

## Introduction

In the month of Former Kanun of the year five hundred and fifty two, in the third year | of Autokrator Caesar Marcus Antonius Gordianus | the Fortunate and Victorious, and in the second year of Aelius Septimius Abgar the king | son of Ma'nu, *pašgribā*, son of Abgar the king, who was honoured with the *hypateia* in Urhoy, | in Edessa, the great city, mother of all the cities of Bet Nahrin, | this document was written in Haiklā New Town of Hunting, of Abgar the king, | on the twenty-eighth day etc. (transl. DRIJVERS and HEALEY, with adaptations).<sup>1</sup>

Thus starts the *scriptura interior*, or 'lower text,' of a Syriac parchment published in 1990 by Javier TEIXIDOR.<sup>2</sup> In a private act in Syriac pertaining to the settlement of a debt between two private individuals and whose dating formula bears the date of 28th December 240 A. D., various time reckoning systems are set next to each other as expressions of different cultures meeting in the Roman Near East: the Seleucid Era, the year of reign of the Roman emperor and at last the year of reign of the sovereign of the royal house of Edessa, the capital city of the reign of the Abgarids, where this document was written. The document itself contains nothing exceptional. This jumbling together of different time reckonings represents a constant characteristic of the documents coming from the areas of the ancient cultures of the Near East. What makes an exceptional document out of it, and which repres-

---

<sup>1</sup> DRIJVERS, HEALEY 1999, P2, Lower text, lines 1-7: *BYRH KNWN QDM ŠNT HṢŠMʾ WHMŠYN WTRTYN BŠNT | TLT DʾWTQRTWR QSR MRQWS ʾNṬWNYWS GWRDYN-WS | GDYʾ WZKYʾ WBŠNT TRTYN DʾLYWS SPṬMYWS ʾBGR MLKʾ | BR MʾNW PŠ-GRYBʾ BR ʾBGR MLKʾ DMYQR BHPTYʾ BʾRHY | BʾRS MDYNTʾ RBTʾ ʾMʾ DMDYNTʾ KLHYN DBYT NHRYN || KTYB ŠṬRʾ HNʾ BHYKLʾ KRKʾ ḤDTʾ DŠYDʾ DʾBGR MLKʾ | BYWM TMYNʾ WʾŠRYN MWDNʾ.*

<sup>2</sup> TEIXIDOR 1990. The definition *interior* makes reference to the way the document was folded, cf. GNOLI 2000, 17-22.

ents one of the subjects of my reflections in this work too, are the titles of the king of Edessa, Aelius Septimius Abgar. This king, a Roman citizen, as the *tria nomina* testify and whose family had probably been granted this title many generations before, was the son of an important figure, Ma'nu, who had always been a crown-prince, and as king, had himself exercised the powers attributed to the Roman consuls. Syriac did not possess any terms suitable for translating the complex institutional situation of Aelius Septimius Abgar and his family, and so we find the transliteration into Syriac of two terms: on the one hand *PŠGRYB'* from a non-attested Parthian form *pš'gryw*<sup>3</sup> and on the other hand *HPTY'* from the Greek ὑπατεία. This term is an abstract form from ὑπατοϛ/*consul*. From the 5th century onward a corresponding abstract term, *consularitas*, was attested also in Latin.<sup>4</sup>

Most scholars, *in primis* the editors of these parchments (besides two Syriac parchments seventeen documents written in Greek are part of this batch of documents)<sup>5</sup> have thought they were perfectly able to explain the *consularitas* of Aelius Septimius Abgar inside the Roman institutional framework. Thus the king of Edessa had been granted the *ornamenta consularia* exactly like Herod or Agrippa in Judaea before him or many other more or less influential people in the Roman ruling class.

I have already taken the opportunity to question broadly such an interpretation in a monograph I expressly dedicated to this documents.<sup>6</sup> For the sake of clarity, the most significant points of my argument will be briefly summed up in the part of this work dedicated to the 'Kings-ὑπατοϛ.' In-

---

<sup>3</sup> GERSHEVITCH 1954; LEURINI 2004.

<sup>4</sup> *Consularitas* is attested in *Notitia Dignitatum*, in *Codices Theodosianus* and *Iustinianus*, in Cassiodorus' *Variae*, and in Paulinus' *Vita Ambrosii*, etc.: cf. *TLL*, s.v.

<sup>5</sup> The publication of this batch was done in various works by Denis FEISSEL and Jean GASCOU with the collaboration of Javier TEIXIDOR for the two Syriac documents and for the Syriac signatures and subscriptions in the Greek documents. Complete publication of PEuphr. 1 and synthetical presentation of all other documents: FEISSEL, GASCOU 1989; TEIXIDOR 1989; complete publication of P1: TEIXIDOR 1990; complete publication of P2: TEIXIDOR 1993; FEISSEL, GASCOU 1995; FEISSEL, GASCOU, TEIXIDOR 1997; FEISSEL, GASCOU 2000. The two Syriac documents were republished together with the contemporary Syriac parchment from Dura Europos by DRIJVERS, HEALEY 1999. Particularly important for the extensive use of these documents MILLAR 1993, specifically 553-562: 'Appendix C. Materials for the History of Roman Edessa and Osrhoene, AD 163-337'; ROSS 1993; POTTER 1996; GAWLIKOWSKI 1998; LUTHER 1999; BENOIST 2000; ROSS 2001.

<sup>6</sup> GNOLI 2000 and *infra*.

stead, here I intend to show how the *consularitas* granted by Rome to allied kings dates back to very ancient times, to that moment in time that is in some way central for both Rome and the Parthian empire, i. e. the reign of Nero. Recent works have tried in various ways to limit the importance of Nero's reign in the history of the relationships between Rome and Ctesiphon, something that I consider to be incorrect. The actual importance of the military victory by Domitius Corbulo in Armenia must have been very different from what was flaunted by his main 'bards,' Cassius Dio and in a more critical way Tacitus, but doubtlessly the settlement between the two powers that took place in 63 (or 64) A. D. represented a turning point in the diplomatic relations between the two empires. The direction given by the treaty of Rhandaia - I use the term 'treaty' but I am aware that the very existence of an act signed in Rhandaia has been recently questioned - to the relationships between Rome and Iran was destined to survive even the dynastic change in Iran in 224 A. D., and indeed was to prove even more effective during the first years of the Sassanian dynasty.

The importance of the reign of Nero in the development of the Roman policy in the East derives not only and not so much from the immediate political and military results the treaty brought about, with a period of non-belligerency lasting about fifty years between the two superpowers, but also - and above all, I would suggest - because by means of the treaty of Rhandaia Rome inaugurated a new political behaviour in the East towards the Parthian enemy and its more or less faithful allies. Since that time, some local entities of substantial strategic importance were granted such a wide political autonomy as to differentiate them significantly from all other ordinary local powers in the Roman empire, i.e. Rome guaranteed all border political entities where the Parthian political, economic and cultural influence was stronger a much greater autonomy than it was willing to accord other local realities that were less important from a strategic as well as military point of view. The most evident trace of this different attention by Rome towards some particular powers located on the oriental borders of the empire is represented by the use of Parthian and Sassanian court titles in regions subjected to the hegemony of Rome and by an abnormal utilization in these same realities of customary terms derived from Roman institutions. Scholars of Roman history who have tried to explain these institutional 'singularities,' as they were convinced they had to explain the institutions of the Roman diplomacy only by following the schemes of Roman law, sought refuge in a

pretended intolerance by the oriental people of the too rigid tenets of that law.<sup>7</sup> What has often been described as some sort of confused ‘Levantine’ interpretation of the Roman public law in the East is actually nothing else than a polymorphism of the Roman institutions in the East that was actuated with the conscious goal of isolating the Parthian and afterwards the Sassanian powers from those border entities over which Rome wanted to exert an exclusive hegemony. This is true notwithstanding the presence of large sections of the population being culturally much more homologous to the Iranian than to the Roman world.

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf., e. g., MACMULLEN 1966, 224-225: “A few years later [sc. of Uranius Antoninus], in Palmyra, under just the same pressures - invasion at the gates, relieving armies busy on other frontiers or engaged in civil strife - and using at times the same kind of irregular troops of ill-armed volunteers, Odenathus went to war. His family had long supplied the ruling sheiks. They bore almost entirely Semitic names and their crack troops, the mounted bowmen so highly valued by Roman generals, were a specialty developed for patrol of the deserts and protection of the caravans streaming in and out of the city. There the Archers formed a sort of public association and presided at feasts and festivals in honor of the god Bel. Despite these native elements, the aristocracy looked to the East or West for importations to set off their rank. They favored tunics and himations, more often Iranian costumes such as can be seen on a relief of the 260’s showing Vorod wearing a riding caftan and loose trousers, richly decorated, with a sword belt round his waist. No less than six statues of this same man lined the colonnade down the main street. He was ‘Procurator, ducenarius, juridicus, president of the Banquets of Bel, and argapet’ - a characteristic mingling of half-understood Roman offices, Palmyrene honors, and Parthian words, Vorod being a Parthian name and argapet denoting the highest military command under Sassanian kings. Like master, like man: Odenathus, too, faced in two directions, toward Rome yet away from Rome. His family boasted senatorial rank, he himself the right to call himself Emperor granted by the grateful emperor for his triumphs over Persia; yet he added the title ‘King of Kings,’ bestowed it unauthorized on his son, spread his hand over Syria, and transmitted to his widow, Zenobia, the strength to expand still further into Cappadocia and Egypt. The latter war may have been less popular with carried a direct challenge to Rome. Zenobia hoped to soften the affront. Her son continued to be called Augustus. Such aping of Roman forms, such juggling of ambitions, was possible, of course, because there was nothing of nationalism in her movement; not only possible, it was necessary in order to provide a claim and to attract a loyalty in the Roman provinces around her.” Of this very long citation I do not share anything but the absence of nationalistic perspectives in the Palmyrene vicissitudes, even though the ever growing role plaid by the *ethne* during the 3rd- 4th century stands out very clearly: cf., e. g., MAZZA 1973; 1992; TRAINA 2001, in partic. 74; GNOLI, forthcoming b.

The inadequacy of the conceptual categories of Roman law in accounting for the multiform institutional reality found in the East was recognized many years ago by a scholar of Roman law who wrote about Palmyra, in my opinion, an unjustly disregarded work:

Palmyre n'est pas un cas unique, en ce sens que la situation d'autres état fait également apparaître cette prévalence de la notion d'hégémonie. Il s'agit de territoires relativement périphériques où la politique d'annexion ne pouvait pas s'appliquer, et qui étaient restés peu près dans le même régime d'Auguste à Claude. Mais c'est pourtant avec Néron que le système va se trouver connaître une ampleur nouvelle et présenter un intérêt particulier.<sup>8</sup>

Even though it was no monarchy and thus clearly distinguished itself from the above-cited situations of Edessa and Armenia, during the period of substantial transformation of the local social, political and economic structures that existed during the 3rd century A. D. also the internal regulations of the *civitas Palmyrenorum* underwent a profound change. The oasis had based its existence and prosperity as a demic and urban centre on caravan trade and on a 'dimorphic' social structure, the latter being a concept adopted in a completely different context by Michael B. ROWTON and recently revived by Michael SOMMER.<sup>9</sup> Its society was founded on the entrepreneurial activities of an extended and varied aristocracy, whose structure was superimposed on tribal communities that were typical of the local Semitic population.<sup>10</sup> Exactly in the first half of the century and in almost perfect chronological coincidence with the dynastic change in Iran, Palmyra experienced an institutional change in an authoritarian sense. Over the Senate assembly and the assembly of the people of the town the figure of the 'chief (of the town) of Tadmor,' the *rš dy tdmwr*, according to the Semitic name of the town, was superposed and acquired an increasing number of functions. This title is attested only starting from Septimius Odainath, but it is also possible that it had been already acquired by the father of the Palmyrene dynast.

---

<sup>8</sup> LEMOSSE 1967, 105. The deriving problem is very important indeed: it is represented by the relations between the Roman *ius* and the epichoric laws. The documentation has been greatly improved since LEMOSSE wrote his book, particularly as far as the provincialization of *Arabia* with the so-called Babatha archive, published by LEWIS 1989 and COTTON, YARDENI 1997 is concerned; about the Babatha archive see, above all, WOLFF, 1980; LEWIS 2003 and many articles Hannah M. COTTON dedicated to such documents.

<sup>9</sup> ROWTON 1973, 1976, 1977; SOMMER 2005.

<sup>10</sup> YON, 2002, 2003; GNOLI, forthcoming b.

Palmyra emerged on grand scene of world history thanks to the strong personality of Septimius Odainath. Rome granted either him or his father an exceptional authority over Palmyra, the same authority that elsewhere in monarchical contexts was attributed to kings: the *hypateia*. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Odainath was very skilful in manipulating this concept, forcing its institutional meaning at will until he now appears as a Senator in our eyes. In the years when the empire suffered the Sassanian initiative in the East and an emperor fell into the enemy's hands alive, Rome failed to rectify and clarify its position towards Palmyra or to contain the audacity of Odainath. On the domestic level the latter began to behave like a sovereign and named his sons as successors (was the *hypateia* all other sovereigns were granted by Rome perhaps not hereditary and intended for life?). Moreover Gallienus himself, as he was in a very difficult situation, entrusted him with an exceptional command over the whole East. In a work that appeared just after my monograph on this subject, but written in the same period, Udo HARTMANN provided an exceptionally in-depth treatment of the crucial years of the Palmyrene 'Teilreich.' However I think that the question of whether or not Odainath was loyal to Rome until his mysterious death,<sup>11</sup> which seems central to the German scholar, is badly posed and substantially irrelevant.

The strange situation which sees titles of Latin or oriental origin, specifically of Parthian origin, found side by side in the same political conditions, is particularly evident in Edessa, as well as in Palmyra. Aelius Septimius Abgar, son of a '*pašgribā*,' holds a 'consulship' in Edessa. In Palmyra more or less simultaneously the same kind of 'consulship' is attributed by Rome most probably to the father of Odainath. Later on the latter was joined in his governing action by a person who bore the rare Parthian title of *argapetes*.

Aelius Septimius Abgar (Chap. 1. 1) and Septimius Odainath (Chap. 1. 2) are thus the so-called 'Kings-ὑπάτοι,' i. e. kings (or 'chiefs') exerting their power, the *hypateia* they had been granted by Rome. The institutional contents of this *hypateia* (Chap. 1. 4) can be clarified only by explaining the origins of the *hypateia* in the Roman diplomacy in the East (Chap. 1. 3).

---

<sup>11</sup> HARTMANN 2001; cf. the related review by YON 2002b.

I am convinced, as I have explained elsewhere, that the attribution of the title of ‘King of Kings’ by Odainath to himself had taken place in full agreement with and maybe even with the encouragement of Gallienus. Such self-attribution of the royal title is not evidence of the will of the dynast to usurp against Rome, but it rather represents the proof of the attempt actuated by Rome itself to destabilize the young Sassanian monarchy ‘from the inside.’<sup>12</sup> If this interpretation is correct, the title of ‘King of Kings’ borne by Odainath should be attributed the same value as the title of ‘King of Kings’ borne by Šābuhr (Chap. 2. 2 and 3). A famous passage in the Babylonian Talmud shows how the Roman and Palmyrene propaganda tried to put the two crowns on the same level and also demonstrates the failure of this initiative.<sup>13</sup> However, if this interpretation of Odainath as ‘King of Kings’ were true, then the reading of the Palmyrene inscription *Inv. III 3*, attributing the same title to the eldest son of Odainath would be inexplicable and mysterious. In Chap. 2. 1 I discuss the unreliability of the readings of this much damaged document that have been proposed so far.

The vicissitude of Odainath of Palmyra in the 3rd century cannot be explained but by supporting the thesis of a role of the caravan city being largely autonomous from Rome. The events in Palmyra become fully understandable only if the very famous sentence by Pliny attributing the town in the desert a *privata sors* between the two empires can be considered true. Of this hybrid position of Palmyra I am firmly convinced like the above mentioned LEMOSSE, ISAAC, SOMMER and many others. The analysis of a title that in Palmyra qualifies the actions by a person of the highest rank, Septimius Vorōd, second only to the great Odainath, i. e. *argapetes*, has allowed me, I think, to bring further evidence in support of the thesis held by those who maintain that the town was substantially independent of the Roman empire (Chap. 3). An appendix is dedicated to the recurrences, in particular in Ḥatra, of a term, *pasāgrīw*, I have already dealt with. It represents the completion of my previous work and a bibliographical updating of a subject I have treated elsewhere in an extensive discussion.

---

<sup>12</sup> GNOLI 2000, 125-153.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *infra* Chap. 2.

