The Arsacid Center of Trade
Charax Spasinou, Capital of Mesene

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Connectivity, the flow of goods, and the movement of people and objects have become major topics in ancient studies in recent years. The growing interest in precursors of modern globalization have led to an increased awareness of the strong interconnectivity of ancient trade networks. Nevertheless, regardless of these new theoretical concepts, the general approach to and perception of agents and spheres of interaction between the Mediterranean and Eastern Asia in the first centuries CE still, to a large extent, follows traditional paths and prejudices. Based on a select group of ancient sources, mostly from the Roman Empire,[1] and basic assumptions deeply rooted in conventional views on the gradual importance of ancient states and cultures, highlighting the Roman Empire on the one hand and the Chinese on the other, the downplaying or outright neglect of those huge landmasses and empires in between prevails. In the field of ancient history, East–West trade is still conceptualized and described either as land-based exchange between Rome and China or as maritime trade between Rome and India, mainly via Roman Egypt. In either case, the regions in between have been and are mostly still only superficially considered. This approach is particularly obvious in the case of the Arsacid Empire, which basically covered the entire region from the upper Euphrates in the West to eastern Iran from the mid-second century BCE onwards until the 220s CE. This contribution hopes to offer some incentives to reconsider the traditional views.

1 More recently, Roman sources are increasingly supplemented by references to a limited group of Chinese reports on travels towards the west. These sources present their own problems, particularly concerning the interpretation of Chinese place names for western regions; cf. already Grosso 1966; Raschke 1978, 645.

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Trade and the Arsacid Empire

The land-based connection between Rome and China is usually referred to as the "Silk Road," a term which seems less and less to refer to the partly romantic notions of its inventor Richthofen and instead affirms Chinese political and economic ambitions. But the concept of the "Silk Road" invites scholars to concentrate on imperial China and the Roman Empire as start- and end-points of purposeful down-the-line trade. The approach not only reduces the complexities of trade to a simplistic narrative of intentional connections between a resource-producer community of luxury goods (silk) and the consumers at the other end[2] but also creates a situation wherein the areas in between, not least the Arsacid Empire, are by and large omitted in descriptions of Roman eastern trade contacts and appear as areas to be traversed.[3] This mindset unfavorably combines with a serious dearth of sources. Summarizing trade in the Arsacid Empire and current scholarship's opinion, Hartmann recently stated: "Der Fernhandel von China und Indien in die Mittelmeerregion lief zwar teilweise durch den Machtbereich der Arsakiden, Parther waren aber als Fernhändler offenbar nicht oder nur in geringem Maß an seiner Abwicklung beteiligt."[4] Such a position mirrors the existing written sources as well as prejudices concerning the interested parties, but those generalizations are based on very limited, partial sources. The approach, as such, disregards the possible interests of all those who might have been actively involved in this trade. It reduces the people and states between China and Rome to mute bystanders and their territories to tiresome, time- and energy-consuming natural and human obstacles.[5] In studies on ancient trade, traditional or recent, more general

2 This perspective finds appreciation within Rome-centered ancient history as well as in China; cf. Liu 2010.

3 A telling recent example is Craig 2018, 2, who describes the "Parthian" Empire together with the Kushan Empire as one of two "powerful administrations" in between Han China and Rome in his introduction, just to neglect them thereafter. They only appear again as "groups in the center of the Silk Roads network, including the Parthian and Kushan Empires, various nomadic confederations and other regional intermediaries, that effectively connected the eastern and western Eurasian worlds together during this First Silk Roads Era" (2018, 148). Interesting in this context is the importance correctly assigned to Sogdians, who find much more interest than the "mute" Arsacids, cf. de la Vaissière 2005.

4 Hartmann 2018, 456; cf. his material-rich discussion, 456–463.

5 This is not the place for an extended discussion of the sources usually applied in discussions on trade across Arsacid territory, e.g., by Hartmann 2018; Gregoratti 2019; Taasob 2022. However, it is important to note that the main source referred to in the context of overland trade through the Arsacid Empire is the so-called "Parthian Stations" by Isidor of Charax, which, in fact, reveals a complete misunderstanding of that text's purpose and value. The text consists of two very different parts. Only the first part describes in some detail an actual route between Zeugma and Seleucia, i.e., from the border between the Roman and Arsacid Empires on the Euphrates to the former Seleucid capital on the Tigris. The second part, which concerns regions east of Seleucia,

or more specialized, an Arsacid interest in this trade—except for taxes—is, thus, rarely acknowledged. The current state of knowledge is correctly summarized by Craig as follows: "Almost nothing concrete is known about road tolls or taxes exacted from merchants active within Parthia, nor whether merchants received protection from Parthian authorities in exchange for any taxes paid."[6] A possible active participation of the inhabitants of this empire in the exchange of goods finds no further discussion so far.

If we look at the alternative major trade network, the maritime trade between Rome and India, the problems of sources and prejudices concerning the Arsacid Empire's participation remain largely the same. Roman trade with India has created considerable interest for a long time, ever since the British rule over India and instigated by finds of Roman coins and pottery.[7] The field gained additional momentum with the emergence of Indian Ocean Studies, which, parallel to Hordon's and Purcell's

follows no particular "route" anymore. Instead, it only lists major (politico-)geographical units, thereby roughly following the direction from west to east before turning south, i.e., adhering to the usual Roman-period system of geographical descriptions of "Persia"; cf. Hauser 2022b, 166. It becomes increasingly rare for the text to mention distances (i.e., the defining aspect of route descriptions), let alone directions or topography. For the most part, it mentions the name of a geographical unit, a rough estimate of some length without explaining to what this refers, and the name(s) of one or several major cities within this region plus a very small, rather arbitrary number of nameless villages. It should be obvious that the information that there are two named cities and five unnamed villages within an area of several hundred kilometers in extent (measured between unnamed points and unexplained directions) offers no serious orientation. Whether this second half of the manuscript that we know as "Parthian Stations" represents remnants or excerpts of a larger book by Isidor, the *Periegesis tes Parthias* (Hartmann 2017, 93–95; Hartmann 2018, 446; Hauser 2017, 129–131), is inconsequential in this context. The existing text is neither an itinerary of practical use, whether for merchants (as is often assumed; summarized by Hartmann 2018 with extensive bibliography) or for military purposes (Millar 1998; Kramer 2003), nor does it provide a list of political provinces. The second part of the Σταθμοὶ Παρθικοί has its main value in providing interesting insights into geographical learning in a probably Mesopotamian context (Hartmann 2017, 116; Hauser 2017, 165). For a detailed discussion of author and work, cf. Hartmann 2017 and Hauser 2017. For an attempt to identify all the places and reconstruct the exact route taken between Zeugma and Seleucia, cf. Hauser 2017.

6 Craig 2018, 171. Taasob 2022, 438, assumes that "parallel to earlier examples, the royal administration (either centrally or locally) was likely in charge of the waystations," but without further evidence. The situation was already aptly summarized in the classic study on Rome's Eastern trade by Raschke 1978, 642, who stated that, while custom duties might have been paid as well as tolls at major cities, the commonly held idea (quoting, e.g., Neusner, Wolski, Colledge, and Prakash) that taxes on trade "were of vital importance to the [Arsacid, SRH] royal treasury […] is a fallacy." Generally, in discussions of possible Arsacid taxes, a negative undercurrent image of undeserved income (or even hustle) unnecessarily complicating travel and multiplying prices is dominant. On the meager evidence for taxation, which simply does not allow a judgement on its extent and possible tax policies, cf. Hartmann 2018, 461–464.

7 On the large stimulus provided by Wheeler's excavations, Tomber 2008, 13–14.

description of the Mediterranean, defined the sea as a space of connectivity.[8] Indian Ocean Studies widened the view of the previous narrower study of Indian–Roman trade and considers relations, connections, and networks between the littoral of India (plus possibly Indonesia) and the African coastal areas from between Egypt in the North to Tanzania in the South.[9] For the past twenty years, research on the trade networks connecting India with Roman Egypt has certainly become one of the most energetic and splendid areas of ancient studies; but while various contributions rightfully discuss the importance of the southern coastal areas and islands off the coast of the Arabian Peninsula in trade with great success,[10] Indian Ocean Studies, whether modern or ancient, generally elides the Persian Gulf. To modern scholars, it seemed that "of all the regions involved in Indo-Roman trade, the Gulf was the most separate, both geographically and politically."[11]

For the Roman period, this omission somehow reflects the geographical coverage of the most important literary source, the *Periplus Mare Erythaeis* (PME).[12] In this important first century testimonial of an (Egyptian) Roman merchant, which provides many details about the various ports, waters, and goods traded along the coasts of India, southern Arabia and western Africa, the Persian Gulf receives a rather cursory description. Only two ports "of Persis" are mentioned within the "vast expanse."[13] Omana is described as *emporion* six runs further from the 600-stades-wide mouth of the Persian Gulf between the Asabo Mountains and Mt. Semiramis on the eastern side. And "at its very head is a legally limited port of trade called Apologos, lying near Charax Spasinu and the Euphrates River."[14] The PME further reports that the merchants of Barygaza send out "big vessels to both of Persis's ports of trade [sc. Apologos and Omana], with supplies of copper, teakwood, and beams, saplings, and logs of sissoo and ebony […] Both ports of trade export to Barygaza and Arabia pearls in quantity but inferior to the Indian; purple cloth; native clothing; wine; dates in quantity; gold; slaves."[15]

8 Hordon and Purcell 2000. For the Indian Ocean, cf. Alpers 2014; Beaujard 2012; Chew 2015; Pearson 2003; Sheriff 2010.

9 Cf. Cobb 2019; de Romanis 1997; de Saxcé 2015; Evers 2017; McLaughlin 2014; Mathew 2015; Sidebotham 2011; Tomber 2008.

10 Avancinci 2015; Nappo 2015; Speidel 2015; Strauch 2012.

11 Tomber 2008, 109.

12 Casson 1989; Seland 2010.

13 PME 35–36. It is commonly agreed that "Persian" in this context should be understood as "Parthian," i.e., Arsacid. "Parthian" and "Persian" are employed interchangeably in many Roman sources, based on the idea that the Arsacids (Parthians) ruled over the Persian territories (Hauser 2022b, 166).

14 PME 35; translation after Casson 1989, 71–73.

15 PME 36; translation after Casson 1989, 73.

The text has been frequently discussed in particular for the location of Omana.[16] What interests us here is the city of Charax Spasinou and the ἐμπόριον νόμινον Apologos, which, according to the *Periplus Mare Erythaeis,* seems to have acted as port for Charax, i.e., the capital of Mesene (cf. below). Although the *Periplus Mare Erythraeis* thus provides records for the existence of officially designated ports in the area of the mouth of the Persian Gulf, and despite the fact that ships starting from northwest India will have followed the southern coast of its Iranian territories for between 600 and 900 km, the Arsacid Empire plays no particular role in modern descriptions of trade, as it is circumvented by the direct connection between Egypt and India.[17] While limited importance in comparison to the Egyptian India-trade and possible restrictions of access to these waters might explain the silence of Roman sources, it does not suffice to explain the limited interest in ancient studies.[18]

Trade in the Persian Gulf in Perspective

The diminution of possible Arsacid interests in trade and the reduction of its territories and people to a passive role in the exchange with India in the literature of ancient history is even more astonishing because Ancient Near Eastern studies, whether Assyriology or archaeology, have collected and published ample evidence for longstanding traditions of intense trade between the lands of Sumer and Akkad with Maggan (i.e., Oman) and Meluhha (i.e., Pakistan/Northern India), with its first acme in the third and early second millennia BCE.[19] Archaeological finds of semiprecious stones from

16 On the identification of Omana with ed-Dur, cf. Potts 1988, 155 (positive); Potts 1990b, 306–310 (positive); Haerinck 1998 (undecided); Salles 2012, 309–310 (agreeing with Potts). Gregoratti 2019, 56 locates Om(m)ana at what he calls the "site-complex of ed-Dur-Mleiha-Dibba," referring to sites which are more than 50 km apart.

17 Craig 2018, 214 adds that maritime trade served the purpose of "eliminating many of the fees and tariffs being charged along the land-based routes by middlemen such as the Parthians." Cf. also the political aspect mentioned by Salles 2012, 323 (cf. note 11).

18 Sidebotham 2011, 237 correctly remarks: "There seems to have been very little direct commercial contact between the Persian Gulf and the northern Red Sea ports throughout the Roman era." Following Salles 2012, 323, this was probably due to restrictions in access to the Persian Gulf waters: "À l'époque de Périple, ces derniers étaient les Characéniens, acteurs d'un puissant royaume qui collaborait avec une puissante cité, Palmyre: leur double tutelle semble s'être étendue sur la totalité du Golfe avec le concours des autres populations riveraines. Le segment maritime était donc «fermé» à des navigations étrangères et/ou à des marchands autres que ceux qui y naviguaient, et l'intérêt que pouvaient avoir les Romains pour ce segment ne pouvait guère se développer qu'à Barygaza ou en Inde."

19 For summaries, cf. During Caspers 1979; Potts 1990a; Franke-Vogt 1995; Possehl 1996; Possehl 2002.

Indian sources clearly demonstrate the continued exchanges with Babylonia and Assyria throughout successive periods. In addition, Potts convincingly demonstrated that the Persian Gulf coast on the Arabian side, certainly as far as Dilmun (Bahrain), was more or less continuously controlled by southern Babylonian dynasties from at least the sixteenth century BCE.[20] The integration intensified during the Achaemenid Empire, when both sides of the lower Gulf region probably even belonged to the same satrapy.[21] The imperial control and intense trade between India and the urban centers in central Babylonia via the Eyrthraean Sea continued through the Seleucid period.[22]

Therefore, it is no surprise to see a dedication of a certain Kephisodoros, "strategos of Tylos [the Greek name for Bahrain] and the Islands" for Hyspaosines, first king of Mesene, and his wife Thallassa. The inscription, which must date to the early to mid-120s BCE, establishes that the traditional political influence of southern Mesopotamia in the Gulf was maintained in the early years of the newly founded kingdom of Mesene.[23] One should assume that the same applies to the well-established trade, though it is rarely documented in written sources. On the other hand, the continued exchange is indeed evident in the archaeological excavations in ed-Dur, Mleiha, Thaj, and Failaka.[24] Proof is only rare in southern Iraq so far, due to the missing localization of the literary attested harbors of Teredon and Apologos and the only recently started exploration of Forat and Mesene's capital, Charax Spasinou.[25]

The Trade of Mesene

The existence of Persian Gulf trade in the Arsacid period is, therefore, indisputable. Problematic and controversial is its character. Central in this maritime trade are the harbors and port cities at the head of the Persian Gulf, i.e., Teredon, Apologos, Forat, and, most specifically, Charax Spasinou—center and capital of the wider region, the kingdom of Mesene/Maishan (Fig. 1).[26] If the ports of Mesene feature in modern

20 Potts 2009; cf. also the summary by Kosmin 2013.

21 On trade in the Gulf in the Achaemenid period, cf. Salles 1990; Salles 1996; Potts 2021, 525. On the satrapy Maka, most probably ancient Maggan, situated around the Oman peninsula, cf. Potts 2009, 38; Potts 2021, 521.

22 Salles 1987; Monerie 2018, 426–435.

23 An excellent discussion is Kosmin 2013.

24 For a splendid summary of the excavation results from ed-Dur and Mleiha, see Tomber 2008, 109–113; for the new excavations at Thaj, Rhomer 2019; on Failaka, Potts 1990b, 154–196.

25 Rescue excavations at Forat (Maqluba) were carried out by the Department of Antiquities of Iraq in 2019 and 2020. On Charax Spasinou, cf. below.

26 For a long time, historical and, specifically, numismatic literature preferred to use the name Characene (Charakene) for the region and described its rulers as Characenian. However, a closer

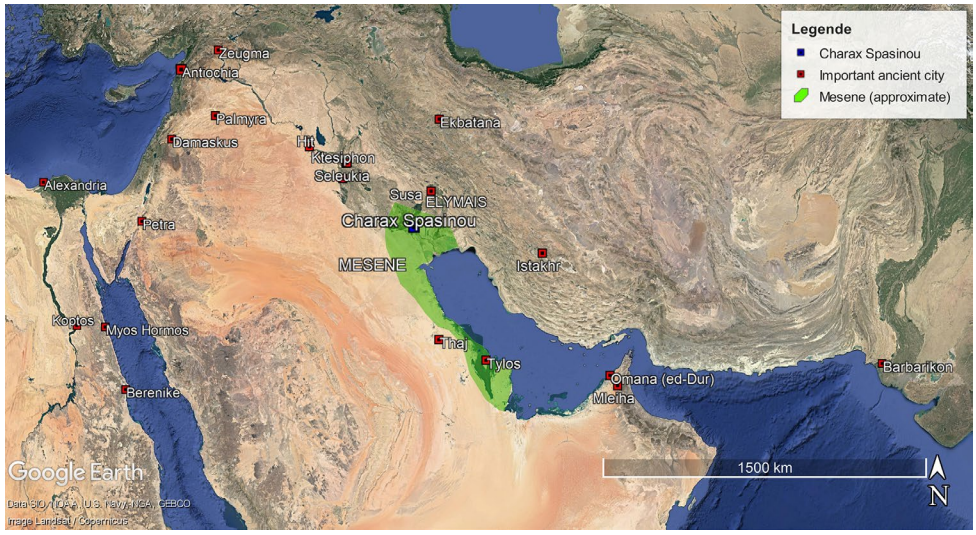

Fig. 1 General map of sites mentioned in the text centering on Mesene.

research, it is usually in connection with their role in the famous long-distance trade of Palmyra.[27]

Among the Palmyrene honorary inscriptions, thirty-nine of them originally accompanying honorary statues refer, in one way or another, to aspects of the city's trade.[28] Eighteen inscriptions testify to the presence of Palmyrene merchants in Mesene

analysis of the various sources indicates that "Characene" is used in geographical contexts only, where it refers to the hinterland (possibly the *chora*) of the city of Charax. The name Characene appears in geographical descriptions by Ptolemaios (6.3.3) and Pliny (NH. 6.136) to describe a geographical subdivision of Elymais (cf. Humbach and Ziegler 1998, 58–59; Schuol 2000, 105–106, 127). In contrast, the name Mesene or Maishan is used to refer to the wider geographical region and, more importantly, is consistently used to denote the kingdom of Hyspaosines and his successors. This applies to sources in Parthian, Middle Persian, Coptic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic as well as to textual references by Roman authors in Greek and Latin. The sources are conveniently collected by Schuol 2000, 41–197. The two terms, therefore, are not interchangeable but distinct, with solely Mesene carrying political meaning.

27 For summaries of this trade, cf. Teixidor 1984; Gawlikowski 1994; Young 2001, 136–186; McLaughlin 2010, 95–102; and, most recently, Seland 2016.

28 On the meaning and use of honorary inscriptions in general, cf. Quaß 1993; Ma 2013; on honorary statues in Palmyra, Hauser 2007, 241–245 with further literature. Thirty-four trade-related inscriptions are listed in Schuol 2000. A slightly divergent list of, again, thirty-four inscriptions is provided by Gawlikowski 1994. When I refer to certain inscriptions in the following, they are only referenced to their respective CIS and PAT numbers and their number in Schuol 2000 where one can find further references.

for the period between 18/19 CE and 211 CE.[29] Two more texts mention the participation in maritime trade with Scythia, i.e., northwestern India, with ships that certainly started in Mesene.[30]

It is widely assumed that Palmyrene merchants traveled southwards generally on the Euphrates and upwards from Mesene mainly along the Euphrates, using water crafts or pack animals according to the actual conditions, mostly transferring their commodities from the barges or rafts to camels at or near the city of Hit to continue their voyage to Palmyra as caravans.[31] Alternatively, they might have used the Tigris river and the connecting Nahr Malka with barges to reach the Euphrates before they arrived at Hit.[32] The Palmyrene honorary inscriptions will have mostly concerned incidents on the final part of the route, but, as they are usually unspecific about the exact help offered by the honoree, several might also be related to administrative matters, e.g., tax, on the way from the harbor to the oasis of Tadmor. It is commonly agreed upon that once the caravans reached Palmyra, the goods were further transported to their destined markets in the Mediterranean. [33]

29 The earliest evidence comes from a text reporting a mission of the Palmyrene Alexandros on behalf of Germanicus to the king of Maishan (PAT 1584; Schuol 2000, 47–48, no. III.1.b.1). Since he is known as a merchant from another inscription, it is assumed that trade relations with Charax Spasinou already existed; cf. Schuol 2000, 48. Charax Spasinou is mentioned in fourteen inscriptions between 50/1 (or 70/1) CE—the date of this inscription (PAT 1584; Schuol 2000, 51, no. III.1.b.4) is unfortunately not certain—and 193 CE (PAT 294; Schuol 2000, 86–87, no. III.1.b.31). Two inscriptions (Schuol 2000, 64–66, no. III.1.b.14 and 15) with dates of 140 and 142 CE refer to Forat. In the latest inscription, PAT 294 = Schuol 2000, 86–87, no. III.1.b.31, dated to 211 CE, two cities are mentioned, but only Vologesias can be read. Since the other site was most certainly further south, it will have been Charax or Forat.

30 Both inscriptions honor Marcus Ulpius Yarḥai, son of Ḥairan, who was honored by at least seven statues between 155 and 159 CE. One of those referring to Scythia dates to 157 CE (PAT 1403; Schuol 2000, 73–74, no. III.1.b.21). The year number of an eighth statue for Yarḥai is not preserved. A date in the 150s can be expected (Schuol 2000, 75–76, no. III.1.b.22).

31 Teixidor 1984, 23–25; Gawlikowski 1994; Schuol 2000, 383; Young 2001, 148–149; and McLaughlin 2010, 97 favor a route along the Euphrates. Earlier reconstructions noticing the important Palmyrene community in Dura Europos sometimes surmised that transshipping might have taken place there. The argument for the direct route between Hit and Palmyra is best explained in Seland 2016, 45–51. The archaeological proof for this route and the dating of the various fortresses and watchtowers in the steppe visible in our detailed analysis of satellite imagery was one aim in a project by the author on nomad–sedentary interrelations, financed by the DFG. Unfortunately, after fieldwork had become untenable in Iraq, it was also stopped in 2006 for security reasons by Syrian authorities, but cf. Hauser 2012.

32 Hartmann 2018, 451.

33 Sommer 2005, 91, based on the assumption of a decline of the trade via Egypt in the first century CE, even believes that the route via Charax and Palmyra became the primary connection between India and the Mediterranean. This seems an overinterpretation of the scale of trade on both routes; cf. Young 2001, 74–89; McLaughlin 2019, 122–123. In addition, evidence for trade (and for Roman military presence) in the Red Sea in the second and third centuries CE has been

In the reconstructions of Palmyrene trade, the harbors of Mesene appear as just one alternative, slightly less important route between India and Rome, serving the same purpose as the main shipping axis via the Egyptian harbors of Berenike and Myos Hormos.[34] Consequently, in modern scholarly literature, the only major ports of the Arsacid Empire known from ancient sources were described as serving mainly the transit of goods towards the Mediterranean, a trade considered as largely bypassing the Arsacid Empire. Again, as in the usual descriptions of the overland trade, the Arsacid Empire appears as a *quantité négligeable,* a space to be crossed with little active interest in goods, no noteworthy market, and, thus, little to no importance for the topic of ancient trade networks aside from its assumed auxiliary ports used by Roman (Palmyrene) merchants out of topographical necessity.

The Kingdom of Mesene and its Relation to the Arsacid King of Kings

The generally accepted perception of a strangely limited interest in trade on the Arsacid side is certainly the result of the common traditional prejudices about the empire.[35] This converges with the highly restricted amount of sources on Arsacid economy. In the case of the Indian Ocean trade via Charax, the absence of written sources from other places, especially from within Mesene, certainly gives the Palmyrene inscriptions disproportionately more weight than they should have.[36] Communities of merchants in foreign cities were very common in antiquity throughout the world. Wherever the source situation allows, we can see that larger ports housed numerous communities.[37]

mounting in recent years; cf. Nappo 2015; Sidebotham 2015; Sidebotham this volume; Speidel 2015. Gawlikowski 2016, on the contrary, argues that the commodities of Palmyrene trade largely remained in the Syrian market and that this route was not significant for the wider Mediterranean in comparison to the trade via Egypt.

34 For summaries, cf. Young 2001, 27–89; Tomber 2008, 57–87; McLaughlin 2010, 23–60; Sidebotham 2011.

35 Summarized in Hauser 2016, 433–436 with further literature; on western biases, i.e., Orientalism, in ancient studies in general, cf. Hauser 2001/2006.

36 Craig's claim that Isidor's "Parthian Stations describes not only the overland routes through the Parthian Empire, but also the flourishing ports of the Persian Gulf, which connected Mesopotamia with the Indian Ocean networks" (Craig 2018, 171) is baseless and outright wrong, as are many other passages in this book, since Isidor makes no reference to areas south of Seleucia.

37 On trade communities, see, e.g., Steuernagel 2004; Hauser 2007, 235–240; Terpstra 2013. Yon 2016, 348, correctly observes with respect to Muziris, but pointing to the applicability of Palmyrenes in Mesene, that "colonies of traders were permanently established in several ports of India

The contingency of particularly good preservation of Palmyrene inscriptions and the divergence in the intensity of research on Palmyra and contemporary cities in modern Iraq induce a contorted image. For good reason, we can follow the characterization provided by the princely narrator of the so-called *Hymn of the Pearl* (or *Song of the Soul*), a Syriac apocryphal text of the third century CE that became part of the Acts of the Apostle Thomas. In his description of his travels from the East via Mesene to Egypt, he reports: "I passed through the borders of Maishan, the meeting place of the merchants of the East" (18) and on his return he came back "to the great Maishan, to the haven of merchants which sits on the shore of the sea" (70–71).[38]

Nevertheless, instead of questioning the validity of the one-sided reconstruction, which basically eliminated the idea of Mesenean and Arsacid interests and agency, the assumed passiveness vis-à-vis Palmyrene and Roman interests was even promoted as result of political compliance. But to understand the argument, we have to return to Mesenean history and our sources.

As previously mentioned, the kingdom of Mesene accrued in the context of inner-Seleucid dynastic conflicts in the mid-second century BCE. Hyspaosines, satrap of the Erythraen Sea, was one of the various regional administrators who had to take sides or to become independent from the Seleucids who lost control over their eastern possessions in the 140s BCE. Hyspasosines is attested fighting in Babylonia as early as 138 BCE; in 127 BCE at the latest, he used the title "king."[39] According to a Babylonian astronomical text, he died on June 11, 124 BCE, at an advanced age.[40] Either before or after his death, his realm became incorporated into the empire of the Arsacid Mithridates I.

The subsequent history of the Mesenean kingdom is not well covered in written sources. Its list of rulers, which currently comprises twenty-four names, is, therefore, mostly based on coins, but at times interrupted and sometimes complicated by uncertain assignations. Minting in Charax started in the last years of Hyspaosines and seems to have continued for the next 350 years until the Sasanian conquest in the 220s CE. The currently known coins, starting with Hyspaosines and ending with coins assigned to a certain Maga, whose reign is tentatively dated to 195–210 CE, are

is made clear by the references to Westerners serving as middlemen between their countrymen who arrived with cargoes and local merchants."

38 Cf. Beyer 1990, 242–243, Z. 18 and 246–247 Z. 70–71 for the Syriac edition. Yon 2016, 349 n. 15 quoting the Greek version. Yon correctly remarks that "Reference here is made to the kingdom, not directly to its ports, even if Spasinou Charax itself, without being a port, may have been an *emporion*." Yon 2016, 349 also reminds us of the presence of Jewish merchants in Mesene attested by Flavius Josephus, A.J. 20.34–35.

39 These data are provided by astronomical diaries from Babylon. For a discussion of Hyspaosines' career, cf. Schuol 2000, 291–300.

40 Sachs and Hunger 1996, 282–283, no. -123A Vs. 18'. The high age is reported by Lukianos, Makrobioi 16, who assigns eighty-five years to Hyspaosines.

allotted to twenty-one different kings, but several attributions (and, thus, proof for the existence of those persons) still need confirmation.[41] Only seven of the twenty-three successors of Hyspaosines, who himself is present in a variety of Babylonian cuneiform and Roman sources, are mentioned in written sources; but these provide little more information about them than evidence for their sheer existence.[42] Given this meager set of information, most summaries of Mesenean history are highly speculative.[43]

The exact status of the kingdom of Mesene and its relation to the Arsacid empire of the King of Kings in Ktesiphon is, nevertheless, highly contested in modern scholarship. This is not only a question of limited sources and their interpretation. The various opinions largely depend on different perceptions of strength or weakness of the central government. The discussion, thus, is at the heart of general perceptions of the Arsacid Empire and has strong repercussions on the idea of Persian Gulf trade as augmented above. This can be illustrated by Gregoratti's summary statement: "Parthian influence in the Gulf area could only be realized with the cooperation of the Characenians, 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

41 Most kings of Mesene are solely known from their coinage. Although lists of rulers based on coins have been compiled since the early nineteenth century, a full numismatic catalogue is still missing but is in preparation by Patrick Pasmans.

42 The information outside coins can be summarized as follows: For Hyspaosines' son Apodakos, we learn from an astronomical diary that he was still a minor when his father died at eighty-five (Schuol 2000, 40, no. III.1.a.7 and 298). For Artabazos I, whose coins only cover the year 49/8 BCE, we learn from Lukian, Macrobioi XVI.16 that he became king on account of the Arsacids when he was eighty-six years old (Schuol 2000, 124, no. III.1.c.20). Abinergaos I (only attested by coins in 10/11 and 22/23 CE) is mentioned by Josephus ant. Iud. XX.22–23 as friendly host and later generous father-in-law to Izates, prince of Adiabene. In between his two coin issues, a certain Orabzes appears in a Palmyrene inscription (Schuol 2000, 48, no. III.1.b.1) who might be a king of Mesene, although this is controversial. Attambelos VII (?!), according to Cassius Dio (68.28), greeted Trajan on his so-far-successful campaign in 116 CE and paid tribute (cf. below). Meredates (c. 130–151) was removed from his throne by the King of Kings Vologases III, as detailed in a bilingual inscription (cf. below). A certain BND or Binega ("Abinergaos II?" according to modern research) is mentioned by Tabari as king of Mesene at the time of Ardashir's I conquest of the region; cf. Schuol 2000, 368. Given this small portfolio of sources, Schuol's attempt to write a history of Mesene along the various rulers is a difficult task. Consequently, in her book the various kings of Mesene only make short appearances at the beginning of each subchapter in which their coins are briefly described before she moves on to descriptions of general Arsacid policy affairs and more or less well-informed speculations about the consequences for Mesene's policies and status as independent, "semi-independent" or autonomous polity (Schuol 2000, 300–378).

43 In particular, this applies to Nodelman 1960.

to develop its trade network in the Gulf and to interact with other political entities which were active on trade routes."[44]

The status of Mesene as (semi-)autonomous has been often assumed based on the long-held negative view of the Arsacid empire as structurally inapt and weak.[45] Background to such reasoning is provided by later Arabic sources (esp. Tabari), who describe the period after Alexander as the period of minor regional kings (Arabic: *molūk al–ṭawā'ef;* Pahlavi: *kadag–xwadāy*). But the common resulting description of secessionist provincial kings and influential landowners of the "Parthian" gentry neglects the fact that Tabari specifically emphasizes that all of these regional kings paid homage to the "Ashkaniyyan in al-Mada'in," that is, the Arsacids in their capital Ctesiphon.[46] Another argument for Mesenean independence is usually seen in the production of coins by various kings,[47] but the argument falls short if we compare minting practices in the Achaemenid Empire and the minting privileges in European Middle Ages, when issuing coins could even be a duty under the terms of fiefdom.[48]

In this situation, every new source on the history of Mesene gains great weight, as was the case with the bronze statue of Herakles-Verethragna, the patron deity of Mesenean rulers, found by soldiers in Seleucia-on-the-Tigris in 1984.[49] On its legs, a bilingual inscription in Aramaic and Greek reports on the successful war waged in 462 Seleucid Era, i.e., 150/151 CE, by the Arsacid King of Kings Vologases (i.e., Vologases III) against the King of Mesene, Meredates/Mithridates.[50] This inscription

44 Gregoratti 2011, 225. It is difficult to follow the argument in its strictness. While autonomy of minor states may help to develop specific networks, the opposite effect of intensified trade exchange and increased revenue as part of a larger producing and consuming economy is certainly also a valid possibility. The other question is, of course, whether Mesene had the means to decide on its status vis-à-vis the Arsacid Empire. Gregoratti's idea rests certainly on his assumption that "since its very beginning, the Parthian kingdom was characterised by a strongly decentralised nature" (Gregoratti 2011, 210). For a different opinion, cf. the extended discussion in Hauser 2016.

45 A comparable tendency also pervades the work of Schuol, who discriminates between long phases of semi-autonomy and phases of direct Arsacid rule, which she calls "parthische Interregna"; cf. Schuol 2000, 453–461.

46 Cf. Hauser 2022b for further discussion.

47 Undecided on this question is Schuol 2000, 333, on the distribution of coins by Attambelos IV from Dura Europos to the Gulf: "ob die bis weit in das Golfgebiet reichenden Handelskontakte der Charakener Ausdruck einer eigenständigen Politik des Königreiches waren oder ob dabei in parthischem Auftrag agiert wurde, ist mittels der numismatischen Zeugnisse nicht zu entscheiden." But Schuol 2000, 368: "Von Abinergaos III. sind keine Münzen bekannt, so daß für die Charakene in dieser Zeit weder eine völlige Unabhängigkeit vom Partherreich noch – als Charakteristikum einer Teilautonomie – ein Münzprägerecht nachweisbar ist."

48 Hauser 2016, 474–475.

49 The statue is called Herakles in the Greek text and Verethragna in the Parthian version; for literature, cf. Schuol 2000, 41–42; Hauser 2022a.

50 The text has often been reproduced, e.g., with translation, cf. Schuol 2000, 41–45; Hauser 2022a, 334 n. 11.

became a central source for Mesenean and Arsacid history. According to David Potter, this text demonstrates "that the accepted reconstruction of Mesenian history (based on coins) which suggested that Mithridates was a Parthian client can no longer be accepted."[51] On the contrary, he concluded that Mesene, previous to the war, must have been independent and supported his argument with the common idea that issuing coins was the prerogative of independent rulers. Glen Bowersock combined these arguments with Cassius Dio's (68.28.4) report that Trajan on his campaign to the Persian Gulf in 116 was greeted by King Attambelos (VII) of Mesene, who remained loyal despite being forced to pay tribute.[52] He concluded that the attack on Mesene might have occurred because Mesene still had friendly relationships with Rome. He saw the missing link in the continued trade relations between Palmyra and Charax in general, and especially in the role played by Palmyrenes in the administration of Mesene. This is demonstrated by one inscription from Palmyra, dating to 131 CE, which honors a certain Yarhai,[53] son of Nebuzabad, a Palmyrene who had lived in Charax for some time and was appointed by king Meredates of Mesene to the position of satrap of Thilouana (Tylos, modern Bahrain). For Bowersock and subsequent literature, the appointment of a Palmyrene was evidence for Roman influence. Bowersock's conclusion that Mesene "was in fact a Roman client kingdom for some time in the second century AD" became generally accepted.[54]

However, the argument is far less straightforward than usually assumed. Neither the presumed Roman position of power towards the Arsacids nor the identification of Palmyrenes as advocates of Roman interests can be confirmed. Soon after his visit to Mesene, Trajan was forced by a massive uprising throughout the conquered territories to leave Mesopotamia for Roman territory in Syria. There he left Hadrian with

51 Potter 1991, 280. Followed by, e.g., Potts 1997, 97; Schuol 2000, 459.

52 Bowersock 1989, 164; Bernard 1990, 37; Potter 1991, 283.

53 The text reads: "Yarhai (son of) Nebuzabad (son of) Shalamallat (son of) Aqqadanos from Hadriana Palmyra, Satrap of the Thilouanians of Meeredates, king of Spasinou Charax. The merchants in Spasinou Charax in his honor, year 442, month Xandikos." Cf. Schuol 2000, 56–57, no. III.1.b.9. A second Palmyrene, whose name is not preserved, made career as archon of Charax according to the partly destroyed inscription (Schuol 2000, 63–64, no. III.1.b.13) which dates between 88 and 188 CE. He belonged to the family 'A'by. Another (or the same) member of this family, Yarḥibol, was honored in 138 CE for his constant support of merchants in Charax Spasinou and his mission as envoy to king Osroes/Worod of Elymais, cf. Schuol 2000, 61–63, no. III.1.b.12; PAT 1414. These are prime examples for the integration of (some) Palmyrene immigrants into Charax.

54 Quote from Young 2001, 146. The opinion is shared by Bowersock 1989, 164–167; Potter 1991, 277; Yon 2002, 104; Edwell 2008, 37; Smith 2013, 165; Gawlikowski 2016, 26. Potter 1991, 281 and Speidel 2016, 112–114, following the lead, take it a step further and suggest a general profound power difference between the Roman and Arsacid Empires, not the least to the advantage of Roman, i.e., Palmyrene, trade. But cf. Hauser 2022a, 345–346.

the army and little chance of continued leverage on Arsacid matters.[55] Moreover, the idea that Yarhai's appointment is indicative of Roman influence presupposes that the Palmyrene acted in the Romans' interest; but Yarhai belonged to the well-established Palmyrene expatriate community, which was part of the international network of merchants in Charax in which Palmyrenes were one of the various groups. As such, he was obviously well integrated into the Mesenean society. Still, examples in history abound where immigrants like Yarhai are entrusted positions in court administrations for their excellence, but often enough also because they have no particular backing outside the king's and are, therefore, reliable arbitrators. In addition, while Yarhai was a Palmyrene and Mesenean administrator, he was certainly no Roman citizen. He received his honorary statue at home, probably less retrospectively and more to positively influence his affections towards his home town and, thereby, possibly also predispose the king of Mesene's interests towards Palmyra.[56] But facilitating Palmyrene trade only indirectly converged with Roman interests and is no argument for Roman bearings in the politics of Mesene.

In fact, the inscription on the Herakles-Verethragna statue sheds a rare light on power struggle within the Arsacid family. Vologases III, who describes himself as "King of Kings" and son of Mithridates, "king" (i.e., the king of Media), waged war on Meredates, king of Mesene, son of the former King of Kings Pakoros. In other words, Vologases III attacked his close relative, most probably in a fight about the succession within the family, but not about secession or independence of one of the Arsacid provinces.[57]

Furthermore, even if the province of Mesene had the right to issue coins, this right and duty might well have been part of the status agreements from early on. As mentioned above, we know of enough examples, e.g., from medieval Europe, where the issuing of coins is delegated as part of fiefdoms; and we also know that in Achaemenid

55 The whole case is argued in detail in Hauser 2022a, 337–342. Aside from the questions of Palmyra's integration into and Palmyrenes' incentive to represent the Roman Empire outside its borders, which certainly needs discussion, we should be aware that Charax is close to 1,000 km from the Roman border in linear distance. No Roman army after Trajan came ever closer than 600 km again. How should one conceive of credible (military) threats and durable incentives for Mesene to prefer Roman *amicitia* vis-à-vis the Arsacids?

56 An exact transfer into a modern parallel might help to elucidate the weakness of the usually accepted argument. Provided only with the evidence of the renaming of the local sports stadium in Arnold Schwarzenegger's Austrian hometown, Graz, in his honor and the information that he served as governor in California at that time, a parallel argumentation to the one concerning Yarhai would conclude that California was, for several decades, independent from the US and instead a client to the European Union.

57 Discussed in detail in Hauser 2022a, 346–349.

and Seleucid times, several satraps had regular coin emissions, without anyone in the literature trying to argue that they must have been independent for that reason.[58]

The coins of Meredates, on the other hand, are of particular interest, as the legend on his tetradrachms of 142 CE describe him as "Meredates, son of Phokoros, King of Kings, king of Omani," which once more indicates a) the family connection of provincial and central rulers and b) the political interests of the king of Mesene in the Persian Gulf.[59] Thus, following the intervention of Vologases III, Mesene remained an integral part of the Arsacid (and later the Sasanian) Empire with its capital at Charax, which eventually was called Karkh Maishan.

The Capital of Mesene: Spasinou Charax

While the *Periplus Mare Erythaeis* mentions Apologos as port at the head of the Persian Gulf, it places the center of the region at Charax Spasinou. This city is renowned from Roman and Palmyrene sources. According to Pliny (NH 6.138), the city was originally founded as Alexandria by Alexander the Great in between the rivers Tigris and Eulaios near their confluence.[60] Pliny (NH 6.138–139) further relates that Alexander's foundation was twice destroyed by floods. It was first rebuilt by Antiochos, "the fifth king," and renamed after himself.[61] Only a few decades later, the former Seleucid governor

58 In the context of coinage as a sign of independence, we should also note that Orabzes, the successor of Meredates, who was most certainly enthroned by Vologases III, immediately started to issue his own coins.

59 This is important with respect to the political situation encountered by merchants; cf. Salles 2012, 323, on possible restrictions. Potts (2021, 519) succinctly states: "During the first millennium CE the Persian Gulf functioned as an easily navigable trade route, but the evidence of either Parthian or Sasanian political and military hegemony is sporadic at best, and evidence from the early Islamic era is meager to say the least."

60 The Eulaios has usually been equated with the modern River Karkhe. But based on the geomorphological interpretation of satellite data, the so-called K2 palaeochannel, which approaches Alexandria/Charax from the northeast, at the time probably represented both Karkhe and Karun; cf. Walstra et al. 2011; Heyvaert et al. 2013.

61 Ever since this specific Antiochos was identified as Antiochos IV by Nodelman 1960, 85, it has been assumed that the rebuilding took place in 166/165 BCE; cf. Hansman 1967, 22; Hansman 1991; Schuol 2000, 107; Campbell et al. 2018, 215. But Pliny's description is problematic, as he states: "postea restituit Antiochus quintus regum et suo nomine apellavit" (NH 6.139). The problem is, of course, that the fifth king of the Seleucid dynasty was the short-lived Seleucos III, who, according to dates provided by Babylonian chronicles, probably only ruled from December 225 to April/June 223 BCE; cf. https://www.livius.org/articles/person/seleucus-iii-keraunos/. Who, then,

of the "Satrapy of the Erythrean Sea," Hyspaosines, declared himself independent in the wake of civil war and the impending dissolution of the eastern part of the Seleucid Empire.[62] Because of the transformation of the former satrapal seat, Alexandria/Antiochia, into his capital, connected with major building efforts to prevent future flooding, the city changed its name again and became called Charax Spasinou, "the palisade" (Greek Charax = Aramaic *krk*) of Hyspaosines. As such (usually inverted as Spasinou Charax), the city appears in twelve of the Greek versions of bilingual Palmyrene inscriptions between 81 and 193 CE.[63] The inscriptions in Palmyrene Aramaic, on the other hand, refer to the site simply as *krk* or interchangeably as either krk 'spsn' [Karak Aspasina] or most often as *krk (dy) myšn* [Karak (of) Maishan].[64] The latter name is also used in later Arabic sources.[65] The name clearly points out the specific role of Charax as center and capital of the region and kingdom of Mesene/Maishan.

is Antiochos, the fifth king? Nodelman (1960, n. 20) stated "that the 'Antiochus quintus regum' who refounded the city was Antiochus IV is hardly open to doubt" but presents no argument aside from arguing that it was Antiochos IV who established Hyspaosines—a fact completely unrelated, and rather counterintuitive—and that Antiochos IV was the fifth Antiochos in the family according to Tarn, one of them never having been king. But Pliny particularly mentions that the person in question was the fifth king(!), not the fifth Antiochos, which should preclude Nodelman's proposal. Antiochos IV, on the other hand, certainly spent some time in the region in 164 BCE before he died in Elymais/Susiana. Alternatively, we could propose Antiochos III (223–187 BCE), who succeeded his brother Seleucos III and, during his rule, showed much presence in the eastern parts of his grand-grandfather's empire. According to Polybius (Histories 5.54.9–12), Antiochos III went to Seleucia after his defeat of the rebel Molon in 220 BCE and re-established Seleucid rule, not the least by appointing new *strategoi* for the provinces of Media, Susiana, and the Erythraean Sea. Some years later, in 205 BCE, Antiochos III even visited Gerrha and Tylos (Bahrain) before he sailed home to Seleucia; cf. Polybius 13.9.5. On the way, he must have passed Alexandria. With his presence in the region and his involvement in the province's organization, Antiochos III would be an apt candidate for the restoration of Alexandria/Antiochia, but this would allow the argument that Pliny either meant "the fifth king after Seleucos I" or that he excluded the briefly reigning Seleucos III from his count. Although neither suggestion is fully satisfying, an attribution of the rebuilding of the city to Antiochos III seems preferable and certainly no less probable than Nodelman's proposal of Antiochos IV.

62 Cf. Schuol 2000, 291–296.

63 For the earliest and latest examples, cf. the bilingual inscriptions Schuol 2000, no. III.1.b.5 and no. III.1.b.28 with previous literature.

64 The name of the site is preserved in eleven Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions. It is called krk 'spsn' in Schuol 2000, no. III.1.b. 18 and no. III.1.b.24, dating to 155 and 159 CE. *krk (dy) myšn* appears in five inscriptions from the second half of the first century, in 135, 140, 155, and 159 CE; cf. Schuol 2000, no. III.1.b.5; no. III.1.b.6; no. III.1.b.11; no. III.1.b.14; and no. III.1.b.25. *krk* without any further additions appears in four inscriptions dating between 156 and 193; cf. Schuol 2000, no. III.1.b.19; no. III.1.b.20; no. III.1.b.26; and no. III.1.b.28. Obviously the names could be used interchangeably. The badly preserved Palmyrene inscription Schuol 2000, no. III.1.b.4, dated between 50/1 and 70/1 CE, refers to 'sp<s>nqrṭ.

65 Cf. Tabari I 818 and I 820, where Ardashir is credited to have built or founded Karkh Mais(h)an with the new name Astābādh Ardashīr (Bosworth 1999, 13; 16).

Although the city's importance was always conceded, it took until 1965 for John Hansman to even become interested in locating it, as part of his UCL dissertation on the ancient landscape of the wider area (1970). Studying aerial photographs, he identified long straight walls or a rampart at a place called Jebel Khayaber that matched Pliny's description of Charax rather well.[66] The remote location and lack of interest in the Arsacid period during the 1970s, the integration of the ruin in the extensive Iraqi defense lines during the Iraq–Iran War in the 1980s, and the political instability and international politics in the 1990s and 2000s prevented further explorations. Systematic archaeological work at Charax Spasinou only began in March 2016, when Jane Moon, Robert Killick, and Stuart Campbell (University of Manchester), at the invitation of the head of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) in Basra, Qahtan al-Abeed, carried out a preliminary season to establish whether a more substantial research project at the long-neglected site would be advisable. This was confirmed by important results in mapping the city and geophysical prospection, which revealed the outline of a major street, nearly 30 m wide, and huge rectangular blocks of urban buildings (Figs. 2 and 3). [67]

Three field campaigns (2017–2019) greatly enlarged our knowledge of the ancient city and demonstrated its unique potential. Survey transects of 550 km in Charax and its vicinity, with more than 18,000 data points collected, allowed us to identify sixteen additional sites and define the southern and eastern limits of Charax. Intense study of drone imagery and, finally, geological coring helped us to reconstruct ancient riverbeds. In addition, over 100 ha of Charax Spasinou has been surveyed by geophysics in specific parts of the city. At selected places, evaluation trenches were excavated to check the results of the magnetic survey and to determine the depth and date of archaeological deposits in preparation of future campaigns.

As a result, we can now describe Charax as a city of nearly 7 km² adjacent to a former Tigris canal in the west. Four different phases of city planning appear in the geophysical exploration. Almost 50 ha of gridded city plan can be seen in the southern half of the site (Fig. 2 and in Fig. 3). It shows a partly residential area of blocks measuring ca. 160 × 85–90 m, which might suggest a system based on 550 × 300 Attic

66 In October 1965, he visited the place for one afternoon and, learning that the site was locally called Naishan, was positively convinced he had identified Charax (Hansman 1970).

67 Moon et al. 2016; Campbell et al. 2018. Once more I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my dear colleagues who were so kind to invite me to become their co-director in 2017. Explorations in Charax and its vicinity were subsequently supported by a three-year grant from the British Cultural Protection Fund for the long-term protection of heritage assets in the Basra province, focused on identifying and mapping archaeological sites in collaboration with SBAH. A geomorphological survey and interpretation of the geophysical survey and drone mapping were supported by a grant from the DFG. Our work was greatly facilitated by Qahtan al-Abeed, to whom we owe our gratitude. The geophysical exploration in 2016 was carried out by Jörg Fassbinder (Munich), to whom I extend my sincere thanks.

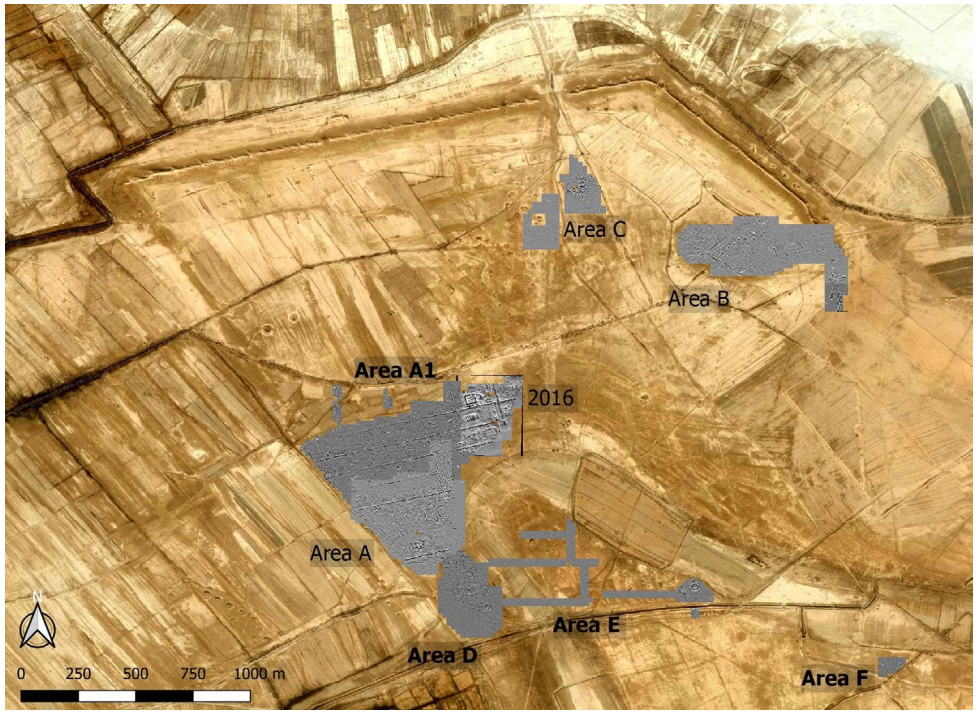

Fig. 2 Satellite image of Charax Spasinou (Jebel Khayabir) with indication of areas of geophysical research until 2019.

Ionic feet. This makes the grid one of the largest known in the ancient world.[68] Several larger buildings, some of them with impressive *peripteroi*, can be identified.

Further north, an industrial area indicated by numerous kilns with slag extends along an inner-city canal (Area B in Fig. 2). Closer to the still impressive rampart, which rises up to 7 m above the flat landscape, we located a palatial area of approximately 110 × 100 m (Area C in Fig. 2). Numerous rooms are clearly visible in drone imagery (Fig. 4). The building exhibits, e.g., a peristyle court featuring massive fluted columns made from backed brick and plaster with the channeling carried out in finest plaster work of high quality.[69] Numerous coins were found, most of them heavily corroded.

68 Cf. Campbell et al. 2018; Killick et al. 2019. At the former Seleucid capital of Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, for example, the blocks are 146.5 × 73.25 m (= 500 × 250 Attic Ionic feet) and at Antioch-on-the-Orontes in Syria 117.2 × 58.6 m (= 400 × 200 Attic Ionic feet).

69 The best comparison is the so-called "Parthian palace" at Nippur, which, in its official/ceremonial part, features the same constellation of a peristyle court and a 15 × 12 m audience hall south of it, located behind an anteroom with two columns in antis and reached by steps. This is basically the same concept as in Charax, only on a much smaller scale. On Arsacid palaces, cf. Hauser 2019.

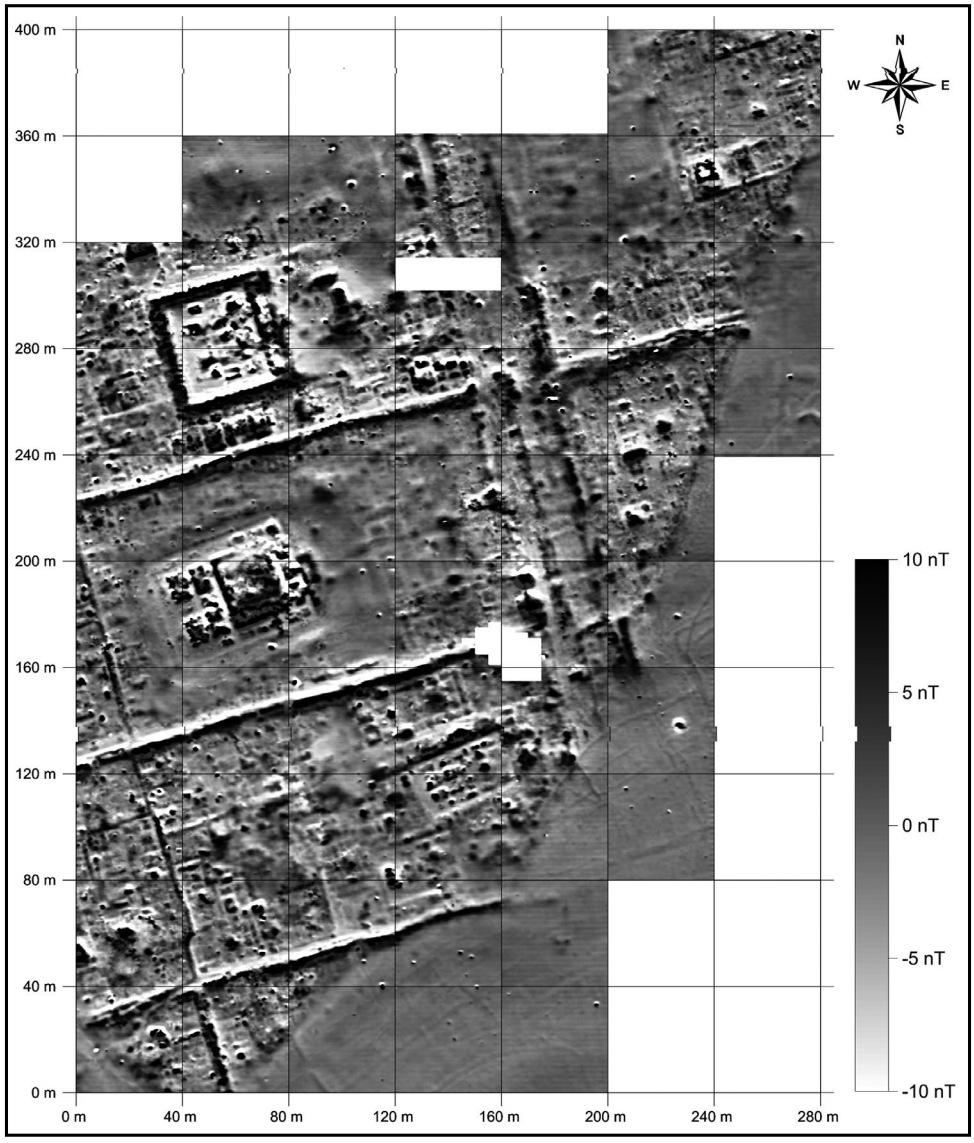

Fig. 3 Area A showing main geo-physical features in the 2016 campaign.

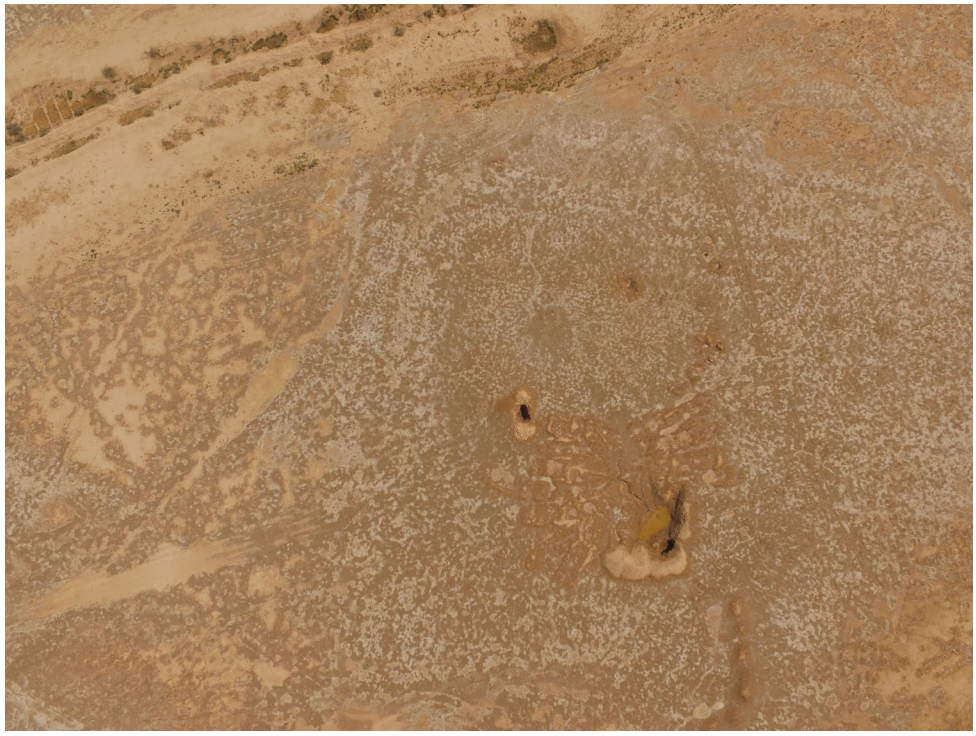

Fig. 4 Area C drone photograph.

One from the upper level of the building gives the date of 461 Seleucid Era, i.e., 149/150 CE, which provides a *terminus post quem* for the building's destruction and nicely coincides with the war between Vologases III and Mesene's king Meredates.

No clear evidence is available for the end of the city. None of the coins found on the surface is later than early Sasanian. We nevertheless learn from the acts of the various synods of the Christian "Church of the East" that bishops from Karka dĕ Maišān participated in these important gatherings until 605 CE.[70] On the other hand, the metropolite of Maishan already resided in neighboring Forat in 410, which probably indicates that Karkh Maishan had lost its position as capital of Mesene.[71] When the

70 Cf. the lists of participants for the synods of 410, 424, 484, 497, 544, 585/6, and 605 CE (Braun 1900/1975, 30; 46; 73; 86; 125; 236; 305).

71 The bishop of Prat Maishan (i.e., Forat) appears as one of six metropolites in the list of participants in the first ecclesiastical synod of the Sasanian Empire in 410, where, on invitation of the Sasanian King of Kings Yazdgerd I, the bishops of his empire formally agreed on the constitution of a united autonomous "Church of the East."

settlement ceased to exist altogether, we do not yet know.[72] Charax became forgotten and repeatedly flooded for far more than a millennium.[73]

Charax and its Role in Trade

Provided that Pliny's report on the foundation by Alexander is correct, Alexandria on the Tigris, i.e., later Charax Spasinou or Karak Meyshan, was the only other major center founded by him west of eastern Iran aside from Alexandria in Egypt. Even a preliminary comparison between these two show that their settings and roles are closely parallel. Just as Alexandria on the Nile links the Mediterranean with the Nile and the cities further upstream, Alexandria on the Tigris connects the Persian Gulf with the city centers in Babylonia and Elymais, either by the Rivers Tigris and Eulaios or via land-based routes (Fig. 1). As the common ground definition for harbors in general is their function as points of connection between water and land that allow for the embarking or debarking of people and objects (commodities), they must be approachable by various ways: from the sea, by land, and usually also by navigable rivers. The location of harbors and port cities thus depends on possible lines of distribution. Especially in flat, sandy coastal areas, the impact of tides prevents ports on the open sea and requires topographically safer areas further inland that can be reached by roads that are not permanently in danger of being flooded. At the same time, the port must be a safe place, protected as much as possible against natural disasters such as high floods, as well as against human threats such as incursions. For all these reasons, port cities are very often not on the sea itself but some distance inland, in places where it is safe to moor or anchor and that can be reached via safe, permanent overland routes. Alternatively, the harbor can be separated from the city governing its trade, as might be indicated by the PME's description of the relation between Apologos and Charax Spasinou, formerly Alexandria.[74]

Pliny (NH 6.139–140) reports that the city was originally founded only 10 *stades* from the littoral but that, because of the outstandingly quick aggradation, Iuba already located it 50 Roman miles from the shore, while contemporary Arab *legats* and "our merchants who have been there" confirm a distance of 120 Roman miles to the open

72 Hansman 1970, 81 refers to a passage in Tabari where the inhabitants of Karka greet the rebellion of Zand in 868 CE. We have found no evidence for such a late settlement so far.

73 Hansman 1970, 82, reports that locals told him the area was flooded annually until the Wadi Tharthar barrage was put in place in 1956.

74 Salles 2012, 304 correctly remarks that the *Periplus* "semble ne pas attribuer de fonction d'échanges maritimes à Spasinou Charax, et les données historiques des siècles postérieurs font plus état de caravanes arrivant à Spasinou Charax que de navires ancrés au quais de la ville (?)"

sea.[75] The latter distance concurs remarkably well with the current situation. Pliny's account in connection with the PME would thus allow for a slight change in Charax' role, from harbor to superior port and principal trading center.[76]

As such, it was the primary purpose of Charax to continue and guarantee the provision of the urban centers in central Babylonia. We should expect an enormous market for goods from India, China, or the Persian Gulf, judging by the expected surplus from the enormous growth of irrigated fields in their vicinity and the impressive population numbers provided by ancient sources.[77] According to Pliny (NH 6.122), Seleucia boasted 600,000 inhabitants; Orosius (Hist. 7.15.3) confirms a population of 400,000. In addition, we have to account for the continually growing capital Ktesiphon, which, following Strabo (16.1.16 [743]), during his time had already developed from a winter residence of the Arsacid Kings of Kings into a hugely populated city in itself, being in other parts adorned by the kings with all they needed, with merchandise, and with all necessary arts.[78] These two cities formed the equivalent to Rome not only in political but also in economic terms.[79] Large-scale irrigation systems and the growth of cities show a general economic and population trend toward the Tigris in this period, but also along the Euphrates, several large urban centers still provided major markets. Especially the former capital, Babylon, would still have had a huge population.[80]

In addition, under the prevailing circumstances of the time and the fluvial system, Charax was also the natural point of supply, with imports for the entire province of Elymais and its capital Susa. These two cities are just 160 km linear distance from each other. A route between them will have been some kilometers longer, mostly depending on bridges or detours for crossing irrigation canals, possibly stopping at

75 Pliny, NH 6.140: "nunc abesse a litore CXX legati Arabum nostrique negotiatores, qui inde venere, adfirmant." On the Tabula Peutingeriana, the site appears on three sides surrounded by water as the endpoint of a route starting in Seleucia.

76 This idea is supported by Potts 1990b, 352–353, who remarks: "It is interesting to note a characteristic of long standing in Mesopotamian commercial relations with the Gulf region. This is the existence of a principal port in southern Babylonia through which most of the contact with the Gulf region was maintained." As indirect successor to Uruk and Ur, he ascribes this function to Alexandria-on-the-Tigris. Cf. also Sidebotham 2011, 212: "At Charax the Palmyrenes had a substantial commercial presence and owned or operated merchant ships sailing in the Gulf and beyond. It was Charax that goods traveled to and from other locations in the Persian Gulf and India."

77 On the transformation of the land behind Ktesiphon, cf. Adams 1965, 61–82.

78 Strabo 16.1.16: "δυνάμει οὖν Παρθικῆ πόλις ἀντὶ κώμης ἐστὶ καὶ τὸ μέγεθος, τοσοῦτόν γε πλῆθος δεχομένη καὶ τὴν κατασκευὴν ὑπ᾽ ἐκείνων αὐτῶν κατεσκευασμένη καὶ τὰ ὤνια καὶ τὰς τέχνας προσφόρους ἐκείνοις πεπορισμένη."

79 For a summary of the cities' histories, see Hauser 2021.

80 The archaeological evidence for the Arsacid period is compiled in Hauser 1999. A population of up to 100,000 inhabitants seems possible.

other markets and to bypass the hilly area west of Susa, making it easier to approach the former Achaemenid capital from the south. In addition, the importance of this mercantile connection is also evident from the high amount of Mesenean coins with countermarks from Elymaean authorities.[81]

The agglomeration Seleucia-Ktesiphon, Babylon, and the Elymaean capital Susa must have provided tremendous opportunities as markets for products from India and beyond—a fact that has been nearly completely neglected in previous studies.[82] We should be aware that these places were the main destinations for the goods imported via Charax. This being the case, greater control of Mesene was in the interest of the Kings of Kings in Ktesiphon; and, likewise, he and the king of Mesene would have agreed on the terms of issuing money—actually of low metal value—to facilitate mercantile activity.[83]

The above discussion, therefore, suggests an understanding of Alexandria-on-the-Tigris, the later Charax Spasinou, together with Seleucia-on-the-Tigris as the newly established Seleucid and Arsacid period axis for trade in Babylonia. The foundation of Alexander fulfilled precisely the same purpose on the Tigris as Alexandria on the Nile: it served as the very place where the routes across the sea and the river connected. But while Alexandria–Charax never received the same paramount importance as its Egyptian counterpart, the ruins recently explored by a British–German team demonstrate its enormous size. In both cases, the city was planned and built on a grand scale by Alexander's successors and became a buzzing center of Hellenistic culture. In the Arsacid period, the city, now called Charax Spasinou or Karak/Karkh Maishan, might have lost some of its function as harbor but continued to be the central place for distributive trade. As a huge city in itself, it provided an attractive market, and, due to its lines of connectivity on or along the rivers, it offered splendid commercial opportunities for the various merchant communities based in the city. One of these communities came from Palmyra and used this hub for commerce between Babylonia and India to purchase objects from the Persian Gulf and those traded in the Indian Ocean, or to sell goods from the Syrian Mediterranean or even as thoroughfare for their direct involvement in trade with India. In Mesene, they met their colleagues and competitors. Some Palmyrenes even assumed positions within the administration of the kingdom, raising hopes in their fellow Palmyrenes that this might prove beneficial for their mercantile activities. The majority of the "merchants of the East" who gathered in Mesene would, nevertheless, have been active in the trade network between India and Babylonia, the epicenter of Arsacid political and economic activities.

81 Hauser 2023.

82 The exception to the rule was McLaughlin 2010, 95, who praised the role of Seleucia and Ktesiphon as important trading and consumer cities.

83 Hauser 2023, 319–320.

Summary and Perspectives

For a long time, the interests and agency of producers, consumers, and merchants in the Arsacid Empire found little consideration in ancient history. The previous discussion should have demonstrated that Mesene, and in particular its capital Charax, served as a harbor and entrance for goods into the Arsacid Empire. As such, it connected the rich urban centers of Babylonia and Elymais with the Persian Gulf and its global connections. While previous scholarship on long-distance exchange neglected the role of Arsacid dominions for general prejudices and the dearth of written sources, we should expect Mesene as a major force in international trade—it has simply been little explored. The new explorations in Alexandria-on-the-Tigris, later called Charax Spasinou or Karkh Maishan, might help to overcome this deplorable situation. Research at Charax forces us to think about prejudices in the currently-so-popular debates on proto-globalization in antiquity, which still suffer from a distinct Western, Romano-centric perspective, and reconfigure our perceptions on trade routes and markets.

The importance of Charax lies in its role as a kind of missing link in our reconstruction of ancient trade, the flow of goods, and the interconnectedness of distant regions. The opportunity to explore this center for exchange between India and the populous cities of Babylonia and Elymais will hopefully help to rebalance our perception and offer some incentive for a novel way to think about Afro-Eurasian interconnectedness.

Figure Credits

Fig. 1 Stefan R. Hauser, based on Google Earth
Fig. 2 Charax Spasinou Project, S. Campbell 2017
Fig. 3 Charax Spasinou Project, J. Fassbinder 2016
Fig. 4 Charax Spasinou Project, S. Campbell 2017

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