THE WORLD BETWEEN EMPIRES

A PICTURE ALBUM

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The World between Empires: A Picture Album presents an introduction to the art and culture of the Middle East in the years 100 B.C.–A.D. 250, a time marked by the struggle for control by the Roman and Parthian Empires. Adapted from the exhibition catalogue, this picture album illustrates the cultural histories of the cities along the great incense and silk routes that connected southwestern Arabia, Nabataea, Judaea, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Twenty-eight carefully selected objects and an informative text provide a fascinating primer to the themes discussed in the catalogue and exhibition. This beautifully illustrated album will inspire reflection about ancient empires long after the reader has visited the galleries.

48 PAGES; 35 ILLUSTRATIONS

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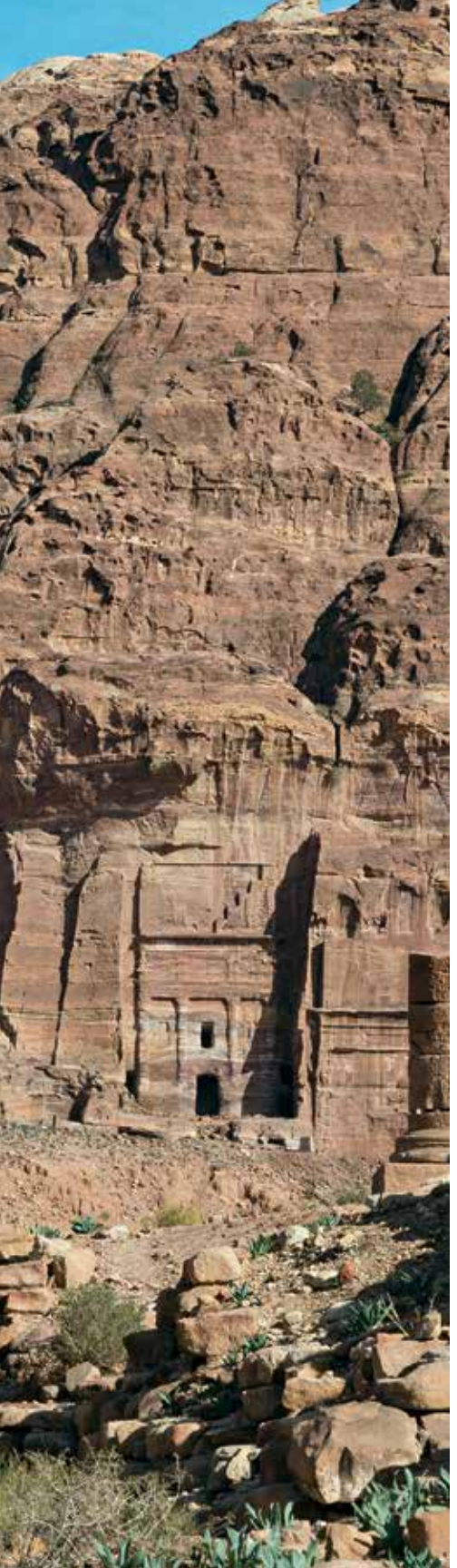
THE MET

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK



From the first century B.C. through the middle of the third century A.D., the political map of the Middle East was defined by two superpowers. The Roman Empire, with its power base in the Mediterranean, and the Parthian Empire, which controlled Iran and much of Central Asia, contested the territories and trade routes of Arabia, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Over several centuries, the two empires alternated between states of diplomatic standoff and outright war with one another, and military and political fortunes were won and lost as the border between them moved back and forth. Yet the Middle East was a region distinct from both Rome and Iran, and its inhabitants had far more in common with one another than with people living elsewhere in either empire.

They spoke a variety of related Semitic languages, as well as Greek; worshipped images of their local and regional gods and dedicated offerings to them in temples that were comparable in form to one another; and worked along the same trade routes and handled the same commodities, since their commercial networks were interdependent. They traveled to one another's cities and often found environments not very different from their own. These people formed a constellation of local communities negotiating their distinctive identities in a world of great imperial powers.

The World between Empires follows a journey through a geographic area that formed the edge of the Parthian and Roman Empires but was central to the political, economic, religious, and cultural life of both. In terms of modern states, this journey begins in Yemen, continues north across Saudi Arabia to Jordan, through Israel and the Palestinian territories, to Lebanon, east across Syria, and finally south and east through Iraq. The kingdoms of ancient southwestern Arabia are the starting point: although they lay outside the boundaries of either Roman or Parthian imperial control, these kingdoms formed the linchpin of the spice and incense trade that defined commerce across the region. Nabataea, the destination of many of the Arabian caravans, was a major commercial power that established far-reaching connections from its capital at Petra. Nabataean art included dramatic Hellenistic imagery alongside stylized and aniconic Arabian forms, sometimes within a single building, and Nabataeans identified their own local gods, such as Dushara and al-'Uzza, with Graeco-Roman equivalents such as Zeus and Aphrodite.

In neighboring Judaea, the predominantly Jewish population struggled for political independence and religious freedom against the constraints of Roman rule. One source of tension was the cult of the divine Roman emperor, which for polytheists did not compromise existing religious practice, since the new cult could simply be added

to the pantheon, but for monotheists created a fundamental conflict. The leaders of rebellions against Rome minted coins that stressed the distinctive Jewish identity of Judaea and particularly Jerusalem. Following the largest of these rebellions, the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132–135, the Roman emperor Hadrian (reigned 117–138) violently expelled the Jewish population from Jerusalem.

Sidon and Tyre, along with other cities along the Phoenician coast, were busy ports that connected the trade routes of the Middle East with those that crossed the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, these cities were major centers of craft production: Sidon was famed as the home of the greatest glassworkers of the age, most notably Ennion. In the Beqaa Valley at Heliopolis-Baalbek, the colossal sanctuary devoted to the cult of Jupiter Heliopolitanus, a god who combined divine features from multiple Roman and Middle Eastern religious traditions, attracted worshippers from the region and beyond; the Roman emperor Trajan (reigned 98–117) famously

received a prediction of his death from the sanctuary's oracle.

To the east in the Syrian Desert, the prominent oasis city of Palmyra played a critical role at the western end of routes that for the first time connected the region to China, forming what would become the early Silk Road. The city profited enormously from levying tariffs on products in return for the protection of caravans by units of mounted Palmyrene archers. Immense prosperity spurred its urban development, and Palmyra's wealth was reflected in its lavish temples, tombs, and sculptures.

Farther east, on the banks of the Euphrates River that frequently formed the border between the two empires, the settlement of Dura-Europos underwent a transformation from a Parthian regional capital into a Roman military frontier outpost, characterized by religious and cultural diversity, while in northern Mesopotamia, the Parthian fortress city of Hatra was both a bulwark in the Parthian confrontation with Rome and one of the greatest religious centers of its day. In southern Mesopotamia, cities and temples that were thousands

of years old were transformed and new cities were founded, including the Parthian capital Ctesiphon, reflecting the commercial and political realignments of the age. During this period the last Babylonian cuneiform tablets were produced, and the ability to read cuneiform was lost.

We can gain a sense of this world and its inhabitants through art and architecture. The sculptures, paintings, and buildings created in the Middle East during this period reflect the identities of their commissioners and makers and are often powerful and complex

expressions of intersecting cultural and religious influences, drawing upon Hellenistic, Roman, Arabian, Syrian, Mesopotamian, and Iranian traditions. Their connections and idiosyncrasies illuminate the dynamics that played out between large international networks and local identities, as people chose how to represent themselves, their families, their gods, and their cities. While this art is in many ways incredibly eclectic and its particular meanings were often highly locally specific, there are important characteristics and themes that reflect strong links between people across the region. Their representations of divinities, their temples and sanctuaries, and their tombs and funerary monuments all have features that correspond with one another even as they vary in their designs and details, attesting to a common underlying religious and cultural background.

BETWEEN ROME AND PARTHIA

Throughout the long period under consideration here, the geopolitical backdrop to life across the region was the struggle between the Roman and Parthian Empires to maintain control over the Middle East and its lucrative trade routes. For the Romans, strategic dominance in the Middle East was key to amassing immense wealth during the late Republic and the imperial period (Principate). The rewards were great, but in seeking them Roman generals and emperors regularly underestimated the power of the Parthian kings and their armies.

The ancient literary sources on the Roman-Parthian wars reflect a Roman bias owing to the dominance of accounts written by Roman historians and information gleaned from Greek and Latin inscriptions; ancient Iranian sources for the Parthians were largely obliterated from the historical record by the dynasty that eventually supplanted them, the Sasanians.

The Parthians' origin lay in a Central Asian seminomadic confederacy called the Parni. The name Parthian reflects the Parni's successful invasion in the mid-third century B.C. of Parthia and Hyrcania, which were Seleucid-held regions of northeastern Iran near the Caspian Sea. The empire and its ruling dynasty are also known as Arsacid after Arsaces I (reigned ca. 247–211 B.C.), the leader who achieved these conquests and whose name became a royal title used by all subsequent kings. Dramatic expansion occurred in the second century B.C. as the Parthian rulers Mithradates I (reigned ca. 171–138 B.C.) and Mithradates II (reigned ca. 123–88 B.C.) seized control of Iran and Mesopotamia from the Seleucids. With the Seleucid Empire greatly weakened, Parthia became the major power to Rome's east.

After the arrival of the Roman general Pompey the Great in Antioch in 64 B.C., the remaining parts of the Seleucid Empire were absorbed into the Roman province of Syria, and Judaea was added as a client kingdom the following year. As the Parthian and Roman Empires came into closer

proximity they also came into conflict, and the two clashed frequently, with the official political border shifting east and west, though often it was set at the Euphrates River. In a famous early encounter between the two empires, a Roman army crossed the Euphrates in 53 B.C., only to suffer a costly defeat to Parthian cavalry at the Battle of Carrhae. The Roman infantry was not prepared to deal with the combination of light and heavy cavalry favored by the Parthians, and the Roman force was destroyed. Subsequent Roman campaigns also fared badly, and not until the reign of the emperor Augustus (reigned 27 B.C.–A.D. 14) was Rome able to negotiate a satisfactory peace. Later, in the second century A.D., Roman armies would repeatedly invade Mesopotamia, though these occupations were always short-lived. The emperor Trajan (reigned 98–117) expanded the Roman Empire to its maximum extent, but his occupation of Mesopotamia was quickly reversed by his successor, Hadrian (reigned 117–138).

Artistic traditions in this imperial setting rarely corresponded neatly to political entities, least of all when these entities were huge empires. It is not the case that "Roman" art featured one set of characteristics while "Parthian" art featured another—the reality is inevitably more nuanced. The term "Roman" sometimes skews the frame of reference too much toward the art of Rome and Italy to the detriment of other influences at play, while a tendency to use Syrian and Mesopotamian examples to define "Parthian art" has probably done a disservice both to the special characteristics of those examples and to the cultural breadth of the Parthian Empire. Rather than seeking a set of characteristics against which to define art as more or less "Roman" or "Parthian," the key question becomes how to understand diversity and localization within empires. Ancient identities, often expressed in art, were as complicated as their modern counterparts. They operated on multiple levels—regional and local, political and religious, and often personal—and featured intersecting and sometimes contradictory layers.

A CONNECTED WORLD: COMMODITIES AND TRADE

Three major trade networks defined the commercial life of the Middle East during the Roman and Parthian period: spice and incense caravan routes running north through Arabia; a set of maritime connections that brought both Arabia and Mesopotamia into Indian Ocean trade; and land routes running east across Syria and Mesopotamia, on through the Zagros Mountains, and then farther east across Iran and Central Asia until finally connecting with China—the early Silk Road. The three systems collectively linked much of the ancient world, and it was in the Middle East that all three came together.

The network now known as the spice or incense road began in southwestern Arabia. Most people in the Roman and Parthian Empires

would have known very little about this region: its kingdoms lay across an almost impassable desert. Yet it was the source of some of the most valuable commodities of the ancient world. The most important of these was frankincense, the aromatic resin burned in temples, palaces, and private homes, at feasts and funerals, by subjects of Rome, those of Parthia, and everyone between. Myrrh, an even more costly aromatic resin that was used in medicine and perfume, was also gathered here. Prior to the Roman period classical sources include only occasional mentions of southwestern Arabia, and the fact that Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* gives a detailed and accurate description of the harvesting of frankincense and the typical itinerary of a caravan is testament to the increased importance of this distant land in the Roman mind. The frankincense tree requires specific environmental conditions to thrive, and mountainous areas of the southern Arabian Peninsula, watered by mists generated ultimately by the Indian monsoon, were the ideal environment. Frankincense was exported using camel caravans organized by the southwestern Arabian kingdoms. The caravans moved along carefully agreed-upon routes, paying taxes for safe passage at each station as they traveled north on the western side of the Arabian Peninsula. There were multiple routes, but the principle was simple: the caravans could move safely if the route was profitable for all who lived along it.

The caravans from southwestern Arabia also carried imported goods that arrived by sea at Aden and other ports. The Indian Ocean routes brought commodities, including textiles, precious and semiprecious stones, and metals, to the Middle East and Mediterranean. Sea routes also terminated at the Roman ports of Berenike and Myos Hormos on the Red Sea coast of Egypt, the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome on the Arabian side of the Red Sea, and the Mesopotamian port of Charax Spasinou at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Beyond these links, each port represented connections to further trade networks, as evidenced

by rubies found in Mesopotamia that probably originate as far afield as present-day Myanmar.

Cities in Syria and Mesopotamia formed the western end of the emerging Silk Road. In reality, the "road" was an amalgam of many routes that formed a network stretching from the Middle East to China. The routes themselves varied, but all had to pass through multiple territories of the Parthian Empire. Most had been used since prehistory, but their integration and viability as a global trade network were far more recent, in part a product of much of Iran and Central Asia being controlled by a series of single empires: first that of the Achaemenids (6th–4th century B.C.), then the Seleucids (4th–2nd century B.C.), then the Parthians (2nd century B.C.–3rd century A.D.). However, only during the Parthian period does the term "Silk Road" first become applicable, since it was Parthia that established formal connections with Han dynasty China and created the conditions for trade in commodities—including, among other goods, silk—from East Asia to the Mediterranean. Palmyra, a city located at an oasis in the Syrian Desert, became both enormously wealthy and politically powerful through its position at the western end of this vast network.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Across the region, worshippers were devoted both to deities with supraregional significance and to local gods attached specifically to their villages and cities. Goddesses of fertility, powerful hero-gods, and weather and storm gods were venerated in various versions and guises, indicative of the enduring significance of multiple older Middle Eastern religious traditions as well as Hellenistic and Roman influence. These substantial survivals from earlier periods coexisted with dramatic changes visible in the creation of new divinities. Deities linked closely to a given place and those with broader appeal reveal an incredible mixture of hyperlocalized traditions and widespread trends. Cult images of gods

and goddesses in sculpture and wall paintings from shrines and temples across the region, and votive dedications of their images that worshippers presented as gifts to them, together reveal this complicated but in some ways consistent picture. Patterns emerge from the great diversity of local cults and divine names, both in the types of deities worshipped and the forms their representations took.

This diverse religious environment also included monotheists. In Judaea, a remarkable object discovered in 2009 and known as the Magdala Stone shows imagery of the Temple of Jerusalem in a synagogue of the first century A.D. Other objects from Judaea come from rebellions against Roman imperial dominance. Coins from these rebellions express Jewish religious and cultural identity, while other objects such as bronze jugs from the Cave of Letters whose figural decoration has been erased were personal possessions of the rebels during the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132–135. In Syria, Dura-Europos provides extraordinary evidence for how Judaism as well as Christianity were integrated within a frontier town in the third century. The synagogue and Christian building at Dura-Europos were both constructed within private houses in the vicinity of religious buildings devoted to the worship of numerous other gods, including the Syrian goddess Atargatis and the storm god Hadad. The modern discovery of wall paintings in the synagogue showed that some ancient synagogues could include figural depictions of biblical narratives, while wall paintings in the baptistery of the Christian building include the earliest known images of Jesus.

One striking characteristic of religious architecture across the region was the construction of enormous enclosures around major temples, the largest of which took up a significant portion of their cities. Those at Petra, Gerasa, Jerusalem, Heliopolis-Baalbek, Palmyra, and Hatra are some of the more prominent examples. There is abundant archaeological evidence attesting to their use for large festivals: at Palmyra, small tesserae with religious imagery were probably used as banquet

invitations or entrance tokens and have been found in great numbers at multiple sanctuaries.

ARTISTIC AND ARCHITECTURAL LEGACIES

The artistic and cultural interchange that characterized the Middle East during this period is critical to understanding the differences between the visual culture of the ancient world and that of Late Antiquity and the medieval period. Artistic conventions, architectural innovations, and religious practices of the Parthian and Roman Middle East had a profound impact on the succeeding Byzantine, Sasanian, and early Islamic empires.

The increasing ubiquity of Dionysiac imagery of vines, leaves, animals, and feasting in the decorative arts across the Middle East and Central Asia is a change that had already begun with the conquests of Alexander in the late fourth century B.C., and the iconography became associated with elite luxury banqueting vessels. By the end of the Roman and Parthian period Dionysiac imagery, along with many standard forms of vessels, had spread across the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Central Asia. Byzantine and

Sasanian silver and glass have much in common, and these similarities owe a great deal to the Middle East in its Roman and Parthian phases.

While the conventions of Graeco-Roman sculpture and painting became integral parts of the Syro-Mesopotamian, Iranian, and Central Asian repertoire during the Seleucid and Parthian periods, "Parthian" conventions permeated later Roman art. More stylized depictions, with relatively schematic features, short beards, and simple incised eyes began to predominate in the portraits of the soldier emperors of the third century, and by the late third century portraits of the tetrarchs did not feature the naturalistic details that had been standard in portraits of previous generations of Roman emperors.

By the early fourth century, portraits of Constantine consciously borrowed iconographic details such as "comma-shaped" locks of hair from images of Augustus and Trajan, but their frontality, over-lifesize, upward-facing eyes, and stylized features also had much in common with the portraiture of the region in this period. Byzantine art, directly or indirectly, was greatly shaped by the visual culture of the region in this period. This influence is also felt in the art of medieval western Europe, where the human, animal, and plant imagery incorporated in the architectural decoration of churches recalls the architectural ornament of the Roman and Parthian Middle East. Much Romanesque sculpture is visibly the descendant of Parthian as well as Roman models, from the busts and "masks" that adorned the walls of temples at Hatra to the animal and plant motifs of arches and capitals.

Some further signs of continuity come in the transformation of cult images in particular. Monotheism would progressively end the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern polytheist traditions of divine cult statues, reliefs, and paintings. Most importantly, the deity no longer inhabited a statue, although some aspects of the representation of Christ and the saints have roots in polytheist traditions. Images of Christ in Byzantine and western medieval art typically incorporate the

strict frontality that is a legacy of the Parthian and Roman Middle East generally, as are the halos of Christ and the saints—an evolution of the radiate crown and nimbus seen on solar and lunar deities. Jewish art and architecture would become increasingly aniconic while preserving aspects of religious iconography established during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, including representations of the menorah and the Ark of the Covenant.

Other legacies are architectural. One remarkable transformation can be seen in the evolution of the large temenos enclosures and towers (religious "high places") of the Roman and Parthian Middle East. In Damascus, the former temenos of the Temple of Hadad-Jupiter became, at the beginning of the eighth century, the courtyard of the most important mosque in a newly Islamic Middle East. In the interim, the temple had previously been converted into an important Christian cathedral, linked to John the Baptist. Early Christian architecture similarly incorporated towers, as seen in some of the vast number of churches in the "Dead Cities" of Syria, but their plans and layouts are very different, based on the form of a Roman meeting hall called a basilica. The basic tripartite colonnaded structure of this building, along with the facade and single or symmetrical pairs of towers, can be seen not only in ancient churches but also in the grandest medieval cathedrals and many modern churches. Finally, the architectural innovation most commonly associated with the Parthian period in Mesopotamia and Iran is the iwan, a vaulted portico or hall open on one side. The Great Iwans of Hatra are the most famous Parthian examples. The Parthian palace at Ashur had four iwans arranged on each side of a square courtyard, and similar arrangements would become hallmarks of later Iranian architecture in particular.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, the cultural heritage of Iraq, Syria, and Yemen has suffered great damage in the context of war. Sites and monuments of the Parthian and Roman period have been irreparably damaged by looting, as in the case of Dura-Europos, or deliberately vandalized or demolished, as at Palmyra. Under these circumstances particularly, the role of the Roman and Parthian Empires in the Middle Eastern and global history of art merit greater exploration for a wide audience. Recent scholarship has reshaped the understanding of the Parthian and Roman Middle East, exploring the cultural and artistic connections that linked southwestern Arabia, Nabataea, Judaea, Phoenicia, Syria, and Mesopotamia and highlighting art that was shaped by far-reaching trade routes, inheritances from earlier periods, a vast array of local gods, and above all by the interplay of imperial, local, and personal identities.

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Ca. 244–45
Clay with layer of painted plaster, H. 15 3/8 in. (39 cm), W. 15 3/8 in. (39 cm), D. 1 15/16 in. (5 cm)
Dura-Europos, Synagogue
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Yale-French Excavations at Dura-Europos

PAGES 44-45
Statuette of Reclining Nude Goddess
Ca. 2nd century B.C.– 2nd century A.D.
Gypsum alabaster, H. 2 7/8 in. (7.3 cm), W. 6 7/8 in. (17.5 cm), D. 2 1/4 in. (5.7 cm)
Said to be from Ctesiphon
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Wolfe Expedition, Purchase, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Gift (1886, 86.16.3)

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