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Recent Studies in Parthian History: Part III

by Dr. G.R.E. Assar

As the editorial revision of Part II of my article (see January issue of The Celator) was nearing completion, an important Parthian tetradrachm (Fig. 1) appeared as lot no. 326 in the catalogue of Triton IV sale (5 December 2000). This was considered as a Sellwood type 18.1 overstruck on a tetradrachm of the Bacchic king Euthydemus I (ca. 230/225-200). Yet, it became at once clear that the undertype could but be a tetradrachm of the rebellious Characanian ruler, Hyspaosimes. He had been proclaimed king in Babylon during June 128–May 127 and very likely controlled Seleucia too. He might even have temporarily annexed Babylonia in March-June 126 and issued a series of coins at the royal mint of Seleucia. Finally, he had to give way to a “new” Parthian king who ruled for a mere 7-8 months.

This prompted me to firstly include an addendum at the end of Part II, highlighting the historical importance of the coin in question, and then consider a further publication devoted entirely to its brief discussion involving other related evidence.

As in the case of Part II, all dates here are in BC and Seleucia refers to the Seleucid royal city on the Tigris unless stated otherwise.

The “New” Parthian King

In rejecting Sellwood type 18 as an inter-regnal issue, purportedly authorised by the mint officials at Seleucia in ca. 127, I tentatively assigned the coinage to Bagasias. He was a brother of Mithradates I (ca. 171-138) and appointed satraps of Media Atropatene when that province fell to the Parthians in ca. 148/7 (see Part II). The sole basis for this attribution was a cursory reference to a “king Arsaces” in the period following the death of Phraates II in mid-March 126 and before the accession of Artaeus I in the last quarter of that same year. This unique evidence is contained in a Babylonian cuneiform tablet compiled in 245 SE (April 67–March 66) as a special type of non-tabular astronomical text termed “Goal-Year Text” by the Late Professor A. J. Sachs (J. of Cuneiform Studies, 2 (1948), pp. 282-285).

The section allocated to certain planetary data on Saturn in this tablet precedes its colophon date by 59 years and opens with “[year 170]+16, Arsaces (being) king, month IV, until around the 14th ....”. I should emphasise that although the year-number in this particular paragraph is only partially preserved it can confidently be restored with the aid of other dates in the same text. Yet the accuracy of this and a number of similar citations have always remained open to question since the corresponding tablets are non-contemporary. For-
fortunately, the uncertainty over the value of brief historical statements in this particular class of astronomical texts has recently been removed. By analysing the colophon texts of numerous different cuffeiform tablets from Babylon and Uruk, I have shown that due care was exercised by the scribes in recording such notices and they can, therefore, be treated with confidence. The omissions and slips in these are no more serious than those detected in many contemporary tablets.

Having restored the reliability of the above text, we may now consider the available numismatic material. Unfortunately, there has never been a comprehensive analysis of the Parthian coins in the period ca. 138-123 (after the death of Mithradates I until the accession of Mithradates II) in association with other related records. This has led, in some cases, to conflicting assignments and untenable hypotheses. However, I believe a careful consideration of the extant evidence can lead to more plausible conclusions although the true identity of some of the kings in this period may still remain elusive.

As already submitted in Part II, it appears that production of coinage at the mint of Seleucia was interrupted with the absence of Parthian kings from that city. We have seen that the last tetradrachms (S13.5) and drachms (S13.10) of Mithradates I, dated DOR on the Seleuco-Macedonian reckoning, were minted during the period October 139-August 138. Thereafter, as a direct result of Phraates' preoccupation with hostile nomadic incursions in the north, the mint ceased to issue further coins until S17 tetradrachms celebrating his victory over Antiochus VII in early summer 129. A similar situation arose under Artabanus I. With the reassertion of Parthian authority in southern Mesopotamia during November 125-January 124, the Parthian king moved to repel the Saka invaders in the northeast. In his absence, the Seleucia mint terminated his S21 tetradrachms and then only resumed striking on the accession of Mithradates II in 123. Hence the absence of coins dated QPR (189 S.E. = 124/3) from this period.

Considering this fact alone excludes the possibility of a posthumous or inter-regnal coinage at the behest of the mint magistrates in Seleucia during the period in question. Added to this is the reverse inscription and inaugural-celebratory quality of S18 tetradrachms. The former reads ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ, implying (the coin of) king Arsaces, while the latter is accentuated by the reverse motif depicting a seated deity holding a wreath-bearing flying Nike. However, our final and decisive clue, connecting the issue with a real rather than fictitious Parthian king, is derived from the overstrike mentioned above.

That the undertype for this important piece is a tetradrachm of Hypsopaisines and not that of Euthydemos is in no doubt. I had the opportunity of examining the coin, which was kindly made available at the CNG Offices in London. Although its reverse retains only minute traces of the inscription from the original coin, this suffices to confirm the reading ΥΣΙΠΑΟΣΙΝΟΥ in the left field rather than ΕΥΘΥΔΗΜΟΥ. At the same time, what is left of the seated Herakles from the undertype clinches the argument.

As illustrated in Fig. 2, on the reverse of this class of Euthydemos' tetradrachms is normally depicted a nude Herakles sitting upon a piece of rock (or an anvil?) which is draped in lion skin. He also holds in his right hand a club.
that rests on his right thigh. It is often possible to discern, on relatively well preserved examples, the lion’s head and forelegs hanging down the right side of the rock.

As their model for this issue the Bactrian die-cutters presumably took either certain tetradrachms of the Seleucid ruler Antiochus I, Soter (281-261) or very probably those of his son and successor Antiochus II, Theos (261-246). The reverses of these Seleucid prototypes have a motif only slightly different from that found on Euthydemos’ tetradrachms.

Turning to Hyspaosines’ issues from both Charax-Spasinu and Seleucia mints (Figs. 3 & 4), one would unhesitatingly notice a striking resemblance between their reverse themes and that of Euthydemos’. But, while at first sight the seated Herakles on the two classes of Hyspaosines’ tetradrachms may appear analogous, they surely exhibit subtle stylistic and iconographical differences. The one that immediately sets these two examples apart is the lion’s tail on the Seleucia example. It stretches over Herakles’ right thigh and then drops down with its tufted end resting on the ground between his legs. A plaster cast of the coin displays this feature more clearly (Fig. 5).

Having examined a number of Characencian tetradrachms from the recent hoard and several illustrations of other examples I can now confirm that the above feature is a unique characteristic of Hyspaosines’ coinage issued at Seleucia. Equally, the many tetradrachms of Euthydemos I, pictured in different publications and sale catalogues, reveal the absence of lion’s tail from their reverse designs although these virtually remain identical with that found on the examples from Charax-Spasinu.

A partially preserved cuneiform tablet dated to month I in 186 SE (March-April 126) gives sketchy reports of Hyspaosines’ activities in 185 SE and also plunder by the Arab raiders in Babylonia. The death of Phraates II and massacre of Parthian army by the Sakae appears to have offered the former the opportunity to once again exercise his power possibly as far as Seleucia. However, he is not styled “king” in this particular text while he was so during 13.III.184–24.II.185 SE (27/8 June 128 – 28/9 May 127). This suggests that we may have to assign his Seleucia coinage to the earlier period assuming, of course, that he had then held the royal city.
The present overstrike not only displays on its reverse traces of Hyspaosines' name, but the remains of the seated Herakles and the lion's tail link the undertype with his unique example from Seleucia. There can now be little doubt about the identity of the original coin; a tetradrachm of Hyspaosines from Seleucia which was deliberately obliterated and utilised for striking S18 tetradrachms.

The combined cuneiform and numismatic evidence implies, rather strongly, that although Hyspaosines provisionally controlled Seleucia in Phraates' absence and perhaps even after the Parthian fiasco in the north, he was eventually supplanted and his coinage suppressed by an Arsacid ruler. I believe there is no real value in assuming that under Characenian rule the mint personnel could have initiated a separate issue with the effigy of a Parthian king that had died over a decade earlier. Firstly, if that ever happened why was Phraates' portrait (as found on his S17 coinage) replaced with that of his dead father, Mithradates I? Secondly, and more importantly, who was responsible for expelling Hyspaosines from Seleucia, suppressing his tetradrachms and then overstriking the issue in the name of "king Arsaces"? The only possibility might be Himerus, a young Hyrcanian probably of Greek descent and unrelated to the Arsacid family. Justin (Book 42.1.3) writes that after his victory over Antiochus VII, the Parthian king left "the charge of his kingdom to a certain Himerus who, in the bloom of his youth, had been his lover". However, in an earlier passage on the Seleucid failed expedition (Book 38.8.10) he states that "Phraates gave him (Antiochus) a funeral befitting a king and took as his wife the daughter of Demetrius (II), whom Antiochus had brought with him, and with whom he (Phraates) fell in love". Considering the fact that on ascending the throne Phraates was only about fourteen years old, Justin's statements leave the Parthian king's liaison with Himerus open to speculation.

According to Trogus Pompeius (Prologue to Book 42), Himerus waged a war against Mescene (Characene) and treated the inhabitants of Babylon and Seleucia with brutality. But, according to the contemporary records Hyspaosines seems to have prevailed victorious and remained in control of Babylonia during June 128 – May 127. At the same time, the recently discovered variety of S18 tetradrachms dated ZITP (187 SE, beginning 19/20 September 126) prove that Himerus could not possibly have been responsible for this issue. The few surviving historical notices from Babylon are silent about him after May-June 130 (see Part II). A passage dated to month VIII of 185 SE (30/31 October—29/30 November 127) suggests that a certain Indupane (satrap of BABYLONIA) might have been in control of Babylon, Borsippa and Seleucia.

As discussed in Part II, Bagasis (the satrap of Media-Atropatene) possibly out-lived both his brother Mithradates I and nephew Phraates II. Although not mentioned in the last tablet referred to above, he probably despatched an army under a certain Timarchus to reinforce the Parthian contingent in Babylonia. The corresponding lines read: "That month, on the 4th, Timarkus who previously from the side of king Arsaces was appointed the guard commander and who in month IV had escaped from Aspasine, came
from the side of Indupane with troops of Media; they entered Babylon. After the provision of one bull and three sheep sacrifices on "The 6th, they went to Borsippa. The 8th, they came out from Borsippa and went to the side of Indupane to the area of Seleucia which is on the Tigris".

Around five months later in March I26 and after the death of Phraates II, a true Parthian king came to the throne, reigned for about 7-8 months and was succeeded by Artabanus I. Whether he personally expelled Hyspaosines or this had already been accomplished earlier remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that under him Hyspaosines' tetradrachms from Seleucia were discontinued, withdrawn from circulation and destroyed by overstriking them with S18 dies.

I have identified this king with Bagasitis but he may have been a different Parthian prince whose name still remains unknown to us.

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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 three articles (Parts I, II and III 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."