

Greek and Syriac in Edessa and Osrhoene, CE 213-363

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1. Introduction

The rise of Syriac as a language of Christian culture and thought is a familiar aspect of the history of the Roman Near East. But we should not take this for granted, as if it could be easily understood, or as if it were not a very distinctive development in Roman provincial history. Equally, no-one will doubt that Syriac, at least as spoken and written within the Roman Empire, always functioned in a state of complex co-existence with Greek. This relationship has been the subject of important surveys and analyses by two major experts.¹ But we may still ask what evidence we have for the nature of this co-existence in one area and in a particular period, and how far this evidence allows us to understand the bilingual culture concerned.

This paper will examine the relations between Greek and Syriac at Edessa and in the surrounding area of Osrhoene, starting at the moment when King Abgar was deposed by Caracalla in CE 212/13, Edessa became a Roman *colonia*, and the kingdom was absorbed into provincial territory.² It will then examine the evidence — erratically distributed in time, and often highly ambiguous — for the period up to the loss of Nisibis to the Persians in CE 363, and the subsequent move of the great Syriac poet and theologian Ephrem from there to Edessa. The linguistic history of the century-and-a-half concerned is a surprising one in various ways. On the one hand, the absorption of a Syriac-speaking kingdom into the Roman provincial structure might have been the moment when the use of Syriac there began to decline, whether slowly or rapidly. In fact, as is well known, it did not. But, on the other hand, the subsequent evidence which can be specifically related to Edessa or Osrhoene is quite limited (see below), and hence the conception of Edessa as having been from an early stage the main centre of Syriac literary culture is possibly misplaced.³ What gave it this centrality, it may be suggested, was the arrival there of Ephrem.

¹ S.P. Brock, 'Greek and Syriac in Late Antique Syria', in A.K. Bowman and G. Woolf (eds.), *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1994), 149-60, repr. in *From Ephrem to Romanos: Interactions between Greek and Syriac in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1999), ch. I; D.G.K. Taylor, 'Bilingualism and Diglossia in Late Antique Syria and Mesopotamia', in J.N. Adams, M. Janse and S. Swain (eds.), *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and the Written Word* (Oxford, 2002), 298-331.

² For the chronology of this transformation, see F. Millar, *The Roman Near East 31bc-AD 337* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), esp. App. 3. For a valuable recent study of the strategic and social context see M. Sommer, 'Modelling Rome's Eastern frontier: the case of Osrhoene', in T. Kaizer and M. Facella (eds.), *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East* (Stuttgart, 2010), 217-226.

³ It is of course entirely possible, as John Healey reminds me, that early Syriac works such as the *Odes of Solomon* or the *Vetus Syra* gospels derive from Edessa. But there is a danger of

As for the wider background, it is essential to stress that Greco-Roman civilisation, as exemplified in the workings and culture of the Roman Empire, was conspicuous in having given formal recognition to only two languages, Latin and Greek. That did not mean that steps were taken to eradicate or suppress the use of other languages; there is no evidence that the Empire had any such policy, or indeed any consistent policy relating to language-use.⁴ But, equally, it is clear that the Imperial government, like its provincial representatives, never expressed itself in any language other than Latin or Greek, or was ever addressed — orally or in writing — through the medium of any language other than these.

That did not mean that other languages were not in use, both for speech and writing. To take only a few examples, we have evidence for the use within the Empire of, for instance, Celtic, neo-Punic (attested until the end of the fourth century),⁵ Egyptian, Hebrew and a number of different branches of Aramaic, as both dialects and scripts, in particular Nabataean, Palmyrene and Syriac itself.⁶

We will look briefly below at the fortunes of Nabataean and Palmyrene under the Empire, but it is necessary to stress first the profound contrast both with Egyptian culture and language on the one hand, and Jewish culture, expressed in Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic, on the other. In both cases a literate culture already existed before Alexander's conquest and the creation of the Hellenistic kingdoms. The continuity of Jewish religious culture, based on the Bible, needs no emphasis. As regards Egyptian writing in hieroglyphic, sometimes adorning newly-built Egyptian-style temples, it continued through the Hellenistic and Roman periods until the fourth century. The demotic script also evolved, and was used for perishable documents. But the key step on which long-term continuity was based was the invention in the Imperial period of an alphabetic script, derived from the Greek alphabet, which, as Coptic, was to be characteristic above all of the monophysite Egyptian Church.⁷ Thus, first in their pre-Classical origins and then in their long-term survival, both contrast sharply with two of the three branches of Aramaic with which we will be concerned at this point.

circularity, and, as a point of principle, I discuss here only material which is explicitly attested as having been written in Edessa or Osrhoene.

⁴ See the survey by B. Rochette, 'Language Policies in the Roman Republic and Empire', in J. Clackson (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to the History of the Latin Language* (Oxford, in press).

⁵ See the thorough analysis by A. Wilson, 'Neo-Punic and Latin Inscriptions in Roman North Africa', in A. Mullen and P. James (eds.), *Multilingualism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, in press).

⁶ See now H. Gzella and M.L. Folmer (eds.), *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting* (Wiesbaden, 2008), and J.F. Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions and Documents of the Roman Period* (Textbook of Syriac Semitic Inscriptions IV, Oxford, 2009).

⁷ See now T.S. Richter, 'Greek, Coptic and the "Language of the Hijra": The Rise and Decline of the Coptic Language in Late Antique and Medieval Egypt', in H.M. Cotton, R.G. Hoyland, J.J. Price and D.J. Wasserstein (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge, 2009), 401-446. See now A. Papaconstantinou (ed.), *The Multilingual Experience in Egypt, from the Ptolemies to the 'Abbāsids*, (Ashgate, 2010).

Aramaic too had of course been in use before Alexander, above all in the Achaemenid Persian Empire. But, firstly, direct and concrete evidence for its currency as a popular language, spoken or written, in the later centuries BCE is extremely scarce. The generally accepted proposition that it was indeed the normal language of daily life in the Near East through the Hellenistic period depends on faith rather than on evidence (it may of course be that one day perishable documents or graffiti may be found, which disprove this sceptical view). As regards all three of the known branches of non-Jewish Aramaic, as attested in the areas eventually ruled by Rome, written documents in the relevant dialects and scripts appear, in the evidence so far available, only in the later Hellenistic or early Roman periods, and in relatively peripheral areas rather than Syria proper: Nabataean from the second century BCE; Palmyrene from the 40s BCE onwards; and Syriac, found in inscriptions from the first century CE onwards.⁸ In other words, whatever may be the wider linguistic background, these specific forms of script and dialect emerge only in the course of the Greco-Roman period. All three are also the products of independent or semi-independent political entities, kingdoms in the case of Nabataean and Syriac, and a city in that of Palmyrene.

So far as we know, although both Nabataea and Palmyra were (at least to some degree) literate societies, there was never any literary production in either language, though there seems no obvious reason why there could not have been. The history of Palmyrene shows a flourishing bi- (and occasionally tri-) lingual 'epigraphic habit' in Palmyrene and Greek, which ceases soon after the Roman re-conquest of the 270s. If Palmyrene continued to be spoken after that, we have no evidence of it; and if it was ever a Christian language, we have no trace of that either. Bishops of Palmyra, from the Council of Nicaea of CE 325 onwards, functioned in Greek, at least as regards their participation in the wider Greek Church.

Nabataean represents a more complex case. Inscriptions in Nabataean dating from after the Roman takeover of CE 106 and the creation of the Roman province of 'Arabia', are few, and largely confined to the outer fringes of the Nabataean area. But they are not unknown; a few are as late as the fourth century, and new discoveries tend to confirm that there was a relationship between later written Nabataean and the earliest forms of Arabic writing.⁹ There is also a major historical question relating to the ever-increasing epigraphic evidence, in various Semitic languages, from the wider Arabian peninsula, and to the question of how the survival of Nabataean relates to that.¹⁰

Nabataean contrasts with Palmyrene, however, in that there is a small corpus of Nabataean documents on perishable materials dating to the later years of the kingdom, and the earliest stages of the Roman province. These texts thus provide an instructive contrast (see below) with those coming from the period of transition from kingdom to

⁸ For an invaluable list see S. Brock, 'Edessene Syriac Inscriptions in late antique Syria', in Cotton et al. (n. 7 above), 289-302.

⁹ See most recently L. Nehmé, 'A Glimpse of the Development of the Nabataean Script into Arabic Based on Old and New Epigraphic Material', in M.C.A. Macdonald (ed.), *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language* (Supplement to the *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 40, Oxford, 2010), 47-88.

¹⁰ M.C.A. Macdonald, 'Ancient Arabia and the Written Word', in Macdonald (ed.), (n. 9 above), 5-27.

province in Osrhoene. To give only the briefest summary, legal documents on papyrus written in Nabataean under the kingdom are known from CE 59-69, 94 and 99 (three). After the formation of the province, documents written in Nabataean are known from 119 and 122, while documents in Greek, but with subscriptions written (in the person's own hand) in Nabataean, come from 122, 125, 129 and 130. The linguistic, cultural and religious situation in this case is complicated by the fact that many of the parties to the transactions concerned are Jews using Jewish Aramaic, so there are also documents in Aramaic, and subscriptions in Aramaic to Greek documents.¹¹ We cannot follow the linguistic evolution here any further, because there are no relevant documents on perishable materials from after the Bar Kochba war of CE 132-5. But what is clearly visible is the rapidly established predominance of Greek as the language of the main documents (first attested in CE 110, four years after the formation of the province), with limited use of Nabataean either for documents or for personal subscriptions. The perishable documents from the Nabataean kingdom demonstrate beyond question that there was, at least among some, a level of literacy which would have made a literature in Nabataean possible. But we know of no such literature, either before or after the imposition of Roman rule. In Osrhoene, by contrast, there was literary production in Syriac both before and after the end of the kingdom.

2. Osrhoene: from kingdom to province

The use of Syriac by the royal dynasty of Edessa and its subjects is amply demonstrated by both coins and inscriptions, among which a group of inscribed mosaics with visual representations of individuals has a significant place.¹² The literary culture of the kingdom is represented above all by *The Book of the Laws of Countries*, in which Bardesanes appears as the main participant in a dialogue (which does not represent a good reason for rejecting the view of later sources that he was also the author).¹³ There is

¹¹ The summary indications of date given above depend on the list of texts in H.M. Cotton, W.E.H. Cockle and F.G.B. Millar, 'The Papyrology of the Roman Near East: a Survey', *Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995), 214-235, on pp. 224-225, which naturally requires revision. The principal relevant publications are N. Lewis (ed.), *The Documents from the Bar-Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters: Greek Papyri* (Jerusalem, 1989); Y. Yadin, J.C. Greenfield, A. Yardeni, B.A. Levine (eds.), *The Documents from the Bar-Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters: Hebrew, Aramaic and Nabataean-Aramaic Papyri*, (Jerusalem, 2002) (unfortunately categorised by language rather than chronological order). All the Semitic-language texts are included in A. Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabataean Documentary Texts from the Judaean Desert, and Related Material A-B* (Jerusalem, 2000). See also Healey, (n. 6 above), ch. III.

¹² These are all collected in H.J.W. Drijvers and J.F. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene: Texts, Translations and Commentary* (Leiden, 1999). While the majority are not dated, those which are explicitly dated (by the years of the Seleucid era) are listed by Brock, (n. 8 above). From the later decades of the kingdom there are inscriptions from 162 (two), 192, 194, 201/2 and 209. See also Healey, (n. 6 above), ch. VI.

¹³ For the text see the edition and translation by F. Nau, *Le livre des lois des pays* (Paris, 1899), and H.J.W. Drijvers, *The Book of the Laws of Countries: Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen, 1965, repr. Piscataway, NJ, 2007). References are to pages of this latter edition.

no need to repeat here the evidence about Bardesanes himself, or for other works attributed to him,¹⁴ except to stress a few key points about his *Laws*. Firstly, the work refers (p. 56) to the recent Roman conquest of ‘Arabia’, which will certainly mean the acquisition by Septimius Severus in the 190s of Mesopotamia (which was one of the many areas to which the term ‘Arabia’ might be applied),¹⁵ and which earned the Emperor the victory-names ‘Arabicus’ and ‘Adiabenicus’. A little later (p. 58), the *Laws* records that King Abgar had ‘come to believe’ — or ‘had been convinced?’ — (HYMN), and had ordered that all who emasculated themselves should have a hand cut off. As the text of this same passage, as quoted in Greek by Eusebius, confirms (see below), this term is not, as often supposed, an unambiguous reference to the king becoming a Christian. For, firstly, Eusebius’ Greek version replaces this verb by an adverbial phrase, $\mu\iota\grave{\alpha} \rho\omicron\pi\eta$ (‘by a single impulse’); and secondly it is only after that that Bardesanes speaks of Christians, and in doing so identifies himself as one of them (p. 58): ‘The new people of us Christians (ŠRBT’ HDT’ DYLN DKRSTYN)’. But then, in listing examples of the changes in the ‘laws’ of different countries brought about by Christianity (p. 60), he identifies the relevant change in Edessa not as the ending of self-emasculation, but as the banning of the killing of wives or sisters guilty of adultery. The major contemporary historian, Cassius Dio (LXXVII, 12, 1), reports that the motivation for Abgar’s legislative innovations was to make Edessene customs conform with Roman ones. This confirms that we should see the changes brought about by Christianity and those instituted by Abgar as distinct.

Bardesanes is recorded as having been born in CE 154 and having died in 222, and thus he lived through the transition by which Abgar was deposed in 212/13, and Edessa was given the status of a Roman *colonia*. So, even if the *Laws* was composed in this latter phase, which there is no positive reason to suggest, Bardesanes was clearly a product of the distinctive culture of the semi-independent kingdom, which had been transferred from Parthian to Roman domination in the 190s. This same culture is reflected in the mosaics of this period; but both they and the *Laws* also reflect the influence of Greek culture. Several of the mosaics depict scenes from Greek mythology,¹⁶ and a small scatter of Greek inscriptions from Edessa and Osrhoene in this period shows that the Greek language was also current.¹⁷ Much more significant, however, is the fact that the dialogue presented in the *Laws* is plainly modelled on Greek philosophical dialogues. Moreover, Eusebius, writing his *Ecclesiastical History* (IV, 30) less than a century later, speaks of Bardesanes’ literary abilities, the numerous works which he composed, and the fact that these had been translated from Syriac into Greek

¹⁴ For a full, if speculative, discussion see H.J.W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen, 1966).

¹⁵ M.C.A. Macdonald, ‘Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic before Late Antiquity’, *Topoi* 16 (2009), 277-322.

¹⁶ F. Millar, ‘Narrative and Identity in Mosaics from the Late Roman Near East: Pagan, Jewish and Christian’, in Y.Z. Eliav, E.A. Friedland and S. Herbert (eds.), *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East* (Leuven, 2008), 225-256.

¹⁷ They are conveniently collected in F. Canali De Rossi, *Iscrizioni dello Estremo Oriente Greco* (Bonn, 2004), esp. nos. 27 (CE 176/7) and 33 (CE 195). Note also a bilingual tomb-inscription of the first or second century (no. 25), and a Jewish inscription in Greek and Syriac, written in square Hebrew letters, of uncertain date (no. 26).

by his associates (γνώριμοι), by which he surely intends to mean local associates, not people working elsewhere in the Greek world. That such translations did indeed take place is confirmed by the fact that several substantial extracts from the *Laws* (including that referring to King Abgar's 'turn', where in the Greek there is no suggestion of conversion to Christianity) are quoted in Greek translation by Eusebius himself, in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* (VI.9.32-10.48; on Abgar, 10.44, see above). We will return below to a further report by Eusebius on Syriac material at Edessa.

The other primary document in Syriac, deriving from the last years of the kingdom, is the vivid description of the flood of CE 201, which appears, anomalously, as the first entry in the sixth-century *Chronicle of Edessa*, which otherwise recounts the history of the city from the 130s BCE onwards. Its claim to be a contemporary eyewitness account, subsequently attached to the *Chronicle*, is reinforced at the end by a colophon recording that two 'scribes of Orhai' (SPR' D'WRHY) had written the text on the orders of King Abgar, and that two other officials, who were in charge of the archive of Orhai (QYMYN HWW 'L 'RKY'WN D'WRH'), had accepted it into the archive in their capacity as commissioners (ŠRYR') of the city.¹⁸ The presence of a few Greek loan-words in the text will do nothing to obscure its profoundly distinctive character, as a contemporary account of a local event, written in a non-Classical language, which was later given pride of place in the *Chronicle*.

The deposition of the King, and the transformation of the official name and the institutions of the city into those of a Roman *colonia* in CE 212/13, must have been a striking, even perhaps traumatic, event. But for the initial 'colonial' period, from CE 213 to 239, we have, unfortunately, no direct contemporary evidence, except for a small group of inscriptions: a Syriac tomb-inscription of CE 224; one of 228, incorporating the figure of Orpheus, duly labelled ('RPWS); and another of 235/6, with the phoenix, also labelled (PNKS). There is nothing in these brief texts to suggest any sudden transformation of local culture.¹⁹

In any case, for unknown reasons, by CE 239/40 a reversal had taken place, for this was the first year of 'Aelius Septimius Abgar, King'. This dating comes from the earliest of a group of five very revealing parchment documents, in Syriac and Greek, spread over the years 240, 242, 243, 249 and 250, which between them reflect in remarkable vividness and detail the political, cultural and linguistic transformations of Osrhoene in the mid-third century. Since they have so much more to offer than our other evidence, they will be treated here in more detail, but only, and specifically, as regards the relative roles of Greek and Syriac, and the question of personal literacy.²⁰

¹⁸ Ed. and trans. L. Hallier, *Untersuchungen über die Edessenische Chronik* (Leipzig, 1892), on p. 147.

¹⁹ CE 224: Drijvers and Healey (n. 12 above), Am 9, and see also Healey (n. 6 above), no. 56; 228: Drijvers and Healey, Am 7, Healey no. 53; 235/6: Drijvers and Healey, Am 6, Healey no. 54.

²⁰ The first three parchments can be found conveniently, with text and translation, in Drijvers and Healey (n. 12 above), pp. 231-248 — but, regrettably, not in chronological order: P1, CE 243; P2, CE 240; P3, CE 242. Those of CE 249 and 250 are published by D. Feissel and J. Gascou, 'Documents d'archives romains inédits du Moyen Euphrate (III^e s. après J.-C.). II. Les actes de vente-achat (P.Euphr. 6 à 10)', *Journal des Savants* (1997), 3, nos. 6/7 (CE 249) and 10 (250).

3. The Parchments of the Mid-Third Century from Osrhoene

- (a) Drijvers-Healey, P 2 (pp. 237-242); Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions* (n. 6 above), no. 62 (pp. 252-264), CE 240.

This Syriac document was written at a place here described as ‘Haykla New Town of Hunting’, identified by the editors as being the same as the place which is later referred to below, in (b) and (d), in Greek as ‘Marcopolis Thera’, southwest of Edessa. This town was within the restored kingdom, since the document is dated by the year 552 of the ‘former (Seleucid) era, the third year of the Emperor Gordian and the second year of Aelius Septimius Abgar, the king, son of Ma’nu, crown prince, son of Abgar the king’. It concerns the recovery of a loan which had not been repaid by the due date. Three different elements in it bear on the question of personal literacy:

1. In ll. 25-6 of the lower text we find the following statement:

25 I, Hašša, son of Mattay, from New Town declare that I have written
 26 on behalf of Ba’išu son, of Abgar, since he does not know how to write...
 25 MWDN’ HŠ’ BR MTY MN KRK’ HDT’ DKTBT
 26 HLP B’YŠW BR ’BGR DSPR’ L’ YD’

2. However, on ll. 29-30 we find, in a way which might seem contradictory, the subscription of the scribe who actually wrote the document:

29 I, Bar Bassa, the scribe, son of
 30 Barba’šamin, wrote this document.
 29 ’N’ BR BS’ SPR’ BR
 30 BRB’ŠMYN KTBT ŠTR’ HN’.

The context is perhaps that Hašša had written an earlier statement, which was then incorporated in the official copy. Hašša also appears below.

3. On the verso there appear five hand-written affirmations by individuals, who either say ‘I have guaranteed’ [‘RBT] or call themselves ‘witness’ [here spelled ŠHD], or both. The fifth entry repeats the first:

v.1 I, Ba’isu, son of Taymu, have guaranteed: he witnesses on his own behalf.
 v.2 I, Hašša son of Mattay, have guaranteed: I have sealed this document.
 v.3 I, Šalam, son of Bar’ata, have guaranteed: he witnesses.
 v.4 I, ‘Abduk, have guaranteed: he witnesses.
 v.5 (repeats 1)

- (b) Drijvers-Healey, P3 (pp. 243-248), CE 242.

This Syriac parchment of 242, concerning the lease of repossessed property, was written in the same place, now called (in Greek, but in Syriac transliteration) ‘Marcopolis Thera’; but it belongs in a new phase in the life of Edessa, namely the now reconstituted *colonia*: it is dated to the year 553 ‘of the Greeks’, in the fifth year of the Emperor Gordian, by the two consuls of the year, and by year 30 of the ‘liberation’ of the *colonia* of Edessa. We also catch a glimpse of the institutions of Marcopolis Thera (MRQPWLS TR’), namely (ll. 4-5 of the lower text) the priesthood (KMRWT’) of someone also described as HYRWS (transliterated Greek *hierus*), and (l. 5) the

'archonship' ('RKWNWT') of someone else. Various elements concern personal literacy:

1. In ll.6f. we find an affirmation by the lessor, Worod, son of Nišryahb, son of Philota, 'that I have signed this document' (DKTBT BŠTR' HN'), and also a reference (ll. 9-10) to the lessee, Marcus Aurelius Tamarqos, having agreed to the terms — 'as he acknowledges from his own mouth' ('YKN' DQR' HW ŠTR' MN PMH).
2. At the end of the main text, there comes a four-line statement in Syriac by Aurelius Worod, which seems to represent the full original text of the affirmation by him mentioned above; not all the elements are clear. It is also not clear whether this is in his own hand or is a copy; (ll. 22-25), trans. Drijvers and Healey:

22 I, Aurelius Worod, son of Nišryahb, declare to Tamarqos son of Šama:

23 I have leased to him this pledge-land and enclosure and buildings in the village of
Seherta;

24 I have leased to him [?] for the whole year, and he received rent for it,

25 [?], as he has written above ('YKN DM'L KTB).

The last line is puzzling, since the 'he' here is Tamarqos, but it does not seem that there is anything written by him above.

3. Further questions are raised by the remaining two lines, where a scribe attests that he has written the document (ll. 26-7):

26 I, Marcus Aurelius Gadda, the scribe, son

27 of Gadda, the scribe, wrote this document.

26 MRQWS 'WRLWS GD' SPR' BR

27 GD' SPR' KTBŠTR' HN'

It will be noted that there is an identical affirmation in the previous document (a), which raises similar questions about who actually wrote what. There, witness-statements appear on the verso (and there are faint traces of these here also), so probably it is only these which we should see as representing the actual hand-writing of their authors, rather than copies of previous hand-written statements.

- (c) Drijvers-Healey, P 1 (pp. 232-236); Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions*, no. 63 (pp. 265-275), Edessa, CE 243.

This Syriac parchment of the sale of a slave-girl, found in the excavations of Dura-Europos, but written at Edessa, is both by far the best known and the most striking of the group of five documents considered here. It is dated by year 6 of Gordian, by the consuls, by the Seleucid year (554) and by year 31 of the 'liberation' of Edessa, with its full Roman titulature (l. 4, lower text): 'NṬWNYN' 'DS' NŠYHT' QWLWNY' MṬRPWLS 'WRLY' 'LKSNDRY' ('Antonina Edessa the Glorious, Colonia, Metropolis Aurelia Alexandria'). The priesthood (KMRWT') of one city-official is recorded, as is the *strategia* ('STRTGWT') of another, *strategos* being the standard Greek term for the *duumvir* of a *colonia*.

Here again, various elements are found which relate to personal literacy, or illiteracy:

1. At the end of the lower text an affirmation is entered, recording that someone has written for the female vendor of the slave because she is illiterate (ll. 20-3):

20.

I, Aurelius Ḥapsay,

21. son of Šamašyahb, Edessene of the twelfth tribe, declare that I have signed on behalf
of Aurelia
22. Matar'ata, my wife, in the subscription, since she does not know how to write, that
she has sold this female slave of hers
23. and received her price as is written above.
20. MWDN' 'WRLS ḤPSY
21. BR ŠMŠYHB 'DYSY' MN PYLYS (φύλη) DTRT'ŠR' DKTBT ḤLP 'WRLY'
22. MTR'T' 'NTTY BRŠM' DSPR' L' ḤKM' DZBNT 'MT' HD' DY LH
23. WQBLT DMYH 'YK DKTYB MN L'L
2. Below the main text come witness-statements from two private persons and a city official (ll. 24-8), which are notable for the alternating use of Syriac and Greek:
24. I, Marcus Aurelius son of Kalba, witness.
25. I, Marcus Aurelius son of [], witness.
26. With the signature of the inspector of documents:
27. I, Aurelius Mannos, superintendent of the sacred
28. and civic (archives), witness.
24. MRQWS 'WRLS BR KLB' ŠHD
25. MRQWS 'WRLS BR P[- -] ŠHD
26. BRŠM' DMBHR' LŠTRYN
27. Αὐρ. Μάννος ὁ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἱεροῦ καὶ
28. τοῦ πολιτικοῦ μ(α)ρ(τυρώ)
- It would seem that the first two lines either are autographs in Syriac, or (as above) are copies of earlier autograph statements, and that l. 26 refers forward in Syriac to the functions of Aurelius Mannos, who then gives his name and office, and testifies in Greek (or had earlier done so, if this is also a copy).
3. As regards the *recto*, there remains one further element (ll. 29-30), a statement by the scribe:
29. I, Marcus Aurelius Belšu, son of
30. Moqimu the scribe, wrote this document
29. MRQWS 'WRLYWS BLŠW BR
30. MQYMW SPR' KTBT ŠTR' HN'
4. Finally, on the *verso*, there are four witness-statements, of which the first is repeated *verbatim* in l. 5. This is the more puzzling, as the 'author' is the illiterate Aurelia Matar'ata, the seller. But, firstly, her statement is given in the third person, while her husband, Aurelius Hapsay, appears in l. 2 in a different capacity from that of a witness, namely as placing a seal on the document. This section too is notable for the alternation of Syriac and Greek.
- v.1 Aurelia Matar'ata, daughter of Šamnay, the seller, witnesses on her own behalf.
- v.2 I, Aurelius Hapsay, son of Šamšyahb, have sealed on this document.
- v.3 I, Aurelius Abgar, strategos, witness. Abgaros.
- v.4 I, Abgar son of Barsimya, witness.
- v.5 (repeats v.1)
- v.1 'WRLY' MTR'T' BRT ŠMNY MZBNNYT' 'L NPŠH ŠHD'
- v.2 'WRLS ḤPSY BR ŠMŠYHB ḤTMT 'L ŠTR' HN'
- v.3 'WRLS 'BGR ŠTRTG' ŠHD "Αβγαρος
- v.4 'BGR BR BRSMY' ŠHD

v.5 (repeats v.1)

The Aurelius Abgar who appears in both Syriac and Greek in v.3 must be the same Marcus Aurelius Abgar, *eques Romanus* (HPWS RHMWS) who is one of the two *stratēgoilduumviri* of the year (ll. 5-6). It is noticeable that in stating his office he omits the normal initial *olaph*. His name then appears also in Greek. We must surely conclude that in witnessing he wrote his name in both languages. A similar mixture of Syriac and Greek appears in the subscriptions of a large group of clerics in Edessa who in 449 made a statement in support of bishop Ibas. The implications of that will need to be discussed further elsewhere.

(d) *P.Euphr.*, nos. 6/7 (pp. 6-26). Marcopolis Thera, CE 249

The two parchments on which the main copies of text are written in Greek brings us back once again to Marcopolis, and records the sale of a slave there in November 249. However, what is significant from the point of view of individual literacy is the extensive series of personal attestations written below the text, mainly in Syriac, with some Greek terms in transliteration, along with two items in Greek. The document comes in two copies, and I quote the text from the more complete version (no. 6, ll. 32-45). As before, I take the separate elements in order.

1. An attestation in Syriac by Aurelius Qoza on behalf of the female vendor, Maththabin, who is illiterate:

32. I, Aurelius Qoza, son of Abba, have written on behalf of Maththabin, daughter of
Abba, who

33. does not know how to write, and she has sold (terms of sale follow)
'WRLS QWZ' BR 'B' KTB T HLP MTBYN BRT 'B' DKTB
DSPR' L(')HKM' WZBNT...

2. Statements by an official and two witnesses, all in Syriac, followed by a note in Greek.

36. Aurelius Salamsin, agent (*πραγματευτής*) of the archon (or archontes?) in charge of the archive (*ἀρχεῖον*) (no verb follows).

37. I, Aurelius Lela, son of Belsyn, on the orders of Belsyn, *oikonomos* (*οἰκονόμος*),
38. witness.

39. I, Aurelius Leitabsin, son of Marabilaha, witness.

40. (This) was written by Balesos, no(tary).

36. 'WRLS ŠLMSYN PRGMTWT' D'RKWN' D'L 'RKYWN

37. 'WRLS LL' BR BLSYN MN PQDN' DBSLYN 'QMNS'

38. ŠHD

39. 'WRLS LTYBSYN BR MR'BYLH' ŠHD

40. ἔγρά(φη) παρὰ Βαλεσῶ νο(μικῶ)

3. On the *verso*, in both 6 and 7, there are the fragmentary remains of four witness-statements written in Syriac, and one in Greek.

(e) *P.Euphr.*, no. 10 (pp. 45-53). Parchment, written in Greek, recording the sale of a horse at Carrhae, CE 250.

Here again, the presence of the wider Roman Empire is manifest. The document is dated by the consuls of the year, one of them the Emperor Decius, by the Roman

calendar and by the Seleucid year (561). Carrhae too has become a Roman *colonia*, with a grandiloquent title: ‘Aurelia Carrhae, *colonia, metropolis* of Mesopotamia’. The vendor, Aurelius Barbesumes (BRBŠMYN), is identified as a ‘Carrhene of the tribe Antoniane’.

As we have seen before, however, the Greek text is followed by three types of personal attestation, all expressed either in Syriac or in a mixture of Syriac and Greek.

1. Affirmation by Aurelius Barbesumen:

20. I, Aurelius Barbesumen
 21. son of Barsimya, a Harranian from the tribe A[n]t[o]niane, have sold a red-
 coloured horse,
 22. and have received its price, 750 *denarii*, as is written
 23. above.
20. 'WRLS BRBŠMYN
 21. BR BSMY' HRNY' MN PL' 'T[W]NY' ZBNT SWST' HL'
 22. W QBLT DM[Y]H DYNR' ŠB' M' WHMŠYN 'YKN' KTYB M<N>
 23. YD L'L

2. One witness then signs in Syriac:

24. I, Aurelius Barsimya, publican of Šin, witness.
 24. 'WRLS BRSMY' MKS' DSYN ŠHD

3. There follows an authentication in Greek:

25. Aurelius Konas,
 26. It was written by me.
 25. **Αὐρήλιος Κωνας**
 26. **ἔγραφή παρ' ἐμοί**

The statement by Konas that he had written the text seems to be confirmed by the fact that the handwriting here is the same as that in the main Greek document.

4. Finally (ll. 27-31), four fragmentary names in Syriac, evidently of witnesses, and one in Greek, appear on the *verso*, but need not be set out here.

Taken together, these five documents, dating to CE 240, 242, 243, 249 and 250, offer remarkable testimony to public scribal and documentary practice in three different cities, Edessa, Marcopolis Thera and Carrhae; to individual literacy and language-use; and to the transition from a (briefly restored) kingdom to established provincial status. What we encounter here is closely comparable to the image of the transition from the Nabataean monarchy to the Roman province of Arabia (see above), where there are quite elaborate Nabataean documents from the end of the regal period, but where Greek rapidly takes over as the established language of public documentary practice. In the case of Edessa it is striking that in the document of 243, deriving from the restored *colonia*, Syriac is still used for the main text. But in those of 249 and 250 it has been replaced by Greek, with Syriac confined to personal attestations and witness-statements.

Unfortunately, this aspect of the linguistic history of the area cannot be pursued further. For, just as there is no later coherent body of mosaics with representational art and Syriac inscriptions to match those of the 190s to 230s, so there are (so far at least) no further documentary texts on perishable materials. It is not until we reach the earliest of

the known Syriac *codices*, written in Edessa in CE 411, that we again encounter Syriac writing on perishable material — and here of course we are dealing with literary texts, not documents. But, the colophons written in their own names by the scribes who wrote these *codices* do provide a certain continuity with the personal attestations and witness-statements of the documents.

4. Edessa and Osrhoene from the Mid-Third Century to the Mid-Fourth

Documentary evidence for this whole century is very poor, amounting to one mosaic (now lost), with an inscription in Syriac from a tomb of unknown location, which is dated to the year [5]70, hence CE 250.²¹ Nor are there any certain cases of literary works, whether in Syriac or Greek, which can be securely dated to the third century, and attributed to Edessa. One much-canvassed possibility is the *Acts of Thomas*. Much more probable are the acts of the Edessene martyrs of the early fourth century (see below). We must therefore make what we can of reports by contemporary observers, or later narratives which report events falling within this period. It is quite significant in this context that the sixth-century *Chronicle of Edessa* records nothing of any relevance between the building of his palace by King Abgar in CE 205/6 (para. IX), and the establishment of the first church in Edessa by bishop Qona in 313 (para. XII). Thereafter, the chronicler's notices are much fuller (see below).

From the later third century and the Tetrarchic period (CE 284-312) we have very limited and indirect evidence. For instance, as we have seen, Eusebius, writing his *Ecclesiastical History* around the end of the third century, shows himself to be aware of the numerous works which Bardesanes had written 'in his native language and script', and which had been translated from Syriac into Greek by his associates; and in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* he duly quotes in Greek a couple of sections from the *Laws*. On the one hand, this shows a relatively rare awareness on the part of a Christian writing in Greek of Christian literary composition in another language. At the same time, his explicit mention that it had been Bardesanes' associates, or disciples, who were responsible for the translation into Greek, illustrates again the interaction between the two languages in the Edessene context.

As is argued above, there is no unambiguous historical evidence that any of the royal dynasty had ever converted to Christianity, or that after their disappearance the city had been collectively Christian; such a state of affairs, obtaining before the conversion of Constantine, would have been inconceivable in any provincial city, and even more so in one which was a Roman *colonia* and the *metropolis* of its province, and hence the normal place of residence of the provincial governor. The idea of such a conversion, however, also derives its origin from Eusebius, namely the report in his *Ecclesiastical History* (I.13), of how the then King Abgar of Edessa heard of Jesus' miraculous cures, wrote him a letter and received an answer (both of which are quoted), and how the Apostle Thomas, after Jesus' death, sent Thaddaeus to cure the king. The relevance of this plainly non-historical material in the present context lies in Eusebius' statement about its source (I.13.5):

²¹ Drijvers and Healey (n. 12 above), 160-162, Am 1.

You have the written evidence for this, derived from the archives (*grammatophylakia*) in Edessa, then a city under royal rule. For among the public documents there, both those concerning ancient events and events under Abgar, these too are to be found preserved from his time until now. So one must hear these actual letters, taken by us from the archives, and in the following manner translated word for word from the Syriac.

That there was a tradition about Abgar and Jesus in Edessa is beyond doubt, and it is later reflected both by the pilgrim Egeria and, in much expanded form, in the *Doctrina Addai*. But no-one will believe that Eusebius visited Edessa himself and read this material in Syriac, or could have. So what he claims about public documentation preserved there in Syriac must also be dubious. There is no strong reason to doubt that the *Christian community* at Edessa could have been in possession of such texts, or that they were in Syriac. But, while nothing can be certain, since the culture of Edessa was plainly not that of a standard Greco-Roman city, it is highly unlikely either that a legendary Christian narrative would have been retained in the *public* archives of a still officially pagan city, or (less certainly) that these archives would have been in Syriac. The move from Syriac to Greek is clearly illustrated by the parchment documents of the 240s discussed above. None the less, some caution is in order. The parchment of CE 243, from the first years of the restored *colonia*, records (l. 9) that one of the two copies of this Syriac deed of sale ‘will be entered into the archive of Antonina Edessa the Glorious’ (N‘L B‘RKYWN D‘NṬWNYN’ ‘DS’ NṢYḤT’). But it remains very improbable that such a text could have been placed in these archives.

Ambiguities of this type characterise all of our evidence about the culture of Edessa and its character as a city, and perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the two martyr-acts of the Tetrarchic period, that of Shmona and Guria, and that of Habbib. All three of these individuals are recorded in the calendar of martyrs which is the last text contained in the famous Syriac *codex* copied in Edessa in CE 411 — but this text, like all the others, is a translation from a Greek version originally put together elsewhere.²² The powerful and moving Syriac Acts of these martyrs, edited and translated by F.C. Burkitt,²³ claim to have been written by one Theophilus, and in the case of Shmona and Guria only five days after their deaths (para. 69); as regards Habbib, both the martyrdom itself and the writing of the Acts took place later (para. 40) — but these Acts too claim to be first-person contemporary testimony.

Burkitt argued that, whatever elaboration may have taken place in the representations of improving verbal exchanges between the martyrs and their captors (and whether introduced by Theophilus himself or in the course of later transmission), the basic narrative is in both cases realistic, and should be accepted as contemporary. Both he and Susan Ashbrook Harvey suggest, without advancing specific arguments, that the texts reached their present form by the end of the fourth century, and perhaps as early as about

²² For the *codex*, BL Add. 12150, see W.H.P. Hatch, *An Album of Dated Syriac Manuscripts* (Boston, 1946; reissued with Introduction by L. Van Rompay, Princeton, NJ, 2002), no. 1. The text is edited, introduced and translated by F. Nau, *Martyrologe du IV^e siècle*, PO X.1 (1915), 5-28; for Habbib, p. 20; for Shmona and Guria, p. 23.

²³ F.C. Burkitt, *Euphemia and the Goth, with the Acts of Martyrdom of the Confessors of Edessa* (London, 1913).

CE 360.²⁴ If so, they represent rather rare examples of Edessene Christian literature originating from before the arrival there of Ephrem in CE 363 or soon after.

Given, therefore, that there is some good reason to see these as Edessene texts written (in essence) very soon after the events described, it will be worth asking what light they shed on the city of the early fourth century. No specific comment is offered by either on the language spoken by the participants. But these Syriac texts both make repeated use of transliterated Greek (and occasionally Latin) terms for the institutions and personnel of the provincial government and the city, and they also provide extended representations of dialogues between the martyrs and provincial or city officials. One thing, therefore, can be taken as certain. If any such dialogues took place — as they must have done, even if in less elaborate and improving terms than portrayed in the Acts — then they took place in Greek. No interpreter is mentioned (though the presence of one may perhaps be silently presumed), and there is no evidence that Roman officials ever engaged in verbal exchanges in any languages other than Latin and (in the East) Greek. So in this respect, these narratives relate to a Greek reality, translated into Syriac very shortly after the event. In other words they reflect a bilingual context.

Very similar conclusions derive from the official vocabulary used, in Syriac transliteration, in these narratives. I take some examples, without recording every instance of each:

(a) Shmona and Guria were martyred in the 'STRṬYGWT' of Abba and Abgar (*SG* 1; see *H* 1). In the parchment of 243 (l. 5), the same term is used, and reflects the Greek *stratēgos*, the standard equivalent of the Latin *duumvir*, used of the two main annual officials of a *colonia*.

(b) The governor of the province is a 'YGMWN' (6), Greek *hēgemōn*, the standard equivalent for the Latin *praeses*.

(c) The clerk who writes down Shmona's defiant words (39) is an 'KSQPTWR, transliterated, with some transposition, from the Latin *exceptor*, literally 'receiver'.

(d) The judicial court of the governor is a DYQSTRYN, Greek *dikastērion* (41), and the officials who accompany him are 'WPYQYN — related to Latin *officiales*, but an adaptation rather than a transliteration. He takes his seat in his B'M('), Greek *bēma*, in a BSLYQ' (basilica).

(e) The official ordered to carry out the execution (55) is an 'SPWQLTR', Latin *speculator* (again a transliteration, with some transposition).

What emerges from this is a worm's-eye view of the exercise of power in the Roman Empire, deploying in Syriac a Greek vocabulary which itself contained a fair number of terms adopted from Latin. Apart from the bare references in each of the Acts to the relevant pair of the annual *stratēgoi*, and some allusions to topography and to popular reactions, neither text has occasion to offer any significant portrait of the city or its population. None the less, on the reasonable assumption that the claim by Theophilus to have composed the Acts shortly after the relevant executions is valid, both are very vivid testimony to Edessene literary composition in Syriac — and are also the earliest examples of Syriac narrative or biographical writing, from within the Roman Empire.

²⁴ S.A. Harvey, 'The Edessan Martyrs and Ascetic Tradition', *V. Symposium Syriacum, 1988*, ed. R. Lavenant (Rome, 1990), 195-206.

It should be acknowledged that there is a potential complication, in that the two Syriac Acts come from a late manuscript of the fifteenth century, and that there are Greek versions of both, each omitting some sections.²⁵ The normal assumption is that these are translations of the Syriac, made at some later date. But we should leave open the possibility that these too derive from Edessa in the early fourth century. It would, however, be going too far to suggest that Theophilus himself wrote these versions also. For although, as the example of the *Book of the Laws of Countries* (see above) shows, translation from Syriac into Greek is well-attested, as is (even more so) that from Greek into Syriac, there seems to be no attested example of the original author producing the same text in both languages.

That both Greek and Syriac functioned as languages of education and culture in Edessa in the late third and early fourth centuries is, however, strongly suggested by what is reported by later sources about the early experiences of both Lucian, martyred in CE 311, and Eusebius, later bishop of Emesa. As regards Lucian, Philostorgius, writing in the first half of the fifth century, says that he came from Samosata, and studied with Macarius, ‘a man who was living in Edessa and expounding the sacred books’.²⁶ The implication that Macarius was someone who came from outside Edessa, but taught the Scriptures there in Greek (at some point in the second half of the third century), seems clearly to be supported by what is said in Socrates’ *Ecclesiastical History* (II.9) about Eusebius, the later bishop of Emesa, who came from an aristocratic family in Edessa. Eusebius seems to have been born in about CE 300, and what Socrates says of his background and education deserves quotation. The context is a debate about the election of a bishop of Alexandria in CE 341:

Ἐπὶ τούτοις τότε τῆς διαβολῆς γενομένης προχειρίζονται τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας ἐπίσκοπον πρῶτον μὲν Εὐσέβιον τὸν ἐπικληθέντα Ἐμεσηνόν. τίς δ’ οὗτος ἦν, διδάσκει Γεώργιος ὁ Λαοδικείας ἐπίσκοπος, ὁ τότε παρῆν ἐν τῇ συνόδῳ. φησὶ γὰρ ἐν τῷ εἰς αὐτὸν πεπονημένῳ ἐγκωμίῳ, ὡς εἶη Εὐσέβιος ἐκ τῶν εὐπατριδῶν τῆς ἐν Μεσοποταμίᾳ Ἐδέσσης καταγόμενος, ἐκ νέας τε ἡλικίας τὰ ἱερά μαθὼν γράμματα, εἶτα τὰ Ἑλλήνων παιδευθεὶς παρὰ τῷ τηλικαῦτα τῇ Ἐδέσσει ἐπιδημήσαντι παιδευτῇ, τέλος ὑπὸ Πατροφίλου καὶ Εὐσεβίου τὰ ἱερά ἠρμηνεύθη βιβλία, ὧν ὁ μὲν τῆς ἐν Καισαρείᾳ, Πατρόφιλος δὲ τῆς ἐν Σκυθοπόλει προεστήκει ἐκκλησίας.

Under these circumstances, with an accusation having been laid, they first chose as bishop of Alexandria Eusebius, called ‘the Emesene’. Who he was is related by Georgius, bishop of Laodicea, who was then present in the synod. For he says in the *encomium* devoted to him that Eusebius, deriving from the aristocracy of Edessa in Mesopotamia, and studying the sacred writings from an early age, and subsequently having been educated in Greek learning by a teacher who was then resident in Edessa, was finally trained in the interpretation of the Scriptures by Patrophilus and Eusebius, of whom the latter presided over the church in Caesarea, and Patrophilus that in Scythopolis.

Sozomenus essentially repeats this account, while correcting ‘Mesopotamia’ to ‘of the Osrhoenians’, and adding that Eusebius’ initial education had been ‘in accordance with

²⁵ Edited by E. Von Dobschütz, *Die Akten der edessenischen Bekenner Gurjas, Samonas und Abibos (Texte und Untersuchungen 37.2, Leipzig, 1911).*

²⁶ Philostorgius, *HE VI.1* (ed. Bidez, p. 184).

the inherited custom'.²⁷ Neither says specifically that the first stage had been conducted in Syriac, but this is clearly implied by the structure of both passages. Moreover, as Bas ter Haar Romeny's important study shows, Eusebius of Emesa was subsequently to be the earliest among Biblical scholars writing in Greek to introduce readings from a Syriac text of the Bible.²⁸ If we follow the implications of what both Socrates and Sozomenus say about his initial study of the scriptures, we have to assume (as is in any case generally supposed) that at least some books of the Bible were in circulation in a Syriac translation in Edessa during the early years of the fourth century. But an upper-class education there also required the contribution of a Greek teacher, evidently (as in Lucian's case) an immigrant from elsewhere. Eusebius' actual role as bishop was to be in Emesa in Syria, and all his works were written in Greek. None the less, his ability to introduce into his exegesis readings from the Syriac text of the Bible represented an important novel contribution, and one which can hardly be unrelated to his early education.

There is only very slight evidence for the culture of Edessa, and for language-use there, in the period between Constantine's conversion and the Emperor Julian's disastrous campaign in CE 363, which led to the loss of Nisibis to the Persians and the emigration of Ephrem to Edessa. We might have expected that the life of the city in the first decades of Christian dominance would be well-attested. It is not, and this makes it all the more difficult to arrive at any real conception of the immediate background to its subsequently-established role as a major centre of Syriac culture.

If we turn to the Syriac *Chronicle of Edessa* (n. 18 above), we find a basic list of events recorded in the relevant paragraphs, which involve some confusions (entries not relating to Edessa are omitted):

- XII (CE 313). Bishop Qona begins work on the church, completed by his successor Sa'ad.
- XIII (324). Construction of the cemetery under Bishop Aithalla.
- XIV (325). (?)Aithalla becomes bishop, and constructs the cemetery and the east side of the church.
- XV ('326'). Council of Nicaea.
- XVIII (345/6). Abraham becomes bishop, and builds the Chapel of the Confessors.
- XXI (355/6). Abraham Qidonaya becomes a monk.
- XXII (360/1). Bishop Abraham dies.
- XXIV (360/1). Bishop Barse transfers from Carrhae to Edessa on the orders of the Emperor (Constantius).

Church-building, following on Constantine's and Licinius' measures of 312/13, is clearly attested, as is the Council of Nicaea. The *Chronicle* does not explicitly say so, but other evidence attests that Aithalla was present.²⁹ It can be taken as certain that if he contributed to the proceedings there, this will have been in Greek. But it is also possible, if by no means certain, that a letter, said to be addressed to the churches in the Sasanid Empire, should be attributed to him, and that it was originally written in Syriac. In its

²⁷ Socrates, *HE* II.9.1-3; Sozomenus, *HE* III.6.1-2.

²⁸ R.B. ter Haar Romeny, *A Syrian in Greek Dress: the Use of Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac Biblical Texts in Eusebius of Emesa's Commentary on Genesis* (Leuven, 1997), esp. 71f.

²⁹ G. Fedalto, *Hierarchia Ecclesiastica Orientalis* II (Padova, 1988), 803.

character, it is a report on discussions at the Council of Nicaea. But the evidence for it is indirect, since the text is preserved only in Armenian, and both the attribution of the original to bishop Aithalla and its date have been challenged (neither the author nor the addressees are explicitly identified in the text as translated by P. Bruns).³⁰ So it must remain uncertain whether this is an (indirectly preserved) expression of Syriac Christianity at Edessa in the period of the Council of Nicaea, and of communication, expressed in Syriac, between the churches of the two empires. If these points could be securely established, they would be of considerable significance.

We are on slightly less infirm ground when we confront the reports in later Greek sources about the Audaios ('WDY) who was the founder of the sect of the Audianoï, or Odianoï, and is described by Theodoret as a 'Syrian both in descent and language', who hailed from beyond the Euphrates. But none of the references to him locate him precisely in Osrhoene.³¹ A couple of passages from his writing are quoted later in Syriac, and it is reasonable to presume that this was indeed their original language.³²

Similarly, Philoxenus, who was bishop of Hierapolis/Mabbug in CE 485-518, and was the first bishop known to us who both occupied a see situated west of the Euphrates and wrote in Syriac, speaks specifically in his *Letter to Patricius* about a monk at Edessa in this period called Asuana ('SWN'), who composed hymns (MDRŠ') which 'are still sung there to this day'.³³ The implication is clearly that these hymns were in Syriac, and it is quite significant that we therefore have concrete evidence, from a well-placed source, for hymn-composition in Syria in Edessa before the arrival of Ephrem.

We can also reasonably take as evidence for the Syriac-speaking context of the Christianity of Osrhoene, Theodoret's report in his *Historia Philotheos* (2,1) of the hermit Ioulianos, who came from Osrhoene, and was called 'Sabas' ('aged') by the locals (*epichōrioi*) as a sign of respect. The relevant term in Syriac is indeed SB'.

But, however, much importance we give to the emergence in Edessa and Osrhoene of a Christian culture expressed in Syriac, we have always to remember that the city, as a secular organisation, was part of the Roman Empire, and must have conducted its public business, and its relations with government, in Greek. Moreover the church of Edessa, and its bishops, will also have communicated in Greek in bishops from elsewhere in the

³⁰ The Armenian text was published by J. Thorossian, *Aithallae Episcopi Edesseni epistola ad Christianos in Persarum regione de fide* (Venice, 1942), with a Latin translation, not accessible to me. There is however a German translation by P. Bruns, 'Brief Aithallahas, des Bischofs von Edessa (Urhai) an die Christen des Perserlandes über den Glauben', *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993), 120-136 and see also P. Bruns, 'Aithallahas Brief über den Glauben. Ein bedeutendes Dokument frühsyrischer Theologie', *Oriens Christianus* 76 (1992), 46-73. The dating of this text to the first half of the fourth century has been challenged by D.D. Bundy, 'The Letter of Aithallah (CPQ 3340): Theology, Purpose, Date' III. *Symposium Syriacum* (1983), 135-142, arguing that it belongs between CE 381 and 428.

³¹ See Epiphanius, *Pan.* 70, 1; cf. Theodoret, *HE* IV, 10, and *Haer. Fab. Compend.* 4, 10; Socrates, *HE* V, 23.

³² Named as 'WDY, he is quoted in Syriac at the end of the 8th century by Theodore bar Koni, *Book of Scholia* XI.63 (ed. Scher, 1899, vol. 2, pp. 319-320); French trans. by R. Hespel and R. Draguet, *Théodore bar Koni, Livre des Scolies* II. *Mimrè VI-XI* (Leuven, 1982), 239.

³³ Philoxenus, *Letter to Patricius* 3, ed. and trans. R. Lavenant, *PO* XXX (1963), pp. 721-873, on pp. 854-855.

Greek world. However, given the scattered nature of our evidence for culture and society in Osrhoene before CE 363, the best evidence for such communications and forms of participation comes from a later period.

One glimpse of the city in the mid-fourth century, however, is provided by the Emperor Julian's well-known letter of CE 362/3, written from Antioch, in which he condemns the violence of the Arians at Edessa against the Valentinians, and ironically lays down that he will assist the Christians there in their search for holy poverty by confiscating the property of their church.³⁴ There is nothing in this hostile reference to doctrinal divisions between the Christians of Edessa to suggest any awareness that there might also have been linguistic divisions, or contrasts.

Even more clearly, Libanius, the great fourth-century orator from Antioch, saw the area beyond the Euphrates, which we can take to mean essentially Osrhoene, as one source among others from which he could draw the pupils who would come to him for training in Greek rhetoric: 'And if you go to the Euphrates, and cross the river and go to the cities beyond, you will come across some of my pupils, and perhaps not bad ones either!'³⁵

5. Conclusion

Apart from the exceptional testimony provided by the series of five parchments dating between CE 239 and 250, which give concrete expression to the notion of a bilingual and bicultural city (or rather three cities — Edessa, Marcopolis and Carrhae), our evidence for the relations of Greek and Syriac in Edessa and Osrhoene is thin, and often indirect. We can reasonably assert, however, that both languages were in use in ordinary life, but that Greek will always have maintained its status as the language of public life, both secular and ecclesiastical. Just as the city will have addressed the officials of the Empire in Greek, so bishops, when in contact with other bishops from the wider Greek world, will have spoken or written in Greek. But in what language did these bishops or presbyters preach to their congregations, and what was the language of the liturgy? Or was a Greek sermon accompanied by an oral exposition in Syriac in the manner recorded for Jerusalem by the pilgrim Egeria in the 380s? At any rate the report by Philoxenus of the composition of hymns in Syriac in this period is clearly significant.

It would be possible, and not unreasonable, to stress the character of Edessa as a Greek city, and to point to the obvious fact that the major representatives of Syriac literary culture in this period, Aphraat and Ephrem, came not from there, but from further east. Literary composition in Syriac, might indeed have taken place anywhere in what became Roman Osrhoene and Mesopotamia, and similarly in the Parthian and then Sasanid Empire. So early Syriac texts should not be attributed to Edessa unless there is a specific reason. The most striking example of Syriac writing in Edessa from before the middle of the fourth century had been Bardesanes' *Laws*, which was a product of the culture of the kingdom, in the period when it was first absorbed, and then abolished, by Rome. The Syriac literature which had since emerged from Edessa as a provincial city

³⁴ Julian, *Ep.* 43 Hertlein/115 Bidez-Cumont/40 Loeb.

³⁵ Libanius, *Or.* LXII, 27, trans. A.F. Norman. See F. Millar, 'Libanius and the Near East', *SCI* 26 (2007), 155-180, on p. 175.

was modest in both scale and level (but, on the other hand, we know of no Greek literature written there). The days of Edessa's status as a major centre of Syriac culture were yet to come. To say this is not to express any scepticism as to the role of Syriac in the culture of Edessa and Osrhoene in this period. It is however to emphasise that in the following period, from the arrival of Ephrem to the middle of the fifth century, there is far more evidence for both literary composition and scribal practice in Edessa, for the translation of Greek theological writings into Syriac, and for the role of the city in attracting students from elsewhere.³⁶

Alternatively, we could stress the significance of the fact that here, unlike in the former kingdom of Nabataea, the local variety of Aramaic not only survived as a language of ordinary life, and could be used, at least initially, in documents, but also functioned as a major vehicle for the literary expression of Christian piety. Since we are not confronted here with a long-established pre-Classical culture, like that of Egypt or of Judaea, we should instead emphasise the distinctiveness of Osrhoene and Mesopotamia as areas where a new literary and religious culture, expressed in a Semitic language, evolved in parallel with absorption into the culture and governmental structure of the Roman Empire. As has always been recognised, however (see n. 1), Syriac as a language which was current in many (but not all) of the provinces of the Roman civil diocese of Oriens, always functioned in a complex inter-relationship with Greek. The contribution to this larger question which this paper, like those which are due to follow it, aims to make is to distinguish between different places and different times. So it asks what we can actually know about the nature of this linguistic co-existence in one specific historical context.

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³⁶ For this subsequent period see F. Millar, 'Greek and Syriac in Edessa: from Ephrem to Rabbula (CE 363-435)', *Semitica et Classica* 4 (2011), in press, and 'Greek and Syriac in Fifth-century Edessa: the Case of Bishop Hibas' (in preparation).

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