

THE HERITAGE OF THE STYLITES

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FOREWORD

In a previous issue of this Journal a short note appeared drawing attention to similarities between the picture presented by the first Stylite saint and that to be inferred from Lucian's account of the ritual of the *dea syria*.¹ The note comprised some incidental remarks suggested to the present writer ten years ago during the course of a visit to the relevant part of Northern Syria. In the interim there has been a renewal of interest in the Syrian Stylites manifested in various studies and surveys.² Furthermore the coincidence observed had in fact been remarked on several times by critical observers at the end of the last century.³ In view of this some excuse is found for adding other observations on a subject revealed to be of more than transient interest.

That anyone (and at this remove) should pretend to assert that he has fathomed the saint's vocation is unthinkable. Even less reasonable is a claim to assess the 'validity' of this vocation. The present concern is solely with external forms of expression, and in this connection a number of interesting documents have survived. They show not the spiritual processes at work in the saint, but contemporary society's effort to render an intelligible account to itself of the phenomenon of the saint as part of that society.

This evidence, as opposed to what may be derived from Lucian's 'treatise', is not literary—it is iconographic. Undoubtedly thus it affords the wider horizon. Images are more conservative than literary speculation and by consideration of this record some contact is established with a range of human imaginings ancient of days when Lucian turned his attention to the *dea syria*.

I

Simeon the Elder, the first Stylite Saint, was born about the year 388⁴ into a family supposedly well set up in a humble way of life. His birthplace was at Sis (Sisan), a village on the northern borders of Syria, and his life was entirely encompassed in neighbouring places in the area between Antioch and Aleppo. He received no formal schooling but was wise. When a youth of 16 he passed from being a shepherd to the practice of notable austerities. These he essayed first within the scope of common monastic life; but his zeal outrunning the bounds of human 'rule',

References appear at end of article.

he went his own way attracting (and retreating from) followers, eventually constituting in himself a monastery *sui generis*. His first vocation was for enclosure within hill caves (c. 413-423). Proceeding thence he took up his station on the top of a pillar or column, which he gradually had heightened so that after seven years it was almost 40 cubits (c. 60ft. or 18m.). In this eminent retirement he lived for 30 years in the sight of men, acting both as a source of blessing and practical wisdom, consciously approximating a heavenly station.⁵ Foretelling his own end he died, September 2, 459.

Having thus martyred himself, in due course a great centralised martyrion was erected about the column,⁶ more truly his relic than any part of his physical person. His corpse, against the desires of his brethren, was taken to Antioch to be lodged in the 'Great Church' where it was regarded as the salvation of the city.⁷ In 468 the Emperor Leo proposed to transfer this sacred possession to the metropolis but on the entreaty of the Antiochenes he allowed them to retain their only defence.⁸ It seemed not to operate against the Persian invading forces and presumably disappeared at this time. No trace nor record of it remains.

II

As is well known Simeon's example was followed, and for several centuries the Stylite became a categorical expression of East Christian holiness and asceticism.⁹ Representations of such figures in time became common in manuscript illumination, in mural decoration and as ikons. These developed into a conventional genre scene (v. Fig. 1). However, there are some representations of the elder St. Simeon which are local and contemporary. These are the reverse of 'conventional'. Primitive not by artistic necessity but in accordance with a religious compulsion, every detail entered expresses a traditional significance. They reveal the heritage of the Stylites.

While engaged on an archaeological survey of the region to the north-east of Hama¹⁰ Lassus discovered a basalt stele (86 x 64cms.) at the site of Abu Samra, reused in a modern village house. The stele bore a powerful representation of a stylite on his column tended by a monk. Lassus made a sketch of the stele



Fig. 1: Conventional Byzantine representation of Stylite Saint.

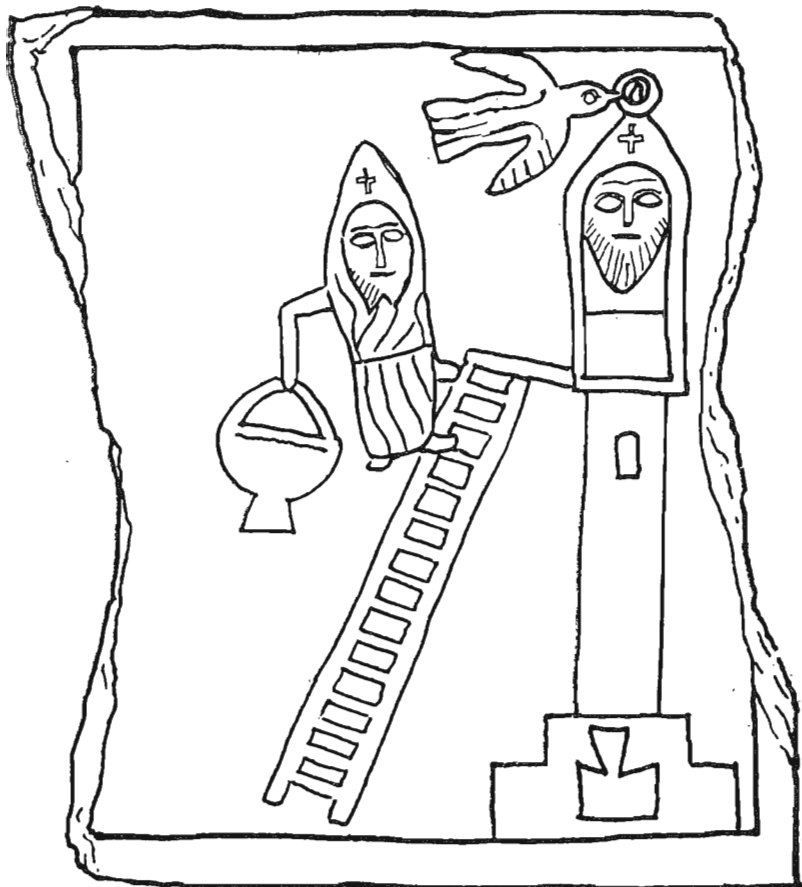


Fig. 2: Stele of St. Simeon in Berlin Museum (after Elbern, *Reliefdarstellung*, Fig. 1).

and published it immediately,¹¹ later incorporating the material in the standard work "Sanctuaires Chrétiens de Syrie".¹² Owing to the inaccessible position of the stela the sketch was somewhat inaccurate in detail.¹³ The stela has recently been acquired by the Berlin Museum and published afresh.¹⁴ With this stela may be compared another (c. 70 x 60cms.) presently exhibited in the Hama Museum¹⁵ (v. Fig. 2). The conjunction of these two stelai establishes the existence of an iconography appropriated to the Stylite, it would seem almost immediately—perhaps even within the lifetime of St. Simeon.¹⁶ Small wonder that the supposition arises that the elements were familiar and ready to hand.

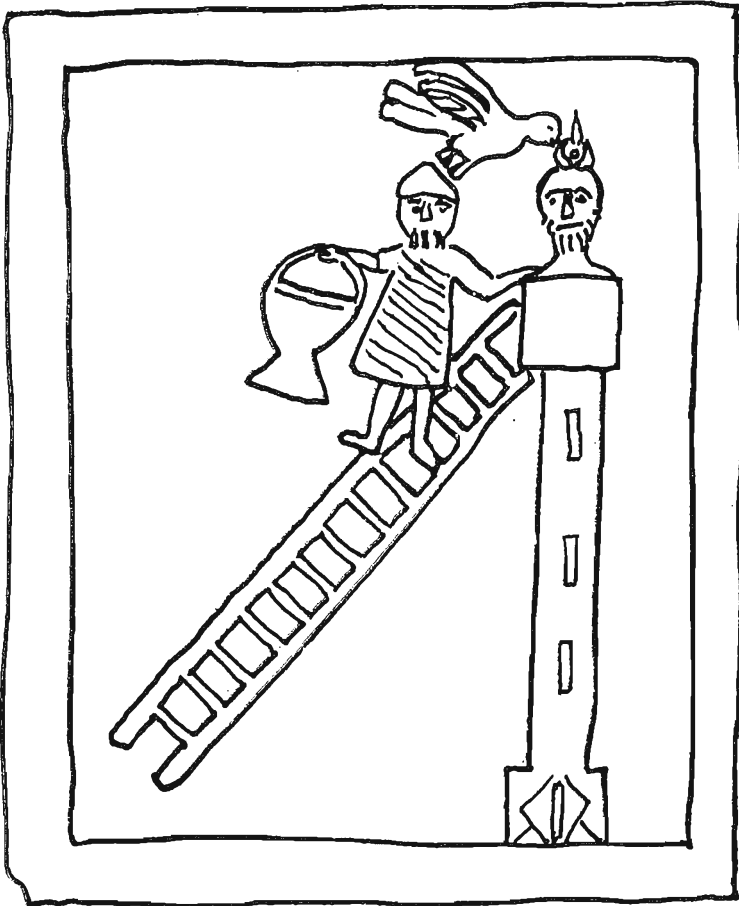


Fig. 2 (continued): Stele in Hama Museum.

The column has its characteristic details which serve to identify it unmistakably, even when the scene is ill preserved. These details are functional and are no longer clearly indicated on the later conventional representations. The column or pier stands on a stepped base. It has no architectural capital, but shows an oversailing balustrade (*boutē*) constituting a sort of box in which the saint took his station.¹⁷ Below the box is a highly characteristic little window-like recess or aperture. This formed an element in the plumbing, serving to cast out the saint's draught.¹⁸

The bust alone of the saint appears crowning the pillar. This is both artistically fitting and also not far removed from what must have been the actual appearance in foreshortened fashion to those assembled about the column. The heavens have opened, the dove descended. In the flesh the saint is made "citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem" (as Evagrius put it). The celestial bird has bestowed on him the nimbus and the tongue of flame of the Holy Ghost.¹⁹ Meanwhile the saint's earthly origin and connection are demonstrated by the attendant with vessel²⁰ climbing the ladder set against the column.

In brief a focus of extreme spiritual necessity has been reduced to a telling image. Furthermore apart from the spiritual significance there is an obvious assurance revealed in the graphic composition of the scene. A consideration of this composition as such (i.e., the form and not the content of the iconography) may serve best to introduce *in medias res* the matter at hand.

From the same geographical region but from a millennium anterior is another stele which figures the same composition²¹ (v. Fig. 3). A ladder is set against a column-trunk and a man mounts to tend the crowning feature. This Syro-Hittite stele from Tell Halaf represents, of course, the artificial fertilisation of the date palm. Its purport is not to illustrate horticultural practices. The tree is the Sacred Tree and clearly visible in the man's hand is the sacerdotal object usually interpreted as a 'pine cone'.²²

In view of the obvious congruence in design between the St. Simeon stelai and the Syro-Hittite stele showing an old religious theme, it is necessary to limit clearly what this congruence may be held to import. It is not to be supposed that the elements of the later scene are adopted from the earlier. Certainly the Stylite was tended by means of a ladder. Literary sources refer to the practice and material evidence of it remains on the ground in the monastery of Mont Admirable.²³ However, the stylised version of this real practice appear to reflect the influence of the earlier composition.²⁴ If this is to be allowed, then the graphic association cannot be accidental. The minds of men must have gone from one theme to another because consciously or sub-consciously they perceived a connection in significance. That is, eschewing all questions of meaning, the composition alone of the St. Simeon stelai has served to raise the issue that those who formed the iconography of the saint were not unmindful of the God of the reborn vegetation figured in the Sacred Tree.

It is this basic issue for which elucidation is now to be sought by considering details of iconography. Since the 'God of



Fig. 3: Syro-Hittite Stele from Tell Halaf, showing artificial fecundation of Sacred Tree (after Danthine, *Le Palmier Dattier et les Arbres Sacrés* Album Pl. 192).

the reborn vegetation' (cf. 'Tree and Pillar Cults') is an all pervasive aspect of the religion of the Ancient Near and Middle East the rapprochement with the picture of the Stylite is narrowed via two intermediary vehicles—intermediate in time, place and religion. These vehicles are the Hierapolis Cult and Christ Crucified.

To discuss such 'ideas' is perhaps foolishness and a presumption. Whatever 'reality' they may be invested with philosophically, they are knowable otherwise only as embodied in the thoughts of men. The men are long dead and there remains to us but the casual expression of these thoughts. The terms of

expression alone can be discussed. "The thought of man is not triable, for the devil himself knoweth not the thought of man."

III

The first step towards revealing the nature and sources of the images which St. Simeon's fellows employed to designate to themselves the significance of the saint is to delimit these images. This can be done briefly. The extensive illumination of the saint's figure in later mediaeval times is not here in point. The concern is solely with the society in which the saint's experience was comprehended—of which the saint himself formed part.

The stelai already adduced show the cowed bust of Simeon crowning a pillar 'between heaven and earth'. From below an attendant mounts a ladder, from on high the bird of the spirit bears heavenly recognition. Although anything but naturalistic in detail nonetheless the composition is basically 'narrative'.

Another stele now in the Louvre²⁵ carries the argument further (v. Fig. 4). Of basalt, overall height 66cms., it is similar

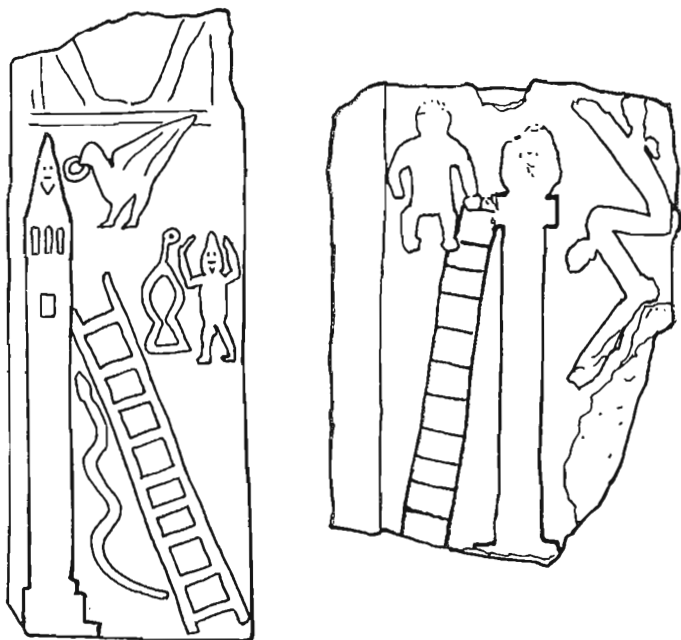


Fig. 4: (left) Stele of St. Simeon in Louvre (after Elbern, fig. 2).
(right) Stele in Damascus Museum (after Elbern, fig. 4).

to the previous ones, and although obtained at Saida (Sidon) its original province is clearly the same. It adds an additional element to the iconography—a serpent (cf. the relief in the Damascus Museum).²⁶ Equally important it indicates the progressive schematisation and dissolution of the composition. The individual items have become separate elements in their own right, not coherent parts of a narrative. The cowled bust is now a triangle. The ladder gives less convincing access to the saint; the attendant has floated away from the ladder; similarly the vessel has become separated from his grasp. The heavenly bird with the nimbus is present but the saint does not receive the spiritual crown. Already the parts speak for themselves, and need not the aid of narrative to be understood. The end of such development is that the several parts need not be associated to be intelligible; one will speak for all—*pars pro tota*. The triangle of the saint's bust on a pillar or post-standard suffices.

This process has been conveniently documented by material collected from the region²⁷ of the saint's dwelling (v. Fig. 5). A votive pillar (less probably a chancel post) found near Rasm el Nafal²⁸ in the Jebel Has gives a clear demonstration. A more

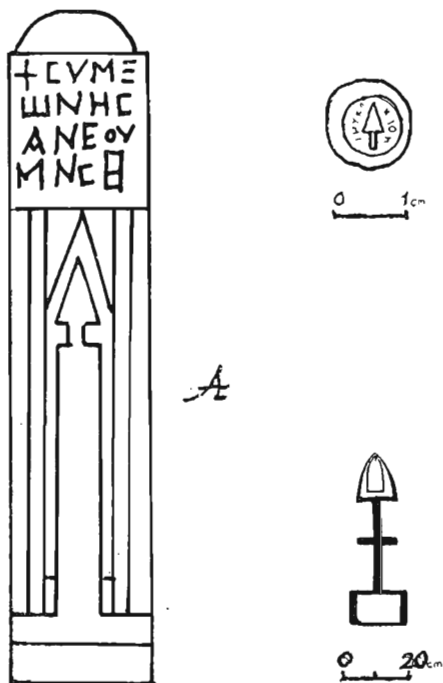


Fig. 5: Emblem of Stylite Saint.

(a) Votive Pillar from Rasm el Nafel (after Jalabert, *Inscriptions Grecques et Latines de la Syrie* II No. 278).

(b) Glass Amulet (after Tchalenko, fig. 16).

(c) Graffito from Der Seiman (after Tchalenko, *Villages Antiques de la Syrie du Nord* III, fig. 17).

extreme stage is shown by a graffito from the wall of a house near the South-West convent of Der Seman.²⁹ And with this latter schema may be compared the symbol on a glass amulet.³⁰ Intrinsically, and from the circumstances of discovery, it is clear that the triangular symbol depicted represents the Stylite Saint on his column and was soon adopted to that end by his neighbours as a shorthand version of the iconography on the basalt stelai. The symbol itself, however, is no new creation. The application and significance are new, not the form.

The symbol is an ancient one which figures prominently in glyptic art (particularly in Assyrian times). It is the *Marru*, originally the standard of the God Marduk—a triangular head set on a shaft or handle planted directly in the ground or set up on a more or less elaborate base (v. Fig. 6). This was once thought to be a spear head, but is now known to represent a basic agricultural implement—a spade.³¹ The cross piece which sometimes appears may be a footrest and the whole appearance becomes meaningful if looked at inverted. The appropriateness of the symbol lies in the original character of Marduk as an ‘agricultural or a vegetation deity’. This was never forgotten and in the late period Marduk was frequently identified with Tammuz.³³ In view of this the *marru* is often found associated with the Tree of Life³⁴ (v. Fig. 7). In exactly the same manner the emblem of the Stylite is shown together with the sacred tree on a reliquary from near the saint’s locality.³⁵ Here then is an iconographic link between the local consciousness of St. Simeon and ancestral memories of a power resident in a tree (post or pillar) who saved, renewed and increased the life of the region in an ancient day.

This conception is already shown forth abundantly by the association of the snake with the saint’s column in the plenary iconography. The association refers ostensibly to the variously reported miracles worked by St. Simeon for the benefit of snakes.³⁶ Rather it would be better to say that the miracles refer to the iconography. The connection of the serpent and the sacred tree (both expressing the regenerative power of life—harming healing,

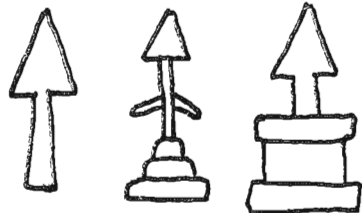


Fig. 6: *The Marru* (after M. Jastrow, *Bilder zur Religion Babylonians*, 1912. figs. 37 f.).

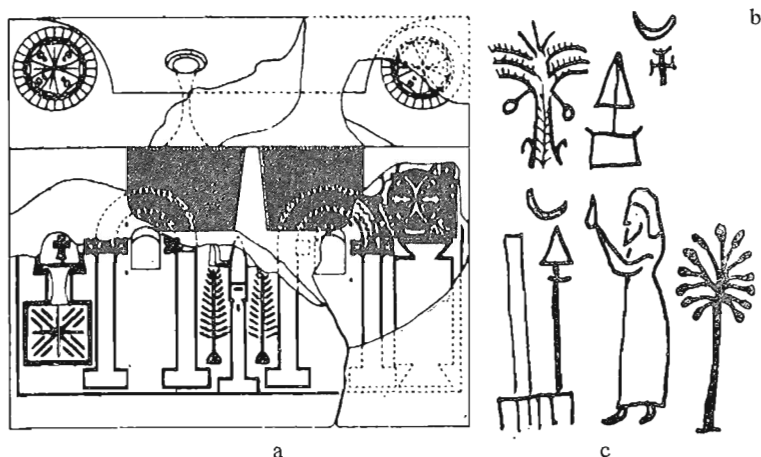


Fig. 7: *The Marru, the Emblem of the Stylite and the Tree of Life.*

- (a) Reliquary from chapel near the village of Beyko showing emblems of Stylite and Sacred Trees (after Tchalenko, fig. 9).
 (b) Cylinder Seal (c. 600 B.C.) showing Marru, emblem of the Moon God (Sin) and Sacred Tree (after Danthine, fig. 173).
 (c) Kassite Cylinder Seal with similar emblems (after Danthine, fig. 38).

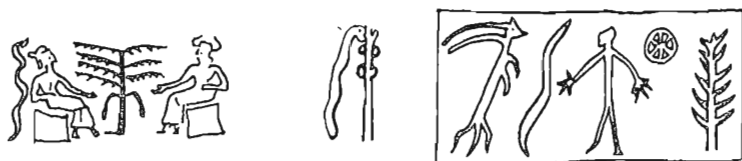


Fig. 8: *Snake and Sacred Tree.*

- (left) The 'Temptation' Cylinder Seal—early part of third millennium (after Danthine, fig. 42).
 (centre) Impression on clay from Susa (after N. Perrot, *Les Représentations de l'Arbre Sacré*, Paris, 1937, fig. 12).
 (right) Elamite Cylinder Seal (after N. Perrot, fig. 8).

decaying reviving) is immediate and universal.³⁷ The one passes into the other³⁸ (cf. Fig. 8).

IV

That pre-Christian precedents exist for the iconography of St. Simeon can hardly be regarded as a singular coincidence. The 'Migration of Symbols' is a familiar process³⁹ and in this instance its working does not altogether remain obscure. The cult of the 'Syrian Goddess' at Hierapolis is one of the best attested in

Antiquity, and with St. Simeon's witnessing this ancient religious centre is chronologically and geographically in direct connection.

The survival of Lucian's treatise has attracted continuous scholarly attention to Hierapolis so that in the course of a short note it is impossible even to outline the ramifications of this comment.⁴⁰ The cult was in essence a fertility cult and the *dea syria* was a *magna mater*. Most probably established in Hierapolis from time out of mind, it took its origin in basic concepts from the spiritual aspect of agriculture characterised in the Dying God. Located at one of the bridge-heads of the Ancient East, the cult was exposed to, and doubtless received, influences from all quarters. Anatolian, Mesopotamian, Phoenecian connections have all been discussed.⁴¹ Such details of development are endlessly controversial: this notwithstanding it is not difficult to set in issue the matter relevant to the present enquiry.

With the Syrian Goddess, Atagartis,⁴² was associated a consort (Hadad in later times)⁴³ who seems to have been of lesser stature. Additionally the nature of the cult presupposes and emphasises the position of a 'young god',⁴⁴ the God of the reborn vegetation, Tammuz⁴⁵ (Marduk), Adonis,⁴⁶ Attis,⁴⁷ Eshmun⁴⁸ are all cogeners, but the name (names) borne by this figure at Hierapolis can be obtained only by inference. When Lucian (the Asiatic Greek from nearby Samosata) came to write about the cult in the good Antonine days, a somewhat unusual situation obtained. Instead of a cult statue (as with the Goddess and her consort) the third figure was represented by a device of completely different aspect.⁴⁹ This object was a type of the ancient 'God's Symbol' set on a standard, familiar in Ancient Mesopotamia (e.g., the *marru* of Marduk previously discussed).⁵⁰ Numismatic evidence (v. Fig. 9) shows that by Lucian's day this had assumed a form equivalent to a Roman Legionary Standard (*Signum*);⁵¹ Lucian refers to it as *Semeion*, the correct Greek term for such a standard. What, however, was a matter worthy of emphatic comment was that the local non-Greek speakers also used this word (or rather a homophone) in the same connection.⁵²

Lucian in providing the cult with a Hellenised garb does not identify this *semeion* with any deity. However, the balance of his general remarks show Dionysos⁵³ as the Hellenic deity most prominently associated with the Goddess and her consort—a figure congruous with the God of the reborn vegetation.⁵⁴ Certainly it is Dionysos with whom Lucian connects the two tall pillars set in the entrance porch of the Temple.⁵⁵ Such twin pillars occur in other Semitic Temples (cf. Jachin and Boaz of Solomon's Temple, I Kings vii 21), and have often been discussed.⁵⁶ Lucian refers

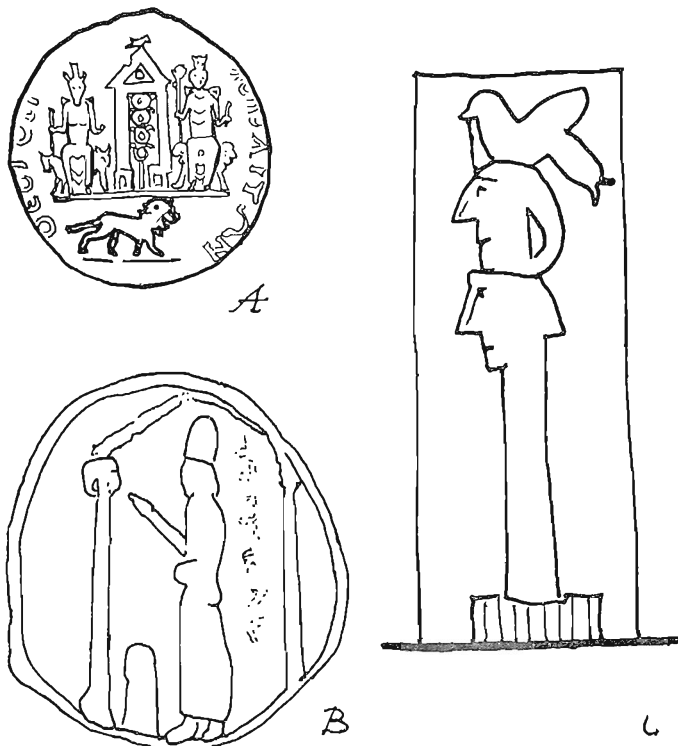


Fig. 9: The 'Standard' of Hierapolis.

- (a) Bronze coin of Hierapolis, third century A.D. (after Strong & Garstang, fig. 7).
- (b) Coin of Hierapolis (after Strong & Garstang, Frontpiece No. 3).
- (c) North Syrian Cylinder Seal of latter part of second millennium B.C. (after Seyrig, *Les Dieux de Hierapolis*, Pl. IX, No. 12).

to them at Hierapolis as Phalloi. That here (or elsewhere) they were exclusively so regarded is most unlikely. However, something of this connotation may have inhered in them.⁵⁷ With respect to these two pillars at Hierapolis Lucian describes a rite not attested elsewhere, and it constitutes one of the most striking particulars concerning the cult. He says⁵⁸ that twice a year a man climbs up one of these pillars as though climbing a palm tree with a rope. He remains on the summit for seven days supposedly being near the Gods and thus in a favourable position for offering prayer. Never sleeping, he prays for the prosperity of Syria and for individual donors.

It is impossible not to be aware of a certain family resemblance between such activities and that of St. Simeon.⁵⁹ This resemblance was fairly pointed out almost a century ago by Nöldecke in his lively sketch 'Some Syrian Saints'.⁶⁰ "Simeon's pride finds its most marked expression in the choice of a pillar as his abode. Long before this, at the great sanctuary of the Syrian Goddess Attar' athé (or Atargatis) in Hierapolis (Mabbog, Arabic Membij), some ninety English miles distant, there had been a colossal pillar to the top of which a man ascended twice every year for seven days' converse with the Gods; but this practice must have died out long before Simeon's time, and it is highly improbable that such an uninformed person as he should have heard anything about it."

For a man of Nöldecke's learning (and detachment) these latter remarks constitute a strangely unwarranted assumption: There is no evidence whatsoever to support the view; on the contrary ample records demonstrate that the Hierapolitan cult subsisted into (and through) St. Simeon's lifetime. Lucian speaks of the cult as famously flourishing in the latter part of the second century A.D. and two hundred years later Macrobius gives the same impression.⁶¹ While in the fifth century (i.e., during Simeon's lifetime) Atagartis is still referred to in Syriac writings as the Goddess of Mabbog.⁶²

Of this survival local Christianity (well attested at Hierapolis itself from the third century A.D.⁶³) could not remain in ignorance—although it might well wish, as far as possible, to feign ignorance! That is to say there is no reason to believe that the practice of mounting a pillar at Hierapolis had died out "long before Simeon's time" and there is every reason to believe that he, in common with all his generation, had heard about it to react as the spirit moved him.

In these circumstances the earliest modern comment linking the Pagan and Christian practice is perhaps the most apposite ever made. Attend Burckhardt's words in 1852.⁶⁴ "It is remarkable that this temple precinct with its wild scenes, also supplied a model for the later Stylites; from the propylaia there towered two enormous stone pillars representing phalluses such as were found in Asia Minor wherever similar cults obtained, and upon these annually a man would climb, to pray for seven days and sleepless nights; those who wished his intercession brought an appropriate gift to the foot of the pillar. Could such an obscene cult better be atoned for in the Christian period than by a saintly penitent ascending the pillar to serve God after his own manner not for

weeks but for decades on end." Without asserting such a claim, these words may well penetrate the psychology of the saint.

Nöldecke's appraisal "We can therefore, at most, attribute both phenomena to similar religious motives . . . but historically they are hardly connected" might well be reversed. Historically the Pagan and the Christian practice are closely connected.⁶⁵

The first possible connection between the Hierapolis Cult and St. Simeon was onomastic and operated on his parents rather than himself. Simeon is, of course, a biblical Hebrew name of frequent occurrence. It derives from the verb 'to hear' and is a hypocoristic for 'God has heard'.⁶⁶ However, in the North Syrian area at the period under discussion the name is of special prominence.⁶⁷ In this fact may there not be seen some influence of that holy name used both in Greek and Aramaic to refer to the sacred presence at Hierapolis—the *Semeion*? Thus pagan instance of Semitic-Greek homophony reinforcing the attraction of the Judeo-Christian homophonic Simeon-Simon? Should this be so perhaps a further insight into the psychological background to the saint's vocation has been afforded.

If Simeon, moved in the spirit to sanctify unholy uses, felt himself designated by circumstance to combat the original sin of his day and age; to challenge the forces of evil where they most prevailed was a basic concept of the contemporary Christian athlete. In other jurisdictions he offered battle in waste and desolate places and, if afforded, in a sepulchral context. The historical circumstances of St. Simeon's milieu dictated differently. To sleep with mummies might have seemed as otiose to St. Simeon as his own *ascesis* to the fathers of the Nitrian desert. Rather he watched on the column just as the depraved minister was wont to hold converse with devils;⁶⁸ and he delivered his wise responses from an elevated aery station as Lucian had observed the Hierapolitan idol to do.⁶⁹

Is such an understanding reflected in the local and contemporary iconography of St. Simeon? Was the famous 'standard' at Hierapolis an element in retaining before men's consciousness the old God's-symbol of the pole with its emblem? Perhaps. The coins of Caracalla and Severus Alexander⁷⁰ show the standard, displayed in a sort of naiskos, the steep pediment of which is surmounted by a dove (v. Fig. 9). The form in outline is not dissimilar from the pillar saint and dove shown on the basalt stelai. The image thus depicted is, however, the elaborated Hellenised (or Romanised) version of the symbol as appearing in the place of majesty within the Temple. Doubtless there remained

known the simple, primitive form of the symbol easily made (and recognised) by men to indicate the divinity. In this connection M. Seyrig has adduced glyptic designs (from the end of the second millennium B.C.) which he suggests may picture an ancestral form of the standard.⁷¹ These reveal a shaft crowned with a device consisting of twin mask-like human heads, above which appears, on occasion, the dove (v. Fig. 9). A millennium later the device on one Hierapolis coin⁷² of Classical times, still appears to show a simple pole standard surmounted by a head reminiscent of the seals collected by M. Seyrig (v. Fig. 9). If some such form as this survived to represent popularly the *Semeion*, then it again could find reflection in the basalt stelai of St. Simeon.⁷³

V

Doubts may subsist concerning a special, conscious relationship between the fifth century Syrian and the famous pagan cult of his neighbourhood. There can be no doubt concerning a special, conscious relationship between the Christian saint and the figure of Christ Crucified. "He sometimes prayed in an erect attitude with his outstretched arms in the figure of a cross."⁷⁴ This relationship, this approximation constituted the very *stasis* (the religious station or attitude) of the saint,⁷⁵ and is portrayed in a striking manner on local stelai and in graffiti, revealing the impression it made on his contemporaries (v. Fig. 10).

The sureness and readiness with which this approximation was expressed suggests in itself that there was some compelling rationale underlying it. That there was. Christian legends record and trace the connection between the Sacred Tree in the Garden and the Holy Cross;⁷⁶ the connection is made apparent in the iconography of the Crucifixion where appear all the emblems of the fall of Adam.⁷⁷ This identity is announced to the faithful in one of the most solemn passages of Christian Liturgy—the Proper Preface for the Mass at Passiontide:

Qui salutem humani generis
in ligno Crucis constituisti;
ut unde mors oriebatur,
inde vita resurgeret;
et qui in ligno vincebat,
in ligno quoque vinceretur:
per Christum Dominum nostrum.

If this understanding was nowhere strange in Christianity, it was most forcefully seized on in the Syriac Church.

"The tree of life is the Cross
Which gave a radiant life to our race.
On top of Golgotha Christ

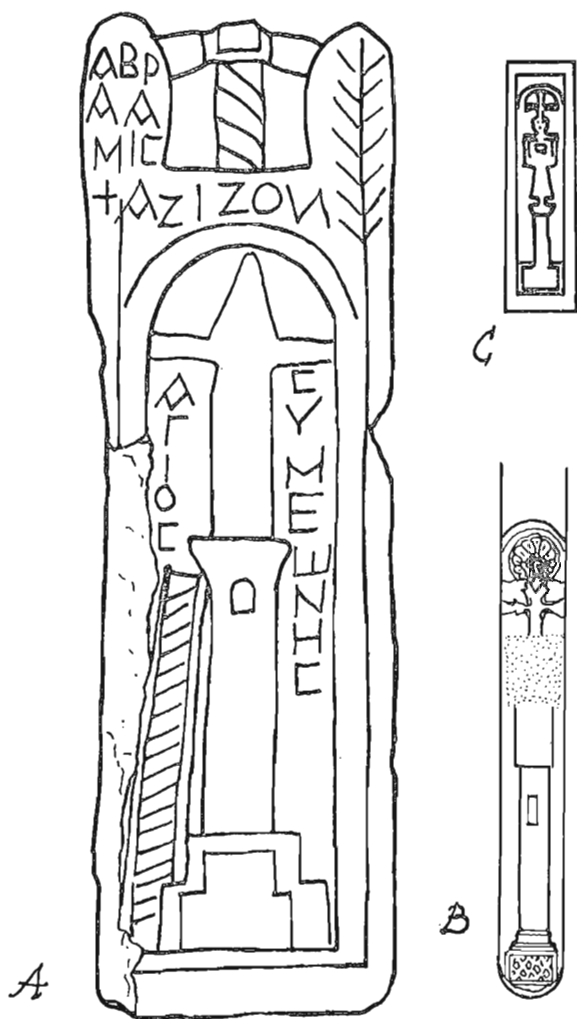


Fig. 10: *The Stylite and the Cross.*

- (a) Stele of St. Simeon in Louvre (after Elbern, fig. 3).
- (b) Chancel post from Qunbus (after H. C. Butler, *Early Churches in Syria*, ill. 285).
- (c) Relief from Facade of Church at Qalb Lozeh (after Elbern, fig. 5).

Distributes life to men.”⁷⁸

“Our Saviour typified his body in the tree.”⁷⁹

“The altar signifies to us Emmanuel himself, who is the Tree of Life. The bread and wine . . . are the fruits of the Tree of Life.”⁸⁰

In that land where the traditions of Tammuz, Adonis, Attis mingled; where Dionysos Dendrites was known, there was no reluctance to understand the suffering of the saviour on the cross in terms of the dying god whose death brings renewed life figured in the Sacred Tree.⁸¹ The men who knew Simeon on his pillar, who knew of the Pillar Climber and rites at Hierapolis knew when the power who served and saved mankind from the tree was incarnate. On the facade of the church at Qalb Lozeh they showed in clear correspondence the figure of the Saviour Saint and the Cross of the *Salvator Mundi* each set on a pillar⁸² (v. Fig. 11).

Symbols at all times mean all things to all men.⁸³ However, there can be little doubt that the majority of the local commons understood these signs in their plain and natural meaning—as proclaiming that the Stylite and the Crucified were figures of the one type and of similar efficacy. The one a manifestation of the *genius loci*, the other the expression of the type in a more ecumenical tradition. Identification between such representatives

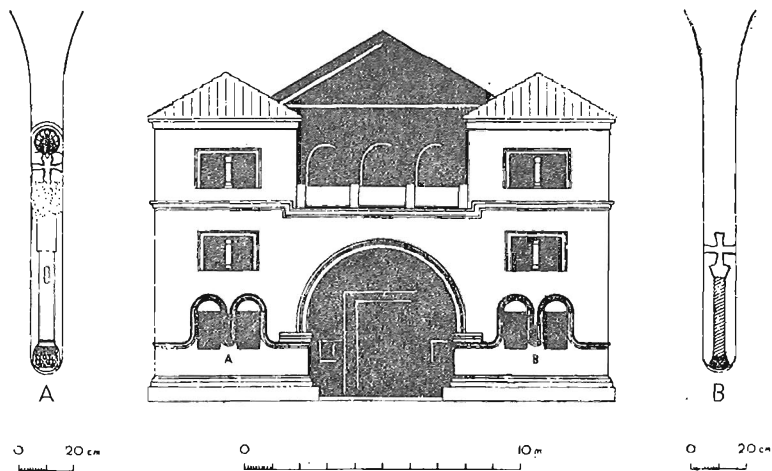


Fig. 11: Facade of Church at Qalb Lozeh showing opposed figure of Stylite and Crucifix mounted on column (after Tchalenko, figs. 13-15).

is common throughout religious history. Certainly a century after the saint's death his column was venerated locally in a manner which left little doubt as to his direct association with the primordial life-giving figure in and of the tree. When Evagrius (the Pausanius of Early Christianity) visited the site (c. 580 A.D.) "he specifically noted that the peasants of the neighbourhood would dance round the pillar and compass it about with their beasts of burden to ensure good luck (i.e., increase, fertility)."⁸⁴

* * * *

The foregoing remarks have been directed towards graven images but it may be permissible to clarify their import by brief concluding reference to the written word. The saint was reasonably served by his biographers and a close study of the themes they present would be most rewarding.⁸⁵ A few superficial observations must suffice here.

Simeon Stylites was a mighty spiritual hero and that he was 'heroised' biographically is obvious—it is the manner which is revealing. Naturally in the beginning he was a 'Good Shepherd'.⁸⁶ Next in view of the close mythological association of the God of the reborn vegetation and the solar power, it is not surprising that (according to the Syriac Life) he had a brother, Shamsi (= Shamash, the Solar God).⁸⁷ When, however, it is reported that Simeon's mother searched for him for 20 years and eventually found him identified with a pillar,⁸⁸ surely we (and the biographer) have heard this story before—and we are not far from the hall of the King of Byblos.

Again the occasions on which the saint chose to work wonder are of great interest. Mention has been made already of the commendable fellow feeling he evidenced in this connection for serpents (e.g., healing the help-mate of one, and releasing another from the constraint laid on it by a hasty priest). One serpent is expressly said to have coiled about his column, thereby exactly reproducing the 'nehushtan' symbol of Christ⁸⁹ (v. Fig. 12).

Of equal note is a quite other circumstance. The saint was invoked by those in peril on the sea; and he confessed himself assiduous in saving lives at sea. On one occasion he kept his congregation waiting for some time while engaged afar-off in this task.⁹⁰ (Subsequently he courteously informed them of the reason for his apparent inattention.) In this connection is it not possible to recall that the '*Semeion*' at Hierapolis was specially charged with the journey to the 'Sea' (the Euphrates) to obtain holy water.⁹¹ The explanation for this activity was as follows. The *Semeion* was identified by some with Sisythos (Deukalion in the Greek version). Sisythos (the Xisithros of Berossus) was the Babylonian flood hero, who saved all manner of living things

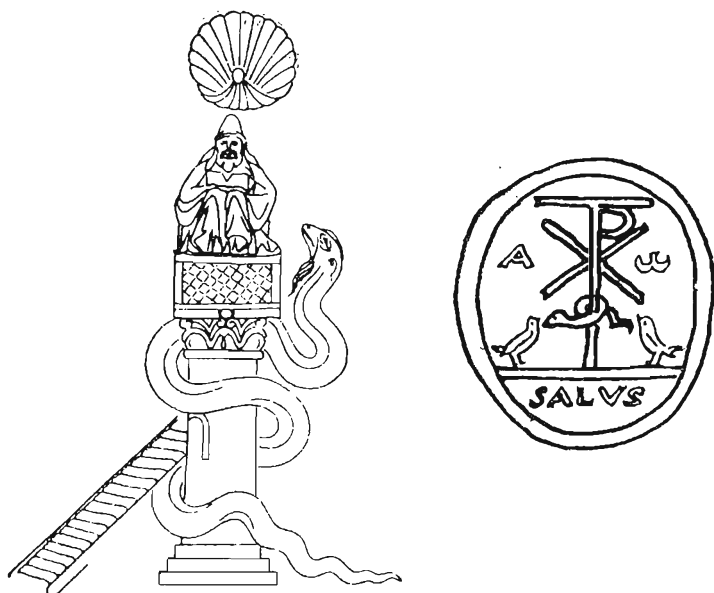


Fig. 12: *The Serpent and the Tree of the Cross.*

(left) Stylite with Serpent from a silver reliquary, c. 600 A.D. (after Tchalenko, fig. 18, c.f., Elbern, fig. 10).

(right) Early Christian gem showing Cross monogram and serpent (after Didron & Durand, *Manuel d'Iconographie Chrétienne*, Paris, 1845).

from the watery consequences of men's evil deeds. The waters were abated by discharge into a chasm and above the site of the chasm the hero raised his altar and founded the Temple. The chasm (in token) remained accessible beneath the Temple and into it was poured the holy water of commemoration.⁹²

Perhaps these latter remarks serve to establish some consonance between the literary and the pictorial evidence concerning the heritage of the Stylites. Perhaps in all something has been shown of this heritage. Much more remains to be noted. The study must end as it began—in *medias res*.

St. Simeon took his station at a nodal point in the Ancient East, in a region where the Near and Middle East coalesced, marking a stage on an arterial route to the Further East. The Heritage of the Stylites was thus central in the basic religious tradition of this world. Specifically, all the cultural influences effective on Judeo-Christendom had been experienced equally

validly and directly in this region. Hierapolis-Aleppo Antioch stood in no distant awe of Jerusalem—nor in any distant misunderstanding thereof. The languages spoken or heard by St. Simeon were those that formed Christianity.

In point of time, likewise, St. Simeon's experience was nodal. The Christian religion in its plenitude was unassailable. Nonetheless in certain locations, as at Hierapolis, the age old traditions were still maintained within the fabric of civilised life and culture. They had not yet been relegated to the shame-faced, inarticulate folk consciousness. Soon after St. Simeon's witnessing (c. 530 A.D.) there was a Christian Stylite established in the sacred city.⁹³ At this time Indians, Phoenecians, Skyths, Greeks and Anatolians still foregathered there to celebrate religious festivals.⁹⁴

To separate out, trace and clarify all the spiritual impulses so indicated demands a work of encyclopaediac scope in the nature of those classics of the beginning of the century. Iconography alone was the proper concern of these remarks, and it inspires a valediction in the middle of the road. The fellows of St. Simeon had an undoubted genius for stark religious imagery. When the Stylite was no more seen on the crown of his pillar, they left the ladder set up on earth and the top of it reaching towards heaven; so that men might say: "Surely the Lord is in this place."

NOTES

1. v. G. R. H. Wright, *Simeon's Ancestors* in *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology* Vol. 1, 1968. For convenience *De Dea Syria* is referred to as by Lucian. The author expressly states that he was born at Samosata but doubts as to the authenticity have frequently been expressed. The study does not appear to have that edge of style and wit proper to Lucian. Explanations for this have been provided by supposing it to be a work of Lucian's youth—or ascribing to it a specious (destructive) naïveté.
2. c.f., e.g., A.-J. Festugière, *Les Moines de Syrie in Antioche Païenne et Chrétienne*, Paris, 1959.
 Coche de la Ferté, *Aquisitions Récentes in La Revue de la Louvre* XI, 1961, 2, pp. 75-84.
 J. Leroy, *L'Icone de stylites de Deir Balamend in Mélanges de l'Université St. Joseph XXXVIII*, 15, 1962, pp. 331-358.
 W. F. Vollbach, *Zur Ikonographie des Styliten Symeon der Jünger in Tortulae*, 1966, pp. 293-299.
 V. H. Elbern, *Eine Frühchristliche Reliefdarstellung des alteren Symeon Stylites in J.D.A.I.*, 80, 1965, pp. 280-304: *Hic Scs Symeon in Cahiers Archéologiques XVI*, 1966, pp. 23-38.
 Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Recherches sur le Monastère et sur l'Iconographie de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune*, Brussels, 1967.

3. c.f., e.g., J. Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, 1852 (v. p. 132, Anchor Edition, 1969).
Th. Nöldecke, *Sketches from Eastern History* (English Translation), 1892 (v. pp. 210, ff, Hayyat Edition, Beirut, 1963).
4. The records give variously 388-390; likewise his death 459-60—and dates are seldom reduced from differing calendrical systems. The most convenient collation of the hagiographical records is now to be found in Festugière *op. cit.*, c.f., also P. Peeters, S. Syméon et ses Premiers Biographes in *Analectia Bollandia* 1934, pp. 29-71. H. Delehaye, *Les Saintes Stylites* (*Subsidia Hagiographica* 14) 1923 gives the essential information concerning the saint and the movement he initiated; likewise, in brief, H. Leclercq's article on the Stylites in *Dictionnaire de l'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* XV, 2 Cols, 1697 ff.
5. *non tantum mente et cogitatione sed corpore.*
6. Commanded by the Emperor Zeno in the years 476-490 at the instance of St. Daniel Stylites.
7. Leclercq *loc. cit.* (col 1701) records that it was first deposited in the Kassianos Church and translated after one month. A disastrous earthquake of the previous year having ruined the City Walls, the Antiochenes turned to Simeon while living for protection and continued to repose their trust in his mortal remains. For *post obit* details v. *Dictionnaire I*, 2 cols. 2380-1; also G. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria*, Princeton, 1961, pp. 479 ff.
8. Did Christian understanding come to invest Simeon with the rôle of the famous Tyche of Antioch?
9. For a general outline of the Stylites v. Delehaye; Leclercq. It was instinctively realised that this form of devotion was not appropriate to Western Christianity. For the abortive history of the would-be Stylite of Gaul v. Leclercq cols. 1708-9.
10. v. J. Lassus, *Inventory Archéologique de la Région au Nord-Est de Hama in Documents d'Études Orientales*, Institut Français de Damas IV, 1935 (p. 153 ff, fig. 155).
11. v. J. Lassus, *Images de Stylites in Bulletin d'Études Orientales Institut Français de Damas II*, 1932, pp. 67-82 (v. pl. xxi).
12. v. J. Lassus, *Sanctuaires Chrétiens de Syrie*, Paris, 1947, pp. 277 ff, fig. 106.
13. c.f., Lassus, *Images*, p. 77.
14. v. V. H. Elbern, *Eine Frühchristliche Reliefdarstellung des Alteren Symeon Stylites in J.D.A.I.* 80, 1965, pp. 280-304.
15. I am indebted to Mme Duchesne-Guillemine for procuring me a photograph of this object. N.B. Doubts as to its genuine antiquity have been expressed to me, but my first-hand observations were not sufficient to permit judging this issue.
16. c.f., Elbern, *Reliefdarstellung*, p. 304.
17. For the Stylites' domestic circumstances v. Delehaye, pp. 151 ff.
18. v. Lassus, *Sanctuaires*, pp. 279, 287.
19. That the crowning spike or pinnacle shown is to be understood only as a tongue of flame (Acts II 3) is not fully apparent. Elbern has questioned this interpretation (*Reliefdarstellung*, p. 290), and there remain interesting possibilities worth consideration.
20. This vessel (characteristic of the scene) has been variously considered a chalice for the Eucharist or a pot of victuals. It is probably a censer (v. Elbern, *Reliefdarstellung*, pp. 300 ff).

21. Owing to the fortunes of war the stele is now in the British Museum. It was captured on the High Seas in 1914 and sold by a Naval Prize Court, v. M. von Oppenheim, Tell Halaf, Leipzig 1931, p. 149. A convenient photograph (and description) is given in H. Danthine *Le Palmier Dattier et Les Arbres Sacrés*, Paris 1937, v. pp. 116-7 and Album, fig. 1128. The stele is also published in D. G. Hogarth *Kings of the Hittites*, London, 1926, fig. 50, p. 53; and by E. Herzfeld in *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* II No. 3, 1934, pp. 63-4.
22. The artificial fecundation of the sacred (palm) tree in the religious art of the Ancient East is a vast and complex theme. An outline with illustrations and references is contained in H. Danthine, *Le Palmier Dattier et Les Arbres Sacrés*, Paris, 1937, v. pp. 20-21 and 111-121.
23. A ladder to approach a height of 60' would seem to require considerable engineering. For the possible arrangements serving the Younger St. Simeon at Mont Admirable v. Lafontaine Dosogne *op. cit.*, pp. 99 ff, fig. 52.
24. The temporal hiatus of a millennium has been duly emphasised. To bridge this might be possible with specific research. However, since the comparison is adduced solely for introductory purposes, the likeness may be allowed to speak for itself, remaining subject to the criticism of temporal discontinuity. The details of iconography subsequently considered may tend to reduce the force of this objection.
25. v. Coche de la Ferté in *La Revue du Louvre* II 1961, pp. 75 ff; *Elbern Reliefdarstellung*, p. 202.
26. For other appearances of the snake v. (for convenience) *Elbern Reliefdarstellung*, fig. 4, a basalt relief from Damascus; fig. 10, a silver reliquary, fig. 11 (an ampulla).
27. v. H. Seyrig, *Inscriptions Grecques*, Appendix II, pp. 2-44; in G. Tchalenko *Villages Antiques de la Syrie du Nord* III, Paris, 1950.
28. *ibid.*, p. 18 (c.f. Jalabert & Mouterde, *Inscriptions Grecques et Latines de la Syrie* II, Paris, 1939, No. 278).
29. *ibid.*
30. *ibid.*
31. v. E. D. van Buren, *Symbols of the Gods in Mesopotamian Art*, Rome, 1945, pp. 14-20.
32. Spades of this sort are normal excavation tools in North Western Iran, and it is recorded that the name survives in Kurdish.
33. v. e.g., S. Langdon, *Semitic Mythology*, Boston, 1931, pp. 155-56.
34. c.f., E.D. van Buren, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
35. v. Seyrig in Tchalenko, *Villages Antiques de la Syrie du Nord*, pp. 17 ff.
36. A most touching version shows the saint approached by a devoted male serpent whose faith is such that his ailing consort is healed by the saint in *absentia*. v. *Greek Life* I 125 (*Festugière*, p. 503). Convenient references to the original sources for these miracles can be found in *Festugière*, pp. 347 ff.
37. The literature on the Ancient Middle Eastern background to the story in Genesis is extensive, c.f. (for convenience) Langdon, *Semitic Mythology*, p. 178. The same association is marked from Scandinavia (*Nidhhöggr* about *Yggdrasil*) to the Nagas of India.
38. As with Aaron's (Moses') rod. Tammuz, the god of the Sacred Tree, was at times identified as USHUMGAL, the great serpent. (v. S. Langdon, *Tammuz and Ishtar*, Oxford, 1914, p. 114; N. Perrot, *Les Représentations de l'Arbre Sacré*, Paris, 1937, p. 13; also v. pp. 30 ff.)

This question is widely explored by P. Toscare, *Etude sur le Serpent in Memoires Delegation en Perse XII* (Paris, 1912), pp. 153-228, valuable for its illustrations.

39. c.f., the classic work with this title by Goblet d'Alviella.
40. A brief resumé can be found in the most recent general study, G. Goossens, *Hierapolis de Syrie*, Louvain, 1943.
41. v. *ibid. pass* and especially at pp. 33-51.
42. Concerning the origins and nature, etymological and otherwise, of the Goddess v. (for convenience) *ibid.*, pp. 57-64.
43. v. *ibid.*, p. 65.
44. This position has been controverted recently v. H. Seyrig, *Les Dieux de Hierapolis in Syria XXVII*, 1960, pp. 233-252. c.f., Note 48 *infra*.
45. c.f. (for convenience), Goossens *op. cit.*, pp. 39; 43.
46. c.f. (for convenience), *ibid.*, pp. 36, 136.
47. c.f. (for convenience), *ibid.*, pp. 36, 39, 40, 41.
48. c.f. (for convenience), *ibid.*, pp. 46, 56, 68, 191.
49. v. Lucian *de Dea Syria* 33. An English translation with notes is available, Strong & Garstang, *The Syrian Goddess*, London, 1913. There is also a version done in archaic English to match the Ionic dialect employed in the original, v. Loeb Edition, vol. IV, pp. 337, ff.
50. c.f., Goossens, p. 66.
51. Conveniently published in Cook Zeus, Vol. 1, Cambridge, 1914, p. 586, figs. 448, 449.
52. v. Lucian 33.

This fact has attracted much comment which can be found summarised in Goossens, pp. 67-8, and more fully in Ingholdt, *Parthian Sculpture from Hatra*, pp. 17 ff, in *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Sciences XII*, 1954. There are broadly speaking two interpretations:

(1) that the native word used referred to the deity symbolised by the 'standard';

(2) that the word referred to the 'standard' itself.

The greater number of commentators, not finding a Semitic word or a homophonic synonym of *semeion* have invoked the deity *simi/simea/simios* (connected with the cult of Atagartis in Askalon, v. Diodoros Siculos II 4, and known in North Syria, v. Goossens, pp. 67-8 and Ingholt, pp. 20-22, also Roscher's *Lexikon fur Mythologie IV*, cols. 660-62). However, more recently, epigraphic evidence has been adduced of *sima siman simyon* in Aramaic usage as a semantic equivalent for *semeion*. This could be in origin a borrowing from the Greek word, but as well may be derived from a Semitic root SYM which gave SAM (to place) in Hebrew and biblical Aramaic, v. A. Cagnot. *Note sur le Semeion in Syria XXXII*, 1955, pp. 59-69. Such an interpretation may rule the deity *simi*, etc., out of court. However, it does not seem *de rigueur* to proceed from this position (that the native word applied to the 'standard' meant exactly standard") to a consequent position that the standard or *signum* did not stand for or signify a separate deity (c.f., H. Seyrig, *Les Dieux de Hierapolis in Syria XXXVII*, 1960, p. 251).

53. c.f., Lucian, 16, 28, 33.
54. For a cursory *mise en scène* of Dionysos (*Dendrites, Endendros*) in this connection v. E. O. James, *The Tree of Life*, Leiden, 1966, p. 234. ". . . he was primarily the divinity of the tree of life and trees in general." Not only were his masks hung on trees and posts, but also on columns on which occasion he was designated as Dionysos

Stylos (c.f. Daremburg Saglio, Dictionnaire des Antiquités, Paris, 1877, at vol. II, p. 626.)

55. v. Lucian 28.
56. c.f., e.g., Robertson Smith, Religion of the Semites, New York Edition, 1951, 1, pp. 457 ff; Sir John Evans, Tree and Pillar Cults in J.H.S., 1901, pp. 99-203. The matter is reviewed by Goossens, p. 111.
57. Certainly two phalloi were erected at the entrance to the Temple of Atagartis in the not far distant town of Dura Europos. This took place in A.D. 34 as we are informed by an inscription. (v. Comptes Rendus Académie des Inscriptions, 1951, p. 204; M. R. Rostovtzeff, Dura Europos and Its Art, Oxford, 1958, p. 142, n. 24.) Also a marble phallus was discovered in the Temple of the Syrian Goddess on Delos, v. P. Roussel, Délos Colonie Athénienne, Paris, 1916, p. 269.
58. v. Lucian 28-9.
59. This question was considered by M. Toutain, La Légende de Saint Simeon Stylite et ses Origines Païennes in Revue de l'histoire des Religions, 1912, pp. 171 ff. Passing note of this brief *mise-en-scène* is taken by Delchaye, Leclercq and Festugière in their works cited as references for the life of the saint (v. note 4 *supra*). Their remarks in this connection, however, add nothing to the understanding of the issue.
60. v. Th. Nöldecke, Sketches from Eastern History, English translation 1892 (p. 214 in Hayyat Edition, Beirut, 1963).
61. v. Saturnalia Convivia I 17.
62. c.f., e.g., Jacob of Sarrug, The Fall of Irolos, 45, 59; Addai, Doctrine, pp. 23-25 (Phillips Edition).
Here mention should be made that in the neighbouring city Harran (with which Hierapolis had many connections) Paganism enjoyed its ultimate survival in the Eastern World, obtaining tolerance from Islam!
63. Philoxenos, Bishop of Hierapolis, represented the see at the Council of Nicaea in 325; while in 381 Theodotos (noted for his piety according to Theodoret) represented the see at the Council of Constantinople. (v. for convenience, Goossens, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-158).
64. v. J. Burckhardt, The Age of Constantine the Great, 1852 (in Anchor Books translation, 1949, p. 132).
65. v. Nöldecke *loc. cit.*
66. v. Genesis XXIX 33.
67. Particularly among the sanctified; c.f., the two Stylites and the St. Simeon associated with St. Sergius. The fact has been noted by Nöldecke v. *op. cit.*, p. 226. Naturally Hierapolitan tradition insisted that its evangelist was the apostle St. Simon the Zealote! v. Michael the Syrian, Chronicles I, p. 148; c.f., Goossens, p. 154.
68. c.f., Lucian 28.
69. c.f., *ibid.* 37.
70. v. (for convenience) Cook, Zeus I, p. 506, figs. 448, 9; c.f., note 47.
71. v. H. Seyrig, Les Dieux de Hiéropolis in Syria XXXVII, 1960, pp. 233-52.
72. v. Strong and Garstang, The Syrian Goddess, London, 1913, Frontispiece (No. 3) and p. 21 (coin published, Numismatic Chronicle, 1878, pl. VI, No. 3). A comparison between this coin and another published with it (No. 2) raises a very interesting possibility concerning the prehistory of the 'standard'. The latter coin (No. 2) shows the priest between two palm trunks a branch from each of which form a sort

of gable above him. He is tending or addressing himself to the left tree. At the base of the branches (or the top of the trunk) it is perhaps possible to discern rudimentary swellings which may represent the pendant branches of dates. On the coin here illustrated (No. 3) the schema is clearly the same. To the right of the priest, the object represented is a date palm with its inclined branch, but to the left (on the analogy of M. Seyrig's study) appears the 'standard'. Nonetheless above the standard rises a palm branch to form the gable. That is to say the head of the standard (in the form of a mask with a handle) may be in origin the pendant bunches of dates of the sacred tree. Certainly the attitude of the priest is consonant with a scene of artificial fecundation. This, of course, links the standard with all the symbolic speculation concerning the origin of the volutes to the Ionian and Corinthian Capitals (c.f., the works of Weigand, Puchstein and Andrae). The doubling of the head in the seals is perfectly congruous in this analysis.

73. v. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chapter XXXVII.
74. c.f., the appraisal of V. Elbern *Hic Scs Symeon in Cahiers Archaeologiques XVI*, Paris, 1966, p. 31.
75. v. for convenience, M. Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des Religions*, Paris, 1949, pp. 253-255.
76. And the famous mosaic of the Cross in the Lateran (of perhaps Constantinian origin) echoes the cross with a palm tree (of life) surmounted by a phoenix (Christ).
77. v. *Sancti Ephraemi Syri Hymni*, col. 769, 2.
78. v. *Ibid.*, col. 115-18.
79. v. R. H. Connolly & H. W. Codrington, *Two Commentaries on the Jacobite Liturgy*, 1913, p. 17.
80. The similarity between the rites (and the date) of the Easter Festival and those of the old dying gods was marked. Early there occurred acrimonious disputes between Christian and Pagan as to the true proprietary interest in such similar manifestations. c.f. (for convenience), Sir J. Faser, *The Golden Bough*, Adonis, Osiris, London, 1919, p. 306. Also C. Vellay, *Le Culte et les Fêtes d'Adonis-Thammuz*, Paris, 1904 (chap. 4, *Les Survivances*).
81. v. H. C. Butler, *Early Churches in Syria*, Princeton, 1929, p. 246; c.f., *Lassus Sanctuaires*, p. 279, pl. XLVI.
82. A Grabar (*Martyrion II*, Paris, 1946, p. 51, note 3) links the figure of the saint praying with extended arms (as on an invisible cross) to a long iconographic tradition originating in Palestine. He suggests for it a devout spiritual significance, i.e., the presence and help of Christ. At Qalb Lozeh the Saint and the Crucified are expressed separately and equally. Nor is there advantage in invoking mystic ideas (c.f., *The Imitation of Christ*). No figure could be more antithetic than Simeon to his possible fellow countryman the pseudo Dionysius Areopagite.
83. v. G. R. H. Wright, *Simeon's Ancestors in The Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology*, 1958, p. 48.
84. For texts of the lives of St. Simeon v. H. Lietzman, *Das Leben der Heiligen Symeon Stylites*, Leipzig, 1908 (together with the material collected and summarised in *Festugière loc. cit.*).
85. v. *Syriac Life 2* (c.f., Tammuz who was at the same time the God of the Sacred Tree and a Good Shepherd, v. N. Perrot, *Les Représentations de l'Arbre Sacré*, Paris, 1951, p. 12).
86. v. *Syriac Life 11*. For the connections between the Sacred Tree and the God Shamash v. Danthine, *Le Palmier-Dattier*, pp. 161-2.

87. v. Greek Life 14.
 88. v. e.g., Greek Life 19. 25; c.f., Nöldecke *loc. cit.*, p. 221.
 89. c.f., St. Ambrose, *De Spiritu Sancti* iii 9 "Imago enim crucis aereus serpens est: qui proprius erat typus corporis Christi. . . ."
 90. c.f., Nöldecke *loc. cit.*, pp. 221-2.
 91. v. Lucian 33.
 92. v. Lucian 12, 13, 48.
 93. v. John Moschus *Pratum Spirit* 36; c.f., Goossens, p. 178.
 94. v. Procopius of Gaza quoted Pauly Wissowa *supp.* IV, col. 736.
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