

**Jake Nabel, *The Arsacids of Rome. Misunderstanding in Roman-Parthian Relations*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2025, 283 pp.
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The case study of Arsacid hostages sent to Rome during the first century CE has gained notable traction in recent historiography, establishing itself as a subject of distinct significance within the broader field of Roman-Parthian relations. In connection with this issue, *The Arsacids of Rome: Misunderstanding in Roman-Parthian Relations* stands out as one of the most significant contributions in recent decades. The author of the monograph is Jake Nabel, Assistant Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies at Pennsylvania State University, who, with this publication, brings to completion a line of research initiated eight years earlier with his doctoral thesis, *The Arsacids of Rome: Royal Hostages and Roman-Parthian Relations in the First Century CE* (2017), submitted at Cornell University. The work constitutes the second volume in the *Iran and the Ancient World* series, published by the University of California Press Foundation. This series seeks to promote interdisciplinary studies focused on the Iranian world and its various forms of interaction with other major civilisations of Antiquity. The series editor is Rahim Shayegan, Professor of Iranian Studies and Director of the Pourdavoud Center for the Study of the Iranian World at the University of California (UCLA).

In terms of structure, the book is divided into five major sections. Although these address diverse aspects of the phenomenon of hostageship, they are all aligned with the central hypothesis that Nabel puts forward throughout the volume. Specifically, that the Arsacids did not conceive of the sending of their princes to the capital on the Tiber as a case of hostageship, but rather as the adoption of royal sons by the emperor. Crucially, this theoretical paradigm, drawn from anthropology and defined as cliental fosterage, entails the subordination of the foster family to the senders. In this sense, the guiding thread of the monograph is the misunderstanding arising from the dissonance between this interpretive framework and that operating in Rome, where a *traditional* notion of hostageship prevailed, according to which the newcomers were construed as proof of the *Urbs'* hegemony (pp. 3-4).

In Chapter 1, *Submission I: The Fosterage Background* (pp. 15-48), the major historiographical trends concerning Parthian hostages in Rome are examined, particularly the duality between those that interpret the phenomenon as a manifestation of Parthian inferiority and those that attribute it to internal dynamics. From this point, the author explores the various forms of interdynastic relationships among ancient Near East civilisations. These include intermarriage –common among the ruling houses of eastern kingdoms but unfeasible in interactions with Rome, which restricted this practice to endogamous circles–; fraternal relations, supported by a distinctive vocabulary observable in information records, and fosterage, defined as “the rearing of a child by nonnatal parents” (p. 25). With regard to the latter, Nabel distinguishes between patronal fosterage

and what he deems to be paradigmatic in the Parthian context: cliental fosterage. His argument is grounded in interpretations drawn from an excellent selection of sources, among which the two inscriptions from Armaztsikhe/Bagineti in Georgia stand out, along with a particularly significant passage from the *History* of Movses Khorenats'i (MKh 2. 27. 2-3).

Another of the work's central ideas is what the author terms "pragmatic misunderstanding", explored throughout Chapter 2, *Submission II: Parthian Pragmatism* (pp. 49-81). Nabel suggests that the mutual misapprehension regarding the function of hostages may not have been a mere fortuitous accident (p. 57), but rather a conscious and deliberate political decision. In this way, each party projected an interpretation of the dynamic that served its own interests, regardless of the potential cultural misreadings that might have occurred in practice. In other words, he posits a strategic exploitation of cultural ambiguity for political ends (pp. 49-50). From the Parthian perspective, the chapter delves into the application of this idea to the management of dynastic strategies documented in sources, which, within this interpretive framework, are reinterpreted. Among these, particular emphasis is placed on the indigenous use of hostageship –a practice whose prevalence in the Parthian context is difficult to confirm due to the terminological indeterminacy of the available records; the opportunity to remove potential rivals to the throne without recourse to overt political purges; the personal ambitions of the most influential women of the king of kings' harem (most notably Queen Thea Musa); the circumvention of dynastic extinction; and the potential for enhancing networking among the ruling elites, attracting prestigious allies while the physical removal of princes contributed to the peace and stability of the court.

In Chapter 3, *Reception: The Arsacids at Rome* (pp. 82-121), the instrumentalisation of hostages is assessed from the host's discursive standpoint, which stands in stark contrast to the high degree of integration of Arsacid princes within the imperial family. The Romans understood the reception of hostages as an integral component of the relationships constructed within the framework of *amicitia*. This context, though marked by concord, inherently implied an asymmetry favourable to the *Urbs*, reaffirming its claim to universal hegemony. In this regard, the author's reflections on three public events in which Arsacid princes were exhibited are particularly illuminating: the spectacles attended in the company of Augustus himself, which reveal the association of these guests with other exotic elements of Eastern *tradition* –reflected subsequently in public iconography and coinage; the procession crossing from Baiae to Puteoli under Caligula, laden with symbols of domination; and, later, the coronation of Tiridates by Nero, an episode marked by a grandiose ceremonial display staged to assert Roman preeminence, during which, the author argues a new contingent of hostages was likely handed over (pp. 100-105). This supremacist framing is then set against an analysis of patronal fosterage in Roman *tradition*. The author's conclusions in this regard are particularly telling. In his view, sufficient evidence exists to speak of a recognisable Roman practice of patronal fosterage (p. 109). In any case, his reinterpretation of Greco-Roman sources leads him to conclude that, whether understood as hostages or as foster children, Rome invariably perceived the arrival of Iranian hostages as evidence of their counterparts' inferiority (p.120).

Nabel challenges the *traditional* interpretation of the release of Arsacid princes, which typically attributes the decision to the emperors' desire to weaken the Parthians and interfere in their internal politics in Chapter 4, *Remission: The Emperor as Parthian Aristocrat* (pp. 122-154). According to the author, drawing primarily on Eastern source material, Parthian dignitaries viewed the Roman emperor as merely another participant in the Arsacid network of cliental fosterage. From this premise, he proceeds to examine this system, which, although headed by the king of kings, also comprised a wide array of actors who anticipated rewards in exchange for their cooperation. This line of reasoning leads him to a compelling digression on the notion of Parthian factionalism, rejecting schematic approaches that posit the existence of clearly defined political camps. In line with this critique, Nabel identifies the agents involved in the release of the Arsacid princes –namely, the nobility, powerful aristocratic families, client kings, figures with administrative or courtly roles, and, finally, individuals of uncertain status (pp. 127-142). In the second part of the chapter, Nabel turns to Tacitus' *Annals*, arguably the most informative source regarding the Arsacid hostages. His reading proves once again particularly thought-provoking. He contends

that the Parthians who petitioned for the return of Arsacid princes from Rome sought to engage the emperor in a fosterage-based dialogue, on the premise that Rome had been subsumed into the Parthian fosterage system –an assumption, unsurprisingly, that did not align with the Roman understanding of the matter.

Chapter Five, *Return: The Parthian Kingships of the Arsacids of Rome* (pp. 155-186), concludes the monograph by exploring the events surrounding the return of the hostages to their homeland. To begin with, Nabel refutes the idea that the failure of their cause occurred in the manner suggested by Greco-Latin sources, according to which their rejection by their fellow countrymen is attributed to the acculturation experienced after decades of confinement in the enemy's capital, which in practice would have turned them into mere slaves of their hosts. The author dismantles this rhetoric by demonstrating the unreliability of the sources that recount these events, primarily Tacitus and Flavius Josephus. However, the review of the available evidence leads him to acknowledge that there is likely some truth to these accounts and that, as a result, the Arsacid princes probably faced a certain level of rejection as a consequence of their years abroad, which would have logically impacted their habits and cultural preferences. This, despite the fact that, as is evident, the Greco-Latin narratives were not intended to be plausible in this regard. Likewise, the coincidence of the return of the princes with the famous "Iranian revival" or "neo-Iranism" (p. 180) provides another argument in support of this direction.

In light of the arguments developed throughout the volume, Nabel reflects in his conclusions on the abrupt cessation of the delivery of hostages at the end of the first century, proposing possible explanations. Among them, notable ones include the imposition of a xenophobic discourse over a fosterage practice whose utility would have dissipated due to changes in the political sphere, the fall of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and by extension, of the individuals with whom the Arsacids were willing to interact on the terms previously operative, or the strengthening of the Roman Empire from the second century onwards, directly proportional to the weakening of Parthia. In parallel, the author reflects on the other side of the issue: the interruption of Arsacids returning to Parthian territory. Similarly to the previous case, several alternatives emerge. Thus, it seems plausible that the Parthians realised that the emperor did not partake in the fosterage policy in the cultural terms they had assumed, but instead instrumentalised this policy to stage Roman superiority. Not to mention the most evident scenario, that the failure of known cases deterred Parthian dignitaries from continuing to request possible claimants to the throne from Rome.

Undoubtedly, this monograph will generate controversy in specialised research. Some of its axioms are, at the very least, debatable. On an argumentative level, Nabel subordinates the political role of hostages in favour of their participation in a sort of patronal system for the rearing of princes prevalent in the Parthian realm, of whose existence the Romans either were unaware or chose to remain ignorant. Moreover, from a methodological perspective, his frequent use of incidental argumentation relies on the assumption of a quasi-timeless continuity that would affect nearly all of the kingdoms of the Near East, thereby downplaying their well-known diversity. However, there are factors that make this contribution a key piece for the development of studies on Roman-Parthian relations. On the one hand, the contrast between Roman hostageship and Parthian fosterage represents an unavoidable new theoretical paradigm for studies on interimperial interactions to be published in the coming years. On the other hand, the successful application of comparative history postulates, and above all, the effective prioritisation of Eastern sources, reverses the *traditional* interpretive parameters with which this issue has been addressed up until now. In this way, Jake Nabel's monograph represents a breath of fresh air in a historiographical field that had begun to show signs of stagnation.

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