

J.A. Baird, *Dura-Europos*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2018. Pp. 240. ISBN 9781472530875. \$26.95. Paper.

Damage to Syrian cultural heritage caused by war and the debates this generated has brought the richness of the Near Eastern archaeological sites in general and of Syria in particular to the attention of the public. The caravan city of Palmyra has enjoyed most of the attention, due to its historical role in long distance trade and its impressive ruins, spectacularly destroyed by modern day criminals. With a proliferation of volumes dedicated to Palmyra, the “ruined gem of Syria”, other less imposing sites have been neglected. This volume is dedicated to one of them: Dura Europos, the “Pompeii of the East”, a less picturesque place, but of incalculable value for the study of the ancient world because of the quality, quantity and variety of finds excavators have brought to light.

In order to properly estimate the value of Baird’s short and agile monograph on Dura Europos, the reader should take into consideration the goals of the series it belongs to: *Archaeological Histories*. Each volume in this series is focused on a single site, presenting not only the physical remains and architectural structures, but also (and this is the series’ unique feature) the history of the excavations and of the research. By looking at the history of sites, the editors chose to shift the focus from the archaeological findings to the men who conducted the excavations and their ideological horizons. Thus, the material remains of the past are not only presented, but also contextualized: they are placed in the society that brought them to light and interpreted them.

Baird’s volume thus opens with a chapter dedicated to the history of the excavation activity at Dura Europos. Baird deals with the accidental discovery of the first Durene frescoes by British soldiers digging a pit in 1920 and with the first expedition hastily organized to document them by J.H. Breasted of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. The latter stayed on the site for only few days and published the results of his investigation in a contribution bearing the evocative title, *The Oriental Forerunners of Byzantine Painting*. Breasted’s suggestion of east-west artistic connections, and the image he promoted of archaeological exploration and adventure in an exotic Near East, raised the interest of the public and prepared the way for the later proper excavations by Cumont and Rostovtzeff. Baird demonstrates well how political interests lurked behind the genuine scholar interests in Durene antiquities and their perceived value for the study of ancient art and history. A successful archaeological expedition in fact was a way to set foot in a disputed region after the Sykes-Picot agreement between Britain and France and with such propagandistic intent it was displayed to the public.

A short but exhaustive summary of Dura’s history follows. Most of what is known from Hellenistic, Parthian and Roman periods of the site is set out in a manner that will be clear and comprehensive to scholars and non-scholars. Particular attention is given to religious life and temples, to the adoption of different cultural characteristics

by Durene inhabitants, and to the debates concerning the Sassanid conquest in 256 AD.

A chapter devoted to the archaeological archive of Dura Europos, another original element of the book, takes on a more profound meaning today in light of the enormous recent damage suffered by the site and the uncertainty of conducting further excavations in near future. The archive of Dura Europos held now mostly at Yale University includes many unpublished pieces, as well as detailed records of the excavation, research and study activities conducted by past scholars. Thanks to these documents, it is possible to investigate the archaeological work and to study how researchers in the last century handled and interpreted the ancient evidence. Baird stresses how the archival material and the excavators' own work on the material findings are themselves interpretations of the evidence that reflect contemporary perceptions, in particular attitudes towards both the ancient and modern "Orient" (including the local Syrian workers).

A clear example is provided by the interpretation of the various ancient texts found at the site. Past scholars considered the use of Greek language and appearance of Greek names as proof of the existence of a Greco-Macedonian elite who were racially distinguishable from the bulk of the Semitic population. This elite class derived from the original Macedonian colonists and struggled to maintain its cultural and racial purity against the gradual corruptive influence of the Orientals, starting from the beginning of the Parthian occupation (late 2nd century BC) through all the Roman one (2nd-3rd century AD).

This dichotomy, at the basis of most studies on Dura's "Greekness", has been proven wrong only recently, when (to point to one counter-argument) it has been shown that the same person might use both Greek and Semitic names. Nevertheless, the older approach to the study of Dura's population and social organization continues to influence modern studies. This highlights how the study of the scholars, their work and the cultural *milieu* in which their ideas and interpretations originated, is of fundamental importance in order to re-evaluate the evidence and to question established historical narratives.

Baird's excellent book deals admirably with Dura Europos. It is well documented, interesting, and approachable for the non-specialist. It is also an inspiration for the scholar for deep reflection. For while Baird focuses on Dura, she points out a more general problem. It forces modern scholarship to take into consideration and to question the work of past scholars in a more challenging way. The "history of the research," usually restricted to an introductory section before the real subject is dealt with, acquires here the dignity of subject in itself. The work of those who preceded us is a lively part of the matter since it influences the starting line of our research, and thus the way we look at the sources and problems. Investigating the cultural environment and the research processes who produced that work is no less important

than investigating the environment and men who produced the sources we use for our research.

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