THE "HERACLES FIGURE" AT HATRA AND PALMYRA: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

In this paper I intend to use the Heracles figure, a prime example of the application of Graeco-Roman imagery to the ever-varying process of expressing Near Eastern forms of religion in the Roman period, to illustrate and guide a brief discourse on the methodological problems concerning the approach to a religious world which was more heterogeneous than is sometimes thought.1 Iconographic representations of a male figure with club and lion’s skin as his main attributes are widespread in the Near East, and indeed far beyond, in the Roman period.2 In what follows I will concentrate on the place and functioning of this so-called Heracles figure within the context of the religious life of Palmyra and Hatra, two desert cities which, each in their own distinctive way, present examples of a complex religious system in which different elements coexisted and might have influenced each other. Evidence from elsewhere in the Near East that may contribute to our perception of the variety of values which a Heracles figure could embody for different groups of worshippers will also be taken into account.

With regard to the places on which I am focusing, I prefer to refer to the figure with club and lion’s skin not as “Heracles” but as the “Heracles figure”, because neither at Palmyra nor at Hatra is that figure ever called by his Greek name in accompanying inscriptions. What the evidence does reveal, though, is that the Heracles figure enjoyed great popularity (especially at Hatra) and was clearly conceived of as deeply rooted in the divine world of both places. As we will see below, it is possible, although not “proven”, that both in Palmyra and in Hatra the Heracles figure was identified with Nergal, a deity with certain chthonian aspects from the Mesopotamian divine world.4 Nevertheless, the identifications are problematic, and one ought to attend to the names and epithets actually given by worshippers.

It should be stated at the outset that the nature of our sources makes them very difficult to interpret. The evidence for religious life in the Near East in the Roman period mainly consists of sculptural and epigraphic material, and we know close to nothing with regard to mythology and ritual life. In the recent past the Heracles figure has been the subject of a growing number of studies which are mainly preoccupied with hypotheses concerning his origin and travels throughout the Near East and beyond, and with theories concerning the various interpretations and assimilations which he underwent.5 In what follows I will leave those problems aside as much as possible.

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ANRW H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds.), Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt (1972–).

H 1, 2, etc.


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5 On the possible typological and historical antecedents of the Heracles figure in the more ancient Near East, see

Iraq LXII (2000)
Rather than implying his Graeco-Romanness, or his Oriental background for that matter, I wish to approach the Heracles figure at Palmyra and Hatra at face value, as we encounter him in the first three centuries AD. Since the evidence is well known and has been studied thoroughly by others, another overview of the material would not, at present, help to further our knowledge. Instead, I wish to touch upon some general problems of approach first, and only then to see how far a study of the Palmyrene and Hatrene Heracles figure, and of the contexts in which he was worshipped, can help to advance our understanding of the nature of religious life in these places.

There were of course many similarities between the religions of the several different towns and local areas in the Near East, but above all the various places were very different from each other.

Both Palmyra and Hatra — each in their own terms — had a culture which cannot be described unambiguously, and when one attempts to label the various facets of their respective cultures either as "western" or as "eastern", those generalisations turn out to be very problematic.6

While the archaeological remains of Palmyra, situated in the Syrian steppe, show a city which was largely Hellenised in its outward appearance, its distinctive and still partly enigmatic art points to a wide range of influences,7 and while both Greek and the local dialect of Aramaic were used alongside each other as written languages in the public life of the city, the religion of Palmyra is usually described as completely Semitic. The view expressed in the concluding remarks of the main work on Palmyrene religion by Gawlikowski is that an indigenous substratum was transformed by Babylonian and Canaanite influences in pre-Hellenistic times, followed by the penetration of so-called Arab and Syrian deities by the first century BC. With the urban development from the early Roman empire onwards came theological systems and astrological doctrines which may have had their origin in Hellenistic Babylonia.8 A number of Graeco-Roman divine names and images also appear, but identification of the Palmyrene deity with the Greek one is usually perceived as secondary, and believed to have also been regarded as such in Roman times.

Hatra, the enigmatic city in the desert of North Mesopotamia which probably originated from a combination of strategic and religious factors, gives a different impression from Palmyra at first glance, with the circular plan of its city walls (at least by the last stage) and the enormous vaulted structures in its central temple complex. Its sculptures reveal many resemblances to those from Palmyra (see above), and the written language was a local dialect of Aramaic, with no Greek inscriptions being found, and only three Latin ones from the brief period of Roman occupation before the city was captured by the Sasanians. Due to the state of research at present, knowledge of Hatrene religion can only be provisional, but the religious life of the city in which the Heracles figure enjoyed such popularity is believed, in accordance with the epigraphic evidence, to have been almost completely Semitic."9


7 Like those from Hatra, the reliefs and sculptures from Palmyra have been characterised as "Parthian art", a term used for the art of East Syria and North Mesopotamia on the basis of resemblances in style, of which the consistent frontality is the most important characteristic. On the problematic use of this term and for a recent overview of the scholarly debate, see H. J. W. Drijvers, "The Syrian cult relief" in Visible Religion 7 (1990), pp. 69–82. See also Millar, The Roman Near East, pp. 329–30.


The problem of "Hellenism" and the formation of religious life in the Near East in the Roman period

Generalisations usually turn out to be very problematic when applied to religious life in the Near East in the Roman period. This becomes very clear when one tries to analyse and describe religious features in terms of interaction between an indigenous oriental substratum and structures which were introduced from the Graeco-Roman world. The various aspects of Greek culture were transmitted into the Near Eastern world in such a way as not only to become a medium by which local culture could find renewed expression, but also to open up a completely new world of historical and cultural knowledge to the Near East. In neither way should Greek culture, "Hellenism", be seen automatically as opposed to the local traditions. Furthermore, if Hellenism really, to quote Bowersock, "provided the means for a more articulate and a more universally comprehensible expression of local traditions," this should not so much be seen in terms of quality but rather as conditioned by continuously changing historical and cultural circumstances. It also depends from which side the matter is viewed: for the indigenous population it may have been, consciously or not, a vigorous new way to make their cultural traditions intelligible. But in his definition of interpretatio graeca, Sartre explains the phenomenon in terms of Greeks and Romans recognising their own gods in the appearance of the local deities of the East.

The nature of our evidence makes the problem even worse, in that it represents three centuries of snapshots rather than revealing any functioning entity. The more or less sudden ending which came to the civilisations of Hatra and Palmyra, when these cities were captured by the Sasanians in the early 240s and by the Roman emperor Aurelian in the early 270s respectively, makes it of course understandable to view the cultural and other processes in these places as representing their culmination shortly before their disappearance. But it is not correct to view the religious life of those places as a perennial system which, although still open to new influences, nevertheless reached its final and conclusive stage in the three centuries from which our evidence dates, thus treating its development in the preceding formative periods as a cultural prelude to the new synthesis. This trap of making teleological assumptions is not new, but there cannot be enough warning against it. On the other hand, what we now call "the religion" of any place in the Near East in the first three centuries AD not only becomes an entity because we choose to study it as such, but also because the evidence dates from exactly that period. Whether one ought to think of the local cultures of Palmyra and Hatra as mysteriously emerging as they are known to us, or whether one should rather understand the sudden appearance of their material cultures in terms of a so-called epigraphic and sculptural habit, are questions which cannot be answered. But any glance at any item which can be connected to the religious world of the Near East in the Roman period reveals the outcome at a particular moment of various historical, social and religious processes.

That said, one should of course acknowledge that the population of a Near Eastern city or region, in this case Palmyra or Hatra, could still experience its religious life as a unified and integrated whole. To quote Stewart, "when viewed at a certain moment in time continuing processes do take on the appearance of discrete states and not only do social scientists frequently perceive social and cultural forms to be established and enduring, but the social actors they describe often work with this premise as well." It is, admittedly, only natural that, in a world which is not only dynamic but also very traditional, many elements are recognisable over the whole of our period. Connected with this is the notion of authenticity which people could ascribe to their religious traditions. The question whether such traditions are historically "true" and original or recently invented is not of any importance. For example, the label ἀρχαῖος, "ancestral", is regularly attached to Palmyrene deities in Greek inscriptions, not so much to stress that the deity is literally inherited from one's father, but rather to assert a special claim on the deity who

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11 Bowersock, Hellenism, p. 9.
12 M. Sartre, L'Orient romain (1991), p. 491. He continues by calling it, p. 496, nothing more than a superficial veneer, applied only to give a Graeco-Roman aspect to the local deities, and argues that their "nature" or cult celebrations are not really affected.
13 Or, for that matter, the destruction of Dura-Europos by the Sasanians in AD 256/257. It should be noted that in the case of Palmyra the end of its local civilisation was less sudden or immediately definitive; see Millar, The Roman Near East, pp. 335–6.
The hidden nature of Near Eastern deities: identification of the Heracles figure with Nergal?

Towards the middle of the second century AD a Graeco-Roman cela was built over the existing temple of the goddess Allat at Palmyra, and a marble statue representing a classical Athena Parthenos was imported and set up in the new temple. Since the way in which Allat was represented in her sanctuary had by then developed from her being seated on a throne in between two lions to standing with helmet, spear, round shield and aegis, it could be argued that this particular Athena statue was called Allat by the Aramaic-speaking worshippers in her Palmyrene temple. But if the same statue had been found in an apparently more Hellenised Near Eastern context, e.g. in one of the cities of the so-called Decapolis, the answer might have been different. As in other cases it is futile to ask what such a deity really “was,” writes Millar, and that should also serve as a warning against hasty and improper identifications of the Heracles figure in Palmyra and Hatra, where he is never identified unambiguously by accompanying inscriptions.

15 See R. MacMullen, Paganism in the Roman Empire (1981), pp. 3–4, on the possible uses of πατριος and πατριας. The word can both be attached to a deity “for remembrance’s sake and from a sense of being a stranger abroad” and to “him who watches over us here at home”. An equivalent in Palmyrene Aramaic can be found in PAT 0324, where Shamash is called “the god of the house of their fathers” (“lb ybt ‘bwn”). In the bilingual inscription PAT 0273, the phrase πατριος θεος is rendered into Palmyrene by ʼlh yth, the “good gods”.

See also the introduction in C. Stewart and R. Shaw (eds.), Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism. The Myth of Divine Integration (1994), p. 7: “both putatively pure and putatively syncretic traditions can be ‘authentic’ if people claim that these traditions are unique, and uniquely their (historical) possession.” Compare the introduction in G. Ajmer (ed.), Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols (1995), p. 12, where the author describes the cultural process of what he calls “generating faked traditions out of a constantly ongoin- bricolage”. For further references to recent approaches to the so-called “invention of tradition”, see Stewart and Shaw, op. cit., p. 1.

17 Stewart, “Relocating syncretism”, p. 31, where the author describes non-literate religions, as opposed to religions of the Book, as “basically more receptive to the incorporation of diverse, exogenous deities into its repertoire of worship”. Recently, the hypothesis has been put forward that since it has been proved that cuneiform continued into the first century AD, temples in which Babylonian deities were worshipped preserved their liturgy and regulations “in cuneiform script as it had been for millennia”; see M. J. Geller, “The last wedge” in Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie 87 (1997), especially p. 47. Whether this can or should be connected to the “Babylonian” cults which are attested at Palmyra and Hatra remains more doubtful.


21 It should be stressed that even the identification of a Heracles figure by an accompanying inscription still does not mean that we know what the deity really “was” for the local worshippers. One of the famous dexiosis beliefs that Antiochus I erected throughout the kingdom of Commagene in the first century BC labels the naked figure with club and lion’s skin who shakes hands with the king as “Artagnes-Heracles”, while “Areis” is joined to this name in another inscription. But the remnants of this royal dynastic cult proceed from the religious and political programme of Antiochus himself and do not tell us anything about the local culture of the area. See J. Wagner, “Dynastie und Herrscherkult in Kommagene” in Istanbuler Mitteilungen 33 (1983), p. 186, and Millar, The Roman Near East, pp. 452–4. See also H. Hutter, Die politische Rolle der Heraklesgestalt im griechischen Herrscherum (1997), pp. 198–210, who stresses that Antiochus’ interest in the Heracles figure resulted from the influence of Hellenistic ruler ideology on the royal house of Commagene from Alexander onwards.
In the Classical tradition each deity has its own well-defined sphere of influence and it may be tempting to think that the Near Eastern deity to whom the Graeco-Roman one is assimilated always performed similar functions. But in most cases it remains uncertain, when iconographic features of a Classical deity are taken over, whether his or her powers are equally transmitted, and if so, whether they remain unchanged or become reinterpreted.\(^{22}\)

As I have briefly stated above, it is generally accepted that both in Palmyra and in Hatra the Greek Heracles was identified with the Mesopotamian Nergal.\(^{23}\) It ought to be stressed, though, that in both places the identification is not only uncertain, in the sense of “not entirely proven”, but also not complete, in as far as it took place at all. We will go through some of the other evidence below. Here I only mention the material usually referred to in this context.

The Palmyrene identification of Heracles with Nergal, as stressed by Seyrig, rests mainly on two *tesserae*, small tokens which are usually interpreted as entrance tickets to religious meals.\(^{24}\) The first one (*RTP* 227) has a club, the main attribute of the Graeco-Roman Heracles, on the obverse, while the name of Nergal is written in the local dialect of Aramaic (*nrgl*) on the reverse. The obverse of the second *tessera* (*RTP* 231) shows the same club, while on the reverse a figure with a double axe is depicted. Although Seyrig has argued, with regard to *RTP* 227, that on none of the other Palmyrene *tesserae* is the name of one deity on the obverse connected with the attribute of another on the reverse, there are plenty of examples where either the names or the images of two or three deities are impressed on the two sides of the *tessera*. In any case, even if there seems to have been some connection between the two kinds of figures, it remains doubtful whether representations of the god with double axe ought to be taken into account as well when discussing what we call the “Heracles figure”. A group of *tesserae* (*RTP* 233–6) on which the deity with double axe, either holding a lion or with the animal leaping at him, is depicted together with an unspecified goddess, is described by Seyrig as representing the Graeco-Oriental image of Nergal and his female companion.\(^{25}\) But whether the cult statue of Nergal at Palmyra took the form of the deity with double axe, while the Graeco-Roman Heracles figure could equally be applied to represent him on certain reliefs and *tesserae*, as Seyrig argued, must remain a hypothesis.\(^{26}\)

Both the Heracles figure with club and lion’s skin (either naked or in Hatrene dress) and a deity with a double axe seem also to have been very popular at Hatra. But in contrast to Palmyra, the evidence from Hatra consists of a great number of statues, ranging from man-sized to minuscule, and found in the various smaller shrines spread throughout the city.\(^{27}\) The Hatrene identification of Heracles with Nergal is believed to have been proved by an inscription which reads *nrgwl klb’* (“Nergal the dog”?) underneath a statue base which shows bare feet and the lower part of a club.\(^{28}\) The identification of the two deities, although not completely certain, may have been

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\(^{22}\) To make matters even more complicated, one ought to take into account that the sphere of influence of a Classical deity was not actually static. Graeco-Roman gods often had more than one “field of interest”, which could gradually alter its direction and should be seen within the context of a wider divine world. See M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *Religions of Rome 1: A History* (1998), p. 16.


\(^{25}\) Ibid., pp. 66–7, Nos. 12–15. It is worth referring here to a relief found in the so-called Camp of Diosclitan, showing a figure in Palmyrene dress holding a club in his right hand and another object in his left hand, standing next to a small altar and a smaller dog; see Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra*, Pt. XV, and Tanabe, *Sculptures of Palmyra*, Pt. 134. Following the interpretation of M. Gawlikowski, “Un nouveau type d’Héraclès à Palmyre” in *Études et Travaux 3* (1966), pp. 141–9, most scholars accept that the relief is the result of the juxtaposition of Greek and Babylonian traditions, and thus represents Heracles-Nergal. Unfortunately, the accompanying inscription (*PAT* 1933) is damaged and does not help us any further.

\(^{26}\) Seyrig, “Héraclès-Nergal”, p. 67. A. Bounni, on the other hand, seems to distinguish between the Greek and the oriental god, arguing that the naked and bearded figure must be Heracles, while the figure holding a double axe represents Nergal, even when he carries an attribute of Heracles in addition. See “Iconographie d’Héraclès en Syrie” in L. Kahil, C. Augé and P. Linant de Bellefonds (eds.), *Iconographie classique et identités régionales* (1986), p. 385. Note that Bounni stresses military presence as being decisive for Heracles’ popularity throughout the Near East, p. 387.


\(^{28}\) See W. I. al-Salihî, “Hercules-Nergal at Hatra” in *Iraq* 33 (1971), Pt. 34d and p. 114, where he states that the various pieces of evidence “clearly illustrate the assimilation of Hercules to Nergal” in Shrine X. The inscription is H71, see B. Aggoula, *Inventaire des inscriptions hatéennes* (1991), and now also K. Beyer, *Die aramäischen Inschriften aus...*
facilitated by a resemblance in the sense that both could be associated with a lion. It has also been argued that "the main reason for the fusion of Heracles and Nergal should be traced in their chthonian nature," from which it has been concluded that the so-called "Cerberus relief" is an "artistic rapprochement" between the Greek and the Babylonian god and also "expresses an actual fusion of religious ideas". Unfortunately, since the figures depicted on the relief are not identified, it is pure speculation, encapsulated in a circular argument, that the three-headed dog on a leash is Cerberus, and any possible interpretation of the evocative relief must remain a hypothesis. Since the written language of Hatra is a local dialect of Aramaic, it is not surprising that, as at Palmyra, the Greek name Heracles is not attested. But in one of the few Latin inscriptions found at Hatra, on the base of another statue of a Heracles figure, a Roman officer who was encamped near the city around AD 240 seems to identify the Genius of his cohort, to which the statue was dedicated, as Hercules sanctus. Whether the epithet sanctus points to an oriental origin of the deity under concern is another matter. The popularity which Hercules enjoyed among Roman soldiers does not make oriental influences in this case necessary. But it is of course possible that the iconographical details of the statue, especially the amulet, have been influenced by local artistic motifs.

Local religions in the Near East: notions of continuous renegotiation

In an important article on the relation between Hellenism and the divine world of Palmyra, Gawlikowski describes what he calls an amalgam of religious notions, corresponding to a civilisation that is oriental in character but "marquée du sceau indélébile de l'hellénisme". It is argued that the Greek or Graeco-Roman appearance of the sanctuaries only disguises the fact that the deities worshipped inside are oriental, and that a "double nature" can only be ascribed to a few gods, such as Nebo-Apollo or Nergal-Heracles, originating in Hellenised Babylonia. Generally speaking, Gawlikowski calls the adoption of Hellenistic models relatively superficial, and characterises it as having been mostly of a decorative character. But concentrating on the little evidence we have from the pre-Roman, Hellenistic period, Gawlikowski stresses that what we encounter there is not the "hellénisation d'une entité déjà formée" but a "syncretisme où l'apport hellénique participe en solution." He then argues that an approach which isolates the various elements which constitute the "religion of Palmyra" does not take sufficient account of the mélange, since "tout syncretisme résulte précisément en une entité homogène." This would be especially clear in the case of Palmyra, with the substantial reduction of its indigenous substratum and the development of the Palmyrene civilisation "tous azimuts". Gawlikowski's remarks are very thought-provoking and deserve some extended discussion. In what follows I will use his authoritative study, despite some minor criticism, as a base for an interpretation of local Near Eastern religion.


29Thus V. Christides, "Heracles-Nergal in Hatra" in Berytus 30 (1982), pp. 105-15, quotations on pp. 106-7. The "Cerberus relief", found in the first shrine excavated in Hatra outside the central temple complex, owes its name to the three-headed dog on a leash next to the main figure on the relief. See Stierlin, Städtte in der Wüste, p. 203 Abb. 188. The main figure is a bearded deity with horns, topped by an eagle, surrounded by snakes and scorpions, and holding an axe in his right hand. Next to him stands a so-called "divine standard", and in the background a goddess is seated between two lions. See also Freyberger, Die frühkaiserzeitlichen Heiligtümer, p. 102.

30Surprisingly, Christides seems to have missed the inscription on which al-Salihi (see above) based his identification of the two deities at Hatra, which makes even more speculative his own discussion of "how his (= Heracles') chthonian nature was spread and understood in the remote town of Hatra" (p. 115).

31With regard to Palmyrene Aramaic it ought to be stressed that Greek divine names could appear in Semitic transliteration: Nemesis (nmsys) is mentioned in an inscription from Wadi 'Arafa in the Palmyrene from AD 153 (PAT 1568) and in a bilingual one from Dura-Europos from AD 244 (PAT 1078). See Gawlikowski, "Les dieux de Palmyre", p. 2642. It is worth mentioning here that the name of Heracles himself appears in Syriac transliteration (hrqls) in the enigmatic Oration of Meliton the Philosopher, see W. Cureton (ed.), Spicilegium Syriacum (1855), p. 24, II. 17 and 26.

32For the inscription see Année Épigraphique 1958, No. 240. Published by D. Oates, "A note on three Latin inscriptions from Hatra" in Sumer 11 (1955), No. 81. For the statue, see Downey, The Heracles Sculpture, Pl. XIX, 2.

33Compare Bonnet, "Héracles en Orient", p. 182.


35Ibid., p. 245.

36Ibid., p. 246.
in the Roman period, which emphasizes the notion of continuous renegotiation of old and new elements more than is generally done.

The pre-Roman evidence from Palmyra, usually referred to by the term “archaic”, mainly comes from the temple of Bel and seems to make clear that before the beginning of our era his cult was accompanied by those of various other deities. Some of them probably originated in the Babylonian religious world, while others have a more enigmatic background or might be labelled as indigenous. Amongst the oldest Palmyrene sculptures is a small relief which depicts a naked Heracles figure with club and lion’s skin alongside a radiate goddess and two radiate gods, one of them with a crescent on top. While the other three deities all wear common Palmyrene dress, the nudity of the Heracles figure is exceptional at Palmyra. If anything, the relief seems to show that, no matter when or from where he arrived at the oasis, the Heracles figure had been fully integrated into the divine world of Palmyra by the time that the evidence became more abundant. His nudity might seem different to us when compared with the way in which other deities were represented, and might also have struck the ancients as divergent, but that does not mean that he cannot have been regarded as as much part of the religious life as other gods and goddesses were.

I have already argued that religious life in the Near East in the three centuries from which our evidence dates should not be regarded as an entity that formed the final stage of an evolutionary process. The notion of continuing change and development should not be overlooked, and it is only natural that the various elements which may already have coexisted for ages, or were introduced more recently, were constantly renegotiated and kept on influencing each other. Indeed, there is no reason why this should be automatically seen as “progressive” or “logical”. If we thus ask ourselves how far cultures of multiple origin represent a cultural mosaic, and how far they were being continuously reintegrated, we are probably asking questions to which there are no unambiguous answers. With every new question and from every new viewpoint the scene seems to change as easily and quickly as a kaleidoscope. Generalisations are difficult to avoid, but either give no explanation at all or do not do justice to the complexity of the material. Efforts have been made recently to reinstate the most notorious term of them all, “syncretism”, long avoided because of its implication of a melting pot. Although all religions are “syncretic” in the sense that the coming together of at least two different sources is involved, Stewart has argued that the term can still be valid in referring to that particular aspect of culture which stresses the borrowing and reinterpretation of divergent elements as part of its very nature. But Drijvers’ argument, with regard to the multi-interpretable cultures of the Near East in the Roman period, that “a culture assimilates other elements to its own tradition and pattern, but does not mingle or mix everything.

37 Most of the “archaic” material comes from a foundation wall in the court of the temple of Bel which is ascribed to the sanctuary that preceded the present one. For a list of the evidence see M. Gawlikowski, *Le temple palmyrënien* (1973), pp. 56–60. Some of the material is fragmentary, undated and only ascribed to the so-called Hellenistic temple because it is believed to be “archaic”. It is worth mentioning that two Greek inscriptions, unfortunately too fragmentary to give any information, are among the material which can certainly be ascribed to the older structure. The following necessarily deals with Palmyra only, for we have no evidence of any cultic life in Hatra in the last centuries ac. In a way, the sudden appearance of Hatrene civilisation as it presents itself to us raises problems even more serious than those concerning Palmyra.

38 Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra*, Pl. XIV and p. 12. Drijvers identifies the other three gods as Astarte, Agibol and Yarhibol, which is possible but not certain. It is possible that originally more deities were depicted. Note that the figure on the right is very similar to the one which is depicted on a stele found at the temple of Nebu, see ibid., Pl. I, 2 and p. 19. W. Pratscher, “‘Das Pantheon von Palmyra’ in P. W. Haider, M. Hutter and S. Kreuzer (eds.), *Religionsgeschichte Syriens* (1996), p. 224, refers to an inscription from the temple of Bel which is dated to 6 bc and in which the priests of the goddess Herta offered various building structures to Herta, Nanai and Relef, the gods (pr'wihny wrlp lhy), see PAT 2766, after stating that “ein aus dem Osten eingewanderter Gott ist auch Nergal, ein Unterweltsgott, der mit dem kanaanäischen Gott Relef identifiziert wurde. In Reliefs trägt er Züge des Herakles.” Although it is indeed possible to go one step further and to argue that the Relef from the inscription from 6 bc should be connected with the Heracles figure on the Hellenistic relief, this must remain a hypothesis.

39 Which is a good reason why a reference to the relief as representing “Héraclès et des divinités de Palmyre” in the above-mentioned study of Hellenism by Gawlikowski, p. 248, Fig. 2, ought to be avoided. The iconography of the Heracles figure may be Greek, but the style of all the deities that are depicted is still very local. Compare Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art*, p. 317, who writes that although the use of nudity “could have made sense only to a Greek”, the nakedness of Heracles was accepted throughout the East.

40 M. Pye, *Syncretism versus Synthesis*, British Association for the Study of Religions, Occasional Papers 8 (1993); Stewart and Shaw (eds.), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism; Aijmer (ed.), Syncretism and the Commerce of Symbols*

together," may be more satisfactory, for it seems to take into account the fact that once so-called syncretistic forms are established, they cease to be syncretistic and become original.\textsuperscript{42} Gawlikowski, therefore, is right to dismiss the idea that Hellenism at Palmyra functioned as nothing more than a veneer.\textsuperscript{43} That would not only imply too static a situation but also ignore the role which Hellenism was due to play from its first appearance onwards as an original ingredient.

Of course, Gawlikowski is right when he argues that an approach which isolates the various elements that constitute the "religion of Palmyra" does not take sufficient account of the mêlange. But I do not agree when he further states that all syncretism results in precisely a homogeneous entity.\textsuperscript{44} In a recent sociological study Aijmer has argued against this view of homogeneous cultural traditions, stating that "there is no a priori reason to assume that customs and conventions should fit into one and the same logical format. Rather, our present knowledge points in the direction that a cultural tradition embraces a number of 'modalities', culturally constructed universes, each with its own given presuppositions."\textsuperscript{45} With regard to the religious world of Palmyra or Hatra one could argue, to make matters even more complex, that the different groups of people who came from different backgrounds could still share similar conceptions of how to visualise the divine world.\textsuperscript{46} It is doubtful, though, how far the notions of "dominance" or "competition", e.g. as used by sociologists in the sense of applying symbolism to the integration of various social groups under the acceptance of one source of dominance,\textsuperscript{47} are applicable to our case. In ancient polytheism neither common concepts of visualisation nor a multiplicity of forms automatically imply the creation of potential conflicts.\textsuperscript{48} And although we come across a variety of social groups who may have arrived at either Palmyra or Hatra at various points in history, the evidence does not seem to reveal any degree of antagonism on the part of one (religious) group towards another. What it does reveal is, if anything, significant cases of religious worlds which do not necessarily have to be local.

Admittedly, it ought to be said that the model which I have been sketching is very dynamic, while the limited nature of the evidence does not help to express those notions of continuous renegotiation we are looking for. Besides, the religious world of the Roman Near East may have been more dependent on tradition than the model seems to take into account. But, although the model cannot be "proven" with our evidence (and necessarily will never be proven), it might still be put forward against (or rather in addition to) the current theory of an accumulation of religious layers, of which the Hellenistic one is believed to have had no real impact. I do not deny, of course, that different spheres of influence can be traced, and I support the idea that the divine world of a place like Palmyra in the Roman period still reveals two main strata, which may originally have been distinguished by ethnicity. But in order to explain the developing nature of a culture, and the way in which development and renegotiation with regard to a system of beliefs were perceived by groups of worshippers, the model of an "additive extension of an open system", as proposed by Bendlin with regard to religious communication in the Roman empire, might be more helpful.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{42} ... and become as such part of the culture's tradition and pattern to which further elements are assimilated. For the quotation see H. J. W. Drijvers, Cults and Beliefs at Edessa (1980), p. 17. See also Aijmer's introduction in idem (ed.), Syncretism, p. 12. I do not believe that the distinction between "syncretism" and "synthesis", as made by Pye, Syncretism versus Synthesis, especially on p. 6, is very helpful in this matter. Pye distinguishes "synthesis", which "implies that, out of multiple possibilities, a new conclusion has been reached," from other resolutions such as "assimilation" (here in the sense of "the outright dominance of one strand of meaning by another") or "dissolution". Those resolutions supposedly come out of the dynamically open and syncretistic situation in which "the potential claims of the constitutive elements are still alive." Especially the idea of "synthesis" as the "coherent mixture" which "represents the conclusion to a process which is thereby completed" is much too artificial and static to be applied to any religious world.\textsuperscript{43} Gawlikowski, "L'Hellénisme", p. 246.\textsuperscript{44} In an early article though, Gawlikowski referred to the "hétérogénéité de la culture, et surtout de la religion palmyrienne": see "Un nouveau type d'Héraclès à Palmyre", p. 149.\textsuperscript{45} Aijmer's introduction in idem, Syncretism, p. 5.\textsuperscript{46} Or in Aijmer's words again, ibid., pp. 5-6: "People do not live in one society only, but simultaneously in several societies, which exist in parallel and apart."\textsuperscript{47} See ibid., pp. 3 and 6. Compare the introduction in Stewart and Shaw (eds.), Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism, pp. 19-22.\textsuperscript{48} Contra A. Feldtkeller, "Synkretismus und Pluralismus am Beispiel von Palmyra" in Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte 48 (1996), especially pp. 27-8, who makes an unnecessary plea for reconsideration of the old theory of rivalry between the two so-called supreme gods at Palmyra.\textsuperscript{49} A. Bendlin, "Peripheral centres — central peripheries: religious communication in the Roman empire" in H.
Graeco-Roman art as mere "decoration" in the East?

In addition to the sculptures produced in the different local styles of the Near East, a number of divine and heroic representations in Greek or Graeco-Roman style appear in the various cities of the area. For example, two sculptured blocks from Palmyra, one representing the Heracles figure and the other a Hermes figure holding a purse and probably a caduceus, are very divergent in style from the typically Palmyrene reliefs.50 The so-called "pure" Greek forms in the East are often played down by explaining them as having been of a decorative character.51 But one should not, I believe, try to make sense of the complex religious world of the region by restricting as many ambiguities as possible. Two mosaics found in houses east of the temple of Bel at Palmyra are good examples of those approaches towards obvious ambiguities. The mosaics, which have been judged contemporary on stylistic grounds, are both in Classical style, and the main figures are labelled by the use of mosaic inscriptions in Greek.52 The first one represents, among other figures, Cassiopeia and Poseidon. But in contrast with the "standard" Greek myth, in which Cassiopeia's bragging about her looks aroused Poseidon's anger and in which she lost the beauty contest against the Nereids, the Cassiopeia from the Palmyrene mosaic is triumphant, with Poseidon in the role of judge in the contest.53 Although it was originally attributed to the years between AD 245 and 273, it was later believed to have originated in the time that Palmyra had become part of the chain of the Strata Diocletiana.54 But the fact that two other depictions of this Near Eastern version of the myth, discovered at Apamea in Syria and on Cyprus, both date from a later period is no guarantee of a later date for the Palmyrene one.55 The second mosaic from Palmyra, believed to be contemporary with the one just described, shows the discovery of Achilles among the daughters of Lycomedes on Scyrus by Odysseus and Diomedes. This Classical theme was also reproduced on a mural painting in the so-called "hypogeum of the three brothers", a tomb which was founded in the first half of the second century AD.56 In the same way the downplaying of a sculpture of Dionysos in Greek style becomes less acceptable when considering another third-century fresco in a hypogeum on which the same deity is represented "au banquet".57 Whatever form belief in an afterlife, if there was any, may have taken at Palmyra, we should not expect the decoration in the necropolis to have been deprived of all significance.58 When Graeco-Roman material in the Middle East is classified as "decorative", it still means that with the new "iconographic repertoire" other religious experiences originally represented by this repertoire in the Graeco-Roman world could also enter the Near Eastern divine world.59 That we do not really
know how far these experiences became newly interpreted in the East, how far they maintained their Classical character, and how they were received by the various sections of the population, goes without saying.

The question whether there ever was a so-called original core in Palmyrene religion cannot be pursued here, but if anything was recognisable in the Roman period to which one would now refer as the "indigenous substratum", it can only be known to us in a context which must have been at least partially different from the world in which it originally developed or from wherever it emerged. When and how the Heracles figure made its entrance to the divine worlds of the various places in the Near East is of course not detectable. The example of Tyre, situated on the southern Phoenician coast, shows that identification of Heracles with an indigenous deity could go back at least to the mid-fifth century BC, but in general one could say that a new dimension was added to the appearances of the Greek hero in the East after the campaigns of Alexander the Great.60 As we have seen above, by the time from which our sources date the Heracles figure had become firmly rooted in the religious worlds of the various localities in the Near East. And although the three centuries of snapshots with which our evidence provides us necessarily leave a lot of the questions which we would like to ask open, it is still possible to get an impression of the possible ways in which the Heracles figure could function and have its own place within the local divine worlds. In this regard it will be necessary to approach the material in various and sometimes seemingly contradictory ways.

The Heracles figure on Near Eastern coins

Considering the role that coinage may have fulfilled in familiarising the Near East with a Graeco-Roman standard form of representing the Heracles figure, it is surprising how little evidence there is. The abundance of the collection of coins from Tyre which depict the laureate head of Heracles-Melqart, the lion's skin knotted around his neck, is exceptional in this regard and ought to be seen in the context of the particular role which the cities on the Phoenician coast played within the Roman world.61 But the coins issued in Palmyra62 or Hatra,63 or found at Dura-Europos,64 do not help us any further, and it is only the coinage of the cities of the so-called Decapolis, in particular Gadara and Philadelphia, that provides us with some examples of stereotypical Graeco-Roman representations of the Heracles figure: seated on a rock or resting on his club (even holding the golden apples of the Hesperides in one case), fighting the Nemean lion, or his bust with the lion's skin knotted around his neck.65 But here as well the local context could

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61 A. Burnett, M. Amandry and Père P. Ripollès, Roman Provincial Coinage I (1992), Nos. 4619-706 (silver) and 4707-19 (bronze). See also above, n. 60, and on the region in general, Millar, The Roman Near East, pp. 264-95.

62 There are a few coins on which Zenobia's son Wahballat (or Vaballathus) is associated with a Heracles figure. See G. Mazzini, Monete imperiali romane IV (1957), p. 171 with Tav. L, M/4v (RIC V,2, p. 585, No. 4). Compare RIC V,2, p. 585, No. 7. See also E. Equini Schneider, Septimia Zenobia Sebaste (1993), p. 87, n. 2, for further references. But any coinage of the brief period that the actual position of Roman emperor was claimed by Wahballat ought to be interpreted in an "imperial" context. In associating himself with Heracles/Hercules, the Palmyrene usurper would have continued an imperial tradition in order to substantiate his claim to the throne. Compare V. Piccozi, "Le monete di Vaballato" in Numismaticca (Rome) n.s. 2 (1961), pp. 123-8. Despite the appearance of various other local deities on the more typically Palmyrene coins, there is no evidence yet for the depiction of the Heracles figure on any of them. See A. Krszyzanowska, "Le monnayage de Palmyre" in Proceedings of the 9th International Congress of Numismatics, Berne, September 1979 I (1982), pp. 445-57, and, in general, W. Szaivert, "Die Münzen von Palmyra" in E. Ruprechtsberger (ed.), Palmyra. Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt (1987), pp. 244-8, with further references.


be very important, and the series of coins of Philadelphia depicting a chariot with canopy supported by four pillars, drawn by four horses, which is identified in Greek as the “chariot of Heracles”, is usually interpreted by scholars as pointing to an underlying indigenous deity.66

In this case one of the labours of Heracles is used and reinterpreted in a local context, and it raises the question whether we should imagine the existence in the Near East of a fixed cycle of his exploits as known from the Classical world. Graeco-Roman influence on the representation of the Heracles figure at Hatra and Dura-Europos can be detected in the use of motifs like the apples of the Hesperides and the battle with the Nemean lion, but whether the whole Greek corpus of the Heracles myth was known or accepted there and elsewhere in the Near East, either for the Classical Heracles who was newly introduced or for any deity to whom he became assimilated, remains very doubtful.68 Since we know close to nothing with regard to Near Eastern mythology in the Roman period, correspondence between myth and iconographic representation, as known from the Classical world, is therefore lacking. Whether that situation will change with future discoveries, or whether it reflects historical reality, remains of course uncertain.

Place and function of the Heracles figure

It is therefore of the uttermost importance that the Heracles figure appears among a row of deities on one of the very few monuments from Palmyra that gives us some insight into the local mythology, and as such above all serves as a reminder of how much we do not know. The relief on one of the beams from the peristyle of the temple of Bel depicts an encounter between Palmyrene deities and a female figure with snakes instead of legs. It is usually interpreted as representing the victory of Bel over Tiamat, known from Enuma Elish, the Babylonian epic of creation which used to be recited during the Akitu festival.69 The deities lined up on the right side of the relief are difficult, if not impossible, to identify unambiguously, but at least they seem to point to a local Palmyrene adaptation of the myth of the slaughter of Tiamat.70 Very recently Dirven has argued that the most important figure on the relief is not Bel, riding a chariot on the left fragment which is now missing, but Nebu (Nabu in Babylon, where he is the son of Marduk-Bel), riding a horse and occupying the most central place on the relief, and that the six deities standing in a row were connected with the temple of Nebu,71 who seems to have been identified

66 Spijkerman, The Coins of the Decapolis, Philadelphia Nos. 21–2, 29, 35, 40, 43 and 46 (from Marcus Aurelius to Elagabal). Mesheror, City-Coins, p. 96, puts forward the hypothesis that the canopy covers the sacred stone which was worshipped in the cult of Heracles, and that the Greek deity was identified with both Melqart and the Ammonite deity Milkom. Bonnet, Melqart, pp. 146–7, although writing with regard to the depictions of Heracles on the coins of the Decapolis that “rien cependant ne le distingue du type grec traditionnel” (p. 147 n. 9), connects the coins depicting Heracles’ chariot with the title of ἥρως ἀνδρώτερος Ἐπαφέας (“the one who raises Heracles”), given to a citizen from Philadelphia who is further identified as gymnasiarch, senator and president of the council and assembly, and argues that “l’Héraclès d’Amman n’est pas simplement le héros grec.”

67 Mesheror, City-coins, No. 13. Stephan of Byzantium, s.v. Ἀκτή, tells the story how Heracles had founded the city in gratitude, the Semitic name Aco being interpreted as Ακτή, the Greek word for “healing”.

68 Compare Boardman, The Diffusion of Classical Art, p. 328 n. 74. For the Heracles figure holding one or more apples at Hatra, see al-Salihi, “The Sculptures of Divinities from Hatra”, pp. 65–6 and Nos. 16–19. Equally, what myth, if any, is represented on a cult bank from Hatra that shows three scenes of a Heracles figure, possibly supported by an Athena figure, fighting a centaur, remains unknown. See Downey, The Heracles Sculpture, p. 88 and Pl. XXI. For the fight with the Nemean lion at Dura-Europos see ibid., Nos. 28–32. One Palmyrene tessera (RTP 1032) is believed to show Heracles hurling the Ceryneian hind to the ground, but this must remain a hypothesis. The mosaic from Philippiopolis on which a drunken Heracles (identified as such in Greek) attends the wedding of Dionysos and Ariadne ought to be interpreted in the context of the rapid changes by which the village of Shabba was transformed in a Graeco-Roman city worthy of being the birthplace of the “Arab” emperor Philip. For the mosaic see Balty, Mosaiques antiques de Syrie, pp. 50–7.


70 See Dirven, “The exaltation of Nabû”, pp. 106–8. Whether the Akitu festival as such was really celebrated in Palmyra, and — if it was — whether it was also subject to local influences and full of Palmyrene peculiarities, we cannot know for sure.

71 Ibid., p. 115. It has indeed been recognised for a long time that any attempt to explain these attendant figures by referring to the cult of Bel causes a lot of problems, see Gawlikowski, “Les dieux de Palmyre”, p. 2615. Equally, a
at Palmyra with Apollo. 72 For two of them this can be shown with some plausibility. First, a goddess with a bow probably represents the Babylonian Nanaia, identified at Palmyra with Artemis, Apollo's twin sister. 73 Secondly, the Heracles figure holding the club appears twice on tesserae alongside this deity with a lyre, and he is also depicted on a relief from the temple which is believed to have been "of Nebu". 74 Nevertheless, one will have to wait for the final publication of this temple to see whether or how the Heracles figure really fitted in with a group of deities who have been identified tentatively as Shadrafa, Nanaia or Atargatis, the son of Atargatis, and Arsu. 75

Another deity with whom the Heracles figure could be associated at Palmyra is Yarhibol, the protector of the Efqa spring and hence one of the oldest Palmyrene deities. They appear on the obverse and the reverse of the same tessera, Yarhibol identified by his name, the Heracles figure without any accompanying inscription. 76 A reclining Heracles figure is also depicted on the obverse of a tessera which shows two unidentified radiate deities, one of them with a crescent on his shoulders. 77 The Heracles figure also appears, sculpted in the local basalt stone, in the Hauran area in southern Syria, 78 but, at present, at Palmyra he does not seem to have been attached to the group of deities centred around Allat and Baal-Shamin, who were among the most popular deities in the Hauran (whence they may actually have reached Palmyra). In contrast, the evidence from Hatra reveals at least some connection between the Heracles figure and Allat: one could refer to a relief from the so-called temple of Allat, on which a Heracles figure and the goddess Allat are believed to have been depicted, and a further connection might be found in the appearance of Allat on a stele from Shrine XIII, whose main deity seems to have been a Heracles figure labelled Gad (see below). 79 Thus, if the present state of the evidence from Palmyra seems to show that the Heracles figure was mainly associated with those deities who are either to be labelled "indigenous" or "Babylonian", one should not automatically exclude other possible relations nor jump to conclusions with regard to his "original divine surroundings". The evidence is equivocal, often unclear, and in general insufficient to trace his origins in Near Eastern religion. 80

Throughout this paper I have stressed that the Heracles figure at Palmyra and Hatra is never identified as "Heracles", and that the so-called "syncretistic" appearance of Heracles-Nergal remains unclear. It is therefore striking that when the figure with club and lion's skin actually is identified by an accompanying inscription, he is labelled (but only at Hatra) Gad, the personification of "Good Fortune", and a term which could also be used to address a distinct deity. 81 Shrine leading role on the part of Nebu on the relief is not incompatible with Nabu's rise to power within the religious world of Babylon, which by the late Babylonian period had made him reach a status equal to Marduk-Bel and which is believed to have been reflected in the Akitu festival; see Dirven, "The exaltation of Nabu", pp. 111-13. Nevertheless, the cult of Nebu at Palmyra is, to say the least, quite difficult to reconstruct.

72 See A. Bounni, "Les représentations d'Apollon en Palmyrène et dans le milieu syrien" in Kahil and Augé (eds.), Mythologie gréco-romaine, mythologies périphériques, pp. 107-12. A deity identified as Nebu and holding a lyre often appears on the tesserae. Note that Bounni, op. cit., p. 108-10, interprets one of the deities lined up on the right side of the relief as Apollo instead.

73 Note that the identification of the Greek twins with the Babylonian couple is also made by Strabo, Geogr. XI 1, 7.

74 For the tesserae see RTP 168 and 237. For the relief see Drijvers, The Religion of Palmyra, Pl. XIII, 2.


76 RTP 247.

77 RTP 245 (and 2467).

78 See e.g. M. Dunand, Le musée de Sousseida (1934), No. 48, and the catalogue of the National Museum of Damascus, p. 112 (CS183). D. Sourdail, Les cultes du Hauran à l'époque romaine (1952), p. 35, put forward the hypothesis that the Hauran functioned as a passage for Phoenician influences to Trans-Jordan, although she stressed the local aspect of the Heracles figure in the Hauran. Bonnet, Melgart, p. 145, argues against the old viewpoint and sees the Greek model standing behind the Heracles figure in the Hauran instead. Compare Bounni, "Iconographie d'Héraclès en Syrie", p. 383.

79 For the relief see W. I. al-Salihi, "Further notes on Hercules-Gnôd' at Hatra" in Sumer 38 (1982), Fig. 1. For the stele see idem, "Palmyrene sculptures found at Hatra" in Iraq 49 (1987), Pl. XXIIa.

80 For example, at Dura the Heracles figure appears on a fresco from the temple either known as "of the Palmyrene gods" or "of Bel", on the tableau immediately left of the Tyche of the Palmyrenes and the Tyche of Dura. The context remains unclear. See F. Cumont, Foulles de Doura-Europos (1926), p. 118 and Pl. XLIIX. On the problems with regard to the labelling of this and other temples see F. Millar, "Dura-Europos under Parthian rule" in J. Wiesehöfer (ed.), Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse, Historia-Einzelschrift 122 (1998), pp. 473-92.

81 See in general T. Kaizer, "De Dea Syria et aliis dis deabusque. A study of the variety of appearances of Gad in Aramaic inscriptions and on sculptures from the Near East
XIII at Hatra has revealed five inscriptions that refer to "the (great) Gad of Ramgu", while sculptures of the same provenance show that it was the Heracles figure that served as the protecting Good Fortune of those frequenting the sanctuary. From the North gate of the same city comes a similar statuette of a Heracles figure in Hatrene dress, identified by the Aramaic inscription underneath as Gad (qdm gnd'). As I have argued elsewhere, the anonymous Gad from one of the city's gates could be compared with the so-called Gad of the gate, who appears twice at Hatra and seems to have fulfilled a public function as divine city protector. And although the interpretation of the evidence remains a hypothesis, the Heracles figure may have played a similar role as guardian at the border of the city territory of both Hatra and Palmyra. An Aramaic inscription found 25 km east of Hatra refers to a sacred place "of Nergal", and that site has been identified with a place which was called, by Ptolemy, Ἡρακλῆσις Ἁβους, and, on the Peutingeriana Tabula, ad Herculem. Equally, a Heracles figure on a column was found at a distance of c. 10 km from Palmyra. In addition, it is worth mentioning that in Dura-Europos he is often attested in private houses. Whether these apotropaic characteristics of the Heracles figure should be explained in terms of Greek influence, where Heracles was the pre-eminent protector who could ward off evil in any period of distress, or by referring to the similar role which Nergal could play in ancient Mesopotamia, remains an open question.

Conclusion
This leads us to my concluding remarks. We cannot know what the variety of representations of the Heracles figure meant to his worshippers in Palmyra, Hatra and elsewhere in the Near East. Typological antecedents in the ancient Near East are of course possible, but any Semitic substratum which may have lain beneath the evidence from the Roman period remains unknown. The Greek and Graeco-Roman Heracles fitted in well in various contexts due to his susceptibility to change and interpretation. But, as I have tried to argue throughout this paper, an ongoing process of Hellenisation is not sufficient to explain the developing nature of the local cultures in which the Heracles figure was deeply rooted in the first three centuries AD. In the local contexts in which I have tried to place the evidence, the appearance of "Nergal" is not necessarily to be perceived as "Babylonisation", and neither is the appearance of the Heracles figure to be seen as "Hellenisation" or "Graeco-Romanisation". The gradual adaptation of new material makes more sense when this material is interpreted as additional to an open local culture in which new material becomes authentic and in which the various cultural elements were constantly reinterpreted. And "reinterpretation", quoting Boardman, "is a respectable creative exercise."
Addendum