

# Greek Letterforms on the Parthian Drachms

Richard A. Olson

One of the most unusual coinages in antiquity was the coinage of the Parthian empire, largest of the later Hellenistic empires. The Parthians were a non-Greek people who used Greek as their first official language of state and as the predominant language on their coins. Their most common denomination, the silver drachm, bore Greek legends for almost half a millenium, and the letterforms underwent a significant transformation in the process. Since the coinage constitutes the largest body of primary source material extant concerning ancient Parthia, that transformation is of significant interest to the classical historian.

The seal of the American Numismatic Society is the image of a coin bearing the Latin inscription "parva ne pereant" ("Small, lest they perish"). The coinage of antiquity did not perish; indeed, it survives in great abundance. Coin hoards are still being discovered throughout the Mediterranean world, and on the floor of the Mediterranean itself. This numismatic abundance is certainly true of ancient Parthia, an empire which lasted *c.* 450 years and at its peak extended from the Euphrates River to China's frontier. Unfortunately the vast number of Parthian coins is matched by an equal dearth of Parthian literary sources. Only a handful of inscriptions and manuscripts written in Parthian Pahlavi are extant, necessitating a heavy reliance on a small number of cuneiform records, the Graeco-Roman authors, and the coins. The Parthian coinage constitutes the largest body of source material concerning the empire, making it invaluable to the historian. The coins describe the culture, political ambitions, and religious nature of the Parthian state; the regime often used the coinage as a form of public media. Everyone who counted politically and socially carried money, so what was placed on the coins was usually designed to communicate to them.

The Parthian coinage is fascinating for a variety of reasons, and one of them is that the Parthians were a non-Greek people who used

Greek as their first official language of state. The Parthians' early and later drachms (the most common silver denomination) bear supplementary Aramaic letters and words inscribed in Pahlavi, but the common language on the coins is Greek. The Parthians adopted a bi-metallic currency, based on silver and copper. The largest of the silver denominations, the tetradrachm, was minted almost exclusively at Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, northeast of Babylon. The predominant Hellenistic influence in that city is reflected by the almost constant nature of the Greek letterforms on the large silver.<sup>1</sup> The copper coinage bore Greek legends until the dwindling size of those coins precluded the continuing use of such. Legends on the copper were discontinued by A.D. 12. The drachm, the "dollar-bill" of ancient Parthia, was inscribed from beginning to end, and was minted in a number of cities throughout the realm, principally in Iran and Elymais. Because of the low degree of Hellenization in those regions, the drachm is most illustrative of changes in letterform development.

The Parthians seized control of the Seleucid satrapy of Parthia (hence their most common name in the West), and merely assumed the language of the Seleucid government for their own. The Parthians emanated from the region east of the Caspian Sea.<sup>2</sup> The Greek geographer Strabo called their dynastic founder, Arsaces I, a "Scythian" (*Geography*, xi, 8, 2), but the term is not ethnically proper. "Scythic" denotes a way of life, not a descent. When speaking of "Scythians" one normally refers to nomads of Iranian origin who migrated to Russia. Many of the Parthian nobles are known to have been able to speak Greek; it was the common language of their coinage, of their correspondence with the principal cities of the empire, and of their rock-cut inscriptions on the Bisitun Rock. Monarchs Mithradates II (c. 123-88/87 B.C.) and Gotarzes II (A.D. 43/44-51/52) placed reliefs and short Greek inscriptions beneath the monumental frieze of Persian king Darius II. An epigraphical study of the Hellenistic Age reveals that squared letterforms came into use for Greek inscriptions long before Roman engravers adopted them, and the Parthian coinage exemplifies that.

In our age of machine-stamped, mass-produced coins with standardized types and letterforms, it is easy to forget that in the pre-industrial world coins were expressions of individual craftsmanship and artistry. In the mints of the Graeco-Roman civilizations every

obverse and reverse die had to be engraved by hand, and as a result no two die impressions were exactly alike. The great variation of representations within similar coin groups attests to the relatively short life-span of the dies, especially the punch dies, which bore the reverse impressions. Hoards often reveal die-linked coins, but usually in limited numbers (Fig. 1). The Parthians minted drachms from the advent of their power *c.* 250 B.C. until their overthrow by the Sasanian Persians in the A.D. 220's.<sup>3</sup> Since the Parthians were non-Greeks, the letterforms on the drachms underwent a significant transformation in that near half-millennium, and the nature and importance of that transformation is our subject here.<sup>4</sup> The major catalogs of the Parthian coinage are not concerned with letterform development; most of them print the coin inscriptions as they *ought* to appear in standard Attic Greek.<sup>5</sup> However, most of them *never* appeared in that form, and this is of interest to the historian using the coinage as primary source material.

The basic nature of the letterform transformation on the drachms was a process of simplification. At the end of Parthian numismatic history six Greek letters were engraved as simple vertical lines. The question is why? The early cataloguers dismissed this apparent degeneration of form as a result of ignorance in the mints. It is true that most of the mints which issued the drachms were on the Iranian plateau, and a "de-Hellenization" of the empire did occur, but other factors are involved. The progressive simplification of the Greek letterforms was accompanied by an increase in the number of titles and epithets placed on the drachms. The size of the drachm was limited by its very denomination; only so many letters could be squeezed onto the coin. The letterforms had to be cut down. The later portraits of the monarchs also became simplified in form as the Parthian engravers gradually re-discovered form simplification in style and epigraphy.

One of the principal reasons letterform development is of interest to the historian is that the most significant changes on the Parthian drachms reflect major political alterations, as will be seen. Also, the Parthians were invaders, usurpers of power; they had to justify their authority, and the continuing presence of Greek on the coinage demonstrates their special need to cater to the Greek business interests in the West, primarily at Seleucia. The Parthians did not occupy

Seleucia, but rather built Ctesiphon on the opposite bank of the Tigris. In fact, Seleucia received a degree of autonomy under the Parthians that became one of the outstanding examples of civic liberty in antiquity. The Arsacid ruling class did not want to disrupt the existing order, but rather establish a working relationship with the Graeco-Semitic commercial aristocracy.<sup>6</sup> Seleucia became the only Greek city under Parthian domination permitted to mint an autonomous copper coinage (until A.D. 24), indicating her favored position.<sup>7</sup>

The inscriptions on the Parthian drachms also interest the classical historian for their unusual numismatic hapax-legomena. The epithet *ΘΕΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ* ("of divine birth"), used to describe certain Arsacid monarchs, appears *only* on Parthian coinage. One of the most common words to appear on the drachms is *ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ* ("Friend of the Greeks"), a carefully chosen expression indicative of the propaganda the dynasty found necessary to appease its sometimes dissident Hellenistic populace. The Parthians excelled at using their coinage as a means of communication. Parthia's arch-rival Rome even adopted certain motifs from the Arsacid coinage for its own numismatic propaganda effort. The Roman emperor Augustus, for example, minted a bronze issue depicting him being crowned by Nike, in imitation of an earlier coinage of Parthian king Orodes II (c. 57–38 B.C.).

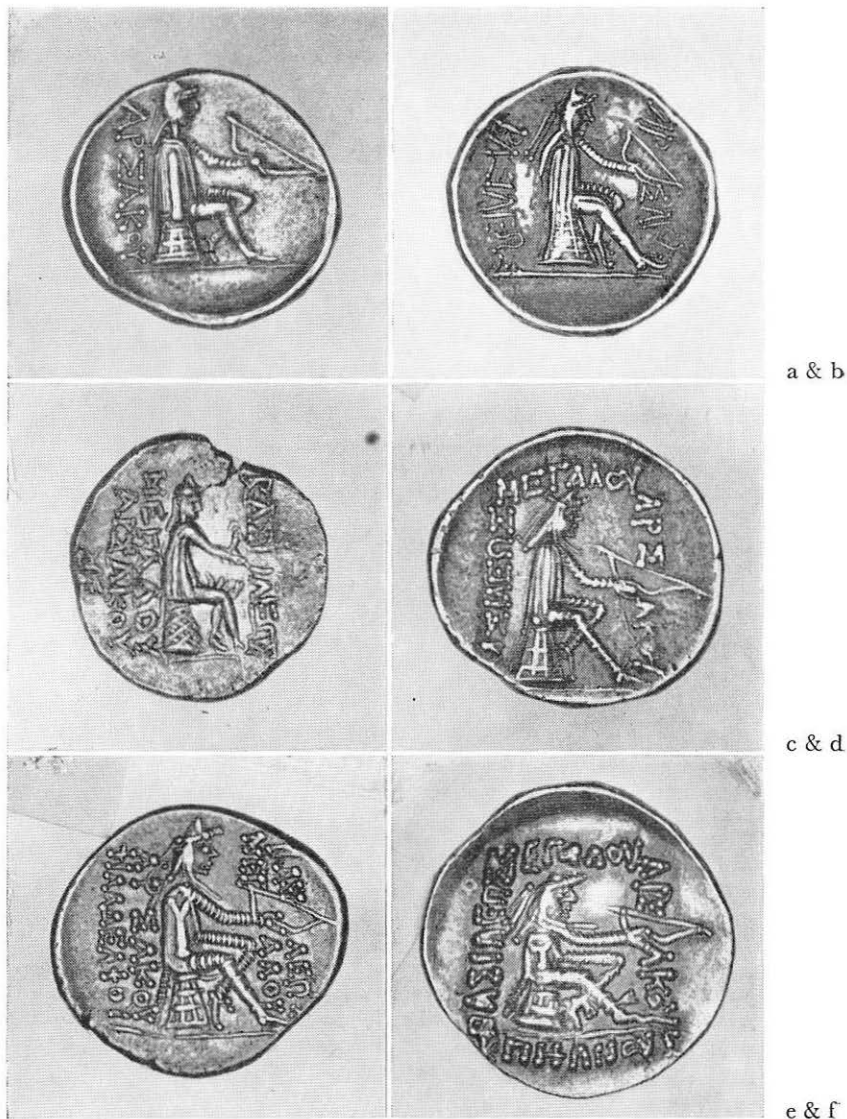
The initial Parthian drachms were struck by Arsaces I, the dynastic founder, in a modified adaptation of their Seleucid counterparts. The single legend reads *ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ*, the founder's name in the genitive case (Fig. 2a). The genitive case was normal for all of the drachm legends; it probably indicates that the coinage was minted in the name of the Arsacids, but not as their property. The name "Arsaces" subsequently became a throne name, like the Roman "Caesar," compounding the problem of attribution. The Parthians normally placed neither the monarchs' personal names nor the date on the drachms. Past cataloguers relied heavily on style in making their identifications (comparing drachm portraits with those on the dated tetradrachms). In recent years studies of the epigraphical changes on the drachms have provided a sounder chronological arrangement, which makes the letterform development so critical to the historian.<sup>8</sup> Stylistic comparisons between dies engraved in Seleucia and in the Iranian mints is too elusive an approach to the problem.



Figure 1. Three drachms of Parthian monarch Phraates III, c. 70–57 B.C. The obverses are from the same die, but the reverses all vary. The anchor behind the obverse portrait is a symbol of Elymais, where Phraates apparently served as sub-king prior to his ascension to the Arsacid throne.

NOTE: All of the coins illustrated with this article have been enlarged to approximately twice actual size.

Figure 2. Ten Parthian drachm reverses, illustrating the increasing number of titles and adjunct symbols and the problem of fitting these all onto the flan. Left to right from the top: (a) Arsaces II?, 211–191 B.C. (b) Priapatius?, 191–176 B.C. (c) Mithradates I, 171–138/37 B.C. (d) Mithradates I. (e) Artabanus I, 128/27–123 B.C. (f) Mithradates II, 123–88/87 B.C. (g) Sinatruces, 77–70 B.C. (h) Gotarzes I, 91–80 B.C. (i) Orodes I, 80–77 B.C. (j) Orodes II, 57–38 B.C.; note the adjunct anchor behind the archer.



The letterforms on the early Parthian drachms are standard Attic representations and compare with contemporary Seleucid ones. The early die-engravers for the Arsacid dynasty had been in the service of the Seleucids themselves. The first drachm legends are parallel with the axis of the coin, behind and before the seated archer, who is probably Arsaces I himself, seated in the guise of the Seleucid Apollo. The Parthians used imagery and titulary familiar to the Greeks. Certain early drachms even bear the epithet *ΘΕΟΥ* (“the Divine”)! A slightly later drachm issue (perhaps that of Arsaces’ brother Tiridates I) added to *ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ* the remarkable title *ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ* (“Autocrat”), which then disappeared forever from the Arsacid coinage.<sup>9</sup> The most common of the second titles to be added to the drachms was *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ* (“King”) (Fig. 2b). The title “King” was very much in vogue during the Hellenistic Age (as well as the title “Queen”). Later a third title, *ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ* (“Great”), was added, and in two different



arrangements (Figs. 2c & 2d) : one places the new line parallel with the other two and the second places it above the archer. Then a fourth title was added, also placed in two differing arrangements (Figs. 2e & 2f), one the parallel placement, and the other beneath the archer, creating a “box-like” arrangement that became the standard pattern, with the legends inscribed at right-angles to each other. Eventually a fifth, sixth, and finally a seventh legend became part of the normal drachm titulary (Figs. 2g, 2h, & 2i). The result was that the corners of the arrangement became too crowded for the size of the flan. Later die-engravers, personally ignorant of Greek, could not always tell where words ended and began at the corners, as some of their divisions reveal, and for the most part the letters could not all fit onto the coin. Many of the drachms then received adjunct symbols as well, pushing the legends out even further (note Fig. 2j with the adjunct anchor). There were various legend arrangements throughout the Parthian period, but the standard one was that seen in Figure 3. The most common of the seven legends read: (1a) *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ*, (1b) *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ*, (2) *ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ*, (3a) *ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ*, (3b) *ΔΙΚΑΙΟΥ*, (4a) *ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ*, and (4b) *ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ* (“King of Kings, Arsaces, the Beneficent, the Just, the Manifest, Friend of the Greeks”).

The problem of crowding all of the letters onto the drachms was compounded even further by engravers who cut excessively large letters for the size of the flan. Line 3a can barely be seen and the corners are all crowded. The letterforms in line 2 have already been greatly simplified.

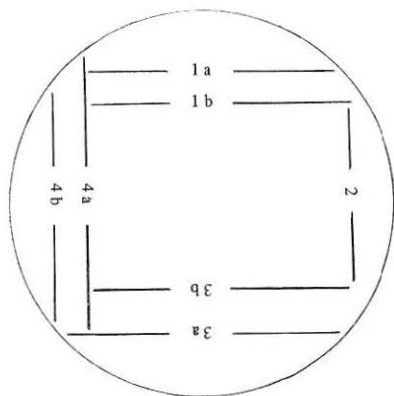


Figure 3. The normal word arrangement on the seven-legend drachms.



Figure 4. A Parthian drachm reverse (Vardanes I, A.D. 39-48) illustrating the engraving of excessively large letters for the size of the flan. Line 3a can barely be seen and the corners are all crowded. The letterforms in line 2 have already been greatly simplified.

tidy situation ; with rare exceptions no apparent orders were given to reduce the titulary or to abbreviate it, as the seven-line arrangement remained standard. Two other options remained open : (1) issue square drachms, as the Bactrians, Parthia's Greek-using neighbors to the East, occasionally did. The square shape conveniently lent itself to legends meeting at a 45-degree angle. Or: (2) arrange the legends in an arc, following the curvature of the drachm, as the Bactrians also did on certain issues. The second option was adopted for the Parthian drachms, but only on two very unusual issues (Figs. 5a & 5b). The first drachm is of king Phraataces and his queen-mother Musa. Musa had been an Italian slave-girl given to Parthian monarch Phraates IV by the emperor Augustus as a gesture of good will in the late first century B.C. The gift proved to be deadly, however, as Musa poisoned her consort and seized the throne for herself and their young son. A



Figure 5. Two Parthian drachms, obverses and reverses. (a) Phraataces and Musa, 2 B.C.–A.D. 4, *left*. (b) Vonones I, A.D. 7/8–12.

few years later mother and son were married—a custom acceptable in Magian tradition—and the act was commemorated by the issuance of a remarkable series of drachms (Fig. 5a). On the obverse, Phraataces is seen, with *no* titles, and on the reverse the tiaraed Musa, and the curved, abbreviated legend to read: *ΘΕΑΣ ΟΥΡΑΝΙΑΣ ΜΟΥΣΗΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ* (“The Divine and Heavenly Queen Musa”).<sup>10</sup> The second drachm (Fig. 5b) was issued by another son of Phraates IV, Vonones I, who had grown up and was educated in Rome. He acquired distinctive Roman mannerisms, and this caused the more conservative Arsacid nobles to support a rival claimant to the throne named Artabanus (II). An arced legend appears on the obverse of Vonones’ drachms, curving around his portrait, in the *Roman* manner. The Romans arced all of their legends on all of their denominations, and generally abbreviated them; e.g., the title *IMPERATOR* usually appears as *IMP.* on the Roman coinage. The only drachm issues of the Parthians to utilize curved or abbreviated legends during the classical period were minted under the authority of two monarchs who had grown up in Italy, where both were the fashion.<sup>11</sup> After Vonones’ passage from power, the traditional seven-line, “box-like” arrangement once again became the rule. As a result, for the balance of their history the Arsacid die-engravers had to virtually “pound a square peg into a round hole.” The only solution available now was to simplify the letterforms, and this is progressively what happened.

In the period 250–123 B.C., when the Parthian empire made its greatest territorial expansion, the Greek letterforms on the drachms remained almost constant. The drachms from this period in the *Quam* collection show variations only on alpha, with the crossbar within the alpha variously angled, lowered, and sometimes omitted altogether (Fig. 6, column 1). This constancy attests to the dominant Greek influence in the mints during a period of growth and solidification. The following period, from 123 to 91 B.C.,<sup>12</sup> a time of great Parthian power, displayed allusions to the supposed Achaemenid Persian heritage of the Arsacid dynasty. King Mithradates II, “the Great,” had himself proclaimed *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ* (“King of Kings”) on his drachms, the Greek translation of the Achaemenid title *Shahanshāh*.<sup>13</sup> The Seleucid omphalos beneath the archer on the reverse of his drachms was also replaced by the “golden throne” of the royal Arsacid house (Fig. 2g). Nevertheless, in spite of this

	250 - 123 BC	123 - 91 BC	91 - 57 BC	57 - 2 BC	2 BC 38 AD	38 - 77 AD	77 - 147 AD	147 - 227 AD
Α	ΑΔΔΔ	ΑΔΔ	ΑΑΔΔ	ΑΑ	ΑΛ	ΑΔΔ	ΑΛ	ΛΙ
Β	Β	Β	Β	Β	ΒΠ	Π	Π	ΠΙ
Γ	Γ	Γ	Γ	Γ	Γ	Γ	ΓΓ	ΓΓΖ
Δ	Δ	Δ	Δ	ΔΛ	Δ	Δ	ΔΔΔ	Λ
Ε	Ε	Ε	Ε	ΕΖ	ΕЄ	ΕЄΞΙ	ΙΙ	ΙΛΙ
Ζ								
Η		Η	Η	Η	Η	Η	Η	Η
Θ	Θ	Θ	ΘΒΠ	Θ				
Ι	Ι	Ι	Ι	Ι	Ι	Ι	Ι	Ι
Κ	Κ	Κ	Κ	Κ	ΚΝΧ	ΝΧΗ	ΝΧ+	Χ
Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	Λ	ΛΔ	Λ	Λ
Μ	Μ	Μ	ΜΠ	Μ				
Ν		Ν	Ν	ΝΗ	ΝΙΧ	ΝΙΧΗ	ΝΗ	ΝΗ
Ξ								
Ο	Ο	Ο•	Ο•	Ο•	ΟΠ	ΟΠ	Π	Π
Π	Π	Π	ΠΠ	Π	Π	Π	Π	Π
Ρ	Ρ	ΡΙ	ΡΙ	ΡΙ	ΡΙΙ	ΙΙ	ΓΙΙ	Ι
Σ	Σ	Σ	ΣΣΙ	ΣΙ	Σ	ΣΙ	Ι	Ι
Τ	Τ		ΤΙ	Τ	Τ	Τ	Τ	Τ
Υ	Υ	Υ	ΥΥ	ΥΥ	ΥΥ	ΥΥΔ	ΥΔΥ	ΥΥ
Φ	Φ	+ ΙΙ	+	+	+	+	+	Χ
Χ								
Ψ								
Ω	Ω	Ω	Ω	Ω	Ωω	Ω	Λ	Λ

Figure 6. Letterform development on the drachms in the Maurice Quam Collection.

apparent Iranian “nationalism,” the Hellenistic influence in the mints remained strong. The letterforms on the drachms from this period show only a few more variants (Fig. 6, column 2). Alpha offers the same, earlier variations; omicron is now also engraved as a dot or pellet; rho is occasionally seen as a single vertical line, without the hook; and phi becomes characteristically two intersecting lines, flaring slightly at the ends. The simplification process had begun.

In the period 91–57 B.C., variations become more common and more significant. In addition to the previous variants, theta, mu, and upsilon join the list, upsilon gradually losing its “tail” (Fig. 6, column 3). But more important are the changes in the letter sigma. The end of the reign of Mithradates II was accompanied by rebellion in the western states. One of the successful rebels was Gotarzes I (c. 91–80 B.C.), hailed as “Satrap of Satraps” on Mithradates’ Bisitun relief, but only as “Great King” on his drachms, and not “King of Kings” (Fig. 2h). The latter title had been ceded to Mithradates’ friend and ally, king Tigranes of Armenia. The traditional epithets on Gotarzes’ drachms retain the older form of sigma, but a series of military drachms, publicizing his victories in the East, bear a number of novel inscriptions with a different sigma. One of those novelties is *KATACTPATEIA* (“on campaign”), added to the other titulary on certain drachms (Fig. 2h, line 2a). Such novel communications utilize the newer, cursive sigma, C, while Σ is still seen in the traditional legends. Toward the end of this period sigma assumed yet another form, two horizontal lines and one connecting vertical line, anticipating a later era of rather block-like letterforms.

Greek letters and combinations of letters also came to be used as monograms on the drachms. Numismatists and historians have long speculated as to the identity of these symbols. The most common monogram of all—and the *only* one to appear on the later drachms—represents several variations on the letter alpha. This mark is now generally accepted as being the identifying symbol of Ecbatana, the capital of Media, after the initial alpha in Agamatana, the Hellenized Persian name. The alpha monogram assumed a number of experimental forms on the drachms before its standard representation was decided upon (Fig. 7, column 1). Two other contemporary monograms combine the letters rho-sigma and rho-gamma (Fig. 7, columns 2 & 3). The rho-sigma monogram, like the Ecbatana mark,

is also seen in variant, experimental forms. These monograms suggest the twin-cities of Rhagae-Arsacia. Rho and sigma are the first two consonants in Arsacia, while rho and gamma are the only two consonants in Rhagae.<sup>14</sup> One has to assume that the variant forms of the monograms precede the standard ones chronologically, although some overlapping would appear to have occurred. Another common monogram found on the drachms from this period combines the letters mu, iota, and theta, spelling out the first part of the name Mithradates, the name of two of the early great Parthian kings (Fig. 7, column 4). This particular monogram, apparently not of a city, perhaps denotes a mint officina mark.

The letterforms on the drachms minted in the period 57–2 B.C. (Fig. 6, column 4) vary little from the previous age, with the addition of a now rather frequent error: the reversal of the letter nu. Other than that no significant transformations occurred. However, as was mentioned earlier, there was a brief and dramatic exception to the rule during the brief reigns of Phraataces and Vonones I (period 2 B.C.–A.D. 12, note Figure 6, column 5, for the prominent exceptions in the letterforms). The “marriage” drachm of Phraataces and Musa in the Quam collection bears an almost totally blundered Greek legend, preventing its letters from being included in Figure 6. It does bear a legible monogram, however, the rho-gamma mark—but *reversed*—raising the question of where these dies were executed and by whom (Fig. 5a); the monogram is beneath Musa’s chin on the reverse side). The Greek on Vonones’ drachm (Fig. 5b) is well engraved, and as on the drachms of Musa, his personal name appears, on *both* obverse and reverse, and in the *nominative* case, not the usual

Α			
Α	ϱ		
Α	ρ→	ϱ	μϑ
Α	Σρ		
Α			
A	ρ+Σ	ρ+Γ	μ+ι+θ

Figure 7. Greek letters and combinations of letters used as monograms on drachm reverses, arranged in the apparent order of development. The bottom monograms are the standard, most common ones. These date from the time of Phraates III, c. 70–57 B.C.

Figure 8. Seven Parthian drachms from the second half of the Parthian epoch; b is an obverse, the others are reverses. These drachms illustrate later letterform development and simplification of form. Left to right from the top: (a) Artabanus II, A.D. 12-38. (b) Volagases I, A.D. 50-77; note pahlavi letters behind head. (c) Volagases III, A.D. 111-147. (d) Mithradates IV, A.D. 130-147; note line 1a, pahlavi name and title. (e) "unknown king," c. A.D. 140. (f) Volagases IV, A.D. 147-192, class 1; engraved by same man who executed d. (g) Volagases IV, class 2.



genitive. Another of the several unique features of his drachms is the fact that neither the traditional imagery nor the title “Arsaces” appear. He is not called “King Arsaces,” but rather “King Vonones” on the obverse, and “King Vonones, Victor over Artabanus,” on the reverse, with the archer replaced by Nike. His legends are all novel and utilize novel letterforms. The eta and sigma are cursive, rather than squared, and the omega appears in its only significantly different form on the drachms, also cursive in nature. The nu is reversed, and the beta assumes the form of a square, with the engraver’s punchmarks at all four corners. As on the drachms of Gotarzes I the novel legends were used to innovate the newer letterforms. The cursive forms, however, did not persist, yielding to simple combinations of straight lines.

The coins of Vonones’ rival and ultimate successor Artabanus II revert to the imagery and titulary of the pre-Roman intrusion. On his final tetradrachms Artabanus is depicted *on horseback*, receiving a palm branch from the Tyche of Seleucia. Vonones had no love of riding or the hunt, traditional Arsacid pastimes. Artabanus’ late tetradrachms also conspicuously lack the epithet *ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ*, revealing the anti-western sympathies of the new regime and the restoration of the earlier ideology. The traditional seven legends were returned to the drachms under Artabanus (Fig. 8a) and the degenerate nature of the Greek also reflects a break with the earlier philhellenic tradition. The beta in lines 1a and 1b is engraved as a square, the kappa in 2 appears as a nu, the rho in 3a is seen as either two connecting



lines or as a vertical line, and the nu in 4b appears as a chi. The engravers were now only imitating what they saw on earlier drachms, and in the process they progressively simplified the letterforms and began gradually to reduce the length and number of the legends as well. The government, obviously concerned about imagery and occasionally about titulary, lacked concern about the quality of the Greek, leaving the engravers to their own devices. The Greeks were not being catered to as in the past, but as will be seen, the words on the drachms retained their *meaning* if not their correct spelling. It should be noted, too, that the quality of engraving on the tetradrachms remained relatively good, indicating the persistent Hellenistic influence in Seleucia, a city that would soon become restive and openly rebellious. Early in his reign King Vardanes I laid siege to Seleucia, and in A.D. 40/41 the royalists in that city overthrew the popular party and welcomed the Arsacid monarch.<sup>15</sup> After the reign of Vardanes the alpha, or "Ecbatana" monogram, became the sole emblem to appear as an identifying mark on the drachms. It certainly does not signify a single mint city; it apparently became a symbol of state, after Parthia's major Iranian city.

If one were to speak of a turning-point in the history of Parthian civilization, it would have to be the reign of Volagases I (A.D. 50-77). This was a period which witnessed a genuine re-birth of elements of Iranian nationalism. Allusions to Hellenism virtually disappeared from the coinage, and for the first time the fire altar of Zoroastrianism was used as a reverse type on the copper. Volagasias, a new city, was founded in Babylonia to rival Seleucia as a commercial center, and other cities were now known by their native names and not their Seleucid ones, such as Susa in Elymais, which had been known since the early Hellenistic age as "Seleucia-on-the-Eulaeus." Apparently all of the scattered remains of the manuscript or oral traditions of the *Avesta* were ordered collected under Volagases, and for the first time since the reign of founder Arsaces I, Aramaic letters supplemented the Greek on the drachms (Fig. 8b). The letters waw-lamed, *wl*, for "Vol"—"Volagases," appear behind his portrait on the obverse. In the past the appearance of personal names in Greek on the drachms indicated a joint rule or a contended throne, when the claimants found it necessary to specify which "Arsaces" was issuing the coinage. Perhaps the "Vol" on these drachms serves a similar purpose. Tacitus mentions a son of Volagases named Vardanes rebelling

against his father early in his reign (*Annals*, xiii, 7, 2). In any event, the Greeks had had their day, as the coins indicate.

The following period, A.D. 77–147 (Fig. 6, column 7), was characterized by internal strife, dynastic rivalries and renewed efforts by Rome to conquer Parthia. The coinage bears witness to this confused age. For 25 years after A.D. 97 no tetradrachms were struck at Seleucia and a number of pretenders to the throne minted drachms of varying quality. In addition to a further simplification of the Greek letterforms, two major epigraphical innovations appeared during this period, one logical and one inexplicable. The latter was the appearance of a *dot* beneath the gamma in line 3a (Fig. 8c), which became a regular addition on all subsequent drachms. Its purpose cannot be explained. The former was the placement of the full name and title of the king, *in Pahlavi*, on the reverse of the drachms. Beginning *c.* A.D. 130 a series of drachms appeared with the legend MTRDT MLK', "King Mithradates," replacing line 1a of the titulary (Fig. 8d). Previously only abbreviations of monarchic names had been engraved in Pahlavi on the drachms. This mysterious king is known *only* from his coins; no literary sources mention him, making these coins invaluable to the historian. Since he issued no tetradrachms, his rule was apparently effective only in the eastern reaches of the empire. His name and portrait alone survive as his legacy to posterity. Because of the similarity in portraiture and style, Wroth assigned two other classes of drachms, *without* Pahlavi, to Mithradates (IV).<sup>16</sup> All depict a king with a long, pointed beard on the obverse, but there are prominent epigraphical discrepancies on the reverses which distinctly separate the three classes chronologically. The spelling on one of the classes (Fig. 8c) is still fairly accurate, far more so than on the drachms of Mithradates IV (in addition to the conspicuous absence of Pahlavi). It is clearly an earlier issue and assigned by Sellwood to Volagases III (A.D. 111–147).<sup>17</sup> The other class (Fig. 8e) is much cruder in style and execution, and not only lacks Pahlavi, but the throne name "Arsaces" as well. The issuer can only be labelled as "unknown king," living late in the reign of Mithradates IV. Legends 4a and 5a on these three classes of drachms illustrate the epigraphical differences most clearly (Fig. 9).

Letterform analysis reveals that the final drachms of Mithradates IV were engraved by the same man who executed the initial drachm dies for Volagases IV, fixing the death or passage from power of

Mithradates in A.D. 147, the year Volagases ascended the Arsacid throne (his tetradrachms are dated). Only the personal names in Pahlavi differ on these drachms (Figs. 8d & 8f). The execution of the Greek is identical, including the unusual representation of lines 4a and 4b, identifying the distinct craftsmanship of this anonymous engraver. The reign of Volagases IV commenced the final period in the Parthian epoch, according to our chronological arrangement, and it marked the conclusion of the process of letterform simplification. The drachms of Volagases can be divided into two classes on the basis of epigraphical derivations: contrast his early drachms (Fig. 8f) and later drachms (Fig. 8g). On his later drachms legends 2, 3a and 3b cannot be seen at all; the beta appears as a single vertical line and the gamma in 3b is reversed. Six Greek letters in this period were often represented as vertical lines, only one of the reasons why word division is problematic in dealing with the late drachms. Simplified letterforms and crowding at the corners make easy formulae in dividing the words almost impossible. However, carefully tracing the pattern of letterform development provides a key aid in making the divisions. To illustrate: Figure 10a represents the normal appearance of legends 1b and 2 on the drachms of Mithradates IV. Wroth made the division as shown in Figure 10b, terminating 1b with the epsilon.<sup>18</sup> However, note Figure 10c which depicts the same lines on the drachms of the "unknown king" (Fig. 8e); the termination of 1b is not in doubt since there is *no* 2 legend. It has been replaced by an

Figure 9. Lines 4a and 4b on drachms of Volagases III, A.D. 111-147; Mithradates IV, c. A.D. 130-147; and an Unknown King, c. A.D. 140.

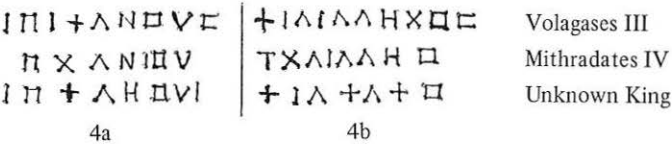


Figure 10. Lines 1b and 2 on the drachms of the mid-second century A.D.



horizontal line. The engraver obviously intended the division shown in Figure 10d as the correct reading, ending with the letter omega (now appearing as a lambda). Nevertheless, Wroth terminated  $\text{rb}$  on all successive drachms in his catalog with the epsilon, and placed the omega as the first “letter” in line 2. Wroth and other early cataloguers paid more attention to portrait style and stylistic differences than to letterform development, which helps account for the fact that their attributions differ so greatly.

The drachms of the “unknown king” were apparently struck in the same mint or mints which issued the drachms of Volagases III, also lacking Pahlavi inscriptions. Western Iran was no doubt the region of origin. All of the late kings, from Volagases IV to the end, had their full names engraved in Pahlavi on the drachms, a precious aid to the identification of these men!

Figure 11. Four Parthian drachms from the final period (all reverses), illustrating the final simplification of the letterforms. Left to right: (a) Volagases V, A.D. 191–207/08. (b) Osroes II, *c.* A.D. 190; note lack of line 2, replaced by horizontal line as on Figure 8e. (c) Volagases VI, A.D. 208–222/23. (d) Artabanus IV, 213–277(?).



The most degenerate of all the late Greek letterforms are contained on the drachms of Volagases V, who acceded the Arsacid throne via revolution in A.D. 192. He apparently was from Elymais, where the anti-Hellenistic reaction began. His hair style on the obverse is Elymaid, and only vestiges of earlier legends remain (Fig. 11a). However, clear evidence that the legends still possessed meaning can be seen on the drachms of a pretender to the throne who minted coins c. A.D. 190, at approximately the same time Volagases V was struggling for the throne. As on the drachms of the "unknown king" the dynastic name "Arsaces" is deleted on the silver of Osroes II, having been replaced by an horizontal line (Fig. 11b). The omission of the most common title to have appeared in the history of the Parthian drachms cannot have been accidental. The name Osroes is South-Iranian, the area where the revolution which eventually swept the Arsacids from power began. As in the case of the "unknown king," Osroes was a non-Arsacid who issued no tetradrachms and is known to history only from his coins.

Two issues of drachms remain, and they represent the ultimate simplification of the letterforms and the legends. On the drachms of Volagases VI and Artabanus IV (Figs. 11c & 11d) most of what remains of the legends can be seen. The Greek portion has been reduced to four lines, as on the earlier drachms of Vonones I and the initial Parthian kings. However, the only word that still looks familiar is  $\text{IB}$ ; <sup>19</sup> the others have been greatly simplified in form. On Volagases' drachm the beta in  $\text{IB}$  is engraved as a vertical line, as are the sigma

$\text{B A } \Sigma \text{ I } \Lambda \text{ E } \Omega \Sigma$

$\text{B A } \square \text{ I } \Lambda \text{ E } \Omega \square$

$\square \text{ A } \square \text{ I } \Lambda \text{ E } \Upsilon \square$

$\square \Lambda \text{ I I } \Lambda \text{ F } \Lambda \text{ N}$

$\square \Lambda \text{ I I } \Lambda \text{ F } \Lambda \text{ H}$

$\text{I } \Lambda \text{ I I } \Lambda \text{ F } \Lambda$

$\text{I } \Lambda \text{ I I } \Lambda \text{ L}$

Figure 12. Variant letterforms in the words  $\text{BAΣIAEΩΣ}$  and  $\text{BAΣIAEΩN}$  between c. 250 B.C.–c. A.D. 227 on the Parthian drachms. The word  $\text{BAΣIAEΩΣ}$  ceased to be placed on the drachms c. A.D. 140.

and of course the iota, and the terminating letter is now eta, which appears as L. The drachm of Artabanus IV is similar, although the quality of execution is somewhat more striking than that seen on its immediate predecessors. It is somewhat ironic that on the eve of their overthrow by the Sasanians the Arsacid engravers re-discovered simplification of form and design, a legacy they bequeathed to their successors. One may not marvel at the artistry of the final Parthian drachms, but assuming that the Greek legends still possessed meaning, the engravers were certainly on the right track.

1. Seleucia was excavated by the University of Michigan and the coins from the site are now in the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology in Ann Arbor; R. H. McDowell, *Coins from Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor, 1935). A more recent analysis of the Seleucia coinage is contained in Georges Le Rider's *Suse sous les Séleucides à les Parthes. Mémoires de la mission archeologique en Iran*, Vol. 38 (Paris, 1965).
2. The Russians have done extensive archaeological work in that area; see I. M. Dyakonov and V. A. Livšits, *Dokumenty iz Nisy*, for a discussion of early Parthian epigraphy.
3. The early date for the beginning of the Parthian coinage has been revived only since 1968, with the discovery of a major drachm hoard in Iran; M. T. Abgarians and D. G. Sellwood, "A Hoard of Early Parthian Drachms," *Numismatic Chronicle*, 7th Series, XI (1971), 103-119. Prior to the appearance of the hoard most had assumed, following E. T. Newell, that the Parthians had neither the means nor the resources to mint coins before the second quarter of the second century B.C. Newell's study is still an excellent one, however, and most of his personal collection was bequeathed to the American Numismatic Society in New York City; E. T. Newell, "The Coinage of the Parthians," *A Survey of Persian Art*, A. U. Pope, ed., I (Oxford, 1938), 475-492. Newell also reviewed McDowell's book on the coins from Seleucia in the *American Journal of Archaeology*, XLI (1937), 515-516.
4. The drachms used to illustrate this article are all from the Maurice Quam collection. Appreciation is here expressed to Joel L. Malter, editor of the *Journal of Numismatic Fine Arts*, for permission to use the photographs. Mr. Quam assembled the collection while living in Iran, and this writer catalogued it as part of his doctoral dissertation. There are certain rare drachms not in the collection, but it is most representative of the Parthian series as a whole.
5. This was true as late as 1965, when the collection of the Danish National Museum was published using modern Greek miniscules and a frequent reference to "barbarian letterforms" for the legends; *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum: Parthia and India*, compiled by Anne Jacobsen and Otto Mørkholm (Copenhagen, 1965). Warwick Wroth, who catalogued the massive British Museum collection, noted variations on the standard letterforms, but did not discuss their significance; W. Wroth, *Catalog of the Coins of Parthia in the British Museum* (London, 1903). The earliest study of the letterforms themselves was Jacques de Morgan's "Étude sur la décadence de l'écriture grecque dans l'empire Perse sous les Arsacides," in the *Revue Archeologique* (1912), pp. 1-31. De Morgan did not have the benefit of photo-

graphs to illustrate his article. In recent years a splendid study on late letterform development was published by D. G. Sellwood, who has worked extensively with the British Museum collection: "A Die-engraver Sequence for Later Parthian Drachms," *Numismatic Chronicle*, 7th Series, VII (1967), 13-28.

6. Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia, Part I: the Parthian Period* (Leiden, 1965). The Jews looked upon the tolerant Parthians as protectors against the hated Romans.

7. A. H. M. Jones contends that the Parthians distrusted the Greek cities and chose to replace them with their own fortresses; he adds that the Greeks welcomed the Romans as protectors of Hellenism. A. H. M. Jones, *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (Oxford, 1937), p. 219.

8. See the reference to Sellwood's article in footnote 5. In addition to his numerous articles on Parthian numismatics, Sellwood has also compiled on a single sheet a chronological arrangement of all the principal drachms and tetradrachms in the Parthian series, published by Joel L. Malter and Co., Encino, California, 1972. With certain exceptions, Sellwood's arrangement has been followed here.

9. Abgarians and Sellwood, p. 104. There are no examples of the 1968 hoard drachms in the Quam collection.

10. Chinese sources say concerning the Parthian coinage: "They also make coins of silver, which have the king's face on the obverse, and the face of his consort on the reverse. When the king dies, they cast new coins" (*Ch'ien-han-shu*, ch. 96a. Written c. A.D.90). Perhaps these were the coins seen. Recent studies indicate that the Chinese knew much more about the Parthians than did the Romans. See B. P. Lozinski, *The Original Homeland of the Parthians* (S'Gravenhage, 1959).

11. The reverse legends on Vonones' drachms retain the "box-like" arrangement, but have been reduced to *four* and are completely visible.

12. The chronological divisions on the chart in Figure 6 are based on breaks in the Arsacid regnal history. Rather than place *circa* in front of most of them, it should be noted that these dates are still largely tentative.

13. Russian excavations reveal that a royal vineyard at Nisa, burial place of the early Parthian kings southeast of the Caspian Sea, was called *Artaxšarakan*, substantiating the belief in later generations that Arsaces I was a descendant of Persian monarch Artaxerxes II. Dyakonov and Livšits, p. 20.

14. Sellwood originally suggested Rhagae-Arsacia, but his assignments are the opposite of those offered here; i.e., he assigns rho-sigma to Rhagae and rho-gamma to Arsacia. D. G. Sellwood, "The Parthian Coins of Gotarzes I, Orodes I, and Sinatruces," *Numismatic Chronicle*, 7th Series, II (1962), 86 ff.; and D. G. Sellwood, "Wroth's Unknown Parthian King," *Numismatic Chronicle*, 7th Series, V (1965), 126.

15. The numismatic evidence describes the nature of the revolt: in its early years the popular party minted a series of low quality coppers bearing the *name* of the city, and a bull as the reverse type. In 40/41 a new series appeared, of fine quality, *without* the city name and with Nike as the reverse type. Obviously the royalists had gained control, and their coinage continued until the new issues of Vardanes appeared in 42. McDowell, pp. 225-226.

16. Wroth, pp. 217-223, plate XXXIII.

17. Sellwood, "A Die-engraver Sequence . . .," pp. 21-24.

18. Wroth, p. 219, note 2.

19. Note Figure 12, an evolution of the words *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ* and *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ* from the Hellenistic Age to the end.