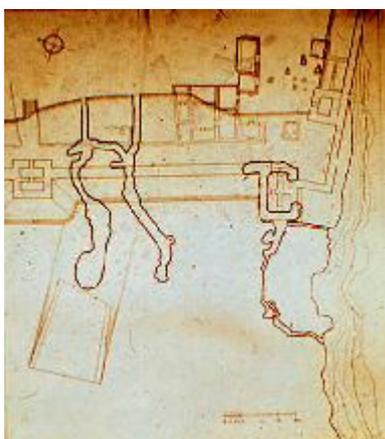


**IMAGES OF ANCIENT IRAN**  
**Arsacid (Parthian) Dynasty (248 BCE - 224 CE)**

**Dura Europas**  
**(Parthian Evidence)**



The city of Dura Europos was founded around 300 BCE by Seleucids, soon after Alexander overthrew Achaemenid Persian Empire in 330 BCE. It was alternatively known to local people as Dura, 'the fortress' (the modern compound name Dura-Europos was not used in Antiquity). By the first century BCE it had been absorbed into the Arsacid Parthian empire. In the CE 160s it was seized by the Romans, and then in the 250s was destroyed by the new Persian empire, the Sasanians.

Its history was always dominated by great imperial powers based in the Mediterranean and Iran. In 100 BCE Arsacid Iran liberated Dura from Seleucid dominance, and after two and half centuries of Arsacid dominance in the CE 160s, aggressive Roman wars against the Parthian empire led to

the permanent seizure of Dura and parts of Mesopotamia to its north. From the early 200s, it became a major forward base for repeated Roman aggressions against the crumbling Arsacid power. But by the 230s, Rome occupiers were on the defensive; Parthia collapsed, and in her place arose a new Persian empire, the fourth Iranian dynasty, under the Sasanians, which proved a much tougher proposition.

Within the walls, many of the most important visible archaeological remains belong to Dura's last decades. The city became more and more dominated by the presence of the Roman army, which took over many buildings and the entire northern part of the town as a garrison cantonment, while its economy was apparently undermined by constant wars and the severing of trade down-river into Persian territory.

Ironically, it was the prolonged and devastating series of wars between Rome and Persia during the third century which resulted in the survival of all this rich testimony down to our times; for things like the wall-paintings of the synagogue and baptistry, behind the city wall between Tower 19 and the Palmyrene Gate, were buried by the Romans in their drastic preparations to withstand an anticipated Persian siege. Once the city fell, the remains were left undisturbed because the region became 'no-man's-land' between the two states.

The Persians built a great siege ramp, and dug several mines under the walls, including one at Tower 19. Here, the Romans tried to stop them undermining the walls, by digging a countermine; but in a sharp underground battle, the Romans were beaten, and the Persians persisted in their task.

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"Dura Europos, 'Pompeii of the Syrian Desert'", <http://www.le.ac.uk/archaeology/stj/dura.htm>

**Abstract:** Dura Europos ruined city on the right bank of the Euphrates between Antioch and Seleucia on the Tigris, founded in 303 B.C.E. by Nicanor, a general of Seleucus I. It flourished under Parthian rule. The site is in modern Syria, on a plateau protected on the east by a citadel built on bluffs overlooking the river, on the north and south by wadis, and on the west by a strong rampart with powerful defensive towers. Its military function of the Greek period was abandoned under the Parthians, but at that time it was the administrative and economic center of the plain extending 100 km between the confluence of the Khâbûr and Euphrates rivers and the Abû Kamâl gorge to the south.

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Initial archeological exploration of the city took place in 1920-22, under the direction of Franz Cumont and the sponsorship of the Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris. From 1929 to 1937 Yale University and the Academie sponsored excavations under the initiative of M. I. Rostovtzeff, who published *Dura-Europos and Its Art*, a synthesis of the history of the town and of its civilization, formed from Greek, Semitic, and Iranian components. This work has served as the basis for all subsequent studies of the site. In fact, however, understanding of Dura Europos depended mainly on written materials (parchments, papyri, inscriptions, and graffiti; see ii, below), paintings, tombs, and portable objects (e.g., coins, bronzes, and lamps) from the excavations, and very little attention has been paid to the architectural remains. Although nearly a third of the town has been excavated, a large number of buildings have been published only summarily or not at all. It therefore became necessary to resume the work of publication, and for this reason the Mission Franco-Syrienne de Doura-Europos was formed in 1986 under the joint direction of the author and Assad Al-Mahmoud; the major objectives are to reexamine the archeological data, to make available the entire mass of documentation from previous excavations, as well as to save the

monuments from destruction.

Dura Europos was brought into the Iranian cultural sphere after the Parthian conquest in about 113 B.C.E. (Bellinger; Welles). This domination lasted three centuries, interrupted by a Roman occupation in 115-17 C.E., during Trajan's expedition to Ctesiphon (q.v.). In 165 Dura was conquered by Avidius Cassius and became a stronghold in the Roman defensive system along the eastern frontier of the empire. Nevertheless, despite an impressive effort to reinforce its defenses, the town was unable to withstand the great offensive launched by the Sasanian Šâpûr I (240-70) in 256; it was taken after a bitter siege, and the population was deported, thus putting an end to the town's existence.



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### The Parthian period

According to recent discoveries, Dura Europos, originally a fortress, was constituted as a city only in the late Hellenistic period and had been only sparsely populated throughout the Greek period. It was under the Parthians, however, that the city assumed its essential aspect, as revealed by the excavations, a configuration only partly modified by the Roman occupation, except for transformation of the northern sector into a Roman camp. Recent work by the Mission Franco-Syrienne has permitted some refinement of this picture; certain buildings that had formerly been attributed to the Parthians can now be dated to the Hellenistic period. For example, according to Armin von Gerkan, the cut-stone fortifications of Dura Europos had been built by the Parthians, fearful that the Greek wall of unbaked bricks would be insufficient against a Roman attack. Only the northern section of the original western wall survived, which he took as proof that the project had been rendered unnecessary by the peace concluded between the Parthians and Augustus in 20 B.C.E. (pp. 4-51). This conclusion was based more on probabilities extrapolated from the reports of ancient historians than on archeological discoveries and has been contradicted by the results of recent soundings and clearing of earlier trenches. It is now clear that it was the Greeks themselves who built the stone fortifications, in the second half of the 2nd century B.C.E., and that the use of mud bricks resulted from the imminent threat from the Parthians, which forced the builders to finish the wall with more easily obtained material (Leriche and Mahmoud, 1990). Similarly, the reconstruction of the palace of the strategus (the redoubt palace; Figure 30/24) and its extension to the north, as well as construction of the second palace in the citadel, which shows a number of similarities, had been attributed to the Parthian period, but recent excavations in the interior and at the base of the facade of the former building have revealed that it belongs to the 2nd century B.C.E., that is, the Greek period. In a recent study Susan Downey (1988) has also called into question the restoration of one palace with an *ayvân* (q.v.), which was suggested in the Yale publications and would imply a Parthian construction.

The Parthian period thus appears to have been primarily a phase of expansion at Dura Europos, an expansion favored by abandonment of the town's military function. All the space enclosed by the walls gradually became occupied, and the installation of new inhabitants with Semitic and Iranian names alongside descendants of the original Macedonian colonists contributed to an increase in the population (Welles et al.). In his celebrated *Caravan Cities* Rostovtzeff had argued that this prosperity could have resulted from the town's position as a trading center and caravan halt, but this hypothesis has been abandoned, for nothing uncovered by the excavations has confirmed it. Instead, Dura Europos owed its development to its role as a regional capital, amply illustrated by the contents of inscriptions,



[\(Click to enlarge\)](#)

parchments, and papyri.

In the Parthian period Greek institutions remained in place (Arnaud), and the property-zoning scheme established in the Hellenistic period was respected in new construction; that is, buildings were kept within the limits of pre-existing blocks 35 x 70 m laid out uniformly over the entire surface of the plateau, even to a large extent in the interior wadis. The only exceptions were the quarter of the town southeast of the citadel, which had apparently already been occupied before the division into lots, and a sector of the agora that had been invaded by domestic buildings. The ramparts were neglected: Domestic trash accumulated along the periphery, finally forming a mass so thick that it prevented access to certain towers on the western wall.

The architecture of the Parthian period was characterized by a progressive evolution of Greek concepts toward new formulas in which regional traditions, particularly those derived from Babylonia, played an increasing role. These innovations affected both religious and domestic buildings. No secular public building is known to have been built during the Parthian period, with the possible exception of a bath constructed of cut stone in the northeast sector of the town (Figure 30/25). The evolved Parthian forms generally persisted into the Roman period, except for buildings in the Roman camp in the northern third of the town, for example, the palace of the Dux Ripae and the praetorium (Figure 30/10, 13).

The architecture of private dwellings varied in detail according to the wealth of the owner. The systematic layout of the Greek city, in which each house was supposed to cover one-eighth of a block (ca. 300 m<sup>2</sup>), was abandoned or modified through subdivision and consolidation resulting from sales or inheritance (Saliou). The smallest houses covered one quarter or even less of a Greek lot, whereas other, more luxurious examples might cover up to half a block. But the organizing principle of the house remained fundamentally the same: The street door, often situated at a corner of the house, opened onto a corridor leading into a central courtyard, which provided access and light to the various rooms of the house. The principal room, the *andron*, was usually situated on the south side, opening to the north, and was surrounded on all four walls by a masonry bench; it served as a reception room (Allara). Some houses incorporated columns, but gabled roofs disappeared in favor of terraces, rooms became irregular in shape, and several houses had second stories.



[\(Click to enlarge\)](#)

Religious architecture underwent a comparable evolution, traceable through numerous excavated buildings: the temples of Artemis Nanaia II and Zeus Megistos II (Figure 30/20, 23), the necropolis temple, and the temples of Artemis Azzanathkona, Zeus Kyrios, Atargatis, Bel, Aphlad, Zeus Theos, Gad, and Adonis (Figure 30/9, 2, 21, 8, 1, 15, 18). This architecture diverged more and more from the hypothetical Greek model, if in fact such a model had ever been introduced at Dura Europos (Downey, 1988, p. 176). All the temples of the Parthian period have the same basic plan, with variations in detail. A generally square temenos is enclosed by a blank wall; the naos stands at the back of the interior courtyard facing the entrance. Against the interior face of the enclosure wall are a series of rooms for service or secondary cults, usually built by donors. When the naos is set against the back wall of the temenos, a narrow space is left between them to provide a separation of the cella from the exterior world. The building is small, usually square in plan, and raised on a podium of two or three steps, with one or more altars in front. The interior is divided in two: the pronaos, which occupies the full width of the building and is sometimes furnished with tiers of benches on either side of the entrance, and the cella, usually flanked by two chapels or lateral sacristies. The cult image on the wall opposite the entrance, either mounted on a pedestal or painted directly on the surface. All that remains from the Greek tradition is the occasional presence of a columned facade in front of the temple or porticoes along the sides of the courtyard, as at the temple of Bel (Figure 30/8).

It is thus clear that at Dura Europos entirely original architectural formulas were perfected during the Parthian period, in both religious and domestic constructions; the Babylonian element predominated, though with a certain Greek dressing, but no unequivocal Iranian influence appears. The formula for religious buildings was followed in all temples, whatever the form of worship to which they were consecrated, Greek or Semitic.

The only Iranian cult known at Dura Europos was that of Mithra, which paradoxically had been introduced into the city by Roman troops in 168. The mithraeum, located near the western wall in the Roman camp (Figure 307), belongs to the type dedicated to the cult throughout the Roman world and has no features in common with the other religious buildings at Dura Europos, except that it stands on a podium. It appears to have been a single room of modest dimensions with a bench on each of the longer sides; above the central aisle there was a raised ceiling with a clerestory. At the end of the room was a niche containing two cultic bas-reliefs with an altar before them. The entire surface of the room was covered with painted decoration: scenes from the life of Mithra, representations of magi and the zodiac around the bas-reliefs in the niche, and mounted hunting scenes on the side walls.



*Above, the undermined defenses at Tower 19 (background), where many of the finest military artefacts were preserved. (Click to enlarge)*

Although Iranian influence is difficult to find in the architecture of Dura Europos, in figurative art it is much more pronounced. In fact, owing to landfill that preserved religious buildings along the western wall (see below), Dura has provided the main evidence of a decorative art that seems to have developed in Parthian domains, reflecting a synthesis of the traditions of the ancient Near East (linear drawing, two-dimensional forms, stiff poses) and the Hellenic world (the use of architectural decoration and friezes, types of dress). Furthermore, in religious settings, those most fully represented, the principle of "Parthian frontality" prevailed. This convention, according to which all figures, human or divine, face directly forward, with eyes fixed on the spectator, made its appearance at Dura very early, in the oldest painting, of the sacrifice of Conon, in the temple of Bel (probably 1st century C.E.; Figure 30/8). It persisted until the destruction of the city, as attested in the frescoes of the synagogue, dating from 245 (Figure 30/5). It was equally apparent in sculpture and terra-cottas (except for a statue of Artemis with the tortoise, which comes from a Hellenistic center) and, for example, in two reliefs of the Gads of Dura and Palmyra. On the other hand, in frequent narrative scenes of combat and hunting on horseback, like those in the mithraeum (Figure 30/7), the horses and wild beasts are portrayed in a flying gallop, a characteristic that was to be developed in Sasanian art.

### **The siege of Dura Europos**

The Sasanian siege of Dura Europos in 256 brought an end to the town's existence and immobilized Šâpûr's army for several months. The determined resistance put up by the inhabitants forced the assailants to adopt various siege tactics, which eventually resulted in conquest of the city; the defensive system, the mines, and the assault ramp were left in place after the deportation of the population, which permits modern investigators to gain an exact idea of the military techniques of the Sasanians and the Romans in the mid-3rd century.

It is not known where the Sasanians located their camp, but traces of their operations against the city wall still survive (du Mesnil du Buisson). To guard against the attack, which was clearly expected from the time that the Sasanian empire was established, the Romans had heightened and reinforced the external faces of the western and northern ramparts by masking them with thick layers of fill covered by a mud-brick glacis and thus burying the buildings along the inside of the wall. The Persians undermined towers 19 and 14 (Figure 30) on the

western wall in order to bring them down, but, owing to the filling and the glacis, the towers were not really destroyed. At the southeast corner of the town they built an assault ramp 40 m long and 10 m high against the wall to permit troops to enter; it consisted of a mass of fill packed between two walls of brick and paved with baked bricks, which made it possible to move a siege machine close to the wall. Two tunnels, each wide enough to permit several men to advance abreast, were dug near the body of the ramp. There is no surviving textual description of the siege of Dura Europos, but Ammianus Marcellinus' account of the siege of Amida (q.v.) a century later, in which the same techniques were used, permits reconstruction of the operations at Dura; the main siege weapons were catapults, movable towers, and even elephants. Clearly the Sasanian armies had a sophisticated knowledge of siege techniques.

The discovery of the body of a Sasanian soldier in one of the trenches has also yielded precious information. He was equipped with a coat of mail, a sword ornamented with a jade disk of Central Asian type, and an iron helmet (*left figure*) made in two halves with an iron crest running vertically down the center of the front, of clearly Mesopotamian and Iranian origin. This type of helmet served as a model for those adopted in the Roman empire in the 3rd century (James).

The chronology of the siege operations has given rise to a debate that is still far from having been resolved. The discovery of Pahlavi inscriptions on the frescoes of the synagogue does not prove that the town had first been occupied by the Sasanians during a campaign in 253, three years before the final siege. It is also improbable that a house near the triumphal arch on the main street, in which there was a fresco of Sasanian type showing a fight between cavalymen, belongs to this putative first occupation. It seems now that this fresco, several ostraca in Pahlavi found in the palace of the Dux Ripae (Figure 30/13), and the tombs discovered in the town and along the river resulted from temporary installation of a small Persian detachment in the town after the victory of 256 (MacDonald; Leriche and Al Mahmoud, 1994).

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*A Sasanian helmet from the siege mines beneath Tower 19, Dura-Europos. It is a rare find of Sasanian military archaeology, and also clearly a prototype for Roman helmets of the 3th century CE*  
(Click to enlarge)

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