

## THE “COURTESY” (COMITAS) OF KING VONONÈS\*

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### Abstract

The Parthian king Vononès (8-12), being full of benevolence and courtesy towards his subjects, was however driven out by his nobility. This fact was the consequence of the opposites of the political mentality of the Roman and Parthian societies. Vononès, who returned to the Parthian throne after a long stay as a hostage in Rome, tried to transfer the way of leadership of republican Rome to a tribal society based on the principles of collectivism and personal leveling. In the ideas of the Parthians, the king (*vir magnus* - Just XLI,6.1) is the embodiment of physical masculinity and exercises power by means of readiness for violence, threats and, accordingly, stimulating fear in his subjects. The fear of the monarch is an incentive to implement his will. The “courtesy” (*comitas*) of Vononès, which Tacitus speaks of, being a characteristic feature of the political communication in republican Rome, was introduced by him into relations with the subjects. It denied the traditional principles of exercising power by the Arsacids on interpersonal level, and destroyed traditional ideas about the king-lord. We could presume that Vononès practically abolished fear as a means of exercising supreme power.

Emperor Claudius, who pursued a policy of terror against the Senate and *equites*, urged the pretender to the Parthian throne the prince Meherdat to follow the official ideological setting of the principate - an ideal relationship between the ruler (*rector*) and citizens and not rule as a despot of slaves. These words to Meherdat expose a calculation that the pursuit of these political precepts will only lead to further unrest within the Parthian Empire identical to that which overthrew Vononès.

**Keywords:** Vononès, Arsacids, Parthia, comitas, Emperor Claudius, Cicero, Principate, political culture in Ancient East.

The Hellenistic period in the Near East was marked by the processes of autocratic state formation among the peoples - main actors of the region: Graeco-Macedonians, Parthians, Armenians, Jews. Their practices of state building were quite distinct in their means of exercise and in their results. The fundamental distinction consisted in the first place in the nature of power relations, manifested in the framework of inter-individual relations with its various gradations [16:13-14] between the holder of power and its object, or, in other words, at the microsociological level.

The data of Trogue Pompey, of Tacitus, and of Plutarch reflect the successive policy of the Parthian monarchs in order to create a centralized state with despotic power. The execution of Surena by order of Orodes (53 BC) had as its task the establishment of unlimited domination over the all-powerful military clan chiefs, to reduce them to the state of domesticity [13:77-82].

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At the same time (II - I centuries), the Seleucid monarchy recognized a certain autonomy of the courtier (“friend of the king”), generally originating from the civil community and considering as primordial his devotion to his local fatherland compared to his obligations towards the monarch [12:29-38]<sup>1</sup>.

Our task would be to consider the peculiarities of the perception of the elements of Greco-Roman political culture at the Parthian court as well as the reasons for its refutation by the Parthian tribal and seminomad society. On this level, the reign of Vononès (8-12) is significant. Being Parthian king and then Armenian king, brought up in Rome where he was sent as a hostage at the age of tender childhood by his father Phraates IV, he was after a brief reign repudiated by his Parthian subjects. His collision with the Parthian aristocracy is told by Tacitus. “The Parthians had repudiated a king as a foreigner” (*ut externum asperabantur*), he wrote, although he was of the Arsacid dynasty. It was Vononès delivered by Phraates to Augustus as a hostage (*Is fuit Vonones obses Augusto datus a Phraate*)...[20:384]. The Parthians soon felt shame. They are degraded from having solicited for them a king impregnated with the way of life of the enemies (*hostium artibus injectum*). Vononès himself nourished this animosity. Alienated from ancestral traditions (*ed ipse diversus a majorem institutis*), he rarely went hunting, avoided horse riding, appeared in cities in the palanquin and disdained the great feasts admitted to his country...Simply approachable (*sed prompti aditus*), he demonstrated unreserved courtesy (*obvia comitas*). These virtues unknown to the Parthians were only extraordinary vices in their eyes (*ignote parthis virtutes, nova vitia*) ...” [20:387].

Vononès’ conflict with his court is usually treated in passing, emphasizing the fact that he was a creature of Augustus. However Tacitus [20:384-387] and Josephus Flavius say nothing about any of his actions for the benefit of Rome [6:22]<sup>2</sup>. At first glance, it is clear that such a characteristic of Vononès’ communication with his subjects as “*comitas*”, the “accentuated courtesy” did not correspond in any way to the stereotypical representations of the monarch (*vir magnus*) among the Parthians. Yet this trait of his behavior has not been considered specifically in the context of difference political notions of the Romans and Parthians. Thus R. Hanslik only mentioned in passing the “römisch-hellenistischen Gebahren” (Roman-Hellenistic behavior) and “Leutseligkeit” (courtesy) [9] of this monarch.

The *comitas* and the accessibility of Vononès, “indicted” to him, were essential characteristics of the culture of political communication in Rome. Suetonius marks the *comitas* of Augustus during his contacts with the simplest of the Romans. (“*Promiscuis salutationibus admittebat et plebem, tanta comitate adeuntium desideria excipiens...*”) [18:208]. According to Cicero, *comitas* is a characteristic

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<sup>1</sup> The growth of individualism in the Hellenistic period is considered in the work of A.F. Losev [10:29-38].

<sup>2</sup> Diakonoff M. M., opined that “Vonones’ pro-Roman policy evidently aroused the irritation of the Parthian nobility” [6:22]. This claim is not confirmed in the sources. Dąbrowa E., rightly mentions the “romanization” of Vonones, but without specifying the content of this term [2:33]; see also [3:174].

feature of the politician's conversation with people ("comitas affabilitas que sermonis") [1:216]. With such moral virtues as the faculty of softening, "clementia atque mansuetudo", the comitas is an important part of the moral image of the ideal citizen (*vir bonus*) of the doctrine of Cicero [1:88-90]. We could also remark briefly that gentleness (mansuetudo), a moral quality of the Roman man, was according to Trogue an inferior trait in the eyes of the Parthians, specific to feminine behavior. In answer to the question why the "comitas" had aroused strong repugnance towards the monarch, it should be emphasized that it was incompatible with such a normative characteristic among the Parthians as the "violentia", the basis of their representation of the virility.

"Men should be disposed to violence, while women - humble", writes Trogue ("*Quippe violentiam viris, manifestationis mansuetudinem mulieribus adsignant*") [11:229-230]. With this report on the manifestations of the customary behavior of a tribal society fits perfectly his famous formula of power relations among the Parthians: "they submit to the prince not of consideration but of fear" (*principibus metu non pudore parent*). The Arsacid monarch - incarnation of virility is the holder of its main characteristic, that of the constant disposition to violence, to physical coercion which logically engenders fear as a motive for obedience. (Thereby following the data of Trogue leads to the following formula of power relations: "violentia" -- threat of physical violence --> "metus" (fear) = desired effect) [23:101]<sup>3</sup>.

Violentia, the threat of coercion, is a negative stimulus, aimed at the subject's emotion and accepted as the norm. Given these realities of the political organization of Parthian society, it would have to be admitted that the "comitas", this accentuated courtesy, raised to the norm of relations between the monarch and the subject, denied the principles of the exercise of power at the interindividual level, and ruined the image of the king-master. Knowingly or unknowingly, Vononès suppressed fear as a means of submission. The case of Vononès also highlights the peculiarity of the understanding of royal etiquette at the Arsacide court. Unlike the political culture of the Principate - of a regime which had elevated hypocrisy to the rank of official policy [21:210], the formalities of etiquette at the Arsacides court were to accentuate the unlimited character of the supreme power, the real political situation of the courtier. We have good reason to conclude that with his simple style of communicating, Vononès imitated the official ideology of the Principate and grasped to the letter the doctrine of the prince, implemented by Augustus [17:77-78]. He followed it probably without realizing its inconceivability to the Parthian political tradition, as well as the fact that this way of managing in Rome was intended to conceal unlimited personal power, based on the waves of the great terror (years 43,41 etc). In this context attention should have been paid to the notion of "pudor" (consideration), indicated by Trogue as a motivation for obedience and the opposite of "metus" (fear). The "pudor" inspired by the prince should

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<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that this mode of exercising power among the Parthians is identical to M. Weber's thesis on the "monopole de la violence physique légitime comme définition de l'État" [23:101].

transform power relations into bilateral volitional interaction. “*Pudor*” already presumes a certain dependence of the will of “A” on the disposition of “B”, on the moral determination of the latter. There is little doubt that the pudor evoked by Trogue belongs to the domain of the official ideology of the Principate. Certainly this “*pudor*” could only be realized in the form of conversation, dialogue as well as the “*comitas*” - courtesy, introduced by Vononès to his court. It should be noted that this comitas was, according to Cicero, inalienable from dialogue (*sermo*). The effect of “*pudor*” and “*comitas*” (consideration and courtesy) is the reciprocal esteem of the parties, an external equality.

Official Roman doctrine accentuated the opposition of the power relations of the great rival powers. On this point, the speech of the Emperor Claudius at the Senate session on the occasion of sending his hostage Meherdat, son of Vononès [19], to the Parthian throne is very revealing. Claudius urges the young Parthian heir not to consider himself master and his subjects as slaves, but to be “*rector*” of citizens (“*civium*”). We cannot overlook the evidence that the emperor identifies himself with the “*rector*”, leader of the citizens and uses this republican term in order to conceal his unlimited power [22:214-217]<sup>4</sup>. Claudius refers to the opposition of the master (*dominus*) and the slave as being absolutely hostile to the mode of governance in the Roman Empire. The official harmonic pair of the “*rector*” and the “*civis*” was intended to camouflage the true transformations of the relationship between the emperor and the representatives of the privileged orders. (Claudius applied of his own free will the law of majesty whose victims were 35 senators and 200 *equites*) [15:292]<sup>5</sup>. As for the Parthians, the relationship of unlimited domination and unreserved submission was in fact an officially recognized norm which found its expression in the words of Tiridates to Nero: “Master... I am your slave” [5:142;13; 5:296]<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> As Utchenko S.L., designates, the term “*rector*” was coined by Cicero and never meant monarchical power. “*Rector*” is the ideal statesman [22:214-217].

<sup>5</sup> Suet. Claud.29[18] According to the opinion of Y. Roman, under Claudius “l’aspect désormais monarchique du système ne pouvait plus être dissimulé” [15:292].

<sup>6</sup> Dio. Cass [5:142]: ἐγώ, δέσποτα...σὸς δὲ δουλὸς εἰμι... In detail [13]. There, it would be appropriate for us to touch in passing on the question of the essential distinction in the practices of political terror in Rome and in the Parthian Empire. The Principate, absolute power coated with republican institutions, recognized all the same the supremacy of the law, all of the private rights (“*jus*”), and the repressions should have a legal and legitimate foundation. However, it must be admitted that the notion of state crime was not developed in the codes of the societies of the classical Orient (see [7:296]). The king punished as he pleased or according to custom for the offense against his power. This reality is explicitly declared by Darius I the Achaemenid in the Behistun inscription. Darius determines of his own free will which of his subjects was the loyal, which was the evil, and punishes or rewards them for his arbitrariness (translation by R. Frye [8:363]). In the same way, without referring to the law, the Parthian king decided the fate of his subjects. Mithridates II the Great (122-87) had put to death Orobasus, his ambassador to Sulla, simply for his clumsiness during negotiations. The latter had to take the seat opposite Ariobarzanes, Roman client-king, while Sulla sat between the two, emphasizing the preeminence of Rome. As for Rome, one can notice without dwelling particularly on the problem,

However, Claudius's remarks testify to the political hypocrisy of the emperor who, having established an arbitrary monarchical regime, recommends that Meherdat introduce into his kingdom ideal relations between the rector and the citizens. It is hardly necessary to believe that Claudius could not fail to realize the unreality of this recommendation. In truth, these words to Meherdat reveal a calculation that the pursuit of these political precepts only leads to new troubles within the Parthian Empire identical to those which overthrew Vononès.

In the fourth year of his reign Vononès was driven out by his aristocrats. Vononès found his salvation in Armenia. First king of the Arsacid dynasty on the Armenian throne, he reigned there for about four years (12-16). One may wonder whether he had learned from the failure of his Parthian reign.<sup>7</sup> The facts come to prove that he continued to avoid the great hunts and did not like the banquets, bringing together the monarch with his aristocrats. He had a competitor, a Greek Zenon, son of Polemon, king of Pontus<sup>7</sup>. According to Tacitus, he succeeded in winning the sympathy of the Armenian population by his devotion to their customs and way of life (big hunts, feasts, etc.). Why did Vononès persist in his errors? Because of his political blindness? Or did he consciously want to follow his political ideas, that reflection of official Roman ideology, there, where they could not be accepted? We cannot know. Yet an evidence proves to the researcher: with respect to a society with its antiindividual values Vononès defended his identity and his morality. It would also be appropriate to note a curious detail: in the series of coins with the effigies of the anonymous Arsacids, Vononès was the first monarch who indicated his own name [14:84].

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that despite all its excesses in the 1st century AD, the imperial power did not attempt to eliminate the personal autonomy of the citizen - holder of civil rights.

<sup>7</sup> Vononès left the Armenian throne in 16. In 18, in Artaxata Germanicus laid on Zenon the signs of royal power. Josephus Flavius [10:40] states that after the expulsion of Vononès from Armenia, Artabanus, the King of kings, "gave Armenia" to his son, Orodes. On this issue N.C. Debevoise believes that Artabanus of Parthia "sent his son Orodes to fill the vacant place" [4:153], but without indicating the result of this action. The enthronement of Orodes in Armenia in 17 and the preliminary open intervention of Artabanus in Armenian affairs are the important events that could not have gone unnoticed by Tacitus. Tacitus claims the opposite: "after the removal of Vonones, the Armenians did not have a king" [20:474]; see [3:171-189]. It is important to emphasize that reporting on the mission of Germanicus to Armenia, with the aim of enthroning Zenon, Tacitus does not speak of the need to remove the Parthians from this country. Tacitus also represents the internal political situation created in Armenia by the arrival of Germanicus. He notes the growing popularity of Zenon among the Armenian people, ("sed favor nationis inclinabat in Zenonem"); Zenon "proceres plebemque iuxta devinxerat" [20:474]). Thus, Zenon, before his coronation in 18, became a recognized contender for the throne of Armenia. Another circumstance seems obvious: Zenon did not arrive in Armenia with Germanicus, but was already in the country. The assimilation of Armenian customs by him, which determined his popularity, is even attributed by Tacitus to the period of his childhood. Probably he had long been considered by part of the Armenian nobility as a candidate for the throne, but Vononès could outstrip him. It could be concluded that the massive support of Zenon by the Armenian population and the intervention of Rome were a decisive obstacle to the realization of the intentions of Artabanus to put his son on the Armenian throne in 16-17.

The reigns of Vononès should be considered within the framework of the contacts of the opposite political cultures: that of the Graeco-Roman world and that of the traditional tribal society, being an example of their immediate collision at the level of interhuman relations.

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## ՎՈՆՈՆ ԹԱԳԱՎՈՐԻ «ՔԱՂԱՔԱՎԱՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ»

### *Ռուբեն Մանասերյան*

**Քանալի բառեր՝** Վոնոն, Արշակունիներ, Պարթևստան, Comitas, Կլավդիոս կայսր, Յիցերոն (Կիկերոն), Պրինցիպատ, իշխանությունը Արևելքում:

Հռոմից պարթևների հրավերով Արշակունիների գահին բազմած Վոնոնը՝ Հրահատ IV-ի որդին, յուրացրել էր դեռևս հանրապետական Հռոմում ձևավորված քաղաքական մշակույթը՝ կառավարման գործելակերպը: Այն հիմնված էր անձի՝ քաղաքացու իրավունքների հարգման սկզբունքի վրա և իշխանավորից պահանջում էր իր գերակայությունը չչեշտող մոտեցում, արտաքնապես իրավահավասար հարաբերությունների պահպանում: Պրինցիպատի միապետական վարչակարգը որդեգրել էր այդ քաղաքական հանրապետական համակարգը սոսկ ձևապաշտորեն՝ իբրև դաժան բռնաճնշումների վրա հիմնված, իրական իշխանության հարաբերությունների պաշտոնական ծածկույթ: Կտրված այդ իրողության ըմբռնումից՝ Վոնոնը փորձեց Հռոմի հանրապետական քաղաքական մշակույթը փոխադրել արևելյան ավանդույթապահ հասարակության մեջ, որի պատկերացումներով արքան՝ բռնություն գործածելու միշտ պատրաստակամ տիրակալը, անմիջապես վախ պիտի ներշնչեր իր հպատակներին (*metus*) որպես իր կամքի կատարման խթան:

Իր հպատակների հետ անմիջական հարաբերությունների մեջ Վոնոնը՝ հավատարիմ իր քաղաքական պատկերացումներին, ներմուծեց նրբանկատ սիրալիրությունը, նաև անձնական մատչելիությունը: Դրանով իսկ նա մերժում էր վախը թագավորի հետ հարաբերություններում, փաստորեն քանդում թագավորի մասին կարծրատիպային պատկերացումները: Նման գործելակերպը ավագանու կողմից մեկնվեց իբրև հռոմեական կայսրից յուրացված ստրկական վարվելակերպի դրսևորում: Վոնոնը գահընկեց արվեց: Վոնոնի պատմության մեջ արտացոլվեց Հռոմի և տոհմացեղային քաղաքական մշակույթների իրարամերժությունը, որի հիմքում էին մարդու, անհատի մասին հակադիր պատկերացումները: