

## Citation style

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Rocco Palermo: *On the Edge of the Empires. North Mesopotamia during the Roman Period (2nd–4th c. CE)*. London/New York: Routledge 2019 (Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East). 288 p. £ 120.00. ISBN: 978-1-138-12013-6.

Since the 2005 monograph by Michael Sommer, recently appeared in a new updated edition,<sup>1</sup> and in connection with the renewed interest in the Roman Eastern border and the Parthian Empire, North Mesopotamia has enjoyed particular popularity among historians and academics. The appeal was stirred mainly by its recognized role of frontier region between the ‘Roman West’ and the ‘Parthian/Persian East’, an area where more than anywhere else, the geopolitical ambiguity would have triggered processes of cultural interaction generating interesting examples of hybridization. In this volume, an archaeologist who worked for years in the field and knows from experience the sites and the material culture of the region describes Upper Mesopotamia. Rocco Palermo provides with this book an archaeologically based description of North Mesopotamia and its people, a description that fits in marvellously with the historical approach by Sommer and the recent ancient geographical one by Hamish Cameron<sup>2</sup> integrating both, and at the same time bringing to the discussion new interesting elements.

The period taken into consideration spans three centuries, from the second to the fourth century AD. This choice is connected with the author’s aims at contextualizing and explaining through material culture the impact of the Roman presence in the area. In the volume, the processes of cultural hybridization of ethnic groups, religion and social institutions are studied starting from the land, looking through the territory for places where the cultural interaction took place effectively. According to the author’s approach, it is time to integrate literary and epigraphic sources recurring to the data gathered by looking at the material culture from these interaction areas. The phenomenon is easily spotted in major towns. Still, it is the

- 1 M. Sommer: *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze. Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian*. Stuttgart 2005 (Oriens et Occidens 9).
- 2 H. Cameron: *Making Mesopotamia: Geography and Empire in a Romano-Iranian Borderland*. Leiden/Boston 2019 (Impact of Empire 32). Cf. the review by T. Shahin in Plekos 22, 2020, 17–21, <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2020/r-cameron.pdf>.

countryside where most of the minor sites are unexcavated, which provides the key to understanding how deep the process of cultural permeation was and in what measure the Roman presence on the territory was recognizable.

On the geopolitical level, North Mesopotamia remained a contested area for centuries, where Rome and Parthia/Persia met and clashed. It was a 'grey zone' on political terms, a region where the ruling authorities in some periods like, for example, during the decades following Lucius Verus' Parthian War are not always clear to modern scholars. Furthermore, also its belonging to one or the other sphere of political influence is most of the time in doubt. In this context characterized by amalgamation between preclassical cultures, the Roman presence emerged from the mid-second century AD. It made its appearance both in the cities, nodal points for trade and movement of men, soldiers, and goods and on the countryside, moving along the communication lines which connected the major settlements. Unfortunately, cities like Nisibis, Singara and Rhesaina, regional administrative centres and military bases have provided limited archaeological data. Therefore, the minor centres come to play a relevant role in reconstructing the traits assumed by the processes of transmission of western culture in the region. It seems clear that the dichotomy between Roman culture and local one must be abandoned in favour of a more nuanced scenario where Roman presence modulates itself using local material culture, while the latter, already the result of a mix of previous cultural interactions, borrows elements from the newcomers. The transformed local culture comes then into the fore of the investigation, differently from what happens in other areas, especially in the western provinces, where the tracking of elements belonging to the Roman culture often plays the prominent role, relegating the local dimension to the background. Palermo takes into consideration both the major and minor settlements of the region, giving a look at their origin in the preclassical period, their function in Roman times and the interaction between local culture and western influences. He collocates them as much as possible into the surrounding rural landscape and in the settlement network.

The book is divided into a series of thematic chapters. After a short introduction dealing with methodology and previous studies, the author presents in detail the scenario, that is to say, the geographical and the environmental context of the region. Special attention is given to the landscape characteristics and to the climatic variabilities, which determined

variations in the ecological system through time. A summary of the historical events which affected the region between Trajan and the fourth century AD follows, which constitutes the historical context where the archaeological data must be collocated. The most relevant literary and epigraphic sources which shed light on the historical events are presented. Then the author moves into the ground. First, the role of the major settlements, cities and legion bases is explored. Minor settlements and military sites are then discussed with particular attention to the data the few excavated ones can provide concerning Roman presence in the area.

The contribution these settlements can offer to the general discussion is highlighted by the detailed analysis of a specific site: Tell Barri, in the Upper Khabur basin, a site where the author worked for many years and which he knows perfectly. The settlement was probably a regional administrative centre during the Parthian period (second/first century BC – second century AD) and underwent a series of radical transformations with the increasing Roman presence in Upper Mesopotamia. The site's relevance diminished until its final abandonment in the third century AD. Its material culture warns against a too hasty attribution of specific features to one or the other cultural and political horizon. At Tell Barri the material culture shows characteristics common to that of the other sites in the area, suggesting that its inhabitants belonged to the local Mesopotamian population and therefore produced local pottery. This argument is evident in the case of the attribution of the well-known and typical for the region, diamond stamped pottery, to a not better-defined area of 'Parthian influence' or 'Parthian material culture'. Palermo warns about such simplifications pointing out that such examples of material culture should be ascribed to the local cultural environment that existed independently from neighbouring macro powers even though indubitably influenced by them. He presents the main surveys that took place in the region in the past, highlighting the data they provided concerning population and settlement patterns' changes through the centuries.

An interesting section is dedicated to the *Tabula Peutingeriana* and its description of the road network of Upper Mesopotamia in the Roman period. The density of communication lines through which men, goods and armies moved demonstrated that the region was a key sector for the connection between the Mediterranean world and the East. Finally, a specific chapter is dedicated to the most elusive inhabitants of the land between the

rivers, the nomads, social groups occupying the interstices between states and as political entities themselves.

Palermo's book gives voice to the archaeologist and presents his approach and knowledge to the topic. It provides a good compendium of what the scholars working on the field and those working on material culture know while at the same time manages to clearly explain their methods and activity contextualizing the data they make available. For all these reasons, the volume should be welcome for any scholar working on Upper Mesopotamia. It constitutes a magnificent instrument for the historian, particularly to the one not familiar with the archaeological world and the material culture.

Being a historian myself, I feel compelled to mention about a few oversights that occurred in the historical sections. They mainly concern century dating, Arsacid Kings' numeration<sup>3</sup> and epigraphic catalogue references and I mention them only hoping to see them fixed in a potential second edition.

3 For example, two different Artabanus IV, Great King of Parthia, on pp. 72–73.

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