

REVIEW ARTICLES

The Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods between Local, Regional and Supra-Regional Approaches¹

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Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East. The Transformation of an Empire*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000. xx + 523 pp. ISBN 0 415 11376 8.

Steven K. Ross, *Roman Edessa. Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire, 114-242 CE*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001. xiii + 204 pp. ISBN 0 415 18787 7.

Maurice Sartre, *D'Alexandre à Zénobie. Histoire du Levant antique, IVe siècle av. J.-C. — IIIe siècle ap. J.-C.*, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2001. 1194 pp. ISBN 2 213 60921 7.

Monika Schuol, *Die Charakene. Ein mesopotamisches Königreich in hellenistisch-parthischer Zeit*, Oriens et Occidens 1, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000. 554 pp. ISBN 3 515 07709 X.

Recent years have witnessed an outpouring of publications covering an immense range of aspects of Near Eastern history in the period between Alexander and Constantine. The books which provide the starting point of this discussion represent different approaches to this field. Ross (R.) focuses on one particular place, providing a fresh account of the way in which Edessa, a city in North Mesopotamia that has always attracted scholarly attention due to its claim to be the world's first Christian kingdom, developed from Parthian subject to Roman client. Schuol (Sch.), in a detailed study of evidence from and related to a wider region in the Near East, aims to investigate the political, economic and cultural-historical importance of the Gulf kingdom of Characene. Ball (B.) provides a comprehensive account of the material sources from the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in relation to the available historical evidence, of the continuing progress of Roman rule eastwards, and — it is argued — of the resulting transformation of the Empire itself under eastern influence. Sartre (Sa.) deals in detail not only with the political history of the Near East over more than six centuries, but also with numerous aspects of daily life, including economic, social and religious aspects.

Local, regional and supra-regional approaches are necessarily dependent on each other, and any thematic division of the study of Near Eastern aspects entails all three sorts of methods. They do, however, imply different outlooks on the way the Near East ought to be conceived. Admittedly, the very imbalance in the spread of evidence always

¹ I am grateful to Fergus Millar for his comments on an earlier much longer draft, and to Hannah Cotton for her encouragement and patience.

has the tendency to force the study of some questions in one direction, both temporal and spatial. The question is thus how to redress this imbalance. These four books deal with this problem in different ways, each of them integrating its own set of sources into the argument. In what follows, I propose to discuss some features of the study of the Near East in Hellenistic and Roman times within the framework of the interaction between local, regional and supra-regional approaches.

In his book on Edessa, R. sets out to investigate why, under what circumstances, and with what effects the city became part of the Roman empire (3). Six chapters are followed by an appendix on numismatic material mainly relating to the city's last king (Abgar X, 239-242 CE). In chs. 1-2 R. introduces pre-Roman Edessa and discusses the process by which the city and its kingdom of Osrhoene became entangled in the web of Roman eastern policy. This is followed by an account of the close relationship of Edessa with Rome, and of its development from a notionally independent monarchy to a province of the empire, and back to a kingdom ('in Rome's service', 69), until the extinction of the Abgarid dynasty (chs. 3-4). Finally, R. examines the rich and varied cultural life of Roman Edessa, which was to become the cradle of Eastern Christianity (chs. 5-6). At the outset, he gives himself the 'bipartite task' of making a study of 'political history and cultural interpretation' (3), two projects which, naturally enough, influence each other throughout the book. Edessa was often impotent in the face of international crises involving the two world powers of its day, but the city's 'special genius' (144) simultaneously generated a unique blend out of the variety of cultural elements which came to Edessa from both sides. R. concentrates on the period before the city became the centre of Syriac Christianity. This is, of course, a reasonable decision, but it may be said that the balance has swung a bit too much away from the most interesting evidence. The application of numismatic evidence is praiseworthy, but art comes off rather poorly and the new archive of Greek and Syriac papyri and parchments from the Middle Euphrates region, a potential gold mine for the social history of the area under Edessan control, is applied only to throw light on the chronology of certain administrative details. On the other hand, the author's decision to start his investigation proper with Trajan's campaigns across the Euphrates has led him to leave unnoticed some important developments in our understanding of the earlier chronology of Edessa's sovereigns. Whereas the city's history so far had been based on the Syriac chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell-Mahre (referred to by R. as the 'Chronicle of Zuqin'), a fragment of a slightly divergent list of kings has now been noticed in the works of Elias of Nisibis, supplying two new royal names.² On the basis of this new evidence a reconstruction has been attempted of the sequence of the earliest rulers over Osrhoene, arguing that they bore the title 'lord' before assuming royal dignity, an evolution also attested at Hatra in a slightly later period.³

Sch.'s detailed work on Characene is presented as 'eine Regionalstudie zum Partherreich' (14). The author wants her analysis of the political structures of the region,

² A. Luther, 'Elias von Nisibis und die Chronologie der edessenischen Könige', *Klio* 81 (1999), 180-98.

³ Id., 'Die ersten Könige von Osrhoene', *Klio* 81 (1999), 437-54. On the situation in Hatra, see S.R. Hauser, 'Hatra und das Königreich der Araber', in J. Wiesehöfer (ed.), *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse* (Stuttgart, 1998), esp. 501-3.

and in particular of the relationship of its rulers with the Great Kings of the Arsacid dynasty, to contribute to an understanding of the way in which the Parthians exercised their influence and authority in the various parts of their empire and other dependent regions. The introductory chapter and a brief overview of the history of the study of Characene are followed by a more than two hundred page long detailed presentation of the literary and epigraphic sources from outside the Gulf kingdom, of the archaeological remains in the region itself and of the coins issued by its kings. Sch. then presents a chronological overview of the political history of Characene from pre-Hellenistic times onwards, dealing individually with all the kings and *interregna*, and discusses the Gulf kingdom in relation to the important centres of long-distance trade. The changing political status and fortune of Characene are 'Auswirkungen jeweils veränderter innen- oder aussenpolitischer Konstellationen' (460) and this combination of facets had an impact also on its functioning in the long-distance trade of the late Hellenistic and Roman periods. Even if the nature of the evidence does not allow the same detailed analysis of the Arsacids as is now possible for the Roman empire, the realm of the Parthians was of course not a "static entity". Furthermore, the activities on their "western frontier" formed only one of many troublesome pursuits, and it is not unlikely that they were a good deal less interested than Rome in expanding their territory to the Near Eastern lands.⁴ The structure of the Arsacid state may have placed disproportionate power in the hands of regional nobility who were able to gain various degrees of temporary independence, but it is difficult to distinguish between regional leaders within the Parthian domain who enjoyed proper independence and those whose political decisions were still subject to their overlord: 'the fact that such local dynasts mint coins bearing their portraits ... seems frequently to be the only indicator of the supposed independence'.⁵ What this all means in terms of culture is a separate problem. Not only is the "Parthian" cultural layer in cities which later came to form part of the Roman empire often overgrown with Graeco-Roman remains, but also the regions in the Parthian realm will have become assimilated with the Hellenism of the time in which the Seleucid kingdom had started to decay.⁶ Studying any Near Eastern region from one empire's point of view will therefore necessarily have limitations, as political borders do not rigidly divide different cultures.

The book by B., formerly Director of Excavations at the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, is a densely illustrated volume, written in a popular style. The author presents a provocative synthesis of the Roman Near East that owes much to a close examination of the material remains and architectural structures of the wider region. In what is arguably the most valuable part of the book, and in any case by far the longest chapter (ch. 7), he aims to show how the 'flowering of architecture' under the high

⁴ On the Parthian empire see J. Wolski, *L'empire des Arsacides. Acta Iranica*, sér.3, 18 (Leuven, 1993), and on the relation with its eastern neighbours see M.J. Olbrycht, *Parthia et ulteriores gentes: die politischen Beziehungen zwischen dem arsakidischen Iran und den Nomaden der eurasischen Steppen* (Munich, 1998).

⁵ Thus A. Kuhrt, 'Concluding remarks' in Wiesehöfer (n. 3) 532. Cf. the remarks on interpretation of numismatic material by Sch. (237-40) and R. (145-62).

⁶ Cf. J.D. Lerner, *The Impact of Seleucid Decline on the Eastern Iranian Plateau: the Foundations of Arsacid Parthia and Graeco-Bactria* (Stuttgart, 1999), esp. 88.

empire 'had an additional element in the East', marking 'a native resurgence': 'Roman frills might be piled onto it, but the real architecture remained what it had always been: Near Eastern' (394-6).⁷ B. presents a series of case studies on eight sub-regions under the heading of 'princely states' (ch. 3), all of which 'were to affect the history of Rome fundamentally, in some cases having a permanent effect on the subsequent history of European civilisation' (31), although it is acknowledged that 'not all were "kingdoms" in the traditional sense' (30). Ch. 4 deals with military campaigns and trade, both producing traces of a Roman presence east of the imperial frontiers, and ch. 5 with the problem of urbanisation in the Near East in the Roman period. B. argues that 'the impression of Roman urbanisation is distorted by inscriptions and definitions' (149), and that the impact of the empire as such on the wider region of the Near East was far more limited than is otherwise assumed. Ch. 6 looks at the countryside, and concludes that villages, in contrast to cities, 'remained firmly a part of the Semitic Near East' (243). The concluding chapter of the book argues that the Roman conquest of the eastern lands 'must be contrasted with the converse: the expansion of Asia into Europe through the medium of the Roman world', and that 'the ensuing interchange culminated in an orientalised Europe' (397). Valuable observations suffer seriously from popularising generalisation. Following a section on the advance of 'the movement of Arabs into the Mediterranean and Europe' in Roman times, the Severan dynasty is highlighted as one of the most important stages in the process in which 'Arabs dominated the very heart of Rome' (404). One may wonder how much can be deduced from figurative representations. The portraits of Julia Domna, 'not bad-looking', are interpreted as conveying 'a far more powerful personality than either her son or her husband. No sloe-eyed, empty-headed eastern floozy here, interested only in harem intrigues! Small wonder she became the power behind the throne of two emperors' (411). As for her son, 'a pampered, puffy-faced spoilt brat' (404), it is 'a pity that Caracalla, who in some ways had some admirable characteristics (he was good with the army, for example), never inherited her force of personality' (411). Similarly, B.'s comments on the emperor Philip deal rather poorly with issues of cultural and ethnic identity: 'as his nickname implies, Philip was Arab. Portraits depict him with the features and tight curly hair that one sees in Syria even today' (418). That Marcus Julius Philippus from Shahba in the Hauran was first and foremost a Roman is called 'irrelevant': 'what is important is what Philip meant to the Arabs themselves ... His reign is one of the more important in the chain of events that culminated in the eventual triumph of the Arabs in the seventh century when the Near East ceased to be Roman and became Arab' (418). However, not only was 'Arab' a tag applied to categorise those with a nomadic way of life and not any specific ethnically defined group, but the emperor is described as "coming from Syria" by the earliest source available.⁸ *Rome in the East* is a pleasure to read and is supplied with beautiful pictures, but B. bases his

⁷ See now K.S. Freyberger, *Die frühkaiserzeitlichen Heiligtümer der Karawanestationen im hellenisierten Osten* (Mainz, 1998), with the review by M. Gawlikowski in *Topoi* 8 (1998), 381-8. Freyberger's book is incorporated in B.'s bibliography, but reached him too late to be put to good use (B. 485, n. 367).

⁸ See now the full collection of relevant sources by C. Körner, *Philippus Arabs: ein Soldatenkaiser in der Tradition des antoninisch-severischen Prinzipat* (Berlin, 2002).

narrative to a hazardous degree on notorious sources such as the *Historia Augusta*, avoids confronting the difficult notions of identity, and makes a rather summary use of modern scholarly literature.

The history of the ancient Levant by Sa. is the most impressive and by far the most important of these four books.⁹ He studies questions related to 'la longue durée' from a different perspective than B., and is aware that 'le problème des continuités est de ceux qu'il faudra aborder' (13). The nearly 1200 pages (including extensive bibliography and indices) are divided into twenty-one chapters, alternating between political narrative and studies of economic, social and religious aspects of both the Hellenistic and Roman periods. After an informative chapter on the available sources, Sa. sets out the situation in Syria in the second half of the fourth century BCE, thereby stressing important geographical distinctions. Ch. 3, on the conquest of Syria, brings the reader to the end of the reign of Seleucus Nicator, and in ch. 4 Sa. deals with the early Hellenistic city foundations, pointing out a real break with the Persian predecessors, as the Seleucids provided the indigenous elites with easy access to the cultural phenomena from the Greek world. Ch. 5 is on the development of administrative, religious and fiscal organisation of the Syrian lands by the two dynasties in charge, the Seleucids and the Ptolemaeans, and ch. 6 is divided between the five Syrian wars (274-199 BCE). In chs. 7-8 the author, aware of the severe limitations of the sources, attempts to reconstruct a socio-economic history of the Hellenistic Near East. Chs. 9-10 concentrate on the Jews and on Judaea until the accession of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and on the reaction of the Maccabean traditionalists against the ongoing process of 'hellenization' of Jewish culture. From Epiphanes' death onwards an interactive process took place in which the central authority gradually gave way to local autonomy and regional principalities. A number of these "client kingdoms" are analysed in ch. 11, but not compared with each other in a systematic manner. When the Romans arrived on the scene, Pompey reorganised large parts of the wider region, and the new province of Syria subsequently became a playing field in the civil wars which eventually led to the establishment of the principate (ch. 12). With the progress in time Sa.'s questions change, and the following chapters bring the reader from the gradual annexation of the client-kingdoms (ch. 13), via an excursion into Judaeian problems from Herod the Great to the Bar Kokhba revolt (ch. 14), to the Severan expeditions and the contemporaneous replacement of the Parthians by the more aggressive neo-Persians as the main force for the Romans to reckon with (ch. 15). These chapters do not only deal with military campaigns, but also (in chronological, geographical or thematic order) with those aspects whose study helps to clarify the process by which the Syrian lands came to form part of the Roman world. The next five chapters are dedicated to the elements which made up the different societies of Syria in the Roman period. Ch. 16 deals with cities, both their constitutions (colonial or other) and 'civic life', and includes case-studies of seven towns which are taken to be representative of the Syrian tetrapolis, frontier strongholds, the Phoenician ports, the Herodian foundations and the Decapolis. Ch. 17, on rural life, is subdivided into discussions of matters of ownership and exploitation of land, agriculture, the variety of communities which could

⁹ The massive work is, in fact, an elaboration of Sa.'s contribution on 'L'Orient sémitique' in C. Lepelley (ed.), *Rome et l'intégration de l'empire, 44 av. J.-C. — 260 apr. J.-C. Tome 2: Approches régionales du Haut-Empire romain* (Paris, 1998), 385-433.

be designated as “villages”, and the interaction of nomads with the sedentary population. Again, Sa. is aware of the unevenness in spread of evidence and the difficulties in producing proper inventories of the documents and material remains necessary to approach the relevant problems, but he succeeds in his aim ‘approcher un peu la réalité’ (735-6). Ch. 18, on the urban economy, opens with the observation that it is the interaction between the abundance of agricultural products, the variety of handicrafts and the different trading networks that resulted in the prosperity of the wider region in the Roman period. The approach in these chapters, in which Sa. creates an impressionistic tableau of exchange modules, based not only on epigraphic and numismatic evidence, but also on elements concerning the production of glass and ceramics, is considerably at variance with earlier studies, the most prominent of which stated that ‘a social and economic history of the Near East in the Roman period cannot be written’,¹⁰ and this should certainly have been emphasised. In any case, the separation of the rural and urban aspects of the economy into separate chapters has the disadvantage of disconnecting elements which should serve to elucidate each other further, and of moving away slightly from the important question as to the degree of state interference in the local and regional “economic networks”. What are the effects of, on the one hand, the concentration of certain natural resources and of the cultivation of particular crops and, on the other, the location of imperial properties in certain areas, on the different sub-regional economic organizations and accordingly on the varying local modes of life?¹¹ In the short ch. 19 Sa. focusses on the complicated set of processes which — with regret (13, n. 7) — he labels “hellenisation”, providing the reader with a useful catalogue of Greek literature from the Levant and discussing (too briefly) the continuation of indigenous cultures. Ch. 20 divides — in what has become the standard fashion in scholarship — the evidence for worship amongst Jews, Christians and ‘pagans’, but does not, unfortunately, situate it side by side in the context of the various local and regional societies. Sa. presents a rich tableau of evidence, but the fashionable statement that neither the nature of the gods nor the celebration of their cults is really affected by the modifications of the process which later contributed to the assimilation between hellenism and paganism (926) should be tempered by focussing on the fact that new religious experiences will have entered the Near East together with the outward appearances of Greek culture. To deal with Judaism in isolation is of course a perfectly acceptable approach, but there is something to be said for a more integrated treatment of Judaeae issues, especially since the separate chapters only highlight the different status of Judaeae in the wider region rather than justifying its inclusion in a book on Syria. Ch. 21 deals with the local tragedies of Edessa, Hatra, Dura-Europos and especially Palmyra. But the book does not actually end with the capture of Zenobia’s city, although the fact that the

¹⁰ F. Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC-AD 337* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 225.

¹¹ See H.I. MacAdam, ‘Some aspects of land tenure and social development in the Roman Near East’ in id., *Geography, Urbanisation and Settlement Patterns in the Roman Near East* (Aldershot, 2002), ch. X. G. Tate, ‘The Syrian countryside during the Roman era’ in S.E. Alcock (ed.), *The Early Roman Empire in the East* (Oxford, 1997), 55-71, distinguishes among five different types of region in terms of agricultural and pastoral production, a distinction which will naturally have had consequences for the varying patterns of urban development in the Near East.

termination of Palmyra's typical civilisation was not sudden would have made a discussion of its fortune indeed the right manner to illustrate Sa.'s own words in the concluding pages of the book: 'En choisissant cet événement de portée strictement locale pour mettre un terme à mon exposé, je suis bien conscient de m'arrêter en chemin', preferring to stop in the middle of the action in order to 'marquer ma conviction que l'histoire n'est jamais faite de ruptures, et que les vrais changements s'opèrent dans la longue durée' (991). Instead, a few pages are added on the tribal groups to whom Rome turned, after the disappearance of a number of sedentary states and dynasties, in order to entrust them with safeguarding the border zones of the empire (984-90), a new imperial policy which represents a 'rupture'. Sa's synthesis of the ancient Levant is a marvellous book, fully annotated, with well-chosen illustrations and with often lengthy quotations from ancient sources. There is no doubt that this impressive piece of scholarship will take its place as a standard work of reference for the Classical Levant.

As overviews of the Near East as a whole, both B. and Sa. ought to be compared briefly with Millar's *The Roman Near East*, since it is inconceivable for any author not to take a position on the issues which that book has raised. B. attacks Millar throughout, and disagrees with the fact that the latter 'constantly labours the lack of native "character" — hence civilisation — compared to Graeco-Roman superiority' (B. 2).¹² In his efforts to bring out the indigenous local cultures in the region, B. underrates the use of inscriptions, not only those written in Greek, but also — in spite of his own programme — those written in any of the Semitic languages. But if he overstresses his case, he has a point in making fuller use of architectural and other visual sources. Sa., who states as one of the reasons for writing his book that Roman Syria had not been studied thoroughly 'avant que Fergus Millar ne consacre une vaste synthèse au Proche-Orient romain' (12-3), is more subtle in his deviation, but his approach to the Roman period as set against the Hellenistic heritage is radically different (more so than he himself points out) from the notion of "historical amnesia" of the Syrian lands under Roman rule.¹³ Sa. and Millar represent different but equally important — even necessarily complementary — approaches, and together they produce the framework for further local and regional histories. They remain, however, firmly based in Classical scholarship. But could any part of the near Eastern lands be fruitfully approached from a different point of view? Even the focus of B.'s study, with its more 'Eastern perspective' (xviii), is on how the Roman empire was transformed under influence from the Orient.

Whereas the book by Sch. on Characene concentrates on a region which was under the political influence of the Parthian world, most parts of the Near East have attracted attention merely to measure the degree to which they became subject to Rome. This is not necessarily a bad starting point. It is striking to notice, for example, how some 'Ori-

¹² A mere selection: p. 2 with n. 5, pp. 3-4 with nn. 9, 12-5, p. 5 with nn. 21-2, p. 31 with n. 8, p. 76 with n. 168, p. 149 with n. 3, p. 156 with nn. 27-8, p. 186 with n. 97, p. 204 with n. 125, p. 247 with n. 2, p. 248 with n. 6, p. 405 with n. 53, p. 407 with n. 60, p. 446 with nn. 243-4, 252, p. 447 with nn. 254-5.

¹³ For a more explicit criticism of this "historical amnesia", see D. Kennedy, 'Greek, Roman and native cultures in the Roman Near East', in J.H. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East*. Vol. 2: *Some Recent Archaeological Research*, *JRA Suppl.* 31 (Portsmouth, Rhode Island, 1999), esp. at 102.

ental' dynasties could eventually give stronger material expression to the Roman culture of dominating architectural models than those lands which had come to constitute the first Near Eastern province. At least from that point of view Herod the Great was probably the most "Roman" of all city developers.¹⁴ The rich material evidence relating to the system of the so-called "client kingdoms" in the East, 'a patchwork of small but glittering princely states' (B. 30), is probably what gives the region most of its unique colour. However, the relationship between Rome and "client king" could vary considerably, even if the modern term is at least in accordance with the fact that the imperial authorities did not draw many distinctions between their subject rulers in theory.¹⁵ An overview of the development of client kingdoms, from Pompey (who deliberately left some rulers on their throne when incorporating large parts of Syria into the provincial framework) via Vespasian's clean-up operation to the creation of Trajan's new provinces, shows the irregular and seemingly haphazard stages by which Rome transferred the eastern lands to direct, provincial rule (esp. Sa. chs. 12-13).

In a later phase (Sa. chs. 15, 21), the fate of Edessa continues to illustrate the inconsistencies. After the civil wars, Septimius Severus made a number of Near Eastern cities pay for their support to Pescennius Niger, notoriously relegating Antioch to "village status" and making it subject to neighbouring Laodicea. It had long been believed that Edessa was punished in like fashion, with the creation of the *provincia* Osrhoene out of royal territories. But as later coins from Edessa depicted not only the emperor on the obverse, but also the "renegade" king Abgar VIII on the reverse, it was assumed that the latter was somehow returned to favour, boasting his restoration also with his nomenclature, styling himself Septimius Abgar. As is now well known, an inscription dated to CE 195 has left no doubt that the establishment of the new province had not implied the end of Edessa's kingdom.¹⁶ There is still debate, however, as to the limitations of the king's realm. According to R. (50-1), 'Abgar lost a substantial amount of his kingdom', which he reckons 'to amount to approximately the western half'. In contrast, Sa. has argued that if Severus had really wanted to punish Abgar, leaving him on the throne would have been 'contradictoire' (617). There is, in fact, no good evidence that the king had actually supported Niger, and it is thus likely that Abgar kept his kingdom, and that nearby principalities such as Anthemusia and Carrhae came to constitute Osrhoene instead.¹⁷ The question remains of why the new province was given a name very similar to that of the kingdom situated next door. Would Abgar have been indignant over the lack of tact shown by Roman diplomacy, and is it thus likely that the Edessan court was less than amused? Or was the name of the new province a way of showing imperial

¹⁴ Emphasised by Kennedy (n. 13), 95. Cf. D.W. Roller, *The Building Program of Herod the Great* (Berkeley and London, 1998); A. Lichtenberger, *Die Baupolitik Herodes des Grossen* (Wiesbaden, 1999); E. Netzer, *The Palaces of the Hasmoneans and Herod the Great* (Jerusalem, 2001).

¹⁵ The standard work is still D.C. Braund, *Rome and the Friendly King. The Character of Client Kingship* (London and New York, 1984).

¹⁶ The first governor of Osrhoene is recorded to have established the border INTER PROVINCIAM OSRHOENAM ET REGNUM ABGARI (R. 46-53).

¹⁷ See M. Gawlikowski, 'The last kings of Edessa', in R. Lavenant (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum VII* (Rome, 1998), 423-4.

appreciation of Abgar's friendship, by styling neighbouring territories after Edessa's traditional royal name, and simultaneously a shrewd means of presenting the dichotomy between royal and provincial lands as a bipartite imperial unity?¹⁸

The fact that the gradual process of extinction of the client kingdoms not only went by fits and starts but seemed occasionally to be reversed remains to be explained. It has been argued that the disappearance of those who were officially acknowledged to be the empire's allies and friends was the very consequence of their success, having fulfilled the task of preparing their region for direct administration.¹⁹ But it has also been suggested that, at the passing away of various client kings, 'Rome crut pouvoir exercer l'administration directe; les difficultés rencontrées firent revenir au système du roi client, dont l'expérience montrait les avantages, si l'on pensait avoir sous la main un prince qui pût donner satisfaction'.²⁰ The ultimate dependence of indigenous rulers on the whim of those in power in the Roman centre is clear throughout, at least in practice. But our modern way of referring to them implies 'a greater theoretical inferiority' than the ancient specification seems to justify.²¹ Modern scholarship chooses to interpret them as 'part of provincial administration',²² but the Roman state certainly sought to avoid making this more obvious than was necessary. Nevertheless, both removing and re-establishing local rulers left little doubt as to the authority eventually in charge. Both activities contributed to Rome's ideology of power, and a one-sided search for the respective advantages and disadvantages of the system to explain its sometimes paradoxical fortunes may therefore well distort our understanding of the phenomenon. A division such as in the Anatolian lands between direct rule over those areas which were considered civilised and dynastic rule over those viewed as uncivilised, which has been called 'almost a cliché of Roman administrative practice',²³ seems therefore not applicable to the Near East. Rome realised that the region formed a *mélange* of familial and other relations, and there was no shame in using it.²⁴ A whole collection of Near Eastern princes, originally sent by their families as hostages to guarantee support of Rome, assembled in the empire's capital to reap the benefits of a classical education; among those princes was the Edessan crown prince Abgar Prahates, known from his tombstone found in Rome.²⁵ But eventually, when the imperial predator decided that enough was enough, descendants of the royal houses of the Orient could preserve their would-be kingships only as leading citizens in the cities of the Eastern provinces, like Philopappus

¹⁸ Following a suggestion by Olivier Hekster.

¹⁹ M. Sartre, *L'Orient romain* (Paris, 1991), 65.

²⁰ Thus J.-P. Rey-Coquais, 'Inscription inédite du Qalamoun: notables de l'Antiliban sous le Haut-Empire romain', *Ktèma* 19 (1994), 47, with n. 27 (I owe this reference to Gérard Roussel).

²¹ A. Lintott, *Imperium Romanum. Politics and Administration* (London and New York, 1993), 32-6, esp. 34.

²² M. Goodman, *The Roman World, 44 BC-AD 180* (London and New York, 1997), 110.

²³ S. Mitchell, *Anatolia I* (Oxford, 1993), 33.

²⁴ Esp. R.D. Sullivan, *Near Eastern Royalty and Rome, 100-30 BC* (Toronto, 1990).

²⁵ Following A. Luther, 'Abgar Prahates filius rex (CIL VI,1797)', *Le Muséon* 111 (1998), 345-57, who has recently solved the riddle of the obscure "filius rex principis Orrhenoru(m)" by explaining "filius rex" as a clumsy though original way to translate the Syriac term for "crown prince" (missed by R., 172 n.1).

in Athens,²⁶ while continuing to intensify their interrelationships via the conventional channels.²⁷

Within the Parthian realm, the diversity of sub-regions was reflected in the acceptance of native satraps, occasionally counterbalanced by direct blood relationship between those in charge of a particular area and the Arsacid dynasty itself. The political history of Characene, based largely on numismatic evidence, illustrates this well, with its series of indigenous kings being challenged by pretenders or replaced by usurpers, twice interrupted by Arsacid princes (Sch. 291-378). When Trajan, after his conquest of Mesopotamia, allowed Attambelos VII to retain his crown of Characene (Sch. 344-8), the Gulf kingdom was obliged to pay tribute to the Roman treasury, but with Hadrian's retreat to the original imperial border behind the Euphrates it was not incorporated (as was possibly planned) in the empire's provincial structure. In contrast, the kingdom of Commagene (Sa. 424-7, 502-04), situated west of the upper Euphrates, which had equally drawn the attention of the Classical world only with the contacts resulting from the progressive extension of Rome's empire eastwards, had become a part of the province of Syria in CE 17 after the death of Antiochus III. Its kingdom restored by Caligula, it became a separate federation within the province under Vespasian. In this case, the royal house claimed to be direct descendants of a Persian family that had ruled over the region in the times of the Achaemenids to whom it was related, but the history of the kings who are attested for the mid-third century BCE, ruling not only over Commagene but also over Sophene, remains totally unclear.²⁸ With Rome's extension eastwards, these and other direct connections between "central" and "peripheral" dynasties in the Parthian world (some of which are debatable²⁹) gradually eroded. When the lands of North Mesopotamia were turned into Roman provinces under Severus, even Armenia, 'the constant bone of contention' (B. 31) between Rome and the Parthians from Corbulo's military and diplomatic successes under Nero to the installation, dethronement and subsequent restoration of a pro-Roman king under Marcus Aurelius, would cease to suffer the effects of being situated between two empires, as 'die Stromgrenze Nordsyriens eine Binnengrenze des Reiches wurde'.³⁰

²⁶ See D. Kleiner, *The Monument of Philopappos in Athens* (Rome, 1983) on the monumental commemoration of the grandson of the last reigning monarch of Commagene, whose friends apparently addressed him as 'king' (Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 1.10.628).

²⁷ On the intermarriage between the families of royal descendants turned leading citizens in the Roman East, see R.D. Sullivan, 'Papyri reflecting the Eastern dynastic network', *ANRW* II 8 (1977), 908-39.

²⁸ Esp. M. Facella, 'Basileus Arsames. Sulla storia dinastica di Commagene' in B. Virgilio (ed.), *Studi Ellenistici* 12 (1999), 127-58. Cf. ead., *La dinastia degli Orontidi nella Commagene ellenistico-romana* (Ph.D. Pisa, 2001, forthcoming as a volume of *Studi Ellenistici*).

²⁹ See D. Potter, 'Alexander Severus and Ardashir', *Mesopotamia* 22 (1987), 147-57, on a possible blood relationship between the Abgarid dynasty at Edessa on the one hand and Hatra and the Arsacids on the other, and on marriage liaisons between the Parthian royal house and the Hatrene notables.

³⁰ Thus M.T. Schmitt, *Die römische Außenpolitik des 2. Jahrhunderts n.Chr. Friedenssicherung oder Expansion?* (Stuttgart, 1997), 72.

In comparison with these and other Near Eastern realms, the absence of kingship at Palmyra is striking. Despite layers of ancient legend and modern romanticised account, the oasis in the Syrian steppe was neither a client kingdom of Rome, nor a royal state in the traditional Oriental sense. The “dynasty” of Odaenathus and Zenobia, in power from the 250s, was not a family of Oriental separatist kings, and recent scholarship has rightly underlined its Roman character, despite the fact that Odaenathus probably styled himself (Sa. 976) “King of Kings”.³¹ As a Roman *colonia* since the early third century Palmyra had very much become part of the empire’s world, and ‘never had any kings until its client status became open to question’ (B. 30).³² Instead of royalty, a sequence of leading families, many of them involved in the caravan trade,³³ can be recognised in the epigraphic evidence as the focal point of the local community at large.³⁴ Nevertheless, the roots of Palmyra’s society remain unknown. According to Rostovtzeff,³⁵ the city remained one of ‘the residences of priest-kings’, ruled by ‘prelate-princes’, but the possibility that priests had played a leading role in pre-Roman times must remain a hypothesis.

In the study of the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, when the divergence of local cultures was less threatened by ‘syncretism’ under the influence of a dominant culture than nowadays, and when the further dissemination of Greek culture to the various cities and regions led to more similarities without obliterating the differences, the local perspective should always be the starting point. Naturally, one cannot study a city without taking its hinterland into account. This is true for large cities as well as for minor settlements. Dura-Europos, whose exceptionally rich remains have granted it a place in modern research which seems disproportionate in relation to its ancient position, served as the focal point for a large number of villages along the river.³⁶ The above-mentioned archive from the Middle Euphrates illustrates how villages in the area were embedded in a legal framework concentrated around the urban settlements in the wider region.³⁷ But also Palmyra, whose public character is most clearly presented in

³¹ U. Hartmann, *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* (Stuttgart, 2001), esp. 176-85. The hypothesis that Odaenathus made a claim to kingship in his lifetime (in inscriptions attested only posthumously) seems now to be confirmed by an unpublished photograph of a lost head with traces of a tiara, presented by J.-C. Balty at a conference in Palmyra in October 2002.

³² Note that B. states that ‘the first royal titles of ‘Udaynath and members of his family are not native but Roman ones awarded for good service to the empire’ (76). However, the honours awarded were not ‘royal’.

³³ G. Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade* (London and New York, 2001), esp. 167-73.

³⁴ J.-B. Yon, *Les notables de Palmyre* (Beirut, 2002).

³⁵ M.I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*² (Oxford, 1957), 269.

³⁶ L. Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos* (Leiden, 1999), 6-7.

³⁷ For the Greek documents in the archive see the recently completed publication by D. Feissel and J. Gascou in *Journal des Savants* (1995), 65-119; (1997), 3-57 (with J. Teixidor); (2000), 157-208, and for the Syriac documents H.J.W. Drijvers and J.F. Healey, *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene* (Leiden, 1999), 237-48. See now also J. Gascou, ‘Unités administratives locales et fonctionnaires romains. Les données des nouveaux papyrus du Moyen Euphrate et d’Arabie’, in W. Eck (ed.), *Lokale Autonomie und römische Ordnungsmacht in den kaiserzeitlichen Provinzen vom 1. bis 3. Jahrhundert*

relation to the long-distance trade, cannot be properly understood without reference to its hinterland, which must have been more fertile in Roman times than the present situation suggests.³⁸ The hinterland should not, of course, be viewed simply as the extension of the city, nor should its culture automatically be interpreted as presenting the “backward” (since “more indigenous”) version of the dominant cultural model of the centre. Jones’ classic statement that ‘culturally the country-side remained utterly unaffected by the Hellenism of the cities’ must surely be exaggerated.³⁹

It has recently been emphasised that ‘the Roman Near East was a world of villages’, applying modern terminology that embodies ‘a variety of forms’, from those which are “city-like” in scale, form, and function’ to ‘those which are no more than hamlets’ and the ‘even smaller, more dispersed types of settlement, of farmsteads and seasonal residences, and temporary camp-sites’.⁴⁰ Most studies of the Near Eastern countryside are based mainly on the settlements of the Hauran and the limestone massif (e.g. B. ch. 6, although Sa.’s equivalent ch. 17, set up thematically rather than geographically, supplements the material from these two areas with documentation from elsewhere). Archaeological surface projects may, in default of labour-intensive and expensive excavations, be helpful in studying the less known parts of the rural Levant. In this context, the impact of the army is worth further investigation, despite the fact that the evidence with regard to the military sphere is clustered around urban centres.⁴¹ It is obvious that the presence of large numbers of soldiers, either temporary or quasi-permanent, will have had important effects on the urban economies, but the consequences for the countryside may be less conspicuous.⁴² Nevertheless, the presence of forces will have contributed to infrastructure, cultivation of particular crops, imposition of tax, distribution of finances and exploitation of raw materials and minerals, and the archive from the Middle Euphrates has now revealed how the military came to form the “backbone” of the region’s rural society.⁴³ Simultaneously, the “institutional identity” which the recruits acquired led more directly to the army’s “separatism” from Near Eastern society than to cultural interaction.⁴⁴ With the introduction of Roman rule came boundaries and milestones. Provinces became clearly delimited from each other and from principalities outside the empire. The impact on the inhabitants of the various sub-regions, and on

(Munich, 1999), 61-73, and T. Gnoli, *Roma, Edessa e Palmira nel iii sec. d.C.: problemi istituzionali, uno studio sui papiri dell’Eufrate* (Pisa, 2000).

³⁸ J. Teixidor, *Un port romain du désert, Palmyre et son commerce d’Auguste à Caracalla. Semitica* 34 (1984), esp. 71-5; F. Millar, ‘Caravan cities: the Roman Near East and long-distance trade by land’, in M. Austin, J. Harries and C. Smith (eds.), *Modus Operandi: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Rickman* (London, 1998), 119-37.

³⁹ A.H.M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*² (Oxford, 1971), 294, followed e.g. by M. Mazza, ‘Strutture sociali e culture locali nelle provincie sulla frontiera dell’Eufrate (ii-iv sec. d.c.)’, in *Siculorum Gymnasium* 45 (1992), 206.

⁴⁰ Kennedy, (n. 13), 97-8, commenting on Millar, *The Roman Near East*, who adopts the phrase throughout.

⁴¹ Esp. B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire. The Roman Army in the East*² (Oxford, 1992).

⁴² Cf. N. Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities and Civilians in Roman Syria* (Ann Arbor, 2000), esp. 171-211 and 241-50, where the balance sheet indicates more exploitation than investment.

⁴³ Gascou, (n. 37), 63.

⁴⁴ Pollard, (n. 42), throughout.

their perception of their world, must have been immense. The higher level of spatial organisation, and especially its continuously changing nature, will have meant a growing awareness of living in a wider region which served as an arena of competition for the two superpowers in East and West.

Local studies must remain the starting point for research on the Classical Levant, but the contributions they make have wider implications. Research into particular localities and regions is fundamental to supplementing our understanding of the Near East as a whole, and comparisons between these different perspectives enable us to improve continuously on the wider picture. If one day the political tensions in the Middle East can be eased, the horizons of historical research will be expanded even further and even more rapidly. For now, the diversity in approaches to the region, and the encouraging results which this has yielded so far, is bound to keep scholars busy enough in their studies of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East.

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