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**A PARTHIAN PORT ON THE PERSIAN GULF:  
CHARACENE AND ITS TRADE\***

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**Introduction**

The title of this contribution intentionally reminds readers of the work the Semitist Javier Teixidor dedicated to the caravan city of Palmyra: '*Un port romain du désert, Palmyre et son commerce d'Auguste à Caracalla*'.<sup>1</sup> Published in 1984 in the pages of the review *Semitica*, this long article described the Syrian city as a pivotal commercial centre of the Roman Empire and the gate of Rome concerning the trade with the East. The particular status of the desert city which was granted extraordinary privileges and autonomy, was set in the context of the valuable and irreplaceable function it performed for the long distance caravan trade.

Now that a decade has passed since the publication of Monika Schuol's fundamental book on the South Mesopotamian kingdom of Characene<sup>2</sup> and in the light of the increasing interest the Parthian state has aroused in recent years, it seems justifiable to reflect upon the role the Characeniens played within the Arsacid administrative system. Characene constituted the most important commercial partner of Palmyra East of the imperial border and it was the point of arrival of the sea routes which connected southern Mesopotamia

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\* I am grateful to the journal's anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. All remaining errors are my own.

<sup>1</sup> Teixidor 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Schuol 2000.

with India through the Persian Gulf. A serious reflection is needed in order to clarify if and how the importance of the Characene leadership for the Great King could be assimilated to that of the Palmyrenes for the Roman Empire. The studies relating to the Palmyrenian commercial enterprise have helped to shed light on the relationship between Characene centres and the West. Nonetheless, it would seem that insufficient attention has been paid to the forms of political control and economic influence which its monarchs, and through them the Parthian Great Kings, were able to exert over the Persian Gulf. The aim of this contribution is to leave aside Palmyra and the caravan trade and to primarily focus attention on the role the Characene played in the Parthian empire, on the influence it had on the sea trade routes crossing the Gulf in relation to the development of the communities located within its trade network. The historical information concerning Parthia and Characene will be taken into consideration along with the archaeological and epigraphic data provided by the field excavations attesting the spreading of the Arsacid presence in the Gulf in order to better understand which role this small Parthian vassal kingdom could have played in the organization of the sea routes.

### **The Historical Situation: the Vassal Kings of Parthia**

Since its very beginning, the Parthian kingdom was characterised by a strongly decentralised nature. Within its vast borders, extending from the Euphrates' left bank to north-west India, including Mesopotamia, the whole Iranian plateau and all the Asiatic territories lying between the Persian Gulf and the Indian ocean on one side and the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus on the other, extremely different realities coexisted. The Arsacid monarchs used to confer some of their royal prerogatives to local groups of power which were strongly rooted in the territory, in order to assure the control of the most important districts and performance of the production activities which took place there. In the land formally submitted to the Great King's authority there were thus local dynasties, endowed with an independent political life and administrative organization. These 'client' kings were influenced in their activity, as were the provincial governors, by the oath of allegiance they took in favour of the Parthian king. Nonetheless, their high degree of autonomy allowed them to develop an individual policy concerning both the international situation and the exploitation of the territorial sources and the trade possibilities their lands offered.

Throughout Arsacid history these minor political entities tried to take advantage of the periodic weakness of the central authority to loosen the control

the Great King was able to exert over their government activity and increase their level of autonomy. For the Parthian king, a solid influence over his vassals and their economic and military sources would have meant the possibility of gaining access to greater financial and military means. Nevertheless, the frequent instability at the head of the kingdom allowed the vassal kings to gain a substantial autonomy until reaching, during the time of deepest crisis for the ruling dynasty, a condition of almost total independence. Once it had managed to regain its stability, the Parthian leadership found itself compelled to take action, through military and diplomatic means, in order to restore the bond of allegiance with the vassal chiefs.

For the Parthian sovereign, a loyal vassal king constituted a valuable ally for resolving international and internal problems. The local proficiencies of such monarchs assured the exploitation of the territorial resources and potential in areas where the often limited capacities of the central authority were not able to intervene or effectively respond to needs.

The autonomy achieved by the vassal kings put them a position where they could rule undisturbed in their countries and freely make the decisions they thought more suitable for the development and wealth of their states, in obedience to the political and economic obligations towards their lord. The Arsacid government system would very likely collapse if continuous attention to the institutional duties of the dynasts had not balanced the autonomy granted. The authority of the legitimate descendant of Arsaces was acknowledged as superior by the 'client' kings.

The history of the relations between the Parthian king and his royal servants can thus be explained as the attempt to strike a balance between autonomy, whose benefits for both the local courts and the central power were evident, and the dangerous centripetal forces originating in the peripheral areas of the empire. These forces could not be underestimated in a geopolitical situation in which the greatest rival of the Parthians, Rome, was enacting a policy of economic expansion in the East.

### **The Peculiarity of the Characenean Kingdom**

A considerable number of the 'client' monarchies could date their origins back to the last period of Seleucid rule, which preceded the final Arsacid submission of Mesopotamia. The Characenean kingdom constitutes the better known of these ancient principalities. The term *Χαρακηνή*, which appears in Pliny's<sup>3</sup> and Ptolemy's (Ptol. *Geogr.* 6.3.3) narrations about southern Mesopotamia, derives

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<sup>3</sup> Plin. *N.H.* 6. 136; Schuol 1998, 407–416.

from the name of his capital and most important city: Spasinou Charax. A second term used by ancient writers, *Μεσσηνή*,<sup>4</sup> denoted the geographical area comprising the Euphrates river, the shores of the Persian Gulf, and the *Eulaios* river, the present Karun, that is to say the natural borders of the Characene kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

According to the sources available, the settlement of Spasinou Charax (Alexandria on the Tigris) was founded at the time of Alexander the Great. This initiative was aimed at creating an important trade centre in south Mesopotamia in order to thwart, according to Seleucids' plans, the rise of the commercial power of the Arabic city of Gerrha<sup>6</sup> in the Gulf.

In 166/165 BC King Antiochos IV rebuilt the city, destroyed by a flood, renaming it Antiochia.<sup>7</sup> He appointed as the head of the Mesenian eparchy a skilful new governor, the Irano-Bactrian Hyspaosines,<sup>8</sup> son of a certain Sagdonacos (Polyb. 5.46; 54). Faced with the Arsacid threat and the sinking of hopes for a Seleucid revival which followed the defeat in 139 BC of Demetrios II and his anti-Parthian coalition, Hyspaosines proclaimed himself king.<sup>9</sup> It was clear to him that no further aid could come from the agonized Seleucid Crown. In the years between 141 and 139 BC, when the Arsacid advance westwards was halted by the sudden troubles in Central Asia, he exploited the political vacuum in Mesopotamia, starting a policy of territorial expansion. The capital Antiochia, devastated by another flood, was rebuilt and assumed the name of Spasinou Charax from its new monarch.<sup>10</sup>

Some cuneiform documents from Babylon attest to the military operation which Hyspaosines undertook in Babylonia.<sup>11</sup> An administrative document dated 127/6 BC confirms the conquest of central Mesopotamia by the self-proclaimed king of Characene.<sup>12</sup> Archaeological data seems to suggest

<sup>4</sup> As. Quadr. frgm. 18 apd. Steph. Byz. *Ethn.* s.v. Ἀδιαβηνή and Μεσσηνή. Ptolemy does not mention the Mesene, but the *Masanites* Gulf, corresponding to actual Kuwait Bay; Ptol. *Geogr.* 5.18.1; 5.19.1; 6.7.19; Nodelman 1960, 84; Brizzi 1981, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Plin. *N.H.* 6. 129; Steph. Byz. *Ethn.* s.v. Ἀραμεία; Brizzi 1981, 87–88, 90–92; Bernard 1990, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Plin. *N.H.* 6. 138; Nodelman 1960, 84; Sellwood 1983, vol. III, 1, 310; Potts 1988, 137; Bowersock 1989, 159; Potts 1990, 8–9 and 17.

<sup>7</sup> Plin. *N.H.* 6. 139; Schuol 2000, 108–109.

<sup>8</sup> Bellinger 1942, 56–58; Potter 1991, 279; Bin Seray 1996, 16; Schuol 2000, 292–293.

<sup>9</sup> Newell 1925; Bellinger 1942, 54.

<sup>10</sup> BMC Arabia, CXCIV–CXCVII; McDowell 1935, 148; Le Rider 1959, 231; Nodelman 1960, 90–91; Hansman 1967, 24.

<sup>11</sup> BM 33461 + 33836, Vs. 9'–12' and 14', Rs. 1'–3' (138–137 AD); Sachs and Hunger 1996, 168–171, No. –137 D, Obv. 9'–14', Rev. 1'–3', pll. 204–205.

<sup>12</sup> Bellinger 1942, 58; Sachs and Hunger 1996, 260–261, No. –125 A, Obv. 15'–21', pll. 234–235; Schuol 2000, 31–34 and 294; Assar 2006, 108–109.

the occupation of other sites in the region as Larsa, Uruk and Tello.<sup>13</sup> The apogee of the Characene power was short-lived. At the end of the 127 BC the Arsacid generals had already managed to enter Babylonia, compelling the Mesenian troops within their kingdom borders again.<sup>14</sup> After this an energetic new Arsaces, Mithridates II, came to power, and the capacity of resistance of the small kingdom failed. The last monetary emissions bearing the name of Hyspaosines date back to 121/0 BC. Later the Parthian king overstruck his coins on his rival exemplars, an indication of Characene defeat and of the fact that Mithridates managed to conquer the region or, at least its capital.<sup>15</sup>

This latter explanation seems due. It would have required the availability of naval squads, trained to cooperate with land units in amphibious operations, to conquer and maintain steady control over Mesene. The Parthian army was composed mainly of cavalry units, whose rapidity of movement was useless in the tangled system of channels and swamps that characterised south Mesopotamia. The armies of the Arsacids were the military instrument of a continental power which did not have the necessary skills and knowledge to wage a war by sea or to organise a network of maritime trade routes. Nonetheless, the Parthian leadership did not ignore the enormous potential represented by the commercial routes connecting the Indian coast and the wealthy Babylonian cities through the Persian Gulf. What the Parthians lacked in terms of means and knowledge was made up for by the strength of the Characenes, who were the heirs of the Seleucid mercantile expansion in the Gulf and the powerful fleet of the Erythrean Sea, the main instrument of that policy.

The nautical skills and the naval means the kings of Characene had at their disposal would thus have been crucial for the political survival of their dynasty, even if not in strictly military terms. Forced to surrender all the conquests on the main land, *Apodakos*, Hyspaosines' son and successor, was acknowledged, like many other dynasts, by the Great King on his father's throne as a vassal sovereign. The submission of the Characene monarch, who was granted significant autonomy, gave Mithridates II the possibility of spreading his area of influence through the trade routes of the Gulf.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Finkbeiner 1982, 155–162; Leisten 1986, 356–359; Schuol 2000, 296–298.

<sup>14</sup> BM 34274 + 34739 (127–6 AD); Sachs and Hunger 1996, 254–255, No. –126 A, Obv. 7'–9', pl. 232–233; Schuol 2000, 34–35, 294–295; Assar 2006, 115.

<sup>15</sup> McDowell 1935, 213; Le Rider 1959, 231–232; Bernard 1990, 41–43; Wolski 1993, 88–89; Habicht 1997, 129–130; Schuol 2000, 298; Simonetta 2006, 43.

<sup>16</sup> BMC Arabia, CXC VII, 289, n. 1, pl. XLII; Nodelman 1960, 91–92; Habicht 1997, 129–130.

### A Characenic Thalassocracy? (second century BC – third century AD)

From the end of the second century BC to the first century AD, Characene was the only political entity in a position, through its harbour structures, to connect the south Mesopotamian Greek cities with the trade centres of South Arabia. Mesene harbours were situated at the mouth of the largest navigable rivers in the region, the Tigris and the Euphrates, through which oriental goods were brought to the mainland, in order to reach the markets of Babylonia and the West.<sup>17</sup>

Until recent times there was no evidence to prove that Hyspaosines was able to occupy the southern coastal area of the Gulf in the course of his reign, which would later prove vital for the Characenic economic expansion. Only a later reference by Lucian of Samosata existed. In his *Makrobioi* he called the founder of the dynasty βασιλεύς τῶν κατ' Ἐρυθρὰν θάλασσαν τόπων, an expression which some scholars interpreted as proof of the expansion of Hyspaosines' rule along the northern coast of the Arabic peninsula as far as the actual Oman.<sup>18</sup> The presence in this period of scarce numismatic evidence in the Gulf area cannot with certainty be associated with a political or military presence of the Characenic. Goods, men and coins moved freely along the well travelled commercial routes. Trade colonies grew up next to strategic locations. While there was no doubt that the region was under the commercial influence of Characene, on the other hand the vast political expansion which some scholars inferred from Lucian's words, written three centuries after the narrated events, appeared to be excluded.

A recent epigraphic finding has made it necessary to reconsider this question. A short dedicatory inscription from the time of Hyspaosines, found in 1997 in the necropolis of Shakhoura on Bahrain island, but only published in 2002, suggests a political hegemony, at least in the northern and central Gulf. The text in Greek says: 'In the name of King Hyspaosines and of Queen Thalassia, Kephisodoros, strategos of Tylos and of the Islands (has dedicated) the temple, to the Dioscuri Saviours, in ex-voto'.<sup>19</sup>

This document can be dated to the latter period of Hyspaosines' rule, in around the Twenties of the second century BC, the apogee of his government. In these circumstances it can be supposed that the monarch maintained the prerogatives due to him as the last governor and Selucid responsible for south Mesopotamia. It is in this sense that the rule over *Tylos*<sup>20</sup> and over other not better speci-

<sup>17</sup> Boucharlat and Salles 1981, 76–80; Schuol 2000, 299–300.

<sup>18</sup> Lucian. *Makr.* 16.16; Potts 1988, 140–141; Salles 1990, 223.

<sup>19</sup> Gatier, Lombard and Al-Sindi 2002, 223–226.

<sup>20</sup> The classical sources use this place name referring to the island; Strab. 16.3.4 and 6–7; Plin. *N.H.* 6.147; Theophr. *De Lapidibus*, 36; Potts 1990, 127–133, 135 and 138; Salles 1992, 87–88.

fied maritime stations in the Gulf must be understood. Hyspaosines was very likely able to strengthen the Characene political position in the Gulf. Nonetheless, even this new document does not allow us to assume an annexation of the northern coast of the Arabian peninsula. It would also be hazardous to conjecture that the island of Bahrain continuously remained under Mesene administration until the middle of the second century AD, when a strategy of the *Thilouanoi* subject to Spasinou Charax is once again evidenced. What the document certainly proves is that a sort of Characene thalassocracy was already established in the second century BC.

In the first century BC and for most of the first century AD Characene experienced a substantial autonomy within the Arsacid empire. Several findings along the Gulf sea routes and near the stopovers on the south coast prove that during this period the Arsacids were also interested in commercially exploiting the Gulf. Such a policy widely, if not exclusively, employed the men, the means and the logistical organization which only the Characene entrepreneurs were able to provide. It is undeniable that the business classes, whether Arsacid or closer to the Characene autonomous royalty, which exerted their influence over the trade network, gave a significant impulse to the evolution of the societies along the sea routes.<sup>21</sup> As had already occurred in the steppe areas around Edessa and Palmyra, the creation of an efficient trade network through the Gulf required the establishment of stopover and supply stations, settlements equipped to receive the convoys headed to India or to the Mesene sea ports.

The oriental goods and luxury ware which the western sources described with admiration were naturally not destined for these stopover settlements, where in fact there is no trace of them. Archaeological research, which has only been satisfactorily conducted in some limited areas, has revealed that the Gulf settlements belonged to the area of diffusion of basic Mesopotamian products. The commercial landings in the Gulf, where doubtless both Characene and Parthian agents operated, were part of a region under the political and cultural influence of Mesopotamia. They constituted an ideal social substratum for both the Great King and the dynasts of Mesene, in view of a future political expansion.

The settlement of Thaj grew up next to the road connecting the Babylonian cities with south Arabia<sup>22</sup> along the Gulf coast. This area experienced a period of prosperity during the Hellenistic age.<sup>23</sup> Archaeological surveys brought to light significant amounts of *Parthian Glazed Ware*, typical of Arsacid Babylonia (first century AD) and produced at Seleucia, Susa and Uruk-Warka. Economic relations with the ports north of the Gulf seem to be proven by the coins, mainly

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<sup>21</sup> Teixidor 1993, 293–294.

<sup>22</sup> Potts 1983, 113–124.

<sup>23</sup> Boucharlat and Salles 1981, 77–78; Salles 1993, 505.

Elymean and Parthian, found in the burial grounds of the villages surrounding the site (for example at Jebel Kenzan).<sup>24</sup>

The archaeological data on the ceramics from the settlement of Ra's al-Qal'at, on Bahrain island, also prove contacts with the Iranian world.<sup>25</sup> The Hellenistic fortress was very likely also used during the Parthian period, as confirmed by the ceramic finds and by the Arabic sources which attest to the existence of fortified structures between the end of the Parthian rule and the beginning of the Sasanian expansion.<sup>26</sup> The forts mentioned in the sources could be an evolution of the palaces originally intended to host the Characene governor.<sup>27</sup> Here too, the burial grounds around the main settlement (Jidd Hafis, Karranah and Janussan) evidenced ceramic and materials coming from Mesopotamia.<sup>28</sup>

Another important and busy commercial station existed on Failaka island, not far from the coast of current Kuwait. This site also provided Parthian ceramics and exemplars of Characene monetary emissions.<sup>29</sup>

The site which proves richest in findings is that of Ed-Dur on the United Arab Emirates coast. It was a vast centre located almost one kilometre from the coast, characterised by intense building activity between the first and fourth century AD.<sup>30</sup> The percentage quantity of Parthian ceramics (*Parthian Glaze Ware*) discovered on the site exceeds what has been found in other Gulf settlements, and reaches 40 % of all the datable fictile material brought to light.<sup>31</sup> Of course these findings should not be taken into consideration as an isolated element but have to be put in close relation with the information provided by the other sources (literary, epigraphic and numismatic) in order to describe a situation on the southern shore of the Gulf where, even if the presence of Characene or Parthian agents cannot be proved by archaeological data only, the economic and political influence of Parthia and Characene seems evident.

<sup>24</sup> Boucharlat 1993, 47–48; Finkbeiner 1993, 283–287.

<sup>25</sup> In particular for the periods *Tylus V b1* (100 BC – 100 AD) and *Tylus V b2* (100 AD – 250 AD); Boucharlat and Salles 1981, 74–76; Potts 1990, 108–109; Potts 1996, 270–273.

<sup>26</sup> Kervran 1983, 71–77; Boucharlat 1986, 435–444; Kervran 1986, 462–464; Bergamini 1987, 195–214; Kennet 2007, 103.

<sup>27</sup> Kervran 1984, 165; Boucharlat et Salles 1987, 283 and 285; Potts 1990, 111–115; Lombard et Kervan 1993, 135–136.

<sup>28</sup> During-Caspers 1972–74, 131–156; Potts 1990, 117; Boucharlat et Salles 1987, 286; For Janussan see: Lombard et Salles 1984, 43, 120–129, 140, 159–161; Herling and Salles 1993, 172–177.

<sup>29</sup> Boucharlat and Salles 1981, 73–74; Potts 1996, 270; Gachet 1998, 69–79.

<sup>30</sup> Salles 1980, 97–98; Boucharlat et Salles 1987, 291–296; Boucharlat 1989, 113–114; Potts 1990, 275–277; Potts 2001, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Boucharlat, Haerinck, Phillips and Potts 1988, 1–26; Haerinck, 1998a, 292; Salles 1987, 241–270.



Investigation of this site is only just beginning, and most of the inhabited area has only been researched through surface surveys. Nonetheless, the wealth of monetary findings from Ed-Dur suggests that the site, possibly even from the first half of the first century, played a vital role as intermediate trade station between India and Mesopotamia, possibly taking the place once occupied by Thaj.<sup>32</sup> There are numerous coins of the first century Characenean kings.<sup>33</sup> It seems that the Mesenean coins substantially influenced the autochthonous coinage,<sup>34</sup> which shows a Heracles' head, the traditional symbol of the Characenean dynasty, next to a seated divinity and the Aramaic legend *Abi'el*.<sup>35</sup> According to D. T. Potts,<sup>36</sup> Ed-Dur could be identified with the harbour of *Ommama*, which the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, a treatise written in the last third of the first century AD, mentions as a 'Persian', that is to say Parthian, emporium.<sup>37</sup>

Taking into consideration the local monetary issues from Ed-Dur, a fundamental step in the evolution of a society which based its wealth on the sea trade, the catalytic role played by the Characenean kingdom and by its business groups in the cultural and social formation of the communities, which had become part of the trade network they created and managed, seems evident.

The leading class of the small Characenean kingdom had been able to understand and exploit the advantages connected with the opening of the sea communication routes with the East. When the internal cohesion of the Parthian kingdom allowed the Great King to adopt a more direct policy aimed at controlling the sea routes, it is probable that he utilized the Mesene network, very likely employing the same men who created it, as a consolidated starting point to push the limits of his activity towards the East, as far as Africa<sup>38</sup> or even India.<sup>39</sup>

In the course of the first century AD, the importance of the sea routes and thus of the Mesenean harbours remains relevant. Nonetheless, the political life of

<sup>32</sup> Haerinck, 1998a, 274.

<sup>33</sup> Salles 1980, 98–99; Potts 1988, 141–143; Haerinck, Phillips, Potts and Stevens 1993, 186–187; Boucharlat et Mouton 1993, 219–249; Boucharlat and Mouton 1994, 214–237; Haerinck 1998a, 283–284; Haerinck 1998b, 22–41; Schuol 2000, 330; Potts 2001, 51–52.

<sup>34</sup> Haerinck 1994, 9–13.

<sup>35</sup> Salles 1980, 100–101; Potts 1990, 288–291; Haerinck 1998a, 283–300.

<sup>36</sup> Salles 1988, 89–91 and 95–98; Potts 1990, 302–303; Haerinck 1998a, 275–278; Potts 2001, 54.

<sup>37</sup> *Per. cap.* 36; Salles 1992, 92–94; Potts 1990, 308–309. Haerinck 1998a, 275–276; Schuol 2000, 336–338.

<sup>38</sup> Some Arsacid coins dated to the first and second century AD were found along the African coast. They have been kept in the Beit al-Amani museum of Zanzibar before they disappeared; Freeman-Grenville 1958, 110; Freeman-Grenville 1960, 33; Knappert 1992, 143–178; Horton 1996, 447.

<sup>39</sup> Schenk 2007, 57–90; Tomber 2007, 972–88. For a very general approach the recent Hackl, Jacobs, Weber 2010, 111–129.

Characene remained indissolubly bound to the Arsacid empire, of whose ruling system it was an integral part. In order to function properly, Characene merchant activity needed adequate logistical support from both the central Parthian authority and the local powers, which were responsible for the government of the inland districts, the roads and the desert tracks which the merchant expeditions had to pass through on their way to the Gulf shore.

On the other hand, along the Arabian coast,<sup>40</sup> the Mesenian monarchs found themselves in a position to unrestrictedly intensify their political and economic relations with the southern Arabian communities and the kingdom of *Ommana* of king *Goaios*, for example, a ruler mentioned by Isidoros from Charax, and later by Lucian. They undoubtedly exploited the presence of Ommani Arabs in the territories under their jurisdiction.<sup>41</sup>

During the crisis which struck the Arsacid central authority, causing political troubles in central Mesopotamia, the main trade subjects in western Asia began to think of the sea routes, whose exploitation was made easier by knowledge of the Monsoon winds, as preferable in comparison with the traditional transcontinental silk roads.<sup>42</sup>

From the Indian ports of *Barbarikon* and *Barygaza* on the Gurajat coast landed spices, ointments, gems, copper, sandalwood, teak, ebony and, of course, raw silk; this was then worked and woven, destined for the households of the most illustrious of the Palmyrene dignitaries.

The *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, which provides most of the information regarding the sea traffic in the Indian Ocean during the second half of the first century AD, only marginally mentions the Gulf routes. According to the anonymous writer of the *Periplus*, the whole Persian Gulf at that time was in the hands of the 'Persians', that is to say the Arsacids who gained supremacy over the sea stations and the outfitting of the ships employed along the Indian Ocean routes.<sup>43</sup>

After the political triumph represented by the Rhandaia treatise in 63 AD and his victory against the Romans in Armenia, the Great King Vologaeses I worked hard to realize his policy of structural consolidation of the Arsacid kingdom. The Characene potentate, which in the meantime had become an important economic power, would no longer find a place in the political plans conceived by the new Arsaces. The scanty sources do not allow precise clarifi-

<sup>40</sup> Schuol 2000, 329.

<sup>41</sup> Lucian. *Makr.*, 16. 17; Plin. *N.H.* 6.145.

<sup>42</sup> Some Palmyrene inscriptions in the first century AD mention Spasinou Charax: PAT 1584; *Inv.*, X, 7; *Inv.*, X, 40 (81 AD); Rostovtzeff 1932, 798; Gawlikowski 1983, nn. 59–60, 63; Starcky et Gawlikowski 1985, 75; Drexhage 1988, 24–27; Will 1992, 21; Gawlikowski 1996, 140; Schuol 2000, 52–54; Gregoratti 2010, 21–37.

<sup>43</sup> Dąbrowa 1991, 141–150; Potts 1990, 313–314.

cation of the political fate of the low Mesopotamian kingdom during the reign of Vologaeses I and his successor Pacoros II. The last Characene coins are dated to 74/75 AD. Up to 101/102 AD, no further royal emissions are attested.<sup>44</sup> It is hard to say whether the probable use of military strength by the Arsacids caused an effective annexation of the Characene or if, on the contrary, the Great King substituted only the leading dynasty of the kingdom, revoking their right to strike coins, and by so doing depriving modern scholars of the information provided by numismatics. Without these, it is impossible to reconstruct the succession of the monarchs who ruled Characene during this period.<sup>45</sup>

What is clear is that a new phase began in the life of the kingdom with the aggressive policy of Rome at the beginning of the second century AD. The warlike Characenean dynasty was not disposed to renounce its autonomist prerogatives. Accepting the authority of the Roman emperor, who sooner or later would have come back to his distant capital, would be preferable to fighting against him in order to maintain the existing situation, where a weak Arsacid authority had for two centuries been trying to become more powerful, by enforcing his influence in the government of the most wealthy and important of his 'client' kings.

Such considerations might have inspired the political choices of Attambelos VII, King of Characene since 113/4 AD,<sup>46</sup> who, hearing that Trajan was approaching Mesene with an army and a fleet, without further ado went to the northern borders of his kingdom to greet him and offer his submission.<sup>47</sup> The failure of the invasion and Trajan's death meant Attambelos' political ruin.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the monarchs who followed bear Iranian names.<sup>49</sup> The Parthians most likely solved the Characenean problem by placing a member of the Arsacid dynasty on the throne and putting an end to the Hyspaosinid line of succession. The next mention of a Characenean royalty occurs fourteen years later (131 AD) in a Palmyrene inscription mentioning a king named Meredates, son of the Great King Pacoros II.<sup>50</sup>

The Great King Vologaeses III, attempting to pursue Pacoros II's economic policy, decided to exploit the international trade to improve the financial situation of the Arsacid state. The new distension policy towards Rome caused an exponential increase in the traffic of oriental goods, multiplying the

<sup>44</sup> Keall 1975, 624–625.

<sup>45</sup> On this period of Parthian history see Olbrycht 1998.

<sup>46</sup> BMC Arabia, CCIII; Le Rider 1959, 252–253; Bernard 1990, 37; Bin Seray 1996, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Cass. Dio. 68.17 and 28; Arr. *Parth.* frags. 17; 67–70; Potter 1991, 281; Schuol 2000, 345–346.

<sup>48</sup> Potter 1991, 283.

<sup>49</sup> Schuol 2000, 348.

<sup>50</sup> *Inv.*, X, 38 = PAT 1374; Gregoratti 2010, 32–34.

income from the trade itself and from the taxes the Arsacid officers collected. Vologaeses III's goal could only be achieved by granting to the western commercial agents, in particular the Palmyrene entrepreneurs, full autonomy in their commercial activity, the internal organisation and management of their merchant colonies in Parthian territory.<sup>51</sup> The circumstances required that a man particularly loyal to Vologaeses III be head of the Characene kingdom: a man who would not abuse the wide political autonomy his role of commercial mediator between Rome and Ctesiphon implied. He had to be able to exploit the proficiency of the Palmyrene merchants in the most convenient way for the Crown, providing them with all the government support they needed to carry on their business in the most effective way. A real synergy was put into action in consideration of the large income which all trade partners, Palmyra and the Romans, on one side, the Characeni and Vologaeses III on the other, could generate.

Vologaeses had to appoint a dynamic monarch, open to collaboration with foreigners, ready to understand and exploit the potential of the region, but also capable of protecting his lord's interests in a region where Hyspaosinid opposition was certainly considerable. The choice fell upon his brother Mithridates, who proved to be up to the task and successfully restored the Characene hegemony in the Gulf. The text of the Palmyrene dedicatory text reads:

*[This is the image of] Yarḥai, son of Nebuzabad, grandson of Šammallath, son of Aqqadam, citizen of Hadriane Palmyra, satrap of the Thilouanoi for the king Meherdates of Spasinou Charax. The merchants of Spasinou Charax in his honour, in the year 442 (131 AD), in the month of Xandios (April).<sup>52</sup>*

Yarḥai, son of Nebuzabad, a Palmyrene was certainly a pre-eminent figure within the circle of merchants operating in the Mesene capital city, the authors of the inscription found in the *αγορά* of the Syrian city. What differentiates this text from the other caravan inscriptions is the reference to the specific office held by Yarḥai in the new king's administration as governor of the district of *Tylos*, that is to say the present-day island of Bahrain.<sup>53</sup>

After many decades of Mesene independence and struggle to affirm their political identity, Mithridates came to power, imposed by a foreign Great King

<sup>51</sup> Several Palmyrene expeditions are attested in the Mesene ruled by Merdates; *Inv.*, X, 112 (140 d.C.); *Inv.*, IX, 14; (142 d.C.); *Inv.*, X, 124 (150 d.C.); Seyrig 1941, n. 21, 252–253; Starcky et Gawlikowski 1985, 77; Drexhage 1980, 35–37; 69–70; 77–79; Teixidor 1984, 165; Gawlikowski 1996, 141–142; Schuol 2000, 64–65.

<sup>52</sup> *Inv.* X, 38; Seyrig 1941, n. 21bis, 253–255; Starcky et Gawlikowski 1985, 77; Drexhage 1980, 28–29; Teixidor 1984, 58–59; Gawlikowski 1996, 141; Schuol 2000, 56–57.

<sup>53</sup> Bowersock 1986, 157–158.

who had punished the traditional dynasty with suppression for its betrayal. It seems probable that he tried to establish a new state administration, appointing men who proved themselves essential for the implementation of his policy, like Yarḥai, to positions of responsibility. He appointed as governor of *Tylos*, a district vital to the merchant system of the Persian Gulf, one of the leaders of the Palmyrene community whose interests were closely connected with perfect functioning of the trade routes. The strategy was remarkably shrewd.

In order to maintain the efficiency of the Gulf routes, and by doing so assuring the income provided by the taxation of the goods, the political responsibility over commercial areas was conferred to those people who could benefit from the efficiency of the merchant organisation more than anyone else. Since the royal authority exploited the commercial network established and managed by the Palmyrenes, it was interested in favouring the strengthening of the Syrian merchants' role in the area.

Palmyrene citizens thus lived on Bahrein island as merchants and governmental officers. Recently-conducted archaeological investigations on the island have not yet provided material proof of the presence of Palmyrenes there, as was the case on Kharg island, just a few kilometres to the north, close to the Iranian coast<sup>54</sup>. The exploration of a funerary complex revealed the existence of two hypogean structures with more than ninety graves; the construction and decorative features of this complex showed clear parallels with contemporary structures in Tadmor.<sup>55</sup> A Palmyrene trade station may have been established in Kharg, the arrival point for boats coming down the Euphrates and starting point for the ocean crossing. As documented for *Tylos*, perhaps here too the local officers were chosen from Palmyrene merchants. Two of them, who died on the island, were probably buried in their adoptive country in tombs similar to those used in their native land.

How much the Palmyrenian element contributed to extending the Characenean political and economic area of influence is underlined by the titulature adopted by Mithridates himself on his coins, attested only from 143/4 AD.<sup>56</sup> Beside his portrait are the words: *MEPEΛAT YI(OC) ΦO(κOPOV) BA(σιλεωC) BACIA(εων) BACIAEYC OMAN(αιων)*, Meredates, son of Pacoros, King of Kings, king of the Ommanes.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ghirshman 1958, 261–268.

<sup>55</sup> Haerinck 1975, 138–145; Boucharlat and Salles 1981, 70–71.

<sup>56</sup> BMC Arabia, CCXI–CCXII, 311–312, nn. 1–15, pl. XLVIII. 5–7; Nodelman 1960, 112–114; Sellwood 1983, 313; Bowersock 1989, 160–163; Potts 1988, 143–144 and 152–154; Bernard 1990, 35–38; Potts 1990, 145–147; Potter 1991, 284.

<sup>57</sup> Potts 1988, 146–149; Potts 1990, 324–327; Schuol 2000, 352.



Pliny documents the presence, south of Mesene along the south-eastern Arabic coast, of Arab groups called Omanites<sup>58</sup> in the second half of the first century AD. Ptolemy mentions a place name, Coromanis, south of the Mesene Gulf, which according to some scholars means ‘cove of the Omanites’.<sup>59</sup> This information is confirmed by the tradition concerning the migration northwards of nomadic groups belonging to the Azd Oman tribe, attested on the north part of the Gulf from the third century until the Islamic conquest. Most probably these movements of people had already begun at the time when Pliny was writing. Some nomadic groups settled near the southern coast of the Gulf and were forced to submit to Mithridates’ rule. As mentioned, Lucian stated that the famous Hyspaosines already ruled over the Omanites, but the second century writer was probably influenced by the power of the Characene king at that time. It seems evident that the Mesenian expansion policy occurred along the sea routes of the north Arabic coast. Mithridates thus took control of the emporium of Ommana, the most important and busy centre, probably identified with the site of Ed-Dur, next to the present-day Oman, as stated previously. The Omanites on Mithridates’ coins were the inhabitants of that port, a prominent station on the route to India, which must have been included in the Characene-Palmyrene commercial network.<sup>60</sup>

Mithridates, thanks to his trade hegemony and his allies, had become powerful. He was a rich monarch, son of the last Great King Pacoros II, who had at his disposal an efficient commercial organization, and had gained an ally in common with Rome. This situation became unsustainable when Vologaeses IV took power in Ctesiphon, starting a new branch of the Arsacid Dynasty (148 AD).<sup>61</sup>

For Vologaeses IV Mithridates was a dangerous rival, a loyal servant of his predecessor ruling over a wealthy and vital region of the empire. He solved the issue through a military campaign, as stated in a famous bilingual inscription from Seleucia on the Tigris.<sup>62</sup> Mithridates was deposed and Orabzes II, loyal to the new Great King, was appointed in his place (151 AD).<sup>63</sup>

Under the new king the Palmyrenian merchant expeditions continued crossing the Arsacid territory, and more direct relations with the Indian peninsula are

<sup>58</sup> Plin. *N.H.*, 6.145; Potts 1988, 152–154.

<sup>59</sup> Arab. *khor*; Miles 1878, 160–171.

<sup>60</sup> Isidorus of Charax, quoted by Lucian (*Makr.* 16) mentions a certain *Goaios* “king of Omanes in the land of incense”.

<sup>61</sup> Olbrycht 1998.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Salihi 1987, 162–164; Pennacchietti 1987, 169–185; Bowersock 1989, 163; Bernard 1990, 23–27; Potter 1991, 278–279.

<sup>63</sup> Gregoratti 2010, 34–35.

attested.<sup>64</sup> Orabzes remained on the throne until the defeat of Vologaeses IV by the Romans<sup>65</sup> when a local dynasty again took control of Mesene.<sup>66</sup>

On the southern shores of the Gulf the reduced Arsacid influence permitted the formation of local potentates, whose kings continued to take advantage of the trade relations with Mesenian harbours, just as the Characeniens did, maintaining a formal dependence on Ctesiphon. The Arabic historic tradition seems to confirm such circumstances. In order to extend his rule over the Gulf, the Sassanid king Ardashir, victorious over the Parthians and the Characeniens, was compelled in the course of the 240 AD campaign to fight the allied armies of *Sana-truk*, the Parthian named monarch of *al-Bahrain*, who committed suicide during the siege of his capital city, and of the Omanite king, 'Amr ibn Waqid al-Himyari.<sup>67</sup>

The Omanite historical tradition itself, in particular the first book of the *Khashf al-Gumma*<sup>68</sup> records a rebellion of the local population led by *Malik b. Fahm*,<sup>69</sup> which forced the 'Persians', most probably the Parthians or the Characeniens, to leave the shores of the eastern Gulf at the end of the second century. According to this source the Omanites experienced a period of political independence under *Malik* and his sons, until the invasion of the *Benú Sasan*, the Sassanids.<sup>70</sup>

## Conclusions

The Characene kingdom was a vital area for the entire Parthian empire. Scattered references in the sources seem to suggest that trade routes crossing the Persian Gulf were established by Characenic monarchs and businessmen, who over the course of time found it particularly advantageous to develop the relations they had with their Palmyrenian colleagues, in order to achieve an actual

<sup>64</sup> *Inv.* X, 111 (156 d.C.); X, 90 (157 d.C.); X, 107 (159 d.C.); X, 29 (161 d.C.); X, 19; Seyrig 1941, n. 24, 264–266; Drexhage 1980, 50–51; Teixidor 1984, 53; Starcky et Gawlikowski 1985, 83; Gawlikowski 1996, 142–143; Gawlikowski 1983, 64.

<sup>65</sup> BMC Arabia, CCX–CCXI; Nodelman 1960, 114–115; Bernard 1990, 40–41; Schuol 2000, 356–357.

<sup>66</sup> Schuol 2000, 359–362.

<sup>67</sup> Al-Ṭabarī p. 839; Al-Dīnawarī 45, 11–14; Yāqūt, Mu'ğam IV, p. 552; Widengren 1971, 730–731; 753–755; 763–773; Piacentini 1985, 57–77.

<sup>68</sup> *Khashf al-Gumma* is a work written in 1728 AD by Shaykh Sirhān bin Sa'īd of Oman which collects the various traditions concerning the migrations of the omanite tribes; Sachau 1898, 1–19; Potts 1990, 238–239.

<sup>69</sup> The first chief of the Qahtanite tribe of the Azd who moved from Yemen to actual Oman: Groom 1994, 198–199 and n.1.

<sup>70</sup> Ross 1874, 111–196; Potts 2001, 5.



commercial and political collaboration. For the Arsacids it was important to exert a form of control over Characene, its Gulf network and its traffic, but even in the period of their greatest power, Parthian influence in the Gulf area could only be realized with the cooperation of the Characeniens, or by establishing an autonomous authority on the throne of Mesene. For most of the Parthian period the autonomy of the region was therefore not under discussion. It could not be otherwise. Autonomy was indispensable for Characene to develop its trade network in the Gulf and to interact with other political entities which were active on trade routes. Only with a special status could Characene effectively perform the function of 'harbour' for the Arsacid empire, as Palmyra did in the middle of the desert routes for the Roman empire.

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## Abstract

Scholars have mainly focused their attention on the western connections of the south Mesopotamian kingdom of Characene, whose harbours appear in several texts of the well known caravan inscriptions from Palmyra. As a consequence this interesting and important state has been often regarded almost exclusively from a western point of view, which favoured the role it played as the main Palmyrenian trading partner in the East. The aim of this paper is to provide a different approach to this topic. The kingdom of Characene was part of the Arsacid empire and its historical role cannot be understood without taking into consideration also the history of the Parthian state and the relationship with its south Mesopotamian vassal kingdom. Parthian kings exploited the proficiencies the Characeniens had gained in sea routes and trade rendering this small kingdom a sort of port for the entire Parthian empire. This can remind the role which another important 'Port of the sands', that is to say Palmyra, played for Rome, the Parthian neighbour. Apart from hosting Palmyra's merchant colonies and within the Parthian state, Characene autonomously developed a trade network in the Persian Gulf, promoting the cultural evolution of the societies which belonged to its trade horizon.