Kommagene gehört zu den Gebieten Kleinasiens, denen im Altertum eine besonders wichtige Bedeutung zukam. Denn das Land spielte wegen seiner Euphratübergänge im Zuge der Verbindungen zwischen dem Norden Mesopotamiens und der Mittelmeerküste einerseits und dem Inneren Kleinasiens andererseits eine große Rolle.¹

*Introduction*

The Mara bar Sarapion letter is a remarkable document that is relevant to a wide variety of scholarly discussions, which might be theological, philosophical, linguistic, historical or archaeological in nature. In this article I will only take the latter two aspects into account and study the text as a historical source that might help us better understand the region of Commagene and its archaeology from the late Hellenistic and Roman era. I will focus on the “Romanisation” of Commagene in particular and—in relation to processes we indicate by that name—in the (possible) existence of a distinct Commagenean identity in the late Hellenistic and Roman period.

An important aspect of the novel edition of the Mara bar Sarapion letter is the dating of the document to the period around AD 72/73, when

¹ F.K. Dörner, “Die Entdeckung von Arsameia am Nymphenfluß und die Ausgrabungen im Hierothesion des Mithridates Kallinikos von Kommagene,” in: *Neue Deutsche Ausgrabungen im Mittelmeergebiet und im vorderen Orient* (1959), 71–88, 71. I would like to warmly thank Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman for their invitation and for the stimulating conference. Part of this paper (on Commagenean cultural responses to Roman power) was presented earlier, at the 8th Roman Archaeology Conference, held in Ann Arbor in 2009, in a session entitled “Peoples at the Peripheries.” I would like to thank David Mattingly and Peter Wells for their kind invitation to participate there. My title draws inspiration from an essay by J.M. Højte, “From Kingdom to Province: Reshaping Pontos after the Fall of Mithridates VI,” in: T. Bekker-Nielsen (ed.), *Rome and the Black Sea Region: Domination, Romanisation, Resistance* (Black Sea Studies 5; Tønnes: Aarhus University Press 2006), 15–30.
Commagene was added to the Roman province of *Syria* and lost its formal independence. In an article from 2008, with comments on the philosophical and historical contexts of the letter that provide background to this dating, Merz and Tieleman have suggested that the letter would document both “the humiliation suffered by a local aristocracy” after “the Roman conquest of Commagene,” and “the history of the reception of the cultic reform of Antiochos I in the first century BCE.” For Commagenean history and archaeology in general, especially the latter observation is potentially of great importance, and I will therefore shortly elaborate on it.

Commagene is probably best known for the dynastic monument of Nemrud Dağ, built by king Antiochos I somewhere around 50 BC. This monument consists of three terraces laid out around an artificially styled tumulus that was probably meant to contain the king’s tomb. On the Eastern and Western terraces a large statue of king Antiochos I is displayed amidst four other colossi that represent the most important gods of his ruler cult. Together with other (stereotypical) elements like depictions of lions and eagles, the same figures are shown in so-called *dexiosis* reliefs. Also ancestor reliefs are part of the architectural ensemble: by means of large stelae, Antiochos I presents members of the Seleucid and Macedonian royal house as his motherly ancestors—going back to Alexander the Great—while through his father’s line he retraces his genealogy to the great Persian King of Kings Dareios. The style of the visual language used is remarkable and most often described as Greco-Iranian, as it is clearly inspired by both the Hellenistic and the Persian worlds. Many elements

---

