

O • N • E

Origins

A Culture of Encounter and Contact

Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, a Semitic language that is most notably related to Hebrew and Arabic but which is more precisely part of the Northwest Semitic language group. The culture that is known as “Syriac” is the heir to a millennium of Aramaic culture and history. The fact that the Syriac language can be known as *suryāyā* (the adjectival form of “Syrian” in the old sense), *arāmāyā* (formed from “Aramean”), or *urhāyā* (formed from the Aramaic name of Edessa, Urhay) shows the complexity of identity and self-definition within this culture.

Aramaic Origins

The first known mention of the Arameans dates from 1111 BC and is found in the annals of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I. The record mentions a campaign led in that year by the Assyrian army against the “Ahlamu-Arameans,” in the region between the Ḥabur and the Euphrates in the northeast of modern-day Syria, as well as the region beyond the river in the Syrian plain north of Palmyra, known as Jabal Bishri. These Arameans are descendants of the Amorites who lived in Syria in the second millennium BC, rather than being new arrivals as had long been thought. The records of the Assyrian kings mention several towns

but no fortifications or sieges. This suggests that at the end of the second millennium, the Aramaic population was living in a tribal society and leading the kind of semi-nomadic life that had become widespread in the area since the end of the Bronze Age empires around 1200 BC.

THE ARAMAIC KINGDOMS

At the beginning of the first millennium, Aramaic tribes organized themselves into small kingdoms along the arc of the Fertile Crescent, from the southwest of Syria (the kingdom of Damascus), to the north-east in the region of the Ḥabur. They developed towns, an architectural and artistic style that already showed a culture of intermixture and contact, and notably a strong Neo-Hittite influence.

INSCRIPTION OF ZAKKUR

The stele that Zakkur, king of Ḥamath and Lu'aš, has set up for Ilu-Wēr [his god]. I am Zakkur, king of Ḥamath and Lu'aš. I was an oppressed man, but Baal Shamain [delivered] me and stood by me, and Baal Shamain made me king in Hazrak. Now Bar-Hadad, the son of Hazael, king of Aram, united against me se[ven]teen kings. Bar-Hadad and his army, Bar-Gūš and his army . . . they were with their armies. And all these kings set up a bulwark against Hazrak and they erected a wall higher than the wall of Hazrak and they dug a moat deeper than its moat. But I lifted up my hands to Baal Shamain and Baal Shamain answered me. And Baal Shamain spoke to me through seers and through messengers. And Baal Shamain said to me: "Do not fear, for I made you king, and I shall stand with you, and I shall deliver you from all these kings who have raised a bulwark against you."

INSCRIPTION OF TELL FEKHERIYE

The figure of Hadad-yis'i, which he placed before Hadad of Sikkān, water controller of heaven and earth, who brings down prosperity, and provides pasture and watering place for all the lands, and provides water-supply and jugs to all the gods his



Inscription of Zakkur: a basalt stele found at Afis, not far from Aleppo in Syria. Dated to the end of the 9th century BC. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

brothers, water controller of all the rivers, who makes all the lands luxuriant, the merciful god to whom praying is sweet, who dwells in Sikkān, the great lord, the lord of Hadad-yis'i, king of Gozān, son of Sasnūrī, king of Gozān, for enlivening his soul, and for lengthening his days, and for multiplying his years, and for safeguarding his house, and for safeguarding his offspring, and for safeguarding his people, and for removing illness from him, and that his prayer may be heard, and that the utterance of his mouth may be acceptable, he set [it] up and gave to him.

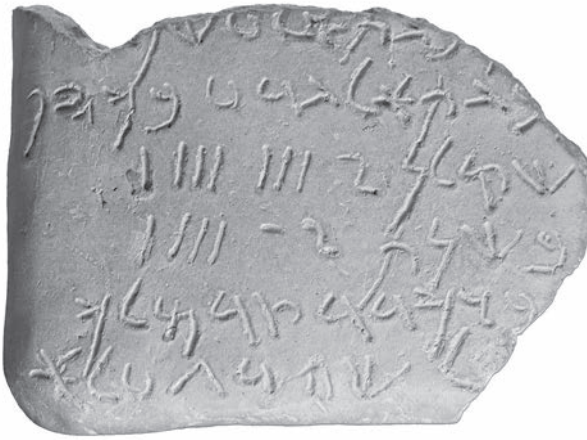
The oldest Aramaic inscriptions date to the 9th century BC. The script is a linear alphabet often described as Phoenician, but which was common to all West Semitic peoples at this time. These are royal

inscriptions, either commemorative or dedicatory, which can be identified chronologically by their connection with the history of Israel or Assyria; for example, the inscription of the king of Ḥamath and Lu'ash, Zakkur, mentions the war waged against him by the king of Damascus, Bar Hadad, who is also referenced in the book of Kings under the Hebrew name of Ben Hadad in the context of his siege of the Israelite capital of Samaria (2 Kgs. 6:24). In the inscription, Zakkur calls on the aid of his god, Baal Shamin, who speaks to him by the mediation of seers and prophets. The pressure of these first Assyrian campaigns caused the Arameans to gather themselves together into kingdoms and principalities, but these kingdoms were progressively subdued and then annexed during the 9th and 8th centuries BC. However, their rulers were sometimes left on the throne as Assyrian governors, as shown, for example, in the inscription on the statue of Hadad-yis'i discovered at Tell Fekheriye. By 720 BC, all of Syria had been integrated into the Assyrian Empire.

THE SPREAD OF THE ARAMAIC LANGUAGE

If the political history of the Arameans more or less stops there after only a brief existence, the same cannot be said for Aramaic cultural history; the Assyrian conquest, far from breaking Aramaic culture, was undoubtedly the driving force that caused it to spread. The usual practice of the Assyrians during their conquests was to deport important figures from the local population. This was partly meant to prevent resistance after the conquest by breaking local solidarity but was also a way to bring specialized labor to the capital or other places in need of development. The book of Kings in the Bible, for example, mentions how the Assyrians deported the inhabitants of the kingdom of Samaria into their empire. As a result, this practice spread the Aramaic-speaking population across the Near East. Arameans found a place in the administration of the Assyrian Empire at all levels, including the very highest ones. The empire became bilingual, speaking both Assyrian and Aramaic, and employed two scripts (using both the logo-syllabic cuneiform writing system and a linear alphabetic script).

By the 7th century BC, Aramaic was already the *lingua franca* of the people of the Near East, as shown by the instance where Hezekiah,



Tablet inscribed in Aramaic from around 570 BC. It is dated to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (r. ca. 605–562 BC). © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Raphaël Chipault / Art Resource, NY.

the king of Judah, wanted to conduct negotiations in Aramaic with the commander leading the Assyrian army that besieged Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 18:26). At the same time, Mesopotamian culture increasingly became part of Syria.

This mixed culture produced the oldest text in Aramaic literature, *The Story and Wisdom of Aḥiqar*, the story of an Assyrian notable of Aramaic origins, a minister at the court of the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. Aḥiqar was betrayed by his nephew Nadin, dismissed by the king, and finally rehabilitated, following a literary motif that was already well known in the ancient world. Preserved in a papyrus from the 5th century BC found in Elephantine in Egypt, this text consists of two independent parts, assembled later and written in two slightly different dialects. The first part consists of wisdom proverbs in a classical Aramaic dialect, doubtless a remnant of traditional Aramaic culture, while the second is the story itself, in an Aramaic style full of Assyrian influences. The reach of *The Story and Wisdom of Aḥiqar* was considerable. It was integrated into Jewish culture (there is a reference to it in the biblical book of Tobit) and, most likely through the Jewish

community of Edessa, entered Aramaic Christian culture. There are five extant Syriac versions, forming the basis of an Armenian version (itself the foundation of later Georgian and Old Turkic versions) as well as Arabic versions, which would be the root of an Ethiopic adaptation. Versions of the story in modern Syriac depend on both Classical Syriac and Arabic. The story of Aḥiqar also passed into European culture, where it was adapted in the first century in Greek as the life of the fable-writer Aesop and then translated into French by La Fontaine in the 17th century.

*THE STORY OF AḤIQAR, ACCORDING TO
THE ARAMAIC VERSION*

The account of the words of the one named Aḥiqar, a wise and expert scribe who taught the son of his sister after he had prayed to god and had said, “May I have a son?”

The beginning of his words: I am Aḥiqar, and I dwelt in the Gate of the Palace, in the house of the seal [bearer] of Sennacherib, king of Assyria. And I said, “I have no children to give my home or my words to.” [Now] Sennacherib was king of Assyria. After Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, had died, I served the one named Esarhaddon, his son. And he was king in Assyria; he replaced Sennacherib, his father. [. . .] old . . . So I took my nephew. And I said, “He shall be my son. At my death he will bury me.” And I taught him wisdom.

*THE WISDOM OF AḤIQAR, ACCORDING TO THE
ARAMAIC VERSION: FROM THE MAXIMS OF WISDOM*

My son, do not damn the day until you see night. Do not let it come into your mind that in every place their eyes and their ears are near your mouth. Watch yourself; let it not be their prey. More than all watchfulness watch your mouth and over what you heard harden your heart. For a bird is a word and he who sends it forth is a person of no heart . . . Do not cover (= ignore) the word of a king; let it be healing for your heart. Soft is the speech of a king, yet it is sharper and mightier than a double-edged knife. See before

you a hard thing: against the face of a king, do not stand. His rage is swifter than lightning. You, watch yourself. Let him not show it because of your sayings lest you die not in your days. See the good of a king. If something is commanded to you, it is a burning fire. Hurry, do it. Do not kindle it against you and do not cover your palms. Moreover, do the word of the king with heat/delight of the heart. How can wood contest with fire, flesh with knife, man with king?

After the Assyrian period, Aramaic continued to spread widely. The Persian conquest of the Near East (including the taking of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC) gave a new impetus to the spread and influence of Aramaic. From Egypt to Uzbekistan and from Anatolia to northern India, the administration of the Persian Empire was conducted not in Persian but in Aramaic: for instance, a recently published administrative archive of Aramaic documents recorded on leather and wooden rods recounts the administration of Bactria by the Persian satrap.

During this period, Aramaic became the language in which people wrote—the language of culture, different from the local dialects that they spoke, a phenomenon that remained one of the characteristics of the Syriac world much later.



Rod of wood inscribed in Aramaic, from Bactria, third year of Darius III, 333 BC. It acted as an accounting tool, with numbers being marked by its notches. Khalili Collection.

ARAMAIC AND GREEK

If the Near East was already in contact with Greek merchants and Greek culture very early on, the Greco-Macedonian conquest (333–331 BC) truly made it part of the Greek world. Greek gradually replaced Aramaic as the language of power, administration, and culture, and became the language spoken both by elites and by a large part of the population. The dialect of Greek from this period is known as *koine*, or the common language of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Aramaic barely appears in documents dating from the Hellenistic period, except in the Jewish world (for instance, certain passages of the Bible are written in Aramaic) or in the regions on the edge of the Hellenistic world, such as the Caucasus, Iran, and India. Around 300 BC, the emperor Ashoka, who founded the first empire in India and was a convert to Buddhism, wrote inscriptions in several languages, including Aramaic.

Only at the end of the Hellenistic period, during the weakening of the Seleucid Empire, would Aramaic become visible again and new inscriptions be written. Although it had always been spoken, it had been eclipsed by Greek as the official language for writing and public display. Now it reappeared in different small kingdoms on the edge of the Roman world—Nabatea, Osroene (Edessa), Ḥatra—and, in the most unusual case, in a city within Roman territory as well, Palmyra.

In the Jewish world, inscriptions on ossuaries show the emergence of a style of writing known as “Square Hebrew,” deriving from Aramaic origins and still in use. Aramaic forms of the alphabet were used to engrave funerary inscriptions and votive offerings, along with other inscriptions relevant to political and local social life. On perishable material, such as papyrus or parchment, some contracts have been preserved. The written records from this period reveal forms of Aramaic that are very different from the unified language of the Achaemenid era, because there was no longer a government that could maintain a single written version of Aramaic or a political and administrative context that centralized the use of the language. As a result, Aramaic evolved, taking on different local and provincial characteristics in both written and spoken forms: for instance, the Nabatean dialect is markedly different from Palmyrene, from Edessan, from the Aramaic spoken in Ḥatra, or



The Spread of Aramaic in the Greek and Persian Eras

the Jewish Aramaic of Babylon or Palestine. Not only are their grammatical forms different, but also their writing, since each one developed its own alphabet.

Among these local forms of Aramaic, the one that would be destined for an extraordinary future is Edessan Aramaic, the dialect spoken in Edessa and in the kingdom of Osrhoene.

Edessa and Osrhoene

We know very little of the ancient history of Edessa, but it is most likely the same place as the town of Adma mentioned in cuneiform Assyrian sources in the 7th century BC. The Aramaic and Syriac documents that mention it give it the name of Urhay, which is the root of the Turkish name of Urfa and later, in 1984, Şanlıurfa, or “Glorious Urfa,” to celebrate the victory of the Turkish army over the French in 1920, who had occupied the area as part of their mandate in Syria.

GREEK FOUNDATION, ARAMAIC KINGDOM, AND ROMAN COLONY

Edessa, the center of Osrhoene, had been founded by the general Seleucus as a Greek city at the end of the 4th century BC (around 303 or 302) for Macedonian colonists from the army of Alexander the Great. In doing so, he was following a model that flourished across the Alexandrian Near East, from Seleucia and Antioch (named after their founders) to Apamea and Laodicea (named after their spouses). In this case, the Macedonian colonists who settled there thought that the land looked similar to their native Edessa in Macedonia; hence, the town was called Edessa. It was also known by the nickname Callirhoe, or “from the beautiful source,” in order to celebrate its water source, the river Daisan/Scyrto, which ran through the city and filled the pools that made up its water reserves.

Edessa flourished because of its location on the route that ran from Syria—and specifically one of the capitals of the kingdom, Antioch on the Orontes, near the Mediterranean—to the Tigris valley, where another capital stood, Seleucia on the Tigris. It is also connected to Birecik,



The Cradle of Syriac

an important point of passage on the Euphrates, as well as to a route going northward to Armenia. As a result, it was not just a strategic site to build a city but an important commercial stop as well.

THE CHRONICLE OF MICHAEL THE GREAT

After the Flood that took place in the days of Noah, King Nimrod, from among the sons of Canaan, built Urhoy and called it Ur, that is Quriat “city” in which the Chaldeans dwelled. Jacob of Edessa said about its destruction:

Concerning its destruction, we did not find who caused it, it is thought that it was destroyed during the time of Sennacherib who marched up against Jerusalem, and it remained desolate until the time of Alexander the Builder. Those who marched up with him from Macedonia rebuilt it and named it Edessa, that is the Beautiful One, after the name of their city in Macedonia, and for this reason, the Macedonian name was added to it. And on this account, the computation of years was carried from the beginning of [the reign of] Seleucus Nicator, because he rebuilt it. After three hundred years, Abgar son of Ma’nu, who believed in Christ, reigned in it. And after Abgar and his sons, it became part of the dominion of the Roman emperors who were still pagans, worshiping idols; it remained under their power for three hundred years. After King Constantine reigned, Christianity increased in it and great churches were built in it.

The Parthian Empire, founded in the 3rd century BC on the Iranian plateau, largely developed during the next century, gradually absorbing Seleucid territory through conquest until it included all the regions east of the Euphrates. Consequently, Edessa passed into Parthian control. It is within the bounds of this empire that the kingdom of Osroene first took shape sometime between 135 and 130 BC, beginning as a small vassal state led by rulers who are variously described as dynasts, phylarchs, or toparchs until around the 3rd century AD. Their succession can be traced both by their coinage and by the historical sources. They held lin-

guistically Arab names; a number of them are called Abgar, a name that would become famous in the Christian tradition, but they also include Wa'el, Ma'nu, and others.

The arrival of Rome in the area, beginning with the campaigns of Pompey, made Osrhoene the object of clashes between the Romans and the Parthians, because the kingdom was situated in a strategic zone, vulnerable to attack from both sides. The kings of Edessa, while always staying within the Parthian sphere, tried their best to navigate between the two empires and sometimes suffered serious consequences as a result. During the campaign of Trajan, Abgar VII, who first submitted and then revolted against Rome, was deposed in 118 and replaced by a king chosen by Rome. Four years later, another Abgarid regained power. Other, similar crises punctuated the 2nd century. In 166, following the campaigns of Lucius Verus in Mesopotamia, Edessa moved temporarily to the Roman side. In 193 the governor of Syria, Pescennius Niger, revolted against the Roman emperor Septimius Severus (r. 193–211) and was supported by the kingdoms of Osrhoene and Adiabene. Edessa came under siege and was captured by the troops of Severus, as commemorated in the triumphal arch in the Roman Forum. However, the king, Abgar VIII, managed to preserve the kingdom itself.

Edessa passed definitively into the Roman orbit at the beginning of the 3rd century. In 212–213 it became a Roman colony, even though its dynasty still played a role and despite a brief restoration of its kingship under Abgar X in 238–242. It stayed in the Eastern Roman Empire until its conquest by Arab-Islamic forces in 641, but only as a buffer province, vulnerable to Roman and Persian armies in each new war.

THE CITY AND ITS TERRITORIES

Without a written record, it is hard to know precisely what the urban landscape of Edessa looked like. The citadel of the city is still visible today, dominated by two Greek-style columns. The river that crosses the city, the Scyrto (literally, “the bound river”), or Daisan as it is known in Aramaic, frequently rises above its bed, resulting in deadly floods, as recounted in Syriac chronicles of the city. It was partly diverted by the emperor Justinian in the 6th century. The Callirhoe spring is still at the

base of the hill where the citadel was built. If one believes the *Teaching of Addai*, the archives were located in the center of the city, next to a large pagan temple.

EXCERPT FROM THE ANONYMOUS CHRONICLE OF
EDESSA UP TO 540: THE FLOOD OF AD 202

In the year 513 in the reign of [Septimius] Severus, and the reign of king Abgar, son of king Ma'nu, in the month of the latter Teshri [November], the spring of water that comes forth from the great palace of King Abgar the Great became abundant; and it rose abundantly as had been its wont previously and it became full and overflowed on all sides. The royal courtyards and porticoes and rooms began to be filled with water. When our lord king Abgar saw this, he went up a safe place on the hill, above his palace where the workmen of the royal works reside and dwell . . . The river Daisan came before the usual time and month . . . the waters broke down the western wall of the city and entered into the city. They destroyed the great and beautiful palace of our lord king and removed everything that was found in their path—the charming and beautiful buildings of the city, everything that was near the river to the south and north. They caused damage moreover to the nave of the church of the Christians . . . Maryhab, the son of Shemesh, and Qayuma, the son of Magartat, the scribes of Edessa, recorded this incident and the decree of King Abgar in writing. Bardin and Bulid, the administrators of the archives of Edessa, received them and deposited them in these archives in their capacity of city officials.

According to the famous account of the flood that took place in Edessa in 202, which is copied in the anonymous Syriac chronicle of 540 and which seems to have been stored in the city archives, the shops of the artisans were built along the river on the roads to the gate, which were lit at night with lanterns. The royal palace and the aristocratic houses were located not far away, while the poorest (beggars, palace servants) were located on the hill. The palace of the king was known as the *apadana*,

a Persian word that was also used for the palace of Darius at Persepolis. The names of certain quarters are mentioned in various chronicles of the city. A hippodrome and theater, indispensable parts of the ancient city, provided a venue for circus games and mime shows, respectively. A *tetrapylon* was located at the intersection of the two main avenues, and several doors in the walls gave access to the main roads.

Edessa was the capital of a kingdom, Osrhoene, whose borders are still unknown, but the distribution of inscriptions in Edessan Aramaic allows for some hypotheses. To the northwest, these inscriptions can be found up to the Euphrates, which for a long time marked the border between the Roman and Persian worlds. The two most ancient Edessan inscriptions put the western limits of Osrhoene on the Euphrates, and its southern limits in Serrin, in today's Syria, around AD 73, and Birecik, probably in AD 106. To the east, it stretched beyond the Balikh River, at least to Sumatar, where there are a good number of inscriptions, dedications, and epitaphs, but not up to the source of the Tigris, which was part of the territory of the city of Amida. To the south, it included Ḥarran and Tell Matin, also in Syria, where a small altar with an Edessan Aramaic inscription was found.

Edessan Culture: A Culture of Contact

Osrhoene was a cosmopolitan region. To the old Aramaic population of the region were added settlers from Greece, Macedonia, and Syria, along with their families. Merchants from Syria and Mesopotamia traveled there, carrying with them the ancient Assyro-Babylonian culture as well with the heritage of Parthian Persia. The area east of Edessa, around Sumatar Harabesi, was inhabited by semi-nomadic or only recently sedentarized Arabs. The Edessan inscriptions that are found in that region mention several notables who have the title ŠLYT' D'RB, or "governor of the Arabs," which one also finds in the inscriptions of Ḥatra. Strabo describes Arab Scenites—literally, "those who live in tents"—in Upper Mesopotamia. It is perhaps to this group that the Edessan dynasts—who, as mentioned above, bore Arab names—belonged. This situation explains where Edessa drew the originality and

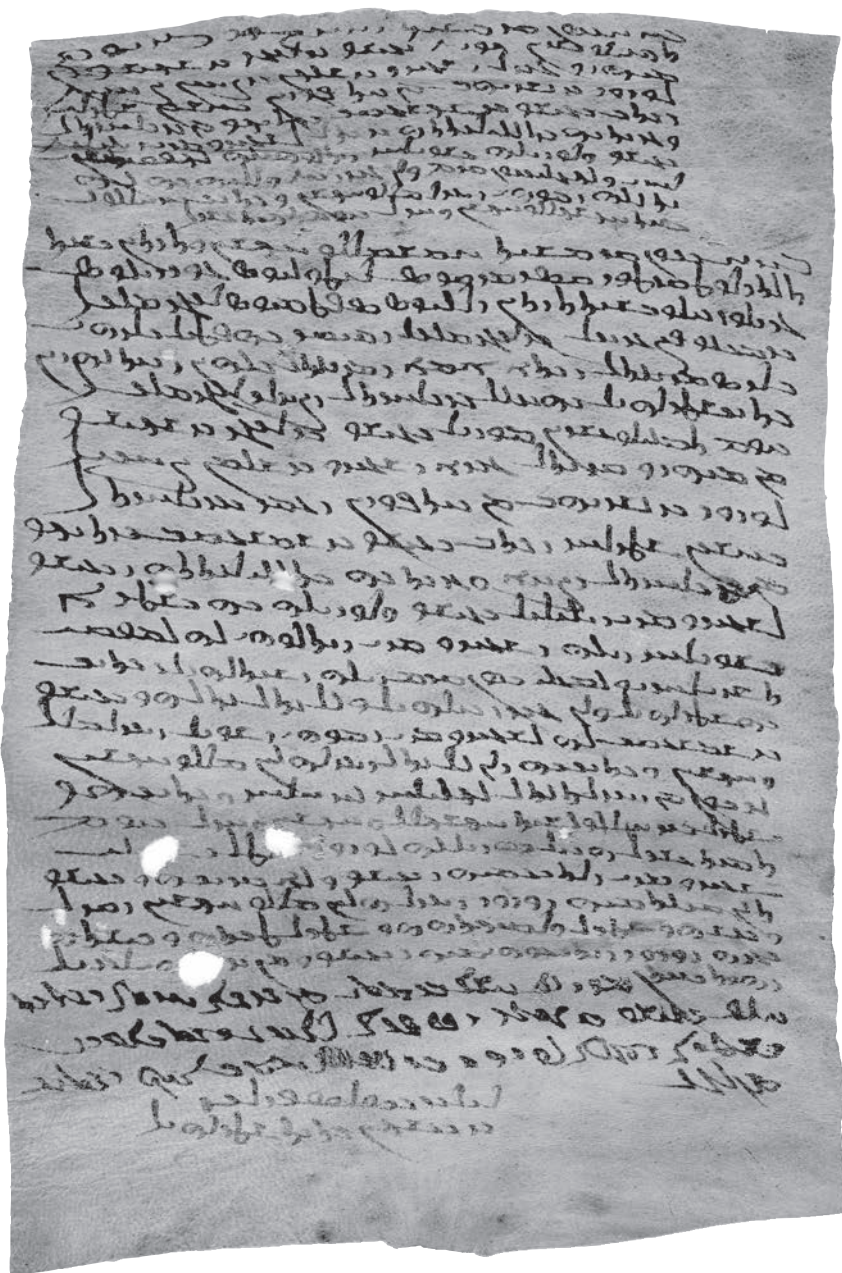
richness of its cosmopolitan character. The use of Greek and Aramaic languages is closely entangled in this region, and the two languages can be found together in inscriptions and civic texts. But we should also note the Mesopotamian, Jewish, Arab, and Persian influences in Edessa. From the Parthian Empire, Persian words relating to administrative and civic culture entered into the Syriac lexicon, including the words for the royal palace, ambassador, architect, and crown prince.

BEGINNING OF THE TEXT ON THE PARCHMENT
FOUND IN DURA-EUROPOS (AD 243)

In the year 6 of Autocrator Caesar Marcus Antonius Gordianus Eusebes Eutyches Sebastos, in the consulship of Annius Arrianus and of Cervonius Papus, in the month of Iyyar, the year five hundred and fifty-four in the former reckoning, and in the year thirty-one of the liberation of Antoniana Edessa the Glorious, Colonia, Metropolis Aurelia Alexandria . . . I, Marcia Aurelia Matar'ata daughter of Šamenbaraz son of Abgar, Edessene resident, I declare to Lucas Aurelius Tiro son of Barba'šamin, Ḥarranian, that I have received from him seven hundred denarii and I have sold Amatsin my female slave, purchased—she is aged twenty-eight years, more or less—from captivity . . .

HISTORY OF ABGAR AND JESUS
(*TEACHING OF ADDAI*)

As is the custom in the kingdom of King Abgar and in all kingdoms, everything which is said before him is written and placed among the records. Labubna, the son of Senaq the son of Abshadar, the scribe of the king, therefore, wrote the things concerning the Apostle Addai from the beginning to the end, while Ḥanan, the faithful archivist of the king, set the hand of witness and placed it among the records of the royal books, where the statutes and ordinances are placed. The matters belonging to those who buy and sell are also kept there with care and concern.



Parchment from the Euphrates (240 BC). It describes the transfer of a debt corresponding to a prior loan that the debtor had not repaid. With this document, the new creditor who had purchased the debt is claiming his due.

Below the text is the signature of two of the five witnesses (the other three signatures are on the back). The document is dated to the “consulate” of King Abgar of Edessa, the second year of his rule. Institut de Papyrologie de la Sorbonne, P.Euphr.Inv.19, *P Euphrate* 18. © Adam Bülow-Jacobsen.

ARCHIVAL PRACTICES

Most likely, the archival practices of the small kingdom of Osrhoene are the reason behind the development of the Edessan Aramaic alphabet. Administrative record-keeping had a prominent role in Edessan culture, influenced by older Aramaic and Mesopotamian practices that endured in the kingdom of Osrhoene and passed into the Syriac tradition. There were official scribes (*sephre*), which are mentioned in later commercial documents and literary texts. One famous parchment found in Dura Europos (P. Dura 28), dating to 243, contains a record of the sale of a slave by a woman from Edessa. It was written by one of the official Edessan scribes, under the supervision of the superintendent of the archives, where, according to the document, a copy would be deposited.

Besides a handful of documents from the Euphrates, the archives themselves were not preserved, but they are mentioned by the Greek historian Eusebius, the Armenian historian Movses Khorenats'i, and various Syriac texts. The Syriac Chronicle of 540, for instance, mentions that the royal edicts meant to prevent the flooding of the city were put into writing by a royal scribe and deposited in the archives. In the 3rd century, the archives were still functional. A quick, cursive form of chancery writing was taught to official scribes, probably in schools specially designated for their training.

These archives had an influence beyond writing and archival practices. Some texts mention the archives to give an air of authenticity to certain fictional stories: the *Teaching of Addai* claims that the history of the conversion of Edessa was deposited there, and the writers of the *Acts* of the martyrs of the city claim that their sources were stored there as well. By claiming that the archives preserved records of these accounts—or had preserved them at one time—the writers bolstered the credibility of their stories.

CULTS AND WORSHIP IN EDESSA

Pre-Christian religion and cultic worship in Edessa also show its mixed culture. The Mesopotamian deities Bel, the supreme god, and Nabu, the

god of writing, were probably at the top of the Edessan pantheon, which also included the god of the underworld, Nergal.

CULTS IN EDESSA (*TEACHING OF ADDAI*)

I see that this city is filled with paganism which is contrary to God. Who is this [man-] made idol Nebo which you worship, and Bel which you honor? Behold there are those among you who worship Bath Nical, like the inhabitants of Ḥaran your neighbors, and Taratha, like the inhabitants of Mabbug, and the Eagle, like the Arabs, and the sun and the moon, like the rest of the inhabitants of Haran who are like you.

Edessans also venerated the Syrian goddess Atargatis and the Aramean god Hadad, as well as the sun—under the name Shamash, which was common throughout the Semitic world—and the moon, under the name of the Mesopotamian god Sin, as well as under the name of the goddess Nikkal. Other gods included Azizos and Monimos, which we can recognize as the Arab divinities ‘Aziz and Mun‘im, or the planet Venus in the form of a morning and evening star, respectively. The expression “Lord of the gods” in these inscriptions generally refers to Baal Shamin, the “Master of Heaven” in the Aramaic pantheon, but, at least in one case, it refers to the Greek god Zeus.

One mosaic, known as the Marallahe, shows the adoption of Greek divinities but also the modes of thought that prevailed in the Roman world between Antioch and Alexandria in the 3rd century. It depicts five gods: the most important, enthroned on the right side of the mosaic, is Zeus, but the writing identifies him by the Aramaic title *mar allahe* (Lord of the gods). Next to him, the Greek name of his wife, Hera, is written in Aramaic letters, as is that of Prometheus and, most likely, Cosmos. Athena, although without a legend of her own, is easily recognizable to his left. Below him is a scene where Hermes puts a small winged soul into a body, just as a pair seems to emerge from the sleep of death, evoking themes from Neoplatonic philosophy. The Syriac letter of Mara Bar Serapion bears witness to the importance of Greek philosophical thought in Osroene; probably written between the 1st and



Edessan mosaic of Marallahe. © William A. Haseltine.

3rd century AD, it contains an exhortation from a father to a son to study Greek thought.

Judaism was also highly visible in Edessa, and the story of the *Teaching of Addai* shows the apostle staying at the house of a Jewish man named Tobit on his arrival in the city. Perhaps roughly 10 percent of the population of the city was Jewish at the beginning of the Christian era. Manichaeism, the religion created by Mani in the 3rd century AD in Mesopotamia, spread to Edessa as well and represented a rival to Christianity in its nascent forms. Various other groups, including the Quqites and the Bardaisanites, were excluded and labeled heretical by the grow-

ing consensus of official Christianity. When the Christians became the majority, they of course passed down only their own texts, but in the beginning Syriac was not only a Christian language in ancient Edessa but also the language of all these other religious groups, including the Jews (who contributed to the translation of the Old Testament version of the Peshiṭta, or Syriac Bible), polytheists (at least until the 9th century), and the Manichaeans, even if little remains of their writings.

ORNAMENTAL AND FUNERARY MOSAICS:
A MIRROR OF EDESSAN SOCIETY

As in the rest of Syria, mosaics were known in Edessa as part of the flourishing of Roman culture, but they also captured local artistic trends. Rich Edessans decorated their homes with lavish mosaics using the style—and probably the same materials and artisans as well—that originally came from Antioch, famous for this kind of work. The most spectacular, already mentioned, is the Marallahe mosaic. Another is a series of panels that would have decorated a reception area. It is made up of scenes depicting episodes from Homer: we see Achilles and Patroclus, Priam and Hecuba, Briseis with a servant, and, further on, Troilos, although the writing on these Greek images is entirely in Edessan Aramaic. These scenes show the influence of Greek culture through its most emblematic work, *The Iliad*, as does the Syriac translation of the *Hypomnemata* of Ambrosios, which mentions the same figures. A mosaic from another cycle shows Andromeda. Discovered in 2007, the mosaics of the palace of Haleplibahçe, part of Şanlıurfa where a new mosaic museum has been constructed, show the taste of aristocratic Edessans from the 3rd or 4th century with a string of Greek mythological motifs, featuring the queens of the Amazons, Hippolytus, Antiope, Melanippe, and Penthesilea, hunting, as well as episodes from the life of Achilles. There is also an exotic twist: an image of a black man dragging a zebra by a bridle.

If these images give a glimpse into a common culture, the art of the mosaic also saw developments original to Edessa. Among the most typical monuments of Edessan culture are funerary mosaics, both figurative and written, which decorate the tombs of rich nobles belonging



Edessan mosaic representing Achilles and Patroclus. Courtesy of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, Israel.

to the 3rd century. It is a form typical of Edessa, whereas in Palmyra and the Roman world of the East these inscriptions are always carved on stone and not on mosaic. A number of these mosaics represent a family group: the father and the founder of the tomb in the center, surrounded by his wife and children, each of whom are identified by their name and surname written in Edessan Aramaic by their heads. In certain cases, a more detailed inscription, placed in the frame, mentions the foundation of the tomb. The men generally wear a type of Parthian clothing, with large pleated pants, long tunics embroidered with elaborate motifs, as well as a beard and a Persian hat. The women wear a kind of robe close to classical dress, attached to the shoulders by fibulae, and often a very tall device covered by a veil. This kind of clothing was also worn by notables in Palmyra, where one also finds figural reliefs on tombstones. Other Edessans chose to decorate their tombstones not with a gallery of familial portraits but with motifs of Greek mythology tied to symbolism of death and life after death: two motifs representing Orpheus, the van-

quisher of the underworld, calming the animals with the sound of his lyre; another of the phoenix, the mythical bird that after death is born again from its ashes. In the absence of other evidence, it is impossible to say whether these suggestions of life after death come from pagans, Jews, or Christians. A very recent discovery of a funerary mosaic with a cross



Votive stele with two people in Parthian dress.
The accompanying inscription is in Greek. Photo by
Françoise Briquel Chatonnet.

but nonfigurative decorations shows that this last possibility should not be excluded.

The names of certain deceased persons are also mentioned on funerary steles in either Greek or Aramaic inscriptions: for instance, there is an inscription in Greek on a bas-relief featuring the deceased in Parthian clothing, showing the hybridity of this culture.

It was in this milieu of cultural interaction, bringing together multiple influences, that Aramaic, or Syriac, Christianity was born.