SANCTUARIES AND VILLAGES ON MT HERMON DURING THE ROMAN PERIOD

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Introduction

The area called ‘Lebanon’ in Antiquity did not only include Mt Lebanon, that is the range in the hinterland of the Phoenician coastal cities, but also the parallel range of the Antilebanon with its southern extension, Jabal esh-Sheikh or Mt Hermon. Since archaeological work began in this region of the Near East, great progress has been reported. Of the ca one hundred cult sites, five have been studied (Har Senaim) or are still under investigation (‘Ayn Qaniya, Chhîm, Mnin, Yanouh). Excavations and intensive surveys have already changed previous perceptions of settlement patterns on the mountain, while revealing various forms of cultic continuity from the Hellenistic up to the Roman period.

As early as 1939, in his review article on D. Krencker and W. Zschietzschmann’s invaluable Römische Tempel in Syrien, H. Seyrig stressed the need for a historical study of Lebanon’s religious life. As he rightly pointed out, the many temples which the German architects had meticulously described might well be “the clue to an important social and economic change that [would] deserve to be one day the focus of a study.” So far his advice has gone unheeded. Up to now, scholars have dealt either with the architecture of the temples

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2 Waliszewski (1999), Ortali-Tarazi and Waliszewski (2002a) and (2002b), with the reports in PADAM 8-14 (1997-2003), for Chhîm on Mt Lebanon; Gatier e.a. (2001) and (2002), for Yanouh and the Nahr Ibraim valley; Omeri (forthcoming), for ‘Ayn Qaniya (Mt Hermon) and Mnin (Qalamoun); Dar (1988) and (1993), for Har Senaim and the southern part of Mt Hermon. See also the copiously illustrated book by Nordiguian (2005).

3 Seyrig (1939), p.441.
for which Lebanon is universally renowned, or with the epigraphic and literary sources. Some of them have further admitted that the creation of the sacred landscape was influenced not only by the natural conditions of the mountain, but also, and above all, by its historical and social context: that is certainly what G. Taylor and M. Tallon meant, when the former saw “the hand of a single master builder” behind the religious architecture, or when the latter put forward the “Roman peace” to account for the high concentration of cult sites in Lebanon. Generally speaking, previous interpretations rightly contextualized the religious building, but they failed to explain why Lebanon was the home of so many sanctuaries during the Roman period. In order to answer this question, I will outline the social dimensions of religious life on a local scale, by dealing with the sanctuaries and villages on Mt Hermon during the Roman period. The wealth of antiquities on Mt Hermon (mainly Roman rural shrines, tombs, and ancient settlements) has been acknowledged for a long time, and Greek epigraphy provides a great deal of information about the local cults. In addition, I will also account for the results of two epigraphic survey campaigns which have been carried out on the Lebanese and Syrian sides of the mountain since September 2002. This study will emphasize on three aspects of the local religious life, first by reassessing the documentation available on the pagan sanctuaries that formed the sacred landscape, then by addressing the issue of the cults and the myths of Mt Hermon, and finally by making assumptions about the relationships of the mountain dwellers’ communities with their temples.

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6 The celebrated Hellenistic dedication of Tel Dan was written in Greek and Aramaic. See BÉ (1977), n°542 (Robert), and Millar (1987), p.132-3. In the city of Paneas, a few texts were written in Latin during the Roman period. See Dar (1993), p.248, for a photograph of a Safaitic inscription that was discovered on the southern slopes of Mt Hermon. However, these are the exceptions that prove the rule: nearly all inscriptions are in Greek and date back to the Roman period.
7 These campaigns aim at collecting the Hermonian inscriptions as part of the program of the Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie (IGLS), under the supervision of J.-C. Decourt (MOM-HISOMA, Lyon), with the agreement of the General Directorate of Antiquities of Lebanon, and the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Syria. As regards the epigraphic evidence, I have included in the footnotes references to the main publications only, and the reader is referred to the forthcoming corpus for an exhaustive bibliography.