

F. G. B. MILLAR, *RELIGION, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNITY IN THE ROMAN NEAR EAST: CONSTANTINE TO MUHAMMAD* (British Academy, Schweich Lectures on Biblical Archaeology, 2010). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xx + 177, map. ISBN 9780197265574. £40.00.

At the start of his book, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC–AD 337* (1993), Fergus Millar set out his wish to write a history of the region from Alexander to Muhammad. The volume under review takes the story forward to the seventh century: a classicist's journey into once-unfamiliar sources in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic.

There are familiar central issues for readers of M.'s earlier work. Chief among these are the extent of the use of Greek and the presence of the Jews. Ch. 1 emphasizes just how widely Greek was employed, whether as a language of epigraphy, in the attestations of bishops at church councils or in the graffiti at a frontier pilgrimage shrine. M. clearly shows how the eastward and southern expansion of the Roman frontier did not only see an extension of infrastructure, but also of the use of Greek as a prestige language, even in quite rural environments.

Ch. 2 turns to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious situation in Palestine. Here M. traces the clear expression of Jewish and Samaritan identity: the activity of rabbis, the construction of synagogues and the use of Hebrew all appear as distinctive markers of Jewish presence and Jewish difference. The observations of Christian or pagan outsiders in neutral contexts make it clear that Jews and synagogues were identifiable and, in some situations, carried a prestige and interest that could prove attractive to non-Jews such as John Chrysostom's congregation at Antioch. Still, Palestine was no exception to the prominence of Greek and a trilingual epigraphic culture, in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, existed here.

In a sense, then, chs 1 and 2 set out continuities with the *The Roman Near East* after the reign of Constantine. Ch. 3 addresses the same core issues of ethnic affiliation, language use and religion for two groups who would become increasingly prominent in Late Antiquity and beyond, the Suryoye ('Syrians', 'Syriac speakers') and the Saracens ('Tayyaye', 'Arabs'). The sheer fact that one needs to provide multiple definitions for these terms illustrates the opacity with which these terms are used, both in the fifth and sixth centuries and in modern scholarship.

M. begins by providing a blow-by-blow dated assessment of the evidence for the use of Syriac. This draws on codices, inscriptions and records of the composition or translation of texts. There have been a number of surveys of Syriac literature, but this section is priceless for its keen attention to *when* and *where* material was composed and copied in Syriac. The data assembled here, building on articles published in the last decade, will be an important starting point for more complex analyses of 'Suryoyo identity'.

M. begins his survey with the third-century evidence from Edessa (the works of Bardaisan and the documents composed in 243 that discuss the sale of a slave). But he notes that Edessa was not the sole centre for Syriac composition in the early period, since Aphrahat came from Sasanian Mesopotamia and Ephraem from Nisibis. Fourth-century Syriac writing would achieve some fame in the lands west of the Euphrates in the fifth century, in the works of Theodoret of Cyrhus and a small number of Syriac inscriptions. But it is also notable that the term 'Syrians' does not seem to have been widely equated with the use of Syriac: Theodoret does not mention 'Syrians' among the crowds at the column of Symeon the Stylite (120), though there must surely have been speakers of Syriac or other Aramaic dialects present.

M. goes on to discuss the sixth-century 'flowering of Syriac'. It is in this period that Syriac inscriptions become much more common west of the Euphrates, a phenomenon that may show the adoption of Syriac as a prestige dialect by speakers of other forms of Aramaic. This 'flowering' was partly a consequence of the importance of the 'Monophysite movement' in areas where Aramaic was used: many of the surviving dated Syriac manuscripts of this period were copied in Monophysite contexts, in centres as far-removed from Edessa as Damascus, Palmyra and Bostra (137), and much of the content of these manuscripts was broadly 'sectarian' in character, such as Paul of Callinicum's translations of Severus (133).

M. repeats his survey of Syriac for the limited evidence that exists for pre-Islamic Arabic. Here he sounds several notes of caution: Roman sources tend to use the term Saracen, so we must be wary in projecting the term 'Arab' onto fifth- and sixth-century sources based on the way that it is employed in the seventh or eighth centuries, since it implies an ethnic and linguistic unity that may not have existed. Similarly, we should be wary of equating Rome's Saracen allies with the 'Ghassanids' of

nostalgic Islamic-era history. In both cases, we must give priority to evidence dated to the period in question.

It is with this methodological caveat in mind that M. concludes with a brief but thought-provoking examination of the Koran. Here he notes that the text's assertion that it is an 'Arabic Koran' must be understood against a Roman background, since pre-Islamic Arabic is only known from inscriptions in Roman territory, often employing the era of Bostra and using a script derived from Nabatean. The Koran seems to speak to a people who already have a sense of themselves as Arabs, and M. places contact with Rome at the heart of Arab 'ethnogenesis'. Fascinatingly, he notes in passing that the people of Thamud, known in the Koran for their rejection of the prophet Salih, are included in the *Notitia Dignitatum* as the 'equites Saraceni Thamudeni'. Very few historians can build bridges between such different sources, and this link is suggestive for how the peoples of the Arab peninsula came to acquire a well-formed and distinct identity, with great consequences for the worlds that M. describes so persuasively here.

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doi:10.1017/S0075435815000271

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