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The genealogy of Artabanos II (AD 8/9–39/40), King of Parthia

One of the most controversial issues in the Parthian history of the early 1st century AD is the lineage of Artabanos II. The resolution of this problem determines the image of Parthian history in the 1st century AD, moulded to a large extent by an internecine struggle for the legitimation of rival parties' claim to power. After the death of Phraates IV (37–3/2 BC) Parthia was ravaged by domestic wars. The power of his son, Phraates V (Phraatakes), turned out to be rather ephemeral. He was succeeded by one Orodes III, an Arsacid but of unknown lineage, who reigned for a short time, and this by Vonones I, son of Phraates IV. Eventually a new order initiated by Artabanos II (ca. 8–39/40), the adversary of the descendants of Phraates IV, emerged out of the chaos of war and political turmoil. The time when Artabanos's ancestral house rose to a high position in Parthia seems to be located somewhere within the turbulent first decade or so of the reign of Phraates IV. We may put forward a hypothesis that a branch of the Arsacids which survived the turmoil of the Sinatrukid period lived among the Dahae. It was from this line that Artabanos II was descended. Artabanos came to rule in Media Atropatene in circumstances which have not been clarified yet. And it was from Media Atropatene that he launched and conducted his struggle for the throne of Parthia against Vonones I. We may assume his ancestry went back to the greatest Arsacid monarch before the Sinatrukids, viz. Mithradates II. The descendants of Phraates IV did not regard any of the other branches of the Arsacids eligible to the throne. The assumption that Artabanos was an Arsacid in the male line is confirmed by Flavius Josephus (*Ant.* 18.48) and Dio (59.17.3).

Key words: Artabanos II, Parthian Iran, Arsacids, Tacitus, Vonones

After the death of Phraates IV (37–3/2 BC) Parthia was ravaged by domestic wars. The power of his son, Phraates V (Phraatakes), turned out to be rather ephemeral. He was succeeded by one Orodes III, an Arsacid but of unknown lineage, who reigned for a short time (Dąbrowa 1983: 43–46; Schottky 1991: 61–63; Olbrycht 2013: 13–53), and he by Vonones I, son of Phraates IV. Eventually a new order ini-

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tiated by Artabanos II (ca. 8–39/40), the adversary of the descendants of Phraates IV, emerged out of the chaos of war and political turmoil.

One of the most controversial issues in the Parthian history of the early 1st century AD is the lineage of Artabanos II (Marquart 1895: 640–642; Schur 1923: 71–76; 1949; Kahrstedt 1950: *passim*; Pani 1972: 86–87; Schottky 1991: 63–78; Olbrycht 1998: 138–142; Boyce 2000: 155–161). The resolution of this problem determines the image of Parthian history in the 1st century AD, moulded to a large extent by an internecine struggle for the legitimation of rival parties' claim to power.

Phraates IV and his progeny belonged to the line of the Arsacids that went back to Sinatrukes (78/77–70 BC). This line ousted other Arsacids with a claim to power, descendants of Mithradates II (Mithradates the Great, 122/121–87 BC) (Olbrycht 2010b). Sintrukes was 80 when he ascended the throne; hence he must have been born around 160–155 BC, in the reign of Mithradates I (165–132 BC) (Olbrycht 2010a). Therefore he may have been one of Mithradates I's sons. His accession created a singular situation, since it blocked the succession of the much younger line descended from Mithradates II. Thus it is not surprising that some Parthians challenged the Sinatrukid claim to the throne and that pretenders like Tiridates I and Mithradates appeared, who tried to depose Phraates IV (Karras-Klapproth 1988: 137–145).

The king who deposed Vonones I and became a bitter enemy of Phraates IV's other offspring was Artabanos II. Unfortunately none of the sources give the names of his parents. The crucial question is: was Artabanos an Arsacid? As we know, the prevalent opinion in the scholarly literature is that he was an Arsacid only on his mother's side (Schur 1923: 71–76; 1949; 2003). Some historians believe that Artabanos was an Atropatid on his father's side (e.g., Marquart 1901: 111; Schottky 1991: 63–78, esp. 66). Let's take a closer look at the sources.

Tacitus makes several references to the descent of Artabanos and his sons. He tells us that Artabanos was “of Arsacid blood” and had “grown up among the Dahae” (*Ann.* 2.3.1: *Artabanus, Arsacidarum e sanguine apud Dahae adultus*). This information is presented with no reservations whatsoever, and it comes immediately after two chapters in which Vonones I is described as an Arsacid (*Ann.* 2.1–2). Elsewhere Tacitus writes about Artabanos's sons as Arsacids: Orodes, king of Armenia (ca. 33/4–36), represented the “glory of the Arsacids” (*claritudo Arsacidarum* – *Ann.* 6.34.3). Vardanes, another of Artabanos's sons (ca. 40–46), is also referred to as an Arsacid: *igitur extractis monumentis, quibus opes suas testabatur nec cuiquam ante Arsacidarum tributa illis de gentibus parta, regreditur ingens gloria atque eo ferocior et subiectis intolerantior* (*Ann.* 11.10.3). The fact that Tacitus referred to Orodes and Vardanes as Arsacids must have been due to his conviction that their father, Artabanos, was an Arsacid as well.

The crucial passage in the *Annals*, 6.42, to which many researchers refer when writing about Artabanos II relates to the episode when Tiridates, grandson of Phraates IV and pretender to the throne supported by Rome, arrived in Seleukeia on the Tigris in 35. The people of that city heaped on Tiridates “the honours paid

to their kings of old”, and they poured insults on Artabanus – “an Arsacid on his mother’s side, but in all else degenerate”:

Tum adventantem Tiridaten extollunt veterum regum honoribus et quos recens aetas largius invenit; simul probra in Artabanum fundebant, materna origine Arsaciden, cetera degenerem.

This passage provides the evidence on the grounds of which many researchers have believed that Artabanos II was an Arsacid only on the distaff side. However, the context in which these words are set is doubtful, and calls for closer scrutiny. Tacitus is quoting the opinion of the people of Seleukeia, who were hostile to Artabanos, and he dissociates himself from that statement. He begins his account of Tiridates’s arrival in Seleukeia with the information that “The greatest show of sycophancy came from the people of Seleukeia” – *plurimum adulationis Seleucenses induere*. But then the Roman historian describes insults poured on Artabanos. Tacitus tells us that the Seleukeians hurled an avalanche of invectives against Artabanos. This was a response to Artabanos’s transfer of power in Seleukeia to an oligarchy (*primores*) which turned out to be oppressive with respect to the people (*plebs*). Now, with the arrival of Tiridates, the tables turned (*Ann.* 6.42). Enjoying Roman support, the adherents of the Phraatids launched a war of propaganda in an attempt to denigrate their adversary. But Artabanos’s supporters were not sitting idly by. They had already decried Vonones as a renegade who had abjured Parthian customs (*Ann.* 2.2.2–3). No-one seems to have noticed the parallel between the accusations levied by the people of Seleukeia against Artabanos, and the allegations made by Hiero, one of Artabanos’s supporters, against the pretender Tiridates. A partisan of Artabanos II was denying Tiridates’s membership of the Arsacids on the grounds of an argument that he was an immature usurper corrupted by foreigners and “the kingship did not now belong to an Arsacid but the power was really in the house of Abdagaeses” (*Ann.* 6.43): *tum Hiero pueritiam Tiridatis increpat, neque penes Arsaciden imperium sed inane nomen apud imbellem externa mollitia, vim in Abdagaesis domo.*

Tacitus was certainly aware of Tiridates’s real ancestry, since the latter’s father, Phraates, and his grandfather King Phraates IV were well-known figures in Rome. Notwithstanding this knowledge Tacitus reproduces a counterfeit of him furnished with insults applied by a representative of Artabanos’s faction and intended to negate Tiridates’s right to the throne. It seems that in his account of the opinion Tiridates’s party had of Artabanos Tacitus he also availed himself of elements of the propaganda, as the pretender was supported by Tiberius, hence the Romans were interested in what happened to their protégé. To counterbalance this remark Tacitus brought in Hiero’s derogatory comments on Tiridates, the essence of which was a denial of Tiridates’s qualifications to exercise power, and even of his belonging to the Arsacids. In view of the specific symmetry of these vituperations levied by the antagonist factions, the conclusion to be drawn is that

both Tiridates and Artabanos II were Arsacids, but came from different branches of the clan.

Obviously the Phraatids considered their branch the only rightful claimant to the throne. This, too, was the opinion of their avid supporters, the people of Seleukeia, who wanted to take revenge on Artabanos for their humiliation. According to them none but the Phraatids had the right to ascend the throne.

Having numerous contemporary documents available for reference (Ehrhardt 1998: 297), Tacitus himself does not voice any doubts that Artabanos was an Arsacid. Unfortunately we do not know who his father was: presumably it was none of the known monarchs of the main Arsacid line. Neither do we have full information on his mother. However, Tacitus was all too familiar with 1st-century Parthian history to have had any doubts as to the legitimacy of Artabanos's claim to the throne. That is why he never queries it: quite on the contrary, when he resorts to *oratio recta* on Artabanos, he writes of him as an Arsacid (*Ann.* 2.3.1).

The allegation that Artabanos was descended through the female line of the Arsacids should be read to mean that he was an Arsacid, but did not belong to the branch represented by Phraates IV and his sons. We may assume his ancestry went back to the greatest Arsacid monarch before the Sinatrukids, viz. Mithradates II². The descendants of Phraates IV did not regard any of the other branches of the Arsacids eligible to the throne. But since they conceded that Artabanos's mother was an Arsacid even when they were mocking him, we can conclude that she came from the Sintarukid and Phraatid line.

The assumption that Artabanos was an Arsacid in the male line is confirmed by Flavius Josephus and Dio. Josephus states unambiguously that Artabanos came from the House of the Arsacids (*Ant.* 18.48: γένος Ἀρσακίδην). In a description of a ceremonial event at Baiai Dio (59.17.3) describes Darius, the son of Artabanos who was a hostage in Rome, as an Arsacid (Δαρεῖος ἀνὴρ Δρσακίδης).

Tacitus gives another relevant item of information on Artabanos: *quia Hyrcanis Carmaniisque per adfinitatem innexus erat* ("as he was connected by marriage alliances with the Hyrcanians and Carmanians" – *Ann.* 6.36.4)³. In *Historiae* 4.68 Tacitus uses the same expression in a context which definitely means cognatic kinship through marriage (cf. Gray 1953: 165; Schottky 1991: 69)⁴. Thus we may definitely say that Artabanos was a kinsman of the Hyrcanians and Carmanians through marriage.

On several occasions Tacitus emphasises Artabanos's connections with the Dahae or "Scythians", which means the same in this context. In *Ann.* 2.3.1 we read that he grew up among the Dahae (*apud Dahas adultus*); and in 6.41.2 we are told

² Mary Boyce (Boyce 2000: 158) believes that Artabanos II (in her article erroneously III) was descended from Artabanos I, the brother of Mithradates I; however, she gives no grounds for this supposition.

³ The expression *per adfinitatem innexus erat* means kinship, rather than affinity of the peoples, as Kahrstedt (Kahrstedt 1950: 13) believed.

⁴ *Arrecinum Clementem, domui Vespasiani per adfinitatem innexum et gratissimum Domitiano.*

he was brought up by the Scythians (*Scythas inter eductum*). These statements imply that Artabanos was brought up among the Dahae in the Transcaspian steppes.

By and large, according to Tacitus, Artabanos had relatives and/or cognatic kinsfolk among the Hyrcanians, who were vicinal neighbours of the Dahae. Thus his family branched out into the lands where the young prince was brought up and – Tacitus stresses – grew to manhood. Hence that place, the land of the Dahae, must have been his home country. These conclusions provide solid grounds for the claim that Artabanos II's father was the prince of the Dahae, an Arsacid by descent.

The reign of Phraates IV was disturbed several times by wars against usurpers including Tiridates (Olbrycht 1998: 117–119; 2013, 13–29). The time when Artabanos's ancestral house rose to a high position in Parthia seems to be located somewhere within the turbulent first decade or so of the reign of Phraates IV. We may put forward a hypothesis that a branch of the Arsacids which survived the turmoil of the Sinatrukid period lived among the Dahae. It was from this line that Artabanos II was descended. Ruling over Transcaspian tribes which were hardly controllable for the central authorities resident in Ecbatana and Ctesiphon, the Dahae Arsacids enjoyed a status of autonomy. They earned the favour of Phraates IV by coming to his aid when he needed it. Artabanos II's father must have been in an alliance with Phraates, who gave his daughter in marriage to his ally the prince of the Dahae. The issue of this union was Artabanos II – presumably born around 30–25 BC (he died in AD 39/40). On reaching manhood he assumed power in Atropatene. This must have occurred towards the close of the reign of Phraates IV, or in the reign of Phraates V. Therefore Phraates IV was Artabanos's maternal grandfather. Artabanos came to rule in Media Atropatene in circumstances which have not been clarified yet (for details and new insights see: Olbrycht 2013: 55–68). And it was from Media Atropatene that he launched and conducted his struggle for the throne of Parthia against Vonones I.

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