ASPECTS OF HATRENE RELIGION: A NOTE ON THE STATUES OF KINGS AND NOBLES FROM HATRA*

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INTRODUCTION

The present contribution examines life-size statues of human figures from Hatra, a pre-Islamic city located in the Jazirah in present-day Iraq.¹ So far, Hatra has yielded about three hundred freestanding statues and reliefs. Most of these sculptures are not dated, but it can safely be assumed that they date from the second half of the second and first half of the third century AD, when Hatra was at the peak of its prosperity.² About half of the sculptures represent one or several deities and thus have an overtly religious character. The remaining one hundred and twenty sculptures are statues of Hatrene kings and other prominent inhabitants. Their religious character is, of course, far less obvious than that of representations of gods. Although in the past, scholars like H. Ingholt and D. Homès-Fredericq stressed the religious qualities of these statues,³ recent publications by K. Dijkstra and J.-B. Yon have put their secular character to the fore. They argued that the statues from Hatra are very similar to, for example, the honorary statues from Palmyra.⁴ It is perhaps not

¹ No catalogue of all the Hatrene sculptures has been published to date. Safar and Mustafa (1974) covers the finds until 1972, but unfortunately this book is in Arabic. Subsequent discoveries are scattered over various journals, notably Sumer, Mesopotamia and the Bulletin of the Asia Institute. Recently, S. Winckelmann has published an invaluable catalogue of all statues with arms from Hatra, see Winckelmann (2004), and J. Bouzek has written a short article on the Hatrene sculptures, see Bouzek (2004). The present author is preparing a catalogue of all published sculptures. This research, of which this article forms part, was conducted at the University of Amsterdam and was financed by UTOPA.

² On the date of sculptures from Hatra, see Mathiesen (1992), p.73-7.


a coincidence that the studies by Dijkstra and Yon take the inscriptions as their starting point, whereas Ingholt and Homès-Fredericq focus on the sculptures and other material remains. The present contribution seeks to demonstrate that it is crucial that statues and inscriptions are studied simultaneously and are interpreted in their architectural and socio-religious context. It will be argued that the statues from Hatra have manifold meanings and fulfil a social as well as a religious function. If anything, it is this very intimate connection between the socio-political and the religious spheres that is typical of Hatra.

The Hatrene statues of kings and nobles nicely illustrate that there is more to religion than gods. In fact, it is only through people that we may hope to catch a glimpse of the supra-natural. Of course, this is true in general, but it is particularly so for cities in Syria and Mesopotamia under Roman and Parthian rule. The character of the material that stands at our disposal for reconstructing the religious worlds of Syrian and Mesopotamian cities during this period, forces us to interpret religion in its sociological, political and economical contexts. There are many things about Hatrene religion one cannot possibly know. This does not imply that Hatrene religion is bound to remain a mystery altogether. It does mean, however, that the historian of religions should attune his or her questions to the available sources. For this reason, a general introduction to Hatra’s history and material remains will precede the description and analysis of the statues.

HATRA, THE CITY OF THE SUN GOD

The spectacular archaeological remains of Hatra are located in the Jazirah, in present day Iraq, ca 80 km southwest of Mosul [PLATE I]. Research first started here at the beginning of the last century, with the German expedition led by W. Andrae, who was working in Assur at the time.5 Since the nineteen-fifties, the town has been under excavation and restoration by Iraqi archaeologists. An Italian team led by R. Venco-Ricciardi worked with intervals at Hatra since 1987. Excavations came to an end in 2002, as a result of the explo-

5 Andrae (1908-12). For Hatra’s history of research, see Hauser (1998) and Venco-Ricciardi (2000).