Submission II

Parthian Pragmatism

The last chapter used Near Eastern sources to argue for a Parthian view of the Arsacids of Rome as foster-children rather than hostages. Evidence from the greater pre-Islamic Iranian world reveals a long tradition of political fosterage and casts a new light on the transimperial circulation of Iranian royal children. When Roman sources are not the basis for narration, the story of the Arsacids of Rome can be told in a different way. Their trajectories can be explained as the product of a pragmatic misunderstanding, an accidentally harmonious arrangement where the Romans received them as hostages, but the Parthians sent them for cliental fosterage. The framework of fosterage meant that the Arsacid viewpoint not only circumvented the logic of Roman hegemony, but inverted it.

But to express the antithesis so neatly risks oversimplifying the complexity behind Arsacid exchange, and this chapter expands on what pragmatic misunderstanding might have looked like among diverse Parthian actors with varying levels of intercultural awareness. A shortcoming of my thesis as stated thus far is that it assumes total Parthian and Roman ignorance of the other's views. This need not have been the case. One reason to doubt the proposition is that post-Hellenistic Iran had a word for hostage and historical experience with hostageship. Couldn't the Parthians have had this institution in mind as they sent Arsacid children off to Rome? While Iranianate sources suggest an affirmative answer to this question, I respond here that pragmatic misunderstanding may have meant choosing to misunderstand. Where both fosterage and hostageship supported reasonable interpretations of what the Arsacids of Rome were, the Parthians could have exploited intercultural ambiguity to

apply a label that was politically expedient rather than mutually intelligible. Though there was common ground between Parthian and Roman conceptions of hostageship, considerations of prestige may have militated against meeting on this terrain. A range of possibilities between mutual comprehension and total misunderstanding must be accounted for, along with the motivated reasoning that could have discouraged Parthian accommodation of the Roman view.

The concept of pragmatic misunderstanding must encompass another type of pragmatism, as well, because the thesis as formulated thus far cannot completely explain the Parthian decision to dispatch Arsacids to Rome. Reigning kings may have thought that they were sending their sons and daughters as foster-children, but why did they want their children fostered? In fact diverse Parthian motives were at play. Kinship creation was a desirable end in its own right, but other objectives had nothing to do with kinship, and indeed not much to do with Rome at all. Reigning kings could use cliental fosterage to purge Arsacid rivals by nonlethal means; to protect vulnerable Arsacids from internal enemies; or to protect the entire Arsacid dynasty from an extinction-level event. Nor were kings the only actors whose agency mattered: the women of the Arsacid court, and their agendas, made an impact on these decisions as well. So while fosterage was an important tool in the Parthian kit, tools can be utilized for different jobs and in different situations. Rome did not determine everything that Parthia did, and one feature of Parthian pragmatism was the empire's exploitation of foreign relations to address its own domestic issues.

To flesh out these two aspects of pragmatic misunderstanding, the evidentiary basis for the following discussion will include both Roman texts and Near Eastern evidence. Here the Roman sources are useful not because they offer direct insight into Arsacid motives, which is more than can be expected of them. Rather, although they are framed by hostageship rather than fosterage, they contain plausible accounts of dynastic management strategies that can be supported by comparative evidence from a range of premodern historical and regional contexts. Direct sources for interstate royal correspondence are absent from the textual record of Roman-Parthian relations (except for problematic summaries in historiography), but they are extant for the Bronze Age, and the epistolary dialogue among earlier Near Eastern rulers can be used to explore the potential dynamics of Arsacid-Caesarian exchange. By the same token, sources from late antique Iran, Central Asia, and Armenia bear witness to dynastic politics in an age shaped by the legacy of the Parthian empire, due not least to the survival of the Arsacid dynasty itself. These disparate forms of evidence allow no direct access to the innermost thoughts of Parthian elites. No surviving sources permit that. But it is possible on this basis to assess the diversity of objectives that the Arsacids may have pursued

within—or even outside of—the institutional framework of cliental fosterage and interdynastic kinship.

HOSTAGESHIP

Could Parthia *really* have misunderstood its interlocutor's view, so fundamentally and so dramatically, on the matter of the Arsacids of Rome? As empire builders no less practiced than the Romans in techniques of coercion and control, surely the Parthian ruling classes had their own experience of hostageship and the power relations that the institution entailed. Moreover, nearly a century separated the first and final cases of Arsacid departure for Roman residence. Could confusion have persisted that whole time on an issue with such massive implications for imperial prestige and rank?

The case for mutual comprehension must begin with the internal evidence for hostageship, which offers ambiguous testimony on the prevalence of this institution in pre-Islamic Iran. Enough survives to establish that Arsacid kings saw the value in keeping foreign dynasts at their court under compulsion—what M. Rahim Shayegan calls the Arsacid "hostage policy."[1] Ancient evidence preserves one case of Arsacid hostage taking, though as with the Arsacids of Rome the word hostage is found only in Greco-Roman literary sources. Both Strabo and Justin say that the Artaxiad Armenian dynast Tigran II was given to the Parthians as a hostage during his youth.[2] Tigran also appears in internal Parthian sources, namely the Babylonian astronomical diaries, but the relevant passages are too fragmentary to draw any conclusions independent of the classical texts. On the basis of Strabo and Justin, the diaries can be understood to refer to Tigran's return to Armenia to occupy its vacant throne at the Arsacids' behest. However, none of these passages contain the Akkadian word for hostage (*līṭu*). They refer to Tigran simply as the "son of the king of Armenia," and they do not otherwise specify how Tigran's residence in Parthian custody was to be understood.[3] To the case of Tigran, Shayegan adds others that collectively establish "the Parthian practice of cultivating foreign princes in exile with the intent of restoring them."[4] The Arsacid captivity of the Seleucid king Demetrius II certainly illustrates this tendency, though Demetrius

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1. Shayegan 2011: xv, 144.

2. Strab. 11.14.15 (using the verbal form of Greek *homēros*); Just. 38.3.1 (*obses*). On the political backstory to this event, see now Patterson 2020.

3. AD 3, nos. –95 A, –95C, –95D (with "son of the king of Armenia" on line 11); compare the divergent editions, restorations, translations, and chronologies in Sachs and Hunger 1996: 416–23 with Shayegan 2011: 92; Böck 2010: 109–10; Geller and Traina 2013: 447–48.

4. Shayegan 2011: 92.

was a prisoner at the Arsacid court, not a hostage or an exile.[5] Shayegan also adduces Kammaškiri the Younger of Elam and Artabazus of Characene.[6] These dynasts too can be shown to have taken control in their respective territories with Arsacid help and under Parthian suzerainty, but no ancient sources identify them as hostages. Though their cases are suggestive, the Parthian conception of hostage-ship remains unclear.

Indeed, not until the late third century C.E. is a word for hostage preserved in a Middle Iranian language, and even then, the reference comes from a Sasanian text, not an Arsacid one. At the site of Paikuli in modern day Iraqi Kurdistan, the Sasa-nian king Narseh (r. 293–303 C.E.) erected a bilingual inscription in Middle Persian and Parthian to commemorate his successful overthrow of his grand-nephew as king of kings.[7] The closing lines of the inscription are fragmentary and difficult to reconstruct, but they preserve the word for hostage in both languages. P. Oktor Skjærvø's edition and translation of the relevant passage in Middle Persian are as follows:[8]

> W MNW BNPŠE OL BBA ZY LNE YATWN ʾynyʾ plys[tky] W dʾšny W npyky W npʾ(k) [Parthian version: nypʾk p[t]st[w](kʾn ? OL BBA ZY [LNE ŠDRWN- OLE ? hws?]lwbyhy W CBW ZY AHRN gwnky YHSNNt

> And whoever came to Our Court himself or [sent ?] an envoy and presents and let-ters [and] hostages (as) promises (of loyalty) (?) to [Our] Court, he would have fame (?) and other things (?).

Despite the poor state of the text, some conclusions can be drawn. Narseh lists here several different tokens that one could send to acknowledge his kingship in lieu of a personal visit: a messenger (*plystky*), a gift (*dʾšny*), a letter (*npyky*), or a hostage or pledge (*npʾk*; Parthian *nypʾk*, or *nēpāk* in transcription). Grammati-cally, *nēpāk* seems to be in apposition to a word that Skjærvø restores as *ptstwkʾn*, which means "promises" or "guarantees." The passage therefore suggests that the submission of a *nēpāk* was a way to recognize Narseh's kingship and to assure him that the sender would remain steadfast in that recognition. However, it is not certain that the *nēpākān* in question were human hostages rather than financial pledges or securities, since the word can have both meanings in Middle Iranian

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5. For discussion, see Dąbrowa 1992: 46–50; Shayegan 2003b; Nabel 2017b: 27, 31–34 with table 2.1 for additional Seleucid prisoners at the Arsacid court.

6. Shayegan 2011: 89–94.

7. For the political background, see Daryaee 2009: 10–13.

8. NPi 94 = Skjærvø 1983: 1.73 (text and translation), 2.130 (commentary). The Middle Persian text is reproduced here, since the Parthian version of the pertinent section (as for the whole text) is highly fragmentary. As indicated, however, the reading of the Parthian *nypʾk* is clear. Unfortunately, the new blocks and readings of the Paikuli inscription published by Cereti and Terribili 2014 do not apply to this section of the text.

languages.[9] Moreover, even if the text does refer to human hostages, it does not specify who their senders were. The immediately preceding sections rehearse a long list of dignitaries who "stayed by [Narseh's] advice and counsel." This obscure phrase seems to amalgamate Sasanian subjects and independent foreign powers, and in any event there is no reason to identify the figures named there with the presumptive hostage givers in the next section.[10] Narseh's inscription could attest an operational concept of hostageship among Persians and Parthians in the late third century C.E., but the contours and scale of the institution remain unclear.

Less ambiguous, and vitally important, is the late antique evidence from Armenian historiography, where hostageship mediates the Arsacid dynasty's relationship with the (eastern) Roman empire. Whereas the classical Armenian word for "foster-father," *dayeak*, directly reflects Middle Iranian *dāyag*, the language uses a different word for hostage: *patand*.[11] Crucially, the sources use this word in reference to Arsacid dynasts who serve as hostages at the Roman court. Pʿawstos Buzand and Movses Khorenatsʿi attest various Arshakuni ("Arsacid" in Armenian) children sent to Rome in this capacity during the fourth century C.E., including several family members of king Tiran; two nephews of Arshak II; and later, a son of Arshak II.[12] The Sasanian king Shapur II is said to have taken hostages from Armenia's nobility, as well, though not from the Arsacids.[13] In a few places, Pʿawstos and Movses also speak of Arsacid hostage *taking* from Armenian populations and from neighboring lands. In one of these passages, Movses describes a case of hostage taking as "in accordance with ancestral custom," which suggests a major role for the practice during the reign of the Arshakuni.[14] All this background makes the Armenian sources highly pertinent to the case of the Arsacids of Rome. If the Arshakuni of the fourth century C.E. were giving "hostages" to Rome as they understood it, then perhaps the same can be said of their Arsacid predecessors in the first century.

Additional evidence for hostageship in the greater Iranianate world can be found in documentary evidence from central Asia, which shows the institution

9. Sims-Williams 2000: 206; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 239; Cheung 2007: 288; see further below.

10. NPi 92–93 = Skjærvø 1983: 1.70–73. The phrase in Middle Persian is *PWN pndy W pʾdysy ZY LNE YKOYMWNd*. The words are badly damaged in section 93, but Skjærvø restored them on the basis of their appearance in section 21, where the Parthian survives as well; see Skjærvø 1983: 1.36; Weber 2012: 204. This restoration has now been partly confirmed by the new blocks published by Cereti and Terribili 2014: 382. On the relationship of these dignitaries to the Sasanian empire, see Skjærvø 1983: 2.120; Weber and Wiesehöfer 2010: 119–21.

11. Alternately *pandand, pantand,* or *padand*. On the etymology of the word, see Olsen 1999: 303.

12. Tiran's family members: MKh 3.13. Arshak II's nephews: PB 4.5, 4.11; MKh 3.21. Son of Arshak II: PB 4.15; MKh 3.29–30. On these passages, see further Garsoïan 1969; Lenski 2002: 155–56.

13. MKh 3.18.

14. In Pʿawstos: PB 5.8–19. These sections all pertain to the activities of Mushegh Mamikonean. Garsoïan 1989: 314 n.6, 593 notes that the phrase "[he] took hostages" appears as a formulaic repetition here, but nowhere else in Pʿawstos' text. In Movses Khorenatsʿi: MKh 2.65, 2.85.

operating in social strata below the level of royal families. Variations on the Parthian word *nēpāk* are found in several corpora, including the Bactrian documents from the Sasanian east in late antique Afghanistan.[15] In Bactrian, the *nēpāk* of the Paikuli inscription is *nabago* or *nibago*, which can have two meanings. The first is "hostage," as is attested in two letters from the mid- to late fifth century C.E. In one, the local ruler of Rob, Kirdir-Warahran, writes to the leader of the Afghan clan concerning a case of horse theft for which the Afghans are suspected; the relevant part of the letter is lacunary, but Kirdir seems to demand a hostage from the Afghans while he investigates the matter.[16] In another letter from the fourth century C.E., a scribe writes to a fortress commander that he has been unable to procure a hostage from a local family because its members "do not have anyone in the house" who can serve in this position—other than "servants and staff," that is, and it is assumed that the fortress commander will be unwilling to accept these.[17] A different letter from the same period is from an elderly man to a lord who holds the elderly man's son as one among many hostages from different families. The man pleads with the lord, "do not beat them, nor arrest (them), nor cause loss (to them)." Though the elderly man calls his son a *pidistobarago* ("surety") rather than a *nabago*, his role is clearly comparable to those called hostages in the preceding documents.[18] The second meaning of *nabago* in this corpus is "security" or "pawn," and several documents apply the word to parcels of land as economic assets.[19] In a purchase contract for a slave, however, it is applied to the person who has been sold, and in a receipt for a loan, the borrower applies the word to his son, who serves as security for the transaction.[20]

The word *np'k* also evinces these two meanings in the Middle Iranian language of Sogdian. A Sogdian purchase contract for a female slave dating to 639 C.E. attests that the woman's new owners may pledge/pawn her (*np'kw*), among many other prerogatives.[21] In a set of two marital contracts from the early eighth century C.E., the first document contains a clause that dissolves the marriage in case either party is taken as a hostage; in the second, the husband promises the bride's father

15. For overviews of this corpus, see Sims-Williams 2020; Sheikh 2023.

16. BD 2, Document cm, line 19 = Sims-Williams 2007: 90–91. For discussion of this document, including the composer of the letter and its chronology, see Sims-Williams 2008: 93–94; Jackson Bonner 2020: 124.

17. BD 2, Document cp, lines 11–15 = Sims-Williams 2007: 94–95, whose translation is quoted. For the date of the document along with Document ce (cited below), see Sims-Williams 2020: 241; on the preference for family members as hostages rather than servants and staff, see King 2020: 261.

18. BD 2, Document ce = Sims-Williams 2007: 76–77 (translation quoted).

19. BD 1, Document Lı, line 21; Document V, line 24; Document W, line 20 = Sims-Williams 2000: 68–69, 118–19, 130–31.

20. Purchase contract for a slave: BD 1, Document P, line 8 = Sims-Williams 2000: 84–85. Loan receipt: BD 1, Document ac, line 4 = Sims-Williams 2000: 152–53.

21. Yutaka (trans.) in Hansen 2003: 160; Sheikh 2023: 129.

that he will not use his new wife as a pawn (or surety, or security).[22] The carceral dimension of hostageship is again on full display in a Sogdian Manichaean text about the five elements, which in this passage are captured by the forces of darkness, specifically by the demon Greed. As the text narrates, Greed "took [the five elements] prisoner, stole them, and corrupted them. It bound them in this tower of darkness, imprisoned them, and took them hostage (*np ʾq*)."[23] The meaning of *np ʾq* here is close to "prisoner," which accords well with the unfree status of hostages in the Bactrian documents.[24] Finally, a possible occurrence of *np ʾk* on a sixth or seventh century C.E. Middle Persian ostracon from southern Turkmenistan might attest the manumission of a hostage, but the reading of the text is questionable.[25] Other attestations are in obscure contexts that elucidate the practice no further.[26]

How do these diverse forms of evidence bear upon the interpretation of the Arsacids of Rome? In the crucial case of Tigran, caution is necessary, since it is once again the Roman authors who apply the vocabulary of hostageship, while the Akkadian texts refer to Tigran only as an Armenian prince. By contrast, the Paikuli inscription firmly attests a word for hostage in the Parthian language, and perhaps a tradition of hostageship that had its roots in the Arsacid period. If the documentary sources from the Iranian east are any indication, that tradition had significant points of contact with Greco-Roman hostageship: the vocabulary for hostages and financial securities blurred together, and hostages were routinely taken from families to gain leverage over the kinship group. Yet the documentary texts also pertain to a social context that was some distance below the realm of high politics in which the Arsacids of Rome circulated. They reveal hostages who were taken as part of the investigation of crimes, who were in real danger of physical harm, who were human collateral for financial lending, and who were tantamount to prisoners. If this was the type of *nēpāk* that Narseh had in mind, the relationship between the Paikuli inscription and the Arsacids of Rome would be a tenuous one.

As for the Armenian sources, one of their features suggests a major discrepancy between the Arsacids of Rome and Arshakuni hostageship, and that is the divergence in terminology between the Parthian and Armenian languages. On

22. Yakubovich 2006: 307, 310–15 (Nov. 3 text lines 11, 14; Nov. 4 text line 11). See also Gershevitch 1962: 91–92; Henning 1965: 248 n.37 (on the double meaning of "hostage" and "pawn").

23. M 133, lines 10–16; I translate the German of Sundermann 1992: 128.

24. Cf. also Martin Schwartz's restoration of *np ʾq* in a Sogdian Christian text on the basis of a Syriac parallel text; he translates the word "captive" (Schwartz 1967: 4, 14).

25. Nikitin 1992: 109 (document 5), 129 (sixth/seventh century C.E. date); also catalogued in Livshits and Nikitin 1995: 320 (no. 5).

26. A Sogdian graffito at the site of Shatial may read *np ʾʾk*, but the word is doubtful: Sims-Williams 1992: 16 (no. 481), 61. An appearance of *nb ʾg* in a Middle Persian Manichaean text with the apparent meaning of "relative" is unparalleled but may be connected to the word for "grandson" (Avestan and Parthian *napāt*, Middle Persian *nab*), which would make sense in the context of the passage; see Sundermann 1973: 16 (line 76), 128; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 239; cf. MacKenzie 1971: 57; Diakonoff and Livshits 2001: 198.

the face of it, the submission of Arshakuni children to the Roman emperors in the fourth century C.E. looks like an extension of the earlier history of the Arsacids of Rome. But there is a problem with this conclusion: the Armenian word for hostage, *patand*, does not come from the Parthian or Middle Persian words for hostage, which are *nēpāk* and *napāk*/*nipāk*, respectively. If Arsacid hostage submission to Rome represented one continuous phenomenon from the late first century B.C.E. through the fourth C.E., then classical Armenian would presumably have inherited its terminology for the institution from Parthian, the language to which it is otherwise profoundly indebted not only for fosterage vocabulary, as discussed in the last chapter, but for political vocabulary in general. That is, if the Arsacid kings of the first century thought that they were sending *nēpākān* (hostages) to Rome, one would expect their Armenian descendants in the fourth century to have inherited the word and to have used a derivative of it to describe their own hostage transactions. Instead, late antique Armenian speakers used a different term for hostage, one they did not share with Middle Iranian speakers.[27] This lexical divergence cannot prove that first-century Parthians did not call the Arsacids of Rome *nēpākān*, but it does suggest that the submission of Arshakuni children to Rome in late antiquity relied on a different conceptual category than the exchanges of the first century C.E.

All told, on the question of whether the Parthians would have called the Arsacids of Rome hostages as the Romans did, the evidence from the Iranianate world is inconclusive. The Parthians had a word for hostage in their own language, and they used the institution of hostageship to build and maintain their empire. Yet there are reasons to doubt the relevance of this framework to the Arsacids of Rome, especially in light of the preponderant evidence for fosterage. The Roman and Parthian conceptions of hostageship exhibit real and meaningful overlap, but to judge by Iranianate sources, one cannot assume the Parthian application of this label to the Arsacid dynasts who were sent to reside at the emperor's court. The potential for mutual comprehension existed, but it need not have been realized.

Since overlap between Parthian and Roman views was possible but is not demonstrable, it may be best to assess misunderstanding not as a binary but on a continuum, with total incomprehension on one end and reciprocal accommodation on the other. After all, the Parthian empire was a composite of various stakeholders. Arsacid kings, Parthian aristocrats, royal concubines, provincial administrators, client kings, city councils, rural villagers—different views of the Arsacids of Rome were probably to be found among these groups and within them, too. Likewise, familiarity with Parthian practices of fosterage and hostageship, and with Roman hostageship, will have varied, as will the readiness and

27. On the strong influence of the Parthian language on classical Armenian, see Schmitt 2005; Meyer 2017: 255–339. Armenian *patand* may have an Iranian origin, as suggested by Olsen 1999: 303, but it is not cognate with *nēpāk*.

inclination of different individuals to apply these categories to the Arsacids of Rome. The internal evidence from pre-Islamic Iran cannot illustrate this variety with any meaningful resolution, but a diversity of perspectives can be reasonably posited given the size and complexity of the empire and the range of experiences its inhabitants would have had with Rome.

Given the diversity of forms that incomprehension could have taken, the pragmatic dimension of misunderstanding should be interpreted not only as a fortuitous accident, but also as a considered decision. Even if some or all Parthians were familiar with Roman hostageship and could see the Arsacids of Rome in this capacity, why would they have been motivated to do so? In this scenario, pragmatism of a second type would have been in operation. The first type has been covered: accidental misunderstanding was *useful* to Parthia and Rome because it flattered the self-conception of both sides. The Romans were happy to have hostages, which they understood as a sign of their own superiority, while the Parthians saw Arsacid foster-children as a sign of theirs. Mutual ignorance was mutually beneficial, but not by design. However, *pragmatic* can have a second meaning in this context, namely that certain actors were aware, to whatever degree, of the other's view of the transaction, but they sidestepped their own knowledge and cultivated the interpretation most satisfactory to their self-image. This is not to say that either party engaged in self-deception or denial. Rather, despite their awareness of an alternate viewpoint, they maintained their culturally conditioned exegesis even in the face of incompatible input from the other side. They perceived divergence, and let it be. In this sense, pragmatic misunderstanding was not an accident, but an intentional strategy. The givers and receivers of the Arsacids of Rome could have chosen to misunderstand, and to encourage misunderstanding among their compatriots, because it was advantageous for them to do so.

One comparative illustration of this type of misunderstanding in intercultural relations comes from Richard White's study of the "middle ground" between Native American and white settler populations in the Great Lakes region. For White, the middle ground was not only the physical terrain where interaction took place but also a process by which "diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings."[28] In the period he considered, the middle ground formed because neither whites nor Native Americans were predominant in strength, but each needed the other for the pursuit and achievement of certain goals. Persuasion was required, and in order to achieve it, both parties searched for points of contact with the other, or what White calls "congruences, either perceived or actual, between the two cultures."[29] One such congruence centered on kinship and specifically on the

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28. White 2011 [1991]: xxvi. For recent applications of White's concept to ancient history, see Sears 2013: 180–81; Heffron 2017; Candelora 2019.

29. White 2011 [1991]: 52.

cultural framing of father-son relations. In 1706 C.E., a bout of violence threatened to break the fragile alliance between the Ottawa and the French. White explains the subsequent diplomatic talks as follows:[30]

> The [Ottawa-French] alliance was centered on Quebec, the home of Onontio, and it was formulated in the language of kinship to which both the French and the Algonquians attached great significance. Leaders of both the French and the Algonquians negotiated according to ritual forms which placed the French governor, Onontio, in the position of father to the Indians, of whom the Ottawas were his eldest sons. The French were quite at home with such patriarchal formulations and attached quite specific meanings to them. For them all authority was patriarchal, from God the Father, to the king (the father of his people), to the father in his home. Fathers commanded; sons obeyed. The Ottawas understood the relationship somewhat differently. A father was kind, generous, and protecting. A child owed a father respect, but a father could not compel obedience. In establishing a middle ground, one took such congruences as one could find and sorted out their meanings later.

Father-son kinship offered both parties a framework within which questions of alliance, hegemony, and obedience could be negotiated—even as each side maintained different cultural views about the parameters and implications of such a relationship. Misunderstanding ensued, but it was productive and generative misunderstanding, for it allowed the Ottawa and the French to develop a mode of engagement through which accommodation could be reached. By leveraging congruences that were the products of incomprehension, each side could use the other to pursue its own objectives, even though they were not on the same page.

Where was the "congruence" between Parthian and Roman political culture that would have underpinned the exchange of the Arsacids of Rome? It is conceivable that it lay in hostageship, an institution known to both empires. Yet for the Parthians that framing would have had the disadvantage of connoting political inferiority, since inferiors gave hostages to superiors. Instead, they may have sought and found a congruence elsewhere. The Romans were accustomed to receiving royal children, the Arsacids to sending them out—but for cliental fosterage, not hostageship. Considerations of prestige could therefore have enjoined the fosterage interpretation upon Parthian actors who were concerned about the relative status of their empire as compared to Rome's. Here, unlike White's Ottawa and French, the Parthians would have had no reason to further cultivate the conceptual middle ground with Rome or to "sort out the meanings later." The pragmatism of the arrangement depended on the maintenance of misunderstanding. Mutual comprehension, where it existed, would have been undesirable, a problem to paper over rather than a promising lead to pursue.

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30. White 2011 [1991]: 84.

If White's selective congruences suggest one potential model of Roman-Parthian accommodation on the matter of the Arsacids of Rome, a letter from the Bronze Age suggests another. In this paradigm, rulers understand one another, but they conceal their comprehension in order to exploit the ignorance of their subjects. The text in question comes from the Amarna letters of the fourteenth century B.C.E., and perhaps belongs to the correspondence between the Kassite king Kadašman-Enlil and the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III.[31] The Kassite author of the letter is upset with the pharaoh, who has not sent him an Egyptian woman to marry. His text describes the impasse and broaches a possible workaround:[32]

> You, my brother, when I wrote [to you] about marrying your daughter, in accordance with your practice of not gi[ving] (a daughter), [wrote to me], saying, "From time immemorial no daughter of the king of Egy[pt] is given to anyone." Why n[ot]? You are a king; you d[o] as you please. Were you to give (a daughter), who would s[ay] anything? Since I was told of this message, I wrote as follows t[o my brother], saying, "[*Someone's*] grown daughters, beautiful women, must be available. Send me a beautiful woman as if she were y[our] daughter. Who is going to say, 'She is no daughter of the king!'?"

Egypt, it emerges, is unique among Bronze Age kingdoms in its refusal to play the game of marital politics by the rules that its contemporaries follow. Whereas royal women from the Kassite or Hittite dynasties are sent abroad to marry foreign kings, Egyptian royal women are not. The writer of this letter is frustrated with the custom and is dissatisfied with the pharaoh's excuse. All the same, he proposes a compromise, of a sort: the pharaoh can send *any* beautiful woman to Babylonia under the pretense that she is his daughter. The final line of the excerpt leaves room for interpretation, but the Kassite king either means that no one will suspect that the woman is anything short of royal or, if they do suspect as much, they will not dare to publicly express their doubts.

The letter shows that ancient kings could collude to enact fictions for domestic political gain. The Kassite king intends to create the mistaken impression among his subjects that he has an Egyptian royal wife, and the successful staging of the charade requires the complicity of the pharaoh—any Egyptian woman will do, but she has at least to be Egyptian, and such a person only the pharaoh can provide. The text highlights the power gap between kings and those they rule, but also the knowledge gap: the Kassite king has a firm conviction that kings may act with impunity even to propagate a falsehood, while his proposed ruse assumes that the correspondents can keep the truth between them as a lie is foisted on the broader public. Indeed, the king regards the successful execution of the plot as eminently achievable. There is no hint that the scribes who composed and read the letter,

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31. On the precise identities of the correspondents, see Rainey 2015: 1328 contra Kühne 1973: 56.
32. EA 4, lines 4–13, trans. Moran 1992: 8.

or the messengers who carried the letter, or the attendants who heard the letter's recitation will reveal the secret of the kings they serve. In a word, this piece of royal correspondence suggests a type of interstate politics where understanding is the prerogative of kings, a resource they monopolize as they foist a politically convenient but fictitious vision of intercultural relations upon their domestic subjects.

Despite the intimation that true intercultural understanding is the exclusive preserve of a ruling cabal, however, the letter also evinces a serious misunderstanding between its author and recipient. As Trevor Bryce notes, the author fails to realize that the pharaohs keep their daughters at home because, in their eyes, it would be a blow to Egyptian prestige to marry them to foreign kings. The pharaohs viewed themselves as first among peers in the interstate brotherhood, and for them, the givers of brides were the subordinates of those who received them. From this perspective, the proposed solution misses the point. If the pharaoh had agreed to the ruse and sent a fake royal woman, Egypt's dignity would have suffered just as if he had sent a real one; public belief in the princess's royal status, even if mistaken, would create the same perception as actual royal status.[33] Even as the letter floats the prospect of a conspiracy between the two rulers that will join them as partners in the concealment of the truth, it reveals that the sender and recipient have divergent understandings of the marital transactions about which they are corresponding. The prospect of interdynastic collusion *and* cross-cultural misunderstanding are both present in the same ancient text. Kings can conspire to conceal the truth between them even as they maintain different interpretations of what the truth is.

Indeed, it is even possible that Kassite-Egyptian marital interactions represent the same type of pragmatic misunderstanding that underpinned fosterage/hostageship transactions in Roman-Parthian relations. So much is argued by Samuel Meier in his treatment of interdynastic marriage during the Amarna period. Outside of Egypt, Meier contends, the most prevalent type of political marriage was the lord's bestowal of his daughter upon a vassal; that is, the receiver of the bride was subordinate to her giver. Case studies from the Hittite empire and from the Mesopotamian kingdom of Mari support this model. Thus, while the pharaohs of Egypt thought themselves superior in their refusal to send their daughters abroad, kings elsewhere in the Near East may have made the opposite assumption.[34] Moreover, a certain level of intercultural understanding did not cause this fortuitous arrangement to unravel. As Meier explains:[35]

> The various ethnic and linguistic entities knew that their neighbors had different customs and saw the world from a different (inferior!) point of view. The lingua

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33. Bryce 2003: 101–2. But cf. the different reading of Westbrook 2000: 381, for whom the Kassite king's proposed ruse was a rhetorical strategy to expose the pharaoh to a charge of hypocrisy.

34. Meier 2000: 171; but cf. Kitchen 1998: 254–55 on Near Eastern expectations of reciprocal marriage arrangements.

35. Meier 2000: 173.

franca and international marriages allowed sufficient ambiguity and imprecision so that those who participated as equals could actually appear so on the international stage. But the ambiguity and cultural games allowed each of the Great Kings to rest satisfied that the others did not really measure up to the stature that each envisioned for himself.

As Meier sees the situation, a modicum of mutual understanding did not spoil the harmonious accident that the Near Eastern givers and Egyptian receivers of royal brides both felt themselves the superior partner in the exchange. Awareness of the other party's view did not entail acceptance or endorsement of it, because it could be written off as "inferior" or papered over by means of "ambiguity and cultural games." Meier's thesis might not account for all the evidence—if non-Egyptian kings saw marrying a foreign princess as a sign of domination by her royal father, why is the Kassite king so keen to secure an Egyptian bride in the letter quoted above?[36] As a general explanation, however, the idea helps account for the one-sided nature of Egyptian marital relations with the other powers of the Mediterranean and Near East during the late Bronze Age. Successful marital politics may have rested on the divergent expectations that each party brought to the negotiating table—and on the conscious allowance of such divergence in order to exploit the ambiguity and misunderstanding that it produced.

If one applies these comparative models to the case of the Arsacids of Rome, the result is a pragmatic misunderstanding that could have accommodated various levels of mutual comprehension and leveraged different types of pragmatism to deal with it. At one end of the spectrum, the Parthian view could have been rooted in fosterage, and the Roman one in hostageship, in complete and total ignorance of the alternate framework on the other side. In this scenario, no accommodation would have been necessary or indeed possible, since the discrepancy of interpretations would have gone unnoticed. Alternately, à la White, the Romans and Parthians may have noticed a "congruence" between their cultures: the Roman emperors were used to receiving royal children, the Arsacid kings to sending theirs out. The dispatch of Arsacids to Rome could have taken advantage of this congruence while the other party's divergent interpretation—if noticed—could be downplayed, glossed over, or ignored, so long as the arrangement remained mutually beneficial. By contrast, the Amarna letter quoted above suggests still another possibility: the Arsacid king and Roman emperor understood the divergence between their two cultures because of direct and intimate contact, and intrigued together to exploit it. "Send me a foster-child whom I may present as a hostage to my people," an emperor might have written along these lines. Rulers could have cultivated the misunderstanding of their subjects through deception even if they themselves knew how the other side thought.

36. Cf. the critique of Meier in Wang 2023: 428–29.

Pragmatic misunderstanding encompasses all these possibilities, which can only be enumerated, and none of them proven. As discussed in the last chapter, the sources for Parthian fosterage are mostly indirect, and no surviving evidence grants access to the inner thoughts of Arsacid kings or, still less, their Parthian subjects. A range of perspectives can be posited, but no single view can be attributed with confidence to a specific historical figure. The submission of royal children to Rome happened on several occasions under three different kings, each operating in different circumstances. The various cases may all have been prompted by similar motives, or by different ones; the evidence admits of no definitive answers. Moreover, since Parthia was a vast and populous empire, it is reasonable to imagine a diversity of interpretations by various actors—kings, nobles, royal women, and so on—at any given point in time. The prominence of political fosterage in ancient Iranian cultures means that this institution is likely to have provided the overarching framework of interpretation, and to have bracketed the views of those who participated in, or observed, the trafficking of Arsacid children. But frameworks are only guidelines, and their power to circumscribe is not absolute.

There is one additional aspect of White's study that has important implications for the case of the Arsacids of Rome, namely his view that two parties will search for congruences between their cultures and seek creative accommodation only if they are approximate equals in power and cannot achieve their goals through force. This supposed precondition should be addressed, because it might occasion a neorealist dismissal of pragmatic misunderstanding as a pivotal feature of Roman-Parthian relations. An analyst in the vein of Waltz or Mearsheimer might contend that the fosterage/hostageship discrepancy was epiphenomenal to a rough balance of power between Rome and Parthia, a footnote to the body text of systemic equilibrium between two hegemonic neighbors. What really mattered was the underlying structural power relationship. Pragmatic misunderstanding might indeed have existed, but its existence is inconsequential to a proper appraisal of Roman-Parthian relations, which should proceed, in the final analysis, only from the distribution of material power between the two empires.

What that neorealist objection would miss, however, is that calculations of power are ideological constructions, and not just reflections of material reality. Human beings judge power, and culture conditions human judgment. The conceptual confusion behind the Arsacids of Rome was not an incidental outgrowth of a pregiven equilibrium; it was an integral factor in that equilibrium's emergence. Put differently, pragmatic misunderstanding was not a byproduct of power, but part of its constitution. Neorealism cannot account for this element, since the proponents of that theoretical orientation calculate power by "size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence"—in other words, overwhelmingly by material metrics.[37]

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37. Quotation from Waltz 1979: 131; cf. Mearsheimer 2001: 55–56.

These variables matter, to be sure, but they have to be interpreted by human beings, and they are applied toward objectives that humans formulate within the cultural parameters of their societies. Since those cultural conditions shape interstate politics no less than material factors, pragmatic and mutually profitable misunderstanding between Rome and Parthia could not only reflect but also *create* balance by simultaneously assuring each side of its own supremacy in rank.

MOTIVES IN DEPTH

While the concept of pragmatic misunderstanding must encompass a spectrum of possibilities between total incomprehension and selective congruence, it likewise needs to account for a diverse set of Parthian motives for the dispatch of royal children. The argument as stated covers how the Parthians understood the conduit that brought Arsacid children to Rome, but it does not explain, at least not exhaustively, why they chose to make use of that conduit. The factors behind those decisions need to be investigated, as do the key actors involved. Neglect of this issue would produce an impoverished Parthian history, where the subject is in view only inasmuch as it intersects with Roman affairs. The submission of Arsacids was of course a facet of Roman-Parthian relations. Yet the decision to send royal children also took its cues from factors that were internal to the Parthian empire, and had little or nothing to do with Rome. It was characteristic of Parthian pragmatism that an interstate mechanism could be used to address a range of issues of domestic origin.

Accordingly, a set of Parthian motives is explored in greater detail here. The installation of Arsacids at Rome could be used to purge Arsacid rivals to the reigning king; to protect Arsacids otherwise vulnerable in the brutal competition of dynastic politics; to fulfill the aspirations of Parthian royal women; and to protect the dynasty as a whole from extermination. To these internal incentives, another should be added that was interdynastic in scope: the Arsacid desire to establish kinship with the Caesars. Kinship formation could be a valuable end in its own right as a form of networking that connected Parthia's reigning family to its peers and colleagues in world rule. The cumulative weight of these motives shows that the exchange of royal children was much more than a mechanism of interaction between the Roman and Parthian states. It was a way to manage a dynasty, at home and abroad, in a way that transcended the borders of the state that the dynasty ruled.

FOSTERAGE AS POLITICAL PURGE

For a fosterage arrangement to be established, at least one child must leave the house of his or her parents to be raised elsewhere. But the Arsacid kings had many more than one child in their households at any given time. How did they choose which children were sent to Rome for fosterage and which remained in Parthia?

On this question, the Roman literary sources offer an answer that is worthy of serious consideration: Arsacid children were selected for fosterage because the king saw them as direct threats to his reign. In such situations, relocation to Rome allowed the king to neutralize a rival without resorting to open violence or assassination, which came with their own costs. The earliest author to explain the submission of Arsacids to Rome in this way was Strabo, who in two places discusses the motives of Frahād/Phraates IV in sending his family members to Rome. In the first locus, Strabo views the move as an effort to solicit the friendship of the Romans. In the second, however, the king is said to have acted "out of fear of civil strife and those who plotted against him. For he knew that no one could get the better of him unless they had someone of Arsacid stock, since the Parthians were exceedingly devoted to the Arsacids. So he got his children out of the way, seeking to remove this hope from evildoers."[38] Tacitus saw a similar motive behind the same submission, which took place "not so much because [Frahād] was afraid of us, but because he mistrusted the loyalty of his compatriots." The idea reoccurs later in the *Annals* as Tacitus writes of the 54 C.E. exchange between Walgaš and Nero. On this occasion, the king initiated a transfer of Arsacids "in order to prepare war from an advantageous position—or to remove those suspected of rivalry through a nominal hostage submission."[39] Thus, the explanation is applied to two different Arsacid kings by a contemporary of Augustus (Strabo) and a second-century C.E. historian of the Julio-Claudian period (Tacitus). With potential rivals in Roman custody, the logic runs, seditious Arsacids would be unable to maneuver for the throne, and conspiratorial Parthians would be deprived of a royal replacement for the reigning king.

The explanation should not be accepted at face value or uncritically. A cautionary note is sounded by Joel Allen, who detects in Strabo and Tacitus a common historical trope underpinned by rhetorical concerns rather than historical reality. The political purge motif offered Roman writers an out-of-the-box interpretation of Arsacid motives that they could deploy for their own literary purposes. Tacitus, for instance, could use it to indict the early emperors for their smug belief in their own omnipotence even as they misconstrued apparent acts of Parthian submission.[40] Allen has a point. The political purge explanation contributes to Tacitus's general indictment of Roman imperial vanity, a critical endeavor that informs much of his writing and his digressions on Parthian affairs not least.[41] Moreover,

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38. Strab. 6.4.2; quotation from 16.1.28. On the relationship between these two passages, see also above, chapter 1. On the necessity of the Parthian king's being an Arsacid, cf. Joseph. *AJ* 18.44.

39. Tac. *Ann.* 2.1.2 (Frahād); *Ann.* 13.9.1 (Walgaš).

40. Allen 2006: 145–47.

41. On Tacitus's criticism of the Principate in his passages on Parthia, see Ehrhardt 1998: 304; Wiesehöfer 2010: 190; Heil 2017: 266–68.

Tacitus's attribution of the motive to two different Arsacid kings in two different episodes arouses suspicion. Did the historian really have separate and distinct sources of information about the intentions of Frahād IV and Walgaš I, or did he simply reapply a trope to two cases that seemed analogous? The question must remain open, but the latter is a distinct possibility. What appear to be separate analyses may be more accurately described as the strategic reuse of a stock motif. Such concerns underline the limitations of the Roman sources for reconstructing Arsacid motives. They suggest the substitution of rhetorical and literary commonplaces for meaningful knowledge of Parthian politics—substitutions that may have stemmed from authorial ignorance, disinterest, or both.

Yet the "political purge" explanation should not be dismissed, either, for it is buttressed by comparative evidence from other pre- and early modern historical contexts. The idea that interstate fosterage could serve as a conduit for Arsacid purges is not true, or exclusive of other interpretations, simply by virtue of its appearance in Roman sources. But a comparative perspective can demonstrate its inherent plausibility. The tension between king and prince is a common theme in theoretical and didactic literature on dynastic politics. In third century B.C.E. China, the philosopher and Han dynast Han Fei Tzu intoned that "if the ruler puts too much trust in his son, then evil ministers will find ways to utilize the son for the accomplishment of their private schemes," and added as a coda, "if someone as close to the ruler as his own consort, and as dear to him as his own son, still cannot be trusted, then obviously no one else is to be trusted either."[42] The author of the *Nitisara*, a political handbook from late antique India, warns readers that "princes taking advantage of the slightest lapse (on the part of the king) invariably kill the sire like the lion cubs mauling the keeper unawares."[43] In his eleventh-century C.E. work on governmental administration, the Persian statesman Nizam al-Mulk quotes an anonymous poet on the treachery of princes: "One obedient slave is better than three hundred sons; for the latter desire their father's death, the former his master's glory."[44] These references establish that a broad range of pre-modern cultures were attuned to the fraught relationship between rulers and their potential dynastic successors. In ruling families across Eurasia, brutal competition among kin was a normal and expected state of affairs.

The statements of Strabo and Tacitus on the Arsacids of Rome may be further compared with testimony from the *Arthaśāstra*, a Sanskrit treatise on political philosophy and statecraft. The work is attributed to the Mauryan imperial official

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42. Han Fei Tzu, *Precautions within the Palace*, trans. Watson 1964: 84–85. On Han Fei's biography, see Goldin 2013.

43. *Nitisara* 7.10.4, trans. Mitra 1982: 133. On the date and authorship of this work, see Roy 2014: 517; Singh 2017: 196.

44. Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings* 27.22, trans. Darke 2002: 117.

Kautilya (fl. late fourth / early third century B.C.E.), though the text is more likely the product of diverse authorship and various composition and redaction phases down to c. 300 C.E.[45] Within a work that is generally, as Upinder Singh puts it, "obsessed with the danger of assassination," one section is devoted to the tactical use of hostage giving to circumvent threats to the king's person.[46] The author advises that shrewd rulers can turn foreign demands for hostages to their own advantage: "The taking of a kinsman or a chief constitutes a hostage. In this event, the one who gives a traitorous minister or a traitorous offspring is the one who outwits. One who does the opposite is outwitted; for the enemy strikes without remorse at the vulnerable points of someone who is full of confidence because of receiving a hostage."[47] Wise rulers, the author explains, can fool their enemies into taking an undesirable as a hostage. Kings are expected to give hostages from the ranks of their own family or from their ministers. In either event, the king can select "a kinsman or a chief" of known or suspected disloyalty for hostageship. The hostage giver thereby removes a source of domestic conspiracy, and the hostage taker is rendered vulnerable by the mistaken impression that they now have leverage. This is precisely the line of reasoning that Strabo and Tacitus attribute to Frahād and Walgaš.

The *Arthaśāstra* thus contains valuable comparative evidence that buttresses the testimony of Strabo and Tacitus on Arsacid motives. The source cannot of course confirm the Roman authors or offer direct insight into the minds of Frahād IV or Walgaš I. While Mauryan India did share points of contact with Parthian Iran, there is no reason to believe that the text of the *Arthaśāstra* directly shaped, or was shaped by, the ruling strategies of the Arsacid kings.[48] Rather, the work is independent testimony that the succession anxieties attested by Strabo and Tacitus did in fact figure in the calculations of ancient rulers, and that the dispatch of princes to the courts of foreign kings was one potential method for the alleviation of such concerns. Regarding Allen's warning, moreover, the appearance of the "political purge" strategy in this Sanskrit text cannot be attributed to the tropes and rhetorical conventions of Roman literature—a textual milieu of which the *Arthaśāstra* is entirely independent. Even if the Arsacid motives attested by Strabo and Tacitus are purely productions of this literary tradition, then, they cannot be dismissed for that reason. In comparative and intercultural context, the political-purge explanation is inherently plausible given the usual dynamics of dynastic politics, and it is explicitly attested in a source from

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45. On the composition, redaction, and dating of the *Arthaśāstra*, see Olivelle 2013: 6–31 with the literature cited at nn.15, 49; Bisht 2020: 12–16.

46. Singh 2021: 15.

47. *Arthaśāstra* 7.17.11–14, trans. Olivelle 2013: 323–24; cf. Rangarajan 1992: 562.

48. Like the Arsacids, the Mauryans interacted with the Seleucid dynasty, for instance; see Thapar 2002: 176–78, 182; Ray 2021: 199.

ancient India. It should be numbered among the potential motives of Frahād IV or Walgaš I in sending their children to Rome.

ARSACID FOSTERAGE AND PARTHIAN ROYAL WOMEN

The Jewish author Josephus offers an alternate explanation for the dispatch of Frahād IV's children. For Josephus, the entire episode is part of the story of Thea Musa, one of the most prominent royal women in Arsacid history. As Josephus relates, Musa was given by Augustus to Frahād IV at an uncertain date.[49] She began her life at the Arsacid court as a concubine, but so charmed Frahād that he soon elevated her to the status of wife.[50] The couple had a son, Frahātak.[51] Musa wanted her child to succeed his father as the Arsacid king of kings, but an obstacle stood in the way: Frahād had other sons who apparently outranked Frahātak in the line of succession. Here Rome entered the picture. Musa asked Frahād to send his other children to Rome "as hostages." The king complied, slavishly devoted as he was to Musa's commands. His other sons went to Rome, and Frahātak became the heir apparent. All this appears in Josephus, and nowhere else.[52]

How seriously can this story be taken as an explanation for the dispatch of Arsacids to Rome? Some scholars are prepared to accept Josephus's explanation more or less at face value. Emma Strugnell, for instance, argues that "Phraates [Frahād] IV's decision to send his legitimate heirs to Rome should be conceived not as a sign of deference to Rome, but as the will of Musa. This view is supported by Josephus."[53] Josef Wiesehöfer and Edward Dąbrowa favor a similar interpretation, but with an important variation: in their view, Frahād's dispatch of his children to Rome was no heartless purge, but an act of kindness to spare them the fate of assassination (or worse) after Musa's ascent to power.[54] For J. M. Bigwood, however, Josephus's account contains "something of the truth" but also "much that is unsatisfactory." She compares the account to a folk-tale and prefers to follow Strabo and Tacitus on the matter of Frahād's children.[55] Erich Gruen writes

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49. Josephus names Musa's giver as "Julius Caesar." But Caesar was assassinated long before Frahād IV's enthronement in 38 B.C.E., so most scholars assume that Augustus must be meant. See Bigwood 2004: 38–39 for discussion.

50. Joseph. *AJ* 18.40. The terms in Greek are *pallakis* (concubine) and *gametēs* (wife).

51. Called Phraataces by Josephus and Cassius Dio (55.10.20, 10a.4). The name *prhtk* / Frahātak is attested in the Nisa ostraca: Diakonoff and Livshits 2001: 179 (no. 2692 line 7); Schmitt 2016: 161 (no. 358). Many scholars refer to Phraataces as Frahād/Phraates V (thus, e.g., Karras-Klapproth 1988: 145; Edwell 2021: 33–34; Olbrycht 2021b; Olbrycht 2021c), but he is never unambiguously referred to by that name in an ancient source. The one possible exception is *Mon. Anc.* 32.1, on which see Nabel 2015: 311–12.

52. Joseph. *AJ* 18.39–44; "as hostages" at 18.42.

53. Strugnell 2008: 283; cf. Schottky 1991: 61–62; Edwell 2021: 33.

54. Wiesehöfer 2010: 187; Dąbrowa 2017: 173; cf. Bivar 1983: 67–68; Gregoratti 2015: 732.

55. Bigwood 2004: 42 (quotation), 46 (folktale).

along similar lines that "[Josephus] here seems less interested in history than in a moralistic pronouncement on the actors of this drama, one that is unrecorded by our other sources."[56] To what extent, then, can Josephus be considered a reliable guide to the issue of Arsacid motives?

On the one hand, there are good reasons to doubt the historical value of the passage. Leonardo Gregoratti, for instance, suggests that Josephus has drawn on a standard set of Greek literary tropes for the representation of Persian royal women in historiography. Like the Atossa of Herodotus or the Parysatis of Ctesias, Josephus's Musa is a scheming, immoral, and ruthless operative who manipulates her husband to brazenly intervene in the otherwise male world of politics.[57] Her portrayal may thus adhere to the classical penchant for recycling Greek historiography on the Achaemenids into Roman historiography on the Arsacids, and it may derive from stock topoi rather than information specific to her case. Also suspicious is Josephus's description of Frahād's would-be successors as "legitimate" children (*gnēsioi* in the Greek)—in contrast, it would seem, to the "illegitimate" Frahātak. The word implies a formal Arsacid hierarchy in which maternity could qualify or disqualify royal children for the kingship. But there is no corroborating evidence for such a system. A key passage from Justin attests primogeniture as the general Arsacid succession rule, but also the considerable latitude that kings enjoyed in determining their successors.[58] Other Greco-Roman authors record that the children of concubines could become Arsacid kings without apparent issue, and Josephus's distinction between legitimate and illegitimate heirs finds no support in internal Parthian sources.[59] These features of the passage raise serious doubts about its value as evidence for Musa's career.

Yet another problematic element is Josephus's reference to the alleged sexual relationship (not a marriage, though this may be implied) between Musa and Frahātak.[60] The existence of such a relationship cannot be otherwise confirmed, but it is plausible enough in a pre-Islamic Zoroastrian milieu where *xwēdōdah* (next-of-kin marriage) was consistently practiced from the Achaemenid through the Sasanian periods. To be sure, mother-son marriages are otherwise unknown from contemporaneous Arsacid sources, which only attest *xwēdōdah* of the

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56. Gruen 2017: 231. Cf. Allen 2006: 147 ("Josephus's account is a clear polemic against [Musa]").

57. Gregoratti 2013: 184–87. See also Bigwood 2004: 45–47 on parallels to the story of Semiramis.

58. Just. 41.5.9–10. The contention of Harl 2016: 107 that the Arsacid kings followed a "lateral succession principle" is not supported by the evidence.

59. The Arsacid king Walgaš I was the son of a Greek concubine and ruled with the acquiescence of his brothers: Tac. *Ann.* 12.44.2. Internal Parthian evidence has little to say about Arsacid children, but the royal polygamy attested in e.g. the Avroman documents suggests a large pool of royal heirs and an ad hoc, contingent approach to succession. See Madreiter and Hartmann 2021: 237–38 for discussion.

60. Josephus's avoidance of marital terminology is stressed by Schottky 1991: 62; Bigwood 2004: 44; contrast, e.g., Schlude and Rubin 2017: 73. See also Olbrycht 2021c.

brother-sister variety.[61] But the preponderance of evidence from both classical authors and late antique Zoroastrian literature makes it abundantly clear that such unions not only existed, but were judged superior to marriages with nonkin.[62] The relative clarity on this point makes one of Josephus's claims difficult to accept: he writes that the Parthians were scandalized by the sexual relationship between Musa and Frahātak, and that this outrage fueled their eventual rebellion and deposition of the pair. The same evidence that establishes the inherent plausibility of this mother-son union enjoins a rejection of Josephus's testimony on this point. *Xwēdōdah* was unremarkable in pre-Islamic Iran, and it could not have furnished the grounds for a coup d'état, even on the level of rhetoric. The disgust with "incest" belongs to Josephus and his readership, not to the Parthians to whom the emotion is imputed. Such editorializing is typical of the reports on *xwēdōdah* by Greco-Roman authors, who often get the basic parameters of the practice right even as they express their shock and horror at its operation. In sum, Josephus's handling of Arsacid sexuality and marital customs reveals an author who is underinformed about Parthian society and culture. Here, too, his testimony on Musa is suspect.

But there are also reasons to accept the general proposition that Josephus asks the reader to consider, even if the author cannot be trusted on the details of the case itself: the dispatch of certain Arsacids to Rome was influenced by Parthian royal women and their interventions in the politics of succession. In the case of Musa, it is hard to gainsay Josephus's portrayal of this enslaved woman-turned-queen as a canny political operator who reached exceptional heights of power and influence, because Arsacid evidence, namely coinage, produces the same impression. As Bigwood has noted, Musa is the only queen to be both depicted and named on Arsacid numismatic issues (see figure 1), where she appears opposite her son Frahātak with the title of *basilissa*, or queen.[63] The coins cannot be used to confirm specific details from Josephus's account like the supposed sexual relationship between Musa and Frahātak or, still less, the notion that Musa persuaded Frahād to send his other children to Rome. But they do reveal a queen who featured on a key medium of Arsacid political communication in a conspicuous departure from centuries of numismatic precedent. It is easy to imagine such a woman exerting influence in debates over the Arsacid succession, Josephus's use of orientalist and misogynistic tropes notwithstanding.

The particular case of Musa aside, comparative studies of court politics support the idea that Parthian queens could influence fosterage transactions in order

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61. See Avroman 1 and 2.

62. From Greco-Roman literature, see esp. Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 3.13 on mother-son marriages. From Zoroastrian literature, see esp. the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 8c1, 8d1 = Williams 1990: 1.50–53, 2.11–12. On the prevalence and high valuation of *xwēdōdah* marriages in pre-Islamic Iran, see de Jong 1997: 424–32; Vevaina 2018: 121–24.

63. Bigwood 2004: 47. See also Schlude and Rubin 2017: 72–78; Madreiter and Hartmann 2021: 239–40.

FIGURE 1. Tetradrachm of Frahātak (obverse) and Musa (reverse), 2 B.C.E.–4 C.E. Sellwood 1980: 190 (type 58.9). Photo credit: American Numismatic Society (ANS 1944.100.82979).

to pursue their own designs. Josephus's use of Greek literary models to describe the influence of royal women in an eastern court is grounds for caution, but it is not necessarily a reason to discount his testimony. As Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones argues in a recent study of female violence at the Achaemenid court, "what is recorded of Persian royal women are not orientalist fantasies on the part of Greek writers, as might easily be supposed, but accurate reflections of the politicking practices within the royal harem."[64] Influential and politically savvy Persian queens were not merely figments of the Greek imagination. Instead, they were the products of competitive court environments where royal women exercised real power. This dynamic of court life is amply attested in other historical settings. Michael Flower and John Marincola reached much the same conclusion as Llewellyn-Jones about Achaemenid women by way of comparative study with the city of Kano in early modern Nigeria.[65] Leslie Peirce's work on the Ottoman harem explored a period of over a hundred years when the women of the sultan's household were, in her analysis, instrumental "in creating and manipulating domestic political factions, in negotiating with foreign powers, and in acting as regents for their sons."[66] In his comparative studies of pre- and early modern dynasties Jeroen Duindam finds few female rulers or queens regnant, but numerous cases where royal women played pivotal roles in the determination of a king's successor.[67] The sensationalist tendencies of Greco-Roman historiography

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64. Llewellyn-Jones 2020: 361.

65. Flower and Marincola 2002: 292, citing Mack 1991.

66. Peirce 1993: vii.

67. Duindam 2016: 147–48. On the rarity of ruling queens, see Duindam 2016: 89–95; Duindam 2021: 153–55.

on pre-Islamic Iranian empires should not be ignored, of course. But as Walter Scheidel writes in a discussion of Persian polygamy, "significant structural properties of the putative oriental counterworld constructed by Mediterranean authors coincide far too closely with information transmitted from within these and comparable societies to have been 'constructed' from scratch or distorted beyond recognition."[68] Josephus's tendentious deployment of Musa as a cautionary tale of female royal power is no basis for concluding that her possession of power must be unhistorical.

As for whether an Arsacid royal woman would have chosen to use her court influence to advance the interests of her son, comparative history can once again establish the inherent plausibility of the proposition. In a study of Hellenistic history, Daniel Ogden described dynastic politics as "amphimetric," that is, characterized by factional strife between groups of royal children who had different mothers but the same father.[69] Ogden saw such conflict as a consequence of royal polygyny without formal rules of succession, since Hellenistic kings produced numerous children with numerous mothers but had no clear procedures for establishing a hierarchy among them. Mothers and sons made for natural allies in such an environment, and other maternally defined groups were often their rivals. Hellenistic history does not entirely conform to this paradigm, and Arsacid history does not either—in one case, for instance, an Arsacid succession dispute turned on one dynast's membership in the royal family through his matriline rather than patriline.[70] But the structural features of the Arsacid and Hellenistic royal families match so closely that amphimetric conflict must have figured in the Arsacid case as well.

Nor were the Hellenistic dynasties alone in sharing polygyny, concubinage, and multitudinous royal heirs with the Arsacids. In the late sixteenth century C.E., the Ottoman empire saw fierce competition among numerous royal concubines who vigorously prosecuted their sons' claims to power.[71] Munis Faruqui's survey of princedom in the Mughal empire likewise finds that mothers were central to the lives and political fortunes of their royal sons.[72] Debby Chih-Yen Huang and Paul Goldin discuss polygynous households in early imperial China, where "the emotional bond between a mother and her natural son would often be enhanced because they faced the same rivalries and crises."[73] On balance, then, Musa's effort

68. Scheidel 2009b: 279.

69. Ogden 1999: x.

70. Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.3 has the inhabitants of Seleucia on the Tigris berate Ardawān II for inheriting his Arsacid status only from his mother; on this passage, see further chapter 4. Judicious criticisms of Ogden's view are mounted in Strootman 2014: 94, 103–10; Penrose 2018; Llewellyn-Jones and McAuley 2023: 13–14.

71. Peirce 1993: 23–24; cf. Imber 2002: 91–92.

72. Faruqui 2012: 72.

73. Huang and Goldin 2018: 27; cf. McMahon 2013: 929–32.

to enable her son's accession by purging the Arsacid court of other princes looks eminently plausible in intercultural context.

Ultimately, Josephus's text is a reasonable basis for concluding that the agency of Parthian royal women was one factor behind the submission of Arsacids to Rome. It is probable that the women of the Arsacid court could influence the reigning king's decision to initiate this transaction in the first place, and also that they played a part in determining which Arsacids would go and which would stay once the decision to send children had been made. These propositions are not acceptable simply by virtue of their appearance in Josephus, as some scholars contend, but they can be maintained in light of comparative evidence for dynastic women in other polygynous court environments. It must remain an open question whether a wife or concubine was ever *entirely* responsible for the initiation of a transfer, as Josephus would have it in the case of Musa. Josephus's account is too problematic to serve as conclusive evidence on this point, and no other sources offer a window into this aspect of dynastic politics. One need not accept Josephus's description of Frahād and Musa's agencies as a zero-sum game that reduced Frahād to a mere puppet of his wife's will, and it is better to imagine a dynamic process in which kings and queens negotiated. But Josephus's Musa excursus is a salutary reminder that Arsacid women would have been key players in debates over the future of Arsacid children. Josephus may not be reliable on the details of Musa's case, but he is surely right about this.

A related but distinct interpretation of Musa's story in modern scholarship reveals yet another potential Arsacid motive: against the backdrop of competitive and violent dynastic politics at court, familial compassion may have been just as important as ruthless politicking in determining the fate of the Arsacids of Rome. Wiesehöfer, Dąbrowa, and others understand Frahād IV's decision as an effort to *spare* his children from the brutal measures that attended succession struggles, assassination perhaps above all.[74] Once the king had accepted Frahātak as his heir, the argument goes, he sent his other offspring to Rome to save them from the mass purges that often accompanied the accession of a new king. This question of sentiment cannot be proven on the basis of the direct evidence for this episode. But Josephus twice adduces parental benevolence as an explanation in comparable scenes set at Adiabene. In one passage, the Adiabenian king Monobazus fears that his favorite son, Izates, will be murdered by his jealous brothers, so he sends Izates to grow up at the court of Abinerglos, the king of Spasinou Charax. In a later episode, the same Izates (now king of Adiabene) uses "hostage" submission to both Parthia and Rome as a way to avoid assassinating his brothers and other relatives suspected of coveting his throne.[75] The anthropologist Peter Parkes notes the

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74. See above, n.54.

75. Joseph. *AJ* 20.22–23, 20.34 (Izates to Abinerglos); 20.29–37 (Izates' brothers and relatives sent to Parthia and Rome); cf. 20.71 (Izates' young children sent to Judaea to study).

frequent appearance of this alleged motive in other historical contexts: "Fears of family violence being done to children—by jealous brothers and agnatic cousins or uncles, as by step-mothers promoting their own offspring—were commonly supposed to explain the out-fostering of heirs in Ireland and Celtic Britain, as in mountain kingdoms of Central Asia." Parkes himself favored the idea that fosterage in these settings aimed "simply to use children as pawns for the construction of familial clientage," but these explanations are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they may even be synergistic and complementary.[76] Clemency and familial affection have no explicit basis in the sources for Musa's reign, then, but comparison suggests that they merit consideration among the diverse set of motives that could have spurred Arsacid kings and queens to send their children to the court of a distant ruler.

A final word on Musa and Frahātak is needed to situate the pair in the development and maintenance of pragmatic misunderstanding between Rome and Parthia. For a few years, the Arsacid empire had an Italian queen and a half-Italian king, and one might well ask: couldn't such rulers have bridged the gap between Roman and Parthian views of Arsacid child circulation? That potential must indeed have existed, but the history of Musa's and Frahātak's reign suggests that it was not fulfilled. In the first place, it should not be an automatic assumption that Musa accepted the cultural valuations of the empire that had reduced her to sexual slavery instead of the one that put her on the throne. Musa surely understood Roman hostageship, but she had as much reason as any Parthian to reject its logics. More importantly, though, Musa was ousted along with her son after only a few years, and the first Parthian queen from the Roman empire was also the last. Where the potential spark of mutual intelligibility and the exchange of cultural views was kindled, it was quickly snuffed out. If Musa was indeed transmitting the Roman view of the Arsacids of Rome, the Parthians shut down the signal before too long. In White's terms, Musa's queenship could have been a step toward meeting on a middle ground. By all indications, however, the Parthians were not interested in scouting this terrain.

EXTINCTION

Another objective that fosterage could serve encompassed the protection of the entire Arsacid dynasty rather than individual members. The installation of Arsacid children at Rome was extermination insurance. Dynasties can go extinct, and the prospect of total annihilation can be a powerful inducement to distribute dynastic eggs among several different baskets on the grounds that geographically dispersed ruling families are harder to eradicate.[77] Dispersal could turn an Arsacid

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76. Parkes 2006: 382 (both quotations).
77. van der Steen 2022: 97.

weakness—namely an overabundance of royal children whose competition made succession violent and destabilizing—into a strength. Reigning kings may thus have viewed a fosterage arrangement with the Roman emperor as a guarantee not so much against Roman behavior as against dynastic catastrophe within Parthian territory itself.

One scholar has advanced this thesis about political fosterage, but in the context of late antique Armenian history rather than Roman-Parthian relations in the first century C.E. In his study of *dayeakutʿiwn* ("noble fosterage"), Robert Bedrosian located the origins of this institution in the "concern for clan survival" that was widespread among the Armenian noble families living under the Arsacid/ Arshakuni kings.[78] The Armenian clans of *nakharar* status had a tempestuous relationship with the Arshakunis. They acknowledged the dynasty's royal status, but they could also take issue with the royal prerogatives that it claimed for itself. Nor were the *nakharar* families a monolithic group; they could fight each other in addition to the crown. When violence broke out among these ruling clans, its scope could be genocidal. Assassination was employed not only against the adult men and women of the offending family, but against its children too. The aim was the complete elimination of the clan as a political and legal entity. Bedrosian catalogs several episodes along these lines in late antique Armenian historiography.

The Arsacids of Rome offer an early glimpse of the family's late antique profile as both an employer of dynastic annihilation and a survivor of it. By securing the Roman emperor as a foster-father, the dynasty could spread itself out and establish an alternate base of power in case a calamitous event befell it in Parthian territory. This strategy operated in tandem with a second survival mechanism, which was the installation of Arsacid family members on the thrones of Parthian client kingdoms to create "cadet branches" of the dynasty.[79] The most consequential and effective of these initiatives was the one that secured Armenia as an Arsacid territory, an event that is traditionally dated to 63 C.E. It was above all its possession of this kingdom that allowed the dynasty to live on for an additional two centuries when it lost its Iranian empire to the Sasanians in 224 C.E. The Arsacids would hang on in Armenia until 428 C.E., and their base in the Caucasus would grow to encompass nearby Albania as well.[80] These were the collective efforts of a dynasty that knew and understood the dangers of extinction, and that took careful steps to avoid the overconcentration of its family representatives in a single place. In a world where kings and their families were in constant peril from domestic enemies, fosterage could represent a form of contingency planning to guard against total

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78. Bedrosian 1984: 26.

79. For the term *cadet branch* in general, see Hey 1996: 63; for its use in Parthian history, see Neusner 1966: 6; Gregoratti 2018: 25. On the installation of Arsacids as kings over client territories, see Hauser 2016: 438–39.

80. On the Arsacids of Albania, see recently Gadjiev 2020.

eradication. The Arsacids certainly availed themselves of this strategy in late antique Armenia, and the Arsacids of Rome can be viewed as an earlier instantiation.

KINSHIP AS ITS OWN MOTIVE

While many Arsacid motives stemmed from domestic politics, one incentive to initiate a fosterage arrangement with Rome was interdynastic in scope: the inherent desirability of a kinship bond with the Julio-Claudians. As the preceding discussion has shown, the establishment of kinship could be a means to various ends, but it could also be an end in itself. In diverse historical and regional contexts, geographically disparate dynasties may interliaise because it is only in foreign ruling families that a king or queen can find a partner commensurate with their own royal dignity. Domestic subjects, by contrast, are no more than that—subjects—and thus unsuitable for this purpose. In this respect, rulers may have more in common with each other than with the people whom they rule, regardless of the distance between their dynastic centers. Indeed, geographical separation between members may make interdynastic kinship more valuable rather than less, conferring as it does an "aura of prestige and awe" on the people with knowledge of what is territorially remote.[81] Where such dynamics prevail, a kinship connection with a colleague in world rule can be its own reward.

The reputational stakes of interdynastic kinship are well illustrated in an exchange of letters between two sovereigns from the late Bronze Age. In c. 1327 B.C.E., the Hittite king Šuppiluliuma received a message from an Egyptian queen.[82] According to a later Hittite reproduction, the text read, "My husband died. I have no son. If you would give me one of your sons, he would become my husband. Never shall I pick out a servant of mine and make him my husband!"[83] Šuppiluliuma was wary at first, but an exchange of diplomatic agents verified the story: Egypt had no reigning pharaoh, and the invitation to supply one was genuine. In a second letter, the Egyptian queen reiterated her refusal to take an Egyptian husband. Moreover, she had approached no other foreign ruler with her request. Only a Hittite prince would do.[84] In the end, Šuppiluliuma overcame his suspicion and dispatched his son Zannanza to wed the queen. The young man was assassinated en route to Egypt for reasons that are unclear, for at this point the evidence that supports detailed reconstruction of the episode trails off.

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81. Helms 1988: 5.

82. Which queen is debated, but inconsequential here. On her identity, see Bryce 1990; Parker 2002: 36–37; Bryce 2003: 179–81 and n.3–4; Miller 2007; Theis 2011; Stavi 2015: 178–82. The date of the letter given above follows Bryce 2003: 181 on the year of the pharaoh's death. But other interpretations are possible; cf. Schneider 2010: 399, 402–3.

83. *The Deeds of Šuppiluliuma* A iii, lines 10–15 = Güterbock 1956: 94 (translation lightly adapted); see also Hoffner in Hallo and Younger 2003: 1.185–92.

84. *The Deeds of Suppiluliuma* A iv, lines 6–13 = Güterbock 1956: 96–97.

The primary source for this interdynastic proposal is *The Manly Deeds of Šuppiluliuma* by the king's son Muršili II, a work that has been pieced together from fragments excavated at the Hittite capital of Hattuša. Shorter references also appear in two "plague prayers" by the same author.[85] Muršili's *Deeds* is a sophisticated work of historiography by a strong literary talent. The author treats the episode from the Hittite side, but in a measured, circumspect fashion free of obvious jingoism.[86] The words of the widowed Egyptian queen quoted above come from Muršili's text, and how faithfully he reproduced her message is an open question. A copy of one of the queen's letters to Šuppiluliuma has also been found at Hattuša, but the text is too fragmentary to shed much light on Muršili's treatment of it. At the very least, Muršili translated the queen's words from Akkadian, the usual language of interstate correspondence in the late Bronze Age, to Hittite, the language in which he wrote the *Deeds* and other works. A more extensive reworking is possible, but not provable on the basis of the extant text.[87] Be that as it may, no scholar questions the basic outlines of the episode as presented by Muršili, and the historicity of the Egyptian queen's request is secure enough.

The queen's proposal shows how the appeal of interdynastic kinship could override and transcend domestic political pressures and state interests. As many discussions of this episode stress, the Hittite kingdom and Egypt were often enemies in the late Bronze Age, when their armies repeatedly clashed over sites in Syria and the Levant.[88] But great power competition did not prevent the Egyptian queen from seeking a Hittite husband. If anything, close rivalry *encouraged* that decision, since only royal coequals could supply a husband commensurate with the queen's rank and prestige. Only the "great king brotherhood," an interdynastic and interstate network of royal kin, would allow the Egyptian queen to escape the undignified fate of marriage to one of her own "servants."[89] This imperative overrode the routine business of foreign relations, armed conflict, and hegemonic competition in peripheral territories. State business operated on one register, interdynastic kinship and its logics on another.

Kinship networking among dynasties can write its own rules, then, and the dynamics of this Bronze Age episode clarify one potential Arsacid motive in seeking Caesarian fosterage. The dictates of royal prestige could have incentivized the Arsacids to secure the most distinguished possible partner in kinship

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85. Beckman in Hallo and Younger 2003: 1.158; Singer 2002: 67–68.

86. van den Hout 2021: 146. More critical remarks are offered by Miller 2007: 262.

87. Edel 1994: 1.14–15 (text and German translation), 2.22–26 (commentary). Bryce 2003: 184 writes, "In fact we have fragments of the queen's original letter, enough to demonstrate how faithfully Mursili's quotation reflects her actual words." But this assessment is unsupportable without Edel's extensive restorations, which are on based on Muršili's renditions of the queen's letters. Cf. Stavi 2015: 165.

88. Liverani 2001: 192; Bryce 2005: 177–78; Theis 2011: 302; Cline 2014: 67; Wang 2023: 405.

89. Podany 2010: 285–86.

creation—even or perhaps *especially* if that partner presided over a distant imperial competitor. The military and diplomatic clashes of the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. gave Rome an impression of Parthia as a political formation of comparable size and strength to its own, and it is a reasonable assumption—though not verifiable on current evidence—that Parthia reached a similar conclusion.[90] The rulers of these empires thus had peers in each other that were not to be found within the territories that they ruled. Like Šuppiluliuma's Egyptian interlocutor, the Arsacids may have seen in their imperial rivals the potential for a kinship connection that would befit their high status, even if they cultivated other kinship relations with domestic dependents at the same time. And since intermarriage between the ruling families of Parthia and Rome was a nonstarter, fosterage offered a workaround—an all the more attractive one if cliental fosterage was the dominant institutional framework.

The ability of interdynastic kinship to transcend the squabbles of great power rivalry has been missed by some scholars of ancient interstate relations, especially those who are explicitly or implicitly realist in theoretical orientation. Writing of the Amarna period, for instance, Steven David finds interdynastic kinship (or Podany's "brotherhood of kings") superficial and incapable of explaining the dynamics of late Bronze Age interstate affairs: "That leaders of countries would refer to one another as 'brother' did not prevent them from fearing one another, subverting the power of potential rivals, and occasionally going to war with one another. Precisely because the discourse of brotherhood and family did not cause the leaders to behave in ways inconsistent with Realism, the Constructivist view is found wanting."[91] From the literature on Roman-Iranian relations, a similar assessment is on offer in Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter's treatment of the Sasanian period: "As a concept, the notion of a 'family of kings' existed throughout the history of Roman–Sasanian relations. West and East agreed on this notion, which contributed to a mutual acknowledgement of the other's sovereignty and compliance with an emerging international law. However, this did not reduce concrete political conflicts between the two."[92] In David's view, interdynastic kinship was entirely inconsequential in ancient interstate politics. Dignas and Winter concede some effect, but ultimately conclude that kinship "did not reduce concrete political conflicts." These discussions are underpinned by similar logic: if interdynastic kinship had been a serious force in foreign relations, then rulers and their empires would have been more benevolent and peaceful toward one another. Since antagonism, brinksmanship, and military conflict persisted even after the establishment of the brotherhood of kings, one must conclude that anarchy, not family, was the

90. For expressions of coequality with Parthia in Roman sources, see Vell. Pat. 2.101.2; Strab. 11.9.2; Plin. *HN* 5.88; Joseph. *AJ* 18.46; Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.1, 2.60.4, 12.10.2, 15.13.2; Cass. Dio 40.14.3; Herodian 4.10.2.

91. David 2000: 64.

92. Dignas and Winter 2007: 233.

ultimate constitutive principle of interstate politics. When the modern analyst strips away the rhetorical cloak of kinship, they expose the timeless realities of foreign affairs: rivalry, competition, and violence unchecked by law or convention.

Such dismissal of kinship goes astray on a number of counts, however. First, both these discussions are premised on the mistaken notion that kin do not fight. Relations among kin are assumed to entail harmony, accord, and peace; the absence of these things means the absence of kinship. These assumptions do not hold up. Many theorists reject the idea that positive emotions like love and affection are essential features of kinship relations. As Cecilia Busby puts it: "However much one loves one's mother's brother, for example, and however much he acts like a father, he remains *categorically* different. The kinship system is categorical, while emotion and affect are individual and haphazard, and one cannot be explained in terms of the other. Not all brothers love their sisters (or even *like* them), yet all brothers *are* related to all sisters in a particular way."[93] In this formulation, affect is incidental to kinship, not a necessary condition for it. Siblings, parents, and children may compete with one another. They may dislike one another, or even hate one another. But these negative emotions do not nullify their kinship, just as positive emotions do not constitute it. Kinship is a system of relatedness that may correlate with certain kinds of sentiments, but it is not premised upon them. It is an error, then, to assume that the creation of a kinship group must necessarily entail harmonious accord among its members.

This conclusion is all the more problematic when the kinship unit under consideration is the dynasty—a type of social group that routinely witnesses violent competition for power within its own ranks. As discussed above, conspiracy, coups, and assassination are rife in the histories of pre- and early modern dynasties across a range of temporal and regional contexts.[94] Such rivalries were often exacerbated by royal polygyny and by the numerous dynastic offspring this practice could produce, though monogamy and limited reproduction (as in Rome) did not guarantee familial harmony either.[95] In the case of the Arsacids, several episodes of intradynastic mass murder are attested, as are polygamy and polygyny.[96] Greco-Roman literature treated these practices in sensationalist fashion, but their main lines are confirmed by internal sources, and in any event, they are unremarkable in comparative perspective. As a typical dynasty, the Arsacid family was subject to typical dynastic infighting, which has lethal consequences for members of the kin group as a matter of course. If in nonruling families kinship often correlates with feelings of love and devotion, in dynasties, it often doesn't.

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93. Busby 1997: 29 (emphases in the original); quoted in Sahlins 2013: 10.

94. Burling 1974: 256–57; Peirce 1993: 21; Duindam 2016: 87–88, 127–53.

95. Duindam 2016: 121–25. On ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern marital practices in comparative perspective, see Betzig 1986: 70–78; Scheidel 2009b: 268–99.

96. For mass murder, see the references collected in Nabel 2017a: 81 n.8; cf. Ellerbrock 2021: 40, table 3.2. On polygamy and polygyny, see Madreiter and Hartmann 2021.

Given the regular, violent competition for power in intradynastic contexts, why should interdynastic kin have behaved otherwise? Transimperial kinship groups like those of the late Bronze Age or Roman-Iranian relations pursued the usual rivalries of the dynastic arena, but on an interstate stage. When once disparate ruling families become intertwined through marriage, fosterage, adoption, or other mechanisms, dynastic competition is internationalized. Assassination or factional strife at the domestic level becomes large-scale war in the interstate environment, as rulers prosecute feuds against their interdynastic kin with the state resources at their disposal. For commentators like David, Winter, and Dignas, war puts the lie to interdynastic kinship, on the grounds that family connections must necessarily curb violence. But kinship is premised on no such behavioral imperatives, and in the case of dynasties, comparative evidence shows that kinship is often attended by lethal forms of violence directed against other family members. If the family in question includes the kings of foreign states, war may result. Realism has no monopoly on explaining violence. Whether in the late Bronze Age or in Roman-Iranian relations, war can be explained as dynastic feuding within an interstate brotherhood of kings, waged with the imperial armies that were at the disposal of the brotherhood's various members.

From a realist perspective, interdynastic kinship might seem to entail contradictory propositions: the construction of an interstate ruling family ran the risk of internationalizing the brutal dynastic politics of the domestic court—and yet such family bonds could be treasured, since they connected rulers across great distances to their few peers in power on the entire earth. But the establishment of interdynastic kinship was valued not because it brought peace, but because it reflected the ruling family's prestige and underlined its transcendence of the polity that it governed. By joining an interdynastic "brotherhood of kings," rulers signposted their membership in a rarified political community, an elite family without borders in which kings had more in common with their foreign counterparts than with the subjects they ruled. Antagonistic relations with those same counterparts did not undercut the arrangement and might even *support* it, on the grounds that only a rival in strength was a true peer and thus suitable for kinship networking. When the Arsacids obtained the Roman emperors as foster-fathers for their children, they did not gain peace, but they did gain a relative whose integration into their family structures redounded to their own glory.

By the same token, understanding interdynastic kinship as a systematized political arrangement can account for many practical questions about how the Parthians cemented the Roman emperor as a long-term Arsacid fosterer across generations. Several Arsacid kings died with their children still in Rome, so there were inevitably cases where the newly installed ruler was not the father of his fellow dynasts at the emperor's court. Moreover, emperors like Caligula and Nero may well have been younger than some of their foster-sons, and from the case of Vonones and his brothers, it is clear that certain Arsacids of Rome were

already fathers themselves when they entered Roman custody. Comparative evidence can establish that such obstacles would have been perfectly superable, however. As discussed in chapter 1, interdynastic brotherhood was a conveyable relation in the late Bronze Age. If a king died and a son took his place, foreign rulers who had called the elder king "brother" could swiftly transfer that appellation to his child. Such flexibility may well have applied to the Arsacid-Caesarian case, with the positions of father, foster-father, and foster-son readily re-assignable as needed.[97] Cross-culturally, anthropologists have noted methods for the creation of kinship through symbolic acts that circumvent inconvenient realities like age. For instance, grown men may gesturally suckle from the breast of an older woman to obtain milk kinship, as attested in early Islamic Arabia as well as early modern Abkhazia and northern Pakistan.[98] In such situations, neither age nor personal sentiments are significant. What matters is the system of kinship that needs to be created to achieve a social goal. The ancient evidence cannot illustrate in detail how the Parthians would have squared a long-term fosterage arrangement with the ages of its participants, which must sometimes have mismatched the desired parent-child relationship. Comparison suggests, however, that they would have had an array of tactical methods at their disposal to maintain their kinship arrangement of choice.

CONCLUSION

On the Parthian side, then, misunderstanding was pragmatic in multiple senses. Incomprehension of the Roman view was useful, since it allowed stakeholders in Arsacid power to imagine the family atop an interdynastic hierarchy. The utility of this perspective could have meant that, even where commonalities with the Roman understanding appeared, the Parthians looked for ways to avoid mutual intelligibility, not achieve it. Evidence from the Iranianate world is sufficient to show an operative institution of hostageship similar to the Roman one. The parallel was no doubt available to Parthian observers of interstate politics in the first century C.E., and those who were adversarial to the reigning king may well have invoked it to challenge the triumphalist framing of cliental fosterage. But the expediency of the fosterage view for Parthian prestige and self-conception would have been a powerful inducement for its broad adoption. As Upton Sinclair's oft-quoted maxim intones, "it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it."[99] At stake for the Arsacids and the

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97. See chapter 1 on EA 29. For a corollary in Roman-Parthian relations, see chapter 3 on the *altor Caesaris* of Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.4.

98. Giladi 1999: 28; Parkes 2001: 10; Parkes 2004a: 591. For a potential Assyrian parallel, see Chapman 2012: 6 n.29.

99. Sinclair 1994 [1935]: 109.

agents of their empire was not just wealth, but honor and reputation—a potent disincentive to cultivate shared meanings with Rome.

Pragmatism also allowed the actors of Parthian domestic politics to use the submission of Arsacid children to pursue internal objectives that had little to do with the empire's relationship with Rome. The reigning Arsacid king had a motive and, thanks to the emperor, an outlet for purging rebellious princes who might seek to supplant him, whether on their own initiative or as the pawns of a rebellious aristocrat. But the practice also benefited the dynasty as a whole. It integrated a powerful foreign ruler into the ranks of Arsacid kin, which conferred prestige in and of itself, and it offered a form of insurance against dynastic extinction by dispersing the family's scions across a wider territory. The interests of royal women mattered, too. Arsacid sons were numerous, and their mothers had scope to exercise agency through their efforts to determine which children, precisely, would be sent to Rome to effect a fosterage relationship. The Arsacids of Rome and the cultural miscommunication behind them were useful not merely as instruments of interdynastic relations, but as a form of internal regulation. Parthia got maximal mileage out of misunderstanding.