

Return

The Parthian Kingships of the Arsacids of Rome

The embassies of the Parthian nobility to the Roman emperor led to the remission of four Arsacids of Rome. Vonones ruled the longest, taking the Arsacid throne in 8 C.E. and holding it until at least 12, when a rebellion began to erode his grip on power. The subsequent returnees reigned for even shorter durations, if at all. Frahād died in transit through Syria and never reached Parthian territory. Tirdād was crowned in Ctesiphon, but his kingship was over within months. Last and not least was Mihrdād, who was crushed in short order by the reigning king, Gōdarz. And yet, despite the abortive and ephemeral nature of these kingships, the attempts of the Arsacids of Rome to rule in Parthia merited lengthy digressions in Tacitus and Josephus, among the most important sources for their lives. How did they assess the Parthian kingships of the Arsacids of Rome, and how did these episodes affect the pragmatic misunderstanding in Roman-Parthian relations?

Tacitus and Josephus suggest that the kingships of the Arsacids of Rome forced Parthians to reckon with the Roman category of hostageship, which, once comprehended, was equated with enslavement to Rome. For the Parthians, moreover, the proof of the humiliating relationship between the Arsacid returnee and the Roman emperor was the acculturation of the former to the customs of the latter. Vonones, Frahād, Tirdād, and Mihrdād had all become Romans thanks to their years of residence in the city, and this alienation from their Parthian heritage made them unacceptable as kings. Taken at face value, then, Tacitus and Josephus enjoin the conclusion that the Parthians gained an understanding of Roman hostageship and its connotation of subordinate political status. If this realization indeed took place, Arsacid return must have forced pragmatic misunderstanding to unravel. This chapter evaluates that proposition.

My reading of Tacitus and Josephus is ambivalent: on this topic, they are at once highly unreliable and possibly right. In their narratives, the Parthian internalization of the “hostage” category is bound up with two discourses: first, the model of enslavement as a Roman paradigm of empire; and second, the fraught issue of barbarian acculturation to Roman habits. The treatment of these themes in Tacitus and Josephus almost certainly does not derive, even indirectly, from authentic Parthian accounts of resistance to the Arsacids of Rome. Instead, the authors take their cues from the rhetorical conventions of Roman historiography and the literary milieu in which they were immersed. Their testimony on Arsacid return therefore warrants major skepticism. However, even if Tacitus and Josephus are underinformed, there are two reasons to entertain the story they tell. The first is comparative history, which shows how cultural anxieties are often projected onto dynastic children who live abroad for extended periods. The second comes from Parthian evidence for a cultural turn in the first century C.E.—precisely when Arsacid returnees are supposed to have forced Parthians to grapple with the effects of acculturation on their would-be kings. So while no Iranian evidence can confirm or disprove the Parthian cognizance of Roman hostageship, Tacitus and Josephus may capture dynamics that really were at play in these episodes. Arsacid return could have triggered a Parthian counterreaction that, over time, led to the breakdown of pragmatic misunderstanding.

In subjecting Tacitus and Josephus to increased scrutiny while rehabilitating certain aspects of their narratives, I seek to improve on scholarly discussions that have been too credulous in their approach to these scenes. Earlier commentators took these passages of Tacitus and Josephus at face value, recycling the ancient accounts or even framing the Arsacid’s supposed acculturation in modern terms. In his narrative treatment of Parthian history, Neilson Debevoise spoke of Vonones’s “western manners,” the “nationalists” who rejected this foreign influence, and the “general dislike of Romanized Parthians” that plagued Mīhrdād’s bid for the kingship.¹ Rostovtzeff’s roughly contemporary view was that Vonones’s “hellenizing” tendencies triggered a “national Iranian reaction” against his reign. He also saw Frahād and Tirdād as “romanized Arsacids.”² More recent studies have shed the anachronistic language of nationalism, but they retain the uncritical use of Tacitus and Josephus as evidence for Arsacid acculturation and the Parthian counterreaction to it.³ Without due attention to their literary underpinnings, these sources cannot be properly employed, and Roman discourse will be conflated with Parthian reality.

1. Debevoise 1938: 151–52, 172.

2. Rostovtzeff 1936: 107.

3. Ziegler 1964: 57; Moscovich 1974: 425 n.37; Dąbrowa 2012: 174; Ellerbrock 2021: 48–49; Cooley 2023: 8, 174.

Other scholars have highlighted the methodological issues with the use of Tacitus and Josephus as indices of Arsacid acculturation, but without turning to comparative or Parthian cultural history to contextualize their findings. Careful readers of Tacitus and Josephus as literature have shown that these passages mount self-reflexive critiques of Roman imperialism instead of rigorously sourced expositions of Parthian domestic politics. Commentators like Norbert Ehrhardt and Josef Wiesehöfer convincingly read the Arsacid return sections as hopelessly gnarled knots of historical judgment, rhetorical invention, and stock tropes, with *Prinzipatskritik* as perhaps the dominant thread. Yet the disconnection from Parthian realities does not appear to be total: certain ethnographic details seem reliable enough, and the general shape of the narrative is believable.⁴ Here comparative case studies can supply vital additional context, as can internal Parthian evidence for the empire's cultural history. Itinerant dynastic children from other premodern settings tended to garner accusations of political and cultural betrayal, and that transhistorical tendency can inform the interpretation of Tacitus and Josephus. Moreover, Parthia's alleged discomfort with the "Romanizing" and/or "Hellenizing" behavior of Arsacid returnees presents intriguing points of contact with the empire's cultural reorientation in the first century C.E. as it emerges from Parthian sources. No pieces of comparative or internal evidence will be dispositive of the Roman texts, but they can offer additional perspective, and support a more balanced treatment, of the vexatious issue of Arsacid return.

THE EVIDENCE

Josephus and Tacitus constitute the traditional evidentiary basis for the Parthian kingships of the Arsacids of Rome. Both authors contain relatively detailed accounts of Vonones, who returned to Parthia in c. 8 C.E. and held the kingship until 12, though his apparent control of the mint at Seleucia on the Tigris as late as 15 suggests that his loss of power was gradual rather than abrupt.⁵ Only Tacitus offers extended digressions on Frahād, Tirdād, and Mihrdād, though a cursory reference to the former in Cassius Dio also merits attention. Vonones is the only Arsacid returnee whose issues have been identified. Frahād and Mihrdād never reigned in any meaningful sense, so it is doubtful that they ever minted any coins at all. For a brief moment, Tirdād did control Seleucia on the Tigris and presumably the mint along with it, but no surviving issues have been associated with him.

In the crucial case of Vonones, both Tacitus and Josephus imagine a Parthian counterreaction against a king tainted by foreign influence, but they articulate the

4. Ehrhardt 1998: 302–3; Wiesehöfer 2010: 190–92; similar is Matthews 1989a: 39. Heil 2017: 269 also endorses Tacitus on some points of Parthian ethnography.

5. On Vonones's minting of coins at Seleucia in 15 C.E., see Gonnella 2001: 71.

nature of that influence in different ways. Josephus's report is part of a long digression on Parthian affairs, and runs as follows:⁶

ἐδόκει γὰρ χωρεῖν τὴν τύχην, ἣν αὐτῷ δύο μέγιστα τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον ἡγεμονίαι προσέφερον, ἰδία καὶ ἄλλοτρία. ταχεῖα δ' ἀνατροπὴ τοὺς βαρβάρους ὕπαισιν ἄτε καὶ φύσει σφαλεροὺς ὄντας πρὸς τε τὴν ἀναξιοπάθειαν, ἀνδραπόδω γὰρ ἄλλοτρίῳ ποιήσειν τὸ προστασόμενον οὐκ ἤξιον, τὴν ὀμηρείαν ἀντὶ δουλείας ὀνομάζοντες, καὶ τῆς ἐπικλήσεως τὴν ἀδοξίαν· οὐ γὰρ [ἄν] πολέμου δικαίῳ δεδόσθαι τὸν βασιλεύσοντα Πάρθοις, ἀλλὰ, ὃ τῷ παντὶ χεῖρον, εἰρήνης ὕβρει.

[Vonones] seemed to encompass a destiny conferred upon him by the two greatest empires under the sun, one his own and the other foreign. But a quick change of heart came over the barbarians [i.e., the Parthians], being fickle by nature, both at the indignity—for they thought it wrong to carry out the commands of a slave of foreigners [or: a foreign slave], considering “hostage” to be synonymous with “slave”—and at the ill-repute of the title, since in their view the man had been given to the Parthians as a king not by the verdict of war but as an insult in a time of peace, which was the worst part of it all.

The first sentence offers the unparalleled suggestion that an Arsacid of Rome could be more than the sum of his parts—that the glory of “the two greatest empires” could be combined in one and the same person. Roman readers may have been reminded of Velleius Paterculus's account of the negotiations between Gaius Caesar and Frahātak on the Euphrates in 1 C.E., a meeting that Velleius called “an exceedingly notable and memorable spectacle” involving “the two most eminent leaders of empires and men.”⁷ In both passages, the accord between Parthia and Rome inspires awe as the two imperial giants are brought into harmonious alignment. In Vonones's case, however, that harmony proves illusory, and the fallout is swift. His Parthian enemies deride him as an *andrapodon allotrion*, which could be translated “foreign slave” or “slave to foreigners.” The point may be either that Vonones has become a servile agent of Roman outsiders, or that he is now, in essence, a foreigner himself. The word *andrapodon*, moreover, is a pointed choice of slave terminology. It can connote enslavement through imprisonment in war, which would imply the military defeat of Parthia by Rome.⁸ Against such a background, the practice the Romans call hostageship is tantamount to slavery. It adds insult to injury that Vonones has not been installed through military force, which would at least be comprehensible through the logic of conquest. Instead, Parthia has accepted his degrading kingship in a time of peace, as though it were actively seeking its own enslavement.

6. Joseph. *AJ* 18.46–47.

7. Vell. Pat. 2.101.2.

8. On this connotation of *andrapodon*, see Gaca 2010: 120–21; Vlassopoulos 2011: 119–20; Lewis 2018: 62 n.17.

Tacitus's account of the same episode hits many of the same notes, though the level of rhetorical invention is greater. The Vonones narrative begins the second book of the *Annals* with a lengthy digression on Parthian affairs. The reaction of the Parthians to the kingship of the Arsacid of Rome is described as follows:⁹

Et accipere barbari laetantes, ut ferme ad nova imperia. Mox subiit pudor degeneravisse Parthos: petitem alio ex orbe regem, hostium artibus infectum; iam inter provincias Romanas solum Arsacidarum haberi darique. Ubi illam gloriam trucidantium Crassum, exturbantium Antonium, si mancipium Caesaris, tot per annos servitutem perpassum, Parthis imperitet? Accendebat dedignantes et ipse diversus a maiorum institutis, raro venatu, segni equorum cura; quotiens per urbes incederet, lecticae gestamine fastuque erga patrias epulas. Inridebantur et Graeci comites ac vilissima utensilium anulo clausa. Sed prompti aditus, obvia comitas, ignotae Parthis virtutes, nova vitia; et quia ipsorum moribus aliena, perinde odium pravis et honestis.

And the barbarians [i.e., the Parthians] received [Vonones] happily, as is usual with new reigns. But soon shame came over them that the Parthians had degenerated: from another world a king had been sought who was infected by the ways of their enemies. Now the throne of the Arsacids was being held and given away as though it were a Roman province! Where was the glory of those who had butchered Crassus and driven away Antony, if a slave of Caesar, having endured servitude for so many years, was ruling over the Parthians? The man himself incited their disdain all the more in his difference from the customs of their ancestors. He rarely hunted. His interest in horsemanship was slack. Whenever he passed through cities, he was conveyed by litter, and he scorned their ancestral feasts. His Greek companions, too, were the object of ridicule, as was his locking away of even the cheapest materials with a seal ring. But he was approachable and ready with kindness—things unknown as virtues among the Parthians, and thus considered as vices because they were new. And since he differed from them in his habits, they hated both his good ones and his bad ones alike.

Many of Tacitus's phrases parallel those in Josephus, but with further elaborations. One sentence establishes the auspicious beginnings of Vonones's kingship, and the next transitions to the swift (*tacheia* / *mox*) reversal of sentiment that came upon (*hupeisin* / *subiit*) the Parthians.¹⁰ Yet another similarity is the couching of hostage-ship in the language of slavery, the terminology for which is roughly parallel in the two passages. Tacitus's *mancipium* echoes Josephus's *andrapodon* in underlining the mercantile dimension of slavery as an institution where human beings are turned into commodities that are bought and sold.¹¹ Both authors then proceed to more general, abstract nouns for slavery (*douleia* in Josephus, *servitus* in Tacitus).

9. Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.

10. Parallels noted by Gowing 1990: 318.

11. On the similarity between Greek *andrapodon* and Latin *mancipium*, see Zelnick-Abramovitz 2018.

The two passages are therefore congruent both in their major thematic concerns and in their phrasing.

But there are differences, too. There is no precise counterpart in Josephus to Tacitus's assertions, through his Parthian characters, that the Roman empire is "another world" (*alius orbis*) from the Arsacid empire, or that Parthia had provincialized itself through its acceptance of Vonones as king. Tacitus is also more profuse than Josephus in his representation of Parthian outrage. He has the Parthians reflect on what he imagines to be the high points of their history, namely their defeats of Crassus and Antony, and he assigns them a dramatic rhetorical question about their lost pride. Moreover, he mentions specific cultural practices that Vonones, thanks to his Roman acculturation, now either avoids or cherishes. The Arsacid of Rome neglects hunting, horsemanship, feasting, and court ceremonies, all supposed mainstays of Parthian culture; by contrast, he has adopted the Roman habits of association with Greeks, conveyance by litter, keeping cheap comestibles under seal, and royal affability. It mattered little whether these deviations from Parthian norms were for the better or worse, according to Tacitus. The bare fact of Vonones's difference from his compatriots was the issue. That difference mobilized the Parthians against him and led to his displacement by Ardawān.

Tacitus's subsequent narratives on the other Arsacids of Rome reuse the acculturation paradigm that the case of Vonones has established. In the following episode, Frahād's death in Syria is attributed to the toll of cultural reprogramming. "While he was adopting the ways of the Parthians and desisting from Roman culture, to which he had been accustomed over the course of so many years, he was taken out by an illness, unequal as he was to his native customs," Tacitus writes.¹² Shortly thereafter, the causes of Tirdād's failure are set out in the fiery speech of Hiero, who complains to Ardawān II that "command resided not with an Arsacid, but in the empty name of a man turned unwarlike from foreign softness."¹³ Finally, Mihrdād's mutilation by Gōdarz was paired with insults that he was "no kinsman [of Gōdarz] nor a man of the Arsacid family, but rather a foreigner and a Roman."¹⁴ Each passage recycles motifs that first appeared in the section on Vonones. Frahād seems to have learned from his brother's example, but the effort to unlearn Roman customs proves fatal. Parthian culture, it appears, requires a fortitude and vigor that a long-time inhabitant of Rome does not possess. Hiero's slander of Tirdād makes the same point: residence in Rome has alienated the young dynast from his Arsacid heritage and inculcated a characteristic Roman "softness." Gōdarz further underlines the loss of Arsacid status that a Roman upbringing entails. His ascription of "foreign" and "Roman" identity to Mihrdād represents the culmination of

12. Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.2. Woodman 2017: 229 observes that the "anagrammatic expression" in these clauses stands in for the process of transformation that Frahād undergoes.

13. Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.3.

14. Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.3.

these invectives. In this final case of return, “Arsacid” and “Roman” have become opposite and mutually exclusive categories.

The only historian to offer additional testimony on these cases is Cassius Dio, who treats the release of Frahād and Tirdād in a fashion that is cursory, yet still consequential for a full assessment of the Roman sources. The entire notice amounts to less than a paragraph on eastern affairs during the reign of Tiberius. Dio writes:¹⁵

καὶ αὐτοῖς τότε μὲν Φραάτην τὸν τοῦ Φραάτου, τελευτήσαντος δὲ ἐκείνου κατὰ τὴν ὁδὸν Τιριδάτην, ἐκ τοῦ βασιλικοῦ καὶ αὐτὸν γένους ὄντα, ἔπεμψε . . . οὐ μέντοι καὶ ἐπὶ πολὺ ὁ Τιριδάτης ἐβασίλευσεν· ὁ γὰρ Ἀρτάβανος Σκύθας προσλαβὼν οὐ χαλεπῶς αὐτὸν ἐξήλασε.

To them [i.e., the Parthians who had petitioned Rome], Tiberius sent Frahād son of Frahād, and, after that man died, Tirdād, who was also from the royal family. . . . Tirdād did not rule long, however, for Ardawān secured the help of the Scythians and expelled him without difficulty.

The account is less detailed than the one in Tacitus, but it illustrates an important point: acculturation was not an indispensable explanation for the failure of the Arsacids of Rome. Dio says nothing about the cultural habits of Frahād or Tirdād. The latter did not lose the throne because his character offended key Parthian officials, which is the impression that Tacitus leaves. Instead, Ardawān owed his victory to the enlistment of “Scythian” auxiliaries, which tipped the balance of power in his favor. The conflict turned on military assistance, not cultural affiliation. When Josephus and Tacitus point to enslavement and acculturation as the causes of the Arsacids of Rome’s failure, then, they are not adducing a factor that was objectively decisive. They are making a historiographic judgment, and by no means an inevitable one.

Vonones’s coins offer additional perspective on the issue of acculturation, though in the final analysis they can neither confirm nor disprove the Roman sources. Vonones minted tetradrachms at Seleucia on the Tigris and drachms at Rhagae and Ecbatana. He could have struck other denominations elsewhere, but no examples are known. The tetradrachms (figure 10) feature a bust on the obverse and Nike on the reverse, and they represent no dramatic departure from established Arsacid numismatic conventions. The Greek legend on the obverse exhibits some novel elements, however. Vonones’s name and the title “king of kings” both appear in the nominative case, not the usual genitive (though the genitive is used on the reverse, which features a typical array of epithets).¹⁶ The mere appearance of the king’s proper name is a rarity in itself. All Arsacid kings took the throne name of Arsaces/Aršak when they began to rule, and most used this appellation alone

15. Cass. Dio 58.26.2–3.

16. Sellwood 1980: 194 (types 60.1–4).



FIGURE 10. Tetradrachm of Vonones I, 10–11 c.e. Sellwood 1980: 194 (type 60.1). Photo credit: American Numismatic Society (ANS 1944.100.82997).



FIGURE 11. Drachm of Vonones I, who wears short hair in his portrait on the obverse. Sellwood 1980: 195 (type 60.5). Photo credit: American Numismatic Society (ANS 0000.999.52971).

on their issues, though exceptions could be made during dynastic wars between two or more royal contenders.¹⁷ Vonones's drachms (figure 11) show additional departures, these ones more dramatic, from Arsacid numismatic precedents. Once again, the king's name and title appear in the nominative on the obverse, but Vonones's portrait here is unconventional. Instead of long locks cascading in serried rows of curls, as would be typical for Arsacid royal portraiture, the king's hair is cropped short. Moreover, the legend that surrounds Nike on the reverse contains a rare reference to a contemporary event. It reads, "King Vonones [who

17. On these exceptions, see Alram 1986a; Errington et al. 2007: 49; Ellerbrock 2021: 52.

has] conquered Ardawān.”¹⁸ The rebellion of Ardawān II must have begun at the time of the coin’s minting. Josephus and Tacitus mention that Vonones scored an initial victory against his rival before his ultimate expulsion from Parthia, and it could have been just after that battle that these drachms were struck.¹⁹ Vonones’s success was fleeting, however, and no coins later than 15 C.E. are known.

Are these the coins of a ruler so indelibly shaped by his years of residence in Rome that he is ignorant of or disinterested in Parthian traditions? Does the portrait on the drachms lend credence to the portrait in Tacitus and Josephus? Different scholars have said yes or no to these questions, but in the end the coins cannot be pressed to validate or repudiate the idea that acculturation fueled the revolt against Vonones. The preeminent Arsacid numismatist David Sellwood saw a close correspondence between Vonones’s coins and the narratives of Tacitus and Josephus. From the start, Sellwood writes, “it was clear that a prince brought up to appreciate imperial culture and the hunting of slaves in the arena would have difficulty in adapting to the court of the Arsacids, based as it was on nomad traditions and rising, in its entertainments, no higher than the plays of Euripides.” The “occidental aberrations” on the coins are explicable through this lens, from the use of “the nominative customary for Roman issues” to “the adoption of a short westernised hair style.”²⁰ Others avoid the normative cultural judgments found in Sellwood, but they too see signs of acculturation in the coins.²¹ Sellwood’s description discounts important comparanda, however. A parallel for Vonones’s coiffure can be found on the coins of Pakōr, an Arsacid prince of the first century B.C.E. who invaded Judaea and died in battle against the Romans.²² Was his short hair “westernizing” too? Moreover, the use of the nominative may be unattested in earlier Arsacid issues, but there are parallels with other Indo-Parthian coinages from the first century C.E. Those coins could in turn have been influenced by Vonones’s precedent, but in any event it is clear that a ruler need not have resided in Rome to favor the nominative over the genitive.²³ These elements cannot be interpreted as straightforward numismatic corollaries of acculturation.

On the other hand, the changes in coin iconography are significant and should not be downplayed. Joel Allen’s otherwise balanced discussion of the iconography

18. Sellwood 1980: 195 (types 60.5–7).

19. Joseph. *AJ* 18.48–49; Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.4. On the probable connection between this initial battle and the legend on the drachms, see Wroth 1903: xlii–xliii; Goodyear 1981: 194; Bivar 1983: 68. The relatively late tetradrachms from Seleucia on the Tigris (Gonnella 2001) accord well with Josephus’s assertion that Seleucia was Vonones’ final refuge in Parthian territory.

20. Sellwood 1980: 193; Sellwood 1983: 293 (“occidental aberrations”).

21. Errington et al. 2007: 49; Keller in Hackl et al. 2010: 2.632; Sinisi 2012b: 286. More cautious about Roman influence is Rezakhani 2013: 770.

22. Sellwood 1980: 157–58 (type 49.1), this time with no explanation for the hairstyle.

23. Cribb 2021: 660, who sees the use of the nominative in both Arsacid and Indo-Parthian coins as “under the influence of Latin coin inscription practices.”

ultimately dismisses the departures from numismatic precedent: "In overall aspect, however, [Vonones's] numismatic issues are still unmistakably Parthian, as one would expect."²⁴ That judgment places too much emphasis on continuity instead of change. Arsacid coin portraiture and iconography were conservative, and elements like throne name, hairstyle, beard length, epithets, headgear, and dress tended to remain consistent over long periods. Where deviations or innovations appear, they matter and should be explained. Primary sources from Parthian territory are far too rare to paint contemporary Arsacid productions with broad brush strokes. The burden of proof belongs on those who deny significance, not those who assert it. Another skeptical reading of Vonones's drachms comes from Everett Wheeler, whose doubts rest on the location of their minting. The acculturation argument, he writes, "would be more convincing if this drachma (like Vonones's tetradrachms) had been minted at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, a Greek city. But the peculiar drachma was minted at Median Ecbatana, a less likely site for romanized presentation of an Arsacid monarch."²⁵ But even if one grants the premise that a "romanized presentation" would have been more expedient at Seleucia than at Ecbatana, it could just as well follow that Vonones was *more* acculturated, not less: if he depicted himself in Roman fashion in a place where it would not have been politically advantageous to do so, then perhaps Roman culture was part of his genuine self-conception instead of a costume to be donned where expedient.

In the end, the coins can neither support nor disprove Tacitus and Josephus on Vonones's supposed acculturation, to say nothing of his alleged enslavement to the Roman emperor. There is no denying the novel elements that appear in Vonones's iconography, especially in an otherwise conservative medium where innovations were rare. But the attribution of these novelties to Vonones's cultural preferences is unsupportable without reference to the Roman literary sources. In other words, the coins can only confirm the texts if they are interpreted by means of the texts. The drachms and tetradrachms cannot give testimony as to the reasoning behind their iconographic changes or their reception among Vonones's Parthian subjects—and these are precisely the issues at stake.

ENSLAVEMENT AND ACCULTURATION

If the coins can neither validate nor refute Tacitus and Josephus, then the literary narratives must be evaluated on their own, and the case against their historicity is a strong one. An initial consideration is where the authors got their information, and there is little reason to believe that either was well informed about Parthian domestic politics in the early decades of the first century C.E. The last chapter considered the content of Parthian speeches delivered at Rome by emissaries of

24. Allen 2006: 177.

25. Wheeler 2007.

the Parthian nobility. Those appeals took place in the city itself, and plausible paths of transmission can be identified between the original utterances and Tacitus's text: the *Acta Senatus*, the emperor's chancellery, earlier Roman historians, or other sources could all have conveyed the basic thrust of the Parthian arguments to subsequent generations.²⁶ The downfall of the Arsacids of Rome in Parthia is a different matter. The enemies of Vonones, Tirdād, and Mihrdād raised their armies—and formulated their arguments for resistance—at great remove from Roman territory. No Romans are known to have taken part in these wars, or to have directly observed them. It is difficult to reconstruct how a Roman aristocrat like Tacitus could have learned about the animus behind Parthian resistance to the Arsacids of Rome, not least because Tacitus himself never held a governmental post on the eastern front or personally interacted with Parthia's inhabitants.²⁷ The outlook might appear more promising in the case of Josephus, whose religion connected him to robust transimperial Jewish networks across the Roman-Parthian frontier.²⁸ But his narrative of Vonones does not appear to have benefited from his potential access to information. As mentioned above, Josephus and Tacitus resemble each other so closely on this topic that it appears they adapted the same source (perhaps Cluvius Rufus, an earlier Latin historian of consular rank, though this is not certain).²⁹ Moreover, Josephus's primary concern was with Parthia's Jewish population, not with its succession struggles. Where he does discuss the latter, he favors personality studies and moralizing clichés over substantive analysis of Arsacid dynastic politics.³⁰ Even if Josephus's sources gave him a deeper understanding of Parthian resistance to the Arsacids of Rome, there is no indication that this knowledge informed his text. Source criticism does not augur well for the reliability of Tacitus or Josephus on the subject of Arsacid return.

A case could be made that Vonones himself served as a source of information on the end of his Parthian reign, but the suggestion is not a satisfying one. Its main shortcoming is that Vonones was treated as spoiled goods when he returned to the Roman empire, never reattaining the status he had held before his kingship. After an abortive attempt to rule in Armenia, Vonones ended up back in Roman Syria. Josephus says that he “handed himself over” to the Roman governor Creticus Silanus, using a verb that often denotes surrender to hostile parties, but also that he was “put under guard out of respect for his Roman education.”³¹ Tacitus

26. On Tacitus's sources, see Devillers 2003; Potter 2012.

27. On Tacitus's inexperience with Parthia and the Roman east, see Heil 2017: 261.

28. On these networks, and the relations between Jews in Rome and Parthia, see recently Gross 2023.

29. Gowing 1990: 317 with n.8; see also Walser 1951: 72 n.330 contra Täubler 1904: 25. On the career and writings of Cluvius Rufus, see Levick 2013b.

30. Gruen 2017: 232, 234, 239.

31. Joseph. *AJ* 18.51–52. On the verb *paradidōmi* with submission to hostiles, cf. *Hdt.* 1.45.1, 3.13.3; *Thuc.* 7.86.4; *Andoc.* 3.11.

has him “summoned and surrounded with guards” by the same official.³² Tiberius’s biographer Suetonius writes that Vonones fled “to the good faith of the Roman people—or so he thought,” only to be immediately despoiled of his financial resources by the emperor.³³ If Josephus was right that Vonones’s time at Rome earned him favorable treatment in Syria, the limits of that favor would soon become clear. Tiberius reconciled with Vonones’s opponent Ardawān II, at whose request the former Arsacid of Rome was relocated to Pompeiopolis, a city in Cilicia at considerable distance from Parthian territory. Ardawān’s discomfort with Vonones’s residence in Roman Syria is evident not only in Tacitus but in a contemporary source as well, namely the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*, an epigraphic document recording the Senate’s verdict in the case of Germanicus’s alleged murder.³⁴ In this text, Vonones is said to have bribed Piso so that he could remain in the east within striking distance of Armenia, despite the emperor’s wishes to the contrary. Piso and Vonones are depicted as wicked schemers, warmongers, and violators of the peace that Tiberius, Germanicus, and Ardawān have created, and though the senators are more concerned with passing judgment on Piso than Vonones, they clearly consider the latter to be a malign influence.³⁵ Thus a preponderance of evidence for Vonones’s return to Roman territory reveals an ill-favored and marginalized figure of little account—a dynast who was put out of the way, and ultimately killed, when Rome wished to recognize a different Arsacid as Parthia’s ruler. Vonones never returned to the city of Rome itself, nor could he have circulated among the empire’s ruling classes as he had before his kingship. He was in no position to inform Romans about the sources of Parthian discontent with his reign, and even if he had been, his testimony might not have counted for much.

Source criticism aside, the problem of historicity is further compounded by the issue of invention, a rhetorical technique that both Tacitus and Josephus employ in keeping with the genre conventions of ancient historiography. Roman historians constructed their narratives around a framework of the facts as they understood them, but within that framework there was ample scope for the elaboration of material, sometimes out of whole cloth. Such inventions were not incompatible with a foundational commitment to accuracy, for they could help the reader access deeper truths in the underlying patterns of history.³⁶ Certain types of scenes offered greater license for imaginative exposition, especially where the baseline of historical knowledge or memory was low. As Eric Adler has shown, “barbarian” speeches were foremost among these. When Roman historians wrote extensive

32. Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.3.

33. Suet. *Tib.* 49.2; on the treasure, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1.

34. For background on Piso and the SCPP, see Eck et al. 1996: 1–10, 71–77; M. Griffin 1997: 254–55; Lott 2012: 255–58.

35. SCPP 37–45, text and trans. Potter and Damon 1999: 18–21; Cooley 2023: 118–19, with commentary at 173–76; cf. Suerbaum 1999: 218.

36. Woodman 1988: 83–94.

rhetorical set pieces and attributed them to non-Romans, they were unlikely to have been guided by textual or oral traditions that preserved the original sentiment of the characters in question.³⁷ Instead, they had considerable leeway to exhibit their rhetorical skills in a setting largely free of documentary parameters. This is not to say that Tacitus or Josephus was disinterested in Parthian domestic politics, or that they made no effort to understand them. But without any identifiable means of access to authentic Parthian rhetoric, their imaginative reconstructions had to fill in the gap. The elaborated, ornamental, and rhetorical nature of those reconstructions makes them a tenuous basis for understanding the counter-reaction to the Arsacids of Rome in Parthia.

Against this backdrop, it should not be surprising that both Tacitus and Josephus invoke one of the Roman elite's central paradigms for modeling the relationship between the Roman ruling class and its non-Roman subjects: enslavement. Slavery was an omnipresent feature of Roman society, especially for the wealthy, landed, and politically influential members of the aristocracy who owned large numbers of slaves—and who produced and consumed the empire's extant literary sources. As Myles Lavan has shown, the institution could therefore furnish one of the most potent metaphors that guided Roman elite thinking about the nature of their imperial order. The relationship of the metropole to the provincial periphery could be compared to that of master and slave, an analogy that allowed members of the ruling class to "conceptualise empire in terms of the concrete and familiar power structures of daily life."³⁸ Like Adler, Lavan notes the tendency of Roman historians to write speeches for non-Romans that condemn imperial rule as slavery, and like Adler, he doubts that these compositions had much to do with the original utterances of the peoples in question, stressing that "this notionally hostile rhetoric is itself a Roman construct."³⁹ Roman writers drew on the language of slavery in such passages because it was a common paradigm for empire among members of their class, not because they knew what the foreign enemies of Rome had actually argued.

Perhaps no Roman author exemplifies this literary tendency more than Tacitus, the main source for the Arsacids of Rome. Whether the foreign people in question are the Parthians or the Britons or the Germans, Tacitus describes the imposition and maintenance of Roman rule with the vocabulary of slavery.⁴⁰ The import of the description is open to interpretation and indeed constitutes a central debate in Tacitean studies: is the characterization of Rome as a slave master an indictment and critique of its territorial expansion, or simply an articulation of imperial power relations in the expected idiom? The issue is further complicated

37. Adler 2011: 6–8; cf. Woodman 2009: 1.

38. Lavan 2013: 4.

39. Lavan 2013: 74.

40. Passages in Lavan 2013: 82, 95, 124–55.

by the historian's application of the metaphor to the government of the principate in the postrepublican world, where the emperor has made slaves of the Senate and Rome's citizens.⁴¹ When Tacitus has the Parthians call Vonones a "slave of Caesar," then, he is not only reconciling the Arsacid case with his usual paradigm for Roman imperial control. He is also asking his elite Roman readers to consider their *own* enslavement to the emperor. What purports to be Parthian rejection of slavery is in fact a Tacitean incitement to self-reflection.

It might seem more surprising to find the elite discourse of imperial enslavement in the text of Josephus, who did not belong to the Roman ruling class as Tacitus did, but several scholars have demonstrated the Josephan corpus's dense interconnections with the broader tapestry of Roman historiography. Richard Fowler contends that, by the time Josephus finished the *Antiquities* in 93/94 C.E., he was a "committed and influential member of the Flavian elite."⁴² That judgment may go too far, and others have seen Josephus's life in Rome as a marginalized one, at least from the aristocratic sphere of the senators and equestrians.⁴³ But Steve Mason has shown how, as an *author*, Josephus was a "full participant in his literary environment" at Rome, writing alongside and against other accounts of the Jewish revolt, sharing common historiographical models like Thucydides, and reflecting on the tension between monarchy and aristocracy that so concerned Tacitus.⁴⁴ As regards the empire-as-enslavement paradigm, Josephus's exposure to it could have begun as early as the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. During his narrative of that event, Josephus has the future emperor Titus promise to behave "like a gentle master in a household" if the inhabitants surrender.⁴⁵ Even if the historian misrepresents Titus's original speech, the sentence nonetheless shows his awareness of, and participation in, the slavery discourse of Roman elites. That discourse is a much better explanation for the appearance of the slavery motif in his Vonones narrative than his potential, but unprovable, knowledge of Parthian political rhetoric from the year 12 C.E.

In addition to enslavement, acculturation is the other major theme that Josephus and Tacitus invoke in their passages on Arsacid return, and here their narratives must be contextualized against the general treatment of boundary-crossing figures in Greco-Roman historiography. Classical authors took a keen interest in characters who negotiated, and thereby defined, the frontier between the civilized and barbarian worlds. An early and paradigmatic example comes from

41. On provincial and senatorial enslavement in Tacitus and the interplay between these themes, see recently Andrade 2012; Lavan 2013: 124–55, esp. 129–30; Woodman 2014: 15–25; Damtoft Poulsen 2017: 838.

42. Fowler 2017: 368.

43. Cotton and Eck 2005: 52; Price 2005: 105–7. den Hollander 2014: 217, 279, 285–86 notes consistent patronage from the Flavian emperors, but is also skeptical that Josephus circulated at a high level.

44. Mason 2016: 96 (quotation), 97–102.

45. Joseph. *BJ* 6.350.

Herodotus's account of Anacharsis and Scyles, two royal Scythians who allegedly adopted Greek customs.⁴⁶ Anacharsis was exposed to Hellenic practices on his travels, while Scyles learned the Greek language from his mother, who came from Istria. When the Scythians discovered how these two had Hellenized, they put the offenders to death. Herodotus observes, "thus do the Scythians protect their own customs, and these are the sorts of penalties they inflict on those who introduce the customs of foreigners."⁴⁷ François Hartog has shown how Herodotus uses his narrative of Anacharsis and Scyles to identify the cultural boundaries between Greece and Scythia, and to illustrate the dangers of crossing them. "To travel and to be bilingual," he writes, "come down to the same thing: both are dangerous, for they lead to forgetting the frontier and thus to transgression."⁴⁸ To write such characters was not just to tell their stories, but to inscribe the fault lines between the Greek and non-Greek worlds.

Other ancient authors wrote on Anacharsis as a Greco-Scythian boundary crosser, and their accounts illustrate how literary portrayals of cultural intermediaries drew on stock elements that could be detached from their original context and reused elsewhere. Following Herodotus's lead, many writers crafted scenes in which Anacharsis's outsider wisdom reveals the illogic behind Greek customs like wine consumption, athletics, and commercial trade.⁴⁹ But in the third-century C.E. account of Diogenes Laertius, a key detail shifts: here Anacharsis has a Greek mother and is bilingual, whereas Herodotus had said this of Scyles. Diogenes does cite earlier authorities on Anacharsis, so perhaps different historians preserved conflicting traditions about his birth and parentage.⁵⁰ But the Scythian's bilingualism seems less like a historical detail and more like a literary marker of his intermediary status. Bilingualism and mixed parentage, in other words, are the sorts of characteristics that an ancient author might assign to a traverser of cultural frontiers. They need not be historically accurate details.⁵¹

Greco-Roman depictions of Scythian intermediaries matter to the historiography of Roman-Parthian relations, and not just because Mediterranean authors saw a major Scythian component in Parthia's heritage.⁵² Historiography on Parthia can draw from the same set of motifs as the various Anacharsis traditions. For

46. Hdt. 4.76–80; cf. 4.46.1.

47. Hdt. 4.80.5.

48. Hartog 1988: 64.

49. For sources and discussion, see Kindstrand 1981; Romm 1992: 74–76; Schubert 2010.

50. Diog. Laert. 1.101; the cited sources are Sosicrates and Hermippus. Tac. *Ann.* 12.44.2 makes the same remark about the Arsacid king Walgaš I.

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

52. On Parthia's supposed nomadism, see esp. Hauser 2005 *contra* Olbrycht 1998b; see also Lerouge 2007: 174–85.

example, when Dio describes the visit to Rome of the Arsacid dynast Tirdād (not the Arsacid of Rome, but the brother of Walgaš I) in 66 C.E., he has Tirdād watch a *pankration* match and protest when he sees a contestant striking his fallen opponent: “The fight is unfair! It’s not fair to hit a man who’s down.”⁵³ This is precisely the kind of objection that Anacharsis raises with Solon in Lucian’s *Anacharsis*, where the two sages discuss athletics.⁵⁴ Jason König suggests that Anacharsis was a popular subject among Second Sophistic authors because “his story could be made to stand for processes of cultural encounter which were central to the experience of many members of the Roman empire elite in this period.”⁵⁵ Dio’s passage shows that Arsacid dynasts could serve the same objective, and that the “outsider” critiques of figures like Anacharsis could be attributed, *mutatis mutandis*, to Arsacid visitors with equal effect. Parthian boundary-crossers no less than Scythian ones could be literary tools for Roman reflection and self-criticism rather than historical personages to be described only with scrupulously sourced information.

As a prominent type of cultural intermediary, foreign “hostages” were subject to similar literary characterization and treatment. Just as Herodotus’s Anacharsis and Scyles turned away from their ancestral way of living and adopted foreign customs, hostages too were supposed to take on the cultural habits of their wardens. In sources from the Roman period, the hostageship at Thebes of Philip II of Macedon is described as an education in military strategy and Pythagorean philosophy.⁵⁶ The Seleucid king Antiochus IV is said to have borrowed a diverse set of cultural practices from the Romans as a consequence of his hostageship in their city.⁵⁷ The late antique historian Ammianus tells of a German son renamed “Serapio” by his father, who had been initiated into the cult of Serapis as a hostage in Gaul. The same author was a personal acquaintance of Jovinianus, a hostage from Corduene whose education in Syria led him to favor the Roman cause over the Sasanian one.⁵⁸ There is even an example of acculturation to Parthian rather than Roman mores: the Seleucid Demetrius II (admittedly a royal prisoner rather than a hostage) supposedly exhibited “Parthian cruelty” after his return to Syria from captivity at the Arsacid court.⁵⁹ As the range of these examples shows, the motif of hostage acculturation was an enduring one

53. Cass. Dio 63.7.1a.

54. See esp. Lucian *Anach.* 1, 3. On the place of Scythia in Lucian’s writings, see Anderson 1976: 82.

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

56. Diod. 16.2.2–3; Plut. *Pel.* 26.5; Just. 6.9.7, 7.5.3; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 49.5. On the strength of these ancient interpretations, see Worthington 2008: 17–18; Hammond 1997: 356 contra Aymard 1954: 34–35. On the question of whether Philip began his hostageship among the Illyrians, see Borza 1990: 189 n.28.

57. Polyb. 26.1.5–6, 30.25–26; Liv. 41.20.1, 41.20.9–13; Diod. 29.32, 31.16.2–3; Granius Licinianus 28.10; cf. Heliodorus *BNJ* 373 F 8.

58. Amm. 16.12.25 (Serapio), 18.6.20 (Jovinianus). For discussion, see Matthews 1989b: 56–57 with n.18; Lee 1991: 368–69; Kagan 2011: 168–69.

59. Just. 39.1.3; cf. Nabel 2017b: 33.

in Greco-Roman literature. From the republican period through late antiquity, classical authors saw hostages as uniquely positioned between the Roman and non-Roman worlds, and the hostage's acculturation presented rich material for exploring the relationship between those two spaces.

The Arsacid acculturation passages in Tacitus and Josephus are better understood as contributions to this literary tradition rather than as documentations of Parthian reality. In the case of Tacitus, it is crucial to note that his narratives of Arsacid return follow a pattern that is repeated elsewhere in the *Annals*, most prominently during Claudius's dispatch of the Cheruscan prince Italicus in 47 C.E. Like Vonones, Italicus was "enhanced with riches" by the emperor.⁶⁰ His initial reception among the Germans was "happy,"⁶¹ but this success soon turned to failure when his opponents argued that he was "infected" by Roman customs and practices.⁶² The language of infection also presents an intertext with Livy's narrative of the Antigonid hostage Demetrius, whom his brother Perseus accused of being "infected with Roman enticements."⁶³ Moreover, Tacitus says that Italicus possessed "affability," a characteristic he also attributes to Vonones.⁶⁴ These parallels run deeper than the mere repetition of a type scene; they redeploy the same words and phrases to homogenize the experiences of barbarian dynasts who spent time at Rome and then returned to their home countries. There is reason to believe, then, that these sections derive from Tacitus's dour view of Roman imperial culture rather than from specific knowledge of Parthian or German political discourse.

Josephus's narrative of Vonones also belongs to this historiographic tradition. In place of informed analysis, the reader finds literary commonplaces. For Josephus, the "fickle nature" of "barbarians" explains why the Parthians turned against their recently installed king. The topos of the fickle barbarian appears often in Greco-Roman literature, where it is applied to Parthians and other peoples of the periphery. It also figures in Tacitus's narrative of Mīhrdād, where the author speaks of the "fickleness" of Parthian subjects.⁶⁵ Faced with the complex task of explaining a dynastic coup in a faraway empire, Josephus instead offers a pat cliché. As an analysis of Parthian behavior in a specific historical moment, in other words, his text has minimal value. Here, too, the narrative of Arsacid return is shaped by editorializing on the relationship between the civilized and noncivilized

60. Koestermann 1963–68: 3.58. Compare 11.16.1 (*auctum [Italicum] pecunia*) with 2.2.1 (*auxitque [Vononen] opibus*).

61. Malloch 2013: 247–48. Compare 11.16.2 (*ac primo laetus Germanis adventus*) with 2.2.1 (*et accipere barbari laetantes*) and 6.42.3 with Woodman 2017: 262.

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

63. Liv. 40.11.3: *infecti Romanis delenimentis*.

64. Ash 2007: 207 (Latin *comitas*). For further verbal parallels, see Keddies 1975: 53–54 with n.8, 16.

65. Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.1. On the Roman topos of the fickle barbarian and/or Parthian, see chapter 4.

worlds, and the author employs stock Roman depictions of barbarians to apply texture and detail to the narrative superstructure. Even if Josephus's years in Judaea and his connections to Babylonian Jews gave him deeper insight into Arsacid dynastic politics (a possibility, but nowhere in evidence), the historian does not display the fruits of such knowledge.

In addition to the "fickle barbarian" explanation, two other topoi can be excavated from the Arsacid return narratives of Tacitus. In his account of Vonones, Tacitus writes that the Arsacid of Rome had lost the taste for hunting during his hostageship, and that the Parthians bristled at his refusal to participate in hunts. Wiesehöfer sees a "historical core" underneath this detail, since the importance of hunting in Iranian elite circles was indeed high.⁶⁶ But caution is necessary here. To be sure, a preponderance of evidence, internal sources included, amply demonstrates that hunting was central to Iranian elite culture, and there is no reason to doubt the proposition.⁶⁷ It is equally the case, however, that Greco-Roman authors viewed the hunt as a characteristically Persian activity, as authors from Herodotus to Ammianus all associate it with the rulers of the Iranian plateau.⁶⁸ For Tacitus, then, a distaste for hunting need have been nothing more than a convenient symbol for the alienation of Vonones from his heritage: how profound the Arsacid's corruption by the Julio-Claudians must have been to disengage him from the preferred pastime of his country! The report is no basis for concluding that Vonones had *actually* lost interest in the hunt. The activity has been chosen for its recognizability as a cultural marker, not because Tacitus knew Vonones's feelings towards it. Indeed, Tacitus's own text contradicts the notion that Vonones avoided the sport. Later in the *Annals*, when the Arsacid tries to escape his confinement at Pompeiopolis, he tells his guards that he is departing for a hunt.⁶⁹ If his distaste for hunting was indeed common knowledge, why choose it as a pretext? Moreover, the notion that "hostageship" at Rome was incompatible with recreational hunting is refuted by the case of the Seleucid Demetrius I, who frequently hunted during his Roman captivity, as the contemporary eyewitness Polybius attests.⁷⁰ Thus the "historical core" to which Wiesehöfer refers cannot be anything more than a general ethnographic point about Parthian society. It has nothing to do with Vonones's acculturation, or the lack thereof.

Yet another conventional topos appears in Tacitus's passage on the short reign of Tirdād. The historian makes the Parthian governor Hiero the spokesman for the opposition, and he has this character condemn the "foreign softness" of the new king in his speech before Ardawān.⁷¹ Softness was a common stereotype for eastern

66. Wiesehöfer 2010: 190 ("historischer Kern").

67. Canepa 2018: 354–66; Almagor 2021.

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

69. Tac. *Ann.* 2.68.1; cf. Goldsworthy 2023: 153–54.

70. Polyb. 31.14.1–3.

71. Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.3 (*mollitia*).

barbarians in late Republican literature, though the Scythian heritage and military success of the Parthians meant that they escaped accusations of effeminacy for the most part.⁷² But for the authors who lamented Rome's loss of manliness during the Imperial period—and there were many—the trope could be reversed: exposure to Roman decadence in the metropole could make barbarians effeminate. Rome could out-feminize the feminizers.⁷³ Juvenal's verses about the Armenian hostage Zalaces offer a roughly contemporary parallel:⁷⁴

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

The people we conquer don't do what the people in the victor's city now do. And yet one Armenian, Zalaces, softer than all the other young men, is said to have indulged himself with a desirous tribune. Look at what commerce brings: he came as a hostage, but here they become civilized men.⁷⁵ If these boys stay any longer in the city, no one will ever lack a lover. Trousers, knives, bridles, and whips will be cast away; thus they take Rome's obscene ways back to Artaxata.

As an Armenian, Zalaces comes from an eastern people predisposed to softness, or so conventional Roman stereotypes would have it. And yet his prior effeminacy pales in comparison to what he encounters during his hostageship at Rome. The city's rampant homosexuality strips Zalaces of his native accoutrements of horsemanship and warfare, rendering him overly refined, unwarlike, and soft—exactly the characterization of Tirdād that Tacitus puts into the mouth of Hiero.⁷⁶ The irony would not have been lost on a reader of the poet or the historian. Rome had so degenerated under the Principate that eastern dynasts, far from learning manly virtue during their time in the city, were corrupted there, and bore their corruption back to their native lands. Could the words of Hiero to Ardawān somewhere in Central Asia really have evoked such themes, and could they really have been transmitted, a century later and thousands of miles away, to Tacitus? Maybe, but ventriloquism is far likelier.

72. Isaac 2004: 378; but cf. Luc. 8.365–66.

73. Gowing 1990: 329–30.

74. Juv. 2.163–70.

75. For the translation of *homo* as “civilized man,” see Habinek 1997: 33 n.37.

76. The items of dress mentioned in line 169 were part of Armenian and Parthian attire: Courtney 2013: 125.

As for Vonones's alleged "locking away of even the cheapest materials with a seal-ring," here too the charge is mentioned by other literary sources as a malady of Roman imperial culture. The main parallel is in Pliny the Elder, who laments that contemporary aristocrats (unlike the Romans of yesteryear) must keep their foodstuffs under seal to guard against theft from their own slaves: "What a life there was in the old days, what innocence, when nothing was kept under seal! Nowadays even food and drink are guarded by a [signet] ring."⁷⁷ Pliny's expression of nostalgia derives from a traditional literary formula: the bygone Republican past was an age of pristine virtue and simple modesty, while the imperial present has been corrupted by power, extravagance, and wealth. For Pliny, then, sealing and ring-wearing practices were a sign of Roman degeneracy from an idealized Republican past.⁷⁸ The idea was illusory—literary references from the Republican period already attest pantries under seal at that date—but a potent indicator of decline all the same.⁷⁹ That is one note of caution against the historicity of the passage, but another can be found in the Bactrian documents from Afghanistan. In a letter, a subordinate writes to his lord that he cannot recognize the transfer of a local plot of land unless he receives a letter from the lord with two seals of authenticity. He adds, "Your lordship yourself ought to know that they do not give one quart of grain from the lord's house, nor one gallon of wine, to (anyone) who does not bring a sealed document, let alone a (piece of) land!"⁸⁰ The complaint here is in essence the same one that Tacitus ascribes to the Parthians aggrieved at Vonones: sealing practices are so restrictive that even trivial food items are kept under guard of seal. Far from being a unique vice of the Roman empire, then, excessive seal use was bemoaned in the Iranian world as well. All told, there is little reason to credit Tacitus on Vonones's stingy accounting practices or the supposed Parthian counterreaction to them.

In sum, Tacitus and Josephus are problematic sources for Arsacid acculturation. Dio's account reveals that Romanization was not an unavoidable explanation for Arsacid failure, and that Tacitus and Josephus made a choice to highlight it. No sources can be identified that might have informed the Roman world about the animus behind Parthian resistance to Arsacid returnees. The passages in question belong to an established literary tradition of meditating on the civilized world's frontiers through description of the intermediaries who crossed them. In some places, Tacitus and Josephus substitute literary commonplaces and xenophobic caricatures for informed analysis, and in others, they use their Parthian characters as mouthpieces for Roman self-criticism. Supposed signs of Romanization like

77. Plin. *HN* 33.26.

78. In a similar vein, cf. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 7.13.11–16 with Hawley 2007: 107.

79. See Plautus, *Casina* 144 and Cicero, *Ad Fam.* 351 (16.26). From the imperial period, Goodyear 1981: 193 also notes Horace, *Epistles* 2.2.133–34 and Martial 9.87.7, to which add Juvenal 14.132.

80. BD 2, Document ci, lines 8–11 = Sims-Williams 2007: 84–85; cf. Rezakhani 2010: 196.

disinterest in hunting, effeminacy, or overzealousness in sealing can be shown to derive from the ideas of Romans about their culture's own excesses or from Roman stereotypes (even if well founded) about Parthian culture. None of this can disprove Tacitus or Josephus on Arsacid acculturation—no surviving evidence can do that. But it is sufficient grounds to regard their narratives on this topic with considerable skepticism, and perhaps even to dismiss them as unreliable.

ACCULTURATION: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

And yet, although Tacitus and Josephus cannot be trusted on this topic, they may have hit on the truth, or something close to it, by accident. Two considerations point in this direction. The first is the comparative history of dynastic intermediaries, which suggests that anxieties about cultural transfer tend to attach themselves to such figures across a range of temporal and regional contexts. The second is Parthia's so-called Iranian revival in the early and middle first century C.E.—precisely the period when the Arsacids of Rome were circulating between Parthian and Roman territory. Neither of these histories amounts to conclusive proof of Arsacid acculturation or a definitive explanation for the end of pragmatic misunderstanding. Taken together, however, they are reason to entertain Tacitus's and Josephus's core assertions on this topic, even if the authors arrived at the right idea for the wrong reasons.

In pre- and early modern historical contexts around the globe, young dynasts went abroad to foreign courts to fill a variety of institutional roles, and their mobility could trigger cultural anxieties in both the host and home societies. Fosterage and hostageship were two vital mechanisms of dynastic exchange, but princes and princesses also served as brides and grooms, pages, students, captives, prisoners, exiles, and in other capacities as well. Moreover, the definitional lines around these statuses were often blurry, and dynasts could hold several in combination. Regardless of their formal role, the itinerant children of ruling families were often the focus of discomfort with acculturation. As prominent figures who personally encapsulated the relationship between two societies, the assimilation of young dynasts to the mores of their hosts—whether real or perceived—could give rise to fear or anger on both sides of the divide they bridged. Royal children were closely watched, and they were freighted with the apprehensions of disparate communities in contact.

The secondary literature on pre-modern hostageship has abundant discussion of royal children whose acculturation could be viewed as a threat to hostage-givers and receivers alike. Maribel Fierro discusses two cases from Ummayyad Corduba that illustrate how “cultural transfer was evaluated as dangerous” by agents on opposite sides.⁸¹ One case concerns a Christian youth named Pelagius

81. Fierro 2012: 74.

(d. 925/926 C.E.), a hostage at the court of ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān III, emir and later caliph of Umayyad Corduba. Christian sources tell a lurid tale of ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān’s lust for his young hostage, whom he attempted to seduce and convert to Islam. Pelagius resisted on both counts and was martyred. The available texts, which were composed within 50 years of Pelagius’s death, are unreliable on the facts of the case, but useful for Christian anxieties over Muslim hostage-taking.⁸² They exhibit a distinct unease with hostageship’s potential to compromise, corrupt, and alienate the hostage from the mores of his upbringing—in this case, his Christian faith and refusal to yield to homosexual desires. Fierro’s other example shows acculturation fears among the Muslim takers of hostages, as well. In his history of the Muslim conquest of Andalusia, the author Ibn al-Qūṭīyya (d. 977 C.E.) tells the story of an Umayyad administrator inspecting the education of young hostages from a Spanish tribe.⁸³ To the administrator’s dismay, the hostages are reciting heroic odes, which he fears will inculcate a warrior spirit and incite them to rebellion. “You have gone to demons who have sorely grieved the emirs and taught them poetry, which will give them an insight into real courage,” he exclaims.⁸⁴ He suggests that the hostages learn only drinking songs and other trifling compositions, since this material is more suitable for the manufacture of docile underlings. Fierro notes that “the process of acculturation—unavoidable and desirable as it was—had to take place in a controlled way so as to avoid any backfiring.”⁸⁵ On both sides of the Muslim-Christian divide, the transformative dimension of hostageship could elicit real alarm.

A similar dynamic can be found at the other end of Eurasia, where royal youths were a vital conduit of relations between the states of pre-modern China and the peoples of the central Asian steppe. Foreign children at the court of the Han emperor, for example, could be called either “hostage sons” or “attending princes” in Chinese sources, though there was considerable overlap between these two categories.⁸⁶ Many foreign peoples sent princes to the Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties to serve in these capacities. In some cases, they did so voluntarily or even enthusiastically, since a well-positioned prince with facility in Chinese law, letters, and customs could be a major asset.⁸⁷ The cultural transfer that could attend hostage submission was not always welcome, however. Jonathan Skaff describes one such occasion that involved Wendi, the Sui emperor of China, and the Turkic ruler Ishbara Qaghan in 585 C.E.⁸⁸

82. Jordan 1999: 23.

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

84. Translation from James 2009: 121.

85. Fierro 2012: 78.

86. Yang 1952: 509.

87. Yang 1952: 510; Skaff 2012: 130–31, 198–200.

88. Skaff 2012: 199.

Ishbara offered to guard the frontiers, send a hostage-page to the Sui court, and proffer annual tribute of fine horses. On the other hand, he requested retaining traditional Turkic dress, hairstyle, language, law, and customs. Wendi's verdict accepted these terms . . . The patron, Wendi, would not interfere with Ishbara's domestic affairs (law, customs, etc.), but the two would cooperate militarily. A hostage and annual tribute would symbolize Ishbara's inferior position.

The Turkic ruler Ishbara was at pains to ensure that his dispatch of a hostage to the Sui court would not be accompanied by the wholesale imposition of Chinese law and culture. Behind his request is an implicit admission that hostage submission leaves the giver vulnerable to cultural encroachment. The political advantages of the practice had to be balanced against cultural considerations, and the situation had to be carefully managed lest the surrendering party be deprived of their native customs.

Cultural tensions could also attend the travels of princes and princesses who married across state lines, for dynasts whose marital relations took them to foreign countries could be accused of neglecting their own. Bethany Aram sees this dynamic at play in the union of Juana of Castile with the Habsburg dynast Philip I (1478–1506 C.E.), the ruler of the Burgundian Netherlands.⁸⁹ On his wife's account, Philip was twice obliged to travel to Spain on lengthy trips that kept him away from the Low Countries for years at a time. To commemorate his return from the first of these journeys, a panegyric was composed in Philip's honor by no less a figure than Desiderius Erasmus. In the work, Erasmus dwells at length on the fear and displeasure of Philip's Dutch subjects at the departure of their ruler for Spain, since, as Erasmus says, "the ideas sometimes passed through their minds (for why should I not venture to admit it?) that perhaps other realms might captivate you and make you less mindful of your own." In one of the more elaborate rhetorical passages in the speech, Erasmus gives voice to the country of the Netherlands itself, which complains in anguished tones over Philip's absence: "If you do not tear yourself away before Spain has had her fill of you, before you quench the thirst of your father- and mother-in-law . . . I doubt if I shall ever see you again."⁹⁰ Despite its adulatory tone, the piece betrays concern over Philip's commitment to the speaker's homeland, furnishing ample demonstration of the rift that interstate marriage could open between a ruler and their local subjects.

Just as kinship created through marriage could threaten to override the primacy of local ties, so too could kinship created through fosterage. Pertinent examples can be found in Norse-Irish relations during the medieval period. Both Gaelic and Scandinavian cultures had robust traditions of fosterage, and the interaction of these peoples during the Viking age led to the exchange of children between them. But the Irish were Christians and the Norse were not, and as Irish sources saw it, this religious difference had a malign effect on Irish foster-children. A medieval

89. Aram 2016: 98.

90. Erasmus, *Panegyricus ad Philippum Austriae ducem*, trans. Radice in Levi 1986: 14, 17.

Irish source gives voice to the problem in its discussion of the Gall Gaedil, a tribe of mixed Gaelic and Norse heritage: “they were men who had forsaken their baptism, and they used to be called Norsemen, for they had the customs of the Norse, and had been fostered by them, and though the original Norsemen were evil to the churches, these were much worse, these people, wherever in Ireland they were.”⁹¹ Another example of fosterage across ethnic and cultural demarcations comes from late medieval Ireland in the early years of English colonization. In the fourteenth century C.E., English marcher lords interfaced with the Irish through fosterage, making use of the long-standing tradition for aristocratic networking. But these arrangements broke down when English children returned as Irish-speakers and, according to some sources, with political allegiances to the Irish rather than to their natal kin. As an English treatise of 1515 put it:⁹²

the Englyshe noble folke useith to delyver therre children to the Kynges Irysshe enymies to foster, and therwyth, as well as wyth maryage, makeyth bandes, and in con-syderations with the Kynges enymies, wherof groweth manye inconveniences and grete damage [damage] to the Kynges subgettes.

Displeased with these developments, the English colonial administration issued numerous prohibitions of English-Irish fosterage in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries C.E. Similar bans were sometimes passed on fosterage among the Welsh, where the institution had comparable purchase.⁹³ The advantages of fosterage as a mode of engagement between noble families were considerable, but when the practice took place across political, ethnic, cultural, and religious borders, its transformative impact on fostered children could cause one side to recoil.

It should be stressed that the comparative cases demonstrate anxieties surrounding the acculturation of royal children, and there are two other issues that must be treated separately: first, the dynast’s actual cultural orientation; and second, the sincerity with which accusations of acculturation were made against them. The charge that a prince or princess has adopted the culture of a foreign host cannot be taken at face value in any historical setting, especially when ruling families are involved. To be sure, some degree of acculturation would have been likely or even inevitable. No one spends years abroad without adapting to the foreign environment, least of all children at an impressionable age. All of the Arsacid returnees spent many years or their entire childhoods in Rome before departing for the east, and those years must have shaped who they were. The epitaph of Seraspades and Rhodaspes is not in Parthian or even Greek but in Latin, which suggests that they (and/or the members of the group who survived

91. *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* 260, ed. and trans. Radner 1978: 104–5; quoted in O’Donnell 2016: 37. On the dating of this passage, see Ní Mhaonaigh 2007: 87–88.

92. “The State of Ireland and Plan for Its Reformation,” quoted in Booker 2018: 171.

93. Smith 1992: 26–27; Booker 2018: 171.

them) learned the language in Rome and adopted it for the purpose of funerary commemoration.⁹⁴ In itself, this linguistic choice is a significant type of acculturation, and there may well have been others, too. But it is impossible to say much more on the basis of the sources that the Arsacids of Rome themselves produced; as discussed above, Vonones's coins are not independent testimony of acculturation, and the other evidence adds little to the epitaph. Political discourse about the cultural preferences of elite, prominent, and contentious dynastic figures cannot be taken as straightforward proof of how they changed while abroad.

By the same token, it is best to reserve judgment on the sincerity, or the lack thereof, with which charges of acculturation were levied against dynastic intermediaries. Because of their membership in ruling families, royal children were big political game, and their enemies may have found success by imputing cultural treachery to them whether they meant it or not. "You are a traitor to your homeland" is a potent accusation, and it can be effective even if the accuser makes it in bad faith or the guilt of the accused is questionable. But where charges of acculturation find purchase, they play on real anxieties and require ready ears to heed them. Different cases would have mixed cynical political rhetoric and genuine fear of cultural Others in varying proportions. It is both methodologically difficult and, for present purposes, unnecessary to separate these factors out, since in the end they point in the same direction.

The comparative examples reviewed above are not dispositive of the Arsacid case, but they do establish the inherent plausibility of Tacitus's and Josephus's acculturation narratives. Whether the Arsacids of Rome are best described as foster-children, hostages, or some other status, they were the scions of a ruling family who lived in a different political unit—and a different cultural setting—for years, decades, or even their entire lives. For those that returned to Parthia and sought the kingship, their bearing and disposition would have been the subject of close scrutiny, and in comparative perspective, it is plausible that any real or perceived divergences from Parthian convention could have triggered a hostile reaction. Plausible does not mean provable, and the existence of comparable cases from other historical contexts does not mean that Tacitus and Josephus were well informed about the episodes of Arsacid return that they narrate. But the basic story is observable elsewhere, and it may well have taken place along the lines that Tacitus and Josephus imagined.

THE IRANIAN TURN

In addition to the background from comparative history, there is evidence from the Parthian empire itself that bears on the question of Arsacid acculturation, though here, too, the relevant sources can only offer further context, not ultimate

94. See the balanced discussion of Álvarez-Pedrosa 2022: 114–15. On this inscription, see further chapter 3.

verification. The cases of Arsacid return all took place in the early and mid-first century C.E. It was during this period that Parthia experienced what some historians have called an “Iranian revival” or a wave of “neo-Iranism” that changed the trajectory of the empire. These terms should be regarded with caution, and some aspects of this narrative are based on tenuous assumptions. Even if the historiography of the period rests on slim evidence, however, significant changes are apparent and, since some of them concern the Arsacid kingship, they can be woven into a narrative that includes the Arsacids of Rome. Taken together, Arsacid return and “Iranian revival” may have been mutually reinforcing historical developments: Parthian counterreactions to Arsacid returnees may have been prompted by, and may have fed into, the broader transformation of the empire in the first century C.E.

If Parthian history has a lynchpin, many scholars would put it in this period. “Iranian renaissance” was Georgina Herrmann’s term and “neo-Iranism” Józef Wolski’s, and though adoption of these labels has not been universal, the view of the period as a cultural turning point has many endorsements.⁹⁵ Several historians ascribe special importance to the reigns of Ardawān II (c. 10–38 C.E.) and Walgaš I (c. 51–79 C.E.), epochal rulers who are said to have reoriented the Arsacid dynasty and the Parthian empire in key respects.⁹⁶ To be sure, there are reasons to object to the vocabulary of *revival* and *restoration* that is often used to describe this era, and it may be preferable to say that the Arsacids were articulating a new identity that combined novel innovations with a strategic reuse of the past.⁹⁷ *Iranian* has its problems, too, since it is not until the Sasanian period that this word is attested in reference to a territorial empire and its ruling class.⁹⁸ Still, the trail of evidence, breadcrumbs though it may be, is suggestive. As the Arsacids of Rome returned to Parthia, they did so against a backdrop of change. What was the nature of this shift, and what, if anything, did they have to do with it?

As ever, Arsacid coins offer indispensable testimony that directly reflects the priorities of the kings themselves, and the issues of Ardawān II and Walgaš I both display features of considerable significance. Ardawān did not follow his predecessor Vonones in the adoption of a short hairstyle on his drachms, though Sellwood’s view that this choice “proclaimed his rejection of western fashions implicitly” can be challenged, as discussed above.⁹⁹ But an iconographic rejoinder to Vonones’s kingship may appear in the form of a kneeling man positioned between the king and the goddess Tyche, offering up what could be a diadem in a gesture of

95. Renaissance: Herrmann 1977: 53; see also Curtis 2007: 15–16, who applies the term to Parthian history more generally. Neo-Iranism: Wolski 1993: 151; Dąbrowa 2012: 174. First century as transition period: Debevoise 1938: 196; Neusner 1963: 47–48; Wiesehöfer 2015: 339; Gnoli 2022: 328.

96. Ardawān II: Kahrstedt 1950: 11; Dąbrowa 1983: 73–92; Frye 1984: 237. Walgaš I: Bivar 1983: 85–86; Olbrycht 1998a: 125–38; Wiesehöfer 2005: 133.

97. Canepa 2018: 68, 93; Nabel 2022: 161.

98. Gnoli 1989: 113–15.

99. Sellwood 1980: 196.



FIGURE 12. Tetradrachm of Ardawān II, 23 C.E. The reverse shows three figures. At left, the goddess Tyche offers a palm to an enthroned Ardawān, who is seated on the right. In the center, a kneeling figure, perhaps Vonones, offers a diadem to the king. Sellwood 1980: 200 (type 62.3). Photo credit: American Numismatic Society (ANS 1944.100.83011).

humble submission (figure 12). The kneeler may represent Vonones.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, on this coin and on others as well, Ardawān chose to depart from the standard set of epithets traditionally attached to the king's name. On some tetradrachms, amid the usual appellations like the Just and the Illustrious, the epithet "Greek-lover" (*philhellēn*) is conspicuously omitted. Sellwood called this decision "an important initial step in the emancipation of Iran from Greek influence."¹⁰¹ However, Wiesehöfer sees it more narrowly as an expression of the king's displeasure with Seleucia on the Tigris, the most powerful Greek polis in the empire.¹⁰² Ardawān was often in conflict with this city. Seleucia had served as Vonones's final refuge in Parthia; it had been quick to support the Arsacid of Rome Tirdād; and it rebelled against Ardawān after his return from central Asia. The omission of "Greek-lover" was not a salvo in a culture war, then, but an *ad hoc* response to Seleucia's intransigence. Whether it was Greek political actors or Greek culture in the crosshairs, though, Ardawān's measure presaged Hellenism's decline in the self-representation of the Arsacids.

The trend continued in the coinage of Walgaš I, the last Arsacid ruler to send his family members to Rome. In one set of drachms, a striking new element emerges (figure 13). To the right of the conventional royal bust on the obverse, two Aramaic letters appear. They read *wl*, an abbreviation of Walgaš, the king's Parthian name.¹⁰³ With the single exception of an Aramaic title on the coins of Aršak I some three

100. Sellwood 1980: 200; Sinisi 2012b: 286.

101. Sellwood 1980: 196.

102. Wiesehöfer 2015: 338.

103. Sinisi 2012a: type IVC; on the onomastic evidence, see further Schmitt 2016: 224–25.



FIGURE 13. Drachm of Walgaš I. Sellwood 1980: 231 (type 71.1); Sinisi 2012a: type IVc/4a.a(1c.a). Photo credit: American Numismatic Society (ANS 1992.45.60).

centuries prior, this is the first appearance of any language but Greek on a Parthian coin.¹⁰⁴ Greek ostensibly appears on Walgaš's drachm, too, but closer inspection of the reverse suggests otherwise. The usual legend that surrounds the king in a square is here blundered and illegible, its letters malformed or misplaced. The die engravers have treated it as pictorial element, not a textual one.¹⁰⁵ To be sure, both of these features—the use of Parthian, and the disuse of Greek—heralded changes that were gradual, not abrupt; some of Walgaš's successors minted coins with legible Greek, and many of them forwent the use of Parthian. Over time, however, these trends would strengthen.¹⁰⁶ In this most vital medium of Arsacid political communication, an Iranian language had begun to displace Greek.

That trend is also observable in documentary texts from Arsacid territory. In the set of three parchments from Avroman (modern Kurdistan in northwest Iran), the two earliest documents are in Greek, but the last one, which dates to the reign of Walgaš I, is in Parthian.¹⁰⁷ Three texts is a slim dataset, but royal inscriptions demonstrate the same transition: the letter of Ardawān II to Susa (21 C.E.) is in Greek, but the inscriptions of Walgaš IV on the Bronze Heracles of Mesene (151 C.E.) are in Greek and Parthian, and thereafter, the inscriptions of (perhaps)

104. For the Aramaic *krny* on the coins of Aršak I, see chapter 4.

105. Sinisi 2012a: 139.

106. For the Parthian legends on the coins of the later Arsacids, see Weber in Hackl et al. 2010: 633–39.

107. This is true whether Avroman 1 and 2 should be dated by the Seleucid era (which would yield dates of 88/87 B.C.E. and 22/21 B.C.E., respectively) or the Arsacid era (which yields 24 B.C.E. and 43/44 C.E.). The usual assumption is the former, but Luther 2018 has recently argued for the latter. Avroman 3 dates to 52/53 C.E. For texts and translations of the Avroman documents, see Minns 1915; Hackl et al. 2010: 2.467–76, 2.566–67.

Walgaš V and Ardawān IV (215 C.E.) are both in Parthian.¹⁰⁸ To be sure, there are non-Greek documentary texts before the first century C.E., especially from the Nisa ostraca, and there are Greek documentary texts after it, especially from the city of Dura-Europos.¹⁰⁹ But the Avroman documents and the royal inscriptions reinforce the impression that, in legal and governmental contexts that concerned the Arsacid dynasty, the Greek language was losing ground to Parthian.¹¹⁰

Another Iranian reorientation may have been underway in the realm of religion and pertains to the history of Zoroastrianism. Here the relevant evidence is in Middle Persian rather than Parthian, and it comes from Zoroastrian texts that are difficult to date. The pertinent compositions were not committed to writing until the late Sasanian period and the extant manuscripts postdate the Arab conquest, but the texts are based on much older oral compositions that go back to the Parthian period, and in some cases even earlier. In at least one passage, and perhaps in two, Zoroastrian literature preserves a memory of an epochal Arsacid king named Walgaš (Walaxš in Middle Persian). The first passage comes from the *Dēnkard*, an account of the transmission of the religion's central compositions, the Avesta and the Zand. One pivotal figure in this history was Walgaš:¹¹¹

Walaxš ī Aškānān Abestāg ud Zand čiyōn abēzagihā andar āmad ēštād hammōg-iz ī aziš harw čē az wizend ud āšuftkārih ī Aleksandar ud ēwār ud rōb ī Hrōmāyān andar Ērānšahr pargandagihā abar nibištag tā čē uzwān abespārišnig pad dast-war mānd ēštād andar šahr čiyōn frāz āmad ēštād nigāh dāstan ō šahrīhā ayādgār kerdan framūd.

Walgaš the Arsacid ordered a memorandum sent to the provinces, [which contained the directive] to preserve the Avesta and the Zand, as they had come down in pristine transmission, and also the teachings derived from them which, scattered throughout Iran by the harm and disruption of Alexander and the pillaging and looting of the Romans, remained among the priests, whether they had been committed to writing or oral tradition, just as they had been transmitted in each province.

The text inserts the Arsacid Walgaš into a series of Iranian rulers—Dārā the Kayanian comes before him, and the Sasanians Ardashir and Shapur after—who made essential contributions to the preservation of Zoroastrian works. This history is an invented one in many respects: the Kayanian dynasty is mythical, and there was almost certainly no authoritative written copy of the Avesta at these early dates. Moreover, most of the *Dēnkard* is based on late Sasanian material, and the extant redaction dates

108. Hackl et al. 2010: 2.486–90 (Letter of Ardawān II), 2.461–2, 2.569–71 (Bronze Heracles of Walgaš IV), 2.571–72 (inscription of Ardawān IV). For the Parthian inscription of a Walgaš (perhaps V), see Gropp and Nadjmabadi 1970; Fowler 2005: 140.

109. On the language of the Nisa ostraca, which could be Aramaic or Parthian, see Haruta 1992: 29–30.

110. Cf. Wiesehöfer 2015: 339.

111. *Dēnkard* 4.16, transcription after Shayegan 2011: 297.

to the ninth or tenth century C.E.¹¹² But these considerations make the appearance of Walgaš more remarkable, not less. In a Sasanian historiography that otherwise denigrated or outright erased the Arsacid contribution to the Iranian past, the persistence of an Arsacid king in this tradition must mean that his place in Zoroastrian history was considered unimpeachable.¹¹³ That impression would be reinforced if it were correct to see the name of “Walgaš the Arsacid” in a passage of the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, a Zoroastrian apocalyptic text, but the reading is not secure and editors are divided on the issue.¹¹⁴ Even if the *Dēnkard* is the only secure reference to an Arsacid king in Zoroastrian literature, however, the passage is compelling evidence that Walgaš’s reign was a watershed moment in the history of the religion.

It is not certain that the figure mentioned in the *Dēnkard* should be identified with Walgaš I rather than one of his homonymous Arsacid successors, but this is the usual assumption, and there are sound reasons to make it.¹¹⁵ The simple fact that Walgaš I was the first Arsacid king of several to bear this name suggests a ruler whose legacy was especially impactful and enduring. The king’s commitment to Zoroastrianism may also be reflected in Greco-Roman sources. Roman authors refer to Walgaš’s brother Tirdād as a *magus*, or Zoroastrian priest, and they attribute religious scruples to the pair that prevented them from traveling to Rome over water.¹¹⁶ That excuse may have been a convenient pretext, at least in part, but the sentiment does have an authentic basis in Zoroastrian purity codes.¹¹⁷ To be sure, Zoroastrianism of one variety or another had adherents in the Parthian empire long before the first century C.E., as early sources like the Nisa ostraca reveal.¹¹⁸ It is not until Walgaš I, however, that the Roman literary sources directly connect the religion with the behavior of Arsacid dynasts. From what is known of the Arsacids who went by the name of Walgaš, then, its first bearer is the most likely figure to have entered Zoroastrian tradition as an epochal king.

What, if anything, does this reorientation toward Iranian language and religion, perhaps at Hellenism’s expense, have to do with the Arsacids of Rome? To some extent, these are discrete histories, each with its own trajectory. The Arsacids of Rome belonged to the sphere of high politics, and their lives were subject to the

112. On these issues, see Boyce 1979: 94; Secunda 2011: 358–61; Mokhtarian 2015: 84–87; Zeini 2018: 156–57.

113. Cf. Zakeri 2022: 65.

114. *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 3.26. Compare the editions of Anklesaria 1957: 14 (who restores the name Walgaš) and Cereti 1995: 87, 135 (who does not).

115. Darmesteter 1895: xxxix–xl; Wolski 1993: 174; Rose 2011: 71; Sinisi 2012a: 20; cf. Boyce 1975: 103. Zakeri 2022: 88 suggests an identification with Walgaš IV, but does not argue the point.

116. Plin. *HN* 30.16; Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1, 15.24.2; Cass. Dio 63.7.2.

117. See de Jong 1997: 416–17; but cf. Cass. Dio 63.7.1 (where Tirdād returns to Parthia by sailing) with Heil 1997: 130 n.63; Nabel 2019c: 228–29.

118. On Zoroastrianism’s long history in the Parthian empire, see Boyce 1979: 81–100; de Jong 2008; de Jong 2013b: 31–35; Rose 2011: 65–97.

ephemeral, shifting forces of the competition for power. By contrast, the Iranian turn was a moment in Parthia's social and cultural history. The ascendance of the Parthian language and Zoroastrianism were gradual trends that would have developed over the course of generations, and the same goes for the eclipse of Greek and the setting of Hellenism's star. Political elites played a part, but so too did broad societal changes that can hardly be tracked in the meager internal sources. Demographics, settlement patterns, environmental history, migration, scribal practices, marital customs—all these factors and more would have shaped Parthian cultural history in the long term, and the extant evidence provides little basis for examining them in detail. In this respect, the Iranian turn cannot be reduced to a top-down program with a direct connection to the Arsacids of Rome.

Yet it is possible to locate a nexus between these two histories, to see them as interrelated developments that went hand in hand, though certainly not in lock-step. Every Arsacid of Rome who returned to Parthia had enemies whom they fought to gain or keep the throne, and even the kings who did not clash with the Arsacids of Rome had to live under the shadow of their prospective return. Tacitus and Josephus give the impression that the Parthian enemies of Arsacid returnees used their residence abroad as a rhetorical cudgel against them, and while the provenance of this argument deserves scrutiny, the idea is plausible in comparative perspective. In such an environment, kings like Ardawān II, Gōdarz II, or Walgaš I may have looked for ways to distinguish their brand of Arsacid kingship from the one they imputed to the Arsacids of Rome. Those efforts at self-distinction, in turn, may have led them away from the Hellenistic aspects of their heritage and toward the Iranian features which, though they had always been present in Parthian history, were now invested with fresh significance and increased visibility. Such an evolution in royal representation need not have been the only or even the primary impetus behind the Iranian turn, but it could have fed into, and been fueled by, the larger social, cultural, and demographic changes that transformed Parthia in the first century C.E.

CONCLUSION

The Roman literary sources on Arsacid return are best read with ambivalence. Tacitus and Josephus both suggest that Arsacid returnees forced Parthians to confront the Roman classification of their princes as hostages. They also give the impression that the Parthians equated such classification with enslavement and political humiliation, and that the Parthian counterreaction to these developments expressed itself as anger at the (real or perceived) romanization of the Arsacid returnee. On balance, it is misguided to accept any of these propositions as authentic Parthian rhetoric. They are far more likely to derive from the genre conventions, thematic concerns, and rhetorical inventions of Roman literature than from actual knowledge of Arsacid dynastic politics.

Yet comparative history suggests that Tacitus and Josephus may be telling the right story for the wrong reasons. Children from ruling families were commonly raised, or spent parts of their young adulthood, in locations far from their natal parents. When they returned, their prolonged absence could trigger questions about their cultural preferences and political loyalties, especially if their fosterage, hostageship, marriage, or pagehood had taken them across hostile territorial lines, as it often did. Anxieties over dynastic acculturation are evident in diverse kinds of primary sources across a range of geographic and temporal contexts from the pre- and early modern world. These comparative cases cannot prove Tacitus or Josephus right. But they can and do suggest that the story of the Arsacids of Rome may have played out along the lines that Tacitus and Josephus imagined—whether or not the Roman historians were well informed about the topic.

If there is something to the idea that Arsacid returnees triggered a counter-reaction to their apparent romanization, then their ephemeral kingships might have contributed to the Iranian turn of the Parthian empire in the first century C.E. Indigenous sources from Arsacid territory are meager, but the extant evidence points to a shift from Hellenistic to Iranian cultural forms during these years, especially in the areas of law, language, and royal self-representation. As the enemies of the Arsacids of Rome sought to distinguish themselves from their “romanized” foes, they may have leaned into this shift, aligning themselves most closely with the facets of Arsacid heritage from which the Arsacids of Rome would have been most alienated—and, by the same token, turning away from the Greek aspects of Parthian history that furnished middle ground with Rome. Such political maneuvering cannot explain the entire Iranian turn, which involved a complex constellation of social and cultural changes over the course of many generations. But it could have been implicated in those changes as both a cause and an effect. Over time, the Parthian body politic developed a resistance to Arsacid return, and culture may have strengthened its immune response.