CHAPTER THREE

ON THE WESTERN EDGE OF THE IRANIAN PLATEAU: SUSA AND ELYMAIS

Susa

Refounded by Seleucus as a Greek polis under the name Seleucia-on-the-Eulaeus\(^1\), Susa was never to regain its former rank of imperial capital; but down to the end of the Parthian period it remained an important city, the head of a satrapy whose boundaries corresponded—at least originally—to the present-day province of Khuzistan. Unlike Persepolis, it had not been deprived of its former royal splendour, and its palaces were maintained, with a veneer of Greek decoration, for the use of the Macedonian satrap and occasional visits by the Seleucid court\(^2\); an inscription datable to the end of the third century B.C. mentions “Timon, the chief of the royal palace”\(^3\). As a military stronghold Susa kept a great strategic importance; in 222 Molon, the rebellious satrap of Media, occupied the lower town (the “craftsmen’s town” of the archaeologists), but was unable to capture the upper town.\(^4\)

Susa continued to play a major economic role, the tributes brought from all parts of the Persian empire being now replaced by a trade conducted by merchants, predominantly along the Mesopotamian axis. It has even been argued that the Seleucid kings deliberately favoured this development, the new foundation of Susa going together with the creation of a direct waterway between the

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\(^1\) The fundamental work on Susa during this (and the subsequent) period is Le Rider, Suse, 1965. (Tarn, GBI, 27, considers that Seleucia-on-the-Eulaeaus was first founded as a military colony, and became a polis only under Antiochus III; but see Le Rider, o.c., pp. 280–1).

\(^2\) P. Bernard, JA, 1976, 256. The “Palace on the Shaur” built by Artaxerxes II opposite the apadana hill has also yielded evidence of a Seleucid reoccupation: ib., n. 33; R. Boucharat and A. Labrousse, Cahiers de la DAFI 10, 1979, 71–8.

\(^3\) Published by F. Cumont, CRAI 1932, 272–4.

\(^4\) Polybius V.48.13–15; cf. above, p. 29. Archaeological investigations have shown that reinforcement of the defences of the upper town during this siege caused the first damage to the apadana palace, which was repeatedly despoiled subsequently for the sake of new buildings (including, it seems, the so-called ayyadana, on which see below, n. 22): R. Ghirshman, Arts Asiatiques, 1968, 14–17; Terrasses sacrées, I 200.
town and the Persian Gulf; this was achieved by restoring and extending the old channel of the Ulaï (mentioned in Daniel 8:2, 16), whose name was adapted to "Eulaios" by the Macedonian settlers. In any case, study of the coins found on the site shows that Hellenistic Susa was able to attract a substantial share of the trade between the new capital Seleucia-on-the-Tigris and the Gulf (despite the fact that Susiana was deprived of part of its coastal strip by the satrapy of the "Erythraean Sea", carved out at its expense some time before 222, which was to become the kingdom of Mesene-Characene).

By comparison, commercial links with the Iranian plateau appear to have been limited. This was, no doubt, due partly to the growing power of the Elymaeans, masters of the Bakhtyari mountains and able therefore to control the routes between Susiana, Media and Persis. After their resounding victory over Antiochus IV's plundering expedition in 164 they appear to have encroached gradually upon the lowlands, removing the whole left bank of the Karun river from Susa's control. In about 147 their king Kamniskaires, first of a long line of rulers to bear this name (or perhaps rather title), held Susa briefly, and issued coins there with his Greek-looking portrait. This episode opened two extremely confused decades in the history of the city, which saw an alternation of Elymaean and Parthian occupations, interrupted by the reign of an obscure usurper bearing the Iranian name Tigraios (c. 137–132), and by two ephemeral Seleucid reconquests: first by Demetrius II (140), then by his brother Antiochus VII (130–129). Parthian rule in Susa was firmly established only with the defeat of the latter at the hands of Phraates II. In these struggles the Elymaeans appear to have acted as a last rampart against Parthian expansion, giving battle to Mithradates I after his capture of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, then sending troops to Demetrius II during his ill-fated expedition in 140.

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5 Le Rider, o.c., pp. 267, 302–8 for the intensification of this traffic under Antiochus III. Ed. Will, however, has expressed a certain scepticism about the long-sighted economic projects attributed by this author to the political masters of Susa: Hist.pol., II 62, 354, 454. On the economy of Susa and Susiana see also R. Boucharlat, "Suse, marché agricole ou relais du grand commerce", Paléorient 11/2, 1985, 71–81.
6 See below, pp. 40–1.
7 See above, p. 33.
10 See above, pp. 33–4.