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Jennifer Baird and Sitta von Reden

11 A Caravan City at the Edge of Empire? The Economy of Dura-Europos in the Syrian Desert

I Introduction

The chronological bracket of this volume, 300 BCE–300 CE, takes in virtually the entire existence of the city of Dura-Europos on the Syrian Euphrates, from its Seleukid foundation, through its Arsakid and Roman lifespans, to its end at the hands of Shapur's Sasanian army. Dura's history begins in the wake of Alexander: while we have only fragmentary remains of early Seleukid Dura, by the Arsakid period the civic founder was remembered as Seleukos Nikator.¹ It seems the basis of that early community was agricultural; the settlers of this initial military colony arrayed beneath the citadel were, we learn from later parchment evidence, holders of plots of land called *kleroi*, which were distributed to them.² The same naturally fortified position over the Euphrates that had attracted that Seleukid colony was probably a central reason that, hundreds of years later, the Roman military also chose the site for a garrison.³ Dura's urban life ended, as it had started, as a military settlement, when, in the late second or early third century CE, a Roman military garrison moved into the site, taking over much of its north side; a Roman palace was built overlooking the Euphrates, and barracks buildings, an amphitheater, and baths displaced much of the population.⁴

As with much of Dura's history, we owe the status quo to Rostovtzeff, renowned émigré scholar and historian. It was Rostovtzeff who orchestrated the funding and permissions for most of the excavations, and he was joint scientific director of the expedition with Franz Cumont. It was also Rostovtzeff, of course, who framed Dura as one of his *Caravan cities* in his volume of that name, arguing that its strategic position on the Euphrates allowed it to protect and tax caravan routes heading from and returning to Palmyra.⁵ For Rostovtzeff, caravan cities were not simply settlements that might have witnessed passing caravans; their very character – their place in history – was dependent on their role in an Asian long-distance trade network.⁶ Ros-

1 For an overview of Dura's history, Baird 2018. On Hellenism at Dura, Kaizer 2017a, 40–62; for the foundation story, see further below.

2 Kosmin 2011.

3 That fortress life might have started early: the Semitic toponym, preserved on a redeposited Old Babylonian tablet at the site, was *Da-wa-ra*, meaning fortress; this naturally fortified site may indeed have a much deeper history: see Stephens 1937; Frahm 2020.

4 On the Roman military base, James 2019.

5 Rostovtzeff 1932.

6 On Rostovtzeff's characterization, see Millar 1998; Alston 2007.

tovtzeff's framing of Dura and its economy still casts a long shadow,⁷ with the site characterized either as a caravan city or a stopping place for Palmyrene trade routes, from which it gathered prosperity and links to long-distance networks.⁸ More recently, it has been described as an above all locally based economy, emphasizing its agrarian setting, local manufacturing, and local commercial connections reaching no further than Ana in the south, the Euphrates-Khabour confluence in the north, or Palmyra and the desert tribes to the east.⁹ This chapter aims to put the evidence for Dura's economy into a new conceptual framework and revisit how the site's position and status is understood better in a global rather than Silk Road perspective.

II The Rhetoric of Maps

Even before Dura was identified as an archaeological site, it appeared on maps, such as a 1914 visualization of the text of Isidore of Charax's *Parthian Stations*, a text that lists nodes on an overland route of the first century BCE.¹⁰ Maps have been key in how the site has been understood, both in its relationship to empires and in its presence or absence in broader trade networks. In either case, Dura can usually be found on the edges: from the point of view of the Roman world, it is the easternmost node on maps of Mithraea, or amphitheaters, or provinces; sometimes, it literally falls off the edge.¹¹ As it is on the right bank of the south-flowing Euphrates and thus not technically in Mesopotamia, it also tends to fall off the western edge of Parthian or Roman-era Mesopotamia as well.¹² Whether on the edge of the Roman world or the Mesopotamian one, Dura was certainly in a liminal zone, a permanent frontier. But, in some ways, this is a cartographic misnomer that privileges a world view of empires, universal units with centers and peripheries. Dura's liminality is simply relational, peripheral only to what we, following ancient imperial world views, perceive as cores.

Maps situating Dura in a world of long-distance trade also quite arbitrarily position trade routes, lines drawn to make a rhetorical point about Dura's involvement in those routes, rendering the argument circular. In Rostovtzeff's map in *Caravan cities* (map 1), Dura marked the easternmost hub of a route network that connected the caravan city with Palmyra, Damascus, Antiocheia, Bosra, Petra, and Seleukeia-

7 Elsner 2021.

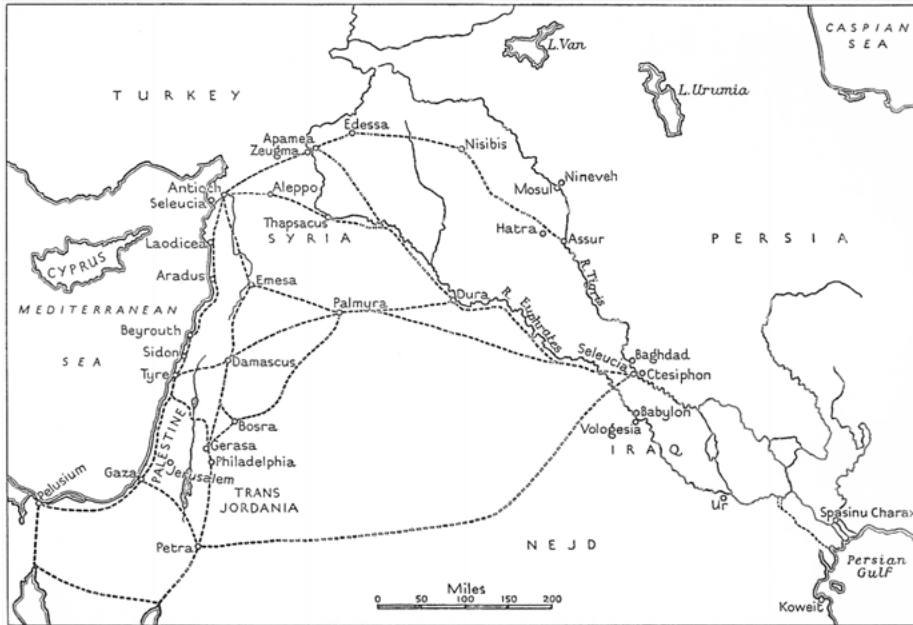
8 For Palmyra, Gregoratti, ch. 10, this volume; von Reden, vol. 2, ch. 2, 29–32.

9 Millar 1993, 449–450; Gawlikowski 1987; Gawlikowski 1996.

10 Schoff 1914. Schoff's map is based on the *Parthian Stations* 1.3–4: "Then the village of Asich, 4 *schoeni*; beyond which is the city of Dura Nicanoris, founded by the Macedonians, also called by the Greeks Europos, 6 *schoeni*. Then Merrha, a fortified place, a walled village, 5 *schoeni*."

11 E.g., <http://sebastianheath.com/roman-amphitheaters/>; Dura is beyond the frame of the map on Collar's plotting of relationships between Jewish communities of the Roman world: see Collar 2013.

12 E.g., Palermo 2019, figure 4.1 for major centers in Roman-period Mesopotamia.



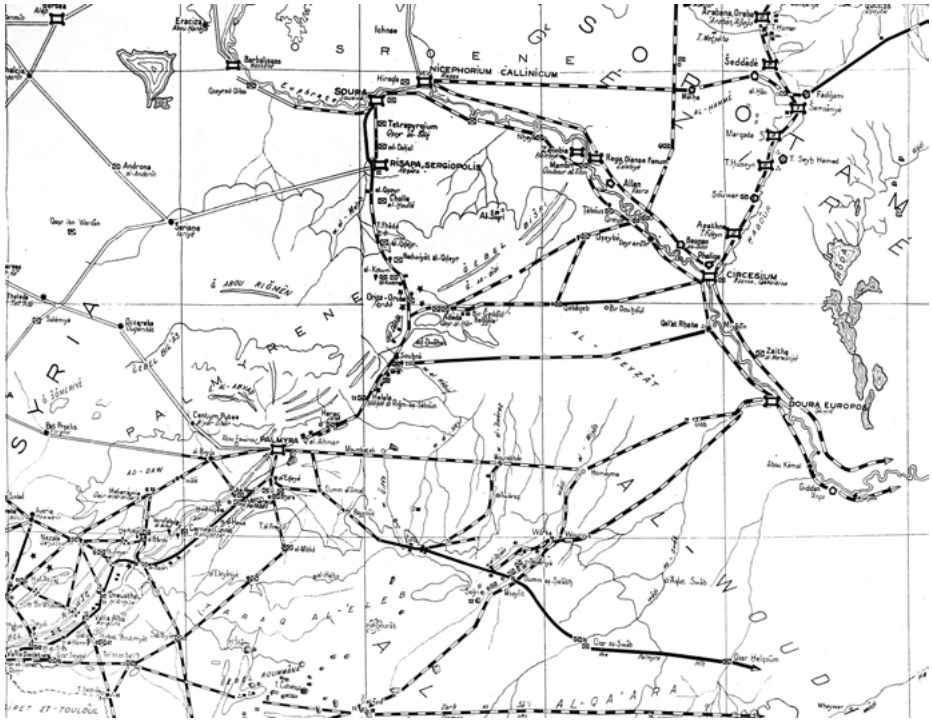
Map 1: M. Rostovtzeff, *Caravan Cities* (1932).

Tigris. The map mirrors Rostovtzeff's own journey. *Caravan cities* was based on what he called "travel sketches" written in 1928, while his journeys through Syria, Arabia, and Palestine "were still fresh" in his mind.¹³ In the map of the French archaeologist Antoine Poidebard (1878–1955), another pioneer of Syrian archaeology, a complex of arteries was represented like railway lines, suggesting that these routes belonged to a regional network of transport that connected the Mediterranean and Northern Mesopotamia to the Arab-Persian Gulf (map 2).¹⁴

The conventions of cartography that were employed made hypothetical routes of movement into an implied physical infrastructure. Over the decades, route lines have been drawn in service of various arguments. Michal Gawlikowski (map 3) makes Dura

¹³ On this point, Ruffing 2007, 399. *Caravan cities* includes a chapter on 'Palmyra and Dura,' which gives an overview of the historical development of the sites, and separate chapters on the ruins of the two sites, respectively. The role of Dura had been noted already by Cumont 1926.

¹⁴ Poidebard 1934. The map appears before the aerial photographs of vol. 2 (Atlas). Poidebard's motivation to identify routes and sites as Roman was to create "a projected connection between ancient Roman and modern French civilization in the geographical region of the Mandate" (Helbig 2016, 283). Dirven 1996, 39–40 with n. 3 on the controversy of the inclusion or exclusion of Dura into the long-distance Euphrates trade route. Dirven considers Dura as a stopover on that route, but suggests that the connections between Dura and Palmyra had primarily a local purpose.



Map 2: A. Poidebard, *La Trace de Rome dans le désert de Syrie*, vol. 2 (1934).

a backwater that is situated beyond the route that connects Palmyra with Hit.¹⁵ In Young’s map, Palmyra is a hub to which several cities on the Euphrates are connected locally, while in the atlas of *Brill’s New Pauly*, Petra is the hub through which Dura and Palmyra are connected to the Mediterranean.¹⁶

The suggestions of the earliest visitors, including the famous British explorer and diplomat Gertrude Bell (1868–1926), the Hungarian-British archaeologist Aurel Stein (1862–1943), as well as Rostovtzeff and Poidebard, were based on rather thin evidence.¹⁷ If they saw tracks on the ground, or on aerial photography, it was difficult to ascertain whether they were Roman, Umayyad, Ottoman, or later.¹⁸ Meyer and Seland have shown that it is in fact extremely difficult to identify ancient roads in a desert landscape.¹⁹ Instead, Meyer and Seland explored the desert hydrology in the

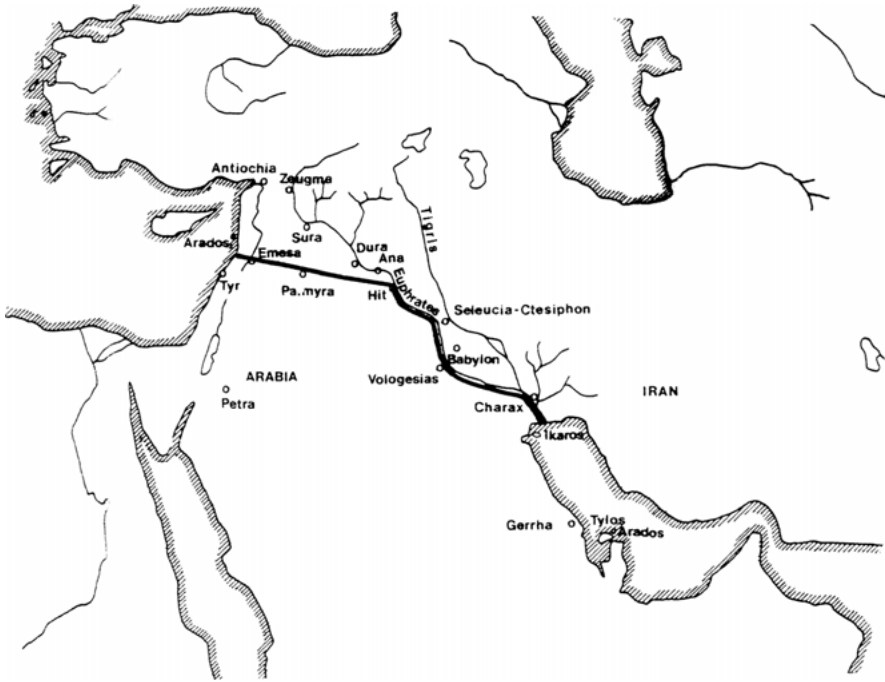
¹⁵ Gawlikowski 1994, figure 1. Gawlikowski’s map has recently been used by Graf 2018, 491. In earlier maps, Gawlikowski had drawn a link between Dura and Pamyra; see Gawlikowski 1983, 54.

¹⁶ Young 2002, 141; *Brill’s New Pauly*, Suppl. 3; <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-new-pauly-supplements-i-3/trade-routes-in-the-roman-empire-1st3rd-cents-ad-BNPA202#>.

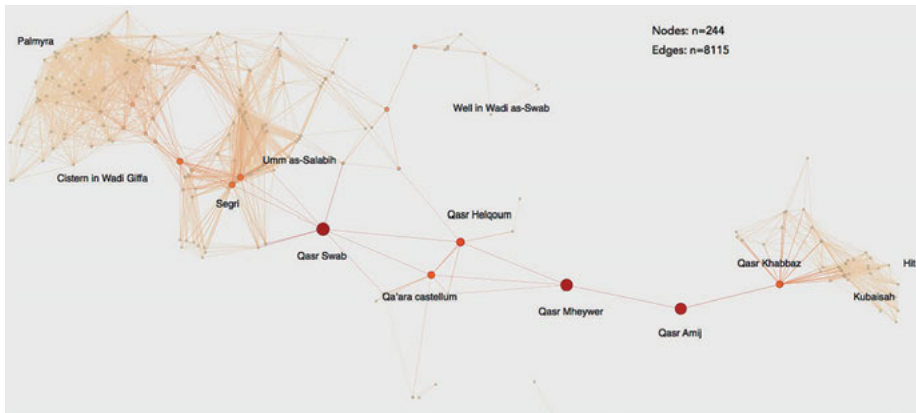
¹⁷ Meyer and Seland 2016, 499–502 for these early visitors.

¹⁸ Meyer and Seland 2016, 498–499.

¹⁹ Meyer and Seland 2016.



Map 3: M. Gawlikowski “Palmyra as a trading centre” (1994). © M. Gawlikowski.



Map 4: J. C. Meyer and E. Seland “Palmyra and the trade route to Euphrates” (2016). © E. Seland.

region triangulated by Palmyra, Dura, and Hit in order to identify historical paths through the desert. The hydrological situation combined with GIS, network, and cost-benefit modeling suggested that caravan routes must have bypassed Dura, reaching the Euphrates at Hit (map 4). Seland and Meyer’s map roughly coincides with Poide-

bard's; a supporting argument for that route might be that the Euphrates between Dura and Hit has strong currents and is not easily navigable in either direction.²⁰ But broadly, we understand the links between Dura and other sites less well than is usually made clear, and the lines on maps are often closer to imagined geographies than real paths in the sand.

III Palmyrene Presences and Spectral Caravans

Rostovtzeff's summary of Dura in *Caravan cities* is in many ways a caricature, with caravans of goods, beasts of burden, and customs duties.²¹ In the chapter focusing on the "The Ruins of Dura," Rostovtzeff sets out Dura's *raison d'être* as he saw it, which was the protection of Palmyra's caravan traffic. Rostovtzeff writes there that his own travels to Dura happened in a Ford and a Chevrolet, because, he writes wistfully, the camel had "once and forever reverted to the world of legend" in the region.²² While Rostovtzeff's view of a romantic desert landscape through which camels crossed was, to his mind, sadly inaccessible in his own era, the links between Dura and Palmyra are nonetheless well attested in the archaeological evidence of Dura, where the presence of Palmyrenes has loomed large in assessments of the Durene.²³

Palmyrenes are attested at Dura first in 33 BCE by the dedication of a temple to the two Palmyrene city gods Bel and Yaribol 350 m outside the city walls. Two individuals, *bny glydbwl* and *bny kmr'* dedicated the sanctuary with an inscription in their native dialect of Aramaic.²⁴ The temple was maintained and renovated several times

20 In contrast to Gawlikowski 1987, who suggested that upstream navigability of the Euphrates ceased at Hit; see Smith 2013, 156, and Meyer and Seland 2016 for discussion.

21 Rostovtzeff 1932, 105. "A glance at the map will show that Dura is the nearest crossing-place of the Euphrates and if, in addition to this, it was also, as we have every reason to suppose, the most northerly fort on the Euphrates owned by Parthia, it was naturally by way of Dura that the Parthians dispatched the majority of the caravans from Palmyra destined for Mesopotamia and Iran, and there that they received those returning to Palmyra. The garrison of Dura was responsible for the safety of the roads leading to the west, south, and east across the Euphrates, and this fact alone was sufficient to lead the caravan merchants to pass through Dura and even to halt there for a longer or shorter period of time. / As a result of this Dura's wealth increased. Her Macedonian landowners developed into Levantine merchants, furnished the caravans with wine, oil, bread, vegetables, beasts of burden, and all other necessities, and levied in return various taxes from all caravans which stopped at, or made use of, Dura. These taxes were distinct from the main customs-dues which were probably levied by the Arsakids. A study of the ruins shows that in the first century A.D. Dura must have been a large and rich town. All her best and richest religious buildings date from this time."

22 Rostovtzeff 1932, 160. Much of the chapter on the "Ruins of Dura" in *Caravan cities* is just a survey of what was known at Dura at the time (up to the fifth season of excavations), and personal experience of traveling there. The chapter unfortunately also includes racist remarks about Bedouin and Syrians.

23 The key work on the Palmyrenes of Dura remains Dirven 1999.

24 'Necropolis temple' inscription, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts (PAT)* 1067. Rostovtzeff, Brown, and Welles 1939, 319–320, no. 916; Dirven 1999, 199–200.

during the first and second centuries CE, suggesting that Palmyrenes frequented it over a long period of time. It grew in size during the period Dura was under Roman control.²⁵ Quite likely, the large contingent of Palmyrene archers, then garrisoned in the city as the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum*, worshipped their home gods in this temple.

Still during the Arsakid era of the city, a temple inside the city was renovated, and the worship of the main god, identified in its bilingual inscription as Baalshamin and Zeus Kyrios, is attested in one of its chambers for the first time.²⁶ Perhaps even more significant is the construction, also in the Arsakid era, of a building which contained a pair of votive reliefs dedicated to the Gadde of both Palmyra and Dura (fig. 1 and 2).²⁷ One of the reliefs (1) depicts the Gad of Palmyra, a female goddess, crowned by Nike and flanked on the left by Hairan, son of Malku and grandson of Nashor, the priest who dedicated the relief in 159 CE.

The complementary relief (2) depicts the Gad of Dura represented here as a male deity. To his right stands Seleukos I Nikator, the founder of the city, and to his left Hairan, this time identified just as son of Malku. The twin reliefs worked by Palmyrene craftsmen and equipped with inscriptions in the Palmyrene dialect seem to have aimed at demonstrating the cooperative relationship between the two cities, especially from the Palmyrene point of view.

The relationship of the two cities was emphasized once again in dedications by the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* in the Roman period. In a painting in the temple of Zeus dated to 239 CE, Palmyrene deities, together with the goddesses of fortune of Dura and Palmyra, receive sacrifice from the Roman military tribune Julius Terentius and the members of the Palmyrene cohort.²⁸ More than anything else, the inscriptions of Palmyrenes at Dura emphasize their being in harmony with the Durene religious cosmos.

While the military connections between Palmyrenes and Dura during the Roman period are undisputed, the reasons for the visibility of Palmyrenes in Dura before this period are more difficult to fathom. The building of a sanctuary in honor of Palmyrene gods and equipment with inscriptions in the Palmyrene dialect suggest a mostly Palmyrene function of the temple. It shows their effort to worship their gods and to mark identity in a foreign environment.²⁹ Dirven has suggested that the cistern and courtyard in the sanctuary may have served as feeding and resting place for camels on their way to Palmyra; yet it may be noted that courtyards and cisterns are quite regular features in religious buildings, and that the courtyard may have served

²⁵ Downey 1988, 98; Dirven 1999, 209–211.

²⁶ PAT 1089, 31 CE; Dirven 1999, 212–218.

²⁷ Downey 1977, 14–19, nos. 4, 5; Smith 2013, 157–159. The central deity of the religious building in which the reliefs were found was likely Malakbel (whose central sculpture was more fragmentary when excavated than the subsidiary cult reliefs of the Gadde), on which see further Dirven 1999.

²⁸ James 2019, 1, 63.

²⁹ Smith 2013, 152.



Fig. 1 and 2: Votive relief to the Gadde of Palmyra (top) and Dura (bottom), Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection 1938.5314 and 1938.5313. © YUAG.

several functions.³⁰ No more conclusive is the fact that the founders of the sanctuary belonged to clans or dynasties that 200 years later appear as sponsors of the caravan trade in the Palmyrene caravan inscriptions. The families may have had a long tradition in the trans-Syrian caravan trade, yet their endowment of a temple in 33 BCE does not prove that this sanctuary was above all an abode for traders, nor indeed that all the euergetic activities of the Palmyrene trading dynasties served the interests of traders. The presence of Palmyrenes is thus a rather poor indicator for the role of trade in the economy of Dura.³¹

Palmyrenes, moreover, were not the only foreigners at the site. Other graffiti, in Safaitic, testifies to the presence of mobile pastoralists from the Arabian steppe,³² and travelers probably from Hatra left a mark too.³³ So, whatever lack of utility we might now place on understanding Dura as ‘caravan city,’ we have here a place that is undoubtedly connected to a much wider ancient world, both geographically and temporally, and not only through the powers that ruled it and the armies that captured it, but also by the goods and people that moved through.

Another point in the debate on Dura is its participation in what has been dubbed caravan trade. This is a term that has become naturalized in the language of Silk Road trade but is rather vague about what it actually denotes economically. What does it say about the nature of this trade? Does it refer to very long-distance trade in contrast to smaller journeys made overland by mules or via river on rafts? Does it include regional journeys to Syria and the Syrian coast, or to Northern and Southern Mesopotamia, or does it refer solely to long-distance ventures to the Arab-Persian Gulf, India, and Central Asia? Does this term in its utter vagueness not just conjure up trade in luxuries to the exclusion of more mundane products such as wine, wool, and unembroidered textiles, which surely were transported on camels too?³⁴ It certainly was just this imagined oriental caravan trade that excavators had in mind when they posed a camel for a photograph in the main gate of the city (fig. 3). The more closely we look, the more it is evident that the notion of ‘caravan city’ not only does not apply to Dura but is also economically meaningless. Without specification of what it refers to, it just summons up oriental nostalgia of premodern camel caravans loaded with pearls and spices, or even worse, railway lines that shipped eastern goods to Europe.

And what does participation in caravan trade mean? To be sure, goods from long-distance trade were consumed in Dura: In the deep deposits of the Roman rampart, built in an ultimately futile attempt to keep the city from Shapur’s army, come frag-

30 Dirven 1999, 32; Downey 1988, 98; Buchmann 2021 on the multifunctionality of sanctuaries, which renders arguments on primary or secondary functions of the Palmyrene temple rather futile.

31 On the Middle Euphrates in this period as a Palmyrene protectorate, Luther 2004. See now Kaizer 2017b.

32 Macdonald 2005.

33 Bertolino 1997; Leriche and Bertolino 1997. On foreigners at Dura, Dirven 2011.

34 See for Silk Road imaginations, von Reden, ch. 1, this volume.

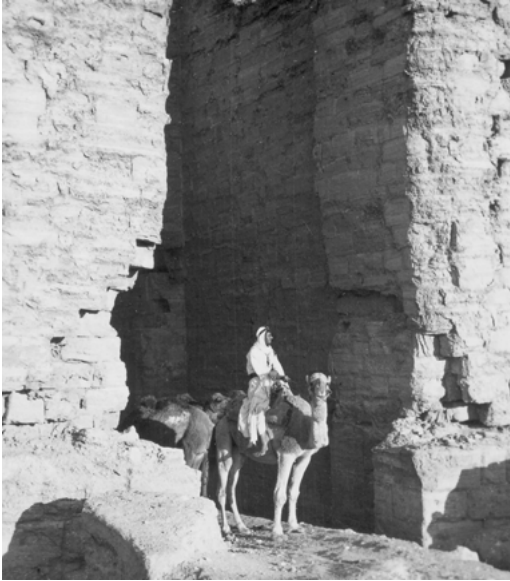


Fig. 3: Mounted camel rider posed for photograph in 1936, Yale University Art Gallery Dura collection Y550. © YUAG.

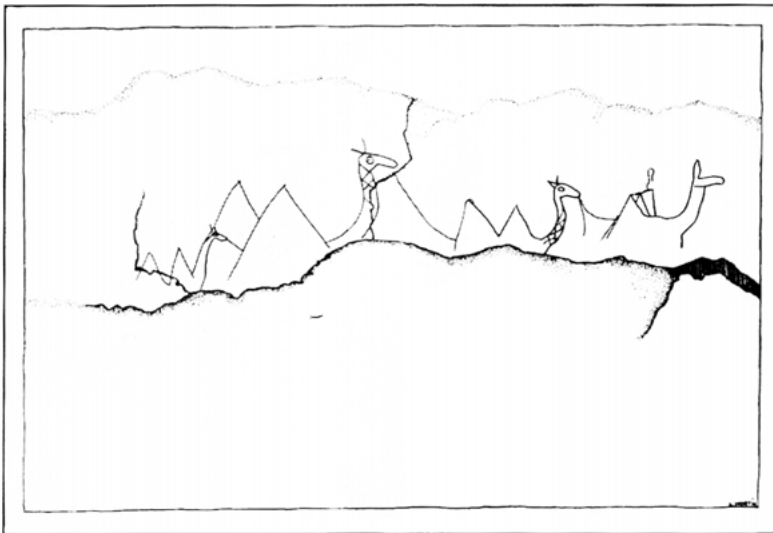


Fig. 4: Graffito of camel caravan (Baur et al. 1933, plate 23.2).

ments of silk.³⁵ Yet there is no evidence that the town of Dura flourished on trade. Taxing foreign goods was usually the preserve of imperial governments, as was the case with the quarter tax that was raised at imperial borders.³⁶ Elites would certainly have profited from being part of the tax administration, but less so from the tax itself. It could also have meant that Dura was involved in haulage, such as loading and unloading camels and boats for transiting from desert to river and vice versa, although we have no similar evidence for this as we have from Koptos in Egypt (which, incidentally, has never been called a caravan city). Caravans were certainly present at Dura, as is shown by an image of one scratched in the plaster of a house wall, but this cannot tell us how important caravan trade might have been for the economy of the site (fig. 4).³⁷

IV The Global Economy of Dura

Let us move then into the twenty-first century – that is, let us ask questions of modern economic history rather than those that occupied scholars a century ago. Ancient sources are notoriously difficult, and indeed insufficient, for writing the economic history we want in the twenty-first century. We would like to know, for example, what proportion of the city's income was earned in foreign trade, how GDP changed as a result and over time, and what agrarian or commercial strategies individuals and the city adopted in order to increase their prosperity and income. These questions are impossible to answer with the evidence we have. But they provide the framework for what we need to look for: visible changes in prosperity and possible reasons for them. In the programmatic chapters of volume 2 of this handbook, we suggested drawing on globalization theory, neoinstitutionalism, and network theory, amongst others. In combination, they help us to search for relationships and institutions that created economic opportunities in ancient desert environments: money, law, and physical infrastructures; networks of trust, and the standards that help to build and sustain networks (such as common coinages, common languages, or common legal institutions); and network power, that is, the ability to use people and networks effectively, and to draw on them to one's own advantage.³⁸ Utilizing some insights of globalization theory, it is possible to shift the perspective on Dura's economy away from the dichotomy between long-distance trade and local agricultural self-sufficiency to one that emphasizes the attempts of Durene economic actors to increase their

³⁵ Snow 2011, 39–40. For other goods of eastern origin, recorded in the graffiti from the walls of house B8-H, the House of Nebukelos, see Ruffing 2000. As noted by Ruffing, Dura may be the city mentioned in Chinese sources as Yü-Lö: Leslie and Gardiner 1996, 166–167, 196–198.

³⁶ Weaverdyck et al., vol. 2, ch. 8, 308.

³⁷ Graffito from the 'House of the Ravine' in block C5: Baur, Rostovtzeff, and Bellinger 1933, 221–222.

³⁸ Von Reden, vol. 2, ch. 2, esp. 43–45.

opportunities in local, regional, and global economic activities, which in total might explain the prosperity of the town. In the following, we will look first at phases of visible increase in urban investment and seek the economic or political backgrounds of that increase. Then we will look at coinage and the monetary networks that the people of Dura seem to have maintained. What interests and network relationships might they reveal? And finally we will revisit some institutions that economic actors in Dura seem to have taken advantage of – Greek language and Greek contractual forms – in order to examine the economic goals of the city and individuals within it. These different aspects will demonstrate that distinctions between a local, regional, and global economy of Dura are not very helpful ones, let alone that any one of these radiuses of economic activity explains the prosperity of Dura independently of the others.

IV.1 Prosperity

Dura was founded as a military settlement (*phourion*) around 300 BCE by either Seleukos I Nikator or one of his generals named Nikanor in an area that since neo-Babylonian times was called Parapotamia – “beyond the river.”³⁹ The perspective on this territory from the eastern bank of the river is significant. The main function of the garrison town seems to have been to control movement along the western bank of the Euphrates and to protect the Seleukid center in Mesopotamia. Possibly, Dura also secured some territorial border, since the rebel Molon, when conquering Parapotamia in 221 BCE, is said to have moved up to, but no further than, Dura (Polybios 5. 48. 16).

The city, which like many Hellenistic foundations incorporated a small earlier settlement, was constructed around a fortified acropolis, with the garrison and residential areas built around it. *Kleruchs* (military settlers) received parcels of land for farming, horti- or viticulture, and residence. Parcels will have varied in size according to military rank, as they did elsewhere in the Hellenistic empires. Like other Hellenistic colonies, moreover, Dura was founded on royal land, that is, on conquered territory that was appropriated by the king and taxed rather than through civic intermediaries by the king directly. It could not be sold by the *kleruch* and if no longer cultivated reverted to the king. As time went by, however, royal land ceded to *kleruchs* became de facto their property and then could be sold and inherited, even though some royal claims continued to be attached to it.⁴⁰ So despite some minor encumbrances, Dura’s land regime was based on Greek private property rights. Such property rights encouraged care and investment, which were likely to maintain if not increase the productivity of the land.

³⁹ Baird 2022; Kosmin 2011; 2014, 219–221, Sommer 2018, 273–310, for this and the following.

⁴⁰ Taasob, vol. 2, ch. 8.B, 442.

The landed assets were located in the fertile alluvial stretch along the western bank of the Euphrates that, if irrigated successfully, provided good conditions for intensive agriculture. Dura developed into a rather large town that could sustain at the height of its prosperity in the Roman period about 10,000 residents.⁴¹ Some *kleruchs* enjoyed a considerable comparative advantage for earning a profit from surplus production through the larger size of their *kleroi*. In the Parthian and Roman period, but possibly under the Seleukids too, Dura served as an administrative center in the region, offering further opportunities for making money and the control of labor at the intersection of public administration and private land management.⁴²

Sometime around the middle of the second century BCE, the size of Dura expanded. Its urban plan was restructured and its political status raised. It received an orthogonal street plan, fortification walls, new temples, and an archive for the collection of public documents.⁴³ Kosmin suggests that the urban upgrade was related to two specific political events: the conquest of Syria-Phoenicia, which brought the southern Levant into the economic orbit of the Seleukids, and the increasing threat of the Parthians, which put pressure on Mesopotamia. Dura became a bulwark against the Parthians and a base from which expeditions could be launched. The energetic urban development was a top-down royal initiative and most likely executed with royal money rather than local resources. However, the political, demographic, and urban increase of the city is likely to have laid the foundations for Dura's efflorescence in the centuries to come.

For the following years, scholars have identified three phases of significant building activity in Dura: first, between the mid-first century BCE and the mid-first century CE when Dura was under Parthian control; second, around the mid-second century CE shortly before the Roman takeover, as can be taken from dates attested epigraphically in sanctuary dedications; and third in the final decades of the second century, when the Romans transformed Dura into a garrison town.

In the first phase, the temple of Artemis was rebuilt and the temple of Zeus Megistos underwent major reconstruction work.⁴⁴ At this time, the small extramural sanctuary of the Palmyrenes was dedicated.⁴⁵ Fifty years later, a number of temples were newly built, such as the temple of Azzanathkona, Zeus Kyrios, Atargatis, Bel, and Aphlad.

In the second phase, the temples of Zeus Theos, of the Gadde, and of Adonis were added. Given that the twin reliefs of the Gadde in the temple of the Gadde were dedicated by a priest, we can assume that the economic elite of Dura was connected with the religious organization of the city.⁴⁶ It is noteworthy, moreover, that the eco-

⁴¹ James 2019, 300; Baird 2020.

⁴² Tasoob, vol. 2, ch. 8.B for those opportunities.

⁴³ Baird 2018, 21–22; Leriche 1996; Coqueugniot 2012.

⁴⁴ Edwell 2008, 103; Downey 1988; Downey 2012.

⁴⁵ Dirven 1999, 199–211.

⁴⁶ On the temple-building phases, Downey 1988, 76–130.

nomic elite did not position themselves just as Graeco-Macedonians, with firm descent from the original settlers, but displayed religious sentiments more closely connected to Syria and Mesopotamia. Over time, a mixture of religious affiliations were prominent: above all, Mesopotamian (Aphlad and Azzanathkona), Syrian (Baalshamin), and Palmyrene (Bel and Yaribol).⁴⁷ With all due caution, one might say that the Durene economic elite was more inclusive and open to newcomers than agrarian elites tend to be.

The urban profile of Dura changed once again in the third phase, when Dura came under Roman control. This period was one of massive reorganization in the region and the site. A large military contingent, including the auxiliary *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* was based in the city and occupied part of its former religious, administrative, and residential space. From then on, there was a city within the city, as Simon James has put it, with the civil and military population negotiating with each other their economic and social interests.⁴⁸ Soldiers brought their families and spending power, which, however, was fueled by their military stipends rather than their economic activity in Dura. It led to a gradual transformation of the urban economy, which was increasingly powered by the spending power and consumption of the soldiers. It will have come as an advantage for the consumption habits of the garrisons that throughout the Parthian period Dura had remained firmly rooted in the Syrian economy despite its population having wider social and cultural connections.

IV.2 Money

Dura did not have its own mint or coinage, like Palmyra, which only started to mint during its short imperial intermezzo. Both cities were dominated by coins minted in Antiocheia, which produced a general currency for the Syrian exchange network in the Roman period. Yet coins from other mints found their way to Dura too, and it is interesting to observe their changing origins. In 1978, J. R. Clark submitted the coin finds of Dura to a quantitative analysis, exploring what he calls their distance-decay gradient, which can indicate how coin circulation can be influenced by political change obstructing the ease of trade in an area. He analyzed 11,775 coins from the beginning of the reign of Augustus (27 BCE) to the end of that of Galienus (256 CE), which had been recorded by A. W. Bellinger during the Dura excavations.⁴⁹ Of these, 10,712 were produced in eastern mints, and 1,063 in the city of Rome. The non-Roman coins were produced from 61 different mints in Asia Minor, Bithynia, Pontos, Kappa-

⁴⁷ Kaizer 2008.

⁴⁸ James 2019, 300–301.

⁴⁹ Clark 1978. Clark's data are taken from Bellinger 1949, whose attributions are currently under revision; the sample is also biased toward particular types of coins and places of deposit. For methodological issues, see Butcher 2013, discussing the coins of Zeugma/Seleukeia-Euphrates.

Tab. 1: Comparison of eastern Greek coins and coins minted at Rome (after Clark 1978, 260).

Coin era	Eastern Greek Coins	Coins minted at Rome	Total	Percentage at Rome
1. 27 BCE–97 CE	568	66	634	10.4
2. 97–180 CE	415	279	694	38.8
3. 180–235 CE	5,020	438	5,458	8.5
4. 235–256 CE	4,709	280	4,989	5.6

dokia, Syria, and Mesopotamia. The 300-year period of the coin finds can be divided into four minting eras: (1) from Augustus to Domitian (27 BCE to 97 CE); (2) from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius (97 to 180 CE); (3) from Commodus to Severus Alexander (180 to 235 CE); and (4) from Maximinus to Gallienus (235 to 256 CE). Clark notes, first, a notable increase of coins in era (3) and (4), second, a greater diversity of the origins of coins in these two eras, and, third, a sharp decrease of the distance of coins from where they were produced in era (4). Even though the relationship between number of coins found and coin use in Dura is rather crudely calculated,⁵⁰ the factor of increase of coins in the years of, and immediately preceding, Roman domination can be taken as significant. This number increased by a factor of 10, and thus to a much larger degree than the number of inhabitants of Dura did. It looks as though Roman soldiers in Dura used more coins in the town than had been circulating there before. Moreover, during eras (1) to (3), coins from Antiocheia dominate the sample of extant coins, while there was still a significant amount of coins from Seleukeia in period (1).⁵¹ Table 1 shows the degree to which the number of coins produced in Rome in period (4) declined proportionally to the total number of coins circulating in the city. The latter is well explained by the fact that the Roman Empire from the Severans onward relied heavily on coinages produced locally.

What might this coin profile tell us about the economy of Arsakid and Roman Dura? First of all, the distance-decay gradient (i.e., the degree to which coins were minted more closely to the place of use) in era (4) need not interest here. Yet the predominance of coins struck in Antiocheia in the middle Arsakid period shows the integration of Dura into a Syrian exchange network in which Antiochean coinage dominated.⁵² There was, by contrast, surprisingly little Arsakid coinage in Dura, de-

⁵⁰ There might be a greater degree of coin loss in these troubled times, lesser amounts of coins leaving the town, i.e., a greater degree of local circulation, and some other factors skewing the evidence.

⁵¹ For the continuity of Seleukid *tetradrachms* struck in Seleukeia-Tigris in the Arsakid period, see Taasob, vol. 2, ch. 8.B, 432 with references.

⁵² It is usually observed that Dura's coinage showed its connection to Antiocheia, or the Antiochean economic orbit, as Dirven 1996, 40, puts it. Yet given the predominance of Antiochean coinage in Syria generally, its predominance in Dura just shows the town's economic connections to Syria more generally.

spite it being an Arsakid town. Secondly, the increase of the total coin volume in Roman Dura suggests greater spending capacity in the city once Roman soldiers arrived. The greater diversity of the origins of coins in this period might (tentatively) suggest quite a diversity of exchange relationships among the soldiers and other Durenes, a diversity that might have been similar in previous eras but does not show up in the smaller sample of coins extant from these eras.

Moreover, the relatively small number of coins in Dura throughout the Arsakid period should not just be noted in passing. The extant papyri and parchments from Dura give the impression that the economy of Dura was thoroughly monetized throughout the Arsakid and Roman periods: taxes, rents, loans, penalties, and other payments were all assessed in Greek monetary units, and one might assume that they were also paid in this form. How did a monetary economy of this kind manage its coin supply, and how did coins circulate into the city before the Romans arrived? The answer must be twofold: one factor must have been Dura's role in the local tax administration, which channeled tax money into the city. The other factor must have been trade. The two, in fact, were intimately related. The availability of coins circulating into the city through taxation benefited monetary trade, exchange, and other interpersonal payment made with the medium of coinage. Most importantly, however, the coin profile of Dura shows its strong economic connections with Syria, and Mesopotamia as far as Seleukid coinage reached, in the earlier and middle Arsakid period and the concentration of connections into Syria in the final 80 years of Arsakid rule.

IV.3 Institutions: Language Use, Contractual Forms, Kinship Practices

The continuing Graeco-Mesopotamian and Graeco-Syrian orientations of Dura in the Parthian period is confirmed by their choice of language and contractual forms. Inscriptions and papyri/parchments show that the administrative and legal language in Dura was Greek and that Greek was the language in which many inhabitants of Dura expressed themselves in public. Yet it is worth emphasizing that economic actors in Dura, just as they used Seleukid and Syrian rather than Arsakid coins, saw advantages in acting within a Greek linguistic and legal framework. Throughout the Arsakid period, the city's institutions and language remained Hellenistic, despite the facts that Dura's population was of mixed origin and that several institutions were controlled by the Arsakids, such as the royal treasury, the royal judges, and the chief tax collector (*argapet*).⁵³ The Durenes, moreover, maintained a Greek property rights regime, Greek forms of legal execution, Greek contractual forms, and Greek notary practices. This gave them an advantage over other Parthian economic actors that used legal tradi-

⁵³ Taasob, vol. 2, ch. 3.B, 150–151.

tions giving landowners and creditors much lesser chances to execute contracts and receive their rights.⁵⁴ In a mixed society that was geographically mobile,⁵⁵ using Greek language, Greek coins, and Greek contractual forms seems to have offered economic actors a great network advantage.

The mixed local elite of Dura sustained their power by a variety of means. Under the Arsakids, they became the overseers of the tax regime that ensured taxes ended up where they were collected. Families adopting Greek names such as Lysias and Heliodoros controlled the town and held power as *strategos kai epistates*. Theirs was a power enacted in part by authority performed as being rooted in the deep past, with *stratego*i and other citizens calling themselves *Europaioi*, “men of Europos,” the name of the town when it was first settled by Macedonian soldiers. Whether that line of descent was real or imagined does not really matter here – what matters is that the claim was worth making. It was also a power that could be framed and indeed named situationally. As Michael Sommer has pointed out, the (Greek) *strategos* in Dura was probably *padheshah* to their Arsakid overlords and *genearch* (“general and ruler of tribes”) to the tribal populations in Dura’s hinterland.⁵⁶

The way the predominantly non-Greek population of Dura inserted itself deliberately into a Greek legal framework despite maintaining socioeconomic relationships that were not typically Greek can be illustrated by *P. Dura 20*.⁵⁷ Here, a person referred to by the Parthian name Phraates is eunuch and subordinate of a certain Manesos, *paraleptes*, *strategos*, and *arabarch* of Mesopotamia and Parapotamia.⁵⁸ He agrees to lend a sum of money to Baarlas, who lives in the village of Peliga in the district of Iradas, where the agreement was sealed before being stored in the record office at Dura. The particular kind of contract was an antichretic loan agreement that was quite common in Seleukid and Arsakid Asia. It was a special contract in which a monetary loan was extended against the payment of interest that was payable in the form of personal service. In the contract of *P. Dura 20*, Baarlas agrees to pay interest in the form of his own servile labour (*chreia doulika*). If he misses a day’s work, a penalty of one *drachm* was to be paid to Phraates. If the loan was not repaid, or not renewed after the initial period of one year, Baarlas had to pay a penalty of 400 *drachms* to Phraates, plus the same amount to the royal treasury. This was a merciless arrangement for a laborer and likely never to be executed. The agreement was most likely a contractual way of organizing a dependent-labor relationship between Phraates and Baarlas that included a monetary budget for Baarlas, here constructed as a loan.

54 Taasob, vol. 2, ch. 8.B, 443.

55 Zerbini 2016 for the mobility of people attested in the parchments and papyri of Dura.

56 Sommer 2006, 429–430. *Strategos kai genearches* attested in the Artemis inscription (31 BCE), for which Rostovtzeff et al. 1936, 411–412; Cumont 1926, 409, no. 52.

57 Taasob, vol. 2, ch. 3.B, 151–152.

58 See von Reden, ch. 8, this volume, for similar titles and the social standing of these personnel in the Eastern Desert of Egypt.

Most important for our context is this: A culturally mixed economic elite continued to use Greek language and contractual forms and apply them to local social institutions, such as dependent-labor relationships and even forms of personal-debt bondage. Combining a local labor regime with Greek contractual law gave creditors and landlords a good chance of receiving their rights in a labor regime that was not Greek. Such hybrid forms of institutional behaviour in combination with the Syrian-Mesopotamian orientation of Durene economic connections might explain the success of Dura in the Arsakid period.

We see the same conservative localism and continuity in the art and architecture of Dura, which is so different in form from nearby urban contemporaries at Palmyra or Zeugma. The local stone – a friable local gypsum, compared for example to the more fine-grained Palmyrene limestone – can only go so far in explaining the different vernacular architectural traditions and the different forms we see, which set Dura apart from other Roman sites in Syria. At Dura, under its ruling families, there is a strength of community ties that meant for instance that all the houses, from the smallest to the largest, shared key features in their layout.⁵⁹ Similarly, there is a depth of shared practice that resulted in shared form and decoration of religious buildings, even when the religions being practiced differed greatly, and even when some were monotheistic, which we can see for example in the practice of painted sanctuary decoration. We see this marked difference with other regional community practices in other ways as well, for instance in the complete lack of funerary portraiture: Despite an excavated necropolis, we have not a single example of funerary commemoration of the type known at Palmyra in the same period, and only one, unfinished, funerary inscription, and that was found inside the city and belonged to a Roman military tribune.⁶⁰

Strong local elite power, elites who would act for whoever the imperial power was, from Hellenistic to Arsakid to Roman, allowed for a continuity of community practice that we see enacted in building and religious traditions. Such was the concentration of local power that some of the differences we see between Dura and other regional sites result from the lack of competition between those elite families (or at least, the lack of competition that resulted in public or funerary monuments). That is not to say there was a static or unchanging local situation at Dura, far from it – but the change was of a particular kind, and so was what it was changing *from*, in that the Arsakid-era site was already a hybrid form based on the Mesopotamian and Hellenistic traditions that were the Seleukid inheritance.⁶¹

We can perhaps begin to account for all this in the terms Monica Smith used almost two decades ago to explain the cities she was investigating in India: that is,

⁵⁹ Baird 2014.

⁶⁰ Similarly on the lack of impact of Roman activity on the nonmilitary settlements of northern Mesopotamia, De Jong and Palermo 2018, 256.

⁶¹ On the hybrid forms of Seleukid architecture, Canepa 2015. See also Canepa 2018.

that cities could act as “small worlds” in which many long-distance connections come together and give prestige to those in charge of maintaining them.⁶² At Dura, even with its many ties to a global ancient world, there was a tendency to turn inward. We see this in house form, secluding as it does kin groups from outside views, but also in the lack of public spaces. Perhaps this was due to the extreme concentration of urban power in the hands of so few at Dura – power that was maintained not only by control of those wider networks, but also strategies enacted locally such as endogamy and brother–sister marriage for the maintenance of landholding.⁶³

The same small group of families who held positions like that of *strategos* under Arsakid rule did their best to maintain it under the Romans, taking on Roman names and titles as any well-behaved local elite would after the Antonine constitution (which gave all free inhabitants of the Roman empire Roman citizenship rights). To a certain extent, this strategy was successful for them, and they were able to hang onto property. The house known as the House of Lysias, which is also epigraphically linked to the Lysiad family, was the only excavated house on the site that did not fragment into smaller properties by the third century. It was immediately adjacent to the Temple of Zeus Megistos, which seems to have been their family sanctuary.⁶⁴

V Conclusion: The Local, Regional, and Global Economy of Dura

Rather than emphasizing Dura’s connection to railway-like long-distance trade routes, we might thus understand an alternative framework for explaining Dura’s prosperity in the Arsakid and Roman period, a framework that might be a starting point for developing a more encompassing approach to the economy of Dura. It might also help to explain Palmyrene presence in Dura’s territory in different ways. In the mid-first century BCE, when the Palmyrene temple outside Dura was dedicated, connections of northern Mesopotamia to the Arab-Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean were as of yet rather incidental, and there is no evidence for Palmyrene involvement in them. However, Palmyra was well connected with Babylonia, the Arabian southern kingdoms, and the Eastern Mediterranean for its own consumption needs. This is attested by the pottery finds and the role of myrrh and precious textiles in its mummification practices.⁶⁵ By contrast, the first Palmyrene temple belonged to the time when Marc Antony was active in the region and Palmyra raided and the Parthians pushed back

⁶² Smith 2003. For a recent implementation of this idea, Wynne-Jones and Fleisher 2016.

⁶³ Associations seem to have been more important, hence ‘chapel’ rooms that are frequently a feature of temples, some of which are recorded in their dedicatory inscriptions.

⁶⁴ On religious communities at Dura and their link to families, Dirven 2004.

⁶⁵ See von Reden, vol. 2, ch. 2, 30.

beyond the Euphrates. It is possible that the Palmyrenes aimed at securing for themselves Mesopotamian goods via Dura, which had better access to the region beyond the Euphrates. As in so many other instances, the presence of Palmyrenes in particular cities had more to do with political conditions that could change abruptly rather than changing routes of long-distance caravan trade. It is noteworthy, moreover, that we hear so much about Palmyrenes in other cities, including Dura, whereas merchants from Dura are not attested at Palmyra.

And so it is not very helpful to separate out local, regional, and long-distance economic connections when explaining the prosperity of Dura in the Arsakid and Roman periods. Dura was an agrarian town that had a good resource base in its own hinterland. The combined factors of a fertile hinterland, good riverine connections, connections with Mesopotamia and Syria, and the network advantage of Dura's elite who remained familiar with the Greek language and Greek legal institutions, are sufficient to explain Dura's economic success in the Arsakid and Roman periods. The presence of considerable amounts of coinage, mostly from the Antiochean but also a host of minor mints, shows the high degree of connectivity that Dura enjoyed during the Arsakid period.

Why global, then, if Dura's exchange networks seem to have spanned above all Syria and Mesopotamia? The question of whether Dura was connected to long-distance trade does not depend on the question of whether or not a caravan route passed through Dura, but rather on how one constructs economic connectivity, and whether we continue to implicitly model a presumed ancient caravan trade on colonial railway transports that moved large amounts of goods over long distances at high frequency. Ancient interimperial trade was laborious, time-intensive, and dependent on a number of regional seasonal factors. Long-distance trade was a series of interlocking short and mid-length journeys in which mostly small consignments of everyday commodities were transacted, with only a few goods traveling over a longer distance. In this system, Dura participated by its location, by its role in the local administration, and by the network advantages that depended on a great variety of social and institutional choices. Caravan trade – like other grand narratives, such as the Silk Road itself – obscures important nuance.

So too do these narratives obscure our ability to recognize local actors' capacity to negotiate their place within that global network. Dura responded to and perhaps survived so long in part through a continuity that was rooted in a local *habitus* and local forms of power, which were successful in maintaining themselves by adapting in relation to higher authority while enacting local conservative power downward. Those local forms of power, that local elite, constructed themselves through a connection with the site's own deep past (through *progonoi* and ancestors) but adapted to change through an ability to position themselves to whatever imperial power they needed to, thus maintaining access to broad networks. Ultimately, the power that pushed inward within the site and backward in time was ill equipped to deal with the Roman military within the city itself. The Lysiads, those shrewd operators, packed up and left before the Sasanians took the site from the Roman military.

Dura survived so long at the meeting point of empires because it was a node in a series of different connections: linguistic, cultural, material, religious, and economic. But perhaps its fate was sealed when the installation of a Roman garrison and the growing power of the Sasanians transformed it from a node to a target. At Dura, by looking carefully at the local situation through time, we can see sophisticated ways of negotiating different spheres and scales. But, in the end, like the fragments of silk found in the rampart, the site itself ended up as collateral damage, and no nuanced power negotiation could save it when the Romans and Sasanians collided, literally, at its gates.⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ On the abandonment sequence of Dura and the final battles there, Baird 2012; James 2007; James 2011; James 2015.

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