

J.L. Lightfoot, *Lucian on the Syrian Goddess*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xx + 608 pp. ISBN 0-19-925138-X.

By the tomb-stone of Lucian, — if it is in being; — if not, why then by his ashes!
(*Tristram Shandy*, vol. III, ch. XIX)

The *de dea Syria* (*DDS*) is a short treatise, ascribed to Lucian, but the subject of prolonged scholarly disagreement as to its author, date and purpose. It offers a description of the city of Hierapolis in North Syria; the narrator identifies himself both at the beginning and at the end as a local, an Assyrian, and claims to be basing his account partly on autopsy, partly on information gathered locally, particularly from the priests. The city was sacred to a goddess and a god, Hera (i.e., perhaps, the Syrian Atargatis) and Zeus (i.e., perhaps, the Syrian Hadad), and the text offers descriptions of the temples as well as of the rituals of these cults. The Greek text runs to about fifteen pages in total; this commentary runs to about 590 pages. It includes a long introduction, containing a history of the whole cult of Atargatis and a comparison of it with other divine mother figures in the Near East and very detailed discussions of all the key controversies about *DDS*'s character, dating and authorship. Lightfoot is unafraid of tackling each and every possible approach to *DDS* — transmission, text, literary structure, parallels of all kinds, archaeology, epigraphy, history, ritual, myth. The range is extraordinary and there can be no doubt that the book is a major event in the story of this work, but it is legitimate to ask how far such royal treatment is justified by the importance of the issues.

The answer to that question depends on the reader's point of view. There is no doubt that the text is seriously contested and has provoked an unusually wide range of disagreements and wildly differing responses, so there are certainly many issues of dispute to be recorded and settled. Secondly, elements of the text have been widely used as authoritative historical sources, providing much-needed evidence about the character of the cults of the city, and its reliability badly needed to be tested. Thirdly, even if it failed such a test, and its use as a historical source should be abandoned, it would still be an interesting problem in cultural history to know who produced it, when, under what conditions and for whom. The fact is that a trustworthy account of the religious life of any city in the Near East under Roman rule would be a precious possession and it is therefore hardly surprising if scholars have been all too anxious to put their trust in what *DDS* has to tell us.

On some of these issues, Lightfoot provides arguments so substantial that the problems in question, long debated in the tradition, can be regarded as definitively settled. Thus, she discusses at great length and from many points of view the relationship between the *DDS* and Herodotus. It has long been clear that the whole piece is Herodotean in some sense (the case is concisely put, e.g., in Jennifer Hall's *Lucian's Satire*, New York, 1981), but this discussion sets the arguments on a new footing, by showing how profoundly not just dialect and style, but the selection of topics, the citation of sources, the claims to authority and so on reflect a deep familiarity with Herodotus and his habits. This by itself is a major contribution to the history of Herodotus' *History*. It also makes it a matter of the greatest interest that the author's identity be established if it can be, since whoever he (or she) was, the author certainly knew and understood Herodotus very well and was a highly skilled parodist.

Just as important are the consequences that follow from these results. There has always seemed to be one serious objection to the attribution of the piece to Lucian: it completely lacks the sceptical, derisive tone with which Lucian normally treats any religious activity that can be suspected or accused of being the work of charlatans. *DDS* is full of information that invites cynical comment and statements that cry out for scepticism; yet all of them receive the same earnest and uncritical treatment. Surely, it has often been argued, this cannot be the Lucian we know and love, never one to miss such opportunities for satirical comment. Lightfoot has now shown us that this was a total misconception, since the author, whoever he was, was adopting the persona of a Hero-

dotean observer and doing so in such a thorough-going manner that there was no opportunity for giving vent to his impulse to berate pseudo-religions. It is just as much part of his parody to maintain the tone of the innocent observer as to use the Ionic dialect, or to claim to have seen the city himself, or to tell racy stories of kings and queens and their servants. The character of the whole work is in all respects determined by the need to maintain flawlessly the fictional identity of the narrator. This of course cannot prove that Lucian was the author, but it does make it far more probable that he was.

Other aspects may be seen to fall into place as well, once the Herodotean model has been so comprehensively identified and analysed. For instance, it would not have been appropriate here, as it is in other of Lucian's writings (e.g. the *Vera Historia*) for the account to consist completely of incredible tales. That would not have been Herodotus' way: his accounts of strange places characteristically contain some elements of sober information, some routine facts that challenge nobody's credulity, some good stories that might just have happened and then some elements of the wonderful and the unbelievable. The tall stories come at intervals, but not constantly. So the good parodist would have been looking out for just such a mixture of these elements; and it is just such a mixture that *DDS* offers in the case of the city of Hierapolis. Again, the patient spade-work of establishing just how the writer sets about his task yields a major step forward in the search to understand what he is saying and why. This again is a real achievement.

On other issues it is far harder to reach any certainty. On the matter of credibility, Lightfoot reaches the conclusion that *DDS* 'remains a priceless source for the religious history of imperial Syria ...' (p. 221). There are many reasons for challenging this bold claim: first, the choice of Herodotus, the Father of Lies, as the stylistic model is a deeply eccentric one if the text's primary purpose is to report accurate facts; secondly, on any view at least some of the stories are believable only if we accept the miraculous (or rationalise them into pointlessness); thirdly, although the narrator is full of claims and guarantees of his authenticity, he is also, as we shall see, full of twists and turns that self-consciously refute the reader's acceptance of him as any kind of authority. The text plays too many games with the reader to be believed. It is a real delusion that anything can be gained for this purpose by the elaborate comparison of the details of *DDS* with the rest of our literary, archaeological and epigraphic record. All this could ever prove is that the author sometimes employs the facts accurately for his own purposes; it can never prove that he always does so, or even often does so, and it gives us no criterion at all for deciding which elements are true and which are fiction or mystification. The fact is that whenever *DDS* is the only evidence for some religious practice in Hierapolis, its evidential value is nil. This is not to say that there may not be true reports included in the text, but detecting them is no more than a subjective guessing game. Nor is it to say that the text cannot be used for other historical purposes: the ideas and attitudes of the author, his skills and knowledge, the circle for which he wrote are all legitimate topics of enquiry. But alas his identity and date are still far from certain.

Lightfoot concludes that Lucian is indeed the author. At least, I think she does. The very name of the book sounds confident enough. Pp. 184–208 trace the controversy about authorship back to its roots in the 17th century and she can, with the weapons sharpened in pp. 86–184, cut to pieces all the negative points that have been thought in the past to rule Lucian out of court as the author. But to disprove the negative does not establish the positive. In the later pages of her discussion, Lightfoot (one of whose most engaging characteristics is her determination to pursue the truth at whatever cost) discusses the ideas of Tomasz Polański (*Oriental Art in Greek Imperial Literature* [Trier 1998], 79–117), who has argued for a later date of composition. This theory evidently attracted her and she never quite brings herself to reject it. Polański does indeed have some real points: not only are there several similarities with later imperial texts, but two passages definitely make more sense in a later context. First, there is an account of phalli at the temple (§§28–9), in the area of the propylaea, which are 1800 feet tall; twice a year, one of these phalli is climbed by a man who lives on top of it for seven days. It is very tempting to suspect that this fantastically tall

story is a pagan satirical take on the behaviour of the Christian stylites, who operated to a considerable extent in the same area. Secondly, at §12 in a supposed account of Deucalion's flood, the circumstantial details come from the Bible story of Noah's flood. Polański himself takes the *DDS* as a hostile tract on Christian and Jewish customs; Lightfoot is right to reject this part of his case as exaggerated; but even reduced to a casual pagan side-swipe at the Christians, the story would still imply a date later than Simeon Stylites for the composition.

It would of course come close to cutting the Gordian knot about the author's identity if we could say, as Lightfoot boldly does on p. 1, that the author is a self-styled Assyrian, as was Lucian himself; but, of course, it is not 'Lucian' at all but the invented Herodotean narrator who is claiming to be an Assyrian. The claim must surely be deliberately paradoxical since Herodotus is the archetypal Greek traveller. How can *he* be an Assyrian? In any case the claim (like others the text makes) is intended to be puzzling, since much, though by no means everything, that the *DDS* reports about Hierapolis turns out to be Greek in language and character. But the narrator's second reference to his Assyrian origins, at the very end of *DDS* (§60), makes things a great deal worse. He reports that there was a ritual in the temple of Hera and Zeus to mark the coming of age of young men: they grow locks from the time of birth and place these special locks, together with the first shavings of their beard, in a sealed silver casket marked with their names. The final sentence is: 'I myself did this when I was young and to this day still in the temple there are the lock and my name'.

As Jaś Elsner (in S. Goldhill ed., *Being Greek under Rome* [Cambridge 2001], 123–53, at p. 127) has noted, the word 'name' reveals that what is omitted from the Greek text here is to be found in a Syrian temple. But if the narrator's identity is thus both asserted as Syrian and problematised as a secret sealed in a casket, the revelation also subverts a good deal else that has gone before. The narrator had seemed, like Herodotus, to be describing a visit or pilgrimage; he had seemed to be an outsider reporting on what he saw, what he was told, even mentioning areas that he did not see and therefore cannot guarantee. We are now apparently being told that he was not a pilgrim or visitor (though Elsner, pp. 142–4, reads this passage differently), but that he grew up from infancy in Hierapolis itself, as Lucian presumably did not; and what then is to be made of the careful claims of autopsy, other than as echoes of Herodotus' style? Why has he not said throughout that he knew all this from his childhood onwards?

That final sentence of *DDS* also makes the reader re-think the myth of the temple's origins, which is told at length at §§17–27. The narrator considers various different tales of origin, but chooses the story of Combabos, a favourite of the King who was sent out to build the temple, together with the beautiful Queen Stratonice. Anticipating that the Queen would fall in love with him, Combabos takes the precaution, before setting out for the trip, of cutting off his own genitals, pickling them and entrusting them, sealed in a casket, to the King to look after while he is away. The Queen does indeed develop just such a passion; and, despite the impossibility of its being satisfied, her reported adoration arouses suspicion with the King; but the sealed casket proves Combabos' innocence when he is on the verge of being put to death, so the King spares and promotes him. The story obviously has some similarities to the story of Genesis, chapter 39, since Combabos like Joseph is the innocent servant wrongly suspected because of the lustful wife and eventually restored to greater glory than ever; but the final result — sterility for Combabos — is the very opposite of the outcome of the Joseph story. The raciness is of course satisfyingly Herodotean and Lightfoot's study suggests that all the other written versions of the story are later than 'Lucian' (for the parallels, Lightfoot, pp. 385–8). Of course, the story type may be far older than all the extant written versions.

The story places the building of the temple firmly in the Seleucid period; the King is not named, but is evidently supposed to be Antiochus I; the temple is not the first on the site and Combabos and Stratonice are presented as together in charge of the building work, which is interrupted by Combabos' disgrace and recall, but completed after his restoration to the King's favour.

His self-castration is treated as an aetiological myth for the custom of self-castration by the Galli, which is said to have originated in the reaction of his friends, who castrated themselves out of sympathy for his sufferings. At this point, as Lightfoot says at pp. 384–5, the story seems flimsily attached to the foundation of the temple, and unsatisfactory as an account of the self-castration. However, the ritual mentioned in the last sentence obviously echoes and yet reverses the sealing up of Combabos' genitals: the first shavings of the beard are symbols of identity at the moment of acquiring the very manhood that Combabos was losing. So a thoroughly Greek tale set in the third century BCE finds expression in the very Syrian ritual of manhood that proves the narrator's non-Greek identity. The last few words are designed to challenge all our assumptions about what has gone before.

It is the complexity and subversiveness of this text that must never be forgotten or underestimated. At times, the narrator's claims of autopsy tremble on the edge of self-refutation. One of the most elaborate of all (at §48) tells us that the narrator has seen one part of a certain ritual, but not the part that took place by the sea, so that his scrupulousness as a witness makes a special claim on our belief; but what is it that he asks us to believe he saw, when the procession returned from the sea? A cock that could open sealed pots of water and collect the money from the pilgrims. Such recurrent playfulness must by itself ensure that the nature and credibility of *DDS* and its value as evidence for religious history will continue to be the object of debate in the future as it has been in the past. Jane Lightfoot will not have put an end to such debates, but we can be sure that they will be conducted in future on the sure foundations she has laid by her scholarship, acuity and insight. However, no interpreter should forget the wild tales scattered through this work: 1800-foot stone phalluses, oracles that float in the air, a cock that opens bottles and cattle that drop off the propylaeum — the final sentence of Tristram Shandy must come to mind:

...what is all this story about?

A COCK and a BULL ...

J.A. North

UCL

Simon Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome. Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 395 pp. ISBN 0 521 66317 2.

This collection of articles addresses a fundamental issue of the ancient encounter between Greece and Rome, namely the question of how Greek writers saw themselves as Greeks while living in the new context of the Roman Empire. As the subtitle of the book suggests, emphasis is given to cultural aspects of identity and to the time span between the first and the third century CE. Given this framework, it is conspicuous that the individual essays in this volume differ significantly with regard both to their inherent quality and to their relevance to the book's overall concern. Some sections of the book make an important contribution to the ongoing discussion of Greek culture and identity in a Roman context, while others do so rather less.

Simon Goldhill opens the volume with a two-fold introduction, offering in part I 'snapshots' of tensions between Greek and Roman perspectives, while problematizing in part II the notions of culture, identity and the Second Sophistic. The development of Empire, also mentioned in the subtitle, is not discussed and should perhaps have been dropped altogether since it plays hardly any role in the book. The snapshots are very lucid as well as appetizing and the discussion of culture and identity is indeed useful. The term Second Sophistic, however, remains somewhat problematic. Goldhill himself dislikes the term, finding its disadvantages greater than its benefits (14). He uses it nevertheless, partly for reasons of convention, even though he includes in the book two contributions which patently exceed the scope of the Second Sophistic: Henderson's study of