RELIGIOUS FRONTIERS IN THE SYRIAN-MESOPOTAMIAN DESERT

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Ever since Michael Rostovtzeff’s article “Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art” was published in 1935, it has been common place to speak of cities in the Syrian-Mesopotamian desert, such as Palmyra, Hatra, Dura-Europos and Edessa, as belonging to the same cultural orbit.1 Whereas Rostovtzeff primarily argued for the existence of a shared material culture, others have put forward the concept of a shared language and religion. Han Drijvers, my much admired and sorely missed teacher, devoted many publications to the common cultural pattern in the cities of the Syrian Mesopotamian desert. Drijvers’ highly influential article on Hatra, Palmyra and Edessa, published in Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt in 1977, linked these cities in the minds of many.2 Although historians such as Ted Kaizer have recently put some stress on the local characteristics of cities in Syria and Mesopotamia, the idea of a shared indigenous culture still dominates academic discourse. Michael Sommer’s recent publication on Rome’s eastern frontier zone is a case in point.4

If the notion of a common culture is correct, this would imply that political borders do not necessarily coincide with cultural and religious frontiers. All the cities mentioned above were situated in the frontier zone between the Roman Empire in the West, and the Parthian Empire in the East. Their political fate, however, was rather diverse. Palmyra was part of the Roman Empire, and never belonged to Parthian territory.5

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5 On Palmyra’s political history, see Drijvers 1977, op. cit. (n. 2), 837–862. See Sommer 2005, op. cit. (n. 4), 149–170, for references to more recent studies.
Dura-Europos and Edessa initially fell within the Parthian orbit, but changed hands in 165 during the campaign of Lucius Verus. Hatra only joined Rome in about 225, after the Parthians had been defeated by the Sasanians. Unlike the other cities then, Hatra was connected to the Parthian Empire for most of its existence.

The view that central political powers had little influence on the culture of their subjects is at odds with recent studies on Romanisation that emphasise the role of indigenous elite groups in the process of Romanisation. This new approach resolves around the idea that the coming of Rome resulted, consciously or unconsciously, in a realignment of social relations. Roman culture is thought to have played an important part within this redirection. In order to establish and confirm their elevated social position, elite groups aligned their interests with those of Rome and forged a connection with the Roman rulers to become more like them. One way of doing this was by adopting Roman cultural elements or incorporating Roman cultural elements into one’s own culture. Notably with respect to civic or public religion in the Roman Empire, it is frequently stressed that politics and religion were in fact two sides of the same coin.

Recent studies of various aspects of Palmyrene culture stress the impact of Roman rule on the local elite of Palmyra. Roman influences to a large extent determined Palmyra’s public and religious architec-

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10 The idea that foreign Roman elements were not necessarily blended into the indigenous culture to merge into a new, typical local culture, was recently advocated by A. Wallace-Hadrill, Rome’s Cultural Revolution (Cambridge 2008), 13–14, who points out that elements from different cultures can survive side by side. Interestingly, Wallace-Hadrill’s plea for cultural bilingualism was inspired by Fergus Millar’s characterisation of culture in Syrian cities such as Palmyra in The Roman Near East, 31 B.C.–AD 337 (Cambridge—Massachusetts—London 1993).