

Michael Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian*, 2., vollständig überarbeitete Auflage, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 2018, 464 pp. + b/w ill. + maps; ISBN 978-3-515-11681-7

It is impossible to comprehend the history of Rome without taking into account the history of the Roman presence in Eastern Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Near East and Arabia. The events on the eastern borders of the Empire often had a major impact on both its domestic and its foreign policy. Rome was not only a participant in these events—it often also inspired them in accordance with the objectives of its foreign policy. This policy was determined above all by relations with the most powerful neighbour in the region—the Parthian state, ruled by the Arsacid dynasty. Although the eastern regions of the Roman Empire played such an important role in its history, our knowledge of its past remains rather limited. Since the 19th century they have been the subject of historical, geographical and archaeological studies, yet owing to the vastness of the area that was under Roman control over time, its geographical-climatic diversity and difficulties of a political nature, scholars have always been confined, depending on the situation at the time, to activities in selected sites such as Palmyra, Dura-Europos and Hatra. Only on rare occasions has research also taken place in other, less known or entirely unknown sites, an example of which is the international project to document archaeological sites along the Euphrates in conjunction with the construction of dams on the river. Despite the limited nature of the research carried out to date, the results demonstrate the material effects of Roman rule and its influence on the development of the local communities, especially in vast desert areas of Syria and Mesopotamia. The strategic importance of these areas for Roman interests and the role they played in trading between the Mediterranean Sea region and the East in broad terms is confirmed in various types of evidence.

Scholars have made repeated attempts to describe the history and role of the cities lying in the Roman-Parthian borderlands. Their studies have most often concerned individual locations, and less often have they attempted to draw a panorama of the history of the entire region. It is therefore understandable that Michael Sommer's habilitation dissertation: "Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra–Edessa–Dura-Europos–Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian," which does just this, met with deserved interest. Since it has long been unavailable in bookshops, the publisher decided to reissue it. The new edition differs from the previous one in being slightly longer (the first edition had 454 pages) and, according to the author, substantially revised ("2. vollständig

überarbeitet Auflage”). He notes that this allowed him to revisit a number of the opinions expressed in the first edition.

The core of the book comprises ten chapters. The first is an extensive introduction (“Einleitung,” pp. 15–36), in which the author presents the methodological premises of his research. He presents at great length the difficulties with evaluating and describing the phenomenon of Romanisation, interpretation of which has in recent years changed considerably compared to that which was dominant in academia until recently. The next chapter (“Vom Orontes bis zum Tigris,” pp. 37–51) focuses on the geography of the desert regions of Syria and Mesopotamia, their economic realities and the living conditions of the local residents. Chapter 3 (“Macht,” pp. 53–86) and 4 (“Institutionen,” pp. 87–105) examine the political and administrative structures that functioned in these areas over time. Chapter 5 (“Kulturelle Identitäten,” pp. 107–144) reflects on the determinants of the identities of the various populations living in the region of study. The author regards architecture, language and religion as the most characteristic. The next four chapters contain a presentation of the political and social history and the religious and cultural life of the most important cities in the region, which are now known as *gateway cities* but were previously called *caravan cities*: Palmyra (“Palmyra und die syrische Wüste,” pp. 145–226), Edessa (“Edessa und Osrhoene,” pp. 227–271), Dura-Europos (“Dura-Europos und der Mittlere Euphrat,” pp. 273–360) and Hatra (“Hatra und das ‘Königreich der Araber,’” pp. 361–394). The author writes at length of the relations between the inhabitants of these places and nomads. The tenth and final chapter is a concise summary of the conclusions concerning the activity and consequences of the presence of Rome in the desert borderlands (“Schluss: Die Romanisierung der Steppengrenze,” pp. 395–406). These essentially boil down to the assertion that the region, which was the site of a blending of many cultural traditions, was able to maintain its diversity even under Roman rule. Roman cultural models did not manage to change its nature, and one reason for this was also that the time of their influence on each of the four cities varied hugely, from little more than a decade to several centuries. The author points out, however, that Rome had the tools to accelerate the process of integration of the region’s inhabitants. These were the policy of bestowing Roman citizenship, civilisational effects improving living conditions (an important part of which was a common law for the entire state), and what the author calls *Mythos*, a broad range of mythological symbols referring to the religious and educational sphere, helping to adapt local contents and ideas to those that the Romans brought with them (cf. pp. 402–406).

Upon careful reading of this book, as well as acknowledging the author’s command of the subject, a number of critical remarks also arise—concerning both the content and the editorial form. At least some of these should be mentioned here. The author’s assertion that Palmyra received *ius Italicum* (p. 162) is baseless. The cited passage from Ulpian (p. 162, note 57) surviving in *Digesta* (50.15.1.15) makes no allusion to Palmyra having this privilege. It also does not prove unequivocally that the city received the status or title of colony. This is suggested rather by the context in which its name appears.<sup>1</sup> It is also noticeable that in the headings of the honorific inscriptions produced by the city

<sup>1</sup> It is worth adding that the name of Palmyra does not appear at all in another place in the *Digesta* (50.15.8), where a list of the cities bestowed with the privilege of *ius Italicum* and colony status is cited after Paul (*Censuses*, book 2).

authorities, there is no allusion at all to the colonial status/title of Palmyra, which in the case of every other city with such a status was exhibited at every opportunity (cf. *SEG* 64.1614). The exception is three inscriptions dated to the second half of the 3rd century CE—one Greek and two Greco-Aramaic. In one of these two, the reference to Palmyra as a colony was reconstructed in its Greek part on the basis of the Aramaic version of the inscription.<sup>2</sup> All of this would suggest that Palmyra probably only received the title of colony, which for its notables was evidently not very important. Regarding the foundation of Europos, for several years scholars have been dating it to c. 303 BCE, and not—as the author says—292 BCE (p. 298). The claim that only after the failure of the expedition of Antiochus VII Sidetes did the southern part of Mesopotamia come under Parthian rule (p. 299) is also incorrect. In fact, this occurred only a few years later, c. 124 BCE, after the end of many years of war between the king of the Parthians, Phraates II, and the rulers of Characene and Elymais, which probably contributed to the fact that Dura-Europos was able to enjoy independence for the next few years. Drawing a link between the formation of *coh. XX Palmyrenorum* and the administrative reforms of Septimius Severus in Syria is also dubious (p. 317). It is highly likely that this unit was formed much earlier, perhaps even during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>3</sup> For now, it is impossible to clarify this issue owing to the lack of any military diplomas issued for the soldiers of *auxilia* stationed in Syria in the period after Antoninus Pius' rule. The rather too general nature and lack of detail in the justification mean that the author's comments on the sacred topography of the Beqaa Valley are also unconvincing ("Sakrale Topographie: Die Biqā in der frühen Kaiserzeit," pp. 136–140). They do not contribute much to reveal its actual shape, as we can see by comparing them with the results of recently published research on the topic.<sup>4</sup>

I also have certain reservations regarding editorial issues. The lack of a list of abbreviations of the source publications cited in the book is surprising. Perhaps for scholars dealing with the region they are obvious, but for readers unacquainted in the subject literature (and the book is also targeted at them, after all), this is something of a difficulty. A list of illustrations and maps would also be advisable. The bibliography at the end of the book (pp. 407–451) is impressive, but it lacks many important publications which appeared before the new edition was completed. The most important ones include J. B. Yon, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de Syrie*, vol. XVII, 3: *Palmyre*, Beyrouth

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *IGLS* XVII, 3, nos. 61, 65 and 224. Yet such allusions do appear in Aramaic inscriptions from Palmyra. Cf. F. Millar, *The Roman Coloniae of the Near East: a Study of Cultural Relations*, in: H. Solin, M. Kajava (eds.), *Roman Eastern Policy and Other Studies in Roman History: Proceedings of a Colloquium at Tvärminne 2–3 October 1987*, Helsinki 1990, 44–46.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. L. Kennedy, *Cohors XX Palmyrenorum—an Alternative Explanation of the Numeral*, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 53, 1983, 214–216. There is no shortage of proponents of the view that this unit was formed by Septimius Severus, as part of his preparations for the expedition against the Parthians. Without any doubt, both upon its formation and later it included both soldiers from Palmyra and many others recruited from elsewhere: J.-B. Yon, *L'onomastique de la garnison 'palmyrénienne' de Doura Europos: la cohors XX Palmyrenorum et l'origine des recrues*, *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire Ancienne* 6, 2017, 143–153 (cf. *AE* 2017, 41).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. S. E. Paturel, *Baalbek-Heliopolis, the Bekaa, and Berytus from 100 BCE to 400 CE: A Landscape Transformed*, Leiden–Boston 2019, 194–246.

2012;<sup>5</sup> G. M. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in Syria, the Red Sea Basin, and North Africa*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2006; *id.*, *The Hellenistic Settlements in the East from Armenia and Mesopotamia to Bactria and India*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 2013. Numerous edited collected volumes,<sup>6</sup> catalogues of exhibitions<sup>7</sup> and journal articles<sup>8</sup> are also omitted. Owing to the diversity of the subjects analysed by the author, these publications would certainly add many additional facts to his work, both concerning the history of the cities he examines and the material culture, which in this book is limited to presentation of architectural sites and describing the paintings and mosaics sometimes associated with them. The author almost completely ignores the other types of artefacts that were a characteristic component of the local material culture. The structure of the bibliography itself sometimes gives the impression that the author's selection is based on criteria that are difficult to understand. In the case of certain renowned scholars in their fields, he uses just a few of their publications, and moreover not always the most important ones. An example is Pierre Leriche, an unquestioned authority in research on Dura-Europos. The author only mentions a few, mostly older publications of his extensive oeuvre. Jean-Baptiste Yon, an eminent expert in the epigraphy of Palmyra, is another example, and there more could be cited. It is an author's right to refer to those publications that he deems important. Yet this incomprehensible selectivity sometimes results in a lack of knowledge on the findings made by other scholars. As a result, the author reproduces opinions and judgements that do not always correspond to the current state of knowledge—which is particularly surprising given that the current edition's claims to be substantially revised.

Despite its various deficiencies, M. Sommer's book undoubtedly merits the attention of a broad range of both professionals and readers interested in expanding their knowledge on its subject matter. Given the military events taking place in Syria and Iraq in recent decades, of which some of the *gateway cities* described in the book have been among the victims, reading it makes us aware not only of the historic role, but also the drama of the irreversible consequences of the brutal destruction of their historical fabric that they experienced as a result of these actions. Nevertheless, thanks to Sommer's book

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also J.-B. Yon, Bilinguisme et trilinguisme à Palmyre, in: F. Biville, J.-C. Decourt, G. Rougemont (eds.), *Bilinguisme gréco-latin et épigraphie. Actes du colloque organisé à l'Université Lumière-Lyon 2 Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée-Jean Pouilloux UMR 5189 Hisoma et JE 2409 Romanitas les 17, 18 et 19 mai 2004*, Lyon 2008, 195–211; *id.*, L'épigraphie palmyrénienne depuis PAT, 1996–2011, *Studia Palmyreńskie* 12, 2013, 333–379.

<sup>6</sup> See p.ex. P. Bieliński, F.M. Stepniowski (eds.), *Aux pays d'Allat. Mélanges offerts à Michal Gawlikowski*, Warszawa 2005; M. Gawlikowski (ed.), *Studia Palmyreńskie*, vol. 11, Warszawa 2010; M. Gawlikowski, G. Majcherek (eds.), *Fifty Years of Polish Excavations in Palmyra 1959–2009: International Conference, Warsaw 6–8 December 2010*, (*Studia Palmyreńskie*, vol. 12), Warszawa 2013; A. Krzyżanowska, M. Gawlikowski, *Monnaies des fouilles polonaises à Palmyre* (*Studia Palmyreńskie*, vol. 13), Warszawa 2014.

<sup>7</sup> See p.ex. *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst Und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt. Einführende Beiträge und Katalog zur Ausstellung*, Linz 1987; J. Charles-Gaffiot et al. (eds.), *Moi, Zénobie, reine de Palmyre*, Paris–Roma–Milano 2001; L. R. Brody, G. L. Hoffman (eds.), *Dura-Europos Crossroads of Antiquity*, Chicago, Il. 2011; J. Y. Chi, S. Heath (eds.), *Edge of Empires: Pagans, Jews and Christians at Roman Dura-Europos*, New York 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J.-P. Yon, Documents sur l'armée romaine à Palmyre, *Electrum* 14, 2008, 129–147; P. Leriche, Europos-Doura séleucide, *Electrum* 18, 2011, 23–40 etc.

too, they will continue to be evidence of the creative nature of the blending of various traditions and cultures under Roman rule.

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