

BOOK REVIEW

Dura-Europos. By J.A. BAIRD. Archaeological Histories Series. London, UK and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Pp. xvi + 221. Paperback, \$26.95. ISBN: 978-1-4725-3087-5.

No other archaeological site presents a more alluring image of the abiding complexities of the Greco-Roman world than the frontier town of Dura-Europos. Rather than shy away from those complications and ambiguities, Jennifer Baird's *Dura-Europos* spotlights the unpredictable crosscurrents that shaped both the ancient history and the 20th-century excavations of Dura, a Hellenistic, Arsacid (Parthian), and then Roman town lying for five hundred years on the edge of the Syrian desert in the troubled border lands of the upper Euphrates valley. My own courses on Roman religion and imperial culture often take students to Dura for several weeks each term (with significant help from the website of the Yale University Art Gallery). Baird's *Dura-Europos* has considerably enriched those trips. Baird is a superb guide to a town that its early excavators were happy to publicize as "the Pompeii of the East" and to an archaeological site that, despite the division of much of its heritage between Damascus and New Haven, remains "one of the most well-preserved and well-documented urban environments to survive from Greco-Roman antiquity" (16).

From the modern origins of Dura-Europos's archaeology in the 1920s, through the renewed work of a Franco-Syrian team led by Pierre Leriche and Assad Al Mahmoud in the 1980s, to the site's ransacking by the Islamic State, Dura has been enmeshed in the politics of culture. As soon as such giants as James Henry Breasted, Franz Cumont, Michael Rostovtzeff and Frank Brown strode the site and such wealthy institutions as the French Academy, Yale University (where Rostovtzeff was Sterling Professor of ancient history and archaeology from 1925 to 1944) and the Rockefeller Foundation undertook financial backing, national jockeying for status and western prejudices began to ripple the surface of Dura's story. Not only the ancient history of Dura (Chapter 2), therefore, but also the site's modern interpretation is a case study in imperialism, colonialism and historical reconstruction. Baird's account of Dura's excavation history (Chapter 1) and her survey (Chapter 3) of its archival materials, primarily

housed at Yale, foreground these issues, but these themes run throughout the volume, making *Dura-Europos* not only a study of the site's multifaceted ancient history but also an exposé of early 20th-century archaeology's complicity (witting and unwitting) in the romanticizing and essentializing of the peoples and places of southwest Asia. It was nearly as natural for scholars of that period to privilege the Greek and Hellenic over the Semitic and native (e.g., 83-6) as it is, as Baird emphasizes, for today's scholars to privilege questions of identity, connectivity, diversity and multiculturalism (156).

Dura's Seleucid period is scantily represented in most media at the site, but the wide range of evidence that documents the town's long Arsacid age (ca. 100 BCE to ca. 165 CE) raises questions that persist through the Roman period until the town's abandonment following its capture by the Sasanians in the mid-3rd century. Baird demonstrates how the typically idiosyncratic material and textual sources reveal the complex nature of what it meant "to be Parthian" (29) or Roman at Dura. The textual remains (including the well-known military calendar, the *Feriale Duranum*), still not completely published but adroitly surveyed in Chapter 4, display a striking diversity of languages (e.g., Greek, Persian, Palmyrenean, Hebrew and Latin) while many texts, formal and informal, archival documents as well as graffiti, consistently problematize the categories of ethnicity, social identity and language use. The persistence of Greek as an official language through the Arsacid period, for example, as well as the elite practice of "double-naming" by which the same individual bore both a Greek and a "Semitic" name (e.g., Alexander-Ammaios) suggest the cultural (rather than ethnic) forces driving such choices. Religion, too, shows the same lean towards cultural hybridity, documenting the multicultural milieu of Arsacid and Roman Dura, even after the installation of a Roman garrison in the northern section of the town physically re-configured the cityscape. The temple of "Artemis, the goddess called *Azzanathkona*," for example, was, like most of Dura's religious buildings, Mesopotamian in plan but decorated along familiar Greco-Roman lines while Greek dominates its epigraphic material (70-1).

Two chapters (five and six) are devoted respectively to Dura's buildings and its objects, the latter including ceramics, coins and small finds as well as "art." Dura's houses (over one hundred) and especially its religious buildings (nineteen) were a primary focus of the Yale-French Academy excavations and the town's sanctuaries remain a primary attraction for scholars. Not surprisingly, as Baird emphasizes, both Dura's domestic and religious architecture resists standard typologies, displaying a mix of Greek, Mesopotamian and Syrian features. The physical

structures of the religious buildings highlight the problems created by the tendency to apply terminology (temple, *naos*, *pronaos*) imported from outside and to prefer nomenclature that disguises the hybrid character of most of the cults celebrated in them (e.g., the Temple of Zeus Kyrios rather than Zeus Kyrios/Baal-Shamin). Two buildings that have long fascinated scholars, the synagogue and the early Christian building, are treated in this chapter but are more fully explored in the context of the paintings that decorated their walls. Baird flags the “art of Dura” as a problematic category both because of the Orientalist biases that so long framed its interpretation and the distortions created by typically viewing Dura’s wall paintings decontextualized in museum settings. Nevertheless, her review of Dura’s rich material culture makes it obvious how much the city’s small finds, paintings and sculptures can reveal about the lifeways of the city’s inhabitants during its Arsacid and Roman centuries.

Dura-Europos dexterously surveys a century of work at Dura at the same time that it measures the distance in methods and questions that separate the age of Rostovtzeff and Cumont from our own. In the final analysis, Baird’s observation that the reliefs and inscriptions from the Temple of Aphlad reveal a story of “cultural, religious, and linguistic practices” so deeply entangled as to be inextricable from one another (73), neatly epitomizes Dura’s history. Cultural hybridity, not hierarchy, is both Baird’s leitmotiv and the site’s underlying form (86). Although Dura’s early 20th-century excavation history still shadows our view of the site, Jennifer Baird allows us to see Dura more clearly in the light of current scholarly pre-occupations.

DENNIS TROUT

University of Missouri, troutd@missouri.edu