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The end of the Aramaic World, a symbol that changed the Middle East forever

Abstract: *The 3rd century CE was a period of several important historical occurrences in the Middle East. In the background of the so-called “3rd century crisis of the Roman Empire” which dramatically changed the situation of the Eastern Provinces, the collapse of Aramaic civilisation occurred. The paper based on the examples presents what political factors involved the end of the Aramaic world, of its leading cities as Palmyra, Hatra or Dura Europos.*

Keywords: 3rd century crisis, Hatra, Dura Europos, Palmyra, Arameans, ancient Middle East, Roman Empire, Parthia

Everything that has a beginning has an end. When a new ethnic group was appearing in the Middle East the moment of unavoidable dusk had been already concluded in the faith of that community. Surely, each individual has a consciousness that the day will come and that a passing into the netherworld will be necessary. But the same clock is ticking all the time, not only for the living but also for tribes, nations and states. In a symbolic way the collapse of the Aramaic tribes definitely changed the world.

This story happened in the Middle East. The sequence of events started at the beginnings of the 1st millennium BC. On vast terrains of today’s Syria and Iraq a new people appeared and slowly started to settle. Those people, whose native language was Aramaic, brought a new value to the Middle Eastern linguistic and ethnic mosaic.

After the 12th century BC crisis, when several Late Bronze age supreme state powers collapsed, this terrain became open for newcomers.¹ At first the Arameans continued their traditional, nomadic way of life in the new lands. This had changed eventually around the 10th century BC and the first Aramaic states were established in the Middle East. These states, still tribal in character, observed a strong position of the family clan, which formed the core of the society. This phenomenon is reflected in the names of those state structures, such as: Bit Addini, Bit Agusi etc.² The Aramaic word bit means a house or a tribe. The second thing that made Arameans so important was their language and especially the system of recording it. The alphabetic scheme was one of the most revolutionary inventions, which is integrally associated with Aramaic-speaking people. This new writing system was a base for an Aramaic language “career” in the whole Middle East.

The beginnings, as always, were not easy. Aramaic states faced the aggressive and very dynamic policy of the Assyrian kings as early as the dawn of the Neo-Assyrian period. The Arameans became a kind of a barrier in the Assyrian route to the Mediterranean Sea. Their fate seemed to be prejudged – they were conquered and submitted by their great neighbours. The tribal states were losing their independence one by one. Finally, in the 8th century BC, during the Sargon II reign all Aramaic states remained under Assyrian control or influence.³

¹ N.P. LEMCHE, *The History of Ancient Syria and Palestine: An Overview*, [in:] J.M. SASSON (ed.), *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. II, Peabody 2000, pp. 1195-1218; T. DOTHAN, *The “Sea Peoples” and the Philistines of the Ancient Palestine*, [in:] *ibidem*, pp. 1267-1279.

² P.E. DION, *Aramaen Tribes and Nations of the First-Millennium Western Asia*, [in:] *ibidem*, pp. 1281-1294.

³ *Loc. cit.*

The Aramaic clans were even trying to collaborate one with another and joined together against Assyria, but without success. The powerful Assyrians were crushing all forms of resistance. However, under “Assyrian occupation”, the Aramaic language became popular and widely spoken. Moreover, Aramaic culture and even so-called “peoples’ identity” found fertile ground to develop. This was possible thanks to the exceptional career of the Aramaic language, which advanced from a tribal dialect into the formal language of the Assyrian empire. When the empire collapsed the language (and the culture) survived. Eventually, Aramaic became an official language of the Persian court under the Achaemenid dynasty. In other words, this language became a *lingua franca* from Egypt to Afghanistan and from the Bosphorus to the Persian Gulf.⁴

The situation changed after the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great. Gradually the Aramaic language was replaced by the language of the conqueror – Greek. Firstly it was visible on the western peripheries of the former Persian Empire. Later, even on the terrain controlled by the “oriental” Seleucid dynasty, the Aramaic language became less and less popular, and finally almost disappeared from the official royal administration. In Hellenistic times, western traditions, customs and beliefs infiltrated the Middle East. The old Aramaic world receded into the shadows. Yet, in some regions, Aramaic-speaking tribes sustained they relatively important position and retained their internal identity, so the process of disappearing changed into a process of transformation. Unfortunately, not for long.

In the late second and the 3rd century CE, the Arameans were more or less involved in political structures and events. The most important is the fact that the Arameans were thrown into the middle of a long-lasting conflict between the two great political powers of their times. The Roman Empire and the Parthian (and later the Sasanians) had been in a state of permanent war for a long time. The history of this conflict is well known from historical sources. From our point of view the most significant occurrences were those connected directly with Aramaic states or cities. Here can be listed the battle on Harran/Carrhae in 53 BC,⁵ the invasion of Mesopotamia led by Trajan in 114 CE and, much later, Septimius Severus’ heavy battles in this region.⁶ Further, Aurelian’s operations in the East or finally military campaigns led by first two Sassanid kings – Ardashir I and Shapur I – should be mentioned as well.⁷

This short historical background opens the space for the discussion about the demise of the Aramaic world. How did the situation of Aramaic-speaking people look finding themselves just in the middle of these political events? The most spectacular indices concerning these circumstances come from the several famous cities settled by the Arameans. Those cities were Palmyra, Dura Europos and Hatra. From the chronological point of view the situation of Hatra should be presented first.

Hatra (Figs 37-38)

The city was located in the Northern Mesopotamia near the Wadi Tartar banks. It was developing dynamically during the second and at the beginning of the 3rd century CE.

⁴ P. BRIANT, *From Cyrus to Alexander, A History of the Persian Empire*, Winona Lake, Ind. 2002, pp. 507-510.

⁵ J. WOLSKI, *L’Empire des Arsacides*, Acta Iranica 32, Leiden 1993, pp. 89, 114, 129-131; A. VERSTANDIG, *Histoire L’Empire Parthe (250-227)*, Bruxelles 2001, pp. 143-168; J. WIESENHÖFER, *Das Frühe Persien, Geschichte eines antiken Weltreichs*, München 1999, pp. 92-96.

⁶ T.K. BUTCHER, *Roman Syria and the Near East*, London 2003 (hereinafter referred to as: *Roman Syria*), pp. 43-51; P.M. EDWELL, *Between Rome and Persia, The Middle Euphrates, Mesopotamia and Palmyra under Roman control*, London, New York 2008 (hereinafter referred to as: *Between Rome and Persia*), pp. 20-29.

⁷ BUTCHER, *Roman Syria*, pp. 48-58; W. BALL, *Rome in the East, The transformation of an empire*, London, New York 2007, pp. 22-24.

Aramaic-speaking Arab tribes had been settled here since the origins of the city. As far as we can assume, the city's existence was strongly correlated with a sanctuary located inside the centre of Hatra.⁸ This fact distinguished the city among others. The sanctuary was very probably not only a local religious centre that gathered believers from the neighbouring region. Most likely, this sanctuary was also extraordinarily important for the Aramaic speaking tribes living far from Hatra. Given this assumption, the city was one of the places where Aramaic identity was especially strong. There are many factors indicating that Hatra became a kind of the Aramaic centre, a "religious capital" gathering people from different regions of the whole Aramaic world. The cult of Shamash, the supreme god in the Hatrene pantheon, reflected of course older Mesopotamian traditions. However, the cults of Baalshamin, Allat and other deities strictly associated with Arameans were very strong in the city too. The temples of those deities became the target of numerous pilgrimages from different parts of Mesopotamia.

In the time of the Parthian domination over Northern Mesopotamia, Hatra, although independent, was under strong Persian influence. The leading role of the city grew in parallel to its urban development. The structures of the city government also evolved. Originally Hatra was ruled by Lords (MRȲ).⁹ Around the middle of the 2nd century CE it became a small realm ruled by a king, what undoubtedly raised the standing of Hatra. This important change can be interpreted twofold: in the face of the Roman threat the Parthian kings decided to bind Hatra rulers to the Arsacid dynasty by offering them the crown and the title. However, the appearance of the person of the king can be connected to entirely different reasons. Some of the ceremonies and religious practices taking place in the main city sanctuary (SGYL) were based on immemorial Mesopotamian traditions. One of the crucial elements of those ceremonies was the presence of the king, who was simultaneously the highest priest (KMR' RB').

Hatra was not only a religious centre, but also an important strategic point on the military map of the Middle East in the times here being considered. The city was a crucial part of the Parthian defensive system. The heroic defence of Hatra during the campaigns against the Parthian Empire led by Trajan and later by Septimus Sevrus became turning points in the war. In both cases the Roman army was forced to retreat. Paradoxically, the great military importance of the city became one of the reasons for its eventual fall. The dark clouds arrived over Hatra when a new dynasty in Persia rose to power. The Sasanians, who were very fast in forming both internal and external policies, completely changed their kingdom on many fields. The former way of administration and international contacts, constituted during the reign of the Arsacid dynasty, were replaced by new standards and customs. In those circumstances there was no space for Hatra, as an independent city. The last ruler of Hatra Sanatruq II had surely realised that the further existence of the city was in danger. The other independent and semi-independent states which had been a part of the former Arsacid Empire (such as Spasinu Charax for instance) were crashed one after another.¹⁰ The Persian army was expected to appear before the Hatra walls sooner or later. Sanatruq II decided to look for alliances. The old Roman enemy became an ally. The IX cohort of the Gordiana legion was relocated to Hatra.¹¹ Their presence was rather symbolic in character, but it gave a clear signal to the Sassanids that Hatra was now under Roman protection. The legionaries were accommodated in the south western part of the city, as we

⁸ F. SAFAR, M.A. MUSTAFA, *Al-Hadhr, Madinat al-Shams (Hatra the City of the Sun God)*, Baghdad 1974 [in Arabic]; J.K. IBRAHIM, *Pre Islamic Settlement in Jazirah*, Baghdad 1986 (hereinafter referred to as: *Pre Islamic Settlement*), pp. 123-127; R. VENCO-RICCARDI, Hatra dans le monde parthe, *Dossiers d'Archéologie* 334 (juillet-août 2009), pp. 58-67; M. GAWLIKOWSKI, Les banquettes sous les voûtes, *Dossiers d'Archéologie* 334 (juillet-août 2009), pp. 14-23.

⁹ IBRAHIM, *Pre Islamic Settlement*, pp. 99-103; SOMMER, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*, pp. 368-376.

¹⁰ M. SCHOUL, *Die Charakene, Ein mesopotamisches Königreich in hellenistisch-parthischer Zeit*, Stuttgart 2000.

¹¹ D. OATES, A Note on Three Latin Inscriptions from Hatra, *Sumer* 11 (1955), pp. 39-43.

know from the four Latin inscriptions discovered in one of the temples. Unfortunately, the presence of the Roman military forces had not discouraged the Persians. They attacked the city in the times of Ardashir I. According to ancient sources, the Sassanid king was badly injured, which stopped the siege for a while. After the king's death his son Shapur I attacked Hatra again.¹² After three years of fighting outside the walls of Hatra, the city for the first and last time was taken by storm. In this way, one of the most splendid Aramaic cities and cultural and religious centres disappeared in very dramatic circumstances.

Dura Europos (Figs. 39-41)

The second among the key cities of the Aramaic world, Dura Europos, was located at a very strategic point. The fortress, founded in 303 BC by Seleucos I (or one of his generals), was erected on the western, abrupt edge of the Euphrates valley.¹³ This was because the origins of the city were where the two great cultures – western, Greek and local, Aramaic – crossed paths. Dura Europos was planned as a typical stronghold overlooking the route leading to southern Mesopotamia along the Euphrates river. However, as it was the only real urban centre in the middle of a deserted region, the city quickly also became a local trade and cultural centre. Greek soldiers were closely collaborating and trading with the native Aramaic-speaking communities. After years these two groups had fused together into one society. The old-new mixed community was a fascinating conglomerate of customs, traditions and beliefs, which was especially visible in the religion of Dura Europos.

In one of the city temples the one goddess was worshiped under the Semitic name of Azanathkona and the Greek name Artemis.¹⁴ This is only one of the many examples of the religious syncretism present in Dura. The Greek and the Aramaic beliefs intermingled and penetrated each other, which produced a unique combination of both religions. There was also a third element of this religious mosaic represented in later Dura Europos. Traces of the Roman cults of Mithra and Dolicheus can also be found in the city.¹⁵ Taking into consideration this splendid mixture of cultures and religion, Dura Europos was one of the most important and intriguing centres of Aramaic world.

The unique position of the city was sustained even when the Parthian king Mitridates II conquered Dura around 113 BC. From that moment Dura became one of the most strategically important points on the restless border between Seleucids and Arsacids. That situation did not change even when a new power – the Roman Empire – suddenly appeared in the East. Shortly after that Dura became a provincial Parthian administrative centre.

Dura Europos as a border fortress had been moving from hand to hand several times. In 116 CE Dura was taken by Trajan during his campaign to Mesopotamia. Several years later in 121 CE the city was retaken by Parthian troops. Next, Dura was captivated in 156 CE by the Roman army led by Lucius Verus. After that date Dura became one of the military strongholds on the eastern border of the Roman Empire. During the time of the reign of Caracalla, Dura became a Roman colony. In 256 CE heavy battles were fought over the city. Traces of these sieges are still visible on the enclosure wall of the city. The Persian army led by Shapur I undermined tower 19 and wall of Dura collapsed, making a final onslaught and capturing of the city possible.¹⁶ This rapid and a very brutal attack left Dura completely devastated and abandoned for many centuries until the moment when the first archaeologist started to uncover the traces of the final moments of that city.

¹² M.H. DODGEON, S.N.C. LIEU, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (AD 226-363) A Documentary History*, London, New York 1994, pp. 15, 33.

¹³ SOMMER, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*, pp. 270-354.

¹⁴ S. DOWNEY, *Mesopotamian Religious Architecture*, Princeton, New Jersey 1988, pp. 99-101.

¹⁵ SOMMER, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*, pp. 270-354; EDWELL, *Between Rome and Persia*, pp. 93-147.

¹⁶ BUTCHER, *Roman Syria*, p. 57.

Palmyra (Figs 42-43)

The significant role of this desert city was a result of its location on the crossroad of the main caravan roads. The incomes from the long-distance trade made the city rich, but Palmyra was famous also as an important religious centre of the Arameans. The main god of Palmyra was Bel, the great “Pan-Semitic” deity, worshiped in the *temenos* located in the heart of the city.¹⁷ Additionally, numerous temples and shrines erected in Palmyra over the ages provided a place for cultic activities of various kinds. The gods and goddess were worshiped here by the citizens but also by the members of nomadic tribes from the neighbouring Syrian Desert. The sacral aspect of city functioning, which can be even named the Palmyrene religion, was the key factor that consolidated people in a certain way. The second element of that Aramaic identity was, as always, language.

The years of excavations in Palmyra brought to light the ruins of numerous temples and shrines. The most important was certainly the *temenos* and the temple devoted to Bel. The other structures known from Palmyra were dedicated to Baalshamin, Allat, Nebo, Arsu, and Rab’asire. We still do not know where were located the shrines of Atargatis, Bel-Hamon (if we reject the thesis that the sanctuary was located on Jebel Mountar peak), and the Sacred Garden of Malakbel and Aglibol, and Yarhibol. The above mentioned places were confirmed in the epigraphic sources.¹⁸

A position of Palmyra was particularly high during the 3rd century CE crisis which tore apart the Roman Empire. The weakness of Rome made the extent of independence of Palmyra much more obvious. In fact the Romans were now ready to treat Palmyra as a partner or ally rather than a subjugated provincial state. This was especially visible during the Odainath reign.¹⁹ This ruler of Palmyra appeared with his troops next to the city walls of Ctesiphon, one of the most important cities in the Persian Empire. His military activity was connected with the fact that the Emperor Valerian had been imprisoned by Sasanians. Odainath was the only one of the local rulers who consequently stood up against this new Persian dynasty. Thanks to his relentless policy he received from the Romans the title of “corrector of the whole East”. Defending against Sasanian Persia was crucial from the Palmyrene perspective. When the Sassanids had come to power they incorporated most of the Mesopotamian state or cities into their kingdom. This meant a completely new economic situation. Palmyra, as a Roman ally, lost its trade partners and sources of incomes. The base of the Palmyrene economy collapsed, since Sassanid Persia was the mortal enemy of the Roman Empire. Concluding, Odainath was fighting desperately for his life and the life of his city. Unfortunately, his military successes could be the reason of Odainath’s fall. His own nephew Maconius, maybe motivated by jealousy, murdered the brave ruler of Palmyra. Yet, quite unexpectedly, power was taken by Odainath’s wife, Zenobia, who started to rule Palmyra in the name of Vaballathus, their underage son. Zenobia perfectly knew the weak points of Rome and its slippery position on the East. She decided to break the alliance and make Palmyra independent from Roman suzerainty. Her rebellion against Rome was strongly supported by various famous people of the time, like philosopher Cassius Longinus. Zenobia dreamed about Palmyrene domination in the whole eastern Mediterranean. All of this effected the conquest of vast terrain from Egypt to the southern parts of Asia Minor.

As usually in each success a future failure is deeply hidden. After a year of crisis, the Roman Empire returned to rebuild its great position as an invincible state. The emperor Aurelian has enough power to restore Roman rule over the rebellious Syria. In 272 CE he

¹⁷ T. KAIZER, *The religious life of Palmyra, A Study of the Social Patterns of Worship in the Roman Period*, Stuttgart 2002 (hereinafter referred to as: *The religious life of Palmyra*), pp. 67-79.

¹⁸ H.J.W. DRIJVERS, *The religion of Palmyra*, Eiden 1976, *passim*; KAIZER, *The religious life of Palmyra*, *passim*.

¹⁹ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, Odainat et Hérodiens, rois des rois, *Mélanges en l’honneur de Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais*, *MUSJ* 60 (2007), pp. 289-311.

besieged and reconquest Palmyra.²⁰ Queen Zenobia was taken to Rome as a prisoner of war. She was forced to parade in golden chains behind the Aurelian chariot during his triumph in Rome. We do not know much about Zenobia's fate after that event. Possibly she was settled somewhere in Italy, supposedly in Tivoli, and maybe she spent the rest of her life missing Palmyra. The city was slowly but unrelentingly losing the important position of a great trade centre. Finally under the reign of Diocletian, Palmyra was transformed into a military fortress. The city, small and partly abandoned, survived until the early medieval times, but was never restored to the position it had held as the Aramaic centre of trade culture and religion

Conclusions

The fall of Aramaic world, in a symbolic way, was doubtlessly accelerated by the geopolitical situation of the region in the 3rd century CE. The Arameans had been placed on two fronts of the conflict between Rome and Persia. They probably did not realise the scale of the danger which suddenly appeared when the Sassanids eventually came to power in Persia. Earlier, the formal borders which had been marked in the Middle Eastern landscape did not interrupt the Aramaic *koine*. As long as Mesopotamia remained under Parthian domination, contacts between Aramaic tribes living there and the tribes living in the parts of Syria controlled by Rome were relatively easy. The Aramaic culture and religion were flourishing. Unfortunately for the Arameans the Sasanian rulers represented a very aggressive policy against the Roman Empire, and against the cities located on the area controlled by Rome. The first victim of this policy was Hatra, later the Persian army led by Shapur I focused its attention on Dura Europos. The fall of these cities, emblematic for Aramaic *koine*, doubtlessly became a symbol of their defeat, and brought terrible consequences not only for Aramaic-speaking Semitic tribes, but also changed the Middle East forever.

In those restless times, the rulers of Palmyra were trying to make their city independent and powerful. They even managed to establish the most important position of Palmyra in the Middle East. However, the winds of good fortune changed, and Aurelian crushed their dreams of Palmyrene domination in the region. The power of Palmyra was broken, in contrast to Hatra and Dura Europos, not by Sasanian but by Roman troops. So, although the initial step leading to the extermination of Aramaic culture was taken by the Persians, the last word belonged to Roman.

The Aramean people were simply thrown between the devil and the deep blue sea, and there was no way to escape their doom. Unfavourable political circumstances sealed their fate. It can be said that they were in the wrong place and at the wrong time, so their existence as a political and cultural factor came to a bitter end, smashed by the great grinder of history.

²⁰ U. HUTTER, *Römische Antike*, Tübingen 2008, p. 373.



Fig. 37. Hatra, the city view from the air (based on: M. GAWLIKOWSKI, La ville de Soleil ses seigneurs et ses rois, *Dossiers d'Archeologie* 334 (juillet-aout 2009), p. 8)



Fig. 38. Hatra. Small temples distribution within the city (drawing by O. Wasilewska)



Fig. 39. Dura Europos a view from the city on the Euphrates river (photograph by A. Kubiak)



Fig. 40. Dura Europos, the temple of Aphlad (photograph by A. Kubiak)



Fig. 41. Dura Europos, the temple devoted to Palmyrene gods (photograph by A. Kubiak)



Fig. 42. Palmyra, the ruins of the temple devoted to Asu (photograph by K. Jakubiak)



Fig. 43. The Bel sanctuary, general view (photograph by K. Jakubiak)



Fig. 44. Penance holes and shape of willow leaves signs (source: Ł. Karol's archive)