



AMERICAN SCHOOLS OF ORIENTAL RESEARCH

The Politics of Parthian Coinage in Media

Author(s): Farhang Khademi Nadooshan, Seyed Sadrudin Moosavi, Frouzandeh Jafarzadeh Pour

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Near Eastern Archaeology*, Vol. 68, No. 3, Archaeology in Iran (Sep., 2005), pp. 123-127

Published by: [The American Schools of Oriental Research](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067611>

Accessed: 06/11/2011 07:31

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

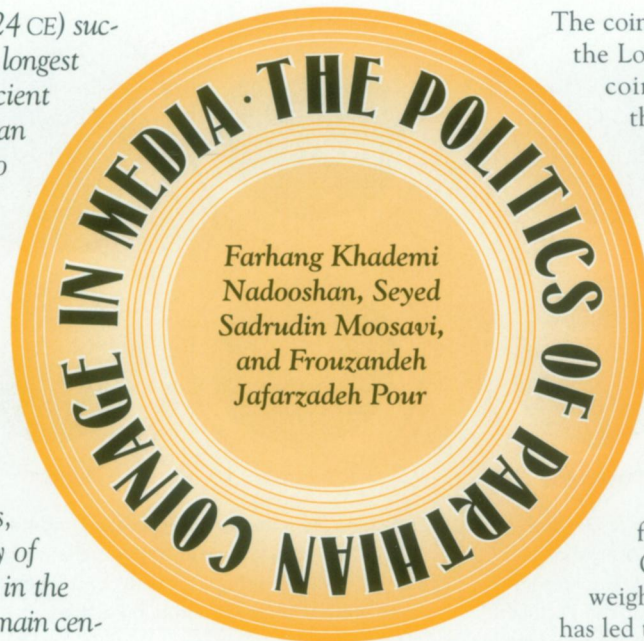
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The American Schools of Oriental Research is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Near Eastern Archaeology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

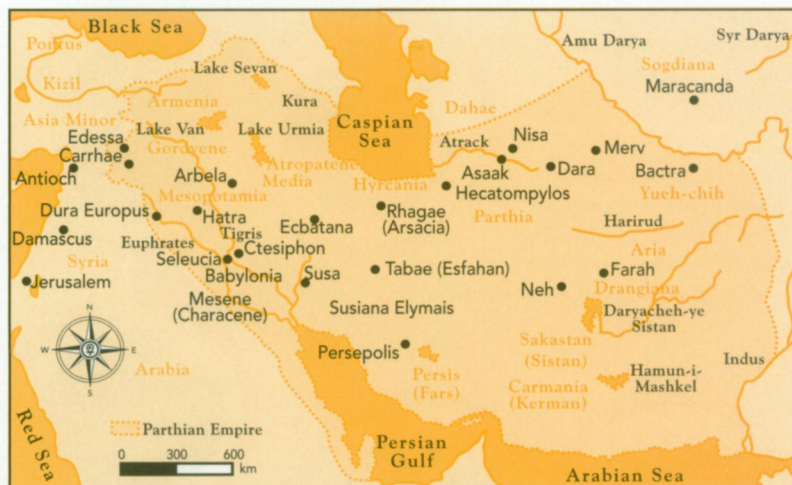
The Parthians (174 BCE–224 CE) succeeded in establishing the longest lasting empire in the ancient Near East. At its height, Parthian rule extended from Anatolia to the Indus Valley and from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf. Consummate horsemen indigenous to Central Asia, the Parthians achieved fame for having routed the remnants of Alexander's Empire from Persia. After defeating the Seleucid emperor on the Iranian Plateau, the first Parthian ruler, Arsaces, established the Arsacid dynasty of Parthia. The satrapy of Media, in the Iranian heartland, had been the main center of resistance against the Seleucids, according to historical documents, and would not succumb fully to Parthian domination until over one hundred years later. It was Arsaces' illustrious descendant, Mithradates I, who conquered Media and its important and legendary capital of Ecbatana. In anticipation of the eventual unification of Media with Parthia, Mithradates immediately began issuing coins in the region—even before his conquest of Ecbatana. For years, specimens of these Parthian coins from Media have sat relatively unnoticed in museums in Tabriz and Lorestan. With insufficient archaeological information from this region, these coins may be our best hope for understanding the nature of the Parthian presence in Media.



The coins discussed here are primarily from the Lorestan Museum, which houses the coins of southern Media.¹ However, the coins of northern Media are also considered thanks to the collection housed in the Azerbaijan Museum in the city of Tabriz. Most of the coins of the Azerbaijan Museum have been donated by local people and have been reported and documented in their names. Even though many of these coins are unprovenanced, it seems clear that they were collected in Azerbaijan province and no coins in the museum collection came from other provinces.

Comparing the type, date, and weight of the coins from these museums has led to some interesting conclusions. For

example, it appears that only drachmas with standard weights were in circulation in the Persian territory, while tetradrachms were the standard currency of the Seleucids. According to Sellwood, during the long reign of the Parthians (about five centuries), the weight of drachma coins remained constant (1980: 8). But in Mesopotamia and Syria, the weight of Parthian tetradrachms was reduced. Since



Map of the Parthian Empire. Media is in the northwest.

the composition of the coins is not known to us due to the fact that most chemical analyses require destructive methods (Caley 1955: 1–104), it



These coins of Mithradates I were probably minted at Hekatompylos in eastern Parthia and represent the first economic intervention of the Parthians in northern Media affairs beginning in the second century BCE. All illustrations courtesy of authors unless otherwise noted.



Drachms of Artabanus II, like this one, are not found in the Lorestan Museum and may not have circulated in southern Media. Artabanus' reign was relatively short (128–124 BCE) and the presence of his coins minted in the Median heartland of Ectabana shows the degree of control over the northern part of the territory.



This coin of Orodes I (90–80 BCE) who followed Gotarzes I (95–90 BCE) on the Parthian throne is the only coin in the Parthian collection at the Tabriz Museum to have been minted in Susa in the south.

The sons of Phraates IV, Vonones I and Orodes III, returned to Parthia and ruled for a short period. This coin of Vonones' short four-year reign was minted in Ecbatana.



The coins from the long reign of Mithridates II (124–88 BCE) are known in both northern and southern Media although these coins from the north were probably minted in Parthia.



Mithradatkart in Turkmenistan was one of the Parthian mints during the reign of Phraates III (70–57 BCE) and was likely to have been the origin of this coin. Phraates was killed by his son Mithridates III whose reign lasted only a very short time until he, in turn, was killed by his brother, Phraates other son, Orodes II.



Until the twenty-year reign of Orodes II (57–38 BCE), the city of Hekatompylos was an important economic center and mint but diminished in importance thereafter. Orodes II gave up his throne at the end of his reign to one of his sons, Phraates IV.



Many of the coins of Phraates IV (38–2 BCE) were minted in the Median heartland city of Ecbatana. After the death of Phraates IV, Parthia was ruled for a short time by his son Phraataces (Phraates V) and his mother Musa. Phraates V issued the coin on the right during his brief two year reign.



Parthian noblemen, restoring Parthian power in Media and Mesopotamia, brought Artabanus II, a son of a local Median king, to power. Artabanus's reign lasted twenty-eight years. His coins, minted in Ecbatana, were widely circulated in Media.



Artabanus II and his successors extended Parthian rule over most of present-day Iran even though he was followed by another Parthian monarchic struggle between Gotarzes II (40–51 CE), whose coin this is, in the main part of the empire and Vardanes I (40–47 CE) in Media.



Pacorus II of Parthia ruled the Parthian Empire from about 78–105 CE. He was given the kingdom of Media by his brother Vologases I after his succession to the throne. After Vologases' death, Pacorus revolted against his brother's son and successor, Vologases II (ca. 78–80 CE), defeating and deposing him. On his numerous coins he always calls himself "Arsaces Pacorus." This mention of his proper name together with the royal name Arsaces, shows that his kingship was disputed by rivals.

It is not clear whether or not this was a measure on the part of the Parthians to control inflation in the Persian territory.

As a bridge between the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia, Media was a crossroads of cultures, and its capital Ecbatana was not only a commercial nexus but also a meeting place for the peoples visiting from Seleucis and Bactria. The Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV installed his minister Timarachus as governor of Media for the purpose of reinforcing political relations with these regions.

Phriapatius, the third King of Parthia, had two sons, Phraates and Mithridates. Phraates I succeeded his father and may have been the first to capture the strategic Caspian gateway and prepare the ground for his brother Mithradates I to penetrate Media, which was then still controlled by the Seleucids. Possibly due to his personal participation in battles on the northwestern frontier against the Sakas and the Bactrians, he was unable to take part personally in the war against the Seleucids. His commander may have led a division to occupy Media (Assar 2004: 69–93) and establish Parthian power there. After the death of Mithridates, his son Phraates II attacked Media and faced Antiochus VII in battle staying there for an entire winter. Antiochus VII, however, was assassinated by Scythian mercenaries who also, in turn, killed Phraates II. When Mithradates II ascended the Parthian throne, he inherited a Parthian territory devastated by the Scythian onslaught. Thus, he enjoyed the support of the Iranian population in both Media and Hyrcania. Later, Mithradates II



Artabanus III (80–90 CE) contended for the throne of Pacorus II. On some coins he calls himself Arsaces Artabanus. Pacorus eventually subdued him, however.

He pushed the Scythians westward, captured Armenia, and finally succeeded in occupying both Media and Mesopotamia. During the last years of his life, he was forced to deal with a divided rule, as several Parthian kings ruled in Mesopotamia simultaneously. The historical documents on these kings are limited to numismatic and epigraphic evidence, which indicate that the Parthian minor kings enjoyed

the support of the local population of

Mesopotamia. After the disappearance of Mithradates II and the decline of several minor Parthian kings, the Parthian Empire came under the control of a Median king, Darius, who was an Arsacid only by his mother's lineage.

Mithradates III, a Parthian king of Media, killed his father Phraates III and was in turn killed by his brother Orodes II. Until the time of Orodes, the city of Heactompylos was an important center of the Parthian kingdom. Orodes II, after a long reign, gave up his throne to one of his sons, Phraates IV. Our information about Media during this phase of Parthian rule is based upon evidence relating to the engagement of Phraates IV in wars waged against him by the Roman Proconsul Mark Anthony in Azerbaijan (Bivar 1993: 59). Phraates IV concluded a peace treaty with Mark Anthony, the Roman Proconsul, after which the latter

The end of Vologases' reign was marked by a revolt by Osroes II. He is unknown to history except for the coins he issued. The date of his reign suggests that he rebelled against Vologases IV but was unable to maintain himself against Vologases' successor. His coins were issued by the mint at Ecbatana, suggesting that he controlled Media at one time.



During the extraordinarily long reign of Vologases IV (147–191 CE) coins of different types were minted in several locations.

returned to Rome via Armenia. After the death of Phraates IV, Phraataces and his mother Musa jointly ruled Parthia. Other sons of Phraates IV, Vonone and Orodes, returned to Parthia and ruled for a short period, one after the other, upon the death of their stepmother and brother. Finally the Parthian noblemen, restoring Parthian power in Media and Mesopotamia, brought Artabanus II, a son of a local Median king, to power.

In the beginning of the first century CE, Parthian territory was divided into several somewhat independent local kingdoms, including Indo-Parthia in Sakastan and Armenia, Pases, Characene, and Elymea. Parthian power was primarily concentrated

in Media, Mesopotamia, and Syria. Artabanus II (10–38 CE) and his successors extended Parthian rule over most of present-day Iran even though his reign was followed by another monarchic struggle between Gotarzes II (40–51 CE) in the main part of the empire and Vardanes I (40–47 CE) in Media. This struggle finally paved the way for Gotarzes II to become the sole king (Bivar 1993: 79).

Media was the capital of Vonones II for a short period and also that of his nephew Vologases I (51–78 CE) the son of Vardanes I. After that, according to the numismatic evidence, a contemporary king of the Trojans (a Roman king of Atropotanean [today Azerbaijan] origin) succeeded Vardanes as the king of Parthia. Osroes II along

Parthian Horsemen

The term “Parthian Shot” has made it into the English lexicon as a term denoting a parting, and ultimately devastating, blow—in modern times more to egos than to bodies. The Parthians were, however, known as skilled cavalrymen who were remarkably adept at aiming their bows both backwards and forwards at enemies. Often Parthian horsemen would feign retreat at full gallop and then quite suddenly turn and fire an arrow at the pursuing enemy. This tactic was most successfully used by the Parthian cavalry to kill foot soldiers who were often prematurely relieved to see their pursuers gallop away from the battle only to be felled by a quick arrow to the heart. This strategy was put to particularly good use in a battle that the Parthians fought in the year 53 BCE near the town of Carrhae (now present-day Harran, Turkey). The Battle of Carrhae, between the Roman Republic, under the legendary general Crassus, and the Parthian Empire resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Parthians. Crassus had arrived in Syria in late 55 BCE and, with aid of Hellenic settlements in Syria and the support of the King of Armenia, attacked the Parthian heartland. The Parthian King Orodes II, in response, sent his cavalry units—only half of his army—against the Romans, who vastly outnumbered them. This became arguably the worst defeat ever suffered by a Republican Army. Crassus son was slain in the battle and his head put on a pike for all to see. The Parthian horse archers shot repeated volleys into the dense formations of legionnaires and, when the Romans attempted to charge the horse archers, the Parthians followed their infamous custom of retreating, turning suddenly to shoot backward arrows at the enemy and abruptly turning back to trample the stricken soldiers.



Kings of Parthia

Arsaces I	250–247 BCE
Tridates	247–211 BCE
Artabanus I	211–191 BCE
Phriapathus	191–176 BCE
Phraates I	176–171 BCE
Mithradates I	171–139 BCE
Phraates II	139–129 BCE
Interregnum	128 BCE
Artabanus II	128–124 BCE
Mithradates II, the Great	124–88 BCE
Gotarzes I (rebel king)	95–90 BCE
Orodes I	90–80 BCE
Sinatruces	80–70 BCE
Phraates III	70–57 BCE
Mithradates III	57–54 BCE
Orodes II	54–38 BCE
Pacorus I (co-ruler)	41–38 BCE
Phraates IV	38–29 BCE
Tiradates I (rebel king)	29–27 BCE
Phraataces	2 BCE–4 CE
Orodes III	6 CE
Vonones I	8–12 CE
Artabanus III	10–38 CE
Tiridates II (rebel king)	35–36 CE
Vardanes I	40–47 CE
Gotarzes II	40–51 CE
Sanabares (rebel king)	50–56 CE
Vonones II	51 CE
Vologases I	51–78 CE
Vardanes II (rebel king)	55–58 CE
Vologases II	78–80 CE
Pacorus II	80–105 CE
Artabanus III (rebel king)	80–90 CE
Vologases III	105–147 CE
Osroes I (co-ruler)	109–129 CE
Parthamaspates (rebel king)	116 CE
Mithradates I	140 CE
Vologases IV	147–191 CE
Osroes II (rebel king)	190 CE
Vologases V	191–208 CE
Vologases VI	208–218 CE
Artabanus V	216–224 CE

with Parthamaspates succeeded Osroes I. After the restoration of peace to the Parthian territories Vologases II, Vologases III and an unknown king ascended the Parthian throne. Later, the long reign of Vologases IV (147–191 CE) once again brought peace and prosperity to the Parthian territory. It seems that during the wars that broke out later between Vologases VI and Artabanus IV (216–224 CE), the latter received the support of the Median population.

Isidore, a first century CE geographer and writer from the city of Charax (the ancient capital of Susiana), divided the Median Satrapy into upper and lower Media, but there is no information as to why he made such a division. The numismatic evidence shows, however, that the Parthian coins circulating south of Ecbatana were being issued by local dynasties, while north of Ecbatana—that is, upper Media—only Parthian coins were in circulation. The coins kept in the Tabriz Museum, which were circulated in northern Media, were minted up to the period of Phraates III (70 BCE) on the eastern side of Parthian territory, while the coins in the Lorestan Museum were clearly minted in Media itself at Ecbatana. Based on this limited information about the minting and circulation of coins, it appears that Parthian control over southern Media was less complete than that over northern Media during several important centuries of Parthian rule.

That the control over northern Media was strong from the earliest days of the empire is supported by numismatic evidence from northern Iranian museums as well. For example, there are thousands of coins of Eucratides I, King of Bactria, in Iranian museums (Mitchiner 1975, 4: 334) but there are no coins from the successors of Eucratides. In fact, following his death in 145 BCE, we find only the coins of Mithradates I in northern Iran. After the time of Mithradates II (124–88 BCE) this situation changed somewhat, and it is apparent that the Parthian kings at least established a strong economic presence in southern Media. A comparative study of Parthian coins in the Tabriz (from northern Media) and Lorestan (from southern Media) museums shows that the coins of Parthian kings found in northern Media until the time of Mithradates II are different from those found in the southern Media but that, after Mithradates II, the coins of northern and southern Media become more similar and, by the time of Vologases IV, some two hundred and thirty-five years later, even the tetradrachms have become standardized. A considerable variety of Vologases IV's coins has been reported in the Tabriz Museum, which suggests that the coins of Vologases IV were in wide circulation in the Median satrapy.

The Parthian coins in the Tabriz and Lorestan museums show that the infiltration of the Parthian Empire in the satrapy of Media took place in two different phases. Parthian economic influence surfaced first in northern Media, while southern Media retained some economic independence even as the political presence of the north was being felt. Possibly two political trends existed in Media, one in favor of Parthian rule in Upper Media and the other more or less in favor of the local dynasties that existed in Lower Media and in the cities that were under the influence of Greco-Iranian culture.

Although ancient Media is relatively unknown archaeologically, the numismatic evidence helps to explain the early division of Media by Isidore of Charex in the first century. Throughout most of the centuries of Parthian rule, in fact, it appears that Media

was divided. While northern Media played an important role in the Parthian political history from the early Christian era through the time when northern Median kings themselves ascended the Parthian throne, southern Media, under Greco-Iranian influence, does not appear to have played as significant a role in Parthian history ((McDowell 1935: 219).

Note

1. Some of the coins discussed here were published previously in an article by two of the authors (Nadooshan, Moosavi, and Azizi 2005).

References

- Assar, G. F.
2004 Genealogy and Coinage of the Early Parthian Rulers. Pp. 69–93 in *Parthia and Beyond. Cultural Interconnections in the Classical Period. Papers in Honour of Gennadij A. Koselenko*. Parthica 6. Rome: Italia incontri di culture nel mondo antico.
- Bivar, A. D. H.
1993 The Political History of Iran under the Arsacids. Pp. 21–99 in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol 3/1: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, edited by E. Yarshater. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Caley, E. R.
1955 *Chemical Composition of Parthian Coins*. Numismatic Notes and Monographs 129. New York: American Numismatic Society.
- McDowell, R. H.
1935 *Coins from Seleucia on the Tigris*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Mitchiner, M.
1975 *Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian Coinage, Vol. 4*. London: Hawkins Publications.
- Nadooshan, F. K.; Moosavi, S. S.; and Azizi, M.
2005 Parthian Coins in Lorestan Museum. *Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter* 183: 5–7.
- Sellwood, D.
1980 *An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia*. 2nd edition. London: Spink & Son.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Farhang Khademi Nadooshan is Assistant Professor at Tarbiat Modarres University, Tehran. Seyed Sadrudin Moosavi is Assistant Professor at the Research Institute of Islamic Revolution, Tehran, and Frouzandeh Jafarzadeh Pour is Assistant Professor, Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences Research (IHSSR), Tehran.



Farhang Khademi
Nadooshan



Seyed Sadrudin
Moosavi



Frouzandeh
Jafarzadeh Pour