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Long Distance Trade and the Parthian Empire: Reclaiming Parthian Agency from an Orientalist Historiography

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**Long Distance Trade and the Parthian Empire:
Reclaiming Parthian Agency from
an Orientalist Historiography**

By

Evan Jones

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in History

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Master's Thesis

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Evan Jones

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**Long Distance Trade and the Parthian Empire:
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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

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Of the Requirements for the Degree
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May 2018

Abstract

The Parthian Empire has long been disregarded in the historiography because of the relative scarcity of primary sources and the lingering effects of orientalism which hang over the secondary sources that do exist. This thesis aims to refute the orientalist practices that have thus far defined the rise and fall of the Parthian Empire and return their political and military agency. I accomplished this through a study of the Parthian Empire in relation to their control over the Silk Road and other long-distance trade routes, with particular effort placed towards linking the periods of success and failure within the Parthian Empire to the status of the long-distance trade routes and who dominated them at the time.

I found that the periods of Parthian success and dominance in the Near East, particularly regarding their relations with the Roman Republic and Empire, correlate strongly with their control over the Silk and Steppe Roads, as well as the rise and fall of the maritime Spice Route. In conclusion, this shows that the political and military history of the Parthian Empire is better understood in terms of their political-economic history than some vague orientalist idea that the Parthians are 'destined' to collapse simply because they are not 'western'.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Historiography

In the 220s CE the Arsacid Parthian Empire, under siege from within by rebellious Persians, collapsed, ending a nearly 500-year-old empire that in its heyday had not only resisted and rebuffed the advances of the Roman Empire, but had also presided over the creation of the Silk Road trade route, an infrastructural institution that united the far east and far west for a thousand years and more. The anglophone historiography surrounding Parthia is not extensive, but it forms the backbone of the myriad problems that exist when discussing this empire.

In 1873, George Rawlinson wrote of the Parthian Empire and their Arsacid kings as a “degenerate” people who, in their rule had become “effete” in their governance of Western Asia. Not only complicit in the decline and fall of their own empire, their incompetence had also allowed the ‘west’ to conquer not only their territory, but that of all the “eastern people” who Rawlinson argued looked to the Parthians for protection.¹ For Rawlinson, the very “tendency of the Parthians was to degenerate,” their collapse attributable to a simple orientalist understanding of the ancient world.² The conclusion for Rawlinson was evident and the answer was simple:

¹ George Rawlinson, *The Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy; or, The Geography, History, & Antiquities of Parthia* (Harlow: Longman, Greens, and Co., 1873), 330-31, 347, 368-9.

² Rawlinson, *Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy*, 428.

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 2-3.

While this topic will be revisited later in this chapter, orientalism can be briefly defined as the academic discourse centered around creating a divide between the east (the orient) and the west (the occident). This discourse then provides the “starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the orient, its people, customs,

Parthia was doomed to fall as the Achaemenid Persians before them and the Sassanian Persians after them because they were weak and tended towards degeneracy while their western opponents were strong and capable military actors.

More than half a century later, in 1938, Neilson Debevoise revisited the history of Arsacid Parthia with his *Political History of Parthia*. Perhaps more even-spoken than Rawlinson, Debevoise still gives no quarter to the empire he sees as degenerate. After the introduction, any time the Parthian collapse is mentioned, the empire is described as “tottering and decrepit,” in “rapid decay,” and a “senile wreck whose ruler had no more power than tradition or his individual prowess could command.”³ Suffice to say, the Parthian Empire does not fare well in Debevoise’s accounting.

Malcolm Colledge built directly on the works of Rawlinson and Debevoise in 1967, with the last published book dedicated entirely to the history of the Parthian Empire. In *The Parthians*, Colledge aimed for a more holistic approach to understanding the Parthian Empire, focusing less on the political blow-by-blow accounting of events, and more on the social, religious, and economic facets of the empire. However, even when branching out, the telling of Parthia is grim. Colledge’s Parthian Empire, “had been sadly undermined by generations of dynastic struggles,” leading to a loss of political stability which allowed for the Roman Empire to invade and wreak

‘mind’, destiny, and so on” by which the popular understanding of the orient is constructed, allowing for those occidental powers to subjugate the oriental ones.

³ Neilson Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), xliii, 254, 262, 269.

havoc upon the struggling Parthians.⁴ Though Colledge did not come right out and say it, his conclusion is as clear as Debevoise and Rawlinson before: the Parthian Empire was simply not fit to survive in its old age, enfeebled by its superior Western enemies and doomed to collapse from within.

Such is the state of the Parthian historiography regarding their decline and eventual collapse. Parthia, an ‘oriental’ empire, withered under the stress of fighting clearly superior western foes and fell to civil war, the inevitable fate for such lazy, effete, oriental empires. The political and military lens through which Rawlinson, Debevoise, and even Colledge saw the Parthians provides only this conclusion, though this is not necessarily their fault. While parts of this thesis will condemn these three authors for their orientalist tone, as is necessary given their continued prominence in the literature, much of the socio-political situation in England of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries encouraged the writing of history that characterized the East in ways beneficial to a British empire. Added to this that the field of economic history, which this thesis draws extensively from is only truly born in the twentieth century – past the effective writing time of any of these authors – and it becomes understandable for their works to read as they do. However, if one examines the Parthian Empire, and the entire Iranian Plateau, through the economic lens that I will propose, a different story emerges.

Between the 6th century BCE and the 7th century CE, four empires dominated Western Asia, spreading their territory over Mesopotamia, Syria, and the Iranian Plateau, while at times also including parts of Anatolia, Egypt, Central Asia, and the Indus Valley. These were the Achaemenid Persian Empire, the Greek Seleucid Empire, the Parthian Empire this study is

⁴ Malcolm Colledge, *The Parthians* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 170.

focused on, and the Sassanid Persian Empire.⁵ These empires that emerged and ruled this region were some of the largest territorial empires to ever exist, in their own time and long after as well.⁶ With the exception of the short-lived Seleucid Empire — a territorial offshoot of Alexander the Great’s conquests that only exercised power and authority in the region for a century at most — peoples emerging from the Persis region and the Central Asian Steppe dominated the region.

Of these three empires, the Achaemenid Persians were the territorial master, holding at one point up to five and a half million square kilometers of land under their dominion; stretching at one point from the Indus Valley to the Danube River in Europe itself. They dominated the kingdoms of Egypt, Babylonia, and Lydia as well as subjugated numerous city-states up and down the coast of Asia Minor. For all this success, and their lifespan of 220 years, the Persians live on in the popular consciousness as oriental despots, seeking only to enslave and dominate

⁵ Of this 1,300-year timeline, this thesis will concern itself primarily with the three hundred years surrounding the expansion, consolidation, and collapse of the Parthian Empire. Despite this limited focus, the entire thousand plus years of history will be tangentially relevant. Therefore, included below is a reference list of those empires:

1st Persian Empire: 550 BCE-330 BCE, ruled by the Achaemenid Dynasty

Seleucid Empire: 312 BCE - 63 BCE, ruled by the Seleucid Dynasty

Parthian Empire: 247 BCE - 227 CE, ruled by the Arsacid Dynasty

2nd Persian Empire: 227 CE - 651 CE, ruled by the Sassanian Dynasty.

⁶ Rein Taagepera, “Size and Duration of Empires: Growth-Decline Curves, 600 B.C. to 600 A.D.,” *Social Science History* 3 (1979): 115.

their neighbors to the west, their most famous moments known only in their antagonistic relationship with Greece and Macedonia.⁷

The last rulers of this region before the Muslim invasions were the Sassanian Persians. Rising in rebellion against the Parthians in the 220s CE, they eventually pushed their territory out to Asia Minor, Egypt, and the Indus Valley, consolidating in large part the holdings of the Achaemenid Persians, who they so greatly revered. Their domination of the region lasted for 415 years, ending only with the Muslim conquests of the 7th century CE. The Sassanians benefited greatly from the Parthian infrastructure they took over — similar to the Seleucid situation with Achaemenid Persia but still advanced their territorial holdings to great effect, reducing the scope of the Eastern Roman Empire and eventually pushing them all the way back to Constantinople.⁸ This success, while certainly impressive, was built upon the infrastructure that their Parthian predecessors had created and maintained: the roads which connected the vast empire and the

⁷ Perhaps it is indeed because of the Persian's success against the prolific Greeks in the Mediterranean that we know them as the despots they were oftentimes portrayed as. *300*, both the movie and the comic it's based on are the most obvious examples here, having been introduced into the anglophone mainstream in the mid-2000s, but they also represent the end point of orientalism. While the discourse of orientalism is academic in its origins, the most damning effects of the practice occur as those ideas trickle down to the general populace. Given credence because of its 'scholarly' origin, little critical thought is given to how such orientalist pieces of culture like *300* and its sequel will affect the views of those who see it.

⁸ Taagepera, "Size and Duration of Empires," 123.

systems of taxation and trade chief among them.⁹ Without understanding the connection between the Parthian Empire and the Sassanian Empire, it becomes too easy to claim that Parthia fell only to its internal weakness, and Sassanian Persia rose only because of its strength. This mindset only reinforces the orientalist ideas this thesis argues so strongly against. Furthermore, to argue any aspect of the early Sassanian period without bringing the Parthians in for reference and context is to ignore the great similarities we know existed between the two empires.¹⁰

It is on the Arsacid Parthians, who expanded from the Central Asian satrapy of Parthia, dominated the Iranian Plateau, and eventually collapsed at the rise of the Sassanid Persians, that this study will focus. The semi-nomadic Parni people who took over Parthia, and later adopted its name, emerged in the 240s BCE and had, by the death of their first ruler Arsaces I, taken control of the former Seleucid provinces of Parthia and Hyrcania and entered the historical record.¹¹ Their reign, lasting from their emergence in the mid-third century BCE and continuing to their usurpation by the Sassanians in 227 CE encompasses 474 years, more than doubling the reign of the Achaemenid Persians and surpassing the duration of their Sassanian successors.

The Arsacid Parthian Empire, in its reign over the region, destroyed Seleucid power and established their dominion over Mesopotamia and the western Iranian Plateau. They challenged

⁹ The Royal Roads date back to the Achaemenid Persian regime, but credit for the organization of the Empire and its taxation and facilitation of trade belong primarily to the Arsacid Parthians.

¹⁰ Chapter Four will delve deeper into these connections and similarities, with special focus given to those shared elements of Parthia and Sassanian Persia which are blamed in part for the fall of Parthia, but are ignored in a rising, vibrant, Sassanid Persia.

¹¹ Maria Brosius, *The Persians: an Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 86.

the invasion of the Roman Empire and fought them to a standstill in several wars, forcing decades long peace agreements upon the expansionist Romans. During these military campaigns, the Parthians also acted to keep the nomadic peoples on their steppe border contained and pacified. The Arsacid Parthians presided over the opening of one of the greatest trade routes in all of history, brokering communication and trade between Han China in the far east and Rome, both Republican and Imperial, in the far west. They forced their mortal enemy, Rome, to pay extravagant amounts of money to them for goods transported and shipped from China and India, while handling attempts to unseat their power by potential coalitions between Rome in the west and the Indian and Kushan Empires in the east. Though many Roman senators, and later an emperor, derided Parthia as weak, barbarous, and politically subservient to Rome, the Parthian Empire, in truth, represented the only imperial threat to Roman dominance in the Near East up to and including their collapse in the 220s CE.¹² The Parthian Empire, the longest lasting Iranian

¹² Brosius, *The Persians*, 97.

Brosius references the statue of Augustus from Prima Porta “showing the emperor wearing military dress; the central motif on his breastplate is the return of the standards by a Parthian. In contrast to the erect stature of the recipient, the figure of the Parthian is curved, his hair in disarray, and his many-folded Parthian clothing untidy.” Brosius then comments that, “For Rome, Augustus had achieved the impossible: the ‘takeover’ of Parthia without a war. It was the beginning of a myth created by Augustus which was to cloud the judgement of subsequent emperors regarding Parthia and shrouded the Parthian Empire and its real political and military force in mystery. It was a brilliant piece of spin, based on no fact. Roman supremacy had to be

empire up to that point in history, challenged on one side by the might of Imperial Rome and on the other by Kushan, Indian, and even Chinese power projections, was and is one of the most successful empires in the entire history of the Near and Middle East.

Why then do the histories of Parthia treat the objectively successful empire so differently? In each of the three works I discussed, even when other ideas are proposed, the majority of text still deals with and traffics in the inherent implication that the Parthian Empire was doomed to fall simply because of their orientalist tendencies. Debevoise provides hints at a more nuanced explanation of Parthia's collapse, tracing their fall to the steadily increasing powers of the nobility and their feelings of self-importance. This idea, interesting as it may be, is only ever mentioned in the introduction to his *Political History of Parthia* and never touched on again, leaving little to work with.¹³ Colledge's *The Parthians* provides an interesting clue to the decline of the Parthians in regards to numismatics, showing that later in the Parthian Empire, "full decadence [was]... now all too apparent," in the quality of the coinage being produced; "in metal

demonstrated." Despite all this, she seems careful to avoid directly stating, as I have, that the Parthians represented the only imperial threat to Roman domination of the region.

¹³ Debevoise, *Political History of Parthia*, xlii-xliii.

In short, Debevoise makes the brief claim that with the steady shifting of power from monarch to nobility, the Parthian kings lost ever more power over time to a divided nobility. This fractious nobility, working towards many different end-goals, weakened the stability of the realm and facilitate destructive infighting between bickering factions. It is an interesting idea, and one that I will address in Chapter Four with the rise of the Sassanid Persians, but it remains one for Debevoise that was not worth any additional study.

and weight too, earlier numismatic standards were gone.”¹⁴ However, for as interesting as these clues are, Colledge goes no further in analyzing their significance, and they remain only clues that demonstrate the empire *was* in decline, and do nothing to elaborate *why* the empire was in decline.

The problem that each of these historians is subject to when discussing Arsacid Parthia is, as mentioned before, that they wrote during a period where orientalism, the academic practice of shaping the ‘East’ into a framework by which they are more easily dominated by ‘Western’ powers, to a greater or lesser degree was accepted and acceptable. Originally conceived in relation to America, Britain, and France’s domination of the Middle East and Muslim countries, the practice has its roots as far back as the first written history. Herodotus’ *Histories* is devoted, with some extraordinary tangents, to exploring how the brave Greeks of the West were able to resist the advances of the perfidious Persians of the East, seeking to pillage and enslave all who resisted them.¹⁵

This pattern of orientalist thought is fundamental in the creation of the broader historical narrative of the Near and Middle East. Orientalism is not just about how Muslims are effeminate, weak, and unable to govern themselves; it is about how the entire ‘orient’, for all of history, has been effeminate, weak, and unable to govern itself. It is for this reason that formulating and arguing a different explanation for the decline and collapse of Parthia is important. As of now, the best that any anglophone historian has put forth towards the fall of an empire nearly five

¹⁴ Colledge, *The Parthians*, 76, 170.

¹⁵ Herodotus may have been born in Halicarnassus as a Persian subject, but his audience was the Greek reading populace, and not the Persian elite that he was born with.

centuries in the making is that Parthia was militarily strong and efficacious in the defense of its territory up until the beginning of the second century CE; after this point they became suddenly unable to defend their territory or exercise their political will as before “because it was in their nature to degenerate.”¹⁶

Even when the discussion focuses on those parts of Parthian history where they reign triumphant, the tone remains orientalist in nature, perhaps best represented by how the kings of Parthia are discussed. The strength of Parthia, when historians accept such a notion is possible, does not come from any particular institution or social idea, like the Roman Senate, Athenian popular assembly, or even the dual-kingship of the Spartans. Rather, Parthia’s strength derives only from certain individual kings who imbued the entire empire with their own charismatic rule.

Instead of judging the leadership of Parthia in aggregate, as we do in such broad strokes for polities like the Roman Republic and the Athenian Democracy, the kings of Parthia are instead judged like a modern historian may describe the leaders of dictatorships; taking power and ruling through their charismatic charm, leaving their state to collapse directly after their death due to its instability. This despite the irrefutable fact that Parthia’s leadership in aggregate guided the empire through nearly five hundred years of existence. A Spartan king may be strong or weak, a Roman emperor powerful or pitiful, but no reasonable historian would place the entirety of praise or blame upon that individual for the fate of the entire state. The reasonable historian

¹⁶ Rawlinson, *Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy*, 428.

I can only speak towards the existence of evidence within the English historiography given my linguistic limits. Francophone and Arabic scholarship on Parthia exist, but I cannot access or read it.

recognizes that the structures behind the figurehead are far more important in describing the rise, decline, and fall of states and empires, than the actions of any one individual who may hold power at any point.¹⁷

Yet, for all that the 'Great Man' theory of history has fallen in popularity among historians of Greece, Rome, and the Mediterranean, the same consideration has not been given to the empires of the Iranian plateau. While the Roman Empire is lauded for the strength of its republican institutions, its military formations, and its systems of taxation, the Parthian Empire is derided for its weak leadership; the lackluster accounting of any particular Arsacid king to blame for any diplomatic failure or loss of territory. This is the case, of course, when the Parthians are allowed any measure of agency in their affairs at all.

The deprivation of agency is one of the most effective tools to marginalize a target group. When historians view the Parthian Empire, it is often not as an active entity complete with unique social and political customs, but as a secondary entity to the Roman state with its only importance in contextualizing Roman achievements and failures. With this mindset, it is easy to accept and perpetuate the claim that the Arsacid Parthians fell from power because they were steadily weakened through extended conflicts with Roman expansionism. This is because the narrative that Parthia is included in is one of military conflict with Rome and is fundamentally subservient to the goals of exploring Roman history. To contextualize this argument, the problem

¹⁷ Said another way, the 'Great Man' theory of history is a poor methodology for understanding any history beyond perhaps the biographical and even that is suspect. The narrow focus of the 'Great Man' theory also encourages easy solutions to complicated social, economic, and political issues.

here is not that Parthia exists in *some* works as a secondary figure to the actions of Republican and Imperial Rome, but that Parthia exists in *almost all* works as a secondary figure to the actions of Republican and Imperial Rome. When even the best of Parthian histories, dedicated to only that empire, spend a majority of their time exploring Parthia only in their relation to the much better documented Rome; when those histories touch only briefly on the broad topic of the empire's decline and collapse, and that topic touched on with little to no depth, something is deeply flawed with the historiography.¹⁸

¹⁸ Brosius' *The Persians*, while being an excellent overview of pre-Islamic Iranian history, does little more than accrue available facts about the Persians and Parthians of the Iranian Plateau while providing little analysis regarding the three empires she discusses. However, to be fair, her work is explicitly an introduction to these empires. More egregiously, in the 472 pages of the 2009 book by Christopher Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (2009), Parthia is given only three pages (83-85, and one mention on 102), barely enough for an extremely truncated political history. For a book explicitly about empires on the Silk Road, this sidelining of the empire most responsible for the Silk Road's facilitation is baffling. Mark Lewis' *Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (2007) discusses the Silk Road only twice (115 and 143) and does not mention the Parthian Empire at all, preferring to provide the name "Persia," which carries its own problems. It is not imperative for any specific work to delve deeply into an analysis of the Parthian Empire, but that the only books that do so are greatly outdated and the subject continues to be largely ignored in *all* English works is problematic.

Why is the history of Parthia treated as such by modern historians? The answer can only be partly placed upon the shoulders of Rawlinson, Debevoise, and Colledge. Their orientalist perspectives are, if nothing else, understandable for the time in which they were written. Edward Said, who heavily criticized this trend of orientalism in academic history only published his book in 1978, more than a decade after Colledge's *The Parthians* came out. Further, Said's *Orientalism* took several years to inculcate itself into the academic consciousness and even then, only did so after a great amount of pushback from those scholars of whose work he had targeted. Simply put, Rawlinson and Debevoise wrote their pieces during a different time, during the final gasps of colonialism and the rising tide of decolonialism.¹⁹ Their works, along with Colledge's represent a common point of view, not just in relation to the Near and Middle East, but across academic historiography.

In fact, when focusing in on Parthia and its fall, it becomes very understandable why so little emphasis was placed upon the empire's decline and collapse. There was already an accepted understanding for why 'oriental' empires fell that had been in place for decades, if not centuries. Orientalism, in the historiography of 'the East,' provided the blueprint for the life of the despotic oriental monarchy; a blueprint which inevitably ended in centralized power fragmenting as the effete, lazy, natural tendencies gave way to excess, degeneracy, and civil war. Why make an argument which only agrees with all the common thought of the time? Rawlinson and

¹⁹ Edward Said, "Afterword," in *Orientalism* (New York City: Vintage Books, 1994), 329-352.

Said discusses this at length in the afterword he wrote for his 1977 book in 1994 where he grapples with the sometimes-hostile responses to his work and the critics that seek to dismantle his ideas.

Debevoise's readers knew why Parthia fell; that was obvious. They wanted the political blow by blow of the empire. Colledge's readers knew why Parthia collapsed; they wanted to know about the art and culture of, as Rawlinson titled his work, the Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy.

The difference between Parthian history and other histories is that those other periods of history, even other Near Eastern history, have continued to attract attention in the anglophone world.²⁰ Parthian historiography in comparison, at least in the anglophone world, essentially stopped in 1967 after Colledge's publication. There have been isolated articles published on Parthian art or their views on religion; Maria Brosius' *The Persians* dedicates a chapter to the Parthians but remains only an introductory piece.²¹ Beyond these works and brief mentions in the histories of neighboring empires, the Parthians have been largely forgotten in the English

²⁰ Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Warsaw: Eisenbrauns, 2002). Achaemenid Persia has recently been given great attention that has begun to rehabilitate our understanding of that great empire from our prior orientalist view. Pierre Briant's *From Cyrus to Alexander*, translated into English in 2002 is a masterpiece of Persian history that deals with that empire on its own terms.

²¹ Brosius, *The Persians*, 79-138.

G. A. Koshelenko and V. N. Pilipko, "Parthia" in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia Volume II: The development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations 700 BC to AC 250*, ed. Janos Harmatta (Paris, UNESCO Publishing: 1994), 127-142.

Koshelenko and Pilipko's article on Parthia for UNESCO's *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* suffers from the same issues that Brosius' chapter does.

historiographical tradition, and as a result the orientalist theories of Rawlinson, Debevoise and Colledge are cemented as the existing definitive works on Parthia.²²

This stagnancy in the English academic tradition may also have its roots in the broader idea of orientalism, spreading even beyond Parthia or Persia and into how the entire field of Near Eastern history is studied. Because of the focus on creating the divide between ‘East’ and ‘West’, and of showing how the ‘advanced West’ has developed from the ‘primitive East’, historians have dedicated their work to examining how “civilization” has moved from East to West, from the Orient to the Occident.²³

²² William H. McNeill, *A World History: Fourth Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press:1998), 202.

Chester G. Starr, *A History of the Ancient World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 631.

William H. McNeill’s *A World History: Fourth Edition* points to powerful Parthian nobility and continued local rebellion as the cause of the Parthian’s decline while Chester G. Starr characterized the Parthians as “the most stagnant in the history of the ancient Near East” in his *History of the Ancient World*, existing only as a low point in Near Eastern history that the Sassanians were able to emerge from.

²³ Mogens Larsen, “Orientalism and Near Eastern Archaeology,” in *Domination and Resistance*, ed. Daniel Miller et al. (London: Routledge, 1995), 230-231.

Marc Van De Mieroop, *Cuneiform Texts and the Writing of History* (London: Routledge, 1999) 3, 165.

This trend has seen significant pushback that continues to improve the methodologies of Ancient Near Eastern history, particularly from Larsen and Marc Van De Mieroop. Van De Mieroop

This focus, by its very nature, preferences certain Near Eastern histories over others, depending on how strong the link is between that kingdom or empire, and its causal links on the development of ‘western civilization’. The civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt are therefore important as ‘cradles of civilization’, while Achaemenid Persia, Parthia, and Sassanian Persia are not because the “Torch of Civilization” had already passed from the Orient to the Occident, leaving those empires of the ‘East’ to stagnate.²⁴ Therefore, the history of Parthia is unimportant because it does not add to our understanding of how Greece or Rome came to power. The decline and collapse of the Parthian Empire holds no value and it is therefore ignored.

Within this thesis, I will revisit the history of the Parthian Empire, their rise, consolidation, decline, and collapse and will provide an alternative methodology for understanding the Parthians that goes beyond the simplistic orientalism that has haunted the retelling of this period of history. Through this inquiry, I will repudiate the ideas of Parthian “degeneracy” or weakness that has so plagued discussions surrounding them. With this in mind, the theory that I propose to explain the Parthian decline and collapse is one not rooted in assumptions of a people’s inherent

comments that “many books still see the pre-Greek Near East as a proto-historical period, on the verge of history but not there yet.” (3) Later, he comments that,

This teleology of history, while providing a rationale for much of the scholarship on Mesopotamia, is highly problematic: it is ethnocentric, privileging histories that have a presumed connection to the Western tradition; it employs evolutionary models that are intellectually suspect; and it denies the Middle East its own antiquity. (165)

Parthia has unfortunately been left behind in these accountings because of historian's general lack of interest in the area.

²⁴ Larsen, “Orientalism and Near Eastern Archaeology,” 236-7.

capabilities or vices, but rather in a broad economic understanding of that empire's life. This theory, though ignored in every history of Parthia I have come across, should not be surprising in the least for an empire that sat upon one of the greatest trade routes in history and facilitated the trade of vast amounts of goods and capital between the Han Chinese Empire and the Roman Empire. I propose that the reason the Parthian Empire was able to fend off intermittent invasions by the Romans, nomadic peoples, and the occasional revolt while expanding their territorial holdings and political reach for the majority of their history is that between 125 BCE and c.100 CE, the Parthians held mastery over the Silk Road and its operation.²⁵ From this mastery, they were able to extract enormous amounts of wealth from the trade passing through their territory that could then be used to pacify their subject peoples, pay for the mercenaries so often used by Iranian civilizations to augment their forces and fight wars, while also building and maintaining the burgeoning infrastructure project that the system of Royal Roads represents.²⁶ For an empire

²⁵ Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 143.

The moniker of "Silk Road" was created and applied to the trade route in the 19th century by the German Baron Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen. While there may not have been a firm conception of the entire trade route as a distinct entity before this point, with each merchant only aware of a few additional nodes east or west on the route, silks and other luxuries still traveled the entire length the route, enriching the merchants and empires who shepherded the goods.

²⁶ Brosius, *The Persians*, 122.

Gary K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade: International commerce and imperial policy, 31 BC – AD 305* (London: Routledge, 2001), 197.

sandwiched between expansionist powers on both their eastern and western borders, they required all the wealth they could amass; after all, “the sinews of war: money in abundance,” and money was one thing the Parthians in their prime were overflowing with.²⁷

To paraphrase the statistician Edward Tufte, correlation does not imply causation, but it certainly is suggestive, and the shift in Parthia’s fortunes, as I will detail, correlates strongly with their territorial control over the Silk Road and the income that came from controlling it.²⁸ Around

The Royal Roads, a building project of the Achaemenid Persians to facilitate economic and political control over their empire, became the primary pathways of the Silk Road trade route. Because of the dearth of sources on Parthia, making many claims about Parthian care of their infrastructure is fraught with danger. However, installations and constructions that survive from the Sassanian period do show extensive wealth being put towards infrastructure maintenance. Given the consistency of Parthian and Sassanian policies and bureaucratic staff, it can be inferred that these same sorts of building projects existed to keep the Royal Roads functional.

²⁷ M. Tullius Cicero, “The Fifth Philippic,” in *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. C. D. Yonge. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903) 5.

²⁸ Christo Lute, “Correlation isn’t Causation, but Sure is a Hint,”

<http://www.analyticsguild.com/blog/2016/5/23/correlation-isnt-causation-but-sure-is-a-hint>.

Lute comments that,

The abuse of this notion [that correlation does not imply causation] occurs when it is taken to an extreme, when it’s translated from the subtle claim that “correlation does not describe a causal relationship but a measure of interdependence of variables” into a proclamation that correlation has nothing to say about causation. This interpretation is patently false; it fails to appreciate one of the main reasons why we use correlations: to discern causal relationships between events.

100 CE, two major changes occurred that I argue disrupted the Parthian's control over their section of the Silk Road. First, the Kushan Empire rose out of northwest India, expanded north to Central Asia and south to the Arabian Sea, essentially cutting through the primary path of the Silk Road trade from China to Parthia. Second, having solidified their empire in the first century CE, Rome expanded their shipbuilding and road infrastructure in Egypt allowing a more full-fledged trade operation to emerge from the Red Sea to India. This facilitated direct trade with Indian and Kushan traders who were, because of the Kushan expansion, funneling the luxury goods that Parthia needed to trade, directly to the Roman traders waiting at the Arabian Sea.

This disruption of both the beginning and the end points of the Parthian section of the Silk Road was deadly to the Parthian Empire and was the true cause of their decline and collapse. Without the ample income the Parthians collected from the Silk Road, their capability to wage wars and support political actors outside of their borders was severely hindered. Added to this, the maintenance of the Royal Roads that facilitated that trade, along with quick and efficacious military movements would be hindered as less capital was available for this upkeep. Worsening conditions on the Royal Road only added to the problems the Parthians started to face on each end of their empire, adding to their decline and later collapse. Shortly after the end of the first century and beginning of the second century CE, the Parthians go from successfully defending

I argue that the relationship between the control over the luxury goods passing through the Silk Road and Parthia's general success is not an abuse of this notion, but a proper application of discerning probable causation from correlations.

their territory and influencing their neighbors, to losing territory, political authority, and popular appeal amongst their subject nations.²⁹

Primary Sources

The primary challenge of this thesis – indeed with much of ancient history as a whole – is struggling with the scarce evidence that exists. The primary sources on Parthia in general are lackluster, and on matters of their economic activity and the Silk Road trade even more so. Despite this, the evidence that does exist, from Parthia, Rome, China, and even the Sassanian Persians, supports the conclusion of this thesis. Available sources on this thesis can first be divided into textual and non-textual categories.

As for the non-textual sources on this topic, two stand out: the numismatic evidence and the excavations of Parthian Nisa, Palmyra, and Dura-Europos.³⁰ Parthian coinage provides the

²⁹ This can be seen in the general fortunes of the Parthians from the second century CE onward. The wars between Parthia and Rome occurred deeper within Parthian territory, and the Arsacid Kings lost their subjugation of Parthia to Roman interests. The loss of appeal can be seen most dramatically in the province of Fars, where the Sassanian Persians rose up and ended the Parthian Empire in 224 CE.

³⁰ G. Widengren, “Sources of Parthian and Sasanian History,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 3: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1262.

best method of dating the reigns of Parthian kings when matched with the Greek and Latin sources from the West. The excavations, especially of Parthian Nisa provide a glimpse into the lives of the Parthians, where so many of their other cities were entirely subsumed by Sassanian and Islamic influences.³¹ Antonio Invernizzi has essentially focused his entire career on the study of Nisa within the Italian and English historiography.

Within the textual sources available, three broad categories can be drawn: Greek and Latin sources on the Parthian Empire, Han Chinese writings on the ‘western regions,’ and the

Unlike the Achaemenid and Sassanian Persians, the Parthians do not seem to have created many royal inscriptions. Only one remains of the king Gotarzes I, though it is less than helpful for this topic on long-distance trade routes.

³¹ Antonio Invernizzi, “The Culture of Parthian Nisa between Steppe and Empire” in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 133 (2007), 163-177.

Antonio Invernizzi, “Representation of gods in Parthian Nisa,” in *Parthica* 7 (2005), 71-79.

Antonio Invernizzi, “Parthian Art – Arsacid Art” in *Topoi: Orient-Occident* 17 (2011), 189-207.

Antonio Invernizzi, “Royal Cult in Arsacid Parthia” in *Studia Hellenistica* 51 (2011), 649-690.

One of the great problems of working in ancient Iranian history is the specific set of valuable locations for urban populations to settle. Unlike Mesopotamia, where the shifting rivers might force a once-populated area to be abandoned (and thus preserved for future archaeologists), the mountainous regions of the Iranian Plateau mean that the major city locations of the Achaemenids became the major city locations of the Arsacids, on and on down to the present day. This complicates excavations and obscures the origins of much of the data that we do have.

ostraca that detail some aspects of the administrative and economic functions of the empire.³² Unfortunately, textual sources like those written in Greek and Latin are virtually nonexistent from within the Parthian empire.

Since so little survives from the Parthian period, a cohesive picture must be constructed using the accounts of neighboring empires, which presents its own set of problems that will be discussed below. The sources that best paint the picture of Parthian history are those written in Greek and Latin and can be divided into two sections: those that primarily detail the military conflicts Rome had with Parthia, and those that attempt to document a historical or geographical examination of the Parthia Empire. Both are useful for their connection with the established Roman historiography which provides easily dated moments that are used to reconstruct the Parthian reign. The downside, to those texts dealing with the Roman-Parthian conflict is that only the Roman perspective is given, and they are, because of that perspective, hostile to the Parthian point-of-view.

Cassius Dio's *Roman History* is emblematic of this problem. Parthia comes up four times in Dio's *History*, once each for the invasions into Parthia by Crassus, Marc Antony, Trajan, and Caracalla, with each section having only enough contextual information to detail the failures or successes of each Roman general.³³ Dio even comments about the Parthians that, "now about

³² Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 141-149.

The Western Regions was a common way to describe those territories to the west of China, beyond where the Han could exercise total political and economic domination.

³³ Cassius Dio, *Roman History Volume(s) III, V, VIII, IX*, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917-1927), Books 40, 49, 68, 79.

their race and their country and their peculiar customs many have written, and I have no intention of describing them,” making clear that any information gleaned about Parthia is only to better understand the Roman perspective.³⁴

Plutarch’s “Life of Crassus” acts in a similar fashion, constructing a narrative of Crassus where the Parthians play only a facilitatory role.³⁵ Works such as these, and others like Eutropius’ *Abridgement of Roman History* and Velleius Paterculus’ *Roman History* give detailed explorations into specific moments of the Roman and Parthian empires without exploring the context of any of these moments. It is from works like these that the histories of Parthia from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were written, providing detailed and lurid views of the debauched actions of this ‘oriental monarchy.’³⁶

³⁴ Cassius Dio, *Roman History: Volume III*, 40.15.1.

³⁵ Plutarch, “Life of Crassus” in *Lives: Volume III*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge University Press, 1916).

Plutarch, “Life of Antony” in *Lives: Volume IX*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge University Press, 1920).

Plutarch must be given even greater scrutiny given the intended effect of his *Lives* being to compare two figures together, often trying to explain a moral lesson, rather than a strictly historical one.

³⁶ Plutarch, “Life of Crassus,” 31.7, 33.2.

Plutarch’s Parthians at the Battle of Carrhae “cut to pieces” the fleeing Romans and used the decapitated head of Crassus as a prop in a play they put on, “lifting it up with clapping of hands and shouts of joy.”

Luckily, not all Greek and Latin histories were written in such a vein. In particular, sections 8.48 and 8.51 of Appian's *Syrian Wars* provide an early and relatively unbiased account of the Parthians in their struggles against the Seleucid Empire, while Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* contains a section on the civil war between Vonones I and Artabanus II, writing like Appian with little interest other than the depiction of the events.³⁷ Books XLI and XLII of Justin's *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* provide an exemplary early history of the Parthian Empire up to the reign of Phraates and his diplomacy with Augustus, providing the context that Paterculus, Eutropius, Dio, and Plutarch often lacked.³⁸ The best works, however, for exploring the broad scope of Parthian history and the systems by which they ran their empire are the works of Isadore of Charax who put together a travel guide of the *Parthian Stations* across the empire, and Pliny the Elder, whose *Natural History* lays out the broad political makeup of the eighteen kingdoms of Parthia.³⁹

³⁷ Appian, *The Foreign Wars*, trans. Horace White, (London: The Macmillan Company, 1899), 8.48 and 8.51.

Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston, (New York City: John E. Beardsley, 1914), 18 Ch. 2.

³⁸ Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus*, trans. Rev. J.S. Watson, (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853).

³⁹ Isadore of Charax, *Parthian Stations*, trans. Wilfred H. Schoff, (Philadelphia: The Commercial Museum, 1914).

Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, trans. John Bostock, (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855).

Lastly, works such as Strabo's *Geography* and the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* will be utilized within this thesis, as they provide general geographical guides of the known Parthian world.⁴⁰ The *Periplus* functions exceptionally well as a travel and trade guide for the maritime Spice Route and provides superb contextual evidence towards the propagation of that trade in the first and second centuries CE.

Moving the focus to Chinese writings, two vital sources exist: the *Records of the Grand Historian*, by Ssu-ma Ch'ien and the *Hou Hanshu* by Fan Ye. Together, these works detail the Chinese expeditions which 'discovered' the western regions and marked the beginnings of the Silk Road.⁴¹ Both deal with the opening of trade and communication between Han China and the West in the late second and early first centuries BCE. Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Records* act more as a biographical narrative of Chang Ch'ien's journey to the west, while Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* reads as closer to Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, preferring a more geographical and less narrative focus on the history of the western regions. Both works are valuable, but Fan Ye's *Hou Hanshu* must be taken with more cautious analysis than the works of Ssu-ma Ch'ien. While Ss-ma lived during the events he wrote about, dying in the first century BCE after the beginning of trade along what would come to be known as the Silk Road, Fan Ye finished the *Hou Hanshu* in the fifth century CE, half a millennium after the events he supposedly wrote about. While this work was almost certainly put together using court records and the information that China had learned

⁴⁰ *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, trans. Lionel Casson, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁴¹ Though, again, *Silk Road* was a term coined in the nineteenth century by a German and there was not any conception at the time in the second century BCE that this is what was being accomplished.

in the interim, those exact things make it important to question the *Hou Hanshu* to its ability to faithfully recount the specific events of the late second century BCE.⁴²

The papyri and ostraca of the Roman East provide another pool of evidence to draw from, though this thesis avoids delving into the micro-economic studies that these pieces allow for. The best source of this evidence comes from Egypt and the maritime Spice Route, but limited sources can be found from other sectors of the Roman East.⁴³ While this thesis does not delve deeply into the study of these pieces, being more a political history informed by economic theory than a strict economic history, they can be used to evaluate the flow of goods traveling into and out of the Roman empire. Additionally, at Nisa, several thousand ostraca have been uncovered that detail some of the history of Eastern Parthia, particularly related to their policy of taxation and customs, which integrate nicely into the evidence that Isidore of Charax provides in his *Parthian Stations*.⁴⁴

⁴² M.A.N. Loewe, "Introduction" in *China in Central Asia, the Early Stage: 125 BC- AD 23* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979), 12-13.

To complicate the matter, there is scholarly debate over whether the *Hou Hanshu* simply copied passages of the *Records* or, more intriguing, that the *Hou Hanshu*, in its early forms, provided the material for the *Records* to copy. For a rundown of this scholarly debate, the entire second section of this introduction is worth reading (3-39). In my view, the *Hou Hanshu* acts as an ancient secondary source, and is valuable for the information it contains. For this thesis, where I am examining the general Chinese understanding of Parthia, both works are valuable.

⁴³ Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 8-9.

⁴⁴ Widengren, *Sources of Parthian and Sasanian History*, 1263.

I mentioned above that the Parthian histories of the last two centuries were primarily written from a collection of the Latin and Greek sources, which tended to be antagonistic towards the Parthians.⁴⁵ It is at this point that Rawlinson, Debevoise, and Colledge must be given some slack for the works that they produced. Working from these sources to near exclusivity creates an image of the Parthians that, within the bounds of the nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism and imperialism, seemed natural and just.⁴⁶ The fact that English translations of the Han Chinese records did not emerge until the mid to late twentieth century further excuses some of these author's historiographical choices. Finally, all three authors wrote in a time where economic history in general was in its infancy.⁴⁷ This does not excuse them for the way they wrote about Parthia, but it provides an explanation for it beyond an accusation of malice.⁴⁸

Aside from these primary sources, I want to also make special mention of those historians of Rome's trade along both the Silk and Spice Roads as their work is the closest to a discussion

⁴⁵ Brosius' chapter within *The Persians* is exempt from this statement, but A. D. H. Bivar's "Political History of Iran under the Arsacids" within the *Cambridge History of Iran* comes much closer to qualifying as he wrote a strictly political history that benefited from such sources.

⁴⁶ Neither Rawlinson nor Debevoise cite any sources that do not stem from a Greek or Latin tradition, barring a few references to older Achaemenid inscriptions and brief discussions on Arsacid coinage.

⁴⁷ Near Eastern economic history in particular, even more so.

⁴⁸ In many ways, the true criticism around Rawlinson, Debevoise and Colledge's political histories of Parthia is in how the modern historiography continues to accept them without criticism (see: McNeill, *A World History*, 202 and Starr, *A history of the Ancient World*, 631).

on this thesis' topic as could be found. Raoul McLaughlin and his two works on Roman economic interactions with the east form a backbone of my fourth chapter. The evidence he brought together in his *Rome and the Distant East* and his *Roman Empire on the Indian Ocean* was invaluable to this work.⁴⁹ Additionally, Gary Young's *Rome's Eastern Trade* was similarly invaluable, though I disagree with some of the conclusions he makes regarding Roman policy regarding their economic situation.⁵⁰

Organization of this Paper

This first chapter having provided an introduction and overview to the historiography of Parthia and aims of this thesis, the following chapters will each be devoted to a chronological accounting of the Parthians: their emergence, rise to dominance, decline, and collapse. Each of these four chapters will detail the literary evidence of the political and military histories of the Parthian Empire, as well as a discussion towards how such information fits within the economically-informed argument this thesis makes. This separation of Parthian history into four periods will show that Parthian success and failure is highly correlated to their control over the Silk Road trade route. This will provide the evidence for my theory that when Parthia is strong against the military and political actions of their enemies and effective at quieting internal strife,

⁴⁹ Raoul McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China* (London: Continuum UK, 2010).

Raoul McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian ocean: The Ancient World Economy & The Kingdoms of Africa, Arabia & India* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2014).

⁵⁰ Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 2001.

their control of the Silk Road was strong. When they began to lose territory to Roman incursion and began facing troubles from within they cannot deal with, they had already lost significant control over the trade routes that had made them so strong before.

Additionally, this structure will also highlight the drastic shifts in fortunes that the Parthian Empire underwent, from success to failure; back to success again and then immediately to collapse. This, perhaps more than anything else, disproves the theory of a degenerate Parthia, weakened by their 'oriental' nature and doomed to fall. After all, if Parthia was in such a degenerative state near the end of their reign, their victory over the Romans in 216-7 CE becomes highly implausible. Finally, my conclusion, along with discussing the further paths of this research, will also document the birth of the Sassanian Empire and how their emergence fits within the economic theory this thesis presents.

The second chapter and first period will focus on the emergence of the Parthians and their rise to dominance, first as a kingdom in the northern Seleucid province of Parthia and Hyrcania, and later as rulers of the entire Iranian plateau. Dating between the reigns of Arsaces I (247-217 BCE) and Artabanus I (128-124/3 BCE), this period witnessed not only the beginning of diplomatic relations between Parthia and Rome, but also the beginnings of trade on the Silk Road as Han China sought military and economic aid against their own enemies. These two relationships defined the Parthian Empire for much of their history and dominated the narrative of their Second Period.

The third chapter and second period, beginning with the rise of Mithridates II (124/3 - 88/7 BCE) as king and ending with the death of Vologeses I (51 - 76/80 CE) brings the consolidated might of the Parthian Empire to bear on an expansionist Roman Republic, raising tensions across their mutual border along the Euphrates River and multiple times escalating to declared war.

During this period, Parthia challenged Rome to territories in both Syria and Armenia claiming several extraordinary victories in the former and establishing political dominance in the latter. Concurrently, the Silk Road overseen by Parthian interests were fully operational, granting the Parthian economic, as well as political power in the region. In short, this period saw the Parthians at their most militarily successful in their conflict with Rome. It is logical to assume successes on other fronts of the Parthian Empire; however, we hear little to nothing about Parthian military or political machinations in their eastern provinces, even with the later rise of the Kushan Empire. It is only the numerous works written by Romans either lamenting their losses or posturing for better appearances that give historians such a good picture of this period. While this conflict raged between Parthian and Roman armies, subject merchants of both the Parthians and Romans engaged in a staggering amount of trade at key cities along their border.⁵¹ Trade during this period was almost certainly at the highest it was during the Parthian dominion of the Iranian Plateau; no coincidence when one correlates their military and political victories of this same time frame.⁵²

The fourth chapter and third period of Parthian history, from the end of the first century CE to the beginning of the third century CE begins with the rise of the Kushan Empire in the east and sees a marked reverse in the power and prestige of the Parthian state. After the mid-late first century CE, for more than a century, no Parthian army bested a Roman one on the field of battle,

⁵¹ Ann Perkins, *The Art of Dura-Europos* (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1973), 4.

⁵² After this point, Rome began trading directly with Kushan and Indian traders through the maritime Spice Route, which almost guaranteed a decrease in the volume of goods being traded across the Silk Road.

whether they were within core Parthian territories or without. Parthian political and diplomatic control of Armenia slipped away, and Roman armies sacked multiple Parthian cities in Mesopotamia and eventually established dominance over northern Mesopotamia. Continuing the correlation between Parthia's economy and their success, this period saw a proliferation of new Roman trade opportunities which cut out Parthian merchants entirely, strengthening the position of the new Kushan Empire which exists as a territorial power between Parthian and Chinese trade.

The fifth chapter and final period of Parthian history is the shortest of the four, lasting at greatest extent 20 - 30 years, and comprising the last war between Parthia and Rome in 216-7 CE and the revolution of the Persians under the Sassanians which overthrew the ruling Arsacid Parthians. I am designating this a separate and distinct period in Parthian history because of its importance to the narratives surrounding Parthia's decline and fall. Simply put, the success Parthia had over the Roman Empire in 217 CE is comparable to their earlier victories over Crassus and Marc Antony in their second period. Within the narratives of Rawlinson, Debevoise, and Colledge, this is an improbability of such a scale that it is unacceptable. The degenerate, weak, oriental Parthian Empire of the classic histories could not have been able to not only best Rome on the field of battle, outside their core territory in Armenia, but also extract indemnities totaling millions of sesterces of silver from their enemy.⁵³ In this chapter, I will explore the Antonine Plague, the reduction in Roman trade opportunities, and the resurrection of the Steppe Route trade. Within this economic lens, one sees a resurgent Parthian trade system which not only granted them the capability to wage such a war, but also the motive to do so.

⁵³ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 79.27.

Though the political and military histories of each of these periods are important tools to frame my economic argument, it is the focus on the Silk Road that provides the evidence through a study of its rise and fall in importance through the Parthian reign. Laced throughout each of chapters two through five will be an examination of the beginnings of the Silk Road along with its neighboring routes which facilitated trade between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Part and parcel of this correlation will be the Kushan Empire and the Roman maritime Spice Route trade, which spell the end of Parthian economic dominance and the cause of their decline and collapse.

The sixth and final chapter will explore the third and fourth centuries CE, and act as a post mortem for the Parthians while exploring how their successors, the Sassanian Persian Empire, used the economic might of the Silk Road to ascend back to a place of power in the region. The Sassanian Empire provides in its history counterpoints to many of the arguments made against the Parthian Empire, particularly the argument of the fractious nobility tearing the empire down, and this chapter will explore those ideas and show why they have little to commend them. By the end of this thesis, I aim to rehabilitate the Parthian Empire by returning to them a sense of autonomy and agency. By viewing their history through this economic lens, the Parthians cease to exist solely as an orientalist monarchy, doomed to fail because of their ‘nature’, and become instead an agent in their own affairs as they always were.

Chapter Two: Parthian Origins

The origins of Parthia as a military and political power begins with the political fracturing of the Seleucid Empire in the 240s BCE. In 246 BCE, the nomadic Parni people, led by King Arsaces I, made several incursions into the Seleucid province of Parthia but were rebuffed by the royal army.⁵⁴ Later that year, with the death of the Seleucid king, the Seleucid governors of Parthia and Bactria rebelled, seeking independence. The new Seleucid king, busy with a war against Ptolemaic Egypt was unable to respond, leaving the two rebellious governors alone against the might of a renewed Parni assault. While the royal army had little difficulty repulsing the invading Parni, the governor of Parthia, Andragoras, had no such capability and the province fell to the invaders.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander: The Battle of Gaugamela* (Book III, 7-16), Trans. E.J. Chinnock, 8.

Prior to their takeover of the province of Parthia, the Parni were mostly unknown. It is clear they were nomadic and had perhaps been dwelling east and north of the Caspian Sea for several hundred years. When writing on the Battle of Gaugamela in the final months of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, Arrian comments that “Phrataphernes [commanded] the Parthians, Hyrcanians, and Tapurians, all of whom were horsemen.” While it is impossible to determine if these ‘Parthians’ were the Parni people or not, the fact that they were all horsemen gives credence to that possibility.

⁵⁵ Koshelenko and Pilipko, “Parthia,” 131.

Table 1: Parthian King List of the First Period, c. 247 – 124/3 BCE

Arsaces I	c. 247 – 217 BCE
Arsaces II	c. 217 – 191 BCE
Phriapatius	c. 191 – 176 BCE
Phraates I	176 – 171 BCE
Mithridates I	171 – 139/8 BCE
Phraates II	139/8 – 128 BCE
Artabanus I	128 – 124/3 BCE

The Parni invaders were temporarily pushed out in later years when the Seleucid king was able to spare the royal army for actions in Parthia, but they very quickly returned when the king and his army returned to the Seleucid capital. With internal problems plaguing the Seleucid Empire and requiring the king's attention, Arsaces I was left as the de-facto ruler of Parthia and parts of Hyrcania until his death in 217 BCE. His successor, Arsaces II, was challenged by another Seleucid king, but was better able to repulse their attack and forced the Seleucids to recognize the Parni as the legitimate rulers and client kings of the Seleucid Empire.⁵⁶ Taking the name of the province they conquered, the newly recognized Parthians, up to the ascension of Mithridates I as king in 171 BCE, remained loyal enough that the Parthians are not mentioned in any records during this period except to record the names of kings.⁵⁷ This implies they acted in a subservient-enough manner for the Seleucid kings to tolerate their presence. Had the Parthians attempted to invade and claim further Seleucid territory, it would surely have been recorded within Justin's *Epitome*.

Mithridates I dominated the second half of Parthia's first period. Ruling from 171 - 139/8 BCE, Mithridates I took the Parthians from the status of a client kingdom of the Seleucids to

⁵⁶ Brosius, *The Parthians*, 86.

⁵⁷ Justin, *Epitome*, 41.4-5.

imperial masters of the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia, independent in their own right.⁵⁸ This shift from kingdom to empire, from nomadic to semi-nomadic is not just a modern appellation to this point in Parthian history, but a distinction that Mithridates was cognizant of and actively engaged in its development. In his reign, the Parthian Empire began minting coins showing his independence and kingship; the soft caps indicative of a steppe nomad that the kings once wore were replaced on the coin with royal diadems.⁵⁹ Not only does this mark the Parthians of Mithridates' time and beyond as rulers of empire, but it also shows a departure from their origins to better dominate a series of settled peoples.

This pattern of nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples invading a settled area to eventually settle themselves, forcing the resident power structure to acknowledge and legitimize their presence, is a common one.⁶⁰ In both Han China and Imperial Rome, the 'legitimate' state often first fought nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples in battle, before grudgingly acknowledging their right to the territory they claimed. The territory the Parthians expanded to encompass through Mithridates I's reign is not out of the norm in terms of geographical extent when compared to some of the nomadic peoples that invaded China. The Parni-turned-Parthians of this period are typical and exhibit no extraordinary attributes over any other nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples of the time.

⁵⁸ Justin, *Epitome*, 41.6.

⁵⁹ Brosius, *The Persians*, 87.

⁶⁰ One could even argue that it is a situation known to all settled societies that exist next to nomadic or semi-nomadic ones up until the mass proliferation of firearms. Most pertinent to Parthia's history, Han China and Imperial Rome certainly understood the dangerous consequences of nomadic neighbors.

The rise of the Parthian Empire in Mithridates' reign gives evidence to this reasoning of the Parthians as nothing out of the ordinary. Parthia, like most successful imperial projects, was able to adapt itself to new circumstances. Additionally, the rise of the Parthian Empire is met in the time of Mithridates and his direct successors with the same challenges that any empire faced, especially those so close to the Central Asian steppe. In Parthia's situation, it was a bitter development. With the expansion of the new empire, the Parthians were beset with the exact problem that so reduced Seleucid territory: nomadic peoples on the steppe threatening to raid territory or, worse, invade with the intent to conquer.⁶¹ The kings of Parthia, like the Seleucids before them, sent armies to the east and north to fend off nomadic groups harassing their borders, leaving their western territories periodically undefended against most conventional settled threats, like the reduced Seleucid Empire or the rising Roman state.

Added to the new threats along their borders, the Parthians also had to deal with their new subject peoples that were culturally and politically different from their own. Keeping subjugated peoples pliant and peaceful is ever the task of imperial rulers and is one that the Parthian kings repeatedly dealt with before eventually succumbing to a particularly dangerous group: the Sassanian Persians. All told, the Parthians exhibit much the same broad history as any other empire: a rapid expansion of territory that brings political and social upheaval that is dealt with as long as possible before the empire fractures or collapses.⁶²

⁶¹ Justin, *Epitome*, 42.1-2.

⁶² Carla Sinopoli, "The Archaeology of Empire" in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994), 162-169. Sinopoli provides the broad timeline of empire in her discussion on Expansion, Consolidation, and Collapse, which, of course, the Parthian Empire follows.

This point is important, as it pertains to the origins of the Parthian people, as well as their eventual collapse. The Parthians, by this argument, are not an oriental or ‘special’ people, doomed by their biology and origin, but simply another people who will rise to rule an empire. The traditional orientalist approach to these cultures is as much composed of delegitimizing their rise as it is disempowering every other part of their history. The Parthian control over the Silk Road propels them to dominance not only on the Iranian Plateau, but beyond into Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Syria. The Parthians must be understood in relation to the economic achievement they have with their position on the Silk Road and not as the oriental nomads subservient to the military will and political machinations of Rome that is so often displayed.⁶³

The Origins of the Silk Road

The formation and operation of the Silk Road shifted the course of the Parthian Empire. Through their control over the western portions of the route, Parthia rose to prominence, and through their later inability to maintain that control, gradually declined and finally collapsed. Within this section, I will explore the foundations of the Silk Road and demonstrate its parallel timeline with the first period of the Parthian Empire. In much the same time that the Parni people

⁶³ Rawlinson, *Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy*, 330-31, 347, 368-9, 428.

Debevoise, *Political History of Parthia*, 254, 262, 269.

Colledge, *The Parthians*, 170.

Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, 83-5, 102.

McNeill, *A World History*, 202.

Starr, *A History of the Ancient World*, 631.

were establishing their kingdom within the province of Parthia, the nomadic Xiongnu of the northern Chinese steppe were forcing the Han Empire to act to preserve their own territory.

The origins of the Silk Road are traced back to Han China, but might be better attributed to the nomadic peoples of Central Asia, as they provided the impetus for Han China to embark on the exploratory missions that eventually opened communication with the western regions.⁶⁴ The history of the Chinese state and the nomadic steppe dwellers in the north was a frequently violent and almost entirely antagonistic one throughout this era.⁶⁵ The Han Chinese, at constant war with the Xiongnu steppe confederation since their rise to power in the late third century BCE, were always looking for possible allies to use against the enemy. These allies were primarily nomadic cultures themselves and were often peoples who had been abused by the Xiongnu in the past. During one conflict in the late second century BCE, nearing the end of Parthia's first period, the Chinese emperor sent envoys to a nomadic people, the Yuehshi, in the far west to ask for their

⁶⁴ Loewe, *China in Central Asia*, 48.

Loewe argues that the origins of this conflict go back to the end of the Ch'in Dynasty:

The collapse of Ch'in authority, c. 210 BCE, and the subsequent failure to maintain an effective defense of the northern commanderies, had coincided with the emergence of a short-lived unity among the main tribesmen who were able to threaten Chinese security, the [Xiongnu].

With the collapse of the Ch'in, the Xiongnu were able to consolidate enough to become a major threat to the Han empire that followed. This then prompted the Han's military and diplomatic envoys to find allies which led them to the Parthian empire, and the initiation of the Silk Road.

⁶⁵ Ishjamts, N. "Nomads in Eastern Central Asia" in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia: Volume II, The Development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations: 700 B.C. to A.D. 250* (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), 153.

aid against the Xiongnu.⁶⁶ This envoy was rebuffed by the nomadic Yuehzi, who had no desire to return to northern China and fight the Xiongnu. However, they did provide information on other semi-nomadic and settled peoples in the Transoxiana region; information that the envoys were able to bring back to the Chinese emperor.⁶⁷ Despite returning to the emperor with no military allies, the expedition had still been useful. The knowledge of other settled peoples that the Yuehzi provided was valuable to the emperor. The Chinese, up to this point, had always been geographically isolated by vast deserts, mountains, and jungles, with all the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples that lived within such environs and were rarely friendly to imperial Chinese interests. The existence of other settled peoples, not so unlike China, presented the possibility of either strong military allies, or wealthy “outer vassals” that could provide tribute to the emperor.⁶⁸ Only a few years after the first envoys returned, a new official diplomatic

⁶⁶ Ying-shih Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 135.

⁶⁷ “Shih Chi 123” in *Records of the Grand Historian of China, Volume II*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) 264-265.

Transoxiana encompasses the region of Central Asia northwest of the Iranian Plateau and west of the Tarim Basin. The merchants of the Silk Road traveled first to the cities of Transoxiana before their goods were shuttled either to west to Parthia, or South to India and the sea. This region will become extremely important when discussing the Kushan Empire and their territorial expansion.

⁶⁸ For more information on the system of Outer Vassals, see *Records of Han Administration Vol 1*, 137.

embassy was sent to the west to the peoples of Transoxiana, and to the Parthian Empire, fresh off its imperial expansion in the midst of Mithridates II's reign.

This new embassy was similarly disappointed in their search for direct military assistance from any of these settled peoples. Travel from the heartland of China through the Tarim Basin was difficult enough for relatively small groups of people; transporting military forces through the region for use in conflict against the Xiongnu was a complete non-starter for the kingdoms of Transoxiana and the Parthian Empire.⁶⁹ Even China, supposed suzerain of many smaller groups in the region, had trouble mounting military expeditions into the Tarim Basin, much less trying to fight a war on the other side of it.⁷⁰ Instead, the embassy focused on making agreements of trade between the western kingdoms and the Chinese Empire. The most important result of these agreements was the import into China of horses bred by the kingdoms of Transoxiana and Parthia. These horses were of far better quality than Chinese bred horses and were prized as weapons to be used against the Xiongnu, being given the name 'heavenly horses'.⁷¹ In return for

⁶⁹ Perhaps the best evidence we have of this is that Han China never received direct military aid from any cultural group west of the Tarim Basin, even though it is a major part of their stated purpose for launching these expeditions to the west.

⁷⁰ C. J. Peers, *Imperial Chinese Armies: 200 BC – 589 AD* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1995) 8. The best example in this period being the failed invasion of Ta-yuan on the western edge of the Tarim Basin by General Li Kuang-li in 104 BCE.

⁷¹ Peers, *Imperial Chinese Armies*, 7.

Central Asian horses, the Chinese traded luxury goods, silks primary among them, and the famous trade route was born.⁷²

It is here that I place the end of the Parthian's first period. Their rise from obscurity on the Central Asian steppe to their domination of the Iranian Plateau as an Empire is important, but such a history could be told for many different cultures and peoples through time. The establishment of the Silk Road and the profits extracted from its control propelled the Parthian Empire to its position within the next two centuries.

⁷² Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 143.

As Mark Edward Lewis comments, “the ‘Silk Road’ did not exist when the Han first sent missions to Central Asia... trade increased only as a consequence of those first missions.”

Chapter Three: Parthian Dominance

The opening of trade between Han China and Arsacid Parthia in the waning years of the second century BCE marks the beginning of the second period of Parthian history, with its end being marked in the second half of the first century CE as Parthia’s economic control over the Silk Road trade and military dominance over Rome in the region ends. This section of the historiography, around the opening of the Silk Road between China and Parthia, is a woefully small part of modern historical works, but what little exists provides tantalizing ideas about the effects it may have had.

Table 2: Parthian King List of the Second Period, 124/3 BCE – 76/80 CE

Mithridates II	124/3 – 88/7 BCE
Gotarzes I	91/0 – 81/0 BCE
Orodes I	81/0 – 76/5 BCE
Sinatruces	c. 78/7 – 71/0 BCE
Phraates III	71/0 – 58/7 BCE
Mithridates III	58/7 BCE
Orodes II	58/7 – 38 BCE
Phraates IV	38 – 3/2 BCE
Phraates V	2 BCE – 2 CE
Orodes III	4 – 6 CE
Vonones I	8/9 CE
Artabanus II	10/11 – 38 CE
Vardanes	38 – 45 CE
Gotarzes II	43/4 – 51 CE
Vonones II	51 CE
Vologeses I	51 – 76/80 CE

Brosius puts forth the idea that burgeoning trade with China was “perhaps one of the reasons why Mithridates II wanted to gain more control over the northwestern border of his

empire, for in 97 [BCE] he subjected Armenia, an independent kingdom, to Parthian rule.”⁷³

Armenia, at this point in the history of the Parthian Empire, was far outside their core regions within the Iranian Plateau and southern Mesopotamia; that Mithridates conducted military operations with the intent to subject Armenia so far from his region of control suggests an additional motive.⁷⁴ I believe this motive was economic in nature, which can be reasoned from the times that Armenia was considered valuable to Parthian interests combined with the information known about the Steppe Road trade route, which was in operation at this time.

Brosius says nothing more on this topic, leaving it frustratingly vague especially when considering only the overland Silk Road trade passing through the Iranian Plateau. Even during the high-points of trade between Parthia and Rome, goods and coin did not flow through Armenia, but through cities in Northern Mesopotamia and Syria like Palmyra. This leaves Armenia out in terms of its independent economic value, but when one considers the goods flowing in from the Eurasian steppe, Mithridates’ actions and Armenia’s value become more tangible.

In the literature surrounding long-distance trade between Han China, Parthia, India, and Rome, two main routes are discussed to the point of near exclusivity: the Silk Road overland route through the Iranian Plateau, and the Spice Route between India and Egypt over the Indian

⁷³ Brosius, *The Persians*, 91.

⁷⁴ While Armenia will certainly play some part as the buffer client state between Roman and Parthian ambitions, such a motive cannot be ascribed to Mithridates II in his efforts to subjugate the region as Parthian officials will only meet Roman officials during this campaign of subjugation.

Ocean. While both are certainly important and compose the vast majority of the luxury good trade between these empires, a third route existed as well, waxing and waning in importance as its neighboring trade routes fluctuated through the years. This Steppe Road, as Raoul McLaughlin calls it, is not a new idea, but rather an economic exploration of traditional nomadic movement across the Eurasian steppe.⁷⁵ On this Steppe Road, goods were not transported by merchant caravans or imperial envoys, but by the steppe people who populated the region. Goods were acquired from China either through the raiding of settlements or the acquisition of tribute and were transported across the Eurasian Steppe by the many tribes that populated the area.⁷⁶

The end point of this Steppe Road is more nebulous than the Silk Road or Spice Route as nomadic groups often traded with settled societies on the southern border of the Eurasian steppe in Bactria and Transoxiana, making exact calculations difficult. However, McLaughlin argues that much of the luxury goods that survived their passage on the steppe, made the journey north of the Aral and Caspian Sea before terminating at trade posts on the Black Sea both north and south of the Caucasus Mountains, an area controlled by Armenia.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 84.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 131.

J. Innes Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire: 29 B.C. to A.D. 641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 122.

This transportation of goods took many forms, such as economic trading and gifting, or more violent pillaging. J. Miller uses the term ‘Scythian Route’ instead of ‘Steppe Road’ but they are functionally the same thing.

⁷⁷ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 83.

With this context, the actions of Mithridates II start to make more sense. Having traded luxury goods with Han China for over a decade by the beginning of the first century BCE, Armenia represented two things: an additional source of luxury Chinese goods, and a potential competitor to Parthian merchants in selling their own goods. For reasons related to their handling of the Kushan Empire that I will explore in Chapter Four, I believe the former was a far more driving concern to the Parthian kings than the latter.⁷⁸

David Marshall Lang, *Armenia: Cradle of Civilization* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), 96.

Lang comments in his discussion on Urartu that,

In addition [to the east-west trade Urartu participated in,] the north-south trade route between the Black Sea region, particularly prosperous Colchis, and Mesopotamia and Elam, passed straight through Urartu.

This gives some indication towards the existence of trans-steppe trade enriching the cultures around the Black Sea, even far before Parthia and the Silk Road emerges.

⁷⁸ Stated briefly, the Arsacid Parthians had a pattern of acting positively to enhance their own economic trading position, rather than acting negatively to damage the economic positions of their neighbors and direct competitors. For example, The Parthians were far more likely to take military and political actions that had a direct positive effect on their own trade activity, rather than actions that hurt others' trade activity, and that had a secondary positive effect on their own. We see the Parthians acting to control Armenia and this inflow of luxury goods from the Steppe Road, yet seemingly do nothing to curtail the later Kushans and their co-ordination with the Roman Empire over the Spice Route.

Whatever cause drove Mithridates II to subjugate Armenia, it was while meddling in their affairs that the Parthians first encountered the Roman Republic, represented by then *pro consule* Lucius Sulla, and made the first territorial agreement between the two powers marking the Euphrates River as their territorial border.⁷⁹ This agreement lasted for three decades, surviving two political crises involving the expansionist actions of the Romans: one in 69 BCE with the commander Lucullus threatening to attack an Armenian city and the other in 66-65 BCE with Pompey looking to change the status quo.⁸⁰ More than anything, the actions of Rome and Parthia in the first forty years of the first century BCE are indicative of the two powers feeling out the strengths and weaknesses of the other; an unsteady peace that violently collapsed in the 50s BCE as the Triumvir Crassus made war on the Parthian Empire.

The beginning of open military conflict between the two powers resulted in a century and more of Parthian dominance on battlefields largely outside their core territories. In 53 BCE, at the Battle of Carrhae, the Parthians inflicted a brutal defeat upon Crassus, killing or capturing tens of thousands of Roman soldiers and deporting the surviving captives to the eastern edge of their empire.⁸¹ Within a decade of this victory, the Parthians launched a major raid into Roman Syria and were only forced back after years of pillaging Roman territory. In 36-33 BCE, the Parthians beat back a Roman invasion under Marc Antony, inflicting a major defeat upon the general and killing tens of thousands more Roman soldiers. This series of losses convinced the

⁷⁹ Plutarch, "Life of Sulla," 5.4.

⁸⁰ Brosius, *The Persians*, 94.

⁸¹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 40.27.

Plutarch, *Life of Crassus*, 31.7.

expansionist and militaristic Rome to establish a peace in 20 BCE with Parthia that persisted for half a century. Not until the 30s CE did Rome attempt to reestablish political and military control over Armenia, prompting military action from the Parthians in the wars between 58 and 63 CE.⁸²

This last set of conflicts, establishing a sort of dual control between Parthia and Rome over Armenia, was also the last military conflict in this second period of Parthian history and the last time for a century and a half that Parthia achieved military and political success against the Romans. This military success is the most clearly visible hallmark of this second period of Parthian history, but it does not exist in a vacuum. This is also the period of history where Parthia saw the most success in controlling their economic interests in general and the Silk Road in particular, with the socio-political benefits that naturally came from such success.

Rather than an oriental empire in decline due to claims of the ‘powerful nobility’ that Debevoise and Colledge discuss, the Parthian Empire of this period was dominant, politically and militarily.⁸³ Rather than their repeated military conflicts with Rome fracturing their power, the Parthians of this period presented a united front against Roman political intrigue and military might. The Parthians not only controlled their own territory to great effectiveness but were also

⁸² Brosius, *The Persians*, 96-97.

⁸³ It must be noted that being dominant in these two areas is often what the Roman state (or certain Greek polities, or France, or England, or any other non-eastern state) is praised for. The double standard that exists for the Parthians and other non-western polities is striking.

able to launch a major years-long raid into Roman territory and compete politically with the Mediterranean superpower over the political fate of Armenia.⁸⁴

The Silk Road of the Second Period

The economic control over the luxury goods trade, both on the Silk Road and the Steppe Road, allowed the Parthians such success in this period. For this discussion, we turn once more to Han China and the late second century BCE, for the true beginnings of the legendary trade route.

Once the Han emperor and the governing elite knew of western settled peoples, trade began quickly. By 119 BCE, the Han were able to reoccupy lands north of the Yellow River that had previously been under Xiongnu control.⁸⁵ By c. 111 BCE, Ssu-ma Ch'ien writes that "up to ten trading caravans were setting west annually, sometimes comprising complements of several hundred men."⁸⁶ In 104-102 BCE, the farthest commanderies of the northwest regions were established, creating trade routes safe from the worst predations of the Xiongnu tribes, making long distance trade a far safer activity. Less than a decade later, the Parthians subjugate Armenia, cementing a new end-point for not only the Silk Road trade they had been benefiting from, but also the Steppe Road and the goods that traveled upon it as well.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ The best examples here being the extended Parthian raid into Syria from 42-37 BCE.

⁸⁵ Loewe, *Records of Han Administration*, 49.

⁸⁶ Shih Chi 123.24-5.

⁸⁷ Brosius, *The Persians*, 91.

Moving briefly back to McLaughlin and the Steppe Road, it was once again Han Chinese policy that drove the economic development of this trade route. With the Steppe Road luxury goods originally obtained through raiding of Chinese towns and villages, there were frequent reprisals and conflicts between the Xiongnu and Han living on their northern border. However, developments in Han diplomatic strategies simplified the process greatly. Instead of trying to fight the Xiongnu, the Han instead gave them annual bribes of coinage, silk, and food, with the intent to mold the nomads into a form of economic domestication.⁸⁸

By all measures, the Han Chinese seem to have been successful at this policy. The Xiongnu of later years were less violent on the whole, and by the end of the first century BCE, the Xiongnu were so indebted to Chinese economic activity that acquiring access to the border markets of the Han became important parts of the nomadic diplomatic playbook.⁸⁹ This development is important to the discussion of the Steppe Road because it increased the quantity of luxury goods entering the Eurasian steppe, thus increasing the quantity of luxury goods

⁸⁸ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 84.

The Chinese officials believed that if they could make the Xiongnu dependent on Chinese goods to live their daily life, they could create leverage over the Xiongnu that could be used to control them. McLaughlin relates a Chinese warning to a Xiongnu ruler:

Your whole horde scarcely equals the population of a couple of Chinese prefectures. The secret of your strength lies in your independence from China for all your real necessities. Now you have this increasing fondness for Chinese things and the Xiongnu customs are changing. Although the Han Empire sends no more than a fifth of its goods here, it will in the end succeed in controlling the whole Xiongnu nation. (84)

⁸⁹ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 85.

exiting the steppe in Armenia, increasing its value and sparking continued conflict over its subjugation by both Rome and Parthia.

This transference of goods was almost certainly less efficient than the transfer of goods along the Silk Road (or later along the Spice Route), but the Steppe Road was also almost certainly in practical operation from long before the Silk Road was established, given our understanding of Xiongnu raiding practices.⁹⁰ This flow of luxuries may not have been exceptionally valuable during the high points of trade along the Silk Road, where better quality and larger quantities of goods could be transferred, but during slow periods of trade, the goods that entered Parthia and Armenia from the steppe became increasingly valuable. As well, during the opening of trade between China and Parthia, and later between Parthia and Rome, the wealth that Parthia could extract from the merchants that traveled along the roads was passed on in price to Roman merchants.⁹¹ This spurred Rome to seek out alternative sources of the luxuries coming

⁹⁰ Long distance trade across the Silk Road begins, at the very earliest, in the 220s BCE, while the raiding of Chinese towns and villages begins hundreds of years earlier. Further, nomadic peoples have been moving across the steppe for thousands of years.

⁹¹ Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, 159.

While China remains the source of the luxury goods that Rome, Parthia and the Kushans fought over, their economic policies meant that it didn't matter much who was receiving their goods past the Tarim Basin, demonstrated through the ease with which Indian and Kushan traders replaced the Transoxianan Greeks who had previously dominated the Tarim Basin trade group. Yu comments that, "on the whole it seems justifiable to say that the Chinese had a smaller interest in the Roman trade than vice versa."

across the Parthian Empire and gave them an interest in Armenia: that end point of the Steppe Road.⁹²

The Parthian and Roman interest in Armenia can only be satisfactorily explained through this economic argument that has not been fully made before. Armenia served as a buffer state between the Parthian Empire and Rome, providing them a non-native territory to fight over to discourage more damaging wars upon their own territory, but this does little to fully explain why Armenia became so important to either empire. The Parthians and Romans already had a common border between Roman Syria and Parthian Mesopotamia, and the military importance of Armenia to one side or the other was relatively small.⁹³ Even when the two powers went to

⁹² We already know that Rome sought desperately to acquire the means of producing silk. Later Roman expeditions were launched with the express purpose of finding where and how silk was produced and stealing it so it could be made within Roman territory instead of having to be imported.

⁹³ Charles Barney and David Marshall Lang, *The People of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus* (London: Phoenix Press, 1971), 200.

With their comment, “from now on, Armenia became a buffer state between Rome and Parthia,” Barney and Lang argue that Armenia was indeed that buffer state, and provide the fact that Marc Antony used Armenia to invade Parthia as evidence towards its importance, especially after the Roman disaster at Carrhae. However, in that same section, they also acknowledge that Armenian support during the invasion was so “lukewarm” that Antony later punished the king and family and had them executed in Alexandria:

Roman losses were disastrous, and Mark Antony blamed these on Artavazd for his lukewarm support. Mark Antony decided to punish him and subdue Armenia, but first attempted to lure the Armenian king and his family to visit the court of Cleopatra in

war, Armenia often acted independently, no matter which side currently had the region subjugated. Not only does viewing Armenia as an economic end point of the Steppe Road explain the fervor with which both Rome and Parthia acted to try and dominate the region, but it also puts forward some explanation of why Parthia, in 216-7 CE reopened hostilities with Rome and made Armenia a battleground once again. It is sufficient to say here that the known decline in trade over the Spice Route and Silk Road due to war and disease caused a resurgence in importance of the Steppe Road with their limited transmission of goods becoming a valuable asset once more to a Parthian Empire attempting to regain its position of power. This will be discussed in further depth in Chapter Five.

The Silk Road trade that Parthia oversaw greatly enriched the rulers of the Iranian Plateau and continued to do so even through the various wars that were fought between Parthia and Rome. Even during conflict between the two powers, Palmyra remained an intermediary trade city, giving both sides a neutral place to buy and sell goods.⁹⁴ Beyond this, we must understand that the caravans traveling through Parthia were not technically ‘Parthian’ at all. It seems likely

Egypt. In 34 BC, Mark Antony suddenly invaded Armenia, and carried off Artavazd and his family to Egypt, where Cleopatra had them murdered in 31 BC.

On Parthia’s status as a buffer state, they remark again on 204, that Armenia “remained a more or less docile buffer state.”

⁹⁴ Perkins, *Art of Dura-Europos*, 5.

Perkins comments that, “Around the first century B.C. Dura began to grow in size and increase in prosperity, presumably as a result of the initiation of the lucrative Palmyrene caravan trade.”

This trade was the Silk Road trade, which continues to match up with the timeline I have proposed for the trade route’s rise.

that the Parthians were primarily overseers in the Silk Road trade, facilitating safe routes for caravans to travel upon and taxing those caravans to extract their wealth.⁹⁵ The caravans themselves were likely made up of local peoples moving goods from one end of their territorial region to the other, transferring to other peoples as they went.⁹⁶ As such, the caravans moving between Parthian and Roman territory were likely Palmyrene, which gave them some immunity from the conflicts that raged around them.⁹⁷

This is not to say that the Parthians did not engage in limiting or changing the relationship of trade through their empire, especially with Rome. For example, the Parthians were able to use their control of the Silk Road and the merchants that plied its routes to their advantage in making peace agreements. One of the terms of the peace agreement between Parthia and Rome in 63 CE dictated that Palmyra was to be the only city of trade between the

⁹⁵ Widengren, “Sources of Parthian and Sasanian History,” 1263.

That the Parthians taxed goods traveling through their territory seems silly to dispute, and we have evidence from Nisa that indicates the presence of “customs posts” in at least the eastern half of the empire.

⁹⁶ Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, 158.

Yu claims the Nabataeans, whose capital was in Rekam or Petra, were responsible for much of the Silk transportation in the Parthian Empire, and thus were the real profiteers. This does not change the Parthian’s capability to tax and profit off the movement of those goods. This simply provides more context to the act of long-distance trade as it crossed the empire.

⁹⁷ Koshelenko and Pilipko, “Parthia,” 138.

Parthians and the Romans, showing two things.⁹⁸ First: that unrestricted trade across the entire Roman-Parthian border was something Rome did not want, implying a discomfort with how much wealth flowed from Roman coffers to Parthian ones, and second: that even though they wished to curtail and regulate the Silk Road trade, Rome was unwilling to tolerate a total cessation of luxury goods coming into the empire. This dynamic, and the desire for luxury goods by the upper classes of Roman society provided the impetus for much of the next two hundred years of Roman economic and political activity in the east.

The trade between Parthia and Rome had two major benefits for the Parthians. First, it enriched Parthian coffers, whether indirectly through Roman coin that was spent crossing the Parthian Empire or directly through the taxation of the caravans that traveled through their territory. Second, this trade forced a tacit agreement between the Parthians and the Romans that war between the two powers could not ever be too deleterious to economic operations, else both sides suffer.

Towards the first benefit, there is clear evidence that Roman leadership was upset at the state of economic affairs along their eastern border. Pliny the Elder commented that great effort went into procuring Chinese silks so that “our ladies may in public display their charms,” while Seneca the Elder commented of silks that “wretched flocks of maids labor so that the adulteress may be visible through her thin dress, so that her husband has no more acquaintance than any

⁹⁸ Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 190.

Indeed, the Romans would make a similar treaty in 299 with the Sassanians limiting all trade to Nisibis.

outsider or foreigner with his wife's body."⁹⁹ It is difficult to attribute this kind of writing to simple moral fear mongering of Pliny or Seneca. Rather they are better seen as signs that the Roman elite was coming to understand the problems with their consumption of luxury goods from the Far East, made even clearer with the Senate's attempt to ban the wearing of silk by men in 14 BCE — an effort that went almost entirely ignored.¹⁰⁰ Even the members of the Senate were later berated by the emperor Tiberius for their wearing of silks and use of perfumes and spices. These complaints are made in terms of concerns towards Roman morality, but it was economic distress over the unequal trade that drove such actions.¹⁰¹

In discussing this unequal trade, Pliny does give some hard numbers to explore. Pliny writes that Rome's trade with India and Arabia cost the empire 50,000,000 sesterces a year while their total trade with the Far East, including goods shipped from China through the Silk Road came to a total cost of 100,000,000 sesterces lost per year.¹⁰² Even if these numbers are inflated past the realm of reality, they provide good evidence of how prominent Romans *thought* the Silk

⁹⁹ Pliny the Elder: *The Natural History*, 6.20.

Seneca the Elder: "Declamations, Excerpta Controversiae" 2.7.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Tucker, *The Silk Road: Art and History*, Art Media Resources Ltd. 2003, 15.

¹⁰¹ If this concern was truly related to Roman morals, then more stringent efforts would have been made to restrict the wearing and display of wealth acquired from Parthia and India.

¹⁰² McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 116.

McLaughlin argues that 100 million sesterces equaled ~1/10th the yearly operating cost of the Roman Empire. If the relative cost were this high, then anxiety around such economic expenditures is understandable.

Road and Spice Route trade affected them. Even if the trade wasn't truly draining Roman coffers of coin and goods, the fact that the Roman elite believed in the loss of wealth gives rationale for their attempts in the east to either dominate Parthia or circumvent it entirely.

The domination of Parthia, as discussed above, was a greatly problematic issue for the Romans of this period. Crassus and Marc Antony learned firsthand what the Parthians could accomplish fighting in their own territory, and the Parthian excursion into Syria showed them to be a dangerous force outside their homeland as well. Domination was a poor avenue to redress economic woes, and over time the Romans turned instead to circumvention which, along with the rise of the Kushans in the east, spelled the end of this second period of Parthian history, and marked the birth of their third period.

The correlation between Parthian political and military success, and their economic control of the Silk and Steppe Roads is unquestionably strong. As the Silk Road trade continued, Parthia expanded their area of influence, and repeatedly met the Roman Republic and then Empire on the field of battle, besting them each time and inflicting upon them vicious defeats. Had the Parthians remained in such control over the Silk Road, or remained militarily dominant as that economic control faltered, there would be less reason to believe this economic argument I have provided. However, as I will explore in this next chapter, the Parthian fall from military and political power, and the collapse of their economic control over the luxury goods trade went hand-in-hand.

Chapter Four: Parthian Decline

The third period in Parthian history saw the sudden shift from Parthian dominance to military and political frailty in dealing with the aggressive Roman Empire. From the end of the first century CE to the first decade of the third century CE, the Romans inflicted three major military defeats upon the Parthians; defeats that occurred not in border regions like Armenia or Syria, but in the heartland of Parthia itself: Mesopotamia. The Parthians of this period lost their authority over not only Armenia, but also temporarily lost the entirety of Mesopotamia, and permanently lost Northern Mesopotamia; regions that had been under core control for a hundred years and more. Chronologically, this period begins with the reign of King Pacorus (77/8 - 108/9 CE) and it ends with the death of Vologeses V (191/2 - 207/8 CE), the third to the last king of Parthia.

Table 3: Parthian King List of the Third Period, 78/9 – 207/8 CE

Pacorus	77/8 – 108/9 CE
Vologeses II	77/8 CE
Artabanus III	79-81 CE
Osroes	108/9 – 127/8 CE
Vologeses III	111/2 – 147/8 CE
Vologeses IV	147/8 – 191/2 CE
Vologeses V	191/2 – 207/8 CE

In 114 CE, the Romans launched an invasion deep into Mesopotamia and were able to hold the entire region for three years before the next Roman emperor decided to pull the military forces in the region back.¹⁰³ However, unlike much of the back-and-forth conflict in the second

¹⁰³ Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 195-97.

period of Parthian history, this recall of Roman forces was not due to a resurgent Parthian counterattack, but because of the unacceptable economic expenditure required to keep the conquered territory pacified.¹⁰⁴ The vast wealth that had once traveled through Mesopotamia and into Roman Syria was evidently greatly diminished by this point, leading to the economic decision to abandon the fertile region.¹⁰⁵ Decades later, between 161 and 165 CE, the Romans fully annexed Armenia and invaded Mesopotamia again, sacking the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon. Thirty years after that, in 195-197 CE, the Romans under Septimus Severus invaded Mesopotamia for a third time and annexed the northern half of the region, making it a part of the Roman military frontier.¹⁰⁶ It should also be noted that it is during the second century CE that

An argument exists that this war of Trajan's was driven by economic desires to conquer the Parthian sections of the Silk Road, but I agree with Young in finding this motive suspect, given the maritime Spice Route was delivering all the luxury goods the Romans might have wanted, and the Silk Road was being cut off by the Kushan Empire.

¹⁰⁴ Brosius, *The Persians*, 100.

¹⁰⁵ Tangential to this discussion but important for later arguments, Roman imperial actions like pulling out of Mesopotamia for economic reasons give credence to the idea of empires making grand political and military decisions based on economic forecasting. The invasion of Dacia under Trajan, the abandonment of Roman Britain, and the Parthian interest in Armenia can all be traced back to this kind of economic decision making.

¹⁰⁶ Brosius, *The Persians*, 100.

many discussions around Parthian internal politicking are made by historians, decrying the internal weaknesses that provided the Roman Empire methods to sow dissent.¹⁰⁷

This last invasion presents a possible contradiction in Roman logic from decades earlier. Why annex a territory that had been economically barren less than a century earlier, especially when leaving the territory to the Parthians provided such an effective raiding target? The answer is evident: the territory of Northern Mesopotamia, especially regarding its position with Armenia, became economically valuable once again with the likelihood of the Silk and Steppe Roads coming back to the forefront of long-distance trade.

Roman Circumvention

As mentioned above, domination was a poor avenue for the Romans to redress economic woes, and, perhaps realizing this, they turned slowly to circumvention and the Spice Route trade between Egypt and India. This following discussion, so rooted in Roman economic and political interests is vital to a discussion of Parthian economic history because of the place Rome held in the ancient world's economy. As a primary consumer of goods transported from China and India, the question is not *where* the luxury goods ended up, but rather *which* imperial power had the ability to levy taxes upon their transport. If Rome could only procure the luxury goods of China and India through Parthian Silk Road, then Parthia had the ability to tax those goods and

¹⁰⁷ Brosius, *The Persians*, 100.

Colledge, *The Parthians*, 170.

generate wealth from their transport. If Roman merchants were the ones transporting those goods from India through the maritime Spice Route, then Rome had all the power to tax the goods and pocket the profits made therein. This wealth that Rome will acquire was thus doubly important to Parthian operations because it is wealth that is both removed from Parthian coffers, while it is added to Roman ones. Finally, the greater the Romans' control over the luxury trade, the less inhibited they were in engaging in military actions against Parthia that might threaten the luxury goods traveling over the Silk Road.

The integration of Egypt back into the empire after the Roman civil war marks the first step in this process of circumvention. When Augustus stood triumphant as emperor of the entire Roman world, it became possible to fully reopen and exploit maritime trade routes stretching from Alexandria to India and beyond. These routes, once plied by Ptolemaic merchants, now had the impetus of a united Roman Empire to drive trade once again.¹⁰⁸ Through a textual analysis of the kings of Arabia listed in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, scholars have determined the likely period of writing to be in the first century CE, between 40 and 70 CE, right at the height of this explosion in Roman trade.¹⁰⁹ In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus boasts that, along with various other

¹⁰⁸ Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, 157.

Yu comments that

Since Rome had especially suffered from the Parthian intervention in her trade with the east, it was her policy during the two centuries following the Christian era 'to encourage direct sea trade with India, cutting out all overland routes through Parthia and thus avoiding the annoyance of fiscal dependence on that consistent enemy of Rome.' (157)

¹⁰⁹ Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, 6-7.

Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, 154-5.

Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 6.

delegations, “embassies from kings in India were frequently sent to me; never before had they been seen with any Roman commander.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, it was one of these embassies, reaching Augustus around 26 BCE, along with another embassy several years later that provided the basis for more focus to be placed on the maritime Spice Route trade, rather than the overland Silk Road that was so dominated by the Parthians.¹¹¹ The result of this initial trade was most likely greater access to the spices and luxuries of India, with any Chinese luxury goods they received only a byproduct of secondary trade routes that Indian merchants used to traveled up through Central Asia.

It will be beneficial to take this moment to discuss the paths of goods traveling between China, India, Parthia, and Rome. While there were many types of goods that were traded, this discussion will focus specifically on the silks and spices that gave two of the trade paths their names. Silk primarily traveled west of China through, traveled west of China through the Tarim Basin and into Transoxiana.¹¹² Here, the silk was either traded to merchants traveling through Parthia along the Silk Road, or transported by other merchants down into India, that main producer of spices traded on the Spice Route.¹¹³ From this point, once maritime trade was established, both spices and silks were shipped from India to Roman Alexandria, where the

¹¹⁰ “Res Gestae Divi Augustus” 31, http://droitromain.upmf-grenoble.fr/Anglica/resgest_engl.html.

¹¹¹ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 112.

¹¹² This is excepting those silk goods transported along the Steppe Road by nomadic peoples.

¹¹³ This discussion is targeting those spices that were traded from India’s shores to Roman Egypt and ignores the spices produced in Arabia and traded much more directly to Roman markets.

goods were taxed and released into the wider Roman economic ecosystem. Thus, through maritime trade with India, the Romans could mitigate the economic leverage that Parthia held over them.

The benefits to this maritime trade were not simply economic though, as this communication between Rome and the various Indian and semi-nomadic kingdoms allowed all parties to put pressure on the Parthian Empire in other ways. McLaughlin comments that the nomadic kingdoms which sent embassies to Augustus had the seeming goal of reducing Parthian power in the region and may have wanted a firm alliance for when Rome did go to war in an attempt to conquer Parthian territory.¹¹⁴ On the Roman side, the peace that was finally made between Rome and Parthia in 20 BCE has been overstated as a Roman victory, perhaps most vocally by the Emperor Augustus, but it may display another aspect of the importance the economy and trade relations had on the actions of the Parthian Empire. With communications opening between Rome and the various kingdoms in India, the Parthian elite must have seen the potential military dangers of such friendships, prompting a desire on their part for peace, even during a period where they were dominant. On the economic side, the Parthians may have also reasoned, correctly, that if Rome could supplement their trade in luxuries to any degree through that maritime route, then there was less potential economic and political blowback to a full invasion of Parthian territory, further encouraging the Parthian elite to seek a lasting peace.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 112.

¹¹⁵ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 112.

McLaughlin comments that,

The Saka court [who sent the embassy to Augustus] expected that war was imminent between Rome and their common rival, Parthia. They believed that

Matching with this Roman desire to communicate with the peoples of India, we see that after his unification of the Roman Empire, Augustus put forth significant effort in cultivating maritime trade through the Red Sea. An invasion force of more than 200 ships was created to “conquer Arabia” and while such efforts failed, McLaughlin rightly concludes that “this ambitious scheme must have established major shipbuilding facilities and supply lines on the Red Sea coast;” infrastructure that was perfect for the facilitation of maritime trade with India.¹¹⁶ Not long after this infrastructure work Strabo wrote that “about 120 ships sail from Myos-Hormos to India, although, in the time of the Ptolemies, scarcely anyone would venture on this voyage and the commerce with the Indies.”¹¹⁷ This comment, along with the writing and proliferation of the *Periplus* indicates a strong desire at this point to establish new lines of trade along this maritime route, strengthening the argument that the Roman Empire sought to circumvent Parthian control over the luxury goods trade.¹¹⁸

Augustus was about to embark on new Eastern conquests to make himself the equal of Alexander the Great. Consequently the Saka king wanted to establish an alliance with Rome in the coming war. (112)

If true, this gives further credence to the fear of the Parthians of an attack from Rome and the efforts of their elite to seek lasting peace.

¹¹⁶ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 28.

¹¹⁷ Strabo, *Geographies*, 2.5.12. While Alexandria was the hub for the processing and taxation of goods, the boats docked and unloaded their wares at Myos-Hormos, a port further south on the Red Sea more conducive to the traffic that such trade saw. Once the trade goods were unloaded, they were transported to the Nile where they were shipped downriver to Alexandria.

¹¹⁸ It is clear that the *Periplus* was copied and spread to a significant number of recipients given the quality of our copies of the text.

This maritime trade, and the taxation of goods coming through Alexandria made the Roman Empire incredible amounts of wealth which in turn greatly increased their ability to project power across the entirety of their empire. The Roman invasion of Britain under Emperor Claudius in 43 CE and the organization of the conquests into the province of Britain shortly after speak to the empire's economic prosperity. The territory, like that of Dacia, conquered in the early second century CE, cost more money to govern than it produced in taxation. It was only the wealth that was generated by the maritime trade with India that allowed for such imperial excess. Indeed, McLaughlin concludes that it was the maritime trade that "helped transform the new Roman Empire into a regime that had unprecedented economic prosperity."¹¹⁹ Through just the maritime trade routed through Alexandria, "about a third of imperial finances were therefore funded."¹²⁰

For all this wealth generation, the Parthian Empire of the first century CE remained an implacable foe, seemingly unyielding against the threat of any Indo-Romano-Scythian alliance. So long as Rome had to trade with Parthia for most of the eastern luxury goods they desired, the Roman elite was limited in a practical sense in the military and economic solutions they could utilize. The rise of the Kushan Empire in the second half of the first century CE, that upset Parthian control of their trade combined with the rise of the Spice Route brought Rome into a period of economic, military, and political dominance over the Parthian Empire.

¹¹⁹ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 167.

¹²⁰ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 168.

The Kushans

The Kushan Empire is even less well documented than the Parthians, though similar kinds of sources are available from both Chinese and Roman texts.¹²¹ Debates rage on almost all aspects of the Kushan Empire, from their origins, to the dating of their kings, to the veracity of any evidence pertaining to them. This thesis will not delve into this debate, instead leaving it to more specialized scholars like B. N. Puri in his chapter on *The Kushans* in a larger work on Central Asian civilizations.¹²² The Kushans were likely an offshoot of the Yuehshi nomads that moved into Transoxiana after conflicts with the Xiongnu centuries earlier. The founder of the Kushan Empire, Kujula Kadphises, rising to power sometime after 45 CE, conquered territory from both the Parthians and the Indians through the latter half of the first century CE. This territory was geographically focused in a single corridor from the Indian Sea straight north through Transoxiana, including the territory of Kabul through which much of the Chinese luxuries passed.¹²³

¹²¹ The *Divi Augustus* is a good example of a Roman text that exists for the Kushans, while the Hou Hanshu, of which I have used to discuss the Parthians, makes up a core part of the Kushan's history.

¹²² B. N. Puri, "The Kushans," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia Volume II: The development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations 700 BC to AD 250*, ed. Janos Harmatta, (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), 247-264.

¹²³ B. N. Puri, "The Kushans," 254.

These conquests do not seem to have elicited much response from the Parthians.¹²⁴ There is one possible counterattack recorded by Josephus of the Parthian king Vologeses I (51 - 76/80 CE) rushing to defend his kingdom from a sudden foreign attack, but nothing more.¹²⁵ Given the dates of Vologeses' reign and the rise of the Kushans in the mid-first century CE, it is likely this was in response to the Kushans, however the generally poor availability of information pertaining to the eastern half of the Parthian Empire make it difficult to claim anything with certainty. A more compelling argument could be made that the settling of the Kushans relieved the Parthians of needing to continually repel nomadic incursions from the northeastern part of their empire. In short, with the rise of the Kushan Empire, a buffer zone between Parthian territory and the fully nomadic steppe people was established. With this buffer zone in place, Parthian kings were free of the need to patrol and defend those borders against the intermittent raids, as now the settled Kushans experienced the brunt of those attacks.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Brosius, *The Persians*, 89.

This could have easily been because of the difficulty of waging conflicts on opposite sides of such a vast empire. Brosius comments that “the king was the leader of the army in war, but two fronts necessitated a military commander who could be entrusted with a sizeable army to fight the king’s cause, but who would not abuse his military position to obtain power.” Along with perhaps explaining why the Parthians strove for diplomatic solutions with the Romans, it might also explain their general lack of recorded response to the Kushans.

¹²⁵ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20.4.2. c. 55 AD.

¹²⁶ Brosius, *The Persians*, 92.

The Kushan Empire is key to understanding the decline of the Parthians during this third period because with the arrival of the Kushans in the first century CE, the territory to the west of the Tarim Basin, China's primary path for exporting luxury goods, was consolidated under a single, unified power.¹²⁷ Where before caravans from China traveled through the Tarim Basin to the Greco-Bactrian cities of Transoxiana and from there send their goods west to Parthia, south to India, or even north to the steppe, those luxury goods now traveled through the Tarim Basin into exclusively Kushan hands. The Kushan Empire controlled the availability of the Chinese caravans, where no such power had existed before. The region had historically been controlled by a constantly shifting power struggle between Greco-Bactrian, Indo-Scythian, and other semi nomadic forces like the Indo-Parthians.¹²⁸ The consolidation of this region in the mid to late first century CE under a singular administrative force changed how trade occurred, with the likely antagonistic relationship between the Kushans and the Parthians limiting the latter's capacity to engage in commerce even further. With the conquest of the southern Indus territories leading to the Indian Ocean in the 90s CE, this situation was amplified as the Kushans gained direct access to the burgeoning maritime trade of the Spice Route.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, 157.

When Yu comments that "Indian merchants had not only tried but succeeded considerably in diverting the silk trade from Parthia," it is the Kushans to whom he refers.

¹²⁸ B. N. Puri, "The Sakas and Indo-Parthians," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia Volume II: The development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations 700 BC to AD 250*, ed. Janos Harmatta, (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), 191-192.

¹²⁹ Hou Hanshu 88.13.

I date the end of the Parthian Empire's second, and most successful, period to the death of King Vologeses in 76/80 CE. By this point, it had been nearly two decades since the truce made with Rome over the governance of Armenia and about two decades since the Kushans had begun their expansions. By this point, as per the arguments of this thesis, the profit gained through the Parthian Silk Road had begun to decline as the volume of luxury goods traveling through Parthian territory diminished. This may not have been immediately noticeable by the Parthian nobility given that it was their subject peoples who transported and operated the actual trade routes through the empire. Two decades from this point, however, the Kushans controlled the entire corridor from the Tarim Basin to the Indian Ocean, where they began trading directly with Roman merchants who had been visiting India to trade with the locals for decades. In 114 CE, the Romans invade the Parthian Empire to conquer, claiming not only Armenia, but also the entire territory of Mesopotamia, by far a greater conquest than they had ever attempted before. That the Parthian military structure was so diminished in its quality and effectiveness over only two generations from 63 CE to 114 CE, as argued by the likes of Rawlinson and Debevoise, makes little sense. However, if the Parthian coffers were undergoing a draining of their funds and a severe economic crisis, such diminishment becomes almost a certainty.

In this third period, the Parthian Empire, economically strangled by the rise of the Kushans taking control of Chinese luxury goods combined with the rise of the Spice Route between Egypt and India, began to feel the economic effects in all areas of their governance. Maintenance and upkeep on the infrastructure of the Parthian Empire began to falter, and local populations felt the burden of an increased taxation to make up for the lost trade revenue, to say

McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 129

nothing of their military expenditures. The core Parthian army was composed of the nobility fighting from horseback, but any supplementary forces had to be paid for in coin. There is no evidence that an Achaemenid style ‘*hatru*’ system existed to recruit or train soldiers for the army and it is likely that the Parthians, like their Sassanian successors, utilized mercenary forces for much of their infantry.¹³⁰ These supplementary forces, whether contracted mercenaries or levies of subject peoples, required payment; something the Parthian Empire had been fully capable of delivering while they had control over the Silk Road and its profits. Once that revenue dwindled, it was only a matter of time for the Parthian treasury to be depleted to a point where they could not muster the military forces necessary to repel a Roman invasion.¹³¹

¹³⁰ David Nicolle, “*Sassanian Armies: The Iranian Empire Army 3rd to mid-7th centuries,*” (Stockport: Montvert Publications, 1996), 6, 45.

Brosius, *The Persians*, 122.

For more information on the Achaemenid ‘*hatru*’ system, see Pierre Briant’s *From Cyrus to Alexander*, Pg. 75.

¹³¹ David Sellwood, “Parthian Coins” in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Volume III: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 296.

Sellwood mentions a period of twenty-five years after 96 CE that no tetradrachms were struck at Seleucia, concluding that this lack of production might coincide with a succession crisis within the Empire. With the evidence available, I believe it just as valid to conclude that the loss of Silk Road trade slowed the capabilities of the Seleucia mint that it could not produce coinage in the quantity it had previously.

More than that, the Roman response to their victory in Mesopotamia adds evidence to this theory. It was not a Parthian counterattack or insurgent behavior that led the Romans to abandon their conquest only three years later in 117 CE, but the economic expenditure required to maintain Roman control of the territory becoming exorbitantly high.¹³² In his *Economic Life of the Ancient World*, Levy comments that in 117 CE, “if conquest ceased immediately after Trajan, it was because the coffers were almost empty.”¹³³ Had Chinese luxury goods been continually trafficked over the Parthian Silk Road into Mesopotamia, this economic burden would have been ameliorated, and Rome’s coffers could have handled the economic stress. With these goods being diverted entirely into the maritime Spice Route via India, Mesopotamia’s value to Rome was greatly reduced and abandoning everything past Armenia, and thus past the end point of the Steppe Road, became a reasonable action.¹³⁴

This victory of Rome’s was also not a fluke as the trend of Parthian failures only continued through the end of the second century CE. I also reject the theory that Rome had developed some new military strategy or political willpower that allowed them to dominate the Parthians. To wit, the Parthians had always been effective at adapting to the military strategies of the Romans, which had allowed them to devastate Roman armies capably at Carrhae or

¹³² McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 98.

¹³³ Levy, *Economic Life of Ancient World*, 80.

¹³⁴ The difference between Mesopotamia and other Roman territorial additions like Dacia and Britain lies in the organized resistance to Roman rule that the local elites of Mesopotamia provided. This resistance was troublesome enough for the Roman's to abandon the region as unsustainable at the time, as is shown in their retreat from the region in 117 CE.

Phraaspa.¹³⁵ That they were suddenly unable to mount a defense of their core territories implies something had structurally changed within the Parthian Empire. Along with my rejection of the oriental decline theory of earlier Parthian histories discussed in Chapter One, the deprivation of revenue from the Silk Road becomes the preeminent reason for their broad series of failures. The Romans invaded again in 161 CE to sack Ctesiphon, but again annexed no territory. It was only in 195-7 CE that Northern Mesopotamia is permanently annexed by the Emperor Septimus Severus. Like with the rise of the Kushans and the exploitation of the Spice Route, the economic forces driving the politics of Western Asia shifted, and the Parthia's fortune briefly turned as the Silk and Steppe Roads become powerful economic factors once again.

The Parthians of this period are strangers to the Parthians of the last. Where once they were successful in their ventures, political and military, at this point they were forced ever further back into the Iranian Plateau, unable to resist Roman advances. Without examining the economic situation the Parthians found themselves, the rise of the Kushans, and the beginning of the Spice Route trade, their general collapse can seem predestined. However, when such economic ideas are considered, their general failure in this third period is understandable, and their surprising resurgence in the last two decades of their rule becomes explainable.

¹³⁵ Against Crassus and Marc Antony respectively.

Chapter Five: Parthian Resurgence and Sassanian Beginnings

The last period of Parthian history is the most vexing for historians looking at the broad sweep of the Parthian decline and collapse. Chronologically the shortest period in my classification, beginning with the rise of Vologeses VI to power in 207/8 CE and ending with the fall of his successor Artabanus IV in 224 CE, this fourth period of Parthian history is notable for two events: the final Parthian war with Rome, and the Persian rebellion that ended the Parthian Empire. While the rise of the Sassanian Persians in rebellion is what ended the Arsacid dynasty, it is the war with Rome that complicates the historical narrative.

Table 4: Parthian King List of the Fourth Period, 207/8 – 224 CE

Vologeses VI	207/8 – 221/2 CE
Artabanus IV	213 – 224 CE

In 216-7 CE, the Romans and Parthians clashed in battle over Armenia resulting in a devastating Roman defeat at the battle of Nisibis. This event alone is noteworthy in the history of Parthia given their declining situation over the last century, but the simple location of the conflict eclipses even that. With the territorial losses Parthia had suffered at Rome's hands, any conflict could reasonably be expected to occur within Mesopotamia, close to the current holdings of the Parthians, but this battle at Nisibis was fought far outside the Parthian area of influence, making the victory even more unlikely. To cap everything off, the peace that was signed by Rome after

the battle was not simply an agreement to cease hostilities; it also included war reparations demanded by the Parthians and dutifully paid by the Romans of perhaps fifty million denarii.¹³⁶

Simply put, this conflict and its outcome forces the existing theories of Parthian decline and collapse to either ignore these events entirely, or pretend such unlikely circumstances simply happened as a fluke of history. After all, Rawlinson's decrepit, oriental Parthia has no business even resisting the might of the Roman Empire in 216 CE, much less beating them on a field of battle far outside their controlled territory and forcing a humiliating peace upon them.

Debevoise' fractious nobility should have stopped any effective Parthian warmongering before they even left their territory, much less facilitated such a conflict so far outside their holdings.

One might dismiss this conflict as a fluke, or the last gasp of a dying empire given that the Parthians fall less than a decade after this battle to internal rebellion by the Sassanian

¹³⁶ Clifford Ando, *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284: the Critical Century*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) 64.

This number is as suspect as Pliny's number from Chapter Three, as it is Romans writing of this loss. Those same Romans could easily have had political reasons for inflating the cost of peace with Parthia, either to discredit the emperor for starting the war, or to publicly shame him for ending it. If this number is compared to Pliny's complaint of the 100,000,000 sesterces lost each year to trading with the east, this cost of 50,000,000 denarii becomes 200,000,000 sesterces when converting the values directly. However, some caution must be utilized here as the value of Roman currency was debased over the century and more between Pliny's statement and the Battle of Nisibis. However, even with the debasement of the currency, this bulk payment would have been significant, equaling or exceeding the costs that Pliny bemoaned.

Persians. However, as I will show, if one examines this conflict through that same economic lens, taking issues of long distance trade and the outbreak of deadly disease into consideration, then the Parthian victory over Rome at Nisibis and their fall to the Sassanian Persians less than a decade later become reasonable.

The Collapse of the Spice Route

Between 165 and 180 CE, the Roman Empire suffered under what was to be called the ‘Antonine Plague.’ This disease killed upwards of 10% of the entire Roman population and has been theorized to be a major element of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire itself.¹³⁷ The plague was first reported in Parthia in 165 during the Roman invasion, where it quickly spreads through the army and the densely populated Roman East.¹³⁸ This plague, likely originating in China where it spread along the Silk Road to Central Asia, India, and Parthia, was devastating to the densely populated civilizations along the long distance trade routes. Shortly after its beginning, maritime trade along the Spice Route slowed and essentially ceased, leaving the Kushans with an excess in luxury goods and no Roman merchant ships with which to trade.¹³⁹ With the Spice Route so damaged, those luxury goods began traveling once again along the Silk Road through Parthia, albeit slowly.

¹³⁷ McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 174.

¹³⁸ McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean*, 210.

¹³⁹ McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean*, 214.

McLaughlin, *Rome and the Distant East*, 164.

This plague crippled the empires along the Silk Road at least until it had run its course, with its time traveling through the Iranian Plateau explaining why Parthia was unable to take full advantage of the renewed trade likely flowing through their territory. Beyond the actual death that such a plague caused, the random nature of those who fell ill sowed chaos through all the institutions of empire. Those empires with a more bureaucratic system would have posts left empty across their territory as the skilled figures who once inhabited them fell ill and died. Such a plague made the continued, organized exploitation of any resource more difficult and made recovering the knowledge of that organization more difficult still. In short, the organized and active exploitation of the Spice Route by the Roman Empire suffered far more damage than the relatively hands-off exploitation of the Silk Road in which the Parthian Empire was engaged. This, along with the chaos that more densely populated cities, common in urban empires like China or Rome, underwent during such a plague provides a rationale for the collapse of Roman economic control of the Spice Route.

The renewed trade through Parthia's Silk Road made Northern Mesopotamia economically valuable once again, giving the Emperor Septimus Severus reason to invade and annex the territory in the 190s CE. Parthia, perhaps recovering from the Antonine Plague and still recovering from the once-atrophied trade route can be easily understood as susceptible to the might of the Roman Empire, however where Rome had lost the incomes of the Spice Route, Parthia had regained their Silk Road income and began to engage in those actions that the Parthians of their second period once had.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ The evidence for this reemergence in the Silk Road can be seen in the Roman efforts to conquer Mesopotamia once again. The Parthians of this period posed no existential threat to the

We see the return of Silk Road revenues in the evidence that this war of 216-7 provides. For the Parthians to best the Romans on an external field of battle in a manner near identical to their victories in their second period indicates a military and political infrastructure strengthened by the same economic base that made it so strong before. Not only this, but that the war occurred primarily in Armenia points to a renewed Parthian interest in Armenia; an interest that had historically only occurred when the Silk Road was in full swing and the Parthians wished to control the only other source of luxury goods: the Steppe Road.

As I have argued above, Armenia held little strategic value in terms of a buffer state between Rome and Parthia, especially since the Romans annexed Northern Mesopotamia at the end of the second century CE. Armenia's importance lay in its geographical position as the end-point of the Steppe Road trade route and a point to offload those same Chinese luxury goods that Rome had worked so hard for in circumventing Parthia. In the early third century CE, Armenia had the same importance as it had since the beginning of the Silk Road at the end of the first century BCE when Mithridates I first subjugated Armenia to Parthian rule. With the Spice Route essentially defunct for the current Roman Empire, and the renewed control of luxury goods trade by the Parthians, the Steppe Road and Armenia provided the only source of luxury goods not controlled by a bitter enemy of the Romans. This is why Parthia of 216-7 was so interested in Armenia and why they went to war with Rome in that territory.

eastern Roman territories, and Rome had abandoned Mesopotamia before due to the excessive cost in holding it. Given this information, it is clear that something had drastically changed in the appraisal of Parthian Mesopotamia, and all signs point towards a reemergence of the Silk Road and all the profits that went with it.

The Rise of the Sassanian Empire

In 224 CE, the history of the Parthian Empire came to a close. While Armenia retained an Arsacid king for the next two centuries, the Arsacid Dynasty of the Parthian Empire was eliminated. However, the empire that rose out of the Parthian's ashes is just as important to this thesis as any period of the Parthians because of how their imperial fortunes so closely follow the economic argument I have laid out.

The rise of the Sassanian Empire closes out the Arsacid dynasty on the Iranian Plateau, but the effects and institutions of the Parthian Empire lived on long after their collapse. In particular, many of the criticisms leveled against the Parthians as reasons for their decline were present in the Sassanian Empire from the very beginning yet seem to affect the Sassanian rise to power very little. Within this epilogue to the Parthian Empire, I will explore the basic chronological structure of Sassanian history and compare their broad successes and failures to their control over the same long-distance trade routes with which the Parthians interacted. With this structure in place, I will then tackle one of the arguments that has been made towards Parthia's decline – the existence of a powerful nobility – and show how this exact situation was present in Sassanian politics throughout their reign; evidence towards my economic thesis and against the orientalist theories of the past.

I will split the Sassanian period of domination into three parts: their rise and consolidation of the eastern empire, their domination over Rome and consolidation of the western empire, and their fall to the Muslim invasions. These divisions are rough at best, given the general Parthia-focused nature of this thesis. While I cannot argue for deep truths about the Sassanian Empire in such a short section, this exploration will elaborate how the trends and forces that so significantly affected the Parthians affected their successors as well.

The first period of Sassanian history can be constrained by those years from their usurpation of the Parthian Empire and its core territories in 224 CE to the eve of Shapur II's ascension as King of Kings in 309 CE. During this first period, the Sassanians acted much as the Parthians had during their own foundational period, establishing political and diplomatic control over their new territories, as well as waging war on those neighbors deemed weak or valuable enough. Clifford Ando comments in his book on Rome during the third century crisis that,

*Ardashir's penetration of Roman territory in 230 was only the beginning. Across the next half century, Rome would reap what it had sown: foreign military forces would make a mockery of the frontiers, crossing the Rhine and Danube in violence, sailing the Hellespont and sacking the cities of Syria and the east.*¹⁴¹

There were six significant clashes between Roman and Sassanian forces, with all but one of the conflicts contained within Mesopotamia and Syria, that common battlefield between Rome and the now fallen Parthian Empire.¹⁴² It is telling that the one conflict outside Syria

¹⁴¹ Ando, *Imperial Rome*, 100.

¹⁴² 230-2 CE – Major Sassanian Raid into Northern Mesopotamia and Syria that Rome eventually repulsed.

238-44 CE – The Sassanian Empire invades Northern Mesopotamia, but the war ends inconclusively.

253 CE – Major Roman defeat at the Battle of Barbalissos within Syria.

258-60 CE – The Sassanian Empire invades Syria again and captures the Roman Emperor at the Battle of Edessa.

283 CE – Rome invades Southern Mesopotamia and sacks Ctesiphon.

296-8 CE – The Sassanian Empire invades Syria and Armenia, besting the Romans at Carrhae

or Mesopotamia was not further inside the Sassanian domain, but back into Armenia in 296-8 CE, reinforcing the importance historians must give to Armenia and the clear economic benefits that I have enumerated above. While the conflicts were less than deterministic towards the final fate of both empires, it is important to note that the conflicts were slowly moving closer to Roman zones of control, implying the Sassanians were accruing increased power. Rome continued to fend off Sassanian attacks for a time but their control over the region and their Iranian neighbors was weakening.

I propose the exact same theory towards the steadily increasing power of the Sassanian Empire as I have proposed towards the rise and fall of the Parthian Empire. As the Sassanians were able to consolidate control over the long-distance trade routes and claim the profits gained from such control, their political and military dominance in the region increased accordingly. Fresh off their conquests of the Parthian Empire, and their raiding into Roman Mesopotamia in the 230s CE, the Sassanian Empire turned east and brought their military might down upon the Kushan Empire, smashing Kushan control over the territory west of the Tarim Basin and pushing them back into Northeast India.¹⁴³ With this action, the Sassanian Empire now had a direct source of Chinese luxury goods that invigorated their military and political efforts, easily visible in their steadily improving fortunes in conflicts with the Roman Empire. It is, in fact, little surprise that once this thoroughly renewed Silk Road trade had some time to reestablish itself, the Sassanians and Romans move into a period where the Sassanians definitively held the military advantage

¹⁴³ Brosius, *The Persians*, 142.

and the Roman Empire began making ‘eternal peaces’ once more as they did when Parthia held the same advantage.

The second period of Sassanian history spanned the rise of Shapur II during his long and fruitful reign in 309 CE to the end of Khosrow II’s reign in 628 CE. During this period, the Sassanians forced the Romans to pay vast amounts of tribute to them twice, killed a Roman emperor on the field of battle, conquered all of Mesopotamia and parts of Armenia again, took for a period of sixteen years the territory of Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Rhodes – which had never been taken from Rome by an Iranian power before – and were even able to besiege the walls of Constantinople itself. These three hundred years speak to a Sassanian Empire growing ever more dominant over their Roman neighbors, even considering the peace that Rome was able to broker that restored a status quo eerily similar to earlier peaces between the Parthians and the Romans. This dominance comes almost entirely from their exploitation of not only the Silk Road, but also their control over Armenia and their later control over the Spice Route as well.¹⁴⁴ With control of all three major trade routes transporting luxury goods, the Roman elite had no choice but to funnel immense amounts of

¹⁴⁴ In the second half of the sixth century CE, the Sassanian King Khosrow was able to invade and conquer *Eudamon* (Modern day Aden) of Southern Arabia, a strange conquest unless the intent was to dominate the Spice Route trade traveling towards Egypt. In fact, it seems like neither Khosrow or his successors cared for anything more than controlling the entrance to the Red Sea and the territory directly adjacent to it, providing all the domination of trade they required. This final conquest of the Spice Route trade occurs in the second half of the sixth century CE, with Constantinople nearly falling to Sassanian invaders less than a century later.

money back to their new Iranian rivals. Combined with a Roman Empire deprived of their naval access to Chinese luxuries, and the significant taxes levied upon the goods once they entered the Roman Empire, this theory towards Roman foreign policy is simple and persuasive.

The last period of Sassanian history describes their quick collapse. I struggle to describe this collapse purely because of the speed with which it occurred. In fact, for an empire that so closely entwined itself in the near-mythical history of the Achaemenid Persians, the Sassanian's fall provides a striking parallel to the collapse of the old Persian Empire. The Achaemenid Empire fell to Alexander the Great's invasion in only a few months' time, and the Sassanian Persian's own fall to the Muslim Invasions took little longer. From their high point of victory against Rome and near-total domination of the long-distance luxury goods' trade, the Sassanian Empire fell quickly, its institutions overwhelmed by the invading Muslim armies.

Thus, the Sassanian's history in brief is told, detailing its rise to prominence with the conquest of Kushan territory and reacquisition of control over the Silk Road, its three-hundred-year dominance of Rome in the east and further consolidation over the Steppe Road and Spice Route, and its final fall to a new, upstart imperial force. Within this period of time, the Sassanian Empire was ruled by a monarchy that older historians called oriental, ruled over a people that warranted the same appellation, and fell to invaders in such a manner that made a mockery of both Achaemenid Persia and Arsacid Parthia from those same older historians. While each of these could – and should – be unpacked within a greater thesis devoted to such themes, I want to discuss in brief a fourth argument, made by Debevoise and Colledge, against the Parthian Empire that was so deeply ingrained in the

Sassanian royal court that its complete irrelevance must make us question its relevance to the history of the Parthians themselves: the powerful nobility.

This argument, first made in the English historiography within Debevoise' *Political History of Parthia*, claimed that the fractious nobility of the Parthian Empire led to infighting and political intrigue within the Parthian court, weakening the political structure of the Parthian Empire and opening them to defeat by Roman invaders.¹⁴⁵ The problem with this argument is that it presupposes that one particular version of rule was superior to another. In this case, it is based on ideas that the absolute monarchs of western Europe who ruled over a weak class of nobility makes an inherently stronger empire than cultures that operate differently. If a government was not republican – within the constraints of the Roman system – or democratic – within the constraints of particular Greek city-states – it must at the very least be ruled by a singular figure passing down power in as strict a fashion as possible.¹⁴⁶ With such an idealistic view of imperial rule, this meant that the practices of

¹⁴⁵ This argument also appears in Koshelenko and Pilipko's article on *Parthia*, (133-134). UNESCO, as well as Brosius' own chapter on Parthia (97-99).

¹⁴⁶ Eugene N. Borza, *In the Shadow of Olympus: The Emergence of Macedon*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 1990), 135, 177-8, 189, 191, 240.

That is, of course, when the culture in question was situated outside of Europe. This same logic, turned on its head, is used to exemplify the Macedonian kingdom as, if not one of its strengths, part of what forged the figures of Philip II and Alexander the Great. From the death of Amyntas I in 498/7 on, nearly every Macedonian succession is plagued with reports of court intrigue, political assassination, or other chicanery by the Argead nobility.

Parthian noble clans having significant power in raising or deposing their king is seen in the light of powerful nobles who weaken their own political system through their scheming, rather than simply a different political construct. Debevoise gives this very idea the credit for the Parthian decline and collapse, while completely ignoring the fact that the transition from Arsacid to Sassanian rule was not so much a massive overhaul in the structure of the empire, but rather a shifting of which family had the right to sit on the throne.

Let there be no misunderstanding: the Sassanian dynasty that ruled the new Persian Empire was 'Persian' and not Parthian as they hailed from Esfahan and Fars, where Persia gets its name. However, the broad structure of the new Persian Empire was not widely governed by Persians, but by those same noble families that had governed the empire under Arsacid rule. Just like under the Parthians, the powerful Parthian nobility continued to exert political, social, and military power on the ruling Sassanian court just as they had on the Arsacid court, yet the Sassanian Empire survived for four hundred years. Debevoise' cause of the Parthian collapse, being wholly present in this next iteration of imperial Iran does nothing to significantly hamper their capabilities. The argument around a powerful nobility is easy to accept because it so clearly delineates reasons that do not require delving into the economic or social aspects of a foreign culture. However, for those cultures that practice such political actions, a powerful nobility does not act as destabilizers of empire, but as the foundation of imperial power. Through these noble families, Arsacid – and later Sassanian – power was spread across the Iranian Plateau and beyond, both west to Mesopotamia, Syria, and Armenia, as well as east to Transoxiana and northwest India.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Future Research

The greatest criticism of this work is known to me: that I am reaching for the conclusions I make given the scarcity of available evidence; that what little evidence is available acts, as Rezakhani puts it, as “a collection of disjointed islands” with “no bridges to be seen and... no map with which to understand the position of each island.”¹⁴⁷ Further, the conclusions that I draw are far outside the realm of more common arguments around the Parthian Empire, normally drawing as they do from the evidence that numismatics, art history, religious studies, and philology allow. This is the struggle of studying history, especially of periods prior to mass literacy and the easy proliferation of information. The nature of ancient history leads to a number of less-than-desirable amounts of evidence to argue for certain conclusions, and when one considers an empire like the Parthians, for whom less evidence survives than from other ancient peoples, the problem is only compounded.

In particular, the question around correlation and causation within this thesis can be considered problematic. After all, most everyone knows that "correlation does not imply causation." However, the very success of this pithy phrase has led it to be greatly abused,

¹⁴⁷ Khodadad Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 4.

Van De Mierop, *Cuneiform Texts*, 164.

On the topic of the Near East, Van De Mierop comments that dealing with the scattered sources in the ancient Near East is like seeing,

Incidental points of light in a vast, dark room, the outline of which is hard to fathom. Thus we have to be aware that as historians the data we rely on for our reconstruction of the past is quite scant. We write history as it has already been written for us by the unequal preservation of traces of the past. (164)

especially outside the field of statistics that it was born into. Dismissing an argument for being grounded in correlative relationships is as bad as misusing those same correlations to imply extreme causations.¹⁴⁸ Beyond spuriously dismissing claims out of hand, the admonition that 'correlation does not imply causation' is most often utilized to shut down conversation and argumentation, instead of using the correlation in question to delve deeper into the problem at hand.¹⁴⁹

An example of a correlation which cannot be causation would be the claim that the Parthian Empire declined due to its powerful nobility, because as I showed above, the evidence

¹⁴⁸Daniel Engber,

http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2012/10/correlation_does_not_imply_causation_how_the_internet_fell_in_love_with_a_stats_class_clich_.html

A footnote to the second edition of *The Grammar of Science*, published in 1900, lays out a critique of spurious relationships in terms that would not look out of place on an Internet message board:

All causation as we have defined it is correlation, but the converse is not necessarily true, i.e. where we find correlation we cannot always predict causation. In a mixed African population of Kaffirs and Europeans, the former may be more subject to smallpox, yet it would be useless to assert darkness of skin (and not absence of vaccination) as a cause.

¹⁴⁹ Lute, "Correlation isn't Causation, but it sure is a Hint"

Lute uses the positive correlation between ice cream consumption and deaths by swimming pool drowning as an example here. It would be extreme to say that eating ice cream increases your risk of drowning in a swimming pool, but by continuing the inquiry into the question, the common identifier of 'summer' emerges as a possible explanation of both.

available around the Parthian Empire show that their powerful nobility had little to no effect on Parthian success until the late first century CE, hundreds of years after their founding. Further, when the Sassanian Persians overthrew the Parthians, their empire rose to power with that exact same powerful nobility existing and having little to no negative effect upon them. This would be a misuse of correlation as causation because the evidence we have contradicts the idea that a powerful nobility leads to imperial decline.¹⁵⁰

The Parthian Empire's success is highly positively correlated with their control over the Silk Road and Steppe Road trade routes, as shown above by the compared timelines of each of these entities' rise and fall from importance. I used this correlation as a starting point that led to further investigation in which I found no data that fundamentally disagrees with this argument and only evidence that agrees with the broader thesis. With this correlation, a simple argument has been proposed: that control over the long-distance trade routes moving through and around Iran caused the masters of those routes to be more imperially successful. With this hypothesis we can examine the Parthian, Sassanian, and early Islamic empires within Iran to see how effectively it functions. The Parthians obviously fit perfectly within this framework, as this thesis has expounded upon, and the Sassanians see the same increase in imperial success as they gain further control over the Silk Road and Spice Route. Then, with the rise of Islam and the Muslim Conquests, these conquests are reversed, and the Sassanians fall.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Lute, "Correlation isn't Causation, but Sure is a Hint."

¹⁵¹ Abd Al Husain Zarrinkub, "The Arab Conquest of Iran and its Aftermath," in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs*, ed. R. N. Frye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 2.

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from a strong correlation is the existence of a relationship between the two factors being studied. I believe that I have sufficiently shown a causal relationship between the Parthian's control over the long-distance trade routes and their success. The Silk Road was not prosperous because the Persians or Parthians succeeded. This is clear from the fact that the Persians and Parthians had no fundamental control over either the very beginning or the very end of the Silk Road. Rather, the Persians and Parthians were successful because the Silk Road was prosperous. Even if further evidence arises that challenges my conclusion, it will only shed further light upon this political and economic relationship and provide a better starting point to further discuss the Parthian Empire than the works of Rawlinson, Debevoise, or Colledge.

Questions also arise around the Kushan Empire and the Parthian response to their rise, considering they are such an important part of this thesis. For the Kushans, the conquering of their empire allowed them to engage in highly lucrative trade directly with the Romans while also weakening their neighbors: the Parthians. Why didn't the Arsacid kings make more of an effort to fight the Kushans and attempt to reclaim their lost territory?¹⁵² I propose that the

¹⁵² Han Shu 118:5b, from Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*, 156.

Evidence does exist towards the Parthians jealously guarding their trade. The *Hou Han Shu* comments that "The Kings of Ta Ch'in (Roman Empire) always desired to send embassies to China, but the Parthians wished to carry trade with Ta Ch'in in Chinese silks and therefore cut them off from communication." This means the Parthians were willing to act when it was in their interest to protect parts of their trade route, implying that better reasons existed to essentially ignore the actions of the Kushans.

greatest immediate threat the Parthians faced on any front, aside from their border with the Roman Republic and Empire, was the nomadic groups that perpetually raided Parthian territory. These nomadic groups, including Indo-Scythian like the Kushan's progenitors, were as difficult for Parthia to combat with their military structures as it was for Republican Roman armies to combat the Parthians.

The inherent power of the nomadic raiders to simply melt away into the steppe made them a constant annoyance, if not a deadly, existential threat.¹⁵³ In fact, we know this was a dire problem for early Parthian kings.¹⁵⁴ King Phraates II died fighting marauding war bands of nomadic Saka in 128 BCE, and his direct successor King Artabanus was mortally wounded fighting invading Yuehzhhi four years later.¹⁵⁵ Though our records of the eastern Parthian Empire are scarce, these sorts of nomadic incursions were regular threats to Parthian control.

With the invasion and consolidation of the Kushan Empire as a settled society, controlling distinct amounts of territory, the Parthian's neighbors shifted from nomadic raiders to settled farmers and traders. This shift meant that it was now the Kushans who had to deal with nomadic groups harrying their borders, freeing the Parthians from such responsibilities. I argue that even though the Kushans conquered Parthian territory, and deprived them of the direct Silk

¹⁵³ Let us remember that the Arsacid Parthians themselves were nomadic peoples who conquered and then ruled over a patchwork of settled kingdoms.

¹⁵⁴ Enoki, K., G. A. Koshalenko, and Z. Haidary, "The Yueh-Chih and their Migrations" in *History of Civilizations in Central Asia: Volume II, The development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations: 700 B.C. to A.D. 250* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1994) 180-1.

¹⁵⁵ McLaughlin, *The Roman Empire and the Silk Routes*, 41-2.

Road trade, the Parthian leadership found the cessation of border security as a constant threat beneficial and thus acceptable. The relationship between the two powers may have never been cordial, but aside from a single reference in Josephus of King Vologeses I taking the army east, there are no records to imply regular conflict ever occurred between the two powers.¹⁵⁶ If this was the full extent of the Parthian reaction to the Kushan invasion, then this minimal response was a clear miscalculation that led to the decline and later collapse of the empire.

Towards Rome and their participation in the Silk Road, and more particularly their role in the Spice Route, one common argument exists around whether the maritime trade should truly be given such prominence within the broader economic fortunes of the empire. Some credit for this prosperity must absolutely be given to the Pax Romana in the Mediterranean, which in the years following Augustus' unification of the empire allowed for more efficient and profit-generating taxation of Roman subjects. However, the timing of Rome's control over the Spice Route pairing almost perfectly with their greatest territorial extent is too coincidental. This territorial peak, reached in the early second century CE when their trade with India was in full force, began to degrade as trade with India faltered, indicating the essential nature of the maritime trade to imperial operations.

Causation must also be considered in this question. Did the maritime trade with Egypt thrive because of a united, unified Roman Empire, or did the maritime trade bolster the empire to allow for such a large unified dominion? Did the faltering maritime trade in the later second and third centuries CE spur a decline in the Roman Empire, or did disruptive forces from within make administering the maritime trade an effort the flailing government could not expend effort

¹⁵⁶ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 20.4.2. c. 55 AD.

on anymore? In the end, with the sources available, there are no definitive answers towards this question beyond the standard response.

Maritime trade with India, like any importance of Parthia to Roman actions, has been downplayed in Roman histories and sometimes omitted entirely in favor of a narrative that places agency entirely upon Roman actions. This line of thought argues that Rome went into a decline because of a string of ineffective emperors, or because of deleterious actions that Rome took; anything to argue that it was Roman agency that determined the empire's fate and not anything else. Like my broader argument on Parthia, I advocate for an alternative economic explanation that places great value upon a vector of massive wealth generation during a period where Rome was both expanding their territorial dominion and paying their soldiers ever increasing wages.

Finally, I want to address the broader subject of agency regarding Rome's place within this thesis. Through this work, I have sought to reclaim agency for the Parthian Empire, taking control of their affairs away from Rome and returning it to Parthian hands. However, in doing this, I have necessarily deprived the Roman Empire of some of their own agency. In particular, I have entirely ignored the argument that exists that because of the instability of the Roman Empire during the final period of Parthian history, the upset victory of Parthian in 216-7 CE can be written off not as a resurgent Parthian Empire, but as a failing Roman one. Further, when I discussed the rise of the Sassanians, this complexity was similarly ignored. Towards this criticism, I can only respond that such focus is inevitable.

As happenings in Parthia are largely ignored when discussing the fate of the Roman Principate and later Empire, so too are the complexities of Rome less of a focus in a study focused on the Parthians. The editor's preface to the 2012 *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284* by

Clifford Ando claims that “Rome, the city and its empire, stands at the center of the history of Europe, of the Mediterranean, *and of lands which we now call the Middle East.*”¹⁵⁷ For a period so defined by the power struggles between Parthians and Persians, to claim Rome as the centerpiece illustrates the power of focus within an academic work.

The book itself is heavily focused on the political struggle of the Roman Empire, which is completely understandable in such a work, but justifies this focus by stating that “those who deny the existence or importance of the crisis discount imperial politics in favor of social and economic life,” as if this wasn’t also a valuable line of inquiry.¹⁵⁸ Even within the economic discussion that is allowed by Ando, no time is spent on the trade with Parthia and later Sassanian Persia. Again, this focus is entirely reasonable for Ando’s book. I bring it up only to provide a comparison to the work I have done. My focus was on the Arsacid Parthian Empire, including their rise to power and later decline and fall, with a special focus on how control of the long-distance trade routes affected their history. By its very nature, this sort of argument will discount or diminish some facets of Roman history to keep the focus squarely on the Parthians and Persians.

This question of the third century Roman crisis is further complicated in how it is presented. Did the crisis begin, as Ando claims, with the death of Commodus in 192 CE and the end of the ‘genuine’ Aurelii family, or did it begin with the death of Alexander Severus in 235 CE as the last emperor to rule more than a decade over a unified empire until Diocletian came to

¹⁵⁷ Emphasis mine. John Richardson, General Editor, “Series Editor’s Preface” in *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284* by Clifford Ando.

¹⁵⁸ Ando, *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284*, 224.

power in 284 CE?¹⁵⁹ Nine emperors between the death of Commodus and the death of Alexander Severus, a period of more than forty years, is not ideal, but it is nothing compared to the twenty emperors that ruled or claimed to rule the Roman Empire in the shorter definition of the crisis.¹⁶⁰ Add all the additional usurpers to Roman authority to the count and the forty years after the death of Alexander Severus had more than three times the claimants to the Emperor's throne than the forty years leading up to his death.¹⁶¹

This discussion of the third century crisis is intended only to show that even if one considers the internal problems of the Roman Empire regarding the final period of the Parthians, there is still little to argue against the thesis I have put forwards. The crisis, whether it began in 192 CE or 235 CE, can easily be argued as stemming from a major reduction in trade revenues from both the collapse of the Spice Route, and the resurgence in importance of the Silk and Steppe Roads. In this way, I believe that even a study which delves into the Roman side of these trade operations, focusing its efforts on providing as much agency to Rome as possible, would make the same broad conclusions that I have within this work.

While the Roman Empire was certainly not beholden to the operations of the Silk Road and Spice Route to the degree that the Parthian Empire was, they were not independent from its

¹⁵⁹ Ando, *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284*, 18.

¹⁶⁰ This accounting of twenty emperors does not even include the four rulers of the short-lived Palmyrene state, nor the five emperors of the so-called Gallic Empire that broke from Rome in 260.

¹⁶¹ The count for these emperors comes from Clifford Ando's table of Imperial Claimants in *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284*, 230-2.

effects. Diseases like the Antonine Plague, born in the east and traveling along these routes, ravaged the Roman Empire and upset the trade in luxury goods, upsetting the upper classes of Roman society. This is to say, in conclusion, that I have not deprived the Romans of agency; instead I have merely integrated Rome's history with that of the emerging long-distance trade routes moving across Asia and the Empires which derived their success from the exploitation of such routes.

The end goal of this thesis is not to uncover absolute Truth regarding the Parthian Empire. The evidence that is currently available is simply too sparse to allow for such a goal. My goal, within this work, was two-fold. First, I wanted to disavow the orientalist narratives of 1873 and 1938 that have, through the simple fact of being the only large-scale anglophone works, been canonized as historical fact within the field of Parthian history. Concurrent with this goal, I have worked to propose a new theory on the rise and fall of the Parthian Empire, tied in more with the economic realities of the ancient world, accomplished through a deep exploration of the correlation between Parthian control over the long-distance trade routes and their imperial success, and less with moral judgements on peoples considered ethnically 'other'. This thesis has not been a work of economic history per se, but a work of political history that is heavily influenced by the ideas of economic history. Second, I hope to spark further discussion and research into the Parthian Empire, not simply as a neighbor to more popular Roman studies, but as a research topic within its own right. This work is fundamentally a new overview of the Parthian Empire, seen from an economic lens, and it naturally has little engagement with much of the religious and cultural evidence that does exist and could be further explored within the framework I have provided.

Future Studies

Where does the historiography of Parthia go from here? From the general histories, tinged with the orientalism of the 19th and 20th centuries, the historiography of Parthia has been advanced into the 21st century and largely stripped of its previous moralizing tone. Comparative histories of Parthian art and religion exist in the forms of individual articles, but even these are scarce in the anglophone tradition. An obvious path is to expand the evidence utilized in Iranian scholarship, however this requires a knowledge of Arabic and Farsi that I cannot provide.

I see three clear paths forward for further inquiry into the Parthian Empire within the anglophone body of evidence: first through a deeper dive into the microeconomic evidence that exists for the Silk Road trade, second through a broader history of Iran, and third through a deeper study into the nomadic heritage of the Parthians. The first path would involve a deep study of the papyri and ostraca of Palmyra, Dura-Europos, and Roman Syria to attempt to piece together specifics about the Silk Road trade from its conception to the fall of the Parthian Empire. Towards the second path, one could place Parthia firmly back into the overarching history of Iran and examine the ways that the empires of Achaemenid and Sassanian Persia are comparatively discussed within the historiography. This sort of analysis would continue the work of de-orientalizing these empires while repairing and rehabilitating them in the broader world history.

It is the third path that is more interesting to me. This thesis has largely ignored the nomadic origins of the Parthian Empire and has indeed cast the various nomadic cultures that are discussed in the role of ‘barbarians at the gate’, harassing and harrying the Parthians during their reign. In a significant way, this is like how histories of Rome portray the Parthian Empire: barbarians at the gate that are only important when they factor into the political narrative of the

subject empire's history. However, unlike Rome's connection to Parthia as simple imperial neighbors, the Arsacid kings and the nobility that ruled the Parthian Empire were nomadic in many important ways.

The easiest comparison to be made is found within the Parthian method of waging war from horseback. The military of the Achaemenid Persians utilized cavalry in war, but it was in the pattern of settled peoples with the nobility forming the backbone of a mounted contingent alongside the primary force of infantry. This Achaemenid cavalry acted much like early Roman cavalry, being possibly decisive, but usually of less importance than foot soldiers in the grand melee. The Parthians, on the other hand, may have taken over much of Persia's former territory, but their method of waging war was very different in the quantity and quality of the mounted contingent within the broader army. Along with the improved armor and weaponry of the Parthian cavalry, it was not only the Parthian nobility that fought from horseback, but the majority of the core Parthian force.¹⁶² With cavalry composed of deadly archers and heavily armored knights, their tactics aped much more the ebb and flow of steppe combat than the single pitched battles of settled peoples across the Mediterranean.¹⁶³

The Parthian capitol of Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia also acted more like a nomadic camp than settled city, serving as the base for the Parthian kings when they resided in Mesopotamia,

¹⁶² Brosius, *The Persians*, 120-2.

As mentioned before, the infantry of Parthian armies was drawn from the Parthian vassals or hired as mercenaries and was not part of the core army.

¹⁶³ The Triumvir Crassus learned of the 'Parthian Retreat' personally to great cost at the battle of Carrhae.

but with urban activities occurring more often in the nearby city of Seleucid-on-the-Tigris. This camp, though it acquired the sort of wealth that made it a worthy target for Roman raids, was only one base of many that the Arsacid kings could move between.

More than anything else however, it is the Parthian method of succession that speaks to their nomadic heritage more than anything else. As mentioned in Chapter Five, the Parthian nobility was responsible for confirming the new king, as well as acting to depose kings who were unqualified in their eyes. Additionally, new kings did not necessarily have to be the oldest son of the last monarch, with the nobility having the option to choose which member of the Arsacid dynasty was best suited for kingship; a power they regularly used especially as Parthian fortunes turned after losing control over the Silk Road and its profits. This method of inheritance blends the styles of both settled and nomadic cultures, creating a new hybrid method that survives into the reign of the Sassanians after the collapse of the Parthian Empire.

In an important sense, the Parthian Empire also serves as the first documented case of a nomadic people taking over a settled empire and ruling it for more than a few token years. The Parthians governed an empire for hundreds of years, without ever truly assimilating with their conquered peoples; feats that later nomadic figures like the Turks replicated. Steppe life and culture from the Xiongnu of Han China to the Mongol khans of the 13th century changed little, even as their settled neighbors to the south did, and a comparative study between the efforts of the Arsacid Parthians and Turks of Central Asia could provide interesting and valuable forms of analysis.

The nomadic heritage and nature of the Parthian Arsacids is an important facet of their identity, even if it is one that I chose to forego for this thesis. With my focus on the rehabilitation

of the Parthian Empire within the historical tradition, this thesis concerned itself primarily with the Parthians as they exist within that existing historical tradition. A greater exploration into the nomadic side of the Parthian Empire could provide avenues of inquiry and insight that do not require new textual or archaeological material to work with, which remain difficult to come by with Parthia as a focus.

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