

Dura-Europos: The Parchments and the Papyri

George D. Kilpatrick

DURA-EUROPOS is one of the most wonderful discoveries of the years between the two wars. Whatever interests us in the Roman Empire—Judaism, Christianity, the mixture of religions, of societies, of nations, commerce and industry, the Roman army and administration—all are illuminated by what the excavator has laid bare of this frontier city of the middle Euphrates.

This is particularly true of the volume of the *Final Reports* containing the parchments and the papyri.¹ Among the many texts of great interest two small parchments are particularly noteworthy. One, a roll, consists of a Greek fragment of Tatian's *Diatessaron*, a harmony of the Four Gospels made about A.D. 170. The other consists of two Hebrew liturgical fragments from a sheet of parchment giving various benedictions. These two texts provide our starting point: one a Christian text in Greek, the other a Jewish text in Hebrew.² To what kind of communities do they belong?

Dura-Europos was a Seleucid foundation on the right bank of the Euphrates a little below the Khaber river. It became Parthian at the end of the second century B.C.; the Romans took it from the Parthians about A.D. 165 and held it for some ninety years before it was captured and destroyed by the Persians.

It is these ninety years that concern us. During them Dura was a frontier fortress with a Roman garrison. It was no longer the important commercial centre that it had been under the Parthians, and for the last thirty years of its existence it was beset by the fear of Persian attack. The new Persian dynasty came to power about A.D. 224 with the support of strong national feeling. Against this threat the Roman

¹ C. Bradford Welles, Robert O. Fink, and J. Frank Gilliam, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Final Report V, Part I, The Parchments and Papyri* (New Haven and London 1959). My study of the documents has been aided by two most instructive visits to the reconstructions of the Christian chapel, the Jewish synagogue and Mithraeum at Yale University.

² Nos. 10 and 11.

garrison was increased, but this precaution did not prevent the city's destruction. In A.D. 256 it fell to the Persians, who left it in ruins.

When these ruins were excavated between the two World Wars there came to light the remains of a Jewish synagogue and of a Christian chapel or house-church. It is with the Jewish synagogue that we first concern ourselves.

Soon after the capture of the city by the Romans, perhaps about A.D. 170, the first synagogue came into being. It was a modest building, a converted house, and at the most could hold some sixty persons. About A.D. 245 it was replaced by a large and more imposing synagogue which suggested that the Jewish community was increasing and becoming more prosperous. About A.D. 250 it was given a series of wall decorations, most of which have survived.

Let us now return to our Hebrew fragments. It is significant that this liturgical text is in Hebrew and not in Greek. There is no Latin text from the synagogue, and there are no other Jewish texts among the papyri. Apart from a few literary papyri we have mainly documents and military records which are most illuminating about the Roman army of this period. There are also a few private pieces.

The range of languages is relevant to our inquiry. First, except our Hebrew liturgical text, all literary pieces are in Greek. Next, the official documents and military records are in Latin or Greek, or sometimes in both. Thirdly, the remaining private texts are in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Parthian, Middle Persian, and one Syriac document, a deed of sale of A.D. 243.

The linguistic picture of the area may help us to interpret this information. Before Alexander the *lingua franca* of the Middle East was Aramaic. The official language of Alexander and his successors was Greek. This was also the recognized language of their foundations. So we would expect Greek and Aramaic to be in use at Dura before the Parthian conquest. During the Parthian period we would expect Aramaic and Greek to remain in use with but little trace of Parthian. Under the Romans Latin would be the language of the army, Greek the language of the civil administration, and for the rest the same variety should be found as before.

Let us look at the Roman period more closely. Our main sources of information are two, the inscriptions and the fragments on papyrus and parchment. The parchments and the papyri have been edited separately in the *Final Report V*, Part I. The inscriptions are to be

found in the ten fascicles of the *Preliminary Reports (PR)*, in the *Final Report VIII*, Part I for the Jewish Synagogue, and in the *Yale Classical Studies XIV*.³

In all there are about twelve hundred inscriptions from Dura, but not all of them belong to the Roman period. Approximate numbers of texts in the various languages dated to this period are as follows:

Greek	439
Latin	68
Pahlavi and Middle Persian	14
Safaitic	8
Palmyrene	7
Syriac	3
Aramaic	1
	540

While the figures for the other languages may be nearly exact (for example all the Latin inscriptions with one exception belong to this period), the number of Greek inscriptions would probably be considerably increased if we knew the date of all the undated inscriptions. We may put together the number of the inscriptions in Syriac, Aramaic and Palmyrene as representing various forms of Aramaic. The Safaitic inscriptions point to Arab connexions. The Pahlavi or Middle Persian inscriptions remind us of the proximity of the Parthians and Persians.

Aramaic inscriptions and numerous proper names show us that, though Aramaic was no longer the *lingua franca* of the area, it was submerged by Greek rather than eliminated by it. This opinion is supported by the fact that in two Greek inscriptions the participle is used where Greek would normally have a finite verb.⁴ From this example we see how Aramaic influence can show itself even in Greek.

The Greek inscriptions predominate in this period even in the temples of gods who were Semitic in origin. Thus all the inscriptions in the temple of Atargatis,⁵ in those of Artemis-Nanaia, of Adonis, of

³ Pp. 127-213 (1955): R. N. Frye, J. F. Gilliam, H. Ingholt, C. B. Welles, "Inscriptions from Dura-Europos." It is expected that when the volume of the *Final Report* containing the inscriptions is issued, some changes will have to be made in the figures now given, but it is not likely that they will be large enough to upset the present conclusions.

⁴ See *PR VII-VIII*, 129-131, nos. 867, 868.

⁵ *YCS XIV*, 131-137, inscription 3, is in Palmyrene, but is probably of the first century A.D. The temple of Zeus Megistos has one Palmyrene inscription of the second half of the second century A.D., no. 5, two Iranian inscriptions, nos. 9 and 10, and five Greek, nos. 6, 7, 8, 11, 12.

Aphlad, of the Palmyrene Gods, of Azzanathkona, are in Greek, with one or two in Latin. The Mithraeum has one bilingual inscription in Palmyrene and Greek; the others are in Greek or Latin. A bas-relief of Herakles has a text in Greek and Palmyrene. A silver vase, found in a private house, with a Syriac inscription, may be a cult object. A Palmyrene inscription was found in Wall Street under a bas-relief of two figures which may be gods. A room in another private house has a Palmyrene text referring to four gods with Semitic names.

The popyri support this evidence. From the Roman period there are 147 Latin texts, mainly military, 52 in Greek, two in Middle Persian, and one each in Parthian, Aramaic, and Syriac. The army administration is Latin, civil administration and private texts are almost entirely in Greek, but two or three texts bear witness to the proximity of Parthia and Persia, and the Aramaic texts remind us of the Aramaic substratum.

When we turn to the synagogue all is different. There is one Hebrew text on parchment. Besides this we have only inscriptions. There are nineteen Greek, twenty-two Aramaic and fifteen Middle Persian and Pahlavi. It is not surprising that there is no Latin, but it is remarkable that the largest number of texts is in Aramaic. Striking too are the Middle Persian and Parthian inscriptions.

How are we to explain this? The presence of Greek texts needs no explaining but we want to know why proportionately they are so few. The simplest and most probable answer is that the Greek element in the congregation of the synagogue was so much the smaller and weaker.

Why is the number of Aramaic texts larger? It is not enough to say that the Aramaic element was stronger than elsewhere. As we have seen, under the predominant use of Greek in Dura as a whole there are traces of Aramaic in occasional texts and in many proper names. We may recall that over the frontier in Parthian or Persian Mesopotamia were large Aramaic-speaking Jewish communities, and it is reasonable to suppose that it was the connexions with these communities in lower Mesopotamia which kept Aramaic so much in use.

With this we may connect the Hebrew liturgical fragment. Jewish liturgical texts in Greek of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. from Egypt show that Greek was still a liturgical language, and possibly the liturgical language, for Jews in Egypt in this period. The third-century Hebrew fragment from Dura is in contrast with this. It is

dangerous to rely too much on so little evidence, but as far as it goes the fragment supports our conclusion. Hebrew was used liturgically by the Jewish communities of Persian Mesopotamia, and our Hebrew fragment shows the same practice present in Dura.

We may now consider the Middle Persian and Pahlavi inscriptions. They too suggest a connexion with Parthia and Persia. What this connexion is we find it hard to determine, but the context of some of the Persian inscriptions is important. The synagogue contains interesting and instructive paintings; on several of them are Persian texts. The interpretation of these texts is disputed, but the following translation is given from the *Final Report VIII*, Part 1, of one of the longest inscriptions (no. 43):

In the month *Miθr*, in the year 14, and on the day *Saθrevar* when Yazdānpēsē, the scribe, and the scribe of the *radak* (building?) to this house came, [and by them] this picture [was looked at and] by them praise was made.

There are ten similar inscriptions which relate the visits of Persian scribes to the various paintings. Among them no. 44 is particularly important. It reads:

In the month *Miθr* in [the year] fourteen, and on the day [*Fravar*]tīn when *Hormazd*, the scribe, and Kantak, the *zandak*, and the scribe of the building, and this *zandak* of the Jews to his edifice of the God [of] the Gods of the Jews came and by them [. . .] this picture was beheld, and by them it was looked at and beheld [.....] it was looked at [.....] the picture [.....].

What is the meaning of *zandak*? Professor Lieberman of New York has related it to a Hebrew term in the Aggadath Esther *zandiqin* which, he suggests, means “dignitaries, selected men, officials.” They are in effect the representatives of the Jewish community before Pharaoh. I suggest that both the Hebrew term and the Middle Persian one are in fact the Greek word *σύνδικος*.⁶ There is no difficulty about the transliteration in Hebrew. One common meaning of *σύνδικος* in Greek is “public advocate, appointed to represent the

⁶ Examples of Hebrew *zayin* representing Greek *σ* are to be found in S. Krauss, *Griechische und lateinische Lohnwörter im Talmud, Midrasch und Targum II* (1899) 239–248. For *a* instead of Greek *υ* we may compare *sanhedrin* for *συνέδριον*.

interests of the state.” There is an example of this use in an inscription from Palmyra of the second century A.D.⁷ The word is also used at Athens of advocates chosen by the tribes to defend their interests. The word seems to describe a representative of the state or of a community. As we have seen this seems to be the meaning of the word in the Jewish text just mentioned, and it will suit the context in the Middle Persian inscription. “This *zandak* of the Jews” will be the representative of the Jewish community in Dura. Who then will Kantak the *zandak* be? Presumably the Persian representative, comparable perhaps to the *ἐθνάρχης* of King Aretas at Damascus mentioned by St. Paul.⁸ Kantak, the *zandak*, will accordingly be something like a consular representative nowadays.

In the light of this, some of the Middle Persian inscriptions in the synagogue seem to be the approval given by the Persian representatives, presumably to some of the paintings there. This explanation suggests that there was a connexion between the Jewish community and Persia before the capture and destruction of the city. It makes unnecessary the suggestion that a year or two before its fall the city was temporarily occupied by the Persians and then reoccupied by the Romans, a suggestion for which there is no other evidence.

There is one other piece of evidence for Persian influence in Dura before its fall. In the House of the Frescoes (House F, Block C7) in the main living room is a battle scene in which the Persians are victorious over the Romans or the Palmyrenes or both.⁹ This curious picture in a Roman frontier fortress could be explained if this were the house of the Persian representative in Dura. It has a number of Middle Persian or Pahlavi inscriptions.

From all this evidence we can construct a clear picture of the Jewish community of Dura. It was one of the more obviously oriental sections of the population of Dura. We can associate with this characteristic connexions both with the large Jewish community of lower Mesopotamia and with Persia.

In considerable contrast to this is the Christian chapel. For our knowledge of Christianity in Dura we are dependent on a Greek parchment fragment, a few brief inscriptions and the remains of the chapel.

⁷ LSJ 1703a *s.v.*

⁸ 2 Cor. 11:32.

⁹ PR IV, 182-199.

The parchment fragment has been published more than once. For the chapel and the inscriptions we have only the *Preliminary Report V*.

Examination of the reconstruction of the chapel at Yale University encourages me to dispute one point in the reconstruction. It is assumed that the chapel contained a font, and it has actually been suggested that the chapel was a baptistery.¹⁰ I much doubt this and I am glad to find that others do also. A font was quite unnecessary. As witnessed by the *Didache*, a second century text from Syria, it was the ancient custom to baptize in living water. This was available outside Dura in abundance in the Euphrates.

Now let us turn to an attempt to determine the character of the church at Dura. First, all our texts are in Greek, both the parchment fragment and the five inscriptions. There is an apparent exception to this, a Syriac inscription which has been translated as follows:

Khalīṣā son of Sennaq, of Qarhā (?), disciple of Rāmā.
May he be remembered before God.¹¹

It is held that as the god is not named, the phrase "before God" suggests that the man is a monotheist and that the use of the term "disciple" implies that he is a Christian. But in the three inscriptions of Epinicus and Alexander, the god is not named though he is probably one of the local divinities.¹² If the man were a Christian, we would expect him to be described as a disciple of Jesus, not of Rama. Further the inscription is on an altar, and it is doubtful whether a Christian altar would be found outside the Christian chapel at this period. We may note that Sennaq is a Parthian name. As a whole the suggestion that the inscription is Christian seems unconvincing. On the evidence the Christian community is Greek-speaking.

This indication is supported by that of costume. In the Mithraeum and the synagogue some of the costumes are Mediterranean and others oriental. When I observed that the Philistines in the synagogue paintings were dressed like Roman soldiers, I tried to apply to these paintings a principle according to which the sympathetic characters were portrayed in oriental dress and the unsympathetic ones in Mediterranean, but this distinction was not consistently observed.

In general the fact that both kinds of costume are to be found in

¹⁰ *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* IV, 365; *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*³ II, 291.

¹¹ PR III, 68-71.

¹² PR VII-VIII, 128-134 (nos. 867-869).

the synagogue and the Mithraeum need not surprise us. The synagogue, as we have seen, had strong oriental as well as Greek connexions. The cult of Mithras is of oriental origin but had much success in the West, particularly in the Roman army.

When we examine the Christian chapel, we find a different practice. So far as they can be discerned, the figures in the Christian paintings, and there are a number of them, all wore Mediterranean costume. Some are very obscure from the damage they have suffered, but there is no clear example of oriental costume among them.

These pieces of evidence suggest that Christianity came to Dura from the Greek West. This agrees with what we know of Christianity in Syria at this time. About A.D. 200 Serapion, the active bishop of Antioch, consecrated Palût the first historical bishop of Edessa.¹³ The origins of the Christian community at Dura seem to belong to the same period. Syriac Christianity at Arbela, for example, appears to be independent and older in origin.

One group of facts may seem not to agree with the suggested origin of Christianity at Dura. The evidence of literary texts discovered in Egypt is that before the fourth century, Jewish and pagan texts were almost without exception written on rolls, while Christian texts equally regularly were written in books, *codices*. At Dura eight of the nine pagan literary texts are on rolls, but the ninth, apparently a fragment of Appian, is written on a codex. On the other hand the Christian fragment of the *Diatessaron* is written on a roll.

How is this to be explained? We do not know, but two points may be made. First, we have only one Christian text from Dura, and it would be imprudent to generalise from this. Secondly, the practice of Egypt may not be true for other parts of the Roman world. We have a fragment of a Jewish liturgical roll in Greek from Egypt of the fourth century.¹⁴ It may be that in Syria Christians followed longer the Jewish practice of using rolls rather than codices. In this case our Christian fragment would be evidence for a Jewish background to Christian practice but not for any origin in a Semitic language.

An even more serious objection to the view that Christianity at Dura was derived from the Greek West is to be found in the text of the fragment of the *Diatessaron*. To explain this objection we must

¹³ Lietzmann, *Geschichte der alten Kirche* II, 270–272.

¹⁴ POxy. 17.2068. I plan a new edition of this text with commentary to demonstrate my identification of it as a Jewish text.

say a little more about the *Diatessaron* itself. It is agreed that the *Diatessaron* was a harmony of the Four Gospels compiled by Tatian about A.D. 170. It is disputed whether he compiled this harmony in Greek or Syriac. At first our fragment was regarded as strong evidence for the view that the *Diatessaron* was originally composed in Greek.

Soon after its publication scholars suggested that it was part of a retroversion into Greek from Syriac.¹⁵ They infer that first there was a Syriac text and that our Greek fragment comes from a Greek translation of this Syriac. They support their suggestion by arguing that several features in the Greek are due either to misinterpretations of the Syriac or to the misreading of Syriac characters.

Before we consider these features let us look at two points. First, the wording of the fragment is, with little exception, that of the Greek Gospels. To achieve this effect the translator from Syriac had either to have a Greek manuscript of the Gospels beside him when he made his translation from Syriac, or else to have the wording of the Greek so fixed in his mind that he could reproduce it at will. In either case we may wonder why he troubled himself to translate from the Syriac at all. In effect the Greek wording of our fragment as a whole is in favour of the view that we are dealing with a text that is derived directly from the Greek Gospels without any Syriac intermediary.

Secondly, as we have seen, all other evidence about the Christian community at Dura points to a Greek background. To counteract this evidence we need concrete instances of a contrary nature; so far these have not been produced. These two points put the burden of proof on those who argue for a Syriac text behind our Greek fragment, and suggest that we give the benefit of the doubt, where doubt exists, to the Greek evidence.

Let us now look at the principal examples where we are expected to find traces of a Syriac original behind the Greek. First, Luke 23:49, describing the women who followed Jesus from Galilee, has the phrase *αἱ γυναῖκες αἱ συνακολουθοῦσαι αὐτῷ* "the women who together followed him." The equivalent in our fragment is *αἱ γυναῖκες [τῶν συ]νακολουθησάντων α[ὐ]τῷ* "the wives of the men who together followed him." It is suggested that this depends on a misinterpretation of the Syriac. But such a hypothesis is quite unnecessary: all we need imagine is a simple desire to preserve the proprieties. A

¹⁵ See the reference in *Final Report V*, Part 1.

picture of Jesus followed by unaccompanied women could easily give rise to calumny; introduce their husbands and all is well.

Secondly, Joseph of Arimathea occurs in all the Gospels, but our fragment gives an unparalleled form of the name of his village, not *APEIMAΘAIA* but *EPINMAΘAIA*. The appearance of the *N* is held to be due to the lengthening of a *yod* into a *nun* in Syriac script. In principle this is possible, but no example of such a mistake with Arimathaea is produced from Syriac manuscripts. Let us overlook this for the moment. We note that this suggestion does not explain the *E* at the beginning of the name in our fragment.

An alternative explanation is possible within an entirely Greek tradition. Imagine that a scribe writes *APEMMAΘAIA* with double *M* for *IM* by mistake. This is resolved to *APEINMAΘAIA*. Concurrently *APE* at the beginning becomes *EP*. These two changes give us the form of the name as it occurs in our fragment without any need of a Syriac hypothesis.

Thirdly Luke 23:49 has *ὀρῶσαι ταῦτα* "seeing these things," describing the women who were witnesses of the crucifixion. This becomes in our papyrus *ὀρῶσαι τὸν CTĀ* (=σταυρωθέντα) "seeing the crucified." It is suggested that the Syriac had translated *τὸν σταυρόν* "the cross," and that this was wrongly translated back into Greek as *τὸν σταυρωθέντα*. It is pointed out that the words for cross and crucified are indistinguishable in Syriac. We may remark that *τὸν CTĀ* and *τὸν CTN̄* are easily confused in Greek and that this reference to the Syriac does nothing to explain the change of *ταῦτα* to *τὸν σταυρόν* or *τὸν σταυρωθέντα* in the first place.

We may conclude from this that the suggestion that our Greek fragment is the product of retranslation into Greek from the Syriac is unconvincing. If we accept this conclusion there remains no evidence to controvert the view that Christianity came to Dura from the Greek West. This view we may regard as holding the field until much stronger evidence is produced on the other side. We must, however, remember that the volume of the *Final Report* dealing with the Christian chapel has not yet appeared.

We may notice one further point. The Decian persecution broke out in A.D. 251, four or five years before the fall of Dura. We have from the Fayyum and elsewhere in Egypt a number of certificates of sacrifice issued in connexion with this persecution. The Christian

chapel was found in what seemed to be a kind of church house. It is unlikely that this Christian centre was unknown to the Roman authorities. Yet we find no trace of persecution in the remains.¹⁶ In view of the great dangers this frontier fortress faced, did the Roman authorities decide not to add to their difficulties by alienating the Christian community by persecution? They may not have been sure of the loyalty of the Jewish community and have preferred to let the edict of persecution remain a dead letter.

Much has been left unsaid about the church and the synagogue of Dura, the papyri and the parchments. Nonetheless something, perhaps, of the varied character of the two communities comes out clearly, the Christian derived from the Greek West and the Jewish with its strong connexions with the Persian Orient.¹⁷

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¹⁶ In particular no *libelli* have been found.

¹⁷ The substance of this paper was given as lectures at the Centre d'Etudes Orientales in the University of Geneva on 2 and 6 March 1964 and the University of Basel on 5 March. To the editors and printers of the Yale Dura-Europos texts I wish to record my appreciation for the high quality of the volume: they have combined to publish the texts in a form which enables us to use them with the greatest ease and confidence.