

Introduction

A medieval chronicler tells of a rivalry between two kings. One was Harald Fairhair of Norway, the other Aethelstan of England. The pair competed for prestige and rank, each seeking supremacy over the other. One day, Harald devised a ruse to gain the upper hand. He gave his young son Hakon to his ambassador, Hauk, and sent them on an embassy to Aethelstan. When they came into the king's presence,¹

Hauk seized the boy and placed him on Aethelstan's knee. The king looked at the boy and asked Hauk why he did this. Hauk answered, "King Harald bade you foster for him the son of his maidservant." The king flew into a rage and seized the sword at his side and drew it as though he would kill the boy. "You have set him upon your knee," said Hauk, "and you may murder him if you so wish, but in doing so you will not do away with all sons of King Harald." Then Hauk and all his men left the hall and made their way to their ship. They sailed out to sea as soon as they could make ready and returned to Norway and King Harald, and he was well pleased with the outcome, for people say that he is a lesser man who fosters a child for someone.

Harald's trick turned on a Norwegian custom unknown to the Englander Aethelstan: to set a child on one's knee was to commit to raising it. Aethelstan was furious once the meaning of the choreography was explained to him, but when he forbore to kill Hakon, he accepted, if grudgingly, the logic of the maneuver. His acquiescence was a victory for Harald. Why? The last sentence of the passage explains: "he is a lesser man who fosters a child for someone."

Medieval Scandinavia may seem an unlikely point of departure for a study of Parthia and Rome, two empires of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean. But at

1. Snorri Sturluson, *Saga of Harald Fairhair* 39, trans. Hollander 1964: 93.

the heart of this book is the idea that something similar to Harald's and Aethelstan's exchange took place in Roman-Parthian relations at the dawn of the current era. The topic of the study, as with the vignette above, is the circulation of royal children between cultures that did not understand each other, and the implications for power and prestige that their misunderstanding produced. Here, too, the themes are interstate rivalry, ruling families, the pursuit of rank and reputation, divergent cultural practices, and the dynastic heirs who were caught in the web of these forces. The children I examine lived in ancient Rome, not medieval England. But the story of how they came to reside there is not far off from Hakon's.

That story began in the final decades B.C.E., when the family that ruled Parthia sent its children to the one that ruled Rome. Parthia belonged to the Arsacids, a dynasty that had held the kingship since the days of the empire's inception in central Asia over two centuries prior. Rome was a newcomer to monarchy, but its emperors soon adopted hereditary principles of succession like their Arsacid counterparts, producing an inaugural dynasty known today as the Julio-Claudians. The heads of this family received Arsacid children not once but several times over the course of nearly a century. They never reciprocated: no Julio-Claudian scion ever went to Parthia. Rome hosted these princes and princesses for years, decades, or even for their entire lives. Some returned to Parthia to become kings, while others died in Italy.² I call these children the Arsacids of Rome, and they are the subject of this book.

Why did the Arsacid kings send their children to the emperors? Scholars who have dealt with this question have done so on the basis of Roman literary sources. Since the Roman authors call the Arsacids of their empire "hostages" (*obsides* in Latin, or *homēroi* in Greek), this classification has been central to all discussion of who they were and why they went to Rome. At face value, the term implies that Rome was stronger than Parthia and received its royal children as guarantees for its good behavior. Was this so? Some say yes and endorse the use of the label;³ others highlight the misleading aspects of "hostage" as a translation for the Greek and Latin terms;⁴ and still others qualify, reject, or avoid the designation altogether.⁵ Many studies, however, simply use the word by force of Romano-centric scholarly habit. Because the Roman sources constitute the bulk of the direct evidence for the Arsacids of Rome, they have always been allowed to set the terms of the inquiry. The Roman perspective dominates. Modern scholars may accept, problematize, or reject it, but they have offered nothing to take its place.

The present book rectifies that imbalance through a different approach to the question. My argument is this. Non-Roman sources from the ancient Near

2. See table 1 for transfers from Parthia to Rome, and table 2 for transfers from Rome to Parthia.

3. Walker 1980: 128; Nedergaard 1988: 111; Lee 1991: 367.

4. Braund 1984: 12–13; Campbell 1993: 224 n.2; Jussen 2022: 148; Álvarez-Pedrosa 2022: 107–8; Goldsworthy 2023: 45.

5. Dąbrowa 1987: 63; Wiesehöfer 2010; Gregoratti 2015: 732; Wheeler 2016: 193.

East suggest that the Parthians would have viewed the Arsacids of Rome not as hostages, but as foster-children. Like the Norwegian prince Hakon, they were sent abroad to implicate a foreign ruler in a pro-parental relationship. For the Parthians, moreover, fosterage was a social institution with distinct connotations for prestige and rank. The maxim that caps Hakon's story above applies to the world of the Arsacids, as well: "he is a lesser man who fosters a child for someone." Anthropologists call this paradigm "cliental fosterage," which means that a subordinate raises the child of their superior.⁶ The evidence for Parthian fosterage is diverse, but most of it supports this model. The Parthians would have interpreted the social status and function of the Arsacids of Rome within this framework.

Where hierarchy and reputation were concerned, then, the Parthian view of the Arsacids of Rome was diametrically opposed to the Roman one. Throughout this study, I refer to this divergence as *pragmatic misunderstanding*, a term for a situation in which two parties hold discordant views of an exchange that nevertheless satisfies each side. In the case of Harald and Aethelstan, conflicting cultural paradigms played a limited role. Aethelstan did not know that he had committed to Hakon's fosterage when he allowed the boy to be placed on his knee, but once Hauk explained the Norwegian custom to him, he grasped the insult, since both Norway and England practiced cliental fosterage. In Roman-Parthian relations, by contrast, misunderstanding ran far deeper. The two sides interpreted the submission of children through institutional frameworks that led them to contrary assessments of their relative power. The Parthians understood the emperor's reception of Arsacids as an acceptance of foster-fatherhood—and of cliental status along with it. The Romans, for their part, saw the emperor taking Arsacid "hostages" and drew the opposite conclusion that Parthia had accepted Rome's superiority. Through expedient incomprehension of their counterpart's view, each party could walk away from the transfer of children convinced of its supremacy over the other.

With the phrase *pragmatic misunderstanding*, I mean to encompass two types of pragmatism along with varying degrees of intercultural awareness. For most Romans and Parthians, outright ignorance of the other party's view supported a pragmatic arrangement that benefited the two empires not by design but by accident: both sides could win because, unbeknownst to the other, they kept score in opposite ways. Yet ignorance need not have been total. There were versions of hostageship in Parthia and fosterage in Rome, and one can posit (though not prove) limited breakthroughs of intelligibility among the actors who dealt most frequently with the interlocutor. But here too, I suggest, pragmatism may have discouraged comprehension in order to ensure that mutual awareness did not spoil an arrangement of mutual benefit. Misunderstanding along these lines would have been no accident, but a choice, a preference, a strategy. *Pragmatic misunderstanding* covers pragmatism in both these senses.

6. See esp. Parkes 2003: 743; discussion and bibliography in chapter 1.

My ideas about Parthian fosterage and pragmatic misunderstanding depend on a method of investigation that departs from previous studies: I reconstruct the Parthian view from ancient Near Eastern sources rather than Roman ones. Prior treatments have based their conclusions about the Arsacids of Rome on evidence from the territories of the Roman empire, and on historiographical texts in Greek and Latin above all. To be sure, there are reasons to approach the topic in this way. Almost all the texts that report directly and in detail on Arsacid children are Roman, and with the exception of a few coins, there are no contemporaneous, internal Parthian sources that immediately pertain to the topic. Yet reliance on the Roman sources has drawbacks, too. One is that Roman categories, namely hostageship, have remained the touchstone of scholarly debate over the Arsacids of Rome. Another is that the Romans knew little about Parthian society and culture, and their literary depictions of the Parthians often resorted to stereotypes, clichés, and free invention, as many scholars stress.⁷ How can historians hope to understand Parthia if they rely on Roman sources that did not? These intractable challenges warrant a new approach.

My effort to counter the hegemony of the Roman perspective depends on two types of Near Eastern sources. The first comprises evidence of immediate relevance to the Parthian empire on the basis of chronological proximity and geographic provenance. For the most part this evidence does not directly pertain to the Arsacids of Rome, though one passage from an Armenian historian does, and is connected to their lives for the first time in this study.⁸ Rather, such sources establish the social context in which the Arsacids of Rome should be situated. They show the enduring importance of fosterage and created kinship to high politics in the ancient Near East, especially in the Seleucid, Arsacid, and Sasanian periods. Pride of place goes to inscriptions from the original era and territory of the Parthian empire (c. 248 B.C.E.–224 C.E.).⁹ These are few in number, but they constitute precious testimony for the operative social institutions in the lands the Arsacids ruled. Even after the dynasty lost its original empire, it reigned for another two centuries in Armenia (63–428 C.E.), and late antique historiography in the Armenian language sheds further light on its fosterage practices there. Additional evidence comes from the Sasanian empire (224–651 C.E.), Parthia's successor and the heir of its fosterage practices. Late antique sources like Sasanian epigraphy, Middle Persian romances, Bactrian documentary texts, and Zoroastrian literature can be used to delimit the institutional parameters of Iranian fosterage and hostageship and to gauge the applicability of these categories to the Arsacids of Rome. Finally, the period after the Arab conquest of Iran offers useful material. This background is essential in any

7. See Lerouge 2007; Wiesehöfer and Müller 2017: vii; Alidoust 2020; Overtom 2020: 9–10; Schlude 2020: 9; Babnis 2022: 11.

8. The passage in question is MKh 2.27.2–3; discussion in chapter 1.

9. For Parthian primary sources and German translations, see Hackl et al. 2010.

event, since many Sasanian compositions took written form only under Muslim rule. But there are also postconquest texts that reflect and rework pre-Islamic material, even if they were authored by strong literary personalities in the late language of New or Classical Persian. Together these sources compose an eclectic corpus, but one that is sufficient to establish fosterage's centrality as a child circulation mechanism among the elites of the Parthian era. Though valuable in their own right, they also afford fresh perspectives on the Roman evidence, defamiliarizing the usual testimonies and highlighting new elements in well-worn passages.

In employing late antique evidence to fill in the lacunae of Parthian history, I do not intend to elide the distinction between Arsacid and Sasanian history, or still less to reify "pre-Islamic Iran" as a construct that stands outside of historical critique. There are major debates in Iranian studies (the nomenclature of the field itself, of course, stakes a position) about the utility of *Iranian* and, relatedly, *Zoroastrian* as labels for pre-Sasanian people and practices.¹⁰ The early Sasanians were the first kings to apply the toponym *Ērān* to the heartland of their territorial empire, and while variants of the word appear in older Avestan and Greek texts, there is no evidence that the Arsacids ever used it.¹¹ Nor was this the only Sasanian innovation. In areas like administration, urbanism, and the union of political and religious power, the Sasanians built a state that diverged from the Parthian one. Recent research, however, highlights elements of continuity as well as change: Parthian noble families persisted in the Sasanian aristocracy, the Parthian language remained in use, and royal Zoroastrianism was not inaugurated but developed from Arsacid precedents, even if the faith's relationship to the state was reconfigured.¹² Other Sasanian elite practices have clear antecedents in the Parthian period, including next-of-kin marriage, heterographic writing, hunting, and indeed, fosterage itself. The late antique evidence is useful, then, not because *Iranian* is a timeless and immutable category, but because demonstrable continuities between Arsacid and Sasanian culture recommend the later material for informed reconstruction of the earlier period.

The second body of Near Eastern evidence that I employ comes from cuneiform texts that long predate the emergence of imperial powers on the Iranian plateau, especially epistolary correspondence in Akkadian among various Near Eastern rulers during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Such evidence is useful not because pharaonic Egyptians, Anatolian Hittites, or Kassite Babylonians had an immediate or straightforward influence on the Arsacids, though it is true enough that, as ancient Near Eastern predecessors, their empires are upstream from the Parthian

10. "Iranian": de Jong 2017a; Payne 2017: 179; Potts 2023: 5–6; Strootman 2023. "Zoroastrian": Rose 2011: 31–32; de Jong 2015: 86, 89–93; Kellens 2021: 1212–13.

11. Gnoli 1989: 129–74; Payne 2013: 6–10.

12. On Parthian families, see Pourshariati 2008; Shayegan 2022; and chapter 4. On the Parthian language, see Gyselen 2016; on Arsacid Zoroastrianism, see de Jong 2022.

one, if by some distance. Instead, the cuneiform sources illustrate how kings and queens in an adjacent period of antiquity actually talked to their royal peers across political and cultural lines. That correspondence, in turn, can help reconstruct the potential dynamics of Arsacid communication with the Julio-Claudians. The epistolary materials, scribal practices, and archival traditions of the pre-Achaemenid Near East mean that royal letters from these earlier periods survive for study. No such documentary evidence exists for Roman-Parthian or even Roman-Sasanian relations. The only accounts of direct address between Iranian kings and Roman emperors appear in problematic literary sources whose authors were no literal transmitters of archival texts. The cuneiform evidence cannot prove anything about the Arsacids of Rome, but it can aid in modeling the interdynastic dialogue that would have attended their exchange.

The final aspect of my method is the use of comparative history. The issue at the heart of this book is how two ruling families made sense of one another and conducted business across the political and cultural gulf that divided them. Additional perspective on this question can be gleaned from the many other geographic and temporal settings where power was concentrated within family groups. Dynasties were widespread in pre- and early-modern world history, and so were their efforts to engage with other ruling families on the basis of kinship. Like the cuneiform evidence, comparative history cannot demonstrate that Roman-Parthian relations must have played out in any given way. But it can help delineate the realms of the plausible and the likely, adding intercultural context to the meager evidence for antiquity.¹³ Comparison is especially incumbent on students of Parthia. Even by the standards of ancient Iranian history, the empire's lack of internal sources is pronounced, and in their absence, scholars have resorted to a Greco-Roman tradition that is hostile, uncomprehending, or both. Countering this evidentiary imbalance calls for the creative use of comparative material to consider Parthian views other than those posited by their western neighbors. Such reconstructions will never be definitive, but they can be generative.

Together, these lines of inquiry allow for a new perspective on the Arsacids of Rome that can better reconstruct the Parthian view and account for its divergence from the Roman one. All approaches to the study of the past have limitations, and the one I have adopted is not, in an absolute sense, *better* than traditional reliance on Greco-Roman texts. Compared to Armenian historiography, Iranian epic, or Akkadian letters, the Roman literary sources have the advantage of chronological proximity to the Arsacids of Rome, and they remain indispensable for the political circumstances that attended the transfer of Arsacid children. In certain respects, an account of Parthian motives that is external but contemporary may be preferable to one that looks for the internal in a range of noncontemporary sources. But as long as Roman texts remain the baseline for the discussion, they will set the

13. Cf. Scheidel 2019: 21–22 with n.29 for earlier literature.

agenda, dictate the relevant social categories, and circumscribe the range of views that can be reconstructed on the Parthian side. Greco-Roman historiography has been allowed to set the line of scrimmage in scholarly debates for long enough. A fresh set of sources deserves its chance to do the same.

The moment is ripe for a revisionist treatment of the Arsacids of Rome, since the topic channels the momentum of recent trends in premodern history on several fronts, including burgeoning interest in pre-Islamic Iran, ongoing efforts to counter the predominance of Rome in ancient studies, and a turn toward global antiquity. I situate my thesis in a growing body of recent work that affirms the world-historical significance of ancient Iran and insists on its study from an internal vantage point, not simply as an adjunct to the classical Mediterranean.¹⁴ This book also contributes to growing literatures that decenter Rome through connected and comparative histories of premodern empires, and that grapple with the problem of excavating non-Roman points of view from the “cognitive aftershocks” of Roman hegemony.¹⁵ Such research does not imply that the Roman case is unimportant, and indeed, my concern with it is equal to the Parthian one. But Rome can be better understood when it is set in a larger global context, which will bring out both the particularities and the common features of its history.

The Arsacids of Rome present an optimal case for the investigation of these themes, unconfined as these figures were by the boundaries of any single ancient empire. To explore their lives is to venture beyond circumscribed imperial histories for a more holistic view. For Roman historians, attention to the Iranian side will aid in the distinction between Roman ideological claims and the complexity of actual power arrangements. That prospect is sometimes dismissed out of hand. Harry Sidebottom, for instance, writes that “it must be uncertain whether barbarian hostages interpreted their role in the same way Romans did.”¹⁶ Such fatalism is unjustified. In the Parthian case, there is enough evidence to reconstruct the cultural logic of the givers; or, at the very least, one should resort to agnosticism only *after* assessing the Near Eastern sources, not before. At stake is not just the Parthian viewpoint, but a better contextualization of the Roman one. On the Near Eastern side, fosterage has long been recognized as a vital social institution in ancient Iran, and Iranists will easily observe my debt to Geo Widengren’s seminal treatment of the practice. Widengren did not include the Arsacids of Rome in that discussion, however.¹⁷ Meret Strothmann and Everett Wheeler cite Widengren and

14. Daryaei 2009; Shayegan 2011; Payne 2015; Khatchadourian 2016; Canepa 2018; Overtom 2020; Jacobs and Rollinger 2021; Gross 2024.

15. Connected histories: Canepa 2009; Smith 2016; Andrade 2018; Schlude 2020; Chen 2021; Rollinger 2023. Comparative studies: Bang and Kołodziejczyk 2012; Scheidel 2015; Ando and Richardson 2017. “Cognitive aftershocks”: Padilla Peralta 2020: 169.

16. Sidebottom 2007: 23.

17. Widengren 1969: 64–95; cf. Widengren 1976: 251–52, 268–69. Widengren 1969: 109 mentions Vonones, but only in a section on Arsacid succession procedures, not fosterage.

do connect Rome's Arsacid children to Iranian fosterage, but in footnotes, and without examining the Near Eastern evidence or the divergence between the hostageship and fosterage paradigms.¹⁸ The exposition is worth the effort, as the direct comparison of Iranian and Roman practices will help integrate Parthia into the broader research landscape of global antiquity.

Moreover, a fuller account of the Parthian viewpoint affords the opportunity to reframe not just the exchange of Arsacid children, but the study of Roman-Parthian relations and ancient interstate affairs more generally. Despite the profusion of recent contributions to the literature, this corner of ancient history remains undertheorized and hamstrung by presentist assumptions about interstate politics. In the absence of clearly articulated theoretical frameworks, many studies map the conceptual apparatus of the modern state onto the ancient world. The Parthian and Roman empires are treated as states, both in their own right and in their engagements with the other. They interacted through state-formulated "foreign policy." Most attention is devoted to military conflict, especially the great battle of Carrhae and the episodic jockeying over the "buffer state" of Armenia. Nonviolent interaction is relegated to the sphere of "diplomacy"—a modern term with no counterpart in any language known to the Parthians and Romans, since they had no conception of it as a distinct sphere of activity. Treaties are the most studied feature of Roman-Parthian relations in this area, and the Arsacids of Rome are sometimes annexed to this topic.¹⁹ Elsewhere they are regarded as features of "diplomacy" inasmuch as they regulated the relationship between the Parthian and Roman states.²⁰ In every case, the particulars of Roman-Parthian interaction are made to conform to the conceptual analytics of the modern nation.

Whereas studies that lack an explicit theoretical orientation tend to smuggle modern assumptions into the analysis of ancient interstate politics, Arthur Eckstein and Nikolaus Overtoom have recently done the field a great service by integrating political science frameworks into their treatments of Roman and Parthian imperialism.²¹ Their discussions apply a theory of international politics variously called neo-, offensive, or structural realism as formulated by the political scientists Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer.²² The theory consists of a few key propositions. First, the state is the basic unit of world politics.²³ Second, states interact against a backdrop of anarchy. This condition imposes uniformly aggressive behavior on states to survive, since no domestic mechanism like law, kinship, or

18. Strothmann 2012: 91–92 n.36; Wheeler 2016: 193 n.157.

19. Ziegler 1964; Elbern 1990: 99. On treaties, see further Keaveney 1981; Keaveney 1982.

20. Lee 1991; Campbell 1993: 224; Campbell 2001: 17.

21. Eckstein 2006; Eckstein 2008; Overtoom 2020.

22. On the distinction between neorealism and conventional or classical Realism, see recently Kirshner 2022: 43–80.

23. Waltz 1979: 93–97; Mearsheimer 2001: 17.

morality can alleviate the inherent violence of the interstate environment.²⁴ Third, the structure of the interstate system as determined by the relative power of state units is the key to understanding world politics.²⁵ A multipolar world with several great powers tends to see much violent conflict, for instance, whereas two great powers will tend to balance in a bipolar system. Eckstein has used this framework to explain Rome's conquest of the eastern Mediterranean as a function of weakening Hellenistic empires that prompted the intervention of a strengthening Roman state.²⁶ Overtoom makes a similar argument for the other end of the Hellenistic world: the Parthian empire's rise came amid "power-transition crises" precipitated by Seleucid and Bactrian decline.²⁷ These pioneering studies have put ancient history and international relations scholarship in dialogue, and they usefully provide an explicit theoretical basis for the comparative study of ancient imperialism. Eckstein's work has been especially influential among Romanists, and his theoretical perspective has since been taken up by Michael Fronda, Steve Mason, Craig Champion, Pierre-Luc Brisson, and others.²⁸

If such studies have demonstrated the analytical purchase of neorealism in ancient history, however, the Arsacids of Rome can show the theory's blind spots and problematize its core assumptions. Eckstein and Overtoom themselves limited their applications of neorealism, because the perspective neglects a variable that each scholar deemed decisive in their respective cases: domestic political culture. Both historians point to unique internal features—Eckstein to Roman assimilationism, and Overtoom to a Parthian trifecta of societal versatility, military innovation, and dynastic stability—to explain why Rome and Parthia succeeded where neighboring states failed.²⁹ Reference to political culture on the unit level is necessary, they continue, because interstate politics are complex and multivariate, and multicausal explanations are needed to understand historical change in this arena.³⁰ Neorealism can engender a fuller appreciation of structural, system-level factors, but domestic politics and culture matter, too.

I agree that a multiplicity of perspectives is necessary for a full exposition of ancient foreign relations, and I see additional problems with neorealism as an analytical frame for Roman-Parthian relations in the first century C.E. (a period, it should be said, with which neither Eckstein nor Overtoom was expressly concerned). One issue is neorealism's conception of the state as a transhistorical, universal, and immutable political unit. On this logic, ancient empires become the

24. Waltz 1979: 88; Mearsheimer 2001: 30.

25. Waltz 1979: 99–101; Mearsheimer 2001: 3, 21, 53.

26. Eckstein 2008.

27. Overtoom 2020: 22–23, 68, 75, 132, 149; see also Overtoom 2016; Overtoom 2019.

28. Fronda 2010: 16–21, 281–87; Mason 2014: 195–204; Champion 2017: 79–121; Brisson 2023: 7; see also Morley 2015: 6–10; Bradley and Hall 2018: 197, 206–7; Scopacasa 2019: 53–55.

29. Eckstein 2006: 33–35, 244–316, esp. 245–57, 312–13; Overtoom 2020: 7, 27–64.

30. Eckstein 2006: 8–9, 33, 67–69; Overtoom 2020: 4, 23–24.

analytic equivalents of Greek *poleis*, tribal confederations, and modern nations. This is not to deny that Rome and Parthia can be meaningfully spoken of as states, though some have advanced serious objections to the use of that term in antiquity.³¹ But even modern empires (to say nothing of ancient ones) have operated with different models of sovereignty and territoriality than those of nations, and elision on this score may occlude more than it clarifies.³² Moreover, even if one accepts that the ancient world was a collection of formally equivalent state units, historians are in a poor position to analyze the structure of ancient interstate systems in the way the neorealists intended. For Waltz and Mearsheimer, “structure” refers to the distribution among state units of *material* capabilities, by which they mean population size, territorial extent, financial wealth, natural resource endowment, technology, economic productivity, and especially military personnel and armaments.³³ Such demographic and economic metrics are very difficult to establish from antiquity’s paltry and fragmentary datasets. Difficulty need not entail radical skepticism, and on the Roman side, recent work has made great progress toward meaningful quantification in the face of uncertainty by assigning probabilities to numerical estimates.³⁴ But the challenges are even more acute in Parthian studies, where the secondary literature on demography and economy lags far behind the treatments available for Rome.³⁵ Neorealist analysis of Roman-Parthian relations based on material capabilities is possible, but it will require extensive quantitative groundwork that accommodates a high degree of uncertainty. Finally, neorealism’s exclusive focus on states overlooks the transimperial forces that operated across the Roman-Parthian frontier—a major blind spot for an era where state institutions were minimal compared to modern ones.³⁶ Several such entities were implicated in high politics on both sides of the Euphrates: the Jewish community and, later, the Christian one; the Janus-faced client kingdoms in Armenia and Mesopotamia; Palmyra and its sprawling commercial networks; and, indeed, the Arsacid family itself.

The concept of pragmatic misunderstanding can further unsettle the assumptions of these state-centric and neorealist literatures and highlight three different dynamics at play in Roman-Parthian relations. First, the Arsacids of Rome call for the dynasty instead of the state to be centered as the key unit of analysis.

31. See the recent discussions of this issue in Hall 2021; Strootman 2021: 333.

32. Burbank and Cooper 2010: 16–17.

33. Waltz 1979: 131; Mearsheimer 2001: 55–56.

34. Lavan 2016; Rubio-Campillo et al. 2017; Lavan 2019.

35. Compare, for instance, the divergent estimates for the size of the Parthian army in Potter 2006: 157; Olbrycht 2016b: 326–29; Overtoom 2020: 230. McEvedy and Jones 1978: 126, 152 seem to put the population of the Parthian empire at five million people. That may be too low, as their estimate for Rome probably was (Scheidel 2019: 533; Lavan 2019: 94), but further research on the topic is badly needed.

36. Cf. the critique of Waltz in Nexon 2009: 33–34, discussing early modern Europe.

Dynasties are ruling families that claim political authority on the basis of kinship and descent.³⁷ They often supply a state with its king, but their power over the state is not absolute, and their members need not be confined within its territorial borders. Moreover, dynasties tend to interface with others of their kind through institutions that unite the two families in kinship. Cross-culturally, marriage is the best attested of such practices, but fosterage plays a part as well. From this vantage point, the Arsacids of Rome can be numbered among the scions of world history who went abroad to network with foreign rulers—in their case, with the inchoate Julio-Claudian dynasty. By means of fosterage, the ruling families of Parthia and Rome were entangled through kinship even as they maintained divergent views on the exchange of Arsacid children. The story, then, is not one of antipodal states arrayed on either shore of the Euphrates, but of an interdynastic family of Arsacids and Caesars who parsed their underlying relationship in different ways.

Second, the Arsacids of Rome foreground the importance of culture and ideas to Roman-Parthian relations instead of the material factors that are central to neo-realism. An exposition of pragmatic misunderstanding must attend to the conflicting social frameworks through which Parthians and Romans made sense of their interactions. Such an approach takes its cues from the political science tradition of constructivism, which holds that the interstate environment is shaped by the culturally contingent beliefs, norms, and practices of its participants.³⁸ Most historians will find that proposition unobjectionable, but the field of ancient interstate relations has largely escaped the type of anthropological critique that proximate domains of antiquity have received.³⁹ An analysis in this vein underscores that power relations are not simply a function of material conditions, as neorealist theory would have it. Rather, the interpretation of power is part of its constitution: the cultural criteria by which prestige, rank, and hierarchy are judged shape how power manifests in the world. To be sure, historians need not make a binary choice between ideas and materials; both can be accorded significance. Eckstein and Overtom contend that the structure of the interstate system has considerable explanatory power. They do not claim that their subjects are reducible to this single variable.⁴⁰ The same qualification applies for culture and ideas. These variables are privileged in this study not because they were the only ones that mattered in Roman-Parthian relations, but because they produced a consequential arrangement—pragmatic misunderstanding—that has thus far been overlooked.

37. Duindam 2016: 4.

38. Classic articulations of the constructivist position in political science are Wendt 1992; Finnemore 1996; Katzenstein 1996; Adler 1997.

39. Burton 2011 is an express application of constructivism to early Roman imperialism. Several studies of ancient interstate politics adopt the perspective without using the term: Gagé 1959; Badian 1967; Lendon 2002; Lendon 2010; Payne 2013. See also Low 2007: 27 n.85.

40. See esp. Eckstein 2006: 185–87; Overtom 2020: 23–24.

Third and finally, pragmatic misunderstanding challenges the realist contention that anarchy is the universal condition of interstate politics. The exchange of Arsacid children produced a regime of misunderstanding, an order that emerged from disharmony and conflicting inputs. The Parthians and Romans held divergent views about the distribution of power between them, but the divergence created an equipoise, a symmetry, a balanced antithesis. Order prevailed even in the absence of an orderer. Eckstein identifies only two means by which states may escape from anarchy: international law, backed by a robust enforcement mechanism, or hierarchy, a system in which a recognized hegemon achieves supremacy.⁴¹ But pragmatic misunderstanding forged an order that was maintained neither by law nor by hegemony. Instead, order arose from harmonizing incomprehension. The two empires achieved equilibrium through interpretations of the Arsacids of Rome that were both mutually unintelligible and mutually satisfying. Equilibrium did not always mean peace, for wars continued in this period. Yet even war was subsumed by a script that operated above the immediate understanding of the actors. Competition could be violent, but it took place within an arena that order had circumscribed.⁴² While a relationship built on the unstable foundations of misunderstanding was necessarily complex and chaotic, chaotic systems can nevertheless produce moments of emergent order, even if that order succumbs to entropy in the end.⁴³ It need not be the case, of course, that all moments in interstate relations are governed by forces like these. Pragmatic misunderstanding is no general theory, and even in Roman-Parthian relations, it prevailed only between c. 30 B.C.E. and 66 C.E. Neorealism *does* claim universal applicability, though, on the grounds that anarchy is a transhistorical and ubiquitous feature of foreign relations.⁴⁴ Pragmatic misunderstanding may be only a single exception to the universality of anarchy, but that is enough to mount a challenge to the putative rule.

To assess the impact of the Arsacids of Rome on the Roman-Parthian relationship, the following chapters compose an abstract model of their circulation, each dealing with different phases of their lives. My focus is not chronological or narrative political history, especially since many such treatments of the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. are available elsewhere.⁴⁵ Rather, I am interested in the patterns that governed the lives of these Arsacid dynasts: their journey to Rome; their residence in Rome; their return to Parthia; and their subsequent careers in Parthia. Not every Arsacid of Rome followed this trajectory. Many or most died in Rome, and some were *born* in Rome. But the prospect of their remission to Parthia, whether

41. Eckstein 2008: 8, 342–43.

42. On war within the framework of pragmatic misunderstanding, see chapter 2 and the conclusion.

43. An insight of chaos theory in mathematics and the natural sciences; see Gleick 1987: 8; Kellert 1993: 81–82, 110–14; Strogatz 2003: 287. For the concept in political science, see Kissane 2014.

44. Eckstein 2006: 9–10 with n.16 for literature.

45. See recently van Kooten 2015: 508–85; Harl 2016; Canepa 2020: 291–94; Curtis and Magub 2020; Fabian 2020: 209–17; Schlude 2020; Ellerbrock 2021: 22–70.

realized or not, was part of the logic of their exchange, and the bidirectional travel of Parthian royalty was central to the transimperial history of this period. The structure of this book traces that journey from beginning to end.

The first two chapters cover the submission of Arsacids to the Roman emperor from the Parthian perspective. They ask why, and under what circumstances, the Arsacid kings of Parthia chose to send their children to Italy. My main answer is that they were sent to be foster-children. Chapter 1 supports this argument by laying out the evidence for interdynastic kinship as a channel of foreign relations in the ancient Near East, and for fosterage as a channel of kinship in pre-Islamic Iran. Within this framework, I then revisit the question of Arsacid motives in chapter 2, exploring the contingent Arsacid objectives that could be subsumed under the general heading of cliental fosterage. At two chapters rather than one, the submission phase receives more attention than others in the book. But the lengthier treatment is warranted. This is where the Roman sources and thus the Roman perspective have weighed heaviest, and where the application of creative force is most required to dislodge them.

Chapter 3 proceeds to Rome and surveys the Roman side of pragmatic misunderstanding. Hostageship was the main paradigm through which the Romans interpreted the arrival of Arsacid children in their city, and triumphal exhibitions of these “hostages” used them to broadcast a message of Roman supremacy over Parthia to the widest possible audience. But fosterage had purchase on the Roman side as well, since the young age of the hostages often invited their captor to play a quasi-parental role. Yet misunderstanding would have reigned here, too, for fosterage as it emerges from Roman sources was a patronal institution, not a cliental one. Even where the Julio-Claudians may have fulfilled Arsacid expectations for the establishment of kinship, the two sides would have maintained antithetical assessments of the underlying power relationship between them.

Where chapters 1–3 deal with the movement of Arsacids from Parthia to Rome, chapters 4–5 look at their return in the opposite direction. With the emperors’ blessing, several Arsacids of Rome were remitted to Parthia, where they mounted bids to claim their ancestral throne. In every case, these episodes were triggered by petitions from the Parthian nobility, a group of nonroyal elites who held a variety of positions within the Parthian empire. As the wider evidence for pre-Islamic Iran can establish, it was this group that routinely served as fosterers for the royal children of the ruling dynasty. Accordingly, in chapter 4, I analyze the petitions of the Parthian nobility to the Roman emperor as a dialogue among cliental fosterers, a perspective that unsettles the usual interpretation of these events as Roman “interference” in the hermetically separate realm of Parthian domestic politics.

Chapter 5 returns to Parthian territory with the Arsacids of Rome who managed to become king, but never with much success or for very long. The Roman literary sources attribute their failure to Parthian recognition of Roman hostageship,

which was perceived as a degrading background for an Arsacid king. The Parthian enemies of the Arsacids of Rome thus reviled them as the emperor's slaves and as the acculturated creatures of their Roman captors. I find major grounds to mistrust this tradition, which is based on internal Roman discourses and literary tropes far more than authentic Parthian rhetoric. But comparative history and internal Parthian sources also lend the tradition credence. The return of interdynastic children from foreign lands often triggers anxieties in their home country as locals grapple with the prospect of foreign influence over a scion of their ruling family. In this sense, the Roman sources on Arsacid return may be both underinformed and correct. The Parthian counterreaction that they describe may indeed have been instrumental in ending the circulation of Arsacid children.

The book's conclusion examines the end of pragmatic misunderstanding, weighing several factors that could have led to the collapse of the arrangement. I close by contextualizing the kinship between the Arsacids and Julio-Claudians with interdynastic relationships from other historical settings, including Roman-Sasanian late antiquity. The Arsacids of Rome were not at the center of a robust, well-integrated, or cosmopolitan interdynastic family like those that emerged in the late Bronze Age or early modern Europe. But their history shows a spark from a fire that elsewhere grew with a roaring flame. The Romans and Parthians may have maintained divergent interpretations of the Arsacids of Rome, but these ambulant children connected, in their way, the circles of two ruling families, constructing an order of incomprehension through their mutual exchange.