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A Show of Resistance: Artabanus, Vitellius and the Giant Eleazar

Resistance to Roman control by peripheral states took many forms, ranging from outright opposition to symbolic gestures made by the defeated when physical rebellion was viewed as imprudent. This paper argues that one example of the latter is an important, but overlooked, episode in Josephus involving the Parthian king Artabanus and the Roman general Vitellius (*A.J.* 18.96-105). Artabanus' behavior constitutes a complex show of resistance, which sought to undermine a particular method of Roman cultural imperialism and to challenge the conquerors' rhetoric of superiority.

Roman activity at the eastern borders of the empire, by the time of Tiberius, had become increasingly dependent on the seizure of foreign hostages. The hostages provided their captors with a source of both potential quislings and, more importantly, tokens of Roman authority that could be displayed to international audiences as evidence, whether real or not, of Roman domination. According to Josephus, in 36 CE Vitellius sought just such a token of victory by demanding that the Parthian heir, Darius, be turned over to Rome. On the occasion of the treaty conference, in a pavilion constructed in the middle of the Euphrates River, Artabanus handed over his son and at the same time made the curious gift of a Jew named Eleazar, whose only distinction was that he was seven cubits tall, or about ten and a half feet.

Artabanus' odd inclusion of the giant Eleazar in the hostage entourage must be interpreted in the light of previous hostage experiences in Rome. During the Republic, hostages had occupied a position of respect as quasi-ambassadors from the subject states on Rome's periphery. Under Augustus, however, they were increasingly used for their propagandistic value and placed in humiliating situations. Numerous sources attest that Augustus put his royal Parthian hostages before the public eye as part of the misrepresentation of the recovery of the standards as a military triumph. According to Suetonius, the Augustan hostages were categorized as objects of curiosity for the crowd, along with a certain dwarf with an unusually loud voice (*Aug.* 43.4). Tacitus, too, provides numerous examples of hostages standing for victories which were, in fact, illusory (*Ann.* 2.2, 6.43, 13.9).

By providing the giant Eleazar as a second 'hostage', Artabanus was answering the Roman spectacle of empire in kind, in effect cheapening the significance of Darius by classifying him as *mirabilia visu* and declaring the Roman interest in the East to be nothing more than an exploration of the exotic. Artabanus was attempting to expose the emptiness of hostage symbolism, and his efforts reflect a profound shift in Roman attitudes toward their empire and non-Roman attitudes toward their conquerors.