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NEILSON C. DEBEVOISE, *POLITICHESKAĪIA ISTORIĪA  
PARFII [A POLITICAL HISTORY OF PARTHIA],  
TRANSLATION, EDITORSHIP  
AND A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SUPPLEMENT  
BY V.P. NIKONOROV, SANKT-PETERSBURG:  
ST. PETERSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY. FACULTY OF  
PHILOLOGY AND ARTS (HISTORICAL LIBRARY), 2008.*

N.C. Debevoise's *A Political History of Parthia*, first published in 1938, is still perceived as one of the most significant books on the Parthians. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the first monograph devoted to Arsacid Iran, following such publications as: G. Rawlinson: *The Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy: or the Geography, History, and Antiquities of Parthia, collected and illustrated from Ancient and Modern sources*, London 1873 and A. von Gutschmid, *Geschichte Irans und seiner Nachbarländer von Alexander dem Grossen bis zum Untergang der Arsaciden*, Tübingen 1888. At present, the book by Debevoise, reprinted in 1970, remains a fundamental treatment of the Parthians next to such studies as A.D.H. Bivar, 'The Political History of Iran under the Arsacids' in E. Yarshater (ed.), *Cambridge History of Iran*, 3.1, Cambridge 1983, 21–99; M.A.R. Colledge, *Parthians*, London 1967; R. Ghirshman, *Iran, Parthians and Sassanians*, Paris 1962; J. Wolski, *L'Empire des Arsacides (Acta Iranica 32)*, Lovanii 1993.

The author uses a vast range of sources, encompassing historical data, archaeological research as well as epigraphic and numismatic studies. This was a new approach in historical research, which at the time drew notably from literary evidence. Debevoise's new approach introduced a fresh perspective on the history and culture of Parthian Iran and opened a new chapter in the Iranian studies. The interdisciplinary attitude of Debevoise was quickly noticed and appreciated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the review by W.W. Tarn, 'A Political History of Parthia by N. C. Debevoise' *JRS* 30, 1940, 110–112.

First chapter is devoted to the beginnings of Parthian history, perceived as a controversial issue till nowadays. Chronological and genealogical schemata presented by American scholar – including the list of the first Parthian kings – did not survive the test of time while confronted with modern research. New archeological excavations in Iran and Central Asia after the WWII allowed many previous hypothesis to be verified. New archaeological data proved the existence of Arsaces I, the founder of Arsacid Parthia, as was explored by J. Wolski, Polish scholar and the author of the first major study devoted to this ruler.<sup>2</sup>

The following two chapters of Debevoise's study focus on the geopolitical location of the Parthian kingdom and its dynamic relations with neighbours. The Arsacid monarchy was founded on Seleucid territories as a result of military conquest. Its borders stretched from the Seleucid state in the west to the confines of Bactria. Due to Parthian flexibility and diplomatic skills, the new Arsacid kingdom managed to survive several attempts of Seleucids retaking their lost provinces. The Parthian kingdom, robustly growing in the 2nd century BC under Mithradates I and II, expanded its borders and become a powerful empire, that was able to stop the Roman conquests in Asia in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

The Parthian empire is perceived by antique sources – concentrating on wars between the Parthians and Seleucids and later with Rome – as well by Eurocentric western scholars as a semi-Hellenized, barbarian rival of the Roman Empire. Such a perspective did not allow them to fully recognise geopolitical conditions in which the Parthian kingdom developed. Debevoise's study was the first to notice the importance of Central Asian peoples in Arsacid politics.

Not only did Parthians find assistance within Central Asian steppes but they had to deal with their dangers as well. It was necessary to cope with nomadic tribes arriving in waves in those areas. Graeco-Bactria was the victim of such attack which led to its fall around 130 BC. Two Arsacid monarchs Phraates II and Artabanos I lost their lives in combat with the nomads.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> J. Wolski, 'Arsaces I, założyciel państwa partyjskiego' ['Arsaces I, the founder of the Parthian state'] *Eos* 38, 1937, 492–513; *Eos* 39, 1938, 244–266 (= 'Arsace Ier, fondateur de l'État parthe' in *Commémoration Cyrus. Actes du congrès de Shiraz 1971 et autres études. Hommage universel* (Acta Iranica 3), Téhéran 1974, 159–199.

<sup>3</sup> More about Parthian Iran and Central Asia relations: M.J. Olbrycht, 'Die Kultur der Steppegebiete und die Beziehungen zwischen Nomaden und der sesshaften Bevölkerung (Der Arsacidische Iran und Nomadenvölker)' in J. Wischöfer (ed.) *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse, Beiträge des Internationalen Colloquiums*, Eutin (27–30. Juni 1996) (Historia. Einzelschriften. Heft 122) Stuttgart 1998, 11–43; idem, *Parthia et ultiores gentes. Die politischen Beziehungen zwischen dem arsakidischen Iran und den Nomaden der eurasischen Steppen*, München 1998; (2000): idem, 'Central Asia and the Arsacid Kingdom' in I.E. Berezkin (ed.): *Vzaimodistvie kultur i tsivilizatsii. V chest jubileia V. M. Massona*, St. Petersburg 2000, 177–193; idem, 'Parthia and Nomads of Central Asia. Elements of Steppe Origin in the Social and Military Developments of

Most part of the book concentrates on the Roman-Arsakid relations. Characteristic titles of the following chapters (*Antony and Armenia*, *Corbulo's campaign*, or *Trajan in Armenia and Mesopotamia*) suggest unequivocally that the author describes the centuries-long struggle between both powers in the Near East from the Roman perspective. As a result, while narrating Roman defeat in Carrhae in 53 BC, the author fails to mention the significance of this event for the Parthian internal affairs.<sup>4</sup> Hence, information about sentencing to death victorious general from the Sūren family, undoubtedly a politically risky step, is not placed in the book. One may not read about effects of the general's execution as well.

The chapter about Corbulo's campaign is also written from the Roman point of view. The struggle for Armenia ended in a military and political triumph of the Parthians over the Romans and allowed them to establish their rule over the kingdom. However, the author does not decidedly evaluate the Roman defeat. He concentrates more on the account of Parthian diplomatic efforts and the description of the Tiridates's coronation by Nero. He fails to notice that Roman invasion came to a halt in AD 117 after its failure in the siege of Hatra and seems to favour the opinion that Roman triumphs came to an end only after Traian's death. Actually, fast ceasing of military actions by next emperor Hadrian points to something entirely different: the war exhausted Rome and Hadrian was aware of an upcoming failure.

The last chapter is devoted to the fall of the Arsakids in Iran. The author overestimates the significance of the Caracalla's war against Parthia, launched in 217 and finished with a great Parthian victory over Rome at Nisibis (218). This victorious battle was the proof of Arsakid power. Debevoise leaves only short remarks concerning Arsakid overthrown in Iran – he mentions the war between Artabanos IV (213–224), or as the author calls him Artabanos V, and Ardashīr (224–241). Up to present times the exact circumstances of Sasanians' successful revolt and overthrowing Parthians have been difficult to reconstruct due to the scarcity of historical sources. Nowadays scholars assume that Ardashīr was able to gain the throne and maintain the power thanks to the support he received from the Iranian aristocracy, including powerful Parthian houses.

Examples given above concentrate on Debevoise's research, parts of which however expired due to the development of recent historical studies. Nonetheless, the American author cannot be denied erudition and skills in using diverse sources. Many of opinions presented in the book are still valid nowadays. Therefore Debevoise's work has remained the fundamental treatment of Parthian history.

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Arsacid Iran' in I. Schneider (ed.), *Mitteilungen des SFB "Differenz und Integration" 5: Militär und Staatlichkeit*, Halle/Saale 2003, 69–109.

<sup>4</sup> See now Giusto Traina, *La resa di Roma. Battaglia a Carre, 9 giugno 53 a.C.*, Rome – Bari 2010; French edition: *Carrhes, 9 juin 53 av. J.-C.*, avec une préface de Giovanni Brizzi, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2011.

The exceptionally meticulous Russian edition of Debevoise's work, published by Fakultet filologii i iskusstv Sankt-Petersburskogo gasudarstvennogo Universiteta in 'Historical Library Series' requires a separate description. V.P. Nikonorov, an outstanding Russian historian and archaeologist, specializing in Iran and Central Asia history, has been the book's Russian translator. The Russian edition is opened by an introduction provided by M.J. Olbrycht and V.P. Nikonorov, showing the meaning of the book for the history of research into Arsakid Iran. It is worth noticing that the Russian edition was partly supported by a grant from Polish Ministry of Science managed by M.J. Olbrycht. Both scholars point out Debevoise's scientific attitude, who was unable to fully break up with "western" view of the history, dominant at the time in historical science. Apart from observations concerning Debevoise's work, the introduction also focuses on his research and provides his fascinating biography prepared by M.J. Olbrycht, V.P. Nikonorov and L.V. Shadrichev. Debevoise resigned from his scholarly career during the WWII and his biography until his death in 1992 is known only on random basis.

To the new edition Nikonorov added many illustrations. Next to maps and black and white photographs, one must point out numerous colourful pictures, made available to the publication by K.M. Lizunov, M.J. Olbrycht, and R.G. Muradov. Pictorial material allows to familiarize with the look of specific monuments, what seems to be particularly important in a work largely based on archaeological sources.

The true value and uniqueness of the book under review, however, lies in its impressive, huge bibliography, compiled by V.P. Nikonorov. All the latest publications about history, culture and social and economic issues of Parthia and the neighbouring countries are mentioned. As a result the volume of the bibliography is bigger than the book itself (sic!), totaling at 516 pages. The bibliography is divided into several sections. Its first part encompasses publications about Iranian borderland: Transcaucasia, Western Mesopotamia and Adiabene. It needs to be emphasized that the notion of Iranian borderland is understood very broadly: not only as territories close to Iran, but such far destinations as northwest China or area in the Don River basin as well. All mentioned places were however connected by cultural and economical ties to Iran.

The Russian edition of the book by Debevoise constitutes due to Nikonorov's efforts one of the most important publications devoted to the Arsakids of the recent decades. The Debevoise's treatment has thus far endured the test of time and remains one of the leading handbooks on Parthian history, and I have no doubt that it will continue to do so for many years to come. The new bibliography compiled by Nikonorov is now an excellent device in researching Parthian and Hellenistic history.