



ABGAR II. HISTORICAL SURVEY

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 Ma’nu VII. A generation later, early in the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the Parthians resumed the offensive against Rome. The king of Edessa, Ma’nu VIII, was replaced by Wa’el, 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 Ma'nu was reinstated as king with the epithet of Philorhomaïos.

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.

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