

The Lady of Palmyra and her alter ego

Palmyra (or, Tadmur)¹, an oasis city in the Syrian desert that flourished due to the caravan trade extended from the coastline of Syria up to Yemen during the first three centuries A. D., was situated in the borderlands between the Roman Empire and the Parthian kingdom. Pliny the Elder states, “Palmyra is a city famous for the beauty of its site, the riches of its soil, and the delicious quality and abundance of its water. Its fields are surrounded by sands on every side, and are thus separated, as it were, by nature from the rest of the world. Though placed between the two great empires of Rome and Parthia, it still maintains its independence; never failing, at the very first moment that a rupture between them is threatened, to attract the careful attention of both. It is distant 337 miles from Seleucia of the Parthians, generally known as Seleucia on the Tigris, 203 from the nearest part of the Syrian coast, and twenty-seven less from Damascus.”²

Palmyra had several temples belonging to Bēl, Nabū, Bʿelšmēn (‘Lord of Heaven’), ʿAllāt, etc., and its pantheon had numerous gods or tutelary deities. In and around the temples a wide number of Aramaic texts –tesserae, dedicatory inscriptions, etc. – have been found – as well as many other texts in both Aramaic and Greek, or simply in Greek, or in Latin.³

The great god of the world is bl /Bēl/ represented in tesserae by a celestial globe. The lady of Palmyra is Bēltī (‘my lady’)⁴

¹ . Aram.-Heb. תַּדְמוֹר /tadmor/ ; Aram. Palm. תַּדְמוֹר; Syr. ܛܕܡܘܪ, ܛܕܡܘܪ; Gr. Παλμύρα (also Ταδάμορα Josephus); Arab. تدمر.

² . *The Natural History*, V. 21. 88 : Palmyra, urbs nobilis situ, divitiis soli et aquis amoenis, vasto undique ambitu haernis includit agros ac, velut terris exempta a rerum natura, privata sorte inter duo imperia summa Romanorum Parthorumque est, prima in discordia semper utrimque cura; abest ab Seleucia Parthorum, quae vocatur ad Tigrim, CCCXXXVII p., a proximo vero Syriae litore CCIII et a Damasco XXVII propius.

³ . See RTP : H. Ingholt, H. Seyrig & J. Starcky (& A. Caquot), *Recueil des tessères de Palmyre*, Paris, 1955; TMP : R. du Mesnil du Buisson, *Les tessères et les monnaies de Palmyre. Un art, une culture et une philosophie grecs dans les moules d'une cité et d'une religion sémitiques*, Paris, 1962; PAT : D. R. Hilliers & E. Cussini, *Palmyrene Epigraphic Texts*, Baltimore, 1996.

⁴ . Akkad. GAŠAN /Bēlet/. Akkad. bēltu means ‘lady’.

consort of the lord Bēl⁵. The third of the divine triad of Palmyra is called, in tesserae, tmwz' /Tammuzā/ (Akkad. DUMU-ZI /Tammuz/). He is portrayed as the dead god lying on a bed, wrapped in a shroud, and the goddess Bēltī mourns for him while wearing her hair dishevelled and clasping her breasts with her hands.⁶

Some other goddesses are associated with Bēl as his female companion: 'Attar'ateh (≈ Atargatis or Astarte)⁷, 'Aštartā⁸, Šaknay, etc. In the temple of the Palmyrene gods in Dura (-Europos) in the Parthian period a relief depicts a goddess, called "Fortune of Palmyrenes" (Τύχη Παλμυρων), seated on a throne, with a *corona muralis*, accompanied by a lion, and also by a naked swimming figure beneath her foot.⁹



The Tychae of Palmyra and of Dura

Another Palmyrene relief depicts a lady clad in a long chiton –“d' aspect matronal” –, seated on a throne, with an eagle upon her head which is crowned with a polos, beneath her foot there is the figure of a youth worn a tunic on the sleeves, and at her right side there is a dog. The bas-relief is dedicated to [] 'štr' tbt', '[Hirtā¹⁰] the good goddess' – this lady may be compared to an anonymous enthroned lady with a dog from Ḥaṭrā.¹¹ Next to her stands another lady wearing a *corona muralis* and holding

⁵ . Akkad. EN, or IDIM /Bēl/. Akkad. *bēlu* means 'lord'. Cf. the introductory invocation in a tablet from Babylon, BM 34035 : [ina a-]mat ^dbēl (EN) u ^dbēlti (GAŠAN)-iá liš-lim 'At the commend of Bēl and Bēltiya, may it prosper !'

⁶ . RTP 342.

⁷ . 'tr'th. Cf. Aram. H. 'tr't'.

⁸ . Cf. 'štr't hr in Phoenician texts (E. Lipiński, *Dieux et déesses de l'univers phénicien et punique*, Leuven, 1995, 132-33). Cf. also Heb. עֲשֵׂרֶת הַתְּרָיִם.

⁹ . M. Rostovtzeff, *Dura-Europos and its Art*, Oxford, 1938, frontispiece, 2. Cf. also J. Cantineau, « Tadmorea », *Syria*, 17/3, 1936, 267-82, 271 : 18° 'Aglibôl et la Fortune de Palmyre. L 2 : ['g]lbwl w-gd tdmr.

¹⁰ . Akkad. NIDLAM /hirtu/ means 'wife' or 'bride'.

¹¹ . See L. Driven, « A Goddess with dogs from Hatra », *Animals, Gods and Men from East to West*, Bar, 2013, 147-60.

an olive branch in her head.¹² She could be called Nanay in Palmyra.



When Bēltī appears alone, she resembles Babylonian Ištar, and when she is accompanied by Nanay, she has motherly look; Nanay also alone behaves like a great lady and has Bēltī's look, but in the presence of Bēltī she appears to be her daughter.

In Palmyra a goddess is called brt bl 'the daughter of Bēl'. It may be compared to nny ... brt bl 'Nanay ... Bēl's daughter' in Assur, and *Nanēakan ... dāstern Aramazday* 'Nana ... Aramazd's daughter' in Armenia.¹³

A celestial deity also appears in Palmyra: 'nhyt /Anāhīt/¹⁴. A triangle tessera, RTP 166, depicts her with globe-shaped earrings.¹⁵ Her head is surrounded by two small globes, the morning star and the evening star, that is, the two aspects of the planet Venus. On the other side of that tessera, there is an eight-petal rosette, and in each corner a globule.¹⁶ Another tessera, RTP 198, depicts a lady with kalathos hat on her head, having globe-shaped earrings, holding in her hand a quiver fastened on her shoulder, and below the bust there is an eight-pointed star – in this way, it depicts the Planet Venus (or the Babylonian goddess Ištar) in the Shape of the Greek goddess of the hunt,

¹² . See E. Will, « La déesse au chien de Palmyre », *Syria*, 62/ 1-2, 1985, 49-55.

¹³ . In the Avesta the daughter/ wife of Ahura Mazdā (Heaven) is Spəntā Ārmaiti (Earth), spənta srīra duγδa ahurahe mazdā 'the holy, beautiful daughter of Ahura Mazdā' (Vd 19.13); and Aši is also called Duγdarəm ahurahe mazdā 'the daughter of Ahura Mazdā' (Yt 17.2).

¹⁴ . Av.-OPers. Anāhitā, Pers. Anāhīd/ Anāhīt.

¹⁵ . « Le haut de la tête manque, de sorte qu'on ne peut pas dire si elle était coiffée d'un kalathos, d'une couronne tourelée, d'un casque, ou nu-tête. » Du Mesnil, 396.

¹⁶ . Notice that ašta.kaožda- 'with eight dents (on a crown)', is a distinctive Avesta epithet of Anāhitā, cf. Yt 5.128.

Artemis. On the other side, it is written: 'štrbd | mlkt' 'Ištarbād the queen'. It is possible that Ištarbād ('protected by Ištar') was the name of a Palmyrene queen.

Texts

A tessera¹⁷

Obv. 'gn bl
bly

Rev. bny
šmwn

'Symposium of Bēl, Bēlī. [The tribe of] Benē Šamūn.'

A tessera¹⁸

Obv. 'gn
bl
ḥrt'

'Symposium of Bēl, Ḥirtā'

A tessera¹⁹

Obv. 'gn bl
w-ḥrt'
w-nny

Rev. bl ybrk
l-bny ḥl'

'Symposium of Bēl and Ḥirtā and Nanay. May Bēl bless the (tribe of) Benē Ḥala.'

A tessera²⁰

Obv. ḥrt'
nny

'Ḥirtā, Nanay'

¹⁷ . RTP 128 ; PAT 2134.

¹⁸ . RTP 133 ; PAT 2139.

¹⁹ . M. de Vogüé, *Syrie centrale. Inscriptions sémitiques*, Paris, 1868, 80, n° 132 ; RTP 134 ; PAT 2140.

²⁰ . RTP 238 ; PAT 2231.

A tessera²¹

Obv. ḥrt'

Rev. nny
ḥggw

‘Ḥirtā, Nanay. Hagegū²²’

A tessera²³

Obv. ḥrt' w-nny

‘Ḥirtā and Nanay’

A tessera²⁴

Obv. ḥrt[']
nny

‘Ḥirtā, Nanay’

A tessera²⁵

Obv. ḥrt'
w-nny
Rev. tbrkn
l-mqymw

‘Ḥirtā and Nanay, bless Moqēmū²⁶!’

A tessera²⁷

Rectangle (15 × 20)

Obv. Two goddesses standing in front: That of right, designated by the name of nny /Nanay/, has worn the short dress of Artemis, holding a bow in the left hand and taking an arrow out of her quiver. That of left, with a long dress (that is, with a motherly aspect), is designated by the name of Skny /Šaknay/ (consort of Bēl). Above them there are two crescents. On the left

²¹ . RTP 239 ; PAT 2232.

²² . Inv. X. 44 Αγεγού, Inv. X.69 Αγεγός.

²³ . RTP 240 ; PAT 2233.

²⁴ . RTP 241 ; PAT 2234

²⁵ . RTP 242 ; PAT 2235.

²⁶ . Μοκειμοϋ. Kh. Al-As'ad, J. Teixidor, « Quelques inscriptions palmyréniennes inédites », *Syria*, 62/ 3-4, 1985, 273.

²⁷ . RTP 285.

of Šaknay it is written: šy't | bbl the 'community or troupe of Babylon'.

Rev. Two men are seen standing, bareheaded, wearing a short tunic, with swords and round shields, and leaning on their spears. Between them there is a palm.

A tessera²⁸

Obv. brt bl

'Bēl's daughter'

A tessera²⁹

Triangle

Obv. The bust of a goddess, designated by the name of 'nhyt /Anāhit/, appears full-face. The head is surrounded by two small globes.

Rev. In the middle, there is an eight-petal rosette, and in each corner a globule.

A tessera³⁰

Obv. 'nhyt

'nyny

tymy

'Anāhit. Onaynay, Taymay³¹,

Rev. An eagle with outstretched wings, holding a palm branch in its talons.

An inscription on statue base, from Palmyra³²

1 b-yrḥ knwn šnt CCC VI[I] 'qymw
kmry' dy ḥrt' šlm' dnh

²⁸ . RTP 143

²⁹ . RTP 166 ; PAT 2169.

³⁰ . RTP 167 ; PAT 2170.

³¹ . CIS 4124 Θαιμαιος

³² . See J. Cantineau, "Tadmorea", *Syria*, XVII, 1936, 267-82; H. Ingholt, "Palmyrene-Hatran-Nabataean", F. Rosenthal (ed.), *An Aramaic Handbook*, I, 1, 1967, (40-50), 40; J.T. Milik, *Dédicaces faites par les dieux (Palmyre, Hatra, Tyr) et des thiasés sémitiques à l'époque romaine*, Paris, 1972, 219-22; M. Gawlikowski, *Le temple palmyrénien. Étude d'épigraphie et de topographie historique*, Warszawa, 1973, 61-2; J. Teixidor, *The Pantheon of Palmyra*, Leiden, 1979, 111-12; PAT 2766.

l- 'gylw br 'yd 'n dy mn bny kmr'
 dy 'bd w-qrb hw w-bnwhy plgwt
 [']lt' dh w-mšl' w-bt nḥry' w
 6 [']d/rn' l-ḥrt' w-l-nny w-l-ršp 'lhy'

‘In the month Kānūn of the year 307 (November 6 BC) the priests of Ḥirtā erected this statue for Ogēlū³³ son of Ayda ‘an who is of [the tribe of] Benē Komarā³⁴; for he and his sons made and offered half of this altar³⁵ and the stele³⁶ and the place for slaughter and the interior³⁷ for Ḥirtā and Nanay and Rešep, the deities.’

Here Nanay appears as a sister or wife of Rešep³⁸.

An inscription on a slab of fragile limestone³⁹

1 byrh knwn š[nt CC]
 LXXX IX ml[... dh dy]
 qrb mqy[mw br ...]
 br ymlkw t[dmwry' dy]
 mn bny bw[... l ...]

³³ . Inv. X.44 Ογηλου.

³⁴ . φυλή χομαρήνων. Cf. also P 1353.

³⁵ . Gawlikowski [mṭ]lt' ‘portique’ (cf. Arab. مظلة, Gr. ἡ λιοστερεής).

³⁶ . Cantineau compares it with Aramaic (Targ.) mšly' ‘petite fourche, fourchette pour prendre la viande des victimes’. Gawlikowski mšl' ‘repositoir (from Aram. šly ‘to rest’). Teixidor, after Milik, mšl' ‘le système de canalisation’. « Il est donc fort probable que le terme palm. mšl' désigne le système de canalisation, existant dans la cour du sanctuaire de Ḥertā, comme il en existait un, fort impressionnant, dans le temple de Bêl. » Milik, 221. See also J. Hofstijzer & K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, I-II, E.J. Brill, 1995, 703.

I however prefer to translate mšl' by ‘stela’ (≈ Arab. مَسَلَة); it resembles Canaanite mšbt/h the stone erect for Ba'alat, and maybe Greek φαλλοί.

³⁷ rn'. Cantineau reads [']rn' ‘cassette sacrée’, Gawl. [' d]rn' ‘salle de banquets, symposion’ from Gr. ἀνδρώων. I prefer to read it 'drn' ≈ Aram. (Talm.) '(n)drwn, Syr. ܐܕܪܘܢ /*addrōnāl* ‘an inner room’ from Pers. *andarōn* ‘inside, interior’, cf. VZ 30.34 *kadag andarōn* ‘the interior of a house’, Dk iii M 367 *andarōn šāhīgān xānag* ‘inside the royal houses’. Cf. also *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, 2:3, 3917 ḥmn' klh hw w'trh w'p ṭll 'drwn' klh ... ‘the whole chapel, with its precinct, and also the whole ceiling of the 'drwn'.’

³⁸ . Palmyrene ršp resembles Babyonian Nabū (Gawlikowski), or Nergal (Teixidor). However, In Dura ršp has the Ugaritic style of the god Hadad.

³⁹ . See J. Starcky, “Inscriptions archaïques de Palmyre”, *Studi Orientalistici in Onore di G. Levi della Vida*, II, Roma, 1956, (509-28), 512-13, n° 1, Pl. Id. See also Milik, 1972, 148 ; Dijkstra, 1995, 89-90.

6 l-brt bl w-[l...]
'lhy' ['l hywhy]
w-ḥyy [...]

‘In the month Kānūn of the year 289 (= October-November 24 BC)⁴⁰ has offered Moqēmū [son of ...] son of Yamlikū who is of [the tribe of] Benē Bo[] this [...] to Bēl’s daughter and [...] the gods⁴² [for the life of himself] and the life of [].’

An inscription on the drum of a column⁴³

It emerged from the debris north-west of the Great Colonnade in the proximity of the theatre.

1 byrḥ 'lwl šnt CC
LXXXXIII qrb blšwry
br mqymw dy mn bny zmr'
'mwd' dnh l-šbs w-'nhyt
'lhy' 'l hywhy w-ḥyy
6 bnwhy w-'ḥwhy

‘In the month Elūl of the year 293 (August 19 BC)⁴⁴ Bēlšūrī son of Moqēmū who belongs to [the tribe of] Benē Zimrā has offered this column to šbs⁴⁵ and Anāhīt, the deities, for the life of himself and the life of his sons and his brothers.’

An inscription on an altar⁴⁶

1 'bd 'lt' w-mwdn
[y]rḥbwl' w-mhrd(t)
bny r'šmhr l-b[l]
w-l-yrḥbwl w-'glybwl
l-'lm' ṭb' mwd'
šlmn rḥmh

⁴⁰ . Dijkstra : October 23 BC.

⁴¹ . Milik restores ml[ʔt] : « On aura donc en ml[ʔt] en Tadm. 33 et ml[ʔt] dans l’inscription arch. 1. Nous récupérerions ainsi un terme ancien désignant le local où on boit et mange, symposion, car mlʔt provient de la racine mlʔ, ‘être plein, se remplir, consommer un repas’, ... mlʔt, ‘salle de repas sacrés’ ... » 166

⁴² . Milik restores 'lhy' [ṭby] ‘good gods’.

⁴³ . A. Bounni & J. Teixidore, *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre*, XII, Damascus, 1975, 22 ; Dijkstra, 91 ; PAT 1539.

⁴⁴ . Dijkstra : September 18 BC.

⁴⁵ . Sabazius ? (Teixidore’s suggestion)

⁴⁶ . *Les antiquités de Palmyre : au musée du Louvre*, Paris, 1993, 157.

‘Yarḥibōlā⁴⁷ and mihrdād sons of Rašnmīhr⁴⁸ have erected [this] altar and give thanks to Bēl and Yarḥibōlā and ‘Eglibōl for ever the good. Šalmān their friend [also] offers praise.’

Raham Asha

⁴⁷ . Inv. X.114 Ιαριβωλης.

⁴⁸ . The editors have read Rashmeher (raš° ‘tête’). But the proper Persic name lšnmtr /Rašnmīhr/ is composed of the names of two Yazata Rašn (from Av. Rašnu) and mihr (Av. Miθra), cf. A. B. Nikitin, « Middle Persian Ostraca from South Turkmenistan », *East and West*, 42/ 1 (March 1992), 124 : 35. A fragment of a large jar.