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OTIVM.
Archeologia e Cultura del Mondo Antico
ISSN 2532-0335 - DOI 10.5281/zenodo.8134353



No. 12, Anno 2022 – Article 5

Septimius Severus and the Province of Syria and Palestine

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Abstract: The paper aims to analyze the approach of Septimius Severus to the territories of the Near East and in particular to the provinces of Syria and Palestine, specifically in the light of the stereotyped concepts of East and West typical of the culture of the time.

Keywords: Septimius Severus – Roman Near East – Eastern Provinces

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I was asked for contextualizing Septimius Severus' attitude towards the Near East and in particular the Province of Syria and Palestine, that included, at that time, the territory of the former Province of Judaea. But Septimius Severus' attitude is incomprehensible without a glance to his own historical context as well as to the development of the so-called Romanization process¹. I am going to divide my paper in four parts, that is also the way to approach the topic from three different perspectives.

1. CULTURALE ISSUE.

Jorge Louis Borges wrote something very important about the East, or better, about European's invention and discovering of the East. I'll quote the very assertive beginning of his conference titled *The East*, published in the book *Seven Nights*:

“The main event of the history of the european nations is the discovering of the Orient. It should be more accurate speaking of an uninterrupted consciousness of the Orient, comparable to the presence of the Persia in the Greek history. Beyond this consciousness, something of huge, immobile, fantastic, incomprehensible... “.

The East should be, therefore, a presence so important in the identity of the european nations that these would not be the same without the East itself.

Yes, of course, we deal with more a poetical thought than an historian's argument. But the facts exist in a cultural and social context of feelings,

¹ Si tratta di un intervento richiestomi per un Convegno in Israele, a cui non potei partecipare all'ultimo momento per l'inizio della triste e nota vicenda della pandemia. tristi e note vicende della pandemia

emotions, symbolic representations: in a world, in what we usually call the imaginary.

In his speech, Borges then evokes the matter of the silk, imported in the ancient Rome from the Far East. For an instant, we are going to follow this evocation, not as a poetic indication, but with the instruments of the scholars.

Vergil, in his *Georgics*, lets us know “how the Seres [that is the people that makes the silk, *sericum* in latin] comb from leaves their fine fleeces”²: we have to do with a fantastic thought about the origin of the silk.

Pliny the Elder, who writes about a century later, still believes that silk comes from some extraordinary trees from the far East. But he adds some moral considerations about the use of the silk: “so manifold is the labour employed, and so distant is the region of the globe draw upon, to enable the Roman matron to flaunt transparent raiment in public”³. It is clear: in Pliny's opinion is not good that women wear transparent clothes in public, moreover, being pleased and proud by this. The silk is therefore charming and elegant but also on the border of morals.

Tacitus, about thirty years later, in his *Annals*, speaking of Tiberius' age, focuses again on the silk as moral matter. In this case the problem is that also the men love drawing attention by silk dresses. So, by a Senate's decree “it was resolved that [...] Oriental silks should no longer degrade the male sex”⁴.

By this way we can bring to the light the other side of Romans' imaginary of the East: it is surely the land of the luxury, of the art and elegance, but

² Verg., *Georg.* II 121; transl. H.R. by Fairclough, 1967.

³ Plin., *N.H.*, VI 54; transl. by H. Rackham, 1961.

⁴ Tac., *Ann.* II 33, 1; transl. by J. Jackson 1967.

also the country where the moral values can be easily subverted, where the gender rules can be confused.

As usually in every historical age, also in the Roman era the decrees about the social morality did not work. Tacitus indeed let us know a Tiberius' official letter yet about the silk dresses. In the presumed Tiberius' words, we met a new matter, moral and economical at once: buying the luxury goods from the East, Romans not only corrupted their traditional morals, but also made ever richer the East, that in this speech is defined as "alien and hostile country".

We can say finally that the East is something of more complicated than an easy geographical issue. For understanding that the idea of East was a cultural construction and not simply a geographical matter, we have to think that both Greeks and Romans had the same conception of the East. But for the Greeks the East begun on the borders of Persian empire, while for the Romans the Greece was yet an Oriental country.

Not by chance Dionysus, or Bacchus, comes from the East: Dionysus, the god with the long hair, female dressed in silk, perfumed with incense and balsam; the god who confused the gender identities, that turned the moral values, that brought the disorder; but also the god of the full happiness, of the chance of going beyond human dimension. Thus the East was charming and dangerous at once, fantastical and hostile.

2. CROSSING TRADES, MIXING PEOPLE.

Even if Roman establishment officially looked at the luxurious goods as the alarming expression of their own decadence, not for this reason the demand of the luxurious good declined; on the contrary this trade was incessantly increasing.

Judea and Syrian regions were one of the crucial hub for this very large network of commercial exchanges of silks and other fine fabrics, frankincense, myrrh and other perfumed oils, various types of gemstones, and so on. [It has been calculated that (gems...)]. Pliny the Elder speaking about the trades of pearls and shoots of balsam tree, states a value for almost two million sesterces⁵: an incredibly large amount.

Pliny's narration about the balsam, "the best among the perfumes", is revealing the two-faced Roman attitude toward the East and particularly deals with Judaea. At the beginning he creates an exotic and fantastic mood saying that: "every other scent ranks below the balsam. The only country to which this plant has been provided is Judaea, where formerly it grew in only two gardens, both belonging to the king"⁶. It almost seems the beginning of a fairytale. But suddenly he recalls the conquest of Judaea using the metaphor of the balsam tree as the symbol of Judaea itself: it would also be a beautiful image, if it were not used for such a detestable smug purpose.

B. Isaac studied the racial and the actual slurs expressed in the *Historia Augusta*⁷. But the daily life is more various and complex than the necessary but abstract scholars's synthesis. So, Isaac himself casted light on two Greek graffito – one with an aramaic word – from Sinai. Isaac arguments: "The Roman officer Zenon [quoted in one of the graffito] did not only have had writers of Aramaic among his friends, he himself had a father with an Arabic name. These texts, then, reflect a sense of superiority held by those

⁵ Plin., *H.N.*, XII 118.ho

⁶ Plin., *H.N.*, XII 111.

⁷ ISAAC 1998a.

who identified with Roman power and the Latin language, while, at the same time, they are evidence of the mixed culture ⁸the area” .

Furthermore, I think that we have to stress how is possible for one Greek and/or Aramaic speaking to identify as Latin and as part of Roman power, because of the prevalence of mixed culture. But the situation of mixed culture was common in the Syro-Judean area, and we have to think that it was quite normally in many provinces of empire as well as it was quite similar the social daily life everywhere in the lands ruled by Romans. I think that W. Ecks, some years ago, was right in writing that “the public face of the majority of cities in the province of Judaea/Syria Palaestina hardly differed from that presented by other urban centers in the Empire”⁹. The so discussed Hadrian's bronze statue from Tel Shalem in Jerusalem is one of clearest example of this true situation, in the same way of the so numerous inscriptions from statue basis considered by W. Ecks.

We do not have to forget Septimius Severus' ancestry: his paternal family had Punic or Syrian origins, while his mother's family descended from Latin colonies from Italy¹⁰. So, also an emperor was able to be a son of this common reality of mixed culture. In the same way, very influent Septimius Severus' wife, Iulia Domna, came from an important family of Emesa, in Syria. Since the end of the first century A.D., the ruler class of Roman empire was characterized as even more multi-ethnic. The creation of a mixed establishment was one of the aims of the so-called Romanization: sending latin colonies in the new country, often veterans, and involving local ruling

⁸ ISAAC 1998a, p. 269.

⁹ ECK 2015, p. 26.

¹⁰ BIRLEY 1988, pp. 26-43.

classes in the local government was the Roman strategy to consolidate the military conquest and to pacify the subjected territories.

Saying that, I do not want to forget the cruel Roman wars of occupation, but to draw the situation after more than a century of Roman rule, that is a very complex and articulate social phenomenon¹¹. The increasingly of the commercial trades and the general but partial situation of peace allow the growing up of a new mixed ruler class, even if always within the limits and conditions imposed by Roman state.

3. THE ROAD NETWORK.

The main topic of this meeting is the considerable archaeological discovery of a stretch of the Roman “Frankincense Road” and some of its milestones. This road was one of the most relevant signals of the economic and strategic importance of the Judaeian and Syrian areas. They were the connection, controlled by Romans, between the foreign oriental world and the Provinces of the Roman empire and the crucial intersection of the largest part of commercial roads from East to West¹². The strategical and economic functions did work well together, but they have not been to be ever the same. While the economic relevance of this region did not ever decrease, the strategical importance depended on most wider problems, like the general military situation of the empire, the social order in this region and the relationships with the states immediately beyond the borders, overall, the Parthian empire. We will see later that some significant changes of these issues will be one of the most important reasons for Septimius Severus' new strategy in the ruling of this area.

¹¹ MILLAR 1990.

¹² FOWLKES-CHILDS, SEYMOUR 2019, p. 9.

But at first, we must focus on the functions and the meaning of the road network in the Roman policy and ideology.

I do not know if it is still fully correct that, quoting Israel Roll, “an impressive indication of the high level of culture is provided by the Roman road network throughout the province of Judaea”, because of the new image of the whole area drawn by the increasingly archaeological excavations, the epigraphic studies and so on, but I am sure that he was right when underlined that “the road network may be considered to be the most important construction project of the imperial administration in Judaea”¹³. This project, however, changed during the time.

But we need to cross ever more the data about the road system with the results of urban archaeology excavations, otherwise we risk giving an incorrect priority to the military perspective of the Romanization.

In the Roman colonialist ideology and in related processes of symbolic construction, the road network was the fundamental instrument of appropriating and controlling the space. Furthermore, it was also used in the imperial propaganda as metaphor of the civilization. Not by chance, the reliefs on Trajan's Column, a monument for the celebration of the emperor military conquest of Dacia, show also some scenes representing soldiers building roads. In the scenes 55-56, for example, we can see the legionary troops advancing into the high hill, preceded by a group of soldiers working for the building of a road¹⁴. Similarly, the scenes 91-92 show some legionaries that, placed the shields and the other weapons, are building a road, at first crossing a wood and then close to a city¹⁵. These scenes wanted

¹³ ROLL 1983, p. 136.

¹⁴ COARELLI 1999, p. 101, tav. 57.

¹⁵ COARELLI 1999, p. 153, tav. 109.

to communicate that the Roman conquest was a great chance for the subjected countries. Therefore, these images connect the constructions of the routes with the army's duties.

Speaking of the great importance that road network had in the roman imaginary, I have just to mention the close topographical and symbolic connection between two great buildings in Rome: the Porticus Vipsania, conceived by general Agrippa and constructed by Augustus, and the Catabulum, that is the official seat of the postal system and of the commission for the routes. The Porticus Vipsaniae was decorated with a great fresco representing an huge map of the Roman empire, ideologically turned into a vision of the world with Rome in the central position¹⁶. The Catabulum, build aside, was supposed to be the starting point of the whole roman road network, the point from which all distances from Rome were measured, the heart of the rout-system conceived as the “nervous system” of the Empire.

But the true function of the road network, beyond the ideological, symbolic and propagandist meanings, was to be the very useful instrument for the public administration and the military control. The post run quickly, the troops were able to move fast, the emperor himself with his own court was able to be in every part of the reign and in general the trades and the people movements were quite safe and rapid. Building roads therefore was one of the most important means and signs of the Romanization.

Even if in the western and northern provinces of the Roman empire the road-building went together with the conquest, also because the central

¹⁶ TROUSSET 1993; for the *Catabulum* see COARELLI 1993, p. 256; for the *Porticus Vipsania* see now GOLDBECK 2015.

power dealt with non-urbanised countries, we have to underline than in the Provinces of Judaea and Syria the matter followed a very different development.

In the first phase of its domination, Rome considered that major projects related to the route system was not necessary. Probably, the central and provincial rulers thought the traditional local route system as adequate to the ordinary needs. They also considered this area safe and pacified because the Parthian borders run far in the north. Furthermore, they were so confident to safely controlling this land to the point that they were not able to preview the outbreak and the strength of Jewish rebellion.

In the late years of the reign of Claudius, some decades after Judaea annexation, we can argue that something was changing by the foundation of the new colony of Ptolemais (Acco), the first in the country after Berytus. We do not deal with the building of the new town, but with a settlement of veterans in the old city and also in its terr¹⁷itory. It is true that, as Millar stressed, we do not have any evidence that this veterans played some role in the later conflicts, but I agree with Isaac as he thinks that this colony could be a Roman response to the increasing clashes between Jews and Samaritans¹⁸.

The inscription on a milestone dated A.D. 56 records the paving of the costal road from Antioch to the new colony of Ptolemais. The milestone does not prove the building of a new road, but at least the technical improvement of an existing route. We have to connect the improvement of the route with the deduction of the colony: they are different actions of the

¹⁷ MILLAR 1990, p. 23 ss.

¹⁸ ISAAC 1980-81, p. 37; MILLAR 1990, p. 25.

same plan. It is the way of reinforcing its own military and cultural presence by Rome as a response to local dangerous troubles. We could also say that it is the way to act a quite stronger Romanization, because the colony, placed on the border of Syria, is in some way a discrete, although evident, presence. The increasing turmoil and troubles, that we can not know better, had suggested to the Romans that their presence were no longer enough.

The Roman local government, rapacious and corrupt, compared with the strong national and religious Jewish identity, missed completely the aim of a pervasive Romanization.

The foundation of the new colony of Cesarea¹⁹ by the new emperor Vespasianus was strictly connected with the First Rebellion as well as the earliest milestone discovered in Judaea, dated at 69 A.D. It was part of the road from Caesarea-on-the-sea to Scythopolis (Bet Shen)²⁰. The names and titles of Vespasian and Marcus Ulpius Traianus, commander of the Legio X Fretensis and father of the future emperor Trajan, were inscribed on it. From a strictly archaeological point of view, the milestones do not date necessary the construction of a road. They could date simply some repairs or also the propagandistic will of an emperor to be named or remembered or lastly the loyalty of a local ruler. But in this case, it is quite easy to say that the military needs connected with the First Jewish War were the reason for building a new road or better for enlarging and reinforcing an old one. In this last sense we can say that we deal with the earliest known Roman route in Judaea.

We have no particular archaeological evidences of roadbuilding until Hadrian's reign. A large part of the several activities planned by Hadrian,

¹⁹ ISAAC 1980-81, p. 43; MILLAR 1990, p. 26.

²⁰ ISAAC, ROLL 1976; ISAAC 1998c, p. 49; ISAAC 2015, p. 41.

who was present in Judaea in 129/130, (road-building, road technical improvements, foundation of the colony of Aelia Capitolina, reinforcing the presence of Roman army), were earlier than the Second Revolt, because the Emperor did many transformations in the administration throughout the empire. But it is very difficult nowadays to understand how and how much the revolt changed and influenced Hadrian's plan. Surely, after Hadrian's reign, Judaea, that had lost its own name, was crossed by many large roads conceived for military aims and was occupied by a larger number of roman troops²¹.

4. SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS IN JUDAEA.

Beyond the foundation of Aelia Capitolina and the larger presence of Roman troops, several elements changed the Provincia of Syria-Palaestinae during the second century A.D. and its role in the complex system of the empire. The enlargement of the south and southeastern borders as well as the building of a large new road from Aisla to Bozra during Trajan's reign increased the strategic and economic importance of the whole area. Moreover Armenia, Mesopotamia and Syria became the main theatre of the centuries-old war with the Parthian empire. This is the reason for the most important plan of roads building and improvement was realized to support the legions at Parthian front. Not by chance Marcus Aurelius' milestones are by far the most extensive group in Judaea. It has been already stressed by B. Isaac that all datable milestones of Marcus Aurelius in Judaea are of the year 162, the same year when the roman campaign against Parthia

²¹ MILLAR 1990, p. 28 s.

begun²². Moreover, the provinces of Sirya-Palaestina and Arabia are the only regions of the empire in which Marcus Aurelius' milestones were found.

We have to find also an explanation for the presence in Judaea of some milestones of emperor Pertinax, whom very few milestones are known. He was emperor only from the 1st of January to the 28th of March of the 193: three months only. It is obviously a time too short for thinking that Pertinax himself planned some road building activity. But he had been governor of Syria from 179 to 182, and before holding the highest rank he had resided in the country many times with different functions and posts²³. So, it is not difficult to think that he maintained good relationships with the local establishment, that promoted the diffusion of the milestones bearing his name to celebrate him as emperor.

It has been written that “with the ascent to throne of Septimius Severus in AD 193 a quite new phase opens in the nature of Roman coloniae in the Near East”, and that “it is not beyond possibility that his origins in Tripolitania, a Latin-speaking area whose Punic sub-culture was a distant product of Phoenician colonisation, had some effect on this change”²⁴. I think that these considerations are formulated from an excessively modernist perspective. My arguments are:

1) too much importance to the ethnic origin of the emperor, when all the establishment is already mixed and transnational and anyway the politic careers are constructed with activities all over the empire;

²² ISAAC 1998c, p. 51.

²³ DABROWA 1998, pp. 119-121.

²⁴ MILLAR 1990, p. 31.

2) not taking account of the general changes of empire and of the social and politic situation of the Syro-Palestinian province.

The Septimius Severus' policy towards this area has been well studied in detail. Regarding the aim of my paper, it is more important to understand the reasons of general attitude of the emperor towards the Near-East.

Septimius Severus, acclaimed emperor by the Pannonian legions in 193 A.D., was directly involved in Near East since his ascent to the throne, because of the civil war unleashed by Pescennius Niger, the governor of the Province of Syria. Some of the the cities of Judaea and Syria choose Severus, some others instead choose Niger, probably all regarding the local perspectives and interest rather than larger matters. After the victory, Severus rewarded the loyal cities and punished Nigers' supporters.

So, for example, Neapolis, in Samaria, was deprived of the status of "city", and probably was ruled by Sebaste, the nearest big urban centre in Samaria, that in this way was rewarded for its loyalty.

In the same way, Antioch in Syria loose the condition of city. Laodicea, that was been plundered by Niger's troops, was rewarded with Antioch's territory and also with the honorific titles of metropolis and capital of the new Province of Syria Coele.

But the punishments did not last long. Severus need to reinforce the support of all the cities of the whole area for both domestic and foreign policy. In particular, the former province of Sirya-Judaea was strongly involved in the Severus' Parthian war, which main aim was the Mesopotamia. A new rebellion in this region would have been fatal for the emperor, being for Parthian empire the good opportunity for a new invasion.

Thus a few years later (197/198 A.D.), during his second stay in the East, probably after his victory on the Parthyan empire, Severus reversed his policy. He reconciled himself to the punished urban centers, that had the status of city back and he rewarded again some other cities with the honorific title of colonia, as Heliopolis, Tyre, Laodicea and Sebaste. We do not deal with the settled of veterans, but only with a honorific title, and maybe in some case with some tax exemption. The reconciliation means evidently the reinforcement of his relationships with all the local establishment. We can easily suppose that the emperor had also financed some public works to embellishments the cities and to propagate his own image and to increase the consensus for his power.

Severus' care of this Province is demonstrated also by the road-improvement testified by the milestones bearing its name, dated to several years of his reign.

Between 199/200 he visited again the area of the former Judea and rewarded some other urban centers with the title of city, as Lydda (Diospolis) and Beth Govrin (Eleutheropolis).

The Septimius Severus' policy in Syria-Judaea can be easily compared to that in Danubian provinces, both of them strictly involved in the Parthian wars. It has been written about the great effort made by Septimius of building and improving road network as "of the extraordinary attempt to celebrate the empire and its power".

Beyond the concrete utility of the road system, these considerations I think are right. Even if the unity of the empire was seriously attacked by local powers and he had to do overall with the eastern provinces, Septimius Severus tried to think and to rule still the empire as a unique whole

complex. But less than fifty years after his reign, demonstrating the failure of the Romanization of the East, Constantine founded the new capital at Byzantium, separating the fates of prosperous Eastern and decadent Western sides of the Roman empire. A separation not still solved.

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