

# EDGE OF EMPIRES

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## PAGANS, JEWS, AND CHRISTIANS AT ROMAN DURA-EUROPOS

Jennifer Y. Chi and Sebastian Heath, Editors

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General Plan of Excavations



<span style="color: blue;">■</span> Public and military buildings	<span style="color: green;">■</span> Cultic Buildings	<span style="color: yellow;">■</span> Dwellings and Shops	<span style="color: grey;">■</span> Modern Buildings
C9 Palace of the Strategos	A1 Citadel temple of Zeus	B2 Houses	C5 "Roman" Houses
E7 Principia	A1 Military temple	B6 Shops	C10 Excavation House (private)
E8, X7 Barracks	B3 T. of Zeus Theos	B8 House of Nebuchelos	T. Tower
F3 Amphitheater	C4 T. of Zeus Megistos	C7 House of the frescoes	St. Street
G1-G8 Agora	E7 T. of Azzanathkona	C11 Houses	
G3 Chreophylakeion	H1 T. of the Gaddé	D1 Residence of Lysias	
G6 Macellum	H2 T. of Atargatis	D5 Residence of the large atrium	
H4 Bouleuterion-Odeon	H4 T. of Artemis	E4 Residence	
L4 Caravansary	J7 Mithraeum	H2 House of the Priests	
X3/X5 Palace of the Dux	J9 T. of Bel	J1 Residence of the higher officer	
Ripae	L5 T. of Adonis	L7 House of the Scribes	
T.A. Triumphal Arch	L7 Synagogue		
	L8 Tychaion		
	<span style="color: red;">■</span> Baths		
	M5 Sanctuary of Bel		
	M8 Christian building		
	M8/N7 T. of Zeus Kyrios		
	N8 T. of Aphlad		
	X7 Dolicheneum		
	X9 North temple		
	C3; E3; M7; X10 Roman baths		
	F3 "Parthian" baths		



Thymiaterion (incense burner). Green-glazed terracotta, cistern at the Temple of Atargatis (H2), Dura-Europos, mid-2nd–mid-3rd century ce. YUAG: 1938.4966. Checklist no. 44.

# TRADING AT THE EDGE: POTTERY, COINS, AND HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS AT DURA-EUROPOS

SEBASTIAN HEATH

It is a remarkable feature of Roman history that in the third century CE—a time of political instability—long-distance trade continued at a high volume. While emperors faced external threats and military coups, merchants carrying goods over both land and sea maintained connections among distant parts of the imperial territory. Dura-Europos, sitting on the boundary between two empires but under Roman control in the first half of the century, illustrates this aspect of the period. In 256 the town was finally captured and sacked by Rome's new rival, the Sasanid Empire. The hasty work to fortify Dura's defenses shows that Sasanian power motivated the town's military commanders to respond to their expectation of a coming attack. This large-scale effort abruptly buried private houses, places of business, and religious structures and thus helped preserve many of the ceramic vessels, coins, and other objects that show that Roman Dura participated in an active network of regional and long-distance civilian commerce and military supply that stretched west to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>1</sup>

The varied material evidence for ongoing trade suggests that one place to start a discussion of Dura's economic connections is in the central Mediterranean, along the relatively short sea route between North Africa and Rome, capital of the empire and also its largest city. Just as the empire was reaching the height of its power in the second century CE, imperial estates in Africa were supplying a greater share of the food required by the capital and by the people of the Italian peninsula, replacing the earlier flow of goods from Spain. Ships carrying grain, olive oil, and fish-sauce north, from what is now the modern country of Tunisia, also had room in their holds for manufactured goods. It is therefore likely that this increased agricultural production played a role in enabling the workshops of Roman Africa to expand production of the table vessels that archaeologists now call African Red Slip (ARS).<sup>2</sup> Of course, supply is only one part of a trading system, and ARS needed consumers—here meaning individuals and households around the Mediterranean and beyond who were willing to use the new vessels at their meals. Archaeologists and others who study material culture cannot always completely explain the choice of vessels that were used to prepare and serve meals in any one time or place. Very generally, one can say that choices were influenced by the food being served, by those vessels that had been available previously, and by options—such as ARS—supplied by merchants carrying goods from nearby and distant sources.<sup>3</sup>



3-1 Fragment of African red-slip dish (Hayes form 49). Terracotta, Dura-Europos, ca. 220–256 CE. Manufactured in North Africa. YUAG: 1938.4971. Checklist no. 46.

3-2 Fragment of African red-slip dish (Hayes form 45). Terracotta, Dura-Europos, mid-3rd century CE. Manufactured in North Africa. YUAG: 1934.433. Checklist no. 50.

3-3 Fragment of Eastern Sigillata A dish (cf. Hayes forms 35/36). Terracotta, Dura-Europos, ca. mid–late 1st century CE. Manufactured in western Syria. YUAG: 1938.4998. Checklist no. 55.

Vessels in ARS—which themselves show influence of North African shapes and a Mediterranean koine—appear on sites around the Mediterranean basin and also on well-connected inland sites, including those that were on navigable rivers. The presence of ARS at Dura (figs. 3-1 and 3-2) is a firm indicator that the town participated in this network of exchange.<sup>4</sup> And while it is not certain what route was followed by the traders who brought ARS to Dura, passage overland from Antioch toward the Euphrates is one likely path.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it must be said that while imported ceramics certainly make Dura a stopping point for goods moving through the region, it was not necessarily a major trade center. Dura was sustained by its military role, a role partly complemented and supplied by economic activity.<sup>6</sup>

Any study of pottery at Dura is hampered by the fact that we do not know the relative amounts of the different types of vessels that were present at the site, as this information was not recorded by the Yale/French excavations.<sup>7</sup> Given the scientific standards of the time, it was enough to collect whole vessels and some smaller fragments of ARS in order to record the presence of the ware at the site. But even without such numbers, it is certain that local products dominated the supply of ceramics to households in the town. Nonetheless, there is evidence for the longevity of Dura's contact with regions to the west. In the first century CE, Eastern Sigillata A (ESA), a category of red-slipped tableware probably produced in the western or coastal areas of Syria near Antioch, was carried to Dura.<sup>8</sup> The piece shown in figure 3-3 is modeled after small plates that were made on the Italic peninsula in the first century CE.<sup>9</sup> This influence of Italian forms on table vessels appearing at Dura shows that even at a time when the town was under the control of the Parthian Empire, as it was almost without interruption from 113 BCE to 165 CE, it was receptive to cultural trends that originated in the Roman Empire.<sup>10</sup> It is appropriate, then, to think of Dura as consistently a meeting point of many influences.

While we do not know the total number of ARS vessels found in the excavation, the published results indicate that ten nearly whole vessels were recorded,<sup>11</sup> suggesting that ARS may not have been excessively rare at Dura in the years before it was sacked. Another third-century connection is with the Aegean. Figure 3-4 illustrates an amphora, or two-handled jar for transporting liquids. Archaeologists call this form Middle Roman Amphora 7 or Kapitän II, among other names, and it is most commonly found on Aegean sites, which suggests it was produced in that region and carried an agricultural product such as oil or wine.<sup>12</sup>

While these imported ceramics may be exceptional, numismatic evidence—meaning coins—provides more reliable evidence for Dura's regional connections.<sup>13</sup> Unlike ceramics, coins were very carefully collected by the Yale/French excavators, and a 1949 catalog provides identification for over 9,000 pieces, ranging from a single Persian coin—a silver siglos—of the fifth century BCE to thousands dating to the last decades of Roman Dura.<sup>14</sup> A silver tetradrachm (fig. 3-5) from the Syrian town of Cyrrhus that was struck under the emperor Caracalla (d. 217) is representative of the higher-value coins that circulated in the town, although it must be said that by the last years of Roman Dura, imperial silver coins had become much smaller and heavily mixed with copper. Many of the Dura excavation coins come from twenty-two accurately recorded hoards, or groups of coins deposited together, perhaps by someone who intended to recover them at a later date or because of accidental loss. Hoards of Roman coins are useful because most of the coins within them bear the portrait of an emperor, thus allowing them to be closely dated. The latest coin in a hoard gives the date after which it must have been buried. Many coins also bear readable indications of the mint where they were struck. Hoards, then, provide valuable evidence for what money was available at Dura in the decades prior to its sack.<sup>15</sup> Looking at coins found in hoards dating to the last decades of Roman Dura, large numbers come from mints either in Mesopotamia, particularly the relatively nearby towns of Edessa and Nisibis, from Syria, and more surprisingly from the Pontus region on the south coast of the Black Sea, which was a source of bronze coinage. There was no mint at Dura itself in the Roman period.



3-4 Transport amphora (Middle Roman Amphora 7). Terracotta, Dura-Europos, first half of the 3rd century CE. Probably manufactured in the Aegean. YUAG: 1938.5999.4288. Checklist no. 45.

Within these major sources the relationship between Dura and the Pontus region is unclear, though it is worth noting that most of these coins are some two decades old by the time they appear in hoards of the mid-third century at Dura, meaning they had circulated for some time before being buried. And as with ceramics, coins hold evidence for more-distant connections. Coins struck in the Peloponnesus in Greece in the early third century, under the Severan emperors, are well represented at Dura. Likewise, coins struck at Rome in the 240s appear in the latest hoards. These coins do not necessarily represent direct economic connections. Multiple acts of buying and selling may have moved these coins from their place of production to Dura. They therefore probably illustrate an indirect network of official transactions and private purchases that linked Dura to the wider Roman economy.

And one should note that coins also give evidence for longer-term connections to the Parthian and Sasanid empires. Dated coins of the Parthian kings Orodes II from 40 BCE and Vologases I from 66/67 CE (fig. 3-6), in addition to a coin of Shapur I (fig. 3-7), the Sasanian emperor in power when Dura was taken in 256, are useful for establishing the breadth of Dura's economic history.

It is a feature of Roman coinage that it can be divided into higher-value precious-metal issues of gold and silver and lower-denomination bronze coins. At Dura it is sometimes



- 3-5 Tetradrachm of Roman emperor Caracalla. Silver, wall street fill (J7W), Hoard 19, Dura-Europos, mint: Cyrrhus, 215–217 CE. YUAG: 1938.6000.56. Checklist no. 65.
- 3-6 Tetradrachm of Parthian king Vologases I. Silver, mint: Seleucia ad Tigrim, 66–67 CE. YUAG: 1938.6000.46. Checklist no. 64.
- 3-7 Drachma of Sasanian king Shapur I. Silver, mint: Seleucia ad Tigrim, 241–256 CE. YUAG: 1938.6000.47. Checklist no. 66.



possible to identify hoards of mostly silver coins as being associated with military activity. This is the case for hoard 10, found in a building identified as a barracks and containing 542 silver coins dating through the reign of the emperors Valerian and Gallienus but only one bronze.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, hoard 11 from building G5 contained 47 bronze coins. Painted writing on the walls of this house suggests that it was used by a traveling band of entertainers from Zeugma, and it is possible that someone in this group carried the coins to Dura, as the selection of mints was considered by their cataloguer to be “entirely abnormal” in comparison to other bronze hoards.<sup>17</sup> But these are extreme examples. The mixed roles of silver and bronze denominations are indicated by a preserved papyrus listing the purchases made for a banquet in the Mithraeum.<sup>18</sup> The amounts spent on oil and wood are listed as denarii, the name of the standard Roman imperial silver coin. The smaller amounts spent on radishes, paper, and lamp wicks are given using a symbol for bronze coins. While price lists such as these do not necessarily indicate the denominations of the actual coins handed over in the purchase, they are an indication that silver and bronze circulated together, and also that the coins found on the site were used to purchase items of everyday life.<sup>19</sup>

Among items that would have been available for purchase in markets at Dura were regionally produced ceramic vessels. A distinctive category of pottery at Dura that is also found more widely in Syria and Mesopotamia is the so-called Green Glazed

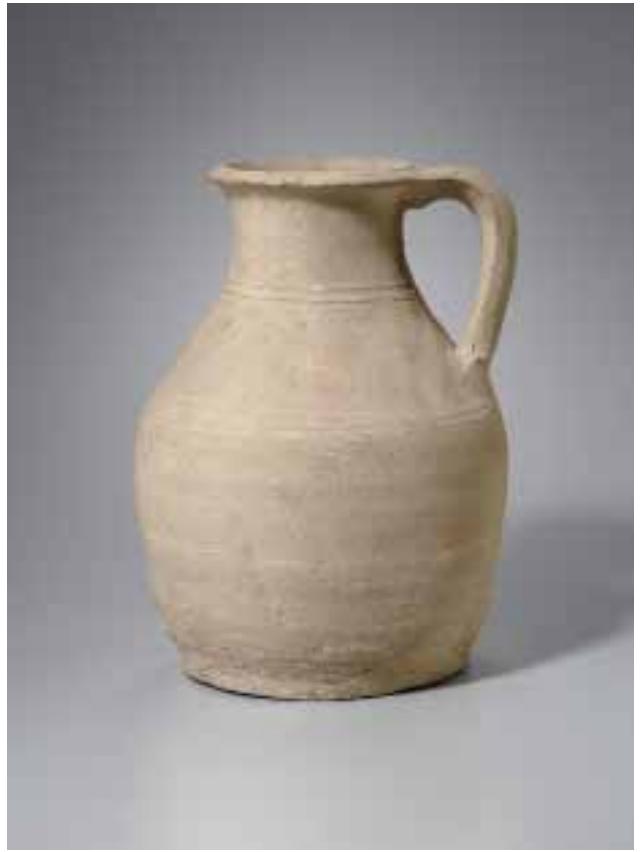


3-8 Cylindrical jar. Green-glazed terracotta, town (L8-W), Dura-Europos, 1st–3rd century CE. YUAG: 1933.345. Checklist no. 52.

3-9 Table amphora. Green-glazed terracotta, town (L8-W104), Dura-Europos, first half of the 3rd century CE. YUAG: 1935.66. Checklist no. 48.

tableware.<sup>20</sup> Figure 3-8 illustrates a small container of a type appearing in burials of the first century CE. Figure 3-9 is an example of the common table amphoras in green glaze that would have appeared at meals in Roman Dura. The form and appearance of this piece and of similar vessels are themselves a mixture of Mesopotamian and Mediterranean influences. Two-handled vessels holding liquids to be poured out to diners were usual at Roman-period meals; variations on the theme are made in ARS. But the green glaze, squat shape, and thumb-impressed decoration all give this piece a distinctly regional aesthetic. Also regional are the two unslipped utilitarian vessels shown in figures 3-10 and 3-11.<sup>21</sup> The pale, barrel-shaped vessel in figure 3-10 is unusual and may have been for carrying water around the town or into the desert. If water was needed during a meal, the plain jug in figure 3-11 would have adequately served that purpose. For household cooking, figure 3-12 is an expertly made thin-walled vessel formed from deliberately mixed clay able to withstand high heat. This piece belongs to a category of ceramics known as Brittle Ware, and Dura remains the source of the largest published group of the ware to date. It is worth noting that vessels in Brittle Ware are known from other sites along the Euphrates, evidence that merchants carried both exceptional products such as ARS and more mundane material while plying their trade.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to pottery, the people of Dura went about their lives using a wide range of manufactured goods. Some of these were luxuries, such as a silver bracelet (fig. 3-13),



3-10 Barrel-shaped water jug or "pilgrim flask." Terracotta, Dura-Europos, before 256 CE. YUAG: 1931.541. Checklist no. 57.

3-11 One-handed jar. Terracotta, House of Nebuchelos (B8), Dura-Europos, before 256 CE. YUAG: 1932.1291. Checklist no. 49.

3-12 Brittle-ware cook pot. Terracotta, Dura-Europos, first half of the 3rd century CE. YUAG: 1981.62.3. Checklist no. 47.





3-13 Bracelet. Silver with stone intaglio, Palmyrene Gate (L8), Dura-Europos, ca. 200–256 CE. YUAG: 1929.405a–b. Checklist no. 75.

3-14 Necklace. Gold and bronze, House of the Archives (B8, room 2), Dura-Europos, ca. 213–256 CE. YUAG: 1932.1732. Checklist no. 73.

3-15 Engagement ring. Gold, Christian Building (M8), Dura-Europos, ca. 200–256 CE. YUAG: 1933.606. Checklist no. 71.

a gold necklace (fig. 3-14), and a gold engagement ring (fig. 3-15) reading “harmony” in Greek. Very expensive items such as these were not part of regular markets. But a child’s shoe (fig. 3-16), a ceramic lamp (fig. 3-17), and a stone bowl (fig. 3-18) are indications of access to consumer goods that may have been part of normal trade; they need not be taken as evidence of any particular wealth. It is important to note that not all these objects are closely dated to the middle of the third century. Nonetheless, the less expensive among them represent categories of goods that would likely have been available throughout the period of Roman Dura.

It is rare to be able to associate a particular individual with any one object, but the range of religious choices at Dura—syncretistic deities combining local and Greek gods, Mithraism with its associations with the army, Judaism, and Christianity—remind us that Dura’s inhabitants constructed their lives by both communal association and personal choice. Trade and external contacts played a role in this complex *mélange* of ideas that existed in the town. A specialized item such as the elaborate thymiaterion found in a cistern at the Temple of Atargatis (see page 62) is a special-purpose object of a sort not produced in large numbers. But the small bronze incense burner (fig. 3-19)



3-16 Child's shoe. Leather, Dura-Europos, ca. 200–256 CE. YUAG: 1981.62.34. Checklist no. 70.

3-17 Roman lamp with Hermes in relief. Terracotta, wall street fill (L7-W1), Dura-Europos, ca. 165–256 CE. YUAG: 1933.350. Checklist no. 51.

3-18 Spouted bowl with three lug handles, Roman (?). Alabaster, Dura-Europos, ca. 1st–3rd century CE. YUAG: 1932.1234. Checklist no. 54.

found in house G1-A is a transportable item that enabled the practice of religion in a domestic context. For its part, Christianity is an idea and it must have been brought to Dura by people. There is no need to say that a merchant introduced this new religion. But it is likely that the Christian community was sustained by the ongoing interaction implied by commercial contacts. More generally, the long-distance and regional contacts demonstrated by the presence of ARS, Aegean amphoras, and Brittle Ware, alongside the thousands of recorded coins from nearby and distant mints—all brought to the town in response to both civilian and military demand—help explain the complex mix of ideas and religion that is so evident in the written and visual record of the town.

Dura has been called the “Pompeii of the Desert.” There is some utility to this comparison when the preservation of wall painting and city plan is taken into account, but the phrase should not be taken to mean that Dura was completely abandoned after the Sasanid sack.<sup>23</sup> This was not the case. A fifth-century Syriac document, the *Life of the Martyr Mu’Ain*, reports that a Christian hermit lived there during the reign of the Sasanid emperor Shapur II (d. 379).<sup>24</sup> A single coin of the Roman emperor Constantius II also indicates fourth-century or later activity. Seven lamps that can be



3-19 Thymiaterion (incense burner). Bronze, House (G1-A), Dura-Europos, ca. 200–256 CE. YUAG: 1932.1396. Checklist no. 77.

3-20 Fragment of Phocaean red-slip dish (Hayes form 3). Terracotta, Dura-Europos, 5th century CE. Manufactured on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor. YUAG: 1938.5711. Checklist no. 56.

fifth century or later were recorded by the Yale/French excavations.<sup>25</sup> More definitively, figure 3-20 illustrates a rim fragment of a Phocaean Red-Slip Hayes form 3,<sup>26</sup> a very common fifth-century form that appears in the western Mediterranean as well as in the British Isles.<sup>27</sup> It was produced at the site of Phocaea, on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor. This particular piece is firm evidence that not only did activity continue at Dura—even if it was only sporadic and cannot confidently be associated with permanent settlement—but that contact with the Mediterranean, though certainly even more sporadic, continued as well.

## Notes

- 1 An extended discussion of the relationship between excavated ceramics and coins from Roman-period sites can be found in Poblome and Zelle 2002, 275–87.
- 2 Bonifay 2004, 445–86, surveys the evidence for the connection between North African agricultural productivity and ceramic production. For further comments, see Bes and Poblome 2008. On ARS generally, see Hayes 1972, 13ff.
- 3 For a survey of Roman-period dining in the eastern Mediterranean, see Hudson 2010. See Hoffman 2011 on material culture and identity. Alaba 1992 documents recent ceramic finds at Dura-Europos.
- 4 Fig. 3-1 is an ARS Hayes form 49; fig. 3-2 is a Hayes form 45. Hayes 50 is also found at the site. Because the destruction of Dura is well dated, the appearance of these forms at the site was important for dating; Hayes 1972, 63, 69; and Baird 2011.
- 5 While Zeugma, which lies upriver from Dura and is closer to Antioch, seems a likely stopping point for traders moving east, the near absence of tableware from second- and third-century levels excavated by the rescue operations recently undertaken means the question needs further study; Kenrick 2009. ARS Hayes form 50 is present in later deposits at Zeugma; Abadie-Reynal, Martz, and Cador 2007, esp. 182.
- 6 See Bowersock in this volume.
- 7 A point also made by Baird 2007, 8.
- 8 Hayes 1985.
- 9 For the chronology of ESA plates influenced by Italian forms, see *ibid.*, 30–31, pl. V.
- 10 See Poblome and Zelle 2002 for pottery forms as an indication of Roman cultural influence. The earlier influence of ESA on Italian products is discussed by Malfitana, Poblome, and Lund 2005.
- 11 Cox 1949, 15.
- 12 See Keay and Williams 2005, “Kapitän 2.”
- 13 For an overview of coinage and circulation in Syria, see Butcher 2003, 212–20. A more complete analysis of conditions in northern Syria can be found in Butcher 2004.
- 14 Bellinger 1949. For more recent finds, see Augé 1997.
- 15 Butcher 2004. See also Harl 1996, 113 and 258.
- 16 Bellinger 1949, 176.
- 17 See *ibid.*, 177, with references to Baur, Rostovtzeff, and Toll 1944, 259.
- 18 Baur, Rostovtzeff, and Toll 1939, 124–25, cat. 861. Butcher 2004, 208, discusses the symbols used in this document.
- 19 Prices from Dura are collected in Sperber 1974.
- 20 Toll and Matson 1943.
- 21 Dyson 1968.
- 22 See Sartre 2005, 197 with references.
- 23 It is worth noting that even at Pompeii archaeologists have identified activity at the site after the town’s destruction in 79 CE; Allison 2004.
- 24 Hoffman 1880, 28. For further references to postdestruction activity at Dura, including lion hunting by the army of the emperor Julian II (d. 363), see Cumont 1926, LXIII.
- 25 Bauer 1947, 70.
- 26 Hayes 1972, 337, mentions this sherd.
- 27 For the western Mediterranean, see Reynolds 1995. For Britain and Ireland, see Thomas 1981 and Kelly 2010, 35–88.

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