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Between Gods and Empires: Commagene, Parthia, and the Personal Cosmology of the Orontid Dynasty

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Abstract: *The hierothesion of Antiochus I on Mount Nemrud is conventionally interpreted through the lens of political theology – as a frontier ruler's calculated synthesis of Greek and Iranian religious traditions designed to legitimise dynastic power between Rome and Parthia. The dominant scholarly tradition, spanning from Theresa Goell and Friedrich Karl Dörner to Margherita Facella, reads Nemrud primarily as an instrument of political pragmatism. This article proposes a complementary, deeper reading: behind the public façade of syncretic cosmology lies a profoundly personal project – a small kingdom's existential response to the condition of permanent in-betweenness. Drawing on the Greek inscriptions of Nemrud and Arsameia, the funerary complex at Karakush, and classical narrative sources from Cassius Dio to Appian and Plutarch, the author argues that the Orontid rulers of Commagene constructed not merely a political theology, but a personal mythology of power, wherein narcissism, eros, and thanatos are inextricably bound to the dynastic programme. The analysis centres on two monuments: the hierothesion on Mount Nemrud, where Antiochus I enthroned himself among the gods as the living synthesis of Achaemenid, Seleucid, and Hellenistic legacies, and the tumulus of Karakush, raised by Mithridates II over the remains of his sister Laodice, the Queen of Parthia who perished at the court of Ctesiphon. These two monuments are read as the twin poles of a singular cosmological system: axis mundi and axis mortis – the defiant desire for eternity balanced against the sacred obligation of memory.*

Keywords: Commagene, Orontid dynasty, Parthia, Cosmology, Nemrud, Karakush, Laodice, axis mundi

Introduction: The Geopolitics of Spirit on the Banks of the Euphrates

The history of Commagene is traditionally examined as an elegant, yet strictly pragmatic exercise in political survival. Scholars – from Theresa Goell to Margherita Facella – have long accustomed us to viewing Antiochus I's hierothesion on Mount Nemrud [Figs. 1-2] primarily as a “tool of legitimation”: the cold calculation of a frontier ruler forced to stitch together a patchwork of Greek and Iranian traditions to

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avoid being crushed between the formidable millstones of Rome and Parthia. Yet, behind this carefully maintained façade of “political theology” lies something far more intimate, haunting, and formidable.

We propose a fundamental shift in perspective. Commagene was never merely a buffer state; it was an existential project. It represented a daring attempt by the Orontid dynasty to transcend the condition of “permanent in-betweenness,” transforming geopolitical isolation into a deeply personal, sovereign cosmology. For these rulers, the frontier was not a mere line on a map, but a vertical axis of the soul – a stubborn, metaphysical refusal to belong to anyone but the sky.

Here, on the threshold of colliding worlds, the kings did not merely build tombs; they erected ontological pillars. Our analysis centres on two monuments that represent the twin, pulsating poles of this ideological system:

Mount Nemrud as Axis Mundi (The World Axis). Here, Antiochus I appears not simply as a monarch, but as a living synthesis of Achaemenid might and Hellenistic splendour. This monument represents the ultimate triumph of a narcissistic Eros – a deliberate attempt to storm the heavens, where the ruler enthrones himself amidst the pantheon, demanding eternity in the “here and now.”

Karakush as Axis Mortis (The Axis of Death). The tumulus raised by Mithridates II over the remains of his sister Laodice, the Parthian queen, reveals a starkly different facet of power. If Nemrud embodies the hubris of immortality, then Karakush speaks of the humility of memory. It is a monument dedicated to Thanatos, a tragic acknowledgment of the fragility of dynastic bonds severed between Ctesiphon and Samosata.¹

Between these two conceptual points – the Axis of the World and the Axis of Death – beats the true heart of Commagene’s history. It is a narrative of how temporal power transfigures into enduring mythology, and how the existential dread of oblivion is ultimately transmuted into imperishable stone.

A methodological caveat is in order before we proceed. This article does not advance a falsifiable hypothesis in the positivist sense, nor does it purport to reconstruct, event by event, the psychological interior of a king two millennia dead. Its method is avowedly hermeneutic and interpretive, moving across iconography, epigraphy, classical narrative, and the phenomenology of religion associated with Mircea Eliade, in order to read the monuments of Commagene as a coherent symbolic system rather than as a set of isolated archaeological data points.

A word is owed on the psychoanalytic vocabulary – narcissism, Eros, Thanatos – that recurs throughout this study. The trait itself is trans-historical: grandiosity, the hunger for admiration, an identity so fragile that it must be perpetually re-

¹ Blömer & Winter, 2011: 96-97.

confirmed from without, are patterns of human self-presentation that neither await, nor depend upon, their twentieth-century Viennese christening. What is historically situated is not the pattern but the theoretical apparatus built around it – the drive theory, the libidinal economy, the clinical framework Freud constructed to explain it. We borrow the naming, not the machine: the psychoanalytic vocabulary is deployed here as the most economical available language for a structure of self-presentation, not as an explanatory mechanism transplanted wholesale from the Viennese consulting room to the Commagenian highlands. Nor, crucially, do we claim access to Antiochus's psyche as such. What survives is not a confession but a monument – a curated, commissioned, dynastically interested artefact addressed to a specific audience. We therefore speak not of a clinical diagnosis of the king, but of the logic of his public self-fashioning, as that logic is legible in stone, inscription, and gesture.

The Alchemy of Stone and Spirit

Mount Nemrud has never lacked for admirers or interpreters. Since Karl Sester's rediscovery of the site in 1881 and the first systematic excavations by Karl Humann and Otto Puchstein in 1882-1883, the hierothesion of Antiochus I Theos of Commagene has generated a body of scholarship vastly disproportionate to the modest geographical dimensions of the kingdom that produced it.² The colossal heads – Zeus-Oromasdes, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, Artagnes-Herakles-Ares, and the king himself enthroned among them – have long been enshrined as iconic images of the ancient Near East [Figs. 1-2]. Predictably, the dominant interpretive tradition reads Nemrud primarily as an instrument of political legitimation: the calculated maneuver of a ruler stranded on the precarious frontier between two superpowers, deploying religious syncretism as a cold strategy of survival.³

This reading is not fundamentally wrong; it is, however, fatally incomplete. Political theology does not erect monuments of such haunting strangeness and towering ambition out of mere geopolitical calculus.⁴ The colossal seated figures, the elaborate horoscope reliefs, and the dexiosis scenes – in which the king clasps the hands of the gods as an equal – far exceed the pragmatic requirements of dynastic propaganda. Instead, they speak of something profoundly intimate: of a man who sought in stone and inscription a solution to an existential dilemma that conventional diplomacy could never resolve.

² Sullivan, 1977: 732-798; Dörner, 1996: 374; Margaryan, 2013a, 2013b.

³ Elsner, 1995; Dörner, 1996; Sanders & Young, 1996; Facella, 2006; Kropp, 2013.

⁴ Humann & Puchstein, 1890; Puchstein, 1895; Dörner & Naumann, 1939; Dörner, 1967, 1975, 1981; Dörner & Goell, 1963; Waldmann, 1973; Hoepfner, 1983.



Fig. 1. The eastern terrace of Nemrud Dag, Turkey. Photo by Alex Wang [Public Domain: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mount_Nemrut_\(3\).JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mount_Nemrut_(3).JPG)].



Fig. 2. Head of Antiochus I (?). The eastern terrace of Nemrud Dag, Turkey. Photo by Alex Wang [Public Domain: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mount_Nemrut_\(4\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mount_Nemrut_(4).jpg)].

Antiochus I of Commagene was a ruler who belonged, definitively, to no single world. He was simultaneously Greek and Iranian, a *philosromaios* (“friend of the Romans”) and a Parthian kinsman, an Achaemenid descendant and a Seleucid heir. The flat, horizontal plane of the frontier demanded a radical vertical response. Nemrud became that response.

Yet, Nemrud was not the only vertical axis left behind by the Orontid dynasty. On the banks of the Nymphaeus River rises the tumulus of Karakush – the “Black Bird” – raised by Mithridates II over the remains of his sister Laodice [Fig. 3]. This woman, the “Queen of Queens” of Parthia, died far from her homeland, deep within the court of Ctesiphon. Amidst the rigid, formulaic conventions of Hellenistic funerary epigraphy at Karakush, the inscription for Laodice’s sister Antiochis – interred there alongside their mother Isias and Antiochis’s daughter Aka – stands out with disarming, heartbreaking simplicity: she was called the most beautiful of women. Laodice’s own memorial nearby, dedicating her image “to the unfading memory of queen Laodice, the king’s sister and the wife of Orodes, the king of kings,” is more restrained in language, but no less final in its gesture: it, too, insists that she belongs, in death, to Commagene rather than to the Parthian court that swallowed her in life.

A word is owed on the corpus. Arsameia on the Nymphaios and Arsameia on the Euphrates, together with the modest architectural remains of Samosata itself, undeniably belong to the same ideological programme and merit their own extended treatment elsewhere.⁵ They are set aside here not because they are marginal, but because the argument advanced in this article turns on a specific dialectic of ascent and descent, of apotheosis and mourning – and it is Nemrud and Karakush alone, among the extant Commagenian monuments, that instantiate this dialectic with such stark, deliberate completeness. Arsameia, by contrast, is predominantly a monument of dynastic genealogy and ancestor cult rather than of personal cosmology in the sense pursued here; extending the analysis to it would broaden the empirical base at the cost of diluting the argument’s central axis.

Taken together, Nemrud and Karakush do not represent two detached, disparate monuments. Rather, they constitute a singular, integrated ideological framework – *axis mundi* and *axis mortis*, the twin verticals of a deeply personal Orontid cosmology. It is the intricate dynamics of this system, this poignant dialogue between the hubris of immortality and the tenderness of memory, that the present article sets out to explore.

⁵ Dörner & Goell, 1963; Hoepfner, 1983.



Fig. 3. Relief of Mithridates II and his sister Laodice. Karakush, Turkey. Photo by Bernard Gagnon [Public Domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tumulus_of_Karakus_11.jpg].

The Frontier as Existential Condition: Commagene between Rome, Parthia, and Armenia

Commagene was a small kingdom by any material measure – a narrow strip of fertile land nestled along the upper Euphrates, with its capital, Samosata, perched on a commanding bluff overlooking the river at its most practicable crossing point. Yet, in the ideological language that the Orontid (Ervanduni) rulers themselves carefully cultivated, it was uniquely conceptualised as a land between worlds: the Euphratean frontier that bifurcated the Roman West and the Iranian East ran directly through its geopolitical heart.

The dynasty that governed this pivotal realm – the Orontids – traced their lineage with a calculated, strategic ambiguity.⁶ They claimed descent from Darius the Great through the Achaemenid satrap Orontes, and from Alexander the Great through the Seleucid royal house. This double genealogy was far more than mere dynastic vanity; it functioned as a precise, razor-sharp diplomatic instrument. When Antiochus I displayed his full titulature in the monumental inscriptions of Nemrud – Βασιλεὺς Μέγας Ἀντίοχος Θεὸς Δίκαιος Ἐπιφανὴς Φιλορωμαῖος καὶ Φιλέλλην – he was encoding in stone a sophisticated metaphysical claim: a defiant right to belong everywhere, and to everyone, at once.

In 69 BCE, Lucullus directed the Roman war machine against Samosata. From the city's towers rained maltha – a burning bitumen that water could not extinguish, forcing the most efficient military apparatus of the ancient world to stall beneath the walls of this highland stronghold.⁷ Roman narrative sources offer nothing definitive regarding the final outcome – an informative, highly conspicuous silence, given the routine tendency of Roman historians to omit or obfuscate strategic setbacks. Pompey fared little better subsequently, ultimately concluding a peace treaty that modern scholarship identifies as “very advantageous for Antiochus and not particularly advantageous for Rome.”⁸ Through such resilience, Commagene not only preserved its sovereignty but expanded its regional influence, transforming into a vital intelligence and diplomatic hub for Rome, as preserved in Cicero’s proconsular correspondence.

Yet, the exact same geopolitical logic made Commagene indispensable to Parthia. Antiochus’s explicitly paraded *philorōmaios* (“friend of the Romans”) epithet did not prevent him from giving his daughter, Laodice, in marriage to the Parthian King of Kings, Orodes II. From this union was born the Crown Prince Pacorus (Bakur), who subsequently married the daughter of the Armenian King Artavasdes II, effectively

⁶ Fraser, 1978: 373; Chahin, 2001: 190-191.

⁷ Plin. *HN* 2.108.

⁸ App. *Mith.* 106; Cic. *Fam.* XV 1. 3. 4; Braund, 1984: 42; Miles, 2000; Steele, 2000: 23; Sumner, 2002; Speidel, 2005; Raggi, 2010: 89, 92; Wu, 2016.

cementing a potent dynastic triangle that Rome watched with deepening unease.⁹ The structural parallel between Antiochus I and Artavasdes II as contemporary practitioners of a sophisticated “third force” policy was by no means accidental;¹⁰ it represented a shared, highly developed geopolitical alchemy.

Even Mark Antony’s subsequent siege of Samosata in 38 BCE concluded with a striking demonstration of Commagenian diplomatic and defensive strength.¹¹ Despite his initial, haughty refusal of a peace offering of one thousand talents, Antony was ultimately forced to accept a mere three hundred talents before ignominiously withdrawing his legions.¹² It is precisely against this historical backdrop of strategic impregnability, flexible loyalties, and masterful diplomacy that the monumental, seemingly eccentric projects of Antiochus I must be read.

Narcissism as Cosmology:

The Hierotheosion of Nemrud and the Apotheosis of the Living King

The titulature of Antiochus I deserves rigorous examination, for every word within it performs a specific intellectual and ideological labor.¹³ Βασιλεὺς Μέγας – the Great King – directly invokes the Achaemenid imperial legacy. Θεὸς Δίκαιος Ἐπιφανής – God, Just and Manifest – belongs squarely to the Seleucid vocabulary of divine kingship. Φιλορωμαῖος καὶ Φιλέλλην – Friend of the Romans and Friend of the Greeks – anchors the monarch within the complex contemporary diplomatic landscape. Each epithet functions as a bridge; together, they constitute a sweeping claim to belong, simultaneously and without contradiction, to every historical world the ancient Near East had ever produced.

The syncretic pantheon that Antiochus installed on Nemrud’s eastern and western terraces enacts this exact same logic at the level of theology.¹⁴ The five colossal seated figures – Zeus-Oromasdes, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, Artagnes-Herakles-Ares, the personified goddess Commagene, and Antiochus himself – are genuinely composite entities. These are deities who manifest as simultaneously Greek and Iranian in a single, indivisible act of cosmological existence. Furthermore, on the dexiosis reliefs, the king does not stand before these gods in an attitude of pious supplication. Instead, he clasps their hands as an absolute equal, entering into a contractual, reciprocal relationship with divinity itself.

⁹ Caes. *BCiv.* III 4-5; App. *B Civ.* II 49; Launey, 1949: 585-586; Fraser, 1978: 373; Oliver, 1981: 412-423; Braund, 1984: 78; Margaryan, 2011.

¹⁰ Manaserian, 1997: 71-72, 213.

¹¹ Cass. Dio XLIX 20-22; Colledge, 1967: 37-44.

¹² Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 34, 50; Cass. Dio XLIX 20-22; Joseph. *BJ* I 16.7; Braund, 1984: 166; Raggi, 2010: 89.

¹³ Fraser, 1978: 373; Dörner, 1996; Sanders & Young, 1996; Margaryan, 2021: 282-293.

¹⁴ Elsner, 1995; Dörner, 1996; Kropp, 2013; Versluys, 2017.

Antiochus I was, in the most literal sense, an individual of “double birth.”¹⁵ His father, Mithridates I Callinicus, was an Orontid prince rooted in the Iranian tradition; his mother, Laodice Thea Philadelphus, was a Seleucid princess. He was thus concurrently the heir of Darius and the heir of Alexander – not as an empty genealogical boast, but as an undeniable biographical fact. Yet, to be the simultaneous heir of two incompatible, historically clashing traditions is, at the deeply personal level, to belong to neither. This is, of course, an interpretive claim rather than a documented fact: no inscription records Antiochus’s inner sense of belonging or non-belonging. It is offered here as the most economical reading of the evidentiary silence – the space opened, and conspicuously left unfilled, between two juxtaposed genealogical claims that no source forces us to reconcile. Antiochus ultimately built himself into divinity because divinity was the only existential category capacious enough to contain the fractured totality of his identity.

The deliberate doubling of the gods, the living king enthroned as an equal among them, and the sacred Nomos commanding perpetual, eternal celebration – all of this is directed relentlessly upward, toward the sky and toward eternity. Nemrud stands as a vertical of fierce, unyielding aspiration, a monumental refusal of human mortality. Yet, this very same dynasty left behind another vertical axis, pointing in the diametrically opposite direction. To truly understand its haunting essence, we must now follow the tragic life and death of another Laodice.

Laodice: Eros and Politics

Among the daughters of Antiochus I, Laodice occupies a singular, haunting position: she is mentioned frequently enough in the source tradition to signal her immense historical weight, yet so sparingly that her biography must be reconstructed through tenuous inferences and the eloquent silences of dynastic epigraphy.¹⁶ The tragic arc of her life is nonetheless clear: she was wed to the Parthian King of Kings, Orodes II, bore a son of exceptional promise, tragically outlived him, and ultimately perished in Ctesiphon – worlds away from the Euphratean highlands of her birth.

This marriage was a masterpiece of Orontid geopolitical triangulation. By joining Laodice to Orodes, Antiochus I embedded an Orontid princess into the very marrow of the Arsacid royal house. The offspring of this union, Crown Prince Pacorus (Bakur), became a unique, living geopolitical nexus: grandson of the Commagenian king, heir apparent to the Parthian throne, and son-in-law to Artavasdes II of Armenia. Three formidable regional dynasties converged within the person of this single young man.

¹⁵ Facella, 2006; Raggi, 2010: 89.

¹⁶ Cass. Dio XLIX 23; Colledge, 1967: 37-44.

However, this sweeping dynastic vision shattered irrevocably in 38 BCE, when the Roman general Ventidius Bassus lured Pacorus into a decisive ambush and killed him. His death was a strategic catastrophe for the entire anti-Roman coalition, but it was most poignantly a personal blow for Laodice. She lost not only a beloved son but the very dynastic leverage that rendered her existence bearable within the alien, highly competitive court of Ctesiphon.

The position of a foreign-born queen in the Arsacid court was, at the best of times, precarious.¹⁷ The cultural logic of the Ctesiphon palace was increasingly shifting toward an orthodox Iranian identity – a world defined by rigid ritual hierarchies and strict Zoroastrian propriety. For a woman raised in Samosata – educated in the fluid Greek tradition and thoroughly shaped by the syncretic, cosmopolitan spirit of the Orontids – Ctesiphon represented a slow, claustrophobic constriction of her world. She ultimately perished during the turbulent reign of Phraates IV, under unrecorded and highly suspicious circumstances.

Upon receiving news of his sister's death, Mithridates II of Commagene dispatched his magi eastward into the heart of Parthia to reclaim her remains.¹⁸ This was far more than a mere act of fraternal piety; it was a political statement of profound, almost reckless audacity. To demand the body of a deceased Parthian queen was to assert a primordial, dynastic claim that directly superseded the Arsacid court's sovereign authority over its own dead. In doing so, the Orontids were defiantly declaring that Laodice belonged to the sacred soil of Commagene before she belonged to the imperial throne of Parthia.

The magi successfully returned with her bones, and Mithridates interred them at Karakush in strict accordance with the Zoroastrian funerary canon.¹⁹ The thirty-meter tumulus stands to this day as a lonely sentinel over the Nymphaeus valley. Beside Laodice, Mithridates gathered his “beloved dead” – his mother Isias, his sister Antiochis, and her daughter Aka, whose shared epitaph we discussed above. The Karakush inscriptions, taken together, refuse the cold pragmatism of dynastic bookkeeping: they are personal in a way the stylistic constraints of the genre neither require nor fully explain, representing a rupture of genuine, raw human emotion tearing through the cold stone of dynastic duty.

Two Verticals as One System: Axis Mundi and Axis Mortis

Standard archaeological treatments of Nemrud and Karakush routinely present them as related but distinct monuments. This separation is methodologically convenient, yet interpretively impoverishing. It completely misses what the two monuments, when

¹⁷ Cass. Dio XLIX; Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 37; Colledge, 1967.

¹⁸ Sargsyan, 1988: 14-23; Facella, 2006; Margaryan, 2021: 272-278, 280.

¹⁹ Margaryan, 2001: 44-52, 2006: 17-24, 2021: 282-293, 272-278, 280.

read together, actually constitute: a singular, integrated cosmological statement about the nature of Orontid power, articulated through the profound spatial metaphor of the vertical.

In the religious imagination of virtually every culture, the vertical is the axis of communication between the human and the divine – what Mircea Eliade famously termed the *axis mundi*, the world-axis, the cosmic pole around which the entire universe organises itself.²⁰ Nemrud is an *axis mundi* of startling literalness: an actual mountain, elevated to an actual summit, where an actual living king placed himself among actual gods.²¹

The concept is not deployed here as an empty universalist label. The ancient Near East furnishes its own rich genealogy of the vertical: the Mesopotamian ziggurat, conceived as a literal staircase between the terrestrial and celestial planes; the Achaemenid royal audience itself, staged upon a raised dais beneath the winged disc of Ahura Mazda, casting the Great King as the terrestrial anchor of a cosmic order; and the enduring Zoroastrian association of mountain summits and fire altars with the axis separating the realm of Asha from the encroaching forces of the Lie.²² Antiochus I's hierothesion draws on precisely this Achaemenid and Zoroastrian inheritance of the sacred vertical, refracted through a Hellenistic idiom of colossal portrait sculpture and dexiosis. Nemrud, in other words, is not a generic instance of Eliade's phenomenological category grafted onto an unrelated cultural field; it is a specifically Perso-Anatolian articulation of it, continuous with a millennia-old regional grammar of mountain, throne, and sky.

Yet, the vertical is always a two-way street. If the *axis mundi* reaches relentlessly upward toward divinity and eternity, the *axis mortis* – the Axis of Death – reaches downward into the earth, toward the realm of the ancestral dead. Karakush reaches downward into the shadows as deliberately as Nemrud reaches upward into the light.

What makes the Orontid case truly remarkable is the degree to which these two distinct verticals are personally, and not merely dynastically, interconnected.²³ Nemrud is the ultimate monument to Antiochus I's self-apotheosis: his defiance that his fractured, double identity can only be resolved at the divine level where all clashing traditions converge. Karakush, conversely, is the monument to Mithridates II's grief: a visceral assertion that his sisters and mother – Laodice, sent away as a diplomatic pawn and ultimately swallowed by an alien imperial court, and Antiochis, “the most beautiful of women,” who never left – belong fundamentally here, in the highland soil of Commagene.²⁴

²⁰ Eliade, 1954.

²¹ Wagner, 2000.

²² Waldmann, 1973.

²³ Facella, 2006; Margaryan, 2021: 210-212.

²⁴ Said, 1978.

Furthermore, Mithridates II's summer residence, from whose high terrace the tumulus of Karakush was clearly visible in the valley below, established a precise, lived spatial relationship.²⁵ The living king was situated physically above the dead queen, yet his gaze was perpetually oriented toward her. Every morning, looking across the green, sweeping valley of the Nymphaeus, Mithridates beheld Karakush. The monument was not a distant destination to be visited; it was an intimate presence to be inhabited. If Nemrud is a monument of the extraordinary, the transcendent, and the sacred, then Karakush is a monument of the continuous – the everyday, the elegiac, and the profoundly human.

The Orontids did not survive the shifting tides of empire.²⁶ In 72 CE, under the Emperor Vespasian, Commagene was permanently absorbed into the Roman province of Syria, and its last ruling monarch, Antiochus IV, was unceremoniously deposed. The defiant dynasty that had successfully withstood the military might of Lucullus, Pompey, Crassus, and Mark Antony was extinguished not by a catastrophic military defeat, but by a cold administrative decree. Yet, the dialectical system the Orontids constructed – the *axis mundi* and the *axis mortis*, the king enthroned among the gods and the queen resting in the highland earth – endures in stone with a haunting permanence that the dynasty's political history could never achieve.

For it was Antiochis who was, in the inscription's own words, the most beautiful of women – and it is beside her, in death, that Laodice finally came to rest.

Conclusion

The hierothesion of Antiochus I on Mount Nemrud and the funerary tumulus of Karakush, raised by Mithridates II over the remains of his sister Laodice, are far more than two detached monumental relics of the Commagenian dynasty; they represent the twin, pulsating poles of a single, cohesive cosmological system. Organised around the evocative spatial metaphor of the vertical, these monuments express, in diametrically complementary directions, the complete existential condition of the Orontid rulers stranded between worlds.

The conventional scholarly interpretation of Nemrud strictly through the lens of “political theology” captures but a single dimension while regrettably neglecting another. It fundamentally underestimates the degree to which the dynastic programme was simultaneously – and inseparably – a profoundly personal one: the intimate response of a specific individual to the psychological burden of an identity forged from historically irresolvable contradictions. Antiochus I placed himself within the divine

²⁵ Bachelard, 1994.

²⁶ Abbott & Johnson, 1926; Bowersock, 1973; Stevenson, 1975; Braund, 1984: 173; Syme, 1988; Speidel, 2005; Haensch, 2010; Canepari, 2010; Andrade, 2013.

pantheon because divinity was the only existential category expansive enough to contain the fractured totality of his being.

Similarly, treating Karakush as merely a conventional funerary monument misses its profound, haunting essence. The epigraphic declaration – she was the most beautiful of women – deliberately transcends the cold pragmatism of the political sphere. It stands as the enduring testimony of a man still in the grip of personal grief, resolutely refusing the sterile consolations of dynastic abstraction. Karakush is not merely a regional dynastic marker; it is a raw act of love made permanent in earth and stone.

The Orontid rulers were never merely opportunistic strategic actors navigating the perilous geopolitical void between Rome and Parthia; they were human beings whose monuments express their emotional and existential investments far more fully than any diplomatic record or imperial archive could ever preserve. The frontier condition – that permanent state of “in-betweenness,” that structural impossibility of simple, unproblematic belonging – produced something vastly greater than a clever survival strategy; it produced a sovereign cosmology. It offers a profound, poetic account of the human situation itself, organised around the twin, unyielding imperatives of transcendence and memory.²⁷

When their political sovereignty finally dissolved – when Vespasian’s bureaucrats arrived with their rigid provincial decrees – what the Orontids left behind was not a transient political legacy, which empires erase by default, but an imperishable cosmological one. Two monuments, pointing in opposite, defiant directions from the rugged highland country above the Euphrates, still speak across the millennia of the king who enthroned himself among the gods, and of the most beautiful of women, sleeping in the quiet valley below.

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²⁷ Santangelo, 1947; Ranovich, 1949: 130; Oliver, 1983; Kleiner, 1983, 1986; Cormack, 1997; Smith, 1998; Byrne, 2003; Camp, 2004; Assmann, 2011.

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