



[The Book of the Laws of the Countries 56-57](#)

Rome's imposition of its laws on conquered nations

Name of the author: Bardaisan? Philippus?

Date: 3d CE

Place: Edessa

Language: Syriac

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Discourse

Title of work: The Book of the Laws of the Countries

Reference: 56-57

Commentary:

In the absence of a formal numbering system for the *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (*BLC*), the reference above refers to the pages on which the Syriac and English text appear facing in the edition of H. J. W. Drijvers (1965).

For a general introduction to the *BLC*, please see the commentary on [52-53](#).

One of the prominent features of the *BLC* is its description of the laws and customs of the people of various countries (see, for example, [52-53](#); the Syriac word for customs/laws is *namusa*, a Greek loan word with the same semantic range as *nomos*; see Andrade, "Romans and Iranians," p. 10). However, as Nathanael Andrade has recently argued, the *BLC* obscures the regional diversity of the Roman empire and the "heterogeneity of its provincial populations' social norms, cultural norms, practices, and legal systems." The text follows Greek and Roman ethnographic traditions from before Rome's expansion out of Italy, and sees all the peoples that it mentions as "foreign to Rome"; in this sense, "Roman" is a category which is presented as something ethnic, rather than civic (Andrade, "Romans and Iranians," p. 10). Earlier in the text, the author notes a desire for conquest as a defining characteristic of the Romans. In the present passage, we see that this is accompanied by their tendency to replace the laws of the people whom they conquer with their own. The *BLC* understands the capacity of people in different countries to make individual laws and obey individual customs as proof that God-given free will is ultimately more powerful than fate (see further the commentary on 52-53). Following on from this discussion, the present passage asserts firstly that wise rulers have the intelligence to do away with laws deemed not to be working, and secondly that some laws are abolished out of sheer situational necessity. Moreover, the stars (i.e. the astrological signs, which are viewed as being connected with fate) do not have the power to keep in place the laws of a country if it has been conquered by another power who wishes to replace its laws with its own. It is here that the Romans enter the argument.

The reference in our passage to the Romans overturning the laws of "Arabia" (here the author seems to be speaking not of the Roman province of Arabia, but of Mesopotamia in general; see Ross, *Roman Edessa*, p. 48) has often been used to date the passage, with an association made with the campaign of Septimius Severus in 195-196 CE, or possibly the later campaign of Macrinus in 217-218 CE (Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, p. 92, n. 3). As recognised by Nathanael Andrade, this therefore makes the *BLC* a useful piece of evidence for how the inhabitants of Edessa perceived imperial intervention in the region at the turn of the third century CE ("Romans and Iranians," p. 12). The specific issue raised is that of circumcision, and this in itself is of interpretative interest. For the most part, Roman law of the Antonine period onwards did not prohibit circumcision outright (see Andrade, "Romans and Iranians," p. 12). However, there were restrictions. From the second century CE onwards, the practice of circumcising non-Jewish slaves was illegal. A rescript of Antoninus Pius states that Jews were only allowed to circumcise their own sons (see [Digest XLVIII.8.11 \(quotation of Modestinus, Legal Rules VI\)](#)). Moreover, the late-third century or early-fourth century legal sentence preserved in the [Sentences of Pseudo-Paul](#), prescribes capital punishment for Jewish slave masters who circumcised their slaves, and punished with permanent exile Roman citizens who circumcised themselves or their slaves (*Sentences* V.22.3-4). Later on, the *Theodosian Code* XVI.9.1 records a law supposedly made by Constantine in an apparent effort to limit conversion to Judaism, which forbids Jewish slave masters from circumcising their slaves (for more details, see the discussion of [Eusebius, Life of Constantine IV.27](#)).



As Peter Schäfer has argued, scholars have attempted to align the very few ancient references to prohibition of circumcision under Roman law with Hadrian's apparent universal ban on circumcision (attested only in the dubious [Historia Augusta XIV.2](#), and supposedly put in place at some time between 128 and 132 CE), and connected with this also Hadrian's apparent dislike for castration (Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 103-104; for the connection between circumcision and castration: Smallwood, "The Legislation of Hadrian," p. 340; Linder, *The Jews*, p. 101). As Ra'anana (Abusch) Boustani points out, the present text seems to evidence the fact that Roman laws regulating circumcision were not all specific to Jews ("Negotiating Difference," p. 88-89). Interestingly, Eusebius's *Preparation for the Gospel* VI—which also witnesses in Greek a portion of the text of the *BLC*—omits the ban on circumcision in its description of the manner in which Rome imposes its laws, stating only that the Romans "changed" the local laws (the [Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions IX.27](#), another witness of some of the text of the *BLC*, leaves out the description of Arabia's submission to Rome altogether; for a discussion of this, see the commentary on that text). However, it is recorded in both the *BLC* 58-59 and Eusebius's *Preparation for the Gospel* VI.10.44 that King Abgar prohibited castration in honour of the Dea Syria (Atargatis), the *BLC* attributing this to his conversion to Christianity (the practice of castration in the region is attested in Lucian, *The Syrian Goddess* 27, 51; see Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, p. 92; the fact of Abgar's conversion is debated: see Ross, *Roman Edessa*, p. 133-135). The precise situation insinuated by the *BLC* is uncertain, but perhaps restrictions on circumcision such as those mentioned above are in mind, and the reality has been exaggerated. When the connection with the mention of King Abgar's banning of castration is considered alongside, however, it is possible that this action was an attempt by the king to appease his Roman conquerors (see Millar, *The Roman Near East*, p. 213, and Andrade, "Romans and Iranians," p. 11-12), prohibiting a practice which the Romans had shown a dislike for. In this sense, the king exemplifies what is stated at the beginning of the present passage regarding the ability of rulers to abolish or change customs as they see fit. Perhaps the issues of laws regarding circumcision and castration became muddled, or perhaps it is simply the case as stated above that the author of the *BLC* was referring to Roman restrictions on circumcision, such as those placed on Jewish slave masters. Regardless, this extract shows the response of a Christian inhabitant of Edessa to impinging Roman imperialism, which is viewed as somewhat aggressive. The free will that the local rulers possess, which enabled them to make their own laws in the first place, is here second to the oppressive force of Roman free will, which forces those in "Arabia" to yield and accept Roman legislation.

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Arabia](#)
- [astrology](#)
- [castration](#)
- [circumcision](#)
- [country](#)
- [king](#)
- [King Abgar VIII](#)
- [law](#)
- [nation](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [ruler](#)

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["The Syriac Book of the Laws of the Countries, Eusebius' Preparation for the](#)



[Gospel, and the Clementine Recognitions: Early Witnesses for Christianity in Central Asia?"](#)

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Text

[Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions IX.27](#)

The imposition of Roman law on other nations



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Text

[Pseudo-Paul, Sentences V.22.3-4](#)

Ban on circumcision for non-Jews

- [Read more about Pseudo-Paul, Sentences V.22.3-4](#)

Text

[Digest XLVIII.8.11 \(Modestinus, Legal Rules VI\)](#)

Antoninus Pius's ban on circumcision for non-Jews

- [Read more about Digest XLVIII.8.11 \(Modestinus, Legal Rules VI\)](#)

Text

[Historia Augusta, Life of Hadrian XIV.2](#)

Hadrian's ban of circumcision

- [Read more about Historia Augusta, Life of Hadrian XIV.2](#)

Text

[Eusebius of Caesarea, Life of Constantine IV.27](#)

Christians may not be slaves to Jews

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