

Conclusion

Why did the exchange of Arsacid children end?

One way to answer is to attack the question: did it? There is some evidence for the continued circulation of Arsacids even after the transfers under Walgaš and Nero. Trajan captured a daughter of Husraw I during his Parthian expedition, and the Arsacid princess spent some time in Roman custody before Hadrian released her.¹ This woman was taken prisoner in a military campaign, though, which differentiates her case from the Arsacids of Rome. In a poem published c. 116/117 C.E., the satirist Juvenal refers to an Armenian hostage named Zalaces. If this young man existed and is not a generic, type-figure eastern “barbarian,” then he might have been royalty from the cadet branch of the Arsacids in Armenia. But this is conjecture, since he is unattested elsewhere.² By contrast, strong evidence for the residence of Armenian Arsacids in Rome comes from a Greek funerary epitaph composed by one Aurelius Pacorus, “king of Great Armenia,” for his brother Aurelius Merithates.³ According to most scholars, however, this Pacorus/Pakōr was the Armenian Arsacid deposed in 164 C.E. as part of Lucius Verus’s Parthian campaign.⁴ His residence at Rome was presumably the result of forced exile or political imprisonment (though probably in comfort, since his names suggest the receipt of citizenship from Marcus Aurelius). Finally, an unnamed brother

1. SHA *Had.* 13.8; Aurel. *Vict. Lib. Caes.* 13.3 with Chaumont 1987.

2. Juv. 2.164. Allen 2006: 199: “probably fictional”; contrast Wheeler 2002: 290; Courtney 2013: 124. On the passage, see also chapter 5.

3. *CIG* 3.6559 = *IG* 14.1472 = *OGIS* 382.

4. Key to this identification is Fronto, *ad Verum imp.* 2.16 = van den Hout 1988: 126; but the succession of Armenian Arsacids during these years is unclear. For discussion, see Vinogradov 1992: 19–21; Ricci 1996: 581–83; van den Hout 1999: 302; Gnoli 2007: 71–74; Schottky 2010: 210.

of the reigning Arsacid king Walgaš V joined the army of Septimius Severus during the emperor's second Parthian expedition.⁵ Yet nothing is known of how he came to Rome in the first place, and if another coordinated exchange of Arsacid children had taken place, the Roman sources preserve no mention of it.

So while the cumulative weight of this evidence is enough to show that Arsacid residence in Rome continued after Nero's death, it would appear that the submission of Arsacid children did not. The Arsacids in Roman custody during the second and third centuries C.E. were not of a piece with the Arsacids of Rome. These later dynasts did not arrive in Italy as part of intentional, uncoerced transfers on the Arsacid king's initiative, but through the direct application of Roman force, or for reasons that are totally unclear. It is conceivable that the relative paucity of Roman literary sources for this period hides additional exchanges like those of the Julio-Claudian period. This possibility does not have much to commend it, however. The arrival of Arsacid "hostages" in Italy attracted considerable attention from contemporaries in the first century C.E. and from later authors who wrote about the period. There would have been every reason to document and comment upon subsequent cases. Instead, none are recorded. By all indications, the circulation of Arsacid children ceased, and pragmatic misunderstanding broke down.

Why? In the absence of express ancient testimony on the end of the arrangement, several explanations can be posited, even if none can be proven. The first was set out in chapter 5. According to Tacitus and Josephus, the Parthian enemies of Arsacid returnees from Rome reviled them as debased slaves of the Roman emperor and acculturated traitors of their heritage. These accounts must be approached with caution, but if their representation of Parthian political rhetoric is accurate, then the homegrown kings who emerged triumphant over the Arsacids of Rome had to confront a novel dilemma: how could one justify sending Arsacid children to Rome when they returned in such a degraded state? What kind of Arsacid father would condemn his child to a condition of Roman slavery? The frame of cliental fosterage could have been overpowered by the xenophobic rhetoric that the enemies of the Arsacids of Rome had adopted. In this sense, pragmatic misunderstanding might have collapsed because it ceased to be pragmatic. That is, it was no longer useful for Arsacid kings to send their children to Rome, since new political considerations had rendered cliental fosterage unviable.

On the other hand, pragmatic misunderstanding might have ended because mutual comprehension took over. Perhaps the Parthians learned enough about the Roman view to rethink the exchange of Arsacid children, and vice versa. On the Parthian side, the key testimony of Movses Khorenats'i on Abgar and Arshavir might suggest such an outcome.⁶ When Germanicus exhibited the children of these kings in his triumph, Abgar heard about it, grew angry, and prepared

5. Cass. Dio 75.9.3; discussion in Hartmann 2009: 255–61.

6. MKh 2.27; see chapter 1.

for war. News of the triumphal exhibition of the Arsacids had reached the east, where it clashed with local expectations of how the princes would be treated. Moses's text too has major shortcomings as evidence for the first century C.E., but it at least broaches the possibility that Rome's position became legible to the Parthians, who perceived its discordance with their own. On the Roman side, the same point might emerge from Strabo and Tacitus. Both authors adumbrate a Roman realization that the Parthians saw "hostage" submission differently and thus maintained a divergent view of the practice's underlying power dynamics.⁷ Of course, such an idea may have been a purely Roman concoction, and it need not reflect Roman cognizance of an authentic Parthian viewpoint. But it might, and if it does, there would be some evidentiary basis for a cross-pollination of perspectives. As Roman-Parthian dialogue increased, the two sides may have understood each other better, and that mutual knowledge may have eroded the basis for the pragmatic misunderstanding behind Arsacid child transfer.

Alternately, the arrangement could have collapsed not because of its inherent features, but because of independent developments unrelated to the Arsacids of Rome. One potential reason for its discontinuation could have come from Rome's internal politics: in 68 C.E., the Julio-Claudian dynasty came to an end with the coup that unseated Nero. The Romans equated Nero's death with the extinction of the Julian line, and thus as an inflection point that marked the transfer of the principate from one ruling family to another.⁸ If the Arsacids shared this view, then the events of 69 C.E. could have prompted them to reassess their mode of engagement with their western imperial neighbor. What was the point of forging kinship bonds with Rome's ruling dynasty when its scions could be ousted and replaced? Why dialogue today with a family that could be gone tomorrow? In Parthia, the Arsacids had reigned since their empire's inception. In Rome, it must now have appeared, the situation would be otherwise. Dealing with Rome as an empire was still necessary, of course, but dealing with its rulers as a dynasty was not. The destruction of the Julio-Claudians could have forced the Arsacids to renounce their foundational assumptions about Roman-Parthian relations in the era of the principate, and to abandon kinship networking as a method of interface. When Nero died, so too did Arsacid fosterage in Rome.

Yet another explanation could come from the structuralist analysis favored by Eckstein and Overtoom: in the second and third centuries C.E., Parthia weakened and Rome strengthened, precluding Arsacid claims to supremacy over the emperors. As many historians of the Roman-Parthian relationship have noted, the scope of Roman campaigns against Parthia in the second century was much greater than in the first.⁹ Emperors in the later period led Roman armies deep

7. Strab. 16.1.28; Tac. *Ann.* 2.1.2, 13.9.1; cf. chapter 1.

8. Suet. *Galba* 1; Cass. Dio 62.18.4.

9. Ziegler 1964: 117; Campbell 1993: 215; Harl 2016: 122–27; Schlude 2020: 156; Gnoli 2022: 335–36.

into Mesopotamia and even sacked Ctesiphon, a key Arsacid royal city. The Parthians led no comparable expeditions into Roman Syria, Egypt, or Anatolia, and still less into Greece or Italy. Rome's aggression was not an existential threat, but it did put Parthia on the back foot. In this context, the Arsacid kings could have found it harder to maintain the impression of Parthian superiority and Roman subordination. Sending Arsacid children under these conditions would have been irreconcilable with the cliental fosterage paradigm, inviting unflattering interpretations of the exchange from Parthian audiences. Once cliental fosterage lost its viability as a frame of reference, in other words, the Arsacid kings stopped sending their children. It is a telling indictment of the Roman paradigm that the cases of Arsacid "hostageship" date to the first century C.E. and not the second, despite the inferior status of Parthia in the later period. If Arsacids in Rome were tokens of Parthian submission, one would expect more of them at times of Parthian weakness, not fewer. But such a distribution is not what the evidence shows.

So much for why Arsacid dynasts stopped going to Rome; but why did they stop coming back? On any reading of the sources, several children at least were still resident in Rome at the end of the Julio-Claudian period. There is no evidence of their return to Parthia, and they presumably lived out the remainder of their lives in Italy like Seraspadan and Rhodaspes in an earlier generation. The disappearance of the last Arsacids of Rome from the historical record might be attributable to gaps in the source material or the vicissitudes of preservation. But just as the initial submission of Arsacids elicited frequent comment from the Roman literary sources, their departures, too, were ceremonious occasions deemed worthy of commemoration by emperors and senatorial elites alike. It would be surprising for subsequent Arsacid remissions to have entirely escaped discussion. But if none took place, why not?

Two factors from chapters 4 and 5 supply potential answers. First, as discussed in chapter 4, one can read Tacitus as evidence for a failure of communication between the Parthian nobility and the Roman emperor (alone or in tandem with the Senate). The two sides wanted the same thing, but for different reasons, and they spoke past one another in their dialogues. Eventually, it may have dawned on Parthian elites that the emperor did not regard himself as a cliental *dāyag* as others of their class did. He was not releasing his wards to aid the Parthian nobility in its righteous management of the Arsacid dynasty, but to inflict harm and to advertise his supremacy over the Parthian empire as a whole. Triumphalist speeches like the one Claudius delivered when he released Mihrdād may, over time, have exposed the discordance between the Roman emperor and the Parthian aristocracy. Second, as discussed in chapter 5, the Arsacids of Rome who returned to Parthia were unsuccessful, failing either to gain the throne or keep it. Over the course of the first century C.E., the Parthian coalitions that sought to replace the ruling king must have noticed this underwhelming record and turned elsewhere for Arsacid rivals. That decision would have been all the more prudent if the Arsacids of Rome failed

in Parthia because of their association with the emperor, as Tacitus and Josephus say. By the mid-first century C.E., the Parthian enemies of Rome's Arsacid children might have had a robust tradition of xenophobic invective at their disposal. With every victory those enemies scored, such rhetoric would have gained power and acceptance until its logic became axiomatic: an Arsacid of Rome was a Roman, not an Arsacid. Once the brand was tainted, the invitations to return dried up.

Whether individually or collectively, these factors must have eroded the foundations of pragmatic misunderstanding as a mediating force in Roman-Parthian relations. Conditions had changed at every stage of Arsacid circulation, from submission and reception to remission and return. To some degree, the changes came from Roman-Parthian contact itself. As interaction between the two sides became more regular and frequent, there were more opportunities for viewpoints to proliferate. Over time, mutual association could have produced an environment where it was harder for misunderstanding to thrive. But independent or unrelated developments played a role, too. The Arsacids of Rome were not purely a feature of Roman-Parthian interaction; in both empires, internal political factors animated their exchange as well. When domestic circumstances shifted, so too did the impetus for sending, receiving, and recalling royal children. Rome and Parthia moved on, and they left the Arsacids of Rome behind.

Interdynastic kinship was not abandoned, however, and while subsequent Roman emperors and Iranian kings made no formal fosterage arrangements, several cases of pro-parentage during the Sasanian period recall the precedent of the Arsacids of Rome. First, in 408 C.E., the moribund emperor Arcadius supposedly made the Sasanian king Yazdgird the "guardian" (*epitropos*) of his young son Theodosius (II) in an effort to ensure the child's succession.¹⁰ The sources say that Yazdgird happily accepted the role—a surprising reaction if, as this study has argued, cliental fosterage provided the dominant framework for such exchanges among the Parthians and Sasanians. But just as Greek *epitropos* differs from *tropheus*, there was a distinction in Middle Persian between a *dāyag* and a *parwartār* (Parthian *parwarāg*, "guardian"), even if a figure like Anagranes could occupy both offices.¹¹ More importantly, it appears that Yazdgird delegated the office to a Persian subordinate at the Roman court, though the extant sources are a muddle on

10. The main Roman sources are Procopius, *Wars* 1.2.1–10; Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicle* AM 5900, trans. Mango and Scott 1997: 123–24. A Persian tradition also survives in the Arabic *Annals* of Hamzah al-Isfahani, trans. Daudpota 1932: 71–72. For additional sources and discussion, see Greatrex and Bardill 1996; Börm 2007: 308–11; Luther 2016: 648 n.6–11, 652 n.24–25; Greatrex 2022: 45–46.

11. On the meaning of *epitropos* in Procopius, see Börm 2007: 309 n.2; and Andres 2022: 242–46, who also judiciously treats Yazdgird's point of view. *Parwartār/āg*: Perikhanian 1997: 94–95, 252–53, 378; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 281. For Anagranes as both *tropheus* and *epitropos*, see chapter 1. If Sundermann's restoration is correct, *dāyag* and *parwarāg* are both applied to the god (or goddess) of water in the Manichaean Parthian hymn *The Sermon of the Soul*: Sundermann 1997: 64 (line 60), 121; cf. Sundermann 1991: 14.

the issue, so much so that some scholars doubt the episode's historicity.¹² In any event, it is clear that Theodosius never left Roman territory and thus was never fostered by Yazdgird.

A second such case came a century later (c. 520 C.E.), when the Sasanian king Kavād tried to have his son Husraw (I) adopted by the emperor Justin.¹³ Justin was agreeable until, in Procopius's telling, he was informed that such an adoption would make Husraw heir to the Roman empire—a puzzling legal argument that modern scholars reject.¹⁴ As a compromise, the Romans suggested Husraw's adoption "in arms," a legally nonbinding form of the practice more suitable for Roman-"barbarian" relations.¹⁵ But Kavād and Husraw found the idea insulting, according to Procopius, and the negotiations came to nothing. From the Sasanian point of view, the overture might have looked like an effort to secure Justin as a client *dāyag* for Husraw, though if that were the case, the pejorative connotations of adoption in arms must have outweighed the benefits of such an arrangement. As with the Arcadius/Yazdgird affair, the dubious representation of events in Procopius raises many questions, and some scholars doubt the historicity of the episode and/or its associated details.¹⁶

A final set of pro-parental arrangements is observable in literary representations of epistolary correspondence between Sasanian kings and Roman emperors in the generations preceding the Arab conquest. In several such passages, "father" and "son" feature as forms of address. When Husraw II fled to Roman territory as a refugee from the rebellion of Bahram Ābuhin in 590 C.E., he presented himself as the son of the emperor Maurice as part of his plea for aid. Maurice supposedly reciprocated by self-identifying as Husraw's father. What actually transpired during Husraw's stay in Roman territory is obscured by spurious accounts of his conversion to Christianity, but the use of father/son salutations is well attested in a broad range of Greek, Armenian, and Arabic sources.¹⁷ Later, the Senate would ask Husraw II to accept the royal aspirant Heraclius as his son.¹⁸ Once enthroned, Heraclius wrote a letter of his own in which he called Husraw's successor Kavād II his (Heraclius's) son.¹⁹ Since these communications are attested only secondhand in literary sources rather than in documentary originals, it is difficult to establish

12. Varying assessments of the episode's historicity are cited in Greatrex 2022: 44–45.

13. Procopius, *Wars* 1.11.1–30; Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.12, trans. Whitby 2000: 212; Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicle AM* 6013; Zonaras 14.5.

14. Börm 2007: 315; Heather 2013: 124–25.

15. On *adoptio in/per arma*, see Kiss 2015.

16. References in Pazdernik 2015: 243 n.43; more recent discussion in Andres 2022: 254–62.

17. Schilling 2008: 235–98, esp. 248–51 for sources and discussion; see also Payne 2015: 164–65.

18. *Chronicon Pascale* 615, Dindorf 1832: 709, trans. Whitby and Whitby 1989: 161; discussion in Howard-Johnston 2021: 107–9.

19. Nikephoros, *Breviarium* 15, trans. Mango 1990: 63.

their historical value, and some of the passages in question are pseudepigraphic.²⁰ The implications for hierarchy are also unclear. The usual view is that son status entailed subordination to a dominant father.²¹ This need not have been the case on the Iranian side, however. For a Sasanian king like Husraw, the construal of the Roman emperor as a parental figure might have been empowering rather than concessive, coming as Husraw did from a society where the fosterer, a pro-parental figure, could be a cliental dependent.

While questions of historicity attend all these cases, the collective impression is that pro-parentage continued to connect Iranian and Roman rulers in late antiquity, building on the precedent of the Arsacids of Rome and forging an interdynastic ruling family along the lines of the late Bronze Age. This development found additional expression in the reemergence of the “brother” salutation in correspondence between Roman emperors and Sasanian kings, and while this form of address too is attested only in literary sources, it appears with such frequency that it may reflect actual epistolary practice.²² Created siblinghood and pro-parentage together heralded a new “family of kings” in which an assemblage of kinship practices offered rulers a mode of interface with their distant counterparts. The scope and interconnectedness of this family is up for debate, to be sure, and scholars variously assess its impact on high politics.²³ On any reading, though, Roman-Sasanian relations went further than their Roman-Parthian precursors in forging an interdynastic family that transcended state boundaries.

But even the Roman-Sasanian relationship never achieved the interconnectedness of the Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean or, to take another example, early modern Europe. In those historical settings, one can speak of a highly integrated, cosmopolitan, and interstate ruling family linked by strong bonds of kinship. Hans Morgenthau’s description of Europe in the seventeenth century C.E. is apt: “The prince and the aristocratic rulers of a particular nation were in constant, intimate contact with the princes and aristocratic rulers of other nations. They were joined together by family ties, a common language (French), common cultural values, a common style of life, and common moral convictions. . . . The princes competing for power considered themselves to be competitors in a game whose rules were

20. Thus, e.g., Schilling 2008: 248, on Agapius of Manbij.

21. For this view, see Whitby and Whitby 1989: 188–89 n.491; Schilling 2008: 249; Maksymiuk 2018: 598; Greatrex 2022: 151.

22. Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 4.11; Ammianus 17.5.3, 17.5.10; Malalas 17.10, 18.44, 18.76 (trans. Jeffreys et al. 2017); Procopius, *Wars* 1.16.1; Menander Protector frg. 6.1; Theophylact Simocatta 4.11.11, 5.3.11; *Chronicon Paschale* 628 (Dindorf 1832: 735, trans. Whitby and Whitby 1989: 188); Theophanes the Confessor, *Chronicle* AM 6013. For kinship salutations in the correspondence between Maurice and Husraw II, see Schilling 2008: 235–98. Other Sasanian usages appear in MKh 3.17; PB 4.20.

23. Shahbazi 1990; Dignas and Winter 2007: 232–34; Canepa 2009: 124–27; Nechaeva 2014: 70; Maksymiuk 2018. On the Roman-Sasanian impact on subsequent medieval and esp. Byzantine history, see Brandes 2013 contra Dölger 1953.

accepted by all the other competitors.²⁴ A realist himself, Morgenthau did not argue that a cosmopolitan overclass of this kind guaranteed untrammled peace and harmony (though he did contrast it with the democratizing nationalism that ushered in the total wars of the twentieth century). His point, rather, was that even armed conflict was pursued within a set of parameters. Wars could be brutal, violent, and traumatic. But they were part of a game, and games have rules that structure competition. The close interconnectedness of the dynastic elites that presided over the European interstate system at this time helped establish the rules of the game and promoted their acceptance by the players.

The Arsacids of Rome gesture toward such a system, but the pragmatic misunderstanding behind them represented an order of a different kind. On the basis of non-Roman sources from the ancient Near East, especially Iran and Armenia, this study has concluded that Roman and Parthian conceptions of the Arsacids of Rome were divergent. Since the Parthian view was framed by fosterage rather than Roman hostageship, each side understood the transfer of Arsacid children in different ways. The Arsacids thus created an interdynastic ruling family, but not a cosmopolitan or highly integrated one. Its Roman and Parthian constituents had different views of their membership; they were separated by a substantial cultural gulf; and the traffic between them was minimal. As discussed above, moreover, it is possible that increased contact between the two sides narrowed the scope for accommodation instead of widening it. The more they associated, the greater the gap between them grew.

And yet, despite the lack of agreement between their givers and receivers, the Arsacids of Rome were at the center of an order that prevailed in Roman-Parthian relations for nearly a century. That order rested not on intimacy, shared values, or law, but on misunderstanding. When the Parthians and Romans slotted Arsacid children into the paradigms of fosterage and hostageship, respectively, each side could maintain the pretension of its superiority to the other. In Morgenthau's terms, the Arsacids and Julio-Claudians were playing two different games, but since the players defined winning in perfectly opposite ways, neither had to reckon with his loss in the other's estimation. In this mutual incomprehension, there was equipoise, symmetry, harmony. This was a structure with no architect, a balance with no fulcrum, an arrangement with no arranger. The legacy of the Arsacids of Rome was an order fashioned from the chaos of misunderstanding.

24. Morgenthau 1948: 184.