

Maurice Sartre: *The Middle East Under Rome*. Abridged, translated by C. Porter and E. Rawlings, with J. Routier-Pucci. Cambridge, Mass./London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2005. xviii, 665 pp. \$ 39.95. ISBN 0-674-01683-1.

The Roman Levant is hot. Whereas the modern Middle East is in the daily news only for the tragic events continuously unfolding in Iraq, in Syria and the Lebanon, in Eastern Turkey and above all in Israel and the Palestinian territories, its counterpart in the imperial period is the subject of a still growing academic fascination with all those aspects that helped to make Syria and surrounding countries both into one of the key zones of the Roman empire and into the cradle of the great monotheistic world religions of today. One of the most significant contributions to the study of this field in recent years is *D’Alexandre à Zénobie* (henceforth *AZ*), published in 2001 by Maurice Sartre, Professor at Tours.¹ The book which is here under review, *The Middle East under Rome* (henceforth *MER*), is an abridged translation of the French original. Since it will doubtless find a wider audience in an increasingly English-reading academic community than *AZ* did, *MER* merits a longer discussion.

The Graeco-Roman Middle East can be, and has been, approached in a multitude of ways: from a central, imperial point of view, or with special attention to the characteristics of the individual sub-regions; set in a wider chronological framework, or focussing on the clear breaks that the advent of the imperial power on the one hand and triumphant Christianity on the other constituted. *MER*, taking its stance within this academic debate, provides a readable overview of the main political and other events, and is conventionally divided into chapters dealing with military, socio-economic and religious aspects. It has great potential to become widely adopted as an undergraduate handbook, not only in the Anglo-Saxon, but also in the German world. Closely interrelated with *AZ*, as it naturally is, *MER* fits, however, neatly in the French tradition of Near Eastern scholarship, which, like the other two main schools, has its roots in long-standing archaeological campaigns.

In the Anglo-Saxon world exploration of the Levant took off with three legendary missions from a Princeton team led by Howard Crosby Butler between 1899 and 1909.² In more recent times, fascination with the region can be summed up by the response to an article published in the *Journal of Roman Studies*

1 M. Sartre: *D’Alexandre à Zénobie*. Histoire du Levant antique, IV^e siècle av. J.-C.–III^e siècle ap. J.-C. Paris 2001.

2 Resulting in two series of monumental publications: PAAES = Publications of an American Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1899–1900, I–IV. New York 1903–1914; PUAES = Syria. Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1904–1905 and 1909, I–IV. Leiden 1914–1949.

by Glen Bowersock on *provincia* Arabia,³ including his own monograph on the subject;⁴ then by Benjamin Isaac's work on the Eastern frontier zone and the various reactions to it;⁵ and above all by the outpouring of publications inspired by and building on Fergus Millar's milestone in the history of the topic, *The Roman Near East* (henceforth *RNE*).⁶ In German Near Eastern studies, forever in the footsteps of Walter Andrae, Otto Puchstein and the ubiquitous Theodor Wiegand,⁷ historical and archaeological explorations continue to multiply until this day (thanks to the activities of the *DAI* and other archaeological institutions), with the most recent synthesis from the pen of Michael Sommer.⁸ And in the long-dominating world of French scholarship – where the key role has always been played by the *Institut français d'archéologie du Proche-Orient* (*IFAPO*, since 2003 *IFPO*),⁹ led by names such as Henry Seyrig, Ernest Will and Jean-Marie Dentzer – the main proponent of the Classical Levant in recent years is Sartre, who is one of the driving forces behind the rejuvenated *In-scriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie* (*IGLS*)¹⁰ and who has authored works such as *Trois études sur l'Arabie romaine et Byzantine, Bostra and*

3 G. W. Bowersock: A report on Arabia Provincia. *Journal of Roman Studies* 61, 1971, 219–242.

4 Id.: *Roman Arabia*. Cambridge, Mass./London 1983. For Bowersock's collected essays on the Levant, see id.: *Studies on the Eastern Roman Empire: Social, Economic and Administrative History, Religion, Historiography* (*Bibliotheca Eruditorum* 9). Goldbach 1994.

5 B. Isaac: *The Limits of Empire. The Roman Army in the East*. Oxford 1990, 1992². For Isaac's collected essays on the subject, see id.: *The Near East under Roman Rule: Selected Papers*. Leiden/New York 1998. For reactions, see especially the articles in D. Kennedy (ed.): *The Roman Army in the East* (*Journal of Roman Archaeology Suppl.* 18). Ann Arbor 1996.

6 F. Millar: *The Roman Near East, 31 BC–AD 337*. Cambridge, Mass./London 1993. With the three-volume collection of Millar's articles now completed, his papers on the Near East are now brought together in id.: *The Greek World, the Jews, & the East. Rome, the Greek World, and the East 3*. Eds. H. M. Cotton and G. M. Rogers. Chapel Hill 2006.

7 Active respectively in Assur and Hatra, Baalbek and Palmyra. In general, see G. Wilhelm (ed.): *Zwischen Tigris und Nil. 100 Jahre Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft in Vorderasien und Ägypten*. Mainz 1998.

8 M. Sommer: *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze: Palmyra – Edessa – Dura-Europos – Hatra. Eine Kulturgeschichte von Pompeius bis Diocletian* (*Oriens et Occidens* 9). Stuttgart 2005. See also id.: *Der römische Orient. Zwischen Mittelmeer und Tigris*. Darmstadt and Stuttgart 2006, reviewed in *Plekos* 9, 2007, 103–106.

9 <http://www.ifporient.org/>

10 http://www.hisoma.mom.fr/Programme-epigraphie/JB.YON/IGLS_intro.html

L'Orient romain,¹¹ before his major contribution to the field in the form of the nearly 1,200-page *AZ*. Despite Sartre's claim that *MER* is also "in part a new work" (xi–xii), it is, in fact, an abridged translation of the French volume.

The most conspicuous difference between *AZ* (which I have discussed a few years ago as part of a review article in *Scripta Classica Israelica*¹²) and *MER* is of course the scope: basically, *MER* is a translation of the second part of *AZ* only, since the whole of *AZ* "would have been difficult to produce in translation" (xi). Whereas *AZ* consists of an introductory chapter on the variety of the available source material and ten chapters each on the Hellenistic and Roman periods, alternating between political narrative and analysis of different aspects of socio-economic and religious history, *MER* has deleted what may count as *AZ*'s most original contribution, and commences with Pompey's settlement of the Near East. The ten Hellenistic chapters of *AZ* are replaced in *MER* by a newly written synthesis ('The Hellenistic legacy'), whose focus is on those elements from the three centuries following Alexander's conquest that continued to be of importance in the Roman period (cf. 3). However, a large part of this chapter owes most of its structure and information directly to the original chapter XI in *AZ*. The new Hellenistic synthesis and the four following chapters bring the reader from the Hasmonean, Nabataean and Commagenean kingdoms in the mid-first century BC, through Pompey's organization of the *provincia* Syria and the gradual annexation of the client-kingdoms, via an excursion into the Judaean problems, to the Severan expeditions and the contemporaneous replacement of the Parthians by the more aggressive neo-Persians as the main force for the Romans to reckon with. This first part of *MER* is not just a historical narrative of military campaigns – which could have been up-dated with Axel Gebhardt's study of the relation between army and cities in pre-Severan Syria¹³ – but it also studies, in either chronological, geographical or thematic order, a number of aspects which are of importance for our understanding of the process by which the Syrian lands came to form part of the Roman world. E. g. on the road system, Sartre remarks that the Roman contribution was not so much actually implementing it – since "there was surely a dense network of

11 M. Sartre: *Trois études sur l'Arabie romaine et Byzantine* (Collection Latomus 178). Brussels 1982; id.: *Bostra, des origines à l'Islam* (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 117). Paris 1985; id.: *L'Orient romain. Provinces et sociétés provinciales en Méditerranée orientale d'Auguste aux Sévères* (31 avant J.-C.–235 après J.-C.). Paris 1991.

12 T. Kaizer: The Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods between local, regional and supra-regional approaches. *Scripta Classica Israelica* 22, 2003, 283–295. Some overlap is of course unavoidable.

13 A. Gebhardt: *Imperiale Politik und provinzielle Entwicklung. Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Kaiser, Heer und Städten im Syrien der vorseverischen Zeit* (Klio Beihefte NF 4). Berlin 2002.

roads across Syria before the Romans appeared” (63) – but constructing roadways with a paved surface. Naturally, this and similar arguments were much better embedded in the structure of *AZ*. A number of client kingdoms (most of which had been introduced in the new chapter on the Hellenistic legacy) are discussed, including the important kingdom of Commagene, whose vicissitudes are very telling about the apparent inconsistency in Roman politics with regard to the Near East:¹⁴ annexed in AD 17, restored and again annexed under Gaius, returned to the rightful king by Claudius and finally – having always faithfully (despite Roman doubts about its reliability, cf. Cic. fam. 15, 1) contributed troops, e. g. those involved in the fall of Jerusalem (Tac. hist. 5, 1) – added to *provincia* Syria by Vespasian, who was assisted on the occasion by troops of other client states, including Emesa (Jos. BJ 7, 225–226), whose own annexation to the empire would follow suit.

The second part of *MER* is dedicated to the different elements which made up the societies of the Roman Levant. Chapter 6 deals both with the cities’ constitutions (colonial or other) and with their civic life, and ends with seven case-studies of towns which are taken to be representative of the tetrapolis, frontier strongholds, Phoenician ports, Herodian foundations and the Decapolis. Chapter 7 takes up, as it were, the challenge of Millar’s description of the region as a “world of villages” (*RNE* e. g. 390), and discusses agricultural economies, the variety among rural communities and nomads. It is followed by a chapter on the urban economy of the Levantine lands. Indeed, this chapter’s opening statement (240), that Syria owes its prosperity to an interplay between abundant agricultural products, handicrafts and trading networks,¹⁵ seems to go straight against Millar’s approach that “a social and economic history of the Near East in the Roman period cannot be written” (*RNE* 225). Sartre sketches an impressionistic tableau that is built up from interdisciplinary source material, including coins, glass and ceramic, in addition to epigraphic and literary texts. In a way, it is unfortunate that the urban and rural economies are separated into different chapters, and a more integrated approach could have further elucidated individual elements and added a dimension to the discussion of the degree in which the Roman state interfered in regional economic networks. How, e. g., did the “heavily exploited” (208) forests of the Lebanon, a well-known imperial estate,¹⁶ affect the economic organization of

14 Since the publication of *MER*, the study of the kingdom’s dynasty has been placed on a higher level by M. Facella: *La dinastia degli Orontidi nella Commagene ellenistico-romana* (Studi Ellenistici 17). Pisa 2006. This splendid book would equally merit an English translation.

15 On the latter aspect see also G. Young: *Rome’s Eastern Trade. International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC–AD 305*. London/New York 2001.

16 For the relevant corpus of inscriptions, see J.-F. Breton (ed.): *Les inscriptions forestières d’Hadrien dans le Mont Liban* (IGLS VIII.3). Paris 1980.

Roman Phoenicia, both by its concentration of natural resources (in the same way that specific crops played a major role in the cultivation of the hinterland of the coastal cities) and by direct Roman involvement? Chapter 9 gives a brief overview of Greek literature written by authors coming from the region and of other aspects of the region's "Hellenization" (274) on the one hand, and of the Levant's indigenous cultures on the other. Sartre's statement that "Syria's rural areas offered virtually total resistance to Hellenization, apart from some superficial aspects that affected only the elites" (291) may sound fashionable, but is clearly too simply put: the epigraphy of the temples dotted around the Limestone Massif, the Tetrapolis' hinterland, is completely in Greek;¹⁷ so is the main part of the archive of papyri and parchments from the Middle Euphrates (showing, among other things, how a series of villages located along the river were embedded in the legal structures of some Near Eastern cities and how Roman soldiers were very much part of day-to-day life in those villages);¹⁸ and even the villages of the Palmyrene steppe show more influences of 'Hellenism' than they are usually granted.¹⁹

Chapter 10 separately discusses pagans, Jews and Christians. Sartre's statement that the local religious cultures remained, as far as the deities' nature and cult celebrations were concerned, at heart unaffected by Graeco-Roman influences (318), is not different from the thesis once famously put forward by Otto Eissfeldt in his classic monograph.²⁰ However, this idea does not acknowledge that, alongside with the Classical iconography and other outward appearances coming to the region from the West, Graeco-Roman religious notions would ha-

- 17 See the classic work by G. Tchalenko: *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord. Le massif du Bélus à l'époque romaine I-III* (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 50). Paris 1953-1958. Cf. *RNE* 250-256.
- 18 The Greek documents are published by D. Feissel and J. Gasco: *Documents d'archives romaines inédits du Moyen Euphrate (III^e s. après J.-C.)*. *Journal des Savants* 1995, 65-119; 1997, 3-57 (with J. Teixidor); 2000, 157-208.
- 19 D. Schlumberger: *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest. Villages et lieux de culte de l'époque impériale. Recherches archéologiques sur la mise en valeur d'une région du désert par les Palmyréniens* (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 49). Paris 1951. For some examples to illustrate my point, see *ibid.*: p. 56, n° 17 (pl. XXI.4) = a fragmentary relief of a typical rider-god with the remains of a Greek inscription (Κασιτωρ) which identifies the deity as one of the Dioscuri; p. 76, n° 1 (pl. XXXVI.1) = a relief of two Palmyrene gods in association with a female figure most likely to be interpreted as the Classical goddess Nemesis [cf. T. Kaizer: *Nemesis, Aglibol and Malakbel: a note on a relief from Khirbet Ramadan in the Palmyrène*. *Parthica* 3, 2001, 211-218]; p. 79-81, n° 1 (pl. XXXVIII.1) = a graffito drawing of a deity (Baal-Shamin?) seated inside a temple with columns and pediment.
- 20 O. Eissfeldt: *Tempel und Kulte syrischer Städte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*. Leipzig 1941.

ve entered the Near Eastern divine world too. Neither does it take into account that even the most exotic of the Levantine cities conformed, at least up to a degree, to some of the general frameworks of religious behaviour characterising the Greek provinces of the Roman empire in general, such as the phenomenon of euergetism and the multifarious modes of sacrifice. In this chapter it is perhaps also most clear, at least to this reader, that *MER* is not as updated as it claims to be (xii), as is already hinted at above with the mention of some works absent from the book's bibliography and endnotes. As regards the chapter on religion, *MER* does not engage with John Healey's *The Religion of the Nabataeans* from 2001,²¹ my *The Religious Life of Palmyra* from 2002,²² or Achim Lichtenberger's *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis* from 2003.²³ Although Jane Lightfoot's book on Lucian's *On the Syrian Goddess* does receive a mention, it is only as an edition and translation (524 n. 10, 607), while the book is a major commentary and, in fact, the best available study of religious life in the Roman Near East as a whole.²⁴ Surprisingly, Sartre still claims that "the treatise attributed to Lucian of Samosata [...] is probably not by him" (524 n. 10), even though Lightfoot has now established beyond reasonable doubt that the work is a complicated and nearly perfect imitation of the style of the work of Herodotus, in the manner that only a Lucian or an equally skilled literator – in any case a "highly cultivated" (524 n. 10) person – could have accomplished. The relatively short *On the Syrian Goddess* certainly deserves more attention than Sartre judges it worthy of, as it is of particular importance as the only contemporary account of pagan worship in the Near East by someone who claims to be an insider. Indeed, the fact that it is a literary game played around Herodotus' work, and therefore not meant in the first place as an accurate account of the cultic realities at the temple of Atargatis at Hierapolis, does not diminish its usefulness for historical purposes. On the contrary, since the piece was meant as tongue-in-cheek, the author would have needed to portray a *realistic* representation of religious life in Roman Syria to make the joke work, and he must therefore have been familiar with the relevant aspects of Near Eastern forms of worship. The treatise is therefore emblematic of religious life in the Classical

- 21 J. F. Healey: *The Religion of the Nabataeans. A Conspectus* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 136). Leiden/Boston/Cologne 2001.
- 22 T. Kaizer: *The Religious Life of Palmyra. A Study of the Social Patterns of Worship in the Roman Period* (Oriens et Occidens 4). Stuttgart 2002 (reviewed by M. Sommer, *Plekos* 5, 2003, 143–146).
- 23 A. Lichtenberger: *Kulte und Kultur der Dekapolis. Untersuchungen zu numismatischen, archäologischen und epigraphischen Zeugnissen* (Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins 29). Wiesbaden 2003 (reviewed by T. Kaizer, *Plekos* 6, 2004, 55–59).
- 24 J. L. Lightfoot: *Lucian, On the Syrian Goddess. Edited with Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. Oxford 2003.

Levant in general, even in those instances when it is the only source to provide evidence for certain religious practice, and its failure to engage with it properly is a serious defect of the section on pagan worship.

The final chapter (“A time of trials”) deals with the geopolitical situation of Syria in the mid- and later third century, when the so-called soldier emperors and a number of usurpers ruled Rome’s empire, and when the Parthian empire had been replaced by that of the Sasanians. Brief introductions to the events that took place at Edessa, Hatra and Dura-Europos are followed by an account of Palmyra’s ‘Teilreich’ (with reference to the title of Udo Hartmann’s book,²⁵ which is absent from *MER*’s bibliography). The choice to end the book with Aurelian’s capture of Zenobia’s oasis city is said to be “more symbolic than historically pertinent” (4), although this section is actually followed by a few pages dealing with the large confederations to whom Rome turned next.

The book with which *MER*, as indeed its French original *AZ*, will naturally be compared, is Millar’s *RNE*. Not only because Sartre’s bibliography shows well the extent to which *RNE* has opened new directions for research and provoked responses since 1993, and not even because he states that the main reason for dedicating a monograph to Syria in the Roman period is the fact that scholars had virtually ignored the topic before the publication of *RNE* (cf. 2). But in the first place the two works will be compared with each other because *MER* is very different in its approach from the earlier synthesis. And it is that different approach that above all merits the abridged translation of *AZ*, since it provides the English reader with an alternative model for interpreting the accumulative amount of evidence from the Roman Near East. Compared with *RNE*, *MER* is less permeated with a direct sense of the limitations of the available evidence, and Sartre’s statement (about the Hellenistic period) that “the disingenuous claim that our information is limited and inherently inadequate cannot be used indefinitely as an alibi” (2, with 375–376 n. 6) is directly aimed against Millar. Throughout the main body of the book, however, Sartre’s divergent method is more subtle, certainly in comparison with Warwick Ball’s *Rome in the East*, which attacks *RNE* throughout.²⁶ But radically different it is nonetheless, more so than Sartre makes explicit, with the evidence of the Roman period set against the Hellenistic heritage, and assuming continuity which goes directly against the historical “amnesia” argued for by Millar (*RNE* 6).²⁷ It goes with-

25 U. Hartmann: *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* (*Oriens et Occidens* 2). Stuttgart 2001 (reviewed by M. Schottky, *Plekos* 3, 2001).

26 W. Ball: *Rome in the East. The Transformation of an Empire*. London/New York 2000.

27 In a manner not too dissimilar to the important review article on *RNE* by D. Kennedy: Greek, Roman and native cultures in the Roman Near East, in J. H. Humphrey (ed.): *The Roman and Byzantine Near East 2. Some Recent Archaeological Research* (*Journal of Roman Archaeology Suppl.* 31). Portsmouth, RI 1999,

out saying that, with its emphasis on “la longue durée” (*AZ* 14), and dealing with both the Hellenistic and the Roman periods, the French original behind *MER* succeeds better in illustrating the notion of continuity, a notion which the work still aims to address in the shortened English translation (2–3, *AZ* 13). The main victim, however, of the process of abridgement, is *AZ*'s informative chapter on the sources for the study of the Levant in Antiquity, especially as anything similar in English is still missing. With a view towards its potential use as an undergraduate handbook, this editorial decision is a pure blunder. It is similarly unfortunate that one of the most useful and certainly charming elements of *AZ*, the insertion of often long quotations from ancient literary and epigraphic sources, has been sacrificed during *MER*'s production.

If Sartre's approach to the subject is completely different from that by Millar, it is also (necessarily) complementary to it, not in the least because it makes more use of visual and material sources (as indeed the above-mentioned work by Ball does too). With Kevin Butcher's recent *Roman Syria and the Near East*²⁸ – which brings the subject up to the early seventh century – there are now three or four good handbooks available for the Levantine lands to be taught properly in the Anglo-Saxon world at undergraduate level. Sartre's first monograph on Syria in the English language is thus, my various points of criticism notwithstanding, very welcome. And Harvard University Press, which had also published the above-mentioned book by Bowersock in 1983 and Millar's *RNE* ten years later, has again proven to be a front-runner in the field of Roman Near Eastern studies. It is just a shame that the result of their efforts could have been even better, had the whole of *AZ* been translated and received a proper up-dating.

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76–106, esp. 102.

28 K. Butcher: *Roman Syria and the Near East*. London 2003.