

THE ROMAN FRONTIER ON THE EUPHRATES

The river Euphrates is usually considered as the eastern frontier of the Roman empire against Parthia, just as the Rhine and the Danube marked the limits of Roman power in Europe. In fact, the two empires were meeting, since their first contact, only on the middle course of the great river, where it runs closest to the Mediterranean¹. In the 1st century A.D., the Roman outposts protecting the province of Syria did not extend downstream farther than BIRTHA (possibly Halebiyé-Zenobia, a strategic fortress blocking the valley route at mid-distance between the Balikh and Khabur rivers, but on the opposite bank). A military road through the desert joined the fortified shore at Sura, slightly upstream; it was traced by Trajan the Elder in 75 A.D.². Contrary to those who have trusted the confused information of Ptolemy, these parts never belonged to the territory of Palmyra³, but formed a military district of *ripa inferior*⁴.

The Euphrates route was described by Isidore of Charax at the end of the 1st century B.C. (this highly probable dating was changed in 1960 by an obvious misunderstanding of a text of Lukian, and advanced for a century⁵. As usual, this error is confidently quoted ever since by everybody, including myself, as the latest state of research). Crossing the Euphrates at Zeugma, the route as described by Isidore traversed the Osrhoene, followed the course of the Balikh, and then descended along the Euphrates. A hindrance to navigation presented by a ruined dam is expressly mentioned. The stations were on the left bank as far as the mouth of the Khabur, from where on they passed to the other bank, called Roman because on the Western side, but presented as firmly held by Parthian garrisons. There were two Greek cities, the famous Dura-Europos and the obscure Giddan

¹ Cf. ED. FRÉZOULS, « Les fonctions du Moyen-Euphrate à l'époque romaine », *Le Moyen-Euphrate*, Actes du Colloque, Strassburg 1977, pp. 355-386; E. DABROWA, in: *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East* (BAR Internat. Series 297, 1986), pp. 93-108.

² R. MOUTERDE, *Syria* 22 (1941), p. 238; H. SEYRIG, *Syria* 13 (1932), p. 276; cf. W. VAN RENGEN, *Colloque Apamée* 1972, pp. 107-110.

³ PTOL. V, XV, 19; A. H. M. JONES, *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*², 1971, p. 268; cf. R. DUSSAUD, *Topographie historique de la Syrie*, 1927, p. 266.

⁴ H. SEYRIG, *Syria* 22 (1941), p. 238.

⁵ S. A. NODELMAN, *Berytus* 13 (1960), p. 107, note 160.

(Eddana in other sources) near the modern Abu Kemal. The territory of Dura remained probably unchanged when it was, in 121 A.D., the residence of the eunuch Manesos, epistates of the Parthian king and strategos of « Mesopotamia, Parapotamia, and arabarchos » i.e. a commissioner for the nomad tribes of his district⁶. There is no reason to ascribe to him on that account the control on the lower course of the river⁷.

The Duran territory was probably still the same after the Roman annexation in 164. In about 208, the line of outposts under the local commander ended a short distance downstream of the modern frontier, at a place called Belesi Biblada, and this point coincided most likely with the demarcation between the two provinces of Syria as created in 194, and with the limits of territory of the two Greek cities⁸. Going down with the river, there were four fortified islands, three of them identified. The most important was Ana, Parthian in the time of Isidore, but before 132 Nabataean horsemen were stationed there and in a camp ashore⁹ and the place was most probably Palmyrene.

An impressive series of inscriptions show the Palmyrene presence in the Wadi Hawran in 98 A.D.¹⁰. This would be hardly conceivable without a hold on the river, so that the occupation of the islands might be even earlier than the Parthian war of Trajan. The place of Ana was certainly in Palmyrene hands after 164 and until the final onslaught of Shahpur in 253, together with the whole district¹¹. A strategos of Ana resided on the island and controlled the smaller islands of Telbis and Bijan¹², as well as a large stretch of the desert to the West of the river¹³.

It would be useful at this point to place a simple question: What was the practical reason for holding these islands? They cannot be considered as a line of defense. Even a short visit to the region will prove to anyone that the river is undefendable as a frontier line: the valley, often no more than a few metres wide on either side, is bordered right and left by the unending desert. Whoever kept the valley, had to keep both banks of it.

On the other hand, the Euphrates was a line of communication. The

⁶ C. B. WELLES, *Dura Final Report V*, 1, 1959, n° 20.

⁷ As J. TEIXIDOR, *Palmyre un port romain du désert*, *Semitica* 18 (1984), p. 21.

⁸ J. F. GILLIAM, *Dura Final Report V*, 1, 1959, p. 222; *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 72 (1941), p. 170.

⁹ CIS II 3973.

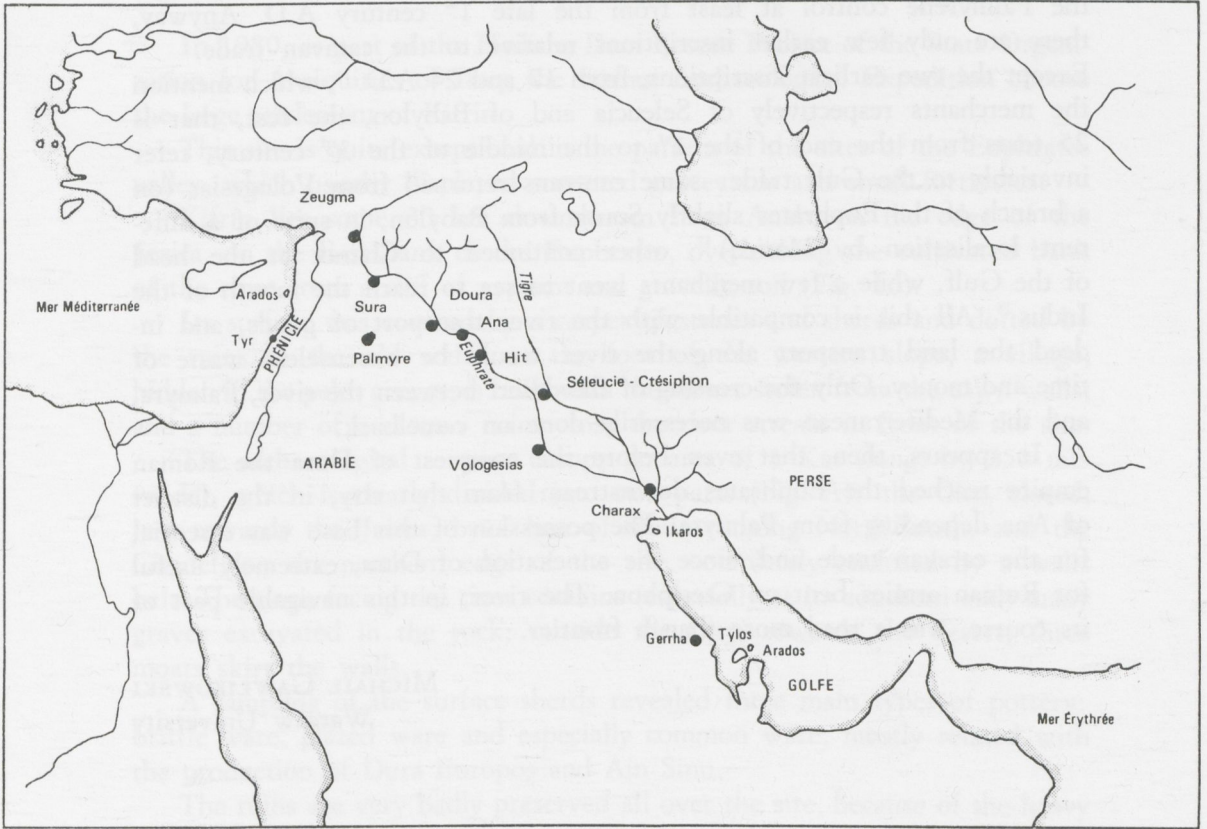
¹⁰ F. SAFAR, *Sumer* 20 (1964), pp. 9-27; J. TEIXIDOR, *Syria* 44 (1967), pp. 187 s. Cf. J. TEIXIDOR, *Syria* 40 (1963), pp. 33 s. and J. STARCKY, *ibid.*, pp. 47 s.

¹¹ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, *Syria* 60 (1983), pp. 53-68.

¹² M. GAWLIKOWSKI, *Sumer* 42 (1986), pp. 15-21, and *Archeologia* 178 (May 1983).

¹³ J. CANTINEAU, *Syria* 14 (1933), p. 178.

expeditions of Trajan, of Verus, of Julian, used the river transport as their main link with the Empire and as their line of advance into the enemy land. In peaceful times, the trade could not possibly ignore the waterway. This was the only reason for Palmyra to take over the islands — they were not only strongholds and bases, but also harbours.



The Euphrates between Parthia and Rome. Main sites mentioned in the text.

It would be absurd if the caravans of camels followed the course of the river whenever it was navigable. Indeed, we do have evidence for fabrication of rafts borne on inflated skins, identical with the modern *kelek*¹⁴. However, the river was difficult when going upstream, and the navigation in this direction stopped much lower, at best at Hit. There is in fact a

¹⁴ H. SEYRIG, *AAS* 13 (1963), pp. 159-166.

caravan path from Hit to Palmyra, discovered by an aerial survey¹⁵, which should have been used by caravans on their way back from Mesopotamia. This posed a serious problem: the large herds of animals had to be protected and kept ready for the returning expedition at some place downstream from the embarkation point. The Wadi Hawran offers the best possible solution: close to Hit and relatively well watered, it was under the Palmyrene control at least from the late 1st century A.D. Anyway, there are only few earlier inscriptions relative to the caravan trade.

Except the two earliest inscriptions, from 17 and 24 A.D.¹⁶, which mention the merchants respectively of Seleucia and of Babylon, the rest, that is 25 texts from the end of the 1st to the middle of the 3rd century, refer invariably to the Gulf trade: some caravans returned from Vologesias (on a branch of the Euphrates slightly South from Babylon, in spite of a different localisation by Maricq)¹⁷, other continued to Charax at the head of the Gulf, while a few merchants went to sea to reach the mouth of the Indus¹⁸. All this is compatible with the river transport of goods, and indeed the land transport along the river would be a senseless waste of time and money. Only the crossing of the desert between the river, Palmyra, and the Mediterranean was necessarily done on camelback.

It appears, then, that even before the conquest of Dura the Roman empire reached the Euphrates downstream from that city, in the district of Ana depending from Palmyra. The possession of this base was essential for the caravan trade and, since the annexation of Dura, extremely useful for Roman armies bent on Ctesiphon. The river, in this navigable part of its course, was a road more than a frontier.

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¹⁵ R. MOUTERDE, A. POIDEBARD, *Syria* 12 (1931), pp. 101-115.

¹⁶ J. CANTINEAU, *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre*, IX, n° 6 and 11.

¹⁷ A. MARICQ, *Classica and Orientalia* (1965), pp. 113-125.

¹⁸ J. STARCKY, *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre*, X, n° 91, 95, 96.