



ELYMAIS

ELYMAIS, semi-independent state frequently subject to Parthian domination, which existed between the second century B.C.E. and the early third century C. E. in the territories of Kūzestān (Susiana), in southwestern Persia.

The earliest reference to the Elymaeans is by Nearchus, the admiral of Alexander the Great, in a passage preserved by Strabo (2.13.6). He relates that the “Elymaei” were one of the four predatory tribes in what is now southwestern Persia, who extracted tribute from the Persian (Achaemenid) kings. Strabo describes Elymais as a mostly rugged country bordering on Susis and inhabited by brigands who waged war against the Susians (Strabo, 15.3.12, 16.1.17). It is clear from this account that the homeland of the Elymaeans comprised only a part of the present province of Kūzestān. To the Assyrians and the Neo-Babylonians, the whole of these lands were Elam. The Achaemenids identified Kūzestān as the satrapy of hŪvja (Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 175), and to the Seleucid successors of Alexander, it was the satrapy of Susaina with its capital at Susa. The Elamites of the second millennium B.C.E. differentiated between the region or district of Susa, which comprised the Kūzestān plain and the separate district of Elam proper. In Sumerian this “regional” Elam was written with the sign NIM, which conveyed the idea of “highland.” In the present context Elam is most probably to be identified with the foothills and valleys of the Zagros mountains, which rise to the east and north of the Kūzestān plain. This location would be consistent with Strabo’s description of Elymais as being mostly rugged. The name Elymais may be understood to mean Elam minor, a usage most probably intended to



differentiate this district from the major part of the old Elamite territories comprising the plains of Susiana. But from time to time over the centuries the kings of Elymais also controlled Susiana.

It has been suggested that the Elymaeans were of Persian origin and that they had been established in this part of Kūzestān since the eighth century B.C.E. (Ghirshman, p. 284). But the hostility shown by the Elymaeans to the Achaemenid kings, as recorded by Nearchus, and the fact that the Elymaeans worshipped non-Iranian gods would seem to suggest that the people of Elymais were descendants of the traditional Elamite inhabitants of these regions. A comparative study of Elymaean religious iconography supports the view that the Elymaeans worshipped Semitic gods of Babylon and Assyria, possibly in syncretization with traditional Elamite deities (Hansman, 1985, pp. 229-46).

Following the conquests of Alexander, the Elymaeans are not mentioned in the sources for over a century. In 220/219 B.C.E. Molon, the acting Seleucid satrap of Media, revolted against Antiochus III and invaded Babylonia and Susiana (Polybius, 5.40-54). In his campaigns Molon was aided by contingents from Elymais (Strabo, 16.1.17), but the revolt failed. In 190 B.C.E., 4,000 mixed Cyrtii (Kurdish) slingers and Elymaean archers were among the forces gathered by Antiochus III (q.v.) for an invasion of Greece, which proved abortive (Livy, 37.40). Appian (*Syria* 66) described these Elymaean archers as riding on swift camels and shooting arrows with dexterity from their high mounts. In 187 B.C.E., being short of funds to pay tribute to Rome, Antiochus III attempted to rob a considerable treasure of gold and silver kept in a temple of Bēl in Elymais (Diodorus Siculus, 28.3, 29.15), but his intentions became known, and he was killed by the local people (Justin, 32.2). In reference to this incident, it is noteworthy that a rock inscription in Elymaean Aramaic, which mentions an altar of Bēl, was found near the Šimbār valley in the upland country of northeastern Kūzestān (Bivar and Shaked, p. 272). The Seleucid king Antiochus IV also sought to rob a wealthy Elymaean sanctuary, the temple of Artemis-Nanaia. But again the Elymaeans foiled the attempt, and Antiochus retreated to Gabae (Isfahan), where he died in 164 B.C. (Polybius, XXI.11; on these various Elymaean temples, see Tarn, pp. 463-66). Among the coins excavated at the site of Susa, were four of a ruler called Hyknopses. Le Rider suggests (pp. 346-47) that he was a local usurper of Seleucid authority who reigned about 162-161 B.C.E. shortly after the death of Antiochus IV. In about 155 B.C.E. Mithradates I, king of Parthia, took Media from the Seleucids, and by 141 B.C.E.



most of Mesopotamia had fallen to the Arsacid forces. Le Rider suggests that in about 147 B.C.E., a period of weakened Seleucid control, the Elymaean king Kamnaskires I took possession of Susiana and replaced the Seleucid contender Alexander Balas as ruler at the capital Susa. He postulates this because certain coins of Kamnaskires known to have been minted at Susa are close in style to an issue of the contemporary Elymaean ally Demetrius II. They also show a monogram which is found on coins of Alexander Balas (*idem*, pp. 349-51). Using other evidence, Le Rider further suggests that some years before 147 B.C.E., Kamnaskires could have taken the important Elymaean town of Seleucia on the Hedyphon.

In 140 B.C.E. the Seleucid king Demetrius II endeavored to regain Mesopotamia from the Parthians, and in this attempt he was joined by contingents of troops from Elymais and from other parts of Persia (Justin, 36.1). A late cuneiform text relates that the Elymaeans made incursions in the neighborhood of the Tigris in the territories of Hyspaosines, king of the state of Characene (q.v.) in southernmost Mesopotamia. Hyspaosines gained independence from the Seleucids before 141 B.C.E., and the Elymaeans could have invaded Characene while allied with Demetrius II during his campaign to reestablish Seleucid authority throughout Mesopotamia. In the event, the Elymaean leader Pittit was defeated by the generals of Hyspaosines, and the whole of Elymais was then “smitten with the sword” (Pincher, pp. 483-84). This attack on the Elymaean homeland may be related to the invasion of that country by Mithradates I in 140-139 B.C.E. in punishment of Elymais for assisting Demetrius II, whose forces had also been defeated by the Parthians. During this campaign Arsacid forces occupied the two major Elymaean cities, Seleucia on the Hedyphon river and Socrates on Mount Casyrus (Strabo, 16.1.18; Pliny, 6.31; Justin, 41.6). The Hedyphon river has been identified with the Jarrāḥī river of southeastern Kūzestān and Seleucia with the archeological site called Jānešīn, which is surrounded by earthen embankments and located on the west bank of the Jarrāḥī (Hansman, 1978, pp. 154-60).

Le Rider further suggests that several decades after the Parthian invasion, the Elymaeans again began to mint their own coins. He theorizes this because the geography of Pliny relating to a political situation existing prior to 45 C. E. would seem to place the Elymaeans of that period in control of much of eastern Kūzestān, but not of the city of Susa (Pliny, 6.31). Le Rider also suggests that the Elymaeans retook Seleucia on the Hedyphon from the Parthians sometime after the conquests of Mithradates I and that, thereafter, Seleucia



served as the Elymaean capital. It is argued that the Elymaeans established a mint at Seleucia, and that this was where silver tetradrachms, commencing with those ascribed to Kamnaskires II and dated to the year 82/81 B.C.E., were struck (Le Rider, p. 426). As an alternative to this theory, we may consider that Elymais remained subject to the Parthians until after the death of the capable and conquering king Mithradates II in 87 B.C.E. Moreover, it would seem reasonable to consider that the date of 82/81 B.C.E., given on the coins of Kamnaskires II, could commemorate the year in which the Elymaeans regained their independence or semi-independence from the Parthians. Some of the coins of Kamnaskires II show a profile of the king jurgate with that of his queen Anzaze. Coins of the next ruler in the Elymaean line, a son of Kamnaskires II who is designated Kamnaskires III by numismatists, include silver tetradrachms dated either 62/61 or 59/58 B.C.E. This Kamnaskires, too, may have issued tetradrachms which are dated 36/35 B.C.E.

In 65 B.C.E. a king of Elymais, probably Kamnaskires III, sent presents to the Roman general Pompey, who then was in Lesser Armenia (Plutarch, *Pompey* 36). The Elymaeans may have sought the support of Rome against the Parthian king Phraetes III (71-57 B.C.E.). Bronze coins of Phraetes are unique to the mint of Susa, and he may have ruled from there at times to menace of the neighboring Elymaeans. In 36 C.E. the Parthian usurper Tiridates III, a nominee of the Roman emperor Tiberius, seized most of Mesopotamia from the rightful ruler Artabanus III. At this time the Elymaeans were allied with Tiridates (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.44). But the revolt failed, and Artabanus regained Mesopotamia in the same year. From at least 82/81 B.C.E., the Elymaeans appear to have maintained a semi-independent existence in their mountainous homelands for over a century. They also controlled parts of the eastern Kuzestān plain, with their capital at Seleucia on the Hedyphon. But coins of successive Parthian rulers, showing the mint signature of Susa, indicate that the Arsacids retained control of western Kuzestān in these times. Le Rider presents numismatic evidence in support of the theory that the Elymaeans retook Susa from the Parthians and then moved their own capital from Seleucia to Susa in about 45 C.E. This is deduced, in part, because no Parthian coins are known to have been minted at Susa after the reign of the Parthian king Vardanes I (41-45 C.E.). In addition, bronze drachmas of Elymais, which date from about 75 C.E. onward, have been found in such numbers at Susa that Le Rider believes were they struck there. He further suggests that the Parthians may have lost Susa in about 45 C.E. because the realm was weakened by opposition to Vardanes from his brother, the rival king Gotarzes.



This could have favored the conquest of Susiana by Elymais (Le Rider, pp. 426-28).

Tetradrachms of one of the Elymaean kings called Kamnaskires bear the dates 55/56 C.E. and 58/59 C.E. From this period the coins of Elymais show a progressive deterioration in quality and style. The silver tetradrachms and drachmas of the earlier kings are replaced by bronze issues, and the inscriptions and busts shown on the obverse of these larger coins gradually become debased. They are eventually omitted altogether and replaced by simple dashed lines. The latest known date recorded on an Elymaean coin is 71/72 C.E. (Hansman, 1990, p. 10). The Elymaean name Kamnaskires may be related to the title *kapnuškira* appearing in Elamite in the Persepolis fortification texts and carrying the meaning of “treasurer” (for occurrences of this latter title, see Hallock, s.v. *kapnuškira*). During the last half of the 1st century C.E., a new line of Elymaean kings appears. Rostovtzeff (p. 118) suggests that this dynasty may have been descended not from the Kamnaskires kings but perhaps from members of the Arsacid family using Parthian royal names. But the second king of this line bore the title of Kamnaskires Orodes, son of Orodes, who was the first of the new line. This could suggest a connection with the old dynasty of Kamnaskires or merely that Kamnaskires was at times used as a regal title rather than as a personal name. Le Rider (p. 428) dates the beginning of this new series of coins from 76 C.E.

The usually accepted sequence of these later kings of Elymais begins with Orodes I. Next, there is the aforementioned Kamnaskires Orodes (II), son of Orodes. The third king of the line was Phraates, son of Orodes. Phraates is sometimes considered to have been succeeded by a king called Chosroes. Coins of this Chosroes show a frontal bust of a king with broad hair masses. This feature closely resembles that shown on coins of the Parthian king Osroes I (r. 109-29 C.E.), who warred with Trajan in Mesopotamia. These similarities and the fact that Chosroes and Osroes are forms of the same name has led to the suggestion that both names identify the same Parthian king, who may have ruled sometimes from Susa. But it is equally possible that a king of Elymais copied the portrait of Osroes for his own coins (Le Rider, pp. 429-30). In 117 C.E. Trajan was warmly received in Mesene (Characene). It has been suggested that both Characene and the neighboring state to the west, Elymais, supported the Roman invasion of Mesopotamia (Nodelman, p. 110). The tetradrachms and drachmas of the series of Kamnaskires Elymaean coinage always show Greek inscriptions, which are debased on the later issues. The tetradrachms of



post-Kamnaskires Elymaean coins are inscribed in Aramaic. The drachmas of Orodes I show Greek inscriptions, those of Kamnaskires-Orodes Aramaic, and those of Phraates either Greek or Aramaic. Le Rider suggests that the tetradrachms with Aramaic inscriptions were minted at the former Elymaean capital of Seleucia on the Hedyphon, perhaps mainly for internal circulation. He suggests that the drachmas with Greek inscriptions were minted at the more cosmopolitan city of Susa, where elements of a Hellenistic past survived (Le Rider, p. 428). A later interpretation of symbols attested on these coins suggests that, while Le Rider's mint identifications are generally correct, Aramaic inscribed tetradrachms were occasionally struck at Susa and those with Greek inscriptions were infrequently struck at Seleucia (Hansman, 1990, pp. 5-10).

Very little is known of the kings of Elymais succeeding Phraates. A coin with the name Orodes, sometimes designated by numismatists as Orodes III, has on its obverse the bust of a woman and the name Ulfan written in Aramaic. This Orodes may be the king of Elamais at Susa identified in an inscription at Palmyra dated 138 C.E. The inscription commemorates the assistance given by a citizen of that city to a Palmyrene embassy to Orodes (Seyrig, pp. 253-55). The lady Ulfan may be identified as the consort of Orodes. Two later kings of Elymais are attested in a series of rock inscriptions written in Aramaic and located at Tang-e Sarvak, a narrow upland valley of eastern Kūzestān. The rulers mentioned are (A)Bar-Basi and an Orodes. From evidence contained in these inscriptions, Henning proposes the following sequence of events: Abar-Basi ruled in Elymais. After this king died Bel-Dusa, the high priest of Bel, installed his own son Orodes on the throne. In treating the chronology of these figures, Henning equates Abar-Basi with the king whose bust is depicted on a late Elymaean coin. Henning suggests a date of 150 C.E. for Abar-Basi. The Orodes of the Tang-i Sarvak inscriptions is equated with the king identified in a coin series as Orodes IV. The date of the accession of this Orodes is suggested to be about 165-170 C. E. (Henning, pp. 166-76; on the sequence of Elymaean coins, see Hill, pp. clxxxii-cxciv).

A commemorative inscription recovered at Susa and dated to 215 C.E. attests that Khwasak, who had recently deceased, had been satrap of Susa under Artabanus IV (r. 213-24 C.E.), the last king of Parthia (Henning, p. 176). When the Sasanian Ardašīr I (q.v.), the Parthian vassal ruler in Fārs, revolted against the Arsacids, Artabanus asked the last king of Elymais, another Orodes (Henning, p. 178, n. 2), to subdue the rebel. But in about 221 C.E. Ardašīr



defeated Orodes, invaded Elymais, and took its major city identified by Ṭabarī as Sorraq (Ṭabarī, I, pp. 818-19; Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 12-1; on the location of Sorraq, see Hansman, 1978).

In sum, the available sources show that there existed in southwestern Persia, from the second century B.C.E. to the early third century C.E., a sometimes independent, occasionally vassal state of the Parthians, called Elymais by classical writers. Most of the Elymaeans were probably descendants of the Elamites who had occupied these same territories in earlier centuries. The conquest of Ardašīr in 221 C.E. marked the end of Elymais as a political state. In the highly centralized Sasanian empire which Ardašīr founded there was no room for local kingdoms.

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