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2015, Vol. 1, No. 1



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*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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**Part I**  
**Articles**

# The kings of Parthia and Persia: Some considerations on the ‘Iranic’ identity in the Parthian Empire

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SINCE 53 BC, that is to say since Crassus’s disastrous defeat at Carrhae, Rome’s expansionist goals in the East were fiercely opposed by the Parthians. A quick look at the map of their empire is enough to understand clearly that the state of the Arsacids was a geographically imposing political entity, a worthy heir of the legendary oriental empires which preceded it, the Assyrian, the Babylonian, the Achaemenid and the Seleucid. And the Parthian rule lasted even longer than many of them before Ardashir founded the Sassanid dynasty in 224 AD. Despite its geographical and historical relevance in comparison with the above mentioned empires the Parthians left relatively scarce traces of their existence. These circumstances are largely due to the attitude of the new rulers, the Sasanids, towards the *Ashkānīs*, the Arsacids. Considered as weak rulers who threw Iran into an “age of darkness”, their historical feats were not reputed worth to be remembered (Fowler 57-59).

This *damnatio memoriae*, relating to a dynasty lasting many centuries and a conspicuous period in the history of ancient Iran, determined a gap in the history of the region which renders extremely difficult to establish which role the Persian ancient past played within the Arsacid political ideology.

The Great King Mithridates II (121-91 BC) adopted the Persian royal title of “King of Kings”, in the Greek version *basileos basileon*, a title which began to be used by many Parthian monarchs on royal coins and official inscriptions (Shayegan 2011, 41-43). In those years of great territorial acquisitions Mithridates probably realized that in order to consolidate its rule on a large and composite kingdom, which included satrapies only superficially influenced by Hellenistic culture, the Parthian kingship required a more convincing ideological legitimacy. Thus, probably in this period, legendary genealogies of the Arsacid family began to appear with the explicit purpose of creating an historical connection with the the Achaemenid Persians, who had ruled a powerful empire on those same lands before Alexander’s invasion (Yarshater 1971).

Traces of this propagandistic reconstruction of the Arsaces’ ancestry can be found in the western writers

who probably used local sources connected with the Parthian court. According to Arrianus the Parthian kings claimed to derive their lineage from king Arsaces/Artaxerxes II (Arr., *Parth.*, *Parth.*, *FGrHist.*, 156 F. 31; Frye 1969, 43; Wiesehöfer 1996, 64; Fowler 2005, 150). Moreover both Pompeius Trogus and Arrianus dealing with Parthian origins underline the similarities between Arsaces’ conquest of power and the legend of Cyrus the Achaemenid, founder of the old Persian empire or the ascension to the throne of Darius the Great, after the murder of Gaumata the usurper (Arr., *Parth.*, *FGrHist.*, 156 F. 30). A propaganda effort was made by the Arsacids to connect their rule with that of the Achaemenids. A legendary official story about the Arsaces’ ascension to power was probably fabricated by taking elements from the stories of a number of Achaemenid kings. This tradition partly survived the Sassanids. According to the Persian chronicler al-Bīrūnī in the XI century AD the Arsacids were the descendants of the old Persian Kings (*al-Athar*, ed. Sachau, p. 113).

In this process of reconstruction of the past, the role of Greek literary culture should not be underestimated. Modern historiography tends to forget that, especially in the *poleis* laying in the western part of the Parthian empire, many subjects of the Parthian Great King were Greek or had largely adopted Greek culture. The Greek Parthian *poleis* had their intellectual circles, from where emerged historians like Apollodoros of Artemita and Isidoros of Charax, and Greek men of letters, certainly familiar with the authors of classical Greece, attended the court or worked in the offices of the royal bureaucracy (Chaumont 1984; Alonso-Núñez, 1986). It is probable that many personalities in the Royal palace were familiar with the works of Herodotus and Xenophon and with their descriptions of the glorious Persian past.

It is hard to establish what kind of information the Parthians had at disposal concerning the Achaemenids and pre-Alexander Iran. Of course it should be assumed that most of their information came from Persian works and documents which survived Greek rule but are now irremediably lost. Nonetheless what it is

certain, and should not be underestimated, is that the Parthians could not be completely unaware of the old Persian history, since most of the literary heritage of Classical and Hellenistic Greece was easily accessible to them.

Nonetheless most of the information available on Parthian history comes from Roman writers. Concerning the role played by the ancient Persian history in Parthian ideology a famous passage contained in Tacitus' *Annales* is often discussed as an explicit example of the fact that the Parthian kings were aware of the Persian past and used it for political purposes (Wolski 1966; Shayegan 2011, 39-40). This passage however should be more carefully taken into consideration. It belongs to the narration of last years of the reign of the Great Parthian King Artabanus II (12 -38/41 AD).

According to Tacitus, in his last years of reign, Artabanus became arrogant and ambitious towards Rome and cruel towards his subjects. A number of military victories made him confident enough to "insist on the ancient boundaries of Persia and Macedonia, and intimate, with a vainglorious threat, that he meant to seize the country possessed by Cyrus and afterwards by Alexander" (Tac., *Ann.*, VI, 31 .1). These lines have been often used by modern scholars to prove the argument that Artabanus and the Arsacids considered themselves the heirs of both Alexander and the ancient Persians.

These two lines should be analyzed within the correct context. We cannot of course exclude the possibility that the account is reliable and that Artabanus did in fact make such a claim, but if we look at the whole passage, and more generally at the explicit and continued anti-Artabanus references by Tacitus (e.g. Tac., *Ann.*, VI, 42-43), some doubts arise concerning its authenticity. The Great King's final claim comes at the end of a list of bad behaviors and acts of arrogance presented in the lines which precede. He "disdained the aged and, as he thought, unwarlike Tiberius"; he "eagerly coveted Armenia, over which he placed Arsaces, his eldest son"; he "further added insult, and sent envoys to reclaim the treasures left by Vonones in Syria and Cilicia" (Tac., *Ann.*, VI, 31). The reference to Cyrus and Alexander clearly constitutes the acme of a list of absurd claims and misdeeds. Artabanus in Tacitus' account ends by claiming to be the legitimate heir not only of the Persians but also of the Greeks, that is to say claiming to rule the whole world, including the Hellenized and Greek world the continuators of which the Romans had always considered themselves. This claim which surely appeared rather strange for the Roman reader, seems thus to be a fabrication of imperial propaganda.

Artabanus was the first strong Parthian ruler after many decades of political trouble who was able to consolidate his kingdom. He managed to strengthen the position of the Crown against the aristocracy and to

jeopardise Roman hegemony in Armenia (Tac., *Ann.*, VI, 32-33). This new strong Great King threatened Rome's plans for the East and he should be neutralized at any cost. Tiberius' reaction was to launch a fierce attack on Armenia through the allied kingdom of Caucasian Iberia, at the same time placing a Roman Arsacid candidate on the throne. These actions explicitly violated the peace agreements which Germanicus, a Roman hero, on behalf of Tiberius Augustus, had previously made with Artabanus himself (Tac., *Ann.*, II, 43 e 56; Questa 1957; Chaumont 1976, 86-87; Dąbrowa 1983, 87-88; Ziegler 1964, 58-59). Tacitus thus felt the need of justifying this aggressive Roman policy referring as it seems, to Roman political propaganda than to the results of a competent historical research.

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