

ARCHAEOLOGY 2933

Animal sculpture at Palmyra

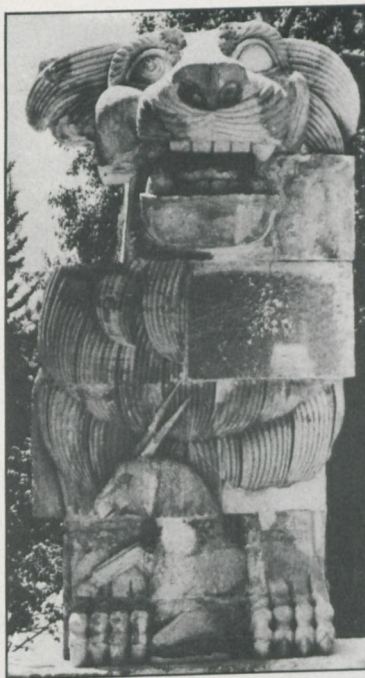
Palmyra, the ancient caravan city of Syria, is one of the most fascinating sites in the ancient Near East, alike for its history, its great queen, Zenobia, and its sculpture, which combines aspects of both classical and eastern cultures.

Excavations continue under a Polish mission led by Professor K. Michalowski. Recent discoveries are described by Dr M. Gawlikowski.

Two years ago (*ILN*, November, 1975) I was able to report on a discovery made at Palmyra by a team working there under the auspices of the Polish Centre of Archaeology in Cairo, directed by Professor K. Michalowski: a marble statue of Athena found in a temple dedicated to the goddess Allat, an Arabic deity identified with the Athenian Parthenos. During two further campaigns the *temenos* in which the temple stood has been excavated almost completely and more evidence has come to light on the sanctuary's long history.

It was already in existence before the beginning of the Christian era and for four centuries continued to attract worshippers, townsfolk and nomads alike. Lying on the outskirts of the caravan city and close to the main approach from the West, it was well placed for the visits of traders and camel-drivers, whose ancestral goddess Allat was. The *temenos*, or sacred enclosure, was surrounded by a wall and formed a rectangle about 48 metres long by 26 metres wide. In the middle of it was a chapel for the cult statue, with an altar in front of it. Over the years porticoes were built to shelter offerings to the goddess and honorific statues for outstanding citizens. Many fragments of both have been found, including life-size figures, eagles and riders on camels represented in relief. All these monuments display the characteristics of the local sculpture, of which the most important is the frontality, which enables the spectator to feel the actual presence of the subjects.

About the middle of the second century AD, as the civilization of Palmyra became increasingly subject to influences from the West, a temple of Roman type replaced the old chapel. The main features of the old chapel continue, however, in the new building. A new cult statue was ordered from a Greek sculptor; and the inspiration of his work can be traced back to fifth-century Athens. Mr Jozef Gazy, a sculptor attached to our mission, has now restored the statue. While the head



Above left, the colossal statue of a lion, 3½ metres high, found in the temple of Allat and now reconstructed. Between its paws crouches an oryx. Above right, the restored statue of Athena Parthenos, a Greek work which derives in part from the lost Athena Parthenos of Phidias.



Part of a relief from the temple of Allat showing two gods in armour, one about to mount a camel. The eagle's head, right, is one of several found in the temple enclosure.

and drapery faithfully reproduce the traits of the lost masterpiece, the Athena Parthenos of Phidias, as far as we can deduce, the raised right arm which held a spear and the aegis held across the chest seem to derive from another source of inspiration, contemporary with Phidias, if not necessarily by him. The famous sculptor made more than one image of Athena, and the Parthenos is only indirectly known to us.

The sanctuary survived the sack of the city under the Emperor Aurelian in AD 272-273, but suffered serious damage. It was, however, soon restored. A new enclosure wall was built, fallen columns were raised and the interior of the temple repaired; but this was done rather carelessly and with the abundant use of broken sculptures from the sanctuary and plundered tombs.

During the last season one of the late



Fragments of a statue showing the goddess Allat between two lions.

an antelope crouches between its huge claws, safe in the protection of this awe-inspiring guardian.

The sculpture was fixed in a wall of the sanctuary early in the first century AD and destroyed, together with the wall, in Aurelian's time. The inscription which accompanied it (which is to be published with other texts from the sanctuary by Professor H. J. W. Drijvers, a Dutch member of our mission) states that no blood should be shed in the precinct.

Traditionally, lions appear as guardians of many Near Eastern temples and city gates from time immemorial. Moreover they are animals sacred to Allat, who is sometimes represented enthroned between two of them, a posture which she shares with Atargatis, the celebrated Dea Syria from Hierapolis (now Membidj, near Aleppo). It is interesting to recall that in the sacred precincts of this latter goddess oxen, horses, tame eagles, bears and lions lived in freedom, untouchable and harmless. Animal sacrifices, whenever made there, were offered in a way in which no blood was shed.

The antelope shown (identified for me by Dr T. Uminski as of the species *Oryx leucoryx*, now believed extinct in its homeland) was the biggest wild game of the Syrian desert. Even if the relatively small courtyard of Allat at Palmyra could hardly have been a very accommodating reserve for animals, they were at least represented there quite profusely in sculpture. Many fragments of lions and eagles were found by chance in the sanctuary or around it.

In direct opposition to customs prevalent in Semitic religions, some Syrian cults forbade the spilling of blood on their altars. This prohibition may have something to do with the settling of Arab nomads in Syria about the beginning of the Christian era. In certain places in Arabia it was forbidden to cut trees or kill game, because these belonged to the gods. One such natural park, owned by Allat, was respected by Mohammed himself ●



PHOTOGRAPHS BY M. VERSTEEGH

foundations yielded an extraordinary find: several sculptured blocks, each over half a ton in weight, were unearthed and some of them appeared to match each other. Essential parts of the whole were badly broken and many fragments were missing. Given the simple technical means at our disposal, it required a great deal of creative imagination to reassemble the sculpture. The credit goes to Mr Gazy, who achieved the restoration work in less than three weeks. In front of the Palmyra Museum there now stands an enormous lion, 3½ metres high, looking menacingly at the bystander, while