



## KINGSHIP III. IN THE PARTHIAN PERIOD

---

Due to limited data provided by different types of historical sources, it is not always possible to present fully all aspects of the basic notions related to the Parthian kingship. Nevertheless, available data make it possible to delineate essential elements important for understanding the constitutional position of Parthian kings, political ideology of the [Arsacids](#), and some religious aspects of their kingship.

The first king of the Parthians was Arsaces I (247-211 BCE). His career began when, as the leader of the [Aparna](#) (Lat. Aparni) tribe, he conquered Astauene (medieval [Ostovā](#)) about the mid-3rd century BCE (Strabo, 11.9.2-3 [515]; Iust. 41.1.1-10, 41.4.619). Probably soon after overrunning that land, Arsaces proclaimed himself king (Isid. Char., *Stath. Parth.* 11), but we do not know if he ever used the title of king (Gaslain, 2005a, pp. 221-22; idem, 2005b, p. 13). It was borne only by his successors. Arsaces' establishment of monarchy as the political system was a watershed event, as it provided a foundation for his own status as well as for Parthian statehood. Arsaces' decision to be crowned king encouraged his subjects to rally around him in a widespread mobilization to continue conquests, which eventually resulted in the establishment of a state on seized territories. One of the lands so acquired, Parthyene, lent its name to the Aparna, who came to be called Parthians, and their state, the Parthian state. Arsaces' contribution to nation building won him enormous respect from his subjects. His name was recognized as the official title of



Parthian kings, to be adopted on accession to the throne (Iust., 41.5.5-8).

The political achievements of Arsaces I became an important reference point in the shaping of the Parthian concept of kingship. The establishment of monarchy laid the ground for the unification of a state composed of the many ethnically and culturally different lands that were subsequently incorporated by conquest. The royal ideology must have been largely affected by the fact that Arsaces was not only a national hero, but also the founder of a national dynasty, which, based on his name, was called the Arsacids. Whatever the vicissitudes, the dynasty continued to rule the Parthian state uninterrupted until its collapse (ca. 228 CE) through the rise of [Ardašir I](#), the founder of the [Sasanian Empire](#). It is only natural to note that this fact favored both the preservation and cultivation of the dynastic tradition and the development of the consequent monarchical ideology.

The monarchy created by Arsaces was absolute and hereditary (Wolski, 1954, pp. 61-64, 69-72; Lerouge, pp. 246-55). That the Arsacids were absolutist is indicated by the position of the ruler in society and by the naming of a successor. The king was the only depository of royal power, which he passed to his selected successor at his sole discretion. His decrees were not subject to anyone's approval. Nor did his ascension to the throne, as far as can be noticed, require any special procedures to legitimize the new king's power. His supreme authority was not checked by any controlling body. Although Parthian kings are known to have had attached to them an assembly, variously called *ordo probulorum* (Iust., 41.2.2), *synedrion* (Strabo, 11.9.3 (515)), or *senatus Parthorum* (Iust., 42.4.1), composed of representatives of aristocratic families and state officials, it is difficult to be certain about its actual impact (Lerouge, pp. 252-55).

The principle of succession within the dynasty operated from Arsaces I on. It was based on the traditional rule of the eldest son being appointed to the throne, although the absolute power enjoyed by Parthian kings allowed them to depart from this principle on many occasions. A ruler could thus name a younger son or even a brother as his successor. A brother could be appointed to the throne, and not only when the king had no offspring, since a son's birthright might be deliberately overruled if the national or dynastic interest so required (Iust., 41.5.9-10). Royal brothers always stood very high in the Arsacid dynastic hierarchy. It seems that they also frequently played a major role in implementing the political plans of the ruler. Relatively little is known, by contrast, about the political roles of royal sons. Historical sources suggest



that at times they could be significant. On occasion, the king's sons were appointed co-rulers or were entrusted with major political tasks (Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.31.1, 6.33.2; Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 20.74; Iust. 42.4.5, 42.4.7-11).

Departures from traditional rules of succession in the Arsacid family often led to dynastic conflicts and usurpations. Many such cases were probably the result of the polygamy practiced by Parthian kings, although one cannot be sure that the practice was followed by all of them (Iust., 41.3.1; Huber and Hartmann, pp. 490-91; Lerouge, pp. 339-45). Some of the more ambitious royal consorts struggled unscrupulously for their offspring's right to the throne, resorting to removal of other eligible children by the king's other wives. Rivalries among the many royal sons sometimes led to elimination by the winner of the others (Strabo, 16.1.28 [748]; Tac., *Ann.* 2.1.2, 11.8.2, 12.10.1; Iust., 42.4.2-4, 42.4.14-5.2; Dio Cass., 49.23.3-4). Dynastic conflicts and usurpations also involved the sons of royal concubines (Tac., *Ann.* 12.44.2; Iust., 42.4.15). Ruthless power struggles victimized, not only the king's competing sons, but also the rulers themselves (Josephus, *Ant. Jud.* 18.39, 18.42; Iust., 42.5.1-2; Plut., *Crass.* 33.5; Wolski, 1954, pp. 61-64; Huber and Hartmann, pp. 487-90).

Little can be said with certainty about the role of royal consorts in public life. The names of some Arsacid wives appear next to their husbands' in the dating formula of some documents (e.g., Gotarzes and Asi'abatar; Orodes and Isubarza; Phraates IV and Olenneieire, Cleopatra, Basierta, Bistheibanaps ...; Bigwood, pp. 237-47). One cannot be sure, however, whether such naming of the queen was practiced throughout Arsacid rule. Inclusion of the queen's name in a dating formula seems to indicate that royal consorts were seen as public figures with a right to appear at the king's side. The status of a queen could be determined by various factors. One certainly was their lineage and prestige of their respective families. A Parthian king could be married to his sister (Del Monte, p. 255; Huber and Hartmann, p. 491). On ascent to the throne by an underage king, an important role in public life was played by his mother, who officially appeared as a regent (Del Monte, pp. 245-46).

Left without a detailed description of the Arsacid court ceremonial, we have only very limited knowledge about the nature of the official relations between the ruler and his environment and related social aspects of Parthian royal ideology (Athen., *Deipn.* 4.152F-153B; Lerouge, pp. 255-60). Still, it is plausible to suppose that an important place may have been held by the custom of *proskynêsis* (bowing), which emphasized the king's authority (Wiesehöfer, pp. 61, 65, note 52). Material relics and numismatic sources supply valuable clues



as to the techniques of self-presentation employed by the Arsacids. Self-presentation was one way in which the ruler consciously communicated messages to the numbers of his subjects and to the outside world. Portraits of the reigning monarch on display in public places, on objects, or on coins, made his figure more familiar to subjects while they helped disseminate a desired ideological and political message. This being so, an analysis of Parthian kings' portraits supplies information on such subjects as the attributes of their power, Parthian royal ideology, and any changes as may have occurred in it over time. Such an analysis is possible chiefly because almost all Arsacids, from Arsaces I to the last one in the line, [Artabanus/Ardavān V](#) (r. ca 213-24 CE), issued their own coins.

Portraits of the Arsacids clearly evolved as centuries passed. On his first coins, Arsaces is shown as a young, beardless man, wearing diademed headgear called *bashlyk* (Gaslain, 2005b, pp. 15-21) in Turkish. On one of his coins, his head is turned to the right, as was customary on representations of the [Seleucids](#); on others, to the left. With no major change, this type of king's portrait survived until Mithradates/Mehrdād I (r. 165-132 BCE). Introduced then, the way of portraying the king became standard. It showed the king bearded, wearing a diadem, and dressed in the Greek style. The Greek dress itself was an imitation of the Seleucid iconographic pattern (Sellwood, pp. 36-43). From Phraates/Farhād II (r. ca. 132-126 BCE), it became the rule to show the king in Parthian national dress (Curtis, pp. 61-67). Under Mithradates II (r. 122-91 BCE), the iconography of Arsacid portraits had one more important item. It was a tiara tied with a diadem (Olbrycht, pp. 41, 56). Yet not all of his successors were portrayed wearing it. Much more often, they were shown crowned with a broad diadem of a distinctly different cut from the earlier [Hellenistic](#)-inspired king's headband. The first king shown to be wearing such a diadem was Phraates III (r. ca. 71/70-58/57 BCE; von Gall, pp. 301-09). Across time, not only did the attributes of royal power change on official representations, but discernible, and frequent, alterations in kingly iconography also affected dress, beard shape, and hairstyle. With time, such features acquired an increasingly distinct Iranian character (Vardanyan, pp. 59-60; cf. Fowler, pp. 143-47).

One of the essential outward signs of Arsacid royal power was a diadem, or a tiara tied with a diadem. Probably equally important attributes were a bow as corresponding to a scepter (Dio, 49.27.4; Winkelmann, pp. 139-41) and a throne (SHA, *vita Hadriani* 13.8; *vita Ant. Pii* 9.7). The royal throne symbolized the



might of the Arsacids. Its loss to an enemy was a serious blow to Parthian prestige in the eyes of subjects and neighbors alike.

Another category of objects associated with the Parthian monarchy was royal palaces and capitals, places where the king was either physically or symbolically present among his people. The first type owed its significance to the fact that palaces were the king's property, where he occasionally stayed. Such stays gave local groups of subjects an opportunity to come into close physical proximity with the king (Invernizzi, 2001, pp. 299-301). The other type was inextricably bound up with that integral part of kingly ideology, which consisted of royal symbolism. Even in his absence, all his palaces and capitals were visible signs of his power that helped reinforce the emotional attachment between him and his people. In addition, some royal palaces played an important part in upholding the Arsacid dynastic tradition; they were places where this tradition was cultivated and propagated. The Arsacids had at least a few capitals where they, as eastern rulers often would, resided seasonally (Strabo, 11.9.1 [514]). Early in the history of Parthian statehood, at the time of great conquests, its kings tended to choose for their successive capitals the main centers of the lands they conquered. As they moved their capital to the next location, their earlier seats did not lose their status. Some of them, boasting royal residences, served as regional centers of authority periodically visited by the kings. Some of them, however, must have declined, as they disappear from records in later times. Some time after their conquest of Mesopotamia in 141 BCE, the Arsacids established their winter residence in [Ctesiphon](#), which also served as their capital (*sedes imperii*) until the Parthian Empire collapsed (Strabo, 16.1.16 [743]; Tac., *Ann.* 6.42.4; Amm. Marc., 23.6.23).

The attitudes of subjects toward Parthian monarchs were affected by many factors, foremost among which were the king's majesty, his personal bravery, and his faithfulness to national traditions. As to the Parthian king's majesty as bearing on his relations with his surroundings, several meaningful mentions are extant (see Livy, *Periochae* 70.7; Vell. Pat., 2.24.3, 2.101.1-3; Tac., *Ann.* 6.34.3, 15.1.1, 15.31; Plut. *Sulla* 5.4-5; Herod., 4.14.1; Dio, 49.27.3-5, 79.3.1, 79.26.2-4).

An important aspect of the king's majesty was his bearing versus enemies. The history of the Arsacid Empire is filled with incessant armed conflicts. On many occasions, the Parthian kings personally led their armies against adversaries and some of them (e.g., Phraates II, Artabanus I) lost their lives in battle (Iust., 42.1.5, 42.2.2). Personal presence of the king in combat was expected by his subjects and contributed to his self-presentation, as it



confirmed his courage and bestowed on him the glory of victory. Such attitudes could have been influenced by traditions going back to the tribal past of Parthians as well as patterns borrowed from the Hellenistic world. How much importance was attached to victory propaganda is best illustrated by the numerous issues of Parthian kings' coins on whose obverses unmistakable symbolism refers to goddess Nike crowning a ruler's head or the title of *nikatōr* (ΝΙΚΑΤΩΡ "victorious") used by some of them (Vardanyan, 2001, 63, no. 5.7.9.11; 69, no. 8; 70, no. 5; 71, no. 5; 74, no. 5-7.9).

An important factor in shaping the subjects' attitudes toward rulers was the treatment by the latter of Iranian-origin national traditions, including lifestyle, dress code, and broadly understood customs (Tac. *Ann.* 2.2.3-4, 6.32.2; Iust., 41.2.4, 41.3.3-4). This deep attachment of at least some of the Parthian imperial elite to national traditions cannot be viewed apart from the Arsacid kingly ideology. An analysis of transformations in this ideology shows that Iranian traditions were present even during the early reigns (see Neusner, pp. 40-48; Wolski, 1977, pp. 223-35; Wiesehöfer, pp. 58-62; Vardanyan, 2001, pp. 102-28; Fowler, pp. 125-49). But these only gained importance under Mithradates II. It was then that major changes were introduced to royal iconography and a brand-new genealogical tradition arose, which pointed to blood relations between the Parthian dynasty and the Achaemenids. To confirm such pretenses, the official titlature of Parthian kings was expanded to include the title "king of kings" (ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ). This was first done by Mithradates I at the end of his reign (Del Monte, p. 245; cf. Neusner, pp. 46-47; Wolski, 1988, pp. 164-66; Wiesehöfer, p. 59; Assar, 2005, p. 44, note 101; Fowler, pp. 141-43). From Mithradates II on, the title was often used by his successors (Del Monte, pp. 249-57).

An element in the royal ideology of the Arsacids that could not be overestimated was the introduction by Mithradates I of the notion of the [Arsacid era](#) (Assar, 2003, p. 176). Its use was not only to bring to mind the figure and achievements of Arsaces I, but especially to accentuate the Arsacids' own historical and dynastic tradition. The least-known aspect of Parthian kingship remains its religious dimension (Wiesehöfer, p. 62; Dąbrowa, 2009; idem, 2011a; idem, 2011b; Muccioli; Invernizzi, 2011). Although the Arsacid royal ideology elevates the figure of Arsaces I as the maker of the Parthian state and founder of the ruling dynasty, no historical account implies that he was deified or was the object of religious worship (Amm. Marc. 23.6.6; Drijvers, pp. 198-99). Still, certain existing premises allow the supposition that



isolated attempts were made to divinize the ruling monarch. The absence of clear indications that the Parthian state had a widespread cult of the reigning king suggests that the practice did not gain popularity within the society, perhaps because it was alien to believers in [Zoroastrianism](#). Yet on the other hand, the presentation of a ruler's divinity in coinage suggests that the Arsacids did find it important, as it furthered their dynastic propaganda (Assar, 2006, pp. 56-57). The existence of organized forms of dynastic cult is suggested by parts of the Old [Nisa](#) palace complex unearthed by archeologists. Some structures on the compound were most probably connected with certain forms of a cult celebrated there (Invernizzi, 2001, pp. 303-10; idem, 2004, pp. 137-40; idem, 2011, pp. 649-66; Dąbrowa, 2009, pp. 41-51). However, no specific information is available to determine what form it took and whether it involved any regular religious observances (Dąbrowa 2014, pp. 150-51).

The Arsacid royal ideology presents a wealth of specific messages, which make up an original system of values and notions created by combining elements of different provenance. Clearly identifiable in this ideology, Greek elements were systematically removed or relegated out of significance, to be replaced by broadly understood Iranian traditions, which eventually predominated and gave it a national character. The Arsacid monarchy was an original form of Oriental kingship.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- Gholamreza F. Assar, "Parthian Calendars at Babylon and Seleucia on the Tigris," *Iran* 41, 2003, pp. 171-91.
- Idem, "Genealogy and Coinage of the Early Parthian Rulers, II: A Revised Stemma," *Parthica* 7, 2005, pp. 29-63.
- Idem, "A Revised Parthian Chronology of the Period 91-55 BC," *Parthica* 8, 2006, pp. 55-104.
- Joan M. Bigwood, "Some Parthian Queens in Greek and Babylonian Documents," *Iranica Antiqua* 43, 2008, pp. 235-73.
- V. S. Curtis, "The Parthian Costume and Headdress," in Josef Wieshöfer, ed., *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse*, Beiträge des Internationalen Colloquiums, Eutin (27-30 June 1996), Stuttgart, 1998, pp. 61-73.
- Edward Dąbrowa, "Mithradates I and the Beginning of the Ruler-Cult in



- Parthia,” *Electrum* 15, 2009, pp. 41-51.
- Idem, “Arsakes Theos: Observations on the Nature of the Parthian Ruler-Cult,” in Carlo Lippolis and Stefano de Marino, eds., *Un impaziente desiderio di scorrere il mondo: Studi in onore di Antoni Invernizzi per il suo settantesimo compleanno*, Florence, 2011a, pp. 247-53.
  - Idem, “Arsakes Epiphanes: Were the Arsacids Deities ‘Revealed’?” *Studi Ellenistici* 24, 2011b, pp. 223-30.
  - Idem, “The Arsacids: Gods or Godlike Creatures?” in Tommaso Gnoli and Federicomaria Muccioli, eds., *Divinizzazione, culto del sovrano e apoteosi: Tra Antichità e Medioevo*, Bologna, 2014, pp. 149-59.
  - Giuseppe F. Del Monte, *Testi dalla Babilonia ellenistica I: Testi cronografici*, Pisa, 1997.
  - Jan Willem Drijvers, “Ammianus Marcellinus’ Image of Arsaces and Early Parthian History,” in Jan Willem Drijvers and David Hunt, eds., *The Late Roman World and Its Historian: Interpreting Ammianus Marcellinus*, London and New York, 1999, pp. 193-206.
  - Richard Fowler, “Most Fortunate Roots: Tradition and Legitimacy in Parthian Royal Ideology,” in Oliver Hekster and Richard Fowler, eds., *Imaginary Kings: Royal Images in the Ancient Near East, Greece and Rome*, Stuttgart, 2005, pp. 125-55.
  - Hubertus von Gall, “Beobachtungen zum arsakidischen Diadem und zur parthischen Bildkunst,” *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 19-20, 1969-70, pp. 299-318.
  - J. Gaslain, “Arsaces I, the First Arsacid King? Some Remarks on the Nature of Early Parthian Power,” in *Central Asia from the Achaemenids to the Timurids: Archaeology, History, Ethnology, Culture*, Materials of an International Scientific Conference dedicated to the Centenary of Alexandr Markovich Belenitsky, St. Petersburg, 2005a, pp. 221-24.
  - Idem, “Le bachlik d’Arsace Ier ou la representation du nomade-roi,” *Bulletin of Parthian and Mixed Oriental Studies* 1, 2005b, pp. 9-30.
  - Irene Huber and Udo Hartmann, “Denn ihrem Diktat vermochte der König nicht zu widersprechen ...: Die Position der Frauen am Hof der Arsakiden,” in Antonio Panaino and Andrea Piras, eds., *Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea Held in Ravenna, 6-11 October 2003, I: Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies*, Milan, 2006, pp. 485-517.
  - Antonio Invernizzi, “Arsacid Palaces,” in Inge Nielsen, ed., *The Royal Palace Institution in the First Millennium BC: Regional Development and Cultural Interchange between East and West*, Athens, 2001, pp. 295-315.



- Idem, “Thoughts on Parthian Nisa,” *Parthica* 6, 2004, pp. 133-43.
- Idem, “Royal Cult in Arsakid Parthia,” in Panagiotis P. Iossif, Andrzej S. Chankowski, and Catharine C. Lorber, eds., *More than Men, Less than Gods: Studies on Royal Cult and Imperial Worship*, Proceedings of the International Colloquium organized by the Belgian School at Athens (November 1-2, 2007), Leuven, 2011, pp. 651-90.
- Charlotte Lerouge, *L’image des Parthes dans le monde gréco-romain: Du début du Ier siècle av. J.-C. jusqu’à la fin du Haut-Empire romain*, Stuttgart, 2007.
- Federicomaria Muccioli, “Il problema del culto del sovrano nella regalità arsacide: Appunti per una discussione,” *Electrum* 15, 2009, pp. 83-104.
- Jacob Neusner, “Parthian Political Ideology,” *Iranica Antiqua* 3, 1963, pp. 40-59.
- Marek J. Olbrycht, “Parthian King’s Tiara: Numismatic Evidence and Some Aspects of Arsacid Political Ideology,” *Notae Numismaticae* 2, 1997, pp. 27-61.
- David Sellwood, *An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia*, 2nd ed., London, 1980.
- R. Vardanyan, “Tendenze culturali e ideologiche nell’impero partico riflesse dalla monetazione,” *Parthica* 3, 2001, pp. 25-132.
- Josef Wiesehöfer, “‘King of Kings’ and ‘Philhellên’: Kingship in Arsacid Iran,” in P. Bilde et al., eds., *Aspects of Hellenistic Kingship*, Aarhus, 1996, pp. 55-66.
- Sylvia Winkelmann, “Waffen und Waffenträger auf parthischen Münzen,” *Parthica* 8, 2006, pp. 131-52.
- Józef Wolski, “Remarques critiques sur les institutions des Arsacides,” *Eurasia Septentrionalis Antiqua* 46, 1954, pp. 59-82.
- Idem, “L’idéologie monarchique chez les Parthes,” in *Studi vari di Storia greca, ellenistica e romana*, Centro ricerche e documentazione sull’antichità classica, Atti 8, Milan, 1977, pp. 223-35.
- Idem, “Le titre de ‘roi des rois’ dans l’idéologie monarchique des Arsacides,” *Acta Antiqua* 30, 1988, pp. 161-66.