Cultural Diversity on the Fringe of the Roman Empire

Jørgen Christian Meyer

TED KAIZER (ed.), *RELIGION, SOCIETY AND CULTURE AT DURA-EUROPOS* (Yale Classical Studies 38; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016). Pp. 310, figs. 64. ISBN 978-1-1071-2379-3.

Dura-Europos is a unique archaeological site in the Middle East. The city was founded as a Hellenistic colony in 303 B.C. at a strategic point at the Euphrates. Around 100 B.C. it became part of the Parthian Empire. In A.D. 165 the Romans took over and Dura Europos became a border town at the fringe of the Roman Empire. The site was abandoned, at least as an urban center, in the middle of the 3rd c. after the Sasanian army captured the city. The site was never built over, and the city area has lain relatively undisturbed up to 1922 when the excavations started. The excavated buildings and the finds from Dura Europos largely belong to the Roman period, and they show an amazing cultural diversity in art, religion and language.

This collection of papers partly originates from a colloquium held at Durham University in 2008, with two contributions added later. The purpose of this publication is not to give a comprehensive treatment of religion, society and culture of Dura Europos as such, but is presented as a "series of case studies on individual aspects" (7).

The volume opens with a useful overview of the history of the exploration of Dura Europos by Ted Kaizer. He stresses that Dura Europos is an excellent case study of a small town in the periphery of the Graeco-Roman world. He compares, with some reservations, Dura Europos with Pompeii, but the city experienced profound changes during the lengthy Sasanian siege.[1] Some of the archaeological material, especially the small finds as shown by J. A. Baird in her contribution, probably represents the final years before the Sasanian conquest, when the city area had become a huge military camp.

Leonardo Gregoratti ("Dura-Europos: A Greek town of the Parthian Empire") focuses on the Parthian period. He compares Dura Europos with Seleucia on the Tigris, the largest city in the

[1] For a more detailed discussion, see J. A. Baird, 2014, 25–29.

region, from a political perspective. Seleucia retained its old Hellenistic political institutions, a *boule* and an *ekklesia*, and as long as there was concord between these two institutions, policies did not include the Parthians. In Dura Europos the Arsacids controlled the city by establishing a local Hellenistic dynasty. Gregoratti gives an interesting picture of the socio-political landscape in the old Hellenistic foundations and the relationship to Arsacid imperial policies, but it is regrettable that there are no references to Michael Sommer's *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian* (2005), which has a more comprehensive discussion of the sources from Dura Europos and the relationship between the city and the Parthian authorities.[2]

Jennifer A. Baird ("Everyday life in Roman Dura-Europos: The evidence of dress practices") analyses the smaller artefacts from the Yale excavations, such as textiles, jewellery, clothing fasteners and grooming implements and relates them gender and the diverse composition of the population. The article has a sound methodological approach, a fine chronological perspective, and the combination with the spatial distribution of the finds within the city and the necropolis is especially rewarding. Crossbow brooches, which were introduced in the military system in the 3rd c., are found all over Dura Europos. This probably reflects the military takeover of the habitation in the final years of the city's existence. Bone hairpins, which can be associated with women, are almost exclusively found in the military area of the city. The women in the military camp obviously differed from the female population in the rest of the city regarding their hairstyle. According to Baird, this may indicate that the women were foreigners following the military units. Another possibility is that they were locals changing their hairstyle when they associated with the military personal.

Michael Sommer ("Acculturation, hybridity, créolité: Mapping cultural diversity in Dura-Europos") starts with an important methodological discussion of the heuristic tools for understanding the cultural diversity, not only of Dura Europos, but also of the Roman Empire, which should not be considered as a monolithic culture. He rightly points out that our point of reference, the Nation State, hamper a deeper understanding of societies in premodern empires. I will come back to this issue in end of the review. Terms like 'acculturation', 'hybridity', 'Créolité', and labels like 'Roman', 'Hellenistic', 'Oriental', 'Semitic' and 'Near Eastern'

[2] New revised edition 2018, 297–308.

may be useful in some circumstances, but they fail to describe the social and cultural reality in its entirety. Rather, the mixture of different elements should be considered as a culture "in its own rights" (66). Then follows two case studies. The first one deals with the Jewish community in Dura Europos based on analysis of the stories displayed on the synagogue wall paintings. Most of them refer to the Old Testament, but one group of images tells the story of Mordecai, Esther and the Persian king Ahasuerus, which emphasises the peaceful relationship with the pagan society. The Jewish diasporas displayed a very high degree of exclusiveness, but Sommer concludes "Integration and demarcation are not mutually exclusive" (63). The second one treats the legal options for women in connection with business matters, based on an analysis of legal documents. They show that women could choose either to follow the local or the Roman law. Sommer concludes that Dura Europos is an "ideal case study in the cultural setup of the Roman Empire's periphery" (67), and, we may add, to the former Hellenistic Empires which stretched from Northern India to the Mediterranean.

Lucinda Dirven ("The problem of Parthian art at Dura") has an important contribution how to classify stylistically sculpture and paintings in Dura Europos and a discussion of the concept of Parthian Imperial art and Parthian art in general. She rightly points out that there are great similarities between Palmyra and Dura Europos, and that artistic traditions cut across the political frontiers. According to Dirven, Palmyrene art owes much to the influence from Roman art combined with Greco-Semitic elements. Palmyra is regarded as the leading cultural centre in the region and the tradition spread eastwards to Dura Europos, but not as far as Hatra, which in the first c. A.D. displayed a strong western classical expression in the sculpture. This was due to either the former Hellenistic culture or, preferable, direct influence from Antioch, though we then have to explain how this western tradition actually reached Hatra. When Dura Europos became a Roman city the artistic influence from Palmyra declined dramatically, probably owing to the transformation of Dura Europos from a relatively thriving Hellenistic centre in the Parthian Empire into a military fortress town, and local traditions took over.

Maura K. Heyn ("Gesture at Dura-Europos: A new interpretation of the so-called "Scène Énigmatique"") presents a new interpretation of the enigmatic mythological scene on a partly damaged fresco in the temple of Bel from the first half of the 3rd c. A.D. Previous scholars have suggested a connection to a cult for an unknown local deity, the Mithras cult or to Christian mythology (The announcement of the Birth of Christ). From the gestures of the

figures, Heyn argues that the scene depicts the discovery of Ariadne on Naxos by Dionysios, and she stresses the strong connection to the pagan cults of the Roman Empire. Heyn admits that not all details fit with this interpretation, as an example the size of the alleged figure of Dionysios, but the article demonstrates that the wall paintings from Dura Europos are still open for new interpretations.

Jean-Baptist Yon ("Women and the religious life at Dura-Europos") makes a detailed analysis of a series of inscriptions with female names on the steps of the pronaos and the *salle à gradins* of the sanctuaries of Artemis, Atargatis and Azzannathkona, primarily datable to the 1st and first half of the 2nd c. A.D. to elucidate the rôle of women in the religious life of Dura Europos. Yon shows that men dominated in the religious life, and that women are only mentioned in connection with husbands or fathers, stressing the importance of the family ties in the public sphere of social life. The latter is perhaps not that surprising, but Yon compares with the sanctuary of Artemis on Delos, where women played a significant rôle as benefactresses in their own names, and he stresses the differences between the coastal and the interior regions of the Roman Near East, where there are no evidence of female priests. The article is an important contribution to our understanding of the gender structure in Dura Europos in the Parthian period.

Julian Buchmann ("Multifunctional sanctuaries at Dura-Europos") looks at the sanctuaries that are surrounded by several rooms with stone benches within the precinct. He rightly questions the traditional view that these rooms only served as banquet halls or ritual dining rooms for the priests in connection with sacrifices. Instead, he argues convincingly for a multifunctional rôle. He suggests that the banquet halls also served as meeting places for travellers, among them merchants. There is also another possibility, namely as meeting place for the members of associations, *collegia*/*σύνοδοι*. Associations were very important in the social life outside the family networks and they served several purposes; social, religious, economic and political, very often in combination, and they all had a religious affiliation. This article adds some very important dimensions to our understanding of the social life in the city.

Tommaso Gnoli ("The mithraeum of Dura-Europos: New perspectives") revaluates the origins of the imagery on reliefs and frescoes in Mithra cult of Dura Europos. According to the inscriptions, Palmyrene officers dedicated the Mithraeum in A.D. 168 and 170–171. In former research, Palmyrene units are supposed to have imported the cult either from Palmyra

itself, where there are no traces of the cult, however, or from the Danube region, where they were stationed before they were relocated to Dura Europos. The Mithras cult was thus a Western creation with some local adaptions.[3] Gnoli analyses the peculiarities in the imagery of the reliefs and the frescoes, and suggests that the Mithraism was perhaps already known in Dura Europos or at least in the region before the arrival of Roman troops. The peculiarities should not be regarded as an inclusion of local or Semitic mythological elements in the cult. Rather they indicate a much stronger cultural and religious influence from the cult of Mithras in the Iranian sphere. Unfortunately, our knowledge of this cult is very scanty, and the issue cannot be decided, but the paper demonstrates that the Mithras cult in Dura Europos is still open to new interpretations.

Christina Marta Acqua ("Imperial representation at Dura-Europos: Suggestions for urban paths") analyses Imperial representation and the changes in the use of urban space, when Dura Europos was transformed into Roman fortress town in A.D. 165. She maps not only the monuments in the Roman military area, but also new cults in the civic area where imperial representation was present, or where the emperors were associated with local deities. She shows how the location of the monuments can be related to the major "paths" through the city from the main gates towards the military area, the agora in the centre of the city, stressing the Imperial power. Acqua's paper is an important contribution to our understanding of the use of urban space in Dura Europos and the relationship between the Roman garrison and the population in civic area. The garrison, and the symbolic imperial presence, was not separated from the rest of the city. It was obviously the intention of the Roman authorities to integrate the civic population across cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries.

Jacquelin Austin ("Thoughts on two Latin *dipinti*") uses two Latin *dipinti* from the military camp to elucidate the different stages of the production of official inscriptions and painted notices. It only involved clerks within the military camp. Her conclusions will undoubtedly have consequences for our understanding of the procedures of producing inscriptions in the rest of the Roman Empire.

Loren T. Stuckenbruck ("The bilingual Palmyrene-Greek inscriptions at Dura-Europos: A comparison with the bilinguals from Palmyra") makes a close comparison between the few

[3] See also Dirven 2016, 17–33.

Palmyrene Aramaic/Greek inscriptions found in Dura Europos and the large amount of bilingual inscriptions from Palmyra. The paper has a detailed analysis of the relationship between the Greek and Aramaic text in the Palmyrene inscriptions, and he concludes that the inscriptions from Dura Europos seem to follow the same patterns over time. According to Stuckenbruck this may indicate that they were produced by Palmyrene residents in Dura Europos with strong ties to their home city. The paper gives rise to an important methodological question. Language in itself cannot be used as an "ethnic" label or as a marker of a distinct and self-conscious Palmyrene society. Is the correlation in the inscription pattern between Dura Europos and Palmyra enough evidence to postulate the existence of a clearly defined Palmyrene group in the city?

Kai Ruffing ("Economic life in Roman Dura-Europos") gives an excellent overview of the economic basis of Dura Europos in the Roman period, partly based on sale contracts and written graffiti. Ruffing stresses the agricultural potential in the broad valley of the Euphrates and the excellent conditions for raising livestock in the more dry hinterland. The presence of a large Roman garrison with its need for supplies must have been a great stimulus to the local and regional economy. He rightly rejects the older notion that Dura Europos was an important caravan city on the route from Palmyra to the Persian Golf,[4] but still it played an important rôle in the regional trade. I will come back to this issue in the end of the review. Ruffing also rejects that Dura Europos was an exporter of grain, wine and olive oil to Palmyra, items which are mentioned in the Palmyrene tax law, but he overestimates Palmyra's need of importing basic foodstuffs. There was a substantial production of barley in the Palmyrene hinterland, and the Palmyrene tax law only mentions wheat.[5]

Susan B. Downey ("The dangers of adventurous reconstruction: Frank Brown at Europos-Doura") has a critical view on Frank Brown's (director of the excavations 1935–1937) reconstructions of wall paintings in naoi of Adonis, Zeus Theos, and of the different phases the Temple of Zeus Megistos and the Citadel Palace. She demonstrates convincingly that the

[4] See Meyer and Seland, 2016.
[5] Meyer 2017, 28–57; Meyer forthcoming.

reconstructions are based on very slim evidence and she emphasises the necessity to restudy the fragmentary evidence that was brought to the Yale University in New Haven in the 1930s.

The collections at the Yale University are the theme of Lisa R. Brody contribution ("Dura-Europos and Yale: Past, present, and future"). She describes the ongoing conservation treatment of the finds, a new reconstruction of the Mithraeum and the reinstallation of the collection in the museum. The collection will undoubtedly have great importance for future research on Dura Europos as the ruins of Dura Europos have been heavily destroyed by deep clandestine diggings and looting during the ongoing civil wars in Syria.

The papers highlight the methodological difficulties of mapping the cultural landscape not only in the political border zone between the Roman and Parthian Empires, but also between the Greek/Roman cultures of the Mediterranean and the cultures of the Middle East by using our traditional concepts from classical studies, which stress the difference between the Orient and the Occident. What is Roman, Greek, Hellenistic, Parthian or Mesopotamian? The concepts may be useful analysing artistic trends, and the religious and linguistic diversity, but our frame of reference is, as stressed by Sommer in his paper, the nation state, where political boundaries are supposed to be identical with cultural and linguistic boundaries. The nation state is a recent phenomenon in the history of the world and the crucial point is whether the ancients attached any importance to different – from our point of view – cultural expressions and the hybridity of different cultural elements. Palmyra too displayed a great diversity of cultural affiliations, but from a social and political point of view, the city appears as a rather homogeneous society. Different social groups may also share the same cultural expressions, but they stand out by not intermarrying. It is also normal to display differences in wealth and social status in dress and housing within the same culture, very often by importing elements from other cultures. Even small "insignificant" objects, like the hairpins worn by the women in the military camp, as shown by Baird, can be markers of a social affiliation. The matter is closely related to the concept of identity. "Identity" has become a new academic vogue word in archaeological publications due to the recent changes in the cultural and religious landscape of Europe, but the concept is difficult to grasp, because all human beings are multi-identity creatures even in relatively homogenous societies. We continually and very often unconsciously adjust our behaviour, dress and our language to changing social arenas. My mother grew up in at the political border zone between Germany and Denmark. She mastered several languages: the local dialect, the official Danish in Copenhagen, where she lived,

German and to some extent Low German. She changed her behaviour markedly when she visited her family and friends on both sides of the border without compromising her self-image. In case of conflict, however, a single identity may become a crucial tool to mobilise and create cohesion within the group against a common adversary, as for example the Jewish population during the uprisings against Roman rule in Judaea.

Several of the authors stress that Roman Dura Europos was only a small fortress town at the edge of the Empire, and everything seems to indicate that the city changed after the Roman takeover. Nor in Hellenistic and Parthian periods was Dura Europos among the largest and most impressive cities in the Middle East. The size of the inhabited area is modest. There are no colonnaded streets or large temples as in Palmyra and other Hellenistic cities. Was Dura Europos only a modest regional centre in the Middle Euphrates region at a strategic point at the river? It is interesting that the pictorial graffiti shows a very high percentage of ship motives. Of the 136 pictorial graffiti registered, seven depict ships.[6] They can be difficult to date, though most of them probably belong to the 2nd and 3rd c. A.D., and unfortunately two of them are only mentioned shortly in the reports without picture. One of them depicts a small river vessel.[7] Three of them are crudely executed, but they can be classified as sailing vessels.[8] They may refer to river transport, but the meandering and narrow course of the upper Euphrates is difficult to navigate with sailing ships, and *keleks*, rafts with inflatable skins mounted in a wooden frame, were the normal craft from antiquity until the first half of the 20th c.[9] One graffito from a shop in the centre of the city is unique both in size and quality.[10] It shows a large ship with detailed hull, rudders and canvas. The ship is rigged with a large square mainsail and a smaller square foresail. The engraver obviously had solid knowledge of this type of vessel, and there is no doubt that this is a Roman merchant ship, not for river transport of supplies and soldiers as suggested by Rostovzeff,[11] but for shipping across the open sea. Another graffito shows a caravan of loaded dromedaries, but it can of course refer to regional transport.[12] A few written graffiti indicate that Dura Europos also played part in the other interregional networks. Six Safaitic graffiti have been registered in Dura Europos.[13]

[6] Langner 2001, 154–155.
[7] Langner 2001, pl. 140, 2199.
[8] Langner 2001, pl. 124, 1955; pl. 133, 2053; pl. 145, 2246.
[9] Seland 2016, 48–49.
[10] Langner 2001, pl. 130, 2020.
[11] Rostovzeff 1931, 213, fig. 6.
[12] Langner 2001, pl. 89, 1357; Rostovzeff 1931, 212, fig. 5.
[13] Macdonald 2005, 118–129.

Safaitic was the language of nomadic groups in southern Syria and northern Jordan. Not all Safaitic speaking people were nomads, but one of them has an affiliation to a larger group, which is normally only added when the author was far from home.[14] Other Safaitic graffiti, some of them partly bilingual Safaitic/Aramaic, have been found west of Euphrates in Wadi Hauran at Umm Kubar datable to the year 409 in the Seleucid calendar (A.D. 98).[15] They too have an affiliation to a larger group, which indicates that the river valley was included in seasonal migrations of some of the nomadic groups from the central Syrian dry steppe. The graffiti do not make Dura Europos a caravan city or an urban centre comparable to Palmyra, but it indicates that the city formed part of larger interregional networks.

The contributions to this volume raise many important questions in our understanding not only of Dura Europos, but also of the cultural diversity in a region, which was politically divided between two great empires, and they are a valuable supplement to the growing amount of publications on Dura Europos.

jorgen.meyer@uib.no University of Bergen

Baird, J. A. 2014. *The Inner Lives of Ancient Houses. An Archaeology of Dura-Europos* (Oxford).

Dirven, L. 2016. "A New Interpretation of the Mounted Hunters in the Mithraeum of Dura-Europos," in M. K. Heyn and A. I. Steinsapir (edd.), *Icon, Cult, and Context: Sacred Spaces and Objects in the Classical World* (Los Angeles) 17–33.

Langner, M. 2001. *Antike Graffitizeichnungen. Motive, Gestaltung und Bedeutung* (Wiesbaden).

Macdonald, M. C. A. 2005. "The Safaitic inscriptions at Dura Europos," in E. Cussini (ed.), *A Journey to Palmyra. Collected Essays to Remember Delbert R. Hillers* (Leiden) 118–129.

Meyer, J. C. and Seland, E. H. 2016. "Palmyra and the trade route to Euphrates," *ARAM* 28, 2, 497–523.

Meyer, J. C. 2017. *Palmyrena: Palmyra and the Surrounding Territory from the Roman to the Early Islamic Period* (Oxford).

[14] Meyer 2017, 66.
[15] Safar 1964, 9–27.

Meyer, J. C. forthcoming. ”Palmyra. Marginal agriculture in a marginal landscape?,” in M. Sommer (ed.), *Palmyra and Its World. From the Mediterranean to India* (Stuttgart).

Rostovzeff, M. 1931. *Caravan Cities* (Oxford).

Safar, F. 1964. ”Inscriptions from Wadi Hauran,” *Sumer* 20, 9–27.

Seland, E. H. 2016. *Ships of the Desert and Ships of the Sea. Palmyra in the World Trade of the First Three Centuries CE* (Wiesbaden).

Sommer, M. 2018. *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian* (2nd edn., Stuttgart).

Caption:
Grafitto of Roman merchant ship from block B8, shop H17. H. 100 cm, l. 133 cm. (Rostovzeff 1931, 213, fig. 6).