CHAPTER TWO
THE SOURCES FOR THE STUDY
OF EDESSA'S RELIGION

Modern Edessa is a crowded town in a remote province of Turkey. Its name Urfa echoes original Urhai, as the city is called in Syriac sources.¹ As is often the case with cities that have continuously been occupied till modern times, the remains from ancient times have for the greater part disappeared, and archaeological research on what remains of the past cannot be done because of modern buildings and houses constructed at the antique site. Edessa’s citadel is virtually the only spot where excavations can be performed, but this task is still waiting. Therefore all archaeological finds in and around Urfa are due to pure luck and accident. It may be assumed that, especially during the past hundred years, much that had been preserved from antiquity—purposely or unintentionally—has been destroyed by the inhabitants. The nineteenth-century German orientalist, E. Sachau, complained even then that the local population used to destroy the Syriac inscriptions in the ancient tombs and elsewhere, and since his time the number of inhabitants has substantially increased so that the ancient cave-tombs of Edessa’s cemeteries have been changed into the slums of modern Urfa.² For this reason archaeological and epigraphical material connected with Edessa’s pagan religion is, in fact, very limited.

In addition to archaeological remains and epigraphical evidence our sources consist of coins struck at Edessa which sometimes bear

¹ The etymology of Urhai is unknown, cf. Segal, Edessa, p. 2; Drijvers, ANRW, II, 8, 866; Urhai occurs in almost all Syriac sources dealing with Edessa’s history; Edessa occurs only in Ephrem Syrus and in the Acts of Sharbel, ed. W. Cureton, Ancient Syriac Documents relative to the earliest Establishment of Christianity in Edessa, reprint Amsterdam 1967, 41; cf. Duval, Histoire d’Édesse, 21ff.
representations from the field of religious iconography, and of information recorded by Syriac Christian authors which deal with pagan practice. Each of these four categories poses its own specific problems, which should now be dealt with.

Inscriptions

Due to fieldwork done by E. Sachau, H. Pognon, F. Cumont, J. B. Segal, et al., seventy Old-Syriac inscriptions are now known.\(^3\) Sixty-eight were published together in a small *corpus* in 1972; one was published in 1973 and another belongs to an unpublished stele in the museum of Urfa representing a man in Parthian dress and armed with a long sword.\(^4\) They nearly all come from Urfa or the surrounding area and represent the language and script current in that region during first centuries A.D. The oldest one, a funerary text, is recorded in the tower of the old citadel in Birecik which dates from 6 A.D.;\(^5\) the last dated one is from 277/78 A.D. so that they roughly cover three centuries. For practical and theoretical reasons the term Old-Syriac is used as a designation for the inscriptions from that period and which have several features in common.\(^6\) The language of the inscriptions, as well as the script, stands mid-way between Official Aramaic—the language of the chancellories of the Achaemenid Empire which functioned as a paradigm for later literary Aramaic—and later Syriac, which is an

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\(^4\) The one published in 1973 dates from A.D. 224 and belongs to a mosaic, see Drijvers, Some New Syriac Inscriptions, 12-14 and Pl. XI-XII (read 'bdt instead of ūbd in line 5); the stele will be shortly published by the present author.


\(^6\) In fact the only reason for calling these inscriptions Syriac is that they originate in the same area in which Syriac later evolved as an East Aramaic dialect; cf. F. Rosenthal, *Die aramaistische Forschung*, Leiden 1939, 195ff. Drijvers, *Old-Syriac Inscriptions*, XII-XIII; Th. Nöldeke had already enumerated all the linguistic characteristics of these inscriptions in a review of H. Pognon, *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie et de la région de Mossoul*, Paris 1907, *ZA* 21, 1908, 151-161.