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The Bones of Khosrow: The Sacred Topography of Ctesiphon

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ا ان ای دل عبرت بین از دیده نظر کن هان
ب وان مدائن را آیینهٔ عبرت دان
ت ک ره ز ره دجله منزل به مدائن کن
ث ز دیده دوم دجله بر خاک مدائن ران
خاقانی

Abstract: This essay discusses the importance of Ctesiphon in the historical and literary tradition of Sasanian and Post-Sasanian Iran. It is proposed that there was a significant buildup of the Ctesiphon's defenses in the third century that it made its conquest by the Roman Empire impossible and its gave it an aura of impregnability. By the last Sasanian period the city was not only inhabited by Iranian speaking people and a capital, but it also became part of Iranian lore and tradition, tied to mythical Iranian culture-heroes and kings. Even with the fall of the Sasanian Empire, in Arabic and Persian poetry the grandeur and memory of Ctesiphon was preserved as part of memory of the great empires of the past.

Keywords: Ctesiphon, Mada'in, Weh-ardašīr, Asbānbar, Parthian, Sasanian.

Ctesiphon has stood in the memory of the Iranians and the Arab Muslims who came afterwards as the great capital of bygone times. Its constant mention in the Persian epic, the *Shāhnāmeh* of Ferdowsī in the tenth, and also in the Arabic and Persian historiography and the literary tradition is a testament to the importance of this late antique metropolis. In the Arabic poetic tradition, one can find many examples of admiration of Ctesiphon for its magnificence with its palaces, gardens, paintings and arches.[1] As it has been noted, the presence of Ctesiphon was both a source of awe and power in late antiquity, but also of unease for the new Arab Muslim rulers, in that it forced them to create a more

[1] Irwin 2009, 27–28; Savant 2013, 182–183.

monumental urban center, namely that of Baghdad.[2] But, for the Iranians, the "trauma" and "nostalgia," for the loss of an empire and what they viewed as their heartland,[3] known as *Del-ī Ērānšahr* (Heart of the Iranian Empire), was translated into Persian poetics, attesting not only to its grandeur, but also as a didactic lesson of impermanence of things. This sense of Iranian nostalgia for the city of Ctesiphon is best captured in the poem by the 12th century poet, Khāghānī who while passing through Iraq began reminiscing about the arch of Madā'īn (**Fig. 1**). In the Iranian world while the edifices crumble and wither, it is Persian poetry which immortalizes them, and Ctesiphon is not an exception to the rule.

Compared to Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, works on the Partho-Sasanian winter capital is few and far in-between.[4] The major studies on Ctesiphon include E. Herzfeld's excavations from 1903–1911;[5] the important work of M. Streck on both Seleucia and Ctesiphon and the literary sources on the place;[6] the German-American excavations of 1931–1932 by O. Reuther and E. Kühnel;[7] the Italian excavations by G. Gullini and A. Invernizzi, intermittently since the mid-1960s to the 1970s;[8] S. Hauser's important study of the round city of Weh-Ardaxšīr;[9] and most recently the work of Chiabrando, C. Lippolis, V. Messina and S. Scicca;[10] and V. Messina's latest study of a Sasanian watchtower, close to Weh-Ardaxšīr.[11] In terms of artistic and stucco finds, the work of J. Kröger presents us with the aesthetic beauty of the once magnificent palace and the city.[12] In terms of the pomp and ceremonies at Ctesiphon, mainly during the reign of Khosrow I (631–579 CE), M. Canepa has surveyed and discussed its ideological importance for the Sasanian Empire.[13]

What is clear is that looking from the West, Ctesiphon appeared to be the seat of the great Parthian and then, Sasanian kings. Most likely Ctesiphon became an important winter capital when Mithradates I (171–138 BCE) conquered Mesopotamia from the Seleucids and brought the Parthians to the land.[14] While the Greeks mainly stayed in the old city of Seleucia, the Parthians inhabited the new city on the other side of the Tigris River. This information is gained from two sources, the first that of Strabo (16.1.16):

> πάλαι μὲν οὖν ἡ Βαβυλὼν ἦν μητρόπολις τῆς Ἀσσυρίας, νῦν δὲ Σελεύκεια ἡ ἐπὶ τῷ Τίγρει λεγομένη. πλησίον δ' ἐστὶ κώμη Κτησιφῶν λεγομένη, μεγάλη: ταύτην δ' ἐποιοῦντο χειμάδιον οἱ τῶν Παρθυαίων βασιλεῖς φειδόμενοι τῶν Σελευκέων, ἵνα μὴ κατασταθμεύοιντο ὑπὸ τοῦ Σκυθικοῦ φύλου καὶ στρατιωτικοῦ: δυνάμει οὖν Παρθικῇ πόλις ἀντὶ κώμης ἐστὶ * καὶ τὸ μέγεθος, τοσοῦτόν

[2] Savant 2013, 171.

[3] For nostalgia and trauma related to empire, see Vasunia 2021, 500–511.

[4] For a survey of all previous works until recent times see, Morony, 2009; Kröger 2011; Simpson, Ctesiphon 2022, http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t256/e259.

[5] Sarre – Herzfeld 1920.

[6] Streck 1900, 246–276; Streck 1917.

[7] Reuther 1930; Breck 1931, 229–230; Upton 1932, 188–197; Kühnel 1931/1932.

[8] Gullini 1966, 7–38; Invernizzi 1976, 167–175.

[9] Hauser 2007, 461–489.

[10] Chiabrando – Lippolis – Messina – Scicca 2017, 151–171.

[11] Messina 2018, 95–104.

[12] Kröger 1982.

[13] Canepa 2009.

[14] Dąbrowa 2005, 77.

Fig. 1. The Arch of Khosrow. Photography by Alexander Svoboda, circa 1850–1888 (Collection Centre Canadian d'Architecture)

γε πλῆθος δεχομένη καὶ τὴν κατασκευὴν ὑπ᾽ ἐκείνων αὐτῶν κατεσκευασμένη καὶ τὰ ὤνια καὶ τὰς τέχνας προσφόρους ἐκείνοις πεπορισμένη. εἰώθασι γὰρ ἐνταῦθα τοῦ χειμῶνος διάγειν οἱ βασιλεῖς διὰ τὸ εὐάερον: θέρους δὲ ἐν Ἐκβατάνοις καὶ τῇ Ὑρκανίᾳ διὰ τὴν ἐπικράτειαν τῆς παλαιᾶς δόξης. ὥσπερ δὲ Βαβυλωνίαν τὴν χώραν καλοῦμεν, οὕτω καὶ τοὺς ἄνδρας τοὺς ἐκεῖθεν Βαβυλωνίους καλοῦμεν, οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς πόλεως, ἀλλ᾽ ἀπὸ τῆς χώρας: ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς Σελευκείας ἧττον, κἂν ἐκεῖθεν ὦσι, καθάπερ Διογένη τὸν στωικὸν φιλόσοφον.

In former times the capital of Assyria was Babylon; it is now called Seleucia upon the Tigris. Near it is a large village called Ctesiphon. This the Parthian kings usually made their winter residence, with a view to spare the Seleucians the burden of furnishing quarters for the Scythian soldiery. In consequence of the power of Parthia, Ctesiphon may be considered as a city rather than a village; from its size it is capable of lodging a great multitude of people; it has been adorned with public buildings by the Parthians, and has furnished merchandise, and given rise to arts profitable to its masters. The kings usually passed the winter there, on account of the salubrity of the air, and the summer at Ecbatana and in Hyrcania induced by the ancient renown of these places. As we call the country Babylonia, so we call the people Babylonians, not from the name of the city, but of the country; the case is not precisely the same, however, as regards even natives of Seleucia, as, for instance, Diogenes, the stoic philosopher [who had the appellation of the Babylonian, and not the Seleucian.[15]

[15] Strabo, 16.1.16.

Most recently, Michael Shenkar has pointed out that Ctesiphon may not have been the kind of capital that one may typically think of, such as that of Rome or Constantinople.[16] Those who have studied Iranian history do know that the idea of a capital in the modern sense did not exist as such in the ancient period, and that the Iranian kings, at least from the Achaemenid period used multiple locations for their seasonal stay, at Ecbatana, Susa, Persepolis, Babylon,[17] and also for the Parthian Empire.[18] However, this polycentric nature of the Iranian Empires, mainly because of its expanse and climate should not deceive us in thinking there were no major and permanent center(s) of power. Neither the Parthians, nor the Sasanians were a wandering kingship in the sense of the Medieval Germanic kingdoms. Still, the fact remains that Ctesiphon did act as a sort of "center" for the Parthians, where nobles of the empire came together to symbolically act in unison to crown the king of kings. Perhaps since Ctesiphon was outside of the traditional Parthian lands of the nobility, the city would be a neutral meeting ground for unifying dynastic power. The clearest reference in this regard is given by Tacitus (6.42):

> Tiridates rem Seleucensem populo permittit. mox consultans quonam die sollemnia regni capesseret, litteras Phraatis et Hieronis qui validissimas praefecturas obtinebant accipit, brevem moram precantium. placitumque opperiri viros praepollentis, atque interim Ctesiphon sedes imperii petita: sed ubi diem ex die prolatabant, multis coram et adprobantibus Surena patrio more Tiridaten insigni regio evinxit.
>
> Tiridates gave the government of Seleucia to the people. Soon afterwards, as he was deliberating on what day he should inaugurate his reign, he received letters from Phraates and Hiero, who held two very powerful provinces, imploring a brief delay. It was thought best to wait for men of such commanding influence, and meanwhile Ctesiphon, the seat of empire, was their chosen destination. But as they postponed their coming from day to day, the Surena, in the presence of an approving throng, crowned Tiridates, according to the national usage, with the royal diadem.[19]

In this essay I would like to suggest that based on the spurious literary as well as archaeological evidence, one can suggest that in time Ctesiphon, not only became an important administrative center of *Erānšahr*, but it also gained ideological resonance for its population as the seat of power. Hence, Ctesiphon was not only a capital of the Partho-Sasanian world (one can only see the large number of embassies and diplomatic references from both the East and the West, including the South to Ctesiphon), and the seat of the leaders of religious communities of the empire (Christians & Jews).[20]

In the beginning of the first century CE, Josephus informs us that Artabanus/Ardawān II moved to this location (*Jewish Antiquities*, 18.48–50):

> Ἀρτάβανος δὲ πολὺν τῇ τροπῇ φόνον ἐργασάμενος ὑπὲρ ἐκπλήξεως τῶν βαρβάρων πρὸς Κτησιφῶντα μετὰ τοῦ πλήθους ἀναχωρεῖ.
>
> Artabanus, who, in order to intimidate the barbarians, had wrought much slaughter during the rout, withdrew with the majority of his troops to Ctesiphon. Artabanus now ruled the Parthians, while Vonones escaped to Armenia.

[16] Shenkar 2018, 116–117.
[17] Llewellyn-Jones 2013, 75–76.
[18] Dąbrowa 2012, 40.
[19] Tac. *Ann*. 6.42.
[20] Mokhtarian 2015, 19–20.

In the Parthian period, the city of Ctesiphon was invaded three times, and sieged many more. These campaigns by the Romans suggest that from the Western point of view, Ctesiphon was seen as the major center for the Parthians and then the Sasanians. In the second century CE Ctesiphon was invaded by the Romans, conquered and partly destroyed and some of its population deported. These events took place, beginning with the Emperor Trajan in 116 CE who ceremoniously took the title of "Parthicus" and struck coins with this title.

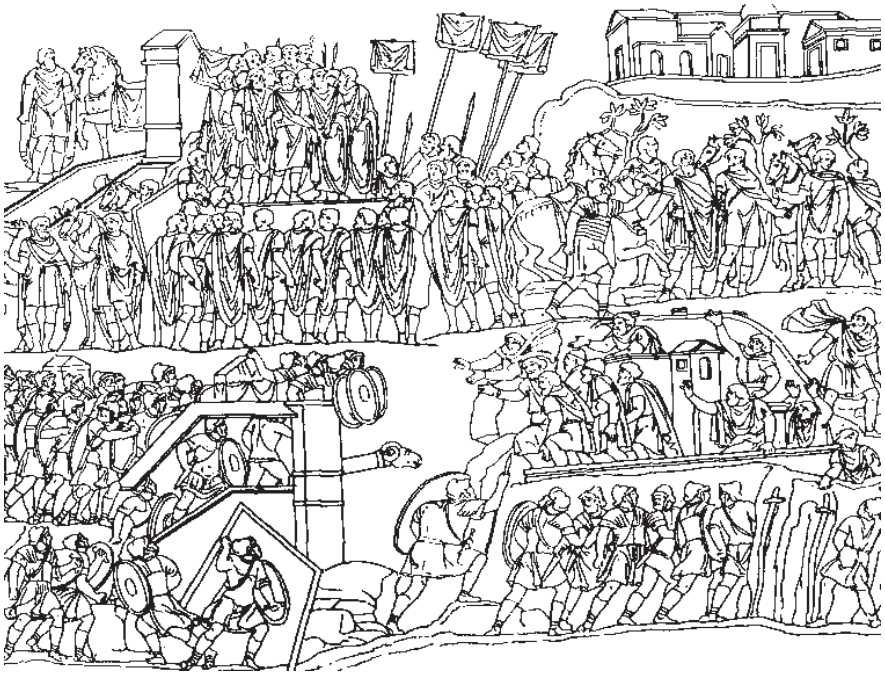

Fig. 2. Forum Romanum, Arch of Severus, Relief west right, drawing: Capture of Ctesiphon (courtesy of J. Lendering, Livius Website), https://www.livius.org/pictures/italy/rome/rome-forum-romanum/rome-forum-arch-of-severus/arch-of-severus-relief-west-right-drawing/

We do not possess contemporary historical sources for this event and rely on Dio Cassius, historian of the fourth century CE.[21] Dio suggests that the Romans inflicted death and destruction in Syria, namely in Edessa where it was sacked and burnt, as well as Seleucia. Trajan himself appears to have conquered Ctesiphon and the Parthian royal throne was taken as a symbol of victory, placing in power a Parthian ruler who was subservient to the Romans.[22] Again, in 165 CE the Roman general, Avidius Cassius pursued the Parthian king, Vologesus, and destroyed Seleucia by fire, razing the royal place at Ctesiphon.[23] Ctesiphon was again conquered in the Parthian period, by Septimius Severus who

[21] Lightfoot 1990, 115–126.
[22] Cass. Dio 68.30.3.
[23] Cass. Dio 71.2.3.

immortalized his conquest of the Near East with his triumphal arches (**Fig. 2**),[24] giving some pictorial details of Ctesiphon. We also have textual information about the sack of the city (16):

> *Harum appellationum causa donativum militibus largissimum dedit, concessa omni praeda oppida Parthici, quod milites quaerebant.*
>
> To celebrate the bestowal of these names Severus gave the soldiers an enormous donative, none other in truth, than liberty to plunder the Parthian capital, a privilege for which they had been clamoring.[25]

The Strengthening of Ctesiphon

According to the *Chronicle of Arbela* the son of the last Arsacid king Ardawān IV, named Aršak was found by Ardaxšīr I in Ctesiphon and killed there, bringing an end the Parthian dynasty.[26] This was perhaps more than anything a symbolic act of the end, from the center of power for the Parthians. While Ardaxšīr I created a round fortified city of Weh-Ardaxšīr, Hormizd I in the third century further rebuilt the city and was also buried there.[27] The city of Ctesiphon must have been reinforced and made more secure as a center for the Sasanian Empire in the third century CE as the Sasanians did not want to have the same predicament as that of the Parthians. We know this based on the reports from the fourth and the seventh century on Ctesiphon in that it had became impregnable. An oracle about Ctesiphon in the Roman sources circulated which is named after the Sasanian capital, and was believed that anyone who tried to take Ctesiphon would be punished. An example of such curse on a Roman general who tried to take Ctesiphon, is Carus who is said to have been struck by lightning.[28] This event took place during the reign of the Sasanian king, Wahrām II (276–293) (HA *Carus* 8.5–7):

> Inter cetera "Cum," inquit, "Carus, princeps noster vere carus, aegrotaret, tanti turbinis subito exorta tempestas est ut caligarent omnia, neque alterutrum nosceret; coruscationum deinde ac tonitruum in modum fulgurum igniti sideris continuata vibratio omnibus nobis veritatis scientiam sustulit subito enim conclamatum est imperatorem mortuum, et post illud praecipue tonitruum quod cuncta terruerat. His accessit quod cubicularii dolentes principis mortem incenderunt tentorium. unde unde fuit, fama emersit fulmine interemptum eum quem, quantum scire possumus, aegritudine constat absumptum." (trans. by D. Magie)
>
> "When Carus, our prince for whom we truly care, was lying ill, there suddenly arose a storm of such violence that all things grew black and none could recognize another; then continuous flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, like bolts from a fiery sky, took from us the power of knowing what truly befell. For suddenly, after an especially violent peal which had terrified all, it was shouted that the emperor was dead. It came to pass, in addition, that the chamberlains, grieving for the death

[24] It is interesting that Khosrow I also immortalized his victories in the Near East by having frescos drawn at his palace in Ctesiphon.

[25] See also Cass. Dio 75.9.2–5.

[26] *Chronicle of Arbela* (1985), 15.

[27] *Mojmal ut-tawārīkh*, 68.

[28] Dignas – Winter 2007, 26.

Fig. 3. Šāpur II standing on the head of Julian at Tāq-e Būstān, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taq-e_Bostan#/media/File:Shapur_II_investiture_at_Taq-e_Bustan_(4684094261).jpg

> of their prince, fired his tent; and the rumor arose, whatever its source, that he had been killed by the lightning, whereas, as far as we can tell, it seems sure that he died of his illness." (trans. by D. Magie)

Perhaps the best preserved account of the Roman invasion of Mesopotamia is that of Julian in the fourth century. Ammianus Marcellinus who was in the retinue of the emperor had firsthand knowledge of the city of Ctesiphon and its structure. In an important passage Ammianus reports that when Julian wanted to lay siege to Ctesiphon, he was told (Amm. Marc. 24.7.1):

> *Digesto itaque consilio cum primatibus super Ctesiphontis obsidio, itum est in voluntatem quorundam, facinus audax et inportunum esse noscentium id adgredi, quod et civitas situ ipso inexpugnabilis defendebatur et cum metuenda multitudine protinus rex adfore credebatur.*
>
> "Having held council with his most distinguished generals about the siege of Ctesiphon, the opinion of some was adopted, who felt sure that the undertaking was rash and untimely, since the city, impregnable by its situation along, was well defended; and, besides, it was believed that the king would soon appear with a formidable force." (trans. by J. C. Rolfe)

Julian, we are told was ill informed about the defenses of Ctesiphon, and consequently lost his life during the Roman retreat.[29] Sources tell us that under Julian's leadership, the

[29] Potter 2004, 517–518.

Romans had marched towards the Iranian capital, but the Romans were "afraid to attack Ctesiphon."[30] Hence Ctesiphon had gained a new status, not only among the Iranians, but also among the Romans who had been able to take it a century before. The naval part of Julian's campaign on the Tigris is rarely discussed, but the evidence shows that while Roman ships were able to come close to the city, the wall of the city by the water was afront to the Romans,[31] and furthermore the Sasanians through riverside engineering installations manipulated the waters to make navigation difficult.[32] Julian's death depicted in the relief of Šāpūr II at Tāq-e Būstān (**Fig. 3**), was a propaganda for the fate of the Roman emperor, not heading the Ctesiphon Oracle.

Then it is very much possible that with Ardaxšīr's conquest of the Parthian Empire, measures had been taken to secure the city. This building of Ctesiphon's defensive walls is made clear again in history in the seventh century CE. When the Roman Emperor Heraclius in 628 CE had defeated the Sasanian forces and was close to Ctesiphon, we are told that he decided not to attack the capital as it had strong fortification.[33] Not only it seems that Ctesiphon was strongly built in the Sasanian period, but it also had an aura of impregnability in late antiquity, something very different from the Ctesiphon of the Parthian period. Again, during the siege of Ctesiphon by Sasanian general, Šahrwarāz, in 630 CE, the young king Ardaxšīr III was kept safe at Ctesiphon for such this reason:

> He took up a position near the city of Ctesiphon, besieged its inhabitants and fought with them, setting up ballistas against the city, but did not manage to enter it. When he realized that he was not strong enough to take it by force, he sought it by means of craft.[34]

Description of Ctesiphon

By the Sasanian period Ctesiphon had become a permanent residence of the Sasanian king of kings, and late sources also assign the centrality of the city from the time of Khosrow I.[35] In the fifth century when the Sasanian Empire was on its knees, we have literary evidence that Ctesiphon was the important center of power to counter the Hephthalites. When the Hephthalites had become the dominant power, Sukhra was ruling the affairs of the state from Ctesiphon,[36] and then Kawād I was crowned at Ctesiphon. But what was the physical layout of Ctesiphon and how was it expanded? For this we must first look at the physical landscape of Ctesiphon based on the archaeological evidence.

Ctesiphon was the largest metropolis in late antique world. What in Arabic came to be called al-Madā'īn (Cities),[37] was composed of continuous building project of the

[30] Dignas – Winter 2007, 92.
[31] Dąbrowa 2007, 237.
[32] Dąbrowa 2007, 239.
[33] Dignas – Winter 2007, 148.
[34] Tabarī 1999, 401.
[35] *Ya'qubi* 2018, 132.
[36] Tabarī 1999, 86/2.
[37] Where the cities have been suggested to have been simply called *Šahrestānān in Middle Persian: Shahbazi 1990.

Parthians and the Sasanians. The Sasanian metropolitan area comprised of seven major cities or Heptapolis,[38] although we are better informed about four of the cities on both sites of the Tigris. Another problem is that there are a number of other cities which are mentioned to have been part of the Ctesiphon metropolis which make the number of cities more than seven. These cities include: 1) Weh-ardaxšīr; 2) Weh-andīyog-husraw; 3) Asbānbar; 4) Walāxšgerd; 5) Ctesiphon; 6) Darzīgān; 7) Nunjāpād.[39]

The earliest Sasanian city that was established is Weh-ardaxšīr, founded by Ardaxšīr I in 230 CE on the western banks of the Tigris.[40] As Hauser has shown this city was round with a protective wall, which matches the round cities of the early Sasanian period in the province of Fars, namely that of Ardaxšīr-xwarreh and Dārābgerd.[41] There was a large bazaar in the city, with substantial Jewish merchants who called the city Hadrašīr, or Māḥōzē, as well as Christians who called it called it Bēt Harṭašīr. The Jewish Exhilarch (MP. Reš Galut) also resided in this city, hence giving it special significance for these religious group. The city was equally important because Kōchē, in the southwest (Tell Baruda) was the location of the cathedral church of the Nestorian catholicos, the Church of Seleucia. Khosrow II had a palace close to an orchard called Bāg al-Hendovān (Indian Garden) in this location,[42] and the church here may be where the son of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice was crowned by Khosrow II as the legitimate emperor in 604 CE.[43] Because of recent excavations at the site, we have materials and object from the artisan quarter of Weh-ardaxšīr, among them terracotta figurines. It is interesting to note that some have suggested that these figurines are toys, either made by children or for them by adults in the workshops.[44] There are several administrative and religious seals and sealings attesting to the cities importance, including an accountant (*āmārgar*), a magi (*mow*); Protector of the Poor and Needy (*Driyōšān jādaggōw ud dādwar*), and a governor (*šahrāb*) of Weh-ardaxšīr,[45] (**Fig. 4**), suggesting an important administrative and religious center.[46] It is also all too probable that the city had its own mint which could be identified with either mint-mark of WH or WYH.[47]

[38] Streck 1900, 276.
[39] There are other cities such as Kurdābād that are mentioned: Streck 1900, 270.
[40] Hauser 2007, 461.
[41] Mittertrainer 2020, 69–76.
[42] Morony 1989; Karimi 1400, 7.
[43] *Chronicle of Khuzestān*, 2016, 20–21, 28–29.
[44] Cellerino – Messina 2013, 128.
[45] Gyselen 2019, 231.
[46] Gyselen 2019, 49–50.
[47] Malek 1993, 243.

Fig. 4. Seal impression of Protector of the Poor and Needy of Weh-ardaxšīr (Gyselen 2019, 231)

Also, on the west bank Tigris stood Weh-andīyog-husraw (Better Antioch Khosrow (built)),” otherwise known as Rūmīgan.[48] Khosrow I was able to capture the city of Antioch in 540 CE and transfer its skilled population to the heartland of his empire. We are told the design of the city of Weh-andīyog-husraw was a mirror copy of the city of Antioch, where the inhabitants of the conquered city were able to find their home in the new city. This city had marble columns, a hippodrome where horse and chariot races took place (MP *aspres*), as well as baths,[49] and its population were given special privileges,[50] and in fact the city became a “Roman” style city outside of the Eastern Roman Empire and it turned out to become a destination for Roman dissidents.[51]

On the eastern banks of Tigris stood the city of Asbānbar (Equerry). The city housed wealthy people with stables for their horses, as well as gardens and paradises.[52] The mint of AS which either stands for Āsurestān, or Aspānbar (**Fig. 5**), minted the largest and high-quality coinage output since the fifth century,[53] suggesting an imperial mint (**Fig. 5**).

Fig. 5. Khosrow I coin: Mint AS

[48] Hauser 2007, 466–467.
[49] Kurz 1941, 40.
[50] Procopius, 2.5–14.
[51] Foss 2000, 24; Karimi 1400, 8.
[52] Karimi 1400, 7.
[53] Malek 1993, 241; Schindel 2018, 498.

Walāxšgerd appears to have been built by the long reigning Parthian ruler, Vologases I or Walāxš I (51–78 CE). This commercial center is said to have been full of gardens, vineyards and early attestation of Sasanian gastronomy during the reign of Hormizd.[54] There is also an administrative seal that belongs to "Nahr-ī-malek-ī-Walāšxābād" (Kingly Canal of Walāxš City), which may be related to this very same city, with its canal after the name of Vologases I, certainly not the Sasanian Walāxš.[55] The other two cities of Darīzgān and Nunīafad are undiscovered.

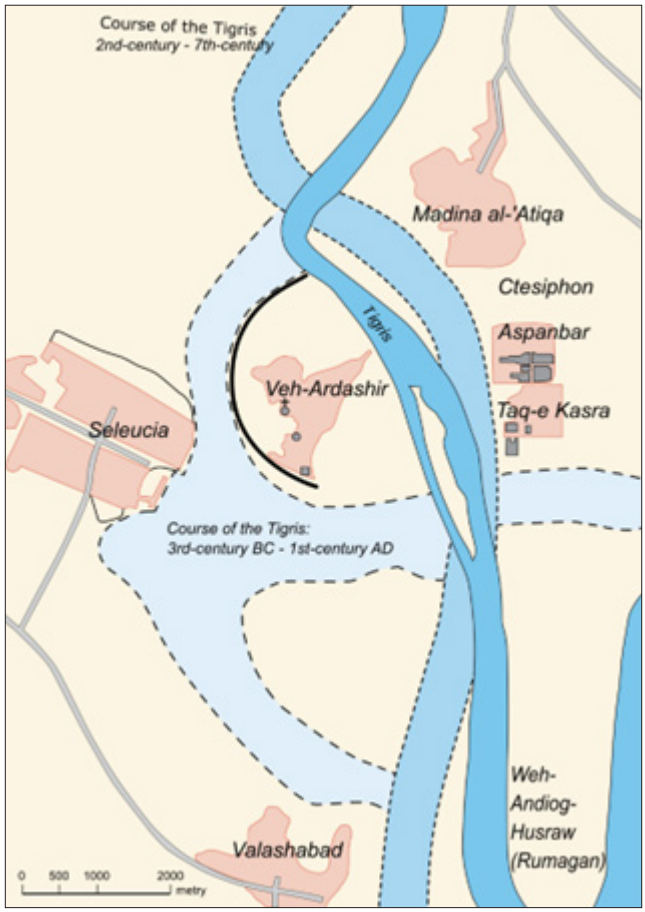

Fig. 6. Map of the metropolis of Ctesiphon (Renato de carvalho Ferreira, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ctesiphon_map-en.svg)

The most magnificent building of these cities was the Arch of Khosrow or Taq-e Kasrā, standing to the south of Asbānbar and is dated to the time of Khosrow I in the 6th Cen-

[54] Karimi 1400, 7.
[55] Gyselen 2019, 233.

tury CE (**Fig. 6**). This palace was ornate with stuccos (**Fig. 7**), and frescos showing such scenes as Khosrow I's feats as well as statues and marbles which were inspired by Roman artistic tradition. We learn certain details about these drawings from Arab poets who visited the Ctesiphon, some two centuries after the fall of the Sasanians. One of these scenes is described as showing the conquest of Antioch by Khosrow I in such a manner (al-Buhturi):

> When you behold the picture of Antioch, you are alarmed as between Byzantium and Persia,
> The Fates there waiting, while Anushirvan urges on the ranks under the royal banner,
> Robed in green over gold, proudly flaunting the dye of red turmeric.[56]

The stories about the pomp and ceremony at the Arch of Khosrow outlived the Sasanian Empire, and we have reports of the celebrations during the Iranian New Year (Nowruz), and the Autumn Festival (Mehregān).[57] The king's epiphany under the arch, before the population was itself an auspicious sign. Inside the palace, another type of ideological play was at work (**Fig. 6**). The king of kings sat on his throne, where a huge crown was suspended from the ceiling. Ibn Balkhī reports:

> The custom of the court of Anušīrwān was this that from the right was his throne, there were golden chairs and from the left there were golden chairs, and from these three chair one was the place of the king of China and the other king of Rome and the other king of Huns, that when they came to his court they would sit on these chairs, and every year these chairs were in place and was not removed, and no one was not worthy on sitting on them, and next to the golden chairs Wuzurgmehr sat and below it the chair of the Chief Mowbed and below it several chair for Warden of Marches, Grandees, whose place was clearly organized, so that no one could challenge the other.[58]

Fig. 7. Stucco work from Ctesiphon (Wolfgang Sauber, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MIK_-_Sassaniden_Pahlavi-Monogramm.jpg)

[56] Irwin 2009, 5.
[57] Inostrantsev 1384, 65–67.
[58] *Fārsnāmeh* 1363, 97; Canepa 2009, 143.

However, the imperial metropolis appears to have been abandoned by its Iranian elite in matter of a few decades following the Muslim conquest. Each of the cities had a different fate, as Rūmīgān which kept a large Christian, and Weh-Ardaxšīr with a large Jewish population, made an agreement with Khaled b. ʻUrfota and even accepted to help the Muslim army. In fact only the Christian Persian nobility were able to preserve their status and survive the Muslim onslaught, especially those in the Nestorian church organization. One way of preserving their land was to place their family land under monastic ownership.[59] The noble family, other nobilities and the army had fled the rest of the cities by 637 CE. Saʿd b. Abi Waqqāṣ also took Asbānbar and took charge of the affaris from the White Palace (Old City), while Arch of Khosrow was used as a mosque.[60] Early Perso-Islamicate geographical work also attest to the grandeur of Madā'īn with its Arch of Khosrow which is said to be the highest in the world, dating to the time of Khosrow I. But more importantly, we are informed of the removal and transfer of its stones and structures to the new Abbasid capital, namely that of Baghdad.[61] This movement of imperial stones from the old Iranian to the new Muslim capital had ideological significance, demonstrating continuity of power and tradition for the region.[62] Thus, as the city gradually became an important Iranian imperial center in late antiquity, it was abandoned rather suddenly and rapidly by the Iranian Zoroastrians in the mid-seventh century CE.

The Bones of Khosrow at Ctesiphon

By the time of Khosrow I's rule in the six century this metropolitan cluster known as Madā'īn was described by the historian Yaʻqubī as:

> This then became the royal residence, and learned astrologers and physicians are unanimous that there is no city in the realm that is more conducive to health, virtue and moderation than that spot and the clime of Babylon that encompasses it.[63]

It is also important to note that Ctesiphon became a sacred ground for the Sasanians, a sort of axis mundi. When Ctesiphon fell to the Arab Muslims, the empire lost its administrative center and its organization. Perhaps this is one reason for which there was no organized resistance to the Arab Muslim armies. Ctesiphon was the resting place of the bones of the Sasanian kings. In Order to understand why the placement of the royal bones of the king is important, we must make a brief excurses into the world of Zoroastrianism. In the Zoroastrian tradition the material world is called *gēhān ī astōmand*, literally the "Boney World." Hence during the end of time and at the time of Renovation (*tan ī pasēn*),[64] the dead arise and are put back together with all their body parts, especially their bones (*astomandān mardomān*) "People with Bones."[65] Thus, the exposure

[59] Morony 1976, 55–56.
[60] Morony 2009.
[61] *Ḥudud al-ʻAlam*, 406.
[62] Savant 2013, 178.
[63] *Yaʻqubī* 2018, 132.
[64] Gignoux 2014, 253.
[65] Nyberg 1974, 33.

of bones and the "politics" of bones was an important issue for antiquity, but also for the Zoroastrian tradition. It is in this context that one can understand the impact of such actions by Roman generals in the East, when for example Caracalla in a deliberate act of what one could call vandalism, unearthed and dispersed the bones of the Parthian royal family in Adiabene,[66] which more probably was the bones of local noble families.[67]

Thus, taking notice of the Zoroastrian boney world is important that we learn that the bones of the Sasanian kings, from the late fifth century onwards were are placed in or close to Ctesiphon. In important medieval Persian text, *Mojamal ud'Tawārīkh wa al-Qisas*, these Sasanian kings are said to be buried there:

> Shapūr b. Hormazd is buried in Ctesiphon … Yazdjird b. Bahrām in Syria, or Iraq. Parwēz b. Homazd in Mada'īn… Kawād b. Shīrūe in Madā'īn; Ardashīr b. Shīrūe in Madā'īn … Būrān-dokht and Āzarīdokht, the daughters of Parwēz (were buried) in Madā'īn of Kasra…[68]

A guess may be made that if indeed the bones of kings was kept at the capital, where it would be? There are two options. First is the old cemetery which has been identified as a Parthian necropolis,[69] while Seleucia has also been identified as another possible site for the bones. Interestingly, this site was used for public executions in the Sasanian period, and a number of artifacts associated with death and magic have been found.[70] Thus, the old city of Seleucia may have acted as a resting place for the bones of the Sasanian kings. It is an interesting sidenote, but all the same relevant that until the twentieth century important men and kings of Qajar Iran were taken to Iraq (Najaf) to be buried.

Ctesiphon as a Capital

Something should be said about Ctesiphon as an administrative center. It is interesting that we only have one seal impression attestation of the toponym Tēsfūn (tēsfōn) (**Fig. 8**). The seal read as:

Tēsfōn-šahrestān mowuh husraw-šād-kawād (The Magi of Tēsfūn, province of Husraw-šād-kawād).[71]

While AS has been discussed above, WYHC is now identified with Weh-az-Andīyog-Khusro,[72] and finally the enigmatic BBA mint, which although is a mobile mint, it is associated with the Court (Aramaic ideography for Middle Persian *Dar*). WH which has also been identified as Weh-ardaxšīr, one of the cities of Madā'īn, while others have opted for Weh-andīyōg-šapur.[73] Lastly, an interesting issue are coins with the mint mark TW & TWS. While they have been usually identified with the city of Tus in the Northeastern Iranian Plateau, there is a possibility to think of Tēsfūn/Ctesiphon as a choice, as

[66] Herod. 4.11.8.
[67] Kettenhofen 1990.
[68] *Mojmal ut-tawārīkh*, 463–464.
[69] Hauser 1993, 325–420.
[70] Simpson – Molleson 2014, 86–87.
[71] Gyselen 2019, 433.
[72] Schindel 2018, 499.
[73] Malek 1993, 243.

Fig. 8. Seal impression of Tysfūn (Rika Gyselen)

Tus could not have been so important to have had two mints. Could there be a play on Tēsfūn and Tūsfūn in the late Sasanian tradition? For this suggestion, we must look at the Middle Persian literary tradition associated for Tēsfūn.

Mythical Foundation of Ctesiphon Tīsfūn & Tūsfūn

In conclusion I would like to discuss the perceptions of Ctesiphon/Tīsfūn and its mythologization in the Iranian tradition. There has been only one suggestion as to the etymology of and origins of the toponym for Ctesiphon. While we have the attestation of the toponym in several languages (Greek, *Ktesiphon*; Syriac, *qtyspwn*; Parthian, Pahlavi, and Sogdian, *tēsfōn*; Arabic, *Taysafun*, Persian *Tīsfōn*), it was Winkler who suggested to see the Biblical Aramaic *aihpisaK/*כָּסְפְּיָא in Ezra 8, 17, meaning "silver place," for the name of the Partho-Sasanian capital.[74] In the only surviving geographical tract in Middle Persian or Pahlavi, composed initially during the reign of Kawād in the late fifth century CE and then redacted at the Abbasid period, the foundation of the city of Ctesiphon is mentioned as such (*Šahrestānīha-ī Ērānšahr* 21):

> *Pad kust (ī) xwarwarān šahrestān ī tīsfōn az framān ī tūs ī warāzag ī gēwagān kard.*
>
> In the Western direction, the city of Ctesiphon was built by the order of Tūs, the son of Warāz the son of Gēw.[75]

The great Orientalist, Markwart who edited this text initially, suggests that the association between Tēsfūn and Tūs is due to "childish etymology."[76] I tend to see this as the mythologization of city and hence its association with heroes and kings of the Iranian tradition. In fact if we look at the textual remains, we see that there is a steady process in making every location and aspects of Ctesiphon as being Iranian from the time immemorial.[77] For example the water streams in Iraq, Middle Persian (*ēr* lowland), it is

[74] Winkler 1900 in Streck 1900, 272.
[75] Daryaee 2002, 18 & 15.
[76] Markwart 1931, 62.
[77] Canepa 2013.

said to have been built by Zāw.[78] The building of one of the cities of Madā'īn, named Kardīndād was associated with Tahmūreth Zīnāwand;[79] and Jamshid is said to have built a bridge over the Tigris, as well as laying out the city of Ctesiphon.[80] Thus, the reports by Persian and Arab authors and ŠĒ, in associating Tūs, Avestan Tūsā with the building of Ctesiphon, hence sometimes being called Tūsfūn is an important word-play. This would be in line with the Iranianization of the sacred topography of Mesopotamia, specifically Ctesiphon and its environment in the Sasanian period.

In 762 CE, a hundred years after the conquest of Ctesiphon, Baghdad which in Persian means "God Given," was established by the ʿAbbasid caliph, Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr as the new capital of the Muslim world, very close to the old Sasanian capital. Baghdad was also a round city, just like Weh-ardaxšīr and had a significant Iranian population.[81] Thus, rather than having a new beginning, we should think that already Baghdad may have been known in the Sasanian period. Baghdad, before becoming a capital, it appears was a place for outings for the inhabitants of Ctesiphon, and some of the Sasanian kings had gardens and palaces in this location. It was also a center as an annual trade outpost for a month in the location that became known as Baghdad.[82] Hence, the new Islamic capital was an old Iranian center, just as Ctesiphon was the old Iranian capital for some seven hundred years.

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[78] Dīnāwarī 1371, 35.

[79] Isfahani 1346, 45.

[80] Isfahani 1346, 45.

[81] Kennedy 1988.

[82] Malāyerī 1394, 107.

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