

Lecture 26: Parthia



HIST 213 Spring 2012

Parthian Dynasty (250 BCE-226 CE)

- Parthian rule lasted 474 years
 - longer than any dynastic period in Iranian history
- Seleucid focused on the western part of his empire
250 BCE The Parni tribe crown a new king in Iran
- Arsaces, eponymous founder of the dynasty
 - outlaw from Bactria who seized Parthia
 - killed satrap
- carved a small kingdom around the Caspian Sea
- series of Parthian kings

The Greeks Fight Back

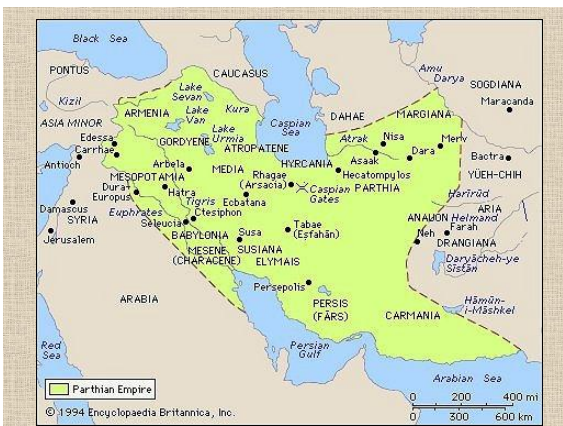
- 206 BCE Arsaces II of Parthia forced to submit to the Seleucid king Antiochus III
- Parthian Kings allowed to rule as vassals
 - not allowed to mint coinage
 - series of weak kings take throne in Parthia until Mithridates I



The Coming of Parthia

Rise of Mithridates I (171-138 BCE)

- made Parthia into a major political power
 - expanded empire to the east, south, and west
- 167 BCE Bactria
 144 BCE Babylonia
 141 BCE Media
 139 BCE Persia
- broke the tenuous hold Greece had on Persia



Mithridates the philhellene

- Mithridates I actively promoted Hellenism
 - titled himself *Philhellene* ("friend of the Greeks") on his coins.
 - Greek-style portrait showing the royal diadem
 - standard Greek symbol for kingship
 - Mithradates I resumed the striking of coins
- His name assigned him to the protection of Mithra
 - carried the god's authority in some measure.

Coin of
Mithridates I



- from the mint at Seleucia on the Tigris
 - reverse shows Heracles holding a cup, lion's skin and club
- Greek inscription reads:
- ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ,
- (Great King Arsaces, friend of the Greeks)
 - date ΓΟΠ is the year 173 of the Seleucid era
 - corresponds to 140–139 BCE

Merging of the royal lines

- 141 BCE Mithridates I captured the Seleucid king Demetrius II
- held captive for 10 years while consolidating his conquests
 - Demetrius II later married Mithridates I's daughter Rhodogune
 - had several children with her
 - Mithridates was killed in battle by Seleucid forces under Antiochus VII Sidetes; brother of Demetrius II.
 - Mithridates I's son, Phraates (138–128 BCE), succeeded him as Great King.

Last Gasp of Seleucid Power

- Antiochus VII Sidetes (139-29 BCE) reconquers Babylonia and Media
 - soon afterwards the inhabitants of the Seleucid garrison towns revolt
 - ally themselves with the Iranians
- Seleucids then suffered a crushing defeat and Antiochus VII himself met his death.
 - From this point on the Seleucid kingdom ceased to rival Parthia

Mithridates II “the Great”

- 115 BCE visited by embassy from Chinese emperor Wu-ti
- the two rulers reached an agreement on the opening of the trade route later known as the “Silk Road.”
- 109 BCE assuming the title “King of Kings”
- 96 BCE met with representatives of Rome on the Euphrates
- Parthian ambassador Orobaros offered Sulla:
 - the proprietor of the province of Cilicia
 - the “friendship” and “alliance” of his master
 - agreements with China and Rome prove Parthia's rise to world status.



A Coin of Mithridates II, The Great
AR Drachm, 4.12 g, Rhagae

Changes in Parthian Culture after Conquest

Absorption of Greek cities forced Parthians to abandon their nomadic tendencies

- capture of Babylon and Seleucia mean a new way of life
 - build a new capital at Ctesiphon
- Scholars question if feudalism was the primary model of governance
 - Soviet era scholarship

Rome vs. Parthia

- Romans and Parthians fought a series of wars
- natural boundary existed in northern Mesopotamia
 - beyond it was difficult for either side to maintain a permanent foothold
- The Parthians were generally less aggressive than the Romans
- generally sought to maintain the status-quo
 - Armenia
- 53-2 BCE Roman invasion of Parthia
- Crassus
 - defeated at Battle of Carrhae
 - loss of eagles (Roman standards)
 - Parthia becomes the eternal enemy of Rome



Marble bust M. Licinius Crassus

Bronze statue of General Surena

Battle of Carrhae (53 BCE)

Parthians outnumbered 4:1
major defeat for Rome

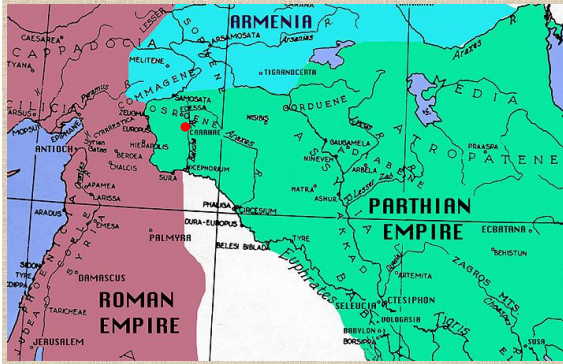
- member of the 1st Triumvirate
- 40,000 infantry
- 4,000 cavalry
- went through deserts of N. Mesopotamia
 - not mountains of Armenia



- General for King Orodes II
 - most of the force went to punish Armenia
- 9000 cavalry archers
- 1000 cataphracts
 - heavy armored horse bowmen



Traditional borders Rome-Parthia



Roman Loss at Carrhae

20,000 killed
10,000 taken prisoner

Rome lost more than this battle
– other defeats in 40 and 36 BCE

- new regime under Augustus (first emperor) needed to “correct” these losses
- Augustus demands return of the legion standards
– eagles



Terry Jones, *Barbarians* (BBC 2006)
4:29-end

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_WqUbpRChU&feature=related

“Victory” for Rome

- 20 BCE Rome sends an army against Armenia
 - hostile to Rome
 - Set up a friendly vassal king
 - constantly ask Parthia for eagles and prisoners
- Parthia in throws of civil war and agrees
- 19 BCE Peace Treaty signed
 - Euphrates now boundary
 - Parthia accepts overlordship over Armenia
 - Augustus sends King Phraates a woman “Musa”
 - she bears him several children
 - becomes new royal line

Augustus’ Propaganda

- Augustus portrays this Peace Treaty as a “victory” against the long-time enemy of the Roman people

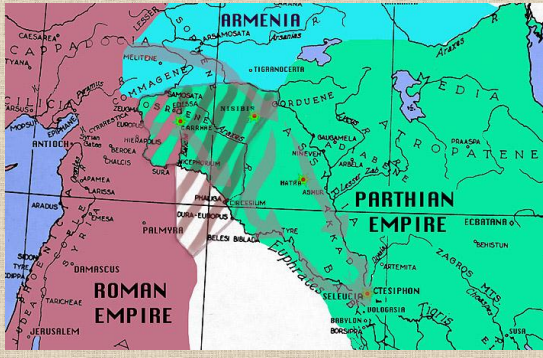


Roman coin from 19 BCE showing a Parthian returning the standards captured at Carrhae in 53 BCE

Prima Porta Augustus



Emperor Trajan Conquers Mesopotamia



Emperor Trajan Conquers Mesopotamia

- 113 CE Dedication of Trajan's column. Trajan prepares for Parthian campaign.
- 114-16 Trajan conquers Mesopotamia
- Babylon
 - Ctesiphon, capital of Parthia
- 117 Trajan dies
- New Emperor Hadrian abandons all lands east of Syria
 - Rome take a more defensive posture



Marble bust of Trajan

Parthian Investiture of Authority

Investiture is a ritual that officially conveys power and authority onto the holder

- Gods invested authority on the Shahen-shah
- Shahen-shah invested local potentates
- evidence for royal investiture comes from coins, rock reliefs, stelae, and textual sources including the Avesta and Classical authors.

Iconography of Parthian Investiture

- winged goddess behind his head holds a diadem
- tied around a spikey/radiate crown
- symbolized by winged goddess on either side of his head
 - Each deity holds in her right hand a diadem
- His consort and mother, the Roman slave Musa, sometimes shown on the reverse of his coins
 - only receives divine investiture from one deity.



tetradrachm of Phraataces
