

Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East

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Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart 2010

MODELLING ROME'S EASTERN FRONTIER: THE CASE OF OSRHOENE

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Leaving garrisons at opportune points, Trajan came to Edessa, and there saw Abgar for the first time. For, although Abgar had previously sent envoys and gifts to the emperor on numerous occasions, he himself, first on one excuse and then another, had failed to put in an appearance, as was also the case with Mannus, the ruler of the neighbouring portion of Arabia, and Sporasces, the ruler of Anthemusia. On this occasion, however, induced partly by the persuasions of his son Arbandes, who was handsome and in the pride of youth and therefore in favour with Trajan, and partly by his fear of the latter's presence, he met him on the road, made his apologies and obtained pardon, for he had a powerful intercessor in the boy. Accordingly he became Trajan's friend and entertained him at a banquet; and during the dinner he brought in his boy to perform some barbaric dance or other.¹

The episode is taken from Cassius Dio's account of Trajan's Parthian war. The emperor made Edessa his winter quarters before proceeding towards the Babylonian core of the Parthian realm. Before his arrival, Abgar, the ruler of Osroene, seems to have taken a sit and wait attitude. By sending envoys carrying gifts to the emperor, but hesitating to appear personally, he showed himself reluctant to abandon his freedom of choice. In case of a Roman defeat, he could have returned safely under the umbrella of Parthian overlordship, continuing to rule as a loyal vassal of the Arsacid king. With Trajan's final entry into the capital of Osroene, Edessa, he was deprived of this option. He had no choice but to prove his loyalty towards the Roman emperor. Was he, therefore, a Roman client king?

By offering his hospitality, Abgar became Trajan's 'friend' (φίλος), a term which was, as we know, as elsewhere in the ancient world loaded with ideological implications in the Roman empire. To understand Dio's account properly, we have to reflect on what *philos* meant to the author, a Roman senator from Bithynia.² Besides, we have to find out how Rome's Eastern frontier, stretching from the Black

1 Dio 68.21 (transl. E. Cary): ὅτι ὁ Τραιανὸς φρουρὰς ἐν τοῖς ἐπικαίροις καταλιπὼν ἦλθεν ἐς Λεδεσσάν, κἀνταῦθα πρῶτον Ἀβγαρον εἶδεν. πρότερον μὲν γὰρ καὶ πρέσβεις καὶ δῶρα τῷ βασιλεῖ πολλάκις ἔπεμψεν, αὐτὸς δὲ ἄλλοτε κατ' ἄλλας προφάσεις οὐ παρεγένετο, ὥσπερ οὐδὲ ὁ Μάννος ὁ τῆς Ἀραβίας τῆς πλησιοχώρου οὐδὲ ὁ Σποράκης ὁ τῆς Ἀνθεμουσίας φύλαρχος. τότε δὲ τὰ μὲν καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ υἱέος Ἀρβάνδου καλοῦ καὶ ἄραιοῦ ὄντος καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τῷ Τραιανῷ φκειωμένον πεισθεῖς, τὰ δὲ καὶ τὴν παρουσίαν αὐτοῦ φοβηθεῖς, ἀπήνησέ τε αὐτῷ προσιόντι καὶ ἀπελογήσατο, συγγνώμης τε ἔτυχεν· ὁ γὰρ παῖς λαμπρόν οἱ ἰκέτευμα ἦν. καὶ ὁ μὲν φίλος τε ἐκ τούτου τῷ Τραιανῷ ἐγένετο καὶ εἰστίασεν αὐτόν, ἐν τε τῷ δειπνῷ παῖδα ἑαυτοῦ ὀρχησόμενον βαρβαρικῶς πῶς παρήγαγεν.

2 On Cassius Dio, still most valuable is Millar (1964). On friendship and the structure of society in general, see Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984). On friendship in the classical world, see Gotter (1996) and now the contributions in Peachin (2001), especially De Blois (2001) and Mroze-

to the Red seas, 'worked', in political, but also in cultural respect.³ The way we conceptualise this particular frontier depends, again, pretty much on our ideas on the Roman empire as a whole. I shall, therefore, begin with some rather general considerations about Rome as a specific case of imperial power.

'EMPIRE'

Arguably the most influential theorist of empire of his time, and perhaps of all times, was a British civil servant named Frederick Lugard, who held high-rank posts in the colonial administrations of India and Nigeria. My conception of the Roman empire owes much to the observations made by Lugard, who thoroughly reflected on the mechanisms of British rule in India, and who, from this, created a general model of 'indirect rule', which he successfully implemented in Nigeria. What Lugard's work is about, and what I want to emphasise here, are the fundamental, though all too often neglected, differences between the two paradigms of 'nation-state' (as the universal post-French-Revolution model of social power) and 'empire' (as the 'archaic' variant, stretching from the Empire of Agade to the Red Empire of the Soviet Union of recent days).

Whereas nation-states seek, by definition, political and cultural homogeneity by assimilating or excluding minorities and heterodox groups, empires do the exact opposite: they feature 'structural tolerance', which allows them to integrate a multitude of political and cultural formations. Hence linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity, multiculturalism and open frontiers are as much constitutive for empires, as homogeneity and clear-cut boundaries are for nation-states. In empires, power radiates, hierarchically stratified, from the centre to the periphery. Power decreases with distance. The British Empire, with England as its core, Wales, Scotland and Ireland as its larger centre, the crown colonies as central peripheries, the colonies as inner, and the indirectly ruled parts of the world as outer peripheries, resembles as truly as possible the ideal type of imperial rule, universal in space and time.⁴

Nobody perceived the immense benefit empires take from indirect rule better than Lord Lugard, who wrote, with regard to India, "that the Political Staff available for the administration of so vast a country, inhabited by many millions, must always be inadequate for complete British administration in the proper sense of the word, and that it was, therefore, imperative to utilise and improve the existing machinery."⁵ Indirect rule had, historically, hundreds of manifestations, from the margravedoms of the Carolingian realm and its heir, the medieval 'Holy Roman

wicz (2001). On friendship as a *necessitudo* in the systems of values of the Roman republican nobility, see Gelzer (1983).

3 Point of reference for any conceptualisation of the Roman Eastern frontier is Millar (1993). Cf. Isaac (1992) and the collected papers in id. (1998); Kennedy and Riley (1990); the contributions in French and Lightfoot (1989) and now Butcher (2003), Sommer (2004a) and id. (2005). For the discussion of further literature, see Sommer (2003b), p. 394.

4 For a concise cross-cultural analysis, see Geiss (1994).

5 Lugard (1970), p. 208.

Empire', to the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Central Europe; and from the petty kingdoms of the Late Bronze Age Levant, forming the periphery of the Hittite kingdom, to the fascist vassal states of Hitler's abortive Grossdeutsches Reich. The features shared by them, without exception, are indigenous, local rulers or dynasts left in power (autocephaly) and a varying degree of imperial non-interference in local affairs, such as religion, culture, treasury, legislation and jurisdiction, education (autonomy). The power relationship between the centre and the periphery was usually recorded in treaties or, less formally, but underpinned by religious sacrosanctity, in loyalty oaths which were by definition unequal, imposed by the central power. Military allegiance and payment of tribute on a regular or irregular basis were generally intrinsic elements of such agreements.

Compared to other empires, Rome was rather compact in shape, with its provincial system and the direct administration of vast territories. Its Eastern rival, for instance, the Parthian realm, had a much smaller core which was administered by imperial officials, whereas it commanded an immense periphery under local dynasts. However, one should not forget the rather minimalistic approach the Romans had towards imperial administration. No Roman governor, whether a republican *proconsul* or an imperial *legatus pro praetore* or *pro consule*, had a considerable apparatus, a bureaucracy in the proper sense of the word, at hand. Roman administration relied almost entirely on the magistrates of local urban centres, *civitates* in the West, *poleis* in the East. Urban autonomy was the specifically Roman form of indirect rule, but it was by far not the only one practised by the Romans.

At all times and at each of their numerous frontiers in the south, the north, the north-east and the east, the Romans knew territorial states and tribal confederations, which were autonomous and ruled by indigenous dynasts, dependent on the empire, but not part of the provincial system as such. Massinissa's Numidia, Rhodes and Pergamum, late Ptolemaic Egypt, the Dacian kingdom and the various Germanic tribes collaborating with Rome are just examples. Their rulers usually held the illustrious title of *reges socii et amici populi Romani*. *Amicitia* with the people of Rome, however, was a two-edged sword, an experience which many of Rome's friends were about to undergo sooner rather than later.⁶

'FRIENDSHIP'

To call a Roman client king an *amicus* was, strictly speaking, a euphemism. *Amicitia* meant, in Rome's social cosmos, a relationship of mutual solidarity between peers. Client kings were by no means equal in rank to the people who dominated the political scenery of the Roman republic nor, later, to the Roman emperor. Though the term 'client king' is of modern, not ancient origin, it describes the specifically Roman relationship of subordination very accurately: *clientela*. Whereas *amicitia* was a relationship of symmetric reciprocity, the ties between a *patronus* and his *clientes*, *patrocinium*, were utterly asymmetric. *Patrocinium* played a key

6 Cimma (1976); Braund (1984); Millar (1996).

role in the 'foreign' relations of the Roman republic, linking the client king with a prominent Roman aristocrat, usually the general who had previously annexed his territory to the Roman sphere of influence. The *patronus* displayed *fides*, which E. Fraenkel aptly translated as 'guarantee in the broadest sense',⁷ and in return could expect *pietas*. The most prominent feature of the relationship between *patronus* and *cliens* was its asymmetry, solidarity was strictly vertical.

Nonetheless, *fides* implied a substantial offer to local rulers. It emphasised their privileged position as compared to other dynasts, and it was a source of prestige and social power within the framework of local society. In some cases, client kings became *reges dati*, accepting their kingdoms as *dona populi Romani*, 'gifts of the Roman people'. Rome provided recognition, military assistance, and arbitration in cases of conflict. But client kings had to struggle hard to ensure the endurance of Rome's *fides*: it was all too easy to replace an unsubordinate or simply unwanted local ruler and cost little more than a gesture of a high-ranking official. Rather than on the swords and lances of its legionaries, Rome's power in this sphere of indirect rule was based on its immense and steadily increasing authority.⁸

ROME'S EASTERN FRONTIER AND OSRHOENE

When Abgar of Osrhoene became Trajan's 'friend', the story's subtext was fairly evident: he became a client king who owed absolute loyalty to his overlord and who was entitled to receiving *fides*. The first proof of *fides* was the pardon granted by Trajan, and asked for by Abgar, for his ambiguous behaviour beforehand. By hastening to meet the emperor on the road, Abgar had signalled his willingness to accept subordination. The gesture of humbleness was repeated when his son, the prince, honoured Trajan by performing a 'barbaric dance'.

Abgar had no choice but to accept the conditions imposed by Trajan. There was, obviously, no room for a power vacuum in the Mesopotamian steppe. Once the Parthians had lost their grip on the area between the Euphrates and the Tigris, it was just a matter of time that the Romans would take up their legacy. The fading of Arsacid overlordship opened, from the late first century AD onwards, for the local rulers a window for a policy of equidistance between the two power centres, and encouraged them to split their royalties. Surrounded by Roman garrisons, Abgar had to realise that he could no longer maintain such a position, since that window had closed as rapidly as it had opened before.

The establishment of Osrhoene as a client kingdom in the course of Trajan's – in the long run abortive – Parthian war, reveals the momentum of continuity which dominated Rome's attitude towards the Near East and its local dynasties. Trajan's annexation of the Nabataean kingdom did not put an end to the policy of indirect rule, but just opened a new phase of it. Rome had now firmly established provincial rule in the entire fertile zone to the west of the Euphrates (apart from the unique

7 Fraenkel (1916).

8 On Rome's execution of power in the Hellenistic East, see Sommer (2002), p. 508–12.

degree of autonomy maintained by Palmyra⁹), and was about to put up a new sphere of indirect rule further east, in Mesopotamia and Armenia.

The Roman dominion in the Near East continued to be a mixture of direct and indirect rule. With the limits of Roman influence being pushed further eastward, former client kingdoms were annexed and provincialised, whereas former adversaries were turned into client kingdoms. The mechanics of various forms of indirect rule and an open frontier of settlement and conquest make it even more difficult to conceptualise Rome's Eastern frontier as a clear boundary.

In the twilight zone between the two imperial structures, the case of Osrhoene sheds some light on the mechanics of imperial frontiers, for the kingdom changed its status and hands several times. Compared to other areas of the Partho-Roman Near East, the documentation is relatively dense. Edessa was founded as a Graeco-Macedonian colony like Dura-Europos, but virtually nothing of its Greek character had survived when the city re-entered the light of history in the first century BC.¹⁰ As A. Luther has recently pointed out, the ruling dynasty of the Abgarids acquired their kingship only late in the first century BC, with 34/3 BC as terminus post quem.¹¹ Before this, they had held the title of *mry*, 'lord'. The same change in titles happened about two hundred years later in Hatra,¹² and the circumstances were strikingly similar: in both cases, the 'upgrading' of a local dynasty was connected to the Roman enemy moving closer. Kingship, within the Parthian system of indirect rule, did not only mean an increase in prestige, but also in autonomy. The generosity of the Arsacids was rewarded: the Abgarid kings of Osrhoene were loyal vassals, and apparently remained so until Abgar became Trajan's 'friend'.¹³

What happened in the power vacuum following Trajan's abortive invasion is, however, cloaked in darkness.¹⁴ The Syriac chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius mentions an interregnum of two years, due to local power struggles, followed by two short-lived reigns of otherwise unknown kings, one of them with an Iranian name.¹⁵ If the Parthians came back, they obviously faced severe difficulties when trying to restore the status quo ante. From ca AD 125/6 onwards, we find, again, a local dy-

9 On Palmyra, see the contribution by J.-B. Yon in this volume. The extent to which Palmyra was integrated in the Roman empire is a much debated issue. The position of most French scholars is outlined in Sartre (1996). It is, however, impossible to determine the precise moment of integration into the province of Syria. It rather seems that the oasis city became, at some point in the second, or even first century AD, subject to the governor's *imperium*, but retained a substantial degree of autonomy, due to its execution of control of the middle Euphrates region in the second half of the second century.

10 For the little that is known of the early history of Edessa, see Kirsten (1963), p. 151–2; Segal (1970); Jones (1971), p. 253; Ross (2001), p. 7–9.

11 Luther (1999b), p. 448–53.

12 Sommer (2003b), p. 390–4.

13 Their constant loyalty is at least suggested by Tac. *Ann.* 12.11–4, who states that the king of Osrhoene (*Acharus* – presumably Abgar V Ukkāmā) took a decidedly anti-Roman position in the struggles of the mid-first century AD.

14 Von Gutschmidt (1887); Drijvers (1977), p. 875; Luther (1999), p. 191.

15 *PRNTSPT* might well have been identical with the Parthamaspatēs, who was enthroned by Trajan as a pro-Roman vassal king over Parthia.

nasty on the throne of Edessa – whether or not they were the direct heirs of the Abgarids remains unknown, though the use of a traditional onomastics suggests that they indeed were: a Ma'nu bar Izaṭ ruled, according to the chronicle of Elija of Nisibis, from ca AD 125 to 165, his son Ma'nu bar Ma'nu from ca AD 165 to 177.¹⁶

Enigmatic is the coinage of two kings of Osrhoene from this period. A Wa'ēl stamped coins with an Aramaic legend and the portrait of the Parthian king Vologaisēs IV;¹⁷ a Ma'nu called himself ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΜΑΝΝΟΣ ΦΙΛΟΡΩΜΑΙΟΣ.¹⁸ The chronology is, once more, uncertain, but two modes of interpretation are possible. Ma'nu bar Izaṭ could have been the *philorhomaïos* who then already ruled as a Roman client king from his accession to the throne onwards. Wa'ēl, in that case, would have been a pro-Parthian usurper, who liquidated Ma'nu bar Izaṭ, but was himself removed by Ma'nu's eponymous son. It is also possible that Ma'nu bar Ma'nu was the *philorhomaïos* and had caused some trouble with his changeover to the Roman side, thus provoking a pro-Parthian revolt led by Wa'ēl. Hence Roman control of Osrhoene could well have continued after Hadrian's withdrawal from most of the territories occupied by his predecessor; or it started with Lucius Verus' Parthian campaign; or the Romans took over control in Edessa some time in between.

Though we cannot trace back the beginnings of Roman suzerainty, the process in itself features some noteworthy details. First, the 'renversement des alliances' expedited by the local rulers, whenever it took place, apparently provoked substantial resistance from within. Second, the pro-Parthian protagonists of the 'resistance movement' used, for their coinage, Aramaic, not Greek, which instead was used by Ma'nu, who labelled himself *philorhomaïos*. The use of language on coins must not necessarily have much of an 'ideological' implication, but it could be a clue for political tensions spreading into the cultural sector.

The political options client kings had grew with political disorder within the centre. An opportunity was provided by the civil war following the murder of Commodus. Unfortunately, Abgar VIII, Ma'nu bar Ma'nu's son, backed the wrong horse (Dio 75.1.1–2): he actively supported Pescennius Niger and started negotiations with the Parthian client kings of Adiabene, on the eastern bank of the Tigris. He got off relatively cheaply: Severus confirmed Abgar's kingship, but transformed the bulk of the kingdom into the new province of Osrhoene.¹⁹

This Abgar had to march further than his eponymous predecessor under Trajan to see his imperial overlord: he travelled to Rome, apparently to beg for pardon, and he had to provide hostages. Edessa became an autonomous enclave and was, for unknown reasons, annexed to the province only under Caracalla, in AD 213 (Dio 78.12.1).²⁰ The annexation put an end to at least three hundred years of local autocephaly, though not yet a definitive one. The autonomy of a client kingdom

16 Luther (1999), p. 192.

17 *BMC Arabia*, p. 91–2, pl.V–IX. Cf. Ross (2001), p. 36.

18 *BMC Arabia*, p. 92–3, pl.XIII.

19 For a different interpretation, see Kaizer (2003a), p. 290–1, and the introduction to this volume.

20 Ross (2001), p. 58; Luther (1999), p. 193, pleading for a continuing autonomous status of

was converted into that of a 'free' *polis*, which was later, under Elagabalus, to become a *colonia*, and still later, under Alexander, a *metropolis*. Abgar's son, however, cleaved to the title of *paşgriba* (crown prince), thus being a "king in waiting".²¹ In the long run, he was not to be disappointed. His son, Aelius Septimius Abgar (Abgar X), became Osrhoene's last short-ruling king when the emperor Gordian III faced serious trouble in the east: Abgar was enthroned in late AD 238 or early 239, but he reigned only for a few years over Edessa, since we know that the city had returned to the status of *colonia* by September AD 242.²² What had happened? What had caused Rome to re-establish the client-kingdom, only to abolish it a couple of years later?

As B. Isaac has convincingly pointed out, Rome had no 'grand strategy' or whatsoever, at least not in the East.²³ Its policy – if one can speak of a 'policy', in the sense of an acting aimed at attaining specific goals – towards its neighbours, rivals and vassals, was all too often incoherent and short-dated. But the lack of an overall strategic framework does not explain the radical swing that the enthronement and subsequent displacement of Severus Abgar effectively meant for the structure of Rome's Eastern frontier. Rome might have lacked a coherent long-term strategy, but its rulers always displayed an impressive ability to react flexibly to various challenges.²⁴ Osrhoene, controlling vital military and commercial routes and a pivotal crossing over the Euphrates, was doubtless a cornerstone in Rome's Eastern defence infrastructure. Any change of its status was far more than an emperor's caprice.

The easiest way of dealing with the enigmatic events is to link them to political constellations on the imperial and inter-imperial scale. The Roman eastern frontier was at risk, since Ardashir had overthrown the Arsacid dynasty and immediately diverted the energies of an inner-Parthian revolt towards the exterior. And Gordian's reign was at risk since his accession to the throne, which took place under extraordinary circumstances.²⁵ What the young man (or the people behind him) needed most, were allies, and a powerful ally was created by establishing Aelius Severus Abgar as king of Osrhoene. The *hypateia* (consular rank) bestowed on Abgar, and his self representation on coins (without exception in military gear), support this interpretation.²⁶ In AD 242, Gordian's *praefectus pro praetorio* and grey

Edessa even within the province of Osrhoene; Teixidor (1989), p. 219, arguing (without cogent arguments) in favour of a colonial status.

21 Millar (1993), p. 477.

22 The chronology is now revealed by the recent finds of papyri from the middle Euphrates, with one document (P. *Euphr.* aram. 1) dating from December of the year AD 240 (552 Seleucid era) and 'in the second year of Aelius Septimius Abgar, the king, the son of Ma'nū the *paşgriba*'. Hence Abgar was king by AD 239. By September AD 241 (553), however, Edessa had returned to the colonial era (P. *Euphr.* aram. 2): 'In the year 30 of the freedom of Edessa Antoniana Colonia Metropolis Aurelia Alexandria the glorious'. On the various aspects of chronology, see Teixidor (1989); Ross (1993); Brock (1991); Gnoli (2000), p. 67–88.

23 Isaac (1992).

24 Sommer (2004b), p. 93–8.

25 Ibid., p. 32–7.

26 Ross (2001), p. 146–9.

eminence Timesitheus was leading a large army group eastward to fight the Persians. Gordian's reign seemed secured. And maybe Abgar became too self-confident and went out of control. Whether dangerous or simply redundant (or both), Aelius Septimius Abgar was displaced and Edessa was turned into a Roman *colonia* again.

A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

What makes the case of Osrhoene so interesting for our topic is the consideration that we have some chance, however slight, to trace the cultural implications of the Roman take-over of power – and of its reversal, the re-establishment of the client kingdom. With the narrative of a great flood, devastating a large part of Edessa, in the *Chronicle of Edessa*, we dispose of a source which provides some insight in the social organisation of the Osrhoenian capital around about AD 200.²⁷ The account outlines the city's reconstruction and Abgar's measures to prevent a recurrence of the devastations. The craftsmen's booths, the aristocrats' dwellings and the royal palace were displaced from the riverside to more elevated areas of the town. The text suggests that the royal palace was the centre of an administrated economy and its most important consumer. Both palaces, old and new, were surrounded by the dwellings of the local elite, who sought spatial and ideological proximity to the monarchic centre. The 'craftsmen' and the 'aristocrats' were among the groups closely linked to the kingship and they are likely to have been a pressure-group in favour of the status quo.

On the other hand, there were people around who could benefit a great deal from the coming of Rome and from Edessa's transformation into a provincial *polis*. Among those were the ruling classes of towns subject to the dynasty of Edessa.

27 *Chron. Min.* 1–3/3–4: 'In the year 513 in the reign of [Septimius] Severus and the reign of King Abgar, son of King Ma'nu, in the month of the latter Teshrin [November], the spring of water that comes forth from the great palace of King Abgar the Great became abundant; and it rose abundantly as had been its wont previously, and it became full and overflowed on all sides. The royal courtyards and porticoes and rooms began to be filled with water. When our lord King Abgar saw this he went up to a safe place on the hill, above his palace where the workmen of the royal works reside and dwell. While the experts ['wise men'] were considering what to do about the excess of waters which had been added, there took place a great and abundant downpour of rain during the night [...]. When the city was full of the sound of wailing and when King Abgar had seen this damage that had taken place, he ordered that all the craftsmen of the city should take away their booths from beside the river, and that no one should build a booth for himself beside the river; through the expert of the surveyors and knowledgeable men, the booths were placed as far as the breadth of the river [allowed] and they added to its former measurements [...] King Abgar ordered that all those who resided in the portico and carried out their occupation opposite the river should not pass the night in their booths from the former Teshrin to Nisan [...]. But our lord King Abgar ordered a building to be built as his royal dwelling, a winter house [in] Beth Tabara – and there he used to dwell all the winter time; in the summer he would go down to the new palace that had been built for him by the source of the spring. His nobles also built for themselves buildings as dwelling places in the neighbourhood in which the king was, in the High Street called Beth Sahraye [...]' (translation J.B. Segal).

One of them, Batnae, a town in Anthemusia, south of Edessa, changed its name twice during the reign of Gordian III. When the dynasty was restored and Aelius Severus Abgar became king, the city took the illustrious name of Hayklā, 'new hunting town palace of Abgar the king' (*P. Euphr. aram.* 1.6). With the re-establishment of the *colonia* Edessa, the name changed again, to Markopolis (*P. Euphr. aram.* 2, *passim*). The documents' language switched from Syriac to Greek, whereas in Edessa Syriac continued to be the lingua franca. The evidence, however scant, could imply that the people who were in power in the new *polis* tried to draw a symbolic line between themselves and the former kingdom.

A second group which could have benefitted from political change was the kingdom's tribal elite. Like the neighbouring regions of northern Mesopotamia, large parts of Osrhoene were dominated by pastoralists migrating on a small scale.²⁸ One sub-region, the Jebel Sinjar, was explicitly called 'Arab'. A corpus of inscriptions from Sumatar in the Jebel Sinjar suggests that the tribal elites held positions in the kingdom's territorial administration. One of the local 'governors', Barnahar, dedicated a statue to a high-ranking local, the imperial *libertus* Aurelius Hapsay. The context and precise significance of the dedication, which took place around AD 176, are enigmatic, but Hapsay, who apparently maintained excellent relations with the Roman suzerain, could have been a major figure within the tribal geography of the steppe *and* the representative of a new elite at the same time. Strikingly, some of his descendants seem to have served as supreme magistrates of the *polis* of Edessa later.

There is a third clue which hints at an intra-community rift, dividing advocates and adversaries of direct Roman rule. The onomastics of colonial Edessa displays the usual patterns of recent provincialisation, namely the spread of the *tria nomina*.²⁹ Yet their triumph is far from complete. Twenty out of thirty-seven males mentioned in the documents bear Roman names.³⁰ Their distribution displays no clear-cut chronological or social pattern, as one would expect – with only one exception: the one document which dates from the short period of restored client kingship shows, exclusively, purely Aramaic names. Potentially, the bearers of *tria nomina* considered their Roman names not useful any more in the struggle for influence and power; but it is likewise possible that bearing the *tria nomina* had simply become politically incorrect.

28 Dillemann (1962), p. 75–6; Ross (2001), p. 26.

29 Caution is needed when using personal names as evidence for cultural and ethnic identities as has been pointed out by Macdonald (1999), p. 259–62. The Roman *tria nomina* are, however, a strong marker as – legally – following the *constitutio Antoniniana* (AD 212) almost every free inhabitant of the empire was entitled to use them. The mere fact that in some regions of the Roman Near East only parts of the population made use of their right to display 'romanness' with their names, hints in the direction of cultural rifts dividing those territories.

30 For an onomastic analysis, see Sommer (2005).

CONCLUSION

The annexation and provincialisation of Osrhoene did not follow any long-term political strategy. Still less was it a manifestation of a deliberate claim to spread Graeco-Roman culture over the imperial periphery of Mesopotamia and the steppe frontier. Any impact Rome's political actions had on local culture, was purely contingent.

The evidence suggests, however, that the coming of Rome had a highly polarising effect on local society, which was divided, or rather fragmented, in several sub-groups. Some of them, understanding they could derive far-reaching benefits from direct Roman rule, adopted Roman names, used Greek, the imperial language in the East, and sought affiliation with locals already integrated in the Roman hierarchy. In short, they identified imperial culture with imperial politics and hence became catalysts of acculturation.

On the other hand, Osrhoene and, above all, its capital Edessa, was filled with people who had all reason to be loyal subjects of the local dynasty – and sceptical about what direct Roman rule would bring. They benefited from an economy, which apparently resembled the pattern of redistributive palace economy so well-known from the pre-Hellenistic Near East: as a specialised labour force in the king's service, or as local notables deriving prestige and influence from their proximity to the royal court. In the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural empire that Rome was, with its centre far beyond their horizon and aristocratic networks operating on an imperial scale, these people were condemned to powerlessness.