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SOME DIRECTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES OF RESEARCH
Graeco-Roman Syria

The Greater Syria, as well known, is a country subject to clear-cut geographical divisions determined by mountains and the hydrographic system, extending from North to South: the coast, the mountain and hill country of Lebanon and Palestine, the great rift, another range of hills, and finally the desert plateau stretching out to the Euphrates valley. These correspond roughly to three cultural patterns during the Greek and Roman periods: the highly urbanized and Hellenized western parts, including the coast and the rift valley, the eastern hill zone which may be called Hellenistic provincial, where more local tendencies survived under the Greek surface, and the desert area resolutely turned eastwards. It is there, in places like Palmyra and Dura, that we find a peculiar civilisation often considered as Parthian [1].

I believe it is easier now than it would be only a few years ago to point out the main directions of research in Greater Syria in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. As elsewhere, the 'temple-and-tomb archaeology' has long remained dominant in these parts, the most impressive monuments being studied in the first place. Many public buildings of principal cities, like Apameia, Palmyra or Gerasa, were uncovered and are now mostly published [2]. Even in modern cities of Aleppo, Damascus or Lattakia the general outline of ancient urban pattern has been determined. On the other hand, inventories of standing buildings have progressed notably, in particular in the northern hill country, where hundreds of monuments have been documented by Tchalenko, most recently in two new volumes on village churches [3]. Much remains still to be done on the same lines, and I find the approach

[1] Cf. E. Will, « La Syrie romaine entre l'Occident gréco-romain et l'Orient parthe », *Actes du VIII Congrès d'archéologique classique* (1963), Paris 1965, p. 511 s.; D. Schlumberger, « Descendants non-méditerranéens de l'art grec », Syria 37 (1960), pp. 131-166, 253-318; Id., *L'Orient hellénisé*, Paris 1970; H. J. W. Drijvers, « Hatra, Palmyra und Edessa », *ANRW* II, 8, Stuttgart 1977.

[2] Cf. recently: J. Balty (Ed.), *Colloque Apamée de Syrie, bilan des recherches archéologiques 1973-79*, Bruxelles 1984; H. Seyrig, R. Amy, E. Will, *Le temple de Bêl à Palmyre*, Paris 1975; M. Gawlikowski, *Palmyre VIII. Les principia de Dioclétien*, Varsovie 1985; *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981-1983*, I, Amman 1986.

[3] G. Tchalenko, E. Baccache, *Eglises de village de la Syrie du Nord*, Paris 1980.

perfectly justified, even more so that there are some outstanding examples of more complex interests; the case of Dura-Europos shall be reminded here tomorrow.

However, in recent years a new tendency is clearly establishing itself to study housing and settlement patterns, both urban and rural, until now largely neglected.

A case in point is a very comprehensive research project now under way in the Hauran, by a team directed by J.-M. Dentzer [4]. While the focal site there remains the important sanctuary of Baalshamin at Si', a pilgrimage centre built between 33 and 1 B.C., the French team is mostly concerned with what they call by the possibly untranslatable name of 'terroir': the fields, the tombs and watchtowers in their midst, the roads and paths, water retaining schemes, village housing, wine-presses, etc. It appeared even possible to date by excavation the present-day stone fences to the Ist century A.D.; a whole network of fossile vineyards and orchards has been recognized by Gentelle and Villeneuve. A curious pattern of symbiosis between the peasants and the Safaitic nomads visiting the sanctuary can be postulated. The life of autonomous village communities organized along tribal divisions appears to have retained its basic features at least from the time of major explosion of settlement in the late Ist century A.D. down to the Umayyad period, in spite of some artificial attempts at urbanization [5]. We have there a 'witness area' and an indigenous society very little touched by the surrounding Hellenism, as can be seen in building techniques, plastic art, burial customs, etc. This local society is not Nabataean either, as long admitted: in fact, the Nabataean civilisation in its various expressions, such as architecture, pottery and script, stops abruptly at the frontier of the kingdom, just North of Bosra.

Another field of study in the same perspective is provided by the Roman and Byzantine settlement in the limestone hills between Apameia and Aleppo. As supposed long ago by Tchalenko, it was related to the intensive cultivation of olive-trees for Western markets. For that reason it was presumed to have come to an abrupt end in the early 7th century. In fact, recent excavation conducted by another French team has shown a more complex picture: even a limited excavation work at Dehes was enough to prove a continuous occupation since the Hellenistic period (until the extant buildings have appeared at the end of the 4th century and through a notable development in the

[4] J.-M. Dentzer et al., *Hauran* I, Paris 1985-86.

[5] Cf. M. Sartre, « Tribus et clans dans le Hauran antique », *Syrie* 50 (1982), pp. 77-91. A far-reaching research on the history of the Safa Beduins is undertaken by J. T. Milik.

5th-6th centuries), at least to the end of the 9th century [6]. The resources were not exclusively olive-oil. A large part of animal husbandry in the rural economy of the area is now established. The whole problem of the economic history of this region is now to be reconsidered.

The urban settlement is being investigated in Apameia. Several huge houses of Late Roman date have been dug there. When found separately, in Syria or elsewhere, such buildings are usually considered 'palaces', because of their peristyle courts and often absidal 'ceremonial rooms'. In fact, they are urban residences of rich landowners [7]. It has been shown how a fascinating process of change transformed them in the early 7th century into rural dwellings. The phenomenon is thought to be linked to the exodus of provincial élites as a result of the Persian invasion of 613-628 and of the following Arab takeover in 636.

Recent excavations at Jerash have provided a somewhat similar picture: there was a survival into the 9th century, but sensibly different from the Classical pattern. It has become again a rural habitat, with large areas left free, while a part of the network of streets was in the same time intruded upon by shops and workshops. The colonnades (which were freestanding, as recent research of Parapetti has shown) [8] gave way to a modern Oriental suq, as it also happened in Palmyra, Apameia, Damascus and certainly elsewhere. Churches continued in use, if no new ones were founded, and a sub-Byzantine society, partly Christian, partly Moslem, kept alive older traditions, as it is especially clear in the case of Jordanian pottery.

While these are some of the highlights of recent research, I understand that my report is expected in the first place to show Syria in its relations to the Iranian world. This is not an easy task, as these relations, except for the relatively well known political and military events, prove to be rather elusive. If the Syrian soil was often invaded by Iranian armies, since Pacorus in 51 B.C. until Chosroes in the early 7th century A.D., the Romans had, on even more occasions, deeply penetrated the lands of Parthian and Sassanian sovereignty, from Crassus and Marc Antony to larger inroads by Trajan, Verus, Gordian and Julian. These contacts have left ruins and desolation, but hardly anything positive. Trade was more apt to bring exchange of things and ideas, but to what extent was there a trade with the Iran proper? The caravans of Palmyra traded with the Gulf, and there is not the slightest evidence of interest for the continental route [9].

[6] J.-P. Sodini, G. Tate et al., « Déhès (Syrie du Nord). Recherches sur l'habitat rural », *Syria* 57 (1980), p. 1-301. Cf. G. Tate, in Balty, *op. cit.*, p. 377 s.

[7] J.-Ch. Balty, *Colloque Apamée* (1984), pp. 471-501; N. Duval, *ibid.*, pp. 447-470.

[8] R. Parapetti, *Mesopotamia* 18/19 (1983-84), pp. 66-74.

[9] M. Gawlikowski, « Palmyre et l'Euphrate », *Syria* 60 (1983), pp. 53-68.

Beyond a few obvious instances of direct borrowing, we still perceive the Syrian-Iranian relations in a rather dim light. There is, to begin with, a striking disproportion in the amount of facts we dispose of, respectively, about the Roman East and the further Orient. Besides, in the same way as the Classical scholars working in Syria had sometimes a tendency to label vaguely as 'Oriental' everything that is alien to the Greek and Roman tradition, those who are interested in Semitic studies tend to push the unknown even further and to attribute to an Iranian influence everything that does not square with their perception of the Semitic world. A good example of this state of mind is the interpretation imposed on some temples of Southern Syria, which are square in plan, had sometimes four columns as inner supports and a corridor surrounding the cella proper. These temples were compared with the 'ayadana' of Susa and some other Iranian buildings, to the effect that they came to be considered as a curious reserve of Iranian architecture, surviving into the Ist century B.C. and later, amid a population not otherwise affected by Achaemenian rule, in a region about which we know strictly nothing for the Persian period. However, it has been pointed out recently that the dating of 'ayadana' as well as its actual function are far from assured and no comparable Iranian buildings can be certainly considered as Achaemenid nor indeed as temples [10]. On the other hand, more similar temples have been identified in the Nabataean lands and in Lebanon, so that it is now likely that we have there an archaic form of square temple proper to regions subject to Arab penetration in the Hellenistic period and owing nothing to Iran.

More amusing was the attempt to recognize in the post-sockets found in the Jerash hippodrome evidence for a transformation of this monument into a polo field by the invading Persians of Chosroes. These horse-riders were also held responsible by one scholar for influencing the appearance of 'Jerash lamps', a particular type common in the 7th and 8th century and provided with a handle in the form of an animal head, supposedly that of a horse.

Such dubious and isolated cases stand in contrast to a real unity of the desert Syria and Mesopotamia. The political frontiers did not coincide there with the cultural ones. The river Euphrates was not a barrier between the Roman Empire and Parthia. It was a road running through lands which shared to a considerable extent the same civilisation.

Palmyra-Dura-Hatra: these three places alone, as best known, could suffice as examples, but they are not alone. While Seleucia and Ctesiphon begin now to emerge thanks to the Italian excavations there, we still know nothing of Mesene and not much of Edessa, to take only these opposite points

[10] R. Boucharlat, in *Temples et sanctuaires*, Lyon 1984, pp. 127-130.

of the Mesopotamian realm. In spite of this, and whatever the particularities observed, there was clearly a large cultural province seated across the frontier, from Susiana in the East to the brink of the Orontes valley: this was a domain of nomadic tribes, but also of flourishing cities, both of Semitic stock.

The situation was clear to the ancients. As Strabo says: « up to the present moment even the language of the people on both sides of the Euphrates is the same. To rend asunder so famous a nation by such a line of cleavage in this region, and to join the parts thus dissevered to the parts that belong to other tribes, would be wholly improper » [11].

Indeed, the Aramaic was the common communication means throughout the area from the Orontes to the Tigris, the use of Greek being limited to some cities, as Seleucia or Dura-Europos, but remaining secondary in Palmyra and absent from Hatra or Edessa. It is likely that the everyday idiom was already largely Arabic, in an archaic form that transpires through the wording and spelling of some inscriptions. Local scripts remain the rule for the expression of Aramaic.

The religious beliefs are definitely Semitic, while being syncretistic and particular to each city [12]. The devotion was still mainly a tribal matter, gods being conceived as belonging to a clan, their cult fixed in particular sanctuaries. When we find Hadad in Dura, it is a god of Hierapolis-Mabbug, Yarhibol is there the 'Idol of the source', viz. the Efqa source in the oasis of Palmyra, Aflad (originally Apil-Addu) is referred to in Dura and Palmyra as the god of Anat. Even without such explicit mention, it is clear that the solar god Shamash is not the same entity in Hatra and in Palmyra. Many gods wear a military garb, this being a reflexion of nomad Arab traditions, as convincingly shown by Seyrig [13]. They tend to be associated in groups, usually larger than triads introduced by the modern research, always in relation to a given sanctuary. Often there is a tendency to identify some gods to those of the Olympus: Allat is equaled to Athena, Bel or Baalshamin become naturally Zeus, Nebo is called Apollo. These parallels, however, seem mostly reduced to names and iconography, and did not affect the contents of beliefs.

On the other hand, no Iranian influence of any consequence is on record: the name of Anahit is found in Palmyra in 18 B.C. [14], but if the gods on a rock-relief at Tang-i Sarvak in Elymais are represented as Bel-Zeus, Athena and Helios, their aspect is not Iranian and there is no material reason to see

[11] *Geogr.* 2.1.31, transl. H. L. Jones (Loeb Classical Library).

[12] H. J. W. Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra*, Leiden 1976; Id., *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*, Leiden 1980; M. Gawlikowski, « Les dieux de Palmyre », *ANRW* II 8 (in print); Id., « Aus dem syrischen Götterhimmel », *1/2 Trierer Winckelmannsprogramm* (1979-80).

[13] H. Seyrig, « Les dieux armés et les Arabes en Syrie », *Syria* 47 (1970), pp. 77-112.

[14] J. Teixidor, A. Bounni, *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre* XII, 22.

in them Ahura-Mazda, Anahita and Mithra [15]. The mithreum of Dura was founded by Roman soldiers and is thus a Western feature.

An interesting recent theory concerns an inscription from Palmyra referring to a citizen who lived in Vologesias and has built there about 108 A.D. a « hammana and its *atar* ». *Atar* means simply 'place' in Aramaic, but the strange wording has led Starcky to admit in this case the Iranian name for 'fire', especially as *hammana* might be a temple associated with a burning altar. This would be not unlikely in a city founded shortly before by an Arsacid king. Other instances of the word 'atar' in similar context, in Palmyra and the Hauran, are less conclusive [16].

Another field where unity is apparent, again in spite of local features, is that of art. It has become common to include the artistic expression of Palmyra, Dura and Hatra under the heading of Parthian art. The frontal, hieratic convention, taken as the distinctive mark of the art in question, can be also found in some rock sculptures, mainly in Elymais, and on some Arsacid coins. Nothing proves, however, that the origin of this convention is to be credited to the Parthians: the theories of Rostovtzeff [17] and his school, developed in the wake of discoveries in Dura, are no longer possible to maintain. As things stand now, it was a way of expression particular to the Aramaic-speaking cities of Mesopotamia, and adopted in Palmyra and Elymais, that is on the outskirts of this country. Nothing is known of the art of the royal court of Ctesiphon, supposed by Schlumberger to be the creative centre of what we are used to call Parthian art [18]. It might be relevant to remind that the early architectural decoration at Palmyra was likewise supposed to have imitated the models of Seleucia [19]; now, the research of Jacqueline Dentzer on the mouldings of the Hauran has shown « troubling common points » with early Palmyra, as well as with the stucco work of Mesopotamia. Were, then, the villages of Southern Syria other « spiritual daughters » of Seleucia, or did they rather share in the same provincial Hellenistic heritage?

The frontal convention appears about the beginning of Christian era in Palmyra, and soon after in Dura and Hatra. Unfortunately, the dating of the first appearance is disputed: the bronze statue of Shami could be from the second half of the Ist century A.D. according to Seyrig, but Ghirshman would

[15] H. Seyrig, *Syria* 47 (1970), pp. 113-116; R. Ghirshman, *Parthians and Sassanians*, New York 1962, pp. 54-5.

[16] J. Starcky, in *Colloque CNRS: Mythologie gréco-romaine, mythologies périphériques*, Paris 1983, p. 123.

[17] M. Rostovtzeff, *Dura and the Problem of Parthian Art*, Yale Classical Studies V, New Haven 1935.

[18] D. Schlumberger, *L'Orient hellénisé*, Paris 1970

[19] H. Seyrig, « Palmyra and the East », *JRS* 1950, pp. 1-7.

rather take it two centuries back, to coincide with the sack of Susiana by Mithridates I in 140 B.C.[20]. A comparison of the portrait of this king on his coins with the rock sculpture at Hung-i Nauruzi (where several frontal figures in Parthian dress are already present) has led Vanden Berghe to the same dating for the beginning of the frontality in Parthian art [21]. Meanwhile, the relief of Mithridates II at Bisutun (about 110 B.C.) is still in Achaemenid tradition, and the profile convention appears even under Gotarzes II (about 40-50 A.D.). The stelae from Assur are often quoted as marking the transition: two of them are in a profile view and dated, but the date of 88 B.C. could possibly be advanced by a century or even two, while the frontal one is not necessarily contemporary [22].

While three-quarters representations of deities — but also of some kings — are rather common on the issues of the Seleucid mints of Seleucia, Ecbatana and Susa, since the 3rd century B.C. and until about 140 B.C., Arsacid frontal issues of the same mints are much more rare and scattered along the series without any continuity [23]. The Parthian origin of frontality is thus unwarranted.

The cultural relationship between Iran and the Semitic, or generally Western world seems to be rather a one-way lane. Arsacid kings called themselves Philhellene, used Greek, might have appreciated Hellenistic art. The Syrians, while at home in Parthian and Sassanian Mesopotamia, limited their borrowings to such specific features as ceremonial dress and elements of horsemanship.

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[20] H. SEYRIG, *Syria* 20 (1939), pp. 177-181; R. GHIRSHMAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-89.

[21] L. VANDEN BERGHE, *Iranica Antiqua* 3 (1963), pp. 155-167.

[22] Bisutun: R. GHIRSHMAN, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-53; Assur: W. ANDRAE, H. LENZEN, *Die Partherstadt Assur*, Osnabrück 1967, pp. 105-6, Pl. 59.

[23] LE RIDER, *Suse sous les Séleucides et les Parthes*, Paris 1965, pp. 358-360; *BMC Parthia*, Pl. XXV, 5-6, XXIX, XXXV. Cf. E. WILL, « L'art parthe et l'art grec », *Etudes d'archéologie classique* II (*Annales de l'Est* 22), 1959, pp. 125-135.