The book under review is the latest fruit of the existence of a transdisciplinary research consortium at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum (the Käte Hamburger Kolleg „Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe“) which has produced a publication consisting of a combination of papers delivered at a conference in Bochum in 2008 and articles which provide a thematic complement to this.

The idea behind this volume is to shed more light on the religious makeup of the Parthian kingdom – a topic whose importance has perhaps not been fully realized in previous scholarship. Indeed, the position of the Parthian kingdom can be aptly characterized as „Mittellege“ (p. 11) in both geographical and chronological terms. Namely, it spanned a vast geographical area from East to West and so „connected the vast steppe lands in central Asia, the area of the Caspic Sea and the Caucasus with Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, bordering Asia Minor to the west and the Indus river to the east“ (p. 9). Such a vast kingdom included many religious traditions (Greek-Macedonian, Jewish, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Indian, Christian and many other local and mixed religious traditions that often escape any strict labelling) which did not remain in isolation but interacted.

Markus Zehnder’s first paper in this volume („Religionspolitik im antiken Vorderen Orient: Assyrer und Parther“) is devoted to a comparison of the religious policy of the Neo-Assyrian and Parthian empires. It starts with a theoretical consideration of various possible models of interaction between „Regierungseliten“, „religiösen Eliten“ and „Volk“ and then gives a thorough presentation of the religious policy of the Assyrians. In Zehnder’s view, the Assyrian policy towards other peoples and their religions, though it did not in general include religious persecution and forced conversion per se, was marked by the belief that Assyria alone presents the kosmos and consequently that the Assyrians are called to subdue and bring order to the surrounding chaos on behalf of their patron deity, Assur. Such a view makes the Assyrian model gravitate towards „homogenization“ (p. 12). In the case of the Parthians, Zehnder also presents the available data and concludes that their approach was characterized by a great deal of tolerance towards different local cultures in their empire. In turn, the Parthians themselves exhibited inclinations towards both Iranian cults and Hellenistic culture.

Two papers are devoted to numismatic issues. First, Linda-Marie Günther („Seleukidische Vorbilder der parthischen Münzikonographie“) shows that some stylistic features of figures of Apollo (an omphalos-like object and a bow) and Hercules (in a standing or sitting pose) on coins struck on behalf of the Parthian kings were adopted from the repertoire of the Seleucid coinage. At the same time, the iconography of Apollo and Hercules was creatively transformed so that it could be understood by both Hellenized and non-Hellenized subjects of the Parthians. For instance, the motif of a...
bow without an arrow was more appropriate for „the king of the kings“ as someone with a supernatural disposition. Secondly, Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis („Parthian Coins: Kingship and Divine Glory“) offers an inventory of iconography on coins and reliefs as well as of inscriptions which are of religious character and can be interpreted as serving the religious legitimation of the kingship.

In her paper „Feindeskinder an Sohnes statt. Parthische Königssöhne im Haus des Augustus“ Meret Strothmann suggests first that sending young Parthian princes to Rome (frequently labelled as sending hostages) can be understood as an aspect of amicitia between Rome and Parthia and secondly that, once in Rome, the Parthian princes were treated as members of familia Caesaris. In his second paper in this volume, entitled „Religious Dynamics in the Parthian Empire“. The cases of Hatra and Arbela“, Zehnder gives a survey of evidence for the religious makeup of Hatra and Arbela (Adiabene). In the case of Hatra, Zehnder thoroughly presents onomastic, epigraphic and iconographic data with the purpose of sketching the ethnic makeup as well as cultural and religious inclinations of Hatra’s population. Zehnder also takes a closer look at some select issues: the characteristics of the cult of Heracles, the existence of a specific cult in Hatra for the Arabs only, the existence of a Christian community, the appearance of Hatrean kings as priests, and finally „dog“ as Nergal’s epithet. As for Arbela, Zehnder’s presentation is limited to brief comments on Josephus’ Antiquitates Iudaicae 20, 17–96 and a summary of the content of the Chronicle of Arbela (preceded by brief remarks on the discussion on its authenticity).

Next, Geoffrey Herman offers a brief overview of sources on „the Jews of Parthian Babylonia“. His discussion includes three groups of sources: „Contemporary Non-rabbinic Sources on the Jews of Parthian Babylonia“ (mainly Josephus), „Contemporary Rabbinic Sources on the Jews of Parthian Babylonia“ and finally „Sasanian Rabbinic Sources on the Jews of Parthian Babylonia. Herman places particular emphasis on the striking change in recent scholarship which came to realize that Babylonian rabbis in the Sasanian period tampered more aggressively with their sources on Babylonian Jews in the Parthian period than previously acknowledged (through embellishment or even invention of these traditions) and consequently we can hardly rely on them in order to reconstruct the Parthian period. In his paper entitled „Jewish Acculturation to Persian Norms at the End of the Parthian Period“ Yaakov Elman examines rabbinic traditions concerning two rabbis, Abba Arikha (known as „Rav“) and his colleague, Samuel, who lived at the turn of the Parthian and Sasanian periods. According to Elman, these traditions show a great deal of acculturation of both rabbis (and consequently their contemporaries) into the surrounding Parthian and Sasanian culture, e.g. the adoption of the custom of temporary marriage by Rav or the visit to the Beit Abidan (being probably an annex building of a Zoroastrian temple where interreligious discussions were held) by Samuel.

Marco Frenschkowski gives a detailed overview of the relationship between Christians and Zoroastrians under both the Parthians and the Sasanians („Frühe Christen in der Begegnung mit dem Zoroastrismus: Eine Orientierung“). His overview includes different perspectives – literary, theological, social and political. To be precise, Frenschkowski first surveys possible Iranian influences on New Testament and early Christian literature (esp. Mt 2 and Revelation), and then turns to references to Zoroastrism among the „Church Fathers“ and in gnostic literature. The knowledge of Greek and Latin „Church Fathers“ is frequently shown to reflect „mehr antikerische Belesenheit als ethnologisches Problembewusstsein“ (p. 171), while at the same time Frenschkowski stresses that Christian authors in Armenian and Syriac show a detailed knowledge of Zoroastrianism. A considerable part of Frenschkowski’s paper gives a sketch of the history of Christians under Parthian and Sasanian rule. Here Frenschkowski suggests an in-depth explanation of the conflicts in theological and social terms; what is more, he aims to include not only Christian, but also the Parthian and Sasanian perspectives of this conflict.

The last paper in the volume is that of Peter Bruns („Weltentstehung und Schöpfung bei Bardaisan von Edessa“) who analyses the
appearance of foreign names – Iranian and Greek – should be interpreted as indicators of cultural and political affiliation of their bearers in the first place (and this interpretation is quoted by Zehnder on pp. 104–105, n. 10, but only as one possible option; his preference in the main text is towards names as patterns of ethnicity). While interpreting Iranian or Greek names as belonging to ethnic Parthians (or Greeks) in Mesopotamia can on occasion be the right guess, in most cases will be a mistake.

As far as Zehnder’s presentation of the religious situation in Arbela is concerned, the paper has one essential flaw in its assumptions. Namely, Zehnder takes Arbela as its geographical focus, but in fact speaks interchangeably about Arbela and Adiabene over the course of his paper. Zehnder treats both notions as synonyms, but they are not. Perhaps Arbelitis (the region between the river basin of the Zabs with Arbela as its main city) is what Zehnder means by Arbela (the main city of Arbelitis – note too that the name Arbela does not appear in Antiquitates Judaicae 20,17–96; it is only an assumption that all scenes set at the royal court in this passage are to be located in Arbela). One could perhaps understand Adiabene as Arbelitis during some historical periods, but even then there is a great deal more available data about religious practices in Adiabene than that pre-


3 For a great deal of variety in what is known as „Second Temple Judaism“ see George W. E. Nickelsburg, Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins. Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation, Minneapolis 2003. For the fact that the term Judaism is not frequently used up to the 1st c. CE and therefore must be treated with caution when describing the Hellenistic and Early Roman periods (not to mention the 8th c. BCE), see Steve Mason, Jews, Judeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History, in: Journal for the Study of Judaism 38 (2007), pp. 457–512.
presented by Zehnder: Parthian sarcophagi in Kilizu, Strabo’s text about Anahita or Nanaia, Tacitus’ description of the cult of Heracles with some distinctively Iranian features, to give only a few examples. What is more, Parthian Adiabene certainly included Nineveh, and there is a lot of archaeological data of religious significance from that city. Furthermore, there are a few minor things to be corrected in Zehnder’s treatment of Arbel (Adiabene): I cannot see how the names Izates and Monobazos can be called Hellenistic. They are indeed recorded in Josephus in Greek, but widely and convincingly interpreted as being of Iranian origin. The inclusion of Adiabene in „Trajan’s provincial system“ is disputed. Talmudic traditions concerning a rabbinic academy in Arbela are likely to be dated only to the late 3rd c. CE. In my opinion, this book is a valuable publication about the religious aspects of the Parthian kingdom and can be particularly useful as a good overview and introduction for further research.


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