CHAPTER TWO

THE TEMPLE OF BEL IN THE NECROPOLIS OF DURA-EUROPOS

The formation of a Palmyrene religious identity

In 33 BCE two Palmyrenes founded a small sanctuary on the plateau outside the walls of the fortified city of Dura-Europos, where the necropolis of the city later developed. This temple is our main source of information on the social and religious position of Palmyrenes in Dura before the second half of the second century CE. Most of the building has deteriorated owing to its unprotected location in the desert and three inscriptions and a fragmentary painting are the only items that have been found there. In spite of this small quantity of material, the temple provides a rich, and in many respects unique, source of information, enabling a fairly accurate reconstruction of the building history of the sanctuary, of its patrons and clientele, and of the development of its cult to be made. In addition, it provides important insights into the religious and economic situation in Palmyra before the Common Era, and, as we shall see below, reflects a certain religious development in Palmyra around the beginning of the Common Era.

The latest inscription from the sanctuary is dated 173 CE, but the temple was probably in use until the city was besieged by the Sasanians around the middle of the third century CE. By and large the history of the temple tallies with our information on the development of the Palmyrene community in the city. It may be inferred from the small dimensions of the original sanctuary that it served the needs of a small community. During the first two centuries of its existence, the sanctuary was not altered much, but it was doubled in size in the second half of the second century CE, an enlargement that coincided with the increase in the Palmyrene community in Dura-Europos in this period. The same development can be noticed within the city, in particular in the so-called 'temple of the Gaddê'.

The two Palmyrenes founded their temple outside the fortified city. We have no proof that by 33 BCE a Palmyrene community had settled within the city proper, but this is not surprising, for sources which pre-date the Common Era are extremely scarce in Dura-Europos. The oldest material that testifies to a Palmyrene

1 Appendix, 210-212.
sanctuary within Dura was found beneath the later temple of the Gaddê and probably has to be dated around 50 CE.2 Unfortunately we know hardly anything about this temple: the most we can say is that, like the temple in the necropolis, it was small and served the needs of a small community. Another temple that is frequently ascribed to the Palmyrene community is the so-called ‘temple of the Palmyrene gods’ or ‘temple of Bel’, a sanctuary located against the city walls in the northern part of the town, but there is no proof that Palmyrenes belonged to the clientele of this temple in the Parthian period.3 All materials that unequivocally testify to the cult of Palmyrene gods in this sanctuary date from the third century CE, when the northern part of the city had been changed into a Roman military camp.

The evidence suggests that the temple in the necropolis was administered by Palmyrenes during the entire period of its existence. The individual who enlarged the sanctuary in 173 CE claims to descend from one of the founders of the temple known from 33 BCE.4 Bel and Iarhibol, the gods mentioned in inscriptions from the temple, are both typically Palmyrene gods, whose cult at Dura was confined to Palmyrenes. If the reading proposed for the badly damaged inscription from the year 173 CE is correct, Palmyrenes served as their priests, a clear indication for the Palmyrene character of this cult. We have no information on the clientele of the sanctuary, but the outspoken Palmyrene character of its tutelary deities, the extra­mural location of the shrine, its original dimensions and its growth over the centuries make it very probable that the sanctuary was mainly visited by Palmyrenes.

When the dedicatory inscription from 33 BCE was first published in 1935, it was the oldest dated Palmyrene inscription known at that time. Although since then slightly older inscriptions have come to light in Palmyra itself, it is still one of the very few Palmyrene inscriptions dated before the Common Era. Early sources from Palmyra are fragmentary and enigmatic and the inscription from Dura therefore provides valuable complementary information, particularly because we are well informed about its historical and archaeological context. Two features of the inscription are unique among Palmyrene inscriptions hitherto known: the fact that it is dedicated to both Bel and Iarhibol, plus the fact that it is a joint dedication by members of two Palmyrene clans. These two features enable us to clarify the religious situation in Palmyra before the Common Era. Moreover, when compared

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2 Appendix, 229-230.
3 For the cult in this temple before the Roman period, see the appendix, 299-300.
4 Inscriptions no. 1 (33 BCE) and no. 3 (173 CE), discussed in the appendix.