

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2001.12.20

Monika Schuol, *Die Charakene: Ein mesopotamisches Königreich in hellenistisch-parthischer Zeit (Oriens et Occidens, Band 1)*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000. Pp. 554. ISBN 3-515-07709-X. DM/sFr 148,00.

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Word count: 3055 words

The book under review is the first volume of a new series, *Oriens et Occidens*, edited by the historian Josef Wiesehofer of Kiel University. In the absence of a preface by the editor the subtitle, "studies to cultural contacts in antiquity and their afterlife", suggests a wide range of topics. Inquiries with the editor and the members of the editorial board (P. Briant, A. Kuhrt and F. Millar) clarified that the series primarily addresses the Achaemenid to Sasanian periods in an attempt to foster research in east-west contacts as well as in the later pre-Islamic empires. Although all the editors are historians, publication of archaeological research is likewise envisaged according to personal communication by Wiesehofer. The new series is published by Franz Steiner in Stuttgart, a publisher renowned for high quality publications, e.g., *Historia Einzelschriften*.

The launching of this new series of monographs coincides with the second numbers of the *Bulletin d'Histoire Achéménide*, edited by P. Briant, and the journal *Parthica*, edited by A. Invernizzi. These series and journals testify to a new interest in Achaemenid to Sasanian periods long neglected in research. This welcome development, nevertheless, bears a risk for scholars not specifically interested in these topics, who will no longer be exposed to articles on these matters in periodicals they read for other reasons. The two sides of specialization are already visible as non-specialists are often unaware of less eurocentric perceptions of the Achaemenid to Sasanian periods which developed in recent years. Reasons for less biased views are certainly the general post-colonial climate in social studies, but also the increased reliance on oriental, indigenous sources and the resulting independence from and critical evaluation of Greek and Roman authors.

This new approach also applies for the book under review, Schuol's 1998 Ph.D. thesis at Kiel University. It is the first monograph on the subject of this kingdom, situated on the southern shore of Mesopotamia and specifically known for its role in long distance trade. The basic facts related by classical authors and gathered from coins were summarized in 1960 by Sh.A. Nodelman in his seminal article "A Preliminary History of Characene" (*Berytus* 13, pp. 83-121), which until now remained the standard reference work on the topic. The amount of written sources in other languages and new archaeological research not only justified (Schuol, p. 13), but called for the overdue, less preliminary revision of the topic. Schuol is to be congratulated for having taken up the challenge.

Schuol's aims, as mentioned in the introduction (ch. I) are threefold. First, the compilation and historical interpretation of sources. Second, the description of history, economy and culture of the kingdom of Characene from its foundation in the mid-second century B.C. to its end with the Sasanian conquest in A.D. 222. And third, the evaluation of the role of Characene within the broader political context. This ambitious program seems difficult to realize as our information on the Characene is indeed very limited. Schuol, nevertheless, assembled a wide array of sources through erudite reading.

After a strikingly short history of research (pp. 21-25 ch. II), roughly half of the text (pp. 27-240) is devoted to the presentation of sources, split into 1. written, 2. archaeological and 3. numismatic. Under the slightly misleading heading "Literarische Zeugnisse", which should be read "Schriftliche Quellen" as it includes all kinds of written material like inscriptions or accounts, Schuol assembled 132 sources written in thirteen different languages. She presents the sources, except for Chinese, Arabic, (Middle-)Persian and Coptic, in transliteration and translation. In most cases both are copied from primary text-editions, but often enough translations are either her own or include alterations to original editions which are not always specifically indicated. Every single text is preceded by a list of the main editions and plenty of modern literature which refers to this text. Sometimes a few words on the preservation of inscriptions (esp. from Palmyra) are added or a short introduction is given into the context of specific passages quoted from lengthy manuscripts (mainly Roman works). Each paragraph ends with a summary of the text's content. The descriptions are of rather uneven quality. Sometimes they add important information concerning Characene not included in the passages

quoted, e.g., Plinius' claim (nat. hist. VI 23) that he learned about the geography of the Parthian empire from Roman participants of war and from Parthians living in Rome (both of which for various reasons might account for Plinius' peculiar mixture of sometimes confused and sometimes useful detailed statements). At times Schuol just repeats the main arguments of the text. Repeatedly, as throughout chapter III, she offers conclusions without presenting the arguments which the reader can only hope to find in later chapters of the book, an irritating habit careful editing of a thesis for publication should have redressed.

The quality of information in the sources themselves is extremely diverse. One of the most important contributions Schuol makes is her use of eastern sources. Most notable in this respect are excerpts from the "astronomical diaries" kept in cuneiform in Babylon at least until the mid first century BC. While their main purpose is the detailed documentation of stellar configurations, they also provide short summaries of important events. Therefore, they are prime sources for political history. Eight diaries largely improve our knowledge about the first king of the Characene, Hyspaosines (Aspasine), summarized by Schuol in one of the best chapters of the book (ch. IV.3.a). Later on Characene is not mentioned in these increasingly rare late cuneiform documents anymore.

Instead evidence is provided by, e.g., 34 Palmyrenian dedicatory inscriptions, most of them bilingual Palmyrene and Greek. Half of them mention Spasinou Charax, the capital of the Characene and attest to direct trade links between the Characene and Palmyra for the period of AD 50/51 (or AD 70/71) to AD 193. Earlier and later inscriptions (Schuol's nos. I.b. 2 to 3 and 29 to 33) report ongoing caravan trade with important cities midway between Palmyra and Characene, from AD 19 until AD 247. Thus, Schuol has good reasons to assume the continuation of trade along the old lines. Still, the most detailed descriptions on geography stem from Roman authors already used by Nodelman. Other sources (Acts of Thomas; several Manichaean fragments and the Talmud, pp. 165-193) supplement these and attest to a number of different religions in the area. But we learn remarkably little about the political status or the dynasts of Characene. The only exception, the bilingual inscription on the bronze Herakles found in Seleucia in 1984, is open to different interpretations of the exact conditions for the war between the Arsacid king of kings and the Characenean king in AD 151.

In contrast to the written sources only 19 pages are devoted to archaeological evidence. This is partly the result of the absence of excavations in Characene proper. In 1965 J. Hansman located Characene's capital Spasinou Charax and the important seaport Forat. Nevertheless, the pottery retrieved from the surface of both sites is only Sasanian and early Islamic in date; other important settlements known from texts are not even located. In her list of archaeological sites Schuol includes places in southern Mesopotamia, like Uruk and Tello, and areas all along the Persian/Arabian Gulf. These regions might have belonged to Characene only during the reign of Hyspaosines but were certainly of interest in continued trade relations. The summary of this chapter makes one assume that the author aimed at an understanding of indicators for political status and trade relations. But in the different subchapters on specific sites or regions we cannot see how these questions guided her inquiries into the vast, difficult to summarize and thus not exhausted archaeological literature. Without guidelines to follow and a clear understanding of the archaeological material itself, the descriptions of sites are sometimes awkwardly off balance. Nevertheless, the chapter's summary correctly points out that pottery provides ample evidence for contact along the Gulf coast, presumably in connection with trade. The existence of Characenean coins in Uruk and Tello, on the other hand, is, contrary to Schuol's assumption (pp. 215, 240), not conclusive proof of political domination.

The coins themselves are the last group of sources considered (pp. 217-240). In the absence of any other evidence they are used not only to establish a list of rulers. Even minor differences in iconography, style or fabric are often seen as reflections of the general political situation, esp. for political (in-)dependence from the Arsacid king of kings. Results have to remain tentative, but often enough these are the only means to judge. All the more was the reviewer surprised by the complete lack of illustrations. This is especially deplorable since the older (and younger) literature has difficulty distinguishing between different rulers of the same name. Schuol seems well aware of the problem but restricts herself to a summary of the available literature and thus follows established identifications without any discussion of the reasoning. This certainly is a major shortcoming because it deprives her of any chance to form an opinion of her own. It also infiltrates into the organization of the book as not only the chapter on coins, but also the core chapter on history of Characene are organized according to rulers.

The summary on coins, on the other hand, is concise and lucid. In 125/124 B.C., shortly after a cuneiform tablet mentions king Hyspaosines of Characene for the first time in 127/126 B.C., we see him minting tetradrachms. After a short interruption in the wake of the conquest of Mesopotamia by Mithridates II, Characenean kings start issuing tetradrachms again. They bear dates according to the Seleucid era as commonly used in the Arsacid empire, the only means to date most of the kings. According to Schuol, following older literature, the right of coinage was preserved until the end of the Arsacid empire, but, especially in the second century AD, the absolute number of coins is too low to prove this with certainty (see

below).

Chapter IV (pp. 242-378) forms the core of Schuol's book. It starts with a review of trade relations between Mesopotamia and the Gulf area from the fifth millennium B.C. to the Hellenistic period. One could ask whether this is really necessary for an understanding of Characene, but these 20 pages are certainly among the best summaries available on the topic, a remarkable achievement and highly recommended as an introduction to the problem.

In the remaining 116 pages Schuol attempts to summarize Characenean history in the form of a narrative. But, despite the evidence carefully assembled by her, Characenean history remains a difficult story to tell. Accordingly most of her text is taken up by reiterating world power politics, especially general Parthian history, interspersed with remarks on possible or likely repercussions for Characene.

Only in the case of the beginnings of the kingdom under Hyspaosines and his interesting career do sources permit concentration on Characenean politics. As Schuol points out, following 166/65 BC Hyspaosines served as satrap to Antiochos IV. After 141 BC, already 68 years old, he used the prolonged power struggle between the Seleucids and the Parthian Arsacids to build himself an empire encompassing for a short period not only Characene proper but most of southern Mesopotamia up to Babylon as well as the coastal areas in the Gulf. When he died on June 11, 124, a date we can now establish thanks to the astronomical diaries, his realm was reduced to the southernmost part of Mesopotamia again. Nevertheless, as founder of the kingdom and possibly its ruling dynasty, he remained the paramount figure among Characene's rulers. The careful description of Hyspaosines' political career is certainly one of Schuol's best chapters.

Unfortunately, many other sub-chapters are less well organized, which seems the unavoidable result of the tension between Schuol's organization of the chapter by Characenean rulers and the bulk of the available material she can report on, i.e., general Parthian history. This forces her to go back and forth in time and place as political developments in the Arsacid empire did not adhere to the time limits of provincial king's reigns.

Of central importance is the status of Characene in relation to the Arsacid central power; though sources on Characene could help to answer questions on the still debated organisation of the Arsacid empire in general. It was not Schuol's task to explore Parthian history. Her re-telling is largely based on available summaries as Debevoise, Ziegler, Schippmann and Wolski.¹ But however useful these may be, they carry all the weight of established views and many prejudices against the Parthian empire. Therefore, relying on them clouds Schuol's opportunity to judge the role of Characene from the sources she collected herself. Accordingly, she sees constant internal turmoil in the Parthian empire and a weak central power as given factors. This in turn forces her to take for granted a largely independent Characene for most of the time considered. Exceptions she sees only with the reigns of Pakoros II (AD 80/1 to 101/2) and Meredates (AD 116/7 to 150/1), members of the Arsacid family, which she calls Parthian *interregna*.

The present writer disagrees with her, and the older literature, on this crucial point. And, while a review is not the place to elaborate on an alternative model, the assumption of (semi-)independence during the Arsacid period is problematic. In fact it is based on two arguments (summarized by Schuol on p. 461): first, that in general the rulers of Characene until the Sasanian conquest belonged to the dynasty of Hyspaosines; second, that minting of coins is evidence for independence. Both these assumptions seem questionable. As Schuol notices herself (p. 454) the only evidence for a Characenean dynasty is a cuneiform tablet which mentions a son of Hyspaosines on the occasion of the latter's death in 121 B.C. After that there is nothing but silence on the matter of family relations for 200 years, until the Arsacid Pacoros is king. It is at least as likely to assume that for many years the kings of Characene like in other Parthian provinces belonged to the Arsacid family as Pacoros and Meredates certainly did. The argument for a direct relationship between independence and minting is disproven by the case of Orabazes II, who immediately after his inthronisation by Vologases IV in AD 151 started to mint coins. This should caution us about seeing minting as the privilege of independent rulers and also calls into question the idea of a change in status of the Characene between the Arsacid and Sasanian periods, during which Mesene (Characene) remained a major province governed by a king of the Sasanian family.

These are questions crucial not only to the study of Characene, but for the Arsacid empire in general. Unfortunately, Schuol never develops ideas off the beaten path or addresses major issues like this. Instead she prefers to remain within the boundaries of established views and chronologies.

In ch. V information on trade between Characene and other areas is surveyed. Once more the enormous scope of Schuol's reading is evident. But she feels forced to explain the often not well established political situation for the areas Characene might have traded with. Thus, the reader is diverted from evidence for trade itself by a wealth of other information. Nevertheless, this chapter gives a very well researched overview of trade in the

ancient world between China, India and the Mediterranean.

Chapters IV and V are again summarized in ch. VI, "Zusammenfassung". Often in summaries the danger lurks that uncertainties are suppressed when results are presented. Schuol cannot avoid this problem. E.g., the Nike on a coin of Attambelos I. (p. 224) is interpreted as possible evidence for some otherwise unknown "eigenständige Politik" of this ruler on p. 315 while in the summary this transforms into an expansion of Characene during his reign and into a prime example of continuous struggle for influence between Characene and her Arsacid overlords (p. 455). In general, Schuol argues for repeated periods of independence, esp. between c. AD 40 and 73, shortly before and after Trajan's invasion and occupation of Mesopotamia, and under Meredat between c. AD 131 and 151. But for most of the time she considers Characene a semi-autonomous kingdom within the Arsacid empire, ruled by a local dynasty as long as the king of kings saw no reason to subdue the Characenean king.

The book closes with a list of rulers (ch. VII, pp. 465-6) and an impressive bibliography (ch. VIII, pp. 467-530). Ten pages of ancient sources in a large number of different editions and slightly more than 1000 titles of secondary or archaeological literature provide a treasure trove. The volume is completely indexed, a very useful tool in a book which covers so much ground.

If we compare the aims stated in the introduction with the results presented in the book, not all goals were met but progress towards a less preliminary history of Characene was made. The first aim, the compilation of sources is extensive. Their historical interpretation, i.e., commentaries on their context is useful with written sources but of varying quality with coins and archaeological evidence. Second, the promise of a description of the history, economy and culture of the kingdom of Characene is not kept as we do not hear anything about culture later on. But history and economy find extensive treatment. Third, Characene's history, from its foundation in the mid-second century B.C. to the Sasanian conquest in A.D. 222 is evaluated within the broader political context as planned. My main critique remains that the author's approach is too deeply embedded in traditional views to pose far-reaching research questions. Her very valuable extensive compilation of all kinds of sources, nevertheless, enables everybody to form an independent opinion on the history of Characene.

Schuol's book is a very knowledgeable study based on a tremendous amount of reading. The bibliography and the compilation of the different sources alone make this study already an important tool for future research. On the other hand, in the text the reviewer often missed careful editing, i.e., the reworking of a PhD thesis into a book. Nevertheless, no future study on the Arsacid empire or the trade within its realm could ignore this work. Thus, despite all criticism we should be very grateful to Schuol for her book which should be available in every major library. We are looking forward to the next volumes in this interesting new series.

Notes:

1. N.C. Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*, Chicago 1938; K.-H. Ziegler, *Die Beziehungen zwischen Rom und dem Partherreich*, Wiesbaden 1964; K. Schippmann, *Grundzüge der parthischen Geschichte*, Darmstadt 1980; Józef Wolski, *L'empire des Arsacides*, Acta Iranica 32, Leuven 1993.

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