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CARAVAN CITIES REVISITED

Peter Edwell
Sam Lieu

In May 2001, Sam Lieu of Macquarie University and Geoffrey Greatrex, then of the University of Dalhousie and now of the University of Ottawa in Canada, organised a visit to a number of key sites in Syria (including Dura Europos and Palmyra). The other members of the expedition were Peter Edwell and Norman Ricklefs, both of Macquarie University. The aim of the visit was to gain more detailed knowledge of the remains of the significant cities of Syria in the Roman and Byzantine periods, and a better understanding of the regions of which those cities were an important part in these periods. The trip began in Damascus and continued north to Hama (ancient Ephaphia) and Aleppo (ancient Beroca) from Aleppo the team’s route lay east alongside a significant length of the middle Euphrates to Deir ez-Zor and from there westwards and inland to Palmyra before returning to Damascus. From Damascus the team visited Bosra and Phillipopolis to the south. Using Hama as a base it visited a number of important sites such as Apane, Hoss Suleiman, Qasr Ibn Warden and the impressive remains of the crusader castle of Krak Des Chevaliers. From Aleppo the team visited sites such as Qalat Suman (the cathedral complex of St Simon Syriotes), Cyprus, Resafa, Qalb Lozeh and the deserted northern cities of Serjilla and Bura. The middle Euphrates sites of Zenobia (Halebiyeh), Halebiyeh and Dura Europos were all accessible from Deir ez-Zor, the main urban centre in eastern Syria, and at Palmyra the team stayed virtually on site at the Hotel Zenobia.

1 Zenobia

This article will focus on the Roman fortifications of the middle Euphrates with particular emphasis on Dura Europos. The site of the fortress known as Zenobia was one of the Roman/Byzantine fortifications we visited. Zenobia is situated approximately 65 km north-west of Deir ez-zor. Dura Europos is approximately 85 km to the south-east. The confluence of the Khabur and Euphrates is approximately 25 km south of Deir ez-zor. This whole section of the Euphrates was under Seleucid control from the late fourth century BC until the beginning of the first century BC when the Parthian empire took control of the Euphrates south from the Khabur river, an area which included Dura Europos. By a treaty struck between the emperor Augustus and the Parthian king Phraates IV, the Khabur became part of the border between the two empires in 19 BC. The emperor Trajan briefly took control of the Euphrates beyond the Khabur in AD 115 before it reverted to Parthian control and in AD 165 Lucius Verus conquered this section of the Euphrates until the Sassanian Persians fortified constructions such as Zenobia (Birtha Aspiorakou, modern Halebiyeh) and Dura Europos in AD 253 and 257 respectively, as part of their extensive invasions of the Roman East. 2 Zenobia continued in use as a fortress until the seventh century AD but Dura Europos was abandoned by the Persians soon after its capture in AD 257 and was not retaken by the Romans. 3

The fortress of Zenobia (modern Halebiyeh), as it is more generally called, is located on the west bank of the Euphrates, 100 km south of Raqqa and 65 km north-west of Deir ez-Zor. What remains of the fortress mostly dates from the reign of Justinian (AD 527-565). It was one of the most significant fortifications to secure the Euphrates designed by Justinian at this time. Unusually the fortifications have not suffered significantly from modern stone robbing as the local population is relatively small. Most of the damage to the stonework has come as a result of weathering and earthquakes.

The location of the fortress was strategically linked to the local geography with the Euphrates running through a very narrow stretch of plains at this point. The fortress operated, in conjunction with another (modern Zalebiyeh) some 750 km further south, to control all passing traffic. Zalebiyeh was on the east bank so that between the two traffic could be controlled on either side of the river. It must be noted that the remains of Zalebiyeh have been almost completely eroded by the Euphrates and establishing the date of its construction and operation is problematic. 3 The site of Zenobia was originally fortified in the late Roman period as it is referred to on the SKZ inscription of Shapur I and in surviving parchments from Dura Europos. The SKZ inscription referred to the fortress as Birtha Aspiorakou while the Dura papyri referred to it simply as Birtha. 4 The fortress became known as Zenobia.

1 References to well-known wider events are not made here. The issue of Dura’s capture by the Persians is considered in greater detail below.


3 See Gregory (1995) 147-50 For more detail on Zalebiyeh and the problematic nature of identifying its dimensions and history

4 SKZ Line 12. The translation of the SKZ referred to here is from Dodge and Levi (1904) The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-165 London 50. References in
during the large scale ‘rebellion’ of Palmyra under Queen Zenobia when, according to Procopius, the site was substantially enlarged at the instigation of the Palmyrene Queen.² It was from this period of the fortress’s enlargement that it received the name by which it is still popularly known. Following Aurelian’s defeat of Zenobia’s forces at Antioch, Emea and finally Palmyra, the fortress was captured by the Romans and probably reinforced by Diocletian (284-305) and later by Anastasius (491-518).³ Justinian’s refortification of Zenobia is thought to have taken place as late as 560 and may have been designed to assist in the protection of substantial Christian populations in the region as well as providing some protection against Persian invasion.⁴

The Site

The walled area measures approximately 12 hectares with a 385m river frontage. The north side measures approximately 350m and the south side approximately 550m. A cardo ran on a north/south axis parallel with the river and was intersected by an east/west axis.⁵ The remains of buildings inside the walls are little more than foundational with the visible outline of a forum, agora and two churches while hypocausts indicate the remains of a bath complex close to the river front. The best surviving building is built into the north wall and appears to have functioned as a praetorium. One of the churches has been dated to the reign of Justinian and the other is thought to be earlier.⁶

The most impressive features of the site are the walls and natural features which they take advantage of. The steep hill which dominates the fortress is flanked on either side by two deep wadis with steep sides. The walls which run up each side of the hill meet at the top which acted as a watch point to provide early warning of enemy troop movements and any traffic movement on the river or along its banks. The strategic advantage of the fortress is particularly noticeable on visiting the site and was clearly realised by Palmyrene and Byzantine military strategists who saw to its enlargement.

The fortress of Zenobia was also important from the third to sixth centuries AD in a wider regional context. It was located approximately 90km north-west of the confluence of the Euphrates and Khabur river. This made Zenobia and Zalebyeh, situated close by, the first significant fortresses which an invading force or traders moving up the river would reach following the passing of this important confluence.

A fortification was also located at the confluence of the Euphrates and Khabur itself. This fortification was known as Circesium as early as the mid-third century AD when, according to the Persian SKZ inscription, it was captured by the forces of Shapur I in the same campaign in which Dura Europos was captured in 257.⁷ At the time of its capture, Circesium was not as significant a fortification as it would later become. After visiting the fortress in 363 while accompanying the emperor Julian on his Persian campaign, Ammianus Marcellinus claimed that Circesium had been previously small and insecure (extrema antiquae et suspicium).⁸ According to Ammianus, Diocletian (284-305) strengthened Circesium significantly as part of his organisation of the frontier defences in the east and Procopius says that it was so strong in 540 that the invading Persian forces under King Chosroes chose to bypass it.⁹

The Confluence of the Khabur and Euphrates Rivers

Circesium’s history before the time of Shapur I and details of its foundation are unknown as its remains today are little more than bare, foundational outlines and are difficult to access. The fortress was located directly at the confluence of the rivers; Ammianus described the fortress’s walls as being washed by both the Khabur and Euphrates (causa molesta ab eo et Euphrates ambient fluminis).¹⁰ The effect of the two rivers converging created a type of island (velut spatium insulare fangentis) according to Ammianus. This landform would have assisted in the defence of the fortress. The changing courses of both rivers since antiquity has resulted in the confluence of the Khabur and Euphrates rivers being located further south than it was at the time of Diocletian’s strengthening of Circesium. The limited remains of the fortress being very difficult to locate, we sought to find the modern confluence of the two rivers. This proved a difficult task in itself as we could not make ourselves understood to the locals of Deir-ez-Zor at all as we asked for assistance in locating the precise spot and how we might get there. This eventually entailed driving along a number of narrow, pot-holed roads in search of the Khabur before driving along its east bank until we came to the

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² Procopius, Persica/ Wars II 5 4-6
³ Bursa (1999) 141
⁴ Bursa (1999) 140
⁵ Bursa (1999) 140-1
⁶ Bursa (1999) 140-1
⁷ SKZ line 17
⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus XXIII 5.2
⁹ Procopius, Persica Wars II 5 4-6
¹⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus XXIII 5.1
Euphrates. We inevitably found ourselves at a number of dead ends and increasingly became a spectacle for the locals who came out of their houses and stared at us in bewilderment. The children were particularly excited to see us and we were in the area appeared to have spread quickly as each collection of houses we came to saw people gathered on the side of the road to wave at us. We eventually found the confluence of the Khabur and Euphrates where a large reception committee had already gathered to meet us. It seems that the local population had worked out what we were looking for and we were proudly escorted down to a field from where we could see the two rivers join. The reception was led by a young man dressed entirely in white and we eventually learned that he was both the local school teacher and secret policeman. Declining an invitation to dinner as it was approaching dusk we headed back to Deir ez-Zor having realised that in the middle of a desert the place where two rivers join is important to the local population for many other reasons than military ones.

2. Dura Europus

An important focus of our time in Syria was the region of the middle of the Euphrates where Dura Europus played a key role in Roman defence during the first half of the third century AD, with a view to gaining an understanding of its wider region, an aspect of its history which has been largely overlooked.

The Discovery

After the defeat and surrender of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, Britain and France jointly administered most of the former Turkish-held territories in Syria and Iraq. In April 1920 a detachment of British soldiers crossed the Euphrates from Iraq into Syria north of Abu Kamal in skirmishes with Bedouin tribes. The soldiers, mostly from the Indian Army, took shelter in the remains of a walled fortress at Salihiyah and in the process of digging shelters for their bivouacs that they found themselves the coincidental instruments of a remarkable archaeological discovery. In the north-west corner of the fortress, the soldiers unearthed paintings of life-size figures of three men, one woman and three other figures partly obliterated. They were eventually discovered to be paintings of the priest Kenon sacrificing with other family members to a triad of Palamyrene gods. The quality of the paintings indicated the potential for other important discoveries elsewhere at the site and that the site may have been a significant settlement in antiquity.

The main road down the west bank of the Euphrates from Deir ez-Zor to Abu Kamal at that time actually cut through the site before descending to the level of the floodplain. Two German scholars, Schulz and Sarre, who passed through the site along this road at the end of the nineteenth century noted its remains as ancient but did not deem it sufficiently important to merit excavation. The report of the find by the troops was forwarded to the Civil Commissioner in Baghdad. He informed Mr Gertrude Bell who was then in the process of establishing what later became the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. She suggested that Professor James Breasted of Chicago University - a world renowned authority on Near Eastern Art who happened to be in Baghdad at the time - visit the site. The worsening political situation brought on by the recent British and French division of large parts of the Middle East meant that Breasted was only able to make a one day visit to Dura. He lost no time, however, in making known to the learned world the importance of the paintings to the history of Near Eastern and Classical art. His publications both learned and popular generated such interest that a French expedition to excavate the site systematically took place in 1922 as that section of the Syrian Euphrates (i.e. the plain of Khana-Mai) had by then come under French administration after the Treaty of San Remo.

The two scholars whose names would give prestige to the site were Franz Cumont - a Belgian scholar from Brussels working on behalf of the French team in 1922-3 - and Michael Rostovtzeff - then Professor of Ancient History at Yale University and one of the most prominent scholars of the Hellenistic world of his time. From 1928-1937, a team from Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters jointly conducted the excavations under the direction of Rostovtzeff. The team made a series of spectacular discoveries and generated public interest through regular reports in the Illustrated London News. These discoveries included a Christian house church with a baptistery, a Mithraeum, a Synagogue with magnificent wall-paintings as well as several temples dedicated to pagan and semi-gods such as Zeus and Bel. Of particular interest also was a large collection of
papyri and inscriptions - many related to the third century Roman garrison in Dura. Equally important was the way in which the archaeology contributed to a virtually lost chapter of Greek and Roman involvement in the Near East and especially of Hellenistic colonisation and urbanisation.

The regional context into which Dura fell was also noted by Rostovtzeff as being important. The strategic geographical location of the city in the Syrian desert approximately 250 km from the trading city of Palmyra and the subsequent discovery of a major Palmyrene presence in the city led Rostovtzeff to surmise that trans-continental trade must have played an important role in the economic life of the city and he subsequently devoted a major part of his popular monograph Caravan Cities to Dura and the city's links with Palmyra. Since 1984, a French team led by Dr Pierre Leriche has excavated at Dura Europos making some important new discoveries and undertaking significant restoration work to repair the damage which occurred from the excavations of the 1920s and 1930s. Work has also been performed on areas previously excavated in order to provide more detail and make corrections. The work performed on the mines under the ramp and tower 14 for example has shed new light on the Persian siege of the city while it has been recently discovered that the main east-west street overlaid what was originally a quarry to provide the stone for the Seleucid construction of the walls.

16 Select papyri were published along with some of the parchments in the preliminary reports of the nine Yale seasons before a final report was issued in 1959 in which all of the parchments and papyri were published: see Welles, C. B. et al. 1950 The Excavations at Dura Europos. Final Report V. The Parchments and Papyri; New Haven. The more significant inscriptions were published in the preliminary reports and also in Cur cur's earlier two volume publication on the 1922/3 seasons. A final report of the inscriptions has not been published.


19 For a more detailed description based on new evidence for the Sassanian siege techniques employed in the capture of Dura see Leriche, P. (1993) "Techniques de guerre sassanides et victoire à Doura-Europos" in P. Vallet and M. Kawasaki ed. L'Aracte Romaine et les Barbares du IIe au VIe siècle. Tome V des Mémoires publiées par l'Association Francaise d'Archéologie Mérovingienne 83-100. The discovery of the quarry under the main street is known through personal communication with Pierre Leriche and the details are yet to be published.

The Site

Dura Europos is situated on the west bank of the Euphrates at 34°46' N, 40°46' E, approximately 85 km south-east of Deir ez-Zor. The nearest modern village is Salkhiyyah. However, small collections of modern dwellings and farm lands are located close to the site.

The walls an area of approximately 70 hectares. These are comprised of a heavily fortified wall on the west side which runs between a ravine (wadi) on the north side and another ravine on the south side. The distance between the two wadis measures approximately 800m. The edges of the ravines were also fortified as was the top of the cliff along the river bank to the east. This created a settlement enclosed by walls on each side which used the natural terrain to great advantage. The extensive archaeology conducted at Dura Europos provides evidence for the city's long and complex existence over 550 years from the early Seleucid period to the mid-third century AD under the Romans.

Apart from the foundations of the city walls the most significant Seleucid remains at Dura Europos are temple foundations. The impact of later Parthian and Roman occupation of the site has resulted in relatively little from the Seleucid period surviving. With the decline in Seleucid strength in the eastern Mediterranean at the hands of Roman and Parthian expansion, Dura Europos came under Parthian control towards the end of the second century BC. The emphasis on Dura as a defensive site appears to have declined in the early period of Parthian control only to be revived towards the end of the first century BC. Pompey's arrival in Syria in 65 BC created greater potential for conflict between Rome and Parthia in the whole region while the Roman arrival in Syria also saw the rise in importance of the trading kingdom of Palmyra. Both of these developments were reflected at Dura Europos following a settlement between Augustus and Phraates IV of Parthia in 19 BC. Dura Europos became the closest Parthian fortification on the Euphrates to the boundary between the two empires in the region of the middle Euphrates as it was drawn at the Khabur river. The evidence from

22 This has been deduced mostly on the basis of numismatic evidence. See Belliger, A. R. (1949) The Excavations at Dura-Europos Final Report V: The Coins New Haven, 20
Dura Europos suggests that the walls underwent a major renovation at this time with a Parthian superstructure built on Hellenistic foundations and the substantial remodeling of the main gate (Palmyrene gate) in the west wall.23

Relatively little is known of the Parthian period of occupation at Dura Europos.24 Significant temple construction along the west wall from the last decades of the first century BC to the middle of the first century AD suggests increased prosperity at Dura Europos during this period which is related to the growing impact of Palmyrene trade on the life of the city. Part of the surviving perimeter walls together with construction and enlargement of some of the temples are the most significant Parthian remains. Some graffiti, inscriptions, green-glazed Parthian ware pottery, papyri and Parthian coins were also found at the site as were the remains of some large private dwellings.

The period of which most is known at Dura Europos dates from the Roman occupation beginning in AD 164/5. The Romans had occupied Dura Europos briefly following the Parthian campaigns of the emperor Trajan in AD 114-117. The scattered remains of a triumphal arch dedicated to Trajan are all that remain of this brief period of Roman occupation and they lie approximately 500m west of the city. The campaigns of Lucius Verus in the mid-160s throughout Syria and Mesopotamia saw cities such as Dura Europos and Nisibis in Mesopotamia captured and retained by Rome. The emphasis on Dura Europos as a defensive city increased significantly during the Roman period as it became Rome’s military centre on the middle Euphrates. The city’s defences were strengthened and a permanent Roman garrison, cohors XV Palmyrenorum, was established in the city by the end of the second century AD. Some of Dura’s most famous buildings such as the Synagogue, the Christian house and the Palace of the Dux Ripae (Commander of the River Bank) were constructed or enlarged during the third century AD. The presence of the Dux Ripae, a unique office in the Roman empire, suggests that Dura Europos was also the key intelligence gathering centre on the middle Euphrates.

The bulk of the garrison at Dura Europos comprised the cohors XV Palmyrenorum, of which the numerous parchments and papyri discovered at

23 During the various construction and renovation phases of the walls is notoriously difficult and has been the subject of much debate since von Gerkan’s initial survey in Provinz. Rep. 7/8 (1979) 235-6 summarised the likely chronology of the walls and the arguments surrounding this difficult issue.
security, providing numerous opportunities to check those entering and leaving and limiting the ability for rapid movement of large numbers of individuals or for the gate to be rushed by an enemy force.

The crests of the north and south wadies were also fortified with walls and towers. However, they were not as large as the west wall and its towers. The north wall has only four known towers, the largest of which is tower 2. The south wall contains eight remaining towers and a postern gate between towers 13 and 14. Tower 10 is of particular interest as it is pentagonal in shape. None of the towers or the gate of the east wall have survived and very little of the city’s east wall remains due largely to the eroding effect of the Euphrates.

Siege evidence

Evidence for the final siege of Dura Europos in 257 comes almost entirely from the west wall. A glacis constructed at various stages against the external face of the wall still covers most of what remains of the desert side of the wall. The embankment constructed against the internal face of the wall was excavated by Yale University in the 1930s. Both of these features were designed to limit the effects of mining the walls and towers. The embankment was constructed in a number of stages and engulfed many of the buildings in the immediate vicinity of the wall, preserving paintings and architectural details on their walls in the process. Fragmentary remains of mud brick extensions to the tops of the west wall were also found.

Towers 14 and 19 provided extensive details of the Sassanian mining operations designed to weaken the towers and walls by which entrance to the city would be gained. The mining activity appears to have failed in this respect and the Sassanians constructed a siege ramp against curtain 14-15. This is the probable means by which the Persians entered the city. The evidence for the Sassanian siege of Dura Europos has provided the clearest evidence to date of Sassanian Persian technical knowledge and application of sophisticated siege techniques.


City Plan

The plan of Dura Europos is based largely on the formation of grids with streets running east-west lined up from the towers of the west wall (see map). There are approximately ten streets running on a north-south axis which make roughly 90 individual occupation blocks (insulae). The grid system breaks down towards the river as a shallow wadi runs in front of the citadel palace. The widest street in the city is that which runs from the Palmyrene Gate and has been termed Main Street. It was clearly the city’s main thoroughfare. The grid plan of Dura Europos is Greek (Hippodamian) in style and is thought to originate from the founding of the city.

Some prominent features of the city plan are the Agora, the citadel palace and the Roman army camp. The Agora is located at blocks G1, G2, G3, and G4. It occupies the centre of the city’s plan and is adjacent to Main Street. The Agora dates from the Hellenistic period and is typically located in terms of Greek city planning. The eastern section of Dura Europos is dominated by
the imposing citadel palace. The citadel palace was probably constructed late in the Seleucid period although von Gerkan thought that it was Parthian. It survives only partially as a result of river erosion on its eastern side. The citadel palace was clearly designed to oversee the whole city.

The Roman army camp in the north-west of the city occupied a substantial area from the beginning of the third century AD. Bloxums E1 to E9 and blocks 11 to 18 were occupied by the garrison when a thick mud brick wall was built to close the military quarters off from the rest of the city. The camp included buildings such as the tribunal’s house, the Temple of Azzanathkhon which acted as the headquarters of cohors XX Palmyrenorum, the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods, the praetorium and a bath complex.

Visiting Dura Europos

Visiting the site of Dura Europos today is not easily accomplished as Deir ez-Zor, the only settlement large enough to offer accommodation, is 85 km to the north-east. It is best to arrive at the site as early as possible in the morning as the condition of the roads is poor and it is not advisable to drive on them after dark. Thanks to Norman Ricker’s being a relatively fluent Arabic-speak, the team was able to hire a car and the resulting mobility gave us longer access to the site than is normally possible to those scholars who are not part of the current Mission Franco-Syrienne working at Dura. The remote location of Dura Europos in modern Syria is reflective of its location in antiquity. From the late Seleucid period through to the periods of Parthian and Roman occupation, Dura was in remote and marginal territory. The site is guarded today by an elderly man brandishing a rifle who rides around the site on a motorbike collecting visitors’ fees. Much of our work at the sites we visited in Syria involved familiarising ourselves with the surrounding terrain and closely inspecting the sites. We returned with over one thousand photographs and slides used for teaching purposes and in the development of the Macquarie Roman East website (http://online.mq.edu.au/pub/AHISTEP). As we took so many photographs at Dura, one of us was bailiffed up in tower 14 by the site guard and asked to pay a special fee. On the basis of the archaeology, tower 14 had witnessed some of the heaviest fighting during the siege of 257. It seemed best to accede to this demand rather than make a further contribution to the tower’s already bloody history.

Besides photographing and recording our preliminary findings at the middle Euphrates sites and at the many other sites we visited in Syria, an important aspect of the visit was to establish contacts with research teams active in continuing excavation and conservation of the sites. Visits to the sites were also important to our later development of the Roman East website which assists in both research and teaching on the history and archaeology of the Roman East (see below). Further to visiting the sites themselves, it was also important to visit the numerous museums in Syria. Most important to us in terms of the middle Euphrates, particularly Dura Europos, were the National Museum of Syria in Damascus and the regional museum at Deir ez-Zor. Following the excavations at Dura Europos in the 1920s and 1930s, many of the larger artefacts and significant wall paintings were sent to Yale University and the Louvre in Paris. The paintings from the Christian house church together with the entire Mithraeum were sent to Yale. Syria retained some of the significant finds including the paintings from the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods and the Synagogue. These are exhibited in the National Museum at Damascus where the Synagogue paintings have their own purpose-built room. The authors have also travelled to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut to see the Mithraeum, Christian house church paintings and some of the numbering over 7,000 individual items. It is a great pleasure to record our thanks to Dr Susan Matheson the Curator of Ancient Art at Yale University Art Gallery for the kind hospitality shown to us on separate visits to the Gallery.

The Foundation of Dura Europos and the Seleucid Period

‘Dura, the city of Niclar’, says Isidore of Charax - a geographer of the Roman period who came from a Greek city in the Persian Gulf, ‘(is) a Macedonian foundation which the Greeks call Europos’.

This is one of only two references to the site in classical sources. The other comes from the late Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus who claimed that Dura was in ruins when the Roman expeditionary force under the Emperor Julian passed it on 6 April 363, over a century after its capture by the Persians.

According to Malalas, Nicolar was a nephew of Seleucus I Nicator while Piny the Elder claimed that Nicolar was governor of Mesopotamia under his uncle and the founder of cities.

C. Bradford Welles – the papyrologist who edited the documents recovered from Dura – believed that Seleucus I Nicator was honoured as the official founder of the city in a papyrus document from the site where he read the phrase ‘In the colony of Europes of Seleucus Nicator’. The reading is problematic however, other evidence from Dura Europos appears to confirm that while Nicolar was the practical founder of

29 Ammianus Marcellinus, XXII. 5. 8.
30 Malalas, 198. 6–9; Piny the Elder, Natural History, v. 117.
31 P Dura 32, lines 4–5.
the city, his uncle Seleucus I Nicator was honoured as its official founder Seleucus Nicator was a well known figure in Greek colonisation and a dedicatory relief of AD 159 from Dura shows the protecting god of the house of the Seleucids, Zeus Olympios, as Tyche of Dura dressed in a Greek military commander’s uniform. It seems that the Greek population of the city looked to Seleucus Nicator as their founding patron and his name also occurs in (Palmynene) Aramaic: abn apgrn in a temple to the God.\textsuperscript{32}

The choice of the site of Dura Europos reflects some of the major criteria of the Seleucid kings for founding a colony. They needed sites which were naturally defensible (Dura is a Semitic word meaning ‘fort’), with their own water supply and surrounded by fertile land which could be worked by inhabitants. As described by Michael Rostovtzeff:

Dura Europos stood in a position of great natural strength, on a rocky plateau overhanging the Euphrates and flanked by two deep ravines. It was surrounded by strong walls of stone with a superstructure of mud bricks pierced by three monumental gates and including a citadel on the river front.\textsuperscript{33}

The city, as Rostovtzeff further indicated, was situated at a vital point for military and commercial traffic between upper and lower Mesopotamia. In addition to its importance as a trade centre Dura also had the advantage of being surrounded by fertile territory. This was divided into allotments (kerai) which were distributed among the Macedonian settlers. The documents from later Seleucid and Roman times indicate that the kerai in the vicinity of the city provided their owners with healthy crops of cereals, grapes and fruits.

While soldiers worked land from which they could derive an adequate livelihood, commanders wanted to be landlords and owners of large estates. The Greek city with its democratic institutions was a safeguard for smallholders and the Seleucid kings made sure that larger grants of land to their trusted friends were made in connection with urban communities to forestall the growth of independent kingdoms.

As Cummont recognised, and as the archaeological investigations have confirmed, the plan and initial layout of the defensive walls date back to the founding of the town.\textsuperscript{34} The division of the civic area into rectangular trivulue and the running through of the main east-west road, going from the

\textsuperscript{32} In Dura 30 p 17
\textsuperscript{34} Hopkins (1979) 235-6; Cummont (1922-3) 22

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Palmyrene gate, correspond to the system of Hippodamos. This demonstrates that Dura is a typical example of a Macedonian town founded in the east in common with many cities in Asia Minor and Syria. The imposing city walls with their towers and the presence of a citadel overlooking the city are classic features of Hellenistic fortifications. Besides the citadel a second fortress, the ‘re doublé’, was built on a height in the eastern part of the town above a valley running north-south through the town; this contained a Hellenistic palace and in the south a temple, probably of Zeus Olympios, and is thought to have been the seat of the strategos of Dura.\textsuperscript{35}

The Parthian Period

Dura was occupied by the Parthians by the end of the second century BC.\textsuperscript{36} The Parthians came from a region south of the Caspian Sea and they exploited the disunity of the Greeks, especially the rivalry between the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria, to extend their influence westwards until the Euphrates was reached towards the end of the second century BC. The first 100 years of Parthian rule at Dura are virtually unknown to us. However, from the late first century BC for almost 200 years the city in its wider context of the Parthian empire is known to us from some surviving records. The parchments and the legal documents which they preserve show that Dura was a type of capital of the middle Euphrates which the Parthians designated as the Satrapy of Paropamis. They show that Greek was still the most important language of administration and law and that Greek civic life continued unabated. The numismatic evidence shows that despite Parthian control, the main supply of silver and bronze coins continued to come from Roman controlled Antioch.

The documents supply names of important Parthian officials but there is no mention of a Parthian garrison. The aristocracy of the city was predominantly Graeco-Macedonian with an admixture of Semites and Parthians. Archaeology has shown that Dura was prosperous under the Parthians. Some luxurious buildings were erected by rich citizens as well as a large number of temples. Temples to Greek gods such as Zeus and Artemis continued to be used and were enlarged during the Parthian period but others which had Iranian and Semitic origins were well established. Of particular importance was a group of deities imported from the city of Palmyra - an indication of the close link between the two cities.

\textsuperscript{35} Hopkins (1979) 252-3
\textsuperscript{36} As noted above (at note 22) this dating is largely based on numismatic evidence
The decisive defeat of M Licinius Crassus by the Parthians at Carrhae in northern Mesopotamia in 53 BC halted the seemingly inexorable expansion of Roman power in this region. The Euphrates became in the following century the effective frontier between the Roman and Parthian empires. In fact the main basis of Dura’s economic prosperity in the period of Romano-Parthian confrontation rested on its position as the meeting point of the oasis route to Palmyra and the Euphrates valley. Trade routes ran from China across the Pamirs to Mesopotamia and it was from cities like Dura and Palmyra that these trade routes then entered the Roman Empire. There were also active maritime links with India via the Persian Gulf and this trade also travelled inland up the Euphrates via Dura into Syria and Armenia.

The Roman Period

Some of the most significant evidence from Dura Europos comes from the period of the Roman occupation of the city. Of particular importance is the evidence from the Sassanian siege and the military importance of Dura to the Romans in the first half of the third century. The significant strengthening of the walls, towers and gates of the city following its capture in 165 together with the establishment of the Roman garrison is evidence of the wider military activity undertaken and that projected by successive Roman emperors. This investment at Dura was part of the original aggressive approach taken by the Romans on the middle Euphrates. Dura eventually became an important centre for defence and providing early warnings of troop movements following the Sassanian Persian revolution and the increasing attacks made on what had become Roman provincial territory in Mesopotamia.

Along with frontier cities like Edessa and Nisibis, Dura had been briefly captured from the Parthians earlier in the second century by the victorious troops of Trajan in AD 115. Trajan occupied the city temporarily but deserted it and most of his territorial gains before his rule. Dura’s role in the protection of its territory before the policies of his rule. Dura’s role in the protection of its territory before the policies of Antioch and other rich Syrian cities became a poor choice as a front-line of defence for the Romans. The Romans had to establish bases as far down the Euphrates as possible in order to slow or halt invasions up the Euphrates. Recent excavation has shown that as part of this strategy a base was established by the end of the second century at Kifrin, further down the Euphrates from the city.

Dura[37] The evidence of the Dura papyri shows that the city supplied detachments of troops to smaller fortifications and watch posts such as Kifrin from as far as west as Barbalissos, approximately 180km west-north-west of the Khabur to Kifrin, approximately 20km south-east of Anatha. The outposts further down the Euphrates were not part of a linear defence but acted as the eyes and ears of the Empire and the trip-wire in the event of a full-scale invasion. The establishment of a senior command post, that of the Dux Ripae at Dura who had control of transportation on that part of the Euphrates by the beginning of the third century AD, confirms Dura’s importance in Rome’s frontier defence and intelligence gathering.

The ineffectiveness of the Euphrates as a frontier-barrier was amply demonstrated in the successful campaigns of the Persian king Shapur I against the Romans. In his ‘first’ campaign Shapur I defeated the invading army of Gordian III at Mithyle in the lower Euphrates in 244 - a site which he renamed Piroshhabur (‘the victorious Shapur’ = Arabic: al-Anbar). Following this, Shapur launched an attack along the Euphrates in 252 which saw many Syrian cities fall, including Antioch. Shapur referred to this as his second ‘campaign’ but it was in reality a series of campaigns. In a smaller campaign which followed that of 252, Dura Europos was captured after a fiercely contested siege in 257.

Building Activities during the Roman Occupation

Some of the most significant construction during the Roman period was related to the military presence at the fortress. The Roman camp enclosed an area of the city and occupied roughly 15 blocks of houses. In the eastern section of the camp this included the praetorium, baths and amphitheatre while to the west was the Mitraeum and the Temple of the Palmyrene gods.

By the third century the Roman garrison at Dura was composed primarily of the cohors XX Palmyrenorum supported by detachments from other army units which arrived at the city from time to time. The cohort’s strength in the third century was, on the basis of the papyri, between 1000 and 1200 at any one time. On the basis of epigraphic evidence, numerous legionary detachments ( vexillations) were also present at the city during the third century. They were often present for specific purposes. Soldiers from IV Scythica and XVI Flavia Firma remodelled the Dura Mitraeum in AD 209.[38]

[38] SC 18 lines 5-8
211 In AD 216, detachments from IV Scythica and III Cyrenaica erected a small amphitheatre. Detachments from both of these legions were present at Dura a number of times during the third century. The discovery at Dura of a large number of papyri in the temple of Azzanatha (mentioned above) relating to military administration has given important insights into local relationships and the inner workings of the Roman army.

The conversion of the city into a fortress and Roman colony brought in many new citizens. In this respect Dura Europos reflected the cultural diversity of the middle Euphrates in the third century C. Bradford Welles has admirably pointed out that this is attested by a sudden influx of new names in the city's graffiti. These names were not only Latin but also Semitic, Levantine and Iranian, reflecting the mixed racial composition of the Roman army and traders. With the grant of Roman citizenship by the Emperor Caracalla in 212, many citizens adopted the Emperor's praenomen of Aurelius as evidenced by a sudden burst of Aurelii and Aureliae on the graffiti. Many of the soldiers' names which appear on the rosters of the cohors XX Palmyrenorum also show evidence of this. The Graeco-Macedonian aristocracy which had flourished at Dura under the Parthians vanished in a short time after the Roman occupation. They might have merged with the newcomers or the native population or, as Welles surmised, they might have migrated to areas under Parthian control.

The fall of the city

The Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus noted that Dura was a deserted city at the time of the ill-fated Persian expedition of Julian the Apostate in AD 363. Not long after the French excavation team arrived under the leadership of Franz Cumont in 1922, the excavators found evidence that the city had been fortified to withstand a major siege. The discovery in 1936-39 by scholars from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago of the bilingual inscription of the Sasanian King Shapur I at the so-called Ka'aba of Zoroastier at Naqsh-e-Rusum, north of Persepolis in Iran, confirmed the capture of the city by Shapur's second campaign against the Roman empire.

And the Caesar (Philip II) tried again and did injustice to Armenia. We (11) marched against the Roman Empire and annihilated a Roman army of 60,000 men at Barbalissos. The nation of Syria and whatever nations and plains that were above it, we set on fire and devastated (12) and laid waste. And in that campaign <we took> (the following) fortresses and cities from the nation of the Romans: the

city of Arzaba with its surrounding territory >ByRT'qum or BYRT'keum with its surrounding territory< Bethran in Asperates with its surrounding territory>(13) - Sura, - Barbaralisos, - Hierapolis, - Beeroa, - Chaldea, - Apamea, (14) - Rephaeal, - Zeugma, - Carrimis, - Gindarios, - Larnaca (15) - Seleucia, - Antioch, - Cyprus, - another city by the name of Seleucia, - Alexandria, (16) - Nicopolis, - Sinuza, - Chamath, - Ariste, - Dikhor, (17) - Dolche, - Doara (sic), - Circeum, - Germenica, - Bama, - Chunar; (18) and from Cappadocia the city of Satala with its surrounding territory, - Domana, - Arrangli, - Souisis, (19) - Phraeta, a total of thirty-seven cities with their surrounding territories (trans. S. Lieu)42

Dura appears to have been captured as part of a secondary invasion as it appears late in the order in which the cities were captured. This is confirmed by the fact that the Sasanian invasion of Syria began in 252 and the archaeological evidence from Dura shows that it cannot have fallen prior to 257. The first main assault up the Euphrates from modern Anbar occurs, therefore, to have bypassed the city. Realising that their opponents were well equipped for siege warfare, the Roman defenders built massive embankments both in front of and behind the curtain walls to forestall tunnelling by the enemy. In doing so they reclaimed all the public buildings and private houses adjacent to parts of the walls. The remains of such buildings (including many places of worship) were subsequently buried under the defensive embankment and turned into a human-made archaeological site. Despite all of these efforts, the city fell to the Persians and was not inhabited thereafter - the population probably transferred to another part of the Persian Empire. It is little wonder that Dura was termed by Rostovtzeff as the 'Pompeii of the Desert' in that both cities were frozen in time - one by a natural and the other by a human catastrophe.

The Preliminary and Final Reports

The monograph of James Bredst, Oriental Forerunners of Byzantine Painting (Chicago UP, 1924), which resulted from his visit, constituted the first major report on the discovery and identification of the site as well as the result of his one-day archaeological activity at the site. The hand-painted colour photographs reproduced in the book remain our main photographic evidence of the paintings from the temple of the Palmyrene gods discovered by the British troops; they were later destroyed, before proper excavation could begin. The results of the excavations were organised by the French

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42 S. Lieu, 'Dura Europos', in Goodspeed, The Cambridge Ancient History, 32.1, 2002, p. 29
43 Potter, D. S. (1990) Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire. Oxford: 291-6 argues that a date of AD 252 is the most likely for the beginning of Shapur I's second invasion.
Academy des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres and were published in two volumes (including a volume of plates) by Franz Cumont (1922-23). These included texts (and sometimes) translations into French of all the Greek and Latin inscriptions but not those in semantic languages. These were later published in a separate monograph and a long article by Comte R. du Mesnil de Buisson (1939 and 1959). From 1928 onwards, Yale University became the dominant financial contributor to the excavations with the Yale team under the direction of Clark Hopkins taking over the task of publication of the excavation reports. Altogether eight volumes of Preliminary Reports (see under Prelim Rep in bibliography) were published (the last volume is in three parts) covering nine seasons of work from 1928-1936. The official account of the tenth season which was directed by Frank Brown was not published until 1992 by Susan Matheson (see also bibliography). In the same journal, Susan Downey also published the notes by Brown on the Citadel Palace. The Final Reports of the excavations have been published in slow intervals since 1949. For the historians, the most relevant volumes are those on the coins by Bellingen (1949), the parchments and papyri by Welles (1959), the Synagogue by Kraeling (1956) and the Christian Building also by Kraeling (1967). The final report on the Mithraeum by Cumont (1975) was not published in the series (see bibliography for references to all of these works). The hundreds of inscriptions in Greek, Latin, Palmyrene, Sabaean and Middle Iranian were published as they were discovered by the preliminary reports but the final report may now never appear. An important long article by Frye and others (1955) includes texts of many inscriptions not in the preliminary reports as well as revised texts of some which are. The final report on armor and weapons by Simon James who has already published a number of important articles on the subject (1986 and 1997) will represent Final Report VII which is due for publication in September 2003. A major study on the fortifications, especially as they were discovered by the stone-mason’s perspective is currently being completed by a member of the Mission Franco-Syrienne.

Conclusion

The discovery and subsequent excavation of Dura Europos was and still is a major international archaeological project. The architectural and defensive remains have yielded significant information regarding many aspects of Dura Europos itself and activity in the ancient Near East on a wider scale. The evidence for the final siege of the city and the desperate defensive efforts is unique. Set in the time frame of the mid-third century AD, the evidence is crucial to the history of Romano-Sassanian relations.

The evidence from the numerous religious buildings is also very important. The discovery and subsequent publication of the Synagogue and the Christian house church sparked significant scholarly and public interest which continues. The contribution of these two discoveries to our knowledge of Judaism and early Christianity in the Roman East is important and unique. The numerous Graeco-Roman and semi-tic temples also provide vital information from a period of significant religious pluralism in the Roman East. The paintings found on the walls of the religious buildings have also been important to our understanding of the history of Near Eastern and Byzantine art.

While these discoveries have provided significant evidence for larger scale issues from the Hellenistic to the Roman periods in the Near East, it is in the thousands of smaller and more obscure finds at Dura Europos that daily life at the site gradually comes into focus. These include magnificent pieces such as decorative wooden shields and skillfully made protective horse mail, together with coins of the emperor Valerian found in the pockets of long dead tunnellers attempting to bring down the city walls. Notable also is a small oil lamp bearing a simple relief of a camel being led across the desert by its travel weary owner - a portrait of thelifetime by which a caravan city survived.

The site of Dura Europos has proven to be one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the last century. When excavation commenced at the site in the 1920s, no one could have predicted the extent of the discoveries which would occur over the next 15 years and beyond. The discoveries at Dura Europos have been significant for numerous fields of study in ancient history and archaeology from the Hellenistic to the Roman periods in the Near East. From religious to military history, numismatics and art history, Dura Europos has provided a large volume of evidence - much of it yet to be interpreted.
Photographs

1. The Euphrates River at Zalehiyeh looking to the fortress of Zenobia

2. The fortress of Zenobia from the river frontage

3. View from the top of Zenobia looking south

4. The west wall of Dura Europos from the remains of the arch of Trajan
5 The Euphrates River at Dura Europos from the south-west corner of the city

6 The external glacis and excavated Wall Street from the top and ground level of the west wall at Dura Europos

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The Christians in the Later Roman Empire*  
A.M. Nobbs  

Teachers who specialize in this section of the HSC Ancient History Syllabus will find that as well as the usual literary texts there are considerable numbers of papyri from Egypt which throw a different and often complementary light on the literary evidence. These papyri also illuminate the way the Christianization of Egypt in the Later Roman Empire affected the lives of ordinary citizens, whereas the literary evidence tends to come from those who were educated and literate.

This documentary evidence from Egypt has been found progressively from the late-nineteenth century, sometimes in rubbish dumps (for example at Oxyrhynchus) or in other incidental discoveries. Their usefulness to the historian comes from the fact that they were not deliberately written for posterity as, for example was the case with poetry and history.

An abundance of public documents such as legal documents, wills, petitions, accounts etc has been found, but it is a couple of centuries into the Christian era before a Christian presence begins to be registered in them.

It has been suggested by way of explanation of this late appearance that prior to this time, Christians and their affairs were too unusual or unimportant to be publicly identified as such, while after Decius (c. 250 AD) their position was too inflammatory to be treated within the ordinary routines of public life. Yet a similar apparent reticence applies in many of the private letters and documents. Many argue that this absence could hardly have been due to fear of disclosure (as sometimes thought), since in the villages especially, there could be no secrets about one’s life-style. One may simply assume that in the ordinary circumstances of life, private as well as public, there was no convention requiring people to identify themselves explicitly as Christian.

In fact, prior to the third century, there is no certain trace of a Christian presence in the public (or even private) documents from Egypt. It is attested however by the growing number of fragments of earlier Christian literary.

*This article reflects work done over many years by a team of researchers at Macquarie University, preparing for a publication to be called Papyri from the Christianisation of Egypt (forthcoming c. 2006: Cambridge University Press). Many have worked on this project: the current team consists of E A Judge, A.M. Nobbs, B F Harris, S R Picketing, R E E Cook, M. Chiari & D C Barker, with advisory help from others.

1 A few are readily available in English editions, and are not introduced here.