PARTHIAN MESOPOTAMIA

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The culture of Parthian Mesopotamia is the result of mutual contributions and interrelations originated long before the beginnings of the Parthian period, which traditionally spans from the conquest of Mithradates I, in 140-141 BC, to the rise of the Sasanian dynasty, in AD 224. Even the region denoted by the term Mesopotamia – the homeland of Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations –, which is overlapped for its largest part by nowadays Iraq and conventionally extends along the course of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, must be considered in a wider geographical and historical context, particularly when referring to the period following the adventure of Alexander, for it reveals to have had cultural and commercial connections with all the regions of Hellenized Asia.

Literary and material evidence is not extensive and there are many blanks in the reconstruction of complex cultural events – a reconstruction that, in the lack of other sources or new data, is often limited to art history –, but it is clear that in any attempt at a definition of the culture and art of Mesopotamia in the Parthian period there are two capital arguments that cannot be neglected: (*a*) the tenacity of the ancient Mesopotamian culture, filtrated through the Achaemenid tradition, and (*b*) the way this culture evolved after its direct and astonishing encounter with the Greek culture and art at the end of the 4th century BC.

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The dialogue induced by this event originated a process of cultural interaction and led to the creation of a common language that characterized the artistic production for centuries, but the ancient Mesopotamian tradition can be considered as the basis of the complex culture of the region at least until the turn of the common era. Literary and archaeological evidence indicates that this tradition revived after Alexander with the full support of the Seleucid sovereigns – the heirs of the Macedonian conqueror who presented themselves as kings of Babylon (*Sharru Babili*), as well as Basileis, and displayed a propitious attitude to local customs –,w[1] but its persistence seems attested well after the Parthian conquest.

Extensive layers of occupation, dating to the Hellenistic and Parthian periods, show that ancient Mesopotamian cities such as Babylon, Uruk, Assur and Borsippa continued to exist as important religious and administrative centres, while ruins of large buildings in the same sites indicate that traditional sanctuaries, built or restored under the direct patronage of the Seleucids, were still in use during the entire Parthian period.[2]

At Uruk, the main centre of South Mesopotamia, at least two monumental sanctuaries were built by local governors, with the support of Antiochus III, following the traditional Babylonian layout: the Bit Resh, including the temple dedicated to Anu and Antum, which was erected close to the ziqqurrat already dedicated to Anu in the second half of the 4th millennium BC and restored by the Seleucids, revealing a clear link with the traditional local cult; the Irigal, only partially unearthed, which was dedicated, according to cuneiform sources, to Ishtar and Nanna, maybe with the purpose of replacing the ancient E-anna sanctuary. In the layout of the Bit Resh, which is far better preserved, no Hellenistic influences are clearly detectable: this is characterized by wide courtyards surrounded by several rooms made in mudbricks, which had different functions, and, in its centre, by the cellae of Anu and Antum, built in baked bricks. Its façades were even articulated in niches, as they were in all other Mesopotamian temples, and decorated with glazed bricks representing traditional animal or monsters (fig. 1).[3]

Official worship in the Esagila seems attested by few epigraphs down to the beginnings of the Sasanian period,[4] while a Greek inscription of the beginnings

1 Messina 2004 Continuità, 169-172, and selected bibliography.

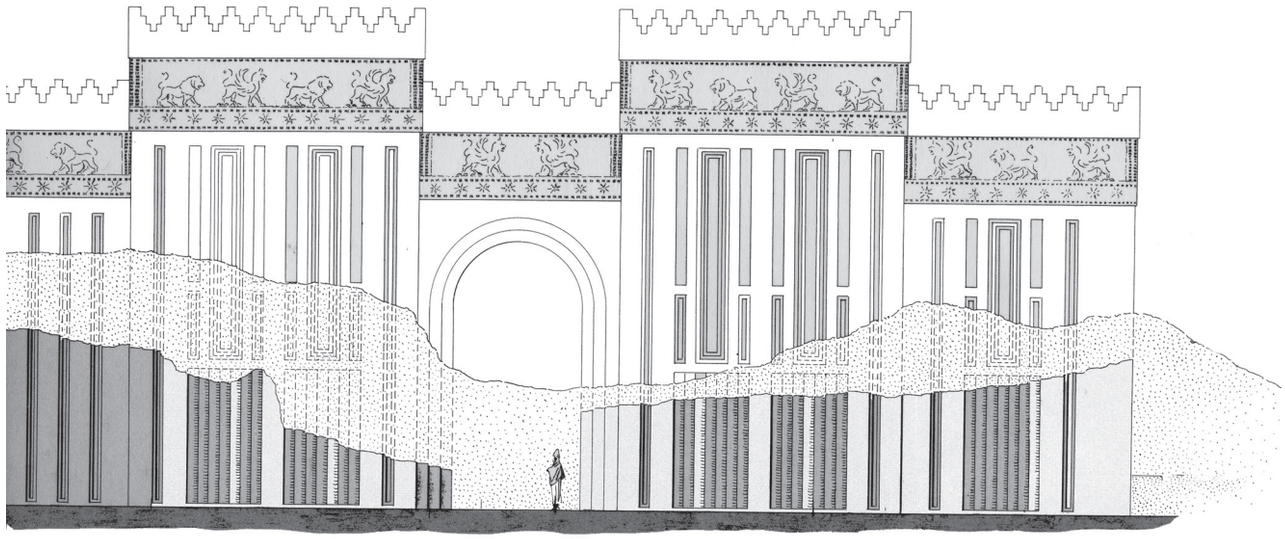
2 Downey 1988 *Religious architecture*, 137-173.

3 See the restored façade and decoration in Kose 1998 *Architektur*, encl. 59.

4 Joannès 2004 *Mesopotamia*, 253-254.

1. Uruk, Bit Resh. Restored façade and decoration (after KOSE 1998 *Architektur*, encl. 59).

2. Seleucia on the Tigris, stoa (after VALTZ 1990 Archives Square, pl. III).



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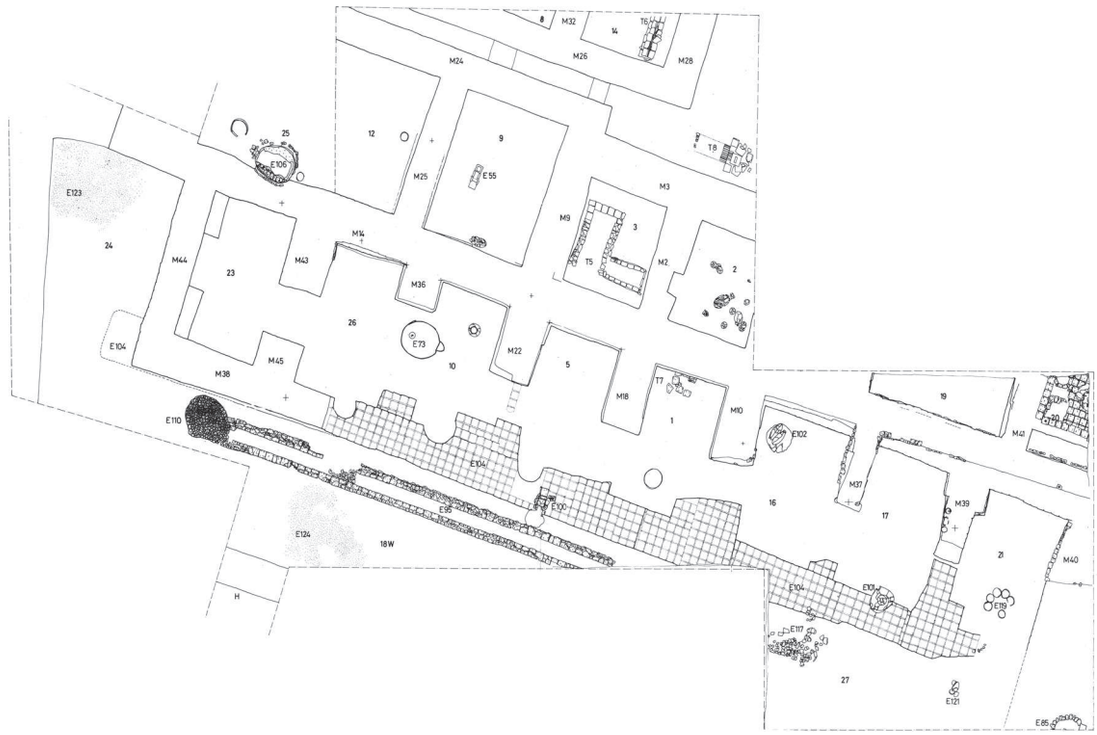

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of the 4th century AD proves the continuation of a Babylonian cult practice in Borsippa.[5]

These buildings were certainly the seats of active traditional institutions, for the survival of cuneiform script must be dependant upon the existence of scribal schools within the circle of local priests: this is well attested not only by cuneiform sources, but also by the archaeological findings, such those of Uruk, where two important archives of cuneiform tablets, concerning for their largest part prebends and private transactions, were situated into rooms of the Bit Resh and Irigal, and kept under the care of at least one well known family of priests, that of Anu-Belshunu.[6]

According to some scholars, the documents available became much more rare and almost exclusively of an astronomical nature after the middle of the 1st century BC, and disappeared during the 1st century AD,[7] a date however postponed by other scholars to the 2nd or even 3rd century AD, on the evidence of the so-called Graeco-Babyloniaca tablets.[8]

Public buildings, temples and houses continued to be built in mudbricks, as they were for millennia, even in the case of buildings revealing a clear Greek influence, such as the stoa of Seleucia on the Tigris (fig. 2);[9] the unchanged production of commonware and the local custom of burying the dead under the floor of the houses (pl. 17.1),[10] attested in some centres down to the Parthian period,[11] denote the affection of a large part of the inhabitants for their Mesopotamian roots; and local influence in handicrafts is also revealed by the production of terracotta figurines.

It is doubtful whether the Parthian sovereigns displayed the same propitious attitude of the Seleucids to local customs, but some evidence seem to show that the Parthian elites agreed to the culture of the Seleucid court while ascending to power: this culture was the synthesis of different components – in particular, of the Mesopotamian culture of the local elites and of the Iranian culture of one branch of the Seleucid dynasty –, but remained basically Hellenistic.

Soon after the middle of the 2nd century BC, Mithradates I conquered Mesopotamia and relegated the last Seleucids in Syria. He was the leader of a dynasty native of the Central Asian steppes and founded in the mid 3rd century BC: the Arsacids.

After their accession, purposing to legitimate themselves as the new rulers of Asia, these sovereigns embraced, together with their court, the Hellenistic culture that was by that time the common language of the countries they had subjected, although they never disclaimed their nomadic roots and their basically Iranian culture. Whether this choice was made at their convenience or not, the extraordinary finds of Old Nisa – the abode of the dynasty – show that the retinue of the early Arsacid sovereigns actually assimilated the habits of a Hellenistic court, at least in their attitude: the outstanding corpus of ivory rhytons, which in their different styles show at least two groups of a remarkable Hellenistic tradition,[12] the small silver figurines representing Greek deities,[13] and the almost life-size clay sculptures portraying the ancestors of the dynasty in a clear Greek appearance[14] could be read in this context.

Following the Seleucid propaganda Mithradates I ascended the throne as the real founder of the Parthian empire, being portrayed on coins struck in Mesopotamia in right profile with the diadem tied at his nape;[15] and by doing so he also established a model for the Arsacid royal iconography that was followed by several of his successors.

5 *Ibid*.

6 According to some scholars (Lindström 2003 *Uruk*, 71-72), the biggest archive was housed into the room 79b of the Bit Resh, together with clay bullae that sealed folded parchments. See *Ibid.*, n. 424, for selected bibliography, and Van Dijk 1962 Inschriftenfunde, with particular regard to the Anu Belshunu family.

7 Joannès 2004 *Mesopotamia*, 226-254.

8 Geller 1997 Wedge, 44-46.

9 This was a great building bounding the eastern side of the main agora of Seleucia on the Tigris – the northern agora – and facing the public archives: it was composed by a rows of more than 8 rectangular rooms with a paved front on the square (Valtz 1990 Archives Square, pl. III).

10 Messina 2006 *Archivi*, 144-150.

11 In centres like Uruk, Babylon, Nippur and Assur burials of the Seleucid and Parthian periods were located in specific areas within the city walls and inside buildings that were partially in use, while at Seleucia on the Tigris these were located under the floors of inhabited houses of the Parthian period, both in the Block G6 and in the area of the archives building (Messina 2006 *Archivi*, 144-145, and selected bibliography).

12 Among the carved friezes decorating the 48 rhytons found in the so-called 'Square House' of Old Nysa different groups can be distinguished by their style: starting from the genuine Hellenistic production of some carvings, which can be considered as the most ancient examples of the corpus, some works seem to evolve toward a less naturalistic representation of the figures. A recent study on the ivory rhytons found at Old Nysa has been published by Pappalardo 2010 *Rhyta*. With regard to the Hellenistic influence on the rhytons of Old Nysa, see Invernizzi 1994 Grundlagen.

13 Figurines of Athena Parthenos and Eros harvesting, made in gilded silver, have been found in the so-called 'Square House' (Invernizzi 1999 *Sculture di metallo*, 11-48).

14 Fragments of clay statues have been discovered in different points of Old Nysa, particularly in the so-called 'Square Hall' and 'Round Hall'. The best preserved fragments show male bearded heads with diadem or pseudo-attic helmet (Pilipko 1991 Testa; Pilipko 1991 Head): one of these heads has been interpreted as the posthumous portrait of Mithradates I, represented in the manner of a philosopher (Invernizzi 2001 Dynastic art).

15 Remarkable coins of Mithradates I, preserved in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale (Cabinet des médailles), are published by Le Rider 1965 *Suse*, pl. LXX:16-20.