

## BOOK REVIEW

*Rome, Parthia, and the Politics of Peace: The Origins of War in the Ancient Middle East.* By JASON M. SCHLUDE. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020. Pp. xvi+ 221. Hardback, \$128.00. ISBN: 978-0-815-35370-6.

From Antiquity on, nearly everyone has misinterpreted Roman-Parthian relations—even contemporaries like Tacitus and Cassius Dio, who experienced Parthian wars (9). Rather than hostility, we should consider peace and cooperation of the two major powers and frame supposed hostility within the effects of rhetorical posturing, largely for domestic consumption, which could then justify conflicts. This work departs from the victimology of the “no-Roman-strategy” school’s innocent, non-threatening Parthians beset by Roman aggression in conceding Parthian initiation of some conflicts, even if sometimes ripostes to Roman provocation. A “glory” motive for Roman campaigns, here “imperialist self-display,” is not entirely abandoned. Few specialists, however, will be deceived. The contrived arguments and myopic bibliographical gaze (largely anglophone) fail to capture the tension and delicacy of Roman-Parthian relations. Throughout, peace is assumed the norm, until disrupted by “troublemakers” like Crassus and Trajan. A certain naïveté about international relations permeates the volume, as if “peace” can be defined solely as the absence of armed conflict, thus ignoring the psychological dimensions of suspicion about a rival’s *bona fides* and potential threats, whether real or imagined. The author correctly recognizes that “peace” and mutual restraint coincided with practicality (13). Expediency might be the better term. After all, neither power realistically ever hoped to conquer the other except in rhetorical fantasies and Rome never attempted to advance beyond Mesopotamia into the Iranian plateau. Peace and cooperation are emphasized rather than limits on power, which for both states domestic issues and troublesome frontiers elsewhere checked, even if both occasionally attempted to exploit the other’s woes. A larger context of Roman-Parthian relations is not addressed.

Every generation from the 50s BCE to the 220s CE experienced a Parthian crisis or war. Yet Schlude's "peaceful co-existence" of two rival powers misconstrues the situation. If head-on armed clashes were generally avoided, Armenia, the chief cause of Roman-Parthian conflicts directly or indirectly, became the circumscribed theater for proxy operations, where prestige could be won (or lost) at minimal risk.<sup>1</sup> But the author's superficial understanding of the Armenian problem is clear, particularly in treating the Neronian compromise (63 CE), termed "cooperative imperialism" (139 n.45). If Nero, like Augustus (20 BCE), disguised peace with images of conquest, Tiridates I's crowning at Rome obscured a Parthian victory. Festus' terse but accurate assessment (*Brev.* 20) is essentially ignored: "Nero lost Armenia." Arsacid rule in Armenia reversed the policy from Augustus on of having an Armenian king with at least a drop of Artaxiad blood in his veins. Vologaeses I's (temporary) withdrawal from the war with delivery of hostages in 55 reflected expediency, not restraint, as a pretender loomed besides a revolt in Hyrcania. Nor can Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.34.2, 37) be used to argue that the compromise of 63, already envisioned in the war's early years, awaited only displays of Roman military might to obtain Parthian acceptance—revival of a view of the 1920s and 1930s (without acknowledgement). The war was originally thought to be over with the installation of Tigranes VI in 59.<sup>2</sup>

Nor will many favor an assertion (5) that East-West conflict begins with Carrhae (53 BCE), a notion generally associated with Herodotus' view of the Persian Wars. Despite citation of some earlier bibliography (misguided in Schlude's view), it remains unclear against whom the anti-hostility thesis is aimed, except for the claim in a popular book that Roman-Parthian conflict was "inevitable."<sup>3</sup> Should such weight be assigned to a popular book? No one has ever argued for a permanent state of war.

<sup>1</sup> See the nuanced discussion (unknown to Schlude) of E. Frézouls, "Les relations romano-parthes avant d'époque flavienne," in E. Frézouls and A. Jacquemin, eds., *Les Relations Internationales* (Paris 1993) 479-498.

<sup>2</sup> See E. Wheeler, "The Chronology of Corbulo in Armenia," *Klio* 79 (1997) 383-397 with bibliography, reasserting Werner Schur's gap in operations 59-61. Schlude, aware (127 with n.63) of the chronological difficulties of Tacitus' account, omits the relevant scholarship. M. Heil, *Die orientalische Aussenpolitik des Kaisers Nero* (Munich 1997) is unknown.

<sup>3</sup> 5, 42-43 with n.2, directed at G. Sampson, *The Defeat of Rome: Crassus, Carrhae, and the Invasion of the East* (Barnsley 2008).

A decade's gestation of the work from a 2009 Berkeley dissertation under Erich Gruen, whose stylistic influence can be discerned, did not alleviate conceptual and bibliographical problems. Much of the work's first half is recycled from published articles and a 2017 anthology (often touted) of dubious merit, whereas the second half relies on a revised 2005 Macquarie dissertation with its own problems.<sup>4</sup> Most astonishing, however, a summary of the book—in the *OCD*'s editors' infinite wisdom—is now canonized in a 2019 digital edition of *OCD*.<sup>5</sup>

Eight chapters discern distinct periods of Roman-Parthian relations. A conclusion summarizes the arguments with a coda (recycled from a 2019 online blog) on the relevance of supposed Roman-Parthian “lessons” for current American-Iranian relations, a now totally passé sermon in the mode of a Victor Hanson diatribe, blasting the threatening rhetoric of Bush II and “The Donald.” Such an overtly political invective has no place in a scholarly tome.

Two ideas underlie the book's assumptions: Sulla established a treaty of alliance and friendship with Mithridates II (96/95 BCE) and Pompey agreed with Phraates III to set the Euphrates as a border (66 BCE). Contrary evidence and arguments are ignored or argued away.<sup>6</sup> References in the near contemporary sources to *societas* and *amicitia*, neither proof of a written *foedus*, come from the mouths of Parthians, who seem to have interpreted oral agreements differently

<sup>4</sup> J. Schlude and B. Rubin, eds., *Arsacids, Romans, and Local Elites: Cross-Cultural Interactions of the Parthian Empire* (Oxford/Philadelphia 2017); see my review, *AWE* 18 (2019) 484-87; P. Edwell, *Between Rome and Persia: The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman Control* (London/New York 2008).

<sup>5</sup> “Parthian and Roman Wars,” doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8047. An otiose correction to the 2019 article (147 n.24, 157 n.2) on the date of Axidares' appointment to the Armenian throne hardly solves the problem, nor offers novelty. The enigmatic Armenian king Sanatruces, prominent in the Armenian tradition, worthy of Arrian's praise (*Parth.* fr. \*77 Roos), and sometimes posited as a successor of Tiridates I, escaped notice. Thankfully, here (159) M. Iunius Homulus, the Cappadocian governor 111/2-113/4, is correctly assigned to the right province, not Syria, as in *OCD*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Unknown is a critique of Konrad Ziegler's legalistic view of Roman-Parthian relations, where it is argued that the only real *foedus* was that of Macrinus with Artabanus IV (218): see E. Wheeler, “Roman Treaties with Parthia: *Völkerrecht* or Power Politics?” in P. Freeman *et al.*, eds., *Limes XVIII. Proceedings of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies* (Oxford 2002) 287-292; similar views at O. Linz, *Studien zur römischen Ostpolitik im Principat*. (Hamburg 2009) 6, 32-34, 63, 72, 89, 120-22, 263, although Schlude, aware of Linz, does not engage with him.

from legalistically inclined Romans. Surena's post-Carrhae demand from Crassus (Plut. *Crass.* 31.3) for a written agreement shows none existed in 53 BCE. Nor can a written *foedus* be claimed for the Augustan settlement (20 BCE) or the Rhandaia compromise (CE 63). An assertion that Sulla's supposed "treaty" of alliance and friendship involved a defense pact for assistance, if attacked, is contradicted in defending Vespasian's refusal to aid Vologaeses I against the Alans (147-148; cf. 25-26). Rome never acknowledged Parthia as an equal, despite literary metaphors of a division of the world between them and theatrical mid-Euphrates conferences (precise locations unknown). Indeed, the account of Hadrian's Parthian conference in 123, ignoring simultaneous Roman troop movements, is thoroughly muddled (167 with n.47). From Trajan on, Parthia (from a Roman perspective) could be considered a client kingdom. As argued in a forthcoming paper, from 63-161 not *pax* but a truce (*indutiae*) characterized Roman-Parthian relations. Recognition of Parthians as *iusti hostes* surfaces only in the Severan era (*Dig.* 49.15.24).

The Euphrates, not exclusively a north-south stream, is also a problematic border. Only the middle Euphrates south of Zeugma comes into question, as Roman clients before 17 CE and thereafter Rome directly held bridgeheads on the eastern bank at Zeugma-Apamea and Tomisa farther upstream. Roman forts on the middle Euphrates begin only in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Before Trajan and even later, Dura-Europos on the west bank was Parthian and Palmyra, well west of the Euphrates, fell under Roman influence only under Tiberius at earliest. Pliny (*HN* 6.120) states that Pompey set the border at Oruros, 50/250 miles (a corrupt number in MSS) from Zeugma, thus eliminating any concession of the Euphrates in a supposed treaty of 66 BCE. Eventually some portion of the upper middle Euphrates did become a *de facto* border despite the fluid loyalty of many locals, but no Roman acknowledgement of the Euphrates as a border *de iure* can be demonstrated.

A short review cannot do justice to Schlude's "spin" of peace and cooperation on major developments, which invite debate, if not rebuttal. A few examples must suffice. A rather conventional view of events of 54-53 BCE (Crassus' ambition) depreciates the actual strategic situation, now better appreciated in a recent

paper.<sup>7</sup> A denial of Parthian interest in Syria and Pompey's appeal for Parthian support against Caesar (cf. Caes. *BC* 3.82.4; Dio 41.55.3-4; Just. 42.4.6), hardly convinces, as Pompey's forces included troops from his eastern clients and an appeal to the Dacian king Burebista is also known. If Schlude, in the footsteps of Dieter Timpe,<sup>8</sup> correctly downplays revenge for Carrhae as a Roman motive, his understanding of Augustan policy paints too rosy a picture. Space precludes a detailed discussion.<sup>9</sup>

Quality of the coverage does not improve once Schlude exits his "comfort zone" in the Late Republican and Augustan eras. A bibliographically lacunose treatment of the Flavian period is unconvincing. Reduction of Commagene's annexation (72) to a contrivance of the Syrian governor Caesennius Paetus and Trajan *pater's* Parthian *ornamenta* as a masquerade ignore epigraphical evidence of a *bellum Commagenicum*, although a view that Parthian forces crossed the Euphrates seems dubious.<sup>10</sup> The almost simultaneous annexation of Armenia Minor surely reflects policy, as it initiated the eventual militarization of eastern Asia Minor in a Galatia-Cappadocia complex, a reaction to the loss of Armenia to the Arsacids. The vague "barbarians" of Suetonius (*Vesp.* 8.4) cannot be Alans—a view long discredited but here desperately revived. Similarly, if allusions in Statius to Domitian's preparations for a Parthian war can be argued away, activity of Cilician mints permits a contrary view.<sup>11</sup>

A final chapter, surveying all Parthian wars from Trajan to Macrinus, is pegged on a false premise of Trajan as a model for subsequent campaigns of Verus, Severus and Caracalla (167-168, 170)—a view not attested in any source. Significant recent German scholarship escaped notice with reliance on Lepper's 1948

<sup>7</sup> N. Overtoom, "Reassessing the Role of Parthia and Rome in the Origins of the First Romano-Parthian War (56/5-50 BCE)," *JAH* 9.2 (2021) 238-268, although not novel in its basic outline and the imaginative reconstruction of details need not be followed on all points.

<sup>8</sup> "Die Bedeutung der Schlacht von Carrhae," *MH* 19 (1962) 104-129 (unknown to Schlude); "Zur augusteischen Partherpolitik zwischen 30 und 20 v. Chr.," *WJA* 1 (1975) 155-169.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. my comments at *AWE* 18 (2019) 485-486 on the 20 BCE agreement, Musa etc.

<sup>10</sup> See E. Dąbrowa, "The *bellum Commagenicum* and the *ornamenta triumphalia* of M. Ulpius Traianus," in E. Dąbrowa, ed., *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East* (Cracow 1994) 19-27. Schlude omits the brief governorship of A. Marius Celsus, Trajan *pater's* predecessor in Syria.

<sup>11</sup> R. Ziegler, "Civic Coins and Imperial Campaigns," in D. Kennedy, ed., *The Roman Army in the East* (*JRA* Suppl. 18: Ann Arbor 1996) 119-134.

monograph.<sup>12</sup> For Schlude, if wisely eschewing trade concerns, Trajan's motive (162-164), is reduced to glory seeking and Alexander-*imitatio*, of which the latter is attributed to Cassius Dio's reliance on Arrian's lost *Parthica*. Dio's use of Arrian (not a new idea) need not indicate Arrian's stressing Alexander-*imitatio* in the *Parthica* or a connection between the *Parthica* and the *Anabasis Alexandri*. The compositional dates of both remain unknown.<sup>13</sup> Yet Schlude, who denies Arrian's participation in Trajan's war, asserts that neither Arrian nor Dio really understood Trajan. A further catalogue of dubious interpretations of Parthian wars from Verus to Macrinus cannot be pursued here. Most incredible is extending Caracalla's 216 activities into Babylonia (170).

In sum, Schlude rightly attributes (193-194) a role of Roman-Parthian wars 114-217 to the Arsacids' demise, but he has no problem with the historicity of either Parthian claims to be Achaemenid Persian heirs (a hotly contested topic) or even Sallust's *epistula Mithridatis*. The numbers of Parthian kings are often wrong (frequently Artabanus III for II and likewise for Vologaeses II-V). The microscopic maps (xv-xvi) add little; Fig. 3 lacks a caption; and the blurry Fig. 25 serves for show rather than illustration. Yet these flaws may lie with the publisher. Proofing errors are relatively few, but at least one is glaring: ΘΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ (3). I cannot recommend this book for undergraduate consumption, but it could be used for discussions in graduate seminars. One can only marvel at why editors of the *OCD* thought this work's arguments worthy of canonization in a standard reference work.

EVERETT L. WHEELER

Duke University, ewheeler@duke.edu

<sup>12</sup> U. Hartmann, "Die Ziele der Orientpolitik Trajans," in R. Rollinger *et al.*, eds, *Interkulturalität in der Alten Welt. Vorderasien, Hellas, Ägypten und die vielfältigen Ebenen des Kontakts* (Wiesbaden 2010) 591-633; K. Strobel, *Kaiser Traian. Eine Epoch der Weltgeschichte* (Regensburg 2010; 2019<sup>2</sup>); F. Lepper, *Trajan's Parthian War* (Oxford 1948).

<sup>13</sup> Strobel (*supra* n.12: 423-424) would replace the Alexander-*imitatio* with a desire to outdo Julius Caesar.