



**Sabine Müller**  
(Germany)

**MAREK JAN OLBRYCHT,**  
***EARLY ARSAKID PARTHIA (CA. 250-165 B.C.)***  
***AT THE CROSSROADS OF IRANIAN, HELLENISTIC,***  
***AND CENTRAL ASIAN HISTORY, LEIDEN / BOSTON:***  
**BRILL 2021 (MNEMOSYNE SUPPLEMENTS 440), 377 P.,**  
**ISBN: 978-90-04-46075-1**

Since compared to Teispid and Achaimenid history, Arsakid Parthia appears to be still understudied – although particularly the recent years saw a notable increase in Arsakid studies – Marek Jan Olbrycht, one of the internationally leading authorities on ancient Iranian history, coinage, and archaeology,<sup>1</sup> enriches the current scholarly debate by this new book (p. IX).

Examining the emergence, rise, and development of Parthia with its cultural interdependencies and political connections from Hellenistic times (3rd century BC) to the era of conquests (2nd century BC), Olbrycht provides the first comprehensive monograph on this subject in the current scholarly debate. The study is based on the whole range of sources available: literary, epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological evidence. It pays special attention to the multifold problems posed by the evidence such as its scarce nature or the Greek and Roman perspective of the literary accounts.

Carefully divided into clear sections, the monograph operates convincingly with a combined chronologic and systematic approach. The first part is dedicated to the geopolitical situation of pre-Arsakid Parthia in Hellenistic times (chapters 1-3, pp. 17-100), the second part treats the emergence and development of the Arsakid realm (chapters 4-7, pp. 103-238), and the third part examines the numismatic and archaeological evidence (chapters 8-9, pp. 241-293).

---

<sup>1</sup> To cite only a few of his numerous essential publications: Olbrycht 1996; 1997; 1998a; 1998b; 2009; 2010; 2013; 2014; 2016; 2017; 2021.

In a highly clear and user-friendly way, most of the chapters end with a short conclusion; the essential results are additionally summed up in concluding remarks (pp. 294-295).

Carefully introducing the readers to the subject, a preliminary chapter informs about scholarship on pre-Arsakid and Arsakid Parthia. In addition, the geopolitical setting of the regions in discussion is explained (pp. 1-13). As for the latter, Olbrycht's profound personal knowledge of the area and its climatic conditions proves to be a major advantage.

Setting the stage for the Parthian rise, chapter 1 explains the geopolitical situation in Northeastern Iran and the Caspian-Aral region in Post-Achaimenid times (pp. 17-36). Chapter 2 discusses the tendencies to disintegration in the Seleukid Empire paving the way to the Parthian struggle for autonomy (pp. 37-72). Chapter 3 is concerned with the important event of the revolt of Andragoras, governor of Parthia-Hyrkania, against the Seleukid rule (pp. 73-100). Critically analyzing the fragmentary literary and the numismatic evidence, particularly the iconography of the coins minted in Andragoras' name as a sign of independent sovereignty, Olbrycht also re-assesses the etymology of his name and importance of his commemoration in Arsakid cultural memory.

Chapter 4 (pp. 103-125) embeds the rise of Arsakid Parthia in its geographical context and brings light into some notoriously debated issues such as the location of the River Ochos (pp. 103-119). Chapter 5 analyzes the crucial events of the *defectio Parthorum* under Arsakes, his subsequent career, and his portrayal in the literary sources (pp. 126-161). Olbrycht argues plausibly that the mysterious figure of Arsakes I's brother Tiridates was in fact a historical person whose commemoration may have been intensified by Tiridates, a pretender challenging Phraates IV: in order to legitimize his claims, Tiridates may have tried to get himself a prestigious namesake from the glorious past (pp. 147-149). Debating the results of the influential Parthian expert Józef Wolski,<sup>2</sup> Olbrycht suggests a revised chronological order of events, re-dating the battle of Ankyra to 244/243 BC (pp. 77, 160-161).

Chapter 6 treats the achievements and problems of Arsakes I and pays special attention to his relations with the steppe people (pp. 162-200). Chapter 7 is devoted to the development of the Arsakid realm and rule from Arsakes II to Phraates I (pp. 201-256).

The Arsakid coinage, mints, resources, and iconography with its reflections of the self-proclaimed royal image as well as the legends of the coins are thoroughly analyzed in chapter 8 (pp. 241-256). Completing the study, the last chapter is concerned with the archaeological perspective on early Arsakid Parthia (pp. 257-293).

<sup>2</sup> Wolski 1956/1957, 41-42; Wolski 1996, 181; Wolski 2003, 26, n. 44.

The book is equipped with a genealogic list of the early Arsakids (p. XVII), a profound map, 16 color pictures of excellent quality, carefully embedded in the text, an extensive bibliography (pp. 297-354), and useful indices (pp. 365-377). As for another advantage, the monograph provides bilingual citations of ancient literary sources, the Greek or Latin texts and English translations, revised by Olbrycht, and uses the Greek, not the Latinized spelling for Greek names.

In sum, Olbrycht provides a highly impressive study reflecting his profound expertise in Iranian political, cultural, and material history from the Achaimenids and Alexander to the Diadochs and Seleukids and the Arsakids. The monograph clearly shows the efforts and results of life-long research on the subject. As mentioned before, particularly Olbrycht's own familiarity with the regions under discussion is a clear advantage adding to his convincing argumentations.

Overall, he provides the reader with an immense wealth of information, new ideas, re-assessments, and plausible solutions to much debated scholarly issues. To name just a few: the re-dating of the Fraternal War to 244/243 BC (p. 72); the reflections on Andragoras' rare name, its etymology, and dependence on the Iranian *Narseh* (pp. 83-84); the suggestions regarding the propagandistic use of the figure of Tiridates by his namesake, the pretender against Phraates IV (pp. 147-149); the re-consideration of the role of the Aparnoi in Arsakid times (pp. 121-122) or the thoughts on the etymology of the name of Friyapatak (pp. 220-221).

The excellent book with the richness of its expert knowledge and complexity of arguments clearly addresses a scholarly audience. However, thanks to the clear structure, user-friendly division, and comprehensive bibliography it can also be recommended to graduate students working on Arsakid Parthia. In any case, Olbrycht's comprehensive monograph will certainly become a standard work and "Must Read," strongly recommended to all interested in Arsakid and in Seleukid history.

## Bibliography

- Olbrycht, M.J. 1996: 'Das Arsakidenreich zwischen der mediterranen Welt und Innerasien. Bemerkungen zur politischen Strategie der Arsakiden von Vologases I. bis zum Herrschaftsantritt Vologases III. (50-147 n. Chr.)' *Electrum* 2, 123-159.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 1997: 'Parthian King's Tiara. Numismatic Evidence and some Aspects of Arsacid Political Ideology' *Notae Numismaticae* 2, 27-57.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 1998a: *Parthia et ulterior gentes. Die politischen Beziehungen zwischen dem arsakidischen Iran und den Nomaden der eurasischen Steppen*, Munich.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 1998b: 'Die Kultur der Steppengebiete und die Beziehungen zwischen Nomaden und der sesshaften Bevölkerung' in J. Wiesehöfer (ed.), *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse*, Stuttgart, 11-44.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 2009: 'Mithridates VI Eupator and Iran' in J.M. Højte (ed.), *Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom*, Aarhus, 163-190.

- Olbrycht, M.J. 2010: 'The Early Reign of Mithradates II the Great in Parthia' *Anabasis. Studia Classica et Orientalia* 1, 144-158.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 2013: 'The Titulature of Arsaces I, King of Parthia' *Parthica* 15, 63-74.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 2014: *Imperium Parthicum. Kryzys i odbudowa państwa Arsakidów w pierwszej połowie I wieku po Chr. (Imperium Parthicum. Crisis and Revival of the Arsacid State in the First Half of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D.)*, Kraków.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 2016: 'Manpower Resources and Army Organisation in the Arsacid Empire' *Ancient Society* 46, 291-338.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 2017: 'Greeks in the Arsacid Empire' in J. Wiesehöfer / S. Müller (eds.), *Parthika: Greek and Roman Authors's Views of the Arsacid Empire*, Wiesbaden, 2-28.
- Olbrycht, M.J. 2021: 'Parthian Warfare under the Early Arsacids' in W. Heckel et al. (eds.), *A Companion to Greek Warfare*, Malden / Oxford, 185-201.
- Wolski, J. 1956/1957: 'The Decay of the Iranian Empire of the Seleucids and the Chronology of the Parthian Beginning' *Berytus* 12, 35-52.
- Wolski, J. 1996: 'Les débuts de l'État parthe et ses contacts avec l'Asie Centrale' in *La Persia e L'Asie Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo*, Rome, 179-185.
- Wolski, J. 2003: *Seleucid and Arsacid Studies: A Progress Report on Developments in Source Research*, Kraków.