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## A BRONZE BASE FROM SYRIA

EUGENE N. LANE

In Roman times, a traveler in the northern parts of the province of Syria would have encountered in the city of Hierapolis (also known as Bambyke) a very interesting cult of the ancient Semitic goddess Atargatis. This goddess was known throughout the Roman world simply as the Syrian Goddess, *Dea Syria*, ἡ Συρία Θεός, so characteristic of the region was her worship considered to be. The name given to her city by the Greeks, Hierapolis, simply means “holy city.” There were several places by this name throughout the ancient world, and in each case we are safe in assuming that the city was entirely overshadowed by the cult of its local divinity. The other name, Bambyke, represents a Hellenization of the native Semitic name, which exists in several variants but is generally given in Latin letters as Mambig. The place still keeps its old name: a village called Manbij, fifty miles northeast of Aleppo and near the Euphrates, is to be identified as the site of the ancient holy city.<sup>1</sup>

The cult, which, like that of Cybele, had castrated *galli* as its priests, spread far and near throughout the Roman Empire. Apuleius, in his *Metamorphoses* (second century), gives a vivid picture of their mendicant activities, wild dances, self-mutilation, and sexual lewdness.<sup>2</sup> But the best description is from the pen of the Greek-writing satirist and contemporary of Apuleius, Lucian. In his account *De Syria Dea* (Περὶ τῆς Συρίας Θεοῦ), he writes in the style and dialect of the historian Herodotus of some seven hundred years earlier, and like Herodotus, views with wide-eyed amazement every strange and unusual phenomenon among the foreign peoples whom he visits, consistently forcing their beliefs and customs into Greek terminology comprehensible to the people back home, for whom he is writing. The treatise is thus a tongue-in-cheek exercise in antiquarianism, all the more remarkable because Lucian was no Greek of Greece but hailed from Samosata in Commagene, on the Euphrates not far upstream from the location of the temple.

Perhaps because Lucian had first-hand information about the practices at Hierapolis-Bambyke, the work rises above a mere antiquarian tour-de-force and furnishes us the only reliable continuous account of the cult, which is borne out by other, independent, testimony.<sup>3</sup>

It would be beyond the scope of this article to recount all the details of the cult of the Syrian Goddess, but what is important for our purposes is that among the associated minor divinities was one whom the Greeks identified with Apollo. It was also a remarkable form of Apollo indeed. Lucian's description:

Behind this throne (sc. of Helios) stands a statue of Apollo, but not as it is usually made. For all others think of Apollo as young and show him in the prime of youth. Only these people display a statue of a bearded Apollo. In acting in this way they commend themselves and accuse the Greeks and anyone else who worships Apollo as a youth. They reason like this. They think it utter stupidity to make the forms of the gods imperfect, and they consider youth an imperfect state. They make yet another innovation in their Apollo, for they alone adorn Apollo with clothing. About his deeds I could say a great deal, but I will describe only what is especially remarkable. I will first mention the oracle. There are many oracles among the Greeks, many among the Egyptians, some in Libia, and many in Asia. None of the others, however, speaks without priests or prophets. This god takes the initiative himself and completes the oracle of his own accord. This is his method. Whenever he wishes to deliver an oracle, he first moves on his throne, and the priests immediately lift him up. If they do not lift him, he begins to sweat and moves still more. When they put him on their shoulders and carry him, he leads them in every direction as he spins around and leaps from one place to another. Finally the chief priest meets him face to face and asks him about all sorts of things. If the god does not want something done, he moves backwards. If he approves of something, like a charioteer he leads forward those who are carrying him. In this manner they collect the divine utterances, and without this ritual they conduct no religious or personal business. The god also speaks of the year and all its seasons, even when they do not ask. . . I will tell something else which he did while I was present. The priests were lifting him up and beginning to carry him, but he left them below on the ground and went off alone into the air. <sup>4</sup>

The other description of this Apollo of Hierapolis is a fifth-century account from the Latin-writing antiquarian, Macrobius:

Furthermore the Hieropolitans, who are of the Assyrian race, attribute all the effects and virtues of the sun to the appearance of one bearded statue, and call him Apollo. His face is characterized by a beard

flowing to a point, with a basket standing out over his head. The statue is armed with a breastplate, and in his right hand he holds an upright spear, with a small figure of Victory standing on top of it, in his left he holds out the figure of a flower, and from the tops of his shoulders a Gorgon-adorned garment surrounded with snakes covers his shoulder-blades. Next to him eagles express the idea of flight, and at his feet there is a female image, on whose left and right hands are female statues. A dragon surrounds them with his flexing folds. The hanging beard signifies that rays fall to the earth from above. The gold basket rising on high points to the top of the ether, whence the substance of the sun is believed to come. By the argument of spear and breastplate the image of Mars is added, whom our account as it proceeds will show to be the same as the sun. The Victory testifies that all things are submitted to the power of this star. The figure of a flower testifies to the flowering of affairs, which this god inseminates, generates, upholds, nourishes, and ripens. The female figure is the image of the earth, which the sun illuminates from above. The two other female statues which surround it signify matter and nature, which operate as fellow servants, and the effigy of the dragon points to the bending route of the star. The eagles by the very high speed of their flight show the height of the sun. The Gorgon-garment is added because Minerva, whom we view as his protectress, is the virtue of the sun, as Porphyry attests to the fact that Minerva is the virtue of the sun which supplies prudence to human minds. For on this account this goddess is related to be sprung from Jupiter's head, that is, sprung from the highest part of the ether, whence is the origin of the sun.<sup>5</sup>

It is against this background that we can interpret a bronze base acquired by the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1984 (Fig. 1a-c).<sup>6</sup> The base's total preserved height is 11.2 cm, while the height of the base alone is 6.2 cm, its width is 10 cm, and its depth is 10 cm. This nearly cubical base is surmounted by an omphalos, that is, a representation of the stone at Apollo's shrine in Delphi, which was thought to represent the navel of the world. The omphalos is decorated with a net pattern of triple incised lines, intended for fillets, with four-petaled rosettes in between (Fig. 2). There is a considerable piece missing at the top, where it is evident that a statuette once stood. Of this more will be said later. The omphalos is cast separately from the base (the statuette was also presumably separately cast) and terminates at the bottom in a sleeve, which is inserted into the top of the base. Traces of a soldering material holding the sleeve in place are visible on the inside of the base.

As for the base itself, the side that we will define as front (the statue seems to have been facing in that direction) has incised frontal busts of the moon,



2. Detail of Fig. 1a, *Omphalos*.



b.



c.

right, and sun, left, with six rosettes spaced irregularly around the field (Fig. 1b). Flanking busts of the sun and moon are a fairly banal phenomenon on ancient dedications to various gods, such as Mithras and Sabazius. They can be viewed as emphasizing the god's power over day and night. The left side and back are plain. A plain molding is at the bottom of all four sides of the base, and a fascia with egg-and-dart decoration around the top. An incised egg-and-dart decoration can also be seen on both vertical edges of the front face. There are holes in the bottom center of the front, and on the left side. The lower back side also has two vertically arranged holes. The omphalos has three smaller holes: one over the right (inscribed) side of the base, and two (vertically arranged) over the back side, somewhat more than 90 degrees removed from the other hole. The most likely explanation for the holes both in the base and in the omphalos is that there was an internal support, going up through the sleeve that connects base and omphalos, for the statuette that surmounted the whole thing. The holes would have

1 a-c. *Bronze base and omphalos*,  
Museum of Art  
and Archaeology  
(84.53).



3. *Victory-on-an-orb*,  
Boston  
Museum of  
Fine Arts  
(62.971).

served for insertion of lateral pins for this support.

The right side of the base (Fig. 1c), which shows numerous signs of damage, bears the following inscription, incised in dots:

Μομβογέος  
Ἡροφίλου  
κὲ Κορενκάνο  
ς ἀδελφὸς  
ἀνέθηκαν.

"Mombogeos, son of Herophilos, and his brother Korenkanos dedicated this."

The name Mombogeos, which occurs in several variants, is derived from the place name Mambig, i.e. Hierapolis-Bambyke. It is interpreted as meaning someone who has made a pilgrimage to, or was born under the protection of the goddess of this place. It is Syrian in distribution and thus not only connects our object with this cult but also gives us a fairly certain provenience.<sup>7</sup> The name Korenkanos seems unparalleled. However the Semitic name QRYN, meaning "horn," occurs in Palmyra, and its Greek transcription is Κόρενος.<sup>8</sup> It is likely that Korenkanos represents an expanded form of this name. At all events, this name can be taken as confirming the Syrian provenience of the object. The base, therefore, which the omphalos shows as being dedicated to Apollo, must have been dedicated to the peculiar form of Apollo worshiped with the Syrian Goddess at the shrine of Hierapolis-Bambyke. (Further confirmation may be drawn from the name of the dedicants' father, Herophilos, as Lucian identifies the Syrian Goddess with Hera, and this identification must have been made at the shrine also.)

We turn now to the subject of the statuette that originally surmounted the base. It is clear from the break at the top of the omphalos that the figure originally had its left foot advanced and lower than the right. The configuration suggests that the personage was thought of as alighting on the omphalos. It is clear that the inspiration for the sculpture is derived from the well-known *Victory-on-an-orb* type of Roman imperial sculpture, which was particularly disseminated by Augustan propaganda but had its roots earlier, in the Hellenistic period. Several handsome examples of such statuettes are known, including the example illustrated here (Fig. 3), a Hellenistic production from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, its right arm unfortunately broken, but its feet

placed in a similar fashion to those of our figure, the right foot, however, being the one advanced, whereas evidence suggests that our object had the left foot advanced.<sup>9</sup>

The question here, however, is whether a figure of Victory is to be restored or whether the influence is restricted merely to the general type, and some other deity can be supplied. There can be no question but that Apollo is the god to whom the statuette is dedicated. It would seem *prima facie* and extremely odd to have Victory landing on his omphalos, and I have been unable to find any parallel examples for such a phenomenon. Nor is Macrobius' listing of Victory among the attributes of Apollo sufficient to explain such a thing. So it would seem to me preferable to have Apollo himself surmounting the structure, although that idea too poses problems. Would it have been a conventional Apollo, or the unusual bearded Apollo of Hierapolis? Certainly the Apollo of Macrobius, with its overlay of accompanying symbols, is ruled out, if indeed it ever existed. Likewise, in spite of the fact that the statue of the Hieropolitan Apollo was said to fly by itself, it is hard to imagine Apollo gracefully landing. He does not have the practice in hovering lightly in the air, holding wreaths over conquerors' heads, that Victory does, especially on coins.<sup>10</sup> When one thinks of Apollo descending, one is more likely to think of the angry Apollo of the *Iliad*, coming down from the peaks of Olympus, his arrows clashing in his quiver as he strides, ready to bring pestilence upon the Achaeans for dishonoring his priest.<sup>11</sup> Balanced against these considerations, however, is the fact that we are dealing with an extremely provincial piece of art. To the manufacturer, dedicants, and viewers of this piece, the type of the Roman Victory might not have seemed incongruous transferred to an Apollo on his omphalos, and although they knew enough about the associations of the Greek Apollo to know that this "navel" symbolized his oracular function, the Iliadic picture of Apollo descending might never have crossed their minds, as it would that of someone (like the author) with greater exposure to mainline Greek culture. We will, of course, never know for sure, unless by some unlikely chance the statuette is recovered. But on the whole, I opt for an Apollo of some sort rather than a Victory.

EUGENE N. LANE is Professor of Classical Studies at the University of Missouri, Columbia. He has published in *Hesperia*, *Berytus*, *Anatolian Studies*, and *Journal of Roman Studies*, and has been a regular contributor to *MUSE*.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>R. A. Oden, *Studies in Lucian's De Syria Dea*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 15 (Missoula, Mont., 1977), 1-2, with references to earlier literature. This book is the best recent general treatment of this cult. The reader may also want to consult Monika Hörig, *Dea Syria = Alter Orient und Altes Testament 208* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1979), which sets the cult in the wider perspective of the religions of the area.

<sup>2</sup>*Metamorphoses* 8. 24-30.

<sup>3</sup>The authorship has been disputed several times in the past, but the attribution is ably defended by Oden, *Lucian's De Syria Dea*, 4-14.

<sup>4</sup>Lucian, *De Syria Dea*, 35-37, trans. Harold W. Attridge and Robert A. Oden, Society of Biblical Literature, Texts and Translations 9, Graeco-Roman Religions Series 1 (Missoula, Mont., 1976). Oracles from moving statues are not at all uncommon in later antiquity. See especially E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, Calif., 1951), 292-95. For a statue that gives oracles by moving as it is carried in procession, see Klaus Kuhlmann, *Das Ammoneion* (Mainz, 1988), 129f. It is probably this oracular function that led to the identification of this Semitic god with Apollo. The original god is most probably the Semitic El. See R. Dussaud, *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 63 (1943), 128-49.

<sup>5</sup>Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1., 17. 66-70, in my own translation, from the edition by J. Willis (Leipzig, 1970). It would seem unlikely that Macrobius ever saw the statue or that it ever actually had all these additional attributes, which seem to have been added for purely symbolic reasons. On the date and identity of Macrobius, see A. Cameron, *Journal of Roman Studies* 56 (1966): 25-38.

<sup>6</sup>Acquisition no. 84.53, purchased in Israel.

<sup>7</sup>The name is attested in Jalabert and Mouterde, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, I (1929), no. 49; IV (1955), nos. 1501 and 1780, Institut français d'archéologie de Beyrouth, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique, 12 and 61. There is also a listing of instances given in Honigmann's article, "Hierapolis," in A.F. von Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopédie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Suppl. 4, col. 733. The accentuations given to the Greek names here are hypothetical.

<sup>8</sup>J. K. Stark, *Personal Names in Palmyrene Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1971), 110. The Greek transcription occurs in an inscription from the village of Mjédil in the area that in ancient times was called Trachonitis, southeast of Damascus (Enno Littmann, David Magie, Jr., and Duane Reed Stuart, *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions in Syria in 1904-1905 and 1909, III, Greek and Latin Inscriptions from Syria, A, Southern Syria* [Leiden, 1921] 389, no. 78710).

<sup>9</sup>See especially Tonio Hölscher, *Victoria Romana* (Mainz, 1967), pl. 4, no. 3 (August), and pl. 5 (Calvatone); another handsome example, from Avenches, *Annalis Leibundgut, Die römischen Bronzen der Schweiz, II* (Mainz, 1976), pls. 33-34. The Calvatone and Avenches examples show the left foot advanced, as in the case of our object. The Boston example is published in M. B. Comstock and C. Vermeule, *Greek, Etruscan, and Roman Bronzes in the Museum of Fine Arts* (Boston and Greenwich, Conn., 1971, 71-72, no. 74).

<sup>10</sup>See for instance the illustrations of Hölscher, *Victoria Romana*, pl. 8.

<sup>11</sup>Homer, *Iliad* 1. 43ff.