

Marek Jan Olbrycht, *Early Arsakid Parthia (ca. 250-165 B.C.): At the Crossroads of Iranian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian History*. Leiden: Brill, 2021. Pp. xvii, 377. ISBN: 9789004460751.

In the past three years several books on the Parthians have been published, demonstrating growing academic and public interest.¹ Yet the study of the Parthians traditionally is much maligned and overlooked in scholarship, and the interactions of Parthia and Rome remain a strong point of emphasis. Overtoom's *Reign of Arrows* (2020) and Ellerbrock's *The Parthians* (2021) are rare examples of monographs that primarily consider the Parthians and their history on their own terms, and into this group we may now add Olbrycht's *Early Arsakid Parthia* (2021). In it Olbrycht investigates the background, origin, and early history of Arsacid Parthia. A major emphasis of the work is connecting the nomadic world of Central Asia to the history of the Hellenistic world, especially within Iran, and, specifically, Arsacid Parthia.

In some ways the title of the book is misleading since the focus of the work is the fourth and third centuries BCE, including a third of the book (Part I) dedicated to understanding Parthia prior to the Arsacid era (beginning 248/247 BCE). Yet in this lies the uniqueness of Olbrycht's approach. He carefully unpacks the geography, climate, and cultural variety of a specific region, what he calls the Caspian-Aral region (northeastern Iran and western and southern Turkmenistan), from the Achaemenids to the early Arsacids. Olbrycht's laborious work investigating the archaeology, numismatics, and topography of this region and period are well noted throughout.

The book was written over the course of a dozen years (although mostly completed in 2008-2010), and Olbrycht admits that "all the relevant hypotheses in this book were formulated a decade ago."² It is divided into an introduction and three parts with nine chapters and numerous sub-chapters. A two-page general conclusion finishes the work. It also offers a short genealogical list, a map, and over a dozen colored pictures spread throughout the text. The content is dense and moves rapidly from subject to subject with many specific places, names, and events, with which the reader is meant to be familiar. This book is for a scholarly audience that specializes in ancient Middle Eastern and Central Asian studies. I believe general readers will find its content and pace challenging. It is unclear to me how scholars of ancient Greece and Rome will receive it, although I hope it helps further engage them in the important developments of the ancient Middle East.

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; Curtis, V. and A. Magub (2020), *Rivalling Rome: Parthian Coins and Culture*, London; Sampson, G. (2020), *Rome and Parthia: Empires at War: Ventidius, Antony and the Second Romano-Parthian War, 40-20 BC*, Barnsley; Ellerbrock, U. (2021), *The Parthians: The Forgotten Empire* (Peoples of the Ancient World), Abingdon.

² Olbrycht (2021) ix.

In the introduction, Olbrycht emphasizes that the nomadic groups of this region and period were not pure nomads, but rather they were diverse and eclectic ethnic and cultural groups. He introduces Parthian historiography and discusses the ancient geography and climate of northeastern Iran and southern Turkmenistan that influenced early developments within Parthia. He argues that the environment was more abundant and hospitable, facilitating and encouraging Arsacid expansion to the west and south into Iran.

Part I contains three chapters. Chapter 1 discusses Parthia and the steppe peoples of the Caspian-Aral region from the Achaemenid to the Seleucid periods, illustrating that interactions along the frontier were common and sometimes hostile. Parthia was a well-situated, important region to the Achaemenids and Seleucids that attracted the attention of the migrating Dahai tribes (some of which came under the control of Arsaces I). Meanwhile, the Seleucid king Antiochus II faced many troubles in his western territories. Chapter 2 introduces several Iranian dynasties across the Seleucid Empire and discusses a series of western distractions and setbacks that facilitated the fracturing of the empire in the 240s BCE. Olbrycht reevaluates the chronology of this period to argue that the Third Syrian War ended in 245/244 BCE, moving the battles of Ancyra and Callinicum (during the civil war of Seleucid kings Seleucus II and Antiochus Hierax) to 244/243 BCE and ending the conflict in 226 BCE with Antiochus' death. Chapter 3 reinterprets the rebellion of the Seleucid satrap of Parthia, Andragoras, and considers his identity. Olbrycht argues, first, that the rebellion occurred much earlier than traditionally thought in 256 BCE and, second, that Arsaces I then conquered Parthia in 244/243 BCE (also earlier than traditionally thought). He credits Andragoras as a praiseworthy ruler, whom the sedentary Parthians supported and honored.

Part II contains four chapters. Chapter 4 considers the geographical details of Parthia with discussions of the possible location of important geographical features (like the Ochus River) and peoples (like the Aparnoi). Chapter 5 examines the available Greek and Latin sources for the rebellion in Parthia and the invasion of Arsaces I to argue that the standard dates of these events set between 245–239 BCE should be shifted to 256 BCE and 244/243 BCE respectively. Chapter 6 evaluates Arsaces I's origin and early conquests before discussing the resistance of the Arsacids to the retaliatory actions of the Seleucids. Olbrycht emphasizes that the Parthian state was a mixture of nomadic and local elements, stressing the importance of including nomadic elements in the history of the Parthians. Chapter 7 discusses the identity of Arsaces II and the military efforts of the Seleucid king Antiochus III during and after his eastern campaign. It also debates the identity and chronology of Arsaces II's immediate successors, ending with a consideration of the Parthians' calendar, language, and writing system.

Part III contains two chapters. Chapter 8 explores Parthian coinage and the evolving messaging of Arsaces I and II on their coins. Olbrycht demonstrates that Arsaces I as king used different titles (like *Autokrator* and *Krny*) to illustrate his independent rule and military success in Parthia. Later Arsacids used the name Arsaces (now a royal

title) and the term *Basileus* (Greek for king) to further imperial propaganda as the Parthian state expanded. The memory of Arsaces I loomed large for his successors and Greek and Roman audiences. Chapter 9 is a general overview of archaeological findings in northern Parthia (southern Turkmenistan). Olbrycht further investigates the climate, geography, urbanism, and culture of this region. He also introduces evidence of several nomadic peoples living in the Caspian-Aral steppes, stressing the importance of a nomadic element in Iranian history due in large part to the success of the early Arsacids.

Early Arsakid Parthia is a thoroughly researched, detailed, and important book for the study of Parthian history. Olbrycht's hard work over a dozen years is easily recognized and appreciated. The book's strength is the attention paid to the impact of geography and nomadic culture to the history of Parthia, not only in the Arsacid era, but also in the Achaemenid, Argead, and Seleucid periods. My issues with the book generally are minor but require brief discussion.

The three parts of the book could have been better integrated to read more smoothly as a whole. Part I, although important on its own, in particular appeared mostly detached from the primary purpose of Parts II and III, namely the history and culture of early Arsacid Parthia. Who the Parthians/Arsacids are and why they are significant are not well established upfront. It is not until the middle of the book that we get this information. Moreover, digressions on items like a Greek inscription (perhaps) from Sistan in Iran, which Olbrycht admits "brings little to the understanding of Parthian history," make one wonder, why include it in a history of Parthia then?³ I also find Olbrycht's conclusion that the rebellions of Parthia and Bactria were separatist movements by Iranians and Greeks seeking independence against the Macedonian Seleucids too nationalistic in tone.⁴ Olbrycht's provocative, albeit speculative reconstruction of Andragoras' rebellion in 256 BCE and Arsaces I's invasion in 244/243 BCE hinges on his equally provocative, albeit speculative reconstruction of the civil war of Seleucus II and Antiochus Hierax (particularly his movement of the Battle of Ancyra back to 244/243 BCE).⁵ Meanwhile, Olbrycht's discussion of the identity and legacy of Andragoras, although interesting, is impossible to prove and cannot be used to justify moving his rebellion back to 256 BCE.⁶ He also accepts that the Arsacids captured Seleucus during his invasion of Parthia (an event that should not be dismissed out-of-hand but appears unlikely) and assumes Antiochus III died looting a temple in southern Iran "to pay enormous tribute to Rome" (when it appears undeniable that Antiochus' true purpose was to gain the money he needed for a new eastern campaign).⁷

³ Olbrycht (2021) 68–69.

⁴ Olbrycht (2021) 31. For the rejection of the "nationalism" theory tradition used by several scholars to explain these rebellions, see Overtoom (2020) 5–6.

⁵ Olbrycht (2021) 59, 67, 72, 160.

⁶ Olbrycht (2021) 99–100.

⁷ Olbrycht (2021) 65, 174–176, 220. Compare Overtoom (2020) 97–98, 101–102, 143–146.

Additionally, Olbrycht's assessment of early Parthian history ends abruptly with the reign of Phraates I. He alludes to the future imperial success of the early Arsacids but does not address it. A short section briefly highlighting the accomplishments of Mithridates I (namely the formation of the Parthian Empire) toward the end of Chapter 7 would be welcome.⁸ It is important to mention that none of these criticisms diminish the importance of Olbrycht's work. The early history of Arsacid Parthia and of the Arsacid dynasty is not definitive and remains fluid. Different perspectives on these people and events are unavoidable and necessary to further the field of study. The above points are examples of where scholars likely will have to agree to disagree.

Finally, Olbrycht clearly engages scholarship published between 2011–2021. For example, I agree with his criticisms of A.S. Balakhvantsev's more radical and reductionist reconstructions of early Parthian history in his 2017 study.⁹ However, it appears that *Early Arsakid Parthia* was published too soon after my book, *Reign of Arrows*, to fully consider and address it. This is not a criticism, but rather it is unfortunate timing. In particular, Olbrycht's discussions of Parthian militarism, the eastern campaigns of Seleucus II and Antiochus III, and the geopolitical developments of Parthia from Arsaces II to Mithridates I overlap considerably with my work, but they do not reference it.¹⁰ Much as my work would have benefited from being able to engage Olbrycht's evidence and conclusions, the same can be said in reverse.

With all this in mind, although my book and Olbrycht's book both investigate the early history of the Parthians and the formation of the Parthian state, there is plenty of room at the table for both studies to offer important and intriguing arguments and conclusions. The study of the Parthians needs more voices, and I hope Olbrycht's work helps raise some. Despite a few areas of disagreement, I found that both studies in many ways enhance each other, and I encourage all those interested in early Parthian history to read both and join the ever-evolving conversation on the origin and rise of Arsacid Parthia.

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⁸ For this assessment, see Overtoom (2020) Chs. 4–6.

⁹ Olbrycht (2021) 170, 185, 226. Note Balakhvantsev, A.S. (2017) *Political History of Early Parthia*, Moscow [in Russian].

¹⁰ Although my book was published in 2020, my articles "The Parthians' Unique Mode of Warfare: A Tradition of Parthian Militarism and the Battle of Carrhae," *Anabasis, Studia Classica et Orientalia* 8 (2017): 99–122 and "The Power-Transition Crisis of the 160s-130s BCE and the Formation of the Parthian Empire," *Journal of Ancient History* 7.1 (2019): 111–155, were available but overlooked.