



Roman Soldiers and a Local Temple in Dura Europos

dura_inscription.jpg

[1]

Alexander, a man of Semitic origin, has to restore the doors of a temple taken away by the Romans when they retreated from Dura Europos

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Building inscription

Original Location/Place: Found on the street north of Tower 24 close to the Mithraeum of Dura Europos (Syria), perhaps in re-used context

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Yale University Art Gallery (inv. no: 1938.5999.12, USA)

Date: 116 CE to 117 CE

Physical Characteristics:

The stele is broken on the left side. It was inscribed both on the obverse and reverse faces. The letters are square but negligently cut and inclined toward curves. Traces of red pigment are preserved

Material: Gypsum

Measurements: 38.735 centimetres in height, 24.765 centimetres in width, and 5.715 centimetres thick. Letters are between 1.5 and 0.8 centimetres tall

Language: Greek

Category: Roman, Greek, Other

Publications:

SEG 37.1442 [AE 1936.69]

Commentary:

[Dura Europos](#) [2] lies on the banks of the river Euphrates, the frontier between Mesopotamia and Syria. This elevated and strategic mound was said to have been founded by one of Alexander the Great's successors, Nicanor, but was later controlled by the rulers of Parthia (see Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements*, p. 156-159). Hellenistic, Parthian, and Semitic heritages were therefore present in this melting pot of different cultures and extraordinarily well preserved site, branded as "the Pompeii of the desert" (Rostovtzeff, *Dura Europos*).

At this location, our inscription was found and its content correspondingly has a very mixed character. Firstly, the year is dated according to the Seleucid era equivalent to 116/117 CE. The gypsum stele was set up by a man called Alexander who wanted to commemorate his building and euergetic activities. Alexander, who also had a Semitic name Ammaios typical of this region (see Welles, "The Population," p. 264-265), presents himself as a priest (?????/?*hiereus*) and herald (?????/?*kéryx*) of the city. It is known that his father also held the latter position (see below), indicating that it might be hereditary as was common in Dura Europos (Teixidor, "Parthian officials", p. 189). The name of the god to which the construction was dedicated is not provided (l. 20-21), which may indicate a local cult among the very varied religious life of this settlement (see Duchâteau, *Les divinités*). The nature of this construction is not completely clear. A "shrine" (????/?*naos*) is mentioned twice in the text, but the inscription was found in a reused context preventing identification with the Mithraeum close to the find-spot. The only certain information about this religious space is that, as lines 5 to 7 record, it had originally been built by his father Epinikos. The obverse face of the same stele corroborates the veracity of this account because it contains the dedication of Epinikos himself (see Welles, "The Shrine," p. 128-129, no. 867). Alexander's father was also herald of the city, priest of the unnamed god, and claimed to have prepared the shrine "for his own safety and that of his children." He also took care of decorating the walls with paintings, following the local preference for this type of art which was displayed even in the famous local synagogue (see Perkins, *The Art*; Bellinger, *The Synagogue*).



Alexander was consequently completing a renovation (??????????/anakainisas), which consisted in the addition of 5 cubits (approximately 2.5 metres) and the restoration of “the original doors (??????????/thyrômata) taken away by the Romans after their retreat.” This last note is very interesting and demands further enquiry. Thanks to the aforementioned date included in the inscription, this departure can be placed between the 14th October – the beginning of the local calendar – 116 CE and the 13th October 117 CE. This time span coincides with an eventful period in Roman history. In 114 CE, Trajan put in motion an eastern campaign that started in Armenia, crossed Mesopotamia, and finally defeated the Parthians at Ctesiphon by the beginning of 116 CE (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXVIII.17-33). Even if the specifics of his itinerary are slightly obscure (see Halfmann, *Itinera*, p. 185-188), it is very likely that the emperor visited Dura Europos on his way to the Parthian capital. Remains of a triumphal arch with an inscription not recording the victory title *Parthicus* has been discovered near the city on the route towards Palmyra (Gould, “Inscriptions,” p. 56-65). The presence of the imperial coinage of Trajan is also unprecedented (Bellinger, “Coins”, p. 203-204). If this historical context is combined with the information provided by our inscription, it must be concluded that some sort of Roman military detachment was left to guard this key crossroads. Trajan, on the other hand, returned to the Syrian coast after his Parthian victory, started his return to Rome, but died on the sea near Cilicia at the beginning of August 117 CE. Hadrian was immediately designated his adoptive son and proclaimed emperor on the 11th August. According to the *Historia Augusta (Hadrian 5)*, one of his first measures was to “abandon all the conquests beyond the Euphrates and the Tigris.” Dura Europos was affected by this decision so the Roman retreat (??????????/apochôrêsis) happened more precisely between the summer and early autumn of 117 CE.

This Roman occupation was brief but still damaged the native inhabitants. In the Syrian desert, wood is a precious good and this is probably why the soldiers took away the doors of Epinikos’s shrine. Yet the civic structures of Dura Europos do not appear to have been massively affected by the return to Parthian control; Alexander could continue his building activities in 118/9 CE (Welles, “The Shrine,” p. 130, no. 869), and he retained the office of herald that had belonged to his father too. This contrasts heavily with the strong impact of Rome on the settlement following Lucius Verus’s Parthian victory in the middle of the 2nd century. Permanent legionary detachments were thereafter stationed along the Euphrates and Roman control prevailed until 256 CE, the year in which the city was finally laid to siege, conquered, and destroyed by the rising Sassanian kingdom (see Pollard, *Soldiers*, 44-58; Andrade, *Syrian Identity*, p. 211-241). The first direct contact with Roman military power, nonetheless, is still important for our assessment of the relations established between the Empire and the local population in the eastern provinces. While conquerors may prefer to present themselves as pious and respectful forces, the inscription of Dura Europos shows that soldiers may not necessarily follow such propagandistic ideals; paying no respect whatsoever to indigenous cults and religious spaces that provided them with much needed resources to pillage as booty.

Keywords in the original language:

- [????](#) [3]
- [?????](#) [4]
- [??????](#) [5]
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Thematic keywords:

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- [Roman army](#) [13]
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- [pillage](#) [15]
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