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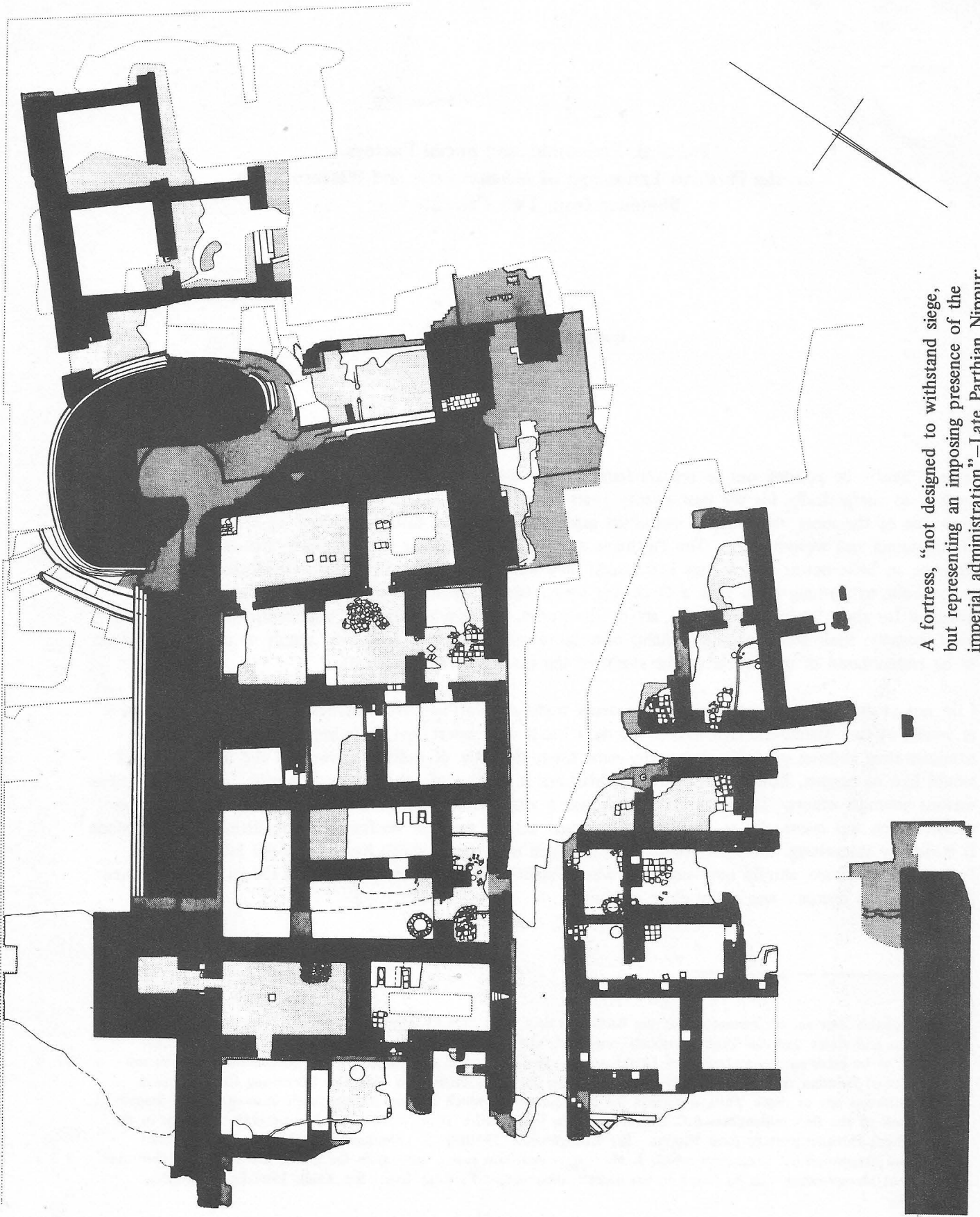
**Political, Economic, and Social Factors
on the Parthian Landscape of Mesopotamia and Western Iran:
Evidence from Two Case Studies**

by
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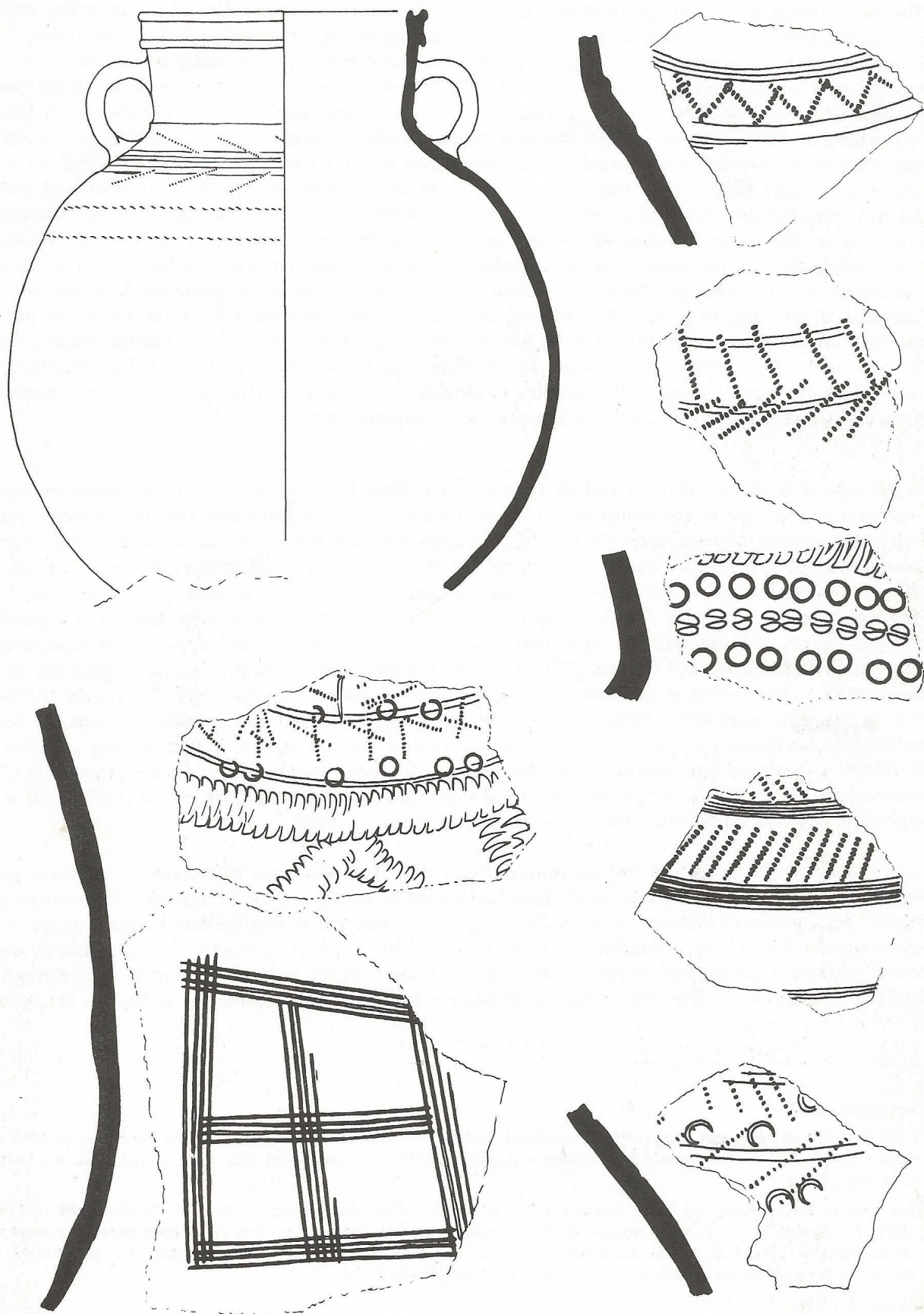
It need hardly be pointed out to readers familiar with the part of the world in which Robert Dyson has worked so energetically for the past twenty years that the Parthian era has for various accidents of fate been one of the most unloved and unstudied aspects of the entire historical period of civilized man in Mesopotamia and western Iran. The Parthians were regarded by their contemporary arch-enemies, the Romans, as little better than savage barbarians; they were looked upon by mediaeval Moslem historians as symbolic of nothing more than a Dark Age which Islam had now gloriously ended; they have been ridiculed for their "debased, oriental" art by the purist, Classical tradition of nineteenth scholarship; and, until recently, their archaeological remains have more often than not been seen simply as an inconvenience to be encountered in the course of the study of the history of earlier epochs.

I do not in any way wish to deny that in many instances Parthian art is at best vigorous and eclectic, at worst, by any standards, atrocious. Nor do I hesitate to assert that their imperial organization and administrative abilities probably deservedly earn them the title of political clowns of the millennium. I would like to suggest, however, that the Parthian era is worthy of considerable attention for two particular reasons amongst others. It is clear that there was a vital cultural tradition emerging in the late Parthian period which was eventually to give Islamic material culture some of its forceful and distinctive expressions.¹ It is doubly interesting, therefore, to observe that this new trend, which has often been labelled as an "orientalising" phase, should have occurred when Parthian political power was at its lowest ebb and when the end of the dynasty was really close at hand.

¹It will probably emerge, for instance, that the Parthians were more directly responsible for the formation of artistic expressions and styles than has been previously suspected, and that the real source of many of these forms which now tend to be credited automatically by Islamicists to vague Byzantine or Sasanian origins should be sought in the expressions of Parthian art. It is a minor point, since the Parthians themselves were also borrowing from the past, but a significant one at that. Thus, a parallel for the *aquamanile* which Richard Ettinghausen observes in the animal-form vessels of the first millennium B.C. of northwestern Iran (Marlik Tepe) can be found more close to home in the (unpublished) Parthian pottery from Nippur. See Ettinghausen, 1969:fig. 7. Similarly, a striking parallel for the intertwined dragon-headed beasts, for which J. M. Rogers mentions many versions in the art of the 10th-13th centuries of northern Mesopotamia, can be found in the stucco ornament of Parthian Iran. See Keall, 1967:fig. 6; Rogers, 1969:154.



A fortress, "not designed to withstand siege, but representing an imposing presence of the imperial administration"—Late Parthian Nippur: Phase II, 1st.-2nd. Cents. A.D. (S. E. Quadrant). Oriental Institute of Chicago Excavations.



Diagnostic Parthian pottery (plain water jars with rocker pattern and stippled designs) enjoying strong regional identity in southern Iraq—from Nippur, 1st.-2nd. Cents. A.D.

The second point worthy of special attention involves the imprecise nature of the Parthian realm, which may in the end help serve as a model for the understanding of regional developments in the earlier historical and pre-historical periods. The very nature of the Parthian empire makes it impossible to identify with confidence an absolutely universal style or cultural expression. If there is something that can be called Parthian culture, it consists of a number of distinct parts, each decidedly different from the other, but making a whole which is certainly the sum of these different parts. As an illustration of this, one can point to the problem encountered by the prehistorian working with a fugitive Parthian level on the top of the mound which often consists of nothing more than a burial layer sunk into earlier wall stubs. All too often the so-called Parthian expert is asked to identify a miserable selection of poorly stratified sherds to provide the prehistorian with a firm terminal date for the occupation of the mound. In fact it is more likely that the prehistorian who, having established a clear typology for the pottery in his area, can isolate and thus label as "Parthian" material which furnishes evidence of distinctive local and regional identities. There may be a marked theoretical correlation in fact, between the way in which, for instance, the Parthian pottery of Azerbaijan may be found to be different from that of the Luristan valleys and the way in which a distinct boundary can be established for the distribution of Yanik Tepe black-burnished ware. In these terms a ceramic distribution can identify a cultural and social entity. In the context of historical archaeology, it may also reflect a political or administrative unity.

In this light it is obvious that the sort of social study promoted by Leo Widengren² in which he attempts to present an overview of the feudal society of pre-Islamic Iran has questionable validity. A major part of Widengren's treatise is based upon the text of a Parthian historical legend and he extracts nuances from it about the nature of Parthian feudal organization, but as conceived by ninth century writers. The use, too, of an admittedly "archaic" Shahnameh vocabulary of the eleventh century to apply retroactively to the pre-Islamic era has little value for the social scientist. The study ignores what must have been a constantly changing pattern of social concepts, as different figures dominated the political scene and as imperial aspirations variously flourished and declined. The handful of contemporary inscriptions that is available for the illumination of the periods in question can only be taken to apply to the time when they were written. Even at that they were often, presumably, put out by parties who might be tempted to distort the real picture for propaganda purposes. Given the present state of Parthian studies, it is misleading and even dangerous to condense into one statement this haphazardly preserved selection of isolated fragments of information. Only when a compendium exists of exhaustively completed individual case studies will it be possible to describe satisfactorily the whole horizon of the social scene.³

Having laboured the idea about the inadequacy of our data it behooves me to present a few salient points which emerge from case studies presently being conducted or in the process of analysis. Excavations at Nippur⁴ have produced evidence of an intensive building programme during the late Parthian period between approximately the mid-first to mid-second century A.D. This phase of development corresponds to the general pattern of growth and investment observed by Robert Adams and Hans Nissen in their surveys of the Uruk countryside.⁵ The reasons for the investment in general, or in particular at Nippur, are by no

²Widengren, 1956.

³I should point out hurriedly that there are a limited number of excellent historical case studies which can be used for these purposes. The most noteworthy of these is Neusner, 1967. Also useful, for data on a limited scale, for instance, is Neusner, 1963.

⁴The Fourth, Sixth, Ninth and Tenth Seasons at Nippur conducted by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1953-67. This writer is currently engaged in the preparation for the Oriental Institute Publication series a monograph on the Parthian Citadel at Nippur, including the remains of the Inanna Temple and the Fortress. For preliminary additional information see Crawford, 1959; Knudstad, 1968; Keall, 1975b.

⁵Adams & Nissen, 1972:57-58.

means clearly proven. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that at Nippur, at least, the apogee of the development coincides with the circulation in the area of coins, struck not only by the King of Kings, Vologases II, but also by the enigmatic character of King Osroes.⁶

Now the significance of this phenomenon is that the striking of coins was normally the prerogative of the King of Kings, with the privilege extended under special circumstances to municipalities which acquired a degree of self-rule,⁷ or to vassal princes or kings who maintained essentially independent realms. Osroes was recognized by the Romans as their main opponent at the time of the invasion of Parthia by Trajan in 116 A.D.⁸ But for Osroes to have been a rebel makes no sense. For Osroes struck no tetradrachms which would have been the normal sign of his claiming the throne of the King of Kings. Furthermore, his own throne and his daughter were captured by the Romans in Ctesiphon, which is presumably an indication that Osroes' presence in the capital was welcomed or at least tolerated by Vologases, the theoretical real King of Kings. Since Osroes' coins occur with great frequency in and around Nippur, but not to the exclusion of those of Vologases, an alternative explanation can be hypothesized. The circulation of coins of Osroes and Vologases in Babylonia suggests a degree of mutual recognition. If Osroes had been a rebel it would have been more logical for the Romans to have welcomed the overtures of his embassy in Athens before the war and to have attacked the vulnerable under-belly of Parthia by an alliance with him, in the same way that during the invasion they joined up with the Characeniens at the head of the Persian Gulf.⁹

It should be stated now quite strongly, too, that in military terms the Parthian fortress at Nippur would never have been suitable to withstand siege or to operate as a stronghold in an hostile environment. The type of structure does not seem to have been appropriate for a rebel stronghold. Neither is it evident that it was a frontier post, nor that it lay in any significant way along a highway or other important line of communication.¹⁰ The most feasible explanation for the complex of structures at Nippur is that they represent a strong presence of the imperial administration, impressive because of its imposing dimensions, but nonetheless not a fortress in the military sense of the word. Without the presence of the garrison, executing the will of the administration, the area would have remained a "frontier of settlement," to use Robert Adams' definition of the words.¹¹ In that sense, Nippur would have remained a small, isolated site, sparsely inhabited and only minimally tied to others in the area by virtue of vague connections of kinship or way of life. For, in general, when the central government was unable to impose itself sufficiently well on a region there was a tendency for local figures to assert themselves more strongly. A good example

⁶For a discussion of the problems of the chronology of the period involved and, in particular, for the numismatic evidence see Keall, 1975a; 1975b.

⁷In this way, for example, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris issued municipal bronze coins from the inception of Parthian rule in Mesopotamia until the prerogative was removed, following civic disturbances, in the early mid-first century A.D. See McDowell, 1935:218 sqq.

⁸For pertinent references on the lives of Osroes and Trajan see Lepper, 1948; Keall, 1975b. One of the additional problems centering on the matter of Osroes' official position involves the questionable nature of the Chronicle of Arbela, since the latter text has, in the past, provided pertinent information. But, following the conclusions of Fiey, the text cannot be used as documentary evidence for the period it claims to represent. See Fiey, 1967.

⁹Nodelman, 1960:110.

¹⁰Unfortunately, there is no clear evidence as to the exact route taken by the celebrated caravan traffic of the first and second centuries A.D. Presumably a number of alternatives were feasible, including using the Euphrates either to navigate as a water course or as a natural feature to follow on land. The problem of the varying locations of the lakes and marshes in southern Iraq complicates matters. A lake could alternatively be either a barrier or a natural means of communication. For a hypothetical reconstruction of the ancient watercourses in southern Iraq, see Gibson, 1972:maps 2-9.

¹¹Adams, 1972:passim.

of this is the case of the two robber barons, Anilai and Asinai,¹² whom Artabanus finally accommodated in his realm by offering the legitimate title to controlling the region on behalf of the King of Kings. Although in his opposition to Trajan Osroes can be judged to have been acting in a spirit of cooperation with the King of Kings, it is also apparent that he would never have acquired such strong influence in Babylonia at that time had it not been for his own association with the Kingdom of Elymais, which had earlier begun to assert itself more vigorously in the area of Susiana at the expense of that royal Parthian province.¹³

The sort of investment for which Adams has produced evidence in the Uruk countryside in the late Parthian period can perhaps be interpreted as originating as an attempt on the part of Vologases I to consolidate his empire after a number of striking territorial losses, including halting the northern encroachment of Characene into the reaches of southern Parthia.¹⁴ The Parthians had also demonstrated a marked inability to control the growing lucrative international trade. This is reflected to some extent in the dramatic decline in the silver standard of the currency, an inflation possibly caused both by excessive military exploits and by bad trade management. Vologases' foundation of the New Town of Vologasias is often regarded as an attempt on the part of the King of Kings to take the management of commerce out of the hands of independent groups.¹⁵ The Parthian fortress at Nippur was probably only one of many such comparable sites, as evidenced by the number of massive late Parthian mounds in southern Babylonia. It was an expression of a strong government presence, a "citadel" in the peaceful sense, dominating the countryside but not a bastion against siege.

Vologases' original intention in sponsoring development in "the South" was possibly two-fold, namely, to consolidate the frontier regions of his empire and to bolster a faltering imperial economy by intensive agricultural development. In the course of time Osroes became identified with the South as a local figure who asserted himself at a time when the imperial court was plagued by troubles closer to home and was unable to dominate absolutely the local scene. A worsening of the political situation in the Parthian capital, the loss of trade revenues as Palmyrene merchants began to establish a virtual monopoly over the Euphrates caravan traffic, and the final suicidal attempt on the part of Parthia to challenge the Roman position in Syria¹⁶ — all these factors forced Parthia to concentrate her efforts on the western physical frontier, resulting in the abandonment of the South to its former self-sufficient status. Following the Adams "frontier of settlement" theory, the official Parthian presence would have been reduced, with the local population returning to its more traditional herding role, without strong international contacts and trade, but with adequate prosperity at an individual level. It is here, then, in this context that one can seek to trace the preservation and subsequent emergence from "underground" of that vital element of material culture (referred to earlier) when urban forces called for "new" artistic expressions. In other words it is in this more loosely organised, non-urbanised milieu that one might seek to find the preservation of the traditional

¹²For a summary of Josephus' fascinating account of the two Jewish runaway weavers who turned cattle thieves and were then recognised officially as barons, see Neusner, 1967:51.

¹³For the hypothetical expansion of Elymais at the expense of the nominally Parthian province of Susiana see Le Rider, 1965:425 sqq.

¹⁴See Kahrstedt, 1950: maps 1-2; Keall, 1975b:figs. 3-4.

¹⁵The exact identities of these independent groups, whether consisting of the Greek or Persian aristocracy or of the Aramaean-speaking middle class, does not concern us unduly here. For the conflicting theories on their identities see McDowell, 1935:229; Neusner, 1967:55. The exact geographical position of Vologasias has also been the subject of debate, but a fairly convincing argument has been made for its location quite close to Seleucia. See Maricq, 1959.

¹⁶The desperate attempt of the Parthians to control Syria and the trade routes backfired, with the Romans mounting an expedition under Lucius Verus in A.D. 165. Subsequent disturbances along the Euphrates corridor crippled the trade and may have hastened the ultimate demise of the Parthian regime. On the question of Palmyrene domination of the trade routes and the conditions which prompted the Parthians to react so strongly see Mouterde & Poidebard, 1931:113-15; Rostovtzeff, 1932:110; Will, 1957:264.

art forms on a "folk" level. It may not be irrelevant to suggest that the reasons why many of the art forms of this type were so appealing to patrons in the tenth through thirteenth centuries was that the backgrounds of many of the persons involved then were also essentially "frontiers of settlement."

Preliminary work at the site of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird presents an entirely different picture.¹⁷ There can be no doubting the stronghold nature of the site. Everything about the military fortifications speaks of a real bastion against the threat of attack. Careful provisions were taken to fortify every scalable portion of the protective escarpment, as well as to establish an intricate network of lookout posts and forts. There are a number of hypothetical situations under which the construction of such an elaborate system of fortifications could have been conceived. It should be stated first, however, that the site was not simply a military fortress. The lavishness of the stuccoed pavilion and its garden of paradise or hunting park speak, rather, of the presence of an important dignitary. The site appears to have been the estate of an as yet unidentified personage, either royal, noble or self-styled baron.

The nature of the site does not seem to make it appropriate for the temporary or even seasonal hunting camp of a prince or a king. Provisions for a game park could just as easily have been provided much nearer to home, whether that was down on the plains near Qasr-i Shirin or in the direction of modern Kermanshah. A basic assumption made here is that a permanent residence of a king would have attracted a much larger urban agglomeration around it than is at all apparent in the remains at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird. Even if this hypothetical royal hunter were to have felt the need to indulge in a real "safari" away from home, there would have been no necessity for him to have taken such elaborate precautions during his temporary stay. If there was such a need, he should never have left home. One must seek the explanation for the site outside of the sphere of royal activity.

One cannot avoid the obvious connection between the site and the main highway running close by. The highway climbs onto the Iranian plateau at this point, ascending the first major ledge of the mountains by way of a pass which, because of its singular importance, has earned for itself the title of "Zagros Gates."¹⁸ A reasonable interpretation of the role played by Qal'eh-i Yazdigird is that, in connection with control of the traffic along the highway,¹⁹ the site could have served as a bastion against the perennially unruly tribes of the interior. By keeping marauders from gaining easy access to the road it would have preserved the wealth of the revenues of the caravan traffic for the royal crown. The site does control access to the highground, and is equally well protected from an attack from that direction by virtue of the defensive network of forts which dominates the cliffs above the main part of the settlement.

Even more so, one cannot avoid the distinct feeling that Qal'eh-i Yazdigird dominates the highroad rather than the hinterland. By far the greater part of the defences is oriented towards, and therefore against, the

¹⁷The project was initiated in 1967 under the auspices of the British Institute of Persian Studies and now, since 1975, is currently being conducted by the Royal Ontario Museum. Originally deduced to be Sasanian on the basis of the surface pottery and the style of the masonry, the site now emerges as one of Parthian date. The once-termed "archaic, Parthianising" elements of the stucco decoration can now legitimately be deemed to be Parthian in their own right. The Sasanian occupation at the site is perhaps limited to the scale of a village after the site had ceased to be occupied in the way that was originally intended. A refinement of the date may alter some of the historical nuances, but it is unlikely that the interpretation of the role played by the site will change drastically, so long as it is to be viewed in the context of Parthian history. See Keall, 1967; 1972; 1976; 1976b.

¹⁸The pass was called the Median Gates by Eratosthenes; the 'Aqabat Hulwan by the Arabs (Hulwan is modern Sar Pul-i Zohab); and Herzfeld called it the natural frontier of Iran. Herzfeld, 1968:11, 23, with refs.

¹⁹There is a basic assumption, here, that the highway did serve as the major trade route from Mesopotamia to Iran in the Parthian period, cf. Schoff, 1914. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that, during the as yet undetermined time that Qal'eh-i Yazdigird flourished as a settlement, the extent of trade along this particular route is by no means clearly established.

lowlands and Mesopotamia. The entire approach and ascent towards the Zagros Gates would have been under the direct supervision and control of whoever sat up in this mountain fastness, secure in splendid isolation from the immediate vicinity of the highway. This is a most logical position for a rebel fortress. Its occupants would have been able to plunder the highroad at will, without fear of reprisal by punitive expeditions sent out from a weak Parthian capital. This is, after all, the land of Iran—home of independent Parthian princes, of whom Ardashir was merely the most successful of all the aspirants to the Parthian throne. His creation of a new (Sasanian) dynasty was merely the inevitable force which, sooner or later, was to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Parthian power base.

In this light, the resident of the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird stronghold—whether dissident noble or self appointed baron—can be seen as maintaining himself in style, aping the fashions of the imperial court, and indulging in the delights of imported and stolen luxuries. A Persian garden of paradise is hardly the place where one would expect to find a pavilion with pitched roof and pantiles, something one would normally associate with the western, Classical world. Vaults and domes would be the more normal thing to expect. But the existence of these imported expressions, exotic as they were in an era when the West was the great enemy, reflect an eclectic taste of the sort referred to earlier in this article. It is this taste which gives such a distinctive and unique flavour to Qal'eh-i Yazdigird and makes it impossible to use the site as a typical example of a Parthian settlement. The phenomenon of the existence of the site can, however, be deemed to be typical of that period.

Nippur and Qal'eh-i Yazdigird, almost contemporary with one another but both quite dissimilar in the nature of their fortress forms and functions, hint at the potential variety of the settlements of the Parthian empire and emphasize the need for more case studies which will permit one to formulate a more accurate picture of the various forces at work on the Parthian landscape.

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