

Parthia

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Parthia is a region of north-eastern Iran, best known for having been the political and cultural base of the Arsacid dynasty, rulers of the Parthian Empire.

The name "Parthia" is a continuation from Latin *Parthia*, from Old Persian *Parthava*, which was the Parthian language self-designator signifying "of the Parthians" who were an Iranian people.

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Young man with Parthian costume. Palmyra, Syria, 1st half of the 3rd century AD. Decoration of a funerary stela. Musée du Louvre.

Geography

Parthia roughly corresponds to the western half of Khorasan region in northeastern Iran. It was bordered by the Kopet Dag mountain range in the north and the Dasht-e-Kavir desert in the south. It bordered Media on the west, Hyrcania on the north west, Margiana on the north east, and Aria on the south east.

During Arsacid times, Parthia was united with Hyrcania as one administrative unit, and that region is therefore often (subject to context) considered a part of Parthia proper.

History

Under the Achaemenids

As the region inhabited by Parthians, Parthia first appears as a political entity in Achaemenid lists of governorates ("satrapies") under their dominion. Prior to this, the people of the region seem to have been subjects of the Medes,^[1] and 7th century BC Assyrian texts mention a country named Partakka or Partukka (though this "need not have coincided topographically with the later Parthia").^[2]

A year after Cyrus the Great's defeat of the Median Astyages, Parthia became one of the first provinces to acknowledge Cyrus as their ruler, "and this allegiance secured Cyrus' eastern flanks and enabled him to conduct the first of his imperial campaigns – against Sardis."^[3] According to Greek sources,

following the seizure of the Achaemenid throne by Darius I, the Parthians united with the Median king Phraortes to revolt against him. Hystaspes, the Achaemenid governor of the province (said to be father of Darius I), managed to suppress the revolt, which seems to have occurred around 522–521 BC.

The first indigenous Iranian mention of Parthia is in the Behistun inscription of Darius I, where Parthia is listed (in the typical Iranian clockwise order) among the governorates in the vicinity of Drangiana. The inscription dates to circa 520 BC. The center of the administration "may have been at [what would later be known as] Hecatompylus".^[4] The Parthians also appear in Herodotus' list of peoples subject to the Achaemenids; the historiographer treats the Parthians, Chorasmians, Sogdians and Areioi as peoples of a single satrapy (the 16th), whose annual tribute to the king he states to be only 300 talents of silver. This "has rightly caused disquiet to modern scholars."^[5]

At the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 BC between the forces of Darius III and those of Alexander the Great, one such Parthian unit was commanded by Phrataphernes, who was at the time Achaemenid governor of Parthia. Following the defeat of Darius III, Phrataphernes surrendered his governorate to Alexander when the Macedonian arrived there in the summer of 330 BC. Phrataphernes was reappointed governor by Alexander.

Under the Seleucids

Following the death of Alexander, in the Partition of Babylon in 323 BC, Parthia became a Seleucid governorate under Nicanor. Phrataphernes, the former governor, became governor of Hyrcania. In 320 BC, at the Partition of Triparadissus, Parthia was reassigned to Philip, former governor of Sogdiana. A few years later, the province was invaded by Peithon, governor of Media major, who then attempted to make his brother Eudamus governor. Peithon and Eudamus were driven back, and Parthia remained a governorate in its own right.

In 316 BC, Stasander, a vassal of Seleucus I Nicator and governor of Bactria (and, it seems, also of Aria and Margiana) was appointed governor of Parthia. For the next 60 years, various Seleucids would be appointed governors of the province.

In 247 BC, following the death of Antiochus II, Ptolemy III seized control of the Seleucid capital at Antioch, and "so left the future of the Seleucid dynasty for a moment in question."^[6] Taking advantage of the uncertain political situation, Andragoras, the Seleucid governor of Parthia, proclaimed his independence and began minting his own coins.

Meanwhile, "a man called Arsaces, of Scythian or Bactrian origin, [was] elected leader of the Parni",^[7] an eastern-Iranian peoples from the Tajen/Tajend River valley, south-east of the Caspian Sea.^[8] Following the secession of Parthia from the Seleucid Empire and the resultant loss of Seleucid military support, Andragoras had difficulty in maintaining his borders, and about 238 BC – under the command of "Arsaces and his brother Tiridates"^{[7][9]} – the Parni invaded^[10] Parthia and seized control of Astabene (Astawa), the northern region of that territory, the administrative capital of which was Kabuchan (Kuchan in the vulgate).



Coin of Andragoras, the last Seleucid satrap of Parthia. He proclaimed independence around 250 BC.

A short while later the Parni seized the rest of Parthia from Andragoras, killing him in the process. Although an initial punitive expedition by the Seleucids under Seleucus II was not successful, the Seleucids under Antiochus III recaptured Arsacid controlled territory in 209 BC from Arsaces' (or Tiridates') successor, Arsaces II. Arsaces II sued for peace and accepted vassal status,^[9] and it was not until Arsaces II's grandson (or grand-nephew) Phraates I, that the Arsacids/Parni would again begin to assert their independence.^[11]

Under the Arsacids

(R. 171–138 BC). The reverse shows Heracles, and the inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ "Great King Arsaces, friend of Greeks".

From their base in Parthia, the Arsacid dynasts eventually extended their dominion to include most of Greater Iran. Even though the Arsacids only sporadically had their capital in Parthia, their power base was there, among the Parthian feudal families, upon whose military and financial support the Arsacids depended. In exchange for this support, these families received large tracts of land among the earliest conquered territories adjacent to Parthia, which the Parthian nobility then ruled as provincial rulers. The largest of these city-states were Kuchan, Semnan, Gorgan, Merv, Zabol and Yazd.

From about 105 BC onwards, the power and influence of this handful of Parthian noble families was such that they frequently opposed the monarch, and would eventually be a "contributory factor in the downfall" of the dynasty.^[12]

From about 130 BC onwards, Parthia suffered numerous incursions by various nomadic tribes, including the Sakas, the Yueh-chi, and the Massagetae. Each time, the Arsacid dynasts responded personally, doing so even when there were more severe threats from Seleucids or Romans looming on the western borders of their empire (as was the case for Mithridates I). Defending the empire against the nomads cost Phraates II and Artabanus I their lives.^[12]

Around 32 BC, civil war broke out when a certain Tiridates rebelled against Phraates IV, probably with the support of the nobility that Phraates had previously persecuted. The revolt was initially successful, but failed by 25 BC.^[13] In 9/8, the Parthian nobility succeeded in putting their preferred king on the throne, but Vonones proved to have too tight a budgetary control, so he was usurped in favor of Artabanus II, who seems to have been a non-Arsacid Parthian nobleman. But when Artabanus attempted to consolidate his position (at which he was successful in most instances), he failed to do so in the regions where the Parthian provincial rulers held sway.^[14]



Parthian horseman, now on display at the Palazzo Madama, Turin.



Reproduction of a Parthian archer as depicted on Trajan's Column.

By the 2nd century AD, the wars with Rome and with the nomads, and the infighting among the Parthian nobility had weakened the Arsacids to a point where they could no longer defend their subjugated territories. The empire fractured as vassalries increasingly claimed independence or were subjugated by others, and the Arsacids were themselves finally vanquished by the Persian Sassanids, a formerly minor vassal from southwestern Iran, in April 224.

Under the Sassanids

Under Sassanid rule, Parthia was folded into a newly formed province, Khorasan, and henceforth ceased to exist as a political entity. Some of the Parthian nobility continued to resist Sassanid dominion for some time, but most switched their allegiance to the Sassanids very early. Several families that claimed descent from the Parthian noble families became a Sassanid institution known as the "Seven houses", five of which are "in all probability" not Parthian, but contrived genealogies "in order to emphasize the antiquity of their families."^[15]

Language and literature

Main article: Parthian language

The Parthians spoke Parthian, a north-western Iranian language related to Median. No Parthian literature survives from before the Sassanid period in its original form,^[16] and they seem to have written down only very little. The Parthians did however have a thriving oral minstrel-poet culture, to the extent that their word for minstrel – *gosan* – survives to this day in many Iranian languages and Armenian gusan. These professionals were evident in every facet of Parthian daily life, from cradle to grave, and they were entertainers of kings and commoners alike, proclaiming the worthiness of their patrons through association with mythical heroes and rulers.^[17] These Parthian heroic poems, "mainly known through Persian of the lost Middle Persian *Xwaday-namag*, and notably through Firdausi's *Shahnameh*, [were] doubtless not yet wholly lost in the Khurasan of [Firdausi's] day."^[18]

In Parthia itself, attested use of written Parthian is limited to the nearly 3,000 ostraca found (in what seems to have been a wine storage) at Nisa, in present-day Turkmenistan. A handful of other evidence of written Parthian have also been found outside Parthia; the most important of these being the part of a land-sale document found at Avroman (in present-day Iranian Kurdistan), and more ostraca, graffiti and the fragment of a business letter found at Dura-Europos in present-day Syria.

The Parthian Arsacids do not seem to have used Parthian until relatively late, and the language first appears on Arsacid coinage during the reign of Vologases I (51-58 AD).^[19] Evidence that use of Parthian was nonetheless widespread comes from early Sassanid times; the declarations of the early Persian kings were – in addition to their native Middle Persian – also inscribed in Parthian.



Hercules, Hatra, Iraq, Parthian period, 1st-2nd century AD.

Society

City-states of "some considerable size" existed in Parthia as early as the first millennium BC, "and not just from the time of the Achaemenids or Seleucids."^[20] However, for the most part, society was rural, and dominated by large landholders with large numbers of serfs, slaves, and other indentured labor at their disposal.^[20] Communities with free peasants also existed.

By Arsacid times, Parthian society was divided into the four classes (limited to freemen). At the top were the kings and near family members of the king. These were followed by the lesser nobility and the general priesthood, followed by the mercantile class and lower-ranking civil servants, and with farmers and herdsman at the bottom.

Little is known of the Parthian economy, but agriculture must have played the most important role in it. Significant trade first occurs with the establishment of the Silk road in 114 BC, when Hecatompylos became an important junction.



Parthian waterspout,
1st-2nd century AD.

See also

- List of Parthian kings

References

1. ^ Diakonoff 1985, p. 127.
2. ^ Diakonoff 1985, p. 104,n.1.
3. ^ Mallowan 1985, p. 406.
4. ^ Cook 1985, p. 248.
5. ^ Cook 1985, p. 252.
6. ^ Bivar 2003, para. 6.
7. ^ ^{a b} Curtis 2007, p. 7.
8. ^ Lecoq 1987, p. 151.
9. ^ ^{a b} Bivar 1983, p. 29.
10. ^ Bickerman 1983, p. 19.
11. ^ Bivar 1983, p. 31.
12. ^ ^{a b} Schippmann 1987, p. 527.
13. ^ Schippmann 1987, p. 528.
14. ^ Schippmann 1987, p. 529.
15. ^ Lukonin 1983, p. 704.
16. ^ Boyce 1983, p. 1151.
17. ^ Boyce 1983, p. 1115.
18. ^ Boyce 1983, p. 1157.
19. ^ Boyce 1983, p. 1153.
20. ^ ^{a b} Schippmann 1987, p. 532.

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