

# Nisibis, capital of the province of *Mesopotamia*: some historical and archaeological perspectives

Rocco Palermo

Nisibis (Nusaybin in SE Turkey, close to the border with Syria (and even falling within the 'no man's land' between the two border fences) sits beneath the southern fringes of Tur Abdin (*Mons Masius*, now Mt. Izala) in a dry steppe plain, c.300 m above sea level (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The settlement is flanked to the west by a seasonal minor wadi, the Khnes, and to the east by a wadi tributary of the river Ḥabur (*Chaboras*), the Jaghjagh (*Hyrmas*, *Mygdonius*).<sup>3</sup> Its location in the zone where agriculture is fed by rainfall facilitated the development of both the city and the surrounding region.<sup>4</sup> Fertility in antiquity seems to be confirmed by an inscription (CIG IV 6856 = IGUR 1151).<sup>5</sup> This *stèle*, found at Rome and probably part of the tombstone of Amazaspus, king of Iberia, who was part of Trajan's entourage during his eastern campaigns in A.D. 115-116, reads (line 5):

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- 1 In the early 1930s A. Poidebard studied the city. In *La trace de Rome dans le désert de Syrie* (Paris 1934), there is an aerial photograph of Qamishli (built during this period) with, in the background, the Turkish city of Nusaybin. He stresses that this was the site of the ancient city, but also complains about the lack of any archaeological remains due to the presence of the two modern centres. Nisibis is also mentioned by L. Dillemann (*Haute-Mesopotamie orientale et territoires adjacents* [Paris 1962]) and D. Oates (*Studies in the ancient history of northern Iraq* [Oxford 1968]): both try to reconstruct the layout of the Roman presence and the position of the *limes* in the area. In 1988, C. Lightfoot ("Fact and fiction — the third siege of Nisibis AD 350," *Historia* 37, 105-25) made a new study of Nisibis, focusing on that siege and references to it in 4th-c. sources. Recent discussions concerning the city appear in P. S. Russell, "Nisibis as the background to the Life of Ephrem the Syrian," in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 8 (2005) 179-235 (<http://syrcom.cua.edu/hugoye/Vol8No2/HV8N2Russell.html>) and S. Lieu, s.v. "Nisibis," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Winona Lake, IN 2006) (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nisibis-city-in-northern-mesopotamia>). Recent archaeological excavations are also trying to shed more light on the ancient city (see below).
  - 2 Strab. 11.13.
  - 3 Plin., *NH* 31.37 and 33.16. The river's location is the subject of a debate between scholars. Russell (supra n.1) 187 states that the Jaghjagh did not pass through the city but to one side, quite close to the eastern city walls, as Lightfoot (supra n.1) 110 had said. Theodoret (*HE* 2.26, ed. Parmentier [1911]) says that during the Sassanian siege the waters of the river were diverted to destroy the city walls, which seems to confirm that the river itself ran outside the circuit. Some Arabic sources (see G. Le Strange, *The lands of the eastern Caliphate: Mesopotamia, Persia, and central Asia, from the Moslem conquest to the time of Timur* [Cambridge 1905] 94-95) and early European travellers (above all, Jean Otter, *Voyage en Turquie et Perse* [Paris 1748] 121) confirm that the river, coming from north, passed close to the city but did not run through the middle. See also a passage in Ephrem's *Carmina Nisibena*: "(the river) flows close to the city". Zonaras 13.7 (vol. 3, p. 194 ll. 7 and 13 [ed. L. Dindorf; 1870]), however, describes the river as flowing through the city, but probably by his day a suburb had developed, and the suburb was separated by the Jaghjagh itself (cf. Lightfoot [supra n.1] 111). In the aerial photographs taken during the French Mandate, the river is seen just to the east of the modern town of Nusaybin.
  - 4 The annual rainfall ranges from 350 to 400 mm in the area of Nusaybin: T. J. Wilkinson, "Structure and dynamics of dry-farming states in Upper Mesopotamia," *Curr. Anthr.* 35 (1994) 483-520 especially 484; J. A. Ur, *Urbanism and cultural landscapes in northeastern Syria: the Tell Hamoukar Survey, 1999-2001* (Chicago 2010) 10.
  - 5 F. Canali De Rossi, *Iscrizioni dello Estremo Oriente greco. Un repertorio* (IGSK 65, 2004) p. 3. The inscription seems to be lost.