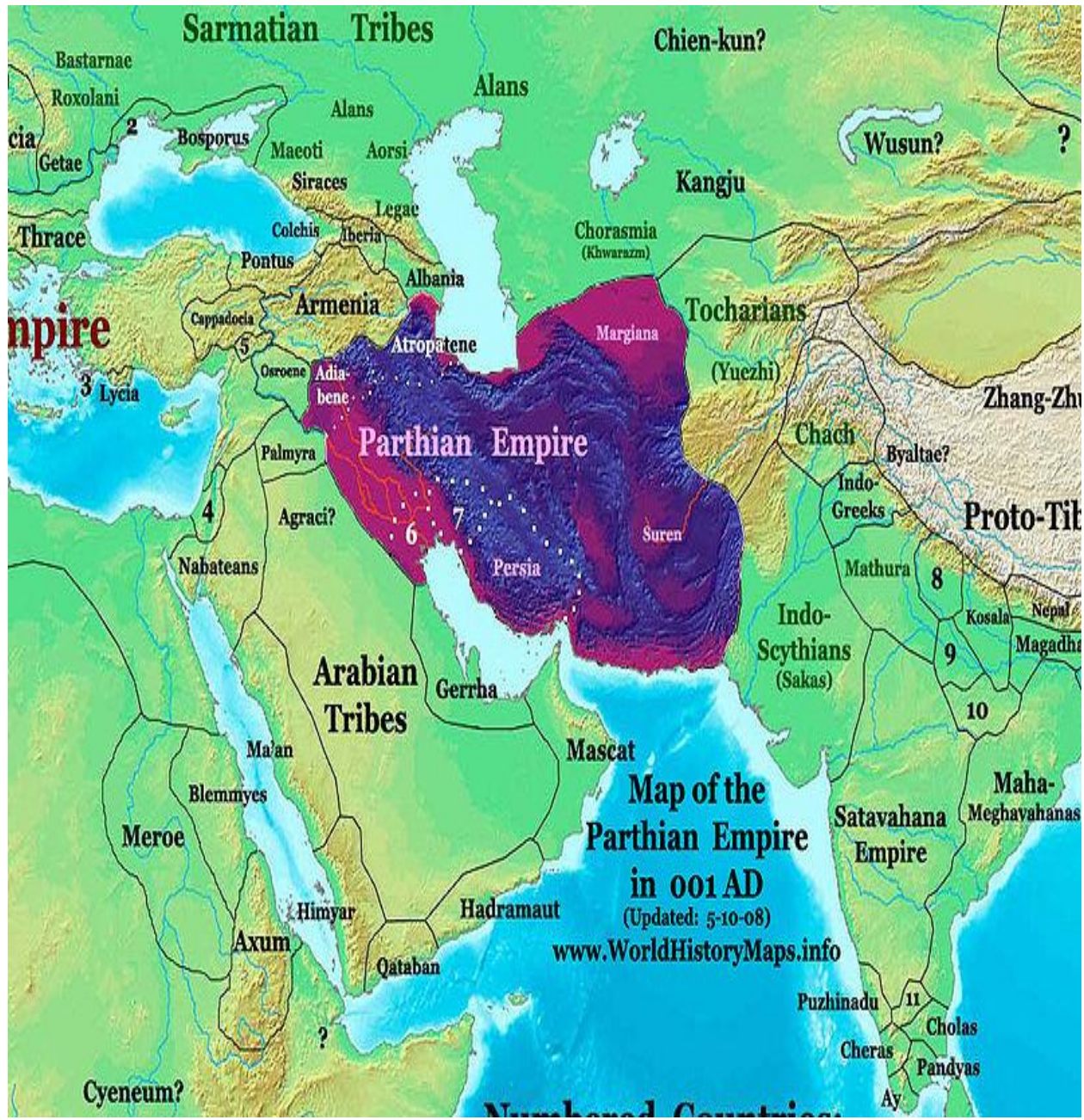


Herod-Parthia Nativity Nexus

By David Lee Burris



Herod the Great: Friend of the Romans *and Parthians?*

Jason M. Schlude explores how King Herod politically manipulated his position between the two regional powers



King Herod is remembered as a Friend of the Romans. Jason Schlude suggests that Herod exploited the broader geopolitical circumstances of the day. *Photo: Hulton-Archive/Getty Images.*

Often we think of [Herod the Great](#) in relation to ancient Rome. We understand the king as steadfast in his loyalty to this western imperial power—and rightly so. Herod’s behavior routinely revealed his Roman interests, and inscriptions attest to and advertise this allegiance by identifying him with such titles as “Friend of the Romans.” It is entirely appropriate then to apply the modern label “Roman client king” to Herod, as scholars have done for so long.

Another view of Herod, however, complicates this picture. Herod was not merely a passive subject of Rome. In fact, if we only view Herod against the Roman backdrop, we misunderstand the circumstances of his rise to power and underestimate his accomplishment. While the Romans were indeed a key source of Herod’s authority, he rose to power and maintained his position through timely manipulations of the contentious geopolitics that defined his day.

Rome was not the undisputed master of the Near East. The empire of Parthia stretched from modern Afghanistan through today's Iran to the Euphrates River in Iraq, encompassing territories once ruled by Persian kings and then by [Alexander the Great](#) and his successors. **Existing for nearly 500 years (c. 250 B.C.E. to the 220s C.E.), the Parthian state was the only advanced civilization that bordered the Roman Empire.** And the two states were not without violent encounters. In 53 B.C.E. the famed Crassus led Roman legions into the Parthian empire only to see his troops massacred and to die violently himself near Carrhae. Later, between 40 and 39 B.C.E., the Parthian king Orodes II conquered and controlled the Roman Near East, including Israel, until Mark Antony organized a counter-offensive that drove his forces from the region. But for the Romans, the damage was done; henceforth, no one would see the Romans as invincible and their control of the Near East certain.

Herod faced this volatile situation and exploited it to his advantage. **Indeed it was no coincidence that the Romans entrusted the throne of Judaea to [Herod the Great](#) at the close of 40 B.C.E., the same year of the Parthian conquest.** During the campaign the Parthians installed Antigonus, son of Aristobulus II and scion of the Hasmonean dynasty, as king of Judaea. Herod fled to Rome to use this event to make a bid for kingship. He sought out Antony and underscored the Parthian threat (and threw in a bribe for good measure!).



As the ancient sources make clear, the strategy worked; the Parthian actions motivated the Senate to make Herod the Great king. In this situation, Herod is best seen as a manipulator of Rome's confrontation with Parthia for his own advantage.

Herod then took the first opportunity to further his position by working with the Parthians. On the Roman side, Herod was in good shape. After the Roman Senate made him king and Herod pacified his new kingdom, Antony had Antigonus executed in 37 B.C. and thus eliminated Herod's most potent rival. But Herod still had a Parthian problem. He must have feared another Parthian invasion of the Roman Near East.

When the Parthians invaded Palestine in 40 B.C.E., they arrested Hyrcanus II, a high priest and member of the Hasmonean family, and cut off his ears. The Parthians then carried him back to their empire in retreat from Roman troops. Despite disfigurement, which disqualified him from holding the high priesthood, Hyrcanus remained the ranking member of the royal Hasmonean family. Might the Parthians not try to make Hyrcanus their own vassal king in Judaea? Herod hedged his bets. He wanted to have Hyrcanus in his own possession and to have the Parthians as friends. To achieve these ends, after Orodes perished in 37 B.C.E.—and with him, the worst of the bad blood between Herod and the Parthians—Herod immediately opened diplomatic relations with his successor Phraates IV in 36 B.C.E. He sent the new king presents and pledges and requested permission for the return of Hyrcanus, which was granted. Though not explicitly mentioned in the sources, this exchange must have resulted in some level of official amicability between Herod and the Parthians. In short, it was to the advantage of Herod to be friend of the Romans *and the Parthians*.

It is ironic, however, that not long after Herod was compelled to break with the Parthian king. In 31/30 B.C. Herod's Roman situation changed dramatically. Defeated at the battle of Actium, Antony took his own life, and Octavian (soon to be hailed "Augustus," the first Roman emperor) now controlled the Near East.

Before embarking for his well-known meeting with Octavian, Herod executed Hyrcanus & thereby eliminated the last surviving Hasmonean heir. This act limited Octavian's choices and rendered Herod more necessary, even if unsavory, to the Romans. Herod's judgment in this decision seems sound, at least in its effectiveness—he remained king. The high-profile murder, however, had its downside. It likely alienated Herod from Phraates IV, who would have been irritated by the political black eye Herod's action created for him. The king's subjects, especially the Babylonian Jews who honored Hyrcanus, would've been displeased with him, thinking either that Phraates conspired with Herod to bring about the Hasmonean's death or that the turn of events reflected the king's weakness of judgment and failure to command respect among regional dynasts. At the very least then Phraates would have had to cut off public diplomatic engagement with Herod. We certainly hear no more of diplomatic exchanges between the two monarchs. But perhaps for Herod there was a thin silver lining. Octavian now could be assured of his loyalty. Where else could Herod turn?

To come to a full appreciation of Herod the Great, we must understand him as more than a one-dimensional Roman front man. He actively and aggressively manipulated the complex imperial circumstances of his day to secure a position of authority for himself. In the process, the "Friend of the Romans" also became a friend of the Parthians, even if the friendship appears short-lived.

Lactantius' account of Roman Emperor Valerian's fate is most gruesome.

Lactantius, ancient Christian author and advisor to Constantine I, claimed that Emperor Valerian was used as a human footstool whenever The Parthian King Shapur wanted to mount his horse. After Valerian's death, Lactantius claims that "he was flayed, and his skin, stripped from the flesh, was dyed with vermillion, and placed in the temple of the gods of the barbarians."



Roman Emperor Used as Human Footstool Until Death & Then Stuffed & Used as Footstool Still.

The Traveling Magi Were Court Advisors To The Parthian Empire

What were the Magi looking for? One possibility lies in Zoroastrian theology. The Gathas, the sacred hymns attributed to Zoroaster, speak of a future figure called the *Saoshyant* or “future benefactor” which will be sent by Ahura Mazda to lead righteousness to triumph over wickedness. The Parthian era Magi were expecting the coming of *the future benefactor* and diligently watching the skies for a sign of his appearance.

How they linked the star to Judea isn't clear. A comet's long tail could have been interpreted pointing towards a specific country. Alternatively, the Magi likely have had access to the Hebrew Bible and the prophecies it contained, as there were thriving communities of Jews in Persia and Mesopotamia at this time. After seeing the star, they could have made inquiries to various religious books in search of prophecies about the birth of kings, found the prophecies in the Hebrew Bible, and decided Judea was the most likely place to find the king.

Regardless, the Magi traveled to Jerusalem, likely traveling town trading routes through the Syrian desert to Aleppo or Palmyra, and then south to Judea. They sought an audience with King Herod, asking “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

In the previous fifty years, Judea had been a pawn in a long-running proxy war between Rome and Parthia for control of the Near East. When Pompey entered Judea and took sides in Judea's civil war in 63 BC, he left with Hyrcanus II established in power as a Roman client state. While Rome was otherwise preoccupied by civil war, in 40 BC the Parthians overthrew Hyrcanus and replaced him with the anti-Roman Antigonus.

Antigonus only ruled for a short time before Herod the Great received sponsorship from Mark Antony to seize control of Judea. With Antony's support, Herod took over the country and Judea again became a Roman client. Rome & Parthia had made a peace treaty 20 BC delineating spheres of influence, temporarily ending the conflict, but the tension persisted.

By the time the Magi arrived, Herod was seventy years old, in poor health and well known to possess extreme paranoia and psychotic tendencies. In his later years, convinced that everyone was plotting against him, he had several members of his close family executed. The effect on the aging & paranoid Herod of the arrival of Magi (who were members of the Parthian ruling class) proclaiming that a prophecy foretold the birth of a new king in Judea, can only be imagined. Likely suspecting a Parthian plot to overthrow him and place some pretender on the throne, Herod asked Jewish religious leaders to search the books of the prophets to find out the location where the Messiah was to be born. They found a passage in the book of Micah which read:

But you, O Bethlehem Eph'rathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Herod then requested a second interview with the Magi to find out when the star had first appeared. He told them that a prophecy said that a king would be born in Bethlehem, and that they should go there in search of the child. When they found him, they were to report back to him that he could go and worship the child as well. All accept that Herod's plan was not to worship the child but to eliminate another perceived rival.

The Magi proceeded to Bethlehem. Here the most problematic part of the passage occurs, as Matthew says "the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed."

Marking a specific place on earth is a difficult task for any celestial object to accomplish, and this remains unexplained.



One of the earliest representations of the Magi at the birth of Jesus, from a 3rd century AD sarcophagus in Rome. Note that only two Magi are shown, Matthew never mentions how many Magi were there & the number three wasn't tradition until much later.

Although Jesus had been born in a stable, he was in a house by the time the Magi arrived. They delivered expensive gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Much symbolism has been read into these gifts by later authors, but none is explicitly stated in Matthew. All of these gifts were very expensive, in fact, the gold was probably the least valuable of the three. Both frankincense and myrrh came from Arabia and the far east, and only available in extremely limited quantities in the Mediterranean world.

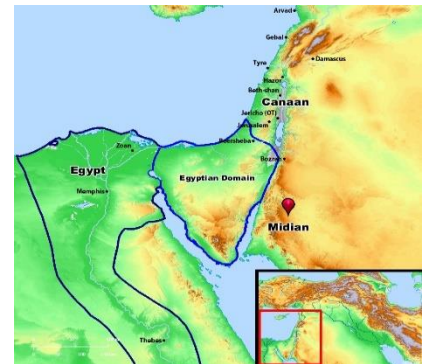
The Magi were, according to Matthew, warned by a dream not to go back to Herod. Dream interpretation was a duty of the Magi, and this presumably applied to interpreting the mental misgivings which were manifested in their own dreams as well. They chose to return to Parthia by a route that avoided Herod & Jerusalem. When Herod heard of this, he ordered all the boys of Bethlehem two years old & under massacred. Unable to kill only the child the Magi identified, he hoped that by killing every child in Bethlehem he would succeed in eliminating the threat.

NOTE: The Parthian Empire extended east and north of Bethlehem including the old Persian Empire located east and south. Magian court advisors from Arabian vassal kingdoms southeast of Bethlehem may have traveled there at the same time.

The Bible speaks to *three* type gifts not *three* kings nor *three* magi.

*"Arise! Shine, for your light has come, the glory of the Lord has dawned on you
... Nations shall walk by your light, kings by the radiance of your dawning
Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you —
Your sons from afar
... Then you shall see and be radiant
... For the riches of the sea shall be poured out before you,
the wealth of nations shall come to you.*

*Caravans of camels shall cover you,
dromedaries of Midian and Ephah;
All from Sheba(Yemen) shall come..." (Isaiah 60)*



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