



# ARSACIDS V. THE “ARSACID” ERA

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As an indication of their imperial aspirations, the Parthians established their own dynastic era, beginning with the vernal equinox (in Babylon with 1 Nisan = 14 April) 247 BCE. Long doubted, the historicity of this era was proved by a Babylonian tablet equating the Seleucid year 208 with 144 of the Arsacid era (G. Smith, *Assyrian Dictionary*, London, 1875, p. 389). Since then numerous documents attesting to the wide use of the era have been discovered from Nisa, Dura-Europos, and other places. In purely Iranian contexts (as in recovered Nisa ostraca from ca. 100 BCE to CE 13), the Arsacid era was used without specified appellation, and with Zoroastrian month and day names. A good example is the stele of Xwāsak, whom Artabanus (Ardawān), the last Parthian Great King, appointed satrap of Susa; this is dated to “year 426, month of Spandārmāt, day of Mihr [= 14 September 215]” (W. B. Henning, “The Monuments and Inscriptions of Tang-i Sarvak,” *Asia Major*, N.S. 2, 1952, p. 176). After the conquest of Mesopotamia, its people were allowed to use a double date, with Babylonian or Macedonian months, first mentioning the Royal (i.e. the Arsacid) reckoning and then the “former” or “ancient” (i.e., the Seleucid year) (C. F. Lehmann-Haupt, “Zur Arsakiden-Ära,” *Klio* 5, 1905, pp. 128-30. E. H. Minns, “Parchments of the Parthian period from Avroman in



Kurdistan,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 35, 1915, pp. 31-36; F. X. Kugler, *Sternkunde und Sterndienst in Babel* II/2, pt. 2, Münster in Westfalen, 1924, pp. 443-63). Thus a Greek letter sent by Artabanus III in CE 21 to Susa was dated by the royal scribe to “year 268” but its receipt was dated “in the year 268 according to the royal reckoning, in the year 333 according to the ancient numbering” (B. Welles, *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period*, New Haven, 1934, no. 75 [p. 301]). And a parchment contract in Greek from Dura-Europos is dated “in the reign of Arsaces, King of Kings, ..., year 368 according to the reckoning of the King of Kings but according to the former reckoning 432, on the twenty-sixth day of the month Daesius” (M. Rostovtzeff, *Yale Classical Studies* 2, 1931, pp. 7-8, 39ff.). The use of the Macedonian and Babylonian months meant that a single Parthian year could be given two beginnings: a Macedonian-style New Year and a Babylonian New year several months later.

The interpretation of the Arsacid era has been much debated (A. D. H. Bivar in *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/1, 1983, pp. 28-29), but the only occasion in the first years of the Arsacid rule sufficiently important to have been counted by Parthian kings as an epoch-making event was the coronation of Arsaces, the eponymous founder and deified hero of the dynasty. Upon mounting the throne, each Iranian king founded a royal fire, counting his regnal year from that moment (Diodorus 17.114; A. Christensen, *Revue des arts asiatiques* 10, 1937, p. 127). Arsaces, too, founded his royal fire at his town of Aršak or Asaak (near Qūčān) when he was crowned, but his fire was kept burning throughout centuries (Isidore of Charax, *Parthian Stations* 11 [ed. and tr. W. H. Schoff, Philadelphia, 1914]), thereby providing the means for an uninterrupted dynastic era (A. von Gutschmid, *Geschichte Irans und seiner Nachbarländern*, Tübingen, 1888, p. 31).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Given in the text.