

## EDESSA: “THE ATHENS OF THE EAST” (CLASS44430)

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The module explores the history of the city of Edessa and the emergence of its unique civilisation, art, and literature in the context of the Roman Near East. A Seleucid foundation, Edessa prospered during the Roman imperial period, when the encounter with Greco-Roman civilisation made it the crucible of new, and extraordinary, cultural developments. The culture of Edessa and its surrounding region thrived through contact with Rome and continued to flourish after its incorporation into the Roman provincial system, as is attested by a rich archaeological record that includes inscriptions, mosaics, and papyri in both Greek and Edessa’s own vernacular language, a dialect of Aramaic later known as Syriac. By far the most surprising development, however, was the appearance and burgeoning of a vernacular literature in Syriac, which, particularly in its earliest phase, found models in existing Greek literature. Syriac literature soon became notable for its poetry, its historiography, and its philosophical and theological writings, but also for the large number of translations of Greek secular texts that it produced over the centuries.

The module explores the history and development of Edessa and the Syriac-speaking society over many centuries of history, from the first centuries of the common era when Edessa was the capital city of the kingdom of Osrhoene, until the ninth century, after the Arab conquests. No knowledge of Syriac is required to attend this module, all primary sources will be provided with English translations. The module consists of 10 seminars, organised around specific research questions and sources.

Some examples of the research questions:

- How can we understand the culture of the **Kingdom of Osrhoene** between the second and third centuries?
- How do we explain the influences shown by **Syriac mosaics** and figurative representations? Can we spot common threads? Do we see elements of innovations?
- Why does **Christianity** play such an important role in Syriac culture and literature?
- What is the role of **Ephrem** in the emergence of **Syriac poetry**?
- What role did Syriac play in the “**Greek-to-Arabic translation movement**”?
- Can we spot **common threads** in the roles played by important cities (Babylon, Athens, Edessa, Baghdad, ...) **in cultural revolutions**?

Examples of the primary evidence considered in this module:

1. Inscriptions

As1 (D27), first half of the third c. CE, pillar, *in situ*



- |                 |   |                             |
|-----------------|---|-----------------------------|
| ܠܘܨܘܪܐ ܠܝܐ      | 1 | 1. I, Aptuḥa                |
| ܐܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ  | 2 | 2. com[mandant], son of     |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ  | 3 | 3. ...[. m]ade              |
| ܠܘܨܘܪܐ          | 4 | 4. this column              |
| ܘܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ ܕܘܒܘܪܐ | 5 | 5. and the statue above it  |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ  | 6 | 6. for Šalmat, the queen,   |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ  | 7 | daughter of                 |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ  | 8 | 7. Maʿnu, the crown prince  |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ  | 9 | 8. wife [of...],            |
|                 |   | 9. my lady [and benefactor] |

Drijvers & Healey 1999: 45

As55, 6 CE, Birecik



- |                    |   |                                       |
|--------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 317 ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ | 1 | 1. In the month of Adar of the year   |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ     | 2 | 317                                   |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ     | 3 | 2. I, Zarbiyan son of Abgar,          |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ     | 4 | governor of Birta                     |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ     | 5 | 3. tutor of ʿAwidallat son of Maʿnu   |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ     | 6 | son of Maʿnu,                         |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ     | 7 | 4. made this tomb for myself and for  |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ     | 8 | Ḥalwiya,                              |
| ܕܘܒܘܪܐ ܕܠܘܨܘܪܐ     | 9 | 5. lady of my household, and for my   |
|                    |   | children...every                      |
|                    |   | 6. one who comes to this tomb         |
|                    |   | 7. and sees and gives praise, may all |
|                    |   | the gods bless him.                   |
|                    |   | 8. Ḥaššay the sculptor and Seluk...   |
|                    |   | 9. .... made (it)...                  |

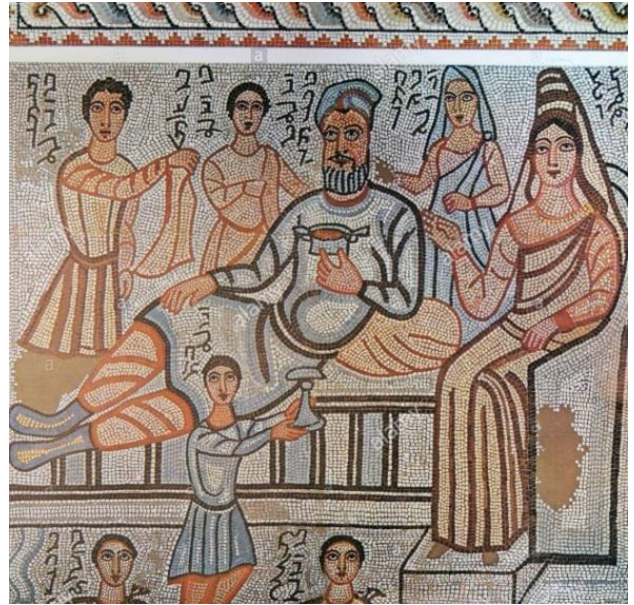
Drijvers & Healey 1999: 140

See Drijvers, H.W.J and Healey, J.F. 1999. *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene*. Leiden: Brill.

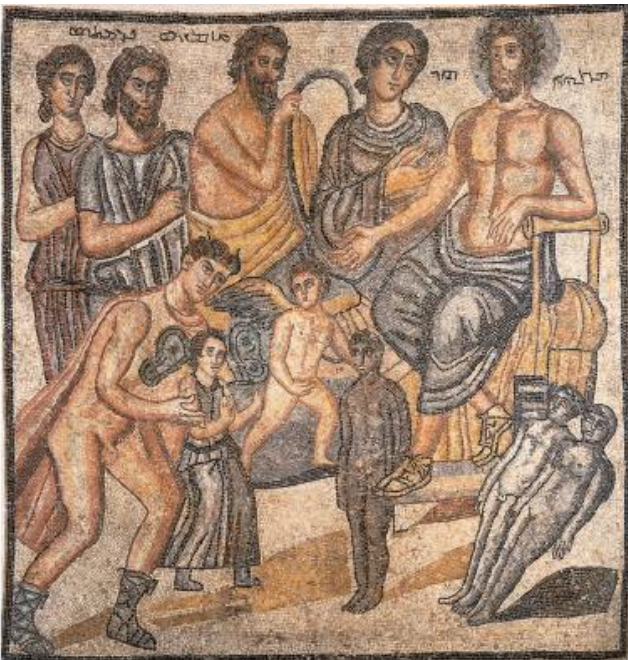
## 2. Mosaics



Orpheus Mosaic, 194 CE



The Funerary Couch Mosaic, 218 or 228 CE



Prometheus Mosaic, probably early third c. CE



Achilles and Patroclus Mosaic, probably third c. CE

See Bowersock, G.W. 2006. *Mosaics as History. The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam*. Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University Press.

### 3. Literature

From *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* (494-506). Translation: F.R. Trombley and J.W. Watt, Liverpool, 2000.

*The year 809 (= 497/8 A.D.)*

(...)

The edict of the emperor Anastasius arrived this year, remitting the gold which tradesmen paid every four years and freeing them from the tax.<sup>144</sup> This edict did not go only to Edessa, but to all cities of [258] the Roman domain. The Edessenes' four-year payment had been one hundred and forty pounds of gold, and the whole city rejoiced (at its remission).<sup>145</sup> They all dressed up in white, from the greatest to the least, and carrying lighted candles and burning censers, to the accompaniment of psalms and hymns, they went out to the *martyrion* of Mar Sergius and Mar Simon, thanking God and praising the emperor.<sup>146</sup> There they held a eucharist, and on coming back into the city they extended the feast of joy and pleasure for a whole week, and decreed that they would celebrate this feast every year. All the tradesmen sat around and had a good time, [bathing and] relaxing in the courtyard of the (City) Church and all the city's colonnades.<sup>147</sup>

*The year 812 (= 500/1 A.D.)*

(...)

Petitions were made in March concerning plague, that it might be held back from the strangers, and the citizens (of Edessa), when praying for them, were like the blessed David when he said to the angel destroying his people, 'If I have sinned and acted perversely, what wrongs have these innocent sheep done? Let your hand be upon me and upon my family.'<sup>220</sup> In April, however, plague broke out among the citizens. In a single day many biers were taken out, and no one could grasp their number. This devastation of plague not only affected Edessa, but from Antioch to Nisibis people were destroyed in this way and tortured by famine and plague.<sup>221</sup> In this year many of the rich died, who had not suffered from hunger, as did many of the nobles of the city. In June and July, after the harvest, we were hoping that from now on we would be delivered from the shortage, but it did not turn out for us as we had hoped. On the contrary, the wheat of the new harvest was being sold at as much as five *modii* a *denarius*.<sup>222</sup>

*The year 813 (= 501/2 A.D.)*

45

After these calamities of locusts, famine, and plague which I have described to you, [271] something of a breathing-space emerged for us, by the mercy of God. (This was) that we might be able to endure what was (still) to come, as we perceived from the (subsequent) events.

From Ephrem the Syrian, *Carmina Nisibena* 1, on the siege of Nisibis. Translation: S.P. Brock and G.A. Kiraz, Provo, Utah, 2009

3. In my case, all kinds of storms have troubled me,  
and I count the Ark fortunate:  
only waves surrounded it,  
[whereas siege-]mounds and arrows [as well as] waves surround me.  
[The Ark] became a store of treasures for You,  
but I have become a deposit of sins.  
It subdued the waves through Your love,  
whereas I have been blind amidst the arrows of Your wrath.  
The flood escorted [the Ark],  
while me the river [Mygdonius] has troubled.  
O Helmsman of that Ark,  
be my pilot on dry land!  
You rested [the Ark] on the haven of a mountain,<sup>6</sup>  
give rest to me too in the haven of my walls.