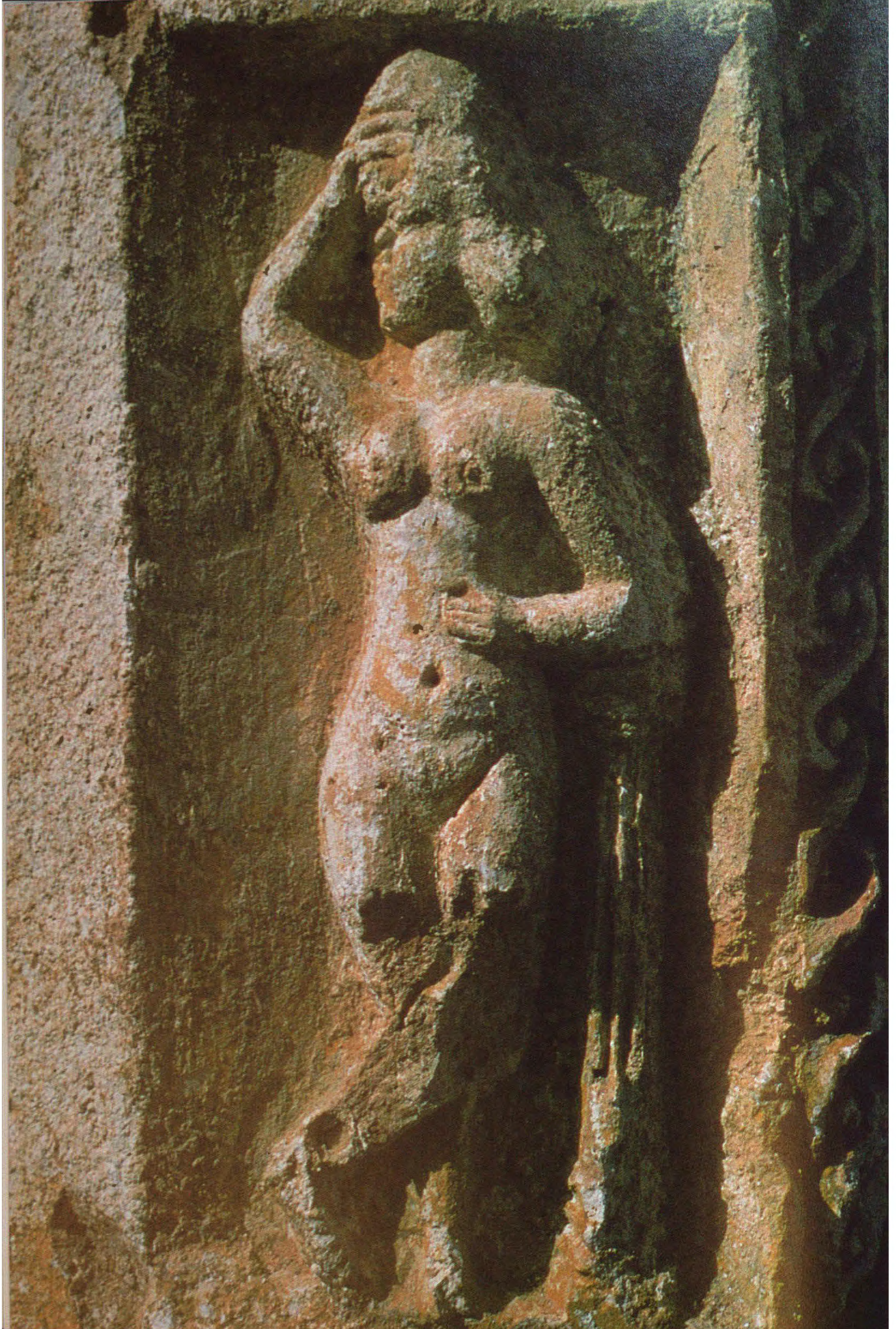


THE ARTS OF PERSIA

Edited by R. W. Ferrier



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4 THE ART OF THE PARTHIANS

DEFINITION OF PARTHIA

THE PARTHIANS RULED the realm of greater Iran nominally, at least, for nearly four hundred years, and they were a recognised dynasty longer than that. Yet of their history we know relatively little. The period failed to retain much significance for later Muslim writers who regarded the era as a dark age, of little importance, except that it had been obliterated by the light of Islam. A large proportion of even the few written sources that have come down to us are essentially items recorded by the chroniclers of Roman history,¹ writers who were often biased and had not even visited Parthia. There can be little question that when it comes to an understanding of the period, art and architecture are two of the most important documents.

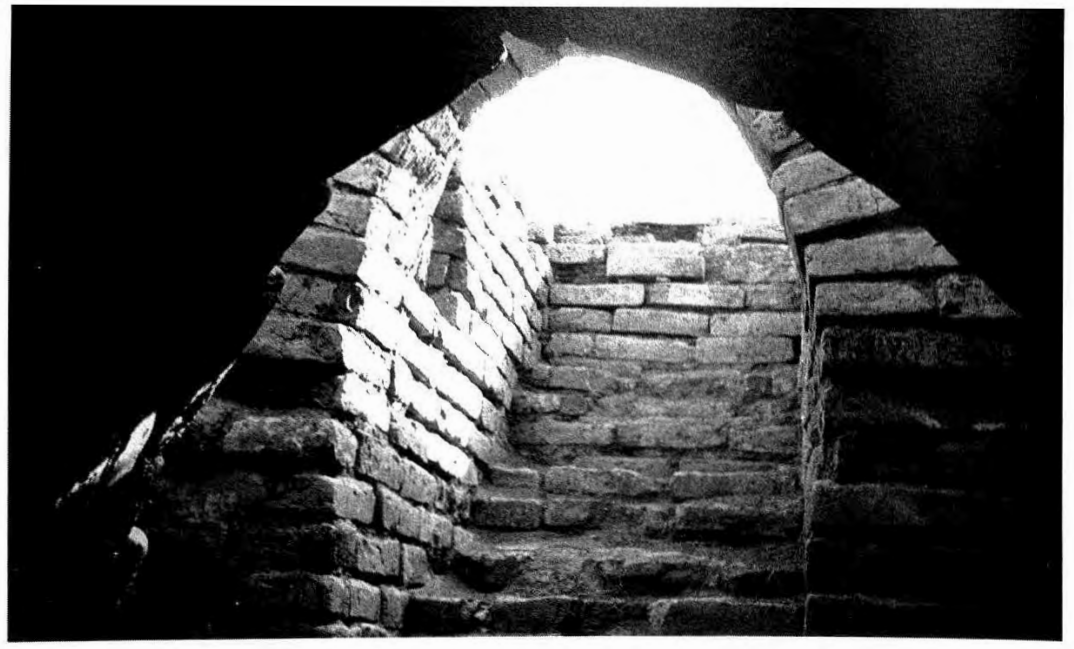
The best preserved remains are monumental buildings and statuary. There are a variety of small objects, though the lack of sound dating criteria tends to reduce their interpretive potential. Immensely valuable evidence comes from Parthian coins because of the portraits they bear of the kings. Artistic conventions change as the era progresses. The coins, however, are not without their own special kinds of drawbacks, not least due to the fact that, until the mid-1st century AD, the king is identified only by the generic title 'Arsaces' and not by his individual name.² The known corpus of Parthian artifacts also includes a limited variety of inscriptions, but here again the evidence is obscure and no literature from the period has survived in its original form.³ There are a few inscriptions on small objects, particularly the wine records from Nisa (the original capital of the Parthians in Soviet Turkmenistan),⁴ though those from other sites are often more famous for the challenge they present the linguist than for the meaningful substance of their contents.

The value of the architecture resides in the physical realities of the objects. The stones cannot lie. They can, of course, be subject to interpretation, with all the connotations of bias that this implies. Interpretations of Parthian art have tended to be coloured very strongly by the West's indebtedness to the classical heritage of Greece and Rome. There has been a tendency for many commentators, from the 13th/19th century to the present, to equate closeness to a classical model with an 'ideal' quality, and departure from these norms with 'debased orientalism'.⁵

One of the problems with trying to come to grips with the Parthians is the fact that the term 'Parthian empire' is a misnomer. At best, the King of Kings controlled no more than a loose confederation of client kings and feudal lords, with no standing army, and with varying degrees of semi-independent status enjoyed by individual cities. The relative strengths of the minor rulers tended to change with time, depending upon alliances of marriage or concessions awarded in return for help in the military defence of the country. Of course, ultimately the supreme monarch's own personal standing had a direct bearing upon how strong rival members of the nobility became. Interference from abroad, especially in Rome's repeated attempts to manipulate the question of Armenia to her own imperial advantage, frequently played a major role in Parthian politics. If there is any general pattern to observe it is that, after the initial expansionist movements culminating in the capture of the Seleucid capital in 141 BC, the realm of Parthia began an inexorable slide towards fragmentation.⁶

It is evident that the known major Parthian sites are few and far between in the territory under consideration. The majority of the 'name' sites fall in the western and north-eastern extremities of the area, and most lie outside the boundaries of modern Iran. There is a noticeable absence of sites in the Tehran-Işfahān-Shīrāz corridor. Perhaps the early shift of the capital to Mesopotamia in the mid-2nd century BC was sufficient impetus to cause the development of the western part of the empire at the expense of the Parthian heartland. Even in Fārs there have been no instances of important Parthian sites being discovered, and

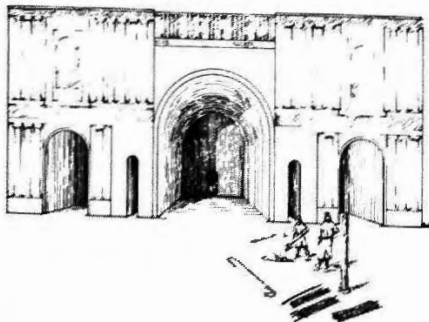
1. Nude female. Part of decorative stucco column of figures in superimposed registers, possibly representing a theatrical performance. Royal Ontario Museum excavations, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, 1976-79.



2. Nippur. Vaulted staircase of a crypt. Baked brick. Burials in Mesopotamia were often placed inside a tomb within individual slipper-shaped coffins. Oriental Institute, University of Chicago excavations at Nippur, 1966–7.

3. Nippur. Blocked doorway. Mud-brick. The propensity in Mesopotamia for building with sun-dried brick included its use in arches and vaults. Oriental Institute, University of Chicago excavations at Nippur, 1966–7.

4. Nippur. Reconstruction drawing of an *ivān* complex. Temporary structures were erected on specific occasions in front of the open hall. Oriental Institute, University of Chicago excavations at Nippur, 1966–7.



one must suppose that they did exist, since it is well documented as being the Sasanian homeland. Certain sites, traditionally identified with the Parthian period, such as Kangāvar, Istakhr, Kirmān, and Darabgird, have yet to be proven to contain any major pre-Sasanian occupational levels.⁷ There are references in texts to cities in Parthian times.⁸ One may have to acknowledge that the plateau, however, was not nearly so urbanised as the Mesopotamian plains. On the other hand, surface surveys in recent years have produced evidence of extensive settlement of the countryside, more so than from any preceding era.⁹ Some of the relative absence of sites is bound to be due to archaeological chance and one may have to acknowledge that the proper picture will not emerge until more extensive surveys have been completed.

It should not be ignored, however, that from the 1st century BC Parthia began to lose territory to various other groups of tribes or ambitious princes. By around AD 60, the sites of Nisa, Kūh-i Khwājeh (in Sīstān), and Shahr-i Qūmis (Hecatompylos, a former Parthian capital, in the province of Gurgān)¹⁰ lay outside the domain of territory controlled from Ctesiphon. In the west, the famous site of Hatra¹¹ was built by an Arab principality which maintained only nominal ties with the Parthian crown. Dura-Europos fell into Roman hands in AD 164, and its artwork should be viewed under a special light.¹² As for Palmyra,¹² it was never a Parthian possession, yet it is often cited in the great debate about the nature of Parthian art by those whose background is the classical Mediterranean. Even closer to home, in the foothills of the Zagros at sites such as Qal'eh-i Yazdigird (in Media) (pls. 1, 8–14) and Masjid-i Sulaymān and Bard-i Nishandeh (in Elymais) [pl. 21], the monuments were sponsored by figures who were in direct confrontation with the Parthian King of Kings or who, at very best, paid him only token allegiance. This division of the realm into two separate regions is attested, in part, by the fact that the distribution of coin types known for the Mesopotamian plains and the Iranian highlands respectively implies two different or separate economies.¹⁴ Coins that circulated in these two areas were of different denominations of silver, and the imagery of these tetradrachms and drachms was also distinctively different. This implies that there is only a narrow strip of land in the middle of Iraq that one can be associated with the Parthian dynasty itself in terms of defining the actual artwork of the era's most creative period. According to this definition, Parthia would be represented by sites such as the new foundations of Seleucia and Ctesiphon (the political capital), as well as the ancient cities of Ashur, Nippur (pls. 2–4), Larsa, and Warka.¹⁴ Except for Hecatompylos in the early period, Iran would not be represented at all in a culture that would need to be described under the dynastic label 'Arsacid'.

It is obvious, then, that in order to define the material culture of the period in question one should not be limited strictly to the area controlled by the Arsacids directly from Ctesiphon. The problem then becomes one of where to stop. There is a risk that the inquiry becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, if the choice of subject matter is limited only to that which fits the initial definition. For the term Parthian should not be used, either, simply to encompass the post-Alexandrian experience of the entire Middle East. The vocabulary of art history is then permeated by the use of such nebulous terms as Graeco-Iranian, Indo-Parthian, and Kushano-Parthian. The permissible compromise is to consider any art that was produced in the Parthian homeland before the mid-2nd century BC, and afterwards, in any of the territory actually administered or garrisoned by the Parthians. This excludes the

Punjab (sites like Taxila), northern Afghanistan (Bactrian sites like Surkh Kotal), Soviet Transoxiana (e.g. Khalechayan), Armenia and Asia Minor (e.g. Nimrud Dagħ), and Syria (e.g. Palmyra and Dura-Europos). An exception is made in the case of Hatra (pls. 14, 16–19), an independent Arab principality, because popular convention has always represented this as a 'Parthian' site.

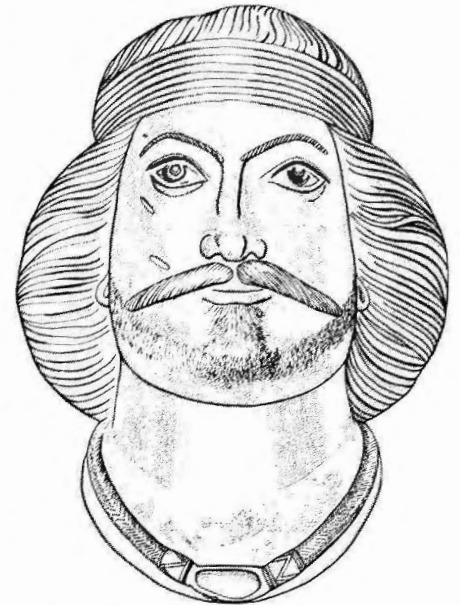
ART PATRONAGE

Notwithstanding the lack of systematic dynastic control over the territory, the later Parthian centuries were artistically very vigorous. In the early period, before the capture of Seleucia, buildings erected reflect Hellenistic practices in effect elsewhere, though examples can be pointed out where the architects have strayed from the classical norm in their use of a particular order or the positioning of a column.¹⁶ Towards the 1st century AD buildings were produced with a variety of groundplans and wall decorations, in an eclectic mix that tends to thwart any attempt to define the nature of Parthian art. One may argue, however, that the variety reflects lively experiment, and the outcome was the emergence of artistic norms that lasted well into the Islamic period.¹⁷

It is perhaps not without significance that the most distinctive Parthian expressions in the arts occurred when the area was politically and economically unstable. There was high inflation and they frequently resorted to debasing the currency. But, interestingly enough, the economic factors which were beginning to cripple the empire may actually have fostered the development of the arts. The dimensions of international trade in the 1st century AD were such that huge wealth could be accumulated in certain segments of society. It is reasonable to suppose that these *nouveaux riches* were particularly active in the sponsorship of the arts, building palaces and monuments to the glory of their own names, and dedicating shrines to the gods for their successful business dealings. Travelling salesmen may have had a field-day peddling products and building designs, as they catered to new pretensions. In other areas where trade did not have such a direct impact, as in many parts of the Iranian plateau, there may have been a perfectly viable local economy, as demonstrated by the vast numbers of Parthian farmsteads or villages found on survey in the Kangavar and Māhī Dasht plains. But the level of art patronage clearly did not approach that exercised by the inhabitants of Mesopotamia. As a result, what Schlumberger described as the 'rustic' quality of the sculpture from Bard-i Nishandeh¹⁸ or the rock reliefs at Tang-i Sarvak (both in Elymais) lies in marked contrast to the superior worked stone products of Hatra. The famous bronze statue from Shami (also in Elymais) (see pl. 5) is a superior product, too, but the significance of this work is considerably reduced by the lack of consensus on the date of its manufacture, and complicated by the unfounded suggestion by Godard that the head was made by an outsider and the body by a local craftsman.¹⁹

There may be some significance to be found in what can best be described as the 'social revolution' of the era. A seven-year revolt in Seleucia, which was terminated in AD 43, may have had economic issues as the basis for the upheavals. McDowell promoted the idea, which has still not been refuted, that by the mid-1st century, the formerly influential inhabitants of Seleucia, who were of Macedonian origin, had begun to be eclipsed by various non-Hellenised groups, including Babylonians and Jews.²⁰ McDowell argues that the revolt was not of Greeks against the Parthians, but rather of a 'native' party against the Greeks. The end result was a city that lost its independent status. The issue is complex, and the facts are few, but there can be no denying that, from the mid-1st century onwards, artistic expressions no longer bear the same kind of relationship to Hellenistic models as they did before. Two new expressions illustrate this most effectively. These were the emergence of a concept for creating a dramatic focal point in buildings through the use of a vaulted, open-ended hall facing a court (*ivān*) (pl. 4), and the adoption of an imposing way of depicting human figures facing the observer directly from the front (see pl. 6). We know the *ivān* mostly from Mesopotamia.²¹ Dates for its appearance at Kūh-i Khwājeh are still problematical, and Gullini's dating of different levels has been challenged by most commentators.²² But the development of both mud- and baked-brick vaulting is well documented in Mesopotamia²³ (see pls. 2–3) and it may only be a matter of time before the *ivān* is recorded on the plateau as well as the plains, given the similar environmental conditions in many parts of Iran where brick would have been a natural building material. As for sculpture, the discoveries in Elymais have demonstrated that artists were working within the framework of a Parthian style, even though the standards of technical craftsmanship were moderately crude.²⁴

Whether the changes that the new building plans and sculptural traditions represent a deliberate and intellectual turning away from the old Hellenistic models, or whether they reflect something much more practical, such as the unsponsored emergence from obscurity



5. Head of famous larger than life bronze statue from Shami. Date frequently disputed between beginning of second, end of first century BC. Excavated by Aurel Stein, 1934. Irān Bāstān Museum.

6. Hatra. Larger than life statue of unidentified worshipper bearing trappings of office, in act of adoration in main temple complex. Classic frontal pose. Excavations of the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities, 1951–67.





7. Mother-goddess figurine. Miniature gold charm pendant Royal Ontario Museum collection Ht. 1.7 cm.



8. Dancing male in tunic and tall Scythian cap. Part of same column register composition as item no. 1. Royal Ontario Museum excavations, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, 1976-9.

10. (*facing page*) Nude female holding dolphins by the tails. Engaged column capital in stucco, painted overall red. The form of the figures suggests a source in the Aphrodite traditions of the West, but the meaning may not necessarily be linked irrefutedly to the original form. Royal Ontario Museum excavations, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, 1976-9.

of long-standing, indigenous artistic practices, is hard to judge. The newly created wealth had a tendency to permit far wider patronage in art than before when power and wealth had been in the hands of a relative minority. Sponsors were in the habit of looking to established artisans (i.e. the Macedonian settlers) for works of art. Schlumberger described Parthia of the 2nd century BC as a period of 'Greek art for non-Greek princes'.²⁵ Thus, the famous ivory rhytons from Nisa can be looked upon as anomalies, for they are generally taken to represent something Greek in their art, albeit appropriately linked to the ancient heritage of the Middle East in the choice of vessel use. By the first two centuries AD we may be dealing with a kind of 'democratisation' of the arts, as individual economic prosperity permitted the expanding mercantile class and the proliferating petty nobility to indulge in established formulas of success, but expressed in a new fashionable style. It has become acceptable amongst commentators on the period to speak of an 'orientalising' trend in Parthian art,²⁶ an artistic revolution, in fact.

The change is all the more significant because the frequent contacts with Rome through trade or war made it quite possible for it to have increased western influence in the arts. Yet while there may be details which are clearly borrowed from the West, the overall effect of the finished product is definitely Parthian. Much attention was paid by past commentators to the workshops of Seleucia which retained close links with the classical past. But it should be borne in mind that the original settlers had come in the 4th century, following Alexander's conquest of Asia. Artists were working with designs and concepts at least four hundred years after the creation of the original models. One may point out that, even when classical details are reproduced fairly faithfully, one cannot necessarily be sure that the same iconographic meaning is retained. A manufactured item, such as a Roman bronze lamp, might become the source of a stucco plasterer's decorative detail. It is possible that the concept of Dionysus had sufficiently infiltrated the Middle East so that Dionysiac iconography could be consciously and meaningfully employed. But it is equally possible, for instance, in the case of an Aphrodite figure portrayed accurately in a classical vein, that the artist might have intended to portray an Asian deity of slightly different character (see pls. 7 and 10).

ECLECTIC COMPOSITIONS

At times there is a confusing eclecticism of subject matter, and it becomes a challenge to ascertain whether it all has a meaning, or whether it is all no more than an indulgence in the exotic. This lesson is nowhere better given than in the stucco finds from Qal'eh-i Yazdigird²⁷ (pls. 1, 8-14). A palace was the archaeological source for a rich variety of ornamental stucco wall and ceiling decorations which included both natural and mythical human and animal forms, geometric and stylised vegetal compositions, architectonic elements, and other repeat designs.

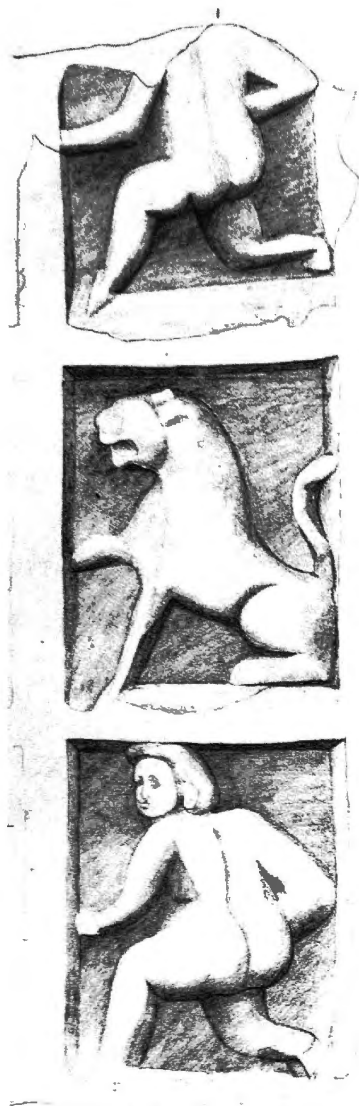


9. Griffon protome. Stucco plaque with decoration in shallow relief showing beast in profile. In composition and style the figure is a forerunner of Sasanian *senmurv* representations. Royal Ontario Museum excavations, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, 1976-9.



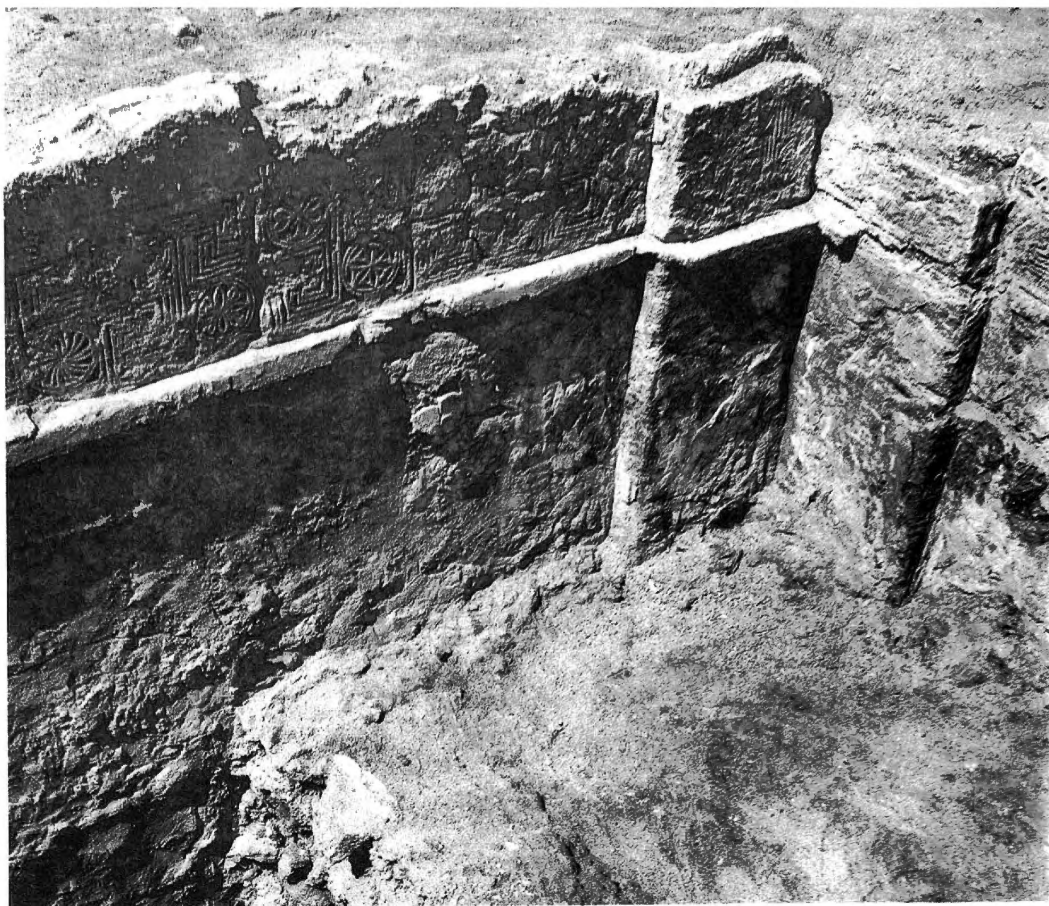
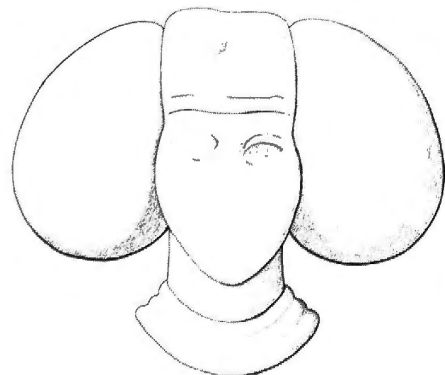
11. Repetitive stylised motif. In-situ stucco decoration from niche architrave panel. Bud-and-tendrils motif. Royal Ontario Museum excavations, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, 1976-9.





12. Qal'eh-i Yazdigird. Nude hero in combat with lion. Engaged column. Figures are portrayed either in full profile or half-turned. Treatment of scenes in registers reminiscent of Gandharan art. Royal Ontario Museum excavations, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, 1976-9.

14. Qal'eh-i Yazdigird. Male bust with exaggerated hair side-bunches. Hairstyle and pose typical of Parthian portraiture in western Iran. Royal Ontario Museum excavations, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, 1976-9.



The stuccoes are gypsum plasters that have been manufactured through a combination of carving and moulding techniques. There is evidence of several repaintings of the stuccoes in either plain or polychrome colours. The schemes generally involved the blocking out of a figure in a strong colour against a different background. The best parallels for the wall decorations can be found in the 1st and 2nd century AD stuccoes from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, Ashur, and Warka (all in Iraq), and from Kūh-i Khwājeh (in Iranian Sīstān).²⁸ There is evidence that two separate phases of decoration were involved at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, possibly connected with repairs following a natural disaster.²⁹ But the occupation of the palace was short-lived. There is no indication that any of the schemes were designed as late as the Sasanian period.

Many of the subjects illustrated reveal distinctly different characteristics. For example, amongst the stuccoes is a procession of marching griffons which are portrayed in a standard manner with beaked head, flared wing and rigidly curved tail. The effect is markedly different from that the winged protome of a griffon (see pl. 9) which, with its diminutive forepaws, heralds the stance (if not the precise details) of the Sasanian *senmurv*.

A similar juxtaposition of decorative elements in different styles can be observed in the human figures portrayed at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird. One of the wall plaques carries the figure of a male bust which is set in a roundel and portrayed frontally (pl. 14). This types of frontal pose and bunched hair-style can be matched exactly to certain issues of coins and to rock reliefs. It is distinctively Parthian. The type is quite different from images of males reproduced in the same building at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird which are shown with curled hair and wearing Roman togas. The figures are clearly human, and not those of gods or cherubs, so it is legitimate to ask who they represent, and why they dress differently? Or is there here a parallel with the way in which an Arab sheikh wears alternately traditional or western garb, depending upon the desired effect?

There is no doubt that artists were realistic in their portrayal of people. They did not indulge in idealised portraits the way their Greek predecessors did. On the coins (pl. 15), great attention was paid to small details, even to the extent of reproducing a facial blemish. When not shown as a nodule above the temple, the tumour is replaced by lock of hair worn below the diadem band, a normal disguise for such a defect.³⁰ One of the most marked characteristics of Parthian art is the concern with self-image. It has given rise to a whole series of statues and portraits of individuals in which the artist has placed more importance on the personal trappings of the individual than on the beauty of the subject's form. This concern with symbols may be an adjunct of, or even the reason behind, the distinctive way of presenting a figure full-face, in the new 'frontal' pose.



13. (facing page) Qal'eh-i Yazdigird. Repeat pattern of interlocking key device and roundels forms part of an in-situ frieze. 'All-over' patterns were a typical decorative treatment in the architecture of Parthian Mesopotamia and Iran. Royal Ontario Museum excavations, Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, 1976-9.

15. Silver tetradrachms. Portraits of Parthian kings, AD 50-150. Artists were careful to preserve individual features, including physical blemishes. American Numismatic Society.

FRONTALISM

Frontalism is assumed to be a way of presenting a figure in a more imposing way, increasing the subject's bearing by the more immediate face to face contact. Frontalistic treatment can occur in the same scene as a profile view. When used it was a preferred technique and not an indication of the limitations of an artist's skills. Details of dress may reveal a person's rank or social background. This is important if we assume that the sponsors were often the petty nobility or the *nouveaux riches*, both of whom no doubt were concerned about imagery in their jockeyings for better positions in social standing. As we have noted, there was much concern for self-image in Parthia. Even the adoption of the title 'King of Kings' by Mithridates II (and henceforth by most Parthian monarchs) can be considered as a reflection of the king's need to establish his legitimacy in the eyes of Parthia's subjects, by appealing to the idea that the king was heir to Achaemenian authority.³¹ It is significant that the title was adopted at a time when Parthian control over its newly conquered territory was beginning to wane.

16. Hatra. Details of costume on statue of royal figure (King Volgasn). The artist has paid great attention to the costume without the slightest attempt at beautifying the body inside it. Excavations of the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities, 1951–67.



17. Hatra. Interlocking key device on recycled statue block. The use of an architectural device on costume underlines the way in which Parthian artists ignored the normal artistic conventions which would have restricted this type of decoration to its use on a building. Excavations of the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities, 1951–67.



With regard to the different kinds of dress that one can see in the period's artwork, the most common costume is an outfit that includes baggy trousers (*shalvārs*) (see pls. 6, 8 and 16) worn beneath a mid-thigh-length, belted tunic. It is a particularly suitable dress for riding horses as we learn from Tacitus' lucid description of two rivals contesting the Parthian throne. Tacitus reports how the Parthian nobles became intensely scornful of Vonones because he aped so many fashions of the West, including the habit of riding the streets in a litter and dining like a Roman.³² Artabanus, his rival, and the 'native son', apparently preferred the more acceptable practices of horse-riding and feasting in a traditional way. One may assume that their clothes also matched their ways of life. In dealing, then, with a small amount of surviving artwork, one faces the problem of having to distinguish between individual fashion, which is faithfully represented by the artist, and a conventional style which simply uses a standard treatment for figures of a certain type. The concern for personal touches – badges of office (pls. 6 and 16) and individual facial features, warts and all – seems to imply that figures are portrayed in Parthian artwork the way they are seen.

REPEAT PATTERNS

Decorative stucco in buildings enjoyed a tremendous vogue under the Parthians. Readily available as a resource and easily worked, stucco became the standard ornament for buildings constructed from a variety of base materials. The speed with which it could be laid tended to encourage a 'wall-paper' effect where linked designs covered surfaces in an 'all-over' pattern (pls. 10 and 13).³³ Possibly the development occurred in close association with the idea of hanging rugs in a dwelling. It may not be unreasonable to see the nomadic origins of the Parthians playing a role here, in providing both the textile tradition as well as the need for climate control. Motifs used in the stucco designs were often employed with little concern for their original function and meaning. Thus, a reel and bead moulding could be used to break up the surface of a composition into separate panels, disregarding the architectural origins of the device as a running motif for a projecting member. Or a running, interlocking key device, also derived from architecture, could be used on costume (pl. 17).

The liberties which artists took with motifs like this can be seen as a harbinger of some of the things that were to happen in Islamic art. An indiscriminate use of architectonic devices was very characteristic of Parthian art. The merlon (stepped crenellation with arrow slot) was a traditional element surmounting the parapets of ancient Middle-Eastern buildings. Used as full-scale military devices as long ago as the Assyrian period, these forms had become architectonic by Parthian times, and appear extensively in a variety of ways in the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird stuccoes.³⁴ The merlon features frequently as a decorative parapet in the Sasanian period, both atop buildings such as the Tāq-i Girra arch, as well as in illustrations of buildings shown in later metalwork. The stepped crenellation is ubiquitous in the mosque architecture of early Islam. Other examples of innovations can also be seen in the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird stuccoes. By taking a circle containing a cluster of tendrils, splitting it, and putting the two halves back to back,³⁵ artists were creating in effect the same principle that applies in the arabesque, where natural forms are subjugated by abstract design.

The vitality of late Parthian art, as well as its eclecticism, is no doubt a reflection of the strength of local traditions. The realm was fragmented, and there was no such thing as an 'imperial' art. But local populations flourished, and archaeological surveys attest to tremendous growth in certain areas, with often diverse local traditions, particularly in the production of pottery. Given the fact that at least some of the ancient temples of Babylonia appear to have functioned along traditional lines until as late as the 1st century AD,³⁶ it is hardly surprising to see the survival of many motifs and symbols from earlier times. Mother-goddess figurines, of a type scarcely distinguishable from those of centuries earlier, appear alongside the very latest in imports from the West.³⁷ Strange beasts reflect the ancient Mesopotamian fondness for hybrid monsters. Here, again, one can use the analogy of the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird stuccoes to show how Parthian art served as the intermediary for the transfer of imagery from the ancient world to that of Islam.

18. Hatra. Horse's head and unidentified male bust. A frontal pose was the standard way to present a figure in Parthian art. The use of oblique presentations indicates that frontality reflects a conscious choice of stance, not a lack of skill. Excavations of the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities, 1951-67.



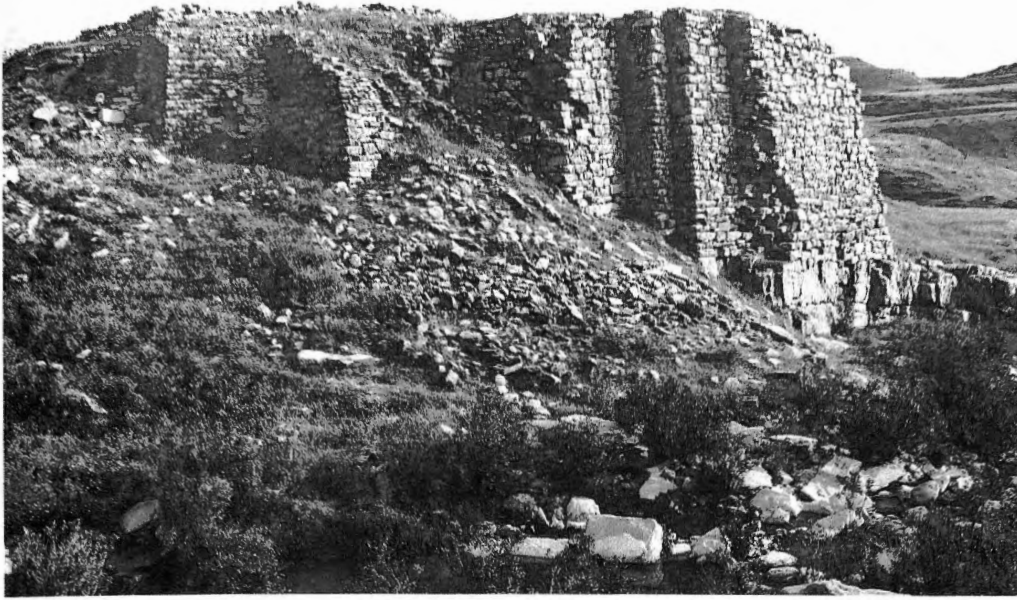


19. Hatra. Bust of Shamash. Figure and inscription flanks the *ivān* of the main temple. Cameo-like busts were applied frequently to the surfaces of architecture as well as works of art, such as ivory and ceramic drinking vessels. Excavations of the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities, 1951–67.

In many aspects of material culture, Parthia is best defined by thinking of it in terms of regionalism. Different pottery types, for instance, can be associated with the different areas. Haerinck proposes five distinct kinds.³⁸ From this limited regional production and distribution one can infer strong local traditions. With the variety of terrain, too, it is natural to find a range of different building materials used, from sun-dried brick to stone rubble. Even within these separate areas, individual approaches were often taken to solve problems, sometimes with disastrous results. Quite definitely, this was a period of experimentation and there were no standards laid down by a central bureaucracy. Choices were dictated by local tradition or taste. It speaks of artistic licence, at times verging on anarchy.

PERSONAL EXPRESSION

The same free-for-all exists in matters of religious expressions. The Parthians can be credited with a relative tolerance of minority religious faiths, and no one practice acquired a dominant position as it did under the Sasanians. Whether this phenomenon stemmed from a position of weakness on the part of the Parthian kings or not, the upshot was that religion tended to take a back seat in the arts. This is not to say that there were no temples or votive objects.



20. Tell-i Badr. Terrace platform in the mountains of Elymais. The Parthians continued the tradition of platform construction developed by the Achaemenians.

After all, perhaps the most famous of all known Parthian monuments is the Temple of Shamash (Sun God) at Hatra (pls. 6, 16–19). But for all their grand size, and for all the decades we know from inscriptions it took to erect them, the monuments at Hatra are human scaled. They are dwarfed by the contemporaneous baroque structures of imperial Rome. And, at Hatra, even though we know (also from inscriptions) that these structures were dedicated to deities, as temples, there is a great deal of ambiguity as to how these monuments operated. There is no justification any more, since the careful work at Hatra of Iraqi archaeologists like Safar, and with the subsequent analyses by Najafy and Al-Salihi,³⁹ to call the central monuments anything but a sacred sanctuary. Clearly the structures are not a palace the way the original German excavators envisaged. But with the votive statuary, the site's most distinctive artwork, religion seems to be merely the vehicle for an individual's self-display. One cannot help but think of the way in which deification of the emperor had become part of the Roman consciousness following Augustus. In one sense the Hatra statues are no more religious in essence than a rock relief depicting the king handing out a fiefdom or lording it over a conquered vassal. As a gesture of self-advertisement, it is the most typical expression of Parthian art. The crude sculptures from the site of Elymais (pls. 20 and 21) belong to the same tradition as the votive statuary from Hatra.⁴⁰ There is a common denominator that links both the plateau and the plains, and allows one to characterise the period by the use of these personal expressions, in spite of the fact that the standards of craftsmanship and modes of presentation may have been so vastly different.



21. Bard-i Nishandeh. Monumental staircase of the terrace, as excavated by Roman Ghirshman, 1975.