

Edge of Empires: Pagans, Jews and Christians at Roman Dura-Europos.

Edited by Jennifer Y. Chi and Sebastian Heath.

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Edge of Empires is the beautifully produced and illustrated brochure of the eponymous exhibition at The Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University which opened on September 23rd 2011 and closes on January 8th 2012.

My first exposure to Dura-Europos when I was studying Hellenistic Jewish History as an undergraduate was focussed on the synagogue and its extraordinary wall paintings; their enduring beauty, the style of dress of the depicted figures and the insights they provided into the way Jews of the period looked.

But Edge of Empires is about much more than Dura-Europos' famous synagogue; following an introduction by G W Bowersock, Emeritus Professor of Ancient History at Princeton, a site plan of the ancient town and a map of the ancient Middle East, are five chapters by scholars in the field: New Research by the French-Syrian Archaeological Expedition to Europos-Dura and New Data on Polytheistic Sanctuaries in Europos-Dura; Art Historical Frontiers: Lessons from Dura-Europos; Trading at the Edge: Pottery, Coins and Household Objects at Dura-Europos; The Diversity of Languages in Dura-Europos; Excavations at Dura-Europos; Excavation at Dura-Europos: Archival Photographs from the Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection.

These chapters are fascinating, highly readable and well-illustrated throughout and the archival photos from digs at Dura-Europos in the 1930s are beautiful and atmospheric. For those of us unlucky enough not to get to the exhibition, Edge of Empires is a thoroughly satisfying summary of life in an extraordinary ancient town which endured for over five hundred years, and from which much can be learned, not least concerning the inter-action between Jews, Christians and pagans there.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh