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NISA

NISA, an Arsacid city and ceremonial center in Parthia (FIGURE 1). Nisa is situated in modern Turkmenistan, about 18 km to the west from its capital Ashgabat (ʿEšqābād, see ASHKHABAD), at the foot of the Kopet Dagh, the chain of mountains that divides the Iranian plateau from the Turkmen plain, beyond which lies the Qara Qum desert. The archeological site consists of two distinct complexes, New Nisa and Old Nisa, which are located immediately to the west and east of the modern village of Bagir. The excavations carried out here have established that New Nisa was one of the most important cities of the region, which flourished from at least the Parthian period until the Middle Ages, while Old Nisa contains within its strong towered ramparts a series of monumental and service buildings which constituted a ceremonial center for the rulers of the Arsacid dynasty (Koshelenko, 1977). After a long period in which these buildings fell into disrepair, new buildings of considerable architectural interest were erected in the medieval period.

The earliest field research began before the World War II and consisted of a series of trenches scattered over a wide area of Old Nisa, which enabled the excavator, A. Marushchenko, to establish the presence of official monuments and to make the first hypothesis about their function (Pilipko, 2001). The results of this research, however, were never published. Not until after the war were New Nisa and Old Nisa chosen as the objective of excavations by the YuTAKE` (the South-Turkmenistan Archeological Complex Expedition) which, under the leadership of M. E. Masson, initiated the era of great archeological explorations in Soviet Central Asia. The results of this work were published

only in part (Masson, 1950 and 1953). There then followed other excavations, limited to Old Nisa: under the direction of V. M. Masson of the Leningrad Institute of Archaeology (1982-86), which produced no report; those of G. A. Koshelenko of the Moscow Institute of Archaeology (1986-92); and the ones of the Parthian Expedition of the Ashgabat Institute of History and of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Turkmenistan (1979 to the present, see Pilipko, 1996). Today the exploration of Old Nisa has resumed through the work of two missions, that of the Turin Center of Archeological Research and Excavation for the Middle East and Asia, under the direction of A. Invernizzi and C. Lippolis (Invernizzi and Lippolis), and that of the National Department for the Study, Conservation, and Restoration of Historical-Artistic Monuments of the Turkmenistan Ministry of Culture, headed by V. N. Pilipko.

New Nisa, the capital of ancient Parthia, occupies a large area enclosed within stout mud-brick fortifications, which enclose a citadel. The excavations here have been sporadic, but have brought to light a monumental funerary building of the Parthian era with a flat, crenellated roof, a façade characterized by an outer portico of slender columns, and wall decoration with terracotta plates nailed to the wall, reproducing Ionic capitals in relief (Pugachenkova, 1958, pp. 60-69). The sector of the residential area, which has been investigated, has revealed a series of levels of occupation datable to the Middle Ages. Research here was not very extensive, but continued in Old Nisa, where important discoveries have been made. The archeological area of New Nisa has also suffered considerably as a result of the agricultural activities of the inhabitants of the village and of the surrounding countryside, who have significantly disturbed the surface by removing earth for using it in the fields.

It is on Old Nisa, therefore, that excavation works have concentrated. The site proved to be a ceremonial center of Arsacid foundation erected on a raised area of land at the foot of the Kopet Dagh mountains in a position which still dominates the plain, accentuating the impressiveness of the towered ramparts, which are of mud brick, as are the walls of the buildings inside. At Old Nisa some spectacular results have been achieved, revealing the excellence of the architecture and art of the Arsacid court. The walled area is roughly triangular in form, with a large depression in the central-eastern part which was apparently a basin planted with trees. In the northern sector stands the largest building, the so-called Square House, in the centre of which there is a large courtyard surrounded in its first building phase by a narrow wooden cloister. On all four sides there is a series of elongated rectangular rooms

which all repeat an analogous schema, with a deep bench along the walls and a roof supported by a central row of wooden columns. The original purpose of the building was apparently official, and its function was probably that of a place of assembly and banqueting (Invernizzi, 2000; Idem, 2001b), but, perhaps from the 1st century CE, it was turned into a store for precious furnishings, disused decorative objects, weapons, ceramics, coins, etc. In other words, it became a treasury for the storing of the objects that were no longer used and of precious goods. Once the rooms were full, they were walled in, and new ones were created in the area formerly occupied by the portico. The change in the use of the area later continued outside the Square House, too, with the construction of groups of storehouses around the old building. Eventually, the structures, built for this purpose on the southern side, blocked up the only entrance, and the Square House was no longer accessible. The discovery of a considerable number of ostrakons in the rooms outside the great building has made it possible to collect information about the economy of the regal foundation which administrated, among other things, the products of farms and vineyards (Diakonoff, Livshits, and MacKenzie). Thanks to these epigraphs we also know the ancient name of Old Nisa, Mithradātkert, the fortress of Mithradates, probably the first king of that name, who was evidently the founder of this great complex.

Among the most precious objects which were still preserved in the Square House, having eluded attempts of looting in ancient times, one must first mention the group of carved ivory rhytons which lay in one of the rooms, on the bench where they had been stored (Masson and Pugachenkova, 1982). This group is truly exceptional, both because of the material they are made of, which was very rarely used for this kind of vessels, and because of their rich sculptural decoration. They were made by assembling separate parts. The horns preserve the tapering form of the original tusk; they are smooth but sometimes have a decoration of vegetal motifs made by thin incisions, or a relief motif of acanthus leaves, which masks the joints of the terminal figures onto the elbow. The terminal figures are mythological characters, human or animal, carved almost completely in the round, and their iconography is a harmonious blend of Greek and Iranian elements. Alongside the winged horned lion-gryphon, which is one of the most recurrent figures, there appear the androcephalous hump-backed bull, which is interpreted as a *gopatshah*, the centaur, perhaps with a small female Lapith on its shoulder, and the hydrophora. Under the rim runs a frieze of figures in high relief, sometimes under another frieze of *têtes coupées* of various kinds and in various attitudes,

which are also enriched with inlays. The vivacity of this plastic decoration was once heightened by the use of a rich polychromy, as can be seen from the traces of color which is still preserved in the hollows. Exceptionally, bronze was joined with ivory: in one case the ivory figures of the frieze are applied to a metal base, and an isolated hollow tuft of acanthus perhaps functioned as the holder for a recipient. The subjects of the scenes of the friezes represent the twelve gods of the Olympus, shown in paratactic compositions, and sacrificial scenes of varied composition, which portray a Dionysiac environment. One frieze shows literary women, *femmes de lettres* (Bernard). The iconography and style are mainly of Greek origin, but in invention and execution they are undoubtedly local, that is, Central Asian. These objects were certainly intended for ritual use in the ceremonies, banquets, and libations that took place in Old Nisa. One inscription, incised on one of the horns, invokes the goddess Hestia, the deity of the domestic hearth for the Greeks, which supports the ritual interpretation of the vessels (Koshelenko, 1967). Although they are a homogeneous set in their function, material, structure, and style, the rhytons are not the work of a single sculptor, but of different hands working to the same directives.

Despite the lack of information about the context in which the rhytons were used, the choice of a few specific subjects from the vast Greek repertoire and significant details of the iconography and execution suggest that Greek art lent to these images only their external forms of expression, since it was the artistic koine, which at that time—the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE are the probable period from which the corpus dates—was in general use at the courts of post-Achaemenid Central Asia. It can hardly be disputed, however, that this language conveys a quintessentially Iranian thought linked with the celebration of Arsacid kingship. An analogous purpose seems evident in the marble statuary, too (Invernizzi, forthcoming). In the Square House there were also five statues: one of Artemis the huntress, of which only the feet have remained; one of Dionysus leaning against a small satyr (all that remain are the head of the latter and the forearm of the god); one of Aphrodite, of which only the head has remained, with a particularly graceful expression; and two almost complete statues. Of the latter, one represents a majestic goddess executed in the archaizing style, who can perhaps be identified as Nana, portrayed as Hekate/Artemis or Hestia; while the other is clearly Anāhitā (see ANĀHID), the great goddess of the waters, represented in the form of Aphrodite Anadyomene. As often happens in Hellenistic sculpture, especially in inland Asia, the format of these sculptures is reduced, and their

manufacture involves the assembly of separately executed parts, with particularly effective results in the case of the Aphrodite Anadyomene, where the whiteness of the torso stands out even more vividly against the dark color of the drapery which covers the legs.

In the figurative repertoire of the architectural decoration, too, the Arsacid sovereigns made abundant use of elements of western origin to define the principles of their kingship, drawing at the same time on various Iranian traditions—those of the Scythian steppes, from which they originated, and of the eastern Iranian countries. Not only Iran but the steppes, too, were the regions of passage for the influences of Hellenistic artistic culture that were reworked at Nisa (Invernizzi, 2006b). Apparently no primary figurative elements have yet been discovered which reflect a conceptual allusion by the Arsacids to Achaemenid kingship, but the recurrent use of the Seleucid anchor among the decorative symbols expresses clear claims to legitimacy in the succession to Seleucid power in Parthia. On the so-called terracotta metopes, which decorated some of the monumental buildings, this motif alternates with the club of Heracles (the dynastic god of the Graeco-Bactrians); with the bow and the quiver, whose allusion to the customs of the Parthians is obvious; with astral motifs such as the sun and the crescent; and with the head (*protome*) of the lion, the regal animal *par excellence*. The choice of the motifs is clearly related to the desire to proclaim the new dignity and legitimacy of the Arsacid sovereigns at the time of the foundation of the empire.

Also related to the symbolism of regal glory is the decoration in metal (gilded iron) of a large display shield which, having been made of perishable material, has not come down to us itself: around a trident placed in the centre runs a frieze in which palmettes alternate with eagles (Invernizzi, 1999a, pp. 117-28). Once again, the iconography and style are reworkings of forms drawn from the Greek repertoire, but the subjects are clearly symbolic of the triregnum of the cosmogony of the inhabitants of the steppes—water, earth, and air—which the Arsacids seem to have brought with them from their ancestral background. Other precious objects still remaining in the Square House (Invernizzi, 1999a) possibly dropped by the looters in their haste to carry away the furnishings which the objects decorated, are a statuette of Athena made of gilded silver, a silver statuette of Eros, a Sphinx, a Harpy, an archer centaur, a griffin, and a medallion with a frontal lion head. In this case, too, a particular interpretation of Hellenistic subjects supplements the oriental ones.

A small corpus of seal impressions completes the artistic and iconographical

evidence found in the Square House and confirms both the blend of subjects of western and eastern origin, typical for the period and art of Nisa, and the originality of the versions of the western subjects with respect to the Mediterranean repertoire (Masson and Pugachenkova, 1954; Bader; Mollo; Nikitin). These impressions were made by rings or seals on the sealings of the communicating doors between the rooms after they were locked.

To the south of the Square House stand some other buildings, grouped in different complexes (Pilipko, 2001). Roughly in the central-western sector of the citadel, the Leningrad Expedition discovered the remains of the structures situated close to the only entrance to the citadel, which is presumed to have been in the western side of the ramparts. These structures include rooms with columns on stone bases of the Achaemenid tradition, a material which seems to have been used chiefly in the earliest building phases, and a large courtyard in which large pithoi stood. No final report, however, has so far been published on these structures.

Proceeding southwards, we come to the main monumental buildings, grouped on the western side of the large central basin, between the basin and the walls. The plans on which these buildings were built differ markedly from one another, and, unlike the architectural decoration, owe little or nothing to the Hellenistic tradition. Grouped close together are the Tower-Building and the Square Hall to the east, and the Round Hall and the Red Building to the west.

The Tower-Building consists of a square central body of massive brickwork surrounded by corridors, with a colonnaded portico on its façade, which opens out towards the north between two square bodies. A larger square projection is on the opposite side, at the southeastern corner. The lack of an analogous projection at the southwestern corner interrupts the symmetry of this side, and in its place we find an entirely independent building, the Round Hall. On the top of the mass of the tower the first investigator of Nisa, A. Maruschchenko, reported the existence of the remains of a small building with columns, of which no trace now remains. However, many fragments of wall paintings have been recovered from the debris of the surrounding ruins. These probably belong to the decoration of the superstructures, but we do not have sufficient evidence to hypothesize about their precise location. The subjects represent a battle—historical or mythological—between two groups of horsemen, both in Iranian dress. One fragment preserves an effective representation of the motif of the “Parthian arrow” battle technique—which so impressed the classical authors—whereby horsemen turned back while

riding away to release their arrows. Despite the different technique, this composition may constitute a precedent for depictions of Kushan equestrian battles, such as those shown in reliefs from Khalchayan. Other scenes, however, point towards Hellenistic culture, as is shown by a fragment which preserves the face of a human figure and the beginning of an inscription in Greek.

The projection lacking at the southwestern corner of the Tower-Building is replaced, in order to create a symmetrical plan, by the Round Hall—a completely independent construction which comprises a large circular inner room with a diameter of 17 m contained within perimeter walls which form a square (Krasheninnikova and Pugachenkova; Gabutti and Mollo; Lippolis). The outer square and the inner ring of bricks are constructed independently, so that the respective walls do not interconnect with one another, and the corner spaces are in turn filled in. The additive or agglutinating principle in fact dominates everywhere in the constructive technique of Nisa. The excavation of the Round Hall was virtually completed by the YuTAKE`, except for the recovery of the fragments of the sculptural decoration of the room, which lay on the floor until they were recovered by the Italian Mission. G. A. Pugachenkova's old reconstruction of the large inner space with a dome on a cylindrical drum, according to a Hellenistic architectural model (Pugachenkova, 1958, p. 104), does not stand up to a detailed study of the residual brick structures. These do not have a vertical wall, but show a curvature towards the inside, which enables us to reconstruct a vault with a continual elliptical outline starting from the floor (Masturzo).

Fragments of sculptures recovered in the room belong to monumental statues, more than 2 m high, executed in the round by moulding more or less thick layers of brown clay over an inner hard mass of greenish clay trends (Invernizzi, 1998b; Bollati). The surface was then finished by applying various colors: red, blue, green, and yellow, as well as black and white. The fragments of sculptures belong to the drapery of tunics and mantles of the purest Hellenistic style and are inspired by prototypes of the 4th century BCE, but the statues must have been executed by sculptors with a Greek training in the location for which they were intended. This enables us to suggest an execution *in loco*, by using blocks of marble imported from the Mediterranean, which holds true for the stone statues of the Square House as well. These, too, show a pure Hellenistic style but are endowed with original features which suggest their creation by Central Asiatic masters who were perfectly familiar with

Mediterranean trends (Invernizzi, forthcoming).

Among the surviving fragments of the large clay statues, particularly striking is the lower part of a male head with a long beard, which has markedly Iranian physiognomical features which suggest that it is a portrait. Perhaps it represents the founder of Mithradātkert, Mithradates I himself, shown with a long flowing beard, which presents him with the features of a philosopher, according to the fashion adopted for the portraits of many high-ranking Hellenistic personages. Unfortunately, it is not possible to definitely attribute any fragment of clothing—either of the Greek-style drapery or of the few fragments which suggest the existence of personages in Iranian dress—to the statue to which this head belonged.

The Round Hall originally had three entrances: the one in the center of the southern façade provided access from the open outer area; the one in a radial direction in the northeast allowed the only direct link with the corridor systems of the Tower-Building and the Red Building; and a narrower, oblique one in the northwest connected the room with the space that separated the building from the walls. In later construction phases, the building was reinforced by outer walls along the outer southern and western sides, and, lastly, after the northeastern and southern passages had been blocked up, the only means of access to the interior was provided by the northwestern passage. Even before that, however, the Round Hall was a secluded space, distant from the main center of the southern ceremonial complex, which the Tower-Building, the Round Building, and the Square Hall faced.

The façade of the Red Building is aligned with that of the Tower-Building, between the Tower-Building and the ramparts, and has the form of a four-columned portico between two full bodies of brickwork (Lippolis). The level of the portico, which is higher than that of the courtyard in front of it, is reached by walking up three steps. Both the socle of this platform and that of the rear wall of the portico are faced with a frieze of stone slabs which show a continuous series of flutings under a dot-and-reel pattern. All surfaces expose bright polychromy. The origin of the motifs is clearly Greek, but their use is completely original and so far has no exact parallels. Behind the portico is the main room of the building—a square hall with a ceiling which rests on four central supports. The square hall is surrounded by rectangular rooms, which are for the most part accessible from the corridors that delimit the building on the sides of the ramparts, the Round Hall, and the Tower-Building. At the time of the excavations the purple color of the plaster on many walls was still

perfectly preserved and bright. Gold leaf had also been often used for decorating the wooden architectural elements. In particular, two rooms have a fine floor painted with purple and ochre colors, which confirms the use of the building for celebrations of special secluded rites.

The Square Hall—accessible from the eastern side of the square which is lined on the southern side by the Red Building and the Tower-Building was built to the north of the Tower-Building over the remains of earlier structures, which were filled in so as to form a raised base for the new building (Pilipko, 1996). The inner hall of the new building is square and communicates with a narrow room which dominates the area of the central basin on the eastern side, opposite the one containing the entrance, and with a corridor on the northern side, terminating in a very small square room at its western extremity. Here the remaining parts of monumental statues of unbaked clay were stored in ancient times. The walls of the hall show narrow vertical niches into which half-columns were slotted. The four central supports were replaced during a second phase by massive quadrilobate pilasters made of baked brick, which could support a lantern roof similar to those still used today in the traditional architecture of the region. In this second phase, the western façade was also enriched by the addition of brickwork overlaid between the entrances which produce marked splaying.

The walls of the hall were divided into two orders, and the upper one had niches in which the clay statues stood. One of the statues, representing a female personage in Greek dress and pose, was discovered on the ground during the YuTAKE` excavations. In the adjacent room, heads and torsos of other clay male statues were found (Pilipko, 1995), notably the head of a bare-headed prince or hero with long flowing locks of hair and a short beard, and with physiognomical features which recall the official portraiture on coins, and two heads of warriors with an Attic helmet on whose cheek-pieces a winged thunderbolt and an armed snake-footed Triton are moulded. These works, too, are Hellenistic in technique and style, but their slightly lesser vividness, in comparison with the head from the Round Hall, seems to derive from a somewhat later date of making.

The existence of earlier structures incorporated in the base of the Square Hall naturally raises the problem of the foundation of the citadel and that of the chronology of its buildings. Its ancient name, Mithradātkert, attributes the role of the founder to Mithradates, probably Mithradates I, but it is not clear how much of its actual construction is attributable to this sovereign, and whether

or not the structures incorporated in the base predated him. We may, however, suggest as the most likely date for the realization of Mithradates' building project the beginning of the actions that led him to conquer Iran and Mesopotamia and therefore to found the Parthian empire, for the foundation of a citadel such as Old Nisa might well have been one of the acts of expression of the regal glory and of proclamation of the new imperial status, whatever the primary objective of the foundation may have been.

The aim of the new design can only be clarified by analyzing the function of the individual constructions through their various building phases. The idea of a fortress, contained in the suffix *–kert* of the place name, obviously does not indicate a prime military purpose, and there is little doubt about the sacral function of buildings such as the Tower-Building and the Round Hall. However, the striking diversity of the layouts implies a diversity in the performance of the ceremonies that took place in them, and perhaps also in their primary significance. The unusual form of the building with the Round Hall and the presence of statues of dynasts in it suggests a mausoleum for the regal cult, in particular, a cult of Mithradates I, if the identification of the head as a portrait of this king is correct. Nothing here, however, can be directly linked to the royal Arsacid tombs which Isidore of Charax mentions as having existed at Nisa. These still remain to be discovered, but as a whole the buildings contained within the walls of the citadel may have served as monumental memorials for the cult of the royal ancestors and as structures for the performance of the relevant ceremonies. Some of these structures were the subject of continual maintenance works and were also partly renovated; others, such as the Square House, radically changed in nature as a result of changes that occurred in the cult procedures.

The Arsacid citadel was at any rate an organism comparable to the great temple foundations of the ancient East and drew part of its wealth from a heritage, in which a large part was played by income from estates. Its flourishing ceased suddenly when its sacral function lapsed at the fall of the dynasty. There is no trace of activity in the Sasanian period; in fact, the buildings were neglected and gradually fell into disrepair, only occasionally being used for the shelter they could provide, perhaps, to shepherds or farmers, until the great monumental spaces were filled in by the collapsing of the roofs and by accumulations caused by rain and wind.

Not until the Middle Ages was there a revival of interest in the site of Old Nisa and a resumption of building activity (Lippolis). Once again, the work was on

quite a large scale. The YuTAKE` discovered the remains of buildings of some importance constructed on the site, where the monumental buildings of the southern complex had formerly stood. Little data is available about them, but the Italian Mission, too, has found, above the Red Building, the remains of a building with a monumental layout, whose walls use part of the Parthian walls as their foundation. The center of the remains is occupied by a large courtyard, and at least on three sides of it stand three *eyvān*s. The building technique of the new complex lost the solidity of the buildings of the Arsacid period, and the walls are much thinner, but the care and regularity of the planning suggest an official government environment which redeveloped the site. The life of Old Nisa ceases, however, with the end of this medieval phase of occupation, which lasted from the 12th century to the mid-16th century, and which is documented by a few rows of brickwork under the surface and a few finds.

Another Arsacid monumental compound with a probably religious function flourished in the neighborhood of Nisa, at Mansur depe (Manṣur tappa), about 3 km north of New Nisa (Koshelenko and Leleko; Koshelenko *et. al.*). It extended over approximately 20-30 hectares, and only parts of it have been excavated. Its general layout consists of a number of buildings situated along the sides of a large courtyard. The largest construction (*ca.* 50×40 m), the Main Temple, stands on the western side opposite the entrance to the courtyard. It has a regular layout with several rooms grouped in quarters, and it opens towards the courtyard with a large *eyvān* surrounded by corridors on three sides. A square room, interpreted as a cella, is situated at the back of it. A second, smaller building with an *eyvān* surrounded by corridors stands to the northeast of the main building, while the North Temple consists of a room surrounded by corridors on all four sides. It is square in plan with sides of 15.3 m and stands on an artificial platform at the northeastern corner of the courtyard. Unfortunately, extensive parts of the unexplored and even the excavated structures have fallen victim to agricultural work.

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