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NISIBIS

NISIBIS, a city in northern Mesopotamia (Figure 1); later a major focus of military confrontations between the Roman and Sasanian Empires, and a renowned center of theological studies for the Church of the East (see CHRISTIANITY).

Early history. Nisibis is the Greek name for a city of great antiquity, sited in a plain below Mons Masius (the modern Tur Abdin) and on the river Jhagjhaga (Greek: Mygdonius). It was well-positioned along the main arteries of trade between Syria and the lands beyond the Tigris, and between Mesopotamia and Armenia. In Assyrian inscriptions *Na-si-bi-na* (root NSB) means “column” in the form *nesib*, and the first mention of Nisibis appears in the history of the campaign of the Assyrian King Adadnirari II (911-890 BCE) against the Aramaic tribes of Mesopotamia. In 899-897 BCE, the Mesopotamians skirted the Tur Abdin by a northern route and, without directly besieging Nisibis, were content with severing it from the rest of the country. In 899-897 BCE, Adadniran laid siege to Nisibis. Significantly, he had a moat dug all around the town and built seven base-camps – a tactic that would later be repeated by the Sasanians in their effort to capture the city from the Romans. The town was duly captured and Nour-Abad, the governor appointed by the King of Nisibis, was sent into captivity with his followers, while the Assyrians seized a rich haul of loot for themselves. Nisibis and its region were annexed by Assyria, but at the end of the reign of Salmanasar III (859-824 BCE), Nisibis rose up in revolt; however, the governor, who was a puppet of the king, remained loyal to him. At the time when the still powerful Assur was fighting Babylon, the

name of Nisibis disappears. Nonetheless, when the new kingdom of Babylon was founded, Nisibis was annexed to it. Its history in the Achaemenid period is a complete blank.

Antioch-in-Mygdonia. Nisibis came under the domination of the Greeks after Alexander's victories at Gaugamela in 331 BCE. At first re-attached to the Syrian satrapy, it later became part of the new Mesopotamian Satrapy. Pliny the Elder links the foundation of Nisibis to a general called Nicanor who was in charge of the administration of Mesopotamia (cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist*. VI.117). However, an inscription which is the tombstone of an Iberian prince in the service of the Romans, and dates from the High Empire (*CIG*, IV.6856), informs that he lays "beside the holy city, which Nicator built about the olive-nurturing stream of Mygdon." But, these two sources are not necessarily contradictory since Graeco-Macedonian elements were introduced gradually into the city. It is likely that in the first stage, a Macedonian garrison was installed in Nisibis by Nicanor, the general of Antigonus who was governor (*praefectus*) of Mesopotamia. But it was not until the reign of Seleucus I that the city possessed a sizeable Greek civilian population. (An identical combination of founder and re-founder is also noted in literary and epigraphical sources for Dura-Europos in Syria). It was under Seleucus that Nisibis became Antioch, a name by which it was known to Polybius (*Hist*. V.51.1), who in his account of the revolt of the Macedonian general Molon against the Seleucids in 223 BCE tells us that, after crossing the Euphrates, Antiochus stopped to allow his army to rest, then marched towards Antioch-in-Mygdonia to spend the winter there. It seems, therefore, that the valley of Nisibis bore the name of Mygdonia when the town had been re-named in honor of Antiochus IV, who passed for the founder of the new city as the coins of Nisibis are struck with his effigy. But the preponderance of Oriental elements in Greco-Macedonian property is evident in the history of Nisibis. The Greek population only appeared progressively in the Middle Eastern towns, and Greek names and Greek institutions only appeared there occasionally. Moreover, the Syriac language—a dialect of Aramaic—remained preponderant there, the Syrians constituting the most important part of the urban population.

Under Armenian, Parthian, and Early Roman rule. With the gradual shrinkage of Seleucid influence in Mesopotamia after the failure of Antiochus the Great's ventures against Rome and Parthia, Nisibis experienced the full force of the frequent political upheavals in this period because it was strategically situated at the meeting point of three contending spheres of political influence: Rome,

Armenia, and Parthia. According to Armenian sources, Arsaces VII Phraates, after he had defeated and killed Antiochus VII Sidetes in129 BCE, placed his brother Valarshak on the throne of Armenia, with Nisibis as his capital, and also granted him substantial adjoining territories in Syria and Anatolia (Moses Khor., I.8, trans. Thomson, pp. 81-82). Though this cannot readily be confirmed, the city, like Edessa, probably did come under Armenian rule, especially during the reign of Tigranes the Great (reigned *c*. BCE 100- *c*. 56). However, a cuneiform astrological text placed Nisibis within the Parthian sphere of influence *c*. 112 BCE (Cf. Kessler, 2000, p. 962). The city was briefly occupied by the Roman general Lucullus in 68 BCE after his defeat at the Battle of Tigranocerta the year before (Plutarch, *Lucullus* 32.4 and Cassius Dio, XXXVI.7.1-4). The Romans discovered that the city was populous and well defended by the governor and his general – a Greek by the name of Callimachus. The wide, double surrounding wall which encircled Nisibis was made of bricks, and between the walls there was a deep moat across which bridges were built in times of peace, and demolished in the event of a siege. Not surprisingly, Lucullus' first attempts at assault failed but he later succeeded on a moonless night; however, the first Roman occupation was exceedingly brief (Cf. Sturm, 1936, pp. 727-34 and Pigulevskaia, 1963, pp. 49-52).

The city was firmly under Parthian control in the first decades of the first century CE as it was given away by the Parthian king Artabanus III to Izates, the King of Adiabene, as reward for the latter's help in securing his throne (*c*. CE 36; cf. Josephus, *Ant*. XX.3.68). Thereafter, it became part of the Kingdom of Adiabene, a vassal of the Parthian King. The city featured in Corbulo's campaign in Armenia during the reign of Nero. In his march from Artaxata to Syria via Tigranocerta, he was said to have seized Nisibis (Joh. Lydus, *De Mag*. III.34), but this second Roman occupation was clearly of short duration. It had to wait for the successful Parthian campaign of Lucius Verus in 161-3 before Nisibis was once more brought within the Roman orbit (Lucian, *quomodo hist. conscrib. sit*, 15). A Roman garrison was probably installed to secure the important route from Edessa to the Tigris via Singara. In the civil war between Septimius Severus and Niger (the latter enjoyed the tacit support of the Parthians) in 195, Nisibis supported Severus and came under siege by the Osrhoeni and Adiabeni (Dio, *Reliq*. LXXVI.1). Severus himself relieved the siege after he had reduced Niger's stronghold at Byzantium and rewarded the citizens of Nisibis for their loyalty by elevating its status and appointing a knight as its governor. Numismatic evidence shows that the city was made a

colonia by CE 195-6, and Cassius Dio made a point of introducing the city with the words "now it belongs to us, being considered a colony of ours," in his account of Lucullus' campaign against Tigranes (XXXVI.6.1). The next two years saw the Parthians going on the offensive in Mesopotamia, exploiting Severus' preoccupation with his rival Albinus in the West. When Severus returned to the East in 197, he found Nisibis besieged by Parthians but also ably defended by Laetus (cf. Dio, *Reliq*. LXXVI.9.1-3. See also Herod. III.9.3 and SHA, *Severus* XV.2-3). The news of the approach of Roman reinforcements persuaded the Parthians to withdraw. The city might have been used by Severus as his headquarters for his Mesopotamian campaign and his unsuccessful siege of Hatra. His successor, Caracalla, was murdered somewhere between Edessa and Nisibis in CE 217, and it was near Nisibis that one of the last great battles between Rome and Parthia was fought when Caracalla's murderer and successor, Opelius Macrinus, took the field against Artabanus V, and was decisively defeated.

Like Edessa, Nisibis also possessed a large and well-respected Jewish community as well as being an early recipient of Christianity. Avircius Marcellus, Bishop of Hieropolis, noted the flourishing Christian community there and in the third century, Nisibis provided the city of Salona in the Balkans with a number of Christian bishops.

"The Shield of Empire." Twenty years after the Parthian victory at Nisibis, the city came under siege by the first Sasanian Šāhanšāh (King of Kings), Ardašir, after his failure to conquer Armenia (Zonaras XII.15). It was relieved by the Roman Emperor Severus Alexander (*c*. CE 233) after he had put down the rebellion of Uranius in Osrhoene (cf. Syncellus, *Chron*., p. 674.1-4). From then on the city was given the title of *metropolis* in addition to *colonia*. Its coins bear the legend of "Septimian colony at the metropolis of Nisibis" (cf. Head, *NH* ii, p. 815). Five years later, it was lost again to the Persians during the brief reign of Maximinus in 238 (Syncellus, *Chron*. p. 681.5-9). Gordian III re-conquered it after his victory at Rhesaina over Šāpur I (SHA *Gordian* 26.6 and 27.6). According to the treaty signed between Philip the Arab and Šāpur, Nisibis together with the rest of Upper Mesopotamia were left in Roman hands and to her official title was now added the name "Julian" to signify the honors bestowed on her by Philip whose full name was Julius Philippus (cf. Head, *NH* ii, p. 815).

The city was not listed in the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis* among those captured by Šāpur I in his second and third campaigns. However, our sources note that it

was brought under Roman control by Odaenathus, the prince of Palmyra, which suggests that at some point it was captured by the Sasanians or by Roman pretenders (SHA, *Gall*. 12.1 and *trig. tyr*. 15.3 and Zos. I.39.1). A tradition exists in Arabic sources which speaks of the capture of the city by Šāpur I whose forces entered the city through a crack in the wall (cf. Eutychius, *Annales*, ed. Pococke, pp. 379-83 and T'abari/Nöldeke, pp. 31-32). This last detail seems to have been derived from the famous incident of the collapse of the wall in the siege of 350, but there is sufficient independent evidence contained in these sources to suggest that the city was invested by Šāpur in his third campaign which began with an invasion of Mesopotamia by the Tigris route even if the manner of its fall is not clear. The same Arabic sources state that on capturing the city, Šāpur slew the Roman soldiers, enslaved the women and children and seized as booty great sums of money deposited there by the Roman emperor. The city might have fallen once more to the Persians in the campaign of Narses in CE 297 (Zon. XII.31). It was certainly reoccupied by the Romans after Galerius' great victory over the same Persian monarch in 298 (Petr. Pat., frag. 14, and Ps. Joshua Styl., *Chron*. 7). Under the treaty drawn up by Diocletian's envoy Sicorius and Narses, Nisibis was to become the only point of commercial and diplomatic exchange between the two empires. Narses was said to have dithered on this and his reason for this might be the restriction such a term would have placed on intelligence gathering by merchants and diplomats, since they would now be allowed only to examine the frontier defenses at one point rather than along its full length. The forty years' peace between the two empires (*c*. CE 298-337) gave the city a valuable breathing space.

The city's successful resistance in the period 337-350, which won it the epithet of the "Shield of the Empire," was in fact something new. Although it was a well-fortified city, it changed hands several times in the early conflicts between Rome and the Sasanians. In the Diocletianic reorganization of the frontier regions, Nisibis became the capital of the newly created province of Mesopotamia and, as such, it was the headquarters of the *dux Mesopotamiae* who had charge of the military affairs of the province and of the *praeses*, the chief civil administrator. In addition, it was the mustering point for the field army of the *magister militum per orientem* which was the main mobile force used to back up the troops garrisoning the frontier strong points (Amm. IV.9.1; XIX.9.6 and XX.6.9). The composition of its main garrison-force is not known to us as the *Notitia Dignitatum*, our main source on the disposition of Roman units along the frontiers, was not compiled until after the city had been

surrendered to the Persians and hence it does not mention Nisibis. However, we learn from the *Notitia* that *Legio I Parthica* has the sobriquet of "Nisibena" (*Or*. XXXVI.29). We also know that this particular legion took part in the unsuccessful defense of Singara in 360 (cf. Amm. XX.6.8); it might have been reconstituted at Nisibis between 360 and 363 or, more probably, it was that the title was gained through long association with the city of Nisibis, especially in participating in its defense in the three sieges under Constantius (CE 337, 346, and 350). The third siege of the city (CE 350) was by far the most determined attempt by Šāpur II to gain a toe-hold in northern Mesopotamia, and consequently the most fiercely contested. It is also the best documented of the three sieges. Of our sources, the most spectacular account is given by the Emperor Julian in his two panegyrics on his imperial cousin, the Emperor Constantius II. Šāpur is said to have surrounded the city with dykes, then imitating the Persian kings of old, he diverted the Mygdonius and created an artificial lake around the city. The Persians then mounted siege-engines on boats but the stalwart defenders managed to haul up some of them, and set others on fire (*Or*. I.27B-D and II.62D). Such a description of a "sea battle on dry land," as Libanius called it (*Or*. XVIII.208), pushes the modern scholar to the limits of credulity. For the towers of Nisibis to be "just visible" above the waters, as Julian would have his readers believe (*Or*. II.62C-D), the earthen mound needed to hold the floodwater would have to be of enormous strength and height. Furthermore, there are some similarities between Julian's account of the siege of Nisibis and a contemporary account of the siege of Syene in a work of romantic fiction, the *Aethiopica* of Heliodorus. The latter also describes a siege conducted from ships. On the other hand, Ephrem who would have been an eyewitness to the third siege of Nisibis, in his *Carmina Nisibena* (composed in celebration of the divine protection of the city), made numerous references to floodwater and dykes (III.6; XI.5 etc.). Šāpur II bypassed the city in his advance towards Amida in CE 359 but the city was picketed to prevent its garrison from sallying against the main Persian force (Amm. XVIII.6.8-9).

Considerable improvement must therefore have been made to its fortification under Diocletian and Constantine. Ammianus (XXV.9.1) mentions a citadel (*arx*) from which flew the Persian flag after the disgraceful surrender of the city in 363. Malalas (XII, p. 336.14-15) calls it "one of the towers" implying that there were several. Ammianus who knew the city well echoes the views of many in remarking that "the entire Orient might have passed into the control of Persia, had not this city with its advantageous situation and mighty walls

resisted him (i.e. Šāpur II)" and the city was undoubtedly "the strongest bulwark of the Orient" (XXV.8.14). Besides the strengthening of her defenses, the morale of Nisibis' citizens was greatly raised by the growth of Christianity in this region after the conversion of Constantine. Jacob, one of the city's first bishops, was active in raising the morale of the garrison in the first siege. As Christians in Persia came to be suspected as a pro-Roman fifth-column and openly persecuted, the war between Rome and Persia acquired a new religious dimension; it was no longer a conflict of Romans versus "barbarians," but of the faithful against persecuting "heathens."

Besides being the "Shield of the Empire," Nisibis appears to have acquired a reputation for medical sciences. It was the home of Magnus the "iatrosophistes" (Gr. *iatros* = doctor). He was a pagan and had the same teacher as Oribasius, a pagan philosopher who became a close friend of Julian and a distinguished medical author (cf. Eunapius, *Vit. soph*. XX.1-2). Magnus taught with great success in Alexandria where a special school was created for him (ibid. XX.5). This interest in medicine, which is common to many Mesopotamian communities, may explain the frequent use of metaphors borrowed from medical practice by Ephrem in his polemics against the Jews (*SFid*. 197-213 etc.). The latter sadly witnessed the surrender of the city without a fight to the Persians on 25th August, CE 363 after lengthy negotiations between Jovian and the Persian commanders following the death of Julian in battle two months earlier. The mainly Christian citizens were allowed to be evacuated to Edessa and in particular to Amida where a new suburb was built for the refugees and named Nisibis.

Once in Sasanian hands, the city's role was reversed to that of the advanced Persian base of operations against the Roman and Byzantine frontier defenses, as it was only 70 *stadia* from the nearest Roman fortress at Sargathon (Procopius, *Pers*. I.10.14). It inevitably became the target of cross-border raids by the Byzantines and was therefore heavily defended (ibid. II.18.1-3 and 7). Nevertheless, it remained one of the main crossing points into Byzantine territory by merchants, but elaborate safeguards were also put in place against espionage (*Cod. Iust*. IV.63.4). The city witnessed fierce fighting in CE 573, and the Christian population was temporarily expelled for fear of treachery (Eavgrius, *Hist. Eccl*. V.9). Amazingly, it was allowed to remain in Sasanian hands after the treaty between Maurice and Ḵosrow Parwiz in 591 (Sebeos 84.20). The city fell to Islamic forces after light resistance in CE 639 and was devastated by an earthquake in 717 which destroyed most of its Romano-

Byzantine architectural remains. (Cf. Honigmann, 1936, pp. 858-59 and Sturm 1936, pp. 736-63; Honigmann, E. 193 Eachery [Eavgri]). The ancient city is divided by the modern Syrian-Turkish border with the citadel in Camishle (Syria) and the Church of Mar Jacob (built by Bishop Vologesias in CE 359) in Nusaybin (Turkey), and the remains of an ancient theatre between the razor-wire in the no-man's land.

The School of Nisibis. After the surrender of the city in CE 363, Ephraim, already established as a Christian poet and theologian, moved to Edessa via Amida. At Edessa he was reputed to have established a theological school which was nicknamed "School of the Persians" because of the large number of refugees from Nisibis and other occupied territories among its students. The School later acquired notoriety as a hot bed of Nestorianism and was persecuted by the Monophysites who had gained control of Edessa. By the time of Zeno's order for its closure in CE 489, most of the staff and students had already fled across the border to Nisibis.

At the synod of Isaac in 410, the East Syrian metropolitan province of Nisibis was established as one of its five provinces and ranked second after the province of Ilam. Its jurisdiction was initially confined to the five regions surrendered by Jovian in CE 363 (Arzun, Qardu-, Bet Zabdaï, Bet Rahimaï and Bet Moksaye), and remained an east Syrian Metropolitan province without interruption between the 5th and the 14th centuries (cf. Fiey, 1977, pp. 38-39 and Wilmshurst, 2000, pp. 40-41). One of the first holders of the see (consecrated in 435) was Barsauma, a refugee from the Byzantine Empire who came to prominence when he realized he could exploit the precarious position of the Christian Church in Persia to his personal advantage. The Catholicos Babowai had entered into a secret correspondence with the bishops of the Roman Empire in the hope of assistance from the Roman government to put pressure on the Šāhanšāh to lessen the persecution of Christians. Even more unwisely, Babowi made slighting remarks about the Persian government in his letter, which was sent hidden in a walking stick by secret courier. However, Barsauma, who had gained so much of the Šāhanšāh's confidence as to be given the post of Marzban of Bet Arabaye (i.e. the region of Nisibis), had the courier arrested, informing the Šāhanšāh of its contents. Though he was not made Catholicos in Babowi's place after the latter's deposition at the Council of Bet Lapat in 484, and his subsequent execution by the order of the Šāhanšāh, Barsauma nevertheless played a major role in the Persianization of the Church (cf. Gero, 1981, pp. 33-41).

The surviving statutes of the School of Nisibis reveal an austere regime for its students, and it is particularly interesting that they were not allowed to act as paid guides for cross-frontier travelers to avoid the odium of espionage or smuggling (Vööbus, 1961, pp. 72-89). Under the leadership of Narsai, and of Abraham d'Bet Rabban, the School remained a major center of both classical and Christian learning for several centuries and provided training for many leaders of the Persian Church, including Mar Aba. It was largely through the proficiency of its students in both Greek and Syriac that a substantial amount of Greek philosophical and scientific learning was passed on to the Islamic world (Vööbus, 1965, pp. 57-121).

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