Published: December 15, 1986
Last Updated: March 4, 2013

ARCHITECTURE II. PARTHIAN PERIOD

ARCHITECTURE

ii. Parthian

To define Parthian architecture is not synonymous with describing the architecture of the Parthians. Firstly, some sites traditionally labeled as Parthian lie outside of an Iran expanded beyond its modern borders. But while other disciplines must also recognize the difference between Iran and non-Iran, there are so few examples of architectural monuments from the plateau of Iran either known or documented in detail that it seems impossible to use the Iranian homeland of the Parthians as the basis for the definition of Parthian architecture. Secondly, the Parthian dynasty of the Arsacids maintained its capital at Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia, but during the latter half of the era there were large sections of the plateau area which claimed independence: “Indo-Parthian” kings struck coins in Sīstān as did other kings in the provinces of Persia and in Elymais, and the south and east of the Caspian, Hyrcania established a degree of autonomy by the middle of the first century A.D. Much closer to the capital, at the head of the Persian Gulf, the kings of Characene maintained their independence (albeit with interruption) for several centuries. Yet it is precisely when Arsacid political authority was being rigorously challenged by other groups that recognizable traits were beginning to appear in Middle Eastern architecture as a whole and which owe

their origins to “indigenous” forces. Given the multiplicity of the ethnic and linguistic make-up of the area, these developments can be seen as expressions that were concurrent with the existence of many political groups. They occurred during the Parthian period, but they are not to be thought of as exclusively the property of the Parthian dynasty of the Arsacids.

The dynastic art of the Arsacids, if such an entity could be conceived, should be sought in no more than central Mesopotamia and the Zagros mountains. Common usage, however, requires that one think of Parthian architecture as involving everything between Hatra in Iraq and Taxila in Pakistan, between Nisa in the Soviet Union and Dārābgerd in southern Iran. In the northeast, the precise boundary between Parthian and Kushan kingdoms is a difficult problem to define. Certain sites, however, such as Khalchayan (Ḵaḷčayān) and Koi-Krylan-Kala in Uzbekistan and Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan, have to be considered under Parthian architecture if that term is to be adequately defined. Geographical limits, then, are not the way to define Parthia. Rather, one should acknowledge that over a wide territory there was a recognizable development of architectural style and form, the evolution of which was not completed when the Parthian period came to an end. And while the source of these fundamental changes may not necessarily have come from Iranian-speaking architects, it was essentially an “Iranian” revolution in the arts. For the evolution continued under the Sasanians, and from there the architectural ideas were transferred as producing some of the more readily identifiable characteristics of the architecture of Iran under Islam.

The single trait most characteristic of this “Iranian” architecture is the use of an *ayvān* as a rectangular, vaulted hall with one end open where it faces a courtyard, for which diverse sources have been proposed ranging from a tent or reed house to the Mycenean *megaron* or the Hellenistic *exedra*. Iranologists, however, stress the theoretical nomadic origins of the Parthians as the reason for the adoption of this distinctive architectural feature, and the Iranian origin of the term. The most important fact in the debate is that at Seleucia-on-Tigris in the late first century A.D. it can be demonstrated that house plans changed from having a hall with a pair of columns set in the opening on the side of the court (*distyle in antis*) to that of a barrel-vaulted *ayvān* as the building’s most important roofed structure, indicating the practical application of a previously well-known constructional technique—the barrel vault of brick—to a portion of the building where Greek style was no longer an important aspect. Barrel vaults of brick had been built as much as a millennium and a half earlier (at

Susa, for example), but it was the application of the vaulted *ayvān* to the main units of a building in the late Parthian period which gave Iranian architecture such a regal reception hall through emphasis on the height of the room and the longitudinal axis. The ground-plan change was negligible, but the visual aspect as vaults replaced columns and beams was revolutionary.

The problem of the heavy lateral thrust of brick vaulting was solved by flanking corridors which buttressed the main vault by carrying the thrust out through a series of parallel side walls. Whatever use was then made of the corridors must have been secondary to the original, structural contribution. In some instances where square chambers have been added at the rear of an *ayvān* complex, the use of a corridor is still retained, a clumsy arrangement which suggests a formative stage when architects had not as yet worked out how to create a unified, integrated layout.

Other details of Parthian architecture, especially unorthodox techniques, underline the formative nature of the art. Bricks stacked on edge in groups, alternating with others in horizontal lays, were quite common in the mud-brick architecture of the Ur III period in Mesopotamia (3rd millennium B.C.). The Parthian version of this technique, used occasionally for walls and columns, employed baked brick with each course built alternating between vertical and horizontal lays, ignoring the bonding properties of flat brick where the joints are laid overlapping both lengthwise and laterally through the wall. Similarly, to build strong wall foundations, deep trenches for wall footings were dug and elaborate systems of platforming were constructed, to support structures above; yet these platforms appear in a variety of forms, suggesting that there was no architectural standard that builders followed. Often, at mound sites with an upper layer of Parthian or late Iron Age date it is only remnants of these platforms which survive, resulting in confusion for the archeologist should the matrix of walls and fill be confused with occupational remains. In some cases where massive platforms have been called for, the execution of the project has defeated the purpose behind the plan. This is especially true where a platform has been designed to project out from an existing elevation, forming an extended terrace. There is a danger here that the sheer weight of the added mass is so heavy that it is torn away from the core to which it is supposed to be anchored. To use brick sizes as a way of dating archeological remains of the Parthian period is unwise: there are generalities one can observe, even local characteristics that repeat themselves, but such dimensions can not be used outside of the area to date other ruins

because the concept of standards does not apply.

More successful, in terms of their execution, were platforms built in the Zagros mountains of field- and dressed-stone. The antecedents of these were the palace terraces for which the Achaemenids are famous. Parthian examples are the terraces at Masǰed-e Solaymān and Bard-e Nešānda which formerly were assigned to early Achaemenid time. Terraces of this kind were indeed a characteristic of early Iranian architecture.

Under the Parthians any observable western influence can just as well be a survival from the Hellenistic period, which is why the monument at Kangāvar was once acceptably dated as early Parthian while recent investigations proved it to be late Sasanian. In some instances elsewhere, such as Nippur in Iraq, there are also survivals of archaic building forms alongside contemporaneous structures in the "new Parthian" style, which helps to stress the fact that buildings can not be dated on isolated features of style alone.

In this light one can also best evaluate Parthian architectural decoration. Wall surface decoration includes a wide range of geometrical, stylized vegetal and figural ornament executed in plaster both molded and carved. Sites in Iraq (such as Ashur/Āšūr, Seleucia-on-Tigris and Warka), in western Iran (Qaľeh-i Yazdigird/Qaḷʿa-ye Yazdegerd), and in Sīstān (Kuh-i Khwaja/Kūh-e Ḵᵛāǰa) all show a tendency on the part of architects to divide up wall surfaces into flat panels and bands of repeat designs, suggestive of textile ornament. These once vividly-colored wall-hangings include motifs taken from the repertoire of western artists, yet the art is not western. Liberties are taken with designs which ignore their original properties, and, through the geometrizing of natural forms, Parthian art anticipates Islamic art by several centuries.

Wall surfaces also include architectonic decorations, that is, architectural members reduced to decorative features to break up flat surfaces. The component parts are often derived from western architectural vocabularies—columns, capitals, cornices, etc.—but the combination of the different elements into façade compositions, particularly "blind arcades," is a distinctive feature of Parthian architecture. Blind arcading—the treatment of a façade without any connection to the building layout behind—is yet again a feature that was transferred via Sasanian architecture to the Islamic architecture of Iran.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

W. Andrae, *Hatra nach Aufnahmen von Mitgliedern der Assur-Expedition der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*, WVDOG 9 and 21, Leipzig, 1908-12.

Idem, *Die deutschen Ausgrabungen in Warka(Uruk)*, Berlin, 1935.

Idem and H. Lenzen, *Die Partherstadt Assur*, WVDOG 57, Leipzig, 1933.

M. Bussagli, "Parthian Art," *Encyclopaedia of World Art* XI, cols. 105-17.

M. R. A. Colledge, *Parthian Art*, London, 1977, pp. 21-79.

V. E. Crawford, "Nippur the Holy City," *Archaeology* 12, 1959, pp. 74-83.

N.C. Debevoise, "The Origins of Decorative Stucco." *AJA* 45, 1941, pp. 45-61.

M. Dieulafoy, *L'art antique de la Perse V: Monuments parthes et sassanides*, Paris, 1889.

C. S. Fisher, "The Mycenaean Palace at Nippur," *AJA* 8, 1904, pp. 401-32.

R. Ghirshman, *Iran: Parthian and Sassanian Period*, London, 1962.

Idem, *Terrasses sacrées de Bard-è Néchandehet Masjid-i Solaiman*, MDAFI 45, 1976.

B. Goldman, "The Allover Pattern in Mesopotamian Stuccowork," *Berytus* 10, 1952-53, pp. 13-20.

G. Gullini, *Architettura iranica dagli Achemenidi ai Sasanidi*, Torino, 1964.

U. W. Hallier, "Neh—eine parthische Stadt in Ostpersien," *AMI*, N.F. 7, 1974, pp. 173-90.

E. Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East*, London and New York, 1941, pp. 276ff.

C. Hopkins, ed., *Topography and Architecture of Seleucia on the Tigris*, Ann Arbor, 1972.

E. J. Keall, "Some Thoughts on the Early Eyvan," in D. K. Kouymjian, ed., *Near*

Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy and History. Studies in Honor of George C. Miles, Beirut, 1974, pp. 123-30.

Idem, M. A. Leveque, and N. Willson, "Qaḷʿeh-i Yazdigird: Its Architectural Decorations," *Iran* 18, 1980, pp. 1-41.

M. Y. Kiani, *Parthian Sites in Hyrcania*, AMI Ergänzungsband 10, Berlin, 1982.

H. J. Lenzen, "Architektur der Partherzeit in Mesopotamia und ihre Brückenstellung zwischen der Architektur des Westens und des Ostens," in E. Boehringer, ed., *Festschrift für Carl Weickert*, Berlin, 1955, pp. 121-36.

W. K. Loftus, *Travels and Researches in Chaldaea and Susiana*, London, 1857.

N. F. Manasseh, "Architectural Features of Block B," *Second Preliminary Report upon the Excavations at Tel Umar, Iraq*, director L. Waterman, Ann Arbor, 1933.

J. Marshall, *Taxila*, 3 vols., Cambridge, 1951.

G. A. Pugachenkova, *Rekonstruktsiya "kvadratnogo zala" parfyanskogo ansamblya Staroĭ Nisy*. Trudy Yuzhno-Turkmenskoĭ arkheologicheskoĭ kompleksnoĭ ekspeditsii II, Ashkhabad, 1951.

O. Reuther, "Parthian Architecture. A: History," *Survey of Persian Art* I, 1938, pp. 411-44.

D. Schlumberger, "Parthian Art," *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/3, 1983, pp. 1027-54.

L. Trümpelmann, "The Parthian Buildings at Assur," *Summer* 35, 1979, pp. 287-93.

T. N. Zadneprovskaya, "Bibliographie de travaux soviétiques sur les parthes," *Studia Iranica* 4/2, 1972, pp. 243-60.