



DEBEVOISE, NEILSON CAREL

DEBEVOISE, NEILSON CAREL (b. Jersey City, N.J., 8 November 1903; d. Harrisburg, Penn., 10 December 1992), American archeologist and scholar of the history and culture of ancient Mesopotamia and Iran. Despite his distinction as a fine scholar and author of well-known works, the available information about his scholarly and professional careers remains scanty and fragmentary. In 1928, he married Martha Esther Debevoise, nee Ketchum (1905-95).

Debevoise attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, where he studied the history of the Orient under the guidance of the distinguished orientalist, Albert Ten Eyck Olmstead (1880-1945) and received the Ph.D. degree in 1929, with the dissertation titled "Parthian Problems" (no. 123965 in the list of theses of this university). The following year he started working at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Debevoise joined American archeological explorations at Seleucia, a metropolis of [Seleucid](#) and [Arsacid](#)/Parthian [Babylonia](#) on the Tigris river. The excavations there, carried out on the initiative of the American School of Oriental Research in [Baghdad](#), had been begun in December 1927 by Leroy Waterman (1875-1972) from the University of Michigan in search of the ancient Babylonian city of Opis, which was thought to have been situated where Seleucia came subsequently into existence. Robert Harbold McDowell (1894-1980), one of the scholars participating in the fieldwork at Selucia, published two books describing his observations and conclusions regarding numismatic finds of the Parthian epoch; his works were widely used by



Debevoise in his monograph *A Political History of Parthia*.

Fieldwork at Seleucia brought Debevoise into close contact with the original data that substantially enriched the already available notions concerning the history and culture of Hellenistic and Parthian Babylonia as well as that of the neighboring regions of Iran.

In the 1930s, he published several articles on the glyptic and architecture of the Parthian and [Sasanian](#) periods. Most notable among them for a deeper cognition of the ancient culture of the Near East is his first monograph entitled “Parthian Pottery from Seleucia on the Tigris” (1934), in which he has described and analyzed nearly 1,600 ceramic vessels (mostly kept in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology of the University of Michigan, which has the largest collection of Parthian pottery in the United States). In the course of working at this project, Debevoise studied almost 3,000 coins uncovered in Seleucia. It was the coins found in such a considerable quantity in the cultural layers together with ceramics that he took as a basis of the chronology for the archeological sites of the Parthian period. For his analysis of the pottery, he also made use of McDowell’s data about clay seals.

In 1938, Debevoise published his main and most celebrated work, a monograph titled *A Political History of Parthia*, which won him worldwide recognition. Until the appearance of this work, the only more or less full study of Parthian history were *The Sixth Great Oriental Monarchy* (1873) by the British orientalist George Rawlinson (1812-1902); *Geschichte Irans und seiner Nachbarländer* by Alfred von Gutschmid (1831-87), not a full survey of the Parthian history; and the two essays on Parthia by two distinguished scholars of Eastern Hellenistic studies, namely William Woodthorpe Tarn (1869-1957) and Michael I. Rostovtzeff (1870-1952), in *The Cambridge Ancient History*. It should be noted, however, that until the appearance of Debevoise’s study, the history of Parthia had not been the subject of detailed study. Many archeologists and historians of antiquity considered it a theme of secondary significance.

Against such a background, Debevoise’s book, which displayed an unprecedented complex analysis of ancient written sources on the history of the Arsacid/Parthian empire, became a real breakthrough. He used the full corpus of the Greco-Latin literary and documentary pieces of evidence known by that time as a basis for reconstructing the chief milestones and events of Parthian history. Moreover, he also used relevant information from Iranian,



Babylonian, Armenian, and Chinese sources to the extent that was available through scholarly works and studies. He used and made a critical analysis of all accessible numismatic and archeological data that were accessible then through scholarly works, as well as taking into account all available publications on Parthian problems.

Debevoise's monograph, although a valuable contribution to our understanding of the antique past of both Iran and adjacent territories, is not free from certain deficiencies. For instance, he considers the early history of Parthia on the erroneous assumption that Tiridates I and [Artabanus I](#) were heirs of Arsaces I (see [ARSACIDS i](#)). One may also point out his pro-Roman approach to the interpretation of individual events, for instance, his calling the war of the Parthian king Vologaeses I with Rome (in the 50s-60s CE) "the Campaign of Corbulo" after the opposing Roman general and former governor of the Roman province of Asia (d. 67 CE). Such points, however, certainly cannot diminish the significance of Debevoise's contribution, which contains a very serious analysis of various sources and his conclusions and hypotheses are all marked by the cautious note of a meticulous scholar (for the reviews of this monograph, see Bibliography).

Debevoise was an innovator for his time, in that he was the one who attracted attention to the relations of Parthia with her neighbors in western Central Asia. Although the political and cultural relations of Arsacid/Parthian Iran with the peoples that lived to the east and north of its borders are immeasurably better known now than was the case in the 1930s, many findings and observations made by Debevoise still retain their significance, and his monograph is still considered a prominent work in Parthian historiography. In view of its perspectives on the history and culture of Parthia, his monograph continues to be a standard study, above all in respect to elucidating the nature and dynamics of the development of interrelations between the Parthians and the Hellenistic kingdoms and Rome. His treatment of these problems looks rather weighty in methodology, as his interdisciplinary approach examines written, archeological, and numismatic sources.

Another notable contribution is his studies on Parthian pottery and seals, which set a significant precedent for subsequent studies on these subjects.

After the appearance of the monograph, Debevoise published several articles and reviews, the latest of which is dated to 1947. In 1940-41 he was at the



Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, as is indicated by an extremely laconic record (see *Bulletin of the Institute for Advanced Study* 10, Princeton, 1941, p. xi). Debevoise's life dramatically changed when the United States became actively involved in World War II. He put an end to his scholarly career and joined the Army Intelligence with the rank of captain, thus beginning the least-known period of his life story. It is only known that he served in Egypt during the war years and was subsequently given an honorary title of a veteran of the Army Air Corps. In the postwar period, under the presidents Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson, Debevoise worked at the Department of State and was a member of the National Security Council. Details are unavailable about this new stage of his life, during which he sacrificed his scholarly career and ambitions in order to serve the political interests of his country. One regrets that his scholarly potential as an expert in the ancient history and archaeology of the Middle East should fall short of full realization, particularly given his expressed intention to compose a work on the Sasanian empire (1938b, last footnote).

Debevoise died in the Harrisburg (Pa.) Hospital on 10 December 1992. He was survived by his wife, Martha Esther (d. 1995), a daughter and a son, as well as seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren (see his obituary in *Harrisburg Patriot*, 12 December 1992, p. B2).

A Persian translation of Debevoise's opus magnum, prepared by 'Ali-Aşğar Hekmat, was published in 1963. A Russian translation by Valeriĭ P. Nikonorov came out in 2008. The latter is provided with an extensive bibliographical supplement containing the majority of works in Russian and other (mostly European) languages (several thousands items), which concern the history, culture, and socio-economic structures of Parthia and her neighbors that were published in the years 1938-2008.

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