



ARSACIDS VIII. MILITARY ARCHITECTURE OF PARTHIA

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viii. Military Architecture Of Parthia

Some interesting features appeared in the military architecture of the vast Parthian domain ruled by the Arsacids (q.v. Bergamini, pp. 195-214; Colledge, pp. 21-79; Francfort, pp. 23-39; Pugachenkova, pp. 26-60), the dynasty that emerged in the wake of a relatively short occupation of Iranian territories by Alexander the Great (q.v.) and his successors (Debevoise, pp. 7-53). Starting from the area of modern Turkmenistan, which the Dachae or Parni tribes conquered after the Andragoras (q.v.) rebellion (Wolski, 1993, pp. 32-33; Idem, 1950, pp. 111-14), the Arsacids extended their empire to the Euphrates in the west taking Mesopotamia in ca. 141 BCE (Wolski, 1993, pp. 80-83).

Two main traditions can be observed in the military architecture of the period. In the western parts of the Parthian Empire, i.e., in the Mesopotamian plain, military and defensive systems and fortifications developed under a clearly strong influence of earlier civilizations that had existed in the region. The eastern Parthian territories, on the other hand, drew on various traditions of military architecture developed in Central Asia (Francfort, pp. 23-39). The dislodging of the Greeks resulted in no particular change in the defensive architecture, presumably because of the nomadic tradition that must have still



determined the outlook of the early Parthians. Consequently, the new dynasty, installed in the Partava province, was focused on stabilizing the situation and maintaining the recently conquered territories. A reorganization of the defensive system of the state came later or was a parallel process (Jakubiak, pp. 127-50).

Some fortified cities had already existed in the early Arsacid period. Merv (or Marv, first called by the Greeks Alexandria Margiana and later Antiochia Margiana) was among the biggest cities in all of Central Asia and an important center on the northeastern frontier. It was established under the Achaemenids (q.v.) and enjoyed a prosperous period under Greek and Parthian domination (Pugachenkova, pp. 19-21, 39-44). Its defensive architecture reveals several characteristic elements. The oldest samples of this architecture are the round Erk Kala citadel, erected by the Achaemenids, and the lower town, erected on a square plan by the Greeks. One of the most important elements to appear at the Greeks' inspiration was a *protejchisma*, found in the lower town in Merv (Herrmann, Kurbandsakhatov, and St. John Simpson, pp. 9-52). A similar construction can be expected in another fortified city Kyrk Kala, which repeated the plan of Merv (Pugachenkova, p. 41). Moreover, it seems that strategically located sites evolved and were furnished with new solid curtain walls. The military system, recognized at these two sites, did not change under the Arsacids, but there were several new developments in this part of the state under the Parthians. Old Nisa—the ancient Mitridakent, capital of Parthia built by Mithridates II (r. 132-88/7 BCE; Invernizzi, pp. 137-40; Wolski, 1993, pp. 93-4) merit attention (FIGURE 1). A look at the defensive wall, its shape, and overall construction gives a clear idea of how the Arsacids perceived military architecture, even if as a capital city with official and representative functions it held a special place among Parthian towns. The mud-brick curtain wall was erected on a huge *pakhsa*, or compacted clay platform. The weakest points at the corners were strengthened with five massive bastions, and there were characteristic buttresses projecting from the wall at regular intervals, and ramps, giving access to the city gates.

Military architecture in the Central-Asian part of the Arsacid domain fell into two different categories. The first and apparently more popular form during the period in question included fortifications erected on a square or rectangular plan. These structures of differing sizes were characterized by a relatively regular spacing of the towers or large buttresses projecting beyond the curtain walls. Massive corner towers were strongly accentuated in these



structures. Gates came in several variants, presumably dependent on individual architectural conditions; they are a good example of experimenting with new solutions that were advantageous from the military point of view, starting from simple gates through sluice-like gates to constructions of a barbican nature. Gates of the kind can be found at Kyrk Tepe, Akcha Tepe (Pugachenkova, pp. 29 and 46; Koshelenko, p. 64), Chichanlik Tepe (Pugachenkova, pp. 29 and 46; Koshelenko, p. 62; Francfort, p. 31), Durnali (Pugachenkova, pp. 47-52; Bader, Gaibov, and Koshelenko, pp. 117-28), and Chilburj (FIGURE 2; Pugachenkova, pp. 51-54; Koshelenko, pp. 58 and 63; Gaibov, Koshelenko, and Novikov, pp. 21-32).

The second category is represented by big cities with defensive walls and an easily distinguished, heavily fortified citadel. The Dev Kala site (Koshelenko, p. 61) is a case in point, as well as many other sites from the Gorgān (q.v.) plain, e.g., Qal'a-ye Dašt-e Ḥalqa, Qal'a-ye Gāvmiāli, Qal'a-ye Kārāba, Qal'a-ye Pāras, and Qal'a-ye Gug (Kiani, *passim*). A huge defensive system, including many outposts and fortresses, was also constructed in the Gorgān region (Huff, pp. 105-10; Kiani, *passim*) for protection against raids by nomadic tribes from Dehestān (q.v.; Wolski, 1993, pp. 33-34, 37; Lacomte, pp. 142-45). It is traditionally referred to as the wall of Alexander the Great, but there is no actual evidence that the Greek conqueror had a role in its construction. In any event, it was definitely in existence under the Arsacids, and it demonstrates the Parthians' familiarity with issues of organization and the protection of strategic and fertile territories like, for example, Gorgān.

In modern Iranian territories, almost no military architecture is known outside the Gorgān plain. Only a few structures, such as Tepe Čoraḡi and Kārkon near Hamadan and Malāyer, for example, may have been erected during the Parthian period (Kleiss, pp. 135-36).

More information on Arsacid military architecture comes from Mesopotamia. Its development there took place under a strong influence from western and earlier Assyro-Babylonian civilization. Consequently, massive curtain walls, furnished with regularly spaced projecting towers, had a long tradition dating back to at least the Early Bronze Age, both in regular military constructions and in city walls. The defensive complexes of Hatra (q.v.; Andrae, pp. 24-59, Khalil Ibrahim, pp. 117-23; Gawlikowski, pp. 147-84), Khirbeth Jaddalah (Khalil Ibrahim, pp. 143-54), Nippur (Knudstad, pp. 95-106; Bergamini, pp. 205-09), Ctesiphon (q.v.), and Dura Europos (q.v.; Gerkan, pp. 4-61; Bergamini, pp. 197-201; Kennedy and Riley, pp. 112-14; Gelin, Leriche, and Abdul Massih, pp.



46; ʒAbdul Massih, pp. 47-54) merit special attention for the discussion of Parthian military architecture. Hatra is undoubtedly the best example of a fortified city preserved from the Parthian period in Mesopotamia (FIGURE 3). The round plan took advantage of a naturally defensive location while the walls were furnished with a number of projecting towers, and four city gates built of stone blocks. Enemy troops would have first been engaged by a network of small forts like, for example, Khirbeth Jaddalah (FIGURE 4), that would block their path before they could actually attack Hatra. These small forts were also used as residences by Hatrean elite and nobles. The Khirbeth Jaddalah fort also exhibits characteristic defensive elements such as towers with rounded corners, which reduced the blind field in front of the curtain wall, and small compartments located all around inside the defensive wall. These fortifications were certainly not designed to stand a long siege, unlike the well-prepared systems of the big cities of Hatra, Ctesiphon (qq.v.), and other Mesopotamian cities settled in the Arsacid period.

Since little is known of Ctesiphon, which like Hatra had been besieged by Roman forces, other military constructions known from Parthian Mesopotamia have to be considered. Foremost is Nippur of the 1st century CE (Bergamini, p. 205), a fort built around the ziggurat. A similar structure is known from Mount Babyl in Babylon (Werzel, Schmidt, and Malwitz, p. 58; FIGURE 5). That structure is alleged to be of late Parthian time, as the round defensive towers projecting from the main curtain wall suggest.

Not to be omitted in this discussion is Dura Europos (FIGURE 6), illustrating how the Parthians took advantage of structures erected by the Greeks in the early Hellenistic period. With its curtain walls and military structures, as well as its strategic location, the city had played an important role on the western Parthian border for many years.

To the extent of our knowledge of Arsacid military architecture, we can observe a number of characteristic features. Continuity and change had typified architecture in the region ever since Achaemenid times. Specific elements were taken from Greek military architecture (Lawrence, *passim*; McNicoll, *passim*), resulting in a new category of defensive structures adapted to the military needs of the Seleucids, in as much as for providing protection against nomadic tribes raiding from Central Asia. The first construction boom must have been under Arsaces I (r. 248/7—after 217 BCE) and Arsaces II (r. after 217—ca. 191 BCE), followed by a peak in development at the time of Mithridates I (r. ca. 171—139/8 BCE) and Mithridates II (r. ca. 124/3—88/7 BCE;



see [ARSACIDS](#)), who probably had to rearrange the military system in Mesopotamia after its conquest. The system definitely developed in the Arsacid Empire until its fall and the rebellion of Ardašir I (r. 224 or 226—242 AD, q.v.; Wolski, 1993, pp. 195-96; Verstandig, pp. 340-59), which gave a new impetus to the development of Iranian military architecture.

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