Section 2: Regional Studies

3. The Syrian Desert under the Romans

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Regional Topography

The land of ancient Syria, being the western half of the so-called Fertile Crescent, borders to the south and the south-east on a band of dry steppe, included approximately between the isohyets of 250 mm and 150 mm of annual rainfall, that is between the dry farming area of western and northern Syria and the true desert of Arabia (Fig. 1). This intermediate area, known in Arabic as *bādiya*, becomes green during some months and can be used for migratory raising of sheep and camels, and even for occasional farming in *wadi* beds in good years. It was the home of some of these 'dimorphic' societies (Rowton 1976) which tend to establish themselves on the ecological borders, to make the best use of the complementary resources offered by two different environments and two contrasting ways of life, in this case nomad pastoralism and sedentary farming.

The area under scrutiny extends over parts of present-day Syria and Jordan, following on the inside the western half of the crescent formed by the agricultural lands in the great river valleys of Syria and Mesopotamia and in the hill country around them (Sartre 1991: 311). The eastern part of the *bādiya* crescent runs along and between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and does not concern us here. West of the Euphrates this belt is up to 200 km wide near the great bend of the river, to become thinner further south where it runs parallel to the mountains of Lebanon and surrounds the depression of the Dead Sea on the northern side before reaching the Mediterranean near Gaza. East of Palestine, a larger tract of agricultural land extends eastwards over the plain of Ḥawrān, reducing the intermediate zone to the outer slopes of the volcanic Jabal al-Drūz mountains. North from there the *bādiya* encloses the large Ghuta oasis around Damascus and then follows the Anti-Lebanon range and the fringe of the Orontes valley, before turning east to follow the course of the Euphrates, leaving to settled life the limestone hills of northern Syria.

Further south and inside the great arch of the *bādiya*, the steppe becomes gradually the stony desert called *ḥamad*, where only rare wells allow for human life and the seasonal presence of flocks (Fig. 2). On the outer borders of the Ḥawrān, one finds the barren lava fields called *ḥarra*, even less hospitable (Fig. 3). The southern limit of the *bādiya* is roughly marked by the hills crossing from the Anti-Lebanon to the Euphrates, passing through the oasis of Palmyra. Beyond, the desert reaches
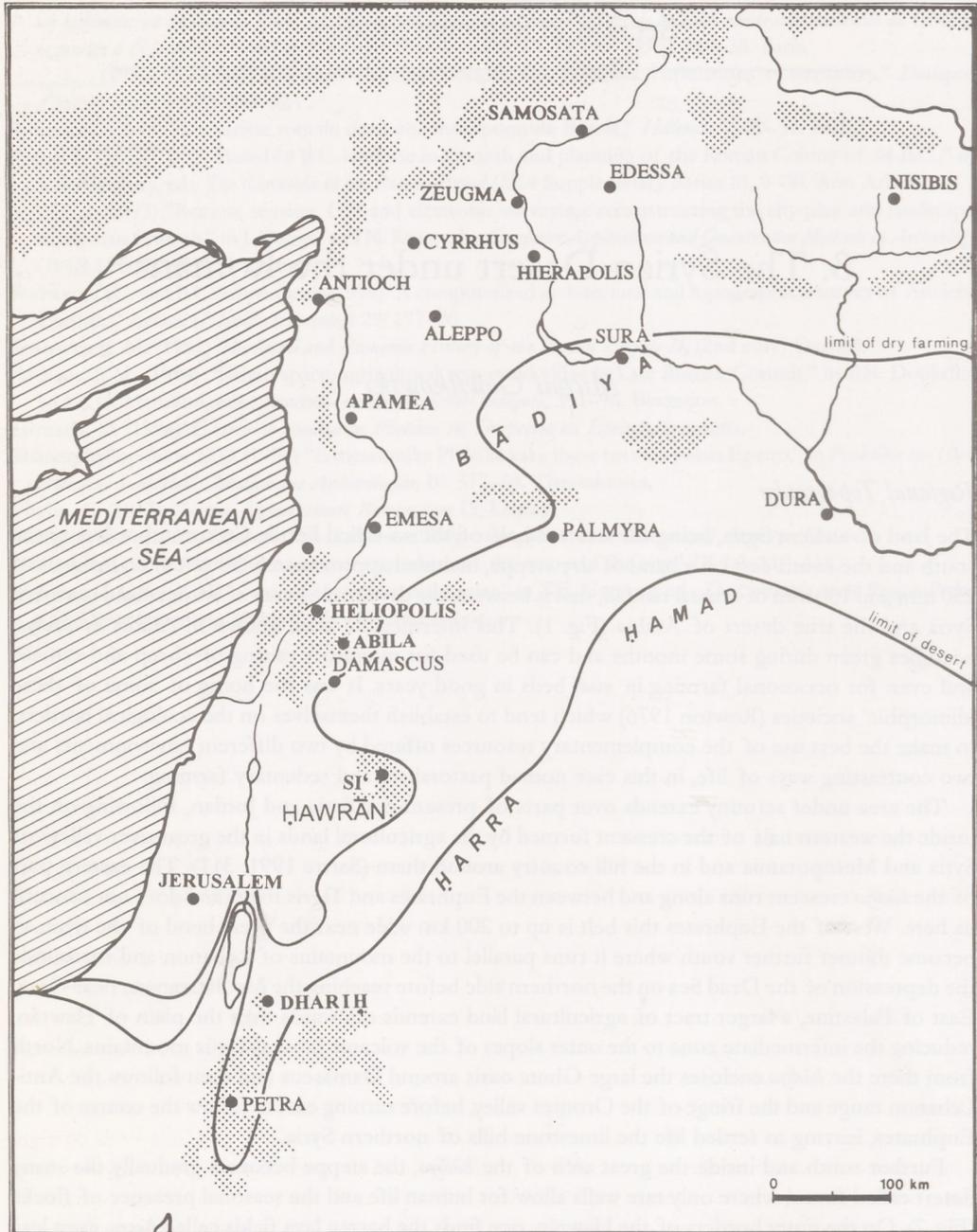
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Figure 1. Map of Syria and Palestine, showing the extent of the bādiya *and the sites mentioned in the text*
(Drawn by M. Puszkarski)

Fig. 2. The Syrian ḥamad with a flock of sheep (Photo M. Gawlikowski)

from the Euphrates to the borders of Egypt across the Negev and the Sinai. Only the camel-herding Bedouin can sustain themselves in this harsh environment.

Unlike its counterpart in the other half of the crescent, the arid zone of Syria is not crossed by fertile river valleys allowing more intimate relations between peasants and pastoralists. The Middle Euphrates to the east provided opportunities for very limited settlement only, although it constituted an excellent access route to Mesopotamia. The *bādiya* is, therefore, a rather compact domain of nomadic tribes living on their herds of sheep and goats, and moving with them quite close to the surrounding agricultural lands in the dry season. At all times, the settled population tended to regard the nomads with distrust, as primitive and dangerous robbers lurking on the outer margins of the civilized world. Yet this opposition was not as clear-cut as alleged by our sources, both ancient and modern, and a great deal of interaction was usually taking place between the Desert and the Sown (Rowton 1973; Briant 1982: 39–51).

The settled part of Syria is much more varied, including a range of distinct landscapes from high mountains and rocky plateaux to river flatland, often divided into small, well delimited regions. For that reason, the country was never unified under a native ruler in antiquity, while foreign powers controlled not so much a single country as an array of cantons of very different characteristics. Kingdoms, free cities, temple estates, peasant communities, and tribal territories existed side by side at different periods, often confined within specific natural pockets.

Fig. 3. The border between the ḥarra *and the fields in the Ḥawrān (Photo M. Gawlikowski)*

The annexation of Syria by Pompey in 64 BC concerned in the first place the surviving rump of the once proud Seleucid kingdom, which at the time still extended from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates, but hardly beyond the lower Orontes valley. Practically all that remained consisted of the urban territories of Greek cities such as Antioch, Apamea, Seleucia-in-Pieria and Laodicea-on-the-Sea (these four making up the Seleucid *tetrapolis*), Cyrrhus, Beroea (Aleppo), and Seleucia-on-the-Euphrates (later simply Zeugma, i.e. 'Bridgehead'). To this Pompey added the often extensive territories of Phoenician cities of the coast, which had gained recently a large measure of independence, such as Aradus, Berytus, Sidon, and Tyre. He included also a range of small cities in Palestine and Transjordan, some of which claimed Greek origins and became known collectively as Decapolis. By this time, some of these places had been subjugated by the Hasmonean kings of Judaea or local strongmen (Jones 1971: 256–269; Rey-Coquais 1978).

The map of the new province, so far as it could be drawn on existing evidence, would thus resemble a patchwork: between the usually extensive territories of the individual cities there were enclaves of client kingdoms and numerous 'tetrarchies' which in some cases preserved their autonomy to the end of the first century AD. With some exceptions, most notably of Judaea, these were primarily principalities created during the final decay of the Seleucid power by tribal chiefs of definitely, or presumably, nomadic origin. Such principalities were usually located on the brink of the *bādiya*, encroaching on the areas of cultivable land.

Nomads and Sedentaries

Some of the richest cropland of ancient Syria lay in the fertile Beqaʻ valley between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges, and along the Orontes river further north. From the first century BC these parts were under the sway of the Ituraeans, a tribe whose original homeland can be vaguely situated somewhere in northern Transjordan and who had first occupied the slopes of Mt. Hermon, and then of the Lebanon ranges (Schotroff 1982). The kingdom of another tribe, the Hemesenians, had been carved out north of the Ituraean possessions, with the capital at Emesa on the middle Orontes, on land settled and tilled for millennia (Sullivan 1977). If both these tribes had apparently once been nomadic, this had ceased to be the case by the time they are first mentioned as already in control of their conquests. We do hear, in passing from Strabo (16.1.28; 16.2.10), of nomad chieftains in the desert along the middle Euphrates as far as Babylonia, including one Alchaidamnus, a volatile ally of the Romans and king of the Rhambaeans. By that time, some form of civic organization must have existed in the oasis of Palmyra. A score of other principalities and tribal districts, most of them apparently in the mountains of northern Syria, are recorded by name alone in Pliny, who also mentions wholesale some seventeen more 'tetrarchies with barbarian names'(*HN* 5.23).

All of the nomads involved in sharing the spoils of the moribund Seleucid kingdom are usually described as Arabs, and indeed many, if not all, seem to have spoken a dialect close to the later Classical Arabic. This does not mean, as is usually maintained (e.g. Dussaud 1955), that they emerged at some point as conquerors from the depths of Arabia. This deep-rooted general theory is not, in fact, supported by any real evidence. On the contrary, the fact that the nomads of the outer desert in the *ḥarra* and the Ḥijāz spoke a more conservative variant of Arabic seems to preclude such a migration (Gawlikowski 1995a). The ancestors of the Ituraeans, Hemesenians, Rhambaeans, and others were most probably living in the Syrian *bādiya* from times immemorial, moving according to season between the steppe and the fringe of the settled land, only establishing themselves and subjugating the local peasant populations when such a course became feasible.

A similar situation prevailed in Mesopotamia, where nomads roamed the desert between the Euphrates and the Tigris. A part of this country was known as 'Arabia' to Xenophon in 401 BC (*An.* 1.5.1). Later, according to Strabo, some of the tribesmen turned to catering to caravans (16.1.27). In due time they came under the control of the cities and the settled rulers of that country: an *arabarches* resided in the Parthian-dominated Dura-Europos, and his counterpart was appointed over Arabs subject to the kingdom of Edessa further north. The city of Hatra in the desert west of the Tigris grew up around a major sanctuary whose high-priests in the second half of the second century AD were given, presumably by the Parthian rulers, the title of 'kings of the Arabs' or 'of Arabia' (Aggoula 1995). Yet the inscriptions left in Hatra and in or around Edessa are conceived in Aramaic, and there is no doubt that this was the spoken language of these cities, as shown by the later development of Syriac literature out of the dialect of Edessa (notwithstanding the Arab-sounding names of the Abgar dynasty there). In Hatra, the texts clearly distinguish between the 'Hatraeans' and 'Arabs', that is between the city dwellers and the nomads (Dijkstra 1990). It is by no means sure that the term of *ʻArab* referred always and everywhere to the speakers of the language so called. It certainly referred to the nomadic way of life, as in the common usage of the Near East where until very recently *ʻArab* means simply 'nomads', corresponding to the ancient Greek *Scenitae,* or 'tent-dwellers' (Briant 1982: 113–125) – not necessarily speakers of a particular language.

Remarkably enough, the inscriptions of Palmyra – Aramaic or Greek – never use the term, even though the oasis was surrounded by nomadic territory and though people of nomadic origin must have accounted for an important part of the population. While no Arabic etymology can be ascertained for the rare toponyms in the area around Palmyra which have come down to us, including the name of Tadmor for Palmyra itself (Gawlikowski 1995b), a high proportion of Arabic personal names appear among the most frequently used, and several typically Arab deities found their way into the local pantheon. While there is no reason to doubt that some tribesmen in the Syrian desert in Roman times could have been native speakers of Aramaic, as they certainly were in the Iron Age, most of them must by that time have spoken Arabic, even if Aramaic remained the means of communicating with their settled neighbors.

A convincing case has been made for Arabic as the spoken idiom of the Nabataeans (Cantineau 1934/35), yet even they used Aramaic in writing. From the earliest description of the Nabataeans, referring to events in 311 BC, it is clear that they were then a tribe of tent-dwellers, having already acquired a notable position in the caravan trade (Diodorus 19.94–100). Settling at Petra in the fourth century BC, they preserved many features of their nomadic origins, while managing to control a large area east and south of the Dead Sea, extending northwards as far as the rich corn lands around Bosra. The Nabataean kings, attested sparingly from the second century BC and known better only in the following century, apparently presided over a motley collection of nomadic tribes and farming communities in the marginal lands of southern Syria (Starcky 1966; Bowersock 1983). Controlling vast expanses of the desert as far as Egypt and deep into Ḥijāz, the Nabataeans mastered the art of employing the extremely scarce water resources of their country for agriculture and settled life. Many of their settlements, including the capital Petra itself, survived either solely or chiefly on rainwater collected with considerable skill by means of dams and cisterns (Dentzer and Zayadine 1992; Graf 1992).

The Nabataeans never succeeded in long controlling any of the Greek or Hellenized cities of the region, although they managed to take and keep Damascus for a short time in the first century BC. The only urban centers of the kingdom were those developed by the Nabataeans themselves: Petra, Bostra, and a score of lesser townships in Transjordan and the Negev. While an unprecedented blossoming of settled life would later transform their lands and last into the Byzantine times, it nonetheless remained marginal, and nomadism continued there as a constant and prevailing mode of existence. Deep to the south, the trading stations on the principal caravan tracks, such as Ḥegra in the Ḥijāz or Jawf at the head of the Wadi Sirḥān, marked the Nabataean presence in a region where settled life is found only in some oases.

From Pompey to Trajan, the Nabataean kingdom remained one of Rome's clients, more or less on par with the realm of Herod and some other petty principalities of Syria, if perhaps less dependent owing to its peripheral position. Perhaps briefly annexed from 3–1 BC (Bowersock 1983: 54–56), it was finally transformed into the Roman province of Arabia in AD 106: the last client of the Augustan period to be annexed. Rome inherited thus a desert frontier, or rather the control of a vast desert area where no fixed line would be conceivable (Gatier and Salles 1988).

Other clients disappeared earlier. This was the fate of the tetrarchy founded about 70 BC by a certain Ptolemy son of Mennaeus (Arabic Maʿnai) in the Beqaʿ Valley (ancient Massyas) and in southern Syria. He styled himself a high-priest, possibly of the sanctuary at Heliopolis which was

later developed to colossal proportions under the regime of the Roman colony. In the first instance, however, Ptolemy appears to have been a tribal chief of the Ituraeans. In 23 and 20 BC, after the reign of his second successor Zenodorus, the Ḥawrān and the adjoining districts were given to King Herod, and the Beqaʿ assigned about the same time to a newly established colony of Augustan veterans. Small Ituraean tetrarchies survived around Arca in northern Lebanon and Abila to the west of Damascus until AD 53. Under Vespasian, the kingdom of Commagene on the upper Euphrates was annexed to the province of Syria, about the same time as Emesa on the middle Orontes. The former Ituraean districts in southern Syria remained largely under the control of the Herodian princes as late as AD 93, when they were finally placed under direct Roman rule, a few years before the Nabataean kingdom.

The ease with which the Roman government pushed all these dynasts around, giving and taking their estates in an apparently capricious way, resulted partly from features common to these lands. Leaving aside the special case of Judaea, determined by its religious singularity, and to some extent the Nabataean kingdom as it evolved during the first century, the districts left to local rulers shared the characteristics of being non-urban and little Hellenized. By comparison, the territories of the Greek and Phoenician cities in the area, with which these kingdoms and tetrarchies were intermingled (especially in southern Syria and Transjordan) in a kind of jigsaw puzzle, belonged to the province from the beginning. It seems that the Romans considered the cities of the Decapolis as a part of the civilized Mediterranean world, whereas they simply left – for the time being – tribal areas to native rulers. Indeed, the Greek names and the Hellenic education of many of these local dynasts do not reflect the general cultural situation in their domains. Long after their annexation, the activities of the land-surveyors of AD 297 show that villages remained the basic administrative units in the parts of southern Syria outside of the Decapolis, in contrast to the much larger city territories elsewhere (Millar 1993: 535–544).

The nomadic population on the margins of the village zone no doubt participated to some extent in the slow process of acculturation (Villeneuve 1989). For instance, the *strategoi nomadôn* attested in some villages on the eastern slopes of the Ḥawrān were styled at the same time as 'ethnarchs' or 'phylarchs': these were recognized tribal chiefs in charge of the auxiliary units provided by their people. Some of these men were buried in sedentary communities, commemorated in Greek, and could well have taken root in the Ḥawrān villages, together with some of their folk (Sartre 1982b: 123; Grushevoi 1985). Definite facts remain, however, extremely scarce.

Some nomads certainly did settle down at one time or another. In some cases this could have been a result of conquest, as for the Ituraeans in the Beqaʿ and the Anti-Lebanon or Hemesenians on the middle Orontes; the plain fact remains, however, that we know next to nothing about these tribes except their names and the names of their chiefs. While the names of the Ituraean Ptolemy and his successors Lysanias and Zenodorus suggest their being Hellenized, another Ituraean prince bears the name of Sohaemus (Arabic Suḥaim), which was also used by the dynasty of Emesa along with those of Sampsigeramus (Šamšigeram) and Jamblichus (Yamliku). Most probably, the tribesmen soon melted into the settled population of the districts they occupied thanks to the Seleucid decline.

Further north, the territory of Apamea reached near the Euphrates, but there is no hint how this large nomadic area, called Parapotamia (Strabo 16.2.11) was administered by the Greek city. Matters seem clearer in the case of Palmyra. A few inscriptions and some early architectural monuments

demonstrate the beginnings of urban life in this isolated oasis during the first century BC. It appears that, about the turn of the Christian era, Palmyra formed a native polity (Aramaic *gebal*, translated as *polis* or *demos*) administered by elected 'treasurers' (Gawlikowski 1973: 41). There is no way of telling how far back in time these institutions reached. This entity was incorporated into the province of Syria, most probably by Germanicus in AD 17, apparently leaving the ancestral institutions in place. By the second half of the century, however, inscriptions already reveal a city council, elected archons, and foreign freedmen acting as publicans: in other words, as far as we know, the standard régime of a provincial city (Will 1992: 39–41). Unlike other provincial cities, however, Palmyra retained Aramaic for official use, if usually doubling it with Greek.

In spite of its cultural particularity, this 'republic of merchants', as it is sometimes called, remained under the firm control of Roman governors with no hint of independence until the paroxysms of the third century. While its northern and western frontiers (with Emesa and Apamea) were fixed, or confirmed, by the Roman authority in the early first century, the civic territory was practically open to the south, fading into the desert *hamad*. To the east, Palmyra controlled a stretch of the Euphrates valley downstream from Dura-Europos, with the island fortress of 'Ana and grazing lands in the Wadi Ḥawrān by the river, as well as military stations along the desert tracks leading there (Gawlikowski 1983). These outposts thus marked the limits of the Roman empire, but they were apparently not manned by regular Roman troops. In a sense, the territory of Palmyra formed a buffer zone, while the city itself remained solidly a part of the province.

The regular caravan traffic to the great river and down to the Persian Gulf presupposed conditions of security that only a complex web of relations with the nomads could have assured (Will 1992: 58–66). And no one but the nomad tribesmen could have provided the necessary growth potential for Palmyra and for the creation of the desert ranches in the north-western hills, essential for the mass breeding of pack animals for the Palmyrene caravans (Schlumberger 1951). Palmyra appears thus as a case of successful settlement of nomads within the pre-existent frame of civic life, prompted by the opportunities for trade which opened with the Roman peace.

Another oasis, situated to the north and only some 20 km distant from the Euphrates, was Mabbug, known in Greek as Hierapolis. A major sanctuary of Atargatis, it was ruled under the Persian Empire by its high-priests, probably remaining under their control during the Hellenistic period, though the local coins have been minted to our knowledge only about the time of Alexander, and not later. Our principal source, the essay of Lucian on the Syrian Goddess, preserved no trace of the sanctuary's continuing autonomy, but portrays it as the seat of a very fervent cult and the goal of pilgrimages from all over Syria and beyond (see Elsner, this volume). Although Hierapolis was situated on the border of nomadic territory, there is nothing in the extant evidence to suggest special ties with the nomadic tribes of the region, such as made the fortune of that other temple city of the *bādiya*, Hatra in Mesopotamia.

Still another important sanctuary of the border zone lay at Si' at the northern edge of the Ḥawrān and close to the city of Kanatha. Built for the god Ba'alšamin by a certain Malikat from 33/32 to 2/1 BC (that is, mainly under King Herod), it is said to have been frequented by the nomads from the *harra*, although no firm proof of such gatherings there and no contacts with the villagers can be adduced (Dentzer 1991). It is also very possible that the origins of the great sanctuary of Heliopolis (Baalbek) can be attributed to the Ituraean princes. Many less important temples in the desert area

could have formed attraction points for nomads, such as the Nabataean temples of Wadi Ramm, Khirbet el-Dharīḥ or Khirbet et-Tannūr (Sartre 1991: 494–495), or as Ruwwafa in the Ḥijāz, where the tribe of the Thamudeni marked their allegiance to Rome by building a temple to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (Sartre 1982b: 130; Bowersock 1983: 96).

Settled nomads could thus develop a highly sophisticated royal court as at Petra (and no doubt in Emesa), a caravan city as at Palmyra, or sustain a sanctuary. Normally, however, remains of the actual nomadic way of life are hard to come by. Fortunately, there is one massive exception to that rule. Nomads of the *ḥarra* in north-eastern Jordan and southern Syria have left thousands upon thousands of graffiti while keeping their herds or mounting guard among the basalt stones (Macdonald 1993). Written by unschooled hands, apparently as a mere pastime, these short texts reflect a tribal society hardly touched by any western influence. These populations, known collectively today under the entrenched misnomer of Safaites, in fact represented various Arab tribes living east and south of the Ḥawrān. They used a South Arabian alphabet rather than the Aramaic letters of their settled neighbors, which surely would have been more useful if the chief intention was communication with the outside world. As far as we know, the response to Hellenism on the part of these people was minimal. No more than half a dozen Greek-Safaitic bilinguals are known to date, and these are composed almost entirely of proper names (Milik 1985). Nor is there any reason to suppose that those tent-dwellers of the Syrian desert who had *not* come to the eccentric idea of writing on loose stones were different in any significant respect from these literate shepherds.

The degree of conflict between the nomads and the sedentary, and the nature of the response of Roman authorities to this threat, has recently become a matter for lively dispute. While some see the desert tribes as potential aggressors requiring a constant military presence on the fortified *limes* (Parker 1986; 1987), others consider them as practically innocuous (Banning 1986; Graf 1989; Isaac 1990: 68–77), and the Arabian *limes* of the second century first and foremost as a military road. What is clear is that there is simply no record of serious nomadic incursions under the early empire (Sartre 1991: 332). Whether this resulted from a salutary awe, or from positive steps taken by the Romans, seems a moot question.

The Roman road, traced by the legate Traianus in the time of Vespasian, ran to the fortress of Sura on the Euphrates by the way of Palmyra (Bowersock 1973). It served the obvious military aim of facilitating troop transfers from southern Syria and from the heavily garrisoned Judaea to the Parthian front. Its extension across the new province of Arabia all the way to Aqaba (called by modern scholars *via nova Traiana*) completed this scheme, whatever its other functions might have been. While the dating of those stations along this line which lie in modern Syria remains largely uncertain, it seems that only from the time of Diocletian did this part of the road become a real *limes*, protected with frequent military forts which could, if need be, keep the nomads in check. This *strata Diocletiana* was apparently the answer to the power vacuum left by the demise of Palmyra (Bauzou 1993).

Arts and Architecture

The authors of the Safaitic inscriptions show no inclination for settled life (Villeneuve 1989: 135). The villages of the Ḥawrān were inhabited by people writing chiefly in Greek. Some Aramaic

inscriptions have been found in the southern part of that region, that is within the borders of the Nabataean kingdom (Starcky 1985), but none in Safaitic, even though the tribal structure of society is very prominent among these sedentary people (Sartre 1982a; 1985; Macdonald 1993: 352–367). Since their proper names are mostly Semitic (but not necessarily Arabic), it would appear that this region possessed a stable indigenous population, not necessarily of nomadic origin, strongly attracted to the Greek way of life. Their temples, their sculpture, their art clearly illustrate such ambitions from the second century AD onwards (Dentzer 1986). As there are few traces of life in the Ḥawrān in Hellenistic times, it is just possible that these country folk might have originated from other parts of Syria, settling the area with encouragement from the Herodian rulers (Sartre 1985).

Considering the artistic production of Roman Syria, Ernest Will (1965) long ago distinguished three rough geographical zones, each of which responded differently to the stimulus of Hellenism. In the first place, in addition to the Seleucid foundations of northern Syria, there were thoroughly Hellenized Phoenician and Palestinian cities of the coast. The artistic expression of these is entirely in a Greek idiom, and so is their epigraphic record during the Roman period. Such native traditions as did survive can be traced there, strongly altered, only in religious iconography. The re-emergence of Aramaic in late antiquity forces us to admit, however, the continuous, if concealed, presence of a non-Hellenized rural population around Antioch and other urban enclaves.

Will's second zone includes primarily the southern part of Syria, perceived as an area where rural isolation led to schematic and often naive rendering of borrowed Greek themes, such as the ever-present statues of winged Victories in the Ḥawrān. This provincial art is represented chiefly in the collections of the Suwaydā Museum, peopled with rather rudimentary squarish, frontal statues (Bolelli 1985). Similar isolated finds have also been made, for instance in Emesa or Aleppo. New research has both enriched the repertory of monuments and refined their understanding. In the early architectural decoration of the Ḥawrān, beginning with the Siʿ sanctuary (Dentzer 1991) but also in Gerasa and elsewhere (Dentzer-Feydy 1992), the traditions of Seleucid art and architecture can now be recognized, surviving in local, simplified forms. The progressive replacement of 'heterodox' capitals, and other idiosyncratic solutions, by the standard Corinthian order took place during the first century AD in Palmyra and Gerasa, somewhat later in the Ḥawrān – coinciding with the annexation to the empire (Dentzer-Feydy 1986; 1988). Some typical Syrian features, such as covering of door frames with scrolls, persisted throughout the Roman period.

Finally, the third zone of Will covered the domain of so-called Parthian art, including Palmyra, Dura-Europos on the Euphrates, and Hatra in Mesopotamia. According to Will and Schlumberger (1970: 67–144), this is a more remote offshoot of Hellenism, stemming from a selective assimilation of the classical repertory. Generalized frontal representations in sculpture and painting are thought to result from the exclusive imitation of a single posture observed in Greek art, one particularly striking to an unaccustomed and unsophisticated Oriental observer. Whether the origin of this convention is indeed to be sought in the Parthian lands is debatable: the basalt sculpture of the Ḥawrān displays similar attitudes, while Iranian influence there is improbable. A Syrian origin for this artistic expression has been recently claimed (Ploug 1988).

Whatever the origins of 'Parthian art', the tripartite system of Will basically still stands some thirty years later. Our present subject excludes the first two zones: the cities of the coast and the rural world of southern Syria. We are concerned with the third less documented area, the belt

running parallel to the settled land of the Fertile Crescent, stretching from the Red Sea to the Middle Euphrates and beyond. Here only certain points, such as Petra or Palmyra, provide reasonably ample information. The rest of the desert was the exclusive domain of the nomads and, in this sequence of regions defined by the decreasing influence of Greek art, is perhaps best considered as a fourth zone, one defined by the sheer absence of such influence.

The variety of art and architecture current in the lands of Nabataean settlement is now much better documented. Sites such as the currently excavated Khirbet el-Dharīḥ above the Wadi Ḥesā, or the previously uncovered neighboring sanctuary of Khirbet Tannūr – together with many others in Negev and Transjordan – show an intensive new village life based on elaborate water catchment procedures. The temples usually contain, behind a profusion of niches and scrolls on the façade, inner shrines in the form of a solid cube with a niche, as at Tannūr, or enclose a raised platform adorned with columns, as at Dharīḥ or in the capital city Petra, where it has been interpreted as the throne of the deity. The niches in the walls of these temples, disguised as Classical decoration, in fact reproduce independent votive tabernacles in the form of a shallow recess within a moulded frame (Arnaud 1986).

The square temple plan (owing nothing to a once-alleged Persian influence), together with the peculiar use of Greek decorative elements, the tendency to cover the walls, door-frames, and even thresholds with running ornaments, and the placement of heads or busts on the capitals, can be found across the Ḥawrān in the first century AD (Dentzer-Feydy 1986). These 'pre-provincial' features, quite often rendered with a degree of clumsiness not entirely owing to the difficulties of working the local basalt stone, disappear gradually during the second century, when this relatively isolated region became annexed for good as part of a Roman province (first of Syria, then of Arabia). These features can also be found in the early manifestations of art in Palmyra, if disappearing earlier there (Seyrig 1940).

It seems to be generally accepted, following Henri Seyrig, that the Arab desert tradition contributed to the common body of religious beliefs of Roman Syria the popularity of the Sun god (Seyrig 1971; cf. Tubach 1986), as well as the habit of conceiving various deities as warriors, often represented in Roman legionary gear (Seyrig 1970; cf. Gawlikowski 1990b). In both cases, novelty is a matter of degree: solar gods and armed gods were always present in the pantheon of the ancient Near East. They are, however, especially prominent in places where Arab settlement and influence was paramount or can be assumed as important. Seyrig linked this with the warlike customs of the nomads, as distinct from the traditions of farming and urban societies who worshipped, among others, the weather-god Hadad or Ba'alšamin (known in the Roman period as Zeus in many local varieties, including Zeus Belos of Apamea or Palmyra) and the goddess Atargatis (often called simply Dea Syria). The old gods never lost their leading position, while admitting among them a new generation of desert warriors (Fig. 6). There is not much evidence for the latter being imported from the Arabian peninsula, and none for any movement of populations which could have brought them to Syria.

The avoidance of the human form as cult object is one common, though by no means general, feature of Nabataean iconography claimed to have emerged from the desert tradition (Pietrzykowski 1985; Patrich 1990). Rectangular blocks, plain or provided with facial features, can be seen represented on many a rock relief; one stele of this form was found in the 'Temple of the Winged Lions' in

Fig. 4. The square-faced idol of a Nabatean goddess in an architectural frame, from the 'Temple of the Winged Lions' at Petra (After Gawlikowski 1990a, pl. 1)

Fig. 5. Head of Dionysos, fragmentary panel from Petra (After Gawlikowski 1990a, pl. 4)

Petra (Fig. 4). We know from elsewhere that such a stone represented the main Nabataean god Dušara in his Petra temple (*Suda* 2.713). The famous betyl of Elagabal, venerated in Emesa and carried to Rome in the third century in the train of its imperial priest and namesake, belongs in the same tradition (Seyrig 1971: 340–345). The idea of gods being better impersonated by plain stones than by human figures certainly goes back to the remote Oriental antiquity of Bronze Age betyls.

On the other hand, the presence of the royal court at Petra favored the introduction of Hellenistic art at its finest (McKenzie 1990). A series of busts of divinities from the entrance to the great Qasr el-Bint temenos at Petra is by no means provincial (Fig. 5). The stucco work on the walls of the Qasr, and above all the imposing series of eighteen, certainly royal, rock tomb façades, directly reflect the architecture of the Greek East, and of Alexandria in particular (in a similar way, the Pompeian painting of the second style reflects these same models). On the other hand, over six hundred other tombs in Petra, and more in Hegra and elsewhere, remain attached to older traditions of the Near East, such as the use of crowsteps and of a cavetto cornice, employing Greek elements only sparingly. After long debate, there is no doubt today that all these monuments should be dated in the first centuries BC/AD – that is under the Nabataean kings and before the Roman annexation (Schmidt-Colinet 1980). The rock-cut tombs, the square temples, the non-figurative idols: all represent indigenous developments stemming from uncertain antecedents and perhaps, in spite of some modern speculation, not of great antiquity. But the royal court imported the metropolitan art of Alexandria and applied it to the tomb façades. Paradoxically, the architecture of that great Hellenistic capital survives most completely on the cliffs of Petra.

Around the turn of the millennium, the city of Palmyra borrowed urban features from rather closer home, most probably from Antioch. While the great temple of Bel, consecrated but not finished in AD 32, is outwardly a Hellenistic pseudo-dipteros, the building retains particularities such as two opposite chapels at the short ends, best explained by the idiosyncrasy of the local cult (see Schmidt-Colinet, this volume). The temple of the Arab goddess Allat, built outside the town about 50 BC, was originally a small shrine, wider than it was deeper, with a statue of the goddess seated in a niche framed with vine scrolls. This original chapel was then enclosed, in the second century, within a Vitruvian cella, quite similar to the contemporary temple of Ba'alšamin, which must likewise have replaced a similar archaic building and which contained an elaborate architectural screen framing a cult relief (Gawlikowski 1989: 339–345). Although no royal patronage was available, Palmyra managed to channel the profits of the caravan trade into temples, colonnades and other buildings, slowly making the desert city akin to any of the more typical coastal centers in Syria (Will 1992: 120–151). As at Petra, this process of acculturation was never quite completed.

This statement is especially true when one considers the plastic art of Palmyra (Colledge 1976). Many hundreds of sculptures depict strictly frontal figures, carved with a love of linear detail in the rendering of costume and jewelry, and most often with an entire indifference to physiognomic truth. While these funerary busts find parallels elsewhere in Syria and in other parts of the Roman world, the Palmyrene style is unmistakable (Parlasca 1985; 1988). Religious relief sculptures, clearly preferred to statues, are striking in their contempt for narrative and in their prefiguration of Byzantine icons (Fig. 6).

The frontal convention appears about the turn of the Christian era in Palmyra, and can be found later in Dura-Europos and in Hatra, when sculpture and painting appear there in the second century. No doubt other urban centers of the *bādiya* shared in this particular style (Schlumberger 1970: 194–

Fig. 6. The desert gods in arms being offered frankincense by the Palmyrene commander of ʿAna (AD 225). From Umm eṣ-Ṣalabiḫ on the track from Palmyra to Hit on the Euphrates (Photo J. Starcky)

207). The hieratic aspect of figures facing the spectator, the linear, highly realistic approach to the rendering of detail, but disregard for movement, action, or emotion: all betray an outlook very different from that of Hellenistic art. This technique conjures the gods and people represented, forcing through their fixed straightforward glance the feeling of the actual presence of the deities worshipped or of the deceased commemorated. Hence also the marked preference for relief (and painting) rather than sculpture in the round: the statues, when they occur, remain strictly frontal and were intended to turn their roughly finished backs against a wall.

All these manifestations of so-called Parthian art are known from the Aramaic-speaking cities of the steppe of Syria and Mesopotamia and from isolated find-spots obviously within the range of these cities (Drijvers 1977). In spite of the name it is commonly given, there is no reason to attribute the inception and practice of this style to the Parthian court at Ctesiphon (whose art remains unknown), and even less to the Parthians as a people (Ploug 1988). The masculine fashions favored in these representations could, however, be described as Iranian, while the Greek himation was also worn in Palmyra (Will 1992: 106–109). The ample trousers and sleeved tunics, sometimes richly embroidered and set with stones and usually worn with arms, indeed stem from the Iranian tradition, but they had become the common garb of the townsfolk in Mesopotamia and parts of Syria (Fig. 7). Simple camel-drivers, on the other hand, used a kind of apron (none other than the

Fig. 7. A man in Iranian dress being served at a banquet. Funerary monument from Palmyra
(Photo: Polish Mission to Palmyra)

loincloth of Arabs of old, as depicted in the Assyrian sculpture) bound around the waist and over a tunic, and sported a small round shield and a spear (Fig. 6). No evidence suggests anything like Parthian sympathies being expressed in the use of the Iranian dress, nor should they be sought for in the style of the plastic arts.

Conclusion

Cultural and ethnic self-consciousness in Roman Syria has recently been the subject of reflection by Fergus Millar (1987; 1993). All nomads were considered Arab in antiquity, although they always used narrower tribal identities to describe themselves. Insofar as the written evidence allows us to see, it is clear that there was no feeling of Arab identity of any kind in Palmyra, whose citizens call themselves Palmyrene and nothing else. The inhabitants of Emesa thought of themselves as

'Phoenicians' in the third century: perhaps simply because the city was part of the province of Syria Phoenice from the time of Septimius Severus, at any rate not because of any demonstrable affinity with Phoenicia proper. In the same way, the inhabitants of the province of Arabia were called Arabs (for example, the emperor Philip the Arab), inheriting the name from the Nabataeans who were commonly called this by Greek and Roman authors and by their Jewish neighbors – no doubt in reference to their nomadic origins.

We know nothing, as Millar observed, of the means employed to hand down literary culture in the vernacular. While there must have been schools teaching Aramaic, at least at an elementary level, and while there must have been a formal chancery tradition in the Nabataean kingdom and in Palmyra, the prestige of Greek remained paramount in higher forms of education. The tombstone for the tutor of Gadimat, king of the Arab Tannūḥ in the late third century, bears a bilingual inscription in illiterate Greek doubled with Nabataean (Millar 1993: 433): bilingualism is typical once some sort of formal culture appears. At the same time, at the sophisticated court of Zenobia, whom the Arab tradition considers as the enemy of the Tannūḥ tribal confederacy, the Greek philosopher Longinus might have seen missionaries from Mesopotamia carrying with them the Manichaean message, probably in the original Aramaic (Will 1992: 202). On the other hand, the curious phenomenon of general literacy among the tribes of the *harra* seems to have been propagated in informal ways and for private use, resulting in no fixed order of letters and indifferent direction of script (Macdonald 1993: 382–388).

The Syrian desert under the Romans saw a development of settled life unprecedented until modern times, the result of a long reign of peace and of growing opportunities for the caravan trade. New sedentary communities did not simply assimilate the Hellenistic civilization of the Syrian coast. Their hybrid culture retained many distinctly native elements, and yet remained conversant with a Hellenic heritage, as expressed in Greek forms of architecture and partly in the use of the Greek language. This desert frontier of the Classical world witnessed the variable absorption of Greek and Roman values, imperfect but not reticent. The early imperial civilization was making steady progress in time and space. It did not recede until several centuries later, as a result of the nomadic intrusions in late antiquity.

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