CHAPTER 12

Greek Poleis in the Near East and Their Parthian Overlords

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Sources and Methodology

To write on the subject “Greek Poleis in the Near East and Their Parthian Overlords” is not an easy matter despite the extant literature on that subject and an excellent annotated edition of sources on the Parthians. The difficulties are of a content-related and methodological nature. Let us start with the latter.

Limits of Historical Sources

First of all, we have to be aware of the limits of the historical sources on the Parthians. These problems involve the written and the archaeological tradition alike. As for the written sources, we owe our knowledge about the history of events and about the structures of the Parthian state almost exclusively to the Greco-Roman tradition. Since the sources are foreign, we have to use them with the utmost care. Some years ago, for example, Stefan Hauser was able to show that the alleged nomadic-warlike character of the Parthians might be explained as a “Roman redaction of foundation myths.” He also pointed out the dangers of being taken in by these Western reports with regard to a weak Parthian kingship.

From a historiographic perspective it is indeed highly interesting that the indigenous East Iranian oral tradition, which was put into writing only in Late Antique times, was able to edge out other regional traditions and to substitute for the recollection of Achaemenid rule a more general antagonism against the West. This was later to be referred to as “Rum.” This indigenous tradition, however, is rather counterproductive for our topic. Since Parthian times, the focus of what Ehsan Yarshater once called “Iranian National History” clearly lies in the East, on the conflict of mythical heroes and historical kings of Iran.

1 Cf. most recently Dąbrowa 2011b; 2011c; Jacobs 2010; Hackl 2010; Grajetzki 2011.
3 Hauser 2005 (against, e.g., Olbrycht 1998a and 2003).
with the Turanians. There is no change of emphasis under the Sasanians. The Arsacids, however, were banned from the semi-official historical tradition in Late Sasanian times, and the Turanians were identified with the Hephthalites and the Turks, and Rum with the East Romans. This also means that the negative image of ‘Alexander of Rum’ in this legendary tradition, which comes from a Zoroastrian background, should not be taken a symptomatic of the Parthian-Greek relationship. In other words, a more detailed Arsacid view of Parthian relations with the Greeks within and beyond the borders of the Empire and with the Romans is almost completely lacking.

Furthermore, the explanatory power of the Late Akkadian cuneiform texts, otherwise not to be underestimated, is quite weak for our topic because of the diminishing volume of these texts in the second or third century AD. Another reason might be the replacement of clay tablets by other, more perishable writing material. It must, however, be admitted that some further surprise may slumber in the archives of major collections and museums. In Mesopotamia and—for administrative texts—also in Iran, the use of transient writing materials caused additional loss of sources.

What remains are some administrative and legal documents in Greek. Among these—and this concerns our subject—some sources stand out: the two parchments from Avroman of the first century BC, as well as the Greek administrative texts from the multilingual Dura-Europus, the famous unfavourable letter of the Parthian king Artabanus II to the magistrates of Susa of the year AD 217 and the bilingual inscription on a Heracles-statue from Seleucia of AD 150/1 or 151/2 recollecting the re-conquest of Southern Mesopotamia.

**Limits of Archaeological Findings**
Secondly, as far as the archaeological findings are concerned, Iran specialists are convinced that the paradigm shift in the interpretation of “Greek” pieces of art and testimonies of the material culture from the soil of the Parthian Empire is indisputable. Those objects are now no longer regarded as part of Parthian booty from regions with a strong Greek population (Bactria, Babylonia) or as “Greek, but a little distorted” (Hauser), but as creations of royally fostered Greek workshops at Parthian places. But I am not sure whether this progress in