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978-0-521-76641-8 - Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia

M. Rahim Shayegan

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ARSACIDS AND SASANIANS

Sasanian Persia, which succeeded the Parthians, was one of the great powers of late antiquity and the most significant power in the Near East, together with the Roman Empire. This book undertakes a thorough investigation of the diverse range of written, numismatic, and archeological sources in order to reassess Sasanian political ideology and its sources and influences in the ideologies of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, Babylonian scholarship and prophecy, and Hellenistic Greek thought. It sheds fresh light on the political complexities of early Arsacid and Sasanian history, especially the situation in Babylon and Elymais, and on the Roman propaganda which penetrated, shaped, and determined Roman attitudes towards Sasanian Persia.

M. RAHIM SHAYEGAN is Assistant Professor of Iranian at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has published on ancient Iranian history and philology, has co-edited a volume on *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context* (2010), and is currently preparing a book on *Aspects of Epic and History in Ancient Iran* (forthcoming).

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Dedication

To Shiva, Twaidot, and Anusha

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Preface

The possession of the past

The present study proposes to examine the political ideology of the early Sasanian empire. In doing so, it shall not only look at Sasanian and Roman relations, but also at Arsacid precedents, for possible *stimuli* in the formation of the Sasanian ideology.

Already Roman historians of the third and fourth centuries CE perceived the imperialism of the Sasanians as infused with the desire to equal, even to surpass, the glory of the kings of old by recovering formerly Achaemenid territories—by then part of the Roman East. In contrast, contemporaneous Sasanian royal inscriptions, in particular the *res gestae* of Šābuhr the Great and the inscription of king Narseh at *Paikuli*, neither provide us with a rationale for the war of conquest waged against Rome, nor do they contain any explicit references to the historical predecessors of the Sasanians.

This conflicting finding raises questions about historiographical practices in Sasanian Iran and Rome. Indeed, one wonders how Sasanians recorded their past, or the extent to which they were acquainted with it; equally important an inquiry is the nature of Roman knowledge of Sasanian history, as well as the sources whence it had been extracted.

Only the elucidation of these problems would allow us to address our initial query, that is, whether the early Sasanians experienced an “Achaemenid revival” that might have shaped their political ideology and prompted their expansionist campaigns against the Roman empire; or whether the revival ascribed to the Sasanians by Roman *literati* was in reality a Roman interpretation comprehensible only in light of Roman political exigencies.

In search of antecedents for the alleged “Achaemenid revival” of the Sasanians, this study will explore the political ideologies of the empire’s immediate predecessors, that is, the Arsacid empire, and to a lesser extent, the Seleucid empire and the Greco-Iranian kingdom of Pontos. The study will seek to demonstrate that the Arsacids themselves had become aware

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of their ancestors mainly through the intermediary of their Babylonian subjects, who had preserved memories of the Achaemenid past by dint of an uninterrupted literary tradition, but also through interactions with the Pontic kingdom of Mithridates VI Eupator.

Due, partially, to the oral nature of historical transmission in Ancient Iran, a precise historical knowledge of the past, more particularly of the Achaemenid empire, was lost in Arsacid Iran. It is thus astonishing that the Parthians, after conquering Mesopotamia in April 141 BCE, adopted the old Achaemenid title of “king of kings,” which is widely attested on Babylonian cuneiform documents and coinage of the Arsacid age, and were suspected by contemporaneous Greek sources of aspiring to reconstitute the old boundaries of the Achaemenid empire.

This study proposes that the “Achaemenid renaissance” under the Arsacids did not emanate, as hitherto assumed, from Iranian quarters, but owed its existence to the permanence of the Babylonian cuneiform tradition. Drawing upon their own literary tradition, which held records of Achaemenid history, Babylonian scholars of the Parthian age linked the new Arsacid dynasty with its Achaemenid forebear and impressed upon it a sense of historical continuity and notion of empire, of which it might have otherwise remained bereft. Moreover, the Arsacids, as they set about reviving Achaemenid traditions through Babylonian mediation, were also exposed to the Greco-Iranian kingdom of Pontos and the charismatic figure of Mithridates VI Eupator. Forced to confront the Roman expansion in the east in the first century BCE, Mithridates Eupator had forged a powerful ideology that simultaneously galvanized the Iranian and Hellenistic elements of his realm and reclaimed the Achaemenid and the Hellenistic heritage as the cornerstones of his political legitimacy.

The study argues that the substratum that would later constitute the political ideology and cultural identity of the Arsacid empire was formed with the help of Babylonian scholars and inspired by the Pontic kingdom of Mithridates Eupator within the span of half a century. In other words, the Arsacid political ideology was given shape by two cultures that, although they had belonged, or been exposed, to the Iranian civilization, were not hitherto deemed to be its essential carrier(s).

The second part of the study investigates the political ideology of the early Sasanians who in the third and fourth centuries CE were themselves accused—again by Greek and Latin sources—of Achaemenid ambitions. The study investigates whether the Sasanians were emulating the Parthians in claiming the Achaemenid heritage, or whether the classical authors, contemporary with the Sasanians, were drawing upon the writings of their

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literary precursors, and using Achaemenid reminiscences of the Arsacids as mere literary *topoi* for the new Persian empire of the Sasanians. The study argues that by the time the Sasanians had replaced the Arsacid dynasty in the third century CE, the Arsacids themselves had lost much of their historical memory of the Achaemenids; that, as a result, the Sasanians like the Arsacids had little historical knowledge of their past; and that when the early Sasanians did become acquainted with their Achaemenid forebears, they did so through Roman agency. Indeed, it may be argued that following the annihilation of the Seleucid polity, consequent upon which the boundaries of the Arsacid and Roman empires became contiguous, the Romans developed different strategies to account for the absence of any lasting success against their Arsacid neighbor, the imperial *other*. Even after the Sasanians had replaced the Arsacids, these strategies remained in effect. With Rome increasingly assuming the Hellenistic heritage, themes such as the emulation of Alexander (*imitatio Alexandri*) with its inherent call for eastern conquest would resurface whenever Rome sought to adopt a bellicose stance against the Arsacids. But, in order to complete the cycle of the *imitatio*, the emulation of Alexander also required the resuscitation of Alexander's former foes, the Achaemenids, to be vanquished by a new Alexander. The portrayal of the Sasanians as heirs to the Achaemenids thus existed as an intrinsic part of the Roman *imitatio*, which not only sought to evince the historical continuity of the Greco-Roman world by vindicating Alexander's legacy, but also to bestow a similar perception of permanence upon the history of the east by depicting the Sasanians as cognizant heirs of the Achaemenids.

The study furthermore makes the case that as early as the fourth century CE, the Sasanian king Šābuhr II, had adopted the Roman rationale for his deeds, and had possibly embraced Achaemenid ambitions as a cornerstone of his political ideology against Roman expansion to the east.

* * *

As with all that pertains to Old Iranian studies, where much is in gentle commotion, and where to risk a comparison may inevitably lead to revisiting entire subfields, our dealing with the Arsacid political ideology, as a potential forerunner of Sasanian practices, took us on an unexpected journey. When dealing with the royal titulature of the Arsacids and their own "Achaemenid reminiscences," it became apparent that much of our understanding of Arsacid history, especially in light of new documentary sources, could not be maintained, and hence serve as the foundation, from which reliable inferences may be made on the state of the Sasanian political ideology.

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Consequently, a lion's share of this study has been dedicated to what may count as a fundamental revision of the first two centuries of Arsacid rule, from the Babylonian conquest of Mihrdād I in April 141 BCE to the end of Ardashān II's reign in 38 BCE—thus, covering the duration of Babylonian cuneiform tradition under the Arsacids that evanesced in 2/3 BCE—as well as the late Seleucid polity. To the extent possible, cuneiform sources pertaining to the Arsacid age have been encompassed, be it the wealth of new material found in the recently edited *Babylonian Astronomical Diaries* (1988–2006), or be it Babylonian business documents, whose systematic synthesis with Iranian inscriptions, as well as with Greek and Latin accounts, has afforded, as we hope, a novel and cogent alternative to traditional interpretations of the first centuries of Arsacid rule.

The historical exploitation of these sources has revealed—beyond our initial inquiry—a radically different picture of Arsacid rule in Mesopotamia and Iran. They show a most centralized state with a ubiquitous royal presence in Mesopotamia, of which the diarists knew to report. A myriad of officials served the interests of the great king; supreme commanders, satraps, and governors were nominated, recalled for report, disposed of, without any reports of mutiny. Numerous were the ranks of Greek commanders and officials serving in the ranks of the Iranian king, and intimate and strong were the bonds of the Greek citizens, the *pulitē* (*πολῖται*), and the Babylonian population with their king, as their common defense against the eastern campaign of the Seleucid king Antiochos VII Sidetes, which represented the last *anabasis* ever to be undertaken by the moribund Hellenistic polity against the house of the Arsacids, clearly demonstrates.

The new picture that the Babylonian evidence displays of the state of two centuries of Arsacid rule is that of an aggressive and driven royal house that systematically expanded and solidified its rule in Mesopotamia, Elymais, and Characene in the span of a few generations—without being subject to any dynastic strife that still remains the most dominant cliché of Arsacid history in modern scholarship.

First, the Arsacids conquered Babylonia under Mihrdād I in April 141, then successfully defended their new possessions against two Seleucid *anabaseis* in June/July 138 and November 129 by rallying Babylonian cities and the Greek citizens to their cause, before, finally, inaugurating the Arsacid “hostage policy” which allowed them to implement their imperial ambitions. This new policy, which aimed at instating pro-Parthian (foreign) princes in Arsacid exile upon their respective thrones, not only helped them hold sway over Seleucid politics in Syria for some decades, but also, in time, enabled them to wrest the Elymaean realm from such powerful

potentates as Kammaškiri the Older and Pittit, as well as to annex the Characenean kingdom of Hyspaosines under Mihrdād II.

Another intriguing aspect of Arsacid policy that came to light was the pursuit of western expansion even after Rome's ascent in the east, an expansion that eventually came to a temporary halt in the first half of the first century BCE, upon the creation of the province of Syria, where the Arsacids had been theretofore able to exploit the weakness of the moribund Seleucid state to their advantage.

Most intriguingly, however, the review of Arsacid history has helped us to realize that both Arsacids and Sasanians primarily owed the remembrance of Achaemenid *grandeur* to agents outside of the Iranian cultural world: the former to their Babylonian subjects and Pontic ally (and later foe); the latter to their interplay with the Roman nemesis. That these agents were able to resuscitate for the Iranian empires of the post-Hellenistic age and Late Antiquity collective memories that would form their political ideologies is not only testimony to the forces of transculturation and the dialectical discourse between civilizations in Antiquity, but also to the permeability of the Iranian world to absorb and rework these influences, even when they were extraneous receptions of its own past.

* * *

A comparative study such as the one we present here inevitably draws on variegated competencies, which we may not claim to own. As our historical treatment mainly reposes upon the interpretation of textual evidence, the required expertise has been primarily philological. Old Iranists may claim some knowledge of ancient languages, Iranian and otherwise, however, the temporal frame of the present study, as well as the literary corpora upon which we have drawn, have occasionally prompted us to venture beyond the Old Iranist's traditional repertoire. Thus, in spite of our endeavor to consult, to the best of our ability, the original texts, our interpretation and judgment may tempt the specialists, whom we ask for indulgence. The difficulties resulting from linguistic exigencies were compounded by the seemingly infinite bulk of recent scholarly literature pertaining to such unrelated fields of studies as Elamite royal titles in the second and first millennia BCE, or Seleucid institutions in the second century CE—which again we have striven fully to discuss, although we are under no illusion that many lacunae may be spotted; for this we equally request the reader's tolerance.

Especially in recent times, with modern scholarship's increased awareness of its own euro-centric roots and tradition in the treatment of the

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history of the ancient Orient, one might find it difficult to speak *à contre-courant* of the impact of Late Antique Rome on Sasanian Iran, without feeling exposed. However, while highly conscious of the pitfalls of this tradition, we are no less ill at ease with an Irano-centric view, which, in reaction to it, might slight the influence of the Occident over the Orient—if influence there ever was. For it was one thing for Rome to impact *nolens volens* the Sasanian empire with her own historiographical constructs, but yet another for the Sasanians to be receptive to it. Indeed, a too principled dealing with the perceived euro-centrism may draw a veil over the aptitude and versatility of the Arsacid and Sasanian empires to embrace ideas and concepts extraneous to their own intellectual world, and repossess them as if they always had been their own. We hope that we have been able in the present study to strike a balance between these poles, by allowing ourselves to be led by the tenor of our sources, which we have sought, time and again, critically to assess.

* * *

The present study is conceived as part of *Vorarbeiten* for a new history of the Sasanian empire, the methodological outline of which I have exposed elsewhere.¹ These studies explore several wide-ranging themes, which have been envisioned as independent publications, but were to a large extent redacted simultaneously, inspired by the view that their dialectic interplay would strengthen their respective tenor. Alas, the constant to and fro between these different projects has exceedingly delayed the publication of the present work, however, it is my hope that henceforth the publication of the remaining installments shall be expedited.

¹ Shayegan, “Approaches,” 363–384.

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This work is dedicated to my *Troika*: Shiva, Turandot, and Anusha. To the girls, we owe much of what is joyful and gay in life, and to Shiva (my own *rudra-śiva*), best friend and companion, I owe all the rest; with her might she keeps us together, and with her brilliance, she shall lead us to new shores.

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Abbreviations

A ¹ I	<i>Inscriptions of Artaxerxes, incerto loco</i> [=VA ¹ e ^a]
A ² H	<i>Inscriptions of Artaxerxes II at Hamadan</i> [a–d]
A ² S	<i>Inscription of Artaxerxes II at Susa</i> [a–e]
A ³ P	<i>Inscriptions of Artaxerxes III at Persepolis</i> [a–b]
AB	<i>Assyriologische Bibliothek</i> (Leipzig 1881–1933); and <i>Neue Folge</i> 1–2 (1933)
ACT	Neugebauer, <i>Astronomical Cuneiform Texts</i>
AD	<i>Astronomical Diaries</i> [=Sachs and Hunger]
AE	Arsacid Era
AJ	<i>Ayādgār i Jamāspīg</i> , ed. Messina
AOF	<i>Alt-Orientalische Forschungen</i>
ARM	<i>Archives Royales de Mari</i>
AWN	<i>Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag</i> , ed. Gignoux
Bd.	<i>Bundahišn</i> , ed. Pakzad
BDH	<i>Bundahišn, Codex DH</i> , ed. Anklesaria
BibMes	<i>Bibliotheca Mesopotamica</i> (vol. 24: B. Weisberg, <i>The Late Babylonian Texts of the Oriental Institute Collection</i>)
BM	British Museum (London), museum siglum
BOR	Babylonian and Oriental Record
BRM	Babylonian Records in the Library of J. Piermont Morgan, ed. Clay
Chicago A	Asiatic Collection (Oriental Institute, Chicago), museum siglum
CT	<i>Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum</i> (vol. 46: Lambert and Millard, <i>Babylonian Literary Texts</i> ; vol. 49: Kennedy, <i>Late Babylonian Economic Texts</i>)
D ² H	<i>Inscriptions of Dareios at Hamadan</i> [a–b]
D ² S	<i>Inscriptions of Dareios at Susa</i> [a–d]
DB	<i>Inscription of Dareios at Bisitun</i>

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DE	<i>Inscription of Dareios at Elvend, Hamadan</i>
DG	<i>Inscription of Dareios from Gherla, Romania</i>
DH	<i>Inscription of Dareios at Hamadan</i>
DkD	<i>Dēnkerd</i> , ed. Dresden
DN	<i>Inscriptions of Dareios at Naqš-e Rostam [a–e]</i>
DP	<i>Inscriptions of Dareios at Persepolis [a–j]</i>
DS	<i>Inscriptions of Dareios at Susa [a–z; aa–ad]</i>
DT	Daily Telegraph (British Museum, London), museum siglum
DW	<i>Inscriptions of Dareios on Weights [a–d]</i>
DZ	<i>Inscriptions of Dareios from the Suez [a–d]</i>
IM	Iraq Museum (Baghdad), museum siglum
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
KAP	<i>Kārnāmag ī Ardashīr ī Pābagān</i> , ed. Nöldeke
LBAT	Sachs, <i>Late Babylonian Astronomical and Related Texts</i>
MDP	<i>Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse / Mémoires de la Mission archéologique en Perse / Mémoires de la Délégation archéologique en Iran, Mission de Susiane</i>
MP	Middle Persian
NPi	<i>Inscription of Narseh at Paikuli</i>
OGIS	<i>Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones</i> , ed. Dittenberger
Pth.	Parthian
PFS	Persepolis Fortification Seal impression
RCT	R. Campbell Thomson Collection (Haskell Oriental Museum, University of Chicago), museum siglum
Rm	Rassam (British Museum, London), museum siglum
S.	Sellwood, <i>An Introduction to the Coinage of Parthia</i>
SBH	Reisner, <i>Sumerisch-babylonische Hymnen</i>
SE	Seleucid Era
SEG	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>
SH	Tell Šemšāra (= Shemshara: Copenague/Baghdad), find siglum
Š-KhM	<i>Šāhnāme</i> , ed. Khaleghi Motlagh
ŠKZ	<i>Inscription of Šābuhr I at the Ka^o abe-ye Zardošt</i>
Sp	Spartoli (British Museum, London), museum siglum
TD ₂	<i>Bundahišn, Codex TD₂</i> , ed. Asa
VA ¹ e ^a	<i>Inscription of Artaxerxes I on Vase</i> (four copies) [= A ¹ I]
VAT	Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin (Vorderasiatische Abteilung: Tontafeln), museum siglum

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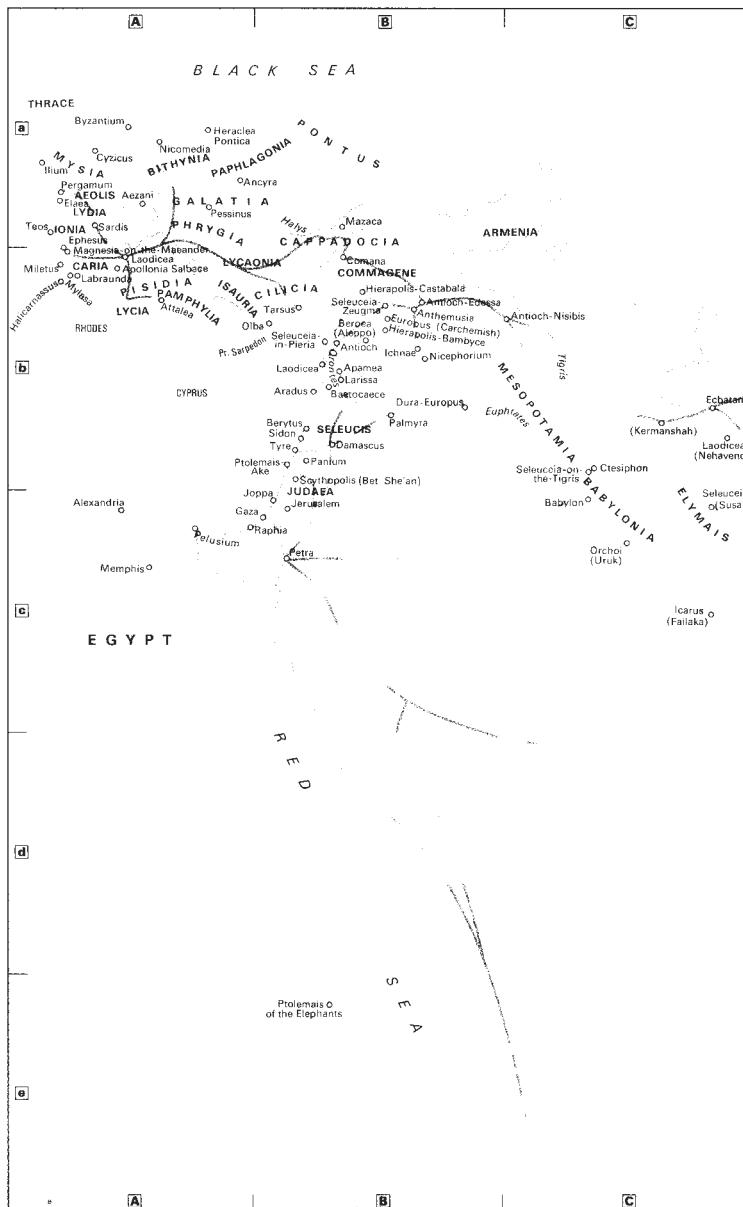
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VAT	Vorderasiatisches Museum (Vorderasiatische Abteilung: Tontafeln), museum siglum
VS	<i>Vorderasiatische Schriftdenkmäler der Königlichen (Staatlichen) Museen zu Berlin</i> (Leipzig 1907–1917); and <i>Neue Folge</i> (Berlin 1971–)
W	Warka (= Uruk, Baghdad/Berlin), find siglum
XE	<i>Inscription of Xerxes at Elvend, Hamadan</i>
XP	<i>Inscriptions of Xerxes at Persepolis</i> [a–r]
XV	<i>Inscription of Xerxes at Van</i>
YBC	Yale Babylonian Collection (Yale University, New Haven), tablet siglum
Yt	<i>Yašt</i>
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete</i>

Maps

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Map 1a Map of Hellenistic Asia

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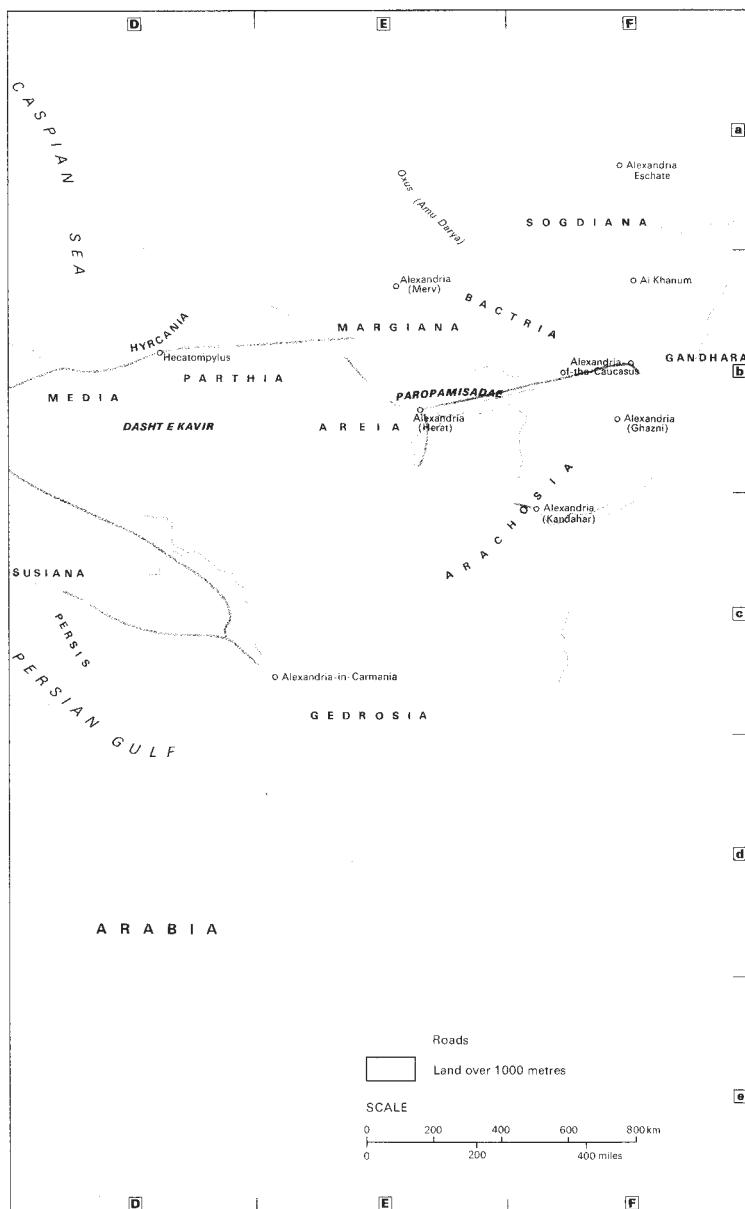
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Map 1b Map of Hellenistic Asia

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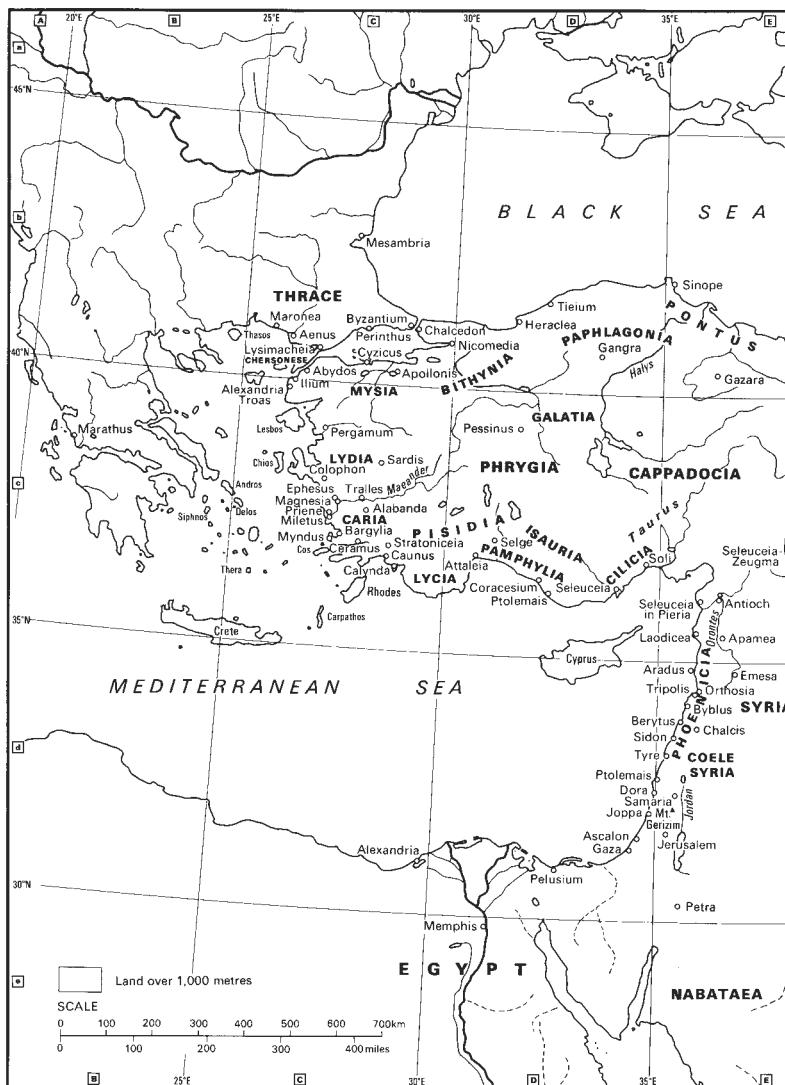
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Map 2a Map of Asia Minor and Syria

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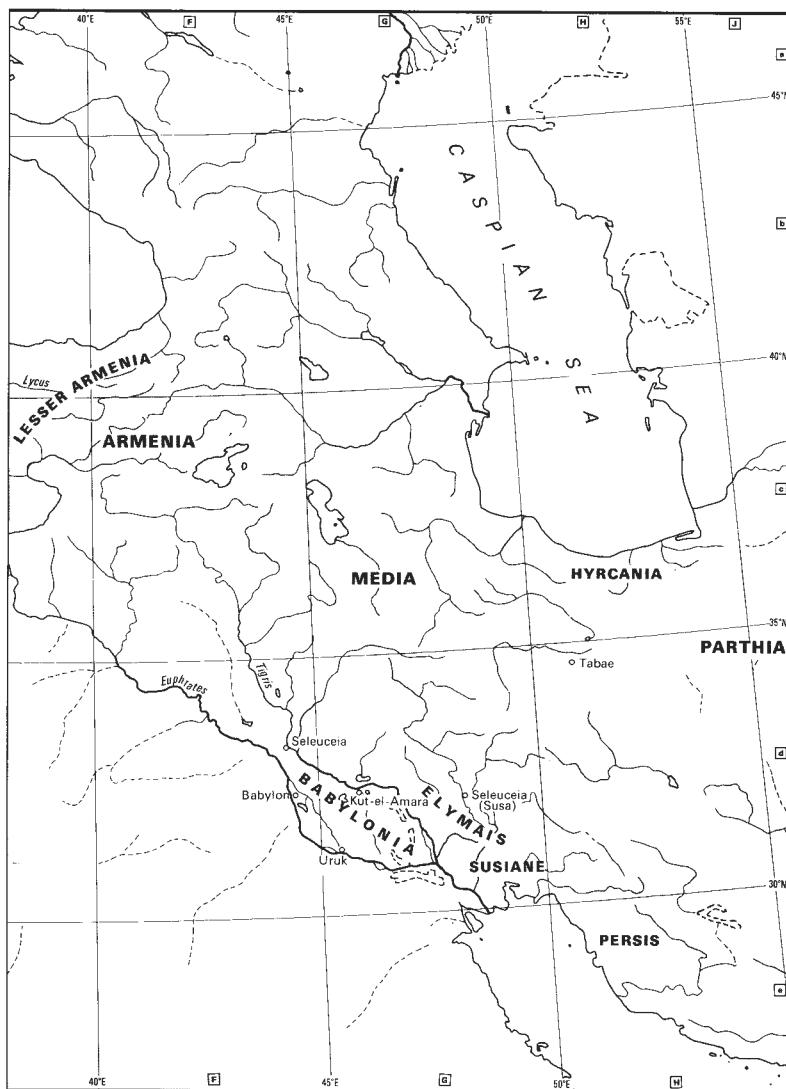
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Map 2b Map of Asia Minor and Syria

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Map 3a Map of the Parthian Empire

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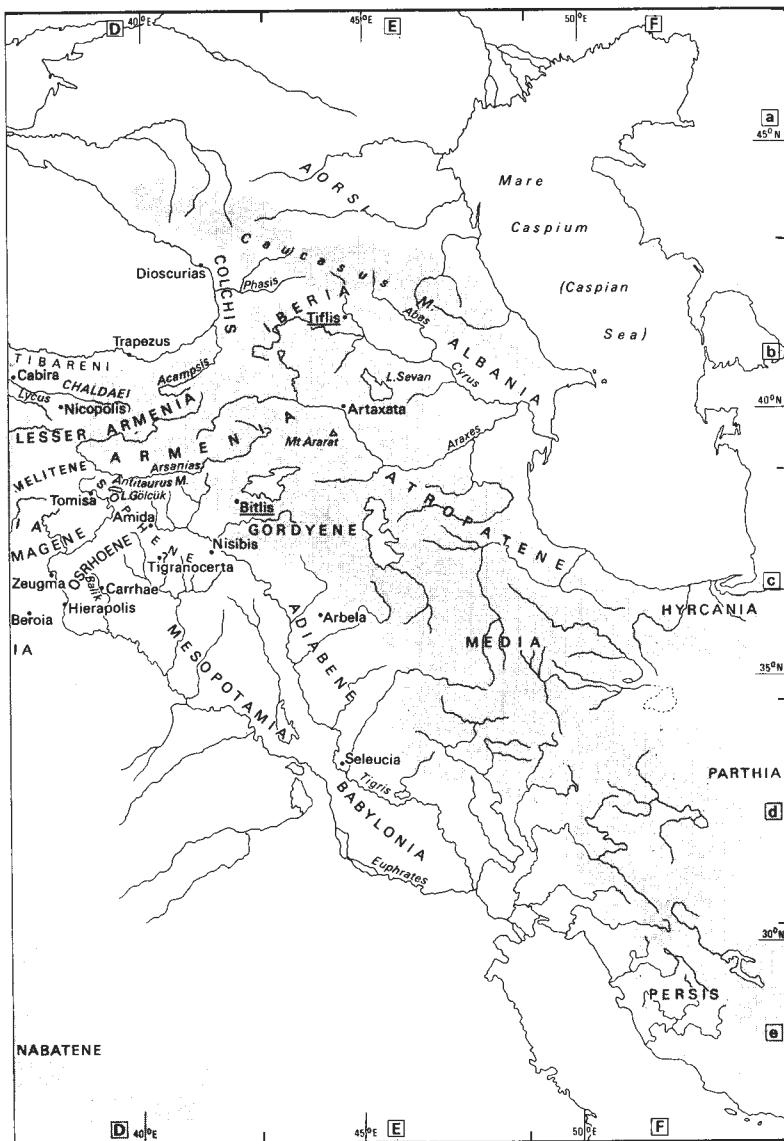
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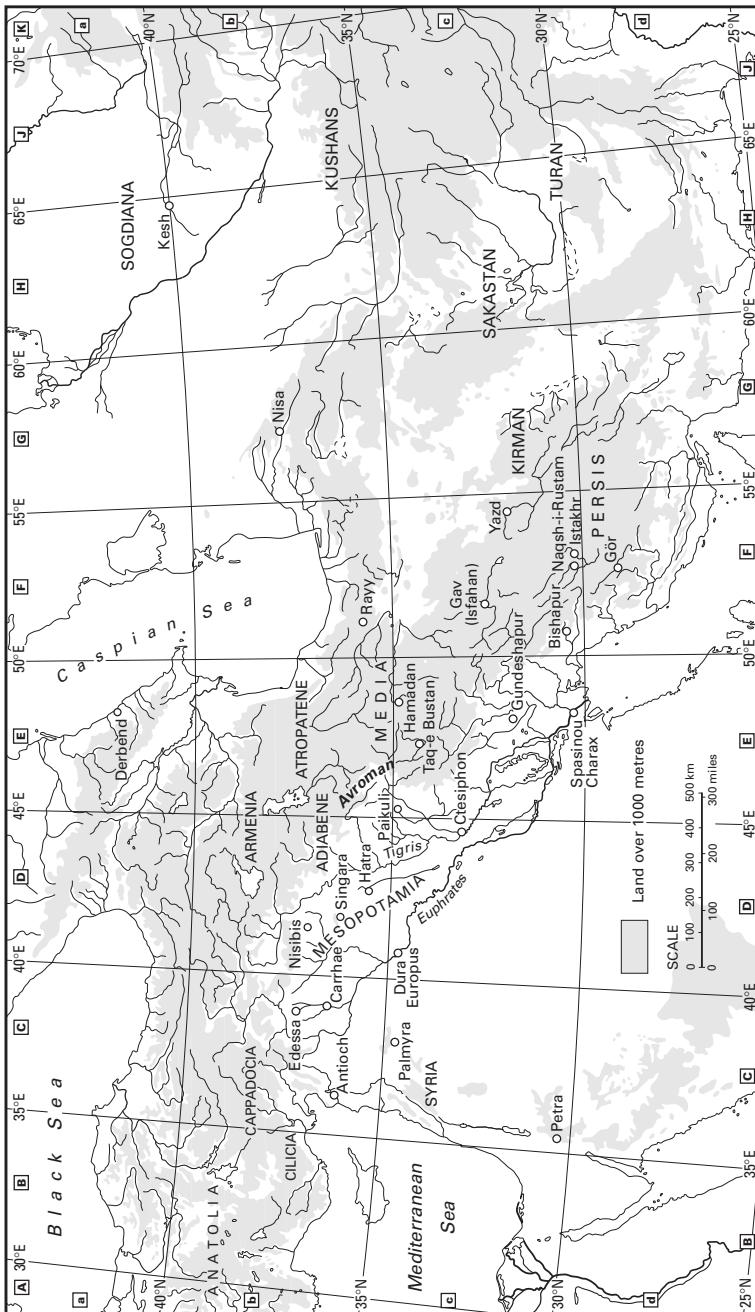
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Map 3b Map of the Parthian Empire

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Map 4 Map of the Sasanian Empire