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## HOW MANY KINGS DID THE PARTHIAN KING OF KINGS RULE?<sup>1</sup>

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Fate more than anything brought me to study the Parthians. It was not out of any great admiration for them that I found myself unearthing them in 1965, researching them, and finally writing my dissertation on them. At times I actually felt apologetic for the Parthians, forced to think of them as lesser mortals by comparison with the great Medes and Persians whom I had also helped unearth at places like Pasargadae and Hasanlu. It wasn't fashionable in those days, perhaps not even possible, to identify Parthian culture by name on the basis of looking at a few fragments of pottery. Archaeologists were obliged to use terms like "late Iron age" for remains excavated in Iran dating from after the Achaemenians. For unless something had a very distinct Greek look, and could be attributed to Alexander's occupation of Iran or that of his Macedonian successors, material remains from the fourth to the first century BC tended to be impossible to characterise, because there was no clearly defined universal expression of Iranian culture recognised from that era, even though technically a body of rulers — the Parthians — could be identified by name. At best, we could identify the types of pottery the Parthians produced at a regional level; and, to a certain extent, these patterns of pottery distribution bore some relationship to the divisions of their political empire, in so far as one might distinguish a "Khuzistan" type, or a "Fars" type and so forth<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a lecture delivered to the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies, Toronto, on May 12th 1993 entitled "Wrotten empire, or brilliant sovereignty association — how many kings did the Parthian King of Kings rule"?

<sup>2</sup> cf. E. Haerinck, *La céramique en Iran pendant la période Parthe (ca. 250 av. J.C. à ca 225 après J.C.): Typologie, chronologie et distribution*, Gent, 1983. For a review article, see W. Vogelsang, "Parthian-period pottery from Iran", *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 18 (1985): 157-172.

Nevertheless, there remains the unmistakable fact that Parthia existed as a state in one form or another for almost four centuries. Yet was it an empire? If it was, perhaps we may judge it to have been a rather pathetic one. We might also, to-day, under the influence of experiencing a different political world than we did in the 1960s, raise the question of what was Parthia? Can it be judged to have been a successful confederation of loosely aligned states — one which would allow us to use the term “sovereignty association” rather than “empire” to define its character? As for the archaeological evidence, interpretation based on excavations of the 1st-2nd. century AD levels at Nippur (Iraq) and Qal’eh-i Yazdigird (Iran) creates the suspicion that the grandiose title of “King of Kings” used by the late Parthian monarchs was more of a publicity pitch than a political reality. To explore the idea, a brief synopsis of the archaeological work at these two sites will be presented, along with summary conclusions about the role of the sites’ inhabitants. These conclusions will be used to reflect upon what at first glance may appear as contradictory evidence. However, whatever the conclusions prove, or fail to prove, they may serve to remind us that these kinds of results derived from archaeological work are one of the most effective ways by which we may expect to redefine what is the nature of Parthia. For the extant texts are so few that, unless new documents come to light, it is impossible to expect to be able to take this handful of what have become clichés and extract any much better sense from them than was already done almost a century ago by the great pioneers of Iranian history.

It may be useful to repeat here that, to minds accustomed to thinking in terms of empires as meritorious, the Parthians simply appear as faint shadows of the great founding fathers of Iran. As rulers of the realm of Iran, after the interlude of Alexander, the Parthians maintained many of the national religious, cultural, and political traditions of their predecessors. At first glance, however, they were less successful and less imposing than the Achaemenians. The lack of a strong imperial apparatus, the lack of an orthodox religion, the lack of an imperial art style — all these factors lead easily to the perception that the Parthians represent ancient Iranian culture in decline. In the course of time, it would be the Sasanian Persians who brought Iran into prominence again on the world stage, as they struggled against Byzantium and established links that stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean to the borders of China. The Parthians, too, had reached the Mediterranean in their fights against the Romans, and

the first western contacts with China were established in Parthian times. But on the whole, one would have to admit that the Parthians threw away their best chances to truly dominate the Middle East. For instance, the spectacular defeat of Rome's Crassus at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BC was frittered away through internal feuding and even, perhaps, through a lack of desire to administer the occupied territories for more than plunder.

The Parthians, of course, had made a strong impression upon the Middle East under the man we know as king Mithradates I, who expanded Parthian territory beyond its limited confines in northeastern Iran and captured the capital of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in Mesopotamia, around 141 BC. It was Mithradates' namesake and successor — king Mithradates II — who was awarded for his exploits the additional epithet "The Great". Unfortunately it is difficult to tell when precisely the much more grandiose title of "King of Kings" was introduced, although we know it was being used by 109 BC<sup>3</sup>. His immediate successors did not claim the title, but by the time of Orodes I around 57 BC, the use of the term "King of Kings" was commonplace.

It is apparent that the term was also used in a war of words over territorial claims, such as in the struggle between Rome and Parthia to control Armenia. Its role in international posturing is perhaps understandable. But Neusner has suggested another interpretation as well — namely that use of the term was a deliberate attempt by the Parthian monarch to claim the right to rule<sup>4</sup>. For the aristocracy who had been replaced by the Arsacid family would no doubt have resented the newcomers. As is commonplace with rulers who shall we say, politely, adopt countries, and particularly at a time when they are having difficulty maintaining authority, the Arsacids may have chosen to bolster their legitimacy by adopting the old Achaemenian title "King of Kings". In other words, the introduction of this grandiose epithet by the Parthian kings was quite pretentious, corresponding with a time when they were being challenged abroad, as well as experiencing difficulty, literally, in staying on the throne at home.

It is in this light that the Parthians can be judged to be imperial lightweights; or, as this writer has intimated, they might be called the political

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<sup>3</sup> D. Sellwood, "Parthian Coins" in *The Cambridge History of Iran* 3/i, ed. E. Yarshater, 1983: 279-298.

<sup>4</sup> J. Neusner, "Parthian Political Ideology", *Iranica Antiqua* 3 (1963): 47.



clowns of the millennium<sup>5</sup>. Yet one inescapable fact remains. The Arsacids established a dynasty in Parthava around the mid-third century BC — it is generally set at 247 — and they ruled Parthia more or less until AD 226. Even if one uses the mid-second century capture of Seleucia to mark the beginning of Parthian empire, that is still three hundred and seventy-five years of continuous government. It is more than four hundred years if one takes the earlier date. In the time-tables of history, almost four centuries is a very respectable record. It is not the longest by any means, but it is far longer than many who have left a much stronger impression on our collective memories. What were the Parthians doing right to survive so long?

To address this question we may turn to the first of two archaeological site case histories. The first is the site of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird to which the romantic label of "Persian castle on the Silk Road" has been attached by this writer and which remains the most logical explanation for the site's existence. The site itself occupies a thumb-like projection, protected by a natural escarpment, and sheltered by the ring of protective cliffs that form part of the higher Zagros mountains behind<sup>6</sup>. To the east, by way of the Zagros Gates, a traveller can reach the higher ground of the Iranian plateau. To the west, the foothills fall away towards the present-day Iraqi border where the land becomes part of the River Tigris drainage system. Across the only open neck of the natural tableland land occupied by the site of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, the sponsors of the project built a defensive wall complete with towers at regular intervals; and even where they felt the cliffs were scalable from below, they built defensive walling with loopholes for firing at would-be assailants<sup>7</sup>. The entire network protected an area of some twenty-five square kilometres. The amount of materials and effort that this implies should not be underestimated; the state of preparedness that it reflects verges on that of paranoia (fig. 1).

<sup>5</sup> E.J. Keall, "Political, Economic, and Social Factors on the Parthian Landscape of Mesopotamia and Western Iran: Evidence from Two Case Studies", *Mountains and Lowlands: Essays in the Archaeology of Greater Mesopotamia*, eds. L.D. Levine & T.C. Young, (Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 7) Malibu, 1977: 81.

<sup>6</sup> Excavations of the Royal Ontario Museum, 1975-79. For references, see E.J. Keall, "Qal'eh-i Yazdigird. An Overview of the Monumental Architecture", *Iran* 20 (1982): 51-72. The best visual impression of the site is to be found in E.J. Keall, "A Persian castle on the Silk Roads", in J.E. Vollmer, E.J. Keall & N. Nagai-Berhtrong, *Silk Roads China Ships*, (Royal Ontario Museum) Toronto, 1983: 35-44.

<sup>7</sup> Illustrated in Keall, *Silk Roads China Ships*: 39.



1. Part of the impressive defensive wall enclosing the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird tableland.

As a military stronghold one might argue for Qal'eh-i Yazdigird being an impressive arm of the state, designed to maintain the security of extremely inhospitable territory, as seen looking into bandit country beyond the protective walls of the cliffs. Yet excavations of the site revealed the strange dichotomy of a fortified tableland protecting an elaborately decorated palace. The nature and lavishness of the wall decorations makes the complex highly unlikely to have been simply a military outpost. The subject matter of the decorations ranges from western Classical imagery, such as the figure of Aphrodite with dolphins, to something more reminiscent of an ancient Mesopotamian tradition, as seen in a pair of

intertwined beasts. Yet while the subject matter is vastly different, the style is consistent<sup>8</sup>. The iconographical meaning and the art historical interpretation of the decorations does not concern us overly here. We are more concerned with their sumptuousness. While acknowledging the impressive character of the defensive systems in place, one must see the artwork as representing sponsorship by a patron of high standing. The financial resources needed to support such an extravagance had to be quite considerable. Given the political circumstances of the era in which, by style, the decorations must be placed — that is, first two centuries AD — given what we know about this period from historical records, the best explanation is to be found in interpreting the site as the home of a robber baron. The castle, then, may be interpreted as the home of a figure who extorted fees from the near-by highway in exchange for safe passage. By this line of argument, the Parthian monarch (the so-called King of Kings) was too weak, or too distracted by other pressing matters, to despatch an army to drive the baron from his lair.

Perhaps one may even be allowed to imagine that the distinctive bust of a male figure represents the portrait of the palace's occupant<sup>9</sup>. Nicely protected behind his walls, this individual was able to extort tolls from the nearby highway, supporting a lavish lifestyle, perfectly safe from reprisals attempted on the part of the so-called King of Kings based in Ctesiphon. Supporting evidence for this idea can be sited showing that, technically speaking, during the second century AD, large parts of the Iranian highlands were no longer really under direct Parthian control<sup>10</sup>. Around the time when the Persian castle flourished, there was even a silver coin minted in Iran which numismatists have attributed to “the unknown king”<sup>11</sup>. Significantly, the engravers of these drachms have omitted the traditional dynastic name of Arsaces from the legend, although otherwise they repeat the now standard formulae for late Parthian drachms. At this time, silver drachms were exclusively associated with Iran, not with

<sup>8</sup> *idem*: 41.

<sup>9</sup> *idem*: 44.

<sup>10</sup> cf. U. Kahrstedt, *Artabanos III. und seine Erben*, ed. A. Alföldi, (Dissertationes Bernenses 1/ii) Bern, 1950. For maps based on Kahrstedt, see E.J. Keall, “Parthian Nippur and Vologases’ Southern Strategy: a hypothesis”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95/iv (1975): figs. 3 & 4.

<sup>11</sup> D. Sellwood, *An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia*, London, 1971: type 83.





2. Silver drachm of “the Unknown King” found at Qal’eh-i Yazdigird, ca. 140 AD. Royal Ontario Museum.

Mesopotamia<sup>12</sup>. A coin of this variety was found at Qal’eh-i Yazdigird — not in the excavations — it was discovered by a villager in the area<sup>13</sup>; fig. 2). However, in the absence of any other Parthian coins from the site at all, this silver drachm that dates from around 140 AD remains as important circumstantial evidence for the date of the site itself. It is tempting to think of it as somehow connecting Qal’eh-i Yazdigird with an independent, regional kingdom of western Media.

<sup>12</sup> R.H. McDowell, *Coins from Seleucia on the Tigris* (University of Michigan Studies, Humanistic Series 37) Ann Arbor, 1939: 154.

<sup>13</sup> Illustrated in Keall, *Silk Roads China Ships*: 44.





3. Building debris dumped on top of collapsed vault, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird.

As for the life of the castle, it is quite clear that at some stage the palatial buildings at its centre were subjected to severe damage. Collapsed rubble was cleared from the rooms and dumped in a cloister off to one side<sup>14</sup> (fig. 3). An earthquake comes mostly to mind for this degree of damage. Many of the fallen building fragments bore traces of ornate decorations. But, curiously, more than one of these lumps had been plastered over in antiquity, reflecting a major scheme of re-decoration. One piece, bearing a portrait, had actually been defaced before the overplaster was applied<sup>15</sup>. In other words, once upon a time there was a portrait on the wall which somebody chose, literally, to deface by chopping off the face. Then the damaged relief was plastered over. After some time, when the building later suffered further damage, probably through natural causes, the old

<sup>14</sup> cf. E.J. Keall, "Islam's debt to Parthian Art", *Archaeologia Iranica et Orientalis. Miscellanea in honorem Louis Vanden Berghe*, eds. L. de Meyer & E. Haerinck, Gent, 1989: 981.

<sup>15</sup> *idem*: fig. 8.

covered-up portrait fell down and was cleared from the building along with a lot of other debris. What caused the damage to the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird palace stuccoes remains for other archaeologists to discover. It is, of course, reasonable to assume that the typical family squabbles which frequently crippled the Parthian court also affected those who claimed the right to rule in the provinces. One of the fragments includes the head of a male who sports the "classic" bunched hair-style of the Parthians (fig. 4).

At this point one may usefully address once more the matter of the rather obscure rock relief that is situated behind Sar Pūl-i Zohāb, the town that lies below the site of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird on the Hulvān plain. The setting where the relief is located is within sight of our palace stronghold. The relief shows a man on horse-back receiving a standing figure. We do not know for sure who were the two figures portrayed here. The scene, of course, repeats a standard kind of theme that can be observed throughout Iranian antiquity, where gestures signifying submission — usually of a local — to a higher visiting authority are documented in public places<sup>16</sup>. They represent a straight forward scenario of "king arrives; locals pay homage". One can see it in the same light as that of the submission of other figures depicted in Parthian art, such as at Hung-i Kamalvand or Hung-i Naurūzī in Elymais.

Unfortunately, the two inscriptions that appear above both the rider and the standing figure are very hard to read, and widely different interpretations have been offered since the time of Henning<sup>17</sup>. There is now general agreement that the rider is "Gotarzes, great king" and that the standing figure is either "keeper of the fortress of Hulvān" or at least "commander of (an unknown) province". In either case, we are looking at a rock relief

<sup>16</sup> cf. H. von Gall, "The Figural Capitals at Taq-e Bostan and the Question of the so-called Investiture in Parthian and Sasanian Art", *Silk Road Art and Archaeology I* (Institute of Silk Road Studies, Kamakura, 1990): 99-122. This article also has a very clear photograph of the relief.

<sup>17</sup> G. Gropp, "Die parthische Inschrift von Sar-Pol-e Zohab", *ZDMG* 118 (1968): 315-319 is Gropp's first rendition of the two inscriptions. In his second contribution on the inscription, in a publication by Trümpelmann, he neglects to comment again on the inscription above the standing figure. See L. Trümpelmann, "Das Parthische Felsrelief", *Iranische Felsreliefs C. Sarpol-i Zohab* (Iranische Denkmäler 7/2) Berlin, 1976: 14-16. Gropp's reading and interpretation of both inscriptions is challenged by Trudy S. Kawami, *Monumental Art of the Parthian Period in Iran* (Acta Iranica 26) Leiden, 1987: 45-58 & 162-164. The new transcription offered is acknowledged as given by Christopher Brunner, but with no other citation.





4. Male portrait recovered from the collapsed debris at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird.

executed in a rather provincial style and referring to the rider as no more than a king, not a kings of kings, which would be appropriate for the Parthian monarch from this era of later than first century AD. Whether the Gotarzes is the figure we know from Bīsitūn (Gropp's theory) or another unknown provincial king who used the title Gotarzes as a family name (Kawami's theory), one has to point out that the relief has been placed in

a public spot outside of Ḥulvān (Sar Pūl-i Zohāb), and that it is the rider who comes to visit the place and be greeted by the standing figure, whom the commentators accept as a provincial commander of some kind. Is it not conceivable, in fact, that it is the lord of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird who rides down to Ḥulvan as self-claimed king, asserting his authority in the area directly in the face of the Parthian administration. He does not overtly challenge the King of Kings, but there can be no mistaking his claim to the territory generally believed to be beyond the control of Ctesiphon by this time. Whether this interpretation has any merit at all is open to question. But one thing is clear — the story of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird underlines the fragile nature of the Parthian state, if judged from an imperial point of view.

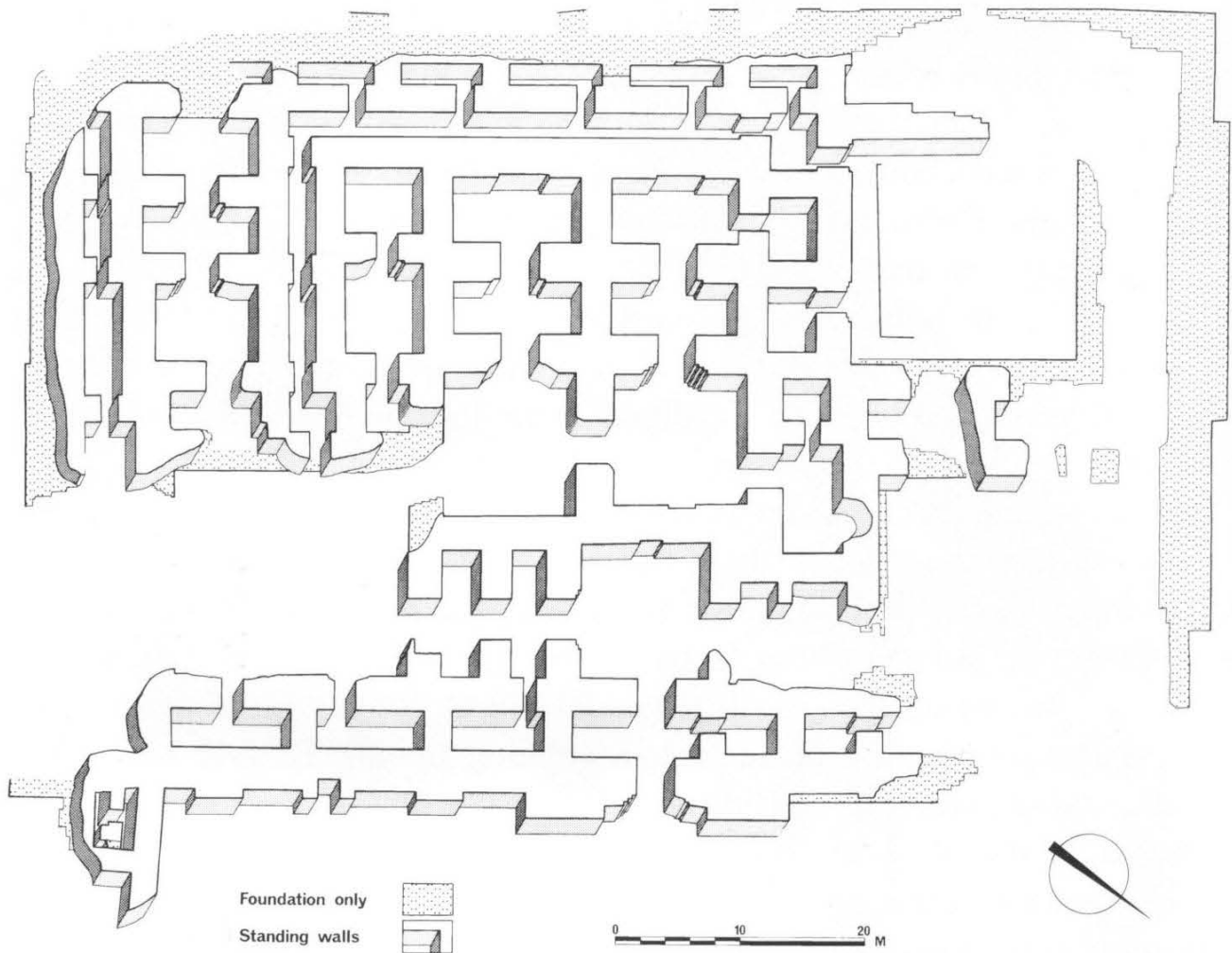
In the second archaeological case history presented here in order to explore further some ideas about the nature of Parthian government, we will turn to Nippur, in Iraq, in the heart of Baylonia<sup>18</sup>. The features of the site that are the subject of our focus for this paper consist of a fortress and a temple situated on the so-called citadel hill at Nippur. Here there is an interesting juxtaposition of an archaic-looking Inanna Temple and modernistic-styled *eyvans* in the Fortress (figs. 5-8). One may usefully repeat here that the use of *eyvans* had just emerged in first century AD Parthia as the new way of creating a monumental structure. Manasseh identified a transition from Greek-styled *megaron* hall to vaulted *eyvan* as having occurred at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris between 69-120 AD<sup>19</sup>. In the Parthian period Inanna Temple, the main axis into the holiest part of the shrine is provided by way of a series of rectangular chambers placed laterally opening off from a courtyard. In other words, a person progresses from the court, and through each chamber in the direction of the inner sanctum, by crossing the shorter dimension of the chambers<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 6). The same

<sup>18</sup> Fifth through tenth season of excavations, Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1954-1967. See J. Knudstad, "A preliminary report on the 1966-67 excavations at Nippur", *Sumer* 24 (1968): 96-106; and, V.E. Crawford, "Nippur, the Holy City", *Archaeology* 12 (1959): 74-84.

<sup>19</sup> N.E. Manasseh, "Architectural Features of Block B (Seasons 1930-31 and 1931-32)" in *Second Preliminary Report upon the Excavations at Tel Umar, Iraq, conducted by the University of Michigan and the Toledo Museum of Art, directed by Leroy Waterman*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1933: 29-31.

<sup>20</sup> For plans of the pre-Parthian Temples, see R.L. Zettler, *The Ur III Temple of Inanna at Nippur* (Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient 11) Berlin, 1992: figs. 4-13. His fig. 14 refers to the Parthian version as "SB Level II Temple".



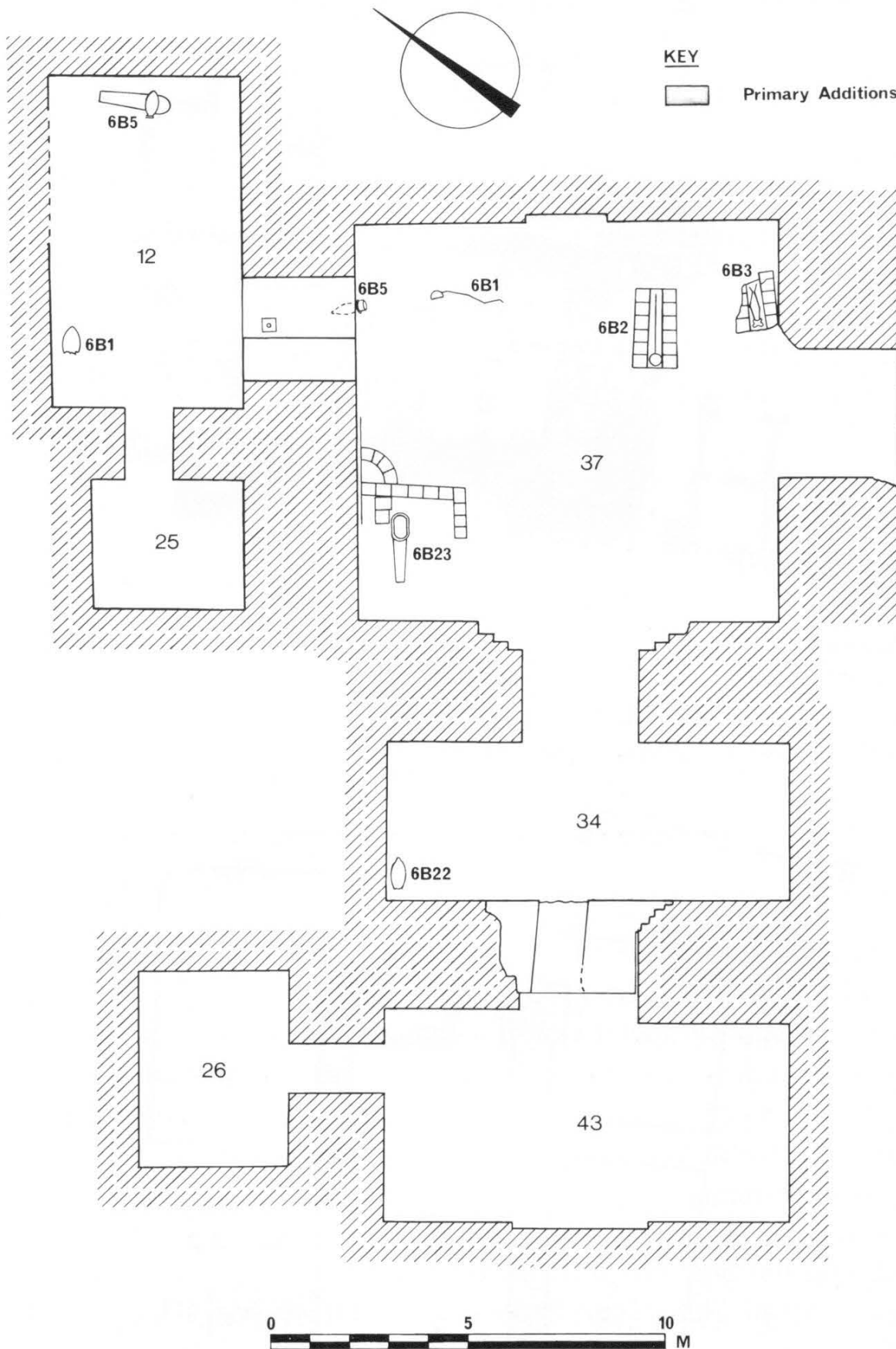


5. The Parthian period Inanna Temple at Nippur. Oriental Institute excavations.

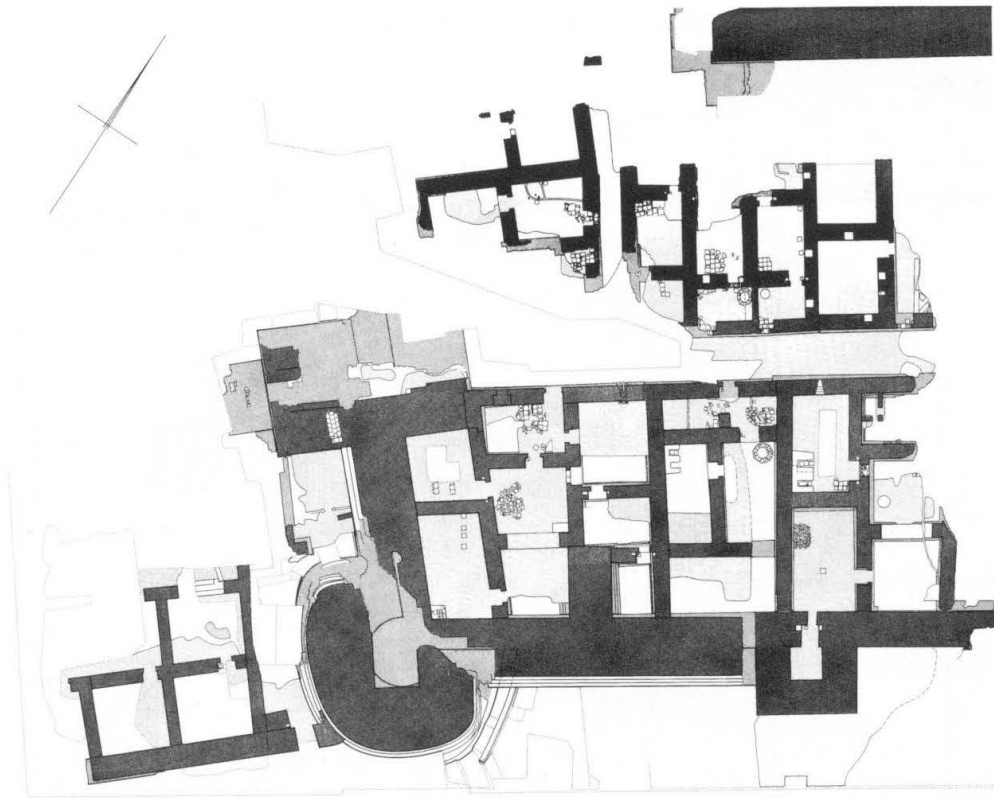
principle can be observed in the layout of most Mesopotamian religious structures dating from at least 2000 BC. In the case of Parthian Nippur, based on the evidence of the excavated finds, the Parthian period structure of the Inanna Temple can be dated to the late first/second century AD. The burials shown interred in figure 6 were also Parthian.

By contrast, in the adjacent and contemporary fortress at Nippur, housing units were built using the new so-called *eyvan* approach to layout, where the main axis of the room corresponded with its greater length, the opposite of what we had occurred earlier<sup>21</sup> (figs. 7 & 8). It was, of course, the Parthians who developed the concept of this vaulted, open *eyvan*

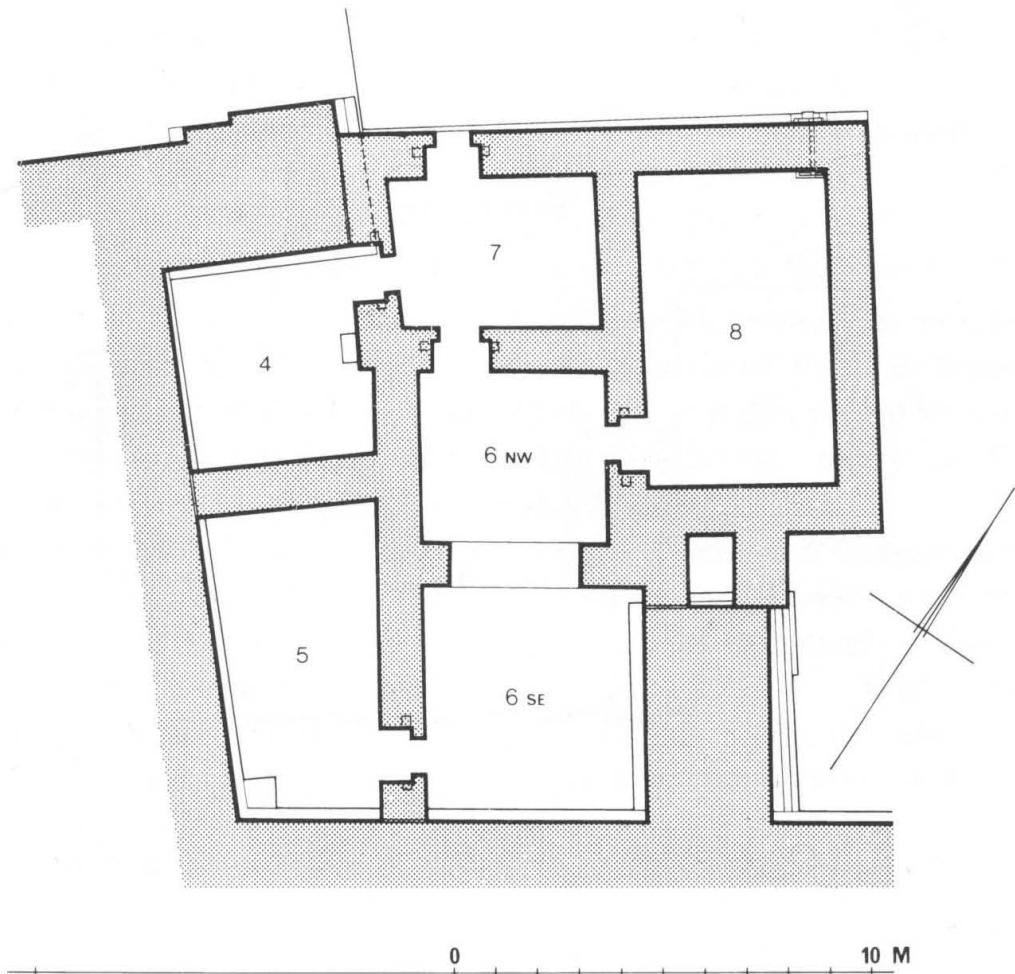
<sup>21</sup> First published in Knudstad, *Sumer* 24.



6. Detail of the main shrine layout in the Parthian period Inanna Temple.



7. Southeast quadrant of the Parthian Fortress at Nippur (Phase II). Oriental Institute excavations.



8. Housing unit with *eyvan* built around 80 AD in the Phase II Fortress.

which was to have such a significant role to play in subsequent Islamic architecture. There is nothing new in this observation. It almost seems superfluous to make the comment in a volume dedicated to an Iranologist. But it is no small issue that two completely different layouts for buildings were employed in Parthian Nippur, at the same time, next door to one another.

But what is important for the purposes of this presentation is that, in spite of the quite different approaches to the architecture, in terms of functional layout, the small material remains recovered from the two units were identical. Pottery, figurines, coins — there is little distinction between those found in the Fortress and those found in the Temple. One may even go further than this. A lot of the archaeological finds were related, not so much to the monuments as they were used, but rather to the time when they were being built. The finds were often derived from construction camps set within the precincts of the monuments being built. These work camps were not cleared away when the time came to occupy the complex; dirt was hauled in and the workers' huts were simply buried beneath fill. What is highly significant about the finds from these construction camps is that the artifacts excavated are consistent with those from both the Temple and Fortress as subsequently occupied. One can only conclude that the people conscripted for manning the Fortress were the same as those who built it, and the same as those who used the Temple. In other words, they were, in all likelihood, from the region of Nippur and not imposed upon the city from the outside.

There is plenty of good evidence for dating the structures of Parthian Nippur. The evidence comes from coins — coins found both in the excavations, and as brought in by workmen from all over the site. And this includes collections from over a century. For the first real excavations at Nippur took place in 1888. And the list of Parthian coins published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1924<sup>22</sup> reads essentially like the University of Chicago's list from 1965-1967 (table 1). My interpretation of the coin evidence is that the citadel complex of Parthian Nippur was begun around 65 AD, flourished between around 80 and 130 AD, and fell into decline around 165 AD. And the figure appearing consistently in these various lists is that of Osroes, who is thought to have minted coins intermittently

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<sup>22</sup> L. Legrain, "Coins from Nippur", *The Museum Journal* (University Museum, Philadelphia, March 1924): 70-76.



**Table 1**  
**Parthian coins found at Nippur**

Artabanus III	10/11 AD - ca. 38	silver	tetradrachm	undated	1
Gotarzes II	40/41 - 50/51	"	"	50/51 AD	1
		"	"	undated	1
Pacorus II	77/78 - 110/11	bronze		82/83	2
		"		106/07	1
		"		undated	1
Osroes	109/10 - 128/29	"		109/10	1
		"		111/12	2
		"		116/17	3
		"		119/20	1
		"		120/21	1
		"		128/29	1
		"		undated	20
Vologases III	111/12 - 146/47	"		118/19	2
		"		132/33	1
		"		142/43	1
		"		undated	15
Vologases IV	147/48-190/91	"		163/64	1
Vologases V	207/08 - 221/22	"		undated	1

between 89/90 and 127/128 AD<sup>23</sup>. Osroes is easy to recognise because of his distinctively bunched hair-style; and on his coins he is portrayed in profile, not frontally.

Now, according to the standard interpretations of historical texts, Osroes was a rebel<sup>24</sup>. It is a fact that Osroes minted only silver drachms and copper coins. Although there is a large copper coin roughly the size of a tetradrachm, Osroes issued none of the large silver coins which would have been the sign of his having been in control of the royal mint in the Parthian capital (cf. n. 12). It is conceivable that Osroes is also to be

<sup>23</sup> cf. G. Le Rider, *Suse sous les Séleucides et les Parthes: Les trouvailles monétaires de la ville*, (Mission Archéologique en Iran 38) Paris, 1965: 177.

<sup>24</sup> E.J. Keall, "Osroes: rebel king or royal delegate?", *Cornucopiae 3/ii* (Ancient Coin Society, Toronto, 1975); and Keall, *JAOS* 1975: 629.

associated with issuing a series of copper coins from Elymais<sup>25</sup> which was an independent kingdom in the mountains of Iran, just east of where Nippur lies. During the time that Osroes was issuing his coins, a Vologases was also striking coins, and this included tetradrachms from the capital. We seem to have straight forward confirmation of the idea that Osroes was an independent ruler. Nippur, then, would be logically part of the territory he controlled<sup>26</sup>.

If one can accept this line of reasoning, the implications of Osroes' minting of coins seem to be that the Parthian state was very fragmented. In support of this hypothesis, we may turn to another subject — this time the invasion of Mesopotamia by the emperor Trajan in the years 115-116 AD. It is a very complicated argument and we do not need to go into the details of it here, except to state that the chronology is based upon the fact that Trajan received imperial salutations back home for his victories and we can keep track of where he went, and when. Some of the events are important for us here, for they involve the figure of our Osroes.

The consensus is that Trajan left Rome in the autumn of AD 113. In Athens he cavalierly rejected overtures of peace which were offered by Osroes. It was this embassy that caused Roman writers to think of Osroes as the Parthian king. Other commentators see it as a Parthian pretender trying to get an arrangement with Trajan which was nothing less than treason. At any rate, it made no difference. After conquering Armenia during 114, Trajan consolidated his holdings by settling northern Mesopotamia, wintering in Antioch where he survived the earthquake of 115, and setting out for central Mesopotamia in the spring of 116. He made an unopposed entry into the Parthian capital, reaching the Gulf by mid-summer. But the Romans had difficulty holding onto their new territory, and revolts brewing in North Africa and Palestine may have persuaded Trajan to withdraw quickly to counter them<sup>27</sup>. When Trajan died prematurely in 117, his successor Hadrian abandoned the expansionist policy of the Romans. Peace talks were conducted with the Parthians.

<sup>25</sup> Le Rider, Suse, 429.

<sup>26</sup> cf. map in Keall, *JAOS* 1975, fig. 7.

<sup>27</sup> On the geography of the area and the invasion route, see A.D.H. Bivar, "The political history of Iran under the Arsacids", in *Cambridge History of Iran* 3/i, ed. E. Yarshater, 1983: 89-91. The impact of the Jewish revolts is stressed in T.D. Barnes, "Trajan and the Jews", *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40 (1989): 145-162.

For our purposes, what is important is that we are told that negotiations were held with Hadrian for the return of Osroes' daughter and of his personal throne which had been captured during the invasion. Does their capture make Osroes look like someone trying to conduct treason? It is hard to imagine a rebel king installed on one side of the river, and the King of Kings on another. We can also look at the singular lack of success which Osroes had in his original embassy to Trajan where he proposed Parthamasiris as an appropriate candidate for the throne of Armenia. Instead, Trajan had Osroes' candidate murdered. In no way does Osroes appear to receive the kind of treatment one might expect to be offered to someone who might usefully serve a divisive purpose, namely to weaken the Parthian state. Rather, we may judge him to be the bona fide representative of Parthian government, and that he made peace overtures to the Romans on behalf of the Parthian state, not against it.

How do we explain the seemingly independent coins of Osroes? To my mind they represent a good example of what may be called sovereignty association — in other words, a lack of federal strength or heavy handedness, combined with a burning desire for self-expression on the part of a region, resulting in the recognition of a quasi-independent state, but without the sense of rebellion. In return for recognition, the independent region then offered support to the state in times of external crisis. Perhaps the alternative to accommodating Osroes and the people of southern Mesopotamia in such an arrangement would have been civil war. There are clear-cut examples in Parthian history of secession, rebellion, revolt — whatever one likes to call it. The Parthian King of Kings claimed the throne on more than one occasion by murdering his own brothers, sometimes his own father. But besides these barbaric acts, we also find the lack of an effective administration confusing. The running of *the state certainly had a lot to do with the power of individuals*, just as we have come to expect this in the modern Middle East. Holding the state together through a variety of different coalitions and allegiances makes Parthia look chaotic. But it is pointless to judge the so-called Parthian empire by the standards of our own perception of empire, which is perhaps based on 19th century concepts. The Parthian realm did survive for nearly four centuries, simply because it was flexible. It was political dexterity which gave the empire such longevity, whereas rigid attention to bureaucratic rules might have hastened its demise more than two centuries earlier.

To understand the different kinds of accommodation that might be found for running the Parthian state, one may introduce a written source. The story is found in *The Jewish Antiquities* of Flavius Josephus<sup>28</sup>. In describing events in Babylonia, in the early first century AD, Josephus speaks of two apprentice weavers who had been mistreated by their employer. These two, who were brothers, stole some weapons from him, setting up camp in the scrublands. They attracted a band of followers and ran what sounds like a protection racket, amongst the people of the region. News of their exploits — or extortions, depending on your political point of view — reached official ears. But attempts to dislodge them were a failure, largely because of the difficulty of campaigning against them in this scrub country. At this point, the king did the only sensible thing — he resorted to diplomacy, summoned the brothers to court under a flag of truce, and gave them the region to administer, an arrangement that lasted for fifteen years. In the end it was only indiscrete behaviour on the part of one of the brothers, who offended his own community, that removed his right to refuge and permitted the king's agents to hunt him down. The point that I am trying to make is that the King of Kings would have preferred to have administered the region with his own appointees, but when this was ineffective he used other measures. How many other times may we imagine this kind of arrangement was made?

Finally, the most extraordinary piece of evidence that reflects upon Parthian government operations is to be found in details recorded on royal silver tetradrachms minted in the year 389 SE (77/8 AD). These coins, of different kings (Pacorus II and Vologases II), were struck with different portraits and with different personal names, but with identical formulae and mint marks<sup>29</sup>. One could argue that the simultaneous minting of similar coins represented a presumably crippling civil war that saw control of the mint changing hands by the moment. On the other hand, seen from a different perspective, it could mean that two figures admittedly competed with each other, but that they agreed on the terms of power sharing, which is reflected in the sharing of the mint. I would

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<sup>28</sup> The story is summarised in J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia, vol. 1: the Parthian Period* (Studia Post-Biblica 9) Leiden, 1965: 51.

<sup>29</sup> cf. Sellwood, *Coinage of Parthia*, types 72 & 73 (Vologases II and Pacorus II).



like to suggest that if we can accept the idea of flexibility in the Parthian state, it may help explain why two kings were able in the year 77 AD to strike coins at the same mint. Of course, under these circumstances, it is a little false for them both to have claimed the title of King of Kings. But who is to say that, even to-day, official formulae claimed by nations for the right to rule always carry precisely the same weight that they were originally intended to bear? I would like to suggest that the Parthian state lasted as long as it did because of flexibility, a remarkable lesson for the bigotted interests in the world to-day, which seem hell-bent on self-destruction. If only they could adopt various formulae for power sharing which were allowed in the Parthian state and which permitted it, not only to survive, but to be a creative entity for so long.