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ABGAR

ABGAR dynasty of Edessa, 2nd century B.C. to 3rd century A.D.

i. General

When the Seleucids withdrew from Mesopotamia in 130-29 B.C., Parthian hegemony there was virtually unchallenged. It was, however, exercised loosely; and a small number of principalities were able to acquire a fair degree of autonomy. The most important of these was Edessa.

The list of the kings of the dynasty may be reconstructed as follows (the early names and dates should be regarded with caution): Aryu, 132-127 B.C.; ʿAbdu, son of Maẓʿur, 127-120; Fradašt, son of Gebaṛʿu, 120-115; Bakru I, son of Fradašt, 115-112; Bakru II, son of Bakru, alone, 112-94; Bakru II and Maʿnu I, 94; Bakru II and Abgar I Piqa, 94-92; Abgar I, alone, 92-68; Abgar II, son of Abgar, 68-53; interregnum, 53-52; Maʿnu II, 52-34; Paqor, 34-29; Abgar III, 29-26; Abgar IV Sumaqa, 26-23; Maʿnu III Saflul, 23-4; Abgar V Ukkama, son of Maʿnu, 4 B.C.-A.D. 7; Maʿnu IV, son of Maʿnu, 7-13; Abgar V (second time), 13-50; Maʿnu V, son of Abgar, 50-57; Maʿnu VI, son of Abgar, 57-71; Abgar VI, son of

Maʿnu, 71-91; interregnum, 91-109; Abgar VII, son of Ezad, 109-16; interregnum, 116-18; Yalur (or Yalud) and Parthamaspat, 118-22; Parthamaspat alone, 122-23; Maʿnu VII, son of Ezad, 123-39; Maʿnu VIII, son of Maʿnu, 139-63; Waʾel, son of Sahru, 163-65; Maʿnu VIII (second time), 165-77; Abgar VIII the Great, son of Maʿnu, 177-212; Abgar IX Severus, son of Abgar, 212-14; Maʿnu IX, son of Abgar, 214-40; Abgar X Frahad, son of Maʿnu, 240-42.

The term “Abgar dynasty” is justified by the frequency of the name Abgar among the kings and by the special importance of the Abgar of the first and second centuries A.D. Armenian writers claim the rulers of Edessa as the Armenian successors of Abgar, son of Aršam, who transferred his capital to Edessa from Metsbin (Nisibis). There is little onomastic support for this theory. Some of the names are Iranian, others Arab (including Abgar itself; Moses of Xorene’s Armenian etymology as *awagayr*, “great man,” [tr. Da N. Tomaséo, *Storia de Mosè Corenese*, Venice, 1841, p. 146] is improbable). But most striking are the names terminating in *-u;* these are undoubtedly Nabatean. Many of the dynasty were therefore ethnically Arab, speaking a form of Aramaic (like the rulers of Hatra, Singara, and Mesene at this time).

ii. Historical Survey

The area of the kingdom was perhaps roughly coterminous with that of the Roman province of Osrhoene. The great loop of the Euphrates was a natural frontier to the north and west. In the south Batnae was capital of the semi-autonomous principality of Anthemusia until its annexation by Rome in A.D. 115. The eastern boundary is uncertain; it may have extended to Nisibis or even to Adiabene in the first century A.D. Ḥarrān, however, only 40 km south of Edessa, always maintained its independent status as a Roman *colonia*.

Edessa was a fortress of considerable strength, and a staging post both large and nearest to the Euphrates. It was an important road junction; an ancient highway, along which caravans carried merchandise from China and India to the West, met there a north-south road connecting the Armenian highlands with Antioch. Inevitably Edessa figured prominently on the international stage.

The first king of Edessa to appear in historical records was Abgar I, an ally of Tigranes of Armenia when he was defeated by the Roman Sextilius in 69 B.C. In Pompey’s settlement of the east, Abgar II was confirmed as ruler of this city. It was the same Abgar whom Roman historians (e.g., Plutarch *Crassus* 21-22

and Dio Cassius 40.20-23) denounced for his part in guiding Crassus to one of the most crushing defeats ever suffered by Roman arms—at the hands of the Parthians near Ḥarrān in 53 B.C. Whether Abgar was guilty of treachery may be doubted; according to a Syriac source, in fact, he lost his throne in the same year (Segal, *Edessa*, p. 12). This victory of the Parthians secured their supremacy in the region, and for the next two centuries the kings of Edessa were to favor the Parthians rather than Rome.

Abgar V Ukkama, famous in Christendom as the contemporary of Jesus (see below), was a member of a delegation that went to Zeugma in A.D. 49 to welcome Mehrdād, the Roman nominee to the throne of Parthia. The "dishonest" Abgar, Tacitus relates (*Annals* 12.12ff.), detained the prince "day after day in the town of Edessa," evidently pandering to the dissipation of the "inexperienced youth." Only when winter had set in did Abgar lead Mehrdād by a circuitous route through the mountains of Armenia. And before his protégé could put his challenge to the test of battle, the king of Edessa had abandoned him to certain defeat and capture by Gōdarz.

A later king of Edessa, Abgar VII, proved an equally unreliable ally of Rome. His envoys came to Trajan at Antioch in A.D. 114 with gifts and protestations of loyalty; they excused Abgar's delay on the grounds of his fear of Parthian reprisals (Dio Cassius 68.18f.). Yet only five years earlier, we are told, he had purchased his throne from Parthia for a large sum of money. Trajan was then entertained at Edessa and received from Abgar 250 horses and mailed horsemen, suits of armor and a store of arrows. Not only was Abgar confirmed in his kingdom; but, at his suggestion, the neighboring phylarch of Anthemusia, his rival, was deposed and his territory annexed to Rome. But no sooner had Trajan returned to the west after his capture of Ctesiphon than Edessa joined a general insurrection, massacring or expelling the Roman garrisons. The Romans exacted swift vengeance. Edessa was laid waste by fire and sword, and Abgar seems to have perished in the disorder.

Trajan's conquests in Mesopotamia were renounced by his successor, Hadrian. To the throne of Edessa, vacant for two years, was appointed a Parthian prince, Parthamaspat, whom the Romans had failed to install as ruler of Parthia. But the former dynasty of Edessa was apparently restored in A.D. 123 in the person of Maʿnu VII. A generation later, early in the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the Parthians resumed the offensive against Rome. The king of Edessa, Maʿnu VIII, was replaced by Waʾel, son of Sahru, who struck coins with the portrait of the king of Parthia. When a Roman army besieged Edessa

in 165, however, its citizens slaughtered the Parthian garrison and admitted the Romans. In the following year Maʿnu was reinstated as king with the epithet of Philorhomaios.

In 194, at a time of uncertainty over the succession of power at Rome, Abgar VIII (commonly called “the Great”) took an independent line; in the company of the king of Adiabene, he laid siege to Nisibis. Soon, however, “Abgar, king of the Persians” (*Life of Severus* 18.1) was worsted by Septimus Severus. The Romans first appointed a procurator in Osrhoene; then Abgar returned to his throne. The position had now changed, though imperceptibly, for Rome had established a firm control of western Mesopotamia. When the Parthians crossed the Tigris and besieged Nisibis, after the return of Severus to the west, Abgar withheld his support. He had adopted Roman names; and he identified himself with the Roman cause, giving his sons as hostages and offering the services of his archers. In return, after the defeat of the Parthians in 197-98, Osrhoene was declared a client state; and Rome recognized the status of Abgar as “king of kings.” He visited Rome some time after 204 and was accorded the most lavish reception given to a foreign potentate since the days of Nero.

For Edessa, however, the end of independence was near. Rome could no longer be content with indirect control of Osrhoene. Abgar Severus, successor of Abgar the Great, was seized and deposed by Caracalla, probably in 214, and Edessa was declared a *colonia*. Later rulers of the dynasty must have governed only in name; it appears that from 242 there was a Roman resident stationed in the city. The monarchy had ended. The last king of Edessa retired with his wife to Rome.

iii. Administration

The king of Edessa had certain prerogatives. He alone was entitled to wear a diadem with the tiara worn by noblemen, possibly also by the priests; he also carried a scepter. The local Syriac *Chronicle* (ed. Guidi, p. 3) describes him as residing in a “great and beautiful palace” (Syr. *ʾapadnā;* Parth. *ap(p)adān*, OPers. *appadāna*) “at the source of the springs” beside the pools of sacred fish (see below). After the flood of A.D. 201 it was rebuilt as a summer palace; a winter palace was then erected on the citadel mount nearby (where two columns still stand). After A.D. 88-89 the kings were buried in a great tomb tower reserved for them.

The regnal year of the king provided the official system of dating, side by side

with that of Roman emperors. The king maintained personal control of the military force of the state and of taxation. Abgar the Great's style of government was direct and paternalistic. He seems to have had his own confidants (Syr. *šarrīrē*), who included his secretary and keeper of the archives. He supervised personally the measures taken at the flood of 201; he forbade the building of booths near the river and ordered that artisans should not pass the night there in winter time.

The principal officer of the state after the king, the "second in the kingdom," had the title of *paṣgrībā* (Parth. *pasāgrīw*). From the Syriac inscription on a column we learn that Queen Šalmath, wife of Abgar (the Great?), was daughter of a *paṣgrībā* (Segal, *Edessa*, pl. 29a and p. 19; his head possibly appears on a coin). The nobleman who governed the marches east of Edessa occupied by the semi-nomad ʿArab was called, both in Greek and Syriac, "governor of the ʿArab" (*arabarchos*). The *nūhadrā* (Parth. *naxwadhār, noxadhār*) was probably of lower rank. In the time of Abgar the Great, the *nūhadrā* evidently controlled the city administration. Order was maintained in the city by the *gezīrāyē*, a term possibly of Iranian origin. City officials included surveyors and other experts. The king himself housed the workmen employed on the upkeep of the royal buildings. In the royal archives were preserved records of private transactions as well as of matters of state; they had a high reputation for accuracy.

By Roman historians the term phylarch is applied to members of the Abgar dynasty; the city was divided into districts allocated to phylae or clans, each administered by an archon. The king ruled through a council of elders. A description of Edessan chiefs as "those who sit with bended knees" may reflect the Parthian practice by which nobles squatted at court, but the Syriac text is not certain (G. Phillips, *The Doctrine of Addai the Apostle*, London, 1876, p. 5; Syr. text, line 15). The nobles of Edessa—called "great men" or "free men"—lived in mansions in the vicinity of the palace. Artisans formed an important category of the population; there is evidence for slaves in the latest period of the kingdom.

Outside the city were villages and farms, dependent economically on the city-dwellers and paying taxes to the royal treasury. In the uncultivated area beyond, like the Tektek mountains east of Edessa, lived the ʿArab governed by the *arabarchos*. One of his functions was to protect them against the Beduins (Syr. Ṭayyāyē, after the Arab tribe Ṭayy).

iv. Social and Cultural Life; Religion

Edessa under the monarchy was influenced by the civilizations of both East and West. The titles of officials, like their political sympathies, were Iranian; town planning and architecture were largely Hellenistic. While female costume was similar to that in the West, men's costume was distinctively Iranian. As in Parthia, elaborate headgear was a sign of rank. Edessan society was highly sophisticated. Clothes were heavily embroidered and gaily colored, and much jewelry was worn. The cave tombs outside the city walls were decorated with reliefs and mosaics. The royal summer palace had statues of the kings, and other statues still survive. There was a hippodrome and a winter bath. The Osrhoenians were celebrated for their archery, and we have a firsthand account of the skill at the sport of the son of Abgar the Great and of the philosopher Bardaiṣan (by Julius Africanus, ed. J. R. Vieillefond, *Fragments des Cestes,* Paris, 1932, pp. 49-50). The status of women was high, except in legal matters.

Edessans of this period were much interested in music and in literature, especially poetry and philosophy. Their language was Syriac, but a few funerary inscriptions survive written in a form of Palmyrene and in Hebrew and Greek. Toward the end of the second century, Greek began to gain ground among the upper class; and children were sent to be educated at Greek academies. The coinage carries legends in Greek. Significantly, however, on the coins of Waʾel, the pro-Parthian usurper (see above), Syriac is used. Bardaiṣan apparently knew no Greek, but his philosophical treatises follow Greek methods of exposition. All the contemporary writings that have reached our time are in Syriac.

Under the Abgar dynasty Edessans worshipped principally the sun, moon, and planets; this is reflected in the ritual depicted in reliefs and mosaics and in personal names. The crescent appeared on coins and, accompanied by stars, on the king's tiara. A central feature of the city were the pools of sacred fish that still survive, probably an emblem of fertility. An anonymous deity, Marilaha ("lord god"), is mentioned in dedicatory inscriptions at Edessa and at Sumatar Harabesi in the Tektek mountains. These inscriptions at Sumatar Harabesi, dated A.D. 165, refer also to a sacral pillar and stool (found too on coins of Waʾel) and a ceremonial meal; the same symbols are alluded to in an Elymaen inscription of the 1st-2nd century A.D. at Tang-e Sarvak (see Bivar and Shaked, "Shimbar," pp. 287-90).

Among members of the Jewish community at Edessa were merchants in silk. They were strongly pro-Parthian and resisted Trajan's army. The fame of Edessa in history rests, however, mainly on its claim to have been the first kingdom to adopt Christianity as its official religion. According to the legend current for centuries throughout the civilized world, Abgar Ukkama wrote to Jesus, inviting him to visit him at Edessa to heal him from sickness. In return he received the blessing of Jesus and subsequently was converted by the evangelist Addai. There is, however, no factual evidence for Christianity at Edessa before the reign of Abgar the Great, 150 years later. Scholars are generally agreed that the legend has confused the two Abgars. It cannot be proved that Abgar the Great adopted Christianity; but his friend Bardaiṣan was a heterodox Christian, and there was a church at Edessa in 201. It is testimony to the personality of Abgar the Great that he is credited by tradition with a leading role in the evangelization of Edessa.

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