



## RESILIENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA. THE BIRTH OF THE PARTHIAN DYNASTY

di  
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At the feet of the Kopet Dagh mountains, over the Kara Qum desert the Parthians, or Aparnian, leaded by Arsace I, founded their first Dynastic ceremonial Capital, Old Nisa, in the modern Turkmenistan (Fig. 1).

The Parthian Empire is a very fascinating period of Central Asian History connected both to Greece and Rome as well. Ruling from 247 B.C. to A.D. 228 in the Iranian region, widely coinciding with ancient Persia, the Parthians defeated Alexander the Great's successors, the Seleucids, conquered most of the Middle East and southwest Asia, controlled the Silk Road and transformed Parthia into an Eastern superpower. The general cultural history of The Parthian empire, could be resumed in the dualism between a complex mixture of nomadic substrate, Iranian cultures and the Roman power at the West.



Fig. 1 - General View of Old Nisa.

Old Nisa is a 14-hectare tell surrounded by a high defensive earth rampart with more than 40 rectangular towers. Its contours take the shape of an irregular pentagon with the corners flanked by powerful bastions<sup>1</sup>.

The entire site was built on a natural hill, the top of which had been levelled up and flattened with layers of earth (pakhsa). The most probable location of the main and, perhaps the only entrance, was at the center of the western part of the surrounding wall.

The general layout is formed by two main sectors housing different architectural complexes, characterized by different functions: Northern and the Central one (Fig. 2).

At the North where lying the so-called Big Square building, articulated into different rooms: the royal treasury, the wine vault in the northern part, and auxiliary premises in the south-eastern parts. This is the place where many famous works of art of Old Nisa were discovered and on which we will focus later.

The Central complex is formed by 5 interrelated buildings: The “building with the Square Hall”, the “building with the Round Hall”, the “tower-like building”, the “Columned hall” and the “Red Building”<sup>2</sup>.

Concerning the function of Old Nisa, archaeological researches have proved that the site was a Royal residence and not an ordinary settlement: Nisa appears today as a monumental ceremonial center, devoted to the glory and the memory of the Arsacid dynasty: a celebration space where traces of daily life are extremely rare.

We reasonably date the major development and the construction of the impressive buildings as well in the middle of the third century BC. The name of the site, Mithradatkert, as well as chronological indication relating its foundation are known thanks to an inscription written on one of the 2700 administrative ceramics (ostraca) found just at Nisa<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Preliminary excavations were carried out by Marušenko in 1930 (A.A. Marušenko, *Kratkij otčet o rabote kabineta archeologii Turkmenskogo gosudarstvennogo instituta istorii* [A short account of the work of the State Turkmen Institute of History], in «Materialy Ju.T.A.K.E.», 1 [1949], p. 183. Then, the results of the systematic archaeological campaigns can be found in V.N. Pilipko, *Staraja Nisa. Osnovnye itogi archeologičeskogo izučeniia v sovetskij period*, Moskva, 2001; A. Invernizzi, C. Lippolis, *Nisa Partica. Ricerche nel complesso monumentale arsacide 1990-2006* (Monografie di Mesopotamia, IX), Firenze 2009.

<sup>2</sup> General information on the site, its history and excavations can be found in the final publication of the complex: A. Invernizzi, C. Lippolis, *Nisa Partica* cit.

<sup>3</sup> V.N. Pilipko, *Staraja Nisa* cit. On the ostraka, see, in general, M. Sznycer, *Ostraka d'époque Parthe trouvés à Nis (U.R.S.S.)*, in «Semitica», 5 (1955), p. 65; E. Morano, *Two new Ostraka from Nisa*, in *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo*. Atti dei Convegni Lincei (Roma, 1-12 nov. 1994), Roma 1996, pp. 139-145; A.N. Bäder, *Parthian Ostraka from Nisa: some Historical Data*, ivi, pp. 251-276.





Fig. 2 - General Plan of the site.

Mithradatkert means “the fortress of Mithidrat”, referring certainly to the king Mithradat I (174-138 BC). In addition, some ancient sources (as Isidorus of Kharax), mention the city of Parthaunisa, as an administrative and economic center for the Arsacid dynasty.

From this royal residence, the Arsacid dynasty engaged huge conquests over a very large territory stretching from the Indus to the Euphrates. Nisa became a major city located in a strategic place, at the crossroad of many cultures: Iran, Greece, Central Asia<sup>4</sup>.

The architectural style of Parthian Nisa can be compared with other Central Asian contemporaneous complexes, characterized by the presence of square buildings surrounded by corridors, courtyard buildings, and round-halls. Moreover, the remains reveal surprisingly specific combinations of several architectural styles, showing a wide use of Hellenistic features, such as Greek architectural order, and sculptural decoration.

Material culture from Old Nisa, furthermore, reveals also the explicit references to both Oriental and Western cultures, reaching, through the ages, a high level of skill in interpreting the different world cultures on this wide region. This art merged the best features of ancient local traditions and influences of Hellenism with Roman art<sup>5</sup>.

The architectural homogeneity could be put in relation with a compact social order and a quite egalitarian relationship among the élite, probably forming the social hierarchy of the peoples following the Arsacids. Everything, in the structural composition of the buildings, in their plans, in the organization of the rooms around a columned central space, sinks its roots within an exquisite Iranian *milieu*, with explicit reference to the Achaemenid past.

Nevertheless, Parthians, or Aparnians, had to find a new royal visual code, suitable for people which from tribe became Dynasty. The ancestral artistic traditions of this semi-nomadic group, evidently, didn't satisfy the new communication's exigencies. In meantime, on this respect, third century Central Asia, was already providing an ideal humus where to construct a new communication code, a modern artistic language, bearing all features useful to express the will and the power of a great kingdom, and adapt to convey messages about this new identity<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> E. Yarshater, *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods. The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, 1, Cambridge 2000.

<sup>5</sup> A. Invernizzi, *Arsacid Dynastic Art*, in «Parthica», 3 (2001), pp. 133-162, with bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander the Great took his throne on 336 B.C., when he was twenty. Just eight years later, his army crossed the Indus. Three years later the king died. «In human terms the achievement was staggering; in terms of cultural history it worked a new orientalising revolution in

The passage from a ruling system based on the deeply rooted tribal hierarchy, born in the Eurasian steppes and slowly grown and transformed through Achaemenid principles, to a monarchy, can be viewed as a “stress” moment. Quite suddenly, the Arsace’s successors had to adapt their ancient and complex culture to a new ruling principle. Just the progressive new elaboration perceivable in the slow change of the coins’ iconography speaks about a conscious will to follow the footprints of the Seleucid kings. As official documents of the kingships, coins are the first witnesses of the new *sense of self* of the Arsacid dynasts. The profile of Mithridates I<sup>7</sup>, no more toward left, but toward right, reproduce the type of the philosopher portrait, spread in Hellenistic culture, and full of meaning in the new Asian context. This was the canonical system of representation of the sovereign, as it is testified by the wide clay sculptural fragment found in the Round Hall, portraying the king in an exquisite Hellenistic style.

The Greek language provided the tool for a global comprehension and sharing of common principles, and Hellenistic art, in the meantime, soon became the modern and immediate medium, universally understood, connecting the new kingdom to its old glorious predecessors<sup>8</sup>.

The fast conquest and the short-lived Macedonian empire in the Orient were followed by a slow but inexorable cultural and social transformation that, to a greater or lesser extent, involved regions as far as India, Iran and Turkmenistan<sup>9</sup>.

Such a process of transformation was accomplished together with one of codification of a new figurative language, exceptional for its uniqueness. This was adapted from time to time to the communication needs of those peoples whose cultural roots were sunk in substrates as diverse as were the cultural and the geographical realities they belonged to. The formal elements of Mediter-

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Greece, and it opened the east to the deeply different arts, politics and behaviour of the Mediterranean world», J. Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*, Princeton 1994.

<sup>7</sup> *Sulla via di Alessandro. Da Seleucia al Gandhāra*, cur. V. Messina, Cinisello Balsamo 2007, p. 51, n. 28.

<sup>8</sup> A critical synthesis for the diffusion of Hellenism in Central Asia and for the different reactions of the local productions is provided by Invernizzi, in A. Invernizzi, *Introduzione all'arte dell'Asia ellenizzata*, in *Sulla via di Alessandro* cit., pp. 63-72 (with bibliography): “L’interscambio tra il pensiero e le forme delle antiche tradizioni orientali e l’arte ellenistica, nuovo interlocutore, fu tanto generalizzato e intenso che nei secoli che seguirono la morte di Alessandro, fino all’età tardo-antica e perfino oltre, si ebbero esiti ben più vari e ampi di quelli prodotti dal primo incontro dell’Oriente con la cultura greca, testimoniato dal contributo che l’arte ionica aveva dato alla creazione dell’arte di corte achemenide” (pp. 63-64). See, in general, D. Schlumberger, *L’Orient Hellénisé. L’Art grec et ses Héritiers dans l’Asie non Méditerranéenne*, Paris 1970.

<sup>9</sup> J. Boardman, *The Diffusion* cit., p. 75.

anean matrix flourished in these regions in parallel with the Greek language, providing new means of expression. These were formed over centuries in the Mediterranean basin, the result of a process of human maturation and philosophical, as well as artistic endeavors that, since the end of the Bronze Age, had led to an awareness of the inseparability of art from the human experience. The adoption of Hellenistic representative models becomes “per se” a clear message of identity, mostly when applied to the figurative language of the court<sup>10</sup>.

It is in this complex cultural context, the one of a deep historical change, that the production of the Nisa works of art must to be considered, and it is on this precise aspect of Arsacid kingship that we will focus this paper<sup>11</sup>. What about resilience? And, what about resilience in Art?

Conceived as conscious form of communication and pragmatic tool in order to convey messages about identity, individual and collective as well, art can assume an active role in ancient societies<sup>12</sup>.

The choice to adopt a precise communication system and group of codes, particularly in context of high symbolic value, must to be placed within the general political and ideological will of the ruling class.

Studies on issues concerning object’s “personality”, alternatively focus on its effective significance in complex processes of formation (and/or transformation) of precise meanings (agency)<sup>13</sup>. We can reasonably consider “meaning-making” as the ongoing outcomes of the processes of engagement between human interlocutors and the materiality of the object itself, that is to say that an object’s meaning can be considered as a socially generated phenomenon linked with human-object interaction rather than a static “epiphenomenal idea existing beyond the object” itself. The basic assumption, then, is that “meaning” must be considered as an active process, continuously shifting and adapted: a dynamic value more than a static inherent entity<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> M.M. Austin, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest. A Selection of Ancient Sources in Translation*, Cambridge 1981.

<sup>11</sup> E. Pappalardo, *Nisa partica. I Rhyta ellenistici*, Firenze 2010.

<sup>12</sup> For a theoretical discussion, see E. Pappalardo, *Connoisseurship and Classification*, in *A Companion to the Ancient Near Eastern Art*, cur. A. Gunter, Oxford-Chicago 2018, pp. 103-128; E. Pappalardo, *Art and Agency. Meaning-Making in Iron Age Mediterranean*, in «Creta Antica», 38 (2018), pp. 1-14.

<sup>13</sup> Chr. Pinney, *Four Types of Visual Culture*, in *Handbook of Material Culture*, cur. Chr. Tilley, W. Keane, S. Küchler, M. Rowlands, P. Spyer, London 2006, pp. 131-144; W. Keane, *Subjects and Objects*, in *Handbook of Material Culture* cit., pp. 197-202; S. Bann, *Meaning/Interpretation*, in *Critical terms for Art History*, cur. R.-S. Nelson, R. Shiff, Chicago 2003, pp. 128-142; E. Pappalardo, *Art and Agency* cit.

<sup>14</sup> R. Osborne, J. Tanner, *Introduction: Art and Agency and Art History*, in *Art’s Agency and Art History*, cur. R. Osborne, J. Tanner, Oxford 2007, p. 9.



On this respect, categories as medium, technique, shape, scale or form, concur altogether to determine an object's significance (and value, then) and have impact on social actions and subjectivities.

More prominently, in this context, raise issues concerning objects of art, where figurative properties are considered key-elements in meaning-making.

Every object found into precise archaeological context should be approached being considered within specific and defined social practices in which it participates. According to this process, then, things acquire value not just on the base of their provenance, but on that of their "acts of consumption". That is to say, emphasis should regard how foreign iconographies and/or styles were taken up, conceived, used in their new environments and, mostly, how they may have influenced new practices and behaviours, sometime strongly conditioning ancient performances.

The architectural remains and the art works found at Old Nisa, form our concrete reference point to reconstruct and define the main features of Arsacid Dynasty, as their royal ideology, in the period of transformation of the small Arsacid kingdom to an empire. With the foundation of Nisa, the great sovereign intended to create a center highly representative of the new imperial status. Mithridates must be viewed as the one having the main role in forming and codifying the main artistic trends of the young Parthian empire.

Beside the architectural features forming the complexes of the ceremonial center, the works of art found numerous at Old Nisa provide us the image of the new language adopted by the Arsacid dynasty to convey messages about its new identity.

Highly representative among these are the marble statues. There is indeed no doubt that they were produced by Hellenic artists of great talent. The image of a female western deity, furthermore, was probably chosen by Mithridates I, according to some scholars in order to portray his daughter Rodogune, according to a process of assimilation of meaning and images almost common both in East and West in this period<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 3). The main symbolic buildings of the ceremonial complex, as for example the square hall and the round hall, housed monumental clay statues, probably representing deities and royal personages as well. A representative example in this sense is provided by the aforementioned beautiful fragmentary head, likewise representing just Mithridates I. The sculptors who produced them were perfectly well aware of the tendencies and development of the Mediterranean artistic production. The stylistic variety of the Nisa sculptures, moreover, is paralleled in Bactria, where the sculptures at Ai

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<sup>15</sup> A. Invernizzi, C. Lippolis, *Nisa Partica* cit., pp. 3-42.



Fig. 3 - Rododune following the model of Aphrodite Anadiomene.

Khanum, also indicate the contemporary existence of different tastes in the everyday production of the local workshops.

Maybe, the best witnesses of the conscious will to adopt a new figurative language, more adapt to celebrate the new dynasty, to be directly linked with Seleucid predecessors and, moreover, with the figure of Alexandre the Great, are the 48 ivory rhytons found in the room 11 of the Square House<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 4).

To this royal corpus of artefacts, I devoted several years of study, finally publishing it in a book on 2010. The rhytons raise issues concerning their function, their meaning and their general role in the Arsacid citadel. Their highness going from 25 to 80 cm, and their rich decoration involving both terminals and upper friezes, stress the important value of these objects, which constitute an *unicum* in the general art production of the ancient world (Fig. 5).

The strong Hellenistic features of some Nisa rhytons has often given rise to a tendency to place this material, together with other famous pieces of art coming from several Asian sites, among the examples of the Hellenized Asian produc-

tion, linking them with more or less Hellenizing contexts.

So, the interpretation of the rhytons as objects “generically” linked with the Hellenistic influences on the Asiatic production of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. has turned out to be inconsistent with the information provided by the systematic study of the corpus<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> M.E. Masson, G. Pugačenkova, *The Parthian Rhytons of Nisa*, Firenze 1982; E. Pappalardo, *Nisa partica* cit.

<sup>17</sup> E. Pappalardo, *The Ivory Rhytons from Ancient Nisa*, in «Central Asia Cultural Values», 4 (2009), pp. 71-82; Ead., *Nisa Partica* cit.; Ead., *Ivory rhytons from Old Nisa: Methodological Remarks*, in *Transactions of the State Hermitage Museum LXII, Sogdians, Their Precursor, Contemporaries and Heirs*, St Petersburg 2013, pp. 45-60.

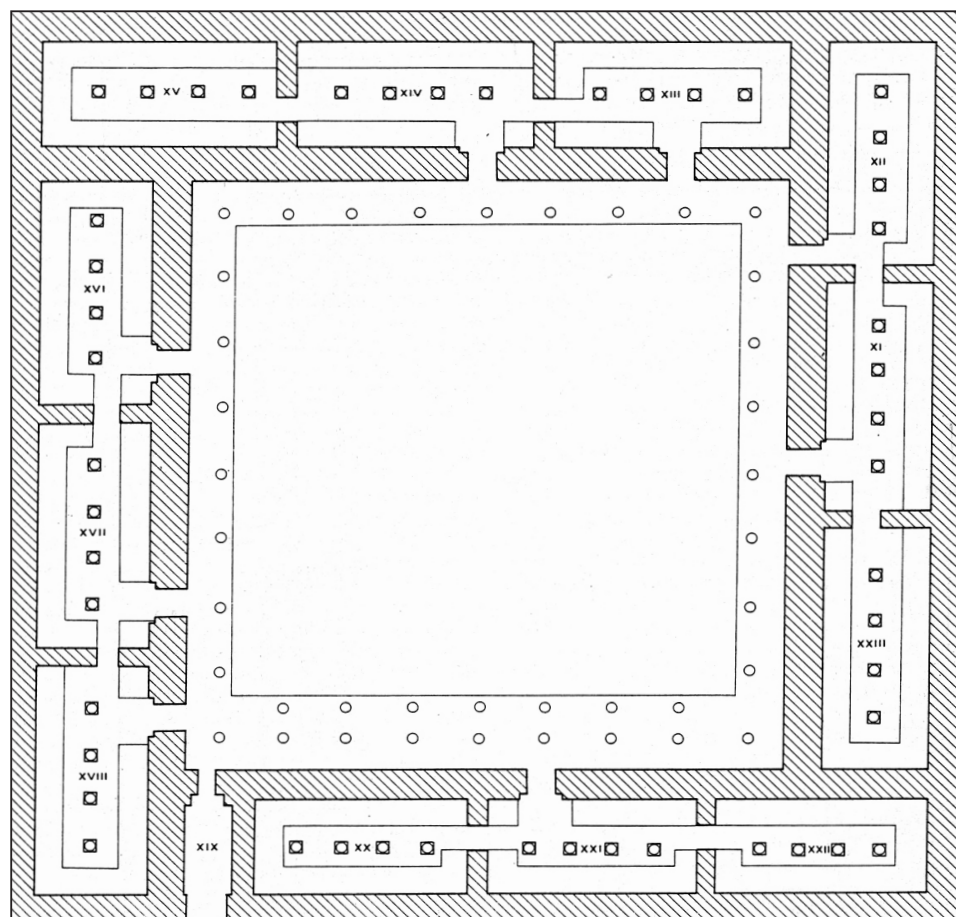


Fig. 4 - The Square House.

If typologically and technically the assemblage is characterized by an almost absolute homogeneity, the scenes represented on the friezes, together with their styles and techniques, show astonishing signs of discontinuity; this phenomenon can be, in some case, explained, either by the large amount of hands working on the rhytons and by chronological differences detectable inside the corpus. In the meantime, however, differences in style and in iconography of some specimens can be due to a conscious choice, a will in affirming identity and origin by connecting oneself to a precise “way of doing things”.

Eight different iconographic themes have been recognized, and the same quantity of stylistic groups<sup>18</sup>. The adoption of a precise “way of doing” things,

<sup>18</sup> E. Pappalardo, *Nisa Partica* cit., p. 123.



Fig. 5 - Rhyton 43.

that we can call “style”, can carry important cultural-ideological implications, sometimes better detectable than in iconography. The style, in fact, often reflects a more or less conscious choice of sharing a discrete language. This type of choice should originate from precise exigencies, at the base of which there are ideological assumptions of the group commissioning the works of art. Not only iconography, then, but also style is a fundamental indicator of the image the purchaser wants to convey about himself.

The distinctive element of the biggest part of the rhytons is mainly detectable in the rendering of the bodies of the figures represented on the friezes. In general, the canons of balance and *ponderatio* along with a particular care for proportions, typical of Greek sculpture, are maintained (Fig. 6). The compositional

scheme is based on the respect of the barycentre; the paratactic composition, in the case of the Dodekatheoi cycle<sup>19</sup>, is often emphasized by different inclinations of the bodies, skilfully counterbalanced by the position of the legs and shoulders. The anatomic details are rendered through naturalistic sensibility. The carving technique is based on the use of a tiny stylus and soft. As to the rendering of faces, the orbital section constitutes the area of biggest effect. The orbital arch is often outlined by protruding edges, defining a more or less light and wide orbit, always shaded<sup>20</sup>. The nose is marked and wide at the base on the male faces. The rendering of drapery draws inspiration from late classical art representations; the folds adapt to the position of arms and legs, outlining it, in some cases, with sinuous or fan-shaped folds.

Greek prototypes for this kind of rendering can be found in the very early Hellenistic production, the one dating back to the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Fea-

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, pp. 123-159.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, figs. 12.18-12.20.





Fig. 6 - Detail of the Rhyton 22 (Hermes).

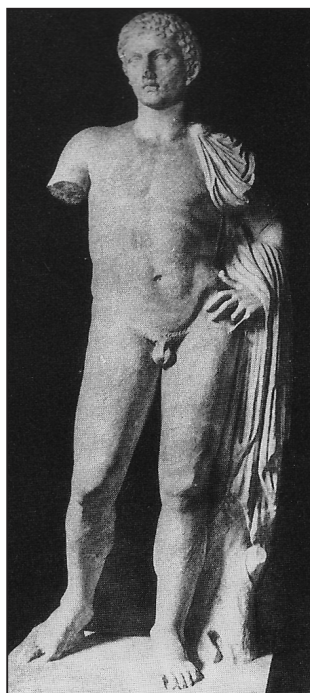


Fig. 7 - Hermes of Atlanta (from a model of Praxiteles).

tures typical of the “maniera” of Lysippus and of the Sicyonian school, or Praxiteles, can be observed in the general compositional schemes of the figures and in the rendering of the faces as well (Fig. 7).

The style of few rhytons, nevertheless, seems to answer different representative exigencies, being the figures more massive and volumetric, with wide chubby faces. As to the collocation of the figures in space, precise elements inside the narrow frieze are detectable. On rhyton no. 78, for example, the figures are not in profile represented, but in an absolutely frontal position. The totally frontal view, lacking on other artefacts, is here adopted in association with the foreshortened one, but it is applied to the figures that must have more prominence on the scene. The frontal representation, in this case, does not answer to the exigencies of an iconographic nature: it is conceptual. The aim of the frontal view of the figures on rhyton no. 78 is clearly that of drawing the attention of the observer to a determined moment of the represented scene<sup>21</sup> (Fig. 8). This result is achieved both by employing the frontal view and using a certain profusion of details in rendering faces, dresses and attributes. The frontal view, then, hasn't an iconographic value (logically, the figure at the altar should be represented paying homage to it and then in profile or foreshortened); it seems to be at the base of principles of the representation different from the Greek/Hellenistic ones. The main interest, here, is not in the naturalistic rendering of the figures, but in the immediate perception of their meaning and of the role they play in the context of the scene. This *new* representative criterion seems very similar to the one adopted in the one commonly defined “Parthian art”. The power of expressivity and the exigency of immediate transmission of a message are just achieved in the frontal representation.

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 173, figs. 4.31-4.35.



Fig. 8 - Rhyton 78 (detail).

The figure at the altar on rhyton no. 8 (Fig. 9), as well as the characters frontally represented on rhyton no. 78, of the same group (the tambourine girl, the double flute player, the thyrsus bearer), all answer these principles.

Similar features characterize frieze no. 81.

Unfortunately, the state of preservation of this specimen doesn't allow appreciating the sequence of the figures. It is, in any case, possible to catch some sort of codification of the representational principles already experimented in the previous group. The number of the frontal characters is increased. The succession of the two types of representation in space seems now definitively to be an obstacle to the effect of the narrow scene.



Fig. 9 - Rhyton 8 (detail).

Once again, the frontal view is put at service of a precise conception of the representation, which here seems to overwhelm.

The Aphrodite represented on frieze No. 81, iconographically recalling the types called “Aphrodite Kushana” and “Aphrodite of Gandhāra” (Figs. 10-11), shows a sinuous scheme (absolutely two-dimensional), very close to the one characterizing some Gandhāran artistic production<sup>22</sup>. Similar considerations regard standing woman (the face scraped off) totally covered by a heavy mantle, characterized by a cascade of arched folds<sup>23</sup>.



Fig. 10 - Rhyton 81 (detail).



Fig. 11 - So-called “Aphrodite Kushana”.

The suggested eight style-groups differ from one another not only in the rendering of separate figures, but in general, in the formal principles underlying the conception of representation itself. The change of these principles seems to be connected with a formal process at the base of which there must be a difference in the representative exigencies.

The adoption of the Hellenistic schemes, visible both in iconographies and styles, naturally mixed with features belonging with the Iranian substratum,

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 232, figs. 9.1, 9.3.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, fig. 9.7.



and re-adapted in order to convey messages and meanings, provides information on how Arsacid Dynasts wanted to be viewed and celebrated by the moment they became an empire. The adhesion to the Hellenistic schemes of representation was variously calibrated in the new communication codes. In certain cases, Hellenistic subjects were consciously used in order to render local, concepts.

The Greek Olympian Gods, represented with their canonical attributes, and attitudes, were thought to be good media in order to reproduce local deities. And so, Zeus, with the thunderbolt, was the subjects used to represent Ahura Mazda, the leading god of the Zoroastrian religion<sup>24</sup>.

Otherwise, craftsmen at the service of Parthian kings, were able to catch also minimal details of the Western Hellenistic compositional schemes, demonstrating as not just iconography, but also style was conceived as important tool in conveying messages about identity.

Everything in Nisa's art seems to speak about *resilience* of the traditional artistic language, the one born in the steppes, sinking roots in the Iranian cultural *milieu*. On one hand the silent resistance of the Parthian way of doing things is implicitly perceivable in the traditional stylistic choices used in rendering new iconographies: these lasts, it must be stressed, often placed at the services of meanings different from the ones which generated them. On the other, instead, it is consciously manifested in adopting old symbols in new objects: this is the case of the clay metopes adorning the official buildings: a Greek architectural decoration in which, nevertheless, the Parthian bow is represented.

Hellenistic style formed a universal language in post-Alexander Central Asia. It could easily satisfy the communication exigencies of the new sovereigns, who wanted more or less explicitly been viewed as the natural successors of the Seleucids and, probably, of Alexander the Great. The expressive power of the Hellenistic art, the richness of its iconographic repertoire, the inclusion of personages as Heracles, Dionysus, the twelve Olympian gods offered to the new rulers the opportunity of communicating through art their greatness, using the same codes of their "Greek" predecessors. Nevertheless, in this context, the rigidity of the original Parthian art, the conceptual use of the style, the immediacy of the message conveyed through the frontal representation, the hierarchy of the figures easily obtained by ignoring the naturalistic reciprocal relations, didn't disappear at all. They continued to be used, resisting the advances of the Hellenistic form and, in the meantime, preparing the milieu of the later Western Roman art.

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<sup>24</sup> Ivi, fig. 3.11.



## ABSTRACT

In questo contributo si affronta un aspetto inedito dell'arte partica, ossia di quella produzione figurata, nata e diffusa in Centro Asia a partire dal II sec. a.C. circa. Ci si focalizza sulla prima capitale arsacide, Nisa Vecchia, indagata negli anni '50 dalla Missione Sovietica JuTAKE e, in seguito, dalla Missione Archeologica del Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino. A seguito delle conquiste orientali di Alessandro Magno, si compì il processo di "ellenizzazione" dell'Asia che coinvolse, a vari livelli, la cultura e la lingua di quelle popolazioni che, originariamente nomadi, affondavano le proprie radici nel substrato iranico. L'arte greca, dunque, diviene lo strumento espressivo ritenuto più idoneo a trasmettere messaggi circa l'identità dei nuovi sovrani. Gli schemi compositivi, oltre che le iconografie, greci sostituiscono le precedenti manifestazioni artistiche iraniche. Tuttavia, l'antica arte dei Parti sembra sopravvivere, mostrando elementi di resilienza, nel protrarsi, in alcuni casi, di schemi e stili legati al milieu iranico e basati sulla composizione gerarchica e sulla frontalità.

This paper deals with a peculiar aspect of Parthian art, that is that figured production born and spread in Central Asia from II cent. BCE. The focus, in particular, will be the first Arsacid ceremonial capital, Old Nisa, investigated since 50s by the Soviet mission JuTAKE and, then, by the Archaeological Mission of the Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino. The conquest of the East by Alexander the Great determined that process of Hellenization which involved at several levels culture and language of those people who, originally nomad, were characterized by Iranian substrate. Greek art, then, becomes the most useful and adapt tool in order to convey messages about the identity of the new sovereigns. The Greek compositional schemes, along with iconographies, took the place of previous Iranian art. Nevertheless, the ancient Parthian art seems to survive, showing a strong resilience, in continuing to use styles and schemes founded on the Iranian milieu and on the hierarchic composition and frontality.