

Christian Körner: *Philippus Arabs, ein Soldatenkaiser in der Tradition des antoninisch-severischen Prinzipats*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter 2002 (Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte 61). XV, 435 S. Euro 98. ISBN 3-11-017205-4.

The early 21st century witnesses concurrent reappraisals of the life and times of Marcus Julius Philippus, emperor of the Roman world from AD 244 to 249 and better known as „Philip the Arab“. Following Philip’s appearance in a dream (sic), Yasmine Zahran produced a personal portrait, aimed at a wider audience, in which he stood out as „a moderate, humane and just man, alone in his struggle against the odds“.<sup>1</sup> And in the context of a zealous study that argued how the cultures of the Near East came to transform the Roman Empire and accordingly European history, Warwick Ball described Philip’s reign as „important for anticipating the rise of the Arabs to domination“.<sup>2</sup> The dissertation of Christian Körner (Bern, 2000), which is here under discussion, stands out amongst the above-mentioned works as a detailed and well annotated exploration of Philip’s career and of a multitude of relevant aspects casting light on his place in the turbulent third century. As such, Körner builds upon the classic paper by Lukas de Blois.<sup>3</sup> Aim of the book is to investigate „welche Bedeutung der Herrschaft Philipps für die ‚Soldatenkaiserzeit‘<sup>4</sup> und die Krise des 3. Jahrhunderts zukommt, und welchen Beitrag der Kaiser zum Transformationsprozess von der Hohen Kaiserzeit zur Spätantike leistete“ (4).

Körner starts by introducing the literary sources to the reign of Philip („Die Quellen zu Philippus Arabs“). The majority of those comes from later centuries, but as they go back mostly to older sources (now lost) they can still be useful. Of contemporary texts, according to the author only the *XIIIth Sibylline Oracle* is preserved, a pseudo-prophetic narrative covering a large part of the third century. The oration „To a King“, preserved as no. 35 in the corpus of Aelius Aristides but according to many to be dated to the reign of Philip, is disregarded only in a footnote, although the problem ought to have received more attention in the book, since it is quite relevant for an interpretation of

- 1 Y. Zahran: *Philip the Arab, a Study in Prejudice*. London 2001, with the quotation from p. 15.
- 2 W. Ball: *Rome in the East. The Transformation of an Empire*. London/New York 2000, 418.
- 3 L. de Blois: The reign of the emperor Philip the Arabian. *Talanta* 10/11, 1978/1979, 11–43. Cf. C. Prickartz: *Philippe l’Arabe (244–249), civilis princeps*. *Antiquité Classique* 64, 1995, 129–153.
- 4 A study by M. Sommer: *Die Soldatenkaiser*. Darmstadt 2003, in press, is eagerly awaited.

Philip's reign.<sup>5</sup> In ch. 2 („Die Herkunft und Familie Philipps“) Körner explores the roots of Philip by listing the often negative descriptions in Late-Roman sources. Most of them emphasise that he was an „Arab“ or that he came from „Arabia“, but it should also have been mentioned that the earliest source available refers to him, indirectly, as „coming from Syria“.<sup>6</sup> In any case, in the Roman period „Arab“ was not a tag applied to categorise those belonging to a specific ethnically defined group, although some recent interpretations of Philip have made too much of his „Orientalness“.<sup>7</sup> A number of the later sources also suggests that he was of low origin,<sup>8</sup> but Körner rightly points to the fact that, with two of his sons occupying a position of Praetorian Prefect, Philip's father can hardly have been anything else than head of a „nicht unbedeutenden Familie“ (32). However, with a view towards their Roman citizenship, it is

- 5 „Sie scheidet daher als historische Quelle für die Regierung Philipps aus“ (5 n. 1). Körner refers only to a forthcoming paper of his, which is now published as „Die Rede *EIS BASILEA* des Pseudo-Aelius Aristides“ in *Museum Helveticum* 59, 2002, 211–228, in which he argued, at p. 227, that „die in der ‚Kaiserrede‘ aufgeführten Herrschertugenden werden nicht durch konkrete Beispiele aus dem Leben des Kaisers untermauert, sondern lediglich aufgezählt“. The main defender of a date in Philip's reign is L. de Blois: *The EIS BASILEA of Ps-Aelius Aristides. Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 27, 1986, 279–288. For other interpretations of its authorship, see e. g. C. P. Jones: *Aelius Aristides' EIS BASILEA*. *JRS* 62, 1972, 134–152 (dating it to the reign of Antoninus Pius), and D. Librale: *L'EIS BASILEA dello pseudo-Aristide e l'ideologia traianea*, in *ANRW II*. 34. 2 (1994), 1271–1313 (dating it to the reign of Trajan).
- 6 *Sib. Or.* XIII, 22, with F. Millar: *The Roman Near East*. Cambridge, MA/London 1993, 530. Note that D. S. Potter: *Prophecy and History in the Crisis of the Roman Empire, a Historical Commentary on the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, Oxford 1990, 216–218, argued that „the description of Philip as a Syrian exemplifies a common type of geographical confusion“. However, it is not entirely certain that the Hauran had become part of provincia Arabia by the time Philip was born, see Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 531. Cf. G. Bowersock: *Roman Arabia*. Cambridge, MA/London 1983, 112–114.
- 7 Note the poor and anachronistic comments concerning Philip's cultural and ethnic identity by Ball, *Rome in the East*, 418: „as his nickname implies, Philip was Arab. Portraits depict him with the features and tight curly hair that one sees in Syria even today.“ That Philip was first and foremost a Roman is called „irrelevant“: „what is important is what Philip meant to the Arabs themselves . . . His reign is one of the more important in the chain of events that culminated in the eventual triumph of the Arabs in the seventh century when the Near East ceased to be Roman and became Arab.“
- 8 Note Körner's interesting observation that in this context „zwischen geographischer Herkunft und sozialem Status zumeist nicht geschieden wurde“ (30).

unlikely that this was a family of nomads,<sup>9</sup> and it is more plausible (although this cannot be proven either) to see them with Fergus Millar as „quite substantial landowners“.<sup>10</sup> Körner goes on to analyse coinage, titulature and honours related to Philip's wife Marcia Otacilia Severa, their son Philip II, his father Marinus (who came to receive divine honours in his hometown), his brother Priscus, and Severianus, who was either Marcia's brother or her father. What stands out is, firstly, their contribution to the creation of a new dynastical framework, and, secondly, the continuation of established patterns of imperial representation.

After a very short overview of his reign in ch. 3 („Chronologie der Regierungszeit Philipps“), Philip's rise to the purple is followed in ch. 4 („Philipps Aufstieg und Machtübernahme“). Most conspicuous in Körner's analysis of Philip's career is the way in which he prefers to see the emperor being involved in the death of his predecessor, Gordian III. It is certain that the latter died in the context of his war against the Persians, but on the details the various sources differ substantially. The King of Kings, in a famous trilingual inscription,<sup>11</sup> claimed that Gordian found his death at the battle of Mesiche, a scenario supported partly by a couple of Byzantine chronicles. The large majority of the late-Roman and early-Byzantine sources, however, apparently uninformed about that battle, follows traditions in which Gordian as the victim of Philip's conspiracy died either at Circesium or at Ktesiphon. Körner's own solution to the insoluble problem is to combine data from different sources: there was a battle, and Philip conspired: „Die Überlieferung, die Philipp für den Tod Gordians verantwortlich macht, lässt sich somit kaum zurückweisen. Der Ermordung ging die Schlacht bei Mesiche voran, an deren Historizität nicht zu zweifeln ist, da trotz aller propagandistischen Verherrlichung in der Schapurinschrift keine Schlacht neu erfunden werden konnte“ (89).

Ch. 5 („Philipps Münzprägung“) shows how Philip's minting program was firmly based on Antonine and Severan themes. Ch. 6 („Grenzpolitik“) is divided into two main sections. The first deals with the peace treaty which Philip struck with Shapur I. Körner pays attention to both the Persian and the Roman presentation of this deal on the basis of the famous rock reliefs of the King of Kings, and Classical literature, imperial coinage and titulature in inscriptions respectively. The second section aims to reconstruct the history of the barbaric invasions of the Danube provinces. The trouble makers Carpi and Goths are

9 Contra Körner: „Sein Vater Marinus könnte ein Nomadenführer gewesen sein, besass daneben aber auch das römische Bürgerrecht“ (323).

10 Thus F. Millar: *The Roman coloniae of the Near East: a study of cultural relations*, in: H. Solin and M. Kajava (eds.): *Roman Eastern Policy and Other Studies in Roman History*. Helsinki 1990, 54.

11 On which see most recently P. Huyse: *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Sabuhrs I. an der Kaba-i Zardust*. London 1999.

acknowledged, but Körner dismisses the suggestion by some modern historians that a third tribe was involved as well: „Der Titel *Germanicus Maximus* erklärt sich vielmehr daraus, dass die Römer die Donauvölker allgemein als ‚Germanen‘ bezeichneten und keine feinen Unterscheidungen zogen“ (151–152). Based above all on the ca eighty rescripta which are dated to Philip’s reign and preserved in the later judicial compilations, ch. 7 („Philipps Rechtsprechung“) deals with the emperor’s stand on the typical matters brought before the imperial court, from which is clear that also in this aspect the principate’s tradition, especially in the format known from the Severan emperors, was adhered to. The same point is argued in ch. 8 („Senatoren und Procuratoren unter Philipp“, with prosopographical details in Appendix I): it is clear that under the so-called „Arab emperor“ „der italische Adel nach wie vor dominierte“ (209) in the make-up of the Senate, and also for procurators is „eine ‚Orientalisierung‘ nicht belegbar“ (209).

Ch. 9 („Philippopolis und Philipps Politik im Osten“) discusses briefly the new imperial showcase formerly known as Shahba, a minor settlement in the Syrian Hauran which thanks to the efforts of its most famous son became „the most complete expression of the export to the edge of the steppe of the Graeco-Roman ideal of a city“. <sup>12</sup> But not just Shahba profited from Philip’s rise to power: Bostra became a *metropolis*, Damascus and Neapolis received colonial status, and building activities took place at Baalbek and Dmeir. In itself, this would not be sufficient evidence to postulate a particular interest of Philip in the region where once his cradle had stood, but as Körner points out in ch. 10 („Philipp und das Reich“), „die Bedeutung, die dem Osten unter Philipp zukam, tritt noch deutlicher hervor, wenn zum Vergleich die Zeugnisse aus dem übrigen Reich herangezogen werden“ (232). It was a chance of history that a man from Shahba came to celebrate the 1000th anniversary of Rome as its distinguished head in AD 248. Or rather, as is pointed out in ch. 11 („Die Tausendjahrfeier“), its 1001st anniversary, as counting from the city’s legendary foundation in 753 BC, one would expect the festivities to have started in AD 247. Invasions of the Danube provinces, however, and the emperor’s need to respond properly, caused the slight delay. As for Philip’s relation to the christian faith, as has sometimes been claimed <sup>13</sup> with reference to Eusebius’ presentation of Origen’s correspondence with the emperor (HE 6, 36, 3) and of the latter’s attendance at services, Körner convincingly points out in ch. 12 („Philipp und

<sup>12</sup> Thus Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 531.

<sup>13</sup> Notably again in the recent work by Ball, *Rome in the East*, 418, where it is claimed, without good evidence, that „it was Philip, not Constantine, who was Rome’s first Christian emperor . . . He would have kept quiet about it and been even more scrupulous to follow Roman public ceremonial to the letter. But the precedent was nonetheless made, and the importance of Philip’s conversion as a precedent for Constantine cannot be overestimated.“

das Christentum und die Unruhen in Alexandria“) that there is no good evidence to corroborate this view. It was the contrast of Philip’s reign with the notorious persecutions under his successor Decius, in combination with the legend (or even historical fact) of Origen’s letters, that has led both late antique and modern authors to interpret Philip as a follower of Christ. Ch. 13 („Die Usurpationen unter Philipp“, with a discussion of fictitious usurpers in Appendix II) deals with the various attempts to usurp Philip’s emperorship, and ch. 14 („Philipps Ende“) analyses the different source traditions concerning the emperor’s death following the final and eventually successful usurpation by Decius.

With this work of reference Körner has reconstructed a picture of a man who wanted to present himself to all levels of society as a „verantwortungsbewusster Kaiser“ (327–328), along the lines of his Antonine and Severan predecessors. Philip’s Oriental background did not prevent that „seine Politik ist gerade so ‚römisch‘ wie die eines Augustus oder eines Marc Aurel“ (327). Körner himself has announced a „populärwissenschaftliche“ (IX) biography based on the findings of this more scholarly work. As for an English biography of the enigmatic emperor, still a desideratum, Körner’s collection and analysis of the relevant sources will certainly facilitate its writing.

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