



Fresco of Julius Terentius Performing a Sacrifice, Dura Europos

temple_of_bel_fresco.jpg



[1]

Original Location/Place: North wall of the pronaos of the Temple of Bel, Dura Europos (Syria).

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Inventory number: 1931.386.

Date: 239 CE

Material: Fresco on plaster.

Measurements:

Height: 107 cm

Width: 165 cm

Description: Wall painting on plaster found on the lower register of the northern wall of the *pronaos* (porch) of the so-called Temple of the Palmyrene Gods (Temple of Bel) in Dura Europos, Syria. The subject of the painting is a Roman sacrifice, which is being performed by a Roman tribune who is named by a painted inscription in Latin as Julius Terentius. He stands just to the right of the centre of the scene, facing forwards but with both feet turned left and in profile. He pours incense into a *thymiaterion* (??) with his right hand, and his left rests on a sword hilt. To his right, the soldiers of his unit are depicted in two rows, and to his left is a standard-bearer. Behind Terentius is a man identified in Greek as a priest, who observes Terentius making the sacrifice. On the left side of Terentius are those to whom the sacrifice is offered; three figures stand on round pedestals, indicating that they are statues, wearing the military dress of a cuirass over a short tunic. Each holds a spear in their raised right hands, and a small, round shield in their left. Beneath these three figures are the personified Fortunes of Dura and Palmyra, whose names are written alongside them, and who are both modelled on the statue of the Fortune (*Tyché*) of Antioch (Perkins, *The Art of Dura Europos*, p. 43-44).

Commentary: This well-known wall painting was discovered in the so-called Temple of the Palmyrene Gods, in the north-west corner of the city walls of Dura Europos. It has, since its discovery in the early twentieth century, divided scholars with regards to which deities the Roman figure named in the painting is sacrificing to. It is either a scene showing the worship of Palmyrene gods, indicating the continued observance of local religious ritual amongst a frontier community of the empire, or the figures represent statues of Roman emperors, meaning that the mural depicts the participation of the Roman military in the imperial cult (Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities and Civilians*, p. 143-144). Both readings offer an interesting image of how religious activity in the Roman world was both understood and tolerated by mixed communities of native inhabitants, the central administration and the different ethnic groups that made up the Roman army units.

The so-called Temple of the Palmyrene Gods (sometimes described as the Temple of Bel) developed from the first century CE, initially as a small structure, which grew into a larger complex with several subdivisions of rooms. By the third century CE, which coincides with the date of the fresco, the temple had become part of the military camp that had transformed the northern section of the city, and which was inhabited by a particular cohort of Palmyrene soldiers, the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* (Kaizer, "A note on the fresco of Iulius Terentius," p. 151; for discussion of the origin and history of the *cohors*, see Kennedy, "The *cohors XX Palmyrenorum*," p. 89-98. For more detailed discussion of the temple and its paintings, see Cumont, *Fouilles de Doura Europos*, esp. p. 41-145). The painting is found on a small panel on the north wall of the *pronaos*, and although it has suffered some weathering and damage, the main scene can still be discerned with reasonable certainty. The figure of a Roman tribune stands just to the right of the centre, in the process of performing a ritual sacrifice with oil; his identity is known from a Latin inscription that accompanies him, which names his as "Julius Terentius, tribune" (*Iul(ius) Teren(tius) trib(unus)*). The same Julius Terentius is known from a private house in block G7 of the city, in which a Greek metrical funerary inscription reveals that he was the commander of the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* in c. 239 CE, and that he died in



battle (see Dirven, *Palmyrenes of Dura Europos*, p. 303, n. 414). He leads the sacrifice with his soldiers and standard-bearer, who carries the traditional *vexillum* (military standard) stood to his right, but attention has focused largely on the figures that he is sacrificing to, on the left of the scene. Here, three figures stand on circular pedestals, indicating that they are statues, wearing military dress including the *cuirass*, short tunic and long boots, with right arms raised to hold a spear and almost in the stance of *contrapposto*, with their weight shifted to one side (Perkins, *The Art of Dura Europos*, p. 44; Cumont, *Fouilles de Doura Europos*, p. 99-100). Behind each of their heads is a nimbus, indicating their divinity. It was assumed by most scholars, following Franz Cumont's initial reading, that these figures represented Palmyrene gods, and particularly the "Palmyrene triad" of Iarhibol, Aglibol and Malakhbel, or perhaps some other constellation that originated from Palmyra (Cumont, *Fouilles de Doura Europa*, p. 102-103). More recently, Lucinda Dirven has noted that graffiti scratched into the wall near the fresco also named these three gods, and proposed that their actual statues may have been placed in the small aedicula of the *naos* that was also constructed in the third century CE (Dirven, *Palmyrenes in Dura Europos*, p. 186-187). The personified Fortunes of both Palmyra and Dura are also depicted in the painting, and identified with inscriptions, indicating both the affinity felt by the soldiers for their adopted home and their on-going connection to the place from which they came.

The worship of Palmyrene deities by Palmyrene soldiers stationed in Dura is interesting in light of the discovery of a third century papyrus, the *Feriale Duranum*, in what appeared to be the archive room of the *cohors*, which contained a list of religious rituals to be performed on specific dates in the Roman calendar; the rituals were identical to those also known to have been performed in Rome, indicating that there was a standardised form of religious practice across the empire, with rituals performed on the same dates by the different units of the military. These religious festivals therefore acted to unify the different groups that made up the Roman army, linking their various ethnicities and origins through the proclamation of loyalty to the emperor, and which prioritised the traditional deities and festivals of the capital city over local celebrations (for further detail, see *Feriale Duranum*). If the wall-painting does indeed depict Palmyrene deities, then it would emphasise the wide range of religious rituals practised by the inhabitants of Dura, including the Roman soldiers in their capacity as private citizens; although the *Feriale Duranum* certainly appears to have formed the basis of an official, or institutional series of offerings, evidence for the worship of non-Roman deities by a group so closely connected to the central administration, such as an army unit, demonstrates that the papyrus cannot be used as evidence for the regulation of private religion.

However, in an influential article Thomas Pekáry argued that the three figures to whom Julius Terentius is sacrificing are, in fact, statues of Roman emperors; he noted the "official" nature of the sacrifice, arguing that the worship of local gods would more likely take place in a less conspicuous setting, such as within a private house rather than the porch of a large temple, and that the military dress in which they are clothed casts them clearly in the role of *Imperator*. He suggested that the three figures were therefore statues of Pupienus, Balbinus and Gordian III, who briefly shared power in 238 CE (for this argument, see Pekáry, "Das Opfer vor dem Kaiserbild," p. 91-103. For the reign of Pupienus, Balbinus and Gordian III see Herodian, *History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus*, VII.5-6; Drinkwater, "Maximinus to Diocletian and the crisis," p. 33). If this interpretation is correct, then the sacrifice being offered in the painting is one to the imperial cult, and more specifically a *supplicatio* ("supplication") as described numerous times throughout the *Feriale Duranum* as suitable offerings on the birthdays and in memory of members of the imperial household. As Thomas Pekáry rightly noted, the poor preservation of the fresco has made it difficult to identify iconographic attributes specific to the Palmyrene deities in the statue-figures; in particular he questioned whether or not a crescent-moon shape can be seen on the left-hand statue, which might be used to identify him as Aglibol, concluding that it could not, and thereby dismissing the previous identification of the three figures as the 'Palmyrene Triad' of Iarhibol, Aglibol and Malakhbel (Pekáry, "Das Opfer vor dem Kaiserbild," p. 91-103). Following new photography of the fresco, however, Ted Kaizer has recently identified part of a crescent shape still visible on the left shoulder of the figure, reigniting the debate that these are indeed Palmyrene deities, but stopping short of identifying all three precisely; he rather notes that "there simply was not one single 'official Palmyrene triad' to be worshipped" and that it was perfectly plausible for them to appear in different "constellations" according to personal preference or the nature of the space in which they appeared (Kaizer, "A note on the fresco of Iulius Terentius," p. 151-159, esp. p. 154).

Regardless of whether or not the fresco depicts a sacrifice to Palmyrene gods or to the Roman imperial cult, it is clear that in the 3rd century CE Dura Europos was a thriving centre of religious activity; from the "corporate observance" of traditional Roman ritual illustrated by the instructions of the *Feriale Duranum* to the multitude of private religious dedications visible in the archaeological record, which included indigenous gods as well as those imported from other parts of the empire, such as Mithras and the Palmyrene deities, these varying "aspects of religious practice coexisted peacefully" (Dirven, *Palmyrenes in Dura-Europos*, p. 184).

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