

## A PALMYRENE ALTAR IN THE CINCINNATI ART MUSEUM\*

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Shelved in one of the storage rooms of the Cincinnati Art Museum, hidden away alongside a couple of typical Palmyrene funerary reliefs,<sup>3</sup> a little altar from Palmyra (catalogue n<sup>o</sup> 1996.467) has thus far escaped publication. All four sides are decorated with figures in relief, a feature unique amongst the Palmyrene altars that have been preserved. Both the altar's shape and its sculptured decoration bring to mind the well-known altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin at Palmyra which a certain Malku had dedicated to the god Malakbel.<sup>4</sup> However, the CAM altar also displays several exceptional iconographic features that are not found elsewhere at Palmyra, not in the least a unique representation of a deity who had thus far not been attested in sculptures from the city. This article starts with a discussion of the origin of the altar, followed by a description of the object itself and its sculptured decoration. Since the four figures in relief are not identified by inscriptions, iconographic parallels and

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\* The altar discussed in this article was noticed by TK on 3 August 2011, when shown around the storage rooms of the Cincinnati Art Museum in order to look at the Nabataean materials from Nelson Glueck's excavations at Khirbet Tannur. At the CAM itself Jay Pattison, Registrar, has been very generous with his time and granted permission to publish the altar, while Jonathan Nolting, Imaging Technician, helped to produce the images that appear in the pages that follow. TK owes further thanks to the University of Cincinnati's Classics Department for the award of a Fellowship in the Margo Tytus Visiting Scholars Program, and in particular to Getzel Cohen, and also to the British Academy for the award of a Small Research Grant. At Hebrew Union College, Nili Fox and Jason Kalman provided helpful information, and at Sotheby's New York, Richard M. Kersey, now International Senior Director and Senior Vice President, Antiquities, offered his help in attempting to track down the original seller. Correspondence in the Museum files revealed that the altar had been noticed also in January 1997 (when it was on display) by Cynthia Finlayson of Brigham Young University, but she informed us that she has no plans to publish it herself. We would also like to thank René van Beek of the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam for discussing some technicalities with us. Finally, we are grateful to Michał Gawlikowski for confirming to us that the altar was indeed unknown, to Maurice Sartre for his encouragement, and to the journal's referees for their suggestions.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. VERMEULE 1981, p. 382, n<sup>o</sup> 331, with *PAT* 2829.

<sup>4</sup> COLLART & VICARI 1969, I, p. 222-225; II, pl. CVIII, 1-3; DUNANT & STUCKY 2000, Taf. 3-4; DRIJVERS 1976, pl. XLIV-XLV; TANABE 1986, pl. 147-149.

other information from Palmyra will be used to make suggestions as regards their identity. Based on the style and iconography we shall subsequently propose a date for the monument. Finally, a comparison with similar monuments from Palmyra and other cities in the Syrian-Mesopotamian steppe zone will serve to throw some light on the altar's place in Palmyrene religion and culture.

### **Origin of the altar**

The altar was purchased by the CAM at public auction from Sotheby's in New York, where it was part of Sale 6863 on Thursday, 13 June 1996, under lot 130.<sup>5</sup> According to the museum files, Richard M. Keresey, as then Head of Antiquities and Islamic Art for the auction house, had provided information that "the piece surfaced on the market in 1996 from a private collection through a European dealer". If it could be known when the previous owner had first got hold of the monument, it would perhaps be possible to link the altar with specific excavations going on at Palmyra at that time, and hence with a particular sanctuary or location.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, such knowledge does now seem to be beyond our reach. When contacted by us with a request for assistance, Dick Keresey courteously made any effort he could to find out more, but eventually had to write the following (in personal correspondence): "The consignor has told me that they have no recollection of the previous owner of the monument, and are unable to recall how long they possessed it before it was sold with us. I can add that it is a business long in operation and therefore they could in theory have had it in their possession for some time." The precise provenance of the altar must therefore remain unknown, and any suggestions with regard to its archaeological context and origins can only be hypotheses. Even the Palmyrene origin of the piece cannot be taken for granted, but will need to be made explicit by means of comparison with other monuments from Palmyra.

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<sup>5</sup> In the respective catalogue of Sotheby's (6863 "FELICITAS"), lot no. 130, the accompanying image shows two sides of the altar, which is said to have been on sale for \$ 6,000-9,000.

<sup>6</sup> That said, it might of course have been an acquisition made by the previous owner in a period before the formal exploration of the site had started, or (perhaps more likely) it might have been the result of illegal excavations in more recent times.

## Description of the altar

The quadrangular altar is made of white-yellow limestone and is 0.40 m high with a square base that is 0.18 m [pl. I]. At the top is a bowl-shaped depression that is *ca* 0.11 m in diameter [pl. II]. The remnants of a lead pipe, *ca* 0.08 m in diameter, are still visible in one corner of the altar top. There are no traces of use. The four corners show the broken remains of what originally seem to have been horn-shaped ornaments. The four faces of the altar are adorned each with a standing figure in low relief. The figures are set in shallow recessed panels that they fill from top to bottom. Apart from several fissures in the stone, the sculptured decoration is in fairly good condition.

The stone of this altar is typical of Palmyrene monuments from the middle of the first century AD onwards. Palmyra has yielded numerous limestone incense altars, which for the most part are square and have a square or rounded top-element with a bowl-shaped depression.<sup>7</sup> The top of the CAM altar, however, is flat with a hollow recession. The closest parallel is the altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin that Malku dedicated to Malakbel and that is adorned with three deities in relief, set in shallow recessed panels similar to the CAM altar.<sup>8</sup> The altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin, however, does not have horn-shaped elements at its top corners, and the CAM altar is the only one from Palmyra known to date with this feature.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, most Palmyrene altars are accompanied by an inscription recording the monument's dedication by an individual to a particular deity.<sup>10</sup> The altar is fairly small, measuring only 0.40 m.<sup>11</sup> Similarly unusual is the fact that all four sides of the

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<sup>7</sup> On Palmyrene incense altars in general, see COLLEDGE 1976, p. 52-53. On the altars found in the Palmyrène, see SCHLUMBERGER 1951, p. 109-112.

<sup>8</sup> See above, n. 4.

<sup>9</sup> INVERNIZZI 1997, p. 57-58, with fig. 4, provides an overview of the various shapes of incense burners attested in Palmyra. The four-horned altar is not among them. In Khirbet Ouadi Souane in the Palmyrène a fragment of a small altar with merlons on its corners was found: SCHLUMBERGER 1951, pl. XLVII, 3. For some crow-stepped altars, cf. AL-AS'AD and GAWLIKOWSKI 1997, no. 1, 21, 118. The four-horned altar was, however, fairly common at Hatra: INVERNIZZI 1997, fig. 6. Cf. SAFAR & MUSTAFA 1974, fig. 140-142, 144, 191, 235, 265-266, 304, 329.

<sup>10</sup> Most altars from Palmyra are dedicated to the so-called anonymous god: SEYRIG 1933, p. 253-282. The altars from the Palmyrène are dedicated to various deities, which shows that the practice was by no means confined to the anonymous god: SCHLUMBERGER 1951, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> The dimensions of altars from both Palmyra and the Palmyrène are diverse. For other examples of smaller altars, see SCHLUMBERGER 1951, p. 110 (for the Palmyrène). Cf. AL-AS'AD and GAWLIKOWSKI 1997, *passim*.

altar are decorated with figures in reliefs. With most altars, the decoration is restricted to the main face, or – less common – spread over three faces.<sup>12</sup> Hence these monuments were designed to stand against a wall, whereas the CAM altar obviously must have been freestanding. It does not have a clear front side, and the order of the discussion of the four panels in what follows is therefore arbitrary.

### **The standing figure with nimbus**

A standing, clean-shaven male figure is represented facing full front [pl. III]. His weight rests firmly on the small feet that point outwards. The nimbus around the head touches the top of the panel and contains twelve rays in slightly higher relief. The figure's right arm is bended upwards with his right hand twisted around the shaft of a spear in an odd back-handed way. With his lowered left hand he grasps the hilt of a sword that hangs from his left side. The figure has an oval face surrounded by a short, curly hairdo. The large almond-shaped eyes have prominent upper and lower eyelids. The straight nose is rather prominent and the mouth is small. The figure is clad in a long-sleeved tunic that reaches just below the knees, with trousers underneath. On top, he wears a body cuirass with two rows of flaps that is too long in comparison with his legs.

The nimbus and rays indicate that this figure ought to be identified as a sun god. There were, however, at least three solar deities worshipped at Palmyra: Yarhibol, Malakbel and Shamash/Helios. Malakbel is only represented wearing a cuirass when he is pictured as a bust flanking that of Baal-Shamin together with his companion Aglibol.<sup>13</sup> From about the middle of the 80s AD onwards, Yarhibol is commonly represented wearing a body cuirass in combination with a short tunic.<sup>14</sup> The iconography of Palmyra's third solar deity

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<sup>12</sup> Palmyrene altars that have three sides decorated with reliefs are very rare. In addition to the above-mentioned altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin (n. 4), the following instances are known: a small altar (0.185 m high) of unknown provenance dedicated to Nergal, see GAWLIKOWSKI 2000; an octagonal altar that has at least three faces decorated with standing deities: MICHALOWSKI 1962, p. 134-136; DRIJVERS 1976, pl. LX, 2; TANABE 1986, pl. 150.

<sup>13</sup> On the cult of Malakbel in Palmyra, his appearance in various divine associations and the distinct iconographic types associated with these manifestations, see GAWLIKOWSKI 1990a, p. 2631-2636; DIRVEN 1998, p. 91-93; DIRVEN 1999, p. 159-168; KAIZER 2002, p. 124-143.

<sup>14</sup> On the iconography of Yarhibol, see LINANT DE BELLEFONDS 1990. There is, in fact, only one relief on which Yarhibol (probably) is pictured in Greek dress, namely the 'archaic' relief showing four deities, a Heracles-

Shamash/Helios is, however, less clearly marked. He may be represented either wearing a tunic as well as a military cuirass and can usually only be identified *as* Shamash/Helios because of his association with the goddess Allat.<sup>15</sup> The exact identity of the solar deity on the CAM altar is therefore ambiguous and largely depends upon the identity of the other figures represented on the altar.

The body cuirass imitates the outfit of the Roman emperor and was introduced in Palmyrene iconography around 80 AD, at a time when Roman influence in the oasis grew stronger.<sup>16</sup> It largely replaced the so-called lamellar cuirass, an idiosyncratic type of cuirass made of superimposed rows of small, vertical strips, joined by horizontal bands.<sup>17</sup> Only leading Palmyrene deities, such as Yarhibol, Aglibol and Arsu, wear the Roman body cuirass.<sup>18</sup> Of Palmyra's chief gods, only Bel retained the old-fashioned lamellar cuirass that is combined with trousers.<sup>19</sup> When Yarhibol is pictured wearing the body-cuirass, his legs are

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figure, a goddess, a sun god and a moon god: DRIJVERS, 1976, pl. XIV; LINANT DE BELLEFONDS 1990, p. 625, n° 20. This anomaly is explained by the early date of the relief, which was found in foundation T of the temple of Bel and dates from the end of the first century BC or the beginning of the first century AD.

<sup>15</sup> On the iconography of Shamash, see GAWLIKOWSKI 1990b. The association seems based especially on the fact that Shamash and Allat are named together, alongside Rahim, in an inscription from AD 129 that records the dedication to them of six columns of a portico with its entablature and roofing in the transversal colonnade near the temple of Allat: PAT 0301. Shamash is also the recipient of a *hamana* according to an inscription from 31/30 BC that was found at the temple of Allat itself: GAWLIKOWSKI 1976, p. 198. The identification of Shamash with Helios is made in a bilingual inscription on an altar: PAT 0325 = IGLS XVII, 1, n° 320, with DRIJVERS 1976, pl. LX, 1. Cf. KAIZER 2002, p. 154-157.

<sup>16</sup> The earliest datable instances are the sculptural decorations from the peristyle of the temple of Bel, dated to *ca* AD 80. They were formerly dated to AD 32, but PIETRZYKOWSKI 1997, p. 125-135, convincingly argued that they ought to be dated *ca* fifty years later. Cf. DIRVEN 1999, p. 52-53, with fig. 16-19. Contra SEYRIG 1970, p. 107, who dated the reliefs to AD 32 and therefore the introduction of the body cuirass accordingly. On the Roman influence and its significance, see DIRVEN 2007.

<sup>17</sup> The oldest instances of cuirassed statues come from what is known as 'foundation T', beneath the temple of Bel, and are dated to the first century BC: SEYRIG 1941, p. 34-39; COLLEDGE 1976, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> As such, it is a clear sign of loyalty to the Roman overlords. On the civic importance of the cults of these gods at Palmyra, see DIRVEN 1999, p. 67-98.

<sup>19</sup> The most telling example is a relief that represents Baalshamin and Bel with Yarhibol and Aglibol, dated to AD 121. Whereas Bel is represented wearing a lamellar cuirass, Yarhibol and Aglibol wear muscled cuirasses: BRIQUEL-CHATONNET & LOZACHMEUR 1998, fig. 1; KAIZER 2002, pl. III. Other examples include a relief from Djebel al-Merah: TANABE 1986, pl. 102 (n.d.); a small relief originally representing six deities standing in a temple fronton, probably dating from AD 119: TANABE 1986, pl. 101; and a small plaque representing a divine triad (identification of the god in the centre as Bel is contested): DRIJVERS 1976, pl. XXXV; CHARLES-GAFFIOT, LAVAGNE & HOFMAN 2001, 270 and 346-7, n° 162 (n.d.). It is not clear why Bel did not change his costume. In

normally bare in conformity with Roman costume. Because a body cuirass combined with trousers is unusual in Yarhibol's iconography, the trousers worn by the solar deity on the CAM altar could suggest that the figure represents Shamash.<sup>20</sup> But since there are no clearly identifiable images of Shamash clad in body cuirass and trousers this is bound to remain hypothetical.

### **The seated female figure**

The panel to the right of the sun god pictures a woman who is seated facing full front, with her legs pointed to the left [pl. IV]. Her right arm is bended upwards with the right hand twisted around the shaft of a spear that touches the top of the panel. Her clinched left hand rests in her lap. She wears a long undergarment that leaves her small feet just uncovered. On top is a slightly shorter garment. Her head is covered by a long veil that passes behind her body and under her right arm and is draped over her lower left arm. The drapery that covers her left shoulder and arm falls down in evenly spaced vertical pleats. The woman has large almond-shaped eyes with clearly marked upper and lower eye-lids, a prominent nose and small mouth. Her hair that is visible below the veil is parted in the centre and falls down on either side of the face in ringlets. Two curved incisions above the upper part of her garment indicate the folds in her neck. She sits on a cushion on a backless stool whose side is decorated with two crossed diagonals.

The woman's pose recalls that of several seated or enthroned female figures on Palmyrene sculptures, such as, notably, the figure of Allat on the above-mentioned altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin.<sup>21</sup> Compared to the latter, however, the figure on the CAM altar seems to have been less well understood by the sculptor. The depiction of the left hand is

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a paper presented at the Danish Institute in Damascus in March 2010, Michał GAWLIKOWSKI suggested that the god kept his ancient costume due to the venerability of the ancient cult statue: GAWLIKOWSKI forthcoming. Cf. KAIZER 2002, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> Although the combination of body cuirass and trousers is not attested for Yarhibol, it is worn by some other Palmyrene deities. On a relief from the temple of Allat, the rider god Arsu is depicted in a body cuirass with trousers: TANABE 1986, pl. 143; and on the well known beam from the temple of Bel that shows Aglibol and Malakbel in their sanctuary, Aglibol also combines the body cuirass with trousers: TANABE 1986, pl. 30.

<sup>21</sup> COLLART & VICARI 1969, I, p. 223-224; II, pl. CVIII, 3; DUNANT & STUCKY 2000, Taf. 3; DRIJVERS 1976, pl. XLV, 1; TANABE 1986, pl. 148. On this altar, the figure is identified by an inscription as Allat ('*li*): PAT 0181.

awkward since the fist shows five fingers and suggests that it holds an object. The drapery over her left shoulder does not follow the body underneath, and the neckline is rendered oddly.

Thanks to the spear the figure can be identified as a goddess. Her seat, however, does not aid in the identification, since there are no precise iconographic parallels available from Palmyra.<sup>22</sup> Apart from the spear and the seat there are no further attributes. This undistinguished iconography reminds one of the goddess Astarte, who in Palmyra is usually depicted without any object, and occasionally holds a sceptre.<sup>23</sup> The spear, however, is typically an attribute of Allat, though seldom on its own, since this goddess is commonly shown with helmet, shield and *aegis*.<sup>24</sup> In addition she is often represented with lions, as is the case with the figure of Allat on the altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin.<sup>25</sup>

The closest parallel to the figure under discussion with regard to both iconography and style is a Palmyrene relief found at Hatra which shows a goddess standing alongside her

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<sup>22</sup> The throne of the famous ‘*déesse au chien*’ recalls the façade of a temple: WILL 1985, p. 51-52; DIRVEN 1999, p. 110, n. 46. Leto is seated on a chair with a high rounded back: DRIJVERS 1976, pl. LII, 1. Allat on the above-mentioned altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin is seated on a chair with a high straight back: see above, n. 21. Representations of goddesses seated on a similar stool as the one on the CAM altar have, however, been found at Hatra, where at least one of them can be identified as the local goddess Marten, ‘Our Lady’: SAFAR & MUSTAFA 1974, fig. 84, 179, 205; and also a relief of Marten from the North Gate: AL-SALIHI 1975, p. 78, fig. 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Astarte is identified as such on a relief from al-Maqate, where she is depicted alongside Bel, Baal-Shamin, Yarhibol and Aglibol in Greek dress, with a numbus around her head, and (probably) a sceptre (the top of which is not visible though): DRIJVERS 1976, pl. X, 1; TANABE 1986, pl. 108; PAT 1567; and also on a relief from Wadi Arafah, where she appears alongside Bel, Baal-Shamin, Aglibol, Malakbel, Nemesis, Arsu and Abgal, in Greek dress while holding a sceptre in her right hand (and with indistinguishable headgear): DRIJVERS 1976, pl. X, 2; TANABE 1986, pl. 107; PAT 1568. On a relief from Khirbet Farouane, dedicated to the ‘genii of the village’ (*gny’ dy qryt*), a female figure holding a sceptre in her raised right hand stands alongside six male deities dressed in indigenous fashion with small round shields: SCHLUMBERGER 1951, p.67 with pl. XXIX, 1; PAT 1704. An anonymous female figure on a relief, accompanying three gods who could be the ‘triad of Bel’ and hence probably Astarte, is depicted in Greek dress with a polos on her head and a sceptre in her raised right hand: TANABE, pl. 101.

<sup>24</sup> On the iconography of Allat, see STARCKY 1981a and STARCKY 1981b. The most recent finds from Hatra are not included in the regular *LIMC* entry, but can be found in the Supplement: LINANT DE BELLEFONDS 2009. On the iconography of the goddess in Palmyra and other places in the Near East (Hatra not included), see now FRIEDLAND 2008.

<sup>25</sup> For general discussion of the type, see DRIJVERS 1979. A fragmentary relief from the temple of Allat depicts a not otherwise identified female figure wearing a long tunic and mantel holding a palm leaf in her left hand: RUPRECHTSBERGER 1987, p. 314, no. 36. Despite the lack of either armour or animals she is identified, by GAWLIKOWSKI ad loc., as Allat, presumably on the grounds of the relief’s finding spot.

worshipper. She is dressed in a long-sleeved tunic and mantel that covers her head, with two thick tresses of hair falling down on her shoulders. She holds a sceptre or spear and is identified by the accompanying inscription in Palmyrene Aramaic as Allat ('lt).<sup>26</sup> On the basis of the Palmyrene relief from Hatra, the seated figure on the CAM altar may perhaps best be identified as Allat.

### **The armed figure wearing indigenous dress**

The panel to the right of the seated female figure shows a standing male figure, facing full front in the centre of the panel [pl. V]. His weight rests on his left leg; his right foot is turned slightly outwards. His right arm is bent upward with the right hand twisted around the shaft of a spear that touches the top of the panel. From his left arm hangs a small round shield, common in the desert, that is adorned with a small circle in the centre. A long sword hangs from his left side. The shield covers the pommel of the sword and the suspension is not sculpted. The figure has wavy hair that is parted in the middle and falls to his shoulders. Two curved incisions mark the folds in his neck. He is clean-shaven apart from a large, drooping moustache. He wears the indigenous costume of Palmyra and its surroundings - a long-sleeved tunic with a piece of cloth wrapped around his waist in a heavy roll that falls down just above the ankles. The folds that fall down from his shoulders suggest he wears a short mantle. Ridges above the instep are the sole indication of footwear.

The indigenous costume and weapons of this figure are typical of a variety of armed gods who were especially popular in the Palmyrène, but who received a cult in Palmyra as well. They were called by various names, such as Maan and Saad, Abgal, and Shalman, and often interpreted by scholars as 'Arab deities'.<sup>27</sup> Apart from the shield and some minor details, the figure is near identical to the god identified as Shaarou or Shaadou on the altar from the temple of Baalshamin.<sup>28</sup> Although it goes too far to identify this god as such, there can be no doubt that he is one of the so-called armed gods from the desert that were analysed

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<sup>26</sup> AL-SALIHI 1987, p. 55-58, pl. XIII; *PAT* 1604; Cf. DIRVEN forthcoming.

<sup>27</sup> Thus TEIXIDOR 1979, p. 77-100.

<sup>28</sup> COLLART & VICARI 1969, I, p. 223-225; II, pl. CVIII, 2; DUNANT & STUCKY 2000, Taf. 4; DRIVERS 1976, pl. XLV, 2; TANABE 1986, pl. 149. On this altar, the figure is identified by an inscription (*š'd/rw*): *PAT* 0181.



by Henry Seyrig in a classic article examining the popularity of armed gods in Roman Syria.<sup>29</sup> These gods were particularly popular in the surroundings of Palmyra, among people who were intimately connected with life in the desert, such as nomads, small farmers and protectors of caravans.<sup>30</sup> The arms and clothing of these gods reflected those of their worshippers and expressed their protective function in an inhospitable environment.<sup>31</sup> According to Seyrig they were introduced in Palmyra when their worshippers settled in the city.<sup>32</sup> Although Seyrig's characterization of these deities as 'Arab' is problematic,<sup>33</sup> it is remarkable that they figure most prominently in sanctuaries with a clientele that still seems to have had intimate connections with life in the desert, namely the temples of Baal-Shamin and of Allat.<sup>34</sup> As protective deities of individuals and small social groups, they are markedly different from gods in Roman military dress, which played a more prominent role in the religious life of the city and were worshipped by larger groups of the population.

### **The standing figure with trident and patera**

The panel to the right of the armed figure shows a bearded male who stands with both feet placed firmly on the ground, facing full front [pl. VI]. With his left hand he grasps a trident, which slants diagonally across his body with the fork to the left of his head. In his lowered

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<sup>29</sup> SEYRIG 1970. Cf. DOWNEY 1977, p. 204-205

<sup>30</sup> On the evidence from the Palmyrène, see SCHLUMBERGER 1951, esp. p. 125-128. DRIJVERS 1976, p. 20-22.

<sup>31</sup> TEIXIDOR 1979, p.79.

<sup>32</sup> SEYRIG 1970, p. 90.

<sup>33</sup> See the important considerations by MACDONALD 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Apart from the altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin that shows the god Shadou or Shaarou (see above, n. 28), a relief found at the Camp of Diocletian (and therefore perhaps from the temple of Allat), depicts Azizu: DRIJVERS 1976, pl. LXVI, 2. Another, fragmentary and crude, relief found at the same Camp shows a stele that represents a god in local dress: RUPRECHTSBERGER 1987, n° 29. From the temple of Allat come a fragmentary relief that pictures a goddess with two gods from the desert: TANABE 1986, pl. 144; and a relief from the cella in the temple of Allat dated to the third century AD that depicts the goddess with Arsu and one or two deities from the desert: DRIJVERS 1979, p. 338-339, pl. LXXIII; RUPRECHTSBERGER 1987, n° 31. On the cult in both temples and the relationship with so-called 'Arab' deities, see DIRVEN 1999, p. 79-81. In addition, Allat is frequently associated with local deities in their sanctuaries in the Palmyrène: DRIJVERS 1976, p. 20, lists the known instances.

right hand is a small patera.<sup>35</sup> He has short wavy hair and a full curly beard with drooping moustache. The god is dressed in a short-sleeved tunic with a round neck and a mantle. On the chest, the tunic falls in straight vertical folds. The mantle falls vertically from the left shoulder to the elbow. It passes behind the body and under the right arm to cover the lower part of the figure's body just above the ankles. The small feet point outwards and appear to be shot in sandals.

The trident seems to identify the figure with the Greek god Poseidon, which accords well with his curly hair and beard. In the classical world, however, it was unusual to picture Poseidon fully clothed in tunic and mantle. Normally, he would be represented either in the nude or with a mantle draped around the lower part of his body. Not surprisingly, as god of the sea Poseidon was frequently associated with fish.<sup>36</sup>

In Palmyra, a male figure with a trident (not identified by an inscription) figures in the central medallion of the so-called Cassiopeia mosaic, probably dating from around the time of the fall of the city.<sup>37</sup> Of course, one would expect the god with the trident who figures in the cycle around Cassiopeia to be identified as the Greek god of the sea, conform to the situation elsewhere in the Graeco-Roman world, but it is by no means certain that this was

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<sup>35</sup> On the phenomenon of deities being depicted holding an offering bowl, see VEYNE 1990, p. 28, who interpreted the patera in divine hands as “une épithète de nature: ‘sacré’, ‘saint’. Le tout aboutit à une tautologie ou plutôt à la plus populaire des figures de rhétorique, la répétition: ‘divin est le dieu’.”

<sup>36</sup> SIMON 1994. On the so-called ‘battle relief’ from Palmyra, on a beam from the temple of Bel, showing the battle between a monster and several Palmyrene deities, two fish flank one of the deities dressed in military cuirass: SEYRIG, AMY & WILL 1975, p. 87-88, pl. 44, with 1968, 90; DIRVEN 1999, p. 147-151, fig. 19. Since elsewhere in the Near East Poseidon was frequently associated with fish, the military figure may be yet another representation of him at Palmyra, although this cannot be more than a hypothesis.

<sup>37</sup> STERN 1977, p. 30-31; BALTY 1995, p. 291-297.

the case also in Palmyra.<sup>38</sup> In any case, contrary to the god on the CAM altar, the figure with a trident on the mosaic is naked.<sup>39</sup>

A second instance of a god with a trident is provided by a tessera, showing a male bust with a trident in his right hand.<sup>40</sup> The character appears to be bearded and clothed, like the figure on the CAM altar, but with a calathos on his head. The bust on the tessera is not identified by an accompanying inscription, but in view of the image of the wailing woman on the reverse side of the tessera, the editors of the *Recueil des tessères de Palmyre* associated the figure with Tammouz.<sup>41</sup> This identification is, however, far from certain, since obverse and reverse of Palmyrene tesserae are not necessarily related.

A bilingual inscription on an altar dated to AD 39, found in the agora, dedicates the monument in Greek to Poseidon. The Palmyrene Aramaic counterpart, much more detailed and hence the primary text on the altar, is dedicated to El-Qonera‘ (‘El the creator’).<sup>42</sup> The latter name appears once more in Palmyra, on a tessera.<sup>43</sup> The bust that accompanies the inscription by no means resembles the god on the CAM altar; on the tessera, the figure is

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<sup>38</sup> In addition to the Palmyrene mosaic, two other Near Eastern mosaics (from Apamea on the Orontes and Nea Paphos on Cyprus) are similarly diverging from the classical version of the myth of Cassiopeia, in showing the protagonist *victorious* in her beauty contest with the Nereids. The key study is BALTU 1981. Cf. BALTU 1996 and 2005, for a neo-Platonic interpretation of the mosaic. The divine judge on the mosaic from Apamea is identified by an inscription as Poseidon, but on the mosaic from Nea Paphos his place has been taken by Aion, the divine personification of the permanence of the cosmos, again identified by an inscription (Ἄϊών). Cf. TEIXIDOR 1977, p. 42-46, on the Near Eastern version of Poseidon, and KAIZER 2011, on the three mosaics’ incompatibility with the variegated evidence for the cult of Andromeda at Iope.

<sup>39</sup> Needless to say, the context is very different. The altar was set up for a cultic purpose, whereas the mosaic (though not necessarily bereft of ‘religious meaning’) was laid on the floor of a private house.

<sup>40</sup> RTP n° 343.

<sup>41</sup> On RTP n° 342 the bust of a wailing woman is associated with an outstretched mummified figure who is identified as Tammouz by the inscription below the couch: PAT 2310 (*tmwz*’).

<sup>42</sup> PAT 2779 = IGLS XVII, 1, n° 318, first published by CANTINEAU 1938, p. 78-79, n° 31: *byrh sywn šnt 350 | [q]rb mqymw br khylw br zbdbl | [dy] mtqrh br zbydy dy mn pħd bny | [gd]ybwl ‘lwt’ ‘ln trtyhn | [l]’lqwnr’ ‘lh’ tb’* (‘In the month of Siwan, the year 350 (June, AD 39), MQYMW son of KHYLW son of ZBDBL who is called son of ZBYDY, who is from the tribe of the Sons of [GD]YBWL, offered these two altars to El-Qonera‘, the good god’) / Ποσειδῶνι θεῶ (‘To Poseidon the god’). Cf. TEIXIDOR 1979, p.25-28. This family of the Gaddibol tribe is not otherwise attested: PIERSIMONI 1995, II, p. 556.

<sup>43</sup> RTP n° 220: ‘*lqnr*’. Cf. PAT 2219.

clean-shaven and wears a Roman helmet.<sup>44</sup> As first suggested by Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais, the divine name El-Qonera‘ calls to mind a deity known as Connarus/Konnaros in Baalbek, where two Latin inscriptions were set up *ex responso dei Connari*, one of them by a councillor of the *colonia* Heliopolis, and where a relief from the ceiling of the temple ‘of Bacchus’ shows a winged bearded figure wearing a conical hat who is labelled in Greek as ‘Konnaros who is also Briares’.<sup>45</sup> The latter is the only representation of the god known to date. It has, however, nothing in common with the representation of the god El-Qonera‘ on the Palmyrene tessera.<sup>46</sup>

Representations of Poseidon are fairly common in western Syria and Phoenicia, especially on the local coinage of Berytus, Arados, Ascalon and Apamea, where the god is represented with the trident and is often associated with fish.<sup>47</sup> Like the god on the CAM altar, he frequently holds a patera in his right hand. This type is attested as far east as Hatra, where an imported marble statue of Poseidon was found in the so-called Hellenistic temple.<sup>48</sup> Most of these instances picture the god either naked or partly draped, whereas the figure on the CAM altar wears a himation. This divergent iconographic feature is attested only on coins from Apamea which date from the second half of the second century BC.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the Apamean representation of Poseidon is remarkably similar to the god on the CAM altar.

<sup>44</sup> The same name occurs on *RTP* n° 221, but here the god is not represented. Cf. *PAT* 2220.

<sup>45</sup> REY-COQUAIS 1978, referring to *IGLS* VI, n° 2743: [*e*]x responso dei Conna[ri] | Baebius Aurelianus Dius | dec(urio) col(oniae) Hel(iopolis) | pro salute sua et | Ant(oniae) Diodorae h(onestae) f(eminae) | coniug(is) et filiorum | suorumque omnium | v(otum) l(ibens) a(nimo) s(olvit) (‘In response to the oracle of the god Connarus, Baebius Aurelianus Dius, councillor of the *colonia* Heliopolis, paid his vow willingly and heartily, for his well-being and that of Antonia Diodora, honourable woman, his wife, and of his children and all those that belong to him’). The divine name Connarus also appears in another, similar inscription from Baalbek, see HAJJAR 1990, p. 2504, n° 364. For the Greek inscription, see *IGLS* VI, n° 2841: [K]όνναρος | ὁ καὶ Βριαίρης (with pl. XXXIV), and for further discussion now ALIQUOT 2009, p. 163-164.

<sup>46</sup> It may be noted that a neo-Punic inscription from Lepcis Magna refers to a god called ‘El the creator of the earth’ (‘lqn’rš), who has been interpreted as the ‘African Neptune’. Cf. LEVI DELLA VIDA & GUZZO AMADASI 1987, p. 45-47, n° 18, with CADOTTE 2007, p. 307-324, esp. p. 313-315, and now also HOŠEK 2012, p. 208.

<sup>47</sup> AUGÉ & LINANT DE BELLEFONDS 1997, n°s 14-18. The Poseidon figure on the coinage issued by Berytus in the imperial period reiterates the appearance of a similar image on coins dating from the second and first centuries BC, which has been interpreted by some as the indigenous deity Baal-Berith. Cf. HALL 2004, p. 130, with HILL 1910, p. 52, n° 5, 8, with pl. VII, 3, 5, and p. xlvii. Cf. KROPP 2011, p. 393, 397.

<sup>48</sup> SAFAR & MUSTAFA 1974, fig. 97. The statue’s head has been missing since April 2003.

<sup>49</sup> AUGÉ & LINANT DE BELLEFONDS 1997, n° 15 ; WROTH 1899, p. 233, n° 2, with pl. XXVI, 10.

On the basis of the bilingual inscription in which El-Qonera‘ is equated with Poseidon, it may be assumed that the Poseidon figure on the CAM altar was identified, at least by some, as the indigenous deity. The fact that the only identifiable Palmyrene representation of El-Qonera‘ (on the tessera) differs from the figure on the altar cannot be used as evidence to the contrary.<sup>50</sup> As is well known, Palmyrene deities could be represented in various guises. For example, Allat could appear with the iconographic features of both Athena and Atargatis, Malakbel could be depicted wearing military costume with a nimbus as well as indigenous dress, and Nebu could be shown with the features both of the Greek god Apollo and of a local god with a solar nimbus. It is therefore certainly possible that El-Qonera‘ was represented in Palmyra both with features of the Greek god Poseidon and in the guise of an indigenous deity.

### **Style and date**

The stone is typical of Palmyrene sculpture from the middle of the first century AD onwards, and hence may provide a *terminus post quem* for the altar. The style of the figures in relief is similar to that of the figures on the altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin, which has been dated to the second half of the first century AD on the basis of the style of the figures and the shape of the letters of the accompanying inscriptions.<sup>51</sup> Other Palmyrene sculptures that are conventionally dated to the second half of the first century, such as the votive relief that pictures three generations of priests of Nebu and the famous relief of ‘la déesse au chien’, display similar stylistic features.<sup>52</sup> The above-mentioned Palmyrene relief from Hatra that represents Allat belongs to the same group.<sup>53</sup> Of special note are the similar treatment of the stylised drapery, the eyes with clearly indicated upper and lower eyelids, the double line in the neck, the awkward pose of the hands that grasp an object, and the small feet. The thick

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<sup>50</sup> In fact, the unique iconography of the figure on the altar is a strong argument in favour of the authenticity of the piece. It would be difficult to imagine a forger inventing the figure without a Palmyrene parallel.

<sup>51</sup> COLLART & VICARI 1969, I, p. 223 ; DUNANT 1971, p. 40. Followed by DRIJVERS 1979, p. 332.

<sup>52</sup> Priests: BOUNNI, SEIGNE & SALIBY 1992, fig. 108, with BOUNNI 2004, p. 88-89, n° 32; TANABE 1986, pl. 173. Goddess with the dog: WILL 1985; BOUNNI, SEIGNE & SALIBY 1992, fig. 103, with BOUNNI 2004, p. 88, n° 31; CHARLES-GAFFIOT, LAVAGNE & HOFMAN 2001, 274, 347, n° 166; TANABE 1986, pl. 123-126. Another striking parallel is provided by a fragmentary relief showing the lower parts of the bodies of one female and two male figures in indigenous dress that was found in the temple of Allat in Palmyra: TANABE 1986, pl. 144.

<sup>53</sup> See above, n. 26.

locks of hair that fall over the shoulders of the seated goddess on the CAM altar are also typical of early Palmyrene sculptures.<sup>54</sup> Whereas these stylistic parallels suggest that the altar was fabricated in Palmyra between AD 50-100, the body cuirass hints at a date after AD 80.<sup>55</sup> In all probability, the altar therefore dates from the last quarter of the first century AD.

### **Concluding remarks**

On the basis of comparison with other Palmyrene representations, three figures on the CAM altar can be identified with some confidence as Allat, a typical armed desert deity, and El-Qonera'/Poseidon. The identity of the fourth figure, the solar deity, is more difficult to pinpoint precisely, since the same iconographic scheme could be used for Yarhibol and Shamash. The fact that he is associated on this altar both with Allat and with an anonymous desert deity, perhaps favours an identification of the figure as Shamash/Helios.

Although there can be no doubt that the altar was fabricated in Palmyra, it does not follow that it was found at the oasis proper. It is well known that Palmyrenes settled in different parts of the Roman world (including Rome, Dacia, Numidia, Berenike, Cos, and of course Dura-Europos) and we know of at least some cases in which they seem to have imported religious sculptures from Palmyra.<sup>56</sup> That said, the chance that the altar originated at Palmyra itself is of course substantially bigger. In view of its small dimensions, it may be best to interpret the CAM altar as a private monument, reflecting the religious preferences of its dedicant. As such, it is likely to have been set up in one of Palmyra's sanctuaries, although the possibility of a domestic context can of course not be excluded. In case of a sanctuary, the appearance of Allat and of an indigenous desert god would point to a place of worship where such deities figured prominently, such as the temples of Baal-Shamin or of Allat. The fact that Allat and the desert deity are associated with El-Qonera'/Poseidon, a deity also attested

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<sup>54</sup> SABEH 1953, pl. I, and BOUNNI 2004, p. 85, n° 23 (probably from the beginning of the first century AD, as it is fabricated of yellow limestone). See also the depiction of Allat on the altar from the temple of Baal-Shamin: above, n. 21; and a first-century gravestone of a woman: COLLEDGE 1976, fig. 68. The figure of Allat on the Palmyrene relief from Hatra displays the same hairdo: see above, n. 26.

<sup>55</sup> See above, n. 16.

<sup>56</sup> In addition to the Palmyrene relief of Allat that was found in Hatra (see above, n. 26), mention should be made of the two reliefs dedicated to the Gadde of Dura and of Tadmor, and the relief dedicated to Nemesis, which were discovered at Dura-Europos: DIRVEN 1999, pl. III-IV, XVI.

at the Phoenician coast and in western Syria, is of course highly suggestive and corresponds well with the western origin of Baal-Shamin and of the latter's associate Durahlun.<sup>57</sup>

To what degree the co-appearance of these four deities on the CAM altar reflects an actual cultic reality at the oasis cannot be known without further supporting epigraphic or other sculptural evidence.<sup>58</sup> In any case, this little monument, found by chance at an unexpected place, contributes to our multifaceted picture of Palmyrene religion, and especially to the issue of how divine constellations could be constituted at Palmyra.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

- IGLS* L. Jalabert, R. Mouterde, e.a., *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, Paris, 1929-.
- LIMC* *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, Zürich/München/Düsseldorf, 1981-2009.
- PAT* D. R. HILLERS and E. CUSSINI, *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts*, Baltimore/London, 1996.
- RTP* H. INGHOLT, H. SEYRIG and J. STARCKY, *Recueil des tessères de Palmyre*, suivi de remarques linguistiques par A. CAQUOT (*BAH* 58), Paris, 1955.

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<sup>57</sup> DIRVEN 1999, p. 80-81. Cf. NIEHR 2003.

<sup>58</sup> It may be worth calling to mind an inscription from 6 BC in Palmyrene Aramaic, which records how a statue was erected for someone who had made major offerings 'to Herta, Nanai and Reshef, the gods': *PAT* 2766, with KAIZER 2002, p. 76. This inscription had long been known, but it was not until the discovery and publication, much later, of a bilingual inscription from the temple of Nebu dating to AD 99, listing the same three deities (in Greek as Hera, Artemis and Rasafos) alongside each other, that it became clear that their initial association had been more than a one-off: BOUNNI 2004, p. 61-62, n° 17; *IGLS* XVII, 1, n° 177. Furthermore, an inscription from AD 129 records how two brothers dedicated six columns of a portico with its entablature and roofing to three deities, Shamash, Allat and Rahim: *PAT* 0301. Rahim (according to his name 'the merciful one') appears at Palmyra alongside various other deities. Cf. KAIZER 2002, p. 107 n. 220, and p. 119 n. 275. He is generally interpreted as one of the more indigenous 'Arab' gods, but unfortunately there is no assured representation of this god which could be compared with the armed figure wearing indigenous dress on the CAM altar. Cf. TEIXIDOR 1979, p. 62-64; GAWLIKOWSKI 1990a, p. 2642-2643. If the figure with nimbus on the altar is interpreted as Shamash, it could be hypothesised that this inscription lists three of the deities depicted on the CAM altar, though El-Qonera/Poseidon is of course missing.

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