

Remission

The Emperor as Parthian Aristocrat

The circulation of Arsacid royalty between the Iranian plateau and the Mediterranean ran in two directions. Members of the dynasty left Parthia for Rome, but some returned, as well. On four occasions, the Arsacids in Italy saw members of their group depart the Julio-Claudian court to contend for their ancestral throne. Powerful factions in the Parthian empire had petitioned the emperor for the release of a new king of kings, and the petition had been granted. In an instant, quiet lives of status and comfort but little actual power were exchanged for the battlefields of dynastic warfare and, in some cases, even the Arsacid kingship itself. The transfer of Arsacids from Parthia to Rome was a function of pragmatic misunderstanding between Arsacid and Julio-Claudian rulers. But why should the trajectory of the Arsacids of Rome have taken them back over the Euphrates in the opposite direction?

The answer routinely offered in the literature adopts a state-centric framework to account for the return of Arsacids to Parthia: the Roman emperors used their Arsacid residents to “interfere” in Parthian domestic politics. Scholars of this persuasion hold that a stable, unified Parthia threatened the Roman east, so the release of Arsacids was a Roman effort to destabilize and divide. State interests and Roman agency are at the center of the story, and the emperor’s custody of Arsacid princes facilitates intrusion upon Parthia’s internal affairs—a sphere to which the Romans did not belong and where they could act only as interlopers. Parthian motives are left unexplained except as a pretext for Roman action, and Parthia itself is thought to have been left enfeebled or even humiliated by its recourse to the Arsacids of the Julio-Claudian court.

This chapter advances a new interpretation of Arsacid remission that replaces state-centric analysis with a focus on ruling families, royal fosterage, and kinship. Centering Parthia instead of Rome, I advance a reading of Arsacid release that construes

the Roman emperor not as a head of state, but as the patriarch of a ruling family performing cliental fosterage for the Arsacid dynasty. This framework opens a new perspective on the relationship between the emperor and the nonroyal Parthian elite, a collection of hereditary clans that supported the Arsacid kingship but also expected privileges and prerogatives from it. From this vantage point, Arsacid remission was not a case of one empire's illicit meddling in the domestic affairs of another, but rather a dialogue among the various parties with a stake in Arsacid fosterage and kinship.

Two bodies of evidence support this reading. First, Near Eastern sources from late antiquity can, with due caution and awareness of their limitations, be used to better understand the Parthian nobility and its interaction with the royal families of Iran and Rome. Few Roman authors offer contemporaneous evidence for the structural role of the Parthian nobility in the first century C.E. Their perspectives, moreover, are external, and their references bare. While sources from Arsacid Armenia and Sasanian Iran postdate the Roman ones, they chronicle a period in which many of the same noble families continued to wield power, and they do so from an internal vantage point. Their testimony sheds new light on the complex negotiations among kings, noblemen, and the royal children who circulated between them. From the standpoint they reveal, the Roman emperor's remission of Arsacids to Parthian custody was not infiltration or subversion, but instead a customary form of resistance among families linked to the Arsacid dynasty through cliental fosterage.

Second, one Roman source, namely Tacitus, attributes detailed argumentation to the envoys of the Parthian elites who petitioned the emperor for Arsacid princes. Scholars discount the historical value of these passages, but they are consistent with the Near Eastern evidence for the Iranian aristocracy and its attitudes toward royal misconduct. Tacitus should not be dismissed out of hand on this topic. Instead, he can be read as a witness to the divergence between Parthian and Roman understandings of Arsacid release. His account shows that the "infiltration" objective so discussed in modern scholarship must be recognized as a particularity of Roman thought, not an objective truth. By the same token, Parthian aspirations to police the Arsacid kingship and to uphold the dynasty's integrity were not Tacitean inventions or empty diplomatic niceties, as is sometimes argued. Rather, these claims illustrate the genuine self-conception of the Parthian aristocracy—a group that now, because of Arsacid fosterage, could reach out to the Roman emperor as a member of its ranks.

INFILTRATION AND FACTIONALISM: THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

Why, and under what conditions, did Arsacid dynasts leave Rome for Ctesiphon? Most scholars approach this question from a Roman perspective and as an adjunct to the study of Roman hostageship. Their discussions center on Roman agency,

interests, and policy. The Romans thought that former hostages made good client-kings, the argument runs, so the release of Arsacids projected their power into Parthia through the installation of a compliant vassal. Over a century ago, Guglielmo Ferrero opined that the emperor's custody of Arsacids gave Rome "an admirable pretext for interference in Parthian policy."¹ The view persists. For Joel Allen, the history of Arsacid release comprises "the efforts of five different emperors to infiltrate the Parthian court with former hostages as vassals."² Edward Dąbrowa describes it as "betting on internal conflicts and supporting Parthian pretenders to keep the Arsacids under pressure."³ Kenneth Harl paints a similar picture: "Augustus and his heirs had a supply of Parthian pretenders, reared at Rome, to produce as rivals to any ambitious Arsacid king who wished to revise the settlement [of 19 B.C.E.]."⁴ Many echo this designation of the Arsacids of Rome as "pretenders," as though association with Rome deprived the Arsacid in question of his authenticity.⁵ In one assessment, the Roman release of Arsacids is even imagined as an exercise in degradation. Thus Barbara Levick sees Claudius's release of Mihrdād as "another opportunity to inflict a crushing humiliation on the Parthians at no cost by deploying a claimant to their throne."⁶ In sum, much of the literature construes Arsacid release as an illicit Roman effort to infiltrate, interfere with, or compromise the sphere of Parthian domestic politics.

Elsewhere, a different perspective is on offer: Arsacid release was not imposed on Parthian domestic politics but rather grew out of them. Here, scholars start from the observation that no Roman emperor ever released an Arsacid without a request from the reigning Arsacid king (in one case) or the Parthian nobility (in four cases). From this vantage point, the motives behind such Parthian initiatives matter and require investigation. Dąbrowa approached this question by positing a division in the Parthian nobility between supporters of a strong monarchy on one side and its antagonists on the other. As he sees it, the opponents of centralized royal power turned to the Arsacids of Rome as a hedge against domineering kings.⁷ Another attempt to delimit factions comes from Marek Olbrycht, who connects Arsacid release to divisions within the Arsacid family itself. For Olbrycht, Parthian politics in the early first century C.E. centered on a group he calls the "Sinatrućids" or the "Phraatids." The terms refer to branches of the Arsacid dynasty that were descended from Sanatruć/Sinatrućes (r. c. 77–70 B.C.E.) and Frahād/Phraates IV,

1. Ferrero 1909: 231.

2. Allen 2020: 256.

3. Dąbrowa 1983: 124 ("... de miser sur les conflits intérieurs et de soutenir les prétendants parthes comme méthode de pression sur les Arsacides.")

4. Harl 2016: 119; cf. Gregoratti 2020: 82, 86; Hauser 2022: 168.

5. Debevoise 1938: 172; Walker 1980: 163; Bivar 1983: 71, 73–74, 76; Olbrycht 2014: 93; Wiesehöfer 2015: 338; Gregoratti 2017: 110; Dąbrowa 2021: 51; Olbrycht 2021d.

6. Levick 2015: 189.

7. Dąbrowa 1983: 44–45, 90, 121–24.

the latter of whom inaugurated the tradition of sending Arsacids to Rome. Olbrycht holds that the Phraatids and their supporters (among whom he numbers the Sūrēn and Kārin families of the Parthian nobility) represented a distinct party or faction in Parthian domestic politics. The preference of this faction for the descendants of Frahād IV explains its appeals to Rome for the release of that king's children and grandchildren.⁸

I share Dąbrowa's and Olbrycht's interest in the Parthian impetus behind Arsacid remission, but I diverge from their conclusions. Both scholars offer valuable correctives to the Romano-centric "infiltration" view. Yet their arguments can be improved upon, for two reasons. First, Dąbrowa and Olbrycht base their conclusions on Greco-Roman literary texts—a reasonable approach, to be sure, since Roman authors constitute the only direct evidence for Arsacid remission. As both scholars illustrate, however, the relationship between the Arsacid king and the Parthian nobility was a pivotal factor in these exchanges. That relationship can be better understood through non-Roman sources for pre-Islamic Iranian history, especially texts from Sasanian Iran and Arsacid Armenia. Second, even if the evidentiary basis for the question is confined to Roman literature, the reconstructions of Dąbrowa and Olbrycht are too schematic. The existence of organized, coherent, and stable factions within the Parthian domestic sphere is simply not supported by the available sources, and the binaries that these discussions posit—between supporters and opponents of a strong Arsacid monarchy in Dąbrowa's case, and between "Phraatids" and their rivals in Olbrycht's—do not withstand close scrutiny. The topic is better served by a fluid and dynamic model of interaction between the Arsacid dynasty and nonroyal Parthian elites, since a more flexible reconstruction both better fits the Roman texts and can accommodate input from the late antique evidence.

A better accounting of the relationship between Arsacid kings and their Parthian elite interlocutors opens a new perspective on Arsacid remission, one that construes the Roman emperor as a client fosterer and, by extension, as a species of Parthian nobleman. For members of the Parthian elite, the emperor's custody of Arsacid children would have made him a peer rather than an alien captor. Consequently, the embassies of the Parthian aristocracy to the Julio-Claudian court can be interpreted not as seditious acts inviting foreign interference, but as a dialogue among stakeholders in Arsacid fosterage. In what follows, then, I investigate the identities of the nonroyal Parthians who petitioned Rome, integrating late antique sources that offer additional insight on the relationship between the Parthian aristocracy and the Arsacid dynasty. I then return to the Arsacids of Rome and reconsider their release from this new vantage point.

8. Olbrycht 2013a: 101; Olbrycht 2013b (I rely on the author's English summary, since the work is in Polish, which I do not read); Olbrycht 2014; Olbrycht 2016a: 23–24.

TABLE 2 Arsacids Sent from Rome to Parthia

Name(s)	Date	Sources
Son of Frahād IV	c. 23 B.C.E.	Cass. Dio 51.18.2–3, 53.33.1–2; Just. 42.5.6–9; cf. <i>Mon. Anc.</i> 32.1
Vonones	c. 8 C.E.	<i>Mon. Anc.</i> 33; SCPP 37–45; Joseph. <i>AJ</i> 18.46; Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 2.2.1
Frahād	35 C.E.	Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 6.31.2; Cass. Dio 58.26.2
Tirdād	35/6 C.E.	Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 6.32.2–3; Cass. Dio 58.26.2
Mihrdād	49 C.E.	Tac. <i>Ann.</i> 11.10.4, 12.10–11

THE CASES

Greek and Latin texts record five cases when an Arsacid departed Rome for Parthian territory. Each time, the release of the dynast came at the request of one or more Parthian dignitaries. Only once, however, was the petitioner the Arsacid king himself. This was during the first case cataloged in table 2, when Frahād IV requested the release of his son—a child, it should be noted, whose submission to Augustus was not his father’s wish, but rather a result of his abduction by the rebel king Tirdād.⁹ Unfortunately, the Roman sources for this episode leave it mired in obscurity. As far as the remission of the child is concerned, the dispute turns on the contradictory testimony of Dio and Justin: the former seems to regard Augustus’s delivery of the Arsacid prince as part of a bargain, while the latter says the child was returned at no cost to his father.¹⁰ Scholars have argued both ways, but a final answer is beyond the reach of the available evidence.¹¹ The logic of the exchange remains unclear. In any event, the transaction was a one-off, since no subsequent Arsacids would return to Parthia at the reigning king’s request.

In every other case, the emperor’s remission of an Arsacid dynast came at the request of nonroyal Parthian elites. The sources for these exchanges are entirely Greco-Roman, and their vocabulary for the social status of the petitioners varies. In the *Res Gestae*, Augustus calls the Parthians who requested Vonones the “most distinguished men” of that people.¹² Josephus describes the same group as “the most well-born.”¹³ In Tacitus, Vonones’s adherents were “the first men” of the Parthians, while those who sought Frahād and Tirdād a generation later were “nobles.”¹⁴

9. For background and recent discussion of the “Tiridates episode,” see Nabel 2015; Curtis and Magub 2020: 45–47; Schlude 2020: 97–102; Olbrycht 2021b.

10. Cass. Dio 53.33.2, 54.8.1; Just. 42.5.9.

11. For those who detect a contractual arrangement at work, see Timpe 1975: 167–68; Nedergaard 1988: 106; Luther 2010: 104. But others reject the idea; see Ziegler 1964: 46–47 (who prefers to follow Justin); Allen 2006: 85 n.53. Schlude 2020: 98–100, at 98 describes the return of the child as a “trust-building measure.”

12. *Mon. Anc.* 33 (*principes*, or *prōtoi* in the Greek).

13. Joseph. *AJ* 18.44–6 (*hoi gennaiotatoi*).

14. Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.1, 6.31.2 (*primores*); 6.31.1 (*nobiles*). The Parthians who sought Mihrdād in 49 C.E. are simply called *legati*, but Tacitus does not specify whose ambassadors, precisely, they were.

In other places, the emperor's petitioners are simply "Parthians" without further specification.¹⁵ On balance, it is clear that the return of Arsacids from Rome to Parthia was initiated by Parthian elites rather than reigning kings, even if the terse references in Roman sources leave their identities unclear.

More information is available on the supporters of the Arsacids of Rome within Parthian territory, however, and the evidence from Tacitus enables their classification into five groups. First, two supporters headed families that belonged to a group conventionally described as the "Parthian nobility." Second, two supporters belonged to a family that may have numbered among these noble clans, but their description is insufficient to say so with confidence. Third, two supporters were Parthian client kings, that is, rulers of regional kingdoms that belonged to the Parthian west. Fourth, two supporters were holders of Parthian administrative offices. Fifth and finally, one supporter's heritage is unknown. His case notwithstanding, the predominant characteristic among these figures is their membership in elite kinship groups. This background matters, for it was precisely such groups that performed cliental fosterage for the ruling dynasty throughout Iranian history. A basic taxonomy of those who sought Arsacid remission provides ample grounds for connecting these exchanges to the matter of fosterage.

The Parthian Nobility

Two figures mentioned by Tacitus belonged to a group that scholars have conventionally labeled the Parthian nobility. The first appears in Tacitus's narrative of Tirdād's campaign in 35/36 C.E. Once the Arsacid of Rome reached Ctesiphon, Tacitus writes, "Surena crowned [him] with the royal insignia according to ancestral custom."¹⁶ The coronation is the only action attributed to Surena, who subsequently disappears from the narrative. The second aristocratic figure is connected to Mihrdād's remission in 49 C.E. As Tacitus tells the story, Mihrdād's wisest and most faithful supporter was one "Carenēs." This man admonished the young dynast against the dilatory course his campaign took in its early stages; he contributed a substantial military force that joined the army in northern Mesopotamia; and he was unique among Mihrdād's supporters in his steadfastness during the final battle against the reigning king Gōdarz II, where his contingent achieved initial success before succumbing to a renewed assault by the enemy.¹⁷

The mention of "Surena" as the figure who crowned Tirdād (at least after his conquest of Mesopotamia) is a clear reference to a relatively well-attested Parthian elite family. Though Roman authors seem to have understood Surena(s) as a personal name, it was in fact the name of a noble family, and its application to individuals is better understood as a hereditary designation connoting patriarchal

15. Cass. Dio 58.26.1–2; Tac. *Ann.* 11.10.4, 12.10–11.

16. Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.4. On the right of the Sūrēn to crown the Arsacid king, see also Plut. *Crass.* 21.7.

17. Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.3, 12.13.1, 12.14.2.

authority. The Sūrēn family is first attested as a major political actor in Roman sources for the year 58 B.C.E., when its clan head had amassed enough power to reinstall Urūd II on the Arsacid throne.¹⁸ It is best known for its participation in the Battle of Carrhae, where the same man supplied and commanded the Parthian army.¹⁹ The Sūrēn survived the transition from Arsacid to Sasanian rule, and the family subsequently appears in a diverse range of sources, from Middle Iranian inscriptions to late antique Latin literature to Armenian historiography. The family's base of power during its heyday is thought to have been the eastern Iranian region called Sakastan or Seistan, but this contention is based on a single sentence of questionable relevance in Tabari, and it may be preferable to imagine dispersed territorial possessions on the model of Achaemenid land tenure practices.²⁰ When the Arabs arrived, the Sūrēn fled east with the Sasanians and remained a potent force even in exile. The final witness to the family's legacy may be a ninth-century C.E. Chinese-Middle Persian epitaph from Tang China that marks the tomb of a Sūrēn princess, though the reading of the family name is contested.²¹ Among his supporters, then, the Arsacid of Rome Tirdād could count one of the most powerful and enduring aristocratic families of pre-Islamic Iran.

No meaner in status than the Sūrēn were the Kārin, whose patriarch seems to have numbered among the allies of Mihrdād in 49 C.E. This, at least, is the common understanding of Tacitus's reference to "Carenēs," and while there are other entities from Parthian Iran to which the name might be connected, the parallel with the Sūrēn's appearance in the Tirdād narrative makes the identification with the Kārin family a convincing one.²² While the Kārin are otherwise unattested in Roman sources for the Parthian period, Near Eastern evidence shows the family's elevated status under the Sasanians. Kārin dignitaries are named alongside Sūrēn ones in the royal inscriptions of Shapur I and Narseh, which include the Kārin among the realm's most important aristocrats.²³ Armenian sources confirm

18. Plut. *Crass.* 21.7; cf. Just. 42.4.

19. See Karras-Klaproth 1988: 165–66 for references.

20. The family's supposed heartland in Sakastan/Seistan is firmly entrenched in the literature: see Marquart 1895: 635–37; Herzfeld 1932: 77–78; Lukonin 1983: 705; Shahbazi 1993: 156–57; Tarn 1997 [1922]: 499; Ball 2000: 13; Hauser 2006: 306; Bivar 2007: 28; Pourshariati 2008: 64; Gazerani 2016: 14–17; Ellerbrock 2021: 83. A dissenting voice is Christensen 1993: 327 n.20. Tabari's testimony is at 1.683, trans. Perlmann 1987: 77. On the dispersed land holdings of Persian elites in the Achaemenid period, see Briant 1985: 55–6; Tuplin 2020: 46–61; Basello 2021: 862; Waerzeggers 2021: 999.

21. Baghbidi 2011: 107; but cf. Yoshida 2022: 86–88, discussing alternate readings.

22. The Aramaic legend *krny* appears on the coinage of Aršak I, the founder of the Arsacid dynasty (e.g. Sellwood 1980: 23, type 3.1), and the Achaemenid title *karanos* (a supraregional commander) is found in Greek sources. One might compare these references to Tacitus's Carenēs, though on balance the Kārin identification seems more likely. On *krny*, see Sinisi 2012b: 280; Hyland 2013; Rung 2015; Shayegan 2017: 406–21. For the identification of Tacitus's Carenēs with the Kārin family, see Herzfeld 1932: 64; Lukonin 1983: 704; Wolski 1989: 226; Hauser 2006: 306; Olbrycht 2016a: 24.

23. ŠKZ 42, 46; NPi 32. On the orthography of the family's name, see Schmitt 1983.

this impression and preserve genealogies that connect the Sūrēn and Kārin to the Arsacid dynasty and to other elite families of the Armenian nobility.²⁴ Various literary sources from late antiquity demonstrate the immense power the Kārin wielded under the later Sasanians, and several surviving bullae were impressed by a seal whose Middle Persian legend proclaimed the bearer's Kārinid pedigree.²⁵ As with the Sūrēn, the fortunes of the family seem to have waxed and waned over time, but by all accounts it was a powerful actor in the Iranian world throughout the Arsacid and Sasanian periods.

What structural place did these families occupy in the Arsacid empire? Contemporary evidence is scarce and external, but sources from Arsacid Armenia and Sasanian Iran can provide further basis for reconstruction. Strabo and Justin both claim that the Parthians had a “senate,” and Strabo’s more detailed report describes this institution as a bicameral body composed of “kinsmen” on one side and “wise people and magi” on the other.²⁶ If the word “kinsman” denoted an honorific, created kinship rather than a natal one, as is usually assumed, then this advisory body may have comprised Parthian aristocrats, but the absence of evidence for any such formal institution outside of Roman sources makes this testimony suspect.²⁷ By contrast, for the Sasanian period, Lukonin’s scheme of the ruling class’s organization identified four groups: the kings, the princes, the great ones, and the free ones.²⁸ Judging by the Sasanian royal inscriptions where the Sūrēn and Kārin appear, these families belonged to the third tier, though the texts in question do not make a clear distinction between the “great” and the “free” in the lists of dignitaries they rehearse.²⁹ By any measure, however, the Sūrēn and Kārin were among the most powerful nonroyalty in the empire. In the extant sources, the most observable manifestation of their power is the occupation of Sasanian offices like the post of *hazārbed* and *wuzurg framādār*.³⁰ It remains unclear, though, whether such posts were hereditary prerogatives or ad hoc appointments; whether noble families were regionally concentrated or geographically dispersed; and whether the collective nobility represented a formal political institution or merely a social

24. Genealogy of the Sūrēn and Kārin: MKh 2.27–28, trans. Thomson 1978: 164–66; cf. Garsoïan 1976: 181, 197–98 n.28. Kamsarakan descent from the Kārin: MKh 2.73, 2.87, trans. Thomson 1978: 219, 241; see also the references collected in Toumanoff 1963: 206–7 n.236.

25. For the literary references, see Pourshariati 2020. For the sigillographic evidence, see Gyselen 2007: 67, 308–10; Gyselen 2019: 169.

26. Strab. 11.9.3 (*synedrion*); Just. 42.4.1 (*senatus*). Just. 41.2.1, where the author says “the order of the people (*populorum*) is next to the authority of the [Arsacid] kings” is generally regarded as a textual corruption.

27. For this understanding of “kinsman,” see Herzfeld 1932: 53–54.

28. Lukonin 1983: 699; see further chapter 1.

29. ŠKZ 42, 46, trans. Huyse 1999: 54–55, 58–59; NPī 16, 32, trans. Skjærvø 1983: 33–34, 42–43. See Rubin 2021: 245–46 for discussion.

30. Pourshariati 2008: 60–65; Payne 2014: 292; Patterson 2017: 192. On the offices, see Shayegan 2003a.

class.³¹ As these issues are debatable even in the Sasanian context where evidence is relatively plentiful, there can be no firm conclusions regarding the Arsacid period.

The *longue durée* history of the Iranian nobility does make clear, however, that its constituent families could clash both with the king of kings and with each other. Regarding its centrifugal tendency to oppose the monarchy, the sources tell of many episodes when constellations of nobles and other allies deposed a reigning king and replaced him with another member of his dynasty. Deposition was not a constitutional right or formal procedure, but took place on an *ad hoc* basis when a critical mass of nonroyal elites had both the will and the means to initiate regime change. This pattern is in evidence even before the Arsacid remissions from Rome, and several Sasanian cases are known as well.³² Such interventions did not signal a complete rejection of the established political order, since the claim of the Arsacid and Sasanian dynasties on the kingship was almost always respected. Rather, they were an exercise of what Zeev Rubin has described as the “noble’s right of rebellion” during the Sasanian period: deviant and unsatisfactory kings could be deposed with justice so long as the reigning dynasty’s royal prerogative was not challenged.³³ The replacement had to be an Arsacid or Sasanian, but his subsequent reign would be more palatable, or so the aggrieved elites would hope.

Yet aristocratic families feuded not only with the king but also with each other, and it would be a mistake to view the kingship and the nobility as two monolithic and immutable factions. When the king of kings clashed with nonroyal elites, his fight was with specific individuals, not the nobility as a whole. For their part, nobles were as likely to take aim at one another as they were the king.³⁴ Indeed, the Kārin family features in one such intra-aristocratic conflict from Sasanian late antiquity. Their fight was with the Mihrān, another noble clan that first appears in the inscription of Shapur I in a position that looks inferior to the Sūrēn and Kārin.³⁵ If the Mihrān began the Sasanian period at a disadvantage, though, they soon made up the ground, and by late antiquity, literary and sigillographic evidence puts its members in charge of key military and administrative posts.³⁶ The only detailed sources on the rivalry between the Kārin and the Mihrān are postconquest, but the main outlines of the episode are clear enough. In the late fifth century C.E., Kārinid power reached an acme under a patriarch by the name of Sukhra or Zarmihr.³⁷ The Sasanian king Kavad rankled at the excessive political influence of Sukhra, and he appealed to Shapur, the head of the Mihrān family, for aid. Shapur marched on

31. On the question of hereditary appointments, see Börm 2018: 26–29.

32. For Arsacid cases, see Ellerbrock 2021: 83 n.27. For Sasanian ones, see Börm 2008: 433–35; Pourshariati 2008: 57–58; Mosig-Walburg 2010: 133–34.

33. Rubin 2021: 263, 268–69.

34. Pourshariati 2008: 81; Mosig-Walburg 2010: 155–56; Payne 2014: 291.

35. ŠKZ 50.

36. Shayegan 2022: 222.

37. On the discrepancy of the sources on his name, see Jackson Bonner 2020: 141.

the court, arrested Sukhra, and had the Kārinid leader executed.³⁸ As the history of the Kārin family itself demonstrates, then, the Iranian nobility was not a unified entity that counterbalanced the kingship as a single bloc. Aristocratic families could fight with one another, whether on behalf of the king of kings, or in conjunction with him, or irrespective of him.

The intra-elite competitive tendencies of the Parthian nobility matter to the cases of Arsacid remission, for they call into question Olbrycht's reconstruction of a "Sinatruclid" or "Phraatid" faction in Parthian domestic politics during the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. According to Olbrycht, the Sūrēn and Kārin consistently lined up behind the Arsacids of Rome and against the reigning kings Ardawān II and Gōdarz II, since they preferred to have the descendants of Frahād IV on the throne.³⁹ But there is no possible evidentiary basis for this argument aside from Tacitus, and his text does not support it. Of the four relevant cases of Arsacid remission tabulated above (table 2), the Sūrēn are connected only to one, namely the case of Tirdād. The same is true of the Kārin, who are named only in the context of Mihrdād's campaign. There is no indication whatsoever, in Tacitus or anywhere else, that the Sūrēn supported Mihrdād, or that the Kārin supported Frahād or Tirdād, or for that matter that either family supported Vonones. The notion that these two clans were members of a stable and enduring faction has no basis, then, in any ancient source. In fact, what Tacitus does say about the participation of the Sūrēn and Kārin in these events—namely that one family supported an earlier attempt at regime change, and the other a later one—accords well with the fluid dynamic that is observable in the Near Eastern sources from late antiquity: Iranian families could oppose either the king of kings or their noble peers based not on categorical political commitments, but on shifting and contingent objectives that varied with historical circumstances. Both the Sūrēn and Kārin supported individual Arsacids of Rome, but the idea that they repeatedly supported this group as a matter of principle is unsustainable.

Elite Families of Uncertain Identity

The Sūrēn and Kārin aside, Tacitus's *Annals* mention one other entity involved in Arsacid remission that was clearly a noble family, but one whose name is not known. The prime instigator of the mission to Rome in 35/36 C.E. was one "Sinnaces," or Sēnak in Parthian.⁴⁰ The name is known from Parthian documentary evidence, but its other bearers were not political elites, or at least not obviously so. In the Nisa ostraca, one Sēnak is attested as a deliverer of flour, and in the parchments from

38. The primary sources are Tabari 1.855, trans. Bosworth 1999: 131–32; Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh* = Khaleghi-Motlagh and Khatibi 2007: 53–60; Dinawari, trans. Jackson Bonner 2014: 368. For analysis of the episode and its source tradition, see Pourshariati 2008: 78–81; Rezakhani 2017: 128–34; Jackson Bonner 2020: 141–42; Rubin 2021: 247–48.

39. Olbrycht 2016a: 23–24.

40. Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2. On the Parthian name, see Schmitt 2016: 203 (no. 474).

Avroman, another is named as a witness on the deed of sale for a vineyard.⁴¹ Both references are devoid of further context, but in neither case does the Sēnak in question seem to occupy a status on par with the nobles from the Sūrēn and Kārīn families. Yet Tacitus describes Sēnak as a member of just such a family. The subsequent narrative bears this out, because Sēnak's father Abdagaš (Abdagases in Latin) would later join his son as a supporter of Tirdād against Ardawān. Indeed, Sēnak and Abdagaš offered the Arsacid of Rome extensive financial and military support, and Abdagaš fought alongside him until the ultimate failure of his campaign.⁴²

The membership of these two figures in an elite family is clear, but less can be said about them than scholars have imagined. One conventional view is that Sēnak and Abdagaš were members of the Sūrēn family, with the latter serving as its clan head or patriarch.⁴³ The rationale for this identification, however, is a tenuous and arbitrary reading of *Annals* 6.42.4, where adherents of this view understand the name Sūrēn as a roundabout reference to Abdagaš. But Tacitus makes no explicit connection between the two figures, and if he understood them to be the same person, his text as written would be a strange and unparalleled way to express the idea. Evidence external to Tacitus does not support the identification, either. A man named Abdagases is also mentioned by Josephus as the military commander (*stratopedarchēs*) of Ardawān II, Tirdād's Arsacid opponent.⁴⁴ It is uncertain whether this official should be identified with the figure of the same name in Tacitus, but in any case, there is no sign of affiliation with the Sūrēn.⁴⁵ Josephus mentions an additional Parthian noble of relevance in an episode from the early first century B.C.E. called "Mithridates Sinakes, the *hyparchos* of the Parthians."⁴⁶ Pascal Arnaud has connected the name Sēnak with the northern Mesopotamian city of Sinnaca, known from Strabo and Plutarch; he suggests that the Roman authors perhaps mistook the title of a regional office ("governor of Sinnaca" or a comparable designation) for a personal name.⁴⁷ At any rate, none of these

41. Diakonoff and Livshits 2001: 168–69 (no. 2599, line 12); Avroman 3, line 6 in Hackl et al. 2010: 2.566–67.

42. Tac. *Ann.* 6.36.2, 6.37.3, 6.43.1, 6.43.3, 6.44.4. On the name Abdagaš, see Schmitt 2016: 33 (no. 1); it need not indicate "Semitic origin" or still less Arab heritage, as claimed by Koestermann 1963–68: 2.316.

43. Cunningham 1890: 119; Marquart 1895: 636–37; Herzfeld 1932: 76–77; Karras-Klapproth 1988: 10, 164; Schottky 2006; Gazerani 2016: 24; Olbrycht 2016a: 25; Woodman 2017: 226. More cautious are Bivar 2007: 32; Brunner 2011.

44. Joseph. *AJ* 18.333–34.

45. On the potential identification between Josephus's and Tacitus's Abdagaš, see Bivar 1983: 73–74; Schottky 2006.

46. Joseph. *AJ* 13.384; cf. Shayegan 2011: 203.

47. Arnaud 1986: 139–41; for the toponym Sinnaca, see Strab. 16.1.23; Plut. *Crass.* 29.4–6. Richardson 2014: 452 n.70 conjectures that Sinnaces might be a "third-hand rendering" of the Assyrian name Sennacherib into Latin/Greek.

references justify an identification with the Sūrēn. The membership of Sēnak and Abdagaš in that family is a figment of scholarly imagination.

More probable, but still unlikely, is an affiliation between Tacitus's Abdagaš and an "Indo-Parthian" king of the same name. The pertinent evidence comes from a series of coins attributed by numismatists to a ruling family that has been called Indo-Parthian, Gondopharid, or Pahlava. These are modern labels of convenience, for the dynasty is unattested in literary sources, and what it called itself is unknown.⁴⁸ Two rulers from this line were named Abdagaš. The first reigned in the first century C.E. and minted bilingual coins in Greek and Prakrit on which he variously described himself as the "great king," "the king of kings," and the "nephew of Gondophares," the founder of the dynasty.⁴⁹ Because this ruler shares a name with Tacitus's Abdagaš, several scholars have posited a family linkage or even a direct identification between the two.⁵⁰ The argument rests on their rough chronological correspondence and on the presence of the Indo-Parthians in Sakastan/Seistan, the supposed homeland of the Sūrēn, the family to which Tacitus's Abdagaš supposedly belonged. These are doubtful propositions. Frequently recurring names are common in the onomastic evidence from pre-Islamic Iran. Many other Iranian names are found in the diverse coinages of the Parthian east, including Vonones, Pakōr, and Sasan.⁵¹ The geographic spread of such nomenclature shows the wide remit of Iranian languages and culture, but it cannot be used to establish concrete dynastic relationships among the bearers of these names, especially in view of the obscure political history of the Parthian east. Moreover, it makes little sense to connect Tacitus's Abdagaš, who is clearly at least a notional subordinate of the Arsacid royal house, with an Indo-Parthian ruler who calls himself a "king of kings."⁵² That title was an Arsacid prerogative within the Parthian empire, but not in Sakastan or Gandhāra, the regions where Indo-Parthian dynasts ruled. A direct connection between the Abdagaš of the coins and the one from Tacitus is not impossible, but there is no compelling reason to draw one. Nothing can be concluded about the Sēnak and Abdagaš of the *Annals* on this basis.

The information that is on hand in Tacitus's text does, however, constitute sufficient grounds for ascribing Sēnak and Abdagaš to a family that numbered among the ranks of the nobility. The hereditary nature of their power can be inferred from the bare fact of their father-son relationship: these were not two aristocrats

48. For recent overviews of the dynasty and its coinage, see Mac Dowall 2007: 254–55; Coloru 2015: 190–91; Rezakhani 2017: 34–40; Cribb 2021: 658–60; Morris 2020: 68–70.

49. Alram 1986b: 246–50; Senior 2001: 2.159–65.

50. Cunningham 1890: 119; Marquart 1895: 636 n.6; Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1949: 358 (criticized on this point by Basham 1953: 88); Senior 2001: 1.113; Gazerani 2016: 25; Olbrycht 2016a: 25; cf. Bivar 2007: 32–33.

51. See Coloru 2015: 185–91; Cribb 2021: 657–60 for references.

52. Abdagaš was not alone among Indo-Parthian and Indo-Scythian kings in his use of this title; see the list of occurrences tabulated in Theophilos 2019: 543–44, table 1.

who achieved their high statuses independently, but members of a kinship group that transmitted political and financial assets to successive generations along lines of descent.⁵³ Tacitus is explicit, moreover, that their family was “distinguished,” that its wealth was vast, and that its support was essential to Tirdād’s efforts to claim the Arsacid throne. There is no explicit evidence that Sēnak and Abdagaš were “Parthian”—an ambiguous term in Iranian history to begin with.⁵⁴ The Sūrēn and Kārin families are both called *Pahlaw* (“Parthian”) in Sasanian sources, but since the family name of Sēnak and Abdagaš is not recorded, the application of the label is not secure in their case. It can at least be said, however, that the name Sēnak appears already in the Nisa ostraca, the oldest Parthian documentary texts, and that Tacitus is ignorant of their geographical point of origin, as he is for the Sūrēn and Kārin. But even if the Parthian ethnicity of Sēnak and Abdagaš must remain conjectural, the preeminent status of their family in the imperial nobility is not in doubt.

The allocation of Sēnak and Abdagaš to the ranks of the nobility is also justified by their attraction of intra-aristocratic ire for their perceived transgressions against the ruling dynasty—a dynamic that is also attested for Sasanian late antiquity. During Tirdād’s brief kingship, Abdagaš made enemies of Frahād/Phraates and Hiero, two dignitaries who “governed the greatest prefectures” of the Parthian empire, according to Tacitus.⁵⁵ The names of these administrative districts are not specified, and no further details about their governors are recorded. Frahād/Phraates may be the individual named as an archon of Susa in the epigraphic letter of Ardawān II to that city, but the name is so common in the Arsacid period that this can be no more than a guess.⁵⁶ Yet if Tacitus is vague on their identities, he is clear on their reason for rejecting Tirdād’s kingship. Frahād and Hiero withheld their support from the Arsacid of Rome because they resented the power of Abdagaš, “who was then in charge of the court and the new king.” Hiero bemoans this state of affairs, complaining that “command resided not with an Arsacid, but in the empty name of a man turned unwarlike from foreign softness. True power resided in the house of Abdagaš.”⁵⁷ In other words, a Parthian aristocrat had achieved *de facto* rule by reducing the king of kings to a figurehead—a contravention of the proper order between king and nobility.

Late antiquity offers a close parallel: the aristocratic counterreaction to Abdagaš resembles the one against the Kārin family in the late fifth century C.E. as described in postconquest sources. The key figure is once again the Kārinid Sukhra, who is said to have gained undue influence over the Sasanian king Kavad I. As Ferdowsi puts it in his verses, for instance, “Everyone alike said: [Kavad] has

53. On the lineal transmission of status and wealth among the Iranian nobility, cf. Payne 2016: 524.

54. On the variable meanings of “Parthian” in Arsacid history, see de Jong 2013a: 147–48.

55. Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.4.

56. For the suggestion, see Cumont 1932: 250. For text and translation of the letter, see Hackl et al. 2010: 2.486–90.

57. Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.1, 6.43.3.

nothing except for the title of 'king.' Neither the wealth nor the army of Iran is his. Neither his command nor his opinion count for anything. The whole world has become the slave of Sukhra."⁵⁸ The words resemble the complaint of Hiero in Tacitus. In both cases, one member of the nobility has reached above his station, enfeebling the king of kings and subverting the empire's traditional distribution of power. The noble peers of the transgressor cannot help but be aggrieved by this state of affairs, which they perceive as a slight. Hiero's accusations against Abdagaš were not unique, then, but a recurring feature of aristocratic competition in post-Hellenistic Iran. Members of noble families could use the king to vault to new heights of power and influence, but if they pressed their advantage too far, those heights could become precipitous, and they risked a fall. Nothing further is known of Sēnak and Abdagaš or their family's fortunes, but they would not be the last Iranian aristocrats to incur the displeasure of their coequals through perceived domination of the king of kings.

Client Kings

Some supporters of the Arsacids of Rome belonged to elite families but were not members of the Parthian nobility as it is usually construed. Instead, they were client kings, local rulers of territories under the suzerainty of the Arsacid dynasty. Client kings are normally treated as distinct entities from the great noble families of Parthia, for two reasons. First, client kings can be located in space, while the Parthian aristocracy cannot, as discussed above. Since the distribution of internal evidence for Parthian history skews west, there is a relative abundance of sources for Parthian clients in Mesene, Adiabene, Armenia, and Hatra. Comparable kingdoms presumably existed in the Parthian east, but the complete absence of textual sources for this region (aside from the ambiguous testimony of numismatics) leaves the matter obscure. Second, client kings were not Parthian in ethnicity. To be sure, it is difficult to understand the boundaries of this ethnonym in the Arsacid period, and one may question its application to families like the Sūrēn and Kārin, since it is not clear that they originated from the territory of Parthia as the empire of the Arsacids did.⁵⁹ By the Sasanian period, however, epigraphic sources distinguish between *Pārs ud Pahlaw*—that is, between Persians from southwestern Iran and Parthians from the northeast.⁶⁰ Whereas the ethnonym *Pahlaw* is consistently applied to the Sūrēn and Kārin, it is not used for the kings of Hatra, or Adiabene, or Mesene. Client kings belonged to the Parthian empire, but they were not Parthian in this sense.

Two client kings are named in connection with the campaign of Mihrdād in 49 C.E. The first is Acbarus, whom Tacitus calls "king of the Arabs."⁶¹ This figure

58. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh* = Khaleghi-Motlagh and Khatibi 2007: 54, lines 36–37.

59. Hauser 2006: 306.

60. Shayegan 2022: 217–20.

61. Tac. *Ann.* 12.12.2–3, 12.14.1.

can be identified with Abgar V Ukkāmā (“the Black”), king of the northern Mesopotamian region of Osroene and its capital Edessa.⁶² In this city, Tacitus says, Abgar delayed Mihrdād for many days with sumptuous entertainments, robbing his campaign of energy and momentum and thus dooming the enterprise from the start. Abgar V belonged to a dynasty of the same name that had ruled Edessa for many generations, and though the kingdom would later be annexed by Rome after the campaigns of Lucius Verus, its position on the east side of the Euphrates put it within the Parthian orbit at the time of Mihrdād’s remission. Tacitus’s identification of Abgar as an Arab can be explained by the Roman geographical conception of this area as “Arabia,” and also by local epigraphy from Edessa and nearby Hatra, where titles such as king or governor of *‘rb* (“Arab”) are attested.⁶³ Abgar himself is best known from an apocryphal Christian tradition as an epistolary correspondent of Jesus, who supposedly sent a disciple to cure the Edessan king of a terminal illness.⁶⁴ Abgar’s correspondence with Jesus is also included in the *History* of Moses Khorenats’i, who remembers Abgar as an Armenian king.⁶⁵ These traditions little pertain to the historical Abgar, but they do give a sense of a consequential ruler who left a distinct mark on the sphere of Roman-Parthian high politics in the first century C.E.

The second client king connected to the campaign of Mihrdād was Izates II of Adiabene, another kingdom in northern Mesopotamia to the east of Osroene.⁶⁶ As with Abgar, Tacitus’s portrayal of this ruler is unflattering. At the approach of Mihrdād’s army, Izates feigned support while cherishing a secret preference for the reigning Arsacid Gōdarz II. When the decisive battle loomed, Izates deserted in concert with Abgar.⁶⁷ Bereft of auxiliaries, Mihrdād lost the ensuing fight. Whereas Abgar would become an important figure in Christian literature, Izates is best known for his conversion, along with his mother Helena, to Judaism. This event drew the interest of the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote in detail of the Adiabenean kingdom’s transimperial connections with Judaea as well as its political relationship with the Parthian empire.⁶⁸ Though Roman influence along its western borders increased over the second and third centuries C.E., Adiabene would remain an integrated Parthian dependency for the rest of the Arsacid period, at least to Roman eyes.⁶⁹

Though Abgar and Izates were not ethnic Parthians, the episode shows that client kings of their ilk could still play kingmaker alongside the great noble families

62. Segal 1982; Luther 1999: 451; Ross 2001: 24 (cautiously); Guscini 2009: 165–66.

63. MacDonald et al. 2015: 35–44 with n.75.

64. Ross 2001: 117–38; Mirkovic 2004; Corke-Webster 2017.

65. MKh 2.31–32. See further chapter 1.

66. On the historical geography of Adiabene, see Marciak 2017: 257–62.

67. Tac. *Ann.* 12.13.1, 12.14.1.

68. Joseph. *AJ* 20.17–96; *BJ* 1.6, 2.388, 2.520, 4.567, 5.55, 5.119, 5.147, 5.252, 5.474, 6.355–57.

69. Marciak 2017: 277–78.

like the Sūrēn and Kārin. The support of Abgar and Izates, or more precisely the untimely withdrawal of it, shaped the outcome of Mihrdād's campaign. Tacitus is characteristically acid in his assessment of their desertion, which he attributes to the "fickleness of the people" and sees as an exemplification of the principle that "barbarians like seeking kings from Rome more than keeping them."⁷⁰ But these comments, warmed-over clichés in any event, are dismissive of the delicate balancing act that would have been required by Abgar and Izates as they negotiated an Arsacid dynastic war.⁷¹ Neither client king favored Mihrdād's cause, but their temporary participation in his campaign and withdrawal before the decisive battle allowed them to help Gōdarz without incurring the costs of resisting Mihrdād from the outset. Moreover, the evidence from Josephus further supports the portrait of Izates as a kingmaker: the Adiabenean is said to have helped Ardawān II return to power at an earlier date, after the dethroned king fled to him for support.⁷² In the complex political processes that selected the Arsacid monarch, it was not only the Arsacid dynasty or the Parthian nobility that determined a candidate's success or failure. As the critical withdrawals of Abgar and Izates from Mihrdād's army show, client kings mattered too.

Parthian Administrators

Whereas Abgar and Izates ruled semi-autonomous kingdoms that were integrated piecemeal into the Arsacid empire, other supporters of the Arsacids of Rome presided over territory as agents of Parthia's central administration. Tacitus attests such a post for Tirdād's ally Ornospadēs, who "was governor of the fields which have the name Mesopotamia, since they are encompassed by the famous streams of the Euphrates and Tigris."⁷³ The phrase may correspond to the "general of Mesopotamia" attested for the year 121 C.E. in a Greek papyrus from Arsacid Dura, though the holder of that post ruled Parapotamia as well.⁷⁴ In any event, Tacitus's word choice indicates that Ornospadēs belonged to the formal Arsacid bureaucracy rather than the ranks of client kings.⁷⁵ Parthia was not the only administration whose ladder Ornospadēs had climbed over the course of his career. During a period of exile some thirty years before Tirdād's remission, he had served on the emperor Tiberius's Dalmatian campaign with sufficient distinction to earn Roman citizenship. Many scholars have linked this period of service with the creation of the *ala Parthorum*, a Roman military division composed of "Parthians" both actual and nominal. Ultimately, though, no hard evidence connects Ornospadēs with the

70. Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.1.

71. On the Roman literary topos of barbarian and Parthian fickleness, see Wheeler 1993: 33 n.100; Barclay 2007: 184; Lerouge 2007: 310–13; Gruen 2011: 142; Bernard 2015: 40, 49 n.55.

72. Joseph. *AJ* 20.54–68.

73. Tac. *Ann.* 6.37.3.

74. *P. Dura* 20, line 5, text and translation in Hackl et al. 2010: 2.448–52.

75. Rostovtzeff and Welles 1931: 48; Olbrycht 2016b: 314.

unit.⁷⁶ After reconciling with an unnamed Arsacid king (probably Ardawān II), Ornospadēs returned to Parthia and assumed his Mesopotamian office. His support of Tirdād was consequential, for he arrived in camp with many thousands of cavalry.

Another supporter of Tirdād is not explicitly said to have held government office, but likely did. This was Abdus, whom Tacitus names as Sēnak's competitor for Tirdād's remission.⁷⁷ Tacitus also identifies him as a figure "of removed manhood" (*ademptae virilitatis*)—that is, as a eunuch.⁷⁸ The historian's subsequent quip that "among the barbarians, [castration] is not looked down on, but actually confers power" is a typically disdainful remark for a Greco-Roman author writing on eastern eunuchs, and it would be understandable to dismiss the comment as a routine deployment of an orientalist trope with little historical value.⁷⁹ But a documentary source from Arsacid Dura-Europos does, in fact, attest a eunuch in a Parthian administrative post. Written in Greek, the document is an antichretic loan contract between a local resident and a certain Phraates (Parthian Frahād), whom the text names as a eunuch and an *arkapatēs*.⁸⁰ The latter term is a Greek rendering of Parthian *hargbed*, an administrative title that denoted tax collection or a military command, and perhaps both.⁸¹ The contract records Phraates's disbursal of a considerable four hundred drachms to the loanee, and if the loanee defaulted—a distinct possibility in view of the size of the loan—then the terms consigned him to long-term debt bondage or even permanent enslavement to Phraates.⁸² What the document shows, then, is a high-ranking Parthian eunuch leveraging his administrative position and financial resources for personal gain. It is no giant leap from a figure like Phraates to the Abdus of Tacitus's *Annals*: a eunuch with enough institutional and individual power to intervene in Arsacid dynastic politics.

Were Ornospadēs and Abdus members of nonroyal elite families, or were they of humbler extraction? Tacitus is silent on the issue, and no other evidence permits a conclusive answer. Ornospadēs may well have come from a kinship group like

76. Wheeler 2016: 193 with n.153 for earlier literature.

77. Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2, 6.32.2. Ramelli 2006: 91–92 thinks that Tacitus's Sinnaces and Abdus are the same figures mentioned at the court of Abgar V, the Edessan king, in the *Teaching of Addai*, a Syriac text from the fourth or fifth century C.E., under the names "Abdu, son of Abdu" and "Senaq, son of Avida" (trans. Howard 1981: 11, 15, 19, 35, 67, 81). This pair, Ramelli continues, later entered Christian hagiography as the martyrs Abdos and Semnes.

78. Martin 2001: 168; Woodman 2017: 226.

79. On the treatment of eastern eunuchs in Greco-Roman literature, see Hall 1989: 157–59; Bardel 2002; Llewellyn-Jones 2002; Lenfant 2021.

80. *P. Dura* 20, line 4; text and translation in Hackl et al. 2010: 2.448–52. The translation of *arkapatēs* is from Wiesehöfer 2020: 485.

81. More recent discussions favor the translation "tax chief" or similar: Gnoli 2007: 96–113; Herman 2012: 82–92; Wiesehöfer 2020: 485. See also Frye 1962: 353; Chaumont 1986; Shayegan 2003a.

82. Taasob 2022: 151–52.

those of the Sūrēn and Kārin, especially since such families are known to have supplied governmental office holders during the Sasanian period.⁸³ But he is attested nowhere else, so the idea can be no more than conjecture. Abdus's identification as a eunuch might seem to preclude his belonging to an elite family, but some later evidence leaves the possibility open. Eunuchs were a mainstay of court administration in ancient Near Eastern empires long before the Parthians, and some evidence suggests that they were employed in this capacity precisely because of their inability to propagate family lines of their own.⁸⁴ In many cases, moreover, eunuchs came from conquered peoples rather than imperial elites. Literary references, for instance, show Achaemenid and Sasanian Persians receiving eunuchs from provincial populations as tribute or castrating the children of military opponents.⁸⁵ It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the name of Phraates in the Dura papyrus is not accompanied by a patronymic, whereas the name of his superior is.⁸⁶ And yet there are also indications in late antique evidence that eunuchs could have noble heritage. Of the two eunuchs named in the Shapur inscription from Naqsh-e Rostam, one is identified by a patronymic, suggesting a noteworthy lineage.⁸⁷ For Arsacid Armenia, historiographical sources attest an Arsacid administrative post called *mardpet* that involved the management of the treasuries. The holder of the office was by rule a eunuch who received the appellation of "Father" along with the post, and according to Movses Khorenats'i, he was always taken from the same "honorable and princely family."⁸⁸ Attested also in the Sasanian empire, the title is Iranian in origin, and the institution might be, too.⁸⁹ None of this evidence directly bears upon Tacitus's Abdus, of course, but it does allow for the possibility of his membership in a noble family. If an aristocratic origin is probable in Ornospadēs's case, it is imaginable in his.

Parthians of Uncertain Status

In contrast to the figures allocated above to groups 1–4, one supporter of Mihrdād is a cipher whose station in Parthian society is impossible to discern. After his defeat at the hands of Gōdarz, Mihrdād entrusted himself to a certain Parraces,

83. See above, n.30.

84. See, e.g., SAA 9 no. 7, lines 3–8, trans. Parpola 1997: 38, where a distinction is made between "the sons of the bearded courtiers and the successors of the eunuchs." On eunuchs in the pre-Hellenistic Near East, see further Ambos 2009; Lemos 2011: 49–54; Pirngruber 2011: 287–308.

85. Achaemenid cases: Hdt. 3.92.1 (cf. 3.97), 6.9.4, 6.32 with Scott 2005: 156. A Sasanian case: PB 4.58, trans. Garsoïan 1989: 178.

86. His superior was Manesos, who is *inter alia* the *strategos* of Mesopotamia in *P. Dura* 20.

87. ŠKZ 50. On Sasanian eunuchs, see further Kolesnikov 2012.

88. MKh 2.7, 3.15, trans. Thomson 1978: 139, 269; PB 3.17–18, 5.7, trans. Garsoïan 1989: 92, 198; Agathangelos 795, trans. Thomson 1976: 335; GhP 39, trans. Bedrosian 2021: 1.219.

89. On the word's etymology and its attestation on a Sasanian seal, see Livshits and Xurshudjan 1989. On the "Iranian and probably Parthian origin" of the office, see Chaumont 2020.

who betrayed him to the enemy.⁹⁰ The only scrap of information on this Parraces that Tacitus transmits is the phrase *paternus cliens*: he was a “client” of Mihrdād’s father, Vonones, the Arsacid of Rome from an earlier generation. What social relationship is this phrase meant to represent, and when and where did it develop? At face value, it might indicate that Vonones met Parraces in Rome, where they entered into a patron-client relationship on the Roman model that they knew from their time in the city. Alternately, Parraces could have journeyed from Parthia to Rome with Vonones when the latter’s residence there began, and Tacitus used *cliens* to translate a preexisting dependent status like the Greek *pelatēs* or Parthian *bandag*.⁹¹ Then again, perhaps Parraces became Vonones’s “client,” however understood, only after the Arsacid of Rome returned to Parthia and began his brief kingship there.⁹² Each of these scenarios is possible, but none is provable. Onomastics are no further help. The Parthian name Pārag is attested on an ostrakon from Dura-Europos, but the document is a bare receipt, and the relationship of this Parthian name to the Parraces of Tacitus’s Latin is debatable.⁹³ Parraces’s place in the Parthian empire, and his reasons for supporting Mihrdād at first and betraying him later, remain obscure.

In sum, from the named accessories of the Arsacids of Rome who were remitted to Parthia, two were from known families of the Parthian nobility (the Sūrēn and the Kārin); two belonged to a powerful family whose name is not recorded (Abdagaš and Sēnak); two were client kings (Abgar and Izates); two held Parthian governmental posts but are of uncertain family background (Ornospades and Abdus); and one is of uncertain background altogether (Parraces).

The feature shared most consistently among these supporters is their membership in elite families. The Sūrēn and Kārin clans are the best-known examples, since they would endure as powerful political units for many centuries, long outlasting the tenure of the Arsacid dynasty in Mesopotamia and Iran. No such longevity is demonstrable in the case of Abdagaš and Sēnak, but the station of their family seems comparable. Abgar and Izates came from groups that were dynasties in their own right, even if their autonomy was limited under Arsacid suzerainty. Nonhereditary elites no doubt figured in these coalitions, as well. No family affiliation can be shown for the Parthian office holders Ornospades or Abdus, and it seems reasonable to assume that at least some such administrators came from nonelite backgrounds. But a critical mass of support for Arsacid remission, from the petitioning of the Roman emperor to the fielding of military forces, came from political groups bound together by kinship.

90. Tac. *Ann.* 12.14.3. On “clients” among the Parthians, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 13.37.1.

91. On *cliens* for *pelatēs* see Olbrycht 2003: 85 n.93, though his contention that Parraces was a Parthian noble is without explicit support in Tacitus’s text. On *bandag*, see Colditz 2000: 108–65. Cf. Benario 1983: 156: “Parraces was probably a freedman.”

92. Suggested by Wheeler 2016: 204 n.237.

93. Harmatta 1958: 111 (no. 2), 122–23; cf. Justi 1895: 242; Bivar 1983: 78 n.2; Schmitt 2016: 148–49.

The familial organization of these groups calls for the contextualization of Arsacid remission within the framework of political fosterage. Each of the groups identified in the breakdown above can be shown to have produced cliental fosterers for the dynasty that supplied Iran's king of kings. For noble families, the most pertinent case is the fosterage of Peroz by Rāham, a member of the powerful Mihrān family that was an aristocratic peer (and sometimes rival) of the Sūrēn and Kārin. The Farragān and Kadugān were also noble fosterers, as were the Mamikonians under the Armenian Arsacids. For the client kings, Abgar and Izates can be paralleled by Monzer, the Arab ruler under Sasanian suzerainty who fostered Bahram Gur. And while Ornospadēs and Abdus were not demonstrably members of an elite family, their group of governmental officials performed cliental fosterage, as well. Dracontis's foster-father Anagranēs is known only as an office holder with the title of *trophēus* and *epitropos*, for example, and the same is true for Abdšalmā, the fosterer of the Hatrene king Sanatruq.⁹⁴ In a word, the Parthian supporters of the Arsacids of Rome came from political and social groups that are elsewhere attested as the fosterers of Arsacid and Sasanian kings.

To a Parthian ruling class with a shared experience of cliental fosterage, the Roman emperor's custody of Arsacid children would have presented a challenge, but also an opportunity. Cliental fosterage conferred upon the raisers of royal children both obligation and privileges. Obligation came from the subordinate duty of the role, but the privileges included the honor of the office, networking opportunities with a potential future king, and possession of a dynastic replacement that could be used to effect regime change, should circumstances require. These privileges would have eroded when the emperor became the Arsacid king's chief *dāyag*, since a role ordinarily delegated to Parthians would now be played by a Roman. Deprivation of royal children gave nobles less control over dynastic politics, and it alienated them from the generation of Arsacids that would one day govern the empire. Yet the situation presented an opportunity, as well. Parthian elites could appeal to the emperor as a peer, for he was a ruler who interfaced with the Arsacid dynasty through fosterage, just as they themselves did. The emperor's status as pro-parent could create a community of interest between Rome and the Parthian aristocracy. After all, both sides were now invested in the Arsacid family and the way it managed its dynastic politics. For the Parthian elite, Arsacid submission had been a setback, but contact and collaboration with the emperor held out the possibility of redress. Contact was made, and collaboration pursued.

Against this background, the history of Arsacid remission can be read differently from the accusations of "intervention" or "interference" that are so common in the scholarly literature. From the perspective of a Parthian noble, the Roman emperor would have acted in Parthian domestic politics not as a foreign infiltrator, but as a legitimate participant. His custody of Arsacid children integrated him into

94. On these figures, see chapter 1.

a fosterage system that regulated the relationship between king and aristocracy in Parthian Iran, giving each a stake in the maintenance of the other. The emperor's release of his Arsacid wards was not an imposition on Parthian affairs, but a response to the invitation to take part in them. To be sure, these invitations were never extended by the Parthian elite as a whole: the Iranian aristocracy was not a monolith, and nobles counterbalanced each other no less than they did the king of kings. For disaffected Parthian aristocrats, however, Rome represented a potential ally and remedy against the disorder that prevailed between the royal house and their own. When the emperor acceded to the requests of the Parthian ambassadors who reached his court, he accepted—to Parthian eyes—his role as coadjutant of the nobility. He became a force in Parthian domestic politics, not on them.

TACITUS AND ROMAN-PARTHIAN MISUNDERSTANDING

This reconstruction of the Parthian interests at play in Arsacid remission opens up fresh perspectives on critical passages in Tacitus, who is the only ancient source to report in detail on the aristocratic missions to Rome (*Annals* 6.31–32 and 12.10–11). Commentary on these audience scenes has been the domain of scholars of Latin literature with primary interests in Tacitean historiography.⁹⁵ Their approaches have produced fuller understandings of the passages, but few have investigated how the sentiments that Tacitus attributes to the Parthian aristocracy might actually reflect the values, aspirations, and outreach of that group to a Roman interlocutor. It is productive to note, for example, that “the treacherous subordinates Abdus and Sinnaces must recall Sejanus,” the latter of whom betrayed Tiberius as the former did Ardawān.⁹⁶ But what about Abdus and Sēnak as agents in their own right? What do their envoys argue, and what do those arguments show about nonroyal Parthian elites? Consideration of these questions can benefit students of Tacitean historiography no less than Parthian historians, since they ask the reader to investigate how Tacitus might have encountered, understood, and represented the rhetoric of the Parthian aristocracy.

Such an approach to the audience scenes allows for Tacitus's text to be read as a reflection of pragmatic misunderstanding between the Roman emperor and the Parthian aristocracy. The statements of the Parthian envoys at *Annals* 6.31–32 and 12.10–11 are in both cases followed by a Roman response that ignores, misconstrues, or talks past the Parthian interlocutor. The Roman reactions are those of the emperors Tiberius and Claudius, who are the immediate targets of the Parthian petitions. But Tacitus, too, was a Roman, and his later overlay is inseparable from

95. Generally, Koestermann 1963–68; Keitel 1978; Gowing 1990; Woodman 2017: 226–28. See further below.

96. Quotation from Ash 1999: 114 n.4, citing parallels drawn by McCulloch 1984: 59–61.

the earlier Julio-Claudian scene. In other words, it is impossible to say whether Tiberius and Claudius really misunderstood their Parthian interlocutors, or Tacitus makes them misunderstand. In either case, though, there is a divergence in his text between the rhetoric of Parthian appeals and the logic of Roman response. That divergence can be interpreted as a consequence of misunderstanding.

Crucial to the evidentiary basis for this reading is the setting of the audience scenes at Rome rather than in the Parthian empire. In the literature, there is a reasonable tendency to speak of Tacitus's "Parthian digressions" as discrete narrative sections of uniform historicity. But a distinction must be made between audiences with Parthians at Rome and the scenes set in Parthia unattended by Roman observers. Tacitus had many potential sources for the former, but virtually none for the latter.⁹⁷ In keeping with the conventions of Roman historiography, he does not cite specific authorities for the audience scenes, and it might not be useful even if he did; only in exceptional cases does the survival of documentary material permit an evaluation of Tacitus's fidelity to his sources.⁹⁸ But information about these encounters would have been available to a diligent and careful historian, and by the standards of ancient historiography Tacitus was certainly that. The arguments that he attributes to Parthians should therefore be surveyed for sentiments that could plausibly have belonged to the Parthian elite, the political and social class whose interests and commitments have been outlined above.

Such a survey yields three key features of Tacitus's audience scenes that can be better explained and contextualized against the backdrop of political fosterage. The first is the complaint of dynastic assassination that appears in both the audience scenes. During the embassy that led to Tirdād's remission, Tacitus explains that Sēnak, Abdus, and their affiliates "couldn't find anyone of the Arsacid family to install on the throne, since most had been killed by Ardawān, or had not yet grown up."⁹⁹ In the following episode, the Parthian ambassadors speak before Claudius and the Senate about the dynastic assassinations of Gōdarz, lamenting that "already his brothers, kin, and even distant relatives had been executed in his massacres; to these, pregnant women and little children were being added."¹⁰⁰ An element common to both scenes, then, is the Parthian elite's frustration with intra-Arsacid violence: the reigning king is systematically eliminating his family members as insurance against an aristocratic coup.

97. On the possible sources for 6.31–32 and 12.10–11, see Koestermann 1963–68: 3.125; Devillers 2003: 17, 60; Dąbrowa 2017: 179; Nabel 2020: 176, 181 (on Ardawān's communication with Tiberius); Olbrycht 2021d. For the Parthian scenes, see the discussion in chapter 5.

98. Exceptional cases: the *SCPP* can be compared to passages from *Ann.* 2 and 3, on which see Barnes 1998; Talbert 1999. The Lyons Tablet (*CIL* 13.1668) can be read against *Ann.* 11.23–25.1, on which see Malloch 2013: 338–41; Malloch 2020: 51–61.

99. Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2.

100. Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.1.

The historiographers have read these complaints as self-reflexive commentary on Rome's imperial disorders, but they should also be understood as an expression of real dysfunction between the Arsacid dynasty and the Parthian aristocracy. For Elizabeth Keitel, the second passage foreshadows the brutal turns that Julio-Claudian dynastic politics will take under Claudius and Nero with the murders of Lucius Silanus, Domitia Lepida, Claudius himself, Britannicus, Agrippina, Octavia, and the pregnant Poppaea.¹⁰¹ J. N. Keddie adduces an internal parallel within the *Annals*: the Germanic Cherusci appeal to Claudius for a king with a similar justification, which suggests that "Tacitus had a common approach or technique in treating these fratricidal kingdoms."¹⁰² The repetition of the element may also underline the cyclical pattern of "hostage" remissions in the *Annals*—scenes that follow a predictable trajectory toward unhappy conclusions, as Alan Gowing and Joel Allen have shown.¹⁰³ These studies amply demonstrate that Tacitus on Parthia is also Tacitus on Rome. The grim irony of the aristocracy's complaint is that it could apply to the court of Claudius no less than the court of Gōdarz.

But the speakers' statement also tracks as an authentic Parthian attempt to appeal to the Roman emperor as a fellow fosterer. Two phrases in the quotations above enjoin consideration of the aristocracy's values, especially its investment in fosterage. First, the reference of Sēnak and Abdus's messengers to Arsacids who "had not yet grown up" may indicate that some princes were in aristocratic custody at the time of the embassy as part of ongoing fosterage arrangements. Second, the outrage at Gōdarz's assassination of "pregnant women and little children" stems not only from the monstrous nature of the crime in its own right, but from the violent demolition of the fosterage system: the elimination of Arsacid children and even the mothers who birth them has deprived the nobility of fosterage opportunities and corrupted a key mechanism of mediation between their families and the ruling dynasty. In both cases, the Roman emperor is not expected to care about Arsacid familicide simply as a matter of principle. The speakers appeal to him as someone who has a vested interest in the rearing of Arsacid children, because he has done so himself. They expect the commiseration and aid of a colleague in fosterage.

The second section of Tacitus that deserves consideration as authentic Parthian rhetoric comes as the envoys of Sēnak and Abdus conclude their remarks before Tiberius. After they bemoan the purges of Ardawān, the speakers once again appeal to the emperor as a stakeholder in the Arsacid family with the following sentence: "Only a name and an initiator were needed for the family of Arsaces to be seen on the shore of the Euphrates through the will of Caesar."¹⁰⁴ The Latin text

101. Keitel 1978: 466.

102. Keddie 1975: 52 n.5.

103. Gowing 1990: 322; Allen 2006: 224–25; cf. Woodman 2017: 224.

104. Tac. *Ann.* 6.31.2

is not entirely secure here, and editors have proposed emendations that construe the phrase “through the will of Caesar” in different ways.¹⁰⁵ But the general thrust of the sentence is clear: if the emperor wants to see regime change in the Parthian empire, he need only release one of his Arsacid wards, and the senders of the envoys will see to his installation on the throne.

Tacitus’s authorial hand is once again detectable in this Parthian utterance. The speakers’ stated desire for a “name” (*nomen*)—that is, the name of an Arsacid of Rome who will be remitted to Parthian territory—is later echoed in the speech of Hiero, who will complain to Ardawān that Tirdād’s kingship is nothing but an “empty name” (*nomen*) devoid of true legitimacy and power.¹⁰⁶ The reappearance of the word is significant, for Hiero’s appeal to Ardawān will bring about the downfall of Tirdād and thus the ultimate failure of the Parthian mission to Tiberius. The initial statement of the Parthian envoys during the audience scene, then, is deployed to create internal correspondence within Tacitus’s text. The repetition of *nomen* creates a conceptual link between the two passages and prompts the reader to reflect on their relationship. This rhetorical patterning is Tacitus’s handiwork. It cannot be attributed to the original utterance of the Parthian characters he uses to craft the parallel.

But the sentence in question also warrants assessment as a real feature of interelite discourse between the Roman emperor and the Parthian nobility. Tacitus could have used any number of words or phrases to link the embassy for Tirdād with the account of his downfall just a few chapters later, and the repetition of *nomen* in itself does not explain the substance of the Parthian appeal. Why should the emperor be swayed by the prospect of installing the Arsacid family across the Euphrates river? Wasn’t Ardawān an Arsacid himself, as Tacitus attests in an earlier book?¹⁰⁷ Why is an appeal to Arsacid sovereignty and legitimacy expected to persuade the Roman emperor?

Once again, this feature of the audience scene is best explained as a Parthian aristocratic appeal to a fellow fosterer with a stake in upholding the Arsacid dynasty. The emperor is expected to agree with the speakers’ arguments because his custody of Arsacid dynasts gives him a stake in the family’s position at the head of the Parthian empire. Moreover, as a foster-father with peers among the Parthian nobility, the emperor is asked to recognize that the reigning Arsacid king has overstepped his bounds and abused his position. In his insolent treatment of Parthian elites and wanton execution of his family members, Ardawān has upset the balance between king and nobility and invited a counterreaction to his injurious reign.

105. My translation follows the text and commentary of Woodman 2017: 35 (*nomine tantum et auctore opus, ut sponte Caesaris [ut] genus Arsacis ripam apud Euphratis cerneretur*), 227 (critical remarks on the repetition of *ut*).

106. Tac. *Ann.* 6.43.3; see above.

107. Tac. *Ann.* 2.3.1.

The envoys are thus invoking what Rubin calls the “noble’s right of rebellion” in his discussion of Sasanian history: a king who acts in an immoral fashion can neither expect nor compel obedience from the empire’s nonroyal elites, who are within their rights to depose him if such behavior persists.¹⁰⁸ Yet there are restrictions on the nobility’s behavior, too, because the iniquity of any one ruling king does not invalidate the right of his dynasty to hold the kingship. A coup d’état against one dynast may be justified, but it carries with it the obligation of installing another. When the Parthian ambassadors speak of Ardawān’s illegitimacy while calling for Arsacid restoration, then, they are not contradicting themselves or resorting to empty rhetoric. They are initiating the emperor into an Iranian discourse of legitimate rebellion. The emperor’s contribution to this discourse is right and proper, because as a fosterer of Arsacids he, too, may participate in the maintenance of the ruling family that is at once the nobility’s prerogative and its obligation.

That discourse had many participants, however, and Tacitus’s text can only reflect the views of the factions that initiated contact with the emperor. The claims and counterclaims of Arsacid legitimacy that appear in the *Annals* are not definitive pronouncements from *the* Parthian nobility about who was a proper Arsacid and who was not. They are refracted bits of propaganda generated by individual elites who fought in shifting and unstable coalitions to shape dynastic politics as they pleased. The noble appeal to Tiberius to restore the Arsacid family is no objective sign that the dynasty has been disempowered in Parthia; rather, it is one faction’s tendentious attempt to delegitimize the reign of a king they disliked. Their rhetoric makes another appearance in Tacitus’s narrative when Tirdād, now in Parthian territory, enters Seleucia on the Tigris. According to Tacitus, Tirdād enjoyed a favorable reception by the people of the city, who as a show of support “poured out insults against Ardawān, who was an Arsacid [only] on his mother’s side, and otherwise lowborn.”¹⁰⁹ That final phrase could be evidence of a categorical Parthian attitude that maternal Arsacid lineage was somehow inferior to paternity, but no external sources corroborate that notion. Instead, it is better to understand the insult as an ad hoc, opportunistic effort to divest the reigning king of Arsacid legitimacy and to bolster the claim of his rival. Such discourse was part of the customary scrum of dynastic politics in Parthian and Sasanian Iran, a setting where royal dynasts and aristocratic clans fought over the kingship in factions of diverse and unstable membership.

Yet if the envoys’ speech before Tiberius appealed to the values of a Parthian aristocrat, Tacitus’s account reveals a stark disjuncture between the couching of the request and the logic of its acceptance. Tiberius granted what the Parthians asked, but not for the reasons they supplied. When the emperor released his Arsacids, Tacitus writes, he was “keeping to his established aims of managing external affairs

108. Rubin 2021: 263, 268–69; see above.

109. Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.3.

with strategy and cunning, and avoiding war.”¹¹⁰ The emperor, it emerges, ascribes the Parthian empire to the realm of “external affairs,” and he is remitting Arsacids to manage this realm without resorting to military force. In order to counter Ardawān’s invasion of Armenia, he will incite dynastic warfare in the Parthian heartland, undercutting the king’s base of power and necessitating his withdrawal from Armenia. So while the Parthian envoys orient their case around the turpitude of Ardawān’s purges and the need for Arsacid restoration, the Roman emperor’s true motive stems from different concerns, and indeed from an altogether different conception of the Roman-Parthian relationship. The rhetoric of the Parthian envoys initiates and integrates the emperor into Arsacid domestic politics, acknowledging his rightful role there by virtue of his foster-fatherhood. The Roman response conceives of Parthia as a discrete and foreign entity that the emperor can throw into chaos with the Arsacid instruments at his disposal. The dissonance between these two positions and the short, misleadingly simple sentence that connects them—“this was Tiberius’s desire”—invites the reader to consider the discrepancy between the Parthian request and the Roman motive for granting it.

It is an open question whether the statist logic of the Roman response belonged to Tiberius or to Tacitus, but both possibilities tend toward the same conclusion: the Roman view diverged from the Parthian one, and the text as written is an exhibition of the misunderstanding between them. There is a case to be made that Tacitus’s interpretation of Tiberius dominates the scene. The pragmatic preference of stragem to war is consistent with the emperor’s depiction elsewhere in the *Annals*, and this characterization reappears in other Tacitean works as well.¹¹¹ But many historians would agree that circumspection and caution were real features of Tiberius’s foreign policy, so his Tacitean portrait may be a faithful one.¹¹² In either case, Tacitus’s text bears witness to Roman incomprehension of the Parthian view. The request of the Parthian envoys is granted, but the arguments they make in its favor are ignored. The Roman justification for remission comes from strategic decisions about “foreign affairs,” in which the Parthian empire is treated as distinct and separable from the Roman one. The Parthians appeal to the emperor as a foster-father, but the emperor acts as a head of state. The interlocutors talk, but they do not hear each other.

One piece of sigillographic evidence adds texture to the question of how Tiberius’s negotiations with the Parthian aristocracy played out, though it supports no firm conclusions on the topic. Supposedly found in the vicinity of ancient Elam, the object is a gem that depicts a youthful Tiberius crowned with a myrtle wreath (figure 9). His image is consistent with Julio-Claudian portraiture in various media, and the gem was presumably manufactured in the Roman empire.

110. Tac. *Ann.* 6.32.1.

111. Koestermann 1963–68: 2.317 and Woodman 2017: 228 adduce the parallels of *Ann.* 2.26.3, 2.43.1, 2.64.1–2; see also *Ann.* 1.11.4 and *Agr.* 13.3 with the discussion in Ober 1982: 311–13.

112. Baar 1990: 177–78; Levick 1999: 111–13; Shotter 2004: 56.



FIGURE 9. Chalcedony intaglio with a portrait of the Roman emperor Tiberius and a later Middle Persian inscription. Photo credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques, Seyrig.1973.1.516.

But while the object's life began in the Roman empire, it did not end there, for encircling the emperor's portrait is a Middle Persian inscription. The text is datable to the third or fourth centuries C.E. on paleographic grounds. It reads: "Mihrag, son of Frahād [or: member of the Frahād family], behold the radiant paradise."¹¹³ In late antiquity, this portrait of a Julio-Claudian emperor had found new purchase as a seal for a Sasanian dignitary.

There are a thousand stories that could be told about this Roman object and its arrival in Iranian territory, but one intriguing suggestion by M. Rahim Shayegan posits a connection to the Arsacids of Rome. Shayegan notes that Frahād is a common Parthian name and, perhaps not coincidentally, the name of one of the Arsacids whom Tiberius remitted to Parthian territory. He suggests that the gem was a parting gift from the emperor to Frahād or Tirdād, who passed it down to their descendants. The latest of these was Mihrag, who added the inscription in late antiquity.¹¹⁴ While any number of transmission paths may have brought this object to Iran at various points in time, the situation of the seal in the historical context of Tirdād's remission is compelling. It offers a convincing explanation for an Iranian nobleman's possession of Tiberius's portrait, even if alternate possibilities should also be entertained.

Two additional considerations, however, may be appended to Shayegan's discussion. The first is that the name Frahād is attested not just in the Arsacid family, but among the Parthian nobility as well. The gem could have been gifted to an Arsacid of Rome, but also to one of the Parthian aristocrats whose representatives petitioned Tiberius. Second, the transimperial life of the gem suggests an object whose handlers understood it in different ways. On the Roman side, Tiberius was part of a dynasty well known for deploying the "power of images" in its ruling program.¹¹⁵ Where the emperor's image went, so too did Julio-Claudian claims to dominance and supremacy. In Iran, however, at least by the Sasanian period, the object is unlikely to have broadcast such a message. Instead, the gem became a seal that represented a Sasanian potentate and exhorted its Middle Persian readers to pursue a Zoroastrian vision of heaven (*wahišt*). In a sense, then, the object is analogous to the Arsacids of Rome themselves: it traversed two empires, but it was understood differently in each one, and it was used to articulate divergent claims to power in its Roman and Iranian iterations. The gem outlived the Arsacids of Rome, but its life shared some features with theirs.

The third section in Tacitus that reflects Parthian aristocratic concerns comes from the speech of the envoys before Claudius and the Senate in their bid to secure Mihrdād's release. After rehearsing the dynastic assassinations and contemptible

113. *Mihrag ī Frahādān wēn wahišt ī rōšn*; text and translation after Shayegan 2022: 225; see also Spier et al. 2022: 348 (no. 194).

114. Shayegan 2022: 223–29.

115. Zanker 1988.

misconduct of Gōdarz, the Parthians continue with additional reasons for the Romans to grant their request:¹¹⁶

Veterem sibi ac publice coeptam nobiscum amicitiam, et 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.

They had an old and publicly initiated friendship with us, and help should be given to allies who were coequals in strength but yielded out of respect. The reason that it was the children of kings who were given as hostages was that, if they tired of their domestic rule, they could resort to the emperor and the senators, from whom a king could be obtained who was better for his habituation to their customs.

The envoys appeal to an old friendship (*amicitia*) between the Parthian aristocrats they represent and the Romans in the audience. Despite their status as peers of the emperor and senators, they showed respect, and deserved reciprocal aid from the Romans on that basis. The emperor's remission of an Arsacid replacement for Gōdarz was justified—required, even—by the logic of the “hostage” system: if the nobility decided to reject a reigning king, they had the right to search for a better Arsacid among the princes in fosterage. Thanks to Gōdarz's purges, the remaining candidates were in Roman custody; hence the appeal.

Scholarly discussions of this section read it as a Tacitean criticism of Roman imperialism through a Parthian mouthpiece. The envoys, on this view, are ventriloquist dummies whose actual voice comes from the historian manipulating them. Genuine Parthian sentiments, whatever they might be, are not on offer. The interpretation has much to commend it, for the signs of Tacitus's authorial hand are all over the passage. The theme of foreign adaptation to Roman mores is especially Tacitean. As the next chapter will discuss, the author's digressions on the return of Rome's “hostages” to their homelands often point to acculturation as an explanation for their failure. The “habituation to [Roman] customs” turns out to be a negative development, since the decadence and chicanery of Roman imperial culture leaves foreign dynastic children ill-equipped to succeed in their countries of origin.¹¹⁷ Like the audience scene before Tiberius, moreover, this passage shows an internal correspondence with a later section in which the Arsacid of Rome meets his end: Claudius's appeal to “clemency” in his response to the Parthian envoys will there be parodied by Gōdarz, who leaves a mutilated Mihrdād alive

116. Tac. *Ann.* 12.10.2. My translation follows the text of Heubner 1994: 240; for discussion of the textual problem with *liberos obsides*, see Koestermann 1963–68: 3.124.

117. For this reading of the passage, see Koestermann 1963–68: 3.124; Keitel 1978: 466; Gowing 1990: 329; Braund 2015: 129. An exception is Matthews 1989a: 38, where the statement is taken as authentic, but without substantive discussion of the Parthian view. On appropriation of barbarian voices in Roman historiography, see Adler 2011, esp. 119–39 on Tacitus. On the supposed acculturation of the Arsacids of Rome, see chapter 5.

“as a sign of his own clemency.”¹¹⁸ The historiographical reading is productive and indispensable, then, illuminating key programmatic features in Tacitus’s work.

Yet Tacitus’s instrumentalization of the envoys need not mean that their words are divorced from the Parthian viewpoint, and their utterance can also be read as an authentic expression of fosterage values. This interpretation is occasioned by the envoys’ representation not of the Arsacid empire as a whole, but of specific Parthian elites, as discussed above. The second phrase in the section—“help should be given to allies who were coequals in strength but yielded out of respect”—is always construed as a statement of equality between the Roman and Parthian *states*.¹¹⁹ But the “allies” (*socii*) in question can simply refer to the Parthian elites who sought Mihrdād; after all, it was precisely such a group that had sent the envoys. The parity, in other words, is not between Rome and Parthia as empires, but between the emperor and the heads of Parthia’s aristocratic families. These nobles are “coequals in strength” (*virium aemulis*) with the emperor because they, too, preside over large armies—the Sūrēn’s defeat of the Romans at the Battle of Carrhae had furnished ample evidence of that—and because they, too, foster Arsacid children. In need of a viable contender for the throne, they have deferred to the fosterer in whose custody the eligible princes remained. This is no subordination of the Parthian empire to the Roman one; rather, it is an integration of the emperor into the Parthian aristocracy.

The final sentence from the quotation has always been understood as Tacitean ventriloquism rather than a genuine Parthian statement: “the reason that it was the children of kings who were given as hostages was that, if they [i.e., the Parthian nobles] tired of their domestic rule, they could resort to the emperor and the senators, from whom a king could be obtained who was better for his habituation to their [Roman] customs.” The contentious issue of Arsacid acculturation will be addressed in the next chapter. For now, the question is whether any Iranian evidence parallels the sentiment expressed here. Could the Parthian aristocracy have regarded adaptation to the customs and mores of the fosterer as not just a by-product but an objective of fosterage?

The answer is a qualified yes. A comparable scene is presented in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* in the section on Bahram Gur, a fifth century C.E. Sasanian king whose life became the subject of an elaborate romantic tradition. As discussed in chapter 1, Bahram’s father, Yazdgird I, is remembered in Ferdowsi’s epic as a malicious tyrant, disrespectful of political and religious elites alike. When his son Bahram is born, it is precisely those elites who take counsel about how the boy should be raised. They proceed from the premise that “if this new child did not inherit his father’s temperament, he would be a just king. But if he did have

118. Tac. *Ann.* 12.11.2, 12.14.3; on the repetition of *clementia*, see Koestermann 1963–68: 3.133.

119. Furneaux 1907: 2.73 n.3; Timpe 1962: 128 n.153; Ziegler 1964: 65; Dąbrowa 2017: 178–79; Doležal 2017: 116.

his father's temperament, then all the land would be thrown into upheaval."¹²⁰ Since Yazdgird's moral character is deficient, in other words, Bahram must not be allowed to spend his formative years near his father's corrupting influence. A foster-father who is noble, just, and humane is thus a necessity not just for Bahram's sake, but for Iran's, too. The character and customs of the *dāyag*, the scene shows, are crucial for the eventual success of the young dynast and for the prosperity of the realm. In the judgment of the Iranian elite, the idea that the fosterer should mold the disposition and habits of the prince is not empty rhetoric, but rather an essential feature of the arrangement.

The statement of the Parthian envoys before Claudius can be read as an expression of this principle, as well. Gōdarz was not the natal father of Mihrdād, but he was the reigning Arsacid king. He therefore occupied a patriarchal position atop Parthia's ruling family and indeed the empire as a whole. The king's savage behavior and moral transgressions parallel the misconduct attributed to Yazdgird in the postconquest authors, and Tacitus shows that the Parthian envoys rehearsed these crimes in detail at the Senate meeting. The upbringing of Mihrdād in Rome—away from Gōdarz and the toxic environment his reign had created—was accordingly not a deficiency to be excused, but an advantage to be utilized. From the Parthian elite's point of view, fosterage could shield the younger generation from the iniquities of the older one. It is in this spirit that the envoys invoke Mihrdād's acculturation as a moral good.

What the Romans heard in this invocation is another matter, and Tacitus once again gives the reader cause to see misunderstanding at play in the exchange. When the envoys express their wish for an Arsacid who is "better for his habituation to their customs," their point, on the Ferdowsi model, is that the fosterer's ways are superior to those of the reigning king. More specifically, they mean that Claudius is a better Arsacid-raiser than Gōdarz. Claudius's response, however, suggests that he understands the comment as a wholesale affirmation of Rome's superiority to Parthia. In his view, the units under comparison are the empires and their cultures, not the individuals who raise children. As a result, the emperor's "pompous," "ludicrous," or even "silly" oration in response to the embassy is a preening and ceremonious one.¹²¹ Claudius discourses on "Roman supremacy and Parthian compliance (*obsequium*)"—a slap in the face to speakers who just moments ago have spoken of deference among equals from respect, not of state hierarchy and rank. He enjoins Mihrdād to treat his subjects like citizens and not like slaves, as he imagines to be the norm. And he appeals to the lofty abstractions of clemency and justice—two qualities that have been in rather short supply in

120. Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh* = Khaleghi-Motlagh and Omdsalar 2005: 364, lines 48–49.

121. Adjectives from Syme 1958: 2.539; Koestermann 1963–68: 3.125; Keitel 1978: 466; Griffin 1990: 486.

his own reign.¹²² Scholars debate the extent to which Tacitus may have played up the irony behind the emperor's words, but in the absence of another Lyons tablet, questions of fidelity to an original text cannot receive a final answer.¹²³ The situation, in the end, is the same as it was for Tiberius: Tacitus's text, as written, shows a Roman-Parthian dialogue in which the interlocutors are not on the same page. Their interests are aligned and their decisions accord, to be sure—the Parthians want Mihrdād released, and Claudius wants to release him. But each side's logic is opaque to the other. The exchange is made, but both parties misconstrue the other's position.

CONCLUSION

A close look at the Parthian figures who sent to Rome for Arsacid release shows that elite families were the key petitioners. Some of their number belonged to Parthian noble families like the Sūrēn and Kārin, and while little is known about the structural place of these families before the Sasanian period, it seems they furnished some of the political and military office holders that ran the Arsacid empire. Other petitioners came from uncertain backgrounds, but the familial basis of their power is either clear in the sources (as it is for Abdagaš and Sēnak, for instance) or seems likely from context. In the main, it was influential families—whether aristocratic clans, client kings, or a combination of the two—that initiated Arsacid remission from Rome.

That context matters, because it was precisely these types of people who ordinarily served as cliental fosterers in the Parthian and Sasanian periods. The evidence from Sasanian Iran and late antique Armenia shows that the great noble families were routinely involved in these relationships—the Mihrān fostered for the Sasanians, for instance, and the Mamikoneans for the Arshakuni. Non-Iranian client kings could be fosterers too, as Monzer was for Bahram. The Parthian aristocrats who contacted Rome on their own initiative therefore came from the same social groups who supplied the fosterers of Arsacid children in ordinary times, and who had been at least partially supplanted in that role by the Roman emperor.

Against this backdrop, the Parthian embassies that sought Arsacid remission can be understood not as insidious conspiracies enabling Roman intervention in the realm of Parthian domestic affairs, but as a dialogue among cliental fosterers in service to the Arsacid dynasty. Fostering an Arsacid child showed a noble's fealty to the ruling family, and in this sense it was an obligation of a lesser lord to a greater. When the Parthian aristocracy saw the dynasty's princes and princesses relocating to Rome, they assumed that the Roman emperor had been integrated

122. Tac. *Ann.* 12.11.

123. See Isaac 2004: 376 n.35 contra Ehrhardt 1998: 302. Koestermann 1963–68: 3.125 thinks Tacitus had access to the original text of the speech.

into this system; he and his realm no longer constituted a discrete and separate state, but rather a part of the Arsacid empire. Yet fosterage came with prerogatives, as well, namely the right to monitor, police, substitute, and resist the Arsacid dynast who reigned as king of kings. This dimension of the practice helps explain why the Parthian envoys who sought Arsacid remission argued in the way Tacitus says they did: through appeals to the moral character of the kingship, the didactic function of the fosterer, and the need to uphold the integrity of the Arsacid family within the Parthian realm.

Such motives were alien to the emperors who remitted the Arsacids of Rome, of course, and Tacitus's accounts of the Parthian audience scenes at Rome are eloquent testimony to the diverging expectations of either side. Appeals to the emperor as a cliental fosterer and thus as a type of Parthian aristocrat fell on deaf ears. Tiberius and Claudius responded to the envoys in keeping with their characters—Tiberius as a cold-blooded realist, Claudius as a preening cosmopolitan—but in both cases as hostage-taking heads of state, not as foster-fathers. The discordance was no obstacle to Arsacid remission, for Roman emperors and Parthian aristocrats were aligned in their wishes to see the Arsacids of Rome enthroned. But their reasons were different, and incomprehensible to the other. Some Arsacids went back, but misunderstanding remained.