

**INTERNATIONAL CARLO SCARPA PRIZE FOR GARDENS**  
**21st edition, 2010**

**Dura Europos. Jury's Report**

The Jury of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens has decided that the twenty-first of these annual awards (2010) will go to Dura Europos, near Salhiyé, on the right bank of the middle course of the River Euphrates, in Syria, about 90 kilometres along the road from Dayr az-Zawr to the Abu Kamal bridge and the present-day border with Iraq.

The site is what remains of an ancient city, surrounded on three sides by defensive walls, with the east-facing fourth side overlooking the great river from a height of over 40 metres, an escarpment that offers a spectacular view both of the fertile alluvial plain stretching away to the horizon and of the powerful vertical structure of the dramatically poised ramparts. On the northern and southern sides the walls follow jagged lines along deep ravines scored into the earth by watercourses flowing from the steppelands of the plateau down to the river. On the western side the wall runs straight for almost a kilometre, punctuated by fourteen towers and pierced by the "Palmyrene Gate", which is flanked by two more tall towers. Discovered "by chance" by a military detachment in 1920, this archaeological site immediately attracted the attention of eminent European and American scholars. Thanks to three successive phases of investigations Dura Europos has been one of the richest sources of historical information about the events and aspects concerning the civilizations, arts and religious cults that flourished in the Middle East in the five centuries and more between the end of the IV century BC and the middle of the III century AD in an area that was especially permeable to contacts and interchanges between the Mediterranean and Asian worlds.

Even the first, adventurous excavation campaign conducted with frenetic intensity by Franz Cumont (1868-1947), with the assistance of whole detachments of soldiers in 1922 and 1923, brought to light an astonishing quantity of finds and raised almost as many questions.

In the second phase, with the campaign of excavations promoted in the 1930s by Yale University under the direction of Mikhail Rostovtzeff (1870-1952), a surprising number of important discoveries continued to be made, described in detail in the various reports issued and removed from the site: the wall paintings of the Synagogue were taken to the National Museum of Damascus; those of the Christian house church and another thirteen thousand items, together with extensive documentation concerning the excavations, became part of the Yale University collections; other finds were acquired by the Louvre and by the National Library of Paris; still others are in the Syrian Museums of Aleppo, Marat Ann Nu'Man and Dayr az-Zawr; and part of the correspondence of Franz Cumont is conserved in Rome, at the Belgian Academy.

The ongoing third phase, which began in 1986, is being conducted by a Franco-Syrian mission coordinated by Pierre Leriche, with the support of an archaeologist of the Directorate General of Syrian Antiquities, currently Ameer Hayo, and in collaboration with various international specialists. The mission works mainly on consolidating the decayed walls and the principal monuments, on publishing the results of the investigations, on updating philological and chronological reference and on expanding the already rich and varied framework of knowledge based on the site. What remains *in situ* of the ancient city is therefore a great international research workshop involving experts in many different disciplines: history and geography, geology and hydrogeology, the history of cities and their defensive walls, the history of ideas, of religious cults, of languages and of the arts.

Much remains to be studied and understood. But it is clear that this place existed as a fortified urban organism for over five centuries, from the end of the IV century BC to the middle of the III AD. When it was founded, on the site of a previous fort (*dawara*, *doura*, *dura*), it was called Europos. It was a defensive bastion, built to control the road from Antioch to Seleucia on the Tigris, the two capitals of the Seleucid Empire. In the mid-II century BC it acquired its definitive, orderly *forma urbis* as a Greco-Macedonian colony, a centre of Hellenistic influence in the Mesopotamian area. In 114 BC the city was conquered by the Parthians

and the resulting oriental influence lasted for three centuries, two of them in a condition of tolerant proximity of the Romans. Eventually, in 115 AD, Trajan decided subjugate it but almost immediately Hadrian (117-138) returned the city to the Parthians. With Marcus Aurelius (161-180) it once again came under Roman rule and it remained part of the Roman Empire until 256 AD, when the Sassanid Persians besieged and conquered it. From then until 1920, Europos disappeared from history and geography. It was completely abandoned and lost to view; without an identity even as an archaeological site, the city was not plundered for building stone, not built over, and therefore kept safe from visits and interests and temptations of any kind. Its discovery was the more astonishing because there was such a total absence of the aura that usually surrounds ruined landscapes, generated by the testimony of mediaeval pilgrims, of humanist antiquarians and of Grand Tour travellers. Curiously, even now, very few care to push beyond Palmyra, while since that day in March 1920, Dura Europos has, like few other places, continued to offer an unencumbered view of the struggle between the forces of elevation that connoted its five centuries of active life and the forces of decay at work during the following sixteen centuries of silence. And though in this case we cannot measure the way the taste that governed successive generations' perceptions of the cultural heritage changed over the centuries we do at least have a close-up view of the rapid and significant transformation of the ways and means of investigating that has taken place over the last ninety years of excavations, the removals of finds, research and restoration.

What we see in Europos Dura – as it is called by the experts of the present archaeological Franco-Syrian mission, and in the most recent bibliography – therefore is both an astonishing balcony overlooking the Euphrates, a layered deposit of signs and symbols that continue to pose questions and an example of the “diaspora” of documents that are now scattered all over the world. For all these reasons it constitutes a unique point of intersection in the many-thousand-year history of Syria, a meeting-point of different worlds: the Greek, the Roman and the oriental. In the course of time different civilizations and religions left distinctive marks of outstanding quality on the place, including a remarkable range of religious buildings, from pagan temples to the two examples of key importance, the frescoed synagogue and one of the first house churches of the earliest Christians. The place has protected these remains beneath its ruined surface for over more than sixteen centuries, sheltering them from a great and not always friendly river, from wind and sun, from flocks and caravans and heedless passing armies, until their re-emergence; and Dura Europos continues to pose all the fundamental issues, from landscape to museography, that have to be tackled in formulating a coherent approach to regulating and planning the management of the cultural heritage in all its forms.

For Dura Europos, in support of safeguarding and studying what remains *in situ*, and of caring for what is conserved in various museums, the Jury of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens appeals for the attention of the scientific world and of the community as a whole and awards the seal of recognition and commitment to the Directorate General of Syrian Antiquities.