

PARTHIAN AND SASSANIAN  
HISTORY SINCE WORLD WAR I

There is a periodic need for a general survey and stock-taking in almost every field, but in the domain of the pre-Islamic history of Iran, to my knowledge, there has been little scholarly assessment of the picture of the past in light of changes wrought by new source materials. One important reason is that the sources for this history have increased considerably in the past few decades, and scholars have devoted the bulk of their time to the elucidation of these sources, with little time left for a study of their historical consequences. Another point which should be made is the difference between the requirements, on the one hand, for the work of ancient and medieval historians and, on the other hand, for that of modern colleagues. Historians of more recent times like to emphasize the homogeneity of the historical profession and the continuity of methods in the entire field. But in practice it is the classicist who, in our universities, concerns himself with ancient history. I mean by this one who is trained in the methods of textual analysis and the tools of the classicist, and it is the Orientalist or philologist who writes the history of the pre-modern Orient. Given the difficulties of ancient

oriental languages and the need to gather source material from the archeologist, epigraphist, numismatist, and art historian, one can understand the great demands on these specialists who would write history. It is no wonder that the methods of the modern historian, evolved from work with an abundance of material and the need for comparison of various sources in evaluating a multitude of factors and roles played by individuals in a given situation, are of a somewhat different nature from those of the scholar who investigates the more distant past. The modern historian is dependent on the economist and political scientist for aid in reconstructing his story. This is the result, of course, of the differentiation and great expansion of knowledge in modern times. The disciplines become defined, and specialization is a necessity in view of the great mass of documentation. Before the advent of writing, archeology, history, and other disciplines are undifferentiated. With its invention, however, the process of ordering subjects and fields at once begins. With the increase of material remains, archeology, for example, divides into the history of architecture, with art, epigraphy, numismatics, the history of technology, and so on. This is inherent in the process of understanding.

The Parthian period of Iran's history is not nearly so well known as the preceding Achaemenid era, and the Sassanian period is much better known than the Achaemenid. We shall not be concerned here with the art history of Parthian and Sassanian Iran or with literature and language, although they are of course important for the over-all history. Both fields have developed considerably in recent years. The question to be asked is this: Has our conception of Parthian and Sassanian history changed in the last generation, and if so, has it broadened in scope as well?

Before trying to answer this question, one must consider briefly the new sources which have come to light since World War I and the histories which have been written as a result of their evaluation.

At the outset, one may turn to finds outside of Persia proper.<sup>1</sup> The

1. I use the present political countries as geographical indicators, the name "Persia" being restricted to the country with its present-day boundaries. "Iran" refers rather to the time before the Mongol invasion and is not restricted to the boundaries of the present-day political entity. Iran means, then, the area where Iranian languages were spoken by the majority of the population, including Afghanistan and parts of West Turkistan and the Caucasus area—what the French call *l'Iran exterieur*.

## Notes and Discussion

manuscript fragments in Parthian, Middle Persian, Sogdian, and Kho-tanese-Saka, to mention only the Iranian languages, are well known and of great importance historically as well as linguistically. Perhaps their greatest contribution to the *history* of pre-Islamic Iran, although the documents themselves are later in time, is their elucidation of Manichaeism. Even though they were found far from Iran, in Chinese Turkistan, and were written after the Arabs conquered Iran, they are nevertheless of prime importance for an understanding of aspects of Iranian culture and civilization before Islam.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that extensive systematic archeological excavations were not carried out in sites in Chinese Turkistan, where for the most part only "surface" work was done.

From Russian or West Turkistan we have a multitude of archeological excavations and surveys. Perhaps the most significant are those in Khwarezm, at Pandjikant in Tadjikistan, and at Nisa in Turkmenistan. Merv and Termez have so far yielded few remains. In Khwarezm a number of pre-Islamic sites were excavated, and inscriptions in the ancient language of Khwarezm, on wood and leather, were found. These are in the process of study.<sup>3</sup> At Mount Mug, Pandjikant, Sogdian documents, wall paintings, and archeological remains from the time of the Arab conquest were excavated,<sup>4</sup> throwing light on the culture of Iran before Islam dominated everything. At Nisa, ostraca in the Parthian language and archeological remains showing a predominantly Hellenistic material culture were found. The names on the ostraca, however, were Iranian—one might even say Zoroastrian—with no trace of Greek influence. Minor excavations have produced a splendid Greco-Buddhist stone frieze from Termez, now in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, as well as coins new to scholarship and other important remains of material culture.<sup>5</sup>

2. These documents now have an enormous bibliography. For them and all epigraphical material relating to Iran cf. W. B. Henning, "Mitteliranisch" in *Handbuch der Orientalistik* (Leiden, 1958).

3. For an account of Tolstov's work in a Western language see his article in *Ars asiaticus*, IV (1957), 187–98; see also R. B. Piotrovsky, *Ourartou, Neopolis des Scythes, Khorezm* (Paris, 1954).

4. V. Belenitsky's *The Paintings of Ancient Pandjikant* (Moscow, 1954) should be translated into a western European language.

5. For an extensive survey in English (with bibliography) see the review of *Epigrafika Vostoka* by O. Grabar in *Ars orientalis*, II (1957), 547–560.

In Syria the excavations at Dura Europos, initiated by the Louvre and continued by Yale University between the wars, have provided much source material for the historian. Inscriptions in Greek, Aramaic, Palmyrene, and Iranian have thrown new light on the border garrison town of the Romans. Hatra in Iraq has produced Aramaic inscriptions and a wealth of art and architectural material. The excavations at Warka (Uruk) have uncovered a Parthian city, but so far results have unfortunately been limited. On the other side of Persia, in Afghanistan, the D el egation Arch eologique Fran aise has investigated a series of sites in the last thirty years, primarily of the pre-Islamic Buddhist culture in the eastern part of the country. Bamiyan, Begram, and Hadda are the principal sites of Buddhist finds, while Surkh Kotal in the north is an important pre-Buddhist town now being excavated. A large inscription, probably of Kanishka II, in the Kushan language but in modified Greek script, is an important step forward in our knowledge of the eastern part of the Iranian world in a little-known period of history.<sup>6</sup> Balkh, the mother of cities, has unfortunately proved disappointing, although excavations were twice carried out there.

In Persia, archeologists have been concerned primarily with Achaemenid or pre-Achaemenid sites, and in this realm results have been notable. For our period the work of R. Ghirshman at Bishapur, before World War II, and the excavations of the Metropolitan Museum at Qasr Abu Nasr near Shiraz should be especially noted. At Bishapur splendid mosaics similar to those from contemporary Antioch were found, and at Qasr Abu Nasr a large collection of bullae with inscribed seal impressions from the late Sassanian period were unearthed. These will help provide clues to the identification of city mint signatures (abbreviations) on Sassanian coins. The important sites of Takht-e Sulayman in Azerbaydjan and Kuh-e Khwadja in Sistan, both the scene of past surveys, will be systematically excavated, the former by H. H. von der Osten, directing a joint Swedish-German expedition, and the latter by an Italian expedition organized by G. Tucci.

The Sassanian inscriptions must be mentioned apart, the royal inscriptions and those of the churchman Kartir being of vital importance for the history of Iran in this period.<sup>7</sup> The four inscriptions of Kartir,

6. Cf. A. Maricq, "La grande inscription de Kaniska," *Journal asiatique* 1958, 345-440.

7. All Iranian inscriptions are being published in London in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*, three folios of which have appeared.

## Notes and Discussion

which are really one inscription with four versions, abridged or with variations, give us an invaluable picture of the Zoroastrian state church of the Sassanians in its embryonic beginnings. The theological statements are simple and unmixed with gnostic or "Zurvanite" features.

The *res gestae divi Saporis*, as the ancient historian Rostovtzeff named the trilingual inscription of Shahpuhr I on the structure known as the Ka'bah of Zoroaster, is a record of Shahpuhr's wars against the Romans, first against Gordian, then against Valerian, whom he captured. It enumerates the cities captured by the Persians, in which Antioch features twice. Finally, the lists of dignitaries at the courts of Ardashir and Shahpuhr are invaluable for a knowledge of Sassanian protocol and the court.

The other inscriptions of the Sassanians at Hajjiabad and Bishapur, carved by order of Shahpuhr I, and the great bilingual of Narses at Paikuli have further enriched our knowledge of early Sassanian times. One should not omit minor inscriptions such as the "Armazi" in the Caucasus, Tang-e Sarwak in the south for the Parthian era, and Firuzabad, Taq-e Bostan, and Pahlavi cursive inscriptions in the vicinity of Persepolis for the later Sassanian period.

One may say, in general, that the inscriptions have been the prime sources for revisions in our conception of Sassanian history. What, then, have the historians done with the new sources?

General histories of Iran or articles in world histories or in a series are not mentioned here, for the progress of scholarship in the history of Parthian and Sassanian Iran can be better measured by monographs and special studies of the period. At the outset it must be confessed that progress has been disappointing.

*A Political History of Parthia* by N. Debevoise (Chicago, 1938), should be mentioned as the first general history of Parthia since the work of Rawlinson and Gutschmid. From this book one sees that Parthian history is still the provenance of classicists. The author unfortunately makes little use of the new discoveries in Dura, and his work tends to follow that of Gutschmid, without showing much in the way of advance. The monograph by P. Lozinski, *The Homeland of the Parthians* (The Hague, 1959), cannot be called a serious work and indicates a retrogression of several steps. The booklet by U. Kahrstedt on *Artabanos III* (Bern, 1950), on the other hand, is an interesting, if not always convincing, attempt to reconstruct the split in Parthian do-

mains in the first century A.D. by reference to the brief and often enigmatic notices in Greek and Latin historians. In a manner similar to W. Tarn in his *Greeks in Bactria and India* (Cambridge University Press, 1938), Kahrstedt assembles all the sources he can find—numismatics, dubious Chinese accounts of Western lands, and archeology—to reconstruct a history from the gaps. This is not a story with many lacunae but rather almost a vacuum with stray bits of factual flotsam roaming about unfixed in time or place. To be frank, one cannot thus reconstruct a history, and the scholarly attempts of Tarn and Kahrstedt must be applauded for their ingenuity but hardly accepted as an account of what really happened. The most successful practitioner of the “universal sources” method was J. Marquart, who, however, did not try to paint a large canvas but rather sought to elucidate minor problems of geography and history with astonishing learning. His works, *Eransahr* (Gottingen, 1901), *Wehrot und Arang* (Leiden, 1938), and others, are mines of erudition.

We are in a much better position to study Sassanian history, owing to the work of Arthur Christensen, who treated it in a series of articles and monographs, culminating in his masterpiece *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (2d ed.; Copenhagen: E. J. Brill, 1944). This is a general cultural, religious, social, and, to a certain extent, political history of the Sassanian period—the only work of its kind in the field. One of its defects, incidentally, is a lack of attention to chronology. F. Altheim, ancient historian of the Free University of Berlin, has developed Christensen's remarks on the financial and bureaucratic reforms of Chosroes I at the beginning of the sixth century A.D. and has convincingly shown the prototype of origin of some of Chosroes' concepts in the reforms carried out by Diocletian in the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> G. Widengren, of Uppsala, has also written on social and bureaucratic changes during the Sassanian period, approaching the subject from the point of view of a historian of religions and expanding Christensen's writings on the subject.<sup>9</sup> Among specialized monographs in the field, the work by W. Ensslin on the wars of Shahpuhr (Munich, 1948) should be mentioned, since it provided a summation from the classical viewpoint

8. Especially in his works *Ein Asiatischer Staat* (Wiesbaden, 1954) and *Finanzgeschichte des alten Orients* (Frankfurt, 1956).

9. “Recherches sur le féodalisme iranien,” *Orientalia Suecana*, V (1956), 79–182, and another book in German now in the press on the same subject.

of the wars between Gordian and Shahpuhr and Valerian and Shahpuhr before the inscription of the Ka'bah of Zoroaster was widely known.

The communist movement of Mazdak, executed about A.D. 531, would naturally attract attention in the Communist world, and O. Klima has written a book on the social and economic history of this period, developing a monograph by Christensen, which was more concerned with the religious implications of the movement.<sup>10</sup> N. Pigulevskaya has steadily produced from Syriac sources a flow of articles and books relating to pre-Islamic Iran, including many works translated from Syriac into Russian.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the Persian statesman Sayyed Hasan Taqizadeh has devoted a lifetime to questions of time reckoning and chronology in pre-Islamic Iran. His latest work is a book on Mani wherein he defends his date of the death of Mani at A.D. 277 against Henning, who places it at 274.<sup>12</sup> R. Ghirshman, *Iran*, in the "Penguin" series (London, 1955), is a general art and cultural survey of pre-Islamic Iran.

One could continue to examine other works, articles, and the like. We should, however, return to the question: Has our picture of Parthian and Sassanian history changed as witnessed in these publications?

It is now fairly clear that there were two cultural traditions in Iran after Alexander the Great, both of which were strong, persistent, and existed *side by side* without much apparent conflict. It is increasingly evident, especially from the excavations, that Greek material culture was strong and pervasive. For example, the art of Gandhara is certainly the result of a continuity from Greco-Bactrian times, with the influx of a later Roman provincial art, as at Palmyra, even though Greek political power had long since disappeared in the East. At Nisa, on the other hand, few if any Greeks were present, yet the Hellenic influence is overwhelming. The prestige of Hellenism in western Iran, too, is indicated by the mosaics of Bishapur and by the use of Greek in the inscriptions of the early Sassanians.

At the same time in the religious sphere Zoroastrianism does not die

10. O. Klima, *Mazdak* (Prague, 1957), with extensive bibliography (in German).

11. E.g. *Byzantium on the Routes to India* (Moscow, 1951) (in Russian).

12. Cf. Henning, "The Dates of Mani's Life," *Asia Major*, VI (1957), 106-21, where the relevant parts of Taqizadeh's book are translated into English.

but continues to develop, first under the Seleucids, then under the Parthians. Owing to the nature of the Parthian monarchy—a conglomeration of various kingdoms with rulers sometimes more important than the *prima inter pares* at court (cf. Kahrstedt)—there was a variety of local developments. But, because of the lack of unity and the resulting disagreements, the *mobads*, or priests, finally had to resort to written words to refresh their memories for the recitation of the sacred *Avesta*. The Arsacid *Avesta* must have helped to preserve the religion and provide a base on which the Sassanians could build. The competition for men's religious allegiance and the spread of Gnostic sects and religions from the outside, which must have entered Iran in this period, probably acted as a stimulus on the Magian priesthood. Our picture of Parthian Iran had developed, albeit slowly. The need is for more source materials, and the excavations under way may well provide them.

The Sassanian church and state are now much better known, thanks primarily to the inscriptions. It is highly probable that there was no social or political revolution with the advent of the Sassanians. Parthian traditions continued for a long time, and the greatest change comes late, after the Mazdakite disorders. It was then that the tax system and economic organization of the state had to be revised and that great reforms were initiated. Probably the state and church organization as we know it from Islamic sources was fixed in this period. Although the titles may have existed previously, the offices of *mobadan mobad* ("chief priest" on the analogy of "King of Kings"), *herbadan herbad* (chief ecclesiastic), and others were probably organized at this time. The class or caste system was certainly tightened after the Mazdakite disorders. This is probably also the time of the invention of the Avestan alphabet, although the reign of Shahpuhr II (ca. 309–79) may have seen important developments in the church. All the activities under Chosroes I, however, point to the period of greatest change in the history of Sassanian Iran.

The picture of the Zoroastrian religion at the beginning of the Sassanian period is one of vitality, simplicity, and assertiveness against other faiths, with even missionary activities outside of Iran (Kartir's establishment of fires in non-Iran), and attacks on heretics. Orthodoxy, however, has not yet been formulated, and special cults (*Anahita*), and time speculation (*Zurvan*) exist among the followers of Zoroaster. At



## *Notes and Discussion*

the end of the Sassanian period the church is exclusive, frozen in an involved fire ritual, with oppressive taboos and cult requirements.

From the time of Chosroes I, concepts of chronology become important. Old beliefs and titles, such as "*Kay*," are resurrected and mythical names, or those from the memory of the folk, become more popular. The "religious" traditions of East Iran and the "historical" of West Iran are brought together, and some attempt is made to give a history or chronology to the *Avesta* (and its tradition from the East), and to bring the *Avesta* into harmony with the traditions of the memory of the Achaemenids. The history of Iran is standardized with set patterns, which Cyrus, Arsaces, and Ardashir Papakan all must follow. This is a pattern of flight and humble surroundings, involving descent from a noble family—indeed from the last kingly family—albeit concealed. After hardships and adventures comes a change of fortune and universal acclaim as the rightful ruler, and a new dynasty is founded. How much of this set tradition comes from Zoroaster and how much from the Achaemenids? These questions and others I hope to develop in a book on pre-Islamic Iran to be published by Weidenfeld and Nicholson in London.