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TRIA CORDA

Scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano

a cura di E. Gabba

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THE ARABIAN ARES

For so great an authority as Arnaldo Momigliano on the encounter of Semitic cultures with those of Greece and Rome I hope that the present investigation of the mysterious god Ares in the Roman province of Arabia will constitute an appropriate tribute.

The existence of an Arabian Ares is proven by the unimpeachable evidence of coins. The city of Rabba, or Rabbathmoba (sometimes Rabbathmoab), located south of Amman (Philadelphia) in the region of biblical Moab, proclaims Θεὸς Ἄρης on the reverse of issues from the time of Septimius Severus (1). The god is represented on these coins as helmeted, wearing a cuirass and boots, with a sword in one hand and a spear and shield in the other (2). To all appearances this is a war-god, in whom a Greek might reasonably see Ares and a Roman see Mars. Since Rabba subsequently takes the name of Areopolis (3), the Ares of its coins must certainly be the eponymous deity. But it is not immediately obvious why Rabba, a peaceful place under Roman and Byzantine rule, should identify itself with such a character.

The Arabian Ares is rarely found outside the confines of the city of Rabba, a fact which underscores the special link between the god and the place. Once, in the vicinity of Qanawat on the western slopes of the Jebel Druz in the northernmost part of Roman Arabia, Ares appears on an inscription: ...ΑΜΟΥ τοῦ Κασίου οἰκοδόμησεν θεῷ Ἄρε[ι] ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων (4). And once, on a jasper gem, the name ap-

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(1) Augustus Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, Jerusalem, 1978, pp. 262-275.

(2) Spijkerman, *loc. cit.*; also *SNG*, American Numismatic Society, part 6 (Palestine-South Arabia), nos. 1414, 1416-1418.

(3) Cf. Eusebius, *Onomast.* 36, 24 (Ariel), 124, 17 (Moab); see also *Not. Dig.* 37, 17.

(4) R. Dussaud and F. Macler, *Nouvelles Archives des Missions scientifiques et*

pears together with the names of Dusares (the chief deity of the Nabataeans) and another Arab deity, Theandrios (5). The appearance of Ares alongside Dusares suffices to eliminate what might otherwise be an attractive interpretation of the Arabian Ares — an identification of this Ares with the Arab Aᶜra ('ᶜr'). For Aᶜra is a local god of Bostra who is himself identified with Dusares and appears only in conjunction with him as *dwšr' 'ᶜr'* (6). Furthermore, an inscription from Umm al-jimal gives the Greek form of his name as Ἀαρρα (7). So Ares cannot be Aᶜra. Who then is he?

In the Suda under the entry Θευσαρης (or Θεὺς Ἄρης) we find the following: τουτέστι Θεὸς Ἄρης, ἐν Πέτρᾳ τῆς Ἀραβίας. σέβεται δὲ Θεὸς Ἄρης παρ' αὐτοῖς · τόνδε γὰρ μάλιστα τιμῶσι. τὸ δὲ ἄγαλμα λίθος ἐστὶ μέλας, τετράγωνος, ἀτύπωτος κτλ. This information comes as something of a surprise. With all that we know about Petra there is nothing anywhere to suggest that Ares was particularly honoured there. Indeed there is nothing to suggest he was honoured there at all. And the god's representation as a black stone has nothing in common with the numismatic representations of Ares. As Jean Starcky and others have recognized, the Suda entry must refer to Dusares, whose cult was undoubtedly important at Petra and who was actually represented by an aniconic stone (8). Accordingly Θεὺς Ἄρης is a corruption of Δοὺς Ἄρης or, correctly, Δουσάρης. Over a century ago Jacob Bernays detected a similar corruption in another Greek text, where Δοὺς Ἄρης concealed Δουσάρης (9). The Suda passage provides an accurate report about

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littéraires 10 (1902), p. 656, no. 20, reproduced in D. Sourdel, *Les cultes du Hauran à l'époque romaine*, Paris, 1952, p. 77.

(5) Louis Robert, *Collection Froehner* I, Inscriptions grecques, Paris, 1936, p. 115, n. 3.

(6) J. Cantineau, *Le nabatéen* II, Paris, 1932, p. 22, no. 10; p. 23, no. 11; p. 24, no. 12. Cf. G.W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge, Mass., 1983, p. 73.

(7) Cantineau, *op. cit.*, p. 23, no. 11. See the discussion by E. Littmann in *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria* IV. A (1914), pp. 34-35, *no.* 38.

(8) *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* 7 (1966), 988. Cf. Sourdel, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.

(9) J. Bernays, *Ein nabatäischer Schriftsteller*, «Rhein. Mus.» 17 (1862), 304-305, reprinted with supplementary material in *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* II (1885), 291-293. It was Arnaldo Momigliano who first drew my attention to this article when he published his remarkable account of Bernays in *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, Afd. Letterk., N.R. 32, no. 5 (1969), 151-178, reprinted in *Quinto Contributo alla Storia degli Studi Classici e del Mondo Antico*, Rome, 1975, pp. 127-158.

Dusares but no help at all in the matter of the Arabian Ares.

Eusebius, in his *Onomasticon*, observes that some people believe the name for Areopolis to be derived from its god Ariel, whose name, he asserts, is formed ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἄρεως ([10]). This comment points obscurely to some kind of local deity. But it is Jerome who makes plain that the local deity, of whom Eusebius is aware, is not Ariel as such but a god of a city called Ar: *civitas Ar, quae hodie ex Hebraeo et Graeco sermone composita Areopolis nuncupatur, non ut plerique existimant quod* Ἄρεως *id est Martis civitas sit* ([11]). This is an explicit repudiation of the gossip which reached Eusebius, and it is a clear statement that the word Areopolis is compounded of the Semitic name Ar and the Greek word πόλις. Ar (ᶜ*r*) is, in fact, a city of Moab known from the Old Testament and plausibly near the site of Rabba: *Num.* 21. 15 (ᶜ*r*), with which compare *Num.* 22. 36 (ᶜ*yr* in Moab), rendered in the Septuagint as πόλις Μωάβ.

Through Jerome's help we have finally found the reason for the special connection between Ares and Rabba. Ares is the hellenized name of the eponymous deity of the place. The city is thus the biblical Ar and the Byzantine Areopolis. The intervening name of Rabbathmoba, which looks as if *rabba* is the root of the first half, may actually also derive from biblical nomenclature. For in transactions assigned to this area in the Old Testament we find the words ᶜ*rbwt mw'b*, translated traditionally in English as the «plains of Moab» but rendered in the Septuagint as a proper name, Ἀραβὼθ Μωάβ, presumably the name of the region ([12]). From Arabothmoab to Rabbathmoab (and Rabbathmoba) would have been an easy step as Rabba became a great (*rabba*) city and the center of the region of Arabothmoab.

The recent publication of hitherto unknown coin types from Rabbathmoba in the reign of Elagabalus shows that it was probably under this emperor that the city first assumed the name incorporating Ar ([13]). The Severan issues depicting and naming the god Ares do not yet display the new city name. But with the Elagabalus specimens, which

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([10]) Eusebius, *Onomast.* 36, 24 (Ariel).

([11]) Jerome, *Comm. in Isaiam* 15, 1.

([12]) Cf. the lexicon to the Hebrew Bible by Koehler-Baumgartner, elucidating the expression as «Sitz der Moabiter» and «waterless region». For examples of Arabothmoab, see, e.g., *Num.* 26. 3; 26. 63; 31. 12; *Deut.* 34. 1; 34. 8.

([13]) Spijkerman, *op. cit.*, p. 263, n. 9 and p. 275; *SNG, op. cit.*, no. 1420. The reverses show the war-god (Spijkerman no. 36), Poseidon (Spijkerman no. 37 and the *SNG* piece), Tyche (Spijkerman nos. 39 and 40), and a nude male figure within a temple (Spijkerman no. 38). The two Tyche types are different.

represent five quite distinct reverse types, we find a surprise: all have Ἀρσάπολις instead of Ἀρεόπολις. This may be due to carelessness ([14]), but with five coin types one wonders. The early form of the name would seem to be an arresting confirmation of Jerome. It shows Ar combined with πόλις, and on three types the word is written retrograde in the Semitic manner. The meaning of *-sa-*, if it is not an error, is unclear; but perhaps, as in many near eastern names, it is a verb (e.g. ṣaḥ, «is bright, is radiant»). The new coins show Ar as no less fundamental in the city's name than in the god's.

The Arabian Ares has thus emerged as the local deity of Rabbathmoba. Manifestly the Greek name Ares for the Semitic Ar carried with it a warrior's image, such as appears on the Severan coins displaying Θεὸς Ἄρης. The reputation of this god as a warrior underlies an episode in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus, who narrates a great struggle against Dionysus precisely in Arabia ([15]). The opponent of Dionysus in Nonnus' epic is Lycurgus, who is now well attested as an Arabian deity venerated in the Hawran ([16]). Since the principal Nabataean deity Dusares was identified with Dionysus among other Greek gods ([17]), we seem to have in Nonnus a reflection of a struggle between two Arabian gods in Hellenized form. The father of Lycurgus in Nonnus is none other than Ares. Dionysus' rival is Ἄρεος αἷμα (20. 149) and ἀνικήτου σπόρος Ἄρεος (20. 196). And Ares himself is invoked before Lycurgus as σὸν γενέτην (20. 214) and described as μενέχαρμος (20. 263) ([18]). But above all Nonnus gives us a portrait of Ares in relating the epiphany of the divine messenger Iris as she goes, disguised as his father the war-god, to Lycurgus:

ἀμειβομένῳ δὲ προσώπῳ
Ἄρεος ἀντιτύποιο νόθην ἐψεύσατο μορφήν·
καὶ λόγον εὐπήληκα διαιθύσσουσα καρήνου,

([14]) Spijkerman, *op. cit.*, p. 263, n. 9.

([15]) Nonnus, *Dionys.*, Book 20.

([16]) Sourdel, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82. Cf., among various examples, *IGR* 3. 1294 and *SEG* 7. 1102.

([17]) For this identification, Sourdel, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-64. It is worth noting that in the north of the Arabian province, just in the area where Lycurgus was worshipped, the town of Suweida took the name of Dionysias, reflecting its claim to have been founded by Dionysus: *IGR* 3. 1277 (προνοίᾳ κυρίου κτίστου Διονύσου) and 1278.

([18]) R. de Vaux, «Rev. Biblique» 48 (1939), p. 84 can scarcely be justified in proposing to identify Ares *with* Lycurgus. For further speculations about Lycurgus and his preference for blood over the wine of Dionysus, see the judicious remarks of Sourdel, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

δαιδαλέους κροκόεντας ἑοὺς ῥίψασα χιτῶνας,
κερδαλέῳ θώρηκι καλύπτετο, μαῖα κυδοιμοῦ,
αἱμαλέῳ θώρηκι
(20. 188-193)

Helmet and cuirass, two of the important appurtenances of Ares on the Rabbathmoba coins, are explicitly registered here as major parts of Iris' disguise.

The connection which Nonnus makes between Ares and the god of the Hawran, Lycurgus, is perhaps not wholly capricious. It will be recalled that the only attestation of Θεὸς Ἄρης in Arabia outside of Rabba is from the area of Qanawat, in the territory just north of the Hawran and closely tied to it. With that exceptional knowledge of local mythologies already emphasized by Louis Robert ([19]), Nonnus reveals verifiable details about the pantheon of the Arabs, and especially about Ares and Lycurgus, whose names he brought most appropriately into his narrative of Dionysus in Arabia.

The Ares of the Arabs is a very particular creation ([20]). Semitic and local, he perpetuates an ancient toponym in Moab. As a result of his assimilation with the Greek god of war by the transformation of Ar into Ares, he assumed a militant aspect which no doubt gave pride and courage to the city he represented. Although confined to Arabia and not identifiable with other syncretistic deities of the same name elsewhere, this Ares was famous enough to find a measure of immortality in late antiquity's greatest epic poem.

([19]) Louis Robert, *Nonnos et les monnaies d'Akmonia de Phrygie*, «Journal des Savants» 1975, pp. 154-192.

([20]) A warrior god appears on some imperial coins of Palestine: *Brit. Mus. Cat., Palestine* p. 31, no. 149 (Caesarea); p. 57, no. 79 (Neapolis); p. 79, no. 10 (Sebaste); p. 85, no. 20 (Aelia Capitolina). But on none of these is the figure identified as Ares, and on none is the image similar to that on the Rabba coins. The stance is different, the sword is lacking, the spear is in the other hand, and the shield is resting on the ground rather than held. It does appear, however, that the figure of the warrior on the coins of the four Palestinian cities is the same, although it is impossible to be sure whether he is an Ares or not.