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THE LIONS OF ALLAT

The Arab goddess Allat, as is well known, not least from a recent contribution by Vassilios Christides,¹ was popular among such sedentary communities of Roman Syria where a heritage of recent nomadic past is otherwise noticeable. She occupied, in the first place, a paramount position in the pantheon of various tribes of Arabia, up to the advent of Islam.² Sharing with other desert gods a warrior character, Allat was rather naturally equated with the Greek Athena, as soon as the degree of Hellenization a community had achieved called for a Greek version of the name.³ There was, however, another and more ancient identification of the Arab goddess, namely with Atargatis or Dea Syria.⁴

1. V. Christides, "The Beginning of Graeco-Nabataean Religious Syncretism: Two Stone Lintels from Sweidat of Nabatene", *Graeco-Arabica* 6 (1995) 272-300.

2. Cf. H. Seyrig, "Les dieux armés et les Arabes en Syrie", *Syria* 47 (1970) 77-112; J. Starcky, "Allath", *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* 1, Zürich - München 1981, 564-570.

3. Cf. J. Starcky, "Allath, Athéna et la Déesse Syrienne", in L. Kahil (ed.), *Mythologie gréco-romaine, mythologies périphériques. Études d'iconographie* (Colloque CNRS 593), Paris 1981, 119-130; M. Gawlikowski, "Les dieux de Palmyre", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II, 18.4, Berlin - New York 1990, 2605-2658, here 2636-2644.

4. Cf. H. Drijvers, "De matre inter leones sedente. Iconography and Character of the Arab Goddess Allat", in Margreet B. de Boer - T. A. Edridge (eds.), *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren*, 1, Leiden 1978, 331-351.

To be sure, this is never expressed in the inscriptions, which, on the contrary, always mention the two godheads separately. The resemblance between them appears in the iconography: both are represented as queens enthroned between two lions, a long sceptre in hand and a *polos* on the head. Only the inscription, whenever extant, can determine which goddess was meant in each particular case.

A good example in point is a small altar found by the Swiss mission of Paul Collart in the Baalshamin sanctuary in Palmyra.⁵ It displays, on three different faces, figures of deities identified with their names written above. Beside Malakbel on his griffin-pulled chariot and the standing warrior named Shaaru, there is also Allat. The goddess is seated in an armchair shown in a side view, a lion crouching beside it. She is clad in the usual garb of Palmyrene ladies, with a veil on her head, and holds an olive branch in her left while raising her right in a blessing gesture. It is to be understood that the lion should be one of a pair flanking the divine seat.⁶

A 3rd-century relief found in Khirbet es-Sane out in the desert NW of Palmyra is dedicated to Allat and Rahim, but shows only the goddess and the donor.⁷ She is seated between two animals, headless at present but having the unmistakable feline paws. Unlike other representations of Allat enthroned, she has typical attributes of Athena, such as *aegis*, helmet, shield, and lance. It may be assumed that a mixing-up of two iconographical types, one of standing armed Athena and the other of Allat enthroned, has occurred here. Usually, the two types are separate, though they were applied to the same goddess under either of her two names, Greek or Arabic. Another sculpture from the same rustic sanctuary shows a goddess seated between the lions, while an armed goddess stands beside her.⁸ They were interpreted as Atargatis and Allat, respectively,⁹ though the seated goddess may be in fact Allat, accompanied by some more obscure desert deity.

Another seated figure in the full frontal view is accompanied by two

5. Ch. Dunant - R. Stucky, *Le sanctuaire de Baalshamin à Palmyre*, 4. *Sculptures*, Rome 2000, no. 3, 83-85, pl. 3 (*LIMC* 1, 565, pl. 424, Allath 3).

6. The motive is reproduced on tesserae: *RTP* 164 and Dunant 11.

7. G. Ploix de Rotrou - H. Seyrig, "Khirbet el-Sané", *Syria* 14 (1933) 12-19, pl. 4 (*LIMC* 1, 568, pl. 430, Allath 44).

8. Ploix de Rotrou - Seyrig, *op. cit.*, pl. 5,2 (*LIMC* 1, 566, pl. 420, Allath 22).

9. *LIMC* 1, loc. cit.

lions on a relief found in 1961 in Diocletian's Camp.¹⁰ Though the head is not preserved and there is no inscription, the excavators have correctly guessed the identity of the goddess, as the find took place just some 20 m from the still standing gate of the sanctuary of Allat.

The excavations in the Allat precinct in Palmyra have yielded, among other sculptures, the lower part of a small relief in soft limestone, showing only the legs of the seated goddess and two lions standing to front on either side of the throne.¹¹ On the plinth, the name "Allat" is neatly inscribed. The lettering, as well as the material of this humble monument, allow a dating in the beginning of the 1st century A.D., if not earlier (Fig. 1).

The two last-mentioned sculptures can be considered as rendering the original cult statue of the Allat temple. Long before an Athenian copy of a Pheidias statue of Athena, standing in arms, came to be installed in the temple,¹² there was a seated statue within a small primitive chapel going back to the middle of the 1st century B.C. at the latest.¹³ The idol of Allat is mentioned in the inscription of an altar dedicated in A.D. 115 as being set up by a certain Mattanai, an ancestor of the author. The long family line could be established from this and another inscription, allowing an estimate as to the likely dating of the foundation, not later than the middle of the 1st century B.C.¹⁴

While the early fragmentary relief could be used to visualise the statue of Allat as it was worshipped in Palmyra from the founding of the

10. K. Michalowski, *Palmyre. Fouilles polonaises 1961*, Warsaw 1963, 172, fig. 224 (*LIMC* 1, 565, pl. 424, Allath 2). Cf. D. Schlumberger, *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest*, Paris 1952, pl. 29,3 (a fragment from Khirbet Farwan).

11. First published by H. Drijvers, "Iconography", 339, pl. 74 (*LIMC* 1, 564, pl. 424, Allath 1). Width (complete) 21 cm, height 26 cm.

12. On this (*LIMC* 1, 566-567, pl. 427, Allath 28), cf. M. Gawlikowski, "Allat-Athena of Palmyra", *Graeco-Arabica* 2 (1983) 217-226; idem, "L'hellénisme et les dieux de Palmyre", in *Ο Ελληνισμός στην Ανατολή*, Athens 1991, 245-256; idem, "The Athena of Palmyra", *Archeologia* 47 (1996) 21-32.

13. Cf. M. Gawlikowski, "Réflexions sur la chronologie du sanctuaire d'Allat à Palmyre", *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 1 (1983) 59-67; idem, "La sanctuaire d'Allat à Palmyre. Aperçu préliminaire", *AAAS* 33 (1983) 179-198; idem, "Du ḥamana au naos. Le temple palmyrénien hellénisé", *Topoi* 7 (1997) 837-849.

14. M. Gawlikowski, "Le premier temple d'Allat", in *Resurrecting the Past. A Joint Tribute to Adnan Bounni*, Leiden 1990, 101-108.

sanctuary up to its sack by Roman troops in A.D. 273 (Fig. 2), the existence and main features of this venerable relic can be independently deduced from the actual traces on the original plinth left in place and found in excavation. These traces are compatible with a seated figure flanked by two lateral grooves intended for some long and relatively narrow objects, such as crouching animals. It is anybody's guess of what material the statue was made, but it seems likely that it was assembled from parts of various texture: stone perhaps, but also metal, wood and cloth. Not only life-size sculpture is not known so early in the history of Palmyrene art (certainly an inconclusive argument), but also such an assembled idol would be lighter and could be taken out in processions. Another early monument from the sanctuary, unfortunately fragmentary, shows indeed a procession with a chariot on which a draped figure is seated.¹⁵ It was recently proposed that the scene, considered as identical with the one represented on the well-known relief from the Bel temple, should have illustrated the translation of an idol of Allat to her sanctuary in Palmyra.¹⁶ However it might have been, the goddess seated in her archaic tabernacle had most certainly two lions as guardians of the throne and as arm rests at the same time. While this type can be traced far back into Levantine antiquity, it seems reasonable to admit in the case of Palmyra the direct influence of the contemporary iconography of Atargatis, such as is known first and foremost from the Syrian Hierapolis.¹⁷

Only after the appearance of the lost statue was firmly established a new monument came to my notice, showing the complete figure of Allat between her lions. Unfortunately, I have only had a glimpse of a rather poor photograph and could secure only a xerox copy of it. Enough can be seen, however, to be sure that this monument, seen by a friend at a dealer's in London, is a complete reproduction of the same statue (Fig. 3). In particular, it is the only replica to have preserved the head, so we

15. First published in E. Ruprechtsberger (ed.), *Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt*, Linz 1987, 314, no. 37. L. Dirven, "The Arrival of the Arab Goddess Allat in Palmyra", *Mesopotamia* 33 (1998) 297-308; idem, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos. A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria*, Leiden 1999, 81-86, pl. 19.

16. Dirven, "Arrival"; idem, *Palmyrenes*, *ibid.*

17. P.-L. van Berg, *Corpus Cultus Deae Syriae* (EPRO 28), Leiden 1972. Cf. H. Seyrig, "Bas-relief des dieux de Hiéropolis", *Syria* 49 (1972) 104, pl. 1; A. Perkins, *The Art of Dura-Europos*, Oxford 1973, 94-96, pl. 38; H. Drijvers, "Die Götter Edessas", in *Festschrift F.-K. Dörner* (EPRO 66), Leiden 1977, 263-283.

can be sure of the presence of a *polos*. The accompanying inscription, which should be dated not later than about A.D. 100, identifies the subject as "the idol (*maṣṣeba*) of Allat", the very term used in A.D. 115 in reference to the founding of the cult in the 1st century B.C.

The idol was established in a small closed shrine called *ḥamana* in a pertinent inscription. Later, this chapel had been encased in a *cella* of classical appearance, which served as an outer shell for the original abode of the goddess.¹⁸ The circumstances remained unchanged until the destruction by the Romans in the late 3rd century. In the restored temple, the old chapel was no more and the marble statue of Athena took the function of the sacked idol. It is possible, though not proven, that the statue has been brought only then to the temple, which became the cult centre of the legionary camp built around the sanctuary.

The installation of Diocletian's camp brought about the dismantling of the eastern wall of the sanctuary in order to adapt its shape to the general layout. The new wall and the replaced gate opening to it were aligned with the *via principalis* of the camp. Some stones have been used in foundations of restored porticoes inside the *temenos*. We could recover a dozen of them having belonged to a monumental relief and restore it in front of Palmyra Museum.¹⁹

The sculpture represents a huge lion in frontal view and was certainly incorporated into the wall of the sanctuary (Fig. 4). There are no clues as to its exact location, but it would be sensible to suppose that the animal served as a guardian of the gate. As all recovered fragments fit into the restored monument, there is no reason to believe that a symmetrical beast accompanied this one at the other side of the entrance.

The figure of the lion is 3,46 m high from tip to toe and 1,94 m wide at the head. The half-opened mouth shows menacing fangs. The luxurious mane covers entirely the breast, leaving only the front legs apparent. Between these, an antelope is crouching, putting confidently one front leg on the predator's claws. The sculptor rendered precisely the features of *oryx leucoryx* (Pallas 1777), a large animal of white complexion and long straight horns, once frequent in Syrian and Arabian deserts. Extinct in Syria for a while, the species has been lately reintroduced in the Talila

18. M. Gawlikowski, "Motab et ḥamana. Sur quelques monuments religieux du Levant", *Topoi* 9/2 (1999) 491-505, cf. fig. 1.

19. First published in *Revue archéologique* 2 (1977) 274, and illustrated many times ever since.

reserve not far from Palmyra, where a herd of some thirty animals roam now a fenced stretch of the desert.

Though maybe deriving from a hunting motive, the composition clearly intends to convey the impression of an idyllic friendship between the predator and its usual prey. The oryx is being protected between the formidable paws and shows no signs of alarm, while the lion seems to deter the beholder from harming its charge (Fig. 5).

This impression is confirmed by a short text inscribed on the left paw of the lion. It runs: "May Allat bless whoever does not spill blood on the *temenos*."²⁰ My translation differs from that of Drijvers only in rendering the word *ḥugbā* by the Greek "*temenos*" rather than "sanctuary", as the former seems to convey better than any English term the idea of sacred, reserved ground that the ancients Arabs called *ḥima* or *ḥaram*.²¹ There is no need to impose on *ḥugbā*, with its Aramaic grammatical ending, the sense of more recent Arabic *ḥiḡāb*, "veil", though the idea of a barrier excluding the sacred from the profane does underlie both.²²

In front of the primitive chapel there stood an altar, preserved in the same place inside the later *cella*. Only the lower part of it subsists today, but the fact that it remained in the 2nd-century temple is proof enough that no animal sacrifice was performed on it. The altar, when complete, had to be rather high and would be intended just for frankincense offering, as most Palmyrene altars were. There are no traces in the *temenos* of a structure that could have supported another altar.

It has been suggested that the symbolism of the lion and oryx, as well as the quoted inscription, could mean that the sanctuary enjoyed asylum rights,²³ but the sacred enclosure is simply too small to allow more or less permanent accommodation of suppliants. The Allat *temenos* is even less appropriate for animals to roam free, as they did in the sanctuary of the Syrian Goddess in Hierapolis according to Lucian.²⁴

More importantly, the antique asylum had to be granted by a ruler, in

20. H. Drijvers, "Sanctuaries and Social Safety. The Iconography of Divine Peace in Hellenistic Syria", *Visible Religion. Annual for Religious Iconography* 1 (1982) 65; D. Hillers - E. Cussini, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts (PAT)*, Baltimore 1996, no. 1122.

21. Cf. M. Gawlikowski, "The Sacred Space in Ancient Arab Religions", in A. Hadidi (ed.), *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, 1, Amman 1982, 301-303.

22. On this term, see B. Aggoula, "Dédicace palmyrénienne à la Renommée et à la Miséricorde", *Semitica* 27 (1977) 117-122.

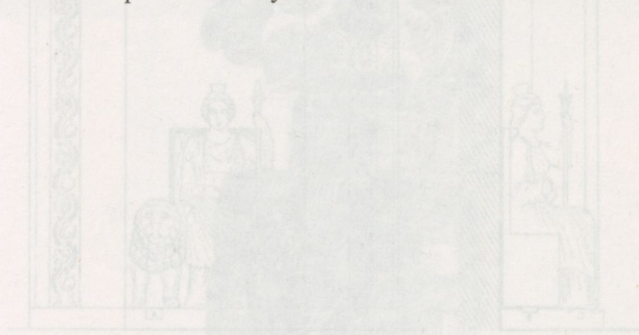
23. Drijvers, *op. cit.* (n. 17).

this case a Seleucid king or a Roman emperor, to a major sanctuary or to a whole city.²⁵ The political circumstances of Palmyra make such a privilege highly unlikely. A simple interdiction to shed blood within the precinct does not constitute an asylum, but a rule of behaviour one would expect in any sanctuary as far as manslaughter was concerned and a ritual prescription particular to this temple in respect to animal sacrifice.

The guardian lion of the Allat sanctuary has been imitated in lesser scale at least twice. One instance is a relief in Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (height 57,5 cm, width at the base 28,5 cm), of unknown origin but certainly from Palmyra (Fig. 6).²⁶ The posture of the lion is exactly the same and the treatment of the mane similar. The smaller animal is different, however: it is an ox, lying between the lion's paws with one front leg bent and the other extended to touch the claws in exactly the same movement as the oryx, but turned to the right. Its head is missing.

The other imitation is even smaller and fragmentary. The sculpture was found recently in the excavations of the Great Colonnade and shows this time a sheep as the protected animal (Fig. 7).

The question whether these replicas (and some similar reliefs showing only a standing lion, e.g. Fig. 8), come from the sanctuary of Allat or some other location is a moot point. The same symbolism could have suited, no doubt, the requirements of various cults and the cult of Allat could of course be practised beyond the limits of her sanctuary.



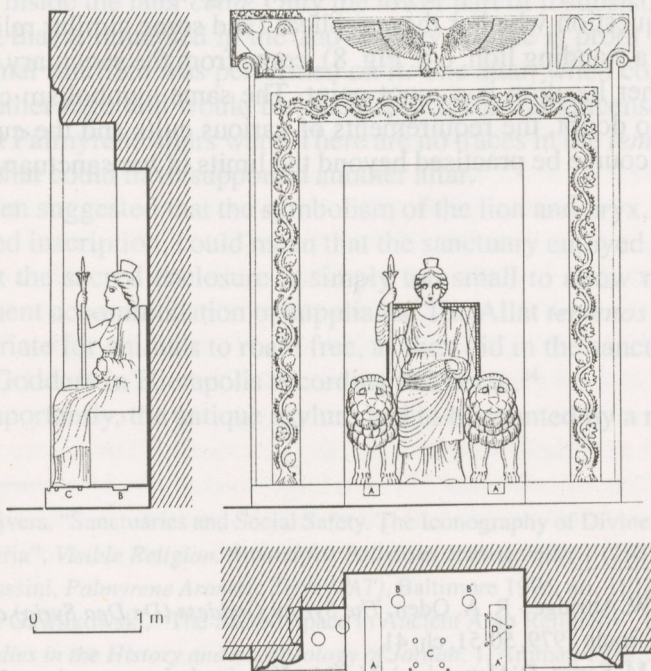
24. H. W. Attridge - R. A. Oden, *The Syrian Goddess (De Dea Syria) attributed to Lucian*, Missoula 1979, 50-51, ch. 41.

25. Cf. M. Sartre, *D'Alexandre à Zénobie. Histoire du Levant antique, IVe siècle av. J.-C. - IIIe siècle ap. J.-C.*, Paris 2001, 176-177, 704.

26. NCG 1154; M. A. R. Colledge, *The Art of Palmyra*, London 1976, 110.



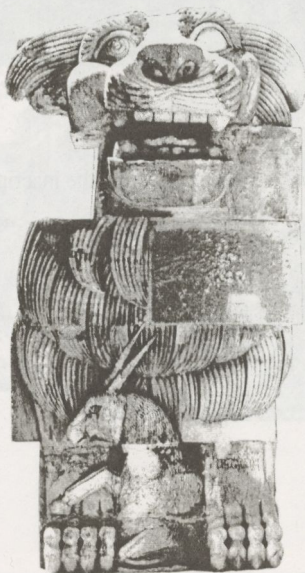
1. Allat seated between her lions. From the temple of Allat.



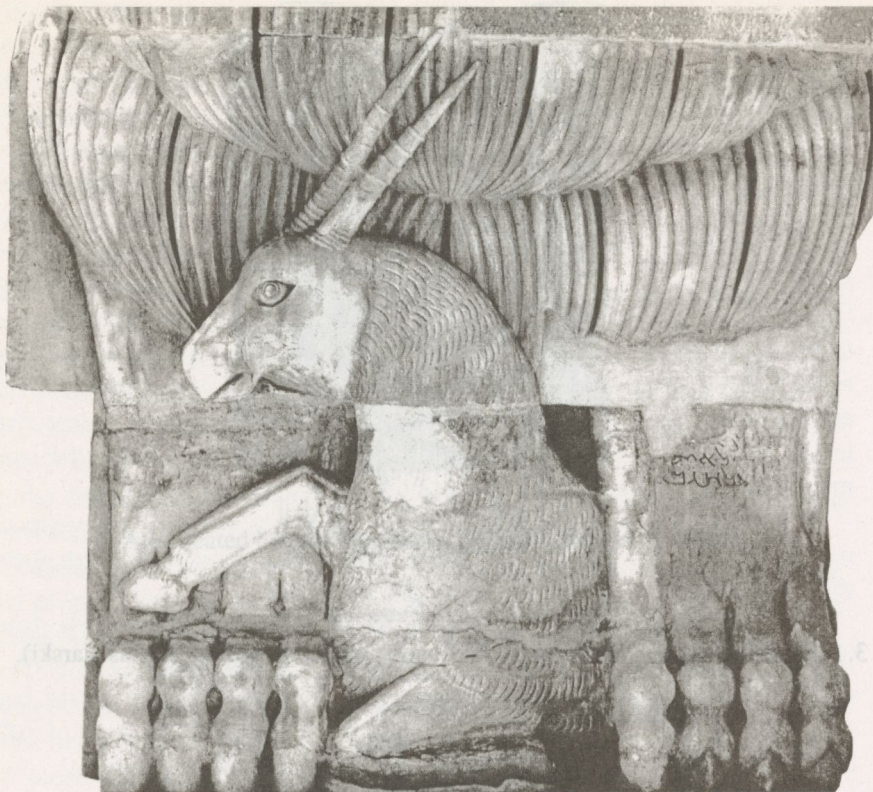
2. A graphic restoration of the statue of Allat in her chapel (M. Puskarski).



3. A relief of seated Allat. Seen on the London market (drawing M. Puskarski).



4. The guardian of the sanctuary, restored in front of Palmyra Museum. Palmyra Museum.



5. The protected oryx and the inscription.



6. The Copenhagen lion and the protected ox (courtesy of NC Glyptotek).



7. A fragment in Palmyra: lion and sheep.



8. A small lion, Palmyra Museum.