



## ARBELA

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**ARBELA** (Assyrian Arbailu, Old. Pers. Arbairā, Gk. Arbēla, Ar. Erbīl, locally Erbel), capital of an ancient northern Mesopotamian province located between the two Zab rivers. An important junction point on major east-west and north-south caravan routes, the town was an occupied site since remote antiquity, and is the only large settlement of ancient Iraq still flourishing and retaining a form of its original name. The present old town of Erbel is built on a mound of the debris of successive settlements rising some twenty meters.

In the Assyrian period the city was famous as the chief cult center of the goddess Ishtar who is mentioned frequently under the title “Lady of Arbel” in the inscriptions of the later Assyrian kings, especially those of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) and Assurbanipal (668-27 B.C.). (See D. Luckenbil, *Ancient Records of Assyria*, Chicago, 1927, s.v. Arbela.) Cyrus the Great occupied Assyria in 547 B.C. and established there an Achaemenid satrapy called in Old Persian Aθurā (Assyria) with Arbela as the capital (E. Herzfeld, *The Persian Empire*, ed. G. Walser, Wiesbaden, 1968, pp. 304-07). In about 521 B.C. Darius I put down a local rebellion led by the Mede Taxmaspāda, who was captured, taken to Arbela, and there impaled (DB 2.90f., Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 122). In October, 331 B.C., Alexander decisively defeated the last Achaemenid king, Darius III, near the village of Gaugamela north of Arbela. Darius escaped to Arbela, then, leaving his own chariot and much treasure in the city, fled to Ecbatana (Arrian, *Anabasis* 2.8-15). Alexander awarded the satrapy of Arbelites (territories of Arbela, Ptolemy 5.1-2) to his general Amphimachus (Diodorus 18.39.3).



After the death of Alexander the district of the two Zab rivers with Arbela as its capital became a Seleucid eparchy called [Adiabene](#), a name at times also associated with the region north of the greater Zab river, called Aturia after the Old Persian rendering of Assyria (Strabo 16.1.3; Herzfeld, op. cit., pp. 228-30).

By 141 B.C. Mithradates I of Parthia had defeated the Seleucid forces in Mesopotamia and was himself recognized as king at the royal city of Seleucia on the Tigris. It was probably at about this date that northern Mesopotamia, including the region of Arbela, came under Parthian control (cf. Moses Khorenats'i 1.2.4.1). In 130 B.C. the Seleucid king Antiochus VII Sidetes defeated the Parthian general Idates on the river Lycus (the Greater Zab) in Adiabene (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.251) and also cleared the Parthians from Seleucia on the Tigris (Justin 38.10.5), but the Arsacid king Phraates II mounted a successful counteroffensive, and Arbela together with the rest of Mesopotamia was returned to Parthian control (Justin 42.1.3). Following the death of Mithradates II in 88 B.C., Tigranes of Armenia occupied Adiabene (Strabo 11.14.15). When a Roman army under Lucullus threatened Armenia in 69 B. C., Tigranes offered to return Adiabene to the Parthian king Phraates III in the hope that the Arsacids would aid in the defense of Armenian homeland (Dio Cassius 36.1).

At some point during the first quarter of the first century A.D. Adiabene became a semi-dependent vassal state under the Parthians. The earliest king of this reconstituted territory of whom we have record is a certain Izates. He was succeeded in about A.D. 30 by Monobazus I. According to an accepted practice of the time Monobazus married his own sister, Helena, later a convert to Judaism. Their son, who became Izates II of Adiabene (r. ca. A.D. 36-60) was himself converted to Judaism while living at Charax Spasinou in southern Mesopotamia.

In A.D. 37 Izates II offered Artabanus II of Parthia refuge in Arbela, and for his assistance in returning that monarch to the throne received territories and privileges (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.54-68). Artabanus died shortly afterwards, and in A.D. 41 his successor, Vardanes I, sought the aid of Izates II against a Roman force threatening the Parthian territories in Armenia. Izates refused to assist, a decision probably influenced by the fact that five of his sons were in Jerusalem, which at that time was in Roman hands (ibid., 20.69-71). The later Arsacid Vologases I demanded in A.D. 51 that Izates relinquish the favors granted by Artabanus II. Troubles in eastern Parthia



prevented a military confrontation (ibid., 20.81-91), and in A.D. 62 Vologases assisted Izates's successor, his brother Monobazus II, in repelling an invasion of Adiabene by Nero's appointee, the Armenian king Tigranes (Dio Cassius 62.20).

In A.D. 195 the emperor Septimius Severus occupied Adiabene and for this he received the imperial salutation "Parthicus Adiabenicus" (N. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*, Chicago, 1938, p. 256), but a year later the Parthian Vologases IV forced the Romans to evacuate northern Mesopotamia (Herodian 3.9.1ff.). Vologases then moved to put down an uprising in the east of the Parthian empire. Narses, the king of Adiabene, had refused to join Vologases in this campaign. Because of this, and also because of the apparent friendliness that Narses showed to Rome, the Parthian king is said to have invaded Adiabene, destroyed several of its cities and drowned Narses in the Greater Zab river (Msiha Zkha, in *Sources Syriaques*, ed. A Mingana, Leipzig, 1907, p. 25, tr. p. 101).

Troubles between Rome and the Parthians again affected Arbela when Caracalla took the city in A.D. 216. The Romans plundered Parthian royal tombs said to be located there and scattered the bones (Dio Cassius 74.1); when his successor, Macrinus, sued for peace, among the conditions of the last Parthian king Artabanus IV was compensation for damage done by the Romans to the royal tombs (Dio Cassius 71.26). It is possible that these so-called Parthian tombs at Arbela were, in fact, the tombs of the vassal dynasty of Adiabene. No Arsacid king is known to have established a seat in the regions controlled by this dependency of the Parthian empire.

In about A.D. 222, Ardašīr revolted against the Parthians and founded the Sasanian empire, to which Adiabene would remain subject for over 400 years. Under the Sasanians, the district of Arbela was administered by a governor or *maupat* (Mid. Pers. *mowbed*). During the reign of Hormizd IV (A.D. 579-90) the king's son and future ruler Kōsrow II was *maupat* in Adiabene. An earlier governor at Arbela called Qardagh was put to death under Šāpūr II (A.D. 301-79) for embracing the Christian faith.

On the whole, however, the Sasanians were tolerant of the Christians. Since very early times Arbela had been the seat of a diocese known either as Arbela, as Hazza (a village near Arbela that was an alternate seat of office), or by the Syraic name Ḥdhayab. The conversion to Christianity of much of northern Mesopotamia was conducted from Arbela.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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See also indices to A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient*, Louvain, 1958; N. Pigulevskaja, *Les villes de l'état iranien aux époques parthe et sassanide*, Paris, 1963.

(J. F. Hansman)