

# INVESTITURE DURING THE PARTHIAN DYNASTY

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In the Parthian period there is evidence for kings being invested by deities and local kings being invested by the king of kings. The investiture is marked by the presentation of an object such as a diadem, a palm frond, a ring and possibly a belt. The evidence for royal investiture comes from coins, rock reliefs, stelae, and textual sources including the Avesta and classical authors.

On coins, the earliest evidence for an investiture scene involving a ruler and a deity dates to the second half of the first century BCE. Pacorus I (c. 39 BCE) has a winged goddess behind his head (*fig. 1*), who holds a diadem which is tied around a spikey/radiate crown (Wroth 1903: pl.18 no.12; Sellwood 1980: 49.1).

Drachms of his brother and successor Phraates IV (c. 38-2 BCE) depict for the first time a bird with a diadem or ring in its beak behind the king's head on the obverse (Sellwood 1980: 52.14, 53.6, 54.7). The reverse of his tetradrachms show him in the presence of different deities, who offer him symbols of kingship: a standing goddess, holding a *cornucopia* and resembling a Hellenistic Tyche presents a diadem (Sellwood 1980 50.1) or a palm frond (Sellwood 1980: 51.5). Sometimes she kneels in front of the seated king and clasps his hand in gesture of a *dexiosis* (Sellwood 1980: 53.1). An Athena-type deity wearing a helmet also offers the king a diadem (Sellwood 1980: 52.3), as does a tiny winged Nike who sits on the palm of the king's right hand (Sellwood 1980: 54.6). The divine investiture of Phraataces (c. 2 BCE-4 CE), the son of Phraates IV, is symbolised on both drachms and tetradrachms by the appearance of a winged goddess on either side of his head (Sellwood 1980: 57.3, 57.13) (*fig. 2*). Each deity holds in her right hand a diadem. His consort and mother, the Roman slave Musa, who is sometimes shown on the reverse of his coins, only receives divine investiture from one deity. On these tetradrachms a winged figure holds a diadem above the queen's forehead (Sellwood 1980: 58.6).



Fig. 2. Coin of Pacorus I

By this time a striking resemblance has developed between the royal bust on the obverse and the seated male figure being invested by a deity on the reverse, showing that they are clearly the same person. This is particularly noticeable on coins of the late first to second centuries CE (Sellwood 1980: 72.1; 79.17).

A tetradrachm of Artabanus II (c. CE 10-38) shows that the enthroned king on the reverse is being invested twice (*fig. 3*): once by a standing female figure who offers him a palm frond and then by a kneeling man who holds a diadem (Sellwood 1980: 62.1). Artabanus III (c. CE 80-90) receives an untied band, a diadem or belt, as a symbol of kingship from a goddess (Sellwood 1980: 74.2), and the mounted Pacorus II (CE 78-105) again receives his investiture from two figures: a goddess with a diadem and a male figure dressed in the Parthian fashion with an untied belt (?) (Sellwood 1980: 75.2), both symbols of kingship (Curtis 2001: 309-10). Towards the end of the Parthian period the royal bird or falcon makes its re-appearance as a symbol of royal investiture on bronze coins of Vologases IV (c. CE 147-191) (Sellwood 1980: 84.161).



Fig. 2. A tetradrachm Phraataces

Despite the Hellenistic-inspired iconography, the deities and divine symbols on Parthian coins have to be understood within an Iranian context. It seems as if we have here representations of Iranian divinities such as Ashi, the goddess of Reward and Fortune, and Anahita, the goddess of Fertility and All Waters. Probably the bird is the Avestan *vâreṇa*, the royal eagle and bestower of the God Given Glory, the *xvarənah*, who is closely associated with *Vərəθrəyṇa*, the god of Victory (Shahbazi 1984: 314, 316; 1989: 516). The winged goddess hovering above the king's head holding a diadem or ring as a symbol of kingship, resembling the Hellenistic Nike, could also be a symbol of *xvarənah* (Shahbazi 1980: 131).

On Bactrian coins, the Kushan kings, who were contemporaries of the Parthians, depict a variety of Iranian deities on their coins. These include Ortagno, the god of Victory, a Kushan equivalent to *Vərəθrəyṇa*. He is shown in royal dress resembling the king and wearing a hat which ends in a bird's head. Another gold coin of Kanishka I shows the king holding a sceptre, which has a bird placed at the top. The name Ortagno (Iranian *Vərəθrəyṇa*) is written in Greek letters on the reverse of this coin (Göbl 1984: pl.8,29). Another Iranian deity identified by name on Kushan coins is Pharro (Iranian *farnah*/Avestan *xvarənah*). He is shown holding a diadem in his hand (Rosenfield 1968: 97; Tanabe 1984: 35).

The royal eagle, as a symbol of divine investiture, also appears on coins of Persis during the first and second centuries CE (Hill 1922: pls. XXX-XXXI). Sometimes it is placed in the centre of the king's crown on the obverse and other times it appears in a worshipping scene to the right of temple on the reverse. Occasionally, it is shown on its own on the reverse (Hill 1922: pl. XXXVIa). The significance of the bird as a symbol of *Vərəθrəyṇa* and divine kingship continues into the Sasanian period, where feathers and the bird itself appear as divine symbols on the royal crowns of a number of Sasanian kings on coins, rock reliefs, silver plates and seals (Göbl 1971: pls. 3, 4, 10, 13; Herrmann 1977: 100, 106, 112). Eagles are also shown on the sculpture of Hatra in northern Mesopotamia. Here they appear on both the diadems and tiaras of Hatrene kings, as well as on their own (Safar and Mustafa 1974: pls. 6-8, 12, 14, 136-8).



Fig. 3. A tetradrachm of Artabanus II

Representations of investiture scenes on rock reliefs and stelae fall into two main categories:

1. The investiture of a local king, sometimes in the presence of the king of kings. A local ruler receives or holds a ring of power. Such scenes are known from Sar-e Pol-e Zohab near Kermanshah, perhaps of the time of Gotarzes II in the first century CE, or even later (Trümpelmann 1977: 16, pls. 9a, 10). A banquet scene at Tang-e Sarvak in Elymais shows the local ruler, Orodes, reclining on a platform throne supported by mythical birds. He holds a ring in his right hand and is surrounded by figures who carry divine attributes such as a *cornucopia*, a helmet and radiate crown (Vanden Berghe and Schippmann 1985: pl. 28). A similar banquet scene appears on the rock relief of Kuh-e Tina (Bard-e Bot), also in Elymais. Here a reclining male figure holds a ring in his right hand and behind him stands a female (?) figure with a stylised *cornucopia* (?) (Vanden Berghe and Schippmann 1985: fig. 5). The best example, which can be dated on the basis of the Aramaic inscription to 215 CE, comes from Susa and shows the investiture of Khwasak, the satrap of Susa, by Artabanus IV (Ghirshman 1962: 56, pl. 70). The king of kings wears his ridged tiara known to us from his coins and he is seated on a throne supported by winged griffins. He offers a ring to the standing local satrap.

2. Court scenes or jousting scenes, where a Nike-type deity or a bird appears behind a human figure, usually the king, and indicates divine protection and royal investiture. A floating winged Nike-type figure, for example, appears on the rock relief of Mithradates II (c.123-88 BCE) at Bisotun, and a bird with a diadem in its beak is shown on the eroded jousting relief of Gotarzes II of perhaps 49-50 CE, also at Bisotun (Herrmann 1977: 53; Vanden Berghe 1984: fig. 3; Curtis 2000: 25, fig. 7) and on the Hong-e Azhdar rock relief near Izeh /Malamir (Vanden Berghe and Schipmann 1985: pl.2). This latter relief is sometimes dated to the reign of Mithradates I and is thought to commemorate his victory over the Elymaian revolt in 140 BCE (Schmitt 1998: 168), but it is more likely that it dates to the end of the first century BCE or even later. It is possible that the scene shows the investiture of a local Elymaian king, perhaps in the first or even second centuries CE, while the inscription, belongs to an earlier relief of the time of Mithradates II, which has not survived (Curtis 2000: 25).

Among classical sources, Strabo (II.9.3) reports that Parthian kingship was hereditary, but the official appointment of the Parthian king was the task of a council, which consisted of relatives of the king, noblemen, "wise men" and "magi" or priests. Plutarch (Crassus ii, 290) writes that the honor of placing the crown on the king's head belonged to the family of Surena. This is confirmed by Armenian sources, where the Surens, one of the seven important families, had the privilege of crowning the king (Kettenhofen 1998:329). Evidence for the investiture of local kings by the Parthian king of kings appears in Josephus (*Antiquities* 20.68), who describes that once the power of Artabanus was restored, Izates, the king of Adiabene, was given permission to wear his tiara upright and to sleep on a golden bed (Rajak 1998: 320). This tiara is likely to have been similar to that worn by the Parthian king of kings, as a coin of Abgarus, a much later king of Adiabene (q.v.) in the second century, shows (Curtis 2000: pl. 81, n, o).

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