



ABGAR IV. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE; RELIGION

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 Osrohenians 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 Bardaisan (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 Wa'el, the pro-Parthian usurper (see above), Syriac is used. Bardaisan 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 Wa'el) 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 Bardaisan 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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