

DARYN GRAHAM, *Rome & Parthia: Power, Politics and Profit*. North Charleston: Createspace, 2012. Pp. 287 pages; 9 figures; 1 map. ISBN 9781484045664. US\$26.96.

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The publication under consideration is a new attempt to synthesise the imperial histories of Rome and the Arsacid (Parthian) empire in a single volume. Aimed at the general public it presents a contrapuntal narrative from the meeting between Sulla and Orobarzes (c.93BCE) to the collapse of Arsacid rule during the principate of Macrinus (c.220CE). Within this framework the narrative focuses on political and military history, with occasional tangents to discuss matters as diverse as Caesar's monarchical goals (pp. 50-54), the astrological significance of Jesus' birth (pp. 80-5) and intermediary frontier communities such as Palmyra and Dura Europos (pp. 148, 171). The narrative features a comprehensive overview of the Flavian and Antonine policies, and occasionally dramatic accounts of battles well-suited to the interested public.

The text's strongest section is the narrative covering the Flavian and Antonine periods (pp.121-94), which seems to have been drawn from Graham's Masters Thesis in foreign policy and trade between Rome and Parthia during this era (p. iv). The narrative flows smoothly here, with a number of archaeological and textual reference points used to illuminate the various foreign policies (pp. 139-94). It will give the general reader a good introduction from which to pursue further information. The few extant records from the area reflect the meeting of the two political dynasties through their agents (p. 207) and the potential of Roman military units to acculturate to their host communities. These attempts to incorporate elements of Eastern affairs are admirable, and enable Graham to recognise when an apparent Roman victory may perhaps be read as a Parthian political gambit (p.101). Graham reappraises Hadrian's foreign policy with similar success, arguing convincingly against the dismissals found in the *Historia Augusta* (*Hadrian*, 17, 21). He recognises the strategy of containment propagated by this princeps, cultivating good relations with such far-flung political entities as the Baktrians and Alani on the Parthians' distant borders (pp.168-71). It is an interesting interpretation, belying the common perception of Hadrian's foreign policy as one beginning and ending with the Wall (p.159). Such comments will benefit the general reader greatly, encouraging them to reconsider earlier assumptions on aspects of Roman imperial history.

Academics, however, will not be convinced by all of Graham's arguments. The author misses some crucial considerations in his more specific analyses, most notably on the meeting of Sulla and Orobarzes, and on the exact motivations of Julius Caesar. Regarding the former, he suggests that by c.93BCE the Romans "probably had considerable knowledge of Parthia's growing power" and that there was "rejoicing" upon Sulla's return (p.10). Graham ignores

Plutarch's comments that the public response was a mixture of praise and condemnation for "ill-timed arrogance," and that Sulla was despatched as propraetor to keep Mithridates VI of Pontus in check rather than to deal with Parthia (Plutarch, *Sulla*, 5.3-5). Placing his seat in a position of superiority between Orobarzes and an Armenian client-king, Sulla was promoting his own status rather than pressing some strategic agenda against the Arsacid rulers. Recognising the humiliation of his representative, and thus himself, the Parthian king had Orobarzes executed. The parallel to this meeting, of course, would be Popillius' encounter with Antiochus IV in 168BCE, an archetype of Roman *auctoritas* superseding and humiliating the prestige of a Hellenistic monarch (Livy, 45.12.3-6).¹ Such a misinterpretation of the evidence is minor for the general reader, but does typify the weak contentions which occasionally mar Graham's overall narrative. His musings on Caesar's intended Parthian war are similarly lacking (pp. 50-5), arguing as he does that Caesar desired the monarchy² because he "hoped that it would be just short [sic] step for Parthians to swap their allegiance, both phonetically and politically, from 'Arsaces' to 'Caesar'" (p.53). Nor are Graham's arguments sustained in other discussions: he asserts, for instance, that the unsuitability of Vonones as a Parthian ruler (p.95) was linked to his aura of "Roman-ness" (Tacitus, *Annales*, 2.1). Similarly, Artabanus supposedly dispatched his son Darius as a hostage to Rome, confident that the "Romanisation" of the prince would remove him as a credible contender for the throne (p. 101).³ With this in mind, it is hard to accept Graham's logic that Caesar desired to establish a Roman-Caesarian monarchy in Parthia. At best, his reading of Caesar's ambition is based on a rather uncritical reception of Plutarch (*Caesar*, 64) and Suetonius (*Julius Caesar*, 79-80).⁴ To these one might add the qualifying statements of Cicero's *de Officiis* (iii.83) or the second *Phillipic* (85), which suggest the issue of kingship was more a rumour preceding and then justifying the Ides than one actively pursued by Caesar himself.⁵ Again, this will confound the academic more than the general reader; nevertheless, Graham undercuts an otherwise competent narrative when he strays into these tendentious aspects of the historical discussion.

¹ Keaveney, Arthur. "Sulla's Cilician Command: The Evidence of Apollinaris Sidonius." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 44.1 (1995): 29-36; Gisborne, Matthew. "A Curia of Kings. Sulla and Royal Imagery." *Imaginary Kings: Royal Images in the Ancient Near East, Greece and Rome*. München, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005: 108-13, in particular 109-11.

² A matter of considerable debate in itself: see Yavetz, Zwi. *Julius Caesar and His Public Image*. London, Thames & Hudson, 1983: 185-213, who is unable to come to a conclusion on the matter; Gelzer, Matthias. *Caesar: Politician and Statesman*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1969: 314-24; Weinstock, Stefan. *Divus Julius*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971: 270-86.

³ Josephus disputes that there actually was a general consensus against Vonones: Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.48; cf. Gowing, 1990: 319, note 14; Gowing, Alan. "Tacitus and the Client Kings." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 120 (1990): 318-9.

⁴ The only scholarship Graham cites on this matter is Billows, who disagrees fundamentally with the argument. Billows, R. *Julius Caesar: the Colossus of Rome*. Routledge, London, 2009: 248.

⁵ Rawson, 1975: 149-50; cf. Balsdon, J. P. V. D. "The Ides of March." *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 7.1 (1958): 80-94, in particular 82-4.

More general concerns arise from the structuring and perspective of the work that will affect the general public, to whom the book is best suited. Graham's study does little to illuminate more recent discussion on the internal history of Arsacid Iran, as he focusses most strongly on Rome and the western side of the Euphrates. Such approaches are difficult to justify today, being a period of increasing scholarship on Rome's Eastern frontier and, more importantly, the socio-economic history of the Iraq-Iranian regions themselves.⁶ Although Parthian architectural remains are few, plenty of evidence exists to expand the reader's understanding. Scholarly discussions of such diverse affairs as the expansion of agricultural zones, and the fortification and defence of the frontiers are reshaping our perception of internal Arsacid history. The scope of the Arsacid realm – an enormous and ethnically diverse one – precluded intense centralised control, but did not necessarily prevent them making valuable social and economic contributions to their realm. Such matters would have been worth exploring, so that Graham might give Arsacid political and military decisions their proper context and weight. Instead, the reader must assemble their understanding of the empire and its inhabitants from fragmented sequences and bibliographical references, to which the public is unlikely to have access. The general paucity of Arsacid imagery is a problem, particularly where the author discusses iconographical issues (pp.10-11, 148). Images of sites such as Behistun or Hung-I Nauruzi would have helped the reader better understand the Parthian empire, an area that has seen significant advances in the last decade. These are not catastrophic issues, but will make it difficult for the non-specialist to attain a nuanced, up-to-date view of Parthian culture. While an independent author cannot be expected to have access to all relevant material, a greater emphasis on Parthian cultural history would have greatly strengthened the narrative.

Such academic concerns aside, the book has a number of merits. The aforementioned Flavian-Antonine section succeeds in turning a complex period of history into an accessible work. The amateur reader will find the book easy to consume, and informative on a variety of points in the military and political realms of Roman history in the East. Graham's prose is accessible, almost jovial in places. Although his sentences occasionally run to the tortuous the narrative moves at a steady and enjoyable pace. References are plentiful, and the non-specialist will find much here they did not necessarily know, particularly as the work treats obscure eras as thoroughly as the well-known Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods. More direct quotations of cited sources such as Horace would have strengthened the impact of Graham's arguments,

⁶ Hauser, Stefan R. "The Arsacid (Parthian) Empire." D.T. Potts (ed.) *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*. Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012: 1001-20; Whittaker, C.R. *Frontiers of the Roman Empire. A Social and Economic Study*. London, 1994; Trinkaus, K. M. "Pre-Islamic Settlement and Land Use in Damghan, Northeast Iran." *Iran* 18 (1983): 119-44; Ristvet, Lauren *et al.*, "On the Edge of Empire: 2008 and 2009 Excavations at Oğlancala, Azerbaijan." *American Journal of Archaeology* 116 (2012): 321-63; Kawami, Trudy S. "Parthian and Elymaean Rock Reliefs." D.T. Potts (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*. Oxford, University Press, 2013: 751-65.

but this is a relatively minor issue in a work that is generally well-referenced and paced.

The political and cultural history of Iran remains an under-developed and exciting field of inquiry. By comparison with Rome the Arsacid dynasty is obscure, despite being recognised as an imperial power by Strabo (XI.9.2), and dominating Central Asia and the Great Game of Armenian politics over a period of some five hundred years. The corpus of publications addressing this political entity and its achievements are few, and the standard works remain Malcolm Colledge's two works: *The Parthians* (1967); *Parthian Art* (1977); and Fergus Millar's *The Roman Near East* (1993). Although under-developed discussions mean it will not replace these earlier works, Graham's book is an admirable attempt to fill a niche for the general public, who should benefit from the effort. Doubtless they will find avenues of inquiry worth pursuing, and at the very least come away wanting to know more about Arsacid Parthia and Iranian history, a necessary interest in our own age.