

Amott, David

Text Panels for the Museum of Archeology, Palmyra Syria: The Temple Bel / Palmyra's Coinage

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Cynthia Finlayson, Department of Art History

This project helps to fulfill a crucial need for research on a highly important collection of ancient artifacts housed in the Archeology Museum of Tadmor-Palmyra, Syria. The collection is significant in that it documents the history and culture of a major center of the ancient Mediterranean world. This research has been used to create several museum text panels and exhibition layouts that, once assembled, will be shipped to Palmyra, Syria and installed as part of a permanent exhibition in Palmyra's Museum of Archeology. Below is text that will be featured on panels concerning Palmyra's Temple Bel, Palmyra's principle god Bel, and the Palmyra museum's collection of antique coins.

Temple Bel:

Dedicated on April 6, 32 A.D., Temple Bel ranked among the most important buildings in the ancient world. The Temple itself encapsulates much of Palmyra's history and culture and occupies one of the oldest and most important religious sites in the Middle East (Colledge pg. 11; Vaughan pg. 43). In addition, the temple's architecture, a blend of eastern and western influences, reflects Palmyra's multi-centered culture that was rooted in the traditions of both the ancient Mediterranean and Orient.

The arrangements of Temple Bel's principal features, which include a Temanose (the temple complex's large outer wall), the inner sanctuary or cella, a sacrificial alter, ramp, and lustrial basin, imitates the layout used at many Mesopotamian and Semitic shrines. Architectural elements, such as the cella's pedimented windows, off-centered doorway, and merlons (ziggurat shaped finials found on the roof of the cella) also reflect Oriental design (Colledge pg. 26; DeGeorge pg. 18).

Other of Temple Bel's features, such as the cella's peristyle (columned porch encircling the cella), fluted Corinthian capitols, boldly painted sculpture, and general proportions stem from the Greco-Roman tradition. Many scholars believe the work of the Hellenistic architect Hermogenes influenced many of Temple Bel's features and details (DeGeorge pg. 18).

By melding together features that reflect both east and west, the ancient Palmyrenes made Temple Bel a unique sanctuary that both reflected the city's heritage and honored the principle God of their pantheon. The temple also helped to foster unity within the city itself by creating a central meeting place to gather Palmyra's many tribes together for civic and religious purposes.

Sources:

Agnes Carr Vaughan, *Zenobia of Palmyra*, 1967.

Malcom A.R. Colledge, *The Art of Palmyra*, 1976.

Gerard DeGeorge, *La Sancutaire de Bel a la Palmyre*, L'Oeil Magazine, pg. 18, 1993.

The God Bel:

The citizens of Palmyra considered Bel, the ruler of the heavens, the protector of caravans, and the god of fertility and human destiny, to be the most important God in their pantheon. Most scholars trace Bel's origins back to the ancient Babylonian god Tammuz who symbolized death and rebirth in nature (online Encyclopedia Mythica, Tammuz, 2003). As the influence of Greco-Roman culture grew in Palmyra, Bel was often compared to Zeus or Jupiter (Bounni and Al-As'Ad, pg. 40). In art, Bel is frequently depicted with Malikbel, who served as Bel's messenger in Palmyranian mythology. Artists also commonly depicted Bel between the gods Yarhibol and Aglibol, deities who represented the sun and moon and who served as protectors of the important Efqa spring located near the Temple Bel. The relief to the (right of, left of, below, near to) this panel comes from the cella of the Temple Bel, and depicts Bel as an eagle accompanied by both Yarhibol and Aglibol on either side (Bounni and Al-As'Ad, pg. 42).

Sources:

Malcom A.R. Colledge, *The Art of Palmyra*, 1976.

Bounni and Al-As'Ad, *Palmyra : History, Monuments and Museum*, 1988

Encyclopedia Mythica (www.pantheon.org), *Tammuz*, 1993

Cult Rituals in Palmyra:

In ancient Palmyra, cult ceremonies and rites often focused on the worship of sacred beytil stones, statuary, or reliefs which depicted, or were dedicated to the city's deities (Colledge, pg 29). In the Temple Bel, a statue of Bel flanked by figures of Yarhibol, the sun god and Aglibol, the moon god were possibly kept inside shrines or adytions found within the Temple's cella (Burns, pg 168).

Each year the Palmyranians held ritual processions to honor their gods, especially during the spring and fall seasons. During these times, priests and worshipers would process together, carrying statues of the gods as they walked. Animal sacrifices and ritual banquets held within the temple complex often accompanied these processions (Colledge, pg 29). Participation in events such as the banquets was strictly controlled through terra-cotta tokens issued to only the priests who served in the temple and a few select citizens (Colledge, pg 29). The Temple Bel, like other Palmyrene temples, had a dining room where these invited participants ate the sacrificial meats. The banquets held to honor Bel were especially sumptuous affairs presided over by the symposiarch, an elected official whose position as a principle celebrant in the Temple Bel lent him particular importance within Palmyrenian society (Colledge, pg 29).

Sources:

Malcom A.R. Colledge, *The Art of Palmyra*, 1976.

Ross Burns, *The Monuments of Syria*, 1999.

Palmyra's Coins:

In 266 AD, after the assassination of her husband, King Odenathus, Zenobia, as Palmyra's regent, began an aggressive campaign to extend the city's power and influence throughout the Near East. Much of this chapter of Palmyra's history can be traced through the coins produced at the Roman mints Zenobia controlled during this period of expansion.

Before Zenobia's rule, Palmyra produced few coins. However, after Aurelian became the

Roman emperor in 270 A.D., Zenobia minted coins at Alexandria depicting her son, Wahballat dressed as a Roman emperor on the coin's secondary or reverse side. Emperor Aurelian's own bust appeared on the coin's principle or obverse side. During this same period, the Alexandrian mint also issued a coin depicting both Wahballat and Aurelian on the same side, facing each other. Both these issues seem to indicate that Zenobia was initially interested in creating an eastern empire while remaining on good terms with Rome (J.M.C. Toynbee, pg 148; Colledge, pg 234).

By 271 A.D., after enjoying military success, Palmyra's coinage became more aggressive in nature. This increased assertiveness suggests that Zenobia, at this point, desired to establish an empire completely independent of Rome. Consequently, the Palmyranian-controlled mint at Antioch began to issue coins that did not refer to Aurelian at all, but instead prominently depict Wahballat as an emperor wearing a radiate crown. The Alexandrian mint also produced similar coins that depict Wahballat but make no reference to Aurelian. At this time, this same mint additionally made several coins that depict Zenobia herself. One such coin shows Zenobia framed by a crescent moon, a symbol that is believed to refer to Zenobia's relation to Egyptian royalty through the Ptolemy line.

Many of these later coins, bold as they may be, were produced during the final days of Zenobia's reign. After only five years on Palmyra's throne, Aurelian defeated Zenobia's armies at Palmyra and led both Zenobia and Wahballat back to Rome in chains (J.M.C. Toynbee, pg 148; Colledge, pg 234).

Sources:

J.M.C. Toynbee, *Roman Historical Portraits*, 1978.

Malcom A.R. Colledge, *The Art of Palmyra*, 1976.