

Religious Syncretism in the Near East: Allāt-Athena in Palmyra

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Resumen: El propósito del presente artículo es examinar aquellos problemas relativos a la fusión Allāt-Athena, centrándose en el caso de Palmira. Ha de tenerse en cuenta, para ello, que los griegos no establecieron dogmas religiosos, asunto que queda confirmado, incluso, en un detallado análisis de los atributos de Athena. Vaya por delante que el autor no pretende ofrecer un tratamiento exhaustivo de las representaciones artísticas de la fusión Allāt-Athena.

Abstract: The aim of the present article is to examine those problems concerning the so-called Allāt-Athena, focusing on the case of Palmyra. It should be taken into account that the Greeks did not have any fixed religious dogmas, a matter that has been confirmed even through a detailed analysis of the attributes of Athena. It is not the purpose of the present author to give any exhaustive treatment of the artistic representations of the so-called Allāt-Athena cluster.

Palabras Clave: Allāt. Athena. Sincretismo religioso.

Key Words: Allāt. Athena. Palmyra. Religious syncretism.



The fusion of the Greek divinities with those of the Near East is complicated and puzzling. M. Rostovtzeff, who was one of the first to deal with this problem, tried to solve it by labeling the Hellenized artistic representations of fused divinities with the term ‘interpretatio romana’, vaguely meaning the Graeco-Roman understanding of local Near Eastern divinities¹. A number of archaeologists, based on isolated artistic elements, such as, a griffin or a female figure flanked

¹ M. ROSTOVITZEFF, “The Caravan Gods of Palmyra”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 22 (1932), pp. 107-116.

by two lions, labeled the fused divinities Allāt-Nemesis' or Allāt-Atargatis' without any complete comparison of relevant attributes². Other scholars considered the Greek-Oriental artistic depictions of local divinities simply as Greek artistic forms used for the representation of Near Eastern divinities without any religious importance³. To accept the latter view is to deny any Greek religious influence on the Palmyrenes, who had close cultural ties with the Graeco-Roman world and did not simply imitate external forms.

The Palmyrenes, a Semitic people, whose commercial activities extended from Yemen to the coastline of Syria, were heavily influenced by Greek culture. Their aristocracy used Greek as a second language and added a Greek name to the original Semitic.⁴ Many relevant articles have been published in the periodicals, *Syria*, *Berytus* and in the Polish series *Studia Palmyrenskie*. References to other relevant works appear below.

In spite of a number of mistakes noticed in the use of Greek language by the Palmyrenes, many caused by a spirit of simplification of the Greek language, the Greek expression in general is adequate, actually attesting an idiomatic *koine* used by the Palmyrenes. The appellation 'wahbalat', 'the gift of Allāt' is either rendered in transliteration: 'ουαχμπαλα- ουαβάλλαθος' or in translation 'Αθηνόδωρος' ('the gift of Athena'). On the Palmyrene coins both appellations appear side by side; see Wad. 2615, 'Ουαβάλλαθος Αθηνόδωρος'.⁵

While most of the archaeological and epigraphical material concerning Palmyra has been collected and published, little progress

² See for example, J. STARCKY, "Allath, Athèna et la déesse syrienne", *Mythologie gréco-romaine, mythologies périphériques*, ed. Lilly Kahil and C. Augé (Paris, 1981), 119-130; also H. Seyrig, who discovered and studied many Syrian monuments, reaching some highly speculative conclusions.

³ J. TEIXIDOR, *The Pantheon of Palmyra* (Leiden, 1979), pp. 61-62.

⁴ H.J.W. DRIJVERS & M.J. VERSTEEGH, "Hatra, Palmyra und Edessa. Die Städte der syrisch-mesopotamischen. Wüste in politischer, kulturgeschichtlicher und religionsgeschichtlicher Beleuchtung", *ANRW II*, 8, ed. W. Haase and G. Temporini (Berlin-New York, 1977), pp. 799-906; J. STARCKY & M. GAWLIKOWSKI, *Palmyre* (Paris, 1985); M. GAWLIKOWSKI, "Les dieux de Palmyre", *ANRW II*, 18.4, ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini (Berlin-New York, 1990), pp. 2605-2658 with the most important bibliography concerning various aspects of the Palmyrene culture. ⁴ For the Palmyrene inscriptions see mainly J. TEIXIDOR, "Bulletin d'épigraphie sémitique", *Syria* 44-54 (1967-1977).

⁵ W.H. WADDINGTON, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1870).

has been made concerning the nature of the fusion between the Greek and Near Eastern divinities. Some important questions were not even raised and discussed: What were the actual attributes of the so-called Allāt-Athena? Was the worship of Allāt-Athena the same in Nabatene, Palmyra and other places of the Near East? Did all the worshippers of the fused divinity share the same religious beliefs? What was the relationship between the religious image of Allāt in the form of a Mesopotamian goddess accompanied by a lion and that of Allāt in the form of Athena?

The aim of the present article will be the examination of such problems concerning the so-called Allāt-Athena, focusing on her nature in Palmyra. Of course, it must be taken into consideration that the Greeks did not have any fixed religious dogmas and even just the detailed examination of the attributes of Athena is elusive.⁶ It is not the purpose to give here an exhaustive treatment of the artistic representations of the so-called Allāt-Athena. Such work has been done in an admirable way in the articles “Allāt”, and “Athena” in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (hereafter *LIMC*). Nevertheless, there is a loose connection between these two articles as well as the relevant articles “Ishtar”, “Atargatis” and the actual attributes of the fused divinity of Allāt-Athena, which appeared in a rather superficial and confusing way. M. Gawlikowski in an extensive article examined in great detail the beautiful statue of Athena made of Pentelic marble, which was found in the temple of Allāt in Palmyra, and compared it successfully with the Greek prototypes.⁷

The question which has not been asked firmly is: Who were the worshippers of the marble statue of Allāt-Athena? Did they worship her in the same way as their nomad compatriots? What traits, if any, of this fused divinity did they recognize and appreciate? How much of the Greek religion and mythology did the Palmyrenes understand? For example, in the tomb of the “Three Brothers” there are two frescoes (2nd c. A.D.), one depicting the visit of Odysseus to the court of the king of Skyros in order to persuade the hero Achilles to join the Greek army in Troy and the other illustrating the myth of Casiopoeia. The same scenes also appear in two mosaics of a Palmyrene house.⁸

⁶ C.J. HERINGTON, *Athena Parthenos and Athena Polias* (Manchester, 1955), p. 50.

⁷ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, “The Athena of Palmyra”, *Archeologia* 21-22 (1996), pp. 21-32.

⁸ H. STERN, *Les mosaïques des maisons d’Achille et Cassiope de Palmyre*, (Paris, 1977).

The scene of Odysseus in the court of the king of Skyros was very popular in Greek and Roman art and, frequently appeared in the artistic representations of Antioch at the time of the wall painting (2nd c. A.D.). It is, therefore, logical to assume that the Palmyrene artist was inspired by and imitated an Antiochian prototype. The question, which naturally arises, is whether the artist and the people for whom it was made understood the actual meaning of the Homeric scene.⁹ There is no doubt that in Antioch the people, at least the elite, were well aware of the Homeric heroes and Achilles' episode. At that time the deeds of Homeric heroes were part of the Greek learning.¹⁰

It is plausible that the elite of Palmyra understood Achilles' scene, being aware of the contents of the heroic cycle and in particular of the episode of Odysseus' visit to Skyros. The Palmyrene paintings and mosaics depict Achilles' episode in the typical way it appears in Roman art. Achilles, who is dressed in female clothes, unmasks himself as soon as he sees the shield brought as a gift by Odysseus, and seizing it leaps into the foreground.¹¹ Odysseus went there to persuade the hero Achilles, whose mother had hidden him among the women, disguised in female dress, hoping to save him from an early death in the Trojan War. Finally, Odysseus persuaded Achilles to tear his clothes off and join him.

No study has addressed the theatrical plays which were performed in the Palmyrene theater, built in Severan times, but not completed.¹² Performance of any classical Greek plays could certainly evidence an understanding of Greek mythology.

A relief found in the city of Palmyra (1st c. A.D.), judging by the costumes of the represented figures and incomplete inscription is of particular importance regarding Palmyrene understanding of Greek mythology and its fusion with local religious beliefs. It is inserted in a niche framed symmetrically with vine leaves. It depicts a woman seated on a cushioned throne wearing a 'calathos' in the form of a turreted city wall and dressed in a long tunic. One of her legs rests on

⁹ For a similar case in Nabatene see a detailed discussion in V. CHRISTIDES, "The Beginning of Graeco-Nabataean Religious Syncretism: Two Stone Lintels from Sweydah of Natatene: 'The Judgment of Paris' and 'Athena and Aphrodite with the Lion'", *Graeco-Arabica* 6 (1995), pp. 272-300.

¹⁰ I. HAMDI, *Ηελληνορωμαϊκή παιδεία εν Αιγύπτω από του Α' έως του Α' μ.Χ. αιώνας κατά τους παπύρους* (Athens, 1972).

¹¹ Margaret R. SCHERER, *The Legends of Troy in Art and Literature* (New York-London, 1963), plate 31.

¹² J. STARCKY & M. GAWLIKOWSKI, *Palmyre* (Paris, 1985), pp. 114, 145, note 6.

the shoulder of a little boy. An eagle with outstretched wings is perched next to her head and a dog is seated close to her legs. Beside her another female figure appears to be holding an olive branch, dressed in a similar fashion and wearing the same type of 'calathos' (Fig. 1).

Various views have been expressed concerning the identity of the persons or gods represented this relief. A. Bounni, the first to try to interpret it based on the elliptic inscription of the relief and the 'calathos', considered the seated figure as the goddess Ishtar-Astarte and her companion Tyche¹³. Colledge correctly points out that the inscription of the relief is elliptic and the words 'štr' *ḫt*' could mean either the 'god Ishtar-Astarte' or simply the 'good goddess', with the proper name lost.¹⁴ He also considers this relief as representing Ishtar-Astarte and Tyche. Nevertheless, the most plausible identification is that the seated goddess represents Dimitra and her consort, her daughter Persephone, known also as Korē. The cult of these two deities, which appear frequently together, was closely related to the renewal in vegetation and the afterlife.¹⁵

There is no doubt that the unknown Palmyrene artist was inspired in his relief by the artistic representation of Eutyichides' Tyche of Antioch, a standard type imitated by the later artists.¹⁶ Eutyichides' statue depicts the goddess Tyche of Antioch seated on a rock wearing the city as a crown and resting her right leg on a young boy personifying the river Orontes. An orientalized painting of Eutyichides' Tyche appears in the temple of Palmyrene gods in Dura Europos bearing the inscription 'Τύχη Παλμυρών' (Tyche of Palmyrenes)¹⁷. Tyche (Fortune) could be personified by any important goddess and this painting most probably represents the goddess Atargatis accompanied by her usual animal, the lion, attached to her throne.

Concerning the Palmyrene relief, the seated goddess with the turreted crown represents the queen of the Underworld, Dimitra; Korē, the acolyte next to her, having an indistinguishable function, bears a

¹³ A. BOUNNI, "Note sur un nouveau bas-relief palmyrénien", *Les Annales archéologiques de Syrie. Revue d'Archéologie et d'Histoire* 15¹ (1965), pp. 87-98.

¹⁴ M. COLLEDGE, *The Art of Palmyra* (London, 1976), p. 48.

¹⁵ M.P. NILSON, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (Munich, 1955), I², p. 461; E. DES PLACES, *La religion grecque* (Paris, 1969), pp. 48-51.

¹⁶ See the picture of a Roman marble copy of Eutyichides' statue from the year 300 B.C. in J.J. POLLITT, *Art in the Hellenistic Age* (Cambridge, 1986), fig. 1, p. 3.

¹⁷ M. ROSTOVITZEFF, *Dura-Europos and its Art* (Oxford, 1938), front page.

similar crown. The eagle perched next to the head of Persephone does not represent a symbol of royalty but that of immortality.¹⁸

Thus the Palmyrene artist used the 4th century statue of Tyche of Antioch as a model to represent the goddesses of the Underworld, Dimitra and her daughter, Persephone (Korē). Dimitra is accompanied by the chthonian dog along with a perched eagle with outstretched wings, typical symbols of immortality. Next to her Persephone holds an olive branch. The funeral aspect is strongly emphasized in the Palmyrene religion as it is shown in the numerous funeral banquets of Palmyra, for which illustrated tesserae were issued as entrance tickets, and in the beautifully decorated tombs where, according to Gawlikowski, the dead were mummified.¹⁹

The idea sometimes expressed that the people of Palmyra could be rigidly divided into various religious layers, each recognizing and worshipping the local divinities in its own way, is here taken to be only partly true. But undoubtedly there was a differentiation in the religious understanding of the local divinities by the different groups of the Palmyrene people as will be seen in the following discussion of the goddess Allāt-Athena.

1. Primitive Allāt and her Early Development

Allāt and her sisters ‘Uzza and Manāt were the most important goddesses of the pre-Islamic Arabs.²⁰ Ibn al-Kalbī describes Allāt as a square stone²¹:

وكانت صخرةً مربعةً

In the Safaitic inscriptions, Arab poetry and a number of Arabic sources, the pre-Islamic Arabs invoke Allāt in their oaths, ask her protection while traveling with their caravans. They carry her idol in their wars to help them in fighting, and her idol also has an apotropaic character protecting the tombs from violators.²² Allāt’s sister, ‘Uzza,

¹⁸ For both symbolisms, see E.R. GOODENOUGH, *Jewish Symbolism in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York, 1958), III, pp. 186 ff.

¹⁹ J. STARCKY & M. GAWLIKOWSKI, *Palmyre* (Paris, 1985), p. 127.

²⁰ T. FAHD, *Le Panthéon de l’Arabie centrale à la veille de L’Hégire* (Paris, 1958), pp. 111-112.

²¹ See IBN AL-KALBI, *Kitāb al-Asnām*, ed. A. Zeki, (Cairo, 1924, 2nd ed.), p. 16.

²² E. LITTMAN, *Semitic Inscriptions* (New York, 1904), pp. 135, 148; IBN HIŠĀM, *Sīrat al-Nabawīyah*, ed. M. Saqqā (Cairo, 1955), I, p. 227; IBN AL-KALBI, *Kitāb al-Asnām*, ed. A. Zeki (Cairo, 1924, 2nd ed.), p. 16.

is also frequently invoked in the Arabic inscriptions along with her sister. But although these two goddesses are almost indistinguishable, 'Uzza appears as a tougher, crueller divinity. Sacrifices of camels were offered to 'Uzza and the blood of the victims was smeared on the head of 'Uzza.²³ Ibn al-Kalbī calls her "She – devil":²⁴

كانت العُزَّى شيطانةً

Camel sacrifices and drinking of their blood by pre-Islamic Arabs also appear in the Byzantine hagiographical work, *The Narrations of Nilus Sinaiticus*.²⁵ Although the name of 'Uzza is not reported in the above source, her association with the morning star and the camel sacrifices manifest the goddess 'Uzza. The third sister Manāt, also closely associated with her sister 'Uzza, was usually invoked for oaths.²⁶

The nomadic Arabs were in constant relations with the townspeople of Palmyra who had created a vast trade network from Yemen to their city. Actually, part of the core of the population of Palmyra was composed of Arab nomads who had settled there. It is not surprising, therefore, that Allāt and the other Arab divinities were accepted and incorporated into the Palmyrene pantheon. In the milieu of Palmyra, Allāt was developed and acquired a new form. It should, nevertheless, be noticed that while this transformation was taking place, a number of the nomadic Arabs related with Palmyra continued to worship Allāt in her primitive form.

The transformation of Allāt appears first in the land of the Nabataeans under the Hellenistic-Roman tradition. Initially her aniconic appearance changes into semi-anthropomorphic. Thus, there is an idol in Wādī Rūm, south of Petra, dating from the 1st c. A.D., depicting, in a crude semi-anthropomorphic way, two divinities which are placed in a niche (Fig. 2). An inscription next to them indicates that they are the 'goddess 'Uzza and the Lord of the House'. Savignac

²³ IBN AL-KALBĪ, *Kitāb al-Asnām*, pp. 11, 21; ZUHAYR, *Dīwān*, ed. A. Y. Tha'lab (Cairo, 1944), p. 178.

²⁴ IBN AL-KALBĪ, *Kitāb al-Asnām*, p. 25.

²⁵ V. CHRISTIDES, "Once Again the 'Narrations' of Nilus Sinaiticus", *Byzantion* 43 (1973), pp. 39-50.

²⁶ IBN AL-KALBĪ, *Kitāb al-Asnām*, p. 14.

published it first²⁷, reprinted later by Zayadine.²⁸ ‘Uzza appears in a semi-anthropomorphic figure whose stellar eyes and a sketchy nose can be recognized. Zayadine, following J. Starcky, calls it ‘Uzza–Aphrodite’, but this idol has little in common with the Greek goddess of beauty, Aphrodite, save her relationship with the morning star²⁹.

We should be very careful before labeling any two divinities side by side as if they are identified *in toto*. Even the bilingual inscription found on the island of Cos, mentioned by Zayadine, in which the name ‘Uzza is translated into Greek as Aphrodite, should not be misinterpreted. It simply reveals that for the Greek inhabitants of Cos, ‘Uzza and obviously her sister Allāt had an important similarity with Aphrodite, most probably their astral character, since both were related with the morning star. Likewise, when Herodotos, the Greek author of the 5th century B.C., mentions that the main goddess of the pre-Islamic Arabs is Alilat (Allāt), whom he calls Ourania (Celestial), he based himself solely on the astral nature of Allāt coinciding with that of Aphrodite.³⁰

The Greek inscriptions from the Ḥawrān frequently have references to the goddess Athena who seems to be fused with Allāt³¹, although there is not a single bilingual inscription found in Ḥawrān with a clear identification of these two divinities. But in the city of Cordoba, a 3rd century A.D. inscription reports “Athena-Allath” (Fig. 3).³² In spite of the lack of any direct evidence of the identification of Allāt-Athena in the inscription in the land of the Nabataeans, the numerous references to her and the translation of theophoric names (wahbalat = Αθηνώδωρος) reveal the direct fusion of these two divinities. But this identification, as stated above, should not be applied *in toto*.

The Greek goddess Athena, worshipped throughout Greece and in particular in Athens, had a multitude of attributes expressed in her cult

²⁷ M.R. SAVIGNAC, “Le sanctuaire d’Allat à Iram”, *Revue Biblique* 43 (1934), pp. 587, fig. 10.

²⁸ F. ZAYADINE, “The God (ess) Aktab-Kutbay and his (her) Iconography”, in F. ZAYADINE (ed.), *Petra and the Caravan Cities* (Amman, 1990), pp. 39, fig. 1.

²⁹ F. ZAYADINE, “L’iconographie d’al-‘Uzza-Aphrodite”, *Mythologie gréco-romaine, mythologies périphériques*, pp. 113-117; F. ZAYADINE, “The God (ess) Aktab-Kutbay and his (her) Iconography”, in F. ZAYADINE (ed.), *Petra and the Caravan Cities* (Amman, 1990), pp. 37-51.

³⁰ HERODOTUS, III, 8.

³¹ D. SOURDEL, *Les cultes du Hauran à l’époque romaine* (Paris, 1952), *passim*.

³² F. CUMONT, “Une dédicace à des dieux Syriens trouvée à Cordoue”, *Syria* 5 (1924), p. 324.

surnames. Thus we meet the expressions ‘Athena Hygeia’ (Protector of Health), ‘Athena Polias’ (Guard of the City), ‘Athena Nike’ (the Victorious), ‘Athena Promachos’ (Fighting for the City), and others.³³ The Greek inscriptions from the Ḥawrān reveal only some of these attributes. While there is no Greek inscription with reference to “Athena Nike”, in Waddington (2410 and 2099) there are references to a dedication of a statue of Nike (Victory) offered to the goddess Athena. The most common cult surname is Αθηνά κυρία (the Lady, the City Goddess). There is also an elliptic inscription mentioning Athena Parthenos (Waddington 2107). In general, we understand from the Greek inscriptions of Ḥawrān that Athena is frequently mentioned as the protector of the city (mainly in Bostra) and according to Greek religious practices, little statues, temples, altars and other parts of the temple and its surroundings are dedicated to her (Waddington 2203a).

Thus it is obvious that Athena’s main attributes, which were fused coinciding with those of Allāt in the land of the Nabataeans, were the martial ones and that of the protector of Cities. The statues of Athena found there emphasize the martial character of Allāt-Athena. A statue found in the museum of Sweyda, represents an orientalized goddess of the type of Athena Promachos. But more frequently the artistic form we meet is that of the type of Athena Parthenos somewhat altered. I believe that the prominently displayed and horrifying ‘gorgoneion’ representing a monstrous head on Athena’s chest is the reason for this preference. The apotropaic attribute was of great importance in Greek religion and even more so in pre-Islamic Arab religion. It is for this reason that this artistic form was widely used in the caravan city of Palmyra, where the fused divinity of Allāt-Athena also appeared.

Palmyra, being on the trade crossroads of the Near Far East, received cultural influences from various areas. Thus, the Palmyrene goddess Allāt in her various forms developed mainly under the influence of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, the Syrian goddess Atargatis and the Greek goddess Athena. It should be noticed that while Allāt was developing, Ishtar continued to coexist in Palmyra. Her independent existence is testified in a Palmyrene tessera, bearing her name, dressed in a long tunic and leaning on a sceptre (R.T.P. 121). A number of Palmyrene tesserae (entrance tickets to funeral banquets) manifest an attempt by the Palmyrenes to represent the aniconic desert goddess Allāt in an anthropomorphic form without any

³³ J. RUDHARDT, *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuse et actes constitutifs du culte dans la Grèce classique* (Geneva, 1958), pp. 89 ff.

connection with the later adopted form of the goddess Athena (R.T.P. 123, 164, 165, 272).

The most conspicuous characteristic of the artistic form of this divinity is the constant appearance of a lion next to her. Du Mesnil du Buisson and especially Drijvers traced the origin of the Palmyrene Allāt to the Syrian goddess Atargatis based on the iconographic evidence of Allāt accompanied by the lion.³⁴ Nevertheless, a careful scrutiny of the sources reveals a closer resemblance of Allāt with the goddess Ishtar introduced from Mesopotamia. Ishtar is reported mainly as a military goddess called 'Lady of the War' in the code of Hammurabi and she appears in the Assyro-Babylonian art fully armed, seizing a sword while arrows protrude over her shoulders.³⁵ Of course, Ishtar is also the goddess of love and fertility, but this aspect was not taken on by the developed divinity of the desert goddess Allāt. In contrast Atargatis had multiple aspects covering an amazingly wide spectrum. Glueck delineates her role according to her attributes, she is the Guardian Goddess, the Grain Goddess, Goddess of Fertility, Fish Goddess, Dolphin Goddess, etc.³⁶ The last attribute places her diametrically opposite to the goddess of the Desert Allāt.

Ishtar inspires terror in her enemies and protects and guides her own people. She is also related with the morning and evening star. All these attributes correspond perfectly to those of Allāt and explain their association. Ishtar appears constantly with a lion symbolizing strength and royal power. Of course, the lion was not an uncommon symbol for other Mesopotamian divinities as well, but it was used for Ishtar 'par excellence'.³⁷ In Assyro-Babylonian art Ishtar appears next to the lion or on top of it, and often the lion appears as a surrogate replacing her.³⁸ It should be noted that the goddess Atargatis was never substituted by the lion. It is therefore not coincidental that the goddess Allāt in Palmyra also appears in a statue and on a tessera, which bear her name (R.T.P. 165), simply with her surrogate, the lion. The

³⁴ R. DU MESNIL DU BUISSON, *Les tessères et les monnaies de Palmyre* (Paris, 1962), p. 375; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, "Das Heiligtum der arabischen Göttin Allāt im westlichen Stadtteil von Palmyra", *Antike Welt*, 7³ (1976), p. 31; H.J.W. DRIJVERS, "De Matre inter leones sedente. Iconography and Character of the Arab Goddess Allāt", in *Hommages à Maarten J. Vermaseren* (Leiden, 1978), I, 331-351.

³⁵ E. DHORME & R. DUSSAUD, *Les religions de Babylonie et d'Assyrie* (Paris, n. d.), pp. 69 ff.

³⁶ N. GLUECK, *Deities and Dolphins* (London, 1966), *passim*.

³⁷ E.R. GOODENOUGH, *Jewish Symbolism in the Greco-Roman Period*, vol. III, p. 59.

³⁸ E. DHORME & R. DUSSAUD, *Les religions de Babylonie et d'Assyrie*, p 71.

reverse side of this tessera depicts a camel demonstrating her association with the nomadic Arabs on the left side of which appears the morning star. There is not any artistic appearance of Allāt on top of a lion in Palmyra, a common depiction of Ishtar. Such a depiction appears in Hatra, where we meet a unique triple fusion of Allāt, Ishtar and Athena (Fig. 4).

In another tessera (R.T.P. 164) seated there is a depiction of Allāt's bearing name, dressed in a long tunic with an uncovered head, holding the branch of a palm tree in one hand and resting the other on a crouching lion. Actually, the lion occupies the corner on the right side of the viewer. This is not the posture typical of the goddess Atargatis seated on a throne between two lions, but it reminds us instead of similar depictions of the goddess Ishtar.

The depiction in the tessera R.T.P. 123 could be considered as somewhat closer to the artistic form of Atargatis enthroned between two lions. It shows Allāt seated on a throne, resting her left hand on a lion while the morning star occupies the upper left corner. In front of her the typical animal of the desert, the camel, is marching. Nevertheless, even in this tessera there is only one lion and it also reminds us of the depiction of Ishtar. A forthcoming article by Gawlikowski illuminates all aspects of the artistic depiction of the lions of Allāt.³⁹

In addition to the independent transformation of Allāt into an anthropomorphic figure in Palmyra, we notice another appearance in the form of the Greek goddess Athena. Most probably this fusion was transmitted from the land of the Nabataeans. The martial spirit of the goddess Athena, her predominant position in the Greek pantheon and her prestigious position as the Guardian Goddess of the city of Athens explain her fusion with Allāt and acceptance of her artistic form for the representation of the fused divinity Allāt-Athena in Palmyra. An inscription found in Palmyra reveals their fusion.⁴⁰

The fused divinity Allāt-Athena appears in Palmyra, seated or standing in a frontal posture resembling the Greek type of Athena Parthenos and wearing a simplified helmet, holding a spear in the right hand while the left is resting on a small circular shield. On her chest, the gorgoneion breastplate with the frightening head of Medusa is

³⁹ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, "The Lions of Allāt", 2003. Forthcoming. I thank Prof. Gawlikowski for permitting me to read this paper before its publication.

⁴⁰ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, "Allāt-Athena of Palmyra", *Graeco-Arabica* 2 (1983), p. 221.

prominently placed. I believe that this evidence that the apotropaic aspect of the goddess Athena is the most conspicuous attribute accepted by the fused divinity Allāt-Athena.

A typical example of the seated fused divinity can be seen in a relief found in a temple of Khirbet es-Sane, northwest of Palmyra.⁴¹ Allāt-Athena is enthroned flanked by two lions, carrying the typical weapons of Athena, a spear in her right hand and a circular shield in her left. Her petrified expression and the stiffness of her posture betray the intermingling of Semitic and Greek elements. Although this relief resembles the typical appearance of Atargatis seated, flanked by two lions and carrying her sceptre, there is little in common between the goddess of fertility, Atargatis, and the military appearance of the fused goddess Allāt-Athena. Allāt-Athena inspires, in general, a warlike spirit and her breastplated gorgoneion an apotropaic feeling of awe in contrast to the peaceful royal dignity of Atargatis. It should be noted that the depiction of a worshipper next to Allāt-Athena offering a sacrifice is evidence of the cult nature of this relief.

Among the standing reliefs of the fused goddess Allāt-Athena, the most important was found in Khirbet Wādī Swane.⁴² In this relief Allāt-Athena, dressed in a long tunic, is standing next to the god Shams. Her helmet is crudely made, the gorgoneion is well demonstrated and her hand rests on a long shield in a gesture similar to which we meet in the type of Athena Parthenos (Fig. 5). Her association with the god Shams, the Sun-god of Palmyra, reveals her importance as a chief goddess of Palmyra; a worshipper next to Shams manifests the performance of a sacrifice ritual.

Another relief from Homs bearing the name of the goddess Athena is of particular interest. It represents three divinities, in the middle of whom stands the goddess Athena (Fig. 6). She is dressed in a long tunic and has all the attributes of the goddess Nemesis. She carries the measuring stick and over her right shoulder the wheel is clearly depicted. She draws aside her garment in a gesture symbolizing her pointing to her chest in order to avert the Evil Eye. Nemesis is the deification of an abstract idea conveying the meaning of 'moral indignation'. Nemesis became very popular in the Hellenistic and Roman periods; she personifies the goddess who punishes those guilty

⁴¹ D. SCHLUMBERGER, *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest* (Paris, 1951), plate XXXVIII.

⁴² For other reliefs depicting standing Allāt-Athena, see D. SCHLUMBERGER, *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest*, and the descriptions found in the articles "Athena and Allāt" in *LIMC* (Zurich-Munich, 1981).

of going beyond the measure (symbolized by the measuring stick), guilty of *hybris*, and those who do not need the constantly changing fate (represented by the wheel).⁴³

In Palmyra, Nemesis becomes very popular as manifested in numerous tesserae (R.T.P. 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, etc.). It seems likely that the goddess represented in the relief from Homs is Nemesis. The name Athena written in Greek above her head is probably a later addition as suggested by Colledge.⁴⁴

Important artistic evidence of the presence of the fused divinity Allāt-Athena is found in a statue found from the so-called 'sanctuary of Allāt' discovered in the city of Palmyra in 1975 (Fig. 7). This temple was excavated systematically by the Polish Center for Mediterranean Archaeology under M. Gawlikowski.⁴⁵ The temple dates from ca. 100 B.C., but the statue of Allāt-Athena had been made in the middle of the 2nd century.⁴⁶ This statue has been admirably preserved and compared with its original models by Gawlikowski. It is made of Pentelic marble and clearly departs from the artistic conventions, which characterize the other depictions of Allāt-Athena in Palmyra, i.e. stiffness of posture, frontality and a certain clumsiness. The goddess appears clad in a sleeveless long tunic standing upright. She wears an Attic helmet, her raised right arm brandishes a spear, while the left is holding the shield. Although the head is an obvious imitation of that of the colossal gold and ivory statue of Athena Parthenos made by Phedias in the 5th c. B.C. and placed in the Acropolis, her combat ready body reveals a contamination of the other types. The frightening image of the gorgoneion is clearly depicted on the chest of the goddess.⁴⁷

⁴³ M. HORNUM, *Nemesis, the Roman State and the Games* (Leiden – New York – Köln 1993); B.C. DIETRICH, *Death, Fate and the Gods* (London, 1965), pp. 157-176; C. DEL GRANDE, *Hybris* (Naples, 1947).

⁴⁴ M. COLLEDGE, *The Art of Palmyra*, p. 47.

⁴⁵ H.J.W. DRUIJVERS, "Das Heiligtum der arabischen Göttin Allāt im westlichen Stadteil von Palmyra", *Antike Welt* 7³ (1976), pp. 28-38; M. GAWLIKOWSKI, "Le temple d'Allat à Palmyre", *Revue archéologique* (1977), pp. 253-274; M. GAWLIKOWSKI, "Les dieux de Palmyre", *ANRW* II, 18.4, 2605-2658.

⁴⁶ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, "The Athena of Palmyra", *Archeologia* 21-22 (1996), pp. 21-22.

⁴⁷ For the Parthenos type and its later copies see W.H. SCHUCHHARDT, "Athena Parthenos", in *Antike Plastik* (Berlin, 1963), II, pp. 31-53 and especially Neda LEIPEN, *Athena Parthenos a Reconstruction* (Toronto, 1971); for the diffusion of the type of Athena in form and content in the Hellenistic World see, Elsie MATHIOPOULOS, "On the Transformation of the Athena Velletri Type in Hellenistic

The martial spirit and the apotropaic aspect are the main characteristics of this statue. It should be noted that a Greek inscription found in a small sanctuary, dating from the year 6 B.C., identifies Allāt with the Greek goddess Artemis.⁴⁸ This is not surprising since, in contrast to the goddess Atargatis-Dea Syria with whom Allāt-Athena had little in common, the goddess Artemis had similar attributes with Athena and often appeared in similar form. Artemis was also a virgin goddess who was mainly associated with hunting and moreover with war. The Athenians sacrificed 300 goats to the goddess Artemis to commemorate their victory over the Persians.⁴⁹ Artemis appears on Hellenistic coins brandishing a spear in one hand and holding a shield in the other, a posture which is borrowed from the form of the fighting Athena as it appears on coins⁵⁰.

An obvious question was asked, but not answered, by Gawlikowski: “To what extent was she [the fused divinity] identified with Allāt rather than with Minerva of the Roman army?”⁵¹ The dating and style of the statue of Athena leave no doubt that it was brought to the temple of Allāt either by Roman soldiers or by Palmyrene veterans serving in the Roman army. The role of the native veterans must have been very important in the fusion of Graeco-Roman and local divinities, since they carried their own ancestral religious beliefs and were also exposed to the Graeco-Roman religion. We can assume that those who brought the Pentelic marble statue of Athena continued to worship a goddess bearing the main attributes of the goddess Athena vaguely associated with Allāt, while, at the same temple, other statues of a more primitive Allāt did exist attracting another segment of the local population. This is not surprising since even in the Parthenon there were various statues representing different aspects of the goddess Athena worshipped by various groups of people, i.e. Athena Parthenos, Athena Ergane (patron deity of the artisans).⁵²

Alexandria”, in Susan DEACY & A. VILLING (ed.), *Athena in the Classical World* (Leiden – Boston – Köln, 2001), pp. 197-217.

⁴⁸ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, “Le temple d’Allāt à Palmyre”, *Revue archéologique* (1977), p. 265.

⁴⁹ XENOPHON, *Anabasis*, III, 2, 12.

⁵⁰ L. LACROIX, *Les reproductions de statues sur les monnaies grecques* (Liège, 1949), p. 135.

⁵¹ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, “The Athena of Palmyra”, *Archeologia* 21-22 (1996), pp. 22.

⁵² J. RUDHARDT, *Notions fondamentales de la pensée religieuse...*, pp. 91-92.

2. Conclusions

Palmyra offered a suitable environment where various religious beliefs expressed in many artistic forms were interwoven. In general, most of the Graeco-Roman religious representations were not arbitrarily chosen but reflected actual beliefs. Those beliefs were not imposed on the local population, but selectively chosen by it and mixed with local religious traditions. Yet is not one of the fused divinities retained *in toto* all the attributes of either of the two parties involved.

The attempt was made to examine the degree of correspondence between the external artistic appearance of the fused Graeco-Oriental divinities and their actual attributes. The rapprochement of a Graeco-Roman divinity with a local one usually betrays a close affinity between them based on certain common attributes. Concerning the fused divinity Allāt-Athena, their main attributes were their martial as well as their apotropaic character expressed by their military attire and the emphasis on the gorgoneion placed prominently on the chest. While the rapprochement between Allāt and Athena, expressed in the form of the latter, appears more commonly in Palmyra, at least from the 1st century B.C. reaching its peak in the 2nd century A.D., simultaneously the primitive aniconic form of the goddess Allāt never ceased to exist among the Palmyrene nomads until the appearance of Islam. In addition, an independent form of the goddess Allāt had been developed under the influence of the Mesopotamian goddess of War, Ishtar. She appears in many Palmyrene tesserae resembling the depiction of Ishtar. Most probably Allāt in all forms depicted on the tesserae manifests a new attribute acquired by the fused divinity under local influence, i.e. the chthonic aspect related to the funeral banquets.

Finally, the existence of a 2nd century Pentelic marble statue of the goddess Athena without any orientalized characteristics, placed in the sanctuary of Allāt in the city of Palmyra along with other Allāt-Athena reliefs in the same temple, reveals the continuous renewal of the original image of the Greek goddess by the Roman soldiers and/or veterans.

The variations of the different types of Allāt in Palmyra have already been noticed by Gawlikowski, who, however, placed special emphasis on her association with Atargatis-Dea Syria.⁵³

⁵³ M. GAWLIKOWSKI, "Allāt-Athena of Palmyra", *Graeco-Arabica* 2 (1983), p. 219 ff.

A more thorough examination of all fused Graeco-Oriental divinities in the Near East may be rewarding.

Additional Note

It should be mentioned here that polytheism in the Greek religion, and in particular in the Near Eastern religions, was not understood in the same way by all believers and there was not any well defined structure in the beliefs of the people, as for example in the Orthodox or Catholic Church.⁵⁴

In the Greek temples it was not unusual to find the statue of a god, i.e. Hermes, in a temple dedicated to another god, i.e. Zeus. Therefore, the existence in the same temple of a statue of a god in its primitive form and another in a more advanced form- as it is attested in the archaeological findings and in the depictions of coins- should not be surprising. Actually, the old “xoanon” in Parthenon coexisted with the new marble statue of Athena and it was to the old that the “peplos” was presented. Thus, the co-existences of Allāt-Athena of Palmyra in typical classical Praxitelian form in the same temple with the primitive statue of Allāt is not unusual. As it has been mentioned, the primitive one represents an earlier stage of the goddess which could appeal more to a segment of the Palmyrene population, and the other one to newcomers from the Graeco-Roman world, most probably soldiers or veterans. There was neither any expression of antagonism between the different layers of the Palmyrene population but rather a symbiosis.

Concerning the so-called “interpretatio graeca”, the present author believes, along with M. Sartre in his book *L'Orient Roman*, Paris 1991, that the rapprochement between a local and a Greek divinity in the Near East should be traced to their nature. The Graeco-Oriental divinities remain basically Oriental but the Greek elements are also incorporated in various degrees. The goddess Athena, in addition to her other attributes, had kept her primitive ferocity as a war goddess and her “aegis” had retained a conspicuous apotropaic aspect.⁵⁵ It is for these attributes that she was accepted and fused with Allāt in Palmyra.

The scope of the present work is not to trace and enumerate the variations of the artistic forms of the goddess Athena in Palmyra- a

⁵⁴ For the Greek religion see W. BURKERT, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass. 1985.) 140.

⁵⁵ W. BURKERT, *Greek Religion*, 139.

task which was undertaken successfully by M. Gawlikowski- but to try to reveal the underlying religious factors.

Figures

Fig. 1. Palmyrene relief. 1st century A.D., plausibly Dimitra and Korē (A. BOUNNI, “Note sur un nouveau bas-relief palmyrénien”, *Les Annales archéologiques de Syrie. Revue d’Archéologie et d’Histoire* 15¹ [1965], pp. 87-98, front page).

Fig. 2. Semi-anthropomorphic depiction of ‘Uzzā (M.R. SAVIGNAC, “Le sanctuaire d’Allat à Iram”, *Revue biblique* 43 (1934), p. 587, fig. 10).

Fig. 3. Greek inscription of Athena-Allāt. Cordoba, 3rd century A.D. (F. CUMONT, “Une dédicace à des dieux Syriens trouvée à Cordove”, *Syria* 5 [1924], p. 324).

Fig. 4. Allāt-Athena on top of a lion, Hatra (Susan DOWNEY, *The Heracles Sculpture*, New Haven. 1969, Pl. XXIV).

Fig. 5. Allāt-Athena, from Khirbet Wādī Swane (D. SCHLUMBERGER, *La Palmyrène du Nord-Ouest*, Paris, 1951, Pl. XXXI, 1).

Fig. 6. Nemesis with a later inscription wrongly naming her as Athena (R. DU MESNIL DU BUISSON, *Les tessères et les monnaies de Palmyre*, Paris, 1962, Fig. 207).

Fig. 7. Athena of Palmyra, ca. 150 A.D. (M. GAWLIKOWSKI, “The Athena of Palmyra”, *Archeologia*, 21-32 [1996], Tablica XVII, 1).