

KAI RUFFING, KERSTIN DROSS-KRÜPE,  
SEBASTIAN FINK, ROBERT ROLLINGER (EDS.)

SOCIETIES AT WAR

ÖSTERREICHISCHE AKADEMIE DER WISSENSCHAFTEN  
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KAI RUFFING, KERSTIN DROSS-KRÜPE,  
SEBASTIAN FINK, ROBERT ROLLINGER (EDS.)

## SOCIETIES AT WAR

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## The Arsacids of Rome and Parthia’s “Iranian Revival” in the First Century CE

*Jake Nabel*

By all accounts, the first century CE in Parthian history was a time of renewed engagement with the empire’s Iranian heritage.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have ascribed particular importance to the reigns of Artabanus II (c. 10–38 CE) and Vologaeses I (c. 51–79 CE), two trailblazing rulers who rearticulated Arsacid power in increasingly Iranian terms.<sup>2</sup> The evidence, meager though it often is, does suggest a shift. The Parthian language appears for the first time on Arsacid coinage as the Greek legends begin to degenerate.<sup>3</sup> A major step in the collection and preservation of Zoroastrianism’s central texts is taken by one Walaxš ī Aškānān, who is possibly to be identified with Vologaeses I.<sup>4</sup> Roman literary texts imagine a connection between the Arsacid dynasty and the ancient Achaemenids.<sup>5</sup> Scholars

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<sup>1</sup> 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: 174–175) as well as in more detailed studies of the Arsacid kingdom (Debevoise, 1938: 196; Neusner, 1963; Wiesehöfer, 2015: 339; Schottky, 1991; Olbrycht, 1998b: 173–179; Kennedy, 1996: 88).

<sup>2</sup> Artabanus II: Frye, 1984: 237; Dąbrowa, 1983: 73–92, esp. 86; Kahrstedt, 1950: 11; but cf. Curtis, 2007: 16, who sees Artabanus’ initiative as a continuation of earlier developments. It is now generally accepted that this king was the second and not the third Artabanus: see Fowler, 2005: 125 n.1. Vologaeses I: Bivar, 1983: 85–86; Wiesehöfer, 2005: 133; Colledge, 1967: 51; Olbrycht, 1998a: 125–138.

<sup>3</sup> Sinisi, 2012a: 19; 2014: 23–24; Curtis, 2000: 27; Lukonin, 1983: 684–685. See further below, n.48–50.

<sup>4</sup> Dk. 412.5–11; cf. ZVYt. 3.26; see below.

<sup>5</sup> Neusner, 1963: 48; Wolski, 1966. On the question of an “Achaemenid program” under the Arsacids see further Shayegan, 2011: 39–331; and below.

speak of an Arsacid “neo-Iranism” or “Iranian revival,” and sometimes of a severing of Parthia’s links to its Hellenistic past.<sup>6</sup>

As usual with Parthian history, it would be unwise to attach mountains of significance to our molehills of evidence. The changes in the coin iconography are gradual, not abrupt. The Zoroastrian texts offer little chronological precision. And the only explicit Arsacid appeals to Achaemenid heritage come from Greco-Roman authors who had their own reasons for connecting the Parthians to the bygone empire of Darius and Xerxes.<sup>7</sup> Still, while parts of this narrative structure may buckle under the weight of further research or new evidence, on the whole, the edifice is likely to stand. The available evidence suggests that, in first century CE Parthia, change mattered more than continuity.

Why did the first century in particular usher in a new phase of Arsacid engagement with the political and religious traditions of ancient Iran? In this paper I suggest one possible answer that has not yet received the attention it deserves. I argue that Parthia’s Iranian revival during the first century CE took place partly as a reaction against the Arsacid “hostages” of the Roman empire and their influence on Parthian political history.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the Julio-Claudian period, several of these dynasts returned to the Parthian kingdom from Rome to claim the Arsacid throne. Their bids for kingship were, on the whole, unsuccessful. But their repatriation to Parthia may nonetheless have prompted their victorious enemies to articulate Arsacid power in new ways. In order to delegitimize the members of the Arsacid family who had lived in Rome, the Parthians developed a conception of Arsacid kingship that was rooted in their empire’s Iranian past. Parthia’s rebirth as an Iranian power was therefore partly a result of interaction with Rome through the trans-imperial circulation of Arsacid royalty.

Preliminarily it should be emphasized that, aside from a few coins, the evidence for the lives of the Arsacids of Rome comes from the literary productions of authors who lived in the Roman empire.<sup>9</sup> While the interest of these authors in Rome’s Arsacid residents means that information about

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<sup>6</sup> Neo-Iranism: Wolski, 1993: 151. Iranian revival: Herrmann, 1977; Curtis, 2007. Recession of Greek influence: Sinisi, 2012a: 19–20; Debevoise, 1938: 196.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Luther, 2014: 158–159.

<sup>8</sup> For the background on these figures, see Dąbrowa, 1987; Wiesehöfer, 2010; Nedergaard, 1988; Strothmann, 2012; Gregoratti, 2015; Nabel, 2017a; 2017b.

<sup>9</sup> The issues of Vonones I have been identified: Sellwood 60/1–9. Coins for the other Arsacids of Rome are not known.

them is relatively abundant, these figures were, in a sense, canvases onto which the Romans could project their preformed conceptions of what Parthians were like – by turns submissive, barbarous, exotic, and deadly.<sup>10</sup> For Tacitus, whose testimony is indispensable, their stories were also occasions to highlight the insidious influence of the emperor's court and the pitfalls of Roman imperialism.<sup>11</sup> Caution is therefore necessary. What the Greco-Roman authors present as Arsacid political discourse is to a considerable extent the Roman imagination let loose within the Parthian empire – or, in the case of Tacitus, a Roman's critique of Rome through a Parthian mouthpiece of the author's own invention.

The use of the term "hostage" to describe the Arsacids of Rome is likewise no neutral designation, and it must be used advisedly. The category is a slippery one even in the Greco-Roman literary sources, as a number of thematic studies of hostages in the Roman world have shown.<sup>12</sup> While Greek and Roman authors are generally consistent in referring to the Arsacids of Rome as hostages, they also assert that the Parthian kings used hostage submission as a pretext for their own purposes, subverting Roman expectations of how the practice worked.<sup>13</sup> The Parthian conception of hostageship is unclear, as no evidence directly addresses how the Arsacids understood these transactions.<sup>14</sup> The Parthian word for hostage (*nyp'k / nēpāk*) survives in a Sasanian inscription from the third century CE, but it is unknown whether the Arsacids applied this term to the members of their family who were sent to Rome.<sup>15</sup>

With these caveats out of the way: what do the Arsacids of Rome have to add to our understanding of the "Iranian revival" during the first century CE?

<sup>10</sup> Lerouge, 2007: 110–119; Schneider, 1986: 67; 1998: 110–113. For the literary conventions surrounding hostages in Greek and Roman historiography, see Allen, 2006; Braund, 1984: 9–17.

<sup>11</sup> See Syme, 1958: 528–533; Adler, 2011: 119–139; Ehrhardt, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Thematic studies of Roman hostage-taking: Walker, 1980; Aymard, 1961; Elbern, 1990; Allen, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> The designation is usually *obses* in Latin and ὄμηρος in Greek, but cf. *pignus* in *Mon. Anc.* 32.2. Arsacid kings use hostage submission as pretext: Strab. 16.1.28; Joseph. *AJ* 18.41–42; Tac. *Ann.* 2.1.2, 13.9.1.

<sup>14</sup> On the basis of Near Eastern and especially Sasanian evidence, I have argued elsewhere that the Parthians would have understood these transactions more as a matter of political fosterage than hostageship; see Nabel, 2017a: 46–65.

<sup>15</sup> NPi 94; Skjærvø, 1983: 73, 114; see also Durkin-Meisterernst, 1998: 239 for MMP-Pa.

With the possible exception of two ambiguous cases from the reign of Trajan, the known transfers of Arsacids to Rome took place during the reign of the Julio-Claudians, a period that saw an ideological shift in how the Romans looked at the empire of their Parthian neighbors to the east.<sup>16</sup> Territorial expansion was deeply embedded in the habits of the Roman Republic.<sup>17</sup> Augustus did not depart from this pattern, and the idea of *imperium sine fine* was vital to the vision of imperial order that he propagated.<sup>18</sup> But his inability or disinterest in mounting a campaign of conquest against Parthia led to the formulation of a new ideology that supported a new kind of policy toward the Arsacid kingdom. This development is well captured in the phrase *divisio orbis*, a description of the Roman-Parthian relationship in Justin (perhaps echoing Trogus, the Augustan author he epitomized).<sup>19</sup> This new way of thinking about the east envisioned Parthia as an *alter orbis*, “another world” – barbarous, decadent, and better kept at bay by Roman power rather than ruled directly.<sup>20</sup>

Crucial to the implementation of this ideology was the use of a historical analogy. The Romans imagined the Parthians as the successors of the ancient Persian empire of the Achaemenids. By extension, they themselves identified with the classical Greeks.<sup>21</sup> During the Greco-Persian wars of the fifth century BCE, these Greeks had (at least in the telling of Herodotus) heroically upheld the proper division of the world by fending off the despotic forces of the east. As heir to the legacy of the classical Greeks, Augustan Rome would keep the Parthians – the successors of the Achaemenids – confined to their own world, the dangerous and backward territory to the east of the Euphrates.

Augustus propagated this ideology through events like his famous *naumachia* of the year 2 BCE, which pitted “Athenians” against “Persians,”

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<sup>16</sup> For a tabulation of known cases (including two ambiguous transactions during the reign of Trajan), see Nabel, 2017b: 28 (Table 2.3).

<sup>17</sup> See esp. Harris, 1979: 105–130. For an overview of approaches to Republican imperialism, see Eckstein, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Brunt, 1963: 171–176; Mattern, 1999: 162–188.

<sup>19</sup> Just. 41.1.1; cf. the *orbis alter* of Manil. 4.674–5; Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.2 (on which see further below). Some (Sonnabend, 1986: 202; Lerouge, 2007: 175) think the phrase belonged to Trogus’ original text, but see also Yardley / Heckl, 1997: 11.

<sup>20</sup> Sonnabend, 1986: 197–227; Schneider, 2007: 54–60; Shayegan, 2011: 332–340.

<sup>21</sup> Spawforth, 1994; Hardie, 1997; Luther, 2010; Schneider, 2012: 119.

"with the Athenians winning, just as they did then."<sup>22</sup> Augustus had recreated the battle of Salamis, where the Athenian-led Greek fleet defeated the Persian navy and repudiated Xerxes' hubristic yoking of east and west together at the Hellespont. By publicly celebrating this victory and appropriating its significance for his own purposes, Augustus shaped the way his Roman subjects thought about the relationship of their own empire to the Arsacid kingdom.<sup>23</sup> The Persian Wars tradition would continue under later Julio-Claudians, most notably at Caligula's Baiae procession and a subsequent Salaminian *naumachia* under Nero.<sup>24</sup>

The Arsacids living in the city at this time proved useful to the implementation of the ideology of the *divisio orbis*. Suetonius records that Augustus exhibited his Arsacid "hostages" to the Romans at one of his festivals, leading them through the middle of the arena and seating them directly behind him in the second row.<sup>25</sup> The author mentions the Parthians in the same breath as other outlandish curiosities that Augustus put on display for the Roman people: a two foot tall dwarf with a stentorian voice; a group of tigers; a giant snake. The sheer foreignness and novelty of these figures would have reinforced the notion that these creatures were the inhabitants of an *alter orbis*: they represented a different kind of empire that belonged to a different kind of world.<sup>26</sup>

But the Arsacids of the Julio-Claudian court effected change in Parthia no less than in Rome. In several cases, members of the Parthian nobility petitioned the Roman emperor to release one of these princes so that he could come back to the Arsacid kingdom to serve as their king.<sup>27</sup> The sources record several such requests, which in every case were granted.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cass. Dio 55.10.7–8: καὶ ἐνίκων καὶ τότε οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι; cf. Ov. *Ars am.* 1.171–2 with Hollis, 1977: 77–78.

<sup>23</sup> See Shayegan, 2011: 337–339.

<sup>24</sup> See Spawforth, 1994: 238; Hardie, 1997. Caligula's Baiae procession: Sen. *De Brev. Vit.* 18.5; Suet. *Calig.* 19; Cass. Dio 59.17; Joseph. *AJ* 19.5–6; [Aurelius Victor] *Epitome* 3.9. Nero's *naumachia*: Cass. Dio 61.9.6; Suet. *Ner.* 12.

<sup>25</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 43.3–4; cf. Rose, 2005: 37.

<sup>26</sup> Wiesehöfer, 2010: 188. Note also Caligula's use of Darius at the Baiae procession; above, n.24.

<sup>27</sup> On the Parthian nobility's relationship with the Arsacid king, see Wolski, 1989; Hauser, 2005: 185–199.

<sup>28</sup> The young son of Phraates IV (returned by Augustus to his father in perhaps 23 BCE) is an exceptional case in that the king, not the nobility, requested his return; for discussion, see Nabel, 2015: 307–314. For Vonones, see *Mon. Anc.* 33; Joseph. *AJ* 18.46; Tac.

A number of Arsacids who had spent years or even decades at Rome therefore returned to Parthia and abruptly changed from the prisoners of one empire into the rulers of another. What impact did they have on Parthia? What forces did their repatriation unleash?

The answer begins with political conditions within the Parthian empire. Every Arsacid who exchanged Roman “hostageship” for Parthian kingship was compelled to fight a civil war for the throne. No reigning Arsacid king ever gave up power willingly, and certain members of the Parthian nobility also seem to have arrayed themselves against the royal contenders returning from Rome. These domestic conflicts meant that the Arsacids of Rome had powerful enemies within Parthia. These enemies didn’t just fight them on the battlefield. They fought them with rhetoric, they fought them with invective, and they fought them with a new vision of Arsacid kingship that was designed to delegitimize the Arsacids of Rome and to disqualify them from taking the throne.

The reconstruction of this rhetoric is a hazardous business, since almost all the evidence comes from Tacitus.<sup>29</sup> As mentioned earlier, this situation poses a serious problem. Tacitus was imperfectly informed about political discourse within the Parthian empire, and his digressions on the fate of the Arsacids of Rome may have aimed at holding up a mirror for the Romans rather than opening a window onto the Parthians.<sup>30</sup> But without Tacitus, there is little basis for assessing the significance of their homecoming. Setting aside for the moment the historicity of his narrative, how does he depict the return of Rome’s Arsacid princes to their native land?

There are three such figures in the *Annals* who return to Parthia to contend for the Arsacid kingship: Vonones (8/9 CE); Tiridates (35/6 CE); and Meherdates (49 CE).<sup>31</sup> In every case, Tacitus writes from the point of view of the opponents of these repatriated princes. Each time, their enemies rehearse different variations of a similar argument:

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*Ann.* 2.2.1. Phraates: Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2; Cass. Dio 58.26.2. Tiridates: Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.2–3; Cass. Dio 58.26.2. Meherdates: Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.4, 12.10–11.

<sup>29</sup> The exception is the return of Vonones, for which Josephus (*AJ* 18.46–52), the *Res Gestae* of Augustus (*Mon. Anc.* 33), and the numismatic evidence offer additional testimony.

<sup>30</sup> On the literary aspects of Tacitus’ Parthian digressions, see Keitel, 1978; Martin, 1981: 179–180; Gowing, 1990; Malloch, 2013: 114–175; Clark, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> For sources, see above, n.28. One Arsacid, Phraates, died in Syria on the way back to Parthia; see further below, n.35.

- a *true* Arsacid is the opposite of a Roman;
- the former "hostage" now vying for the throne has lived at Rome for so long that he has become Roman and, by extension, a tool of Roman power;
- therefore he has lost his Arsacid legitimacy and is ineligible for the kingship.

The last case, that of Meherdates in 49 CE, is perhaps the clearest formulation of this argument. Meherdates fights a war against Gotarzes, the reigning Parthian king. He loses. Gotarzes has his defeated enemy brought before him, and Tacitus writes a reproach from the king's point of view. "Gotarzes," the author says, "upbraiding [Meherdates] as no relative of his nor a man of the Arsacid clan but instead 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."<sup>32</sup>

The accusations draw on potent political rhetoric. Although Meherdates was by blood uncontestedly a member of the Arsacid family, Gotarzes rejects his Arsacid heritage. Instead of an Arsacid, he is called a foreigner – a man who does not belong in the Parthian empire – and a Roman. These two terms – "Arsacid" on the one hand, and "Roman" on the other – are presented in Gotarzes' speech as incompatible and irreconcilable opposites.

Tacitus' Gotarzes closely echoes the idea from Augustan ideology that Parthia was a world apart from Rome. In Tacitus' characterization, the *divisio orbis* underpins Parthian thinking about Rome just as it does Roman thinking about Parthia. This view is equally present when the historian writes of Vonones' return to Parthia in 8 CE. Vonones' opponents complain that "a king had been sought from another world."<sup>33</sup> Josephus describes Vonones' return to Parthia as well; like Tacitus, he considers the viewpoint of Vonones' political enemies. The story in his account is much the same: Vonones' residence at Rome has allegedly made him a "foreign slave" – a foreigner being the opposite of Arsacid, and a slave being the opposite of a king.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.3: *atque ille non propinquum neque Arsacis de gente, sed alienigenam et Romanum increpans, auribus decisis vivere iubet, ostentui clementiae suae et in nos dehonestamento.*

<sup>33</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.2–4: *petitum alio ex orbe regem.*

<sup>34</sup> Joseph. *AJ* 18.47: ἀνδραπόδω γὰρ ἀλλοτρίω. For a comparison of Josephus and Tacitus' accounts of this episode, see Kahrstedt, 1950: 11–12; Gowing, 1990: 316–320.

But this way of thinking is found only among the enemies of the Arsacids of Rome. Tacitus himself does not say that these princes had “sunk down into a slave-like subjection,” as he does when speaking of the Cappadocian hostage Tigranes.<sup>35</sup> Instead, this invective is ascribed to their Parthian political rivals. These foes seize upon the ideology of the *divisio orbis* because it gives them a way to delegitimize and discredit their opponents. First, they characterize the Arsacid as the opposite of the Roman; second, they claim that the former “hostages” have been at Rome for so long that they have become creatures of the Romans. This logic effectively disqualifies the Arsacids of Rome from contention for the kingship of Parthia. In other words, Tacitus shows the enemies of Vonones, Tiridates, and Meherdates adopting the ideology of the *divisio orbis* because it gives them a way to justify the configuration of power that they want – namely, the rejection of the Arsacids of Rome as potential kings.

But is Tacitus a reliable source for Parthian political discourse? Isn’t he merely using the Parthians to voice his own critique of Roman decadence? Aren’t his Arsacid narratives merely occasions to remark on how Roman culture corrupts the hapless barbarians who are ensnared and degraded by the wiles of the imperial court?

To be sure, such ventriloquism is part of what Tacitus is up to in these passages. Gotarzes’ invective against Meherdates, for instance, is in part a response to an earlier speech by the emperor Claudius made on the occasion of Meherdates’ release, directly echoing some of its vocabulary.<sup>36</sup> This is obviously a feature of Tacitus’ text, not of Parthian rhetoric or historical reality. Nevertheless, there are several reasons to believe that his account reflects a real development in Parthian political discourse in the early first century CE.

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<sup>35</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 14.26.1: *usque ad servilem patientiam demissus*. The closest Tacitus comes to applying this language to an Arsacid is in his assessment of the death of Phraates in Syria in 35 CE, whose succumbing to disease is attributed to his exchanging Rome’s customs for Parthia’s and being “unequal to his native dispositions” (*patriis moribus impar*): Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2; cf. Allen, 2006: 233. But this comment stops well short of the accusations that Tacitus assigns to the Parthian enemies of the Arsacids of Rome.

<sup>36</sup> Koestermann, 1967: 132–133. See also the similarities with the return narrative of the Cheruscan prince Italicus: Tac. *Ann.* 11.16–17 with Malloch, 2013: 247–248; Nabel, 2017a: 134–135.



First, Tacitus worked from at least one well-informed source. Many scholars assume very little Roman knowledge about conditions within the Parthian empire, a blank slate that could have given Tacitus more freedom to invent.<sup>37</sup> This skepticism is well founded and necessary, but it ignores the insight that Tacitus could have gained through the testimony of the general Domitius Corbulo, who was one of his sources for eastern affairs.<sup>38</sup> Under Nero, Corbulo campaigned against the Parthians in Armenia for nearly a decade.<sup>39</sup> At one point, he held a number of Arsacids 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.<sup>40</sup> Corbulo wrote with an agenda, of course, and Tacitus had to treat aspects of his account with caution.<sup>41</sup> Still, the general was in a unique position to supply information about Arsacid dynastic struggles and the domestic political environment within Parthia. Tacitus undoubtedly shaped this material to suit his purposes, but it goes too far to say that he would have been wholly ignorant of Arsacid internal affairs.

Second, comparative evidence suggests that concerns about acculturation – whether real or perceived – were of high importance when long-absent royalty returned to their homelands. There are other ancient examples of elites who supposedly adopted parts of their host's culture. Most of these were prisoners of the Romans, to be sure, and their stories are related by Roman sources.<sup>42</sup> But at least one case shows that the

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<sup>37</sup> See Sonnabend, 1986: 198; Campbell, 1993: 225; Gowing, 1990: 315; Allen, 2006: 225–234.

<sup>38</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.16.1–3. The nature of Corbulo's compositions is debated: see Levick, 2013: 541–545; Malloch, 2013: 264 n.159.

<sup>39</sup> From 55–63 CE; for chronology, see Wheeler, 1997. On Corbulo's career in general, see Syme, 1970.

<sup>40</sup> Corbulo receives Arsacids in his camp: 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; cf. Schottky, 1991: 119; Olbrycht, 1998b: 181–183. See also Tac. *Ann.* 15.27.2, where Corbulo claims knowledge of Parthian domestic affairs.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. the German hostage Agenarich/Serapio (Amm. 16.12.25; cf. Lee, 1991: 368–369); Jovinianus of Corduene (Amm. 18.6.20). Some have seen Vonones' short hairstyle on his drachms as a sign of Roman influence: Sellwood, 1980: 181; Allen, 2006: 176–177; Sinesi, 2012b: 286.

phenomenon was held to work in the other direction: the character of the Seleucid king Demetrius II allegedly worsened through his exposure to “Parthian cruelty” during his years of captivity at the Arsacid court.<sup>43</sup> But whatever the reality behind these supposed transformations, for the present purposes it is far more important that accusations of betrayal levelled at royal hostages and prisoners tended to stick. An illustrative case is the return of Demetrius, son of Philip V and member of the Antigonid royal family, to Macedon after an extended hostageship in Rome.<sup>44</sup> Demetrius’ jealous brother Perseus accused him of collusion with the Romans. Livy has Perseus say that, after Demetrius’ hostageship, “the Romans gave us back his body, but they held onto his soul themselves.”<sup>45</sup> Philip apparently agreed; in the end, he had Demetrius executed. Tarring repatriated dynasts with the brush of Romanization was an effective tactic, as the Arsacids of Rome would learn to their cost.

Finally, there is the evidence from Parthian territory that points to a re-articulation of Arsacid power by the same first century CE kings who confronted the threat of dynastic rivals returning from Rome. The coins of Artabanus II evince some significant departures from the iconographic choices of his predecessors. On one tetradrachm type, a unique forward-facing bust exemplifies the frontality that some see as a defining characteristic of Parthian art starting in the first century CE.<sup>46</sup> On others, Artabanus omitted the common epithet *philellen* – a break from tradition, and perhaps a pointed message to the Greek populations of the empire with whom the king had clashed.<sup>47</sup>

Artabanus’ innovations were taken further by Vologaeses I, a leader whose kingship has rightly been seen as a turning point in Parthian history. Vologaeses was the first king since the founder of the Arsacid dynasty to use any language but Greek on his coins.<sup>48</sup> On the obverse of

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<sup>43</sup> Just. 39.1.3: *Antiochenses primi duce Tryphone, execrantes superbiam regis [sc. Demetrii], quae conversatione Parthicae crudelitatis intolerabilis facta erat*. On Demetrius’ imprisonment by the Arsacids, see Shayegan, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> On Demetrius, see Edson, 1935; Walbank, 1938; Allen, 2006: 1–13.

<sup>45</sup> Liv. 40.5.12: *corpus nobis reddiderunt Romani, animum ipsi habent*.

<sup>46</sup> Sellwood 63/1; Frye, 1984: 246; Colledge, 1977: 143–144; but cf. Sinisi, 2014: 17, 36–50.

<sup>47</sup> Sellwood, 1980: 185; Sinisi, 2012b: 286; cf. Curtis, 2000: 24.

<sup>48</sup> 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: 190–191) and may be connected with Greek *κάρπας*; see further Wiesehöfer, 1993: 96; Briant, 2002: 340; Hyland, 2013; Rung, 2015; Sinisi, 2014: 12.

later drachms, an abbreviation of his name appears in Parthian to the right of his diademed bust. On the reverse, the Greek legend is blundered and illegible, having become a pictorial element rather than a textual one.<sup>49</sup> The Avroman documents offer some limited support to the idea that the importance of the Parthian language increased in the first century CE, at least for legal transactions.<sup>50</sup>

The changes may also have had a religious dimension. A proclamation attributed to "Valakhsh the Arsacid" (*Walaxš ī Aškānān*) in the tenth century CE *Dēnkard* records the initiative of a king named Vologaeses to collect and preserve the various traditions of the Avesta and the Zand, the central text of Zoroastrianism and its exegesis.<sup>51</sup> Behramgore Anklesaria's text of the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* also contains a reference to a *Walaxš ī Aškānān*, though Carlo Cereti's more recent edition leaves the personal name of the king unrestored.<sup>52</sup> In connection with these passages it is perhaps relevant that the Roman sources call Vologaeses' brother Tiridates a magus and underline the pair's sense of religious propriety.<sup>53</sup> It is not certain that the Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts refer to Vologaeses I rather than one of his successors by the same name, but many scholars see the identification as a distinct or even the most likely possibility.<sup>54</sup> If so, the memory of Vologaeses as an epochal king may suggest that he aligned Arsacid power with the religious authority of Zoroastrianism to an extent that went beyond the self-styling of his predecessors.

Vologaeses also seems to have innovated in more directly subordinating the various lands that made up the Parthian empire to the control of the Arsacid family. In 51/2 CE, he installed his brother Tiridates on the Armenian throne "so that no part of his family would be without dominion,"

<sup>49</sup> The legend reads *wl*, short for *wlgšy* / *Walgaš* / Vologaeses: SNP type IVc/4a.a(1c.a) = Sellwood 71/1; see also above, n.3. 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.

<sup>50</sup> Avroman I and II date to the first century BCE (88/7 and 22/1, respectively) and are written in Greek; Avroman III dates to 53 CE and is in Parthian. See Wiesehöfer, 2015: 339.

<sup>51</sup> Dk. 412.5–11. For the text, see Shaki, 1981: 115; cf. Boyce, 1984: 113–114. On the transmission of the Avesta generally, see Hintze, 1998; Hoffman / Narten, 1989.

<sup>52</sup> ZVYt. 3.26; compare the texts of Anklesaria, 1957: 14 and Cereti, 1995: 87. See also Boyce, 1968: 49–50; 1984: 91–92.

<sup>53</sup> Plin. *HN* 30.16; Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1, 15.24.2; cf. Cass. Dio 63.7.2; Lerouge, 2007: 333.

<sup>54</sup> See Debevoise, 1938: 196; Boyce, 1975: 103; Sinisi, 2012a: 20; 2012b: 287; Wiesehöfer, 2015: 339; Wolski, 1993: 174; Olbrycht, 1998b: 185.

as Tacitus puts it.<sup>55</sup> This was not the first Arsacid attempt to wrest Armenia away from the Romans, but it was the first to succeed.<sup>56</sup> Vologaeses also awarded Media to his brother Pacorus.<sup>57</sup> Numismatic evidence suggests that similar developments took place in Characene and Elymais, where the apparent cessation of local dynastic coinage might point to a tighter imposition of Arsacid control.<sup>58</sup> Adiabene and Hyrcania also seem to have been brought back into line, though as with Characene and Elymais there is no direct evidence of their receiving an Arsacid as king.<sup>59</sup> Pliny further attests that Vologaeses sought to curb the power of the often recalcitrant Greek polis Seleucia on the Tigris through the nearby foundation of an eponymous city, Vologesocerta.<sup>60</sup>

Then there is the much-discussed issue of Parthia's reconnection to the Achaemenid past, though here the evidence has sometimes been pushed too far. Not a single piece of contemporary, indigenous Parthian evidence survives that unambiguously positions the Arsacids as the successors to the Achaemenids. The argument that the Arsacids would have considered themselves as such rests largely on their re-employment of the Achaemenid title "king of kings."<sup>61</sup> This is an important development, to be sure, especially since the Seleucids do not seem to have used the term. But it is hardly an unequivocal claim to Achaemenid heritage.

The only sources that do contain such explicit claims are Roman. In a passage in Tacitus' *Annals*, Artabanus II lays claim to the former territories of the Achaemenid and Macedonian empires in a missive to the

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<sup>55</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 12.50.1: *ne qua pars domus sine imperio ageret*; cf. Joseph. *AJ* 20.74. The Romans eventually accepted the arrangement after years of war; see Dąbrowa, 1983: 131–147; Ziegler, 1964: 66–78; Wolski, 1993: 163–175; Debevoise, 1938: 177–195; Wheeler, 1997.

<sup>56</sup> Artabanus II had made a similar effort to win Armenia for his sons: Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1–33.2; Joseph. *AJ* 18.96–98; Cass. Dio 58.26.1–3. Cf. Philostr. *VA* 2.2, who mentions an Armenian king named Arsaces. On Artabanus' Armenian war as a precedent for Vologaeses, see Hauser, 2005: 196; 2006: 307.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph. *AJ* 20.74; *BJ* 7.7.4; Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1.

<sup>58</sup> See Dąbrowa, 1991: 143–145; Keall, 1975: 624–625; Schuol, 2000: 339, 395–397; cf. Hauser, 2005: 196 n.115.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Schottky, 1991: 116–130.

<sup>60</sup> Plin. *HN* 6.122; Sinisi, 2012a: 17 and n.32; Schuol, 2000: 337; Wolski, 1993: 175. Vologaeses may have been responsible for a number of other city foundations: see Olbrycht, 1998b: 184.

<sup>61</sup> For an appraisal of the Arsacid use of this title, see Shayegan, 2011: 39–331.

Roman emperor Tiberius.<sup>62</sup> His appeal to Achaemenid heritage may be part of the reason why a new Arsacid origin myth is found in the second century CE author Arrian; unlike the Augustan-era accounts of Strabo and Trogus/Justin, Arrian records a genealogical link between the Arsacid and Achaemenid dynasties.<sup>63</sup> Such passages might reflect Parthian views. But this is far from certain, especially since the Romans had their own tradition of styling Parthia as a reborn Achaemenid empire.<sup>64</sup>

In sum, Artabanus and Vologaeses do seem to have been rulers who put a new face on the Arsacid monarchy and redeployed Arsacid power in new ways, even if their connection to the Achaemenid past remains unclear. These two kings placed renewed emphasis on the Iranian features of Parthia's heritage which, though always present throughout the empire's history, were nevertheless now invested with a new significance. Moreover, this development seems to have happened partly at the expense of the Arsacid monarchy's connection to the Hellenistic models that had influenced it. The legacy of Greek culture did not disappear overnight, of course; this was the beginning of a gradual change, not a sudden rupture. But as time wore on, the Arsacids increasingly turned towards Iran and away from Greece: towards Iranian religion, language, and models of kingship, and away from the facets of their self-presentation that they had inherited from Greco-Macedonian rulers.

Why did this shift take place in the first century CE? The Arsacids of Rome are an important part of the answer to this question. The first half of the first century saw several cases when recalcitrant Parthian nobles petitioned the Roman emperor for the release of one of these dynasts, whom they then attempted to install on the throne. For Artabanus, this was an existential threat: he was forced to fight both Vonones and Tiridates.<sup>65</sup> For Vologaeses, the threat was potential, but still serious. Tacitus' account may show how these kings and their near contemporaries met these challenges on the level of royal ideology: a new vision of Arsacid kingship was propagated to rob former "hostages" of the Arsacid legitimacy they

<sup>62</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1. For discussion, see Dąbrowa, 1983: 104; Wolski, 1993: 154; Shayegan, 2011: 293–307, 330–331; Fowler, 2005: 125–129; Olbrycht, 1998b: 144–145.

<sup>63</sup> Neusner, 1963: 48; Wiesehöfer, 1993: 179–187, with references.

<sup>64</sup> See Sonnabend, 1986: 281 n. 85; Schneider, 1998: 110–13; 2007: 70 and n. 91; Luther, 2010: 109; Shayegan, 2011: 336 and n.14, with references; see also above.

<sup>65</sup> Artabanus may even have depicted the defeated Vonones on some of his coins: see Sellwood 62/1–10; Sinisi, 2012b: 286.

needed to become king. First, Tacitus suggests, their political enemies argued that what was Arsacid was the opposite of what was Roman – that is, that the two terms were mutually exclusive. Second, they claimed that the returning Arsacids had effectively become Romans by virtue of their long residence in the empire of the Caesars. This line of argumentation delegitimized the Arsacids of Rome, robbing them of the royal status that underpinned their bid for the throne. Since the enemies of Vonones, Tiridates, and Meherdates prevailed on the battlefield, in the end their vision of Arsacid kingship was the one that mattered. The parameters of who counted as an Arsacid duly shifted.

The influence of the Arsacids of Rome explains not only why the victorious Arsacid kings reconnected with Iranian cultural forms, but also why they began to turn away from the Hellenistic traditions that had historically been a significant feature of Arsacid kingship.<sup>66</sup> “De-Hellenization” in first century CE Parthia did not mean a comprehensive program directed against every aspect of Greek culture.<sup>67</sup> Instead, it was a response to contingent political challenges that stemmed, in part, from the Arsacid family’s Roman branch. The limited evidence suggests that the Greek communities in Parthia tended to support royal contenders returning from Roman territory in their conflicts against the reigning king. Tiridates was eagerly received by the inhabitants of the predominantly Greek communities in Nicephorium, Anthemusias, and Seleucia on the Tigris as he marched to war against Artabanus II.<sup>68</sup> And in the invective that Tacitus writes for the enemies of Vonones, one of the prime complaints is the king’s retinue of Greeks.<sup>69</sup> It surely only exacerbated the situation that (as events like Augustus’ *naumachia* show) the Romans had claimed the mantle of the classical Greeks in their struggle against an eastern empire that they saw as a resurrection of Achaemenid Persia. It is against this backdrop – support for returning Arsacids among Parthia’s Greeks, and Roman identification with the victors of Salamis – that one should understand developments like Artabanus’ avoidance of the epithet *philellen*, the blundered Greek legends on Vologaeses’ drachms, and the foundation of Vologesocerta. Political expedience, not cultural policy, triggered the Arsacid disengagement with the Greek past.

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<sup>66</sup> On the depth of the Arsacids’ engagement with Greek culture, see Wiesehöfer, 2000.

<sup>67</sup> Wiesehöfer, 2015: 338–341.

<sup>68</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 6.41.2–42.4.

<sup>69</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.3.

In the end, no source can independently verify or refute Tacitus' description of the return of the Arsacids of Rome to Parthian territory. But Tacitus' narrative shows a discourse and a debate about the nature of Arsacid kingship that helps explain the changes that are evident in the rest of the evidence for the first century CE. Conflict with the Arsacids of Rome forced Parthia's victorious kings to answer the question of what an Arsacid was and what an Arsacid was not. Over time, the positive answers came more and more from Parthia's Iranian heritage, and the negative ones from Greece and Rome. Change in first century CE Parthia, then, is partly a story of interaction with Rome, a story in which the trans-imperial reach of the Arsacid family is of paramount importance. In one sense, it took a rejection of the Romanized Arsacid to invent the Iranian one.

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