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The Effects of Romano-Persian Interaction on the Cultures of the Cities on the Syrian Limes of the Roman Empire

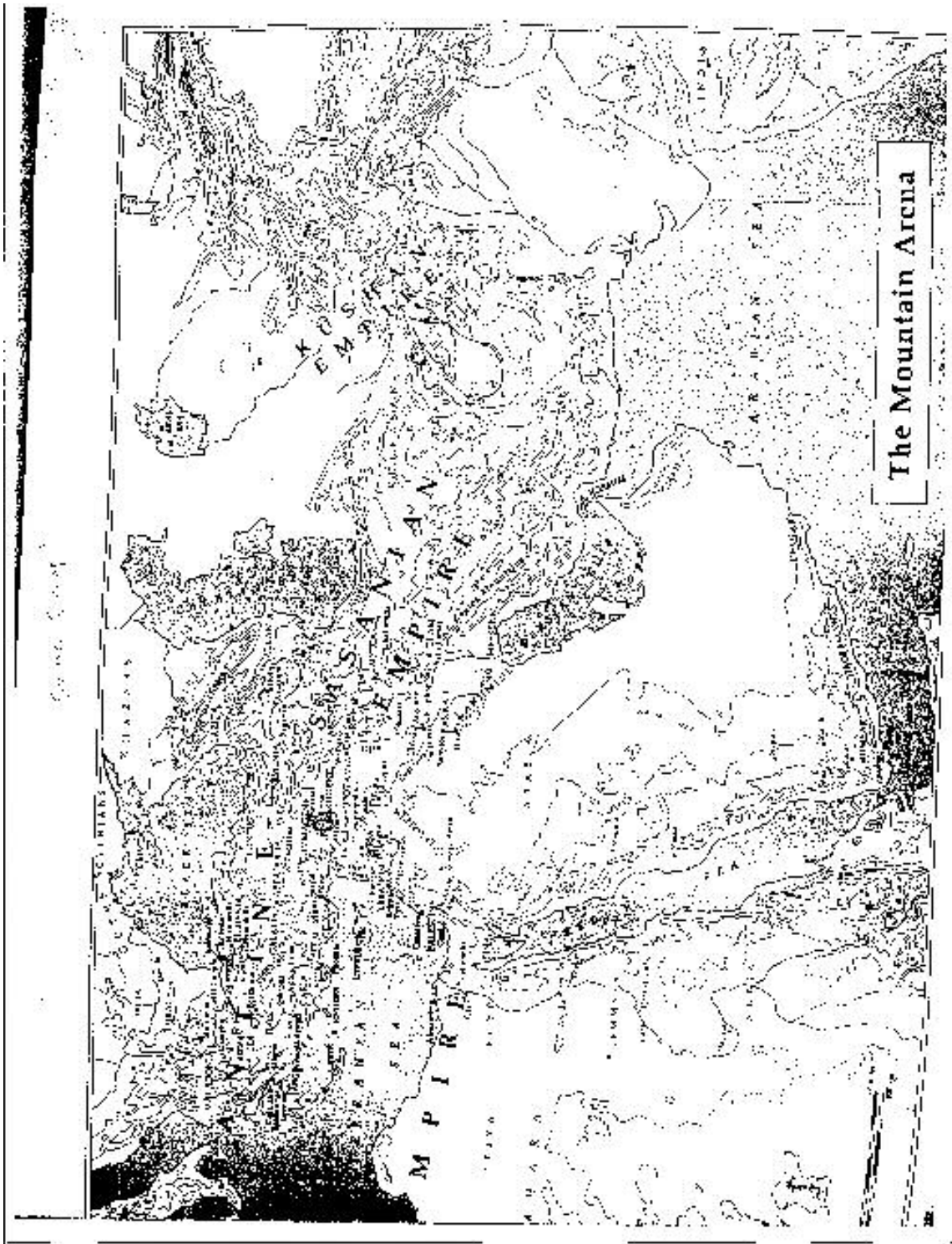
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Map of the Near East
(Fowden, From Empire to...)

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Abstract

Despite the almost continuous state of war that existed between the Roman and Persian Empires from the first century BCE until the destruction of the Sassanid Persian Empire, cultural exchange between East and West occurred frequently in the cities on the borders of these two empires. Despite their more apparent influences of Rome and Persia, local culture often had far reaching effects, not only in their respective cities and territories, but throughout Antiquity. This paper seeks to explore and explain the nature of this phenomenon and to give a new face to the relationships between the cultures and peoples that were caught in this ancient clash of civilizations. To accomplish this, the material culture of two cities will be explored in depth, Dura in the north and the city-state of Palmyra to the south. Each city provides unique examples of the combined influences of Rome and Persia and how these influences interacted with local civilizations to create two unique cultures.

Introduction

My interest in the interaction between Mediterranean and the Near Eastern cultures began where two were irrevocably intertwined, with the conquests of Alexander the Great. Professor Rife's course on the Hellenistic World opened my eyes to an area that is often considered outside the bounds of Classical Studies, the Near East. In this class I was encouraged to examine the implications of Hellenism as it was brought to bear on the former Persian Empire. It was not until I was in the class *India and Rome* in my junior year that I began to consider the implications of local and national eastern *Kultur* interaction with Hellenism. When I began my studies the ancient Mediterranean world was divided between those studying the Western Greco-Roman civilizations and those studying the Eastern Persian empires. This divide may be considered as a buffer to the beginning student of classics to some; the scope of East-West interaction throughout antiquity is almost staggering when viewed as a whole and as is reflected in modern research as well as ancient sources. Greco-Roman and Persian cultures were engaged in a continual conflict that spanned the rule of six successive empires almost without pause. But while the military conflict occurred only sporadically over this time, a cultural struggle was unceasing. A dominant Archaemenid Persia gave way to the Hellenization of Alexander of Macedon which was replaced by Parthian influence and so on. Within this struggle for cultural dominance, there was also a cultural give and take. As the overarching empires fought epic battles, local cultures took and adapted their art, dress, and even language to fit their societies. The cultures of Syria and to a different extent the

Levant found themselves on the front lines of conflict and caught in what at first seems to be a tug of war. Despite the seeming need for these cultures to align themselves with a major power, they took the best of both sides. This occurrence begs the question, what was the effect of this east-west cultural exchange on local cultures?

This question is nothing new. In fact the subject of East-West cultural exchange covers a scholarly expanse far greater than can be considered in this thesis. The scholarly work done on this topic can also inhibit anyone who seeks to better understand these relations as I have found in writing my thesis. While many influential scholars have tackled the issue in the past, their information is often dated and biased. I found that the divide between academic works mentioned earlier was very evident throughout my research. The case of Palmyra in particular has caused scholars to pick an ancient side: either the Persians held sway or the Romans did. This bias is clear in many of Goodenough's interpretations as well as in the writings of Bowersock and Seyrig, who at times seem to completely oppose each other without any objective evidence to support either argument. Ancient authors hold a deeper bias. The tendency of western writers to ignore the East during the early empire gave rise to the term Silent Empire for the Parthian Empire in modern scholarship. The bias that exists in ancient sources is further complicated by the often questionable accuracy of ancient sources. Strabo's accounts of the area and its socio-economic history are erroneous at best and it may be better to ignore his information in favor of finding either a more reliable written source, which is unlikely, or more telling material evidence (Dirven, 9).

These problems extend beyond writings to the language itself. While I was able to translate earlier Latin and Greek sources concerning the Persians in the east, and even

pieces of later Arabic, I was inhibited by my inability to read many of the Semitic, Persian, and indigenous languages of the Near East. In the last fifty years of Roman rule in Dura Europos, inscriptions were written in eight different languages. Bills of sale written in Syriac Greek and Safaitic graffiti on the walls of the Dura synagogue are much more difficult to understand without extensive linguistic skill that is difficult for scholars of either Classics or Near Eastern studies to acquire. Modern language also present a barrier as any local research will be done in either Farsi or Arabic, and while I can work through the latter, information in Farsi would be difficult to obtain, much less translate. Despite these difficulties, studies continue due to the efforts of many researchers in both fields.

Mediterranean-Persian cultural interactions were already over one thousand years old by the time Dura was founded and later when Palmyra came to prominence. Mesopotamian and Sumerian artistic styles found their way into the repertoires of Greek and Egyptian sculptors and potters as early as 800 BCE, and Herodotus certainly wrote about the history of Greco-Persian interaction and began the dichotomy between east and west in *The Histories*, attempting to justify the Greco-Persian Wars of Classical Greece (Herodotus, 1.1-2.1). It was not until the conquests of Alexander the Great and the consequent Hellenization of the Persian “East” that the cultural synchronism of the East and West reached an advanced stage of development.

At this point there is mainly one viewpoint on what happened culturally in the Near East and it is that of the classicist. During the Hellenistic Period, the dominance of Greek culture would have seemed staggering even to a Greek who lived even fifty years before Alexander. The language and culture of Greece largely supplanted that imposed

by the Archaemenid Empire especially within the courts of the former *satrapies*, and while local culture survived it was heavily influenced by Hellenism. Even with the final splintering of political control of the Hellenistic Kingdoms in the first century BCE, there was little doubt that its cultural influences still lingered. When the Romans brought their own culture to the East it was heavily influenced by the Greeks. Koine Greek or a variant of it remained the Lingua Franca of the Eastern aristocracy of the Roman Empire through the 6th century CE.

The problem with this view of East-West cultural exchange comes from the absence of information on the Archaemenid culture present before Hellenization (Millar, 112). The challenges surrounding this lack of evidence continue into the Late Hellenistic period. Our knowledge of Parthian rule is almost as incomplete as our knowledge of their predecessors. We are led to believe that they were Hellenized but how they came to this culture is not well documented (Peters 343-45). Whether they simply ruled the Greek poleis as the Seleucids had done and the Persian villages as the Archaemenid did, or whether they embraced Hellenism is not clear, but they most likely did not encourage the spread of Hellenism as Alexander and to an extent the Seleucids did before them. Their military was set up along Asiatic lines, with cavalry drawn in a feudal manner from throughout the kingdom, as was their economic systems of production (Peters, 345).

By the Middle Roman period, the limits of empire were more specifically drawn. Permanent fortifications were set up by the Romans in cities like Dura in Syria, while the city state of Palmyra was courted for its support against the Parthians and later the Sasanians. Material evidence for this period is also much more prevalent than in the Hellenistic period. But the issue of local influences remains. Local cultures lingered and

every so often flourished in one form or another throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Their continuing presence throughout Syria and the Levant bring the depth of Hellenistic cultural penetration into question. In many ways the Hellenistic influences that were prevalent around the turn of the millennium fell to local and eastern influences as early as the mid first century CE. In truth, our knowledge of the Hellenistic period is lacking. Most material culture from this period was replaced or improved upon by Romans in the Common Era and while there is Greek literary evidence, much of it points to racial tension (see Herodas 3.4). Most of the evidence that we have points towards the presence of Greeks at an administrative level and not towards their influence among the common people (Peters, 345-46). The question thus becomes this: how can we tell how far Hellenism and also Persian culture percolated into the village and city life of Syrians?

This thesis will look into this question by considering two of the cities that lined the Roman-Persian border during late antiquity and the material culture found within them. As the most fruitful period for archaeological evidence is between the second and fifth centuries CE, I will concentrate on the material and literary evidence pertaining to this period. These centuries are made more interesting by the collapse of the Parthian Empire and the emergence of the Sasanian Empire along with political strife that was occurring in Rome due to changing emperors. The power vacuums that were created by these events were not completely filled by the Roman Empire nor the Persian Empires respectively. Instead, as we shall see in the examples of Dura Europos and Palmyra, the vacuum was filled almost immediately by culture of individual cities and the sphere of influence that held them. Rome was never truly able to exploit its advantage against any of the Persian Empires, and vice-versa, either culturally or militarily which will be seen

in the evidence presented here. This period's proximity to the collapse of Hellenism and long standing Persian influences at the end of Antiquity will also allow for the examination of the overall effectiveness of Hellenism and for additions to the argument over whether Hellenism ever really took hold in the minds of the citizens of Syria and the East.

Finally, it must be noted that although I would like to make an in depth investigation of the local cultures in these two cities, such a task is made impossible at this point by the absence of modern scholarship in the area of local cultures in the Near East. Also, as previously mentioned the modern sources that do exist are inherently biased towards either the east or the west. This fact has contributed to either giving up on investigating the underlying cultures of cities or never starting in favor of investigating the influences of high culture on the local. There is very good reason for this however. No matter what many scholars of modern and medieval history may think, the high culture of the East and West had such a profound effect on these cities in terms of architecture, art and dress that it is impossible to ignore the possibility that while local culture did exist, it had heavily incorporated Greco-Roman and Persian influences to the point that they became a living part of a new unique culture. It is to this point that I will argue, and although I will look continuously at the local culture of because of my scholastic limitations and the evidence that I have found, I will look at Durene and Palmyrene culture as unique because of its roots and because of the outside high culture that they absorbed.

Dura Europos

Early History

The Fertile Crescent, the Cradle of Civilization, was of strategic importance to almost every major empire in antiquity and arguably continues to be so today. In antiquity, the Syria-Mesopotamian plain was caught in the middle of the centuries long conflict between the Greeks, and later Romans, in the west and the Iranian Empires in the east. As Fowden states so eloquently, “Syria-Mesopotamia suffers from a crucial weakness that guarantees the embroilment in its affairs of whoever controls the eastern Mediterranean or Iran” (Fowden, *Empire*, 17). It is then no surprise that when Europos was founded in Syria during the Alexandrian conquests it was designed as a military city. Dura was situated above the Euphrates River

Europos, as it was called by the Greeks, was founded on a settlement of semi-nomads by Nicator I, the first of the Seleucid line, in 303 BCE. Its geographic position allowed it to control the northern Euphrates River from high ground (see Fig. 1). The Hellenistic city plan of Europos was probably not laid until the mid second century although there is not firm archaeological evidence of when the city that we see today was really built. Its cultural importance under the Seleucids was, to ancient authors, almost non-existent; during this period, nothing of note was written about Europos’ cultural or military import by either Western or Eastern authors. To classicists, it would have been akin to the many other fortress cities founded by either Alexander or the Hellenistic empires that followed his conquest. Its military importance would have been minimalized during this period as well because of the Seleucid Empire that erased any

previous borders between east and west that had existed for the previous five-hundred years. After the fall of Seleucid Babylon to the Parthians around 100 BCE, the situation of Europos changed. The short lived Mesopotamian empire of the Greeks was divided and the Fertile Crescent was no longer in control of its own destiny. Europos was renamed Dura and eastern bazaars replaced the Hellenistic agora (Ward-Perkins, 347-350). The orthogonal grid of the city saw some minor changes, but the style of Hippodamos remained, for the most part, intact (Fig 1). Dura was, at its foundation, a Hellenized city and it would remain so until its destruction in the mid third century CE.

At the time of the Parthian conquest, another group of culturally unique people were beginning adopt the influences of east and west on their culture and their religion. Just as Syria-Mesopotamia was caught between the Persian and Greco-Roman worlds on a global scale, the Judaic Diaspora community in Dura was moved back and forth between the city's masters. The transfer of power from an Easternized Hellenistic kingdom to a Hellenized Parthian civilization did not entail any severe change. This is in part due to the nature of the Parthian Empire that replaced the Seleucids. The Parthians are sometimes referred to as a silent empire in history and one would not be far off in characterizing them as such. Documentation of their presence is sparse because Rome, at least publicly, did not give them a second thought. This seems a contradictory position to take considering the importance of Palestine in the Empire's defense and the defeat of and subsequent death of Crassus in a battle with the Parthians. Nevertheless, Parthia was known to have come by their Hellenism easily in the early centuries of their rule (Peters, 353). It is thus easy to understand why Dura remained somewhat Hellenized up to the period of Roman occupation. It also lends importance to local culture instead of high

Parthian/Persian culture, in turning the city towards accepting eastern influences. In other words, the local culture of Dura was more likely to make a decision to look towards the east for artistic and cultural inspiration than the west because of own determination and not because it was being forced to turn east for military or aggressive cultural reasons.

Dura Europos in Late Antiquity

It is necessary to recognize that much had changed for the citizens of Dura between the times that Dura was a small city under Parthian rule and its final occupation by the Romans. During the late rule of the Roman Empire, Eastern Diaspora Judaism was caught between multiple warring factions. The Christianizing elements of the Empire sought to root out not only pagan but heretic Christian elements of the Mediterranean world, while the emperors in Constantinople and Ctesiphon were embroiled in an almost constant state of war. These circumstances led to a change within Diaspora traditions that encompassed not only the wars that they were often caught in the middle of, but the cultural exchange that occurred during times of peace. Because of its proximity to the border of the Roman Empire and Persia, Dura Europos is in a sense the perfect example of Judaism under the pressure of conflict and outside culture. Situated on the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia, Dura Europos was ruled by the Parthians until 167 CE when the Romans held the city until it was destroyed in 256 CE. Its Jewish population was relatively small when compared with those of large cities like Alexandria and Sardis, but the archaeological evidence left by its inhabitants provide insights into the unique nature of this small border town. In fact, writing on several paintings within the

second synagogue completed in 243 CE under Roman rule indicates that Sasanian “ambassadors” were not only present in the city but showed a degree of appreciation towards its culture. This reception flies in the face of Roman rule, not just because of the presence of Persians in the city, but because of the apocalyptic messages that were also scrawled and attributed to the Sasanian by Kraeling (Goodenough, 12-13). Local Semitic culture and a third party culture, the Dura Judaic community, can be used to justify the warm reception and the appreciation of Sasanian ambassadors towards the city (see Goodenough, 10-14). These events do not just show the conflict between Roman and Sasanian culture but the role of the culture of Dura in this conflict. Whether they were Jews or Palmyrene expatriates, the many faceted culture of Dura made its own decisions throughout its existence despite the influences of their direct rulers.

The first Synagogue was little more than a remodeled Hellenistic dwelling (Goodenough, 15). The destruction of this synagogue at the beginning of the third century CE limits our knowledge of the period of Parthian rule, but its reconstruction under the Romans provides one of the best possible summaries of the culmination of Romano-Persian interaction over several centuries. In 245 CE, construction was completed on a synagogue that utilized many different cultures in its interior art. It is through this art that we can see how the location of Dura Europos between two empires and multiple religious traditions shaped the beliefs of its Judaic Diaspora community and gives us insight into how a significant part of Durene culture existed.

An Overview of Cultural Influences on Dura Judaic Art

One of the largest influences on the city of Dura Europos was certainly Persian. Throughout its Roman occupation, Dura was a fortress city. On the border with the Parthian and later the Sassanian empires, Dura was touched by both cultures through both war and peaceful interactions. In the Dura synagogue which was built within the first decades of the founding of the Sasanian Empire in 226 CE, there is evidence of not only an apocalyptic movement within the synagogue, but also Sassanian influence upon the city. According to Goldstein, the excavators of the Dura synagogue “were astonished at the extent to which those assumptions [that Sassanians were considered foreign] proved false. Within Roman of Dura there was considerable interest in the Sassanian Empire and in its artistic patterns” (102). Jews in particular may have had reason to view the Sassanians as liberators instead of enemies (see Goldstein, 102-103). Not only was the Sassanian king Ahasuerus displayed prominently next to the Torah niche, but in the depiction of the “Battle of Gog and Magog,” the black rider, who would have been viewed as leading the evil army, depicted a Roman instead of a Sassanian, who instead appeared as the good white rider (Goldstein, 103).

Other Near Eastern elements in the synagogue include the organization of many paintings in parallel bands, an aspect of near eastern art that dates back to Sumerian art. The tree/vine fresco in the reredos of the synagogue (Fig. 2) is also an example of Near-Eastern art, where the “tree of life” is often a theme. The scene of investiture in Figure 2 is an example of what Goldstein refers to as the “sandwich pattern” of investiture painting that places the king between two figures, usually gods or dignitaries that was

very popular in Sassanian painting during the third century (106). This scene of investiture has also been combined with another Near-Eastern theme of enthronement. But despite the prevalence and at times preference of Sassanians and Near Eastern art, ample evidence of Greco-Roman art and themes also exist in the synagogue.

Also in the reredos over the Torah niche is a scene that is often referred to as an Orpheus scene (Fig. 3). In this depiction, a figure that appears to be Orpheus is placed amongst predatory wild beasts. The Orpheus figure is the only Greco-Roman mythological depiction that appears unaltered in Judaic and Christian art (Goldstein, 85). The one important difference in the Orpheus in Judaic and Christian art is his royal status. The synagogue in Gaza exhibits a floor mosaic of a diadem wearing Orpheus similarly surrounded by wild beasts, creating a parallel for the Dura reredos. The royal icons may identify the reredos Orpheus as a messiah figure as described in Isaiah 11.1-9 (Goldstein, 84). It is also possible to rule out Orpheus as being a depiction of David. Kraeling's first analysis of the reredos identified Orpheus as David, but in order to do so he ignored the animals near him with the exception of the eagle, which he associated with the golden heraldic eagle of royalty (Goodenough, 93). The bestial cats and other creatures that Kraeling left out weaken his theory however. It is important that a portrayal of a lyre-playing David would be a commoner/shepherd and that he would play not for wild animals, as David was said to play before tame animals. The royal eagle also seems misplaced as any representation of David the shepherd should not include royal imagery. David became an important king, but his later status is not reflected in his current capacity in the reredos (Goodenough, 94).

The art in the Durene synagogue present less of a conundrum when placed in the context of a syncretistic local culture within high Jewish culture. Durene Jews chose to portray different cultural facets of east and west in its high art, almost mixing and matching the two to create imagery that is at once both eastern and western: Durene imagery. While we are looking at examples of high culture in much of the synagogue art, it is important to note that this culture would have had some effect on the citizens of Dura that visited the synagogue. It is also important here to draw a distinction between the temple Judaic tradition, and the Diaspora which existed in Dura. While Jews in Dura would have likely defined themselves as Jewish, they would also have described themselves as citizens of Dura and its culture, much like the Jews of Sardis (see Krabel, 244, 246). It would be shortsighted to state that by looking at Judaic high culture in Dura we are not seeing what the common Durene citizen would have experienced, because these people were Durenes; one of many different cultural groups, as will be seen later in this paper. It would also be shortsighted of this thesis, however, to present the interaction of outside influences as completely disconnected.

Depiction of Dress

Looking at the separate effects of Persian and Roman influences on the art of the synagogue will only take us so far. As Goodenough states, “to decide by studying the painting that [what is] Greek means this, the Persian that, then to explain the paintings on that basis, and finally to complete the circle by showing that the paintings have in turn

explained the [art], has little to commend it” (Goodenough, 11.124). In order to avoid this folly, I will muddy the waters of some of my previous observations.

As we will see in Palmyrene art, the most confusing blend of eastern and western art occurs in the depiction of dress. The most plentiful evidence of cultural interaction occurs in the painting above the Torah niche, the reredos. Both Kraeling and Goodenough note that this painting is crucial to understanding dress in Dura and its implications for the art in the synagogue (Goodenough, 11.124). Unfortunately not much has been made of women’s dress in Dura. Because there are only two types of dress which are not distinctive of either Greek or Persian culture, most have dismissed them as a tool for understanding cultural interaction¹. Men, on the other hand, are split into three basic categories: those wearing armor, those in full Greek dress, and those in Persian dress (Goodenough, 11.125-127). Those wearing armor have been simply relegated to the role of soldier, but the other two groups are cause for further investigation, especially in the reredos where the two styles are used in conjunction with one another.

While the Orpheus painting is already a mixture of Near Eastern and Mediterranean themes and characters, another aspect is added when the dress of Orpheus, a very Greco-Roman character, is observed closely. In a caftan and pants (Fig. 4) with a cape on his back, he is dressed like Persian royalty (J. de Morgan, plate XXI, 5). Other examples in the reredos, including Jacob blessing the thirteen tribes of Israel have a mixture of Greek and Persian dress. Jacob wears a Greek robe of splendor (Goodenough, 9.105) while the remaining tribe members are dressed in the caftan and pants without the royal cape (Goodenough, 9.130). In fact it has been suggested that the dress of common

¹ . I will do the same in this thesis, because of a lack of material evidence in Dura to suggest that I can do otherwise without basing my argument purely on speculation.

Persians, the caftan and pants without a cape mentioned above, was used interchangeably with the common wear of Greeks, the chiton (Goodenough, 9.131). This mixture of Greco-Roman and Persian themes presents a problem for the neatly divided art types that were described above.

In order to understand Dura's position within Greco-Roman and Persian culture, new conclusions about the meaning of dress need to be drawn. Goodenough suggests several tenuous possibilities for the symbolic incorporation of the chiton and the Greek robe into the rabbinic artistic tradition (Goodenough, 9.173) but he declines to make any substantial conclusion about the presence of Persian clothing in the Dura paintings. This may in part be due to Goodenough's desire to present as many aspects of the synagogue as possible as Hellenic in origin, a bias that is common in the study of this city.

Objectively there is little that can be decided conclusively about the dress of the people of Dura. Little physical evidence has been discovered and the scraps that have been found do not seem indicative of common dress in either the Near East or around Mediterranean (Goodenough, 9.127). The intricate nature of both Greek and Persian dress begs the question whether the dress depicted was purely ceremonial (Goodenough, 9.153).

Seyrig, refers to a similar problem with the "duality of dress" in Palmyra, calling the Persian and Greek dress represented pretentious and not something that the common man would wear on an every day basis (Seyrig, 2). Without any reliable objective evidence many have disregarded any interpretations of the relationship between dress and the influences of Persian culture on the citizens of Dura as guesswork, throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. The fact remains that the art of the Dura synagogue

is heavily influenced by two high cultures and was most likely not controlled culturally by either.

The problem with earlier interpretations is an unwillingness to see a city such as Dura or Palmyra as a cultural mixing pot. None have attempted to understand in depth the possibilities of a city that because of its unique location was able to create a new culture. It is obvious from the evidence that has been presented that artists of the synagogue were influenced by both Persian and Greco-Roman artistic traditions. While no all encompassing shift may have occurred in art or dress, it is possible that while walking the streets of Roman Dura in the third century CE that one might see a man in a Greek robe conversing with a man in Persian dress. Third party influences including the Jewish community and the presence of Palmyrene traders and a detachment of Palmyrene archers at the Roman fort would have also played a role. In earlier theories, Goodenough and Seyrig may have attempted to draw too sharp of a conclusion to the problem of dress in art. Instead of trying to analyze which culture was dominant based on the use of garments in art, perhaps a more direct correlation can be drawn. The reason that both Greek and Persian dress was represented interchangeably was because both kinds of dress were present among the citizens of Dura. Although it may seem ridiculous to some that citizens under Roman rule on the strategic crux of the eastern *limes* would allow such a cultural state of affairs, it is important to remember that Rome was, above all, in favor of minimizing *στρασις* or unrest in its occupied lands and colonies. This would explain their response to what may be viewed as a local Parthian influenced culture despite any Hellenistic traits that it exhibited. To draw a parallel with another Syrian city, Palmyra was known to have citizens who dressed in either Greek or Persian garb. (Peters, 596) A

similar situation occurred in Palmyra in the first and early second centuries CE with the names of its citizens. Aramaic inscriptions indicate that while many of its citizens took Greek names, they also kept their Aramaic names (Jones, 267). Considering the influence that Palmyrene culture held over Dura Europos it seems likely that its people would have adopted similar standards. Objectively, the depiction of dress in Palmyra is similar to that in Dura; the dress of individuals depicted in paintings and sculpture are far too intricate or ceremonial to be worn by the common people (Seyrig, 4). In the reredos paintings religious figures wear both Persian and Greek dress, but usually the only characters that wear the Greek robe are performing ceremonial functions. The kings, including Orpheus and Saul are dressed in the caftan and trousers along with the leaders of the tribes of Israel (Goodenough, 9.234). Angels are dressed in Persian garb as well (Goodenough 9.236). This does not mean that Greek and Persian dress was not worn in Dura. Instead, as will be seen in Palmyra, Greek and Persian dress may have been combined. In wearing both forms of high culture dress Dura was sending both a political message and taking on both forms as their own version of a high Durene culture. The possibilities of these artistic interpretations are, like those of Seyrig and Goodenough, not as complete or as objective as one could hope. I do hope however that they begin to shed light on new possibilities for the interpretation of cultural struggle that occurred in Dura.

The Quality of Foreign Influence

The city of Dura as a whole was influenced by high culture and the architecture of the city is an excellent example. The mixture of architecture around the city points to the

city being a mixture instead of being dominantly influenced by either culture. The foundation of the city was certainly Greek. Greek building styles were used on private dwellings and in city planning. This aspect of Mediterranean culture remained with the city until its destruction, and shows how flexible and hardy this kind of Hellenism was. On the other hand, over time the evidence of Greek architectural influence became more shallow and ephemeral (Ward-Perkins, 348). The agora that was such a prominent feature of the Greek city was converted into a Near-Eastern style bazaar even before the Parthians wrested control of the city from the Greeks. The style of temple architecture was also Near-Eastern in origin. Like the Sanctuary of Se in the Hauran, there were very few vestiges of Hellenistic building code in Durene temples. The arrival of the Romans quickly shifted this decline of Mediterranean influence later years that they maintained a presence. The decision of local culture to throw off the Hellenistic code in its later building suggests a break between Durene local culture and its adherence to a Greek cultural foundation.

The first sign of change was in language. All of the inscriptions that have been found and dated before 165 CE in Dura were either written in Greek, Palmyrene, or Safaitic. After 190 CE, Latin, Syriac, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Middle Persian were added to that list (Kilpatrick, 215-225). Under Parthian control the city was administered by the στρατηγος και επιστατης της πολεως. It is believed these men were drawn from the city's ethnic Macedonians, as evidenced by their Greek names (Dirivan, 13). Three decades after the Romans conquered Dura in 165 CE, a βουλη replaced the επιστατης. The reasons for this change in government are not clear, but they may be assumed to be a measure taken to ensure that the city would not fall prey to *στασις*. Further proof of this

point comes from the disappearance of the aforementioned Greek names from inscriptions and texts for the next sixty years. Greek names still existed, although they were different names than those of the previous ruling class (Dirivan, 13-14). This indicates that either the rulers changed all of their names, an unlikely occurrence, or that the population of the city was better represented in the *boule* than it was under the *επιστατης*. This indicates that the city would likewise be made up of Semitic citizens. The legion fort constructed at the turn of the second century CE contained all the amenities of Rome or Antioch such as a bathhouse and an amphitheatre (see Fig 1). However it is less likely that the army continued to play a role in the city's cultural development, as a thick mud brick wall was erected to separate the city from the fortress. It is questionable whether the auxiliary Palmyrene archers, who were stationed in Dura even before the Roman conquest, were similarly separated.

So where did this Semitic influence come from? As suggested earlier it likely came from Palmyra, which helps to explain some of the unique evidence in Dura along with its similar developmental timeline. Roman religion played no part in either Parthian or Roman Dura even among Greek speakers (Rostovtzeff, 59 & 61). Instead, the gods worshiped by Durene citizens were local or imported from Palmyra in the first century CE. With all of the influences coming from so many directions, Dura still managed to maintain a local culture which eventually began to break away from the other influences.

One of the first documents written in Syriac that we have discovered was found in Dura Europos and was dated to 243 CE (Kuhrt & Sherwin, 126). At the height of Roman power in Dura, a Roman citizen living in a Hellenized city nevertheless wrote a bill of sale for slaves in Syriac between two Jews (Goldstein 36). This fact provides a contrast

to the commonly held belief that Greek, even in heavily Persian areas, continued to be used as an economic language long after the last Seleucid ruler lost his throne. What confuses the situation more is the signature of a chief magistrate on the document (Goldstein, 52). The signatures on the verso of the document, a common feature of eastern Semitic documents, are arranged in a fashion that deviates from the western norm where such signatures did not exist. The use of Syriac and the divergences from Roman western practices in the document suggest that the language had been at least somewhat well established by the time that the Dura synagogue was built. It also casts doubt upon Bowersock's statement that Greek was still dominant at this time because of its use in the $\chi\omicron\rho\alpha$ and because it is associated with the Hellenized city in the Near-East (29-33). Several inscriptions found in the Syrian countryside that have been dated to the second and third centuries CE show that Greek was at least in use in a significant way outside of the city. The beginnings of a new language in the city may have signaled the downfall of Greek in the country, however. The prevalence of Greek inscriptions in the country in Syria at this time may indicate that the literate farming aristocracy along with the priest class indeed spoke Greek but not the common man.

In many ways this document sums up the result of outside influences and the emergence of a local culture despite them. It also indicates that Dura Europos was founded as a Greek city that struggled to adjust to its local Semitic environment. The fact however still remains that local culture of Dura was constantly using Greek and Persian cultures for its own purposes. This occurrence of syncretism was not unique to Dura, and as shall be seen in the next section, much of the syncretism of Dura corresponds to that of another desert city.

Palmyra: A Brief History

Local culture in Palmyra thus becomes more difficult to define. From what evidence has been presented, Palmyra was still a melting pot of culture, but its local high/aristocratic culture was more dominant throughout its existence. Unlike Dura, which experienced a shift in high culture from Macedonian to Roman/Semitic rulership, Palmyra was almost always ruled by Palmyrenes. This fact along with a lack of evidence and my linguistic limitations makes defining the common local culture too difficult to undertake in this thesis. Instead I will undertake the more modest goal of determining the local high culture in the city.

Palmyra was founded through a coming together of Arab and Bedouin peoples. Unlike Dura, there was no direct Hellenistic influence at its beginning, but such influence grew as time went on. The oasis called Tadmor had been used as a stop on trade routes for years before the city of Palmyra was founded. The first mention of a settlement at Tadmor occurs in the archives of Mari along with several other Assyrian sources dated between 1000 and 800 BCE (Peters, 596). The coming of Hellenism in the second and third centuries BCE had the effect of urbanizing the sparse settlement, not because of Macedonian colonization as was the case in Dura Europos, but on account of the increase in trade that was facilitated in this period. Palmyra only grew in importance from this period until it was sacked by Aurelius Severus in 273 CE. During this time, which reached a head during the late second to mid third centuries BCE, Palmyra was one of the most culturally diverse and important cities in both the Persian and Roman empires.

Every city in antiquity had to have access to at least two things, a defensible position and water. In the case of Palmyra, its location contains one of the only sources of abundant water in the middle of the Syrian Desert. It is not surprising therefore that Palmyra quickly grew into an important trading center between the caravans from the cities bordering the Mediterranean and the East, all the way to India. Palmyra's situation, both politically and culturally, was more directly influenced by Persia and Rome than Dura. As mentioned earlier, although Dura began as a Macedonian colony, the local Semitic influences and the later influences of the Palmyrenes were powerful enough to turn its eyes to the East (Ward-Perkins, 354) while retaining western aspects of culture and in doing so created a local culture that was unique. Palmyra did not begin as a Mediterranean outpost but would eventually be drawn to the political power of Rome. Eight senators and various Equestrian officers and office holders in the Roman Empire came from Palmyra (Ward-Perkins, 354-356). This Romanization extended into the architecture of the city to some extent but it is difficult to differentiate the Hellenistic elements of the city constructed in the early first century CE and the Roman influenced buildings that came only decades later. In spite of the powerful Greco-Roman features of the city, there are still very powerful Easternized components.

Palmyra received more attention from the two ancient superpowers than did Dura Europos. Its status as a trade center and trade middleman for the two empires meant that it received cultural attention in many forms. In its architecture, Palmyra displays a late Hellenistic architecture that had absorbed and was tempered by many Semitic and Persian elements. Separating it from Dura are the facts that it was not set up on the strict orthogonal grid of Hippodamus, nor were the houses of the city constructed in the

Hellenistic style (Ward-Perkins, 357). It does however share several architectural designs in common with more Romanized cities such as Nysa-Scythopolis in Palestine. As Ward-Perkins states so well, “The first feature of Palmyra that strikes the eye and the imagination of every visitor is its colonnaded streets.” (359, Fig. 5) Public spaces have also been found in abundance, at least when compared with the deficit of public space that has been identified in Dura (the exception of course being within the Roman fortress at Dura itself). The public baths, a theatre and an agora were also present and featured prominently. Perhaps most importantly in terms of Roman cultural relations was the squared porticoed enclosure with an incorporated basilica hall that may have been associated with a Kaiserion/Augustaeum (Ward-Perkins, 360). Even the Temple of Bel was in many ways influenced by Roman and thus Hellenistic architecture. Bel, like many structures in the Roman east, was not wholly an orthodox building in either the Roman or Persian architectural catalog. It began as a Hellenistic Greek style temple, but because it was being constructed during the rise of Roman imperial power in the first century CE it adopted many aspects of Roman architecture. Yet there are many Persian facets to the structure, as one would expect from a temple devoted to a Semitic god, such as crowstep melons capping the cornices (Fig 6) (Richmond, 44). This competition between gaining Roman influence and the requirements of the local cult created many different anomalies in the temple’s construction (Ward-Perkins, 356). Like at the Temple of Jupiter in Baalbek, the geo-political and thus cultural situation of Palmyra manifested itself in its architecture. The local Semitic influences could not be broken so easily though, and Palmyra remained obstinately loyal to its eastern and local Semitic roots until its end for more than one reason.

Art in Palmyra

Like in the example of Dura Europos, the art of Palmyra gives us an incomplete glimpse into the path that cultural interactions took through the city and through its citizens. To further mix up the issue of whether Palmyra associated itself with Rome or Persia, art and depictions of dress seemed to be focused towards Ctesiphon or even India more than towards Rome or Antioch. In opposition to the architectural evidence presented so far, the paintings and sculpture of Palmyra remained, throughout its history, stubbornly Persian (Ward-Perkins, 357). It is partly for this reason that Henri Seyrig stated in a conference in 1948 that even after the political influence of Rome was at its peak, “the inhabitants of Palmyra were already accustomed to turning their eyes to the east towards Mesopotamia” (Seyrig, 1) Part of this habit comes from the uneasy history that Palmyra enjoyed with Rome. Although the demand for eastern goods in the Mediterranean was great enough to ensure a powerful economic relationship, events such as the raid by Marc Antony in 42 BCE served to weaken any permanent loyalty to the west. The representations of people in art help to reinforce the opinion of Seyrig and the opinion of this author that although Palmyra was heavily influenced architecturally by the Romans, the common people and, later in its history, the upper classes as well, turned away from the influences of the Mediterranean towards the East. In the paintings on the Temple of Bel we can see pertinent examples of this phenomenon.

One of the most important distinctions in the depiction of Palmyrene native dress is that no native Palmyrene ever deemed it worthy enough for artistic portrayal except on

some local cult statues and depictions of local gods (Seyrig, 2). Instead the upper classes were almost always portrayed in either Persian or Greco-Roman garb, similar to the paintings in the Dura synagogue. While this dichotomy of dress seems clear cut at first, there are several factors that connect these two seemingly opposed forms of dress within the city. The most obvious connector is that nearly every ornate design on the clothing of Palmyrenes was based upon or was a copy of Greek design. Running wave borders, acanthus scrolls, and lilies are only some of the Greek patterns that were shown on Persian costumes. One design is not as evident however. What appears as an embroidered design of pearls bordering clothing suggests Eastern influences even beyond those of the Iranian Plateau (Seyrig 3-5). In Mathura a sculpture of Kanishka shows the same pearl design. Several fragments of textile from the same city show that this was indeed an embroidered design and that it is possible that Palmyra received it from Indian caravans passing through its walls (Seyrig, 3). Similar evidence is found in the city's late history. Inscriptions discovered in the Agora of Palmyra indicate a prolific Palmyrene-India trade, especially with Scythia. This Scythia was not the area in the Caucasus which spawned the Parthians but an area located to the north of the Indus River. Palmyrene traders would sail up the Indus to reach the Scythians. As one inscription states, "This statue of Marcus Vlpus Iarhai...has been offered by the merchants who sailed from Scythia who sailed in the boat of Honaino son of Haddudan because he helped them in every way in the month of [March 157 CE]" (Seyrig, 6). The theory that these garments were influenced if not designed in India is further reinforced because the pearl design is not found on any example of Mediterranean textile reinforces this theory.

Another possibility is that the Hellenized garments were the result of exported Hellenism which moved through Palmyra and the Parthian empire during the Hellenistic period and found its way to India (Seyrig, 3-4). If this last possibility is the case, then it would also help to explain the presence of Greek and Persian dress in the same works of art. Portrayals of families included both forms of dress making it difficult to assign a particular meaning to the dress of either culture (Seyrig, 5). The Persian and Greco-Roman dress' dispersal among the members of a family also seem to be random as there is no member that consistently wears caftans or robes.

While it has been suggested that this phenomenon is the result of Parthian Hellenism (Seyrig, 4), I find this possibility to be unlikely. Although this may have been the case in early Palmyra, the Parthian empire moved farther away from its Hellenistic heritage in the late first century CE. Greek appeared to be falling out of favor with the courts as Pahlavik, a derivative of Aramaic, became the dominant written and spoken tongue (Peters, 346). It is more likely that Persia and Rome were forced to play to the affections of Palmyrene traders in order to trade with the West and East respectively. As mentioned earlier, the unfriendly state of relations between Rome and Persia meant that a third party had to be employed to trade with the lands to the east or west. This process could have had two effects. First, the traders dealing with Roman merchants would have adopted their dress and certainly their language as a matter of practicality. The dispersion of styles of dress may have also been purely stylistic and a personal preference among Palmyrenes (Seyrig, 4). Of these two consequences, the later seems the most likely. A family would most likely have remained in the same trade, but marriages

among merchant families to enhance economic prospects in trade were certainly possible and could explain these anomalies of dress.

Sculpture in Palmyra has already been discussed as remaining Eastern throughout the history of Palmyra. Palmyrene sculpture's style itself certainly contained Persian elements, but its most distinctive facet was contained in its presentation. Older sculptures in the Temple of Bel wear Hellenistic armor, but were moved to one side and looking up at a battle. While at first they seem to be Mediterranean in style because of their dress, they in fact hold more in common with Semitic and Persian art. They are individually emphasized instead of shown in a dramatic scene (Fig. 7), a precept of Hellenistic sculpture (Seyrig, 6, Syrzygowski, 52). The sculptures are also stiffly standing like sculptures in Dynastic Egypt instead of in a contra postal position. Oddly enough, the closest parallel that can be drawn is between this unique style and Byzantine art (Seyrig, 4-9). This similar style suggests that eastern art's influences reached not only Palmyra, but also into the heart of the late Roman Empire and its official state religion. It is important to note that eastern art may have never reached the Byzantium in the way outlined above without a middleman of culture and trade. The art of Palmyra, while influenced by the east, was still a style all its own and it was this style that would have affected Byzantine art, not traveling pure eastern art style.

Religion and Politics in Palmyra

The religions of early Palmyra were mostly a local phenomenon, although their deities were exported to other settlements and outposts such as Dura (Dirven, 170). Despite the massive cultural influences that were acting upon the city, its religion stayed true to its local Semitic roots. The apparent preference was towards Bel and Baal, two of the major sky gods. Roman attempts to assimilate Bel to Zeus, as was the Greco-Roman custom, later in the city's history were somewhat successful but had little effect on the Palmyrenes. This is not to say that either Roman or Persian rulers during this period wanted to change a city's religious circumstances. Neither empire had yet evolved into a commonwealth reliant on religious rule, but the Palmyrenes still felt pressure from the early Christians. Palmyra did not exist as a major city long enough to feel the full influence of Christianity but its influences began to be felt in a significant way just before the city was sacked. In the 263 CE, Paul of Samosata was elected as bishop of Antioch by the Palmyrene Christians. He was also at that time, if not slightly later, appointed as fiscal procurator of the city (Peters, 598). Although there were attempts to remove him from office during synods, in one of which he was actually deposed, his Palmyrene supporters were strong enough and plentiful enough that he refused to bend to these attacks and remained in control of Antioch until the capture of Zenobia in 273 CE. Paul's life exemplifies the mirror of Palmyrene culture by taking local Palmyrene Christianity to the highest office of Antioch. After years of being culturally and politically subordinated to the Romans, Palmyra was making its mark on what was fast becoming the West's dominant religion, not with Roman ideas but with local Palmyrene

ones. This influence may also help to explain why Palmyrene art appears to be a precursor to Byzantine art even though the city did not exist long enough to see the result of this influence.

Palmyra's acceptance of Christianity, in the mid-third century CE, was not yet a sign of preference of Roman or Sasanian cultural hegemony as neither empire had yet come to terms with their rising religious factions. Even though Palmyra had been associated with the west for two hundred years, it still held much in common with, if not the east, than with their own distinctive city's brand of art and culture. At this point in history, Palmyra was neither here nor there; the city was Hellenistic in architecture but not in art. It was not in the political realm of the East as can be discerned by language and the fact that the king of Palmyra, for a time, held the reigns of the entire eastern Roman army (Dirven, 16). Palmyra's Christians came mostly from monophocites and Judaeo-Christian outcasts who held beliefs that were opposed to the dominant opinions of Alexandrian followers of Origin and of the Antioch synod (Peters, 398-399). Palmyra was able to give this sect of Christianity a voice, and in doing so flexed the cultural muscle of the city just as Zenobia planned her revolt against Rome and successful conquest, if only temporarily, of the most important cities in the Eastern Roman Empire.

Palmyra's influence, at least within its circle of influence in Syria, would also have been able to export its culture of art and ideals to other cities and outposts. In cities such as Samosata evidence of relief sculpture heavily inspired by Palmyrene art has been found. In Heliopolis-Bambyce evidence has been found of similar style relief sculptures (Seyrig, 9). Dura Europos contained several Palmyrene temples which held not only their gods but examples of their art. As early as 33 CE, a Palmyrene sculptor created

work that was Palmyrene in style but not in composition by creating art that depicted foreign scenes using Palmyrene artistic themes (Diriven, 10-11). Depictions of Palmyrene native dress have also been found on murals in Dura (Diriven, 207). This evidence points to the export of Palmyrene art and culture to cities that would outlast the great commercial city itself as is likely the case with Byzantine art.

Palmyra was unique in its position as an intermediary between two opposing cultures (Diriven, 21). Although its political associations changed over time, its culture could indeed be called syncretistic. From its architecture to the dress of its people, there was never a city in the Roman world outside of Alexandria that was more diverse. And through change and oscillating influences, Palmyra remained true to a local culture at its core and was even able to export this syncretized culture to influence the two powers that once held cultural sway over its citizens.

The End of Hellenism in the Near-East

Most scholars can agree that there is no cookie cutter mold for cultural relations in the Near-East, especially along the borders of the Persian and Roman empires. In both Dura Europos and Palmyra, this is certainly the case. The volume of cultural interaction between the two empires and these individual cities varies as do their responses to it. However, one crucially important common factor between these case studies has been the resiliency of their respective local cultures in the face of a cultural barrage from East and West. This quality of the local cultures of these two cities also fits into the question of how Hellenism came to an end in the Near-East. In this final section I do not mean to

answer this long standing question as its scope far exceeds that of this analysis. Instead, my aim is merely to add to the scholarly debate in the hopes that we may eventually have enough evidence to establish concrete answers to this hole in Hellenic studies.

In the years following the Islamic conquests of 630 CE, the influence of the West faded into the sunset. With the emergence of Arabic culture as the dominant culture of the East and the South-East Mediterranean, the influences of Hellenism in particular faded into obscurity. What happened to the culture that existed throughout the Mediterranean with a strong presence for nearly a millenium is complicated to say the least. We are hampered in our efforts by the lack of archaeological and literary evidence caused in no small part by the overthrow of the more “worldly” Umayyad Empire by the more conservative Abbasids. Political and religious prejudices abound in the writings of ninth and tenth century Islamic historians and “we find ourselves being carried forward into the ‘classical’ Islamic world of Baghdad” (Fowden, Qusayr, xxiii). This being said, it is relatively simple to draw some basic conclusions about the local cultures of Dura and Palmyra and their relationships to what would come three hundred years after their declines.

The most important inference that can be made between the cities of these case studies in Syria in late antiquity and the cities of Syria after the Arabic conquest is the syncretism of outside influences with local culture. Like Dura Europos and Palmyra, the Arabs were an influenced by both the Persians and the Romans even before the time of Muhammad. As stated by Fowden in his study of Qusayr ‘Amra, “Arabs had been an egregious presence in Rome’s eastern provinces and on the Sasanians’ westerly Marshes” (Fowden, Qusayr, xxiii). Because of this contact, Arabs living under the Umayyad

dynasty were able to draw upon this rich cultural background to create a culture of their own with pieces of each of “the world’s two eyes” (Fowden, Qusayr , xxii-xxiv). It is possible then that the examples of Palmyra and Dura were precursors to the events that were to come in the seventh century CE. This would also explain the prevalence of both Sasanian and Greco-Roman art within Qusayr ‘Amra, which was a site populated by Syrian citizens of the Islamic Empire under the Umayyads. It also appears evident from the city of Dura that once the ethnic Greco-Roman or Persian leaders were removed from power, the heralds of local culture took over the governance of cities. The populace of cities like Dura and especially Palmyra would have welcomed the similar culture of the southern Arabs which was very similar to both the ethnic Bedouins of Palmyra and the Semites and Syrians of Dura. Because of the importance of local culture throughout the histories of these cities, a dominant culture that appealed to this characteristic and not to the adapted cultures of the Mediterranean and Iran would have held great sway over their citizens.

Conclusion

In two cities along the borders of the “Eyes of the World” cultural interactions were plentiful. Hellenistic architecture mixed with Persian, families dressed in the garb of warring empires for portraiture among many other examples of this exchange. But through this cultural attention, both Dura and Palmyra kept their cultures alive and in some cases were able to see them grow within the context of cultural syncretism. Although Persian and Greco- Roman culture had strong, very evident effects on both cities the influence of these cultures were never able to suppress or replace the local culture of either Dura or Palmyra. The appearance of Persian and Greco-Roman culture manifested through art, inscription, or architecture was viewed through a kaleidoscope by the citizens of Dura and Palmyra. Instead of being dominated by either culture, these cities took from both East and West to create their local culture, and in the case of Palmyra, looked back upon the cultures of both east and west, reflecting a new syncretistic culture back on the larger high cultures.

A final word must be added about the similarities between this cultural phenomenon and the eventual subjugation of both of the “world’s two eyes” to the new local syncretistic culture of the Islamic Arabs. To say that the cultures of these dead cities were the harbingers of a new era may be an overstatement, but it is nevertheless true that there are many parallels between them. To think that this kind of culture was to become the dominant cultural force of the next thousand years may have been unbelievable even to a Roman citizen of Dura in the third century CE, but it would become the case that syncretism of Mediterranean and Iranian influences and the

resilience of a Arabic/Semitic local culture would create a dominant society and that this new culture had precedence in the cities of Dura Europos and Palmyra in the second and third centuries of the Common Era.



Figure 1: Map of Roman Dura Europos
(Isaac, Limits...)



Figure 2: Dura Reredos, Investiture and Tree of Life
(<http://www.udel.edu/ArtHistory/nees/209/images.html>)



Figure 3: Dura Reredos, Orpheus Figure and Animals
(<http://www.udel.edu/ArtHistory/nees/209/images.html>)



Figure 4: Art from the Third Century Palmyrene Tomb of Maqqai, examples of Caftan and Trousers/Pants (Seyrig, 9)



Figure 5: Palmyra, Colonnaded Street
(Ward-Perkins, 358)

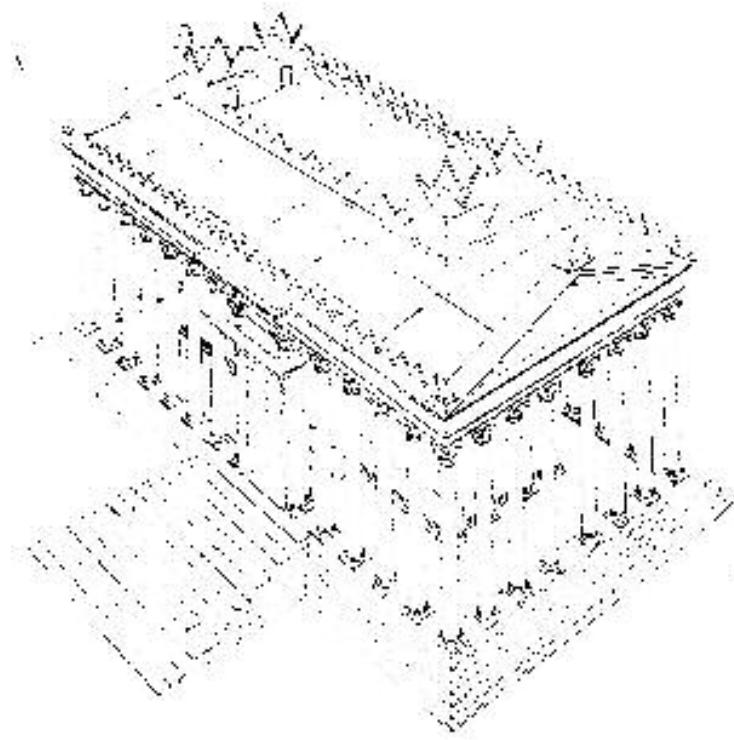


Figure 6: Temple of Bel, Palmyra
(Ward-Perkins, 356)

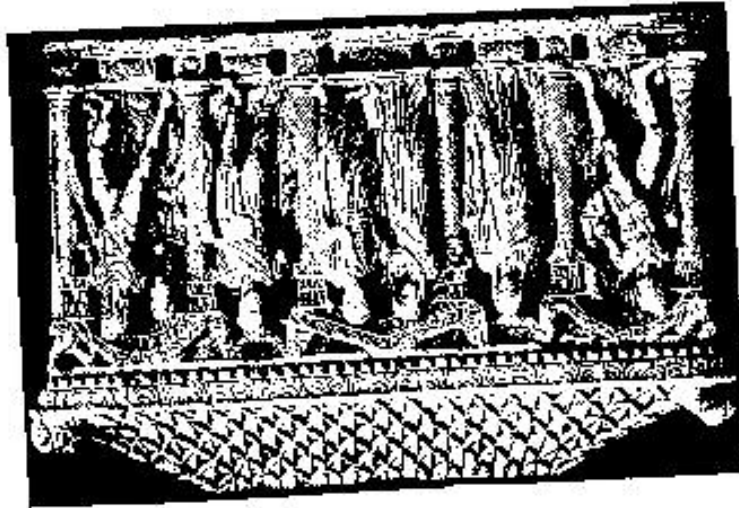


Figure 7: Example of non-Hellenistic, individual portrayal in sculpture, from the Hochzeitssarkophagus (Strzygowski, 45)

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