

MOUNT NEMRUT
DISCOVERING THE LIFE OF KING ANTIOCHUS I THEOS OF COMMAGENE

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The article is dedicated to King Antiochus I Theos of Commagene and the commissioned by him Pantheon of Gods on Mount Nemrut. The paper goes through the historical context of the Commagene Kingdom during the Late Hellenistic period, a time of turbulence in the Near East with many major power clashes. Antiochus, finding himself amidst a unique situation, was compelled to rely on his Armenian, Persian and Greek ancestry to be able to leverage his alliances accordingly. His dedication on the Pantheon of Gods atop Mount Nemrut states his political position. In that most ambitious construction, many characteristic features of Hellenistic, as well as Persian and Armenian art and culture coalesce. The paper attempts to illustrate those influences and thereby shed light on the history of this little-known kingdom.

Key words: Hellenism, Antiochus I, Nemrut, Tigranes the Great, Commagene, Orontid, Orontes.

Introduction

At the twilight of the Hellenistic era, in the 1st century BC, Roman hegemony gradually established itself over the Mediterranean and most of the Near East. The main successor state of Alexander the Great's empire, the Seleucid Kingdom, had already lost its political power over the region, and its borders were confined to Syria and Phoenicia. Ptolemaic Egypt had also been weakened and its influence reduced to own borders. Instead, other Hellenistic states became more dominant. The growing Parthia, which had inherited Hellenistic culture and way of life from the Seleucid Empire, continued to remain strong and influential in the Near East. The Kingdom of Pontus was expanding and challenging Roman dominance in Asia Minor. The Kingdom of Greater Armenia, to the east of Pontus, which had also adopted the Hellenistic model of state government, remained a close ally of Pontus and was fighting for political independence from Parthia. In the middle of the abovementioned regional powers, a small kingdom existed in south-central Anatolia, east of the Taurus Mountains, known in its Hellenized name as Commagene (fig. 1). During the 1st century BC, the state was governed by their pre-eminent king Antiochus I Theos, who had ordered the construction of a monumental sanctuary on Mount Nemrut, the highest peak of his kingdom (fig. 2). There supposedly lies his

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tomb surrounded with colossal statues of Greek and Eastern deities along with other creatures and symbols. The purpose of this paper is to learn about the life of Antiochus I Theos of Commagene, his origins and his years in power through the study and iconography of the Mount Nemrut religious sanctuary. First, the paper will briefly recompose the early history of the Kingdom of Commagene relying mainly on the sources from the Iron Age kingdoms. Afterwards, the origins of Antiochus I and his dynasty will be restored with the help of the monument itself and its inscriptions, as well as ancient Greco-Roman sources. This will be followed by the analysis and iconography of the monument, which will examine the artistic and religious elements and influences, in addition to the historical events related to the period of reign of Antiochus I Theos. The paper will conclude with the legacy of Antiochus I to the Hellenistic world.

History of the Kingdom of Commagene

Commagene was known as a small kingdom among many greater powers of the region in the period of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. In early Assyrian sources, the area was called Kummuh, and referred to both the land, located on the west bank of the Euphrates, and the city founded in that same region [7, p. 330]. There is a possibility that in cuneiform Hittite sources Commagene is also mentioned as Kummaha, contemporary to early Assyrian references made by King Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244-1208 BC), yet Kummaha, according to the Hittites, lies within the boundaries of the land of Hayasa, geographically far to the northeast to be associated with the region of interest in this paper [7, p. 330]. There are more references to Commagene during the Iron Age, when it was known as a small kingdom bordering the Euphrates on the east, the mountain range separating it from the city of Melid on the north, and Gurgum on the west (fig. 3). Most of what is known of this Iron Age kingdom comes from the Assyrian and Urartian sources (which name it Kummuh and Qumaha, respectively) [7, p. 331]. The capital of Commagene was Samsat, later on known as Samosata. Commagene was caught in the midst of the rivalry between two major contemporary powers, Assyria and Urartu, for dominance in the region. It was intermittently forced to declare allegiance to one or the other: to Assyria in 800 BC (under the rule of Adad-Nirari III), and to Urartu in 750 BC (under the rule of Sarduri II), destined to act as a buffer zone or vassal state [7, p. 331-332]. By 705 BC, Kummuh-Commagene had been turned into an Assyrian province, which remained under the control of Assyria up until the fall of the kingdom [7, p. 332]. With the eventual rise of Achaemenid Persia, Commagene was incorporated into the boundaries of the Neo-Babylonian and later on – the Achaemenid Persian Empire [4, p. 170]. Nearly two hundred years after Alexander the Great's conquests, right at the heart of the Hellenistic era, Commagene becomes a small independent kingdom. Diodorus Siculus recounts how a ruler named Ptolemaeus, who was governor of Commagene, exploited the opportunity of internal quarrels of the Seleucid royal court and declared

independence in 161 BC [9, XXXI, 19]. The kingdom broke away from the Seleucid rule again in 80 BC by Mithridates I, father of Antiochus I [6, p. 137]. Commagene persisted as a small kingdom, yet, given the size, its legendary king Antiochus I, upon rising to the throne in 70 BC, took up the construction of one of the most monumental structures of the Hellenistic world, the Pantheon of Gods on the top of Mount Nemrut. The monument provides modern scholars with information regarding King Antiochus I's life and bloodline.

Description of the Mount Nemrut site

The Mount Nemrut monument consists of two major components. One is the artificial cone-shaped mound on the summit made of fist crushed limestone [6, p. 139-140], considered to be the tumulus of Antiochus I. Such artificial mounds are found all across Anatolia. Some served as tombs, others are believed to be accumulations of ancient habitation levels. The freestanding sculptures are the other notable element of the Mount Nemrut monument. The main group consists of a series of colossal limestone figures. Identical sets of statues (Figs. 2 and 5) are located on what scholars refer to as the East and West Courts (north-east and south-west) of the monument (fig. 4) [6, p. 140]. Each of the two groups includes five seated statues of deities and King Antiochus I. These figures are flanked on either side by a lion and an eagle (fig. 6) [Belmonte and Garcia 2010, 2]. Theresa Goell, the renowned excavator of the Mount Nemrut monument in the 1950s, compares their style with Hellenistic artistic trends (Neo-Classical and Neo-Baroque), concurrently pointing out the quite noticeable Eastern influence in them [6, p. 143]. In front of these gigantic statues lies a great altar, where rituals and sacrifices took place. The inscriptions at the back of the statues are the words of Antiochus I where he recounts his desire to erect this monument, as well as provides information about himself [6, p. 143]. Along with the colossal statues, sandstone stelae with bas-reliefs were found, one of them showing a lion with an astronomical calendar (fig. 21), and others depicting scenes of King Antiochus shaking hands with deities (Figs. 7 and 8) (both discussed below) [6, p. 143]. Yet, before tackling the interpretation of the colossi, it is essential to analyze the following artifacts found next to the monument.

Ancestry: Seleucids and Orontids (Yervanduni)

The familial lineage of Antiochus I is possible to trace through the series of life-size stone stelae on the low walls of the gigantic statues [6, p. 141]. Here, Antiochus I presents his both paternal and maternal ancestries. His mother Laodike was of Greek descent, the daughter of Seleucid King Antiochus VIII Grypus. Through his mother, Antiochus I relates himself to the Seleucids and further to Alexander the Great. Tracing his paternal line is often more complicated and sometimes causes misunderstanding among scholars. Antiochus I mentions the founder of the Achaemenid Persian dynasty Darius I as the progenitor of his paternal bloodline. This lineage sometimes leads scholars to the conclusion that Antiochus was of

Persian origin [6, p. 136]. Yet, upon closer examination of the stelae, the discovery of the Orontid dynasty changes the nature of his origins. In one of his slabs, he honors one of the earlier members of the Orontids, Aroandes (Orontes) II, from whom the bloodline of the Orontid descendants is continued to be represented [10, p. 34]. The Orontids were satraps of the province of Armenia under Achaemenid Persia with possible nobility ties with the throne [8, p. 120]. After the Battle of Gaugamela, the Orontids declared independence from Persia. The Orontid dynasty, the ones represented on Mount Nemrut, ruled over Armenia up until 201 BC, the year when Armenia was conquered by the Seleucids with the help of Artaxias I (also known as Artashes the Conqueror) – an Armenian strategos and founder of the Artaxiad dynasty [8, p. 120-121; 124-125].

What Antiochus I had eventually succeeded to achieve through these series of slabs was that he legitimized his rule over Commagene by claiming descent from two of the most prominent figures in the history of the time: Alexander the Great and Darius I of Persia.

Hellenistic syncretism with the East, and the gods of Commagene

After the spread of Hellenistic culture and religion in the Near East, syncretism of Greek and Eastern deities is observed all across the Hellenistic world. The Parthian Empire, a non-Greek nation, also adopted this mythology, and they projected themselves as Philhellenes [5, p. 29]. The same can be said about Greater Armenia. In 189 BC, Artaxias I, a general of Armenian descent loyal to the Seleucids, used the opportunity of the defeat of Antiochus III in Magnesia against the Romans and established the Artaxiad dynasty. Throughout his reign, Hellenistic culture started to be imported into Armenia with increasing intensity. During the Artashesian period, Hellenistic culture greatly infiltrated Armenia, and Perso-Armenian deities were often associated with their Greek counterparts, such as Aramazd/Ahuramazda with Zeus, and Vahagn with Heracles [1, p. 35]. This commonality is clearly manifested in Commagene, most vividly in the presentations of Antiochus I. Identification of the seated figures of the Nemrut Pantheon cannot be done without consulting King Antiochus I's inscription, where he gives the names of the deities represented in his person. Since he claims both Greek and Persian roots, both the Greek and Perso-Armenian names are given. The inscription reads as follows [3, p. 200].

“After inheriting my ancestral kingdom, I immediately established this new sanctuary of the ancient power of Zeus-Oromasdes and of Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes and of Artagnes-Herakles-Ares and I made the honor of the great gods grow in step with own fortune, and I set up in sacred stone within a single compass alongside the images of the deities the representation of my own receiving the benevolent right hands of the gods...”.

As the reader notes, Antiochus I applies a diplomatic move by merging Greek and Eastern deities under the same banner. Oromasdes is the Hellenized form of the Persian Ahuramazda and of the Armenian Aramazd (fig. 9) – the chief god of the Armenian and Persian pantheon associated with Zeus [5, p. 31; 8, p. 127]. The

sculpted female deity is not given any name (fig. 10). Theresa Goell named her the Tyche/Fortuna of Commagene [6, p. 142]. Juan Antonio Belmonte argues she may be related to other prominent goddesses, such as the Roman Juno Dolichena or the Iranian goddess of fertility Anahita [Belmonte and Garcia 2010, 6]. The present author believes the latter identification to be the most plausible – taking into account the dual Persian and Armenian ancestry of Antiochus, and that Anahita was worshipped as the Mother Goddess in both Persia/Parthia and Armenia [8, p. 148]. Mithra, the god of light and/or the sun, was an important deity for the Persians and Armenians and, in the case of Antiochus, for him personally (figs. 8 and 11), as he presents himself as “Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes”. Armenian mythology is rooted in the Mithraic cult, which was venerated in Persia as well. As regards Antiochus, it is known that in 200 BC there was a member of the Orontid family who was a Mithraic priest in Armenia’s capital of the time Armavir [8, p. 128, 148]. Another notable deity on this Pantheon is Artagnes-Heracles-Ares (figs. 7 and 12). The present author believes that the god of war and victory Artagnes is connected with Verethragna of the Persians and Vahagn of the Armenians, hence his association with the Greeks’ Heracles and Ares [8, p. 148].

Finally, the fifth figure seated on the right alongside the four gods is King Antiochus I (Figs. 13 and 14), who had deified himself. He starts his inscription as follows: “Great King Antiochus, the God, Just, Manifest, a Friend of the Romans and a Friend of the Greeks, the son of King Mithridates the Gloriously Victorious and Queen Laodike the Goddess” [3, p. 199]. Antiochus I, who had reached the godly status, is seen on other stelae shaking hands with gods – as he testifies in his inscription – Apollo-Mithras and Artagnes-Heracles.

The Armenian tiara: Tigranes the Great and the Artashesian dynasty

The head statues of Aramazd and Mithra are presented wearing a Persian-style tiara [12, p. 33], while Antiochus’ headgear is of a different shape never seen before. Incidentally, the tiara in his coin depiction is of the same shape with an eight-pointed star flanked with two eagles (fig. 17). In order to understand the differing shape of his crown, we need to resort to historical records and archaeological finds. This shape is highly influenced by what is known in modern academia as Armenian tiara. The eight-pointed star and eagles representing the royal insignia were first seen on the coins of the Artaxiad (Artashesian) kings of Greater Armenia. The best examples are found on the coins of the most famous king of that dynasty, Tigranes II the Great (fig. 18) [1, p. 36], known for expanding the borders of Armenia and for a short time ruling over the strongest empire in the Near East, which encompassed Iberia (modern-day Georgia), Caucasian Albania, Northern Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Cilicia and also Commagene in 80 BC (fig. 20) [11, p. 62]. Some of the coins he minted carried an inscription in Greek saying King of Kings (fig. 19) – a title he took over from the Parthian kings after subduing their kingdom. Since Commagene was already under Armenian dominion, archaeological and historical evidence confirm

that Commagene's coinage and sculpture was influenced by Greater Armenia, regardless of the dating of the Mount Nemrut monument (discussed below). The common Armenian ancestry of Tigranes and Antiochus may have played its role here as well. Antiochus was crowned with the Armenian tiara. The identity of the crowns is seen on the coins of Antiochus and Tigranes [10, p. 20]. The lions and eagles are represented on Mount Nemrut in similarity to the Armenian royal insignia, although in different manners. The pillars on the Sacred Processional Way to the monument hold eagles on their top, and Antiochus has lions flanking the star on his tiara in the slabs where he shakes hands with the gods [10, p. 20-22]. Finally, the drapery that Antiochus, as well as Apollo-Mithras wears on the same slabs is also of Eastern attire [6, p. 141]. Artagnes-Heracles-Ares, on the other hand, is represented in the Greek style: bearded, with a lion skin, holding his club [6, p. 141].

Contemporary political considerations: dating the Pantheon's construction

The construction of the Mount Nemrut monument may have begun a few years after Antiochus' coronation. According to an earlier theory based on literary and archaeological evidence, the construction was completed after 66 BC. On this date, the third Mithridatic War came to an end. Pontus was conquered by Roman general Pompey, and its king Mithridates VI Eupator fled to Crimea. Tigranes of Armenia, being the son-in-law and ally of Mithridates, was engaged in the war and was fighting against Rome and Parthia. In the end, however, Tigranes the Great consolidated peace with Pompey, where he would relinquish all of his previously conquered territories. In exchange, Armenia would remain intact and become an ally of Rome against Parthia. Pompey gladly accepts this proposal and, as a message to Parthia, allows Tigranes to hold the title of King of Kings (fig. 18) [1, p. 33]. With this new peace treaty, Commagene once again became an independent kingdom on paper, yet most probably served as a vassal state to Rome, for during the Third Mithridatic war, Antiochus was forced into submission by Pompey and showed allegiance to him when the latter was making his advances against Pontus. This can be attested with the starting words of the Nemrut inscription, where Antiochus claims to be 'a Friend of the Romans and a Friend of the Greeks' [3, p. 199]. Antiochus' kingdom was surrounded by Romans and Greek-speakers. Therefore his pro-Greek and pro-Roman sentiments can be regarded as diplomatic moves in order to solidify his rule and maintain friendly relations with the new reality along his country's borders.

The Lion of Nemrut

Another important detail in terms of dating the monument is the sculpted Lion on the West Court of the tomb (Figs. 21 and 22). The Lion is studded with nineteen stars and the crescent moon. Theresa Goell, who excavated at Nemrut in 1952, claims that the Lion stele is a true Greek astronomical calendar, whose stars and crescent moon, translated to the date of July in the year 62 BC, indicate the year when, according to her research, the Romans proclaimed Antiochus I as king [6, p.

138]. This validates the presumption that the monument was accomplished after the events of the Third Mithridatic War which ended in 66 BC. The recent astronomical research, conducted on the same Lion stele, has provided a more plausible date. Scholars Juan Antonio Belmonte and A. Cesar Gonzales Garcia date the construction of the East Court around July 23, 49 BC, the date Antiochus ascended the throne, while the West Court was completed around December 23, 49 BC, on the birthday of King Antiochus I [Belmonte and Garcia 2010, 11]. Belmonte and Garcia rely on the dates of completion of the monuments provided by king Antiochus I in his inscriptions and correlate them with their astronomical research. They claim that, by 49 BC, Antiochus was, compared to the early years of his reign, well-established and thus was able to erect this colossal sanctuary with the Romans' funding [Belmonte and Garcia 2010, 11]. In both cases of dating, whether 62 BC or 49 BC, the construction of the Mount Nemrut monument ended when Antiochus I was a client king of Rome and had to resort to diplomacy and present himself as 'a Friend of the Romans and a Friend of the Greeks' in his inscriptions. With the rise of the Second Triumvirate, Commagene was entering a critical situation during the 30s BC. Marc Anthony's campaigns in the east were unpredictable for a kingdom as small as Commagene. Anthony's generals twice besieged Samosata, the capital city of Commagene. After showing fierce resistance, Antiochus had to eventually agree on a peaceful settlement with Marc Anthony [Plutarch "The Life of Anthony", 34 and Cassius Dio XLIX, 19].

Conclusion and Aftermath

During the final stages of the Hellenistic and the beginning of the Roman era, the Kingdom of Commagene acted as a buffer state between Armenia and Parthia on the one hand, and Syria and Rome, on the other, just like the Iron Age Kingdom of Commagene was between Neo-Assyria and Urartu. The royal house of the Hellenistic Commagenian rulers had dynastic links with the Armenian Orontid dynasty [2, p. 191]. Antiochus I also claimed kinship to Darius I the Great of Persia and to Alexander the Great of Macedon. His monument reflects the syncretism of Greek, Persian and Armenian deities, as well as the merging of cultural elements found in Hellenistic and Perso-Armenian art. Antiochus was successful in his diplomatic maneuvers and in thereby preserving the integrity of his kingdom. Thus, resorting to his Armenian origins he accepted Tigranes the Great's rule to afterwards switch his allegiance to the Romans and declare himself a Hellenophile and Romanophile. All of those characteristics are manifest in the commissioned by Antiochus I Mount Nemrut monument – one of the most convincing embodiments in Hellenistic art of what Alexander the Great had envisioned: unification and syncretism of Greek and Eastern culture, traditions, customs and people. Soon after the turbulent events of the 1st century BC, Commagene became a significant center of Roman art and civilization through its proximity to such cities as Antioch and Palmyra (fig. 23) [2, p. 191]. It continued to act as a client kingdom until finally the

last Orontid king was deposed by Emperor Vespasian in 72 AD, and Commagene was annexed to Rome.

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ՆԵՄՐՈՒԹ ԼԵՌ

ՆՈՐԸ ԿՈՄՄԱԳԵՆԵԻ ԹԱԳԱՎՈՐ ԱՆՏԻՈՔՈՍ Ա ԹԵՈՍԻ ԿՅԱՆՔԻ ՄԱՍԻՆ

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Հոդվածը նվիրված է Նեմրուֆ լեռան բարձունքում Կոմմագենեի թագավոր Անտիոքոս Ա Թեոսի կարգադրությամբ կառուցված Աստվածների պանթեոնի ուսումնասիրությանը: Անդրադարձ է արվում է Կոմմագենյան թագավորության

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Բանալի բաներ՝ հեղինակ, Անտիոքոս Ա, Նեմրուֆ, Տիգրան Մեծ, Կոմմագենե, Օրոնտիդներ, Օրոնտ, Երվանդունիներ:

ГОРА НЕМРУТ

НОВОЕ О ЖИЗНИ ЦАРЯ КОММАГЕНЫ АНТИОХА I ТЕОСА

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Статья посвящена изучению Пантеона богов на горе Немрут, построенного по повелению царя Коммагены Антиоха I Теоса. Приводится обзор исторического контекста Коммагенского царства в период позднего эллинизма, когда бурные столкновения между крупными державами на Ближнем Востоке происходили одно за другим. Оказавшемуся в исключительно сложной ситуации Антиохи приходилось уповать на свои армянские, персидские и греческие корни, тем самым обеспечивая возможность задействовать союзников соответственно с обстоятельствами. Надпись на Пантеоне богов на горе Немрут отражает его политическую позицию. В этом грандиозном сооружении соединились характерные элементы эллинистического, персидского и армянского искусства и культуры. В статье предпринята попытка посредством их анализа пролить свет на историю этого малоизученного царства.

Ключевые слова: эллинизм, Антиох I, Немрут, Тигран Великий, Коммагена, Оронтиды, Оронт.

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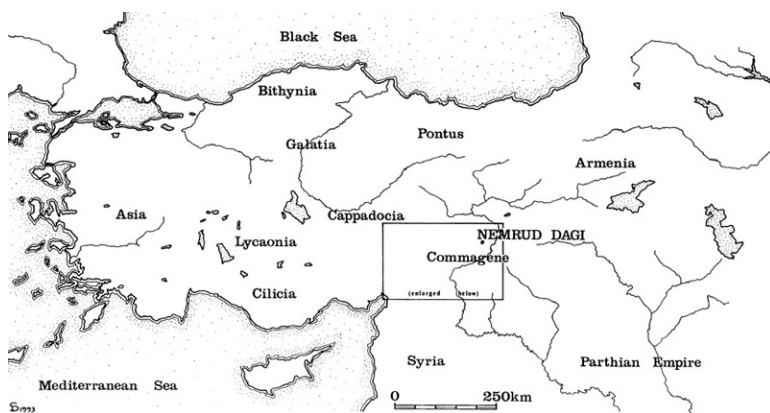


Fig. 1. Location of Commagene and Mount Nemrut



Fig. 2. View of the East Court of the Mount Nemrut monument



Fig. 3. The Iron Age Kingdom of Kummuhu caught in the midst of the Assyrian-Urartian conflict



Fig. 4. Plan of the Mount Nemrut monument and tomb

Fig. 5. View of the West court of the Mount Nemrut monument



Fig. 7. Stele representing Antiochus I shaking hands with Artagnes-Heracles-Ares



Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the Mount Nemrut monument



Fig. 8. Stele depicting Antiochus I shaking hands with Apollo-Mithras-Helios



Fig. 9. Colossal head of Zeus-Oromasdes

Fig. 10. Colossal head of the female deity of Commagene, allegedly representing Anahita/Anahit



Fig. 11. Colossal head of Apollo-Mithras- Helios Hermes



Fig. 12. Colossal head of Artagnes-Heracles- Ares



Fig. 13. Colossal head of Antiochus I Theos



Fig. 14. Colossal head of Antiochus I Theos with the Armenian tiara on his head, viewed in profile





Fig. 17. Coin of Antiochus I Theos of Commagene



Fig. 18. Coin of Tigranes the Great wearing the Armenian tiara and royal insignia. The inscription on the back reads "King Tigranes"



Fig. 19. Coin of Tigranes the Great with the Armenian tiara and the insignia (worn out). The Inscription on the reverse reads "King of Kings Tigranes"

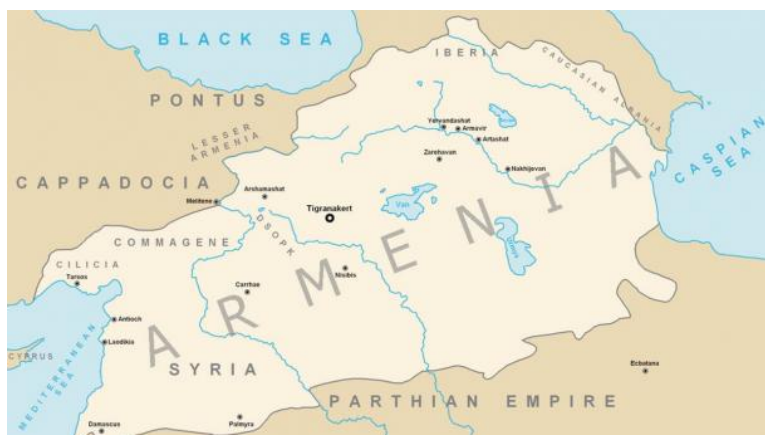


Fig. 20. Armenia at its greatest extent under Tigranes the Great. Commagene lies within the borders



Fig. 21. The lion slab holding the astronomical calendar



Fig. 22. The lion slab, damaged



Fig. 23. Map of the Near East in 50 AD, when Commagene was in the middle of conflict between Rome on the one side, and Parthia and Armenia, on the other