

ASHKÂNĪÂN - PARTHIANS THE EMPIRE OF ARSACID DYNASTY 248BCE to 28th April CE224

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**“When you see a Parthian charger tied up to a tomb-stone in Palestine,
the hour of the Messiah will be near”.**

Jewish saying



Parthian Empire at its' greatest extent in 1st Century CE

After the invasion of Iran, lead by Alexander III of Macedonia, Iran became in a constant conflict between the Iranian traditional values and the Hellenistic way of life, between the oriental monarchy and city state, and between an economic system based on private enterprise and controlled oriental economy. Invaders were unable to solve these and other problems inherent in such a mixed and complex society. In the end, the empire which the Iranians founded by Deioces of Mede, and flourished under the Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great, triumphed over the mirage which Alexander tried to sow in Iranian soil. The Macedonians and Greeks whom he made citizens of Iran ultimately ceased to be what they originally were. The temporarily vanquished people of Iran conquered them so completely that posterity was never to recognise them as the Macedonians and Greeks of Alexander or the short-lived dynasty of the Seleucids.

A reaction set in against the penetration of Hellenism and its imposition on a foreign sub-stratum; in the east sprang up the Iranians and the Kushans, and in the west Carthage and Rome. All were on the fringes of the limited Hellenistic world and were, to a greater or lesser extent, affected by Hellenism. The last century of the pre-common era and the first centuries of the common era witnessed the greatest expansion of the Iranian world. Under the Parthian dynasty, Iranians advanced to the frontiers of Egypt; the Kushan empire occupied the whole of north India, Russian Turkistan and part of Chinese Turkistan; the Iranian-Sarmatians, who swarmed over the



Coin of Arsaces I, 247-211 BCE, Nisa mint
(Click to enlarge)

Eurasian steppes, became masters of a great part of the northern shore of the Black Sea, reached the borders of the Danubian world and spread into central Asia. The Iranian world took its revenge on the Macedonians by attacking its two eastern outposts. The Graeco-Bactrian kingdom disappeared under the onslaught of the Yueh-chih, the later Kushans, and the Greek settlements on the Black Sea coast were over-run by the Sarmatians. Iran maintained its pressure against the Romans when they appeared in Asia. The wars of Mithradates of Pontus represent the resistance of the Easterners under Iranian leadership. From this titanic duel Iran under the Parthian emperors emerged victorious over the dying Hellenist Seleucids.

About 250 BCE two brothers, Arashk (*NPer.* Arash, *Lat.* Arsaces) and Tirdat (Tiridates), with their forces under the command of five other chiefs, occupied the district of upper Tejen. Arashk (Arsaces) was to become the first king of the Arsacid (Arsacid or Parthian) dynasty.

This was the period when Seleucus II was just about to consolidate his empire. The Iranian continued to challenge Hellenistic authority, particularly as the Seleucids faced revolts in their empire and a challenge from Rome. Almost a century after the first Parthian "Shahanshah" claim to possess an independent kingdom, Mithradates I, founded Arsacid (Parthian) empire between the years 160 and 140 BCE. Mithradates I annexed provinces of Media, Elymais, Persia, Characene, Babylonia and Assyria in the west and Gedrosia and Herat and Sakestan (Sistan) in the east, and Selucia on the Tigris, was the largest city in this part of Asia at that time back from Selucids. The Iranians did not annex Selucia, but built a vast military camp facing the city on the left bank of the Tigris. This later became the new Iranian capital of Ctesiphon. The Selucid, Demetrius II, set out to reconquer the eastern part of Iran. He lost his battle against the Iranian cavalry and fell into the hands of Mithradates I. The Parthian king treated him with great magnanimity, installing him in Hyrcania, and gave him his daughter in marriage.

Mithradates I has been mentioned as being many admirable qualities - virtuous, brave and a good legislator. He was, in fact, the restorer of the Old Iranian Empire, Achaemenians, and took the title of the 'Great King'. The part he played in the revival of the Iranian State may be compared to that of Cyrus the Great, whom in some ways, he resembled in character. He died in 137 BCE.

Twelve years later, the Seleucids really passed away in 129 BCE in a battle between Antiochus VII Sidetes and the Iranians. The Hellenism was defeated. This was a fateful day for Hellenism. It never again recovered and the Seleucid kingdom, though it survived for several more decades, lay prostrate before triumphant Iran.

The frontier of Macedonia, extended by Alexander to the banks of the Indus, was now thrown back to the Euphrates. Six years later Mithradates II the Great took charge of the Arsacid Empire. It was he who guarded Iran in the east. After restoring order in the west, he pushed the frontiers of Iran back to the Oxus, re-occupied the eastern provinces of the Iran and damned back the flood of the nomads. His success was of the first importance, for it saved the western world from the menace of the Sakae. In this the Parthian king revived the historic role of Iran of protecting the civilisation of western Asia. The greatness of Mithradates II the Great can be judged from the attitude of the other great empires towards him. About 115 BCE he received an embassy from the Emperor of China and the two rulers concluded a treaty designed to facilitate the movement of international commerce, in which Iran, as a transit state, formed a vitally important link. He also brought back Armenia within the Iranian sphere of influence. The parts played by Mithradates I and Mithradates II in the Iranian Empire may be likened respectively to those of Cyrus the Great and Darius the Great. The former ruler was responsible for its territorial expansion, while the latter consolidated and organised what had been won. Mithradates II the Great made Iran back into a world power, and its relations with Rome in the west and China in the east show the importance of the position it occupied in the political and economic life of the contemporary world. Emperor Mithradates II gave formal expression to the increase in his power by assuming the title of Shahanshah "King of Kings".



Emperor Mithradates (Mehrdād) II the Great
(Click to enlarge)

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The Iranians were entered into negotiations with Rome and accepted to be neutral in the Roman wars against Armenia. However, the Romans, in their pride and ignorance, continued to show little regard for the Parthian Emperors, who had kept their pledges scrupulously. Pompey violated the Parthian-Roman peace treaty, seized the western provinces of Parthia, intrigued with its vassal princes and insulted the Parthian emperor, Phraates II, the Romans behaved unscrupulously and without shame. For example, when after the death of Phraates II, Mithradates III wanted to seize the Parthian throne from Orodes II, Gabinius agreed to assist him in return for a large sum of money. However, he turned against him because he accepted the offer of a larger amount of money from another pretender.

The greed of the Roman leaders reached its apogee when Crassus was made pro-consul of Syria. It is true that the Roman senate had no desire for a war with Iran. Crassus, on the other hand, believed that the conquest of Iran would be an easy victory and would yield a rich booty. Thus was joined the battle between the Romans and the Iranians. The Iranian heavy cavalry commanded by Eran-Espahbet Rostaham Suren-Pahlav, smashed the Roman army and killed and captured three-quarters of the forces of Crassus. Crassus himself paid for the disaster with his own life and that of his son. In this battle, fought at Carrhae in 53 BCE, the combined Iranian forces of heavy cavalry and mounted bowmen carried the day and proved superior to the Roman army, which had no mounted formations. The Battle of Carrhae forced Rome to introduce cavalry into its army, just as nearly a thousand years earlier the first Iranians to reach the plateau had induced the Assyrians to introduce a similar reform.

The shock of the Iranian victory opened the eyes of Rome to the real strength of Iran - a superpower whose policy was defensive rather than offensive. The Iranians carried away the Roman eagles of the legions of Crassus, and these remained only in the Arsacid temples. Once again Iran had forcibly thrown back from its frontiers the Hellenism to which the Romans claimed to be the heirs. The consequence was that for a whole century the Iranian frontiers on the Euphrates remained inviolate, and not only the Iranians, but the western Semitics, such as the Jews of Palestine, the Nabateans of Damascus, the Arabs of the desert, and the inhabitants of Palmyra, looked with hope to Iran where the Parthian dynasty appeared as true successors of the Achaemenians. They felt that they were to have their revenge on the Romans through the Iranian horsemen, whose coming to defeat the Roman beast was foretold in the Apocalypse.

The Romans made repeated attempts to conquer what was known to them as "the Roman east" from the Iranians. During the reign of Phraates IV c.37 BCE Antony mounted a major invasion of the territories of the Parthian Empire. His failure led Augustus to adopt a policy of compromise. The consequent agreement with Iran led to the return of the eagles of the legions of Crassus to Rome. This period coincided with the slow decay of the House of Mithradates, and its replacement by another Parthian dynasty. The change helped the revival of Iran, since the new dynasty helped the country to back more Iranian values and national in character.

The first signs of the new Iranian renaissance appeared under Valakhs I (Balash, N.Pers., Vologases lat.), on the reverse of his coinage is depicted a fire altar with a sacrificing priest. For the first time, Iranian money bore letters of the Pahlavi alphabet. According to a later tradition, the text of the Avesta was compiled in his reign. This revival coincided with the reversal of the Roman policy of compromise and adjustment. Trajan reversed the ideas of Augustus and decided that the Romans must conquer Armenia, converting it into a Roman province, and that Iran must be reduced to vassalage, to be governed by a puppet king. In CE 114 Trajan began his campaign and started conquering the lands of the Caucasus and areas around the Black Sea. He invaded Armenia and even conquered the Iranian capital, Ctesiphon. He went further south, up to the Persian Gulf. The Iranians had remained mysteriously quiet; they waited for the inevitable, which was the revolt of the conquered peoples against the Romans. The Jews of Cyrenaica, Egypt and Cyprus rose in rebellion, and the revolt spread to Palestine, Syria, northern Mesopotamia and eventually to the entire Semitic world. It was at this time that the Iranians struck. The result was that the great victories of Rome turned to defeat.

With the accession of Vologases II CE 148-92 the Iranian retribution began to be exacted from the Romans. The wars continued for decades; cities changed hands and territories were conquered and lost by both parties. In the end the Romans were defeated. The Parthian Emperor, Artabanus V, was twice victorious over the Emperor Macrinus and imposed a heavy tribute on Rome. Thus, after

two and a half centuries, Roman attempts to reduce Iran to vassalage ended in failure. The contest between Rome and Iran, from the point of view of Iran, was essentially defensive in nature. The Iranians had opportunities to march on to Rome, but they did not do so on purpose. They were satisfied with their vast empire, within which, according to the classical writers, there were eighteen vassal states.

Iranian society retained its ancient traditional values under the Parthian dynasty by following of the three Zoroastrian principle divines of Good Thoughts, Goods Words, and Good Deeds. The Monolithic religion of Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) was worshipped under the Median and Achaemenian dynasties, have retained its hold on the popular and it was the semi-official religion under the Parthians.

Except the Zoroastrian religion the Iranians were worshipping the two deities; Anahita (Ānâhitâ) and Mithra. Anahita, who enjoyed most popularity beyond the western frontiers of Iran, which her cult spread to Lydia, where she was called 'the lady of Bactria', to Pontus, Cappadocia and Armenia. But Mithra, was even more popular than Anahita, which the pirates captured by Pompey took to Rome, whence it was carried by the Roman armies as far as the Rhine, Danube and Brittany.

Arsacid dynasty, who like the Kushans, sprang from the nomadic Iranian peoples of Central Asia, were very tolerant of foreign religions. In Mesopotamia, they adopted the cults of the country they conquered, though they modified them and gave them a slightly different aspect. They do not seem to have encouraged proselytising among the conquered peoples. Among the many sanctuaries excavated at Dura-Europos in Syria, which long remained an advance post of the Iranian Empire, not a single fire temple was discovered, although there was an important Iranian territory in this trading centre. The tolerance of the Iranians was particularly evident in their relations with the Jews. Having been oppressed by the Seleucids and the Romans, they believed that Iran was the only great power capable of delivering them from the foreign yoke, as it had done once before in the Achaemenian period. The Parthian dynasty role in the liberation of the Jews gave rise to the well-known saying:

"When you see a Parthian charger tied up to a tomb-stone in Palestine, the hour of the Messiah will be near".

The true character of the Arsacids over which they ruled for nearly five centuries, is gradually emerging as a result of research into its history, religion and civilisation. At first it was no more than a conquest by a small and insignificant outlying province of the Seleucid Empire. Gradually the Iranians under the Arsacids' leadership eliminated the traces of dying Hellenism. Iran under the Parthian dynasty advance to the west had its counterpart in that of Rome to the east. Eventually the two peoples, Iranian and Roman, who had divided between them the material and spiritual heritage of Hellenism came face to face on opposite banks of the Euphrates. The former, claiming to be heir to the Achaemenians and the Selucids, aspired to restore the ancient empire with its outlets on the Mediterranean. The latter, under the Caesars, claimed to be heir to Alexander and aspired to the dominion of the whole of Asia, including India. For nearly three centuries, Iran stood on the defensive against Rome, all of whose sallies, apart from certain ephemeral successes, were doomed to failure. Iran emerged victorious from the long struggle with the formidable Roman Empire. This struggle proved to the Iranians that they possessed resources capable of resisting the assault of the savagery and that they could maintain their country and their integrity and dignity.

In addition to this struggle with Rome, Parthian Iran had to face the onslaught of nomadic invasions, some of which came from the north-east steppes and others through the Caucasian passes. By resisting these attacks, Iran made a great contribution to the world, since it defended, and perhaps saved from destruction, the ancient civilisation of western Asia. By their revival of the Iranian spirit and their successful foreign policy, Iran under the wise leadership of the Arsacid dynasty, who were enabled Iranians to achieve a national unity and a civilisation that became again Iranian.

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