

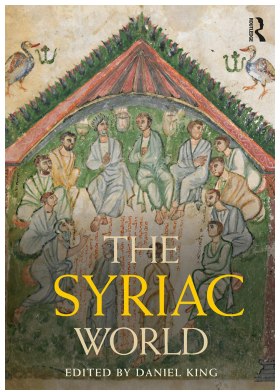
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Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Syriac World

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The Pre-Christian Religions of the Syriac-Speaking Regions

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315708195-4>

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Published online on: 18 Dec 2018

How to cite :- John F. Healey. 18 Dec 2018, *The Pre-Christian Religions of the Syriac-Speaking Regions from: The Syriac World* Routledge

Accessed on: 29 Jan 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315708195-4>

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CHAPTER THREE

THE PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS OF THE SYRIAC-SPEAKING REGIONS



John F. Healey

Syriac is thought of as a ‘Christian’ language which became predominantly, so far as surviving records are concerned, a theological and liturgical tongue. We are fortunate, however, in having sources of information on the *pre*-Christian Syriac-speaking communities of Edessa and its surroundings, though, as we will see, these sources provide us with an incomplete picture of the society and linguistic situation in which Christian Syriac emerged.

There is an additional difficulty in defining precisely the geographical boundaries of the Syriac linguistic region in the first centuries CE, and they did not remain fixed over time. Our approach here will be to concentrate on pre-Christian Edessa and its immediate region, while referring also briefly to comparable evidence of pre-Christian paganism more widely in northern Mesopotamia and Syria (especially Ḥaṭra and Palmyra).

SOURCES

Very few scholarly treatments of religion in pre-Christian Edessa exist (Segal 1970: 42–61; Drijvers 1980; Ross 2001: 85–101). All have to cope with the limitations of the sources, which can be considered under the following headings.

Literary sources

Literary accounts of pre-Christian religion in Syriac date from the Christian period and these obviously have to be treated with caution, since the inherent Christian bias of such writings is hardly likely to give either an accurate or fair picture of pre-Christian paganism. A few appear to contain genuine information reported in contexts in which it is unlikely that basic details have been falsified. Thus, *The Book of the Laws of Countries* of Bardaiṣan (ca. 154–222), a dialogue written down by one of his followers, contains useable details. Bardaiṣan was a Christian, if barely recognised as such by later writers, who tend to treat him as a pagan and a heretic. This circumstance gives more credence to the book as a source of information. A similar trustworthiness attaches to Julian the Apostate’s comments on Edessan religion in his *Oration IV*: it is hard to imagine why it would contain false information.

In some other sources, the context in which information is provided is polemical and a judgement has to be made as to whether the information is likely to be correct. Frequently cited in the present context are *The Teaching of Addai* (dated perhaps to the fifth century) and the *Homily on the Fall of Idols* by Jacob of Sarug (late-fifth century). To these we will return. Reference will also be made to the *Oration of Pseudo-Meliton* (of uncertain date), though the author's approach is euhemeristic and the details given are hard to corroborate.

Archaeology[†]

Archaeological evidence in the strict sense is extremely meagre: Edessa itself has grown into the sprawling modern city of Şanlıurfa and there has been little scientific archaeological excavation of relevance, except in one area to the west of the city centre. There are, however, the important sites of Dayr Yaqub on the southern edge of the modern city and Sumatar Harabesi further to the south, both of which have yielded relevant inscriptions. The former of these sites has been subjected to close study (Deichmann and Peschlow 1977; inscription As62) and the latter was surveyed superficially by J. B. Segal (1953, see also 1954), to whom we owe what is still the most important work on Edessa itself (Segal 1970). And from Edessa there have also been sporadic but revealing finds, often uncovered by modern building works. Sadly even the most elementary recording of such finds is neglected, and the local museum is rarely called in to deal with finds before they disappear, either completely or onto the antiquities market.

The Haleplibahçe area to the west of the city centre is a rare exception. Recent discoveries there include a series of mosaics probably of fifth/sixth century date. Though pagan in their themes, these mosaics (Karabulut et al. 2011) are of Byzantine date and are paralleled elsewhere in the Edessa region (e.g. in the sixth century at Serrīn in Syria: Balty 1990).

Among the surviving mosaics and fragments of mosaics of *earlier* date, some are from tomb chambers (such as the mosaics containing inscriptions Am4 and Am5), but several probably come from villas or similar buildings. Broadly these mosaics belong to the tradition of mosaic-making well known to us from western Syria (see Balty 1995). They reveal decorative themes derived from Greco-Roman mythology, reflecting the interests of a westward-looking elite which was imitating Roman fashion, but containing Syriac inscriptions which, apart from helping us to identify the persons depicted, also show a high degree of integration between Syriac and Greco-Roman traditions. Figures depicted (and named in Syriac script) include Māralāhē/Zeus, Hera, Chronos, Prometheus, Achilles, Patroclus, Priam, Hecuba, Briseis, Troilus, and the River Euphrates. The mosaics are numerous enough to give us a rather full picture of the local Edessan tradition of mosaic-making, its artistic conventions and its iconography (Colledge 1994; Parlasca 1983, 1984; Balty and Briquel-Chatonnet 2000).

To the south of Edessa there are two tomb-towers incorporating inscriptions, the one at Dayr Yaqub (As62, above) and another at Serrīn in Syria. Both have been studied archaeologically (for Serrīn, see Gogrāfe 1995; Bs1).

Inscriptions

The pre-Christian Syriac inscriptions (on stone, in mosaics, and also on parchments) are our most important source of information on pre-Christian Edessan religion and

society. Called ‘Old Syriac’ because of minor linguistic differences from Classical Syriac (Healey 2008), they extend in date from a probable 6 CE to about 250 CE. By the latter date Christianity was already established in Edessa, though it was more than another fifty years before Bishop Qona began to build the city’s cathedral around the time the Edict of Constantine made Christianity licit. Whatever about the size of the earlier Christian community and its date of origin, it is noteworthy that the Old Syriac inscriptions reflect a *pagan* culture which was predominant at least among the elite: there is no reason to believe that any of these inscriptions was written by a Christian.²

The evidence of the inscriptions is most important, however, because of what they tell us about the pagan religious practices of the region in the pre-Christian period. The vast majority of the pagan Syriac inscriptions (and the three long legal parchments from the 240s CE which are of no religious interest apart from providing some theophoric personal names) are gathered in the corpus published in Drijvers and Healey (1999) (DH). Depending on the way of counting, the total number of inscriptions in stone and mosaic in 1999 was about ninety-five (excluding coins and the parchments). This database has been expanded since 1999 by the addition of approximately forty further epigraphic items of varying lengths and places of origin, many of which are not yet published. We are thus dealing with a (meagre) total corpus of about 150 items.

Apart from personal names (on which see below), relatively few of these inscriptions have direct religious content – the number increases if we assume that the funerary mosaics have some bearing on religious beliefs, but, as we will see, the literary sources remain vitally important.

Theophoric personal names

There are in the inscriptions and parchments a number of transparent theophoric personal names, i.e. names incorporating the name of an identifiable deity. The list which follows is selective and references are not given, but most can be traced easily through DH:

Allāhā:	<i>brlh</i> ’, <i>brtlh</i> ’ (is ‘the god’ one of those named below?)
Allāt:	<i>’bdlt</i> , <i>’wydlt</i> , <i>’wydlt</i> , <i>zydlt</i>
Atargatis:	<i>’bd’t</i> ’, <i>mtr’t</i> ’, <i>br’t</i> ’, <i>šlm’t</i> ’, <i>zbd’t</i> ’
Ba’alšamīn:	<i>brb’s</i> ’, <i>brb’smyn</i>
Bēl:	<i>blbn</i> ’, <i>blšw</i> , <i>’lbl</i> , <i>bly</i> , <i>mr’bylh</i> ’ (?)
Hadad:	<i>brhdd</i>
Naḥay:	<i>’bdnḥy</i> , <i>’bdnḥy</i> , <i>’mtnḥy</i> , <i>’šrdwnḥ</i> ’ (?)
Nanaya:	<i>btyny</i>
Nebō:	<i>brnbw</i> , <i>brnbs</i> , <i>brny</i>
Nešrā:	<i>nšryhb</i>
Šamaš:	<i>’mšmš</i> , <i>bršmš</i> , <i>’bdšmš</i> , <i>šmšgrm</i> , <i>šmšyhb</i> , <i>šmš’qb</i> , <i>lšmš</i>
Sēmēion/a:	<i>brsmy</i> ’, <i>btsmy</i> ’, <i>’bsmy</i> ’, <i>bsmy</i> ’
Sīn:	<i>’mtsy</i> , <i>wrdsyn</i> , <i>šlmsyn</i> , <i>blsyn</i>
al-‘Uzzā:	<i>mt’zt</i>

(Some theophoric names are harder to analyse: *brklb*’ [Kalbā = Nergal?; see comment on As48 in DH; it also appears in *The Teaching of Addai* in Howard 1981: 67,

Syr. 33, l. 12]; *bršlm*, *btšlm* and *'bšlm* [a deity called Šalmā related to Šalman, as at Ḥaṭra (Beyer 1998: 150; Drijvers 1977: 834)], and *'bdšwk*. A number of the 'pagan' names above, and others, occur in the early *Christian* literature in Syriac, names such as Šarbēl, 'Abdnebō, 'Absamyā, Barsamyā, 'Abšalmā and 'Abdšamaš [see Preissler 1989; Harrak 1992].)

Of the more than forty names in the list above, the god Šamaš appears in seven (names of about fifteen separate individuals), but he is not explicitly mentioned in any inscription, though there is other evidence of his cult (below). Bēl appears in five, as does Atargatis, but neither is explicitly mentioned in any inscription, though Atargatis's importance is clear from a passage in Bardaišan (below). Sīn (four) and Naḥay (four) are both explicitly mentioned in inscriptions, but Nebō (three times) does not appear in the inscriptions. He and Bēl do appear, however, in the literary sources (below). Ba'alšamīn, the great pan-Syrian deity, appears in two names, but there is no other direct evidence of his cult at Edessa or its immediate region.

It will be clear from the above that the amount of information available to us from Syriac-language sources and from the immediate area of Edessa is meagre. There is a temptation to look to other, better-evidenced centres in the general region of Edessa for further light on its religion. Palmyra is not far away and has a number of points of cultural contact with Edessa: because of the number of inscriptions and the extent of archaeological works there, it is much better known than Edessa. And Ḥaṭra, to the east, is similar, though with a smaller number of inscriptions. Hierapolis is a special case because of the survival of Lucian's *Dea Syria*.

The temptation to refer constantly to these to fill out information lacking at Edessa should, however, be avoided. Apart from the obvious fact that the gaps to be filled are so enormous that a high degree of speculation would be involved, recent scholarship has made us more aware of the *variety* of religious expression in this region (see e.g. Kaizer 2008). Each cultural centre had its own religious construct with its own rituals and styles, as we can see from the immense differences between Palmyra, Ḥaṭra, and Hierapolis themselves. (For a fuller account drawing in evidence from outside Edessa and its environs, see Drijvers 1980.)

EVIDENCE OF JUDAISM

Before turning to the detailed evidence of pagan deities, we should note that Judaism was well established in the city of Edessa and its region in the pre-Christian period (Drijvers 1985; Segal 1970: 41–2). Hints of this are provided by literary evidence. Firstly, according to legend, the first steps towards Christianity involved Jews. In *The Teaching of Addai*, it is to the Jewish household of Tobiah that the evangelist Addai first comes for lodging (Howard 1981: 11). It is hardly likely that this would have been introduced at a late stage into the tradition, since all the evidence suggests that antisemitism was strong in the area in the later Christian period and is already evident in the Addai story. Secondly, it is established that much of the Syriac Old Testament of the Peshiṭta translation had a Jewish origin, i.e. the Hebrew Bible was translated into the local Aramaic dialect, Syriac, by Jews, before 300 CE (Weizmann 1999; Brock 2006: 23–7). This suggests that the local Jewish community must have been of significant size and sophistication. And finally we have the direct evidence of inscriptions: several Jewish inscriptions of very early date have been found in and

around Edessa and they too are written in the local Aramaic of the region, though using a Jewish form of the Aramaic script (Noy and Bloedhorn 2004: 128–32).

THE PAGAN DEITIES IN EDESSA

The evidence of the literary sources does not fit easily with that of the personal names and of the inscriptions themselves, mainly because deities proclaimed in the literary sources as having been prominent at Edessa appear only in personal names. This may be because of the unevenness of the epigraphic record. Thus there are several explicit references to the god Sīn, though these are concentrated at rural Sumatar, while there are no religious inscriptions as such at all from the immediate area of Edessa itself, so that we only have personal names from the city as a guide. This may explain why, for example, the deities Bēl, Nebō, and Atargatis appear epigraphically only in personal names, despite the fact that they were prominent in the city according to the literary sources.

Bēl and Nebō

In fact there is strong literary evidence that Nebō, Bēl (possibly identified with Hadad, who appears in a single theophoric name: Ross 2001: 90), and Atargatis (below) were major deities of pagan Edessa, despite their limited appearance in direct evidence. Drijvers (1980: 40–75) adduces a number of later Christian polemical texts which accuse the Edessans of having followed these cults. Addai's sermon at Edessa in *The Teaching of Addai* (probably fifth century) includes the following passage:

Who is this man-made idol Nebō whom you worship and Bēl whom you honour? Behold, there are some of you who worship Bat-Nikkal, like the inhabitants of Ḥarran your neighbours, and Tar'atā, like the inhabitants of Mabbōg, and Nešrā (the Eagle), like the Arabs, and the sun and the moon, like the rest of the inhabitants of Ḥarran.

(Howard 1981: 49, Syr. 24, ll. 15–20)

This implies that there were some Edessans who worshipped deities not regarded as being fully native to the city, such as Tar'atā and the sun and moon deities (see below). As far as Bat-Nikkal is concerned, she is clearly a moon-goddess, daughter of Ningal, who was worshipped at Ḥarran (where an as yet unpublished Syriac dedication to *nykl* has been found: to be published by M. Önal and A. Desreumaux). Nešrā, here associated with the Arab element of the population (probably the 'Arabs' of the area called 'Arab' to the south-east of Edessa), cannot be clearly identified, though his name means 'the Eagle' and 'Our Lord the Eagle' figures in Hatran religion (Drijvers 1980: 41; Beyer 1998: 149). The god Nasr was worshipped in pre-Islamic north Arabia (Höfner 1965: 457).

There are other passages in *The Teaching of Addai* which mention the worship of Bēl and Nebō. In one place they are specified as being the gods of the city ('their gods') (Howard 1981: 69, Sy. 34, l. 6) and in Addai's final address he warns his followers:

Again, beware of pagans who worship the sun and the moon, Bēl and Nebō, and the rest of those they call gods.

(Howard 1981: 87, Syr. 43, ll. 22–3)

While not specifying Edessa, these texts further reinforce the evidence of the earlier passage quoted above.

There is also a section of the *Homily on the Fall of Idols* by Jacob of Sarug (ca. 451–521) referring to Satan’s activity:

in Edessa he set Nebō and Bēl together with many others, he led astray Ḥarran by Sīn, Baʿalshamīn and Bar Nemrā and by my Lord with his Dogs . . . and the goddesses Tarʿatā and Gadlat.

(Martin 1876: 110, ll. 52–4; Bedjan 1907: 797–8)

The allocation of different deities to particular places or peoples is noteworthy, though some of the identifications are unclear (see e.g. Dirven 2009). These texts cannot be regarded as the last word on these issues, nor do they imply water-tight boundaries marking the geographical spheres of each of the deities. Sīn and the moon-goddess Bat-Nikkal are not *restricted* to Ḥarran or Atargatis to Hierapolis/Mabbōg. But the texts do suggest a strong association between Edessa and the pair Bēl and Nebō. It is notable also that both deities have a long history going back to ancient Mesopotamia (Bēl-Marduk of Babylon, Nebō or Nabū of Borsippa), but they are equally prominent in Palmyra and Ḥaṭra (Gawlikowski 1990: 2608–25, 2644–6; Kaizer 2002: 67–79, 89–99; Beyer 1998: 149). We should not assume that the deity behind each name was identical with the ancient Mesopotamian version. Local deities probably adopted the name and some features from Mesopotamian tradition, Bēl representing some local divinity in a kind of *interpretatio babyloniaca* (so Drijvers 1980: 53, 73, also identifying Nebō as Mercury, 62–3).

Atargatis (Tarʿata or ʿAtā/eh), Hadad, and the Sēmēion (smyʿ)

There is another important literary source referring to the religion of Edessa in *The Book of the Laws of Countries* of Bardaiṣan (154–222):

In Syria and Edessa there was the custom of self-emasculatation in honour of Tarʿata, but when king Abgar had come to the faith, he ordered that every man who emasculated himself should have his hand chopped off.

(Drijvers 1965: 58–9, ll. 20–1)

Given the date and nature of this work, it is strong testimony to the importance of Atargatis at Edessa. We have seen that her name appears relatively often in theophoric names and other, iconographic evidence has been adduced (Drijvers 1980: 76–121, especially 80–3). The fish-pools which still exist in modern Şanlıurfa may go back to the pools observed by the pilgrim Egeria (Wilkinson 1999: 133, §19. 7) and to fish-pools sacred to Atargatis, a feature of her cult reflected in Lucian’s *Dea Syria*. Hierapolis is, of course, very close to Edessa.

Hadad, who is associated with Atargatis at Hierapolis, appears only in a personal name at Edessa, *brhdd*, while the *sēmēion* appears to have a role at Edessa associated with that of Atargatis and Hadad as a pairing: thus in a relief from Edessa interpreted as representing Atargatis and Hadad with the *sēmēion* (Drijvers 1980: 80–2, pl. xxii). It figured also in the cults at Hierapolis and Ḥaṭra, but is not directly known in

Edessa except through personal names like *'bsmy*' and *brsmy*' (see Lightfoot 2003: 446–8 [inc. fig. 36], 540–7; Beyer 1998: 152–3; Drijvers 1977: 828–36). The name Barsamyā appears in *The Teaching of Addai* (Howard 1981: 71, Syr. 45:6).

Šamaš, Azizos, and Monimos

Apart from personal names we may note that the south gate of the city of Edessa was called the 'Gate of Beth Šamaš', with reference, one assumes, to a temple dedicated to that deity (see the *Chronicle of Edessa*, § lxviii). Christian martyrs met their fate when they refused to worship the sun (*Martyrdom of Shmōnā and Gūryā*: Burkitt 1913: §§ 42–3, where the sun-god is called *šamšā māran*, 'the Sun our Lord'). We may note also the fact that the emperor Julian (r. 361–63) regarded Edessa as a centre of the worship of the sun-god. In his *Oration IV* on King Helios (Lacombrade 1964: 128, §34), he makes reference to the cult of Helios at Edessa:

The inhabitants of Edessa, a place sacred to Helios from of old, have Monimos and Azizos seated alongside him. And Iamblichus . . . takes this to mean that Monimos is Hermes and Azizos Ares, associates of Helios, dispensing many benefits on the earth.

Both Emesa (which some prefer to read instead of Edessa here, though without justification) and Ḥaṭra are known for the special role that the sun-god played in each (Tubach 1986, specifically 63–125 on Edessa; on Ḥaṭra Sommer 2005: 383–8). Only the Julian passage attests to it explicitly at Edessa. Azizos and Monimos appear to represent Semitic *'Azīz* and *Mun'im* ('Mighty' and 'Kindly': Drijvers 1980: 159–61 notes that both appear as divine names in Palmyra), probably morning and evening stars, perhaps manifestations of the planet Venus, traditionally conceived as connected with sunrise and sunset (Drijvers 1980: 149–52, though Tubach 1986: 63–71 prefers to associate Monimos with Nebō/Mercury, who was associated with the sun-god in Mesopotamia). Nabataean al-'Uzzā, 'the Mighty Goddess', is another manifestation (Healey 2001: 114–19; note Syriac *'wzy* in Isaac of Antioch as worshipped by the Arabs: Bickell 1873: 210, l. 101; the same text in Isaac calls the moon-god *syn*': 214: l. 214). Al-'Uzzā's name appears in a single Syriac personal name, *mt'zt*.

Naḥay

The only deity mentioned explicitly in the inscriptions apart from Sin (below) is Naḥay (Bs1 at Serrīn and also on a coin-type, Co2). The Serrīn inscription is funerary and only mentions in passing the function of the builder of the monument, Ma'nū, as *'bdr* of Naḥay'. He is also called *qaššiša*, which in Classical Syriac is used for 'priest' (the equivalent of *prebytēros*), though in the Serrīn inscription it probably simply means 'the elder'.

Naḥay is known also in the personal names (above) and in Palmyrene personal names (Stark 1971: 99). Drijvers (1980: 155–6) and others refer to the gods of Adummatu (al-Jawf/Dūmat al-Jandal in Saudi Arabia) taken away by Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) in one of his campaigns in north Arabia: 'Atar-samayin, Dāya, Nuḥāya, Ruldāwu, Abirillu and Atar-qurumā, the gods of these Arabs' (Leichty 2011: 1–26,

no. 1, specifically p. 19, ll. 10–12 [p. 49]; similarly no. 6, iii', 5'–7'; no. 97, ll. 10–11 [p. 180]). The divine name *nby* appears commonly in Thamudic B inscriptions (Höfner 1965: 456–7) and there is no doubt that the deity Nuḥaya (in cuneiform *Nu-ḫa-a-a*) of Adummatu is the same as the *nby* who appears in a Dumaitic inscription from Sakāka, where a similar list of local gods appears: 'Ruḷā and Nuhay (*nby*) and 'Attarsam' (Winnett and Reed 1970: 80–1, no. 23: the suggestion there, repeated in Drijvers 1980: 156 [earlier in Drijvers 1972b: 360], that NHY might be a sun-deity is based on a single inscription of doubtful reading and interpretation). To judge from the spelling (with {h}), Old Syriac NHY appears to be borrowed from a Mesopotamian source.³

So far as Syriac evidence is concerned, it is likely that Naḥay is a deity worshipped in the Euphrates and Palmyrene areas, of male gender if the coin evidence is reliable (Cs2: 'lh' *nḥy*, read as 'lh' *nḥy*). The author of the Serrīn inscription seems to be a local ruler of the east bank of the Euphrates. There is no indication in the inscription of a direct connection with Edessa, though the language and script suggest it, as do the personal name Ma' nū and the religious details (*bdr* [on which seen below at Sumatar], *qšyš'*, Naḥay).

Kutbay

There are other sources which allude to Edessan deities, but they are often euhemeristic and fanciful. One which is worthy of mention is the *Oration of Pseudo-Meliton of Sardis*, which tells us of the worship in Edessa of the goddess Kutbay (*kwby*), who might be related to the Arab/Nabataean al-Kutbā (Cureton 1855: 44, ll. 31–3, Syr. 25, ll. 12–14; Lightfoot 2007; Healey 2001: 123), though the evidence is inconclusive.

Ba' alšamīn

Ba' alšamīn, the great pan-Syrian deity, appears in two names, but, surprisingly perhaps, there is no other direct evidence of his cult at Edessa or its region. This may just be an accident of discovery, since he is well known in Palmyra and at Ḥaṭra.

THE GOD SĪN AT SUMATAR HARABESI

The moon-god, Sīn, played the central role at least at the site of Sumatar (or Soḡmatar) Harabesi about 60 km south-east of Edessa in the Tektek mountains (in general Drijvers 1980: 122–45). It is closer to Ḥarran than to Edessa itself. The Syriac-related monuments at the site were first noted by Pognon, who visited the area in 1901 and 1905 and published the inscriptions he found in 1907 (Pognon 1907). He found the cave on the site which came to be known as 'Pognon's cave', but remained unaware of the importance of the central hill at the site and did not mention its many inscriptions. The discovery of the latter was left to J. B. Segal in 1952, with subsequent publication of the inscriptions and a general assessment of the site published in Segal 1953 (Figure 3.1).

Sīn is named explicitly in three texts from Sumatar, and the presence there of his cult is one of the few firmly established facts on religion in the Edessa region in this period.



Figure 3.1 Inscription between two figures in Pognon's Cave, Sumatar

Source: Author

The texts mentioning Sīn explicitly read as follows:

As27, to the left of a relief on the central hill:

Šilā [son of Šil]ā made the image in honour of the god Sīn, for the life of Tiridates son of Adōnā and for the life of his brothers.

As28, to the left of As27:

I, the god, see him. I see him and behold, I, Sīn (?), the g[od . . .]

As60, on a statue from Sumatar (Figure 3.2):

Image of Lišamaš son of Šamašyahb, which Barnay, his brother, made for him.
Whoever destroys it, Sīn will be his judge.



Figure 3.2 Inscription from Sumatar mentioning the god Sīn

Source: Author

Šin also appears in a Greek and Syriac legal parchment from the Middle Euphrates witnessed by *'wrls brsmy' mks' dsyn*, 'Aurelius Barsamyā, tax-collector of [the god] Šin' (P. Euphr. 10:24; the text is a sale executed in Ḥarran and the reference appears to be to the Ḥarran temple of Šin: Feissel et al. 1997: 45–53, specifically 52). Šin may also be alluded to through the relief pillars surmounted by a crescent shape in 'Pognon's cave' (Pognon 1907: 25).

Šin is, of course, in origin an ancient deity of southern Mesopotamia, with his main temple at Ur. We do not need, however, to look so far away for a context for the appearance of Šin at Sumatar, since Ḥarran, which in the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods became a major centre of the Šin cult, is close by (Green 1992). It is not surprising that Šin worship should have spilled over from Ḥarran, and indeed it had been well known in the area of Upper Mesopotamia and Syria in older Aramaic evidence: thus the priest Si'-gabbar and various moon deities in the Neirab inscriptions, possibly of the early seventh century BCE (Gibson 1975: 93–8, nos 18–19). That this association of the area with the moon-god continued into Late Antiquity is reflected in Julian the Apostate's praying there to the moon-goddess (Ammianus Marcellinus XXIII.3.2).

Beyond the mere occurrence of the name of Šin as that of the deity worshipped at least at Sumatar, there is a little more we can add.

Sumatar was a religious site connected with significant funerary monuments and memorials. The former (initially identified by Segal as planetary temples like the temples at Ḥarran described by tenth-century author al-Mas'ūdī: Segal 1953: 113–14) are located on hills which surround the central hill. The funerary memorials are located near the centre of the site in Pognon's Cave, which has its walls lined with full-sized carvings of human figures (in the 'Parthian' style typical of the region) and, importantly, inscriptions identifying the individuals as local rulers who probably exercised power under the ultimate authority of the king in Edessa. The cave is best interpreted as a focus of a funerary ritual, though it was not, apparently, the place of burial of the officials involved.

At the centre of the site is a high limestone outcrop, on which the inscriptions referring to Šin and other religious details are found. Some are on natural steps in the limestone which provide suitable vertical surfaces. Much more remarkable are the dozen or so inscriptions which are carved horizontally (facing the sky) on the top surface of the hill.

That this hill had religious significance cannot be in any doubt. One of the horizontal inscriptions actually refers to 'this blessed mountain' (As37):

In Šebaṭ of the year 476 (= 165 CE), in that month, I, Maniš son of Adōnā and Ma'nā, and Alkūr and Bēlbena and Alkūr, his brother, we set up (*šmn*) this pillar (*nšbt'*) on this blessed mountain (*ṭwr' bryk'*) and erected a seat (*'qymn krs'*) for the one who maintains it. The governor will be *budar* (*bwdr*) after Tiridates, the governor, and he will give the seat to the one who is going to maintain it. His recompense will be from Māralāhē. But if he withholds the seat or the pillar is ruined, he, the god, will be the judge.

The other major inscription, As₃₆, refers to an altar set up at the site:

In the month of Šebaṭ of the year 476, I, Tiridates son of Adōnā, governor of 'Arab, built (*bnyt*) this altar ('*lt*') and set up a pillar (*šmt nšbt*) for Māralāhē, for the life of my lord the king and his children and for the life of Adōnā, my father, and for my own life and that of my brothers and of our children.

There is some dispute about the precise nature of the *nšbt* here said in each inscription to have been located on top of the hill. Segal and those following him took the term to refer to a 'pillar'. Palmer (2015) has argued that a better translation would be 'sapling', understanding this as a poetic term for a wooden cultic sculpture or monument. There is nothing in the inscriptions, of course, to help us decide between a wooden and a stone monument: one can only decide on the basis of comparison with other monuments and with contemporary and later dialects of Aramaic. In favour of 'sapling' would be especially the later Classical Syriac usage of the word *nšbt*, though the verb *šym* for the action involved suggests 'to place' rather than 'to plant (a sapling)' or 'to build (a wooden structure described as a sapling)'. Earlier translators of the text (DH: 106; Segal 1954: 25–6) gave more weight to contemporary usage in Palmyrene Aramaic and in other languages, while bearing in mind the common Classical Syriac use of NŠB for the 'founding' of monasteries. The near-contemporary Palmyrene evidence is that of an inscription referring to the 'making' (*'bd*) of 'this *nšbt*' and altar' (Hillers and Cussini 1996: no. 1546: 3–4: *nšbt' dh w'lt*).

The precise nature of what was erected remains uncertain, but there were two of them, erected by different persons at more or less the same time. We may note also that there was an altar of some sort on the hill. Indeed, Segal clearly thought that there was a substantial building there, in which case the above inscriptions may have been located *inside* this temple building (and then would not have been open to the elements). As₃₇ refers to the establishing of a 'chair', and Segal drew attention to coins on which there appear a pillar and a throne (Segal 1970: 58).

Maintenance is one of the concerns of As₃₇, and here we are given a hint that the person responsible for this was called *bwdr*. This term is obscure. It occurs elsewhere only once, in the Serrīn inscription (above), where there is reference to the *bdr* (note the difference of spelling and hence more uncertainty) of the deity Naḥay. It is assumed that one of these is a variant spelling of the other: the implication would be that the vocalisation was something like *budar* or *būdar*. The root BDR in Syriac means 'to sprinkle', and one might imagine a term describing a ritual function. There is, however, no evidence to support such an interpretation and Segal (1954: 27) looked (improbably) to a mediæval Arabic term of unknown meaning connected with the cult at Ḥarran according to Ibn al-Nadīm.

Other inscriptions on the top of the hill are less momentous. They mostly belong to the 'Remembered be . . .' category and would be secondary to the main religious function of the hill (e.g. As₃₁; on such inscriptions see Healey 1996).

One other detail that can be derived from the inscriptions at the site is the fact that the main god at Sumatar was given the epithet *Māralāhē*, ‘lord of the gods’ (Ross 2001: 91; As36: 3; As37: 8 and As31: 3).

We know from the Syriac New Testament that this title, in the form *māre ‘alāhē*, was regarded by the translators as a suitable substitute for the name of Zeus (Acts 14: 12–13). In one of the mosaics containing Syriac text, the god Zeus (alongside Hera) is called *Māralāhē (mrlh’)* (Cm11: 1). It is clear, therefore, that this epithet could be applied to Zeus. But at Sumatar it appears to refer to *Sīn*, as the ultimate divine title of the highest deity worshipped there. The title has its historical roots in Akkadian *bēl ilāni*, ‘Lord of the Gods’, a title used of *Sīn* and of other deities in Mesopotamian tradition. In As20: 6 from Edessa itself *Māralāhē* is the god who might curse anyone who disturbs a tomb, and As31 is a call for remembrance ‘before *Māralāhē*’. There is also evidence of the title from *Ḥaṭra* (*syn mrlh’* on coins, Vattioni 1981: 107), Ashur (Aggoula 1985: 38, no. 15b: 2 = *Bēl*), Sa‘adiyyah (Vattioni 1981: 106), and Tille (Lightfoot and Healey 1991: line 6 = Zeus), as well as Palmyra (Gawlikowski 1974: 78–9, no. 154; Hillers and Cussini 1996: no. 1939). At Sumatar it is virtually certain that ‘*Māralāhē*’ refers to *Sīn*.

The only direct evidence of a cult of *Sīn* at Edessa itself is the statement in *The Teaching of Addai* cited earlier to the effect that some Edessans worshipped him, just as the *Ḥarranians* did, though *Sīn*-based theophoric names suggest that the deity was widely venerated. It is possible that *Māralāhē* in As20 from a cave-tomb on the edge of Edessa also refers to *Sīn*, which seems more likely in this context than Zeus. *Bēl* or *Ba‘alšamīn* are other possibilities.

Sumatar, Serrīn, and politics

While it is impossible on the basis of the above evidence to reach any far-reaching conclusions, there does emerge from the Sumatar inscriptions and from the Serrīn inscription a common theme: the connection between religious practice at these sites and regional politics.

Sumatar inscriptions frequently refer to the *Adōnā* family and to the *šlyt’ d’rb*, ‘the ruler of the ‘Arab region’ (As36: 2; As47: 3; As49: 2–3; As51: 4–5; As52: 4–5). The reference is to the area south-east of Edessa stretching towards *Ḥaṭra*. At the same time As36: 4 implies loyalty to the king, probably the king of Edessa (though the dated inscriptions at Sumatar appear to come from the period of Parthian control of the city, when Parthian puppet rulers were imposed). The funerary cult of Pognon’s cave thus appears to be connected with the kingship in Edessa and with control of the local region by officials of the king, members of the *Adōnā* family. It is almost certain that the same officials were the custodians of the cult of *Sīn* at Sumatar, responsible for its maintenance and possibly holding the office of *budar*.

The information in the Serrīn inscription is thinner, but it seems to imply a similar situation of a local ruler who was ultimately under the authority of the Edessan



Figure 3.3 Funerary inscription for the governor of Birecik

king. The inscription is funerary, not religious, but the title *budar* again appears on the inscription and the implication is that this was an important religious office in the locality. Thus the Serrīn inscription too can be regarded as reflecting the power structures of the Edessan kingdom.

We may even be able to add the Birecik inscription, not so far mentioned, to this picture (As55) (Figure 3.3). This funerary inscription, probably dated to 6 CE (though the date is damaged and 106 cannot be ruled out completely), also has a semi-official character, since it was erected by ‘Zarbiyan, son of Abgar, governor of Birtā (= Birecik), tutor (*mrbyn*’, on which note the *mrbyn*’ of the king at Ḥaṭra: Vattioni 1981: 74–5, no. 203: 2) of ‘Awīdallāt son of Ma‘nū son of Ma‘nū’. On the date of the inscription, see Luther (2009: 20–2) and Kiraz (2012: 245).

EVIDENCE FOR THE SPREAD OF GRECO-ROMAN RELIGIOUS IDEAS

Already in the first centuries CE Edessa was subject to strong cultural and to some extent religious influence from the Greco-Roman world. In artistic terms this is exemplified by the prominence of mosaics. Many relate to tombs and conceptions of the afterlife (below), but some show striking reflections of Greco-Roman mythology and legend.



Figure 3.4 Orpheus taming the wild animals (mosaic from Edessa, AD 194)

Source: Author

The ‘mythological’ mosaics include one which depicts the creation of man by Zeus in the guise of Māralāhē and includes depictions of Hera, Chronos, and Prometheus (Cm11; Balty and Briquel Chatonnet 2000: 32–51), two which have Orpheus as the central figure (Am7; Segal 1970: pl. 44; Healey 2006) (Figure 3.4) and fragments which depict Achilles, Patroclus, Priam and Briseis, Hecuba, and Troilus (Cm5, Cm4; Balty and Briquel Chatonnet 2000: 51–71) and the mythologised River Euphrates (Bm1 from Tell Ma’sūdiyyah, south-east of Aleppo). In all of these cases the mosaic figures are accompanied by Syriac text indicating who is depicted, which shows very concretely the integration of Hellenic ideas into the local culture of the Edessa region. Some of these mosaics appear to have originated in villas (the creation, the Euphrates, and probably the Trojan War series). It seems probable that the mosaics containing Syriac were commissioned by patrons who wanted to assert their Syrian identity as well as their integration into Western culture.

Ross argued (2001: 96) that there is an absence of evidence of *interpretatio graeca* of the local deities of Edessa (by contrast with, e.g., Palmyra). It is fair to say that there is no wholesale conversion of the Edessan deities into Greek versions of themselves, again suggesting an independence of spirit in the religious sphere. We have noted, however, the equating of Māralāhē with Zeus.

This local character is evident also in most of the funerary mosaics, of which there are several well-preserved examples incorporating inscriptions which at least vaguely hint at conceptions of death and the afterlife, though they are inevitably hard to interpret (Am2, Am3, Am4, Am5, Am8, Am10, etc.). These funerary mosaics display a very different spirit from the ‘classical’ ones mentioned earlier. They contain only Syriac inscriptions, sometimes using typical dating and memorial formulae which are well known from places like Palmyra, and reflect the local artistic traditions, with so-called ‘Parthian’ elements (in frontality and clothing) which are again paralleled at Palmyra (and also at Ḥaṭra) (Colledge 1977: 80–121; 1994; Parlasca 1984).

It is hard to pin down attitudes to death and afterlife from this slight evidence, but the inscriptions in these mosaics typically describe the tomb itself as a *byt ‘lm*’, a ‘house of eternity’ or ‘eternal dwelling’ (As7: 3, etc.; appearing also in Palmyrene, Nabataean, etc. and known also from Egypt and in Greek funerary inscriptions). There are a few variations on this terminology: ‘house of rest’ (*byt mškb*’ [or *mškn*’]: Healey 2006: 316, line 4), ‘dwelling-place’ (*byt mšry*’: As5: 2). Perhaps a reflection of this notion of permanent dwelling at ease are the several depictions in mosaic of whole families, wife and children surrounding a principal male figure (e.g. Am8, Am5). These scenes have their closest parallels in Palmyrene funerary sculpture depicting the central figure reclining as at a family meal or a banquet.

A phoenix is central in one mosaic (Am6), standing on a funerary stele beside a sarcophagus and identified explicitly by the Syriac writing beside its head. We cannot be sure of what the phoenix meant to the people of Edessa, but in the wider context we know that it became a symbol of post-mortal revival in the Roman world (and thence in Christianity). It is thus part of the repertoire of symbols used at Edessa, even if not native to it, sitting alongside the paradisiacal Orpheus theme, also found in tombs (Am7; for the second mosaic, now in Urfa Museum, see Healey 2006 and Possek 2008; Colledge 1994: 191). It is very likely that such mosaics were intended to proclaim the local identity of the tombs’ owners: they were, like Bardaišan, committed adherents of the new culture which came from the West, but that did not swamp local identity (and again there is a parallel at Palmyra).

Going beyond the prosaic are two funerary inscriptions which give us a glimpse of the sophistication of pre-Christian Edessa. One contains at the end of its inscriptions the following (slightly uncertain and obscure) epigram: ‘Whoever removes the sorrow of his offspring and mourns for his forefathers will have a happy afterlife’ (Am5: 13–16). Segal (1970: 34, 44–5), translating slightly differently, finds the influence, here and in other evidence, of Gnosticism. In another funerary text we appear to have a rather poetic reflection on the life of the deceased, who was, perhaps, an astrologer: ‘And you saw the height and the depth and the distant and the near and the hidden and the manifest’ (As5: 11–13).

PAGAN RELIGION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY

The Syriac New Testament attests at a very early stage to a certain degree of assimilation of the most important local deity (Bēl/Māralāhē) to Zeus (Acts 14: 12–13), as in the creation mosaic referred to above (Cm11), and on that basis we may speculate on a certain local readiness for such syncretisms. There is no doubt, however, that Syriac Christianity became ferociously anti-pagan, and writers like those cited above mocked the pagan gods as powerless.

There may, on the other hand, be themes in Syriac Christianity which have a pre-Christian parallel. I am thinking here especially of the importance of asceticism and specifically celibacy. We know that in pre-Christian Hierapolis, Edessa's near neighbour, the cult of Atargatis included a tradition of self-emasculation as an act of devotion to the goddess (Lightfoot 2003: § 50 on the *galli*). The Atargatis cult seems to have been strong also in Edessa, as we have seen. In the fifth century the Bishop of Edessa, Rabbula (d. 435/6), issued regulations forbidding the practice of self-emasculation by monks and *bnay qyāmā* (Vööbus 1960: 40 §55; Drijvers 1980: 77).

It is remarkable also that there grew up a Christian transformation of the cult of the *galli*, who climbed the pillars at Hierapolis in a phallic cult (Lightfoot 2003: 418–21, discussing §§ 28–9), into the central figure of the ascetic stylite. Simeon Stylites (ca. 389–459) is the best known of these, and the habit of asceticism associated with pillar-hermitages spread widely. It remains the fact, however, that the pre-Christian cult is attested principally at Hierapolis, some way from Edessa itself, and there is no attestation of it in Syriac epigraphy.

Perhaps the most important thing to say about the inheritance from the pre-Christian environment is not so much concerned with the local ('Semitic?') religious tradition, but with the Edessa region's being deeply imbued with Hellenism already in the pre-Christian period. Edessa itself was a Seleucid foundation (or perhaps re-foundation), and when it gained its independence under the Abgarids (c. 140 BCE) it retained a Hellenistic style of kingship and society. Mosaics became popular, incorporating Hellenistic themes (above), but also intellectual life was deeply affected by Hellenistic influences. This is exemplified especially by what we know of the philosophical ideas and method of argument of the earliest named Syriac author, Bardaišan.

Bardaišan's whole mode of life is a reflection of a Greek model. He was a court philosopher and poet, part of the entourage of Abgar VIII of Edessa. His mode of philosophical debate, as reflected in *The Book of the Laws of Countries* (Drijvers 1965), was Socratic: the book is essentially a report of a dialogue between Bardaišan and his pupils, written up as a report by Philippos, one of those pupils. The whole subject of the dialogue is the role of fate in the life of men, and it shows an awareness of and use of Greek philosophical notions and terms, though transformed into Syriac dress (see Drijvers 1966; Segal 1970: 35–8).

All the indications are that Edessa was thoroughly Hellenised long before it became part of a Roman province in 212/13 CE. Its elite was well prepared, therefore, for engagement with the debates in the Greek-speaking church as they emerged in the third and fourth centuries CE. Greek was widely known among elites at least, and its

role was reinforced in the area after the Roman liberation of the territory, as can be seen from the Middle Euphrates papyri (Feissel et al. 1995, 2000, 1997).

Paganism did not disappear quickly from Edessa and its region. The polemics of the religious authorities testify to this, as do occasional references to pagan practices, as, for example, in *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius*, where we find reference to orgiastic pagan festivals taking place in Edessa in the late-fifth century (Trombley and Watt 2000: 28, 32; Syr. in Chabot 1927: 256–7, 259; see also Segal 1970: 105–8; Drijvers 1982). Pagan personal names too were retained by converts to Christianity, as in *The Teaching of Addai*. It is perhaps more surprising that in subsequent centuries pagan names were still in use (Harrak 1992).

NOTES

- 1 Both mosaics and inscriptions are identified here through the *sigla* found in Drijvers and Healey 1999 (otherwise abbreviated as DH). Other items are cited in the usual way.
- 2 There is one inscription in DH, AS10, which is probably Christian. It is of unknown date and was only included because it had appeared in Drijvers 1972a, which was being updated.
- 3 I thank Michael Macdonald and Dr. Ahmad al-Jallad for their advice on matters Safaitic and Thamudic.

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