In Search of Oriental Cults. Methodological Problems concerning 'the Particular' and 'the General' in near Eastern Religion in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods
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IN SEARCH OF ORIENTAL CULTS.
METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS CONCERNING ‘THE PARTICULAR’ AND ‘THE GENERAL’ IN NEAR EASTERN RELIGION IN THE HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN PERIODS

Introduction

Any student of the religious life of a particular city or region in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East is faced by a dilemma: how can one account for the application of comparative material from elsewhere to one’s own study of a local religion without embracing the hotly debated concept of ‘Oriental cults’? Modern research on so-called eastern religious practices in the period from Alexander to Constantine often starts from arguing that the category of ‘Oriental cults’ conflates matters which ought to be kept separate, and that, although there were a great number of similarities between the cultures and religions of the several different towns and local areas in the Near East, above all the various places were very different from each other. Naturally, by combining different local perspectives, and by taking into account both how far they correspond and how far they are divergent, it should also be possible to make careful observations about religious life in the Near East in a wider context. But by focussing on the evidence from one city it proves only too easy to lose sight of the necessity for justification for bringing in visual and textual sources from other local or regional cultural spheres of influence in order to illustrate one’s argument or to help filling in

1 This paper follows up a challenge which I owe in the first place to Martin Goodman and Stephen Mitchell, the examiners of my D.Phil. thesis on Palmyrene religion, who pointed out to me that the assumption “that religious life in the Near East in the Roman period was above all local” ought to be supported by more methodological exploration. An earlier version was presented in London in January 2001 as a public lecture at the annual joint meeting of the Palestine Exploration Fund, the Society for Arabian Studies and the Council for British Research in the Levant. I am very grateful to Michael Macdonald for the invitation which sparked off my attempts to write this paper, and to Olivier Hekster for serving as a sounding board for my ideas. Subsequent revised versions have benefitted from the generous comments of Nicole Belayche, Corinne Bonnet, Jaś Elsner, Jane Lightfoot and Fergus Millar. Finally, I owe thanks to the British Academy for support through the award of a Postdoctoral Fellowship.


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the gaps. Broad patterns of continuous similarity, such as the system of name-giving and the application of particular cult titles to deities, certain features of religious practice, and the background of a world in which Semitic (and other non-Classical) languages played a role, easily seduce the observer into explaining elements known only from specific local contexts as automatically belonging to a wider ‘Oriental’ whole. This paper aims to bring together a number of methodological issues with regard to this juxtaposition of ‘the particular’ and ‘the general’ within the study of religious life in the Classical Levant. But rather than studying the assorted aspects of worship in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods which can be framed under the headings of ‘localisation’ and ‘universalisation’ in opposition to each other, this paper will argue that they ought to be viewed as being integrated. In the process, a variety of ways will be explored of how to conceptualise the interaction of local cultures and wider interpretative frameworks without having to resort to constructs which are as little justifiable as the notion of ‘Oriental cults’ itself. The present treatment of the problems involved may be cursory, but it deals with matters which have not always received the attention they deserve.

‘Oriental cults’

Any search for ‘Oriental cults’ necessarily starts with the sobering observation that this very notion implies a non-oriental point of departure. In the early second century AD the satirist Juvenal made his famous statement that “the Syrian Orontes river has long been discharging into the Tiber.” Ancient authors referred to the foreign nature of many individual cults which were on offer in the Roman world and, even if the modern term does not correspond to any formal differentiation consistently applied in Antiquity itself, it was especially in the scope of religious matters that the eastern parts of the Empire were dealt with in differentiated modes. In the modern world the Belgian scholar Franz Cumont became the “high priest of ‘oriental’ cults”. His Les religions orientales dans le

3 Sat. 3.62. It ought to be remarked, however, that the poet’s voice is directed at mainland Greece (Amydon in Macedonia and Sicyon on the Peloponnesus), the Aegean islands (Andros and Samos) and Asia Minor (Tralles in Lydia and Alabanda in Caria) rather than at the inhabitants of the Near East. See N. Belayche, ‘L’Oronte et le Tibre: l’«Orient» des cultes «Oriental» de l’Empire romain’ in M.A. Amir-Moezzi and J. Scheid (eds.), L’Orient dans l’histoire religieuse de l’Europe. L’invention des origines (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers n.v., 2000), esp. p. 12-7, who argued that the Orontes river came to act as a metonym for Hellenistic influences, “cette civilisation grecque matinée d’éléments orientaux qui a donné une unité culturelle certaine aux pays de l’Asie romaine” (p. 14). Contra R. Turcan, The Cults of the Roman Empire (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 132, who stresses the river’s “symbolic value where Syrian cults were concerned” as more or less passing by a number of important local sanctuaries.


paganisme romain, first published in 1906, swiftly translated into English and German, and reaching its classic fourth edition in French in 1929, would set the academic agenda for the following generation. A supporter of the historical-critical method, Cumont sought to explain both Christianity and paganism in their common origin. In his evolutionary view of the cults from the East he interpreted these religious movements as being similar mystery religions whose main attraction was the promise of after-life, and which accordingly paved the way for a triumphant Christendom. Once coined by Cumont, the designation ‘Oriental cults’ was definitively preserved as a major research tool by Maarten Vermaseren as editor of the series Études préliminaires sur les religions orientales dans l’empire romain. Since then, it has been remarked numerous times that the term implies a non-existing unity, and does not do justice to the diversity of the forms under which religious experiences could be expressed in various places.

In any case, ‘Oriental cults’ has come to be used in the first place to denote the veneration of those gods who spread beyond the Fertile Crescent and other homelands, such as Asia Minor, Persia and Egypt, and who attracted worshippers throughout the whole Roman Empire. It needs therefore to be emphasised that this paper is not concerned with Cumont’s broad range of entirely disparate forms of worship, but with the question of to what degree there exists an integral unity of cults whose local origins lay within the eventual boundaries of those areas which, at some point in their history, would constitute the Near Eastern provinces of the Roman empire. In Maurice Sartre’s words, it is about ‘the indigenous gods at home’. Scholars have for a long time been looking for common characteristics of religious practice among the inhabitants of the Near East who spoke one of the Semitic languages. This search for shared patterns of worship is understandable and, in principle, legitimate. It remains to be seen, how-


8 Turcan, The Cults of the Roman Empire (n.3), p. 7, proposed to speak instead “of religions of eastern origin, or of Graeco-Oriental religions, which have been coated, or even penetrated, by a Hellenic veneer”. Turcan admitted that, in approach and structure, his work paid tribute to Cumont, but it may be considered significant that the English version of his book, a translation of Les cultes orientaux dans le monde romain (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1989), missed an important word in the title. Compare the comments on the similarities between Turcan and Cumont as made by Belayche, ‘L’Oronte et le Tibre’ (n.3), p. 5 n.36: “Le plan des deux ouvrages est sensiblement identique et on ne peut expliquer autrement que par une inspiration le fait de rejeter dans un dernier chapitre Dionysos et Sabazios.” Note the stance now adopted by Turcan in his conclusion to the volume edited by Bonnet and Motte, Les syncrétismes religieux (n.5), p. 385–400.


11 Millar, The Roman Near East (n.2), p. 11: “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.”
ever, whether the various Aramaic dialects in use in the Near East sufficed to provide a common link for the pagan cult centres. A detailed study would be needed to investigate the degree to which a consistent terminology for religious practices existed which could be understood in the various Semitic languages and dialects. Ideally, an examination of shared cult-related vocabulary (e.g. concerning cult titles, but also linguistic formation in general) could produce new insights into the problem of whether deities who were specifically linked to certain localities or regions tended to express their local or regional character in similar ways. For our purpose at present, however, it is sufficient to note that any interpretation of a local religion will have to take into account certain parallels to its religious phraseology in other languages. And this raises indeed further questions as to which degree a local religious system is dependent on its language, and whether cults underwent some sort of transformation when they were expressed in a language which was not their ‘original’ one. Different words in different languages can transmit different values, and it is impossible to measure exactly the impact which the inherent meaning of sacred terminology originating elsewhere could have on a local religious system in which it was introduced in a later phase.

Problems arise especially when scholars intend to analyse religious features in terms of a convergence of indigenous oriental layers on the one hand and of structures which were introduced from the Greek, or rather the Graeco-Roman, world on the other. There is still a tendency to argue that the so-called ‘true nature’ of indigenous gods, and of local rituals and religious systems, remained unaffected by the application of the ubiquitous *interpretatio graeca*, Graeco-Roman imagery and other aspects of Greek culture. However, it has been convincingly argued that ‘Hellenism’ should not be viewed automatically as opposed to indigenous traditions: once transmitted to the Near East, Graeco-Roman cultural facets could come to serve as a medium by which a local culture could find renewed expression. But simultaneously, they would introduce a completely different historical, cultural, mythological and religious knowledge to the region. In neither case is the influence of Graeco-Roman culture on religious life in the Near East easily quantifiable. An ongoing process of hellenization is certainly insufficient to explain the developing nature of the local cultures in the region: new traditions, once introduced alongside the native traditions, could become

12 According to G. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 15–6, it was only Greek that “met that need”.


as such part of the native culture’s tradition and pattern to which further new elements could then be assimilated, and in which, accordingly, old and new cultural elements were continuously renegotiated and reinterpreted.\textsuperscript{17}

It has to be admitted, however, that such a highly dynamic theoretical model of continuous reinterpretation of cultural elements seems to be at odds with the limited nature of the relevant evidence, especially of that of the inscriptions which provide the basis for the research. The epigraphist Javier Teixidor, in what is still one of the very few academic efforts to deal with aspects of religion in the Near East as a whole, concluded that “popular religion must have remained practically unchanged in Greco-Roman times, for the inscriptions do not reflect the impact of new fashions”.\textsuperscript{18} He further argued that the religious practices sometimes show “a bourgeois contentment”\textsuperscript{19} and that “it was this traditional confidence that made pagan religion so popular”.\textsuperscript{20} But to conclude that pagan religious practice in the Near East did not undergo changes in the Roman period because of the static nature of the documentary evidence is in itself a risky assumption, as it passes over the fact that religious inscriptions commonly applied standard formulaic patterns which did not necessarily continue to refer to the same notions over time.\textsuperscript{21}

The misleading presentation of the divine world in literary sources

How can one ascertain the validity of the interpretation of evidence from a local religion in the context of evidence from elsewhere in the Near East, or even from outside this wider region, without falling into the trap of creating constructs similar to ‘Oriental religion’? In other words, is it possible to demonstrate that a ‘local religion’, i.e. the religious life of one particular place, was indeed first and foremost local, without using comparative evidence at particular stages of the argument? Naturally, it is not. Issues concerning ‘the particular’ cannot be understood properly without resorting to ‘the general’, and it is undeniable that the imbalance in spread of evidence has shaped the way in which modern scholars present their material. The challenge must therefore be to use the full range of sources in such an integrated way that this imbalance can be redressed.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibidem: “The faithful were intuitive and simple; occasionally their practices reflect a bourgeois contentment, for instance, in the hundreds of texts that end by saying that the offering was made ‘because the god has listened to the prayer.’”

\textsuperscript{20} Ibidem, p. 11: “The inscriptions are far from reflecting any feeling of insecurity or a peremptory need of salvation. The faithful simply expected the gods to listen to their prayers.”

\textsuperscript{21} Compare A.D. Nock’s interpretation of ‘local cults in the Near East’ in \textit{CAH XII} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), p. 419, as the prolongation of a “static equilibrium”, adding that “the Near East, though retentive of tradition, was not stationary.”
Many deities appear in many places and in more than one context. To be sure, there was no such thing as a ‘Semitic pantheon’ underlying the multitude of divine worlds which populated the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The modern division of the divine world of the region into a Phoenician, an Aramaean and an Arab pantheon, which correspond to each other without being identical,\(^{22}\) is a grave oversimplification. It is even debatable whether there were any ‘local pantheons’ in the region, at least when we interpret a pantheon as an organised and somehow structured assemblage of divine beings in which each deity’s place and function result from continuous interaction with others.\(^{23}\) As far as our evidence can tell us, there are only vague relations between the divinities worshipped in places such as Palmyra, Hatra, Edessa, the Nabataean region and the cities of the Decapolis.\(^{24}\) And a presentation of the genealogy of a divine world such as the one by Philo of Byblos (with regard to the Phoenician gods) ought to be explained as a literary construct rather than as truly representing an institutionalised religious system.\(^{25}\) The contemporaneous co-existence of so-called ‘supreme gods’ within a divine world, which has so often been embraced by modern scholars in their quest for the measuring of an assumed dormant, and as yet not fully developed, monotheism among the Semites, may point to the presence of more than one main cultural sphere of influence, rather than to a strictly organised and hierarchical pantheon.

Although it would be absurd to claim that we can actually know the ‘true nature’ or ‘personality’ of Near Eastern gods in the Roman period, it is possible to catch glimpses of the variations in standing that a deity could have in different religious contexts. But our source material has severe limitations. The evidence mainly consists of epigraphic and sculptural material and the remains of temples. We know close to nothing with regard to the mythological realms of the various local religious worlds, most of which were delineated orally.\(^{26}\) And early Christian authors have managed to distort our understanding and appreciation by publishing deliberately oversimplified interpretations of the divine worlds which surrounded them. As regards the contemporary

\(^{22}\) Sartre, *L'Orient romain* (n.9), p. 490: “Le premier aspect qu'il faut souligner est la présence de panthéons différents, qui se recoupent sans être identiques.”

\(^{23}\) I may be too sceptical on this point. See the seminal paper by J. Scheid, ‘Héirarchie et structure dans le polythéisme romain: façons romaines de penser l’action’ in Archiv für Religionsgeschichte 1,2 (1999), p. 184–203, now available in an English translation in Ando (ed.), *Roman Religion* (n.17), p. 164–89.


\(^{25}\) For a family tree of the Phoenician gods according to Philo, see A. Feldkeller, *Im Reich der syrischen Götter. Eine religiösis plural Kultur als Umwelt des frühen Christentums, Studien zum Verstehen fremder Religionen* 8 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), p. 83, with his comments on p. 84.

\(^{26}\) For an outline of the sociopolitical processes involved, see E. Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts. The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 113–36. Since it is mostly the ‘canonical’ versions which are written down, the distinction between written and oral versions as such is too crude.
literary sources from the region itself which deal with pagan cults in the Near East, these are few, and provide us with sometimes extremely deceptive information.

These texts, the *Phoenician History* by Philo of Byblos, *De Dea Syria* (ascribed to the satirist Lucian of Samosata) and a section on pagan cults in the enigmatic Syriac *Oration of Melito the Philosopher*, all reveal a mythological interest in the past, paralleling a trend which in the Graeco-Roman world had its most obvious exponent in Pausanias’ *Description of Greece*.27 Thus in *De Dea Syria* various contradictory traditions with regard to the foundation of the temple of Atargatis in Hierapolis are listed28, an aspect which has long since contributed to academic pleas for an authentic authorship of Lucian, “producing a deliberate linguistic parody of Herodotus”.29 Regardless of the problems of authorship, which are now settled beyond reasonable doubt by Jane Lightfoot’s major commentary, the huge inconsistency inherent in these passages can be perceived as striking: interpretative statements seem to be at odds with documentary evidence. But to what degree the coexistence of different and ‘contradictory’ traditions also shocked the inhabitants of the ancient world remains to be seen. I remain unconvinced by Andreas Feldtkeller’s suggestion that we should see the different aetiologies in *De Dea Syria* as a sign of the disagreement of the local population with ‘official cult theology’.30 In contrast, one of Keith Hopkins’ time-travellers to ancient Hierapolis may have captured the spirit of the times better when he “realised that having a variety of accounts, instead of a single ‘true’ account, made some sense”, which he supposed “in a minor way ... was a conversion”.31

A closer look at the relevant ‘pagan’ section in the otherwise Christian *Oration of Melito the Philosopher* may serve to cast light on the confusion which its contents cause about the notion of ‘the particular’ and ‘the general’ in Near Eastern cults. As this unique Syriac text is not well-known outside the field of Oriental Studies, I deal with it


28 Respectively foundation by Deucalion after the great flood (12–13), foundation by the Babylonian Semiramus in honour of her mother Derketo (14), foundation by the Lydian Attis for the goddess Rhea after she castrated him (15), foundation by Dionysos on his way back from Ethiopia (16) and the later foundation by Stratonice, the wife of the king of Assyria, and her would-be toyboy Combabus who unmanned himself to escape her advances (17–27). See Lightfoot, *Lucian: On the Syrian Goddess* (n.27), p. 335–417.


31 K. Hopkins, *A World Full of Gods. Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: Phoenix, 1999), p. 194. This point is not automatically devalued if the presentation of the multiple foundation traditions in *De Dea Syria* is indeed a literary masterpiece based upon a comparable pattern in Herodotus, as is argued by Lightfoot, *Lucian: On the Syrian Goddess* (n.27), esp. p. 184–208. The traditions listed in *De Dea Syria* would not necessarily have been recognizable to the actual worshippers in the temple at Hierapolis.
here at some length. It is preserved only in the same British Museum manuscript which also contains the famous Book of the Laws of Countries or the Dialogue on Fate by Bardaisan of Edessa, and has not been edited since the discovery of the manuscript in the mid-nineteenth century. Possibly written in the early third century AD, this "remarkably frustrating Syriac text" does not seem to be what it claims to be, 'a discourse of Melito the philosopher before Antoninus Caesar' ('m'mr dmylytmn pylswp’dhw qdm 'ntwnynwqs qsr). Although Cureton maintained that the text was from the second-century Melito bishop of Sardes in Asia Minor, the Greek fragments of a speech addressed to Marcus Aurelius by this Melito, included by Eusebius of Caesarea in his Ecclesiastical History (IV 26), do not correspond with our Syriac text. Indeed, the fact that Melito is explicitly called 'the philosopher' in the Syriac text may indeed lead us to suggest that the latter was composed shortly after its model, the apology of Melito of Sardis as presented by Eusebius, became known in the Near East. It is unclear which emperor is meant by the 'Antoninus Caesar', before whom the discourse claims to have been presented. It is possible that the author meant Marcus Aurelius, if only because he wanted to give his text some cachet by addressing the same emperor as the historical apology of Melito of Sardis. In any case, if the claim in the Syriac text, of having been addressed to a Roman emperor, is correct, there will at least have been a Greek counterpart, or even a Greek original, for the actual address. But it is equally possible that the text of the Syriac Oration is an example of pseudonymity and that it was never addressed to an emperor at all.

The Oration of Melito starts with an exposition of the distinction between that which truly exists and is called God and that which does not exist, followed by an account of how mankind went astray. This fascinating passage takes a euhemeristic form, and describes how particular deities were worshipped by a particular people, region or city, in acknowledgement of their benign benefactions. I will quote the relevant section in full:


35 On these Greek fragments, which form part of an apology in which Melito of Sardis petitioned the emperor to stop the persecutions of Christians throughout Asia and 'to protect the philosophy which grew up with the empire and began with Augustus', see also E. Gabba, ‘L’Apologia di Melitone da Sardi’ in Critica Storica 1 (1962), p. 469–82. Gabba argued that the Syriac Oration was written under Caracalla or Elagabal.

36 The following is my translation (based on the one made by Cureton) of the whole euhemeristic account within the Oration, and not just of those sections relating to the Near East (cf. p. 241.15 – p. 25 I.23 of Cureton’s Syriac text). I have aimed to stay as close to the Syriac text as possible, which may occasionally have resulted in artificial English. Personal, divine and place names are followed by the Syriac words in brackets. Footnotes are kept to an absolute minimum.
The desire town brought Again, I, the Argos wife fallen The hunting seized (pwnyq'), daughter Elisha the On rescued (swry'), (mgw.?'), and always she spent time with Heracles (hrgls), because he was her brother via her father, for king Zeus loved Alcmenè (lqymn'), the wife of Electryon (lqtrywn), who was from Argos ('rgws), and committed adultery with her, and she gave birth to Heracles. The people from Phoenicia (pwnyq') worshipped Belti (blty), the queen of Cyprus (qwprws), because she fell in love with Tammuz (imwz'), the son of the Phoenicians (pwnyq'), left her kingdom, came and dwelt in Byblos (gbli), the fortress of the Phoenicians, and at that very time enslaved all Cyprians (kprwn') to king kwtr. Because before Tammuz she had fallen in love with Ares (rw{s), and she committed adultery with him, and her husband Hephaestus seized her and envious him. He came, killed Tammuz at Mount Lebanon (lbhnnjwr') while he was hunting boars (?)40 From that time Belti remained in Byblos, and she died in the town Aphaca ('pq'), the place where Tammuz was buried. The Elamites ('ylmy') worshipped nh41, the daughter of the king of Elam ('ylm). When enemies led her away in captivity, her father made her an image and a temple in 3swn, the palace in Elam. The Syrians (swryy') worshipped Atti ('ty), a woman from Adiabene (hdbytyr'), who sent the daughter of blt, a nurse, and she cured Simi (smy), the daughter of Hadad (hdd), the king of Syria (swry'), and after some time, when leprosy came over Hadad, that same Atti beseeched the Hebrew Elisha ('lyâ' brty'), and he came and cured him from his leprosy. The people from Mesopotamia (byt nhryn) also worshipped the Hebrew woman kwthy, for she rescued Bakru (bkwr), a patrician from Edessa ('wrhy), from his enemies.42 On Nebo (nbw) then, who is in Mabog/Hierapolis (mbwg), why shall I write to you? For behold, all the priests who are in Mabog know that this is the image of Orpheus (rwpws), the Thracian magian (mgws' trgy'), and Hadaran (hdrn), this is the image of Zaradusta ('r dw{t), the Persian magian (mgws' prsy'), because these two practised magianism to a well which was in the forest near Mabog, for there was an impure spirit (rwh' tnpi') in that well, harming and assaulting anyone who wanted to pass by that place in which in the present time the fortress of Mabog is situated. And they, as magians, ordered Simi, daughter of Hadad, to draw water from the sea and to put it in the well, so that the spirit would not ascend and harm people, 'according to that which was a mystery in their magism'.43 And like this, also the rest of mankind made images for their kings and worshipped them, which I will not describe further.

37 According to Cureton "evidently an error for Erethonius or Erechteus."
38 Cureton referred to the Kivupaq of the Greeks.
39 The Syriac text at this point reads kd 'bd hnyr' bwrz', but Cureton argued that "there is no such word as hnyr'. It is evidently an error of the copyist for nhšr' or nhšyr'; 'hunting'.'
40 Both Cureton and Renan suggested another blunder by the manuscript's copyist for 'nyy, the goddess Anaitis/Anais.
41 See now Ross, Roman Edessa (n.24), p. 85, who argues that "Kutbaï at Edessa may have been a manifestation of Nebo, who was the god of literature and the arts, among other things".
42 This last line is taken literally from Cureton's translation.
The longest and very wordy part of the *Oration* then follows, in which Melito advises the emperor not to direct his worship towards man-made images, but instead to the only God who made them all. If the emperor acknowledges this God of justice, he will be able to guide his empire in peace. The euhemeristic account clearly forms a ‘break’ in the text, and this has naturally led scholars to interpret it as coming from a different and possibly Greek source. In any case, in none of the above-quoted passages does the author provide us with anything like an authentic ‘insider’s view: ‘standard’ mythol-
ogy and local variations are irretrievably mixed up.

Travel to sacred centres

The *Oration of Melito* is a prime example of the oversimplifying accounts which have distorted our view of the pluralist polytheistic religious world of the Near East. There is no doubt that their readership knew very well that worship of individual deities was not restricted to one particular locality or region. But it remains a fact that the linking of a god or goddess with a specific place could catch the imagination of readers and worshippers alike, resulting in the place’s pre-eminence as a sacred centre in the cult of the respective god or goddess. According to one interpretation, a deity who was of special importance in a particular locality had a ‘functional importance’ in that place which was substantially more extensive than his or her ‘supraregional importance’ within a wider polytheistic religious system. But even if one temple was known to accommodate the most ‘intensified’ version of a deity, it is clear that he or she could be worshipped enthusiastically also in many other places throughout the wider region. Conversely, it can be noted that “possession of a sacred center was not, of course, a precondition of universality”. On


45 Note how, at the end of the second century, Tertullian had written in his *Apologeticus* (24.8) how “unicuique etiam provinciae et civitati suus deus est”, linking Atargatis to Syria and Dusares to Arabia. A later text in which deities are similarly connected with particular localities, mostly situated in the Near East, is Jacob of Sarug’s *Discourse on the Fall of the Idols*. In this sixth-century homily, the author preaches how ‘Satan’ had provided Ephesos with Artemis, Rome with Zeus, Antioch with Apollo and other deities, Edessa with Nebo, Bel and many other gods, Harran with Sin, Baal-Shamin, Bar-Nemre the lord of the dogs, and the goddesses Tar’ate and Gadiat, Aqaron with Beelzebub, the Moabites with Camosh, the Amonites with Malkom, and Sidon with Astarot. For the text and what is still the standard translation, see M. l’Abbé Martin, ‘*Discours de Jacques de Sarogu sur la chute des idoles*’ in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgen-
ländischen Gesellschaft* 29 (1875), p. 107–47. The section within the homily that relates directly to the distribution of pagan deities over the Near East is p. 110 I.42–p. 112 I.91.


their way to a specific sacred place, in the context of worship whose patterns are
discussed here as a concatenation of universalisation and localisation, people travelled,
not only through the region they inhabited, but sometimes also through the known world
as a whole. Naturally, there will have been many who crossed the boundaries of their own
physical environment or conceptual homeland only seldom. And it is clear that there may
have been quite extensive and disproportionate variations in both the number and the
variety of the clientele of the many local and regional cult centres in the Hellenistic and
Roman Near East. In short, temple complexes located in the interior lands of this wider
region reveal less evidence of visitors from elsewhere than focal points of worship
situated on the coast or within the Fertile Crescent. But this is not to say that all
sanctuaries on or near the significant channels of transport and communication which
stretched across the Near East attracted crowds of worshippers from everywhere.49

It seems to be in contrast with the Graeco-Roman world at large that there were no
(oracular cult centres) in the Levant.50 In Asia Minor, especially at the sanctuaries in
Claros and Didyma, Apolline oracles blossomed in the Roman period, as is known both
from abundant references in the Classical sources and from the epigraphic records at
the sites themselves.51 Our evidence, however, is simply not good enough to discern
similar patterns of 'pilgrimage' further east. As elsewhere in the Classical world, Near
Eastern deities were well able to transmit freely their messages to man. But the
evidence with regard to the advice that the local gods could give via dreams or other
channels of transmission should not be automatically interpreted as referring to 'oracular'
cults. There was no need for worshippers to travel to one particular sacred centre,
as the gods chose to communicate with them at various places.

With the exception of the Temple at Jerusalem, whose unique position in the
Jewish world resulted in visits from far away which were not only of a devotional but
also of a 'normative' character, our limited source material suggests that, in the Near
East, the great majority of the temple clientele and of attendants at any festival came
from the immediate hinterland (even if that is not what the rhetoric of the De Dea
Syria proclaims).52 Notions of 'travel', 'tourism' and 'pilgrimage' are of course completely

49 Which may be the impression after reading through MacMullen, Paganism in the Roman Empire
(n.5), esp. p. 18–34, who incorporates Near Eastern material in his synthetic discourse on the
pluralist religions of the Roman Empire.

50 This statement is made in full awareness of literary references to imperial visits and inquiries made
to the god of the Carmel by Vespasian (Tac., Hist. II.78; Suet., Vesp. 5), to Zeus Kasios by Hadrian
(SHA, Had. 14) and Julian the Apostle (Lib., Or. 18.172), and to Bel of Apamea by Septimius
Severus (Dio 79.8.5–6), or of the presentation of Apollo as an oracular god at the temple of
Hierapolis (De Dea Syria 35–7). This and other material is conveniently assembled by Y. Hajjar,
'Divinités oraculaires et rites divinatoires en Syrie et en Phénicie à l'époque gréco-romaine' in
ANRW II 18.4 (1990), p. 2236–320. But the title of his catalogue seems to make too much of the
evidence and runs the risk of implying discrepancies which are not necessarily the case between
gods who are listed and gods who are not.

51 See in general H. Parke, The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor (London & Dover, N.H.: Croom
Helm, 1985), esp. p. 69–92, and R. Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (Harmondsworth: Viking,

52 Pilgrimage to the Temple at Jerusalem was not, however, rigidly restricted to Jews, as is shown by
evidence for the participation of 'Greeks' and other gentiles in the annual feasts of the Jewish
calendar. See E. Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ II, edited by
of sacred journeys are discussed by A. Morinis, 'Introduction: the territory of the anthropology of
intermingled in the case of visits to local or regional cult centres that took place within the context of those occasions which formed part of the respective sacred calendars.\textsuperscript{53} And religious festivities will have been connected everywhere with commercial fairs: the massive temple enclosures of the cult centres may point to both their ‘religious’ and ‘socio-economic’ (in so far as these concepts are separable) functions.\textsuperscript{54} To mention two brief examples, at Hatra inscriptions from the central temenos seem to imply a shared market function of the enclosed square\textsuperscript{55}, and at Husn Suleiman (ancient Baetocaeca) a large inscription shows how the cult of the local Zeus was allowed to benefit from a twice-monthly market with a fair.\textsuperscript{56} Unfortunately, we lack good evidence to inform us how commercial markets and fairs were organised in the Near East and to what degree they were the result of planning in such a way as to correspond in time with the celebrations of a local deity’s holy day, and to avoid clashes of interest with other towns. This is of course partly a problem of reportage, in the same way that Pausanias seems deliberately blind as regards fairs, but not festivals, in Roman Greece. In any case, stressing the important socio-religious functions that the local cult centres had within their surrounding region is not to insist on the absolute absence of travellers from far away. But the relatively few foreigners who were present at any festival could just have “added greatly to the prestige of the festival”.\textsuperscript{57}

Many cult sites in the Near East consisted of tiny chapels within a sacred enclosure (a ‘hima’ or ‘haram’)\textsuperscript{58}, which were supposed to be the dwelling-place of a deity; but shrines and sanctuaries were not the only places which were inhabited by the divine,


\textsuperscript{53} Compare P. Horden and N. Purcell, \textit{The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History} (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 445, who argue that “the salient point about pilgrimage is that it need not always be a journey undertaken exclusively or even principally for religious reasons. ... The travellers who invoked divine protection for their essentially non-religious journey shade into the pilgrims whose religious voyage could embrace many material opportunities.” See also, in general, S. Coleman and J. Elsner, \textit{Pilgrimage. Past and Present. Sacred Travel and Sacred Space in the World Religions} (London: British Museum Press, 1995).


\textsuperscript{57} I have borrowed a quote from Hopkins, \textit{A World Full of Gods} (n.31), p. 193, narrating the annual festival at Hierapolis.

and deities could be attested virtually in any rock, water or wood.\textsuperscript{59} And the more ancient a cult site was – either by continuation or by resumption of worship – the more attractive it could become. Accordingly, the very fact that visits to a certain centre became attractive may have aroused interest among other potential visitors, a process which in itself contributes to a further differentiation of motives for visiting a sacred place. The sanctuaries on the Phoenician coast, the enclosure of Atargatis at Hierapolis ("presented as absolutely primary in its holiness")\textsuperscript{60} and indeed the Temple at Jerusalem all boasted impressive histories. In contrast, some of the cult centres in the interior lands of the Near East seem to have emerged, or at least developed suddenly, only in the Roman period. And it could be suggested that it is precisely such a lack of "involvement with the past"\textsuperscript{61} that had a direct bearing on the absence of centres of pilgrimage in the Near Eastern steppes that attracted visitors from outside their own territory.\textsuperscript{62} Nonetheless, it ought to be taken into account that notions of tradition could be ascribed to newly introduced modes of religious life as well: the main temple in the central temenos of Hatra, which dates from the early second century AD, and whose predecessor seems – according to the most recent excavations – not to predate the beginning of our era, is called \\textit{sgyl} in the local dialect, which must be a reminiscence of the famous Esangila of Marduk-Bel in Babylon.\textsuperscript{63} It is of course unclear how far such a 'reconstitution of the past' resulted from a certain nostalgia or from a quest for identity, and it is equally unclear to which degree 'new traditions' could become considered authentic in their new setting.\textsuperscript{64}

If none of the Near Eastern sanctuaries wanted to attract large crowds in order to spread particular forms of belief to as many worshippers as possible, some of them still managed to draw more visitors than others, which would have resulted from a variety of factors. The interplay of those factors has been formulated as 'spiritual magnetism', of which three variables (in addition to the appearances of divine beings) are distinguished: miraculous cures, sacred geography and difficulty of access,\textsuperscript{65} features which

\textsuperscript{59} On the other hand, it is important to realise "how the religious response to particular landforms can only be understood in terms of a system that reaches far beyond the locality." Thus Horden and Purcell, \textit{The Corrupting Sea} (n.53), p. 440.

\textsuperscript{60} Elsner, 'Describing Self in the Language of the Other' (n.29), p. 152.


\textsuperscript{63} See Kaizer, 'Some remarks about the Religious Life of Hatra' (n.24), p. 235, for further references.

\textsuperscript{64} Cultural continuity (in contrast to mere influence) can hardly ever be proved, although some cases may seem very plausible. The below-described 'canonical' portrayal of Jupiter Dolichenus is "an unmistakable borrowing" from much older Hittite beliefs found in the same region, see Millar, \textit{The Roman Near East} (n.2), p. 249. Occasionally, the archaic sculptures were re-employed in the late Hellenistic and Roman period, see e.g. \textit{LIMC} 8 (1997), s.v. 'Iuppiter Dolichenus', p. 472, n°8 (a seventh-century stela from Maras), with a drawing on p. 473.

contributed to the popularity of a religious complex such as Echmoun, place of worship of Astarte and a local healing god who in later periods became identified with Asklepios, situated near ancient Sidon in a beautiful setting on the Nahr al-Awali. And so the different patterns of worship within the Near East further developed from their traditional frameworks. This development, hardly traceable in itself, must have taken place spontaneously. If people travelled or emigrated, they tended to pay homage to their ‘ancestral’ gods on foreign sand, while on the other hand the introduction of new deities on return to the home town was never excluded.

**Multifarious idolisation**

Literary sources discussing pagan cults in the Roman Near East, with their limited scope, are seriously delusive as regards the way in which the divine world of the region was built up. And the apparent repute of some of the great local cult centres, where deities who were worshipped throughout the region attracted noteworthy attention, ought to be viewed in the context of an assorted distribution of sacred sites with their own individual historical and topographical circumstances. Considering the empire as a whole, “the lack of an articulated religious system that integrated both ritual and belief” has been stressed recently in order to explain the fact that the Romans “were apparently quite content to accept that things worked differently in cult from how they did in myth, even if that meant that a god could simultaneously be multiple and singular, local and universal”. Indeed, this may have lain behind the development of additional divine names. As regards the Classical Greek world, tensions between cultic realities and the Panhellenic pantheon are more easily pinned down. But the quest for an Oriental pantheon will always be frustrated due to the lack of anything comparable to Homer and Hesiod. The absence of coherent mythological accounts in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East which were spread over the whole region in more or less ‘fixed’ written formats will have aggravated the multifariousness of forms of appearance of ‘a’ deity. And one could argue that this was further intensified by the multiplicity of the collective memory of the worshippers, which contributed concomitantly to the unconscious conceptualisation of a ‘basic’ fabric of aspects of the divine world. It is tempting, then, when studying the evidence mainly dating from the Roman period, to focus on those forms of worship which create the impression that they are the more ‘original’ and ‘indigenous’ ones, and to extrapolate from this source material a common denominator behind a deity who received cults in numerous societies and communities. But sociological processes of ‘archaicization’, through which certain religious aspects could be endowed with distinction, may occasionally obscure our perceptions.

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68 See Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts* (n.26), p. 113–36, for suggestions with regard to processes of interaction between memory, social praxis and structure of oral representation.
In addition, the degree to which the remaining traces of particular native religious elements are helpful in detecting general levels of interrelatedness differs from situation to situation. It is the modern historian’s challenge to peel off in separate case-studies the layers of the ‘Roman’ evidence, to investigate how far particular aspects were actuated or even transformed by distinctive spheres of influence, and only then to see how near one can get to instances of ‘Oriental cults’.

The idea that gods and their cults have to be interpreted first and foremost as conditioned by their direct local context was propagated (with regard to Greek religion) in the nineteenth century by Karl Otfrid Müller, who stated “dass derselbe Name im geordneten griechischen Göttersystem oft Verehrungen von sehr verschiedener Natur bezeichnet”.

Indeed, those aspects which together made up the religious system of a particular locality were not always ‘local’ in character. But the fact that so many Near Eastern deities were named after localities (either at their own temple only, such as Zeus of Baetocaece, or away from their homeland, such as Jupiter Dolichenus) shows how their worshippers deliberately applied forms of cultural and possibly ethnic identification to them, and a closer look at this variegated evidence may contribute to a more complete understanding of the way in which different local societies were built up and conceived themselves. Two examples from Palmyra should suffice to illustrate this point. A certain Wahballat erected an altar in the city ‘for the god of Sa’bu, who is called the Gad of the Nabataeans’. This local or regional deity (’lh ʃ’b/w’), also known from two Nabataean inscriptions, is here explicitly referred to as the personified good fortune of the people to whom the dedicant doubtless belonged. But the inscription itself is written in the local Aramaic dialect of Palmyra. The same holds true with regard to another dedication at Palmyra made to a god known to have been worshipped amongst the Nabataeans: a Nabataean horseman (identified as such, nh’ty ... prʃ) set up an altar ‘for Shai-al-Qaum, the good and generous god who does not drink wine’, the peculiar appellation being possibly a reference to a prohibition on the drinking of wine in his cult. The crux of the matter is that by deliberately inscribing their altars in the local Palmyrene dialect, rather than in their own language, which would always have been an option, these Nabataeans – not deliberately – extended the local religious system of Palmyra.


70 Cf. Belayche, ‘L’Oronte et le Tibre’ (n.3), p. 17, who pointed out that the ‘exoticness’ of cults coming from the East was also expressed “dès le pronomé du nom de la divinité, souvent un topicque obscur et barbare, que le grec et le latin on transcrit phonétiquement avec une orthographie incertaine, en l’accolant (ou non) au générique jovien”. For a brief overview of various ‘local deities’ from the Near East see also Turcan, The Cults of the Roman Empire (n.3), p. 169–72.


73 There have been no Nabataean inscriptions found at Palmyra to date, but the discovery of Safaitic graffiti at the temple of Allat at Palmyra shows that such practice would not have been unthinkable. See H.J.W. Drijvers, ‘Das Heiligum der arabischen Göttin Allāt im westlichen Stadtteil von Palmyra’ in Antike Welt 7.3 (1976), p. 34. And the same could, obviously, also happen the other
Those who worshipped a deity with the same name in the various localities in the Near East will have shared a certain focus in their worship of this god, although they may have operated quite differently from each other within their respective local contexts. Thus the god Bel received a cult in the Hellenistic and Roman periods in Babylon, Palmyra, Apamea, Edessa, and many other places. And in all these manifold local societies and communities, worship of Bel was indispensably incorporated into a local religious world, with the god in each case surrounded by different divine beings, his cult embedded in different topographical settings, and his main religious functionaries engaged in different socio-political careers. At the same time, spatial and geographical distinctions notwithstanding, a worshipper of Bel in one place will have perceived the cult of Bel in another place as belonging to the same ‘network’ as the one he knew from home, even if an additional name or title, which would have more emphatically given the god a common identity everywhere, was lacking. Rather than assuming one central ‘cult of Bel’, distributed over the Near East, one ought to view the problem the other way around. One can understand these occurrences of idolisation as local cults whose totality of pluralist identities serves to create the conception of an instance of a wider ‘Oriental cult’.

Iconography, exclusivity and organization of the divine world

I have argued that the notion of a central ‘theological orthodoxy’, co-ordinating the cult of one particular deity throughout the Near East, is not supported by good evidence, and that it is methodologically more correct to approach the multifarious idolisation in the region in the Hellenistic and Roman periods from the local perspective. However, if this notion of a ‘theological orthodoxy’ can be left behind, it ought to be recognised that an ‘orthodoxy of iconography’ is often recognisable, although usually liable to a variable use of motifs and deviating details. The nearly ‘canonical’ type of Jupiter Heliopolitanus (occasionally he could be represented in a different manner) portrays the god as a beardless person with curly hair usually crowned with some sort of calathos, standing on a plinth, flanked by bulls, enclosed in a kind of sheath which is neatly divided in a varying number of sections displaying busts, and holding a whip in

way around: in shrine XIII at Hatra, a remembrance inscription in the local Aramaic dialect (‘Hatrean’) relates a sculpture (in Palmyrene style) to the tutelary deity of that shrine, but it is added in Palmyrene Aramaic that it was dedicated to the goddess Allat. See W.I. al-Salihi, ‘Palmyrene Sculptures Found at Hatra’ in Iraq 49 (1987), p. 58 and pl.XIII-XIV, with PAT 1604.


75 With regard to virtually all instances, our understanding is severely limited by the available evidence. But we know e.g. that in the second half of the third century AD one of Palmyra’s leading figures, Septimius Worod, fulfilled not only the symposiarchia of the priests of Bel, but also important civic functions as procurator of the emperor, ducenarius, and both duumvir and aedilis of the Colonia Palmyra, see PAT 0288 (AD 267). And at Apamea a priest of Bel served as head of the school of the Epicureans (διδάχος ἐν Ἀπαμείᾳ τῶν Ἐπικουρείων) in the middle of the second century AD, see J.-P. Rey-Coquais, ‘Inscriptions grecques d’Apamée’ in AAAS 23 (1973), p. 66–8. See on the cult of Bel at Apamea also Hajjar, ‘Divinités oraculaires’ (n.50), p. 2255–7, with further references.

76 For a similar methodology, see Beard, North and Price, Religions of Rome 1 (n.6), p. 301–12.
his right hand and an ear in his left.77 Similarly, the characteristic representation of Jupiter Dolichenus featured him standing on the back of a bull, bearded, wearing a kind of tiara and a girdled tunic, and wielding an axe in his right hand. Occasionally he is accompanied by his female counterpart, *Iuno Dolichena*, standing on a cow and holding sceptre and mirror.78 Atargatis, better known as ‘the Syrian Goddess’, was commonly associated with a lion, although it ought to be stressed that in her case there was no fixed iconography.79 Naturally, some of the main characteristics of one deity could be applied to another, as is shown by Palmyrene sculptures of Allat on which she is equally depicted as seated between two lions.80 But the latter goddess could also be represented in the same area as a warrior goddess, wearing a helmet and holding a spear and a shield, and by inclusion of the *aegis* assimilated with the Greek Athena.81 She is a clear illustration of a deity whose worshippers could apply two completely different – and non-competitive – iconographies within one and the same locality.82 Occasionally,


81 Drijvers, *The Religion of Palmyra* (n.80), pl.LVI.1, where she is depicted alongside a god with a solar nimbus holding a torch (from Khirbet Wadi Souane).

the two could even result in a mixed form.\textsuperscript{83} In the context of bookless religions, the divine image could attain an essential and quasi-doctrinal quality.

The striking identifications of deities, as featuring in the literary texts, will have had their effect on the apparent ease with which divine names from different cultural backgrounds could be matched with particular deities.\textsuperscript{84} As the notion of exclusivity does not seem to have been present at a popular level in the polytheistic world of the Near East, worshippers could interpret deities from a divine world unknown to them, having in mind familiar deities whose characteristics were thought to correspond with those from the unknown ones. Naturally, different worshippers would make different interpretations, as different worshippers would emphasise different aspects of different deities.\textsuperscript{85} It is therefore not surprising that moderns can easily be left so confused as to retreat into the (attractive but dangerous) option of creating scholarly chains of identifications between ancient deities. On a theological level, the question of exclusivity leads to a different discussion. How do Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus and Jupiter Optimus Maximus Heliopolitanus relate to Jupiter Optimus Maximus whose temple had stood on the Capitol in Rome for centuries? We should always keep in mind that “worshippers could literally make of him what they would”\textsuperscript{86}: in Aquileia in North Italy a dedication was actually made to a composite deity ‘Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus Heliopolitanus’!\textsuperscript{87} According to their names, the cults of IOMD and IOMH originated in the local religious systems of Doliche (located in the territory which had once formed part of the kingdom of Commagene)\textsuperscript{88} and Heliopolis-Baalbek (during an

\textsuperscript{83} On a relief from Khirbet el-Sane in the Palmyrene the goddess is seated between two lions and simultaneously depicted with helmet, aegis, shield and spear. See Drijvers, \textit{The Religion of Palmyra} (n.80), pl.LVIII; Tanabe, \textit{Scultpures of Palmyra I} (n.80), pl.128. She is identified in the accompanying inscription, which also names the god Rahim (\textit{PAT} 2758).

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Locus classicus} is \textit{De Dea Syria} 32, which narrates how the statue of ‘Hera’ presents many different forms: “Generally speaking, she is certainly Hera, but the statue has also something of Athena, Aphrodite, Selene, Rhea, Artemis, Nemesis and the Fates” (καὶ τὰ μὲν ξύμπαντα σφρακέλων ἤθετα ἔχει ἄλλο τι καὶ Ἐθναίας καὶ Ἀφροδίτης καὶ Σελήναιας καὶ Ῥέης καὶ Ἀρτέμιδος καὶ Νεμέσιος καὶ Μοῖρων). See also Lightfoot, \textit{Lucian: On the Syrian Goddess} (n.27), ad loc.

\textsuperscript{85} E.g., the oldest dated inscription from the temple of Allat at Palmyra which actually mentions the goddess identifies her with Artemis, see Drijvers, ‘\textit{De mater inter leones sedente}’ (n.82), p. 340 with pl.LXXV (a fragmentary Greek text whose damaged Palmyrene counterpart remains unpublished). In contrast, it seems that identification of Allat with Athena was the convention in Roman Palmyra, see above and compare also the bilingual inscription from AD 144 published by H.J.W. Drijvers, ‘Greek and Aramaic in Palmyrene Inscriptions’ in M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield and M.P. Weitzman (eds.), \textit{Studia Aramaica, JSS Suppl.} 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of Manchester, 1995), p. 34–8.

\textsuperscript{86} Millar, \textit{The Roman Near East} (n.2), p. 249.


important period in its history part of the district that belonged to Berytus).\textsuperscript{89} But the fact that they so obviously borrow the epithets of the Capitoline god serves “to express the over-arching position” of these local deities.\textsuperscript{90} In other words, they compellingly lay claim to the position of the state cult of the Roman Empire itself, while in turn the latter “could absorb and display the influence of local culture and conditions”.\textsuperscript{91} As ‘new’ gods, no longer confined to their ‘home locality’, Jupiter Dolichenus and Heliopolitanus penetrated and became an inseparable part of numerous other local religious systems.\textsuperscript{92} Simultaneously, they absorbed one of the most traditional and far-reaching parades of power, and accordingly incorporated other deities into that display.\textsuperscript{93} The evidence hints at the alternative that nominally local cults could be to the worship of a world-wide established deity, even if the latter himself was indeed in origin a local deity as well, but of a city-state turned empire.

It has been argued by Feldtkeller that the penetration of gods from ‘outside’ into a local religious system would necessarily result in a conflict situation, as the new deities would be competing with those deities already settled within the local religious system who fulfilled similar functions.\textsuperscript{94} However, this limited point of view does not take into account that a number of deities could be covering partly the same ‘field of interest’, a field whose tenor could also be gradually modified and ought to be interpreted always within the context of a wider divine world.\textsuperscript{95} Feldtkeller’s statement that a Pantheon


\textsuperscript{90} Beard, North and Price, Religions of Rome 1 (n.6), p. 281 (with regard to Jupiter Dolichenus).

\textsuperscript{91} Ibidem, p. 334. This does not, of course, automatically assume a notion of ‘resistance’ to the religious establishment. But compare Elsner, ‘The origins of the icon’ (n.47).

\textsuperscript{92} To be fair, it ought to be stressed that, although both deities had a huge following in the empire as a whole, especially among the military (also on the Eastern frontiers), with regard to the Near East the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus penetrated other local religious systems only in the territory of Comagene, while the cult of Jupiter Heliopolitanus was spread also in other parts of the wider region.

\textsuperscript{93} This is most clearly visible in evidence from outside the Near East, in surviving sculptures from the sanctuary of Jupiter Dolichenus on the Aventine in Rome which depict Apollo (Hörig and Schwertherm, CCCD [n.78], no. 380) or Heracles (CCCID, no. 358), or show Dolichenus with Isis and Serapis (CCCID, no.365 and 386). Special mention ought to go to two inscriptions found in Dacia, where a certain ‘Commagenean god’ is mentioned alongside IOMD: CCCID no. 147 (a dedication to IOMD Commagenorum by a priest of IOMD) and no. 148 (a dedication to IOMD et deo Commacen). Contra the editors, I would not find it plausible that these are identical deities in the mind of the worshipers.

\textsuperscript{94} Feldtkeller, Im Reich der syrischen Göttin (n.25), p. 85: “Faktisch drangen durch Interpretationen fremde Gottheiten in Religionssysteme ein und traten zu funktionsähnlichen eigenen Gottheiten in Konkurrenz”.

could not be organised without a hierarchy\textsuperscript{96} is the result of a failure to evade the blinding effects of the attempts at rationalisation of which the literary sources form the product. Instead, the interaction between a framework of a set of local cults and the worship of deities who are in some way or another identified as coming from outside ought to be viewed in a more integrated manner. Even if it is not implausible that the literary notion of rationalisation had some influence on popular experiences, there is no good documentary evidence which would show how any local religious system in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East was organised in a clear-cut set-up providing the respective deities with ranks and levels of authority attuned to each other. The closest we may get to something like a ‘composed’ structure of a local divine world seems to be by taking into account numismatic evidence (even if the respective figures are mostly chosen separately): which deities are represented on coins of which city, in what way and accompanied by which legend? In a way, coins are more significant than individual dedications, since they come from a locality as a collectivity. But the fact that they therefore present, by nature, an official facade, also means that they do not always provide a reliable picture of the local divine world.\textsuperscript{97}

Both on coins and by means of other visual media, the gods would be presented in a miscellaneous pastiche: one can easily trace the assimilation process, without grasping its full significance. In addition to the input of deities who are explicitly identified as coming from a particular locality, worshippers could apply Graeco-Roman imagery to give visual expression to their deities. Here, the main example is the so-called ‘Heracles figure’, who was almost never identified as ‘Heracles’ in the region, and who seems often assimilated with divergent indigenous gods such as Nergal, Melqart or Reshef.\textsuperscript{98} Furthermore, a deity who seems to have been taken over straight from the wider Graeco-Roman religious system could be incorporated in a Near Eastern divine world. It is still an enigma why the goddess Nemesis was identified a few times in Palmyrene inscriptions with an Aramaic transliteration (\textit{nmsys}) of her Greek name, and as such counts as the only instance of the exact opposite of the common Palmyrene practice, by which the majority of the gods kept their indigenous names also in Greek transliteration.\textsuperscript{99}

Finally, mention should be made of aniconic images, such as large stones, ‘betyl’ (sg. βαίτυλος, probably from the Semitic root \textit{br’t}, ‘house of the deity’), stelae

\textsuperscript{96} Feldtkeller, \textit{Im Reich der syrischen Göttin} (n.25), p. 76: “Ein Pantheon war wohl gar nicht ohne eine Hierarchie zu organisieren”.

\textsuperscript{97} In addition, a development within the coinage of the wider Roman East (including Asia Minor) ought to be taken into consideration, from “conservative religious themes” in the early principate and under the Flavian dynasty to “a flowering of imaginative and diverse types”, see K.W. Harl, \textit{Civic Coins and Civic Politics in the Roman East}, AD 180–275 (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), p. 14.


\textsuperscript{99} \textit{PAT} 1078 (AD 144, from Dura-Europos), 1568 (AD 153, from Wadi Arafa) and 2825 (undated, provenance unknown). See Gawlikowski, ‘L’hellénisme et les dieux de Palmyre’ (n.14), p. 248, on the Palmyrene practices of naming deities, and T. Kaizer, ‘Nemesis, Aglibol and Malakbel: a Note on a Relief from Khirbet Ramadan in the Palmyrene’ in \textit{Parthica} 3 (2001), p. 211–8, for further discussion and references. What happens with regard to Nemesis in Palmyrene Aramaic is comparable to the transliteration of a number of divine names into Syriac in the above-quoted section of the \textit{Oration of Meliton the Philosopher}. 
This century application (masseboth) or altars, which in some cults took the central place that was otherwise reserved for the statues known especially from the Graeco-Roman world. More than a century after the creation of the Roman provincia Arabia, coins could still (or rather again?) be minted at Bostra depicting three betyls, symbolising Dusares, an important god within the region of the Nabataeans.\(^{100}\) In the cities of their former kingdom, the application of aniconic images was a widespread and characteristic phenomenon.\(^{101}\) But it was certainly not the only manner in which divine powers could be manifested. And what is more, virtually all attestations of these aniconic, non-anthropomorphic cults date from precisely the Roman period.\(^{102}\) Thus, although there is abundant evidence to show both the use of aniconic cult objects in the Near East as a whole\(^{103}\) and the fact that the Classical authors knew about this contrasting form of worship,\(^{104}\) it remains uncertain how close this sort of imagery was to the heart of ‘Oriental cults’.\(^{105}\)

**Conclusion**

This paper has sketched out some methodological issues with regard to the study of religious life in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East which are in need of further hypotheses to test. It drew attention in particular to the conundrum of how to justify the

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105 The subtitle of Patrich’s mentioned study, *Prohibition of a Graven Image Among the Nabataeans* (n.101), is a grave overstatement.
relevance for the study of local Near Eastern religious systems of comparative evidence coming from other places in the region, without falling into the trap of unconsciously creating a construct which is as little justifiable as the notion of ‘Oriental cults’ itself. It argued that conceptions (both ancient and modern) of ‘Oriental cults’ could be created by the cumulative effects of a variety of local cults, with their multifarious identities and their wide range of rituals. Local and universal aspects of idolisation ought therefore to be studied in a unified manner. On the one hand, the direct context should always be the basis for discussion of religious phenomena, as it was a particular society (or subgroup of society) that provided the framework within which a cult functioned. On the other hand, any local cult was also, simultaneously, a manifestation of patterns of worship known from the wider region, and a constant convergence of religious structures should be taken into consideration.

Trying to find a way forward in the study of the cults of the Classical Levant, further exploration of the relevancy of those languages and dialects present in a certain area to the functioning of its religious structures remains one of the main desiderata. However, demarcating the wider region of the Near Eastern lands in terms of a linguistic force field, where the effects of the overlapping presence of Classical, Semitic and other Eastern languages could be felt, does not automatically imply that the study of the semantic features of individual cults will yield major results in each instance. In addition, models for the conceptualisation of local forms of rituals and of beliefs ought to be constructed in such a way as to encompass evidence for rural worship, without the need to fall back on the fashionable though ultimately unhelpful distinction between ‘indigenous’ and ‘allochthonous’ cults. In order to comprehend more fully the impact of first Hellenistic then Roman rule on the religious life of the Near East, the developing nature of what was there already, and the varying influences at work of what had been there in earlier phases, need to be taken more into account.

What is left for us to see in the Roman period is a continuous interplay between deities from different cultural spheres of influence, a haphazard application of Graeco-Roman imagery to the divine world, and a multitude of deities that were deliberately identified as coming from elsewhere. And all of this universally, different for each locality. This diversity, however, does not necessarily show up in the eyes of the modern scholar. But it is this very diversity which should define the religious world of the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods as a whole, and failure to recognise this has contributed to conceptions of ‘Oriental cults’. It need not surprise us. Modern scholarship approaches the unified field of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East from a multitude of different angles, viewing it according to preference as Mesopotamian, Arab, Greek, Roman, Phoenician or Syrian. Behind a seemingly homogeneous concept looms a great deal of heterogeneity. It might well be, therefore, a unification of our miscellaneous approaches that would form the best guide in search of Oriental cults.

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