

## CREATING LOCAL RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN THE ROMAN NEAR EAST\*

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The attentive visitor to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge may spot in room 24 a beautiful large statue in basalt stone which, according to the accompanying label, is that of a ‘syncretistic, Syrian military deity’ (Fig. 1). The statue, from the Syrian Hauran region ca 100 km south to south-east of Damascus, was published in the Acquisitions guide of the Museum, but has, to the best of my knowledge, not otherwise been discussed in scholarly literature.<sup>1</sup> In 1979 the Keeper of Antiquities Dick Nicholls described it in a slightly longer, unpublished report to the then director of the Museum as follows:

This statue, possibly the finest of the Hauran sculptures now surviving, lacks its arms and legs but is otherwise splendidly preserved. The head is that of a goddess wearing drop ear-rings, a splendid late Roman link-in-link chain necklace with animal-head finials and a central medallion and, in her hair, the form of the Greek *stephane* that had by Roman times evolved into a kind of crown worn by certain goddesses such as Venus and Diana. [... ...] Her hair is rendered in one of the developments from the much older Hellenistic ‘melon style’ that became widespread in the eastern Roman provinces in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, and more especially in the later part of that century. The figure wears a military cloak, fastened at the right shoulder by a brooch with ivy-leaf pendants hanging by chains, and a breastplate. The latter terminates below the androgynous breasts which mark the transition from a female head to a male body and is worn without shoulder-guards. The preserved shoulders and struts from the body show that both arms were lowered to the sides. The right arm held a double-bladed battle axe, the blades and top of which are preserved

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholls 1983: 36, no. 224. Lucilla Burn informed me that there was an opportunity in 1979 or 1980 to analyse a sample of the stone, since the statue’s head proved to have been detached and there were some problems mounting it, and that it was then confirmed to be ‘olivine basalt’, common throughout Syria but especially characteristic for the Hauran.

against the right shoulder. [... ..] The left arm also held an attribute, of which the only part surviving is the head of a snake that extends over on to the breastplate. Almost certainly, what the statue held was the *kerykeion*, or herald's staff, of Hermes, twined with two snakes.

The report further recognised elements of different gods and goddesses in the figure, Zeus, Aphrodite and Hermes, who were equated with the Syrian deities Hadad, Atargatis and Simois respectively, and connected with the planets Jupiter, Venus and Mercury. Noting that sculptures from the Hauran - in the words of Nicholls "possibly the most remarkable of all branches of provincial Roman art" - were not at all well presented in British museums, he was especially keen to buy the statue because it complemented the so-called 'shrine of Malikat' already in the Fitzwilliam (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> This monolithic monument, with a preserved height of half a meter, and a hollow interior which originally housed a divine image or sacred object, owes its name to a Greek inscription which refers to the lamp originally topping the shrine: Λύχνος Μαλειχάθου, Malikat being the very common indigenous name behind the Greek transcription. The monument is especially notable for its side reliefs: on the right a bust of a sun god with solar crown, wearing a *chiton*, and on the left a bust of a moon goddess with accompanying crescent. As is emphasised correctly in the Museum Catalogue, this divine imagery does not necessarily hint at the deity or deities to whom the monument would have been dedicated. The view which was traditionally held amongst scholars, namely that the supreme gods of most localities in the Near East had become solar deities by the Hellenistic period, was put straight by a classic article of Henri Seyrig, in which he pointed out that in virtually all cases the sun god in the local religions of the classical Levant was never actually identified with the relevant supreme deity, but did instead become one of the latter's main manifestations.<sup>3</sup> Solar imagery - often, but certainly not always, in combination with a lunar representation - was in any case very present in many local Near Eastern religious contexts, where it could be used to portray, in some sort of 'abbreviated format', the cosmic settings of the divine world, such as for example on the lintels of the Palmyrene temples of Bel and of Baal-Shamin.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Budde and Nicholls 1964: 78-9, no. 126 with pl.42.

<sup>3</sup> Seyrig 1971.

<sup>4</sup> Gawlikowski 1981. For the lintels from the temples of Bel and of Baal-Shamin at Palmyra, see Drijvers 1976: pl.II and pl.XXXII respectively.

The brief introductory remarks about these two relatively unknown sculptures in the Fitzwilliam have touched upon some of the issues which will be addressed in this chapter. There is something, whether it is in their material, style, or iconographic detail, which makes the sculptures instantly recognizable as being inherently ‘Oriental’, or rather ‘Near Eastern’. Some elements, such as the busts of the sun and the moon deities on the sides of the miniature shrine, or the military breastplate of the statue, are similar to, or even identical with, evidence known from elsewhere in the Near East. Other aspects cannot be pinned down so easily, and it is especially the unprecedented combination of this particular set of iconographic features which turns the statue of the so-called ‘syncretistic, Syrian military deity’ into a unique, unparalleled divine figure. Without willing to comment on the report’s precise identification of the statue, the fact that it recognised iconographic features and requisites relating to different deities in order to characterise the figure, calls to mind the device applied in a well-known passage in the treatise that counts as the only contemporary account of pagan worship in the Roman Near East by someone who claims to be an insider, *On the Syrian Goddess*, attributed to the second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata. In paragraph 32, the author describes the statue of the main goddess at the large temple of Hierapolis (Mabog, in northern Syria) as follows:<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, the image of Zeus looks entirely like Zeus in features and clothes and seated posture; you could not identify it otherwise even if you wished. But when you examine Hera, her image appears to be of many forms. While the overall effect is certainly that of Hera, she also has something of Athena and Aphrodite and Selene and Rhea and Artemis and Nemesis and the Fates. In one hand she has a sceptre, in the other a spindle, and on her head she wears rays, a tower, and the *kestos* with which they adorn Ourania alone.

The description then continues, referring to precious stones sent to the goddess from far away, and elaborating on the radiating *lychnis* she wears on her head. It may be known for certain from other sources, such as Strabo and Pliny the Elder, that she was

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<sup>5</sup> Καὶ δῆτα τὸ μὲν τοῦ Διὸς ἄγαλμα ἐς Δία πάντα ὄρη καὶ κεφαλὴν καὶ εἴματα καὶ ἔδρην, καὶ μιν οὐδὲ ἐθέλων ἄλλως εἰκάσεις. ἡ δὲ Ἥρη σκοπέοντί τοι πολυειδέα μορφήν ἐκφανέει· καὶ τὰ μὲν ξύμπαντα ἀτρεκέϊ λόγῳ Ἥρη ἐστίν, ἔχει δὲ τι καὶ Ἀθηναίης καὶ Ἀφροδίτης καὶ Σεληναίης καὶ Ῥέης καὶ Ἀρτέμιδος καὶ Νεμέσιος καὶ Μοιρέων. χειρὶ δὲ τῆ μὲν ἑτέρῃ σκῆπτρον ἔχει, τῆ ἑτέρῃ δὲ ἄτρακτον, καὶ ἐπὶ τῆ κεφαλῇ ἀκτῖνάς τε φορέει καὶ πύργον καὶ κέστον τῷ μούνην τὴν Οὐρανίαν κοσμέουσιν. The translation follows Lightfoot 2003, which is not just an excellent edition and commentary of a complicated text, but simultaneously the most extensive study of Near Eastern religion in book form thus far.

Atargatis,<sup>6</sup> or rather Atar-ate as coin legends from Hellenistic Hierapolis and Aramaic inscriptions from elsewhere in the Near East inform us.<sup>7</sup> But that is *not* how the treatise refers to her. Instead, it seems clear that this explicit syncretism (if the word may be used), the invocation of other divine names in order to make a deity understandable, is a way to approach the uniquely local, indigenous deities of the Near East *not only* on the part of modern scholars, but also in Antiquity. Of course, this is only Lucian, and if it was not Lucian than it was at least an equally skilled literator, who presents himself as someone able to give inside information while imitating the linguistic style of Herodotus with near perfection, as Jane Lightfoot has now established beyond reasonable doubt. Naturally, it could be argued that the fact that *On the Syrian Goddess* was first and foremost meant to be a linguistic play on its Herodotean model has a serious effect on its usefulness for historical purposes. But it should also be recognised that, even if the piece was meant as tongue-in-cheek, the joke could only have worked in case the author managed to portray a realistic representation of religious life in the wider Roman Syria. The text may therefore not have given an accurate picture of what went on in this specific sanctuary at Hierapolis, but it is emblematic rather of religious life in the Near Eastern lands as a whole.<sup>8</sup>

Moving away from the literary nuances, something similar can indeed be observed at the ostentatious *hierothesion* at Nemrud Dag, the tomb sanctuary of Antiochus I, king over Commagene from ca 70 to 36 BC. The enormous statues on the west and east terraces of Mt Nemrud, amongst which the king himself is seated too, are explicitly identified, in the inscriptions running on the back of the statues, as Ζεὺς Ὀρομάσδης, Απόλλων Μίθρης Ἥλιος Ἐρμῆς, and Ἀρτάγνης Ἡρακλῆς Ἄρης, the ultimate embodiment of the notion of syncretism, and the same gods with whom the king portrayed himself on the multiple *dexiôsis* reliefs which

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<sup>6</sup> Strabo 16.1.27 (748): ἡ Βαμβύκη, ἣν καὶ Ἐδεσσαν καὶ Ἱερὰν πόλιν καλοῦσιν, ἐν ἣ τριῶσι τὴν Συρίαν θεὸν τὴν Ἀταργάτιν ('Bambyce, which is also called Edessa and Hierapolis, where the Syrian goddess Atargatis is worshipped' [LCL]); Pliny, *HN* 5.19/81: *Bambycen quae alio nomine Hierapolis vocatur, Syris vero Mabog - ibi prodigiosa Atargatis, Graecis autem Derceto dicta, colitur* ('Bambyce which is also called by another name, Hierapolis, but by the Syri Mabog; there the monstrous goddess Atargatis is worshipped, but called Derceto by the Greeks' [LCL]).

<sup>7</sup> Lightfoot 2003: 4-6 and 13-4 for references to coins and inscriptions, and 434-43 on the above-quoted description of the iconography of the temple's statue.

<sup>8</sup> I have made this point in Kaizer 2008: 28-9.

were set up throughout his kingdom (Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup> Naturally, these over-the-top remnants of the royal dynastic cult of Commagene do not seem to tell us much about the area's indigenous religious culture. However, even if they proceed from the religious and political programme of the slightly megalomaniac Antiochus himself, they still needed to be sufficiently geared to his subjects in order to realise their potential as adherents to the cults. The religious structures in Commagene are of course very distinct from those known from other areas within the Near East. But any bird's-eye view of the religious life of the wider region, even if far from comprehensive, will immediately reveal that the same can be said about most other places as well.<sup>10</sup> Patterns of worship in the many cities, villages and sub-regions that constituted the Roman Near East were above all very different from each other, despite some obvious similarities. It is true that the various local temple complexes were all embedded in sub-regions with quite specific geological characteristics, which obviously had a bearing on their relevant cultural developments, but the geographical divisions cannot explain all the variety, and neither should that variety be attributed to the undeniable imbalance in spread of evidence. Literary sources are scant, and - with the exception of the earlier mentioned *On the Syrian Goddess*, which has its own instruction manual, and Philo of Byblos' *Phoenician History*, which according to its title is geographically speaking of a more limited value - mostly useless. Still, they are interesting for their approach. The church father Tertullian's statement from the late second century that 'each individual region and each locality had its own deity', linking Syria to the goddess Astartes and Arabia to the god Dusares, is a key example of the simplified treatment that the religious life of the Roman Near East suffered at the hands of Christian and other literary sources.<sup>11</sup> An enigmatic passage in the Syriac *Oration of Melito the Philosopher*, which claims to be a Christian speech addressed to a Roman emperor, gives a list of which deities received a cult where. The section, which apparently comes from a different source than the rest of the discourse, takes a euhemeristic form, describing how the respective gods and goddesses came to be

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<sup>9</sup> For the tomb sanctuary, see Sanders 1996; for the *dexiôsis* reliefs, see Petzl 2003, and for the epigraphic sources on Antiochus' ruler cult, see Crowther and Facella 2003. Cf. Facella 2006: 279-85.

<sup>10</sup> For an attempted bird's-eye view of local religious life in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East as a whole, see Kaizer 2008: 2-10.

<sup>11</sup> Tert. *Apol.* 24.7: *unicuique etiam provinciae et civitati suus deus est, ut Syriae Astartes, ut Arabiae Dusares, ut Noricis Belenus, ut Africae Caelestis, ut Mauritaniae reguli sui* ('every individual province, every city, has its own god; Syria has Astartes; Arabia, Dusares; the Norici Belenus; Africa, her Heavenly Virgin, Mauretania its chieftains' [LCL]).

worshipped as a result of their benefactions made while human. The often confusing passage states, for example, how ‘the Phoenicians worshipped Belti, queen of Cyprus’ and ‘the Syrians worshipped Atti, a woman from Adiabene, who sent the daughter of *BLT*, a nurse, and she cured *SYMY*, the daughter of Hadad, the king of Syria’, while ‘on Nebu then, who is in Mabog, why shall I write to you? For behold, all the priests who are in Mabog know that this is the image of Orpheus, the Thracian magian, and Hadaran, this is the image of Zaradusta, the Persian magian, because these two practised magianism to a well which was in the forest near Mabog.’<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in the sixth century Jacob of Sarug in his homily *On the Fall of the Idols* describes how Satan places Antioch under the protection of Apollo, Edessa under that of Nebu and Bel, Harran under that of the moon god Sin and Baal-Shamin, and so forth.<sup>13</sup>

Such ‘fractionation’<sup>14</sup> of worship in the Near East, as the literary sources with their simplified treatment propagate it, was of course not reflected by the cultic realities. The cults of individual gods and goddesses were not restricted to particular places only, and many of them were worshipped throughout the wider region. It seems logical then that worshippers of a deity with the same name in different localities in the Near East (for example adherents to the cult of Bel at Palmyra, Apamea and Edessa, amongst other places) must have shared a certain focus in their worship of that deity, even if they operated quite differently from each other within their respective local contexts. However, whether we should therefore assume that the multifarious idolisation of individual deities was the result of one ‘central’ cult of a particular deity being distributed over the Near East is a different matter. Such multiple occurrences of a god’s idolisation could also, and maybe better, be understood as being in the first place *local* cults, thanks to whose totality of pluralist identities the notion of a ‘Near Eastern’ cult of that god would be shaped.<sup>15</sup>

If a ‘Near Eastern’ religion in the Roman period may be hard to distinguish, a number of broad patterns of resemblance - such as the application of certain types of cult titles to deities, some specific rituals, and above all the presence of a number of non-classical languages - have certainly assisted in the recognition (in any case on the part of modern scholars) of elements known from specific local contexts as generally

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<sup>12</sup> Cureton 1855: 24, line 15 - 25, line 23 (Syriac text). For a translation of the passage with further references, see Kaizer 2006a: 30-5.

<sup>13</sup> Martin 1875: 110, line 42 - 112, line 91 (Syriac text).

<sup>14</sup> Kaizer 2008: 1.

<sup>15</sup> As was argued in Kaizer 2006a: 39-41.

‘Near Eastern’. Scholars have searched for common characteristics of religious practice amongst the inhabitants of the Near East who spoke one of the Semitic languages at least since William Robertson Smith famously orated on the ‘religion of the Semites’, in his Burnett lectures at Aberdeen University from 1888 to 1891.<sup>16</sup> Mikhaïl Rostovtzeff formulated it as a ‘religious κοινή, familiar to all the Semites and to the semitized Greeks and Iranians throughout Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Arabia’.<sup>17</sup> As Fergus Millar has pointed out, this search is not only understandable, but also in principle legitimate: ‘Given the fundamental importance of language to the emergence of nationalism in the modern world, it is natural that we should pose the question, provided that we remain aware that it may embody completely inappropriate preconceptions.’<sup>18</sup> However, one would need a large-scale study of the applied terminology for religious practices in the various Semitic languages and dialects in order to establish properly to what degree relevant phraseology was shared between different local and sub-regional communities in the Near East as a whole, and the jury is still out over the degree in which the use of different Aramaic dialects, such as Palmyrenean, Hatrean and Nabataean, could provide a ‘common link’ for the pagan cult centres in the Levant. Naturally, these different dialects followed their own trajectory from the period when they started to develop from the dominant ‘imperial Aramaic’ onwards, but that is not to say necessarily that it was only Greek, the new *lingua franca* in the Near East since Alexander, that could meet such a need, as Glen Bowersock wanted to see it.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars have attempted to get round the apparent variety in Near Eastern forms of religious life in various ways. Maurice Sartre proposed a traditional division in multiple pantheons (Phoenician, Aramean and Arab), ‘that correspond to each other without being identical’.<sup>20</sup> However, the evidence from the different places in the Near East is seldom good enough to warrant the recognition of clearly structured relations between different divinities on the local level, let alone of a proper religious system on a larger scale, and talking of Phoenician, Aramean and Arab pantheons is a huge oversimplification. Indeed, William Robertson Smith in his final lecture series

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<sup>16</sup> Smith 1889 and 1995.

<sup>17</sup> Rostovtzeff 1938: 66. For useful criticism of his influential thesis, see Dirven 1999: xix-xxii.

<sup>18</sup> Millar 1993: 11.

<sup>19</sup> Bowersock 1990: 15-6. On the variety of Aramaic dialects in the Roman Near East, see most recently Gzella 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Sartre 1991: 490: ‘Le premier aspect qu’il faut souligner est la présence de panthéons différents, qui se recoupent sans être identiques. Il faut distinguer entre les panthéons phéniciens, araméens et arabes.’

on the subject already recognised that it is the physical connection between a deity and its local sanctuary that is fundamental.<sup>21</sup> The idea that the divine worlds of the Roman Near East were ‘mixtures’ of larger pantheons basically builds on the classic thesis of Otto Eissfeldt that nearly all Near Eastern sites were founded, or at least re-founded, in the Hellenistic period; that they underwent influence not only from the Graeco-Roman world (and in some cases from the Parthian and later also Persian spheres), but also from the surrounding ‘Arab’ populations; but that ultimately, and most importantly, their local religious cultures remained at heart indigenous.<sup>22</sup> Consecutively, it has often been argued that the assumed ‘indigenous nature of Near Eastern religion’ was visible also in the Graeco-Roman appearance of the Levantine temples. Above all, the separation of the inner most sanctuary, the adyton (θάλαμος in Lucian’s terminology, *On the Syrian Goddess* 31), from the cella, the temple building proper, is said to reflect the primitive chapel, which despite its ‘superficial’ Graeco-Roman veneer remains the home of the indigenous deity. The indigenous Near Eastern deities are believed to have remained untouched by the *interpretatio graeca* from the Roman period, even if the classical cover layer at first glance suggests otherwise. Inevitably then, the religious history of the Roman Near East has invariably been analysed in terms of an intersection between ‘indigenous’ and ‘foreign’ (mostly classical) elements; between ‘local’ aspects and those coming from, or at least ascribed to, different cultural spheres of influence. One way around this problem would be a radical appreciation that those elements of a local religion that were themselves not ‘local’, or at least not local in origin, could over time become considered as an intrinsic part of that same local religion, and would subsequently lose any foreign association to which they had been subject in an earlier phase. Thus, a relief from the temple of Bel at Palmyra showing a naked Heracles figure with club and lion skin, standing alongside three deities in traditional Palmyrene dress (Fig. 4), ought really to be discussed as a relief of *four* gods, *all* of which are Palmyrene. The iconography of the Heracles figure may be originally Greek, but the style in which he is depicted on this relief is similar to that of the other deities, and hence very local. This is even more clear at Hatra, originally a Parthian stronghold in the north-Mesopotamian Jazirah steppe, where the Heracles figure could be depicted wearing

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<sup>21</sup> Smith 1995: 62-4.

<sup>22</sup> Eissfeldt 1941: 9 and 153-4.



typically Hatrene jewellery.<sup>23</sup> According to the available sources, both at Palmyra and at Hatra the Heracles figure formed very much part of the local religious set-up. In order to make sense of the often baffling evidence - and as an alternative to the still fashionable theory of an accumulation of rather 'stationary' religious layers, of which the latest, the classical one, is believed to have had no real impact on the indigenous religious elements - it may be more helpful to postulate a process of continuous renegotiation of religious elements taking place in the context of the various open local cultures, a process which not automatically took place in what moderns might view as a progressive or logical format.<sup>24</sup> That said, it remains a problem that the static nature of the documentary and visual evidence seems to show the opposite of the dynamism of the model of continuous renegotiation. But if the religious worlds of the Roman Near East may have been more dependent on tradition than this model seems to take into account, it is also a very risky assumption to conclude from the static nature of the evidence that pagan religious practice in the Near East was therefore unchanging and unchangeable in the Roman period.<sup>25</sup>

So far it has been argued that gods and their cults in the Near East ought to be interpreted first and foremost as conditioned by their direct local context, and that these local forms of religious life must have undergone continuing development, even if the nature of the evidence does not always help to reveal such development. But by what means were local religious identities created? In order to answer that question in full, attention ought to be paid to a variety of aspects, such as the language chosen by the worshipper to address his or her deity and to publicise his or her adherence to its cult, the actual terminology used in the inscriptions to describe the gods and to deal with the complicated divine worlds, the way the gods are depicted in sculptures and on coins, the sort of temple in which a particular deity was worshipped and that temple's location in relation to other sacred places within the locality, and the financial backing for a cult and its maintenance. These are only some of the issues related to the large and commonly ignored subject of the mechanics by which specifically *local* gods and goddesses could be created, by their worshippers and observers alike, in the Roman Near East, and only some of them can be dealt with in a little more detail in what follows.

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<sup>23</sup> E.g. Sommer 2003: Abb. 117.

<sup>24</sup> For this model, see Kaizer 2000a: 225-6.

<sup>25</sup> Contra e.g. Teixidor 1977: 6.

It is fitting to look first at the widely spread worship throughout the region of so-called toponymic deities, gods and goddesses who were explicitly named after a specific locality. They provide important case-studies, as it is clear that the local context is by definition of the utmost relevance for our understanding of the cult centred on a ‘universally known’ god with an epithet that links him to his place of origin, whether a famous city in the case of Zeus *Damaskènos*, or a village owned by a temple complex in the middle of the Jebel Ansariyeh in the case of Zeus *Baitokèkè*.<sup>26</sup> By means of such expressions worshippers applied explicit labels of cultural identification to their deities, and these can therefore illuminate the way in which the inhabitants of the Near East conceived themselves, namely above all belonging to a particular city or (even more common) a particular village. The Roman Near East has been described as ‘a world of villages’,<sup>27</sup> and although the archaeological remains of these villages and small towns are scant and often lost, the multitude of inscribed dedications to their local gods show that they often formed the focal point in daily life. That is of course not to say that we can claim to know who these local deities really *were*, since we are handicapped by the nearly complete absence of sources which may have hinted at what the inhabitants of the Near East actually ‘believed’. Inscriptions commonly form the basis of our investigations, providing the opportunity to attend first and foremost to the names and epithets actually given to the deities by their worshippers. In a way, therefore, as Fergus Millar phrased it, ‘the god is what the worshipper says he is’.<sup>28</sup> This is certainly right in the sense that most of our knowledge of the divine world of the Roman Near East depends on the inscribed altars, steles and columns which individual dedicants and benefactors paid for in honour of specific inhabitants of that divine world. That said, an ancient worshipper would certainly not agree with this idea that he had ‘made up’ his own god. Surely, he just addressed his deity in that manner which seemed to fit the appropriate situation best? In other words, and on a more theological level, the inhabitants of the local divine worlds within the Near East were there perpetually and invariably. Worshippers could simply adjust the divine names and approach deities in

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<sup>26</sup> On Zeus *Damaskènos*: *IGLS* XIII.1 no. 9013 (an inscription actually found at Bostra), and see now Freyberger 2006. On Zeus *Baitokèkè*: *IGLS* III no. 4028, with Steinsapir 2005: 31-45. Further examples of toponymic deities are innumerable.

<sup>27</sup> Millar 1993: e.g. 228, 250, 292, 390.

<sup>28</sup> Millar 1993: 248-9 and 270.

sometimes contradictory manners, depending both on the local context and on the worshippers' own perspectives.

In addition to the use of toponymic epithets, a strong *local* religious identity could also be expressed, and accordingly created, by using epithets that were not connected to the place name of the town or the village as such, but which were still restricted to one particular site. Two examples will show, in different ways, how unique and local forms of religion must be put in a wider context in order to gain full appreciation of the peculiarity that seems to characterise them in the first place. The first example is that of the well-known set of fascinating deities in the Limestone Massif, the hinterland of the cities of northwest Syria, who are characterised by unique epithets which simultaneously reveal some conceptual similarity lying underneath, namely a link with aniconic cult features.<sup>29</sup> At Burj Baqirha on the Jebel Barisha the best preserved temple of the Massif (Fig. 5) was dedicated by local benefactors, according to the lintel of the temenos gate, to Zeus Bômos, Zeus 'Altar'. At Srir, also on the Jebel Barisha, a temple was built in classical style for Zeus Tourbarachos, the 'ancestral deity', whose etymology is based on a junction of the Semitic roots *šwr* and *brk*, leading to something along the lines of 'blessed rock'. At Kalota on the Jebel Seman, to the northeast of Srir, a shrine belonged to Symbetylos, Zeus Seimos and Leôn, thus to a deity whose name means 'the one who shares the betyl (the aniconic stone)', a god whose name may be connected with the Semitic word for 'name' (*shem*), and a divine figure called 'lion'.<sup>30</sup> A fourth pagan temple, on top of the dominant hill top in the area, Jebel Sheikh Barakat, and hence from a topographical point of view the most important of the set, was dedicated to Zeus Madbachos (*mdbk'*) and Selamanes. Whereas the latter may be connected with an old Assyrian divine name 'Shulmanu', the epithet of Zeus, Madbachos, is in fact the Aramaic version of the Greek *bômos*, 'altar', since *mdbk'* comes from the root *dbk*, 'to sacrifice'. Whether all those involved in the worship of these deities fully realised the conceptual overlap between these cults is of course another matter, but - despite the fact that the individual divine names appear only in the context of their own site - the idea of some sort of notional network between these sanctuaries and their gods is

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<sup>29</sup> For what follows, see Callot and Marcillet-Jaubert 1984; Millar 1993: 250-6; and Gatier 1997.

<sup>30</sup> The latter, and especially his association with an aniconic cult object, calls to mind a passage in the early sixth-century *Life of Isidorus* (203) by the neo-platonist Damascius, which is preserved in Photius' *Bibliotheca*, cod.242 [348a-b], in which an aniconic stone near Damascus replies to an oracular question that it belonged to a deity worshipped in Baalbek in the shape of a lion. The story may be suggestive, but of course it would be too far-fetched to look for any direct connection.

hard to escape. Nevertheless, even if the deities were named in similar fashion, the fact that their peculiar epithets seem to have been restricted to one particular place only implies that worshippers considered them as individual deities. Simultaneously, and this is especially relevant considering the non-classical elements of the divine nomenclature, it is worth emphasising that the architectural expression given to these cults in the Roman period is not indigenous, but Graeco-Roman.<sup>31</sup> This observation may be used as a warning against too hastily drawn conclusions about the nature of these cults: despite the agreement in meaning between the divine names, it is not an automatic given that, in the Roman period, the cults centred completely around aniconic imagery. Indeed, it has now been convincingly argued by Milette Gaifman that the long-held view that aniconic imagery was characteristic for the Near East as a whole is not longer tenable, and that the scholarly model which contrasts aniconic with anthropomorphic cult objects disagrees with the actual realities of worship.<sup>32</sup> As regards the pagan temples in the Limestone Massif, it ought to be noted that some anthropomorphic figures are indeed present. At the start of the two roads leading up to the sanctuary at Srir, of the three roads leading to the top of Jebel Sheik Barakat, and also of a road leading up to Qal'at Kalota, are inscribed reliefs of a reclining Heracles figure. The two reliefs at Srir differ from each other, and from the other ones, in one important aspect: while the relief at the northern approach is dated to AD 130 according to the era of Antioch (year 179), the one at the southern approach is dated to AD 131 according to the Seleucid era (year 445), showing how the sanctuary was situated right at the border between the civic territories of Antioch and of Chalcis, and hence raising questions about the logistics of the temple's administration and about the relevance that this local rural temple must have had for the civic communities of two major cities on either side.

The second example is that of Deir el-Qala, a place located on Mt Lebanon with a view over the nearby *colonia* Berytus that functioned as the centre of worship of a god known as the 'Lord of Dances'.<sup>33</sup> His Latin and Greek names, *Jupiter Balmarcod* and *Theos Balmarkôs*, both attested only at Deir el-Qala, come from the

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<sup>31</sup> Thus Millar 1993: 255: 'Continuity of cult over centuries is quite possible. Even if that must remain a mere hypothesis, our evidence from this rural area makes it certain that the Hellenistic cities did not wholly determine the nature of religious practices even at the heart of the most Hellenised part of the Near East. Yet the *expression* given to this cult in architectural form belongs, as always, to the Roman Empire.'

<sup>32</sup> Gaifman 2008.

<sup>33</sup> For what follows, see Rey-Coquais 1999.

Semitic phrase *b'l mrqd*, which has that precise meaning. And like his more famous toponymic counterparts from the Near East, the originally local gods of Doliche and Baalbek (known throughout the empire as Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus and Jupiter Optimus Maximus Heliopolitanus respectively), the Lord of Dances could receive dedications to Jupiter Optimus Maximus Balmarcod, similarly turning a local cult into a nominal alternative to the deity who presented Rome's most traditional and far-reaching parade of power. The case of Deir el-Qala is of particular interest because it can provide a glimpse into the role that mythology known from the classical world could play in local religious contexts in the Roman Near East.<sup>34</sup> The Dionysiac epithet *κόζαυε κώμων*, 'leader of the processional band of revellers', that the Lord of Dances received in at least one inscription, seems to confirm that for at least some worshippers this indigenous divine figure was to be identified with Dionysos, the Greek god of merry-making, in whose cult processional and wild dancing played such a major part. If that is correct, it may be possible to explain the surprising presence of some of the other deities who are mentioned in the inscriptions from Deir el-Qala, such as Mater Matuta (the Latin equivalent of Leucothea), Juno and Poseidon. As is well known, these deities play a role in the myth of Ino-Leucothea. Ino was the daughter of Cadmus and second wife of Athamas, who - by bringing up Dionysos (the son of Zeus by her sister Semele) - provoked the anger of Hera. In her revenge the goddess drove them mad, so that Athamas killed their son Learchus, and Ino jumped with their other son, Melicertes, to their death into the sea. There, of course, they were received by Poseidon as sea-divinities, under the names of Leucothea and Palaemon. Interestingly, coins from Berytus, the city closest to Deir el-Qala that issued coinage, often show a dolphin, alongside Poseidon or his trident,<sup>35</sup> and it could be that this imagery is connectable to the version of the myth in which Melicertes-Palaemon is carried to the Isthmus by a dolphin.<sup>36</sup> It is of course a valid question to ask how much of this story would actually have been known in a Hellenised city on the Phoenician coast that had become a Roman colony in the late first century BC, and especially why it is relevant to cultic practice in the immediate surroundings of Berytus. However, as Dennis Feeney has emphasised, mythology

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<sup>34</sup> For full details and references concerning the example that follows, see Kaizer (2005).

<sup>35</sup> *BMC Phoenicia*, no. 11 (from the first century BC); *SNG Cop.*, no. 102 (from the reign of Antoninus Pius).

<sup>36</sup> Paus. I.44.7-8 and II.1.3; Stat. *Theb.* IX.330.

functioned as a vital component of the continuous reproduction of Graeco-Roman religious culture. And as regards the Roman Near East in particular, the unfolding of local mythologies was further complicated because there were no coherent ‘Oriental’ mythological accounts which were spread all over the region, comparable to Homer and Hesiod, or to Ovid. The case of Deir el-Qala may therefore be used, with care, as a case-study of how a mythological ‘package’ from the classical world contributed to the creation of a local religious identity.

Further problems are encountered when considering visual representations of mythological stories: as long as there is no written evidence to tell us otherwise, it seems only natural for the modern scholar to assume that a Near Eastern depiction of a myth known from the classical world implies not only full knowledge of that classical myth on the part of the relevant worshippers, but also adherence to the prevalent version from the Graeco-Roman world. In some cases, it must indeed have been a rather straightforward process of interpretation. A relief on a basalt lintel from the Hauran, now in the Louvre, represents - albeit in un-classically static fashion - the judgement of Paris.<sup>37</sup> For the observer unable to spot this dynamic story immediately from the inactive line-up of figures on the relief, the accompanying labels leave no space for doubt: from left to right the figures are named as Paris himself, Hermes, Aphrodite, Athena, Hera and finally Zeus. However, even if the divine figures are unambiguously identified by accompanying inscriptions, what we get is not always what we seem to see. In the late 1930s, excavations behind the temple of Bel at Palmyra laid bare a mosaic with the figure of Cassiopeia, identified by an inscription (Κασσιόπεια), revealing herself in all her naked beauty, with Poseidon standing in the centre of the scene (Fig. 6).<sup>38</sup> When the mosaic was published it was concluded that this was a depiction of the well-known story in which Cassiopeia, the wife of king Cepheus of Ethiopia, boasted that she was more beautiful than the Nereids, with the result that an angry Poseidon sent a sea-monster in revenge of Cassiopeia’s slight of the sea-goddesses, with due consequences for Cassiopeia’s daughter Andromeda.<sup>39</sup> The interpretation seemed very logical indeed. However, many years later two mosaics were discovered at Apamea on the Orontes and at New Paphos on Cyprus respectively, which clearly show Cassiopeia as the *victress* in her beauty contest with

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<sup>37</sup> Dunand 1934: 11-3, no. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Stern 1977: 26-42.

<sup>39</sup> Apollod. *Bibl.* II.4.3.

the Nereids, as she is crowned by a Nikè in the presence of a divine judge (Poseidon again, on the mosaic from Apamea).<sup>40</sup> No representation of the standard story, therefore, but an interesting twist on the classical myth, as was first noted by Jean-Charles Balty.<sup>41</sup> His theory was built on by Janine Balty, who put forward a neo-Platonic interpretation of the mosaic:<sup>42</sup> the victory of Cassiopeia, etymologically linked to the toponymic deity of Mt. Kasios, probably the most famous hilltop in Syria, is believed to stand for the victory of the cosmic order over the chaos of the aquatic powers - of the unchanging, immaterial world that is the real beauty, over the changing, material world that is represented by the marine element. Indeed, the *Suda* identifies Cassiopeia as *hè kallonè*, Beauty personified.<sup>43</sup> Poseidon, standing in the centre of the Palmyrene mosaic and seated on the one from Apamea, seems far removed from the raging sea god acting out his revenge, as we know him from classical mythology. On these Near Eastern mosaics he is instead acting as a wise judge and a more supreme deity. In fact, a bilingual inscription from AD 39 from Palmyra explicitly identifies Poseidon with Elqonera, ‘El the creator’,<sup>44</sup> and it does not come as a surprise, then, that his place on the mosaic from New Paphos has been taken by Aion (identified by an inscription: Αἰών), the divine personification of the permanence of the cosmos. It is argued that this unique mixture between Oriental cosmological conceptions and the neo-Platonic theory of the transmigration of the souls could only have come into existence in the local circumstances of Palmyra, where the philosopher Longinus spent the last years of his life at the court of Zenobia, and that the idea was later copied at New Paphos and at Apamea. The clear diversion away from the classical story on these three mosaics serves as a warning that our main sources for classical mythology are insufficient to provide a supra-regional framework to which we can relate the indigenous deities of the Near East.

However, the opposite is also true: it cannot be automatically assumed that ancient Mesopotamian mythology was transmitted to the Roman Near East without changes, as a discussion of the so-called ‘battle relief’ on one of the beams from the temple of Bel at Palmyra (Fig. 7) can clarify. With a few early exceptions of scholars

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<sup>40</sup> For the mosaic from Apamea, see Balty 1977: 82-87, nos. 36-8. For the mosaic from New Paphos, see Bowersock 1990: pl. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Balty 1981.

<sup>42</sup> Balty 1996 and 2005.

<sup>43</sup> *Suda*, s.v. Kassiopeia (ed. Adler: kappa, no. 453).

<sup>44</sup> Hillers and Cussini 1996, no. 2779.

who wanted to see elements of the myth of Zeus and Typhon in the relief,<sup>45</sup> there has long been agreement that it depicts the fight against Tiamat, known from the Babylonian epic of creation *Enuma Elish* (in which the chief deity Marduk-Bel riding in his chariot had to overcome the monster Tiamat in order to create the world), and that therefore the famous Akitu festival from ancient Babylon was still celebrated in more or less identical format thousand years later in the caravan city in the Syrian desert.<sup>46</sup> However, Lucinda Dirven has drawn attention to some important variations on the Babylonian myth.<sup>47</sup> Not only is the monster on the Palmyrene relief represented with multiple legs in the shape of snakes, but in addition the figure in the chariot, on the far left of the relief (Fig. 8), is not the most important adversary of the chaos monster. Instead, the central position of the action scene seems to go to a horse-rider, who is leading six other figures standing to the right of the relief. If it is correct to view the figure in the chariot as Bel, this may be surprising, since Bel was by far the most important god of the city. Dirven's iconographic analysis concludes convincingly that nearly all of the six figures who stand to the right of the horse-rider can be identified with deities who received a cult in the temple 'of Nebu' at Palmyra.<sup>48</sup> Nabu, as he was known in ancient Mesopotamia, was the son of Marduk-Bel, and his leading role on the battle relief would not be incompatible with the fact that by the late Babylonian period he had reached a status virtually equal to that of his father - a rise to power reflected in an ancient Mesopotamian text known as *The Exaltation of Nabu*, and which scholars also believe to have been manifested in the proceedings of the Akitu festival. However, whether that says much about an Akitu festival at Palmyra is another matter. The temple 'of Nebu' at Palmyra was, despite its central location, a relatively minor religious building, certainly compared to that of Bel. And the simple but often forgotten fact that Palmyra had no kingship (at least not before Odaenathus and Zenobia's episode) necessarily means that the rituals of the ancient Mesopotamian festival, which served to confirm the existing socio-political order centred around the king, cannot have had the same meaning at Palmyra. On the other hand, as will be seen below, in AD 32 the temple of Bel at Palmyra was

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<sup>45</sup> Note that Strabo (16.2.7) locates the mythical story of Typhon's stroke by lightning 'somewhere' along the Orontes river, 'formerly called Typhon'.

<sup>46</sup> E.g. Dalley 1998: 51; Tubach 1995.

<sup>47</sup> For what follows, see Dirven 1997 and 1999: 128-56.

<sup>48</sup> For the inscriptions and sculptures from this temple, see Bounni, Seigne and Saliby 1992, and Bounni 2004. Cf. Kaizer 2002: 89-99.



dedicated on the sixth day of Nisan (April), falling precisely in the period in which the Akitu festival was traditionally celebrated.

Thus far we have seen how inscriptions, sculptures and mosaics could contribute to the creation of local religious identities. It is only natural that different source materials provide different sorts of information on deities and their cults, and amongst the sources the so-called Roman provincial coinage stands out as the medium *par excellence* by which cities in the eastern part of the Roman empire expressed their civic identity.<sup>49</sup> The religious imagery on such coinage was not the result of the piety of an individual or a small group like a family, since these coins were issued by the city *as a collectivity*, and they are therefore more significant than individual dedications for our understanding of local religious identity from a civic point of view. The religious imagery on these issues was supposedly recognised, and worshipped, by the entire population of the place where they were minted. However, as the following three examples illustrate, the numismatic evidence for gods, cults, myths and rituals at a city, does not provide a complete and impartial view of the patterns of worship of that city. The coinage of cities in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire presents a mere civic façade of religious life, indeed a façade decided on by, and thus in the first place reflecting, the religious tastes of the local elites. First, at Gerasa in the Syrian Decapolis, the earliest coins, struck from the reign of Nero onwards, have both Artemis and Zeus on the reverse, but from Hadrian onwards, only Artemis appears on coins, usually explicitly identified as the Tyche of the citizens of Gerasa.<sup>50</sup> It seems clear that this development signifies the increasingly important role of the goddess in the public presentation of the city outwards, to such a degree that she even came to monopolise it. But it is not the whole story.<sup>51</sup> Both Zeus and Artemis occupied a large sanctuary at Gerasa, but whereas the temple of Zeus goes back to the late Hellenistic period, possibly even to a pre-historic grotto, the temple of Artemis, on the other hand, was built only under Hadrian, resulting in a substantial reconstruction of the city's centre. With the new temple built, the temple of Zeus became, in a geographical sense, a bit peripheral. But that is not to say that this temple ceased to perform an important function in day to day religious life, and inscriptions do indeed tell us that it continued to be well maintained throughout the second and

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Harl 1987, and now Howgego, Heuchert and Burnett 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Spijkerman 1978: 156-67; Lichtenberger 2003: 195-200.

<sup>51</sup> See now Lichtenberger 2008.

third centuries AD.<sup>52</sup> Second, at Scythopolis in the Decapolis, also known as Nysa - after the nymph who acted as nurse of the baby Dionysus and who was supposed to have been buried here - strong local traditions led to the complete domination of the city's coinage by Dionysus.<sup>53</sup> The god is depicted on issues from the early Roman period onwards, but it is only in the late second century AD that a new visual programme came to be introduced: Dionysus' mythological world now became directly connected with the local foundation legends, and a number of scenes appeared for the first time. Coins struck under the Severans and Gordian III show the second birth of Dionysus out of Zeus' thigh, after which he is handed over to the nymph Nysa, who is depicted on the coins with the *corona muralis* of the city protectress. And other coins from the early third century show how the baby Dionysus is cradled by Nysa, again depicted with a mural crown. And an issue from the reign of Gordian III shows the god riding in a *biga* drawn by two panthers, a reference to his triumphal return from India.<sup>54</sup> Taking all this into account, it seemed logical that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, archaeologists chose to identify the large temple on top of the acropolis at Beth-Shean, the modern name of Scythopolis, as that of Dionysus. Who else? However, later epigraphic finds have revealed that this temple was actually dedicated to another god, to *Zeus Akraios*, according to his epithet 'dwelling on heights'.<sup>55</sup> And according to recent excavations, the main cult of Dionysus at the city was located in a smaller sanctuary in the centre.<sup>56</sup> Dionysus' domination of the civic coinage of Nysa-Scythopolis seems, then, not to have been the result of an actual or literal domination of the city's religious life, and it could be suggested that it had rather more to do with the civic spirit which was of such importance in this period, the Second Sophistic, and which led cities throughout the eastern empire to highlight their Greek past, whether real or legendary, with a view towards self-promotion before other cities.<sup>57</sup>

Third, the coinage of Palmyra - generally poorly executed and badly preserved, and probably not minted before the second century AD - is very different

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<sup>52</sup> Raja (forthcoming).

<sup>53</sup> See now Barkay 2003.

<sup>54</sup> The respective coins are Spijkerman 1978: 194-5, no. 23; 198-9, no. 32, and 202-3, nos. 46-8; 208-9, nos. 60-1. Cf. Barkay 2003: 123-4, with clear drawings of the images.

<sup>55</sup> Lifshitz 1961; Tsafir 1989; Lichtenberger 2003: 153-5.

<sup>56</sup> Foerster and Tsafir 2002: 80. Cf. Lichtenberger 2003: 150, 'Für Dionysos wäre allerdings zu erwarten, daß in Nysa-Skythopolis ein größeres Heiligtum errichtet war.'

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Di Segni 1997; Lichtenberger 2004.

from ‘regular’ Roman provincial coinage since it has neither an imperial portrait on the obverse (with the exception of coins minted under Zenobia, but that is a different story), nor a legend to identify it as being ‘of the Palmyrenes’.<sup>58</sup> Only a very few issues refer to the city at all, simply stating ‘Palmyra’, without mention of *Palmurènon*. The obverse, giving the Greek name of the city (ΠΑΛΜΥΡΑ), shows a Nikè holding scales and possibly a palm. The reverse shows three gods: the one in the middle wears a *kalathos*, while the two figures that flank the central figure wear a solar crown and a crescent respectively.<sup>59</sup> The three gods on the reverse can be interpreted, on convincing iconographic grounds, as the so-called ‘triad of Bel’: Bel and his ‘acolytes’ Yarhibol (the sun) and Aglibol (the moon). As is well known, these are the three gods to whom the north adyton of the great temple of Bel was dedicated in AD 32, on the sixth day of Nisan, as an inscription from thirteen years later records.<sup>60</sup> The designation ‘temple of Bel’, even if it does appear as such in a number of other inscriptions,<sup>61</sup> is a simplification of the actual cultic situation. Long before the dedication of the north adyton in AD 32, a large number of other deities are recorded as receiving a cult in the sanctuary too.<sup>62</sup> And indeed, in addition to the inscriptions from the first century AD that refer to the temple as that ‘of Bel’, others from the same time designate it - more correctly - as the ‘house of the gods of the Palmyrenes’.<sup>63</sup> But while the latter name seems to have got out of fashion, the conventional designation ‘temple of Bel’ remained in use into the second century, as inscriptions show.<sup>64</sup> The fact that in AD 32 the temple was dedicated jointly to Bel and Yarhibol and Aglibol, is generally interpreted as the direct result of a priestly intervention, the creation of a new ‘triad’ on theological grounds. However, it is equally possible, if not more likely, that this joint dedication has to be explained simply as the initiative of the benefactor who paid for the north adyton.<sup>65</sup> Along the same lines one could then argue that another benefactor, who was responsible a generation later for the addition of a second, south adyton, ought to be credited with

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<sup>58</sup> See now Kaizer 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Du Mesnil du Buisson 1944: no. XCI. I have argued in Kaizer 2007: 53, that there is just enough visible of an Aramic *dalet* (-d-) to postulate that the reverse gave the indigenous name of the city, ‘Tadmor’, which - if correct - matches the city’s unique bilingualism of its public inscriptions and its countarmarked coins.

<sup>60</sup> Hillers and Cussini 1996: no. 1347.

<sup>61</sup> Hillers and Cussini 1996: nos. 0270, 1352.

<sup>62</sup> Kaizer 2002: 67-79.

<sup>63</sup> Hillers and Cussini 1996: nos. 0269, 1353.

<sup>64</sup> Hillers and Cussini 1996: nos. 0260, 2769.

<sup>65</sup> Kaizer 2006b.

the addition of the goddess Astarte to the most prestigious part of the temple. An inscription from AD 127 points to the group of Bel, Yarhibol, Aglibol and Astarte having become a divine constellation in its own right by then.<sup>66</sup> If this hypothesis is correct, one could further suggest, with regard to the representation of Bel, Yarhibol and Aglibol on the Palmyrene coin, that the so-called ‘triad of Bel’, originally put together at the whim of one benefactor, had grown into a true civic symbol for Palmyra by the second century, when the city started to mint its own coins.

The above examples of Gerasa and of Nysa-Scythopolis also show clearly to what degree the religious topography of a place, i.e. the way in which temples are distributed over a city’s territory and are related to each other, can give a very different impression of that site’s religious life than the one gained through coins: At Gerasa, Zeus eventually lost out on the coinage, but the cult in his temple (the major religious building of the city alongside that of Artemis) remained of significance. At Nysa, the divine inhabitant of the largest temple on the city’s acropolis (*Zeus Akraios*) did not make it at all to the coinage, which was instead dominated by Dionysus, who had to do with a more modest shrine. It may therefore be useful to focus briefly on Hatra, a city whose religious topography must form the basis of any study of its patterns of worship. Seemingly appearing out of the blue in the late first century AD and flourishing in the second and early third centuries, Hatra is characterised by a circular plan, dominated in its centre by an enormous rectangular temple complex.<sup>67</sup> Central to any understanding of Hatrene religion is the difference between, on the one hand, the temples within this central temenos and, on the other, the numerous minor shrines spread throughout the city. The deities who were worshipped in the central temple complex - above all the unique family triad of Maren, Marten and Bar-Maren, ‘Our Lord, Our Lady and the Son of Our Lord and Our Lady’ - appeared also in the smaller shrines. In contrast, the cults of deities such as Baal-Shamin and Atargatis were practised only in one or more of the minor shrines, but never in the central complex.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the city’s temples were differentiated by their respective building plans and architecture: the iwans in the temenos, enormous vaulted structures that were representatives of a new temple type in the Parthian period, contrasted with the ‘Breitraum’ shrines elsewhere in the city, that were rooted in an older,

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<sup>66</sup> Drijvers 1995.

<sup>67</sup> Kennedy and Riley 1990: 105, Fig. 53.

<sup>68</sup> Kaizer 2000b: 231.

Mesopotamian tradition. Both these aspects seem to point to a division between centralised cults that were important for the city as a whole and deities who were worshipped by a particular part of the population only.

The examples discussed in this chapter in various degrees illuminate the continuing process by which religious identities were created in the different localities that constituted the Roman Near East. The final case comes from Dura-Europos, a small town on the Euphrates that started life as a Seleucid fortress and fell under Parthian control for hundreds of years before it was occupied by Roman troops during the last age of its existence, finally being captured and destroyed by the Sasanians in the middle of the third century. The location of nearly all religious buildings at Dura was embedded within a gridiron city plan, which created conditions for the negotiation of religious space that were very different from those at Hatra. In one of those shrines, built against the wall and a tower in the southwest corner of the city, a relief was found showing a deity in cuirass (Fig. 9), the divine dress code generally taken to single out a god or goddess as protector of those travelling through the steppe and desert areas of the Near East,<sup>69</sup> and similar to the outfit worn by the statue from the Fitzwilliam which was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Bearded like Baal-Shamin, the lord of the heavens, and wearing a *kalathos* like Bel, the god is standing on top of two griffons, resembling the near-canonical type of Jupiter Dolichenus, who in his characteristic representation is standing on the back of a bull. My choice to describe the figure by means of reference to other divinities is of course deliberate, and it would once again have been impossible to guess which god this was, were it not for the accompanying inscription. This time, fortunately, it is recorded on the relief itself how ‘Hadadiabos son of Zabdibolos son of Sillos set up this ἀφείδρυστις from the sanctuary of Aphlad, named god of Anath, the village on the Euphrates, as a vow, for his own salvation and that of his children and of his whole house’.<sup>70</sup> The divine name, otherwise unknown and transcribed differently in the available Greek inscriptions from the temple<sup>71</sup> (clearly reflecting a god whose name was originally spelt in a different language), has been explained as a combination of

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<sup>69</sup> On the military outfit as a popular dress code amongst Near Eastern deities, see Seyrig 1970.

<sup>70</sup> Rostovtzeff 1934: 112-3, no. 416: Τὴν ἀφείδρυστιν ταύτη[ν] ἱεροῦ Ἀφλαδ λεγομένου θεοῦ τῆς Ἀναθ κώμης Εὐφράτου ἀνέθηκεν Ἀδαδιαβος Ζαβδιβωλου τοῦ Σιλλοι εὐχὴν ὑπὲρ τῆς σωτηρί[ας] αὐτοῦ καὶ τέκνων καὶ τοῦ πά[ν]τος οἴκου.

<sup>71</sup> E.g. Rostovtzeff 1934: 114, no. 418, a dedication Ἀπαλαδωι θεωι; and Rostovtzeff 1934: 122-3, no. 426, a memento inscription πρὸς τὸν Ἀφαλαδων θεὸν.

the Akkadian word *aplu*, ‘son’, and Adda, meaning ‘son of Hadad’, which matches the fact that an old-Assyrian text had connected the ‘Son of Hadad’ to this region along the Middle Euphrates.<sup>72</sup> The text establishes beyond doubt that the cult of Aphlad at Dura-Europos was considered as having its origins in the village of Anath. Indeed, the choice of the term ἀφείδουσις implies that the image set up in the temple of Aphlad at Dura-Europos was a precise copy of the original cult statue.<sup>73</sup> However, what is most peculiar is the meticulous description of the god, which makes it very doubtful whether his cult at the Euphrates stronghold was adhered to only by villagers from Anath themselves. The inscription, referring explicitly to Aphlad, known as the god of Anath, a village on the Euphrates, must have been meant to communicate this specific information to a wider audience. It must be emphasised too that the relief is inscribed in Greek, despite the fact that not only the deity, but also the dedicant and the village have non-classical names.<sup>74</sup> This final example demonstrates once again clearly how a specific local religious identity could be created - from elements which seem typically ‘Near Eastern’ - by labelling a deity whose very name (‘Son of Hadad’) locates him firmly in a supra-regional divine world, as god *of* a particular village, by doing so simultaneously expanding the local religious world of the small town Dura-Europos: ‘the religion of the locality interacts with principles, ideas and traditions which transcend space.’<sup>75</sup>

Fig. 1

Statue of a so-called ‘syncretistic, Syrian military deity’ from the Hauran. Now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Courtesy of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

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<sup>72</sup> Rostovtzeff 1934: 118.

<sup>73</sup> Robert 1965: 120, no. 4, and 124, no. 4.

<sup>74</sup> On the relation between cults and languages at Dura-Europos, see Kaizer (in press).

<sup>75</sup> Horden and Purcell 2000: 422.

Fig. 2

Miniature 'shrine', supporting lamp of Malikat, from the Hauran. Now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Courtesy of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

Fig. 3

*Dexiôsis* relief of Antiochus I of Commagene with Artagnes Heracles Ares, *in situ* at Arsameia on the Nymphaios. Photo © Ted Kaizer.

Fig. 4

Relief of four Palmyrene deities, including a Heracles figure, from the temple of Bel at Palmyra. Now in the National Museum, Damascus.

Fig. 5

The temple of Zeus Bômos at Burj Baqirha. Photo © Ted Kaizer.

Fig. 6

Mosaic of Cassiopeia from Palmyra. Now in the National Museum, Damascus.

Fig. 7

So-called 'battle relief' from the temple of Bel at Palmyra. Photo © Ted Kaizer.

Fig. 8

Missing part of the so-called 'battle relief' from the temple of Bel at Palmyra. Photo © Ted Kaizer.

Fig. 9

Relief of Aphlad from Dura-Europos. Now in the National Museum, Damascus.

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