

**The Forgotten Roll That the Parthian Empire Played In
Perpetuating the Glory of Zoroastrianism**

By

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The Legacy of the Achaemenid Empire

1500 years after Zarathushtra's time, the first Zoroastrian Empire was born. Its founder, Cyrus the Great, not only conquered 23 countries, but held the Empire's polyglot population with his ecumenical policies of freedom – free will and freedom of worship – tenets laid down by the prophet Zarathushtra. Cyrus' book on leadership was so brilliant that Julius Cesar, Napoleon and John Locke were his avid followers. In fact, the great management guru of our age, Peter Drucker, called Cyrus' book the best book on leadership.

Were the Achaemenids Really Zoroastrian?

There is no question but that the Achaemenid emperors were Zoroastrian. Their homage to Ahura Mazda makes this abundantly clear. But the question remains, why is there no mention of Zarathushtra in any of the myriad inscriptions that the Achaemenid emperors left behind? Various theories are advanced:

- 1500 years had passed between Zarathushtra's time of 2000 B.C. and the Achaemenid Empire founded in 550 B.C. Zarathushtra's image may have receded with that long passage of time.
- The Achaemenid emperors may not have perceived the need for a human prophet to intercede between God and themselves.
- The priests – the Magi may have been jealous of Zarathushtra's teachings and those of the prophet's priests – the athavans, and downplayed – even erased – the memory of the prophet and his teachings.

Alexander's Conquest

In 330 B.C. the Achaemenid Empire, already weakened by its later monarchs, lost the final battle with Alexander, who went on to burn and pillage Persepolis – the seat of the empire. He carted off the wealth of the empire and the 21 volumes of Zoroastrian religion, medicine, science and culture. (Later, Greece copied much from these stolen treasures – passing it off as Greece's contribution to civilization!)

Alexander, however, was faced with a monumental problem: how to govern an empire that spanned 23 countries? His Greek and Macedonian savages knew only how to fight, not govern. Alexander was forced to utilize Zoroastrian administrators. Gradually, Alexander realized the great value of the Persian court, its culture and its allure. He calls Zoroastrianism the best religion and even took a Persian princess, Roxanna, as his wife. But soon he renewed his conquest in Afghanistan and North India. Seven years after his Persian conquest, he was dead.

The Seleucids who inherited the Persian Empire could not govern the vast territory. Many revolts took place, and within two generations a major challenge came from a brilliant leader – Arcases.

The Parthian Empire - The Second Zoroastrian Empire of Parthia

The Parthians belonged to the Saka Aryan tribe – cousins of the Medes and Persians who had migrated to northwest and southwest Iran, respectively, around 1000 B.C. The Parthians migrated to North Iran (now Khorasan) at about the same time. Parthian territory included Merv and the ancient Magiana civilization in present day Turkmenistan which my wife and I visited on our Central Asian tour.

Khorasan continues to be the granary of Iran. Its city of Sanjan was the original home of the Parsis, who later fled to India rather than give up their Zoroastrian religion. (This contradicts the popular belief that the Parsi ancestors fled to India from Pars in South Iran). According to the chronicle, Quesst-I-Sanjan, the Parsis were of Parthian stock and named one of their early colonies in India “Sanjan”, which is a famous pilgrimage site for modern Parsis in India.

Arsaces, the Founder of the Parthian Empire

In 250 B.C., there arose a brilliant leader and statesman by the name of Arsaces, who declared his independence from Seleucid rule to become the founder of the Parthian Empire – a second Zoroastrian renaissance. The headquarters of his new kingdom was in Nissa, a walled hilled town, in present day Turkmenistan. Arsaces, hailed "as a mini Cyrus", became the founder of a mighty dynasty – the Parthian Empire – that was later to rule for 450 years (almost equally spaced between the eras of B.C. and A.D.) from 250 B.C to 204 A.D. Smaller

in size as compared to the Achaemenid Empire, it took in all of the Asian territory of the Achaemenids, with the Euphrates River as its western border. "The empires' Zoroastrian subjects plainly believed that the glory of the Avestan scriptures had once again smiled on them."

The Emperors, Mithradates I and Mithradates II

There were 33 emperors in the long Parthian Dynasty. The first six, out of respect for Arsaces himself, took his name as their throne name as a tribute to him, but then caused endless confusion for Parthia's historians. It took Mithradates I, the Great, to extend the boundaries of the Parthian Empire in 148 B.C. to about two thirds the size of the Achaemenid Empire. Several years later, another Mithradates II rose to power to become the star of the Parthian Empire (123 – 87 B.C.). He set the tone for wise governance, balancing consistent and the subsistence of power, without dominating its satraps (provinces) in all matters. As an example, Parthia was noted for its ecumenism. While Zoroastrianism was the state religion, Parthia allowed other faiths – Jews, Greeks and later, Christians – the full freedom of worship, as had the Achaemenids.

Roller Coaster Relations with the Roman Empire

In 132 B.C., the Roman Republic had acquired its first possession in Asia and had advanced to the shores of the Euphrates River. Mithradates II sent an envoy to greet the Roman general but was rebuffed, thus starting a tug-of-war that lasted for four centuries between Rome and the Parthian Empire and continued with the Sassanian Empire.

There were three major battles between Parthian forces and Rome, all of which resulted in Rome being expelled from its territorial ambitions in Asia. Parthian prestige soared and its wealth grew with the fortunes of the famous Silk Road trade with China and India flourished.

The Good Fortunes for Zoroastrianism in the Parthian Empire

The restoration of Zoroastrianism as a state religion was the greatest religious contribution of the Parthian Empire. Without state pressure or sponsorship, Zoroastrianism spread in large numbers to eastern Asia Minor, Galatia, Lydia and to Egypt. Colonies of Zoroastrian priests

became an active source of the spread of Zoroastrian beliefs. The rulers of the dynasties established in Pontus, Cappadocia, Armenia and Commagene took pride in tracing their origins to the great Parthian Empire.

Heresies and Retrogressions Galore: So much for the good news. The bad news was that the long slide from the purity of Zarathustra's own theology that had flourished in the centuries after his death continued its downward trajectory in the Parthian Empire. The culprits were, once again, the Magi priests. "The priesthood was steeped in ignorance." The Magi gained so much influence that they even had a seat on the council of state. "Not only did the Magi encourage the worship of Ahura Mazda as a person, but they also elevated Mithra, Anahita, Spenta Mainyu and even Vohu Manah (the good mind) as gods! In fact, Strabo, the Greek geographer at the time of Christ, writes of Zoroastrian divinity images being carried in a procession in Armenia, Cappadocia and Asia Minor".

Rescue of the Avesta

Part of the reason – but only a small part – by the time of the Parthians, the sacred Avesta texts were no longer intelligible was that the language of the Avesta (quite apart from the much older Gathic) had long ceased to be a living tongue. The new language during the Parthian period was Pahlavi, meaning "heroic". It is a mixture of Aryan and Semitic. The Aryan elements belong to the Avesta, while the Semitic element is Aramaic. The Magi and the Athravans – the priests of eastern Iran who traced their origins from the days of Zarathustra's disciples – became united to undertake the translation of the Avesta into Pahlavi. This included the Zend - the interpretations of the Avesta, in a manner similar to the Jewish Talmud being an interpretation of the Torah.

The Royal sponsor of this great undertaking was Vologes I (51 to 80 A.D.) – also known as Valakhsh. He ordered the round-up of all scattered fragments of manuscript material that might have survived the four centuries of neglect following Alexander's bonfire. Voloese had even mandated that oral translations be preserved. Nevertheless, the Dinkard informs us that all that could be recovered of the lost Zoroastrian canon was only a small fraction of the total and only as much as what the Dasturs (priests) could retain in their memories.

History Not Kind to the Parthians

Until the 20th century, Iranian history, in general, and Zoroastrian history, in particular, has not accorded the Parthian Empire with the same awe as it has for the Achaemenid Empire that preceded it or for the Sassanian Empire that succeeded it. Several theories have been advanced for this "amnesia."

- Unlike the Achaemenids and Sassanians, the Parthians did not leave famous architecture like Persepolis and other gems for posterity to admire.
- Other than coins of the rulers, there were no statues, inscriptions or artwork left of the Parthian period.
- The endless wars against the Roman Empire did not make for a Pax Parthia as it did for a Pax Achaemenia.
- The reports of Greek and Latin writers appeared to carry an anti-Parthian bias. It is only recently – in the 20th century – in which original Parthian materials has become available, and has shed fresh light on this long period of Iranian and Zoroastrian history.
- The Sassanian rulers traced their superior lineage to the Achaemenids and not to the Parthians, and thus the Parthians were not “pure” enough.
- A strong feeling that Parthian Zoroastrianism had been diluted and even corrupted by Greek paganism.
- Even Zoroastrian authors had by-passed or short-changed the Parthian era.

Yet, Parthia provided a vital bridge between the Zoroastrian religion as believed and practiced under the Achaemenids and Sassanians. Without Parthia and its state religion of Zoroastrianism, Hellenist thought and culture would have drowned Zoroastrianism. The Parsi and Irani-Zoroastrian communities of today owe the Parthians a great debt of gratitude for savings Zoroastrianism from extinction.

Retrogression of Zarathushtra’s Teachings in the Sassanian Empire

The outstanding policy that characterized the Sassanian Empire that succeeded the Parthian Empire was the close bond between the state and religion. In other words, the Sassanian

rule was a classic theocratic state, dominated by a harsh dogmatic Zoroastrian orthodoxy that disallowed not only all religious rivals, such as Nestorian Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism and Mazdayism, but also a narrow, regimented doctrine, formulated by its two chief prelates – first Tansar in the 3rd century, A.D. and then Kirder – whose Zoroastrian tyranny spanned 5 Sassanian Emperors.

It is no wonder that the common people felt oppressed and the once great Sassanian Empire fell like a ripe plum to the uncouth Arab hordes who conquered Iran in the 7th century A.D.

A Post Script

History repeats itself. The enlightened Parsi scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries – giants such as K.R. Cama, Dr. Dhalla and Dr. Bode – have been hijacked by the ultra orthodox Parsi pancayet and the machinations of Khojeste Mistry. It is too much to hope that the ever shrinking Parsi community in India can overthrow this tyranny, before the whole community disappears altogether by the end of this century.

The Center of Gravity of Zoroastrianism has Shifted to North America

There are now over 30,000 Zoroastrians in North America. To that figure must be added the neo-Zoroastrians that have embraced the faith – mainly from the thousands of Iranian Muslims who are refugees from persecutions in Iran.

We have new and progressive leaders, like Rohinton Rivetna of Fezana, Dr. Kaikhosrow Irani, Dr. Ali Jaffery of the Zathustrian Assembly who have worked diligently for a Zoroastrian renaissance as our prophet has guided us. May their dreams come true!

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