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TIRIDATES IN THE FORUM, PEROZ ON HIS KNEES: RELIGION AND REPUTATION IN ANCIENT IRANIAN DIPLOMACY

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After the open warfare that attended the collision of Rome and Parthia during the Late Republic, the early years of the Principate witnessed a series of high-profile diplomatic conferences between the two empires. Several of these meetings – at least according to Roman literary sources – involved religious and devotional acts of apparent Parthian submission to Roman leaders and imperial insignia. Artabanus II is supposed to have sacrificed to statues of the Caesars at a Euphrates conference with Lucius Vitellius.¹ Tiridates, the brother of king Vologaeses I, performed a similar ritual before a statue of Nero.² But the most famous such case involves the same Tiridates, now in Rome rather than Armenia, and now in front of Nero himself rather than a statue. By all accounts, the Arsacid king's obeisance to the emperor on the so-called "Golden Day" was one of the most brilliant spectacles of antiquity, a dazzling exposition that mixed religion with politics, pageantry, and theater.³

* My thanks to Marek Olbrycht, Jeffrey Lerner, and the two anonymous *Anabasis* reviewers whose feedback greatly improved this piece. All citations of Cassius Dio follow the numbering of Cary 1925. Abbreviations of Zoroastrian texts follow Stausberg / Vevaina 2015, xxiii–xxvii. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹ Suet. *Calig.* 14.3; *Vit.* 2.4 (who mentions eagles, standards, and statues of the Caesars as the objects of veneration, and puts the event during the reign of Caligula); Cass. Dio 59.27.3 (who mentions statues only, and puts it under Tiberius). On this conference, see also Joseph. *AJ* 18.101–4. The date is unclear: see Täubler 1904, 33–40; Dąbrowa 1983, 107 for discussion.

² Tac. *Ann.* 15.29.2–3; Cass. Dio 62.23.3.

³ Cass. Dio 63.1.2–8.1; Suet. *Ner.* 13; Tac. *Ann.* 16.23.2–24.1; cf. Plin. *HN* 30.16–7. On the preservation of the later books of Dio, see Millar 1964, 1–4. Dio's narrative of the Golden Day is preserved only in Xiphilinus' epitome, on which see Mallan 2013.

Despite considerable scholarly interest in the political ramifications of the Golden Day, however, attempts to reconstruct Tiridates' own experience of this landmark event have been limited and superficial. The literature offers, in the main, two assessments of the Arsacid dynast's perspective. The first is that Tiridates swallowed his pride and participated in a demeaning charade in exchange for Armenia;⁴ the second, that religious communion with Nero allowed the two rulers to jointly orchestrate a ceremony that accommodated reputational concerns on both sides.⁵ The paucity of interpretations is not helped by the confinement of the question's evidentiary basis to the four Roman authors who report on the Golden Day, and the discussion remains mostly focalized through the Roman point of view, whether consciously or from a rote inheritance of the classical authors' preoccupations.⁶ Assessments of the day's implications for the Roman-Parthian status quo and the distribution of power between the two empires are many and rich, but considerations of the Parthian vantage point are impoverished.⁷

While the shortage of contemporary, indigenous sources keeps the Arsacid perspective, as always, at greatest remove, a passage in the Byzantine historian Procopius suggests that Tiridates could have circumvented Rome's ascription of meaning to the Golden Day not by sharing his religious beliefs, but by concealing them. Procopius tells a story of the Sasanian king Peroz, trapped with his army by the Hephthalites in a narrow defile, and compelled to purchase salvation at the cost of his dignity. But while Peroz agrees to his enemy's terms, he escapes his prescribed self-abasement with a trick: by orchestrating the circumstances of his prostration to conform with morning prayers, he transforms the ceremony into a routine Zoroastrian rite, negating the dishonor that it would otherwise entail, at least in his own estimation.⁸

Peroz's religious chicanery can be applied with profit to the case of Tiridates, not only because the Parthian may have pulled the same trick, but because the logic of the story can challenge the dominance of the Roman perspective. Procopius' text shows the susceptibility of diplomatic summits to divergent assessments that

⁴ Fini 1994, 70–1; Mattern 1999, 178, 202; Malitz 2005, 60; Oller Guzmán 2014, 94.

⁵ Campbell 1993, 231–2; Champlin 2003, 226; Winterling 2009, 9–10; Mratschek 2013, 52–3.

⁶ Even scholarship that purports to represent the Parthian viewpoint adduces no evidence outside of Pliny, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio: see e.g. Wolski 2003, 83; La Rocca 2017, 202. Schulz 2019, 212–3 considers Dio's representation of Tiridates' reactions to the event, but the object of study is the author's literary strategies rather than Parthian history.

⁷ Evaluations of the settlement are divided. Some scholars stress that an Arsacid king in Armenia represented a real loss for Rome: see Ziegler 1964, 75; Chaumont 1976, 123; Wolski 1987; Griffin 1984, 227, 232; Wheeler 2007, 242–3; Lerouge 2007, 143–4. Other historians see the conclusion to the war as something closer to an even compromise, since Tiridates' kingship was basically palatable to the Romans, especially after his splendid coronation by Nero: see Wiedemann 1996, 248; Heil 1997, 134; Harl 2016, 121; Noreña 2017, 57; Drinkwater 2013, 160; 2019, 142; cf. Charlesworth 1950, 72; Champlin 2003, 221–9. On the Roman reception of the settlement, see Nabel 2019, 618–9.

⁸ Procop. *Wars* 1.3.15–22.

stem not just from misunderstanding, but from antagonistic deception that guards the deceiver from dishonor. Commentators on Tiridates' coronation have assumed that the meaning of the ceremony was legible to both sides. The Peroz story, however, demonstrates that at least one actor in a diplomatic meeting may have a vested interest in *hiding* the event's "true" significance from their interlocutor, whose ignorance allows them to maintain an alternate version more favorable to their own interests. The evidence cannot reveal what Tiridates and Peroz were thinking as they bowed to their enemies. But Procopius' testimony foregrounds the tricks that rulers may play on an interstate stage, and it offers a way to consider how one Parthian dynast may have leveraged his religion to escape from Roman hegemony even as he bent the knee in the forum.

Peroz

In 484 CE, the Sasanian king Peroz marches through Bactria to settle a border dispute with the Hephthalite Huns under their king Akhshunwār.⁹ He leads the Persian army into a valley with no outlet, recognizing his mistake only too late. The Hephthalites block the exit and trap the Persian army. Messengers from the Hephthalite king arrive with an offer: Peroz and his men can leave with their lives if the Sasanian king bows before him, swears oaths (ὄρκοι), and offers pledges (πιστά) never to attack the Hephthalites again.¹⁰ Peroz turns to the army's magi (Zoroastrian priests) for counsel, and Procopius describes their answer as follows:

οἱ δὲ μάγοι ἀπεκρίναντο τὰ μὲν ἀμφὶ τῷ ὄρκῳ ὅπῃ οἱ βουλομένῳ ἐστὶν αὐτὸν διοικήσασθαι, ἐς μέντοι τὸ ἕτερον σοφία περιελθεῖν τὸν πολέμιον. εἶναι γὰρ αὐτοῖς νόμον τὰς τοῦ ἡλίου ἀνατολὰς προσκυνεῖν ἡμέρα ἐκάστη. δεῖσειν οὖν αὐτὸν τηρήσαντα ἐς τὸ ἀκριβὲς τὸν καιρὸν ξυγγενέσθαι μὲν ἅμα ἡμέρα τῷ τῶν Ἐφθαλιτῶν ἄρχοντι, τετραμμένον δέ που πρὸς ἀνίσχοντα ἡλίον προσκυνεῖν: ταῦτη γὰρ ἂν ἐς τὸ ἐπειτα τῆς πράξεως τὴν ἀτιμίαν φυγεῖν δύναίτο.¹¹

The magi replied that he should manage the matter of the oath as he saw fit, but as for the rest, he should circumvent his enemy through cleverness. They had a custom of prostrating themselves before the rising sun each day. Peroz should pay close attention to the time of day and meet with the Hephthalite leader at dawn, and make obeisance having turned towards the rising sun. In this way, he could escape the subsequent dishonor of the deed.

⁹ The background to the war is poorly understood, due not least to the absence of sources for the Sasanian east. For political and military orientation, see Dignas / Winter 2007, 36–41; Canepa 2009, 27; Kim 2013, 37; Payne 2014, 286–8; Rezakhani 2017, 125–8; Potts 2018, 290–7; Heather 2018, 76; Kulikowski 2019, 234–7. The name of the Hephthalite king appears in post-conquest sources like the history of Tabari (1.874; trans. Bosworth 1999, 113) and the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi (Khaleghi-Motlagh / Khatibi 2007, 19, line 49). On the difficulties associated with the name, see Bosworth 1999, 113 n.291; Rezakhani 2017, 126–7 and n.5–6.

¹⁰ Procop. *Wars* 1.3.17.

¹¹ Procop. *Wars* 1.3.19–21.

Peroz follows their advice, and the ceremony proceeds to the satisfaction of all parties. Procopius closes the scene with Peroz marching homeward in good spirits (1.3.22: ἄσμενος).

Before it can shed any light on the diplomatic strategies of Iranian rulers, Procopius' account must be acknowledged for what it is: a piece of Greek historiography, written by an inhabitant of the Byzantine empire, and intimately connected with centuries of Greco-Roman tale-telling about the Persian east. The audience of Peroz before the Hephthalite king, after all, is only related by Procopius; it appears neither in Armenian nor in Syriac historiography, nor in sources from post-conquest Iran, nor even in other Greek authors.¹² Procopius' text, moreover, is littered with fabulous stories about Persian kings, and about Peroz not least. His account of the king's life noticeably includes an elaborate, folkloric tale of a fisherman's battle with a giant shark to obtain a prize pearl for the Sasanian king.¹³ His account of the king's death, by a similar token, bears more than a passing resemblance to Herodotus' description of a minor Phocian-Thessalian battle, since both passages involve cavalry riding at unawares into a ditch. The echo may be no accident, since Procopius' description of the Persian-Hephthalite confrontation evokes, in more ways than one, Herodotus' account of the clash between the Achaemenid king Darius and the Scythians.¹⁴ The precedents of Greek historiography are perhaps also evident in the author's identification of the Persian magi as the instigators of Peroz's mendacity. That attribution may be prompted by the two meanings of the Greek word μάγος, which commonly referred not only to Persian priests but also

¹² Other sources for Peroz's campaign: Armenian sources: Łazar P'arpec'i 85 (trans. Thomson 1991, 214–7); [Sebeos] 67 (trans. Thomson / Howard-Johnston 1999, 5); see further Cameron 1969, 153. Syriac sources: (Pseudo-) Joshua the Stylite 9–11 (trans. Trombley / Watt 2000, 9–11). Sources from post-conquest Iran: Tabari 1.872–7 (trans. Bosworth 1999, 109–17); Bal'ami = Bahar / Gona-badi 1974, 2.952–61; Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh* = Khaleghi-Motlagh / Khatibi 2007, 15–27; Mas'udi, *al-Tanbih wa-l-ishraf* 101 (trans. Hoyland 2018, 97); Ya'qubi 184–5 (trans. Hoyland 2018, 114). Greek sources: Agathias 4.27.3–4 (trans. Cameron 1969, 126–9); Priscus *Exc. de Leg. Rom.* 12 (trans. Blockley 1983, 348–9). Like Tabari, the Greek chronographer Theophanes (*Chronographia* AM 5967–8; trans. Mango / Scott 1997, 187–8) preserves a story of Peroz's initial entrapment by the Hephthalites, but he does not report the story of the sun-prostration ruse, and he specifically says that Peroz suffered dishonor because of the episode. For a late deployment of the Peroz/Hephthalites story in Arab political thought, see Ibn Zafar's *Consolation for the Ruler During the Hostility of Subjects* (trans. Kechichian / Dekmejian 2003, 181–8).

¹³ Procop. *Wars* 1.4.17–31. For discussion, see Cameron 1985, 154–5; Kaldellis 2004, 75–80; Börm 2007, 109; Kulikowski 2018, 155–6.

¹⁴ The ploy of the covered ditch: Procop. *Wars* 1.4.7–14; cf. Agathias 4.27.4; Maurice, *Strategicon* 4.3.1–20; Theophanes, *Chronographia* AM 5968; Łazar P'arpec'i 85 (trans. Thomson 1991, 215); Tabari 1.876–7 (trans. Bosworth 1999, 115–6); Ya'qubi 184–5 (trans. Hoyland 2018, 114). The parallel with Hdt. 8.28 is pointed out by Kaldellis 2004, 243 n.24; Whately 2016, 71; see further Kaldellis 2004, 71–2; Whately 2016, 70 n.10 on the Persian-Hephthalite/Achaemenids-Scythians analogy. There is also a textual echo in the phrase σοφία περιελθεῖν (“to circumvent through cleverness”), which Procop. *Wars* 1.3.19 shares with Hdt. 3.4.2.

to practitioners of magic who were perceived as devious quacks, charlatans, and frauds.¹⁵ Even nomenclature connects Procopius with the conventions of Greco-Roman literature: the author occasionally refers to the Persians as “Medes,” just as his classical predecessors had done for centuries.¹⁶

But two factors speak against an analysis of the passage purely in terms of classical historiography and its tropes. The first is that ornate compositions about the triumphs and travails of Persian kings were, by late antiquity, no longer the preserve of Greco-Roman authors; similar tales are told in non-Byzantine sources that stand outside the classical tradition. Although Procopius is the only author to include the prostration trick in his account of Peroz, the king’s initial capitulation to the Huns also appears in Tabari, whose account of the campaign is likewise oriented around a set-piece of deception: a Hephthalite agent infiltrates Peroz’s army and wins his confidence, only to lead the Persians through a desert where they are nearly destroyed by thirst. After recommending his own mutilation in order to more effectively deceive the Persians, the spy asks his king to reward him for his sacrifice by caring for his wife and children – the very same request that Procopius’ fisherman makes of Peroz before setting off to obtain the pearl.¹⁷ The self-mutilating fake defector is well represented in both Mediterranean and Near Eastern literary traditions, including the Arab world, where the figure is a folkloric archetype.¹⁸ Such stories may be elusive in their origins, their veracity, and their paths of transmission between different literatures. But they constituted a vital mechanism by which history was told and understood across a range of audiences and cultures in the late antique Near East. In this sense, the historicity of Peroz’s sun-prostration trick is less important than the fact that a story about it circulated,

¹⁵ On Procopius’ characterization of the magi and their role in the Peroz episode, see Börm 2007, 189–93. On the two meanings of μάγος in the classical sources, see de Jong 1997, 387–8; Bremmer 1999.

¹⁶ On the interchangeability of the terms “Mede,” “Persian,” and “Parthian” in Greco-Roman historiography, see Schneider 1998, 110–3; Drijvers 1999, 195; Munson 2009, 460 n.15; Shayegan 2011, 332–40.

¹⁷ Tabari 1.875 (trans. Bosworth 1999, 114); Procop. *Wars* 1.4.25; cf. Polyaeus, *Stratagemata* 7.12. See also Tabari’s account of Qasir, an Arab who uses the same ruse on al-Zabbā’ / Zenobia of Palmyra (1.763–7; trans. Perlmann 1987, 144–8; discussion in Andrade 2018, 223–5, with references).

¹⁸ In Greco-Roman sources, figures of this type include Zopyrus (Hdt. 3.154; Ctesias F13.26; Diod. Sic. 10.19.2; Plut. *Mor.* 173a; Frontin. *Str.* 3.3.4; Polyaeus, *Stratagemata* 7.13; Just. *Epit.* 1.10.15–17; Libanius, *Letters* 85.1; Gregory Nazianzen, *Second Invective* 11; Suda s.v. Ζωπύρου τάλαντα); Sinon (Tryphiodorus, *The Taking of Ilios* 219–31); Siraces (Polyaeus, *Stratagemata* 7.12). On the figure in Arabic literature, see Muth 1992, 244–57; Weststeijn 2013; and El-Shamy 2004, 661, under the heading “Partisan (patriot, spy, soldier, etc.) leads enemy to believe that he is switching sides: enemy betrayed and defeated.” See further Hoyland 2018, 135–43, where Hoyland compares Tabari 1.875 with the Arabic narratives of Euty chius and Ibn Qutayba, all substantially similar to one another. Hoyland concludes, “Possibly, then, the tale of Firuz’s campaigns against Akhshunwar also survived as a stand-alone text before being incorporated into the *siyar* literature, the compilations of narratives about ancient Persia that became so popular in early Abbasid times” (2018, 140).

and that this story gained currency as an example of shrewd religious manipulation at a diplomatic summit.

The second reason to read the Procopius passage as something more than pure Greek mythmaking is that his description of morning prayer tallies well with what is known of Zoroastrian practice. In addition to classical literature and references in Armenian historiography, ample evidence for both ancient and modern contexts shows that Zoroastrians do face the sun when they pray, especially at sunrise, and that the rite may involve prostration.¹⁹ The testimonies include older Avestan texts as well as Middle Persian ones of Sasanian date, though it should be emphasized that all the relevant compositions were first committed to writing after the Arab conquest. Perhaps the most pertinent material surrounds the *Xwaršēd Niyāyišn* (Middle Persian for “devotional song to the sun”), one of five litanies included in the *Khordeh Avestā*, which is a collection that guides much of daily Zoroastrian prayer.²⁰ The *Xwaršēd Niyāyišn* is recited three times per day in accordance with the Zoroastrian *gāh* system, a way of structuring the hours of the day and night; one recitation is performed in the morning (*hāwan gāh*) in the period between sunrise and noon.²¹ In some manuscripts of the *Khordeh Avestā*, the Avestan text of the *Xwaršēd Niyāyišn* is accompanied by ritual instructions in Middle Persian/Pahlavi that direct the devotee to bow at specified moments in the ceremony.²² Further instructions for this litany are found in the *Dēnkart*, a 9/10th century CE Zoroastrian compendium in Middle Persian; the relevant passage also prescribes bowing, and additionally enjoins the reciter to face the sun.²³ Ethnographies from the modern period also supply relevant testimonia, as interviews with contemporary Zoroastrian populations demonstrate that sun-oriented worship at dawn has retained its currency down to the present day.²⁴

Such rituals and performances reflect the enormous importance of the sun and sunrise in Zoroastrian thought. The *Xwaršēd Niyāyišn* exalts the sun’s ability to

¹⁹ Other relevant passages from classical historiography include Hdt. 7.54 (Xerxes faces the sun and prays at dawn); Xen. *Cyr.* 8.1.23, 5.3 (Cyrus the Great sings hymns and makes sacrifices to the gods at daybreak, and pitches his tent facing east; cf. Boyce 1982, 214). Armenian evidence: Elishē regards “adoration of the sun” as a central feature of Zoroastrian religion; see Thomson 1982, 71 n.9 for references, and cf. Łazar P’arpec’i 24–8 (trans. Thomson 1991, 82–93). On the practice in Zoroastrian ritual generally, see Boyce 1979, 32–3; Boyce / Grenet 1991, 481; de Jong 1997, 366; Dadachanji 1941, 416.

²⁰ On the five *niyāyišns* see Choksy / Kotwal 2005, 216; and see Taraf 1981 for text and German translation.

²¹ Malandra 2000. On the Zoroastrian divisions of the day, see Boyce 1979, 32; Stausberg / Karanjia 2015, 369; Cantera 2017, 26–8.

²² Kotwal 2016, 100–1; König 2015, 17. Kotwal further discusses evidence from the 15th century CE for a debate over the necessary depth of the prescribed bow.

²³ *Dēnkart* 3.81 (trans. de Menasce 1973, 90–2); for discussion, see König 2015, 17; Kotwal 2016, 100 n.8.

²⁴ Rose 2011a, 124; Kreyenbroek / Munshi 2001, 19, 107; Stewart / Moavenat 2018, 257–8.

purify the earth from *daevas* (demons), and much the same point is made in *Yašt* 6.²⁵ The transition from night to day thus represents a quotidian victory of Ahura Mazda over Angra Mainyu and his demonic assistants – a moment significant enough to warrant the inclusion of a hymn to dawn (*Hōšbām*) in the *Khordeh Avestā*. This cosmic battle is embedded in the very oldest compositions of the Zoroastrian religion, the *Gāthās*, which imagine the universe as a battleground between “those who bring out the sun and those who try to prevent it from rising.”²⁶ Against the backdrop of such a struggle, the sun was a symbol of Ahura Mazda’s Order, and its daily arrival revitalized his creations in the natural world, from water to plants to humankind itself. No less for cosmology than for ritual, then, the sun figures prominently in both pre- and post-conquest sources for Zoroastrian thought and practice.

So what did the Peroz story *do*, and what would it have been good for, in a Persian context? In one sense, the episode may have helped to explain Peroz’s death at the hands of the Hephthalites, which could be justified by recasting the king as an oath-breaker of dubious integrity. Even sources that are not overtly hostile to Peroz suggest that his death was righteous punishment for his violation of a Sasanian-Hephthalite treaty, a document that the aggrieved Akhshunwār dramatically displayed on the point of his lance during the final battle.²⁷ But the feigned-prostration story also works from a Persian point of view because it underlines the non-Zoroastrianism of the Hephthalite kingdom. In Iranian eyes, the Hephthalites represented a civilizational enemy as inhabitants of Turan, a geographical region roughly corresponding to central Asia that had been at war with Ērānšahr (“the land of the Iranians”) since time immemorial.²⁸ Peroz’s trick on the Hephthalite king is one that could only be played on a foreigner unfamiliar with Iranian customs and religious practices. The paganism of the Huns does not excuse the Sasanian king’s underhandedness, which many sources present as a moral problem. But it does allow Peroz to make creative use of their incomprehension, and this background would have let an Iranian audience in on the trick with a wink and a nod.

In the end, neither Near Eastern literature nor Zoroastrian texts can confirm the story of Peroz’s obeisance in Procopius, but they do supply important context for the valence of such a tale in the political and religious milieu of late antique Iran. No piece of evidence can reveal the workings of Peroz’s mind or precisely illuminate the interplay of religious and military factors that led to his prostration before the Hephthalite king. But Procopius’ ethnographic observation on Zoroastrian ritual

²⁵ Ny. 1.12–3 (trans. Taraf 1981, 40–3); Yt. 6.2–3 (trans. Boyce 1984, 31–2). For a collection of passages on this theme, see Dadachanji 1941, 424–6.

²⁶ Skjærvø 2015, 66.

²⁷ Procop. *Wars* 1.4.1; Agathias 4.27.3–4 (trans. Cameron 1969, 126–9); Łazar P’arpec’i 85 (trans. Thomson 1991, 215); Tabari 1.873–7 (trans. Bosworth 1999, 110–6); Ya’qubi 184–5 (trans. Hoyland 2018, 114). A different story of Peroz’s faithlessness is preserved in Priscus *Exc. de Leg. Rom.* 12 (trans. Blockley 1983, 348–9).

²⁸ See Payne 2013, 15; 2014, 284; Daryaei 2018; Wiesehöfer 2006, 19.

accords well with other sources, some internal to the religion itself, and his Peroz narrative draws on the kinds of literary motifs that were integral to how history was told in the ancient Near East, especially on the Iranian plateau. Ultimate verification of the passage is out of reach, but Peroz's sun-prostration can be usefully read as a story that circulated in a Sasanian setting, and as an illustration of how Persians thought royal dignity could be salvaged in the face of military defeat.

Tiridates

As he bows to the Hephthalite king, Procopius' Peroz is unscrupulous in his dealings, but also intact in dignity. He has exploited his interlocutor's ignorance of Zoroastrian ritual to perform a parallel ceremony, incompatible with the one his enemies wanted to enact, and free from their imposition of subordinate status. The very same can hold true for Tiridates in his prostration before Nero. The Peroz story allows for a reading of the Golden Day where the Parthian representative not only kept his dignity, but did so by concealing his religious frame of reference rather than sharing it.

Previous scholarly treatments of the Golden Day do not account for this possibility. Many share a conception of Tiridates' inner monologue that goes back to Dio himself: the Arsacid dynast "did not mind speaking in a debased way given the prospect of achieving his goals" – that is, he wittingly paid the price of degradation in exchange for the Armenian kingship.²⁹ Hence Susan Mattern's designation of the day's events as a "baroque ceremonial humiliation of Tiridates," a position that is often echoed.³⁰ Harry Sidebottom sees a similar power dynamic at work, and he views the king's employment of religion as a means to palliate the bitterness of inferiority: "[Tiridates] was allowed to express his subordination in his own religious terms."³¹ In David Braund's assessment, Tiridates' speech in the forum reveals how "he played his part in the pageant of gold... [he] had every reason to play along as far as his dignity would allow."³² Nero wrote the script, gathered the audience, and dictated the meaning of the whole event; Tiridates grudgingly consented to follow the choreography. None of these treatments consider the ability of Parthian religion to provide a different framework for the event – one that could have allowed Tiridates to play by his own rules, rather than simply play along.

Other scholarly discussions do attend to the matter of Parthian religion, but with the assumption that Tiridates would have shared his religious outlook with

²⁹ Cass. Dio 63.5.1: μηδὲν φροντίσας εἶ τι ταπεινὸν φθέγγεται, πρὸς τὴν ἐλπίδα ὧν τεύξοιτο.

³⁰ Mattern 1999, 178, 202 (quotation); cf. Fini 1994, 70–1; Malitz 2005, 60; Oller Guzmán 2014, 94.

³¹ Sidebottom 2007, 15.

³² Braund 2013, 95.

his Roman counterpart in the spirit of cooperation and exchange. A classic article on the Golden Day by Franz Cumont imagines Tiridates' visit – and his communion with Nero – as a seminal moment in the spread of Mithraism within the Roman empire.³³ The idea has long been influential, and indeed a recent biography of Nero by John Drinkwater maintains that “in 66, Tiridates initiated Nero into the cult of Mithras.”³⁴ But the most powerful and persuasive interpretation of the Golden Day as a moment in diplomatic rapport and intercultural dialogue is that of Edward Champlin, for whom “[the] whole occasion reflects serious negotiation and ingenious compromise between two very different traditions” represented by Nero and his “kindred spirit” Tiridates.³⁵ On these readings, Tiridates' religion did play a part in the events of the day, but it was only by sharing points of doctrine and ritual with the Roman emperor that ignominy was avoided.

The case of Peroz affords a different perspective on the Golden Day in which Tiridates' pride was undiminished, but through the dissemblance of ritual rather than its communication. The comparison between the two rulers is occasioned above all by Arsacid Zoroastrianism, a crucial feature of Parthian history. Debates about the religion's trajectory in this earlier period persist, of course: it is unclear what state the Avesta was in, how standardized the rituals and the pantheon were, and to what degree later Middle Persian literature can be used to investigate such matters. But the Parthian practice of some form of the religion – if not necessarily the one codified in late Sasanian/early Islamic texts – is attested in a good deal of evidence, from the Nisa ostraca to Parthian inscriptions to the *Dēnkart*.³⁶ Roman sources further justify an application of this religious background to the case of Tiridates. Pliny the Elder calls Rome's Arsacid visitor a magus, while Tacitus and Dio comment on his reluctance to defile the element of water by sailing over it – a scruple that emerges from other evidence as well.³⁷ It is difficult to know how much to credit Pliny, whose text condemns Persian magi alongside other practitioners of “magic” without much distinction.³⁸ Still, the king's religiosity is consistently underlined in the Greco-Roman literary evidence. The collective impression is one of substantial (though not complete) continuity between Tiridates' religious milieu in the first century CE and Peroz's in the fifth.

If Tiridates and Peroz shared a general religious orientation, one specific detail demonstrates a clear connection between the former's prostration before Nero, and

³³ Cumont 1933.

³⁴ Drinkwater 2019, 265. A related but more skeptical view is Griffin 1984, 216–7.

³⁵ Champlin 2003, 225–6; in a similar vein, see Campbell 1993, 231–2; Winterling 2009, 9–10; Mratschek 2013, 52–3.

³⁶ On Parthian Zoroastrianism, see Boyce 1979, 81–100; de Jong 2008; 2013, 31–5; Rose 2011b, 68–97.

³⁷ Plin. *HN* 30.16–7; Tac. *Ann.* 15.24.2; cf. Cass. Dio 63.1–2, 7.1. On the Zoroastrian reverence for the element of water, see de Jong 1997, 416–7.

³⁸ Cf. Russell 1987, 268; Méthy 2000, 383. See further above, n.15.

the latter's before the Hephthalites: the Arsacid king, too, bowed at dawn. As Dio reports, the preparations for the Golden Day included both extensive decorations and the marshalling of enormous crowds – but the timing was a critical factor. “All these things,” the author writes, “had been prepared in advance during the night. Right at dawn (ἄμα τῆ ἡμέρᾳ), Nero entered the forum.”³⁹ The centrality of sunrise to the affair further emerges from a remark in Suetonius, who says that the date initially chosen for the ceremony was cancelled due to cloudy weather (*propter nubilum*).⁴⁰ It was at dawn and on a clear day, then, that Tiridates prostrated himself before Nero in a gesture that Dio describes with the verb προσκυνέω (which Procopius applies to Peroz as well) and Suetonius with *subeo*.⁴¹ Tiridates did bow, but only at a time when he would have done so anyway.

Assuming some continuity between Parthian and Sasanian religious practice, then, Tiridates may have pulled the same trick as Peroz. A dawn prostration could easily have been reconciled with the rituals of Zoroastrian prayer, rendering the ceremony a routine salutation of sunrise instead of a personal humiliation or a geopolitical reverse. The ancient evidence does not offer any explanation as to why, precisely, the coronation was performed at daybreak – did Nero's regime make the decision unilaterally, or was the choreography prepared after consultation with Tiridates and his retinue? Only speculation is possible. It can at least be said, however, that the selection of sunrise offered numerous and fruitful points of contact with Zoroastrian traditions, securely attested outside of Roman evidence, that would have figured prominently in Tiridates' calculations. What looked like a case of *rex datus* to the Romans may have been a mere morning prayer to their Arsacid guest.

A deeper connection between Tiridates and the sun may be evident in a Greek inscription from the Armenian site of Garni, though this piece of evidence poses serious problems of interpretation. The text in question records the construction of a building (apparently a fort) in the 11th year of a ruler's reign.⁴² The name of this figure is not fully preserved. Reconstructions have varied, but the reading Ἥλιος Τηριδάτης (“Tiridates the Sun”) is generally accepted.⁴³ Was this Tiridates I, the first

³⁹ Cass. Dio 63.4.3: τούτων δ' οὕτως ἐκ νυκτὸς προπαρασκευασθέντων ἐσηλθεν ἐς τὴν ἀγορὰν ὁ Νέρων ἄμα τῆ ἡμέρᾳ.

⁴⁰ Suet. *Ner.* 13.1. Bradley 1978, 89 points out that Suetonius mentions further Neronian cancellations at *Ner.* 19.1. La Rocca 2017, 202 discusses this cancellation from Nero's point of view.

⁴¹ Cass. Dio 63.4.3; Procop. *Wars* 1.3.22; Suet. *Ner.* 13.2. The gestures associated with προσκύνησις are discussed by Choksy 1990; Briant 2002, 222–3; Bowden 2013, 59.

⁴² *SEG* 45.1873 = Canali De Rossi 2004, 14 (no. 17). The phrase that refers to the structure is usually restored as τὸν ἀνίκητον κάσ[τελλον τοῦτον], “this invincible fortress” (line 4; see line 5 for the regnal year). Tacitus mentions a *castellum Gorneae* in a passage describing the events of 51 CE; see Tac. *Ann.* 12.45.2 with Khatchadourian 2008, 252 n.26. On the relationship of the inscription to the extant building at Garni, see Wilkinson 1982, 227–34; Nersessian 2001, 102–3.

⁴³ The reading Ἥλιος Τηριδάτης is accepted by Russell 1987, 268–70; de Jong 1997, 289; Vinogradov in Gauthier et al. 1990, 559; Canali De Rossi 2004, 14 (no. 17); Olbrycht 2016, 101. For alternate readings, see Russell 1987, 280–1 n.56; Kettenhofen 1995, 113–20, with references.

Arsacid king of Armenia, brother of Vologaeses and interlocutor of Nero? Some think so, but others prefer an identification with later bearers of this name, and a passage from the Armenian historian Moses Khorenats'i that seems to refer to the inscription attributes it to Tiridates III (r. 287—330 CE).⁴⁴ A ruler who appended “the Sun” to his name might have had an additional motive to stage-manage the solar lighting of his investiture. But there are several other cases of “Helios” as both a personal name and epithet.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the numerous ambiguities that surround the Garni inscription make it a precarious basis for further insight into the Golden Day's religious valences.

Two possible objections speak against the idea that Tiridates used sun prostration to hoodwink Nero, even if neither is ultimately conclusive. The first is that the Arsacid king is said to have made other gestures of submission to the emperor. When Dio writes of the *προσκύνησις* in the forum, in fact, he refers back to an earlier episode in Neapolis when, on his first meeting with the emperor, Tiridates knelt upon the ground, called Nero “master,” and made obeisance.⁴⁶ For this occasion, the author does not note the time of day or the position of the sun. Regarding the ceremony in Rome, moreover, both Dio and Suetonius mention a subsequent event in the Theater of Pompey. Suetonius here describes Tiridates as *rursus supplicantem*, “again making supplication.”⁴⁷ The gestures of Greco-Roman supplication varied somewhat, but often included the suppliant falling to their knees or an otherwise humble posture.⁴⁸ Both passages could point to instances of homage where Tiridates might not have had recourse to the rising sun.

The second problem is the topography of the Roman forum, which would have made it difficult for Tiridates to face the sunrise even on the Golden Day itself. When Nero began the ceremony at dawn, he took a seat on the rostra, which during the imperial period occupied the northwest corner of the forum; he must have faced southeast to look out over the assembled crowds.⁴⁹ Both Suetonius and Dio describe a temporary scaffolding that Tiridates ascended during the ceremony. Presumably,

⁴⁴ Identification with Tiridates I: Kettenhofen 1995, 113–20, with references to earlier discussions; Russell 1987, 268–70; Olbrycht 2016, 101. Chaumont 1969, 177–82 and Canali De Rossi 2004, 14 prefer an identification with Tiridates III. The Moses Khorenats'i passage is at 2.90 (trans. Thomson 1978, 247).

⁴⁵ Jennes 2013 collects evidence for the name Helios in the eastern Mediterranean (while eliminating some possible attestations from Greco-Roman Egypt). A royal parallel is Alexander Helios, the son of Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII (Cass. Dio 51.21.8).

⁴⁶ Cass. Dio 63.2.4: *καίτοι καὶ ἐς γῆν τὸ γόνυ καθεὶς καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἐπαλλάξας, δεσπότην τε αὐτὸν ὀνομάσας καὶ προσκυνήσας*; this sentence is presumably the referent of *προσεκύνησαν αὐτόν, ὡσπερ καὶ πρότερον* in 63.4.3.

⁴⁷ Suet. *Ner.* 13.2. Drinkwater 2019, 265 refers to a “double coronation” on the Golden Day, but no source speaks of a second crowning in the Theater of Pompey.

⁴⁸ Naiden 2006, 44–59.

⁴⁹ Nero sits on the rostra: Suet. *Ner.* 13.1; Cass. Dio 63.4.3 (τὸ βῆμα). On Nero's orientation, cf. Champlin 2003, 228. On the *Rostra Augusti* (distinct from the rostra of the Republican period), see Verduchi 1999; Gorski / Packer 2015, 34.

this construction ran from the front of the rostra to the ground below, though neither author explicitly states this.⁵⁰ A reconstruction of the event's blocking is proposed in Figure 1, which overlays a basic topographical map with the information about the Golden Day supplied by Suetonius and Dio.

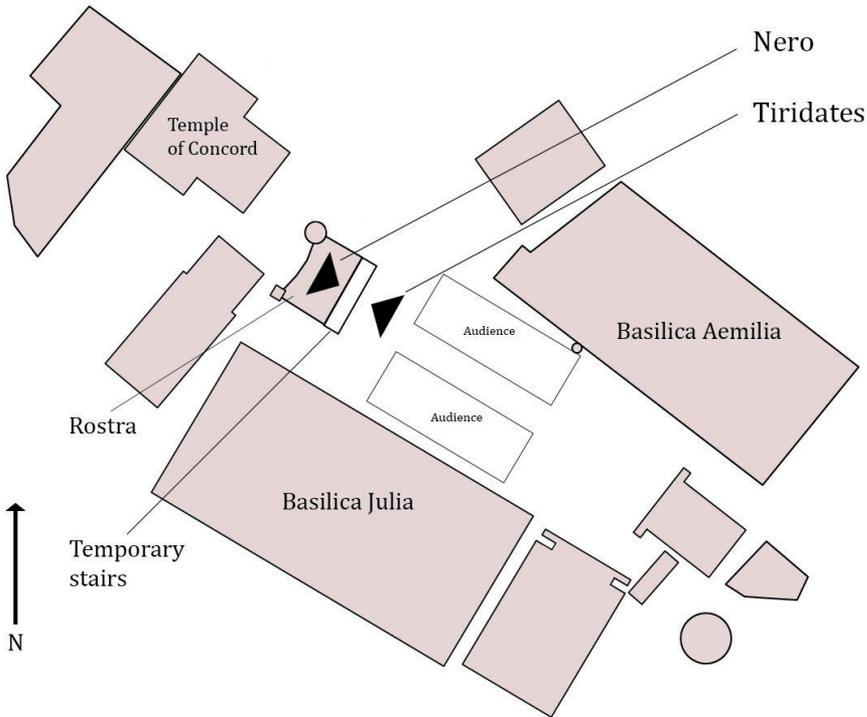


Fig. 1. A reconstruction of Tiridates' orientation at the moment of his obeisance.

This map is a derivative of "Plan du Forum Romanum sous l'Empire" by Wikimedia Commons user Cassius Ahenobarbus, used under CC BY-SA 3.0. Modifications and overlay by the author.

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If, as this reconstruction assumes, Tiridates stood in front of the rostra and bowed to a figure looking out over the crowd, then he would have been facing roughly northwest, not east towards the sunrise.⁵¹ There are of course any number of ways that the stage direction of the ceremony could have allowed for an eastward orientation without leaving a trace in the extant evidence. Yet Suetonius and Dio offer relatively ample commentary on the issue, by ancient standards at any rate, and the most straightforward reading of their texts makes it hard to see how Tiridates could have directed his bow towards the rising sun.

⁵⁰ Suet. *Ner.* 13.2; Cass. Dio 63.5.4.

⁵¹ Cf. Champlin 2003, 228–9.

But while these issues pose problems for the notion that Tiridates' prostration in the forum relied on religious legerdemain to escape disgrace, neither is ultimately sufficient to gainsay the psychological validity of religious ceremonials, even or perhaps *especially* those performed under exigent conditions. A reader of Procopius' Peroz narrative might reasonably judge the king's stratagem to be a feeble, desperate attempt to dismiss a manifest catastrophe. By what reckoning could this ruse have alleviated the shame of subjugation to the Hephthalite king? In whose eyes was the opprobrium truly removed? If this was cover, it was paper-thin. And yet the entire logic of the passage supposes that the trick exhibited shrewdness and cunning; it would not have made a story worth telling if it did not, and the king's elation at the end of the episode is hardly explicable any other way. Modern observers may conclude that there were serious obstacles to Tiridates' employment of the same contrivance. But the tenuousness of the arrangement disproves neither its implementation nor its effectiveness. The high reputational stakes of this moment could have made it all the more urgent to generate a counter-narrative – even an unlikely one – that reclaimed the proceedings from Roman hegemony and preserved Arsacid dignity.

Accounting for the adversarial mobilization of religion allows for new perspectives on key features of the episode, and on Tiridates' much-discussed invocation of Mithras not least. This deity appears in what is perhaps the most contentious phrase of Dio's account, in which Rome's visitor proclaims to Nero, "I have come to you as my god, to worship you as I do Mithras."⁵² Some scholars have tried to salvage from this sentence a "garbled" original utterance in which Tiridates identified Nero and Mithras as one and the same.⁵³ But there is no support for such an association in Zoroastrianism, which may conceive of kings as god-like, but not as named gods of the pantheon.⁵⁴ On the level of word choice, the statement is better understood as a Greek literary trope; indeed, the phrase [τινα] ὡς καὶ τὸν Μίθραν προσκυνέω is almost exactly paralleled in Persian scenes from the Alex-

⁵² Cass. Dio 63.5.2: καὶ ἤλθὼν τε πρὸς σὲ τὸν ἐμὸν θεόν, προσκυνήσω σε ὡς καὶ τὸν Μίθραν.

⁵³ Griffin 1984, 217: "Dio may have garbled what was really a declaration that Nero *was* Mithras" (emphasis in the original); Cizek 1972, 211; Shotter 2005, 39, 58–9, 72. See also the attempts of Chaumont 1976, 121 and n.265; Wolski 2003, 82–4 to explain away Tiridates' self-description as Nero's "slave" (σὸς δὲ δοῦλός εἰμι). Heil 1997, 132 n.76 is non-committal on the historicity of the speech. See also Schulz 2014, 414, who points to Cass. Dio 63.6.5 and concludes that, in Dio's eyes, the identification with Mithras was insincere flattery.

⁵⁴ Zoroastrian kingship was sacral rather than divine, on which distinction see Choksy 1988, 35. Kings were the representatives of Ahura Mazda on earth, but not identical to him: see Schmitt 1977, 390–2; Skjærvø 2011, 37; Lincoln 2012, 169 and n.7. Testimonia from the rulers themselves, however, have always left room for debate over their self-conception as divine beings (or not). See e.g. Daryaei 2008, 65–8 *contra* Panaino 2003; 2004; and more recently 2009 on the Sasanians; or Root 2012 *contra* Brisch 2008, 9 on the Achaemenids. The Arsacid case is also problematic, since the early Arsacids may have instituted a ruler cult on the Hellenistic model, and some Arsacid kings used the epithet θεός on their issues; see Dąbrowa 2014; Shenkar 2014, 57–8; Olbrycht 2016; Canepa 2018, 235–9.

ander Romance's earliest recension, which is roughly contemporary with Dio.⁵⁵ The complete absence of ruler-Mithras association in indigenous Iranian sources suggests that this phrase is Greco-Roman *Perserie* or "Persianism" rather than reliable ethnography.⁵⁶ Yet another complication, often overlooked by those who credit Dio's text, comes from a remark in Suetonius. The biographer informs his readers that the audience at Tiridates' coronation heard the words not of Tiridates himself but of an interpreter – the former presumably in Parthian or Greek, the latter in Latin.⁵⁷ One can only guess at how much was lost in translation, whether through incomprehension, willful misrepresentation, or both.⁵⁸

If anything from Tiridates' speech can be salvaged, it is not Nero's identification with Mithras but simply the invocation of this deity, since the Zoroastrian Mithras was closely associated with morning light, the sun, and – an important feature in a diplomatic context – the contract. In the *Khordeh Avestā*, the *Xwaršēd Niyāyišn* (devotional song to the sun) is immediately and necessarily followed by the *Mihr Niyāyišn* (devotional prayer to Mithras), and indeed the two prayers are so closely associated that they are often referred to jointly as the *Xwaršēd-Mihr Niyāyišn*.⁵⁹ Mithras is thus intimately connected with the glowing light of dawn in Avestan literature, and in later Zoroastrian texts with the sun as well.⁶⁰ The deity also figures in Zoroastrian literature as a god of the contract, judging the adherence of the deceased to the covenants they entered into when they lived.⁶¹ Given

⁵⁵ Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (rec. α) 1.36.2, and esp. 2.14.5–6 (προσεκύνησεν ὡς θεὸν Μίθραν). On the second passage, cf. de Jong 1997, 289–90 and Nawotka 2017, 172, who explains how the reference draws on Roman notions of the "conventionally Oriental." The close correspondence with Cass. Dio 63.5.2 is noted by Mastrocinque 2017, 53–8, who uses the passages to argue that Mithras "was often the image, or the divine model, of the ruler himself". But the other evidence adduced hardly supports this point, and both Dio and the Alexander Romance are simply assumed to faithfully represent Iranian religious practices. For the date of the Greek version of the Alexander Romance, see Dowden 1989, 650, who notes a possible range from the 2nd to the 4th centuries CE. On the reliability of Nero's speech in Cass. Dio 63.5.3, see Charlesworth 1950, 72 on its similarities to *SIG*³ 814 = *ILS* 8794.

⁵⁶ "Persianism" *sensu* Strootman / Versluys 2017; cf. Gordon 2017. Olbrycht takes the name "Ἡλιος Τιριδάτης" in the Garni inscription as evidence that Tiridates himself identified with Mithras (2016, 101; for the inscription, see above, n.42–3). But see the differing assessments of Russell 1987, 270; de Jong 1997, 289–90.

⁵⁷ Suet. *Ner.* 13.2. For the view that Tiridates spoke in Parthian, see further Peretz 2006, 465–6 *contra* Millar 1988, 373 ("it is at least as likely that Tiridates was speaking Greek as Parthian"). On Mithras and the Greek language, cf. Lucian, *Deorum concil.* 9.

⁵⁸ On this point see esp. Müller 2014, 304–5 and n.167, arguing against earlier discussions that credited the authenticity of the speech. Cf. Braund 2013, 95: "Some no doubt remembered what was said and a public record may well have been made, so that the words we have are probably more than fiction." But a public record would surely have followed the translator's words rather than those of Tiridates himself.

⁵⁹ Boyce 1975, 271.

⁶⁰ See Cantera 2017, 25–32 with citations of Avestan passages; Gershevitch 1975, 70; Boyce / Grenet 1991, 478–82; Briant 2002, 251–2.

⁶¹ Thieme 1957, 18–71; Boyce 1979, 8–9, 27; Sick 2004; Mastrocinque 2017, 48; Mazhjoos 2017, 58. On the contract in Zoroastrianism, see further Macuch 2015, 293–4.

all these features, Mithras would have been a supremely appropriate witness for a high-profile agreement where the salutation of dawn clandestinely took the place of submission to a diplomatic interlocutor. The invocation of the deity – if he was indeed invoked – need have had nothing to do with the transmission of theology, or still less the veneration of Nero. It may simply mean that Tiridates performed quotidian religious rites before a Roman audience that mapped his worship of a Zoroastrian deity onto the Roman emperor himself.

After all, how much of this religious background could Romans understand? The “collaboration” view holds that Tiridates explained his religious outlook to Nero, at least, but the interpretive lens afforded by Peroz’s trick supports a different perspective: both the emperor and his subjects grasped very little, and Tiridates exploited their ignorance.⁶² Mithras was of course an object of cult veneration in the Roman empire, and it was Franz Cumont’s belief that the Roman manifestations of the deity came, in origin and in essence, from Iran.⁶³ But this view has since been largely dismantled, and at any rate the earliest evidence for the Roman religion is post-Neronian in date.⁶⁴ Even if Tiridates’ visit itself were an important moment in the inception and dissemination of Mithraic cult, as some have argued, that would be no necessary indication that Zoroastrian practices were well known to a Roman audience in 66 CE.⁶⁵ It might even lead to a conclusion of a rather different nature: if “information” about the deity came from Tiridates, then the Arsacid would have been in a position to control its dissemination, and to explain things about his religion in a manner that suited him.

In fact, the Roman literary sources preserve two proximate cases where explanations of religious beliefs were manipulated to serve political objectives in Roman-Parthian relations. The first pertains to Tiridates himself, whose aversion to sailing lest he defile the element of water has often been noted and connected to Zoroastrian beliefs.⁶⁶ It is less often observed, however, that this scruple seems not to have hindered Tiridates’ return to the east by sea after his visit to Rome had concluded, as Dio explicitly attests.⁶⁷ As it happens, the king’s insistence on land

⁶² For the “collaboration” view see above, n.33–5, and below, n.75 (Champlin quotation).

⁶³ Cumont 1903, 30–1. For a recent review of the history of Mithraic scholarship, see Chalupa 2016, 67–75; on Cumont, cf. Gordon 2017, 291–2; Adrych et al. 2017, 4–7.

⁶⁴ Important criticisms of Cumont’s “strong Iranian hypothesis” include Gordon 1975; Jacobs 1999; Clauss 2000. For additional bibliography and the current state of the debate, see Beck 2006, 28–9 and n.5; Chalupa 2016, 69–74; Gordon 2017. On the earliest evidence for Roman Mithras cult, see Beck 2002, 292; Gordon 2017, 289–97 on Stat. *Theb.* 1.719–20; Mastrocinque 2017, 185–9.

⁶⁵ For the view that Tiridates’ visit was a seminal moment for the Roman cult of Mithras, see Cumont 1933; Beck 2001; 2002.

⁶⁶ See above, n.37.

⁶⁷ Cass. Dio 63.1–2 (from the Euphrates to Rome by land), 63.7.1 (return by sea from Brundisium to Dyrrachium). Even where mentioned, the change in route is usually not accounted for, e.g. Malitz 2005, 62; Ash 2018, 57; Drinkwater 2019, 222 n.214, 225; Champlin 2003, 225–6. The exception is Heil 1997, 130 n.63 (quoted below, n.70). The journey from Brundisium to Dyrrachium is 80 nauti-

travel to Italy secured him a rather stately outward journey: “a procession like a triumph all the way from the Euphrates,” in Dio’s eyes, and one that boasted a huge escort of both Romans and Parthians, numerous city receptions, and crowds of well-wishers.⁶⁸ Rome footed the bill, to the tune of 800,000 sesterces per day, and the provinces groaned to bear it.⁶⁹ In other words, Nero paid an exorbitant price for Tiridates’ religious scruples, only to find them relax once the spotlights were off.⁷⁰ The second case where religious information was manipulated involves Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, the Roman general who opposed the Arsacids in Armenia. At the conference that concluded hostilities in that war, Tiridates asked his host to explain various features of the Roman camp, including the way the altar in front of the augural tent was tended.⁷¹ “By exaggerating everything,” Tacitus writes, “Corbulo kindled [in Tiridates] a reverence for ancient customs.”⁷² The literal truth of this statement is unimportant; the point is that, at least in the eyes of one of Corbulo’s readers, religious paraphernalia were gussied up to impress a Parthian dignitary.⁷³ When Roman and Parthian elites explained their religions to one another, one may conclude, the timing and manner of their explanations served political ends.

If Tiridates shared religious knowledge on a tactical basis – or if, like Peroz, he weaponized his interlocutor’s ignorance of Zoroastrian ritual – then some assumptions about Nero’s initiation to “the banquets of the Magi” need to be destabilized.⁷⁴ As Champlin sees it, Nero’s induction allowed the two rulers to collaborate on the Golden Day’s choreography and to reach a mutual understanding about what it meant: “The important point – something Nero would know as an initiate, whether others did or not – is that for Zoroastrians the sun was the eye of Mithra, and Mithra was often so

cal miles/150 kilometers; Cicero took one day to sail it in the opposite direction (Cic. *Att.* 4.1.4 with Kaster 2006, 370). On the speed of ancient sea voyages, see Casson 1986, 281–91.

⁶⁸ Cass. Dio 63.1.2: καὶ ἐγένετο αὐτῶν πομπὴ διὰ πάσης τῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ Εὐφράτου γῆς ὥσπερ ἐν ἐπιτυχίῳ; further description of the journey in 63.2. See also Cass. Dio 80.16.2 with Scott 2018, 136–7.

⁶⁹ The figure for the daily cost of the procession comes from Suet. *Ner.* 30.2; Cass. Dio 63.2.2. Plin. *HN* 30.16 calls it *provinciis gravis*. For discussion of financial matters, see Griffin 1984, 204; Champlin 2003, 227 and n.27; Drinkwater 2019, 331.

⁷⁰ See Heil 1997, 130 n.63, who writes of Tiridates’ return by sea, “Dies erweckt den Eindruck, daß es den Parthern eigentlich nicht um die Religionsgesetze zu tun war, sondern daß sie die religiösen Bedenken nur vorschoben, wenn sie einer Forderung aus irgendwelchen Gründen nicht nachkommen wollten; bei Bedarf konnten sie ihre kultischen Vorschriften auch anders auslegen.”

⁷¹ Beck 2002, 286 and Fig. 1, 292–3 connects Tiridates’ question about the altar (*Ann.* 15.30.1: *structam ante augurale aram subdita face accendi*) to a Mithraic relief in which an attendant lights an altar at its base with a caduceus.

⁷² Tac. *Ann.* 15.30.1: *cuncta in maius attollens admiratione prisca moris adfecit*. On Corbulo’s old-fashioned character, cf. *Ann.* 11.18.2 with the discussion in Koestermann 1968, 219–20; Ash 2018, 154.

⁷³ Cf. Miller 1973, 80. Both Tacitus (*Ann.* 15.16.1–3) and Pliny the Elder (*HN* 6.23) claim to have consulted Corbulo’s writings. On these compositions, see Levick 2013, 541–5; Malloch 2013, 264 n.159; on their use by Tacitus for the study of Parthian affairs, see Heil 1997, 33–6; Ehrhardt 1998, 298.

⁷⁴ Plin. *HN* 30.17: *magicis etiam cenis eum initiaverat*.

closely associated with the sun as to be identified with it.⁷⁵ A minor error of fact aside – in Zoroastrian texts, the sun is the eye of Ahura Mazda, not of Mithras – the sentence assumes, first, that Nero’s initiation took place *before* the events of the Golden Day; and second, that the emperor received meaningful instruction in Zoroastrian doctrine and ritual.⁷⁶ But Pliny’s account hardly confirms either point, and in light of Peroz’s story, another possibility should be entertained: Nero learned nothing of substance about Zoroastrian sun adoration, or, if he did, he received his education only *after* the spectacle was over, the crowds had dispersed, and the moment had passed. *Apost factum* lesson in Zoroastrian morning ritual would have been a delicious twist of the knife, an ironic lesson to the emperor in the terms of his recent beguilement. In Champlin’s characterization, the Golden Day was marked by “serious negotiation and ingenious compromise” between Nero and his “kindred spirit” Tiridates.⁷⁷ But several factors, and the case of Peroz not least, support a view of the occasion underpinned by very different dynamics: cynical manipulation, political opportunism, and the pragmatic employment of religious obfuscation to escape from disgrace.

By reconfiguring the Golden Day as a routine Zoroastrian ceremonial, Tiridates may have found a ritual form of resistance to the meaning that Nero wished to ascribe to the coronation. To assess the psychological efficacy of such resistance is of course completely beyond the reach of the available evidence. The king may have fallen to his knees before the rostra on the Golden Day fully armored in the religious conviction that this dawn prostration was like any other; or he may have felt the derision of the emperor and his thronging subjects and clung to his counter-narrative as best he could. But the Peroz story, whether historical or not, illustrates how the concealment of religious beliefs from diplomatic interlocutors could give Iranian negotiators the tools to save face even when the hard realities of power were arrayed against them. Interstate settlements can be hindered by misunderstanding between their signatories. But they can also thrive on it.

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⁷⁵ Champlin 2003, 228.

⁷⁶ The sun is the eye of Mithras in Vedic texts but not in Zoroastrian literature, where it is called the eye of Ahura Mazda: Gershevitch 1975, 89 n.11; Sick 2004, 436, 449.

⁷⁷ Above, n. 35.

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Abstract

In 66 CE, the Arsacid dynast Tiridates bowed before Nero in the Roman forum in order to “receive” the kingdom of Armenia from the emperor. The scholarly literature on this episode, though large, has done little to reconstruct the Arsacid view of the coronation. This article decenters the Roman perspective through a reading of the day’s events anchored in Zoroastrianism. Taking a later anecdote about the Sasanian king Peroz as a point of departure, the discussion surveys Zoroastrian beliefs and practices concerning the sun, morning prayer, and Mithras, all of which featured in Tiridates’ investiture. Where previous treatments have seen Tiridates’ prostration before Nero as either a humiliating self-abasement or an intercultural religious collaboration, it is argued here that the Arsacid may have construed the proceedings as a routine Zoroastrian rite – an interpretation that could have preserved his dignity and circumvented Rome’s hegemonic ascription of meaning to this high-profile diplomatic affair.