

THE PARTHIAN EMPIRE

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The Parthian Empire was founded in 248/47 BC and quickly grew into the most influential actor in Near Eastern politics, a position that it held for nearly five centuries. Its history started in the former Achaemenid and Seleucid province of Parthyene, a gateway region between the northeastern Iranian plateau and the Central Asian steppe. For this reason, Western scholarship variously applies the label "Parthian" to the empire's point of origin, to its territory as a whole, to the group of elites that ran it, and to the chronological period of its primacy. But this designation gained its currency from Roman texts rather than internal sources, and some historians now prefer to speak of the Arsacid Empire after the line of kings that presided over it, without intermission, from its first day to its last.¹

From modest beginnings, the Arsacid kings created a state that eclipsed the other empires of pre-Islamic Iran in duration; neither the Achaemenids, nor the Seleucids, nor the Sasanians held power for so long. Territorial possessions from the Euphrates River to the steppe gave Parthia a diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious character, and its geographic position athwart the major trade routes of Eurasia put it at the confluence of the ancient world's major powers.

Despite its manifest importance to world history, however, the study of the Parthian Empire is severely limited by a lack of sources—literary narratives most of all, but also documentary texts and archaeological materials. The evidentiary problems that attend the study of other pre-Islamic Iranian empires are even more pronounced in the Arsacid case. There is no Parthian

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equivalent of the long-form royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid king Darius I, for instance, or the Sasanian Shapur I. No Parthian monumental art matches the visual program of Achaemenid and Sasanian sites like Persepolis or Naqsh-e Rostam. Even the historical traditions of pre-Islamic Iran, scanty and refracted in any event, accord Parthia little place; the Sasanian editors of these accounts obliterated the memory of their Arsacid predecessors or else kept it alive only for disparagement. What remains is literature written by Romans—sometimes hostile, sometimes uncomprehending, often both—a vital but problematic corpus of Arsacid coins (cats. 90–104), and a scattered collection of texts in an array of languages.² Contemporary indigenous sources are few. Even by the standards of ancient history, then, the world of the Arsacids remains exceedingly remote and fragmentary.

The scarcity of the evidence has led to divergent assessments of Parthia's place in the grand sweep of antiquity. Was it an "empire of nostalgia" for the Achaemenid period, a polity in which some essential characteristic of Iranian rule was revived after the violent interruption of Alexander the Great's invasion?³ Was it a feudal conglomeration bereft of real political and cultural unity or an "imperial lightweight" despite its extent and longevity?⁴ Then again, perhaps Parthia's footprint wasn't so light after all; several recent discussions have argued that its impact on its western territories was much deeper, and its administration more sophisticated, than previous scholarship has recognized.⁵

While debates on fundamental questions are bound to continue in the absence of a robust corpus of sources, Parthia is beginning to reclaim its own place in history, thanks in part to the integration of cuneiform evidence from Babylon as well as sophisticated treatments of Roman literature and its limitations. The empire, it is now clear, was not simply a coda to the Hellenistic period, or the antagonist of Rome, or the prelude to the Sasanian age. It was an imperial formation with a character of its own, neither dependent on the past nor disconnected from it—a state that lived on its own terms,

and often dictated terms to others, for half a millennium. Even if a shortage of sources keeps the Parthians in frustrating obscurity, there is nevertheless enough to place them at the center of their own story. That story was no sideshow in the *longue durée* of the ancient world; rather, it was a main event.

Narratives begin with origins, but it is precisely the earliest phase of Parthia's history that has been most burdened by an enormous historiographic weight heaped upon the flimsiest and least cohesive of evidence. Many discussions have proceeded from the assumption that the essence of Parthian identity may be understood if only the Parthians' origins—whether racial, ethnic, or geographic—can be properly discerned. From this vantage point, it looked like a crucial task to extract the truth from the various stories in the Roman literary sources about the empire's beginnings. Some of those accounts held that the first Parthians were fugitive Scythians, a nomadic people from the Central Asian steppe; others saw them as residents of a settled Seleucid province.⁶ Modern adherents to the nomadic origin story find it indispensable for clarifying the empire's core features, from military tactics and grand strategy to cultural preferences and administration. All of these, the logic runs, can be explained by a deeply rooted historical experience on the steppe, which indelibly shaped Parthia's essential characteristics.

Even if it were the case that origins explain essence, however, the truth about early Parthian ancestry is simply not recoverable from the underinformed Roman literary sources. The classical authors themselves admit their uncertainty on fundamental issues, especially the background of Arsaces I,

Parthia's first king and the founder of the Arsacid line. The gaps in their knowledge were filled with literary tropes and foundation mythology, and the story of Arsaces, a seminal dynastic figure, was prone to the type of narrative elaboration that routinely blended legend with fact. Such treatments were about the production of heroes, not the careful exposition of heritage. The study of who the Parthians were and what their place in history was cannot rest on positivist reconstructions of their origins.⁷

Indeed, the shape of the early Parthian state is best understood not as an inevitable consequence of its creators' ethnic background but instead as a confident new formation built from the mix of cultures that had left their mark on Central Asia. The most vivid testimony to the character of the early Parthians comes from the coins of Arsaces himself (cat. 90). The issues of the empire's founder show a ruler familiar with earlier idioms of Achaemenid and Seleucid power, but not bound or defined by them. Arsaces wears a *kyrbasia*, a head-dress that had regularly featured on the coins of Achaemenid satraps.⁸ His depiction as an archer, though not unprecedented, contributed to an innovative dynastic image; the connection between king and bow had long been a close one in the royal art of the Near East, but under the Arsacids it grew more intimate still.⁹ The coins also exhibit a novel bilingualism. Arsaces's own name appears in Greek, sometimes alongside the appellation *autokrator* (sovereign ruler). On other coins, an Aramaic legend also proclaims him *krny*, a term whose meaning is debated but that seems to have originally referred to an Achaemenid supraregional commander (fig. 40). If this

Fig. 40.
Drachm of Arsaces I, Parthian,
247–211 BC. Silver. Minted at Nisa-
Mithradatkert. Inscribed with the
title of *krny* in Aramaic (reverse).
Sellwood type 3.1



titulature fails to clarify the precise political relationship between the fledgling Arsacid state and the Seleucid realm, the dynamism and enterprise of its adopter are plain to see. Arsaces's coins represented a new constellation of images, languages, and titles for a ruler and a dynasty on the march.¹⁰

While the career of Arsaces I remains obscure, subsequent Parthian history underlines his successful foundation of a dynasty that remained a stable center even as the empire rapidly grew. An especially precipitous phase of territorial expansion took place under Mithradates I (171–138 BC), who completed the conquest of the Iranian plateau as well as the dense urban centers of Mesopotamia. Cuneiform sources from Babylon hint at an extensive network of generals, governors, and satraps deployed to administer these new territories.¹¹ Some key posts went to members of the Parthian nobility, a collection of families that had risen with the Arsacids to a great height of power, though the meager evidence little clarifies their structural role in the empire. The oscillating allegiance of these clans to the royal family is one of the key variables in debates about Parthia's coherence and centralization, as is the integration of non-Parthian "client kings" in areas like Adiabene, Hatra, and Characene (cat. 125).¹²

Another key Arsacid constituency was the Greek population of the former Seleucid Empire, and the status of these communities continues to fuel one of the most contentious debates among historians of the Parthian Empire: the nature and extent of Arsacid Hellenism. After Arsaces I, no language but Greek appeared on any Parthian coin until the mid-first century AD, and other iconographic elements like the diadem and the *omphalos* aligned Arsacid kingship even more closely with Hellenistic precedents. But the clearest expression of royal philhellenism was the use of the word *philhellen* (Greek-loving) itself as a royal epithet, which became a standard feature of Arsacid coinage after Mithradates I.¹³ There are also ample remains of Greek-inspired sculpture from Arsacid dynastic sites like Nisa (in present-day Turkmenistan) (see figs. 51, 52), as well as anecdotal (though problematic) evidence from Roman texts that the kings enjoyed Greek literature and theater.¹⁴

What do these diverse categories of evidence say, precisely, about Parthian affinity for Greek culture or the lack thereof? One scholar has concluded that the "Asiatic" adoption of the epithet *philhellen* was "only appropriate for someone who in fact stood outside the Greek world, looking in."¹⁵ But it might be better to say that the Arsacids were standing astride the Greek world, looking down. Their use of Hellenistic self-styling was not a desperate bid to gain admission to an exclusive club, but rather a sign to the membership that things would continue to run as usual under new owners. Nor was Parthian employment of Greek cultural forms a cynical ploy that merely served the needs of political expedience. Hellenism was neither a disguise that an Arsacid could don or remove to suit the needs of the moment nor the situational camouflage of a "chameleon king."¹⁶ In the early days of the empire at least, it was a distinct part of who the Parthians were, the result of meaningful engagement with the Near East's waning imperial culture and the sizable Greek populations that still preserved it.¹⁷

The relationship of Parthian elites to Hellenism took on a new dimension once their empire came into regular contact with Rome, a foreign power that was a chief concern of Arsacid interstate affairs. Like Parthia, Rome governed large Greek populations that had enjoyed privileged positions under Hellenistic monarchs, and like Parthia, Rome had an elite that was attracted to Greek culture for reasons of both expedience and affinity. So while the two empires fought their share of wars from the mid-first century BC to the third century AD (cat. 141), another kind of battle was fought in the realm of ideas, where Roman literature deprecated Parthian rule over the remnants of the Hellenistic East. The Greek cities of Mesopotamia were characterized as civilized islands in a sea of barbarism, the Arsacids portrayed as new versions of the Achaemenid kings that the Romans knew from Greek historiography. Indeed, that very literature provided a host of stereotypes of eastern barbarians that the Romans readily applied to the Parthians: by turns soft or savage, enervated or libidinous, exhausted by decadence or vigorous in despotism.¹⁸

Fig. 41.

The Prima Porta Augustus, Roman, ca. 19 BC. Marble, H: 210 cm. Detail of breastplate, with personifications of Rome (left) and Parthia (right). Musei Vaticani, Braccio Nuovo, 2290



Actual relations between the two empires were sometimes as acrimonious as such "othering" would seem to portend, but some occasions witnessed constructive and humane dialogue that supported real peace. Parthia rode high during the first decades of interaction, dealing Rome one of its most crushing defeats at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC and exacerbating the

civil wars of the Late Republic through military intervention.¹⁹ But the balance later shifted, and several Roman emperors of the second century AD achieved major victories deep within Parthian territory. These conquests were always ephemeral until the reign of Septimius Severus, whose formal annexation of Mesopotamia brought Rome more trouble than profit—at least in the assessment of one contemporary from the senatorial class.²⁰

Yet hostility could yield to cooperation, especially in the first century AD. High-ranking Romans and Parthians sometimes dined together in diplomatic conferences on the Euphrates, the rough boundary between the two empires in this period, and expressions of mutual respect and goodwill appear episodically in Roman sources. Peace even shaped works of Roman art, perhaps most notably on the breastplate of the marble Augustus of Prima Porta (fig. 41). The scene shows the Parthian return of the Roman military ensigns taken at Carrhae, but its imagery is not jingoistic. The Parthian figure stands tall, not kneeling or prostrate, as was typical for barbarians in Roman art (cat. 140). He raises a standard in a gesture of acclamation but not submission, and his placement at the center of the cuirass shows the premium Rome placed on relations with his kingdom. The scene looks less like a standoff between civilizational enemies than the meeting of colleagues in world rule.²¹

If foreign relations between Rome and Parthia could be constructive as well as violent, however, this engagement did not produce a robust interstate society like those known from other historical periods, and after the first century AD the Arsacid kingship moved sharply away from the Greek middle ground that it had shared with Rome.²² The evidence, limited though it is, suggests the gradual replacement of the Greek language by Parthian in royal and legal contexts.²³ The drachms of Vologeses I (AD 51–79) mark a turning point in their use of Aramaic letters to abbreviate the king's Parthian name next to his bust. On the other side of the coin, the formerly standard Greek legend, now blundered, became a pictorial element rather than a textual one—an apparent sign of the die engravers' ignorance of the Greek language or the

king's disinterest in communicating with his Greek subjects through this medium (fig. 42).²⁴

Adumbrations of change appear in the realm of religion, too: Vologeses seems to have been the only Arsacid king whose role in the history of Zoroastrianism could not be excised from Middle Persian literature, which is otherwise marked by Sasanian erasure of the Parthian past.²⁵ Some of the changes in this vein can no doubt be attributed to the personal initiative of Vologeses, who was an epochal king if ever there was one in Parthian history. But his kingship also reflected a deeper, more gradual transformation that in some ways heralded the end of the Hellenistic Near East and the emergence of a new era.

This new period has been characterized as an "Iranian revival" by some scholars; however, this phrase implies that the Parthians were resuscitating a quality of Iranian rule that had lain dormant rather than forging a path of their own.²⁶ To be sure, in certain respects the Arsacids followed Persian models: heterographic writing, calendrics, royal titulature, and artistic installations at sites like Bisotun all echoed Achaemenid precedents. But explicit claims to Achaemenid heritage are found only in problematic Roman literary texts, and none appear in indigenous sources for either the Arsacids or their Sasanian successors. Nor does it seem that an "Iranian" identity would have been part of Parthian self-conception; it was only during the Sasanian period that this label was applied to a geographic empire and its ruling class.²⁷

The Parthians were therefore not reconnecting with an Iran that already existed but were laying the groundwork for the

one to come. Later Arsacid kings minted coins that featured a Middle Iranian language; they aligned royal power with the Zoroastrian religion; they rooted their empire in the southern Mesopotamian city of Ctesiphon but not so deeply that Roman attacks on the city would mean eradication; they courted a small circle of Parthian noble families who, while sometimes recalcitrant, were vital to the empire's cohesion; and they laid the basis for economic prosperity through trade and agricultural irrigation.²⁸ All of these themes were further developed under Sasanian rule, but the Arsacids played the first notes. While scholarship has rightly emphasized the Sasanian elaboration of a new political and religious order—one that explicitly articulated a concept of "Iran" and launched unprecedented administrative and bureaucratic reforms to ensure its primacy—that order was not constructed *ex nihilo* and indeed rested on Arsacid foundations.²⁹

When the Sasanian progenitor Ardashir dethroned the last Arsacid king, Artabanus IV, in AD 224, the world that emerged was characterized by continuity as well as change. The view of the Sasanians as the founders of the Iranian world has had its share of proponents, but there is a growing consensus that it rests on the stories that the Sasanians told about themselves rather than on a firm evidentiary basis. Abolqasem Ferdowsi (ca. AD 940–1020), the poet whose *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*) is among the few works to preserve historical traditions from pre-Islamic Iran, knew only one thing about the Arsacids: there was nothing worth knowing about them. These kings, the narrator of the poem says, "ruled for such a short time and had so little influence that the chronicler did not

Fig. 42.
Drachm of Vologeses I, Parthian,
ca. AD 51–79. Silver. Minted at
Ecbatana. Inscribed with Aramaic
letters (obverse) and blundered
Greek legend (reverse). Sellwood
type 71.1. Washington, DC,
National Numismatic Collection,
Smithsonian Institution



Fig. 43.

Folio from Abolqasem Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*), Iranian, Il-Khanid period, ca. AD 1330–36. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper. Made in Tabriz, Iran. Verso, showing the Sasanian Ardashir (on horseback) and Ardavan/Artabanus IV, the last Arsacid king (at right, with hands bound). Washington, DC, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, S1986.103



record their lives in detail.³⁰ But the absence of the Parthians from the traditions that Ferdowsi drew on was not a historiographical given; it stemmed from a Sasanian vision of history that saw Ardashir as the restorer, rectifier, and avenger of Parthian weakness and misrule. Such a view was of course entirely polemical, the product of propaganda and self-justification, not serious historical reflection. Ferdowsi's subscription to it meant that, for him, the defeat of Artabanus IV (the only Arsacid king to appear in any detail in his poem; fig. 43) finally ended the fragmentation of the Iranian world that followed Alexander the Great's invasion. But that world—even if it was not yet called Iran—was not a disparate one. It had achieved meaningful unity in both politics and culture through the agency of the Parthians, who gave it the shape that later generations would inherit.

1. On issues of nomenclature, see Invernizzi 2011a, 189–90; Hauser 2012, 1001; De Jong 2013, 147–48.
2. For foundational studies of the evidence, see Wiesehöfer 1998. For the Greco-Roman literary sources, see esp. Lerouge-Cohen 2007; Wiesehöfer and Müller 2017. The default reference for Parthian coinage is still Sellwood 1980. A comprehensive effort to reedit the coins is underway at the *Sylloge Nummorum Parthorum*; nine volumes are planned, of which one is currently in print (Sinisi 2012b). Primary textual sources are now conveniently collected in Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber (2010), with German translations.
3. "Empire of nostalgia" as used by Barfield 2001, 38–39. For this view, see, for example, Wolski 1993; Dąbrowa 2012, 174.
4. On Parthian "feudalism" (a concept borrowed, not very helpfully, from medieval European history), see Debevoise 1938, xlii; Neusner 1963; Widengren 1976, 249–80; for critiques, see Herman 2012, 35 and 35n78 for further literature. "Imperial lightweights": Keall 1994, 255; compare Keall (1977, 81), where the author dubs the Parthians "the political clowns of the millennium." Both phrases have rightly been criticized; see, for example, Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1987, xi; Hauser 2005, 186; Hartmann

- 2015, 307n14. But see also Keall (1994, 270–72) for the more productive argument that the decentralized nature of Parthian power gave the state a flexibility and dexterity that allowed for its long survival; compare Gregoratti 2017, 95–97.
5. Hauser 2005; Hauser 2006; Shayegan 2011, xv; De Jong 2013, 159. On the assessment of the administration, see also Jacobs 2010c.
 6. The ancient sources are Strabo, *Geography* 11.9.3; Justin, *Epitome* 41.1; and fragments of Arrian's *Parthica* preserved (with variations) in Byzantine authors (text in Arrian 1967, 2.224–27; Hackl, Jacobs, and Weber 2010, 2.37–48).
 7. At the crux of the debate are the arguments of Boyce 1994; Hauser 2005; and Hauser 2006, the latter against the "nomadic heritage" view of Olbrycht 1998a; Olbrycht 1998b, 51–76; Olbrycht 2003; compare Overtoom 2017.
 8. V. Curtis 1998, 61–62. On the nomenclature of the headdress, see Shahbazi 1992.
 9. Je. Lerner 2017, 9.
 10. It is unclear whether Arsaces's use of the Greek *autokrator* or the Aramaic *krny* advertised independence from the Seleucid Empire (see Gaslain 2009, 32; Olbrycht 2013, 64–68; Olbrycht 2018, 204–5) or the ruler's status as a functionary within it (see Engels 2018, 180–81). On the meaning of *krny*, see further Briant 2002, 340; Sinisi 2012a, 280; Hyland 2013; Rung 2015; Shayegan 2017, 406–21.
 11. See the tabulation in Shayegan 2011, 221. On the cuneiform sources for Parthian history, see also Van der Spek 1998b; Haubold 2019.
 12. On the Parthian nobility, see Wolski 1989; Dqbrowa 2013. Comparative evidence from the Sasanian period may offer insight into its structure: see Lukonin 1983, 698–99; Wiesehöfer 1993, 228–29; Hauser 2005, 193–94; Pourshariati 2008. The evidence for the "client kings" of the Parthian Empire pertains almost entirely to its western regions. See generally Edwell 2008; Hartmann 2015; Hauser 2016; Gregoratti 2017. For higher-resolution studies, see, for example, Marciak 2014 and Luther 2015 on Adiabene; Dirven 2013 on Hatra; Schuol 2000 and De Jong 2013, 150, on Characene.
 13. On the changes in coin iconography, especially under Mithradates I, see V. Curtis 2007b, 418; Dqbrowa 2008, 26–27; Sinisi 2012a, 280–81; Rezakhani 2013, 769.
 14. For Greek influence on Parthian art at Nisa, see Invernizzi 2011a, 195; Canepa 2018, 71–77; Fowlkes–Childs and Seymour 2019, 6. On Arsacid philhellenism in Greco–Roman literature, see the passages cited in Olbrycht 2017, 4–5, and further Zadorojniy 1997; Wiesehöfer 2000; Mossman 2014, 444–46.
 15. Green 1990, 320.
 16. The phrase is that of Kosmin (2014b, 174), who warns against interpreting Seleucid royal engagement with Babylonian traditions in this way.
 17. Wiesehöfer 2015, 332–33, 340. For further discussion of Greco–Parthian relations, see Wolski 1983; Olbrycht 2014; Gregoratti 2016; Olbrycht 2017; and the essays in Dqbrowa 2011.
 18. On Rome's representation of Parthia, especially in literature, see Sonnabend 1986; R. Schneider 1998; Lerouge–Cohen 2007; R. Schneider 2007; Wiesehöfer 2010a; Schlude 2018.
 19. On Carrhae and its aftermath, see Timpe 1962; Ziegler 1964, 32–42; Harl 2016, 117. On Parthian intervention in Roman civil war, see Nabel 2019.
 20. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 75.3.3; discussion in Strauss 2019, 249. On the political history of Roman–Parthian relations, often with a focus on warfare, see Dqbrowa 1983; Isaac 1992, 28–33; Wolski 1993, 122–94; Harl 2016; Overtoom 2016.
 21. On concordant depictions of Parthians in Roman imperial art, see C. Rose 2005, esp. 24–28, on the Prima Porta Augustus. Studies that emphasize the constructive and/or pacific facets of the Roman–Parthian relationship include Campbell 1993; Schlude and Rubin 2017. Ziegler (1964) focuses on treaties and a nascent "international law"; for a critique, see Wheeler 2002.
 22. Compare, for instance, the interstate systems of the late Bronze Age (R. Cohen 1996, 252) or early modern Europe (Morgenthau 1948, 184).
 23. Wiesehöfer 2015, 339.
 24. Sellwood 1980, 231 (type 71.1); Sinisi 2012b: type IVc/4a.a(1c.a). On the legend, see Sinisi 2012b, 19, 139.
 25. An Arsacid king named Vologeses is named in the *Dēnkard*, a tenth-century account of the transmission of the Avesta and the *Zand* (Dk. 412.5–11; text in Shaki 1981, 115; compare Boyce 1984, 113–14). On the transmission of the Avesta generally, see K. Hoffmann and Narten 1989; Hintze 1998. A reference to a king of the same name may also have appeared in the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, an apocalyptic text, though this is a conjectural restoration (ZVYt. 3.26; compare the texts of Anklesaria 1957, 14, and Cereti 1995, 87; and see also Boyce 1968a, 49–50; Boyce 1984, 91–92). In neither case is it certain that the Vologeses in question was Vologeses I, but some scholars see him as the most likely candidate; see Debevoise 1938, 196; Boyce 1975b, 103; Wolski 1993, 174; Olbrycht 1998b, 185; Sinisi 2012a, 287; Sinisi 2012b, 20; Wiesehöfer 2015, 339.
 26. For "Iranian revival," see Herrmann 1977; V. Curtis 2007a. Compare Wolski 1993, 151 ("neo–Iranism").
 27. G. Gnoli 1989, 113–5. The most comprehensive discussion of the Arsacid relationship to the Achaemenid past is Shayegan 2011, 39–331; see also Shayegan 2012; De Jong 2017, esp. 37; Nabel 2018, 210–13 (with a list of relevant passages from Greco–Roman literature at 212n55). On Arsacid engagement with the Achaemenid landscape, esp. at Bisotun, see Canepa 2018, 77–81.
 28. On trade, compare Gregoratti 2019 and Payne 2018 on the Parthian and Sasanian periods, respectively. On irrigation development, see Hauser 2012, 1012–13.
 29. On the Sasanian articulation of "the idea of Iran," see G. Gnoli 1989, 129–74; Daryaei 2009, xvii. On Sasanian ideology generally, see Shayegan 2011, 5–29; Payne 2013; Daryaei 2018.
 30. Ferdowsi 2005, 139, line 82; translation from Ferdowsi 2006, 529.