

BMCR 2015.01.34

Hatra. Politics, Culture and Religion between Parthia and Rome. *Oriens et Occidens* – Band 21

Lucinda Dirven, *Hatra. Politics, Culture and Religion between Parthia and Rome. Oriens et Occidens – Band 21*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013. 363. ISBN 9783515104128 €42.00.

Review by

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[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

In the collective imagination of modern scholars, Hatra, the ancient city in the al-Jazira region of Iraq, symbolizes the resistance to Roman power par excellence. Three Roman attempts to conquer Hatra by siege are known (under Trajan, Septimius Severus and Lucius Verus), all of which failed. Later, between 240 and 241 AD, the city surrendered to the Sasanians, but only after two attacks and a long siege. The Hatrenes were deported, and their city was abandoned and never occupied again. Grandiose archaeological monuments testify to its wealth and attract, now as in the past, the attention of archaeologists, historians and travellers. The first fieldwork, conducted by Walter Andrae beginning in 1906, recorded all visible remains. Excavations and restoration work started in the 1950s under the direction of Fuad Safar and Muhammad Ali Mustafa and have been continued by other Iraqi archaeologists until recently. Between 1987 and 2002 the Great Temenos, the tombs and some domestic buildings were excavated by an Italian mission led by Roberta Venco Ricciardi. A Polish team coordinated by Michal Gawlikowski contributed to the investigations of the ancient city walls in 1990. All these works have produced a large amount of data, greatly enhancing our knowledge of a city that in the literary sources appears only at the dawn of the 2nd century AD. Still, much work remains to be done on the history of this settlement and its political and cultural evolution. As the editor of the present volume explains in a clear and useful introduction, an overview of the Iraqi excavations is still missing and the few publications of the finds can be difficult to access.

This collection of papers from a colloquium held at the University of Amsterdam in 2009 assesses the present status of the research and identifies profitable directions for future work in this important Mesopotamian settlement. Certainly, this goal has been reached and we should congratulate Dirven for offering a book which is

informative, stimulating and pleasant to read. Seventeen essays, written by specialists in the field, are divided in three sections: “Between Parthia and Rome”, “The City and its Remains”, “Culture and Religion on the Crossroads”. A rich bibliography and 77 figures of very fine quality close the volume. There is no index, but finding references to ancient and modern sources is not hard because of the very specific subject of each paper and the convenient format of the footnotes. The editing of the book is generally accurate.¹

Due to space constraints, I will remark only on a couple of general points of the volume that demand comment and I will focus on a few issues that have attracted my personal interest. The most striking aspect, which cannot escape the reader’s attention, is the controversy of some reconstructions of Hatra’s position in the politics and economy of the Romano-Parthian Near East. Hauser considers Hatra an ally of the Parthian empire, a view that is shared by Sommer, Gregoratti and others, but refused by Isaac, for whom Hatra belonged to the Roman Empire in the 2nd and 3rd century. Gregoratti and Gawlikowski are convinced that after Trajan’s attack Hatra was favoured by the Parthian king because of the city’s resistance against Rome. The change in the title of Hatrene rulers (from “lord” to “king”) was one of these privileges and it is an indication of a greater level of independence granted to the city. This conclusion, already advanced by Teixidor, Segal and Pennacchietti,² is questioned by de Jong, who points out that these shifts in titles are not uncommon in the Parthian empire and are usually connected with services rendered to the king. Similarly Kaizer warns us of oversimplification and easy associations: the change from a system of lordship into that of kingship and the increasing wealth of Hatra in the 2nd century are not necessarily connected. Kaizer invites to look at the hinterland of Hatra to understand the origin of the city’s prosperity, an opinion which is not shared by other contributors, for example, Gawlikowski who considers Hatra “a sacred city, grown around a sanctuary in a neighbourhood that, while provided reasonably well with water, could not support a stable agricultural exploitation” (p. 74).

The political alignment of the city after the Sasanian defeat is also unclear: three Latin dedications show the presence of Roman soldiers at Hatra between 235 and 238, suggesting to most contributors a cooperation between this city and Rome at the time. On the contrary, Hauser believes that the Roman presence was temporary and sees no compelling evidence to consider Hatra a dependent ally of Rome.

Even the extension of the city and of its sacred area before the expansion of the 2nd century AD are a matter for discussion. A 3 m thick mudbrick wall (MC), running almost parallel to a later stone wall with semi-circular pillars (MP), was found by the Italian team in the careful excavations of the Great Iwan and convincingly explained by Ricciardi, Peruzzetto and Valentini as part of an earlier temenos enclosure. On the other hand, Gawlikowski has proposed a different reconstruction: despite some differences, the mudbrick wall and the remains of the walls uncovered by the Polish mission on the south of the Great Iwan belong to the same defensive system, which he dates to the 1st century AD.

The editor presents these and other divergences in interpretation in the Introduction: “no attempt has been made to cover these up. On the contrary, they are brought to the fore because they show us the way forward concerning future research”. For specialists these differences are stimulating, almost entertaining; for a less experienced reader, however, they might be confusing, because they often concern crucial issues. It can be a bit puzzling to find a section called “Between Parthia and Rome” and to read the learned contribution of de Jong which shows how it is “historically misleading to think of Hatra as a city between Rome and Parthia” (p. 143). The evidence collected by de Jong shows how much Hatra participated in the Parthian culture and was integrated into what he labels the “Parthian Commonwealth”. One must conclude that the editor is only partially convinced by de Jong’s arguments, which also deal with the application of the notions of “independence” and “indigenoussness” to the history of Hatra.

The volume is suitable for specialists or graduate students, who should understand the difficulties of investigating sites with limited literary documentation. For a good overview and analysis of the literary sources I suggest the article of Sommer, who adopts a three-sided perspective (Roman, Parthian, local) to understand Hatra’s political role. The importance of epigraphic evidence for reconstructing the social and cultural background of Hatra becomes apparent when we turn to the articles of Yon and Gregoratti. In both articles Hatrene and Palmyrene inscriptions are compared for similarities (for example the “tribal” component in the two cities) and differences (for example the establishment of kingship at Hatra, the existence of civic institutions based on a Greek model at Palmyra, etc.). Particularly instructive is the paper of Stefan Hauser, which sums up many years of fruitful researches in the field. Hauser leads us back to the final siege of Hatra. Thanks to satellite images and aerial photographs taken in the 1950s, Hauser and David Tucker have been able to identify the remains of the elaborate siege system, consisting of long contravallation walls and a circumvallation connected to a massive camp (unfortunately no plates or figures illustrate the article). An attentive analysis of the archaeological evidence and a close comparison with Graeco-Roman and Arabic literary sources have allowed Hauser to assign the works to the Sasanians and to cast light on the political situation of Hatra and Mesopotamia in general in the 230s.

The list of papers which deserve to be read is long, and I am sure that in such a rich selection every reader will find many articles that interest him or her. The volume should be included in every serious academic library, because it offers the most updated overview on the history of a fascinating ancient city, lying at the crossroad of different cultures, in an area which is now, as in the past, tormented by cruel wars.

Authors and Titles

B. Isaac: Against Rome and Persia. From success to destruction

M. Sommer: Hatra between Rome and Iran

L. Gregoratti: Hatra: on the West of the East

- T. Kaizer: Questions and problems concerning the sudden appearance of material culture of Hatra in the first centuries CE
- M. Gawlikowski: The development of the city of Hatra
- R. Venco Ricciardi / A. Peruzzetto: The ancient phases of the great sanctuary at Hatra
- K. Jakubiak: A note on the inscriptions and architectural decorations from the small temples in Hatra
- H. B. al-Aswad: New discoveries in Temple XIV in Hatra
- S. Downey: Clothed statuettes of Heracles from Hatra
- S. R. Hauser: On the significance of the final siege of Hatra
- A. de Jong: Hatra and the Parthian Commonwealth
- J.-B. Yon: Hatra and Palmyra: the monumentalization of public space
- K. Dijkstra: Does Gorgo harm us? About the interpretation of H106
- A. Kropp: The iconography of Nabu at Hatra in the context of Syrian cult images
- J. Tubach: The triad of Hatra
- S. James: Roman Partho-Sasanian martial interactions: testimony of a cheekpiece from Hatra and its parallels
- S. Winkelmann: The weapons of Hatra as reflection of interregional contacts

Notes

1. I spotted the following mistakes and inconsistencies: the name Maqym at p. 113 is missing in the translation; the hyphenation in Kaizer's contribution is sometimes wrong; p. 149, *philhellēnos* is the genitive of the adjective, not the nominative, which is obviously *philhellēn*; the paper of James contains a typo in the main title: "maritial" for "martial". Rehm 1941 and Fowler 2005 are missing from the Bibliography; in Winter 1987 "sasanidisch-römisch" is wrongly spelled; no figure 51 appears in the Plates, but there are two figures 52 (the first of which is clearly 51, see List of figures at p. 312).
2. J. Teixidor, "The kingdom of Adiabene and Hatra", *Berytus* 17 (1967-1968), pp. 1-11; J.B. Segal, "Arabs at Hatra and the Vicinity: Marginalia on new Aramaic Texts", *JSS* 31 (1986), pp. 57-80; F.A. Pennacchietti, "Tre note di epigrafia hatrena", *Mesopotamia* 23 (1988), pp. 43-61.