



TACITUS

TACITUS, PUBLIUS CORNELIUS, Roman official and historian (ca. 55-120 CE).

Tacitus originated from Gaul (Roman *Galia Narbonensis*) and had a senatorial career in the Flavian period (70-96 CE). He was a consul in 97 and proconsul in the province of Asia (western Turkey) in 112. He died in about 120 (Tacitus: PIR² C1467; Syme, 1958, 1970; Borzsák; Oliver; Birley). Tacitus' most cited works are the *Annals* (*Cornelii Taciti Annalium ab excessu divi Augusti libri*) and the *Histories* (*Historiae*). In addition, Tacitus published minor works, including the *Life of Agricola* (*De vita Iulii Agricolae*), the *Dialogue on orators* (*Dialogus de oratoribus*), and *Germania* (*De origine et situ Germanorum*, i.e., *Origin and Situation of the Germans*) (see Walker; Questa; Flach; Sage; Pomeroy; Potter, 2012; Woodman; Pagán; Zecchini, pp. 160-64).

The major works. Tacitus's *Annals* represent, alongside the *Antiquitates Judaicae* of Flavius Josephus, the most important source for the Roman-Parthian relations of the 1st century CE. Due to the relative sparseness of Parthian sources, Tacitus' data on Parthia, chiefly included in the *Annals*, but scattered also in his other works (the *Historiae* and *Germania*), is of particular importance (Walser; Sonnabend; Ehrhardt; Thommen; cf. Pfordt; Lerouge, pp. 129-49; Gregoratti). Tacitus provides much information on political and military relations between Parthia and Rome, including also Armenia (q.v.) and southern Caucasia (Iberia, Albania) as the regions that were involved in close contacts with Parthia. Although Tacitus offers no ethnographic descriptions, like Justin (41.1-3), his Parthian accounts provide valuable evidence on Parthian customs and society. Tacitus often resorts to a



psychological approach that partly replaces political clarification. Moreover, he uses traditional stereotypes, including “barbarian” clichés circulating in Rome. As a rule, however, a careful scrutiny enables getting abundant information that features a high level of credibility on developments in the Arsacid Empire. Tacitus’ diction entails undertones referring to contemporary Roman politics (Keitel; Devillers, 2016).

The *Annals*, completed about 110-20 CE, is one of the most outstanding works of ancient historiography (Hahn; Questa; Syme, 1977; Benario, 1975, 1983). Originally, the *Annals* consisted of 16 or 18 books, of which books 1-4 and 12-15 are extant, and 5, 6, 11 and 16 are preserved in fragments. They cover the period from the accession of Tiberius in 14 CE to the death of Nero in 68 CE. The exact date of the completion of the *Annals* is debatable (Syme, 1958, pp. 467-74; Potter, 1991, pp. 287-90; Birley, pp. 242-46). Presumably the work was finished in the initial years of the reign of Hadrian (q.v; r. 117-38 CE). It appears that Tacitus’ accounts on Parthia include an indirect criticism of Trajan’s (q.v.) Parthian policy, which was aimed at direct military confrontation (Syme, 1958, p. 492 ff.; Koestermann, 1968, p. 173).

The dating of the *Annals* is linked by some scholars with *Ann.* 2.61.2 where it is said that the Roman Empire extended to the Red Sea (*quod nunc Rubrum ad mare patescit*). Since the term *mare Rubrum* can be interpreted as the Persian Gulf, the passage would refer to the conquest of Mesopotamia and Characene/Mesene (qq.v.) by Trajan (116/117 CE). Moreover, it is assumed that Characene/Mesene was under Roman predominance in 117-51 (Potter, 1991, p. 290; Ehrhardt, p. 306). However, the view of Characene/Mesene as a kingdom subject to Rome after 117 is without foundation. All one can say is that Characene/Mesene retained some independence and was the subject of dynastic fights within the Parthian Empire (Olbrycht, 1998b, pp. 140-41).

Chapters of the *Annals* that depict Roman-Parthian relations may be divided into three chronological sections, related to the emperors Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero.

1) The reign of Vonones I (ca. 8/9-11/12 CE) and Artabanus II (q.v.; ca. 8/9-39/40 CE) in Parthia, with retrospections dealing with Phraates IV and Phraates V (Phraataces, qq.v.). Late in the reign of Augustus, the Romans supported the Parthian pretender Vonones I who seized the Arsacid throne but was soon expelled. The new Arsacid king, Artabanus II, defeated Vonones (*Ann.* 2.1-4,

56-58; cf. Olbrycht, 2013a; 2013b; 2014; 2016a; 2018). In 34-37 CE, Artabanus II intervened in Armenia and faced a strong Roman pressure but was able to overcome Roman aggressive measures (*Ann.* 6.31-37, 41-44; cf. Olbrycht, 2012).

2) The next section concerns the 40s CE and the reign of Vardanes (39/40-45) and Gotarzes II (see [GÖDARZ](#), 45-51 CE) in Parthia. Books 7-10 and partially book 11 of the *Annals* are not preserved (in Rome, the reign of Gaius Caligula and the first six years of Claudius); however, *Annals* 11.8-10 and 12.10-14 offer valuable data on Vardanes and Gotarzes II (basically after 47 CE) with retrospective digressions (see Olbrycht, 1997; 1998c; 2013a; 2013b; Schottky).

3) A detailed body of information deals with the reign of Vologases I (see [BALĀŠ](#) I, r. 50-79 CE) in Parthia and his war on Rome over Armenia (*Ann.* 12.44-51; 13.6-9, 34-41; 14.23-26; 15.1-18, 24-31; cf. Gilmartin; Dąbrowa, 1983; Heil; Olbrycht, 1998a; 1998b; 2016c; Müller, 2014; 2016). The last news that refers to these events is that of the arrival of Tiridates in Rome (*Ann.* 16.23.2-24.1), who was confirmed by Nero as king in Armenia (66 CE; cf. Wolski).

The *Histories* that were written about 105-9 CE deal with the “year of four emperors” and the Flavian dynasty (69-96). Of 12 or 14 books, only the first four survived in their entirety, and parts of the fifth. The extant books depict the events from 1 January 69 to the summer of 70 (Syme, 1958, pp. 117-20; Birley, p. 241). In the Flavian period, there were serious tensions between Rome and Parthia under Pacorus II (r. 79-110) (Debevoise, pp. 201-2; Olbrycht, 1998b, pp. 131-34; Dąbrowa, 1981), so the *Histories* must have included detailed information on them. In the preserved parts of the *Histories*, there are several passages dealing with Parthia: *Hist.* 1.2.1 (false Nero), 2.6 (Parthia and civil wars in Rome), 2.82.3 (Vespasian’s mission to Parthia); 3.24 (references to [Mark Antony](#) [q.v.] and Corbulo); 4.51.1-2 (Vologases I offers 40,000 horse archers to Vespasian in 69); 5.8.2-3 (reference to Arsaces and Antiochus [q.v.]), 5.9.1 (reference to Pacorus I and Bassus). At the time, in 68-69, the Roman-Parthian relationship remained peaceful despite occasional differences due to the fact that Jews from Parthia and representatives of Parthian [Adiabene](#) (q.v.) supported the Jewish rebellion against Rome in 66-70 (Olbrycht, 1998b, p. 133).

Fundamentally, Tacitus refers in his historical works to the events that belong to his chief focus (in the extant books), i.e., the time span 14-70 CE. There are also some references to events that occurred before 14 CE, e.g., to Crassus and his expedition (*Ann.* 2.2.2); to the Parthian campaign of P. Ventidius Bassus



(*Hist.* 5.9.1); to the expedition of Mark Antony (*Hist.* 2.2.2; 3.24.2); to Antony's activities in Armenia (*Ann.* 2.3.1–2); and to the activities of Augustus vis-à-vis Parthia and Armenia (*Ann.* 2.1.2; 2.4.1; 12.11.1). There is a reference to Parthian power in the 160s BCE, when [Antiochus IV Epiphanes](#) (q.v.) intervened in western Iran (*Hist.* 5.8.2-3). There are some general references to the Persians and Medes in the times of the legendary Rhamses (*Ann.* 2.60), to the historical Persians (*Ann.* 3.61: Persian rule in Ephesus; 12.13: town of Ninus near the battlefield of Darius III) and Atropatenian Medes (2.4: Ariobarzanes the Mede; 2.56, 6.34: Medes in Caucasia; 12.14: king Vonones II of Media; 13.41: Media in the plans of Tiridates, king of Armenia; 14.26: Media as a base of Tiridates; 15.2: Pacorus, king of Media; 15.31: Pacorus in Media, Vologases in Ecbatana). The important passage *Ann.* 6.31 is discussed below.

Despite his general statements about annalistic chronological arrangement, Tacitus often resorts to favoring thematic coherence over chronology (*Ann.* 12.40.5). For example, in the year 47, Tacitus depicts affairs in Parthia and Armenia that actually began in 41 (*Ann.* 11.8-10). About this chronological distortion he remains silent. Likewise, he combines two years of Parthian affairs into one account (*Ann.* 6.31.1-37.4) admitting this at *Ann.* 6.38.1 (see Malloch, 2009, p. 122; 2013, pp. 114-75).

In *Germania*, Tacitus compares the Germans and the Parthians (37.3-4) and states that “the freedom of the Germans makes for more ferocity than the kingdom of Arsaces” (*quippe regno Arsacis acrior est Germanorum*). He denies the Parthians the value of freedom (*libertas*). The Orient could only boast one victory, over Crassus (37.3); Germans, on the other hand, routed some six Roman generals (37.4). Besides, the Orient “fell at the feet of a Ventidius and lost Pacorus.” This digression encapsulates Rome's complexes towards the Parthians and Germans, the most significant enemies of Rome in the lifetime of Tacitus.

Sources and reliability. Tacitus, who only rarely refers to his primary sources, drew abundant data related to Parthia from the Roman archives (*acta senatus*), official daily gazette (*acta diurna*), from public inscriptions, and from personal communications by Roman politicians and commanders. He also used historiographical and biographical works (Syme, 1982; Devillers, 2003; Potter, 2012). For instance, Tacitus refers to the *Commentarii* of Corbulo, the Roman commander who fought against the Parthians in Armenia (*Ann.* 15.16.1; cf. Gilmartin; Ash, 2006). The prevailing general practice of Roman Latin historians was not to name their sources. Tacitus' evidence may be

compared with and supplemented by the accounts of Josephus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio (q.v.; see Mehl; Baar; Zecchini). In some instances, Tacitus offers unique and first-hand evidence, like the data on the origin of Artabanus II and his Dahaeian background (Olbrycht, 2014).

Tacitean speeches include reliable historical substance. For example, Tacitus places a speech in the mouth of King Vologases I, in which the Arsacid emphasizes the agreement with his brothers Tiridates and Pacorus as his own achievement (*Ann.* 15.2.1-2). This is credible and supported by other testimonies (Olbrycht, 1998b). In his accounts Tacitus rarely puts stress on the geographical setting. For example, it is difficult to locate the Mount Sanbulos mentioned in the Gotarzes' story (*Ann.* 12.13) as an important cultic place (Bernard; Tubach). The description of the military activities of Corbulo in Armenia provides a number of unclear locations (*Ann.* 13-15 with Heil).

Arsacid rulers. Tacitus is reliable in his descriptions of the internal struggles in Parthia and the factions in the nobility and among the [Arsacids](#) (q.v.) in the first half of the 1st century CE, including the struggles between Vonones I and Artabanus II (*Ann.* 2.1-4, 42-43; 6.31-37, 41-44; see Olbrycht, 2013a; 2013b; 2018). Tacitus reports (*Ann.* 6.31, year 35 CE) that the Parthian king Artabanus II reclaimed from Tiberius the treasure (*gaza*) left behind by his rival Vonones and pointed to the old Persian and Macedonian borders (*veteres Persarum ac Macedonum terminos*); at the same time he announced "in a boastful manner" that he intended to move into the Roman territories ruled by [Cyrus](#) (q.v.) and later by [Alexander](#) (q.v.). Thus, Artabanus II harked back to Achaemenid and Alexander's traditions (Walser, p. 146). The testimonial of Tacitus is by no means isolated, but fits into a political tradition line formulated by the Arsacids (see Olbrycht, 2012). Tacitus uses for the "treasury" the Iranian term *gaza* (see also *Ann.* 6.37.3 and Suet., *Tib.* 49.2), a fact attesting his good knowledge of Parthian realities (for *gaza/gazn-*, see GANZAK). The term *gaza* is also used by [Curtius Rufus](#) (q.v.; 3.13.5), a Roman writer of the 1st century CE.

Tacitus offers important data concerning the crowning of Arsacid kings by the members of the Parthian Sūrēn clan (*Ann.* 6.42). This custom is confirmed in Plutarch, *Crassus* 21.7. (On the Sūrēn, see Olbrycht, 1998c, p. 117, n. 76; 2016a.)

After the death of Artabanus II, there were fights for the Arsacid throne between Vardanes (son of Artabanus) and Gotarzes II (adopted son of Artabanus), described in *Annals* 11.8-10; 12.10-14 (Olbrycht, 1997; 2014; Malloch, 2013, pp. 114-75). Tacitus is the main source of information on this



period, most of which is unique. Tacitus' account includes such distant locations as [Hyrcania](#) (*Ann.* 11.9, cf. 13.39) and [Bactria](#) (qq.v.) in the east (*Ann.* 11.8.4). That Bactria belonged to the Arsacid sphere of influence confirms Josephus (for ca. 52 CE, *AJ* 20.87). Some details provided by Tacitus are unique and imply that he used primary sources. Thus, we are informed that when Vardanes was occupied by the siege of Seleucia on the Tigris, Gotarzes received reinforcements from the Hyrcanians and the Dahae (q.v.) and withdrew to the *campi Bactriani* (*Ann.* 11.8.4). The location of the *campi Bactriani* arouses controversy. Indeed, many researchers insist that Tacitus mentions a region in Babylonia or Media (qq.v.; Kahrstedt, p. 25, n. 5; Schottky, p. 105). Koestermann (1967, p. 44) rightly assumes the evident location in Bactria (see also Olbrycht, 1997). The compromise reached in the fields of Bactria in 41 between Vardanes and Gotarzes proved unsustainable (*Ann.* 11.10.1-4; cf. Olbrycht, 1997, pp. 86-88). This time the war operations reached the homeland of Gotarzes, i.e., Hyrcania and [Dehestān](#) (q.v.), as well as the Trans-Caspian steppes and [Chorasmia](#) (q.v.). Vardanes's army crossed the Erindes River ([Atrak](#), q.v.). Tacitus (*Ann.* 11.10.2) speaks in an astonishing epic tone about the fortunate battles of Vardanes' army and the conquest of the tribes as far as the Sindes River, *quod Dahas Ariosque disternat*. The Tacitean *Arii* were a people in the lower Oxus ([Āmū Daryā](#), q.v.) or Jaxartes (Syr Daryā) region (Nipperdey and Andresen, p. 16, n. 13; cf. Koestermann, 1967, p. 46; see also [IRAN v. PEOPLES OF IRAN \[2\] Pre-Islamic](#)). The *Arii* may be a variant of the name of the [Alans](#) (q.v.), whose designation derives directly from the ancient Iranian form **arya-*, "Aryan" (Bailey, p. 803; Abaev, pp. 801-3). The Tacitean epic description of Vardanes' struggle with Gotarzes shows a dramatic conflict involving Iranian forces and the powers of Central Asian peoples, reminiscent of the struggle between Iran and Turān. For this excursus, Tacitus must have used sources of excellent quality, probably data provided by Parthian emissaries in Rome that represented a faction supporting the pro-Roman claimant Meherdates in 49 CE. This evidence was probably archived by Roman officials who were engaged in the expedition of that pretender, including C. Cassius Longinus, governor of Syria (Debevoise, pp. 172-73).

Tacitus depicts the Arsacid king Vologases I (r. 50-79) as a powerful, skillful and outstanding ruler (*Ann.* 12.14, 44, 50; 13.7, 9, 34, 37; 14.25, and *passim* in Book 15). Indeed, under Vologases I the Parthian Empire was substantially reinforced and entered a phase of considerable power (Dąbrowa, 1983, pp. 131-76; Olbrycht, 1998a; 1998b; 2016c). Vologases turned out to be a

challenging opponent for the emperors of Rome, Claudius, Nero, and later Vespasian as well. In the already well-established rivalry with Rome for Armenia (Heil; Olbrycht, 1998a; Vervaet, 1999; 2002) Vologases scored a decisive success, forcing the Romans to withdraw from that land and setting up his brother Tiridates on the Armenian throne (Olbrycht, 1998b, pp. 140-41; Wolski, 1987). While Tacitus otherwise often portrays Parthian rulers as hesitant, Vologases appears to be a decidedly energetic king who successfully waged war against Caesennius Paetus (*Ann.* 15.1ff.; 61/62 CE).

In the *Annals*, Tacitus is aware of the Arsacids' special position in the Parthian Empire as the clan that monopolized the dynastic succession in Iran and formulated claims with regard to Armenia. Orodes, the son of Artabanus II, speaks of the Parthian rule over the Orient and the reputation of the Arsacids (*Ann.* 6.34.3: *claritudinem Arsacidarum*). Vologases I perceived the momentary expulsion of his brother Tiridates and the establishment of pro-Roman Tigranes in Armenia as contempt of the Arsacid dignity (*Ann.* 15.1.1: *Arsacidarum fastigium*). Significant are comparisons between the fate of Roman emperors and Arsacids. Tacitus juxtaposes Galba's murder with a possible assassination of Parthian kings: "Then Roman soldiers proceeded with the intention to slaughter their own emperor, a defenseless old man, as though they were about to drive Vologases or Pacorus from the ancestral throne of the Arsacids" (*Igitur milites Romani, quasi Vologaesum aut Pacorum avito Arsacidarum solio depulsuri ac non imperatorem suum inermem et senem trucidare pergerent: Hist.* 1.40.2). This statement implies a special and privileged position of the Arsacids in Parthia as the royal clan.

Seleucia on the Tigris. Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.42) throws light on the nature of the struggle that took place in Parthian Seleucia on the Tigris (see [CTESIPHON](#)), which was connected with the domestic war in Parthia. Thus, Artabanus II sought the assistance of the *primores* (aristocracy) of Seleucia against the city's *populus* (people). Tacitus claims that Seleucia had not declined into barbarism but retained the character of its founder *Seleucus* (q.v.; *civitas potens, saepta muris neque in barbarum corrupta, sed conditoris Seleuci retinens: Ann.* 6.42.1; Olbrycht, 2012; 2017, pp. 13-14). Tacitus' account may be supplemented by Josephus who claims that Seleucia was an ethnically mixed metropolis with two dominant communities: Greek and Babylonian (called "Syrian"). According to Josephus, after the death of the Jewish leader Anilaios, Jews fled in large numbers to Seleucia and took part in internal struggles (*AJ* 18.371-373). Tacitus avoids describing the ethnic elements in the city.



Parthians in Armenia and southern Caucasia. Tacitus' account of Germanicus' Armenian mission (*Ann.* 2.56.2-3) in 18 CE is full of relevant points, but partly obscured by its author's distanced style. The historian left certain key points unsaid. In fact, Zeno Artaxias, depicted by Tacitus as the choice of the Armenians, had been appointed king by Artabanus II before Germanicus' mission (Olbrycht, 2016b). Zeno's coronation by Germanicus (*Ann.* 2.56.3) involved the placing of the diadem (*insigne regium*), on Zeno's head, as shown by the passage in Tacitus and by the coins struck to commemorate the occasion (Olbrycht, 2016b, pp. 624-26). On the coins, Artaxias is wearing a tiara, on which the diadem is being placed.

Tacitus makes insightful references to Parthian politics and the art of war in connection with the Parthian intervention in Armenia and Iberia that was hindered by Tiberius' activities (Olbrycht, 2012, pp. 221-23). The key role in the Roman plan was ascribed to the king of Iberia. Large amounts of money induced not only the Iberians, but also the Albanians to join in the fighting against Parthia. In addition the Iberians brought nomadic Sarmatian mercenaries into Armenia (*Ann.* 6.32.3-4; cf. Joseph., *AJ* 18.96-97; Dio Cass. 58.26.2-4). Tacitus may have received data on this war from Roman reports of emissaries in Iberia. Incidentally, large amount of coins minted under Tiberius and Augustus have been discovered in Iberia and Armenia, providing support for Tacitus' evidence (Sherozia, p. 250). Deprived of its Sarmatian allies, Parthian army led by prince Orodes was far weaker than the combined Iberian, Albanian, and Alanian forces. The two armies clashed in close combat described by Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.34-35; cf. Ash, 1999). Orodes was injured by a blow to his helmet (*galea*). Josephus (*AJ* 18.98) speaks of his death along with "tens of thousands of soldiers." Tacitus' account is in harmony with that of Josephus, and both narratives are complementary.

Customs and honor code. Tacitus provides an insight into the social and political structures of the Parthians. The picture corresponds roughly to that painted by other Greek-Roman authors (see Olbrycht, 2003). At *Annals* 2.2, Tacitus speaks of accusations made by Parthian nobles against the "degenerate" pretender Vonones I, who was supported by Rome. From this list, it follows which are the right behaviors to be expected from a Parthian. Tacitus describes Vonones' reign as a spell of degeneration. His casual lifestyle and lack of enthusiasm for horsemanship and hunting alienated his subjects (Walser, pp. 73-74; Ehrhardt, p. 304; Olbrycht, 2017, pp. 18-19). Josephus discusses Vonones in a similar way (*AJ* 18.47), stressing that

the Parthians “could not think of obeying the commands of one that had been a slave” to the foreigner. Tacitus describes Parthian princes living in Rome and then appearing as pretenders in Parthia or Armenia as degenerate, no longer familiar with local customs (see Olbrycht, 2017). This recurring idea applies to Tiridates (*Ann.* 6.43) and to non-Parthian Tigranes (*Ann.* 14.26). The accusation of moral degeneration was used effectively in political power plays in Iran. The fate of Hormozd (see [HORMOZD \[2\]](#)), a Sasanian prince and son of [Hormozd II](#) (q.v, r. 302-309 CE), provides an enlightening example (Zos. 2.27).

Tacitus refers to the Parthian art of war and notes that the strength of the Parthians lay solely in their cavalry (*Ann.* 6.34.1: *sola in equite vis*). In close combat, Parthians lose their mobility and run the risk of being pulled off the horse. Tacitus stresses that the Parthians were extremely flexible in battle and equally accustomed to pursuing and retreating (6.35.1). They avoided coming into direct contact with the enemy and preferred to attack at a distance with projectiles (6.35.2).

Value judgments of Tacitus. Tacitus represents a specifically Roman, moralizing historiography. He maintains that beyond Roman rule, any freedom degenerated into barbarian wildness (*Hist.* 4.74). Thus, the assessment of the Parthians was related to the concept of freedom. The chapters of the *Annals* on Parthians and Roman-Parthian relations are enriched with judgments and evaluations on the part of Tacitus. They are by no means isolated within the *Annals*. Often, Tacitus argues psychologically, with character changes or the final breakthrough of bad qualities. The contrast between the Parthian kings and Roman sovereigns’ virtues is thematized by Tacitus in an account in which Parthian envoys appear before Claudius (*Ann.* 12.10-11) and ask him to appoint a new king, Meherdates, son of Vonones I, because of the tyranny (*dominatio*) of Gotarzes. In his answer (*Ann.* 12.11) Claudius first emphasizes the obedience of the Parthians and then speaks about clemency and justice (*clementia* and *iustitia*), virtues “unknown to the barbarians.” Tacitus regularly refers to greed for power and hubris (*superbia*, *Ann.* 15.4.3), recklessness (*levitas*, *Ann.* 12.14.1), and cruelty (*saevitia*, *Ann.* 12.10) as marks of Parthian rulers. Thus, he praises the defection of the Parthians from Gotarzes with the fact that he was cruel and wasteful (*Ann.* 11.10.4: *per saevitiam ac luxum*). The Parthian rulers appear as arrogant towards the Romans (*Ann.* 6.31.1: *superbia* of Artabanus II). It is above all greed for power and hypocrisy that underlie Tacitus’ criticism of



Roman leaders (cf. *Hist.* 2.38), and the same approach is valid for Parthia (cf. Schmal, p. 766; see Andrade). The crimes of Roman emperors are also in the undertone of the murders committed by Parthians (*Ann.* 11.10: death of Vardanes). Particular royal *crudelitas*-like murder of relatives (*Ann.* 12.10: cruelty of Gotarzes II) was not alien to Roman emperors. Tacitus operates with views and ideas which came about by forcing the Parthians into a traditional “Oriental” scheme using the notions of another world (*alius orbis*) and degeneration (*degeneratio*, cf. Sonnabend, pp. 218-19). Stereotypes can be found in Corbulo’s speech to his soldiers before launching them against the forces of Tiridates in Armenia: the Roman would fight against “a vagrant enemy” whose flight reveals “perfidy and cowardice” (*sed perfidiam et ignaviam fuga confidentem*) (*Ann.* 13.39.2). Perfidy and cowardice were traditionally attributed to the Persians and other peoples of the East in the Greek and Roman literature (Lerouge, p. 313). The Parthian tactic of false flight is mentioned only as proof of the lack of courage. However, on the narrative level of political realities, topoi and stereotypes like luxury, decadence, and cowardice play no significant role in Tacitus.

Tacitus does not describe the Parthians (this applies to the Armenians and Iberians too) for their own sake, but within the framework of the Roman-Parthian relations of the 1st century CE. Tacitus’ language is carefully selected and sophisticated. In his accounts, he does not falsify events, but often leaves part of the truth in the shadow. This is visible in the case of Zeno Artaxias in Armenia: a frugal description is true, but not complete, because Tacitus’ aim is to show the victory of Germanicus and to keep silent about the former successes of Parthians. Tacitus’ assessment of the Parthians and their policies is ambivalent. To Tacitus, the Parthians are the world power par excellence next to Rome (*maxima imperia* at *Ann.* 2.56.1; cf. *Ann.* 2.60, 12.10.2, 15.13.2; Sonnabend, p. 203). The fact that the image of the Parthians includes negative assessments (alleged perfidy and cowardice) does not diminish recognition for their strength and even admiration for their rulers, like Artabanus II, Vardanes, and Vologases I, in some passages of the *Annals*.

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