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Gods and temples of Palmyra

The paper is based on a lecture given at the University of Gdansk in 2010. Four sanctuaries that have been excavated in Palmyra are briefly presented according to the latest research. The principal sanctuary of Bel and those of Ba'alshamin and of Nabu are published by their excavators. The ideas about the cult of Bel as formulated forty years ago can now be reconsidered. The sanctuary of Allat, the last to be excavated, was already presented in several preliminary papers and the final publication is nearing completion. Some observations concerning this sanctuary are submitted here for the first time.

Key words: Palmyra, Roman Near East, temples, Aramaic religion

The caravan emporium that grew out of an isolated oasis under the early Roman Empire has acquired some institutions typical of a Greek *polis* by the middle of the first century AD, without renouncing its ancestral heritage (Sartre 2001: 972–973). In particular, the local pantheon was mixed, being composed of various gods, some of them Babylonian, others Phoenician or Arabic in origin, while still others are not known, being from elsewhere, and probably go back to the early, and dark, ages of Tadmor, as the oasis had been called since time immemorial (cf. Drijvers 1976; Gawlikowski 1990: 2605–2658).

While the traditional godheads of the Levant generally underwent the irresistible attraction of Hellenism and became known by the names of the more or less similar Greek gods, Palmyra maintained most of its gods under their native names, only adding one or two borrowed Greek figures to the already crowded company. Though being, ever since Tiberius, a part of the Roman province of Syria, Palmyra belonged culturally to the Aramaic-speaking world of the Syro-Mesopotamian steppe, extending along both banks of the Euphrates and being subject in varying degrees to Western or Iranian cultural influence.

Accordingly, the civilisation of Palmyra should be considered in comparison with other centres of the same Aramaic domain, in the first place with the city of

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Dura-Europos on the Euphrates (Macedonian in origin, later Parthian, then Roman) and to a lesser extent Hatra (capital of petty rulers in Parthian dependence). All three were destroyed about the middle of the third century BC. We know much less about Emesa in Syria, and Edessa, Nisibis or other cities of Mesopotamia of the same period (cf. Drijvers 1977: 799–896).

Outwardly, however, Palmyra should have looked very much like any other major city in Syria. Streets lined with Corinthian columns and sanctuaries hosting likewise colonnaded cellas in the midst of courtyards surrounded with porticoes proclaimed proudly their belonging to the civilized world of Greece and Rome. True, inscriptions are mostly conceived in Aramaic and not always accompanied with an abridged translation into Greek, and many passers-by preferred trousers to himation, but in the main the place seemed rather Hellenized. This impression would change if one were to enter one of the temples.

The great temple of Bel is a Corinthian pseudodipteros planned on the Hellenistic model elaborated by Hermogenes for Artemis Leukofryene in Magnesia. This is the earliest major building of the site, never surpassed in size and precision of workmanship (Fig. 1). While the cella has been described and published in great detail (Seyrig, Amy, Will 1975), the temenos is much less well-known. Both this square courtyard and a huge banqueting hall are later than the temple itself. It was the common sanctuary of all the Palmyrenes and the centre of the civic cult. As the construction of the cella is first attested in AD 19, about the time of the annexation of Palmyra to the province, it is possible that the impulse came from the imperial government, but the work went on for many years with local support (Pietrzykowski 1997). The gift of the bronze doors of the cella and perhaps of the roof is mentioned as late as AD 108. In the meantime, the temple was consecrated in AD 32, on the day of the Babylonian New Year. The great god of the oasis, Bol, had already changed his name to Bel sometime before, in unison with the lord of Babylon (also known there as Marduk).

In spite of the Classical inspirations of the no doubt imported craftsmen, the building strikes us, at the first glance, as peculiar, indeed unique. A tall gateway set into the colonnade of one long side announces two shrines at the opposite ends of the cella, each conceived in imitation of a separate temple (Fig. 2). They probably replace, though do not imitate in their architectural form, some older buildings. The main, northern adyton harbours at its back wall mortises indicating that a huge plaque had been fixed there, no doubt a bronze relief representing several gods. There is not enough space for statues in the round. What remains of the decoration contains cosmic symbols such as busts of the seven planetary gods inside a zodiac circle and an eagle spreading its wings across the star-spangled heavens. A terrace roof of the temple should have served for ceremonies in honour of a host of gods, including those of the planets: Yarhibol for the Sun, Aglibol for the Moon, Arsu for Mars, Ashtart for Venus, all of them named and represented on several votive monuments in the company of Bel, the ruler of the Universe.

Interestingly, these, and other, gods of Palmyra are usually shown as militaristic. This seems to be a result of a fascination with the might of the Roman army,

even if some traits, such as bell-shaped helmets, point rather to Hellenistic tradition. The oldest images, however, show the gods draped in Greek style. They may be accompanied by the nude Heracles with his club and *leonte*, intruding among the fully dressed local figures (Fig. 3). In any case, it is hard to find a reference to the iconography of the ancient Orient before Alexander.

Another sanctuary was excavated in the 1950s by a Swiss mission under Paul Collart (Collart, Vicari 1969). It was sacred to Ba'alshamin, based on existing evidence it is thought to have been built at the beginning of the first century AD. The "Lord of Heaven", as this name is translated, had been known in Syria for many centuries already. In Palmyra he is a bearded Zeus wearing a calathus and holding ears of corn or a thunderbolt, one more Hellenized Syrian weather-god. The cult was founded by a tribe, probably recently settled and apparently not bothered by the fact that their heavenly god was very similar to Bel, both of them supposed to reign supreme.

The cella of Ba'alshamin, a small Corinthian prostyle standing complete except for the roof, is as late as AD 130. It was built into one of the courtyards of the sanctuary over a century old by that time. At the far end of the cella a peculiar, rather theatrical decoration framed a bronze plate representing in the relief the enthroned god. Its appearance can be restored with some probability after a rather awkward contemporary pilgrim's drawing (Fig. 4). Some earlier sculptures were inserted into this setup, no doubt preserved from an earlier shrine standing in the same place (Gawlikowski, Pietrzykowski 1980: 421–452).

The fact that the cult images in these two temples were flat reliefs, as so many votive sculptures once set up in more humble shrines or banqueting halls, suggests a mode of cult very different from that of the traditional Near Eastern religions. While statues of gods could have served as living beings, with food, anointing, wearing clothing, etc., a relief or painting could be only addressed with less material forms of worship. Such spiritualization was definitely in the air of time, and found its expression in Palmyra itself in the private cult of the so-called Anonymous God, who apparently contented himself with frankincense burned on his altars.

According to Henri Seyrig (Seyrig 1933: 238–252; 1934: 87–102; 1971: 85–114), the two main sanctuaries housed two independent triads: one of Bel, Yarhibol and 'Aglibol, gods of Sun and Moon, and the other of Ba'alshamin, Aglibol and Malakbel (Moon and Sun), in each case flanking a supreme cosmic deity. The triads would be artificially created in order to express the supposed *Weltanschauung* of the priests, who were deeply impressed with contemporary astrological wisdom of real or reputed Babylonian origin. If so, the twin theological systems of the main sanctuaries would be highly speculative, while negligent of local tradition such as it could have survived the sudden rise of a modern city out of an insignificant oasis settlement. It seems, however, that things looked otherwise.

Indeed, Bel is usually flanked by more than two companions: the warrior Arsu and the goddess Ashtart, while several more obscure figures also found their place on the temenos. Some of them came to be identified with planets, but the group of

Bel was not necessarily a rigid hierarchical structure and no underlying doctrine must be necessarily posited. The same is true of Ba'alshamin and his mysterious companion Durah'lun followed by the goddess called simply Belti ("Milady"). The seven personifications of planets are figured also on a lintel in the Ba'alshamin cella. And so, two forms of a primitive rain-and-thunder god, one local and the other imported, were worshipped in Palmyra at the same time, both as rulers of the Universe and apparently in good harmony in spite of the logical difficulty which has worried some modern authors.

This coexistence is not unprecedented. In Palmyra itself, there were likewise no less than three distinct Sun gods: Yarhibol, Malakbel and finally the Sun as such (Shamash), each of them worshipped in a different sanctuary, in the company of other variously assorted gods. Some of these cult locations have not yet been discovered.

Another temple was sacred to the Babylonian Nabu, lord of wisdom and writing, in Palmyra equated to Apollo, the Greek patron of arts (Bounnī, Seigne, Saliby 1992). In Babylon he was considered son of Marduk-Bel, and it was probably so in Palmyra too, where his sanctuary stood close to Bel's. One more excavated temple in Palmyra was sacred to Allat. The cult of this Arab goddess was placed under the care of the same tribe that was responsible for the Ba'alshamin sanctuary. Both were situated, at the time of their foundation, on the outskirts of the city, one to the north, the other to the west, already close to burial grounds.

The iconography of Allat follows two different traditions. She is either seated between two lions, looking very much the same as Atargatis of Hierapolis, widely known as Dea Syria, or stands in arms with traits of the Greek Athena. In Palmyra, she can appear in either aspect, and some inscriptions translate the name of Allat into Greek as "Athena the ancestral goddess", though in one early bilingual rendering the name is Artemis (Starcky 1981: 119–130).

This transformation of a stately queen into an armed goddess has been explained by the habit of the Arab nomads to conceive their gods as desert warriors protecting the tribes and accompanying them in their wanderings and their raids. Indeed, there are many images of such minor gods mounted on horses or camels, clad as Beduin and armed like them with spears and small rounded shields (Seyrig 1970: 77–112). It is less sure whether this explanation can apply to gods on foot wearing legionary armour (Fig. 5). While it is true that among Greek goddesses only Athena goes armed, wearing aegis and helmet and brandishing a spear, this may not represent sufficient evidence in and of itself to consider her identical to Allat.

The sanctuary of Allat (Gawlikowski 1977: 253–274; 1983: 59–67; 1997: 837–849) included a temple which is clearly younger than the temenos itself. The same is true of the temple of Ba'alshamin, and the two are very similar to each other, even if that of Allat is preserved only in its lower courses. Both are prostyle of Roman type with a Corinthian porch of four columns in front and two intercolumnia deep, facing East, both are articulated on three other sides with pilasters, both stand on low podiums and had plain pediments in front and back. The temple of

Allat can be dated from the internal evidence of two incomplete inscriptions as having been built in AD 148 or slightly later, barely twenty years or so after the cella of Ba'alshamin. It is also clear that the same families were involved in the two sanctuaries.

The fragmentary text from the doorway of Allat mentions two buildings: "this naos" and "the old *hamana*". The latter term is Aramaic and applies to some sort of shrine. Here, for the first time, it can be ascribed with practical certainty to material remains.

These remains consist of the foundations of a small rectangular building, broader than it is deep (7.35 through 5.50 m), with very thick walls around a narrow room, barely large enough for the door wings to open inwards (Fig. 6). This shrine has been piously preserved within the second century temple in such a way that the new walls enclose the old, leaving between them a space averaging only 6 cm wide. Stone of a different kind was used in each case. As the floor of the old building was laid practically on the ancient ground level, and as it continued to be used, the internal level of the new temple was lower than expected: the front columns set on a bench around the porch and the floor of the cella a few steps down from the porch. The foundations of the new building also go deeper into the ground, which would have been no easy affair: they would have had to undermine the old shrine partly while keeping it intact at all costs.

The cella is thus nothing more than a box containing the ancient tabernacle which remained in use as the adyton, the inner sanctum and seat of the goddess (Fig. 7). This is apparently the only known case of such survival in Syria: usually, the adyton is built together with the temple, even if it may take the aspect of an independent building, as the two adytions of Bel, or incorporate some elements taken from the older phase, as in the case of Ba'alshamin. The exterior changed radically and became Classical in inspiration, Hellenistic for Bel, Vitruvian for the other two. In each case, however, these Corinthian temples were meant to impress the viewer and proclaim their belonging to the modern Roman world, but they were just a disguise. All three keep in different ways the memory of smaller, simpler tabernacles dedicated to the same godheads in the same places, but only the temple of Allat actually preserved its predecessor intact.

As the *hamana* of Allat remained complete, it would be pointless to roof the new cella above it. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that the place was left open: not only has an outlet been arranged for rainwater, but more importantly, the pre-existing altar was left in front of the tabernacle but inside the temple, standing on a stone pavement not linked to either building; it could be used only if open to the sky. On the other hand, the porch should have been covered in the normal way.

The narrow room inside the primitive shrine could not have any windows, as its walls are over 2 m thick. It was closed with two-winged doors which, when opened, revealed a statue inside a niche. We have recovered several fragments of the framing, consisting of jambs covered with vine-scrolls and of a lintel featuring

a spread eagle. The slab on which the statue was placed is preserved in place and bears a series of grooves and mortises suggesting a graphic restoration. This is possible thanks to several small replicas of the enthroned goddess, seated between two lions and holding a long sceptre (Fig. 8).

The statue was probably not of one piece but composite, and could perhaps have been moved from the throne to be carried in processions. This is in sharp contrast to rituals that we can envisage for the relief images of other temples. But then, the idol of Allat was much older than the appearance of frontality in the art of Palmyra, and with it the possibility to represent the gods on a flat surface offered for viewing and veneration in other temples.

Dated monuments allow us to fix the advent of frontality in the brackets between AD 15 and 30. For its part, the idol of Allat (called “Lady of the House”), was offered by a certain Mattanai, being an ancestor of someone who mentioned the fact five generations later in AD 115. This would bring back the original foundation to about 50 BC at the latest (Gawlikowski 1990: 101–108). By the same token, the first shrine of Allat becomes the oldest known in Palmyra and the first of which some remains are still in place.

Another inscription found nearby mentions a *hamana* built in 31/30 BC for the solar god Shamash. A square foundation 4 m to the side is still to be seen there, exactly on the axis of the Allat temple. It could have once contained a small inner room and the inscription could once have been placed in its wall, though we cannot establish this with absolute certainty. Another similar foundation was found a few years ago very close to the Allat temple (cf. Gawlikowski 2010: 517–526). Possibly, the original temenos contained several such chapels, each for a different god. The Vitruvian cella had intruded in its midst about AD 150 without changing the character of the cult and scrupulously keeping the old installations in place.

The temple of Allat was destroyed twice: it was sacked once in 272 by the Roman troops of the emperor Aurelian and again, definitely, by a Christian mob at the end of the fourth century. In the meantime, the sanctuary remained in use within the limits of a legionary camp for over a century. One may imagine that access to it was restricted as far as the civilian population was concerned. The temple’s interior was radically changed during this time.

Indeed, the old tabernacle contained within the cella had been destroyed together with the statue on the first occasion, while the walls of the cella seem to have remained intact. At any rate, a restoration effort occurred very soon afterwards. Instead of trying to rebuild the shrine, its foundations were left in place and covered with a kind of platform including some sculptured fragments, which were thus piously preserved. We could recover some votive reliefs of the first to third centuries and some elements of the niche once framing the seated statue of the goddess.

The cult image itself had to be replaced. Four short columns were brought in and set up in front of the masonry preserving the broken remains to support roofing in the form of a square canopy or perhaps a shelter from wall to wall over

the whole ruin of the primitive shrine. Under the canopy a new statue was fixed. Fallen and broken during the second sack, it has survived for the most part and could be reassembled (Gawlikowski 1996: 21–32).

The statue is a second century copy of a statue of Athena, executed in Pentelic marble. It is clear that the original was Athenian and conceived in the circle of Pheidias. It has replaced an old and venerable, but no doubt primitive statue, and this in a time right after a military disaster and economic collapse. It could hardly be imported from Greece in these conditions, but could rather have embellished some profane public building in the city before receiving divine honours in the restored temple.

The late restoration was probably an initiative of a Roman legionary legate under Aurelian, who wanted to reconcile the destitute local goddess, seeing in her no doubt Minerva, one of the standard Roman army cults. If so, the statue does not provide evidence for the cult of Allat, but is rather one of a series of Classical marbles imported to Palmyra for adornment of public buildings.

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Fig. 1. The temple of Bel from the South

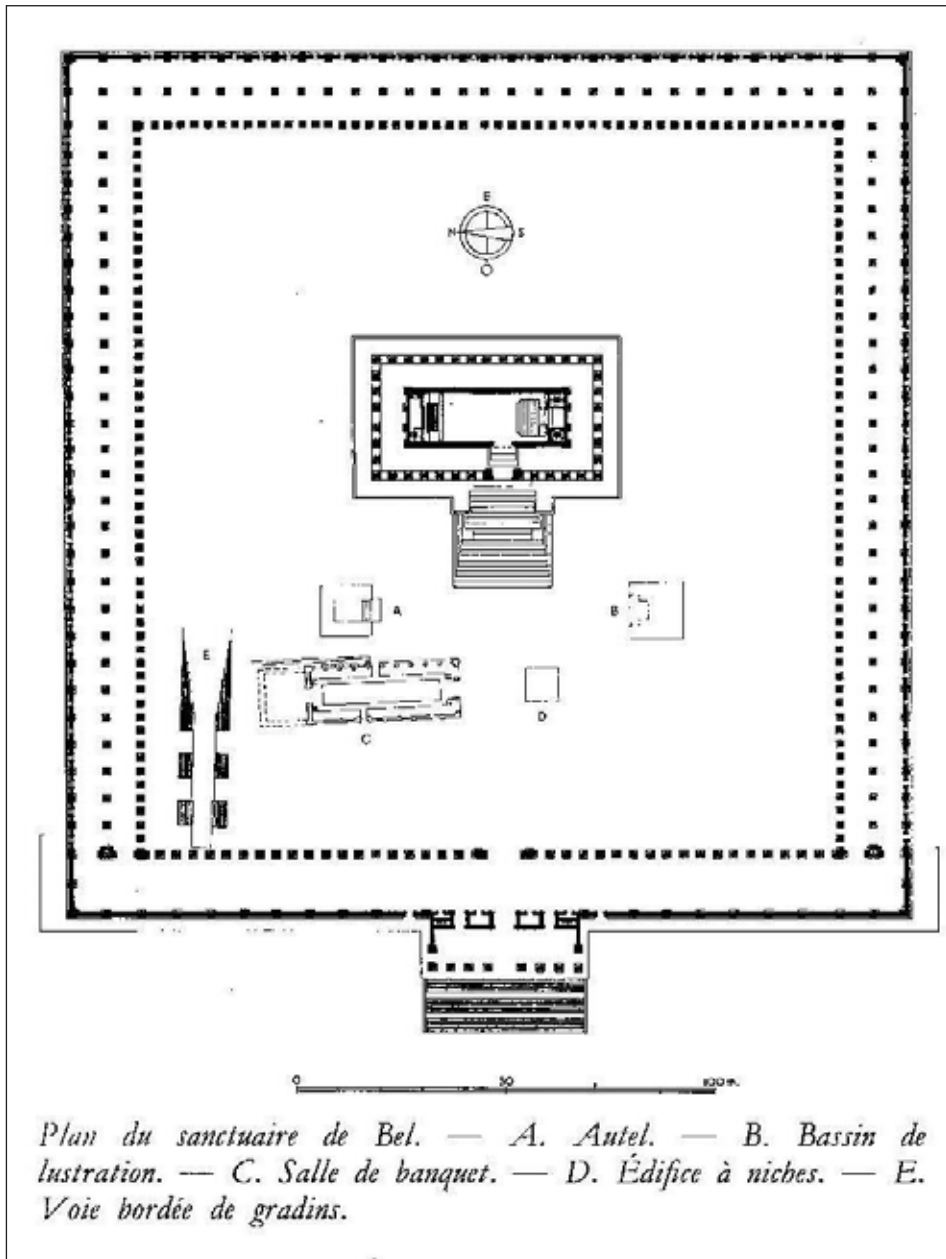


Fig. 2. Plan of the temenos (R. Amy)



Fig. 3. An early relief showing Heracles and three gods of Palmyra

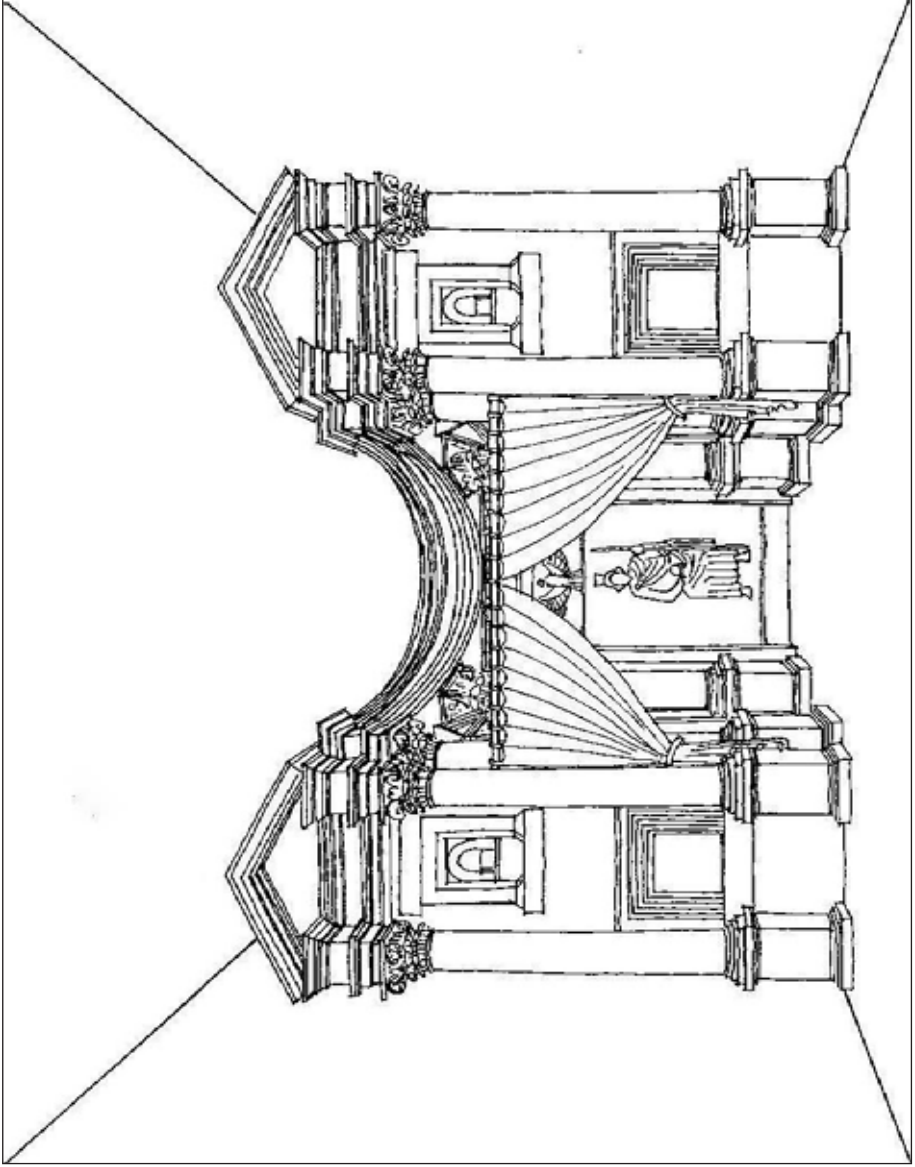


Fig. 4. A restored view of the adyton in the Ba'alshamin temple (M. Baranski)

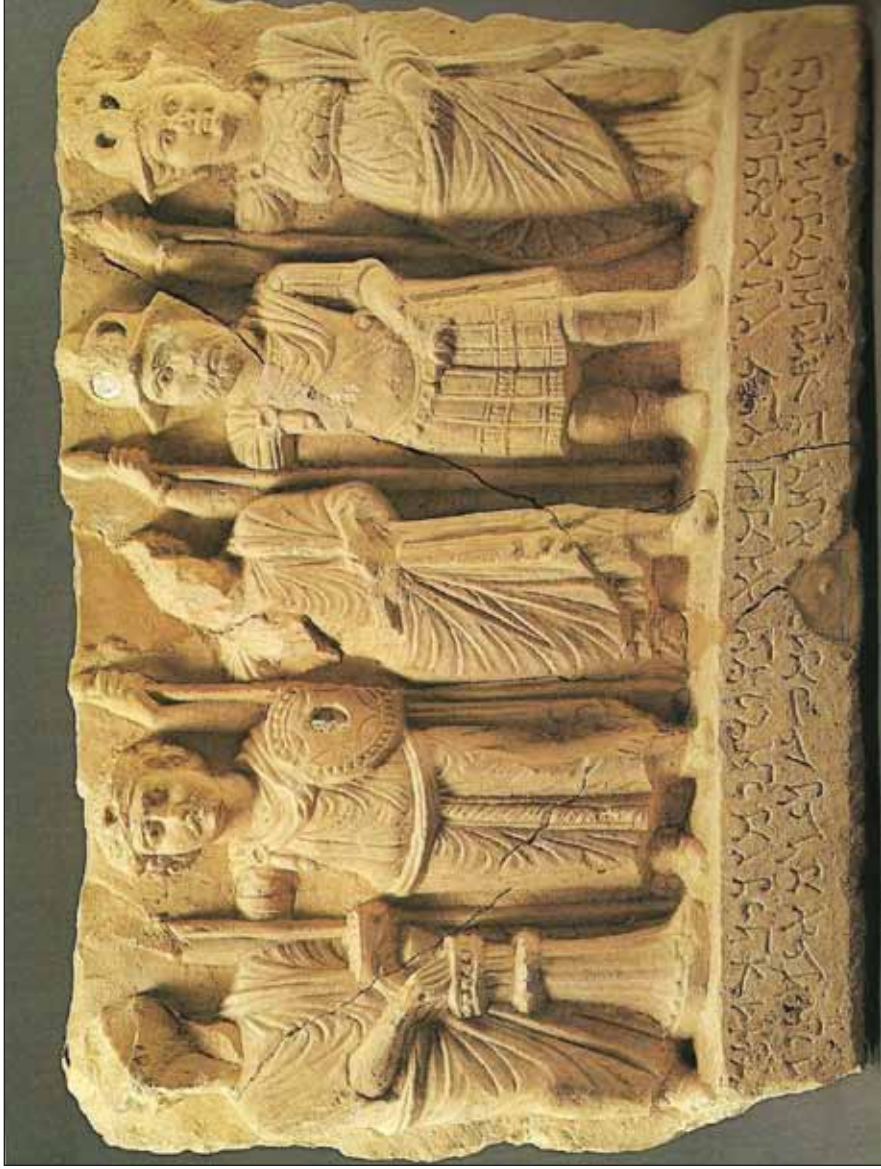


Fig. 5. Warrior gods: from right, Allat as Athena, a god in Roman armour; two gods in Beduin dress and the donor

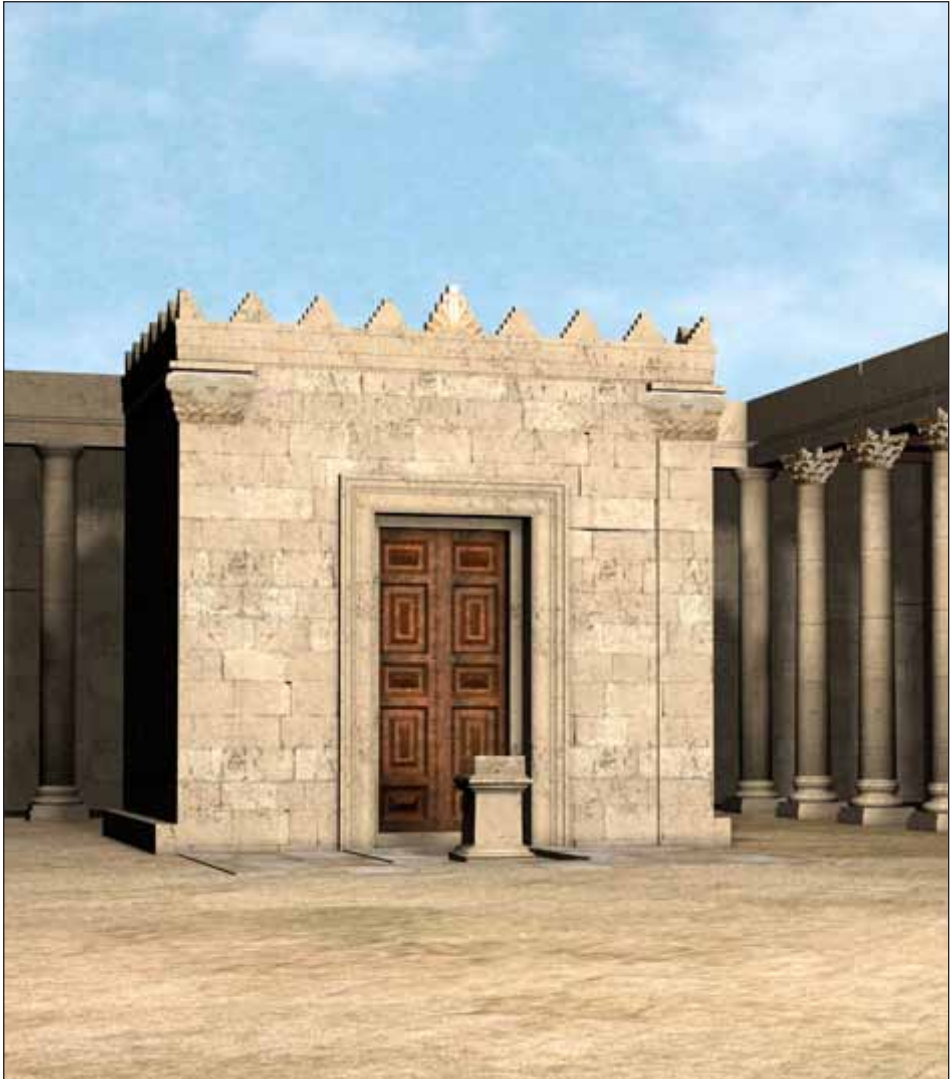


Fig. 6. The early temple of Allat. A restitution (D. Tarara)

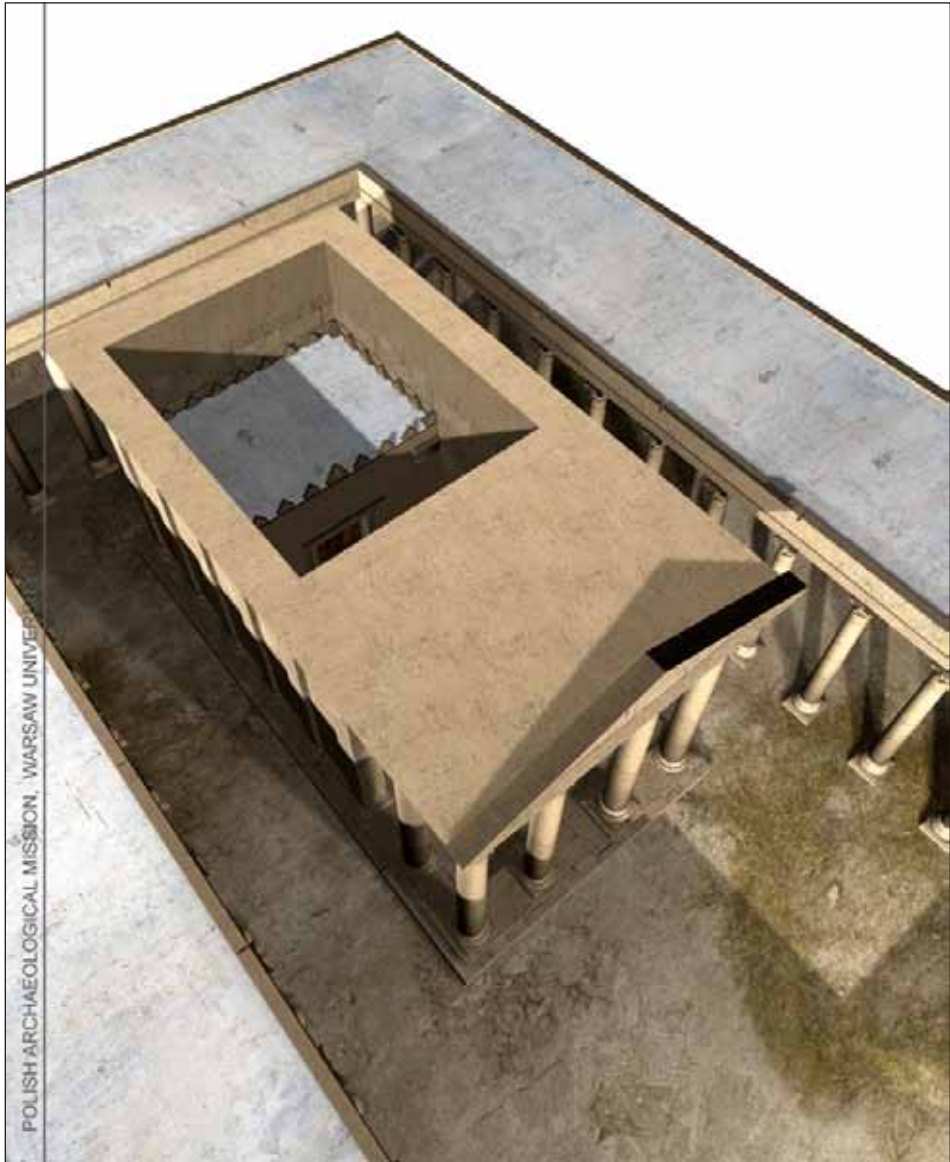


Fig. 7. The later temple of Allat. A restitution in birdeye's view (D. Tarara)

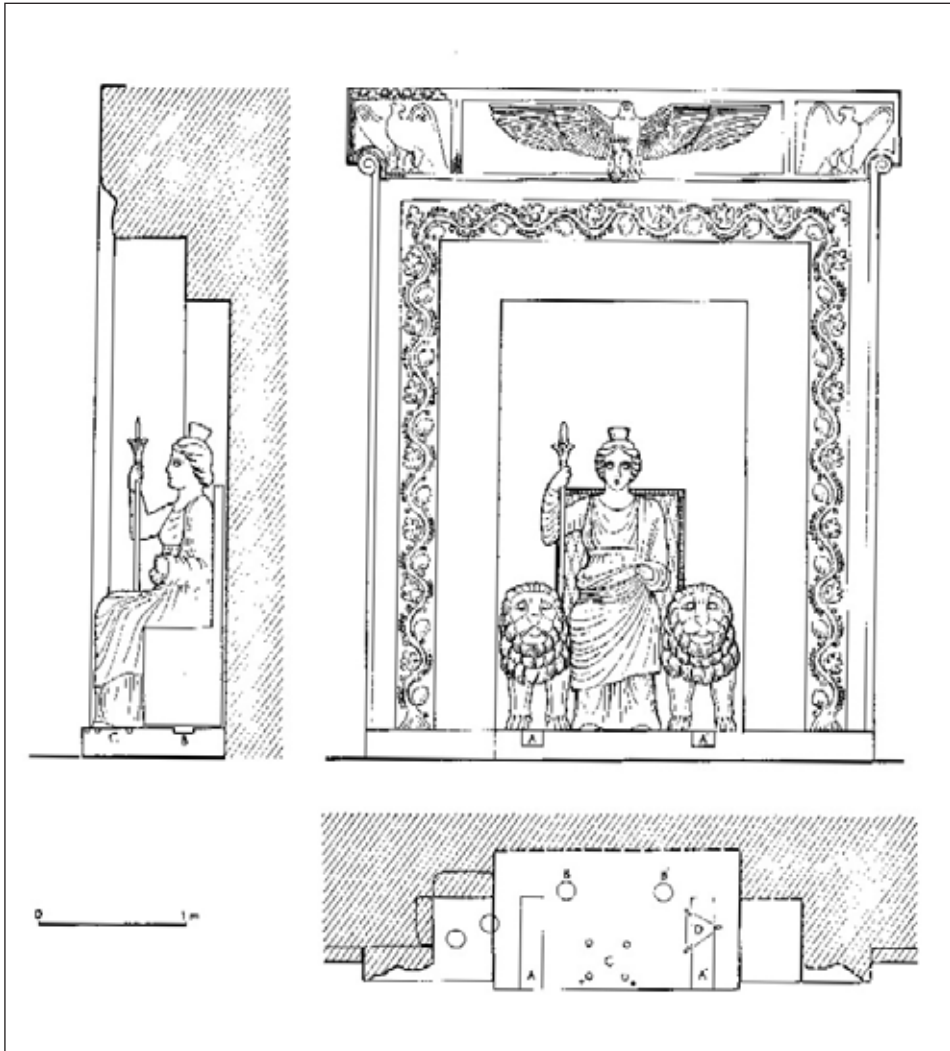


Fig. 8. Restitution of the early statue of Allat in her temple (M. Puzzkarski)