

Bardaisan the Proculian: Echoes of Roman Law in an Early Syriac Text

In recent years, scholars have been keen to point out the reception of Roman law in Syriac contexts in the fourth and fifth centuries (Monnickendam 2018, Doerfler 2019). In this presentation, I expand on this proposition and show much earlier evidence of cultural interaction between Roman law and Syriac literature. I identify hitherto neglected allusions to Roman legal thinking in the earliest surviving piece of Syriac literature, *The Book of the Laws of Countries* (*BLC*) associated with Bardaisan of Edessa (Drijvers 1965). These references include a Proculian view of puberty, limitations on *patria potestas*, Roman punishments for *furtum*, and imperial policy in Arabia.

Collectively, these connections intimate more than a superficial knowledge of Roman law and administration on the part of Bardaisan and his circle. Although Bardaisan probably lacked formal legal training and some of his knowledge of Roman legal practice was impressionistic, the legal references in the text suggest that the educated elite of Osroene interacted with Roman juristic principles at least as early as the third century. I propose that the establishment of the legal school in Beirut might have played a role in this intellectual interaction. It is noteworthy that we might see the influence of Roman law, a system that is often treated as insular from other systems (Watson 1995), as far afield as a Syriac dialogue on fate by a Christian philosopher.

This argument may have implications for our interpretation of the *BLC* itself. If Bardaisan was aware of Latin juristic literature, even indirectly, then his framework for understanding the workings of fate may owe something to Roman analogical legal thinking. For example, just as the Proculians maintained that law should invariably hold one age of puberty for all boys and one age for all girls, Bardaisan could contend that universal biological laws

(*nāmuse*) could be an argument against the power of Fate. A full accounting of Bardaisan's engagement of Roman law shows the sophistication of his ethnography and rhetorical strategies throughout the treatise.

Bibliography

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