

# AfarinNameh

Essays on the Archaeology of Iran in Honour of Mehdi Rahbar

Edited by: YOUSEF MORADI

With the assistance of Susan Cantan, Edward J. Keall and Rasoul Boroujeni



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# Power Fluctuations in Parthian Government: Some Case Examples

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**Abstract:** The rulers of the Parthian Empire between the time of its 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE inception to its 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE termination enjoyed varying degrees of power. Ironically, in times of weakness, the honorific titles claimed by them tended to become more grand. Over the course of time there were many struggles for control of the imperial throne. At times, regional attempts to secede or secure autonomy threatened the Parthian state's integrity; Roman attempts to manipulate to its advantage the kingdom of Armenia were the basis of major confrontation with Parthia. Yet the Parthian empire lasted for over three centuries. It is suggested here that the lack of a strongly centralised Parthian government may have allowed the state to survive. This article presents case examples to illustrate moments when there was significant division in the powers of the central authority. One also has to acknowledge the truth in the adage that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". Parthian coins give us unequivocal evidence for the change from the titular use of 'king' as a royal title to that of 'king of kings'. As an expedient measure, when Artabanus III failed to diffuse an extortionist racket in Babylonia, he resorted to diplomacy and appointed the two dissident brothers as governors. The actions of Osroes in attempting to negotiate with the Roman emperor Trajan has been taken by some to imply he was a rebel. But one could also argue that he was acting on behalf of the crown, as a royal delegate. The site of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird has been judged to have been the stronghold of a warlord who extracted tolls from the caravan traffic along the Silk Road. A nearby rock-relief, which depicts a standing figure saluting a horseman, has been taken to commemorate the act of a royal authority acknowledging the warlord's control over the highway route towards the Zagros Gates.

**Keywords:** Parthian empire, king of kings, rebel king, warlord, stronghold, Zagros Gates.

## Preamble

I had the pleasure of encountering Mehdi Rahbar for the first time in 1975 when he joined the expedition of the Royal Ontario Museum to Qal'eh-i Yazdigird in Kermanshah province as that season's Representative from the Iranian Archaeological Service (Fig. 1). We benefitted from the fact that Mehdi accepted readily an active role in the site excavation work. Regrettably, my own

active archaeological fieldwork in Iran was abruptly terminated in February 1979 with establishment of the regime of the new Islamic Republic of Iran. Seeking an alternative base for my archaeological activity, I shifted focus to the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) which soon absorbed all of my energy and resources. I did publish articles on the results of the last season of work at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird (Keall 1982). But apart from encyclopedia



Fig. 1 Mehdi Rahbar and members of the 1975 Canadian Expedition.

entries, contributions to ‘pot-boiler’ volumes on Iranian art, and popular magazine articles, I was not active further with any extensive publication of our findings.

However, when Yousef Moradi asked me to be one of his PhD thesis supervisors in 2014, I had the benefit of being drawn back into contemplating the Iranian archaeological scene. Collaborating with Yousef helped especially for me to learn about what had been accomplished by the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization in their program at Qal‘eh-i Yazdigird between 2007-2010. Ironically, it is the current tragic insecurity in Yemen that has prevented my continuing fieldwork there, but it has given me an opportunity and incentive to use energy to make more available to a wide audience a lot more of the facts and figures about our work in Iran that lie buried hidden in the Royal Ontario Museum archive housed in Toronto. At the same time, I have had the opportunity to revisit (in my mind) the site of Qal‘eh-i Yazdigird and its remains, modifying to an extent some of the interpretations that I had made before new facts came to light.

I am delighted to find that the Parthians have received considerable attention since the time of my own studies in the 1970s, but I am acutely embarrassed by the fact that I am hopelessly out-of-date with the current published record. In this article dedicated to Mehdi Rahbar I make no pretense towards trying to evaluate how others have

recently defined Parthian government, because in reality there can be no simple definition anyway. To attempt a comprehensive overview would be a monumental task, albeit a noble effort in that direction has been made by Stefan Hauser (Hauser 2013). The fact is that Parthia was not a monolithic state, nor static. Power struggles to rule the state were common throughout most of its life; the territories actually administered directly from the capital varied with time; weakness on the part of the central government meant increasing degrees of autonomy or even independence for peripheral areas. Essentially this article presents a number of incidents (mostly published separately by me elsewhere) that can be used to support this position, and applies that theory in offering an interpretation for the remarkable Parthian-era remains to be found at the site of Qal‘eh-i Yazdigird.

### **The Parthian state**

The first monarch to expand substantially a Parthian state in Iran did so at the expense of Seleucid suzerainty over that territory. Around 155 BCE, Mithradates I forcibly occupied the region of Media in western Iran (centred on the ancient city of Ecbatana / modern Hamadan). Then, in 141 BCE he captured the old Macedonian capital of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in Mesopotamia. At this point we may legitimately define the Parthian state as that of an ‘empire’, which Mithradates ruled until 132 BCE.

On coins struck by the royal mint, Mithradates bore the simple honorific title of *Basileōs Arsākou* (King Arsaces, see Fig. 2). It was he who began the practice of having the Parthian king simply called 'Arsacid'—that is, he traced his royal inheritance back to Arsaces, the legendary founder of the Parthian state of the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. A subsequent successor to Mithradates, Mithradates II (ruled 124/3-88/7 BCE) expanded Parthian territory considerably. But he faced serious security problems in the form of secessionist movements on both the eastern and southern fringes of the empire. Nonetheless—and perhaps in fact because of it—Mithradates claimed the title of *Basileōs Megalou Arsākou* (Great King Arsaces, see Fig. 3), alluding perhaps to the powerful authority implied in the old Achaemenid Persian honorific title of 'king of kings'. One may legitimately argue that Mithradates adopted the title as a standard protocol formula, part of a program devised to re-claim authority in the territories that the Achaemenids had once held in their powerful prime. One may reasonably argue also that this significant change in title protocol was being coined literally as a propagandistic way of enhancing the image of what in reality was a monarch facing difficulty in keeping the expanded Parthian empire intact. There are plenty of modern analogies that where state rulers—such as the 'Supreme Leader' of North Korea—are tempted to adopt this kind of approach, to better their image in the eyes of the people.

There are some sporadic examples of how Mithradates II even actually used occasionally the old Achaemenid title of *Basileōs Basileōn* (King of Kings), as did some of his immediate successors. But it was Orodes II who adopted it consistently after around 57 BCE, whereafter it became the standard Parthian formula (Fig. 4), along with permanent use of the term *Philhellene* (Friend of the Greeks)—a conciliatory gesture to buy the political support of the Macedonian Greek settlers in Mesopotamia. The term had originally been coined by Mithradates after his capture of the old capital of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in 141 BCE, but it was not used consistently until the time of Orodes (ruled ca. 57-38 BCE).

Western scholarship of the past two centuries (often heavily influenced by British and French world policies and attitudes of the time) has generally tended towards thinking of 'empire' in the ancient world as a meritorious system of government. Obviously, this reflects the position of how the British and French saw their empires as justified. The very



Fig. 2 Tetradrachm of Mithradates I.



Fig. 3 Tetradrachm of Mithradates II.



Fig. 4 Tetradrachm of Orodes II.

concept that an empire has weakened clearly carries with it the connotation that it was better when it was strong. From that perspective, anything that reflects internal opposition to imperial rule is usually judged as 'rebellion' or 'secession'. In today's news media parlance, 'insurgency' implies undesirable insurrection against incumbent governmental control of a country or region. But it is fair to counter this attitude by citing the idea that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter". In South Africa, Nelson Mandela was seen by the Apartheid regime for some time as a terrorist, until eventually he became the father of a new nation; Robert Mugabe was initially a freedom fighter against the white supremacist government of Southern Rhodesia, though he later turned Zimbabwe into what many judge as a pariah state; in the USA, the Black Panthers promoted creditable programs of social justice, although they were seen by the American establishment as dangerous extremists. One has to measure 'insecurity' by different standards.

### **Civil war in Parthian Babylonia**

No one can deny that the Parthian empire did not experience from time to time serious insurrections. To illustrate this point, it is useful to read a passage in the text of 'Jewish Antiquities' by Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (Neusner 1956: 51; Fowler 2007: 147-162). Josephus relates an account from 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Babylonia (part of the Parthian empire) where it is possible to judge the events described from two different points of view—either as 'acts of banditry', or as 'protection of a person's civil rights'. The story describes how two Jewish brothers—Asinai and Anilai—were apprenticed as weavers in to-day's southern Iraq. Feeling they had been subjected to injustices by their master who beat them for their laziness, they stole some weapons from him and ran away, setting up camp in the Euphrates marshes. They attracted to their cause a number of Jews who had grievances of their own. From their fortified base, the brothers operated what can be seen from one point of view to be an extortion racket, demanding pay-offs from local herdsmen for 'protection'.

The Parthian satrap of Babylonia failed to dislodge them by force, despite launching an attack on the Sabbath, when the dissidents were expected to be unwilling to take up arms. In response to this failure of direct confrontation, Artabanus III (the Parthian king, ruled ca. 12-38 CE) sensibly resorted to diplomacy to solve the crisis. The king assigned Asinai responsibility for governing the region's affairs. The 'extortionists' were now 'governors'. The diplomatic settlement brought a superficial quiet to southern Babylonia for some time.

It was irreligious and indiscrete behaviour on the part of Anilai that brought about the eventual demise of the brothers' operation. Anilai had married the wife of an Arsacid general he had killed, adopting her 'foreign' religion. This estranged him from his fellow Jewish community which protested to Asinai about it, but the latter took no action. As it happens, he was poisoned by his brother's wife who feared Asinai might turn against her, and Anilai now became leader of the maverick group. Anilai's downfall came as a result of a raid he made on the property of a member of the royal family in Babylonia, humiliating the people he vanquished. In a renewed attempt at revenge by the vanquished, with Anilai having lost his supporters' readiness to resist, a military invasion brought about the defeat of Anilai and terminated this interlude of local anarchy/autonomy. In the end, Anilai was murdered

by the native Aramaean residents of Babylonia. Yet the fact that the anomalous situation lasted for fifteen years serves well to illustrate how the Parthian imperial territorial control was not always universal and infinite.

A significant sequel to the story is that with strong authority of Asinai and Anilai removed, the Aramaeans of Babylonia felt free to harass the Jewish communities in the region, prompting them in 33 CE to flee. The harassed Jews found refuge in Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, the old Seleucid capital, where initially they may have found some commonalities with the Aramaean residents there whom Josephus calls "Syrians" (labelled by Tacitus as "the Populace"). Seemingly, the Greek-speaking residents (called "Hellenes" by Josephus) had been given favoured status by Artabanus III, enjoying a Senate of three hundred wealthy citizens; the Populace had a Peoples' Assembly, with lesser powers.

That situation changed when Artabanus III was temporarily ousted as king of Parthia around 35 CE. A pretender to the throne (Tiridates) was installed on the throne around 36 CE with the backing of the Roman governor of Syria. Tiridates reversed the previous policy concerning the administration of Seleucia, choosing to side with the Populace. As a result, the Hellenes felt disempowered; there was civil war in Seleucia for seven years (McDowell 1972: 151, 159-160). It is hard to extract from the written sources exactly what did go on, but during this time there was a massacre in Seleucia of the Jews who had fled there from Babylonia. Seemingly the Hellenes had somehow managed to get a reconciliation with the Populace, probably due to a common cause against the Arsacid nobility. The issue was only finally settled in CE 43 by Vardanes I (ruled ca. 40-45 CE) who, after forcing the subjugation of Seleucia, concentrated increasingly more Parthian administrative activity in Ctesiphon on the east bank of the Tigris. Ctesiphon was originally only a Parthian military camp and royal winter residence; from now onwards it was the real Parthian capital.

### **Power struggles in Parthia**

The extent to which the Parthian kings were able to keep the empire together is one of the leading questions for our understanding of the last two centuries of Parthian history. It has been argued here that the civil war in Seleucia-on-the-Tigris can be regarded as an attempt on the part of the Greek-speaking inhabitants to regain some of the political

ground they were losing, after originally having been awarded a considerable degree of local autonomy—a move designed on the part of the Parthian state to buy the allegiance of the conquered Greeks. On their coins—as explained above—the Parthian kings used the term *‘Philhellene’* to underline this positioning (Fig. 4). But, seemingly, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE both the Aramaic-speaking residents of Babylonia and the Arsacid nobility were increasing their influence.

In addition, as the Roman state inexorably expanded its influence eastwards, military conflicts also arose between Parthia and Rome over who had the right to dominate the politics of Armenia. What was judged by Rome to be interference in Armenia by Parthia, when Vologases I of Parthia installed another Tiridates (his brother) on the Armenian throne in 52 CE, sparked a contracted war. The conflict dragged on for years, culminating only in an ambitious Armenian campaign sponsored by the Roman Emperor Nero and led by his general Corbulo, when eventually convenient diplomatic accommodations between the two sides were reached. This included the compromise agreed upon in 66 CE that Tiridates should travel to Rome to be crowned by the Emperor in person as king of Armenia (Bivar 1983: 81-85).

The area of Parthia that was truly controlled by the King of Kings shrank considerably between the time of Artabanus II (ca.10-38 CE) and Vologases I (ca.50-76 CE) (Fig. 5, and Keall 1975a: fig. 3). One of the reasons for this stems from the fact that there increasingly power struggles for control of the Parthian capital. After Artabanus, two figures minted royal tetradrachms in exactly the same year, both claiming to be ‘king of kings’. The tetradrachms bore the personal names of two brothers, Gotarzes II and Vardanes II. The individual names in Greek script of both figures claiming to be the supreme monarch are quite clear, as is the date of minting that is given as a year in the Seleucid era calendar: 355 SE—43/44 CE. One may conclude that this represents rivalry, namely that two individuals were contesting possession of the Parthian throne. Though one may also suggest that it reflects, perhaps, an act of power-sharing, where two individuals—albeit rivals—agreed to share the supreme royal authority. This would imply, of course, that the value of the term ‘king of kings’ had by this time become rather meaningless.

The same situation can be documented in the following decade. In 362 SE—50/51 CE Vologases I had come to power with the acquiescence of

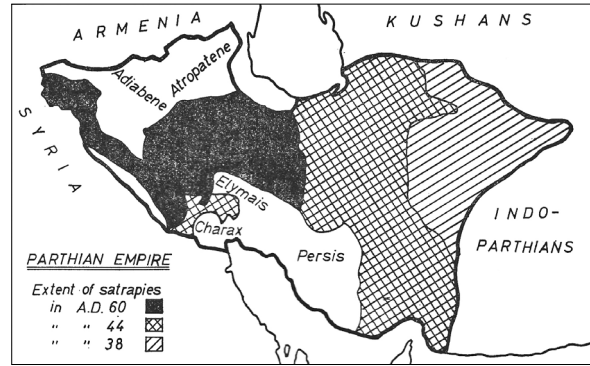


Fig. 5 Map showing shrinkage of the Parthian state.



Fig. 6 Tetradrachm of Vologases II.



Fig. 7 Tetradrachm of a young Pacorus II.

his brothers. But shortly thereafter he had to face the revolt of his brother Vardanes who struck tetradrachms in the capital for four years beginning in 366 SE—54/55 CE, until Vologases was able to reclaim the throne.

The third twist in the sense of what it meant to be ‘king of kings’ occurred in the year 389 SE—77/78 CE. In this case it was Vologases II and a young Pacorus II (his uncle) who both claimed the title King of Kings (Keall 1975b: 20-21). The different identity of these two figures is quite clear, since now as usual their personal names are on the coins (Figs. 6-7). The coins of both figures were struck in the same month of that year; the fabric of both issues of tetradrachms is identical, which indicates that both sets of coins were minted in the Parthian capital. Yet the portraits of the kings are quite different. There is no question that two totally different people are represented. Both kings had tetradrachms minted





Fig. 8 Tetradrachm of a mature Pacorus II.



Fig. 9 Drachm of Osroes.

in the following year as well (390 SE—78/79 CE). In 391 SE Pacorus again had tetradrachms struck, but a third figure (Artabanus IV) also appears on the scene, having his own tetradrachms struck for two years. But then Pacorus managed to seize power exclusively (in 393 SE—80/81 CE), remaining the sole king of kings for a long time, striking coins until 406 SE—94/95 CE). Interestingly, on his early issues he is portrayed without a beard, a clear indication of his youth (Fig. 7). It is noteworthy that at that time he was clearly much younger than his nephew. In time he was shown progressively more bearded, eventually (beginning in 404 SE—92/93 CE) sporting a magnificent full beard, as well as a grand tiara (Fig. 8), trying to capture some of the respect that was once associated with the King of Kings. During the course of his struggle for supremacy he was also depicted receiving the royal diadem while on horseback—a posture that likely reflects victory over a rival.

### Osroes, rebel king or royal delegate?

We look now at another situation where the rule of authority does not mesh thoroughly with the standard interpretation of what a 'strong empire' should be like. Excavations conducted by the University of Chicago, at the site of Nippur in southern Iraq in the 1960s, exposed from Parthian times a temple dedicated to the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Inanna (Keall 1994: 264-265, figs. 5-6; 2014/15). The Parthian-era temple was the uppermost in a long series of temples superimposed one above another going back to Ur III time (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE). The Parthian temple was built using a layout pattern that very much reflects an ancient Babylonian temple plan. Some of the cultic features in the Parthian Inanna temple—such as offering tables in the inner chambers of small shrine units—also reflect the same ancient Babylonian practices that are reflected in the temples exposed below the Parthian one.

But, in late Parthian Nippur, there is also a military

fortress that is adjacent to and contemporary with the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE Inanna temple. The military fortress was built using totally different layout principles, including extensive use of *eywan* halls—architectural features that are specifically to be associated with Iranian building traditions (Keall 1994: 266, figs. 7-8). The implication is that some authority with close ties to Iran chose to establish a military presence at Nippur, while maintaining respect for the local culture, allowing the Inanna Temple to continue to operate. One may go a step further and reasonably argue that a number of Babylonian residents were enrolled to man the Parthian military garrison in the fortress. For, even in the fortress, some of the residential units that were suitable for an officer's family had cultic offering tables replicating those found in the Inanna temple. What, then, was the source of this military investment in late Parthian Nippur?

One suggestion of an appropriate time period for this hypothetical venture emerges from specific measures taken by the Parthian King of Kings Vologases I (ruled 51-77 CE). The founding by him of a new city in Babylonia (called Vologasias) is generally taken to reflect attempts on his part to halt the decline of Parthian authority in southern Mesopotamia and re-establish control over the Euphrates trade corridor. In 1975 I interpreted this as part of a 'southern strategy' that was sponsored by Vologases to counter in the Persian Gulf commercial traffic the increasing presence of Palmyrene merchants, who were by-passing the established trade station of Dura-Europos in Syria, by means of their own routes across the desert (Keall 1975a).

One of the puzzles in the Nippur story is the fact that a lot of coins recovered through archaeological work there in the last century and a half were issued by the figure of Osroes. He did not issue silver tetradrachms—the standard official coins of the Parthian royal regime. His coins are often of bronze, though he did issue silver drachms. But the absence of tetradrachms implies that he had no position of authority in the capital based in Mesopotamia

(for drachms circulated mainly in the Iranian highlands). Osroes is immediately recognisable from his distinctive hairstyle, with its exaggerated side bunches of hair reminiscent of the later classic Sasanian hairstyle (Fig. 9). His portrait is quite different from that of the contemporary so-called Parthian Kings of Kings.

Osroes is known to us from historical texts as having led an embassy to the military camp of the Roman emperor Trajan in Athens in 113 CE, on the eve of the latter's planned invasion of Parthia, which was finally launched from Antioch in 116 CE (Keall 1975b: 22-23). Osroes' embassy in Athens was treated with disdain by Trajan. Osroes' initiative is usually judged by western scholarship to reflect an attempt by a Parthian subversive to gain influence with Trajan on the eve of the Roman invasion. But the fact that Osroes' golden throne, as well as his daughter, were both seized by Trajan's forces when they entered the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon in 116 CE seems to imply that Osroes' relationship with the Parthian state should not be seen as one of conflict. Surely if he was a rebel aspiring to seize power, he would neither have been able, nor wanted to maintain a residence in the capital. How, then, can we explain this discrepancy?

### **Kings and Kings of Kings**

At this point, it may be useful to refer to the Pahlevi chronicle of the *Kārnāmag-i Ardashīr-i Pābagān*, which helps us better understand the nature of Parthian government in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. The text speaks briefly of Iranian government after the death of Alexander as being comprised of two hundred and forty figures who were designated as *kadag-khwadāy*, literally meaning "master of the house" (Antia 1900: ch.1, sect.1). To-day that term is equivalent in modern Persian to the word *kad-khodāh*, which refers to a village or district headman. In 3<sup>rd</sup> century Parthian Iran it is possible to suggest the idea of something like the position of authority enjoyed by 'lords' in 16<sup>th</sup> century Elizabethan England. The term implies the authority to govern a region, recognised by the central government, with those appointees often being members of the royal family. In Elizabethan England those lords often had responsibility for raising and financing armies on behalf of the monarch. A critical point is that these figures were recognised by the central ruling authority, mainly appointed by that state.

In Parthian history there is a good example of

this kind of role that the commander of the House of Suren played on behalf of king Orodes II in the famous battle of Carrhae, in 54 BCE, where Roman Crassus was so dramatically defeated and mutilated (Bivar 1983: 49-56). But Surenas was himself subsequently executed by Orodes, seemingly because of the latter's suspicion of his successful general's ambitions. It is easy to envisage other situations in Parthia where officially recognised rulers conceived ambitious plans to seize more power. Also, local figures without authority assigned by the central government might find ways to exploit weaknesses in the state to their own advantage.

Besides the revealing information about the Parthian state as just spelled out, we have the additional evidence from Roman writers (such as Pliny) who speak of eighteen 'kingdoms' in Parthia (eleven of them in the "upper" regions, seven of them in the "lower" parts). So, following the *Karnāmag*, and with the help of Pliny and numismatic evidence, we have a Parthian 'king of kings' ruling by means of provincial satraps, eighteen autonomous 'vice-regents' of autonomous kingdoms, and two hundred and forty 'lords'. In addition, in early Parthian times there were autonomous city-states (such as Seleucia-on-the-Tigris) which were awarded this status in response to the fact that (as described earlier) the Parthian conquerors in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE felt they needed to accommodate the Macedonians originally settled there by Alexander the Great. In time, this independent status was gradually reduced, but the arrangement lasted well into the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.

### **Parthian warlord at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird<sup>1</sup>**

It is in light of the thesis presented here so far that we can try to evaluate the character of the person who sponsored in the late Parthian era in western Iran an extraordinary stronghold. It consisted of a network

1. Strictly speaking, use of this toponym is a misnomer. There are number of toponyms applied by the local inhabitants to different ruins on the Ban Zardeh tableland that encompasses twenty-five square kilometres of terrain. In that context, the name "Qal'eh-i Yazdigird" really refers only to a defensive pinnacle-top fort that overlooks the tableland (for other toponyms, see Keall 1982: 52, fig.1). Out of expediency, however, the name Qal'eh-i Yazdigird was applied by me in 1965 to all of the archaeological remains on the tableland when I submitted a request to the Iranian Archaeological Service for an excavation work permit. Since the site has subsequently been described in numerous publications (by myself and by others) under that name, it seems best to let the toponym stand. However, another site name might have been more appropriate, had that knowledge been known in 1965.

An Iranian writer (Sultani), in discussing historical works and poetry connected with the Ahl Haqq Sayyid Bābā Yādgār (Sultān Sayyid Ahmad 'Alavī), revealed the evidence for why the name of Yazdigird was at all associated with the site (when there is no plausible archaeological explanation

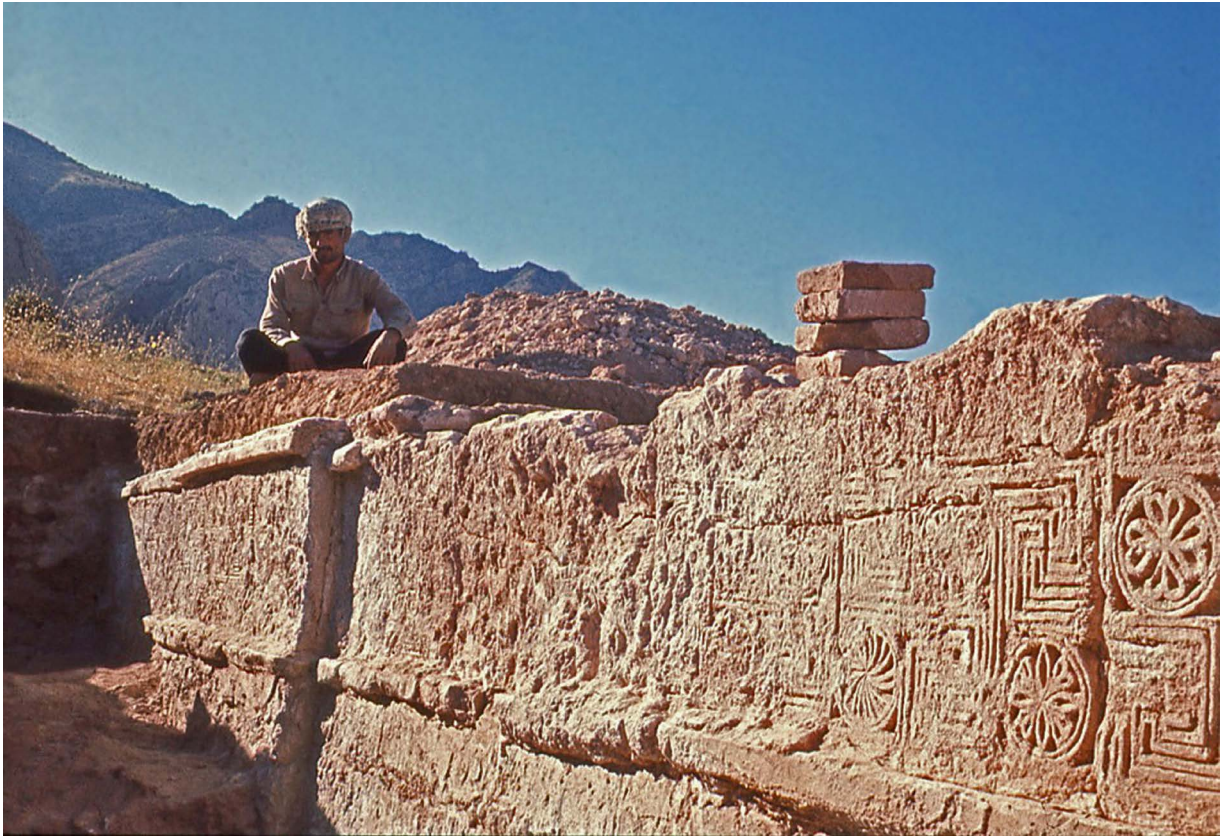


Fig. 10 Decorated wall standing below ground in the field of Gach Gumbad.

of military defences that have always been reported under the rubric of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird; in the heart of the stronghold lies a lavishly decorated palatial compound, set at the head of a 'garden of paradise'. The designs of the plaster decorations point to a mid-second century CE date for their execution (Figs. 10-11, and Keall 1977; Keall *et al.* 1980; Mathiesen 1992). Yet it is implausible that the complex was built, say, as a hunting lodge for a Parthian king at this time. The king's absence from the capital for a long period of time such as a trip like that entailed would have provided an opportunity for a coup d'état, as a rival claimant to the throne seized power during the monarch's lengthy absence from the capital.

The region of the stronghold on the extreme western edge of the Zagros mountains has no really valuable natural resources of its own that could have served as the basis of wealth for the stronghold's sponsorship. The land furnishes only a basic subsistence economy at best. But the stronghold's geographical location is unique. The stronghold encompasses a thumb-shaped tableland projection—formed by a syncline in the Zagros fold mountains—covering some twenty-five square kilometres (Fig. 12, and Keall 1982). There is a formidable escarpment on the side of the



Fig. 11 Senmurv-griffon.

for it). A *waqf* document dated to 933AH—1527 CE spells out how out of gratitude for his release from prison in Baghdad, Qumam al-Din—an emir from Zohāb—dedicated properties and produce from his land holdings in support of Baba Yādgār's shrine (Sultānī 1382/2004: 124-126).

One of Bābā Yādgār's familiar names is 'Zard' (Persian for "yellow"), connected with the idea in the Ahl Haqq faith that good people are made out of yellow clay, bad people out of dark clay. The *waqf* document recounts how Bābā Yādgār lived in the "Serā-ye Zard Yazdigirdi". It seems highly probable that the use of Yazdigird's name was adopted by the Ahl Haqq as part of their general wish to associate themselves with the pre-Islamic Iranian past. In the same spirit they believe that Yazdigird III's daughter, Bibi Shahrbanou, married Husayn ibn'Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. In one of the cliff faces below the Bābā Yādgār shrine there is a cave associated in the minds of the local inhabitants with Bibi Shahrbanou.



Fig. 12 Satellite image of the tableland.

tableland overlooking the plain that stretches towards Mesopotamia to the west, and steep cliffs that rise up on the other side that merge with the higher reaches of the Zagros mountains. Both the escarpment and the cliffs have been fortified by defences of masonry built wherever the natural terrain was judged to be inadequate for military defensive purposes, as well a long defensive wall built across the only open neck of land (Fig. 13). The tableland looms over the route of the famous highway of antiquity that has often been called the Silk Road. The pass where the route climbs up to reach the Iranian plateau has been labelled by ancient writers as that of “the Zagros Gates”.

I hypothesize that the position of the stronghold would have allowed its occupants the ability to control for their own benefit what was likely a considerable amount of caravan traffic plying the pass between Iran and Mesopotamia. In this scenario, I argue the stronghold’s occupants would not have plundered the caravans, for this action would have likely forced the merchants to ply other routes. But tolls extracted from the caravans for safe passage could easily have generated the kinds of large amounts of revenue that would have been needed to build the massive complex of Qal’eh-i Yazdigird. Its defensive network would have provided a formidable challenge to any force attempting to capture the stronghold.

Defining the character of the stronghold’s owner is a challenge. I have rightly been criticised for resorting too readily to the descriptive term ‘robber baron’, in order to



Fig. 13 Long defensive wall.

match the idea that the stronghold’s owner grew wealthy at the expense of the caravans. Kurdish nationalist Mehrdad Izady remonstrated that this designation was typical of western writers who invariably tagged all Kurds with the sense of being brigands (Izady 1993). There may indeed be some justification in moving away from the ‘robber baron’ idea that I originally wrote about. Perhaps a better term is ‘warlord’, in the spirit of how in parts of Afghanistan today there are native warlords who are beyond the control of the central government but have the support of most of the local populace. The same could have applied in the case of the lord of Qal’eh-i Yazdigird. For the defences of the stronghold seem to be designed to prevent an attack from the direction of the great highway and the Parthian capital in Mesopotamia, rather than from the high ground of the Zagros behind the site where local support was likely prevalent.

### Sasanian capture of Qal’eh-i Yazdigird

In terms of formidable fortresses, there is a beautiful analogy to be found in the classic Iranian story of Haftān Būkht (Haftvād). For commentary on the textual sources, including Firdowsi’s *Shahnameh* and an older Pahlavi text—the *Kārnāmag-i Ardashīr*



Fig. 14 Fire-temple of Gach Dawar.

(Shahbazi 2003: 534-536). Conflating two legendary traditions, Haftān Būkht had a daughter who one day, while out spinning as usual, ate an apple that had in it a *kirm* ('fruit grub', or 'worm'). But she saved the worm and took it home to keep as a pet. Miraculously the girl's spinning output increased dramatically after that, and the family grew wealthy. With his new-found wealth Haftān Būkht, defeated a local ruler and built a fortress for himself. The grateful worm turned into a friendly giant dragon that in return protected Haftān Būkht's fortress.

According to the story, after the Sasanian King of Kings Ardashir had rallied in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE from a defeat in battle against the Kurds of Media, his booty train was raided by Haftān Būkht while it was on its way back to Ardashir's home-base in Pars province. Ardashir vowed to take revenge against Haftān Būkht, but his attempts to take the 'Fortress of the Worm' were at first unsuccessful. Eventually, through subterfuge, Ardashir's men managed to infiltrate the fortress' confines in disguise as merchants bearing gifts; they got the guardsmen drunk and murdered the dragon by tricking it into swallowing molten metal. Without the dragon's protection, the fortress quickly fell to Ardashir's forces.

I hasten to add immediately that it is a mistake, as Mehrdad Izady has tried to do, to identify the owner of the stronghold of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird as an actual

ancestor of Haftān Būkht. For the latter is to be associated with Kerman (in south central Iran), not Kermanshah (western Iran). But Ardashir did indeed campaign in the northwest of Iran—notably with great difficulty—against incumbent Parthian rulers. And, the Haftān Būkht story revolves around the fact that this figure lived in a formidable stronghold. Hence the genuine validity of the analogy for interpreting Qal'eh-i Yazdigird.

The idea of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird being a Parthian-era fortress that was captured by the Sasanians has considerable appeal. This follows the discovery in 1978 (Keall 1982: 59-60) of a classic Sasanian *chahār tāq* that we normally associate with being a Zoroastrian fire-temple—a reminder of the fact that the Sasanians sponsored Zoroastrianism as their state religion. Corroboration that the structure was definitively a fire-temple emerged from the work of the 2007 mission of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization that re-examined the site (Fig. 14, and Moradi & Keall, forthcoming). In this vein, the fire-temple of Gach Dawar at Qal'eh-i Yazdigird can be judged to represent a statement by the Sasanian government that the era of the Parthian stronghold was over. No more exacting tolls on the merchant caravans at the Zagros Gates. Let those revenues go directly to the Sasanian state.



Fig. 15 Rock-relief on a cliff at Sar Pul-i Zohab.

### Iran's *kadag-khwadāy*

We may deduce from the evidence just presented that the lord of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird actually may well have been one of Parthia's two hundred and forty *kadag-khwadāy* (as specified in the *Kārnāmag-i Ardashīr*). To support this notion we can also usefully look at a rock-relief on a cliff outside of Sar Pūl-i Zohāb, the market town just beyond the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird escarpment, and on the ancient highway to the Zagros Gates.

The badly eroded Sar Pul rock-relief, high up on a cliff, depicts a figure on foot standing before an approaching horse-rider (Gropp 1968; Kawami 1987). Above the rider's head is an inscription in Pahlavi calling the depiction "the image of Goudarz, great king, son of Gew, great king" (Fig. 15). The rider's headdress is adorned with a ribboned diadem, a standard symbol of monarchy. The rider is obviously a more important character than the figure standing before him who reaches out, seemingly, to grasp something offered by the horse-rider. Standard interpretation of ancient Iranian rock-reliefs would interpret this as a formal greeting by a visiting power, making a symbolic gesture to a local figure in investing them with some kind of authority. The Pahlavi inscription above the standing figure is severely eroded and a challenge to read with surety, but Gropp's reading of it (Gropp 1968: 317) as

indicating "S...wrn, keeper of the Holwān fortress" is intriguing. Perhaps it is not too far a stretch to imagine that the standing figure who greets the horse-riding visitor is the local *kadag-khwadāy* (lord) of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird.

It is highly significant that the title claimed by the horse-rider is "great king", not "king of kings". It is unlikely, then, that the rider is either Gotarzes I (ruled around 90 BCE) or Gotarzes II (ruled around 50 CE), since both of these monarchs claimed the more prestigious title. Furthermore, Brunner (1972: 493) places the inscription in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, on the basis of the epigraphic style. It is also significant that the horse-rider is depicted in Sar Pul-i Zohab, seemingly having authority in the lowland area of what was the district of Chalonitis—later Holwān—rather than in the upland area of Media beyond the Zagros Gates. If the horse-rider had been coming from Media, he would have more logically met the standing figure at the Zagros Gates pass where the scene could easily have been carved.

Following this line of argument, and to explain away why a ruler of Holwān would be investing authority in the hands of a warlord who held a stronghold on the edge of the Zagros mountains, overlooking Chalonitis, it seems plausible that the ruler was simply acknowledging that the warlord enjoyed control over the caravan highway that ran



Fig. 16 Drachm of the 'Unknown King'.

through Holwān to the Zagros Gates.

To further substantiate the connection of the warlord to the highlands, it is appropriate to report that—from the fields of the Qal'eh-i Yazdigird archaeological site in the 1970s—a local farmer picked up a silver coin, a classic Parthian drachm (Fig. 16, and Keall 1994: 259, fig. 2). Drachms were the main coinage of circulation on the Iranian plateau, rather than the tetradrachm which circulated in Mesopotamia where the Parthian capital lay. Coin catalogues generally attribute this particular coin issue to someone identified as the 'Unknown King' of Iran, from around 140 CE. The normal association that academics would make is that this coin type was minted by a king of Media. It underlines how one may reasonably deduce that the ruler of Qal'eh-i Yazdigird was more tied to Media than to Mesopotamia.

### Conclusion

To summarise the ideas presented here, it is a challenge to define what is meant by 'Parthian empire'. First, we must accept the fact that we are talking about an era of over three hundred years. So, we should not expect to apply the same standards of interpretation for that entire period. But it is certainly apparent that during Parthian times there were numerous occasions when disputes over inheritance, following the death of the King of Kings, resulted in challenges concerning who would inherit the royal authority. Incidents of fratricide, when a brother murdered his rival sibling, are not rare. But there are also well documented instances for two siblings finding a basis for sharing power, at least for a moment, when they both issued royal tetradrachms in the same year,

even the same month. It is certainly hard to judge whether this represents 'power-sharing' or 'civil war'.

As just spelled out, the strange thing about Parthian history is that what can be defined as 'Parthian empire', for all its deficiencies, lasted for well over three centuries. This is considerably longer than that enjoyed by many other empires, including those of fairly recent times. But it is blatantly apparent that the governmental situation in Parthia was fraught with diversity. The complexity of the state and the lack of a powerful and rigid system of bureaucracy easily lead itself to 'separatist' movements'. I myself (albeit somewhat facetiously) once suggested that the Parthians could possibly be called "the political clowns of the millennium" in Iran (Keall 1994: 256, fn. 5). So we may ask, what was the reason for the longevity of Parthian empire? Was flexibility of the governmental system behind the reason for its success? Was it the absence of a strong, centralised bureaucratic system that enabled the Parthian state to survive for so long? In that spirit, perhaps it is like the analogy of the difference between the oak and the willow tree. The oak is strong; the willow is weak, but flexible. In a storm, an oak is sometimes toppled, because it is not flexible; while the willow survives because it is pliant.

### Postscript

My academic life between 1962 and 1979 was largely directed first towards learning about the Sasanians of Iran, and then increasingly about their predecessors—the Parthians. I spent a lot of time in the 1960s travelling in Iran to what in those days were very remote parts of the country—by bus, taxi, and even on bicycle—visiting Sasanian fire-temples (particularly in Fars province) and studying the rock reliefs of ancient Elymais (Khuzistan province). My PhD dissertation written in 1970 at the University of Michigan was entitled "The Significance of Late Parthian Nippur". The ruins of Nippur lie in the modern country of Iraq; the ancient layers of that site relate to the history of Babylonia. But during the time period represented by ruins the region was administered on behalf of the Arsacid Parthian authorities, whose origins lay on the Iranian plateau.

I had no prior knowledge of the Parthians in 1962 when I first started working as an archaeologist in Iran. Yet while studying ancient history at university, in England in the late 1950s, I became aware of the fact that the Parthians had inflicted in 53 BCE a massive defeat on a Roman army based in the

province of Syria (see above, and Bihar 1983: 49-56). Crassus was the province's administrator and he conceived of an invasion of Parthia, intent on seizing control of the lucrative trade routes that brought luxurious goods from China to the markets of Rome. The dramatic defeat of the Roman forces led by Crassus resulted in the capture of legionary standards; this haunted the Romans for decades.

The essence of the Parthian victory has been dramatised in the coining of a phrase that epitomises the victory—namely that Parthian horse archers raced towards the stationary formation of the Roman infantrymen, discharging a devastating volley of arrows towards them, then wheeling away to avoid close combat. The manoeuvre is known as a 'Parthian shot'. In Victorian English literature, the term was used to describe a barb that disgruntled lovers threw over their shoulders towards their partners as they departed for the last time. The Roman poet Ovid lamented this disgrace, and his words held their poignancy for decades, until the Emperor Augustus eventually was able to negotiate a peace treaty and return of the military standards in 20 BCE.

There is an additional twist in the story for our purposes here. On Crassus' arrival in Syria in 55 BCE to build an army, the Armenian king Artavasdes had offered him the use of a cavalry contingent. He also advised Crassus that his campaign route should be through the hills of Armenia where he would receive additional cavalry troops and avoid the Syrian desert route besides. But Crassus rejected the advice; his defeat by the numerically smaller, but better equipped Parthian forces, has been outlined above. These forces were commanded by the general (*spahbod*) Surenas, from eastern Iran. Meanwhile, the Parthian king Orodes II had marched with an army to Armenia with the intent of punishing Artavasdes. Seemingly a peaceful resolution was quickly found instead, whereby the Armenians abandoned their allegiance to the Romans, making an alliance with the Parthians instead.

The hastily arranged collaboration was marked by a marriage between King Artavasdes' sister and the Parthian king's son (Pacorus). At the wedding ceremony, there was a performance of a theatrical play—*The Bacchae*, a tragedy written by the ancient Greek poet Euripides. In Greek mythology, Pentheus the king of Thebes outlawed worship of the god Dionysus in his country but was lured through some trickery to watch a performance of Bacchic ritual that was intimately connected with Dionysiac worship.

When Dionysus' Maenads spied King Pentheus secretly watching their revellings, they managed to apprehend him and tore his body to pieces. During the play's performance at the Armenian wedding, to illustrate Pentheus' dismemberment, the severed head of the recently captured Crassus was thrown onto the stage as a grisly theatrical prop. Western commentators have often declared "how barbaric". An alternative point of view is to declare "how sophisticated that a Parthian and an Armenian king's family would watch a classical Greek play at a wedding". But the stark reality is also that Orodes soon had his brilliant general Surenas executed, out of fear for his prowess. As such, the Parthians were sometimes their own worst enemies.

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# آشنی‌ها

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به کوشش: یوسف مرادی

با همکاری سوزان کنتن، ادوارد جان کیل و رسول بروجنی

