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RECENT PERSPECTIVES ON PARTHIAN HISTORY: RESEARCH APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

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For historians of antiquity, the history of Parthia remains one of the most challenging areas of research. The reason for this is the great diversity of the sources, which makes it difficult to utilize them effectively. Furthermore, this history encompasses a vast area comprising many distinct regions, spanning from the Persian Gulf to Afghanistan. Therefore, there are not many multifaceted and comprehensive monographs on Parthian history. Wolski (1993), still essential, is too condensed and needs significant additions. Some recent monographs deal with Parthia-Rome relations (Schlude 2020; Nabel 2025). Most existing studies are partially outdated (Debevoise 1938), superficial, or lack substantial academic merit, as is often the case with many recent efforts. There are also interesting popular publications outside the scope of this review.

Three monographs on early Parthia have recently been released: Balakhvantsev (2017), Olbrycht (2021), and Overtoom (2020). In my 2021 monograph (*Early Arsakid Parthia*), I chose to omit some controversial issues offered by Overtoom (2020), believing that a debut author could be forgiven for shortcomings or errors. When N. Overtoom published his overly critical review of my book (Overtoom 2022),[1] I decided to respond by addressing his work more thoroughly, for the benefit of the historical research on the Arsakid and Hellenistic periods.

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[1] Several reviews of my book on early Parthia (Olbrycht 2021) have been published. See Nikolić 2021; Günther 2022; Lerner 2023; Müller 2025. I acknowledge the support of the Humboldt Foundation and the University of Münster, Germany.

Overtoom's book contains reasonable and correct conclusions. Thus, e.g., Overtoom (2020, 64) is right in his statement that "From Arsaces I to Mithridates II, the early Arsacids carved out a mighty imperial state that endured far longer than the previous hegemonies of the Achaemenids, Argeads, and Seleucids. This unexpected success created a legacy that inadvertently influenced the early relationship of the Parthians and Romans and eventually led to one of the longest-standing rivalries in history." It should be recognized that Overtoom (2020, 252) is correct in identifying the Guti with the Yuezhi and other tribes in Central Asia.

Overtoom's monograph is filled with footnotes, many of which cite numerous studies. However, it is often unclear whether these cited studies support or contradict the concepts presented. An example is the following passage: "Mithridates II appears to have occupied all of the lands of the former Kingdom of Bactria (likely including Sogdiana and Arachosia), extending the Parthian frontier in the east." Thus, reference is made to the conquests in Bactria and Arachosia under Mithradates II. This is what footnote 44 refers to, including 12 studies.[2] Of these studies, a large portion do not discuss eastern Parthian expansionism but instead focus on coin finds made in Bactria and Sogdiana. Contrary to Overtoom's (2020, 256) claims, the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian never visited Parthia in person.

It is necessary to point out the debatable interpretative background that Overtoom adopted: his book is based on several questionable premises. The author advocates for the neo-realist theory in international relations, although he prefers the term "realist theory" or an "international-systems approach." This concept is drawn from contemporary political science (Overtoom 2020, 25, n. 133). Neorealism, a framework taught by Kenneth Waltz at Columbia and Brandeis, has been widely employed in political science and historical research in the USA.[3] Overtoom (2020, 23) argues that realist theory is "a useful and rewarding theoretical framework for the study of geopolitical history in the ancient world, especially in the third to first centuries." He believes that the structural realist approach to international relations helps us reevaluate the reasons for Parthian success within the broader international context of the ancient Middle East. Overtoom's approach is notable for its unquestioning acceptance of realist theory as a research model without offering any detailed justification for its merits.

However, what Overtoom considers a valuable framework raises questions for historians of the period and scholars of Oriental studies, as it appears to be a flawed methodological approach in some aspects. Overtoom claims that "realist theorists argue that interactions between states become increasingly tense because the understanding of power capabilities between states is opaque"

[2] "Olbrycht 2010b: 151–53; Overtoom 2019b: 14–15. Compare Pilipko 1976; Koshelenko and Sarianidi 1992; Rtveladze 1992: 33; id. 1994: 87; Zeymal 1997; Rtveladze 2000; Biriukov 2010; Litvinskii 2010; Gorin 2010; Olbrycht 2012b."

[3] See, e.g., Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2018.

(Overtoom 2020, 19). However, the statement that "in a system of interstate anarchy, warfare is the only way to determine actual state power and its relation to the power capabilities of other states" (ibidem) is misleading. Numerous forms of diplomatic and economic relations can regulate conflicts or prevent armed confrontations. Furthermore, when analyzing inter-state relations, cultural, religious (e.g., references to cults), and economic factors that do not relate to the military sphere should be taken into account.[4] A fine example of the coexistence of several large states and a whole group of small principalities is the political system in Western Asia around 1500-1100 B.C., which has been described in detail by researchers. It was not anarchy, but an advanced system of relations that is still referred to today in the diplomacy.[5] The realist theory is not comprehensive in covering the full spectrum of relations between states and nations.[6]

The realist theory fails to account for significant deviations in actual state behavior. Leadership, domestic politics, religion, cults, ideology, economic and technological conditions, and international institutions play crucial roles in shaping state behavior. These influences and interconnections can lead to outcomes that the so-called "realist theory" cannot predict or explain. By and large, a more nuanced approach to understanding international relations is needed – one that incorporates domestic and transnational factors, acknowledges the role of change, and recognizes that a wider array of variables influences cooperation and conflict than the realist theory allows. While realist theory has contributed valuable insights to the study of ancient history, it faces substantial challenges from multiple theoretical perspectives. Alternative approaches – ranging from constructivism to postcolonial theories – offer richer, more nuanced frameworks for understanding the complexity of ancient international relations.[7] Rather than reducing ancient politics to power

[4] The essay by May, Rosecrance, and Steiner (2010, 6-7) offers insightful critiques of the fundamental shortcomings of realist theory. They argue that "realists and neorealists have overlooked the importance of "change," ignored ideological, economic, and social constraints, and downplayed the significance of ideological leadership. They have ignored the key factor of geography, in itself a changing circumstance; they have omitted theory and international history of transnational ties and institutional, economic, and social factors that affect the international environment in which states operate and, indeed, alter the balance between the state and the international order." See also Ahrensdorf 1997.

[5] See Liverani 2001.

[6] The limitations resulting from the application of the "realist" theory in historical research were pointed out by J.D. Lerner (2022, 444): "The predicative capability of the Realist theory is limited merely to a binary proposition that rulers faced: anarchy or warfare in which only recurrent war or hegemonial domination was the logical outcome. In other words, it is a self-fulfilling proposition." As wisely noted by a scholar, "According to this theory, states coexist in a Hobbesian, dog-eat-dog condition, where war and conquest are required to survive. Overtoom relies on this theory to explain the endless wars of this period" (Chaffetz 2020).

[7] One of the more commendable models of international relations is the concept developed by Paweł Włodkowic (c. 1370–1435), also known as Paulus Vladimiri. He was a Polish scholar, diplomat, and the rector of Cracow Academy. His concept, termed the theory of permissive natural

(chiefly military) competition, these theories illuminate the roles of culture, cults, norms, institutions, networks, and ideas in shaping the ancient world. The ongoing scholarly debate reflects the vitality of the field and the continued need for theoretical innovation in ancient history studies.

When sources are lacking, a pattern of the realist theory is sometimes injected. This leads to risky conclusions. By way of an example, Overtoom (2020, 199) claims, "Moreover, a closer evaluation of the geopolitical developments in the region through the framework of Realist Theory strengthens the case that the cities in Mesopotamia sided with Antiochus in 130 because of systemic pressures." It is difficult to understand how realist theory can enable the reconstruction of the course of Antiochos VII Sidetes' expedition against Parthia.

In ancient history, Arthur Eckstein (2006) applied the realist theory to the Hellenistic world and Rome's expansion in his work *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*. However, his efforts yielded results, some of which were heavily criticized. The book was critiqued by German historian Karl Hölkeskamp (2009), who highlighted the shortcomings of Eckstein's approach, particularly the inadequacy of the theoretical model he employed. Interestingly, Eckstein emphasized the connections between realist theory and Mommsen's concept of imperialism (2006a; 2012). Hölkeskamp also noticed this connection. Eckstein's analysis draws upon Mommsen's work, highlighting the alignment between his own interpretation and the fundamental tenets of Mommsen's classic thesis, which viewed Rome as a force for ordering the "Hellenistic world" of anarchy. In this approach, the expansion of the Roman Empire was seen chiefly as a reaction to systemic pressures rather than a manifestation of the Romans' exceptional, pathological imperialism.[8] Essentially, the same model can be seen in Mommsen's and Waltz's theories, namely the justification of military force used by a given power as the only solution to remove alleged "interstate anarchy." Conquest is viewed as a universal remedy to political "chaos."

Overtoom (2020, 5) criticizes Mommsen for viewing the Parthian uprising as a nationalistic movement;[9] However, he found in my book a "nationalistic"

law or just war theory, represents one of the earliest and most systematic formulations of international law principles. Włodkowic's ideas, which include advocating for diplomatic solutions and the sovereignty of states, are considered precursors to modern human rights principles and international relations theory. He opposed the use of brute force in politics (Bełch 1965; Wielgus 1998).

[8] It is not difficult to see Mommsen's parallel with his chauvinistic recognition of Prussian imperialism and the Second German Reich as a kind of necessity to bring order to Europe on the eve of the 19th/20th centuries. Mommsen labeled himself a "liberal," but was a fervent advocate of German nationalism and maintained a militant stance toward Slavic peoples, including Czechs and Poles. See his 1897 letter to the *Neue Freie Presse* of Vienna.

[9] Overtoom 2020, 5: "A good example of misguided "unit-attribute" theory in Parthian studies is the notion that Parthian success stemmed from a "nationalistic" Iranian backlash against the Hellenistic Seleucids. Theodor Mommsen described the Parthian rebellion and war against the Seleucids as a nationalistic crusade against Hellenism." Mommsen evaluates Parthia according

aberration, and in the spirit of Mommsen and Waltz, he condemned it: "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 (Overtoom 2022, 46). The statement refers to the phrase "Iranian and Greek aspirations for independence" (Olbrycht 2021, 31), specifically regarding Parthia and Bactria. This insinuation is a hasty attempt to put a misleading label on legitimate scholarly conclusions.

According to Overtoom, the history of Parthia is marked mainly by wars and transitional crises between major conflicts. Indeed, the sources discuss wars in great detail, but one must also consider other aspects of the source tradition. What is falsely called "interstate anarchy" is usually the system of equilibrium of many countries (involving treaties, alliances, and conflicts), as was the case, for example, in the 2nd-1st centuries B.C., when there were various states in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East - the Seleukid Empire, Pergamon, Kappadokia, Bithynia, Pontos, Greater Armenia, Egypt, Macedonia, Judaea and other minor kingdoms. It was not anarchy, although the Seleukids' specific degradation became apparent in their constant domestic struggle. It was a world order and a particular hierarchy involving major states and smaller kingdoms.

Overtoom relies solely on classical sources, largely ignoring archaeological evidence, particularly from Turkmenistan and Iranian Khorasan. He references several works focused on Western Parthia, including Hatra and Nineveh, which only play a minor role in his narrative. Additionally, he cites E.J. Keall, who addressed Western Iran during the Later Parthian period. Overtoom fails to study the numismatic sources independently, instead relying heavily on the work of F. Assar and accepting sometimes questionable theories without scrutiny. For instance, Overtoom follows Assar in asserting that Arsakes IV was a historical figure around 170 B.C., despite the absence of any primary source mentioning him. He claims (2020, 153) that "Phriapatius died around 170, and new epigraphic evidence from Nisa suggests the existence of a previously unknown Parthian king, now known as Arsaces IV, who was the great-grandson of Arsaces I and Phriapatius' second cousin once removed. He reigned briefly for two years before dying unexpectedly in his early thirties as an ineffective leader without an heir." However, in notes 122 and 123, the main source of his information is derived from five works by Assar and a study by Karras-Klapproth, which is irrelevant to the topic. Overtoom accepts this theory without conducting an independent analysis of it. This pattern is repeated throughout the volume, which

to his model, seeing in the rise of the Parthian state "a national and religious reaction" – Mommsen 1894, vol. 3, 288: "the Parthian state, as compared with that of the Seleucids, was based on a national and religious reaction, and that the old Iranian language, the order of the Magi and the worship of Mithra, the Oriental feudatory system, the cavalry of the desert and the bow and arrow, first emerged there in renewed and superior opposition to Hellenism."

raises doubts about the validity of the author's conclusions. Between Phraates II and Mithradates II, Assar in Overtoom (2020, 248) posits the existence of three kings – two named Artabanos and one named Arsakes (c. 127–121 B.C.) – despite historical records mentioning only Artabanos I during this period. Overtoom takes these speculative assertions at face value, demonstrating a lack of independent scrutiny of the written sources and numismatic evidence.

Overall, the absence of a thorough approach to the evidence significantly limits the quality of Overtoom's book, which is rife with speculation and interpretation without the application of rigorous historical methodology. In the field of historical research, the appropriate use of sources is crucial, and, unfortunately, Overtoom's work falls significantly short of the expected standard.

Issues of historical geography are likewise missing. Chaffetz (2020) pointed out this major shortcoming: "It would have been helpful had Overtoom devoted more attention to geography, explaining where and what resources were exploited by his protagonists." The Ochos River, where Arsakes I lived, is not mentioned.

The term "Hellenistic" Middle East (Overtoom 2020, 246 and passim) is not appropriate for Arsakid expansion under Mithradates II and his successors. It is better to avoid the label "Hellenistic" for this phase, when the role of states with dynasties of Greek-Macedonian descent, i.e., Hellenistic kingdoms, was marginal. In particular, it is challenging to consider Armenia, Adiabene, or Mesene as "Hellenistic" states.

The use of the designation "Iranian interstate system" for the Parthian Empire is questionable: "the Parthian Empire under Mithridates remained an unlimited revisionist state that aggressively pursued the complete dominance of the much-expanded Iranian interstate system" (Overtoom 2020, 250-251). Such terminology is inappropriate as the Arsakid Empire included not only kingdoms in Iran, such as Atropatene, Elymais, and Persis, but also claimed territories in many countries outside of Iran, including Babylonia, Mesene, Adiabene, Osrhoene, Armenia, Albania, and Seleukid Syria.

One issue with Overtoom's book is its organization, particularly the use of enigmatic chapter titles. A similar problem exists with subchapters appearing in different fonts. Apparently, they are intended to represent various levels of importance, but it is unclear what significance, if any, they may hold. Overtoom often applies a Seleukid perspective: the subchapter "A New Crisis" (p. 162) begins with the statement, "After becoming king in 175, Antiochus IV appointed his close friend Timarchus to the major command of viceroy over the Upper Satrapies." Bactria and Demetrios appear in subsection titles, but the less experienced reader will be confused. After the subheading "Recovery" on p. 150, there is the subsection "The Disaster of Demetrius." And where is the Parthian conquest of Babylonia? According to Overtoom 2020, 175 (with n. 175): "Justin

in 41.6.8 states that the Parthians conquered Elymais before conquering Babylonia." Nevertheless, this claim is not justified, as there is no mention of Babylonia in Justin 41.6; the passage mentions Media, Hyrcania, and Elymais.

Contrary to Overtoom's claim on p. 171 n. 227, Justin 41.6.7–8 records that Mithradates returned to Hyrcania after finalizing his conquest of Media. The statement on page 173 raises doubts: "Mithridates entered the symbolically powerful cities of Seleucia and Babylon as a triumphant conqueror, appointing commanders of Greek descent to maximize support in the region." Next, in footnote 235, Overtoom states that Mithradates I appointed Antiochos, son of King Ar'abuzana, as his supreme commander, with Nikanor as one of Antiochos' subordinates. Overtoom does not discuss Antiochos in detail but apparently believes he was Greek. However, this prince was the son of King Ariobarzanes, an Iranian ruler likely from Media Atropatene. From the reign of Phraates II, we know that there were commanders called Philinos and Theodosios, who seem to have been of Greek or Macedonian descent, judging by their names, but this remains a hypothesis.[10] One of the supreme governors was Himeros, the Hyrcanian. And the Arsakid viceroy in Greater Media was Bagayasha, the brother of Mithradates I.

Chapter 5, "The Climax of the Seleucid-Parthian Rivalry" (pp. 189-245) begins with the mention of Mithradates I. The first footnote reads, "The Parthians revered Mithridates so much that they deified him. Assar 2011: 118." I take it on faith that Mithradates was deified, but I would prefer to have source evidence to support this assertion. In fact, the chapter chiefly deals not with Mithradates I but with Antiochos VII and his war against Phraates II.

Overtoom mentions Phraates II's seizure of power only in passing (2020, 198): "He began his reign by consolidating Parthian hegemony over Elymais in 132/131, and he also initiated extensive military preparations in Babylonia in 131." It is essential to know where Phraates was in 130 B.C. because he did not stay in Mesopotamia and did not confront the invading army of Antiochos VII. Overtoom claims that he was making preparations there and pacifying Elymais. It seems more likely that Phraates stayed in the eastern borderlands of Parthia, fighting the nomads.[11]

Overtoom (2020, 267 and 275) presents a speculative version of the end of Mithradates II's reign. According to this view, in ca. 93 B.C., the remaining son of Mithradates I, Sinatrukes, rebelled against Mithradates II. Mithradates II died around 91 B.C., and one of his successors was "his son Mithradates III". Overtoom does not discuss the accounts himself but extensively quotes several works by Assar as the basis for his narrative.

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[10] A comprehensive account of these officials and commanders was compiled by Mitsuma (2021), published after Overtoom (2020) had been released.

[11] Olbrycht 1998, 86.

On questions of the origins of Parthian military traditions, Overtoom (2020, 37) presents a sound position: "The innovations of the Parthian army were indeed exceptional in the Hellenistic Middle East. Although the Parthians settled on the Iranian plateau and came to embrace many cultural influences from Greek and Persian neighbors, they did not adopt the military traditions of the Greeks and Persians. Instead, the Parthians continued to emphasize the asymmetric cavalry tactics and organization of their nomadic roots. The Parthians recruited their cavalry largely from settler-soldiers, who offered service in exchange for land; however, the Parthians' cavalry-focused militarism was of steppe origin, and the social structure of the Parthian state remained closely connected to its military organization."

In his review of my book (Olbrycht 2021), Overtoom (2022, 46) raises concerns about its balanced approach: "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." This is a flawed argument, which stems from a completely different research methodology than that used by Overtoom. If we detach the history of Andragoras and the activities of the Seleucids in the province of Parthia prior to Arsakes from the broader context of early Arsakid Parthian history and culture, it becomes challenging to justify this approach. In his articles and influential book, Józef Wolski extensively examined the origins of the Parthian state, devoting a significant portion to Seleucid history (Wolski 1993). This focus is also reflected in my own book.

Overtoom (2022) applies the ambiguous terms "provocative reconstruction" and "speculative reconstruction" to place my book (Olbrycht 2020) in a negative light: "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". It would have been more instructive had he engaged directly with the scholarship rather than relying on superficial labels.

In his review, Overtoom criticizes my statement that Antiochos III died looting a temple in southern Iran "to pay enormous tribute to Rome (when it appears undeniably that Antiochus' true purpose was to gain the money he needed for a new eastern campaign) (Olbrycht, 2021, pp. 68–69)." Fortunately for us, Justin (32.2.1-2) provides an explanation of the event - Antiochos needed money for Rome: "In Syria, meanwhile, king Antiochos, being burdened, after he was conquered by the Romans, with a heavy tribute under his articles of peace, and being impelled by want of money or stimulated by avarice, brought up his army one night, and made an assault upon the temple of Jupiter in Elymais, hoping that he might more excusably commit sacrilege under plea of wanting money to pay his tribute. But the affair became known, he was killed by a rising of the people who dwelt about the temple." In Elymais, Antiochos III wanted

to repeat his exploit of Ekbatana in 211/0 B.C.: the sacrilegious plundering of a local sanctuary.[12]

In the peculiar realm of realist theory, the position of Parthia is difficult to determine. Although it was a kind of superpower, did it remain an element of an alleged "interstate anarchy"? Overtoom's Parthia is a state that increasingly became a "rogue superpower" – neither committed to internationalism nor retreating into isolationism, but instead pursued an assertive, self-interested foreign policy. The lack of a nuanced and subtle analysis of the sources leads Overtoom to reconstruct a Parthia that acted unilaterally by prioritizing its imperial (if not "nationalistic") military interests over multilateral cooperation. This approach thus views Parthia as a state built purely on its military prowess without the constraints of regional consensus or alliance obligations, whose only notable contribution was to bring anarchy into the world. Overtoom uses a theoretical model that partially distorts historical reality, making it inaccurate and misleading.

In the field of research on Parthia, Overtoom's book fails to provide sorely needed insights. To a certain extent, Overtoom offers interesting reflections on the wars and struggles associated with the expansion of Parthia, but these issues are often discussed from the Seleukids' perspective, who were essentially the enemies of Parthia. While Overtoom effectively demonstrated his writing skills in his shorter articles on Parthia, his "realist" models in the monograph under review are over-utilized. They should have been set aside to focus instead on extracting valuable information about Parthian history.

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[12] Will 1982, II, 239.

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Abstract

Historians specializing in antiquity face significant challenges when studying Parthian history. This difficulty primarily stems from the wide variety of sources available, which makes them complex to utilize effectively. Furthermore, Parthian history encompasses a vast territory, including numerous distinct regions that stretch from the Persian Gulf to Afghanistan. Consequently, comprehensive, multifaceted monographs on Parthian history are scarce. Recently, three monographs on early Parthia have been published: Balakhvantsev (2017), Olbrycht (2021), and Overtoom (2020). Overtoom's work employs a theoretical model that distorts historical reality in certain aspects, resulting in inaccuracies and misleading conclusions. The author supports the neo-realist theory in international relations. Historians of this period and scholars in Oriental studies should approach this model and methodological concept with caution, utilizing a broader research spectrum.