

Uwe Ellerbrock, *The Parthians: The Forgotten Empire*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021. 362 pages. ISBN 9780367473099.

This book is a welcome introductory account of the society, culture, and impact of the traditionally much neglected and maligned Parthians in English. It does not address one common narrative or time period, but rather it addresses the entirety of the Parthians' long history (middle third century BCE to early third century CE) and the evolution of their society from migrants on the Central Asian steppe to world imperialists. It is a further revision and English translation of the second edition of Sylvia Winkelmann and Uwe Ellerbrock's book, *Die Parther: die vergessene Großmacht*, published in 2015. Ellerbrock completed the task of revising, re-editing, and translating the work, including over ninety new photos to an already visually rich book. This publication is in-line with other newly published books on the Parthians in 2020 and 2021 in attempting to salvage the reputation and accomplishments of the Parthians, while trying to understand the Parthians on their own terms.¹ Its revision and translation into English will open the world of the Parthians to an entirely new anglophone audience.

The Parthians is an overview of one of the most successful and yet overlooked civilizations in world history. The goal of the work is to help bring the Parthians further out of the shadows of history to emphasize their importance on the world stage. It is a book that will interest scholars of Hellenistic, Roman, Near Eastern, Iranian, and specifically Parthian studies; however, perhaps its most exciting potential is its ability to engage and educate non-specialists. In particular, this book will be immensely useful in undergraduate and graduate courses that focus on the ancient Near East and Middle East, ancient world civilizations, and the interactions and international relations of the Greeks and Romans with neighboring peoples.

The book is divided into eleven chapters, each with several subchapters, and it rapidly moves from subject to subject. Although well researched, this work is meant to be an introduction to all things Parthian, rather than an exhaustive focus on any particular topic. The 200+ maps, images, and tables found throughout the book are well organized, instructive, and engaging. A great deal of work has gone into them to the reader's benefit. A glossary of historic place names and a grouping of indexes of general terms, personal names, and geographical names also will be to the benefit of a general audience.

The first several chapters of the book focus on the geopolitical developments and workings of ancient Iran, generally, and of the Parthians, specifically. Chapter 1 introduces the sparse and scattered sources of Parthian history, highlighting the

¹ Overtoom, N.L. (2020) *Reign of Arrows: The Rise of the Parthian Empire in the Hellenistic Middle East*. Oxford. Schlude, J. (2020) *Rome, Parthia, and the Politics of Peace: The Origins of War in the Ancient Middle East*. Abingdon. Olbrycht, M.J. (2021) *Early Arsakid Parthia (ca. 250-165 B.C.): At the Crossroads of Iranian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian History*. Leiden.

challenges of interpreting such a distorted record. It also emphasizes the evolving identity and culture of the Parthians over 500 years, which interwove Iranian, Hellenic, and nomadic elements across a diverse landscape. Chapter 2 is a short discussion of the pre-Parthian empires that ruled in Iran. Chapter 3 charts the history of the Parthians through the various reigns of the Arsacid kings in four phases: developmental, expansionist, great power, and stability to decline and fall. Chapter 4 investigates the structure of the Parthian Empire, which Ellerbrock views more as a Commonwealth (71). It discusses the strong but evolving imagery of the Arsacid kings, interchanging nomadic, Hellenic, and Iranian symbolism. It also considers the role of nobles and royal woman at court, while describing the horse-based composition of the Parthian military. Chapter 5 and 6 are two short chapters, first, introducing the background and role of various small vassal states under the Parthians, and second, introducing the various Central Asian and Greek peoples the Parthians interacted with along their vast eastern frontier. These chapters illustrate the political and cultural ingenuity and flexibility of the Parthians in forging and maintaining their empire.

The next two chapters focus on the urban and economic accomplishments of the Parthians. Chapter 7 is a survey of Parthian urbanism, discussing their architecture and a dozen of their most important cities. Chapter 8 emphasizes the richness and importance of the Parthians' coinage before discussing their skill in mining, agriculture, animal breeding, and trade. Despite the unfortunate dearth of archaeological remains, clearly the Parthians were skilled builders, administrators, farmers, and merchants. Finally, the last three chapters, which make up over a third of the entire book and contain over half of its images, are an interesting assessment of the social history of the Parthians. Chapter 9 evaluates a wide spectrum of the vibrant social life in Parthia, including language, literature, education, music, medical knowledge, cuisine, and clothing. It ends with a consideration of how the Parthians utilized different calendar systems to date the years and months. Chapter 10 illustrates the great beauty and vibrancy of art and craftsmanship under the Parthians, which had strong regional influences across their vast, multi-cultural empire. Lastly, Chapter 11 emphasizes that our understanding of religiosity and worship within the Parthian world is complex and difficult to reconstruct. Ellerbrock argues that, although numerous religions existed or even thrived within the empire, including traditional polytheism, Manichaeism, Mithraism, Judaism, and Christianity, the available evidence points to the Parthians utilizing a variety of religious symbolism over the course of their long history but, generally, adhering to the Zoroastrian faith.

The issues I have with the book are few and stem mostly from the unavoidable limitations of the source materials and the overall nature of the book as an introductory survey. Many chapters and most subchapters are quite short and shift from subject to subject rapidly, piquing the interest of the reader but leaving the reader in want of more information. The chapters in this book in many ways serve as a series of separate appetizers, rather than interwoven elements of a main course. The issue here, in part, as Ellerbrock admits on several occasions, is that so much of Parthian history remains

obscured by limited and much debated physical and literary evidence. Of course, this is not Ellerbrock's fault. This is a major obstacle facing all scholars and students who wish to study the Parthians and their world. It is difficult to make definitive conclusions on the Parthians' history and culture, certainly a factor in why they have been traditionally "forgotten" compared to other successful civilizations. That said, Ellerbrock's study abruptly ends without reiterating the important overarching themes of the work or considering where Parthian studies can grow in the future. A strong introduction and conclusion would have helped tie all the disparate chapters and their conclusions together.

These observations aside, Ellerbrock has published an engaging and important work long overdue and much needed for an anglophone audience. This book will quickly become a leading reference for scholars and students interested in the society and culture of the Parthians. No doubt it will help create further awareness of the Parthians as a great and accomplished civilization and stimulate further debate about their place in world history. Thus, Ellerbrock's book does not serve as an end, but rather as an important beginning for future interest in and scholarship on the Parthians. If the goal of the book was to "restore the memory of the Parthian Empire, 'the forgotten superpower'" (xxv), Ellerbrock has helped greatly with that task.

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