

H.J.W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa. Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain LXXXII*, Leiden, Brill, 1980, pp. 204, pl. I-XXXIV.

This is the first comprehensive monograph on the pagan religion of Osrhoene, as known from extremely poor original documents, and from the indirect evidence of Syriac texts, mostly by Christian apologists or Gnostic writers. The author is a distinguished scholar in the field of Syriac literature, deeply interested for many years in its pagan background. No wonder that the book provides a very precious contribution to the overall picture of the religious situation in the Near East in the crucial period of late antiquity.

Edessa was only one of the Aramaic-speaking centers of Syria and Mesopotamia described by M. Rostovtzeff as "caravan cities". However misleading this term may be, these communities did share a common civilisation which is, sometimes and rather improperly, called Parthian, especially when its artistic expression is considered. Drijvers has already attempted to approach this original phenomenon in a more general work on "Hatra, Palmyra and Edessa", recently published in the series *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (II, 8, Stuttgart 1977). Here he offers a detailed examination of evidence concerning the future "Blessed City" in pagan times.

The religious reality in Edessa, and elsewhere in the Near East during the Graeco-Roman period, is generally dubbed "syncretistic". This term is, however, too often understood as describing a "mixed" culture, pieced together from various elements of different origins; the existence of such monstrous entities is justly rejected by the author. Every culture forms a unity, even if its components are subject to different interpretations in terms borrowed from outside, thus assimilating alien notions and external features found elsewhere. What is usually called syncretism is, in fact, "a process of expressing conceptions of one culture with the vehicles of another culture in order to keep the world identifiable, ...determined and limited by the possibilities of recognition one culture finds in the other" (p. 174). The Oriental religions in the Roman period fit well this definition. In Edessa, as in Palmyra or Hatra, gods of Babylonian, Syrian, and Arab origin are not assembled through a learned speculation, but as a result of the complex social and ethnic pattern of these cities. The gods were worshipped by particular groups of the population, and understood in terms familiar to them. The astrological interpretation came to be increasingly popular there, attributing the heavenly bodies to certain gods, a cosmocrator, usually Bel, governing them all.

Apart from in Syria, Bel of Edessa always comes in a second position, after Nebo. This order is respected by Syriac authors, and confirmed by other documents, being moreover in accordance with the late Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian tradition. It is likely, then, that both gods represent the oldest stratum in the religion of Edessa. However, if Nebo was, apparently, the most important deity of Edessa, it becomes doubtful whether he could have been a "local *dieu-fils*" (p. 54), only because the Babylonian Nebo was considered the son of Bel.

Most interesting are the remarks about the Hellenistic interpretation of Nebo as Apollo. This god was established in the Seleucid royal tradition as a protector of the dynasty, together with Zeus; this should have forwarded the popularity of Nebo among the native population, when the link between Apollo-Nebo and Tyche would reflect the traditional role of Ishtar as the Fortune of the king, reinterpreted in the Greek way (p.68-72). It is indeed remarkable that the iconography of Apollo of Hierapolis (its best example being the statue from Hatra, known as Assurbel) reverts the pattern set by Eutychemes in his famous Tyche of Antioch: the Tyche is placed under the feet of Nebo-Apollo.

It is more difficult to follow the author's assumption (p. 120) that "every town of any



importance in this area originally had its own ba'al and ba'alat, a male deity of the heavenly sky, of storm and rain, giver of fertility, and a female one representing security, at the same time a mother and a virgin, who protects her children". While this description of the god reflects well what we know about many Oriental supreme deities, usually called Haddad or Bel or Ba'alshamin, the motherly character of the goddess, let alone her virginity, cannot be checked in most cases from the existing evidence. More important, can we really take such a divine couple as the basic and constant feature throughout the Near East? It seems to me that there is no more ground for this assumption than for many "triads" read back by modern scholars from the fragmentary sources at our disposal. The couple is to be found in Hierapolis, in Baalbek, a triad existed in Hatra, but in Edessa no such link can be shown between Bel and Atargatis, as Drijvers admits himself in another passage (p. 179).

The family pattern is by no means a general one in the Near-Eastern pantheons. In particular, a belief of the followers of Bardaišan, as reported by Ephrem Syrus, in the Father and Mother of Life and their Son represented as a fish (p. 79) is obviously Christian-influenced and cannot be taken as a safe proof of the existence of a triad of Atargatis not only in Edessa, but even in Hierapolis, where Bardaišan is said to have acquired his religious education before converting.

The very presence of Atargatis in Edessa is claimed by Drijvers with mainly two arguments in support: the sacred pond with carps, attested by Egeria in the V century A.D. and still existing in modern Urfa, could refer to the well-known link of the Syrian Goddess with fishes, when a bas-relief in the Urfa Museum, published in this book (p.80-82, pl. XXII) would provide a direct proof. Unfortunately, the explanation of this monument seems to me open to question: instead of a god and a goddess facing a *semeion*, as on some known representations of the gods of Hierapolis, I can see on the excellent photograph two identical figures, neither of them distinct as a female, and a conical object between them without any clear characteristics of a *semeion*. Moreover, both persons do not "appear to grasp the semion with one hand... or to be connected with it otherwise". In fact, they hold a rod passing through or behind the conical pillar, and having attached two shovel-like objects right and left of it. When the central motif of the composition remains enigmatic, it can hardly be called a *semeion*. The high headgears of both figures, in the absence of any other attributes, are not enough to identify them as deities.

The only sources for the cult of Atargatis at Edessa remain thus a mention in the *Doctrina Addai*: "there are those among you who adore... Tar'atha as the people of Mabbog" (i.e. Hierapolis), some theophorous proper names, and the presence of the sacred pond. While not excluded, the cult is in need of further confirmation.

By the same token, there is no evidence for the cult of Hadad, because the conical pillar with the lateral staffs certainly cannot represent "Hadad with both arms raised" (p. 95). Neither is such a figure of Hadad to be recognized on a Hierapolis coin from the IV century B.C. (p.86, n.30): the legend was tentatively translated as "Abdhadad priest of Mabbog, who resembles Hadaran his Lord" (A. Caquot, in H. Seyrig, *Revue numismatique* 13, 1971, p. 16). Drijvers is rightly doubtful about this reading, because the high-priest is shown there as a servant of his god; this is, in my opinion, expressed by the words *ydmr* (not *ydmh*) *bhdrn b'lh* (cf. *Syria*, 58 [1971] p. 415).

The cult of Sin, called "Lord of the gods", at the nearby Sumatar Harabesi, belongs to the Harran tradition. However, Drijvers has attempted to show that the rulers of 'Arab recorded in the inscriptions from the Central Mount were dependent on kings of Edessa, and not on Hatra, as B. Aggoula would have it. The extensive discussion of their titles, their chronology, and the political events around 165 A.D. (p. 122-135) presents



a coherent picture. The author interprets the monuments around the Central Mount as tombs (and not planet temples as believed by J.B. Segal), when the so-called Pognon's cave would be a place of investiture of the Sin priests, being at the same time rulers of 'Arab (i.e. of the nomad population) for the kings of Edessa (p. 138-139). There seems to be no doubt about tombs, and the suggestion about the investiture is an attractive one: it is supported by two arguments, viz. the horned pillars of Sin carved on the walls of the Pognon's cave and the fact that the recorded officials belong to different families.

For the record, the relief offered to Sin by one Ma'ana in 165 A.D. (p. 123, pl. XXV and XXVII) does not represent a person wearing "a headdress of large peacock's (?) feathers"; the presumed plume is simply the usual conch crowning the niche in which the figure is standing.

Still another cult attributed to Edessa is that of Azizos and Monimos. The only evidence is provided by a well-known passage from the Emperor Julian, based upon information of the philosopher Iamblichus: "The inhabitants of Edessa, a place from time immemorial sacred to Helios, associate with him Monimos and Azizos... Monimos is Hermes and Azizos Ares, the assessors of Helios". Many scholars who commented upon this text have seen in the two companions of the Sun the Evening and Morning Star, respectively, but some of them preferred to read Emesa, instead of Edessa.

Drijvers follows those who reject the unnecessary emendation, stressing that the presence of these Arab gods is by no means surprising at Edessa. The much discussed question (cf. p. 150-169) why Azizos and Monimos represented to Iamblichus Ares and Hermes is still far from solved. The fragmentary evidence of other Arab cults, mainly from Palmyra, does not provide any firm ground for a proper understanding of Julian's statement, which, being literary, does not necessarily reflect exactly the beliefs of Edessa. There is, for instance, no reason to admit that the city was really "sacred to Helios", although the solar cult itself is confirmed there by the *Doctrina Addai*, and by the name of one of the city gates (Gate of the Sun Temple). Incidentally, this name does not point to the location of this temple outside the walls (p. 180), but only to its proximity to the gate.

As it happens, the best documented Oriental cults of the time are known from Palmyra, Dura-Europos, and Hatra, cities whose civilisation had come to a stop before Christianity could develop there; only in Dura a small community is attested. The beliefs of Edessa, despite the poor evidence, are therefore extremely important, as the immediate background of Oriental Christianity in one of the main centers of the new religion. The book shall be a very useful reminder of this fact to the students of Christian, and a guide to those of pagan, antiquity. Most important, the author's vision of syncretism as a means of communication between different systems of thought and belief, bears a promise of better understanding of what was happening in the Near East during the Graeco-Roman period.

M. GAWLIKOWSKI