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ALLĀT AND THE DESERT “KULTLANDSCHAFT” OF ALLĀT IN THE EAST

Abstract: This paper offers an approach to the worship of Allāt through the concept of the geography of religions and ritual landscape. It combines the epigraphic, archaeological and geographical evidence to present the goddess as the protectress of the borderland with a focus on the rocky deserts and drylands. For the first time it offers a study not through the “Arabic”, ethnic, approach, but through the topography of the sacred places dedicated to the goddess. The paper focuses on the emplacement of the temples of Allāt in Palmyra, Salkhad, Wadi Ramm and Hatra as well as on the location of the Northern Arabian inscriptions (Safaitic and Dadanitic) on the rocks. The paper emphasizes the role of the desert in the perception of the divine.

Keywords: *Desert; geography; religion; Near East; Allat; Syria.*

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Numerous ancient sanctuaries of various gods distance themselves from the rest of the urban landscapes with the walls of sacred precincts and with a special architecture. They present the boundaries between civic and sacred life. They are the most visible testimonies of human intervention upon a once-undifferentiated natural environment, bringing cultural, social and sacred meanings into it.¹ The sanctuaries are an example of the re-creation of a geographical space by humans and dedication of a specific physical place to the higher powers.² The rituals and worship take place in a defined space, using not only built structures, but also making use of natural environments and the geography of the terrain.³ Polytheistic systems seem to interplay with geospatial localizations. Some deities are worshipped on the tops of the mountains, some have their dwelling in springs. Numerous Safaitic graffiti mention deities and the sacrifices which take place in the open space in the desert.⁴

This paper offers a new insight into the sanctuaries dedicated to Allāt and their socio-geographical locations and focuses on the archaeology of the cult of this goddess. It concerns the sanctuaries in Palmyra, Hatra, Şalkhad and Wadi Ramm (Fig. 1), identified by epigraphic sources related to the cult of the goddess. It also investigates the geographic and topographic contexts of Northern Arabian inscriptions (e.g. Safaitic and Dadanitic) which mention Allāt.

¹ ANSCHUETZ/WILSHUSEN/SCHIECK 2001, 160–162.

² For shaping religious space see recently RÜPKE 2020, 47–50.

³ MOSER/FELDMAN 2014, 1.

⁴ MACDONALD 2010, 15–16; MACDONALD 2015, 22–24; AL-JALLAD 2022, 5–7.

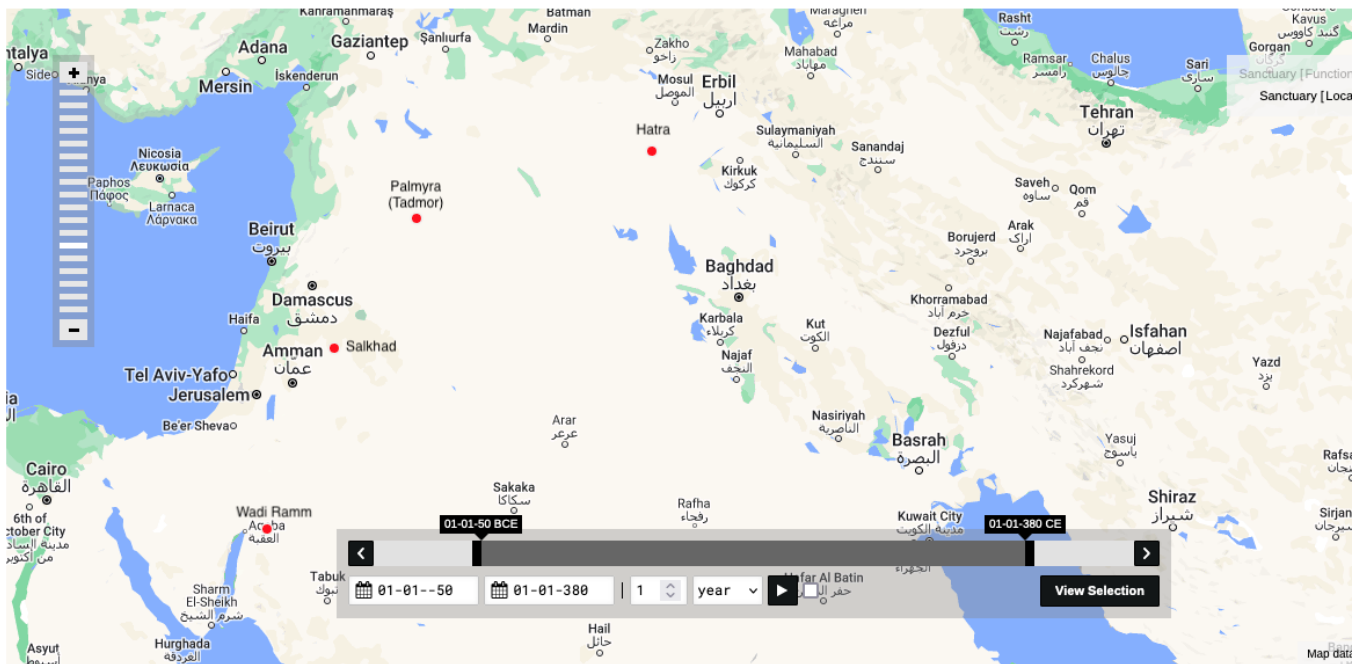


Fig. 1. Map of the region with the temples of Allat (NodeGoat database of Al-At project, A. Kubiak-Schneider)

Tab. 1. Geo-coordinates of the places of worship of Allāt mentioned in the article (according to Pleiades⁵).

Place name	Latitude	Longitude
1. Palmyra	34.5549196337	38.2616638405
2. Salkhad	32.491336	36.712059
3. Wadi Ramm	29.573154	35.430265
4. Hatra	35.587884	42.718342
5. Al-Ula	26.612692	37.922841
6. Ta'if	21.27	40.416
7. Dura-Europos	34.7493491633	40.731185381

The temples dedicated to Athena in the Hauran are not included in this study, having no explicit reference to Allāt.⁶

Referring to the German term “Kultlandschaft”, a term meaning the “landscape or topography of cult”, this article focuses on the relation between cult and the physical geography of the cultic areas dedicated to Allāt. The expression, borrowed from the geography of religions, highlights an approach towards the goddess through the lens of the landscape as an element which permits us to understand divine competences without having theological texts, as in the case of the goddess Allāt.

The goal of this paper is to propose a link between the goddess and the localization of the temples at the crossroads between the drylands and the mountains. Allāt will be studied as the goddess of the borderland, emphasizing the role that

the desert and rougher land play in the perception of this particular female deity. The iconographic attributes, such as male lions, gazelles and camels, will be set in connection to the dryland zones. This paper attempts to be a voice in the discussion on the correlation between topography, nature and sacred places in Antiquity.⁷

CULTIC AREAS DEDICATED TO ALLĀT

Palmyra

At the foot of the hill called Jebel al-Husayniyet, on the north-western edge of the ancient city of Palmyra, a Polish archaeological mission discovered a sanctuary dedicated to Allāt (Fig. 2).⁸

On the slopes of the hill, some funerary caves were cut; on the opposite slope of the Jebel there is a necropolis, and around the area of the temple a funerary structure can be found, a so-called “temple-tomb”.⁹ This place was originally located on the border of the city, away from the settled area.

The size of the sanctuary is not very impressive in comparison to other temples, such as that of Nabu or even Ba'alshamin in Palmyra. The cella itself is 7 m wide and 3 m long, with 1 m thick walls. It is oriented towards the south-west, pointing towards the monumental temple of Bel situated in eastern Palmyra. The room was small and hosted a statue. The first temple contained only a cella, built probably in the mid-1st century BCE, and architectural changes were made in the 2nd century CE. In the epigraphic record, the Aramaic term *hamānā* describes the sacred space. M. Gawlikowski proposed the definition of this type of building as enclosing a niche and a statue, comparable to the constructions on firm ground made by nomadic people

⁵ <https://pleiades.stoa.org> (accessed on 20.11.2023).
⁶ For the inscriptions marking the temples of Athena in this Syrian region see SOURDEL 1952 and recently IGLS 16.1–3. For the vagueness of the definitive interpretation of the Greek gods without the Semitic inscriptions see SARTRE 2019, 34. See also MAZZILLI 2019.

⁷ For the important attempts in this matter see HAUSSLER/CHIAI 2020.
⁸ GAWLIKOWSKI 2017; KUBIAK-SCHNEIDER 2019.
⁹ GAWLIKOWSKI 2017, 15.



Fig. 2. Temple of Allāt within the Diocletian Camp (A. Kubiak-Schneider)

to protect their deities. This explanation corresponds well with the archaeology of the temple. It contained only a small chamber, whose size strongly limited the access inside. It enclosed a niche, traditionally adorned with eagles, which hosted a non-preserved cultic statue placed on a socle at the back of the chamber.¹⁰ The architectural phases of the temple of Allāt show the evolution of the sacred place from a small chapel situated at the edge of the city, at the borderland with the steppe, to a major sacred place in the urban plan, becoming one of the four civic sanctuaries. The localization of this sacred place, far away from the center of the city and probably placed originally *extra muros*, should not be surprising: it was close to the dryland, and area of pastoral livestock grazing, accessible without getting into the city.¹¹

The temple was under the administration of the members of a tribe or an association known as Bene Maʿzīn, “the sons of the goat-herders”. M. Gawlikowski suggested the nomadic and Arabic origins of the association.¹² The temenos created from the 1st century to the 2nd century CE

¹⁰ KUBIAK-SCHNEIDER 2019; GAWLIKOWSKI 2017, *inscr.* 2, p. 237.

¹¹ Even in the first decade of the 20th century, before the civil war in Syria, in this area one could hear sheep and the Bedouin families living in the close neighbourhood of the area where the Palmyrene temple of Allāt is located. Furthermore, it was a shorter distance from the Damascus Gate to the temple of Allāt than to the temple of Bel or the Agora.

¹² GAWLIKOWSKI 2017, 196. The Aramaic *bny*, similarly to the Hebrew *bn* and Arabic *banū*, can be translated literally “the sons of”, pointing out a tribal affiliation, but it also has a meaning of “members of...” when referring to a religious association. See *Bēnē Kōmarē* in Palmyra which is rather an association of priests.

was expanded with columned porticoes which served to display honorific statues of the benefactors of the temple as well as prominent figures of Palmyrene society. The scholarship on Palmyra counts this temple among the four civic sanctuaries.¹³ One of the honorands of the temple of Allāt was Shoʿadū, son of Bōliada, the famous caravan leader, organizer of the caravan to Vologesias and savior of the trading campaign from desert pirates under the leadership of ʿAbdallāt, the citizen of a village near modern Hit.¹⁴

The social situation of the people visiting the temple of Allāt in Palmyra is ethnically rather homogenous; the honorands and dedicators are Palmyrenes, as implied by their onomastics and genealogical affiliations. The majority of the epigraphic material from the temple of the goddess is written in the local dialect and script of Aramaic.

Northern Arabian (rock) inscriptions

Besides Aramaic (and five examples of Greek and Aramaic bilinguals from the temple itself¹⁵), the temple also provided three Safaitic inscriptions, which mention only personal names and do not contain any direct reference to the goddess.¹⁶ However, the texts from Jordanian harrāh and Southern Syria concern the successful travels to and from Palmyra.¹⁷ We can imagine such a situation that when these people arrived to Palmyra, some of them might have left their graffiti in the temple of Allāt. 44% of the Safaitic inscriptions are related to Allāt – Lat (written in the texts as *lt*).¹⁸ Allāt – Lat is thus the most important deity for the people who left these inscriptions.¹⁹ She is mentioned in prayers for protection and peace but also in curses and pleas for revenge.²⁰ Thus, they are witnesses to transcultural religious exchange and the mobility of people and deities. 10 Safaitic inscriptions were also found beyond Palmyra and the temple of Allāt.²¹ Texts in this Northern Arabian script from the mountains of the North-West Palmyrena, the territory adjacent to Palmyra, mention Allāt.²² Two texts mention Allāt in the context of grazing flocks and journeys.²³ Beside this evidence concerning Palmyrena, other Safaitic

¹³ Beside the temple of Arsu, the non-localized temple of Atargatis and the temple in the divine garden, see KAIZER 2002, 153–154.

¹⁴ YON 2002, 145–146; GAWLIKOWSKI 2017, 266–267, *inscr.* 36; IGLS 17.127. Text is dated in 144 CE.

¹⁵ The bilinguals from the temple of Allāt are: GAWLIKOWSKI 2017, nos. 3, 20, 31, 33, 36. The texts in two languages, Greek and Aramaic, were never issued by the administrative organ (Boule and Demos) of Palmyra. They represent rather the individual choice to publish the content in these two languages.

¹⁶ Beside these three inscriptions from the temple of Allāt from Palmyra, there are seven more Safaitic texts found around Palmyra. See below. For the Safaitic inscriptions from the temple of Allāt see GAWLIKOWSKI 2017, no 40–42, pp. 270–272. (Edited by M. Macdonald).

¹⁷ Ociana database C663: http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0003868.html , C1649: http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0004854.html and LP 717: http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/corpus/pages/OCIANA_0009301.html. Both C663 and LP 717 have an invocation for protection of the goddess al-Lat.

¹⁸ AL-JALLAD 2022, 56. For Safaitic and the definition of the script see MACDONALD 1993.

¹⁹ MACDONALD 2022, 34.

²⁰ AL-JALLAD 2022; ROCHE 2009.

²¹ See MEYER 2020, 258.

²² MEYER 2020, 258, nos 4 and 7.

²³ MEYER 2020, 259.

texts mention Allāt in the pleas for the protection of flocks and from the robbery raids, as well as in the curses for blinding anyone who destroys carvings. These inscriptions do not come from monumental architecture or from elaborate stelae or altars but were carved on rocks, accompanied sometimes by images of people and animals, usually camels and oryxes. None of the “Safaitic” inscriptions mentions any cultic specialist of the goddess. Hence, it is impossible to trace an Allāt sanctuary in the context of the people writing the Safaitic texts, but the written material shows the individual devotion and the high rank of the goddess in the religious mindset of the authors of these short prayers.

Beside Safaitic sources, she is invoked in other Northern Arabian epigraphic sources already from the 6th century BCE, known as “Thamudic” inscriptions,²⁴ including Dadanitic, Hismaitic, and even in Qatabanic (Southern Arabian) texts.²⁵ The references in Thamudic and Dadanitic are the oldest, giving an insight into the situation before the 1st century BCE concerning the worship of Allāt in the southern parts of the Near East. Dadan (modern al-Ula) was located at an oasis on the important incense trade route. The Dadanitic inscriptions and graffiti are attested there and in the vicinity of Tayma, about 150 km from al-Ula.²⁶ In the Dadanitic occurrences, we find references to cultic personnel like the *afkal* of the goddess Allāt and his servants. These epigraphic attestations are enough to suggest the formal cult of the goddess with the involvement of priests and cultic officials, most probably within a structure, although a temple of Allāt has not yet been discovered in al-Ula.²⁷

Ṣalkhad

The Safaitic inscriptions are numerous not far east of Ṣalkhad, a village located in the southern Syrian region of Hauran, about 20 km east of Bosra. The sanctuary of Allāt confirmed by the epigraphic material from this site comes from a similar timespan to the temple of Allāt in Palmyra. Ṣalkhad is located in the middle of the site of a hill emerging from the surrounding plain.²⁸ As the temple was built on the top of this elevation, P. Alpass classifies this sanctuary as one of the “high places” known from the Nabatean contexts.²⁹ Unfortunately, the only remains of the sanctuary are loose blocks with decoration, stylistically similar to that of the temple of Baalshamin near Si'.³⁰ From the non-preserved temple comes also a Corinthian capital. The epigraphic material in Nabatean Aramaic confirms the existence of a temple of Allāt. An inscription dated 56/57 CE (CIS II 182) explicitly records the building of the temple and founding of the cult of the goddess at this place:

*dnh byt' dy bnh rwḥw br mlkw br 'klbw br rwḥw l'lt 'lthm
dy bšlḥd wdy nšb rwḥw br qšyw 'm rwḥw dnh 'l'
byrh 'b šnt 'šr wšb' lmlkw mlk nbṭw br ḥrtt mlk nbṭw
rh[m] 'mh.*

Translation: This is the temple (lit. house) which Rawḥū, son of Malkū, son of Aklabū, son of Rawḥū built for Allāt, their goddess who is in Ṣalkhad, and which Rawḥū, son of Qasiū, the grandfather of this above Rawḥū set up. In the month of Ab, the 17th year of Malichus, king of Nabateans, son of Aretas (IV), king of Nabateans who loves his people. (ca. 56/57 CE).³¹

The dating, according to the rule of the Nabatean kings, shows that this area was under Nabatean control and that the temple was built by Rawḥū during the reign of Malichus II (40–70 CE). Dating by the Nabatean rulers here in Ṣalkhad shows us the importance of the village as the cultic center of one of the main Nabatean deities worshipped at the northern edge of the kingdom.³²

The inscription also shows that the cult of Allāt in Ṣalkhad was introduced in the mid-1st cent. BCE, which Sourdel said might be linked with the king Aretas III – who conquered the Hauran.³³ Here, similarly to the Palmyrene context, one family was in charge of the administration of the temple. The quoted inscription and another one from 93 CE clearly refer to the family of Qasiū, a member of which rebuilt the temple of Allāt less than 50 years later. The same family was responsible for the cult of the goddess in another Hauran village, Hebran.³⁴ The sanctuary in Ṣalkhad was of great importance in this micro-region, probably being visited by the people of nearby Bosra, one of the capitals situated on the northern margins of the Nabatean kingdom.

Wadi Rāmm

In Wadi Rāmm, a place known from the inscriptions as Iram and located on the important trade route leading to the south and to the Red Sea, a sanctuary dedicated to Allāt was discovered. The situation and construction of the sanctuary present many similarities to Palmyra. A first analogy to Palmyra is the chronology of both sanctuaries. The cultic centre in Wadi Rāmm was built in the 1st century BCE and went through some re-buildings and amendments from the early 1st century CE until the early 2nd century CE.³⁵ This was the period when the village was under Nabatean dominion. The second parallel is architectural. The naos, chapel, is also of small dimensions (4 x 5 m), designed to host only a *betyl* of the goddess, and the entrance is opened on the eastern side (Fig. 3). The temenos contained columns

²⁴ KRONE 1992, 88; WENNING 2013, 337–338.

²⁵ MuB 522. CSAI I, 16 see: <http://dasi.cnr.it/index.php?id=30&prjId=1&corId=0&colId=0&navId=628339827&re-clId=5054&mark=05054%2C003%2C006> (opened on 19.09.2023).

²⁶ KOOTSTRA 2023, 31–32.

²⁷ KRONE 1992, 97–98.

²⁸ ALPASS 2013, 194.

²⁹ ALPASS 2013, 68.

³⁰ ALPASS 2013, 194; MAZZILLI 2019, 184.

³¹ See CIS II 182; new edition: ALPASS 2013, 194; HEALEY 2001, 109; MAZZILLI 2019, 184–185. Translation by the author.

³² ALPASS 2013, 181.

³³ SOURDEL 1952, 70.

³⁴ CIS II 170 (text mentions Malkū, son of Qasiū, the priest, kmr², of Allāt), dated 47 CE; HEALEY 2001, 109; ALPASS 2013, 195; MAZZILLI 2019, 170.

³⁵ THOLBECQ 1998, 243.

and in front of the naos were four columns, as in Palmyra.³⁶ The third similarity is based on the administration in the hands of the tribal affiliations. An inscription states that the temple, named here as “house” - *bēt*, was built by a man from the ‘Ad tribe.³⁷ Fourthly, both temples are located on the edge of the settlement. The temple in Wadi Rāmm was situated at the edge, not in the center, of the habitation area, at the foot of the local mountain, Jebel Rāmm.³⁸



Fig. 3. Temple of Allāt in Wadi Rāmm (M. Gunter, CC-BY SA0 Wikicommons)

A particularity of the temple in Iram is the presence of an open-air sanctuary beside the well, Ain esh-Shāllalā, situated a small distance from the settlements on the opposite side. In both areas, 14 inscriptions mentioning Allāt (mostly in the vicinity of the spring) were found written either on a man-made object or on the rock wall towering over the place. Among these texts was an inscription which associated the place, Iram (ʿRM), with the cult of Allāt. Judging by the diversity of languages and scripts in both places, which were definitely connected, the sanctuary was visited by representatives of many cultures (texts in Minaic, Latin, and Greek), although the majority belongs to the Nabatean epigraphic record.³⁹ Among the people mentioned, we find craftsmen, surely working on the decoration of the temple (sculptors, plasterers), cultic specialists – *afkals* and their servants, a link to the ritual agents mentioned in the Dadanitic inscriptions, and the Nabataean king Rabbēl II, pointing to the role of the Nabataeans in the administration of the sacred areas and their presence in this place.⁴⁰

Hatra

Another archaeologically and epigraphically confirmed sacred space of Allāt is located in Hatra. The distance from Wadi Rāmm is enormous, about 1070 km in a direct line. The temple in Hatra is the northernmost attested temple of this goddess and, like the other places studied

here, was and is surrounded by arid territory. The location of the sanctuary within the city is significant, as it is placed not among the small shrines but within the Great Temenos, the central cultic area of Hatra.⁴¹ The temple of Allāt in Hatra is chronologically the latest temple of this goddess.

Many inscriptions (seven of a total of 24) found in the temple of Allāt in Hatra refer to royal activity mentioning Sanatruq I and his successor Abdsamīa. Moreover, the kings are also depicted in the iconographic material as sacrificing in front of the goddess.⁴² The inclusion of the temple of Allāt in the area of the Great Temenos is connected to the official introduction of the cult ca. 150 CE by the Hatrene king Sanatruq I.⁴³ He gained the title “king of Arab” (*mlk ʿrbʿ*),⁴⁴ which can be related to the introduction of this new divine figure in the official cult. The inscriptions and iconographic sources attest temple personnel like a priest (*kmrʿ*), an administrator (*rbyʿtʿ*), and possibly an incantation priest (*ʿddy*).⁴⁵ The plan of the sanctuary definitely does not match the other temples discussed in this paper. The temple itself contains the *iwāns* oriented to the east and a small room at the southern part of the building, the entrance to which was from the side of the one of the *iwāns*.⁴⁶ This architecture bears similarities to the local Hatrene sanctuaries rather than to the temples in Palmyra or Wadi Rāmm.

ALLĀT AND THE DESERT

The temples with their precincts are the most visible signs of the imprint of religions on the landscape, yet the sacred space can be situated beyond the walls of the sanctuaries. This is most visible in the numerous Safaitic inscriptions in the desert: by writing prayers and divine names on rocks, people awarded a notion of sacredness to the outside territory.

In the light of the cult of Allāt seen through the lenses of the geography of religions, which deals with religions in their human and physical settings and the interactions of religions with the landscape seen as a product of culture⁴⁷, we consider the relation of Allāt’s places of worship with the edges of settled areas like Palmyra and Wadi Rāmm. The places of worship are situated explicitly at the borders of the settlements. The topographic set-ups of the temples and the Arabian rock inscriptions are related to the drylands, a large arid area characterized by limited precipitation and seasonal, steppe vegetation (low grasses, bushes, etc.). In the more local Palmyrene context, the goddess also shows herself on the border near the special place of the dead, her temple being in close vicinity to the Valley of the Tombs, temple-

⁴¹ FOIETTA 2018, 362.

⁴² DIRVEN 2022, 9.

⁴³ Inscription H367 mentions the king Sanatruq I as the constructor of the temple. Numbering the inscriptions of Hatra follows the system applied by AGGOULA 1991 and BEYER 1998.

⁴⁴ The title either *mlk ʿrbʿ* or *rbyʿt ʿrbʿ* does not appear earlier than mid-2nd century CE. A similar title is attested in Edessa from the same period (about 165 CE). It should be seen as the outcome of some, unknown otherwise, political events in Hatra and Edessa and adjacent territories. For the question of Arabs in this region see MACDONALD 2015, 34–44.

⁴⁵ JAKUBIAK 2014, 37. See also labels H384 of a relief presenting a religious ceremony with throning and veiled Allāt.

⁴⁶ JAKUBIAK 2014, 34; see also DIRVEN 2022, 8.

⁴⁷ PARK 2004, 18–19; KNAPP/ASHMORE 1999.

³⁶ THOLBECQ 1998, 243–246.

³⁷ ZAYADINE/FARÈS-DRAPEAU 1998, 256–257.

³⁸ RIEGER 2017, 18.

³⁹ RIEGER 2017, 20.

⁴⁰ RIEGER 2017, 20.

tombs and the grottos in the adjacent hill. The temples of Allāt in Palmyra and Wadi Rāmm and mentioned in the North Arabian inscriptions present a correlation with the terrain, since they are placed by the mountains and rocks.

From the available evidence, there is never a hazardous or random choice in the location of a cultic center. A sanctuary, a locale of worship, needs to have connections to ritual arrangements as well as the perception of the deity, his/her theology and competences, and the religious traditions of the place itself.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the people shape the landscape, adapting it along with their culture and religions. The sacred places are fitted in to be part of the environmental backgrounds.

The issue of the impact of landscape on the socio-cultural and religious aspects of life and the spatialization of religions have lately been a research topic in archaeology and religion.⁴⁹ The case of the cult of Allāt resounds with the natural topography: rocks, deserts, mountains, dryland zones. The places presented above are in the marginal zones between the desert and cultivated areas, except in the case of most of the Safaitic inscriptions, which are exclusively in the desert. The set-ups of the Northern Arabian rock inscriptions and the large quantity of religious texts suggest that the concept of mountains and rocks as something sacred was central, especially when we encounter curses warning against the destruction of the engraved texts.⁵⁰ This is more than the simple graffito, it is a material and visual sign of the mobility of the people. The inscription is left in the sacred area, dedicated and surveyed by the gods, the domain of the goddess Allāt, who is mostly invoked in those texts. Clearly, the constructed temple with splendid features and elaborated architecture was not always needed, when people had at their disposal the natural “Kultlandschaft”.

Landscapes are dynamic cultural products that people shape through their activities, beliefs, concepts and system of values, giving them special meanings.⁵¹ The concept of the rocks and mountains in the religious practices and understanding of these places as sacred also influenced the way the goddess was represented among the pre-Islamic Arabian people (including the Nabateans). The images in Wadi Rāmm carved on the rock wall between the temple and the spring provide her image as a stone with eyes and mouth, a sort of *betyl*. Islamic historian Ibn al-Kalbi wrote in the “Book of Idols” that Allāt was worshipped in pre-Islamic Ta’if in the form of cubic stone.⁵² Interestingly, the inscriptions

from Šalkhad attest that the temple accommodated a sacred stone stele called in Nabatean Aramaic as *wgr*. It is not a simple aniconism, but this image reveals the real nature of the goddess Allāt as a rock. That would explain the many Safaitic prayers written to Allāt on the rocks in the *harrah*, with pleas for revenge in case of destruction of the rock inscription. This rock was the embodiment of the deity and not simply a taboo against anthropomorphic representation. The anthropomorphism of Allāt, as in Palmyra or Hatra, was an adaptation according to local cultural codes.

The method of geo-referencing worship presented in this paper provides a deeper understanding of the role of Allāt as the protectress of the borderlands and particularly the dryland rocky zones. Palmyra, placed at an oasis in the midst of the dry-steppe with hills and mountains,⁵³ Šalkhad in the center of the volcanic area of Jebel Hauran characterized by elevations of terrain, Wadi Rāmm in the Arabian Desert, also at an oasis, the topographical set-ups for the Safaitic texts, as well as the topography of the kingdom of Dadan and inscriptions in the Dadanitic language, all point to places connected through an essential system of roads and trade routes. People living there or only traversing these areas shared the same concepts and experiences of the drylands. The deserts or the dry-steppes are challenging territories, while the settlements are always located where there are springs or seasonal wadis which facilitate agriculture. The huge land area of the steppes and semi-deserts are used periodically for transhumant searching for pasture for goats, sheep and camels. The deserts and mountains constitute borders that are difficult to cross.

More generally, seen from a psychological perspective, stepping into the desert is akin to getting out of the comfort zone, crossing the particular border of something safe and protected to the vast and rough land.⁵⁴ The challenges of the arid areas are not only forced mobility in search of food for the flocks and herds but also dealing with “desert pirates”, robbers who menace the herders, travelers, traders and settlements. The passers-by through these huge land zones also needed to deal with wild nature and predatory animals, like lions. Stepping into this area, one needed extra protection.

The connections between the arid lands and Allāt are also present in the goddess’s iconography. Again, taking the example of Palmyra, the monumental relief of a lion stood at the gate to the sanctuary of Allāt (Fig.4).⁵⁵

Between his paws rests an *oryx leucoryx* antelope. Both animals, lion and the gazelle, are representative of the area, being typical animals for this geographic zone reaching as far south as the Arabian Peninsula. The Palmyrene lion does not harass the antelope but protects it. Beyond the royal and war ideology behind the image of lions in the visual arts in the Near East,⁵⁶ the connection of this animal to the steppe zone is undeniable, as the Asiatic lions were spotted until the 19th century in the area comprising Iraq, Syria, Iran,

⁴⁸ R. Raja makes a point over the adaptation of the sanctuaries to their localization in the urban space on the example of the temple of Bel in Palmyra. See RAJA 2022, 135.

⁴⁹ RIEGER 2020, 311; SZABÓ 2020, 77 – Physical geography is a component and agent of interaction place-ritual; ANSCHUETZ/WILSHUSEN/SCHIECK 2001; MAZZILLI 2023, 175 (Sacred landscape in the network thinking). For the terms see also HORSTER 2010, 435–436. Through her explanation of “religious landscape”, the same as “Kultlandschaft”, it seems this is the right approach to apply for the case of Allāt – as it refers from the rituals to the cultural perception and mythology of the worshipped deities: it is the real, physical place and space of the deity. For the same approach see TEBES 2020, 334.

⁵⁰ AL-JALLAD 2020, 56.

⁵¹ This is one of the four paradigms of landscape enunciated by ANSCHUETZ/WILSHUSEN/SCHIECK 2001, 160–161.

⁵² HEALEY 2001, 112; KRONE 1992, 187; ROBIN 2012, 10.

⁵³ For topography of Palmyra and Palmyrena see MEYER 2017 and MEYER 2020, 256–257.

⁵⁴ This is the subject of the environmental psychology, see UZZEL 1991.

⁵⁵ For the lion see GAWLIKOWSKI 2017, 95–96.

⁵⁶ See ULANOWSKI 2015 and the literature quoted within.



Fig. 4. Relief of Lion and Oryx from the Temple of Allāt in Palmyra (A. Kubiak-Schneider)

and Turkey. They became a recurrent motif in the visual arts, often in relation to goddesses (Ishtar, Atargatis, Kybele, Allāt, Artemis).⁵⁷ This animal also became the avatar of the wilderness. The images of oryxes appear, in addition to the Palmyrene example, in the context of the petroglyphs found in the Arabian Desert, left by the people who wrote the Safaitic inscriptions and by the Nabateans, most probably in a sacred context.⁵⁸

One animal connects the desert and Allāt: the camel. Camels appear in images from Hatra and from the petroglyphs in the Arabian desert.⁵⁹ The images of camels embody the crossing of the desert and the caravan trade in which the people from Palmyra, as well as Arabia, were specialists. These animals do not have to be the zoomorphic image of the goddess, as the Palmyrene tesserae also depict them in association with such gods as Bel and Azizu.

⁵⁷ The complexity of this representation in connection with the female deities was presented recently in a paper of R. WENNING and M.A. PERRY (2021); ULANOWSKI 2015, 271–272.

⁵⁸ NORRIS/AL-MANASER 2020, 439.

⁵⁹ An image of a camel is also attested in the temple of Bel in Palmyra. The animal bears a “palanquin” on its hunch and goes in a sort of a procession. The scene is interpreted by L. Dirven as the introduction of the cult of Allāt in Palmyra, see DIRVEN 1998, 109. However, looking at the entire context of all the reliefs from the frieze of the temple of Bel in Palmyra, it can be interpreted as a scene referring to the celebration of the New Year festival in the city. It could be connected to the travel of Bel or Nabu from the Euphrates or farther south to Palmyra through the desert.

CONCLUSION

Until now, scholars have described Allāt as the Arabian goddess *per se*. She was linked with the identity of the people who worshipped her, despite the fact that such a relation is not noted in the ancient inscriptions.⁶⁰ The definition of the “Arab” people in Antiquity is much more complex, as the studies of Greg Fisher and Michael Macdonald show.⁶¹ This paper presented the goddess Allāt from a different angle than the ethnic one. It approached the worship through geography, the factor which must have interacted with the perception of the deity. The conditions of the dryland were not easy and required extra protection against all obstacles and difficulties. They required a specialized deity whom the people on the move could address in this situation. She must have been the goddess of everyone who had to deal with the arid zones and their wild, unpredictable nature, rather than being connected to a particular ethnic identity. The people who wrote in the Northern Arabian scripts could have been the transmitters of the cult in farther places when trade and epigraphic culture flourished. Allāt can be seen as the goddess of the borderland, whose sanctuaries connected the settled areas with the traversing zones, mountains or hills, desert, and steppe. The presence of Allāt at the gateways of the desert or steppe has strong ties with the mobility and migrations of people through this vast and rough territory. The desert character of the goddess did not bring her fame or usefulness in other parts of the ancient world, like Rome or the Greek islands, regions that present different topographies and climates.⁶²

We do not yet have any direct archaeological or epigraphical testimony for the organized worship of this goddess at Dura-Europos. The conditions of this Mesopotamian city, such as its localization on the cliff towering over the Euphrates valley and at the gateway to the dry-steppe, its relations with Palmyra and Hatra, as well as the presence of the Safaitic inscriptions within the city, are a good environment for the worship of Allāt. Furthermore, the awareness of the goddess is marked in the onomastics by theophoric names containing “Allāt” attested in the local epigraphic sources.⁶³ Taking into account the observations about the topography of the cult of Allāt and her connections to border zones and desert or dry land in general, we can expect to discover one day a shrine or a temple dedicated to Allāt in Dura-Europos.

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⁶⁰ We know the Theos Arabikos, who is a masculine divinity. See KUBIAK-SCHNEIDER/LICHTENBERGER 2022; ANDRADE 2022.

⁶¹ FISHER 2015, 4–8; MACDONALD 2015.

⁶² Only one text was found until now mentioning Allāt beyond her Syrian, Mesopotamian and Arabic context. It is an inscription discovered in Cordoba, see SEG 4:164 (<https://scholarlyeditions.brill.com/reader/urn:cts:greekDoc:seg.004-0164.sego:lem-ap/>). The dedication was surely established by a traveler from that part of the world.

⁶³ DUCHATEAU 2013, 406–408; GRASSI 2012.

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