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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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The city of brotherly love. The language of family affection in the Artaxiad dynasty between the Hellenistic and the Parthian world

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Abstract - At section X.5, the *Tabula Peutingeriana* shows a settlement called Filadelfia (Gr. Philadelphiea) located on the road between Artaxata and Ecbatana. According to modern scholarship, the settlement was on the northern shores of Lake Urmia, but its founder is unknown. Historians tentatively suggested Demetrios II of Syria (first reign 145-138 BC) or Artabanos I of Parthia (126-122 BC) as the possible founders because they both had *Philadelphos* among their royal epithets. However, a significant political act such as the foundation of a settlement in Armenia by one of these monarchs is not convincing when we take a closer look to the geopolitical situation of the area. It is also plausible that the settlement was named Philadelphiea to celebrate the coregency of Tigranes IV and his sister-queen Erato (10-2 BC). The couple was supported by Phraates V of Parthia, who favoured an anti-Roman policy in Armenia. Taking my cue from the foundation of Philadelphiea, I will also analyse the royal titles born by the members of the Artaxiad dynasty in order to understand the place of family in the Artaxiad ideology of kingship and to show the interplay between Armenian, Parthian, and Hellenistic discourses on royal legitimacy based on kinship.

Keywords: Armenia, Artaxiad dynasty, Hellenistic kingship, Parthia, Rome

The *Tabula Peutingeriana* is a medieval copy of an ancient Roman map showing the road network of the Roman Empire as well as that of areas politically and/or economically connected to Rome such as Persia, India and China. At section X.5, the map attests the existence of a settlement called *Filadelfia* (i.e. the Latin transcription of Greek *Philadelphiea*) located on the road between Artaxata and Ecbatana, more precisely between the stations of *Gobdi* and *Trispeda*, at the borders of Media Atropatene (Fig. 1).

According to modern scholarship, the settlement was located on the northern shores of Lake Urmia: Konrad Miller assumed that the town was located between Khoy and Marand, while Hakob Manandian argued for a location between modern Khoy and Tarvitch.¹

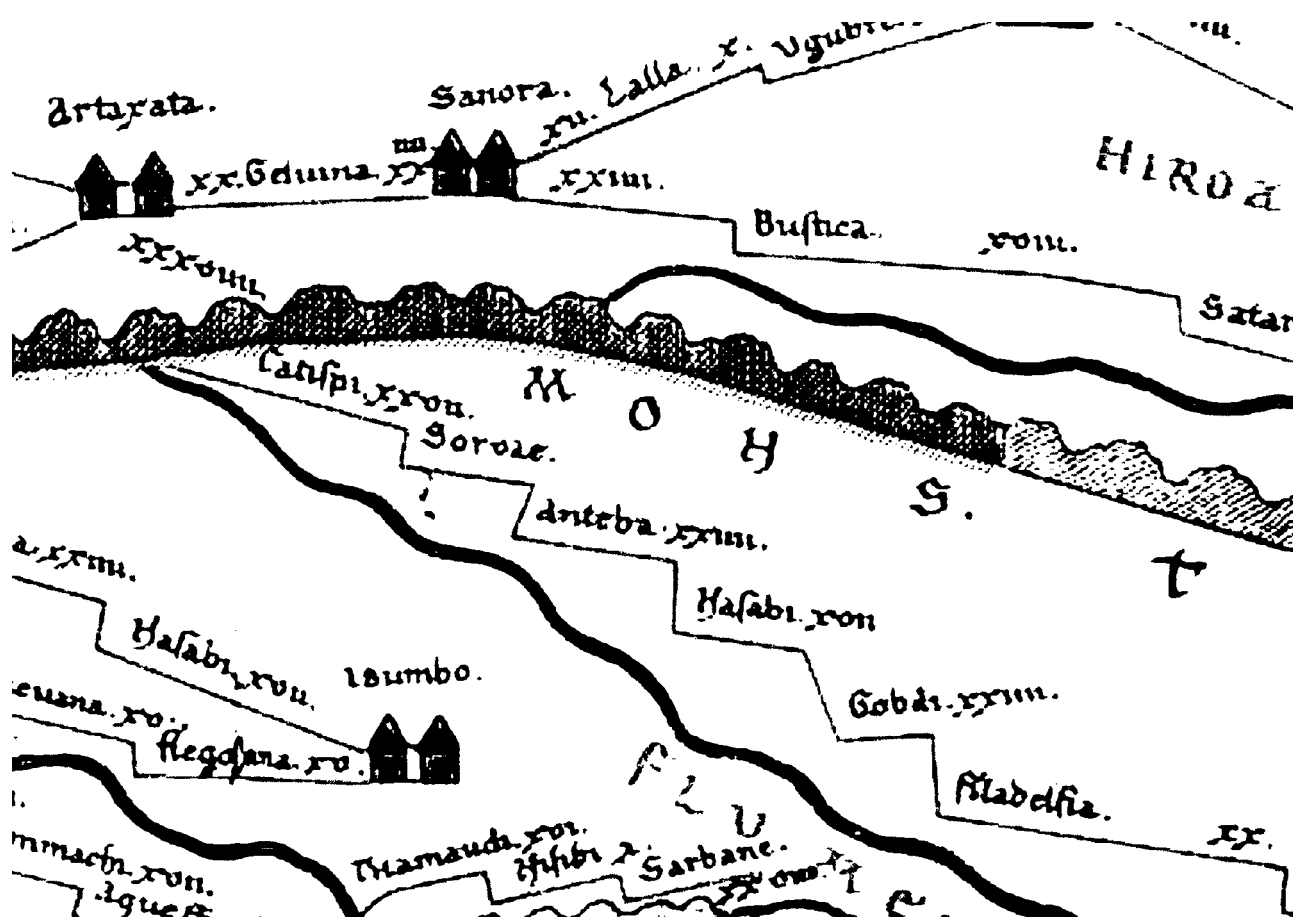


Fig. 1, *Tabula Peutingeriana*, (Konrad Miller's facsimile 1887/1888), section X.5 with the itinerary from Artaxata to *Filadelfia* (Public Domain).

The founder of Philadelphiea is unknown, but historians have tentatively suggested Demetrios II of Syria (first reign 145-138 BC) or Artabanos I of Parthia (126-122 BC)² as possible founders given that they both had *Philadelphos* ('Brother-loving') among their royal epithets. The (quite improbable) hypothesis put forward by Miller, who assumed that the founder of Philadelphiea was an 'Arsaces II Philadelphos' (ca. 211-185 BC) should not be taken into account for two reasons: first, because the son and successor of Arsaces I never bore such a title; and second, because during his reign Parthia was not in a position to exert any political

1- *I wish to dedicate this contribution to the memory of my friend and colleague, the regretted Prof. Federicomaria Muccioli (1965-2020).

Miller 1916, 781: This itinerary is strange because of a shift in units of measure without any notice or explanation. See also Tcherikover 1927, 83 who argues in favor of a foundation by Artabanos I of Parthia; Manandian 1967, 110, 111, and 113. See in general Chaumont 1993, 440 and Cohen 2013, 49-50.

2- Tcherikover 1927, 83. For the chronology of Arsaces IX Artabanos I see Assar 2006, 23-33.

influence on Armenia. In fact, at that time the territory of the Arsacid kingdom was more or less limited to Parthia proper, and after the *Anabasis* (212-206 BC) of Antiochos III in the Upper Satrapies Arsaces II had become a vassal/client king of the Seleucids. Our attention, then, should focus only on Demetrios II and Artabanos I as possible founders of the settlement. As for the latter, the objection by Marie-Louise Chaumont is still valid: the Arsacid kings never named their foundations after a royal epithet, but only after their personal names, e.g. *Arsacia*, *Mithradatkart*, *Vologesia*.³ To this objection, we should add that during his reign of four years Artabanos I was constantly occupied in conflicts in southern Mesopotamia, Media and eastern Iran, where he eventually died while fighting against the Tochari.⁴ The presence of Artabanos in the area between Armenia and Media Atropatene is thus quite improbable and difficult to substantiate.

Among the possible founders of Philadelphieia, the Seleucid king Demetrios II has always been considered the most probable candidate since Droysen's *Geschichte des Hellenismus*.⁵ Our historical sources tell us that Demetrios campaigned against Mithridates I of Parthia in order to regain the lost territories in Mesopotamia and Media, and used the Upper Satrapies as military base to fight against the usurper Diodotos Tryphon.⁶ However, after winning a number of victories against the Parthians, Demetrios was ambushed and taken prisoner. Mithridates sent him to Hyrcania, but he gave his daughter Rhodogune in marriage to Demetrios.⁷ The chronology of this short-lived campaign should be placed between the spring of 139 BC and the summer of 138 BC⁸ and the Parthian victory over Demetrios is recorded by a Babylonian astronomical diary of the year 174 SE (= 7/8.7. – 4/5.8.138 BC):

8: [...] planned evil. That month, I heard as follows: (scribal error?) King Demetrios who before [...] his troops from the cities of [...]

9: [...] made [...] of Babylonia, and this King Arsaces went from the cities of Media to Babylonia, and [...]

10: [...] brought about [the defeat] of his troops, and seized him and his nobles, saying: King Arsaces [...] good peace for you? from.... [...]

11: [...] in plenty, happiness and good peace in the cities of Media next to King Arsaces [...]⁹

Thanks to the analysis of Edward Dąbrowa,¹⁰ we know that the main area for the military operations of Demetrios was Media: this strategic choice aimed to cut communication routes between Mesopotamia and Parthia proper, forcing Mithridates to retreat to his ancestral kingdom. In addition, Babylonian evidence shows that Demetrios and his army crossed the Euphrates during the spring of 138 BC and in the following

3- Chaumont 1993, 440, but see also her contribution on the earliest Parthian foundations in Chaumont 1973, 197-222 as well as the case study of the Parthian cities named after Vologeses in Chaumont 1974, 75-89.

4- Jušt. XLII.2.2.

5- Droysen 1878, 317.

6- Jos., *AJ* XIII.184-185.

7- Historical sources on Demetrios's Parthian campaign I *Macc.* 14.1; Jos. *AJ* XIII.184-186; App. *Syr.* 67; Diod. XXXIII.28; Eus. *Chron.* (ed. Schoene) 1.255 (= Porph. *FGrHist* II 260 F 32.16); Jušt. XXXVI.1.5

8- Dąbrowa 1999, 13-14.

9- Transcription and translation in Assar 2006, 6-7.

10- Dąbrowa 1999, 9-16.

month the Seleucid king was able to regain the control of upper and lower Mesopotamia.¹¹ It is safe to assume that after these victories, Demetrios went directly to Media from Mesopotamia. In this case, the itinerary followed by Demetrios and his army raises some doubts regarding his possible foundation of *Philadelphieia*. To have done so Demetrios would have taken a long detour around the northern shores of Urmia Lake and such a delay seems odd for a sovereign who needed to move quickly in order to regain Mesopotamia and then reach Media. Another fairly implausible detail is the simple act of establishing a settlement in a territory that was no longer under Seleucid control. After the death of Antiochos IV in 164 BC, Armenia was no more integrated in Seleucid territorial space and Artaxias and his successors pursued an independent policy as kings in their own right. As far as we know, this would be the first case of a Seleucid settlement founded outside the sphere of political influence of the kingdom. We should also add that a significant political act such as the foundation of a settlement in Armenia would not have occurred without some kind of repercussions from the local power. Finally, there is the question of the name of the settlement. According to Livy (*Epit.* 50), Demetrios assumed the epithet *Philadelphos* to honour the memory of his brother Antigonos, who was murdered when the usurper Alexander Balas took power. However, it is more likely that this title was chosen to celebrate the unity between Demetrios and his brother Antiochos Sidetes, who were both sent to Asia Minor by their father Demetrios I in order to protect them during the civil war against Alexander Balas. Alongside *Philadelphos*, Demetrios II was also hailed as *Nikator* ('Victorious'), *Theos* ('god'), and also *Theopator* ('He whose father is a god' or 'The one who deified his father'). All these titles appear in different combinations on coin legends that vary depending on the region in which these coins were minted.¹² In the coinage of Demetrios, the title *Philadelphos* never occurs alone but is always accompanied by one of the other epithets *Theos*, *Nikator*, and *Theopator*. On the other hand, the epithet *Nikator* seems to have been his first and main title. Appian (*Syr.* 67), who apparently draws his information from Seleucid sources, employs this title when speaking of Demetrios II. As a consequence of this, the numismatic evidence shows that *Philadelphos* was not a title particularly favoured by the king, or in any case it did not have such a special place in the king's propaganda to justify naming a settlement after it. Although the evidence on Demetrios as founder of *Philadelphieia* is far from being conclusive, henceforth it was the most likely candidate. However, I would like to introduce other two characters who could challenge the assumption that Demetrios II was the actual founder of the settlement: the royal couple comprised of Tigranes IV (first rule ca. 8/6-5 BC; second rule ca. 2 BC – ca. AD 1) and his sister-queen Erato (10-2 BC).

Son of Tigranes III, Tigranes IV succeed his father without asking Roman permission and married his sister Erato, who shared the throne with him. In Zoroastrianism, next-of-kin marriage (MP *xwēdōdah*) was an accepted practice which from a religious point of view aimed to return the world to the primordial state of its creation by Ahura Mazda.¹³ In addition, it served to keep a family line pure and to prevent familial inheritance from being split up. At the level of kingship, consanguineous marriage was a strategy adopted in order to preserve power within a dynasty, and during the Hellenistic period it is found not only in monarchies of Iranian background such as the Parthians, but among the Seleucids and the Lagids as well.¹⁴

11- Monerie 2019, 181.

12- See Houghton-Lorber-Hoover 2008, 266-268.

13- Payne 2015, 109.

14- De Jong 1997, 424-432.

The royal couple was supported by Phraates IV of Parthia, who looked favourably at the emergent policy of challenging Roman interference in the Armenian kingdom.¹⁵ After a few years, the Romans dethroned Tigranes and replaced him with his uncle Artavasdes III (5-2 BC). However, the Armenian nobility (the *naxarars*) so strongly opposed this resolution that Tigranes and Erato were restored in ca. 2 BC with the help of the Parthians. Augustus sent his grandson Gaius with an army in order to settle the issue by force of arms, but as Tigranes asked the emperor for peace Augustus agreed to formal recognition of his claim to the throne. Accordingly, this peace once again entailed Roman interference in the affairs of Armenia, but Tigranes' second reign lasted only a few years because he lost his life in battle against some northern barbarians in ca. AD 1. Erato was left with no choice but to abdicate and Gaius Caesar placed Ariobarzanes of Media Atropatene on the Armenian throne.¹⁶ Again, his reign lasted only one year ca. AD 2-3 because the Armenians revolted against this Roman settlement of the kingdom. Gaius then attempted to put another candidate on the throne, this time Artavasdes IV, son of Ariobarzanes, but after a few years he was murdered (ca. AD 6). Thereafter the Armenian throne was occupied by a certain Tigranes, possibly the grandson of Herod the Great, son of Alexander I, and Glaphyra, daughter of Archelaos of Cappadocia. But once again the Armenian nobles overthrew him and restored Erato back to the throne, who would go on to reign as sole ruler at least for 3 years from ca. AD 13-15 as suggested by the date Ε Γ (year 3) which appears on her coinage.¹⁷

One may object that neither Tigranes IV nor Erato had the title of *Philadelphos*, but I aim to show that this fact does not represent an insurmountable obstacle. Let us begin by exploring the issue of the royal epithets. I have demonstrated elsewhere that the habit of producing coinage bearing graphic and/or written messages concerning kinship, family unity and the like, originated from the Seleucid and Lagid kingdoms and was subsequently imitated by non-Greek dynasties who adapted it according to their own culture, in the process creating new ways of communicating kinship-based propaganda.¹⁸ In the Arsacid dynasty, titles attesting familial ties on coins begin to appear by the second half of the II century BC under Phraates II (138-127 BC), who sports the epithets of *Philopator* ('Father-Loving') and *Theopator* in order to connect himself to the memory of his father Mithradates I (ca. 171-138 BC).¹⁹ The use of these epithets increases considerably during the so-called Parthian *Dark Age* (I cent. BC) under the reigns of Gotarzes I (95-87 BC), Orodes I (90-77 BC), Sinatruces (77-70 BC), Phraates III (70-57 BC), and Orodes II (57-38 BC), who also adopt this rhetorical strategy in order to claim legitimacy through their familial ties. Mithradates III (57-54 BC) and Phraates IV (38-2 BC) did the same by using the epithet *Eupator* ('Born of a noble father').²⁰

Under the joint reign of Mousa and her son Phraatakes (2 BC- AD 4), Parthian coinage attests the first and only portrait of another member of the royal family besides the king.²¹ Mousa was initially a concubine

15- According to Rufius Festus, *Brev.* 19, Armenia and Parthia were both leading an anti-Roman policy in that period.

16- See Coloru 2019; Tac., *Ann.* II.4.2; Cass. Dio, LV, 10a.5-7.

17- See Kovacs 2016, 30-31.

18- Coloru 2015, 173-199.

19- On the Arsacid royal titles see Muccioli 2013, in particular 171, 192, 195, 199, 219, 232-233, 257-258, 314-315, 320-326, 341-342, 346, 403-407, 419-420-

20- Muccioli 2013, 232-233, 239 and n. 496.

21- For a recent biographical study on Mousa see Strugnell 2008, 275-298. See also Bigwood 2004, 35-70; Schulde -Rubin 2017, 71-74; Roller 2018, 123-127.

sent to Parthia by Augustus as a gift to Phraates IV (38–2 BC). In short order, however, she soon managed to become the favorite concubine of the king and gave birth to Phraatakes. Thanks to the strong influence that she exerted on her husband, Mousa succeeded in convincing Phraates to send his sons from other women of the court to Rome as hostages. Once she secured the position of Phraatakes as crown prince, Mousa poisoned Phraates and married her own son in order to rule jointly (2 BC–AD 4). As we have seen, next-of-kin marriage was not an extraordinary practice in that cultural and political context, but what it is really out of the ordinary is the appearance of the queen's portrait on the Arsacid coinage. In addition, unlike the usual Hellenistic iconography, Mousa and Phraatakes are not depicted with jugate busts, but separately on either side of the coin (Fig. 2). This feature may suggest that Mousa had the status of public person²² and quite probably she was imitating the iconography of the *denarii* struck a few decades before (32 BC) by Cleopatra VII of Egypt and Mark Antony in order to represent herself and her son as a royal divine couple.²³



Fig. 2, AR Drachm of Phraatakes and Mousa (© CNG www.cngcoins.com)

In the Artaxiad dynasty, the first king to adopt a royal epithet conveying a message of kinship and affection towards a member of the royal family is Tigranes II the Great, who in his early coinage styles himself as *Philopator* but also *Philhellen*, i.e. 'Greek-loving', another popular epithet among the Arsacid kings since the reign of Mithridates I.²⁴ In fact, we know that Tigranes spent his youth as a royal hostage at the court of Mithridates II (121–91),²⁵ so it is not far-fetched to assume that he took inspiration from the Arsacid dynasty in the choice of his own titles. After Tigranes the Great, the only legend in Artaxiad coinage referring to kinship is that of the joint rule of Tigranes IV and Erato between 2 BC and AD 1. On the reverse of the 4 chalkoi issues we can read the following legend: ΕΡΑΤΩ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΤΙΓΡΑΝΟΥ ΑΔΕΛΦΗ, i.e. "Erato, sister of King Tigranes".²⁶ The iconography of the royal Armenian couple as it is depicted on coins from the

22- Dąbrowa 2010, 126.

23- See Schulde – Rubin 2017, 75–76. Mousa's choice of imitating Cleopatra was dictated by the fact that the latter «shared power with a string of male co-rulers [...]. Nevertheless, Cleopatra always found a way to pursue her own ideological goals and assert her authority as co-equal, if not dominant partner with her male counterparts» (Schulde-Rubin 2017, 76). The political role played by Mousa and Erato pursues a tradition inaugurated by the Hellenistic queens of the Seleucid and Lagid dynasties, see the collection of studies edited by Coşkun - McAuley 2016.

24- Kovacs 2016, no. 60.

25- Geller – Traina 2013, 447–454.

26- Kovacs 2016, no. 179.

period of 2 BC-1AD should also be taken into account. The series of 4 chalkoi presents the portraits of brother and sister separate on the two sides of the coin: the bust of Tigranes on the obverse and that of Erato on the reverse (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3, AE chalkos of Tigranes IV and Erato (© GORNY & MOSCH)

The bust of the sister-queen is accompanied by a legend specifying that the woman represented is the sister of Tigranes.²⁷ This typology recalls the series portraying the Parthian royal couple of Phraatakes and Mousa, with the difference that Mousa sports the title of *basilissa* and the royal epithet *Thea Ourania* ('Heavenly Goddess'), a title that to a Greek audience recalled Aphrodite, but in the East it was also connected to Ishtar and the Iranian Anahita.²⁸ Likewise, the appearance of the portrait of Erato on the Artaxiad coinage is also unprecedented, even if Erato is only defined as *adelphe*, 'sister' of the king. This difference is justified by the special nature of the kingship of Mousa, who, even though in a joint rule, seems to have been the dominant ruler, while Erato was a co-ruler, possibly in a subordinate position compared to her brother. Interestingly enough, these two series, i.e. Tigranes-Erato and Phraatakes-Mousa, are almost contemporary with one another. Incidentally, we may also notice that the two queens share two names belonging to the same semantic and cultural area: Mousa being the generic name for a muse, one of the goddesses of the arts, while Erato is the personal name of the muse of lyric and love poetry.

Another interesting portrait of the royal couple Tigranes-Erato appears on the 2 chalkoi series dated to the first year (A) of Tigranes' second rule, ca. 2 BC (Fig. 4). On the obverse, the couple is portrayed with jugate busts according to the "classic" model introduced by the Hellenistic dynasties. Even more remarkably, the reverse bears the oldest representation of the double peaks of Mt. Ararat.²⁹ Given the paramount place of Mt. Ararat in the Armenian religious and cultural sphere, the iconography of the obverse and that of the reverse cannot be considered independently from one another; on the contrary, they are deeply intertwined because the royal couple Tigranes-Erato seems to mirror the divine couple represented by the Great and Little Ararat.³⁰

27- Kovacs 2016, no. 179.

28- Schulde – Rubin 2017, 73-74.

29- Kovacs 2016, no. 180.

30- In Armenian epic and folklore there is a group of supernatural beings called *kajk* i.e. "the brave ones" who inhabited mountains and we may add that *kaj* seems also to have been a title of the kings of the Artaxiad dynasty. Russel 1986; Asatrian 2013, 13-14.



Fig. 4, AE chalkos of Tigranes IV and Erato with the representation of the Great and Little Ararat (© Roma Numismatics, www.RomaNumismatics.com)

From what we have seen thus far, it is clear that the iconography adopted by Tigranes places a strong emphasis on the special relationship between brother and sister, a relationship through which Tigranes's right to rule seems to be strengthened in the eyes of both the domestic Armenian audience and external political actors, namely Rome and Parthia. We may thus argue that Tigranes is conveying a message of family unity and, to phrase it in Greek, *philadelpheia*, i.e. 'brotherly love'. But the chronology of this peculiar coin iconography is just as important. These issues belong to the second reign of Tigranes IV. Because of Tigranes' pro-Parthian policy, Augustus had the king replaced with his uncle Artavasdes III,³¹ brother of Artaxias II and Tigranes III, but the latter was driven out by the Armenian *naxarars* after a short time. Tigranes was then able to regain his throne thanks to the support of Parthia, but eventually was left with no other choice but to abandon his pro-Parthian politics and be crowned by Augustus, a fact that is highlighted by the additional royal title that Tigranes used on his coinage, i.e. *Philokaisar* ('Friend of Caesar'). The foundation or the renaming of a settlement celebrating brotherly love between the king and his sister-queen could fit the political situation of this period. It is possible that Tigranes and Erato had to show that their throne was strong enough because of their special relationship, a strong familial bond which could assure the dynastic purity and continuity of the Artaxiad monarchy. But this foundation also raises the question why they would have chosen a settlement located so close to the territory of Media Atropatene. While there is no straightforward or easy answer to this question, we can nonetheless advance a hypothesis. To this end, we should take into account the events following the death of Tigranes: we have seen that the immediate successors to the Armenian throne chose by Gaius Caesar were Ariobarzanes (AD 2-3) and Artavasdes IV (AD 3-6) of Media Atropatene. It is possible that Tigranes and Erato were fully aware that their position in the eyes of Rome was weak and that Augustus and Gaius already had other candidates in mind, namely some members of the dynasty of Atropatene. If this is the case, the foundation or the renaming of *Philadelpheia* could be interpreted as part of an ideological and political program aimed at promoting a message of dynastic unity which was addressed not only to Rome and Parthia, but also to their Atropatenian neighbors and competitors.

31- Kovacs 2016, no. 177.

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