

The Avroman Parchments and the Use of Greek in the Parthian Empire*

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Questo contributo analizza la situazione sociolinguistica del greco all'interno dell'impero partico, prendendo come elementi di analisi il greco delle élite, il greco dei coloni della città di Susa e la situazione peculiare del greco rurale conservato nei rotoli di Avroman. Come vedremo, il greco non sopravvisse in una bolla urbana, ma ci furono numerosi punti di contatto con le lingue dei dintorni, che si manifestano in testimonianze di rispetto culturale reciproco.

INTRODUCTION

The Parthian Empire, also called the Arsacid Empire after the reigning dynasty descended from Arsaces, the founder of the empire, was a political entity that controlled a vast territory stretching from India to the Euphrates and from the steppes of Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. For almost five hundred years, from the rebellion of Arsaces I against the Seleucids (c. 247 BCE) until the end of the Arsacid dynasty and its replacement by the Sassanid Empire (224 CE), the Parthian Empire played a fundamental role in shaping the trade routes linking Asia to Europe and the policies affecting the Near and Middle East. However, despite the empire's key role in the history of the Ancient World, our knowledge of the details of its political history and cultural and linguistic life is very poor, because the sources available to access such knowledge are deficient and often biased.¹

The Parthian Empire inherited the multilingual nature of its predecessors, the Seleucid and Achaemenid empires. This multilingualism is evident in the material documentation and in the testimonies transmitted by the classical authors, but it remains difficult to describe or assess because of the scarcity of information and the problems entailed in drawing reliable sociolinguistic conclusions about languages or linguistic stages from a very limited corpus, as is the case for the Parthian era.

The language of the Arsacid imperial family was Parthian, a Middle Iranian language of the Western family,² although being the Easternmost of this group, it was influenced by contact with Eastern Iranian. Middle Iranian languages (Parthian, Middle Persian, Sogdian and Khwarezmian) were written during the period between the end

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¹ The most recent and complete compendium of sources for reconstructing the history of the Parthian Empire is Hackl, Jacobs, Weber 2010. For a history of the Parthian Empire, see Bivar 1983; Wolski 1993; Wiesehöfer 1998; 2001; Hauser 2012; Gregoratti 2017; Fabian 2020.

² The standard reference text is that by Durkin-Meisterernst 2014. A glossary in Gignoux 1972.