

TOMASZ BABNIS

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THE IMAGE  
OF THE IRANIAN WORLD

IN THE ROMAN POETRY  
OF THE REPUBLICAN  
AND AUGUSTAN  
AGES





*The Image of the Iranian World  
in the Roman Poetry  
of the Republican and Augustan Ages*





Tomasz Babnis

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*Beatae, uxori carissimae*





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# *Introduction*

Three great powers of ancient Iran were the mightiest enemies that the world of Graeco-Roman civilization encountered throughout the centuries of its existence. The Achaemenid Persia (6<sup>th</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), the Arsacid Parthian Empire (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) and finally the Sasanian Persia (3<sup>rd</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) were the empires which existed through ages on the eastern border of the Mediterranean world, becoming its main point of reference. These states, encompassing great areas of Near and Middle East, ruling their large and rich populations, constituted the most important element of the Oriental world, in contact with which the classical world emerged.<sup>1</sup> The Achaemenid, Arsacid and Sasanian empires made up organizational frames not only for the Iranian civilization, but also for many other peoples subjugated in the course of their conquests. Persians and Parthians had great political, economic and cultural power at their disposal, becoming, in the eyes of Greeks and Romans, not only a model example of the peoples of the East, but also – in some way – of the generalized, archetypical Others. This state of affairs resulted from the centuries-long, intensive contacts between the Mediterranean civilization and the Iranian world<sup>2</sup> that lasted from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, when Greeks first met the Achaemenid Persians, whose empire was expanding into Asia Minor, until the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, when the Roman Empire, limited to its eastern part then, waged its last war with the Sasanian Persia. The soon-to-come Arab conquest of Persia put an end to the relations between Greeks and Romans and the Iranian world, whose place was

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<sup>1</sup> On the influence of the Orient on the classical civilization's beginnings, see esp. Bernal 1987; Burkert 1992; Burkert 2004; West 2008. See also e.g. Walcot 1966; Kurke 1992; Ball 2002; Węcowski 2011; Metcalf 2015.

<sup>2</sup> On the frequently used term “the Iranian world” and its relations to such terms as “Iran” and “Persia,” see below.

taken by the new (though, obviously, strongly indebted to the earlier Middle Eastern traditions) Islamic civilization.<sup>3</sup>

The longevity and intensity of the relations between Greece and Rome and the empires of Persia and Parthia must have left a mark on Graeco-Roman literature.<sup>4</sup> In this “clash of civilizations,” to use the famous Huntington’s term, only the element of hostile confrontation (the idea of the conflict between East and West exposed for the first time in Herodotus’ “Histories”<sup>5</sup>) was usually addressed and emphasized, resulting, for example (to mention the most glaring example) in the famous movie “300”. However, over the centuries, the periods of war interchanged with the times of peace and cooperation. Thus, in order to fully understand the image of the Iranian world, the awareness of the historical context is necessary: not only of the current situation in the relations between the Mediterranean world and the Persian or Parthian Empires, but also of the past events, influencing the perception of the eastern neighbor. In the latter issue, the influence of both actual events and processes as well as their vision developed in the literature (being a point of reference for later authors) was of particular importance.

The role of these literary creations is more crucial, since they made a lasting impact on the identity of the nations that created them. A prime example of such a process can surely be seen in the history of Greece, where after the Graeco-Persian Wars of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC the new vision of Greekness and, at the same time, the idea of a Persian barbarian as the Other (epitomizing the reversion of the features the Greeks found important in themselves) emerged.<sup>6</sup> One of the reasons for classifying Persians as different from Greeks was the so-called *Milieu*theorie (“environmental theory”) emphasizing the link between the natural circumstances of a given region and the nature of the population that inhabits it. The best character traits were ascribed to people living in moderate environment, while the inhabitants of the cold and hot lands were doomed to have worse moral features: this idea strongly influenced the Greek perception of

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<sup>3</sup> The history of the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian Empires has an enormous literature. The works I used and admire the most are: Debevoise 1938; Ziegler 1964; Głombiowski 1981; Dąbrowa 1983; Frye 1984; Sherwin-White 1984; Georges 1994; Spawforth 1994; Balcer 1995; Wolski 1996; Kaim 1997; Greatrex 1998; Wiesehöfer (ed.) 1998; Wiesehöfer 2001; Briant 2002; Campbell 2002; Olbrycht 2004; Maksymiuk 2005; Rose 2005; Bivar 2006; Brosius 2006; Farrokh 2007; Hardie 2007; Edwell 2008; Parker 2008; Canepa 2009; Daryaee 2009; Olbrycht 2010; Dąbrowa 2011; Fisher 2011; Maksymiuk 2011; Piegdoń 2011; Shayegan 2011; Ruzicka 2012; Llewellyn-Jones 2013; Olbrycht 2013; Payne 2015; Stoneman 2015; Olbrycht 2016; Rezakhani 2017; Wiesehöfer, Müller (ed.) 2017; Overtoom 2020; Edwell 2021; Ellerbrock 2021; Olbrycht 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Obviously, they left a mark on Persian literature, too, however the state of preservation of pre-Islamic literature in the Iranian world is far from good, so the presence of the Graeco-Roman motifs in it is much more scarce. On some examples of the Iranian (mainly Persian) reception of the Graeco-Roman world, see e.g. Daryaee 2018; Nabel 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Spawforth 1994; Polański 2003; Gregoratti 2011. See also Wolski 1994; Strootman 2020 (interesting remarks about the conflict between “Iranism” and the Graeco-Roman civilization).

<sup>6</sup> On this issue, see esp. Hall 1989; Georges 1994. See also Almagor 2005.

Persians and other eastern barbarians living, generally, in a warmer climate than Greeks.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, the Greek vision of Persia became the fundament of the Greek perception of other Orientals (often the subjects of the Achaemenid Empire) and later on was borrowed by Romans. Thus, the literary description of foreign nations, the Iranian peoples in particular, was soon dominated by various stereotypes and associations. They were usually based not on the actual historical, geographical or social reality, but rather on a mental image, unprecise and not stemming from a solid knowledge of the region, the image that used to reveal more about the describing than about the described.<sup>8</sup>

The rich and diversified tradition of the literary depiction of the Iranian world influenced Roman poetry, too. Roman poets were – first and foremost in the Republican Age – diligent pupils and imitators of Greeks, also in describing the Orient. However, since Rome, after the conquest of Eastern Mediterranean, established direct relations with the Arsacid Empire, Latin poetry could break free from this literary dependence, manifesting itself in treating the Iranian motifs that have already been used by Greeks.<sup>9</sup> Roman authors gradually broadened the scope of the Iranian motifs, particularly those stemming from their own experience in relations with the Parthian, and later with the Sasanian Empire,<sup>10</sup> though actually never abandoning the motifs developed earlier in Greek literature.<sup>11</sup> In the course of time, Roman poets created

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<sup>7</sup> Elements of this tradition can be noticed as early as in the Hippocratic text “Airs, Waters and Places,” however, the idea of the superiority of Greeks over barbarians (being the result of the former living in moderate climate) is absent from this work – Backhaus 1976; Jones 1999: 98–99; Evans 2008: 24–30; Lenfant 2017.

<sup>8</sup> As Christopher Tuplin (2014: 230) rightly put it: “Persia is a tool with which to think about non-Persian things”. Admittedly, the British historian referred these words to Plato and Xenophon, but they can be also extrapolated to the works of other classical authors writing on Persia and Parthia. This particular interest in Persia was also observed by Dominique Lenfant (2007: 200), who stated: “Perhaps no foreign people had more detailed histories written about themselves by the ancient Greeks than the Persians”. Of course, this interest was present not only in historiography, but also in other literary genres.

<sup>9</sup> The importance of this issue has already been indicated by: Sonnabend 1986: 235–246; Schneider 1998: 103; Campbell 2002: 216–220. The Graeco-Parthian relations were not so crucial for Roman poetry, though one cannot deny that the Greek subjects of the Arsacids made a significant contribution to the cognition of the Oriental world. On Graeco-Parthian relations, see Sonnabend 1986: 229–235; Momigliano 1990: 123–150; Wiesehöfer 2001: 136–143; Muccioli 2007; Wiesehöfer 2007: 128–129; Dąbrowa 2011; Grajetzki 2011; Olbrycht 2014; Olbrycht 2017; Strootman 2020.

<sup>10</sup> For the detailed description of the relations between Rome and Parthia/Persia, see esp. Ziegler 1964; Pani 1972; Dąbrowa 1983; Sherwin-White 1984; Heil 1997; Greatrex 1998; Campbell 2002; Landskron 2005; Maksymiuk 2005; Rose 2005; Dignas, Winter 2007; Farrokh 2007; Edwell 2008; Parker 2008; Canepa 2009; Daryaee 2009; Sheldon 2010; Fisher 2011; Maksymiuk 2011; Piegdoń 2011; Shayegan 2011; Olbrycht 2013; Babnis 2017; Barnett 2017; Schlude, Rubin (ed.) 2017; Nabel 2019; Nabel 2020; Edwell 2021.

<sup>11</sup> For obvious chronological reasons, Romans could not establish direct contacts with the Achaemenid Persia. Nevertheless, they used to treat Parthians (and then the Sasanians) as actual successors of the Achaemenids. On this issue, see esp. Daryaee 2006; Shayegan 2011; Spawforth 2012: 1–58; Olbrycht 2019.

their own vision of the Iranian world, which – though in no small measure dependent from the Greek one – exploited the elements that were new or newly devised. It is just this image of the Iranian world created by the poets of the ancient Rome that is the matter of interest in this book.

The source material used in my research is the extant<sup>12</sup> corpus of Latin poetry created between the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (i.e. the beginning of the existence of Roman literature) and the turn of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, when, on the one hand, the Sasanian empire collapsed and, on the other, Latin literary texts ceased to be written in the Eastern Roman Empire, whereas the poetry of the Latin West lost its interest in the Iranian themes. In the period determined by these caesurae we encounter a number of poets who included in their works references to the Iranian world. They were active in every period of Latin literature, thence the way of putting the issue of our interest underwent significant modifications. This variability resulted not only from diverse historical contexts, but also from the treatment of these motifs by different individualities within the framework of different literary genres. For these reasons, the material to be put under scrutiny is very rich and diversified, though – surprisingly – it has not been fully analyzed by scholars. Meanwhile, a great number of similar references and their presence in Latin poetry created over the course of about eight centuries (from Plautus to Venantius Fortunatus) require a thorough study that would include the entire extant corpus of Roman poetry, providing for all literary periods, genres and authors that touched these issues (even in a marginal way).

This study, being the first of two parts, is limited chronologically to the Republican and Augustan Ages. The period stretching from the Plautine comedies to the Ovidian exile poetry, can be – generally – called the “period of creation,” in which Roman poets, firstly, started to use references to the Iranian world, mainly drawn from Greek sources and, secondly, in the short time built some kind of repertory of motifs to be later reused and reconfigured. It is hard to overestimate its role – especially the role of the Augustan Age – in developing the essential features of the later Latin literature: this concerns both the most general issues and the Iranian matters. For many reasons (to be discussed later), the Augustan Age was more important than any other in the process of creating the Roman image of the Iranian world, while the Republican Age served as a sort of introduction to the following period. Thus, the poetry of these years is included in this first part of the study. The second part is to encompass the poetry of the Imperial and Late Antique Ages (from Manilius to Venantius Fortunatus), which – in terms of the image of the Iranian world – could be called the “period of change and

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<sup>12</sup> In the case of Greek and Roman literature, the problem of the texts’ preservation plays an important role. Only a small part of the literary texts written in the Graeco-Roman times survived: the works of some authors were preserved in fragments, while others are known only from indirect tradition. It is hard to estimate how many texts are totally unknown to us.

development”. The authors of this period mainly exploited the repertory of motifs that came into being earlier, but – obviously – did not settle for the mere imitation, trying to adjust the aforementioned motifs to new realities: transitions of both empires (e.g. taking power by the Sasanians or Christianization of Rome), changes in literary tastes, emergence of new genres or general growth of knowledge of the East.

Generally speaking, the issue of the Iranian world and its relations with Rome did not become the main topic of the works of Latin poetry. Neither in the extant *oeuvre* of Roman poets, nor in the works known only from fragments or testimonies can we find a piece that would be dedicated first and foremost to those issues (despite its title, Plautine “Persa” is not the case). This situation resulted from several reasons. First, Romans had particular fondness for mythological topics, which – necessarily – did not give much space for the motifs related to Persia or Parthia. Second, the extant historical epics, as Lucan’s “Pharsalia” or Silius Italicus’ “Punica,” did not concern the Roman wars with Parthia or Persia but with other enemies. Roman poetry lacks, then, the works which – to mention only the chronologically extreme examples – could serve as a counterpart for Greek works like Aeschylus’ “Persians” (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) or Georgios Pisides’ “Heraclias” (7<sup>th</sup> century AD), which were dedicated mainly to the relations with the empires of the Iranian world. Furthermore, references to the Iranian worlds scattered throughout the works of Latin poets are usually small ornaments (allusions to political-military relations, *exempla*,<sup>13</sup> similes), marginal from the point of view of the entire works. Nevertheless, the effort of collecting and putting this very interesting and *summa summarum* extensive material under scrutiny seems to be in every respect reasoned.

In this place I feel obliged to explain how the term “Iranian world” is to be used in this work. It is strongly connected with the ethnolinguistic criterion, since the Iranian world has never been, in fact, politically united, whereas it has been mainly inhabited by the peoples using Iranian languages (a branch of the Indo-Iranian languages in the Indo-European language family). From the etymological point of view, Iran means “land of Aryans” (Middle Persian *Eranshahr*) – this name is first used in our sources in the Sasanian period. Nowadays, more than 200 million people use Iranian languages and its native speakers make up a vast majority of population in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. These three countries are the core of the area called sometimes “Greater Iran,” in which not only Iranian languages but also Iranian culture (in particular Persian language and literature) dominate. One should, then, discern Iran (the Islamic Republic of Iran) as a contemporary state from Iran understood as the Iranian world, which is – obviously – a much broader concept. We can encounter a similar situation in the

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<sup>13</sup> The role of *exemplum* (defined by Cicero as follows: *Exemplum est quod rem auctoritate aut casu alicuius hominis aut negotii confirmat aut infirmat* – Cic. *De inv.* 49) in Roman literature was indeed crucial and its use constituted an important element of historical and political reflection, pervading poetry, too. On *exemplum*, see e.g. Roller 2009; Bridges 2015: 163–164; Roller 2018; Nabel 2020b: 177–178.





## *Summary*

The present book is dedicated to the image of the Iranian world emerging from the extant Roman poetry written in the Republican and Augustan Ages. The scope of the source material stretches thus from the comedies of Plautus to the Ovidian exile poetry, covering over 200 years of the great development of Latin literature. My aim is to investigate which motifs were referred to by Roman poets, which patterns could be noticed in those texts, which elements were mentioned most often, what relations can be observed between these references and historical, geographical, social or religious realities, and finally, what the function of these references is within the scope of entire poems or parts of texts extracted from the works of a greater size. I am also interested in the “genealogy” of these motifs: their origin and way of exploitation by the poets of subsequent periods. I aim at examining how consistent the overall image created from references scattered throughout the works of various authors was and how it changed in the course of time.

Generally speaking, the issue of the Iranian world (seen in its broadest sense as encompassing the great empires of Persia and Parthia along with their component parts, as well as other Iranian peoples, even if they were not linked to these states in a given period) and its relations with Rome did not become the main topic of the works of Latin poetry. However, gathered together, the references to the Iranian motifs make up a considerable material that demands a detailed analysis. To date, these issues have been discussed only partially, since they have been treated either as a part of greater wholes, when Latin poetry was treated together with Greek one or a given author was taken into consideration. Furthermore, some passages from poetry have been surprisingly omitted and considered apart from others. Meanwhile, without the full source material the analysis cannot be complete and the conclusions sufficiently well-grounded. This is why I researched all the extant corpus of Roman poetry in order to find all

possible mentions of the Iranian topics. Throughout the book, I embraced the following structural arrangement (taken from the seminal Michael Wissemann's monograph): the passages containing relevant references are quoted in Latin and then analyzed in detail.

The poetry of the Republican and Augustan Ages can be legitimately called a "period of creation," in which Roman poets, firstly, started to use references to the Iranian world, mainly drawn from Greek sources and, secondly, in a short time, built some kind of repertory of motifs to be later reused and reconfigured. One cannot overestimate the importance of the relations between Rome and Parthia which had gained momentum at the end of the Republican Period and became one of the crucial parts of Roman political agenda. The defeat of Crassus in the battle of Carrhae (53 BC) and the revenge for it were the factors driving Roman eastern policy towards confrontation. Augustus, though probably planned an eastern campaign, finally opted for peace which was concluded in 20 BC and was declared a great Roman success. These two events greatly influenced the image of the Iranian world in poetry, which frequently alluded to recent political-military affairs.

My study has been designed in the following manner. In the Introduction, some basic aspects (methodology, state of research, preliminary assumptions) are discussed. The main body of the book is divided into six chapters concerning specific periods and authors. Chapter 1 is dedicated to the poetry of the Republican period. Chapters 2–6 are devoted to Augustan literature, in which these issues were treated more thoroughly. This is why I decided to dedicate an entire chapter to each of the poets who referred to the Iranian affairs on numerous occasions, that is, to Vergil (Chapter 2), Horace (Chapter 3), Propertius (Chapter 4) and Ovid (Chapter 5). In Chapter 6, I placed together Cornelius Gallus, *Corpus Tibullianum*, "Appendix Vergiliana" and Grattius, calling them all jointly *poetae minores*. Every chapter ends with a partial conclusion. These partial corollaries are summed up again in the final Conclusions section. The arrangement of the analyzed material respects the chronological order, with some exceptions in Chapter 6. I decided to embrace this composition order so as to link more clearly the poets' statements with the political events happening between Rome and Parthia, to reveal patterns changing over time as well as to indicate the influence of certain poets on some others.

The image of the Iranian world emerging from Roman poetry seems to be a purely literary creation. As in the case of the majority of the ancient authors writing on the world of Orient, Roman poets drew the Iranian motifs mainly from earlier texts, not basing on any empirical knowledge of the Iranian world. This must have led to numerous misunderstandings and distortions, which was additionally enhanced by the antagonistic relations between Rome and Parthia. The poets chose from the literary sources such elements that they found surprising and exceptional, different from the norms accepted in the Roman world. It argues for the frequent mentioning of the Parthian tactics, Oriental peculiarities or exotic wild nature. The poets' knowledge of the Iranian world taken from literature is neither profound nor particularly reliable. It came down to the acquaintance with a small group of – usually stereotypical –

themes and motifs. Neither history, nor geography, nor ethnography of the Iranian world were topics really known by Roman authors, though they tried to treat them to a limited extent. Therefore, the Iranian peoples were generally indicated as hostile to Rome, sometimes fierce and dangerous, sometimes cowardly and effeminate (this inconsistency did not bother Latin authors). In this respect, the description of the Iranian world did not differ from that of other Eastern nations. This resulted from the fact, that – generally speaking – Latin poets perceived the ancient Iranian empires as a part of the fabulous, abundant but also corrupt and immoral East that should be given a wide berth, since it could “pollute” Romans and their ancestral morality and religion.

Why then did Romans mentioned the Iranian motifs so frequently? Importantly, such a situation can be spotted in various literary genres and one cannot observe any explicit link between a given motif and a specific literary genre or period, which means that this perception of the Iranian world was quite pervasive and stable. It seems that the reason for this was the Roman tendency to treat Persian, Parthians and other Iranian peoples as a mirror in which they could look at themselves. Thus, they could obtain the corroboration of their own identity and superiority over other nations. In a way, the references to the Iranian world found in Latin poetry could be seen as a form of discussion about the Roman world, its identity, values, virtues and worldview. For Latin poets, the Iranian peoples were not important *per se*, but only inasmuch as reference to them concerned Romans. It allowed them to look at themselves from a different perspective.

**Keywords:** Roman poetry, Ancient Iran, Parthia, Roman-Parthian relations, Orient in Roman poetry, Roman policy in the East

The present work is dedicated to the image of the Iranian world in the works of Roman poets of the Republican and Augustan Ages, that is from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC until 14 AD. These times can be viewed as a period of creation of the literary vision that was later creatively developed by later generations of poets. By the term “Iranian world,” the author means not only the great empires (the Achaemenid Persia and the Arsacid Parthia) but also their component parts, as well as other Iranian peoples. Thus, he aims at reconstructing the broadest possible picture of the civilization that became the mightiest enemy of the Graeco-Roman world for more than a millennium.



He offers a new approach to this issue linking the techniques of both classical philologist and historian in his analysis of the chosen poetical passages found in the extant corpus of Roman poetry. Thus, the source material used in this book includes not only the works of great poets like Vergil or Horace, but also of authors like Plautus, Lucretius or Grattius. This way, the author tries to introduce some new sources and broaden our knowledge of the place that the Iranian world took in Roman poetry while demonstrating its difference from the image known from Greek literature.

This book attempts at making a contribution to our better understanding of not only Latin poetry but also of the Roman perception of foreign nations in general. Its second part, dedicated to Roman poetry of the Imperial and Late Antiquity Ages, is to be published soon.

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