



PERSIS, KINGS OF

PERSIS, KINGS OF, the Persian dynasts who between the 2nd century BCE and 3rd century CE ruled as Parthian representatives in Persis, southwestern Iran ([TABLE 1](#)).

The sources for Persis between about 140 BCE and 224 CE are scant, and it is very difficult to write its history. The archeological evidence for the Parthian period yields very little. Aside from the mostly late literary evidence for the rise of the [Sasanian dynasty](#) in the early 3rd century CE, only a few sources are available: coins issued by the regional kings of Persis; religious accounts of the Christian proselytization in Persis from much later periods; reports in Strabo (64/63 BCE-12 CE?) and the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (1st century CE) which only document Parthian rule in the region; and the Iranian national history which suggests a disappearance of southwestern Iranian historical traditions in the Parthian period.

Seleucids, Persians, and Parthians. Most scholars are still convinced that, from the end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 2nd century BCE onwards, Persian dynasts ruled Persis as Seleucid representatives (*fratarakā*; for the most recent discussion of the sources, see Callieri, 2007) and issued their own coinage (for a different starting date of the “first phase”-coins in the early 3rd century and a thesis about breaks between the *fratarakā* series, see Klose and Müsseler; Hoover). Shortly before the appearance of the Parthians, this Seleucid phase ended when an independent dynast seized the rule of Persis (Alram, 1986, pp. 162-64; Wiesehöfer, 1994). The numismatic evidence (Alram, 1987, pp. 127-30) documents that the [Arsacid coinage](#) finally began to dominate Persis’ local

coinage after the second series of coins issued by Wādfraḏād III (early 1st century BCE). But this phase should be separated from a preceding period, the beginning of which is marked by the coins of Wādfraḏād (II?), and which also includes the coins of the Unknown King I (2nd half of 2nd century BCE) and Dārāyān I (end of the 2nd century BCE), as well as the early coins of Wādfraḏād III. These coins are iconographically still related to the Fratarakā coinage, but show Parthian influence because tetradrachms were no longer issued and drachms became the leading denomination. Because of the disappearance of the legends with the dynast's name and title during the time of Wādfraḏād (II?) and the 'Unknown King I,' Michael Alram (1987, p. 128) has suggested that these coins are linked to an effort of the Arsacid overlord to suppress the rebellious behavior of the rulers of Persis. The historical background for such a countermeasure could be that in the years before 123 BCE the Parthians, with difficulties though in the end successfully, attempted to maintain their position against the aspirations of both the Seleucid Antiochus VII (r. 138-129 BCE) and of Hyspaosines (r. ca. 127-122/21 BCE), the dynast of Characene (see Schuol, pp. 268-75, 291-300; Potts, pp. 384-401). Therefore, Wahbarz (1st half of 2nd century BCE) and/or Wādfraḏād I (1st half of 2nd century BCE) initiated the separation of Persis from the Seleucids, and afterwards Wādfraḏād II (ca. 140 BCE) was forced to acknowledge Arsacid overlords (for different dates, see Klose and Müsseler, pp. 41-43). Presumably, the Arsacids followed Seleucid custom when they granted the right to issue coins to vassals in southwestern Iran. The local dynasts were probably allowed to assume the role of regional kings because the Arsacids did not perceive a threat in the Fratarakā's limited ambitions after their secession from the Seleucids (Wiesehöfer, 1994, pp. 135-36).

The sources for Persis during the pre-Christian era comprise archeological remains (Callieri, 2007), some minor testimonies, and the coins of the Persian dynasts: A historiographical fragment ((Ps.-) Lucianus, *Macr.* 15 = Isidorus *Char. FGrHist* 781 F 3) and a Middle-Persian inscription on a silver cup (Skjærvø; Callieri, 2007, pp. 131-32), both mention Artaxares (II), and so the coins (Alram, 1986, pp. 162-86; 1987, pp. 127-30; Callieri, 2007; Klose and Müsseler) constitute the most important body of evidence. The dynasts are called kings because the title appears in their legends: e.g. "d'ryw MLK' BRH wtprdt MLK'" (Dārāyān the King, son of Wādfraḏād the King). Despite unique characteristics in the typology of the reverse and the obverse, the influence of Arsacid coinage is unmistakable. The coins, considered as medium for the representation of power, do not indicate that at this time the Persian vassals



started to distance themselves from their overlords. This impression is supported by Strabo's report (20.3.24; cf. 15. 3.3) that at the time of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) the kings of the Persians were as subservient to the Parthians as they had been earlier to the Macedonians.

For the 1st century of the Christian era, the coinage of the Persian kings does also not provide any evidence to the contrary. Yet it has been suggested that the so-called *Periplus Maris Erythraei* provides a snapshot of the political situation in southwestern Iran that supports the thesis of the political independence of the kings of Persis. Regardless of the exact period in which this text originated, it belongs undoubtedly to the 1st and not the 3rd century CE (Wiesehöfer, 1998, p. 427 n. 10). It is stated (chaps. 33-37) that major areas of the Gulf region, including the port cities of Apologus (in Characene) and Omana (probably near El-Dūr, not far from the Strait of Hormuz on the Arab side), as well as southeastern Arabia belonged to the *basileia tēs Persidos*. But the overall picture of the political landscape of the Arsacid empire changes, depending on whether *basileia* is linked with the Parthians or with the kings of Persis, and depending on whether this *basileia* is understood as Parthian rule over Persian vassals, regional rule of these vassals, or the rule of independent kings of Persis. In the author's view, the only possible interpretation of the *Periplus* is that *Persis* refers to the Parthians (Da...browa, pp. 144-47). Since Omana is described as *heteron emporion tēs Persidos* the *Periplus* author must have included the *emporion* Apologus in the political sphere of Persis. But there is no evidence that the reach of the kings of Persis extended as far as Characene. Consequently, the *basileia tēs Persidos* must refer to the Arsacid empire, and Characene, the territory of today's United Arab Emirates, and south-eastern Arabia must have been under Parthian rule or influence. During this period, there is no evidence for the independence of the kings of Persis. Moreover, the absence of the Parthians from the archeological record corresponds with the western written sources, in which Persis is not identified as a trouble spot. Both seem to indicate that the Arsacids did not need to employ any particular political-military force to keep this territory within their sphere of influence.

The picture of this period may slightly change if a large hoard of Persis coins, which was discovered in the 1980s, is taken into consideration. The hoard contained some previously unknown small silver coins. Based on typological characteristics, they have been classified as the local coinage of a *kyrios* (Vologases?) who was closely affiliated with the Arsacids and controlled a part,

or an outlying area, of Persis at the end of the 1st century CE (Alram, 1987, pp. 138-40). If it were correct to draw the political conclusion that a prince loyal to the Arsacids opposed the regional dynasty of the kings of Persis, it were possible to argue that there were conflicts between the Persian regional kings and their Parthian overlords. But these coins do not suffice as evidence for a temporary independence of the kings of Persis.

Contrary to the view of many scholars that Persis was a rather troubled Parthian vassal state, the only serious reference to a rebellious Persis in Parthian times is provided by a Syriac source, known as the *Chronicle of Arbela*. In connection with the episcopate of Hāb°ēl (Meshika, pp. 22-23, tr. p. 41), it is mentioned that Vologases fielded an army of 120,000 men against the Persians who had been preparing for war for a long time and that after heavy fighting he succeeded in defeating them in Khorasan. However, the value of this report has been questioned (Kettenhofen).

The administration. The above-mentioned local coinage of the *kyrios* is also important evidence for reconstructing the administration of Persis. Since for the early Sasanians (ŠKZ MP. l. 25/Pa. l. 20/Gr. l. 46) the increase in power was expressed through the promotion of the *kyrios* (MP. MR'HY, Pa. ḥwtwy) Sāsān to the *basileus* (MP./Pa. MLK') Pābag (see BĀBAK), it is probable that already in Parthian times the MLK' of Persis was the regional overlord of a *kyrios*. In an administrative context the term *kyrios* would thus refer to a man holding a certain high political office. For the reconstruction of the late Parthian and the early Sasanian administration, it is tempting to rely on the detailed report on the rise of the Sasanians by Ṭabari (839-923), since he describes certain political-administrative hierarchies and names officials and functionaries (I, pp. 814-22, tr. V, pp. 1-22). Yet the entire Arabic historiography of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period belongs to a tradition that cannot be uncritically employed because it compiles material from a repeatedly broken chain of transmission. Still, Ṭabari's description of the administrative hierarchy (I, pp. 814-15, cf. I, p. 869)—the king of Eṣṭakr (*malek Eṣṭakr*) gives orders to the ruler of a district (*malek al-rostāq*) and to a garrison commander (*arjabad*)—and the historical geography of the early campaigns by Ardašīr I (d. 241/42) do have some plausibility, especially in view of the coins of the sub-Parthian *kyrios* in (near?) Persis.

The rise of the Sasanians. The Middle Persian-Parthian inscription of Wēh-Šābuhr (ŠVŠ) allows for dating the beginning of the Sasanian era to 205/6 CE (Altheim-Stiehl) and Ṭabari dates the rebellion of Ardašīr to 211/12.



Consequently, the Sasanian drive for independence seems closely related to the Roman-Parthian conflicts during the times of Septimus Severus (r. 193-211), as well as to the dispute over the throne between the brothers Vologases VI (r. 207/8-221/22 or 227/8) and Artabanus IV (r. 213-24). However, these Sasanian attempts should not be interpreted as symptoms of a political disintegration process of the late Parthian empire. The Parthians—and perhaps even the Sasanians themselves—may have judged the events in southwestern Iran as limited regional conflicts over the vassal kingdom of Persis, since Artabanus's successes against Rome were roughly contemporary (Dio 79.1.1-3.5, 26.3-8), and the consolidation of the early Sasanian empire was a longer process. Only in retrospect does the outcome of the battle at Hormozdgān appear as inevitable (for the early Sasanian coinages, see Alam and Gyselen).

Interesting post-Achaemenid evidence is preserved at Persepolis, where some graffiti were engraved with very thin lines on the limestone blocks of the Harem of Xerxes and of the Tachara. Although the depicted figures cannot be clearly identified, they may very probably date to the period of the sub-Parthian kings of Persis. Like their Sasanian counterparts in the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, these kings probably regarded Persepolis and [Naqš-e Rostam](#) as the holy places of their forebears (Callieri, 2006; 2007, pp. 132-34).

It appears—despite all the reservations resulting from the sources' many gaps and a high degree of distortion—that Persis was, at least well into the 2nd century CE, a loyal vassal kingdom of the Parthians. There is scant evidence for Persian individuals and their affairs, the Parthian presence has left few traces in Fārs' archeological and the numismatic record, and the oral tradition of southwestern Iran is strongly influenced by that of Parthian eastern Iran. Yet the sources do not conclusively indicate the dynasts' independence, or striving for independence, and, conversely, their tense relationship with the Parthian central power. If the thesis of a particularly autonomous and independent role of this *regnum* within the Parthian empire is abandoned, as has already been done for the Seleucid period, the interpretation of the sources would change: The successful Parthian rule of southwestern Iran aimed at preserving the loyalty of the dynasts and the population, and combined privileges, a degree of autonomy, and tolerance for cultural independence with a probably strict supervision of garrisons etc., though such supervision is not reflected in the sources at all. The early Sasanians fit in this picture: They are in many regards, despite their differing political and



ideological orientations, correctly characterized as the heirs of the Parthians.

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