



# DAMASCUS, ZOROASTRIANS AT

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**DAMASCUS**, Zoroastrians at. The earliest evidence for the presence of Zoroastrians at Damascus is provided by **Berossus**, who stated (Jacoby, *Fragmente* IIIC, frag. 65) that this was one of the cities of the Achaemenid empire at which **Artaxerxes II** (404-358 b.c.e.) had a statue set up for “Anaitis” (q.v.). “At” need mean no more than “near” (see Boyce and Grenet, pp. 203, 354), and the temple in which the statue was erected may well have stood outside the city by one of the streams flowing down from the Anti-Lebanon, the banks of which would have been a fit place for the worship of a river divinity. Its foundation there argues for the presence in this fertile and attractive region of a considerable body of Persian colonists, as does the fact that at the time of Alexander’s conquest this part of Syria was, exceptionally, under a Persian, not a native, governor (Jones, p. 234).

Subsequently Polyænus (4.15) tells of a ruse practiced by the Seleucid king **Antiochus I** in order to capture Damascus from a Ptoleimid force. This event could have taken place in 274 b.c.e. (Will, I, p. 147). Antiochus, who was himself half-Iranian by blood (his mother being the Bactrian noblewoman **Apamā**), and who had Iranian troops in his army, may be supposed to have been familiar with the major Zoroastrian festivals, one of which was evidently then due to take place. He accordingly ordered his army and the “whole countryside” to celebrate this “Persian” festival with the utmost lavishness. Hearing of the merrymaking, the Egyptian commander slackened his vigi-



lance, and Antiochus was able to surprise and take the city.

There is no evidence as to how long the Zoroastrian community maintained itself in and around Damascus, but in general descendants of Persian colonists in western lands of the former Achaemenid empire are known to have retained their ethnic identity and locally their religion down to the 3rd-4th centuries and in some regions even the 6th century c.e. (Boyce and Grenet, pp. 197-360, *passim*).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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(Mary Boyce)