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The Parthians

I. Introduction

A. The Importance of the Parthians

1. The Persian Resurgence

- a) demonstrates continued vigor of Iranians
- b) unlike other Middle Eastern peoples, the Iranians maintain their identity and political power in the face of outside invasion
 - (1) first, Greeks
 - (2) then, Romans
 - (3) then, Arabs
 - (4) then, European imperialism and colonialism

2. They Were A Major Power for 470 Years: 247 BCE - 227 CE

- a) They destroyed the Seleucid kingdom
- b) They blocked Roman expansion into Mesopotamia and Armenia

B. Sources of Information

1. Literary Sources Are Very Scanty

- a) almost nothing that is itself Parthian
- b) most comes from hostile or disdainful Greek and Roman writers

2. Epigraphic Material Is Limited

- a) Some Greek inscriptions from Parthia
- b) Some Parthian and Aramaic inscriptions on jewelry

3. There Is Minimal Archeological Material

- a) very little excavation in Iran prior to 1979
- b) none at all since 1979

C. The Origins of the Parthians

1. The Name 'Parthia'

- a) actually the Greek form of the Achaemenid name (*Parthava*) of a satrapy in northern Iran

2. The 'Parni'

- a) their name for themselves
- b) members of a semi-nomadic Dahae confederacy north of Hyrcania, between the Caspian and Aral Seas

II. The Rise of Arsacid Parthia

A. The Establishment of the Parthian Kingdom

1. The Rebellion Against Seleucid Rule in 238 BCE

- a) led by their chieftain, Arsaces, the Parni expelled Andragoras, the rebel Seleucid governor of Parthia, from his province
 - (1) they then permanently occupy the district of Astavene (Astrabad) in the province of Parthia
 - (2) the Seleucids were distracted and weakened at the time
 - (a) dynastic civil war
 - (b) Ptolemaic invasion of Babylonia

- (3) eastern provinces in Afghanistan break away at this time under their Greek governor, Diodotus, who founds the Greek kingdom of Bactria

b) Arsaces claims to be the successor of the Achaemenids

B. The Parthian Conquest of the Seleucid East

1. The Establishment of the Parthian Kingdom in Northern Iran

a) Arsaces' brother, Tiridates, succeeded Arsaces on his death (date unknown) and reigned until 211

(1) began to aggressively expand Parthian territory around 235

(a) Seleucids were weakened again by dynastic infighting

(b) Tiridates overran all of Parthia and Hyrcania

(2) in 230, Seleucus II campaigned against Tiridates and drove him into the steppes, but was forced to give up the reconquered territories by another dynastic civil war

(3) Tiridates returns and consolidates his earlier conquests into the kingdom of Parthia, in north-central Iran, south of the Caspian Sea

(4) Tiridates is succeeded by Artabanus I (211-191 BCE)

b) Antiochus III's brief reconquest of Parthia

(1) in 209-208, Antiochus III invaded the Parthian heartland and defeated Priapatius, Artabanus' son and successor, in battle

(2) Antiochus allows Priapatius to remain in control of Parthia, however, as Antiochus' vassal

(3) but Antiochus' disastrous defeat at the hands of the Romans at Magnesia in 190 undid all his work, and Parthia threw off its nominal allegiance to him

2. The Kingdom Becomes an Empire: The Conquest of Media and Babylonia

a) Phraates I: 176-171 BCE

(1) consolidates Parthian control over northern Iran

b) Mithridates I: 171-137 BCE

(1) the real founder of the Parthian empire

(2) Mithridates I takes advantage of Seleucid civil war in 160 to overrun Media and Elymais (SW Iran)

(3) in 141, Mithridates seizes Babylon

(4) in 139-138 he defeats a Seleucid attempt to regain Babylon and captures the Seleucid king, Demetrius, who remains his prisoner for ten years

c) Phraates II (137-128 BCE)

(1) the defeat of Antiochus VII's counterattack 130-129

(2) Antiochus VII defeats Phraates in three battles and invades Media

(3) but then Antiochus overplays his hand in demanding submission of Phraates, who sends Demetrius out of

captivity to foment rebellion, then counterattacks, defeats, and kills Antiochus, regaining all that the Parthians had lost

- d) Artabanus II (128-124 BCE)
 - (1) further Parthian conquests are checked for the time being by nomadic invasions of the Parthian homeland (125-115 BCE), which the Parthians eventually defeat
- e) Mithridates II the Great (124-87 BCE)
 - (1) defeats the nomads threatening Parthia from the East, and secures the eastern border
 - (2) he then turns to the west and by 100 BCE, Mithridates II had put all of Mesopotamia under Parthian control
- f) dynastic turmoil and civil war: 90-70 BCE
 - (1) several different rulers listed
 - (2) Babylonia secedes under its satrap, Gotarzes

III. The Parthian Empire

A. Characteristics

1. Conflict With Rome Over Armenia

- a) neither empire could tolerate an independent Armenia
- b) but neither could allow the other to annex Armenia, since it afforded a good invasion route into both empires
- c) Parthia and Rome could never come to a stable agreement over neutralization of Armenia
 - (1) each insisted that its own puppet ruler control Armenia

2. Dynastic Civil War

B. Parthian-Roman Relations In the First Century BCE

1. Early Relations With Rome

- a) result from Rome's intrusion into Asia minor in late 2nd century BCE, and annexation of Syria in 63 BCE
- b) Phraates III (70-58 BCE) concludes alliance with Pompey against Tigranes of Armenia in 66 BCE

2. The Foundations of Hostility

- a) Roman dishonesty
 - (1) Pompey cheated Phraates after Tigranes' defeat, resulting in long-term hostility towards Rome
- b) Roman meddling in internal Parthian politics
 - (1) Gabinius, *procos.* Syria, supports unsuccessful claimant to the Parthian throne against the legitimate ruler, Orodes II
- c) Roman attack on Parthia
 - (1) M. Licinius Crassus, seeking military glory in 53 BCE, gets from the Senate the *procos.* of Syria and a free hand to deal with Parthia any way he sees fit
 - (2) Crassus intervenes in a Parthian dynastic civil war
 - (3) the Parthians under "the Suren" (*Surenas*), general of Orodes II (58-39 BCE), surround Crassus in the open near Carrhae, destroy his army, and kill him

- d) the Euphrates becomes the boundary between the two empires
- 3. Antony's War With Parthia
 - a) Parthian king Phraates IV (39 - 2 BCE) takes advantage of civil wars after Caesar's assassination to seize Syria, Palestine, and much of Asia minor: 40-37 BCE
 - b) Antony counterattacks: 36-33 BCE
 - (1) also seeks revenge for Crassus' defeat
 - (2) selects invasion route through Armenian mountains into Media Atropatene, lays siege to Phraaspa (mod. Tabriz), but cannot take it
 - (3) winter forces him into a retreat that costs 22,000 Romans their lives
 - (4) Antony's planned renewal of invasion in 32 was cut short by his Actium campaign
- C. Parthian-Roman Relations Under the Roman Principate
 - 1. Augustus' Policy
 - a) Augustus prefers diplomacy to war against Parthia
 - b) by exploiting a Parthian dynastic civil war, he secures return of the legionary standards and surviving POWs lost at Carrhae
 - 2. First Century CE Dominated by the Armenian Question
 - a) each realm seeks to dominate the region by placing its own client on the throne
 - b) many inconclusive and localized wars fought over Armenia
 - 3. Second-Century CE Shift in Focus of Warfare With Rome
 - a) Romans begin to invade Mesopotamia rather than fighting over Armenia
 - b) but the invasions are inconclusive
 - 4. Trajan's Invasion of Parthia: 116 - 117 CE
 - a) prompted by thirty-year period of dynastic instability in Parthia
 - b) Trajan marches south from northern Mesopotamia and easily captures Parthian capital at Ctesiphon in central Babylonia, near Baghdad
 - c) Trajan ultimately takes all of Mesopotamia as far as the Persian Gulf
 - d) Trajan names his own candidate, Parthamaspates, king of Parthia
 - e) Trajan withdraws from Mesopotamia in the summer of 117
- D. The Last Century of the Parthian Empire
 - 1. Second Century CE Is the Most Poorly Attested
 - a) the only surviving authentic sources are Roman
 - 2. Dynastic Turmoil: 117 - 148 CE
 - a) coins attest multiple brief reigns
 - b) ended by accession of Vologaeses III (148 - 192 CE)
 - 3. Peace With Rome: 117 - 161 CE
 - 4. The Roman War of 161 - 165 CE
 - a) sparked by Vologaeses III's invasion of Armenia in 161
 - (1) at first successful, destroying a Roman army sent against

him

- b) Marcus Aurelius' co-emperor Lucius Verus gathers eight legions with supporting auxiliary units in Syria and invades Armenia and Mesopotamia in 163
- c) Lucius Verus (actually, his general, Avidius Cassius) captures and burns Ctesiphon in 165
 - (1) Parthians offer little resistance, having been hit by a plague of smallpox that originated in central Asia
 - (2) the Romans catch the plague and carry it back to their Empire, where it ravages the entire territory of the Empire and kills a third of the population

5. The Roman War of 196 - 198 CE

- a) Septimius Severus invades Mesopotamia and destroys Ctesiphon again
- b) annexes northern Mesopotamia, turning it into a heavily garrisoned Roman province

6. The Roman War of 216 - 217 CE

- a) started by treacherous Roman attack on Parthian royal party during a diplomatic parley
 - (1) King Artabanus V escapes
- b) Romans invade and devastate Media, plundering the Parthian royal tombs at Arbela and scattering the bones of the kings buried there
- c) the Parthians counterattack and defeat the Romans

E. The Overthrow of the Arsacids

- 1. The Rebellion of Artaxerxes (Artaxerxes) of Persis
 - a) defeats King Vologaeses V in three battles
- 2. The Establishment of Sassanid Persia: 227 CE

IV. Government, Society, and Culture

A. Parthian Government

- 1. Sources Are Very Poor
 - a) and are largely hostile Greek and Roman writers
- 2. Strongly Decentralized
 - a) prevents Parthians from assuming an aggressive stance against their neighbors
- 3. Relatively Weak King
 - a) styled themselves “King of Kings”, though
 - b) capital is at Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia
 - c) no clear mechanism for succession to the throne
 - (1) produced repeated episodes of civil war
 - (2) may have had an elective character, chosen by the great nobles and the Zoroastrian priesthood
 - d) rarely able to assert meaningful central control
- 4. The King's Council
 - a) semi-independent dynasts, or regional grandees
 - b) royal relatives

c) leaders of major aristocratic clans

5. Satrapies

a) governed by satraps (*marzapan*) or *strategoï*

(1) govern provinces of the Parthian kingdom

(2) method of appointment is unclear

(3) often semi-independent of central control

6. Sub-Units of Satrapies

a) Phylarchies

(1) some are cities founded by Greeks

(2) some are petty tribal kingdoms

b) city-states

(1) concentrated in Mesopotamia

(2) largely founded by Seleucids

(a) Parthians left their constitutions intact

7. Vassal and Client States

a) vassal states

(1) owe only nominal allegiance to Parthian rule

(2) each had one or more near-hereditary ruling houses, whose heads were feudal lords of many villages and towns

(3) Iberia

(a) ruling house was the Mihran

(4) Media Atropatene

(a) ruling house was the Karen

(5) Sacastene

(a) ruling house was the Suren

(b) had its own coinage

(6) Persis

(a) ruling house was the Sassanids

(b) also had its own coinage

(7) Hyrcania

b) client states

(1) differed in rank, and a client state's rank could be altered by the Parthian king

(a) Adiabene

(b) Oshroene

(c) Elymais

(d) Charax

B. Society

1. Great Ethnic Diversity

a) results from the early Parthian conquest of ethnically diverse Seleucid territories

b) Parthians in northern Iran

c) Medes and Persians in western and central Iran

d) Semites and Greek colonists in Mesopotamia

2. Social Classes

a) Iranian society was divided into 'estates'

- b) Priests ('Magi')
- c) The Warriors ('Azatan')
- d) The Scribes
 - (1) royal bureaucracy
- e) Commoners (literally 'Cultivators')
 - (1) townsmen
 - (a) artisans
 - (b) traders
 - (c) professionals
 - (2) free peasants
- f) The Importance of Citizenship
 - (1) to have legal standing, you had to belong to one of these estates; otherwise, you were a pariah
 - (2) membership in an estate gave you rights of inheritance, worship, and the right to social welfare
- g) Persons Without Rights
 - (1) Free Persons Without Rights
 - (a) aliens
 - (b) those who weren't members of an estate
 - (c) casual settlers
 - (d) those expelled from their home community
 - (e) illegitimate children
 - (2) Slaves
 - (a) very extensive in Parthia
 - (b) literal meaning of Iranian word for slave was 'thing', indicating its vulnerability to disposition at the whim of the owner
 - (c) but Iranian law, under the influence of religion, did recognize the slave's humanity
 - (i) he could receive property, though he couldn't sell it
 - (ii) he could participate in litigation
 - (iii) he could sue his master for mistreatment
 - (iv) but was not allowed to have a family, in a legal sense
 - (d) manumission was solely at the will of the master, unless the slave was a Zoroastrian and the master wasn't
 - (i) freed slaves had full freedom, and were guaranteed against ever being enslaved again
 - (ii) manumission also applied to a slave's children (so then, why was a slave not allowed a 'legal' family?)
 - (3) "Sacred Slaves"
 - (a) persons dedicated to a Zoroastrian temple

(b) not actually slaves in any real sense

3. The Family

- a) the family was the primary unit of Iranian society
- b) Iranian society valued both the nuclear and the extended family (both called *dutak* and *katak* in Iranian)
- c) extended family relationships were very important
 - (1) the Parthian family was analogous to the Roman *familia*, extending outward several generations
 - (2) linked both by kinship, worship, and property
 - (a) so the family was a kinship, religious, and economic unit
- d) males are reckoned as adults at age 15, when they are formally initiated into the religious worship (as in 'confirmed'); the literal term for this moment was being "born again"

4. Marriage

- a) existed in several different forms
- b) full marriage took the woman into her husband's family group, severing her from her birth family and her father's authority
 - (1) women were under their husband's authority and obliged to obey him
 - (2) a wife's infringement of that subjected her to divorce
 - (3) but women did have property rights
- c) divorce could take place on the initiative of either husband or wife, and required the consent of both
- d) other types of marriage
 - (1) marriage concluded by the bride's choice, without formal transfer of her family's guardianship over her
 - (2) 'temporary' marriage, for a definite period

C. Culture

1. Strong Greek Influence

- a) due to Hellenization of the Seleucid realm the Parthians conquered

D. Warfare

1. Recruitment

- a) largely came from the private armies of the satraps and vassal kings
- b) nucleus was the king's own troops and his bodyguard, largely consisting of foreigners

2. Mailed Cavalry

- a) mostly recruited from among the lesser nobility
- b) horse archers (*clibanarii*)
 - (1) perhaps their most lethal combat arm
 - (a) main weapon was the bow
 - (b) equipped with the Oriental compound bow
- c) cataphracts
 - (1) main weapon was the lance
- d) these provide the inspiration for Roman and Byzantine cavalry that

ultimately in turn give rise to the knights of medieval Europe

3. Great Horse-Breeders

- a) thanks to reliance on cavalry
- b) their Nisaeen horses were famed as far away as China

4. Infantry

- a) sources note its presence, but it wasn't the major combat arm
- b) Greek colonists were little used
- c) siege equipment was derived from Roman models

E. Religion

1. Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism) Revives in First Century CE

- a) in reaction against Greek syncretism and paganism
- b) Vologaeses I makes Mazdaism the state religion
 - (1) compiles a new edition of the *Avesta*
- c) but this Zoroastrianism was much corrupted by pre-Zoroastrian paganism
 - (1) Ahura Mazda comes to be thought of as the Creator of the pantheon of lesser gods
 - (2) worship of a hierarchy of angelic beings appears
 - (3) an elaborate cult of the dead grows up
 - (4) dynasty of Persis remained attached to a more orthodox Mazdaism
- d) central physical feature was the fire-temple
- e) children were received into Zoroastrian faith through a formal initiation rite at about age 15
 - (1) they had to forswear worship of the *daevas* and Ahriman

2. Fires and Temples

- a) fires
 - (1) fire was the symbol of Ahura Mazda
 - (2) the Yasna was the sacrifice before the fire, for purification
 - (3) the fire was the hereditary possession of the family
- b) temples had central rooms with perpetual fires burning, tended by professional clergy

3. Major Deities

- a) Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda)
- b) Mithra
- c) Anahita
- d) Varhran

4. Zoroastrian Heresies

- a) Zurvanism
 - (1) believed that Ahura Mazda and Ahriman were brothers, created at the same time, by the Creator Zurvan

5. Toleration for Other Religions

- a) Judaism
- b) Christianity