

The Roman Near East

31 B.C.-337 A.D.

Millar, Fergus. 1993. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass. London, England.

Book Review by Ann Yonan-2006

This book is a difficult and repetitive read at first but due to its detailed and informative nature, it is one of the most comprehensive and important books written on the Roman Near East. Millar himself admits that he had to be repetitive to discuss the Roman Near East through various aspects. Hence, the Roman Near East can be defined in three ways: geographically, chronologically, and linguistically.

Geographically, Millar hypothesizes the Roman Near East was all those areas that lie between the Taurus Mountains and Egypt, which came under the Roman rule, and historians define as the Roman Near East. The area consists of 8 modern states: Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The Western border was all the way to the Mediterranean, north to Mount Amanus, to the southwest, parts of Hedjaz, and to the east no definable boundaries. The middle Euphrates served as a symbol boundary between the empires of Rome and Parthia, and this boundary ended in the second century. By the end of the third century, it extended to the upper Tigris. This expansion included most of Mesopotamia, to Medain Saleh, 300 kilometers from Medina.

The book starts with the battle of Actium and it ends with the death of Constantine. The treaty of 298-299 gave Rome firm control of the upper Tigris. After the death of Julian in 363, Jovian cedes Nisibis, and parts of Mesopotamia, and Constantine formally recognizes the Christian church, and the construction of churches begin under his rule. The Aesthetic Movement began in southwestern Gaza and reached to the north, around Nisibis, during the fourth century. The book stops at the formal

recognition of the Christian churches, and leaves out 3 centuries from the death of Constantine, to the first Islamic conquest.

Linguistically, the book is primarily based on inscriptions for two related reasons: Political structure and language. Christian epigraphy of the late Roman Empire, written in Syriac and some Arabic, reflects a changed world in the Mid East. Linguistically, the Roman Near East can be defined by language, which is that area where Greek coexisted with a family of Semetic languages: Nabataean, Palmyran, and Syriac, which he maintains are all dialects of Aramaic, written in the same alphabet, with slightly different script. Both Jews and gentiles in Judea, and later in Syria-Palestine, or the Jordan steppe, to the Nabataean kingdom, spoke the same language, according to Millar. He posits that Greek observers tended to speak of all these languages or dialects, without distinction, and called them the “the language of the Suroi” meaning Assyrians, and referred to people using these dialects, as speaking “Suristic,” or Assyrian. (5)

Millar states that the prime purpose of this book is to use surviving inscriptions to draw geographical and chronological maps of the places and times where and when these various languages or dialects are attested. According to historical inscriptions, Millar points out, the languages spoken in the Roman Near East were many, among which were Aramaic, Hebrew, Phoenician, Nabataean, Palmyrene, and Syriac, which Ammianus defines as being derived from the Assyrian language. Millar categorizes these groups of Semetic languages from Ammianus’ and Josephus’ works, which formulate their theories on the basis of group identity shared by the Semetic people, who had the same customs, beliefs, and practically the same religion. In fact, this description of the Semetic people can be found in Josephus’ Jewish Antiquities, written in Rome at the end of the first Century A.D. Hence, and according to Millar the question of descent is not a biological one but a question of identity and ethnicity, which in turn is based on regional

identity.

This regional identity to the Assyrians was rooted in the regions where the Assyrian empire was firmly established, and includes Nisibis, Tur Abdin, Taurus to Egypt, and all the way to the Mediterranean, including Lebanon and Syria-Palestine. Giving us some information as to how this region might have changed in time, Millar quotes Josephus “It is the Greeks who are responsible for this change of nomenclature, for when they rose to power, they appropriated the glories of the past, embellishing the nations with names which they could understand and imposing on them forms of government, as though they were descended from them.” (9)

Millar contradicts himself in several places. He quotes Bardesan and Tatian of Samasota, who call themselves Assyrians, speaking the Assyrian language, but states there’s no proof of their Assyrian identity in the context of the Roman Near East. Millar fails to mention why he doubts their words. However, on page 211-212 he reverses himself by stating that both authors may have been right to identify themselves as Assyrians, by quoting Ammianus who declares, “Many of those who are now called Greek names which were imposed on them by the will of their founder, nevertheless have not lost the old appellation in the Assyrian tongue which the original settlers gave them.” Millar points out that “Ammianus’ view was a doubly retrospective one, set in his narrative of the 350’s, but written at least three decades later.

Contemporary evidence for the early decades of the century provides no comparable picture, states Millar. “What evidence we do have shows how the operations of the state were established by new priorities: hostility to pagan practice, the enforcement of Christian morality and the glorification of the Christian church.”(212).

According to Millar, Christianity’s single biggest development occurred between

the reign of Augustus to the death of Constantine. By then, Christian literature in Syriac had been in existence for at least a century. Churches had been built everywhere, from Mesopotamia to Antioch, Tyre, Jerusalem, and southern Syria, and pilgrimage had already been established. But prior to Constantine house-churches had been destroyed when the Romans conquered Dura-Europas in the 250's A. D.

Millar alludes that Christianity was somehow started by the Assyrians and quotes Bishop Melito of Sardis as having written, "It had been divine providence that Christianity's beginning was among the "Barbaroi" (Assyrians to Greeks) and had coincided with the foundation of the Imperial Monarchy (baseloi) by Augustus. (22) By 325 A.D. Constantine declares his personal mission as a Christian and Millar maintains that it was Constantine's innovations and conflicts that shaped the Christian culture of the Mid East. Constantine's personal mission was proclaimed throughout the eastern provinces by hundreds of bishops who were his subjects, and had gathered at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. and who had been ordered to construct and decorate elaborate churches. Constantine even ordered Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, to set the construction of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This suggests that it was not "Jesus" or his disciples who created or established Christianity, but the religion had been propped-up by the Romans themselves during the Imperial period through the relationship of the emperor Constantine and his "Christianized" subjects, or between the Roman Empire and its colonial provinces.

In general then, Constantine's Christianizing measures and legislation contributed a revolutionary reversal to the previous values and objectives of the state. Millar explains that this book is not the place to reassess the wider impact on pagan, (Pre-Christian) Middle Eastern society, as a direct result of Constantine's Christian mission. He suggests that many aspects of this revolution are arguable, but that it is safe to say that Christianity was imposed on the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, by brutal force

and sheer power.

Millar synthesizes three aspects of the permanently changed nature of the relations between the Roman state and its subjects. The first is the council of Nicea in 325 A.D. in which the immense elevation of local bishops to visible status of Imperial favorites, enforced Christianity as a state religion and legitimized it throughout the Middle East. The list of provinces represented at this council in 325 A.D. is indicative of not only the power and influence with which Rome choked the Middle East, but reflects the enthusiasm with which the bishops themselves embraced Rome, in exchange for lands, titles, and the authority they eventually came to enjoy. Equally impressive were the resources of the state used to build churches. Up to that point, only a few churches had been built by early Christians. The sixth-century Chronicles of Edessa, (Urhay) reported that in 312-313 Bishop Qana built a church there, and the literary monument of this phase is the sermon which Eusebius himself delivered at the direction of the Christian Basilica of Tyre. By launching the resources of the state to advertise his own commitment to Christianity, Constantine's priorities were naturally shaped by political geography of the "pagan" state itself. Apart from his new capital, (Constantinople) which he placed at the central point of the route between the Danube and the Euphrates, his major Christian buildings were erected in Rome itself and the strategic Nicomedia and Antioch, the greatest one being the Octagon.

Millar correctly points out that it was Constantine, in the second century, that imported the Christian conception of particular places in Jerusalem as being "holy" sites and worthy of pilgrimage. This gave Jerusalem and the surrounding areas a centrality in Christian conception that it never had before. It also impacted the deliberate repression of "pagan" religious activities by the state, which resulted in the actual destruction of pre-Christian temples. For example, the temple of Ishtar/Venus was destroyed to build the

Church of the “Holy Sepulchre” in Jerusalem, and this stressed the point just how deliberate and visible a reversal of religious ideologies this was! It didn’t matter much whether the site was the actual tomb of Jesus or not.

The book’s strengths lie in Millar’s comprehension of the Aramaic and Syriac languages and historical as well as geographical knowledge of the Middle East. The book’s weaknesses suffer from lack of understanding with regards to Mesopotamian cults, which had been Greco-Romanized by the time of the Imperial Roman period. Throughout the book, Millar argues that is impossible and even Futile to try to define exactly which cult or deity really was when we look at the statues and figurines found in the ruins of some of the temples of the Near East. That’s because Millar doesn’t try to trace any of the so-called “Syrian” Gods and Goddess to their original Sumero-Akkadian form and origin, even when confronted by the Oration of Melithon, The Philosopher, where Nabo’s cult is discussed. Rather, he picks up where the Greeks left off in the Middle East. On the other hand, Millar does cite examples of Lucian of Samasota’s “On the Syrian Goddess,” written in the middle of the second century A.D. describing the priestly costumes of the cult having survived the centuries unchanged.

Millar admits there are concrete details of the temple, the cult, and the priests, which Lucian reveals. But even here, Millar refuses to name the original cult of Ishtar due to the ambiguity of the text in calling the Goddess “Syrian” rather than Assyrian. This is why Millar questions the authenticity of Lucian’s ethnic origins, when Lucian refers to himself as “Assyrios” to the extent it is not until he writes “How to Write History” that Lucian concretely identifies Samasota as his native city. This argument is not only weak, but reveals Millar’s unfamiliarity with the Greeks having dropped the “A” from “Assyria” and Hellenized the native Assyrian reference to their traditional homeland, Bet-Nahrain, (Between Two Rivers) by calling it Mesopotamia, as has been

validated by the great Assyriologist, Simo Parpola throughout his work.

Millar concedes that Lucian does twice stress from how many different regions or peoples outside the empire, offerings came to the temple: The Phoenicians, the Babylonians, Cappodecians, Cilicians, and the Assyrians, and much later, the Egyptians, the Medes, and the Armenians. He suggests that the cults of “Mabog,” (in Syriac/Aramaic MNBG) are in fact reflected in a work preserved in Syriac, probably written in Eddessa (Urhay), and one of the most specific confirmations of iconography found in Dura-Europas, was a limestone relief depicting an enthroned couple, on whose either side stand two small bulls and a pair of lions, (symbols of Assyrian divinity). In between them is represented a pole topped by a crescent with three disks, and above them a cross-bat. Millar calls this object of worship as “Syrian” by origin, yet in all the scattered notes of antiquity and attested through Assyrian artifacts found by Henry Layard in Nineveh, the Assyrian queen Shamiram, (the Hellenized Semiramis) which was later deified as Ishtar, was the only goddess/Madonna known in the Middle East for being associated with Sin the moon, (crescent) and was the only queen to have ordered her Assyrian subjects to use a cross bat along side or above the crescent. Hence the cross bat was only found to be in use in pre-Christian Assyria, before the fall of the empire. Moreover, only Ishtar bears the symbol of the three disks, representing the Assyrian trinity of the deified Shamiram, Ninos, and Nimrod, (madonna, child, and the husband king). But Millar states that Lucian in one excerpt writes that the Assyrians had no name for this object of worship, and called it “Semeion.” We can only assume that because Lucian was writing in Syriac for Greek audiences, he might have written Shamiram as Semeion, (according to Greek pronunciation). It is the religious and symbolic Syrian connections to its Assyrian roots that Millar either misses or dismisses.

Millar deserves credit for having written a very thorough and mostly accurate and

above all a very detailed and comprehensive book about a complex subject such as the Roman Near East. This book is an immense contribution to the understanding of the many ancient Near Eastern geopolitical changes, which had evidently taken place before and after the Roman period.