

THE ANCIENT NAME OF EDESSA*

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EDESSA,¹ modern Urfa in southeastern Turkey, is mentioned in various Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Arabic sources.² These describe the city as a Hellenistic stronghold, the first Christian kingdom, and the cradle of Syriac literature. They also indicate the significant role it once played as a buffer city between the Roman and the Parthian Empires and later between the Arabs and the Crusaders. Unfortunately, these sources offer little information about the pre-Seleucid history of Edessa. No systematic archaeological excavations have been conducted in the city's early levels, and the ancient history of Edessa has remained shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, Syriac lexicographical sources include in their entries a name for the city which is similar in form to a toponym often mentioned in cuneiform itinerary texts. By identifying this toponym with Edessa, this paper will shed some light on the latter's early history.

Edessa is located on the Bāliḥ River, some two days march from Ḥarrān to the southeast and some ten days march from Aleppo to the southwest (fig. 1).³ A river, called in antiquity Daysān, passed through it, and its water, together with that of the Cullab (Ġul-lāb) River, formed the Bāliḥ, a perennial branch of the Euphrates. The Bāliḥ and the many natural springs flowing around Edessa provide the city with abundant water. This made the city an important station on the silk route—like Nisibis and Singara to the east—and, as such, it linked India and China with the Mediterranean world. As will be seen, its role as a caravan station is attested as early as the Old Assyrian period (early second millennium B.C.).

In 304 B.C. Seleucus I Nicator built in the city a new settlement upon an older fortress and named it Edessa. The name was originally given to the ancient capital of Macedonia. Perhaps the reason behind naming the new Hellenistic settlement Edessa was that it enjoyed abundant water, just as its Macedonian homonym did. At any rate, the new

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¹ In this article, Edessa is used to refer to the geographical spot where the city is found, regardless of the fact that it normally refers only to the Seleucid city on this spot.

² The Greek sources include Procopius, *History of the Wars*, vol. 2, trans. H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library, no. 48 (1914; Cambridge, Mass., 1979), not to mention Greek Church historians such as Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret. Latin sources include *Amianus Marcellinus* 18.5 ff., 19.12 ff.; trans. John C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1 (1935; Cam-

bridge, Mass., 1982). Among the Syriac sources one should mention the famous *Chronicle of Edessa*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, *Scriptores Syri*, 3d series, vol. 4, *Chronica Minora*, ed. J. Guidi (Paris, 1893), pp. 1–14. The Arabic sources include, among others, *Kiṭāb Futūḥ al-Buldān* of Al-Balāḏuri, ed. M. de Goeje (Leiden, 1866), pp. 172 ff. and *Muġam al-Buldān* of Yāqūt (sub Ġazīra and al-Rahhā²) (Beirut, 1955–57).

³ For a general history of Edessa, see, in particular, R. Duval, "Histoire politique, religieuse et littéraire d'Edesse jusqu'à la première croisade," *JA*, 8th ser. 18 (1891): 87–133, 201–78, 381–439 and 19 (1892): 5–102 (reprinted as *Histoire d'Edesse* [Amsterdam, 1975]); and J. B. Segal, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford, 1970). For a survey of Edessa's history, see H. J. W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden, 1980), especially pp. 9–18.

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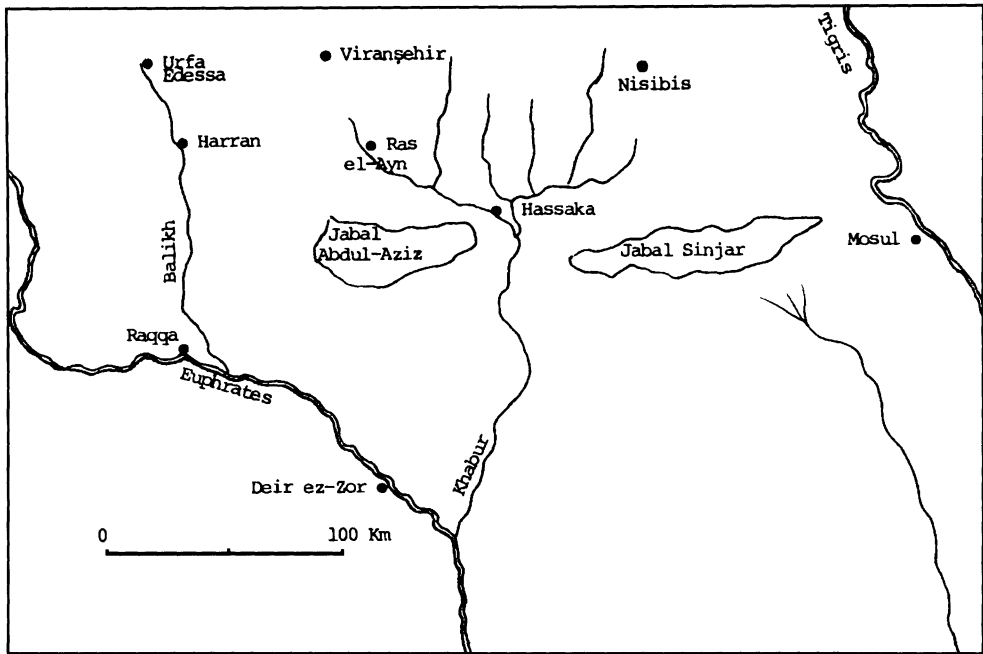


FIG. 1.—Edessa and its surroundings

name must have replaced an indigenous one, as was the case with many “new” Hellenistic settlements in the Near East.⁴ The phenomenon of replacing local toponyms with Greek and Latin ones was already noted by the Latin author Ammianus Marcellinus (fourth century A.D.), a native of Antioch, who wrote about the reign of Seleucus I as follows:

For by taking advantage of the great number of men whom he ruled for a long time in peace, in place of their rustic dwellings he built cities of great strength and abundant wealth; and many of these, although they are now called by the Greek names which were imposed upon them by the will of their founder, nevertheless have not lost the old appellations in the Assyrian tongue which the original settlers gave them.⁵

Thus, most of the Hellenistic settlements in the Near East were erected on earlier settlements. This is obvious at such Hellenized cities as Aleppo and Ḥammān, since these toponyms are attested in cuneiform sources, but some new settlements also provided proof of their ancient background. This is the case of Apamia where prehistorical data

⁴ Among the other Near Eastern cities which were given Greek or Latin names are Ammonite Rabbat (Ḥammān)-Philadelphia, Acco-Ptolemais (later Antiocheia), Bet Shean-Scythopolis, Ḥalab-Beroia, Susita-Hippos (the latter name is a mere translation of the Aramaic one); see V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civil-*

ization and the Jews (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 109. Most of the original names continued to be used, despite the change, but this does not seem to be the case with Edessa.

⁵ *Ammianus Marcellinus* 14.6, p. 69.

and Hittite sculptures were excavated in its early levels.⁶ Unfortunately, no systematic excavations have been conducted in the pre-Seleucid fortress of Edessa to help identify the settlement(s) of the city.

Moreover, the Syriac and Arabic chronographies which discuss the early history of Edessa do not help to identify its pre-Seleucid settlement(s). The sources in question reconstruct that history with numerous mythological and biblical-literary motifs which confuse the origins of the city. Thus, the Syriac chronicler Bar-Hebraeus (thirteenth century)⁷ states that in the days of Enoch, the sage who taught men how to build cities, 180 cities were built, of which the smallest was Urhay (Edessa). Nine centuries earlier, St. Ephrem the Syrian (fourth century) wrote about the famous Nimrod “who ruled in Erech which is Edessa (Urhay).” He was followed in this belief in the identification of Edessa with Erech by Patriarch Michael the Syrian (twelfth century).⁸ Edessa is thus identified with the Sumerian city of Uruk.⁹ Jewish and Muslim traditions made Edessa the dwelling place of Abraham, whose enemy was the above-mentioned Nimrod. This explains the numerous buildings (among which are two mosques) and several fish pools named after the “Father of the Faithful,” Abraham. As for the Arab geographer Yāqūt (thirteenth century), he called Edessa al-Rahhā² and stated that its founder was al-Rahhā² bin al-Balandī bin Mālik bin Da^csar.¹⁰ The anonymous Syriac chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē (end of the eighth century), however, relates the city name to its first king, ²RHY BR ḤWY².¹¹

The latter Arabic and Syriac sources reflect the belief that al-Rahhā² and Urhay (from which modern Urfa is derived)¹² were the original names of the city. Nevertheless, the occurrence of the name during the Seleucid period is not firm. Syriac Urhay may correspond to the second part of the toponym Antiochia Kallirhoe, “Antioch by the Kallirhoe,” which appears on the coins struck at Edessa by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.).¹³ Urhay may have formed part of the province name, Osrohene, in which it was located when the province was created after the defeat of Antiochus Sidetes in 130–129 B.C. at the hand of the Parthians.¹⁴ Afterwards, the name Urhay appears predominantly in the Syriac and Arabic sources. J. Segal has questioned why the name Urhay does not appear in cuneiform itineraries, unlike Ḥarrān,¹⁵ the famous seat of the

⁶ C. Préaux, *Le Monde hellénistique: La Grèce et l'Orient (323–146 av. J.-C.)*, Nouvelle Clio, vol. 6 bis (Paris, 1978), p. 404.

⁷ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Chronography of Bar Hebraeus Gregory Abū²-Faraj 1225–1286* (London, 1932; reprint Amsterdam, 1976), vol. 1, p. 5.

⁸ J.-B. Chabot, ed. and trans., *Chronique de Michel le Syrien patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* (Paris, 1899–1924), vol. 3, p. 278.

⁹ This association of toponyms must be merely symbolic. Bar-Bahlūl states that “Ctesiphon and Māhōzē (al-Madā²in) are Urhay and Nisibis”; idem, *Lexicon Syriacum*, ed. R. Duval (Paris, 1888–1901; reprint Amsterdam, 1970), vol. 2, p. 897. As is clear, Urhay, the once Christian kingdom and center of Syriac Christianity, is compared by Syriac authors with two great religious and political centers of southern Mesopotamia, Uruk, and Ctesiphon.

¹⁰ *Mu^cḡam al-Buldān*, vol. 3, pp. 106–7.

¹¹ Chabot, ed., *Incerti Auctoris Chronicon Pseudo-*

Dionysianum Vulgo Dictum, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Syri, ser. 3 (Paris, 1927–33), vol. 1, p. 50:21–22 (Syriac text), vol. 2, p. 40 (Latin trans.). Medieval historians tend to associate city names with the names of their alleged founders, as Yāqūt and Pseudo-Dionysius suggest. This is also the case of Theodore Bar Koni for whom king Ḥṭērū built the city of Ḥaṭrā: Theodore Bar Koni, *Livre des scolies (recension de Séert)*, trans. R. Hespel and R. Draguet, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptorum Syri, vol. 187 (Louvain, 1981), p. 304.

¹² This name is not attested before the Turkish period; see Segal, *Edessa*, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6; Drijvers, *Cults*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Segal, *Edessa*, p. 9.

¹⁵ On the early history of Ḥarrān, see J. N. Postgate, “Ḥarrān,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, vol. 4, pp. 122 ff.

moon-god, which is already mentioned in the early documents from Ebla.¹⁶ Scholars have searched for the name Urhay in cuneiform sources since the beginning of this century, and A. Billerbeck has suggested that the Til Abne, mentioned in the so-called Broken Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, was Urhay.¹⁷ Others have associated Urhay with Assyrian Ru³ua, Neo-Sumerian Uršu, and Hittite Urušša. E. Honigmann rightly rejected these identifications which were based only on the phonetic similarity of these toponyms.¹⁸ On the other hand, Segal seems correct in assuming that Urhay “may be alluded to under a different name which has not been identified.”¹⁹

Fortunately, Syriac sources give a name for the city other than the familiar Urhay and Edessa. One of these sources, the Syriac-Arabic lexicon of Bar-Bahlūl (tenth century), states the following:

اسم مدينة وهي الرها

DM³ *ismu madīnatin wahiā al-ruhā*²⁰

DM³: the name of a city which is al-Rahhā³

Two other Syriac lexicographers, Īṣō^c Bar-ʿAlī (ninth century) and the Maronite Georgius of Karm-Sadda (early seventeenth century), give a similar interpretation of the name.²¹ Since DM³ does not appear in Syriac chronographies, where Edessa is called almost exclusively Urhay (in a few cases Edessa), the toponym must have fallen into disuse. It was then deemed necessary by the lexicographers to include DM³ in their lexicographical lists.

Syriac DM³ is attested in cuneiform sources as Adme, Admi, and Admum, a city located near Ḥarrān. The oldest attestation is found on a fragmentary Old Assyrian “Cap-padocian” tablet, VAT 9260, which mentions road stations in one part. J. Lewy edited the fragment in part and decided which side was the obverse and which side was the reverse.²² In 1987, Kh. Nashef edited the entire text and reversed Lewy’s ordering,²³ but in a more recent article he has gone back to Lewy’s arrangement.²⁴ The following sequence of toponyms is presented:

<i>Obv.</i>	Adme, Mardaman, [. . .]um, [. . .]
<i>Rev.</i>	Ḥaburā, Burallum, Širum, [. . .]ḥu-ḥu?
<i>Left Edge</i>	Šima

¹⁶ See V. Davidovič, “Trade Routes between Northern Syria and Central Anatolia in the Middle of the III Millennium B.C.” *Acta Sumerologica* 11 (1989): 3 ff.

¹⁷ A. Billerbeck, “Die Palastore Salmanassars III von Balawat,” *Beiträge zur Assyriologie* 6 (1909): 56.

¹⁸ E. Honigmann, “Urfä keilschriftlich nachweisbar?,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 39 (1930): 301 f.

¹⁹ Segal, *Edessa*, p. 5. See also Drijvers, *Cults*, p. 9.

²⁰ Bar-Bahlūl, *Lexicon Syriacum*, vol. 2, p. 39:9.

²¹ See R. Payne-Smith, ed., *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford 1879–1901; Hildesheim, 1981), vol. 1, p. 38.

²² J. Lewy, “Studies in the Historic Geography of the Ancient Near East,” *Orientalia* n.s. 21 (1952): 265, n. 2.

²³ Kh. Nashef, *Rekonstruktion der Reiserouten zur Zeit der altassyrischen Handelsniederlassungen*, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des vorderen Orients, Reihe B, Nr. 83 (Wiesbaden, 1987), pp. 53–54. See also my review article of this book in *ZA* 81 (1991): 146–50.

²⁴ Idem, “Qaṭṭarā and Karanā,” *Welt des Orients* 19 (1989): 36, n. 6.

According to the fragment in question, Adme and Ḥaburā are located on the same route. Ḥaburā must have been a city connected with the Ḥābūr River, and therefore Adme must have been located not far from that river. Thus Lewy's suggestion that the city was located northeast of Nuṣaybīn is not correct.²⁵ On the other hand, W. van Liere's identification of Adme with Tell Ḥuerā²⁶ (northeast of Jabal ʿAbd-al-ʿAzīz) is equally erroneous. As B. Groneberg has noted earlier, Tell Ḥuerā has no evidence of an Old Babylonian settlement.²⁷

Old Babylonian itinerary texts provide a better idea of the location of Adme. One itinerary text, UIOM 2134, published by A. Goetze,²⁸ mentions Adme in the following sequence:

(/) Ḥarrānum, Saḥulda, Ḥaziri, Admum, Ḥuburmeš (/Urkiš/Šubat-Enlil)

The fact that Adme was located three stages to Ḥarrān made Goetze suggest that the town was to be found "near the northern rim of the great Mesopotamian plain," somewhere between Naḥur and Eluḥat.²⁹ M. Falkner went further and located the city to the west of modern Viranşehir, "on the route of Urfa."³⁰

When W. Hallo published another version of the Babylonian itinerary, YBC 4499, he pointed to a route going from Emar³¹ (Meskene Qadime on the Euphrates) to Ḥarrān and then circling "northward in the general area of present-day Urfa and Viranshehir" where Ḥaziri (Neo-Assyrian Ḥazirina and modern Sultantepe) and Admum must have been located.³² After Hallo's publication, there was a consensus among Assyriologists that Adme was to be located near Ḥarrān.³³ Lately, M. Astour wrote that Adme "could hardly have corresponded to any spot but the exceptionally well-endowed and water-rich oasis of Urfa."³⁴ Unquestionably, these scholars have pointed in the right direction in locating Adme, and the Syriac sources confirm their conclusions.

Following the first occurrence of Adme in the Old Assyrian sources, the archives from Mari (eighteenth century B.C.) mention the town twice, in the fragmentary ARM I 103 and in ARM XIII 139. ARM I 103 is a letter from the Assyrian king Šamši-Adad I to his son Yasmaḥ-Addu, whom he had earlier appointed governor of Mari, on the Middle Euphrates. The letter appears to deal with a military expedition somewhere in northern Syria. The toponyms Ḥurmiš and Ḥarizānum are mentioned on the obverse of the tablet, and on the reverse (12, 18) it is said that Šamši-Adad had gone from the city of Nihriia to Admum. Falkner³⁵ located Nihriia (a toponym well attested in cuneiform

²⁵ Lewy, "Studies," p. 265, n. 2.

²⁶ Van Liere, "Urkiš, centre religieux Hurrite," *Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes* 7 (1957): 94.

²⁷ B. Groneberg, *Die Orts- und Gewässernamen der altbabylonischen Zeit*, RGTC 3 (Wiesbaden, 1980), p. 3.

²⁸ A. Goetze, "An Old Babylonian Itinerary," *JCS* 7 (1953): 51 ff.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁰ M. Falkner, "Studien zur Geographie des alten Mesopotamien," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 18 (1957–58): 35.

³¹ W. Hallo, "The Road to Emar," *JCS* 18 (1964): 82.

³² See also Hallo's map, *ibid.*, p. 87, where Admum is placed northwest of Ḥarrān.

³³ M. Astour, "A North Mesopotamian Locale of the Keret Epic," *UF* 5 (1973): 33 f.; K. Kessler, *Untersuchungen zur historischen Topographie Nordmesopotamiens nach keilschriftlichen Quellen des 1. Jahrtausands v. Chr.*, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des vorderen Orients, Reihe B, Nr. 26 (Wiesbaden, 1980), p. 64.

³⁴ Astour, review of Nashef, *Rekonstruktion der Reiserouten*, in *JAOS* 109 (1989): 687.

³⁵ Falkner, "Studien zur Geographie des alten Mesopotamien," pp. 20 ff.

sources), somewhere around Admum.³⁶ The other document, ARM XIII 139:19–20, talks about the people of Adme (LÚ.MEŠ *Ad-ma-a-i* KI) in connection with barley. Adme is also attested in an unpublished Middle Assyrian text, DeZ 2212:2,³⁷ but the context in which the toponym (*a-na URU Ad-me*) is found is not known.

Adme is not mentioned in Neo-Assyrian texts, in contrast to the particularly well-documented city of Ḥarrān. The city must have been overshadowed by neighboring Ḥarrān, an important cult center of the moon-god Sîn and the last stronghold of the Assyrian empire. Nonetheless, Adme gained prestige when Seleucus I Nicator selected it to become Edessa and when the city officially adopted Christianity a few centuries later. In both cases, the city added a cultural and intellectual character to its ancient role as a commercial link between East and West.

³⁶ The location of Nihriia in northern Syria sets the geographical context of the “battle of Nihriia” which took place between the Assyrians and the Hittites, at the end of the late Bronze Age; see my *Assyria and Hanigalbat: A Historical Reconstruction of Bilateral Relations from the Middle of the Fourteenth to the*

End of the Twelfth Centuries B.C., *Texte und Studien zur Orientalistik* 4 (Hildesheim, 1987), pp. 140 ff., 185, 261.

³⁷ Nashef, *Die Orts- und Gewässernamen der mittelbabylonischen und mittelassyrischen Zeit*, *RGTC* 5 (Wiesbaden, 1980), p. 45.