

A brief historiography of Parthian art, from Winckelmann to Rostovtzeff

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Prologue

'I do not know', wrote Michael Rostovtzeff in 1935, 'who was the first to suggest the current view, but once stated, it soon became general and is still repeated by leading scholars'. He went on to explain that:

In short, it is the view that the Parthian kings were but an accident in the history of the Iranian world. They were not themselves creative in any field, whether in government, religion, or art. Their only service to mankind was in not destroying the elements of Greek culture in their Empire but in allowing them to develop unmolested. Thus their art, for example, was merely a barbarized and degenerate version of the Graeco-Mesopotamian art of the Hellenistic period.¹

The purpose of the present article is to investigate the history of the 'current view', that is, as Rostovtzeff put it, the 'problem of Parthian art'. This history begins with Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* is widely regarded as the foundational text of ancient art history. It ends with Rostovtzeff himself, who was arguably the first scholar to recognize that Parthian art was a problem at all. He was also the first to develop a methodology for addressing the problem, although it had relatively little impact in succeeding decades. Instead, narratives depicting Parthian art as a degradation or decline came to dominate art historical scholarship until recently. For example, in his influential and oft reprinted book *Aesthetics and History*, first published in 1948, Bernard Berenson wrote that: 'In Parthian and Sassanian reliefs, coins, and other faint traces of illustrative art, everything is Hellenistic except what is due to the originality of incompetence'.² Similarly, Roman Ghirshman, in an apparent attempt to put a positive spin on what he evidently regarded as a negative development, opined that:

That phase of Parthian art that corresponds to the transition from Greco-Iranian to neo-Iranian is a melancholy one; the return towards a primitive technique is undeniable, and the decline in workmanship persisted throughout the Parthian period and influenced the early works of the Sassanians. The deterioration in technique was,

¹ Michael I. Rostovtzeff, 'Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art', *Yale Classical Studies* 5, 1935, 158, 160.

² Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History*, Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1954, 173.

however, offset by the attempt to revive a native tradition free of all foreign influence. This was a gain on the national plane, though an artistic loss.³

Both of these statements appear in books targeted at general audiences. Happily the situation is much improved since their publication, but the legacy of these narratives continues to colour current scholarship and public perceptions.⁴

The historiography of Parthian art from Winckelmann to Rostovtzeff is usefully divided into three overlapping phases. The first, 'Ordering', begins with Winckelmann and continues to the end of the nineteenth century. This phase deals almost exclusively with coins, as these were the main form of Parthian art widely known in Europe at the time. While most scholars used coins to order the Parthian kings into a chronological sequence, Winckelmann instead focused on the style of the coins, which he condemned as derivative. The second phase – 'Exploration' – coincides with the advent of archaeological excavation in Mesopotamia, beginning in the 1840s, which was primarily concerned with finding older material, especially cuneiform tablets. Persia by contrast saw very little excavation, so the major discoveries were made by travellers, beginning especially with Flandin and Coste in 1839. These discoveries were mainly rock reliefs and standing architecture. The only significant excavations were at Susa, where once again the focus was on earlier periods, a situation that persisted until 1927, although the exploration of Iran by travellers continued even after this date. The third phase – 'Grand Narratives' – occurs in the 1930s and early 1940s, when the volume of known Parthian art seems to have reached a critical mass. At this time the first major synthetic treatments of Parthian art and archaeology appeared, including several chapters in *A Survey of Persian Art*, edited by Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackermann, and

³ Roman Ghirshman, *Iran from the Earliest Times to the Islamic Conquest*, Margaret Munn-Rankin, trans. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954, 277.

⁴ Recent important studies and overviews of the problem of Parthian art (including architecture) include Antonio Invernizzi, 'Parthian Art – Arsacid Art', *Topoi Orient-Occident* 17, 2011, 189-207; Stefan R. Hauser, 'The Arsacid (Parthian) Empire', in *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, D. T. Potts, ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, 1001-20; Hauser, 'The Arsacids (Parthians)', in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, D. T. Potts, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 728-50; Trudy S. Kawami, 'Parthian and Elymaean Rock Reliefs', in Potts, *Oxford Handbook*, 751-65; Bruno Jacobs, ed. *Parthische Kunst' – Kunst im Partherreich: Akten des internationalen Kolloquiums in Basel, 9. Oktober 2010*, Duisburg: Wellem Verlag, 2014; Fabrizio Sinisi, 'Sources for the History of Art of the Parthian Period: Arsacid Coinage as Evidence for Continuity of Imperial Art in Iran', *Parthica* 16, 2014, 9-59; Sylvia Winkelmann, 'Die Kunst der Parther', in *Die Parther: die vergessene Großmacht*, 2nd edition, Uwe Ellerbrock and Sylvia Winkelmann, eds, Darmstadt: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2015, 220-78; Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE-642 CE*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2018, 68-94, 235-9, 315-23; Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Alexandra Magub, *Rivalling Rome: Parthian Coins and Culture*, London: Spink, 2020.

Archaeological History of Iran and Iran in the Ancient East by Ernst Herzfeld. In accordance with Reza Shah Pahlavi's ideology, these treatments promoted a narrative of Iran as a succession of great empires, to which surviving Parthian art was seemingly a poor fit. At the same time, based in part on their involvement in excavations in Mesopotamia, Rostovtzeff and Neilson Debevoise offered alternative views that saw Parthian art as plentiful and pervasive. Rostovtzeff in particular saw the Parthians as part of the broader history of Eurasia, culminating in the formation of the Russian Empire.⁵ Yet, it was the narratives of Pope and Herzfeld, to some extent echoing Winckelmann's original harsh judgment, that ultimately set the tone for most subsequent studies of Parthian art.

Phase 1: Ordering (ca. 18th and 19th Centuries)

This historiographical survey starts with Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, first published in 1764, not because it is important for the study of Parthian art per se – it clearly is not – but because it stands at the head of a long tradition of art historical scholarship which has proven to be massively influential. As is well known, Winckelmann was an outspoken proponent of Greek art and considered the representation of the nude male form to be the pinnacle of artistic achievement. It is no surprise, therefore, that he regarded Persian art as inferior to Greek: 'Their artists did not pursue the highest theme of art – the nude. Consequently, the subject of their art was the flow of the robe and not, as among the Greeks, the appearance of the nude underneath it'.⁶ Although he makes only a few scattered references to Parthian art, Winckelmann extended this judgement to include it as well. In a short paragraph at the end of his chapter on the 'Art of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Persians' he says, after describing Parthian appreciation for Greek literature, that:

This favorable disposition of the Parthian kings toward the Greeks and their language also extended to Greek artists, and the coins of these kings with Greek letters must have been made by artisans of that nation. The latter were presumably raised and educated in these countries, for the stamping of these coins has something foreign, one could even say barbaric, about it.⁷

In his subsequent narrative treatment of Greek art he makes similar comments, condemning the later Seleucid coinage by likening it to Parthian coins, which he also attributes to Greeks living in the Parthian Empire.⁸

⁵ Caspar Meyer, 'Rostovtzeff and the Classical Origins of Eurasianism', *Anabases* 9, 2009, 185-98.

⁶ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, Harry Francis Mallgrave, trans. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006, 148.

⁷ Winckelmann, *History*, 150; see also François de Callataÿ, 'Winckelmann et les monnaies antiques', *Revue des études grecques* 120, 2007, 571-2.

⁸ Winckelmann, *History*, 326.

Despite its dismissive brevity, Winckelmann's remarks arguably represent the earliest stylistic assessment of Parthian art. Although he cites the Greek inscriptions that appear on early Parthian coinage as evidence that the die-cutters were Greeks, the style of the coins evidently struck him as being incongruous with the work of contemporary Greek artisans in the Mediterranean region. He then explains this discrepancy with a familiar orientalist trope, namely that Greeks living in the Parthian Empire gradually succumbed to barbarian influences whose effects were discernible in their work. This is not so different from Berenson's assessment, quoted above, that Parthian art was characterized by an 'originality of incompetence'.⁹

Winckelmann's assessment of Parthian art is based solely on coinage because it was the only relevant material widely known at that time. There were Parthian seals in major European collections, including that of Baron Philip von Stosch, which Winckelmann himself catalogued and published, but they were generally lumped together with Near Eastern seals of disparate periods under the rubric of 'Persian gems'.¹⁰ Indeed, Winckelmann only explicitly recognized three Parthian seals, all depicting kings, as such in his publication of Stosch's collection and says very little about them beyond noting their existence.¹¹ The single Parthian rock relief known to European audiences was the relief of Mithridates II (since reattributed to Gotarzes I) at Bisitun, which was sketched by Guillaume-Joseph Grelot in 1674 but not published until 1803.¹² Even then, scholarly attention, including that of the illustrious linguist Silvestre de Sacy, focused on the accompanying Greek inscription rather than on the relief itself.¹³

Most scholars of Parthian art in this period therefore focused exclusively on coins, and given their apparent dependence on Greek models and artisans, their chief value was as a means of ordering the Parthian kings and determining their chronology. One of the earliest such works is Jean Foy-Vaillant's posthumous *Arsacidarum imperium sive regum Parthorum historia, ad fidem numismatum*

⁹ Berenson, *Aesthetics and History*, 173.

¹⁰ Melissa Eppihimer, 'Caylus, Winckelmann, and the Art of "Persian Gems"', *Journal of Art Historiography* 13/ME1, 2015, 1-27; Eppihimer, 'A Paradox of Eighteenth-Century Antiquarianism: "Persian" Gems among the Tassie Casts', *Journal of the History of Collections* 28, 2016, 191-208.

¹¹ J. J. Winckelmann, *Description des pierres gravées du feu Baron de Stosch dédiée a son eminence Monseigneur le cardinal Alexandre Albani*, Florence: André Bonducci, 1760, 405.

¹² Ambrosio Bembo, *The Travels and Journal of Ambrosio Bembo*, Clara Bargellini, trans. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 373, fig. 5; see also Kawami, 'Rock Reliefs', 753; Antonio Invernizzi, 'On the Post-Achaemenid Rock Reliefs at Bisitun', *Parthica* 22, 2020, 52-68.

¹³ Silvestre de Sacy, 'Mémoire sur les monuments et les inscriptions de Kirmanshah et de Bisitoun, et sur divers autres monumens Sassanides', *Histoire et mémoires de l'Institut Royal de France, classe d'histoire et de littérature ancienne* 2, 1815, 189-96; see now Andreas Luther, 'Zu den griechischen Inschriften aus Bisotun', *Gymnasium* 125, 2018, 129-54.

accommodata ('The empire of the Arsacids, or the history of the kings of the Parthians, having been adjusted according to numismatic proof'), published in 1725.¹⁴ As the title indicates, this work used coins as its basis for ordering Parthian history. And this remained the dominant concern for scholars of the Parthians well into the nineteenth century. Several further efforts to order and date Parthian coins were published in this period, notably by Joseph Eckhel (1794). E. Q. Visconti (1811), Ivan Aleksyeevich Bartholomaei (1848), John Lindsay (1852), Adrien de Longpérier (1853-82), Anton von Prokesch-Osten (1874-5) and Percy Gardiner (1877), as well as shorter discussions in general numismatic books and journals.¹⁵ None, however, was concerned with Parthian art itself, only with determining the chronological order of the coins. This was likely the case for two reasons. First, as Winckelmann had already stated, Parthian coins were (it seems) not really Parthian (since they must have been made by Greeks) and they were 'barbaric', that is, inferior to Greek coins. Second, much of the scholarship in this period was driven by the needs and interests of coins collectors. Indeed, many of the authors of these were themselves collectors of Parthian coins.

Yet despite their general lack of interest in art historical matters, these early works on Parthian coinage nevertheless established a basic sequence of stylistic development in the art of the Arsacid court, from the verisimilitude of the second century BCE to the abstraction of the second century CE (fig. 1). This in turn provides a basis for dating art in other media, especially sculpture. Furthermore, as the dates and attributions of specific coin issues remain uncertain or problematic, the ordering of Parthian coinage continues to the present day, especially in the work of David Sellwood and now in the *Sylloge Nummorum Parthiorum*, of which two volumes have already been published.¹⁶

¹⁴ Jean Foy-Vaillant, *Arsacidarum imperium sive regum Parthorum historia, ad fidem numismatum accommodata*, Paris: Carolus Moette, 1725. On Vaillant see Peter Franz Mittag, 'Foy-Vaillant, Jean', in *History of Classical Scholarship: A Biographical Dictionary*, Peter Kuhlmann and Helmut Schneider, eds, Leiden: Brill, 2014, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2214-8647_bnps6_COM_00238.

¹⁵ Joseph Eckhel, *Doctrina numorum veterum*, vol. 3, Vienna: Joseph Camesina, 1794, 522-50; E. Q. Visconti, *Iconographie grecque*, vol. 3, Paris: P. Didot l'ainé, 1811, 43-137; J. de Bartholomaei, 'Recherches sur la numismatique arsacide', *Mémoires de la Société d'archéologie et de numismatique de St. Pétersbourg* 2, 1848, 1-80; John Lindsay, *A View of the History and Coinage of the Parthians, with Descriptive Catalogues and Tables, Illustrated with a Complete Set of Engravings of Coins, a Large Number of Them Unpublished*, Cork: John Crowe, 1852; Adrien de Longpérier, *Mémoires sur la chronologie et l'iconographie des rois parthes arsacides*, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1853-82; Le Comte de Prokesch-Osten, *Les monnaies des rois parthes de la collection de M. le Comte Prokesch-Osten*, Paris: Société française de numismatique et d'archéologie, 1874-5; Percy Gardiner, *The Parthian Coinage*, London: Trübner and Co., 1877.

¹⁶ David Sellwood, *An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia*, 2nd edition, London: Spink and Son, 1980; Fabrizio Sinisi, *Sylloge Nummorum Parthiorum*, vol. 7: *Vologases I – Pacorus II*, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012; Vesta Sarkhosh



Figure 1. a: Silver drachm of Mithridates I, 171-138 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 99.35.2952. b: Silver drachm of Phraates IV, 38-2 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 99.35.2957. c: Silver drachm of Pacorus II, 78-110 CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 99.35.2961. d: Silver drachm of Vologases III, 147-191 CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 99.35.2963. Public domain images from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Phase 2: Exploration (ca. 1830s to 1920s)

Perhaps the earliest credible attempt to characterize Parthian art as a whole was made by George Rawlinson in *The Sixth Oriental Monarchy, or the Geography, History, and Antiquities of Parthia*, published in 1873.¹⁷ The younger brother of the soldier and cuneiform scholar Henry Rawlinson, who was the first to publish copies of the Bisitun Inscription of Darius I, Rawlinson was Camden Professor of Ancient History at Oxford and a canon of Canterbury Cathedral. His study of the Parthians was part of a larger project to write a full history of the ancient Near East beginning with 'Chaldaeae' (by which he meant Babylonia) and continuing down to the Sasanian Empire. As was typical of the day, Rawlinson espoused Hellenocentric and Orientalist views in his scholarship, relying heavily on Greek and Roman authors (he was a noted translator of Herodotus), making crude and overly simple generalizations about 'Orientals', and judging them unfavourably according to

Curtis, Alexandra Magub, Elizabeth J. Pendleton and Edward C. D. Hopkins, *Sylloge Nummorum Parthorum*, vol. 2: *Mithradates II*, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2020.

¹⁷ George Rawlinson, *The Sixth Oriental Monarchy, or the Geography, History, and Antiquities of Parthia*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1873, 371-97.

contemporary European criteria, usually in the context of a narrative of decline.¹⁸ For example, he concludes his discussion of Parthian art with a patronizing condemnation:

Such are the chief remains of Parthian aesthetic art. They convey an idea of decline below the standard reached by the Persians of the Achaemenian times, which was itself a decline from the earlier art of the Assyrians. Had they been the efforts of a race devoid of models, they might fairly have been regarded as not altogether without promise. But, considered as the work of a nation which possessed the Achaemenian sculptures, and which had moreover, to a certain extent, access to Greek examples, they must be pronounced clumsy, coarse, and wanting in all the higher qualities of Fine Art. It is no wonder that they are scanty and exceptional.¹⁹

Rawlinson charts an artistic decline from the Assyrians to the Parthians, whom he chides for their apparent failure to closely imitate the models provided by, in his view, superior civilizations. This perspective arises from both Rawlinson's dependence on Greek and Roman textual sources, which viewed the Parthians as barbarians, and contemporary prejudices against the modern population of the Middle East.²⁰ It thus served to reinforce European claims to superiority over the Orient. As is well known, colonialism and archaeology often supported each other in the nineteenth century; indeed, his brother Henry's research on the Bisitun Inscription was carried out during his military and diplomatic service in Persia.

Despite his negative comments, Rawlinson's survey of Parthian art is nevertheless a major improvement over its predecessors. Whereas previous scholarship was concerned exclusively with coins, Rawlinson includes architecture and architectural sculpture, ceramic vessels, sarcophagi and figurines, glass, jewellery and rock reliefs. In fact, he omits coins altogether and instead focuses on material excavated from two sites, Hatra in northern Mesopotamia and Uruk in the south, as well as rock reliefs in Persia. Hatra (about a hundred km southwest of Mosul) was the capital of an eponymous vassal kingdom of the Parthian Empire. Rawlinson describes the circular shape of the city and the standing remains of the Great Temenos, a sacred precinct dedicated to the god Shamash which he calls the

¹⁸ Thomas Harrison, 'Exploring Virgin Fields: Henry and George Rawlinson on Ancient and Modern Orient', in *Ancient Ethnography: New Approaches*, Eran Almagor and Joseph Skinner, eds, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 223-255.

¹⁹ Rawlinson, *Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, 396.

²⁰ As already noted by Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 'The Fifth Oriental Monarchy and Hellenocentrism: Cyropaedia VIII and Its Influence', in *Achaemenid History*, vol. 2: *The Greek Sources*, Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Amélie Kuhrt, eds, Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1987, 128-31, in reference to Rawlinson's study of the Achaemenid Empire (his 'Fifth Oriental Monarchy').

'Palace-Temple', at its centre.²¹ These remains include three massive iwans and four smaller ones forming a single façade adorned with sculptural decoration (fig. 2). The iwan is a characteristic Parthian architectural form, which subsequently plays an important role in Sasanian and Islamic architecture well beyond Mesopotamia.²² Although Rawlinson did not identify them as such, the iwans at Hatra are among the earliest known Parthian examples of this form.



Figure 2. Frontispiece from Rawlinson, *Sixth Oriental Monarchy* (1877), depicting the ruins of Hatra, Iraq. Image in the public domain.

The material from Uruk (modern Warka, Iraq) is primarily architectural fragments and small finds, among which are several important types of Parthian art and material culture.²³ Notable among these are 'slipper coffins' – tubular ceramic sarcophagi with a large oval opening on the top of one end, through which the corpse could be placed inside.²⁴ They are frequently decorated with moulded figural relief and alkaline glaze. They are found at several sites in Mesopotamia but not elsewhere in the Parthian Empire, perhaps suggesting they were an adaptation of an earlier local practice. Alkaline glaze is also a distinctive feature of Parthian pottery

²¹ Rawlinson, *Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, 372-83. For the archaeology of Hatra see now Enrico Foietta, *Hatra: il territorio e l'urbanistica*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2018.

²² Edward J. Keall, 'Some Thoughts on the Early *Eyvan*', in *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy, and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*, Dickran Kouymjian, ed. Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1974, 123-30.

²³ Rawlinson, *Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, 383-8.

²⁴ On slipper coffins see now Christina Heike Richter, *Parthische Pantoffelsarkophage: Untersuchungen zu einer Sargform Mesopotamiens im Vergleich mit Tonsärgen von Ägypten über den Mittelmeerraum bis Zentralasien*, Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011; Marek Jan Olbrycht, 'Slipper Coffins and Funerary Practices in Parthia', *Anabasis: Studia Classica et Orientalia* 8, 2017, 301-13.

in Mesopotamia, which Rawlinson also mentions briefly.²⁵ He addresses some remarks to the subject of Parthian clothing and adornment as well, based on the ceramic figurines, stucco decoration, and jewellery found at Uruk.

Finally, Rawlinson includes six Parthian rock reliefs, from Bisitun, Sar-e Pol-e Zohab and Tang-e Sarvak Rock II, all in western Persia.²⁶ He evidently relied on engravings published by Flandin and Coste for his knowledge of these reliefs, although his brother Henry did see the reliefs at Bisitun for himself in 1836.²⁷ His descriptions of the scenes are reasonably accurate, if not cursory, but he refrains from interpreting them beyond identifying the main figures in each as kings, queens, priests, etc., preferring instead to offer judgments on their artistic merit. For example, he writes of a relief at Bisitun that:

The human figures have a heavy clumsiness about them that is unpleasant to contemplate; the horses are rudely outlined, and are too small for the men; the figure of Fame [i.e. Nike/Victory] is out of all proportion to the hero whom she crowns, and the diadem which she places on his head is ridiculous, being nearly as large as herself!²⁸

This judgment implies a comparison with Greek sculpture, since it assumes that the sculptor's goal was verisimilitude. He goes on to conclude that 'the nation which could produce nothing better must have felt that its vocation was not towards the artistic, and that its powers had better be employed in other directions, e.g. in conquest and in organisation'.²⁹

Despite these negative judgments, Rawlinson's major achievement was to assemble for the first time a corpus of Parthian art across different media. His apparent criteria for inclusion of material were mainly chronological and geographical – that is, material datable to the period of Parthian rule and originating from regions thought to be part of the empire. The reliefs at Bisitun and Sar-e Pol-e Zohab were accompanied by Greek inscriptions naming Parthian rulers. The material from Uruk, excavated by William Kennett Loftus, is datable on account of the Parthian coins found at the site.³⁰ And in the case of Hatra, Rawlinson

²⁵ St John Simpson, 'Partho-Sasanian Ceramic Industries in Mesopotamia', in *Pottery in the Making: World Ceramic Traditions*, Ian Freestone and David R. M. Gaimster, eds, London: British Museum, 1997, 74-9.

²⁶ Rawlinson, *Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, 388-96; see now Kawami, 'Rock Reliefs'.

²⁷ Henry Rawlinson, 'Notes on a March from Zoháb, at the Foot of the Zagros, along the Mountains to Khúzistán (Susiana), and from Thence through the Province of Luristan to Kirmánsháh, in the Year 1836', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 9, 1839, 115-16.

²⁸ Rawlinson, *Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, 390.

²⁹ Rawlinson, *Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, 396-7.

³⁰ William Kennett Loftus, *Travels and Researches in Chaldaeia and Susiana, with an Account of Excavations at Warka, the 'Erech' of Nimrod, and Shush, 'Shushan the Palace' of Esther, in 1849-52*, London: James Nisbet and Co., 1857, 203.

established the date and cultural affinity of the city himself, in disagreement with his main sources William Ainsworth, Austen Henry Layard and James Fergusson. Ainsworth attributed what he considered to be the most beautiful sculpture at the site to Roman workmanship, while Layard and Fergusson both assumed that the architecture of the Great Temenos was derivative of Roman prototypes.³¹ Fergusson further dated it to between the reigns of Aurelian (270-275 CE) and Constantine (306-337 CE) and thereby attributed it to the Sasanians rather than the Parthians. Rawlinson, however, dated it to the period of Parthian rule, based on references in Greek and Roman authors to the city repelling Roman sieges.³² He accordingly regarded Hatra as an important example of Parthian architecture.

In the century between Winckelmann and Rawlinson scholarly attitudes about the Parthians had not changed much, but the amount and variety of material available for study had increased significantly. This increase was due in large part to the advent of archaeological exploration in the Middle East. While European travellers had visited ancient sites in Persia and the Ottoman Empire since the twelfth century CE, their accounts were often lacking in precision and detail, making them of limited scholarly value.³³ However, in the nineteenth century archaeological exploration of the Middle East began in earnest and the first major excavations in Mesopotamia, by Paul-Émile Botta, Layard, Victor Place and Hormuzd Rassam, took place in the 1840s and 1850s.³⁴ As noted above, Hatra was visited by John Ross in 1836 and 1837, Ainsworth and Layard in 1840, and once more by Layard in 1846, all of whom published detailed descriptions of the site.³⁵ Loftus excavated at Uruk between 1850 and 1854.³⁶ After a lull in the 1860s and

³¹ William Francis Ainsworth, *Travels and Researches in Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Chaldea, and Armenia*, vol. 2, London: John W. Parker, 1842, 170; Austin H. Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon; with Travels in Armenia, Kurdistan and the Desert: Being the Result of a Second Expedition Undertaken for the Trustees of the British Museum*, London: John Murray, 1853, 571; James Fergusson, *A History of Architecture in All Countries, from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, vol. 2, London: John Murray, 1867, 423-5.

³² Rawlinson, *Sixth Oriental Monarchy*, 372-3, 381.

³³ Many of these early accounts are usefully collected by Antonio Invernizzi, *Il genio vagante: Babilonia, Ctesifonte, Persepoli in racconti di viaggio e testimonianze dei secoli XII-XVIII*, Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2005.

³⁴ Nicole Chevalier, 'Early Excavations (pre-1914)', in Potts, *Companion*, 49-54.

³⁵ John Ross, 'Notes on Two Journeys from Baghdád to the Ruins of Al Hadhr, in Mesopotamia, in 1836 and 1837', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 9, 1839, 443-70; Ainsworth, *Travels and Researches*, 166-74; Austen Henry Layard, 'Notes on the Ruins of the Palace of Al Hather (Hadhr)', *Transactions of the Royal Institute of British Architects* 7, 1891, 63-8.

³⁶ Loftus, *Travels and Researches*; see now D. Thompson, 'Parthian Stucco from Warka in the British Museum: Quantitative Analysis and the Bust Motif in Parthian and Sasanian Art', in *Akten des VII. internationalen Kongresses für iranische Kunst und Archäologie, München 7.-10. September 1976*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1979, 294-308; J. E. Curtis, 'Loftus' Parthian Cemetery at Warka', in *Akten des VII. internationalen Kongresses*, 309-17.

1870s, archaeological exploration resumed in the 1880s, now with German and American participation as well.³⁷ Between 1888 and 1900 the University of Pennsylvania excavated at Nippur, where Parthian period remains, including a palace and fortifications, were discovered, although they were not immediately recognized as such.³⁸ The first excavations at Hatra, directed by Charles Fossey, took place in 1899 and produced the first photographs of the site.³⁹ German archaeologists were especially active in Mesopotamia in this period, thanks in part to the support of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft under the patronage of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Robert Koldewey directed excavations at Babylon from 1899 to 1914, where he found houses and burials of Parthian date that yielded many small finds.⁴⁰ Walter Andrae, who had been Koldewey's site architect at Babylon, worked at Hatra and Ashur, excavating a palace and temples of Parthian date at the latter.⁴¹ And in 1912 Julius Jordan, also formerly of Babylon, began excavations at Uruk that identified a Parthian temple and houses, from which decorative stuccoes were recovered.⁴²

³⁷ Chevalier, 'Early Excavations', 57-61.

³⁸ John Punnett Peters, *Nippur, or Explorations and Adventures on the Euphrates: The Narrative of the University of Pennsylvania Expedition to Babylonia in the Years 1888-1890*, vol. 2, *Second Campaign*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1898, 172-92; H. V. Hilprecht, *Explorations in Bible Lands during the 19th Century*, Philadelphia: A. J. Hollman and Company, 1903, 308-9, 313, 327-32, 337-42, 422-3, 556-68; see now Canepa, *Iranian Expanse*, 90-2, 320-1. Despite being part of the same expedition, Peters and Hilprecht had a bitter personal rivalry that affected their vastly differing interpretations of the site; see Robert G. Ousterhout, 'Archaeologists and Travelers in Ottoman Lands: Three Intersecting Lives', *Expedition* 52:2, 2010, 9-20.

³⁹ Enrico Fioletta, 'An Unexpected Journey: The French Expedition of Charles Fossey at Hatra (Iraq)', *Asia Anteriore Antica* 3, 2021, 153-72.

⁴⁰ Robert Koldewey, *Das wieder erstehende Babylon: die bisherigen Ergebnisse der deutschen Ausgrabungen*, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1913, 165, 179, 210-15, 233-4, 244-53, 271-9; Oscar Reuther, *Die Innenstadt von Babylon (Merkes)*, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1926, 39-40, 148-50, 249-65; see now Stefan R. Hauser, 'Babylon in arsakider Zeit', in *Babylon: Focus mesopotamischer Geschichte, wiege früher Gelehrsamkeit, Mythos in der Moderne*, Johannes Renger, ed. Saarbrücken: SDV Saarbrücker Druckerei und Verlag, 1999, 207-39.

⁴¹ Walter Andrae, *Hatra: nach Aufnahmen von Mitgliedern der Assur-Expedition der deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*, vols. 1-2, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1908-12; Walter Andrae and Heinz Lenzen, *Die Partherstadt Assur*, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1933; for Parthian Ashur see now Stefan R. Hauser, 'Assur und sein Umland in der Arsakidenzeit', in *Assur – Gott, Stadt und Land: 5. internationales Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 18.-21. Februar 2004 in Berlin*, Johannes Renger, ed. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011, 115-48.

⁴² Julius Jordan, *Uruk-Warka: nach den Ausgrabungen durch die Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft*, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1928, 36-8; see now Arno Kose, *Uruk, Architektur*, vol. 4, *Von der Seleukiden- bis zur Sasanidenzeit*, Mainz am Rhein: P. von Zabern, 1998.

These early excavations were fuelled by a desire to furnish nascent national museums, such as the British Museum, the Louvre and the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum in Berlin, with impressive collections, and to locate places mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.⁴³ For example, in the title of his book publishing the results of his excavations Loftus glosses Warka as the 'Erech of Nimrod', and Susa as 'Shushan the Palace of Esther', referring to Genesis (10:10) and Esther (*passim*) respectively. Another major goal was the acquisition of cuneiform tablets. Regarding his excavations at Nippur, for example, Peters wrote that they 'were conducted primarily for the purpose of securing inscribed objects, for that was naturally the constant demand of the home committee, and by the discovery of these, or failure to discover them, the success of our Expedition would be judged'.⁴⁴ To accomplish these goals, archaeologists had to dig through the uppermost, and therefore latest, strata on a site, which often contained Parthian material. Although this material was not always published fully, if at all, it nevertheless added much to the quantity of Parthian art and architecture available for study.

Excavation in Persia, by contrast, was quite limited in this period, but significant archaeological exploration did take place. Although not the first to illustrate and publish standing Parthian remains, the painter Eugène Flandin and architect Pascale Coste were doubtless the most important of the early European travellers in the 19th century. They went to Persia in 1839 as part of the Comte de Sercey's diplomatic mission to the court of Mohammad Shah Qajar. After leaving the mission at Isfahan in 1841 they travelled extensively in western and central Persia as far south as Bushehr and as far north as Tabriz, and published an account of their journeys with six accompanying volumes of plates.⁴⁵ In addition to their comments on contemporary politics and society they documented extant structures both ancient and recent, standing remains and rock reliefs (fig. 3), including the Parthian reliefs discussed by Rawlinson. The real value of their work, however, lay in the illustrations, which were far more detailed and accurate than any of their predecessors and which made these monuments available to European audiences in a hitherto unprecedented fashion.

⁴³ Zainab Bahrani, 'Conjuring Mesopotamia', in *Archaeology under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*, Lynn Meskell, ed. London: Routledge, 1998, 159-74.

⁴⁴ Peters, *Nippur*, 212; see also Hilprecht, *Explorations*, 341-4; Ousterhout, 'Archaeologists and Travelers', 11.

⁴⁵ Eugène Flandin and Pascale Coste, *Voyage en Perse*, vols. 1-2, Paris: Gide et Jules Baudry, 1851-4; see also Jean Calmard, 'Flandin and Coste', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 10:1, 1999 [2012], 35-9.

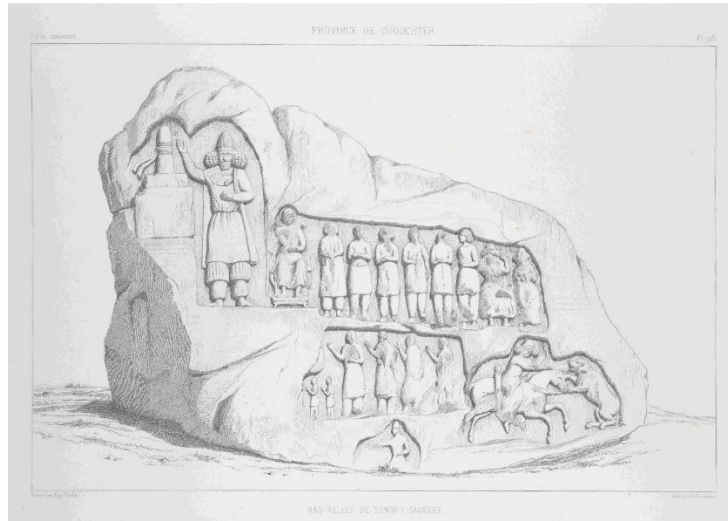


Figure 3. Relief at Tang-e Sarvak Rock II, Iran, drawn by E. Flandin from Flandin and Coste, *Voyage en Perse*, vol. 4, pl. 242. Image in the public domain.



Figure 4. Photograph of the remains at Khorheh, Iran, taken by Āqā Rezā in 1859. Albumen print, 234 x 171 mm. Tehran, Golestan Palace Photothèque. Public domain image from Adle, 'Khorheh', pl. 3.

The first formal excavations in Persia were undertaken by Loftus at Susa between 1850 and 1852, which turned up relatively little in the way of identifiably Parthian material.⁴⁶ A second brief excavation, instigated by Naser al-Din Shah, took place in 1859 at Khorheh, southwest of Qom, a site originally interpreted as a

⁴⁶ Loftus, *Travels and Researches*, 349-80, 396-433; see also John Curtis, 'William Kennett Loftus and His Excavations at Susa', *Iranica Antiqua* 28, 1993, 1-55.

Seleucid temple but now understood to be a Parthian villa.⁴⁷ Although no formal report was ever published, two photographs of the excavation survive (fig. 4), marking one of the first known archaeological uses of this technology (only Girault de Prangey's daguerreotypes were earlier). No further excavations were carried in Persia until the arrival of Marcel-Auguste and Jane Dieulafoy at Susa in 1884.

Trained as an engineer, Marcel Dieulafoy became interested in medieval architecture, including Islamic architecture, which he believed was heavily influenced by Sasanian models.⁴⁸ He accordingly travelled to Persia in 1880 to collect material for his five-volume work *L'art antique de la Perse*, of which the fifth and final volume addresses Parthian and Sasanian art, as well as the 'Persian origins of the French architecture of the Middle Ages'.⁴⁹ Given his interest in architecture, he focuses mainly on the sites of Hatra, Babylon, Warka, Susa and Kangavar, the latter being the site of a 'temple' identified by Flandin and Coste as the temple of Anahita mentioned by Isidore of Charax (*Parthian Stations* 6), but now understood to be the remains of a Sassanian villa.⁵⁰ Dieulafoy's discussion of the temple is indicative of his approach: he dates it to the Parthian period on the grounds that it featured a 'confused mixture of Hellenizing styles from all periods' meaning 'it is therefore necessary to span a few more years to classify this monument and reach the reign of the Arsacids, a period which wholly bears the stamp of a poorly understood and poorly digested Hellenism'.⁵¹ He similarly regarded Parthian sculpture as derivative of Greek prototypes, writing that it had 'a barbarian

⁴⁷ Chahryar Adle, 'Khorheh: The Dawn of Iranian Scientific Archaeology', *Tavoos Quarterly* 3-4, 2000, 11-13, 27-8; on Khorheh see now Ali Hakemi, 'The Excavation of Khurha', *East and West* 40, 1990, 11-41; Mehdi Rabhar, 'Khorheh: une residence parthe sur le plateau iranien', *Dossiers d'archéologie* 243, 1999, 44-6.

⁴⁸ Pierre Amiet, 'Dieulafoy, Marcel-Auguste', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 7:4, 1995 [2011], 399-401; Jean Calmard, 'Dieulafoy, Jane Henriette Magre', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 7:4, 1995 [2011], 398-9; Eve Gran-Aymerich, 'Jane Dieulafoy, 1851-1916', in *Breaking Ground: Pioneering Women Archaeologists*, Getzel M. Cohen and Martha Sharp Joukowsky, eds, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004, 34-67.

⁴⁹ 'Origines perses de l'architecture française du moyen age;', Marcel Dieulafoy, *L'art antique de la Perse: Achéménides, Parthes, Sassanides*, vol. 5, *Monuments parthes et sassanides*, Paris: Librairie des imprimeries réunies, 1889.

⁵⁰ Flandin and Coste, *Voyage en Perse*, vol. 1, 409-12, pls. 28-31; see now Massoud Azarnoush, 'New Evidence on the Chronology of the "Anahita Temple"', *Iranica Antiqua* 44, 2009, 393-402.

⁵¹ 'Mélange confus de styles grécisants de toutes les époques... il faut donc franchir encore quelques années pour classer ce monument et atteindre au règne des Arsacides, à cette époque tout empreinte d'un hellénisme mal compris et mal digéré'; Dieulafoy, *L'art antique*, 10.

character, when it is made by indigenous craftsmen, and attests to the slavish imitation of Greek, and later Roman, models'.⁵²

The Dieulafoys returned to Persia in 1884 with funding from the Louvre and the French government to excavate at Susa, where they worked until 1886. Their chief aim was to uncover the Achaemenid columned hall initially identified by Loftus, with the result that they dug through the Parthian layers fairly concertedly. Marcel Dieulafoy's final report on the excavations, published in 1893, contains what has been called 'possibly one of the greatest speculative tours de force extant in archaeological literature'.⁵³ Indeed, it is riddled with fantastical and unverifiable claims and gross errors. One notable example is his presentation of the Achaemenid columned hall as being open on the south when in fact he simply missed the presence of a mudbrick wall there. As a result of this error, he argued that the iwan (although he does not use this term) originated at Susa before being adopted by the Parthians at Hatra and the Sasanians at Ctesiphon.⁵⁴ Thus he successfully identifies a key element of Parthian architecture, but on entirely faulty grounds.

Excavations at Susa resumed in 1897 under the direction of Jacques de Morgan. For the next thirty years this was the only foreign archaeological project in Persia thanks to a treaty granting the French a monopoly on excavation there.⁵⁵ De Morgan's stated interest in the site was in its earliest phases: 'Susa, by its very remote antiquity, offered to solve the largest and most important problem of our origins'.⁵⁶ Therefore, save for summer forays to Talysh to study Bronze and Iron Age cemeteries, he focused his efforts exclusively on excavating the Acropole mound at Susa, which he carried out in a manner congruent with his training as a mining engineer. He dug at a furious rate, turning up a wealth of finds but

⁵² 'Un caractère barbare quand ils sont exécutés par des artistes indigènes ou attestent une imitation servile des modèles grecs, et plus tard, romains'; Dieulafoy, *L'art antique*, 35.

⁵³ Robert H. Dyson, jr. 'Early Work on the Acropolis at Susa: The Beginning of Prehistory in Iraq and Iran', *Expedition* 10:4, 1968, 26.

⁵⁴ Marcel Dieulafoy, *L'acropole de Suse, d'après les fouilles exécutées en 1884, 1885, 1886, sous les auspices du Musée du Louvre*, Paris: Librairie Hatchette, 1893, 341-6; see also Amiet, 'Dieulafoy'. On the development of the iwan see Keall, 'Early *Eyvan*'.

⁵⁵ Kamyar Abdi, 'Nationalism, Politics, and the Development of Archaeology in Iran', *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, 2001, 54; James F. Goode, *Negotiating for the Past: Archaeology, Nationalism, and Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1919-1941*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007, 127-30; Ali Mousavi, 'The History of Archaeological Research in Iran', in Potts, *Oxford Handbook*, 6.

⁵⁶ 'Suse, par son antiquité très reculée, s'offrait pour résoudre le problème le plus vaste et le plus importante de nos origines'; J. de Morgan, *La Délégation en Perse du Ministère de l'instruction publique 1897 à 1902*, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1902, 16; see also Elizabeth Carter, 'A History of Excavation at Susa: Personalities and Archaeological Methodologies', in *The Royal City of Susa: Ancient Near Eastern Treasures from the Louvre*, Prudence O. Harper, Joan Aruz and François Tallon, eds, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992, 21-2; Pierre Amiet, 'De Morgan, Jacques', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 7:2, 1994 [2014], 175-7.

obliterating architecture and stratigraphy in the process, making those finds difficult to date or study constructively. His approach was continued by his successor at Susa, Roland de Mecquenem (another mining engineer), until the 1940s. Given their interest in earlier periods (Achaemenid, Elamite and protohistoric) Dieulafoy, de Morgan and de Mecquenem all largely ignored the Parthian material they discovered in their rush to reach older, deeper levels of the site. It is only in recent decades that this material has been re-examined and fully published.⁵⁷

As a result of the French monopoly and de Morgan's exclusive focus on Susa, no other sites in Persia were excavated in this period, despite there being many promising ones, including some already identified as Parthian. For example, Henry Rawlinson had identified Masjed-e Solayman in Khuzestan as a Parthian sanctuary in 1836 based on local informants and Classical references, and Layard visited it in 1841, but the site was not excavated until the 1960s.⁵⁸ While the scope and pace of excavation in Mesopotamia continued to expand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in Persia it remained stagnant and dependent on the work of archaeological travellers. Knowledge of Parthian art in Persia itself thus remained limited mainly to rock reliefs until the 1920s and 30s, and even then additions to the corpus were infrequent and fortuitous, such as the discovery of the Shami bronze statue in 1935, found during the digging of the foundation for a house and documented six months later by Aurel Stein.⁵⁹

Ernst Herzfeld was doubtless the most important of these travellers in the first half of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ Trained as an architect, his earliest archaeological experience was as an assistant to Andrae at Ashur from 1903 to 1905. He then travelled extensively in Syria, Iraq and Iran, often in the company of his frequent collaborator Friedrich Sarre. In 1920 he was appointed the first ever professor of Near Eastern archaeology at the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universität in Berlin, a position he held until 1935, although he was often on leave in Persia during this time. Herzfeld's interests were chronologically and geographically broad, spanning Iranian prehistory to Islamic architecture in Syria and Jordan. Owing to

⁵⁷ E.g., Pierre Amiet, 'La sculpture susienne à l'époque de l'empire perse', *Iranica Antiqua* 36, 2001, 239-91; D. T. Potts, *The Archaeology of Elam: Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 389-400.

⁵⁸ Rawlinson, 'March from Zoháb', 78, 86; A. H. Layard, 'A Description of the Province of Khúzistán', *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 16, 1846, 81; see now Roman Ghirshman, *Terrasses sacrées de Bard-è Néchandeh et Masjid-i Solaiman: l'Iran du sud-ouest du VIII^e s. av. n. ère au V^e s. de n. ère*, vols. 1-2, Paris: E. J. Brill, 1976.

⁵⁹ Aurel Stein, *Old Routes of Western Iran: Narrative of an Archaeological Journey*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1940, 143-4; see also Trudy S. Kawami, 'Shami Statue', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2016, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/shami-statue>.

⁶⁰ Stefan R. Hauser et al. 'Herzfeld, Ernst', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 12:3, 2003 [2012], 290-302; Ann C. Gunter and Stefan R. Hauser, eds, *Ernst Herzfeld and the Development of Near Eastern Studies, 1900-1950*, Leiden: Brill, 2005.

the French monopoly his research in Iran initially focused on rock reliefs and inscriptions, in which he sought to identify specific individuals known from textual sources.⁶¹ For example, he reconstructed the name 'Mithridates' in the Greek inscription on one of the Parthian reliefs at Bisitun in order to link it to Mithridates II.⁶² He subsequently extended this approach to other types of Parthian material, including unprovenanced objects he purchased or was shown during his travels. In one instance he argued that a pair of gold clasps in the form of eagles (fig. 5), which he believed to be part of a larger hoard attributed to Nahavand, belonged to the Parthian period because they exhibit both Greek and Achaemenid elements. He further connected this hoard to the Iranian noble family of Karin, which was based at Nahavand.⁶³ A more extreme case is his dating of the earliest architecture and murals at Kuh-e Khwaja to the Parthian period in order to link it with Kaspar, one of the biblical Magi, despite both its earlier identification as a Buddhist site and the clearly Sasanian character of the painted decoration.⁶⁴



Figure 5. Belt adornment with an eagle and its prey, ca. 1st-2nd cen. CE. Gold with turquoise inlay; H. 6.3 cm, W. 8.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 17.190.2055. Public domain image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

⁶¹ Ernst Herzfeld, *Am Tor von Asien: Felsdenkmale aus Irans Heldenzeit*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer/Ernst Vohsen, 1920, 35-57.

⁶² Herzfeld, *Am Tor von Asien*, 39; Herzfeld, *Archaeological History of Iran*, London: Oxford University Press, 1935, 54-5; see also Kawami, 'Rock Reliefs', 753; Invernizzi, 'Rock Reliefs at Bisitun', 52-68; on the inscription see Luther, 'Inschriften aus Bisotun'.

⁶³ Ernst Herzfeld, 'The Hoard of the Kâren Pahlavs', *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 52, 1928, 21-7; see also Parvaneh Pourshariati, 'Kârin', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2017, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/karin>.

⁶⁴ Ernst Herzfeld, 'Sakastan, geschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den Ausgrabungen am Kûh i Khwâdja', *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 4, 1932, 115-16; see also Trudy S. Kawami, 'Ernst Herzfeld, Kuh-e Khwaja, and the Study of Parthian Art', in Gunter and Hauser, *Ernst Herzfeld*, 181-214.

His more fanciful interpretations notwithstanding, Herzfeld made two major contributions to the study of Parthian art. The first was that he considered it from an Iranian rather than a Greek standpoint. Herzfeld's historical approach emphasized continuity in ancient Iranian art and material culture. In his later, more synthetic scholarship he linked the origins of this enduring Iranian cultural legacy to the figure of Zarathustra, a narrative that supported the Shah's nationalist vision of contemporary Iran as the inevitable successor to the pre-Islamic Persian empires.⁶⁵ This approach placed Parthian art firmly within the *longue durée* of ancient Iranian art, even while admitting of Greek features and influences, an unprecedented stance at the time. It also created an interpretive framework that could accommodate multiple forms of material culture, including unprovenanced objects, which Herzfeld frequently discussed in his published works. In short, he was perhaps the first scholar to assume that Parthian art was a cogent phenomenon rather than a mere degradation of barbarization of Hellenistic Greek art.

Herzfeld's other major achievement with a significant, yet indirect, impact on the field of Parthian art was his role in creating Persia's first antiquities legislation in 1927.⁶⁶ Following the overthrow of Ahmad Shah Qajar in 1925, the new government sought to end the exclusive French excavation concession and to create a national archaeological service. Herzfeld, who had been a steady presence in Persia since 1923, began to advise the government on archaeological matters. He evidently used his connections to agitate for an end to the French monopoly, which finally happened in October 1927. He subsequently lobbied for the creation of an antiquities law, enacted in 1930, that would ban illicit digging and formalize divisions of finds between the government and foreign institutions. Herzfeld's efforts were doubtless motivated by self-interest, since the end of the French monopoly allowed him to excavate at Persepolis, as he had long hoped to do, and the new antiquities law facilitated foreign sponsorship of the excavation. These measures did not immediately affect Parthian art directly, since the new excavations that resulted from it mainly focused on Achaemenid or prehistoric sites. But it had important long-term effects and it opened Persia to foreign scholars on a much greater scale, which in turn contributed to the third phase of Parthian art historical scholarship, namely the age of grand narratives.

Phase 3: Grand Narratives (ca. 1920s and 1930s)

The early surveys by Rawlinson and Dieulafoy were handicapped by the limited material available to them and by their treatment of Parthian art as ancillary and derivative. A brief chapter by Sarre in *Die Kunst des alten Persien*, published in 1923,

⁶⁵ Jennifer Jenkins, 'Excavating Zarathustra: Ernst Herzfeld's *Archaeological History of Iran*', *Iranian Studies* 45, 2012, 1-27.

⁶⁶ Ali Mousavi, 'Ernst Herzfeld, Politics, and Antiquities Legislation in Iran', in Gunter and Hauser, *Ernst Herzfeld*, 445-75; Mousavi, 'Archaeological Research', 7; Goode, *Negotiating*, 137-46.

improved on these pioneering efforts, but it was not until the 1930s that the first grand narratives of Parthian art appeared.⁶⁷ In this period the broader canon of ancient Iranian art, spanning the Chalcolithic to the Sasanian Empire, coalesced into its current form. This coalescence resulted from several factors. The end of the French archaeological monopoly in 1927 created new opportunities for excavation in Persia and generated new interest in the country's antiquities. Archaeology in Syria and Iraq was bolstered after World War I by the antiquities services created (and often staffed) by the French and British mandates, as well as by wealthy American institutions and donors.⁶⁸ Likewise, the establishment of an antiquities service in the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic in 1929 facilitated archaeological research in Central Asia, including the first excavations at the Parthian capital Old Nisa in 1931 and 1934-5.⁶⁹ Another contributing factor was Reza Shah Pahlavi's nationalist ideology linking modern Iran to its pre-Islamic past, which he promoted through his sponsorship of the International Exhibition of Persian Art in 1931, organized by Arthur Upham Pope, and through excavations, such as those at Persepolis directed by Herzfeld.⁷⁰

It is no surprise therefore that Pope and Herzfeld both played important roles in the articulation of the canon. With his wife Phyllis Ackerman, Pope edited *A Survey of Persian Art*, first published in 1938, which, as its name suggests, sought to survey the entirety of Iranian art from antiquity to the present, with the first volume being dedicated to the prehistoric through Sasanian periods.⁷¹ The *Survey* was originally conceived of as a companion to the 1931 exhibition, and it too was sponsored by the Shah. In keeping with the Shah's ideological program, it emphasized the continuity of Iranian art and, as per Pope's interests, focused on generalized discussions of aesthetics rather than specific historical contexts.⁷²

⁶⁷ Friedrich Sarre, *Die Kunst des alten Persien*, Berlin: Bruno Cassirer Verlag, 1923, 23-31. His account is notable mostly for its inclusion of the Nemrut Dağ sculptures from ancient Commagene. On Sarre see now Jens Kröger, 'Friedrich Sarre und die Kunst des alten Persien', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 153, 2021, 13-26.

⁶⁸ Goode, *Negotiating*, 185-201.

⁶⁹ E. Atagarryev and O. Berdyev, 'The Archaeological Exploration of Turkmenistan in the Years of Soviet Power', *East and West* 20, 1970, 288-9; Aydogdy Kurbanov, 'A Brief History of Archaeological Research in Turkmenistan from the Beginning of the 20th Century until the Present', *ArchéOrient – Le Blog*, 14 Sept 2018, <https://archeorient.hypotheses.org/9078>.

⁷⁰ Abdi, 'Nationalism', 57-62.

⁷¹ Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman, eds, *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, vol. 1, *Pre-Achaemenid, Achaemenid, Parthian and Sāsānian Periods*, London: Oxford University Press, 1938. On Pope see Noel Silver, 'Pope, Arthur Upham', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2005, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/pope-arthur-upham>; Yuka Kadoi, ed. *Arthur Upham Pope and a New Survey of Persian Art*, Leiden: Brill, 2016.

⁷² Kishwar Rizvi, 'Art History and the Nation: Arthur Upham Pope and the Discourse on "Persian Art" in the Early Twentieth Century', *Muqarnas* 24, 2007, 45-65; Meyer Schapiro, Review of Pope and Ackerman, *Survey*, *Art Bulletin* 23, 1941, 82-86.

Indeed, its treatment of different media in separate chapters suggests that its target audience consisted of collectors and museum curators rather than archaeologists and historians. The *Survey* contains chapters on Parthian architecture, metalwork, glyptic, coins and ceramics. The inclusion of metalwork, seals and ceramics demonstrates the expansion of the scope of Parthian art history since the 19th century, due to both archaeological excavation in Mesopotamia and to the inclusion of unprovenanced objects. The chapters on Jandial Temple C at Taxila and on the art of 'West Turkistan' in the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian periods evidence the geographic expansion of the study of Parthian art beyond Mesopotamia and western Iran.⁷³ The chapter on architecture by Oscar Reuther is noteworthy for explicitly identifying the iwan as a Parthian innovation.⁷⁴ Perhaps the closest the *Survey* comes to a true narrative treatment is a short, general chapter by Sarre, in which he characterizes Parthian art as a combination of Greek and 'Oriental' elements; indeed, much of this chapter is focused on identifying Greek influences.⁷⁵

Herzfeld articulated the ancient Iranian canon in a series of lectures delivered at the Lowell Institute in Boston in 1936, later published as *Iran in the Ancient East*.⁷⁶ In contrast to Pope, Herzfeld was interested in the historical (although not necessarily archaeological) context of Iranian art. He sought to link individual sites, monuments and objects to historical figures, events and phenomena. In doing he brought together an unprecedented range of material, from the Chalcolithic to the Sasanian era and from sites all over Iran, many of which he knew first-hand. He organized this material into a narrative foregrounding Iran's role in the history of the ancient Near East. In this respect the book is a pioneering synthesis, and like the *Survey of Persian Art* its outlook was compatible with, if not informed by, the Shah's ideological interests.⁷⁷ Yet Herzfeld's discussion of Parthian art in *Iran and the Ancient East* is disappointingly limited. The bulk of his remarks are dedicated to Kuh-e Khwaja, which, as mentioned above, dates mainly to the Sasanian period. In addition to this he mentions the remains at Kangavar and Istakhr (both also Sasanian) and Khorheh, rock reliefs at Bisitun, and coins. As a conclusion he offers a damning judgment:

The 400 years of the Arsacidan period, from c. 200 B.C. to A.D. 200, mark a pathetically low level...The period begins with a conscious surrender to everything European. But the spirit of Hellenism

⁷³ Ugo Monneret de Villard, 'The Iranian Temple of Taxila', in Pope and Ackerman, *Survey*, 445-48; Alexander Strelkoff, 'Īrān and the Pre-Islamic Art of West Turkistān', in Pope and Ackerman, *Survey*, 449-58.

⁷⁴ Oscar Reuther, 'Parthian Architecture: History', in Pope and Ackerman, *Survey*, 428-35.

⁷⁵ Friedrich Sarre, 'Parthian Art', in Pope and Ackerman, *Survey*, 406-10.

⁷⁶ Ernst E. Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East: Archaeological Studies Presented in the Lowell Lectures in Boston*, London: Oxford University Press, 1941; see also Herzfeld, *Archaeological History*, in which he succinctly addresses the historical periods.

⁷⁷ See also Jenkins, 'Excavating Zarathustra'.

remained alien to Iran. The works of art produced look like relapses into almost prehistoric primitive stages – not the primitivity of youth, but of impotent age. Predominant was painting, which lacked technical schooling. Walls too poor to be shown uncovered were veiled by pictures or by cheap plaster ornaments. Both lead to the complete decomposition of sculpture and to the further decline of architecture. Hellenism, while preparing the western world for a great future, had the most destructive effect on Iran.⁷⁸

Herzfeld thus found Parthian art wanting, but rather than blaming the Parthians themselves for its defects he instead regarded Alexander's invasion and Greek influence more broadly as pernicious forces, from whose malign effects the Sasanians represented a recovery.⁷⁹

It is difficult to say precisely why Herzfeld held this view, but two reasons in particular seem most probable. First, although the volume of known examples of Parthian art had increased significantly thanks to the preceding period of exploration and excavation, it still paled in comparison to that of the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods, and thus did relatively little to support any narrative of imperial continuity through the ages. This doubtless informed Pope's approach in the *Survey* as well. Second, as is especially evident in the last book published in his lifetime, *Zoroaster and His World*, Herzfeld was keenly interested in the figure of Zarathustra.⁸⁰ But even today the Parthian evidence for Zoroastrianism is limited and difficult to interpret, and thus the Parthians presumably held little scholarly appeal for him.⁸¹

These two books became the foundation of Iranian archaeology. All subsequent studies of ancient Iranian art enhanced and built upon their findings, but did not radically alter the overall picture they presented.⁸² Thus their views on Parthian art became the received wisdom that persisted for much of the twentieth century. But there were also important minority opinions in this period of grand narratives that saw Parthian art in a more positive light. Two scholars in particular stand out in this respect: Neilson Debevoise and Michael Rostovtzeff. Debevoise was an archaeologist and ancient historian associated with the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, and he participated in the excavations at Seleucia-on-the-

⁷⁸ Herzfeld, *Iran*, 305-6.

⁷⁹ Herzfeld, *Iran*, 275; also Herzfeld, *Archaeological History*, 44.

⁸⁰ Ernst Herzfeld, *Zoroaster and His World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947; see also Jenkins, 'Excavating Zarathustra'.

⁸¹ Albert de Jong, 'Religion and Politics in Pre-Islamic Iran', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, Michael Stausberg, Yuhon Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina and Anna Tessmann, eds, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2015, 94-6.

⁸² Henry P. Colburn, 'The Canon of Ancient Iranian Art: From Grand Narratives to Local Perspectives', in *Testing the Canon of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology*, Amy Gansell and Ann Shafer, eds, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, 112-16.

Tigris near modern Baghdad, an important Seleucid and Parthian site.⁸³ Although his best-known work is *A Political History of Parthia*, published in 1938, he authored several important studies of Parthian art and material culture, including the first synthetic treatments of Parthian glyptic, pottery and stucco.⁸⁴ Unlike earlier scholarship, these studies emphasized the plenitude of Parthian material. This optimism was no doubt prompted by Debevoise's experience as a field archaeologist; for example, he reports that more than 1500 ceramic vessels were excavated at Seleucia. He also recognized that the study of Parthian art required more nuance than simply gauging the extent of Greek influence, as shown by the published abstract of a paper he presented (while still a graduate student) at a meeting of the Middle West Branch of the American Oriental Society in 1928.⁸⁵ Unfortunately he never pursued the full implication of this recognition and he left academia permanently during the Second World War to work for the US State Department.

Best known for his scholarship on the ancient economy, Rostovtzeff was also an archaeologist and art historian who published very widely on such diverse topics as Roman wall paintings, Scythian metalwork and Chinese inlaid bronzes.⁸⁶ After twenty years teaching in St. Petersburg he fled Russia for England in 1918, ultimately coming to United States where he taught first at the University of Wisconsin and then at Yale. Between 1928 and 1937 he directed excavations at Dura-Europos in the French Mandate of Syria. Founded as a Seleucid colony ca. 300 BCE, Dura was part of the Parthian Empire from the mid-second century BCE until ca. 165 CE, with only a brief interruption; after this it was under Roman control until its destruction ca. 256 following a Sasanian siege. The site yielded a wealth of wall paintings, sculptures and small finds, prompting Rostovtzeff to write 'Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art', a monographic article published in *Yale Classical Studies* in 1935.⁸⁷ In this essay he sought to delineate the central characteristics of Parthian art, first by synthesizing the material known at the time and then attempting to identify shared features and motifs.

⁸³ M. J. Olbrycht and V. P. Nikonorov, 'Debevoise, Neilson Carel', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2015, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/debevoise-neilson-carel>.

⁸⁴ Neilson C. Debevoise, 'The Essential Characteristics of Parthian and Sasanian Glyptic Art', *Berytus* 1, 1934, 12-18; Debevoise, *Parthian Pottery from Seleucia-on-the-Tigris*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1934; Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938; Debevoise, 'The Origin of Decorative Stucco', *American Journal of Archaeology* 45, 1941, 45-61.

⁸⁵ Neilson C. Debevoise, 'Did the Parthians Have an Art?', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 49, 1929, 369.

⁸⁶ Heinz Heinen, 'Michael Ivanovich Rostovtzeff (1870-1952)', in *Klassiker der Geschichtswissenschaft*, vol. 1: *Von Edward Gibbon bis Marc Bloch*, Lutz Raphael, ed. München: Beck, 2006, 172-89.

⁸⁷ Rostovtzeff, 'Dura'.



Figure 6. Dipinto picture and inscription from Dura-Europos, Syria, ca. 323 BCE-256 CE. Paint on plaster; 20.32 × 28.58 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven 1933.299. Public domain image from the Yale University Art Gallery.

Figure 7. Banquet scene from Dura-Europos, Syria, 194 CE. Paint on plaster; 148.6 × 183.5 × 12.7 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven 1938.5999.1147. Public domain image from the Yale University Art Gallery.

Rostovtzeff's approach is perhaps best described as 'Eurasianist' in its outlook, that is, it was a forerunner to a school of thought that saw Russia as the successor to both Greek and ancient Iranian civilization.⁸⁸ His earlier work on the art of the Black Sea region sought to identify the ancient origins of Russia as a combination of Greek and Scythian elements, with the latter prevailing. He understood Parthian art in a similar vein, namely as having the same origin, and therefore meaning, as Scythian art. He thus identified several major features of Parthian art based on their putative Iranian character, such as the prevalence of scenes of hunting and feasting (figs 6-7), the use of a frontal view in the depiction of human figures, and the flying gallop motif. While these features are certainly common at Dura-Europos and some have strong connections to Iranian art, none is exclusively or even predominantly Parthian.⁸⁹ Moreover, Rostovtzeff's understanding of the details of the site was somewhat limited, both because he was not directly involved in excavation himself and because many aspects have been clarified or revised by more recent fieldwork there.⁹⁰

Yet at the same time, Rostovtzeff's treatment of Parthian art was revolutionary for several reasons. Thanks to his Eurasianist outlook he regarded it as a vibrant, worthy artistic tradition in its own right, not as a degraded form of

⁸⁸ Meyer, 'Eurasianism'; see further Meyer, *Greco-Scythian Art and the Birth of Eurasia: From Classical Antiquity to Russian Modernity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁸⁹ See discussions in Stefan R. Hauser, "'Parthian Art' or 'Arts in the Arsacid Empire': Hatra and Palmyra as Nodal Points for Cultural Interaction', in Jacobs, *'Parthische Kunst'*, 127-31; Lucinda Dirven, 'The Problem with Parthian Art at Dura', in *Religion, Society and Culture at Dura-Europos*, Ted Kaizer, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 68-88.

⁹⁰ See now J. A. Baird, *Dura-Europos*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

Greek art. In his view there must have been a cogent Parthian artistic program on display at the royal court, which he located at Ctesiphon, some 400 km to the southeast. That it does not survive is due to the Sasanian policy of obliterating and overbuilding Parthian royal sites as a means of rewriting history to support the legitimization of their nascent imperial dynasty.⁹¹ He believed not only that this art existed but that it exercised an influence on other artistic traditions, both within the empire and beyond its geographical and temporal boundaries. For example, he introduces the art of Commagene, Palmyra and Gandhara into his discussion of frontality.⁹² This idea was more revolutionary in Rostovtzeff's day than it seems now, but until comparatively recently the study of Parthian art focused exclusively on its sources rather than its impact. Rostovtzeff, however, saw it as part of a larger Iranian phenomenon whose influence he was eager to track – especially to Russia. Indeed, an opposing impetus is evident in subsequent studies of Parthian art that sought to define it narrowly and delimit its extent and impact.⁹³ Finally, he also understood the style of Parthian art to be the result of a deliberate choice rather than imitation or degradation of Greek prototypes. For example, in discussing the transition from verisimilitude to abstraction in Parthian coin types he draws a comparison with Roman art, in which a similar transition takes place:

The leading idea is to emphasize the majesty of the kings without attempting to either deify them or give them a too human semblance. In this, the art of the coins is not Greek, but neo-Iranian... In the last decades of Parthian rule the coins become less and less artistic, more and more schematic. Is this mere decadence or the beginning of a new conception of art? Who knows? In the Roman Empire at the same time it is both – decay of the old, and inception of something new which reaches its completion in the fourth century.⁹⁴

He extended this view to other media as well, which, due to his archaeological focus, includes some categories that not represented in other synthetic studies. For example, his is the first synthesis to include figurines, a ubiquitous type of Mesopotamian material culture during the Parthian period which often defies straightforward typological and chronological analysis.⁹⁵ While the essay was not intended as a comprehensive grand narrative, it did provide both a fairly full

⁹¹ Canepa, *Iranian Expanse*, 209.

⁹² Rostovtzeff, 'Dura', 234-41.

⁹³ E.g., Daniel Schlumberger, *L'Orient hellénisé: l'art grec et ses héritiers dans l'Asie non méditerranéenne*, Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1970, 67-73; Malcolm A. R. Colledge, *Parthian Art*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977, 138-44.

⁹⁴ Rostovtzeff, 'Dura', 175.

⁹⁵ Rostovtzeff, 'Dura', 179-83; see now Stephanie M. Langin-Hooper, *Figurines in Hellenistic Babylonia: Miniaturization and Cultural Hybridity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

picture of Parthian art as it was known in the 1930s, as well as a methodological blueprint for how to study it.

Neither Debevoise nor Rostovtzeff had any notable immediate impact on the study of Parthian art, perhaps in part because their work was published only in academic journals; Rostovtzeff's essay in particular was not well received among western European and American scholars.⁹⁶ It did, however, enjoy a somewhat better reception in Russia, perhaps thanks to its Eurasianist outlook.⁹⁷ Pope and Herzfeld, on the other hand, were prominent figures in the field of ancient Iranian art who wrote for wide audiences; Pope in particular was a major tastemaker among collectors and museum curators in the early twentieth century.⁹⁸ It was their grand narratives that became the standard versions of Parthian art for years to come. Indeed, in *Aesthetics and History* Berenson approvingly quotes Herzfeld's characterization of Parthian art as 'a hybrid art, if art it can be called, worthy to be studied only out of scientific and historical, not of aesthetic, interest'.⁹⁹

Epilogue

The problem of Parthian art, as identified by Rostovtzeff, persisted for much of the twentieth century. But, as this paper has tried to show, it was centuries in the making, going back at least to Winckelmann. In its earliest stages, the study of Parthian art had only coins for evidence and had only Greek and Roman coins to which to compare them, with the result that, given Winckelmann's proclivities and interests, they were judged inferior to their Classical models. This set the tone for subsequent research and created an interpretative framework for later finds, beginning with those uncovered by the first excavations in Mesopotamia in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, due to the French archaeological monopoly in Persia, Mesopotamia remained the major source of Parthian art into the twentieth century, with the exception of rock reliefs and unprovenanced artifacts. It was not until the 1930s that there was both sufficient material and sufficient interest for synthetic treatments. The major narratives produced at that time, those of Pope and Herzfeld, regarded the Parthians as an unfortunate interlude between the acmes of the Achaemenid and Sasanian Empires. Rostovtzeff's grand narrative, by contrast, sought to give them an outsized role in the development of ancient Iranian art. In his view, this was the solution to the problem of Parthian art. Yet his solution never caught on; instead, it was the views of Pope and Herzfeld, continuing in a long

⁹⁶ Hauser, 'Parthian Art', 129.

⁹⁷ E.g., Vladimir G. Lukonin, *Persia*, vol. 2, James Hogarth, trans. Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1967, 132-5.

⁹⁸ Yuka Kadoi, 'The Rise of Persian Art Connoisseurship: Arthur Upham Pope and Early Twentieth-Century Chicago', in Kadoi, *Arthur Upham Pope*, 235-66.

⁹⁹ Berenson, *Aesthetics and History*, 174, quoting Herzfeld, *Archaeological History*, 52.

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tradition going back to Winckelmann, that shaped the modern study of Parthian art.¹⁰⁰

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