

# The Palmyrenes and the Arsacid Policy

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From the time in which the attention of scholars, temporarily taking little notice of the monumental and suggestive ruins of the Roman controlled town of Palmyra, devoted a special attention to the territory of the caravan city, it became clear that the romantic idea of an oasis town, isolated in the middle of a desert expanse, at the limits of the empire — a last stop on the journey to the East - had no true confirmation in the reality<sup>1</sup>. As the investigation intensified, the desert steppe revealed a complex system of routes and *praesidia*, evidence of that auxiliary territorial organisation, necessary to commercial activities and to survival itself of the city.

Palmyra's evocative ruins thus appeared as the geographical centre of a vast organisation aimed at the exploitation of the city's extensive territory and its potential. In addition the recent interest provoked by its leading classes contributed to better define the Palmyrene's role within the imperial administration, clearing the range of their relations both at local and international level. Despite several aspects that are still unclear, it seems that a more realistic concept of Palmyra prevailed, based on the study of the geographical and socio-political context in which it was placed<sup>2</sup>.

Unfortunately, such a comprehensive point of view had not been applied to those administrative Palmyrene entities which constitute,

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<sup>1</sup> The first important work which took into consideration Palmyra's territory was that of D. Schlumberger (*La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest suivi du Recueil des inscriptions sémitiques de cette région par H. Ingholt et J. Starcky // Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique. T. XLIX. Paris, 1951*).

<sup>2</sup> *Schlumberger D. Bornes frontières de la Palmyrène // Syria. 1939. T. 20. P. 43–73; Gawlikowski M. Palmyre et l'Euphrate // Syria. 1983. Vol. 60. P. 53–68; Teixidor J. Un port romain du désert, Palmyre et son commerce d'Auguste à Caracalla // Semitica. Vol. XXXIV. Paris, 1984; Millar F. The Roman Near East (31 BC — AD 337). Cambridge (Mass.); London, 1993. P. 319–336.*

by far, the most interesting subject for scholars dealing with caravan long-distance trade, that is, the merchant colonies the inhabitants of the Syrian town established in the cities of Arsacid Mesopotamia as attested by several epigraphic documents from Palmyra itself. These commercial communities in the general scarcity of sources regarding to the Parthian Empire, find it difficult even now to acquire a concrete dimension. They tend to be considered, in the studies devoted to Palmyra exclusively in their geographical connotation, as islands of “western activity” floating in the middle of that desert of knowledge that is the Arsacid Mesopotamia of the present state of the research. Priceless information can be obtained leaving behind a roman-centric approach to the matter and giving privilege to the study of the socio-political *milieu* to which these colonies belonged.

In other words, the role of the Mesopotamian Palmyrenes must be considered in the frame of the Parthian history and within the transformations that affected the Arsacid society. This in the attempt to clarify the historical scenario, which surrounded these communities and from which depended both their trade activity and survival.

The starting point for such investigation is the so-called “corpus of the Palmyrene caravan inscriptions”<sup>3</sup>. It is a group of about thirty four epigraphic honorific documents, often drawn up both in Greek and Palmyrene, conceived to illustrate the portraits of notable citizens which the grateful merchants ordered to be erected in the town’s most visible points (the main streets and the agora).

The geographical references provided by Palmyrene traders or by the citizens who accomplished the inscriptions, give essential aid to particularly definition of the areas of Palmyrene presence and commercial activity outside the Roman borders. Most of the names places found in these inscriptions, such as Babylon, Spasinou Charax

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<sup>3</sup> *Rostovtzeff M.* Les inscriptions carovanières de Palmyre // *Mélanges Glotz*. T. II. Paris, 1932. P. 793–811; *Gawlikowski M.* Palmyra and its Caravan Trade // *AAAS*. 1996. Vol. XLII: Palmyra and the Silk Road. International Colloquium (Palmyra, 7–11 april 1992). P. 139-145; *Yon J.-B.* // *Les notables de Palmyre* // *BAH*. T. 163. Beyrouth, 2002. P. 100–106, 263–264.

and Vologesias, to mention only the most frequent ones, refer to urban communities located deep in Parthian Mesopotamia.

Among the texts belonging to the corpus, only the most ancient one, dating to the 19 AD mentions the city of Seleucia on the Tigris<sup>4</sup>, the commercial metropolis that Strabo and Pliny describe as the most populous city outside the Roman empire, and the fulcrum of the whole Arsacid kingdom<sup>5</sup>.

[.....]	byrh ʾb šnt 3.100+20+10 [slmʾ dnh dy]
[...ἔμπ]ο[ρ]οι Πα[λμυρηνοί]	ydy ʾbl br ʾzyzw br ydyʾ[bl dy mn]
[καὶ Ἑλλην]ες ἀνέσ[τη]σ[αν]	bny mtbw[l dy] ʾqym[w lh tdmryʾ]
[τὸν ἀνδιάν]τα Ἰεδειβ[ήλω]	wywnyʾ dy bslwkyʾ [bdyldy]
[Ἀζίζου Παλ]μυρηῶ φ[υλῆς]	qm wšmš bmgdʾ r[bʾ lbt bl]
[Μανθαβω]λείων ἔπει	
[κατεσπο]ύδασεν εἰς τὴν	
[κτίσιν τ]οῦ ναοῦ Βήλου.	

Greek text: [...] the Palmyrene and Greek merchants from Seleucia erected this statue for Yedibel, son of Azizu, Palmyrene from the tribe of Mattabol, because he attended with zeal to the construction of the temple of Bel.

Aramaic text: In the month of Ab, year 330; this is the statue of Yedibel, son of Azizu grandson of Yedibel, belonging to the Beni

<sup>4</sup> *Inv.*, IX, 6a = CIS. II. 3924 = PAT. 270; *Rostovtzeff M.* Les inscriptions caravanières... P. 796-797; *Gawlikowski M.* Palmyre et l'Euphrate... P. 63; *Teixidor J.* Un port romain ... P. 11; *Matthews J. F.* The Tax Law of Palmyra: Evidence for Economic History in a City of the Roman East // JRS. 1984. Vol. 74. P. 166; *Starcky J.*, *Gawlikowski M.* Palmyre. Paris, 1985<sup>2</sup>. P. 74-75; *Drexhage R.* Untersuchungen zum römischen Osthandel. Bonn, 1988. S. 22-23; *Zayadine F.* Palmyre, Pétra, la Mer Erythrée // AAAS. 1996. Vol. XLII. P. 168; *Savino E.* Città di frontiera nell'impero romano. Forme della romanizzazione da Augusto ai Severi. Bari, 1999. P. 53, 78-79; *Yon J.-B.* Les notables de Palmyre... P. 25-26, 103-105.

<sup>5</sup> *Strab.*, XVI, 2. 5; *Plut.*, Crass., 32; *Plin.*, Nat. hist., VI, 122.

Mattabol, which has been erected for him the Palmyrenes and the Greeks from Seleucia because he has been their leader and because he contributed to the building of the temple of Bel.

From the text it can be inferred that the Palmyrene merchants ran their business in collaboration with their Greek colleagues. In those years, the Hellenised and Greek citizens indisputably controlled the city government. The Great King Artabanus, on the throne since 12 AD, forced to deal with the Roman offensive in Armenia, was not strong enough to oppose the economic monopoly of the Mesopotamian Greeks. Nevertheless, as both the literary and epigraphic sources attest to, in those years the Crown began to put into action a strategy of gradual infiltration in the political life of the Greek *poleis*, which would lead in a short amount of time, to a direct confrontation between the Arsacids and Seleucia's leading class<sup>6</sup>.

In 19 AD the Palmyrene merchants and businessmen, who had appeared on the caravan trade scene only recently, had no choice

<sup>6</sup> *Tac.*, Ann., VI, 42; *Flav.*, Ant. Iud., XVIII, 310-379; *Kahrstedt U.* Artabanos III. und seine Erben. (Dissertationes Bernenses. I. 2). Bern, 1950 S. 43, 48-49, 52-53; *Pigulevskaja N.* Les villes de l'état iranien aux époques parthe et sassanide // Contribution à l'histoire sociale de la Basse Antiquité. École pratique des Hautes Études. Paris; La Haye, 1963. P. 62-63, 85-87; *Schippmann K.* Grundzüge der parthischen Geschichte (Grundzüge. 39). Darmstadt, 1980 S. 52-53; *Dabrowa E.* La politique de l'état parthe à l'égard de Rome — d'Artaban II à Vologèse I (ca 11 — ca 79 de n. è.) et les facteurs qui la conditionnaient. (Uniwersytet Jagiellonski. Rozprawy Habilitacyjne. 74). Kraków, 1983 P. 82-85, 90-91; *Wolski J.* L'Empire des Arsacides // Acta Iranica. Vol. 32. Leuven, 1993. P. 158-161; *Dabrowa E.* Dall'autonomia alla dipendenza. Le città greche e gli Arsacidi nella prima metà del I secolo d.C. // Mesopotamia. 1994. Vol. XXIX. P. 54-80. For the specific situation at Susa and at Seleucia on the Tigris; *Zambelli M.* La lettera di Artabano III alla città di Susa // RFIC. 1963. Vol. 91. P. 153-155; *McDowell R.* The Coins from Seleucia on the Tigris // University of Michigan studies. Humanistic series. Ann Arbor, 1935. Vol. 37. P. 117-118, 136-166, 178-180, 222-228; *Le Rider G.* Suse sous les Séleucides et les Parthes. Trouvailles monétaires et l'histoire de la ville // Mémoires de la Mission Archéologique en Iran. Paris, 1965. T. 38. P. 24-25, 58, 87; *ibid.* Séleucie du Tigre. Les monnaies séleucides et parthes // Monografie di Mesopotamia. Firenze, 1999. T. 6. P. 351-359, 369.

but to co-operate with the Greeks of Seleucia, whose experience about Mesopotamian traffic was age-old and consolidated. In order to pursue their purposes, and to extend their sphere of influence beyond the Euphrates, they found themselves forced to find an agreement with the Greek traders. For the latter an economic alliance with the “Venice of the desert” meant the possibility of expanding their trade network over new areas, in particular the nearly untapped routes of south-eastern Syria. It seems very likely that, at the beginning of their Mesopotamian activity, the Palmyrene upper classes were economically and culturally affected by their richer and more powerful trade partners.

In the same period (18/19 AD) an extremely fragmentary inscription testifies to the first contacts that Palmyrenes made with the kingdom of Mesene, undoubtedly acting on Rome’s impulse<sup>7</sup>.

[.....td]mry’ dy hw ‘bd  
[....]h lqdmyn wšdrh grmnqs  
[.....m]lk’ myšny[’..]lwt ‘rbz  
[.....]h’ mn s[r.....]lyswdy  
[.....]mlk [...]k’ ršy’  
[.....]wlwt [.....]

Aramaic text: [...] who is also called Alexandros / [...Pal]myrene, because he performed (?)/[...] before (?), and Germanicus sent him/ [...] of Maišan, and to Orabzes / [...] Šamšigeram, Supreme King. (transl. J.F. Matthews)

The Mesene, better yet Characene, was an Arsacid vassal state lying in southern Mesopotamia close to the mouths of the Euphrates

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<sup>7</sup> PAT. 2754; *Seyrig H.* Antiquités syriennes. 9. L’incorporation de Palmyre à l’empire romain // Syria. 1932. T. 13. P. 266-268; *Cantineau J.* Textes palmyréniens provenant de la fouille du temple de Bêl // Syria. 1931. T. 12. P. 139–141. № 18; *Matthews J. F.* The Tax Law of Palmyra: Evidence for Economic History in a City of the Roman East // JRS. 1984. Vol. 74. P. 164; *Yon J.-B.* Les notables de Palmyre... P. 105.

and the Tigris. Its strategic importance originated from the control it exerted over the Persian Gulf harbours, terminus of the sea routes connecting Mesopotamia and India<sup>8</sup>. The Characene dynasts descended from the ancient Seleucid governor in the region: the Greek-Bactrian Hyaspesians (II century BC). They were obliged to loyalty to the Parthian Great King; nonetheless, they always tried to exploit Arsacids' institutional weaknesses to free themselves from their masters' control. The probable mention of a monarch of Emesa, at that time a Roman client state and the western trade partner of the Palmyrenes, allows for the conclusion that the purposes of Alexander's mission were very likely commercial. The text seems to attest that Germanicus, in those years supreme commander in the near East, was working through Alexander the Palmyrene, merchant and diplomat, to extend the imperial influence along the sea and land routes leading to the East.

The document mentions a certain Orabzes (*'rbz*). This monarch does not appear in the list of Characene kings provided by the numismatic sources. The open attitude showed by Orabzes towards a potential economic rival belonging to the Roman sphere of influence is striking. His predecessor Abinergaos I, whose contacts with the Adiabenean Jewish dynasty are recorded, favoured Jewish merchants, allies of the Great King. All of these elements support the hypothesis of a usurpation of the throne by Orabzes to the detriment of Abinergaos<sup>9</sup>, which the unprepared Great King Artabanus II was unable to oppose. These events probably occurred before during the first years of Artabanus' reign. That was a problematic period

<sup>8</sup> *Nodelman S. A. A preliminary History of Characene // Berytus. 1960. Vol. XIII. P. 83–121; Schul M. Die Charakene. Ein mesopotamisches Königreich in hellenistisch-parthischer Zeit // Oriens et Occidens. Bd. 1. Stuttgart, 2000.*

<sup>9</sup> Abinergaos I is attested by numismatic sources from 10/11 until 22/23 AD (BMC. Vol. XXVIII: Arabia, Mesopotamia, Persia. Hill, 1928. P. CXCIX, 295. № 1; Pl. XLIII. 7); *Nodelman S. A. A preliminary History... P. 97–99; Le Rider G. Monnaies... P. 238; Schul M. Die Charakene... S. 320.* Between 30 and 36 AD probably the same Abinergaos is mentioned by Flavius Josephus as the king who gave hospitality to Izates, prince of Adiabenes, allowing him to marry his daughter Symmacos: *Flav., Ant. Iud., XX, 22.*

in which all of Parthians' energies were employed to consolidate their power in the core regions of the kingdom, protecting them from external threats. A direct intervention by the Crown in the peripheral and difficult sector of Characene would have been, under those circumstances, unthinkable.

These initial pioneer contacts with the Characene would prove to be extremely useful for the subsequent development of the Palmyrene commercial organisation. The transformations involving the long-distance trade system, in addition to the new deal of the Arsacid policy towards the Greek towns, quickly determined a radical increase in importance of the south Mesopotamian centres. By the middle of the I century AD radical changes occurred in the long-distance trading system in Babylonia. Urged by Roman authorities, and by the fast-growing demand for eastern goods from imperial markets, Palmyra quickly became a first-rate economic power. This meant that the Palmyrene businessmen felt the need to look for new areas of business, and to create an area of economic influence in which their trade colonies could operate without being conditioned by the ever more intolerable monopoly of the Greeks of Babylonia. Furthermore, the spreading of the information concerning the sea routes of the Indian Ocean and the climatic factors which affected the navigation within the Roman Empire contributed to modifying the privileged routes for moving men and goods through long distances. The advantages of the transport of luxury wares by sea from India and China, compared to land itineraries, quickly became evident in.

In the second half of the I<sup>nd</sup> century AD the sea routes bore most of the traffic. That explains the pre-eminence given in the Palmyrene inscriptions from that period to Spasinu Charax, the Characene capital city<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> IP. 34 = PAT. 1584 (between 50/51 and 70/71 AD); Inv., X, 7 = PAT. 1366; Inv., X, 40 = PAT. 1376; *Milik J.T.* Dédicaces faites par des dieux (Palmyre, Hatra, Tyr) et des thiasés sémitiques à l'époque romaine // BAH. 1972. T. XCII. P. 20–21; *Drexhage R.* Untersuchungen... S. 24–27; *Savino E.* Città di frontiera... P. 78–80; *Schuol M.* Die Charakene... S. 52–54.

[Z]αβδιβωλον Ο[γ]ηλου το[ῦ] Αμ]	<i>šlm' dnh d[y] zbdbwl</i>
μαθου τοῦ Λαχει Παλμυρηνον	<i>br 'gylw br ['m]t br '[.....]</i>
Οἱ ἀπὸ Σπασίνου Χάρακος	<i>[d]y mn bny m'zyn dy 'qymw lh tgrý'</i>
ἀν[αβ]άντες Παλμυρηνοὶ ἔμπορο[ι]	<i>[tdmry' dy s]lqw mn krk my[šn]</i>
τειμῆς χάριν.	<i>[lyqrh byrh ']b [šn]t 3.100+[80+10+2].</i>

Greek text: Image of Zabdibol son of Ogeilos, grandson of Ammathos, son of Aacheis, Palmyrene, committed by the Palmyrene merchants who returned from Spasinou Charax, in his honour.

Aramaic text: This is the statue of Zabdibol son of Ogeilu, grandson of Ammat, son of [...] of the Beni Maziyān, which have erected the Palmyrene merchants who have returned from Charax of Mesene in his honour; in the month of Ab, year 392 (81 AD)<sup>11</sup>.

The decade following the death of the Great King Artabanus was characterised by a bitter dynastic conflict in Parthia. The Characene kings, taking advantage of the lack of a central Arsacid authority, were able to significantly expand their area of commercial influence to include southern Mesopotamia, the coasts of the Persian Gulf and the land routes reaching the Roman borders<sup>12</sup>. Only after the decisive consolidation of the royalty which Vologases I, Great King from the 51 AD, put into effect after the resolution of the Armenian crisis (63 AD), with the subsequent agreement with the Rome (66 AD), were the Parthians again able to exert control over Characene. The sources at our disposal seem to indicate that a political occupation of the vassal kingdom took place. The last local coinage dates to the 74/5 AD (king Attambelos V). No other emissions from the Characene kings are attested to until 101/102 AD<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Inv., X, 40 = PAT. 1376.

<sup>12</sup> *Schuol M.* Die Charakene... S. 329–336.

<sup>13</sup> *Keall E. J.* Parthian Nippur and Vologases' Southern Strategy: A Hypothesis // *JAOS*. 1975. Vol. 95. P. 624–625; *Dabrowa E.* Die Politik der Arsakiden auf dem Gebiet des südlichen Mesopotamiens und im Becken des Persischen Meerbusens in der zweiten Hälfte des I. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. // *Mesopotamia*. 1991. Vol. XXVI. S. 143, 150.

It is difficult to establish whether the Arsacids effectively annexed the kingdom through the employment of military force, or instead chose to proceed to a substitution of the local monarch by revoking their the right to mint their own coins. Whatever forms the control of Vologaeses I and his successor Pacoros II assumed in South Mesopotamia, they don't seem to have affected the commercial relationships between the Characenes and the Palmyrenes. Mesenes' cities continued to gain mention in the caravan inscription during most of the II century AD.

Particularly severe, rather was Vologaeses' repression against the Greeks from Seleucia, who during the anarchy years, openly rebelled against the Great King. Seleucia lost its autonomy and most of its political role. Its leading classes remained rich and powerful nonetheless, managing to maintain control over Mesopotamian trade. Vologaeses was not as interested in controlling the town as he was than in gaining control on the commercial enterprises which gravitated around Seleucia forming the source of its wealth and power.

The solution conceived by the king implied the creation of an alternative trade system in competition with that of Seleucia, where the royal officers and allies could operate without being impeded by the Greek monopoly. This led to the foundation of Vologesias: a new Seleucia open to the foreign merchants, free from the influence of the Hellenic lobbies in which, it seems to be supported, the presence of non-Greek merchants was promoted by a city leading class very close and faithful to the monarch. This strategy was successful. Vologesias managed to gradually take the place of Seleucia as main centre on the route towards Mesene and the Persian Gulf.

A Palmyrene inscription dated to 108 AD proves that the presence of Syrian merchants in Vologesias was at that time consolidated enough to allow some of them to take part in the building activity taking place in the new metropolis<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Inv., IX, 15 = CIS. II. 3917 = PAT. 263; *Gawlikowski M.* Palmyre VI: Le temple palmyrénien, Etude d'épigraphie et de topographie historique. Warszawa, 1973. P. 34, 73; *Hauser S. R.* Tempel für den palmyrenischen Bel // *Rollinger R., Luther A., Wiesehöfer J.* Getrennte Wege? Kommunikation, Raum und Wahrnehmung in der Alten Welt. Frankfurt am Main, 2007. S. 228–255.

*šlm' dnh dy 'qyh b[r n'r]y br 'qyh*  
*dy 'bdw lh bny gdybw1 bdyldy 'bd lhn*  
*bb' wtr'why w'p 'bd b'lgšy' ḥmn'*  
*klh hw w'trh w'p ḥll 'drwn'*  
*klh wšpr lhwn bkl šbw klh*  
*bdykwt 'bdw lh šlm' dnh lyqrh*  
*byrh knwn šnt 4.100+20*

Aramaic text: This statue is that of Aqqayh, son of Norai, grandson of Aqqayh, erected for him by the members of the Beni Gaddibol because he erected a gate and its knockers, he built a whole pyreum in Vologesias together with its worship place, he covered the shrine and was always kind. For this reason they erected this statue in order to honour him, in the month of Kanun, year 420.

No other inscription refers to the commercial stations in the Characene until 131 AD. During that span of time, another period of political crisis followed the death of Pacoros II (about 110 AD). Arsacid pretenders were still fighting for the succession when Emperor Trajan decided to conquer the Parthian kingdom (114–117 AD): a huge and expensive military enterprise that ended in failure.

The international situation was stabilised and the western relations with Characene were vigorously resumed with Vologaeses III's ascent to the Parthian throne (129 AD) and the beginning of the reign of Hadrian at Rome (117 AD). The inscriptions indicate that in the period between 129 AD and the conflict with Rome of 161 AD the trade activity in eastern Asia reached its climax<sup>15</sup>. In some cases the Palmyrenes living in Parthian territory gained such a level of integration to allow some of them to be appointed to important government offices.

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<sup>15</sup> Inv., X, 112 (140 d.C.); Inv., IX, 14 = CIS. II. 3916 = OGIS. 632 (142 d.C.); Inv., X, 124 (150 d.C.); Inv., X, 111 (156 d.C.); X, 90 (157 d.C.); X, 107 (159 d.C.); X, 29 (161 d.C.); X, 19.

After decades of conflicts with local dynasts and considering the increasing importance of the Characene for the international trade the new ruler of Parthia, Vologaeses III decided to assure the Arsacids of definite and enduring control over southern Mesopotamia.

Attempting to prosecute Pacoros II's economic policy, he decided to exploit international trade to improve the financial situation of the Arsacid state. This could only be achieved by granting full autonomy for that concerning their commercial activity, the internal organisation and the management of their merchant colonies to the western commercial agents, in particular the Palmyrene entrepreneurs. The circumstances required that a man particularly loyal to Vologaeses III be head of the Characene kingdom: a man who would not abuse the wide political autonomy his role of commercial mediator between Rome and Ctesiphon implied. He had to be able to deal with Palmyrene merchants, making use of their proficiency in the most convenient way for the Crown, and providing them of all the government support they needed to carry on their business in the most effective way.

A real synergy was put into action by the Characene leadership. Like in Vologesias foreign traders and capitals were allowed to penetrate into Parthian territory on a large scale, and were granted the collaboration of the local authorities as well as unlimited use of the infrastructures put under the responsibility of Arsacid or Characene officers. Such collaboration was widely justified by the large income that both trade partners, Palmyra and the Romans on one side and the Characenes and Vologaeses on the other, could obtain. It is therefore easy to understand how the political organisation of the Mesene was an extremely delicate problem for the Great King.

After the defection of the last representative of the Hyspaosinid royal lineage, Attambelos VII, who enthusiastically greeted with Trajan's armies in 116 AD<sup>16</sup>, it was necessary to appoint to the throne of Characene a member of the Arsacid family. For Vologaeses was

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<sup>16</sup> *Cass. Dio.*, LXVIII, 17; 28; *Arr.*, Parth., fr. 17; 67–70; *Schuol M.* Die Characene... S. 345-346.

fundamental to appoint the right man to this vital task. The new monarch should understand the importance of foreign merchants, without giving up control over trade, but also be able to protect the royal interests in a region where the local opposition against the Arsacids was certainly considerable. The choice fell upon Mithridates, son of Pacoros II, and brother of the Great King: a man who had both a strong allegiance to the Crown and that spirit of initiative which the position required<sup>17</sup>.

Probably after a short period of direct Parthian rule in Mesene, Mithridates found himself at the head, as an imposed king of an important state that had a long-lasting tradition of self-government. His position was problematic. In order to rule, he could not rely exclusively on local officers, moved by a strong anti-Arsacid feeling, nor on Parthian notables, too attached to the Great King. Nevertheless, he was supposed to firmly rule the trade centres respecting Characene's autonomy while keeping local opposition under control.

A Palmyrene honorary inscription, the most ancient document related to Mithridates' reign, sheds light on the solution that he chose to accomplish his difficult task. It is a bilingual text whose Greek version is much better preserved than the Aramaic one:

Ιαραιον Νεβο[υζαβαδ]ου τοῦ  
 [Σ]αλαμαλλαθου [του] Αχχαδαδου  
 [Ἀδ]ριανόν | Παλμυρινόν σατρά  
 [π]ην Θιλουανων Μεερεδατου  
 Βασιλέως Σπασινου Χαρακος  
 οί ἐν [Σ]πασινου Χαρακι ἔμποροι,  
 τειμῆς χάριν. ἔτους βμύ, μη[νι]  
 Ξανδικῶ.

Greek text: (This is the image of) *Yarhai*, son of *Nebuzabad*, grandson of *Šammallath*, son of *Aqqadam*, citizen of *Hadriane*

<sup>17</sup> BMC. Vol. XXVIII: Arabia, Mesopotamia, Persia. London, 1928. P. CCXI–CCXII; 311–312. № 1–15. Pl. XLVIII. 5-7.

*Palmyra*, satrap of the Thilouanoi for the king Meherdates of Spasinou Charax. The merchants of Spasinou Charax in his honour, in the year 442 (131 AD), in the month of Xandios (april)<sup>18</sup>.

The Palmyrene was certainly a pre-eminent figure within the circle of merchants operating in the Mesenian capital city, grateful men who dedicated of the statue whose inscription was found in the αγορά of the Syrian city. What differentiates this text from the other caravan inscriptions referring to the Palmyrene activity in south Mesopotamia, is the reference to the specific office held by Yarḥai in Mithridates' administration as governor of the district of *Tylos*, the classical toponym for the present-day island of Bahrain<sup>19</sup>. This businessman constitutes a perfect example of the penetration capacity of the Syrian merchants in the political and economic life of the Characene kingdom. The text gives an idea of the political prestige that their commercial skill earned them from the kingdom court.

Considering the above-outlined political situation, it seems probable that the Arsacid monarch tried to establish a new state administration appointing men who proved themselves essential for the realization of his policy to positions of responsibility. He collocated as governor of *Tylos*, a district vital to the merchant system of the Persian Gulf, one of the leaders of the Palmyrene community whose interests were closely connected to the perfect functioning of the trade routes which had in *Tylos* itself one of their nodal points. The strategy was

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<sup>18</sup> Inv., X, 38 = PAT. 1374; *Seyrig H.* Antiquités syriennes 38. Inscriptions grecques de l'agora de Palmyre // *Syria*. 1941. Vol. 22. P. 253–255. № 21b; *Richmond I. A.* Palmyra under the Aegis of Rome // *JRS*. 1963. Vol. 53. P. 53; *Teixidor J.* Un port romain... P. 58–59; *Matthews J. F.* The Tax Law... P. 166; *Drexhage R.* Untersuchungen... S. 28–29; *Savino E.* Città di frontiera... P. 78; *Schulz M.* Die Charakene... S. 56–57.

<sup>19</sup> *Strab.*, XVI, 3, 4 C 766; 6–7 C 766–767; *Plin.*, Nat. hist., VI, 147; *Theophr.*, De lapid., 36; *Potts D. T.* The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity. Vol. II: From Alexander to the Coming of Islam. Oxf., 1990. P. 127–133, 135, 138; *Salles J.-F.* Découvertes du Golfe Arabo-Persique aux époques grecque et romaine // *REA*. 1992. T. 94. P. 87–88.

remarkably shrewd. In order to assure the maximum efficiency of the trade routes, and by doing so assuring the income provided by the taxation of the goods, the political responsibility over commercial nodal points would be conferred to those people who could benefit from the efficiency of the merchant organisation more than anyone else. Since the Arsacid Great Kings exploited the commercial network that had been established and managed by the Palmyrenes, it was naturally more convenient for them to favour the growth of the Syrian merchants' role in the area. The amount of foreign capitals invested in southern Mesopotamia, and the influence on the trade increased without restrictions, actually excluding those, particularly locals and Jews, who were not disposed to recognising the Palmyrene monopoly from the traffics.

Citizens from the Syrian town lived on Bahrein island, as merchants and governmental officers. Recently-conducted archaeological investigations on the island had not yet provided material proofs for the presence of Palmyrenes there. On Kharg island, however, just few kilometres to the north, close to the Iranian coast, the exploration of a funerary complex revealed the existence of two hypogean structures of up to more than ninety graves the building and decorative features of which had clear parallels with contemporary structures in Tadmor<sup>20</sup>.

Perhaps even a Palmyrene trade station was established in Kharg, the arrival point of boats coming down the Euphrates and starting place for the ocean crossing. As documented for *Tylos* perhaps there too the local officers had been chosen among Palmyrene merchants. Two of them, dead on the island were probably buried in their adoptive country in tombs similar to those used in their native land.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ghirshman R.* L'île de Kharg dans le golfe Persique // CRAI. 1958. 102-e an. № 3. P. 261–268; *ibid.* L'île de Kharg (Ikaros) dans le Golfe Persique // RArch. 1959. T. 7. P. 73–76; *ibid.* Île de Kharg dans le golfe Persique // Arts Asiatiques. 1959. T. 6. P. 106–120; *Haerinck E.* Quelques monuments funéraires de l'île de Kharg dans le Golfe Persique // IA. 1975. T. 11. P. 138–145; *Potts D.T.* The Arabian Gulf... P. 147.

The famous inscription from Seleucia on the Tigris, dates to 151 AD, the end of Mitridates' reign in Characene<sup>21</sup>. He fell victim to the purging which took place after of the ascent to the Parthian throne Vologaeses IV's, (141 AD) first exponent of new Arsacid dynasty. Palmyrene documents attests to the fact that activity on the Gulf was not affected by this leadership change, nor by the loss of their royal supporter. Their privileges and influence were probably so entrenched at that time to render it extremely difficult and certainly inconvenient for a new appointed king trying to interfere in that consolidated collaborative system.

It is evident from the consideration of the caravan texts that the Palmyrene trade activity was performed to a large extent within the Arsacid domains. It is therefore clear that the Syrian merchants would have been informed as to Parthian socio-political structures and on the transformations they underwent. It was of capital importance for a Palmyrene merchant to completely understand which were the political forces, the power groups and the social tensions that shaped Parthian policy and composite society. All of these factors were capable of deeply influencing his trade activity and the *milieu* in which he was inserted, and in part integrated into, and with which he was forced to deal in his everyday life. Living and operating at Vologesias or at Spasinou Charax the Arsacid kingdom, to a Palmyrene, was a concrete and complex reality in which different factors interacted, conditioning its existence and ability to be governed.

In conclusion, under this point of view, the Parthian Empire was a dynamic political structure where different forces and interests played an important role. These dynamics could not only be easily perceived by a Palmyrene living close to the Roman borders, but could also, if correctly understood, be cleverly exploited to his own advantage.

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<sup>21</sup> *Al-Salihi W. I.* The weary Hercules of Mesene // *Mesopotamia*. 1987. Vol. XXII. P. 162–164; *Pennacchiotti F. A.* L'iscrizione bilingue greco-partica dell'Eracle di Seleucia // *Mesopotamia*. 1987. Vol. XXII. P. 169–185; *Bernard P.* Vicissitudes au gré de l'histoire d'une statue en bronze d'Héraclès entre Séleucie du Tigre et la Mésène // *JS*. 1990. P. 3–68; *Potter D. S.* The Inscription on the Bronze Herakles from Mesene: Vologes IV's War with Rome and the Date of Tacitus' *Annales* // *ZPE*. 1991. Bd. 88. P. 277–290.

In the imagery of these men, used to play a daily game well beyond the Roman borders, the narrow-minded and stereotypical view that the intellectual circles in the *Urbs* developed about the Parthians and their subjects, never found a place.

Summary

**L. Gregoratti**

### **The Palmyrenes and the Arsacid Policy**

It is evident from the consideration of the epigraphic documents known as Palmyrene caravan texts that the Palmyrene trade activity was performed to a large extent within the Arsacid domains. It is therefore clear that the life of the merchant colonies the inhabitants of the Syrian town established in the cities of Arsacid Mesopotamia was closely connected with Arsacid history and with the transformations the Parthian socio-political structure underwent. It was of capital importance for a Palmyrene merchant to completely understand which were the political forces, the power groups and the social tensions that shaped Parthian policy and composite society. All of these factors were capable of deeply influencing his trade activity and the *milieu* in which he was inserted. Living and operating at Vologesias or at Spasinou Charax the Arsacid kingdom, to a Palmyrene, was a concrete and complex reality in which different factors interacted, conditioning its existence and ability to be governed. These dynamics, if they were correctly understood, could be cleverly exploited by Palmyrene traders.

Резюме

**Л. Грегоратти**

### **Пальмирцы и политика Аршакидов**

Как видно из рассмотренных в статье эпиграфических документов, известных как Пальмирские караванные тексты, торго-

вая деятельность жителей Пальмиры осуществлялась на территориях, принадлежащих Аршакидам, в большом объёме. По этой причине становится ясным, что жизнедеятельность купеческих колоний, основанных в населённых пунктах Аршакидской Месопотамии и состоявших из жителей этого сирийского города, была тесно связана с историей Аршакидов и с изменениями, которым подверглась социально-политическая структура Парфии. Для купца из Пальмиры было крайне важно точно понимать, каковы были расстановка политических сил, позиция отдельных властных группировок и степень социальной напряжённости, которые формировали политику Парфии и общество. Все данные факторы могли сильно влиять на торговую деятельность купца и положение, в которое он попадал. Для жителя Пальмиры жизнь и деятельность в Вологезии или Спасину Харакс в царстве Аршакидов была непосредственной сложной реальностью, в которую вмешивались различные факторы, обуславливающие эту реальность и позволявшие управлять ею. Эти динамические процессы в случае их правильного понимания могли быть умело использованы торговцами Пальмиры.