

The Osrhoene Kingdom and The Roman Period

CULTUREL DETAILS OF ŞANLIURFA

The Osrhoene Kingdom and the Roman Period

Within a century after the Third Syrian War, the Syriac people, who of Aramaean origin and who were living in the Urfa region, took advantage of the waning of the Seleucid Kingdom and under the leadership of Aryu (the Lion), they established their own kingdom, Osrhoene, in 132 B.C. Thus a separate Kingdom was founded in Urfa for the first time in history. The capital of the Osrhoene Kingdom was Urfa, which was called Edessa in those times. The Greek historians referred to the Osrhoene kings as Phylarch or Topacrh: Both words meant "City Kings".

In 53 B.C. the Roman general Crassus, leading an army of 50.000, conducted a campaign against Syria. After he captured a few cities on the way, he hurried to cross the Euphrates River as if he were imitating Alexander the Great and with hopes of receiving laurels and accolades and everperhaps the title of "Emperor" but as he drove his forces over Rakkan towards Harran, Parthian cavalry besieged his forces in a pincers movement. In the ensuing battle, the Roman army was defeated and decimated; Crassus himself was taken captive and only a few of the Roman soldiers managed to escape the battlefield and cross the Euphrates to the west.

The Osrhoene King Abgar V who reigned twice, first between 4 B.C. and 7 A.D. and then again for a period of 37 years between 13 A.D. and 50 A.D., has an important place in Early Christian History:

Before the arrival of Christianity, the Mesopotamian people including those who lived in Urfa and the Syriacs, had regressed to paganism. They were worshipping the ancient gods and goddesses of moon, sun and planets, and the Moon God Sin was being worshipped in Urfa and its environs. Artifacts, statuettes and inscriptions indicating that pagan beliefs and worship were wide-spread have been unearthed in sites at Sogmatar, a town located about 40 miles south-southwest of Urfa. The name of Abgar V is associated with a legend in this regard: According to this legend Abgar V was the first Christian King and adopted Christianity shortly after Jesus had been crucified. The legend, as it is still retold through an oral tradition in the region, is as follows:

The King of Edessa, Abgar V, was stricken with leprosy and was suffering greatly. He had heard that a man named Jesus was able to cure the sick, but he could not travel to Jerusalem because he was very ill; so instead he sent an emissary named Hannan with a letter saying he, the King of Edessa Abgar V, believed in him and wanted to learn about his teachings. Hannan, who also happened to be a talented painter, tried to draw a picture of Jesus' face after he handed him Abgar's letter but just could not manage it. Jesus, who sensed this, washed his face and wiped it on a clean handkerchief a disciple had handed him. Lo and behold, a likeness of Jesus' face appeared on the handkerchief. Jesus then penned a letter in reply to Abgar and Hannan returned to Edessa bearing both the letter and the handkerchief.

According to this legend, here is what Jesus wrote as a reply to Abgar:

"Blessed are you Abgar and blessed is Edessa! Blessed are you, who believed in me even without having seen me, because you shall be granted health as long as you live! As for your invitation: Know that I must complete the work for which I was sent and then return to the Father. However, I shall send to you, to Edessa, one of my disciples, Adday, who is also known by the name Thomas, so that you may have eternal life and peace. Amen, in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit!"

The text of this letter has been carved on rocks at the entrance of an ancient cave near Urfa and can still be seen today.

According to the legend, the King of Edessa Abgar V who indeed recovered and led a healthy life thereafter, had this handkerchief (Hagion Mandylion) stretched out and placed in a special niche carved in a wall by the main gate to the city. This handkerchief later played an important role both in Christian art during the Middle Ages and in Byzantine-Moslem relations. Meanwhile it became a tradition to make copies of the Hagion Mandylion and present them to visitors to Urfa.

By the second century A.D., Roman domination of Southeast Anatolia had begun: the King of Edessa Abgar VII (109-116 B.C.) is recorded as having met the Roman Emperor Trajan, who was returning from a campaign far outside Edessa's city-gates, and as paying tribute to the Emperor by presenting him valuable gifts (114 B.C.).

The Roman domination of the area did not however occur without pain and bloodshed. The people of Urfa, who took part in a rebellion which spread like wildfire throughout Mesopotamia, raided Roman garrisons in the area and massacred the Roman soldiers. Urfa and its people paid heavily for this rebellion: The city was soon besieged by a Roman army, captured and subjugated after the Romans shed a great deal of blood and caused much destruction (116 B.C.). This event marked the end of King Abgar VII's reign. Urfa thus became a Roman dominion for a while and a personal protectorate of the Emperor Trajan, who died a year later in 117 B.C.

In 163 B.C. the Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Parth clashed over disagreements about who should dominate the Armenian Kingdom. The Roman campaign into the depths of Anatolia ended with the capture of Mesopotamia and the Osroene Kingdom. After defeating Parthian armies in several battles which took place in Southeast Anatolia, the Romans besieged Urfa, which had become a protectorate of the Parths. The people of Urfa correctly guessed which way the wind was blowing and so they attacked and killed off the soldiers of the Parth garrison in the city and handed the city over to the Romans, thus avoiding a repeat of the massacres of 116 B.C. King Wael bar Shru (163-165 B.C.) was on the throne as these events took place.

However, just 2 years later King Wael bar Shru bet on the wrong horse and attracted the wrath of the Roman Empire, which responded by sending General Avidius Cassius to Urfa. In 165 B.C., Cassius' army besieged and captured the city and Cassius presided over an extensive massacre. Peace was made shortly after, when King Ma'nu VII, who pledged allegiance to Rome and who was granted the title of "Philoromaios" by Rome, ascended the throne. Thus in 166 B.C. started an unbroken period of Roman dominance in Edessa, which ended in 244 A.D. when the Osroene Kingdom based in Urfa disappeared altogether.

In November, 201 A.D., a massive flood (the first ever in the recorded history of Urfa) killed more than 2,000 people and destroyed the royal palace as well as the church of the Christians. King Abgar VIII (Son of King Ma'nu) constructed two new palaces after

this deluge – a summer-palace, and another one for the winter months.

In 213 A.D., the Roman Emperor Antoninus Caracalla conducted a campaign in Mesopotamia. On his way back from this campaign, he took King Abgar Severus and his sons captive and brought them to Rome where he had them killed. Caracalla turned the Osrhoene kingdom into a mere Roman colony in January, 214 A.D. Three years later, on April 8, 217 A.D., the Emperor Caracalla was assassinated by his own officers on the road between Harran and Urfa while he was returning from a visit to the Temple of the Moon God Sin in Harran. Caracalla was a cruel man and a pagan and he had become infamous for his hatred of the Christians.

Between 216 and 242 A.D., Ma'nu IX enjoyed the title of "The King of Urfa". However he was king in name only: He had no real power and by the time he bore this hollow title, the Osrhoene Kingdom had become a mere colony of the Roman Empire. The columns with Corinthian capitals which are still standing in the Urfa citadel are believed to have been erected during his "reign".

In the beginning of the 240's (A.D.), the Sassanid kings Erdeshir and Shahpur I started to challenge Roman dominance in Urfa, whereupon the Roman Emperor Gordianus III appointed Abgar Ferhad XI as the king of Urfa in 242. Gordianus III was assassinated shortly thereafter. Phillipus Arabs, who replaced him, made a treaty with the Sassanids in which he agreed to leave Mesopotamia to them (244 A.D.). This spelled the formal end of the Osrhoene Kingdom. The last Osrhoene king, Abgar Ferhad XI, left Urfa for Rome in 244 A.D. and never returned, although Southeast Anatolia including Harran and Urfa were again brought under Roman domination three years later. Abgar Ferhad XI, the last King of Urfa (or Edessa), and his family spent the rest of their lives in Rome, where they were buried.

Of the 31 Osrhoene kings, eleven were named Abgar; nine were called Ma'nu and four Bakru. Other common Osrhoene royal names were Aryu, Abdo, Fradašt, Pakor, Yalud, Wael and Parthamaspat.

This Syriac kingdom, which lasted for 376 years, had a rich cultural and literary tradition: One of the earliest translations of the Bible from Greek to a foreign language was its translation into the Syriac language known as Peshitta.

The culture of its capital Edessa (Urfa) was a blending of the Greek, Persian and Aramaean-Syriac cultures. Many artifacts and works of art from this period have survived: Over twenty colored floor-mosaics unearthed in Urfa, the Syriac inscriptions written in Estrangela (a dialect spoken by Syriac people in the east of Urfa) and numerous graves carved in rocks, all belong to this period.

Early Christians in Edessa suffered from Roman persecution much the same as their brethren in the west had. For instance, the early Christian sages Sharbil and Barsimya were martyred in 250 B.C. by Romans, and their graves are in Urfa. Three other early Christian sages, Habbib, Shmona and Gurya, were similarly martyred in 310 A.D. on orders of the Roman Emperor Constantine.

In 395 A.D. the Roman Empire split in two. The Osrhoene Province became a part of the Eastern Roman Empire, i.e, Byzantium.