

F. MILLAR, *THE ROMAN NEAR EAST 31 B.C.-A.D. 337*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1993. Pp. xxix + 587, 12 maps. ISBN 0-674-77885-5. £35.95/US \$53.95.

This book will without doubt long remain a standard reference work for the political and social history of the region with which it deals. The vast erudition and cautious judgement of the author make it a mine of reliable information, but the book also offers the reader matter for reflection on many problems, familiar or unsuspected, that result from our very inadequate knowledge of the conditions in and around Roman Syria.

In fact, Millar himself states flatly that a social and political history of the Roman Near East cannot be written. He chooses to call his work a 'map of surface appearances' (226), based as it is on the vast but still largely inadequate evidence in our possession. He has already attempted the even more tantalizing task of treating Hellenistic Syria (in A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White, *Hellenism in the East* (1987), 110-33). The present book, in which the same acute sense of limitations is to be felt at every page, takes advantage of the little more that is actually known.

It is a long time since a comprehensive book of this quality has appeared on the subject. The obvious comparison is with the classic work of A. H. M. Jones on *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*. Maurice Sartre's excellent book, *L'Orient romain. Provinces et sociétés provinciales en Méditerranée orientale d'Auguste aux Sévères* (1991), published too late to be used by M., covers the whole Greek half of the Empire, whereas the geographical extension of the Roman Near East as M. defines it includes only the Eastern Mediterranean front with its hinterland as far as Roman rule reached. In other words, the region treated by M. is restricted to those countries within the Empire in which a Semitic language was spoken: the provinces of Syria, Judaea, Arabia, and Mesopotamia. As a result, M. leaves himself space for a more detailed account of the diversity of peoples and traditions of ancient Syria in the broadest sense. Thus the main part of the book comprises a masterly survey of particular regions after an outline, in the first part of the book, of political and military events from Augustus to Constantine.

The author was naturally unable to avoid considering the recently much discussed problems of the role of the Roman army and Roman military installations in Syria. Was it an army of occupation, as Benjamin Isaac would have it? Was its purpose in regard to its Parthian neighbour in the main offensive or defensive? Was the *limes* a guarded road or a barrier? The central notion of the book, however, is the ethnic and cultural identity of the communities under examination, both as it was felt and expressed by them and as it was perceived by western outsiders.

M. portrays the history of Roman rule in the Near East as a slow advance of the legions and a gradual process of extension of the unique, and originally small, province of Syria until the Empire reached under the Tetrarchy to the upper Tigris and beyond (27-222). According to M. there was no 'grand strategy' in these developments. Flavian annexation of the dependent kingdoms after the Jewish War does give the impression of the implementation of a concerted plan, but even in this case most dynasts seem to have been given a chance to pass away before their domains were incorporated, perhaps mostly for fiscal reasons to help defray the costs of garrisoning Syria and Judaea. Before that, during more than a century from Pompey to Vespasian, direct Roman rule covered only the territories of Greek or Hellenized cities: the Seleucid *tetrapolis* and the Phoenician coast, as well as the enclaves of Damascus and the Decapolis where apparently no garrisons and perhaps even no standing representatives of the provincial administration were present.

To what extent the native traditions survived in such places is a question that cannot be answered on our evidence, as M. admits. However, if the *epichorioi* preserved many Semitic place names down to the Islamic conquest, if Aramaic was spoken in the fourth century near Cyrrhus and until modern times in the Lebanese mountains, it is not absurd to imagine a largely bilingual society in the villages around Antioch, if not in some quarters of this and other cities. Moreover, it seems to me possible that we do have indirect evidence for some cities allowing officially for the autonomy of non-Greek communities in their midst. How else should the presence of the 'ethnarch of king Aretas' in Damascus when Paul came there be understood, or indeed the judicial powers of the Jewish elders implied by the story as told in *Acts*? We have no reason to reject these details or to accept a temporary Nabataean occupation of the city (*contra* 56-7). There may rather have been an organization of the civic body prefiguring in a way the Ottoman system of *millet*, which still marks some societies of the modern Near East.

The formal education dispensed in Syria was entirely Hellenic, and standard. With the obvious exception of the Jewish community, there is no reason to suppose the existence of schools maintaining native literary traditions (if any). Even in Palmyra, where the 'epigraphic habit' exceptionally produced texts in Aramaic, the existence of the practice does not necessarily imply any training above elementary level. After all, the tribesmen who left thousands of Safaitic inscriptions in the Syrian desert surely never went to school. This is why I tend (regretfully) to dismiss as fiction the story about the native 'Babylonian' education of the novelist Iamblichus (cf. 489-92). The supposition that the man could have come from Palmyra is attractive, even more

so since the name of Jamblichus is attested there (as YMLKW), but there is nothing Babylonian or generally Oriental in his *Babyloniaca* beyond the title. In a similar way, the allegedly Phoenician cosmology reported by Philo of Byblos seems to owe more to Greek myth and Biblical reminiscences than to genuine local traditions (cf. 277-9).

Nor are Mithraic myths or Babylonian astrology anything but 'Western constructs', elaborated largely in Syria and owing nothing to contemporary Mesopotamia or Iran. However, the Western-oriented approach, as imposed by our sources and overtly admitted by M. in this book, should perhaps be tempered by considering the possible action of Greek cities within the Parthian Empire. While Syriac culture is indeed a derivative of Hellenism, Edessa began as a Macedonian foundation and perhaps this tradition was preserved there just as well as in Europos, which started to be called by its native name of Dura only under Roman rule. On the other hand, the influential idea of Henri Seyrig, that Seleucia-on-the-Tigris was the main centre of so-called Parthian art, still waits, after half a century, for supporting evidence. The origins of this artistic convention evade us, but apparently they lay in the steppe zone extending from Emesa to Hatra by way of Palmyra.

Still, the lack of apparent contact between Hatra and Roman Syria is striking. When rulers of this city became in mid-second century 'kings of Arab' (495), that is, of the nomad tribes of Jezireh, the region under their sway extended to the Euphrates valley. As can be seen on a map, it must have touched the territory of Dura-Europos and of dependencies of Palmyra farther downstream. Yet traces of mutual presence are slight: a modest Palmyrene ex-voto in Hatra, a Hatrean inscription in Dura, and possibly a proper name in Palmyra are all that can be put forward.

In spite of this apparent isolation, which an unexpected discovery might any day render illusory, the cultural affinity of the Aramaic-speaking cities of the Syro-Mesopotamian steppe remains beyond doubt. All of them are often construed nowadays as a result of the common Arab origin of their people. This book brings a salutary reminder that modern notions do not always apply to the reality of the ancient world. 'Ancient observers generally associated the term "Arab" not with language or culture but with the unsettled way of life' (511-14). Indeed, this name for Bedouins was commonly used in Syria until quite recently and can still be heard from elderly villagers, in accordance with the usage of the legal inscriptions from Hatra, distinguishing between 'Arabs' and 'Hatreans'. In this sense there could have been Aramaic-speaking 'Arabs', even if M.'s idea (402-3) of counting Nabataeans as such against the commonly accepted views is rather bold. At any rate, Aramaic seems to have been commonly used in Palmyrene territory, and there is no evidence whatsoever of any Arab consciousness in Palmyra itself, even if the inhabitants were in part of Arab origin linguistically. They always referred to themselves as 'Palmyrene', never using in the extant inscriptions any larger identity, unlike their Emesene neighbours who sometimes fancied themselves as 'Phoenician' (cf. 306). (But was it not, rather, the name of the province in which they found themselves since the time of Severus? For Aramaic being spoken in Phoenicia by that time, see F. Briquel-Chatonnet, *Rivista di Studi Fenici* 19 (1991), 14.) M. argues convincingly (8, 515) that Arab self-consciousness first formed itself under the influence of the Biblical tradition and found its final form only in the message of Islam. (More on the subject will be found in the papers of a *table ronde* held at Collège de France in November 1993 on *La présence arabe dans le Croissant fertile avant l'Hégire*.)

I agree with M. (cf. 171-3) that the episode of Zenobia should be seen in the Roman context of the third century and not as a national movement. He has already discussed elsewhere at length the supposed relations of Zenobia with Bishop Paul of Samosata. There is no way of knowing what should be thought of her alleged interest in Manicheism. Legend took an early hold of the figure of the hapless queen, as is exposed in detail in the valuable monograph by Eugenia Equini Schneider, *Septimia Zenobia Sebaste* (1993); it is at any rate remarkable that Arab tradition, while entirely confabulatory, presents her as an adversary of Arab tribal rulers (cf. 433-5).

The career of Septimius Odenathus, and the slightly earlier career of the family of Bassianus in Emesa, may be judged to have remained entirely within a Roman framework, if we dismiss the title of 'king of kings' as posthumous (162) and that of *restitutor totius Orientis* as unofficial (170), but neither claim is certain even if the relevant inscriptions date after the death of Odinat. However, the inscription from the great Arch, very poorly preserved, seems to relate the royal title to a victory by Orontes (in 253 or 260?). It seems best to see Odinat as both a Roman *consularis* and an Oriental ruler, as so many dynasts before him.

M. rightly remains sceptical about the Roman army in the East being mainly an occupational force. It certainly was in Judaea for an extended time, and perhaps intermittently in other regions, but the plain fact is that the Romans could never keep their provinces without at least the qualified consent of the population. The history of the Jewish War shows how great an effort was needed to quell a real revolt. Needless to say, police duties were sometimes detailed to the military, but on the available evidence it is not possible to be precise about the normal role of the army with regard to the provincials. The army was clearly dispatched to guard the Euphrates frontier and

to provide the means for offensives in Armenia or Mesopotamia. Especially under the Flavians, the effort deployed in tracing roads through the desert and improving river transport in the area of Antioch (see D. van Berchem in *Bonner Jahrbücher* 185 (1985), 47) shows unmistakably that the point was to allow rapid concentration on the Middle Euphrates between Sura and Samosata, by then acquired by Rome.

The great river was below this sector not a frontier but a road, and so was the Khabur which flows into it (cf. 129ff.). The 'Parthian stations' also served mainly as relays once they fell under Roman control. Many rectangular forts to be seen on Poidebard's aerial photographs are in fact such *khans* of various ages; one of them was recently investigated on the western outskirts of Palmyra and seems to have served as barracks of a military unit in the 270s but not necessarily earlier. Only under the Tetrarchy did the track from Damascus to the Euphrates through Palmyra become a military road, part of a line of over 1,200 km from Aila to the Tigris along which most Roman troops were by that time stationed.

The purpose of this *limes* is still a matter of disagreement. Was it, as traditionally held, a barrier intended to keep the nomads away from the settled land or a means of controlling their movements between the desert and the sown? It seems to the present writer that the founding of the *strata Diocletiana* represents an attempt to replace Palmyra in its successful policing of the desert during the previous two and a half centuries. The vacuum created by the demise of the caravan city must have resulted in an increase of insecurity serious enough to require the imperial presence during the campaign of A.D. 290 against the Saraceni. The extensive fortifications in the aftermath of this war, including the camps of seven legions and many forts listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum* a century later, could be useful in building up an army to operate when needed in Mesopotamia, but essentially served to support local patrolling. This costly system was replaced in the sixth century by an alliance with Arab tribes led by Ghassanids.

M. argues that strong local identities, as expressed by tribal organization and the cult of major sanctuaries but also by citizenship of Greek cities and Roman *coloniae* (the latter often Aramaic-speaking), functioned deeply ensconced within the Imperial framework and do not manifest any generally 'Oriental' quality to be opposed to Hellenic culture. Claims to Babylonian or Phoenician cultural identity are literary and do not reflect real particularities and even less a national awareness. In fact, every community, whatever its everyday language, was permeated to varying degrees with Greek forms, values, and ideas, as expressed for instance by sculptures from the Hawran, by athletic and other competitions held in Gaza or Damascus, and by public munificence in Palmyra and elsewhere.

M.'s book does justice to this diversity and to the common ground behind it. Western-oriented by choice and necessity (3), it is a masterly account of Rome's progress in the East and of the East's reaction to it. Rich both in carefully documented detail and in historical insight, it should be read by every ancient historian and every archaeologist concerned with the Near East.

University of Warsaw

M. GAWLIKOWSKI