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The Romano-Parthian Cold War: Julio-Claudian Foreign Policy in the First Century CE and Tacitus' *Annales*

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THE ROMANO-PARTHIAN
COLD WAR:
JULIO-CLAUDIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE FIRST CENTURY CE
AND
TACITUS' *ANNALES*

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
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in

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by
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ABSTRACT

Many ancient and modern authors view the first century CE as an unprecedented era of peace and security for the Roman Empire. These writers often identify the Roman emperor Augustus' diplomatic settlement with Parthia (ca. 20 BCE) as an important cornerstone of the Pax Romana. But while the two ancient superpowers may have averted large-scale conflicts, Romano-Parthian relations under Augustus and the Julio-Claudians were never entirely uneventful or especially peaceful. Whether the Parthian Empire posed a real threat to Rome's internal security or not, Julio-Claudian emperors developed elaborate "cold war"-style strategies to keep Rome's eastern rival in check. Augustus and his successors frequently dispatched dynastic pretenders to destabilize Parthia's Arsacid regime and fought hard to maintain the Kingdom of Armenia as a strategic buffer-state. These strategies, for the most part, preserved the integrity of Rome's eastern provinces for more than a century; however, that security came at some cost to the Julio-Claudians' reputation at home. Despite the diplomatic strategy's general effectiveness, Roman critics viewed the Julio-Claudians' Parthian strategy with disdain—as a poor substitute for a more direct, more "Roman" militaristic approach to the eastern frontier. To better understand these critics' objections, this study focuses on the Roman historian Tacitus' *Annales*. Tacitus' work, composed either just prior to or during Trajan's Parthian War, contains a series of extensive passages dedicated to Romano-Parthian affairs in the first century. In the past, some Tacitean scholars have dismissed these eastern episodes as aimless digressions that bear no relevance for the historian's overall purpose. Careful analysis reveals, however, that these passages, in fact, form a highly schematized literary argument which calls into question the wisdom of the Julio-Claudians' Parthian strategy. Undermining the Julio-Claudians' foreign policy allows Tacitus to portray Trajan's Parthian War as the proper course of action all Roman emperors should adopt in terms of the eastern frontier.

INTRODUCTION

In 66 CE, the emperor Nero presided over one of the most elaborate—and costly—celebrations ever thrown in the Roman Empire’s capital. The event was meant to commemorate the victorious end of the Princes’ long Armenian War (58-63 CE). However, what most Romans witnessed over the course of those several days was a bit different from the triumphal processions of the Republic. Rome’s citizenry would have certainly had the opportunity to witness an exotic parade of (supposedly) defeated foreigners, but none of the Roman spectators would have been allowed to hurl anything—either rotten vegetables or insults—at the strangely dressed outsiders. The Roman public would have also been able to watch as a “barbarian” king prostrated himself at the emperor’s feet. Yet unlike the Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix at Julius Caesar’s triumph in 46, Nero’s “barbarian” king was not led into the Forum that day to serve as a humiliating symbol of his country’s military defeat and national disgrace. Nero’s suppliant, the Armenian monarch Tiridates I, would not have just emerged from a dark, dank Roman prison cell. As Tiridates would have approached the emperor’s dais, he would have remained not only unshackled, but perhaps even armed. Nor, for that matter, would the throngs of Roman onlookers, or even Tiridates himself, have been anticipating that the king’s audience with Rome’s head of state would conclude, as Vercingetorix’s had, with the foreign monarch’s brutal execution.

Although Tiridates had technically lost the war with Rome, he had not come to the capital as a prisoner, but willingly and by his own devices. Tiridates had traveled to Rome in 66 for the express purpose of groveling before Nero and begging absolution for his past crimes against the Roman state, but his journey had not been made in the typical manner or with what many must have deemed the appropriate sense of haste for an individual in his precarious position. Because of his status as a Magus, a Zoroastrian priest whose sect proscribed him from taking voyages by sea, the Armenian king had requested and received a special dispensation from Nero to make his way to Rome overland. This

decision should have perhaps lengthened the monarch's trip from one month to three. But when Tiridates had finally decided to depart the East for Italy, he had further insisted on bringing along an imposing retinue of over three thousand guards, attendants, and family members. The size of the Armenian monarch's delegation, as well as the fact that the king frequently chose to stop and feast in the many local towns along his party's circuitous route through Asia Minor and Illyricum, quickly turned Tiridates' three- to six-month journey into a nine-month, movable banquet through the Roman Empire's eastern provinces. However, perhaps the most unusual aspect of Tiridates' whole festive trek to Rome was the fact that it was financed not by the king himself, but by the Roman treasury at the staggering cost of 200,000 sesterces per day.¹

Only a few years before, Tiridates had been one of the Roman Empire's bitterest, "most wanted" adversaries. He, with the help of his ally and brother, the Parthian king Vologeses I, had orchestrated one of the worst, most humiliating military losses Rome's legions experienced in the first century—second perhaps only to the Varian disaster of 9 CE. During Nero's lengthy war over Armenia, Tiridates and his Parthian allies had routed two of the Roman army's most distinguished legions at Rhandaia (61). The legionary survivors had then been forced to endure a long, torturous siege before finally being subjected to the shameful practice of marching under the enemy's yoke.² With such a blot on the Armenian king's record, why was Tiridates risking a trip to Rome at all? It was well known in the ancient world that Rome did not suffer slights lightly; those who had dared challenge her in the past had often paid the price harshly. Many would-be regional potentates, men little different from Tiridates, had either been killed by a centurion's spear point or executed by imperial decree for doing much less. Moreover, if Tiridates had decided to beg Nero for mercy, to try to worm his way back into the Princeps' good graces with flattery and promises (as Herod had with Octavian in 31 CE), why keep the

1 For accounts of Tiridates' overland journey to Rome cf. Cass. Dio 62 (63.1-7); Suet. *Nero* 13; Pliny *NH* 30.6.

2 For the Battle of Rhandaia and the aftermath of the Parthians and Armenians' siege of the Roman camp see Tac. *Ann.* 15.9-16 and Cass. Dio 62.21.

emperor waiting by taking the most leisurely pace possible to Rome?³ If Tiridates thought there were a possibility that he might be forfeiting his life, he should not have traveled to the Roman capital in the first place. On the other hand, if he suspected that there were a chance for redemption, then he should have proceeded with a much greater sense of urgency.

Despite having lost the war against Rome, despite having murdered and shamed nearly ten thousand Roman legionnaires and citizens, Tiridates had not, in fact, journeyed to the capital to be chastised and punished. Nero's famous eastern commander, Cn. Domitius Corbulo, had beaten back Tiridates' local Armenian supporters and Parthian allies on two separate occasions (58 and 63 CE). Nevertheless, Nero had decided to buck nearly a century of Roman diplomatic policy and accept Tiridates, a member of Parthia's royal Arsacid family, as the kingdom's ruler. In spite of his long list of crimes against the Roman people, Tiridates had actually come to Rome in 66 so that Nero could officially appoint him as the empire's newest client-king. Tiridates had not therefore come really as a suppliant, as a man seeking absolution, but as the Roman emperor's honored guest.

For his guest, the emperor, as we said, spared little expense or pageantry. Instead of expressing impatience or anger about Tiridates' casual pace of travel, Nero actually dispatched an imperial escort to welcome the king's entourage when it first entered Italy. Tiridates and his wife were then conveyed by horse-drawn carriage to Neapolis in Apulia where the king at last came face-to-face with his new imperial benefactor.⁴ At their initial meeting, Tiridates did obeisance to Nero as any proper client-king was supposed to, yet nevertheless refused to relinquish his personal dagger for the ceremony. The king did agree to fasten the weapon permanently to its sheath with nails, but his initial obstinance only demonstrates that Tiridates himself had chosen to play his part in Nero's grand stage show somewhat

3 In the lead-up to Octavian's showdown with Antony at Actium in 31 BCE, Herod had foolishly chosen to back Antony. After Octavian's decisive victory in Greece, however, the king met the empire's now undisputed leader at Rhodes to ask for forgiveness for his earlier poor judgment. In a brilliant speech, Herod somehow managed to convince Octavian not only to pardon his infraction, but also to reinstate him as Judea's ruler (Joseph. *BJ* 1.20.1).

4 By way of Picenum along the Adriatic coast, and so therefore at first bypassing Rome. Nero probably shocked his councilors by leaving Rome and eschewing diplomatic protocol so that he could meet and impress the Armenian king first at Neapolis.

grudgingly. From Neapolis, Nero then escorted Tiridates to Puteoli where the emperor showed off by entertaining the king with a series of exotic and expensive gladiatorial exhibitions before finally moving on to Rome itself.⁵

For Tiridates' formal investiture ceremony, Nero had ordered the imperial capital festooned with garlands and decorated with lights. When the festive day finally arrived, the emperor entered the Forum and ascended the rostrum, clad in the triumphal robes of a conqueror and accompanied by senators and praetorians. The Forum itself was so packed with soldiers in gilded armor and the city's most distinguished elite that less prestigious spectators were forced to watch from nearby rooftops. Tiridates and his suite then filed in, marching between rows of heavily armed centurions. After the king himself had climbed the dais, knelt before the Princeps, and repeated his earlier act of obeisance, a great cacophony erupted from the crowd of Roman onlookers which caused Tiridates, at least momentarily, to fear for his life. However, Nero quickly allayed the king's concerns by setting the diadem, the symbol of Tiridates' new office, on his head and proclaimed him Armenia's legitimate monarch.

To cap off the indulgent pageantry of the official investiture ceremony, Nero had organized several additional days of revelry and celebrations. To impress Tiridates and perhaps Rome's own population, the emperor followed the coronation in the Forum with an elaborate stage production in the theater of Pompey. He spared no expense for the event itself, decorating the venue with various gilded ornaments and statues, as well as with a series of opulent purple tapestries embroidered with depictions of himself as a victorious charioteer. The sheer extravagance and grandeur of the whole celebration led many local Romans to refer to the spectacle informally (or perhaps a bit sarcastically) as Nero's "Golden Day." Moreover, during the equally costly banquets that followed in the days after the theatrical production, the emperor, it seems, tried to astound his foreign guests even further by personally performing lyre recitals and driving racing chariots—though Tiridates and his entourage appear to have found these demonstrations, as most Romans themselves probably did, demeaning for

⁵ These gladiatorial shows were paid for by Patrobius, a local businessman and one of Nero's freedmen.

someone of Nero's rank. But for tolerating Nero's sometimes excessive hospitality and many idiosyncrasies patiently in silence, before departing Rome, Tiridates further earned, in addition to his crown, a rather lavish monetary reward: a lump sum of 800,000 sesterces which the emperor bestowed on his new vassal as a gift to rebuild Armenia's war-torn capital of Artaxata.⁶

Therefore, by the time Tiridates returned home, not only had he managed to avoid punishment for his many "war crimes" against the Roman state and its people, but he had also somehow convinced Nero to grant him the very thing he had lost in the war, the kingship of Armenia. Tiridates had been one of the Roman Empire's most dangerous enemies only a few years earlier, but by 66 the Roman emperor himself was throwing lavish spectacles and banquets for the Arsacid monarch—not to mention, practically showering him with money. The many Romans who crowded the Forum to witness the events of Nero's "Golden Day" would have been impressed by the spectacle of it all. But at least some must have wondered how Tiridates had gone from being one of the empire's most reviled enemies to its most honored guest in such a short span of time.

* * * * *

To reconstruct the details of Tiridates' investiture ceremony at Rome in 66 and its accompanying celebrations, we are forced to rely on several different ancient authors. The Greek historian Cassius Dio provides us with the fullest account, followed next by the biographer Suetonius, and finally by Pliny the Elder who mentions Nero and Tiridates' encounter briefly in the volume of his *Naturalis Historia* dealing with magic and supernatural practices.⁷ But to understand properly what implications Tiridates' visit had in terms of the larger scope of Rome's foreign relations, we must look elsewhere, for each of these authors' works unfortunately contains one shortcoming or another that

⁶ Cass. Dio 62 (63.1-7); Suet. *Nero* 13; Pliny *NH* 30.6.

⁷ Pliny *NH* 30.

hinders its use in any broader analysis of the Roman Empire's complex foreign policy situation during the early to mid first-century CE. For example, all of the later Books of Cassius Dio's *Historia Romana*, despite ironically containing our best record of Nero and Tiridates' meeting, have come down to us as epitomes, summarizations by a later manuscript copyist. Therefore, teasing out nuances of historical analysis from what remains of Dio's work can at times be a difficult task due to the text's pared down state. Moreover, it is sometimes hard to separate Dio's opinions from those of his epitomist.⁸ Suetonius' and Pliny's texts, on the other hand, are not histories at all, but works of biography and natural philosophy, respectively. Consequently, these authors often treat Tiridates' story rather superficially, either simply as another example of Nero's grossly despotic behavior or as little better than a passing oddity. For his part, Suetonius includes an account of the Armenian king's visit to demonstrate the unnecessary burden Nero's grand, over-the-top theatrics placed on the state treasury. Pliny only discusses Tiridates as a way of combating the Roman public's widespread belief in magic and superstition.⁹ Therefore, while Dio's, Suetonius', and Pliny's accounts may all be entertaining and useful in their own way, none is particularly helpful as a tool for establishing the full historical context or contemporary implications of Nero's unprecedented decision to accept, and so publicly celebrate, a Parthian backed candidate as ruler of the strategically critical border kingdom of Armenia. To understand exactly why Nero honored Tiridates in 66 rather than executing him as a war criminal, we must turn to another source—one which may, admittedly, seem at first just as problematic as the others, the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus and his masterpiece, the *Annales*.

Although Tacitus does note Tiridates' trip to Rome and investiture in 66, the historian may appear less helpful to some researchers because he records even fewer details about the whole affair than Suetonius or Pliny. Tacitus actually sums up the Armenian monarch's journey to Rome and Nero's

⁸ Cassius Dio is also, of course, farther removed in time than either Suetonius or Pliny, who may have both had firsthand knowledge of Tiridates' visit and investiture celebration—or, at least, access to sources who did.

⁹ Pliny, for instance, brings up Tiridates specifically so that he can mention how the Magian priest tried—and failed—to teach Nero the magical black arts of his mysterious, eastern sect during one of their late night drinking banquets. The naturalist's implication seems to be that if someone as depraved and wicked as Nero could not master black magic, then clearly such powers did not really exist.

“Golden Day” in the single, solitary sentence at *Annales* 16.23. However, the *Annales*’ manuscript, as it exists in its present form, breaks off only a few chapters after this remark,¹⁰ and there is good reason to suspect that Tacitus would have treated these events more thoroughly in the work’s subsequent sections. For unlike either Suetonius or Pliny, Tacitus does not treat the Armenian king simply as a passing, ancillary character. Tiridates features prominently throughout what remains of the *Annales*’ final hexad (Books 13-16). The entire story of Tiridates’ long conflict with Rome, not just his visit to the imperial capital, actually makes up an integral part of Tacitus’ larger plot; it is in fact the crux of a much broader argument that the author masterfully crafts not just against Nero, but against the Julio-Claudian dynasty as a whole.

Many commentators have interpreted Tacitus’ work chiefly as the story of the Roman Empire’s first-century domestic troubles because of the *Annales*’ focus on the city of Rome itself—on the various plots and palace intrigues of the Julio-Claudian emperors and their royal consorts, on the seemingly innumerable *maiestas* trials and tales of brave senatorial opposition. But to do so is a mistake. For the *Annales* also contains a broad array of passages dedicated to Rome’s foreign affairs under Augustus and his successors. At various points throughout the text, Tacitus discusses rebellions against Roman rule in Germany, North Africa, and Britain—as well as the bloody legionary campaigns launched to suppress these uprisings.¹¹ The historian, furthermore, dedicates several lengthy passages (we would argue an almost disproportionate number) to Rome’s affairs on the eastern frontier and its complicated interactions with the Parthian Empire.¹² These eastern episodes, in particular, have in the past either been dismissed as pointless digressions which contribute little to the *Annales*’ overall narrative or seen as compartmentalized passages that only hold relevance for the individual Books in which they

¹⁰ Specifically, half way through 16.35.

¹¹ Although this is not in any way an exhaustive list, examples would include: Germanicus’ expedition to Germany (*Ann.* 1.49, 71; 2.5-26); the Numidian Tacfarinas’ revolt in North Africa (2.52; 3.32, 73; 4.13, 23-26); and Boudicca’s rebellion in Britain (14.31-37).

¹² *Tac. Ann.* 2.1-4, 2.56-58, 2.68, 6.14, 6.31-37, 6.41-44, 11.8-10, 12.10-14, 12.44-51, 13.6-9, 13.34-41, 14.23-26, 15.1-18, 15.24-31.

appear.¹³ However, not only do all of these “Parthian Passages” seem to be connected thematically, they also appear to crop up, if not at regularly spaced intervals, then at least at times and in ways which form clearly discernible patterns. Scenes that share the same themes, topics, and characters—which are sometimes separated from one another in the text due to the work’s annalistic structure—should be read as single episodes. This study will argue that the *Annales*’ eastern scenes should be interpreted together according to following thematic scheme: Parthian Passage 1 (*Ann.* 2.1-4, 2.56-58, 2.68); Parthian Passage 2 (*Ann.* 6.14, 6.31-37, 6.41-44); Parthian Passage 3 (*Ann.* 11.8-10, 12.10-14, 12.44-51); Parthian Passage 4 (*Ann.* 13.6-9, 13.34-41, 14.23-26, 15.1-18, 15.24-31). Once the various eastern scenes have been grouped together in this way, there seems to be one eastern episode apiece for each of the Julio-Claudian emperors who appear in Tacitus’ narrative (i.e., Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero). Moreover, each of these four Parthian Passages, in turn, addresses the exact same issues: 1) the Julio-Claudians’ repeated use of foreign hostages as pretenders for the Parthian throne,¹⁴ and 2) that dynasty’s lack of proper attention regarding the strategic buffer-kingdom of Armenia, the key to the Roman Empire’s security along its easternmost border.

The following study will show that the themes and patterns of these eastern episodes prove that they are a key piece of Tacitus’ larger argument against the incompetence and misrule of the Julio-Claudian emperors. Just as Tacitus highlights palace intrigues and treason trials to demonstrate the dynasty’s ineptness as rulers at home, he similarly uses its habitual mismanagement of the eastern frontier as proof of its incompetence abroad. An important leitmotif of the *Annales* is that under the watch of Augustus and his successors, the empire’s borders, especially its eastern border, were never truly as safe or secure as most contemporary Romans believed. In addition, although an exact publication date for the *Annales* is hard to determine, Tacitus probably penned much of the work

¹³ For those scholars who subscribe to the first interpretation see Syme 1958: 259; Walker 1960: 34-35; Vessey 1971: 385-409; Seif 1973: 59-63, 237-41, 257-258; et al. Cf. Keitel 1978: 462 n. 1 for a complete survey of scholars who espouse this view. As for those who have argued the second interpretation see Gilmartin 1973: 584-85; Keitel 1978: 462; McCulloch 1984: 59-61, 92-93, 140-43; Roberts 1988: 118-32; Gowing 1990: 315; and Ash 1999: 114.

¹⁴ Specifically, these pretenders all come from a pool of Parthian hostages made up of the sons and grandsons of the Parthian Arsacid monarch Phraates IV who came to reside in Rome under Augustus’ reign.

around the time of Trajan's Parthian War (113-117 CE). The historian's treatment of the Julio-Claudians' policies in the East would have seemed topical to any reader currently following that emperor's efforts to subdue the same troublesome frontier region. This project will therefore also examine the relationship between Tacitus' passages about Parthia and Armenia and Trajan's famous eastern campaign. Tacitus was in many respects a great admirer of Trajan, not only for the emperor's laudable domestic reforms—his easing of tensions with the senatorial class and his ending of punishments for political dissenters and imperial critics—but also for his new, hardline stance towards Parthia and the East. Unlike the Julio-Claudians, who dealt with Parthia mainly through the use of spies, pretenders, and various client-kings, Trajan was an unapologetic militarist who attacked the Parthian Empire boldly and directly the very first chance he got. It is thus also possible for us to interpret the eastern episodes in Tacitus' *Annales* as a sort of call to arms: taken in their entirety, they are a condemnation of the passive, indirect foreign policy strategies of Trajan's predecessors and an argument strongly in favor of that emperor's novel, aggressive approach to the empire's problems in the East.

To demonstrate the viability of such a thesis, we will divide our project into two parts. Part 1 will involve a detailed historical analysis of Romano-Parthian interactions in the Late Republic and Early Principate. It will show that Rome's earliest Republican commanders in the East who first came into contact with the Parthians (Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey) employed a broad array of "cold war" tactics—including brinkmanship, political espionage, and a considerable amount of backhanded diplomacy—for handling Rome's potentially dangerous new enemy. This Part will then discuss the more aggressive eastern approaches of generals like Crassus and Antony who both launched unsuccessful attacks on the Parthian Empire (53 and 36 BCE). Seeing specifically what did and did not work in terms of these earlier Republican commanders' strategies for resolving Rome's "Parthian problem" will help us better understand how and why Augustus eventually settled on a less overtly

confrontational path for his dynasty's own future interactions with the Parthian state. Augustus' ingenious "new direction" for Rome's frontier affairs managed to stave off another "hot war" with Rome's eastern neighbor, which was certainly a considerable achievement following Crassus and Antony's costly and demoralizing campaigns. Augustus was in many ways not just the architect of the Roman Principate, but of the empire's entire first-century Parthian policy. Over the course of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, his successors tried desperately to preserve the foreign policy standards he had established. Analyzing how this Augustan strategy initially developed will help explain why it persisted for so long, and why someone like Tacitus would have still felt the need to write about it more than a century later.

Part 2 of this project will then examine the eastern episodes ("Parthian Passages") in Tacitus' *Annales* in close detail. Scrutinizing these passages will reveal that, by the historian's own day, Tacitus and a portion of the Roman public had come to see Augustus' longstanding Parthian strategy as tired and obsolete. In Trajan, many Romans had finally found a leader who was willing to and, more importantly, capable of carrying war directly to the Parthians. For more than a century, Romans had tolerated emperors whose tentative half measures on the eastern frontier had achieved hardly anything of note and oftentimes appeared publicly like Parthian appeasement. Our analysis of how the historian portrays Tiridates will show that this may be what some Roman citizens thought of Nero's investiture of the Armenian monarch. Part 2 will argue that echoes of Trajan's Parthian War can be found in Tacitus' work, and that these echoes prove that the Roman public had been eagerly waiting for an emperor of Trajan's ilk, someone who would fight the empire's longtime nemesis head-on and restore Rome's collective sense of national honor.

Review of the Literature

Scholarly debate about Rome and Parthia has revolved mainly around their wars, the issue of assigning blame, and the precise nature of the Parthians' political system and society. Roman writers labeled the Parthians as barbarians and argued that their empire was one of the greatest threats Rome faced. The first modern historians to address the topic of Romano-Parthian relations seem to have taken these ancient commentators at their word. Although it should receive credit for being the first real attempt to document the period, George Rawlinson's *Parthia*, published in 1893, portrayed the Parthians as dangerous, decadent barbarians who stood in the way of Rome's more noble territorial ambitions. Nelson Debevoise's *A Political History of Parthia* (1938) and Malcolm Colledge's *The Parthians* (1967), both noted Parthian society's Hellenistic connections. But, while each of these studies was less judgmental than Rawlinson's work, they still identified Parthia as a systemic threat to Rome and classified the Parthian Empire as a "feudal" power, implying the same barbarism and backwardness that was once reserved for histories of Medieval Europe.¹⁵ Attempts were, nevertheless, made to rehabilitate Parthia's tarnished reputation. Karl Ziegler's *Die Beziehungen zwischen Rom und dem Partherreich* (1964) was the first study to propose that the Parthian Empire's imperial desires may have been limited. Ziegler argued that, despite Roman authors' claims, the Parthians were, for the most part, content with their territorial boundaries by the first century BCE. Ziegler contended that Roman greed, and not Parthian land hunger, was to blame for many of the later conflicts that arose between the two empires. Numerous articles by Józef Wolski also tried to redefine the traditional image of the Parthians.¹⁶ Wolski recast the Parthians as direct heirs of the Achaemenids; he emphasized the Parthians' uniquely Persian qualities and downplayed their reputation as nomadic barbarians or Hellenistic imitators.

¹⁵ Debevoise 1938: xxxviii and Colledge: 1986: 3.

¹⁶ Wolski 1966-1993.

These earlier, widely varying interpretations of Parthian history and Romano-Parthian interactions were made possible mostly by the glaring lack of Parthian records. Few written sources survive from Parthia itself.¹⁷ Previous scholars acknowledged the bias inherent in our Greco-Roman sources, but often still assumed that those sources were historically accurate. Only recently have experts started to address this lack of evidence and the potential prejudice of our literary source directly. Uwe Ellerbrock and Sylvia Winkelmann's *Die Parther: die vergessene Großmacht* (2012), for example, avoids the problem of literary bias by basing its survey of Parthian history and society almost exclusively on numismatic and archeological evidence. In contrast, other authors have chosen to tackle Greco-Roman preconceptions about Parthia head-on. Studies, such as Charlotte Lerouge's *L'image des Parthes dans le monde gréco-romain* (2007), analyze Parthian history specifically through the lens of Greco-Roman commentators. Lerouge, for instance, focuses on evaluating the biases of individual Greek and Roman authors and gauging their trustworthiness.

Our study will adopt a similar, philological approach to Romano-Parthian history. However, unlike Lerouge's monograph, which surveys the topic and era broadly, our research will be more narrowly focused on the first century CE and the Roman historian Tacitus. Romano-Parthian affairs in the first century are often minimized or overlooked completely in modern historical accounts. This oversight is typically due to spatial constraints. General overviews of Parthia commonly eschew Rome and Parthia's first-century diplomatic entanglements and minor military contests for more dramatic episodes in the Late Republic and High Empire. Like most histories on Parthia, Lerouge dedicates considerable space to Crassus' and Trajan's Parthian expeditions, but relatively little to the first century. The present examination intends to rectify this gap in the historiography by carefully analyzing Romano-Parthian interactions under the Julio-Claudians.

Tacitus is our best source for Romano-Parthian affairs in the first century, but he is not the only ancient author to write about Parthia. We know the names of several Greco-Roman writers who

¹⁷ For more on the lack of Parthian records see Introduction to Part 1 below.

produced more detailed historical commentaries about the eastern empire. Apollodorus of Artemita, for example, composed a four-volume history of Parthia at the beginning of the first century BCE, and Asinius Quadratus published a similar work during the third century in the wake of the Severan dynasty's Parthian wars.¹⁸ Arrian's *Parthica*, which was written soon after the *Annales*' publication during Hadrian's reign, probably chronicled many of Rome's first-century interactions with Parthia. But, like Apollodorus' and Asinius Quadratus' treatises, Arrian's commentary has not survived intact and exists now only in fragments.¹⁹ We have no choice, therefore, but to rely on works not specifically dedicated to Parthian history, like the *Annales*, when analyzing Romano-Parthian relations during the Julio-Claudian era.

Fortunately, like Tacitus, a variety of classical writers discuss Romano-Parthian affairs during the early Principate as part of their treatment of other topics. The historians Velleius Paterculus, Flavius Josephus, and Cassius Dio, as well as the biographers Suetonius and Plutarch, all record stories about Parthia involving Augustus and his successors. None is as detailed in its recounting of Parthian affairs as Tacitus' *Annales*, however. This is partly the result of the subject matter or time frame of these other works. Paterculus' *Historiarum Libri Duo* ends halfway through Tiberius' reign, and Josephus' *Bellum Judicae* is much more focused on events in Judea than on Rome's shared border with Parthia.²⁰ The scope of Dio's *Historia Romana* is so broad that it often only mentions Parthian affairs hurriedly in passing.²¹ And the anecdotal accounts in Suetonius' and Plutarch's biographic essays are usually more concerned with sensationalism and moralizing than they are with historical accuracy.²² By contrast, when the *Annales* was initially published (at the close of the first century CE or start of the second), it probably covered most of the Julio-Claudian period, from Augustus' death to the end of Nero's reign.

18 For Apollodorus see Nikonorov 1996 and for Asinius Quadratus see Cornell 2013: 615-616.

19 For the fragments of Arrian's *Parthica* cf. Lepper and DeVoto 1985.

20 Paterculus wrote during the first half of the first century CE, Josephus during the second half.

21 Cassius Dio, who lived during the late second and early third century, composed an eighty volume history of Rome, which covered the period from the founding of Rome to 229 CE.

22 Suetonius produced a series of biographies in the early second century CE about the Julio-Claudian emperors. Plutarch's late first-century biographies about the Julio-Claudian emperors have not survived except for a few fragments. His essays about the Late Republican generals Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey have, however.

Furthermore, in most cases, when the same Parthian story appears in the *Annales* and other ancient texts, the *Annales*' version is almost always longer and more descriptive. Despite major lacunae in our current version of the text, the *Annales* remains our most thorough and probing treatment of Rome's first-century encounters with the Parthian Empire.²³

The historiography of Tacitean studies is complex; however, it usually starts—at least, in most modern discussions—with Ronald Syme's seminal work, *Tacitus: 2 Volumes* (1958). Syme's study blended in-depth textual analysis of Tacitus' works with socio-political commentary about the writer's contemporary world. Syme may not have been the first to recognize Tacitus' genius as a historian, but he was responsible for establishing the author's literary contributions as part of the social context and political environment of the early Principate, something which no other commentator had previously accomplished. Syme's work is an important precedent for our own study, which also intends to approach the *Annales* from a historical perspective. Like Syme, we will also attempt to set the *Annales* squarely within the political context of its day and age. This socio-political approach is not the only way to assess Tacitus as a writer, however. Alongside Syme's method, Tacitean scholars have also tried to understand the historian's works on a purely literary level. In 1896, the Latinist Friedrich Leo called Tacitus one of the Roman Empire's greatest poets.²⁴ Since then, experts have attempted to examine how other literary genres may have influenced Tacitus' works. Authors, such as E. Löfstedt, C. Mendell, and A. Leeman, have argued that Tacitus' style uses writing techniques commonly found in tragic poetry.²⁵ Other commentators, like S. Bartsch, have focused on the theatricality that permeates many of Tacitus' scenes.²⁶ And F. L'Hoir has proposed that Tacitus' vocabulary patterns in the *Annales* adhere to some of

23 The books of the *Annales* dealing with all of Caligula's reign, as well as those addressing the beginning of Claudius' and the end Nero's, are now lost. Most scholars now suspect that Tacitus divided his work into thirds, three hexads which each contained six books. The first hexad seems to have been dedicated to Tiberius, the second to Caligula and Claudius, and the third to Nero.

24 Cf. Mellor 1995: 218-229 and 2011: 6; L'Hoir 2006: 1.

25 Löfstedt 1948; Mendell 1935 and 1957; and Leeman 1974.

26 Bartsch 1994.

the rules for writing tragedy set forth in Aristotle's *Poetics*.²⁷ Analyzing the *Annales* properly will therefore require us to take into account all of Tacitus' personae—as historian, politician, and poet.

²⁷ L'Hoir 2006.

PART 1:
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT FOR TACITUS' TREATMENT OF PARTHIA IN THE *ANNALES*

Romano-Parthian interactions during the first centuries BCE and CE progressed through three distinct stages. After first coming into contact with the Parthian Empire in 96 BCE, Rome's commanders adopted a diplomatic, yet oftentimes heavy-handed approach when dealing with the newest superpower in the eastern Mediterranean. Until Crassus' Parthian campaign in 53, Parthia was technically Rome's ally in the East—though Roman generals like Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey probably still viewed the Parthian king as more of a client than an equal. Crassus' expedition, followed shortly afterwards by two Parthian raids into Syria (51 and 40) and Antony's counterattack (36), quickly altered the status quo along the eastern frontier. In the second stage of their relationship, Rome's formerly tense but often workable partnership with the Parthian Arsacid dynasty devolved into a state of open warfare. Large armies of Roman legionnaires and Parthian cavalry were pitted against one another in violent clashes of arms. Such a drastic shift in the course of these two superpowers' history has, as we might expect, elicited considerable debate.

Part of what has fueled and continues to drive this debate even now is our glaring lack of knowledge about the Parthians themselves; at times they seem to defy definition. At one point or another, they have been variously identified as Scythian nomads, Persian revivalists, Hellenistic despots, or feudal warlords.²⁸ This frustratingly enigmatic picture of Parthian society is due in no small part to the sparse, fragmentary nature of our evidence. Few Parthian records have survived down to the modern era. This tragedy was not brought about by any simple accident of manuscript transmission (although, to be sure, the rigors of time have also played a part). The disappearance of the Parthians from the historical record was most likely a deliberate act perpetrated by their enemies and heirs. After

²⁸ For the Parthians as "Scythians" see Lozinski 1959: 36-37 and Paratore 1966: 526-527. As "Persian revivalists" cf. Wolski 1966, 1976, 1983, and 1985. See Colledge 1967: 57-76 for the similarities between the Parthian government and the imperial system of Hellenistic rulers. As "feudal warlords" see Debevoise 1938: xxxviii, who refers to Parthia at one point as "a vast feudatory power," and Colledge 1986: 3, who states that the Parthian kingship depended on "the co-operation of the baronial feudal Iranian lords and vassal kings."

the fall of the Parthian Arsacids (ca. 224 CE), their successors, the Neo-Persian Sassanids, systematically destroyed most documents and monuments dedicated to the reigns of Parthia's former kings. As true Persian revivalists, they considered the Arsacids dynastic interlopers and religious heretics.²⁹

We must therefore glean much of what we wish to know about Parthia from 1) numismatics, which were not so easily destroyed, and 2) Greco-Roman literary sources, which are coeval with Parthian society but hostile. However, while coinage can certainly provide us with regnal dates and occasional clues about this or that particular king's iconography, it is unable to offer much else, at least nothing in the way of specific detail. To understand the true character of the Parthians we must thus rely (unfortunately) on descriptions handed down to us by Parthia's chief rivals, the Greeks and Romans.³⁰ Doing so can create its own set of challenges, however. Such accounts tend to be heavily biased against the Parthians; Parthia was, after all, the Roman Empire's on-again off-again enemy for more than two and a half centuries. Such a long drawn-out period of conflict meant that over time the Greeks and Romans started to regard Parthia not just as an enemy, but as a nemesis—as the unyielding, relentless danger that lay just beyond their empire's eastern border. For many Romans, and especially for those of the Late Republican Period, Parthia seemed to be a sort of bogeyman, a constant threat lurking always in the shadows.³¹

This rather malevolent, largely Roman image of Parthia—that is, the specter of the great oriental “evil empire”—has percolated in one form or another down to our own day and given rise to the idea among some authors that Parthia, somewhat like Rome, was an aggressive state bent on the

29 Colledge 1967: 103-104; Dignas and Winter 2007: 56-62.

30 For broader discussions of Parthian sources see Bivar 1983: 21-24 and Widengren 1983: 1261-1283.

31 Horace *Carm.* 1.12.53 speaks of the “Parthians now threatening Latium”; Strabo 2.9.2 reports that “now they [the Parthians] rule over so much land and so many peoples, that in a way they have become rivals of the Romans in the size of their empire”; and Pompeius Trogus 41.1.1 describes “the Parthians, who now rule the East, having as it were divided the world with the Romans.” Although later Cass. Dio 40.14-15 also calls Parthia Rome's “rival” and suggests that the Parthians had become invincible in their own territory. And for Parthia's “other worldliness” cf. Manilius 4.674-675 and Lucan 8.290-307.

limitless expansion of its empire.³² Some scholars accuse the Parthians, in particular, of land hunger, building their empire and maintaining their power through the continuous absorption of neighboring states.³³ They have also been suspected of promoting themselves as the cultural inheritors of earlier Iranian dynasties and of laying claim to the Achaemenids' and Seleucids' former territorial holdings, many of which had over time inconveniently fallen into Rome's hegemonic sphere of influence.³⁴

32 For Rome's "boundless" imperial ambition cf. Verg. *Aen.* 1.279 ("empire without end"); Horace *Carm.* 4.15.14-15 ("Grant our nation power, and may it increase!"); and Cic. *Cat.* 3.26 ("Our empire ends not in any region of the earth but in the heavens.").

33 The temptation to see the Parthians as land-hungry "barbarians" derives largely from Strabo and Pompeius Trogus' assertion that the Parthians were originally steppe nomads of Scythian ethnicity. Ancient authors regularly portrayed the Scythians as violent, intractable itinerant barbarians from central Asia. So it is perhaps no wonder that at least a few connections have been drawn (Lozinski 1959: 36-37) between the "Scythian" Parthians and later central Asian nomadic hordes who swept across Europe (e.g., the Huns and Mongols). But we should steer far clear of condemning the Parthians as some sort of nomadic pestilence. This "guilt by association" assumes (rather unfairly) that the Parthians, much like the Huns or Mongols, not only built their empire on the backs of their enemies, but also sustained it through continuous conquest. This simply does not seem to have been the case. There is little support for the theory that the Parthian Empire was nothing more than a predatory animal. The Parthians were—at least by the end of the second century BCE—primarily agriculturalists. The Parthians' widespread reputation as superior horseman and the itinerant nature of the Arsacid court does certainly attest to some sort of nomadic roots. But there is every reason to believe that this type of lifestyle was quickly abandoned once the Parthians gained access to the rich agrarian plains of central and lower Mesopotamia. In addition, the Parthians were also able to maintain their empire's economic vitality largely through trade. Parthia's kings grew extremely rich by acting as middlemen along the famous Silk Road. Taken together with their vast agricultural resources, it seems highly unlikely then that the Parthians would have needed plunder, either from raids or foreign conquests, to sustain their empire economically.

34 It is hard to deny that Parthia's early kings promoted themselves at least in some sense as traditional Hellenistic monarchs. Not only did they preserve many of the old Greco-Macedonian provinces, which were themselves based on the even older Achaemenid satrapal system, but most also continued to use Greek for their various propaganda purposes. ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ or "Friend to the Greeks," for example, appears quite often on Parthian coinage (Sellwood 1983: 282 et passim). But beginning with Mithridates II "the Great" (ca. 123—88/87), the Parthians also started adopting titlature reminiscent of the Achaemenid Persians. Mithridates and a number of his successors styled themselves as ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ or "King of kings," the traditional title of the Achaemenid rulers. Cuneiform tablets confirm Mithridates II's official adoption of this title in 109 BCE (see Sellwood 1983: 285). Mithridates also apparently commissioned a rock relief sometime between 123 and 110 BCE at Behistun in north-western Iran, depicting himself and his four most distinguished satraps. The close proximity of this relief (which somehow miraculously survived the Sassanids' purge) to Darius the Great's famous Behistun monument (located just above) probably implies that Mithridates intended his audience to associate the two carvings (Colledge 1967: 32-33; Bivar 1983: 41-44). None of this, however, should be taken as definitive proof that Parthia's long-term imperial goals included all of the Achaemenids'/Seleucids' former territorial holding. Without the insight that the Parthians' own writings would provide—i.e., in the absence of any sort of policy statement laying out the exact limits of Parthia's imperial ambitions—it seems foolish to assume that the Parthians' only aspiration was the precise recreation of their predecessors' former dominions, what we might call "imperial envy." The closest we have to such a policy statement comes from Tacitus' *Annales* 6.31. At the end of Tiberius' reign, the Parthian king Artabanus II (III) sent the aged emperor a letter in which he threatened to reclaim all of the property that once belonged to the Achaemenids and Seleucids. But besides being long after the outbreak of the Romano-Parthian Wars and therefore far removed chronologically from early Parthian history, there is also nothing, no Parthian source, to corroborate its authenticity. It should therefore not be offered as proof of the Arsacids' imperial designs in the second or first centuries BCE. The resurrection of the Achaemenid ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ title, as well as the widespread use of the pro-Greek (and a bit pandering) ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ, does have a far simpler, less melodramatic explanation. Like so many other former conquerors of Mesopotamia, the Parthians quickly found themselves towards the close of the second century trying to administer a vast, multi-ethnic empire. Their revival of old Achaemenid/Hellenistic titles could have been nothing more than their way of seeking legitimacy, of endearing

Therefore, according to this interpretation, because of the two states' imperialistic inclinations and the lack of other potential adversaries at the time,³⁵ the clash of civilizations was not just possible but inevitable.³⁶

Other experts have argued that the empires were never destined to collide, that by the time of their first contact (ca. 96 BCE), Parthia's expansionist tendencies had diminished considerably. The Parthians' strong desire to shake off the Seleucid yoke is what had compelled them first to leave their homeland along the shores of the Caspian Sea and then to conquer the rest of the Near East.³⁷ But by the early first century BCE, Parthia's wars with the Seleucids were largely over. Antiochus VII Sidetes' abortive eastern campaign (127 BCE) had proved to be the last great gasp of his dynasty's imperial legacy. Afterwards, Parthia consolidated its rule over everything up to the Euphrates River, as Roman hegemony meanwhile permeated more and more of the eastern Mediterranean. As a result, the Seleucids' suzerainty soon became limited only to a small area immediately surrounding their capital at Antioch. With the Seleucid threat effectively neutralized, there is no reason to believe that Parthia either needed or wanted to keep expanding. In fact, as we will see throughout Part 1, there is every

themselves to their two largest subject ethnic groups, the Persians and the Greeks. Even Wolski 1993: 155-156, who appears convinced that the Arsacids identified with the Achaemenid/Iranian tradition, at least recognizes that their use of ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ was a political ploy meant to draw Greek support away from the Seleucids.

- 35 By the end of the mid-first century BCE, no other large highly organized state still existed that was capable of challenging Roman or Parthian expansion. With the gradual yet inevitable collapse of the Antigonids, the Seleucids, and several lesser imperial kingdoms in the East (e.g., Mithridates IV Eupator's Pontic kingdom and Tigranes I the Elder's Armenian empire), Rome and Parthia were simply put the last men standing when the smoke finally cleared. The world, or at least the world which encompassed the Mediterranean Basin and the Middle East, had become what Eckstein 2006: 23-24 has called a bipolar anarchy, a world dominated by only two superpowers with little or no international law.
- 36 Debevoisie 1938: 28; Luttwak 1976: 19 refers to Parthia as a "systemic threat to Rome"; and Wachter 1987: 18 claims Parthia was "a serious and continuing threat ... in the East." Rarely have the Parthians been viewed sympathetically—although notable exceptions would include Anderson 1934: 257; Ziegler 1964; and perhaps also Lozinski 1959 who remarks that "the policy of the Parthian Empire was not aggressive, but its resources were sufficient to enable it to stop the expansion of Rome."
- 37 Although primarily westwards in their outlook (i.e., Mediterranean-facing), the Seleucids clung desperately to their far eastern possessions at time. Both the Seleucid kings Demetrius II and Antiochus VII tried and failed to restore territories lost to the Parthians over the course of the second century BCE. These Seleucid campaigns, or rather their abysmal failures, are what compelled the Parthians to press westwards and to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of Seleucid authority. By occupying strategic provinces like Media and Babylonia as the Seleucids withdrew, the Parthians were able to buffer themselves and their homeland from any future Seleucid reprisals. The story of the Parthian Empire's rise is, in other words, closely intertwined with the demise of the Seleucid state; it is rather hard in fact to speak of one without referring to the other. And for this reason, there is a strong argument to be made that this rivalry, this struggle to remain independent from Seleucid rule—and not strict land hunger or "imperial envy" of former Achaemenid/Seleucid territorial possessions—is what really stoked the fires of Parthia's early imperialism.

reason to suspect that the Parthians were, for the most part, perfectly content with the Euphrates as their westernmost boundary.³⁸

If this latter theory is correct (as we suspect), then such an interpretation would have a direct impact on how we view early Romano-Parthian interactions. Rome alone, and not Parthia, was to blame for many of the eastern frontier conflicts of the Late Republic. Specifically, Rome's eastern commanders more often than not unnecessarily provoked war by treating the Parthian king and his representatives condescendingly. They employed what we might call "cold war" tactics—brinkmanship, espionage, and devious diplomatic strategies—to coerce unfavorable territorial concessions and treaties out of the Parthians. They attempted to destabilize the Arsacid regime by backing pretenders for the Parthian throne. And when the right time finally came, these same Roman generals launched two unabashed wars of conquest against the Parthian Empire.³⁹ However, Parthia was never a helpless victim in this great struggle for dominance over the eastern Mediterranean; once sufficiently provoked, it vigorously and successfully defended its territory. In spite of the Romans' long record of duplicitous tactics and blatant aggression, the Parthians managed to beat back not just one, but two invading legionary armies—a feat few other empires had been able to achieve in the preceding 200-year period.⁴⁰

Rome's inability to conquer Parthia outright in the 50s and 30s led directly to the third and final stage of Romano-Parthian interaction during the Late Republic and Early Principate, the Augustan settlement. Over the course of his long reign, Augustus established a rapport with Parthia's monarchs and ended the cycle of invasions and counterattacks. In 23 BCE, Rome's new Princeps negotiated a

³⁸ Isaac 1993: 31-33 and Cornell 1993: 144 point out that, during the Romano-Parthian conflicts of the Late Republic, Parthia was never the instigator. The Parthians attack Syria twice, but only after Crassus' invasion of their own territory.

³⁹ I.e., Crassus in 53 and Antony in 36. While few would dispute that Crassus' campaign was unprovoked, some might argue that Antony's expedition was not a war of conquest, but retaliation for earlier Parthian raids into Syria, especially those of Pacorus and the Roman traitor Labienus in 40. However, while these earlier Parthian attacks might have served as a convenient pretext, Antony's true motive must have been his desire for military renown and plunder. At the time, he was engaged with Octavian in a heated propaganda campaign, and the glory and gold he would have gained from conquering Parthia would have gone far to assist him in his ongoing domestic contest for control of the empire.

⁴⁰ Crassus' at Carrhae in 53; Antony's at Phraaspa in 36.

truce with the Parthian king Phraates IV; and in 2 CE, he agreed to a formal treaty which probably set the Euphrates as the official boundary between the two states. This eastern settlement seems to have officially remained in place until the outbreak of Nero's Armenian War (58 CE). As a result, some scholars have come to see this stage of Romano-Parthian relations under Augustus and his Julio-Claudian successors as an unusually long, extended period of harmony and peaceful coexistence. It is sometimes cited, in fact, as one of the cornerstones of the Pax Romana.⁴¹

However, what we will demonstrate in Part 1 is that this period was never truly harmonious or especially peaceful. Augustus may have stopped fighting Parthia overtly and publicly as Crassus and Antony had done, but the struggle against Rome's eastern rival continued nonetheless—only now secretly through pretenders and proxies. Augustus readopted and sometimes modified many of the “cold war” tactics employed by earlier Roman commanders; he also invented a few of his own. It was this cold war, and not any happy, peaceful coexistence, that his successors inherited and perpetuated. The Pax Romana of the first century CE, as far as Parthia is concerned, is a myth. Tacitus' chief goal in the *Annales*' eastern episodes is to repudiate this Julio-Claudian cold war, to show that it was always a bad foreign policy. Before we can fully appreciate Tacitus' objections, however, we must first understand the Julio-Claudian Parthian policy itself, its origins, and the key mechanisms which made it so attractive to the dynasty for so long.

41 Luttwak 1976: 24. Bivar 1983: 67 says that, thanks to the Augustan settlement, “both sides were easily able to escape from the shackles of their own military propaganda, and lay the foundations of a comparatively stable peace, the Pax Romana.” Sheldon 2010: 97 remarks in a similar statement that: “By the use of diplomacy under Augustus, each side was able to escape the shackles of its own military propaganda and lay the foundations of a relatively stable peace.” Dignas and Winter 2007: 13-14 call Augustus' treaty with Parthia “a great success” and claim that “Augustus' policy of cooperation laid the foundation for a more or less uninterrupted peace between the two powers throughout the first century AD.” Other authors sometimes seem to imply through omission that this period was less contentious than it really was; their accounts often jump directly from the Augustan settlement to Nero's war with Parthia over Armenia, overlooking the many indirect confrontations which occurred through pretenders and proxies (e.g., Luttwak 1976: 104-105; Campbell 1993: 229). Of course, part of this misconception stems from the ancient authors themselves who believed that, under the Julio-Claudians, they were living in an unprecedented period of peace. To be fair, however, there are also a number of modern writers who have acknowledged Rome and Parthia's ongoing struggles against each other during the former half of the first century CE (e.g., Whittaker 1994: 53-54; Bennett 1997: 188)

Chapter 1
Early Romano-Parthian Diplomatic Relations: Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey

Introduction

The “cold war” strategies that Augustus created to deal with Parthia and that the rest of the Julio-Claudian emperors eventually adhered to did not arise out of nowhere. Rome had a long history of double-dealing (bullying, spying, and treaty-breaking) when it came to eastern diplomacy; it also had a long history of interfering in the internal politics of sovereign states. In their early dealings with Parthia, many of Rome’s Late Republican generals simply did what they and their predecessors had always done to wrangle Hellenistic kings and eastern potentates: they treated them as inferiors, as petulant children to be guided by a firm Roman hand—or back of the hand as the case may be. But scholars often dismiss the double-dealings and backhanded diplomacy of these Republican commanders as simply another example of Roman *superbia*. Historians typically characterize these Roman generals as men who were wholly ignorant of how diplomacy and politics truly worked in the East. And they explain away Rome’s habit of mistreating eastern allies and clients as some mixture of Roman condescension, arrogance, and stupidity.

But while these, admittedly, ubiquitous Roman traits played some part in Rome’s eastern and early Parthian diplomatic encounters, we should perhaps not be too quick to dismiss the possibility that these “double-dealings” were also legitimate strategies for manipulating, containing, and hamstringing troublesome Hellenistic kingdoms. Republican generals like Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey were at times arrogant and haughty, but they were hardly stupid men. This does not imply that any of these individuals followed some sort of master plan in his early dealings with the Parthians. Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey conceived and implemented their various diplomatic maneuverings in the East independently and often on an ad hoc basis. Yet their individual strategies for handling the Parthians do form discernible patterns, precedents that their successors clearly seized and built upon. To understand

Augustus' own Parthian policy, we must therefore first examine the foundation upon which his innovations rest.

Sulla “the Fortunate” or “the Bully”?: An Example of Roman Brinkmanship

Ca. 100 BCE, the throne of the Anatolian kingdom of Cappadocia was in heated dispute. With the collapse of the kingdom's Ariarathid dynasty earlier that year, Cappadocia's bitter rivals, Mithridates VI of Pontus and Nicomedes III of Bithynia, both began vying to install their own creatures on the vacant throne. However, unable to resolve the affair themselves, each eventually submitted claims to the Roman Senate, which had arbitrated regional disagreements of this sort in the past. But rather than siding for either party, the Senate chose instead to leave Cappadocia's fate in the hands of the nation's nobility. The Cappadocians quickly rejected both foreign claimants and elected one of their own number, Ariobarzanes, as their new king. The senators were astute enough, though, to realize that Ariobarzanes' position would be tenuous at best without additional Roman support, so they dispatched the propraetor (and future dictator) L. Cornelius Sulla to the East.⁴²

While Sulla was in Asia Minor propping up Ariobarzanes, his business affairs took him near the Euphrates River, although we are not told exactly why. It was here that Sulla apparently earned the (in)famous distinction of being the first Roman ever to make contact with Parthia. As the story goes, the Parthians, who, we are told, “sought the friendship (*amicitia*) of the Roman people,” sent a special embassy to the Roman general.⁴³ At the meeting, Sulla—unknowingly or purposefully depending on one's interpretation—seated the Parthian ambassador Orobazus across from the Cappadocian Ariobarzanes. Sulla himself then sat down between the two men, acting not as humble host to the Parthian Empire's distinguished representative, but rather as referee for a couple of Rome's petulant

⁴² Probably in 92 BCE, although this date—as well as the exact sequence of these events—has been challenged in the past. Cf. Badian 1959; Sherwin-White 1977; and Keaveney 1981.

⁴³ Liv. *Epit.* 70.7: *ut amicitiam populi Romani peterent.*

clients. Although some sort of treaty must have come out of these talks (see below), Sulla's "improper" diplomatic protocol, nevertheless, still left Orobazus feeling greatly insulted. And, in fact, the Parthian king had the poor man executed upon his return to court at Ctesiphon just for tolerating such humiliation.⁴⁴

Thanks mostly to the salacious tone of Plutarch's popular account, many authors, both ancient and modern, have unsurprisingly blamed Sulla's personal shortcomings, his typical Roman arrogance and ignorance of eastern affairs, for Rome's less than stellar start with Parthia. According to these writers, Sulla treated Orobazus badly either because he could or because he truly had no idea who or how important the Parthians were.⁴⁵ But such explanations really do not give Sulla, a man who not only became dictator but also somehow died peacefully in his bed, enough credit. Sulla may well have been guilty of hubris at times, but he was also a seasoned diplomat. It seems improbable then that Sulla would have gone through the great trouble of hosting Orobazus without first learning something about the people whom the man represented. Anything less would have been imprudent and highly uncharacteristic for someone as shrewd as Sulla. Besides, he already had a good source of information about the East at his disposal, his Cappadocian client Ariobarzanes.⁴⁶ But if Sulla was not, in fact, ill-informed about eastern affairs, if he did know exactly who and how dangerous the Parthians were, then we should perhaps view his "mistreatment" of Orobazus as a calculated, diplomatic maneuver and not as a careless lapse in protocol. He must have knowingly risked provoking the Parthians.

We should perhaps first note that, in spite of everything, these talks were not entirely fruitless. If nothing else, the two parties left having agreed to respect the Euphrates as the official boundary between their two empires.⁴⁷ Although the Parthians themselves were not ardent imperialists, we would

44 Plut. *Sulla* 5.7-8; Liv. *Epit.* 70; Ruf. *Fest. Brev.* 15; Ampelius 31; and Vell. Pat. 2.24.3.

45 Debevoise 1938: 46; Campbell 1993: 214.

46 Keaveney 1981: 196-197; Sheldon 2010: 15-16.

47 Florus 1.46.4 states that just prior to Crassus' invasion of Parthia a messenger arrived from the Parthian king who "reminded the Romans of the former treaties with Pompey and Sulla" (*percussorum cum Pompeio foederum Sullaque meminisset*). At least, here, in Florus, the Parthian king seems to be suggesting that by proceeding with his attack (i.e.,

suggest that at this time (ca. 96 BCE) such a settlement was actually contrary to their interests in the region. The Parthians may have been content, for the most part, with their own current imperial borders; however, their client, Tigranes II of Armenia, certainly was not. Tigranes had recently annexed neighboring Sophene, gaining not only access to the Euphrates at Tomisa but also a common border with none other than Ariobarzanes' much embattled Cappadocian kingdom. We know that Tigranes may have had his eye on Cappadocia too, because he actually invaded the kingdom and ousted Ariobarzanes soon after Sulla and Orobasus' encounter.⁴⁸

We can, furthermore, probably also assume that the Parthian king was at least aware, if not openly supportive, of Tigranes' imperial designs. Tigranes would later become one of Parthia's bitter rivals, but at this early stage in his career he was still very much under the Parthian king's thumb.⁴⁹ Thus, because of Parthia's long relationship with Tigranes and apparent tolerance for his imperial ambitions, the Parthian king might not have wanted what he considered Orobasus' "limiting" border agreement with Rome. We can only speculate, but perhaps Orobasus was not even authorized to make such a treaty. Perhaps his instructions were to just feel out the Romans; it was only their first meeting, after all. And if Orobasus did walk away from Sulla having signed an unauthorized treaty, then this interpretation might explain why he was executed after returning home, not simply because he sat in the wrong place, but because he had signed an disadvantageous treaty against the Parthian king's explicit wishes.

Sulla, on the other hand, would have undoubtedly welcomed such a boundary agreement, not because he or any of his successors had any intention of respecting it themselves—as we will soon see,

by crossing the Euphrates) Crassus is somehow breaking an earlier agreement of both Pompey *and* Sulla. Cf. also Orosius 6.13.2 who says something similar.

48 For Tigranes' annexation of Sophene see Strabo 11.14.15. Tigranes' subsequent attack on Cappadocia (probably in 91, although once again cf. E. Badian 1959; Sherwin-White 1977; and Keaveney 1980) successfully ousted Ariobarzanes. The Senate then dispatched Manius Aquilius (ca. 90/89) to restore Ariobarzanes to his throne. Also cf. Redgate 1998: 68-69 for Tigranes' imperial career.

49 Tigranes acceded to the Armenian throne with Parthia's help, see Strabo 11.14.6. This has led some scholars to see him as Parthia's "vassal." See especially Chaumont 1985-88: 23. Cf. also Redgate 1998: 69.

Rome's eastern generals would cross the Euphrates whenever it suited them, treaties be damned—but because he probably believed that a treaty with Parthia, Armenia's patron, was the best way to hinder Tigranes and to protect Ariobarzanes' fledgling kingdom. Cappadocia was, after all, Sulla's whole reason for being in the East in the first place. He would have had no way of knowing at the time that Tigranes secretly resented his Parthian overlord and that the Armenian king would eventually attack Ariobarzanes anyway. Finally, if this boundary agreement were not, in fact, part of Sulla's strategy for defending Cappadocia, why was Ariobarzanes even at the meeting with the Parthian ambassador? Ariobarzanes' presence, and the mere fact that Sulla seated him across from Orobazus, seems to suggest that the Cappadocian had an important stake in the discussions.

If our theory is correct, then that would, of course, mean Sulla actually coerced Orobazus into signing a treaty he was not willing—or worse, not authorized—to conclude. It would mean that Sulla's seating arrangement at the talks, far from being some sort of diplomatic faux pas, was actually an intentional intimidation tactic, a way of bullying the Parthian ambassador into giving Sulla exactly what he wanted. “Bully diplomacy” of this sort—what modern political scientists commonly refer to as brinkmanship—was, admittedly, extremely risky; Sulla could have easily incited a war with Parthia. However, this possibility was never really Sulla's concern. The unique makeup of Rome's imperial machine meant that Sulla's time in the East was limited, and like so many of Rome's other eastern generals, Sulla had goals that were almost always personal and often shortsighted. If “bully diplomacy” got Sulla what he wanted, the prestige and political clout that came with fulfilling the Senate's Cappadocian mandate, then that was all that mattered. If, by chance, his plan had backfired, an insulted diplomat, an irate Parthian king, and an ominous eastern war would have likely been problems not for Sulla, but for one of his successors.

Lucullus and Sextilius “the Spy”

When Rome’s Third Mithridatic War (74/73 - 63 BCE) finally brought Rome and Parthia to the bargaining table again (ca. 69 and almost thirty years after Sulla’s mission), the political landscape of Asia Minor had drastically changed and so had the nature of Rome’s interests in the region. Mithridates VI Eupator’s “Asiatic Vespers” (88 BCE), a widespread Anatolian conspiracy, which resulted in the deaths of almost eighty thousand Roman and Italian citizens, had made most Romans, understandably, deeply suspicious of easterners. Nor did it help that the First and Second Mithridatic Wars (89-85 and ca. 83-81, respectively) ended somewhat inconclusively, resolving little and alleviating few Roman anxieties about the East.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Mithridates, though gaining few tangible benefits from these earlier contests with Rome, still managed to reap some rewards. His uncanny ability to engage the most powerful force in the Mediterranean and to survive somehow—not just once, but repeatedly—made him quite popular among anti-Roman advocates. Even if Rome still had a distinct military advantage over Pontus, Mithridates’ propaganda war against Rome was clearly gaining momentum in the late 80s and early 70s BCE. This would have meant that, when the Roman general L. Licinius Lucullus set out against Pontus in 74 for Rome’s third and final contest with Mithridates, he would have had few allies left in the region—and fewer still whom he would have trusted.

Fortunately, Lucullus seems to have not needed many allies—at least at first. In 74/73, Mithridates besieged the port city of Cyzicus in Bithynia after defeating Lucullus’ co-consul M. Cotta in a pitched battle near Chalcedon. Lucullus, although arriving too late from his designated province of Cilicia to assist Cotta, demonstrated enough presence of mind not to risk another direct assault. Instead he chose to encircle Mithridates’ army in a counter-siege and to begin harrying the Pontic king’s supply

⁵⁰ Mithridates briefly occupied Macedon and Greece during the First Mithridatic War, but was eventually captured in battle by Sulla. With the Social War raging in Italy, however, Sulla was compelled in the end to set Mithridates free, essentially sacrificing face for political necessity. Nor did Roman prestige in Asia fare any better during the Second Mithridatic War which, thanks to Sulla’s lieutenant L. Licinius Murena, devolved rather quickly into nothing more than an inconclusive border skirmish. For more on Rome’s earlier contests with Mithridates see also Magie 1950; Sherwin-White 1983; Matyszak 2008; and Mayor 2011.

lines. The strategy proved effective, eventually crippling Mithridates' troops with hunger and disease. As winter approached and with Cyzicus still as yet unbreached, Mithridates finally relented, withdrawing to Pontus with but a fraction of his original army. Lucullus' victory prompted a meeting of Roman proconsuls later that year at Nicomedia to discuss how the war was to proceed. The conservative elements at the conference favored a diplomatic solution, but Lucullus and his lieutenants overruled them and insisted on pursuing Mithridates. Thus, in the summer of 71, Lucullus launched his Pontic campaign, the intention of which was to capture Mithridates and to end Rome's troubles in Asia permanently. However, this phase of the war unfolded, unfortunately, much the same. The Romans attacked Mithridates' communication lines and laid siege to various Pontic cities, presumably this time trying to goad the king into open battle. Already reeling from his earlier losses in Bithynia, Mithridates did not dare engage the Romans now without his forces at full strength. While retreating still farther westwards, Pontus' army completely lost its discipline, forcing Mithridates to abandon the field and flee for his life.⁵¹

Mithridates and his small band of companions fled for safety into Armenia, where they found asylum at the court of Tigranes (now known as "the Great"). Although technically the Pontic king's son-in-law, Tigranes had chosen, up to this point, to remain neutral and not involve himself in Mithridates' earlier encounters with Rome. And he might have done so again had Lucullus, after learning of Mithridates' whereabouts, not dispatched his legate, Appius Clodius, with a rather stern ultimatum. Clodius, in what we might see as just another example of Rome's "bully diplomacy" tactics, demanded that Tigranes hand over his father-in-law at once or face his own Roman invasion. Tigranes, of course, refused to capitulate to Clodius' threats, probably not out of some sense of familial obligation—most of the Asiatic kingdoms were connected at this time by marriage alliances—but because he, most likely, thought that backing Mithridates was a better way of advancing his own

⁵¹ Plut. *Luc.* 8.6-8, 9.2-5, 11.2, 14.1; App. *Mithr.* 72-76, 78.

imperial agenda. Ever since returning to the Armenian throne from his Parthian hostageship (ca. 96/95), Tigranes had been an ardent imperialist. As we have already seen, he attacked Rome's client Ariobarzanes of Cappadocia (probably in 92) only a few years after Sulla and Orobazus' meeting and treaty arrangement, perhaps against the explicit wishes of the Parthian king. After the death of his lord, the Parthian king Mithridates II Megas in 88 BCE,⁵² Tigranes finally broke all ties with his former masters and seized the Parthian-controlled, northern Mesopotamian territories of Gordyene, Sordene, and Adiabene.⁵³ Until the sudden appearance of Mithridates at Tigranes' court, the Armenian king's main rival was, therefore, not Rome but Parthia. Had Lucullus been a bit more patient and Clodius a bit less abrasive in his diplomatic approach, this might have stayed the case; Tigranes might have surrendered his father-in-law without much fuss. However, in this instance, that typical Roman *superbia* and reliance on "bully diplomacy" backfired, unlike in our earlier example of Sulla and Orobazus, driving two potentially dangerous adversaries into an unlikely, but formidable new alliance. Lucullus' alienation of Tigranes did create an interesting opportunity, though. For the first and perhaps only time in their shared 400-year conflict, it gave Rome and Parthia a common enemy.⁵⁴

True to his word, Lucullus launched his Armenian campaign in 69, marking the first time a Roman army marched onto the Tigris plateau. Once there, he wasted no time advancing on Tigranes' southern capital of Tigranocerta. Unlike in Bithynia or Pontus, however, he was met in battle by a sizable force commanded by both Tigranes and Mithridates. But despite being outnumbered, the

⁵² Interestingly, the same year as Mithridates Eupator's "Asiatic Vespers."

⁵³ Tigranes' obvious thirst for conquest probably meant that he would have turned against the Parthians eventually anyway (it is likely that he harbored bitterness against them for keeping him as a political hostage). But if the Parthian king had for some reason tried to hold Tigranes back from invading Cappadocia in 92 because of Sulla's/Orobazus' treaty, then this too might have further alienated the Armenian monarch. It may be that, over the objections of the Parthians, Tigranes attacked Ariobarzanes anyway simply to demonstrate that his leash was not quite as taut as the Parthian king had hoped. But he still, of course, would have had to wait until Mithridates II's death before being so bold as to seize Parthian territory outright. The point here, of course, is that if, as we suspect, the Parthian king still felt obligated to respect Orobazus' treaty, despite any personal distaste, then Sulla's "bully diplomacy" may have actually hastened the break between the Parthians and Tigranes.

⁵⁴ Plut. *Luc.* 14.6, 21-23, 27-30; Cass. Dio 37.5.3-5; App. *Mithr.* 78; Memnon 43.2; also cf. Sherwin-White 1983: 174-76; and Sullivan 1990: 97-99.

Romans still managed to turn back the Armenian army. No doubt to Lucullus' immense disappointment, Mithridates once again eluded capture, fleeing with Tigranes into the mountains of northern Armenia, where the pair immediately began recruiting another fighting force. Meanwhile, perhaps out of disgust, Lucullus proceeded to dismember the Tigranes' empire systematically. He began first by completely dismantling Tigranocerta and freeing the various peoples Tigranes had enslaved there. We are also told that he liberated several northern Mesopotamian territories from Armenian rule, probably the same Gordyene, Sordene, and Adiabene which, as we just mentioned, had been former Parthian vassal states.⁵⁵ This last act may have been some sort of overture to the Parthians, a way of enticing them into siding with Rome against Tigranes and Mithridates.

This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Tigranes and Mithridates had recently sent an offer of alliance to the Parthian king, Phraates III Theos. During the winter of 69/68, Tigranes and Mithridates were rallying their new army in the north, and, with little else left to bargain with, they probably promised to return the disputed Mesopotamian territories in exchange for the Parthians' help against Rome. And Mithridates would have likely added his typical warning about the insatiable rapaciousness of Rome's imperial ambitions (essentially, help us or you will be Rome's next victim). But, of course, such an offer would have seemed hollow once Lucullus' own ambassador appeared before Phraates with news that the Romans had already liberated the provinces in question—presumably, the implication was that the newly-freed territories would eventually be reabsorbed by the Parthian state.⁵⁶ Such a seemingly benevolent gesture on the Romans' part would not, however, have come without a cost; Rome was not typically in the business of assisting its imperial neighbors without an expectation of *quid pro quo*. Probably in exchange for the Romans' act of good faith, Lucullus expected the Parthians to support Rome in its ongoing war against Tigranes and Mithridates.⁵⁷ And this

⁵⁵ Plut. *Luc.* 25-29; App. *Mithr.* 67, 84-87; and Cass. Dio 36.1.

⁵⁶ App. *Mithr.* 87; Cass. Dio 36.1-3; Memnon 58; and Sherwin-White 1983: 181.

⁵⁷ Even here, when it seems that the Romans were relying more on the carrot, they would have still had the stick in reserve. As Keaveney 1981: 199 notes: "When Lucullus heard of this [i.e., Tigranes'/Mithridates' embassy to the Parthians] he

seems to be precisely what happened.⁵⁸ After all, Sulla's previous diplomatic slight had been almost a generation earlier and probably now long forgotten. Phraates was, more than likely, concerned now with recouping his territorial losses in northern Mesopotamia and punishing Tigranes for his betrayal. If an alliance with Rome afforded him the best chance of doing so, then so be it.

Given how the next phase of Lucullus' war was to play out, the Romans, too, would have likely benefited from Parthia's military assistance. Not only could the Parthians have provided the Romans with crucial logistical information about northern Armenia, where Tigranes and Mithridates were presently hiding out, but they could have also supplied invaluable additional cavalry support.⁵⁹ The Roman legions at this time relied rather heavily on infantry units, sometimes to the detriment of their cavalry corps.⁶⁰ While this may have given Lucullus an advantage on the battlefield and in siegecraft, it also made the Roman army less mobile. Lucullus had already lost Mithridates on three separate occasions, at least partly because he could not pursue him quickly enough. Perhaps Lucullus himself realized how advantageous a Parthian alliance could be, and this was why he was so amenable towards Phraates at first. Yet, in spite of the mutual benefits of working together and the alliance's rather promising start, Lucullus' partnership with Phraates broke down rather rapidly. After expelling Lucullus' ambassadors from his court, Phraates and the Parthians, we are told, assumed a "watchful neutrality."⁶¹

Still intent on capturing Mithridates, perhaps for the glory he imagined himself receiving, Lucullus blundered into northern Armenia in the fall of 69, probably only moderately prepared for the conditions his army was about to encounter. His goal was, most likely, Tigranes' secondary capital of

too sent ambassadors to the king asking that he should either help the Romans or remain strictly neutral. He made all sorts of promises if they should take the Roman side but he also backed this with threats as to what he would do to them if they aided the enemy."

58 Keaveney 1981: 199-201, at least, seems to think that the two powers signed another formal treaty at this time.

59 Prior to Tigranes' imperial revival, Armenia had been a Parthian dependent for almost half of a century during most of the Parthian king Mithridates II Megas' reign.

60 Keppie 1984: 78-79.

61 Cass. Dio 36.3.3.

Artaxata. But the region's mountainous terrain, as well as the enemy's superb guerrilla tactics, soon convinced Lucullus that his target was unobtainable. Unable to reach Artaxata, Lucullus finally withdrew to the south, where he mitigated his failure, and, no doubt, his personal disgust at having lost his prize yet again, by besieging and occupying Nisibis. However, while the Romans were wintering there, Mithridates somehow managed to raise a small army of his own and march back to Pontus undetected. Surprising the local Roman garrison commander, who like Lucullus may have never expected to see the Pontic king again, Mithridates then managed at Zela to slaughter the equivalent of two and a half Roman legions. When news of the bloodbath reach Lucullus' camp, the general's troops mutinied, refusing, as Lucullus wished, to chase after Mithridates yet again. Lucullus' officers instead led the army back to Galatia where they assumed a defensive posture. Mithridates, who had in the meantime fallen back to the citadel of Talaura in Lesser Armenia to await Tigranes' reinforcements, now sallied out from his stronghold and leisurely retook all of Pontus. Hearing of this fiasco, the Roman Senate, which had previously chosen not to interfere, voted to recall Lucullus. His replacement, the famous Cn. Pompeius Magnus, assumed command of Rome's Asian army the following year and finally brought the war to its long-awaited, if anticlimactic, conclusion.⁶²

Would an alliance between Rome and Parthia have changed the outcome of Lucullus' campaign? We can only speculate, but we suspect so. Better intelligence about northern Armenia would have certainly aided Roman efforts there. And a more mobile strike force, perhaps an auxiliary contingent of Parthian horsemen, would have definitely limited Mithridates' movements in and out of Pontus. So why then did Romano-Parthian talks collapse so abruptly in 69? At least two of our sources, Appian and Plutarch, suggest that it was because of the Parthian king's duplicity. Through his ambassadors at the Parthian court, Lucullus apparently learned that Phraates was also secretly negotiating with Tigranes—playing both sides, as it were.⁶³ Although this Parthian treachery is a

⁶² Plut. *Luc.* 31-35; App. *Mithr.* 87-89; and Cass. Dio 36.4-13.

⁶³ Plut. *Luc.* 30.1; App. *Mithr.* 87.

possibility, it seems rather unlikely. Tigranes, once just an unruly vassal, was now one of Parthia's bitterest enemies. Why would Phraates throw in his lot with someone like Tigranes who had not only annexed Parthian territory, but now even dared call himself "King of kings," the traditional title of Persian and Parthian royalty?⁶⁴ Besides, by this date, not only had Lucullus demonstrated that he was the superior general, having just bested Tigranes and Mithridates at Tigranocerta, but he had also come bearing gifts—i.e., the disputed Mesopotamian provinces. Phraates would have been foolish to risk such a profitable alliance by double-dealing with Tigranes. Furthermore, once the Romano-Parthian talks had broken down, why did Phraates not jump in and assist the Armenians? If the Parthian king had been hedging his bets all along and negotiating with both sides, he should have rushed to Tigranes' camp when the alliance with Lucullus fell through. But, as we noted earlier, he did not; he remained neutral, which would suggest that he was not also secretly in league with the Armenians.

Cassius Dio's version of these events gives a more nuanced account, and for this reason alone it should carry some weight. According to Dio, after both parties had agreed to an alliance, Lucullus dispatched a Roman officer named Sextilius to Phraates' court, presumably to act as some sort of military adviser or liaison.⁶⁵ We are told that Phraates, however, soon became suspicious of Sextilius, believing him to be a spy assessing Parthia's military capabilities for some future Roman invasion. The Parthian king quickly expelled Sextilius from court and broke off his fledgling alliance with Lucullus.⁶⁶ We must determine now whether Phraates was just being unduly paranoid, or was Sextilius, in fact, some sort of Roman agent? The sparse and often contradictory nature of our evidence makes it rather hard to say for sure one way or the other. But we must at least admit the possibility that not only was Sextilius a Roman spy, but that Lucullus might have been planning all along to double cross the Parthians.

⁶⁴ On Tigranes' adoption of the title "King of kings," see Redgate 1998: 74-75.

⁶⁵ Dio actually calls this officer "Secilius", but modern authors seem to agree that this is, in fact, the same Sextilius whom we find in Appian (see Keaveney 1981: 200 n. 23). On Sextilius' role at the Parthian court cf. Keaveney 1981: 201.

⁶⁶ Cass. Dio 36.1-3.

Plutarch reports that Lucullus actually contemplated bypassing Tigranes and Mithridates after the Roman victory at Tigranocerta and attacking Parthia instead. Admittedly, Plutarch makes no mention of Sextilius specifically at this juncture, and the proposed invasion is ultimately aborted when Lucullus' troops mutiny, refusing to proceed any farther eastwards into unknown territory.⁶⁷ However, Plutarch's story, which is too often dismissed by scholars as entirely fanciful,⁶⁸ does closely coincide with descriptions of Lucullus' character elsewhere. For example, Sallust, who is rather critical of Lucullus, notes that "he was thought outstanding in every way except for his extreme desire for extending the empire."⁶⁹ It may be then that Plutarch's account, although derived from the same rather conflated, biased source as Appian's, still contains a small kernel of truth—i.e., Lucullus' desire to bring the war to Parthia's doorstep. As Plutarch says, "[Lucullus] resolved to pass by Tigranes and Mithridates as antagonists already overcome and to try the power of Parthia by leading his army against them, thinking it would be a glorious result, thus in one current of war, like an athlete in the games, to throw down three kings, one after another, and successively to deal as a conqueror with three of the greatest powers under heaven."⁷⁰

If before Lucullus could carry out his Parthian invasion, his troops balked, as Plutarch claims and, as we know from future events, they were prone to do, then perhaps this was when the Roman general began formulating an alternate strategy, one that included a temporary alliance with the Parthians until after his campaign into northern Armenia. This would have provided him with both the Parthians' military resources, which as noted earlier would have been handy for finishing off Tigranes and Mithridates, and the opportunity to familiarize himself with the layout of Phraates' kingdom. Part

⁶⁷ Plut. *Luc.* 30.1.

⁶⁸ Sherwin-White 1983: 181 dismisses Plutarch's account arguing that Lucullus would have never intentionally marched on Parthia while leaving Tigranes/Mithridates at his rear. But Lucullus had already beaten Tigranes' army at Tigranocerta and put Mithridates to flight on several occasions. He would have had no reason to fear or even to suspect that they would have posed any immediate trouble.

⁶⁹ Sall. *Hist.* 4.70.

⁷⁰ Plut. *Luc.* 30.1.

of the reason Lucullus' soldiers had refused to go any farther was because Parthia was "unknown territory." Perhaps Sextilius' mission was to remedy this lack of intelligence by gathering geographical and logistical information about the alien kingdom. But, of course, as we have already seen, this plan, too, failed to play out as Lucullus might have hoped. Sextilius' subterfuge was, in time, discovered by Phraates, the Romano-Parthian alliance collapsed, and perhaps as a result, Lucullus' northern Armenian campaign ended in disaster. The Roman troops then mutinied—for the second time according to our reckoning—and the Senate recalled Lucullus to Rome in disgrace.

Spying is, of course, not just a tool of modern nation-states. The Romans used local spies and field scouts throughout the Republic as part of their various military operations against enemies.⁷¹ However, Sextilius' mission to and expulsion from Phraates' court proves that the Romans were willing to deploy subversive agents to supposedly friendly regimes too. Even Parthia's far-reaching political and military clout in the East could not deter Lucullus from meddling in the court affairs of one of Rome's most powerful neighbors. Therefore, if brinkmanship had its part to play in Rome's early interactions with Parthia, apparently so did espionage.

Pompey the Great "Treaty-maker"/"Treaty-breaker" and the First Fight for an Armenian Buffer-State

In 66 BCE, Pompey replaced Lucullus as Rome's supreme commander in the East. Besides concluding the war with Mithridates and subduing the Cilician pirates, for which he duly earned both praise and respect from his fellow Romans, Pompey also famously reorganized the eastern provinces and client kingdoms to reflect more adequately Rome's current interests overseas. However, this final act, which Pompey probably considered one of his greatest achievements, required the general to

⁷¹ Sheldon 2005.

expend not only most of his political capital at home,⁷² but also the last bit of diplomatic goodwill left between Rome and Parthia.

Upon his arrival in the East, one of the first things Pompey did was renew Rome's treaty with the Parthians and invite Phraates to attack Armenia.⁷³ This, of course, had been Lucullus' plan, and it had not been a bad one at the time. Nor was it an especially poor strategy now, for, much like Lucullus, Pompey faced a well-entrenched Mithridates in Pontus and Tigranes who, at this point, still obstinately refused to abandon his father-in-law. A policy of divide and conquer would be just as effective now, and the change in Roman leadership was probably more than enough to mollify Phraates over the Sextilius mishap. But before we see how Pompey's renewed Romano-Parthian alliance would play out, it might be prudent first to ask what Parthian assistance cost the Romans. What did Pompey have to promise Phraates in exchange for the Parthians' opening a second front in Armenia? The sources themselves are silent about the particulars of Pompey's Parthian treaty, but we would offer that the disputed northern Mesopotamian territories (i.e., Gordyene, Sordene, and Adiabene), which were once again in Tigranes' hands after Lucullus' withdrawal would have seemed adequate compensation to the Parthian king. In fact, depending on how badly Pompey felt he needed the Parthians, and if Phraates actually had any proof of Sextilius' espionage, the Romans may have had to promise the Parthian king even more, perhaps even all of Armenia after Tigranes' ouster.

Whatever the exact terms of the treaty, Phraates must have accepted, for he soon launched an invasion of Armenia, just as Pompey must have hoped. The Parthians probably even had the upper hand, for Tigranes' kingdom was currently embroiled in civil war. Tigranes' last surviving son (whom we will, for convenience, henceforth refer to as Tigranes Jr. in the custom of Keaveney) had recently

⁷² Pompey spent most of the next decade trying to get the Senate to ratify his eastern settlement. In the end, he could only accomplish this goal by allying with Caesar and Crassus in the First Triumvirate.

⁷³ For Pompey's treaty with the Parthians see Cass. Dio 36.45.3 and Liv. *Epit.* 100. See also Keaveney 1981: 202-204 as to why Pompey might have felt it necessary to renew the treaty Lucullus had established with the Parthians.

rebelled against his father.⁷⁴ But when Tigranes Jr.'s own coup had proved unsuccessful, he fled for safety to Phraates who promptly married the young man to one of his daughters, conveniently making himself the father-in-law of Armenia's heir apparent.⁷⁵ That Phraates brought his new son-in-law along in 66 on his own Armenian campaign might suggest that the Parthian king's intentions were possibly a bit grander than a few disputed border provinces. With Pompey's consent, perhaps Phraates planned to take all of Armenia for himself and install Tigranes Jr. as his vassal.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, Phraates' invasion met with only moderate gains. Parthian forces did reach Tigranes Sr.'s northern capital of Artaxata (proving that the Parthians would have been invaluable during Lucullus' Armenian expedition; Lucullus had failed to make it so far). But once there, Phraates realized that the city could only be taken with a lengthy siege.⁷⁷ He thus returned to Parthia, leaving Tigranes Jr. in charge of a modest Parthian contingent to conduct the blockade. After Phraates' departure, however, Tigranes Sr. sallied out of the city and broke the siege, demonstrating for the second time that the son was no match for the father in battle. But Tigranes Jr., like the slippery Mithridates Eupator, somehow managed to escape yet again. Despite his poor showing, he eventually found refuge, as before, with the Parthians.⁷⁸

The question is, had Phraates fulfilled his part of the treaty with the Romans? And what would Pompey have thought of his ally's performance in Armenia? By anyone's reckoning, the Parthians had

⁷⁴ Although it probably has little relevance here, the fates of Tigranes' other sons, at least, make for interesting reading. App. *Mithr.* 104 reports that Tigranes had had three sons by a daughter of Mithridates. He had already killed one who had revolted against him in battle. He had also executed another when the son had failed to assist him after he was thrown from a horse while hunting. Thinking his father was mortally wounded this particular son had made the mistake of placing the diadem on his head prematurely. Seeing Tigranes' track record, is it any wonder then that his third son also eventually tried to overthrow him?

⁷⁵ As we noted earlier, most of Asian kingdoms' ruling dynasties were related in some way by marriage. Diplomatic marriage was considered a legitimate means not only of preserving the peace, but, if done shrewdly enough, of also expanding one's territorial holdings. We would contend that Phraates' aim in becoming Tigranes Jr.'s father-in-law was the latter.

⁷⁶ There was, after all, some precedent for this. As we have discussed, the Parthian king Mithridates II Megas, with whom Sulla had indirectly dealt only a generation earlier, had considered Tigranes Sr. his vassal at one time and Armenia within Parthia's hegemonic sphere of influence.

⁷⁷ The Romans, unlike the Parthians, were masters of siegecraft. And so, the irony is that, had Sextilius not ruined the first Parthian alliance, a combined Romano-Parthian army might have been able not only to reach Artaxata, but to breach its walls as well.

⁷⁸ For Tigranes Jr.'s revolt against his father his exile and marriage to Phraates' daughter and Phraates' invasion of Armenia see Cass. Dio 36.50-51 and App. *Mithr.* 104.

done exactly what they had agreed to do (i.e., attack Tigranes). They might have failed to capture Armenia, it is true, but their efforts had not been totally in vain. If nothing else, Phraates and Tigranes Jr. had occupied the Armenians long enough to prevent them from reinforcing Mithridates in Pontus. And we should perhaps not underestimate how important this was in helping secure Pompey's overall victory. For with Tigranes' army busy defending their homeland, Pompey was able to cobble together a larger fighting force than Mithridates, giving the Romans a crucial numerical advantage in their final battle with Pontus. Pompey seems to have combined his own legions with several Anatolian allies and the remnants of Lucullus' army to create an expeditionary force of roughly forty-five thousand men. On the other hand, Mithridates, bereft of his former Armenian allies and now with only himself to rely on, could muster no more than thirty thousand infantry and two or three thousand cavalry. Although the sources are somewhat hazy, when the two armies finally met, probably in the upper Lycus valley near Nicopolis, the Romans' greater number apparently allowed Pompey's legionaries to route Mithridates' smaller army with relative ease.⁷⁹ That the Armenians, the backbone of Mithridates' most recent rebellion, were conspicuously absent on the battlefield must have been obvious to everyone involved, but perhaps especially to those Roman soldiers who had also fought for Lucullus. Did Pompey see it the same way, however?

Nowhere do the sources reveal Pompey's inner thoughts, so we must attempt to discern his feelings on the matter from his subsequent actions. Perhaps not all that surprisingly, in the wake of the Romans' victory at Nicopolis, Mithridates evaded capture once more. Unlike on previous occasions, however, the Pontic king fled, not to Armenia, but north into the Caucasus Mountains where he hid first in Colchis before finally making his way to Azov on the northern shore of the Black Sea. Yet, despite rumors of Mithridates' whereabouts, Pompey did not immediately pursue the Pontic king. Likely with knowledge of Phraates' less than spectacular Armenian expedition, Pompey chose instead to test his

⁷⁹ Plut. Pomp. 28-32; App. Mithr. 96-100; Cass. Dio 36,46-48; and also cf. Sherwin-White 1983: 190-192.

own troops against Tigranes and Artaxata's steep walls. This is perhaps our first sign that the Roman general was less than impressed by Phraates' performance, regardless of whatever actual advantage the Romans might have accrued at Nicopolis from the Parthian's "interference" in Armenia. Pompey probably did not want to chase Mithridates any farther into untrodden territory without first settling affairs with Tigranes; he may have thus considered Phraates' job in Armenia unfinished. Interestingly and perhaps telling about the Parthian viewpoint, however, is that, as the Romans were marching into Armenia, Phraates sent Tigranes Jr. to Pompey to act as an adviser and guide.⁸⁰ He would have done so only if he truly believed his alliance with Pompey were still intact and not in any sort of jeopardy. He may have even hoped, if he had not already received earlier assurances from Pompey, that the Romans would place Tigranes Jr. on the Armenian throne after ejecting his father.

Tigranes Sr., however, saw his once vast empire slowly crumbling. His only surviving son was in open rebellion against him and allied with his enemies; his father-in-law and collaborator, Mithridates, was in the wind; and now the Romans were once again on his doorstep only weeks after his capital had been under Parthian siege. Seeing few other options left to him, Tigranes therefore decided to surrender to Pompey peacefully. As the Roman army approached Artaxata, the Armenian king rode out to meet it with a small group of retainers. He left his guards and relinquished his sword at the gates of the Roman camp, appearing before Pompey alone and unarmed as an act of deference. To complete his demonstration of humility, Tigranes then prostrated himself at Pompey's feet, performing proskynesis, the traditional method of paying homage in the East, and asked for the "friendship" of the Roman people. Tigranes Jr., who was on hand for these theatrics, must have relished the sight of his father groveling. As we just noted, he probably expected Pompey to strip his father of his crown, which would have left the throne open for him to become Armenia's new king.⁸¹ But to the son's surprise—

⁸⁰ Cass. Dio 36.51; App. *Mithr.* 104; and Plut. *Pomp.* 33.

⁸¹ Cass. Dio 36.52-53; App. *Mithr.* 104. If Pompey still desired an alliance with Parthia, Tigranes Jr. would have been an excellent choice for the Armenian throne. As a Roman client, (i.e., invested with the accouterments of his office by a Roman general) and as a relative of the Parthian king (i.e., as Phraates' son-in-law), he would have been perfect liaison

and, no doubt, disgust—Pompey instead did the exact opposite. After beckoning Tigranes Sr. to stand up, Pompey seated him on one side of his dais. With Tigranes Jr. on his other side, Pompey then proceeded, perhaps with threats and much coercion, to reconcile the estranged pair. He allowed Tigranes Sr. to remain king of Greater Armenia, but deprived him of his possessions in Syria and Cilicia. To Tigranes Jr., he gave the consolation prize of Lesser Armenia (i.e., Sophene and Gordyene) and the right to all of Armenia upon his father’s death.⁸² And yet, as we might imagine, Pompey’s “Armenian settlement” did not sit well with Tigranes Jr. who had probably been led to expect more, not just by Phraates, but perhaps even initially by Pompey as well. Soon after his “reconciliation,” he therefore became involved in a plot to assassinate his father. But the conspiracy was eventually betrayed to Pompey who threw the disgruntled young prince into chains to be saved for the general’s future triumph back in Rome.⁸³ Upon discovering Tigranes Jr.’s plot, Pompey turned control of Lesser Armenia (i.e., Sophene and Gordyene) over to Ariobarzanes I of Cappadocia who was one of Rome’s more faithful clients.⁸⁴

Phraates, meanwhile in Parthia, must have been greatly dismayed by what he saw happening across the Euphrates. He had risked much by invading Armenia to assist Pompey and the Romans, and he had yet to receive any compensation. Had Pompey deposed Tigranes Sr. and installed his son in his stead, Phraates would have been the father-in-law of Armenia’s king and perhaps by extension even the kingdom’s de facto ruler. Had Tigranes Jr. afterward not been so quick to collude or so careless as to get caught, Phraates might have at least gotten back control of one of the long-disputed border provinces, Gordyene. But now neither was the case thanks to Pompey’s bait and switch diplomacy. To

between the two superpowers.

82 Cass. Dio 36.53.2 records that Pompey gave Tigranes Jr. only Sophene. App. *Mithr.* 105 mentions Sophene too, but adds Gordyene as well—and so all of Lesser Armenia. In light of Tigranes Jr.’s relationship with the Parthians and Phraates’ future actions (i.e., his otherwise unexplained invasion of Gordyene in 65), we assume here that both provinces were initially given to Tigranes Jr. as part of Pompey’s “Armenian settlement.”

83 Cass. Dio 53.4; App. *Mithr.* 104; and Plut. *Pomp.* 33.

84 App. *Mithr.* 105. One cannot help but wonder though why our other sources (i.e. Cassius Dio and Plutarch) are silent about the fate of Lesser Armenia. Is it because we are to assume that after Tigranes’ Jr.’s betrayal the provinces reverted back to his father’s control? If not for Appian’s claim, this would be the more logical assumption.

the Parthians, it must have seemed as though their treaty with Rome (Lucullus' treaty renewed by Pompey in 66) was only good as long as Pompey still needed them, as long as Mithridates remained a potential threat in Pontus. Once he had been dealt with, and once Tigranes Sr. had so conveniently bent his knee to Roman authority, Pompey, it seemed, was perfectly content ignoring his earlier promises to Phraates.

The Romans' general untrustworthiness and willingness to break treaties was, furthermore, made even more apparent the following year after the bulk of Pompey's army had marched north into the Caucasus region in pursuit of the fugitive Mithridates. While Pompey was occupied battling various Iberian and Albanian hill tribes, one of his officers left behind in Armenia, A. Gabinius, led a raiding party across the Euphrates to the banks of the Tigris.⁸⁵ Whether Pompey himself ordered Gabinius to cross into Parthian territory is unknown, as is the exact purpose of the raid. Maybe it was a scouting party; maybe Pompey planned to invade Parthia, too, at some later date. Or perhaps Gabinius was just acting alone, hunting for easy loot, as it were.⁸⁶ Whatever the case may be, Gabinius' unannounced foray into northern Mesopotamia must have been seen by the Parthians as a serious violation of their territorial sovereignty. It could have convinced Phraates that Pompey was never going to uphold his end of the bargain. In fact, it probably appeared to Phraates that the Romans were now actually backing the Armenians.

Angered but far from foolish, for he was still probably unsure of his exact standing with the Romans (was he just inconsequential or a future target?), Phraates took two bold steps. He first sent an embassy to Pompey asking for a renewal of their prior treaty. But in case the general's mood was less than amenable, Phraates also in the meantime, somewhat brazenly, invaded Gordyene.⁸⁷ Phraates might

⁸⁵ Cass. Dio 37.5; Plut. *Pomp.* 36.

⁸⁶ There is also a third option. As we will see in the next section, Gabinius also apparently had designs on conquering Parthia. That this was an early attempt at doing so is doubtful, but perhaps it was he and not Pompey who was scouting for a future expedition against Parthia.

⁸⁷ Cass. Dio 37.5; Plut. *Pomp.* 36.2. Keaveney 1981: 207 thinks Phraates' occupation of Gordyene was done at least in part at Tigranes' Jr.'s invitation. But while Phraates probably rested his claim to the province on his relationship with

have assumed that Pompey would simply give in if he politely did a bit of saber rattling. Most of the Romans' forces were, after all, still busy chasing Mithridates or rounding up tribes in the Caucasus. But, unfortunately, the Parthian king's gamble failed miserably. Instead of agreeing to a treaty renewal, Pompey demanded that the Parthians immediately evacuate Gordyene. And in his hastily written reply letter, Pompey even went so far as to insult Phraates by merely referring to him as "King" rather than as "King of Kings," as Parthian custom dictated. In fact, Pompey did not even give the poor monarch the opportunity to comply—or even to respond to his letter. For once the Parthian ambassadors had departed, he immediately sent out his lieutenant, L. Afranius, with orders to expel the Parthians from Gordyene by force. We are, admittedly, uncertain whether the Parthians in Gordyene left peacefully or put up a fight; the nature of our evidence is somewhat contradictory. But it is clear, nonetheless, that Afranius eventually succeeded.⁸⁸ He even took the time to antagonize the Parthians a bit more by marching, like Gabinius, through "undisputed" Parthian territory in Mesopotamia on his journey back to Syria.⁸⁹

Having been thwarted in Gordyene, Phraates then sent a second letter to Pompey. If he was to receive no compensation for his timely assistance against Tigranes Sr., he at least asked that the Romans return his son-in-law Tigranes Jr. and henceforth respect the Euphrates boundary, as established by the treaties of Sulla and (perhaps also) Lucullus. With this last request Phraates, no doubt, had in mind Gabinius and Afranius' recent incursions. Pompey was, however, not about to humor Phraates now, especially since Afranius' mission had already proved a success. He responded that Tigranes Jr. was better off in the hands of his real father rather than his father-in-law, although in reality the prince was probably still a Roman captive. And, as for the Euphrates border, he simply said

Tigranes Jr., it is unclear how seizing the territory would have helped the young Armenian prince who was still at this stage Pompey's prisoner.

⁸⁸ Cass. Dio 37.5 states that the Parthians retreated from the province without offering battle while Plut. *Pomp.* 36 claims Afranius not only fought with Phraates but also chased him as far as Arbela.

⁸⁹ For Pompey's reply to Phraates as well as Afranius' raid see Cass. Dio 37.5 and Plut. *Pomp.* 36.2, 38.2.

that a sufficient boundary “would eventually be settled.”⁹⁰ Phraates, who may have taken Pompey’s words as a threat, must have at this point thought that he had nothing left to lose. Early in 64, he thus attempted to overrun Gordyene again. Without Roman support, Tigranes’ Armenian defenders were, in this instance, little match for the Parthians, who seized the province now for the second time. Both sides, of course, appealed to the Romans almost immediately. Strangely, however, on this occasion, Pompey did not rush to Tigranes’ aid as he had earlier. Rather, he dispatched three Roman arbitrators who appear to have resolved the business both quickly and peaceably.

Perhaps Pompey had grown weary of the whole affair and simply no longer cared about committing Roman troops. But his change of tactics for dealing with Tigranes/Phraates (i.e., the use of arbitrators) was more likely a calculated move. Third-party arbitration was a main-staple of Hellenistic diplomacy, and Pompey may have finally realized working within the established eastern system achieved better, more lasting results than brute force alone. As we argued earlier with Sulla, such a subtle understanding of Hellenistic customs shows that Rome’s eastern commanders were not completely ignorant of how the Hellenistic world worked on an international level. Phraates, it seems, accepted another disputed province, Adiabene, in exchange for handing Gordyene back to Tigranes. Both monarchs apparently agreed to the compromise because in the end they felt that Rome, with its rapidly growing influence in the region, would soon be their shared enemy.⁹¹ But Phraates’ decision to give over Gordyene after such a long, costly struggle probably also had something to do with the Romans’ newfound willingness to renew their own treaty with Parthia and to acknowledge the Euphrates as the empire’s official boundary.⁹²

This highly volatile situation involving Gordyene might have easily escalated into a full-scale war between Rome and Parthia. So we might wonder why Pompey was so willing to double cross

⁹⁰ Cass. Dio 37.6; Plut. *Pomp.* 33.6.

⁹¹ Cass. Dio 37.5-6; Plut. *Pomp.* 39; Appian *Mithr.* 106.

⁹² As we have already noted, Florus 1.46.4 and Orosius 6.13.2 state that the Parthian king of Crassus’ day still believed Pompey’s treaty with the Parthians was valid.

Phraates and afterward to take such an aggressive stance towards Parthia. Why was an independent Armenia so important to Pompey? Was Gordyene really so critical to Rome's military interests? As Arthur Eckstein has recently pointed out, the Eastern Mediterranean was at this stage transitioning from what political scientists call a multi-polar to a bi-polar anarchy. The political landscape, which was devoid of any sort of international law (hence the "anarchy" label), was quickly changing from a world of multiple international players to one in which there were now but two, Rome and Parthia.⁹³ As the smoke cleared from the Mithridatic Wars, Pompey was perhaps the first to recognize this new political reality, and especially the potential threat that Parthia, the only other remaining superpower, posed to Rome's eastern holdings. The kingdom of Armenia, as the doorway into both Roman Asia Minor and Syria, was thus of critical importance to Rome's regional interests. Regardless of whatever trouble Tigranes Sr. had caused in the past, Pompey could not let his kingdom, once again, become Parthia's vassal. His successful reorganization of the eastern provinces depended on it. That much was clear. And if keeping Armenia free from Parthian control meant breaking Rome's earlier treaty and double crossing Phraates, then so be it. We should perhaps then see Pompey's double dealing and hard line stance against Phraates not merely as stereotypical Roman *superbia*, but as a calculated attempt, the first attempt in fact, to set up a strategic buffer zone along the Roman Empire's easternmost frontier.

Sulla's bully diplomacy, Lucullus' spying and possible ambitions to conquer Parthia, and Pompey's treaty-breaking habit and Armenian buffer-state are all, therefore, part of a discernible pattern. Rome's Late Republican generals in the East were not arrogant, stupid men, stumbling through the intricacies of Hellenistic diplomacy as if blind, dumb, and full of their own self-importance. They were not simply ignorant of how statecraft worked in the East. Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey were all careful, calculating individuals; they each purposefully used highhanded diplomatic techniques in their

⁹³ Eckstein 2006: 23-24.

dealings with the Parthians. And these techniques became the foundation on which Augustus would later base his own Parthian policy.

Chapter 2

Romano-Parthian Wars of the Late Republic: Gabinius, Crassus, and Antony

Introduction

Both ancient and modern writers have observed that one distinguishing feature of Parthia's political system was its penchant for civil strife. The frequency of these civil disturbances had a lot to do with how the Parthian kingship itself was set up. The king, who was required by law to be an Arsacid, wielded near absolute power at the top of the social hierarchy. The only check on his authority was a dual council made up of nobles and Magi, a special tribe of Zoroastrian priests, who elected each new Arsacid candidate for the throne. As monarchies go, it was a unique and even somewhat logical system, but it did have one particular flaw: because the Arsacid clan was so large and candidates could be drawn from lateral branches of the family too—not just sons of the sitting king, but brothers and uncles as well—there were always numerous disgruntled pretenders waiting in the wings. Unhappy nobles within Parthia, who could not become king because of their non-Arsacid lineage, commonly bankrolled these pretenders as a way of winning more power for themselves.⁹⁴ But this same flaw also left Parthia open to meddling from outside the empire. Romans of the Late Republican Era, in particular, apparently liked lending aid to Parthia's royal pretenders so that Rome might have a reason to invade. As we will see, A. Gabinius and M. Crassus—and M. Antony, as well, for that matter—all used Parthia's domestic troubles as an excuse to launch their own Parthian campaigns. But would this more direct method for dealing with Parthia, this divide and conquer strategy, be more effective than the diplomatic strategies employed by Rome's previous eastern commanders—Sulla, Lucullus and Pompey?

⁹⁴ For the Parthian political system and problems with Arsacid succession see Colledge 1967: 57-61.

Gabinius and Crassus: Taking Sides in Civil War

A. Gabinius, the same lieutenant of Pompey's who had violated the Euphrates boundary in 65, was elected consul in 58 BCE. After some initial diplomatic wrangling, he received command of Syria. His job was supposedly to protect the province from Arab raiders who had been ceaselessly harassing the local population.⁹⁵ But the sheer size of Gabinius' consular army might also suggest some sort of ulterior motive. Considering that Gabinius probably had Pompey to thank for his Syrian command, it is certainly possible that the patron/client pair had a campaign against Parthia in the back of their minds from the very start.⁹⁶ However, Gabinius alone could have been the main impetus behind such an endeavor—if this were, in fact, the new consul's real plan. There is, after all, no proof that Pompey ever officially condoned Gabinius' earlier foray across the Euphrates. Perhaps Pompey's political assistance in securing Gabinius' provincial assignment was nothing more than a patron rewarding his client for many years of loyal military service. This explanation at least would certainly shed light on why Pompey was later so willing to betray Gabinius by handing his Parthian campaign over to Crassus (see below).

Whatever Pompey's true feelings on the matter, Parthia's currently fractured political state must have only made such an expedition all the more enticing once Gabinius actually arrived in Syria. For, in 58/57 BCE, the Parthian king Phraates III had fallen victim to an assassination plot conceived by his two sons, Mithridates and Orodes. Being the elder of the brothers, Mithridates had at first taken the throne under the royal title Mithridates III. After a few years, however, a dissatisfied group of Parthian nobles led by Surenas, the future victor at Carrhae, carried out another palace coup and deposed Mithridates as well. The younger brother, Orodes, was then made king in his sibling's place, assuming the throne name Orodes II. Mithridates, although fortunate enough to walk away from this latest palace plot with his life (unlike his father), was given Media to govern, a rather poor consolation prize after

⁹⁵ Cicero *De Domo Sua* 23, 55; *Periochae of Livy* 105; and App. *Syr.* 51. Gabinius had been assigned Cilicia at first, but conspired with his patron, Pompey, to receive the more lucrative reassignment to Syria.

⁹⁶ For this opinion see Sampson 2008: 91 and especially Arnaud 1998: 4 et passim. And although Pompey may have approved of Gabinius' campaign, there is evidence that the Senate did not. See Strabo 12.3.34.

once having worn the crown of the “King of kings.” Intent on retaking his former throne but seeing few other options, Mithridates thus turned to the Romans, and specifically to Gabinius, for assistance. If Gabinius, either with or without Pompey’s explicit knowledge, had been secretly planning a Parthian invasion, the arrival of Mithridates’ offer, no doubt, would have seemed especially auspicious. But even if Gabinius, against what all our evidence seems to imply, had no designs on Parthia, Mithridates’ request for aid would have still been a difficult thing for the consul to pass up. And so, in 55, with or without his patron’s approval, pre-planned or not, Gabinius crossed the Euphrates into Parthian territory for the second time under the pretext of restoring Mithridates to his rightful place of power.⁹⁷

And yet, even before Gabinius’ Parthian venture could build a head of steam, it was derailed by more politically expedient concerns back in Rome. For just as Gabinius’ army was preparing to depart, Pompey and his fellow triumvirs, M. Crassus and Julius Caesar, met at Luca where it was decided that, in exchange for renewing Pompey’s and Crassus’ consulships and giving Caesar another five-year command in Gaul, Crassus would also be allowed to take charge of Syria and the upcoming invasion of Parthia. As a result, Pompey immediately dispatched a letter to Gabinius, who was apparently already in Parthian territory when he received it, instructing him to divert his army to Egypt instead. The Egyptian king Ptolemy XII Auletes had, much like the Parthian Mithridates, asked—or rather bribed—the Romans for help after a popular uprising had driven him from his throne in Alexandria. Gabinius, although disappointed, could hardly ignore the wishes of his patron. He dutifully complied with Pompey’s orders, returned from Parthia, and set out at once for the Nile Delta. With the Roman legionnaires at his side, Ptolemy retook his throne with only minimal effort, for which he paid Pompey and Gabinius the handsome sum of ten thousand talents. Once the situation in Egypt had been settled to everyone’s satisfaction, Gabinius then marched back to Judea to quell a possible rebellion simmering in that region.⁹⁸

97 Cass. Dio 39.56; Justin 42.4.

98 Cass. Dio 39.56; Justin 42.4; App. *Syr.* 51; Joseph. *BJ* 1.175-178.

The most interesting detail about Gabinius' Egyptian detour, and the reason we have sketched the story out briefly here, is the fact that the Parthian exile Mithridates seems to have accompanied the Roman commander to Alexandria. And yet, afterward, when Gabinius traveled to Judea, Mithridates parted ways with his Roman protectors and journeyed back to Parthia where, with no obvious Roman support troops and at first only a few loyal retainers, he commenced waging war against his brother. However, over the course of the next several months, Mithridates somehow managed to raise a large enough local army to besiege and capture both Babylon and Seleucia.⁹⁹ How the exiled king was able to accomplish this feat must have had something to do with his presence in Egypt and the fact that he only returned to Parthia after Ptolemy had paid Gabinius and the Romans for their services in Alexandria. Gabinius must have passed part of his, or perhaps Pompey's, Egyptian reward money over to Mithridates so that the king could hire his own mercenaries or bribe some of Parthia's less scrupulous nobles. How else could Mithridates have captured southern Mesopotamia so quickly and easily? But that would mean Gabinius and the triumvirs, who knew Crassus' Parthian expedition lay just around the corner, colluded to use Mithridates. They armed the former Parthian monarch, not with Roman soldiers and weapons as Mithridates had no doubt wished, but with questionably procured funds. They then sent the king off in advance of Crassus' upcoming campaign as a way of destabilizing Parthia, of wreaking havoc among Parthia's defenses and drawing its present king, Orodes, off balance.¹⁰⁰

Crassus departed from Rome in early November 55 BCE. He and his army sailed first to Greece and then marched overland across Asia Minor into Syria. Based on Cassius Dio's account, we know that Crassus sent a legate to Gabinius in advance of his army's arrival, perhaps while the Romans were still crossing through Anatolia, to accept the official transfer of command. Gabinius apparently refused,

⁹⁹ Justin 42.4. If Mithridates captured Seleucia, he probably gained control over the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon at the same time which lay immediately across the Tigris River.

¹⁰⁰ Sampson 2008: 94-95 supports this interpretation. In all likelihood, however, the Romans probably had few real expectations for Mithridates' chances beyond simply creating chaos abroad. But distracting or destabilizing Orodes' regime would have been all that the Crassus really needed anyway. That Mithridates actually succeeded in capturing several of Parthia's largest cities and establishing a strong base of operations in southern Mesopotamia was probably a welcome, if unanticipated, surprise for his Roman allies.

however, which implies that he may have still harbored some resentment against Crassus for stealing what would have been his long-awaited moment of glory.¹⁰¹ Although Dio does not tell us precisely how, the situation was eventually resolved, most likely when Crassus himself appeared in Syria sporting the *fasces* and other regalia of a newly-elected consul. With Gabinius finally out of the way and with Crassus' own authority thus firmly established, Crassus then spent the remainder of the year, as well as part of the next, arming and training his soldiers. Crassus' legionnaires, it seems, were young and as untested in battle. Crassus also seems to have been waiting for the Armenian king Artavasdes II's allied cavalry contingent and the arrival of his son Publius, who had been serving with Caesar in Gaul and was now coming to meet his father with a regiment of Gallic cavalry.¹⁰² But by mid-54, the general must have felt some sort of pressing need, for without either the Armenians or his son, he set out in haste for the Parthian border.¹⁰³ Ancient commentators, like Dio and Plutarch, criticize Crassus at this stage in the campaign for his chosen route, i.e., directly across the Euphrates and through the arid plains of northern Mesopotamia. According to many sources, this course was the shorter but more hazardous route. Apparently, a much more hospitable path through southern Armenia was widely known and also lay open to the Romans.¹⁰⁴

What was Crassus' great hurry? He had already waited more than half a year, longer if we count his preparations in Rome. Why set out mid-campaigning season without his Armenian allies or his son and, perhaps, even before his troops had been completely trained? And, furthermore, why take the more dangerous route when the easier Armenian option was also available? Although scholars have offered various explanations,¹⁰⁵ one possibility might be that Crassus was still desperately trying to take

101 Cass. Dio 39.60.

102 For more on Crassus' pre-war preparations and potential allies see Debevoise 1938: 80.

103 We should also probably consider Gabinius' earlier trek across the Euphrates the previous year, as well as Crassus' two subsequent Parthian campaigns (54 and 53), as additional examples of Roman "treaty-breaking." We have already seen, thanks to Florus and Orosius, how even up to this late date the Parthians still believed their treaties with Pompey and Sulla were valid.

104 The sources criticize Crassus' more infamous, ill-fated campaign of the following year, the one which led to the disaster at Carrhae, for this same oversight.

105 Tam 1923a: 606 believes Crassus was trying to set up a supply base in Mesopotamia; Debevoise 1938: 81 thinks, however, that Crassus' first campaign was nothing more than a training exercise.

advantage of Parthia's ongoing civil war, a war which he and Pompey had worked hard and paid handsomely to orchestrate. Mithridates, with the help of Gabinius' "off the books" financial support, had already secured an impressive foothold in southern Mesopotamia. If Crassus could help keep this pocket of resistance alive, Mithridates' rebellion would only be of benefit during the Roman general's own campaign. But, of course, Orodes, Mithridates' brother and the reigning Parthian king, surely would not allow such an obvious challenge to go uncontested for very long. And, in fact, early in 54 Crassus may have learned, perhaps through Mithridates, that the Parthians were in the early stages of preparing to attack southern Mesopotamia. While Orodes was organizing Parthia's main army to defend against the Romans' imminent invasion,¹⁰⁶ the nobleman Surenas, the same individual who had initially deposed Mithridates, was busy meanwhile bringing another, smaller Parthian army to bear against the rebellious cities in the south. While we lack any definitive proof because of our sources' silence, it seems only reasonable to assume that, by the summer of 54, with Surenas steadily approaching, Mithridates would have had no choice but to appeal to Crassus for relief. We should perhaps, therefore, view Crassus' first Parthian campaign in 54 as an impromptu, spontaneous attempt to aid Mithridates and thus prolong Parthia's current civil war.

But even though Crassus may have launched his Parthian War prematurely in response to Mithridates' call for help, we should not see the 54 campaign as some sort of reckless rescue mission. As we are about to see, there was no madcap "race to Ctesiphon" between the Romans and Parthians. Crassus, though certainly concerned for how Mithridates' fall would affect his own expedition, would have felt no real sense of obligation to the Parthian pretender. To the Romans, men like Mithridates were merely tools, a means to an end, and nothing more.¹⁰⁷ That this was the general's mentality

¹⁰⁶ With the southern capital Ctesiphon under Mithridates' control, Orodes had relocated his court to the Parthians' summer capital of Ecbatana in Media.

¹⁰⁷ We could argue, based on Badian 1958: 1-13, 154-167, et al., that an exiled figure like Mithridates who spent a significant amount of time under Roman protection might have been seen by the Romans as a client, implying that the Romans would have felt some obligation to assist their embattled dependent. But for the argument against the patron-client system extending to Rome's foreign relations see Gruen 1984: 199-200. And, in any case, if Mithridates were anyone's "client," he would have been Gabinius', or perhaps technically Pompey's. But Mithridates probably never met Crassus in person. The general would, therefore, have looked upon Mithridates as a military asset, and perhaps as an expendable one at that.

towards Mithridates' dire situation can be easily inferred from Crassus' subsequent actions and the overall course of his first campaign.¹⁰⁸ For, after crossing the Euphrates, Crassus did not rush south to reinforce Mithridates immediately, despite the tenuous appearance of the king's predicament. Instead, the Romans marched directly into northern Mesopotamia where they engaged and easily defeated in battle the local satrap, Silaces, perhaps near the town of Ichnae. They then garrisoned many of the surrounding cities, including Ichnae, Nicephorium, and (a bit ominously considering future events) Carrhae. Only one community, Zenodotium, fervently resisted the Romans, but after a brief siege it, too, finally succumbed to Crassus' iron will; the city itself was sacked and its population sold into slavery.¹⁰⁹

But it would be wrong to interpret the Romans' efforts in northern Mesopotamia, as some ancient authors have, as aimless, unproductive, and altogether unrelated to what was happening in the south.¹¹⁰ Although it might seem otherwise at first, it is our opinion that Crassus was actually doing what he could to aid Mithridates—or, at least, what he could without risking too many Roman lives. Most likely, Crassus' goal was to cause enough trouble in the north to lure Surenas away from his intended target. Had the Romans headed straight for Ctesiphon as they were—without Publius' or the Armenians' supplemental units, and so, not at full strength—they would have been at a grave disadvantage, just as they would have been had they left hostile communities like Zenodotium at their rear. Besides, the Parthians were never known for their siege tactics. Even if the Romans were unable to goad Surenas northwards, Crassus might have assumed that Mithridates could simply wait out the enemy behind the ancient walls of Seleucia or Babylon until the Romans had fully mustered and carved

¹⁰⁸ The reasoning behind Crassus' first campaign in 54, mainly because of its limited scope and abortive ending, has baffled ancient and modern scholars alike.

¹⁰⁹ Plut. *Crass.* 17; Cass. Dio 40.13. Many of these communities, because of their predominantly Greek populations, opened their gates willingly to the Romans. The tyrant of Zenodotium, Apollonius, made the foolish mistake however of attempting subterfuge. He invited a Roman party into his city under the pretext of surrendering, but then surrounded and massacred them, and so incurred the extreme, if still somewhat understandable, wrath of Crassus. For more on these events cf. Sampson 2008: 101.

¹¹⁰ Plut. *Crass.* 17.4 and Cass. Dio 40.13 both rebuke Crassus for wasting his time wandering around northern Mesopotamia while he should have been relieving Mithridates. We argue, however, that relieving Mithridates was Crassus' primary concern all along and that his actions in the north were, in fact, a big part of his attempt to do so.

a safe path through Parthian territory. Crassus' 54 campaign was, therefore, not so much unplanned or reckless as it was just spur-of-the-moment. In spite of its being somewhat hastily conceived, Crassus' ad hoc strategy for assisting Mithridates and drawing out Parthia's civil conflict was nevertheless viable and well measured.

Unfortunately for the Romans, Crassus' efforts in northern Mesopotamia were still wasted. Surenas was smart enough not to fall for Crassus' bait and steered well clear of the Roman army. Even as one Parthian city after another opened its gates to the enemy, he kept his sights set on the pretender in the south. Eventually, he cornered Mithridates within the walls of Seleucia and laid siege to the great city.¹¹¹ Still, this turn of events alone did not completely ruin Crassus' plan. As just noted, had Mithridates been able to hold out, perhaps the Romans could have still come to his aid after securing the north. But in spite of the Parthians' poor reputation for siegecraft, Seleucia seems to have fallen (somewhat strangely) relatively quickly.¹¹² Although Mithridates' ultimate fate is obscure, it is perhaps safe to assume that he was captured when the city's defenses collapsed, after which he would have, in all likelihood, been carted off to his brother for execution.¹¹³ We are, however, informed by Plutarch that Surenas himself, as the "bravest and most handsome of Parthia's warriors," was the first to breach the city's walls.¹¹⁴ Plutarch probably includes this unusual bit of sensationalism to build up Surenas' reputation in the reader's mind before moving on to his description of the Carrhae disaster. He is essentially trying to make Crassus' eventual fall more dramatic by portraying Surenas' martial abilities as larger than life. A much more likely explanation is that Seleucia capitulated so rapidly because Surenas had help on the inside. There is really no other reason why the city would have fallen to a Parthian siege so soon. Surenas might have had spies within Mithridates' ranks or, what is even more

¹¹¹ Perhaps even as Crassus himself was besieging Zenodotium.

¹¹² The precise chronology for the fall of Seleucia is, admittedly, controversial. Keaveney 1982: 412 places it in 55 BCE before Crassus' first campaign. Sampson 2008: 105 argues, however, as we have here, for the later date of 54. Although the problem may never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction, the 54 date seems to make more sense only because it would greatly help explain why Crassus withdrew to Syria at the end of 54 after having seemingly been so successful in northern Mesopotamia.

¹¹³ Plut. *Crass.* 21; Justin 42.4.

¹¹⁴ Plut. *Crass.* 21.

probable, the city itself simply revolted and handed over the pretender when relief (i.e., Mithridates' Roman allies) did not show up immediately as promised. With the loss of his ally Mithridates and the Parthians' sudden recapture of Seleucia, and presumably Babylon and Ctesiphon as well, Crassus had no reason to press his luck any further. Through no fault of his own, he had already lost his advantage. The Romans, therefore, abandoned their somewhat tenuous position in northern Mesopotamia for the safety and milder climate of Syria. There, during the winter of 54, Crassus awaited the rest of his allies and his son, as he would have done in the first place had Mithridates' pleas for help not prematurely forced his hand.

When the Armenian king Artavasdes II finally arrived with his substantial cavalry contingent, he offered to let the Romans march through his kingdom. But while Crassus might have greatly benefited from Artavasdes' additional horsemen, especially considering how his second campaign was to play out, he still refused the king's suggestion and insisted on retracing his earlier path across northern Mesopotamia. Incensed at being snubbed, Artavasdes gathered up his cavalry troops and departed.¹¹⁵ Some authors have claimed that Crassus turned down Artavasdes' offer because he suspected that the Armenian king was secretly a Parthian agent.¹¹⁶ Although this is a distinct possibility considering Artavasdes' later relationship with the Parthians and his, at best, questionable performance in M. Antony's service (see below), it is unlikely that Crassus would have had any real reason to doubt the monarch's allegiance to Rome at the time. More likely than not, Crassus simply wished to retrace the course of his earlier aborted expedition; he had faced relatively little Parthian resistance there the year before, and many of the cities in northern Mesopotamia had gone over to the Romans willingly. Why would he not want to repeat this success with his second, major push?¹¹⁷ He also perhaps did not yet realize, when the Armenian king threatened to take his soldiers and go home, just how valuable the additional cavalry support would be on this particular occasion. The disaster at Carrhae was, after all,

¹¹⁵ Plut. *Crass.* 19.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Sampson 2008: 107.

¹¹⁷ This seems to be the opinion of both Rawlinson 1893: 154 and Bivar 1983: 53.

the benchmark that finally convinced the Romans of the importance of incorporating a strong mobile cavalry wing into their armies, especially for those Roman commanders operating in the East. But on the eve of his own Parthian War, Crassus could hardly benefit from such hindsight.

In the spring of 53, Crassus at long last launched his more famous, ill-fated second Parthian campaign. Thanks to their extensive treatment elsewhere, this expedition's exact details need not be recounted again at any great length here.¹¹⁸ After crossing the Euphrates at Zeugma, Crassus proceeded, much as before, through northern Mesopotamia accepting homage from various regional potentates, including, as it happened, King Abgarus II of Osrhoëne. This time, however, the Romans would not be content merely with ransacking northern villages and humiliating local warlords; Crassus' stated goal was nothing less than Seleucia itself, the very city he had been unable to capture with Mithridates III's help the previous year. But Crassus, somewhat foolishly, placed his trust in Abgarus, who was almost certainly in the pay of the Parthian king. The Arab king guided the Roman army deep into the arid plains of Upper Mesopotamia where water supplies were scarce. Unaccustomed as the Romans were to the harsh desert environment, they soon stumbled into a Parthian ambush near Carrhae.

The catastrophe at Carrhae, which resulted in the death or capture of Crassus' entire thirty-five to forty thousand man army, including the general himself, had a powerful, lasting impact on the Roman psyche. Rome had not experienced a defeat of this magnitude since the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE during the Second Punic War and Hannibal's invasion of Italy. Afterward, the "Parthian threat" became a permanent fixture in Rome's collective consciousness and soon came to dominate all political discussions dealing with the empire's eastern border. It really did not matter that a few overly ambitious and greedy individuals—Gabinus, Pompey, and Crassus—had begun the whole affair by inciting civil war in one of Rome's neighbor states. Nor did it matter that Rome had signed at least two treaties of non-aggression with Parthia. Rome's honor had been injured and honor could only be restored now through military victory.

¹¹⁸ For the most recent see Lerouge 2007; Sampson 2008; and Sheldon 2010. But Rawlinson 1893; Debevoise 1938; and Bivar 1983, while dated, contain excellent accounts as well.

M. Antony: A Whole New Plan?

Parthia was not the only state plagued by civil strife during this era. Rome, too, experienced more than its fair share of internal discord and violent rebellion during the latter half of the first century BCE. We might think that the Roman civil wars of the Late Republic would have helped abate the latent hostility between the Roman and Parthian Empires which had built up over the course of the previous hundred years. The Roman Civil Wars should have lessened international tensions because the Romans would have been too busy fighting among themselves to bother with Parthia. Unfortunately, Romans had long memories, and the fervor for avenging Crassus and the disaster at Carrhae did not dissipate just because the Romans decided to slaughter each other for a little while first.¹¹⁹ Nor should we underestimate in the aftermath of each of Rome's civil wars (Caesar vs. Pompey; Octavian and Antony vs. Caesar's assassins; and Octavian vs. Antony) the ability of savvy politicians to use the idea of a common enemy, a foreign enemy like Parthia, to help distract the public from recent internal troubles. Demonizing Parthia and reminding the Roman people of the imminent threat from outside the empire's borders could go far sometimes to heal the political rifts and scars created by horribly divisive civil war.

This is perhaps why, following his victory over Pompey, Caesar was so intent on carrying war to the "Caspian Gates," the doorstep of the Parthian Empire. Just prior to his assassination (44 BCE), he amassed a considerable invasion force, sixteen legions in all, not to mention several contingents of auxiliary cavalry and light armed infantry. As part of his preparations, he stationed six of these legions in Greece and at least one in Syria. He also dispatched large quantities of gold to the East for funding the expedition and ordered the production and stockpiling of arms at Demetrias in Thessaly.¹²⁰ As far as we can tell, Caesar's Parthian strategy seems to have been adaptive, as we might expect from a superior commander like Caesar. His plan took into account the fatal mistakes that had led to Crassus' death and

¹¹⁹ For references not only to Carrhae, but also to Parthia, Armenia, and a possible retaliatory expedition to the East during the Augustan Era cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1.2, 1.12, 7.9; *Epist.* 1.18.56; *Sat.* 2.1.15; Verg. *Ecl.* 1.62, 10.59-60; *G.* 2.126-36, 2.440, 2.466; *Aen.* 4.367; *Ov. Am.* 1.2.47; *Met.* 2.248, 4.21.

¹²⁰ App. *BC* 3.24; Cass. Dio 45.3; Plut. *Brut.* 25.

tried to devise a better way to deal with the Parthians. Caesar, it seems, expected to lead an army of roughly sixty thousand against Parthia, more than twice the number of men that Crassus had had at his disposal. He also apparently planned to field more cavalry units than his former colleague, which would be crucial for negating the Parthians' mobility advantage. Appian states that Caesar mustered ten thousand horsemen for his upcoming venture.¹²¹ But, perhaps most importantly, he also seems to have chosen to take the route through Lesser Armenia past the "Caspian Gates" (i.e., the route rejected by Crassus).¹²² Not only was this route logistically easier and safer, it would also allow the Romans to benefit from the local knowledge and military assistance of their supposed Armenian ally, Artavasdes, something that Crassus had failed to seize upon at the time.¹²³

Caesar's plan for invading Parthia, though shelved for almost eight years after the dictator's premature death, would be inherited and eventually implemented in 36 by his lieutenant-turned-triumvir M. Antony. Although not a strategist of Caesar's caliber, Antony was first and foremost a good soldier, so he, to his credit, tried his best when the time finally came to follow Caesar's prearranged plan. But in spite of the Romans' "improved" strategy, Antony's Parthian War still ended as an unmitigated disaster. Maybe Caesar's Parthian strategy, the strategy Antony adopted as his own, was, therefore, not quite as novel or innovative as it first appears. It may have been gussied up a bit with additional troops and cavalry, but did it still have at its heart the same fatal flaws that doomed Crassus' campaign? To answer such a question, it will be necessary to look not just at what distinguished Antony's campaign from Crassus', but rather—and more closely—at what the two had in common.

Much like Gabinius and Crassus, Antony, it seems, not only used Parthia's internal troubles as a pretext for his attack, but also tried to exploit them as a way of sowing dissension within the Parthians' ranks. When Phraates IV acceded to the Parthian throne in 37 BCE, he secured his newly-inherited position and earned a reputation for ruthlessness among his people by murdering all thirty of his

¹²¹ App. *BC* 2.110. Crassus probably had, at most, four thousand cavalry at Carrhae. See Sampson 2008: 114.

¹²² Suet. *Div. Jul.* 44; Plut. *Caesar* 58.

¹²³ Not everyone is in agreement that Caesar was planning to invade Parthia. Anderson 1963: 72 and McDermott 1982/1983: 223-231 both argue that Caesar's projected eastern campaign was much more limited in scope. For authors more amenable to the possibility, on the other hand, see Malitz 1984 and Sonnabend 1986: 179-185.

brothers.¹²⁴ He also tormented the Parthian nobility who turned, as before in the case of Mithridates III and Gabinius, to the Romans for relief. One of these Parthian nobles, a veteran of the recent Syrian Wars named Monaeses, after fleeing his homeland as an exile, sought asylum in Syria with Antony. While there, Monaeses attempted to convince Antony, who in reality probably needed little convincing, that the moment was right for the Romans to attack Parthia.¹²⁵ Phraates was a young king new to the throne and had just rather foolishly alienated, with his brutal political crackdown, many of the very aristocrats who supplied the Parthian crown with the arms and soldiers for its various wars.¹²⁶ And yet, even without Monaeses' goading, the Roman general must have eagerly received the news of Parthia's current internal disunity. Antony, whose own political domain now included all of the eastern Roman Empire, probably thought a Parthian victory would win him points in his rapidly escalating propaganda war against Octavian.¹²⁷ That the expatriated Monaeses could act as a guide and informant for Antony's army was probably an unexpected bonus. Had Antony given any forethought as to what he would do if his invasion proved successful, he may have also, at this rather preliminary stage, contemplated installing Monaeses as a client king after deposing Phraates. Gabinius and Crassus probably had had similar plans in store for Mithridates III before that pretender's rebellion inconveniently collapsed. And, whether he had had his own designs on the Arsacid throne all along or only developed such ambitions after joining Antony's company, Monaeses too must have been extremely enthusiastic about becoming Parthia's newest monarch, especially now with a force of nearly sixty thousand Roman soldiers at his back.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ The contradictory nature of our sources obscures the exact circumstances of Phraates IV's rise to power. Cass. Dio 49.23 reports that Orodes II chose Phraates as his heir after the king's eldest son, Pacorus, was killed during a Parthian raid into Syria. Orodes was so distraught over Pacorus' untimely death that he himself then died, apparently of extreme grief, immediately following Phraates' accession. Plut. *Crass.* 33, however, claims Phraates conspired against his father and eventually murdered the aged king along with his many siblings in a bloody palace coup.

¹²⁵ Plut. *Ant.* 37; and also see Hor. *Od.* 3.6.9.

¹²⁶ For the "feudal" nature of Parthia's military system cf. Colledge 1967: 65-66.

¹²⁷ On the rivalry between Octavian and Antony cf. Zanker 1988: 33-78.

¹²⁸ One objection to this final thought is that Monaeses, though of noble birth and something of a war hero in his homeland, was not an Arsacid himself, a critical requirement for all potential Parthian kings. But we must also remember that Phraates' coup had just recently thinned out the Arsacid line significantly. Monaeses might very well have believed Phraates' current widespread unpopularity with Parthia's nobility combined with the conspicuous lack of any other Arsacid candidates might have just been enough to make him a viable choice for the throne. Further proof of Monaeses' royal ambitions is also provided by Tarn's often overlooked 1932 article "Tiridates and the Young Phraates." Here Tarn

However, soon after Antony had fully committed all of his resources to the attack,¹²⁹ a sudden diplomatic “twist” occurred which must have given the general, his war councilors, and their new collaborator Monaeses a moment of pause. Phraates, perhaps finally realizing the true extent of his mistake, sent a messenger to Monaeses offering him the Parthian king’s “right hand,” the traditional Iranian symbol of amnesty.¹³⁰ Seeing as how the Roman army was already well underway at this point, marching steadily towards Armenia where Antony was about to supplement his invasion force with Artavasdes’ thirty-thousand Armenian auxiliaries, Phraates’ last minute amnesty offer probably seemed to smack a bit of desperation. Without knowing any better, we might have guessed that Antony and Monaeses would have rejected Phraates’ overture immediately out of hand. But strangely they did not. In fact, not only did Monaeses return to Parthia where he accepted some sort of minor military command under the Great King’s supreme authority, but Antony apparently even encouraged him to do so!¹³¹ How might we explain this seemingly odd behavior on Antony and Monaeses’ parts? Why would Antony willingly risk losing his best source of intelligence and his potential future client-king? And why would Monaeses risk sacrificing not only his best chance of winning the Parthian throne, but also possibly his life? For even if Phraates’ amnesty offer had not been a ruse to lure Monaeses back to Parthia for execution—and, admittedly, from Monaeses’ subsequent reinstatement it seems it was not—neither Antony nor Monaeses would have had any way of knowing this beforehand.

argues that the Parthian pretender, Tiridates, who later ousts Phraates IV during Augustus’ reign is actually the same man we see here, the Monaeses of Antony’s campaign (for more on this see Chap. 3). Tarn suspects that Tiridates is Monaeses’ later throne name. If Tarn is correct, then it is perhaps not so unreasonable to think that Monaeses’/Tiridates’ dynastic ambitions started here.

¹²⁹ While debating whether or not to accept Monaeses’ advice, Antony had been otherwise occupied reconquering Judea which had fallen during Pacorus’ and the Roman traitor Q. Labienus’ recent invasion of Syria and Asia Minor (41 BCE). On this occasion, Antony deposed the pro-Parthian candidate Antigonus who had seized the throne in Jerusalem with Pacorus’ help. His removal by Antony then allowed Herod to ascend, which probably explains why Herod, to his detriment, backed Antony in his later contest with Octavian. What is especially interesting is that Monaeses, who had served with Pacorus during the Parthians’ occupation of Syria and Judea, might have actually been present to see Antigonus’ ouster and all the Parthians’ recent work in the region undone. What impression would this have left on Monaeses, witnessing, as he was, the futility of opposing Rome? Given his present predicament and Antony’s demonstration of Roman power, the idea of being a Roman client-king might not have seemed so distasteful.

¹³⁰ Cf. Sherwin-White 1978: 183.

¹³¹ Cass. Dio 49.24; Plut. *Ant.* 37.

At least one commentator has tried to resolve this dilemma by suggesting that Monaeses was secretly a Parthian double agent, and that Antony thought his valuable collaborator was just returning to Phraates to convey the Romans' demands for Parthia's surrender.¹³² But this explanation seems rather unlikely, for the theory contains several holes. First, if Monaeses' allegiance truly lay with Phraates from the very beginning, then that would mean the Parthian king was actually attempting to trick the Romans into launching a massive invasion of his country. This Parthian strategy seems highly improbable. Phraates may have been young and a bit naive at times, but he was hardly stupid. And, second, as we will see below shortly, Monaeses, even once he was back in Phraates' service, still tried his level best to assist the Romans covertly, and this well after fate and the tides of war had turned violently against Antony. Were Monaeses, indeed, a Parthian agent, one would think that when the time came, he would have tried to press the Parthians' advantage, not undercut it.

A better explanation is that Monaeses was, from beginning to end, truly dedicated to the successful completion of the Romans' campaign. At the moment, he would have had no other way of gaining what he really wanted—i.e., the Parthian crown. But when Phraates' proposal of amnesty arrived, both he and Antony realized that they had, lying at their feet, a unique opportunity to subvert Phraates' fragile authority even further. Monaeses must have known, perhaps from spies or sympathizers he still had at court, that the Parthian king's offer was sincere, otherwise he would have never returned willingly, especially considering Phraates' past record of executing political dissenters. Maybe Monaeses, with Antony's consent, believed he could quietly rally these anti-Phraates elements and mount a coup or rebellion from within the Parthian king's own ranks, perhaps something akin to Mithridates III's earlier revolt during Crassus' expedition. If not, then Monaeses would at least be in a prime position, if nothing else, to supply Antony with crucial information about the Parthians' troop movements. Although there is no way to be absolutely sure, this theory seems a much more reasonable explanation for why Monaeses would suddenly abandon the Romans' promising enterprise and return

¹³² Bivar 1983: 61. And for Antony's demands on the Parthians see Cass. Dio 49. 24 and Plut. *Ant.* 37.

to Phraates' service, with Antony's blessing no less. But this explanation also means that Antony was either using Monaeses as an instrument of political subversion (i.e., as a tool to incite civil war in Parthia in the fashion of Gabinius and Crassus) or as a source of intelligence (perhaps something a bit akin to Lucullus' use of Sextilius). The question is, however, would Antony and Monaeses' risky gamble pay off? Unfortunately, with his departure for Parthia, the would-be rabble rouser/spy Monaeses disappears, somewhat frustratingly, from our sight for the time being. He will reemerge briefly later in our story, but for the moment we must turn back, as our sources do, to Antony's early maneuvers.

Even while debating what to do with Monaeses, the Romans were already marching northwards into Armenia, adhering to Caesar's preplanned route and thus actively avoiding one of Crassus' mistakes.¹³³ Furthermore, once in Armenia, Antony eagerly accepted Artavasdes II's offer of thirty thousand additional cavalry, bringing the entire Roman invasion force to an unprecedented one hundred thousand, and thus conveniently sidestepping what many considered another of Crassus' errors—that is, his lack of sufficient troops, be they Roman, Armenian, or otherwise.¹³⁴ But it is also here that Antony may have made his fatal mistake. He did not just supplement his army with Armenian auxiliaries, but actually placed the direction of his entire expedition in hands of Artavasdes, a local potentate whose loyalty was hardly above suspicion.¹³⁵ Perhaps Antony did so because he felt that, without someone like Monaeses at his side any longer, the Romans had no choice but to trust the Armenian king for advice about the local terrain and Parthian operations. The whole situation should

¹³³ Suet. *Div. Jul.* 44.

¹³⁴ Plut. *Ant.* 37. This is the same Artavasdes whom we met earlier while discussing Crassus' Parthian campaign. In 37, Antony's legate, Canidius, had marched against Armenia to, once more, secure the king's dubious allegiance.

¹³⁵ Artavasdes might very well have been a trustworthy Roman client in Crassus' day, but his political goals were much more in tune with the Parthians by the time of Antony's Parthian War, hence the need for Canidius' Armenian raid in 37 (see previous note). After Carrhae and the Parthians' first raids into Syria (53/52 BCE), Artavasdes entered into a marriage alliance with the Parthian king Orodes. Artavasdes' sister apparently married Orodes' son Pacorus. During Pacorus' subsequent invasion of Syria with the Roman traitor Q. Labienus (41/40), Artavasdes may have also contemplated launching a simultaneous attack against Rome's ally in Cappadocia, although no such attack ever actually occurred. Whether Antony was just ignorant of these connections between Armenia and Parthia or simply chose to ignore them is debatable. But clearly he should have been more wary of trusting Artavasdes with his intelligence needs. For more on the evolving relationship between Artavasdes and the Parthians in the 50s BCE cf. Redgate 1998: 76 and Sheldon 2010: 50-53.

remind us—perhaps a bit unsettlingly—of Crassus’ poor decision to follow Abgarus of Osroëne towards Carrhae. Artavasdes’ first bit of advice, counsel which Antony regrettably seems to have followed with some enthusiasm, was that the army should deviate from its preplanned course through northern Mesopotamia and assault instead the local stronghold of Phraaspa in Media Atropotene. Although Antony would admittedly have had no way of knowing this at the time, Artavasdes probably suggested this detour more for his kingdom’s own security needs than for the Romans’ benefit. We should also not overlook the rather strong possibility that Artavasdes was working for the Parthians from the outset and may have been leading the Romans straight into a Parthian ambush, just as in the case of Crassus and Abgarus.¹³⁶

Antony’s characteristic eagerness to demonstrate his battlefield prowess, perhaps combined with his immense desire to outdo Crassus, did not help matters either, however. In his rush to Phraaspa, Antony quickly outstripped his supply lines, leaving his baggage train far to the rear guarded only by a meager force of two legions and Artavasdes’ Armenians. Phraates, who had wisely chosen to lead the Parthian army personally, was lying in wait nearby and, as soon as Antony’s mistake had become fully apparent, viciously fell upon the Roman defenders. Artavasdes’ cavalry, either out of cowardice or because it had all been part of the plan, fled instantly, leaving the Roman legionnaires relatively defenseless against the Parthians’ highly mobile horse archers. By the time Antony reached the scene with reinforcements, it was too late; both legions, nearly ten thousand men and all of the army’s supplies (more than 300 wagons and pack animals) had been completely wiped out.¹³⁷ The immensity of this setback, along with Artavasdes’ obvious untrustworthiness, should have caused Antony at this point to rethink his overall strategy. Attacking Phraaspa had been Artavasdes’ idea, after all. In spite of the loss of his supply line and the Armenian’s cowardice/betrayal, Antony rather foolishly pressed on even further into Media Atropotene.

¹³⁶ Antony certainly identified Artavasdes later on as a traitor (Plut. *Ant.* 50). See Strabo 11.13.4, 16.1.28 also for this opinion. As for modern commentators, Sheldon 2010: 67 supports this view as well, although Debevoise 1938: 125, Redgate 1998: 76, and Wylie 1990: 42 seem less sure.

¹³⁷ Cass. Dio 49.25; Plut. *Ant.* 42; Vell. Pat. 2.82; Florus 2.20.3; *Periochae of Livy* 130.

Few can deny that Antony tried his best to capture the Median fortress; the Romans not only constructed all new siege engines from scavenged timber (those originally built for the expedition had been destroyed with the loss of the baggage train), but they even tried, towards the end of the affair, to erect a siege mound against one of the city's walls. None of these tactics succeeded, however, in breaching the stronghold's defenses. One cannot help but wonder, once again, whether the Medians had been forewarned either by Artavasdes or Phraates; this would certainly explain why they were so well prepared to withstand the Romans' assault. Nor did it help that, as the siege dragged on, the Parthians continued to attack the Romans' foraging parties. Without an intact supply line, the Roman troops often suffered more from hunger and disease than the defenders within the city. Such hardships eventually even gave rise, at one critical stage, to a short-lived mutiny among Antony's soldiers. Although quickly suppressed thanks largely to Antony's revival of the archaic Roman military practice of decimation, this sudden breakdown of discipline, more than anything else, seems to be what finally convinced Antony of the enterprise's futility.¹³⁸

Antony probably also realized by this time that Monaeses was going to be of little help, although this may not have been entirely the Parthian nobleman's fault. As mentioned, Phraates had chosen to lead the Parthian army himself, unlike, for example, his predecessor Orodes who left the heaviest and dirtiest military work to Surenas during Crassus' invasion. A Parthian king personally commanding his troops on the battlefield was by no means unprecedented, but such a demonstration of royal courage may have gone far to heal some of the political rifts Phraates had opened at the outset of his reign. Neither Antony nor Monaeses probably anticipated this tactful political move when they agreed to accept the Parthian king's amnesty offer, which would have made Monaeses' job of fomenting internal dissent at court much more difficult. If Monaeses could manage at some later date to incite rebellion among his fellow Parthian aristocrats, it would still be too late to save Antony's army at

¹³⁸ On the siege of Phraaspa see Cass. Dio 49.25 and Plut. *Ant.* 38-40.

Phraaspa. And so, after several months besieging the Median fortress with little to show for it and with no relief in sight, Antony finally ordered the Roman retreat.

Oddly though, most of Antony's losses during the campaign occurred not as the Romans were besieging Phraaspa, but actually as they were attempting to withdraw. They were, of course, more vulnerable while on the move, a fact of which the Parthians were well aware. As the Romans marched sullenly back to Armenia, they were harried ceaselessly by the enemy, sometimes both day and night. Many of those that did not die during the Parthians' frequent attacks succumbed to disease, either from malnutrition due to the long siege or from the harsh conditions on the forced march home. Moreover, it took the Romans more than a month before they reached the Araxes River, the official border between Parthian occupied space and the security of "allied" Armenia. Of Antony's original sixty thousand-man army (not counting Artavasdes' thirty thousand auxiliaries who had fled earlier), almost twenty-four thousand, or the near equivalent of those lost at Carrhae, had died before once again reaching the safety of Roman territory.¹³⁹

These losses would have probably been significantly worse if not for the intervention of Monaeses. As we alluded to above, after welcoming Monaeses back to court, Phraates seems to have given the redeemed exile a minor command in the king's army. Most likely, he wanted to keep Monaeses close, perhaps because he still did not completely trust the former Roman collaborator and wanted to keep him nearby. But while this, too, may have hindered Monaeses' efforts to foment rebellion and overthrow Phraates, it also gave him direct access to the Parthian army's movements. During the Roman retreat, Monaeses twice sent his cousin, another Mithridates, secretly to Antony with crucial information about how best to avoid Phraates' pursuit. On the first occasion, Mithridates steered Antony away from a Parthian ambush at the last minute. On the second, he warned the embattled Romans of Phraates' close proximity to their camp. Thanks to this timely bit of intelligence, Antony was able to drive his weary soldiers on at just the right moment and reach the Araxes before the

¹³⁹ For more detailed accounts of Antony's retreat cf. Devevoise 1938: 127-133; Bivar 1983: 61-64; and Sheldon 2010: 70-73.

Parthians could launch their final assault.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, while Monaeses and Antony's original strategy of hamstringing Phraates by starting a Parthian civil war did not work out quite as planned, it did, just maybe, save Antony from getting exactly what he had desired. Without Monaeses' eleventh-hour assistance, Antony may have very well outdone Crassus, not with the scope of his accomplishments, but with the extent of his misfortune. Antony's invasion force, which Caesar himself had gathered together, had been twice the size of his predecessor's expeditionary army. Had Antony's army been completely wiped out on the retreat from Phraaspa, future Roman generations would have surely spent much less time, as they were prone to do, lamenting Carrhae and beseeching the gods to avenge Crassus. The names Phraaspa and Antony would have surely occupied many more of their prayers.

As a brief addendum to our story, we should probably also mention that in 34 Antony mounted another eastern expedition once his ego had sufficiently recovered. Rather than attack Parthia, though, he directed the brunt of his assault on this occasion against Armenia, no doubt to punish Artavasdes for what he saw as the king's earlier betrayal.¹⁴¹ After luring Artavasdes to his camp with talk of forgiveness and a sham marriage alliance proposal, Antony cast the Armenian into irons and carted him off to Alexandria where he humiliatingly graced one of Antony's triumphal processions before being executed. The Romans then defeated Artavasdes' sons, Tigranes and Artaxias, in battle and overran the rest of the country with relative ease.¹⁴² As part of the "Donations of Alexandria," Antony soon afterward named his young son by Cleopatra, Alexander Helios, king of Armenia as well as, rather presumptuously, king "of all the lands between the Euphrates and Indus."¹⁴³ Although Alexander's pompous titles were nothing more than mere bluster probably meant more for Antony's audience back in Rome than for the Parthians themselves, it is not hard to imagine what Phraates would have thought of them. What the Parthians perceived as hollow mockery on the Romans' part, especially in light of their most recent failure at Phraaspa, must have lingered long on the mind of the Parthian king. But by

¹⁴⁰ Plut. *Ant.* 46-48; App. *Parth.* 18. Mithridates had also accompanied Monaeses during his earlier exile. See Plut. *Ant.* 37.

¹⁴¹ Octavian's attempt to broker an alliance with Artavasdes probably also had something to do with Antony's decision to re-invade Armenia. See Cass. Dio 49.41 and possibly Verg. *G.* 4.560.

¹⁴² Plut. *Ant.* 50; Joseph. *BJ* 1.363 and *AJ* 15.104; Strabo 11.14.15.

¹⁴³ Plut. *Ant.* 54.4; Cass. Dio 49.41.

constantly meddling with the eastern frontier, Antony also managed to antagonize the Armenians unnecessarily. Because Alexander Helios was still a minor, at the same time as his son's accession, Antony had to install a Roman military governor to rule over Armenia. This appointment greatly unsettled the Armenian nobility who may have tolerated from time to time foreigners poking around in their internal politics, but never any form of outside military rule, as Antony was now trying.

Antony's Parthian War, while it may have seemed more promising at the start due to Caesar's improvements on Crassus' strategy, in the end failed just as miserably as its predecessor's—and for similar reasons. Although Antony was careful not to underestimate the Parthians' military capabilities, as Crassus had, he did make the same critical error of assuming that Parthia's satellite kingdoms were largely unhappy with the status quo, that many of the lesser rulers whose kingdoms lay between the two great empires would welcome Roman "liberation" with open arms. This mindset was common when it came to Rome's conquest of the Middle East: the notion that eastern peoples long oppressed by living for centuries under the harsh shadow of Persian/Parthian despotism would eagerly imbibe Greco-Roman culture when given the chance. But, of course, not everyone was discontented with Parthian rule; many benefited from Parthian protection and some were even connected to the Arsacid family by marriage. Had Crassus and Antony not been clouded by such typical Roman preconceptions, perhaps they would have been more wary of trusting characters like Abgarus and Artavasdes. Had they taken the time to vet each of these would-be allies a little better, perhaps history would remember Carrhae and Phraaspa as great Roman victories and not as the disasters that they turned out to be.¹⁴⁴ Also like Crassus, Antony, it seems, tried to incite a Parthian civil war, a strategy which, we must admit, did have some merit for in both cases their efforts did, in fact, result in outbreaks of disruptive civil strife within Parthia. The problem was one of timing, however. Once a challenger for the throne was dispatched, the Romans had no real way of controlling how or when the ensuing revolt would proceed. For Crassus,

¹⁴⁴ Antony did eventually learn this lesson, only too late. On his retreat from Phraaspa, before Monaeses'/Mithridates' assistance, Antony apparently hired a Mardian guide to lead his army safely out of Parthian territory. But to be sure that the man would not deceive him, as Artavasdes had, Antony placed him in fetters, promising him great rewards if he succeeded and death if he proved untrustworthy. Had he only been so careful about choosing his guides at the outset of the campaign, the story might have turned out quite differently.

Mithridates' rebellion had peaked and then quickly petered out before the Romans were ready to invade. In Antony's case, Monaeses was eventually able to rally enough of the Parthian nobility to his side and even to drive Phraates temporarily from the throne, but not in time to be of any real assistance to Antony in 36. The dispatching of Parthian pretenders was, therefore, an effective and even quite powerful weapon in Rome's eastern arsenal; it was just not a very accurate weapon.

Chapter 3

From Hot War to Cold War: Romano-Parthian Affairs under Augustus

Introduction

In the decades immediately following Actium, the shadow of Rome's long and tumultuous relationship with Parthia still loomed large in the collective consciousness of the Roman people. A few older Romans might have still recalled Crassus' infamous loss at Carrhae in 53, but even the younger Roman generation had not yet forgotten Parthia's violent raids against Syria and Asia Minor in the 40s, or Antony's disastrous expedition into northern Mesopotamia in 36.¹⁴⁵ Romans of all ages probably believed that Rome's honor had been sullied and that these slights had to be avenged militarily. Perhaps this is why so many of the Augustan writers predicted that Augustus would eventually add Parthia to the empire. Propertius is perhaps the least bellicose of the Augustan poets. But even he does a bit of saber-rattling when, speaking about Parthia, he boasts: "Late will that province [Parthia] come beneath Ausonia's [Italy's] rods, yet it will surely come; Parthia's trophies will become familiar with Latin Jupiter."¹⁴⁶ But was this sentiment, popular among the public and with the era's poets, shared by the emperor himself? Did Augustus ever actually intend to invade Parthia?

The question is difficult to answer with certainty. Ambiguous doublespeak and political propaganda often shroud Augustus' true intentions. But if we must hazard a guess, we might say, based more on his actions than on his words, that Augustus' attitude towards Parthia was fluid: it was belligerent when it needed to be, but tempered at other times. Most importantly, it was, somewhat like Caesar's overall approach to Parthia, adaptive. When the political winds in Rome shifted, when opportunities on the eastern frontier or in Parthia presented themselves, Augustus quickly repositioned himself to seize the advantage. His strategy for handling Parthia was never entirely static or unchanging; nor did it burst fully-formed from his head after Antony and Cleopatra's coalition

¹⁴⁵ For Parthia's attacks on Syria and other Roman provinces in the late 50s and early 40s see Debevoise 1938: 96-120; Bivar 1983: 56-58; Sheldon 2005: 50-64; Lerouge 2007: 83-86; and Curran 2007: 33-53.

¹⁴⁶ Prop. *Eleg.* 3.4.5-6.

collapsed. From the moment the eastern frontier fell into his lap, Augustus was ready to experiment: to test, reject, and reevaluate political strategies—all ultimately to find the best, most efficient way of dealing with the Parthians. Sometimes Augustus' constantly-evolving Parthian strategies drew from the playbook of Rome's Late Republican generals (bully diplomacy, spying, and the occasional treaty-breaking); at other times, however, the Princeps' eastern policy modified earlier techniques (the notion of an Armenian buffer-state and the dispatching of Parthian royal pretenders) to fit his own special political needs.

Did Augustus ever intend to conquer Parthia? The best answer might be: only if he had to, and only if the time was right.

Tiridates and the Young Phraates

In the wake of Actium, Augustus took time to tour the eastern provinces. He traveled first to Syria, where he assessed the province's military preparedness, and then to Asia Minor, where he spent the winter of 30/29 BCE.¹⁴⁷ Most scholars agree that Augustus' inspection was not, at the time, a precursor to his own Parthian invasion. But, as we will see shortly, the frequent use of spies, scouts, and other reconnaissance agents in the East throughout the course of Augustus' reign suggests that the option was never entirely off the table. Had the Parthians tried to take advantage of Rome's internal discord and threatened Syria, Cilicia, or their neighboring provinces after Actium, there is little doubt that the newly-made emperor of Rome would have risen to the task. But if the young conqueror were contemplating such an expedition in 30/29, he would have soon reevaluated such a plan. In those same years, a series of unusual events transpired within Parthia which, for the time being, made such an expedition unnecessary and which, in the long term, forever altered how Augustus would approach Parthian relations.

¹⁴⁷ Some of the events described in this chapter occurred before Octavian assumed the title of Augustus in 27 BCE, others after. For convenience, we refer to him as Augustus throughout.

While Augustus and Antony had been locked in their heated struggle, a similar contest for the throne had been going on in Parthia. A pretender known as Tiridates had deposed Phraates IV, forcing the unpopular monarch to flee to Hyrcania, the traditional homeland of the Parthians east of the Caspian Sea. Tiridates had trouble consolidating his rule, however, and in the same year as Augustus' state visit to Syria, Phraates was able to rally his Scythian vassals and drive Tiridates from the Arsacid capital. But before absconding, Tiridates managed to get his hands on Phraates' infant son. He fled with the young prince to Syria, where Augustus received the two refugees as royal hostages. In spite of Phraates' avid protests, Augustus kept the boy in Rome until 23, when he "benevolently" returned the Parthian king's heir without ransom.¹⁴⁸ He refused to hand over Tiridates, however. For the pretender, he seems to have had other plans.

We can only speculate about why Augustus waited seven years before sending the Parthian prince home. Perhaps he wanted to keep Phraates' son in reserve as a sort of bargaining chip, while he gave Tiridates sufficient time to stage another coup. As noted in the previous chapter, Tiridates here may be the Monaeses who convinced Antony to attack Parthia and who then assisted the Romans during their harried retreat from Phraaspa. If so, that would mean Antony's efforts to incite a Parthian civil war had succeeded. Monaeses had been true to his word; he had just been too late to be of any real benefit to Antony. Even if this theory is faulty, there is still every reason to believe that Tiridates was a committed Roman ally. On his coinage, for example, he conspicuously styled himself ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟ or "Friend of the Romans."¹⁴⁹ Tiridates' public commitment to Rome, a commitment which may have gone all the way back to Antony's expedition, may have convinced Augustus to give the Parthian pretender another chance to oust Phraates. Soon after these events, the outbreak of additional rebellions

¹⁴⁸ Just. *Epit.* 42.5.6-9.

¹⁴⁹ Wroth 1964: 135. Justin 42.5 furthermore claims that Tiridates offered to rule Parthia on Rome's behalf. For more on this see Magie 1908: 151. Sherwin-White 1984: 322 also rejects the idea that Augustus lent Tiridates military support. But, then again, neither did Antony and that did not seem to have lessened Tiridates' commitment to Rome in any way. Strugnell 2008: 283 subscribes to the idea of a second attempt by Tiridates to capture the Parthian throne with Roman approval—if not with Roman arms.

against Roman rule in Spain and Gaul may have also caused Augustus to welcome the prospect of a friendly Parthian client-king.

Augustus' hopes that Tiridates could capture lightning in a bottle twice seem to have amounted to little, though. After 25 BCE, Tiridates disappears completely from the historical and numismatic record. His ultimate fate is unknown, although it is not unreasonable to assume that any second attempt to capture the Parthian throne would have been much more difficult than the first—and that attempt had taken Monaeses more than five years. As noted in our earlier discussion of Antony's campaign, Monaeses/Tiridates was not a member of the Arsacid clan, one of the traditional requirements for nomination to the Parthian throne. Difficulty overcoming this political handicap is probably why his initial rebellion had taken so long to mature, and is perhaps why his new regime collapsed after existing only from 30 to 26 BCE. Despite Augustus' backing, Tiridates would have had to overcome his lineage problem to regain the Parthian crown. But by this time, many of Tiridates' former allies among the Parthian aristocracy, who had been willing to overlook his non-Arsacid roots during his first rebellion, had most likely been purged from the nobility's ranks after Phraates' restoration. Without a cadre of dedicated aristocratic supporters, Tiridates' second run at the Parthian throne probably petered out before it began. This failure could be why Augustus finally decided, in 23 BCE, to negotiate with Phraates, offering the Parthian king back his son in exchange for the symbolic return of Rome's captured military standards and prisoners.

Recovering Rome's Eagles

Augustus' point man for these negotiations was probably Marcus Agrippa who, while visiting the East in 23, may have dispatched officers from Mytilene to carry the emperor's offer to Phraates' envoys on the Parthian border.¹⁵⁰ The Parthian king must have accepted, because Augustus repatriated Phraates' son without delay that very same year. Phraates was not nearly as timely with upholding his

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Magie 1908: 145-152.

part of the bargain. Almost three full years passed before the formal return of the standards and prisoners took place in Syria, and then only after Augustus had traveled, once again, to the province personally. He had also ordered his stepson Tiberius into Armenia with a full legion.¹⁵¹ There is a chance that Augustus' presence at the exchange was purely ceremonial and that Phraates' seeming lack of promptness was, in fact, a prearranged part of the agreement. After all, Augustus only had to return the king's son, whom he probably kept close at hand. Phraates, by contrast, had to gather together the standards and the Roman prisoners captured at Carrhae and Phraaspa, who were scattered across the Parthian kingdom.¹⁵²

Still, the more likely explanation is that Phraates, after receiving back his son, simply assumed that he could double-cross the Romans. Surely Augustus would not risk an all-out war for a handful of old soldiers and tarnished standards. On this last point he might have been right.¹⁵³ But Phraates misunderstood or severely underestimated the public pressure Augustus was under to repair Rome's battered reputation in the East.¹⁵⁴ If the emperor suspected that Phraates was intentionally not rounding up the Roman prisoners fast enough, he might have seen brinkmanship as just the thing to goad the Parthian king into action. This may be why Augustus himself returned to the eastern frontier in 20, and why he dispatched Tiberius to Armenia. It was diplomacy backed up by a demonstration of Roman military might, a way of compelling the Parthians into complying with the treaty and of ensuring that Rome's honor was not sullied once again.

¹⁵¹ Suet. *Tib.* 9 states that Tiberius recovered the standards, but all other ancient authors claim that Augustus recovered the standards and prisoners himself. See *Res Gest.* 29; Cass. Dio 54.8; Justin 42.5; Strabo 16.1; Vell. Pat. 2.91; *Periochae of Livy* 141; Eutr. *Brev.* 7.9; Oros. 6.21; and Suet. *Aug.* 21. Notice that this list of sources includes (rather oddly) Suet. *Aug.* 21 which contradicts that author's statement about Tiberius and the standards at *Tib.* 9. For this reason, Suetonius' crediting of Tiberius with the recovery is now generally considered to be a mistake. On this point cf. Van der Vin 1981: 120-121 and Rose 2005: 22.

¹⁵² We are told that some of the prisoners could not be located at all, and that others even committed suicide rather than return to Rome (Justin 42.5 and Dio 54.8, but cf. also Sampson 2008: 182-184). However, most of the prisoners—perhaps after only a painstaking search which might account for the long delay—were found and chose to accompany the standards home. For more on the fate of Crassus' captured soldiers see Sampson 2008: 182-185.

¹⁵³ Immediately following the Roman civil wars Augustus was probably unwilling to commit to another costly foreign war if he could at all help it. The civil wars had severely drained the empire's resources, and Augustus' first priority was to consolidate his new rule and repair the damage done by decades of civil strife.

¹⁵⁴ For example, Prop. 4.6.79 describes the Parthian settlement of 20 BCE as a "stopgap" measure. And Cass. Dio 51.18 makes it clear that the Roman people did not believe Augustus' motivations; they wished him to attack and punish the Parthians.

Although Augustus did not achieve a military victory over the Parthians, few Roman citizens may have noticed given all the pomp and pageantry of the emperor's return to the city in 19 BCE. He had spent the previous three years abroad, settling affairs with Phraates and touring the western provinces, including Spain and Gaul. His homecoming was touted everywhere as the beginning of a new era (*novum saeculum*) of peaceful relations between West and East, a true Pax Romana. On his journey back to Rome from the eastern frontier, a series of coins specially minted for the occasion may have been released in advance of the emperor's arrival.¹⁵⁵ Many of these bore, among other things, images and legends referring to the Parthian settlement—for example, the “recovered standards” (*signis [parthicis] receptis*) and the “rescued prisoners” (*ob civis servatos*). The Senate helped perpetuate the fiction of Augustus' pacification of the East by announcing the dedication of a victory arch in the Forum, which would celebrate the emperor's successes against the Parthians.¹⁵⁶ Everyone ignored the fact that such monuments were usually reserved for real military conquests.

With the city's populace thus prepared, Augustus himself appeared in Rome that October at the head of a great triumphal procession. He displayed the Roman prisoners he had liberated from Parthian servitude. At the same time, he showed off the recovered standards—not only those of Crassus, but also those of two other Roman armies which had been lost battling against the Parthians.¹⁵⁷ While the eventual fate of the Roman prisoners after their return is unknown, that of the standards was widely publicized.¹⁵⁸ They were eventually housed in a newly-constructed temple in the Augustan Forum

¹⁵⁵ Van der Vin 1981: 129 believes that the coins depicting the return of the standards were released in one unusually large batch between 20 and 17 BCE, and that they appeared in carefully timed increments as Augustus traveled home from the East.

¹⁵⁶ Cass. Dio 54.8. For more on this monument cf. Rich 1998: 97-115 and Rose 2005: 28-36. It apparently depicted a kneeling Parthian presenting Augustus with Crassus' standards (the *signa*). The cuirass of Augustus' Prima Porta statue, too, conveys a similar scene. It is, in fact, a common theme throughout the iconography of Augustus' reign. See Zanker 1988: 183-192 and Mattern 1999: 186-187.

¹⁵⁷ In his *Res Gestae*, the emperor himself boasts that he forced *Parthos trium exercitum Romanorum spolia et signa reddere [sibi] supplicesque amicitiam populi Romani petere* (*Res Gest.* 5.29). Van der Vin 1981: 119 says that two are certainly Crassus' and Antony's, but claims that the third is more difficult to identify. It could be that of L. Decidius Saxa from Pacorus'/Labienus' Syrian invasion in 40 BCE or perhaps from another expedition of Antony in 33 BCE.

¹⁵⁸ As for the prisoners, see especially Sampson 2008: 182-185. Van der Vin 1981: 133 argues that the general lack of comments along with the few disparaging ones that we do have about the prisoners (see especially Cass. Dio 54.8 and Hor. *Od.* 3.5) suggests that the majority of the Roman people thought it shameful that they had been captured in the first place. In terms of the standards, as Rose 2005: 23 notes, those recovered from the Parthians would have not been the only trophies paraded through Rome on this occasion. Augustus would have displayed more than a hundred “lost”

dedicated to Mars Ultor (“Mars the Avenger”).¹⁵⁹ Augustus had vowed to build this temple on the eve of the battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, the battle in which he had finally avenged Julius Caesar by killing his assassins.¹⁶⁰ The temple was thus an extremely potent symbol of the domestic peace that Augustus had brought back to the Republic. But the temple also shared many architectural features with the Capitoline sanctuary of Jupiter Feretrius, a shrine supposedly built to display Romulus’ *spolia* from his contests with the Caninians.¹⁶¹ The same temple may have held the *spolia* of the kings of Veii (from 428 BCE), as well as those of the Insubrian Gauls (from 222 BCE). Beside the emperor’s new shrine of Mars Ultor, as Brian Rose remarks, “the two temples would have functioned as complementary symbols of Roman hegemony [over] both East and West.” By storing the standards where he did, Augustus was trying to emphasize both his domestic achievements and his accomplishments on the frontiers. Parthia had been humbled for its past transgressions (Carrhae and Phraaspa) and was submissive to the power of a renewed, reinvigorated Roman Empire under Augustus’ direction.¹⁶²

The problem was that this image of a pacified Parthia and a secure eastern border was largely fiction. Augustus had not defeated Phraates in battle; he had not even been able to arrange the Parthian king’s removal. Backing Tiridates had accomplished relatively little. He may have recovered the lost standards, and in the eyes of many Romans avenged Crassus, but he had only done this through blackmail, by holding Phraates’ heir hostage. If Phraates felt anything at this point in time, it was, most likely, anger at Rome’s continuous interference in his kingdom’s affairs. First it had been Antony; now it was Augustus. Despite Augustus’ claims to the contrary back in Rome, the last thing Phraates likely felt was humility, passivity, or submissiveness. The fiction of the safe, secure imperial border that

ensigns recovered from all over the empire during his three-year tour. Given their frequent mention in the sources and, as we are about to see, their honored resting place in the emperor’s new temple, we can assume, however, that the Parthian standards would have been especially publicized.

¹⁵⁹ Ovid *Fast.* 5.579-596, in fact, seems to imply that an annual celebration was held for the return of the standards.

¹⁶⁰ Suet. *Aug.* 29.2; Ovid *Fast.* 5.569-578.

¹⁶¹ Cass. Dio 54.8 actually claims that the temple of Mars Ultor was constructed in imitation of that of Jupiter Feretrius. For a fuller description of their similarities and relationship cf. Anderson 1984: 68; Simpson 1993; Hannah 1998: 425-430; Rich 1998: 79-97; and Rose 2005: 22-23.

¹⁶² Rose 2005: 23 also mentions that Augustus’ “return from the East coincided with the publication of the *Aeneid*, which diagrammed the origins of Rome in the East, the rise of a new Troy in the West, and the creation of a *novum saeculum*, which Augustus was in the process of renewing.”

Augustus was so carefully crafting in Rome would have fallen apart if the Parthian king ever decided to retaliate by attacking Syria, as his predecessors had. The trick for Augustus was to find a way to mollify, or perhaps hamstring, the Parthian king without resorting to a costly, full-scale military invasion.

Thea Musa and the Sons of Phraates

Shortly after the return of the standards in 20 BCE—and, perhaps, as part of an attempt to solve his Parthian dilemma—Augustus sent Phraates an Italian slave girl named Musa for his harem. Despite the recent tensions, Phraates seems to have readily accepted the girl, making her one of his most distinguished concubines. Our main source for this diplomatic exchange, the Jewish historian Josephus, seems to suggest that Augustus intended this girl as a gift and act of good faith.¹⁶³ This may very well be the case. We know, for example, that in the spring of 26 BCE, most likely to prevent it from falling into the hands of the pretender Tiridates, Phraates had executed his entire harem.¹⁶⁴ Augustus' offer of Musa was thus a fitting “replacement” for what the Parthian monarch had lost and so it could have been an effective way of smoothing over relations. The move also had many precedents among the Hellenistic monarchies of the East.

But the general silence of Latin authors on the topic of Musa's exchange, as well as the rather extraordinary events surrounding her later career, has led some scholars to see a more devious motive behind Augustus' gift.¹⁶⁵ These authors have speculated that Musa's true purpose at Phraates' court was to spy for the Roman emperor. This would explain why we hear so little about her. If her mission was supposed to be covert, Augustus would not have publicized her existence much, even in Rome, for fear

¹⁶³ Joseph. *AJ* 18.39-40, although our lone literary source for Musa's career, is backed up by extensive numismatic evidence. And her existence is, at least, alluded to in other authors (e.g., Velleius Paterculus and Tacitus), although her name is always omitted and her significance often obscured. Cf. Strugnell 2008: 276-279. As to why this is the case, we will speculate shortly below.

¹⁶⁴ Isidore of Charax 1. Presumably Phraates IV's son, the one kidnapped by Tiridates, was either captured earlier by the pretender or not kept with the harem at the time of the Parthian king's brutal act.

¹⁶⁵ Those who are more suspicious of Musa's true purpose in the East include Taylor 1936: 163; Debevoise 1938: 143; Delorme 2005: 57, 175, 185, et passim (although Delorme also believes Musa was sent to Phraates much earlier than 20 BCE); Strugnell 2008: 283; and Sheldon 2010: 85.

of compromising his agent. Presumably, the Parthians would have had their own informants in the Roman capital, and Augustus would not have wanted to arouse any suspicion that would travel back to Phraates' ears.¹⁶⁶

We do not know if Musa's original orders from Augustus were simply to relay information back to Rome or actually to influence the Parthian king's decisions. Given how events would soon play out, the latter seems probable. Prior to 12 BCE, Musa's son by Phraates, known alternately as either Phraates V or by his more common, diminutive name Phraataces, had become old enough to contend for the Parthian throne.¹⁶⁷ Although we are not privy to the details of how she accomplished it, Musa seems to have somehow convinced Phraates to make her queen and his chief consort. Phraates then sent his other sons (those of his other queens) to Rome for safekeeping, leaving Musa's son Phraataces the only remaining heir to the throne. Four of Phraates' sons (Seraspadanes, Phraates, Rhodaspes, and Vonones), along with two of their wives and four of their sons, were handed over to the Roman governor of Syria, M. Titius. They were then escorted to Rome where they and their descendants resided for the next half century, enjoying all the luxuries and privileges given to any of Rome's royal hostages.¹⁶⁸ This exiled group of Parthian royalty formed a convenient pool from which Augustus and the other Julio-Claudian emperors later drew their candidates—we might call them “pretenders”—for the Parthian and Armenian thrones.

There are three competing theories for why Phraates deported a substantial portion of his family. The first, laid out by Augustus himself in his *Res Gestae*, claims that Phraates offered his sons

¹⁶⁶ Josephus, our best source for Musa, only records her story as background for his more important account of the revolt of Asinaeus and Anilaeus, two brothers who established an independent Jewish state near Babylon under Parthian rule (*AJ* 18.325). So clearly, even his knowledge of Musa is probably derived from a non-Latin source. As far as the Roman writers were concerned, Musa was a non-entity and this may be just how Augustus wanted it if she were, in fact, a spy.

¹⁶⁷ Archaeological evidence has shown that, even with the execution of his harem in 26, by this date Phraates still had, besides Musa who was his concubine, at least four queens: Olennieire, Cleopatra, Baseirta, and Bistheibanaps. Whether these had somehow survived the earlier purging of the harem, as the young Phraates had, or were married in the interim between 26 and 10 BCE is unknown. See Minns 1915: 32 and Debevoise 1938: 140.

¹⁶⁸ *Res Gest.* 32; Strabo 16.1; Vell. Pat. 2.94; Justin 42.5; Oros. 6.21; Eutrop. *Brev.* 7.9; Tac. *Ann.* 2.1; Cass. Dio 51.18; Sue. *Aug.* 21; and Joseph. *AJ* 18.41-42. The precise date for the transfer of the hostages to Rome depends on the problematic dating of M. Titius' governorship of Syria. Arguments vary anywhere from 20 BCE (Taylor 1936) to somewhere between 10 and 8 BCE (Mommsen 1883: 166 n. 3 and Syme 1989: 117-118). Rose 2005: 37 contains perhaps the best explanation about this ongoing debate, so we have largely followed his conclusion that Titius' stint as governor and the transfer of the Parthian princes occurred sometime prior to 12 BCE.

to Augustus as *pignora* (“tokens”), because he so strongly desired the *amicitia* (“friendship”) of the Roman people. But considering how intent Phraates was to recover his kidnapped son fifteen years earlier, this explanation seems highly improbable and smacks of Augustan propaganda. Besides, why would a better relationship with Rome require Phraates to offer up all but one of his offspring as hostages? The second theory, espoused by most of the Latin writers, suggests that Phraates’ true purpose was to rid his kingdom of potential Arsacid rivals for the throne. This theory is certainly a more plausible explanation; remember, Phraates had murdered his own father and thirty of his brothers in 37 BCE, shortly after becoming king, to solidify his hold on power. That, combined with the purging of his harem in 26, demonstrates that he was not above such drastic acts to keep his position as the Great King secure.

But there is one crucial flaw with this second theory, and that flaw is what finally proves that Musa—and, by extension, Augustus—must have had a hand in prompting the transfer of the Parthian hostages. In both 37 and 26, Phraates simply resorted to murdering his family members en masse rather than letting them survive as challengers or tools of his enemies. If he were so concerned about the loyalty of his sons, why did he not just execute them, as he had done twice before? Why did he send them all to Rome where they could be used for Augustus’ propaganda purposes and as possible royal challengers in the future?¹⁶⁹ The only explanation (our third and best theory, and the one proffered by Josephus) is that Musa influenced Phraates’ decision. The transfer of the hostages coincided, after all, with her promotion to first queen, and only her son escaped the fate of his step-siblings. We may never know precisely how Musa achieved this feat of palace intrigue. But that is all the more reason to suspect that she was, in fact, much more than what she seemed. As Josephus asserts, she was not only a probable agent of Augustus, but an especially deft one.

¹⁶⁹ Sullivan 1990: 468; Ridley 2003: 220; and Strugnell 2008: 285 also put forth the possibility that Phraates might have had other sons (i.e., sons other than Musa’s and those that were sent to Rome). But while faintly possible, there is no evidence of any additional offspring and, considering how quickly Musa’s son attained the throne after his father’s death in 2 BCE, this theory seems altogether unlikely.

Before moving on we must ask why Augustus would even want the Parthian king's heirs in Rome. At this stage in the game, and from the emperor's perspective, their value as potential pretenders must have seemed rather limited. Musa might be able to sway the king, but any challenger to the throne would need the support of the Parthian aristocracy, and Musa could hardly coerce the entire Parthian nobility singlehandedly. She was good, but probably not that good. And despite everything that had transpired in the past, Augustus would have seen that Phraates was now firmly entrenched on the Parthian throne. Nor did the Princes likely expect any success from using the hostages as bargaining chips, as he had used Phraates' young son in the mid-20s. Even on that occasion, the Parthian monarch had proven himself a stubborn opponent, unwilling to yield easily to blackmail. We might recall the long delay between the return of Phraates' son (23 BCE) and the recovery of the standards (20 BCE), and how Augustus had only achieved his desired result after flexing a considerable amount of Roman military muscle on the eastern frontier. Phraates was even less likely to succumb to such tactics now because he now had at least one viable heir at his disposal: Musa's son Phraataces.¹⁷⁰

Perhaps Augustus wanted the Parthian princes for his own propaganda purposes in Rome. He realized that he could use them as living examples of how he had "pacified" the unruly Parthians. This is, in essence, what he claims in the *Res Gestae*.¹⁷¹ Suetonius informs us that the emperor often displayed the princes to the public at theatrical events and games to popularize the fiction of this foreign policy. Emma Strugnell states: "The Parthian heirs were treated as novelties, and [Suetonius] places them in the context of other marvelous curiosities: a two-foot high dwarf, a rhinoceros and 50 cubit-long serpent."¹⁷² The Parthian hostages are probably depicted in Augustus' entourage on the Ara Pacis Augustae, the Altar of Augustan Peace, which was dedicated in 9 BCE (shortly after the princes'

¹⁷⁰ Although the precise chronology of events in the 20s is difficult to nail down with any sort of certainty, we would offer that Phraates' seemingly strong desire to recover his son from Augustus was because he had no other heir at the time. He had just recently murdered his whole harem. Thanks to Musa's influence, the situation in 10 BCE was somewhat different.

¹⁷¹ *Res Gest.* 5.29.

¹⁷² Strugnell 2008: 285; Suet. Aug. 43. See also Nedergaard 1988: 108-109.

transfer to Rome).¹⁷³ However, in the back of his mind, Augustus must have also held out hope that Musa's son, Phraataces, the only remaining legitimate heir at the Parthian court, would someday succeed his father—that is, if Musa could manage to stay in Phraates' good graces. If that happened, Augustus might finally have a Parthian ruler he could more easily manipulate, a true Parthian client-king.

The Armenian Crisis: The Origin of Rome's Proxy War

Despite Augustus' ever-strengthening position with regards to Parthia, Roman hegemony in Armenia had become somewhat tenuous. Shortly following Antony's second eastern campaign (some time after 34 BCE), one of Artavasdes II's sons returned from his exile in Parthia and expelled the last of Antony's Roman garrisons. This son, who took the throne name Artaxias II, had ruled Armenia, largely with Phraates' support, until 20 BCE, when his oppressive rule finally turned the country's nobility against him. The Armenians requested that Augustus reinstate Tigranes, Artavasdes' other son and Artaxias' brother, who was still being held hostage in Alexandria. The Roman emperor agreed and dispatched Tiberius to Armenia, with Tigranes obediently in tow. But before the Romans arrived, the Armenians had already risen up and murdered Artaxias. With the hardest part of his task thus already accomplished, Tiberius then placed Tigranes on the Armenian throne as his countrymen had requested, establishing what many consider to be the first true Roman client-king of Armenia.¹⁷⁴

The first of Augustus' Armenian candidates, Tigranes III, was eventually succeeded in 12 BCE by his son Tigranes IV and his sister-wife Erato. Tigranes' accession was apparently brought about at the time without Augustus' implicit consent, but at first this probably mattered little to the Roman emperor. Tigranes III had been loyal; why would his son not also be? However, if this was Augustus'

¹⁷³ The "foreign dressed" children on the Ara Pacis have in the past mistakenly been identified as Gaius and Lucius, Augustus' grandsons. They were assumed to be in Trojan garb due to Gaius' participation in the *Lusus Troiae*, the Trojan Games described in Verg. *Aen.* 5 and revived by Augustus for the Secular Games celebrated in 17 BCE. However, recently Rose 2005: 36-44 has demonstrated that the clothing worn by the children on the altar frieze is, in fact, more consistent with how Augustan era craftsmen portrayed contemporary Parthians.

¹⁷⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.

assumption, it was a bit premature. Evidence suggests that Tigranes IV's reign, in fact, marked a significant foreign policy shift in Armenia. Cassius Dio, for one, informs us that Rome began fearing Armenia's increased regional authority after Tigranes' accession.¹⁷⁵ He even mentions the monarch's promotion of a pro-Parthian party within his kingdom. The Roman historian Sextus Festus seems to confirm the existence of this growing anti-Roman element within Tigranes' court.¹⁷⁶ These events are probably the early stages of an Armenian rebellion against Roman hegemony.

And yet the Parthians do not seem to have taken immediate advantage of Armenia's shifting political atmosphere. Phraates did enter into an alliance with Tigranes, but he did not send Tigranes any sort of military support. He certainly did not rush to the Armenian monarch's aid in 5 BCE when, on Augustus' orders, Tiberius reentered Armenia and briefly deposed the troublesome king. On this occasion, Tiberius replaced Tigranes with Artavasdes III, a Median prince whose commitment to Rome must have been all but assured. The best explanation for Phraates' lukewarm response to the Armenians' nascent anti-Roman rebellion is that his primary concern was to maintain as much regional stability as possible. Phraates did not want to upset his new neighbors by rejecting their overtures outright, but he was not about to start a war with Rome on their behalf. Phraates' disinterest might also have had something to do with Musa's influence and the recent transfer of the Parthian hostages.

If Phraates had lived any longer, given his hands-off approach to Armenia at the time, Artavasdes' throne might have remained secure. However, in 2 BCE, Musa poisoned her husband, who might have been ailing anyway, given his advanced age. This left the way open for Phraataces to assume the Parthian crown. But if Augustus had hoped that Phraates' removal would result in an obedient Parthian client king, he would be sorely disappointed. If Musa had, at one time, been the emperor's faithful agent, she was one no longer. Even prior to her husband's demise, she had started working to win the pro-Parthian aristocratic party in Armenia over to her side. At the news of Phraates' death, these disgruntled Armenian nobles, at Musa's urging and with a good bit of Parthian military

¹⁷⁵ Cass. Dio 55.9.

¹⁷⁶ Sext. Fest. *Brev.* 19.

support, rebelled against Artavasdes, drove him from the throne, and once again installed the pro-Parthians Tigranes IV and Erato.¹⁷⁷ At the same time, Musa had her son, Parthia's new Great King, send an embassy to Augustus requesting a renewal of the Romano-Parthian peace treaty of 20 BCE. But Phraataces' ambassadors also, rather haughtily, demanded not only the return of the Parthian hostages (i.e., the king's step-siblings), but also the right to interfere in Armenia's internal affairs.¹⁷⁸ As far as the latter demand went, Musa and Phraataces seem to have conveniently ignored the fact that they had already begun meddling in Armenia's politics. At the very least, if the rebellion occurred after the embassy, they did not wait for the Roman emperor's response before inciting the overthrow of Artavasdes.¹⁷⁹

Either Artavasdes' overthrow or Phraataces' embassy would have made Augustus instantly aware of Musa's betrayal. Despite his certain outrage, the emperor would have had a dilemma on his hands: he could not allow such an affront—by a woman, a former slave, and a native Italian at that—to go unavenged. To do so would signal weakness at home and abroad. But Augustus could no longer call upon his best generals: Agrippa had died a decade earlier in 12 BCE, and Tiberius, who was disillusioned at having been passed over as Augustus' heir yet again, had recently retired to the island of Rhodes. Augustus, who was by this time at least sixty, had no choice but to trust the necessary punitive expedition to his current heir, his oldest grandson, Gaius Caesar. Augustus must have harbored many reservations about sending Gaius to the East on such a mission. The Roman prince was young and inexperienced (only eighteen at the outset of his campaign), and was also, along with his younger

¹⁷⁷ Rose 2005: 45 and Strugnell 2008: 289 both identify the Armenian king on this occasion as Tigranes III rather than Tigranes IV.

¹⁷⁸ Joseph. *AJ* 18.42-43. Phraataces actually sent Augustus a letter, which was presumably delivered by his ambassadors. The Roman emperor responded by demanding that the Parthians immediately withdraw from Armenia. He even went so far as to insult Phraataces by referring to the young monarch simply as "King" rather than by the more traditional Persian title of "King of kings." Phraataces eventually reciprocated by addressing his own counter letter to "Caesar." Cf. Cass. Dio 55.10.

¹⁷⁹ For the overthrow of Artavasdes III and the reinstatement of Tigranes IV and Erato, see Vell. Pat. 2.100; *Res Gest.* 27; Tac. *Ann.* 2.4; Cass. Dio 55.10. For the numismatic evidence suggesting 2 BCE as the rebellion's date cf. Sellwood Types 3.57.1-12.

brother Lucius, one of Augustus' last, favored choices for a successor.¹⁸⁰ The danger inherent in the expedition would have weighed heavily on the emperor's mind.

Gaius Caesar's Eastern Expedition

Musa's betrayal and the Armenian Crisis also caused Augustus to face a crisis of political image. As long as Phraates IV was alive, Augustus had tried to project an image at home of peaceful coexistence with Parthia. The Parthians were now supposed to be subdued and cooperating with Rome in its many imperial endeavors.¹⁸¹ Tiberius' two previous missions into Armenia probably would not have upset the emperor's fiction of a pacified eastern frontier too much. The first, in 20 BCE to install Tigranes III, had been at the request of the Armenians themselves, so, in essence, they had willingly deferred to Rome. The second, which ousted Tigranes IV in 5 BCE, could simply be viewed as the chastisement of an unruly client-king. In both cases, Parthia had chosen not to interfere. Rome could not ignore Musa and Phraataces' direct and unapologetic involvement in the latest Armenian revolt, however. Nor could it be hidden from public view or spun into something less ominous. The news of Parthia's renewed aggression in the East must have shattered the peaceful image of the frontier Augustus had been so carefully crafting over the course of the last two decades.

¹⁸⁰ M. Claudius Marcellus, Augustus' nephew and son-in-law, had been the emperor's first choice but died in 23 BCE of illness. Augustus' second candidate, M. Agrippa, had, as already noted, died in 12 BCE leaving Gaius and Lucius Caesar as the emperor's last preferred heirs before turning to his less favorable alternatives like Tiberius.

¹⁸¹ Rose's reconstruction, mostly from numismatic images, of Augustus' Parthian Victory Arch shows Augustus in a quadriga flanked by two (and this is the important part) "unbound" Parthians, one with a bow and the other kneeling and offering the *signa*. Rose 2005: 28-33 suggests that this portrays the Parthians in a subservient light, but nevertheless in a positive one. They are smaller than Augustus, but they are not bound as in Republican representations of enemies. Moreover, Rose says that the "eastern garb" (i.e., the Phrygian caps and pants) of the Parthians would not have seemed so negative because that same clothing had been used for centuries to depict Trojans and Attis, the husband of Cybele, in Roman art, and that this was the first time it was used to depict "the enemy." Rose argues that Augustus was trying to show the East as domesticated and as a partner in his new peace. But we should also note that Augustus' efforts to project this image through his monuments and coinage, while generally successful with the Roman public, may not have been entirely believed by all segments of Roman society. This is precisely the period when we first begin to see references to Parthia appear speaking of it as Rome's "rival." Strabo 2.9.2 reports, for example, that "now they [the Parthians] rule over so much land and so many peoples, that in a way they have become rivals of the Romans in the size of their empire." Other examples of Parthia as Rome's "rival" include: Manilius 4.674-675: "and the Parthians, a sort of other world"; and Pompeius Trogus 41.1.1: "the Parthians, who now rule the east, having as it were divided the world with the Romans."

As a result, after 2 BCE Augustus began to project a different image of Parthia, one which cast the Parthians not as Rome's collaborators, but as the latest reincarnation of the empire's age-old enemy from the East.¹⁸² In anticipation of Gaius' upcoming expedition, for example, the emperor dedicated his temple to Mars Ultor. The shrine was then being used to house the *signa* recovered from the Parthians nearly 20 years earlier. Recall that Augustus had first vowed the temple on the eve of the Battle of Philippi, and so, as Brian Rose has observed, the Ultor epithet referred "to [Augustus'] vengeance against the assassins of his adoptive father Caesar. [But] by the time of the temple's dedication, however, the *ultio* in question also signified Rome's vengeance against Parthia."¹⁸³ In conjunction with the temple's dedication, Augustus also held an elaborate series of games, the highlights of which included the slaughter of thirty-six crocodiles in the Circus Flaminius and a naval reenactment (*naumachia*) recreating the Battle of Salamis.¹⁸⁴ The crocodiles, symbols of Antony and Cleopatra, would have been clearly reminiscent of Augustus' victory at Actium. Juxtaposed with the Greeks' legendary defeat of the ancient Persians, the games would have emphasized the temple's dual purpose and cast Gaius' campaign as part of the antagonistic tradition of East versus West.¹⁸⁵ Gaius was probably depicted as a veritable Alexander the Great,¹⁸⁶ and his eastern mission was almost certainly billed as the final, long-awaited Roman retribution for Crassus and Carrhae. Ovid even identifies Gaius, at one point, as Ultor, or as the spirit of Roman vengeance.¹⁸⁷ Gaius, like Augustus when he

182 For the best discussion of this about-face in Augustus' attitude towards the Parthians and the resulting shift in imperial Parthian imagery see Rose 2005. Lerouge 2007: 76 also points out that Romano-Parthian relations improved at least during the first half of Augustus' reign.

183 Rose 2005: 46.

184 For the crocodiles and *naumachia* see Cass. Dio 55.10. *Res Gest.* 23 and Ovid *Ars. am.* 1.171-172 may also contain references to the naval reenactment. For modern discussions of these events, see Rose 2005: 45-46; Alcock 2002: 82; Schneider 1998: 112-113; Spawforth 1994: 238; Syme 1984: 922; and Bowersock 1984: 175-176.

185 The Vicus Sandaliarius altar, which depicts the *tripudium* or chicken eating sacrifice ceremony Gaius took part in before leaving for the East, probably also emphasized the campaign's place in this tradition. Rose 2005: 46-50 believes that the priest or priestess in the image is one of Cybele, and that the inclusion reflects both older Republican victories (e.g., the Cybele cult coming to Rome during the Second Punic War to avenge Hannibal's victories), but also that an eastern goddess would affirm Gaius' campaign.

186 Cf. Cass. Dio 55.10.2-5. Augustus also apparently at this time commissioned paintings by Apelles depicting Alexander's conquests over the Persians. Given Gaius' upcoming campaign, these paintings must have been meant to highlight the similarities between Persia's greatest conqueror and the future undertaking of the emperor's grandson. For more on this iconography cf. Rose 2005: 46.

187 Ovid *Ars. am.* 1.179-181, but see also *Ars. am.* 1.201-212; Cass. Dio 55.10; and, for a modern opinion, Gruen 1996: 160. Ovid's gradual transition from describing Gaius in *Ars. am.* 1.171-228 as a *puer* to that of a *iuvenis* probably is also

forced the Parthians to return the captured standards, would be the one, it was claimed, who would at last restore Roman honor.¹⁸⁸

But, for all his bluster, Augustus was not about to take too many chances with the life of Gaius, who was by now his adoptive heir. The Roman emperor surrounded his grandson with several advisers, whose first duty was to keep the prince safe and unharmed. One of these advisers was M. Lollius, who had been consul in 21 BCE and governor of Gaul in 16.¹⁸⁹ But Augustus also apparently sought to improve his grandson's chances by dispatching reconnaissance agents to the East in advance of Gaius' departure. Isidore of Charax was perhaps one such agent. His *Parthian Stations* essentially maps out a possible invasion route into Parthia. Another may be Lycotas, who appears in Propertius' poem "Arethusa to Lycotas."¹⁹⁰ Propertius' verse describes the desperate pleas of a wife, Arethusa, whose husband has been long absent scouting the frontiers. Arethusa in her loneliness admits in her letter:

And I learn where the Araxes flows that you must conquer,
and how many miles a Parthian horse travels without water:
I'm driven to study the world depicted on a map,
and learn what kind of position the god set up there.

et disco, qua parte fluat vincendus Araxes,
quot sine aqua Parthus milia currat equus;
cogor et e tabula pictos ediscere mundos,
qualis et haec docti sit positura dei¹⁹¹

Even if Arethusa and Lycotas are nothing more than figments of Propertius' vivid imagination, the poem could reflect possible existence of such agents, operating in the East on the eve of Gaius' campaign.¹⁹²

meant to suggest that the eastern mission would be what would finally inaugurate Gaius into manhood.

188 Presumably a certain amount of cognitive dissonance was necessary for the Roman people to believe that Augustus had already restored Roman honor twenty years before with the recovered *signa* and that his grandson was going to "re-restore" it now.

189 It is a bit unclear as to why Augustus would have chosen Lollius, since his stint in Gaul ended in a disastrous defeat at the hands of several German tribes. Suet. *Aug.* 23 and *Tib.* 12 even pair his loss with that of P. Quinctilius Varus' Teutoburg disaster. Lollius seems, however, to have had some sort of relationship with M. Agrippa, who vouched for him during the civil wars and had him removed from the triumvirs' proscription lists. Although Agrippa was already dead by the time of Gaius' campaign, perhaps this connection is what convinced the emperor of Lollius' reliability. Cf. Broughton 1952: 365.

190 Prop. 4.3. Cf. also Dee 1974: 81-96 and Anderson 1934: 262.

191 Prop. 4.3.35-38. Trans. by A. S. Kline.

192 Strugnell 2008: 291 and Sheldon 2010: 81-82 both agree with the characterization of Isidore and Lycotas as reconnaissance agents/spies—although Sheldon seems to place Lycotas' possible activities towards the beginning of

Gaius departed from Rome in 2 BCE, but he did not actually arrive on the eastern frontier until almost four years later. Part of his delay is because he casually toured the provinces, in particular Greece, Pannonia, and Anatolia. His snail's pace probably demonstrates that both he and Augustus wanted to project a powerful image of Roman authority to the provincials before rushing precipitously into another Parthian war. Coins depicting Gaius driving a quadriga were struck, most notably in Cyprus and Phrygia, and issued in advance of the prince's arrival there.¹⁹³ The quadriga was, in all likelihood, meant to recall Augustus' Parthian victory arch, and the propaganda technique itself (i.e., releasing specially minted coins to publicize Parthia's defeat—or, in this case, imminent defeat) should remind us to some degree of Augustus' journey back from Syria in 20 BCE after retrieving the *signa*. Inscriptions from both Athens and Mylasa describe Gaius as the “new Ares,” which was the Greeks' way of recognizing Augustus' heir as Mars Ultor as well.¹⁹⁴ And, finally, Gaius' visit to the East coincided conveniently with the prince's election as consul in 1 CE. These intimidation tactics proved so successful that, by the time the Roman prince reached the frontier, the nervous provincials had been sufficiently cowed and the Armenian monarchs, Tigranes and Erato, and even Phraataces himself, had all experienced a change of heart and now wished to make amends and treat with Rome.

The Armenian Tigranes sent an emissary directly to Augustus (ca. 2 BCE, so perhaps shortly after his reinstatement), asking the emperor to officially recognize his claim to the throne. Perhaps because Armenia's deference had been what Augustus wanted from the start, he acquiesced to Tigranes' request. But he did command the monarch to appear before Gaius in Syria to receive Rome's official blessing.¹⁹⁵ Presumably, Tigranes complied and was soon afterward invested by Gaius with the regalia

Augustus' reign, possibly right after Actium. The terminus ante quem for Propertius' Book 4, however, is 16 BCE (i.e., well after Actium and well after the return of the standards). Even if it were published ca. 16 this would be during the period of relative peace between Augustus and Phraates IV which makes Roman spies scouting out possible invasion routes through Parthia unlikely. The more reasonable explanation is that Propertius' poem dates to the later period of Romano-Parthian tension which preceded Gaius' expedition.

¹⁹³ Burnett 1992: nos. 3908, 3911-3, and 3129.

¹⁹⁴ For the Athenian and Mylasan inscriptions cf. Lewinsohn 1947: 68-69 and Cousin 1888: 15 no. 4. The Athenian inscription, in particular, seems to have coincided with the relocation of the Temple of Ares from the Athenian Acropolis to the Agora. On this, see especially Rose 2005: 52-53.

¹⁹⁵ Cass. Dio 50.21.

of his office—and hence with the authority of Rome—because he continued to rule Armenia until his death in 1 CE. But, by giving in to Augustus, the Armenian only further encouraged his country’s pro-Parthian nationalist party, the one which had helped reinstate him only a year earlier. Tigranes’ political change of course allowed the nationalist party’s leader, a man named Adduus, to rally enough support to capture the stronghold of Artagira, where he continued to rail against Roman interference in Armenia’s internal affairs.¹⁹⁶ Only a directed Roman campaign (i.e., Gaius’ personal attention) would be able to extirpate Adduus and his anti-Roman supporters, and thus restore order to Armenia. Before embarking on such a mission, Gaius had to deal with the root of all the recent eastern troubles:

Phraataces.

The two young men, one the heir of Rome, the other the newly-crowned sovereign of Parthia’s vast domains, met on an island in the middle of the Euphrates River in 2 CE with their respective armies posturing nervously on either bank.¹⁹⁷ Velleius Paterculus, who was an eyewitness to this momentous occasion, provides us with our best account:

On an island in the Euphrates with equal retinue on each side, [Gaius had a meeting with the King of the Parthians]. Such a spectacle of the Roman army arrayed on one side, the Parthians on the other, while these two eminent leaders not only of the empires they represented but also of mankind thus met in a conference—truly a notable sight—it was for my fortune to see in my early career as a soldier when I held the rank of tribune.

in insula quam amnis Euphrates ambiebat, aequato utriusque partis numero coiit. Quod spectaculum stantis ex diverso hinc Romani, illinc Parthorum exercitus, cum duo inter se eminentissima imperiorum et hominum coirent capita, perquam clarum et memorabile sub initia stipendiorum meorum tribuno militum mihi visere contigit.¹⁹⁸

Despite all the Parthian posturing, Phraataces was in no mood to incite war with Rome. The pomp and grandeur of Gaius’ personal appearance on the frontier likely explains the king’s newfound reluctance to fight, but a resurgence of domestic troubles within Parthia could have also contributed.¹⁹⁹ At the

¹⁹⁶ The leader of the anti-Roman party is actually identified by various names: “Donnes” by Florus 2.32; “Adwr” by Strabo 11.14.6; “Addwn” by Cass. Dio 55.10; and “Adduus” by Vell. Pat. 2.101 and Valerius Maximus 2.102.2. He was perhaps a local satrap appointed earlier by Phraataces.

¹⁹⁷ No mention of Musa is made in any of our sources describing the conference, but this is not surprising given that most are Latin authors who, as we have already discussed, either were uninformed of her activities or were disdainful of a woman who wielded such political influence.

¹⁹⁸ Vell. Pat. 2.101.1-3. Trans. by Frederick Shipley.

¹⁹⁹ For Parthia’s domestic troubles see Cass. Dio 55.10a.4. As for the Romans’ willingness to parley, Sheldon 2010: 88 and Romer 1979: 209 both suggest that Gaius might have also been more willing to negotiate by this date because he had

conference, the king acceded to all of Augustus' demands, permanently relinquishing his right to Armenian interference and to the Parthian hostages in Rome. He also revealed to Gaius a potential traitor in the Roman camp. Phraataces informed Gaius that M. Lollius, the very man Augustus had chosen to keep his grandson safe, was in the pay of several local rulers. Velleius Paterculus, our main source for this information, hedges by admitting that the Parthian king's claims were, for the most part, uncorroborated. But there must have been at least some truth to the accusation, because Lollius was immediately exiled from the Roman camp and then discovered murdered only a couple of days later.²⁰⁰ How the Parthian king learned of Lollius' double-dealings is anyone's guess, as is why he would reveal the information to Gaius. One may speculate that Lollius was on Phraataces' payroll. The Parthian would have learned of the value of spies and double agents from his mother Musa. But by the time of the Euphrates conference, maybe Phraataces had come to feel that betraying Lollius and winning Gaius' goodwill was of more importance than whatever information his well-situated Roman agent could supply.²⁰¹ After all, the results of the Euphrates meeting were not one-sided. Thanks to his general amiability (for conceding on issues like Armenia and the hostages) and his goodwill gesture (offering up Lollius), Phraataces did receive Gaius' assurance that Rome would, henceforth, respect Parthian sovereignty beyond the Euphrates boundary.

Having thus secured Phraataces' assurance that the Parthians would no longer intervene in or attempt to influence Armenian politics, Gaius then pressed northwards into that troublesome kingdom to put down, once and for all, Adduus and his anti-Roman rebels. Gaius arranged for Ariobarzanes of Atropotene to rule Armenia as a Roman protectorate.²⁰² The Romans remained in the territory for

recently received word of his brother Lucius' death in Gaul (cf. Sen. *ad. Polyb.* 15.4). But Gaius' willingness to fight does not seem to have diminished in any way. In the upcoming negotiations, it would be Phraataces, and not Gaius, who would do the most diplomatic back-peddling. And even after the conference, Gaius did not immediately return home, but proceeded into Armenia where he spent another two years campaigning.

²⁰⁰ Lollius apparently did have something of a reputation for avarice (see especially Vell. Pat. 2.97.1 and Pliny *NH* 9.118), so Phraataces' accusations might have just confirmed what many in Gaius' entourage already suspected. On these events also cf. Romer 1979: 210.

²⁰¹ Phraataces' efforts to mollify Gaius even went as far as hosting a banquet on the Parthian controlled bank of the river in the Roman prince's honor. Gaius, it seems, had invited Phraataces to be similarly entertained on the Roman shore (Vell. Pat. 2.101).

²⁰² Tigranes IV had in the meantime been killed in 1 CE, battling hostile tribes in the Caucasus region. His sister-wife Erato

nearly two years, besieging the rebel-held stronghold at Artagira.²⁰³ In 3 CE, Adduus, rather interestingly, invited Gaius to discuss a truce. He apparently intended to offer Gaius a list of the Parthian king's "treasure stores" (*thensaurorum rationes*) in exchange for lifting the siege. Gaius seems to have eagerly agreed, but the meeting was a trap. According to Florus, as Adduus himself pretended to hand Gaius the list, the satrap drew his sword and then struck and severely wounded the Roman prince.²⁰⁴ The Romans soon thereafter quickly overcame Artagira's defenses and razed the fortress to the ground, killing everyone inside. Gaius' army then retired to Syria where the prince lingered for almost a full year before finally dying of his injury. Back in Rome, Augustus was so angered by the news of Gaius' death that he ordered the immediate execution of several of Gaius' advisers in Syria, including the prince's *paedagogus* and a number of others who had used the opportunity of Gaius' infirmity to ravage the wealthy province.²⁰⁵

Before moving on to see how Gaius' death altered Augustus' approach to Parthia, we should first take a few moments to examine one important implication of Gaius and Adduus' meeting—namely, what Gaius' desire to learn the whereabouts of Phraataces' treasure hordes really meant. If Gaius had truly made peace with Phraataces at the Euphrates conference, if he sincerely no longer had any desire to cross into Parthian territory, then why would he need such information? The answer is that he would not—that is, unless he were still toying with the possibility of invading Phraataces' kingdom. That he did want the information could imply devious motives for Gaius' political and diplomatic machinations in the East. The sources suggest that this Armenian expedition might have been only a precursor to a full-scale campaign against Parthia itself. Seneca notes that Augustus still sought to expand the eastern border beyond the Euphrates.²⁰⁶ Phraataces' treasure would have certainly

was apparently still in control of Armenia when Gaius arrived there. Perhaps he chose to depose her and install Ariobarzanes because he felt her rule, now alone without Tigranes, was too weak to control the anti-Roman elements within her country. He might have also still simply distrusted her because of how Musa's reign had turned out in Parthia.

²⁰³ For the siege of Artagira see *CIL* 9.5290; *Vell. Pat.* 2.102; *Florus* 2.32; *Festus* 19.

²⁰⁴ *Florus* 2.32.44.

²⁰⁵ *Suet. Aug.* 67.2.

²⁰⁶ *Sen. De cons. ad Polyb.* 15.4; *De brev. vit.* 4.5; *Ovid Ars am.* 1.177, 1.199, 1.223; *Rem. am.* 155, 224. And, as Debevoise 1938: 150 n. 30 points out, the "last verse cited possibly expresses disappointment over the failure of the expedition."

helped finance such an expedition. The possibility exists that the Euphrates conference was nothing more than a Roman ruse, a delaying tactic meant to set the Parthian king at ease while Gaius' army first secured the rebellious kingdom of Armenia at its rear.²⁰⁷ As the avenger of Crassus and Carrhae, Gaius should have been well aware of the importance of securing Armenia before invading Parthia. A lack of Armenian support and intelligence—along with a bit of Armenian treachery—had derailed Crassus and Antony's own Parthian expeditions.

The Aftermath of Gaius' Death: Augustus' New Direction

Whether the Romans would have succeeded in annexing Parthia if Gaius had lived is debatable. Augustus' intentions are less questionable. Although he never launched such an expedition, Augustus' reconnaissance agents (men such as Isidore of Charax and Lycotas), Gaius' pursuit of detailed information about the Parthians' treasure stores, and remarks by Seneca and Ovid all make clear the idea that he planned one. Augustus most likely continued to consider it even after Gaius Caesar's Euphrates meeting.²⁰⁸ Augustus' constant jostling for position in Armenia also seems to support the theory of a possible Parthian campaign. If that meant Gaius making and then breaking a treaty with Phraataces, then so be it. At the outset of his reign, Augustus had been unwilling to risk such an endeavor for fear that it would result in another Carrhae. He had been content to recover Crassus' standards and to overplay their significance.²⁰⁹ By the early first century CE, however, Parthia was in political disarray, several members of the Arsacid royal family were hostages in Rome, and the Armenian throne was secure with Tigranes IV (once he had bent his knee to Rome) and then Ariobarzanes as king. Such favorable conditions and Musa's/Phraataces' initial impudence had, no doubt, made Augustus reconsider a Parthian invasion in his later years. Parthia was now, after all, Rome's only significant rival. Its conquest would have certainly loomed large before Augustus as

²⁰⁷ Key to this theory is, of course, that the Euphrates conference preceded Gaius' Armenian campaign which seems confirmed by Cass. Dio 55.10a.6 and Vell. Pat. 2.102.

²⁰⁸ Sen. *De cons. ad Polyb.* 15.4, *De brev. vit.* 4.5; Ovid *Ars am.* 1.177, 1.199.

²⁰⁹ Zanker 1988: 183-92.

potentially his greatest achievement. Gaius' unforeseen death completely altered such plans and probably contributed to Augustus' eventual decision to halt imperial expansion entirely. War on the frontiers and with the Parthians was a noble Roman goal, but the price had suddenly become too high. Soldiers and treasure were one thing, but now Augustus was losing something even more precious: his heirs. The Princeps could no longer afford this, given his advanced age and the dearth of qualified, trustworthy relatives.²¹⁰

Fortunately, a new option for dealing with Parthia soon presented itself. This option was less than ideal, because it did not permanently resolve the potential threat the Parthians posed. But it did not require Augustus to risk more of his valuable resources or heirs. In 2 CE, Phraataces married his mother Musa and thus became guilty, at least in the eyes of his subjects, of not only patricide, but also incest.²¹¹ This act, along with his lingering status as an outsider because of his mother's Italian stock, soon turned the Parthian nobility against him. By 4 CE, he had either been assassinated or driven to exile in Syria. His successor, an Arsacid prince named Orodes III, only reigned until 6 CE, when the disgruntled nobility murdered him too. Upon his demise, the Parthians sent word to Rome, requesting the return of Vonones, the eldest son of Phraates IV, whom Augustus was still conveniently holding hostage. Since Vonones had now been living in Rome for nearly sixteen years and was, if not practically a Roman himself, at least favorably disposed to them, Augustus was more than willing to oblige their request.²¹²

²¹⁰ Gaius and Lucius Caesar's death had left Tiberius, Augustus' step-son by Livia, as his last, best choice to succeed him. But the sources make it clear that Tiberius was never Augustus' first choice, and that fact had strained their relationship which culminated in Tiberius' eventual retirement to the island of Rhodes.

²¹¹ Joseph. *AJ* 18.39 and Luc. *Phar.* 8.401-409 may also allude to the event. Strugnell 2008: 293 argues that the Parthians would have been less concerned with the charge of incest than they were with the extraordinary honors Phraataces had bestowed on his mother. Tigranes IV's marriage to his half-sister Erato had aroused little ire among the Armenians, after all. Musa was, on the other hand, given the title Thea Musa after her son's accession, and after 2 BCE, she may have even begun to appear on coinage alongside Phraataces, although Kahrstedt 1910: 287 and Bigwood 2004: 62 suggest that this was done in effigy after her death. And some scholars (Lewy 1944: 211 n. 132; Debevoise 1938: 149; Bigwood 2004: 46) have seen Phraataces' marriage to Musa as linked to older Mesopotamian/Persian royal marriage customs and as possible evidence of a revival of Zoroastrianism among the Parthians. However, most of these claims are circumstantial, at best, and Tigranes' marriage to his half-sister is a far cry from mother-son marriage. Most likely all of these factors, including the incest, contributed to Phraataces' ouster in 4 BCE.

²¹² Joseph. *AJ* 18.42-47.

Since Vonones' brief stint on the Parthian throne and his subsequent adventures in the East make up the first of Tacitus' Parthian Passages, the bulk of the details concerning this particular Parthian prince's rise and fall will be covered in Part 2 (see Chapter 5: Analysis Parthian Passage 1: *Fuga Vononis*). For now, it is enough to note that Vonones was unable to retain the throne for an extended period of time; he was deposed in 12 CE.²¹³ If Augustus' hope on this occasion was, once again, to install a friendly Parthian client-king, he failed just as he had when he backed the pretender Tiridates. However, despite their similar outcomes, the emperor must have realized how much more disruptive Vonones' coup had been than Tiridates'.²¹⁴ The politically-astute Augustus would have been well-aware of the reasons for this. In the early 30s, Tiridates had had trouble first winning the throne and then holding it because he was not a member of the Arsacid family. He was an outsider and, therefore, was unfavorable to the conservative element of Parthia's nobility. However, as the son of Phraates IV, Vonones had no such political handicap to overcome. The Parthians had requested him themselves, after all. Vonones eventually alienated his nobility for reasons other than his lineage, and so his reign was ultimately fleeting as well. But Augustus must have seen how it kept the Parthians preoccupied with their own internal struggles. Even though Vonones had failed, Augustus still had a pool of other Arsacid princes at hand from which he could choose, to keep the Parthians busy.

By the close of Augustus' reign, the Princeps' strategy towards Parthia had thus evolved into something completely new. In the early years of his reign he had tried to share the world with the Parthians as long as Phraates IV stayed in his place. But Musa's betrayal and Phraataces' initial bravado had afterward convinced the emperor that a more aggressive approach was necessary. That more aggressive approach ultimately proved to be too costly, ending as it had in Gaius' death. And so, in his final years, Augustus seems to have settled at last on what we might call his "cold war" strategy. Rather

²¹³ Joseph. *AJ* 18.47-52; Tac. *Ann.* 2.1-4.

²¹⁴ Vonones' reign had lasted for nearly six years; Tiridates' had barely made four before he was overthrown. And we should remember that Tiridates' second attempt to regain the Parthian throne, the one Augustus had backed himself, had failed completely. So Augustus' opinion of Tiridates was probably based on this last unsuccessful coup and not on the brief period when the pretender actually held the crown.

than either taking a hands-off approach or provoking open conflict, Augustus kept Armenia, that crucial buffer region between the Empire and the Parthian kingdom, tightly under Roman control, and he used Phraates' sons and grandsons as tools to subvert Parthian authority from within. Like so many of Augustus' other policies, his "cold war" Parthian strategy would set the tone for the rest of the Julio-Claudian Era. Augustus' successors would continue to plot to have their own candidates placed on the thrones of both Armenia and Parthia. These candidates were always the sons or grandsons of Phraates IV. Rome's first Princeps had been unable to conquer Parthia himself; however, the policies and protocols that he established quickly became the model on which later Julio-Claudian emperors based their actions in the East.

Chapter 4
A Comparison of Late Republican and Augustan Era Parthian Strategies

The Keys to Augustus' New Parthian Policy: Imitation and Innovation

The strategies that Augustus used for dealing with Parthia did not arise out of nowhere. They were based largely on the older, Late Republican models that men like Sulla, Lucullus, Pompey, Crassus, and Antony had employed. Augustus' innovation in Roman foreign policy, like so many of his domestic reforms, was not a complete overhaul, but rather a subtle modification of the pre-existing order. This sleight-of-hand allowed Augustus to preserve the illusion of a restored Republic. It was thus a conscious strategy to imitate his Late Republican predecessors. It was also a gradual process, like so many of his domestic policies. Augustus did not simply jump into his "cold war" strategy for handling Parthia immediately after Actium. Rather, he started with something familiar, with Republican models, and evolved into his new policy over time. It might be helpful to briefly examine what Augustus drew from these Late Republican models, as well as how he manipulated them to fit his own purposes.

Like Sulla, Lucullus, and Pompey, Augustus relied heavily on the threat of force to bring about desired diplomatic results, even when he had no real intention of going to war himself. Whether we refer to this as bully diplomacy or brinkmanship, it is clear that he was every bit the master of it as his predecessors. When Phraates IV tried to worm his way out of returning the standards, between 23 and 20 BCE, by using delaying tactics and excuses, Augustus appeared at the head of a sizable army in Syria (on Phraates' doorstep), and even dispatched Tiberius into Armenia as if to imply that the Romans were mobilizing for a full-scale invasion of Parthia. Nor should we overlook the fact that the emperor had probably coerced Phraates into returning the standards and prisoners in the first place by holding his son, the young Phraates, hostage. And Augustus rolled out a similar strategy in 2 BCE when Musa and Phraataces began causing trouble in the East, riling up anti-Roman elements in Armenia. The pomp and ceremony in the capital surrounding Gaius' departure, and his circuitous journey through the eastern provinces, was probably meant, at least partly, for the Parthians themselves, to demonstrate the

loyalty of Rome's eastern subjects. Proof of this is perhaps how quickly both Musa and Phraataces, not to mention the anti-Roman Tigranes and Erato in Armenia, caved to Roman demands once news of Gaius' campaign arrived. The only difference between the events of 20 and 2 BCE is that, for the former, Augustus probably had no real intention of attacking Parthia, while, for the latter, there was a very real possibility of Gaius going through with his campaign. But both are clear examples of Augustan brinkmanship at work.

Also like his Republican predecessors, Augustus was not above using spies to stay informed about or manipulate the Parthian court. Lucullus had perhaps employed Sextilius for such purposes during his own dealings with Parthia. And Antony had dispatched the exiled Parthian nobleman Monaeses, under the guise of returning as a faithful subject of the Parthian king, specifically with the goal of undermining Phraates IV's authority at home and fomenting an aristocratic rebellion. Augustus' ingenious use of Musa to create dissension at the Parthian court and to drive a wedge between Phraates and his harem should be seen as similar to Lucullus and Antony's earlier efforts. But, unlike many of his Late Republican forebears, the emperor also seems to have made use of special "reconnaissance agents" (Isidore of Charax and men such as Lycotas), which we might see as a slight modification of earlier Republican tactics. While Rome's previous eastern commanders had all used cavalry scouts (*exploratores*) in the field on an ad hoc basis, none had ever gone so far as to commission a detailed geographical accounting of an area before an invasion, as Augustus seems to have done prior to Gaius' eastern expedition.²¹⁵ The lack of such information is why Crassus and Antony had to rely on unreliable local guides like Abgarus of Osroëne and Artavasdes II of Armenia during their campaigns. These men were probably in the pay of the Parthian king and were, most likely, the reason for the disasters at Carrhae and Praaspa. Although Isidore and Lycotas' "itineraries" were never put into use—at least, not by Gaius—their mere creation represents an important leap in the sophistication of intelligence gathering under Augustus' reign. They show that Augustus was more concerned with knowing about

²¹⁵ For the use of *exploratores* in the Republican Era see Sheldon 2005: 11-26.

what was going on in Parthia than he was with blundering into another military disaster on the eastern frontier.

The charge of treaty-breaking is not as easily leveled against Augustus. Men like Pompey, Gabinius, and Crassus had all, for the most part, looked upon the Parthian king as any other eastern potentate Rome might have come across: as a potential client-king, and so just another stepping stone for their personal enrichment and Rome's world domination. They had few qualms about giving their word to someone they considered their social inferior and then retracting their promises when the situation proved more suitable to the empire's—or sometimes just their own personal—interests. Pompey's reallocation of Gordyene to Tigranes after promising it to the Parthians, and Gabinius and Crassus' multiple violations of Parthian territorial sovereignty are probably the best examples of this type of Roman high-handedness. But, as we have just seen, Augustus did not always have the luxury of pitting various eastern powers against one another. He could not always take the same high-handed approach.

For one thing, by Augustus' day, there were no Hellenistic kingdoms left in the East that could still rival Parthia. Tigranes the Great's once impressive Armenian Empire had largely been shattered by Mithridates Eupator's unsuccessful bid for power. A Pompey-style reshuffling of the East in Rome's image was now rather impractical. And besides, Augustus had, after the civil wars, more things to worry about in Rome's domestic sphere than he did on the foreign front. For most of his reign, Augustus needed a workable relationship with Parthia. As long as Phraates IV, who was at least open to diplomacy, was alive, Augustus could portray the Empire's greatest rival as a collaborator in his new peace. He thus pursued an official policy of *détente* with the Parthians. In any case, the bravado of Pompey, Gabinius, and Crassus had achieved little in terms of winning Parthian blood and treasure for Rome, and Augustus luckily had the benefit of hindsight.

The one significant exception to Augustus' *détente* policy was Gaius' possible contemplation of an invasion of Parthia, even after the Euphrates conference. But this had been provoked by the young

monarch Phraataces' inexperience and somewhat reckless flexing of his imperial muscles in Armenia. Had Musa not goaded her son into abandoning the "live and let live" relationship that Augustus had developed over time with Phraates, the emperor might never have contemplated breaking faith with the Parthians. The fact that he did so plainly shows that, at his core, he possessed some of the same bravado and sense of superiority as his predecessors. And so, in the end, we must conclude that Augustus was not above making and breaking treaties with Parthia. He was only more wary and perhaps more calculated about when and how he did so.

Augustus' most novel innovations in terms of Rome's Parthian policy came from his treatment of Armenia as a true Roman buffer-state, and from his use of the Parthian hostages as tools to subvert Parthia's internal stability. Even here we can still identify Republican Era precedents. In terms of Armenia, for instance, Pompey's hesitance in the late 60s to unseat the Armenian monarch Tigranes the Great, despite that king's repeated backing of Mithridates Eupator, probably stemmed from the Roman general's fear of Armenia falling permanently under Parthia's sway. Pompey wished to maintain an adequate buffer zone between the rising star of Parthia and the newly-acquired territories and allegiances that Rome, and he personally, had fought so long and hard for in eastern Anatolia—especially, for example, Mithridates' troublesome kingdom of Pontus. Antony, although perhaps most concerned with punishing Artavasdes II for what he believed to be that monarch's cowardly betrayal in the lead-up to Phraaspa, must have recognized the need for a strong Roman presence in Armenia. He did not want his own military debacle to be exacerbated, as Carrhae had been, by allowing the Parthians to ravage Rome's remaining eastern provinces. Antony's second eastern campaign in 34, which deposed Artavasdes and his sons and turned the kingdom into a Roman dependency under the "Donations of Alexandria" was, most likely, both punitive and strategic in nature.

Neither of these examples comes close to Augustus' near obsession with the frigid, mountainous, and relatively resource-sparse eastern kingdom. In 20 BCE, as we have already seen, Augustus had ordered Tiberius to install Tigranes III on the Armenian throne in place of his less

popular brother Artaxias II. This action had been at the request of the country's own nobility, but the emperor had happily obliged, perhaps because of the ongoing tensions with Parthia over the delayed return of the standards and prisoners. As soon as Tigranes' son, Tigranes IV, along with his sister-wife Erato, began toeing an anti-Roman line (ca. 5 BCE), Augustus sent Tiberius back into the kingdom to replace him with the pro-Roman Artavasdes III. And even after Tiberius' retirement, Augustus simply turned to Gaius when a change of Armenian leadership again became necessary. Following the Euphrates conference, Gaius' first task had been to "re-depose" Erato, who had in the meantime regained her position, and to empower Ariobarzanes to rule over Armenia as a Roman protectorate.

Augustus' strong desire to keep Armenia within Rome's sphere of influence could be seen as having future military implications. Augustus' namesake, Julius Caesar, had contemplated marching to the "Caspian Gates" and possibly even into Parthia itself, and so the Princeps may have wanted to keep the kingdom "in his pocket," as it were, just in case he, too, ever had such a desire. But if this were the sole reason—or even part of the reason—does it not seem likely that Augustus would have launched his own expedition long prior to Gaius' campaign? What is more probable is that Augustus realized that Armenia, if left unregulated, could potentially ruin his illusion of a pacified eastern frontier. That is why he acted so quickly and decisively when word of Tigranes and Erato's anti-Roman rhetoric reached Rome. The fact that the troublesome pair had acceded to the throne without direct Roman approval was probably just an afterthought to Augustus. But by deposing these monarchs when and how he did, Augustus established an important precedent in Armenia that all future Julio-Claudian emperors would strive to imitate. Henceforth, every Armenian monarch would first have to be vetted by Rome, not just because the kingdom was a strategic buffer zone against Parthian aggression, but because it had quickly evolved into a tangible symbol of the emperor's domestic peace. Under Augustus, Armenia became the barometer by which Romans, especially eastern Romans, measured the effectiveness of the Pax Romana.

The other major Late Republican tactic that Augustus built on was the use of Parthian pretenders as weapons to destabilize the Arsacid court from within. Pompey, Gabinius, and Crassus, prior to their own failed invasions in the early 50s BCE, had apparently tried to use the deposed Parthian monarch Mithridates III to sow dissension within the Parthians' ranks. Antony had attempted something similar with the Parthian nobleman Monaeses before his eastern campaign more than a decade later. As we have already discussed, Monaeses might have been the exiled Parthian king Tiridates III of the Augustan era, whom the emperor dispatched right after Actium to attempt a second coup. Augustus, therefore, not only imitated the tactics of his predecessors in the East, but also may have, at least in the case of Monaeses, used the same pretender that his rival Antony had fielded earlier.

The problem, of course, was that these pretenders, as tools to spread discord and mayhem within Parthia, were unreliable. That is why they had been so problematic for Crassus and Antony: both of them had probably counted on Mithridates' and Monaeses' rebellions to improve their campaigns' chances. Augustus would have come to realize this firsthand when Monaeses'/Tiridates' mission to retake the Parthian throne failed. But Augustus, as always an astute observer and political strategist, must have also realized that Tiridates' major flaw was his lack of proper Parthian dynastic lineage. Tiridates had no Arsacid blood, and this fact had doomed his second coup. Augustus thus shelved the idea of a Roman client-king on the Parthian throne for the time being and instead pursued a "live and let live" policy with Rome's bitter rival.

When Phraates IV's sons and grandsons eventually fell into Augustus' lap in 10 BCE, thanks to Musa, the thought of using the Parthian king's heirs as future pretenders must have at least crossed the Princeps' mind. Now he had what he had been lacking with Tiridates: young men he could manipulate and who, most importantly, possessed a pure Arsacid bloodline. But young minds take time to mold, and Musa's son Phraataces was, in any case, better positioned at the time to become Rome's man on the Arsacid throne. As of this date, Augustus had every reason to trust Musa's loyalty to Rome. But Musa's apparent betrayal at the time of her son's accession and Phraataces' subsequent callow disregard for

Rome's regional interests necessitated a stern public response from Augustus—hence Gaius' eastern expedition.

Gaius' death, however, required Augustus to reevaluate his eastern policy. Was bringing Parthia to heel worth the cost of his own dynastic line? Could he afford to expend any more of his own heirs on the intractable Parthians? The conclusion that the emperor seems to have come to was no, because by the end of his reign Augustus was advocating no further imperial expansion. When the Parthian nobility came to Augustus in 6 CE, disillusioned with their current king and requesting the return of one of Phraates' sons, the emperor must have remembered that he had other heirs to throw at the Parthian problem. The Parthian hostages had been living in Rome for almost two decades now. The youngest had spent their most formative years imbibing Roman customs and lifestyle. Though they would not be proper client kings, they would surely be more friendly to Rome than some of their predecessors. Moreover, Phraates' heirs would have in many cases, unlike the pretender Tiridates, the support of the Parthian aristocracy because of their Arsacid blood, and therefore a better chance of winning and then holding onto the throne of the "King of kings."

But the true beauty of the whole strategy was that the timing and the ultimate outcome of such attempts to thrust an heir of Phraates back into power in Parthia would matter relatively little to Augustus. If a Parthian civil war broke out as a result, its timing made no difference for the Romans themselves; there was no Roman invasion waiting in the wings, as there had been in the case of Crassus and Antony. And if the first attempt failed, as Vonones' would, Augustus always had other heirs of Phraates to dispatch, including several other sons, grandsons, and even offspring born in Rome. It was, in essence, an endless pool of Parthian pretenders, one which Augustus and his successors would turn to again and again when the need arose.

Early Possible Opposition to Augustus' Parthian Policy: Horace and the Roman Prisoners

Tacitus composed parts of the *Annales* specifically to challenge Augustus' Parthian policy. Tacitus believed that Arsacid pretenders and the Armenian buffer state were unworthy substitutes for demonstrations of imperial gravitas and Roman military might. But before turning our attention to the *Annales*, we should point out that opposition to Augustus' new foreign policy in the East did not take a full century, until Tacitus' own day, to crop up. Critics of the Julio-Claudians' new direction on the eastern frontier were probably plentiful, if not always especially vocal, even while that dynasty held power. These detractors are frequently hard to spot, mostly because of the nature of our source material. Augustan era literature is often steeped in various layers of imperial propaganda and blandishments; works concerning Parthia and the recovered standards are especially prone to such political promotion. One noteworthy exception, however, might be Horace's *Ode* 3.5, which could, considering its historical context, be interpreted as a condemnation of Augustus' new approach to Parthia. So, before diving headlong into Tacitus' work, it might be helpful to discuss Horace's poem first. The underlying theme of *Ode* 3.5 is, in some ways, quite similar to what we find in the *Annales*.

The return of Crassus' standards in 20 BCE is universally celebrated by Roman authors as one of Augustus' greatest achievements. In his *Res Gestae*, the emperor himself boasts that he forced the Parthians "to return the spoils and standards of three Roman armies and, supplicating themselves, to seek the friendship of the Roman people."²¹⁶ The historian Pompeius Trogus declares: "Caesar [Augustus] could do more with the greatness of his name than another general was able to do with arms."²¹⁷ However, the Augustan poets seem to brag most openly and passionately about the emperor's diplomatic coup. Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*, for example—a poem first written to commemorate the dedication of the temple of Mars Ultor and the *Ludi Saeculares* ("Secular Games") that Augustus held in 17 BCE—proclaims: "Now Faith and Peace and Honor and Shame and neglected Virtue dare to

²¹⁶ *Res Gest.* 5.29.

²¹⁷ Just. *Epit.* 42.5.12.

return, and blessed Plenty with her full horn is seen.”²¹⁸ And yet, for all the pomp and circumstance surrounding the standards, the Augustan poets mention next to nothing about the return of the Roman prisoners who were taken captive by the Parthians. If not for Pompeius Trogus (Justin) and Cassius Dio, we would be wholly ignorant of the fact that these prisoners were sent back along with the standards as part of Augustus’ negotiated peace.²¹⁹ Our only hint about why these men are not mentioned more often in the literature of the period is Horace’s *Ode* 3.5, which casts the prisoners as cowards and traitors to Rome’s martial ethos. But, as we will see, this poem, along with the rest of Horace’s Book 3, may represent more than mere righteous indignation on Horace’s part. It could also be a subtle criticism of Augustus’ policies towards Parthia in general.

Books 1-3 of Horace’s *Odes* were probably first published in 23 BCE, approximately three years before Augustus’ official Parthian truce. As part of Maecenas’ circle, Horace must have been privy to at least some of Augustus’ machinations concerning Parthia. That is not to say he necessarily approved. He probably considered Tiridates too skittish to make an effective client-king. In *Ode* 1.26 he remarks: “I will banish gloom and fear ..., all unconcerned what ruler of the frozen borders of the North is object of our fear, or what dangers frighten Tiridates.”²²⁰ Instead Horace, like most Romans, probably expected Augustus to capitalize on Parthia’s current civil discord by finally invading the kingdom and taking revenge for all of Rome’s recent military disasters. Horace himself calls attention to the kingdom’s vulnerability in *Ode* 3.8 where he remarks how “the hostile Medes [i.e., the Parthians] are fighting with each other in disastrous strife.”²²¹ But if Horace was disappointed by the emperor’s failure to take advantage of Parthia’s weakened state, he must have been altogether horrified by the repatriation of Phraates’ son, the one Tiridates had kidnapped in 23 BCE. If he were ignorant, like most Romans, of Augustus’ diplomatic maneuverings behind the scenes, the return of the Parthian prince

218 Hor. *Carm. Saec.* 57-60. The translation of Horace here and throughout this chapter are by C. E. Bennett.

219 Justin 42.5; Cass. Dio 54.8.

220 Hor. *Od.* 1.26.5-6: ... *tristitiam et metus/tradam ... quis sub Arcto / rex gelidae metuatur orae, / quid Tiridaten terreat, unice / securus.*

221 Hor. *Od.* 3.8.19-20: *Medus infestus sibi luctuosis / dissidet armis, ...*

without any publicly stated preconditions would have seemed like nothing less than an act of capitulation. On the other hand, even if Horace had knowledge of Augustus' secret agreement with Phraates beforehand, as we might suspect given his close proximity to the Princeps, there is still every reason to assume that he would have disapproved. After all, handing over the boy first, before the standards and prisoners were returned, required a great deal of good faith on Augustus' part, faith which Horace makes clear was ill-placed.²²² Nor would the three-year lag between the prince's return and the recovery of the standards in 20 BCE have helped to mitigate Horace's suspicions. To Horace and other outside observers, the only explanation as to why Augustus would relinquish such a valuable asset so readily must have been that he had somehow lost the upper hand in his diplomatic contest with Parthia. We, of course, now suspect a more subtle political motive—namely, the failure of Tiridates' counter-coup. Horace's *Ode* 3.5 suggests that the issue of the Roman prisoners might have also been “in the air,” so to speak. And it would have been even more gossip-worthy if everyone still believed that the emperor was preparing to launch his own Parthian campaign. If so, then Parthia's Roman prisoners could pose potentially dire problems for such an expedition. They might be used either as hostages or, if they had already joined the Persian ranks, as weapons against their own countrymen. Many Romans probably believed that the return of these prisoners was critical to Augustus' successful conquest of Parthia—even if Augustus himself had no such plans. Horace's *Ode* 3.5 may be the poet's way of mollifying these popular fears; it may also be his way of criticizing Augustus for, as he saw it, giving up Phraates' heir needlessly.

From the poem's very outset, Horace does seem to assume that there will be a Parthian expedition. He proclaims that “Augustus will be deemed a god on earth for adding to our empire the

²²² In *Od.* 4.15.23 Horace refers to the Parthians as *infidi Persae* or “faithless Persians.” And in *Ep.* 2.1.111-112 he declares: “I, myself, who declare that I write no verses, prove to be more of a liar than the Parthians.” And even the repetition of *iam* in *Carm. Saec.* 53-60 is probably meant to emphasize that easterners—in this case, the Parthians (here called Medes), Scythians, and Indians—represent the exact opposite of what the Romans are in terms of *Fides et Pax et Honor Pudorque*.

Britons and the dread Parthians.”²²³ However, he then turns rather abruptly to the topic of the prisoners in the next two stanzas:

Did Crassus’ troops live in base wedlock with barbarian wives
and grow old in service of the foes whose daughters they had wedded
(alas, our sunken Senate and our altered ways!)

Marsian and Apulian submissive to a Parthian king,
forgetful of the sacred shields, the Roman name, the toga, and eternal Vesta,
while Jove’s temples and the city of Rome remained unharmed?

milesne Crassi coniuge barbara
turpis maritus vixit et hostium
(pro curia inversique mores!)
consenuit socerorum in armis

sub rege Medo, Marsus et Apulus
anciliorum et nominis et togae
oblitus aeternaeque Vestae,
incolumi Iove et urbe Roma?²²⁴

Certainly phrasing this passage in the form of a question makes it a bit less caustic. But Horace’s intent remains clear. His primary goal is to challenge the notion that these prisoners are still of value either as hostages or as soldiers. He does so first by pointing out how they have, in all likelihood, abandoned Roman customs, dress, and religious observances. He suggests that they have debased themselves by wedding “barbarian wives” and growing old “in the service of enemy father-in-laws.” And yet it is not simply their Romanness—or lack thereof—which Horace attacks; he also belittles their martial abilities. For example, later in the poem, he comments sarcastically: “Redeemed for gold, of course, our soldiers returned more fierce!”²²⁵ He seems to be expressing this same idea when he asks: “If the doe gives flight when loosed from the net, then will he be brave who has trusted himself to a perfidious foe?”²²⁶ At this point, Horace’s opinion of the prisoners is already obvious: he believes that they pose no threat as Parthian collaborators, possess little value as hostages, and would be worth even less, as

223 Hor. *Od.* 3.5.3-4: ... *praesens divus habebitur / Augustus adiectis Britannis / imperio gravibusque Persis.*

224 Hor. *Od.* 3.5.5-12.

225 Hor. *Od.* 3.5.25-26: *auro repensus scilicet acrior / miles redibit.*

226 Hor. *Od.* 3.5.31-33: *si pugnata extricata densis / cerva plagis, erit ille fortis / qui perfidis se credidit hostibus?*

soldiers, if ransomed. Nevertheless, Horace spends the rest of the poem comparing the cowardice of these prisoners to M. Regulus, who forfeited his own life in the First Punic War by boldly refusing to broker a prisoner exchange between Rome and his Carthaginian captors. Regulus' compelling tale of undaunting courage certainly magnifies the indignity and faintheartedness of Crassus' soldiers. One wonders if Horace did not conjure up Regulus' story here as a way of commenting upon the emperor's own recent "prisoner exchange." If Horace believed that Augustus had traded Phraates' son for the remnants of Crassus and Antony's legions, this poem may be his way of demonstrating—or even denouncing—the inherent inequity of such a deal.

Yet it is also fair to say that Horace would have probably disapproved of any agreement between Rome and Parthia. Despite his own ignominious performance at Philippi, Horace is a rather bellicose individual, and especially when it comes to the Parthians. His animosity towards them is, admittedly, at first somewhat odd, since he had been willing to fight alongside them as part of Brutus and Cassius' Republican army.²²⁷ Perhaps he feared that appearing to be too soft on the Parthians would arouse suspicion in Rome about his own loyalty. Or, perhaps, he just feared the effect a powerful eastern enemy would have on the empire's internal stability. In either case, Horace's disdain for the Roman prisoners probably stemmed from his deep-seeded dislike and mistrust of the Parthians in general. For whatever reason, he could not tolerate any deference to the Parthian king, however slight it might be. His opinion of how Rome's relationship with Parthia should proceed is, perhaps, best summed up not in diplomatic talks and in the mutual exchange of hostages, but in Ode 3.3 where he exclaims: "Let the Capitol stand gleaming and let warlike Rome dictate terms to the conquered Medes!"²²⁸

As we turn to Part 2 of our study, we should keep in mind that Tacitus' *Annales* was probably not the first work to find fault with Augustus' Parthian strategy. Horace's *Od.* 3.5 may be an early

²²⁷ For Horace's performance at Philippi see Hor. *Carm.* 2.7.9-14. Cf. also Sihler 1911: 146-148. For evidence of the Parthians fighting for the Republicans at Philippi see App. *BC* 4.88.

²²⁸ Hor. *Od.* 3.3.42-44.

example. Yet, unlike Horace, Tacitus had the luxury of criticizing Augustus and the Julio-Claudians after their dynasty had been removed from power. Tacitus may be the most vocal critic of Augustus' eastern foreign policy, but his objections were probably not novel. In some sense or another, Tacitus probably owed an ideological—if not direct literary—debt to men like Horace. We know that, during the century or so between Horace and Tacitus, the Julio-Claudians' despotic behavior encouraged many political dissenters. Great Stoic Republicans, such as Thrasea Paetus, were the most outspoken, but there must have been many others; there were too many *maiestas* trials during the Julio-Claudian era for them all to be nothing more than judicial witch hunts. These political dissenters—many of whom we know about only because of Tacitus' *Annales*—objected mostly to the ruling dynasty's tyrannical domestic crimes: its hoarding of political and military power at home. But some must have also held and expressed concern over the dynasty's new frontier policy. These writers and their lost works are the missing link that bridges the gap between Horace and Tacitus. Without their literary contributions, tracing the evolution of opposition to Augustus' Parthian policy over the course of the first century CE is all but impossible. Tacitus' *Annales* is, however, by far our best chance to catch a glimpse of what these political dissenters' arguments might have entailed.

PART 2:
TACITUS' *ANNALES* AND JULIO-CLAUDIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE EAST

The eastern episodes in Tacitus' *Annales* are essential to the work's overall scheme. They allow Tacitus to criticize what he believes is the Julio-Claudian dynasty's failed foreign policy strategy with Parthia. In the past, scholars have occasionally dismissed these passages as aimless digressions, in no small part because of a remark Tacitus himself makes at *Ann.* 6.38.1. In that chapter, the historian states that he has included information about the East "in order that the reader's mind may rest from all the domestic horrors."²²⁹ Some historians, among them most notably R. Syme, have interpreted this remark as a programmatic statement for all of Tacitus' eastern stories. Besides the author's personal idiosyncrasies and sometimes loose adherence to annalistic chronology, these scholars see little rhyme or reason behind the order or placement of episodes involving Parthia and its various satellite kingdoms.²³⁰

More recently, other scholars have begun to reassess this theory. They have started to regard Tacitus' eastern passages as integral to the larger plot lines of the individual Books in which they appear.²³¹ Elizabeth Keitel has, for instance, demonstrated that one of the purposes of the different eastern scenes in Books 11 and 12 is to draw connections in the reader's mind between the domestic plots and intrigues of Claudius' household and the rather similar disputes and murders occurring simultaneously within the Parthian royal family. Keitel argues that Tacitus uses scenes of Parthia's domestic violence and bloody fraternal rivalry to paint Claudius' household as a despotic, oriental regime.²³² Along the same lines, Rhiannon Ash has shown that the lengthy Iberio-Parthian battle narrative (*Ann.* 6.34-35) that immediately precedes Tacitus' above remark is, likewise, not entirely detached from events in the Roman capital. Ash suspects that this particular episode is intended to

²²⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.38.1: ... *quo requiesceret animus a domesticis malis*

²³⁰ Syme 1958: 259; Walker 1960: 34-35; Vessey 1971: 385-409; Seif 1973: 59-63, 237-41, 257-258; et al. For a complete survey of scholars who espouse this view cf. Keitel 1978: 462 n. 1.

²³¹ Gilmartin 1973: 584-85; Keitel 1978: 462; McCulloch 1984: 59-61, 92-93, 140-43; Roberts 1988: 118-32; Gowing 1990: 315; and Ash 1999: 114.

²³² Keitel 1978.

belittle the Parthians' military capabilities and shame Tiberius for his administrative laxity on the eastern frontier.²³³

While Keitel, Ash, and scholars who share their mindset are on the right track, few historians or classicists have tried to find an overarching thematic scheme for the *Annales*' eastern episodes.²³⁴ As the state of research currently stands, experts no longer consider these stories aimless digressions; however, they are still commonly thought of as disjointed scenes. These scenes may now be relevant, but only on an ad hoc basis. They are pertinent, but only to the specific Books in which we find them. The eastern scenes in Tiberian and Claudian Books may be important, but they have little to do with each other. This view of Tacitus' eastern narratives has continued to persist in some academic circles, in part, because it does seem sometimes as if Tacitus scattered his eastern episodes at random throughout the work. If read only superficially, these scenes often appear difficult to connect thematically. Careful analysis, however, shows that these episodes share key characters, themes, and literary patterns. They are not as disjointed as scholars have thought. On the surface, what do Keitel and Ash's findings really have to do with one another? We would suggest, in fact, quite a lot.

Perhaps the best way to begin to dispel the misconception that the eastern episodes are significant but self-contained scenes is to explain why we feel it is inappropriate to refer to them merely as "eastern passages." To start with, despite first impressions, almost all of the episodes dealing with the East, either directly or indirectly, involve Rome's tenuous peace with the Parthian Empire, the only superpower left abutting Roman territory in the first century. Even when a story's action occurs entirely outside the bounds of both empires, as in the *Annales*' several lengthy Armenian episodes, Tacitus always finds a way to relate the action back in some fashion to Rome and Parthia's endless game of diplomatic tug-of-war. Therefore, instead of a vague and somewhat inaccurate label such as "eastern passages," we prefer to use the more specific term "Parthian Passages." This emended name makes clear the idea that these scenes, at their core, revolve around a central thematic issue: Romano-

²³³ Ash 1999.

²³⁴ Gowing 1990 is perhaps the one exception.

Parthian relations under the Julio-Claudian dynasty. They are not simply a random, haphazard spattering of disconnect stories about the East.

Rebranding these episodes is also attractive because we can easily boil down the subject matter of each Parthian Passage even further into two convenient sub-categories: 1) Those describing the attempts of the Julio-Claudians to install pretenders directly on the Parthian throne and 2) those relating the efforts—or rather, missed opportunities—of Rome’s emperors to establish Armenia as a loyal, stable buffer-state between the Roman and Parthian Empires. Variations of these two scenarios occur time and again as we read through the *Annales*. In fact, Tacitus rarely raises other issues that must have cropped up on the Roman Empire’s easternmost border over the course of the first century. He often seems narrowly, even obsessively, focused on the Parthian kingship and Rome’s Armenian interests.

Once we understand that these two themes are Tacitus’ chief interest, we begin to see other patterns emerge from the narrative’s larger structure. First of all, in spite of the disorderly impression that they sometimes leave on the reader, the Parthian Passages actually seem to follow four separate, clearly discernible story lines. The exact chapters we believe should be rebranded as Parthian Passages include: Parthian Passage 1 (*Ann.* 2.1-4, 2.56-58, 2.68); Parthian Passage 2 (*Ann.* 6.14, 6.31-37, 6.41-44); Parthian Passage 3 (*Ann.* 11.8-10, 12.10-14, 12.44-51); Parthian Passage 4 (*Ann.* 13.6-9, 13.34-41, 14.23-26, 15.1-18, 15.24-31). In fact, there appears to be roughly one Parthian Passage for each of the Julio-Claudian emperors whom Tacitus discusses in the extant portions of the *Annales* (Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero).²³⁵ Secondly, the first three of these Julio-Claudian rulers dispatched pretenders to Parthia drawn from the pool of Arsacid hostages residing in Rome. Consequently, each of their Parthian Passages focuses primarily on the stories of these pretenders (although each also

²³⁵ Tacitus only addresses the final days of Augustus’ reign in the *Annales*, but the first Parthian pretender, Vonones, is nevertheless dispatched before Tiberius’ accession. Most experts believe that Tacitus organized the *Annales* into three hexads: one each for the reigns of Tiberius (Books 1-6); Caligula and Claudius (Books 7-12); and Nero (Books 13-18). Substantial portions of the work have been lost, however – including all sections relating Caligula’s principate and the latter half of Nero’s reign. Because the Books covering Caligula’s reign are no longer extant, we cannot know for sure whether or not Tacitus penned a Parthian Passage for that emperor too. As we will see in our discussion of Parthian Passage 3, however, intratextual evidence does suggest that Tacitus may have.

addresses the secondary issue of the Armenian buffer-state in its own way). The last Parthian Passage, which occurs during the emperor Nero's reign, conspicuously reprioritizes the themes we find in earlier Parthian Passages. Because of Nero's Armenian War, that kingdom becomes the central issue of Rome and Parthia's ongoing contest in the *Annales*' fourth and final Parthian Passage.

These themes and patterns are not always immediately obvious, and this fact probably accounts for why both scholars and lay readers have largely overlooked them until now. In Part 2, we will examine each of the Parthian Passages in order to give a better sense of Tacitus' broader scheme and argument. Our analysis will show that the primary purpose of these Parthian Passages is to question the viability of the Julio-Claudians' foreign policy. Augustus and his dynastic successors preferred passive, indirect strategies for dealing with Parthia; they relied heavily on the use of Arsacid pretenders and the Armenian buffer-state. Tacitus believed that these strategies were flawed. They robbed Rome's legions of glory; they denied the Roman people vengeance; and they made Rome's emperors appear weak and dilatory in the eyes of the empire's enemies. The *Annales*' Parthian Passages are a carefully crafted literary argument in favor of a more aggressive approach to the Roman Empire's eastern frontier. The historian held the emperor Trajan in high esteem, and Tacitus thought Trajan's Parthian War (113-117 CE) perfectly embodied this new approach.

Chapter 5
Analysis Parthian Passage 1: Fuga Vononis (*Ann.* 2.1-4; 2.56-58; 2.68)

Summary and Structural Overview

The main focus of the *Annales*' first Parthian Passage is the rise and fall of Augustus' Parthian client-king Vonones, the eldest son of Phraates IV. Although Vonones' father had sent the Parthian prince along with his brothers to Rome ca. 12 BCE as a hostage, Parthia's nobility recalled the Arsacid heir towards the end of Augustus' reign. Vonones ruled Parthia (perhaps from 8 to 12 CE) before losing his crown to a distant relative and usurper, Artabanus III. As an exile, Vonones initially fled to Armenia where he also briefly became king. Pressured by Artabanus, however, the Romans soon removed Vonones from Armenia and kept him under house arrest, first in Syria and then in Cilicia. Vonones remained a prisoner until being killed while trying to escape his Roman captors.

Tacitus' first Parthian Passage, like all the Parthian Passages, does not occur in a single, contiguous unit. Vonones' story, although weighted heavily towards the beginning of Book 2, actually spans several subsequent chapters in the *Annales*' second Book as well. The work's annalistic structure probably accounts for some of Parthian Passage 1's broken, disjointed appearance, but Tacitus also occasionally conflates episodes from different years.²³⁶ Therefore, various factors, besides simple chronology, probably helped to determine the seemingly haphazard placement of some of Tacitus' eastern scenes (both here and throughout the other Parthian Passages); the historian's personal preference also likely played a part. As a result, design and not pure coincidence might account for why the bulk of Parthian Passage 1 falls at the opening of Book 2 (2.1-4). Tacitus could be attempting to emphasize the importance of this material in his work's overall scheme.²³⁷ Delaying several of the

²³⁶ Proof of Tacitus' occasionally loose adherence to "Livian" annalistic pattern can actually be found in the same "programmatic" statement many scholars point to when discussing the work's eastern episodes. The complete sentence at *Ann.* 6.38.1 in fact reads: "I have joined together the events of two summers (*Quae duabus aestatibus gesta coniunxi*) in order to allow the mind some respite from domestic horrors." Ginsburg 1981: 84-85 notes, furthermore, that in the *Annales*' first hexad Tacitus regularly ignores the annalistic structure. For more on annalistic patterning and the genre in general cf. McDonald 1957; Ginsburg 1981: 10-14; Woodman and Martin 1989: 7; Verbrugge 1989; and Scholz 1994.

²³⁷ Tacitus will employ this technique again when discussing Caesennius Paetus' Armenian campaign in the fourth Parthian Passage (*Ann.* 15.1-18).

episodes involving Vonones until later in the Book (2.56; 2.58; 2.68) also certainly helps heighten the story's tension by reserving the tale's most dramatic scenes for the very end.

But the central theme of Book 2 of the *Annales* is the ongoing contest between the emperor Tiberius and his nephew and chief political rival, the popular Roman prince Germanicus. Tacitus introduces this rivalry first in Book 1 where he relates the story of that prince's successful wars in Germany and notes how these victories roused considerable envy in his uncle, the emperor. Because of Germanicus' widespread popularity in Rome, however, Tiberius is unable to assassinate Germanicus publicly; over the course of Book 2 he must therefore plot and maneuver against his nephew covertly behind the scenes and in the shadows. The stories related by Book 2's Parthian Passage, especially Augustus and Tiberius' use of the pretender Vonones, who is himself portrayed as a shadowy, unscrupulous character at times, in many ways run parallel to—or perhaps as a backdrop for—the secret “cold war” going on outside the public's view between the jealous emperor and the irreproachable prince of Rome, Germanicus. Thus, Tacitus probably also locates the bulk of Parthian Passage 2 at the beginning of the *Annales*' second Book specifically so that he can use the disturbances in the East as a segue; it is a mechanism to explain how Tiberius was able to remove his nephew from the glory of his German post. As we will see below, Tacitus claims that the trouble Vonones stirred up on the eastern frontier gave Tiberius the pretext he needed to transfer Germanicus away from his popular command on the northern border. But this will not be the only link the historian draws between Vonones' and Germanicus' stories. Their tales will intertwine on more than one occasion as Book 2 progresses, and in each case where they do, they remind the reader of how the Julio-Claudians truly operated—not directly in the light of day, but through agents and proxies of questionable moral character.

However, as noted above, Vonones' adventures at one point or another take the prince not just to Parthia, but to Armenia as well. This happy coincidence also allows Tacitus to use Vonones' story as a convenient tool to criticize both legs of Augustus' Parthian strategy: the use of Phraates' sons as pretenders for co-opting or subverting Parthia's royal authority and the establishment of Armenia as a buffer-state against Parthian aggression. Vonones will be the first, though certainly not the last, Roman-backed pretender who tries to claim Parthia's ancestral throne in Tacitus' *Annales*. The story of Vonones' downfall, in fact, will set a precedent for later pretenders in Parthian Passages 2, 3, and 4. Moreover, Tacitus will imply over the course of this first Parthian Passage that the prince's failure to maintain Parthia's crown for any length of time—as well as his inability to hold onto his consolation prize, the Armenian kingship—stems from his intimate, longtime exposure to Roman culture. Vonones may seem to Augustus like the ideal candidate for a client king; he possesses, after all, the perfect combination of pure Arsacid blood and Roman cultural affinities. But, as Tacitus will eagerly point out, the very characteristics that make Vonones ideal in Augustus' mind will not be praised so readily by the prince's native countrymen. It will be the failure of the Julio-Claudians to realize this critical oversight, their own cultural shortsightedness, that will make Vonones' story a familiar, recurring feature of the *Annales'* eastern scenes.

A. Parthian Passage 1.1 (*Ann.* 2.1-4): Vonones and the Problem with Parthian Pretenders

In the opening chapter (2.1), Tacitus sets the stage for his broader discussion of Augustus' Parthian policy by first providing his audience with crucial background information:

In the consulships of Statilius Sisenna Taurus and Lucius Libo, troubles arose in the Roman provinces and kingdoms of the East. These problems started first among the Parthians *who, having sought and accepted a king from Rome, now despised him as a foreigner, despite the fact that he was an Arsacid*. This was Vonones, the hostage who was given to Augustus by Phraates. For although Phraates had beaten back Roman armies and generals, he had offered Augustus every public sign of respect and, to solidify their friendship, he had sent part of his family to Augustus—not particularly from fear of us, but because he doubted the loyalty of his countrymen.

Sisenna Statilio Tauro, L. Libone consuibus, mota Orientis regna provinciaeque Romanae, initio apud Parthos orto, *qui petitum Roma acceptumque regem, quamvis gentis Arsacidarum, ut externum aspernantur*. Is fuit Vonones, obses Augusto datus a Phraate. Nam Phraates, quamquam depulisset exercitus ducesque Romanos, cuncta venerantium officia ad Augustum verterat partemque prolis firmandae amicitiae miserat, *haud perinde nostri metu fidei popularium diffisus*.²³⁸ (emphasis mine)

Besides merely introducing Tacitus' main topic of Vonones' aborted stint on the Parthian throne, this initial chapter also takes two rather subtle jabs right away at Augustus' foreign policy. First of all, by specifically noting Vonones' Arsacid lineage and the fact that the unpopular monarch was "despised as a foreigner" (*ut externum aspernantur*), Tacitus highlights one of the major structural flaws he sees underpinning the Augustan strategy abroad—namely, the assumption that Phraates' heirs would make better pretenders than non-Arsacids like Monaeses/Tiridates. However, because Tacitus fleshes out this particular gripe in more detail in his next chapter (2.2), we will set it aside for the time being—especially because our author's last remark here is, in some ways, even more damning and inflammatory.

Tacitus' final words in chapter 2.1 are probably intended to recall and contradict the Princeps' own assertions in the *Res Gestae*. In that work, Augustus claimed that Phraates had offered his sons to Rome as hostages to gain the "friendship" (*amicitia*) of the Roman people.²³⁹ Tacitus' similar language here (*firmandae amicitiae*) seems to suggest that he wants his readers to draw a connection to Augustus' monumental document. In fact, scholars have identified other verbal echoes linking the *Res Gestae* to chapters 2.1 and 2.2 of the *Annales*.²⁴⁰ And yet, like most other Latin writers who broach the topic, Tacitus seems to distrust the motivation Augustus ascribes to the Parthian king. As evident from the final clause, Tacitus instead believed that internal political concerns, and not the Princeps' sheer *gravitas*, were what actually compelled Phraates to agree to the hostage transfer.²⁴¹

²³⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 2.1.

²³⁹ *Res Gest.* 32. Both Strabo (6.4.2; 16.1.28) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.1) also mention this particular motivation, perhaps following Augustus' lead.

²⁴⁰ Cf. Urban 1979: 59-74 and Gowing 1990: 317-319. Gowing 1990: 319 n. 18, incidentally, believes that *Ann.* 2.3-4, which deals with Armenia, also alludes to the *Res Gestae*.

²⁴¹ Strabo 16.1.28 also points out this alternate motivation, as does Josephus *AJ* 18.44. Yet while Tacitus, Strabo, and Josephus only seem to imply that this was Phraates' true motivation, at least two other ancient writers (Justinus 42.5.10-12 and

Therefore, from the outset, Tacitus is questioning not just the wisdom behind Rome's foreign policy strategy, but the emperor's word in some sense. He seems to be trying to discredit Augustus by casting doubt on the integrity of the Princeps' administration. If this is correct, then we must admit that this approach is an especially cunning way to begin the Parthian Passages. These hostages will make up the pool from which Augustus and later Julio-Claudians draw their Parthian pretenders; Vonones is the first from this group used in this way but hardly the last. Thus, by implying that the Princeps misrepresented or even lied outright about the motivation behind the hostage exchange, Tacitus subtly prepares his audience for even more scathing criticisms of the dynasty later on. By questioning the *Res Gestae* and Augustus' characterization of events, Tacitus lays the groundwork for his larger argument. Essentially, if the root is rotten (how and why the hostages came to reside in Rome), then perhaps so is the rest of the tree (the Julio-Claudians' entire policy concerning their Parthian pretenders).

Tacitus' subsequent chapter (2.2) lays out in more detail Vonones' recall to Parthia and the reasons for his eventual expulsion and exile:

After internal palace plots brought an end to Phraates and his successors, a delegation of Parthian nobles came to Rome to summon that king's eldest son. Caesar saw the request as an honor to himself and offered additional resources to assist the Parthian prince. Overjoyed, the barbarians accepted, as is usual at the start of any new regime. However, *soon shame overcame the Parthians* that they had degenerated: they had sought a king from a foreign realm, a man infected by enemy arts; now the throne of the Arsacids was held or given away like one of Rome's provinces. Where was the glory of those who killed Crassus and drove out Antony if the slave of Caesar, a man who had tolerated servitude for so many years, should rule the Parthians? *It heightened the scorn that the man himself turned away from the institutions of his ancestors, with his hunting sparse, his care of horses lazy. He proceeded through the city by being carried on a litter and held disdain for the paternal banquets. Both his Greek retinue and his use of his signet ring for the littlest cause were also ridiculed.* But his easy accessibility and open kindness, virtues unknown to the Parthians, were new vices; and, because these were foreign to their customs, there was just as much hatred for his crooked and honest manners. Therefore, Artabanus, an Arsacid by blood who was raised to adulthood among the Dahae, although routed in his first engagement, prepared his men anew and took possession of the kingdom.

Post finem Phraatis et sequentium regum ob internas caedis venere in urbem legati a primoribus Parthis, qui Vononem vetustissimum liberorum eius accirent. Magnificum id sibi credidit Caesar auxitque opibus. Et acceperere barbari laetantes, ut ferme ad nova imperia. *Mox subiit pudor degeneravisse Parthos: petitum alio ex orbe regem, hostium artibus infectum; iam inter*

Vell. Pat. 2.94.4) appear to make this claim unambiguously. Cf. Nedergaard 1988: 107.

provincias Romanas solium Arsacidarum haberi darique. Ubi illam gloriam trucidantium Crassum, exturbantium Antonium, si mancipium Caesaris, tot per annos servitutem perpessum, Parthis imperitet? *Accendebat dedignantis 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 causa.* Sed prompti aditus, obvia comitas, ignotae Parthis virtutes, nova vitia; et quia ipsorum moribus aliena perinde odium pravis et honestis. Igitur Artabanus *Arsacidarum e sanguine apud Dahas adultus excitur, primoque congressu fusus reparat viros regnoque potitur.*²⁴² (emphasis mine)

Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae* 18.46-49 closely parallels Tacitus' account of Vonones' reign, leading some experts to suspect a common source.²⁴³

But when [Parthian] ambassadors came to Rome, they asked for a king from one of the hostages, and Vonones, who was preferred to his brothers, was sent. For he seemed to deserve the chance which the two largest empires under the sun, his own and one foreign, were granting to him. But a sudden change of heart came over the barbarians who are fickle by nature. They thought it an indignity to offer their kingdom's leadership to a foreign captive, for they referred to him as a hostage and held his surname [i.e., Arsacid] in ill-repute even before labeling him as a slave. He had not emerged from war as per custom to bring rule to the Parthians, but from insolent peace, which was in every way inferior. The Parthians immediately summoned Artabanus, the king of Media, who was a member of the Arsacid family. Artabanus was persuaded and came with his army. Vonones met him and at first, because the majority of the Parthians were still loyal to him, Vonones was victorious in battle, and Artabanus retreated to the borders of Media. After not much time, Artabanus rallied his men and brought together Vonones and victory.

πρεσβεύσαντες δὲ εἰς Ῥώμην ἠτοῦντο βασιλέα τῶν ὀμηρευόντων, καὶ πέμπεται Βονώνης προκριθεὶς τῶν ἀδελφῶν. ἐδόκει γὰρ χωρεῖν τὴν τύχην, ἦν αὐτῷ δύο μέγιστα τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν ἥλιον ἡγεμονία προσέφερον, ἰδία καὶ ἀλλοτρία. ταχεῖα δ' ἀνατροπὴ τοὺς βαρβάρους ὕπεισιν ἅτε καὶ φύσει σφαλεροὺς ὄντας πρὸς τε τὴν ἀναξιοπάθειαν ἀνδραπόδω γὰρ ἀλλοτρίῳ ποιήσειν τὸ προστασσόμενον ἤξιον, τὴν ὀμηρείαν ἀντὶ δουλείας ὀνομάζοντες, καὶ τῆς ἐπικλήσεως τὴν ἀδοξίαν. οὐ γὰρ ἂν πολέμου δικαίῳ δεδόσθαι τὸν βασιλεύσοντα Πάρθοις, ἀλλὰ, ὃ τῷ παντὶ χειρὸν, εἰρήνης ὕβρει. παραχρῆμα δ' ἐκάλουν Ἀρτάβανον Μηδίας βασιλεύοντα γένος Ἀρσακίδην: πείθεται δ' Ἀρτάβανος καὶ μετὰ στρατιᾶς ἔπεισιν. ὑπαντιάζει δ' αὐτῷ Βονώνης: καὶ τὸ μὲν πρῶτον συμφρονήσαντος αὐτῷ τοῦ πλήθους τῶν Πάρθων παραταξάμενος νικᾷ, καὶ φεύγει πρὸς τοὺς ὄρους τῆς Μηδίας Ἀρτάβανος. μετ' οὐ πολὺ δὲ συναγαγὼν συμβάλλει τε Βονώνη καὶ νικᾷ ...²⁴⁴

²⁴² Tac. *Ann.* 2.2-3.1. Phraates IV's successors were Phraates V (Phraataces), whom we met in our previous chapter, and Orodes III, whose unrestrained cruelty led to his murder ca. 6/7 CE either during a festival or while out hunting (Joseph. *AJ* 18.44). See Debevoise 1938: 151 and Sheldon 2010: 90. For Orodes III's coinage, which would help to date the beginning of Vonones' reign, see Gardner 1968: 46.

²⁴³ Walser 1951: 72 n. 330 notes that scholars such as Mommsen, Norden, et al. suggest Cluvius Rufus as the possible source. Hölscher 1916 also seems to share this opinion. And Gowing 1990: 317 n. 8 adds: "We do not know the point at which Cluvius' *History* began, though even if with the reign of Nero (as is often assumed), he may have briefly sketched the history of Rome's relationship with Parthia as background to his account of Corbulo's campaigns. That he was one of Tacitus' main sources for the third hexad of the *Annales* ... and for the *Historiae* is axiomatic." For a general discussion of Tacitus' sources, see Syme 1958: 279-280, 296-297; Borsák 1968: 449-453, 479-484; and Mellor 2011: 22-41.

²⁴⁴ Joseph. *AJ* 18.46-49.

Yet, as Alain Gowing’s article “Tacitus and the Client Kings” observes, the minor differences between these two near-contemporary historians are really what betray Tacitus’ underlying purpose—specifically, his wish to question the viability of using Phraates’ heirs as Roman clients.²⁴⁵ In both versions, the Parthians reject Vonones as their king after a sudden moment of regret.²⁴⁶ Josephus ascribes the Parthians’ change of heart to their mercurial national character, especially to the fickleness of their aristocracy. He lays relatively little blame for Vonones’ removal on Vonones himself. Tacitus, on the other hand, places the lion’s share of the blame squarely on the pretender’s shoulders. More accurately, he believes that the king’s many character flaws explain how Vonones, whom the Parthians had personally requested, quickly became so unpopular. Tacitus points out, for example, Vonones’ neglect of or disdain for Parthia’s national pastimes, activities like hunting, horsemanship, and banqueting. He also insinuates, by commenting on Vonones’ Greek entourage and the king’s frequent use of a litter, that the man often acted more like a Roman aristocrat than a true Parthian monarch.²⁴⁷

Tacitus’ account of the king’s fall also differs from the Jewish historian’s version in another significant way. Unlike Josephus’ work, the *Annales* purposefully distorts the length of Vonones’ reign, making it seem far shorter than it actually was. Reading only Tacitus’ story, one gets the general impression that Vonones’ rule was rather brief. The Parthians restore him to the throne at 2.2.1 and then, only six sentences later, we discover that Artabanus has already unseated him. Furthermore, Tacitus uses his disparaging character attack to bridge these two events. He gives us no hint, not a

245 Gowing 1990.

246 Tacitus: *mox subiit pudor*; Josephus: *ταχεῖα δ’ ἀνατροπή τοῦ βαρβάρου ἐπεισιν*.

247 Tacitus might intend for his readers to recall Polybius and Livy’s description of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (Polyb. 26.1/Livy 41.4-6) who was also a Roman hostage before being returned to the Seleucid throne. Many of Antiochus’ Roman idiosyncrasies differ from Vonones’, but the general implication is the same: both have become alien to their native customs and are thought mad or unfit to rule by their countrymen. The one interesting flaw that both Antiochus and Vonones seem to share is that they are each much too affable with commoners and foreigners. Eastern Hellenistic-style monarchs were supposed to be much more aloof with their court and distanced from their subjects. We might also note that the environmental determinist argument that Tacitus employs here, the idea that a soft, decadent environment is capable of enervating otherwise strong and powerful individuals, is quite similar to that used by Horace in *Od.* 3.5 to describe the Roman prisoners returned in 20 BCE. Of course, here, we are seeing the reverse of that (i.e., the decadence of life in Rome corrupting Parthians), so Tacitus is probably commenting (somewhat as he does in the *Germania*) not just on Augustus’ foreign policy or on the shortcomings of the emperors themselves, but also on the culture of Roman life in general.

single clause, suggesting Vonones was ever popular with his countrymen. Tacitus mentions that Vonones successfully repelled Artabanus' first attempt to usurp the throne, but he largely glosses over this accomplishment by recounting the whole affair in merely three words (*primoque congressu fusus*).²⁴⁸ By contrast, Josephus implies that the majority of Parthians actually favored Vonones as their king, a possibility bolstered by the fact that the former Roman hostage apparently ruled unopposed for almost a full half decade before Artabanus' challenge.²⁴⁹ The Jewish writer uses at least an entire sentence to describe Vonones' first battle with his rival.²⁵⁰ But any hint of Vonones' moderately successful reign are absent in Tacitus' more hostile account.

We should notice, too, that Tacitus reinforces his argument against Vonones at 2.3.1 by emphasizing the lineage and background of the soon-to-be deposed king's challenger, Artabanus.²⁵¹ Like Vonones, Artabanus was "an Arsacid by blood," possessing the very trait that was supposed to make Vonones a more attractive candidate to his fellow Parthians. Of course, thanks to Tacitus' preceding chapter, we are left thinking that Vonones' countrymen reviled him. The only conclusion we can come to is that blood alone is not enough to make a man into a proper Parthian king. But if not blood, then what?

Fortunately, Tacitus provides an answer. Immediately after citing Artabanus' Arsacid lineage, the historian also notes that, unlike Augustus' candidate Vonones, this usurper had been "raised to adulthood among the Dahae" (*apud Dahae adultus*), a Scythian tribe that lived east of the Caspian Sea. The reader gets the distinct feeling that this difference in upbringing, and not their shared royal blood, is what allowed Artabanus to overthrow Vonones so swiftly. Being reared among the Dahae apparently made Artabanus more popular with his Parthian constituents, a critical factor which, in turn, gave him

²⁴⁸ For Vonones' struggle with Artabanus III see Debevoise 1938: 1522 and Sheldon 2010: 90. Vonones' initial victory over Artabanus was apparently significant enough to warrant the minting of special coins celebrating the event. See Gardner 1968: 11, 47 with Pl. 5.4-5 and McDowell 1935: 223.

²⁴⁹ Joseph. *AJ* 18.48. For this interpretation see especially Gowing 1990: 319 n. 14. Concerning the length of Vonones' reign, the consensus among scholars is 6/7-12/13 CE. This estimate is based mainly on the scant numismatic record from Orodes III and Vonones' reigns.

²⁵⁰ Joseph. *AJ* 18.48.

²⁵¹ Tacitus' portrayal of Vonones is based largely on ancient notions of environmental determinism. For a broader discussion of this topic see especially Isaac 2004: 9-13, 102-108.

an advantage over Vonones on the battlefield. The implication seems to be that the usurper's Scythian heritage made him appreciate the Parthians' cherished pastimes of hunting, horsemanship, and banqueting—the same habits Tacitus, in 2.2, says Vonones shunned.

For Tacitus then, nurture seems to trump nature—at least as far as Parthian kings are concerned. He appears to be suggesting that Augustus' assumption that the heirs of Phraates IV would make good Parthian pretenders was fatally flawed. Unlike Artabanus, Vonones was reared in Rome and, therefore, was exposed to Roman customs. He could not avoid exposure to the city's depraved culture. In spite of his Arsacid blood, Vonones was, for all intents and purposes, Roman, and so he failed. In Tacitus' opinion, to pretend that Vonones was anything else was foolish; to base a cornerstone of the empire's foreign policy on such a faulty assumption was even more so.

Luckily for Tacitus and perhaps for his audience, Vonones' story did not simply end with his ouster. After being chased off of his throne by the more worthy, more “Parthian” Artabanus, the exiled king fled to Armenia whose throne was “at the time vacant” (*vacua tunc*).²⁵² Armenia's nobility, it seems, had become disillusioned with their recent “attempt with female rule” (*temptatoque feminae imperio*) and had, as a consequence, just deposed their queen, a woman named Erato.²⁵³ The Armenians gave the exiled Vonones sanctuary and also offered to make him their new monarch.²⁵⁴ Yet, while Vonones' stint as Armenia's king would be brief—certainly briefer than his Parthian reign—we should not be too quick to dismiss the pretender's Armenian excursus as entirely insignificant.

Although Vonones' time in Armenia may seem relatively unimportant, at least in the historical sense, it does still bear some weight as part of Tacitus' larger argument against the Julio-Claudians. The exiled monarch's stopover in Armenia is, in fact, the mechanism that allows Tacitus to chastise the second leg of the Augustan Parthian strategy, the Armenian buffer-state policy. To explain how the

²⁵² Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.2.

²⁵³ Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.4. It is unclear whether this Erato is the same queen who ruled alongside her husband-brother Tigranes IV. After her husband's death, Tigranes' consort did reign briefly alone, however C. Caesar supposedly deposed her during his eastern expedition. This Erato could be the same woman; she might have returned to the throne at a later date. More likely, though, it is not. Perhaps it could be one of her daughters.

²⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.3-4.

Armenian throne became vacant, Tacitus first takes his audience on a voyage of their own in the form of an excursus on Armenian history. Although the narrative hardly requires such a detailed account, Tacitus spends most of chapter 2.3 and a significant portion of 2.4 untangling the convoluted history of Rome's Armenian client-kings. Just to give some sense of how tortuous the account is at times: Tacitus, in rapid succession, mentions 1) M. Antony's deposition and execution of Artavasdes I, 2) the reinstatement of that monarch's son, Artaxias II, thanks to Parthian backing, and 3) Augustus' subsequent hand in the installation of Tigranes III. Tacitus also somehow finds time to allude to the short reign of Tigranes' heirs, Tigranes IV and Erato, before moving on to Tiberius' sponsorship, under Augustus' orders, of Artavasdes II and C. Caesar's similar nomination of Ariobarzanes the Mede.²⁵⁵ Only after all these twists and turns does Tacitus finally note that Ariobarzanes' death led the Armenians, because of their intolerance for foreign rulers, to elect a woman as their queen and sole ruler. This queen is Erato whose eventual removal finally opens the door for the "fugitive Vonones" (*profugum Vononen*) to assume the Armenian crown.

Tacitus' purpose for recounting Armenia's lengthy regal history is a bit deceptive. Had he simply wished to bring his readers up to speed on Armenian affairs, he could have done so in a much less taxing way. Explaining why the Armenians would offer Vonones their kingdom's throne does not require almost two whole chapters. Tacitus is deservedly famous for his brevity; why did he not simply sum up Erato's overthrow in one of his trademark ablative absolutes and move on? Why did he feel it necessary to reach all the way back to Antony's day to justify the unlikely circumstances surrounding Vonones' odd accession?

Tacitus' treatment of Armenian history here would be excessive if all he were trying to do was find a rationale for Vonones' unexpected coronation. But if we examine these chapters carefully, we discover that accounting for the exile's good fortune was not his only goal. Tacitus also uses these passages to outline Rome's legacy of unwelcome—and occasionally illegal—interference in Armenia's

²⁵⁵ For more on these events see Debevoise 1938: 152-153.

internal politics. In a real sense, *Ann.* 2.3-4 is less a summary of Armenia's monarchical history than it is an indictment of Rome's crimes against that kingdom's sovereign rule. What Tacitus' Roman audience would have really cared about was how those crimes caused further problems for the empire. For example, Tacitus states that "Armenia was ... an unreliable political asset because of Antony's crime" and that "[Artavasdes I's] son Artaxias was hostile to [the Romans] on account of his father's memory."²⁵⁶ Some of Tacitus' rhetoric is clearly inflammatory. He emphasizes, for instance, that Tiberius deposed Artavasdes II "not without much Roman bloodshed" (*non sine clade nostra*); however, little evidence of staunch Armenian resistance remains to support such an assertion.²⁵⁷ Furthermore, Tacitus calls Ariobarzanes, whom Augustus' grandson C. Caesar had installed as Armenia's king, "by origin a Mede" (*origine Medum*).²⁵⁸ Yet while this characterization of Ariobarzanes' ethnicity may or may not be accurate, in the context, such a claim is probably meant to be provocative, since it could imply some sort of Parthian/Persian allegiance. Finally, when Augustus assigns Tigranes III to Armenia, Tacitus points out that the client-king was settled "on his throne by Tiberius Nero" (*in regnum a Tiberio Nerone*).²⁵⁹ Tacitus' use of Tiberius' alternate name Nero, as we find it here, appears rarely elsewhere in the *Annales*. One explanation for why he employs it here could be that he wants to draw a connection in the reader's mind between Tiberius and the last Julio-Claudian emperor, Nero. In 58 CE, that Nero also installed a "Tigranes" on the Armenian throne, an event which many of Tacitus' readers would have been old enough to remember.²⁶⁰ The reign of Nero's "Tigranes" was, by all accounts, an unmitigated disaster. By linking these two similarly-named client-kings, perhaps Tacitus is implying that Augustus' and Tiberius' early efforts to realign Armenia were, much like Nero's later attempt, more trouble than they were worth.²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.2: ... *Armenia fuit ... opes infida ob scelus Antonii Eius filius Artaxias, memoriae patris nobis infensus* As noted in the preceding paragraph, Antony was responsible for executing Artavasdes I.

²⁵⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.1.

²⁵⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.3.

²⁵⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.4.

²⁶⁰ I.e., Tigranes VI following Cn. Domitius Corbulo's invasion of Armenia.

²⁶¹ Besides simple name recognition, both this account and the later passages involving Nero and Tigranes occupy prominent positions at the beginning of their respective Books: Parthian Passage 1 here in Book 2; Parthian Passage 4 (or, at least, the portion of 4 dealing with Tigranes) in Book 15. Therefore, the structural layout of the work may have also implied some connection to the reader.

Tacitus' extended recollection of Rome's various debacles in Armenia is also fitting for another reason. It foreshadows the fact that Vonones' reign will ultimately be a failure. We are not particularly surprised to learn, as chapter 2.4 closes, that "with Artabanus threatening and with little support coming from the Armenians, and because even if Roman forces defended [Vonones], war would still have to be taken up against the Parthians, Creticus Silanus, the governor of Syria, took the frightened [Vonones] into custody, yet nevertheless left him his luxuries and royal title."²⁶²

B. Parthian Passage 1.2 (Ann. 2.56-58): Vonones vs. Germanicus: A Better Way

Book 2 of the *Annales* focuses predominantly on Augustus' grandson and great-nephew Germanicus. It traces that prince's grand tour through Asia, his ongoing dispute with the Syrian governor Cn. Calpurnius Piso, and finally his death—perhaps by poisoning at Piso's hands and Tiberius' request. Consequently, Tacitus must somehow justify the lengthy treatment of Vonones and the Parthians with which he opens Book 2; he has to explain what Parthian Passage 1 has to do with the Book's major plot line. He seems to overcome this minor stumbling block at 2.5.1 where he states: "But, for Tiberius, the eastern disturbances were not at all unwelcome, because thanks to this pretext he could pull Germanicus away from his accustomed legions and, having placed the prince in new provinces, could expose him to grief and misfortunes."²⁶³ Such a remark might, at first, make the reader feel as if the four preceding chapters concerning Vonones and the East were unnecessary window dressing, intended to get the character of Germanicus out to the eastern frontier.²⁶⁴ Yet nothing could be further from the truth. This hasty, almost perfunctory transitional sentence is not the only link Tacitus draws between Vonones' and Germanicus' story lines; the two men's tales intertwine several more

²⁶² Tac. *Ann.* 2.4.5: *ubi minitari Artabanus et parum subsidii in Armeniis, vel, si nostra vi defenderetur, bellum adversus Parthos sumendum erat, rector Syriae Creticus Silanus excitem custodia circumdat, manente luxu et regio nomine.* Vonones' eviction and relocation, which we learn thanks to Josephus was to Syria (*AJ* 18.50-52), probably occurred in 15 or 16 CE. For modern discussions, cf. Gwatkin 1930: 13; McDowell 1935: 187; Debevoise 1938: 151; and Sheldon 2010: 90.

²⁶³ Tac. *Ann.* 2.5.1: *Ceterum Tiberio haud ingratum accidit turbari res Orientis, ut ea specie Germanicum suetis legionibus abstraheret novisque provinciis impositum dolo simul et casibus obiectaret.*

²⁶⁴ Abrupt and not terribly well-developed transition sentences such as that which we find here at 2.5.1 might also help explain why the Parthian Passages are often regarded as pointless digressions.

times as we make our way through the rest of Book 2. In each instance where Tacitus conveniently finds an excuse to reconnect these two characters thematically, his goal always seems to be the same: to reassert his belief that Vonones was a poor choice for a Roman client-king, whether in Parthia or Armenia. After all, as Tacitus saw it, how could anyone expect a man who had spent his entire life as the lackey of the Roman emperor to command a whole nation of servile barbarians in Rome's name?²⁶⁵ In Tacitus' opinion, Augustus had chosen poorly. The question was: could Germanicus do any better?

We first run across Vonones' and Germanicus' story lines again intersecting at 2.56 in the midst of Germanicus' feud with Piso. Perhaps to lend the whole scene some context, Tacitus first reminds his audience about Armenia's critical placement between the two vast empires of Rome and Parthia.²⁶⁶ He then recalls that "at that time, [the Armenians] had no king because Vonones had been removed."²⁶⁷ Germanicus, who had only recently arrived in the East, and who wisely decided to ignore Piso's misrule in Syria for the time being, therefore hastened to Armenia so that he could appoint a suitable new monarch to fill Vonones' empty seat.²⁶⁸ However, unlike Augustus, who preferred to use one of Phraates' sons, Germanicus selected Zeno, the son of the Pontic king Polemo. In his subsequent description of the Pontic prince, Tacitus could not be any clearer. Zeno was, in almost every respect, the very antithesis of Vonones: "Because Zeno had been from his earliest childhood an emulator of the institutions and culture of the Armenians, he joined himself equally to both the leaders and the common people by means of the hunt, banquets, and other things barbarians celebrate."²⁶⁹ Thus, as with his

²⁶⁵ Roman writers like Tacitus often identified the Parthians as ancient Persians. Doing so allowed them to employ a whole host of negative Greek stereotypes about easterners. One such stereotype was that all Parthians/Persians were slaves because they lived under the monarchical rule of the Great King. For an in-depth discussion of Rome's prejudices against the Parthians see Isaac 2004: 371-380 and Mellor 2011: 60.

²⁶⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.1. Such a reminder seems unnecessary, especially given the fact that the Parthians play no real part in the rest of the scene. However, that Tacitus feels it prudent to include such lines seems to justify our belief, as stated in our introduction to Part 2, that these episodes are still part of, and not separate from, the "Parthian Passages." Even when the Parthians are conspicuously absent from a scene, Tacitus always seems to find a way to set the action within the context of the broader Romano-Parthian cold war.

²⁶⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.2: *Regem illa tempestate non habebant, amoto Vonone.*

²⁶⁸ Tiberius apparently granted Germanicus sweeping powers in Asia to appoint and depose client-kings, levy troops, and impose tribute on various subject states. For further discussions of Germanicus' mandate in the East, see Debevoise 1938: 153 and Sheldon 2010: 91.

²⁶⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.1: *... Zenonem ... quod is prima ab infantia instituta et cultum Armeniorum aemulatus, venatu, epulis et quae alia barbari celebrant, proceres plebemque iuxta devinxerat.*

earlier comparison to the Parthian usurper Artabanus, Tacitus appears to be stressing that Vonones' failure, first in Parthia and then in Armenia, was due to his non-eastern, Roman predilections. By contrast, Zeno is the perfect choice for a Roman client-king; he is the model of a good eastern monarch. He not only exhibits, but genuinely seems to value, the customs and native practices of the people over whom he is about to rule.

Tacitus further reports that Germanicus crowned Zeno, who then assumed the throne name Artaxias III, personally at Artaxata, the Armenian capital on the Araxas River.²⁷⁰ Although seemingly innocuous, this simple act distinguishes Germanicus from the rest of the Julio-Claudian clan. After all, Augustus had not personally invested Vonones as Parthia's monarch, and the Princeps may have not known about his candidate's brief switch to the Armenian kingship before Artabanus lodged his complaint with the Syrian governor, Creticus Silanus. Compared to Germanicus' handling of Artaxias' coronation, Augustus and the other Julio-Claudian emperors seem unwilling to claim their eastern clients—at least not in the hands-on way we see here. As we will learn, Augustus' successors, like the Princeps himself, will typically prefer to crown their eastern pretenders from afar, and through intermediaries.²⁷¹ For Tacitus, Germanicus seems to represent the proper way Romans should handle Armenian affairs. He is, in many ways, the exemplar by which we are supposed to judge the imprudent and sometime even criminal strategies other Romans employ to secure the Armenian buffer-state for the empire's better interests.

Artaxias' entire coronation scene could, in fact, be an allusion to Tacitus' fourth Parthian Passage. Artaxata, the Armenian capital conspicuously mentioned here which serves as the backdrop

²⁷⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.3 but also see Suet. *Gaius* 1.2 and Strabo 12.3.29. Mattingly 2007: 104 no. 8 and Debevoise 1938: 154 n. 47 point out that coins commemorating the event were struck depicting the coronation scene and bearing the legend GERMANICUS ARTAXIAS. Moreover, Tacitus specifically mentions Zeno's name change to Artaxias III: "Others acclaiming him declared [Zeno] as King Artaxias" (*Ann.* 2.56.4: *Ceteri venerantes regem Artaxiam consalutavere ...*). Perhaps there is no underlying literary motive for this remark. However, as we have already discussed at 2.3, Tacitus points out that Artaxias II had been particularly antagonistic towards Rome because M. Antony had murdered his father. The scene of Artaxias III's coronation here, especially his friendly relationship with Germanicus, would have stood out starkly compared to his namesake's/predecessor's earlier interactions with Rome.

²⁷¹ The one exception, of course, will be Nero's investiture of the Armenian king Tiridates in 66 CE. But even in that case, Tiridates must travel to Rome to receive the emperor's blessing; Nero never goes to Armenia. Like Tiberius' use of Germanicus here, Nero will choose to delegate his eastern responsibilities and wars to a more worthy subordinate – namely, the renowned general Domitius Corbulo.

for the king's investiture ceremony, is the same city Nero's general Cn. Domitius Corbulo famously razes to the ground in the late 50s (*Ann.* 13.41). And during Nero's Armenian War, Corbulo uncrowns the Armenian monarch Tiridates (*Ann.* 15.29), the exact opposite of what we see Germanicus do here. The whole episode at 2.56 might then be a kind of mirror image of this later scene in the *Annales*. If so, then the purpose must be to emphasize a connection between Germanicus and Corbulo. Just as Tacitus considers Germanicus the antithesis of the despotic Tiberius throughout the *Annales*' first hexad, he portrays Corbulo in much the same way in the work's final Books—that is, as a foil to Nero's reckless unrestrained rule.²⁷²

And yet this scene is not the only one where we must witness Germanicus wrestling with Vonones' legacy in the East. Tacitus describes how the fates of the Roman prince and the exiled king intertwine again at 2.58:

Meanwhile, legates came from the Parthian king Artabanus. He had sent them to remind the Romans of their nation's friendship and treaty, and to request that oaths be renewed. They also announced that, to give honor to Germanicus, Artabanus agreed to meet the prince on the bank of the Euphrates. However, he asked that Vonones should not be held in Syria, nor should he be allowed to drag the leaders of the clans into discord with nearby messengers. To these conditions, Germanicus answered favorably concerning the alliance between the Romans and Parthians. About the coming of the king and the king's courtesy to him, Germanicus responded with grace and modesty. Vonones was removed to Pompeiopolis, a maritime city in Cilicia.

Inter quae ab rege Parthorum Artabano legati venere. Miserat amicitiam ac foedus memoraturos, et cupere novari dextras, daturumque honori Germanici ut ripam Euphratis accederet: petere interim ne Vonones in Syria haberetur neu proceres gentium propinquis nuntiis ad discordias traheret. Ad ea Germanicus de societate Romanorum Parthorumque magnifice, de adventu regis et cultu sui cum decore ac modestia respondit. Vonones Pompeiopolim, Ciliciae maritimam urbem, amotus est.²⁷³

On the most basic level, these lines set the stage for Parthian Passage 1's dramatic conclusion.

Germanicus' diplomatic interactions with the Parthian monarch Artabanus help explain why the

²⁷² For scholars who discuss this apparent link between the characters of Germanicus and Corbulo see Gilmartin 1973: 596-597; and Vervaet 1999a: 290-291.

²⁷³ Tac. *Ann.* 2.58.1-4. Pompeiopolis is present-day Mezetlü, Turkey. And although she offers no proof, Sheldon 2010: 91, at least, suspects that Creticus Silanus may have moved Vonones to Antioch in order to use him as a "covert operator" against Artabanus.

Romans decided to move Vonones from Syria to Cilicia, the site that will be the backdrop for the exile's suspenseful last stand and demise.

However, Tacitus probably also designed this passage to recall C. Caesar and Phraataces' Euphrates conference in 2 CE, which is described by Velleius Paterculus. The similarities between Tacitus' account and that of Velleius are too many to be merely coincidental. Besides the similar location (i.e., on the bank of the Euphrates River), each case involves a Roman prince meeting a newly-crowned Parthian monarch. Both princes, C. Caesar and Germanicus, are furthermore Augustus' grandsons. Additionally, the Romano-Parthian peace treaty referred to in the passage, which Artabanus hoped to renew, was probably the same treaty Gaius had negotiated with Phraataces in 2 CE. Finally, one of the more conspicuous details from Velleius' story is the revelation that C. Caesar's trusted confidant, M. Lollius, was in the pay of several foreign rulers. Although Velleius does not state explicitly that Lollius was plotting to murder his ward, he clearly implies it.²⁷⁴ Velleius' story of treason, betrayal, and the attempted murder of a prince of Rome is particularly apropos at this point in the *Annales*. Tacitus actually tries to tie Calpurnius Piso's plot to assassinate Germanicus, in a roundabout way, to Vonones, as if to suggest that Piso, like Lollius, was in the pocket of a corrupt foreign enemy.²⁷⁵ Alluding to Velleius' earlier work lends Tacitus' account of Vonones' time in Syria critical background flavor.

Only three chapters prior to the above passage recounting Vonones' transfer, Tacitus describes in intimate detail Piso's misrule, corruption, and rampant bribery in Syria.²⁷⁶ But *Ann.* 2.55 also emphasizes the complicity of Piso's equally unscrupulous wife Plancina, who, Tacitus maintains, "could not hold herself to what is proper for women, but attended the cavalry exercise and infantry maneuvers Even some of the good soldiers were open to her wicked indulgences" ²⁷⁷ Thus, the

²⁷⁴ Vell. Pat. 2.101.1-3.

²⁷⁵ M. Lollius apparently had a particularly nasty reputation for many of the same vices Tacitus ascribes to Piso. For Lollius' avarice, cf. Vell. Pat. 2.97.1 and Pliny *NH* 9.118.

²⁷⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 2.55.

²⁷⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 2.55: *Nec Plancina se intra decora feminis tenebat, sed exercitio equitum, ... quibusdam etiam bonorum militum ad mala obsequia promptis ...* .

final sentence of 2.58, the passage relating Vonones' relocation to Cilicia, is pregnant with Tacitus' famous innuendo when he remarks: "[Vonones' transfer] was approved not only because of Artabanus' requests, but as an insult to Piso, to whom [Vonones] was most pleasing because of the many kindnesses and gifts which had tied him closely to Plancina."²⁷⁸ Should we take this last sentence, and especially its final clause, to mean that some sort of illicit relationship existed between Plancina and Vonones? Was Piso, or perhaps just his wife, planning a mutiny against the state, and was Vonones somehow helping to bankroll their (or only her) treasonous endeavor?²⁷⁹

Admittedly, for these questions, we may never have conclusive answers. Tacitus, as he so often does, implies much but confirms little. He does seem to suggest that Vonones, in one way or another, was closely tied to Piso and Plancina's misgovernance and corruption in Syria, the province where he was supposed to be under house arrest. Tacitus appears to be implying that Vonones, perhaps because of his unusual upbringing, was more comfortable in the company of crooked, debauched Roman aristocrats like Piso and Plancina than he was among his own people.²⁸⁰

If we pause for a moment to take stock, we realize that Tacitus has painted Vonones as the veritable poster boy for Augustus' ill-conceived Parthian foreign policy. The pretender had failed as an effective client-king in Parthia, and he had been equally useless as a tool to secure the restless buffer-state of Armenia. And now he had shown himself to be a liability within the empire as well, by cavorting with Germanicus' alleged assassins and perhaps by exploiting the empire's Syrian provincials.

²⁷⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 2.58.5: *Datum id non modo precibus Artabani, sed contumeliae Pisonis cui gratissimus erat ob plurima officia et dona quibus Plancinam devinxerat.* For Tacitus' use of innuendo, cf. Ryberg 1942 and Sullivan 1976.

²⁷⁹ At *Ann.* 2.57 Piso chastises Germanicus for accepting a gold crown from the Nabataeans at a banquet held in the prince's honor. Piso upbraids Germanicus declaring this was a dinner given to the son of "a Roman Princeps, not a Parthian king" (*principis Romani, non Parthi regis*). As readers, our initial reaction is just to conjure up an image of Germanicus acting like the Parthian king Artabanus, but perhaps our author intended something else. After all, in the following scene (2.58), Germanicus and Artabanus engage in relatively cordial diplomatic relations. In these few scenes at least, neither of them appears to be behaving especially tyrannically or despotically. However, while Piso is certainly no Roman prince, he does receive a gold crown, though a lesser one, at the Nabataean banquet too. Therefore, maybe Tacitus' goal was to imply that Piso is actually being hypocritical, that, in fact, another Roman (Piso himself) and his Parthian king counterpart (Vonones) were the ones really acting like depraved eastern potentates.

²⁸⁰ It is certainly a different impression from the one we get only a few sentences earlier at 2.58.1-2 where the ambassadors of Artabanus, Vonones' usurper, seem well-spoken, amiable, and, most importantly, willing to comply with Rome's treaty requirements.

C. Parthian Passage 1.3 (*Ann.* 2.68): Vonones: No Country For Old Pretenders

Tacitus delays his account of Vonones' escape from Pompeiopolis, the king's suspenseful flight, and his capture and execution until 2.68. Holding off the Parthian Passage's conclusion until almost the very end of Book 2 allows Tacitus to build dramatic tension. The passage is placed at a critical juncture in the narrative, immediately before the chapter in which Tacitus reveals Germanicus' mysterious illness—the sickness which eventually brings about the prince's death—and the rumor that it was Piso who had given him poison (*Ann.* 2.69). The close proximity, at least in terms of the narrative's structure, of Vonones' escape attempt and Piso's supposed assassination plot could be a deliberate attempt by Tacitus to intimate some sort of connection or collusion between these two men. Also, by deferring the story's ending several chapters, Tacitus is better able to emphasize the rather anticlimactic way Vonones finally gives up the ghost. The historian reports the pretender's last days as follows:

Around the same time, Vonones, whose removal to Cilicia I mentioned, tried to bribe his guards and escape first to Armenia, and then from there to the Albani and the Heniochi, and finally to his relative, the king of the Scythians. Under the pretext of hunting, he bypassed the coastal places and sought out-of-the-way regions of the forests. By the swiftness of his horse, he soon proceeded to the river Pyramus, whose bridges locals had torn down after hearing about the king's escape. Not able to ford the river, [Vonones] was cornered on the bank by Vibius Fronto, the prefect of the cavalry. Soon Remmius, a reenlisted veteran, who had been assigned as the former guard of the king, stabbed him with a sword as if out of anger. But there is a greater belief that the death of Vonones was brought about as a crime of conscience and from Remmius' fear of indictment.

Per idem tempus Vonones, quem amotum in Ciliciam memoravi, corruptis custodibus effugere ad Armenios, inde Albanos Heniochosque et consanguineum sibi regem Scytharum conatus est. Specie venandi omissis maritimis locis avia saltuum petiit, mox pernecitate equi ad amnem Pyramum contendit, cuius pontes accolae ruperant audita regis fuga, neque vado penetrari poterat. Igitur in ripa fluminis a Vibio Prontone praefecto equitum vincitur; mox Remmius evocatus, priori custodiae regis adpositus, quasi per iram gladio eum transigit. Unde maior fides conscientia sceleris et metu indicii mortem Vononi inlatam.²⁸¹

This passage's opening sentence seems, at first, to convey the idea that Vonones had some sort of well thought out, preconceived strategy for escape. Based on Tacitus' remarks, Vonones seemingly wanted

²⁸¹ Tac. *Ann.* 2.68.

to flee first to Armenia and then to the Albani and Heniochs. The implication seems to be that these tribes lay beyond the mountainous kingdom, perhaps in the Caucasus region. This projected path is not entirely unreasonable. According to our narrative, Vonones' final destination was the safety of a distant kingdom ruled by one of his relatives, the unnamed Scythian king. And Scythian territory, of course, lay far to the north, well beyond not only Armenia but also the reach of Rome and Parthia. Yet while the inclusion of such precise details seems to suggest that either Tacitus or his source went to some effort to preserve the historical and geographical accuracy of Vonones' escape, we should not jump too hastily to this conclusion.

As Aleksandr Cernjak has demonstrated, the flight plan Tacitus ascribes to the exiled king is not quite as geographically viable as it first appears. For one thing, while the Albani may have lived somewhere along Vonones' projected route through the Caucasus Mountains, the Heniochs were, more than likely, not even located in the region. In fact, they are more often identified as a buccaneer-type tribe (Seeräuber) living along the northern shore of the Black Sea.²⁸² And based on this fact, Cernjak has even recommended an emendation of *Ann.* 2.68.1 from *Albanos Heniochesque* ("the Albani and Heniochs") to *Albanos Heniochesve* ("the Albani or Heniochs").²⁸³ But besides possible manuscript errors, a lack of supporting archeological evidence also undermines the viability of Vonones' escape plan. A number of archeologists have, for instance, tried to identify Vonones' mysterious *rex Scytharum* as a chief of the Massageti, a tribe that was known to occupy the western shore of the Caspian Sea earlier in antiquity. However, the conspicuous absence of archeological remains has all but proven that no such tribe existed in that area during the first century CE.²⁸⁴ If Vonones had a sympathetic Scythian relative, the king has thus far eluded detection.

The inability to reconcile Vonones' proposed route in the *Annales* with the historical record has led some scholars to doubt that either Tacitus or his source had any real knowledge of Vonones' plans.

282 Cernjak 1986: 198 et passim. Tacitus himself makes no mention of such a tribe while allies are being recruited from the Caucasus region during the Iberio-Parthian conflict described in *Ann.* 6.33.

283 Cernjak 1986: 205.

284 Cf. Cernjak 1986: 201-202.

These experts commonly hold that Tacitus sometimes uses foreign tribes and alien place names, as he does here, to add color to his narrative.²⁸⁵ But if historical accuracy was not our author's primary concern, what was his goal? Why mention Vonones' intentions in such detail at all, even if it is all nothing more than fiction?

Although somewhat counterintuitive, considering how much detail Tacitus includes, one possibility could be that the historian wishes to reemphasize the aimless, ill-prepared quality of Vonones' eastern (mis)adventures. Citing far-flung tribes in the Caucasus and elsewhere, as well as some mysterious *rex Scytharum*, might imply that the pretender had no clear destination. After all, as we have seen, Parthian Passage 1 is, in many ways, the story of Vonones' wanderings. He journeys from Rome to Parthia, then to Armenia, and finally to Syria—and yet everywhere he goes he causes trouble for Rome. Augustus had dispatched him with a specific goal in mind, to be Rome's client on the Parthian throne. However, Vonones had only become a liability and a constant headache. The geographical ambiguity of 2.68's first sentence could be intentional. It could be Tacitus' unique—and even a bit sarcastic—way of questioning where Vonones was going to go next. Where else could the pretender go to cause more trouble for Rome?

The rest of 2.68 also showcases Tacitus' biting wit, further bolstering such an interpretation. This Parthian Passage is not just about Vonones' wanderings; it is also the story of his personal shortcomings, those Roman character flaws that caused his own Parthian countrymen to abandon him. Parthian Passage 1 begins with a discussion of Vonones' Roman proclivities, and so perhaps it is only fitting that Tacitus should return to that topic as the passage comes to a close. Tacitus essentially frames the entire Parthian Passage with references to the source of Vonones' fecklessness: his Roman upbringing.

²⁸⁵ Cernjak 1986: 204 remarks: "Beachtet man aber, ... um diese Zeit (19 u. Z.) die nordkaspischen Stämme den Römern noch wenig bekannt waren, vielleicht, weil sie kein Interesse an ihnen hatten (so erscheint auch der ungenannte *rex Scytharum* als eine recht märchenhafte Gestalt) und Tacitus selbst kein Freund unnötiger Detaillierung war, so hatten die fremden Namen, seien es die eines Königs oder eines Stammes, falls er sie in seinen Quellen fand, nur geringe Chancen, durch ihn in die römischen Annalen zu gelangen."

However, here Tacitus is more subtle; he is also much more ironic. Only now, at the very end, does Vonones finally reject his Romanness and embrace his Parthian heritage. Tacitus claims that Vonones planned to flee to “his relative the Scythian king.” Yet earlier, Artabanus’ Scythian upbringing had been what distinguished him from the Roman pretender. Where were Vonones’ Scythian blood ties when Tacitus was touting the advantages of Artabanus’ rugged childhood among the Dahae? In addition, the historian mentions that Vonones orchestrated his escape “under the pretext of a hunting expedition” (*specie venandi*) and hurried to the nearby river “by the swiftness of his horse” (*pernicitate equi*). And yet, according to Tacitus, the king’s lack of interest in hunting and horsemanship had been what made him so unpopular among his native Parthians. Now, these Parthian pastimes have become the actual means of his escape. The greatest irony, however, may be that Vonones, after at last adopting Parthian customs, finally becoming what Augustus needed, dies by the hand of a Roman: that of his own guard, Remmius.

Thus, in the *Annales*, Tacitus carefully portrays Vonones as a man ill-suited for his assigned task. As Tacitus sees it, a life of decadence and amoral behavior in the empire’s capital corrupted the pretender, sapping him of his potential. As a result, Vonones suffers from a sort of cultural confusion—or, maybe, “bi-polar ethnicity disorder.” Among the Parthians, he is too Roman, and among the Romans, he is too Parthian.

Chapter 6
Analysis of Parthian Passage 2: Arma Procul Habere (*Ann.* 6.14; 6.31-37; 6.41-44)

Summary and Structural Overview

Tacitus' second Parthian Passage's central topic is Tiberius' two Parthian pretenders, Phraates Jr. and Tiridates—the first a son, the second a grandson of the Parthian king Phraates IV. Tacitus uses his accounts of these two pretenders—specifically, their equally pitiful attempts to regain Parthia's ancestral throne—to build upon themes introduced during his previous discussion of Vonones. However, between Phraates' and Tiridates' stories, Tacitus inserts a rather elaborate battle scene depicting a violent clash of arms between Parthian and Iberian forces in Armenia. The conspicuous absence of direct Roman participation in this battle narrative has often led readers to regard the scene as out-of-place and disconnected from both the Parthian Passage itself and the *Annales*' larger plot.²⁸⁶

Such sentiments are not entirely groundless. Parthian Passage 2 as a whole does seem, in many respects, more disconnected from its particular Book than other Parthian Passages. However, this disjointed impression could derive more from the nature of Book 6's subject matter than from any inherent flaw in the Parthian Passage itself. Besides an account of the destructive Aventine fire which breaks out in the city (ca. 35/36 CE) and Tiberius' death and funeral (37 CE), Book 6's main concern is the many trials and purges which follow in the wake of Sejanus' downfall—all rather depressing, tedious, and sometimes quite compartmentalized affairs. Lengthy, multifaceted plot elements such as Germanicus and Tiberius'/Piso's recurring feud in Book 2 are, for the most part, absent here in Book 6. Without a dramatic, overarching plot element like Germanicus' eastern adventures and assassination, scenes in Book 6 do sometimes appear more isolated and disconnected from those that precede and follow.

Whether this structural feature is a failure on Tacitus' part, an intentional oversight, or simply an accidental result of history's frustrating tendency not to always conform neatly to compelling story

²⁸⁶ Tacitus' frequently cited, "programmatic" statement only a few chapters later at 6.38.1 certainly does not help dispel this impression.

lines is anyone's guess. But we must admit that Tacitus has woven Parthian Passage 2 much less skillfully into the thematic fabric of Book 6's broader plot. Parthian Passage 2's two major sections (6.31-37; 6.41-44) float, somewhat like two rafts set adrift, in a sea of *maiestas* trials and executions in the middle of the last Book of the Tiberian hexad. By comparison, Parthian Passage 1 is weighted heavily towards the beginning of Book 2. Tacitus himself probably recognized this structural shortcoming in Book 6, which explains why he chose to place his "programmatic" statement here at 6.38.1 rather than much earlier in the work. As noted in our introduction to Part 2, he states that he has included information about the East "in order that the reader's mind may rest from all the domestic horrors" (... *quo requiesceret animus a domesticis malis* ...). But Tacitus probably never intended for his readers to interpret this remark too broadly, as a justification for all of the *Annales*' Parthian Passages; nor was he simply being disingenuous, as some scholars have asserted.²⁸⁷ He was merely trying to acknowledge Book 6's occasionally disjointed, compartmentalized structure. His statement at 6.38.1 is indeed a "programmatic" statement of sorts, but it applies best to Book 6 only—not to the Parthian Passages as a whole.

And yet, in spite of these structural flaws, Tacitus has set up Parthian Passage 2 to question the wisdom of the Julio-Claudians' Parthian strategy. Parthian Passage 2's various eastern story lines may be more disconnected from events occurring in the Roman capital; however, their internal thematic layout should seem familiar. As in Parthian Passage 1, Tacitus first attacks the emperor's character—in this case, Tiberius' unwarlike spirit—before branching out to address, once more, the mismanagement of the Armenian buffer-state and the use of the Parthian hostages as pretenders. Tacitus may have fit Parthian Passage 2 less masterfully into Book 6's overall narrative structure, but it still remains a well-defined part of his larger argument against the Julio-Claudian dynasty's passive foreign policy.

²⁸⁷ Ash 1999: 114, but a view clearly shared by other scholars such as Keitel 1978 and Gowing 1990.

A. Parthian Passage 2.1 (*Ann.* 6.14; 6.31-32): Phraates Jr.: The False Starter

Tacitus sets the tone for the *Annales*' second Parthian Passage early in Book 6 when discussing the various purges that follow Sejanus' execution. Amid the seemingly innumerable trials, Tacitus reports:

... Rubius Fabatus was placed under guard because it was as if he, as a result of Rome's desperate affairs, were about to flee to the mercy of the Parthians. He was indeed discovered crossing the channel to Sicily and, when questioned by a centurion, could offer no reasonable explanations for his long journey. Nevertheless, he remained unharmed, more because of forgetfulness than clemency.

... Rubrio Fabato, tamquam desperatis rebus Romanis Parthorum ad misericordiam fugeret, custodes additi. Sane is repertus apud fretum Siciliae retractusque per centurionem nullas probabiles causas longinquae peregrinationis adferebat: mansit tamen incolumis, oblivione magis quam clementia.²⁸⁸

Tacitus probably includes this account of the Roman aristocrat Rubius Fabatus' attempted defection, at least partly, for pure shock value, to emphasize just how onerous the political atmosphere was in Rome at the time. Few of Tacitus' readers would have believed that any Roman, much less a prominent nobleman of Rubius' stature, would willingly betray his honor and family by deserting to the enemy. Fewer still may have even considered the Parthians capable of the "mercy" (*misericiordiam*) Rubius seems to attribute to them. There may, in fact, be a bit of Tacitean irony injected into the word. Therefore, some of Tacitus' readers may have interpreted Rubius' defection not just as some sort of self-imposed exile, but as a suicidal Stoic attempt to escape the tyranny of Tiberius' administration.

Tacitus also seems to use Rubius' account as a type of literary bridge, as a device to link the earlier story of Vonones to the rest of Parthian Passage 2. The flights of the Roman aristocrat and the Parthian pretender are quite similar in many respects, and not just because both men desperately try to escape Rome's custody. In both cases, their escapes are thwarted by a legionnaire and a body of water: Rubius' by an unnamed centurion and the Sicilian Straits; Vonones' by the cavalry prefect Vibius

²⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 6.14.3-4.

Fronto and the Pyramus River.²⁸⁹ Furthermore, both men spend their last few years under house arrest.²⁹⁰ Additionally, although Rubius' story seems at first randomly located in Book 6, its placement may be no mere coincidence. Tacitus inserts the passage at 6.14, almost exactly half way through Book 6's lead-up to the main body of Parthian Passage 2 (6.31). Thus, besides simply serving as a reminder of Vonones, Rubius' cautionary tale might also act as a kind of literary signpost, a warning to Tacitus' readers that they should expect another foray into Rome's foreign affairs.

Tacitus introduces his broader argument against Tiberius' mismanagement of the frontier at 6.31. He begins by first noting how "in the consulate of C. Cestius and M. Servilius, a number of Parthian nobles made their way to the capital without the knowledge of King Artabanus."²⁹¹ The most influential instigators behind this embassy were the Parthian nobleman Sinnaces, a man of a distinguished and wealthy family, and the eunuch Abdus, who Tacitus implies held some sort of powerful political sway at the Parthian court.²⁹² These courtiers, along with several other Parthian aristocrats, wished to depose Artabanus. But "because they were unable to grant the honor to anyone of the Arsacid clan, many of whom had either been murdered by Artabanus or were not yet adults, they asked Rome for Phraates Jr., the son of king Phraates IV."²⁹³ To explain why these nobles wanted to unseat Artabanus, Tacitus provides the following explanation:

Because of his fear of Germanicus, [Artabanus], who was at first loyal to the Romans and fair to his own people, soon became arrogant towards us and savage towards his countrymen. He was confident because of the wars which he had favorably carried out against surrounding nations, and he despised the old Tiberius as defenseless. [Artabanus] was also hungry for control of Armenia, to which as king (after the death of Artaxias) he assigned Arsaces, the oldest of his sons. The Parthian king furthermore swelled with hubris by sending representatives to ask for the return of the treasure left by Vonones in Syria and Cilicia; at the same time, he boasted and threatened that he was

289 Tac. *Ann.* 2.68.

290 Vonones is admittedly placed under house arrest before his flight, Rubius not until after. However, compare what Tacitus says about Vonones' eviction from Armenia at *Ann.* 2.4.5: "Creticus Silanus, the governor of Syria, took the frightened [Vonones] into custody" (*rector Syriae Creticus Silanus excitum custodia circumdat*).

291 Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.1: *C. Cestio M. Servilio consulibus nobiles Parthi in urbem venire, ignaro rege Artabano.*

292 Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.3-4. Tacitus notes that as far as Abdus' status as a eunuch went: "Among the barbarians that condition brings with it not contempt but actual power" (*non despectum id apud barbaros ultroque potentiam habet*).

293 Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.5: ... *quia neminem gentis Arsacidarum summae rei inponere poterant, interfectis ab Artabano plerisque aut nondum adultis, Phraaten regis Phraatis filium Roma poscebant* So as not to confuse this Phraates with his father, the Parthian king Phraates IV, we will for convenience's sake refer to the pretender as Phraates Jr.

going to invade the possessions first held first by Cyrus and afterwards by Alexander—that is, the old territorial borders of the Persians and Macedonians.

Is metu Germanici fidus Romanis, aequabilis in suos, mox superbiam in nos, saevitiam in populares sumpsit, fretus bellis, quae secunda adversum circumiectas nationes exercuerat, et senectutem Tiberii ut inermem despiciens avidusque Armeniae, cui defuncto rege Artaxia Arsacen liberorum suorum veterrimum inposuit, addita contumelia et missis, qui gazam a Vonone relictam in Syria Ciliciaque reposcerent; simul veteres Persarum ac Macedonum terminos, seque invasurum possessa primum Cyro et post Alexandro per vaniloquentiam ac minas iaciebat.²⁹⁴

Although Tacitus starts off by pointing out Artabanus' abuse of his own subjects, the historian's audience probably would have reacted little to such a blatant example of "oriental despotism." The Parthian king was, in most Romans' minds, a tyrant; he was expected to act cruelly. However, Artabanus also had committed two grievous sins against Rome. Tacitus' readers may have been shocked to learn that the Parthian king had gotten away with installing his son Arsaces on the Armenian throne without consulting the Roman emperor, a clear affront to Rome's national honor. Worse still, Artabanus had threatened to attack the eastern empire itself, a possibility not truly contemplated since well before Augustus' reign. The first of these Parthian slights is probably historical fact, corroborated, for the most part, by Cassius Dio and Suetonius.²⁹⁵ The second, though admittedly more debatable, is not entirely outside the realm of possibilities.²⁹⁶ However, what is especially important is not the veracity of these events, but Tacitus' careful portrayal of Artabanus' actions.

The conspiracy against Artabanus begins as a purely internal Parthian coup. Technically speaking, with the exception of Sinnaces and Abdus' Roman embassy, the plot should have stayed in Parthia and only concerned the Parthians. However, Tacitus quickly twists the conspiracy into something more ominous and personal for the *Annales*' readers—into something that has dire implications not just for Parthia, but for Rome as well. For instance, Tacitus also makes clear the idea that the audience should not blame Artabanus for Parthia's recent slights against Rome; the king's

²⁹⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2.

²⁹⁵ Cf. Cass. Dio 58.26 and Suet. *Tib.* 66.

²⁹⁶ Cass. Dio 58.26 even adds that Artabanus conducted military operations in the Roman province of Cappadocia, a clear affront to Roman sovereignty.

ambition and Phraates Jr.'s recall are disturbing symptoms, but they are hardly the root cause of Rome's broader problem. Tacitus seems to assume in the text, and his audience probably would have agreed, that Artabanus' haughtiness and posturing on the frontier (*superbia in nos*) were just an inherent part of the eastern despot's nature.²⁹⁷ From the Roman perspective, chastising the Parthian monarch for rattling his saber was pointless. The Roman emperor—in this case, Tiberius—was supposed to keep Rome safe and such threats in check.

Thus for Tacitus, the culprit here, the root of Rome's recent frontier problems, is not Artabanus, but Tiberius. In Tacitus' opinion, Tiberius is now both incapable and unwilling to fulfill his critical role as imperial protector; therefore, these latest affronts to Roman honor are the Princeps' fault and no other. As the historian plainly states in the above passage, fear of Germanicus (*metu Germanici*) had once been enough to stifle Artabanus' wild ambitions. But now that Roman prince was long dead. And Tacitus' readers would not have soon forgotten how Tacitus had earlier implicated not just Vonones and Piso in the prince's murder, but Tiberius and his mother Livia, too.²⁹⁸ Tacitus appears to be saying, therefore, that the emperor's domestic crimes are, in a roundabout but still quite damning way, the real reason for Artabanus' newfound, contemptuous attitude towards Rome.

Furthermore, having removed Germanicus, the one true deterrent to Parthian aggression, Tiberius is now physically unable to take on the job himself. As Tacitus eagerly points out, the emperor is "old" and "harmless" (*senex* and *inermis*). Perhaps worse, nor does the Princeps even seem to have the desire to defend the empire forcefully any longer; Tiberius has apparently given up entirely on the idea of projecting a powerful military image across the eastern border. In what might be a better programmatic statement for the *Annales*' Parthian Passages, Tacitus characterizes Tiberius' passive

²⁹⁷ Ehrhardt 1998: 295-307 furthermore cites two additional passages from the *Annales* (12.44-51 and 13.38) which, he claims, proves that Romans typically thought of the Parthian, in general, as cruel. Isaac 2004: 376 n. 35 disagrees with Ehrhardt's assessment, however, because of the lack of corroborating evidence outside the Tacitean corpus. Isaac believes the Romans would have viewed eastern kings as cruel and tyrannical because they were kings, not because their culture was inherently inhumane or sadistic.

²⁹⁸ For a full account of how Tacitus uses innuendo and rumor to implicate Tiberius and Livia in Piso's alleged poisoning of Germanicus see Shotter 1968: 204-214 and Barrett 2002: 77-91.

foreign policy in these words: “Tiberius adorned and armed Phraates Jr. as a Parthian king because this was exactly what he wanted: *to continue to manipulate the empire’s foreign affairs through diplomatic policy and trickery, and to avoid taking up arms*”²⁹⁹ (emphasis mine). In Tacitus’ view, Tiberius could have gathered an army; he could have marched to the Euphrates and beaten back Artabanus with the full might of Rome’s legions. However, following Augustus’ lead, Tiberius had chosen instead to resort to backhanded diplomacy and subterfuge, the arming and dispatching of another pretender, Phraates Jr. To many of those reading the *Annales*, such indirect tactics probably would have seemed little better than appeasement, an altogether poor substitute for avenging Roman honor with the blood of Rome’s enemies.

Tacitus immediately reiterates the foolishness and futility of Tiberius’ strategy by relating, with typical Tacitean brevity, how Phraates Jr.’s nascent coup collapses before it ever really gets off of the ground. After learning of the courtiers’ plot and Tiberius’ pretender, the wily Artabanus moves swiftly to eliminate Phraates Jr.’s potential allies at the Parthian court. He distracts Sinnaces “with feigned ignorance, gifts, and business matters (*dissimulatione ac donis simul per negotia*) and incapacitates the eunuch Abdus “with a slow poison” (*lento veneno*).³⁰⁰ But Tacitus seems to enjoy pointing out that ultimately none of these court intrigues was necessary: “Phraates Jr., who was now in Syria, abandoned his Roman lifestyle, to which he had become accustomed after many years, and adopted the cultural institutions of the Parthians; however, because he was unsuited for his paternal customs, he was carried off by sickness.”³⁰¹ With this line, Tacitus appears to imply that, even when Julio-Claudian sponsored pretenders attempt to conform to their native Parthian lifestyle, even when they try to shed the handicap of their Roman upbringing, they are incapable of doing so. Phraates Jr. may have tried not to repeat the

²⁹⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.1: *Cupitum id Tiberio: ornat Phraaten accingitque paternum ad fastigium, destinata retinens consiliis et astu res externas moliri, arma procul habere.* And Ash 1999:129 further points out that: “Avoidance of warfare was Tiberius’ method in Thrace, where he dealt with the problematic king Rhescuporis *astu* (*Ann.* 2.64.2), and in Germany where he achieved more *consilio quam vi* (*Ann.* 2.26.3).” Furthermore, between the years 19 and 32 CE, Tiberius appointed only one governor, L. Vitellius, to Syria, for which oversight he received harsh criticism (Suet. *Tib.* 41).

³⁰⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.3.

³⁰¹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.4: *Et Phraates apud Syriam dum omissio cultu Romano, cui per tot annos insueverat, instituta Parthorum sumit, patriis moribus impar morbo absumptus est.*

error of his older brother, Vonones, who, as we witnessed in the previous chapter, had adamantly rejected Parthian customs. But, in Tacitus' mind, the brothers' fatal flaw was not merely a matter of choice; it was ingrained. Decades of exposure to the Roman capital's decadence and vice had enervated the Parthian hostages; they were constitutionally unfit to resume a rigorous Parthian lifestyle. Phraates Jr., who tries to become a Parthian again and instantly dies, is Tacitus' best example of just how imprudent and useless such efforts could be.³⁰²

Tiberius' botched attempt to install Phraates Jr. is, in many ways, only the tip of the iceberg in terms of Parthian Passage 2. Phraates' premature death is simply the teaser or dress rehearsal; its true purpose is to prepare the audience for Tacitus' more elaborate argument which follows. Immediately after describing Phraates' untimely demise, the historian abruptly announces:

But Tiberius refused to give up: he chose Tiridates, who was also an Arsacid, as another potential rival for Artabanus; for the recovery of Armenia, he selected the Iberian Mithridates, and reconciled him with his brother, Pharasmenes, the king of Iberia; and for the overall management of eastern affairs, he appointed L. Vitellius.

Sed non Tiberius omisit incepta: Tiridatem sanguinis eiusdem aemulum Artabano recipendaque Armeniae Hiberum Mithridaten deligit conciliatque fratri Pharasmani, qui gentile imperium obtinebat; et cunctis, quae apud Orientem parabantur, L. Vitellium praefecit.³⁰³

Thus, in a single sentence, Tacitus introduces his audience to the major players and the two-pronged scheme that the rest of the Parthian Passage will follow. As in Parthian Passage 1, Tacitus will first broach the issue of Armenia, demonstrating how Tiberius' mismanagement and occasional lack of oversight has endangered not only that kingdom's security, but the safety of the entire eastern frontier. With the appointment of the Iberian client-king Mithridates, Armenia will finally devolve into the scene of a dishonorable proxy war in Rome's name. The historian will then trace the story of Tiberius' second Parthian pretender, an individual who is (somewhat confusingly for us) also named Tiridates.³⁰⁴ Tacitus'

³⁰² Sheldon 2010: 93 follows Rawlinson 1893: 130 in suggesting that Artabanus might have also had Phraates Jr. assassinated. This may be possible, but there is no proof to support such speculation. And, in any case, there is no hint from Tacitus that Phraates died from anything other than "sickness" (*morbo*).

³⁰³ Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.5.

³⁰⁴ We should not confuse this Tiridates with either Augustus' earlier pretender or Nero's later Arsacid compromise

goal for this particular portion of the text will be to show that Tiridates is as unviable a candidate for the Parthian throne as Rome's two previous candidates, Vonones and Phraates Jr.

B. Parthian Passage 2.2 (Ann. 6.33-35): With Rome Just Looking On: The Iberio-Parthian Battle for Armenia

Tacitus starts off Book 6's discussion of Rome's Armenian proxy war by highlighting the ignoble, questionable tactics Tiberius' candidate, the Iberian Mithridates, employs to oust the Parthian king's son, Arsaces, from the buffer-state's throne. According to the text, Mithridates first convinces his brother Pharasmenes, the ruler of Iberia, to support his bid for the Armenian crown. However, Tacitus then paints the Iberian siblings as little better than devious thugs or dishonorable mercenaries. In chapter 33's first sentence, for example, he reports that the brothers immediately resorted to both "deception and strong arm tactics" (*dolo et vi*) to achieve their—and thus, by extension, Tiberius'—desired result. Mithridates initially dispatched "bribery agents" (*corruptores*) who, with hefty amounts of gold perhaps procured from Rome, induced Arsaces' attendants to murder the young Arsacid monarch. Pharasmenes' Iberians, meanwhile, launched a military invasion of Armenia, which, thanks to Arsaces' assassination, ended in the rapid capture of Artaxata.³⁰⁵

Tiberius' plan for re-securing the eastern frontier was multifaceted; it involved more than just returning Armenia to Rome's hegemonic sphere of influence. In terms of the Princeps' overarching strategy, Armenia was simply a decoy, a distraction to occupy Artabanus' attention while Tiberius' new pretender, Tiridates, mounted his own coup in Parthia. By delegating the dirty work of retaking Armenia to clients like the two Iberian siblings, Rome's Syrian governor Vitellius was free to launch Tiridates' rebellion against the insolent Parthian king. But Mithridates' and Pharasmenes' actions must have also struck Tacitus' readers as somewhat dubious and shameful. They had won the Armenian throne, but mainly through treachery and guile, not through the glory of battle.³⁰⁶

candidate for the Armenian throne, both of whom are also named Tiridates.

³⁰⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 6.33.1; Cass. Dio 58.26; and Pliny *NH* 15.83. For modern accounts of these events, cf. Bivar 1938: 73; Debevoise 1938: 158; and Sheldon 2010: 93.

³⁰⁶ That the Iberians' treachery is Tacitus' main focus seems confirmed by the fact that Cassius Dio, who also mentions

Tacitus may have, furthermore, struck another emotional chord in his Roman audience when he remarked right afterwards that Artabanus, upon learning of the treachery surrounding Arsaces' death, at once "prepared his [other] son Orodes *for the part of avenger*"³⁰⁷ (emphasis mine). This remark may appear straightforward enough, but we should be careful not to overlook what cultural resonance such a statement carried for Tacitus' Roman readers. After all, it had been another Orodes (i.e., Orodes II) who had presided over Parthia during M. Crassus' first-century invasion of Mesopotamia and the accompanying disaster at Carrhae. Ever since Crassus' day, the epithet "avenger" (*ultor*) had become synonymous in Roman propaganda and literary circles with those men who wished to avenge the first-century triumvir's death and restore Rome's tarnished reputation.³⁰⁸ By labeling Artabanus' son Orodes here as "the avenger," Tacitus could be discreetly implying, in some sense at least, that the tables had turned. Despite the Parthian king's previous slights against the empire, which were in Tacitus' opinion Tiberius' fault, the moral indignation Artabanus expresses at the murder of his son is not just understandable, but justified. As Tacitus sees it, the Parthians are the ones in the right, specifically because of Tiberius' tacit approval of Mithridates and Pharasmenes' deceitful, unscrupulous tactics in Armenia.³⁰⁹

Tacitus' goal in these chapters of Parthian Passage 2 (*Ann.* 6.33-35) is more complex than simply depicting Parthia as Rome's moral superior—that is, as the "good guys." Calling into question the Roman Empire's, and especially Tiberius', moral standing may be part of the historian's purpose; however, Tacitus is also walking a fine line. He wants to portray Parthia, the empire's most

Arsaces' assassination (58.26), wholly ignores the details of how Mithridates arranged the murder—that is, the Greek historian says nothing about the Iberian's "bribery agents."

307 Tac. *Ann.* 6.33.2: ... *filium Oroden ultorem parat* ...

308 This sentiment was closely associated with Augustus' temple dedicated to Mars Ultor where Crassus' recovered standards were housed. Ovid *Ars. am.* 1.179-181, 201-212 also portrays C. Caesar as "the avenger" before the prince's own eastern expedition. Most Romans simply overlooked the fact that Crassus' Parthian War was technically unprovoked; the Parthians were still thought to be "in the wrong" for the triumvir's death and their victory was, almost without exception, widely considered an affront to Roman honor.

309 Artabanus had, of course, installed Arsaces "illegally" without first consulting Rome; the Parthian king had, in essence, broken the earlier Romano-Parthian treaty concluded by C. Caesar and Phraataces. But, as we have argued here, Tacitus seems to absolve the king of this particular crime by blaming the whole troublesome affair on Tiberius' lethargy. As far as the historian is concerned, the entire situation is the fault of the Princeps, first for ignoring the frontier and then for selecting dishonorable allies, like the Iberians.

recognizable enemy, to some extent as more honorable. Doing so allows him to heap ever greater opprobrium on the Julio-Claudians. But he must also be careful not to suggest that Parthia is Rome's military equal. Tacitus is trying to undercut his reader's confidence in the Julio-Claudian dynasty, not in the effectiveness or skill of Rome's legions or in the viability of the empire as a whole.

Tacitus dedicates the next two chapters of the Parthian Passage (*Ann.* 6.34-35) to Orodes' attempted recovery of Armenia from the Iberians. Although both Cassius Dio and Josephus also mention the subsequent Iberio-Parthian battle, their descriptions are cursory at best, no more than a line in each of their respective histories.³¹⁰ Tacitus' account, by contrast, is not only much more detailed, but a bit odd. Strangely, Tacitus' version contains little mention of Rome at all—something unusual for an ancient work dedicated to recounting Roman history. Previously, the conspicuous lack of Roman participation in this particular battle narrative has led some scholars to question the episode's relevance; they have interpreted it as another example of one of Tacitus' aimlessly eastern tangents.³¹¹ However, it should be clear to us by now that Rome's absence from these scenes is not simply the result of some oversight, but rather careful Tacitean design. In the following chapters of the *Annales*, the Iberians represent Rome; they are Rome's stand-in and act as Tiberius' proxy in the East. Meanwhile, the Romans themselves—both those in the text, as well as those reading Tacitus' work—are left to look on eagerly, helplessly in frustration.

But just as the Iberians fail to act as a proper substitute for Roman traditional morality, they also fall far short as replacements for Rome's legions. As Rhiannon Ash demonstrates in her article, "An Exemplary Conflict: Tacitus' Parthian Battle Narrative," in the lead-up to the episode's climax, the historian goes to great lengths to recast the Iberians as a motley band of northern-style barbarians.³¹² For example, Tacitus downplays the fact that Mithridates and Pharasmenes' army consisted primarily of cavalry units, the typical make-up of armies from the Caucasus region. Instead, the historian expends

³¹⁰ Cass. Dio 58.26; Joseph. *AJ* 18.98.

³¹¹ Martin 1990: 1549.

³¹² For Tacitus' literary techniques characterizing the Iberians as northern-style barbarians see Ash 1999: 119-125.

considerable effort emphasizing the Iberians' use of mercenaries; he points out on several occasions, for instance, that the army contained not just Iberians, but Albanians and Sarmatians as well. Ash suspects that Tacitus does so purposefully to mislead his readers into believing that the Iberian army was overall a rather wild, heterogeneous mix of different nations and ethnic groups.³¹³ Also, Tacitus seems to portray the Iberians as infantry fighters, despite their long tradition in the historical record as mounted warriors. Finally, the historian makes unusual, almost unnecessary comments such as: "Pharasmenes was even strong in infantry, for the Iberians and Albanians have become more accustomed to hardiness and endurance (*duritiae patientiaeque*) because they inhabit the forest regions."³¹⁴ Ash maintains that terms like *duritiae* and *patientiae*, especially in Tacitus' skillful hands, were catchwords, adjectives commonly used to evoke images of people who lived in the cold, frozen north. For these reasons, she contends that Tacitus' ultimate goal was to give his readers the impression that the Iberians are almost German-like in their composition and demeanor.

By contrast, Tacitus describes Orodes' Parthians in rather typical fashion for Latin writers of the era: the Parthian army is largely portrayed as a horde of horse archers.³¹⁵ The historian even briefly falls back onto what is perhaps the most common Parthian literary trope, the famed "Parthian shot."³¹⁶ To perform this maneuver, riders, as the passage depicts, perfected the technique of firing backwards in their saddles while feigning a retreat. Many Roman authors—Tacitus apparently here being no exception—particularly enjoyed calling attention to this Parthian cavalry maneuver because most Romans considered the use of bows and arrows, as well as trickery of this sort in battle, cowardly acts.³¹⁷ Furthermore, although the Parthian force probably included a number of different mercenaries

313 Herodotus' description of Xerxes' motley horde (Herod. 7.61-80) is similar, as is Polybius' and Livy's descriptions of Hannibal's multi-ethnic army (Polyb. 15.11-12; Livy 30.33) and Virgil's treatment of Antony's forces at Actium (*Aen.* 8.687-692).

314 Tac. *Ann.* 6.34.2-3: *Pharasmenes et pedite valebat. Nam Hiberi Albanique saltuosos locos incolentes duritiae patientiaeque magis insuevere ...*

315 For a detailed discussion of the tactics commonly employed by Parthian horse archers and the "Parthian shot" in particular see Lerouge 2007: 296-300.

316 See especially *Ann.* 6.35.1: "... the Parthians, accustomed to pursue or flee with equal skill, separate their cavalry units and seek room for firing their arrows ..." (*Parthus sequi vel fugere pari arte suetus distraheret turmas, spatium ictibus quaereret*).

317 Orodes' army would have also likely contained a certain number of heavy cavalry known as cataphracts who would have

and allied dependents, Tacitus, unlike with the Iberians, minimizes this aspect of the Parthian army's composition. With the exception of a few Sarmatian mercenaries, Tacitus states that Orodes was "lacking in allies" (*sociorum inopem*).³¹⁸ Ash thinks he emphasizes the Parthians' heavy reliance on cavalry and simultaneously glosses over their allied contingents so that he can paint Orodes' army, in terms of tactics and make-up, as the exact opposite of the Iberians.³¹⁹

Thus, the contending armies in Book 6's Iberio-Parthian battle narrative are little better than literary caricatures: the Iberians are a savage, heterogeneous group of infantrymen; the Parthians a craven, homogeneous force of horsemen. Ash offers a host of reasons why Tacitus might have ignored the historical reality and modified the narrative in this way. First of all, embellishments of this type would have made this particular episode, in addition to the overall work, more entertaining. Leaving Rome out of the picture for at least a few chapters helps break up the sometimes repetitive, compartmentalized feeling of Book 6. Although not his only motive for including 6.34-35's battle narrative, Tacitus may simply be trying to uphold his claim—that is, offering his readers an entertaining battle story and "rest from all [of Rome's] domestic horrors."³²⁰ By pitting the Iberians' hardy, northern skirmishers against the Parthians' devious cavalry archers, Tacitus could be attempting to add a bit of flavor to what would otherwise have been a rather dry depiction of similar foreigners fighting in an obscure, far-off place. Ash, for instance, notes the Romans' predilection for pairing gladiators of different fighting styles in the arena, and she suggests that Tacitus may be trying to do the literary equivalent here in the *Annales*. The historian is trying to make the scene more interesting by matching Iberian foot soldiers and Parthian horse archers together in the Armenian arena.³²¹

In addition, Ash also suspects that Tacitus manipulates the Iberio-Parthian battle narrative to deflate the Parthians' reputation as a formidable military opponent. After all, when the two armies do

been equipped with heavy lances and relied on direct cavalry charges. For a description of Parthian cataphracts, see Plut. *Crass.* 24-25. And for modern descriptions Colledge 1967: 65-67 and Lerouge 2007: 300-303.

318 Tac. *Ann.* 6.34.1.

319 For Tacitus' literary techniques characterizing the Parthians as predominantly horse archers see Ash 1999: 119-125.

320 Tac. *Ann.* 6.38.1.

321 Ash 1999: 119-128.

clash, it is the Iberians, not the Parthians, who are victorious. But even more than their loss, it is how Orodes and his troops handle themselves on the battlefield that reveals the true extent of the Parthians' ineptitude. Tacitus describes how, at the engagement's outset, the Parthian horse archers foolishly wander too close to the Iberians' front infantry ranks. The presumption seems to be that the Parthians are attempting to perform their cowardly "Parthian shot," but dangerously misjudge their distance. As a result, the Parthian cavalymen become locked in heated, close-quarters combat, which negates their mobility advantage and makes their deadly arrow barrages ineffective.

Furthermore, Orodes himself, in the end, fares just as badly as his troops. After he spies the Iberian king Pharasmenes on the field of battle, the two generals first exchange a volley of javelins and then charge each other. The epic single combat proves anticlimactic, however, for on the initial pass Orodes emerges the worst, receiving an incapacitating, but non-fatal blow to his helmet. Pharasmenes' overexcited horse, somewhat comically, then gallops off out of its rider's control, preventing the Iberian king from finishing off his wounded adversary. Thanks to the blunder, Orodes' attendants are then able to rush to their master's aid and carry the Parthian general to safety. However, Orodes' sudden retirement from the fray soon gives rise to a rumor of his death, leading quickly to the demoralization of the Parthians and his army's ignoble retreat.³²²

Ash herself sums up the purpose of these two chapters as follows:

What Tacitus has done is to narrate an episode which deploys polarised ethnographic details and succinct characterisation of the two commanders to entertain, but also to convey a more serious message. In the battle description itself and particularly in the ineffectual closure of the fighting, Tacitus deconstructs the traditional image of Parthia as an intimidating military power. The Parthians are characterised as inflexible combatants, whose complacent reliance on their famous archery and cavalry tactics leads them into difficulties.³²³

³²² Tac. *Ann.* 6.35.5.

³²³ Ash 1999: 128 also notes: "This is a theme which will recur in Tacitus' account of a siege during Corbulo's campaigns: *sed Partho ad exequendas obsidiones nulla comminus audacia: raris sagittis neque clausos exterret et semet frustratur* (*Ann.* 15.4.3)."

Ash thus believes that Tacitus has distorted the picture of the Iberians and Parthians' heated contest to suit his overall purpose.

Yet this battle narrative is not the first place Tacitus emphasizes the Parthians' poor military performance. When Parthia's aristocracy initially recalled Vonones in the *Annales'* first Parthian Passage, the historian remarked disdainfully: “[With Vonones' return], soon shame overcame the Parthians that they had degenerated: ... where was the glory of those who killed Crassus?”³²⁴ Tacitus might have even wanted his audience to recall these earlier comments while reading through the present account of Orodes' woeful demonstration of Parthia's supposed military prowess. This theory would explain why Tacitus starts off the battle narrative by referring to Orodes as “the avenger” (*ultorem*), a possible allusion to Crassus. As in Parthian Passage 1, Tacitus wishes to highlight that the Parthians, in spite of their reputation, are no real threat to Rome.

Tacitus may also be suggesting that, thanks to the laxity of Julio-Claudians like Tiberius, the Armenian buffer-state was never quite as secure as the Roman public may have believed. As this passage shows, the proper way to secure Armenia was not through petty client-kings such as Mithridates and Pharasmenes. Admittedly, the Iberians had won and beaten back the Parthians, and in rather comedic fashion. However, as far as Tacitus is concerned, such tribes were really nothing more than a motley group of barbarians; they would never be the infantry army Rome was. They were a stand-in for Rome's legions, and a poor one at that. Essentially, Tacitus appears to be asking: Why are the Julio-Claudians content with leaving imperial security to simple savages on the frontier; why is the dynasty robbing the legions of the military victories and glory that should be theirs?

C. Parthian Passage 2.3 (*Ann.* 6.36-37; 6.41-44): Tiridates: Could He Be The One?

In the two chapters that follow the Armenian battle narrative (6.36-37), Tacitus finally begins to redirect the story back to what started all of the eastern unrest in the first place, Artabanus' unpopularity

³²⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.2: *Mox subiit pudor degeneravisse Parthos: ... Ubi illam gloriam trucidantium Crassum, ...*

among his own people and Tiberius' efforts to install a Parthian pretender. The historian first informs us that Orodes' withdrawal from Armenia, though damaging to Artabanus' reputation at home, would not have resulted in a totally unrecoverable political or military situation had Tiberius' general Vitellius not flexed his own strategic muscle at that very moment. By mobilizing Roman troops in Syria and spreading a rumor that he was about to invade Armenia, Vitellius was able to convince the Parthian king to abandon the hotly disputed kingdom once and for all.³²⁵ Therefore, thanks to a considerable amount of Iberian arms and a bit of Roman bluffing, Tiberius' client Mithridates was finally allowed to accede to the Armenian throne.

Artabanus' decision to yield Armenia to Rome's candidate soon produced a violent, political whirlpool from which the Parthian king's administration could not recover. The downward spiral began with Sinnaces, the Parthian nobleman whose earlier embassy to Rome had prompted the emperor to dispatch Phraates Jr. Reinspired by Artabanus' setbacks in Armenia, Sinnaces enlisted the aid of his father Abdagaeses, whom Tacitus describes as "the leader of his [son's] party" (*columen partium*).³²⁶ The father-son pair were then, in turn, "joined little by little by men who had submitted more from fear than from goodwill, and who maintained their esprit de corps only because of their discovery of new leaders."³²⁷ As the rebellion slowly grew, Artabanus, fearing for his own safety, fled from the Parthian capital with nothing more than a small band of foreign retainers. Tacitus, for his part, makes sure to note that these retainers were the type of men "who had neither an understanding of good nor a concern for wicked things, but through bribery nourished themselves with crimes."³²⁸ Thus, abandoned by his people, Artabanus and his vilified hangers-on, at last, escaped to the remote districts bordering Scythian

325 Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.1-3. In addition to threatening Roman intervention, Vitellius may have also incited the Alani, a hostile tribe from the Caucasus region, to attack Parthian territory, drawing Artabanus' attention away from Armenia. For this possibility cf. Rostovtzeff 1922: 116 and Debevoise 1938: 159. A hint of this intervention may also appear in Sen. *Thyestes* 630.

326 Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.5.

327 Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.4: ... *afluentibus paulatim, qui metu magis quam benevolentia subiecti repertis auctoribus sustulerant animum.*

328 Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.5: ... *quis neque boni intellectus neque mali cura, sed mercede aluntur ministri sceleribus.*

territory. Tacitus tells us that the reviled monarch hoped that his marriage connections to the Hyrcanians and Carmanians would help win him allies and eventually facilitate his return to power.³²⁹

Tacitus then describes how Artabanus' sudden, unexpected flight was especially encouraging to both Vitellius and his Parthian charge Tiridates, who, we imagine, must have been waiting eagerly in the wings. According to our text, after receiving reports of the burgeoning revolt against the Parthian monarch, the Roman commander quickly prompted Tiridates to rush back to his homeland so that the pretender could take advantage of the rapidly evolving situation. Vitellius, along with the "the best of his legions and allies" (*robur legionum sociorumque*), it seems, even personally accompanied the Parthian prince to the bank of the Euphrates.³³⁰ Upon reaching the river, both Vitellius and Tiridates performed sacrifices together, each according to his native custom.³³¹ And after having sought the gods' approval, the Roman general then ordered legionary engineers to construct a bridge of boats to allow Tiridates and his entourage to cross the Euphrates more easily.³³²

Tacitus reports that Ornospades, the satrap of Mesopotamia, was the first to welcome Tiridates. The Parthian pretender, no doubt, happily received the governor's allegiance, not only because Ornospades' loyalty lent Tiridates' regal claim legitimacy, but also because the satrap did not arrive entirely empty handed. By himself, the potentially powerful ally added several thousand cavalry to Tiridates' cause, and what the pretender needed now, above all else, was troops.³³³ Tiberius may have

³²⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.6.

³³⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.1.

³³¹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.2-3. Jackson 1937: 218 n. 1 and 2 suggests that the Roman sacrifice would have been that of a boar, a ram, and a bull, dedicated to Mars on behalf of the army. Tiridates, on the other hand, sacrificed a horse, the traditional Persian offering, usually offered to the Sun (Xen. *An.* 4.5; Just. 1.10), but also to the Strymon (Herod. 7.113). Conspicuously noting Tiridates' "Persian" sacrifice may be Tacitus' way of emphasizing that this pretender, like Phraates Jr. earlier, was trying at least to avoid Vonones' mistake. Tiridates was attempting to shed his Romanness and readopt his native Parthian customs to some extent.

³³² Both the sacrifice and the pontoon bridge described here should be compared to similar scenes from Tacitus' fourth Parthian Passage. In these later scenes (which we will describe in more detail later), Caesennius Paetus' Armenian campaign is deemed inauspicious when a horse breaks free and flees from the Roman camp (Tac. *Ann.* 15.7). And Corbulo's own "bridge of boats" across the Euphrates (Tac. *Ann.* 15.9), with its archer turrets and the battle surrounding its construction, is seen more as a precursor to a real invasion of Parthia. Corbulo's military maneuvers in Syria stand in stark contrast to Vitellius', whose efforts here appear deceitful, half-hearted, and uncommitted to a real invasion of Parthia. He, for example, simply spreads the "rumor" of his possible invasion of Armenia, but never actually follows through.

³³³ Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.3.

funded and perhaps even armed the pretender's expedition; however, following Tiridates' Euphrates crossing, there is no further mention in the narrative of any additional, direct Roman participation. Vitellius remained safely on Roman soil, never traversing the pontoon bridge himself. As with the Iberio-Parthian battle, for the rest of this Parthian Passage, the Romans will act as passive observers and not as actors in the story.

Tacitus still seems to give credit for Ornospadēs' defection not to any particular charisma Tiridates may have possessed, but to the emperor and the pretender's Roman ties. For example, he makes special note of the fact that Ornospadēs had once been an exile himself, forced to flee from his native country to the sanctuary of Roman territory. And, rather interestingly, not only had the future satrap fought for Tiberius in the Dalmatic War, but the Princeps had even granted the Parthian expatriate Roman citizenship for his service.³³⁴ By including this story, Tacitus could be trying to emphasize the benefits of foreigners associating with Rome. Once banished from Parthia, Ornospadēs had found shelter in the Roman Empire, and he had served the emperor faithfully. Although never stated directly, the presumption is that, as a result of his Roman connections, Ornospadēs had eventually been able to return to his native land and attain a more prominent position of authority as satrap of Mesopotamia. Tacitus wants his readers to draw parallels between Ornospadēs' life story and Tiridates' current career trajectory. At this stage, we, as the audience, are perhaps supposed to see Parthians who have thrown their lot in with Rome favorably. We are supposed to anticipate that Tiridates, like Ornospadēs, will ultimately be successful.

The notion that Tacitus' purpose in this chapter is to project a positive impression of Tiridates' overall chances is supported by other events as well. For instance, besides Ornospadēs' additional horsemen, the historian reports that Sinnaces, too, soon appeared in the pretender's camp and augmented the rebel army with further reinforcements. At the same time, that nobleman's father, Abdagaeses, handed over to Tiridates not only the crown and other regalia of the kingship, but also

³³⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.4. For more see Rawlinson 1893: 234 and Debevoise 1938: 160.

what remained of the royal treasury.³³⁵ Therefore, just as 6.37 closes and Tacitus begins a three-chapter hiatus from the Parthian Passage (6.38-40), we are left feeling as though everything is proceeding largely in Tiridates' favor. Artabanus himself is long gone, and both the Parthian nobility and rabble are flocking to the pretender's side. As Tacitus steers our attention back to Rome for another tedious round of rather forgettable trials and executions, we cannot help but think that, perhaps this time, the Julio-Claudians' pretender policy just might work. Vonones and Phraates Jr. had been unfortunate hiccups, growing pains as the strategy found its footing. Who could deny, however, that Tiridates was now on the right track? Perhaps this heir of Phraates IV would then finally be the one to prove that Augustus' foreign policy was an effective strategy after all.

Although 6.37 ends on somewhat of a high note, such optimism does not necessarily mean that Tacitus himself feels the same sense of promise for Tiridates' budding endeavor. Tacitus' goal is to build up the Parthian pretender's chances in the minds of his readers. He does so to heighten the episode's dramatic tension, for when Tiridates' regime does finally collapse, the impracticality of the entire Julio-Claudian foreign policy system will seem even more severe. At this point in the narrative, Tacitus is attempting to project a sense of optimism to his audience, but it is clearly not a feeling he personally shares.

Even prior to the Parthian Passage's three-chapter break, Tacitus does occasionally drop hints, clues that the historian sprinkles like breadcrumbs throughout the text, to suggest to particularly observant readers that Tiridates' coup will not end quite as brilliantly as it has begun. For example, as Vitellius and Tiridates are performing sacrifices on the banks of the Euphrates, Tacitus mentions this rather ambiguous omen:

... locals reported that the Euphrates, with no great rainstorms, rose spontaneously and to an immeasurable level. At the same time, in the whitening foam, circles wound in the shape of a diadem, a favorable omen for the crossings. However, certain men interpreted it more skillfully: the initial try would be favorable, but not long-lasting because heaven

³³⁵ All items Artabanus apparently left behind, presumably because of the unanticipated and hasty nature of his flight from the Parthian capital. Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.5-7 for Tiridates' interactions with Sinnaces and Abdagaeses.

is more certain of those things which are portended by the land and sky. The unstable nature of rivers showed omens and, at the same time, carried them away.

... nuntiavere accolae Euphraten nulla imbrium vi sponte et immensum attolli, simul albetibus spumis in modum diadematis sinuare orbes, auspiciū prosperi transgressus. Quidam callidius interpretabantur, initia conatus secunda neque diuturna, quia eorum, quae terra caelove portenderentur, certior fides, fluminum instabilis natura simul ostenderet omina raperetque.³³⁶

By setting up the second of the omen interpretations as he does—that is, by specifically stating “certain men interpreted it more skillfully” (*Quidam callidius interpretabantur*)—Tacitus may intend for us to see the latter reading, the one which characterizes Tiridates’ chances as “favorable, but not long-lasting” (*initia conatus secunda neque diuturna*), as the more valid of the two interpretations.³³⁷

Furthermore, when describing Artabanus’ flight to Hyrcania, Tacitus remarks that the king hoped that “in the interval [of his absence], the Parthians, fair to those absent and fickle to those present, might be persuaded to regret their decision.”³³⁸ When Tacitus resumes his account of Tiridates’ rebellion later in Book 6, this warning by Artabanus will seem hauntingly prescient, for it sums up precisely how events will play out. Therefore, even as Parthia’s pitchforked mob chases the unpopular, tyrannical Artabanus from the throne and into exile, Tacitus still leaves us with the impression that it is Artabanus—not Tiberius and Vitellius, not Sinnaces and Abdagaeses, not even Tiridates—who truly understands the Parthian people’s capricious, fickle character best. Despite 6.36-37’s overall optimism, Tacitus foreshadows to the careful reader, however subtly, Tiridates’ failure and Artabanus’ return.

When Tacitus again picks up Tiridates’ story at 6.41.2, the prince’s rebellion is still, for the moment at least, on the upswing. The historian informs us that several Parthian towns and Greek cities had recently defected to the pretender’s banner. The most noteworthy of these potential allies, the

³³⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.2

³³⁷ Additionally, we should probably view the interpreters’ characterization of rivers as “unstable by nature” (*instabilis natura*) in a similar vein. Although these experts are, in the most literal sense, speaking about all “rivers” (*fluminum*), Tacitus obviously means to invoke the specific image of the Euphrates. That body of water is, after all, what produces the disputed omen in the first place. And by Tacitus’ day, Roman writers from various genres, but especially the Latin poets, had widely started using the Euphrates as a sort of shorthand for the eastern frontier and the Parthian Empire.

³³⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.6: ... *atque interim posse Parthos absentium aequos praesentibus mobilis, ad paenitentiam mutari.*

Hellenistic stronghold of Seleucia, had even opened its gates and welcomed Tiridates “with the honors of ancient kings” (*veterum regum honoribus*).³³⁹

Tacitus also seems content for the time being to resolve the sticky issue of the pretender’s Roman upbringing in Tiridates’ favor. In Parthian Passage 1, Tacitus deemphasized the advantage Vonones’ Arsacid blood had over Artabanus’ Scythian heritage. At this stage in Parthian Passage 2, however, Tacitus wishes to minimize the idea that Artabanus’ Scythian rearing gave him any sort of psychological or military advantage over Tiridates. Tacitus says, for instance, that local people were enthusiastic because Artabanus “with his Scythian education” (*Scythas inter eductum*) had been ousted, and “they hoped that Roman culture had tempered Tiridates’ character” (*Tiridatis ingenium Romanas per artis sperabant*).³⁴⁰ In addition, when the population of Seleucia celebrates Tiridates’ arrival, Tacitus reports “... at the same time, they poured abuses on Artabanus who, they claimed, *was indeed an Arsacid on his mother’s side, but otherwise unworthy*”³⁴¹ (emphasis mine). Tacitus thus seems temporarily to reverse the position he took in Parthian Passage 1 with Vonones and Artabanus. At least for the moment, in this contest between Tiridates and Artabanus, the historian appears to suggest that, in terms of winning popular support in Parthia, the pretender’s nature has trumped the Parthian king’s nurture.

And yet, these few optimistic remarks about Tiridates’ chances are just part of Tacitus’ bait and switch. For as soon as we leave chapters 6.41–42, the story suddenly takes on a different tone, and we begin to see cracks form within the upper ranks of Tiridates’ revolt. For example, immediately after

³³⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.5. Tacitus lists the towns that Tiridates captures as Nicephorium, Anthemusias, Halus, and Artemita (*Ann.* 6.41).

³⁴⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 6.41.2: ... *certantibus gaudio qui Artabanum Scythas inter eductum ob saevitiam exsecrati come Tiridatis ingenium Romanas per artis sperabant.*

³⁴¹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.5: ... *simul probra in Artabanum fundebant, materna origine Arsaciden, cetera degenerem.* Based on Tacitus’ testimony here, the scholarly community has for the most part accepted Artabanus’ status as a non-Arsacid “half-breed.” Boyce 2000: 159, who has most recently tried to redeem Artabanus as a true Arsacid, argues, among other things, that Tacitus’ remark might actually be a reference to—or rather a slur against—Artabanus’ next-of-kin marriage. Boyce notes “marriages of this kind are recorded among the Arsacids, who, as Zoroastrians, would have considered them meritorious, whereas to the citizens of Seleucia they would have seemed incestuous and abhorrent.” But whether Boyce is correct or not is irrelevant to our theory, as is whether Tacitus made up the Seleucians’ abusive remarks or simply copied them from some other source. Whatever the origin, Tacitus has clearly recorded the slur here to highlight the nature vs. nurture argument he has been constructing against Rome’s Parthian pretenders since his introduction of Vonones.

securing Seleucia, Tiridates decides to move the seat of his new government to the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon, which was located on the opposite bank of the Tigris River. He then tries to set the date for his official coronation, but several of the empire's more powerful satraps, Phraates and Hiero, send letters requesting the ceremony's delay.³⁴² Presumably, the two satraps were still unsure about Tiridates' long-term prospects; however, Tacitus explains that the pair was also rather jealous of Abdagaeses "who was, at that moment, master of the court and the new king."³⁴³ Undismayed by the two holdouts' lack of confidence and perhaps finally just tired of waiting, the pretender at last resolves to go through with the coronation anyway.

In accordance with Parthian tradition, Tiridates was crowned by the nobleman Surenas amid the fawning crowds of the capital. Tacitus readily admits that, had the new Parthian king acted immediately, had he marched boldly into the empire's interior and forced Phraates and Hiero's submission, his throne might very well have remained secure. But rather than acting proactively, Tiridates chooses instead to spend several weeks besieging one of Artabanus' former fortresses.³⁴⁴ The stronghold, admittedly, did contain a portion of Artabanus' private treasure and the exiled king's harem, and the capture of these prizes would have lent Tiridates' new administration some much needed legitimacy. But because of the close proximity of earlier remarks touting Tiridates' Roman upbringing, Tacitus probably means for his audience to interpret Tiridates' siege strategy negatively. He most likely points it out to distinguish Tiridates from Tiberius' first pretender, Phraates Jr., who had at least attempted to conform to the Parthian lifestyle. In Tacitus' opinion, Tiridates is, by contrast, much more like Vonones: despite Tiridates' proper Arsacid lineage, despite the warm welcome he receives thanks to his revered bloodline, he is still at his core a Roman, and so corrupted by the imperial decadence of Rome. Tacitus makes it seem as though Tiridates is more concerned with garnering the various

³⁴² Hiero's administrative position is unknown, but Cumont 1932: 249 suggested that this Phraates could have been the satrap of Susiana, which was at that time one of Parthia's more important provinces. Debevoise 1938: 161 and Sheldon 2010: 109 seem to follow Cumont in this opinion.

³⁴³ Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.2: ... *qui tum aula et novo rege potiebatur*

³⁴⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.6-43.1.

accoutrements of his office—the regalia which Abdagaeses offers, the crown itself, and the treasure and women which Artabanus leaves behind—than he is with winning the respect of his people or properly solidifying his tenuous hold on power.

These misplaced priorities eventually become the source of Tiridates’ undoing. As Tacitus puts it, by wasting time besieging Artabanus’ fortress, the newly-crowned Parthian monarch “provided leeway for those who wished to repudiate earlier agreements” (*dedit spatium exuendi pacta*).³⁴⁵ The satraps Phraates and Hiero, who had never truly aligned themselves with Tiridates’ camp, now once more “turned to Artabanus” (*ad Artabanum vertere*).³⁴⁶ Tacitus tells us that the noblemen finally found the deposed, exiled Parthian monarch in Hyrcania “covered with filth and feeding himself with his bow” (*inlucie obsitus et alimenta arcu expediens*).³⁴⁷ At first, the wild man/former king refuses to trust the pair, believing that they had come to assassinate him. But after voicing their concerns, Hiero reassures Artabanus by criticizing Tiridates’ “as a youth” (*pueritiam*) and saying: “There was no Arsacid in charge: the empty title was held, due to Tiridates’ foreign softness, by an unwarlike man; true authority resided in the house of Abdagaeses.”³⁴⁸ Only after Hiero’s speech does the “veteran monarch” (*vetus regnandi*) realize that the satraps are in fact sincere and have been “false in love” (*falsos in amore*) all along with Tiridates.³⁴⁹

This characterization of the Parthians as being *falsos in amore* refers to Artabanus’ earlier remark concerning his people’s fickleness, as well as the assurance of their inevitable repentance.³⁵⁰ Tacitus even uses similar verbs of “changing/turning” (*mutari* in 6.36.6; *vertere* in 6.43.2) to emphasize the close connection between these two passages.³⁵¹ Like Phraates and Hiero, the reader, too, is meant

345 Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.1.

346 Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.2.

347 Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.2.

348 Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.4: ... *neque penes Arsaciden imperium, sed inane nomen apud inbellem externa mollitia, vim in Abdagaesis domo.*

349 Tac. *Ann.* 6.44.1.

350 Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.6.

351 L’Hoir 2006: 80-81 argues that Tacitus often uses dramatic vocabulary—specifically, combinations of words—to emphasize a tragic twist or turning of events (*peripeteia*). She suggests that the repetition of words such as *vertere* or *mutare*, along with their many derivatives, implies a impending change in the present action of a scene.

to alter his opinion of Artabanus at this stage. We are supposed to see the bedraggled, former Parthian king in a new light. Artabanus is no longer the cruel despot whom we met at the beginning of this Parthian Passage. He is now “experienced at ruling” (*vetus regnandi*) whereas Tiridates is “a youth” (*pueritiam*). Artabanus is now a warrior/hunter, someone capable of “feeding himself with his bow” (*alimenta arcu expediens*). Tiridates, on the other hand, is a man whose “foreign effeminacy” has made him “unwarlike” (*inbellem externa mollitia*). And so, when Artabanus reappears and Tiridates’ nascent regime collapses almost immediately—just as Vonones’ in Parthian Passage 1—we, as the audience, are hardly surprised.

Tacitus, in fact, portrays Artabanus’ return here in Parthian Passage 2 as even more anticlimactic in many ways than that monarch’s similar overthrow of Vonones in Parthian Passage 1. At least in that earlier case involving Vonones, an actual battle had taken place.³⁵² On this occasion, however, Artabanus merely has to retain his threadbare wardrobe—the disheveled, dirty clothing in which the satraps discover him. Tacitus reports that the king’s abject appearance alone was enough to win the exiled monarch throngs of willing supporters who flocked to his banner. Therefore, as Artabanus and his makeshift army make their way to Ctesiphon, Tiridates and his advisers begin to panic. Tacitus describes Tiridates himself as “unnerved” (*perculsus*) by the news of his rival’s approach. Some of Tiridates’ advisers advocate meeting Artabanus in open battle, a strategy which would have been the correct, “Parthian” way to handle the situation. But Abdagaeses who, as Hiero claims in the previous chapter actually held power, urges Tiridates instead to adopt a policy of delay. Abdagaeses convinces Tiridates to withdraw to Mesopotamia where together they might raise reinforcements among the Armenians, Elymaeans, and other nations before confronting Artabanus head-on. Tacitus tells us that Tiridates agreed to this plan because he had “little appetite for danger” (*ignavus ad pericula erat*). So once more we see Tiridates demonstrate not only his cowardly, unwarlike nature, but also his lack of

³⁵² Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.1. Although admittedly, as we have already seen, Tacitus does his best to downplay this earlier battle between Artabanus and Vonones.

leadership. In Tacitus' opinion, Tiridates is no Parthian king; he is not even a proper pretender. He is a political puppet for the ambitions of greater men like Tiberius or Abdagaeses.

Tiridates and Abdagaeses' strategic retreat does not proceed, however, exactly as the pair envisioned:

... The army withdrew as if in full retreat. When the Arab tribe started to do so, the other allies began leaving for their homes or for the camp of Artabanus, until Tiridates, with a few supporters, rode back to Syria and absolved all of the shame of betrayal.”

... fugae specie discessum; ac principio a gente Arabum facto ceteri domos abeunt vel in castra Artabani, donec Tiridates cum paucis in Syriam revector pudore prodicionis omnis exsolvit.³⁵³

By specifically referring to Tiridates' retreat as a *fuga*, Tacitus probably means for us to compare this pretender's strategic withdrawal to Vonones' earlier flight. In fact, Tacitus frames the entire Parthian Passage in some respects with “flight”: Rubius Fabatus' out of Roman territory at 6.14 and now Tiridates' here back to Rome at 6.44. And by conspicuously noting that the Arabs were the first to abandon Tiridates, Tacitus may also mean for his audience to recall Crassus once more. Crassus had similarly placed too much faith in the wrong eastern allies during his own Parthian campaign—namely, the Arab king of Oshroene, Abgarus.³⁵⁴

Therefore, by the time we reach the closing lines of 6.44 and the end of Parthian Passage 2, Tacitus seems to have brought his readers full circle. Having built up Tiridates' chances in the reader's mind in earlier chapters, he shows, by the time of Artabanus' counter-coup, that those chances were greatly exaggerated. Like Vonones before him, Tiridates is an Arsacid by blood, but a Parthian in name only. He has none of the traits that would have made him a proper Parthian monarch; he has none of

³⁵³ Tac. *Ann.* 6.44.8.

³⁵⁴ Recall also Tacitus' statement earlier in Parthian Passage 2 at 2.2.2 where he asks: “where was the glory of the men who killed Crassus?” (*Ubi illam gloriam trucidantium Crassum*). We should note here too that, although Tacitus makes no mention of it himself, following Tiridates' flight to Syria, Tiberius seems to have given up on the idea of installing a Parthian pretender. According to Josephus (*AJ* 18.101-103), the emperor ordered Vitellius to offer Artabanus terms. The two men met at the Euphrates in 36 or 37 CE on a specially-built bridge of boats, similar to C. Caesar's earlier meeting with Phraataces. The Jewish historian says only that the terms agreed upon were favorable for both parties. Sheldon 2010: 96 speculates, however, that “peace was established between the two empires, probably by having Rome promise not to back any more pretenders to the Parthian throne, and by having Parthia give up any claim to Armenia.” On this opinion see also Anderson 1963: 749.

Artabanus' hardiness or warlike spirit. In the end, these deficiencies are what accounts for his failure. Parthian Passage 2 is thus in many ways a mirror of Parthian Passage 1. It contains two distinct passages (Parthian Passages 2.2 and 2.3) that we can read as harsh critiques of the Julio-Claudians' strategy in Armenia and their policy of dispatching royal pretenders. The difference, albeit subtle, is that Vonones' fall from grace seems to happen immediately in Tacitus' first Parthian Passage.³⁵⁵ Vonones' ouster and flight to Armenia, the events which mark him out as a true failure from the audience's viewpoint, occur early on. In contrast, Parthian Passage 2 saves the revelation of Tiridates' shortcomings until the very end. For most of Parthian Passage 2, Tacitus leads the reader to believe that this time the strategy could succeed, that Tiberius' current pretender is somehow more viable than Augustus' had been. But at the last moment Tacitus pulls the rug out from under his audience, revealing that Vonones, Phraates, and Tiridates are, in fact, no different from one another. They are all fruit borne from the poisoned tree that is Rome and, as such, they are doomed to fail time and again. Their individual stories make no difference because their origins are all the same.

³⁵⁵ Tacitus starts to discuss the reasons for Vonones' growing unpopularity among his native people towards the beginning of Parthian Passage 1 at 2.2. By 2.3.1, he has already mentioned the pretender's overthrow at the hands of Artabanus.

Chapter 7
Analysis Parthian Passage 3: Rex Melior (*Ann.* 11.8-10; 12.10-14; 12.44-51)

Introduction

The *Annales*' third Parthian Passage begins with an account of the Parthian civil war between the two Arsacid brothers Gotarzes and Vardanes. From Tacitus' point of view, this internal Parthian conflict provides the Roman emperor Claudius with the opportunity to dispatch Meherdates, a grandson of Phraates IV and Rome's fourth and final Parthian pretender (as far as we know). After relating the familiar story of this pretender's failed attempt to recapture Parthia's throne, Tacitus redirects the audience's attention back to Armenia as the Parthian Passage concludes. The historian ends by describing the colorful—and somewhat tragic—tale of the Iberian adventurer Radamistus. The ambitious, wily Radamistus conspires to steal the Armenian crown from the kingdom's current ruler, his uncle and Rome's client-king Mithridates. The Iberian prince's unsuccessful bid to replace Mithridates leaves the buffer kingdom in a dangerously anomalous, leaderless state—a veritable powder keg in the volatile Roman-Parthian cold war.

Parthian Passage 3 spans the Claudian Books of the *Annales*. Structurally, Tacitus divides the passage into three main sections (11.8-10; 12.10-14; 12.44-51). Each of these sections grows progressively larger as the Parthian Passage proceeds, suggesting that Tacitus is slowly building to some sort of climax. That climax, and what is in fact the dramatic conclusion to all the Parthian Passages, will be Nero's Armenian War. That emperor's eastern war is the only instance under the Julio-Claudians when Rome's cold war with Parthia breaks out into open conflict. Tacitus treats the Armenian War in Parthian Passage 4, and so we must wait until our next chapter before examining the Parthian Passages' climax in detail. But the layout of Parthian Passage 3 builds towards the work's final eastern episodes.

In terms of its structural layout, Parthian Passage 3 is much more like Parthian Passage 1 than 2. This Parthian Passage carries certain undertones which speak to or flesh out events occurring as part of

the domestic scene in Rome. Tacitus uses the first section of Parthian Passage 3 especially (11.8-10), the part describing the Parthian civil war between Artabanus' sons, to draw attention to the various intrigues and plots plaguing the Claudian household. He uses Parthia's civil discord not only to make the crimes of the young Nero appear more depraved, but also to highlight the numerous collusions and improprieties of Claudius' wives, Messalina and Agrippina. Parthian Passage 3 is therefore much better integrated into the over-arching scheme of the *Annales* than, say, Tacitus' account of Tiridates in Book 6.

The primary focus of this Parthian Passage, like the two previous ones we have examined, remains the two "legs" of the Julio-Claudian foreign policy—namely, the careless use of Parthian pretenders and the dynasty's dangerous over-reliance on an Armenian buffer-state. Tacitus broaches the Parthian civil war in the first section of this Parthian Passage for the express purpose of setting up the latter two sections, each of which criticizes one of these "legs." For instance, despite being eagerly back by Claudius, Meherdates' attempted Parthian coup, which is related in Parthian Passage 3.2 (*Ann.* 12.10-14), ends in utter disaster much like his predecessors. And Radamistus' similar bid for power in Armenia, recounted in Parthian Passage 3.3 (*Ann.* 12.44-51), emphasizes how Roman moral corruption and provincial interference actually exacerbates the Iberian prince's reckless actions, contributing to a lawless, leaderless Armenia. Thanks to Radamistus, the kingdom draws Rome ever closer to and not, as was intended, farther away from war with Parthia. Thus Tacitus uses his account of events in the East to question, once again, the inherent wisdom of Augustus' eastern frontier strategy.

A. Parthian Passage 3.1 (*Ann.* 11.8-10): Gotarzes vs. Vardanes: The Parthian Civil War

Although Tacitus dedicates the first section of Parthian Passage 3 (11.8-10) to the fratricidal war between the Parthian king Artabanus' heirs, he starts by mentioning Armenia's current political situation. Doing so allows him to return to the topic of the troublesome buffer state later in the text and helps justify his upcoming three-chapter account of Parthia's civil strife. Tacitus' Roman readers would

have only been interested in Parthia's internal disorder if it had some effect on Rome. By beginning with Armenia, where Rome did have a vested interest, Tacitus connects what his audience may have considered unimportant events in Parthia with the crucial Armenian border kingdom, and thereby with Rome's own imperial security.

Because of the *Annales*' missing portions, the modern reader may be left at something of a loss. Based just on Tacitus' opening lines, it is clear that earlier sections of Parthian Passage 3 have not survived:

... Mithridates, who, as I recounted, had ruled over the Armenians and had been imprisoned by order of Caligula, returned to his kingdom at Claudius' instruction having trusted in the support of Pharasmenes. As king of Iberia and at the same time brother of Mithridates, Pharasmenes reported that the Parthians were quarreling, that Parthia's kingship was contested, and that the country's minor affairs were being ignored.

... Mithridates, quem imperitasse Armeniis iussuque Gai Caesaris vinctum memoravi, monente Claudio in regnum remeavit, fisis Pharasmanis opibus. Is rex Hiberis idemque Mithridatis frater nuntiabat discordare Parthos summaque imperii ambigua, minora sine cura haberi.³⁵⁶

When we last encountered Mithridates at 6.35, he had just won the Armenian throne thanks to the military efforts of his brother Pharamenes. That Iberian monarch had captured Armenia in Mithridates' name and with Tiberius' approval after defeating Artabanus III's son, Orodes, in that rather farcical battle. From Tacitus' remarks it is clear, however, that Mithridates' good fortune did not hold up indefinitely. At some point, he seems to have fallen afoul of Caligula, perhaps for no other reason than because of his former allegiance to Tiberius. As the passage suggests, Mithridates was not only recalled to Rome at an earlier, unspecified date, but imprisoned there for the duration of Caligula's reign and part of Claudius'. During Mithridates' absence, Armenia reverted back temporarily to the control of the Parthian Arsacids.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 11.8.1-2.

³⁵⁷ Besides Tacitus' few words here describing Mithridates' deposition and eventual restoration see also Cass. Dio 60.8; Sen. *De tranquillitate animi* 11.12; and, for modern remarks, Dabrowa 1989: 69.

Caligula's removal and subsequent arrest of Mithridates are interesting topics for further discussion; however, it is enough here to note that Mithridates' restoration by Claudius, the incident with which Tacitus opens Parthian Passage 3, is a literary bridge of sorts.³⁵⁸ Tacitus employs the device to direct his audience's focus back to eastern affairs; it gently leads the reader into the historian's main topic for this particular section, the Parthian civil war between Artabanus' sons which followed that monarch's death in 40 CE. But because Parthian Passage 3 also ends with a lengthy account of Radamistus' adventures in Armenia, the subject of Mithridates' restoration serves an alternate purpose as well: it helps to frame the entire Parthian Passage by making it both begin and end with Armenian affairs.³⁵⁹

After initially mentioning the Armenian client-king's restoration, Tacitus' three-chapter treatment of the Arsacid brothers' bitter contest commences with this brief flashback.³⁶⁰

For, among his many savage acts, Gotarzes had orchestrated the murder of his brother Artabanus, as well as those of his brother's wife and son. These terrifying acts aroused a fear of him in others, and, as a result, they summoned Vardanes. Because he was already predisposed to great feats of daring, Vardanes traveled three thousand stades in two days and ousted the surprised and terrified Gotarzes. Nor did the new king hesitate to seize the nearest satrapies, with only the Seleucians resisting his control. Against these people, as they were also the betrayers of his father, Vardanes became incensed because of anger more than from the current circumstance. He thus entangled himself in the siege of Seleucia, a strong city with the defenses of a surrounding river, a wall, and accessible supplies. Meanwhile, Gotarzes, bolstered by the resources of the Dahae and Hyrcanians, renewed the war; Vardanes, having been forced to abandon Seleucia, moved his camp to the Bactrian plains.

Nam Gotarzes inter pleraque saeva necem fratri Artabano coniugique ac filio eius paraverat, unde metus eius in ceteros, et accivere Vardanen. Ille, ut erat magnis ausis promptus, biduo tria milia stadiorum invadit ignarumque et exterritum Gotarzen proturbat; neque cunctatur quin proximas praefecturas corripit, solis Seleucensibus dominationem eius abnueantibus. In quos, ut patris sui quoque defectores, ira magis quam ex usu praesenti accensus, implicatur obsidione urbis validae et munimentis obiecti amnis muroque et comitatibus firmatae. Interim Gotarzes Daharum

³⁵⁸ Not unlike his story of Rubius Fabatus' flight to Parthia at *Ann.* 6.14.3-4.

³⁵⁹ The overall structural layout of Parthian Passage 3 is unclear because of the lacunae in our manuscripts. One might argue, however, that these remarks are the first mention Tacitus makes of Armenia or Parthia in the Claudine Books of the *Annales*. Those references to the East that appear in the missing books dedicated to Caligula's reign could make up their own separate Parthian Passage. Therefore, it is possible that Tacitus intended to frame his central discussion about Gotarzes and Vardanes' civil war and Meherdates' attempted coup with Armenia-related topics and references.

³⁶⁰ The events of the following four sentences, if not technically a flashback, at least occur chronologically before Mithridates' return to the Armenian throne. This fact is made clear by Tacitus' remarks at the beginning of 11.9.

Hyrcanorumque opibus auctus bellum renovat, coactusque Vardanes omittere Seleuciam Bactrianos apud campos castra contulit.³⁶¹

Again, Tacitus is always conscious of framing such a strictly eastern story in terms of Roman interests. Therefore, the historian next abruptly interjects that, at the moment of Gotarzes and Vardanes' stand-off in Bactria, the Iberian Mithridates reinvaded Armenia. With the timely assistance of his brother Pharasmenes and a local Roman prefect, Mithridates was able to destroy several hill forts and regain the Armenian throne.³⁶²

But by arranging the elements of his story as he has, Tacitus has done something a bit odd. He has been redundant, mentioning Mithridates' restoration once in passing at 11.8.1 and then again in greater detail at 11.9.1. This repetition should not simply be considered an oversight on the historian's part. This redundancy is important because it helps solidify in the reader's mind the idea that internal discord and civil unrest—and especially dynastic struggles between brothers—are distracting, ruinous, and ultimately detrimental to a nation's security. The Parthians, after reestablishing their sway over Armenia thanks to Mithridates' recall and imprisonment by Caligula, lose control over the buffer kingdom once more because they are too busy fighting among themselves. From a strictly historical perspective, the Parthians' loss of Armenia happens only once. However, in terms of Tacitus' narrative, Mithridates' restoration occurs twice. Most likely, the historian has structured his story in this way to highlight the Parthians' grave mistake—a mistake which Rome itself could just as easily make.

And yet, a setback as critical as the loss of one of their satellite kingdoms is, at first, still not enough to end the Arsacid siblings' bitter feud. Gotarzes and Vardanes, it is true, reconcile briefly before their stand-off in Bactria erupts into open conflict, but political expediency and personal interest prompt this temporary settlement, not any sincere concern for national security. Tacitus takes time to

361 Tac. *Ann.* 11.8.3-6.

362 Tac. *Ann.* 11.9.1-2.

point out that, only after learning about a popular conspiracy to assassinate them both,³⁶³ do the brothers finally resolve their dispute peaceably:

... [Gotarzes and Vardanes] came together hesitantly at first. But they then clasped right hands and, at the altars of the gods, swore to avenge the treachery of their enemies and promised that they themselves would compromise. Vardanes was seen as being better suited for retaining the throne; and Gotarzes, lest any rivalry should arise, departed for the Hyrcanian back country. Upon his return, Seleucia surrendered to Vardanes in the seventh year after the outbreak of its rebellion—but not without shame for the Parthians, against whom one city had humiliated for so long.

... congressique primo cunctanter, dein complexi dextras apud altaria deum pepigere fraudem inimicorum ulcisci atque ipsi inter se concedere. Potiorque Vardanes visus retinendo regno: at Gotarzes, ne quid aemulationis exsisteret, penitus in Hyrcaniam abiit. Regressoque Vardani deditur Seleucia septimo post defectionem anno, non sine dedecore Parthorum, quos una civitas tam diu eluserat.³⁶⁴

As we might expect, Gotarzes and Vardanes' compromise, born as such out of fear and self-preservation rather than out of genuine goodwill, proves short-lived. Only two lines later, Tacitus already reports Gotarzes' discontent with the whole situation. Goaded into outright rebellion by several Parthian nobles who deemed "servitude harsher in peacetime,"³⁶⁵ Gotarzes gathered yet another army and once again challenged his brother to pitched battle near the site of the Erindes River.³⁶⁶ Vardanes, it seems, was unwilling to seek common ground a second time. He thus met and, on this occasion, routed his brother's opposing force with relative ease. Nevertheless, Gotarzes' reappearance later in Tacitus' narrative would suggest that, in this instance at least, the defeated prince either escaped capture or benefited in some way from Vardanes' leniency.³⁶⁷

Having thwarted Gotarzes' bid for the throne, Vardanes next turned his attention to subduing hostile Scythian tribes on the Parthian Empire's northeastern border. However, over the course of this campaign, the king's luck finally gave out:

363 Tac. *Ann.* 11.9.3: *cognitis popularium insidiis.*

364 Tac. *Ann.* 11.9.4-6.

365 Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.2: *cui in pace durius servitium est.*

366 Still as yet unidentified.

367 Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.6-7.

[On the border, Vardanes'] good fortune came to an end. For the Parthians, although victorious, spurned a distant war. Therefore, the king built monuments on which he recorded his achievements, that no Arsacid before him had been able to win tribute from those tribes. He returned filled with glory and, for that reason, acted more ferocious and intolerant towards his subjects. His subjects, by a prearranged deception, assassinated Vardanes who was distracted and preoccupied with hunting

Ibi modus rebus secundis positus: nam Parthi quamquam victores longinquam militiam aspernantur. Igitur exstructis monimentis, quibus opes suas testabatur nec cuiquam ante Arsacidarum tributa illis de gentibus parta, regreditur ingens gloria atque eo ferocior et subiectis intolerantior; qui dolo ante composito incautum venationique intentum interfecere³⁶⁸

Following Vardanes' assassination, a group of Parthian aristocrats debated whether to elect Gotarzes or to recall Meherdates, the son of Vonones and grandson of Phraates IV who still resided in Rome as a hostage. In the end, these noblemen settled on Gotarzes chiefly because he was already at hand in Parthia.³⁶⁹ But, once back in power, Gotarzes immediately reverted to his old ways and "through savagery and decadence compelled the Parthians to send secret requests to the Roman Princeps, which asked that Meherdates be permitted to accede to his ancestors' throne."³⁷⁰

A 1978 article by Elizabeth Keitel proposes a close connection between Gotarzes and Vardanes' civil war and broader themes found elsewhere in Tacitus' work. Keitel believes that the historian has included this account of Parthia's civil disorder specifically to flesh out the crimes of the Claudian household in greater detail. In particular, Keitel identifies two themes which she thinks Tacitus tries to emphasize: 1) the dangers of fraternal strife, and 2) the pathology of despotism.

The first of these themes, ruinous fraternal strife, is destructive because it turns a state's focus inwards and distracts rulers from potentially serious outside threats. As just witnessed, Gotarzes' concern over Vardanes' royal challenge is what initially prompts the Iberian monarch Pharasmenes to petition Claudius to first free and then reinstate his brother Mithridates as Armenia's king. The Parthian siblings' tenuous truce and then renewed feuding is furthermore what prevents Vardanes from

³⁶⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.4-5.

³⁶⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.6-7.

³⁷⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.8: *per saevitiam ac luxum adegit Parthos mittere ad principem Romanum occultas preces, quis permitti Meherdaten patrium ad fastigium orabant.*

recovering the buffer state after Mithridates' restoration.³⁷¹ Keitel suspects that Tacitus spends such a disproportionate amount of time on Gotarzes and Vardanes' contentious relationship (three chapters in total) to highlight similar fraternal disputes going on within Claudius' own family. She argues, for example, that it is no coincidence that right after concluding his account of the Parthian civil war, Tacitus introduces the rivalry between the Roman princes L. Domitius Nero and his half-brother Britannicus.³⁷² The two boys will be dynastic competitors for Claudius' *imperium*, and Nero's jealousy eventually leads him to poison Britannicus, as Tacitus later records.³⁷³ But it is here at 11.11.2, immediately following the lengthy account of Parthia's bitter domestic strife, that Tacitus first chooses to introduce the Roman princes to his audience.

Proximity to the Parthian Passage is not the only thing that makes the two boys' debut notable for us. They first appear—both to the *Annales*' audience and to the Roman public—by participating in Claudius' Secular Games. As part of this large spectacle, Tacitus describes how the two princes take part in the Trojan Games (*lusus Troiae*). The Trojan Games were a cavalry display meant to reenact the funeral games held in honor of Aeneas' father Anchises; they involved intricate equestrian maneuvers, as well as elaborate Trojan-style costumes.³⁷⁴ Although Tacitus does not describe the boys' garb in any detail, his readers would have been familiar with the exotic eastern dress typically worn for the ceremony (e.g., the Phryian caps and trousers). Costumes such as these were commonly used throughout Tacitus' era in both Roman literature and iconography to portray Parthians.³⁷⁵ Thus, the imagery of the princes in Trojan garb, coupled with the audience's foreknowledge of Nero's upcoming

371 Tacitus mentions at *Ann.* 11.10.1 that, after concluding his agreement to share power with Gotarzes, Vardanes “was longing to retake Armenia, if he had not been deterred by Vibius Marsus, the legate of Syria, who was threatening war.” (... *et recipere Armeniam avebat, ni a Vibio Marso, Suriae legato, bellum minitante cohibitus foret.*). But in the very next sentence, Tacitus jumps back to Gotarzes, his discontent as a provincial satrap, and his renewal of hostilities. The implication seems to be that the brothers' agreement, while certainly struck and implemented, was still somewhat tenuous, and that Vardanes, however passionately he wished to recover Armenia, could not risk war with Rome as long as some air of suspicion remained about his brother's allegiance.

372 Tac. *Ann.* 11.11.

373 Tac. *Ann.* 13.17.

374 Described most notably by Vergil in *Aen.* 5.545-603. For more on the *lusus Troiae* cf. Toutain 1877; Schneider 1927; Mehl 1956; Williams 1960: 145-157; Weinstock 1971: 88; Fuchs 1990; La Rocca 1994: 284-286; La Rocca 2002: 283-286; and Rose 2005: 36-44.

375 On Roman views of Parthian dress see Rose 2005: 36-44 and Lerouge 2007:349-360.

murder of Britannicus, would have made this particular pair of fratricidal Roman brothers seem not so dissimilar from their Parthian counterparts, Gotarzes and Vardanes. This parallelism may just be Tacitus' not-so-subtle way of implying that the Julio-Claudians' domestic intrigues and dynastic disputes are, in fact, not all that different from or less destructive than the civil war which we see happening in Parthia.

The second theme Keitel identifies in this section of Parthian Passage 3 is a “pathology of despotism,” the typically callous disregard all dynasts, whether Parthian or Roman, show towards their subjects during their quest for ever greater wealth and power.³⁷⁶ As for Roman models of this type of despotic behavior in Books 11 and 12, the depraved, scandalous acts of Claudius' wives provide us with the best examples. Therefore, we should not be surprised to learn Tacitus sometimes employs similar plots and vocabulary to link the cruelties and political machinations of the Parthian brothers and the crimes of Rome's royal women, individuals like Messalina and Agrippina who operate within the palace behind the scenes. Tacitus says, for instance, that Parthia's nobility first sought out Vardanes as his brother's possible rival because “among his many savage acts (*pleraque saeva*), Gotarzes had orchestrated the murder of his brother Artabanus, as well as those of his brother's wife and son.³⁷⁷ The historian furthermore claims Vardanes, after having bested his brother in battle and subdued the Scythian border tribes, then “returned filled with glory and, for that reason, acted more ferocious (*ferocior*) and intolerant (*intolerantior*) towards his subjects.”³⁷⁸ And Gotarzes, after regaining his crown following Vardanes' death “through savagery (*saevitiam*) and decadence (*luxum*), compelled the Parthians to send secret requests to the Roman Princeps, which asked that Meherdates be permitted to accede to his ancestors' throne.”³⁷⁹ Even Rome's own client Mithridates, once restored to power in Armenia, demonstrated a similar lack of restraint by employing “more severity (*atrociorem*) than one

376 Keitel 1978: 464.

377 Tac. *Ann.* 11.8.3: ... *Gotarzes inter pleraque saeva necem fratri Artabano coniugique ac filio eius paraverat*

378 Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.5: ... *regreditur ingens gloria atque eo ferocior et subiectis intolerantior*

379 Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.8: ... *per saevitiam ac luxum adegit Parthos mittere ad principem Romanum occultas preces*

should for a new reign.”³⁸⁰ We are again reminded of Gotarzes’ earlier fratricidal crimes, as well as a few others he commits during the interim, when the Parthian envoys sent to Rome criticize “Gotarzes’ tyranny which was just as intolerable for the nobles and common people. Brothers and family members both near and far were all exhausted by his savage crimes (*caedibus exhaustos*); pregnant wives and small children were being marked for death, while he, inactive at home and unlucky in foreign wars, hid his cowardice with savagery (*saevitia*).”³⁸¹

Gotarzes’ murder of his brother Artabanus and his brother’s family might have seemed barbaric to Tacitus’ readers, but it would not have appeared out of place considering other events the historian describes in the Claudian Books. Messalina, Agrippina, and even Nero attempt or successfully carry out similar family purges. At 11.26.2, Messalina and her lover Silius plot the murder of Claudius. And, as Keitel points out: “In the course of Book 12, Agrippina eliminates Lucius Silanus, Domitia Lepida, and Claudius; in Book 13 Nero murders Britannicus and in Book 14 Octavia.”³⁸² Tacitus uses the same language to describe both the crimes of Gotarzes and Vardanes and those of Messalina and Agrippina. In Book 11, for example, Tacitus says pity was growing for Agrippina “because of the savagery (*saevitiam*) of Messalina”³⁸³ And later, Claudius learns of his wife’s affair with Silius because, it is said, “Messalina was at no other time freer with her decadence (*luxu*).”³⁸⁴ Furthermore, Tacitus even labels Agrippina herself as *atrox* and *ferocia* in Books 12 and 13.³⁸⁵ We, as Tacitus’ audience, are probably meant to associate the fratricidal wars and familial murders in Parthia involving Gotarzes and Vardanes with these domestic scenes in Rome—a scene which serves in many ways not just as the Parthian Passage’s backdrop, but as its literary parallel.

380 Tac. *Ann.* 11.9.2: ... *atrociolem quam novo regno conduceret.*

381 Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.1-2: ... *dominationem Gotarzis nobilitati plebique iuxta intolerandam. Iam fratres, iam propinquos, iam longius sitos caedibus exhaustos; adici coniuges gravidas, liberos parvos, dum socors domi, bellis infaustus ignaviam saevitia tegat.*

382 Keitel 1978: 466.

383 Tac. *Ann.* 11.12.1: ... *ob saevitiam Messalinae*

384 Tac. *Ann.* 11.31.4: ... *Messalina non alias solutior luxu*

385 Tac. *Ann.* 12.22.1 and 13.13.3 as *atrox*; 13.2.2 and 13.21.2 as *ferocia*.

B. Parthian Passage 3.2 (*Ann.* 12.10-14): Meherdates: Rome's Last Parthian Pretender

While Keitel is correct to draw connections between the Parthian civil war in Book 11 and Rome's domestic troubles, these connections are still only Tacitus' minor focus in his third Parthian Passage. His main goal is to show how the civil discord in Parthia set the stage, so to speak, for the disastrous coup of Rome's last Parthian pretender, Meherdates.³⁸⁶ Tacitus returns to his account of this particular pretender's story early in Book 12. But because nearly an entire book of Roman domestic issues has transpired in the meantime, he first reminds his readers of the embassy of Parthian nobles sent to Rome after Gotarzes' harsh rule had, once more, become too onerous for his subjects to endure. Tacitus' habit of recounting the "state of affairs" before beginning another section of the same Parthian Passage (something which he does again here) proves that he intends his audience to see the story of Meherdates' coup as a continuation of the civil war narrative in Book 11. Although it may only be a coincidence, Parthian Passage 3.1 conveniently ends at 11.10 while 3.2 picks up again with the same chapter in Book 12 (*Ann.* 12.10). This structural coincidence could also suggest some sort of thematic connection.

The Parthian ambassadors who presented themselves before the emperor Claudius and the Senate, according to Tacitus, began their appeal with the following words:

[The Parthians] were not ignorant of the treaty, nor had they come in revolt against the family of the Arsacids, but rather to summon the son of Vonones, the grandson of Phraates, to combat the tyranny of Gotarzes, which was intolerable to both the nobles and commoners. ... Their friendship with us was old and officially begun, and it was our responsibility to assist allies who were equal to our power and deferred to us out of respect. That is why they gave the sons of kings as hostages, so that, if domestic authority become burdensome, there would be regress to the emperor and Senate, and a better king instilled with their manners might be approved.

Non se foederis ignaros nec defectione a familia Arsacidarum venire, sed filium Vononis, nepotem Phraatis accersere adversus dominationem Gotarzis nobilitati plebique iuxta intolerandam. ... Veterem sibi ac publice coeptam nobiscum amicitiam, et

³⁸⁶ The name Meherdates is an alternate rendering of Mithridates. Tacitus' use of this alternate spelling could be either the result of employing a different source for these chapters or simply the author's attempt to avoid confusion. Both Meherdates, the Roman-backed Parthian pretender, and Mithridates, the Roman client-king of Armenia, figure prominently in this particular Parthian Passage. Perhaps Tacitus merely wanted to help his readers keep the two individuals clearly separated.

subveniendum sociis virium aemulis cedentibusque per reverentiam. Ideo regum liberos obsides dari, ut, si domestici imperii taedeat, sit regressus ad principem patresque, quorum moribus adsuefactus rex melior adscisceretur.³⁸⁷

Precisely which Romano-Parthian treaty the Parthian ambassadors are citing in this passage is open to some debate because Tacitus' version of their speech is somewhat vague on this point.³⁸⁸ It could refer to a more recent agreement between Tiberius and Artabanus III, or perhaps to some still as yet unidentified treaty from Caligula's short reign.³⁸⁹ However, in Tacitus' subsequent remarks, he continues by saying:

When [the Parthians] had discussed these and other similar things, the emperor Claudius began a speech about Roman dignity and the compliance of the Parthians. He claimed that his authority was equal to the divine Augustus and referred to the pretender that that man had sent [i.e., Vonones]. Yet Claudius omitted any mention of Tiberius, although that emperor had also dispatched a pretender [i.e., Tiridates].

Ubi haec atque talia dissertavere, incipit orationem Caesar de fastigio Romano Parthorumque obsequiis, seque divo Augusto adaequabat, petitem ab eo regem referens, omissa Tiberii memoria, quamquam is quoque miserat.³⁹⁰

The convenient reference to Augustus here would seem then to imply that this treaty, more likely, refers to the older Augustan Era agreement negotiated between C. Caesar and Phraataces on the banks of the Euphrates River in 4 CE. This treaty was, after all, the one that did the most to establish the dual “legs” of Augustus' eastern strategy. It legally relinquished the claims of subsequent Parthian kings to the hostages in Roman custody and established an official policy of Parthian non-interference in Armenian affairs—though, as we have seen, this last measure was not always strictly adhered to. Tacitus probably has the Parthian emissaries start by alluding to this treaty, however vaguely it is done, so that he can set the pretender Meherdates' upcoming campaign squarely within the tradition of the Julio-Claudians'

³⁸⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.2-4.

³⁸⁸ But the ambiguousness of the Parthian ambassadors' speech before the Senate, at least in terms of this particular treaty, could be the ambassadors' fault and not necessarily that of the author. Because the Parthians gave their speech in the Senate, Tacitus may have had access to senatorial archives recording exactly what the ambassadors said. At least one of Claudius' other speeches in the *Annales*, that given in support of admitting Gauls into the Senate (*Ann.* 11.23-24), has been corroborated by archeological evidence—namely, the Lyon inscription. For a discussion of Claudius' speeches in the *Annales* and Tacitus' sources for them cf. Mellor 2011: 181-184.

³⁸⁹ For the treaty between Tiberius and Artabanus once again cf. Joseph. *AJ* 18.101-103.

³⁹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 12.11.1.

Parthian foreign policy. This theory may also explain why, in the following passage 12.11 (just quoted above), Claudius' response speech starts by recalling Augustus' earlier pretender, and why Tacitus casually throws in a reference to Tiberius' pretenders as well. Tacitus wishes to remind his audience from the outset that Meherdates' story will be nothing new; it is part of a pattern stretching all the way back to the beginning of the Principate.

Tacitus also employs his special brand of irony in these opening chapters of the Meherdates narrative. The first hint of sarcasm occurs when the Parthian ambassadors describe the heir of Phraates IV, or any potential pretender, as “a better king instilled with Roman manners” (*moribus adsuefactus rex melior*).³⁹¹ From the stories of the previous pretenders—Vonones, Phraates Jr., and Tiridates—Tacitus' readers would have already been well aware that the Parthian princes/hostages had none of their native Parthian traits. As we and Tacitus have argued elsewhere, these men were far more Roman now than Parthian. When they tried to assume the guise of a true Parthian, as in the case of Phraates Jr., they were constitutionally unfit for the task, having been enervated by the decadent life of the Roman capital. By stating that fact here in such a blatant, conspicuous way, Tacitus makes clear that both the Roman emperor and the Parthians are deluding themselves. The quality that they see as a boon for would-be pretenders is, in fact, the very thing that has hindered the establishment of a successful client-king for the Romans and a stable regime for the Parthians. Moreover, by placing such a comment in the mouths of the Parthian ambassadors—who, if anyone, should by now have known better—Tacitus only heightens the irony of the scene. Only the *Annales*' audience, at this critical stage in the narrative, appears aware that the pretenders' Romanness is actually the crux of the problem. But, as readers, we are left helplessly to watch as Claudius and these Parthian ambassadors try once more to carry out a plan that has already failed on three separate occasions. Despite mentioning Augustus' and Tiberius' former pretenders, Claudius seems oblivious to the fact that these individuals' earlier attempts had

³⁹¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.4.

failed miserably. Only Tacitus' audience seems to see the irony of it all, to be privy to the lesson that Claudius himself should have learned from history.³⁹²

Tacitus also seems keen to demonstrate that Claudius' myopic view of the Principate is not restricted merely to the realm of foreign policy. After citing Augustus as a precedent, Claudius' response speech to the Parthian delegation stumbles clumsily into an even more ironic diatribe on the merits of benevolent monarchical rule and proper Republican-style government:

Claudius advised the prince (for, indeed, Meherdates was present), *that he should not think of himself as a tyrant or consider his subjects to be slaves, but act as a guide for his nation's citizens. He should promote mercy and justice, qualities as unknown to the barbarians as things more joyous.* Then, Claudius, having turned to the legates, presented the city's foster-son to public cheers, for the purpose of proving his modesty. And yet, Claudius added that the temperament of kings must also sometimes be tolerated, for frequent political changes were never a good thing. *Because the Roman state had arrived at the point where it had enough glory, it also wanted peace for foreign nations.*

Addidit praecepta (etenim aderat Meherdates), *ut non dominationem et servos, sed rectorem et cives cogitaret, clementiamque ac iustitiam, quanto ignota barbaris, tanto laetiora capesseret.* Hinc versus ad legatos extollit laudibus alumnum urbis, spectatae ad id modestiae: ac tamen ferenda regum ingenia, neque usui crebras mutationes. *Rem Romanam huc satietate gloriae provectam, ut externis quoque gentibus quietem velit.*³⁹³ (emphasis mine)

As Keitel astutely remarks, Claudius' advice, whether truly the emperor's own words or merely the invention of the author's imagination, is rife with Tacitean irony:

... *dominatio* and *servi* better describe the current Roman state of affairs than the old-fashioned, republican *rector* and *cives*. Nor can *clementia* and *iustitia* apply to the rule of the Tacitean Claudius. The *princeps*' vaunted *clementia* often means punishing the innocent (Asiaticus at 11.3.1) or sparing the guilty (he tries to pardon Mnester at 11.36.2 and seems on the verge of forgiving the errant Messalina at 11.37.2). Nor can *iustitia*, a rare word in the *Annals*, be applied to Claudius' acts in Books 11 and 12. His administration of justice is erratic and subjective, susceptible to the play of his own feelings or to the promptings of his wives, freedmen and courtiers.³⁹⁴

392 For more on the irony of Claudius' remarks see Gowing 1990: 320-322.

393 Tac. *Ann.* 12.11.2-4.

394 Keitel 1978: 467.

In addition to Keitel's keen observations, we suspect that Claudius' last remark, that Rome "wanted peace for foreign nations" (*ut externis ... quietem velit*), would have also rung especially hollow and insincere in his readers' ears.³⁹⁵ Scholars who have commented on the emperor's remarks here have sometimes overlooked these final words. But besides the simple fact that Claudius is about to dispatch another pretender, Meherdates, and so promote further unrest in Parthia, comments by Claudius' own troops in Armenia later in this same Parthian Passage (*Ann.* 12.48.2) blatantly contradict the emperor's assessment of Rome's current foreign policy strategy. These later comments suggest that Rome has always and will continue to interfere in the affairs of other states, and that this policy is not accidental, the result of overzealous local commanders, but deliberate and handed down from the emperor himself.

The chapter containing Claudius' highly ironic speech (12.11) concludes with a single, yet still rather poignant transition line—at least in terms of Tacitus' ongoing motif. Just after the emperor finishes speaking, Tacitus adds: "C. Cassius, who was in charge of Syria at the time, was then appointed to lead the young man to the bank of the Euphrates."³⁹⁶ Although Tacitus laments that "the military arts are lost in a peaceful world" (*nam militares artes per otium ignotae*), he lauds Cassius for reinstating the old military discipline in his province, drilling his legions regularly, and acting as if the enemy were always at hand.³⁹⁷ We do not deny that C. Cassius Longinus was governor of Syria at this time or that he was Claudius' choice to accompany Meherdates to the Parthian border; we are not accusing Tacitus of making-up facts to fit his narrative. But Tacitus' particular literary genius lies in how he occasionally molds historical facts to suit whatever thematic trail he is currently pursuing. For

³⁹⁵ Keitel 1978: 467 notes the inherent irony of such a comment once it is set against the remarks of emperor's soldier in the field at 12.48.2. Gowing 1990: 320-321 discusses the Claudius' speech to Meherdates as well.

³⁹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 12.11.5: *Datum posthac C. Cassio, qui Suriae praeerat, deducere iuvenem ripam ad Euphratis.* Compare Cassius' mission to install Meherdates, too, with Sen. *Apocolocyntosis* 12 which probably alludes to Claudius' victory over the Parthians.

³⁹⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.1-2. The ill-preparedness of Rome's eastern legions, especially under the watch of the Julio-Claudians, is a continuing theme not only in the *Annales*, but throughout Silver Age Latin literature. Many of the empire's eastern legionaries who were stationed in cities rather than along the more rural border zones were thought to have become "soft" from prolonged city-life. On this topic, see Wheeler 1996: 229-276. Tacitus' remarks here on Cassius' military discipline, what the historian probably considers the "right way" to assure the security of the frontier, mirror the way he describes Corbulo's attitude towards legionary discipline (see Tac. *Ann.* 11.8.3-5). Corbulo is Tacitus' prime example of a proper eastern commander. Both Corbulo's approach and Cassius' should be contrasted, for example, with L. Caesennius Paetus' (see Tac. *Ann.* 15.1-17) whose rather lax army discipline leads to one of the greatest Roman military disasters recorded in the *Annales*, that of the Roman surrender at Rhandaia.

example, as the next chapter (12.12) begins and Tacitus starts to elaborate, the historian first mentions Cassius' credentials, noting how many Romans considered him one of the of the greatest jurists of the age.³⁹⁸ Yet Tacitus also says that Cassius' conduct as governor was "considered worthy of his ancestors and the Cassian family, and earned him praise even among those nations."³⁹⁹ This last reference to Cassius' ancestry, though admittedly just as vague in some regards as the treaty brought up earlier in Claudius' speech, could be Tacitus' subtle way of alluding to this general's famous forebear and namesake, the tyrannicide Cassius Longinus. Before becoming embroiled in the plot to murder Julius Caesar, that Cassius had won renown for defending Syria from the Parthian invasion that followed Crassus' disastrous Parthian campaign and the Roman slaughter at Carrhae (53 BCE). This accomplishment is most probably what Tacitus is referring to here.

But in terms of Rome's historical memory, this Cassius' military achievement in Syria would have been far overshadowed by the part he played in Rome's most memorable political assassination. Despite what Tacitus says, Cassius "the tyrannicide," not Cassius "the defender of Syria" would have been what jumped to the forefront of his readers' minds. That a direct descendant of one of Rome's greatest champions of Republicanism was, at the behest of a Roman despot, now assisting to install a foreign king like Meherdates must have struck Tacitus' audience as especially farcical. Taking time to point out that Cassius Longinus will be the Parthian pretender's escort and alluding to the general's famous ancestor is therefore Tacitus' way of continuing the stark irony of the previous chapter.

Claudius' advice to Meherdates is as hypocritical as his choice of commander for assisting the would-be Parthian king in his coup.⁴⁰⁰

398 Belonging to the school of Masurius Sabinus and Ateius Capito.

399 Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.2: ... *ita dignum maioribus suis et familia Cassia ratus per illas quoque gentes celebrata.*

400 Still, that is not to say that the two mental images—i.e., of Cassius "the tyrannicide" and "the defender of Syria"—are mutually exclusive. Tacitus probably wished his readers to recall both personas to some extent; perhaps that is why he only hints at the accomplishments of Cassius' ancestors. Moving away from Claudius' ironic speech, he likely intended us to think first of Cassius' "tyrannicide" persona so that, as we say, he could cap the emperor's obviously hypocritical advice to Meherdates with an even greater irony. As the pretender Meherdates' story progresses, however, Tacitus would have also wanted his audience to recognize Cassius' other persona too, for Cassius "the defender of Syria" would have invoked images of Crassus and Carrhae. Crassus' failure is, after all, what ultimately set the stage for Cassius Longinus' noble defense of Syria.

The remainder of Meherdates' tale is littered with allusions and references to Crassus' ill-fated campaign, as well as a few to Antony's in 36. Tacitus uses these Late Republican military calamities in Parthia to color and add depth to the rest of his account about Meherdates' invasion. Tacitus' extended reference to Cassius' ancestry is the first example of this technique in the Parthian Passage 3. It transitions the reader from the topic of imperial hypocrisy—both in terms of the true despotism of Claudius' wives in Books 11 and 12 and of Claudius himself here—to the failures of Roman-backed actions abroad.

Finally leaving Cassius' credentials and ancestry aside, Tacitus commences his account of Meherdates' bid for the Parthian throne by stating:

Thus Cassius summoned those who had sought the king and pitched his camp at Zeugma, a place from which the river is easily fordable. After the Parthian nobles and Acbarus the king of the Arabs had arrived, he warned Meherdates that the barbarians' enthusiasm would either wane with delay or change quickly into treachery: thus let him urgently begin his undertaking.

Igitur excitis quorum de sententia petitus rex, positisque castris apud Zeugma, unde maxime pervius amnis, postquam inlustres Parthi rexque Arabum Acbarus advenerat, monet Meherdaten, barbarorum impetus acris cunctatione languescere aut in perfidiam mutari: ita urgeret coepta.⁴⁰¹

However, after imparting this last bit of prudent advice, Cassius plays no further part in the story. In fact, he disappears from the narrative completely. Logically, his short appearance makes perfect sense; the emperor only commissions him to escort Meherdates to the border, not to carry the pretender all the way to Ctesiphon. But the fact that Cassius' ancestral resumé receives three lines in the chapter (12.11.5-12.2), while Tacitus sums up his actions as Meherdates' bodyguard in just one (12.12.3), only bolsters the idea that what Cassius' family symbolizes is more important to the author than the actual task the general performs.

Having crossed the Euphrates, Meherdates, whom Tacitus describes as an “inexperienced youth” (*iuvenem ignarum*) unfortunately does exactly the opposite of what Cassius advises.⁴⁰² Rather

⁴⁰¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.3.

⁴⁰² Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.4. Compare to 6.43.4 where Tacitus refers to Tiridates, the pretender from Parthian Passage 2, as

than avoid delay, the Parthian prince chooses instead to dally at Edessa, enjoying the hospitality of the Arab king Acbarus.⁴⁰³ An earlier Abgarus of Oshroëne had betrayed Crassus and led that Roman general's army into a Parthian ambush in 53 BCE.⁴⁰⁴ Simple name recognition would have been enough to remind Tacitus' audience of this connection. But the historian takes no chances and goes a step further by suggesting that Meherdates' Acbarus possessed an especially duplicitous character. Tacitus says that Meherdates "was detained for many days in the town of Edessa."⁴⁰⁵ Such wording implies that Acbarus meant to delay the prince there, if not by outright force then perhaps through guile. Could Acbarus have been some sort of a Parthian agent, occupying Meherdates with banquets and pleasantries while Gotarzes mobilized his troops? Tacitus' careful phrasing does not discount this as a possibility.

When Carenus (presumably one of the "Parthian magnates" Tacitus mentions above) encourages Meherdates to make haste and take the shortest road into Mesopotamia, the pretender foolishly decides instead to march through Armenia, "not only taking a tortuous route, but also, because winter was just beginning, risking the trip at a time when the country was rather inhospitable."⁴⁰⁶ Besides implying Acbarus was a traitor, simply mentioning the two possible invasion routes through Mesopotamia and Armenia may have been enough to invoke images of Crassus' campaign as well. Crassus had faced a similar dilemma and, although he chose the course through Mesopotamia instead, part of his mistake was his similar disregard for the region's harsh climatic conditions: Crassus had unwisely marched his troops straight through the blistering desert of northern Mesopotamia; Meherdates forces his army to suffer through the harsh Armenian winter.⁴⁰⁷

"boyish" (*pueritiam*).

403 Apparently Abgar V of Oshroëne. Recorded in the *Annales* as Acbarus but more commonly spelled Abgar or Abgarus on numismatics and inscriptions. Cf. Ross 2001: 24.

404 Abgar II (68-53 BCE).

405 Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.4: ... *multos per dies attinuit apud oppidum Edessam*.

406 Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.5: ... *sed flexu Armeniam petivit, id temporis importunam, quia hiems occipiebat*. Jackson 1937: 332 n. 4 suggests that Carenus may have been satrap (*praefectus*) of Mesopotamia.

407 Note too that this passage is not the first instance where we suspect Tacitus of alluding to Crassus and Carrhae. See also 6.33.2 where he may be doing likewise when he describes the Parthian king Artabanus' son Orodes as "the avenger" (*Oroden ultorem*).

After longer delays and unnecessarily hazarding the snowy mountains of Armenia, Meherdates' rebel army eventually rendezvous with Carenus near the Tigris River. The two forces cross into Adiabene together and in the process capture "Nineveh, the oldest seat of Assyrian power and a remarkable fortress, which was considered famous because at that place the achievements of the Persian Empire had crumbled with the final battle between Darius and Alexander."⁴⁰⁸ This last observation may also imply hesitancy and delay on the pretender's part. Meherdates seems to be attacking, not viable Parthian targets, not the cities and fortifications which make up the heart of Parthia's power base, but historical targets, an Assyrian capital whose heyday had long since passed and a fort from the era of Alexander the Great.⁴⁰⁹ Even if these sites had military value and were not simply relics of a bygone era, by pointing out their age and ignoring whatever military effort was needed to capture them, Tacitus appears to suggest their relative insignificance in terms of moving Meherdates' rebellion forward.

Tacitus, furthermore, lingers on the issue of untrustworthy barbarian allies by noting how Meherdates, after emerging from Armenia, rejoined with Carenus' army and "marched through Adiabene, whose king, Izates, had publicly allied with Meherdates, although he was, in fact, secretly more loyal to Gotarzes."⁴¹⁰ In the following chapter, we learn that bribery agents acting on Gotarzes' behalf convince both Acbarus and Izates to abandon Meherdates' camp on the eve of the decisive battle.⁴¹¹ Those readers familiar with the details of Crassus' and Antony's eastern expeditions would have seen these desertions as common errors for any potential invader of Parthia. Like Meherdates' supposed allies, Abgarus had abandoned Crassus' army right before Carrhae and Antony's trusted

408 Tac. *Ann.* 12.13.2: ... *urbs Ninus, vetustissima sedes Assyriae, et castellum insigne fama, quod postremo inter Darium atque Alexandrum proelio Persarum illic opes conciderant.*

409 One's first inclination is to think of the Battle of Arbela/Gaugamela (331 BCE). Compare for example Amm. Marc. 23.6.22: *In hac Adiabene Ninus est civitas ... et Arbela et Gaugamela ubi Dareum Alexander ... incitato Marte prostravit.* But Jackson 1937: 333 n. 6 points out that neither Arbela nor Gaugamela was a *castellum* which somewhat muddles the issue. Perhaps Tacitus had bad information. Or, perhaps his concern was less historical and geographical accuracy than it was demonstrating Meherdates' aimlessness. On this last theory see more below.

410 Tac. *Ann.* 12.13.1: ... *permeant Adiabenos, quorum rex Izates societatem Meherdatis palam induerat, in Gotarzen per occulta et magis fida inclinabat.*

411 Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.1-2.

adviser, Artavasdes II of Armenia, had similarly betrayed the Romans in the lead-up to Phraaspa. Placing too much faith in barbarian allies was a critical mistake for any ambitious commander, and Crassus and Antony had already proven such an oversight could be especially fatal in the East. By coloring his account of Meherdates' adventure with such reminders of Rome's former missteps beyond the Euphrates, Tacitus intimates that this prince's invasion is also doomed to fail.

Therefore, when Meherdates' end does come, Tacitus needs no great embellishment or lengthy explanation; the collapse of the pretender's rebellion happens suddenly but predictably. With the bulk of his allies lured away by Gotarzes' bribes and promises, Meherdates challenged his rival to open battle. Tacitus points out that the prince had no other choice given the dire circumstances in which he now found himself. In the ensuing engagement between the two Parthian adversaries, it is not Meherdates who distinguishes himself but the pretender's last remaining ally, the satrap Carenes. Carenes nearly carries the battle for Meherdates' rebels by initially breaking through the enemy forces opposing his wing. Unfortunately, the satrap then advances too quickly in pursuit and is cut off by fresh enemy troops. The military prowess and boldness that Carenes exhibits on the battlefield stand in stark contrast to Meherdates, whose own actions Tacitus does not even bother to mention in his short description of the battle. We should probably read the prince's conspicuous absence as just another example of Tacitus demonstrating his core belief about the Parthian hostages: their upbringing in Rome had made them soft and incapable of being the warrior-kings of which the Parthians were especially fond. Even at this last crucial moment, when a single battle is all that stands between the Parthian throne and oblivion, Meherdates is—at least in terms of the *Annales*' narrative structure—nowhere to be found.

When Meherdates finally reappears after the battle's disappointing conclusion, he is even more contemptible. He not only now seems to lack courage, but he has also clearly not learned anything about choosing his friends. After Acbarus' and Izates' defections, the prince should at least show moderately better judgment in selecting allies. And yet, Tacitus recounts:

Then, with all hope lost, Meherdates decided to follow the advice of Parraces, the client of his father. However, this nobleman tricked Meherdates, who was then chained and handed over to Gotarzes. That man rebuked his prisoner and refused to acknowledge him as a relative or as a member of the Arsacid clan. Gotarzes called Meherdates a foreigner and a Roman, and ordered the man's ears cut off—a lasting symbol of the Parthian king's mercy and of our disgrace.

Tum omni spe perdita Meherdates, promissa Parracis paterni clientis secutus, dolo eius vincitur traditurque victori. Atque ille non propinquum neque Arsacis de gente, sed alienigenam et Romanum increpans, auribus decisis vivere iubet, ostentui clementiae suae et in nos dehonestamento.⁴¹²

By now, none of the inherent weaknesses or failures of the Julio-Claudians' Parthian pretenders would have been especially surprising to Tacitus' readers. Of the pretenders Tacitus highlights in his text, Vonones and Tiridates had regained their ancestral throne (albeit only temporarily); Phraates Jr. and Meherdates had fallen short of achieving that goal. But even if the latter two had succeeded, there seems to be no doubt in Tacitus' mind that the end result would have been the same. The historian plainly states only a few lines before describing Meherdates' ignoble end: "We know through trial and error that the barbarians prefer to seek their kings from Rome rather than to keep them."⁴¹³

C. PP 3.3 (*Ann.* 12.44-51): Radamistus: So Who's Ruling Armenia Now?

Unlike the *Annales'* earlier Parthian Passages, Tacitus inverts the order in which he addresses his two primary themes—the Parthian pretenders and the Armenian buffer state—in Parthian Passage 3. In previous Parthian Passages, the historian makes an effort to broach the issue of the pretenders last, as if to imply the hostages are the more important of the two topics. In Book 12, however, he chooses to tackle Armenia last. This shift could be the result of a strict adherence to annalistic chronology. But Tacitus has demonstrated a willingness to conflate stories from different consular years when it proves convenient, as in Parthian Passage 2.⁴¹⁴ Therefore, we should probably interpret his return to Armenian

⁴¹² Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.5-6. There may also be a subtle allusion to Crassus and Carrhae here because Crassus was also lured into a trap where the Parthians apparently first attempted to capture the Roman general alive. For more on this see Sampson 2008: 142.

⁴¹³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.2: ... *experimentis cognitum est barbaros malle Roma petere reges quam habere.*

⁴¹⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 6.38.1.

affairs in Book 12's final chapters as a purposeful attempt to redirect the reader's priorities away from the pretenders and back towards the buffer state issue. Meherdates was the last descendant of Phraates IV whom Rome tried to place on the Parthian throne. In terms of historical relevance, Armenia becomes a much more critical flash point between the two superpowers by the end of the Julio-Claudian Era, especially during Nero's reign. Delaying the "Armenian portion" of Parthian Passage 3 until the end is Tacitus' way of emphasizing this new geopolitical reality. Up to this point in the narrative, the hostages/pretenders have been Rome's primary strategy for keeping Parthia politically off balance; henceforth, the Armenian buffer state will take center stage.

Reprioritizing the "legs" of the Augustan foreign policy is necessary because, following the death of the Parthian king Gotarzes from disease, a savvy new monarch, Vologeses I, acceded to the Parthian throne.⁴¹⁵ Vologeses differed from previous Parthian rulers because he chose to work with his siblings—as opposed to murdering his family members or incessantly warring with them. Gotarzes and Vardanes, whose bloody story of fratricidal civil war starts the third Parthian Passage, stand in stark contrast. Such harmony within the Arsacid family's upper ranks must have made the successful installation of one of Rome's Parthian pretenders seem increasingly less likely. (Not that they had been all that successful so far, as we have seen.) Although Tacitus will delve into the implications of this new political reality in Parthian Passage 4 (located in the Neronian Books/the *Annales*' third hexad), he first hints at it here at the outset of his interlude describing the Armenian adventure of the Iberian prince Radamistus. Tacitus notes, for instance, that:

... a war that arose between the Armenians and Iberians also caused the gravest disturbance between the Parthians and Romans. Vologeses, whose mother was a Greek concubine, led the Parthian nations. He had inherited the kingdom with the concession of his brothers ...

⁴¹⁵ Tacitus reports Gotarzes' death at 12.14.7-8. He also notes here that afterwards Vonones, who was then viceroy of Media, took the dead monarch's place. However, "no successes and no reverses entitled him to mention: he completed a short, inglorious and perfunctory reign, and the Parthian empire devolved upon his son Vologeses" (*Nulla huic prospera aut adversa, quis memoraretur: brevi et inglorio imperio perfunctus est, resque Parthorum in filium eius Vologesen translatae*).

... *bellum inter Armenios Hiberosque exortum Parthis quoque ac Romanis gravissimorum inter se motuum causa fuit. Genti Parthorum Vologeses imperitabat, materna origine ex paelice Graeca, concessu fratrum regnum adeptus ...*⁴¹⁶ (emphasis mine)

By taking time to point out that Vologeses reigned “with the concession of his brothers,” Tacitus is directing his readers’ attention to the new political situation in Parthia. But he delays his fuller explanation of just how problematic this newfound sense of Arsacid cooperation will be for Rome until later in his narrative.

Critics have too often mistakenly labeled the Radamistus story (Parthian Passage 3.3), along with Tacitus’ accounts of the Iberio-Parthian battle narrative (Parthian Passage 2.2) and the Gotarzes/Vardanes civil war (Parthian Passage 3.1), as insignificant and unrelated to what the historian is trying to achieve with the *Annales*’ eastern episodes.⁴¹⁷ Most of these criticisms have stemmed from the fact that, in these passages, Romans themselves play little or no role in the action. But such thinking is erroneous; Parthian Passages 2.2 and 3.1 are, each in its own way, intricately linked to the *Annales*’ overarching scheme. Radamistus’ story is no different. We can see from this chapter’s first sentence that Tacitus’ chief purpose is to set Radamistus’ story firmly within the context of the larger issue of Romano-Parthian relations. Tacitus’ first line in 12.44, though sometimes overlooked, proves that Tacitus intended his audience to see the following events surrounding Radamistus’ attempted Armenian coup as part of, and not detached from, his larger Parthian scheme.

Following his short statement about Parthia’s political situation and Rome’s diplomatic concerns, Tacitus then quickly turns to introducing the major players of his Armenian operetta. He notes, for example, that Pharasmanes still ruled in Iberia, while his brother Mithridates continued to control Armenia “with Roman support” (*opibus nostris*).⁴¹⁸ We have come across both of these

416 Tac. *Ann.* 12.44.1-2.

417 Syme 1958: 259; Walker 1960: 34-35; Vessey 1971: 385-409; Seif 1973: 59-63, 237-41, 257-258; et al. For a complete survey of scholars who espouse this view cf. Keitel 1978: 462 n. 1.

418 Tac. *Ann.* 12.44.2.

characters in earlier episodes.⁴¹⁹ But Tacitus then adds to his cast by pointing out that Pharasmanes had a son, Radamistus, who was “noble because of his tallness, remarkable for his strength of body, *educated in the paternal arts, and extremely famous among the neighboring peoples.*”⁴²⁰ (emphasis mine) This description of Radamistus, and especially the words *patrias artes edoctus, claraque inter accolas fama*, seems at first to imply Tacitus’ deep admiration for the Iberian prince. Rome’s Parthian pretenders could never quite reclaim their own national character and customs or the love of their native people. Radamistus, by contrast, appears to have no such difficulties. He is an Alcibiades, a playboy, and in terms of the *Annales*’ cast of characters, much closer to Tacitus’ portrayal of, say, the Parthian king Artabanus or Germanicus’ Armenian candidate Zeno/Artaxias III. Tacitus depicts both Artabanus and Zeno/Artaxias III as examples of men who are deeply in tune with their national character.⁴²¹

Yet in spite of Radamistus’ personal charisma and popularity at home, Tacitus acknowledges that the prince had a particularly troubling fatal flaw: Radamistus was impatient for power. Radamistus’ father, Pharasmanes, was keeping the young prince from inheriting the Iberian throne by means of his “old age” (*senecta*).⁴²² Worse still, Radamistus was gradually becoming more vocal in public about his regal designs. Rumors of his impatience for his inheritance eventually traveled to the ears of Pharasmanes, who was greatly disturbed by the news. Pharasmanes therefore concocted a plan to redirect his ambitious son’s interests away from Iberia’s crown and towards other pursuits—namely, the Armenian kingdom of his brother and Radamistus’ uncle, Mithridates. With Pharasmanes’ consent and encouragement, Radamistus hatched a plot. After first feigning a break with Pharasmanes based on the pair’s current public tensions, the prince fled to his uncle’s court. In Armenia, Radamistus begged refuge from the hatred of his stepmother, Pharasmanes’ wife. Unwittingly, Mithridates welcomed his

419 Pharasmanes led the Iberians in battle against the Parthians in Armenia to have his brother Mithridates installed as king in Parthian Passage 2.2 (*Ann.* 6.34-35). And it is Pharasmanes who convinces Claudius to reinstate Mithridates after that king’s deposition by Caligula at the start of Parthian Passage 3.1 (*Ann.* 11.8).

420 Tac. *Ann.* 12.44.3: ... *decora proceritate, vi corporis insignis et patrias artes edoctus, claraque inter accolas fama.*

421 For Artabanus III see *Ann.* 2.2-3.1; and for Zeno/Artaxias III see *Ann.* 2.56.1.

422 Tac. *Ann.* 12.44.4.

nephew and treated him affably. However, even while enjoying the Armenian king's hospitality, Radamistus conspired, recruiting Mithridates' various disgruntled nobles and courtiers into his plot. Once the trap had been set, Radamistus returned to Iberia, gathered his father's army, and openly invaded his uncle's kingdom. Armenia's defenses, thanks to the prince's earlier covert mission, fell rapidly.⁴²³ In fact, the Iberian attack was so unexpected that Radamistus "frightened Mithridates, forced him from the plains, and drove him into the fortress at Gornea. The fortress, which was safe because of its defensible position and Roman garrison, was commanded by the prefect Caelius Pollio and the centurion Casperius."⁴²⁴

At another point in the *Annales*, Tacitus' readers might have interpreted Pharasmenes and Radamistus' skulking and plotting against Mithridates as pretty standard fare: such treachery was, as far as most Romans were concerned, the typical method by which eastern dynasts usually won and lost their kingdoms. But here in Book 12, such family intrigue would have held special poignancy. First of all, Tacitus begins Radamistus' story by alluding to Parthia's newfound sense of dynastic cooperation. The reasonableness and pragmatism of the Arsacid Vologeses' arrangement with his siblings would have shown brilliantly against the backdrop of the blood feud going on between Iberia and Armenia.⁴²⁵ And yet, while sharply contrasting with Parthia's relatively congenial state of affairs, the chaos in Armenia would have simultaneously mirrored the conspiracies brewing within the Claudian household in Rome. Keitel argues that at least part of Radamistus' relevance in Tacitus' work lies in the fact that the historian places the power hungry prince's story immediately before the closing chapters of Book 12 (*Ann.* 12.52-69). These chapters are where Tacitus brings the familial plots of Nero and his mother Agrippina to a head, and Keitel recognizes several rather conspicuous similarities between these conspirators within the *domus Caesaris* and the figure of Radamistus:

⁴²³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.44-45.

⁴²⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 12.45.3: ... *territum excutumque campis Mithridaten compulit in castellum Gorneas, tutum loco ac praesidio militum, quis Caelius Pollio praefectus, centurio Casperius praeerat.*

⁴²⁵ Tacitus fleshes out the Parthian brothers' arrangement more fully in Parthian Passage 4.2 (*Ann.* 15.2): in exchange for recognizing Vologeses as king, his two younger brothers, Tiridates and Pacorus, accept as compensation the dependent kingdoms of Armenia and Media Atropatene, respectively.

The parallels between the situations in Iberia and Rome are multivalent. Radamistus, heir to the Iberian throne, combines the roles Nero and Agrippina play at Rome. He is both heir (as Nero) and plotter (as Agrippina). Like Nero, as a young and popular heir, he is an obvious threat to the current king, his father Pharasmenes. Also like Nero, Radamistus wins over a king, his uncle Mithridates, who treats him as a son and even gives him his daughter in marriage. Radamistus resembles Agrippina in his ill-concealed impatience to rule ..., and like her, he hypocritically woos the uncle whom he intends to overthrow. Radamistus pretends to seek refuge with his uncle from the unfair treatment of his stepmother, the very injury that the rightful heir at Rome suffers ...⁴²⁶

In many ways, Tacitus seems to suggest an inversion or reversal of the natural state of dynastic discord in the Mediterranean world. In an orderly world, the *domus Caesaris* is supposed to be the model of dynastic harmony. The emperor, by means of his immense power, is supposed to project that harmony throughout the empire and Rome's dependent kingdoms. Claudius himself claims to have achieved precisely this state of imperial equilibrium in his speech to Meherdates (*Ann.* 12.11.4).⁴²⁷ Parthia, on the other hand, is supposed to be the kingdom constantly wracked by internal upheavals. However, here we see the exact opposite. Despite Rome's best efforts to destabilize Parthia with one pretender after another, that kingdom is dynastically stable under Vologeses. From the viewpoint of the *Annales'* readers, it is the city of Rome itself (because of Agrippina and Nero's villainy) and now the empire's client-kingdom Armenia (thanks to Radamistus' misdeeds) that are currently unsettled by ruinous and disruptive dynastic strife.

The promotion of internal harmony among Rome's various clients, Claudius' boast in *Ann.* 12.11.4, begins to ring even more hollow and hypocritical as Tacitus next turns to the embarrassing issue of the Iberians' siege of Gornaea. As we saw above, this fort was under the protection of a Roman garrison and had become Mithridates' sanctuary after his nephew had chased him from the Armenian capital. At Gornaea, the beleaguered king should have been relatively safe because of his status as a Roman client. Besides being surrounded by an entire Roman cohort, Tacitus points out, in addition, that

⁴²⁶ Keitel 1978: 469.

⁴²⁷ Claudius claims (*Ann.* 12.11.4) that "Rome, in her satiety of glory, had reached the stage where she desired tranquility for foreign countries as well as herself" (*Rem Romanam huc satietate gloriae provectam, ut externis quoque gentibus quietem velit*).

the Iberians, as a barbarian people, were wholly incapable of carrying out successful siege operations like the Romans.⁴²⁸ When Radamistus tries but fails to capture the fortress with brute force, we, as Tacitus' audience, are hardly surprised. Unfortunately for Mithridates, however, Radamistus' own persistence and cunning more than make up for the Iberians' lack of engineering skills and siegecraft abilities. Although initially rebuffed, the Iberians simply envelop Gornaea and set up a blockade, trapping both the king and the Romans soldiers inside.

As the siege begins to drag on, Tacitus describes how Radamistus then started to probe the loyalty of the king's Roman defenders, shrewdly pitting one against the other:

... [Radamistus] played to the prefect's greed, although Casperius protested all the while. *The centurion asserted that an ally king, that Armenia, the gift of the Roman people, should not be turned by wickedness and money.* Finally, because Pollio continued to offer the multitude of the enemy as an excuse, and Radamistus the orders of his father, Casperius negotiated a truce and then departed, so that, if he were unable to deter Pharasmenes from the war path, he could at least inform Ummidius Quadratus, the governor of Syria, of Armenia's status.”

... avaritiam praefecti emeretur, obtestante Casperio, *ne socius rex, ne Armenia donum populi Romani scelere et pecunia verterentur.* Postremo quia multitudinem hostium Pollio, iussa patris Radamistus obtendebant, pactus indutias abscedit, ut, nisi Pharasmanem bello absterrisset, Ummidium Quadratum praesidem Syriae doceret, quo in statu Armenia foret.⁴²⁹ (emphasis mine)

After departing from Gornaea, Casperius reappears a few lines later attempting to convince Radamistus' father, Pharasmenes, to abandon the Iberians' military efforts in Armenia.⁴³⁰ Following up as Tacitus does here with the centurion—that is, showing Casperius actively trying to dissuade the Iberian king from his current course—is significant. The scene demonstrates that the centurion is a man of his word, that he does not simply use his support of Mithridates as an excuse to escape the besieged fortress and save his own life.⁴³¹ The centurion Casperius represents Rome's better angels; he is the

428 Specifically, Tacitus says at *Ann.* 12.45.4: “Nothing is so unknown to barbarians as the siege engines and cunning of military assaults: but, on the other hand, this aspect of warfare completely familiar to us” (*Nihil tam ignarum barbaris quam machinamenta et astus oppugnationum: at nobis ea pars militiae maxime gnara est*).

429 *Tac. Ann.* 12.45.5-6.

430 *Tac. Ann.* 12.46.2.

431 Casperius reappears later at *Ann.* 15.5 as Corbulo's go-between with the Parthians. He may also be the same Casperius seen in *Hist.* 3.73.

more honorable and less corruptible of Mithridates' two Roman protectors. Tacitus carefully steers us towards the opinion that Casperius is correct to back the Armenian monarch by conspicuously reminding us that Mithridates received his kingdom as "a gift from the Roman people." Tacitus wants us on Casperius' side, believing that Mithridates deserves every bit of Rome's protection. After all, was Mithridates, despite being imprisoned by Caligula, not now Rome's loyal subject? Was it not Claudius himself who had bestowed the Armenian throne on him? Consequently, was Rome not now obligated to help defend and reinstate him? These questions seem to be what Tacitus is asking his readers to consider.

But, at least in this case, Rome's better angels, embodied in the upright figure of Casperius, do not win out. As the historian remarks soon afterwards:

After Casperius' departure, Pollio, as if freed from his guard, encouraged Mithridates to accept the treaty He also compelled the Roman soldiers with bribes to demand peace and threaten that they would abandon their posts. Out of necessity, Mithridates thus approved the day and place for the treaty and left the fortress.

Digressu centurionis velut custode exsolutus praefectus hortari Mithridaten ad sancendum foedus, ... et Pollio occulta corruptione impellit milites, ut pacem flagitarent seque praesidium omissuros minitarentur. Qua necessitate Mithridates diem locumque foederi accepit castelloque egreditur.⁴³²

Under the pretense of welcoming his uncle and forging a treaty, Radamistus led Mithridates, upon exiting the fort, to a nearby grove. Tacitus conveys, in some detail, the lengths to which the Iberian prince went to keep his and Pollio's ruse alive until the very last moment. Radamistus' guards eventually seized Mithridates, bound him in chains, and carried him off to execution. Because Radamistus had promised earlier not to harm his uncle or other relatives "with either a sword or poison" (*non ferro non veneno*),⁴³³ the prince decided to murder Mithridates and his family by having

⁴³² Tac. *Ann.* 12.46.1-5. Tacitus, in fact, states that Pollio actually prompted Mithridates to surrender by first trying to convince him that Radamistus' intentions were honorable because of their familial connection. When this strategy proved ineffective because of Mithridates' continued distrust of the prefect (the Armenian king suspected Pollio of bedding one of his royal concubines), Radamistus received approval from his father to increase the bribe to Pollio (*Ann.* 12.46.1-3). It is apparently with these additional funds that the prefect was able to induce the rest of the Roman troops to mutiny against Mithridates.

⁴³³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.47.9.

them thrown “to the ground and covered with heavy piles of clothes.”⁴³⁴ Such embellishments highlight Radamistus’ duplicity and villainy even further, and cast those who would ally with him, someone like Pollio, in an even more disparaging light.

But so that we should not consider Pollio’s dishonorable acts in Rome’s name merely an exception, Tacitus’ narrative then wanders to the war council of the Syrian governor Ummidius Quadratus. There, we witness other Roman officers ignoring Casperius and condemning the centurion’s position. Rather, these officers uphold Pollio’s bad faith and mistreatment of Rome’s allies as policies that are actually good for the empire:

Quadratus, knowing that Mithridates had been betrayed and that his kingdom had been seized by murderers, called together his war council. He informed his advisers about affairs in Armenia and deliberated whether they should avenge Mithridates. *A few argued that public honor was at stake, more argued for caution. This last group of advisers claimed that all foreign crime should be celebrated, and that the seeds of hatred should be sown. The Roman emperors had, in the past, often conferred this same Armenia on foreign kings supposedly as an act of largess. But, in truth, they had done so primarily to disturb the spirit of the barbarians.* Therefore, let Radamistus wickedly take possession of parts of the kingdom. If the notorious adventurer were perceived negatively, how much better it would be than if he would have seized Armenia with his glory intact.

At Quadratus cognoscens proditum Mithridaten et regnum ab interfectorebus optineri, vocat consilium, docet acta at an ulcisceretur consultat. *Paucis decus publicum curae, plures tuta disserunt: omne scelus externum cum laetitia habendum; semina etiam odiorum iacienda, ut saepe principes Romani eandem Armeniam specie largitionis turbandis barbarorum animis praebuerint: poteretur Radamistus male partis, dum invisus infamis, quando id magis ex usu, quam si cum gloria adeptus foret.*⁴³⁵ (emphasis mine)

Tacitus also adds that Quadratus and his advisers, as much crafty politicians as soldiers, still sent Pharasmenes a message ordering him to evacuate Armenia “lest they seemed to have acquiesced to the crime.”⁴³⁶ Tacitus’ implication seems plain enough. Crooked prefects (Pollio) are bad enough, but having high ranking Roman administrators and officers (Quadratus and his staff) ignoring, condoning, and even covering up such blatant corruption and dishonorable acts is something else entirely. Once

434 Tac. *Ann.* 12.47.9: ... *proiectos in humum et veste multa gravisque opertos necat.*

435 Tac. *Ann.* 12.48.1-2.

436 Tac. *Ann.* 12.48.4: *Ne tamen adnuisse facinori viderentur ...*

more, we see Claudius' earlier declaration, the claim that what Rome really desired on the frontier was "quiet" (*Ann.* 12.11.4: *quietem*) proved false. The majority of Quadratus' war council admits as much.

Pollio's crimes and Quadratus' dishonorable indifference, however, pale in comparison to the incompetence of the procurator of Cappadocia, Julius Paelignus, whom Tacitus introduces next. The historian describes Paelignus bluntly as a man "despised equally for his lethargic spirit and grotesque body, yet extremely familiar to Claudius, who as a private citizen some time ago entertained wasteful leisure with the conversation of loafers."⁴³⁷ Mentioning the procurator's personal relationship with the emperor, as he does, allows Tacitus to link Paelignus' crimes in the reader's mind more closely to the imperial administration. Tacitus wants us to view Paelignus' upcoming misconduct as an extension of Claudius' own imperial ineptitude—and perhaps actual malfeasance. Nor is Tacitus terribly subtle about the procurator's administrative incompetence; Paelignus' errors in judgment are many and, as the *Annales'* audience must have thought, inexcusable:

This Paelignus called up Cappadocia's auxiliaries as if he were about to retake Armenia. But while he was plundering his allies more than the enemy, due to the absence of his soldiers, he left himself exposed to barbarian incursions. He fled therefore to Radamistus who overwhelmed him with gifts. Paelignus encouraged Radamistus, among other things, to assume the symbol of the kingship, and was present as a promoter and courtier for its assumption.

Is Paelignus auxiliis provincialium contractis tamquam reciperaturus Armeniam, dum socios magis quam hostis praedatur, abscessu suorum et incursantibus barbaris praesidium egens ad Radamistum venit; donisque eius evictus ultro regium insigne sumere cohortatur sumentique adest auctor et satelles.⁴³⁸

Tacitus thus casts Paelignus, Claudius' confidant and hand-picked administrator for Cappadocia, as the poster boy for Roman administrative malfeasance in the East. He is worse than Pollio, worse than Quadratus; he is one of Tacitus' "serial fools" (Caesennius Paetus in Book 15 will be another). Despite Paelignus' close relationship with Claudius, Tacitus makes no mention of the emperor's direct approval for the procurator's military action. We can only assume therefore that Paelignus acts without imperial

⁴³⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 12.49.1: ... *ignavia animi et deridiculo corporis iuxta despiciendus, sed Claudio perquam familiaris, cum privatus olim conversatione scurrarum iners otium oblectaret.*

⁴³⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 12.49.2.

permission. In any case, his mission seems to be little more than an excuse to extort Rome’s provincial allies. But greed is hardly Paelignus’ only sin. Distracted by such lucrative plunder, the procurator leaves his province open to outside threats, an unfortunate oversight that then drives the procurator into the service of Radamistus—the very barbarian, in fact, whom Paelignus had set out to overthrow. For Tacitus’ audience, the portrait of such a figure, someone so incompetent and steeped in criminality, must have been disturbing. But it might also have been a bit humorous. Because of his greed (a character flaw reflected in his corpulent physical appearance), Paelignus goes, in the brief duration of one sentence, from supposedly rescuing Armenia and avenging Roman honor to legitimizing Rome’s enemy, Radamistus. He has the opportunity to show himself to be more honorable, more effective than Quadratus who cowardly chooses not to intervene at all. At least Paelignus does that much. But the foolish procurator still fails because he is handicapped, hindered by the same avarice and amorality we see manifested in Pollio.

Tacitus next reports that, to remedy the situation “so that others should not also be judged by Paelignus’ acts, the legate Helvidius Priscus was dispatched (*mittitur*) with a legion”⁴³⁹ The passive verb (*mittitur*) seems to imply that Priscus’ mission, unlike Paelignus’, was sanctioned by the emperor himself or perhaps the Senate. Tacitus then, however, tells us only that while crossing the Taurus Mountains, Priscus settled affairs “more by moderation than by force” (*moderatione plura quam vi*), which might be a faint echo of Tiberius’ earlier sentiment in Parthian Passage 2.2 (*Ann.* 6.32.1: . . . *destinata retinens consiliis et astu res externas moliri, arma procul habere*). We are not informed exactly what, if any, effects Priscus’ diplomacy achieved; Tacitus remains rather vague on this particular point. But given the fact that Priscus was hastily recalled to Syria “so that he should not bring about the start of a Parthian war,”⁴⁴⁰ we can probably assume that he was, for the most part, as impotent

⁴³⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.49.3: . . . *ne ceteri quoque ex Paeligno coniectarentur, Helvidius Priscus legatus cum legione mittitur . . .* . Cf. Jackson 1937: 386 n. 1 who points out that this Helvidius Priscus may be an elder brother of the more famous Stoic martyr of the same name. For the Stoic Helvidius Priscus, see Tac. *Ann.* 16.28; *Hist.* 4.5; and for his execution by Vespasian Suet. *Vesp.* 15; Cass. Dio 66.12.

⁴⁴⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 12.49.4: . . . *ne initium belli adversus Parthos existeret.*

as his forerunners in resolving the Armenian crisis. Tacitus' final remark about possibly inciting an eastern war could even imply that Rome's leadership was, on some level, afraid of angering Vologeses. It is as if Tacitus is asking his readers: should Romans shy away from such conflict? Is that the way real Romans behave? Is that truly the best way to uphold Roman honor?

Tacitus' response to all of these questions would, most likely, be a resounding no, and he quickly demonstrates why in the following chapter's opening sentence. Despite Priscus' best efforts not to provoke the Parthians, Vologeses interprets the Roman general's reluctance to enter Armenia, in the end, as a sign of Roman weakness:

Vologeses thought that his chance for invading Armenia had come, *a kingdom which had once been the possession of his ancestors* and had now been obtained by a foreign king through a disgraceful act. He drew together his abundant military resources and prepared to lead his brother Tiridates into the kingdom, so that no part of his house should be without authority.

Vologeses casum invadendae Armeniae obvenisse ratus, *quam a maioribus suis possessam* externus rex flagitio optineret, contrahit copias *fratremque Tiridaten deducere in regnum parat, ne qua pars domus sine imperio ageret.*⁴⁴¹

As always, Tacitus' language operates on several levels. The mention of Armenia as the ancestral property of the Arsacids, for instance, again reminds us of Parthian Passage 2.2 where the Parthian king Artabanus laid claim to all the former Persian/Macedonian territories, including Armenia (*Ann.* 6.31.2: ... *simul veteres Persarum ac Macedonum terminos, seque invasurum possessa primum Cyro et post Alexandro per vaniloquentiam ac minas iaciebat.*)⁴⁴² But this first line also hints at the newfound sense of cooperation within the Arsacid family to which Tacitus alludes at the outset of Parthian Passage 3.3. Tacitus' reason for bringing up this particular issue again here is not so much to shower praise on the Arsacids' harmonious working relationship, but to show how their ability to cooperate stands in stark contrast to the Romans. And perhaps, in this case, Tacitus has not just the *domus*

⁴⁴¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.50.1.

⁴⁴² Jackson 1937: 388 n. 1 claims that besides simply harking back to Artabanus' earlier boast, Vologeses may be referring specifically to a branch of the Arsacid dynasty. Presumably, Jackson is referring to the Artaxiads who ruled in Armenia during the second and first centuries BCE. However, other authors mention no such familial connection between the Artaxiad and Arsacid dynasties of Armenia. Cf. Redgate 1998: 88-107.

Caesaris in mind, but also Rome's various eastern commanders. As we have seen, Tacitus has been careful to portray the Romans' response to this latest crisis in Armenia as not only ineffective, but also inconsistent. He depicts Casperius and Pollio at odds on how to handle the siege of Gornaea, of course. But Quadratus' and Paelignus' responses to Radamistus' invasion are equally incongruous: the first advocates no response at all, while the second marches foolishly headlong into Armenia. Vologeses and his brothers, in contrast, appear to experience no such miscommunication. From the vantage point of the *Annales*' readers, the Parthians seem to have a consistent plan with clear objectives.

Thus for Tacitus, the real problem with Claudius' approach to Armenia—and we might include all the Julio-Claudians in this criticism to some extent—went far beyond just Rome's individual eastern commanders. The greed of a Pollio, the indifference of a Quadratus, the avarice and incompetence of a Paelignus, and the cowardice of a Priscus were indeed all symptoms of a more insidious ailment, but they were not the disease itself. Tacitus' real problem lay with what he saw as the emperors' generally inattentive attitude towards the frontier. The Julio-Claudians' casual, lax approach to border security is what concerned the historian most. Nowhere was this problem more apparent than in Armenia. Claudius and his predecessors' hands-off style of administering the eastern frontier had allowed this latest quandary with Radamistus to develop and evolve into a truly dangerous crisis—a crisis that now risked drawing Rome, after almost a century of cold war, into open conflict with the Parthian Empire.

We should be clear, however. The credit Tacitus gives to Vologeses for ending Parthia's atmosphere of political and dynastic divisiveness does not carry over as readily into the realm of military affairs. As he shows in Parthian Passage 2.2 (*Ann.* 6.34-35) where he addresses the Iberio-Parthian battle narrative (an episode, incidentally, in which Radamistus' father Pharasmenes also plays a critical role), Tacitus remains committed to depicting Parthia's military capabilities and tactics as inferior to Rome's. This commitment could explain why he next notes:

With the advance of the Parthians, the Iberians were driven back without a battle, and the cities of Armenia, Artaxata and Tigranocerta, accepted the yoke. Then, a harsh

winter, a dearth of supplies, and diseases having arisen from both hardships compelled Vologeses to give up his present course of action.

Incessu Parthorum sine acie pulsi Hiberi, urbesque Armeniorum Artaxata et Tigranocerta iugum acceperere. Deinde atrox hiems et parum provisi commeatus et orta ex utroque tabes perpellunt Vologesen omittere praesentia.⁴⁴³

Rome's military record in Armenia over the course of Book 12, of course, has not been especially stellar, either. Neither Paelignus nor Priscus, the two Roman commanders who set out with the intention of unseating Radamistus by force, achieved his goal. But Tacitus has already explained away their poor performances as the result of greed and ineptitude (Paelignus) and a lack of full and decisive battlefield authority (perhaps in Priscus' case). For Tacitus, Parthia's military setbacks are not the result of leadership failures; the historian has gone out of his way to portray Vologeses as an exceptional king. Rather, Parthia's battlefield disasters happen as the result of a weakness in its unique system of warfare: cavalry-heavy armies are inherently flawed, doomed to outstrip their supply lines time and again. On the other hand, when Rome's legions falter, it is due to corruption, ineptitude, or political and dynastic infighting on the highest levels.

In general, therefore, Tacitus seems to suggest that politically the Parthians, thanks to Vologeses and his siblings, are the model to be emulated—especially when compared to the Romans and Iberians. Yet in terms of their army's logistical abilities, the Parthians still, at times, appear amateurish. Vologeses' failure to take Armenia, in this instance, because of something as simple as inadequate provisioning seems to be a perfect example of Tacitus' point.⁴⁴⁴ One of the Parthian Passage's themes seems then to be that Rome's eastern commanders, if truly competent and bestowed with the necessary

⁴⁴³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.50.2-3. Vologeses' first expedition, which began about 52 CE, drove Radamistus into hiding and captured the important cities of Artaxata and Tigranocerta. However, the Parthians were ill-prepared for the bitter Armenian winter. Vologeses thus withdrew his forces to Mesopotamia until the following year when he launched another campaign into Armenia, now better provisioned. This second expedition, too, met with little resistance, and, at Vologeses' behest, his brother assumed the Armenian throne as Tiridates I. However, news of these events in Armenia did not reach Rome until late in 54 CE. By then, the emperor Claudius was already dead, poisoned by members of his own household. Although young, Claudius' adopted son, Nero, was hailed by the Senate as the new Princeps.

⁴⁴⁴ Add to this example *Ann.* 15.5.5 where a second Armenian campaign by Vologeses ends similarly in plague, famine, and the Parthians' eventual withdrawal. Tacitus' overall implication seems to be that the Parthians were mobile due to their heavy reliance on cavalry, but that they paid the price for that mobility advantage by often outstripping their supply lines.

authority to act, should have little trouble besting unruly, eastern barbarians and establishing a stable frontier. Germanicus, who received wide ranging powers for his eastern command, successfully installed Zeno/Artaxias III.⁴⁴⁵ Cn. Domitius Corbulo, whom we will encounter next in the *Annales*' third hexad, will conquer Armenia not once, but twice in swift and brilliant fashion, proving once and for all that the Parthians are no match for Rome's legions when properly commanded.

Turning our attention to the *Annales*' fourth and final Parthian Passage, we must remember that throughout all of the episodes we have covered so far, the Romans and Parthians have still not met in battle themselves. Their contests have all been through pretenders and proxies. Part of Tacitus' purpose in Parthian Passages 1 through 3 is to speculate about what would happen if the two superpowers did confront each other in an open contest of arms. But the historian has also been subtly goading his readers, asking why they should tolerate such incompetence and corruption on the eastern frontier. Why should they settle for diplomacy, as opposed to Rome's unwavering and clearly superior military might?

The main goal of Parthian Passage 3.3, in many ways, is to prepare the reader for the answers to such questions, to set the stage for Nero's Armenian War, the only "hot" war that Rome and Parthia would fight in the first century. This contest is the primary focus of Parthian Passage 4, and because the impetus for that conflict will be control of Armenia, Tacitus conveniently leaves the tricky issue of who rules the disputed kingdom unresolved. After the Romans' unsuccessful attempts to oust Radamistus, and the Parthians' equally futile effort to do the same, the fugitive Iberian does return to the throne briefly. Radamistus' intolerable treatment of the local population soon incites a rebellion of Armenian nationalists, however, who surround the palace at Artaxata and force the Iberian adventurer to flee into the countryside with his pregnant wife.⁴⁴⁶ And so, after all that has transpired, as Parthian Passage 3 closes, Tacitus leaves the kingdom up for grabs—or, as he calls it, "again masterless" (*vacuamque*

⁴⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.3.

⁴⁴⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 12.50.4-51.5.

rursus Armenia).⁴⁴⁷ Interestingly, Tacitus uses this same word *vacuam* to refer to the state of the Armenian throne in Parthian Passage 1 immediately before the first pretender Vonones' accession.⁴⁴⁸

447 Tac. *Ann.* 12.50.4.

448 Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.2.

Synopsis and Structural Overview

Tacitus' primary subject in the *Annales*' fourth Parthian Passage is Nero's Armenian War (58-63 CE). The historian discusses in some detail how Parthian encroachments into Armenia during Nero's early reign resulted in the emperor dispatching the renowned general, Cn. Domitius Corbulo, to the East. Corbulo's first campaign to recover the strategic buffer kingdom proved a resounding success; however, Nero's personal jealousies soon derailed any momentum his popular general had achieved on the frontier. Corbulo's replacement, the far less skilled L. Caesennius Paetus, rather than shore up Rome's recent gains against the Parthians as he should have, unfortunately led the empire instead into one of the worst military disasters since the Teutoberg Forest. Paetus' own campaign of private greed and personal ambition ended in a humiliating Roman surrender at Rhandaia, a painful loss which, in turn, contributed directly to the equally humiliating Neronian compromise. After Rhandaia, the emperor lost all taste for further war on the frontier and agreed to allow the Parthian king to select candidates for the Armenian throne in exchange for preserving the illusion of Roman hegemony over the kingdom.

Like the others, Parthian Passage 4 is made up of one continuous story spread out over several of the *Annales*' Books—in this case, Books 13, 14, and 15 of Tacitus' last hexad. Also, like the previous Parthian Passages, this one can be further divided thematically into three distinct sections: 4.1 covers Corbulo's first Armenian campaign; 4.2 addresses Paetus' failed expedition, as well as the Rhandaia debacle; and 4.3 records Corbulo's second march into the disputed kingdom to negotiate and carry out the terms of Nero's new peace. Structurally, however, Parthian Passage 4 revolves around section 4.2, which occupies an especially prominent place in the narrative at the very beginning of Book 15.

Tacitus' description of Paetus and Rhandaia is also by far the largest contiguous section in any of the

work's Parthian Passages, including seventeen chapters in all (*Ann.* 15.1-17). Therefore, just in terms of Tacitus' overall layout, the Rhandaia episode seems to be an important turning point—perhaps the most important—in the historian's broader account of eastern affairs.⁴⁴⁹

A. Parthian Passage 4.1 (*Ann.* 13.6-9; 13.34-41; 14.23-26): Corbulo: Optimus Imperator

Following the Radamistus episode, we hear nothing else about the Armenians until the end of chapter 13.5. There, Tacitus tells us that a delegation of Armenian ambassadors presented itself before the young emperor Nero. The historian may choose to use the Armenians' visit as the transition into his fourth Parthian Passage because it serves as the backdrop for one of more conspicuous examples of the political overreach in the Neronian Books. Nero's mother, Agrippina, demonstrates the lack of boundaries typically associated with the Julio-Claudian women:

In fact, while the legates of the Armenians were arguing their national cause to Nero, [Agrippina, Claudius' widow and the emperor's mother] was acting as if she were about to ascend the emperor's dais and rule. With other courtiers transfixed in terror, Seneca advised the young emperor that he should rush to meet his approaching mother. Thus, the shameful act was averted by the appearance of filial piety.

Quin et legatis Armeniorum causam gentis apud Neronem orantibus escendere suggestum imperatoris et praesidere simul parabat, nisi ceteris pavore defixis Seneca admonuisset, venienti matri occurreret. Ita specie pietatis obviam itum dedecori.⁴⁵⁰

By this point in the *Annales*, Agrippina is a familiar figure. As the chief architect of Britannicus' and Claudius' murders, and now as the stereotypical, power-hungry queen mother, she best represents the deleterious infighting that has stunted the Julio-Claudian dynasty's ability to act. This scene is a perfect

⁴⁴⁹ It is important to note, however, that nearly half of Tacitus' last hexad has not survived. The text breaks off abruptly around 16.35. Therefore, we cannot know for sure whether or not Tacitus included other, additional eastern passages in the non-extant portion of the work.

⁴⁵⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 13.5.3. Furneaux 1907: 159 and Koestermann 1967: 243 agree that the delegation mentioned at *Ann.* 13.5.3 represents some party of disgruntled Armenians, perhaps the same nationalists who earlier drove Radamistus from the palace at Artaxata, but not necessarily the kingdom's official government. This insight would help explain Tacitus' subsequent remark about Radamistus, whom the historian says "was once master of the kingdom, then a fugitive, and had now once more abandoned the struggle" (*qui saepe regni eius potitus, dein profugus, tum quoque bellum deseruerat*). Apparently, after his dramatic flight in Book 12, Radamistus must have return briefly to power in Armenia, a fact that Tacitus fails to mention in the intervening chapters.

symbol of the Julio-Claudians' dynastic dysfunction getting in the way of conducting foreign business effectively. By juxtaposing Agrippina's lack of proper protocol with the opening of Parthian Passage 4 in the next chapter, Tacitus suggests that the same domestic problems that stifled Nero's predecessors will continue into this emperor's reign. As the reader approaches Parthian Passage 4's opening chapter, Tacitus seems just as pessimistic about this new monarch's ability to rectify the troubled eastern frontier.

This pessimism evaporates somewhat as the fourth Parthian Passage begins. Unlike his discussions of prior Julio-Claudian emperors, Tacitus seems to hold out at least a glimmer of hope for Nero's chances. As 13.6 starts, he informs us, for example, that news arrived "in the form of disturbing rumors that the Parthians had again rushed out, and that Armenia was being carried away by robbery."⁴⁵¹ Tacitus adds that these rumors then gave rise to a heated debate within Rome's city limits about how the new emperor should proceed, and whether he, being so young and inexperienced, was even capable of handling such a dangerous situation.⁴⁵² Besides Nero's callowness, the more cynical critics questioned how an emperor could conduct a proper war when he "was held back by a woman" (*a femina regetur*).⁴⁵³ Such remarks are a clear reminder of the scandalous nature of Agrippina's imperial influence. These cynics seem to doubt, furthermore, whether such a military undertaking could be carried out "by advisers" (*per magistros*).⁴⁵⁴ Such a statement is almost certainly a backhanded

⁴⁵¹ Tac. *Ann.* 13.6.1: ... *turbidis rumoribus prorupisse rursus Parthos et rapti Armeniam adlatum est* The Parthian attack that Tacitus describes here most likely refers to Vologeses' second invasion of Armenia in 53. After its successful completion, he installed his brother Tiridates I as king. The report of this second attack did not reach Rome until 54, however, which might be why Tacitus refers to the news as gossip. Gilmartin 1973: 585 even suggests that the alliteration Tacitus employs in this line—especially the repetition of the "r" sound—emphasizes that this news was "rumor." For the importance of rumor in Tacitus see Ryberg 1942.

⁴⁵² Specifically, these critics question "how a prince who had barely passed his seventeenth birthday would be able to sustain this burden or repel it" (*Ann.* 13.6.2: ... *quem ad modum princeps vix septemdecim annos egressus suscipere eam molem aut propulsare posset* ...). Although Tacitus phrases this complaint about Nero's young age and inexperience differently, we are perhaps meant to recall the historian's earlier criticisms about the Julio-Claudians' Parthian pretenders, Tiridates and Meherdates. In the case of both of these pretenders, Tacitus seems to link their youth to later military shortcomings. While describing each of their failed attempts to hold onto the Parthian throne, Tacitus refers to Tiridates as *pueritiam* (*Ann.* 6.43.4) and Meherdates as an *iuvenem ignarum* (*Ann.* 12.12.4).

⁴⁵³ Tac. *Ann.* 13.6.2.

⁴⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 13.6.2.

reference to Nero's advisers, the urban prefect Sex. Afranius Burrus and Stoic philosopher L. Annaeus Seneca.

But many Roman citizens were more hopeful:

Against this, others argued that it had developed better than if Claudius, incapacitated by old age and laziness, had been called to the labors of a soldier; he would have had to obey the orders of slaves. At least Burrus and Seneca were knowledgeable and had experience in these many affairs. And how could one say that the emperor lacked maturity, when Pompey in his eighteenth year and Octavian in his nineteenth had fought a civil war? *Greater things were achieved by auspices and advisers than by spears and legionaries. It would be a clear testament to whether or not the emperor employed trustworthy friends, if he set aside jealousies and chose an exceptional general rather than a double-crosser whose chief concern was greed and courtly favor.*

Contra alii melius evenisse disserunt, quam si invalidus senecta et ignavia Claudius militiae ad labores vocaretur, servilibus iussis obtemperaturus. Burrum tamen et Senecam multarum rerum experientia cognitos; et imperatori quantum ad robur deesse, cum octavo decimo aetatis anno Cn. Pompeius, nono decimo Caesar Octavianus civilia bella sustinuerint? *Pleraque in summa fortuna auspiciis et conciliis quam telis et manibus geri. Daturum plane documentum, honestis an secus amicis uteretur, si ducem amota invidia egregium quam si pecuniosum et gratia subnixum per ambitum deligeret.*⁴⁵⁵ (emphasis mine)

That Tacitus inclines, at this point at least, towards this more optimistic view of Nero's chances is evident from the way the *Annales* favorably depicts the emperor's advisers Burrus and Seneca. As in the above passage, the third hexad's early Books often portray these two men as bulwarks of moderation and good sense; sometimes they are the only force holding back the young Nero's more despotic tendencies.⁴⁵⁶ Nowhere else in his work does Tacitus seem to give his readers the impression that Burrus and Seneca are simply feckless "advisers," one of the criticisms of Nero's more pessimistic detractors.

Yet while Tacitus may express a certain amount of reserved hopefulness for the untested emperor at the start, that optimism is not based on any sort of blind infatuation; it is logical and, more

⁴⁵⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 13.6.3-6.

⁴⁵⁶ For a discussion of Burrus' and Seneca's influence over the young emperor see Mellor 2011. However, also cf. Tacitus' own comments about the prefect and philosopher at *Ann.* 13.2.1-2.

importantly, conditional. In the final two lines of the passage, we can see “Tacitean echoes” of previous Julio-Claudian missteps concerning Parthian relations. For instance, the second-to-last sentence, which emphasizes the use of diplomacy over military might, is highly reminiscent of Parthian Passage 2.1 (*Ann.* 6.32.1) and Tacitus’ earlier characterization of Tiberius’ approach to foreign affairs.⁴⁵⁷ This line might have also brought to mind Augustus’ similar over-reliance on diplomacy.⁴⁵⁸ Moreover, the last sentence of the chapter seems equally packed with allusions to Nero’s predecessors. Tacitus implies, for example, that Nero could be successful if he were only able to “set aside jealousies” (*amota invidia*) and avoid “a double-crosser whose chief concern was greed and courtly favor” (*pecuniosum et gratia subnixum per ambitum*). Tiberius’ major shortcoming had been his jealousy of Germanicus, and greed and courtly favor had been the root cause of many problems at Claudius’ court. Thus Tacitus’ impression of this emperor’s chances seems unambiguous: if Nero can overcome the failings of his predecessors, the over-reliance on diplomacy and the usual court jealousies and distractions, and if he can appoint an “exceptional general” (*ducem ... egregium*), then he might just redeem his dynasty’s dysfunctional frontier strategy.

Nero does seem, here at the start, to buck the Augustan/Tiberian trend of relying too heavily on diplomacy when interacting with Parthia. In response to the “rumors” of Parthian incursions into Armenia, Tacitus notes that Nero himself ordered (*Nero ... iubet*) a decisive military build-up along the eastern frontier. Besides levying new units, he moved existing legions closer to the Armenian border. He commanded Rome’s most trusted clients in the area, Herod Agrippa II of Judea and Antiochus IV of Commagene, to ready their auxiliary forces. And he had bridges thrown over the Euphrates River in preparation for a full-scale Roman invasion of Armenia.⁴⁵⁹ Presumably, Nero’s chief advisers, Burrus

457 Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.1: *Cupitum id Tiberio: ornat Phraaten accingitque paternum ad fastigium, destinata retinens consiliis et astu res externas moliri, arma procul habere.*

458 Consider, for example, the historian Pompeius Trogus’ remark: “Caesar [Augustus] could do more with the magnitude of his name than another general was able to do with arms” (Just. *Epit.* 42.5.12).

459 Tac. *Ann.* 13.7.1.

and Seneca, would have had some hand in carrying out this rapid mobilization of the Roman army; however, their names are not mentioned anywhere in 13.7. Tacitus wishes to give the impression that the emperor is the only decision maker here, not his councilors.

Rome's citizens welcomed Nero's decisiveness regarding the frontier so much that Tacitus reports sycophants heaped honors upon the emperor. Although Armenia still lay in peril, although nothing had been accomplished yet, the Senate voted a national day of thanksgiving, honored the emperor with triumphal robes and ovations, and even awarded Nero "a statue of him equal in size to that of Mars Ultor in the same temple."⁴⁶⁰ As we have witnessed throughout the Parthian Passages, whenever trouble crops up in the East, Tacitus is hardly shy about coloring his narrative with allusions to Rome's pre-imperial interactions with Parthia. Typically these references have been to Crassus and Carrhae, to the disaster itself and Rome's collective disgrace. The statue and temple that Tacitus cites here, however, are those of Augustus, built to celebrate the recovery of Crassus' lost standards. They are symbols of Roman success, not failure, and that fact bodes well for Nero. Tacitus plainly states that Rome's citizens were excited, not just about Nero's bold military stance, but also about the emperor's choice for field commander: "[The Romans] were happy because Nero had assigned Domitius Corbulo to recover Armenia, and the general's appointment was thought by many to have thrown open Rome to the virtues."⁴⁶¹

However, by this point in the *Annales*, Corbulo is not an unknown entity.⁴⁶² Tacitus introduces him earlier at 11.18-20. As the emperor Claudius' newly appointed commander of Lower Germany, the general heroically rescues the province from raiders.⁴⁶³ Corbulo's series of impressive victories along

⁴⁶⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 13.8.1: ... *effigiemque eius pari magnitudine ac Martis Ultoris eodem in templo censuere ...*

⁴⁶¹ Tac. *Ann.* 13.8.1: ... *laeti quod Domitium Corbulonem retinendae Armeniae praeposuerat videbaturque locus virtutibus patefactus.*

⁴⁶² Little is known of Corbulo's early life and career. He was born sometime around 4 CE to the clan of the Domitii, an old senatorial family which prided itself on upholding Roman tradition. Corbulo's father, who served as praetor, famously once chastised a younger nobleman in the Senate for not giving up his seat to an elder statesman (*Ann.* 3.31). Corbulo followed in his father's aristocratic footsteps, becoming consul in 39. And besides acting as proconsul of Lower Germany (47 CE), he also served as governor of Asia (sometime before 54 CE) prior to his Armenian expeditions.

⁴⁶³ Specifically the Cherusci and Chauci who lived on the other side of the Danube River.

the northern frontier make him one of the Roman public's best respected generals and help establish his reputation as a stern disciplinarian. Regarding Corbulo's strict adherence to the old legionary code of conduct, Tacitus says:

Outpost and sentinel duties were conducted both day and night with arms, and it was said that two soldiers were executed: one because he was at the rampart unarmed, another because he had only his dagger at hand. This story, which is highly doubtful or untrue, is nevertheless a proper reflection of the commander's severity. He, who treated even small offenses with such roughness, was believed strict and inexorable for great crimes.

Stationes, vigiliae, diurna nocturnaque munia in armis agitabantur. Feruntque militem, quia vallum non accinctus, atque alium, quia pugione tantum accinctus foderet, morte punitos. Quae nimia et incertum an falso iacta originem tamen e severitate ducis traxere; intentumque et magnis delictis inexorabilem scias, cui tantum asperitatis etiam adversus levia credebatur.⁴⁶⁴

The historian's admiration for Corbulo's rigorous pursuit of proper military discipline recurs throughout Parthian Passage 4. Tacitus intentionally brings up Corbulo's stern yet superior generalship to distinguish him from other, less competent colleagues, men like the prefect Pollio and the procurator Julius Paelignus. A large part of Corbulo's purpose in the *Annales*' final hexad is to function as a role model.⁴⁶⁵ In fact, his purpose is closely related to the role that Germanicus plays in the work's Tiberian Books.⁴⁶⁶

Tacitus employs the famous general this way especially in chapters 13.8 and 13.9. These passages discuss Ummidius Quadratus' and Corbulo's military allotments, as well as the diplomatic debacle that permanently sets the two men at odds. According to the narrative at 13.8, Nero decided to divide Rome's eastern military resources evenly between the Syrian governor and his newly assigned

⁴⁶⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 11.18.3-5.

⁴⁶⁵ Tacitus' high regard for Corbulo may also have something to do with the general's family ties. The emperor Domitian, whom Tacitus detested, "stole" Corbulo's daughter Domitia from her husband L. Aelius Lamia in 70 (i.e., after Corbulo's death). Domitia eventually helped conspire to kill Domitian, which may account for part of Tacitus' respect for the Domitii clan. Cf. Hammond 1934: 83-84.

⁴⁶⁶ Several scholars have already noted the many similarities between the characters of Germanicus and Corbulo in the *Annales*. Cf. Syme 1958: 496; Vervaet 1999a: 290.

field commander: Quadratus kept half of the eastern auxiliaries and two legions to defend his province, while Corbulo took control of an equal number of the Roman soldiers and auxiliary infantry and cavalry wintering in Cappadocia. The emperor, moreover, ordered Rome's various client-kings in the area to obey the commands of both men, an oversight which led to an unclear chain of command.⁴⁶⁷

In spite of this equitable arrangement, Quadratus still resented, and even feared, Corbulo's appointment. He had good reason. Tacitus admits, for instance, that, in spite of Nero's explicit instructions, many of Rome's allied kings "were more enthusiastic for Corbulo."⁴⁶⁸ Corbulo's military reputation and determination to recapture Armenia intimidated Quadratus so much that the Syrian proconsul rode out to meet Corbulo in Cilicia. Quadratus feared that "if Corbulo entered Syria to take command of his military resources, all popular talk would turn to the general, who was impressive because of his stature, his eloquent words, as well as beyond experienced and wise, and even strong in appearance for qualities he lacked."⁴⁶⁹ Corbulo was, after all, about to accomplish exactly what Quadratus had contemplated, but feared to do himself after Radamistus' coup. Next to Corbulo, the Syrian governor's impotence, both in terms of his personal charisma and military reputation, was especially evident.

Tacitus reminds his audience about the disparity between Quadratus' and Corbulo's abilities in the following scene as well (13.9). Soon after Corbulo's arrival, both men sent couriers to Vologeses, encouraging the Parthian monarch to "prefer peace to war, and, by offering hostages, to continue demonstrating reverence to the Roman people in the custom of his predecessors."⁴⁷⁰ Vologeses somewhat surprisingly agreed, although Tacitus makes it clear that the king's consent was more of a

467 Tac. *Ann.* 11.8.3. Probably not only Herod Agrippa II and Antiochus IV mentioned above, but also Aristobulos of Lesser Armenia and Sohaemus of Sophene, both of whom Nero had assigned as part of his eastern mobilization efforts.

468 Tac. *Ann.* 11.8.3: ... *sed studia eorum in Corbulonem promptiora erant.*

469 Tac. *Ann.* 13.8.4: ... *illuc progressum, ne, si ad accipiendas copias Suriam intravisset Corbulo, omnium ora in se verteret, corpore ingens, verbis magnificis et super experientiam sapientiamque etiam specie inanium validus.*

470 Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.1: ... *pacem quam bellum mallet datisque obsidibus solitam prioribus reverentiam in populum Romanum continuaret.*

delaying tactic than a sincere act of deference to Roman authority: “Vologeses, either to prepare for war at his own convenience or to remove suspected rivals in the guise of hostages, handed over the noblest members of the Arsacid family.”⁴⁷¹ One way to view this diplomatic exchange is as Nero’s attempt to renew the standard Julio-Claudian relationship with Parthia by securing a new, up-to-date pool of Arsacid pretenders. However, the two excuses Tacitus provides for why Vologeses acquiesced to the hostage transfer undercuts the possibility that this military strategy would ever actually avert a war. After all, despite calling the hostages “the noblest members of the Arsacid family,” Tacitus makes no specific mention of Vologeses’ brother, Tiridates I, whose accession to the Armenian throne the previous year had sparked the whole eastern crisis in the first place. Even with the hostage transfer, the main stumbling block to peace, Tiridates’ Armenian kingship, must have still remained a contested issue.⁴⁷²

The hostage transfer scene which follows is more about Corbulo’s superior character and military skill:

Insteius, a centurion who had by chance been sent by Ummidius to the Parthian king concerning a prior affair, received the hostages. After it had become known to Corbulo, the general ordered Arrius Varus, the prefect of the cohort, to go and recover the hostages. *When an argument arose between the prefect and centurion, so that the judgment of the matter not be a spectacle for the enemy, it was given to the hostages and the legates who were leading them. Those men appointed Corbulo, a man recent in glory and in the certain inclination of his enemies.* For this reason, discord existed afterwards between the two generals. Ummidius complained that he had been robbed of those things which he and his advisers had executed; *Corbulo argued, on the other*

⁴⁷¹ Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.2: *Et Vologeses, quo bellum ex commodo pararet, an ut aemulationis suspectos per nomen obsidum amoveret, tradit nobilissimos ex familia Arsacidarum.*

⁴⁷² That Tiridates’ removal from the Armenian throne is not part of this hostage transfer agreement is not simply inferred from the absence of his name here in 13.9. Tacitus states emphatically at 13.34.2 that Vologeses refused to allow his brother’s removal. And remarks Tacitus attributes to Tiridates at 13.37.5 even seem to suggest that the Parthians were led to believe that the hostages were payment for letting Tiridates retain the Armenian crown. The hostages that the Parthian monarch agreed to hand over may have, however, included one of the king’s sons (a certain Vardanes), whose earlier revolt against his father’s rule briefly promoted the evacuation of Parthian troops from Armenia (*Ann.* 13.7.2). And yet, even during this incident, Tiridates apparently stayed in place on the Armenian throne. Therefore, we would argue that neither Vardanes’ rebellion nor Vologeses’ transfer of Arsacid family members to Rome undercuts our theory that Tacitus’ main goal is to emphasize Parthia’s new era of dynastic cooperation. For Tacitus, that cooperation is just between Vologeses and his two brothers (Tiridates, the king of Armenia, and Pacorus, the king of Media Atropatene) and not with every passing or marginal Arsacid whom we might come across.

hand, that the Parthian king's decision to offer hostages had only come about because he himself had been selected to lead the war: his appointment had changed the Parthian king's hope to fear.

Accepitque eos centurio Insteius ab Ummidio missus, forte priore de causa adito rege. Quod postquam Corbuloni cognitum est, ire praefectum cohortis Arrium Varum et recipere obsides iubet. *Hinc ortum inter praefectum et centurionem iurgium ne diutius externis spectaculo esset, arbitrium rei obsidibus legatisque, qui eos ducebant, permissum. Atque illi recentem gloria et inclinatione quadam etiam hostium Corbulonem praetulere.* Unde discordia inter duces, querente Ummidio praerepta quae suis consiliis patravisset, *testante contra Corbulone non prius conversum regem ad offerendos obsides, quam ipse dux bello delectus spes eius ad metum mutaret.*⁴⁷³ (emphasis mine)

The purpose of this passage is to heighten the audience's opinion of Corbulo, to highlight his personal attributes and to portray him as the embodiment of a truly effective Roman frontier strategy. Unlike Quadratus or his incompetent contemporaries, Tacitus stresses that Corbulo earned the respect not just of his fellow Romans, but of his enemies.⁴⁷⁴ Through the character of Corbulo, the historian seems to emphasize what he believes should be one of the cornerstones of a proper Roman foreign policy—namely, fear (*metus*). As Corbulo asserts, the Parthian king only offered up hostages because he feared the new general's appointment. The implication seems to be that the Great King was never really afraid of Corbulo's predecessors. Quadratus can only claim that he secured the Parthian's compliance through diplomacy; he has none of Corbulo's fear-inspiring reputation to tout. Tacitus has, therefore, set up Corbulo, in some respects, as a new Germanicus.⁴⁷⁵ While discussing Germanicus' death in Parthian Passage 2.1 (*Ann.* 6.31.2), Tacitus states that "fear of Germanicus" (*metu Germanici*) had been what kept Vologeses' predecessor, the Parthian king Artabanus, in line.

⁴⁷³ Tac. *Ann.* 13.9.3-6.

⁴⁷⁴ Besides just disparaging Quadratus, Tacitus might also be trying here to recall the ignoble actions of other eastern Roman commanders so as to make Corbulo shine even more brightly. For example, mentioning that the quarrel arose between "the prefect and the centurion" (*Hinc ortum inter praefectum et centurionem iurgium*) could be an allusion to the earlier dispute in Parthian Passage 3.3 between the "prefect" Pollio and the "centurion" Casperius (*Ann.* 12.45-46).

⁴⁷⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2: "[Artabanus] who, *because of his fear of Germanicus*, was at first loyal to the Romans and fair to his own people, soon became arrogant towards us and savage towards his countrymen." (*Is metu Germanici fidus Romanis, aequabilis in suos, mox superbiam in nos, saevitiam in populares sumpsit ...*).

The question is whether Nero, too, would adopt a role from the past. Would he become the new Tiberius, plagued by jealousies and intent on stifling and conspiring against his popular brilliant eastern commander? Or, would Nero break from the traditional mold, overcome his family's many personal and political flaws, and finally be the emperor who abandoned the Julio-Claudians' long effete Parthian strategy for a better way? Interestingly, as Tacitus closes 13.9, he informs us that the emperor ordered laurels added to the imperial fasces in honor of Corbulo and Quadratus' combined achievement and to resolve the dispute between the two men. Could there be significance to the fact that Nero, despite his earlier, highly militant stance and praiseworthy backing of Corbulo, does not definitively side with the general here? Could Tacitus be trying to say that Nero, in spite of his promising start, now has no clear preference for either Quadratus' "diplomatic" or Corbulo's "fear-based" approaches to handling Parthia? Tacitus may be foreshadowing Nero's eventual backslide into the old, ineffective diplomacy of his Julio-Claudian forebears.

Ann. 13.34-41 relates the story of Corbulo's military preparations in the East and his first Armenian campaign (54-59 CE).⁴⁷⁶ To begin with, Tacitus reminds his readers of the intractable situation Corbulo faced in Armenia. The Parthian king "Vologeses refused to allow his brother, Tiridates, to be deprived of Armenia, a kingdom which he himself had bestowed; nor would Vologeses allow his brother to hold it as the gift of a foreign power."⁴⁷⁷ This statement makes clear to the audience that Tiridates is no mere petty king whom Rome can bully. He benefits from the new era of Arsacid dynastic concord; he has the backing of his brother and thus Parthia's full military might. Nor could Corbulo, as Tacitus also points out, count on the fickle loyalties of Armenia's aristocracy: "the Armenians, whose loyalty was questionable at best, were encouraging both parties to take up arms. But because of their geographic location and the similarity of their customs, they were aligned more closely

⁴⁷⁶ For the arguments surrounding the chronology of Corbulo's Armenian Wars cf. Henderson 1901.

⁴⁷⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 13.34.2: ... *nec Vologeses sinebat fratrem Tiridaten dati a se regni expertem esse aut alienae id potentiae donum habere ...*

with the Parthians, to whom they were connected by marriage. Being ignorant of liberty, the Armenians were also more inclined to slavery.”⁴⁷⁸ Therefore, even if Armenia’s nationalist party was not entirely happy with its Arsacid monarch Tiridates, the Romans could expect little in terms of native assistance. Yet neither of these potential problems were as troubling to Corbulo as the dilapidated state of the eastern legions, many of which had been stationed in Syria under Quadratus’ command:

The legions transferred from Syria, enervated by the long peace, were not tolerating the duties of the Roman camp well. It was obvious that there were veterans in Corbulo’s army who had never guarded an outpost or stood watch. They viewed the rampart and fosse as if new and miraculous; they owned neither helmets nor cuirasses. They were finely adorned and wealthy; it was an army which had grown fat through town living.

Suria transmotaе legiones, pace longa segnes, munia castrorum Romanorum aegerrime tolerabant. Satis constitit fuisse in eo exercitu veteranos, qui non stationem, non vigiliis inissent, vallum fossamque quasi nova et mira viserent, sine galeis, sine loriceis, nitidi et quaestuosi, militia per oppida expleta.⁴⁷⁹

None of these factors, however, made Corbulo reconsider his Armenian invasion plans. Tacitus states that “Corbulo thought it worthy of the majesty of the Roman people to recover the old conquests of Lucullus and Pompey.”⁴⁸⁰ The general’s first task, therefore, had to be the revitalization of the legions, which he undertook with his characteristic vigor. After dismissing the old and sickly from the ranks, he levied new recruits from Galatia and Cappadocia. He also had reinforcements called up from his former province of Germany. During the harsh winter months, he bivouacked these new soldiers not in the Syrian towns, the chief source of decadence and unit degeneration, but “in army tents” (*sub pellibus*).⁴⁸¹ Tacitus reports that many of Corbulo’s legionnaires suffered from frostbite and that, because of these hardships, desertions soon became common. Yet Tacitus also notes that the general soon resolved these problems by braving the elements himself, working beside his men, and imposing rigid disciplinary penalties:

478 Tac. *Ann.* 13.34.2: ... *Armenii ambigua fide utraque arma invitabant, situ terrarum, similitudine morum Parthis propiores conubiisque permixti ac libertate ignota illuc magis ad servitium inclinantes.*

479 Tac. *Ann.* 13.35.1-2.

480 Tac. *Ann.* 13.34. *et Corbulo dignum magnitudine populi Romani rebatur parta olim a Lucullo Pompeioque recipere.*

481 Tac. *Ann.* 13.53.4.

Corbulo, with light clothing and his head uncovered, frequently spent time among his troops and at their labors. He showed praise on the vigorous, comfort to the weak, and himself as an example to all. But then, because of the harshness of the environment and martial lifestyle, many soldiers refused and began to desert. The remedy was sought in severity. Nor indeed, as in other armies, did leniency follow the first or second offense. He who deserted the standards, immediately paid the penalty with his own life.

Ipsē cultu levi, capite intecto, in agmine, in laboribus frequens adesse, laudem strenuis, solacium invalidis, exemplum omnibus ostendere. Dehinc quia duritiam caeli militiaeque multi abnuebant deserebantque, remedium severitate quaesitum est. Nec enim, ut in aliis exercitibus, primum alterumque delictum venia prosequebatur, sed qui signa reliquerat, statim capite poenas luebat.⁴⁸²

Tacitus' narrative conveniently glosses over the fact that Corbulo's efforts to retrain Rome's eastern armies took quite a number of years (roughly from 54 to 58). Had he emphasized this fact, such information would have made the overall campaign seem dilatory and sluggish. Tacitus purposefully obscures the time frame to give the audience the impression that Corbulo is proceeding with a sense of urgency.

That Tacitus wishes to portray Corbulo as a decisive man-of-action is further supported by the fact that, when Corbulo finally sets off to prosecute his Armenian War, he does so with a considerable amount of alacrity and skill. For instance, to negate the possibility of Armenia's pro-Parthian, native population interfering during the Roman advance, Corbulo orchestrated a simultaneous invasion of the kingdom by several of the Armenians' traditional enemies. Corbulo had Antiochus of Commagene attack the Armenian territories adjoining his own kingdom. At the same time, he convinced the Iberian Pharasmenes to once again rekindle "his old hatred of the Armenians as proof of his loyalty to Rome."⁴⁸³ Additionally, the Roman general appears to have brokered a treaty agreement with an obscure Pontic tribe known as the Moschi and persuaded it to raid "the wasteland of Armenia" (*avia Armeniae*).⁴⁸⁴ At first, the use of Roman allies in this way smacks a bit of the Julio-Claudians' standard,

⁴⁸² Tac. *Ann.* 13.35.8-10.

⁴⁸³ Tac. *Ann.* 13.37.3: *Nam Pharasmenes ... quo fidem in nos testaretur, vetus adversus Armenios odium promptius exercebat.*

⁴⁸⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 13.37.4. Tacitus claims that this treaty represented Rome's first alliance with the Moschi who are otherwise

hands-off approach to controlling Armenia through proxies. But the Roman general is not using allied peoples to fight his Armenian War for him, as Tiberius does with Pharasmenes and Quadratus with Radamistus. For each of the allied peoples whom Corbulo recruits into Roman service, Tacitus makes clear that their objective is not the Arsacid Tiridates, nor even the Parthians should they interfere. As the historian plainly states in each case, the primary objective of Rome's allies is either the Armenians themselves or Armenian territory. Corbulo has, therefore, employed these allied peoples specifically to deal with the second problem confronting the Romans: the issue of the possibly hostile, pro-Parthian Armenian natives. Essentially, he has hired local tribesmen to occupy Rome's minor enemies and facilitate Rome's conquest of the kingdom, but not to fight his army's major battles or its primary adversary, the Parthians. Unlike the Julio-Claudians' proxy policy, exemplified best in the narrative by Tiberius and Quadratus, Corbulo is not content to let petty allies rob his legions of their well-deserved glory and spoils. He had worked far too long and hard to retraining them. In Tacitus' opinion, Corbulo's use of allies (basically as distractions and cannon fodder) is the proper, intelligent way Roman generals should wage war.

Corbulo thus reserved the most intimidating obstacle standing in the way of Armenia's reconquest, Tiridates and his vast Parthian military resources, for himself and his Roman legionnaires. No one could accuse Corbulo of fighting a proxy war or robbing the legions of glory. Over the course of the next several chapters, Tacitus' Corbulo steals the show. The general can, as far as Tacitus is concerned, do no wrong. Tacitus describes, for instance, a series of provocative missives sent back and forth between Corbulo and Tiridates, which are clearly intended to goad the Armenian king into war with Rome. Corbulo only adopted this more aggressive posture, however, once he had "learned that Vologeses was preoccupied by a Hyrcanian revolt."⁴⁸⁵ Noting this fact emphasizes that Corbulo, through little more than careful timing, was able to nullify the last of Tiridates' advantages, his ready

unknown except for a brief reference in Herodotus 3.94.

⁴⁸⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 13.37.7: ... *satis comperto Vologesen defectione Hyrcaniae attineri*

access to his brother's reinforcements. Thus, Tacitus has demonstrated, in rather swift succession, how Corbulo has removed the three main obstacles standing in the way of Armenia's recovery, obstacles that seemed so insurmountable when they are first brought up at 13.34. Without engaging in a single battle, the general has already, by employing only sheer grit and guile, retrained Rome's soft eastern troops into battle-ready soldiers, undercut pro-Parthian resistance among Armenia's native population by strategically deploying Rome's clients, and negated Tiridates' most important ally using patience and proper timing.

Corbulo also avoided falling into Tiridates' trap when the Arsacid invited the Roman general to a peace conference in an attempt to stave off a full-scale conflict. To ease the Roman commander's mind, Tiridates offered to let Corbulo bring a larger security detail. However, Tacitus makes it obvious that Corbulo was not fooled by the Parthian's generosity:

The barbarian's ruse would have been obvious to anyone, much less a veteran and keen general. Thus the suggestion that the Parthians should limit their number and that the Romans should bring more meant that a trick was planned. For a numerical advantage is no advantage at all if unprotected troops are exposed to cavalry trained in the use of bows and arrows.

Cuicumque mortalium, nedum veteri et provido duci, barbarae astutiae patuissent: ideo artum inde numerum finiri et hinc maiorem offerri, ut dolus pararetur; nam equiti sagittarum usu exercito si detecta corpora obicerentur, nihil profuturam multitudinem.⁴⁸⁶

Corbulo, therefore, agreed to the day and time of Tiridates' conference, but, just in case, the Roman general wisely took precautions. He choose an alternate site for the meeting, one ill-suited for cavalry maneuvers, and appeared on the field with his entire army arrayed behind him. Corbulo even played with Tiridates a bit, as Tacitus says, by only raising a single standard on the occasion. The result was a perfect example of Corbulo's mastery of psychological warfare for "by raising only one eagle, Corbulo made it seem as if the whole army were just one legion."⁴⁸⁷ Although Tiridates drew up his forces

486 Tac. *Ann.* 13.38.3.

487 Tac. *Ann.* 13.38.6: ... *una cum aquila, quasi eadem legio spectaretur.*

across the valley, the Parthian never dared to venture close enough to conduct the conference, and he refused any attempt to engage in battle.⁴⁸⁸ Tacitus' description of Tiridates' refusal to meet or fight the Roman force is intended to suggest duplicity on the Parthian's part. While Tacitus does not say so explicitly, he leaves little doubt in the reader's mind that the conference was, in fact, a trap. Corbulo's ability to recognize this ambush and outwit his adversary is just one more item on the general's long list of praiseworthy deeds. Even though Tacitus claims that "anyone" (*cuicumque mortalium*) could have identified the Parthian's peace talk as a ruse, not every Roman had. By phrasing it this way, Tacitus, as he frequently does throughout the Parthian Passages, is probably alluding once again to Crassus. Crassus had died after being lured into a similar ambush after his loss at Carrhae in 53 BCE.

With the conference's failure, Corbulo had no reason to delay his full-scale invasion of the Armenian kingdom any longer. *Ann.* 13.39 describes the Romans' initial maneuvers after entering Armenia and their efforts to dislodge Tiridates' troops, who had occupied various hill forts scattered throughout the country's more mountainous regions. Similar to the previous passage which echoes Crassus' story, this chapter is oddly reminiscent of M. Antony's Parthian campaign in 36 BCE. As on Antony's march, the Parthians first try to repel Corbulo by attacking the Roman army's baggage train. In 36, the loss of Antony's baggage train, which was the general's own fault for having trusted its protection to untrustworthy allies, had handicapped his expedition before it ever started. Perhaps this historical tidbit is why Tacitus specifically mentions that Tiridates "was not able to effectively harass Corbulo's supply lines because they were carried through the mountains and guarded by Roman soldiers."⁴⁸⁹ In addition, like Antony's war which began and ended with the siege of Phraaspa, Corbulo's campaign begins similarly with the Roman army's envelopment of an enemy fortress—in this case, one of the strongest in the area, a citadel known as Volandum. But, unlike the siege of Phraaspa which dragged on for months and cost countless Roman lives, Corbulo's troops demonstrated

⁴⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 13.38.7.

⁴⁸⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 13.39.2: *Sed neque com meatibus vim facere potuit, quia per montis ducebantur praesidiis nostris insessos ...*

“such a passion for fighting that, by part of the third day, the walls were emptied of defenders; the gate barricades were overturned; the ramparts were scaled and captured; and all the young men were killed, having lost no Roman soldier and with very few wounded.”⁴⁹⁰ With the swift capture of Volandum, Tacitus notes that the remaining enemy strongholds quickly capitulated, some because their defenders simply panicked, others because their garrisons went over willingly to the Romans. This sudden collapse of enemy resistance is what then encouraged the Romans to eye Armenia’s capital of Artaxata, the seat of Tiridates’ new regime and the place where the king himself currently resided.⁴⁹¹

Yet Tacitus records that Corbulo did not “take his legions by the closest road”—perhaps another allusion to Crassus’ expedition—because the bridge which spanned the Araxas River ran too close to the city’s walls.⁴⁹² Always conscious of the Parthians’ formidable reputation for ranged attacks, Corbulo instead wisely chose to ford the river upstream beyond the reach of the defenders’ missiles.⁴⁹³ Tiridates, for his part, not wishing merely to wait or become trapped within Artaxata’s walls, rode out against Corbulo as the Roman army weaved its way towards the capital city. The Armenian king’s tactics, however, were predictable; he tried once again to assault the Romans’ baggage train. But after the first attempt, Corbulo smartly ordered the baggage brought within the Roman lines and guarded by a thousand horsemen.⁴⁹⁴ Tiridates then attempted, by means of skirmishing and feigned retreats, to draw off and kill overeager legionnaires, the ubiquitous Parthian tactic referred to as the “Parthian Shot.” Consequently, Corbulo gave his troops specific orders that, even when harried, they should not pursue the enemy. For the most part, the Romans seem to have followed his command and, as a result, they

490 Tac. *Ann.* 13.39.7: *Tantus inde ardor certantis exercitus fuit, ut intra tertium diei partem nudati propugnatoribus muri, obices portarum subversi, capta escensu munimenta omnesque puberes trucidati sint, nullo milite amisso, paucis admodum vulneratis.*

491 Tac. *Ann.* 13.39.8-10.

492 Tac. *Ann.* 13.39.11: *Nec tamen proximo itinere ductae legiones ...* . Crassus had been given the choice during his own eastern campaign to march either through Armenia, the longer but safer path, or directly into Mesopotamia via Syria. He chose the shorter route into Mesopotamia and, as a result, fell victim to the Parthians’ ambush at Carrhae.

493 Tac. *Ann.* 13.39.11.

494 Tac. *Ann.* 13.40.3.

incurred few casualties. Tacitus emphasizes the following incident as a testament to why Corbulo's rigid style of discipline was necessary:

Tiridates attacked from different directions, but never wandered within range of the Romans' spears. He would act threatening, then ride away as if afraid to see if he could loosen the Roman ranks and set upon those legionnaires who separated from the rest. Nothing was achieved from such foolhardy acts except that a decurion of the cavalry rode out too boldly and was transfixed by arrows. When that man's example had strengthened the other Romans' obedience, Tiridates went off now with darkness approaching.

Adsultare ex diverso Tiridates, non usque ad ictum teli, sed tum minitans, tum specie trepidantis, si laxare ordines et diversos consecrari posset. Ubi nihil temeritate solutum, nec amplius quam decurio equitum audentius progressus et sagittis confixus ceteros ad obsequium exemplo firmaverat, propinquis iam tenebris abscessit.⁴⁹⁵

Tiridates' inability to stop or slow the Romans' advance convinced the king to flee Artaxata altogether.⁴⁹⁶ Once the Romans had arrived at the capital, Corbulo started preparations for an extended siege, but the citizens opened the city's gates and immediately surrendered. For their capitulation, Tacitus reports that Corbulo generously spared the inhabitants their lives, yet he still ordered the city itself razed to the ground. Tacitus maintains that Corbulo resorted to such an extreme measure because Artaxata was too large to garrison with the troops at Corbulo's disposal. But the historian makes it plain, too, that the firing of Artaxata won Corbulo divine approval:

To this was added a marvel as if it were offered by divine will: for everything surrounding Artaxata was bathed in sunlight, but the area within the walls was suddenly covered by a black cloud and separated by flashes of lightning. Many believed that the city had been marked for destruction by the hostile gods.

Adicitur miraculum velut numine oblatum: nam cuncta Artaxatis tenus sole inlustrata fuere; quod moenibus cingebatur, repente ita atra nube coopertum fulguribusque discretum est, ut quasi infensantibus deis exitio tradi crederetur.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 13.40.5-6.

⁴⁹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 13.41.2 speculates that the Tiridates' destination was possibly either Media or Albania. In either case, he clearly fled to the protection of his brother Vologeses.

⁴⁹⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 13.41.4.

Back in Rome, Corbulo must have received due praise as well. But, as had become common practice in the Principate, great achievements such as his were often celebrated by others. Tacitus informs us that, in this instance, the news of Artaxata's capture encouraged the Senate to heap honors on Nero. The Princeps was, for example, awarded the title of *imperator*,⁴⁹⁸ and the ebullient atmosphere in the capital degenerated into a farcical scene:

... the day on which the victory was achieved, the day it was reported, and the day the official resolution about it was passed were all celebrated as holidays. Moreover, other honors of the same sort were decreed so beyond measure that C. Cassius, who had agreed to the other tributes, pointed out: if on behalf of the benevolence of fortune thanks was given to the gods, had he scattered the whole year with supplications, it would have not been sufficient. For this reason, he suggested that it was necessary to distinguish between sacred and business days, for those who wished to honor heaven and not hinder human affairs.

... inter festos referretur dies, quo patrata victoria, quo nuntiata, quo relatum de ea esset, aliaque in eandem formam decernuntur, adeo modum egressa, ut C. Cassius de ceteris honoribus adsensus, si pro benignitate fortunae dis grates agerentur, ne totum quidem annum supplicationibus sufficere disseruerit, eoque oportere dividi sacros et negotiosos dies, quis divina colerent et humana non impedirent.⁴⁹⁹

And yet, even here, the reader is left wondering what to make of Nero's assessment of Rome's new direction in eastern affairs. Tacitus' wording makes it difficult to decide how invested the emperor is in Corbulo's rapidly progressing campaign. The ridiculousness of the above scene is presumably brought about by overeager courtiers and sycophants; Nero's opinion of these celebrations is not specifically mentioned.

Tacitus picks up the story of Corbulo's Armenian War again in Book 14 (*Ann.* 14.23) where we find the Roman army advancing in haste to seize the kingdom's secondary capital of Tigranocerta.⁵⁰⁰ These scenes are more muted in terms of suspense and dramatic effect than Tacitus' earlier descriptions of Corbulo's maneuvers; however, they still provide the audience with additional examples of the

498 Tac. *Ann.* 13.41.5.

499 Tac. *Ann.* 13.41.5.

500 For the location of Tigranocerta cf. Henderson 1903a.

Roman commander's superior generalship. Tacitus goes out of his way to reemphasize the general's uncanny ability to solve the three distinct problems that confronted the Romans at the war's outset: the lack of legionary discipline, the hostility of Armenia's native population, and the threat of potential Parthian intervention.

As to the first of these issues, Tacitus begins by noting that, on the road to Tigranocerta, the Romans experienced severe deprivations. Shortages of water and army provisions eventually reduced them to eating a "the flesh of cattle" (*carne pecudum*).⁵⁰¹ Tacitus remarks that Corbulo's men continued on, however, inspired by their leader's willingness to suffer alongside them: "the one mitigating circumstance being the patience of the general, who bore the same privations as the common soldier, and even more."⁵⁰² Moreover, these hardships do not seem to have sapped the Romans' hardiness or fighting ability. Tacitus mentions, for example, that "the military post of Legerda, which had been shut to the Romans by a body of resolute youths, was defeated only with a struggle, as the defenders both risked an engagement outside the walls and, when driven within the ramparts, yielded only to a siege-mound and the arms of the storming-party."⁵⁰³ The endurance and military skill Corbulo's soldiers demonstrate stand as a testament to the general's training and strict discipline. These were the same legionnaires who, only three years earlier, had deserted Corbulo's winter camp, regarded the rampart and fosse as novelties, and owned neither helmets nor breastplates. Thanks to Corbulo, these same men were now bearing hardship bravely, constructing siege mounds, and storming enemy fortifications.

The historian also reports that, along the route to Tigranocerta, Corbulo employed a number of different strategies for pacifying hostile tribes. Throughout the passage, Tacitus refers to these enemy peoples simply as "barbarians" (*barbari*), but he clearly means for the audience to identify these

501 Tac. *Ann.* 14.24.1. Roman field armies typically subsisted on grain rations. For sources who deem the diet of Corbulo's troops as improper and even harmful see Caesar *BG* 7.17 and Pliny *NH* 18.

502 Tac. *Ann.* 14.24.2: ... *sola ducis patientia mitigabantur, eadem pluraque gregario milite tolerantis.*

503 Tac. *Ann.* 14.25.1: *At praesidium Legerda, quod ferox iuventus clauserat, non sine certamine expugnatum est: nam et proelium pro muris ausi erant et pulsi intra munimenta aggeri demum et inrumpentium armis cessere.*

tribesmen as the same pro-Parthian, Armenian natives cited in Book 13.⁵⁰⁴ Tacitus records that “the Roman general varied his methods: in the case of the suppliants, he employed pardon; in that of the fugitives, pursuit; to those lurking in hiding-places he was merciless, firing the entrances and exits of their dens, after filling them with lopped branches and bushes.”⁵⁰⁵ Additionally, Corbulo acted decisively against the Mardi, an indigenous tribe of mountain raiders who had been harassing the Roman army. By unleashing the Romans’ allied Iberians against this troublesome group, Tacitus claims, Corbulo “avenged the enemy’s boldness with foreign blood.”⁵⁰⁶ We should view this scene as another example of Corbulo’s adaptability as a field commander and his proper use of Roman allies—that is, as cannon fodder to fight Rome’s minor enemies, and not as its main weapon against Parthia.

Finally, Tacitus also highlights the careful timing of Corbulo’s Armenia invasion:

These successes were gained more easily because the Parthians were distracted by the Hyrcanian war. The Hyrcanians had sent word to the Roman emperor, asking for an alliance and pointing, as a guarantee of their friendship, to their restraint of Vologeses. On the return of the Hyrcanian messengers, Corbulo, so that they should not be encircled by the enemy patrols while crossing the Euphrates, assigned them a guard and led them to the shores of their own sea, from which they were able to retrace to their country, while avoiding the borders of the Parthians.

Quae facilius proveniebant, quia Parthi Hyrcano bello distinebantur. Miserantque Hyrcani ad principem Romanum societatem oratum, attineri a se Vologesen pro pignore amicitiae ostentantes. Eos regredientis Corbulo, ne Euphraten transgressi hostium custodiis circumvenirentur, dato praesidio ad litora maris sui deduxit, unde vitatis Parthorum finibus patris in sedes remeare.⁵⁰⁷

Bringing up the Hyrcanians and their ongoing contest with Vologeses again here allows Tacitus to remind his audience of Corbulo’s astute skills as a strategist. The general did not simply blunder into

504 Tac. *Ann.* 14.23.2-4. These *barbari* are clearly not Parthians (i.e., foreigners to Armenia), if they have knowledge of the local countryside and caves in which to hide from the Romans. And nowhere does Tacitus explicitly mention that they are under Tiridates’ direct command.

505 Tac. *Ann.* 14.23.3: ... *dux Romanus diversis artibus, misericordia adversus supplices, celeritate adversus profugos, inmitis iis, qui latebras insederant, ora et exitus specuum sarmentis virgultisque completos igni exurit.*

506 Tac. *Ann.* 14.23.4: ... *hostilemque audaciam externo sanguine ultus est.* This reference to the Mardi may also be an allusion to Antony’s eastern expedition (36 BCE). A Mardi guide led Antony’s army out of hostile Parthian territory after his army had been unable to capture Phraaspa.

507 Tac. *Ann.* 14.25.2-4.

Armenia unprepared or uninformed; he was patient and employed a well-proven strategy of “divide and conquer.” He ingeniously used the Hyrcanians to distract Vologeses to make the conquest of Armenia easier.

For Tacitus, these examples are perfect reasons to see Corbulo as the role model by which Romans should judge all their eastern commanders: he is neither haughty nor elitist, but willing to ask of his men only those things he himself is willing to endure; he is neither impotent nor overly cruel, but understands that sometimes leaders must employ both the “carrot” and the “stick” to achieve the best results; and, finally, he is neither reckless nor shortsighted, but sees the value of carefully calculated moves on the battlefield and in interstate diplomacy.

The tangible benefits of occasionally treating a population mercifully, for example, as Corbulo demonstrates with Artaxata’s citizenry and several of the *barbari*, become apparent in the following scene. Ambassadors soon arrived at the Romans’ camp to report that, like Artaxata, Tigranocerta too was willing to throw open its gates to Corbulo. Because Tigranocerta’s envoys had come early, before Corbulo had considered besieging the city, the general chose not to raze the capital. He hoped, as Tacitus says, that “a population which had lost nothing would retain its loyalty with greater readiness.”⁵⁰⁸ But, having had to raze Artaxata earlier for logistical reasons, Corbulo may have kept Tigranocerta intact so that the city could serve as the headquarters/capital for whoever administered the kingdom next. Tigranocerta, as opposed to Artaxata, was located much closer to Parthian territory. It could thus serve as a defensive outpost in the event that Parthia chose to reinvade. Following the Roman capture of Tigranocerta, Tiridates attempted one last, rather pitiful counterattack, launched from the neighboring kingdom of Media, with the hope of establishing an Arsacid foothold along Armenia’s eastern frontier. However, Corbulo’s rapid response, first sending out a mobile auxiliary contingent to

508 Tac. *Ann.* 14.24.7: ... *quo promptius obsequium integri retinerent.*

cut off Tiridates and then conducting a forced march himself to the Median border, quickly put an end to any appetite the Arsacid had for prolonging the war.⁵⁰⁹

With all of Armenia, including Tigranocerta, firmly under Roman control, Tacitus concludes 14.26 by recounting how Nero then dispatched a handpicked candidate for the Armenian throne:

... after Corbulo had learned about the places which were hostile to the Romans, *he was in the process of taking possession of Armenia, devastating it with slaughter and fire*, when Tigranes, who had been chosen by Nero to assume the throne, arrived. Tigranes was a member of the Cappadocian royal house and a great-grandson of King Archelaus, *but because of his lengthy stay as a hostage in Rome, he had been completely reduced to a slave-like demeanor*. ... [Tigranes] was allowed a garrison of one thousand legionnaires, three allied cohorts, and two squadrons of cavalry; and, to defend his new kingdom more easily, any part of Armenia that adjoined the frontiers of Pharasmenes or Polemo, or Aristobulus or Antiochus, was ordered to obey him. Corbulo departed to Syria, which because of the death of its governor Ummidius [Quadratus] was unoccupied, and since then left to its own devices.

... quosque nobis aversos animis cognoverat, *caedibus et incendiis perpopulatus possessionem Armeniae usurpabat*, cum advenit Tigranes a Nerone ad capessendum imperium delectus, Cappadocum ex nobilitate, regis Archelai nepos, *sed quod diu obses apud urbem fuerat, usque ad servilem patientiam demissus*. ... Additum ei praesidium mille legionarii, tres sociorum cohortes duaeque equitum alae, et quo facilius novum regnum tueretur, pars Armeniae, ut cuique finitima, Pharasmani Polemonique et Aristobulo atque Antiocho parere iussae sunt. Corbulo in Syriam abscessit, morte Ummidii legati vacuum ac sibi permissam.⁵¹⁰ (emphasis mine)

Kristine Gilmartin has already noted in her extensive article “Corbulo’s Campaigns in the East” that the language Tacitus uses represents an important turning point in the story. Expressions such as *caedibus et incendiis perpopulatus* and the verb *usurpo* carry distinctly negative connotations and may hint that Corbulo is acting more like a rogue conqueror or imperial rival than as Nero’s obedient servant.⁵¹¹

Gilmartin claims that Tacitus uses such vocabulary to suggest that the emperor was becoming

⁵⁰⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 14.26.1.

⁵¹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 14.26.1. At the time, Pharasmenes was king of Iberia; Polemo of Pontus and Trapezus; Aristobulos of Lesser Armenia; and Antiochus of Commagene. Barrett 1979 has suggested that the first two of these monarchs *Pharasmani Polemonique* were later emendations to Tacitus’ original text, and that only Aristobulos and Antiochus were actually ordered to obey Tigranes.

⁵¹¹ Gilmartin 1973: 603. Koestermann 1967: 74-75 notes, furthermore, that the verb *perpopulor* appears nowhere else in the Latin corpus.

increasingly jealous of both Corbulo's achievements in the East and the general's skyrocketing popularity back in Rome. This theory would explain why Tigranes, Nero's replacement for Corbulo, appears so abruptly mid-sentence. The lack of any previous introduction for Tigranes might imply that he is something of a wild card, perhaps hastily chosen and with little forethought on Nero's part. But the emperor's fears about Corbulo's treasonous ambitions derive entirely from the Princeps' own brooding paranoia; they are not grounded in reality.⁵¹² Tacitus squashes any idea of Corbulo's disloyalty—if not in Nero's mind, then at least in the reader's—by describing in the chapter's last sentence, the dutiful, obedient way the general abandons Armenia and takes up his new post in Syria.⁵¹³

This passage also demonstrates how the emperor, by installing Tigranes, has simultaneously laid the foundation for unraveling Corbulo's great achievement in Armenia. By mentioning Tigranes' heritage, that the prince was a member of the Cappadocian royal family and grandson of King Archelaus, Tacitus wants his audience to recall Germanicus' earlier installation of Zeno/Artaxias III on the Armenian throne.⁵¹⁴ We have already seen how Tacitus used Germanicus' candidate as the perfect example of a viable Armenian client-king; Artaxias was not only from a local eastern dynastic family, Pontus' royal house, but he also shared many of the cultural idiosyncrasies of the native Armenians.⁵¹⁵ Tigranes, on the other hand, may be ethnically compatible with the Armenians over whom he is about to rule, but he is hardly in tune with their customs. As Tacitus plainly points out, Tigranes' "long residence as a hostage in the capital had reduced him to a slave-like docility." Although Tacitus does not say so outright, we can probably assume that Tigranes suffers from the same cultural confusion, from the same "bi-polar ethnicity" disorder, as the other Julio-Claudians' Parthian candidates.

⁵¹² Throughout the *Annales* and elsewhere (Suet. *Nero* 13; Cass. Dio 62 (63.17)), Corbulo is often praised—and sometimes even criticized—for his unwavering uprightness of character and ceaseless obedience to Nero. The general's famous loyalty, in fact, eventually led him to take his own life at Nero's command. Cf. Cass. Dio 63.17.

⁵¹³ Hammond 1934: 92-93 at least believes that Corbulo's actions, in general, betray the fact that he did not approve of Nero's selection of Tigranes.

⁵¹⁴ Additionally, Tigranes' paternal great-grandfather was Herod the Great.

⁵¹⁵ Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 2.56.1.

Unlike his imperial predecessors, Nero never has the opportunity in the *Annales* to back a pretender for the Parthian throne. But as the focus of the Julio-Claudian foreign policy shifts from Parthia to Armenia in Tacitus' final hexad, Tigranes becomes Nero's best chance to follow in the long-established, failed strategy of his forebears. Like the Parthian pretenders Vonones, Phraates Jr., Tiridates, and Meherdates, Nero's candidate for Armenia, Tigranes, can never be an effective Roman client-king because of the prince's upbringing. Nevertheless, Nero still places Tigranes in charge of the hotly disputed kingdom, arms him with two legions, and orders Rome's other client-kings in the region to obey him. Nero believes he is replacing Corbulo, his rival, with a safer, more obedient puppet. But Tigranes is just another flawed pretender. The irony is that Nero has just traded his most obedient and effective general for a far less obedient and infinitely less skilled proxy. Based on the track record for pretenders that Tacitus has established in the first three Parthian Passages, Tigranes seems almost fated to cause further problems for Rome.

B. Parthian Passage 4.2 (*Ann.* 15.1-17): Paetus & Rhandaia: The Dangers of Hubris and the Mutability of Fortune

As Book 15 opens, Tacitus spends the first several chapters explaining how Tigranes' ineptitude and greed clumsily drew Rome into its first "hot war" with Parthia in over a century. Yet the historian begins by commenting on Vologeses' initial hesitancy to go to war:

Meanwhile, the Parthian king Vologeses, who knew about Corbulo's achievements and that the foreign king Tigranes had been put in charge of Armenia after his brother Tiridates' expulsion, wanted to avenge this great insult to the Arsacids. But he was deterred by a variety of concerns: *by Rome's renewed reputation for greatness and by his own reverence for the continuing treaty. Vologeses was by nature a delayer*, and he had become distracted by the revolt of the Hyrcanians, a strong nation, which had tied up the Parthians in many wars ever since.

Interea rex Parthorum Vologeses cognitis Corbulonis rebus regemque alienigenam Tigranen Armeniae impositum, simul fratre Tiridate pulso spretum Arsacidarum fastigium ire ultum volens, magnitudine rursus Romana et *continui foederis reverentia*

*diversas ad curas trahebatur, cunctator ingenio et defectione Hyrcanorum, gentis validae, multisque ex eo bellis inligatus.*⁵¹⁶ (emphasis mine)

Vologeses may seem bold and assertive in Book 14; however, here Tacitus gives his readers the impression that the Parthian king is full of bluster. When the moment for war arrives, the Parthian king equivocates and, in the end, appears to lose his nerve. Because he is “by nature a delayer” (*cunctator ingenio*), we are reminded of the monarch’s Roman counterparts, the Julio-Claudian emperors, who have achieved more through delay and diplomacy than through military force. Tacitus’ reference to Vologeses’ “reverence for the continuing treaty” (*continui foederis reverentia*), for example, is most likely an allusion to the Augustan-era diplomatic agreement between C. Caesar and Phraataces at the Euhprates in 2 CE. Similar to Vologeses’ current situation, Phraataces had, thanks to his mother Thea Musa’s encouragement, tried to exert Parthian influence in Armenia at Rome’s expense. But because of distracting domestic troubles and the threat of C. Caesar’s military intervention, that earlier Parthian king had eventually chosen peace rather than war with Rome.⁵¹⁷ Therefore, Tacitus appears to be implying, as Book 15 commences, that Vologeses will ultimately yield to Roman pressure, much like his predecessor Phraataces. We are probably supposed to interpret Vologeses’ commitment to Tiridates, as well as to the Arsacid brothers’ newly-established fraternal concord, as being in danger of faltering and collapsing at this point.⁵¹⁸

Tacitus then immediately shows us at 15.1.2 how Nero’s removal of Corbulo from Armenia quickly reverses this favorable situation for Rome:

⁵¹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 15.1.1. Describing Tigranes as an alien (*alienigenam Tigranen*) is probably a reference to his Artaxiad rather than Arsacid heritage.

⁵¹⁷ For an account of C. Caesar’s meeting with Phraataces see Vell. Pat. 2.101.1-3. For Phraataces’ domestic problems at the time, cf. Cass. Dio 55.10a.4. As for Vologeses’ domestic issues, Tacitus cites, in the passage quoted above, the ongoing war with the Hyrcanians. Mentioning the Hyrcanians again here also helps connect this passage in the reader’s mind to the previous sections of Parthian Passage 4 in Books 13 and 14. Another similarity between Vologeses and Phraataces is their mixed ethnicity: Vologeses was the son of the Parthian king Vonones II and a Greek concubine (Cass. Dio 62 (63.5); Joseph. *AJ* 20.74; Tac. *Ann.* 12.44); Phraataces was the son of the Parthian king Phraates IV and the Italian slave girl turned royal consort Musa (Joseph. *AJ* 18.39-40).

⁵¹⁸ Vologeses had brokered a compromise with his two brothers, reigning himself as king of Parthia, but allowing Pacorus to rule over Media Atropotene and Tiridates over Armenia (see Joseph. *AJ* 20.74; Tac. *Ann.* 15.2).

[Vologeses] was still dithering when a new report of a insult compelled him to act. Apparently, Tigranes had ventured out of Armenia *and devastated the Adiabeni, a neighboring people. His attack was, however, broader in scope and longer in duration than just an act of piracy.* The nobles of Adiabene tolerated Tigranes' raid poorly. They claimed that they had descended to the point of contempt that they were not even being assaulted by a Roman general, *but by the temerity of a hostage who had lived for so many years as a slave and as one of his master's possessions.*

Atque illum ambiguum novus insuper nuntius contumeliae exstimulat: quippe egressus Armenia Tigranes *Adiabenos, conterminam nationem, latius ac diutius quam per latrocinia vastaverat,* idque primores gentium aegre tolerabant: eo contemptiois descensum, ut ne duce quidem Romano incursarentur, *sed temeritate obsidis tot per annos inter mancipia habiti.*⁵¹⁹ (emphasis mine)

Tacitus' wording suggests that Tigranes' unprovoked incursion into the Parthian dependency of Adiabene is what upset the status quo in Armenia after Corbulo's departure. The recklessness of Nero's client-king is what compels Vologeses to reconsider abandoning his struggle with Rome. The reader must assume therefore that, had Nero left Corbulo in charge and never appointed Tigranes, Vologeses would have sheepishly deferred to Roman power.

Tacitus does not clearly state whether Nero ordered Tigranes to attack Adiabene. But, as we saw in our previous section, the historian does not specifically state why the emperor chose to replace Corbulo with Tigranes, either. Tacitus' silence about Nero's motivations is probably purposeful. Doing so allows the audience to read between the lines and pick up on Tacitus' subtle grammatical clues, innuendos, and allusions. Without evidence to the contrary, readers are left to assume the worst about the emperor. For example, despite the historian's reticence about Nero's hand in Tigranes' provocative moves across the border, Tacitus does make clear that the Armenian monarch's goal was expansion and not simply plunder (*latius ac diutius quam per latrocinia*). Because Nero's jealousy of Corbulo's conquests may be what first prompted the popular general's removal, we are meant to infer that Tigranes is, like the other Julio-Claudians' Parthian pretenders, trying to conquer Parthia for his master

⁵¹⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.1.2.

in Rome. We are supposed to see Tigranes not just as Nero's appointee, but as his creature. Tigranes is, after all, someone whose achievements the emperor could more easily publicize as his own. Tacitus intends us to fill in the blanks, to think that Nero hoped Tigranes, a Roman "hostage" (*obses*) and the emperor's "property" (*mancipium*), would conquer Parthia in his name. Nero could then use this achievement as propaganda in Rome to overshadow Corbulo's recovery of Armenia. But even if Nero did not order Tigranes to do so, attacking Adiabene would have still seemed imprudent to Tacitus' audience. It may have even appeared worse, because Tigranes' actions against Adiabene would have then implied that Nero had no control over his creature. Corbulo's popularity may have been a problem for Nero, but at least that general was obedient.

Tacitus next dedicates considerable space (*Ann.* 15.1.3-15.2) to the internal debate at the Parthian court concerning Tigranes' raids. This debate shows Vologeses to be one of the *Annales'* few truly dynamic characters; his hesitancy and inclination to inaction at Book 15's starts to abate as his advisers present him with logical arguments for war. The Parthian monarch's viewpoint does not remain static, but evolves over the course of the discussion.⁵²⁰ The ruling prince of Adiabene, for instance, points out somewhat begrudgingly to Vologeses that "if the Parthians would not defend Adiabene, then Roman slavery rested more lightly on those who capitulated than on those who resisted."⁵²¹ Yet it is the Great King's own brother, Tiridates, who speaks most eloquently and finally spurs the monarch to take action. Tiridates boldly asserts: "Great empires were not preserved by lethargy; the struggle of men and arms was required. Might made right. Maintaining personal

⁵²⁰ Nero, who is in many regards the Parthian king's counterpoint in the third hexad, is another dynamic character. But Nero's evolution as a ruler is the mirror image of Vologeses'. Nero's fatal flaw, his megalomania and paranoia, which starts off as relatively manageable thanks to Seneca and Burrus' wise counsel, will from here out grow only worse. From Tacitus' viewpoint, Vologeses evolves into a man of action, while Nero essentially devolves into a hack.

⁵²¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.1.4: ... *nisi defendant Parthi, levius servitium apud Romanos deditis quam captis esse*. Because Caesennius Paetus' campaign and the disastrous surrender of his army at Rhandaia are the main focus of Book 15, this line could be a ironic, early framing device or allusion to those upcoming events.

possessions was praiseworthy for private households, but struggling for the possessions of others, that was the true measure of a king.”⁵²²

Tiridates’ remarks are key to understanding the true meaning behind the *Annales*’ Parthian Passages. His keen insight about imperial power is, in effect, the counterargument to the Julio-Claudians’ passive foreign policy. The advice Tiridates offers his brother is the exact opposite of Tiberius’ attitude in Parthian Passage 2. That emperor’s desire had been to “manipulate the empire’s foreign affairs through diplomatic policy and trickery, and to avoid taking up arms.”⁵²³ By placing such critical remarks in the mouth of a Roman enemy, Tacitus highlights what he sees as the greatest irony: that Roman emperors, from Augustus to Nero, fought their eastern wars vicariously through pretenders, while this Parthian monarch, Vologeses—in spite of his his initial reservations—was willing to risk his own life on the battlefield. In addition, this passage demonstrates Vologeses’ recommitment to the fraternal pact with his brothers, something which was in doubt at Book 15’s outset. As Vologeses’ lengthy response to Tiridates and the other Parthian war councilors begins, Tacitus unambiguously lays out the Parthian brothers’ shared power scheme:⁵²⁴

[Vologeses] placed Tiridates next to him and thus began: “This man, the son of same father as myself, who ceded the crown to me because of my greater age, I led off to take possession of Armenia. That kingdom was our empire’s third greatest seat of power, for Pacorus had already taken Media. I seemed against the old fraternal feuds and family struggles because I united the household with the proper religious rites. The Romans are now prohibiting it and breaking the peace, which they have never challenged successfully, to their own ruin. I will not deny that I preferred to retain the territory of our ancestors with more equity than bloodshed, with more reason than arms. If, by delaying, I was wrong, I will make amends with virtue.

[Vologeses] proximum sibi Tiridaten constituit atque ita orditur: “Hunc ego eodem mecum patre gentium, cum mihi per aetatem summo nomine concessisset, in possessionem Armeniae deduxi, qui tertius potentiae gradus habetur: nam Medos Pacorus ante ceperat. Videbarque contra vetera fratrum odia et certamina familiae nostrae penatis rite composuisse. Prohibent Romani et pacem numquam ipsis prospere

522 Tac. *Ann.* 15.1.5: ... *Non enim ignavia magna imperia contineri; virorum armorumque faciendum certamen; id in summa fortuna aequius quod validius, et sua retinere privatae domus, de alienis certare regiam laudem esse.*

523 Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.1: ... *retinens consiliis et astu res externas moliri, arma procul habere.*

524 Rather than just alluding to it as we have seen him do in earlier Books.

laccessitam nunc quoque in exitium suum abrumpunt. Non ibo infitias: aequitate quam sanguine, causa quam armis retinere parta maioribus malueram. Si cunctatione deliqui, virtute corrigam.⁵²⁵

As the Great King's speech progresses, we can see Vologeses' character evolve. He renounces his earlier hesitancy and boldly rejects any future diplomatic solution concerning the recovery of Armenia. His concluding remarks are, in essence, Parthia's declaration of war; they serve as the watershed in Tacitus' narrative between cold war and hot war. Vologeses is the very antithesis of the Julio-Claudians, and, thanks to Tiridates' wise counsel, he has finally committed himself and his nation to a warlike posture against Rome.

Following the Parthian monarch's address, Tacitus includes a brief description of the forceful steps Vologeses next takes to restore Tiridates:

[Vologeses] bound Tiridates' head with a diadem. He handed over his available cavalry guard, which by custom followed the king, and auxiliary units of Adiabeni to a nobleman named Monaeses, whom he entrusted with the task of driving Tigranes out of Armenia. The Parthian king then set aside his war with the Hyrcanians, mustered his best men and the full weight of his war resources, and began threatening the Roman provinces.

Diademate caput Tiridatis evinxit, promptam equitum manum, quae regem ex more sectatur, Monaesi nobili viro tradidit, adiectis Adiabenorum auxiliis mandavitque Tigranen Armenia exturbandum dum ipse positus adversus Hyrcanos discordiis viris intimas molemque belli ciet, provinciis Romanis minitans.⁵²⁶

This sentence may seem straightforward, but closer inspection reveals that it is, in fact, pregnant with allusions to both later and earlier Romano-Parthian interactions. The crowning of Tiridates is, for instance, a recurring feature of Tacitus' last hexad. The Arsacid brother has, by this point, already been installed on and deposed from the Armenian throne once. Yet Tiridates' investiture, which Tacitus briefly depicts here, plays out at least twice more in the *Annales*: 1) after Corbulo's second Armenian

⁵²⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.1-5.

⁵²⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 15.2.7.

campaign when the Roman general presides over the Arsacid's uncrowning; and 2) after Tiridates' famous journey to Rome when Nero invests Tiridates as Rome's newest client-king.⁵²⁷

Furthermore, by mentioning both Tiridates' and Monaeses' names in the same breath, Tacitus might be attempting to recall the Parthian pretender Monaeses/Tiridates, whom Antony and then Augustus tried to install as a client-king on the Parthian throne. Monaeses/Tiridates was a disappointing failure for Rome's first emperor mainly because of his non-Arsacid bloodline. During his short stint on the Parthian throne, Monaeses/Tiridates was unable to garner the support of Parthia's nobility and was eventually unseated by the pure blooded Arsacid Phraates IV. This setback was what had first encouraged Augustus to start using Phraates' heirs as pretenders; their Arsacid lineage made them seem more viable.⁵²⁸ Reminding his readers of the earlier Monaeses/Tiridates incident would be especially fitting at this juncture in Tacitus' story because Nero has foolishly stumbled into a similar situation. Tigranes was "a member of the Cappadocian royal house and a great-grandson of King Archelaus"; he was therefore a descendant of Armenia's old Artaxiad dynasty, but no Arsacid like Tiridates. In addition, because of his Roman upbringing, Tigranes is not even a worthy substitute like Germanicus' Artaxias. The Monaeses/Tiridates allusion could be another reminder that the Julio-Claudians had learned little since Augustus' early days of meddling in eastern affairs; they have still not figured out the critical formula for choosing viable eastern clients.

⁵²⁷ For Tiridates' uncrowning by Corbulo see *Ann.* 15.29. Tiridates' subsequent journey to Rome and investiture by Nero are, of course, not included in the extant portions of the *Annales*; however, given the Armenian king's prominent role in Tacitus' Neronian Books, it seems unlikely that the historian would have failed to mention the event. And for non-Tacitean accounts of Tiridates' investiture ceremony at Rome see Cass. Dio 62 (63.1-7); Suet. *Nero* 13; Pliny *NH* 30.6. Additionally, Tacitus might have meant for his audience to recognize faint echoes of Germanicus' crowning of Artaxias III as well (*Tac. Ann.* 2.56). Both cases involve rulers (Vologeses/Germanicus) personally crowning their hand-picked subordinates (Tiridates/Artaxias). And Tacitus seems to invoke Artaxias' coronation scene whenever he wishes to suggest that the selection of a proper, worthy Armenian king has just taken place. Perhaps we are supposed to interpret Vologeses' Tiridates, as opposed to Nero's Tigranes, as one of these deserving Armenian candidates.

⁵²⁸ Such a theory is, admittedly, highly speculative. These two names were common among Parthia's upper class; they may simply be coincidental in the present context. However, if we take into account Tacitus' other Augustan era allusions in this chapter (e.g., the possible references to C. Caesar's earlier Parthian treaty and Augustus' *Res Gestae*), the weight of the evidence makes this coincidence seem more intentional than not.

Tacitus casts Tiridates and his older brother Vologeses as the spiritual, not just dynastic, successors to men like Artabanus III and Phraates IV. These men were the last Parthian kings who successfully stood up to Rome.⁵²⁹ Together, Tiridates and Vologeses are the perfect combination of Parthian upbringing, Arsacid blood, and aggressive posturing; they are the most formidable enemies Rome faces in the *Annales*. After overcoming some initial Tiberian-esque hesitancy for war, Vologeses shows that he is not a descendant of Phraataces, his half-Italian ancestor who caved in the face of Roman pressure. He is more like Artabanus or Phraates, pure blooded and hardened in his resolve against Rome.

Such an interpretation might explain why Tacitus ends 15.2 by stating that Vologeses was threatening not Armenia, but “the Roman provinces” (*provinciis Romanis minitans*). This phrase seems, at first, a bit strange because Armenia is the source of the current dispute and will remain the main theater of war. This inconsistency could be foreshadowing; Vologeses does attempt to invade Syria later in the story. But Tacitus has so far given no other indication that Vologeses’ sights were set on anything other than the recovery of Armenia. Therefore, the statement might be pure Tacitean hyperbole, an attempt to invoke the specter of Artabanus’ and Phraates’ better led, more dangerous Parthians. Tacitus seemed to think that a broad, threatening posture made Artabanus III an especially praiseworthy monarch in the *Annales*’ first two Parthian Passages. In Book 6, where Tacitus comments on Tiberius’ hesitancy to take up arms and defend the empire by force, the historian mentions in the very same breath the following about Artabanus’ intentions:

[Artabanus] coveted Armenia; therefore, after the death of king Artaxias, he installed his eldest son Arsaces as monarch, ... at the same time, the old territorial borders of the Persians and Macedonians, the possessions first held first by Cyrus and afterwards by Alexander, he boasted and threatened that he was about to invade.

[Artabanus] avidusque Armeniae, cui defuncto rege Artaxia Arsacen liberorum suorum veterrimum inposuit, ... simul veteres Persarum ac Macedonum terminos, seque

⁵²⁹ Artabanus III against the Roman pretenders Vonones and Tiridates (i.e., the sons of Phraates IV); and Phraates IV himself earlier against M. Antony and Augustus’ pretender Monaeses/Tiridates.

invasurum possessa primum Cyro et post Alexandro per vaniloquentiam ac minas iaciebat.⁵³⁰

Artabanus' earlier actions in Armenia, especially his aggressive foreign policy stance, in some ways mirrors Tacitus' treatment of Vologeses and his brother Tiridates here in Book 15.

In the chapters which follow the Parthian war council (*Ann.* 15.3-5), Tacitus gives an account of the nobleman Monaeses' attempt to expel Tigranes from Armenia. According to the historian, the Parthians' cavalry army and allies poured into the kingdom so swiftly that they completely surprised Rome's shortsighted pretender. The suddenness of the Parthians' appearance forced Tigranes to seek refuge, along with several Roman cohorts, behind the walls of Tigranocerta, to which the Parthians then laid siege. From Syria, Corbulo dispatched two legions to aid Tigranes. The general also stationed a legion along the Syrian bank of the Euphrates to protect his own province from Parthian raids, and he sent word to Rome requesting that the emperor appoint an additional commander to oversee Armenian operations. Yet Tacitus makes clear that these measures were, for the moment at least, premature. Even without the assistance of Corbulo's legionary reinforcements, Monaeses' siege met with little success. To explain why the Parthians were unable to drive out Tigranes, Tacitus launches into a familiar diatribe about the Parthians' military weaknesses:

... The Parthian lacks the boldness at close quarters demanded for the persecution of a siege: he resorts to occasional flights of arrows, which both fail to terrify the garrison and delude himself. The Adiaberi, on beginning to push forward their ladders and machines, were easily thrown back, then cut to pieces by a sally of our men.

... Partho ad exsequendas obsidiones nulla cominus audacia: raris sagittis neque clausos exterret et semet frustratur. Adiabeni cum promovere scalas et machinamenta inciperent, facile detrusi, mox erumpentibus nostris caeduntur.⁵³¹

Monaeses' failure at Tigranocerta afford Corbulo the opportunity to resort to bully diplomacy. He sent a personal letter to Vologeses, who was residing at Nisibis, brazenly threatening the Parthian monarch.

⁵³⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2.

⁵³¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.4.5-6.

Tacitus indicates that the hostile message was delivered “with ferocity” (*ferociter*)⁵³² by the centurion Casperius, the same upstanding legionnaire whom we met earlier during the Radamistus affair. Standing before the Great King, Casperius boldly declared: “An attack had been carried out against [Corbulo’s province of Syria]. An allied king and friend, as well as Roman cohorts, were now being besieged [in Armenia]. It would be better to end that blockade, or [Corbulo] was also about to set up his camp on hostile ground [i.e., Parthia!].”⁵³³

Besides Casperius’ convenient reappearance at this point in the narrative, Corbulo’s message to Vologeses also shares other similarities with the Radamistus affair from Parthian Passage 3.3. The Roman general’s threat is not only a point for point assessment of Armenia’s current situation under Nero’s client Tigranes, but also an echo of Armenian affairs under Claudius’ client Mithridates. Ummidius Quadratus, Corbulo’s predecessor in Syria, had dealt with a similar siege, Radamistus’ envelopment of the fortress at Gornaëa. During Radamistus’ bid for the Armenian throne, his uncle Mithridates had fled, much like Tigranes, to a nearby fortress and the protection of several Roman cohorts. But Quadratus’ and Corbulo’s responses to these two sieges differ. Quadratus refused to interfere on Mithridates’ behalf or uphold Roman honor in Armenia. As a result, Mithridates was betrayed by his Roman guards and deposed. Corbulo, on the other hand, intercedes on Tigranes’ behalf as best he can and even goes so far as to risk war with Parthia. As a consequence, Vologeses will in the end have to back down and accept a short-term, diplomatic compromise. The comparison of Quadratus’ and Corbulo’s approaches is just another reminder of Corbulo’s superior qualities. Tacitus believed the general was an example of how a proper Roman commander should act.

⁵³² Tac. *Ann.* 15.5.3.

⁵³³ Tac. *Ann.* 15.5.1-2: ... *vim provinciae inlatam: socium amicumque regem, cohortis Romanas circumsideri. Omitteret potius obsidionem, aut se quoque in agro hostili castra positurum.* Despite Tacitus’ recent statement that Vologeses was threatening the Roman provinces, at this point in the narrative, the historian is still unclear about what overt military actions Vologeses had made towards any territory other than Armenian, including Syria. Perhaps Corbulo’s accusation that the Parthian king had violated Syria is nothing more than diplomatic bluster. However, Tacitus also says that Casperius delivered the general’s message to Vologeses at Nisibis (*Ann.* 15.5.3). As we are about to see, Nisibis will be the Parthians’ staging point for their upcoming attacks on Armenia and Syria in Book 15. Therefore, maybe Corbulo considered Vologeses’ presence at Nisibis, even at this early stage in the conflict, a direct “violation” of Syria’s security.

On top of Monaeses' fruitless siege, Vologeses faced logistical problems. Tacitus reports that "[Vologeses'] cavalry was crippled by a lack of fodder, for a swarm of locusts had appeared and eaten whatever grass or leaves were available."⁵³⁴ Confronted with these setbacks and Corbulo's harsh rhetoric, the Parthian king had to adopt a less belligerent attitude.⁵³⁵ Vologeses sent word to Corbulo that the Parthians would dispatch ambassadors to Rome to discuss peace terms and the possibility of a compromise settlement for Armenia. In the meantime, the Parthian monarch offered to recall Monaeses and lift the siege of Tigranocerta if Corbulo agreed to remove Tigranes from the kingdom while diplomatic negotiations took place.⁵³⁶ The Roman commander seems to have accepted Vologeses' armistice, and both sides evacuated the disputed kingdom. Rather conspicuously, Tacitus does not bother to announce Tigranes' own departure directly, despite finding space to dedicate a full sentence to Monaeses' withdrawal from Tigranocerta and Vologeses' departure from Nisibis.⁵³⁷ The historian chooses instead to use rumors and innuendo to convey the Roman pretender's exit from Armenia and the narrative, thus purposefully obscuring Tigranes' fate. In terms of the storyline, Nero's Armenian candidate vanishes just as quickly as he appears.

Leaving Armenian affairs as such sets the stage for Tacitus' tragic account of L. Caesennius Paetus' disastrous expedition. Just as Radamistus' meddling had opened the door for Corbulo's first Armenian campaign, Tigranes' bungling similarly paves the way for Paetus' entrance into the narrative. These chapters also carry over an important theme from the *Annales'* other Armenian sections—

⁵³⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.5.5: ... *sibi inbecillum equitem pabuli inopia: nam exorta vis locustarum ambederat quidquid herbidum aut frondosum.*

⁵³⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.5.6.

⁵³⁶ Tacitus never directly states that Corbulo agreed to Tigranes' removal. But the historian does strongly hint at this concession couched in the form of legionary rumor (*Ann.* 15.6.1): "By the majority of men these results [i.e., the lifting of the siege] were acclaimed as a victory due to the fears of the king and to Corbulo's threats. Others found the explanation in a private compact stipulating that, if hostilities were suspended on both sides and Vologeses withdrew, Tigranes would also make his exit from Armenia" (*Haec plures ut formidine regis et Corbulonis minis patrata ac magna extollebant: alii occulte pepigisse interpretabantur, ut omisso utrimque bello et abeunte Vologese Tigranes quoque Armenia abscederet*). Most likely, Tacitus obscures Corbulo's concession so as not to detract any from the assertive, warrior persona that the historian has been so carefully crafting for the general over the course of his fourth Parthian Passage.

⁵³⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.5.7.

notably, the idea of Parthia's military vulnerabilities. This same theme crops up not only in Parthian Passage 3.3 (the Radamistus affair), but also in 2.2 (the Iberio-Parthian battle narrative). As in these earlier sections, Tacitus once again emphasizes the Parthians' frightening mobility; they possess the uncanny ability to surprise their adversaries by traversing immense distances rapidly. But he also dedicates considerable space to their weaknesses, their deficiencies at siegecraft (e.g., Monaeses' inability to capture Tigranocerta) and their tendency to outstrip their supply lines (e.g., the dissolution of Vologeses' cavalry by a locust swarm). In some respects then, Tacitus' purpose in these introductory chapters to Paetus' campaign seems to be to juxtapose the Parthian king Vologeses' "correct" behavior and attitude as a leader—his dedication to familial concord, a strong military ethos, and a distinctly aggressive foreign policy—with what Tacitus sees as the Parthians' innate military shortcomings. The historian appears to be shaming the Julio-Claudians by comparison, yet simultaneously pointing out that the Parthians are not unbeatable. If Rome's emperors would only act more like Vologeses, if they would be less hesitant and more proactive, if they would rely less on unreliable pretenders and corruptible eastern commanders and more on well disciplined, honorable men like Corbulo, then perhaps Parthia would not be Rome's bitter rival, but rather its newest province. However, the story of Paetus' Armenian campaign is not a redemptionary, but a cautionary tale. It is the Parthian Passages' tragic climax, the moment when the historian's audience finally understands the consequences of the Julio-Claudians' half-century of "cold war" diplomacy on the eastern frontier.

Tacitus announces L. Caesennius Paetus' entrance halfway through 15.6 in the form of a rumor:

Hostilities had been delayed so that Vologeses might contend with someone other than Corbulo, and so that Corbulo might not further endanger the well deserved glory of so many years. For, as I reported, Corbulo had requested a special general for the defense of Armenia, *and Caesennius Paetus was reported to be on the way.*

Dilata prorsus arma, ut Vologeses cum alio quam cum Corbulone certaret, Corbulo meritae tot per annos gloriae non ultra periculum faceret. Nam, ut rettuli, proprium

ducem tuendae Armeniae poposcerat, *et adventare Caesennius Paetus audiebatur*.⁵³⁸
(emphasis mine)

By relating Paetus' sudden arrival mid-chapter and as a rumor, Tacitus implies certain similarities between this general and Tigranes, whose entrance and exit in the narrative are just as abrupt. The historian may be suggesting that, as with Tigranes, Nero had put little forethought into the selection of this individual. But, unlike Tigranes, whose origin as a Roman hostage Tacitus relates, we are told nothing specific about Paetus' background, military ability, or demeanor in war. At first, Paetus is something of an unknown.⁵³⁹

The one salient characteristic about Paetus that Tacitus does share, however, is the commander's bitter disdain for his predecessor's accomplishments:

... Paetus, who would have had plenty glory if he had only placed second, despised Corbulo's achievements. Paetus claimed that there had been no slaughter, no spoils. To speak of Corbulo storming cities was nothing more than playing with words. He himself was about to impose on those conquered peoples tribute, law, and justice *instead of a king's shadow*.

... Paetus, cui satis ad gloriam erat, si proximus haberetur, despiciebat gesta, *nihil caedis aut praedae*, usurpatas nomine tenus urbium expugnationes dictitans: se tributa ac leges *et pro umbra regis* Romanum ius victis impositurum.⁵⁴⁰ (emphasis mine)

As a champion of "slaughter and spoils," Paetus should remind us of some of the other Roman commanders whom we met while discussing Armenian affairs, men like Pollio and Paelignus. Paetus is far more concerned with financial gain and personal glory than with resolving Rome's eastern frontier problems. Additionally, the conspicuous remark Tacitus places in Paetus' mouth, that the general wished to impose Roman tribute and law on Armenia "instead of a king's shadow," must refer, on the

⁵³⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.6.5-6.

⁵³⁹ Hammond 1934: 94-98 thinks we can explain Nero's poor choice of Paetus as commander, as well as Tigranes' appointment, as a result of Seneca and Burrus giving Nero more leeway after Agrippina's fall in 59. Both selections are a result of the emperor's megalomania. Nero's appointment of Paetus is mirrored in Britain by the career of the equally incompetent Petronius Turpilianus (*Ann.* 14.39.4-5; *Agricola* 16), showing a pattern of Nero's poor judgment.

⁵⁴⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 15.6.8.

surface at least, to Tigranes. That pretender had spent more of his short reign trying to conquer Adiabene than ruling his own kingdom. But Tacitus probably also intends the reference to evoke images of Nero and the Julio-Claudians as Armenia's absentee landlords.⁵⁴¹ One of the historian's major themes is, after all, the lack of attention Rome's emperors paid to Armenia and the eastern frontier.

Paetus' inept generalship, however, soon makes it apparent that he is in no way Corbulo's equal. Paetus commits every possible military blunder while attempting to outdo his predecessor. After Vologeses' ambassadors returned from Rome having failed to strike a compromise, Paetus assumed command of the fourth and twelfth legions in Cappadocia, along with reinforcements from Moesia and auxiliaries from Pontus and Galatia. In the autumn of 61, the Parthians "committed to open warfare,"⁵⁴² and Paetus, who spent precious little time readying his troops, set out at once for Armenia. Despite experiencing several ominous prodigies before entering the kingdom, the Roman general remained undeterred and pressed on, fording the Euphrates near Melitene.⁵⁴³ Tacitus explains Paetus' haste by

⁵⁴¹ Tacitus' use of *rex* may seem, at first, to contradict this interpretation; the emperors were of course always careful not to liken themselves to "kings." However, one of Tacitus' salient themes in the *Annales* is how the emperors, despite their supposed political limitations, often behave more like true tyrants and despots. Cf. for example *Ann.* 1.1.1 where Tacitus also uses the word *rex* prominently but probably means to draw the reader's attention to the Julio-Claudians' depraved behavior: "The city of Rome from the beginning had kings" (*urbem Romam a principio reges habuere*).

⁵⁴² Tac. *Ann.* 15.7.1: ... *bellumque propalam sumptum a Parthis*.

⁵⁴³ The various ill-fated portents Paetus' army experienced included (*Ann.* 15.7): 1) a horse bearing the consular insignia becoming startled and fleeing while the army was crossing a bridge; 2) a sacrificial victim breaking free in camp and escaping; and 3) a fire destroying the army's supply of javelins. Tacitus notes that this last harbinger was particularly foreboding "because the Parthian is an enemy whose battles are decided by missiles" (*quia Parthus hostis missilibus telis decertat*). Gilmartin 1973: 610-611 suggests that Tacitus uses these omens as recollections of Crassus and the pretender Tiridates (*Ann.* 4.37.2) who both experience similar signs of doom prior to their eastern campaigns. However, Tacitus' main purpose for including these omens must be to highlight the contrast between Paetus' inauspicious expedition and Corbulo's previously successful campaign. Paetus' cavalier approach to proper religious observance, especially his failure to expiate these various signs of divine disfavor, would have stood out distinctly from Corbulo's highly disciplined character. And the reader would have also likely recalled that, as compared to these forebodings of doom and calamity, Corbulo had at his greatest moment of glory, the razing of Artaxata, won heavenly approval—perhaps in the form of a comet (*Ann.* 13.41). Tacitus' personal belief in such prodigies is not entirely clear. He seems to suggest at various places that such signs are things for the masses, implying perhaps that they are not usually believed by educated people like himself (cf. *Hist.* 1.86.1 as well as *Ann.* 1.28.3, 12.64.1, and 14.12.4). However, Tacitus also states his belief in omens at *Hist.* 1.3.3, and he suggests that at no time more than in his day are the gods demonstrating that they are not protecting but punishing the Roman people. Krauss 1930: 31-34 notes that prodigy (*prodigium*) is the larger category of ill-fates signs which is split into *portentum* and *ostentum* (prodigies for the state) and *omen* (for the individual). Interestingly, the signs Tacitus describes before Paetus enters Armenia are called both *prodigium* and *omen* which might suggest that they are meant for Paetus the individual, rather than for the Roman people as a whole.

noting how strongly he wished to best Corbulo. Paetus believed he could simultaneously reestablish Roman control in Armenia and ruin Corbulo's reputation by recapturing Tigranocerta, the fortress Corbulo had agreed to abandon to secure Tigranes' extraction and the Parthian truce. Yet, at times, Tacitus seems quite skeptical about Paetus' goal. The historian emphasizes, for instance, the tortuous path the general's army cut through the Armenian countryside in search of plunder and provisions:

[Paetus], in fact, captured several fortresses, and not without some glory and spoils. Had he only retained this glory with proper measure or these spoils with care. While marching through far off regions which the Romans were not able to consolidate, the supplies which Paetus had captured were ruined and the looming winter started to threaten the army

Et capta quaedam castella, gloriaeque et praedae nonnihil partum, si aut gloriam cum modo aut praedam cum cura habuisset. Longinquis itineribus percursando quae obtineri nequibant, corrupto qui captus erat commeatu et instante iam hieme⁵⁴⁴

Paetus was thus, because of poor planning and improper provisioning, forced to abandon his long march to Tigranocerta. The irony of a Roman army outstripping its supply lines right after Tacitus just finished pointing out how such logistical problems were normally Parthian difficulties must not have been lost on the *Annales*' audience. And yet, the historian notes that, despite the Roman commander's failure, Paetus still penned "a letter to Caesar, with eloquent words devoid of content (*verbis magnificis, rerum vacuas*), claiming that the war was over."⁵⁴⁵ Tacitus uses the word *vacua* to describe the state of Armenian affairs not only here following Paetus' pitiful expedition, but also in Parthian Passages 1 and 3, during Vonones' tenure as Armenia's ruler and at the end of Radamistus' bid for the kingdom's throne.⁵⁴⁶

Paetus' abortive Armenian march had one important consequence, however: it provided Vologeses the opportunity to take the offensive against Rome. Early in 62, the Parthian king reoccupied Nisibis and tried launching raids not only into Armenia, but into Syria as well. Tacitus says that

⁵⁴⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.8.2-3.

⁵⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.8.3: ... *ad Caesarem litteras quasi confecto bello, verbis magnificis, rerum vacuas.*

⁵⁴⁶ Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.2 and 12.50.4.

Vologeses, in fact, sent the brunt of his military force against Corbulo's province because the Parthian hoped that a sudden, surprise assault would cause the Roman garrisons along the Euphrates to capitulate quickly. The Parthians could then force Syria to give up the immense wealth of its cities. However, Vologeses soon learned just how vigilant Corbulo had been in organizing his province's defenses. In a short, but brilliant battle scene (*Ann.* 15.9), Tacitus describes how Corbulo's soldiers fashioned a causeway of boats across the Euphrates to establish a bridgehead into Parthian occupied territory on the river's left bank. As construction of the pontoon bridge progressed, volleys of Parthian arrows began raining down on the legionary engineers. To protect his workers, Corbulo ordered archer turrets built along the bridge's span to deter the enemy on the opposite bank; the Romans also laid down covering fire from their bank with catapults and ballistae. After completing the imposing structure and establishing a bridgehead, the Romans had little trouble dispersing the remaining Parthian attackers.

But the Great King, it seems, was not so easily deterred. Having failed to penetrate Syria's defenses, Vologeses recalled his army to Nisibis. He then set out personally, redirecting the bulk of his resources against Armenia. Paetus, who had foolishly decided to winter a portion of his army far off in Pontus, and who "had enervated his remaining soldiers with indiscriminate furloughs,"⁵⁴⁷ broke camp and resumed his march towards Tigranocerta.⁵⁴⁸ In an act of foolish bravado, the Roman general advanced as if intending to break through the Parthian line, which now obstructed his path to the citadel. However, "after he had lost a centurion and a few soldiers on a scouting mission, [Paetus] retraced his steps in fear."⁵⁴⁹ The Romans retreated to Rhandeia where they set up walls and ramparts.⁵⁵⁰ From this point in the narrative, Tacitus becomes even more critical of Paetus' decisions. For example,

547 Tac. *Ann.* 15.9.2: ... *reliquas promiscis militum com meatibus infirmaverat* ...

548 The presumption seems to be that Paetus was still more concerned with capturing Tigranocerta and embarrassing Corbulo than with preparing a proper defense against Vologeses' Parthians.

549 Tac. *Ann.* 15.10.3: ... *amisso centurione et paucis militibus, quos visendis hostium copiis praemisera, trepidus remeavit.*

550 See Henderson 1903b for the exact location of Rhandeia.

he notes that, had Paetus remained behind his defensive works, the Romans might have delayed Vologeses long enough for Corbulo to dispatch reinforcements. But as the Parthians approached, Paetus recklessly sallied out of the camp to offer pitched battle. The general paid little heed to either tactics or topography; he separated his forces, situating units on distant hills and uneven terrain. He also dedicated resources carelessly: “[Paetus] harbored his wife and son in a fortress known as Arsamosata, to which he assigned an entire cohort as garrison. He thus dispersed a force which, if concentrated, might have held out more easily against an elusive enemy.”⁵⁵¹ As a result of Paetus’ lack of foresight, when the Parthians finally attacked, the disparate Roman units were easily cut off from one another. With no reinforcements, Paetus’ moment of glory turned into a rout, and the Romans who did not die or desert fled back to the Roman camp at Rhandaia. The Parthians then promptly laid siege to the camp.⁵⁵² Of the commander himself, Tacitus simply says that Paetus’ ineptitude was matched only by his cowardice: “Not even the general tried to resist these adversities, but had relinquished all of his military duties after dispatching a letter ... to Corbulo requesting assistance. Paetus urged that Corbulo should come quickly to save the standards and eagles and to protect his unfortunate army’s remaining reputation”⁵⁵³

In response to Paetus’ plea for help—and implied cowardice—Corbulo “fearless” (*interritus*) left part of force to defend Syria and set out to rescue the besieged Roman army. Tacitus emphasizes that Corbulo took the shortest route “not destitute of supplies” (*commeatibus non egenum*)⁵⁵⁴ through Commagene and Cappadocia, and that he also brought along “a supply train of camels loaded with

⁵⁵¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.10.4: *Coniunx ac filius castello, cui Arsamosata nomen est, abditi, data in praesidium cohorte ac disperso milite, qui in uno habitus vagum hostem promptius sustentavisset.*

⁵⁵² Tacitus does see fit to mention (*Ann.* 15.11.1) one individual’s redeemable actions, those of “a solitary centurion, Tarquitiu Crescens, [who] had courage to defend the turret which he was garrisoning, repeating his sorties and cutting down the barbarians who ventured too close, until he succumbed to showers of firebrands” (*uno tantum centurione Tarquitiu Crescente turrim, in qua praesidium agitabat, defendere auso factaque saepius eruptione et caesis, qui barbarorum propius suggredebantur, donec ignium iactu circumveniretur*). The image of Tarquitiu bravely defending his “turret” may be meant to recall Corbulo’s soldiers who were also manning “turrets” in the earlier Euphrates scene.

⁵⁵³ Tac. *Ann.* 15.11.3: *Ne dux quidem obniti adversis, sed cuncta militiae munia deseruerat, missis ... ad Corbulonem precibus, veniret propere, signa et aquilas et nomen reliquum infelicis exercitus tueretur*

⁵⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.12.1.

grain, so that he could repel both hunger and the enemy.”⁵⁵⁵ By specifically pointing out the general’s provisioning techniques, Tacitus wants us to recognize the stark contrast between Corbulo’s preparations and those of Paetus and the Parthians. Unlike Paetus or the Parthians, Corbulo does not risk outstripping his supply chain so easily. Nor would he suffer the lax discipline embodied by Paetus and his soldiers. During Corbulo’s march, the Romans came across numerous legionnaires who had escaped and were fleeing the Armenian disaster. When these soldiers offered Corbulo excuses to explain their flight, as a testament to the general’s famous discipline and a reminder of Paetus’ negligence, Tacitus reports that Corbulo “advised them to return to their standards and test the mercy of Paetus; he himself was pitiless, except to those who were victorious.”⁵⁵⁶

Tacitus, in fact, spends relatively little time describing either Paetus’ rout or Corbulo’s rescue march. For the historian, the real tragedy was not Paetus’ military defeat, but its aftermath. For these more important events, Tacitus dedicates three lengthy chapters (*Ann.* 15.-14-16). He tells us that, while under siege at Rhandeia, the Roman soldiers fell into utter despair; in particular, they fixated on the fact that, if the Parthians decided to assault the camp, “the Caudine and Numantine disasters would be seen as precedents.”⁵⁵⁷ Furthermore, Paetus, who vacillated back and forth between command and catatonia, only made the situation worse. He demonstrated even poorer judgment than previously by choosing this rather inauspicious moment to test Vologeses with threats of Roman reprisals. Chapters 15.14-16 not only relate the Parthian king’s response to Paetus’ chest beating, but also give a description of the Romans’ humiliating surrender. They contain the frankest discussion in the *Annales* about Armenia’s role as a buffer state and the true nature of hegemony. In addition, they are infused with allusions to

555 Tac. *Ann.* 15.12.2: ... *sueta bello magna vis camelorum onusta frumenti, ut simul hostem famemque depelleret*. The camels, in particular, could also be a reference to Crassus and Carrhae. During that disaster, Crassus’ adversary, the Parthian Surenas, had deployed camels carrying baskets of arrows to restock the Parthian mounted archers who had encircled the Roman army. Cf. Sampson 2008: 128-129.

556 Tac. *Ann.* 15.12.3: ... *redire ad signa et clementiam Paeti experiri monebat: se nisi victoribus immitem esse*.

557 Tac. *Ann.* 15.13.2: ... *provisis exemplis Caudinae Numantinaeque cladis* ...

Rome and Parthia's checkered past, as well as with a sense of profound pathos matched few other places in Tacitus' work:

... Vologeses responded, but nothing about the present situation, only that he had to wait for his brothers, Pacorus and Tiridates. A place and time had been chosen for their meeting, at which point they would decide what to do about Armenia. The gods had increased the dignity of the Arsacids, and, at the same time, had decided the fate of Roman legions. Afterwards, messengers were sent by Paetus, who invited the king to a conference. Vologeses ordered his cavalry prefect Vasaces to go. At the meeting, Paetus recalled the deeds of Lucullus and Pompey and the means by which the Caesars had conducted Armenian affairs, first administering the kingdom themselves and then bestowing it on clients. Vasaces pointed out that the illusion of administering and bestowing belonged to Rome, while true power belonged to the Parthians. Even though much was decided at the conference, Monobazus of Adiabene was summoned on the day after as a witness to all the issues upon which they settled. It was agreed that the legions should be freed from the siege, and that every soldier should depart from Armenia. Moreover, the fortresses and supplies were to be handed over to the Parthians. After these things were accomplished, Vologeses would be given the opportunity to send legates to Nero.

Meanwhile, Paetus constructed a bridge across the river Arsanias, which flowed by his camp. Supposedly, it was to provide his troops a way to march out, but, in truth, the Parthians had ordered it as a testament to their victory. For the bridge was used by the Parthians, the Roman soldiers went home by a different path. Rumor holds that the legions were sent under the yoke and other unfortunate things, of which the imitation was taken from the Armenian. For they entered the Roman camp's rampart even before the column departed. They also lined the roads, identifying and dragging off slaves and beasts of burden, which had been captured earlier. Even the Roman soldiers' clothing was ripped away and their weapons were confiscated. The soldiers left trembling so as not to give the Armenians any excuse to attack. Vologeses collected the arms and bodies of those slain so that it might be a testament to the Roman slaughter. However, he abstained from watching the legions actually fleeing. He was cultivating a reputation for moderation, after he had gorged himself on arrogance. Sitting upon an elephant, he strode across the river Arsanias, while his courtiers followed by the strength of their horses. He did so because a rumor had circulated that the bridge would collapse under the elephant's burden due to a Roman trick. But those who dared to cross it found it strong and trustworthy.

From the rest who survived, it was properly established that the granary had been so well supplied that the Romans set fire to the storehouses. Against this, Corbulo has put forth that the Parthians were about to abandon the siege because of the lack of supplies and scarcity of fodder, and that he was not more than a three-day journey away at the time. He added that Paetus swore by oath among the standards and those whom Vologeses had sent as witnesses that no Roman would enter Armenia until Nero's orders returned consenting to the peace. Such stories were probably composed to increase the Romans' disgrace, but the rest is hardly obscure. On one day, Paetus marched over forty

miles, abandoning the wounded here and there as he went. The fear apparent in the fleeing men was no less disturbing than if they had turned their backs in battle. Corbulo, who met these men with his own at the bank of the Euphrates, hid from sight the Roman standards and arms so that he should not heighten the disparity between the two armies. Corbulo's soldiers, full of sorrow and miserable due to the plight of their comrades, could not even hold back their tears. The greeting was replaced with wailing. The contest of virtue and ambition for glory, the feelings of happy men, had all disappeared. Misery alone remained strong, and more among the lower ranking soldiers.

Ad ea Vologaeses nihil pro causa, sed opperandos sibi fratres Pacorum ac Tiridaten rescripsit; illum locum tempusque consilio destinatum, quid de Armenia cernerent; adiecisse deos dignum Arsacidarum, simul ut de legionibus Romanis statuerent. missi posthac Paeto nuntii et regis conloquium petitem, qui Vasacen praefectum equitatus ire iussit. tum Paetus Lucullos, Pompeios et si qua C[a]jesa[res] obtinendae donandaeve Armeniae egerant, Vasaces imaginem retinendi largiendive penes nos, vim penes Parthos memorat. et multum in vicem disceptato, Monobazus Adiabenus in diem posterum testis iis quae pepigissent adhibetur. placuitque liberari obsidio legiones et decedere omnem militem finibus Armeniorum castellaque et commeatus Parthis tradi, quibus perpetratis copia Vologaesi fieret mittendi ad Neronem legatos.

Interim flumini Arsaniae (is castra praefluebat) pontem imposuit, specie sibi illud iter expedientis, sed Parthi quasi documentum victoriae iusserant; namque iis usui fuit, nostri per diversum iere. addidit rumor sub iugum missas legiones et alia ex rebus infaustis, quorum simulacrum ab Armeniis usurpatum est. namque et munimenta ingressi sunt, antequam agmen Romanum excederet, et circumstetero vias, captiva olim mancipia aut iumenta adgnoscentes abstrahentesque; raptae etiam vestes, retenta arma, pavido milite et concedente, ne qua proelii causa existeret. Vologaeses armis et corporibus caesorum aggeratis, quo cladem nostram testaretur, visu fugientium legionum abstinuit: fama moderationis quaerebatur, postquam superbiam expleverat. flumen Arsaniam elephanto insidens, proximus quisque regem vi equorum perrupere, quia rumor incesserat pontem cessurum oneri dolo fabricantium; sed qui ingredi ausi sunt, validum et fidum intellexere.

Ceterum obsessis adeo suppeditavisse rem frumentariam constitit, ut horreis ignem inicerent, contraque prodiderit Corbulo Parthos inopes copiarum et pabulo attrito relicturos oppugnationem, neque se plus tridui itinere afuisse. adicit iure iurando Paeti cautum apud signa, adstantibus iis, quos testificando rex misisset, neminem Romanum Armeniam ingressurum, donec referrentur litterae Neronis, an paci adnueret. quae ut augendae infamiae composita, sic reliqua non in obscuro habentur, una die quadraginta milium spatium emensum esse Paetum, desertis passim sauciis, neque minus deformem illam fugientium trepidationem, quam si terga in acie vertissent. Corbulo cum suis copiis apud ripam Euphratis obvius non eam speciem insignium et armorum praetulit, ut diversitatem exprobraret: maesti manipuli ac vicem commilitonum miserantes ne lacrimis quidem temperare; vix prae fletu usurpata consalutatio. decesserat certamen

virtutis et ambitio gloriae, felicitum hominum adfectus: sola misericordia valebat, et apud minores magis.⁵⁵⁸

For Tacitus, the bridge is an important literary motif, particularly throughout Book 15. The historian uses bridge imagery to emphasize the great disparity between Paetus and Corbulo. Both men, in fact, build bridges during the course of Tacitus' narrative. Corbulo constructs his as a defensive structure, to repel the Parthians from the Euphrates and deter an invasion of Syria. Corbulo's bridge is by all accounts a success, fulfilling the function for which it was intended. By contrast, the first portent Paetus experienced when he entered Armenia was a consular horse rearing back and fleeing back across the Euphrates bridge at Melitene.⁵⁵⁹ Moreover, the bridge that Paetus builds over the Arsanius River here at 15.15.1 can only be viewed as a symbol of Rome's consummate disgrace.⁵⁶⁰ Tacitus states unequivocally that "the Parthians had ordered [the Arsanius bridge] as if it were a monument to their victory."⁵⁶¹ Nor is Paetus' bridge even used for its intended purpose. Because of the Parthian king's fear of Roman duplicity, Vologeses chooses in the end to ride an elephant across the river rather than risk crossing Paetus' structure.⁵⁶² The irony may be that usually it was the Parthians who were thought duplicitous, and that, despite Vologeses' concerns, upon closer inspection the bridge proved sound—a testament to the Romans' military and engineering skill.

The fact that Tacitus mentions both Paetus' shameful bridge and the rumor of the legions passing under the "yoke" (*iugum*) in the same breath may also be significant.⁵⁶³ Although Tacitus does not name the specific site of Corbulo's battle on the banks of the Euphrates, it is possible his audience

558 Tac. *Ann.* 15.14-16.

559 For the other omens Paetus experiences upon entering Armenia cf. *Ann.* 15.7.

560 The Arsanius River is a weaker tributary of the Euphrates, which may also be symbolic. Just like the Euphrates and its lesser tributary, Paetus is an anemic, less worthy appendage of Corbulo.

561 Tac. *Ann.* 15.15.1: ... *Parthi quasi documentum victoriae iusserant.*

562 Gilmartin 1973: 616 points out that one of Tacitus' underlying themes is the juxtaposition of reality and "appearance" (*species*). Corbulo's bridge serves a purpose; it helps repel the Parthians. Paetus' bridge, on the other hand, is "just for show."

563 Tac. *Ann.* 15.15.1-2.

would have simply assumed the battle site was Zeugma.⁵⁶⁴ This frontier Syrian town derived its name from the Greek word for “yoke” (ζυγόν). Zeugma was widely known throughout the empire in Tacitus’ day as the bridge that connected the Roman West and the Parthian East.⁵⁶⁵ If Roman readers were already drawing a mental comparison between Paetus and Corbulo because of the bridge imagery in the previous sentence, the simple use of the word *iugum* added to this contrast by suggesting the site of Corbulo’s earlier victory over the Parthians.

In the final chapter of Tacitus’ Rhandaia episode (*Ann.* 15.17), the historian describes how Paetus finally came face-to-face with Corbulo at the Armenian border. Paetus tried to convince Corbulo to combine forces and immediately reinvade Armenia, but Corbulo refused. The general claimed not only that had he no orders from the emperor to do so, but that his troops were simply too weary from their long forced march. Although these two excuses were both legitimate, Corbulo also probably had no desire to link his fate to Paetus’, a man who had recently been so critical of Corbulo’s Armenian War. As a result of Corbulo’s decision, the Romans had no choice but to acquiesce to all of Vologeses’ demands. The Parthian king had insisted that, in addition to evacuating Armenia, the Romans must also demolish the fortifications Corbulo had constructed across the Euphrates. Therefore, after Paetus had retired to Cappadocia to winter what was left of his expeditionary force, Corbulo returned to Syria, where he recalled his soldiers from Parthian territory and tore down the bridge they had fought so hard to build.⁵⁶⁶ As Parthian Passage 4.2 closes, Tacitus seems to enjoy pointing out the irony of Nero’s celebrations back in Rome. In spite of these worrisome setbacks in the East, “Parthian trophies and victory arches, decreed by the Senate while the war was ongoing and then never canceled, were set up in the middle of the Capitoline Hill—these monuments were considered for the sake of appearance only; the truth was spurned.”⁵⁶⁷

564 Cf. Henderson 1903: 274 and Jackson 1937: 228.

565 Pliny *NH* 5.21.

566 Tac. *Ann.* 15.17.

567 Tac. *Ann.* 15.18.1: *At Romae tropaea de Parthis arcusque medio Capitolini montis sistebantur, decreta ab senatu integro*

C. Parthian Passage 4.3 (*Ann.* 15.24-31): The Neronian Compromise: Armenia Relicta

Tacitus picks up his account of Armenian affairs a few chapters later at 15.24 in the spring of 63

CE:

... Parthian legates dispatched by King Vologeses brought a letter. The king declared that he was now relinquishing his prior and often bandied about claims to possession of Armenia, since the gods, who are the true judges of powerful people, had already handed over the kingdom to the Parthians, not without Roman dishonor. Recently, Tigranes had been besieged and, afterwards, Paetus and his legions. Although the king could have conquered them, he had released them unharmed. He had proved his power enough; he had even given an example of his leniency.

... legati Parthorum mandata regis Vologesis litterasque ... attulere: se priora et totiens iactata super optinenda Armenia nunc omittere, quoniam dii, quamvis potentium populorum arbitri, possessionem Parthis non sine ignominia Romana tradidissent. Nuper clausum Tigranen; post Paetum legionesque, cum opprimere posset, incolumis dimisisse. Satis adprobatam vim; datum et lenitatis experimentum.⁵⁶⁸

But because Vologeses might have not been quite as confident as he boasts, he included this possible compromise at the end of his letter: “Tiridates would be willing to come to Rome to accept his diadem, if it were not for the fact that his priesthood’s religious ritual prevented him [from sea voyages]. He could journey [overland], however, to the standards and effigies of the emperor, and receive his kingdom’s crown in front of the legions.”⁵⁶⁹ Therefore, despite Vologeses’ military windfall and pompous attitude, he now seemed to want to avoid war with Rome. He appeared willing to pay lip

adhuc bello neque tum omissa, dum aspectui consulitur spreta conscientia. But Tacitus also adds at 18.2: “Moreover, to cloak his uneasiness as to the situation abroad, Nero had the grain for the populace—which had been spoiled by age—thrown into the Tiber, as proof that the corn supply was not a matter for anxiety” (*Quin et dissimulandis rerum externarum curis Nero frumentum plebis vetustate corruptum in Tiberim iecit, quo securitatem annonae ostentaret*). Paetus had earlier (*Ann.* 15.8.3) abandoned his march to Tigranocerta because his grain supply had similarly been “ruined” (*corruptus*). Tacitus’ remark at 18.2 could therefore be one last attempt by the historian to connect Nero’s reckless behavior with that of his foolish commander Paetus.

⁵⁶⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.24.1-3.

⁵⁶⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.24.4-5: *Nec recusaturum Tiridaten accipiendo diademati in urbem venire, nisi sacerdotii religione attineretur. Iturum ad signa et effigies principis, ubi legionibus coram regnum auspicaretur.* The priesthood to which Vologeses refers is that of the Magi who were prohibited by religious stricture from crossing bodies of water (cf. Pliny *NH* 30.2.16). This peculiar prohibition will become significant towards the end of Parthian Passage 4.3. If this prohibition is the same one to which Vologeses refers here, then it is unclear why Tiridates’ status as a Magian priest prevented him from journeying to Rome—he will later, just overland instead. Perhaps Vologeses is referring to some other, unknown Magian obligation, although a more likely explanation is that the Parthian king simply did not want to send his brother into enemy territory if he did not have to.

service to Roman hegemony in Armenia, if Nero would only sanction his brother Tiridates' nomination as king. Considering the battered state of Rome's frontier forces, such an offer was especially generous. But if the emperor accepted, it would have established an interesting precedent: Parthian Arsacids had sat on the Armenian throne in the past, but none for very long and never with Rome's blessing; an Arsacid king of Armenia selected by Parthia, but approved by Rome would be an entirely new arrangement.

Before Nero and his advisers could discuss the Parthian's offer, Tacitus reports they interrogated the centurion who had accompanied the Parthian delegates. Vologeses' letter was inconsistent with what had been written by Paetus, who claimed that the situation was under control.⁵⁷⁰ Neither Nero nor his advisers would appear then to have been privy to the fact that all of Rome's forces had withdrawn from Armenia. Tacitus seems to blame the emperor's ignorance of the eastern situation on Paetus' deceptive correspondence. However, while Tacitus does depict Paetus falsifying reports at one point, the historian also states at the end of the previous Parthian Passage that Nero's celebrations had continued even while "the truth was spurned."⁵⁷¹ This earlier statement would seem to imply that the Roman leadership was aware, to some extent at least, of Paetus' loss to the Parthians. Therefore, Tacitus' readers might have doubted whether Nero's plausible deniability here was, in fact, genuine.⁵⁷²

After Nero "discovers" the truth about the dire state of the frontier, Tacitus relates the Roman leader's response to Vologeses' letter in the form of an internal discussion between the emperor and his councilors:

⁵⁷⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 15.25.1.

⁵⁷¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.18.1: ... *spreta conscientia*. For Paetus falsifying progress reports to Rome see *Ann.* 15.18.3.

⁵⁷² Additionally, when Nero recalls Paetus from Cappadocia (*Ann.* 15.25.7), he immediately pardons the nervous commander "lest a person with such a tendency to panic might fall ill if his suspense were protracted" (*ne tam promptus in pavorem longiore solitudine aegresceret*). Tacitus perhaps includes this humorous bit of information to suggest that Nero does not take the situation of the eastern frontier seriously enough—he certainly is not trying to show the emperor as merciful. But we might also interpret Nero's leniency as proof that he already knew about Rhandaia. He has to feign disgust in front of his advisers, but when Paetus finally shows up, the emperor's anger has abated because the disaster is now old news.

Nero then consulted the noblest of Rome's citizens. He asked whether war or a dishonest peace would be more acceptable. There was no hesitation about war. Furthermore, Corbulo, who had come to know both the soldiers and the enemy over so many years, was appointed to conduct the military operation. Nero feared that the incompetence of another commander might once again end in disaster, because he had been so annoyed by Paetus.

consuluit inter primores civitatis Nero, bellum anceps an pax inhonesta placeret. Nec dubitatum de bello. Et Corbulo militum atque hostium tot per annos gnarus gerendae rei praeficitur, ne cuius alterius inscitia rursus peccaretur, quia Paeti piguerat.⁵⁷³

At first, such forceful Roman rhetoric, devoid as it is of hesitation or any inkling of possible concessions, comes across as refreshing. Tacitus almost seems to imply, thanks to the emphatic brevity of his sentence at 15.25.3, that this war council was a turning point. Indeed, "there was no hesitation about war." Furthermore, Nero, who was earlier so jealous of Corbulo's popularity at home, has finally overcome his petty rivalry and is now ready to do what is in Rome's best interest. The emperor decided not to appoint another Tigranes or Paetus, but Corbulo, a general who had proved his skill in managing the Parthians.

However, Tacitus instantly undercuts the idea that Nero might have learned some sort of lesson, or that Rome might have turned a corner by noting in the very next sentence: "Therefore, [the Parthian delegation] returned home without a diplomatic agreement, yet with gifts and thus the hope that, if Tiridates made these requests in person, he would not do so in vain."⁵⁷⁴ Nero's war council is not, therefore, what it first seems. It is not the bold, long awaited retooling of Roman foreign policy that Tacitus' audience so desperately desires. Rather, it is just more diplomacy, couched in the form of hawkish, face-saving rhetoric. Nero will dispatch Corbulo, Rome's best weapon in the East, but not to confront Vologeses and take the war to Parthia's doorstep. For the rest of Parthian Passage 4, the *Annales'* readers know, after this introduction, that Corbulo's mission is limited in scope; it is not to

⁵⁷³ Tac. *Ann.* 15.25.2-4.

⁵⁷⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 15.25.5: *Igitur inriti remittuntur; cum donis tamen, unde spes fieret non frustra eadem oraturum Tiridaten, si preces ipse attulisset.*

win new glory for Rome or even to avenge the slight of Rhandaia with the enemy's blood. Corbulo's purpose is to carry Nero's counteroffer to Vologeses, to force the Parthians, through a demonstration of Roman military might, to accept the emperor's one stipulation: that Tiridates should be crowned in Rome, not in absentia. Nero has already accepted Vologeses' compromise; Corbulo's job is simply to make the deal happen.

Corbulo's second Armenian campaign began with a reshuffling of Rome's eastern legions and provincial administrators. What remained of Paetus' fourth and twelfth legions was transferred to Syria.⁵⁷⁵ To replace these armies, others were brought in from as far away as Pannonia and Egypt.⁵⁷⁶ Nero, moreover, appointed C. Cestius as the new proconsul of Corbulo's former Syrian province.⁵⁷⁷ For the rest of Rome's eastern allies, "written instructions were sent to the tetrarchs and kings, the prefects and procurators, and the praetors who administered the bordering provinces, to obey the orders of Corbulo, whose powers were increased to nearly the same level as those the Roman people granted to Cn. Pompey for conducting the Pirate War."⁵⁷⁸ Tacitus does not specifically mention C. Caesar or Germanicus here, but we are probably supposed to recall the similar, broad powers bestowed on those princes during their earlier eastern commands.

⁵⁷⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.26.1.

⁵⁷⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 15.25.6 for the fifteenth legion under the command of M. Celsus; *Ann.* 15.26.2 for those from Egypt. To these, Corbulo added the sixth and third which had been formerly stationed in Syria, the fifth which had escaped the Rhandaia by wintering in Pontus, as well as detachments from Illyricum and auxiliaries from Rome's various client princes.

⁵⁷⁷ C. Cestius will be the same proconsul of Syria whose legionary army is destroyed at the outbreak of the Jewish Revolt.

⁵⁷⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.25.7: *Scribitur tetrarchis ac regibus praefectisque et procuratoribus et qui praetorum finitimas provincias regebant, iussis Corbulonis obsequi, in tantum ferme modum aucta potestate, quem populus Romanus Cn. Pompeio bellum piraticum gesturo dederat.* Gwatkin 1930: 46-47, Magie 1950: 1411-1412 n. 40, Syme 1970: 27-39, Gilmartin 1973: 587, and Mitford 1980: 1176 have all asserted that Corbulo's entire command—i.e., from the moment he arrived in the East in 54—was somehow "extraordinary" in terms of its military authority. Vervaeke 1999b (closely following Sherk 1980) has convincingly argued, however, that this understanding of Corbulo's command is flawed. Corbulo was at first only appointed *legatus Augusti pro praetore* of the newly combined province of Galatia-Cappadocia when Quadratus was still governor of Syria—hence their dispute over hostages. After Quadratus died, Corbulo assumed administrative command of Syria, too, until Paetus arrived to relieve Corbulo of Galatia-Cappadocia. Following Paetus' recall during the winter of 62/63, Nero transferred Syria to C. Cestius and granted Corbulo the far-reaching, "extraordinary" powers Tacitus describes here. No mention is made, at this point, of Galatia-Cappadocia's new administrator. Presumably, Corbulo resumed administrative command of his original province, but now—for the first and only time—with *imperium maius*.

Likening Corbulo to Pompey may also be one of Tacitus' jabs at Paetus. The historian notes that soon after the Romans' preparations had been completed, Corbulo entered Armenia, "marching along the road which L. Lucullus had once taken."⁵⁷⁹ This road ended at Tigranocerta, the very city Paetus had hoped to capture and use to shame Corbulo. Furthermore, the last place Tacitus cites Pompey and Lucullus so closely together is at 15.14.3 during the siege of Rhandaia and Paetus' ignominious negotiations with the Parthians. There, Paetus cited the achievements of these Republican generals as part of his intimidation tactic; he used Pompey's and Lucullus' names in an effort to force the Parthians to lift the siege. But here we see Corbulo not just spouting empty rhetoric, using words and diplomacy as weapons, but in fact acting the part. Unlike Paetus, Corbulo actually possesses Pompey's legendary authority and Lucullus' bold sense of strategy and exploration. Pompey had long ago, through force of will and personal charisma, been the first to establish Armenia's buffer state status when it teetered on the verge of becoming just another Parthian dependency. Lucullus had been the first Roman commander to enter Armenia and march an army onto the Tigris plateau. Tacitus is trying to convey the feeling that Corbulo, despite being constrained and misused as little more than Nero's diplomatic errand boy, potentially still has what it takes to redeem Rome's tarnished reputation. Corbulo is the real inheritor of Pompey's and Lucullus' eastern skills; Paetus was always just an imposter—a pretender of sorts.⁵⁸⁰

Once Corbulo reentered Armenia, Vologeses and Tiridates' envoys conveniently arrived in the Roman camp to discuss a truce. Corbulo, rather than issuing another powerful threat, sent the Parthian ambassadors back "with orders not overly harsh."⁵⁸¹ In his message, Corbulo returned the Parthians' peaceful overtures and spoke about how both nations had learned lessons in "arrogance" (*superbia*).⁵⁸²

579 Tac. *Ann.* 15.27.1: ... *iter L. Lucullo quondam penetratum ... pergit.*

580 For a more detailed analysis of Corbulo and Lucullus cf. Ash 2006.

581 Tac. *Ann.* 15.27.2: ... *cum mandatis non inmitibus: ...*

582 Tac. *Ann.* 15.27.3: ... *documento adversus superbiam.* Presumably, Corbulo is referring, for Rome, to Rhandaia and, in the case of Parthia, to his first Armenian campaign and more recent events in Syria along the Euphrates.

He urged the Parthian monarch to accept a new alliance with Rome and to allow his brother Tiridates “to accept his kingdom as a gift, untouched by conquest.”⁵⁸³ Tacitus does inform us that Corbulo also seized several local fortresses and harshly punished the Armenian natives “who had been the first to revolt against [the Romans].” However, as the negotiations between Corbulo and the Parthians continue, there is a conspicuous lack of dramatic tension; the text reads almost as if the whole settlement had already been prearranged. Eventually, Vologeses did accept Corbulo’s advice. The Parthian king even agreed to let Tiridates travel to the Roman camp for an interview. And Tacitus does seem to imply that Corbulo’s diplomatic skills played a part. But Tacitus gives the impression that Corbulo’s wings had been clipped; he is simply in Armenia to negotiate Nero and Vologeses’ compromise. Despite his broadly based *imperium*, Corbulo is not allowed to act as the same bold conqueror whom we read about in Books 13 and 14. His negotiations with the Parthians and chastisement of the Armenians in these chapters are not further examples of Corbulo’s superior generalship. Here, Corbulo’s actions are much more perfunctory and, in many ways, just for show.⁵⁸⁴ What follows is more pageantry than anything else; it is certainly not the dramatic military climax that we, as readers, hoped to see.

In the end, Corbulo and Tiridates agreed to meet one another at Rhandeia, the site of Rome’s recent disgrace:

Upon seeing Corbulo, the king dismounted first from his horse. Corbulo did not hesitate to follow, and the two men shook hands on foot. After that, the Roman general praised the young king for abandoning foolhardy pursuits and adopting a safe and healthy course of action. Although Tiridates began by touting the nobility of his family rather excessively, he spoke more modestly about other things. He would, of course, travel to Rome and carry a new honor to Caesar, an Arsacid as a suppliant—that is, despite the fact that Parthia’s political position was favorable. Then, it was agreed that Tiridates should place the symbol of his kingship before the effigy of Caesar, and that he should only reclaim it from Nero’s own hand. The meeting was ended with a kiss. After the interval of a few days, both sides put on a great spectacle. For their part, the Parthians arrived with their cavalry arrayed into companies and displayed their paternal insignias.

583 Tac. *Ann.* 15.27.4: ... *intactum vastationibus regnum dono accipere*

584 For this assessment see Hammond 1934: 101.

From the Romans' side, the columns of legionnaires stood with the eagles and standards shimmering and with the images of the gods set up as if it were a temple. In the middle, the tribunal held a curule chair, and the chair an effigy of Nero. Tiridates went up to this effigy and, after the customary sacrifice of victims, lifted the diadem from his head and placed it under the statue. Great emotions swept over the spirits of everyone, and these feelings were amplified for those who had personally witnessed the slaughter or siege of the Roman armies there. Finally, the tides of war were turning. Tiridates would serve as a symbol for Rome's client states; he would seem little more than a captive.

Et viso Corbulone rex prior equo desiluit; nec cunctatus Corbulo, et pedes uterque dexteras miscuere. Exim Romanus laudat iuvenem omissis praecipitibus tuta et salutaria capessentem. ille de nobilitate generis multum praefatus, cetera temperanter adiungit: iturum quippe Romam laturumque novum Caesari decus, non adversis Parthorum rebus supplicem Arsaciden. tum placuit Tiridaten ponere apud effigiem Caesaris insigne regium nec nisi manu Neronis resumere; et colloquium osculo finitum. dein paucis diebus interiectis magna utrimque specie inde eques compositus per turmas et insignibus patriis, hinc agmina legionum stetero fulgentibus aquilis signisque et simulacris deum in modum templi: medio tribunal sedem curulem et sedes effigiem Neronis sustinebat. ad quam progressus Tiridates, caesis ex more victimis, sublato capiti diadema imagini subiecit, magnis apud cunctos animorum motibus, quos augebat insita adhuc oculis exercituum Romanorum caedes aut obsidio. at nunc versos casus: iturum Tiridaten ostentui gentibus, quanto minus quam captivum?⁵⁸⁵

In truth, Tiridates was hardly the “captive” (*captivus*) Corbulo's troops perceived him to be. Tacitus ends this particular Parthian Passage by noting at 15.31 that, before departing for Rome, Tiridates met with his brother Pacorus in Media and Vologeses at Ecbatana.⁵⁸⁶ Perhaps Tacitus wants us to recall the Parthians' fraternal harmony one last time. Tiridates and Vologeses' commitment to one another is, after all, what brought about their victory over and concessions from Rome. Tacitus probably also wishes us to take note of Tiridates' freedom of movement, his freedom to visit his brothers and his ability to travel to Rome on his own timetable. These are not liberties which we would expect afforded to an actual *captivus*. Nor, for that matter, were Vologeses' other stipulations for his brother's journey:

... through official letters, [Vologeses] had sought additional concession from Corbulo. Tiridates should not endure any appearance of slavery or be forced to hand over his sword. He should not be prevented from embracing provincial administrators or be left standing at their doors. And, at Rome, he should be afforded the honor usually reserved for consuls.

⁵⁸⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 15.28-29.

⁵⁸⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 15.31.1. Ecbatana was the Parthians' summer capital.

... quippe et propriis nuntiis a Corbulone petierat, ne quam imaginem servitii Tiridates perferret neu ferrum traderet aut complexu provincias optinentium arceretur foribusve eorum adsisteret, tantusque ei Romae quantus consulibus honor esset.⁵⁸⁷

Tacitus states that the king demanded these amenities because of his “foreign pride” (*externa superbia*).⁵⁸⁸ However, he never says that Corbulo rejected any of these stipulations. Thus, when Tiridates traveled to meet Nero in 66, he did so not as an abject *captivus*, but as Nero’s distinguished guest. The Romans treated Tiridates as though he were a *consul*, one of their highest, most honored officials.

Tacitus mentions Tiridates’ visit to Rome and investiture by Nero in 66 CE only in passing (*Ann.* 16.23.3-24.1). He records none of the details of the elaborate ceremony surrounding the Armenian king’s arrival. For this information, we must rely exclusively on Suetonius and Cassius Dio. In 66, Tiridates departed for Italy with a retinue of three thousand guards and attendants. His overland journey lasted nine months and was financed by the Roman treasury at the staggering cost of 800,000 sesterces per day. Many of the local towns along his route through Asia Minor and Illyricum held festivities in his honor. But Tiridates was cautious not to let his celebrated status get the better of him. When he met Nero at Neapolis, he did obeisance before the emperor, who rewarded him with a gladiatorial exhibition. The pair then traveled together to Rome where, before a huge crowd of onlookers, Tiridates proclaimed Nero his master and god. Nero, in turn, replaced the diadem which Tiridates had willingly removed, named him Armenia’s new monarch, and granted him the regalia of his office. Nero then bestowed gifts on his new client, which Dio reports valued in excess of two hundred million sesterces. After several additional days of revelry, Tiridates left Rome with Nero’s

⁵⁸⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 15.31.1.

⁵⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 15.31.2. Specifically, Tacitus says: “Evidently, accustomed to foreign pride, [Vologeses] lacked any knowledge of Roman culture, which values the power of authority, but shuns its vanities” (*Scilicet externae superbiae sueto non inerat notitia nostri, apud quos vis imperii valet, inania tramittuntur*). Gilmartin 1973: 625 in particular has pointed out the importance of this sentence’s ambiguity: Tacitus’ final criticism of “pride” (*superbia*) and “vanity” (*inania*) can be applied, at least grammatically speaking, to either the Romans or Parthians.

blessing and began the long journey home, where he used the emperor's munificence to rebuild his capital at Artaxata.⁵⁸⁹

Tacitus' failure to record these rather damning details of Nero's excesses may be the result of an accident of transmission; our extant portion of the *Annales* breaks off only a few chapters later at 16.35. Perhaps Tacitus included some or all of these facts, but that part of the text has not survived. If this is the case, it is unfortunate—as is the fact that we must read about Corbulo's dutiful suicide elsewhere.⁵⁹⁰ Understanding Tacitus' own treatment and context for these events would have told us much about the historian's overall purpose. Yet even without such information, it is still possible to deduce something about Tacitus' intent. The Neronian compromise in Armenia—that is, simply rubber stamping an Armenian king selected by the Parthians—would have seemed especially unsatisfying to Tacitus' readers following both Parthian Passages 4.1 and 4.2. After Nero's promising start at this Parthian Passage's outset, what a Roman reader in Tacitus' day wanted to see was one of two things. Either Tacitus' audience would have liked to see Corbulo's Armenian War (4.1) brought to its logical conclusion, or they would have wanted to see Paetus' disgraceful loss at Rhandaia (4.2) avenged. Either of these wishes could have been satiated by giving Corbulo free reign to carry war beyond Armenia, to Parthia and Vologeses' doorstep. But this never happens, either in terms of Tacitus' narrative or in terms of the history on which it is based. Instead, the Romans received only Nero's embarrassing compromise, perhaps the worst excuse for Julio-Claudian diplomacy during the entire first century. As far as the Julio-Claudians' foreign policy goes, Tacitus leaves his readers, in the end, wanting. His Parthian Passages make the reader yearn for an active soldier at the helm of the Roman state, not a passive diplomat. More than anything, the Passages leave the reader feeling unfulfilled and unsatisfied—and, perhaps, eager for bloodshed and vengeance.

589 Cass. Dio 62 (63.1-7); Suet. *Nero* 13.

590 Cass. Dio 62 (63.17).

Chapter 9
Echoes of the Persian Wars:
Rhandeia as Tragedy

Tacitus' Rhandeia account is the climax not just of the *Annales*' third Parthian Passage, but of all the work's foreign episodes. The Rhandeia episode evokes a powerful sense of pathos and loss in *Annales* readers. It portrays Paetus' military defeat as the worst, most humiliating setback Rome had experienced against Parthia since Crassus and Carrhae. Tacitus produces this effect, as we have seen, partially by dedicating a disproportionate amount of space and detail to Rhandeia's aftermath. But the length of the passage and wealth of narrative detail are not the only tools Tacitus uses to bring about this effect. In this chapter, we will examine how the historian also employs specific words, vocabulary combinations, and imagery to connect Rhandeia to a specific Greek literary precedent, Aeschylus' *Persians*. Many Greco-Roman authors believed that the contest between West and East spanned millennia and stretched all the way back to the era of the Trojan War. Tacitus uses vocabulary reminiscent of Aeschylus' play and the Persian Wars to help set Paetus' defeat squarely within the context of this age-old conflict between West and East. Tacitus' allusions to Aeschylus' drama imply that Rhandeia is much more than just a minor military setback for Rome; it is a true tragedy.

That Tacitus wishes us to see Rhandeia not just as a devastating military disaster, but as something more catastrophic—perhaps as a true Roman tragedy—becomes obvious if we examine these chapters of the *Annales* more closely (*Ann.* 15.14-16).⁵⁹¹ Scholars have long recognized connections between Tacitus' work and Latin poetry, especially the historian's mimicry of and many allusions to epic.⁵⁹² However, Tacitus' debt to tragic poetry—in particular, Greek tragedy—has gone, for the most part, overlooked.⁵⁹³ An important exception to this oversight is Francesca L'Hoir's recent

⁵⁹¹ Tacitus recounts the Armenian campaign of L. Caesennius Paetus and the Roman general's defeat in battle over the span of *Ann.* 15.1-17. Here, however, we are most concerned with those chapters (15.14-16) which deal with Paetus' surrender and the Romans' humiliating retreat.

⁵⁹² Cf. Baxter 1972: 246-269 and Benario 1967: 24-27.

⁵⁹³ Löfstedt 1948: 5-8 does admittedly recognize tragic underpinnings in the *Annales*, as well as elements of Greek

study *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales*.⁵⁹⁴ In her monograph, L'Hoir identifies linguistic patterns and imagery which suggest that the *Annales* invokes Greek tragedy to lend its own story greater depth. Specifically, L'Hoir believes Tacitus' early Books mirror in both theme and vocabulary Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. She thinks that Tacitus purposefully embedded subtle references to the Atreids in his work to lend weight and context to the Julio-Claudian household's intrigues and atrocities.⁵⁹⁵ But if L'Hoir is correct, then that could mean that Tacitus used other tragic Greek works, not just the *Oresteia*, for similar effect elsewhere in the *Annales*; nor might L'Hoir's discovery be isolated to Tacitus' early Books. L'Hoir, however, deals almost exclusively with the affairs of the royal household in Rome. She spends little time on Tacitus' Parthian Passages. This omission is regrettable because if Tacitus had access to and readily employed one of Aeschylus' works, perhaps he also used another. Could Tacitus have used Aeschylus' *Persians* similarly to lend greater depth and tragic affect to the Rhandaia episode? Quintilian, after all, who might have been Tacitus' teacher, states in his *Institutio Oratoria* that in his day it was all the rage for authors to place something "hidden" in their works for readers (or listeners) to find!⁵⁹⁶

Greek tragedy had been especially popular among Latin authors ever since the heyday of the Republic. Ingo Gildenhard, in particular, argues that Roman writers pilfered and adapted the Greeks' stories freely, not because Greek drama was better or because, lacking high culture of their own, the

biography. But Löfstedt's main concern is Tacitus' overall development, not these tragic roots. Bartsch 1994 also discusses theatricality in the sources dealing with Nero's reign—i.e., Suetonius, Cassius Dio, and Tacitus. However, Bartsch is more concerned with the political climate of doublespeak in Rome under oppressive emperors like Nero and Domitian than with tracking down literary precedents.

⁵⁹⁴ Galtier 2011 is also a noteworthy exception. However, like L'Hoir, Galtier is mainly concerned with how Tacitus employs tragic techniques in his discussion of domestic scenes in Rome; he is more interested in the emperors themselves and the imperial household. Neither L'Hoir nor Galtier examines the *Annales*' foreign passages in great detail.

⁵⁹⁵ L'Hoir 2006.

⁵⁹⁶ Quint. 9.2.65: "Now indeed to this type, because it is both quite frequent and, I believe, eagerly anticipated Through a certain suspicion, we want what we do not say to be received [by the audience]. It is certainly not the opposite, as in irony, but something hidden as if it should be discovered by the listener" (*iam enim ad id genus, quod et frequentissimum est et expectari maxime credo . . . per quamdam suspicionem quod non dicimus accipi volumus, non utique contrarium, ut in Εἰρωνείᾳ, sed aliud latens et auditori quasi inveniendum*).

Romans needed to steal someone else's literary heritage. Rather, Gildenhard suggests that the Romans procured and modified Greek drama on a large scale simply because Hellenic tragedies could be more easily sensationalized. In Roman hands, the political undertones of fifth-century Athens, which are infused into so many of the Greeks' dramatic works, just seemed less burdensome and more malleable outside their historically and geographically Attic context. For Roman authors, the Greek tragedies were perfect tools for entertainment.⁵⁹⁷ If an audience member were a Roman philhellene, adaptations or allusions to the Greek tragedians lent the work a greater air of respectability. On the other hand, if that same spectator were more critical of Greek culture, those same allusions might be interpreted as comic relief—as a subtle, humorous jab at the Greeks' melodramatic, unbelievable, and outdated myths. Because of the adaptability of Greek drama, the popularity of Hellenic tragedy survived well into the High and Late Roman Imperial periods. Still, how popular a specific Greek tragedy, like Aeschylus' *Persians*, was in Tacitus' day is, admittedly, a much more difficult question to answer. It is made even more problematic because no Roman adaptation of the *Persians* has come down to us—or, for that matter, is even known to have existed. Seneca the Younger, among his many other tragedies, wrote an *Agamemnon* perhaps derived in part from the first play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. But no Roman version of the *Persians* is extant or attested anywhere in the sources.

We do know, however, that the Persian Wars motif was both alive and well during the course of the first century. The Julio-Claudians themselves may, in fact, be largely responsible for preserving this West vs. East motif as part of Rome's collective consciousness. The dynasty readily exploited the story of Xerxes' Greek campaign and the Battle of Salamis to improve its own public image on several occasions. Augustus, on the eve of C. Caesar's mission to the East, celebrated by staging a mock sea battle (*naumachia*) reenacting the Battle of Salamis and the Greeks' naval victory over the Persians.⁵⁹⁸ Caligula's famously expensive and elaborate bridging of the Bay of Naples, too, might have been, in

⁵⁹⁷ Gildenhard 2010: 165.

⁵⁹⁸ *Res Gest.* 23; Cass. Dio 55.10.7; and Ovid *Ars amat.* 1.171-172; Vell. Pat. 2.100; and Suet. *Aug.* 43.2.

part, an homage to Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont. While driving across the pontoon bridge on his chariot, the emperor carried beside him the Parthian prince and newest Roman political hostage, Darius, the son of the Parthian king Artabanus III.⁵⁹⁹ Anthony Spawforth, at least, speculates that Caligula's Bay of Naples spectacle might therefore have had a legitimate political purpose: to impress the Parthian monarch's son and demonstrate Rome's power.⁶⁰⁰ Finally, in 57 or 58, Nero added to this tradition by staging another *naumachia*, based on Augustus' Salamis model, to commemorate the start of his Armenian War that winter.⁶⁰¹

The message embedded in these various spectacles would have only held meaning for the Roman public if those viewing them already had some exposure to the stories surrounding the Persian Wars. Part of this exposure must have been iconographic. But teasing out specific Roman artistic allusions to the Achaemenids and Persian Wars in the first and early second centuries CE is a complicated task due to the wealth of overlapping Parthian iconography, especially during the reigns of Augustus and Nero. Depictions of Parthians, such as on Augustus' Prima Porta statue, victory arch, and Ara Pacis altar, are most easily recognized from their context.⁶⁰² Their "barbarian" garb (e.g., trousers, torques, and Phrygian caps) certainly distinguished these figures as eastern, but it is often hard to determine whether these individual features are just common, everyday ways of representing Parthians or, in fact, allusions with some deeper meaning. When we observe the image of a kneeling Parthian presenting a Roman soldier with the legionary standards on the Prima Porta statue, clearly we are supposed to envision, first and foremost, Augustus humbling the Parthians and recovering Crassus' lost military standards. But would the kneeling barbarian's beard and trousers have suggested something more to a Roman viewer? Would a Roman have also seen the supplicating barbarian not just as a

599 For accounts of Caligula's Bay of Naples bridge see Cass. Dio 59.17 and Joseph. *AJ* 19.5-6. For suggestions that the show was done in imitation of Xerxes see Suet. *Gaius* 19 and *Brev Vit.* 18.5. On this point also cf. Spawforth 1994: 238.

600 Spawforth 1994: 241.

601 Cass. Dio 61.9.6; Suet. *Nero* 12.

602 For representations of Parthians in Rome—especially Augustan Rome—see Rose 2005.

Parthian, but as the personification of the East? Would that Roman have then also thought about Rome's place in the historical West vs. East conflict, perhaps even further identifying the barbarian as an ancient Persian or a humbled Xerxes? We suspect not, but then that is the point. So removed in time and place, it is difficult, given our dearth of evidence, to know for sure what deeper meaning a Roman viewer would have taken away from such an artistic piece.

In terms of the city of Rome itself under the Julio-Claudians, a couple meager bits of evidence will suffice to demonstrate at least the possibility of a more widespread Persian Wars iconography. Tonio Hölscher has, for instance, pointed to several Augustan era reliefs depicting the goddess Victory holding a trireme's stern-post as allusions not just to the Battle of Actium, but also to Salamis. These Roman reliefs are closely related in theme and form to a number of Hellenic reliefs of Nike and Athena first sculpted in commemoration of the Greeks' naval victory over the Persians.⁶⁰³ Additionally, a sculptural group depicting three kneeling "eastern" barbarians supporting a tripod, reconstructed by Rolf Schneider and dated to the Augustan era, may be further evidence of an iconographic tradition of Persians in Rome's cultural sphere. Augustus might have even housed in his own residence on the Palatine Hill this particular statuary group, which appears to follow closely in the same artistic line as the tripod-column dedicated at Delphi by the Greeks after the Battle of Plataea.⁶⁰⁴ Pausanias describes a similar monument made up of a bronze tripod and marble figures of Persians, which might serve as another precedent for Schneider's group, in the temple of Olympian Zeus at Athens.⁶⁰⁵ Lastly, A. Kuttner has speculated that the statues of Parthian captives in the Basilica Aemilia and the "Persian" Caryatids at the Villa Farnesina may actually allude to the Persian Porch in Sparta.⁶⁰⁶ Admittedly, the examples listed here are all probably from the early first century and Augustus' reign, and Spawforth

603 Hölscher 1984.

604 See Schneider 1986 but also Spawforth 1994: 238.

605 Paus. 1.18.8. See Hardie 2007: 130 who admittedly points out that Spawforth believes the statuary group could date to the High Empire, to either Trajan's or Hadrian's reigns. This revised dating scheme does not necessarily mean, however, that Tacitus would not have seen it.

606 Kuttner 1995: 83. And for more on these examples of Persian iconography in Rome cf. also Hardie 2007: 130.

does claim that by Tacitus' day there were significantly fewer overt allusions in Roman art to Classical Greece.⁶⁰⁷ However, A. Stewart has identified at least one additional possibility, the so-called "Vatican Persian," a Roman copy of a wounded Persian originally set up in the Campus Martius perhaps during Trajan's reign.⁶⁰⁸ But even if Spawforth is correct, and the appearance of artistic references to the Persian Wars are weighted more heavily towards the start of the first century, many of these statues must have remained a visible part of the city throughout the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties, well into Tacitus' own lifetime. As a longtime resident of the capital city, Tacitus must have been influenced by at least a few of these Persian Wars references.

Outside the confines of Rome's city limits, artistic depictions of—or art work containing allusions to—the Persian Wars, Xerxes' defeat, and the Battle of Salamis abound. The Athenian acropolis—in some respects, the entire Greek world—was one giant monument to Hellenic civilization's resilience against the "eastern menace." Two examples may hold special relevance for our current discussion, however. The first is a gilded, honorific inscription dedicated to the emperor Nero on the Athenian acropolis in 61/62.⁶⁰⁹ The inscription's dedicator, a prominent Athenian noble and Romanophile named Tib. Claudius Novius, was closely connected to cults at Plataea and the Eleuthrian Games. Both of these cults celebrated, as part of their mysteries, the legacy of the Persian Wars.⁶¹⁰ Perhaps for this reason, Claudius chose to install the emperor's epigraphic monument on Greece's greatest reminder of the Achaemenid Persians' attempted oppression, the Parthenon.⁶¹¹ Nero's inscription was in fact set alongside four sculpted panels depicting Attalus I's victory against the Gauls, as well as beside Alexander the Great's shields from the Battle at the Granicus River. Many Greco-

607 Spawforth 1994: 242-243 maintains that, especially with Trajan's eastern war, many Romans viewed Parthia less as a threat like the Persians of old. Spawforth claims that Alexander the Great was a much more apt model for comparison to Trajan.

608 Stewart 2004: 136-152. The statue of the wounded Persian was originally part of a larger group including defeated Giants, Amazons, Persians, and Gauls set up on the Athenian acropolis by the Attalid kings of Pergamum.

609 For a detailed description of the inscription itself see Carroll 1982.

610 For more on Tib. Claudius Novius cf. Geagan 1979.

611 Spawforth 1994: 234 points out that "later Athenians thought of the Parthenon itself as paid for by Persian spoils." Cf. especially Dem. 22.13.

Romans viewed Pergamum's conflicts with the Gauls and Alexander's conquests as part of the same West vs. East contest as the Persian Wars. The juxtaposition of Nero's dedication with these other monuments and trophies would have therefore firmly set Nero's Armenian War within this broader framework of cultural conflict stretching all the way back to Xerxes' invasion of Greece.⁶¹²

In addition to Claudius Novius' honorific monument in Athens, the citizens of Aphrodisias in the region of Caria in Asia Minor also decided, around the same time, to adorn their Sebasteion (also known as the Augusteum) with a monument to Nero's achievements in Armenia. The dramatic relief added to the temple portrayed a wounded or slain Armenian collapsed against the victorious, imposing image of the emperor. The Sebasteion temple was dedicated to Aphrodite, the *divus Augustus*, and the local people. Aphrodite/Venus was the patron deity of the Julii clan. Thus, besides simply honoring Nero for his military conquests, this relief may have been Aphrodisias' attempt to liken the current emperor's eastern successes to those of Augustus.⁶¹³

On the most basic level, these examples from the Parthenon in Athens and Sebasteion in Aphrodisias help fill in the blanks left over from our previous discussion on Persian-style spectacles and iconography in Rome. The Romanophile Claudius Novius' inscription shows that many citizens of the empire—not just those inside the capital—interpreted Rome's wars in the East as the latest incarnation of the Greco-Roman world's ongoing battle with descendants of Achaemenid Persia. And the Aphrodisians' monumental frieze may demonstrate that those same citizens also understood Armenia as the linchpin in that age-old contest of civilizations. What is especially interesting, though, is the fact that both Claudius Novius and the Aphrodisians made their dedications at the same time in 61/62, the same year as the Rhandaia disaster. They are both testaments celebrating Nero—the heir of the Divine Augustus—as the West's latest champion against the “eastern menace.” In the *Annales*, Tacitus does not specifically discuss any foreign honors Nero received in that year, but the Athenian

⁶¹² Spawforth 1994: 234-237; Hardie 2007: 130.

⁶¹³ For the relief itself see Smith 1987: 117-120, but also Spawforth 1994: 237.

and Aphrodisian tributes could be part of the same celebrations the historian describes the Senate holding to honor the emperor and his “victory” in Armenia—that is, despite the fact that Paetus had just evacuated the kingdom in disgrace (*Ann.* 15.18). What is more, although such a claim can perhaps never be definitively proved, Tacitus himself might have even had the opportunity to view these dedications to Nero in Athens and Aphrodisias. Little is known about the Roman author’s administrative career. Yet at least a few scholars have speculated that Tacitus served as proconsul of the province of Asia (perhaps from 112 to 113).⁶¹⁴ An inscription discovered at Mylasa in Caria, not far from Aphrodisias, honoring a Cornelius Tacitus for his service seems to partially corroborate this theory.⁶¹⁵

If Tacitus were governor of Asia, he would have had numerous chances to visit Aphrodisias where, even sixty years later, he could have still seen and would have, no doubt, appreciated the irony of a monument set up to immortalize, of all things, Rhandaia.⁶¹⁶ Furthermore, on his journey to or from his provincial governorship, Tacitus might very well have stopped over in Athens, as so many Romans did while visiting the East. If so, then perhaps he would have also viewed Nero’s Rhandaia tribute there, mounted shamefully on the Parthenon beside much worthier relics like Alexander’s shields from the Granicus. In Parthian Passage 2.2 (*Ann.* 6.35.3-4), Tacitus’ description of the single combat between the Iberian Pharasmenes and the Parthian Orodes for possession of Armenia seems eerily reminiscent at times of Alexander’s battle at the Granicus. The two generals fight a one-on-one contest on horseback, and the Parthian commander Orodes is even wounded “through the helmet” (*per galeam*) like Alexander. Could it be that when Tacitus was penning that particular passage about Armenia, set during the hexad dedicated to Tiberius Claudius Nero, the historian was actually thinking about Tiberius Claudius Novius’ honorific to Nero? Could Tacitus have been alluding to Rhandaia not just in Book 15,

614 Cf. Mellor 2011: 9 who follows Bowersock 1992.

615 *OGIS* 487.

616 Tac. *Ann.* 3.60-63 in fact demonstrates that Tacitus had an intimate knowledge of the various local city cults of Asia Minor—including those of Aphrodisias.

but even in Book 6? Could he have been mocking the fact that, even in his own day, a tribute to Nero's Armenian albatross still hung disgracefully on the Parthenon for all to see right next to Alexander's great legacy?

Literary references or allusions to the Persian Wars over the course of the first and early second centuries—as opposed to strictly iconographic representations—are more numerous and less ambiguous. Latin authors, including several whom Tacitus might well have read as part of his education and even known personally, frequently refer to Xerxes as the consummate symbol of excessive pride and arrogance.⁶¹⁷ The Elder Pliny mentions, for example, how Pompey often accused Lucullus of confusing land and sea and called him “Xerxes in a toga.”⁶¹⁸ Two of Seneca the Elder's rhetorical exercises, the *Suasoriae*, deal specifically with Xerxes.⁶¹⁹ Furthermore, the poet Lucan compares Julius Caesar to the Persian king at one point as well, and pseudo-Lucian claims Nero's canal project across the isthmus of Corinth was reminiscent of both Darius' and Xerxes' attempts to dig a similar canal across the peninsula at Mt. Athos.⁶²⁰ Finally, Juvenal's Tenth Satire names Xerxes, along with Alexander the Great and Hannibal, as generals who defied nature and paid a price.⁶²¹

The most important author for our purposes, however, may be Seneca the Younger. Seneca does not mention Xerxes by name at all. But as part of his tragic play *Agamemnon*, the author describes the return of the remnants of the Greek fleet from Troy.⁶²² Philip Hardie has already noted how the scene, which takes up most of Act III and which Seneca chooses to relate entirely via messenger speech, displays all of the traditional hallmarks of the topos of the overly ambitious and defeated general in ignominious flight.⁶²³ Richard Tarrent has pointed out, in addition, that this topos was commonly used

617 For a more exhaustive discussion of such references cf. Hardie 2007: 132-135.

618 Pliny *NH* 9.170: *Xerxes togatus*. See also Plut. *Luc.* 39.3; Vell. Pat. 2.33.4; and Cass. Dio 60.27 for criticisms of Lucullus' extravagance, ambition, and greed. Lucullus was especially famous for his “Persian gardens.” And for other comments on Lucullus' building projects on the Bay of Naples see Varro *Rer. Rust.* 3.17.9.

619 Sen. the Elder *Suas.* 1.2 and 1.5.

620 Lucan *BC* 2.669-679; Pseudo-Lucian *Nero* 2.

621 Juv. *Sat.* 10.173-187.

622 Sen. *Ag.* 421-578.

623 Hardie 2007: 135.

by authors in the High Imperial period, most often in reference to Pompey and Pharsalus. Cassius Dio, for instance, says Pompey was nicknamed “Agamemnon,” and Appian claims Pompey’s constituents in the capital sometimes even called him “King of Kings and Agamemnon.”⁶²⁴ “King of Kings” was a common title for Persian/Parthian monarchs, and so Appian’s remark especially might seem to imply that both Persian kings, like Xerxes, and Agamemnon were seen similarly by Tacitus’ near contemporaries: their names were shorthand for hubris, the shameful loss in war (or, at least, Pyrrhic victories) and the return home in disgrace.

In regards to the fact that the Atreid king and Xerxes might have been seen as kindred spirits, Annette Baertschi has also noted several other commonalities between the return of the Greek fleet in Act III of Seneca’s *Agamemnon* and Aeschylus’ account of Xerxes’ return to Ctesiphon in the *Persians*. Both passages, besides focusing on the hubris and shameful homecoming of their main characters, relate the destruction of fleets, after all. Baertschi, moreover, asserts that both Seneca’s *Agamemnon* and Aeschylus’ *Persians* convey their topics in like fashion using extended messenger speeches. In fact, the criticism most frequently leveled against Seneca’s tragic style, his overuse of the messenger as a medium for relating dramatic action, may further hint that he consulted the *Persians* while writing his *Agamemnon*. Although messenger speeches in themselves are quite common throughout Greek drama, Aeschylus’ *Persians* contains the single longest messenger speech by far of any known extant tragedy (*Pers.* 249-514).⁶²⁵ Given the prominent role Seneca plays throughout the *Annales*, it seem hard to imagine that the historian would not have been intimately familiar with the famous statesman and Stoic philosopher’s works, including his *Agamemnon*.⁶²⁶

⁶²⁴ Tarrant 1976. Cass. Dio 42.5.5; Appian *BC* 2.67.

⁶²⁵ Baertschi 2010.

⁶²⁶ Henry and Walker 1963 seem to reject this supposition. They maintain that Tacitus’ personal beliefs about the Principate made him unsympathetic to the Stoics. However, even if true, that does not mean he was unfamiliar with Seneca’s writings. Furthermore, L’Hoir 2006: 204-220 believes that she has identified distinct elements of Seneca’s Neo-Stoicism in the *Annales*; she point to examples where she thinks Tacitus is paying homage to Seneca. First of all, L’Hoir likens the Great Fire of Rome under Nero to the Stoic conception of the periodical conflagration which consumes the world. L’Hoir also points to several episodes depicting the emperors trying to master or dominate nature itself and the disastrous results of such hubris (e.g., Nero’s Domus Aurea). L’Hoir thinks that these examples go directly against the

None of this iconographic or literary evidence definitively proves by itself that Tacitus had Aeschylus' *Persians* in mind while he was crafting his Rhandaia episode. For that, we must examine Tacitus' own account in detail, a task to which we will turn presently. Yet the information provided above, though no smoking gun, is highly suggestive. Over the course of the first and early second centuries CE, stories about and references to the Persian Wars appear to have remained quite popular both among the Roman public and in certain literary circles. What is more, those stories were actively promoted by the emperors and their admirers in the provinces who wished to see Rome's various dealings along the Euphrates frontier set within the broader context of the conflict between West and East. If Tacitus were looking for a historical/literary model to make Paetus seem even more prideful, incompetent, and abject, no choice would have been more apt than Xerxes. And if Aeschylus' *Persians* was available to and good enough for Seneca to allude to in his own tragedy, perhaps Tacitus might have had the same thought when he began his account of Rhandaia—what he saw as the critical, tragic turning point of Rome's first-century foreign policy.

L'Hoir argues that, like Greek tragedy, Tacitus often uses dramatic vocabulary—specifically, combinations of words—to emphasize a tragic twist or turning of events (*peripeteia*). She suggests that the repetition of words such as *vertere* or *mutare*, along with their many derivatives, implies an impending change in the present action of a scene.⁶²⁷ Although L'Hoir's study does not discuss Paetus, thematic language of this sort is as prevalent in Tacitus' description of Rhandaia as it is through the remainder of the work. For example, immediately prior to Paetus entering Armenia, Tacitus reports that Vologeses' legates “returned without result” (*revertere inriti*).⁶²⁸ Furthermore, after balking before Corbulo's staunch resistance at the Euphrates, the Parthians “turned all their hope toward Armenia”

Stoic concept of living in accord with nature. Finally, L'Hoir sees reflections of Tacitus' dualistic character portrayals, characters being defined either as good or bad, in Seneca's *Naturales Questiones*, the treatise which best lays out the philosopher's ideals of Neo-Stoicism.

627 L'Hoir 2006: 80-81.

628 Tac. *Ann.* 15.7.1.

(*spem omnem in Armeniam verterent*).⁶²⁹ And, finally, in the aftermath of the Romans' surrender, Tacitus says that Paetus' legions retreated as "if they had turned their backs in battle" (*si terga in acie vertissent*).⁶³⁰ Like the *Persians*, which Aeschylus sets in the aftermath of the Battle of Salamis, Tacitus' account of Rhandaia also takes place after a dramatic reversal of military fortune.

Additionally, in his first scene (*Ann.* 15.6), Paetus declares boldly that he wishes to impose Roman justice, law, and tribute on Armenia *pro umbra regis*. One way to translate this prepositional phrase is as "instead of a king's shadow." Such a rendering would imply that Paetus intended to substitute proper Roman administration for Tigranes' rule and Armenia's long series of effete client kings. But nowhere does Tacitus mention that Nero gave Paetus the authority to provincialize Armenia. Moreover, even if we ignore this problem, how do we balance this interpretation with the odd fact that, at this point in Tacitus' narrative, Armenia had no such client king? Following Corbulo's negotiated truce with Parthia in 61, Tigranes disappears from Tacitus' story altogether. On the eve of Paetus' campaign, if the Armenians lived under anyone's shadow, it was that of the Parthian king Vologeses. In addition, *umbra* may be translated as "shadow," but also as "ghost" or "phantom." And so, at least one translator has interpreted this phrase alternately as "on behalf of a phantom king," a rendering which could be highly suggestive of Darius' ghost in the *Persians*.⁶³¹ Perhaps Tacitus was trying to foreshadow that Paetus, through his ineptitude and recklessness, would hand over Armenia to the Parthian king.

Tacitus may well allude to the *Persians* again when describing the harassment the Romans suffer after their surrender. The historian is not timid about invoking the Romans' greatest symbol of consummate loss, stating: "Rumor holds that the legions were sent under the yoke" (*addidit rumor sub iugum missas legiones*).⁶³² Arguably, Tacitus most likely intends this image to dredge up painful memories of the Roman Republic's early disaster at Caudium in 321 BCE during the Third Samnite

629 Tac. *Ann.* 15.9.2.

630 Tac. *Ann.* 15.16.3.

631 Jackson 1937: 227.

632 Tac. *Ann.* 15.15.2.

War. Tacitus refers specifically to Caudium prior to Paetus' surrender (*Ann.* 15.13.2), and the account of Roman legionnaires marching under the Samnite yoke is quite reminiscent of what Paetus' troops experience. As the Roman soldiers leave camp, Armenians line either side of the road, subjecting Paetus' men to both physical and verbal abuse. Livy's account of Caudium describes very similar abuses by the Samnites.⁶³³ But Tacitus' description of the Roman retreat is at times also suggestive of scenes from the *Persians*.⁶³⁴ For instance, as the Romans march through the Armenian gauntlet, Tacitus remarks how "even the Roman soldiers' clothing was ripped away" (*raptae etiam vestes*).⁶³⁵ In the *Persians*, one of Aeschylus' favorite literary devices is the contrasting image of Darius' ghost, adorned in all the regalia of the Great King, and Xerxes, who by the final act emerges bedraggled and in rags.⁶³⁶ Furthermore, Tacitus records later on that, when Paetus' retreating troops came across Corbulo's reinforcements, the soldiers "could not even hold back their tears" (*ne lacrimis quidem temperare*).⁶³⁷ Like these distraught soldiers, both Xerxes' mother Atossa and the chorus of Persian elders spend much of Aeschylus' play weeping inconsolably and bemoaning the plight of their countrymen.⁶³⁸ Finally, the Greek tragedian portrays Xerxes, who eventually appears in Susa not only threadbare, but also in full flight and far ahead of the remnants of his army, as a coward.⁶³⁹ In this regard, there can be no question that the Roman commander resembles Aeschylus' Xerxes, for "on one day, Paetus marched over forty miles, abandoning the wounded here and there as he went" (*una die quadraginta milium spatium emensum esse Paetum, desertis passim sauciis*).⁶⁴⁰

633 For an account of Caudium see Livy 9.2.

634 And somewhat oddly Horsfall 1982: 50-51 argues that Livy's account of Caudium's geography defies any sort of modern analysis. He suggests that Livy's description of the area and ambush is actually a rather common literary trope: in Roman literature, armies apparently frequently get trapped in valleys surrounded by steep cliffs that do not actually exist anywhere on the planet. Horsfall claims, in fact, that Livy's account of the Caudium disaster closely resembles Curtius Rufus' report of Alexander the Great's forcing of the Cilician and Persian Gates.

635 Tac. *Ann.* 15.15.3.

636 Aesch. *Pers.* 649-647 (for Darius' Persian costume); and 197-199, 465-470, and 831-836 (for Xerxes' destitute appearance). Cf. Hall 1989: 70.

637 Tac. *Ann.* 15.16.5.

638 Aesch. *Pers.* 120, 133, et passim.

639 Aesch. *Pers.* 734-736.

640 Tac. *Ann.* 15.16.3. A typical legionary army could march 20 Roman miles in a day (cf. Veg. 1.9 and Joseph. *BJ* 3.72).

Taken separately, these bits and pieces of evidence prove little. But when combined with L'Hoir's findings, the sheer frequency of times Tacitus' Rhandeia imagery aligns with Aeschylus' themes in the *Persians* suggests a correlation. While discussing the Julio-Claudian/Atreid connection in the *Annales*' earlier Books, L'Hoir argues that Tacitus is not attempting to depict Livia, for instance, as the exact mirror of Clytemnestra. Tacitus colors his description of Livia with references to Agamemnon's unfaithful, colluding wife to add a greater depth of character to the emperor's mother. But the two women are not supposed to be a precise one-to-one match in terms of their life stories.⁶⁴¹ We propose that Tacitus is doing something similar here with Paetus and Xerxes. Tacitus does not sprinkle allusions to the *Persians* throughout *Annales* Book 15 to imply any sort of absolute or fixed model for the Roman commander. Tacitus is not trying to portray Paetus as the exact reincarnation of Xerxes. However, as far as the historian is concerned, the two men do share certain commonalities of character: both men are led by recklessness and excessive pride into cataclysmic military disasters which drastically alter the course of their respective civilizations. The same hubris and cowardice Aeschylus identifies in Xerxes Tacitus sees in the cravenly reflection of Paetus.

The care Tacitus used to craft his Rhandeia episode supports the argument that the *Annales*' eastern episodes are not simply aimless digressions. As Ash has shown with the Iberio-Parthian battle narrative (*Ann.* 6.33-35) and Keitel has argued with the Parthian civil war account (*Ann.* 11.8-10), the *Annales*' foreign episodes often operate on a variety of levels.⁶⁴² Scenes like Rhandeia are far too complex in construction and meaning to be merely the author's insignificant afterthought. Furthermore, Tacitus chose to use the same Greek playwright, Aeschylus, to add depth both to some of the domestic scenes in the *Annales*' early Books and Parthian Passage 4 here in Book 15.⁶⁴³ This common thread

⁶⁴¹ L'Hoir 2006: 15-70 readily admits that there is not a literary "smoking gun." But she maintains that the sheer number of examples suggests some connection. She does not claim that Tacitus slavishly follows the plot of the *Oresteia*, but rather only that he mimics Aeschylus' themes, vocabulary, and verbal structures (*mimesis*) to imbue his own work with a similar sense of tragedy.

⁶⁴² Ash 1999; Keitel 1978.

⁶⁴³ L'Hoir 2006: 15-70.

could imply that he did not wish his audience to view his work's domestic and foreign scenes entirely independently from each other. Aeschylus' plays address the hubris and despotism of both Greeks and Persians—of both the Atreids in the *Oresteia* and the Achaemenids in the *Persians*. By using Aeschylus as his literary precedent, Tacitus could be suggesting that the dangers of despotic rule transcend a nation's domestic or foreign politics; they transcend race and international boundaries. They are universal dangers that both civilized states, like Rome, and barbarian kingdoms, like Parthia, had to struggle against equally. Perhaps for Tacitus, the side who would prove victorious was not the one who dominated the battlefield, but the one who could first overcome its own internal demons.

Chapter 10
Trajan's Parthian War and Tacitus' *Annales*

Trajan's Parthian War

Either Caesennius Paetus or perhaps his son (who may have shared the same name) shows up again briefly in Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum*. The Jewish historian records that in 72 CE, Paetus, who was now (somewhat ironically) serving as governor of Syria, informed the Roman emperor Vespasian that King Antiochus of Commagene was considering an alliance with the Parthians. Such an alliance would have threatened the Neronian compromise; therefore, Vespasian authorized Paetus to invade Commagene and depose Antiochus. Although the king's two sons, Epiphanes and Callinicus, rallied a small army to oppose the Romans, their father apparently did not share their confidence. As soon as Paetus' army entered the kingdom, Antiochus fled to Parthia and the safety of Vologeses' court. After the king's departure, the Romans had no trouble mopping up Commagene's meager forces. But because Antiochus had not personally taken up arms against Rome, Vespasian eventually allowed the deposed monarch to surrender and live out the remainder of his days in Sparta with a considerable stipend.⁶⁴⁴

Instead of simply installing a new client king on Commagene's throne, Vespasian chose to annex the kingdom. At the same time, Rome also took the opportunity to seize a rather large chunk of western Armenia. Such an audacious move on Vespasian's part would have normally provoked strong objections from the Parthians; however, Vologeses was preoccupied at the moment battling the Alani. These nomadic tribesmen had in recent years poured into Parthia in hordes, sacking and raiding Vologeses' northern provinces around the Caspian Sea. By 75, Parthia's situation had become so dire, in fact, that Vologeses deigned to ask Rome's assistance against the raiders, who had overrun Hyrcania and Media Atropotene and even deposed the Parthian king's brother Pacorus. In response to the king's

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Joseph. *BJ* 7.219-243.

petition, Vespasian dispatched troops to reinforce the king of Iberia, Rome's easternmost ally who was also suffering from Alani incursions. But Vologeses' hope that the emperor would send one of his sons, either Titus or Domitian, to the East never materialized.⁶⁴⁵

As time passed, Vologeses' ongoing struggle against the Alani left the Parthian throne vulnerable to political rivals. Our literary sources are silent, but numismatic evidence suggests ca. 79 a usurper named Pacorus II removed Vologeses from power.⁶⁴⁶ The accession of a new monarch did not, however, immediately return stability to the Parthian state. Continuing pressure from the Alani and the sudden appearance of another royal contender, Vologeses II, led to two lengthy periods (84-93 and 95-105) when Pacorus minted no coins at either Seleucia or Ctesiphon. More problematic still, Pacorus' own brother or brother-in-law, a nobleman named Osroes, started producing coinage bearing his own image ca. 109/110. These many challenges over time proved too much for Pacorus to handle, for the embattled monarch eventually fades altogether from the numismatic record. Although Vologeses II's and Osroes' contest probably continued for some time after Pacorus had fallen by the wayside, the latter of these two contenders appears to have won out in the end.⁶⁴⁷ Osroes' consolidation of power had been a long, hard-fought affair; however, all of the Parthians' internal squabbling had not gone unnoticed far off in Rome.

Towards the end of his reign, Domitian ordered his advisers to draw up plans for an attack on Parthia. He no doubt hoped to take advantage of Parthia's fractured political situation. But as with his

⁶⁴⁵ Joseph. *BJ* 7.244-251; Suet. *Vesp.* 8.4, *Dom.* 2.2. Specifically, Vespasian assisted the Iberian king Mithridates in fortifying his strongholds at Metskheta and Tiflis. For Roman activity in Iberia at this time see Berolini, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, III, no. 6052 and Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, no. 8795. More recently, however, Bennett 1997 has pointed out that the emperor Trajan's father, Traianus, was appointed governor of Armenia and Syria by Vespasian during this same period. Bennett 1997: 18 states the "Traianus' triumphal laurels [as governor of Syria] are specifically associated with a military campaign in Parthia. They may have been awarded in connection with an invasion of Parthian territory by the Alani in 75." But Bennett also downplays the idea that this was any sort of full-scale invasion campaign. He quotes Syme who notes "in such circumstance, triumphal honours would be in order as much for a combination of skillful diplomacy and limited military action as for full-scale warfare."

⁶⁴⁶ Hollis 1994 argues that this Pacorus, whom the Flavian era poet Statius may refer to in his *Thebaid*, was in fact one of Vologeses' sons. Other than this passing poetic reference, however, we possess no other literary evidence for Pacorus' reign, which makes Hollis' assertion difficult to corroborate.

⁶⁴⁷ Wroth 1964: 193-216.

German and Dacian wars, which prompted a fair share of imperial criticism, Domitian probably envisioned a Parthian expedition as a defensive measure, as more of an opportunity to shore up Rome's border territories in the East. Domitian also probably had no real intention of leading such a campaign personally. Any speculation about Domitian's plans are irrelevant, however, for no achievements abroad—modest or otherwise—could have alleviated the widespread contempt the emperor had stirred up in the capital. Domitian's harsh treatment of dissenters in Rome had alienated most of Rome's citizenry, and in 96 CE a household plot finally succeeded in assassinating the despised emperor.⁶⁴⁸

Domitian's successor, Nerva, paid little attention to affairs on the eastern frontier. As the founder of a new imperial dynasty, Nerva was far more concerned with reestablishing imperial authority in Italy and the western provinces. He was also already rather advanced in years when he assumed the purple, and his reign was, as a consequence, relatively short. Domitian's assassination and Nerva's preoccupation with the western empire (and age) are, however, what convinced the Parthian king Osroes that the time had finally come to depose the Armenian monarch Tiridates. The Armenian king's long reign had kept the peace between Parthia and Rome ever since Nero's day, but from Osroes' perspective Tiridates also represented a dangerous, if admittedly, bygone era. Tiridates' two brothers, the Parthian monarch Vologeses I and Pacorus, the former king of Media Atropotene, had succumbed early on during Parthia's most recent round of domestic strife and confrontations with the Alani. But Tiridates and the memory of his brothers—that is, their branch of the Arsacid family's clout—must have still cast a long shadow. Tiridates, as the last surviving brother of Vologeses, still had the potential to be a spoiler for Osroes' nascent regime. Therefore, sometime ca. 111, the Parthian monarch orchestrated Tiridates' removal and installed his nephew, Axidares, as a replacement.⁶⁴⁹ However,

⁶⁴⁸ On Domitian's plans for an eastern expedition cf. Statius *Silvae* 5.1.89. And for a modern discussion see Debevoise 1938: 215.

⁶⁴⁹ Axidares was one of the sons of Osroes' predecessor—as well as brother or brother-in-law—Pacorus II. Despite his own earlier rivalry with Pacorus, Osroes may have felt installing a close relative on Armenia's throne was still the best way to overshadow fraternal concord and family allegiance of Vologeses I and his brothers.

because he most likely knew Rome would not acquiesce to this regime change, Osroes made no effort at all to garner Rome's approval. This crucial mistake was Osroes' undoing, for it provided Nerva's heir, the emperor Trajan, with the pretext for launching his own Parthian war.⁶⁵⁰

In the fall of 113, after departing Rome, Trajan sailed first to Athens.⁶⁵¹ There, the emperor discovered Osroes' ambassadors eagerly awaiting his arrival. The Parthian envoys informed Trajan that their master had had a change of heart and now strongly desired to avert a war.⁶⁵² To mollify the Princeps and rectify the situation, Osroes had already gone so far as to depose Axidares. Moreover, the Parthian king was now formally requesting that Trajan consider another of his nephews, Parthamasiris, as an alternate candidate for the Armenian kingship. But if Osroes believed this last-ditch effort would be enough to appease Trajan, he was wrong. The emperor made no effort whatsoever to acknowledge the Parthian king's olive branch. Without even replying to Osroes' ambassadors, Trajan chose instead to set out immediately for Antioch, where he continued war preparations, only now in more haste.⁶⁵³

That winter, Trajan called up several legions and auxiliary units from Egypt and Pannonia. These troops, along with those already stationed in Syria, Judea, and Commagene, would make up the bulk of his expeditionary force. By the spring of 114, with his army thus assembled, Trajan was ready to proceed.⁶⁵⁴ He advanced first to Melitene and, from there, marched unopposed into Lesser Armenia. At Satala, numerous tribal leaders from the Caucasus region appeared to welcome Trajan and offer

650 Statius *Silvae* 5.1; Cass. Dio 68.17.1; and Arrian *Parth.* frs. 37 and 40.

651 Although unverifiable, I like to imagine that in Athens Trajan would have also visited the Parthenon and seen Nero's inscription commemorating Rhandaia set alongside the various other Persian War dedications. The year 113 would have also been roughly the same time as Tacitus' Asian proconsulship. The emperor and the historian would have known each other; perhaps they even traveled to Athens together.

652 Osroes may have believed that Trajan's recent Dacian Wars would give the Parthians the political cover to depose Tiridates. The Parthian king probably thought that, after Rome's extended conflict with Decebalus, Trajan would not have the will to jump into another war far off in the East. When it became apparent that Trajan did have the will, Osroes must have panicked.

653 Cass. Dio 68.17.2-3.

654 For modern accounts of Trajan's Parthian War cf. Rawlinson 1893; Guey 1937; Debevoise 1938; Lepper 1948; Bivar 1983; Lerouge 2007; and Sheldon 2010.

their allegiance to Rome. The Roman emperor exchanged gifts with Anchialus, the king of the Heniochi, and held audiences with the rulers of the Iberians, Sarmatians, and Colchians.⁶⁵⁵

Like these local potentates, Parthamasiris, too, had been trying to secure an audience with Trajan ever since the Princeps' arrival at Antioch. The emperor had, however, up to this point denied the Arsacid's request. But once in Armenia, Trajan finally relented, agreeing to meet Parthamasiris in the Roman army's camp at Elegia. In a memorable scene, Cassius Dio describes how the Armenian candidate supplicated himself before Trajan, removing his diadem and placing it at the emperor's feet. Parthamasiris, it seems, fully believed that he was participating in a reenactment of Tiridates' investiture, that the Roman emperor would simply replace the crown as Nero had replaced Tiridates' in 66. Yet, to Parthamasiris' surprise and disgust, Trajan did not return the diadem. Rather, the emperor accepted the Parthian's act of supplication as a sign of surrender and declared that Armenia would henceforth officially be a province of the Roman Empire. Trajan allowed Parthamasiris to leave the camp, even providing him an escort of Roman cavalry to assure his safe passage home. However, soon after departing, the Arsacid died, apparently under rather mysterious circumstances.⁶⁵⁶

Following Trajan's meeting with Parthamasiris, the emperor turned to the task of consolidating his new Armenian province. He appointed a procuratorial governor and dispatched his legate, L. Quietus, against the Mardi, a hostile tribe living east of Lake Van.⁶⁵⁷ After destroying this tribe, Quietus garrisoned the region near the Caspian Gates, perhaps as a deterrent against Alani raids. With the subjugation of Armenia and its adjacent territories, Trajan at last felt the moment right to accept, at the Senate's behest, the appellation "Optimus."⁶⁵⁸ Trajan prized the title above all others, believing the

655 For Trajan's legions and early contacts on the campaign cf. Cass. Dio 68.19 and Eutrop. *Brev.* 8.3. Also, see Longden 1936: 241-242 and Debevoise 1938: 219-221.

656 Cass. Dio 68.19-20; Arrian *Parth.* frs. 38-39; and Eutrop. *Brev.* 8.3.

657 Longden 1931: 10 and Debevoise 1938: 225 have identified Trajan's Armenian procurator with some difficulty either as L. Catilius Severus, C. Atilius Claudius, or T. Haterius Nepos. All three men were prominent officials in the early reorganization of Armenia.

658 Cass. Dio 68.23; Arrian *Parth.* frs. 86-87; and Themistius *Orat.* 16. See also Mattingly 1968: 235.

moniker an affirmation not only of his military accomplishments, but also of his character. For Trajan, it proved that his interpretation of what a proper emperor should be—a warrior and conqueror—was what Romans really wanted from their Princeps.

From Armenia, Trajan's army next marched through Adiabene, where it successfully besieged the stronghold at Adenystrae before finally entering the Kingdom of Osrhoëne. At Osrhoëne's capital Edessa, Trajan planned to rein in the vacillating King Abgarus VII. Although Abgarus had been summoned earlier to an audience with the emperor, he had failed to present himself. His loyalty to Rome was thus still questionable, and a display of Roman force was necessary before Trajan proceeded any farther southwards. Trajan therefore drew up the Roman army's full legionary panoply in front of Edessa's walls. Not at all surprisingly, such a demonstration of Rome's formidable military might quickly convinced Abgarus that he had little choice but to comply. The Arab king immediately sent weapons and troops to Trajan as symbols of Edessa's fealty to Rome. The Roman emperor returned most of these gifts, his point having plainly been made, and then officially reconfirmed Abgarus as the city's phylarch.⁶⁵⁹

With Abgarus' allegiance secured, the pace of the Roman campaign quickened. Soon after departing Edessa, Trajan captured the strategic cities of Nisibis and Batnae. For these victories, the Senate awarded him an additional epithet, that of "Parthicus," and issued a series of coins throughout the empire touting ARMENIA ET MESOPOTAMIA IN POTESTATEM P. R. REDACTAE. Despite such encouragement, however, Trajan could not risk advancing any farther with winter rapidly approaching. He therefore garrisoned Nisibis, set up his troops in winter quarters, and returned to Antioch himself to wait for the spring campaigning season. But Trajan's decision to retire to the safety and comfort of the Syrian capital ironically led to the closest call the emperor would experience during the whole Parthian War. That winter (115 CE), an unusually violent earthquake struck Antioch and

⁶⁵⁹ Cass. Dio 68.22; Arrian *Parth.* frs. 42-48.

destroyed vast sections of the city. Trajan and his attendants only narrowly escaped death themselves by sheltering in the local hippodrome.⁶⁶⁰

As soon as spring arrived, Trajan returned to Nisibis to begin preparations for restarting the campaign. He first inspected a fleet that he had ordered constructed in his absence. He then had this fleet carried overland from Nisibis to the Tigris where it was used to cross the river back into the satrapy of Adiabene. Osroes' Parthians had taken the opportunity to reoccupy Adiabene while the Romans were either delayed at Edessa or wintering at Nisibis. But the enemy proved no better match for the Romans on this occasion, and Trajan retook the satrapy with relatively little trouble. And yet, before heading back to the Euphrates and resuming the march towards Ctesiphon, the emperor converted Adiabene, too, into an official Roman possession, the province of Assyria.

Having once more secured the Roman army's rear flank, Trajan commenced with his long march towards the Parthian capital. The Romans proceeded slowly at first, following the bank of the Euphrates to assure a consistent supply of water. But the army's modest pace was probably not just a logistical precaution; it also afforded Trajan the chance to visit local cities such as Phaliga, Dura-Europos, and Tyre. He probably wanted to assess the allegiance of these local rulers personally. Also wisely, the emperor had commissioned a fleet of ships, similar to those built at Nisibis, to sail alongside his army for support. Somewhere just north of Ctesiphon, he ordered this entire flotilla transferred, once again entirely overland, to the Tigris—probably in preparation for blockading the Parthian capital which occupied the river's left bank. Trajan, in all likelihood, anticipated a long, drawn out siege because Osroes had had ample time to prepare.⁶⁶¹

All the Romans' carefully calculated logistical maneuvers, in the end, proved unnecessary. Ctesiphon fell almost as soon as Trajan appeared at its gates. Osroes was apparently too afraid to confront the Romans and had fled only a few days earlier. The Parthian king had, moreover, absconded

⁶⁶⁰ Mattingly 1968: 289; Cass. Dio 68.23-25.

⁶⁶¹ Cass. Dio 68.26; Eutrop. *Brev.* 8.3; and Arrian *Parth.* 10 frs. 8 and 64.

in such a hurry that he mistakenly left behind not only his famous golden throne, but also his daughter. Therefore, with no one to oppose him, Trajan entered the Parthian capital on February 20, 116 amid the cheers of his soldiers and imposed a heavy tribute on his new Parthian subjects.⁶⁶² To celebrate the occasion back in Rome, the Senate commissioned coins displaying the image of the emperor and bearing the inscription PARTHIA CAPTA. Thus, what had been the heart of the Parthian Empire only the day before now became the Rome's newest province of Mesopotamia.⁶⁶³

A series of dramatic events that followed Ctesiphon's fall soon overshadowed any plans Trajan may have had to rebuild the war-torn kingdom. That winter, Trajan sailed down the Tigris River and occupied several small towns still committed to the Parthians.⁶⁶⁴ During this same excursion, the emperor also journeyed to view the Persian Gulf and on his return voyage stopped at Babylon to see the (supposed) death chamber of Alexander the Great. While touring Babylon, Trajan first received news of widespread rebellions in northern Mesopotamia. Many of these revolts had started as local, isolated uprisings instigated by Osroes' brother Mithridates, who had recently recaptured tracts of Roman territory along the upper Euphrates. Mithridates himself soon died from injuries sustained in an equestrian accident, but his son and Osroes' nephew, Sanatruces, continued to defy Roman authorities by inciting pro-Parthian resistance.⁶⁶⁵

Trajan immediately dispatched his best lieutenants, App. Maximus and L. Quietus, to quell these uprisings. Maximus was unfortunately killed fighting somewhere near the Taurus Mountains, but Quietus succeeded in reconquering most of northern Mesopotamia. He reoccupied Nisibis and razed Abgarus' Edessa to the ground after both cities had switched their allegiance back to the Parthians'

⁶⁶² Although no mention of Seleucia is made in the literary sources, numismatic evidence suggests that the Parthians—possibly even a royal rival of Osroes—may have still controlled the city even after Ctesiphon's capitulation. See Debevoise 1938: 233 and Mattingly 1968: 267. Seleucia lay on the opposite bank of the Tigris River not far from the Parthian capital. If Osroes' political rival did hold power there at the time, it might help to explain why the Parthian king was so eager to abandon his capital. He probably did not want to confront the Romans with a potential usurper waiting so closely nearby.

⁶⁶³ Cass. Dio 68.28.

⁶⁶⁴ I.e., Akra, Oratha, and Apamea.

⁶⁶⁵ Arrian *Parth.* 16 frs. 15-16, 69, and 75; Cass. Dio 68.29-30 (75.9).

banner. However, in the process, Quietus also left himself exposed to Sanatruces' counterattack. The pro-Parthian rebels had just received reinforcements from Osroes, who had sent his son Parthamaspates with a large contingent of Parthian horse archers and cataphracts. Yet fortunately for the Romans, this particular Parthian prince soon showed himself to be more pragmatic than loyal. Parthamaspates struck a deal with the Romans, exchanging his army's allegiance for the chance to become Trajan's Parthian client king. Once the emperor had agreed, Quietus and Parthamaspates combined forces and together routed Sanatruces' outmatched rebels.⁶⁶⁶

The pro-Parthian resistance movement continued to plague Trajan even after Sanatruces' defeat. In Armenia, Sanatruces' son orchestrated a successful coup against that province's Roman administrators. Trajan, who was preoccupied besieging the Parthian stronghold of Hatra at the time, had no additional manpower to spare for Armenia's recovery. He thus ceded a substantial portion of the province's territory to Sanatruces' son in exchange for the temporary return of amicable relations. When a lack of supplies then forced the Romans to quit their siege of Hatra, Trajan decided to recall all but his northernmost troops from Mesopotamia. He had intended to return the next year to shore up his hold on the province's southern cities; however, his health, which had been deteriorating steadily for several months, soon derailed any such plans. While preparing to sail home to Italy in August of 117, Trajan's chronic illness finally overcame him.⁶⁶⁷ The emperor's successor, Hadrian, apparently did not share Trajan's vision of a boundless Roman Empire. Over the next several months, Hadrian ordered the strategic withdrawal of all of Rome's forces from beyond the Euphrates.

The Motivation for Trajan's Parthian War

Our account of Trajan's Parthian War derives mainly from two classical texts, Cassius Dio's

Historia Romana and Arrian's *Parthica*. However, in spite of their incalculable historical value, both of

⁶⁶⁶ Cass. Dio 68.30; Euseb. 4.2.1; and HA *Hadrian* 5.4.

⁶⁶⁷ Cass. Dio 68.30 (75.9)-31, 33.

these sources possess a key flaw not easily overlooked. The passages in Dio's and Arrian's works that describe Trajan's Parthian War were preserved primarily by the efforts of the tenth-century Byzantine culturist Constantine VII. Consequently, these passages exist today only in the form of fragments and epitomes. Our picture of Trajan's Parthian War is therefore at best an incomplete one. The rather sparse nature of our evidence still has not deterred scholars from speculating about what the real, underlying causes of the war might have been. Reviewing the historiography of Trajan's war motivations should give us a better sense of why the Parthian War began and what type of emperor Trajan was.

In a 1931 article titled "Notes on the Parthian Campaigns of Trajan," R. P. Longden analyzed Pliny's *Bithynian Letters* to disprove the notion, which was popular at the time, that Trajan had planned to invade Mesopotamia long prior to 113.⁶⁶⁸ Longden's contemporaries had previously used Pliny's correspondence, which dates to 110/111, as proof of the emperor's premeditated motives. In *Epp.* 27 and 28, for example, Pliny writes that Trajan granted his procurator Maximus an extra amount of grain for distribution among the soldiers. Proponents who supported the case for Trajan's premeditated war argued that this additional grain allotment would have been necessary for troops mobilizing for a full-scale campaign. However, Longden pointed out that such an allotment could just as easily have been intended for storage in Bithynia's provincial granaries.⁶⁶⁹ Furthermore, *Epp.* 63, 64, and 67 relate how an imperial freedman named Lycormas requested Pliny detain an embassy from the Kingdom of Bosphorus in Bithynia until his arrival. Some scholars had previously interpreted this episode as a race between Lycormas and the Bosphorans to report urgent news from the eastern frontier to Trajan. Longden dismissed this explanation, too, and proposed instead that in actuality the freedman may have just fallen out of favor with the Bosphoran king and was trying to prevent the royal messengers from reporting his indiscretion to the emperor. Finally, in *Ep.* 74, Pliny apologizes to Trajan for delaying an imperial courier named Callidromus who possessed information that the Dacian king Decebalus had

⁶⁶⁸ Perhaps the best known advocate of the premeditation theory was Cuntz 1926.

⁶⁶⁹ Pliny *Ep.* 27-28; Longden 1931: 19-20.

sent gifts to the Parthian court.⁶⁷⁰ Longden's fellow scholars claimed that, if nothing else, this particular letter proved Trajan had ample reason early on to attack Parthia. However, while Longden agreed with this assessment, he also noted that Trajan's response to Pliny's *Ep.* 24 has not survived. There is thus no way to know for sure what Trajan's attitude would have been to this allegation of Parthia's collusion with Decebalus.⁶⁷¹

Over time, Longden's arguments found favor with many scholars who came to believe that Trajan never had any intention of invading Parthia. According to revised interpretation of Longden's proponents, at first, Trajan only wanted to recover Armenia and restore Rome's border security. However, after accomplishing this task, the emperor realized how troublesome the Parthians were and how easy it would be to conquer Mesopotamia as well. He therefore decided to carry his campaign a step further, but only after the Romans had completely subdued Armenia. Trajan's Parthian War was thus not a premeditated, but an impromptu affair. But such an interpretation—based, as it was, largely on the absence of evidence in Pliny's *Bithynian Letters*—failed to take into account either the Roman psyche or the emperor's personality. Just because Longden could not discover definitive proof for a prearranged, full-scale Parthian expedition in Pliny's work, that does not mean Trajan was in any way shortsighted. The emperor must have understood long beforehand the danger Parthia posed to the Roman Empire's internal security, and he must have also been fully aware of the potential profits awaiting anyone bold enough to try to conquer Mesopotamia.

These specific objections to Longden's model eventually led J. Guey to publish his 1937 response paper "Essai sur la guerre parthique de Trajan (114-117)." Guey attempted to show that Trajan's eastern war was actually the result of the emperor's own excessive greed. For instance, Guey's article proposed that, following the Dacian War, Trajan needed new sources of revenue to complete his

⁶⁷⁰ Callidromus actually claimed (Pliny *Ep.* 74) that he had been a slave of Laberius Maximus, one of Trajan's generals during the Dacian War. When his master had been captured by the Dacians, Decebalus had sent Callidromus to the Parthian king as a gift.

⁶⁷¹ Pliny *Ep.* 63-64, 67, 74; Longden 1931: 20-21.

many celebratory building projects in Rome, especially his elaborate and expensive new forum. This economically based view of the war also argued that Trajan may have been trying to seize control of Parthia's lucrative trade routes to the Far East. The emperor had, after all, just recently annexed the Kingdom of the Nabataeans ca. 107 or 108, probably for these same trade-related purposes. But to prove these suspicions correct, Guey needed to demonstrate that Trajan intended all along to attack Parthia. His study therefore also had to wrestle with the scanty, circumstantial evidence for premeditation.⁶⁷²

Like Longden's predecessors, Guey's treatment of the premeditation debate, at first, proffered Pliny's letters as evidence of a preplanned Mesopotamian expedition. But Guey plainly admitted the limitations of this evidence and, in fact, spent little time refuting Longden's earlier arguments. To buttress the inconclusive evidence in Pliny, however, Guey put forth other epigraphical proof of mass Roman troop deployments to the eastern frontier prior to the start of Trajan's campaign in 113. An inscription from Ancyra, for example, describing the prestigious career of Tib. Julius Severus, a public official during Hadrian's administration, mentions that Roman troops wintered in Ancyra for the "Parthian War." And a similar inscription from Thyateira records Roman legionary deployments in Galatia perhaps around the same time. Guey insisted that these monuments helped bolster the idea that a massive mobilization of Roman troops was already underway in Asia Minor long prior to Trajan's arrival in the East. However, as in the case of Pliny's letters, Guey's archeological evidence is hardly above suspicion. Because both the inscriptions cited contain no precise dating references, there is no way to tell beyond a doubt that their information pertains specifically to Trajan's era. They may, but then they could also just as easily refer to troop movements in the lead-up to Hadrian's Jewish War (the Bar Kokhba Revolt) in 132 or L. Verus' Parthian War in 161.⁶⁷³

672 Fiema 1987: 35; and for Guey's argument reference also Lepper 1948: 158-63.

673 Lepper 1948: 164-83.

F. A. Lepper's *Trajan's Parthian War* (1948), on the other hand, chose to endorse neither Longden's nor Guey's views completely, but instead took a "middle of the road" approach. Perhaps for this reason, Lepper's interpretation is still preferred by many scholars even today. For his part, Lepper believed that Longden's model was too simplistic and failed to take into account the Romans' strong predilection for glory-hunting and plundering. But Lepper regarded Guey's purely economic model at the same time as equally suspect because of the ambiguity of the study's archeological evidence. Lepper thus instead preferred to favor the opinions of Trajan's near contemporaries, men like Cassius Dio and Dio Chrysostom, who maintained that Trajan had invaded Mesopotamia, above all else, to win fame and glory.⁶⁷⁴

Prior to Lepper's championing of this particular viewpoint, most scholars dismissed such an explanation as nothing more than political spin-doctoring. Historians thought glory-hunting accusations of this sort—and, in particular, Cassius Dio's remark that the "real reason [for Trajan's war] was a desire to win renown"—were really just Hadrianic propaganda, meant to show that Rome's withdrawal from Mesopotamia after Trajan's death was justified.⁶⁷⁵ The notion of Trajan being an egomaniac, leading Rome into a prolonged war for his own personal aggrandizement, also seemed to clash with earlier assessments of the Princeps' character. Lepper points out, for example, that before setting out on his Parthian expedition, Trajan was rarely, if ever, accused of egotism or vanity. In addition, of the numerous titles voted to him, Trajan seems to have preferred 'Optimus' more than the rest specifically because it carried non-military connotations. And yet, while Lepper agreed for the most part with this evaluation of Trajan's character, he also noted that the emperor's age and illness may have altered his outlook or even his mental state towards the end of his life.⁶⁷⁶ Therefore, according to Lepper, if Trajan

⁶⁷⁴ Lepper 1948: 156-57, 188-94.

⁶⁷⁵ Cass. Dio 68.17.1.

⁶⁷⁶ According to Lepper 1948: 197-200, Trajan's symptoms—loss of strength, dropsy, and and partial paralysis—could have been caused by the onset of heart failure or a possible stroke. If so, then these conditions might have also caused some sort of mental impairment.

knew his end were near, his Parthian War may have been the result not so much of glory- but legacy-hunting.⁶⁷⁷

Dio Chrysostom's fourth kingship oration, which was probably performed for Trajan's birthday celebration in 103/104, may somewhat help to corroborate Lepper's theory. For in his speech, Chrysostom seems at times to compare the emperor to Alexander the Great. He accuses the legendary Macedonian king, for instance, of "being a slave to glory" (τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον δοῦλον ὄντα τῆς δόξης) and burning to conquer Babylon and Persia. Lepper, in particular, suspected that the Greek orator included such remarks so that his Roman audience would associate Alexander's wars against the Persians with Trajan's impending Parthian campaign. Rome's most popular military commanders—especially those Republican-era generals who operated in the East (Lucullus, Pompey, and Crassus)—had enjoyed thinking of themselves as Alexander's heirs. While surveying southern Mesopotamia, Trajan had, admittedly, taken time to visit Alexander's death chamber in Babylon, which would seem to imply that he also held the Macedonian conqueror in high esteem. Chrysostom may have therefore been trying to depict Trajan's upcoming Parthian War, like Alexander's, as an exercise in imperial vanity.⁶⁷⁸

However, we should note, as Lepper did, that a glory-/legacy-hunting explanation for Trajan's Parthian expedition is not entirely incompatible with other possible motivations. Lepper himself readily admitted that Longden's opportunistic and Guey's economically driven models could have very well been secondary considerations in Trajan's calculus for war. Lepper's theory is able to accommodate these earlier models specifically because it is not overly obsessed with proving premeditation. Perhaps Trajan planned to invade Mesopotamia as early as 103 (or at least 111); or perhaps he only

⁶⁷⁷ Lepper 1948: 197-200.

⁶⁷⁸ Dio Chrysos. *Or.* 4.60; Lepper 1948: 194-97. Mole 1983: 251-278, on the other hand, disagrees with Lepper. Mole believes Chrysostom's relevant remarks were added later, during or even after Trajan's eastern campaign had already started. However, while Mole's objections may call into question how early Trajan actually contemplated his Parthian War (i.e., not as early as 103/104), they do not detract from Lepper's main point—that Chrysostom, like Cassius Dio, viewed Trajan above all as a glory-hunter.

contemplated attacking Parthia after the collapse of resistance in Armenia. Either way, Lepper, no doubt, properly saw the pursuit of fame and glory as the unrelenting, driving force behind Trajan's Parthian War.⁶⁷⁹

Our purpose in reviewing the historiography of Trajan's war motivations is to emphasize the general lack of responsibility for the war both ancient and modern historians seem to ascribe to Parthia. Despite the fact that the Parthian king Osroes was technically guilty of breaching the terms of the Neronian compromise, neither Cassius Dio nor Dio Chrysostom—nor Lepper and his contemporaries, for that matter—ever blames the Parthians for starting the conflict. How could they, considering how desperately Osroes' ambassadors had attempted to avert war when they met with Trajan in Athens? The Parthian monarch had, without doubt, overstepped his bounds in Armenia by installing Axidares, but he had also tried to make amends. By offering Parthamasiris as a substitute candidate and requesting Roman confirmation, Osroes was simply attempting to adhere to the precedent Nero and Vologeses had established nearly fifty years earlier. Trajan was the one who had flatly rejected the Parthian king's quite reasonable diplomatic overture.⁶⁸⁰ Indeed, what is most interesting about Longden's, Guey's, and Lepper's theories is not their differences, but their one peculiar commonality: each of these authors places the lion's share of the blame for the Parthian War squarely on Trajan's shoulders. Trajan was decisive; he was militaristic—he was everything the Julio-Claudians had not been. There would have been no question among Tacitus' contemporaries that Trajan's Parthian War was a war of conquest, the kind not seen since the heyday of the Republic.

⁶⁷⁹ Lepper 1948: 201-4.

⁶⁸⁰ Because of the ambiguity of the numismatic evidence, it is also possible that Osroes was still vying with either Pacorus or Vologeses III—or perhaps even both—for the Parthian throne. If so, he would have likely tried everything to defer war with Rome once he realized Trajan was serious.

Trajan's Parthian War and Juvenal's *Satire 2*

None of our discussion so far has been meant to suggest that Trajan's Parthian War lacked widespread popular support in Rome. The impetus for the campaign may have started with the emperor's desire for glory, but the Roman public was also probably eager to renew the contest with Parthia at the beginning of the second century CE. Vespasian's Jewish War (66-73) and Trajan's own Dacian War (101-106) may have served as recent symbols of national Roman pride, but neither of these conflicts had resolved Rome's longstanding issues with the Parthians. The Julio-Claudians' legacy of passive diplomacy and delayed military intervention on the eastern frontier must have still burdened most Romans. Nero's disgraceful compromise over Armenia, a policy which most Roman citizens probably considered little better than Parthian appeasement, still plagued Rome's collective sense of national honor. Many Roman citizens had come to believe that delaying necessary conflicts with cold war tactics and avoiding the empire's most formidable enemies had enervated the empire's population. Rome's leadership had become soft, and the Roman capital had become a place of decadence and vice. The Roman public's collective mentality in the lead-up to Trajan's Parthian War was not the same as that which most Europeans experienced on the eve of the First World War; Rome's second-century sense of societal discontent and Europe's pre-WWI malaise had different root causes, of course. Yet both ancient Romans and modern Europeans seem to have thought the cure for their respective maladies was the same: a cleansing war, a great conflagration that would purge society of its many troublesome vices. For Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century, that conflagration was the Great War; for the Roman Empire at the turn of the first century, it was Trajan's Parthian War.

Tacitus' *Annales* gives us some sense of the empire's societal woes on the eve of Trajan's Great War. Even if we completely ignore the work's domestic scenes (which are, admittedly, its main focus), Tacitus emphasizes, time and again throughout the Parthian Passages, the Roman capital's deleterious effects on foreigners, especially the Parthian hostages. The historian harps on this issue partly because

it speaks to the unworkable foreign policy of Augustus and his descendants, but also because it demonstrates the amoral, despondent state of Rome's citizenry. For Tacitus, the corruptible atmosphere of the imperial city was as much the result of the Julio-Claudians' lack of a staunch warrior ethos as anything else. Nor was Tacitus alone in this opinion. His contemporary, the satirist Juvenal, seems to have shared a similar attitude, not just about the abject condition of Roman society, but about what may have caused the state's cultural decay.

Juvenal's *Satire 2* is primarily an attack on Rome's depraved aristocratic culture. The poem recounts a broad array of (what the satirist sees as) morally corrupt behavior and chastises the Roman nobility for allowing such practices to have become commonplace. Hypocritical philosophers, passive homosexuals, and unabashed perverts all elicit their fair share of scorn and contempt from the author as the poem progresses. But for Juvenal, the most conspicuous sign of the capital's social degeneracy is the fact that Rome has now begun exporting its vices to foreign lands. The satire's final lines relate the story of an Armenian hostage named Zalaces who, while residing in the imperial capital, had become the paramour of a prominent Roman tribune:

Yet we hear of one Armenian who outstripped our most effeminate
young home-grown pansies: he surrendered his person
to the lusts of a tribune. A good deal more than the mind
is broadened by travel: he came to Rome as a hostage,
but Rome turns boys into men. If the stay here long enough
to catch her sickness, they'll never go short of lovers.
Trousers, sheath-knives, whips, even bridles, are cast aside,
and they carry back upper-class Roman habits to Artaxata.

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
indulsit pueris, non umquam derit amator.
mittentur braciae cultelli frena flagellum;
sic praetextatos referunt Artaxata mores.⁶⁸¹

681 Juv. 2.163-70. Trans. by Peter Green.

The poem seems to lament the fact then that this young Armenian will carry the Roman aristocracy's many depraved customs—perhaps a bit like a virus—back to his country's capital of Artaxata. But the poet's chief concern was not the Armenians' well-being; neither Juvenal nor his Roman audience would have lost much sleep over a foreign people's social uprightness. Rather, Rome's own cultural bankruptcy would have been the main focus for Juvenal and his readers. However, that means Juvenal could have just as easily made the same point with a character of some other nationality. Why did he specifically choose Zalaces, an Armenian political hostage, to punctuate his scathing critique of the Roman aristocracy's dangerous excesses?

One possible explanation—and perhaps the most tempting—could be that Zalaces represents an actual historical figure, someone who was a visible fixture of the capital's cultural scene in Juvenal's own day. Perhaps this particular Armenian youth was already well-known to the satirist's audience, and that is why he uses the hostage's account to conclude his poem. Some scholars have even speculated that Zalaces might have been part of the Neronian compromise, perhaps the son of one of Tiridates' Armenian aristocratic supporters. However, neither Tacitus nor Suetonius mentions any such hostage exchange at the time of Tiridates' state visit to Rome in 66. Nor is it likely that the Flavians would have demanded their own political hostages from Tiridates after they had come to power. After assuming the Armenian throne, Tiridates ruled his kingdom, for the most part, without any major international incidents until his deposition by the Parthian king Osroes at the beginning of the Antonine era (ca. 111). The Flavian emperors would have therefore had no reason—or, at least, none now known to us—to request hostages from Armenia. Consequently, while there is a slight chance that Zalaces could represent some real historical person, it may be more reasonable simply to conclude that Juvenal invented the character to satisfy his poem's immediate thematic needs. But to appreciate exactly why the story of a fictitious Armenian hostage would have made an especially apropos ending for *Satire 2*,

we should start by establishing a rough date for Juvenal's first two Books of poems (the Books containing *Satires* 1-6). The satirical genre is by its very nature tied closely to socio-political current events, and so a better understanding of *Satire 2*'s historical context may help shed light on the true purpose of Zalaces' story.

Determining a precise publication date for Juvenal's individual satires can be challenging at times; the poet himself offers few chronological references as signposts for modern researchers. Nevertheless, we may still be able to say with a reasonable measure of accuracy that Books 1 and 2 were probably published sometime between 110 and 120 CE. An allusion to the impeachment trial of Marius Priscus in *Satire 1* sets 100 as a convenient *terminus post quem* composition date. Exactly how long after this date Juvenal made his first Book of poems available for public consumption is a bit more difficult to calculate. *Satire 2* offers something of a subtle hint while describing the decadent battlefield habits of the emperor Otho: Juvenal remarks that Otho's vanity is "a matter for new annals and recent histories."⁶⁸² Although hardly a smoking gun, this turn of phrase could very well be the satirist's way of paying homage to Tacitus' contemporary works. We know Tacitus treated Otho's reign prominently in his *Histories*, a work which was itself published sometime between 104 and 109, and a chance exists that Tacitus was already contemplating or even reciting early versions of his *Annales* around this same time.⁶⁸³ If correct, then this literary acknowledgment of Tacitus would help set the publication date for Juvenal's first 2 Books during the latter half of Trajan's reign (ca. 110 or just afterwards).⁶⁸⁴

Additionally, a gossiping wife in *Satire 6* who claims that "she is always the first to see any comet threatening the kings of Armenia and Parthia" and who spends her days ranting at the city gates about

682 Juv. 2.102-103: ... *res memoranda novis annalibus atque recenti historia*.

683 Courtney 1980: 139 agrees that this line refers to Tacitus, although she suspects that it only alludes to his *Historiae*, not to the *Annales*.

684 Book 3 also commends an unnamed emperor for his patronage of letters and implies that a new age for Roman poets has begun (Juv. 7.1-3). Because most scholars agree that this emperor was probably Hadrian, we can also safely assume Juvenal's first 2 Books of satirical poems were published no later than 120 or so.

natural disasters in the East might also help corroborate this theory.⁶⁸⁵ The comet to which the wife refers may be one witnessed in 115 during Trajan's Parthian campaign, and the reference to a natural disaster might be intended to recall the earthquake that struck Antioch in the same year and nearly claimed the emperor's life.⁶⁸⁶ If Book 2 does allude to these events, then Juvenal's first Book of satirical poems, which would include *Satire 2* and the Zalaces account, must have been produced sometime prior to 115. A publication date of 110 to 115 for Juvenal's story of the Armenian hostage Zalaces therefore would seem reasonable.

Juvenal's second *Satire* was thus probably published either just before or perhaps shortly after Trajan's conquest of Armenia (ca. 114). Zalaces' story, positioned so prominently as it is at the poem's end, would have therefore caught the audience's attention and seemed especially topical. More than likely, Juvenal's readers would have recognized similarities between the character of Zalaces and the Julio-Claudians' long string of first-century Parthian pretenders. Both the poem's Armenian youth and the descendants of the Parthian king Phraates IV had been political hostages of eastern origin. And, like the fictitious Zalaces, the real-life Parthian prisoners had been similarly corrupted by lengthy stays in the imperial capital. In fact, as Juvenal's remark at 2.102-103 suggests, Tacitus' *Annales* may have even been available in whole or part to many savvy Roman readers for ready comparison. And as Juvenal's readers pondered Zalaces' situation, they may very well have also had one or more of the Arsacid pretenders from the *Annales*' Parthian Passages in mind. After all, just like Zalaces, Augustus' pretender Vonones had been "tainted with the enemy's arts" (*hostium artibus infectum*) and had similarly thrown aside his native dress, hunting tools, and riding implements. Furthermore, as with Zalaces, Tacitus refers to Tiberius' and Claudius' pretenders, Tiridates and Meherdates, as "youths" (*pueri*) for the express purpose of implying effeminacy and softness.⁶⁸⁷ Furthermore, Zalaces' Armenian nationality

685 Juv. 6.407-408: *instantem regi Armenio Parthoque cometen / prima videt.*

686 Cf. Hight 1961: 236; Courtney 1980: 314.

687 Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.4 for Tiridates and 12.12.4 for Meherdates.

would have also stirred up mental images of Rome's long legacy of dishonorable interference in the Armenian buffer state kingdom. If portions of Tacitus' Parthian Passages were, in fact, widely accessible at the time (as some must have been), then alongside the Parthian pretenders, Juvenal's readers may have also been able to draw comparisons to the Cappadocian prince Tigranes, Nero's Armenian candidate who had briefly assumed power after Corbulo's first Armenian campaign. As Tacitus notes in the *Annales*, Tigranes too had "by his long residence as a hostage in the capital been reduced to a slave-like docility."⁶⁸⁸

The long reign of the Romano-Parthian compromise candidate Tiridates (66-111 CE) had prevented the Flavian emperors from establishing their own policy concerning the Armenian succession. It is possible then that at the time of Tiridates' deposition, many Romans still associated the Armenian throne with the Julio-Claudians' long history of eastern appeasement and failed diplomacy. Many of them would have, therefore, probably welcomed a decisive emperor like Trajan, someone who was willing to rein in the upstart Parthian king Osroes and renew Rome's national honor. As reports of Trajan's rapid pace and achievements in Armenia and Mesopotamia poured into the capital ca. 115, many Romans must have begun to question why the subjugation of the East had taken so long. Zalaces' story at the end of Juvenal's second *Satire* therefore probably serves a similar purpose to the various pretender stories scattered throughout the *Annales*' Parthian Passages. Although perhaps not as overt or detailed in its criticism as Tacitus' more thorough, historically grounded accounts of Vonones, Tiridates, Meherdates, and Tigranes, Juvenal's brief vignette about Zalaces still calls the reader's attention—in its own uniquely satirical way—to the Julio-Claudians' decades-long, political quagmire on the eastern frontier.⁶⁸⁹

688 Tac. *Ann.* 14.26: ... *sed quod diu obses apud urbem fuerat, usque ad servilem patientiam demissus.*

689 Besides Juvenal and Tacitus, Josephus *AJ* 18.145-146 also mentions the harmful effects of life in the Roman capital on young princes.

Echoes of Trajan's Parthian War in Tacitus' *Annales*

That the impetus for Trajan's Parthian War can be boiled down to simple glory-hunting is not out of character with the man as we know him from his family background, early army career, and later military adventures. Trajan probably served as military tribune in Syria during the governorship of his father, M. Ulpius Traianus (76-77). He is also known to have assisted Domitian in suppressing the rebellion of Saturninus in Upper Germany (79).⁶⁹⁰ And shortly after becoming emperor in 98 CE, Trajan embarked on two long wars against the Dacian king Decebalus (101-102 and 105-106). Following the last of these wars, Trajan returned to Rome where he spent the next seven years—the longest continuous period he would ever reside in the capital—adorning the city with his Dacian spoils. But Trajan did not spend even these few years completely idle militarily. From Rome, the Princeps orchestrated the annexation of Nabataean Arabia (ca. 107 or 108), and Julian Bennett points to several bits of evidence which may suggest that Trajan was already contemplating an eastern war as early as 111.⁶⁹¹ As Princeps then, it would seem that Trajan spent most years either preparing for a war or actually fighting one; he was therefore, by any reckoning, a military emperor. He was more comfortable on campaign in the provinces than at home in the imperial palace. Trajan's tendency to avoid both peacetime and the capital may have just stemmed from his military fervor, his desire to win glory and renown. He was, after all, not born into the purple. His family, the Ulpii, came from the province of Spain, and as a result Trajan was one of the "new men" (*novi homines*).⁶⁹² Nor, for that matter, had the dynasty started by his adopted father Nerva been long-established. The new Princeps may have felt that he had something to prove, and perhaps this is why he spent so much of his reign battling barbarians and fighting to expand the empire's borders.

⁶⁹⁰ Bennett 1997: 18-30.

⁶⁹¹ Bennett 1997: 183-184 notes that in 111 Trajan celebrated his quindecennial (15-year reign) and issued coins with the inscription FORTUNA REDUX. These coins contained many "ominous" themes of Mars and Victory, which Bennett suggests may imply an impending trip overseas. That same year, Trajan also appointed Hadrian governor of Syria, perhaps in anticipation of war with Parthia.

⁶⁹² Bennett 1997: 48-49.

But Trajan did not eventually win the widespread praises of his fellow countrymen simply by being myopically obsessed with personal aggrandizement and Roman expansion. Tacitus and his contemporaries believed Trajan's reign represented a turning point, a glorious new era in the history of the Principate. In Pliny's panegyric to Trajan, presented on the occasion of the senator's proconsular appointment to Bithynia, the author lauds the Princeps not only for his readiness to take up arms and go abroad, but also for his restoration of harmony and virtue within the Roman state:

You have earned a reputation because of your recent moderation. Whenever the dignity of the empire forced you to either wage war or repel hostilities, you seem not to have conquered so that you could triumph, but to triumph because you conquered. ... Indeed, this Princeps is not one who thinks that which was prepared against Rome's enemies threatens and is intended for him. This was the belief of those emperors who feared hostile acts when they were done. These same men thus rejoiced in a lethargic military spirit in not only the hearts of the soldiers, but in their very bodies. They also enjoyed that swords were being blunted and dulled because of neglect.

Meruisti proxima moderatione, ut quandoque te vel inferre vel propulsare bellum coegerit imperi dignitas, non ideo vicisse videaris ut triumphares, sed triumphare quia viceris. ... Quippe non is princeps qui sibi imminere sibi intendi putet, quod in hostes paretur; quae persuasio fuit illorum qui hostilia cum facerent timebant. Iidem ergo torpere militaria studia nec animos modo sed corpora ipsa languescere, gladios etiam incuria hebetari retundique gaudebant.⁶⁹³

For most members of the Roman elite in the capital, Trajan's rule was a welcome relief from the recent, more oppressive despotisms of emperors like Nero and Domitian. Under Domitian especially, during whose reign both Tacitus and Trajan had built their careers, political opposition—both in terms of public and private criticisms of the imperial administration—had been severely punished. However, Trajan made it clear soon after his accession that he would reject the decadence and secrecy which had for so long plagued Rome; the personal vendettas and show trials of past years would not be repeated under his watch. Despite his absolutist authority, Trajan tried hard, for instance, to work with the Senate. He allowed senators access to the consulship once again, an office which had under the Julio-Claudians and Flavians become restricted to members of the imperial family alone. And unlike Nero or

⁶⁹³ Pliny *Panegy.* 17.3-18.4.

Domitian, Trajan chose to shun the ostentatious lifestyle most Romans had come to expect from their emperors. He made himself more accessible to the public, often walking to the Curia on foot and accepting private petitions along the way. He held official audiences in view of the public and always ate meals communally. But perhaps most tellingly, on the occasion of his first public games, rather than execute prisoners as per Roman custom, Trajan paraded all of Domitian's former informants through the Colosseum before corralling them onto ships and sending them out to sea.⁶⁹⁴ Leaving such informers to suffer the vengeance of the gods sent a powerful signal that the rule of Roman law—and not merely the capricious whim of the emperor—would be the cornerstone of Trajan's new administration.⁶⁹⁵

Trajan's new model for the Principate therefore seems to have been two-tiered: it combined an aggressive foreign policy with a commitment to senatorial collaboration and free expression in the imperial capital's internal politics. But we should not overlook the fact that the first leg of this platform conveniently made the second that much easier to adhere to. After all, the simplest way for Trajan to avoid literary or senatorial criticism—not to mention the temptation to stifle such criticism—was to keep the emperor and the Senate physically separated. Both Trajan and Rome's elite probably knew, and may have even tacitly agreed, to preserve the peace between them by essentially avoiding one another. That may be why Trajan spent so much time abroad, for his own personal aggrandizement, but also to grant his constituents in Rome some semblance of autonomy. While Trajan was far off in Dacia or Mesopotamia, senators could run for and hold honorary offices; they could debate the merits of policies; and they could even criticize the emperor himself. In exchange for that autonomy, the Senate continued to approve Trajan's foreign wars, not just out of some sense of sycophantic duty, but because

⁶⁹⁴ Bennett 1997: 61-62.

⁶⁹⁵ By contrast, when Nerva came to the throne, he left many of Domitian's appointees/supporters in place, causing a lot of resentment. Bennett 1997: 38-41.

doing so kept aristocrats free from the Princes' heavy hand. If the emperor were otherwise occupied oppressing barbarians on the frontier, he could not so easily oppress senators and writers in Rome, too.

The *Annales*' disapproval of the Julio-Claudians' passive, cold war strategies—specifically, its repeated use of Parthian pretenders and the Armenian buffer state—might not just be a result of the historian's curmudgeonly attitude towards what he considered proper Roman mores. Tacitus may not have been obsessed with the idea that Roman leaders should be great warriors because the gods favored personal heroics and imperial expansion. The historian's republicanism was not the same as that of writers in the Late Republic or even Early Principate; he most likely did not believe that the Senate should reclaim its ancestral role as the empire's supreme authority or that senators should march off themselves to fight wars and win booty. That dream had died long before Tacitus' day.⁶⁹⁶ Tacitus' republicanism was much more pragmatic: it had no delusions about where real authority lay—that is, with the emperor. The historian probably advocated a more active, aggressive foreign policy in large part because, like Pliny, he desired the freedom to write and say what he wanted, not just because he had some anachronistic, idealized vision of what a true emperor should be. Thus we see Tacitus open his *Historiae* by praising Trajan not for some past or future conquest, but for promoting a public atmosphere in Rome “where we may [finally] think what we please, and express what we think.”⁶⁹⁷ It just so happened that an emperor who fought frequent wars on the frontier made life that much easier for those left behind in Rome.

And yet, setting Tacitus' own personal motivations aside, the *Annales*' scathing critiques of the Julio-Claudians' passive, hesitant, and compromising foreign policy towards Parthia must have stood in stark contrast next to Trajan's bold, highly militaristic approach to the eastern frontier. Perhaps part of the work's inherent genius is that it would have appealed equally to those anachronistic, old school Roman republicans (if any were left), as well as to anyone like Tacitus who held a more pragmatic view

⁶⁹⁶ On Tacitus' republicanism see especially Gowing 2005: 6-8, 24-25, 28-31, et passim.

⁶⁹⁷ Tac. Hist. 1.1: ... *ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*.

of the Principate. Tacitus' readers would have seen Trajan's forceful new direction in the East as a sharp break from earlier Augustan policies which had for so long relied not on the spear point, but on feckless pretenders and overly cautious diplomacy. Trajan's unapologetic, thinly-veiled war of eastern conquest harked back to an era of Romano-Parthian interactions before Augustus, a time when Rome's Republican generals needed or offered few excuses—other than glory and plunder—for carrying war to the Parthians. Late Republican commanders, like Crassus and Antony, may have failed to conquer Parthia themselves, but they had nevertheless acted, as some of Tacitus' contemporaries must have seen it, as honorable Romans should: as masters of the world, willing to risk their reputations and lives to expand the empire's easternmost border. Perhaps this alternate viewpoint is why we find so many allusions to Late Republican conflicts in the East, especially Crassus' Parthian expedition, scattered throughout the *Annales'* Parthian Passages. Maybe it is also why we see Tacitus repeatedly highlight the military shortcomings of Parthians, their deficiencies in siegecraft and their tendency to outstrip their supply lines. The historian is probably trying to show that, when confronted by a truly competent Roman field commander, someone such as Corbulo or Trajan, the Parthians were really no match for Rome's highly efficient and adaptable war machine.

This interpretation may also help explain why Tacitus lionizes Corbulo so much in Books 13-15, and why we find distinct echoes of Trajan's conquest of Armenia in the last hexad. These echoes are meant to liken Trajan to Corbulo, to show Trajan as a brilliant strategist like Tacitus' military hero. After all, both Nero's and Trajan's eastern crises began similarly: a dispute over Armenian succession prompted the Parthian king's installation of his own candidate (Tiridates in 53; Axiadares in 110) without any deference to Rome's wishes. However, unlike Nero, Trajan did not just dispatch stand-ins, men like Corbulo and Paetus, to resolve the situation. The Optimus Princeps raised an army and marched off to the East himself; his war represented a clear break from the Julio-Claudians' long established precedent of avoiding the eastern frontier themselves.

Dio's account (68.19-20) of Trajan's meeting with Parthia's alternate Armenian candidate

Parthamasiris at Elegia, in particular, seems highly reminiscent at times of a key scene from Parthian Passage 4. Dio's story, for example, first conveys how Parthamasiris presented himself to Trajan as a supplicant:

And greeting [Trajan], the king took the diadem from his head and set it at [the emperor's] feet. He had risen up in silence, and he was expecting to receive it back. And upon this, the soldiers cried aloud and hailed Trajan imperator, as if it were some victory. For they called it a crownless and bloodless victory to see the king, an Arsacid, the son of Pacorus, the nephew of Osroes, set beside [Trajan] without his diadem like a captive

καὶ ὃς ἀσπασάμενος αὐτὸν τό τε διάδημα ἀπὸ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἀφεῖλε καὶ πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ἔθηκε, σιγῇ τε εἰστήκει, καὶ προσεδόκα αὐτὸ ἀπολήψεσθαι. Συμβοησάντων δὲ ἐπὶ τούτῳ τῶν στρατιωτῶν, καὶ αὐτοκράτορα τὸν Τραϊανὸν ὡς καὶ ἐπὶ νίκη τινὶ ἐπικαλεσάντων νίκην γὰρ ἀσέλινον ἄναιμον ὠνόμαζον ὅτι τὸν βασιλέα τὸν Ἀρσακίδην, τὸν Πακόρου παῖδα, τὸν Ὀρρόου ἀδελφιδοῦν, προσεστηκότα αὐτῷ ἄνευ διαδήματος εἶδον ὥσπερ αἰχμάλωτον⁶⁹⁸

Tacitus' description of Corbulo and Tiridates' ceremony at Rhandaia, which cemented the terms of the Neronian compromise must be meant to recall this episode from Trajan's campaign. Although crafted before Dio's, Tacitus' story probably relied on that author's same source. Like Parthamasiris, Tiridates in Tacitus' passage similarly removes his diadem, kneels down, and places it at the feet of the emperor —albeit not Nero's own, but those of his sacred effigy. And, as in Dio's story, the Roman soldiers who witness Tiridates' act of obeisance then comment how the Parthian candidate appeared to be “little less than a captive.”⁶⁹⁹

But it is the differences, not the similarities, of how Trajan and Corbulo then handled their respective Armenian candidates that reveal Tacitus' purpose for mimicking what must be Dio's source material. Unlike in Tiridates' case, where the diadem is eventually placed back on the Arsacid's head in Rome by Nero's own hand, Trajan did not follow suit and return Parthamasiris' crown. Parthamasiris, of course, had expected to be treated quite differently and protested, demanding the restoration of his

⁶⁹⁸ Cass. Dio 68.19.3-4.

⁶⁹⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.29.6: ... *quanto minus quam captivum?*

diadem “as Tiridates had received it from Nero.”⁷⁰⁰ However, Trajan not only flatly refused to acknowledge Parthamasiris as Armenia’s new monarch, but instead took the opportunity to declare the kingdom Roman property. He announced that Armenia would now have a Roman governor.⁷⁰¹ According to the *Annales*, after Tiridates had supplicated himself before Nero’s statue, Corbulo treated his guest to an elaborate banquet, as did Nero after Tiridates had finally made his way to the imperial capital. Parthamasiris, on the other hand, received no such fanfare. Dio does state that Trajan allowed the Arsacid to leave the Roman camp unmolested, and even provided a Roman cavalry escort to assure Parthamasiris’ safe passage.⁷⁰² But a fragment of Arrian’s *Parthica* suggests that, shortly after departing Trajan’s camp, Parthamasiris died under mysterious circumstances, perhaps executed by his Roman escort at the emperor’s command.⁷⁰³

The connections between Dio’s and Tacitus’ accounts suggest that Tacitus penned all, or at least a large portion, of the work’s third hexad in the wake of Trajan’s conquest of Armenia. These similarities prove that Tacitus meant for his audience to read the Parthian Passages against the backdrop of Trajan’s contemporary expedition in the East. Tacitus’ Parthian Passages are therefore far from aimless digressions, nothing more than the structureless mental wanderings of a geriatric storyteller. They are, like the satire itself, closely tied to current events. At the time of the *Annales*’ publication,

⁷⁰⁰ Cass. Dio 68.20.2: ... ὡσπερ καὶ ὁ Τιριδάτης παρὰ τοῦ Νέρωνος.

⁷⁰¹ Ronald Syme was the first to notice that Paetus’ arrogant remark at *Ann.* 15.6.8, his hubristic declaration that only he could impose Roman law and tribute on Armenia “instead of a king’s shadow,” in fact closely resembles, at least in sentiment, the statement Dio attributes to Trajan when he refuses Parthamasiris’ petition (68.20.3). For this reason, Vervaeke 1999: 291 has proposed Tacitus may have been trying to suggest that Trajan had chosen the wrong path, that he had deviated from Corbulo’s model of diplomacy backed by a show of military force and had instead walked in Paetus’ and Nero’s ill-advised, imprudent footsteps. Vervaeke believes Tacitus may have survived and continued to work on the *Annales* into the early 120s; the historian would have therefore been alive to see Hadrian’s withdrawal of Rome’s forces from beyond the Euphrates. Vervaeke’s theory, however, hangs on the somewhat shaky similarity between Tacitus’ and Dio’s statements above. Tacitus’ death date is anyone’s guess. If Tacitus did not live as long as Vervaeke suspects, the similarity of the statements could just as easily be explained away as an example of Trajan succeeding where Paetus failed.

⁷⁰² Cass. Dio 68.20.4.

⁷⁰³ Arrian *Parth.* 40. See also Fronto *Prince. Hist.* 18 and cf. Bivar 1983: 88 and Bennett 1997: 194.

these passages were, like Juvenal's *Satire 2*, topical and intimately connected to the Roman public's latest, most immediate political and social concerns.

CONCLUSION

Hadrian might have abandoned all of Rome's provinces beyond the Euphrates after Trajan's death in 117 CE. However, his mentor's Parthian War was far from inconsequential; it had significant, long-lasting effects on Romano-Parthian interactions. Following Trajan's Mesopotamian expedition, other Roman emperors tried to emulate Trajan's grand, if short-lived, achievements in the East. Prompted by Parthian interference in Armenia, Marcus Aurelius' co-emperor, Lucius Verus, led his own campaign against Parthia in 163/164. Although Verus directed most of the war from the safety of Antioch, his field commanders, Statius Priscus and Avidius Cassius, had little trouble seizing Armenia and Mesopotamia. The latter general even managed to raze Seleucia and Ctesiphon before failing to occupy the territory permanently because of an untimely outbreak of plague.⁷⁰⁴ In 193, the Parthians also incited the anger of Septimus Severus by backing one of his political rivals. As a result, Severus marched into Mesopotamia three years later to exact his revenge. In imitation of Trajan's expedition, Severus constructed a fleet and sailed down the Tigris River. When the Parthian king fled, the emperor, once again, sacked Ctesiphon. Dio reports Severus unleashed his troops on the Parthian capital solely for the purpose of plundering and burning the city. Unfortunately, the fortified city of Hatra, which had also defied Trajan, resisted several months of Roman siege, and the stalemate eventually forced Severus to withdraw from the East.⁷⁰⁵ Finally, at the beginning of the third century, Severus' son, the emperor Caracalla, also invaded northern Mesopotamia. Caracalla tried to arrange a marriage alliance with the Parthian monarch, but the king had politely refused. Caracalla's marriage proposal was probably nothing more than a pretext for war; the emperor had recently failed to conquer Armenia, and he may have thought a Parthian expedition would restore his political credibility at home.⁷⁰⁶ Sources for

⁷⁰⁴ HA *Verus* 7.1-8.4; Cass. Dio 71.2-3.

⁷⁰⁵ Cass. Dio 75-76.

⁷⁰⁶ Herodian's version of this story even states that Caracalla's proposal was accepted at first, and that the emperor's entourage traveled to the Parthian king's court and took part in an elaborate wedding feast. However, during the

Caracalla's Parthian campaign are frustratingly vague, but the Romans must have spent significant time laying waste to Media and its surrounding territories. Prior to the emperor's assassination near Edessa in 217 CE, either the Senate or Caracalla himself struck a series of coins bearing the inscription VIC(TORIA) PART(HICA).⁷⁰⁷

Even a brief historical sketch such as this reveals the true legacy of Trajan's Parthian War. After 117, Roman emperors were no longer hesitant to undertake wars of conquest in the East. Trajan had, if nothing else, demonstrated that the Parthians were not Rome's military equal—one of Tacitus' main themes in the Parthian Passages. Once Mesopotamia had been conquered, the Romans might have had trouble holding onto areas beyond the Euphrates for extended periods of time, but Trajan's example dispelled the aura of Parthian invincibility. After Trajan, Roman emperors sacked and burned Ctesiphon not once, but twice with relatively little effort. In many ways, these Roman incursions were the death knell of the Arsacid dynasty. Rome's relentless attacks crippled the Parthian Empire's infrastructure, weakened the resolve of its military, and undermined the last bit of Arsacid authority. By 220, the kingdom's long history of civil strife and repeated foreign occupation had taken its toll. Many of the Arsacid dynasty's vassals no longer had enough confidence in Parthia's rulers to warrant their continued support. A movement for new leadership, initiated by Ardashir of Persis, soon arose and spread rapidly among Parthia's disgruntled nobility. In 222/23, Ardashir's coalition defeated an Arsacid army and took control of Seleucia and Ctesiphon. Five years later, the last Arsacid king was finally slain, making Ardashir the sole ruler of all Parthia.⁷⁰⁸

The dynasty Ardashir founded, the Sassanids, proved much more problematic for the Roman Empire than the Arsacids had ever been. Over the next few years, Ardashir and his son Shapur I

celebration, the Romans ambushed the Parthian guests, who were too inebriated to defend themselves. Although certainly dramatic, Herodian's embellishments are probably fictitious.

⁷⁰⁷ Sellwood *Coinage of Parthia* 286-89; Dio Cass. 79 (78.1); Herodian 4.11; and Mattingly and Sydenham *Roman Imperial Coinage*, IV, 257.

⁷⁰⁸ Bivar 1983: 124-32.

reconquered all of Mesopotamia and launched destructive raids into Roman Syria. In 258/59, Shapur even captured the Roman emperor Valerian in battle near Edessa. Persian monumental reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam and Bishapur depict the humiliating scene of Valerian kneeling before his Sassanid conqueror. Furthermore, after defeating a substantial Roman force at Barbalissos in 250, Shapur occupied Lesser Armenia and Cappadocia. An unnamed Sassanid ruler in Moses of Khorene's history, most likely also Shapur, orchestrated the assassination of Greater Armenia's king and placed a Sassanid client on that kingdom's throne. Later Roman emperors in the third century eventually rolled back some of the Sassanids' territorial gains, but only with great difficulty.⁷⁰⁹ For the rest of Rome and Persia's shared history—in fact, well into the Byzantine period—the Roman/Byzantine eastern frontier remained hotly contested. But, of course, Roman emperors who helped inadvertently bring about the birth of the Sassanid dynasty—Trajan, Verus, Severus, and Caracalla—would have had no way of knowing in their day that the Arsacids were actually the more tractable of the two adversaries.

The *Annales* did not directly contribute to Rome's new policy approach to the East in the second century CE. To say that Tacitus' work inspired Trajan or his successors to alter the empire's methods for managing the eastern frontier would be an overstatement. The *Annales* is more a cautionary tale than a political manifesto or call to arms. Trajan's personal motivations, coupled with his successors' desires to emulate his achievements, had much more to do with ending Augustus' long entrenched Parthian strategy. However, Tacitus' work does reflect the Roman public's frustration with the Julio-Claudians' over-reliance on lethargic, compromising diplomacy. The *Annales*' Parthian Passages show that most Romans were ready for a drastic change. They were weary of the Roman Empire's inward focus on political informers, palace conspiracies, and treason trials. Trajan turned the imperial administration's gaze outward again; he redirected the empire's energies towards more worthy pursuits: punishing barbarians and upholding Rome's national honor. Neither Tacitus nor his contemporaries,

⁷⁰⁹ Bivar 1983: 124-132.

Juvenal and Pliny, would have lived long enough to understand the long-term effects of Trajan's Parthian War. Trajan's sudden death while campaigning and Hadrian's quick withdrawal from the East, in fact, probably left them with the impression that Trajan's military vigor was an exception, that Rome's emperors would soon fall back into old rhythms of passive diplomacy and Parthian appeasement. But had Tacitus, Juvenal, and Pliny known about Rome's long list of third-century Parthian wars, had they been privy to the knowledge that Trajan's reign represented a watershed in Romano-Parthian affairs, they would have approved and praised the empire's new direction.

Scholars like Elizabeth Keitel, Rhiannon Ash, and Alain Gowing have demonstrated that Tacitus' eastern episodes are not merely aimless digressions. These stories are more closely connected to the broader themes of the individual Books in which they appear than was once thought. But, taken together, the Parthian Passages also form a story and argument all their own. The Parthian Passages in Tacitus' *Annales* mirror Roman attitudes about imperial foreign policy in the Trajanic era. They reflect what might have been the feeling of most contemporary Romans: that the renewal of an expansionist foreign policy was in the empire's best interests. The Parthian Passages highlight the failures of the Julio-Claudians' foreign policy to make Trajan's new direction in the East seem more appealing. Echoes of this attitude can be found in each of Tacitus' four Parthian Passages, and this recurring theme proves that Tacitus never intended the *Annales*' eastern episodes to be read as isolated stories. When we read the *Annales*, we must remember that Tacitus was not so shortsighted as to believe that the dangers of the Julio-Claudians' despotism were confined just to the capital city. The *Annales*' narrative may focus predominately on events occurring in Rome, but its author understood well that the dynasty's excesses had repercussions for the empire as a whole. The political and cultural corruption of the capital infected and endangered Romans living far from the empire's center.

The final irony, however, might be that, for all of Tacitus' criticisms, it is still hard to deny that the Julio-Claudians' "cold war" Parthian strategies were effective. In some respects, they might have

been even more effective than the aggressive approach of Trajan and his later imitators. The Julio-Claudians' pretenders and proxy wars might have been "un-Roman"; they might have denied Rome's legions glory; they might have tarnished the empire's honor. But the Augustan Parthian policy kept the Roman Empire's eastern provinces safe and secure for more than a century. Over the course of the first century CE, no Parthian force ever crossed the Euphrates boundary. As Tacitus himself points out, despite the fact Syria bordered enemy territory, by Corbulo's day, Roman legionnaires stationed in the province did not even know how to use weapons.⁷¹⁰ The Roman Empire's eastern provincials probably viewed their relatively peaceful coexistence with neighboring Parthia as a result of the Pax Romana: essentially, Rome's formidable reputation kept the barbarians away from the gates. However, there was never anything especially peaceful about Romano-Parthian affairs in the first century. Disagreements and disputes often arose between the two superpowers. The sense of security that Syria's population enjoyed was largely the result of the Parthians' unstable internal politics; Parthian rulers were too busy fending off challengers or jockeying for position in Armenia to bother with Roman Syria. Parthia's instability derived, in part, from the cut-throat nature of the empire's own political system: because an Arsacid had to hold the crown, the king's closest family members regularly became his bitterest rivals.

But the Julio-Claudians' repeated interference played a significant part in perpetuating Parthia's internal unrest. On multiple occasions, Augustus' heirs exploited this flaw in Parthia's political system, dispatched their own Parthian pretenders, and, by doing so, kept the Parthian Empire off balance. The Julio-Claudians orchestrated proxy wars in Armenia, contests between Roman and Parthian allies, to keep Parthia preoccupied with the otherwise inconsequential buffer-state. Finally, when the two sides entered into direct conflict during Nero's Armenian War, that emperor eventually resolved the situation by agreeing to a compromise. Tiridates' investiture ceremony in 66 might have been reprehensible to some Roman onlookers, but it preserved the peace for another fifty years. Tacitus and his compatriots

⁷¹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 13.35.1-2.

might not have approved of the Julio-Claudians' "cold war" strategies on the eastern frontier, but they were nevertheless an efficient method for maintaining the Roman Empire's internal security. Romano-Parthian conflicts of the first century were low intensity conflicts. The same cannot be said for the Parthian wars of Trajan and his successors. Their wars restarted the tit-for-tat, blood feud mentality of the Late Republic. Their wars facilitated the rise of the Sassanids who, unlike the Arsacids, did eventually compromise the border security of the Roman Empire.

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APPENDIX 1:
List of Rulers

Armenian Kings

The Artaxiad Dynasty:

Artaxias I	190-159
Tigranes I	159-123
Artavasdes I	123-95
Tigranes II the Great	95-55
Artavasdes II	55-34
Artaxias II	33-20
Tigranes III	20-10
Tigranes IV and Erato	10-5 and 4-1
Artavasdes III	5-4
Ariobarzanes	3-1

Non-Artaxiad or Arsacid kings:

Artavasdes III (reign cont.)	1 BCE-CE 12/13
Vonones	12/13?-13/14?
Orodes I	14/15?-18
Artaxias III	18-32
Arsaces I	32-35?
Mithridates	35?-52
Rhadamistus	52
Tiridates I	53-60
Tigranes V	60-62

The Arsacid Dynasty:

Tiridates I (reign cont.)	62-75
Sanatruk	75-110
Axidares	110-113
Parthamasiris	113-114
Parthaspates	116-117
Valarsh	117-140
Aurelius Pacorus	161-163
Valarsh II	180-91
Khusrau I	191-217
Tiridates II	217-52

Parthian Kings

Arsaces	ca. 250-248	Orodes III	4-ca. 6/7
Tiridates I	ca. 248-211	Vonones I	7/8-12
Artabanus I	ca. 211-191	Artabanus III	12-ca. 38
Priapatius	ca. 191-176	Tiridates III	ca. 36
Phraates I	ca. 176-171	Gotarzes II	ca. 38-51
Mithridates I	ca. 171-138/37	Vardanes	ca. 39-47/48
Phraates II	138/37-ca. 128	Vonones II	ca. 51
Artabanus II	ca. 128-124/23	Vologases I	51/52-79/80
Mithridates II	ca. 123-88/87	Vologases II	77-80
Gotarzes I	91-81/80	Pacorus II	78-115/16
Orodes I	80-76/75	Artabanus IV	80-81
Sinatruces	76/75-70 or 69	Osroes	ca. 109/10-128/29
Phraates III	70 or 69-58/57	Parthamaspates	ca. 117
Mithridates III	58/57-55	Vologases III	105/6-147
Orodes II	ca. 57-37/36	Mithridates IV	128/29-147
Pacorus I	died in 38	Vologases IV	148-192
Phraates IV	ca. 38-2	Vologases V	191-207/8
Tiridates II	ca. 30-25	Vologases VI	207/8-222/23
Phraataces (Phraates V)	2 BCE-CE 4	Artabanus V	ca. 213-227
		Artavasdes	ca. 227-228/29

Roman Emperors

Augustus	27 BCE-CE 14	Trajan	98-117
Tiberius	14-37	Hadrian	117-138
Caligula	37-41	Antonius Pius	138-161
Claudius	41-54	Marcus Aurelius	161-180
Nero	54-68	Lucius Verus	161-169
Galba, Otho, Vitellius	68-69	Commodus	180-192
Vespasian	69-79	Julianus and Pertinax	193
Titus	79-81	Septimius Severus	193-211
Domitian	81-96	Caracalla	211-217
Nerva	96-98		

VITA

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