

A NOTE ON THE FRESCO OF IULIUS TERENTIUS FROM DURA-EUROPOS

This brief note, which I offer with pleasure to Professor Peter Haider, deals with the famous fresco of the sacrifice by the tribune Iulius Terentius, originally from Dura-Europos, but now on display in the Yale University Art Gallery at New Haven. After some introductory remarks, I will put forward my arguments that the recipients of the sacrifice are Palmyrene deities, not Roman emperors. I will then continue by looking in some detail at the consequences this has for any interpretation (which must ultimately remain uncertain) of the enigmatic priestly figure on the wall painting.

The fresco under discussion [PLATE I-II], first published by James Breasted and then by Franz Cumont, comes from a sanctuary built in the northwest corner of the city walls of Dura-Europos, known since its excavation by Cumont as the ‘temple of the Palmyrene gods’.¹ From the first century AD onwards, this temple developed from a small structure, consisting of a *naos* and two rooms which were built against the wall of the court, into a much reconstructed complex with many subdivisions. By the third century, from which the fresco dates, the north section of Dura, in which the temple was situated, had been transformed into a military camp for Roman troops, more precisely a cohort of Palmyrene soldiers.² The fresco was painted on quite a small panel on the north wall of the pronaos of the temple, and shows a rather crowded sacrificial scene. The central figure, who burns incense on a *thymiatèrion*, is identified by a Latin inscription as *Iul(ius) Terentius trib(unus)*, tribune of the *Cohors XX Palmyrenorum* as we know from other documents from Dura.³ On his right (left for us) stands a *vexillarius*, and next to

¹ Breasted (1922), p.200-6 with pl.XLVIII; id. (1924), p.94-102 with pl.XXI; Cumont (1926), p.89-114 with pl.XLIX-LI. Cf. Dirven (1999), p.302-7 with pl.XIII. Scholars later also employed the name ‘temple of Bel’. However, there is no good evidence that Palmyrenes belonged to its clientele in the pre-Roman period. In fact, as Millar (1998), p.482, and Dirven (1999), p.293-5, have argued independently from each other, inscriptions from the sanctuary suggest that for the Parthian period it should be referred to as the ‘temple of Zeus’. For the *Roman* period, ‘temple of the Palmyrene gods’ may still be the best available label.

² Whether or not the temple ‘of the Palmyrene gods’ actually still functioned as such by the time our fresco was added is another matter. See e.g. Pekáry (1986), p.95-6, who argued that “dieses Gebäude seit 165 kein Heiligtum mehr war” and that “das Bild gehört also nicht zur ursprünglichen Ausstattung des Tempels.” However, I cannot see, contra Pekáry, how this necessarily bears upon our interpretation of the fresco.

³ On the *cohors*, now the best-known one from the Roman world, see Kennedy (1994).

him and behind him his men, all of whom raise their right hand in prayer. At the top left of the troop of soldiers is the only other identified human figure on the fresco, according to the Greek inscription a priest (Qevmh~ Mokivmou iJereuv~). At the bottom left corner two Tyche figures are seated, both wearing a mural crown. The one on the left is labelled Tuvch Palmuvrwn, and the one on the right Tuvch Douvra~. Above these city protectresses stand three male figures with nimbus on consoles. Obviously, they are the recipients of the tribune's sacrifice.

Throughout the years, most scholars have assumed that the three figures are Palmyrene deities, either the 'triad of Bel', or another constellation. However, in 1986, Thomas Pekáry took up a suggestion first made by James Breasted (who himself later switched to the 'Palmyrene' side of the argument), namely that the three figures are Roman emperors.⁴ More recently, the extensive discussion by Oliver Stoll (who had initially sided with Pekáry) brings into play again reasons to identify the figures as gods from Palmyra.⁵ Although my own position is firmly in the Palmyrene camp, it ought to be emphasized that most of Pekáry's arguments are sound in themselves, and that neither interpretation can of course be 'proven'. Indeed, as Pekáry was right to point out, the fresco's poor state of preservation, and the fact that most reproductions of it (including the one given by Cumont) are not of the original photograph but of various modern drawings, have no doubt contributed to the contrasting descriptions given by scholars.⁶ Unfortunately, the photograph from which Pekáry worked himself was not that clear either, and the reproduction he gives is found wanting. It is not my intention to repeat here the full argumentation of both sides in the debate, and I will restrict what follows to highlighting some issues which are in need of further exploration or emphasis.

Pekáry pointed out that the sacrificial scene on the fresco seems to be an official occasion, and he argued that worship of indigenous deities would normally have taken place in a more private setting. That the Palmyrene soldiers at Dura-Europos both honoured the ancestral gods of their hometown and adhered to the Roman state cult is beyond doubt. On the one hand, there is unequivocal evidence for the cult of Palmyrene

⁴ Pekáry (1986). He proposed to interpret the three figures as Pupienus, Balbinus and Gordian III, who for a short while in 238 shared power, the former two as *Augusti*, the latter one (then a thirteen-year old boy) as *Caesar*.

⁵ Stoll (2001), p.367-79.

⁶ Pekáry (1986), p.91.

gods in this context.⁷ On the other hand, the *Feriale Duranum*, the sacrificial calendar in use by the Palmyrene *cohors* in the early third century (now in the Beinecke library in New Haven), lacks any reference to the distinctive inhabitants of the divine world of Palmyra.⁸ This calendar, an official list in Latin which was employed throughout the empire by both legionary and auxiliary troops, mainly records imperial anniversaries, but also days in honour of gods of the Roman state cult, such as the Capitoline triad and Mars, and specifies which occasions ought to be celebrated with which sacrifice. From the *Feriale* alone, one would never guess that those who used it at Dura-Europos came from Palmyra.

That being said, it can be argued on purely iconographic grounds that the three recipients of the sacrifice by Iulius Terentius were clearly meant to be understood as Palmyrene deities. A lot seems to depend on whether or not a moon crescent can be seen on the shoulders of the figure on the left. Pekáry complained that the modern reproductions of the fresco did not show one, but even if this is factually correct, it is hardly a convincing argument. Others, working from the original photographs, *did* claim to spot it, as Henri Seyrig in 1932.⁹ As far as I can see on my own photograph [PLATE III], made in the YUAG in 1999, part of a crescent is indeed just visible on the figure's left shoulder.¹⁰ If correct, this would of course identify him beyond any doubt as Aglibol, generally depicted in Palmyrene contexts with a crescent.¹¹ But even if scholars decide that there is *no* moon crescent visible, the clear iconography of the figure standing on the right should take away any remaining doubts: he wears a distinguished helmet and also carries a small, round shield. Pekáry may have argued convincingly that neither of these elements, nor the nimbus (which appeared in 'private art' long before it became part of the 'official' imperial image), should stop us from interpreting the figures as emperors, but both items, especially the shield, are requisites of Arsu, a god identified in bilingual

⁷ Cf. Dirven (1999), esp. p.183-8, with references, and at p.187: "the monuments from Dura clearly show that the official religion of the Roman army and the cult of indigenous deities coexisted peacefully."

⁸ Welles, Fink and Gilliam (1959), n°54; Fink (1971), n°117.

⁹ Seyrig (1932), p.194-5. Cf. Dirven (1999), p.306-7.

¹⁰ I am very grateful to Susan Matheson, Curator of Ancient Art at the YUAG, for granting me permission to use my own pictures of the fresco here.

¹¹ As such, his iconography fits in well with the meaning of his name, 'calf of Bol'. See Kaizer (2002), p.138-9, for further references.

inscriptions from Palmyra with Ares.¹² When depicted alongside other Palmyrene deities, Arsu is the only one with these attributes.¹³ In addition, the fact that all three figures are dressed in a cuirass conforms to the sculptural representation of Palmyrene gods in military outfit.¹⁴

As for the middle figure, who is slightly taller than his two companions, various options have been proposed, namely Yarhibol (who appears at Palmyra in the company of Bel and Aglibol with solar nimbus and military dress), Bel himself, or even Malakbel (an enigmatic deity who hardly appears at Palmyra itself with a solar nimbus, and whose ‘solarization’¹⁵ at home is interpreted as being of secondary importance, resulting from encounters with Roman military religion abroad). According to some, the figures on the fresco are listed in a nearby inscription, supposedly dedicated to Yarhibol, Aglibol and Arsu, but not only is the text damaged (the name of Aglibol is restored, for example), ‘Arsu’ appears with a variant form of his name (*rš*’ instead of *’ršw*), and any connection between the inscription and the fresco must remain a hypothesis.¹⁶ In any case, it seems clear that, whatever label one chooses to attach to the middle figure, the fresco does not depict the ‘triad of Bel, Yarhibol and Aglibol’, the three gods to whom the cella of the temple of Bel was dedicated in AD 32 and who often appear alongside each other on visual representations. Too often, these three deities have been explained in terms of an official, civic triad, and the fact that the figures on the fresco do not match ‘Bel, Yarhibol and Aglibol’ precisely, has even been used as an argument *against* an interpretation of the fresco as depicting Palmyrene deities.¹⁷ However, this must be an invalid argument, as there simply was not one single ‘official Palmyrene triad’ to be worshipped. The gods from Palmyra could, and did, receive cult in different constellations, which often depended on the background or simply the taste of the worshipper, and one should not always look for too much theology behind such formations.¹⁸

¹² Linant de Bellefonds (1984).

¹³ E.g. Drijvers (1976), pl.VII, IX.1-2.

¹⁴ See, in general, Seyrig (1970).

¹⁵ Dirven (1999), p.174.

¹⁶ Stoll (2001), p.371-2; Gawlikowski (1990), p.2618-9; Dirven (1999), p.307-8; Kaizer (2002), p.122.

¹⁷ E.g. Pekáry (1986), p.96.

¹⁸ I have argued elsewhere that the joint dedication at Palmyra in AD 32 of the new temple ‘of Bel’, to Bel, Yarhibol and Aglibol, was just the result of the initiative of the benefactor who paid for it, see Kaizer (forthcoming).

It is obvious that any interpretation of the recipients of the sacrifice by the tribune Iulius Terentius will have an effect on the analysis of another figure that appears on the fresco, the above-mentioned priest Themes, the son of Mokimos (Θεῶν Μοκίμου υἱοῦ Θερῶν), who is - as Rudolf Haensch recently emphasized in an excellent paper on ‘Heidnische Armeepriester’¹⁹ - the only of the attendants apart from the tribune who is identified. It is interesting that, in contrast to Iulius Terentius, he is identified in Greek. As is well known, this Themes appears once more in Dura-Europos, again in the context of the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum*. A papyrus from AD 239 records the morning report of the cohort: the first centurion ‘announced the orders of the day; we will both do whatever may be ordered and be ready at every command; there are standing watch at the standards of our lord the emperor’, and then a number of functionaries are listed, first their title, then their name. In addition to the first centurion they include the *signifer*, a *bucinator*, the priest (*sacerdos*) Themes and a *tesserarius*.²⁰

What sort of priest was this Themes? Should he be described as an ‘army priest’, i.e. in Roman terms only? Both Themes and Mokimos are common names in Palmyra, and it seems reasonable to assume that he was a Palmyrene. On the wall-painting, Themes is undistinguished from his fellow attendants, apart from the fact that he is identified by an inscription. As a Palmyrene and a priest, he certainly looks very different from the typically Palmyrene or other ‘Oriental’ priests known from visual representations from Dura-Europos. Thus, reliefs from the so-called temple of the Gadde show the Palmyrene benefactor Hairan, engaged in an act of sacrifice, wearing the round *modus* typically for priests from his hometown.²¹ A similar *modus*, in addition to a half length tunic and an embroidered mantle, is worn by a priest depicted on a small relief dedicated to Bel, from an otherwise unidentified building in the west of Dura.²² And another famous wall-painting from the temple ‘of the Palmyrene gods’, of the sacrifice by Conon, depicts priests with tall, conical hats and white dresses - illustrating nicely the description of priests at Hierapolis in *On the Syrian Goddess* (42-3)²³, though not, of

¹⁹ Presented at the fifth meeting of *Impact of Empire* in Münster in the summer of 2004.

²⁰ Welles, Fink and Gilliam (1959), n°89; Fink (1971), n°50.

²¹ Drijvers (1976), pl.XX.

²² Dirven (1999), pl.X, with p.275-8.

²³ Fresco: Breasted (1924), pl.VIIIff. On Hierapolis, see Lightfoot (1999), p.479-87, with Kaizer (2005), p.182-3.

course, matching the Palmyrene evidence. None of these other priests from Dura are identified as such by an inscription. In fact, their recognizable headgear made it unnecessary to do so. But as far as Themes, son of Mokimos is concerned, one would never have guessed that he was a priest if it had not been for the accompanying three words.²⁴ It seems clear, then, that Themes was not a ‘standard’ Palmyrene priest:²⁵ if he had been, he should have worn priestly headgear.²⁶ However, there *were* Palmyrene priests without *modus*, as is known from the relief of an ‘*pkl*’ of Aglibol and Malakbel.²⁷ Even if this is exceptional in a Palmyrene context, it nonetheless warns against hasty conclusions.

It remains unknown how Themes’ priestly position would have been expressed in the local Aramaic dialect of Palmyra. Both the Greek on the fresco (iJereuv~) and the Latin in the papyrus (*sacerdos*) are general terms. The most common Palmyrenean term was *kmr*’, but as the above-mentioned relief of the priest of Aglibol and Malakbel shows, other terms were possible as well. One could argue from that relief that it is unlikely that a Palmyrene priest without a *modus* would have been labeled a *kmr*’, but one cannot be certain that in all cases the application of terminology was following a strictly regular pattern. It may be relevant at this point to refer briefly to one of the two Syriac parchments which formed part of the (otherwise Greek) archive from the Middle Euphrates. Sebastian Brock’s reading of this text points to the simultaneous employment of two very different terms for priesthood: P.Mesopotamia B was dated - in addition to both the standard imperial and consular reckoning, and the Seleucid and Edessa’s new colonial era - to ‘the priesthood of Marcus Aurelius Abama (?), the priest’ (*bkmrwt’ dmrqws ’wrlwys ’[b]m’ hyrws* (1.4-5)).²⁸ Interestingly, the term used for ‘priesthood’

²⁴ According to some, e.g. Stoll (2001), p.373, Themes holds a bundle of twigs in his hand, but I doubt that this would identify him unequivocally as a ‘Syrian priest’, as has been suggested. But see Sadurska and Bounni (1994), fig.63-7, for examples of non-priests holding twigs.

²⁵ As e.g. Cumont (1926), p.113, saw it: “nous trouvons donc ici un prêtre indigène, en costume militaire, attaché au service de la *cohors XX Palmyrenorum*.”

²⁶ On Palmyrene priesthood in general, see Kaizer (2002), p.234-42, and id. (2005), p.179-82. Note that active Palmyrene priests wearing the *modus* would also need to be clean-shaven. According to the reproduction given here, after Cumont’s drawing [PLATE II], Themes had a beard, although I cannot trace that on the fresco itself.

²⁷ Sadurska and Bounni (1994), p.27, cat.21, fig.32.

²⁸ Brock (1991), p.264, with n.32-3.

(*k(w)mrwt'*) comes from the standard Aramaic word for priest (*kmr'*), while the word 'priest' (*hyrws*) is a transliteration of *iJereuv~*.

In contrast to Themes' description as a *sacerdos* in the Dura-papyrus, one could think of another Palmyrene who apparently was both a priest and a member of the imperial army, known from a funerary stele from Roman Dacia.²⁹ Its Latin inscription commemorates Aelius Guras, son of Iiddeus, an adjutant in the division of Palmyrenes (*[op]tio ex n(umero) Palmyr(enorum)*), and informs the reader that the monument was set up by Aelius Habibis, 'priest and heir' (*[pon]tif(ex) et h(eres)*). Both the deceased's and the priest's name point to an Oriental origin, and as Aelius Habibis is described as the heir of Aelius Guras, one may assume that the former was a member of the same auxiliary unit as the latter and also a Palmyrene. In contrast to our Themes, son of Mokimos, Habibis' priestly title is that of *pontifex*, a more specific term than the general *sacerdos*. Whether one should conclude from this that the *pontifex* title of Habibis is an explicit reference to a typically Roman priesthood, whereas Themes' designation as *sacerdos* (and *iJereuv~*) makes him a 'Palmyrene' priest, is of course another matter. The fact that another inscription from Roman Dacia records how Yarhibol received a dedication from a man who is designated as a *sacerdos numinum*,³⁰ points to a possibly inconsistent use of priestly terminology in this context.

As regards Themes and his precise connection to the recipients of the sacrifice by the tribune Iulius Terentius, we remain in the dark. Stoll wrote that "Themes ist hier als orientalischer Priester, aber dennoch zugleich als reguläres Mitglied des Kommandeursstabes dargestellt."³¹ But if the three recipient figures are indeed Palmyrene gods, as I think they are, it must at least be taken into account that Themes did *not* wear a priestly *modus*. Concerning his priestly title, it remains unclear whether *iJereuv~* (on the fresco) and *sacerdos* (on the papyrus) were actually meant as precise equivalents. They could instead, as Stoll suggested,³² have covered different spheres. Maybe the fact that *Qevmh~ Mokivmou iJereuv~*, in contrast to *Iul Terentius trib*

²⁹ *Inscriptiones Daciae Romanae* III.1, n°154, with Kaizer (2004), p.564.

³⁰ *Inscriptiones Daciae Romanae* III.5, n°103.

³¹ Stoll (2001), p.374.

³² *Ibid.*: "Themes Mocimi war zugleich 'Sacerdos' im Rahmen des Regimentes und 'Hiereus' eines 'privaten' Kultes" and "es handelt sich ... um die Verschiebung ein- und desselben sozialen Rollenverständnisses in unterschiedliche Lebensbereiche."

(but like the names of the two city protectresses!) was written in Greek rather than in Latin is highly relevant in this context. However, it is of course also possible that Themes functioned as a priest only in a military context, and simply acknowledged his ancestral deities alongside his compatriots. But in that case it remains unclear why he in particular was identified alongside his tribune on the fresco. The last word on the fresco of the sacrifice by Iulius Terentius has probably not yet been said.

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