

# ROMAN EDESSA

Politics and culture on the eastern fringes  
of the Roman Empire, 114–242 CE

*Steven K. Ross*



London and New York

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# PREFACE

This work arose from a dissertation submitted in 1997 at the University of California at Berkeley. Its original kernel, however, was a paper written for a seminar on Documents from Roman Syria under the direction of Professor Glen Bowersock, of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. The focus of that paper was on the Syriac parchments from Edessa found along with the Euphrates Papyri cache, and on historical conclusions that could be reached from those documents in combination with numismatic data. Although the final project has advanced far beyond those concerns, they remain at the center of this work, as will be seen. Although the intent has been to deal, as much as possible, with the evidence for early (pre-Christian) Edessa, the city's later importance as a religious and literary center demands some treatment of Edessan Christianity and culture, the arrival of the new faith and the evidence offered by early Syriac literature. It is in these areas that I feel my credentials to be most lacking, and it is only with trepidation that I offer any opinion at all on controversial topics.

Although their names are mentioned in the Acknowledgements, I would like to express here again my deepest personal gratitude to the giants of scholarship in this area, Professors Sebastian Brock, H. J. W. Drijvers, and J. B. Segal. Each of them has been most generous with suggestions and assistance, and their kindness has rescued me countless times from the brink of error. A number of crucial suggestions were provided by the publisher's anonymous referee, with the result that this work approximates much more closely to a full and balanced treatment. I am fully responsible for any errors and weaknesses that remain.

Throughout the extended period of work on this subject I have been sagely counseled, and gently prodded, by Prof. Erich S. Gruen, the mentor of mentors. Glen Bowersock, the original inspiration for

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my work on Edessa, has proven to be an endless source of cheer and encouragement. Finally, I owe an undying debt of gratitude to my long-suffering wife and family.

Steven K. Ross  
Louisiana State University  
Baton Rouge

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Grateful permission is also extended to the American Numismatic Society for rights to reproduce photos of Edessan coins studied there during my term as Fellow in Roman Coinage Studies (Figs. App.1–4), and to Prof. Segal for reproductions of, and reproductive rights to the Shelmath inscription (Fig. Int.1), hand-drawn illustrations of Edessan mosaics by Mrs Seton Lloyd (Figs. 5.1–4, 5.7), the photograph of the Mosaic of Aptuḥa (Fig. 5.6), and the Plan of Urfa (Fig. 5.5). Thanks are also due to Prof. Segal for permission to quote the lengthy extract from the *Chronicle of Edessa* in his translation (Chapter 5).

Finally, I acknowledge my debt of gratitude to Richard Stoneman, Coco Stevenson and the staff at Routledge, for their patience during a long and trying period of waiting.

Sincere thanks also go to any and all whose assistance I may have failed to acknowledge.

S. R.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AE</i>	<i>l'Année Epigraphique</i>
<i>BLC</i>	H. J. W. Drijvers, <i>The Book of the Laws of Countries: Dialogue on Fate of Bardaisan of Edessa</i> , ed. J. H. Hospers and Th. C. Vriezen (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1965): Text (even-numbered pages) with English translation (odd-numbered pages).
<i>BMC Arabia, etc.</i>	G. F. Hill, <i>Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Arabia, Mesopotamia and Persia</i> (London: British Museum, 1922).
<i>BMC Roman Empire</i>	<i>Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum</i> (London: British Museum, 1923–62). Vol. I: Augustus to Vitellius; Vol. II: Vespasian to Domitian; Vol. III: Nerva to Hadrian; Vol. IV: Antoninus Pius to Commodus; Vol. V: Pertinax to Elagabalus; Vol. VI: Severus Alexander to Balbinus and Pupienus.
<i>Bull. Epigr.</i>	<i>Bulletin Epigraphique</i> .
<i>CAH</i>	<i>Cambridge Ancient History</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970– ).
<i>Chron. Min.</i>	<i>Chronica Minora</i> (CSCO vols. 1–6; Scr. Syr. ser. 3, vol. 4). Cited by page numbers of text/translation.
<i>Chron. Zuq.</i>	<i>Chronicle of Zuqin</i> ('Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tell-Mahrē'). CSCO 91, 121, 104; Scr. Syr. ser. 3, vols. 1–2. Cited by page numbers of text/translation.
<i>CIG</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> .
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i> .

## ABBREVIATIONS

CRAI	<i>Comptes Rendues de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.</i>
CSCO	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalum</i> (Louvain); Scr. Syr. = <i>Scriptores Syri.</i>
Dessau	Hermann Dessau, <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae.</i>
FHG	Karl Müller, <i>Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum</i> (1841–70).
<i>Geog. Graec. Min.</i>	Karl Müller (ed.), <i>Geographi Graeci Minores</i> (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1855–82).
HA	<i>Historia Augusta.</i>
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae.</i>
IGLS	L. Jalabert, R. Mouterde <i>et al.</i> , <i>Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie</i> (1929– ).
IGR	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanae Pertinendae.</i>
Migne P. G.	J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca</i> (Paris: Migne, 1857–87).
Mommsen, <i>R. Gesch.</i>	Theodor Mommsen, <i>Römische Geschichte</i> (Berlin: Weidmann, 1854–94).
NHC	Nag Hammadi Corpus, cited by codex and tractate number.
PIR <sup>2</sup>	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i> <sup>2</sup> .
RE	A. F. von Pauly and Georg Wissowa, <i>Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1893–1963).
RIC	Harold Mattingly <i>et al.</i> , <i>Roman Imperial Coinage</i> (London: Spink and Son, 1923–94).
SEG	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i> (1923– ).
YCS	<i>Yale Classical Studies.</i>
ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik.</i>



# INTRODUCTION

Visitors to the modern-day economic center and provincial capital of Urfa (Şanlıurfa) in southeastern Turkey will, almost inevitably, find their attention drawn to the most prominent physical reminders of that city's pre-Byzantine history: the two columns on the rock outcropping known as the city's 'Citadel,' at the southern end of town. Standing sentinel over the modern-day market district and the mosques which are the focus of devotion among the region's faithful, the two columns are together known as the 'Throne of Nimrud' in accordance with local legends relating them to the town's reputed Patriarchal history. The columns' bossed drums and Corinthian-influenced capitals clearly reflect the influence of Greco-Roman culture in this community, once known by its Greek name, Edessa – the capital of the small northern Mesopotamian district known as Osrhoene. It is only by a closer approach, and by a careful examination of one of the two, that the observer discovers another telling feature: an inscription in early Syriac characters carved into its face (Fig. Int. 1):

I Aphtuḥa, *nu{badra?}*, son of Bars[—] made this column and the statue which is on it to Shelmath the Queen, daughter of Ma'nu the *pa{s}griba*, wife of the [king?] my lady [—].<sup>1</sup>

With this honorary inscription, one of very few surviving from the independent monarchy, a notable pays his respects to the daughter of Ma'nu the *pašgriba*, or heir apparent to the Edessan throne. The date is probably in the first third of the third century CE, and Ma'nu is likely to have been second-to-last in the royal line, father of Abgar X, the last king of Edessa (239–42 CE).

By the time this last of the native monarchs took the throne, the





*Figure Int.1* Early Syriac inscription on a Roman-era column on Urfa's Citadel hill. It honors 'Shelmath, daughter of Ma'nu the *paşgriiba*', a member of the Edessan royal family. It is one of very few surviving monuments from the period of Edessa's native monarchy that can be seen by visitors to Urfa today. Photo courtesy J. B. Segal.

absorption of Edessa and its territory into the Roman Empire was nearly complete, and in fact this king's reign itself was anomalous. The column of Shelmath, however, is interesting for another reason: the mixture of cultural forces it represents. The language of the inscription is Syriac, a form of Aramaic that evolved in northern Mesopotamia and eastern Syria in the Hellenistic and Parthian periods, but which would produce an impressive corpus of literature only after the annexation by Rome, at the hands of the Christian Fathers. The names of the individuals named in the inscription – Shelmath herself, Ma'nu, and Aphtuḥa – show strong affinities with the Arab and other Semitic peoples that surrounded Edessa, which was the center of Syriac language and culture. At the same time, embedded in the inscription is the term *paşgriiba*, a royal title which is not Semitic but of Persian/Parthian derivation. This represents a Parthian strain that also crops up in other contexts when considering Edessan culture. Finally there is the archaeological locus of the inscription: a column in a Classical order showing a marked Greek or Roman influence. Whether this architectural style is only an expression of the spread of Hellenism around the Near and Middle

## INTRODUCTION

East, and its survival after the fall of the Seleucid Kingdom, or whether, on the other hand, it is also part of a revival or injection of 'Classical' culture under the more recent influence of Rome, may never be known. In any case, the column and its mate spring out of the cultural context of the late monarchy, and in some degree, they express the layering or mixture of cultural and political influences to which the kingdom was subject during the more than three centuries of its existence.

This book traces the history of Edessa's encounter with Rome and seeks to clarify the circumstances under which it was eventually absorbed, as well as the reasons for that absorption, and its consequences. Although much of this tale has been told before, it is now possible to bring to bear new evidence and to interpret some of the old evidence in a different light. Moreover, by focusing on events in the first two-and-a-half centuries of the Common Era – before there is any convincing evidence of 'official' Christianity at Edessa – it is possible to evaluate the events of this period in their own right, uninfluenced by the city's later importance in the history of the Christian Empire. This is, thus, the beginning of an attempt to write the needed 'history of profane Edessa,' in the words of the historian Peter Brown.<sup>2</sup>

That history cannot, however, be written without some attempt to address the other questions posed by the Citadel column and the Shelmath inscription: those of Edessa's cultural antecedents and influences, and the significance of the mixture that we see in the column, in the inscription and in other expressions of Edessan culture. The answers to some of these questions may be, at the moment, beyond our reach; but this is our second aim: to come as close to those answers as possible, using the evidence of language, art, religion and iconography. The two projects – political history and cultural interpretation – are fairly clearly delimited in the pages that follow, but they illuminate each other at various points, and are intended to form the two parts of a coherent whole.

Before taking on that bipartite task it is necessary to deal with some preliminaries, beginning with the historical geography of Edessa: this includes such questions as the potential influence of long-range trade routes on the city's prosperity; the site's strategic significance; and the extent of Osrhoene, Edessa's kingdom and later a Roman province. The Hellenistic origins of Edessa, the arrival of the Abgarid kings during the second century BCE, and Parthian overlordship may also be considered preliminaries to the main project, as are Edessa's early contacts with Rome. After considering all

these questions, we embark on the main journey, taking our starting point from the first full-scale Roman invasion of Mesopotamia, under the Emperor Trajan in 114 CE. The political history of Rome and the Edessan kingdom carries us down to the reign of the last native king, up to Edessa's final incorporation into the empire *c.* 242 CE. The reader will note that a disproportionate amount of attention is paid to the events of the last few years before that incorporation. This is because it is to these years that the most recently discovered documentary evidence pertains, as does the material that forms the main subject of our numismatic study.

At some time in the years leading up to the kingdom's final incorporation, and possibly during the reign of the last Abgar, the inscription of Shelmath was carved into the face of the Citadel column. In our final chapters we will turn to the questions posed by that monument, those of Edessa's cultural identity – by looking at literature, religion, language, art and archaeology. If at the end of this inquiry many more questions than answers still remain, this should indicate not the sterility of the topic, but its potential ability to lead us to a new and deeper understanding of the fascinating place that is the Roman Near East. To find the final answers to all these questions may be the task of hands more skilled than ours; here, we can but point the way.

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