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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Exemplary History and Arsacid Genealogy in Tacitus, *Annals* 6.31

Jake Nabel
(Pennsylvania State University)

*simul veteres Persarum ac Macedonum terminos, seque invasurum possessa Cyro et post Alexandro per vaniloquentiam ac minas iaciebat.*¹

At the same time, he [Artabanus II] was boasting through vaunting and threats of the old borders of the Persians and the Macedonians, saying that he would seize the places held by Cyrus and later by Alexander.

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These words conclude Tacitus' description of the challenges to Rome issued by the Arsacid king Artabanus II in 35 CE. Though composed by a Roman author, the sentence is rare evidence for the Parthian understanding of history and the Arsacid dynasty's ideas about its ruling pedigree. In the near total absence of textual sources from Parthia itself, this passage in the *Annals* is one of very few in ancient literature to consider how the Arsacids related to the empires that preceded them on the Iranian plateau.

The question is whether Tacitus' portrayal is authentic, and scholars have offered different answers. In their foundational works on Roman-Parthian relations, Neilson Debevoise and Karl-Heinz Ziegler took the passage at face value.² In a 1986 article Josef Wiesehöfer was cautious, but still found the report helpful

1- I thank Touraj Daryaee, Éric Rebillard, M. Rahim Shayegan, and Lydia Spielberg for their help with this piece. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1; text after Woodman 2017: 35.

2- Debevoise 1938: 157; Ziegler 1964: 60.

for explaining Arsacid ideology and western foreign policy.³ In recent discussions, Rahim Shayegan has emphasized parallel claims to Perso-Macedonian heritage in Pontus and Commagene: the Arsacids may have borrowed this dual genealogy from their Hellenistic neighbors, Shayegan argues, but then again, Tacitus may have borrowed it for them.⁴ Other scholars take a range of positions on the passage's value as evidence for Arsacid self-conception.⁵

Perhaps the clearest deployment of *Annals* 6.31, however, came from the pen of the pioneering Arsacid historian Józef Wolski. Wolski considered the passage a faithful reproduction of a letter that Tacitus had found in the imperial archives, the contents of which revealed an unambiguous Arsacid claim to Achaemenid heritage (what the reference to Alexander and the Macedonians might mean, the reader does not learn).⁶ The sentence was a key piece of evidence in Wolski's argument for the Arsacid monarchy's "Achaemenid program" – a conscious, systematic, and protracted effort to reclaim the authority and territory of the earlier Persian empire.⁷ Tacitus' text had to bear a good deal of weight in the construction of this scholarly edifice, because not a single piece of contemporary, indigenous Parthian evidence shows an explicit Arsacid claim to Achaemenid ancestry.⁸ The idea persists and is evident, for example, in the authoritative *Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*, where Edward Dąbrowa writes of Artabanus II's attempt on Armenia that "[the] rationale behind the move was to implement the program of Achaemenid imperial restoration."⁹

My contention in this paper is not so much with the "Achaemenid" part of this formulation (which other scholars have already challenged) as with the "program," because a closer reading of Tacitus' text will reveal that the passage is about the characterization of an *individual* rather than the political genealogy of an entire empire. In support of this argument I will adduce an overlooked intertext with a passage from Cicero, who also attributes emulation of Cyrus and Alexander to an overly ambitious political figure.¹⁰ Attention to Cicero helps clarify how the reference to these two conquerors in Tacitus is an invocation of moral *exempla*, not imperial ancestors. Moreover, the connection between Cicero and Tacitus can also help anchor the passage more firmly within the realm of Latin historiography and Roman political thought – fields to which it unquestionably belongs, whereas its relationship with Parthian political ideology is much more contentious. My discussion will not produce an authoritative judgment on the historicity of *Annals* 6.31, but it will shed greater light on the passage's literary moorings, which require more consideration than they have heretofore received.

3- Wiesehöfer 1986: 177–81.

4- Shayegan 2011: *passim*, esp. 39–41, 293–331; cf. Shayegan 2016: 8–9; 2017: 433–6.

5- A recent positive assessment is Heil 2017: 271–2 and n.91. Olbrycht 2012: 218; 2019: 210–1 assumes the references to Cyrus and Alexander were Artabanus' original words. More skeptical are Gregoratti 2015: 15; van Kooten 2015: 564. Non-committal are Walser 1951: 146; Lerouge 2007: 132.

6- Wolski 1966: 72–3. Wolski's silence on the Alexander reference is pointed out by Fowler 2005: 126.

7- See e.g. Wolski 1989: 443: "Le penchant pour le programme dit achéménide, la tendance à faire jouer pour le compte de l'Etat parthe l'héritage du glorieux passé du premier Empire perse, à revendiquer les terres jadis possédées par la Perse, comme on le voit dans les dernières études, étaient un élément constant des Arsacides jusqu'à la chute de l'Empire parthe."

8- de Jong 2017: 37–8.

9- Dąbrowa 2012: 174; cf. 1981: 190–1; 2017: 176 n. 28. See more recently Muccioli 2018: 286: "it remains doubtful whether the Parthians really wanted to create a link with the Macedonian king (whereas it is by far more plausible the link with their Iranian roots)" (emphasis added).

10- The overlap between the two passages does not figure in commentaries on *Annals* 6; see for example Allen 1899: 386; Koestermann 1965: 316; Martin 2001: 168; Woodman 2017: 226.

Cicero's distaste for Cyrus and Alexander imitation is found in the *Brutus*, a dialogue about rhetoric and oratory. In this case, the emulator who comes in for criticism is not a Parthian attacking Rome, but instead a Roman attacking Parthia. The subject is Publius Licinius Crassus, son of the triumvir Marcus Crassus, and along with his father a casualty at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE. In a passage meant to illustrate the difference between offices (*honores*) and power (*opes*),¹¹ Cicero has the following to say about the younger Crassus' pursuit of the latter at the expense of the former:

*Sed hunc quoque absorbuit aestus quidam insolitae adolescentibus gloriae, qui quia navarat miles operam imperatori, imperatorem se statim esse cupiebat, cui muneri mos maiorum aetatem certam, sortem incertam reliquit. ita gravissimo suo casu, dum Cyri et Alexandri similis esse voluit, qui suum cursum transcurrerant, et L. Crassi et multorum Crassorum inventus est dissimillimus.*¹²

But [Publius] was consumed by burning for the sort of glory that is not suited to young men. Because as a soldier he served a general, he desired to become a general himself right away – an office which ancestral custom permits only to men of a certain age who have won it through sortition. Thus, while he was trying to be like Cyrus and Alexander – men who rushed through their own careers in haste¹³ – he in his own most violent destruction turned out to be most unlike [his ancestor] Lucius Crassus, and many other Crassi besides.

Cicero here uses Publius Crassus as an example of a talented but rash young man who sought to ascend higher and more quickly than Roman custom allowed. Although the accusation is not substantiated in other sources (including Cicero's own letters), the passage implies that Publius sought to hold *imperium* before reaching the minimum age and without obtaining it through sortition.¹⁴ Whatever the historical basis of such a charge, Cyrus and Alexander are brought in to illustrate the nature of the transgression: by emulating conquerors who set their sights too high and their timetables too short, Publius went astray.

The passage demonstrates the importance of *exempla* to Roman ideas about history, politics, and moral education. As Matthew Roller and others have extensively discussed, the point of studying historical figures like Cyrus, Alexander, or the earlier Crassi was to find paradigms of behavior that served as paragons to emulate or cautionary tales to avoid.¹⁵ An individual's likeness or unlikeness to earlier *exempla* could show either their wisdom or their folly, as Cicero's *similis/disimilis esse* illustrates. For Cicero, this was a topic of both theoretical interest and practical use. He ventures a formal definition in the *De inventione*, where he describes an *exemplum* as "something that either strengthens or weakens an argument by way of reference to the authority or outcome of some individual or event."¹⁶ Historical figures and past events illustrate certain principles, and they can be adduced to either support or undermine a proposed course of action in

11- Cic. *Brut.* 280–1.

12- Cic. *Brut.* 282; text from Malcovati 1970: 87.

13- Douglas 1966: 208 translates *suum cursum transcurrerant* as "completed their careers with speed." The preceding sentence supplies the relevant context: Publius wanted to become a general at a very young age in violation of Roman custom.

14- On the fairness of the accusation, see Douglas 1966: 208; Shackleton Bailey 1977: 456.

15- Roller 2018. See also Wiedemann 2000; Roller 2009; Langlands 2011: 102; Stadter 2009: 460–6; and the contributions on Roman history in Lowrie / Lüdemann 2015. For exemplary thought in Greek literature, see Hedrick 2009, esp. 422.

16- Cic. *Inv. rhet.* 49: *Exemplum est quod rem auctoritate aut casu alicuius hominis aut negotii confirmat aut infirmat.* Cf. *Rhet. ad Herr.* 4.62.

the present. Cicero marshalled and deployed *exempla* in all his writings, and an ample scholarly literature has traced the practice across his letters, speeches, and treatises.¹⁷

Crucially, the centrality of *exempla* is also clear in a Latin literary genre which Cicero did not write, but Tacitus did: historiography.¹⁸ The classic expression appears in Livy's preface, where the author commends history as a training in which "you see lessons of every *exemplum* set in the clear record of the past."¹⁹ Jane Chaplin has demonstrated how the entire narrative of Livy's history "can profitably be read as an extended enactment of [this] programmatic statement," especially in its portrayals of historical actors who draw on their own reserves of *exempla* as a guide to decision-making.²⁰ The exemplary approach to the past grounds the work of the other major Roman historians, and Tacitus not least.²¹ In one much discussed passage, Tacitus intones that the "principal function of annals" is "to insure that acts of virtue are not silenced, and that fear of posterity's condemnation will attend those who say and do evil things."²² The introductions to the *Histories* and the *Agricola* also foreground the cases of notable conduct (whether good or bad) that the author will collect in the monograph to come.²³ In short, it is clear that "Tacitus saw himself as writing in large part to provide *exempla*, for moral purposes," and he was not unique among Roman historians in this project.²⁴

If Cicero and Tacitus wrote within the Roman exemplary tradition – and a critical mass of scholarship has demonstrated that they did – then their references to Cyrus and Alexander must be surveyed for moral and didactic content, not merely factual information about the past. In the passage of the *Brutus* cited above, the point is not so much that Publius Crassus wished to recreate a conquest of any specific territory. Rather, his attempt to imitate the meteoric careers of Cyrus and Alexander revealed a feature of his character that was unsuited to Roman society, where the title of *imperator* was reserved for older men who had followed the proper procedures. According to the reasoning of the passage, unhistorical though it may be, it was this character flaw that led to the young Crassus' "most violent destruction." Cyrus and Alexander are summoned, then, to make a moral point that can instruct Cicero's readers on proper conduct. Whether or not emulation of these two conquerors was a conscious motive for Publius – a question that can scarcely be resolved on the basis of the available evidence – it is clear that comparison to them was a didactic tool for Cicero.

17- See most recently van der Blom 2010: 65–147, esp. 68–72; Urban 2011 for the entire Ciceronian corpus. For more specialized studies, see Opperman 2000; Schönberger 1914 on Cicero's letters; Bücher 2006; Riggsby 2002: 160–7; D'Arms 1972; Schönberger 1911 on the speeches; and Blincoe 1941; Brinton 1988 for the works on philosophy and rhetoric.

18- Some Ciceronian passages do comment on the principles of historiography, however: see *De or.* 2.51–64; *Leg.* 1.5; *Fam.* 5.12.3. These passages are at the center of contentious debates about the relationship between rhetoric and historiography in ancient literature. For key discussions, see Rawson 1972; Woodman 2008; Lendon 2009: 49–52; Brunt 2011; Woodman 2011.

19- Liv. *Praef.* 10: *hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempli documenta in industri posita monumento intueri*. While the general meaning is clear, debate over the subtleties persists, especially regarding the phrase *in industri monumento*. Compare Ogilvie 1965: 28; Gould / Whiteley [1952] 2004: 96; Feldherr 1998: 6–12.

20- Chaplin 2000: 2; see also Chaplin 2014; Feldherr 1998: 82–111; Marincola 2007: 130–2.

21- Wiedemann 2000; Roller 2009: 217–9; Marincola 2010: 279–87.

22- Tac. *Ann.* 3.65.1: *quod praecipuum munus annalium reor, ne virtutes sileantur utque pravis dictis factisque ex posteritate et infamia metus sit*. The ambiguity of the *quod* has fueled debates on the grammatical construal of the sentence and whether Tacitus intended it as a historiographical principle; see Turpin 2008, esp. 361–3 (whose conclusions are followed in my translation above) *contra* Woodman 1995. For further bibliography, see Strunk 2017: 137 n.17; Luce 1991: 2906.

23- Tac. *Hist.* 1.3; *Agr.* 1.1.

24- Quotation from Turpin 2008: 260. See also Ash 1999: 131 for a reading of *Annals* 6.34–5 as "an exemplary model for contemporary Romans who might themselves be sent out to the turbulent eastern provinces on foreign campaigns" (emphasis added).

One other consideration argues against a reading anchored in political genealogy: Cicero's reference completely avoids the alignment of Alexander with Rome and Cyrus with Parthia that underpinned so much Roman discourse about the Arsacid empire. Many scholars have discussed the Roman construal of Parthia as a continuation of Achaemenid Persia and, by the same token, the Roman appropriation of Alexander the Great's legacy.²⁵ The analogy shaped the place of Parthia in Roman thought for many commentators, but it does not underpin the references to Cyrus and Alexander in the *Brutus*. Cicero did not see it as Rome's business to reenact Alexander's destruction of the empire Cyrus founded; indeed, his mentions of these figures elsewhere in his writings evince considerable admiration for Cyrus, and scorn for Alexander.²⁶ In the passage from the *Brutus*, though, the two are undifferentiated. This is because Cicero's immediate objective is not so much to show not that *they* were good or bad, simply that Publius Crassus was wrong to follow their example.

To what extent can the same be said of Tacitus, assuming the substitution of Artabanus for Publius Crassus? At the very least, the exemplary tradition can help explain why Tacitus' language in the passage is couched above all in moral terms – a feature that previous discussions have not explained. Tacitus passes judgment on Artabanus' claims as he reports them: the king's statement is characterized by boasts (*iaciebat*), empty talk (*vaniloquentia*), and threats (*minae*). The preceding sentences too have painted a negative portrait of a ruler who is by turns arrogant, savage, greedy, and insulting.²⁷ The vocabulary shows that, like Cicero's Publius Crassus, Tacitus' Artabanus is overreaching. He is venturing on conquests that are beyond his capabilities, and his impudence leads him to speak in a way that he cannot back up.

The inclusion of Cyrus and Alexander in the sentence serves this moral judgment in its illustration of Artabanus' character deficiencies by means of *exempla*. Just as Cicero referred to the Persian and Macedonian kings to clarify the unrealistic scope of Publius' ambition, their appearance in Artabanus' boast exposes the distance between the Parthian king's plans and his ability to execute them. The achievements of Cyrus and Alexander were gargantuan, and their replication was out of reach for all but the most epochal of rulers. With words like *vaniloquentia*, Tacitus signals that he does not include Artabanus in this echelon, and the historian's narrative will later bear that assessment out. Thanks in part to passages like Cicero's, Roman readers knew Cyrus and Alexander as titans of conquest whose deeds were all but unmatchable. Artabanus' aspiration to such heights is a signpost of *moral* failure, from which other types of failure are sure to follow.

The ensuing digression on Parthian internal affairs is a lengthy, stylized, and vivid dramatization of the Arsacid king's overreach, fall, and chastened return. Artabanus' insolent diplomatic bearing is soon followed by a series of crushing reverses that drive the king into poverty, obscurity, and disgrace.²⁸ Having

25- On the Roman association of the Achaemenid and Arsacid empires, see Sonnabend 1986: 281 n.85; Schneider 1998: 110–3; 2007: 70 and n.91; Luther 2010: 109; Shayegan 2011: 336 and n.14, with references; Nabel 2018: 208–12, 215–6.

26- On the (mostly positive) reception of Cyrus in Cicero, see Schlude 2019: 184–5, 188–94, with the list of Ciceronian passages on 184 n.9. On Cicero's dim view of Alexander (*Inv. rhet.* 1.93; *Rep.* 3.24; *Off.* 1.90; *Tusc.* 3.21), see Muccioli 2018: 290–1; Nabel 2018: 216–7.

27- See Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1, where Artabanus exhibits *superbia* and *saevitia*; is described as *avidus*; and addresses Tiberius with *contumelia*. On Tacitus' descriptions of Arsacid arrogance, see further Heil 2017: 264 and n.36, 271 and n.87.

28- My focus in this recapitulation is Tacitus' narrative of these events rather than the events themselves. For more comprehensive discussions that include consideration of the other ancient sources (namely Cass. Dio 58.26), see Ziegler 1964: 59–63; Olbrycht 2012: 217–8; van Kooten 2015: 563–5; Dąbrowa 2017: 175–7.

installed his son Arsaces as king of Armenia in an opening expansionist salvo, Artabanus soon sees him murdered at the instigation of Rome's Iberian allies.²⁹ An attempt at retaliation under his other son Orodes fails.³⁰ Nor is Artabanus' personal presence sufficient to salvage the situation, because the arrival of another Arsacid claimant from Roman territory leads to numerous defections and shatters the base of his support. Betrayed and deserted, he flees to the reaches of remote Scythia until discontent with Tiridates' reign presents the opportunity for recovery.

As Tacitus narrates Artabanus' fall and restoration, vivid detail enlivens his portrait of a ruler who has aimed too high and fallen correspondingly low. In retreat, the only company left to Artabanus is a band of foreigners, "each man an exile from his own land – men who have neither knowledge of good or concern with evil, but who are nourished by wages to be helpers in crime."³¹ The mercenary retinue of the tyrant is a *topos* of Greco-Roman literature, and its deployment in this section grounds Artabanus' failure in the arbitrary and despotic nature of his reign.³² When Tiridates' opponents among the Parthian nobility go looking for the fugitive king, moreover, he is shown in his nadir to be "covered in filth, procuring food by means of his bow."³³ The author's account also lingers on Artabanus' psychological reaction to the nobles' overtures: his initial fear upon their arrival soon turns to elation and then shrewd resolve as his swift dash into Mesopotamia – still wearing the mud of his exile to garner sympathy – overwhelms his opponent's dilatory efforts.³⁴

A detailed assessment of the historicity of the passage is impossible in the absence of other narratives of comparable detail, but Tacitus' rich characterization of Artabanus and his dramatic account of the king's rise, fall, and restoration amount to a fitting literary treatment of a figure whose Cyrus-and-Alexander-sized ambitions presage his fall. Many scholars have noted the folkloric qualities of Artabanus' story, which might be the work of Tacitus, an intermediary Greek or Roman source, or an otherwise unknown tradition.³⁵ But whatever historical realities may be elucidated or concealed by the narrative, it is crucial to recognize that the intimate concern with the king's condition links back to 6.31, where his arrogant and insulting behavior culminates with an aspiration to parity with Cyrus and Alexander. For a Roman readership that had these two conquerors in their inventory of *exempla* and passages like Cicero's to look back on, a proposed recreation of those epochal careers would have looked like an invitation to disaster. Tacitus' narrative richly fulfills this expectation, with ample attention paid to the consequences of reaching beyond one's station in an impudent manner.

What does the exemplary mode of the Artabanus narrative mean for those whose ultimate interests lie in Parthian history rather than Roman literature? In the first instance, it should be stressed that the passage's moral and didactic elements deliver, in and of themselves, no authoritative verdict on the historicity of the message or Tacitus' description of its contents. Recognition of the rhetorical features

29- Tac. *Ann.* 6.33.1.

30- Tac. *Ann.* 6.33–5.

31- Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.3: *suis quisque sedibus extorres, quis neque boni intellectus neque mali cura sed mercede aluntur ministri sceleribus.*

32- For the classical *topos* of foreign mercenaries as the bodyguards of tyrants, see Woodman 2017: 152.

33- Tac *Ann.* 6.43.2: *inluvie obsitus et alimenta arcu expediens.* On the connection between Parthians and the bow in Greco-Roman literature, see further Hollis 1994: 210; Lerouge 2007: 295–305.

34- Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.2–44.5.

35- Walser 1951: 144–7; Koestermann 1965: 344; Martin 2001: 181; Devillers 2003: 43.

of a Latin historiographical text need not mean dismissal of its testimony. If the language of *Annals* 6.31 revolves around moral behavior as well as political genealogy, however, it is worth asking what Tacitus might have taken from the milieu of Latin literature rather than his knowledge, such as it was, of Arsacid self-conception.

Quellenforschung offers little help in this regard. The passage does not reveal Tacitus' source for Artabanus' communication: were the king's words conveyed via written letter or orally-delivered message?³⁶ Some scholars have assumed the former, based partially on a reference in Suetonius to an insulting letter from Artabanus which upbraided Tiberius for murdering his own family.³⁷ But many scholars have cast doubt on Suetonius' description of this letter, if not the existence of the letter itself, so the problematic passage is not conclusive for an evaluation of Tacitus' account.³⁸ On the other hand, if one should understand that the unexpressed subjects of the participle *missis* in 6.31.1 are reporting the message, then the run of the sentence suggests that envoys (sc. *legatis* vel sim.) delivered the words orally.³⁹ No fundamental document can therefore be shown to underpin the passage, and appeals to an original text offer no way out. Even if Suetonius and Tacitus were both working from a copy of the same letter, their summaries and interpretations of its contents emphasize manifestly different points; if such a document existed, the two authors evidently saw fit to pass on different aspects of it to their readers – a discrepancy that might be attributable to differences in historical judgment, narrative concern, literary genre, or still other factors. As David Potter has put it in a general discussion of Tacitus' historiographical method, “the important question is not so much ‘what were the sources of Tacitus?’ as... ‘how did he evaluate and use them?’”⁴⁰ In the absence of earlier documentary evidence, reconstruction of the king's *ipsissima verba* should be abandoned in favor of a closer consideration of how Tacitus worked.

Comparison with another Tacitean passage that *can* be controlled by an independent source may help. Book 11 of the *Annals* reproduces a speech by the emperor Claudius; a copy of the oration has survived on a bronze tablet from Lugdunum (modern Lyon), which affords a rare opportunity to examine Tacitus' engagement with a primary document. The relationship between the inscription and the corresponding section of *Annals* 11 have been discussed from many vantage points, but one topic supplies an especially important comparandum for the present purposes.⁴¹ One sentence from each text mentions Romulus, the quasi-mythical founder of Rome and another figure who often served as an *exemplum* in Roman

36- In addition to the bibliography below (nn.37–9), see most recently Woodman 2017: 225 on the phrase *addita contumelia et missis qui gazam a Vonone relictam in Syria Ciliciaque reposcerent*. The verb in the relative clause has been incorrectly reproduced in some important discussions: see *reposcerunt* in Wolski 1993: 154; *reposceret* in Fowler 2005: 125.

37- Suet. *Tib.* 66: *Quin et Artabani Parthorum regis laceratus est litteris parricidia et caedes et ignaviam et luxuriam obicientis monentisque, ut voluntaria morte maximo iustissimoque civium odio quam primum satis faceret*. For those who assume an epistolary communication in *Annals* 6.31.1, see Schippmann 1986; Koeßtermann 1965: 315; Olbrycht 2012: 219.

38- Rejection of Suetonius' testimony in Walser 1951: 146; Koeßtermann 1965: 315; Martin 2001: 168; Seager 2005: 275 n.61. Anderson (1934: 747 n.4) argues that Artabanus could not have accused Tiberius of familicide since he was guilty of it himself (Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2), which is unconvincing.

39- For the Latin phrase, see above, n.36. See Wolski 1993: 154 on “les propos des *messagers* d'Artaban II.”

40- Potter 2012: 129.

41- Important treatments include Griffin 1982 (with earlier bibliography at 404 n.1); 2009: 180–1; Riess 2003: 214–22; Malloch 2009: 124–6; 2013: 338–80. Laird 1999: 134 and n.34 takes issue with the assumption that the tablet represents the “real” text of the original speech; for the opposite view, see e.g. Woodman 1988: 13.

historical writing.⁴² Romulus is especially apropos because the Romans saw him as their equivalent of Cyrus, Alexander, and Arsaces. In a passage on the latter king, for example, Justin writes that he was “no less memorable for the Parthians than Cyrus for the Persians, Alexander for the Macedonians, or Romulus for the Romans.”⁴³ The two sentences on Romulus from the Lyon Tablet and the *Annals*, respectively, read as follows:

Lyon Tablet

*Supervenere alieni et quidem ext[er]ni, ut Numa Romulo successerit ex Sabinis veniens, vicinus quidem, sed tunc externus, ut Anco Marcio Priscus Tarquinius.*⁴⁴

Men from other families, foreigners in fact, succeeded them, such that Romulus was followed by Numa, who came from the Sabines – a neighboring people [these days], to be sure, but in those days a foreign one – and Ancus Marcius by Priscus Tarquinius.

Tacitus, *Annals* 11.24

*At conditor nostri Romulus tantum sapientia valuit ut plerosque populos eodem die hostis, dein civis habuerit.*⁴⁵

But our founder Romulus was so powerful in wisdom that, in many cases, he considered a group of people to be first enemies and then citizens on the very same day.

These sentences account for the only mention of Romulus in both texts; the damage to the Lyon tablet might conceal another reference, but this possibility is unlikely.⁴⁶ The comments come as Claudius rehearses a long list of figures from early Roman history that showed the city’s readiness to assimilate new populations into the ranks of its political leadership. The main objective of the speech is to advocate for the admission of Gallic noblemen to the Senate, and the speaker marshals historical *exempla* to show that such a policy would be in keeping with long-established Roman political habits.

The two sentences illustrate how Tacitus made use of a reference to a founding figure in one of his primary sources. On a general level, the historian does not distort the core message of the speech. Claudius argued for integration by adducing examples of it from early Roman history; Tacitus has him do this as well. But a closer look reveals that the historian has selected, edited, and reshaped his material. The reference to Romulus in the tablet is brief, and the king’s role is minimal. His presence in the text is merely to point

42- On Romulus as an *exemplum*, see Stem 2007. Dench 2005: 11–25 traces divergent literary treatments of the rape of the Sabine women.

43- Just. 41.5.5: *Sic Arsaces... non minus memorabilis Parthis quam Persis Cyrus, Macedonibus Alexander, Romanis Romulus.*

44- *CIL* 13.1668 (= *ILS* 212), lines 9–11.

45- Tac. *Ann.* 11.24.4; text from Malloch 2013: 41.

46- The tablet is damaged at the top; since the text on it is arranged in two columns, there are lacunae at the beginning and middle of the speech. It is unclear how much of the text is lost. Griffin 1982: 408 points out that an entire column might be missing.

out that Numa took over from him, a succession that is attributed not so much to his personal initiative as to an ingrained feature of Roman political culture. In the *Annals*, the matter is otherwise. Here Romulus is the engine of assimilation, and his policy is said to have sprung from his personal qualities, namely his wisdom: within the course of a single day, the king could defeat a population on the battlefield and then welcome them as members of his political community.⁴⁷ Numa is also removed from the equation, whereas the tablet depends on the *pairing* of Romulus and Numa to illustrate the speaker's point. The general thrust of the argumentation is the same, but the treatment of Rome's founding ruler looks rather different in a side-by-side comparison.

Can Tacitus therefore be trusted to faithfully port *exempla* from a primary source to the text of his history? Perhaps not. At a bare minimum, reading the Lyon tablet against the *Annals* shows that it would be unwise to hang too much on the expectation that Tacitus offers a word-for-word transcript of a document or speech. More specifically, though, the case study shows Tacitus taking an original point about Roman political culture and exemplifying that trait in the character of an individual, and a foundational hero at that. The observation of this tendency has significant consequences for those who understand the references to Cyrus and Alexander in *Annals* 6.31 to be essentially reproductions of Artabanus' original utterance. The parallel is all the more important because the Persian and Macedonian conquerors were, like Romulus, the founders of great empires, and therefore frequently subject to the sort of exemplary treatment that supplied Roman historiography with much of its moral and didactic content.

One might go even further down this road and suspect Tacitus of outright fabrication rather than creative interpretation – though this may go too far. Another analogue to Artabanus' statement comes from the *Epistula Mithradatis* (*EM*), a fragmentary survival from the now-lost *Histories* of Tacitus' predecessor (and model) Sallust.⁴⁸ The surviving text purports to be a letter from Mithradates VI Eupator to the Arsacid king Phraates III in which the Pontic king proposes an alliance against the eastward advance of the predatory Romans. Scholars have taken a range of positions on the origin of the epistolary material that Sallust presents. Did the historian work from a genuine letter or, failing that, from Pontic propaganda otherwise accessible to Roman authors in the late first century BCE?⁴⁹ Perhaps, but a much larger group of commentators regards the *EM* simply as free invention more or less out of whole cloth. If the non-existence of a Pontic original cannot, for obvious reasons, be decisively proven, then the passage's deep indebtedness to Greco-Roman rhetoric – not only in its phraseology but also in the substance of its arguments – has allowed the skeptics to make a strong case that Sallust need not have consulted any Pontic sources to pen such a screed.⁵⁰ A reference to the passage in Fronto clarifies little; the rhetorician includes the *EM* in a list of letters preserved in historiography that were “partly written by the leaders themselves, and partly

47- Cf. Riess 2003: 220.

48- Sall. *Hist.* 4.69 (ed. Maurenbrecher).

49- For the view that Sallust's composition is based on an original letter, see Stier 1969: 447; Pédech 1991: 69 n.21. Raditsa 1969: 6 holds that the letter is not a “word for word translation of a Pontic document” but rather “a Latin composition based on a close knowledge of eastern propaganda and historiography”; similar are McGing 1986: 162; Olbrycht 2009: 178, 186 n.144. Plutarch mentions the seizure of Mithridates' γράμματα (Luc. 22.4).

50- See most recently Adler 2011: 17–8; earlier discussions include Bickerman 1946: 131; Earl 1961: 109; Ahlheid 1988 (arguing that the passage is only superficially a letter, and is better analyzed as an oration); McGushin 1994: 174; Adler 2006: 387–8. See also Rosenblitt 2013: 459–60.

composed by the authors of histories or annals.” But the meaning of the Latin is debated.⁵¹ In short, while it seems clear enough that Mithridates and Phraates III communicated with one another, one cannot be sure that Sallust’s composition reflects anything of the substance of the exchanges.⁵²

But if the *EM* engenders skepticism, other evidence prevents the conclusion that the *Annals* offer no pathway whatsoever to the claims of Arsacid political ideology. Here too Roman historiography on Mithridates VI offers a crucial bridge to the Parthian world. As mentioned above, Shayegan has observed that Artabanus’ claims are paralleled in the anti-Roman speech of Mithridates in Justin’s epitome of Trogus – another composition whose relationship to Pontic propaganda (or its lack thereof) has occasioned much debate.⁵³ Justin tells his readers that Trogus made a point of writing the speech in indirect statement, since (in his view) speeches in *oratio recta* transgressed the proper bounds of history.⁵⁴ The sentence regarding Mithridates’ ancestry runs as follows:

*Se autem, seu nobilitate illis conparetur, clariorem illa conluvie convenarum esse, qui paternos maiores suos a Cyro Darioque, conditoribus Persici regni, maternos a magno Alexandro ac Nicatore Seleuco, conditoribus imperii Macedonici.*⁵⁵

[He said that] if his lineage were compared to [the Romans’], then he was more distinguished than that cesspool of refugees – he, who traced his paternal ancestors from Cyrus and Darius, the founders of the Persian empire, and his maternal ones from Alexander and Seleucus, the founders of the Macedonian empire.

Cyrus and Alexander once again rate a mention, and the adjectives *Persicum* and *Macedonicum* resemble *Annals* 6.31 as well. Unlike Tacitus’ Artabanus, Mithridates is clear in his identification of these empire builders as his ancestors, and his connection to their legacy strengthens his royal credentials, especially in comparison with the ignominious origins of the Romans.⁵⁶ By itself, this passage does not support any firmer

51- Fronto *Ad Verum Imp.* 2.1.14, text from van den Hout 1988: 124: *partim ab ipsis ducibus conscriptae, partim a scriptoribus historiarum vel annalium compositae*. Does this mean that, in Fronto’s view, some extant letters survived in the original words of the political leaders who wrote them, while others were written by historians and annalists (Bikerman 1946: 131; followed by McGing 1986: 156; van den Hout 1999: 297; cf. Davenport / Manley 2014: 165–6)? Or that the letters preserved in histories and annals were partly original and partly reworked by the authors who incorporated them (Raditsa 1969: 36–7 n.56)?

52- On relations between Mithridates VI Eupator and Parthia, including other ancient evidence for communication between them, see Olbrycht 2009; Kreuz 2009: 134–7.

53- See above, n.4. An additional complication here is the possible influence of Trogus on Tacitus; see Levene 2010.

54- Just. 38.3.11. Andrew Laird dismisses the idea that Trogus preferred indirect statement for his version of the speech because it was more truthful than the direct quotation of Livy and Sallust: Laird 1999: 136–8; followed by Adler 2011: 8. See also the references and discussion in Marincola 2010: 259 n.2.

55- Just. 38.7.1.

56- Allen 1899: 386 comments on Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1 with the remark that Artabanus “regarded himself as the successor of Cyrus and Alexander.” The text does not explicitly say this, however. Compare the invocation of ancestors by Vologaeses in *Ann.* 12.50.1, where Tacitus has the king describe Armenia as a land that his ancestors had once possessed (*Nam Vologeses casum invadendae Armeniae obvenisse ratus, quam a maioribus suis possessam externus rex flagitio obtineret*). This might be an oblique reference to Cyrus and/or Alexander, but neither is named, and Tacitus’ Vologaeses might simply have earlier Arsacid kings in mind. Cf. Hauser 2016: 439; Olbrycht 2019: 214: “The Arsacids were able to develop a universal imperial ideology of their own. Their chief point of reference was Arsaces, not his links, real or fictive, with the Achaemenids.”

conclusions, since the problems that attend the analysis of Tacitus remain: in the absence of corroborating Mithridatic evidence, it is impossible to gauge the Roman historian's use of (or disinterest in) his source material.⁵⁷ The king's self-conception thus remains obscure.⁵⁸ An additional variable in this case is the agency of Justin, whose method in abridging and adapting Trogus is much debated but ultimately unclear.⁵⁹

But while no Pontic document survives to confirm or repudiate Justin's attribution of a Perso-Macedonian lineage to Mithridates, one piece of contemporary evidence offers a close parallel and bears on the truth value of the passage: the inscriptions at the *hierothesion* of Antiochus I of Commagene at Nemrud Dağı.⁶⁰ In the *Nomos* inscription, the central text of the monument, the king boasts that he has supported the manifold artistic representations of divinities "as the ancient custom of the Greeks and Persians – the most fortunate root of my ancestry – has transmitted."⁶¹ While the designation Ἑλλήνες in this phrase does not exactly match the *Macedones* of Sallust or Tacitus, the stela inscriptions from the monument's ancestor galleries trace the king's maternal line back to Alexander the Great and Seleucus; the paternal line begins with the Achaemenid king Darius I (the Great).⁶² Cyrus does not figure in this genealogy, but its close correspondence with the scheme outlined by Justin's Mithridates is clear.

The inscriptional evidence from Antiochus' *hierothesion* shows that the genealogical claims in Justin and Tacitus can be neither decoupled from the Near Eastern political contexts that they represent nor read purely as the productions of a Roman literary elite. Antiochus was a contemporary and a neighbor of Mithridates who lived, ruled, and mounted an ideological program of kingship alongside his Pontic counterpart. If he found the advertisement of a real or imagined Perso-Macedonian ancestry to be expedient, then it is well within the realm of possibility that a fellow dynast from the Hellenistic Near East felt the same. Indeed, other authors preserve a host of similar claims to an antique pedigree among various dynasts in the Roman Near East.⁶³ When considered alongside the elaborate ancestor galleries at Nemrud

57- The monument for Mithridates VI Eupator at Delos does include some earlier Seleucids, but the gallery poses problems of interpretation, and its relationship to the king's self-presentation is unclear. See Kreuz 2009: 134–40.

58- The genealogical claim has elicited a range of scholarly responses. Some scholars have argued that Mithridates not only advertised such an ancestry, but that the claims were in fact true: see Bosworth / Wheatley 1998: 161–4; McGing 2009: 205, 210; Mayor 2010: 37. More skeptical are Kreuz 2009: 143 n.49; McGing 1986: 13; Olbrycht 2019: 203–4. See also Facella 2005: 88 and n.13; Pařtor 2014: 180; Muccioli 2018: 280–1.

59- See Yardley / Heckel 1997: 12–15; Adler 2011: 37–9, with further bibliography at 221 n.8.

60- On the site, the monument, and the historical background, see Sanders 1996: 1–33, 86–170; Mittag 2004; Rubin 2008: 98–101, 127–9; further references in Shayegan 2017: 428 nn.137–8; Muccioli 2018: 282 n.32.

61- Text of the *Nomos* inscription (*OGIS* 383) from Dörner/Young in Sanders 1996: 208, lines 28–31: καθ, ὃ παλαιὸς λόγος Περσῶν τε καὶ Ἑλλήνων – ἐμοῦ γένους εὐτυχιστάτη ῥίζα – παραδέδωκε. On the relationship between this phrase and the monument's ancestor gallery, see Jacobs 2014: 512–3.

62- The relevant inscriptions both come from the West Terrace of the monument: see Dörner/Young in Sanders 1996: 281–2 (Darius), 322–3 (Alexander).

63- Other Greco-Roman authors attest Mithridatic descent from one of the Seven Persians who overthrew Bardiya/Smerdis: see Polyb. 5.43.2 (who reports the genealogy as a claim and does not vouch for its authenticity); Sall. *Hist.* 2.73 (ed. Maurenbrecher); Diod. Sic. 19.40.2; Flor. 1.40.1; [Aur. Viçt.] *De vir. ill.* 76.1; cf. App. *Mith.* 9, 112. Strabo (11.14.15) reports the same for Orontes of Armenia. Tacitus (*Ann.* 12.18.2) has the Bosporan dynast Mithridates VIII style himself as *proles magni Achaemenis*. According to Josephus, the Cappadocian princess Glaphyra traced her lineage back to Temenus (the mythical founder of the Temenid dynasty, from whom the Argeads claimed descent) and Darius the Great (*BJ* 1.476). The Cappadocian kings claimed Cyrus as an ancestor, as well as one of the Seven Persians: Diod. Sic. 31.19.1–2. On the general tendency, see Mittag 2004: 20 n.85; Fowler 2005: 150; Engels 2017: 75–6; Olbrycht 2019: 201–2.

Dağı, the frequency of these references suggests that such genealogical schemes were a pedestrian feature of Near Eastern dynasties rather than a figment of the Greco-Roman imagination. In this milieu, it would have been unsurprising for Mithridates VI, Artabanus II, or any other king to mount a claim to power by dint of a glorious inheritance.

With the question of historicity having been surveyed, though by no means settled, how does *Annals* 6.31 hold up as supporting evidence for the notion of an “Achaemenid program”? Proponents of this idea have cited this Tacitean passage as a genuine reflection of Parthian political ideology. As the discussion above has illustrated, there are reasons to be skeptical of this position, but it is defensible: as *exempla*, Cyrus and Alexander were popular subjects of rhetorical elaboration and didactic exposition in Roman literature, but as founders they were frequently invoked sources of dynastic legitimacy in the (post-)Hellenistic Near East.

A reading of *Annals* 6.31 as exemplary history, however, shows that the chapter is better read as a personal commentary on Artabanus rather than a programmatic statement on Arsacid imperial preoccupations. The Ciceronian intertext suggests that Cyrus and Alexander-imitation was a red flag for hubristic ambition and reckless overconfidence that could be applied to Roman upstarts no less than Arsacid ones. From this vantage point, the subject’s ethnic or genealogical background is not at issue; the focus is on their character and moral standing. In the narrative context of the *Annals*, Artabanus’ reference to the great conquerors of antiquity foregrounds the king’s individual megalomania more than the embedded features of Parthian ideology.

This is not to say that Artabanus’ invocation of Cyrus and Alexander is an empty rhetorical flourish with no basis in Arsacid self-conception; as discussed above, the task here is not to resolve questions of historicity once and for all, but to better evaluate the nature of the evidence on hand. The endeavor to use Tacitus as a source for Parthian history must involve a consideration of the intellectual equipment that Roman historians most frequently employed in order to make sense of the past. For Tacitus, Cicero, and other Latin authors, *exempla* were among the most important of such tools, and while exemplary history was by no means incompatible with telling the truth as the author understood it, it was also an activity with moral and didactic aims centered on the personal conduct of great men and the lessons their lives might hold for posterity. Tacitus wanted to give his readers an accurate account of what Artabanus said and did, but he was also interested in the king’s ethical behavior, its implications for Roman-Parthian relations, and its consequences. These are the themes around which the Parthian passages of Book 6 revolve, and they stem from the nature of exemplary history rather than a synoptic treatment of Arsacid ideology. Modern scholars do not need to do Parthian history on Tacitus’ terms, but they do need to understand what those terms were.

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