- RECENT STUDIES IN PARTHIAN HISTORY: PART I
- THE CITIES OF SOUTH CENTRAL AND EASTERN CILICIA: AN ANCIENT NUMISMATIST'S PARADISE
- JOHN FREDERICK BERGMAN NUMISMATIC BOOKSELLER–FRIEND
Recent Studies in Parthian History: Part I

by Dr. G.R.F. Assar

Having failed to deliver my papers at the "Kings 'N' Things" conference (organised by the Caravan Foundation and held at the Cooper Union building on 25-26 July 2000 in New York City), and in response to Jeff Winter's article in the September issue of The Celator (pg. 29), I am presenting to those interested in Parthian affairs the following excerpts from my notes. They cover two different but somewhat related topics. Firstly, the various calendars used by the Parthians for dating their documents and coins, and secondly, the identity of Parthian kings in the period ac. 91-54 BC. I must add that detailed analysis and discussion of the evidence cited here is set aside for a book intended for publication in 2001.

1. The Parthian Calendars

The extant textual and numismatic evidence points to the fact that the Parthians had three major calendars in operation throughout their Empire. For most of their documents written in Aramaic-script Parthian, they employed the Zoroastrian calendar with twelve months of 30 days duration and five epagomenal days. Several ostraca from Nisa with Iranian month and day names, a parchment from Avroman (dated AD 53/4), and an inscribed relief from Susa depicting Artabanus IV (ca. AD 216-224) investing his satrap Khwaskas are dated according to this calendar.

Their scribes in Mesopotamia, recording the astronomical and astrological information, legal documents, business contracts, prayers and other data in Akkadian cuneiform, operated the reformed Babylonian dating system with Nisanu (= March-April) as its first month. This was a lunisolar calendar composed strictly of lunar months with an intercalary mechanism that kept it in approximate accord with the solar year. It had been devised and perfected by the Babylonian astronomers under the Achaemenids and utilised in dating various documents as early as 503 BC, i.e. the 19th year of Darius I (522-486 BC).

Among a variety of both unedited and published cuneiform texts from Babylon, some bear the year date and intercalary month names. These have served to identify the structure of the Babylonian calendar and disposition of its intercalary months. We now know that through millennium-long observation, recording and study of the planetary and lunar phenomena, the Babylonian astronomers under the Achaemenids had finally discovered that 235 (19+5+7) lunar months comprised practically the same number of days as 19 solar years. Thus, in order to retain the solar and lunar calendars in harmony, they introduced 7 intercalary months in every 19-year period and reduced the discrepancy between the two systems to a day in about 60 years. This is the widely attested 19-year intercalary cycle whose original discovery and application have been habitually but incorrectly attributed to the Greek astronomer Meton who, in 432 BC, introduced a similar scheme in Athens purely for astronomical purposes. I shall provide ample evidence in my book and demonstrate that the Babylonian calendar with its advanced intercalary cycle preceded the so-called "Metonic" system by about 70 years.

According to a relatively large number of dated cuneiform tablets, the Babylonian 19-year cycle had an additional sixth month (Uluulu) in its first year followed by an intercalary twelfth month (Addaru) in years 3, 6, 9, 11, 14 and 17.

After the fall of the Achaemenid Empire in 331 BC, the Babylonian calendar and its improved intercalary cycle was adopted by the Macedonians. The extant evidence indisputably demonstrates that the original Macedonian calendar had been equated to the Babylonian before the death in 323 BC of Alexander III. In fact, the synchronisation might well have taken place by aligning the months of the two calendars and retaining the relationship as they stood when Alexander entered Babylon.

The first month of the Macedonian calendar was Dios (October-November) which corresponded to the 7th Babylonian month Tashritu. The 6-month interval between the two calendars caused the Macedonian system to have an embolismic 12th month in the first year followed by six cases of intercalary 6th month in years 4, 7, 10, 12, 15 and 18 of its 19-year cycle.

In 311 BC, shortly after capturing Babylon, Seleucus I (312/11-281 BC) began the enumeration of his satrapal years there. However, after his decisive victory over Antigonus in 307/6 BC, he backdated his "fictitious" first regnal year to coincide with 1 Nisanu 311 BC (New Year's Day). This marked the ante-dated epoch of the Seleucid calendar according to the Babylonian reckoning. Later in 305/4 BC, when Seleucus took the diadem and assumed the royal title "king", he retained the numbering of his regnal years in Babylon but employed the Macedonian calendar and pushed his accession year back to autumn 312 BC. This became the ante-dated epoch of the Seleucid era on the Macedonian calendar.

Under the Seleucids and later the Parthians, both the reformed Babylonian and Macedonian calendars were in operation for dating official and administrative documents. The evidence pertaining to the
application in Mesopotamia of the Babylonian calendar during these rules is relatively abundant. I have compiled a list of some relevant cuneiform tablets (with intercalary month dates in the period 299-6 BC) from Babylon and Uruk that are dated according to this calendar though with differing Seleucid and Parthian eras. The latter had its epoch fixed at 1 Nisanu 247 BC (considered as either the "fictitious" accession year of the eponymous founder of the Parthian dynasty, or the inscription date of the Parthi tribe led by their chieftain, Arsaces I).

My detailed analysis of the dated Babylonian cuneiform tablets confirms that the reformed calendar of Babylon with its 19-year intercalary cycle remained unchanged in Mesopotamia under the Macedonians, Seleucids and the Parthians.

Further to the north of Babylon, for dating their regal coinage struck at Seleucia on the Tigris, the Parthian mint authorities operated the Macedonian style of the Seleucid calendar. This happened shortly after Mesopotamia was conquered in 141 BC by the Parthian army under Mithradates I (ca. 171-138 BC). Even so, the available numismatic evidence corresponding to the leap years in this calendar remains extremely meagre. There are no dated Seleucid coins from Seleucia on the Tigris and the inclusion of combined month and year dates on Parthian coins did not start before the reign of Phraates IV (ca. 38-2 BC).

Our only examples from Seleucia on the Tigris with intercalary month dates have been a few Parthian tetrachrons. The first of these relates to the reign of Orodes II (ca. 57-38 BC) and carries no year date. The remaining examples are from the reigns of Phraates IV, Orodes III (ca. AD 6) and Vologases II (ca. AD 77-79). These, however, have contributed very little knowledge to a satisfactory reconstruction of the Seleuco-Macedonian calendar and its intercalary cycle. But, the fortuitous discovery in mid-1991 of a large hoard of Parthian tetrachrons yielded a small number of coins struck during several leap years other than those already known. These provided the required information and so occasioned a fresh reassessment of the calendar of Seleucia on the Tigris. Two of the specimens from this hoard bear, in addition to their year dates (AD 6 and 49 respectively), the month names either in full or abbreviated for convenience. These are respectively accompanied by EM (= Embolimos) and EFIBO (a degenerated abbreviation of EMBOAIMOZ = inserted) to signify the intercalary quality of the corresponding months (Dystros and Gorpiaios). I have taken this information and determined the correct structure of the Seleuco-Macedonian calendar. Furthermore, I have shown that this calendar experienced a subtle but important change in about 49 BC; the Parthians shifted its first month from Dios to Hyperberatetas! This meant that the embolismic month of the first year in the 19-year intercalary cycle changed from Hyperberatetas (the 12th month) to Gorpiaios (see Fig. 1) while years 4, 7, 10, 12, 15 and 18 each had an extra Dystros (the 6th month) in place of Xandikos. Such an early date for this shift contrasts sharply with those given by previous scholars who had proposed a date in the period AD 17-31 or even AD 46/7 in the reign of Gotarzes II (ca. AD 40-51).

I believe the change itself may have been introduced by the Parthians to harmonise their calendar at Seleucia on the Tigris with that operated at Antioch. This had its era beginning in 49 BC and Hyperberatetas as the first calendar month rather than Dios.

Further examples from the same hoard and other sources point to the fact that the retardation of Seleuco-Macedonian calendar by the Parthians may have lasted but for about a century (49 BC to AD 50/51).
Several dated tetradrachms of Vologases II and Pacorus II (ca. AD 78-105) indicate that during the period AD 77-79 Dios was, once again, the first month in the Parthian calendar. Unfortunately, there are no recorded coins or other evidence to clarify the state of this calendar during AD 49/50-77. Nonetheless, because a number of important reforms are reported to have taken place under Vologases I (ca. AD 51-54 and again from ca. AD 59-77), I suspect that the original calendar with Dios as the first month was restored by this king. For the period after AD 79 we have, yet again, no record of the first and embolismic months of the Parthian calendar. However, certain dated tetradrachms of Vologases IV (ca. AD 147-191) in my collection may suggest that Dios was taken as the first month throughout AD 79-228. The following is a summary of the state of Parthian calendar during its application at Seleucia on the Tigris:

1. before 49 BC: first month of the calendar = Dios with Xandikos and Hyperberetaitos as the embolismic months of the 19-year intercalary cycle.
2. period 49 BC–AD 50/51: first month of the calendar = Hyperberetaitos with Dystros and Gorpiaios as the embolismic months of the 19-year cycle.
3. period AD 50/51–77: either of the above two systems could have been used. But, I believe the original calendar (as in (1) above) was operational.
4. period AD 77-79: first month of the calendar = Dios with Xandikos and Hyperberetaitos as the embolismic months of the 19-year intercalary cycle.
5. period AD 79-228: first month of the calendar = Dios with Xandikos and Hyperberetaitos probably as the embolismic months of the 19-year intercalary cycle.

2. The Kings of the Parthian "Dark Age"

It is generally accepted that the interval between the death of Mithradates II and accession of Orodes II, i.e. the so-called Parthian "Dark Age", is a peculiarly impenetrable period of Arsacid rule. The reason for this lies primarily with the fact that apart from many coins from this period (so far fourteen different types) very little else has survived. Our sole classical reference to the Parthian affairs after the death of Mithradates II is found in the Prologue to Book 42 of Trogus Pompeius. He writes: *Ut varia conplurium regum in Parthis successeone imperium accepti Orodes, ...“Then an account of how, after a succession of several different kings in Parthia, Orodes acceded the throne,...”.

Turning to the numismatic material, it is important to realise that the history of
of Parthia has been, to a large extent, reconstructed from coinage. However, owing to the fact that the coins of Parthian "Dark Age" remain undated and carry no personal names, they have failed to clarify the history of this period and identify its kings.

During the last 35 years or so, fresh attempts have been made to correlate the Parthian coinage of the "Dark Age" with the kings mentioned in a few Babylonian cuneiform tablets. But, due to a string of conflicting interpretations of the texts, this has led, in its turn, to chapters of differing hypotheses and generated even further complications.

My own investigation of the problem began primarily with a fresh examination of the published material and collation of a number of very important but unedited Babylonian cuneiform tablets in the British and other museums. After compiling and analysing over 220 different texts (covering the period 141-6 BC), I realised that there were a number of serious inconsistencies in some of the translations by earlier scholars. Unfortunately, these had been overlooked for more than a century and inadvertently incorporated in subsequent publications leading to a series of erroneous conclusions.

Having eradicated these persistent errors and taken into account the extant numismatic material and classical references, I believe we can now have a much clearer picture of the Parthian "Dark Age". What is presented here is only a résumé of a more expanded and detailed work intended for inclusion in the book mentioned earlier.

2.1 – the last cuneiform tablet from Babylon referring to Mithradates II (ca. 123-91 BC) as "Arsaces, king of kings" is dated 3.III.221 SE (29/30 May 91 BC). There is another text from year 221 SE in the name of "king of kings" but unfortunately lacks the month date.

2.2 – the next Babylonian cuneiform text is in the name of "Arsaces who is called king Gotarzes". It too is dated 221 SE (91/90 BC) and provides the following two significant clues. Firstly, the death of Mithradates II happened during the period June-December 91 BC (at the latest) and not in 87 BC as is generally reckoned. Secondly, there was a father-son relationship between Mithradates II and Gotarzes I (ca. 91-87 BC). The text refers to a parchment sent by king Arsaces (= Gotarzes) to the governor and citizens of Babylon in month 9 of the same year (November/December 91 BC). It reads "... from the day when my father Arsaces, king of kings, had turned to fate (i.e. died), until the day when I...". This confirms the above points beyond any doubt.

New Attribution

2.3 – Sellwood type 28 drachms are the last issue of Mithradates II (Fig. 2). I have allocated S32 tetradrachms and S29 drachms (Fig. 3) to Gotarzes I. He can well be the "satrap of satraps" in the Behistun inscription.
of “Mithradates” and probably Gotarzes “Geopothros” of the adjacent relief there.

The last Babylonian text referring to Gotarzes I and his queen Ašıbatara, corresponds to the beginning of year 225 SE (April 87 BC).

**New Attribution**

2.4 – the king responsible for the demise of Mithradates II was Sinatruces (ca. 91-70/69 BC) to whom I have attributed S33 drachms (Fig. 4). The inclusion of the epithet ΝΙΚΑΤΟΡΟΣ (conqueror) in the inscription of this type signifies Sinatruces’ great victory over Mithradates II. This was accomplished with the aid of the Saca army.

Sinatruces was a son of Mithradates I (ca. 171-138 BC) and a brother of Phraates II (ca. 138-126 BC). The Saca invaders captured him after the defeat of the Parthian army and death of Phraates II. The father-son relationship between Mithradates I and Sinatruces is confirmed by the epithet ΘΕΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ (of divine descent, son of a deified father) on S33 silver and bronze issues. Lucian (*Macrobius, 15*) says he was an octogenarian when called to the throne and reigned for seven years while Phlegon of Trales gives the date of his death as Olympiad 177,3 (70/69 BC). However, Lucian’s accounts may refer to the latter part of Sinatruces’ reign (77-70 BC) when he clashed with the king of S30 coinage (see below). The long reign of about 20 years for Sinatruces is supported by the fact that his coins are the commonest among the Parthian coinage of the “Dark Age”.

A “mule” drachm in Sellwood’s collection with S33 obverse and S28 reverse together with the sequence of die engravers for Parthian drachms confirms the close proximity of the two types. The evidence from several hoards also suggests that S28, S33 and S29 were close issues.

There is no reference to Sinatruces in any of the surviving Babylonian tablets and his coinage lacks tetradrachms from Seleucia on the Tigris. These imply that his reign was confined to Iran and did not extend to Mesopotamia which remained firmly under Gotarzes I.

**New King (Mithradates III)**

2.5 – the next Babylonian cuneiform text, dated to month IV of year 225 SE (July-August 87 BC), refers to a king who “…sat on his throne”. To this king, I have attributed S31 coinage (Fig. 5). He was another son of Mithradates II who followed his brother Gotarzes I. The father-son relationship between Mithradates II and this king is confirmed by the epithet ΦΙΛΑΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ (loving his father, the devoted son) on his coinage. This is the king to whom Demetrios III (Eucaurus) was delivered in 87 BC. Josephus (Ant. Jud. XLI, 384-386) refers to him as “Mithradates, the king of Parthia” and the tablets mention him only as “king Arsaces” down to the beginning of year 231 SE (April 81 BC). The “annual” bronze coinage from Susa (S31.16-31.24) indicates that this king terminated Sinatruces’ rule over that city and confined him to the Iranian regions of the Empire. He also held
Susa for a further two years after the loss of Babylonia to the succeeding king.

2.6—the next series of Babylonian tablets beginning with 13.I.232 SE (10/11 April 80 BC) refer to a king “who is called Orodes”. He is later associated with Is-pabarza, his sister-queen, in the following tablets down to month IX of year 236 SE (December 76 - January 75 BC).

**New Attribution**

2.7—I have given S34 tetradrachms and drachms (Fig. 6) to Orodes I. His campaign against K Cumaxiris the king of El-ly-mais, is reported in a Babylonian tablet (with no mention of queen Anzaxes) during month XI of year 234 SE (= January-February 77 BC). The presence of an “anchor”, the royal insignia of Ellymite kings, on some of S34 drachms celebrates Orodes’ victory over K Cumaxiris. The general rarity of S34 coinage points to a comparatively short reign for this king.

**Third Son of Mithradates II**

2.8—a break of around six years (76-70 BC) in our cuneiform records prevents precise determination of the end of Orodes’ reign. But, it appears that from about 77/6 BC, a third son of Mithradates II was issuing tetradrachms in Seleucia, drachms in Iran and bronze coins in Susa. M. Mäthel (Num. Chron. 1980) has correctly identified a single engraver responsible for the reverse dies of S34.1 and S30.12 tetradrachms. The control mark ΣYM shared by these examples and S30.10 tetradrachms, and the presence of a “mule” drachm in Sellwood’s collection with S30 obverse and S34 reverse, establish the close proximity of S34 and S30 issues.

2.9—the father-son relationship between Mithradates II (defied by now) and the issuer of S30 may be inferred from the epithet ΘΕΟΠΙΑΤΟΡΟΣ on the coinage of this king (Fig. 7). Unfortunately, his personal name is not found on any of the currently available cuneiform texts in the period 236-242 SE (76/5-70/69 BC). However, I believe he might have been called Arataan (Mithradates II had his father and a brother called by this name).

2.10—the presence in Sellwood’s collection of a “mule” drachm with S30 obverse and S33 reverse, and also certain S30 drachms carrying full mint names (Fig. 8) indicate a long struggle between S30 and Sinatruces. This ended with the demise of the latter in 70/69 BC. A cuneiform tablet from Babylon dated month XII, year 242 SE (= February-March 69 BC) refers to a “king Arseses” without his personal name. The number of “annual” bronze issues from Susa (S30.33-30.43) reveals that after Sinatruces, while Phraates III was in overall control of Parthia, the king of S30 was active in south-western regions of the Empire during ca. 69-66/5 BC.

2.11—a single tablet dated 243 SE (69/8 BC) and three from year 244 SE (68/7 BC) refer to a “king Arseses” in association with his queen, Piruzatana. This may well be Phraates III who had eventually
recovered Babylonia but was still being opposed by the king of S30 (Artabanes II). It is conceivable that Phraates III issued S37 tetradrachms at this point in time to inaugurate his rule. The similarity between the tiaras on this issue and those on S33 of Sinatraces, and, the one worn by Phraates III on S39 tetradrachms and drachms support the attribution. It is also possible to assign S36 issue (Fig. 9) to Phraates III since we know of no other claimant at this point in time who could have issued tetradrachms at Seleucia, drachms from all operational mints in Parthia and five “annual” bronze types (S36.23-36.27) in Susa. The epithet ΦΙΛΟΠΙΑΤΟΡΟΣ on S37 and S36 not only exemplifies the father-son relationship between Sinatraces and Phraates III, but also indicates the proximity of the two reigns (according to Philemon of Tralles, Sinatraces died in 70/69 BC and was followed by his son Phraates III).

2.12 – S35 drachms (Figs. 10-12) may also be attributed to Phraates III who occupied Media-Atropatene after Pompey captured the local ruler Darius and carried him off to Rome about 66 BC. Although frontal portraits are normally associated with kings originating from Media-Atropatene, I believe it can also imply that the issuer had recovered and was in full control of that region. The presence of the epithet ΘΕΟΠΙΑΤΟΡΟΣ on this issue again reconfirms the father-son relationship between Sinatraces and Phraates III.

2.13 – a single tablet from Babylon dated 182 AE (246 SE = 66/5 BC) refers to an “Arsaces, king of kings” in association with a queen whose name has not survived. Thereafter, we have a tablet from year 248 SE (64/3 BC) referring to an “Arsaces, king of kings”, one dated 249 SE (63/2 BC) mentioning “Arsaces, king of kings” accompanied by his queen, Telechike, and finally one from the beginning of year 254 SE (March 58 BC) giving “Arsaces, king of kings”. These may conveniently be assigned to Phraates III whose final coinage includes S38 and S39 (Figs. 13 and 14). A “mule” drachm with S38 obverse and S30.18 reverse in Sellwood’s collection confirms the overlap or proximity of the reigns of S30 king (Artabanes II) and Phraates III.

**New Attribution**

2.14 – I have attributed S44 tetradrachms to Mithradates IV (62/1-54 BC) whose coinage includes S40 and S41 (Figs. 15 and 16). He was appointed by Phraates III as ruler of Media-Atropatene and probably co-reigned with his father during ca. 62/1-58/7 BC. His sole rule covered the period 58/7-54 BC and was inaugurated by S44 tetradrachms. These have a fabric and workmanship more akin to the earlier types, i.e. S36-S38 of Phraates III than the later issues such as S45-S47 of Orodes II. Their inscription includes ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡ-ΣΑΚΟΥ, i.e. the same as that on S41 drachms. The S41 tetradrachms of Mithradates IV, carrying his personal name, were minted very
shortly before his demise. The surviving examples suggest that they were seized and over-struck by victorious Orodes II.

The above conclusions and new attributions may be summarised as follows:

(b) -- Gotarzes I (ca. 91-87/6 BC) son of Mithradates II. Coinage = S32 tetradrachms and, S29 drachms and bronze (S32 drachms are an aberrant type of S28 coinage of Mithradates II from mints to the east of Parthia).
(c) -- Sinatruces (ca. 91-70/69 BC) son of Mithradates I. Coinage = S33.
(d) -- Mithradates III (ca. 87/6-79/8 BC) son of Mithradates II. Coinage = S31.
(e) -- Orodes I (ca. 80-76/5 BC) brother of Mithradates II. Coinage = S34.
(f) -- Artabanus I king of S30 (ca. 77/6-66/5 BC) son of Mithradates II. Coinage = S30.
(g) -- Phraates III (ca. 70/69-58/7 BC) son of Sinatruces. Coinage = S37, S36, S35, S38 and S39.
(h) -- Mithradates IV (ca. 62/1-58/7 BC) son of Phraates III and co-regent with his father. Coinage = S47.
(i) -- Mithradates IV (ca. 58/7-54 BC) sole rule. Coinage = S44 tetradrachms and S41.

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About the author—Dr. G.R.F. Assar was born in Tehran, Iran in 1951. He graduated with a BSc in Chemical Engineering from Tehran University in 1973. He started his postgraduate studies at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, Scotland in the autumn of 1977, and received his PhD in Chemical Engineering from there in 1982. He has been collecting Parthian coins (exclusively) since the age of 8 with his father's support and encouragement. He has studied a large number of Babylonian cuneiform tablets (mainly housed at the British Museum, London) and collected and edited over 220 different texts directly related to the period 141-6 BC of Parthian history.

Dr. Assar states that: "This work has never been undertaken by any of the past or present scholars. In many cases, I have eradicated inconsistencies and errors in published transliterations and translations of the relevant texts. Combining the historical notices in these tablets with the classical literary sources and available numismatic evidence, I have been able to clarify a number of ambiguous issues in the Parthian history of the above period. The two articles (Part I and II in The Celator) represent a summary of the conclusions from my research whose full discussions and several chapters on the entire Parthian series would appear in a book I hope to have ready for publication in late 2001."