

Religious Transformation in the City of Emesa, Syria: From Paganism to Christianity During the Roman and Early- Byzantine Periods

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of religious life in Emesa during Roman and early Byzantine times. It illustrates how the city's religious landscape changed from the worship of local gods, such as Elagabalus, to the general acceptance of Christianity in the fourth century AD. Examining the political and social factors that led to this transformation reveals a complex history of religious tolerance and struggle that ultimately allowed Christianity to flourish. The study stresses the significance of Emesa's religious and urban character in this remarkable transformation, as well as the influence of rising elites on these features. This paper bridges the gaps related to significant buildings, including the Temple of the Sun, by utilizing archaeological data and historical sources. It also shows how Christian churches evolved from pagan temples. Finally, this study clarifies the special situation of Emesa among other Eastern Roman cities, therefore improving our knowledge of the complex religious reform movement at this crucial point.

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INTRODUCTION

Located in central Syria on the eastern bank of the Orontes River, Emesa naturally sits at a crossroads between the Syrian coast and the inner desert (Fig. 1). This site was important on ancient commerce routes, especially Antioch to Damascus and the larger Levant. For the empires, Emesa became a continual target of attention, serving as both a commercial center and a strategic gateway for conquering the Syrian desert and eastern region. Among Syrian cities, Emesa is among the most significant, particularly in the Roman era, noteworthy religious and cultural innovations reflected the important changes affecting the Roman Empire and Syria, including following the end of the Seleucid Empire (See: Andrade, 2020; Abdulkarim, 1997), the city developed as a hub for pagan faiths in Emesa and the adoration of the native deity Elagabalus, who subsequently came to be acknowledged as a god in Rome. The Roman identity of Emesa was fundamentally based on paganism. Referring to himself as Elagabalus, the native solar deity, the spiritual practices of the city mainly revolved around him. The Temple of Elagabalus was a significant venue for seasonal feasts and religious activity in Emesa. Like other Syrian gods such as Baal and Ishtar, pagan beliefs in Emesa encompassed the worship of Elagabalus and a range of gods linked with fertility, battle, and the environment. Religious plurality was symbolized by the coexistence of indigenous gods with the conventional Roman deities brought by Roman colonists and fighters. Seen by their active participation in the city government and close relations with the Roman authorities, priests were significant to Emesa's society; they operated as religious mediators with a significant

social and political impact. Some of the priests from Emesa occupied prominent imperial posts; one of them was Emperor Elagabalus, a priest of Elagabalus before he acceded to the imperial throne. Although paganism is somewhat popular, several sources point to early interactions with Christianity, including official decrees and inscriptions. As time passed, Christianity initially seeped into the religious and social structure of the Roman Empire; significant political and social developments shaped the Empire. It was the most often utilized religion by the end of the fourth century AD. With an eye toward the change from paganism to Christianity, this paper investigates the expressions of religious pluralism in Emesa over the Roman Empire. It clarifies the elements of this transformation, its causes, and its effects on the city's architectural, cultural, and social identity. What kinds of manifestations of religious variety did Emesa show throughout the Roman era? What factors enabled paganism to survive in Emesa even as Christianity grew across the country? Was the change from paganism to Christianity in Emesa either forceful or gradual? How did this theological shift influence the social and cultural character of the city.



Fig. 1. Map of Syria showing the location of the city of Emesa in central Syria, by Khaled Hyatleh.

THE CREATION OF EMESA AND ITS URBAN GROWTH IN THE HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN ERAS

Scholars disagree on the question of the growth of the city of Emesa (Emesa), whether the notable urban prosperity started in the Hellenistic period or the Roman era. Based on verified facts, from the mid-third millennium BCE, Emesa first seemed to be a village or small town on the Emesa hill (Fig. 2). Regarding classical times, the current knowledge about the city's limits, the sites of its monuments, and the study of its surroundings is still inadequate. Different researchers have tackled the problem of Emesa's re-establishment and offered different points of view. Considering that "Emesa must be among the Syrian cities founded by Seleucus Nicator

or given a Greek name," Rene Dussaud assumed that Emesa was re-established in the Hellenistic era; nonetheless, he acknowledged the lack of any reference to the city's name prior to the Roman era (Dussaud, 1927, p. 103). In the same line, Dodinet et al. (1990, p. 351) based on the use of the Seleucid calendar in existing inscriptions, observed in the contemporary layout of the city of Emesa an extension of a real estate network dating back to the Hellenistic period, similar to that uncovered by Sauvaget (1949, pp. 314–358).

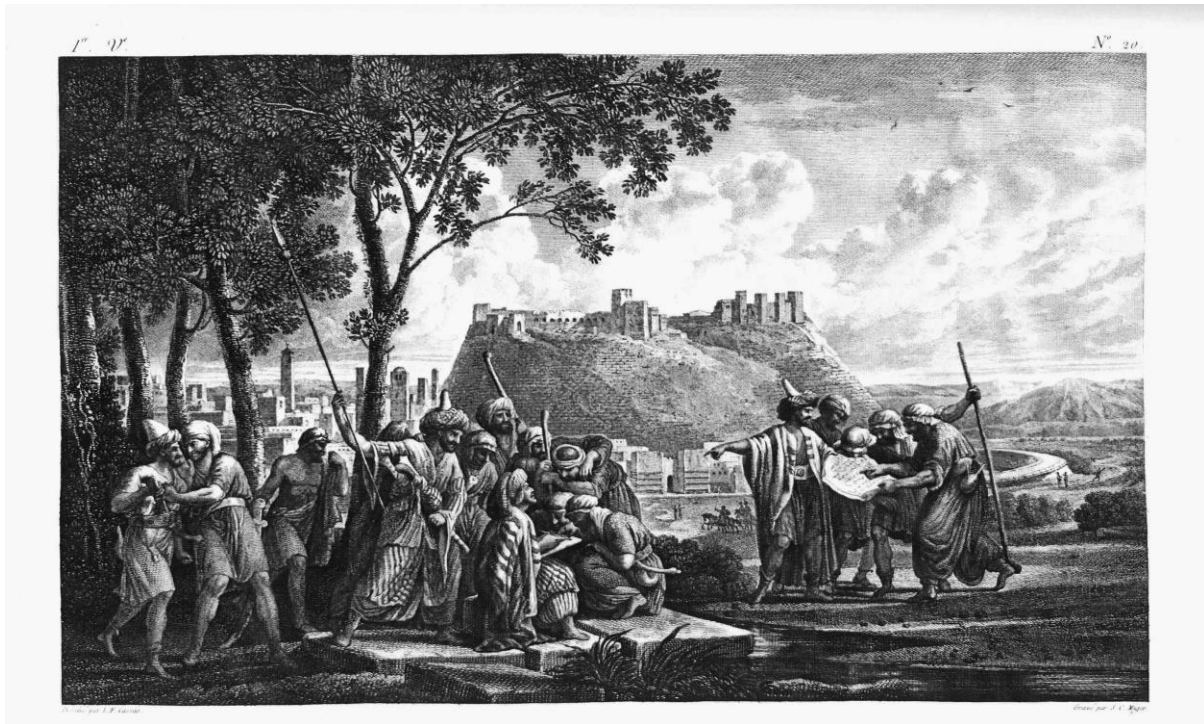


Fig. 2. Illustration of the state of the Emesa Castle. By L. F. Cassas 1799-1800.

On the other hand, some studies hold that the notable urban expansion occurred under Roman rule. Based on the writings of ancient historians, especially Strabo, Henry Seyrig confirmed that Emesa in the Hellenistic age was only the residence of a tribe of settled Arab chiefs, more well-known than the city itself, who were hired to support troops. Seyrig further noted that the building of a dam on the Orontes River, where the channels connected to it were devoted to supplying Emesa, linked the city's development to the richness only realized during the Roman era, which the construction of a dam indicated (Seyrig, 1959, p. 166). Jones (1987, p. 71) noted for his part that official records from the time of Augustus did not name Emesa as a city until the first decade of his rule. Likewise, Moussli (1984, p. 27) clarified that, absent architectural evidence from the Hellenistic period, the city of Emesa remained limited to the bounds of the hill until the Roman era, when it started to spread beyond them. Pierre-Louis Gatier opposed this theory linking the development of Emesa to the prosperity of Palmyra, proving that the growth of Emesa started during the Hellenistic period, based on the fertility of its agricultural lands and its strategic location as a link between northern and southern Syria, not only as a gateway to the desert (Gatier, 1992, pp. 431-436). At last, E. Will noted that "nothing or almost nothing can be said about Beroea (Aleppo) and Emesa" in ancient times (Will 1989, p. 235). Whether textual, archaeological, or epigraphic, depending on reports and studies, some of which are still not fully published or suffer from a lack of consistency and completeness in the data, the method taken to investigate the development of the city to address the issue of Emesa accurately requires an in-depth analysis of many kinds of available data. Using this all-encompassing strategy that we have embraced, we have arrived at a hypothesis on the proportions, character, and organization of the Roman metropolis (Abdulkarim, 1997;

Abdulkarim, 1999, pp. 14-34; Abdulkarim & Olesti-Villa, 2007, pp. 249-276). The city is central to the network of Roman Syrian cities. After being under Roman rule in the first century BC, it entered a new political, economic, and cultural development.

EMESA IN THE ROMAN ERA

The city's eastern Mediterranean strategic location reflected the significant political, military, and religious developments the Roman era brought about in the region of Emesa. Profiting from the slow fall in central Seleucid power and their fight with surrounding nations such as the Romans and Parthians, local dynasties, including the Emesa dynasty, developed toward the end of the Seleucid era in the second century BC. Rising among military and political protagonists in the internal Seleucid conflict were Emesa's princes. Figures such as Sampsigeramus and Iamblichus alternately supported or undermined the Seleucid kings depending on the balance of power (Chad, 1972, p. 35; Abdulkarim, 1997; Sartre, 2001). Particularly regarding the changes in the Roman Near East following Pompey the Great's intervention in 64 BC, which ended Seleucid rule and reorganized Syria as a Roman province, classical sources, including Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Flavius Josephus, reveal the degree of influence these Arab families had (Diodorus Siculus, *Excepta in Fragm., Histor. Graec.*, II, XVII; Strabon, *Géographie*, XVI, 10; and Flavius Josephus, *Jewish antiquities*, Livre XVIII, 131). Under Roman rule, Emesa's princes, especially the Sampsigeramus family, kept semi-independence as "client kings," a tactic the Romans employed to divide the peripheral territory of a tribal nature or unfit for direct administration. This association held until the Emesa dynasty gradually disappeared from historical accounts at the end of the first century AD. Emesa was apparently directly administratively seized by the empire after Soheim abdicated circa 79 AD.

The city, as defined in the first century AD, was shaped by relative stability, as well as religious and economic growth. For the sun god Elagabalus, Emesa became a center of devotion; later, it played a prominent role in Roman religious rites. The Emesa rule seems to have evolved in a more deliberate, orderly way. Strabo adds that local leaders organized taxation, defense, and land allocation, marking the evolution of a permanent city government. The peak period for Emesa occurred primarily in the late 2nd century and the first half of the 3rd century. This is exemplified by the wedding of Emperor Septimius Severus to Julia Domna, the daughter of the high priest of the sun deity of Emesa, which took place in the late 2nd century. This union gave rise to the Emesa dynasty, which reached the height of its influence when Emperor Elagabalus ascended the throne and temporarily introduced the solar worship of Emesa to Rome (Abdulkarim, 1997; Sartre, 1991, p.94; Sartre, 2001, pp. 75–77).

Rising as the Severan Empire developed, Emesa became an important political, military, and religious center. Two administrative provinces were formed from Syria, one of which would have had Emesa as its capital to limit the power of regional governors. Still, the city maintained its religious purpose, particularly concerning the Temple of the Sun, which remained a focal point until the Severan age. Following its incorporation into the empire, Emesa most definitely maintained some limited religious and administrative freedom, especially given that sources show Emesa family names were still used in inscriptions without political titles, indicating a change from a ruling dynasty to a local aristocracy with religious and cultural influence. The royal funerary mausoleum and its inscriptions reveal the names of the royal family that ruled Homs. This mausoleum remained in use until 1911, when it was demolished to make way for a new building. A significant number of artifacts, likely belonging to the royal family, were discovered in one of the tombs, including a face mask and extensive jewelry. Additionally, rare paintings and a mosaic depicting the birth and life of Hercules were

found in Homs. These findings suggest that Homs was a prosperous city during the Roman era (Rey-Coquais, 1977, p. 23; Aggoula, 1995, pp. 73-79; Abdulkarim, 1997, pp. 144-157; Decourt, 2003, pp. 161-176; Abdulkarim, 2023, pp. 145-156) (See Figs. 3–5).

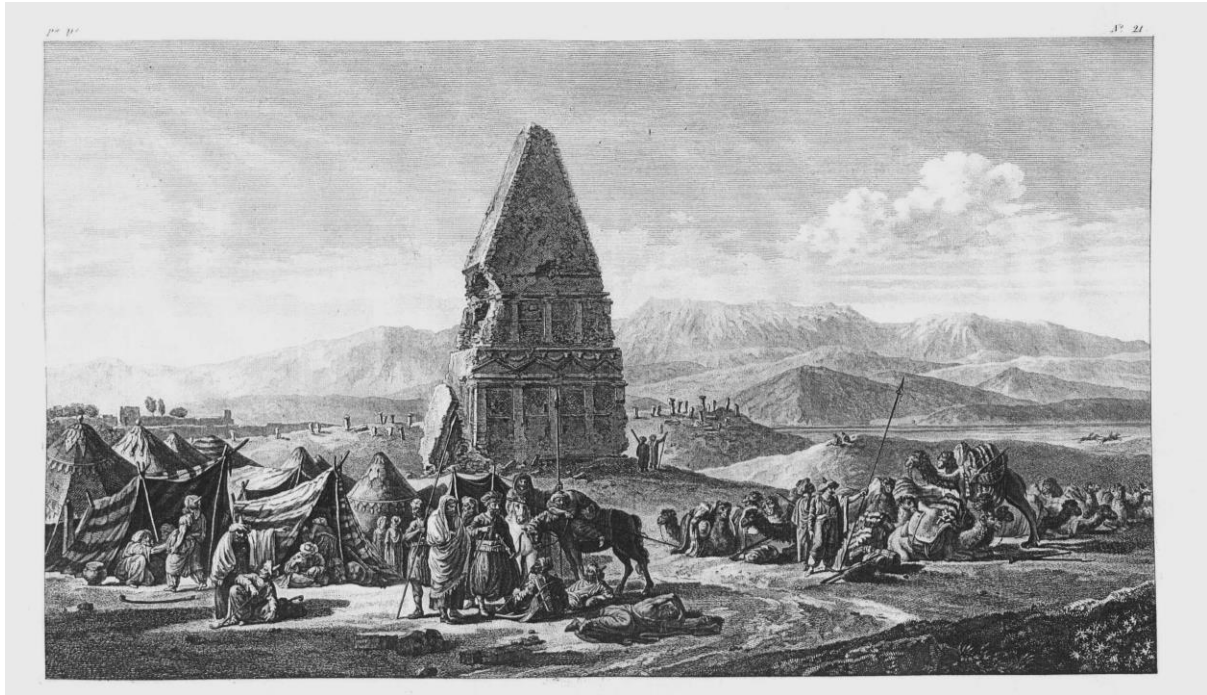


Fig. 3. The royal burial in Emesa existed until 1911, when it was destroyed. © L.F. Cassas 1799-1800.



Fig. 4. A mask of a person believed to be from the royal family, discovered in the Abu Saboun cemetery in Homs (Emesa), photograph by Maamoun Abdulkarim.



Fig. 5. A model of a mosaic fragment depicting the figure of Hercules from the Roman era was discovered in Homs, photograph by Maamoun Abdulkarim.

THE RESPECT OF ELAGABALUS AND ITS RELEVANCE

During the Roman era, the main religious framework of the people living in Emesa was the Pagan faith. The ongoing worship of local gods, combined with the acceptance of certain aspects of the official Roman religion, reflected the city's historic religious traditions, which originated in the Aramaic era. The religious life of Emesa revolved mostly on the respect of Elagabalus, the local sun god. Since his enormous temple, constructed in the middle of Emesa, was among the holiest temples in Roman Syria, this deity stood for the religious character of the city. An old Eastern custom held that the god was commonly shown as a black holy stone, signifying the unembodied divine power. Particularly when one of the priests of this deity, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Elagabalus), came to the throne of the Roman Empire (218–222 AD), trying to impose the worship of Elagabalus on Rome itself, his veneration became somewhat well-known outside the boundaries of Emesa. According to sources, the Temple of Elagabalus was not only a site of religious ceremonies but also a powerful political establishment connected to the prominent households of Emesa (about the religion in Syria during the Roman period, see Teixidor, 1989, pp. 81–96; Gawlikowski, 1989, pp. 323–346).

THE TEMPLE OF THE SUN IN EMESA

Roman historian Herodian offers a thorough account of the Temple of the Sun at Emesa, pointing out that it was constructed to pay tribute to the god Elagabalus and embellished with plenty of gold, silver, and precious stones. Apart from the residents, it is said that kings and sultans from surrounding areas would compete yearly to present the god with extravagant

presents. Regarding the idol, it resembled a big black stone, conical at the top, thought to have fallen from the heavens rather than being sculpted in the conventional Greek or Roman style (Herodian, 1990, pp. 138–139).

Although Herodian's writings lack exact architectural specifics of the temple's construction or altar, Robert Turcan notes that important studies of coins struck under the reigns of Caracalla, Elagabalus, and Uranus Antoninus enable one to visualize the temple's elements (Fig. 6). These testimonies tend to indicate that the temple was built on a high platform reachable by a broad staircase and comprised of a rectangular construction flanked by columns on all sides (peripteral). Flanked by the royal eagle insignia on the coins, the Black Stone took the stage in the middle of the facade, flanked by other symbols such as the crescent moon found in the temple front. The Black Stone is thought to have been guarded by an elegant barrier between two jewel-encrusted canopies, and in front of it was an offering table next to a large jar, perhaps used for wine storage for the offering ceremonies. Like those discovered in Baalbek and Palmyra, coins also show the presence of a large altar standing in an open courtyard in front of the temple. The temple's location and destiny: Though the Temple of the Sun is still important, its characteristics have entirely disappeared, and only scattered traces remain (Turcan, 1985, p. 26). Salim Abdul Haq speculates that the temple's site might have been within the Great Nur Mosque in Emesa, where some traces of the ancient construction are still visible (Abdulhak, 1960, p. 17). According to Turcan, the temple was originally built, then transformed into a church in honor of All Saints, and later converted into the Grand Mosque. Medieval Islamic stories confirm this theory since sources like Ibn Hawqal and al-Maqdisi noted that the mosque was once a church split between a section for Muslims and another for Christians during the Islamic conquest (Abdulkarim, 1997). Inside the mosque, Greek inscriptions from the Byzantine era also existed. On the other hand, based on the discovery of a small altar in 1974 carrying a Greek inscription indicating the offering of an altar to the god Elagabalus, together with a stone lion's head discovered at the same site, M. Moussli believes the temple was situated on the hill of Emesa. But since textual sources and coins show the original altar as a colossal construction at the center of a great temple, the small size of the altar (less than one square meter) and its rather light weight call into question this theory (Abdulkarim, 1997). Further interpretative studies by W. Ball imply that the sun may have been worship at Baalbek rather than Emesa, as there is little archeological evidence in Emesa (Ball, 2000, pp. 37–47; King, 2003, pp. 3–49).



Fig. 6. A coin minted in Homs from the Roman period showing the shape of the Temple of the Sun, after Turcan, 1985.

However, this theory falls short of the specific writings of Herodian, who verifies that Emesa is the site of the Temple of the Sun. Furthermore, unlike the god of Baalbek (Hadad, the storm god), the deity worshiped in Emesa is the god of Mount Elagabalus. The theories about the site of the temple remain unverified since it is impossible to carry out archeological digs under the Great Mosque for religious reasons. Between 1995 and 1999, a Syrian-British archaeological team dug at Tell Emesa; although they could not establish the temple's presence, more research and excavation projects are necessary.

During restoration work on the wall of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri in Homs in 2016, a Greek inscription was discovered on the eastern end of a column base that overlooks the mosque's inner courtyard. Previously, another two-line Greek inscription had been found on the northern side of the same column's base. The translation of the previous inscription is: *"The king, the round image of the universe, conquered all peoples and obtained everything through the skillful driving of a chariot."* This text was translated by Waddington (1870), who suggested that the phrase "the round image of the universe" likely refers to the building's dedication to the sun god.

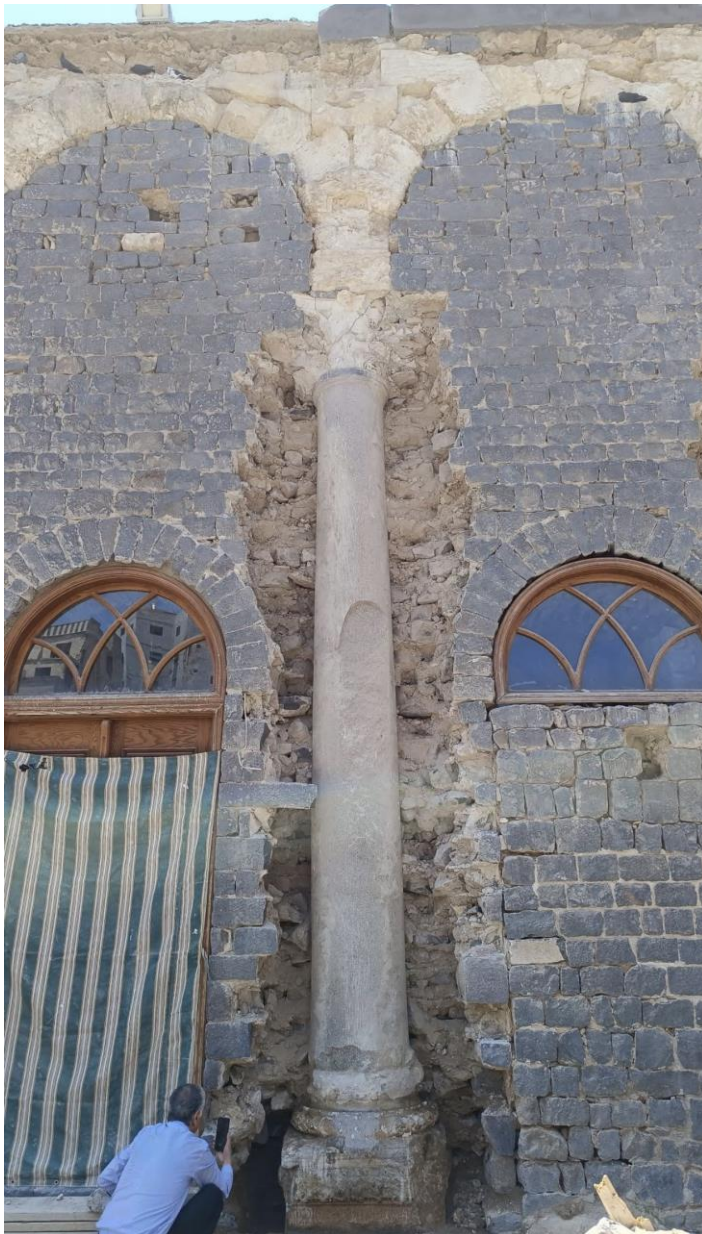


Fig. 7. The column on whose base the Greek inscription was discovered, photograph by Al-Najjar (2024)

On May 24, 2024, Al-Najjar (2024) translated the new inscription and posted it on his Facebook page: *"He soars in the sky to crush the warring barbarians. He comes with a screaming voice, piercing the air. He smashes shields with his sword, tearing the enemy into pieces. He instantly transforms into a tiger, facing the foe. From the top of the hill, you hear his roar as he strikes with strength and ferocity. His royal power is derived from the god of war during the day."* (See Figs. 7–8).

Fig. 8. Greek inscription discovered on the base of the column, photograph by Al-Najjar (2024)



This new inscription reiterates references to the sun god, symbolized by the eagle soaring in the sky. The text also mentions a hill, likely referring to the Citadel of Homs. It concludes by highlighting the close relationship between the royal leader and the god (most likely the god of war), who bestowed upon him the strength to defeat and destroy his enemies.

This discovery could improve our understanding of the connection between this mosque and the pagan temple. However, there are currently no well-preserved Roman architectural remains in Homs. The city's urban layout underwent significant changes during the Byzantine and Islamic periods due to political unrest, and repeated earthquakes destroyed many historic buildings. In the future, new archaeological discoveries may offer additional information regarding the location of this temple.

POLYTHEISM AND LOCAL CULTS

The various gods and local ceremonies practiced in Emesa reflect the nature of the open Emesa culture, which was influenced by ancient Syrian religious traditions, as well as Hellenistic and Roman practices. The religious landscape in the city of Emesa during the Roman era was marked by a clear variety of gods and local worshipers. Serving as a significant spiritual and social hub for the city, the Temple of the god Elagabalus, the local sun deity, was at the core of religious life in Emesa, where he was revered as the highest cosmic force connected with the sun. Alongside Elagabalus, several local deities mixed with Greek and Roman gods via the mechanism of religious syncretism, that is, the worship of Athena, which was united with Al-Lat, a common religious phenomenon in the central Syrian cities (see Teixidor, 1989, pp. 81–96; Sartre, 2001). The inscriptions found near the city revealed the existence of memorial ceremonies for several gods, suggesting that the people of Emesa followed an open polytheistic religion that combined local legacy with newly adopted rituals (Rey-Coquais, 1977, p. 28; Decourt, 2003, pp. 161–176). Managing this religious plurality, supervising ceremonies, and planning significant religious events that enhanced the regional reputation of the city, the priests played a crucial role. This religious variety gave Emesa cultural and religious freedom, which allowed it to welcome significant changes later with the rise of Christianity.

THE PRIESTS AND THEIR ROLE

Within the dynamic Roman age, priests in Emesa became a potent social and religious class with influence much beyond the boundaries of conventional religious observances. They were crucial in forming the political, financial, and cultural scene of the city. Based on the worship of the famed sun god, Elagabalus, Emesa housed a coherent and complex religious system. Often consisting of people from the aristocratic class of Emesa, this priesthood was respected and treated with great dignity. Usually from well-known families, priests skillfully merged their religious authority with significant civic influence (Abdulkarim, 1997; Sartre, 1991; Sartre, 2001).

In their religious roles, priests oversaw important ceremonies and lively celebrations, including the vivid New Year festivities and grand processions celebrating the gods. Both from the city and its environs, these significant events attracted many ardent attendees who turned Emesa into a hive of spiritual activity. Charged with temple management, priests painstakingly planned worship ceremonies, made holy sacrifices, and supervised the maintenance of temple grounds, which comprised rich real estate prospects and fertile agricultural areas. Politically, clerics' impact reached into the city's government. According to inscriptions, those revered as high priests were often vital municipal council members. In Emesa, this symbiosis between religious and civil power highlighted how closely these sectors were entwined. One very remarkable example of this phenomenon is the Severus family. Celebrated for their ascent to ultimate authority inside the Roman Empire, their religious background is thought to have given a solid basis for their political ascent. Economically, by controlling temple endowments, priests played a crucial role in energizing the local economy, which in turn supported numerous urban and philanthropic initiatives throughout the city. Significant religious seasons spurred the local economy, especially when makeshift markets opened to serve pilgrims and celebrants participating in religious celebrations (Abdulkarim, 1997). Culturally, priests were the guardians of local religious identity, assigned the difficult chore of maintaining customs even in the face of Christian invasion. Their deft reinterpretation of some ancient rites and symbols combined them into a larger cultural narrative that would help them to remain influential in society. The position of pagan priests dropped when the empire started its slow conversion to

Christianity; nonetheless, some managed to retain a symbolic presence in the changing social structure, especially during the early years of Christianity in Emesa. Their efforts guaranteed that, even as new ideas spread, vestiges of the ancient rituals would survive.

EARLY INDICES OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE WITHIN STRONG PAGAN TRADITION

Recognized as a major center of paganism in Syria throughout the first three centuries AD, due to the worship of the local god Elagabalus and the support of the aristocratic priestly class, Emesa began to exhibit early signs of religious conversion to Christianity in the second half of the third century. The slow transformation of the city's social and religious architecture was among the earliest positive signs of this shift. Minor Christian communities began to develop on the fringes of Emesa society, particularly among groups such as artists and minor tradesmen who were less entrenched in the conventional pagan hierarchy. Inscriptions discovered around Emesa also reveal a shift in naming rules and symbolism, including early Christian ideas, such as peace symbols and words like "life" and "light." This language and cultural development emphasizes a growing openness to fresh religious ideas. Political events during this period also helped to enable this change. The crises of the third century and the weakening power of the central state reduced the stronghold of the traditional pagan priesthood over public life, hence opening a more receptive environment for the spread of Christian teachings (see Millar, 1993). Using the current conflicts among various socioeconomic levels to support its expansion, the early church seized this opportunity to establish a social foundation within the city. Changing burial customs was another essential element of the evolving religious scene. Early graves discovered by researchers deviated from conventional pagan symbols and instead included references to fundamental Christian themes such as resurrection and eternal life (Rey-Coquais, 1977, p. 35). With the official support of Emperor Constantine, true conversion to Christianity did not materialize until the fourth century AD; still, these early signals show a slow decrease of paganism in the face of the spiritual and social powers of Christianity. Examining religious life in Emesa during the Roman era reveals a rich tapestry of ideas marked by pluralism and a blend of local and Roman religious practices. Although paganism remained predominant, as evidenced by the cult of Elagabalus, the early seeds of change were sown through the growing impact of Christianity. Understanding the larger religious shift depends on this basic phase, which marks Emesa's development from a pagan bastion into a growing center of Christianity (see Canivet, 1989, pp. 117–148).

INDICES OF CHRISTIAN PENETRATION INSIDE EMESE

During the second and third centuries AD, a time when paganism dominated religious and social life, Christianity started to grow in the city of Emesa. Although few direct sources record this early era, subsequent Christian writings and archaeological evidence indicate gradual changes in the city's framework (for more about Christianity in Syria, see Canivet, 1989, pp. 117–148).

Thanks to their excellent preservation and scientific significance, the catacombs in Emesa provide important archaeological evidence of Byzantine-era habitation. Discovered during an archaeological dig, these catacombs in the Al-Shorfa area were studied. The examination of the catacomb framework revealed objects from the early Byzantine period and materials dating back to the third century AD. Designed in a classic form, the catacombs include corridors, reception areas, crypts, burial chambers (for both solitary and group tombs), chapels and niches all lit by lamps. Murals and stucco abound in many of these areas. Burial customs ranged from hypogeum-style funeral chambers to cubiculum chambers to both private and group graves. Archaeological finds from excavations abound in pottery, glass, coins, and tools fashioned of wood, bone, metal, and gold. These results are significant, as they provide a reliable dating of

the site and shed light on Christian burial customs in the Levant during the Roman and Byzantine periods (Bounni, 1970, p. 44). Despite the prevailing pagan beliefs, certain elements contributed to Christianity's flourishing in Emesa throughout the third and fourth centuries AD. The political and economic troubles that beset the Roman Empire undermined people's faith in established religious institutions, therefore enabling the reception of fresh ideas, most famously Christianity (Millar, 1993). Emphasizing equality and personal redemption, the Christian message connected especially with underprivileged groups, including small farmers and artists. Not connected to any one country or class, the global character of Christianity helped it to grow quickly in eastern cities such as Emesa (Rey-Coquais, 1977, p. 55). Furthermore, the relative tolerance policies implemented by some emperors, including Gallienus, allowed Christians to practice their faith with relative freedom during specific periods, thereby enabling the development of strong, cohesive Christian communities (see Greatrex & Lieu, 2002). Although Christianity was gradually embraced in Emesa, its public profile remained low for a long period. This was primarily due to the significant power held by pagan institutions, especially the temple of the god Elagabalus, which served as a religious and social hub with considerable political influence. Keeping their rituals hidden was much aided by the early Christians' dread of persecution. Christians experienced persecution, particularly under Emperor Diocletian, which caused them to hide their religious identity and practice their faith in small, covert groups (see Elsner, 1998; Evans, 1996). Moreover, Emesa's culture followed ancient religious practices firmly connected to public life and local identity, which made it challenging for new Christians to freely express their beliefs without running the danger of social rejection or social persecution. Early on, Christianity in Emesa stayed a minority religion, practiced away from the public eye until political circumstances suited its public birth in the early 4th century AD.

COEXISTENCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND PAGANS IN EMESA DURING THE ROMAN PERIOD

The city of Emesa experienced a period of coexistence between adherents of traditional paganism and newly forming Christian groups in the third and fourth centuries AD. Though paganism, especially the worship of the god Elagabalus, remained the officially dominant religion until the 4th century, Christianity started to acquire a footing among socioeconomic groupings less bound to the conventional structure of the pagan priesthood. During this time, public life in Emesa was distinguished by a noteworthy example of religious coexistence permeating all social and cultural spheres. Markets, forums, and civic events included followers of both religions who engaged in daily activities without clear divisions. Inscriptions and archeological discoveries point to elements of business and financial life shared by Christians and pagans. Some prominent families in Emesa comprised people who converted to Christianity, with those who stayed pagan, suggesting that religious conversion did not instantly lead to notable social divisions (Rey-Coquais, 1977, p. 60; Abdulkarim, 2023, pp. 145–156). Some public buildings in architecture and the arts reflected attempts to balance pagan legacy with components of the growing Christian religion by having dual traits in their symbols and decorations. For structures from this transitional era, for example, one may notice the combined usage of symbols of light and the solar flower. This coexistence was preserved in most of the third century AD by the absence of a policy of harsh religious persecution by local authorities. Christians were generally allowed to follow their rituals without endangering public peace (Greatrex & Lieu, 2002). But with the official conversion of the Roman state to Christianity, this relative adaptability started to fade, and religious affiliation started to shape people's places in public life and society more significantly. Furthermore, the absence of oppressive imperial legislation against Christians during different eras of the third century, especially under Emperor Gallienus's rule, encouraged this coexistence. This tolerance allowed Christianity to grow slowly without inciting local pagan officials. Still, this equilibrium started

to shift when Constantine the Great declared Christianity the official religion. By the end of the fourth century, peaceful cohabitation gave way to Christianity's slow predominance.

CONTINUUM OF COEXISTENCE AND THE STARTING OF A FRACTURE

With the issuance of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which granted Christians religious freedom, the balance of cohabitation began to shift in favor of Christianity at the start of the fourth century AD. With this shift, signals of a disturbance in the previous pattern of coexistence surfaced as religious rivalry over public venues grew more intense. Some pagan people were offended when Christians started advocating the transformation of their temples into churches. Consequently, more definite differences began to show between those who followed pagan customs and those who adopted Christianity, resulting in significant social structure changes. As a result, in the second half of the 4th century AD, the religious cohabitation between Christians and pagans in Emesa started to fall apart. Once Christianity was established as the official religion of the Roman state by Emperor Theodosius I, whose ordinances forbade pagan worship in 391 AD, this decline became more evident (Millar, 1993). Many pagan temples were shuttered or converted into churches; therefore, the legal protections that had once shielded them became direct persecution. One such example is the Al-Nuri Mosque, a church previously a temple, some believe to be Sun-related (Abdulkarim, 1997). This sharp change drove growing conflict among adherents of the two religions. Archaeological data and inscriptions point to a slow reduction in pagan symbols in the public areas of Emesa, which were replaced by Christian symbols, therefore suggesting a change in the religious balance of the city. Certain administrative records also suggest conflicts between pagan and Christian parties about the ownership of temples and their grounds over real estate and religious liberties (Rey-Coquais, 1977, p. 63). This change occurred over a sequence of consecutive imperial decrees forbidding sacrifices, outlawing pagan celebrations, and subordinating pagan clergy under Christian civic power; it was not instantaneous (Evans, 1996). Some elements of cooperation lasted for a longer period, especially in daily social life, even though official aggression against paganism continued. Some groups kept following popular rites and traditions anchored in paganism, but inside new models fit for Christianity. For example, religious reinterpretation applied to agricultural celebrations and public gatherings (Greatrex & Lieu, 2002). Research shows that certain groups kept cultural and religious components inside a Christian environment rather than instantly renouncing all their previous symbols, therefore fostering a condition of symbolic cohabitation that persisted until the fifth century AD.

PAGAN PRACTICES AFTER CHRISTIANITY'S ARRIVAL IN EMESA

Particularly when Constantine the Great recognized Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the move from paganism to Christianity in the fourth century AD represented a radical upheaval in the religious scene of the city. Still, for a long time, many pagan customs and celebrations influenced social and ecclesiastical life. Particularly in rural places where custom loyalty was strong, these rites either stayed hidden or merged with Christian festivals, therefore proving cultural identity endurance until roughly the sixth century AD. Under Emperor Justinian I (527–565 AD), attempts to eradicate surviving pagan festivals throughout the Byzantine Empire saw notable increase in areas such as Emesa. The continuation of pagan practices challenged the idea of religious unity and led to the publication of various harsh orders meant to eradicate remains of the paganism. These rules penalized people who maintained or supported old cults, closed pagan temples, outlawed rites and sacrifices, seized their wealth for the Church or imperial treasury, and punished those who followed these laws (Evans, 1996). Important to this effort was the edict of 529 AD, which ordered the closing of

Athens' most prestigious Plato's Academy, among other pagan academic institutions. This action represented Justinian's larger overall goal to target intellectual centers supporting paganism and religious rites (Bury, 1923, vol. II, pp. 348–380). Especially in Emesa, local clergymen sponsored by government officials were vital in implementing these measures in Syria. Strong efforts produced the destruction of pagan monuments, the conversion of historic buildings into churches, and the appointment of regional governors to check loyalty. Usually following Christian or symbolic forms, some ceremonies survived in secret within popular culture for several decades until public pagan actions officially destroyed them. Emesa's architectural, social, and cultural atmosphere changed dramatically as paganism gave place to Christianity. Emesa improved its position as a key center within the theological and cultural framework of the late Roman Empire by means of effective adaptation to these developments. This metamorphosis shows how religion shapes urban development, cultural identity, and social structure, thus going beyond mere theological processes.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the Roman Empire, Emesa became a notable example of religious diversity in the Near East. The early ages' strong religious framework, as exemplified by the worship of Elagabalus and other pagan gods, helped the city establish its social and cultural character, setting the stage for the gradual impact of Christianity. Religious conversion in Emesa was not a simple process but rather a complex interaction of continuity and change. Particularly when the Roman Empire formally sponsored Christianity, old ideas coexisted alongside new ones, often during periods typified by little strife and slow adoption, rather than violent overthrow. This change was motivated by several political, social, and financial aspects. The fall of conventional paganism and other crises within the empire provided a rich foundation for the emergence of new Christian groups. The city's urban growth was largely driven by the expansion of religious sects, reshaping the religious landscape. The situation in Emesa offers valuable insights into the dynamics of religious conversion in ancient cities.

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التحول الديني في مدينة حمص، سوريا: من الوثنية إلى المسيحية خلال العصرين الروماني والبيزنطي المبكر

الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث تطور الحياة الدينية في حمص خلال العصر الروماني والعصر البيزنطي المبكر. ويوضح كيف تحولت الديانة في المدينة من عبادة آلهة محلية، مثل إيلا جابالوس، إلى القبول العام للمسيحية في القرن الرابع الميلادي. يكشف تحليل العوامل السياسية والاجتماعية التي أدت إلى هذا التحول عن تاريخ معقد من التسامح الديني والصراع الذي سمح في النهاية للمسيحية بالازدهار. ويؤكد البحث على أهمية الطابع الديني والحضري لحمص في هذا التغيير المذهل، بالإضافة إلى تأثير النخب الصاعدة على هذه السمات. وقد سدت هذه الدراسة الثغرات المتعلقة بالمباني الشهيرة، بما في ذلك معبد الشمس، باستخدام المعطيات الأثرية والمصادر التاريخية. كما يوضح كيف تطورت الكنائس المسيحية من المعابد الوثنية. وأخيراً، توضح هذه الدراسة الوضع الخاص لحمص بين المدن الرومانية الشرقية الأخرى، مما يعزز معرفتنا بحركة الإصلاح الديني المعقدة في هذه المرحلة الحاسمة.

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بيانات المقال

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تم قبول البحث في ٢٨ سبتمبر ٢٠٢٥
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الكلمات الدالة

حمص الرومانية – التعددية الدينية –
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