵² The identity of this pretender is ambiguously preserved in the surviving manuscripts of Tacitus, but it is clear that he mounted a serious challenge; the numismatic evidence indicates that he had the support of the Greek city of Seleucia.⁵³ His rebellion derailed Vologaeses' initial foray into Armenia, which he had invaded

⁵² Vologaeses acceded in 51 CE: Sinisi 2012a: 15. On his rise to the kingship, see Joseph. *AJ* 20.74; Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.4. Vologaeses' paternity is debated. Josephus has Vologaeses demanding the return of the honors conferred upon the Adiabeanian king Izates by his father (*AJ* 20.82: τὰς ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῷ δοθείσας τιμὰς ἔπεμψεν ἀπατῶν). If one takes the text literally here, the speaker must mean Artabanus II, whose donations to Izates Josephus has earlier recorded (*AJ* 20.66–7; cf. Fowler 2010: 72). But Artabanus was almost certainly not Vologaeses' father. For discussion, see Karras-Klapproth 1988: 214; Dąbrowa 1983: 124 and n.39; Schottky 1991: 113–5; Olbrycht 1998a: 125; Malloch 2013: 127–31.

⁵³ The rival Arsacid is mentioned only in Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.7.2), and discrepancies in the manuscript tradition of the *Annals* mean that his name remains a matter of debate. Some editions have *filius Vardanes* with the name in the nominative, in which case the rebel would have been a son of Vologaeses named Vardanes. Others read *filius Vardanis*, by which Tacitus presumably means that the rebel was a son of the earlier Arsacid king Vardanes, the rival of Gotarzes. For the reading “[his] son Vardanes,” see Furneaux 1907: 162; Heubner 1983: 275; Koestermann 1963–8: 3.247. For “the son of Vardanes,” see Kahrstedt 1950: 23 and n.23; Sinisi 2012a: 16; Wiesehöfer 2015: 338; Schottky 1991: 117; Heil 1997: 77 and n.85. A series of coins struck by this pretender at Seleucia has been identified: see Sinisi 2012a: 80 (II.1.3.2.1); Sellwood 69.1–11.

and given to Tiridates in 54 CE, and led to the temporary retreat of the Arsacids from the kingdom.⁵⁴ Who ruled Armenia for the next three years is unclear, though it appears that Tiridates retained control over at least part of the territory.⁵⁵ Hostilities between Rome and Parthia would not resume until 57 CE.⁵⁶

It was only at this point – during a lull in the conflict over Armenia and while dealing with a domestic rebellion – that Vologaeses submitted hostages to Rome. Both Corbulo and Ummidius Quadratus, then governor of Syria, had dispatched messengers to Vologaeses to urge him “to prefer peace to war, and, having given hostages, to continue in the respect for the Roman people that had been customary among his predecessors.”⁵⁷ But Tacitus’ interpretation of Vologaeses’ motives emphasizes domestic concerns rather than foreign policy:

*et Vologaeses, quo bellum ex commodo pararet, an ut aemulationis suspectos per nomen obsidum amoveret, tradit nobilissimos ex familia Arsacidarum.*⁵⁸

And Vologaeses, in order to prepare war from an advantageous position – or, in the name of “hostages,” to remove those suspected of rivalry – handed over the most noble of the Arsacid family.

Beset by a domestic struggle against a fellow Arsacid, Tacitus’ Vologaeses uses the Roman requests for hostages to his own advantage. The king’s actions conform to the Romans’ expectations in appearance, but subvert them in reality.⁵⁹ The submission of these hostages is

⁵⁴ Vologaeses and Tiridates invade Armenia: Tac. *Ann.* 12.44–51.

⁵⁵ Tacitus cites as the cause for the resumption of hostilities in 58 CE Corbulo’s determination to *recover* Armenia (*Ann.* 13.34.2: *Corbulo dignum magnitudine populi Romani rebatur parta olim a Lucullo Pompeioque recipere*), suggesting that Rome did not have control of the area in the intervening years. In the same year Tacitus has Tiridates complain of his being driven out of Armenia (*Ann.* 13.37.4: *vetere Armeniae possessione depelleretur*). Gilmartin (1973: 591) points out that Tacitus has the Senate speak of *retaining* Armenia (13.8.1: *retinendae Armeniae*), but the author himself of *obtaining* it (13.42.2: *de obtinenda Armenia*).

⁵⁶ Dates in this paragraph follow the chronology of Wheeler 1997: 393–7; cf. Heil 1997: 213–23.

⁵⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.1: *Ceterum uterque ad Vologaesem regem nuntiis monebant, pacem quam bellum mallet datisque obsidibus solitam prioribus reverentiam in populum Romanum continuaret.*

⁵⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.1.

⁵⁹ Gilmartin 1973: 588.

less a concession to Roman demands than a purge of royal rivals through international channels. It is domestic maneuvering dressed up as foreign policy.

As noted in the last chapter, Tacitus here is reusing an explanation for Arsacid hostage submission that he has previously applied to Phraates IV, and it is not clear whether the author had any specific information about Vologaeses' motives.⁶⁰ Tacitus was perhaps more interested in the episode's reflection on Rome than he was in Parthian affairs; his narrative highlights the ineptness of Nero's commanders and their failure to cooperate even in the face of foreign aggression. The text has Corbulo and Ummidius immediately fall to arguing over who gets credit for obtaining the Arsacid captives. Their quarrel shows how the need to score points with the emperor led to embarrassing comportment in the field; indeed, Tacitus even raises the prospect that the generals' bickering might have left a poor impression on the hostages.⁶¹ The episode is an apt illustration of a characteristically Tacitean theme: Rome's internal rot leaves it ill-prepared to deal with the peoples on its periphery.

In other respects, however, Tacitus' interpretation of Vologaeses' decision has merit, because the king's submission of hostages cannot be satisfactorily explained as a purely military decision. Although A. D. Lee describes the transfer as a Parthian "acknowledgement of Roman ascendancy," that characterization does not hold up under scrutiny.⁶² The quarrel between Corbulo and Ummidius over credit for the hostage surrender shows that both men viewed the receipt of the Arsacids as a great accomplishment – one for which they both wanted credit.⁶³ But

⁶⁰ See Chapter 4, p. 131–44.

⁶¹ Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.2. See Gilmartin 1973: 589 and Allen 2006: 117–9, who discusses this quarrel alongside the competition between Vitellius and Herod Antipas to inform Tiberius of the receipt of Parthian hostages in c. 37 CE (Joseph. *AJ* 18.104–5; Suet. *Calig.* 14; Cass. Dio 59.27.2–6). On the rivalry between Quadratus and Corbulo, see Dąbrowa 1998: 52.

⁶² Lee 1991: 367.

⁶³ Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.2–3. Allen (2006: ch. 9, esp. 239–44) argues that Tacitus' Corbulo represents a model of forthright conquest that does not depend on the indirect method of hostage-taking. But this does not explain Corbulo's eagerness to take credit for Vologaeses' hostages here, or his apparent conviction that their surrender would provide

if the Romans thought that the surrender of Arsacids would be in any way a check on Vologaeses' activities in Armenia, the future course of the war would offer a harsh corrective. As soon as Parthian affairs were settled, Vologaeses returned to Armenia and resumed operations. Indeed, it is telling that virtually all the Roman-Parthian hostilities took place *after* the Arsacids were offered up to Rome. The transfer of young Arsacid dynasts to Nero offered no check whatsoever on the king's imperial ventures in Armenia.

Vologaeses' hostages thus need to be seen in the context of Parthian domestic affairs, not just the Armenian conflict. Arsacid *internal* dissension supplied a crucial motive for the hostage surrender of 55 CE.⁶⁴ The conduit of hostage submission once again offered Parthia's ruler a way to deal with the challenges of dynastic succession through his Roman interlocutors across the Euphrates. Vologaeses' decision was motivated by a domestic Parthian political problem, one which the Arsacid king solved through the mechanisms that bound Rome and Parthia together. It remains unclear how much information Tacitus had about this moment in Parthian history, but his account advances a sound interpretation of the king's calculations against a backdrop of internal rebellion and civil war.

At this point, however, recent Parthian history would have demonstrated that Vologaeses had another problem to consider: the possible return of an Arsacid hostage from Roman territory. Sending hostages to Rome to consolidate power could be a useful option for a besieged Arsacid king, but the first half of the first century CE had shown that additional precautions were needed. As previous chapters have discussed, the political boundary between Rome and Parthia was not necessarily an obstacle for discontented members of the Parthian nobility who wanted to supplant the reigning Arsacid with another candidate. It was not enough to ship royal rivals to

a solution to the Armenian problem.

⁶⁴ Dąbrowa 1983: 137; Griffin 1984: 226; Heil 1997: 79; cf. Koestermann 1963–8: 3.251.

the court of the emperor in the west; their ability to usurp the Parthian throne needed to be anticipated and countered.

To ensure that Rome would become a permanent prison for seditious Arsacids, Vologaeses became the ultimate arbiter of what it meant to belong to Parthia's ruling dynasty. Towards trusted subordinates, he adopted a position of familial piety. Choice client-kingships were awarded to his brothers, and Vologaeses made much of his obligation to support them. But the king's devotion to the Arsacid family inside of Parthia had a tacit correlate: the Arsacids of Rome were, through rhetorical maneuvering, deprived of their royal heritage. Within the Parthian empire, Vologaeses promoted a vision of Arsacid harmony under the devout leadership of the king of kings. But there was no place in this vision for the Arsacid dynasts living at the court of the emperor across the Euphrates; they were written out of Arsacid history as Vologaeses reconfigured what it meant to belong to Parthia's ruling dynasty.

Vologaeses' approach to Arsacid family management was unique from the beginning of his reign. Both Tacitus and Josephus suggest that his accession to the throne involved cooperation and coordination with his brothers, an approach that distinguished the king's reign from those of his Arsacid predecessors. Josephus reports that Vologaeses "entrusted positions of power to two of his brothers from the same father: Media to the elder, Pacorus, and Armenia to the younger, Tiridates."⁶⁵ The comment that Pacorus and Tiridates were of the same father (ὁμοπάτριοι) as Vologaeses is valuable, since this makes clear that all three were members of the same Arsacid family circle. Tacitus says that Vologaeses "obtained rule through the acquiescence (*concessu*) of his brothers."⁶⁶ The sentence implies that Pacorus and Tiridates had

⁶⁵ Joseph. *AJ* 20.74: ὃς δὴ καὶ τοῖς ὁμοπατρίοις δυσὶν ἀδελφοῖς δυναστείας ἐπίστευσεν, Πακόρω μὲν τῷ καὶ πρεσβυτέρῳ τὴν Μήδων, Τιριδάτῃ δὲ τῷ νεωτέρῳ τὴν Ἀρμενίαν. Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1: *eodem mecum patre genitum*.

⁶⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 12.44.1: *concessu fratrum regnum adeptus*. Later passages strongly suggest that Tacitus has Pacorus and Tiridates in mind here: cf. *Ann.* 12.50.1, 15.2.1.

the ability to obstruct their brother's accession if they wanted to. Vologaeses appears to have reconciled them with his kingship by promising them powerful commands of their own.

Scholars have seen these appointments as indications of a sea change in first century CE Parthian politics which saw ever more provinces come under the direct control of the Arsacid family.⁶⁷ This extension of Arsacid power required cooperation rather than familial strife. Earlier kings had been brutal in their treatment of potential rivals from among their brothers and sons, often relying on assassination to clear the field of competitors. As noted previously, Arsacid kin-slaying as a tool of power consolidation is attested for many Parthian kings, though this approach carried the potential disadvantage of uniting the nobility against what they saw as an abuse of royal power.⁶⁸ The assignment of key provincial kingdoms to family members was a way of minimizing the destabilizing aspects of royal succession.

To be sure, there were precedents for Arsacid rule over Parthian client kingdoms. The Arsacid Mithradates ruled Media in 55 BCE under the kingship of his brother Orodes II, although it is not clear whether Orodes assigned him the position.⁶⁹ Artabanus II was the ruler of Media when the nobility asked him to replace the hostage-king Vonones, and it was to Media that he fled after losing an initial battle.⁷⁰ Perhaps because he recognized the strategic importance of the area, Artabanus assigned control of Media to Vonones II, who, depending on which reports in the ancient sources one chooses to follow, may have been his brother.⁷¹ Artabanus also made two attempts to place his sons on the throne of Armenia, although a combination of factors

⁶⁷ Olbrycht 1998a: 125–31; Hauser 2005: 196 n.114; 2006: 307; cf. Heil 2017: 270.

⁶⁸ On Arsacid dynastic murders, see the discussion in Chapter 3, p. 81 and n.8.

⁶⁹ Cass. Dio 39.56.2. Justin's account here (42.4.1–4) differs from Dio's on several points; for discussion, see Debevoise 1938: 76.

⁷⁰ Joseph. *AJ* 18.48.

⁷¹ Dąbrowa 1983: 102 and n.4, citing Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.4; followed by Sinisi 2012a: 16 n.27. But the family tree here is more difficult to disentangle than these studies suggest; see the discussion with references in Karras-Klapproth 1988: 60.

conspired to thwart this effort.⁷² It is debated whether Artabanus' efforts in Armenia represented a general plan for the wider institution of dynastic control or merely an ad hoc initiative.⁷³

But while these precedents should not be downplayed, Vologaeses was unique in the depth of his commitment to this strategy and in its successful implementation. His determination to see Tiridates installed in Armenia endured through nearly a decade of intermittent war with Rome, and the eventual settlement in 63 CE overturned – in Parthia's favor – a status quo that had remained basically unchanged since the reign of Phraates IV.⁷⁴ The Arsacid family's tenure over this kingdom would prove remarkably durable, outlasting the dynasty's preeminence even over the Iranian plateau itself. An Arsacid king would rule in Armenia until the mid-fourth century CE.⁷⁵

Vologaeses' deep concern with Arsacid family management is most vividly portrayed in a speech that Tacitus has him give to other Parthian ruling elites on the eve of the resumption of the Armenian war in 62 CE. Vologaeses delivers the oration at a meeting of his "council" (*concilium*) with his brother Tiridates placed prominently at his side.⁷⁶ If Tacitus' *concilium* can be compared with the Parthian συνέδριον mentioned by Strabo, the audience likely included Arsacid family members (including, most obviously, Tiridates), Parthian nobles, and perhaps a group of Magi and other religious elites, as well.⁷⁷ Indeed, Vologaeses' arguments seem crafted to appeal to such an assembly:

⁷² See Chapter 3, p. 108–14.

⁷³ See Kahrstedt 1950: 46–7 for the view that Artabanus tried to install Arsacids in Elymais and parts of Persis; but cf. Frye 1984: 274.

⁷⁴ For an interpretation of the Neronian settlement with Tiridates and Vologaeses as a loss for Rome, see Ziegler 1964: 75; Wolski 1987: 175; cf. Griffin 1984: 227. But other scholars see the settlement as more of a draw, e.g. Frézouls 1995: 494–8.

⁷⁵ On the long rule of the Arsacids in Armenia, see Lang 1983: 517–20; Pourshariati 2008: 43–7.

⁷⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1: *Igitur commotus his Vologaeses concilium vocat et proximum sibi Tiridaten constituit atque ita orditur.*

⁷⁷ Strabo 11.9.3: τῶν Παρθυαίων συνέδριόν φησιν εἶναι Ποσειδώνιος διττόν, τὸ μὲν συγγενῶν τὸ δὲ σοφῶν καὶ μάγων, ἐξ ὧν ἀμφοῖν τοὺς βασιλεῖς καθίστασθαι. Cf. Just. 41.1.2, 42.3.1 on the Parthian *senatus*. For discussion, see

*hunc ego eodem mecum patre genitum, cum mihi per aetatem summo nomine concessisset, in possessionem Armeniae deduxi, qui tertius potentiae gradus habetur (nam Medos Pacorus ante ceperat) videbarque contra vetera fratrum odia et certamin<a> familiae nostrae penates rite composuisse.*⁷⁸

This man, borne from the same father as I, since he yielded the highest title to me from considerations of age, I put in charge of Armenia, which in the rankings of power is reckoned third (for Pacorus had previously taken charge of the Medes). It looked like I had found a way to properly settle our family's house, as opposed to the brother-hatred and strife of former times.

The speech puts the Arsacid lineage of Vologaeses and Tiridates front and center. Tacitus seems to have understood that a claim to membership in the Arsacid family was stronger if it rested on paternity rather than maternity. Earlier in his account this prejudice underpinned the contempt of the citizens of Seleucia for the lineage of Artabanus II: that king is supposed to have deserved scorn since he was “an Arsacid on his mother’s side, but otherwise lowborn.”⁷⁹ By contrast, Vologaeses’ Arsacid legitimacy is unquestionable.

The king also suggests that his brother’s Arsacid status demands a position commensurate with his prestige. In Tacitus’ formulation, the Parthians reckon the kingship of Armenia the third most powerful position in their empire, after that of Media and the Arsacid king-of-kingship itself. Here it is useful to consider the flavor of the clause *cum mihi per aetatem summo nomine concessisset*. That is, did Vologaeses grant Armenia to Tiridates *although* Tiridates had yielded the supreme kingship to him, or *because* of that fact? Taking a long view of Parthian history, the answer would seem to be the former: Vologaeses’ bequest to his brother is an unexpected kindness shown by a superior to his subordinate, who does not necessarily

Lukonin 1983: 689–91; Hauser 2005: 187–99; see also the discussion in Chapter 3, p. 79–82. In the context of Persian kingship, a συγγενής was not a blood relative but a honorific title conferred on a close friend of the monarch: cf. Xen. *Cyr.* 1.4.27; 2.2.31; discussion in Wiesehöfer 2012a: 60–1; Llewelyn-Jones 2013: 30–5. For Poseidonius and his use by Strabo as a source for Parthian history, see Malitz 1983: 42–6, 282–97; Drijvers 1998: 287–8.

⁷⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1.

⁷⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.3: *simul probra in Artabanum fundebant, materna origine Arsaciden, cetera degenerem.*

deserve such an honor. Yet the other possibility deserves consideration, as well. If Tiridates received Armenia *because of* his acceptance of his brother's kingship, then the text suggests a contractual arrangement through which Vologaeses secured the acquiescence of his fellow Arsacid. Tiridates' loyalty to the regime of Vologaeses earned him the reward of a provincial kingdom of paramount importance. This reading of the passage would point to a Parthian king with a relatively new way of managing his family members, a considered and calculated system designed to minimize inter-Arsacid rivalry.⁸⁰

That indeed seems to be Tacitus' understanding. The historian has the Arsacid king acting in contradistinction to the family rivalries (*contra vetera fratrum odia et certamina*) that had torn at the fabric of the Parthian empire in earlier times.⁸¹ Tacitus' Vologaeses claims to be concerned with organizing the Arsacid family in an upright manner, an effort that seems to have both political and religious aspects. The king expresses his concern for his family's *Penates*, a word that probably means "house" or "home" here, but literally means a family's household gods.⁸² The adverb *rite* further evokes religious piety. It may be true that Tacitus' portrayal of a pious and dutiful Vologaeses is meant to throw Roman *vitia* (especially Nero's familial wickedness) into relief.⁸³ But the intertwining of political and religious concerns within the Arsacid family at this moment in history is echoed elsewhere. As discussed above, both Zoroastrian and Greco-Roman literature support the notion that Vologaeses and Tiridates cultivated public piety, associating the Arsacid family with Zoroastrianism to an extent that their predecessors had not.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Cf. Heil 1997: 61 n.21.

⁸¹ Ehrhardt 1998: 298; Heil 2017: 270.

⁸² *Penates* sometimes simply means "family" in Tacitus: see Tac. *Hist.* 1.15; *Ann.* 14.61.5. But the addition of *nostrae familiae* here requires a different translation.

⁸³ See Clark 2011: 213–4. On Tacitus' composition of the scene, see Heil 1997: 102.

⁸⁴ See above, p. 167–70.

The speech points to a discourse within Parthian politics about how an Arsacid ruler should act and behave. But such discourse was not purely a domestic matter; it was occasioned by the recurring interventions of the Arsacids of Rome in Parthian domestic politics. Arsacid dynastic rivalry was not wholly internal to the Parthian empire, since one branch of the family now lived in Roman territory. The return to Parthia of the Roman Arsacids Vonones, Phraates, Tiridates and Meherdates triggered large scale civil wars in the first half of the first century CE. The combatants of these wars fought, in part, over what Arsacid kingship stood for. Although Vologaeses is addressing a domestic audience about an ostensibly domestic topic, the dynastic conflict he alludes to has roots in both Parthia *and* Rome.

The interstate dimension of Arsacid family strife becomes clearer as Vologaeses proceeds to blame the Romans for obstructing his efforts to set the Arsacid territories to rights. After he mentions his attempt to end or at least alleviate Arsacid dynastic conflict, Vologaeses' next words are *prohibent Romani*, "the Romans hinder me."⁸⁵ Tacitus links an ostensibly domestic subject – Arsacid family rivalry – with the Parthian empire's long competition with the Romans for control of Armenia.⁸⁶ Here the primary obstacle to a properly arranged Arsacid family – and, by extension, a properly arranged Parthian state – is an external factor, not an internal one. The text presents Arsacid family management as a matter of both domestic and foreign affairs.

Tacitus' Vologaeses makes two rhetorical moves in this speech. First, the king declares his intention to minimize Arsacid family strife through cooperation with his closest kin. Second, he blames Rome for foiling his efforts, laying the blame for Arsacid dissension at the feet of the Roman emperor and his commanders. Arsacid harmony is thwarted by Roman intrusion. The

⁸⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.2: *prohibent Romani et pacem numquam ipsis prospere laccessitam nunc quoque in exitium suum abrumpunt.*

⁸⁶ Cf. Gilmartin 1973: 606: Vologaeses "[gives] the impression that foreigners have unwarrantably interfered with his purely domestic affairs."

implicit dichotomy between Arsacid and Roman effectively erases the branch of the Parthian royal family that lived in Roman territory – some of whom Vologaeses himself had sent away.

A War Ended and a Bridge Destroyed, 62/3 CE

A few years after the resumption of hostilities in Armenia, Vologaeses won an important tactical victory at Rhandeia, trapping Corbulo's colleague Paetus in an unfavorable position. Paetus agreed to a temporary truce in order to extract his soldiers and withdrew from Armenia in humiliation.⁸⁷ But Corbulo fought back, and his successes were enough to bring Vologaeses to the negotiating table. This time the king proved ready to accept Nero's condition for peace: the Romans would recognize Tiridates as king of Armenia provided that he journeyed to Rome to receive his crown from Nero.⁸⁸ Hostages – this time, both Parthian *and* Roman – played a key role at the conference where this agreement was finally settled once and for all.

In his account of the war's final negotiations, Tacitus foregrounds Corbulo's knowledge of Parthian domestic politics and his ability to use it to gain concessions.⁸⁹ Corbulo demonstrates an awareness that Vologaeses cannot afford to wage war in Armenia indefinitely with internal enemies ready to strike:

*scire, quantum intus discordiarum, quamque indomitas et praeferoces nationes
regeret: contra imperatori suo immotam ubique pacem et unum id bellum esse.*⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.14.1; 15.15.2; 16.2.3; Cass. Dio 62.21.1–4. This withdrawal gives Tacitus an occasion to hearken back to similar episodes of Roman military disgrace, namely the disaster of the Caudine Forks (321 BCE) and the defeat of Hostilius Mancinus at Numantia (137 BCE). On the Caudine Forks, see Liv. 9.1–6; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 11.24.5. For Numantia, see Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 5–7; App. *Hisp.* 80. Tacitus reports rumors that the army had been sent under the yoke and that Paetus had sworn an oath that no Roman would enter Armenia until word returned from Nero. But he admits that the latter accusation may have been fabricated by Corbulo, whose commentaries were one of his sources: cf. Ehrhardt 1998: 298. Dio reports Paetus' outright abandonment of Armenia as fact.

⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.24.2. Corbulo had proposed this solution years earlier (Tac. *Ann.* 13.37.5), but it was not immediately accepted; cf. Koestermann 1963–8: 3.308.

⁸⁹ Cf. Ziegler 1964: 68.

⁹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 15.27.2.

He knew⁹¹ how much internal disturbance there was, and how unruly and insolent the people he [sc. Vologaeses] ruled were; but on the other side his emperor had undisturbed peace everywhere, and this war was his only one.

The general no doubt remembered that Vologaeses' withdrawal from Armenia in 54 CE was due to the revolt of an Arsacid contender for the throne, probably with the support of the populace of Seleucia. He had seen the king's attention to the western frontier delayed for several years because of a rebellion in Hyrcania – indeed, he had communicated and to a certain extent even coordinated with the rebels.⁹² Your hold on power within Parthia is tenuous, Corbulo says in effect; continuing the war will make it more tenuous. Meanwhile Nero's hold on power is secure. This is not mere posturing on Corbulo's part; it is Tacitus' view, as well.⁹³

There may also be a veiled threat behind Corbulo's words. Just a few years before these negotiations took place, the general had received an unspecified number of “the noblest of the Arsacidae” as hostages.⁹⁴ As discussed above, it is unlikely that Corbulo understood the *domestic* political significance of this hostage exchange at the time. But perhaps his knowledge of Parthian internal politics had deepened in the intervening years. The hostages themselves were surely a key source of information – who knew more than they about Vologaeses' vulnerability?⁹⁵ Moreover, the general had been in close communication with the Hyrcanians during their revolt. By 63 CE, Corbulo may have understood how domestic fragility in Parthia could be exploited for Roman advantage. By making a show of his knowledge of Parthian internal politics at the

⁹¹ There has been some debate as to whether the subject of *scire* in this quotation is Corbulo or Vologaeses: see Koestermann 1963–8: 4.213. Even if there is a clear answer, though, the significance of the sentence for the present purposes remains the same: Corbulo considers himself well-informed about the domestic political situation within the Parthian empire, and he wants Vologaeses to know the extent of his knowledge.

⁹² Tac. *Ann.* 14.25.2; cf. Dąbrowa 1984; Olbrycht 1998c: 180–3.

⁹³ See Tac. *Ann.* 15.46.2, where the author comments on the remarkable absence of war throughout the empire.

⁹⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.1; see above, p. 173.

⁹⁵ Pliny (*HN* 6.23, 40) remarks explicitly that Corbulo's campaigns and the hostages that they produced had furnished important new sources of information about Cappadocia, Armenia, and the lands to the east. This new insight surely applied to other branches of knowledge than geography: Matthews 1989a: 40.

negotiations, Corbulo was perhaps reminding the king that Rome now had an enlarged stable of Arsacids who might return to Parthia as his replacement. Vologaeses may have looked back on his predecessor Artabanus; he too had been fighting in Armenia when the appearance of the hostage-king Tiridates cost him not only the war, but very nearly his throne, as well.

It is difficult to say exactly why Vologaeses decided to make peace now on a condition he had rejected before.⁹⁶ One possible explanation, though, is that Corbulo's veiled threat of fomenting internal dissension in Parthia had hit a nerve. The tactical Parthian victory at Rhandaia must have boosted Vologaeses' prestige, but this gain would soon be lost if Vologaeses departed Armenia with a powerful Roman army once again laying waste to Tiridates' kingdom. Yet remaining in Armenia carried risks, as well. Vologaeses' own experience had taught him that internal foes were more likely to rear their heads when their king was preoccupied on the empire's western front. And if domestic opposition in Parthia strengthened in his absence, his enemies might find the Romans close at hand with a suitable Arsacid replacement.

In short, the king's willingness to compromise in 63 CE shows the intimate connections between Parthian domestic politics and Roman-Parthian relations – connections that were forged in large part through hostageship. Vologaeses knew that surrendering rival Arsacids to the Romans was a risky proposition, because it turned a domestic problem – Arsacid family rivalry – into an interstate problem. The surrender of these Arsacids may have offered the king some relief from the internal disorders that had plagued his reign during the mid-50s CE, but now the bill for this temporary stopgap was coming due. If Vologaeses persisted in his military efforts in Armenia, he ran the risk of coordination between his domestic and foreign enemies –

⁹⁶ The condition was Tiridates' "acceptance" of the kingdom from Nero in person; see further Chapter 7, p. 249–62.

coordination that might center on the hostages that the king himself had delivered up to the Romans.

The importance of hostages to the final conference between Corbulo and Tiridates is highlighted in the accounts of both Tacitus and Dio. For the first time in a Roman-Parthian context, important dignitaries from the Roman army served, if only temporarily, as hostages among the Parthians. Before the talks began, the knight Tiberius Alexander and Corbulo's stepson Annius Vinicianus entered the Parthian camp "as a compliment to Tiridates and in order that, in view of so great a pledge, he need fear no trap."⁹⁷ Tacitus calls the two Romans a *pignus*, the same word Augustus uses in the *Res Gestae* to describe the sons of Phraates IV.⁹⁸ But both Alexander and Vinicianus were almost certainly released as soon as the talks ended. Hostages as safeguards against treachery in battlefield negotiations are attested in other contexts; the expectation seems to have been that such exchanges were temporary.⁹⁹ That was clearly the case here: Annius is found back with Corbulo after the conclusion of the peace, and Tiberius Alexander later became prefect of Egypt in 66 CE.¹⁰⁰

On this occasion the Parthians gave hostages, as well, although the duration of their captivity is more difficult to establish. After the conference but before embarking on his journey to Rome Tiridates gave Corbulo his daughter as a hostage.¹⁰¹ This measure may also have been provisional, her captivity merely an assurance that her father would make good on his promise to

⁹⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.28.3: *die pacta Tiberius Alexander illustris eques Romanus, minister bello datus, et Vini[c]ianum Annium, gener Corbulonis, nondum senatoria aetate et pro legato quintae legionis impositus, in castra Tiridatis venire, honor[e] eius ac ne metueret insidias tali pignore.*

⁹⁸ *Mon. Anc.* 32.2.

⁹⁹ Elbern 1990: 100, 140 (section 4, "Waffenstillstandsverträge").

¹⁰⁰ Annius after the conclusion of the conference: Cass. Dio 62.23.6; see also Griffin 1984: 178. Tiberius Alexander's later prefecture in Egypt: Joseph. *BJ* 2.309; cf. Turner 1954: 59.

¹⁰¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.30.2: *obsidem interea filiam tradit litterasque supplices ad Neronem.* Cf. Koestermann 1963–8: 4.220; Champlin 2003: 222.

journey to Rome.¹⁰² A brief reference in Dio has both the Adiabeanian king Monobazus and Vologaeses himself submitting further hostages after the conclusion of Tiridates' negotiations with Corbulo.¹⁰³ This report does not accord well with Tacitus' account, which seems to put Vologaeses elsewhere at this point in time.¹⁰⁴ But Dio has Tiridates bringing "not just his own children, but also those of Vologaeses, Pacorus, and Monobazus" on his visit to Rome in 66 CE, so it may be possible to reconcile the two passages.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the hostages from the conference at Rhandaia seem to have been temporary measures rather than long term arrangements. Dio reports a parley between Corbulo and the Parthian noble Monaeses that took place at the Euphrates river shortly before the war's end. In many respects the meeting resembled earlier Roman-Parthian conferences, but this time there was one crucial difference:

ὁ δὲ Οὐολόγαισος Μοναίσην πρὸς Κορβούλωνα πέμψας ἠξίωσεν αὐτὸν τὸ ἔρυμα τὸ ἐν τῇ Μεσοποταμίᾳ ἐκλιπεῖν: καὶ διελέχθησαν ἐκεῖνοι πολλὰ ἀλλήλοις ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ τοῦ Εὐφράτου γεφύρα, **τὸ μέσον αὐτῆς λύσαντες.**¹⁰⁶

Vologaeses, having sent Monaeses to Corbulo, thought it right that he abandon the fort in Mesopotamia. So these men spoke long in conversation with one another on a bridge over the Euphrates, **having first destroyed its middle section.**

The precautionary measure of removing the bridge's middle may not have seemed significant to Corbulo or Monaeses, but it is nonetheless an apt metaphor for the deepening division between Rome and Parthia that took place under Vologaeses' reign.¹⁰⁷ Earlier pontoons over the Euphrates had facilitated the movement of Arsacid hostages from east to west and back again.

¹⁰² Thus Elbern 1990: 100 n.24.

¹⁰³ Cass. Dio 62.23.4.

¹⁰⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.31 has Vologaeses at Ecbatana; it is unlikely the king himself was present at the conference.

¹⁰⁵ Cass. Dio 63.1.2: καὶ ὁ Τηριδάτης ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην, **οὐχ ὅτι τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ παῖδας ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς τοῦ Οὐολογαίου τοῦ τε Πακόρου καὶ τοῦ Μονοβάζου ἄγων**, ἀνήχθη. For discussion, see Heil 1997: 127–8; cf. Chapter 7, p. 250–2.

¹⁰⁶ Cass. Dio 62.22.2–3.

¹⁰⁷ For another bridge with a destroyed middle, for instance, see Tac. *Hist.* 5.26 with Ziegler 1964: 71 n.200.

These hostages had forged a connection between the two empires that aligned Roman and Parthian elites in constellations that transcended imperial boundaries. From c. 30 BCE to 63 CE, the history of the Arsacid family was written on both sides of the Euphrates.

But now the bridge was cut. After the settlement of 63 CE Arsacid hostages vanish from the Greco-Roman literary sources; their role at the center of the Roman-Parthian relationship ends. The driving force behind this development was the successful effort by the opponents of the Arsacid hostage-kings – Vologaeses last and most of all – to redefine Arsacid kingship on their own terms. There were no doubt several hostages remaining at the Roman court, but Parthian political ideology had evolved in such a way as to render them ineligible for the Arsacid throne. Vologaeses had taken control of the discourse surrounding the definition of an Arsacid. By doing so, he shut the door on those of his kin who dwelt across the Euphrates.

Conclusion

Several sources from within the Parthian empire itself suggest that Parthian political ideology was in transition in the first half of the first century CE. As this period wore on, the Arsacid kings increasingly rooted their power in Iranian traditions as the legacy of the Greek east began to fade away. The Parthian language grew in importance. New appeals to the Achaemenid “heritage” of the Arsacids seem to have emerged. And Zoroastrianism took on a new importance under Vologaeses, who made a point of collecting and codifying the religion’s central texts. While no Arsacid initiative ever categorically rejected the Greek language and culture, it is possible that this “Iranian revival” among the Arsacids happened at the expense of the kingdom’s connections to its Hellenistic past. Artabanus dropped the title *philhellen* from his coins; Vologaeses wrote it in illegible and fossilized Greek that was devoid of meaning.

Why did these changes happen now, during the early and middle first century CE? The paucity of indigenous Parthian evidence leaves much unclear, but it seems that the face of Parthian kingship changed as a reaction against the destabilizing influence of the Arsacids of Rome. The hostage-kings who returned from captivity had enemies within the Parthian empire. These enemies argued that the former hostages had become puppets of their hosts, Romanized to the point of alienation from their Arsacid heritage, and unfit to rule the kingdom of the Parthians. Such rhetoric is only preserved in historiographical sources from the Roman Mediterranean, and authors like Tacitus and Josephus drew heavily on Greco-Roman literary conventions to craft these parts of their narratives. Still, the arguments that they assign to Parthians like Vologaeses make sense in the mouths of rulers who needed to guard against Arsacid claimants returning from Roman territory. While the Roman and Iranian sources speak to very different processes and time-scales, the bodies of evidence from east and west do tell a story that hangs together – a story of Roman infiltration of the Arsacid royal house, and the Parthian counter-reaction that such encroachment spurred.

The Arsacids of Rome thus constitute a small but distinct part of the broader history of Parthia's "Iranian revival" during this period. The Arsacid kings of the first century CE – Vologaeses most of all – may have turned towards Iranian traditions in order to distinguish their brand of Arsacid power from the "Romanized" example that hostage-kings represented. A true Arsacid would now root his legitimacy in sources of power that divided and differentiated Parthia from its imperial peer to the west. The Parthian language, the legacy of the Achaemenids, the maintenance of Zoroastrian traditions: in contrast to the Greek and Hellenistic heritage of the empire, these traditions highlighted Parthia's difference from Rome. That difference made the Iranian revival a valuable tool for monarchs who needed to distinguish themselves from their kin

residing across the Euphrates in Rome. In an important sense, it took a rejection of the Romanized Arsacid to invent the Iranian one.

CHAPTER 6

ARSACID HOSTAGES IN AUGUSTAN ROME

The first Arsacid hostages arrived in Rome at a time of change. The civil wars of the 40s and 30s BCE among Rome's various military strongmen had exposed the Republican system of government as untenable. As the ultimate victor of these contests, Augustus took steps to restructure Roman power. His greatest challenge was the implementation of reforms on the one hand while maintaining the appearance of continuity with Republican traditions on the other. Change was needed, but so was discretion in bringing it about.

This tension was evident not least in the crafting of Parthian policy. Crassus' defeat at Carrhae remained a stain on Roman honor, and Julius Caesar was on the verge of setting out for Parthia when he fell to the daggers of the conspirators.¹ Octavian was heir to a massive campaign against the Arsacid kingdom, and the literature of the Augustan period reveals an expectation that he would make good on his inheritance.² But war with Parthia never came. What happened instead was a reconfiguration of the place of the Arsacid kingdom in Roman imperial ideology.

Several commentators have described this shift as an Augustan policy that divided the world into Parthian and Roman spheres of influence in the east and west – a *divisio orbis*, to borrow a phrase from Justin's epitome of Trogus.³ Such an ideology allowed Augustus to forego a campaign of conquest against Parthia by relegating the Arsacid kingdom to a brutal, barbarous, and decadent world over which Roman dominion was both impossible and undesirable – a world

¹ For the ignominy of Carrhae, see Timpe 1962: 127–9 and n.144; Lerouge 2007: 93–8; Traina 2011: 212–4. On Caesar's Parthian expedition, see McDermott 1982/3; Malitz 1984; Strauss 2015: 54–6.

² For the anticipation of a Parthian campaign in Augustan literature, see Verg. *Georg.* 3.30–3; Hor. *Carm.* 2.9.21–2; 3.2.1–4; 3.3.43–4; 3.5.1–4; Prop. 3.4.5–9; 4.6.75–84; Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.177–81.

³ Just. 41.1.1. The phrase is closely echoed in other Latin authors; see e.g. Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.2 and Manil. 4.674–5. For scholarly discussions of the *divisio orbis*, see esp. Sonnabend 1986; Lerouge 2007; Wiesehöfer 2010; Shayegan 2011: 334–40.

better kept at bay rather than ruled directly. This idea coexisted uneasily with older, more deeply ingrained expansionist instincts that were the inheritance of the late Republic. But the idea that the Parthian kingdom belonged outside of Roman imperial space supported a policy of accommodation with the Arsacid kings that held firm for most of the first century CE.

Scholars have described the *divisio orbis* as a consequence of Rome's insularity and geographical separation from Parthia: the remoteness and inaccessibility of the Arsacid kingdom is said to have supported its characterization as an exotic, backward, and uncivilized realm.⁴ As this chapter will demonstrate, however, this new ideology was also closely bound up with Parthia's submission of royal hostages to Rome's first emperor. The presence of Arsacid dynasts at the center of the Roman political arena distinctly shaped how the Parthian east was conceived. As the imperial period began, the Augustan view of the Arsacid kingdom stemmed not only from Parthia's geographical separation from the heart of Roman power; it was equally a result of the connection that hostage transfer had established between the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds.

For the Augustan regime, Arsacid hostages were a valuable commodity because they allowed the emperor to depict Rome's relationship with Parthia as a matter of both continuity and change. Continuity came from the physical captivity of the Arsacids within the city of Rome, where they could serve as symbols of Parthian subjection to the Augustan imperial order. Importantly, they were symbols that a Roman audience accustomed to the militaristic traditions of the late Republic could understand. As with hostages from Spain, Egypt, or Thrace, the imprisonment of the Arsacids stood in for the political subjugation of the kingdom their family ruled – even if the realities of power differed from Augustan representations.

⁴ In addition to the literature cited above (n.3), see Schneider 1998: 106–16; Isaac 2004: 375–6.

But the fact of Parthian autonomy and Augustus' eschewal of a campaign of conquest called for certain departures from Republican precedents. Here hostages were useful again. Captive Arsacids were indispensable tools for the characterization of the Parthians as the inhabitants of a foreign and non-Roman world. As discussed below, they were exhibited in the city of Rome as though they were the creatures of a distant land, bizarre curiosities from territories far beyond the reach of Roman power. If their presence in Rome represented Parthian subservience, their public appearances highlighted the remoteness and unfamiliarity of the Arsacid realm – an idea that found expression in the literature, monuments, and art of Augustan Rome.

The following discussion proceeds in three sections. First, it establishes how the Arsacid kingdom presented Augustus with a problem as he consolidated power in the wake of his victory at Actium. Second, it surveys the place of the Arsacid kingdom in Roman imperial ideology as reflected in the literary and material evidence of the Augustan period. Third, it examines the role that Arsacid hostages played in Augustus' implementation of the *divisio orbis* to show how Roman political ideology in the Parthian east was shaped, in part, by face to face encounters with Arsacid dynasts living in the center of Roman power.

Crassus' Ghost

Augustus' Parthian problem began with Crassus. When the triumvir perished at Carrhae along with the majority of his army in 53 BCE, he left a stain on Roman honor that succeeding generations felt a duty to remove. The civil war between Caesar and Pompey distracted from this enterprise for most of the 40s BCE. Writing at the end of the Julio-Claudian period under Nero, Lucan would castigate Caesar and Pompey for fighting each other while “the shade of Crassus

wandered unavenged.”⁵ Justin explains that the Parthians supported Pompey in that war partly because Crassus’ son Marcus fought for Caesar; the Parthians supposedly feared that “he would be his father’s avenger in the event of a Caesarian victory.”⁶ There is some evidence for Parthian participation in these wars, though it was never enough to tip the scales of battle.⁷ Crassus’ unavenged death was part of Caesar’s invective against Metellus Scipio for committing the Syrian legions to the civil war instead of action against the Parthians.⁸ Revenge may or may not have been one of Caesar’s actual motives for the Parthian campaign he was planning at the time of his death, but it did figure prominently in his public justifications for the initiative.⁹

Caesar’s assassination plunged the Roman world into a new round of civil wars, but Crassus was not forgotten. Horace bemoaned that the Romans had fought each other instead of foreign enemies, the Parthians above all.¹⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Horace never mentions that he himself had fought alongside Parthian troops against the Caesarians.¹¹ So had Quintus Labienus, whose large scale invasion of Roman territory in conjunction with the Arsacid prince Pacorus Horace apparently remembered as a purely Parthian campaign.¹² Mark Antony’s deputy Ventidius defeated this incursion and celebrated a triumph over the Parthians in 38/7 BCE, but the victory evidently did not erase the need for vengeance.¹³

⁵ Luc. 1.11: *umbraque erraret Crassus inulta*.

⁶ Just. 42.4.6: *quem ultorem patris uictore Caesare futurum deliberabant*.

⁷ On Parthian military involvement in this war see Cic. *Att.* 14.9; Cass. Dio 47.27; App. *B Civ.* 4.58. Pompey may have considered fleeing to Parthia after his loss at Pharsalus, though the ancient authors do not agree on this point: see Plut. *Pomp.* 76.4–6; App. *B Civ.* 2.83; Vell. Pat. 2.53.1; Cass. Dio 41.55.4, 42.2.5; Caes. *B Civ.* 3.82.5; cf. Luc. 8.202–455. For discussion of this possibility, see Gelzer 1959: 241; Seager 2002: 167–8.

⁸ Caes. *B Civ.* 3.31.3; see the discussion in Curran 2007: 40.

⁹ Malitz 1984; Wiesehöfer 2012b: 204.

¹⁰ Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.21–4, 51–2; 1.12.53–4; 1.35.29–40; 2.1.29–32; 3.2.1–4; 3.3.44; 3.6.9–12.

¹¹ Parthians at Philippi with Horace: App. *B Civ.* 4.59, 63, 88, 99, 133.

¹² On Labienus see Curran 2007; Lerouge-Cohen 2010; Biedermann / Dumke 2014. An inscription from the time of the second triumvirate (after 39 BCE) remembers Labienus’ campaign as *ληστέια*, or brigandage: Sherk 1969: 308–9 (no. 59 line 10). Horace on Pacorus: *Carm.* 3.6.9–12.

¹³ Sumi 2005: 200–3; Strugnell 2006; Lerouge-Cohen 2010: 177; Traina 2011: 212; cf. Seaver 1952.

Indeed, although several authors say that Ventidius' victories were adequate recompense for Carrhae, the motif of vengeance for Crassus appears frequently in Augustan literature.¹⁴ "Avenge Crassus and his downfall!" Propertius urges in a poem most likely published in 22/1 BCE, shortly before Augustus' eastern settlement in 19.¹⁵ The persistence of this exhortation must be partly attributable to Augustus himself, who in the *Res Gestae* explicitly framed his recovery of Rome's standards and prisoners from Phraates IV in 20/19 BCE as a matter of vengeance with the words "I moreover restored these standards to the inner shrine that is in the temple of Mars the Avenger."¹⁶ Augustus originally vowed to erect this temple in 42 BCE upon the fulfillment of his mission to bring Julius Caesar's assassins to justice, but over time the theme of victory over Parthia invested the building with a new significance.¹⁷ Coins further spread the message of vengeance. Several denarii types from 19/8 BCE showed the standards installed in a shrine, sometimes held by a statue of Mars and with the legend *MARTIS ULTORIS* (Fig. 4).

¹⁴ Plut. *Ant.* 34.2; Flor. 2.19.7; Cass. Dio 49.20.1; cf. Eutrop. *Brev.* 7.5. Similar is Tac. *Germ.* 37. Dio is the only author to assign this view to Ventidius' contemporaries, however.

¹⁵ Prop. 3.4.5–9: *Crassos clademque piate*. On the date of the third book of Propertius, see Newman 2006: 330; Heyworth / Morwood 2011: 44.

¹⁶ *Mon. Anc.* 29: *Ea autem signa in penetráli, quod est in templo Martis Vltoris, reposui*. Augustus claimed that he had recovered not just Crassus' standards but also those lost by Decidius Saxa and Antony.

¹⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 29.2; cf. Cass. Dio 54.8.3. See the discussion in Dowling 2006: 156–8; Beckmann 2016: 126–36.



Fig. 4: Denarius of Augustus, 19/8 BCE. *RIC* 1 39b. Photo courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.; available online at <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=216124>.

“The temple has rightly been given to the god, as has the name of avenger twice over,” Ovid says. He adds that Crassus’ defeat had remained unavenged before Augustus’ recovery of the standards.¹⁸ The view that Augustus’ dealings with Phraates IV had obtained satisfaction for Rome is well represented in a number of other authors.¹⁹

But in spite of Augustus’ apparent success in restoring Roman honor and settling the score of Carrhae, calls for revenge against the Parthians persisted well after the standards of Crassus returned to Rome. In the run-up to Gaius Caesar’s campaign in 2 BCE, Ovid proclaims that “an avenger is at hand” to right the wrongs suffered by Crassus and his standards.²⁰ In a book of poetry published around 16/5 BCE Propertius conceives of the eastern settlement as the beginning of revenge against Parthia, not its culmination:

*hic referat sero confessum foedere Parthum:
“reddat signa Remi, mox dabit ipse sua:
siue aliquid pharetris Augustus parcat Eois,*

¹⁸ See Ov. *Fast.* 5.550–96, esp. 5.595 (*rite deo templumque datum nomenque bis ulto*) and 5.583–4 (*addiderant animos Crassorum funera genti | cum periit miles signaque duxque simul*). A similar expression is found in Ov. *Trist.* 227–8: *nunc porrigit arcus | Parthus eques timida captaque signa manu*.

¹⁹ Hor. *Carm.* 4.15.6–9 (where the recovery of the standards is connected to the closing of the Temple of Janus); *Epist.* 1.12.27–8; 1.18.56; 2.1.256; *Vell. Pat.* 2.91.1; *Just.* 42.5.11–2. Virgil hints at this idea as well in his statement that “the Euphrates now runs with quieter waves” (*Aen.* 8.726: *Euphrates ibat iam mollior undis*; cf. *Aen.* 7.601–6). But note that Dio (54.8.1–3) expresses skepticism about the value of recovering the standards.

²⁰ Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.179–81: *Crassi gaudete sepulti | Signaque barbaricas non bene passa manus | Ultor adest*.

*differat in pueros ista tropaea suos.
gaude, Crasse, nigras si quid sapis inter harenas:
ire per Euphraten ad tua busta licet.*²¹

Let this [poet] tell of the Parthian who conceded to the recent treaty: “Let him give back the standards of Remus – soon he’ll have to hand over his own. Or, if Augustus decides to spare the quivers of the east, let him set aside those trophies for his sons. Rejoice, Crassus, if you know of this, buried among the black sand: we’ll cross the Euphrates to your ashes.”

Propertius urged a campaign of vengeance against Parthia before the return of the standards in 20/19 BCE, and he continued to advocate for it afterwards. In this passage it is not enough that Rome has recovered its own standards: the Parthians should give up their own. The poet expects the emperor himself to mount a campaign to this end, though he concedes that Augustus might delegate this task to one of his heirs. Only the successful prosecution of such a war seems able to obtain true revenge for the death of Crassus, whom the poet addresses directly.

The last line of this passage may hint at one reason for the tenacity of the revenge motif in Roman thinking about the Parthian east: avenging Crassus was as much about extending Roman power into Parthia as it was about recovering the standards and prisoners that he had lost in defeat. Propertius imagines a future campaign that crosses the Euphrates (*ire per Euphraten ad tua busta licet*). Other poets spoke in such terms, as well, both before and after the eastern settlement. As early as the completion of the *Georgics* in 29 BCE, Virgil looked forward to Augustan wars of conquest against foreign peoples, the Parthians included.²² Horace too expresses the hope that the Parthians will be added to the empire.²³ And in anticipation of Gaius Caesar’s eastern campaign, Ovid rejoices that “Caesar is preparing to add what is lacking to the conquered world.”²⁴ Such aspiration contrasted with the agreement that Augustus and Phraates

²¹ Prop. 4.6.75–84. On the dating of Propertius’ fourth book, see Günther 2006: 354.

²² Verg. *Georg.* 3.30–3. On the completion of the *Georgics* by 29 BCE, see Thomas 1988: 1; Morgan 1999: 4–5.

²³ Hor. *Carm.* 2.9.21–2; 3.2.1–4; 3.3.43–4; 3.5.1–4; cf. Nabel 2015: 318–21.

²⁴ Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.177–8: *Ecce, parat Caesar domito quod defuit orbi | Addere.*

IV concluded in 20/19 BCE, which recognized the areas to the east of the Euphrates as Parthian territory. Gaius' campaign had the same outcome. Augustus had brought the Romans peace in the Parthian east, but he did not bring them victory, and that – at least in the eyes of some – was what was required to carry out the work of an *ultor*.

But the professed expectation of the poets for new Parthian conquests must have inevitably run up against the plain fact that their emperor was either unable or unwilling to attempt them. Augustus' aversion to an invasion of the Arsacid kingdom was rooted in a number of motives both internal and external. Some ancient observers attributed his military restraint to a general distaste for imperial expansion and a desire to maintain peace wherever possible.²⁵ But this view is hard to square with the facts: Augustus did wage wars of territorial acquisition, especially in Spain, and he did not shy away from celebrating these achievement in his public proclamations, the *Res Gestae* not least.²⁶ The defeats of earlier Roman commanders and the distinct possibility of failure surely were an important consideration; the Parthian army had proven to be a deadly foe in its own territory.²⁷ But considerations arising from domestic politics played a part, too. Augustus could not have forgotten that his adoptive father had been killed while planning a Parthian campaign that was unpopular among the *optimates* – a class of men that Augustus needed to reconcile with his new imperial order rather than estrange from it.²⁸

The role of Parthia in Roman imperial ideology during the reign of Augustus was therefore a contentious one that elicited different prescriptions for and descriptions of Roman action in the east. These tensions did not manifest in any simple or dichotomous configuration:

²⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 21.2; Cass. Dio 53.10.4; 54.9.1.

²⁶ Brunt 1963: 171–6; Ober 1982: 317–8; Cornell 1993: 141–2.

²⁷ Campbell 1993: 217–9; cf. Cass. Dio 40.15.4–5 and Gratt. *Cyn.* 508–9 (on Parthian horses): *et Parthis inter sua mollia rura | mansit honor*.

²⁸ See esp. Timpe 1962.

the matter did not come down to the poets against the emperor, the emperor against the senatorial elite, or the ruling class against the populace. Incompatible and conflicting statements abound, even within the works of a single author. Rome needed to reclaim its honor from Parthia; Rome had humbled Parthia; Crassus' ghost wandered on the far bank of the Euphrates; Crassus had been avenged – all these sentiments seem to have been simultaneously present in Augustan Rome. The emperor's challenge was to negotiate between and among these various ideas: his Parthian policy had to be all things to all men.

The *Divisio Orbis*

When the unstoppable force of Roman imperialism met the immovable object of the Arsacid kingdom, the result was predictably paradoxical: the Parthian empire was “conquered” by Rome, at least symbolically, while remaining whole, inviolate, and outside of Roman control. Two contradictory ideas coexisted uneasily. The first was that Parthia was a power of comparable size and strength to that of Rome and represented a part of the earth not under Roman control. The second was that the Roman world had demonstrated its superiority to the Parthian one: the Parthians were more or less peers, but the Romans liked to think “less” rather than “more.”

The view that Rome and Parthia had divided the world between them is best exemplified by a key sentence in Justin's epitome of the Augustan author Pompeius Trogus.

*Parthi, penes quos velut divisione orbis cum Romanis facta nunc Orientis imperium est, Scytharum exules fuere.*²⁹

The Parthians, in whose hands the power of the east now rests, having divided the world with the Romans, as it were, were Scythian exiles.

²⁹ Just. 41.1.1.

Although Justin's text is at best an abridgement and at worst a distortion of Trogu's original account, it seems reasonable to assume that the above passage is a faithful reproduction.³⁰ The word *nunc* suggests that this status quo is a relatively recent development, which would make sense for Trogu's lifetime, but not Justin's.³¹ The quotation shows first that the extent of Parthia's power was held to be comparable to Rome's, and second that Parthia and Rome were both *imperia* and thus similar political formations. The latter point distinguished the Parthians from, for instance, the Germans – another people who, the Romans eventually realized, could not be completely conquered.³²

Parthia is described in similar language in the *Astronomica* of Marcus Manilius, a poet and astrologer who wrote under Augustus, although parts of the work may date to the reign of Tiberius.³³ In his survey of the lands that belong to Asia, Manilius includes “the world of the Parthians, another world indeed.”³⁴ After reviewing the major rivers that belong to the continent, the poet reprises this conception of Arsacid territory, this time emphasizing the infinite variety of eastern peoples who inhabit this world.³⁵ This language is echoed closely by later authors. Lucan's Pompey calls the Parthian kingdom “the eastern world,” adding that “the Euphrates divides the vast world with its waters.”³⁶ Shortly thereafter Pompey echoes Manilius almost

³⁰ Sonnabend 1986: 202; Lerouge 2007: 175.

³¹ Efforts to date Justin range from the second through the fifth centuries CE: see Syme 1988; Yardley / Heckl 1997: 8–14; Bartlett 2014: 264–6. The idea that Just. 41.1.1 could not be written by an author who lived in the time of the Sasanians is unconvincing. An author like Ammianus, for instance, could continue to use the designation “Parthian” for the Sasanians well into the fourth century: Drijvers 1999: 195. Yardley (Yardley / Heckl 1997: 11) contends that Justin is unlikely to be guilty of this, since he refers to both “Parthians” and “Persians;” but so too does Ammianus.

³² Cf. Tac. *Germ.* 37.3–4: “German freedom is truly more dangerous than the rule of an Arsacid” (*quippe regno Arsacis acrior est Germanorum libertas*).

³³ On the date of Manilius, which depends largely on his reference (1.898–903) to the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, see Volk 2009: 1; 2011: 4–5. On connections between Manilius' text and the reign of Augustus, see Abery 2011.

³⁴ Manil. 4.674–5: *Parthique vel orbis | alter*. The placement of *alter* at the beginning of the next line emphasizes that the Parthian world is a different and separate one.

³⁵ Manil. 4.802–5.

³⁶ Luc. 8.289–90: *quare agite Eoum, comites, properemus in orbem. | dividit Euphrates ingentem gurgite mundum*.

directly, calling Parthia an *alius orbis*.³⁷ Tacitus employs the same phrase in his description of the Arsacid hostage Vonones' release from Roman custody.³⁸

Parthia was therefore different and separate from the Roman world, but as an empire it was also something approaching a peer or an equal. For Velleius Paterculus, a historian who knew the eastern frontier well from his service with Gaius Caesar, the Arsacids were the last of the “independent” or “sovereign” kings left after the Roman defeat of Mithradates VI Eupator.³⁹ Velleius describes the Euphrates conference between Gaius Caesar and Phraataces in 2 BCE as a meeting of “the two most illustrious leaders of their empires and of men.”⁴⁰ Strabo, another contemporary of Augustus, calls the Arsacids the “rivals” (ἀντίπαλοι) of the Romans.⁴¹ The term indicates rough parity; Parthia is not only a rival, but a rival of comparable size and strength.⁴² Parthia is moreover an ἀρχή, an empire, a polity cut from the same cloth as Rome. Similar statements are found in later authors. For Pliny, Rome and Parthia were “the two greatest empires.”⁴³ For Josephus, they were “the two greatest empires under the sun.”⁴⁴ Although Tacitus' view in the *Germania* is that the Parthians pose less of a threat than the Germans, in the *Annals* he calls Rome and Parthia “the greatest empires” and considers them imperial peers.⁴⁵

³⁷ Luc. 8.315: *orbe iacens alio*.

³⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.2: *alio ex orbe*.

³⁹ Vell. Pat. 2.40.1: *iuris sui*. The description presents an interesting contrast with Hor. *Epist.* 1.12.26–7: *ius imperiumque Praehates | Caesaris accepit genibus minor*.

⁴⁰ Vell. Pat. 2.101.2: *cum duo inter se eminentissima imperiorum et hominum coirent capita*.

⁴¹ Strab. 11.9.2.

⁴² Compare Hdt. 7.236.2: ἀξιόμαχοί τοι γίνονται οἱ ἀντίπαλοι. These words are spoken by Achaemenes, who argues that the Greeks will be a match for the Persian navy if Xerxes divides his fleet.

⁴³ Plin. *HN* 5.88: *duo imperia summa Romanorum Parthorumque*.

⁴⁴ Joseph. *AJ* 18.46: [αἱ] δύο μέγιστα τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον ἡγεμονίαι.

⁴⁵ Germany a greater threat: Tac. *Germ.* 37. Rome and Parthia as the greatest empires: Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.1: *maxima imperia*; cf. 2.60.4. At *Ann.* 12.10.2 and 15.13.2 the Parthians are called *aemuli*, or closely-matched rivals of the Romans, a term that is not far from Strabo's ἀντίπαλοι. It must be noted, though, that the author assigns the word to speakers who cannot be assumed to represent his own view: a Parthian embassy in the first passage, and the cowardly soldiers of Paetus in the second. Cf. Syme 1958: 530 (“Tacitus is careful not to concede full parity... there is no animosity, but almost respect, tempered perhaps with a tone of patronage”); Heil 2017: 267–8.

Dio also viewed the Parthians as the ἀντίπαλοι of the Romans since the days of Crassus.⁴⁶

Herodian, who documented the last clashes between the Roman emperors and the Arsacid kings in the early third century CE, likewise called the two states “the two greatest empires.”⁴⁷

Parthia was not the only geographic area that could be called an *alter orbis*; Britain sometimes received this designation as well, as did the remote regions of northern Europe on the edge of Roman geographical knowledge.⁴⁸ But it was the only such region that contained an empire similar in size and power to Rome’s own. In this respect, it presented Roman exceptionalism with a challenge that no other region could mount. How could Rome be the *caput orbis* if the world had two heads, Rome and Parthia?⁴⁹ The stark reality of Arsacid power challenged the notion that Rome possessed *imperium sine fine*, an empire without limit.⁵⁰

How did Augustan Rome deal with this challenge? The first step was the description of Parthia as a kingdom that was not worth ruling, an uncivilized land where Roman power did not belong. In the Greco-Roman ethnographies of the Parthians that survive in the literary sources, the Parthians are described as a semi-nomadic people who only superficially exhibit the signs of civilization. “[Their] disposition is arrogant, quarrelsome, faithless, and insolent,” Justin writes.⁵¹ This perceived temperament helped the Romans explain the Arsacid kingdom’s frequent civil wars – yet another indication of the unruliness of their realm.⁵² The Parthians are also called libidinous, a trait that accounted for their polygamous marital habits as well as the Arsacid king’s possession of numerous concubines.⁵³ And their nomadic heritage, whether real or perceived, is

⁴⁶ Cass. Dio 40.14.3: τελευτῶντες δὲ ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον καὶ τῆς δόξης καὶ τῆς δυνάμεως ἐχώρησαν ὥστε καὶ τοῖς Ῥωμαίοις τότε τε ἀντιπολεμῆσαι καὶ δεῦρο αἰεὶ ἀντίπαλοι νομίζεσθαι.

⁴⁷ Herodian 4.10.2: δύο δὲ ταύτας ἀρχὰς εἶναι μεγίστας, τὴν τε Ῥωμαίων καὶ τὴν Παρθυαίων.

⁴⁸ Britain: Vell. Pat. 2.46.1; Flor. 1.45.16. Scandinavia: Plin. *HN* 4.96. See further Housman 1920: 87–8.

⁴⁹ The phrase is from Ovid (*Am.* 1.15.26). Cf. *caput mundi* in Luc. 2.655–6.

⁵⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 1.279.

⁵¹ Just. 41.3.7: *Ingenia genti tumida, seditiosa, fraudulenta, procacia.*

⁵² Sonnabend 1986: 273.

⁵³ Just. 41.3.9; for discussion, see Lerouge 2007: 339–49.

always highlighted.⁵⁴ The nature and extent of Parthian nomadism remains a subject of debate in the scholarly literature, and some take the position that the lifestyle of the central Asian steppe really did leave an indelible mark on the Arsacids, even as they took over the urban centers of the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia.⁵⁵ But there is also reason to believe that Greco-Roman authors played up this part of Parthia's heritage, which offered them an explanation for the skill of the Parthian cavalry that had proved so effective against Roman armies.⁵⁶ For the Romans, a people of this sort were better left to their own devices rather than ruled directly. The annexation of such a kingdom to the *orbis Romanus* was undesirable, since it was not in the nature of such a race to live in a civilized world.⁵⁷

The second step was presenting the Augustan settlement of 20/19 BCE as a Roman victory over the Parthian east, despite the lack of battlefield victories and territorial conquest so familiar to the Romans from the days of the late Republic. Augustus' official account in the *Res Gestae* employs strong language: "I forced the Parthians to return to me the spoils and standards of three Roman armies and to seek the friendship of the Roman people as suppliants."⁵⁸ The verb *cogo* implies coercion, though no military confrontation took place. The emperor used his coins to project a similar message, and one that was widely distributed: the Parthian settlement was featured in more coin types than any other Augustan campaign.⁵⁹ Coins issued in the wake of the settlement depicted a kneeling Parthian submissively handing over a Roman standard, drawing on the posture of subjugated barbarians from visual language of the late Republic (Fig. 5).⁶⁰

⁵⁴ E.g. Just. 41.3.4; Cass. Dio 40.15.3; Strab. 11.9.2; Curt. 6.2.14.

⁵⁵ See the literature cited at Chapter 3, p. 111 n.133.

⁵⁶ Hauser 2005; 2006; cf. Sonnabend 1986: 280.

⁵⁷ Sonnabend 1986; Schneider 2007: 60; Shayegan 2011: 334–5.

⁵⁸ *Mon. Anc.* 29.2: *Parthos trium exercitu<u>m Romanorum spolia et signa re[ddere] mihi supplicesque amicitiam populi Romani petere coegi.*

⁵⁹ Rose 2005: 23. On the numismatic evidence generally, see Van der Vin 1981.

⁶⁰ E.g. *RIC* 1 [Sutherland / Carson 1984] 62, no. 287, 288.



Fig. 5: Denarius of Augustus, 19 BCE. *RIC* 1 288. Photo courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.; available online at <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=155283>.

This image of the Parthian – beaten, groveling, and inferior – was taken up in other works of art from the Augustan period. Fragments of three statues of a visually similar type (the so-called “Kneeling Oriental”) survive that date to the late first century BCE (Fig. 6). They may have originally been part of a single monument, supporting a bronze tripod dedicated by Augustus to



Fig. 6: The “Kneeling Oriental” from the Horti Sallustiani in Rome, 1st century BCE (Copenhagen Glyptotek). Photo by the author.

commemorate his “defeat” of the Arsacid kingdom.⁶¹ The image is found in other visual media, as well. Glass gems dating to the Augustan period and produced on a large scale show two kneeling Parthians offering up standards to the goddess Victory, who advances Roman claims to world rule by standing atop a globe.⁶² The Homeric scene on one of the Hoby cups showing Priam’s supplication of Achilles probably evoked Parthian affairs, as well; given his Parthian dress, Priam might have been seen as a Parthian submitting to his counterpart Augustus/Achilles.⁶³

The third step was the designation of the Arsacids as the heirs to the Achaemenid Persian empire. The Romans knew from Greek historiography that Parthian territory was more or less coterminous with the lands that had once been part of the Achaemenid realm – Persia’s possessions in the eastern Mediterranean excepted – so the analogy was, to a certain extent, a natural one to make.⁶⁴ At the beginning of the Augustan period, then, it became common to imagine Parthia as a new iteration of Achaemenid Persia. Horace drew on this identification frequently in his poetry, most notably in his description of the Arsacid king Phraates IV’s victory over the pretender Tiridates at some point between 25–23 BCE:

*redditum Cyri solio Phraaten
dissidens plebi numero beatorum
eximit Virtus*⁶⁵

Phraates is restored to the throne of Cyrus, but Virtue dissents from the mob and excludes him from the roll of the truly rich.

⁶¹ Schneider 1986: 18–97; 2007: 71–2. But cf. the skepticism of Rose (2005: 24 n.22) on this point.

⁶² Schneider 2007: 61.

⁶³ Vermeule 1968: 125; Dowling 2006: 144–5 and n.45.

⁶⁴ Sonnabend 1986: 281.

⁶⁵ Hor. Carm. 2.2.17–9. Text and translation from West 1998: 14–5. On the war between Phraates IV and Tiridates, see the discussion in Chapter 3, p. 82–3.

The lines draw on the *topos* – well established in Greek literature about the Persian empire centuries before Horace – of the Persian king as the happiest and richest man in the world.⁶⁶ More importantly, though, Phraates is imagined as sitting on the throne of Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid dynasty. Many other passages in Augustan poetry describe the Parthians as Medes, Persians, and Achaemenids.⁶⁷ In Augustan Rome just as in classical Greece, these terms referred to Cyrus' descendants and the inhabitants of their empire.

The idea that the Arsacids had succeeded the Achaemenids not only changed how the Romans looked at the Parthians; it changed how they looked at themselves. If Parthia was a reincarnation of the Persian empire, the Romans were, by extension, heirs to the legacy of the classical Greeks. The Athenians and Spartans of the fifth century BCE had fought against the Achaemenid invasions of Darius and Xerxes and were remembered – not least because of the influence of Herodotus' account – as the defenders of Europe against the hordes of barbarous Asia, as the champions of the west against the east.⁶⁸

Augustus himself directly drew on this Persian Wars tradition in one of his best known public spectacles, the *naumachia* of 2 BCE.⁶⁹ Held in the heart of the city near the Tiber island, the massive display involved the excavation of a pit some 500 by 350 meters in area, with 30 ships and over 3,000 men (not counting the rowers) participating as combatants – at least according to Augustus, who thought the event important enough to include in the *Res Gestae*. Although the *naumachia* is mentioned by many sources, Dio is the only historian to include the

⁶⁶ On this *topos*, see Nisbet / Hubbard 1978: 48; cf. *Carm.* 3.9.1–4.

⁶⁷ See e.g. Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.22, 51; 1.21.14; 1.38.1; 2.1.31; 2.9.21; 2.16.6; 3.1.44; 3.3.44; 3.5.4, 9; 3.8.19; 3.9.4; 3.29.27–8; 4.15.23; 4.14.42; *Carm. Saec.* 54; Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.223–6; Prop. 2.13.1. For such uses in other genres of literature, see Cic. *De Dom. Sua* 60.124; *De Har. Resp.* 28; Sall. *Hist.* F 4.69.19 (*Epist. Mith.*); Plin. *HN* 6.41. See further Wissemann 1982: 122–3; Schneider 1998: 111; Sonnabend 1986: 280–8.

⁶⁸ On the Persian wars tradition in Roman political ideology, see Spawforth 1994; Hardie 1997; 2007.

⁶⁹ *Mon. Anc.* 23; Vell. Pat. 2.100.2; Suet. *Aug.* 43; Tac. *Ann.* 12.56.1; 14.15.2; Cass. Dio 55.10.7–8; 66.25.3; Front. *Aq.* 1.22.

assigned identities of the competing sides, whom he calls “Persians and Athenians.”⁷⁰ These identifications are supported by Ovid, a contemporary who probably attended the event himself. He describes a spectacle of “Persian and Cecropian ships;” the latter term is almost certainly a reference to Cecrops, the mythical king of Athens.⁷¹ The “Athenians” won.⁷² Augustus had recreated the naval battle of Salamis, originally fought in 480 BCE between an Athenian-led Greek fleet and the Persian armada of the Achaemenid king Xerxes. The emperor exploited the significance of this victory for his own purposes; the triumph of the Greeks over the Persians was appropriated by the Augustan regime.

To what end? While the east-west flavor of the *naumachia* might have evoked Augustus’ defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, the Parthian resonance of the spectacle would have been undeniable.⁷³ The Roman audience surely had eastern affairs in mind during the display for three reasons. First, the show was staged in connection with the dedication of the temple of Mars Ultor, a structure that Augustus explicitly connected with the restoration of Rome’s standards and prisoners by Phraates IV.⁷⁴ Second, the emperor’s adopted son Gaius Caesar was about to depart for Parthia in order to settle the dispute that had arisen over Phraataces’ activity in Armenia.⁷⁵ Third and most importantly, the Arsacids had been conflated with the Achaemenids in Roman thinking about the Parthian east; the “Persians” who went down in defeat at this

⁷⁰ Cass. Dio 55.10.7–8: ναυμαχία ἐν τῷ χωρίῳ ἐν ᾧ καὶ νῦν ἔτι σημεῖα τινα αὐτῆς δαίκνυται Περσῶν καὶ Ἀθηναίων ἐποιήθη: ταῦτα γὰρ τὰ ὀνόματα τοῖς ναυμαχοῦσιν ἐτέθη, καὶ ἐνίκων καὶ τότε οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι.

⁷¹ Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.171–2: *Quid, modo cum belli navalis imagine Caesar | Persidas induxit Cecropiasque rates*; Hollis 1977: 64; Bowersock 1984: 175.

⁷² Coleman (1990: 71) suggests Dio’s description “may imply that he thought the outcome was a coincidence.” The possibility that the battle might have gone the other way cannot be ruled out. Dio (66.25.4) mentions another *naumachia* staged by the emperor Titus which pitted “Athenians” against “Syracusans,” with the former victorious; if this was a recreation of the harbor battle of the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 7.59–72), then the reenactment had the opposite outcome of the historical battle.

⁷³ Cf. Swan 2004: 100–1.

⁷⁴ For the connection with the *naumachia*, see Vell. Pat. 2.100.2; Cass. Dio 55.10.6–9.

⁷⁵ See the discussion in Chapter 3, p. 96–7.

reenactment could therefore be understood as the representatives of the Parthian empire. By extension, the audience itself could identify with the classical Greeks.⁷⁶

This historical analogy told a story that had a moral, and moreover a moral that was unique to the Augustan period. In contrast to the Alexander the Great-style eastern adventurism of the late Republic, the Greco-Persian wars tradition supported an accommodation with the Parthians along the Euphrates, now understood as the boundary that marked the *divisio orbis* between the two empires. The victory of the Greek city-states of the fifth century BCE – especially as enshrined in the account of Herodotus – had been a victory over Achaemenid imperial expansion. Athens and Sparta had foiled the attempts of Darius and Xerxes to yoke together the east with the west, Asia with Europe, Persia with Greece. Herodotus showed how the hubristic folly behind such efforts was rectified by the triumph of the Athenians and Spartans over the barbarous hordes of Asia. Fifth century BCE Greece offered an exemplum of the successful and righteous defense of the west in the face of Oriental aggression and invasion.⁷⁷ That exemplum was a useful one for reconciling a Roman audience with the Parthian settlement of 20/19 BCE and with Gaius Caesar's imminent campaign, both of which recognized the renunciation of Roman imperial claims east of the Euphrates.

Finally, the inhabitants of Augustan Rome seem to have developed a way of thinking about the Parthian empire as something close to an imperial peer. The *divisio orbis* did not always entail hostility and antagonism toward the Arsacids; there may have been some basis for looking at the division of the world between Rome and Parthia as a cooperative venture rooted in mutual respect if not necessarily in goodwill. The Arsacid kingdom had an important part to play

⁷⁶ Syme 1984: 922; Bowersock 1984: 175; Spawforth 1994: 238–42; Lerouge 2007: 125; Hardie 2007: 129–30.

⁷⁷ Shayegan 2011: 338–40.

in the Augustan vision of world order. This significance may be seen in several monuments which arguably treat the Parthians not simply as enemies and villains, but as peers and partners.

Support for this view may be found in the cuirassed statue of Augustus from Primaporta, which is most likely a copy of an original set up in Rome in 19 BCE.⁷⁸ On the center of the emperor's breastplate two figures are depicted that are almost universally understood to represent Rome and Parthia, though specific identifications have proved much more contentious.⁷⁹ The Roman figure on Augustus' right side has been variously argued to be Mars Ultor, Tiberius, or Roma; the bearded and trouser-wearing man on the left to represent Phraates IV, one of his hostage children, a Zoroastrian deity, or simply a generalized Parthian.



Fig. 7: The Primaporta Augustus with detail of figures on breastplate. Photo via Wikimedia Commons; online at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Augusto di pirma porta, inv. 2290, 02.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Augusto_di_pirma_porta_inv.2290_02.JPG).

⁷⁸ Rose 2005: 24 and n.23.

⁷⁹ See esp. Kähler 1959: 16; Bastet 1966: 80; Jucker 1977; Pollini 1978: 8–74; Van der Vin 1981: 120–1; Zanker 1988: 188–92; Simon 1991: 207–16; Schneider 1998: 97–9; Schäfer 1998: 84–92; Kuttner 1999: 117–8; Rose 2005: 24–8. The identifications in older studies are conveniently tabulated in Jucker 1977: 37.

The Parthian is returning to Rome the standards captured from the armies of Crassus, Saxa, and Antony; the scene therefore numbers among the many celebrations in visual media of the 20/19 BCE settlement between Augustus and Phraates IV. Yet the Parthian on the breastplate here is noticeably different from the kneeling figure featured on Augustus' denarii and in other artworks. He is shorter than his Roman counterpart, but not by much. He stands erect; nothing in his posture suggests defeat or submissiveness. And while personifications of Spain and Gaul appear on the sides of the breastplate as women in mourning, the Parthian on the front is male. Indeed, Parthia is the only regional personification to be assigned this gender in Augustan art.⁸⁰ The presentation of the settlement is thus quite different from the picture that emerges from the *Res Gestae*, coinage, and Augustan poetry. The agreement with Parthia looks like a deal struck with a peer – a junior partner, perhaps, but certainly not a cowering subordinate.

Another surprisingly pacific depiction of the Parthians may have been found on Augustus' Parthian arch, a monument that has not survived but which may be reconstructed using a combination of literary, numismatic, and archaeological evidence.⁸¹ Dio records that the Senate voted Augustus the arch in honor of his recovery of the standards in 19 BCE, and a scholiast to Virgil's *Aeneid* places the location of the monument "next to the temple of the Divine Julius" in the Roman forum.⁸² Visual evidence survives in three separate coin series, each from a different mint.⁸³ The latest of these, a denarius struck at Rome in 16 BCE, seems likely to

⁸⁰ Rose 2005: 23–8.

⁸¹ On Augustus' Parthian arch, see Levi 1952: 6–9; Andrae 1957: 149–53, 168–75; Fuchs 1969: 40–1; Van der Vin 1981: 128–9; Coarelli 1985: 258–308; Nedergaard 1988b; 1993: 81–5; 2001; De Maria 1988: 90–9, 105–6, 266–75; Schneider 1986: 94–5; 1998: 99; Kleiner 1985: 25–8; 1989: 198–200; Gurval 1995: 36–47; Carnabuci 1991: 315–28; Rich 1998: 97–115; Scott 2000. Simpson (1992) questions the historicity of the arch. Where major disagreement remains, the conclusions of Rose (2005: 58–64) are followed here.

⁸² Cass. Dio 54.8.3; Schol. Veron. in Verg. *Aen.* 7.605: *iuxta aedem divi Iulii*. On the scholiast, see further Rich 1998: 98.

⁸³ *RIC* 1 [Sutherland / Carson 1984], 82, no. 508 (Pergamon, 19/18 BCE); *RIC* 1 [Sutherland / Carson 1984], 50, no. 131 (Spain, 18/17 BCE); *RIC* 1 [Sutherland / Carson 1984], 68, no. 359 (Rome, 16 BCE).

best represent the monument, as the architectural plan it preserves corresponds closely to the archaeological remains that have come to light through excavation (Fig. 8).⁸⁴



Fig. 8: Denarius of Augustus with Parthian arch, 16 BCE. *RIC* 1 359. Photo courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.; available online at <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=324831>.

At the top of the monument the emperor himself rides a quadriga; he is flanked by Parthians, who hold (on his left) a Roman standard and (on his right) a bow. As with the Parthian on the Primaporta statue, the figures are standing erect. They do not assume the poses typical of subjugated peoples in triumphal imagery and iconography, who usually kneel and have bound hands. To be sure, their placement below the emperor indicates that they are his inferiors. But their gesture of acclamation suggests that the Parthians are, in a way, participants in the peace Augustus has created.⁸⁵ It has not simply been imposed on them.

The treatment of the Parthian empire in the Augustan evidence thus shows a balancing act. On the one hand, Augustus' Rome was an "empire without limit" that could accept no restrictions on its power. On the other hand, the Arsacid kingdom was increasingly recognized as something like an imperial peer. Equally large and equally powerful, it controlled a vast world

⁸⁴ Gurval 1995: 43–7; Nedergaard 2001: 113.

⁸⁵ Rose 2005: 28–36.

where Roman power did not belong and could not reach. How could the ideal of an *imperium sine fine* coexist with the perception of a *divisio orbis*, a world divided between two empires?

The Arsacids at Rome

The Arsacid hostages of Augustan Rome are a key part of the answer. Hostages were canvases onto which the Romans projected their ideas of what an inhabitant of the Parthian empire was – by turns submissive, wild, barbarous, or an imperial peer worthy of respect. They were a means through which the Romans tried to reconcile conflicting ideological representations of the Parthian east. A look at their lives at the court of Augustus reveals their centrality to Roman conceptions of the Arsacid kingdom.

Literary and epigraphic evidence attests that Augustus housed his Arsacid hostages in Rome itself. The most explicit testimony comes from Strabo, who as a coda to the hostage submission of Phraates IV records that “now all his [i.e. Phraates’] children who survive are cared for at Rome at public expense and in royal fashion.”⁸⁶ Strabo does not explain what such royal treatment entailed, but comparative evidence may shed more light on what he means. Hostages at Rome were generally received with respect, although those surrendered by a foreign power as part of a *deditio* (unconditional surrender) could meet with harsh treatment.⁸⁷ The 300 young Carthaginian nobles sent to Rome at the end of the Third Punic War, for instance, were kept in close confinement in the hull of a docked ship.⁸⁸ But such conditions of imprisonment seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. Equally high-ranking Carthaginian hostages from the Second Punic War were attended by slaves in their captivity in Setia, a Latin town.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Strab. 16.1.28: τῶν μὲν οὖν παίδων ὅσοι περίεισιν ἐν Ῥώμῃ δημοσίᾳ βασιλικῶς τημελοῦνται.

⁸⁷ Elbern 1990: 110–4.

⁸⁸ Polyb. 36.4.6–6.1; App. *Lib.* 76–80.

⁸⁹ Liv. 32.26.5: *obsides Carthaginiensium Setia custodiebantur. Cum iis, ut principum liberis, magna vis servorum erat.*

Even for Rome's defeated enemies, then, a hostage's maintenance might approximate the standard of living that they had enjoyed in their earlier life.

Hostages from the royal families of Hellenistic dynasties fared even better. The Seleucid Antiochus III sent his younger son Antiochus (later Antiochus IV Epiphanes) to Rome in c. 188 BCE in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Apamea.⁹⁰ The Romans built Antiochus a house within their city at public expense where he served out his hostageship. It was almost certainly a luxurious dwelling, since the wealthy poet Lucilius lived there a few decades later.⁹¹ This building perhaps also housed Demetrius I, who soon replaced Antiochus IV in Rome after the death of Antiochus III.⁹² The remarks of the historian Polybius, who knew this Demetrius personally, reveal that his hostageship came with several amenities: he could leave his house and even the city of Rome at will; he owned several slaves; he regularly went hunting at Circeii, a nearby town, and had his own dogs and nets for such occasions.⁹³ Nor does Demetrius seem to have been very closely watched. After his escape to Syria, it took four days for his absence to arouse any suspicion among his Roman captors.⁹⁴

Strabo's statement that the family members of Phraates IV were maintained "at public expense and in royal fashion" strongly suggests that the Arsacids of Rome were treated like the Antigonid and Seleucid royalty that had preceded them in Roman captivity. It is likely that they, like Antiochus IV, were housed in a stately mansion; that they enjoyed the attendance of servants

⁹⁰ Polyb. 21.43.22; Liv. 38.38.15; Diod. 29.10; App. *Syr.* 39; Memnon *FrGH* 434 F 18.9 = *BNJ* 434 F 1.9. For discussion of the settlement and its impact, see Mørkholm 1966: 22–32; Gruen 1984: 640–3; Green 1990: 421–3; Sherwin-White / Kuhrt 1993: 210–6; Ma 1999: 247–50; Austin 2003: 131–2.

⁹¹ Ascon. *In Pison.* p. 13 (Clark) = Atticus fr. 6P = *FRH* 33 F 7 (Cornell 2013); Walker 1980: 106 and n.31; Mittag 2006: 37–40; 2014: 119–21.

⁹² Suggested by Elbern 1990: 112. On the exchange of Demetrius for Antiochus see App. *Syr.* 45.

⁹³ Polyb. 31.14.1–3. Cf. Diod. 31.18.1, where Demetrius attempts to provide the impoverished Ptolemy VI Philometor with a diadem, garments, and a horse fit for a king. The anecdote assumes considerable wealth on Demetrius' part: Walker 1980: 120. Like Demetrius, Vonones would later attempt to escape Roman custody while under guard in Pompeiopolis under the pretense of a hunting expedition: Tac. *Ann.* 2.68.1.

⁹⁴ Polyb. 31.15.6; cf. Mørkholm 1966: 39; Braund 1984: 13–4; Matthews 1989a: 39–40.

and slaves; and that their Roman guard was light and not particularly oppressive. These figures were prisoners, to be sure. But their cage was gilded, and it was roomier than most.

One piece of epigraphic evidence tells an ambiguous story of Arsacid responses to Roman captivity. The inscription was found at Rome, and it appears to mark the grave of two of the Arsacid hostages named by Strabo.⁹⁵

SERASPADANES · PHRAATIS
 ARSACIS · RÉGUM · RÉGIS · F
 PARTHUS
 RHODASPES · PHRAATIS
 ARSACIS · RÉGUM · RÉGIS · F
 PARTHUS⁹⁶

Seraspadanes, son of Phraates Arsaces, King of Kings, a Parthian.
 Rhodaspes, son of Phraates Arsaces, King of Kings, a Parthian.

While their brothers Vonones and Phraates eventually returned to Parthia to claim the Arsacid throne, Seraspadanés and Rhodaspes spent the rest of their lives in captivity, dying in the city that had served as their prison. Their epitaph cannot be precisely dated, but it may be useful to observe that whoever set it up seems to have known that the deceased would be buried without Vonones and Phraates. That might be reason to place the text after 35 CE, by which time Vonones had long been dead and Phraates had perished on the trip back to Parthia.⁹⁷ This hypothetical reconstruction would date the inscription to the middle of the first century CE, when Seraspadanés and Rhodaspes were presumably advanced in age.

Aside from the text's composition in the Latin language, it is striking how closely it cleaves to Parthian titulature. Phraates IV is referred to by both his personal name "Phraates" as well as the throne name of "Arsaces." Justin's epitome of the Augustan author Trogus suggests

⁹⁵ Strab. 16.1.28.

⁹⁶ *CIL* 6.1799 = *ILS* 842 = Hackl et al. 2010: 2.436 (III.1.3.A.2).

⁹⁷ On Phraates' death, see Chapter 3, p. 109 and n.121.

that the Romans of the first century CE probably understood this naming practice.⁹⁸ But to judge by Greek and Roman historiography, the Romans tended to use the personal names of the kings only; Augustus, for instance, refers to Phraates IV in the *Res Gestae* as simply “King Phrates.”⁹⁹ The use of Arsacid titulature in the hostages’ epitaph offers strong support for the idea that the kin of Seraspadanus and Rhodaspes were responsible for the erection of the memorial.

Phraates is also referred to in the epitaph as the “king of kings” (*regum rex*), an Arsacid title amply attested in the Parthian empire on coins, in the Babylonian astronomical diaries, and in the papyrological evidence from Avroman.¹⁰⁰ The use of this title in the heart of Rome, however, is surprising. Pompey reportedly refused to apply the title to Phraates III; an echo of his refusal may be evident in Augustus’ avoidance of even the honorific “king” with Phraataces, the successor of Phraates IV.¹⁰¹ The purpose of the epithet, after all, is to emphasize that the king of kings has no peer – even the potentates of other kingdoms are subordinate to him. Perhaps the inscription reveals a defiant pride on the part of Seraspadanus, Rhodaspes, and the other Arsacid hostages who may have played a part in erecting the monument. Though disempowered captives, they could nonetheless boast that their father’s power had no equal.¹⁰²

The epitaph’s emphasis on the Arsacid lineage of the deceased presents a significant contrast with inscriptions by other hostages and Parthian captives. Four comparanda are relevant. The first is the epitaph of one Sitalces, a Thracian hostage, and his sister Julia. Like the tombstone of Seraspadanus and Rhodaspes, it was found at Rome.

SITALCES · DIVI | AUGUSTI | OPSES · THRACUM || IULIA · PHYLLIS | SOROR ·
EIUS¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Just. 41.5.8: *omnes reges suos hoc nomine [sc. Arsacis], sicuti Romani Caesares Augustosque, cognominavere.*

⁹⁹ *Mon. Anc.* 32–3: *rex Phrates.*

¹⁰⁰ Coins: Sellwood 38.1–22. Astronomical diaries: Sachs / Hunger 1996: 514 (vol. 3 no. -62 upper edge); 2001: 78 (vol. 5 no. 30); Shayegan 2011: 42, 236–9. Avroman: Minns 1915: 28–30.

¹⁰¹ Pompey and Phraates III: Plut. *Pomp.* 38.2; Cass. Dio 37.6.1–2. Augustus and Phraataces: Cass. Dio 55.10.20.

¹⁰² Suggested by Wiesehöfer 2002a: 295–6; 2010: 191–2.

¹⁰³ *CIL* 6.26608 = *ILS* 846. The word *opses* is an alternate orthography for *obses*. The form is also attested for the

Sitalces, a Thracian hostage of the Divine Augustus; Julia Phyllis, his sister

Sitalces' story must have been similar to that of the sons of Phraates IV. He was one of Augustus' hostages; perhaps he was taken during Piso's Thracian campaign in 12–10 BCE.¹⁰⁴ Since Augustus is *divus* in the inscription, it must have been erected after his death in 14 CE.¹⁰⁵ Although no literary source mentions Sitalces, his name suggests that he was a member of the Odrysian nobility.¹⁰⁶ But if he did in fact have an illustrious pedigree, it is striking that his epitaph gives no indication of it. Whoever composed the text of the inscription – presumably his sister Julia, though this cannot be proven – provided no information about Sitalces' life other than his status as a hostage of the Roman emperor.

The second comparandum is the epitaph of another Parthian by the name of Mygdonius. He was born in Parthia, but was taken prisoner and brought to Roman territory, where he evidently learned Latin and lived out the rest of his days. His epitaph was found at Ravenna.

C(aius) Iul(ius) Mygdonius | generi Parthus | natus ingenuus capt(us) | pubis aetate, dat(us) in terra(m) | Romana(m). Qui, dum factus || cives R(omanus) iuvente fato col|locavi arkam, dum esse(m) | annor(um) L. Peti(i) usq(ue) a <p>ub|ertate senectae meae perveni|re. Nunc recipe me, saxe, libens; || tecum cura solutus ero.¹⁰⁷

G(aius) Jul(ius) Mygdonius | Parthian by race | born free; captured | transferred during the age of his youth to the territory | of the Romans. When I was made || a Roman citizen with the assistance of fate, I | arranged this coffin for when I was | 50 years old. I sought from the time of | youth to reach my old age. | Now receive me happily, stone; || with you, I will be free from care.

meaning “hostage” on the tomb of the Scipios on the Via Appia: *CIL* 6.1284–5 = *ILS* 1: *subigit omne Loucanam opsidesque abdoucit*; cf. *AE* (1979) 78, below. For bibliography on the Scipio inscription, see Allen 2006: 101–2 and n.23.

¹⁰⁴ On Piso in Thrace from 12–10 BCE, see Liv. *Per.* 140; Cass. Dio 54.34.5–7; Vell. Pat. 2.98; Flor. 2.27; Sen. *Ep.* 83.14.

¹⁰⁵ On the deification of Augustus, see Bleicken 1998: 666–7.

¹⁰⁶ Two high-ranking figures by this name are attested among the Thracian Odrysae in earlier Greek historiography. Sitalces I was an Odrysian king in the late fifth century BCE (Herod. 4.80, 7.137.3; Thuc. 2.29, 67; Diod. 12.50). Another Sitalces is attested among the Thracians in the army of Alexander the Great: Arr. *Anab.* 1.28.4; cf. Heckel 2006: 251.

¹⁰⁷ *CIL* 11.137 = *ILS* 1980 = Hackl et al. 2010: 2.437–8 (III.1.3.A.4).

A date for the inscription between c. 50 BCE and 50 CE may be preferable on palaeographic and onomastic grounds. “Mygdonius” probably means “a man from Mygdonia,” which given the Parthian *genus* of the deceased must indicate not the region in Macedon but rather Nisibis, which under the Seleucids was called Antiochia Mygdonia.¹⁰⁸ The conditions that led to Mygdonius’ enslavement are unclear. He may have been captured in a Roman campaign, but the routine mechanics of the slave trade may also have been responsible.¹⁰⁹

Though much about his life remains uncertain, this Parthian captive’s epitaph differs markedly from that of the Arsacid hostages Seraspades and Rhodaspes. Mygdonius took the Roman name Gaius Julius; he became a Roman citizen; and he seems to have celebrated that citizenship, which he declares he obtained “with the assistance of fate” (*iuvente fato*). The Latin on the inscription – presumably of Mygdonius’ own composition, though the inscriber or a family member is equally possible – is not perfect, but the author was proficient, and he moreover made a conscious choice to use it on his tombstone. Mygdonius’ epitaph embraces his Roman citizenship and a long life successfully led in Roman territory. Whereas Seraspades and Rhodaspes are simply *Parthi* in their inscription, Mygdonius is *generi Parthus* – a Parthian by race, by birth. The implication seems to be that, in life, he became something else.

Mygdonius’ case bears a close resemblance to those of several other Parthians who lived in Roman territory and who set up inscriptions in Latin. The gravestone of one “Gaius Julius, son of Tiridates, decurion of the *ala Parthorum*... whose home was Rome” has been found in Clissa in Dalmatia.¹¹⁰ Gaius’ father may have been the Tiridates who fought Phraates IV in the 20s

¹⁰⁸ Gnoli 2005: 466, with references; Thommen in Hackl et al. 2010: 2.438.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Bradley 2004: 311.

¹¹⁰ *CIL* 3.8746 = *ILS* 2532 = Hackl et al. 2010: 2.437 (III.1.3.A.3): *C(aius) Iul(ius) Th[ir]idat[is] f(i)lius | dec(urio) ala Partho(rum) | an(nis) XXVI dom(o) | Roma h(ic) s(itus) e(st) | Sex(tus) Coelius*. The inscription dates to the early first century CE.

BCE, while the findspot of the inscription may indicate that he fought alongside Ornospadēs, a Parthian exile who served Tiberius in the Dalmatian revolt.¹¹¹ The rededication of a monument in Italy was financed by a freedman named Narcissus – *paedagogus* of the emperor Antoninus Pius’ children, mentor of his concubine, and Parthian in nationality.¹¹² And a man named Marcus Ulpius Chresimus served as the priest of Jupiter Dolichenus during the late second or early third centuries CE; in a dedication to the emperor he calls himself “of Parthian nationality.”¹¹³ All these men were Parthian by birth, but had careers in the Roman empire that they commemorated in Latin.

A final comparandum may be the most germane. A fragmentary inscription from Rome furnishes the only known example of a Parthian hostage in Roman territory that is not otherwise reported by a literary source.

[D(is) M(anibus) | M(arcus) ? Ulpius ... et] | Ulpia Axse opses Parthoru(m) | fecerunt sibi et | Ulpiae Vobrane fil(iae) et | nepotibus suis et libertis lib(ertabusque) | posterisque eorum.¹¹⁴

[To the gods below | M(arcus) Ulpius(?) and] | Ulpia Axse, a hostage of/from the Parthians | made [this monument] for themselves and | for Ulpia Vobrane, their daughter, and | for their grandsons and freedmen and freedwomen | and for the descendants of these.

Some discussions date the inscription to the wake of Trajan’s invasion of Parthia in 116 CE, a possibility that is nonetheless conjecture.¹¹⁵ The text may well be an indication that Parthian-Roman hostage submission continued even after the Julio-Claudian period, though such activity

¹¹¹ On Gaius’ father Tiridates, see Timpe 1975. On Ornospadēs, see Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.3; cf. Haynes 2013: 111. For Persians in Roman military service during the Sasanian period, see Heil 2006.

¹¹² *CIL* 6.8972 = *ILS* 1836; cf. Demandt 1997: 94. Narcissus describes himself as *natione Parthus paedagogus* | [*puero*]rum imp et papas *Galeriae* | [*Aug liber*]tae *Lysistrates concubinae* | *divi Pii*. The date must be after Pius’ death in 161 CE. Lysistrate may be the concubine mentioned at *SHA Ant. Pius* 8: *sed Repentinus fabula famosa percussus est, quod per concubinam principis ad praefecturam venisset*.

¹¹³ Hackl et al. 2010: 2.440–1 (III.1.3.A.7): *natione Parth|us*; cf. Speidel 1978: 12–4.

¹¹⁴ *AE* (1979) 78.

¹¹⁵ See Priuli 1977: 332–3; Álvarez Pérez-Sostoa 2010: 173; cf. Noy 2000: 107 and n.196.

is otherwise unattested.¹¹⁶ Onomastics offer no insight aside from the confirmation that Axse is indeed an Iranian name, as is Vobrane.¹¹⁷ While Axse came from Parthian territory, there is no indication that she was a member of the Arsacid family.

Whatever the date of Axse's death, her tombstone provides valuable testimony about the lives of foreign hostages living at Rome. A striking feature is Axse's self-designation as an *opses Parthorum*. Her identification as a "hostage" on her epitaph implies that the term contained no opprobrium; the author of the inscribed text, at any rate, seems not to have viewed her hostageship as a shameful condition. The beginning of the inscription is lost, but the restoration of a male name – presumably Axse's husband – seems reasonable. As a hostage from Parthian territory, "Ulpia" was probably not part of Axse's original name; in all likelihood she acquired it from her husband. The Iranian name of Axse's daughter moreover suggests that Axse's Parthian background was not incompatible with her new life as a Roman woman. It was part of her daughter's inheritance, and not, apparently, a disgraceful one.

Collectively, then, these comparanda present a stark contrast with the epitaph of Seraspadan and Rhodaspes. The funerary inscription of the Arsacids differs in significant ways from those of other Augustan hostages (Sitalces), other Parthian captives (Mygdonius), other Parthians living in Roman territory (Gaius Julius, son of Tiridates; Narcissus; Ulpian Chresimus), and other Parthian hostages (Axse). These other figures variously took Roman names, became Roman citizens, occupied important positions within the Roman empire, and accepted their hostageship as part of their identity. Seraspadan and Rhodaspes either refrained from these measures or neglected to include the information in their epitaph. What they did emphasize, to

¹¹⁶ The literary sources do record that the Romans continued to take Parthian captives after the Julio-Claudian period: see SHA *Had.* 13.8; Aurel. *Vict. Lib. Caes.* 13.3; Herod. 4.15.8. But the submission of hostages, especially Arsacid hostages, is unattested.

¹¹⁷ Chaumont 2002.

the exclusion of all other aspects of their lives, was their membership in the Arsacid family, their descent from the king of kings Phraates IV, and their identification – after years or even decades of residence in Rome – as Parthians.

The epitaph of Seraspadanus and Rhodaspes may therefore betray a stubborn resistance to the taking of Roman names, spouses, and citizenship that the monuments of other hostages and other Parthians reveal. Yet such Arsacid aversion to Roman customs may have been distinctly useful to the Augustan regime. A passage from Suetonius suggests that the emperor made use of the children of Phraates IV in a public display that was intended to highlight their foreignness and their difference from the Roman audience that looked on.

*Ad scaenicas quoque et gladiatorias operas et equitibus Romanis aliquando usus est, verum prius quam senatus consulto interdiceretur. postea nihil sane praeterquam adulescentulum Lycium honeste natum exhibuit, tantum ut ostenderet, quod erat bipedali minor, librarum septemdecim ac vocis immensae. Quodam autem muneris die Parthorum obsides tunc primum missos per mediam harenam ad spectaculum induxit superque se subsellio secundo collocavit.*¹¹⁸

[Augustus] used to sometimes employ even Roman knights at theatrical or gladiatorial games, but before this was forbidden by a decree of the Senate. After that he exhibited no one of respectable parentage except for a certain young man named Lycius, and him only as a curiosity, because he was less than two feet tall, weighed seventeen pounds, and had a stentorian voice. But on the day of one of his festivals he led the first of the Parthian hostages to have been sent [to Rome] through the middle of the arena and sat them above him in the second row.

Suetonius follows this description with an account of other curiosities that Augustus procured for the entertainment of the Roman people, like a rhinoceros, a tiger, and a giant snake. The offspring of Phraates IV are mentioned by the biographer in the same breath as these outlandish attractions; his text lumps the hostages together with bizarre and wondrous creatures drawn from the distant corners of the earth.¹¹⁹ To be sure, this grouping is first and foremost an authorial

¹¹⁸ Suet. *Aug.* 43.3–4.

¹¹⁹ Wiesehöfer 2010: 188. It is not entirely clear that Suetonius' *Parthorum obsides tunc primum missos* refers to the relatives of Phraates IV mentioned by Strab. 16.1.28, since these were not the first sent to Rome; that would have

decision on Suetonius' part. But it may also be an accurate reflection of how Augustus' Roman audience looked at the recently arrived Parthian hostages – or at least how their emperor sought to guide their gaze.

Augustus' exhibition of Phraates' family members recalls the earlier participation of hostages in the triumphs of Republican dynasts. In Titus Quinctius Flamininus' triumph in 193 BCE, "many noble captives and hostages" were made to walk before the victor's chariot, among them the Antigonid prince Demetrius.¹²⁰ More recently, Pompey's triumph in 61 BCE had featured "hostages from the Alani, the Iberi, and the king of Commagene."¹²¹ Although explicit testimony is lacking, it is possible that other Roman generals employed this practice as well.¹²² The exhibition of a hostage in such a procession was a sign of the conqueror's power over the land from which he or she was taken; hostage-taking was explicitly linked to military victory and the subordination of foreign states.

Augustus' use of his Arsacid hostages would have sent a similar message. The display of a foreign captive in a Roman spectacle was a demonstration of power that an audience accustomed to the traditions of the Late Republic could understand. Like the tigers and snakes brought from distant lands, the exhibition of the Arsacids from remote Parthia showed the long reach of the emperor's authority, the sheer geographical extent of his control. Given this emphasis, any resistance on the part of the Parthians to Roman customs would have worked for Augustus, not against him. The less Roman his Arsacids were, the better. Although Suetonius

been the son of Phraates brought to Augustus by Tiridates in c. 30 BCE. But (*pace* Sonnabend 1986: 256) since Suetonius speaks of "hostages" in the plural, the later hostages sent between 19–12 BCE seem a more likely referent.

¹²⁰ Liv. 34.52.9: *ante currum multi nobiles captivi obsidesque, inter quos Demetrius, regis Philippi filius, fuit et Armenes, Nabidis tyranni filius, Lacedaemonius*; cf. Eutrop. 4.2.3; Oros. 4.20.2. Walker (1980: 98) suggests that other Roman conquerors may have displayed hostages in their triumphs. For discussions of the general's chariot in the Roman triumph, see Versnel 1970: 95–6; Hopkins 1978: 26–7; Champlin 2003: 214–5; Beard 2007: 81.

¹²¹ Plut. *Pomp.* 45.4: Ἀλβανῶν δὲ καὶ Ἰβήρων ὄμηροι καὶ τοῦ Κομμαγενῶν βασιλέως; cf. App. *Mith.* 117.

¹²² Walker 1980: 98. On hostages and prisoners in Roman triumphs, see further Östenberg 2009: 128–67.

says nothing about their appearance during the event in question, they may well have been clad in the sort of Parthian dress that emerges from Roman art: trousers, V-shaped tunics, Phrygian caps, perhaps complete with full beards and long, curly hair.¹²³ The visual strangeness of the Parthians would have helped the emperor demonstrate their foreignness, their difference from the inhabitants of Rome, and his power over the lands that belonged to the distant Parthian east.

Yet Suetonius's passage reveals another aspect of Augustus' treatment of his Arsacid hostages: they were shown respect. If on the one hand they were exhibited as curiosities among dwarves, tigers, and giant snakes, on the other they were shown a reverence due to important visiting dignitaries. After displaying them to the crowd, Augustus sat them in the row immediately behind him while the show proceeded. This was no seat for enemies, nor was it an honor that people like Lycius are likely to have received. Seating and status were closely connected at these events, and the Roman audience would not have missed the significance of the gesture.¹²⁴ The implication was that, although these Parthians were the representatives of a strange, distant, and dangerous people, the hostages themselves were tame. Moreover, they deserved respect and a place of honor by the emperor's side.

Indeed, one of the most important Augustan monuments may even depict an Arsacid hostage playing a part in the establishment of Roman peace. The Ara Pacis was voted Augustus by the Senate in 13 BCE and completed a few years later in 9 BCE. On the south frieze of the monument is a young child who wears a decidedly non-Roman getup: he has corkscrew curls, a headband or diadem, a loose tunic, and long-laced shoes (Fig. 9). He presents a stark contrast with the three other children on the south frieze, all of whom wear the togas and *bullae* that were

¹²³ Wiesehöfer 2010: 188. On the art historical evidence, see above.

¹²⁴ On the relationship between hierarchy and seating in Roman theaters, see Boatwright 1990. For an episode where a dispute over seating among senators resulted in a serious quarrel, see Tac. *Ann.* 3.31.3; discussion in Kavanagh 2004.



Fig. 9: The so-called “eastern child” from the south frieze of the Ara Pacis. Museo dell’Ara Pacis. Photo by the author.

characteristic of Roman dress. The woman standing behind the young boy is also diademed, and she is the only woman in the entire procession who wears earrings and a scarf.¹²⁵ The identity of this child has been the subject of much debate, but recent interpretations have suggested that he represents one of the grandchildren of Phraates IV who, by the time of the altar’s dedication in 9 BCE, would have recently arrived in Rome.¹²⁶ The boy’s costume is a close match for other depictions of Parthians in Augustan art, and his corkscrew curls recall the hairstyle of the Arsacid kings on Parthian coins. The woman standing behind him may be a hostage as well, perhaps the wife of one of Phraates IV’s sons. The viewer might have concluded that the

¹²⁵ Pollini 1978: 118–9; Rose 1990: 456–9.

¹²⁶ Argued by Rose 2005: 38–44; Allen 2006: 106. For differing interpretations, see Kuttner 1995: 104; La Rocca 2002: 286–96. For an effort to reconcile divergent identifications of the children represented on the Ara Pacis, see Schneider 2012: 125–8.

Parthians had been integrated into the Augustan order; through hostages, the Arsacid family had become part of the harmony that was the *pax Augusta*.

A final piece of evidence even seems to suggest that Roman campaigns in the Parthian east might be justified by way of reference to Augustus' Arsacid hostages and the rights due to them as the children of Phraates IV. On the eve of Gaius Caesar's eastern campaign in 2 BCE, the poet Ovid urges Augustus' heir to obtain vengeance not just for the Roman losses at Carrhae, but also for the Arsacid family that has been outraged by the patricide of Phraataces.

*Cum tibi sint fratres, fratres ulciscere laesos:
Cumque pater tibi sit, iura tuere patris.
Induit arma tibi genitor patriaeque tuusque:
Hostis ab invito regna parente rapit;
Tu pia tela feres, sceleratas ille sagittas:
Stabit pro signis iusque piusque tuis.¹²⁷*

Since you have brothers, avenge the brothers who have been wronged
Since you have a father, defend the rights due to a father.
The father who arms you is both the country's and yours
The enemy seized his kingdom from an unwilling parent
You bear righteous darts; the enemy, arrows of wickedness
Law and piety will stand before your standards.

Some readings of these lines assume that the *fratres laesos* in line 195 are Gaius' own brothers, while the second *pater* in the following line is Augustus.¹²⁸ The more satisfactory interpretation of A. S. Hollis, however, understands these phrases as references to Seraspadanus, Rhodaspes, Phraates and Vonones and to their father Phraates IV, respectively.¹²⁹ This identification is strongly supported by line 198, an apparent reference to Phraataces' murder of his father Phraates IV in 2 BCE.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.195–200.

¹²⁸ E.g. Roy 1974: 95.

¹²⁹ See Hollis 1977: 77–8; followed by Syme 1978: 9; Pianezzola 1991: 212; Dimundo 2003: 100–1; Casali 2006: 224–6; Luther 2010: 108 and n.22.

¹³⁰ This event is attested otherwise only in Joseph. *AJ* 18.42–3. Yardley (Yardley / Heckl 1997: 5) suggest that Just. 42.4.16 may refer to the murder as well, but this reading is not secure: see Bigwood 2004: 42 and n.29.

Ovid's verses cast Gaius Caesar as the avenger of a crime committed within the Arsacid family. It is Phraataces' patricide that furnishes the grounds for Roman intervention in Parthia; aside from the slain king himself, the victims of this crime are the Arsacid hostages of Rome, who have been unjustly and impiously robbed of their father. Gaius, who by contrast with Phraataces is a model of filial piety, will deliver revenge not just for the defeats Parthia has inflicted on Rome, but for the bereaved sons of Phraates IV. The poet makes no mention of what both ancient and modern commentators view as the real impetus behind Gaius' campaign: Phraataces' attempt to install a Parthian-backed candidate on the throne of Armenia, a kingdom over which Rome claimed dominance.¹³¹ That this was in fact Rome's true motive for war seems confirmed by the actual outcome of Gaius' eastern intervention: far from dethroning Phraataces, he patched up the status quo with the Arsacid prince in a diplomatic conference on the Euphrates after reestablishing Roman control over Armenia.¹³² But Ovid's castigation of Phraataces' patricide and his call for vengeance for the Arsacids of Rome shows that – rhetorically, at least – Augustus' hostages might furnish a just pretext for Roman intervention in the Parthian empire.

The most remarkable feature of this justification for war is that it equates Roman grievances with Arsacid grievances. This claim may simply have been a manifestation of the idea that every war required a *iusta causa*, or just cause.¹³³ But if so, it is striking that the internal struggles of the Arsacid family might furnish such a motive. In Ovid's formulation, Gaius marches not just to avenge the ghosts of Carrhae, but to restore propriety to the Arsacid family. Through hostages, the fortunes of Rome and the Arsacid dynasty had become intertwined.

¹³¹ Luther 2010.

¹³² Ziegler 1964: 53–6.

¹³³ Cic. *De Off.* 1.35–8; cf. *Mon. Anc.* 26; Suet. *Aug.* 21.2.

Conclusion

The Arsacids of Rome were an indispensable part of how the Romans reconciled the competing ideologies of universal rule on the one hand and a world divided with Parthia on the other.

Although the hostages themselves were physically under Roman control, they represented a part of the world that wasn't. Although they were the tame wards of Augustus, they were also the representatives of a power that had destroyed the armies of Crassus, Saxa, and Antony and badly damaged Roman prestige in the east. The hostage was a canvas onto which Roman conceptions of the Parthians could be projected. And since Augustan views of Parthia were varied and diverse, so too Arsacid hostages played several different parts for the Roman audiences to which they were exhibited.

First, the Arsacids of Rome could embody the idea that Parthia was an *alter orbis*, a vast and incomprehensible world that lay far beyond the reach of Roman power. The emperor's exhibition of Phraates IV's progeny alongside dwarves, rhinoceroses, tigers, and snakes presented them as foreign curiosities and made them into a spectacle for all of Rome to see. Such displays were the only opportunity most Romans are likely to have had to see a Parthian in the flesh. Arsacid hostages could thus serve as living, breathing manifestations of the other-worldliness of the Parthians that such observers had encountered in literature, in art and monuments, and on coins. The presentation of the Arsacids on the same stage as abnormalities and wild beasts played into the stereotypes about the inhabitants of the east that had been propagated in Greco-Roman ethnographies ever since the fifth century BCE: they were hot-tempered and faithless, slaves to their baser instincts, ungovernable, unamenable to the arts of civilization. Augustus therefore showed off his hostages among other creatures that were fierce and savage. While the evidence is mixed on whether and to what extent Phraates' progeny

became “Romanized,” it is worth noting that their propaganda value within the city itself probably stemmed from their difference to the inhabitants rather than from any acculturation they may have undergone. Augustus didn’t need his Arsacids to become Romans; he needed them to represent the inhabitants of a different world where Roman power had no sway.

Second, such exhibition also served as a demonstration of Roman superiority to the Arsacid kingdom, as did the mere presence of Parthian hostages in the city. Hostages from the great kingdoms of the east had lived in captivity at Rome since the late third century BCE. Their submission by the monarchs of the Antigonid, Seleucid, and Artaxiad families was usually the result of battlefield victory, conquest, and the extension of Rome’s empire. Although Rome won no such triumphs over the Arsacids during the Augustan period, Augustus took pains to make it seem as though he had. In this effort, his possession of Arsacids was invaluable. The recovery of Rome’s standards and prisoners demonstrated that Augustus had avenged the ignominy of Carrhae and the other military disasters suffered at the hands of the Parthians during the late Republic. But hostages furnished another apparent indication of the emperor’s power: they made it seem as though Parthia – like the Antigonids, Seleucids, and Artaxiads before them – would be the next kingdom to fall as Rome continued to push further east. In practice, Augustus renounced Roman imperial ambitions east of the Euphrates, and codified this arrangement with two successive Arsacid kings. In the realm of ideology, however, hostages allowed him to create the impression that Roman arms were still on the march, and that the aspiration of *imperium sine fine* was still within reach.

Third, Arsacid hostages could show Rome that the Parthian enemy might, on occasion, be worthy of respect. Phraates’ progeny were maintained in royal fashion and at public expense; they were accorded places of honor at certain festivals, even sitting near the emperor himself;

and their likenesses appeared on monuments as upholders of the Augustan peace. Although such treatment is only part of the story, it is nonetheless a significant one. For Roman superiority over Parthia to have meaning, the Arsacid enemy had to be formidable, not contemptible. Victory over a paltry enemy is unremarkable. By treating the Arsacids as the representatives of a power that was worthy of respect if not necessarily of love, Augustus made his widely advertised success over Parthia all the more impressive. The Arsacid empire took second place to Rome's own, of course. But it was a close second, not a distant one. The Arsacids of Rome were significant not least because they helped the Romans see Parthia as an imperial peer.

CHAPTER 7

THE ARSACIDS OF ROME UNDER THE LATER JULIO-CLAUDIANS

This chapter turns to the role of Parthia in Julio-Claudian policy and imperial ideology after the end of the Augustan period. From the accession of Tiberius to the death of Nero, Roman relations with the Arsacid kingdom were profoundly shaped by the presence of Parthian dynasts in the city of Rome and other sites in Italy. The circulation of Arsacids within Roman territory had two conflicting and paradoxical effects on the Roman-Parthian relationship.

First, the Arsacids of Rome implicated Parthians in Roman internal affairs. According to need, the later Julio-Claudian emperors used Arsacid kings, Parthian nobles, and of course the hostages themselves in order to pursue domestic goals. These rulers had inherited a central concern from their predecessor Augustus: Roman claims to supremacy over the Arsacid empire had to be maintained against the mundane reality of coexistence along the Euphrates – or even, in some cases, in the face of Parthian imperial advances in Armenia. Hostages were indispensable tools for dealing with this challenge. The need to obtain and release hostages aligned the emperors with political actors from Arsacid territory, creating contingent alliances and shifting coalitions across imperial boundaries.

Second, the exhibition of hostages in Roman spectacles deepened the ideological division between the two empires even as their internal politics and ruling families became more interconnected. The Augustan conception of Parthia as “another world” survived and thrived under his successors. Grandiose displays involving hostages presented these figures as the curiosities of a distant, exotic, and barbaric Orient. Steeped in Roman clichés about the Parthian east, the Julio-Claudian exhibition of Arsacid dynasts deepened the Roman conviction that the

lands to the east of the Euphrates were unruly and unruleable, a place better kept at bay by their imperial power rather than ruled directly.

In the realm of politics, the Arsacids of Rome blurred the line that marked where the Roman state ended and the Parthian one began. In the realm of ideology, they were turned into symbols that reduced such complexity to black and white – entrenching a division between two empires whose boundaries they transcended.

Tiberius and Vonones

Vonones' return to Roman territory in 15/16 CE after his failed kingship was not only part of the history of international relations between the Roman and Arsacid empires; it had an impact within Roman domestic politics, as well. The former hostage was implicated in the alleged misdeeds of Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, the Syrian governor whose trial drew him into one of the biggest political scandals of the early Principate.¹ Differing views of Vonones are found in the ancient sources – an ambivalence that suggests that he was used by different Roman political actors in different ways. For some ancient observers, Vonones was a grasping outsider whose meddlesomeness nearly dragged Rome into a war with Artabanus, the new Parthian king. For others, he was a dignitary worthy of Roman protection and support – in stark contrast to the actual treatment he received at the hands of Tiberius.

The only contemporary account comes from the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre* (*SCPP*), an inscribed document that records the Senate's decisions following the trial of Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso. Piso was tried and convicted in 20 CE for the murder of Germanicus, Tiberius' nephew. The Senate's proclamation has survived in several different inscriptions, and while it is

¹ For the background on this Piso, see Syme 1979: 738–41; 1986: 367–75; Shotter 1974: 229–32; Vogel-Weidemann 1982: 121–7; Eck et al. 1996: 71–7 with n.61 for further literature.

not clear whether there was originally one or many *senatus consulta* that dealt with the incident, the document that was distributed to the provinces can be reconstructed with some confidence.²

The portion of the text that deals with Vonones has few textual issues:

...*bellum cum Armeniacum*
tum Parthicum, quantum in ipso fuit, moverit, quod neq(ue) ex mandatis principis nostri epistulisq(ue) frequentibus Germanici Caesaris, cum is abesset, Vononem, qui suspectus regi Parthorum erat, longius removeri voluerit, ne profugere ex custodia posset, id quod fecit, et conloqui quosdam ex numero Armeniorum malos et audaces cum Vonone passus sit, ut per eosdem tumultus in Armenia excitaretur ac Vonone(s) vel occiso vel expulso rege Armeniae, quem Germanicus Caesar ex voluntate patris sui senatusq(ue) ei genti regem dedisset, (eam) occuparet, eaq(ue) magnis muneribus Vononis corruptus fecerit³

[Piso], to the extent that it was in his power, stirred up both an Armenian and a Parthian war, in that he did not, in accordance with the commands of our *princeps* and the frequent missives of Germanicus Caesar, when the latter was away, want Vonones, who was suspected by the king of the Parthians, to be removed a great distance away in order to insure that he not flee from custody – which did in fact happen. He also allowed certain wicked and reckless men from among the Armenians to confer with Vonones so that discord might arise in Armenia through their agency and Vonones seize the throne once the king of Armenia – whom Germanicus had given to that race in accordance with his father's will and the will of the Senate – had been killed or driven out; and he did these things because he was corrupted by great gifts from Vonones.

Although Vonones is important to the decree only inasmuch as he highlights the misdeeds of Piso, the Senate clearly regards the deposed Arsacid king with hostility. Piso is faulted for supporting and enabling Vonones despite the commands (*mandata*) of Tiberius and the letters of Germanicus, whose overriding *imperium* – second only to that of Tiberius himself – is mentioned in the immediately preceding lines.⁴

² On the survival and reconstruction of the text see Eck et al. 1996: 1–10; Griffin 1997: 254–5; Lott 2012: 255–8.

³ *SCPP* 37–45; text after Potter / Damon 1999; cf. Suerbaum 1999: 218.

⁴ *SCPP* 29–35; cf. *TS* 113; Tac. *Ann.* 2.43.1. On Germanicus' proconsular power, see further Syme 1986: 372–3; Lott 2012: 219.

The text shows how groups of political actors joined in coalitions that cut across Rome and Parthia's imperial boundaries.⁵ Piso, Vonones, and the "wicked men" among the Armenians are aligned on one side; their opponents are the Senate, the emperor, the deceased Germanicus, and, most strikingly, the Arsacid king Artabanus, whose complaints about Vonones have worked their way into a Roman domestic political dispute. The Senate makes it clear that an offense against Artabanus – in this case, refusing to allow Vonones to be relocated a safe distance away from the Roman-Parthian frontier – is tantamount to an offense against the authority of the emperor, who has aligned himself with his Arsacid counterpart.

The emperor's complete disavowal of a former Roman hostage is striking. Vonones' departure for Parthia from Rome was a point of pride for Augustus, who proudly commemorated the event in the *Res Gestae*.⁶ But the deposed king's return to Roman territory seems to have been ignominious. There is no hint in any of the ancient sources that Tiberius or Germanicus harbored hopes of restoring Rome's former hostage to the Arsacid throne.⁷ Instead, the emperor and his representative Germanicus chose good relations with Artabanus over a renewal of Rome's earlier support for Vonones. Artabanus' victory over Vonones in Parthia had undermined the latter's claim for the Arsacid throne in the Parthian east; the actions of the Julio-Claudian royal family now did the same in the Roman west. Tiberius and Artabanus worked in tandem to eliminate the influence of this figure in Roman-Parthian relations.⁸

Piso's course of action shows that he had a very different idea of Vonones' future trajectory. According to the *SCPP*, Piso accepted substantial bribes from Vonones in exchange for political support. An echo of the idea is found in Tacitus, who writes that Vonones endeared

⁵ Cf. Rowe 2002: 165, noting that the trial involved foreign kings.

⁶ *Mon. Anc.* 33; cf. Chapter 2, p. 65–6.

⁷ Cf. Dando-Collins 2008: 56: Germanicus "[considered] Vonones a man without a future."

⁸ Cf. Levick 1976: 145–6; Seager 2002: 81.

Piso to him through many gifts to the governor's wife, Plancina.⁹ The accusation is not implausible in light of the reports that Vonones entered Roman territory with a sizeable fortune at his disposal.¹⁰ But that is not to say that Piso's actions were self-evidently criminal. Accepting "gifts" from foreign potentates in exchange for political backing was a Roman practice with a long history. Had Piso not been implicated in Germanicus' untimely death, his relationship with Vonones might not have attracted any negative attention – certainly not enough to elicit such harsh condemnation from both the Senate and the emperor.¹¹ In this light, the senate's claim that Piso had tried to "stir up a war" seems like a hyperbolic accusation.¹² A more measured assessment is that he merely used Vonones to pursue his own interest.

The notion that Rome owed such support to one of its former hostages may be evident in other sources that remember Vonones as less a wicked conspirator than a victim of Tiberius' intrigues. According to Josephus, Silanus kept Vonones under guard in Syria "out of respect for his Roman education."¹³ The implication seems to be that Rome was under obligation to its erstwhile ward; Vonones deserved certain considerations in light of his earlier Roman internment. If the deposed king's previous hostageship was a factor for Silanus, then it could also have been a factor for Piso, who took over as governor of Syria in 17 CE.

Was Tiberius' behavior towards Vonones in keeping with the expectations among Roman elites for the treatment of former hostages? The sources preserve different assessments of Vonones' conduct and Tiberius' response to it. Tacitus depicts Vonones as unscrupulous, but also as a victim of his partners in crime. Vonones effected escape from Pompeiopolis through

⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 2.58.1. On the relationship between the *SCPP* and Tacitus' account, see Griffin 1997: 258–61; 2009: 177–80; Talbert 1999; Mellor 2011: 26–41.

¹⁰ Suet. *Tib.* 49.2; Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1.

¹¹ For the Senate's attacks on Piso's character in the document, cf. Cooley 1998: 199–201.

¹² Lott 2012: 271.

¹³ Joseph. *AJ* 18.52: κάκεινος μὲν κατὰ αἰδῶ τῆς ἐν Ῥώμῃ κομιδῆς ἐν Συρίᾳ παρεφυλάσσετο. Cf. Braund (1984: 12) on "the typological similarity of the hostage and student."

bribes, to be sure, an action that Tacitus calls a *scelus*, or a wicked deed. But he was also murdered by a soldier who may have been the recipient of one of those bribes and feared the exposure of his guilt – the right punishment, perhaps, but for the wrong reasons.¹⁴

But Suetonius' discussion uses the Arsacid dynast to make a moral point: Vonones was a victim of Tiberius' greed. The author's biography of Tiberius refers to the former hostage as *rex Parthorum* despite the fact that he had lost the throne – a far cry from the *SCPP*, where Artabanus is the only monarch to be called by that name. The deposed king "had betaken himself to Roman territory in the belief that he was committing himself to the faith of the Roman people," but instead "was despoiled through treachery and murdered."¹⁵ Vonones is one of several examples chosen to highlight Tiberius' use of plunder (*rapina*) to fill up the treasury. The innocence of the other men and women mentioned in this passage lends the author's point greater heft. Tiberius' covetousness appears all the worse because its victims were guiltless.¹⁶

To be sure, Suetonius does not tell the reader the source for his information about Vonones, and it is possible that the moral spin on the story comes from the biographer himself.¹⁷ But Tacitus too mentions the fortune that Vonones brought to Syria, a treasure that the Arsacid king Artabanus evidently demanded back from Tiberius.¹⁸ While it cannot be proved that any Tiberian contemporaries shared Suetonius' view of Vonones' unfortunate end, contention over the emperor's appropriation of these funds does seem to have begun shortly after the former hostage's death. Perhaps Suetonius saw in this debate suitable material for the illustration of Tiberius' greed.

¹⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.68.

¹⁵ Suet. *Tib.* 49.2: *sed et Vononem regem Parthorum, qui pulsus a suis quasi in fidem p. R. cum ingenti gaza Antiochiam se receperat, spoliatum perfidia et occisum.*

¹⁶ Cf. Vogt 1975: 219–21.

¹⁷ On Suetonius' sources for his life of Tiberius, see Baldwin 1983: 146–57.

¹⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1; cf. Seager 2005: 203.

The discrepancies between the *SCPP* and the later literary sources show the diversity of Roman views on Vonones' career, as well as the political controversy that could arise from divergent interpretations of his hostageship. In the *SCPP*, Vonones is a scheming ally of Piso who conspires to drag Rome into a Parthian war; in Suetonius and, to a lesser extent, Tacitus, he is a victim of Tiberius' greed and deceptiveness. Which tradition better captures the "real" Vonones is, for the present discussion, of less interest than the tendency of different actors in Roman domestic politics to use the former hostage for their various purposes. Tiberius and the Senate used him as a tool to discredit and indict Piso. Piso used him as a means to extend the reach of his gubernatorial power in the east and as a way to show his defiance of Germanicus.¹⁹ Germanicus relocated him to Cilicia as a way to spite Piso.²⁰ And Suetonius' text invokes Vonones' memory as an example of Tiberius' rapaciousness, highlighting the emperor's impropriety in his mistreatment of the hostage.

Tiberius, Phraates, and Tiridates

As Artabanus II pressed forward with his military campaign in Armenia in 35 CE, a delegation from the rebellious Parthian nobles Sinnaces and Abdus arrived in Rome to petition the emperor for the release of a hostage.²¹ The only source for this embassy is Tacitus, who has the delegates employ an unusual line of argumentation.²² To secure the release of the hostage Phraates, the messengers proclaim to Tiberius that "only a name and an instigator for the deed were required if it were the will of Caesar that the stock of Arsaces be seen on the bank of the Euphrates."²³

¹⁹ See Shotter 1968: 206; Andrade 2012: 467.

²⁰ Seager 2005: 86.

²¹ On this campaign, see Chapter 3, p. 108–14.

²² For a discussion of the scene in the context of Tacitus' other digressions on foreign affairs, see Pfordt 1998: 71–5.

²³ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2: *nomine tantum et auctore opus [ut] sponte Caesaris ut genus Arsacis ripam apud Euphratis cerneretur.*

Recourse to Rome is necessary, they say, because of Artabanus' large scale assassination of the Arsacids living in Parthian territory, even children.²⁴ As Tacitus presents it, the Parthian case for a Roman response to Artabanus' provocations has nothing to do with Armenia or with Roman security on the eastern frontier. Instead, it is couched in terms of upholding the Arsacid family's power in the lands east of the Euphrates.

To be sure, the wording of the messengers' statement is disingenuous, as the reader of Tacitus knows. In his discussion of Artabanus' rise to power, the historian unambiguously states that the man who toppled Vonones was "of Arsacid blood."²⁵ He later has Tiridates' supporters in Seleucia impute that Artabanus was only partly Arsacid – in an apparent contrast with Tiridates, he was a member of the family only on his mother's side.²⁶ Even this formulation does not go so far as to completely deny Artabanus' Arsacid lineage, even though it is uttered by Artabanus' enemies within the Parthian empire. The delegates who come to request the release of Phraates are therefore misrepresenting the truth. They themselves know that the *genus Arsacis* already controls the Parthian throne, because Artabanus is a member of that family. There is no reason to believe that the Romans would have thought otherwise.

Why, then, does the faction of Sinnaces and Abdus ask Tiberius for assistance in *reinstalling* an Arsacid on the Parthian throne, as though it were presently held by a non-Arsacid? The answer is that the rhetorical contest to determine who counted as a member of the Arsacid family was happening on both sides of the Euphrates. Because of the cross-border circulation of the Arsacids of Rome, the matter of Arsacid legitimacy was now debated in Roman territory and in the midst of Roman discussions about eastern policy. With a branch of

²⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2: *quia neminem gentis Arsacidarum summae rei imponere poterant, interfectis ab Artabano plerisque aut nondum adultis.* For Tacitus' use of *aut* for *et aliis*, see Koestermann 1963–8: 2.316.

²⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.1: *Arsacidarum e sanguine.*

²⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.3.

the Arsacid family living in the city of Rome, the Julio-Claudian emperors had a stake in this debate. Through Arsacid hostages and the Parthian nobles who crossed the Euphrates to ask for their release, the discourse surrounding the nature of Arsacid kingship took place in both the Parthian and Roman empires, transcending the political boundary between the two states.

The audience scene therefore depicts the Romans as engaged interlocutors in a discussion about the right of the Arsacid family to rule Parthia. Why would Tiberius care whether “the stock of Arsaces was seen on the bank of the Euphrates”? The appeal shows that Rome was actively engaged in defining the parameters of Arsacid kingship and, on a rhetorical level, in upholding the Arsacid family within Parthian territory. The Augustan ideology of the *divisio orbis* had marked Parthia out as a different world from that of the Roman imperium. But the Arsacid hostages who lived in the capital meant that Rome had a stake in the preservation of the family who ruled that world. When Sinnaces and Abdus asked for Phraates from Tiberius, their petition meant that Arsacid history was taking shape on both sides of the Euphrates, in Rome no less than in Ctesiphon. As the hosts of a group of Arsacid dynasts, the Romans had yoked themselves to the fortunes of Parthia’s ruling family. Parthia may have been a separate world, but the dynastic politics of the Arsacid family now had roots on either side of the *divisio orbis*.

Caligula and Darius

In 39 CE, Caligula built a three-mile-long pontoon bridge from Baiae to Puteoli and rode back and forth over it in a theatrical procession.²⁷ The meaning of this spectacle – as intended by Caligula and as understood by his Italian audience – has been the subject of much debate. Ancient authors preserve several explanations for Caligula’s construction of the bridge.²⁸

²⁷ On the date, see now Wardle 2007.

²⁸ The only contemporary to mention the Baiae procession is Seneca (*De Brev. Vit.* 18.5); both he and Josephus (*AJ* 19.6) characterize the event as the bombastic self-aggrandizement of a madman. Suetonius knew of three possible

Modern commentators have connected the exhibition to a number of different aspects of his reign, including the abortive British and German campaigns, the relationship between the emperor and the senatorial aristocracy, and, of course, the emperor's personal psychology and supposed madness.²⁹ Without discounting previous treatments, a focus on the event's connections to Roman-Parthian relations can complement Donna Hurley's interpretation of the Baiae procession as a "surrogate triumph over the East" by showing how the participation of an Arsacid hostage was central to the political meaning of the spectacle.³⁰

That hostage was Darius, the son of king Artabanus II. Although the chronology is disputed, Darius had been handed over to Lucius Vitellius in around 36 CE and would thus have recently arrived in Italy.³¹ Suetonius and Dio are the only two authors to mention his participation in the spectacle. They agree that he did not take part on the first day, when Caligula traversed the pontoon from Baiae to Puteoli – that is, marching from west to east – and that he accompanied the emperor during the subsequent return in the opposite direction. But the details differ. Suetonius' notice leaves much about Darius' participation unclear:

*Per hunc pontem ultro citro commeavit biduo continenti, primo die phalerato equo insignisque quercea corona et caetra et gladio aureaque chlamyde, postridie quadrigario habitu curriculoque biiugi famosorum equorum, prae se ferens Dareum puerum ex Parthorum obsidibus.*³²

motives: to rival the Achaemenid king Xerxes; to instill fear in the Germans and Britons; and to spite the prophecy of an astrologer named Thrasyllus (*Cal.* 19.3). Dio's explanation is that Caligula was eager to drive his chariot over the sea (59.17.1). A late and brief account in [Aurel. Vict.] *Epit.* 3.9 adds little.

²⁹ Scholarly discussions of Baiae with respect to the army and Caligula's British and German campaigns: Kleijwegt 1994: 664; Winterling 2011: 129–30. Slight to senatorial aristocracy: Winterling 2011: 131. Demonstration of manhood: Barrett 1989: 212. The literature on the question of Caligula's madness is vast; see Winterling 2009: 103–19, with citations.

³⁰ Hurley 1993: 73–4. Balsdon (1934: 53) made much of Darius' participation, but held that Caligula's intention was to impress the Parthian visitor, not his Italian audience. The interpretation is hard to square with the fact that, so far as is known, Darius never returned to Parthian territory, though it is true that "reports of the latest imperial spectacles and monuments could eventually have filtered back, and given food for thought, to the Parthian court" (Spawforth 1994: 242).

³¹ On the chronology of Darius' journey to Italy, see Balsdon 1934: 52.

³² Suet. *Calig.* 19.2; cf. [Aurel. Vict.] *Epit.* 3.9.

Over this bridge [Caligula] passed to and fro for two successive days. On the first day he went on a decorated horse, distinguished by a crown of oak leaves, a small shield, a sword, and a golden chlamys. On the next day he wore the costume of a charioteer on a chariot drawn by a pair of renowned horses, making a display of Darius, a boy from among the Parthian hostages.

Since Caligula is dressed as a charioteer, Allen has suggested that the emperor served as the driver for his hostage, who presumably took pride of place next to Caligula on the chariot.³³

Ultimately, though, all that is clear from the text is that the emperor made a prominent display (*prae se ferens*) of the Arsacid; Darius was a particularly noteworthy part of the procession, even if the details concerning his exhibition are vague.³⁴

Dio's assessment is more specific. In his account, Darius' subjection is on full display, and the spectacle is explicitly connected to the triumphal processions of the late Republic.³⁵

κάνταῦθα τῆς ὑστεραίας ἀναπαυσάμενος ὥσπερ ἐκ μάχης, ἀνεκομίσθη διὰ τῆς αὐτῆς γεφύρας ἐφ' ἄρματος, χιτῶνα χρυσόπαστον ἐνδύς: ἤγον δὲ αὐτὸν οἱ ἀθληταὶ ἵπποι οἱ ἀξιονικότατοι. καὶ ἄλλα τε αὐτῷ πολλὰ ὡς καὶ λάφυρα συνηκολούθησε, καὶ Δαρεῖος ἀνὴρ Ἀρσακίδης, ἐν τοῖς ὁμηρεύουσι τότε τῶν Πάρθων ὄν.³⁶

And resting there on the following day as though from battle, [Caligula] was borne back over the same bridge on a chariot, clad in a gold-embroidered tunic; and two champion horses accustomed to winning the most victories drew him. A great many things followed after him as though they were spoils, including Darius, an Arsacid man who was among the Parthians serving as hostages at that time.

The long train of spoils recalls the Roman triumph. There was a Republican tradition of exhibiting hostages at such processions; Caligula's use of Darius may have hearkened back to earlier triumphal appearances of captive dynasts.³⁷ But Dio's comment "as though they were

³³ Allen 2006: 122. Nero is also supposed to have appeared as a charioteer in public: see Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.5; Cass. Dio 63.1.1.

³⁴ For the meaning of *prae se ferens*, see Hurley 1993: 77, who notes that Suetonius also applies the phrase to Artabanus (*Cal.* 14.3).

³⁵ On the general differences between Suetonius and Dio's descriptions of the Baiae spectacle, see Kleijwegt 1994: 655–6.

³⁶ Cass. Dio 59.17.5.

³⁷ Hostages in Republican triumphs: Liv. 34.52.9; Eutrop. 4.2.3; Oros. 4.20.2; Plut. *Pomp.* 45.4; App. *Mith.* 117; cf.

spoils” (ὡς καὶ λάφυρα) makes it clear that, in the author’s point of view, this triumph was a sham.³⁸ It was all show and no substance, since Caligula had made no conquests that might have been worthy of a triumphal honor.

The sources thus support a range of interpretations of how Darius took part in the procession. One consequence of his role, however, is clear: the Arsacid’s participation would have clearly connected the spectacle to recent events in the Parthian east. It was on another bridge of boats there, just two years earlier, that Lucius Vitellius and Artabanus II had conducted negotiations that patched up the Roman-Parthian status quo after Artabanus’ failed attempt to claim Armenia for the Arsacid family.³⁹ Darius’ Roman captivity was a direct result of the talks that took place on that pontoon, as Josephus reports:

καὶ ζεύξεως τοῦ ποταμοῦ γενομένης κατὰ τὸ μεσαίτατον τῆς γεφύρας ἀλλήλους ὑπηντίαζον μετὰ φυλακῆς ἑκάτερος τῆς περὶ αὐτόν... καὶ Ἀρτάβανος πέμπει Τιβερίῳ ὄμηρον Δαρεῖον τὸν υἱὸν μετὰ πολλῶν δώρων.⁴⁰

When the river had been yoked, [Vitellius and Artabanus] met one another in the very middle of the bridge, each with a guard around him... And Artabanus sent to Tiberius his son Darius as a hostage along with many other gifts.

The Baiae spectacle can thus be read as a restaging of the events along the Euphrates that led to Darius’ surrender to the Romans, an interpretation supported above all by the east-west orientation of Caligula’s bridge. On the first day of the procession the emperor marched from Baiae into Puteoli – that is, from west to east – crossing the “Euphrates” from Roman territory into Parthia. On the next day, he returned with Darius from east to west – recreating the Arsacid prince’s departure from Parthia and his entrance into Roman custody.⁴¹

Walker 1980: 98; Beard 2007: 107–42; Östenberg 2009: 128–67. On Baiae as a triumph, see Beacham 1999: 177–8; Beard 2007: 271; but cf. Malloch 2001: 211.

³⁸ Cf. [Aurel. Vict.] *Epit.* 3.9: *quasi triumphans*.

³⁹ See Chapter 3, p. 114–5.

⁴⁰ Joseph. *AJ* 18.102–3.

⁴¹ Cf. Hurley 1993: 73–4.

Caligula's exhibition of Darius thus followed the Augustan precedent of using Arsacid hostages to project an image of Roman dominance over Parthia. Just as Augustus had paraded the children of Phraates IV in front of an urban crowd at one of his spectacles, Caligula used a recent Arsacid arrival as a showpiece in a grandiose public display.⁴² Once again, Rome's physical control over the body of an Arsacid dynast could represent Roman suzerainty over the kingdom that his family ruled. Darius' subjection stood in for the subjection of Parthia as a whole. Rome's 36 CE "victory" over Parthia was recreated in Italy, where the submission of an Arsacid royal hostage could be symbolically restaged.

As in Augustus' case, the pomp and circumstance of imperial spectacle was a poor reflection of the realities of power on the ground. Tiberius and Vitellius had managed to maintain Roman supremacy over Armenia in the face of Parthian aggression, but the events of 35/6 CE amounted to no more than a defense of the status quo. Caligula had not extended the empire to the east any more than Augustus had; the Euphrates remained the rough boundary between Rome and Parthia, and both states preserved their respective spheres of influence. But the emperor's possession of a new Arsacid hostage meant that his presentation of eastern affairs to a domestic audience didn't have to adhere scrupulously to the truth. In the realm of foreign policy, the submission of Darius had done little more than reaffirm the existing order. In the realm of domestic affairs, however, his presence in Italy could shore up Roman pretensions to *imperium sine fine* in the Parthian east. As Caligula re-crossed his pontoon from east to west accompanied by a new Arsacid hostage, he could send a message to his Italian audience: Roman power had been successfully projected to the far bank of the Euphrates.

⁴² On Augustus' spectacle, see Suet. *Aug.* 43.3–4 with the discussion in Chapter 6, p. 219–20.

Like Augustus' Salaminian *naumachia*, the Baiae procession connected Roman policy in the Parthian east with the Greco-Persian wars tradition.⁴³ A massive pontoon stretched over a vast expanse of ocean; a bridge linking East and West together; the participation of a Persian dynast named Darius – the echo of the Achaemenid crossings of the Bosphorus and Hellespont by Darius and Xerxes was undeniable.⁴⁴ Both Suetonius and Dio mention Caligula's desire to outdo these Persian bridge-builders.⁴⁵ As discussed in the last chapter, the Romans imagined the Achaemenids as the ancestors and predecessors of the Arsacids.⁴⁶ The presence of the young Darius could thus have turned the Baiae spectacle into a sort of inversion of the Greco-Persian wars: now the West was on the march, with the East on the defensive.

But Caligula also added a new element to Augustus' take on the Persian wars tradition. He drew on the legacy of Alexander the Great – a historical exemplum that supported eastern expansion rather than eastern accommodation. The *Alexandri imitatio* is clear in Caligula's use of a breastplate that had supposedly belonged to the Macedonian conqueror; the emperor wore this piece of armor on the first day of the procession, as he crossed from west to east, moving from Baiae to Puteoli.⁴⁷ When he returned with Darius, the Arsacid prince might have stood in for Darius III, the Achaemenid king whom Alexander had made every effort to capture alive.⁴⁸ Once again, there was a precedent for invoking Alexander's legacy in Roman spectacles that dealt with the east: Pompey wore a cloak that had supposedly belonged to Alexander in his

⁴³ On Augustus' *naumachia*, see Chapter 6, p. 205–7.

⁴⁴ Darius bridges the Bosphorus: Hdt. 4.83–9. Xerxes bridges the Hellespont: Hdt. 7.33–56. On the Greco-Persian war echoes of Caligula's bridge, see Balsdon 1934: 50–4; Spawforth 1994: 238–42; Wardle 1994: 195; Bridges 2015: 160–73.

⁴⁵ Suet. *Cal.* 19.3 (who mentions Xerxes alone); Cass. Dio 59.17.11 (who mentions both Darius and Xerxes).

⁴⁶ See Chapter 6, p. 204–7.

⁴⁷ Cass. Dio 59.17.3. Suetonius (*Cal.* 52) also mentions this breastplate, though not in connection with the Baiae spectacle. On Caligula's *Alexandri imitatio*, see esp. Malloch 2001.

⁴⁸ Venetis 2012: 149.

triumph of 61 BCE.⁴⁹ As in the days of the late Republic, Alexander could serve as a model for extending Roman power into “Persian” territory.⁵⁰

Whichever Achaemenid the hostage was meant to represent, the Persian war echoes once again cast the Arsacid kings as the heirs to the empire of the ancient Persians – and, by extension, identified Rome with the Greek or Macedonian foes of that empire. Darius, whose connection to the Achaemenid realm must have seemed obvious from his very name, provided a living embodiment of the ancient dynasty that ruled the east. His presence thus shored up a historical analogy that continued to shape how the Romans understood the relationship between their own empire and that of the Arsacids. Both geography and history divided the two powers – the former by means of the Euphrates, the latter by means of a timeless East-West conflict that long predated the Julio-Claudian period. Darius for his part furnished the emperor with an Achaemenid prop to play to a domestic audience, allowing Rome’s leader to claim preeminence over the Persian east through the exhibition of a subdued Arsacid captive.

After the Baiae procession, Darius makes no further appearance in the literary sources. But epigraphic evidence may preserve traces of his later life in the vicinity of the Italian religious complex at Nemi. A piece of lead pipe found in the vicinity of Nemi’s theater and nymphaeum carries the inscription *DARII REGIS*, “of Darius the king.”⁵¹ The meaning of both the name in the genitive and the title of “king” have been debated.⁵² But an identification with Caligula’s

⁴⁹ App. *Mith.* 117. On the passage, see Beard 2003: 35; 2007: 13–4.

⁵⁰ On Alexander as a model for would-be Roman conquerors in the east, see Mossé 2004: 170–2; Heuss 1954; Vogt 1969: 303–8; Isager 1993; Kühnen 2008; on Roman reception of Alexander generally, see Spencer 2002. But see also Gruen 2003: 640–1, who takes a skeptical view of Alexander’s influence on Roman dynasts.

⁵¹ Morpurgo 1931: 252, 280.

⁵² Coarelli (1987: 181–3) posited the existence of a nearby villa owned first by Darius and then by Volusia Cornelia, but Bruun (1995: 52–7; cf. Scheid 1989) has reinterpreted the inscribed *fistulae* and the waterworks of which they were part as the donations of benefactors, not the property of real estate owners. Various conjectures have been made as to why Caligula’s Darius would have been called *rex*. Morpurgo’s idea (1931: 298–9) that Caligula named Darius the *rex nemorensis* has been poorly received (see Leone 2000: 29; Green 2007: 58 n.8). Chaumont (1992: 59) suggests that he may have been given the title after the death of Artabanus II. Leone (2000: 30–1) suggests that

hostage seems likely, especially in light of the imperial form of the inscribed letters as well as the emperor's attested activities at Nemi.⁵³

Partly on the basis of this *fistula*, Filippo Coarelli reinterpreted an inscription also found at Nemi that seems to be a Hadrianic restoration of a shrine originally set up by an Arsacid dedicator.⁵⁴ Coarelli restored the text as follows:

[imp. Caesar divi Traiani Parthici fil. divi] Nervae nepos Traianus
[Hadrianus Augustus pont. max. trib]unic. potest. VI cos. III
[fanum (?) quod Dareius Arthabani regis regu]m Parthorum fil. Arsacides
[fecerat, vetustate collaps]um restituit.⁵⁵

The emperor Caesar, son of the divine Trajan Parthicus, grandson of Nerva, Trajan Hadrian Augustus, High Priest, tribune six times, consul three times, restored the shrine which... Darius, the son of Artabanus, king of kings, an Arsacid, had set up, which had collapsed due to age.

In contrast to older reconstructions which did not supply a proper name for the original dedicator, Coarelli argued that Darius was the *Arsacides* referred to in the third line of the inscription.⁵⁶ The *fistula*, he reasoned, attested Darius' presence at Nemi, while the hostage's reception by Caligula, who owned a villa nearby, also suggested a connection to the site.⁵⁷ It is certain that the inscription commemorates a Hadrianic restoration; the description of the emperor as the *Nervae nepos* is attested in other extant inscriptions.⁵⁸ A date of 122 CE can be determined from the references to Hadrian's sixth tribunate and third consulship. The involvement of an Arsacid is likewise clear from the patronymic *Arsacides* in the preserved text, and the conjecture

Caligula took the title "king of kings" for himself and designated Darius "king" to mark him as a vassal.

⁵³ On Caligula at Nemi, see Balsdon 1934: 149; Barrett 1989: 201–2; Wardle 1994: 281–2; Leone 2000: 30–2; Green 2007: 58–9. On the dating of the letters on the *fistula* to the empire, see Morpurgo 1931: 298.

⁵⁴ The dedication has been variously identified with temples to Diana (Gardthausen 1906: 6; Nedergaard 1988a: 108; Allen 2006: 161 n.46) or Isis (Horster 2001: 228). Ultimately, though, there is no way to securely connect any particular deity to the Hadrianic restoration, to say nothing of the original Arsacid dedication.

⁵⁵ Coarelli 1987: 180–1.

⁵⁶ See *CIL* 14.2216 = *ILS* 843 = Hackl et al. 2010: 2.439–40 (III.1.3.A.6), where the third line runs [*fanum quod... Phraatis regis regu]m Parthorum fil. Arsacides*.

⁵⁷ Coarelli 1987: 180–1.

⁵⁸ See e.g. *CIL* 16.69.

that Hadrian was restoring a building originally dedicated by an Arsacid is likely if not ultimately provable.⁵⁹ Of the Arsacid hostages named in other literary and epigraphic sources, Coarelli's arguments show that Darius is most likely to have been the original dedicator.

These two inscriptions hint at aspects of Darius' Roman life that the literary sources pass over in silence. After his exhibition at the Baiae spectacle, the Arsacid prince was not sequestered in captivity or held as a debased prisoner. He seems to have lived a life that was similar, at least in certain respects, to Roman aristocrats. He may have used his resources to set up a dedication at Nemi, an important religious center patronized by many Romans of both high and low status.⁶⁰ Moreover, depending on how one chooses to interpret the *fistula* inscription, Darius might have inhabited a villa at Nemi or even donated a building he subsequently supplied with water. It is striking how the evidence for Darius' activities at Nemi mirrors the finds connected with the Roman matron Volusia Cornelia. Her name, too, was found on a *fistula* in the vicinity, and another inscription survives that commemorates her restoration of Nemi's theater.⁶¹ An Arsacid hostage, in other words, left a footprint at Nemi quite similar to that of a Roman elite.

Darius' Roman life thus looks very different in the literary and epigraphic evidence. In Caligula's Baiae spectacle, the hostage once again embodied the timeless Achaemenid enemy of the east. The emperor paraded Darius across his pontoon to the west, a symbolic display that advertised Caligula's ability to project power even to the far bank of the Euphrates. But when the show was over, the Arsacid entered into an unremarkable Roman life that, despite his apparent

⁵⁹ On "Arsacidae" as a patronymic cf. Cass. Dio 40.14.3: ἕς τε τὸ μέσον τότε πρῶτον ὑπ' Ἀρσάκου τινὸς ἀφίκοντο, ὅθεν περ καὶ οἱ ἔπειτα βασιλεύσαντες αὐτῶν Ἀρσακίδαι ἐπωνομάσθησαν; Ampel. 31.2.1–2: *Arsaces forma et virtute praecipuus, cuius posterī | Arsacidae cognominati sunt.*

⁶⁰ For other dedications at Nemi, see *ILLRP* 74–85; discussion in Green 2007: 280–95.

⁶¹ Morpurgo 1931: 252, 280. The *fistula* was inscribed *VOLUSIAE Q F CORNELIAE*, with the name again in the genitive. For the inscription, see Marzano 2007: 196, with references.

title of *rex*, was never again to involve him in high politics. In the first instance, Darius was a caricature trotted out for a performance, a symbol of Roman supremacy over the timeless power of Persia for an Italian audience to behold. In the second, he took a place in Roman society. Aside from his name and title, little may have distinguished the son of the Arsacid king of kings from a typical Italian aristocrat.

Claudius

Parthian affairs played little role for the remainder of Caligula's short reign. His successor Claudius (r. 41–54 CE) was the next emperor to receive a delegation from the Parthian nobility with a petition for the release of an Arsacid hostage. In 49 CE, Parthian ambassadors spoke before the Senate and successfully petitioned Claudius for the release of Meherdates, the son of Vonones I and the grandson of Phraates IV.⁶² The only source for this embassy is Tacitus, and as usual it is impossible to know how well his text represents the arguments that the Parthian ambassadors made.⁶³ Once again, however, his account points to the dense interconnections between Parthian and Roman domestic politics and the ways in which the influence of the Arsacid family had linked affairs in both empires together.

A quotation from Barbara Levick's biography of Claudius is representative of most scholarly discussions of this episode, particularly among Roman historians and readers of Tacitus: "Claudius had another opportunity to inflict a crushing humiliation on the Parthians at no cost by deploying a claimant to their throne."⁶⁴ Built into the statement are a number of assumptions about the Roman-Parthian relationship. It is characterized as essentially antagonistic; Rome's ruler ruthlessly seizes any chance to "humiliate" the empire's eastern rival.

⁶² On the date of the embassy, see Koestermann 1963–8: 3.123.

⁶³ Speech of the Parthians and Claudius' response: Tac. *Ann.* 12.10–1.

⁶⁴ Levick 1990: 159.

Claudius' scheme is directed at "the Parthians" as a collective, without distinguishing different factions among them. And Meherdates is conceived of as a Roman weapon aimed at the Arsacid throne – the heart of Parthian power.⁶⁵

But this reading glosses over the complex political connections that Tacitus' account of the embassy reveals. In fact, the speech illustrates Rome's commitment to upholding the Arsacids. As with the ambassadors who petitioned Tiberius for the release of Tiridates, the Parthian noblemen are at pains to stress their devotion to Parthia's ruling family. "They did not come," Tacitus has them say, "in ignorance of the treaty or in rebellion against the Arsacid family; they sought the son of Vonones and grandson of Phraates to counter the despotism of Gotarzes, unendurable as it was to both the nobility and to the people."⁶⁶ The representatives of Parthia's recalcitrant nobles reassure the emperor that they have no intention of challenging the Roman-Parthian status quo – and also, more curiously, that they are not disputing the right of the Arsacid family to control the throne. Even if this statement is pure rhetoric, it is not immediately obvious why it is rhetoric that would appeal to the Roman emperor and the Senate. Why do the Parthian speakers feel obligated to publicly reaffirm their loyalty to the Arsacids?

The structure of the speakers' appeal reveals continued Roman support for the position of the Arsacid family within the Parthian empire – support occasioned, in large part, by Rome's possession of Arsacid hostages. As the host of these dynasts, Claudius is expected to shore up and uphold the royal prerogative of Meherdates' family. The Parthian speakers urge the emperor to see that the reign of Gotarzes harms not just Parthia as a whole, but the Arsacids in particular. They illustrate this point with lurid tales of the king's murderous conduct. Gotarzes'

⁶⁵ See Momigliano 1961: 60; Frézouls 1995: 494; Allen 2006: 136; Lerouge 2007: 133.

⁶⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.1: *non se foederis ignaros nec defectione a familia Arsacidarum venire, set [et] filium Vononis, nepotem Phraatis accersere adversus dominationem Gotarzis nobilitati plebique iuxta intolerandum.*

determination to root out potential rivals is said to have ensnared brothers, relatives, and even distant relations; the speakers also add the pathetic detail that the victims of these purges included pregnant women and small children.⁶⁷ The ambassadors urge Claudius to take action against Gotarzes not because the king is harming Rome, but because he is harming Parthia and the family that rules it. In other words, they ask the emperor to help set Parthian internal affairs to rights. Roman foreign policy takes Parthian domestic politics into account.

One might argue that this appeal is pure rhetoric, a diplomatic sleight of hand that obscures Rome's true motives for releasing another Arsacid hostage. Levick's quotation above supports an often expressed view: the Romans used their hostages to interfere in Parthian domestic politics in order to foment chaos and to keep their eastern neighbor weak.⁶⁸ On this interpretation, the embassy from the nobility provided Claudius with an opportunity to trigger a Parthian civil war that would neutralize any threat the kingdom might pose to Roman interests in the east. The resulting instability within the Arsacid empire would actually benefit Rome, because it minimized the chance of a strong Arsacid king challenging the status quo along the Euphrates – or because it laid the groundwork for further Roman imperial expansion east of the Euphrates.⁶⁹

But such an explanation is difficult to reconcile with what is known of Parthian internal affairs during this period. On any reading, the Arsacid kingdom was already weak. Tacitus' own account lingers on the protracted civil wars between Gotarzes and his brother Vardanes, a series of conflicts that preoccupied the Arsacid family within Parthia for several years and rendered

⁶⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.1: *iam fratres, iam propinquos, iam longius sitos caedibus exhaustos; adici coniuges gravidas, liberos parvos.*

⁶⁸ Osgood (2011: 239–40) characterizes Claudius' eastern policy as essentially defensive, and he seems to consider the release of Meherdates as one such defensive measure.

⁶⁹ See the literature cited above, n.65.

encroachment on Rome's sphere of influence impossible.⁷⁰ Nor do the Parthian ambassadors play up their king's potential threat to Roman interests. They call him "unsuccessful in war" and refer contemptuously to his laziness – hardly a characterization that would play upon Roman fears of Arsacid aggression.⁷¹ The circumstances surrounding this embassy were profoundly different from those of 35 CE, when Parthian nobles had petitioned Tiberius for an Arsacid dynast to replace Artabanus II. Tiberius' subsequent dispatch of Phraates and Tiridates was a response to Artabanus' challenge to Roman authority in Armenia. But Claudius faced no such challenge. His release of Meherdates did not address a security issue. The east was quiet, and had been so since at least 41 CE, when a potential Parthian invasion of Armenia had been warded off by the Syrian governor Vibius Marsus.⁷²

Arguments rooted in *Realpolitik*, then, cannot satisfactorily explain why Claudius accedes to the Parthian request for Meherdates' release. Rome's response to this embassy shows how the empire was less a discrete and unitary state seeking an advantage over a rival than a porous political formation entangled in the affairs of its eastern neighbor through the circulation of Arsacid dynasts. The emperor's response to the ambassadors, at least as represented by Tacitus, offers further illustration of this intermingling of Roman and Parthian affairs. "The Roman state," the emperor told his Parthian guests, "had obtained such a fullness of glory that it wanted peace even for foreign nations."⁷³ This is a preening statement made in a highly rhetorical diplomatic setting, to be sure. But it sheds real light on Rome's relationship to Parthia. Claudius' words explicitly couch Roman greatness in terms of Parthian peace. Satiated with conquests, Claudius wants an Arsacid kingdom strong enough to maintain the status quo in the

⁷⁰ For a full discussion of the wars between Vardanes and Gotarzes, see Olbrycht 1997; Malloch 2011: 126–31.

⁷¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.1: *dum socors domi, bellis infaustus ignaviam saevitia tegat.*

⁷² On this aborted invasion, see Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.1.

⁷³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.11.3: *Rem Romanam huc satietate gloriae provectam, ut externis quoque gentibus quietem velit.*

east.⁷⁴ Moreover, the release of Meherdates at the nobility's request means that Rome will work with Parthian actors to see this peace achieved. The hostage would not be an externally imposed Roman puppet, but a leader with crucial support from both Roman and Parthian elites. Rome would stabilize conditions within the Arsacid kingdom by working *through* Parthian domestic politics, not around them.

Nero, Tiridates, and the Golden Day

The war between Nero and Vologaeses for control of Armenia came to a close not through a decisive battle, but through two ceremonial events that delicately negotiated questions of power and prestige. The first was the conference of Corbulo and Tiridates in Armenia in 63 CE, an event discussed in Chapter 5. The second was the crowning of Tiridates by Nero in Rome in 66 CE, a spectacle so opulent that it came to be known as the Golden Day.⁷⁵

Tiridates' coronation is usually construed as an act of face-saving diplomacy: the public submission of Armenia's new ruler allowed Nero to cede the kingdom to the Arsacid family while preserving Rome's reputation.⁷⁶ The interpretation has merit, but previous discussions have not attended to the spectacle's indebtedness to the traditions of Arsacid hostageship. Nero's event must be understood in the context of previous Julio-Claudian exhibitions of the Arsacids of Rome, not least because Tiridates seems to have brought a new group of them with him to the city. Moreover, the coronation once again shows the impact of the Arsacids on Roman internal

⁷⁴ Cf. Koestermann 1963–8: 3.126.

⁷⁵ Cass. Dio 63.6.1. Dio's account of the Golden Day survives mostly in the Epitome of Ioannes Xiphilinus, on which see Millar 1964: 2; Mallan 2013.

⁷⁶ Chaumont 1976: 123; Brunt 1990: 457; Heil 1997: 130–1, 196–7; Campbell 1993: 232–3; Wheeler 2002: 289; Griffin 1984: 227, 232; Lerouge 2007: 131; Mratschek 2013: 52. For a different view, see Frézoul 1995: 494–8, who sees the Neronian settlement as the only lasting accommodation between Rome and Parthia in the first century CE.

affairs, further demonstrating how these hostages had blurred the lines between domestic and foreign politics between Rome and Parthia.

Tiridates' visit may have been the last sizeable transfer of Parthian hostages to Rome. As Dio attests, a number of young Arsacids travelled with Tiridates and were in Rome to take part in Nero's spectacle.

καὶ ὁ Τιριδάτης ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην, οὐχ ὅτι τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ παῖδας ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς τοῦ
Οὐλογαΐσου τοῦ τε Πακόρου καὶ τοῦ Μονοβάζου ἄγων, ἀνήχθη.⁷⁷

But Tiridates was brought up to Rome, bringing with him not just his own children, but also those of Vologaeses, Pacorus, and Monobazus.

Tiridates came to Rome with the children of the three highest ranking Arsacids: his own; those of his brother Pacorus, the king of Media; and those of the Arsacid king of kings Vologaeses.⁷⁸

Monobazus was the king of Adiabene, which despite its status as a Parthian dependency had submitted hostages to Rome during the reign of Claudius.⁷⁹

Dio does not explicitly say that any of these children came as hostages, but this possibility seems likely based on a passage in Pliny. The latter author makes a brief reference to royal hostages as he introduces his account of “the interior of Asia,” a region that includes Cappadocia, the Caucasus, and – most importantly for the present discussion – Armenia.⁸⁰

*nunc reddatur ingens in mediterraneo situs, in quo multa aliter ac veteres proditurum me non eo infitias, anxia perquisitis cura rebus nuper in eo situ gestis a Domitio Corbulone regibusque inde missis supplicibus aut regum liberis obsidibus.*⁸¹

Now let an account be given of the vast area of the interior [of Asia]. I do not deny that I will relate much that differs from the accounts of previous authors, as I took solicitous care in ascertaining recent events in this area from Domitius

⁷⁷ Cass. Dio 63.1.2. This was presumably a different group than those mentioned at Tac. *Ann.* 15.30.2 and Cass. Dio 62.23.4; for a discussion of those passages, see Heil 1997: 127–8.

⁷⁸ On Vologaeses, Tiridates, and Pacorus as the three most powerful Arsacids, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1.

⁷⁹ Joseph. *AJ* 20.36–7. On Monobazus' submission of hostages, see further Heil 1997: 169. On Adiabene between Rome and Parthia, see further Marciak 2014a.

⁸⁰ Plin. *HN* 6.23–33.

⁸¹ Plin. *HN* 6.23.

Corbulo and from the kings sent from these places as suppliants or the children of kings who were sent as hostages.

Pliny names three sources that have provided him with a more reliable geography of the Asian interior than the version available in earlier authors: Corbulo, suppliant kings, and young royal hostages. Corbulo penned reports of his activities in the field in the east; these works supplied Roman audiences (including future historians like Tacitus) with new information about the Parthians and the lands they ruled.⁸² Pliny himself served under Corbulo during the Roman war against the Chauci in 47 CE, so his use of his former commander as a source makes sense.⁸³

Pliny does not supply the names of any of these suppliant kings, nor does he specify that any of the young hostages were Arsacids. But if one considers his testimony alongside Dio's, some inferences can be made. Pliny is recording the geography of Armenia, a land where Corbulo fought the Arsacids Vologaeses and Tiridates in campaigns that he narrated in a written account. Moreover, at the conclusion of the war, Tiridates came to Rome to bend the knee to Nero in exchange for the crown of Armenia. That event could have looked like an act of supplication, at least to Roman eyes, so Tiridates was probably one of the *reges supplices* that Pliny mentions.⁸⁴ Finally, Dio reports that Tiridates arrived in Rome with his own children, those of his brothers Vologaeses and Pacorus, and even those of Monobazus, the king of Adiabene; the *παῖδες* of Dio's text matches the *liberi* of Pliny's.

It thus seems likely that at least some of the children in Tiridates' retinue were Arsacid hostages intended for internment in Rome. Neither their number nor their gender is anywhere specified, but if previous hostage submissions were any indication, anywhere from one to several

⁸² On Corbulo's writings, see Chapter 1, p. 37–9.

⁸³ Plin. *Epist.* 3.5.3; Plin. *HN* 16.2; Tac. *Ann.* 11.18–9.

⁸⁴ As Braund (2013: 93) notes, however, this is not to say that Tiridates himself would have understood his visit as an acceptance of vassalage.

of these children would have remained in Rome in hostageship after Tiridates' departure. The visit of the new Armenian king was therefore not simply an act of diplomacy between two discrete and unitary states. It was also a hostage submission that would entrust the royal youth of the east to the court of Nero, linking the two empires together even as it formalized a new status quo in Armenia.

The possible presence of hostages in Tiridates' retinue can inform the interpretation of how Nero put his Parthian guests on display. After a lengthy and expensive overland procession from the Euphrates to Italy, Tiridates and his company met the emperor in Neapolis.⁸⁵ Before heading to Rome for the main event, the emperor and the king appeared together at a gladiatorial exhibition put on by the imperial freedman Patrobius at Puteoli – a show at which the Parthians were to be both spectators and spectacle. In a page straight out of the Augustan playbook, the games demonstrated the geographical reach of Rome's power in their display of men, women and children from Ethiopia. The representatives from this foreign and exotic population were, according to Dio, a sign of the brilliance and luxury of the spectacle.⁸⁶ Perhaps connected with recent expeditions that Nero had dispatched to Ethiopia, the show would have dazzled its Italian and Parthian onlookers with the sheer number of people brought from a land at the very edge of the known world.⁸⁷

But as with previous imperial spectacles, the presence of hostages meant that the Parthians were there not just to look, but also to be looked at. Dio reports that Tiridates gave an

⁸⁵ On the procession, which supposedly cost 800,000 sesterces per day for nine months, see Cass. Dio 63.1.2–2.3; Suet. *Ner.* 30.2; Plin. *HN* 30.16. On the expenses, see Bradley 1978: 89; Heil 1997: 130; Malitz 1999: 65; Mratschek 2013: 48.

⁸⁶ Cass. Dio 63.3.1.

⁸⁷ On Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman imagination, see Snowden 1970, esp. 163–8, on Ethiopians in Roman theatrical displays. Nero had Ethiopia explored, perhaps in anticipation of a campaign: see Sen. *QNat.* 6.8.3; Plin. *HN* 6.181–4; discussion in Snowden 1970: 135–6; Braund 2015: 131–42. On Nero's desire to find the source of the Nile (Sen. *QNat.* 6.8.3), cf. Luc. 10.188–91 with Tracy 2014: 259–60; Ahl 1970: 224–5.

archery demonstration to honor Patrobius' efforts in orchestrating the ceremonies. The king "shot at wild beasts from his seat on high, and – if this can be believed – wounded and killed two bulls at once with a single arrow."⁸⁸ Even if the final detail exaggerates Tiridates' prowess, the report shows that Ethiopia was not the only foreign land on display in Patrobius' show. In the Roman mind the Parthians were inexorably linked to archery, as numerous literary and sculptural references to the bows and arrows of Parthia's mounted horsemen attest.⁸⁹ Tiridates' demonstration would thus have played into Roman stereotypes about the Parthians, turning the emperor's guests into showpieces put on display for Italian viewers.⁹⁰

In his exhibition of Tiridates and the younger royalty who accompanied him, Nero drew on Augustan precedent for the domestic use of Arsacid hostages. The first Julio-Claudian emperor had led his Arsacid hostages over the arena's sands before seating them directly behind him to view the amusements that followed.⁹¹ Rome's Parthian royalty commanded respect and were accorded a seat of honor near Augustus, but they were also made into an attraction to be viewed on the same stage as exotic curiosities like rhinoceroses, tigers, and giant snakes. The same dynamic applied to Tiridates and his retinue. The Armenian king shot "from his seat on high," a position of honor that nevertheless became an elevated stage when the moment required. Like the Ethiopians he had been watching not long before, Tiridates and the Arsacids around him represented a distant population brought to the heart of the empire by the power of its ruler. They were there not only to view a demonstration of Rome's geographical reach, but to furnish further

⁸⁸ Cass. Dio 63.3.2: ἐτόξευσεν ὁ Τιριδάτης ἄνωθεν ἐκ τῆς ἕδρας θηρία, καὶ δύο γε ταύρους μᾶ ἅμα βολῆ, εἰ γέ τω πιστόν, διέτρωσε καὶ ἀπέκτεινε.

⁸⁹ On the connection between the Parthians and archery in Roman literature and art, see Lerouge 2007: 296–300; Debevoise 1938: 209; Rose 2005: 33; Boyle 2014: 307. Great feats of hunting and animal slaughter were characteristic of Near Eastern and Hellenistic kings: see Briant 2002: 230–2. While mounted archers were surely an important component in the Parthian army, however, the Roman view probably goes too far: see Hauser 2006: 298–304.

⁹⁰ Cf. Elbern 2010: 71.

⁹¹ See Suet. *Aug.* 43.3–4; see Chapter 6, p. 219–21.

proof of it.⁹² Initiated by Augustus, this stagecraft still guided the exhibitions of Parthians under Nero, and Arsacid hostages supported it in both the first and final instances.

The example of Augustus is clearly of paramount importance in the other evidence for the place of Parthia in the worldview of Neronian Rome. In 54 CE, the Senate had voted Nero a number of honors for his handling of the crisis in Armenia – prematurely, as it turned out, since the crisis soon turned into a war that dragged on for nearly a decade. Among these honors were the right to wear the triumphal costume (which he would wear again during Tiridates’ visit), an ovation, and – most significantly – a statue of himself “of equal size to that of Mars Ultor and [erected in] the same temple.”⁹³ The utilization of this particular building was significant. Augustus’ original erection of the temple of Mars Ultor was partly a commemoration of his “victory” over the Parthians when Phraates IV returned Rome’s standards and prisoners.⁹⁴ More recently, the Senate had voted for the erection of statues of Germanicus and Drusus in the structure after Germanicus imposed a king on Armenia in 19 CE.⁹⁵ Nero’s statue and its proximity to Mars Ultor thus drew upon an established tradition of proclaiming Rome’s superiority over the Arsacid kingdom.

Like his predecessors, Nero also connected Roman-Parthian relations with the Greco-Persian wars tradition. In 57 CE, he staged a *naumachia* on the Campus Martius that recreated the battle of Salamis: his combatants were designated as Athenians and Persians.⁹⁶ The show hearkened directly back to Augustus’ *naumachia* of 2 BCE, which had reenacted the same battle.⁹⁷ Another evocation of this memorable spectacle came two years later, when Nero feasted

⁹² On “staging the world” through triumphal spectacle, see Östenberg 2009.

⁹³ Tac. *Ann.* 13.8.1: *effigiemque eius pari magnitudine ac Martis Ultoris eodem in templo censuere.*

⁹⁴ See Chapter 6, p. 194.

⁹⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.64.1. For Germanicus’ installation of Artaxias in Armenia, see Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.3.

⁹⁶ Cass. Dio 61.9.5; Suet. *Ner.* 12.1; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 13.31.1; discussion in Champlin 2003: 68.

⁹⁷ See Chapter 6, p. 205–7.

the people on boats at the very spot along the Tiber where Augustus' *naumachia* had taken place.⁹⁸ Nero's Salaminian display showed that the Persian Wars tradition was still deeply embedded in how the Romans looked at Parthia. The war between Corbulo and Tiridates in Armenia from 54–63 was the most violent Roman-Parthian conflict of the first century CE. As in Augustus' day, Rome's fight against the Arsacids was couched in terms of a Hellenic west resisting the expansionist power of the Persian east. Nero's personal philhellenism surely fed into and strengthened this way of thinking about Parthia.⁹⁹ An Athenian inscription in honor of Nero from 61/2 CE may suggest that the emperor's Greek subjects further encouraged the analogy: its letters were mounted on the Parthenon, a structure that for the Athenians was inextricably connected with the Persian Wars of the fifth century BCE.¹⁰⁰

As with Augustus, Nero's putative "victories" against the Parthians were commemorated with an arch, which stood on the Capitoline hill.¹⁰¹ Tacitus wryly notes its ongoing construction in 62 CE despite Paetus' recent humiliation at Rhandaia.¹⁰² It was apparently voted by the Senate in 58 CE after Corbulo's destruction of Artaxata, though Tacitus is not entirely clear on this point.¹⁰³ The structure does not survive today, and it is likely that it did not long outlast Nero's reign.¹⁰⁴ But a visual depiction can be found on *sestertii* minted in Rome and Lugdunum from 64–67 CE (Fig. 10).¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ Cass. Dio 61.20.5.

⁹⁹ On Nero's philhellenism, see Griffin 1984: 208; Mratschek 2013. But cf. Champlin 2003: 54, who views the emperor's love for Greece as "sharply limited."

¹⁰⁰ *IG* ii².3277; but see now the text in Carroll 1982: 16. For the inscription's place in the Persian Wars tradition see Carroll 1982: 67–73; Spawforth 1994: 234–7.

¹⁰¹ Augustus' was in the Roman forum: see Chapter 6, p. 209–10. On the topography of Nero's arch see further La Rocca 1992: 408–11.

¹⁰² Tac. *Ann.* 15.18.1.

¹⁰³ Tac. *Ann.* 13.41.4; cf. Furneaux 1907: 339; Koestermann 1963–8: 4.194; Kleiner 1985: 70.

¹⁰⁴ Kleiner 1985: 94–5; La Rocca 1992: 404.

¹⁰⁵ Kleiner 1985: 72, 99–153; Champlin 2003: 216–7.



Fig. 10: Sestertius of Nero with Parthian arch on reverse. *RIC* 1 149 var. (bust with aegis). Photo courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.; available online at <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=258707>.

Unlike Augustus' arch, Nero's apparently did not feature any representations of the Parthian enemy; the upper tier of his monument was instead flanked by Roman soldiers. But both Nero and Augustus topped their arches riding *quadrigae*. Moreover, a statue of Mars in the lower niche could have directed the viewer's mind to the temple of Mars Ultor – another building that represented Roman victory over Parthia, and that also featured a statue of Nero.¹⁰⁶ A relief fragment found at Rome may have originally belonged to Nero's arch: it features a bare-headed Parthian with a full beard and the V-shaped tunic that was characteristic of Parthian dress (Fig. 11). Interpretations have varied, but the fragment may well date to the reign of Nero, and if so, his Parthian arch is one plausible context.¹⁰⁷ The Parthian's beard and V tunic might have

¹⁰⁶ Kleiner 1985: 80–1.

¹⁰⁷ Neronian date: Hölscher 1988: 537–41, with references to earlier literature. Originally part of Nero's Parthian arch: La Rocca 1992: 411–4.

reminded a Roman viewer of the Parthian on the breastplate of Augustus' Primaporta statue, a visually similar representation.¹⁰⁸

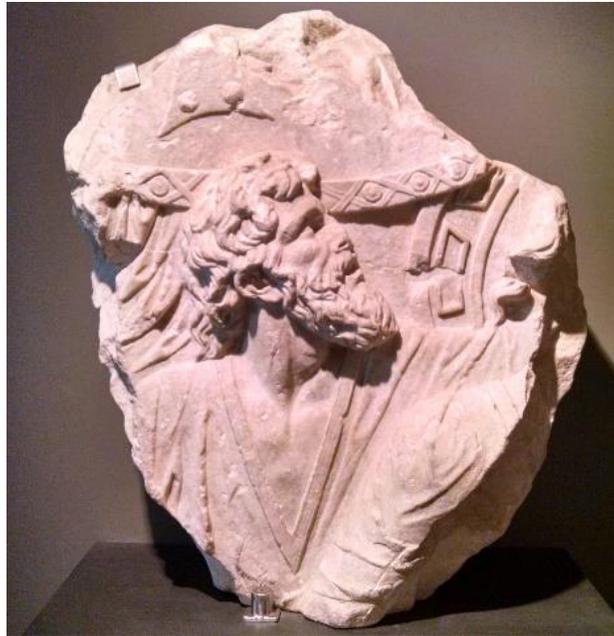


Fig. 11: Relief with bearded Parthian. Palazzo Massimo, inv. 39163. Photo by the author.

In a final nod to Augustan precedent, Nero closed the doors of the Temple of Janus to proclaim universal peace after his war with the Parthians was over. Suetonius has Nero shutting the doors after Tiridates' visit in 66 CE, but coins that date as early as 64 show the closed doors of the temple.¹⁰⁹ The legend on these issues reads “with peace for the Roman people having been obtained on land and sea, he closed the [Temple of] Janus by decree of the Senate.”¹¹⁰ The first part of this phrase (*pace PR terra marique parta*) was unmistakably an Augustan slogan. While used in reference to several of Augustus' accomplishments, it was most closely connected with

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Hölscher 1998: 538; Schneider 1998: 100–2.

¹⁰⁹ Suet. *Ner.* 13.2. See further Townend 1980; Griffin 1984: 122; Syme 1989: 118.

¹¹⁰ *PACE P R TERRA MARIQ IANUM CLUSIT S C*. For this legend (sometimes with minor variations) see the types cited in Champlin 2003: 307–8 n.92 (*RIC* 1 50–1, 58, 263–71, 283–91, 300–311, 323–28, 337–42, 347–50, 353–5, 421, 438–9, 468–72, 510–2, 537–9, 583–5).

his three closures of the doors of Janus.¹¹¹ It is not entirely clear whether any of these closures were related to Parthian affairs, but a number of ancient sources both Augustan and later seem to have drawn this conclusion.¹¹² For Nero as for Augustus, then, the shut doors on the Temple of Janus proclaimed a (re)assertion of Roman supremacy in the east and the humbling of Parthian haughtiness.

The similarities between Augustus' and Nero's representations of the Parthian empire point to a deeper continuity: Julio-Claudian proclamations of Roman mastery in the east were consistently underpinned by the theatrical use of Arsacid hostages. Nero's message of "triumph" over the Parthians in Armenia was almost entirely dependent on spectacle, as many scholars have noted.¹¹³ But the efficacy of these spectacles rested in large part on the emperor's procurement of hostages and the submissiveness that their surrender connoted to a Roman audience. From Augustus to Nero, Parthian policy was promoted and legitimized through the exhibition of Arsacid dynasts in the heart of Roman power. Hostages could of course be unleashed in the east as tools of foreign policy, as Tiberius' release of Tiridates showed. But the Julio-Claudians were more interested in deploying them in Italy than on the Euphrates; they were meant not for external but internal use. Roman domination over Parthia had to be staged for a domestic audience, and hostages were the props that made these displays work.

It is no surprise, then, that Rome's last shipment of Arsacid hostages was again put on display when Nero and Tiridates reached Rome for the coronation. Massive crowds turned out to

¹¹¹ The connection to Janus is clear in *Mon. Anc.* 13; *Suet. Aug.* 22. But the phrase was also used in reference to the victory at Actium (see the dedication from Octavian's campsite memorial in Murray / Petsas 1989: 76; cf. *Liv.* 1.19.3) and possibly after the defeat of Sextus Pompeius in 36 BCE (*App. B Civ.* 5.130; cf. Lange 2009: 35). For discussion, see Lange 2009: 111–23, 146–8; Wardle 2014: 181–2.

¹¹² See the sources and discussion in Syme 1984: 1192: "... at an early stage two of the closures, and even all three, amalgamate to a single transaction which tends to be associated with Parthia."

¹¹³ See the literature cited above, n.76.

see the emperor and his Parthian guests.¹¹⁴ Suetonius refers to the event as one of Nero’s best *spectacula* – the same word he uses to describe Augustus’ exhibition of Rome’s first Arsacid hostages.¹¹⁵ For Suetonius, Tiridates’ visit was just one particularly notable show among others that featured gladiators, wild beasts, pyrrhic dances, and other entertainments.¹¹⁶ A Neronian observer may well have felt the same. As during Augustus’ reign, the political affairs of Roman-Parthian relations were inextricably bound up with public spectacle.¹¹⁷

Although Tiridates surely had the highest profile among the visiting Parthians, Dio reports that the prostration of his entire retinue – the likely hostages included – elicited a tremendous roar from the crowd. Both Suetonius and Dio write that Nero turned up for the coronation in triumphal dress – the same outfit Caligula donned for his appearance with the Arsacid hostage Darius.¹¹⁸ Suetonius speaks only of Tiridates’ participation in the spectacle from this point, but Dio includes the crucial information that a larger group of Parthians was involved.

καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο ὅ τε Τιριδάτης καὶ οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ διὰ τε στοίχων ὀπλιτῶν ἐκατέρωθεν παρατεταγμένων διήλθον καὶ πρὸς τῷ βήματι προσστάντες προσεκύνησαν αὐτόν, ὥσπερ καὶ πρότερον.¹¹⁹

Next, Tiridates and those with him passed between the rows of heavily-armed soldiers, stood before the rostra, and prostrated themselves before [Nero], just as they had done before.

The Roman crowd greeted this show of Parthian deference to their emperor with a loud roar. Importantly, the Armenian king was not the only dynast to publicly submit to the emperor’s authority. The audience could watch as the children of the Arsacid family’s most powerful rulers

¹¹⁴ Cass. Dio 63.4.2; Suet. *Ner.* 13; Tac. *Ann.* 16.23.2. Tacitus’ report is brief, but he does say that “all the citizenry” (*omni civitate*) turned out to watch.

¹¹⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 43.4.

¹¹⁶ Suet. *Ner.* 11–2.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Griffin 1984: 109; Champlin 2003: 227–9. Kierdorf (1992: 177) points out that Suetonius’ verb *producere* highlights the theatricality of the display.

¹¹⁸ Suet. *Ner.* 13.1; Cass. Dio 62.4.3. On triumphal clothing as part of the emperor’s costume, see Alföldi 1935: 25–38.

¹¹⁹ Cass. Dio 62.4.3.

knelt before the power of Rome's sovereign – soon to enter custody and to become permanent reminders of Parthian submission. No Julio-Claudian emperor had ever crowned an Arsacid king of Armenia before. But they all had hosted Arsacid hostages and displayed them as symbols of Roman supremacy in the east. The prostration of a fresh group in public before a preening emperor helped maintain these deep-seated Roman pretensions.

Nero's presentation of the Roman-Parthian relationship had little to do with the realities of power on the ground, and there are indications in the ancient sources that some Romans, at least, were not fooled. In the fourth century, the epitomator Festus would bluntly assert that Nero was responsible for the empire's loss of Armenia, which remained out of Rome's orbit until Trajan's Parthian campaign.¹²⁰ How prevalent this sentiment was in Nero's own time is unclear, but the report suggests that at least some contemporary observers saw the "golden day" as nothing more than empty theatrics meant to conceal an embarrassing defeat. Other literary evidence imagines Nero as a friend to the Parthians, presumably because of his willingness to cede Armenia to them. Nero is supposed to have contemplated fleeing to the Arsacids as a suppliant during the collapse of his regime.¹²¹ Indeed, the fifth Sibylline Oracle "prophecies" his arrival among "the kings of the Persians;" the fourth does the same, and even anticipates his return from the east at the head of Parthian troops.¹²² During the war of 69 CE and under the subsequent Flavian dynasty, three pretenders emerged who claimed to be Nero. The latter two were active in Parthian territory and appear to have won Arsacid backing on the grounds that

¹²⁰ Fest. *Brev.* 20. For the aftermath of Neronian policy in the east under the successive Flavian dynasty, see Dąbrowa 1981; Wheeler 1993: 32–3.

¹²¹ Suet. *Ner.* 47.2: *varie agitavit, Parthosne an Galbam supplex peteret*; cf. Aurel. Vict. *Lib. de Caes.* 5. But see Sansone 1993, who doubts the historicity of Suetonius' account of Nero's death.

¹²² *Orac. Sibyll.* 5.147: ἤξει δ' εἰς Μήδους καὶ Περσῶν πρὸς βασιλῆας; *Orac. Sibyll.* 4.119–24, 130–9. The two books achieved their final form at different points in time and reflect different traditions surrounding Nero; see Syme 1936: 144–5; Champlin 2003: 12–7.

they deserved recompense for Nero's surrender of Armenia.¹²³ Suetonius wrote of Vologaeses' explicit affection for Nero: at some point after 68 CE, the king is supposed to have asked the Senate "to cherish Nero's memory."¹²⁴ A much later epitomator even records that "the Persians" were so fond of him that they sent messengers upon his death to see to the erection of a monument.¹²⁵ It is unclear to what extent these reports capture actual Parthian sentiments about Nero, but it does look like certain Romans thought that Nero had done the Parthians a favor – and his own empire a disservice – by failing to uphold Roman suzerainty in Armenia.¹²⁶

But the participation of Arsacid hostages in the Golden Day helps illustrate the considerable extent to which Nero's Armenian settlement was a matter of Roman domestic politics, not just foreign affairs with Parthia. Tiridates' visit was certainly a diplomatic affair that formalized a new eastern status quo, and in that sense it was a major event in Roman-Parthian relations. But the physical presence of the Arsacid king in Campania and Rome, his probable submission of yet another group of hostages to the emperor, and their participation in carefully orchestrated public spectacles all marketed the settlement of 66 CE in continuity with the Julio-Claudian message of Roman domination over Parthia through hostages. In that sense, the Golden Day was a marriage of domestic and foreign politics: the visit of a high-ranking Arsacid and his submission of royal hostages meant that the Parthians themselves actively participated in the emperor's promotion of the new settlement to a Roman audience. The Arsacid family was a

¹²³ The first so-called "False Nero" dates to 69 CE and was assassinated by an associate of Galba: Tac. *Hist.* 1.2, 2.8–9. The second, one Terentius Maximus, arose in Parthia during Titus' reign: Cass. Dio 66.19.3b; Joann. Antioch. fr. 104. The third, according to Suetonius, was active twenty years after Nero's death (88 CE): Suet. *Ner.* 57. A reference to this "False Nero" may also appear in Stat. *Silv.* 4.3.110 (on which see also Syme 1936: 144–5; 1984: 1194 and n.61; Newlands 2002: 298–9. See further Jones 1992: 157–9; Griffin 1984: 214–5.

¹²⁴ Suet. *Ner.* 57: *quin etiam Vologaesus Parthorum rex missis ad senatum legatis de instauranda societate hoc etiam magno opere oravit, ut Neronis memoria coleretur.*

¹²⁵ [Aurel. Vict.] *Epit. de Caes.* 5.8.

¹²⁶ Cf. Redgate 1988: 88–9. Nero's possible initiation into Zoroastrianism (Plin. *HN* 30.14–7) may also have been a reason for his good reputation among the Parthians; for discussion, see Cumont 1933: 152–3; Griffin 1982: 217; Méthy 2000; Champlin 2003: 167–71.

central part of how Nero explained, propagated, and legitimized his management of the east to his Italian subjects. The Parthians didn't just exert a force on Roman politics; in equal measure, they exerted influence through them.

Conclusion

Under the later Julio-Claudians, Arsacid hostages continued to have a paradoxical effect on Rome's engagement with the Parthian empire. In one respect, hostages brought political actors in Rome and Parthia together in ways that transcended the boundary between the two states.

Tiberius at first aligned with Artabanus to quash the collaboration between Piso and Vonones, but later dispatched two Arsacid hostages at the request of Artabanus' political enemies among the Parthian nobility. The king's subsequent submission of his son Darius allowed Caligula to advertise the apparent advance of Roman power in the east, despite an unchanged status quo.

Claudius too acceded to the requests of renegade Parthian nobles while trumpeting Meherdates' Roman virtues in a lofty oration before the Senate. Thanks to the trope of Parthian submissiveness that royal hostages supported, Nero was able to use the Golden Day to transform a military defeat in Armenia into a triumphal display of Arsacid subordination to Roman power. The Arsacids of Rome forged a bond that brought Parthians into Roman domestic politics, blurring the line between internal and external affairs.

But the primary use of hostages in the domestic political arena as symbols of the Parthian enemy also deepened the ideological gulf between the two empires. The Arsacids of Rome served the emperors above all as caricatures of the exotic, barbaric, and dangerous people who lived beyond the Euphrates; the figure of the hostage, as fashioned for public consumption, was a dramatic prop which the emperor used to stage Roman supremacy and Parthian compliance. Caligula's exhibition of Darius utilized deep-seated Roman clichés about the east, drawing on

the Persian wars tradition to cast Parthia as the timeless Achaemenid enemy of a Greek or Macedonian west. Tiridates' archery demonstration was an impressive display of Parthian martial prowess conducted at Nero's behest – a spectacle, like so many Nero put on, that advertised the emperor's power by bringing foreign curiosities to the heart of Rome. While the impact of hostages on Roman affairs was varied and diverse, the Julio-Claudian emperors could never resist leveraging their symbolic value to trumpet Roman "victories" over Parthia which, though unobtainable in war or in the realm of foreign policy, could nevertheless be manufactured for a domestic audience. In public, the Arsacids of Rome had to play the part of the subjugated eastern barbarian, even though their native kingdom had never been subjugated. Where hostages connected, then, they subsequently divided – a dynamic that had remained consistent in Rome for the entire Julio-Claudian period.

CONCLUSION

THE END OF ARSACID HOSTAGESHIP

Why did Arsacid hostage submission end?

After the reign of Nero, evidence for Parthian dynasts living in Rome is scarce. A small group must have still been living in the city when Vespasian took power; the recent arrivals under Nero presumably lived out their lives in Italy under the Flavians much as Seraspades and Rhodaspes had done during the Augustan period.¹ Occasional submissions of Arsacids to Rome may have continued, though probably not with the scale and regularity that they had reached during the early Principate. Glimpses survive. Writing in the early second century CE, Juvenal mentions an Armenian hostage named Zalaces who may have been an Arsacid.² The epitaph of Axse could be later evidence for an Arsacid at Rome, though the date is unclear and the text does not name her as a member of the Parthian royal family.³ A second century CE figure named Sohaemus, an eastern dynast and also a Roman senator, seems to have at least claimed Arsacid ancestry.⁴ These clues might offer some indication that Arsacid dynasts continued to play a role within Roman territory even after Nero's reign. But there is nothing to suggest that they maintained the prominence that they had under the Julio-Claudian emperors.

On one point, at least, the surviving evidence is clear: there is no indication that any Arsacids ever returned to Parthia from Roman territory after the end of the Julio-Claudian

¹ For the epitaph of Seraspades and Rhodaspes, see Chapter 6, p. 213.

² Juv. 2.164; see above, Chapter 4, p. 138–9.

³ On Axse, see Chapter 6, p. 217–8.

⁴ Sohaemus' membership in the Arsacid family seems to be attested in Photius' summary of Sohaemus' contemporary Iamblichus, in which text Sohaemus is called Σοαίμου τοῦ Ἀχαμενίδου τοῦ Ἀρσακίδου (Phot. *Bibl.* 94). It is far from clear, however, whether this constitutes hard evidence for Arsacid descent. See further Mommsen 1886: 76; Birley 2000: 131. On the Emesene dynasty in the first century CE, see Barrett 1977.

dynasty, and no further petitions from Parthian nobles for the release of a hostage are attested.⁵ To be sure, this picture might stem from the meagerness of the historical record. Parthian sources for the late first and second centuries CE remain scant, and the Greco-Roman literary evidence is considerably less extensive than it is for the earlier Principate. The later books of Tacitus' *Histories* might have contained ample material on the Arsacids, if his interest in Parthian affairs in the *Annals* is any indication.⁶ It is possible, though of course not provable, that accounts of additional repatriated Arsacids were lost with the rest of Tacitus' work.

Given the evidence to hand, however, why might the Arsacids of Rome have lost their position at the heart of Roman-Parthian relations? Part of the answer may be that the connection that the hostages forged had also, in an ironic turn, driven the two empires apart in a way that left no room for intermediaries between them. In both Rome and Parthia, Arsacid hostages were turned into caricatures of the people on the far shore of the Euphrates. The Julio-Claudian emperors had presented them as the proud but conquered grandees of a barbarous and exotic *alter orbis*; their Parthian opponents had delegitimized them with accusations of treason and acculturation. One effect of these characterizations, at least in the realm of ideology, may have been the erosion of a middle ground between Rome and Parthia, the loss of a space where a dynast with both Arsacid legitimacy and Roman connections might operate.

The disappearance of the Arsacid hostage probably stemmed from developments within Parthia more than those in Rome, though this conclusion must remain speculative in the absence of relevant evidence for the later first century CE. By the reign of Vologaeses, it must have been clear to rebellious Parthian nobles that the Arsacids of Rome had a losing record in contending

⁵ On the disappearance of the Parthian nobility from the Greco-Roman literary sources, see further Hauser 2005: 196.

⁶ On the chronological scope of the *Histories*, see Chilver 1979: 22–30; Städele 2014: viii–xiii.

for the position of king of kings. Moreover, while Vologaeses himself gave hostages as least partially as a means to maintain his hold on the throne, none of his successors appear to have followed suit. Hostage submission to Rome offered an Arsacid king short-term stability, but with the longer-term possibility that discontented members of the nobility might collaborate with the Roman emperor to obtain a replacement monarch. After the turbulent history of the early first century CE, later Arsacid kings might have concluded that the bargain wasn't worth it.

On the Roman side, it is curious that the exhibitions of Arsacid dynasts in grandiose spectacles of supremacy over Parthia no longer appear in the literary evidence. The Arsacids remaining in Rome surely retained their propaganda value as symbols of Parthian submission, even if fresh shipments of hostages were no longer arriving. But perhaps eastern affairs rendered the question of Rome's power over Parthia less urgent, at least during the later first century CE. The Jewish revolt from 66–73 CE may even have aligned the interests of Vespasian and Vologaeses; the Parthian king offered Vespasian military assistance against the Jews, and at the war's end congratulated Titus on his victory with a gold crown.⁷ Meanwhile the Parthians were occupied by the invasions of the Alani, a threat grave enough to prompt Vologaeses to request Roman assistance.⁸ Roman anxiety about the influence and autonomy of the Parthian empire might have been superseded by other concerns, at least temporarily, reducing the need to stage Roman supremacy over Parthia with the Arsacid hostages as props.

While the state of the evidence precludes certainty about the causes, it does seem clear that the Roman branch of the Arsacid family withered and died. The connection that made these hostages a living link to Parthian domestic politics lost its vitality, alienating the Arsacids of Rome from the state that their family ruled and stranding them, as people without futures, deep

⁷ Vologaeses' offer of assistance: Tac. *Hist.* 4.51; Suet. *Vesp.* 6. Titus crowned: Joseph. *BJ* 7.105.

⁸ Suet. *Dom.* 2.2; Cass. Dio 66.15.3.

in Roman territory. With their eclipse ended a moment in Roman-Parthian relations that saw the two empires intertwined, each entangled in the affairs of the other through the circulation of Arsacid dynasts across the Euphrates. As the Arsacid family became more firmly rooted in Parthian territory, relations between the two powers would enter a new phase.

How did Arsacid hostageship change the relationship between Rome and Parthia during the Julio-Claudian period? The legacy of the Arsacids of Rome was the way that they made foreigners matter to the domestic political arena in both empires.

In Parthia the reigning kings discovered, in the pressures of Arsacid court politics, a reason to commit their sons to the custody of the Roman emperors in the west. The king thereby deprived his political enemies of potential replacement monarchs and shored up his own hold on power in the absence of other rivals for the throne. To be sure, this explanation is only partial. Other motives also came into play that had less to do with Parthia's internal affairs and more to do with regulating the Arsacid state's relationship with Rome. But the domestic component was critical: the kings found that they could use a connection beyond Parthia's political borders to deal with a problem that arose within them. In the Roman emperor, the king found a species of ally who could help him set his own house in order.

The Julio-Claudian emperors, of course, had their own uses for the Arsacid dynasts interned in their city. As the Roman ideal of universal conquest collided with the uncomfortable reality of Parthian autonomy, the figure of the hostage offered the emperor a way to represent the Arsacid kingdom as both separate from and subordinate to the Roman imperium. The exoticism and foreignness of the Arsacid dynast underlined the other-worldly status of the Parthian empire as a place where Roman power could not reach, a realm better kept at bay by Roman power

rather than ruled directly. At the same time, however, the exhibition of the hostage as part of an imperial spectacle broadcasted Rome's superiority to this *alter orbis*. Parthia might be distant, but the emperor still had the power to display its subjugated royalty to an audience at the center of Roman power. In a word, the Julio-Claudians staged Roman domination over the Parthian east with props obtained from the Arsacid king himself.

The picture became more complicated as members of the Parthian nobility forged their own connections to the Romans in the west in defiance of their Arsacid head of state. Seditious aristocrats found that political boundaries were no obstacle in their search for alternative Arsacid dynasts. Under the right circumstances, suitable replacements could be obtained from the Roman emperor – that is, from a political actor who was external to the Parthian empire itself. The Julio-Claudians could preen that they had bestowed a king on the great empire of the east; the rebellious nobles could secure a dynast to rival the sitting monarch and to reign in accordance with their own wishes, assuming they could install him successfully.

But the civil wars that resulted from the return of the Arsacids of Rome to Parthian territory would turn a history of connection and interpenetration in the realm of politics into one of differentiation and division in the realm of ideology. The political opponents of the returning hostages – reigning kings and hostile nobles alike – undermined their eligibility for the throne by contrasting Arsacid legitimacy with Roman servitude. The nature of Arsacid kingship, they argued, was incompatible with indebtedness to Roman power. Tarring the former hostages with the brush of Romanization, these opponents supplemented their military efforts against the former hostages with rhetorical attacks. Since they triumphed on the battlefield, it was their vision of Arsacid kingship that ultimately won out.

It cannot be determined with complete confidence how these events dovetailed with the deep and gradual “Iranian revival” underway throughout the first century CE, but it seems likely that the two processes complemented one another – that a contingent development in domestic politics fed into and strengthened currents that were already circulating in the broad sweep of history on the Iranian plateau. The story of Parthia’s rejection of the Arsacids of Rome emerges only from Greco-Roman literary sources, while the cultural changes of the first century are glimpsed in diverse categories of evidence scattered throughout Parthian territory. These two histories do not confirm one another, but it is possible to construct a narrative from them that hangs together. The reaction against the Arsacid kings who came from the Roman branch of the family may have left a mark on Parthian and indeed Iranian history that extended well beyond the political circumstances of the early first century CE.

Although the Arsacids of Rome had intertwined the internal affairs of Rome and Parthia, their ultimate legacy was also one of division. A group of dynasts who transcended the boundary between two empires had, in a paradoxical turn, deepened the division that their own lives had done so much to erase.

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