

SIMEON'S ANCESTORS

(or THE SKELETON ON THE COLUMN)

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St. Simeon Stylites (who was the first of a succession of pillar saints, several of whom took his name) lived from A.D. 388-460. He was born in humble circumstances at Sisan, a village on the borders of Cilicia and Syria. While a boy he became a shepherd and throughout his life remained illiterate. At an early age, apparently when about 16, he with his brother embraced the religious life and joined a monastery where he created a disturbance by the excessive character of his austerities, some of them indeed of a very disgusting nature. These practices naturally seemed to his brethren a reproach against their own easier life. Therefore after bearing with him for nine years, they desired his expulsion, whereupon he made his way to another monastery. Later, about the year 413, he established himself in a cell near Antioch, where his austerities speedily attracted a number of followers who formed a kind of society called the Mandra (i.e., the Enclosure). Possibly this name was taken in consideration of the saint's current vocation for immuring himself. This form of austerity he practised between 413 and 423.

In 423 on an eminence above the modern village of Afrin, which lies on the way between Antioch and Aleppo, he built a low pillar, which he gradually raised or had raised, until in 430 he attained the height of 40 cubits (approx. 60 ft.). In this manner with his neck manacled by an iron he spent the last 30 years of his life engaged in perpetual adoration save when he condescended to bestow his advice concerning mundane matters. His extraordinary way of life made a great impression; large numbers of Arabians, Armenians and other pagans were converted by him, while emperors, bishops and pilgrims from the most distant lands, even Spain and Britain, consulted him most reverently. Doubtlessly these were attracted by more than novelty, but the novelty of the saint's life was specifically emphasised—"for without an example it has since set an example" (*quia sine nullo exemplo in exemplum potius proposita ceteris est*).

Great crowds assembled as the day of his death approached (Sept. 2nd, 459). Against the earnest wishes of his brethren and fellows, his body was taken to Antioch (with much pomp). Later (in 468) the Antiochenes piteously implored the Emperor Leo not to carry out his intentions of removing the relic to Constan-

tinople reminding him that it was their only defence (their walls having been sapped by earthquake).

One hundred and twenty years after the saint's death, a pious visitor, Evagrius, described the appearance of Simeon's relics, and a visit which he (Evagrius) paid to the monastery which had grown about the locality of the saint's holy life. The pillar was then (c. 580 A.D.) enclosed in a cruciform church. The saint's body was undecayed and demonstrated him to have been of great stature.¹

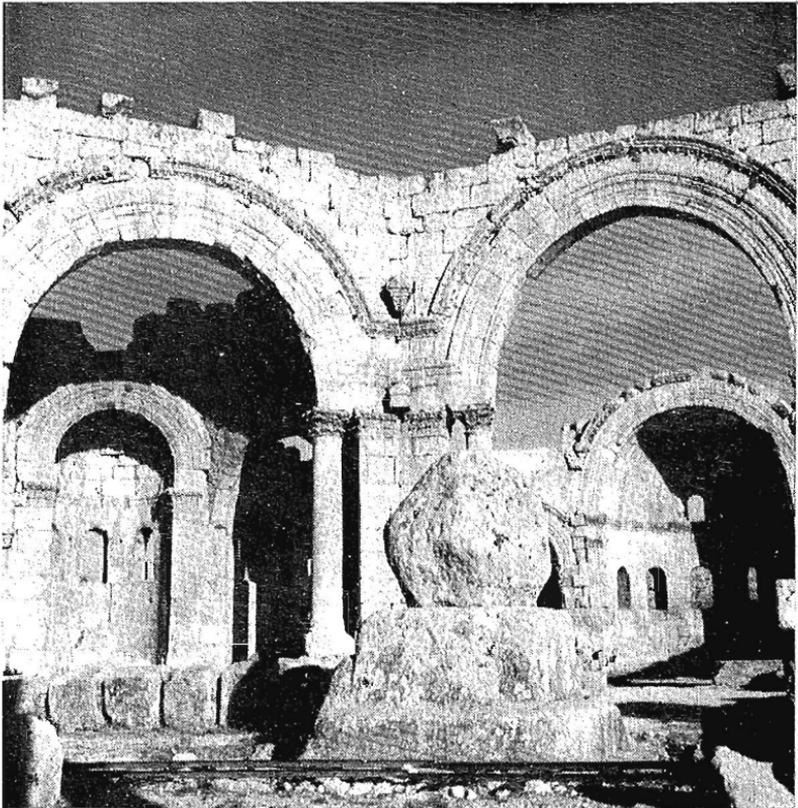


Fig. 1: The remnants of St. Simeon Pillar enclose in the 5th Century Church. Showing here the restorations effected by the department of antiquities of Syria.

1. This account makes no pretension to critical scholarship and is paraphrased from standard hagiographical sources. The church or Martyrion was built by the Emperor Zeno (constructed 476-490) at the instance of St. Daniel Stylites (a successor of Simeon who followed his vocation at Constantinople).

The remains of the monastery were identified on the ground as the present Qalat Seman in the middle of the last century by de Vogüé. After the Great War the French Antiquities Service made archaeological investigations in the area and commenced the reconstruction of the commemorative church. This work has been carried forward in recent years on an increasing scale by the Syrian Department of Antiquities (v. fig. I).

From these and kindred activities a considerable amount of corroborative detail concerning the *modus vivendi* of a Stylites has been obtained.



Fig. 2: Local Graffito of the Sixth Century showing St. Simeon on column with attendant.

(Lassus fig 106)

St. Simeon's column was set on a base surrounded by a chancel. The recovered drums give a total height of 8.80 m. with a diameter diminishing to something less than a metre. Although no capital has been found it has been assumed that it would be some form of Corinthian. In point of fact, however, there never was any capital in the conventional sense to St. Simeon's column. To his many striking capacities, it is doubtful that the saint professed to add that of equitation. He did not stand, sit or lie on the top of a

Corinthian capital, with no privacy and in continual jeopardy.^{1a} The crowning of his column was in the form of an oversailing block hollowed out like a box, the hollowing extending down into the column shaft itself, in which open air cubicle the saint dwelt. Around the parapet of this cubicle was probably a balustrade over which the saint's bust appeared to the assembly below, giving (appropriately enough) a general impression of an elevated pulpit. On a level with the bottom of the internal cutting a small aperture in the shaft expressed the sanitary conveniences, with corresponding drainage arrangements at the foot of the column. The saint's few requirements on the world below² were tended him by means of a ladder set against the column.³ (c.f. fig. 2).

From these remarks it may be seen that the archaeological evidence accords closely with the various accounts of the saint's devotional life. Now, if these accounts are examined with a view to an explanation of St. Simeon's vocation, the following essentials may be abstracted:

- (1) The place is North Syria.
- (2) The time is the first half of the fifth century.
- (3) The saint mounted and remained on top of a column.
- (4) To be nearer heaven (*non tantum mente et cogitatione, sed corpore*) to pray for the welfare of all Syria.
- (5) He became a pilgrim centre.
- (6) His acts were considered highly novel by visitors.

It is surely more than a coincidence that there is something apposite to be said on all these matters if the immediate pagan background to St. Simeon's activities is considered. In brief:

- (1) The place is in the same region a few days walk from Hierapolis (Membidj) the famous centre of worship of the "Dea Syria".⁴

1a. Contrary to the assertion of Gibon interpreting ancient sources, "Habit and exercise instructed him to maintain his dangerous situation without fear or giddyness, and successfully to assume the different postures of devotion." (v. Decline and Fall. Chapter XXXVI).

2. It is recorded that St. Simeon ate sparingly. In general once a week and not at all during the forty days of lent.

3. All this explanation is based on archaeological investigations which may be found in the standard work, "Les Sanctuaires de Syrie", Lassus, Paris, 1947.

4. The most convenient brief account of Hierapolis is to be found in Paully Wissowa, Supp. IV, Cols. 733 ff. The principal visitors of the site have been Maundrell (1699), Pococke (1737), Drummond (1747), Sachau (1879), Hogarth (1908); reference to whose accounts may be found in Paully Wissowa. They all agree in the paucity of ancient remains. In Maundrell's day the city walls were preserved; and "on the west side a deep pit of about 100 yards diameter" could be discerned partially filled with ruins but still containing water.

- (2) In St. Simeon's day there was a strong pagan survival in this area.⁵
- (3) Perhaps the most striking aspect of the cult of the Syrian goddess was the ascension of a pillar by a man who remained aloft for a considerable period of time.
- (4) The purpose of this was to be nearer the gods ("*corpore*") so that his prayers for the fertility of the land (Syria) might be the better heard.
- (5) By virtue of this cult Hierapolis was a Holy City and a centre of pilgrimage.
- (6) The novelty of St. Simeon's acts was in the eyes of strangers not of the indigenou.⁶

Perhaps in view of these recitals there does arise a presumption that St. Simeon may have been influenced in the choice of the manner of his austere devotions by the example of the principal pagan cult of his native land.

The cult of the Syrian goddess is one of the best attested in Antiquity principally because of the extant book on the subject by Lucian (3rd century A.D.) who was a native of Samosata in the adjoining northerly province of Commagene. The following is a translation or paraphrase of the passages most relevant to the present study.

"In this propylaia (of the Temple at Hierapolis) stand two phalloi dedicated by Dionysos to his mother, Hera, and reaching to a height of 30 fathoms. Twice a year a man climbs up one of them and spends seven days on the top. The reason of this ascent is given as follows: the people believe that the man who is aloft holds converse with the gods and prays for good fortune for the whole of Syria and that the gods since he is near them hear his prayers . . ."⁷

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5. Pautly Wissowa specifically notes a panegyric of Procopius of Gaza on the Emperor Anastasius which mentions that at the beginning of the fifth century Indians, Phoenicians, Scythians, Greeks and people from Asia Minor still foregathered in Hierapolis to celebrate religious festivals.
 6. Note in this connection a very revealing story told by Evagrius, which begins as follows, "When Simeon, that angel upon earth, that citizen in the flesh of the heavenly Jerusalem (sic!) had devised his strange and hitherto unknown walk, the inhabitants of the holy desert (i.e., Nitrian desert) sent a person to him, charged with an injunction to render a reason of this singular behaviour, why abandoning the beaten path which the saints had trodden, he is pursuing another altogether unknown to mankind . . ." (i.e., they mean unknown to them).
 7. De Dea Syria 28, 29. A convenient translation with commentary of Lucian is to be found in "The Syrian Goddess", J. Garstang, London, 1913. The crucial matter is also dealt with in Vol. I, p. 591, of "Zeus", Cooke, Cambridge, 1914.

The cult of the Syrian goddess has been the subject of much study; however, some elementary remarks may be made about it here insofar as it seems relevant to the career of St. Simeon. It was undoubtedly a fertility cult. Atagartis-Derketo, the goddess by name, was related to Cybele, the Magna Mater, as her seat on the road from Anatolia to Syria might suggest. Moreover, common to both cults was the institution of emasculated priests or Galloi.⁸ There is no doubt that the cult was autochthonous; and recently iconographic material appearing on cylinder seals of the first half of the second millennium has been assembled to show that all the elements of the cult were well formed at that time.⁹

Lucian did not accept the popular aetiology quoted above for the ascent of the column, nor the alternative that the practice was commemorative of the flood. He proposed an explanation of his own and, so far as this is clear, it seems that in the essentials of his comparative religion Lucian was not far amiss. He says, "To me all this seems highly improbable, and I think that they observe this custom in honour of Dionysos and I conjecture this from the following fact, that all those who rear Phalloi to Dionysos take care to place mannikins of wood on the phalloi; the reason for this I cannot (will not) say, but it seems to me that the ascent is made in imitation of the wooden mannikins."

Lucian thus identified Dionysos with one of the personages of the cult at Hierapolis, and this on a strict comparative analysis of the cult's origins cannot be well sustained.¹⁰ Nonetheless, whatever may have been the original basis of the cult in prehistoric times, it seems by Lucian's day the Greeks popularly assumed the identification. Hence the inscription on the columns (presumably in Greek) referring to Dionysos.¹¹ In point of fact Dionysos, the god of reborn vegetation and fertility, he who came in triumph from the East, is the type of deity to be associated popularly with a great mother fertility cult. Although a very composite figure as he came into Greek religion, comprehending Phrygian and Thracian aspects, Dionysos was marked by several of the characteristic features of the fertility cults of Asia Minor. It therefore seems permissible to give serious attention to Lucian's remarks.

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8. According to the legend related by Lucian, the founder priest of the cult at Hierapolis emasculated himself.
 9. v. *Antiquités Syriennes* (H. Seyrig) in *Syria* XXXVII, 1960, p. 233 ff.
 10. The appearance of Dionysos would infer an original triad, Atagartis-Hera, Hadad-Zeus, Son-Dionysos. Recent research (e.g., Seyrig in "Les Dieux de Hierapolis", *Syria*, loc. cit.) seeks to refute this.
 11. cf. *De Dea Syria*, 16. "Further a pair of phalloi of great size are seen standing in the vestibule bearing the inscription, 'I, Dionysos dedicated these phalloi to my step-mother, Hera'".

The basis of Lucian's analysis is two-fold. He asserts a phallic significance for the two tall columns in the porch or vestibule of the temple, and he correlates the function of the man who ascends the column with the "Phallobates" (a marionette or "*neuospaste* — a small puppet figure with large genitalia set on a phallos in honor of Dionysos"). However, Lucian with regrettable mock modesty refrains from explaining why such puppets are set on phalloi, and hence, why in his opinion the man sits on the top of the tall column in the Temple of Hierapolis. This question merits some consideration.

It is unfortunate that the Phallobates is attested in literary sources alone, and not iconographically.¹² It might be thought that representations would occur in the repertoire of figured Attic pottery, however, this does not seem to be so. Silens riding and drawing phalloi are common enough and also woman cultivating phalloi,¹³ but these scenes are other in significance. In contrast to this both Herodotos¹⁴ and Plutarch¹⁵ refer to the puppets. They are recording the Egyptian feast of Pamylios¹⁶ which corresponds to the Greek Phallophoria, the latter in origin a magical fertility charm. Pamylios was a priapic god and the gist of the festival probably was to celebrate the re-erection of Osiris by Isis, again aetiologically a fertility rite.

It is to be noted that the references do not specify the mounting of the marionettes on phalloi, indeed Herodotos (II, 48) mentions that the figures are in substitution for the phalloi of the Greeks. However, both writers stress the identity of the Greek and Egyptian rites. This so impressed Herodotos that he sought to account for it by giving both rites a common origin in Phoenicia (v. II, 49) which may or may not have something to do with the present enquiry.

Considering the literary evidence concerning the *neuospaste* and associating with it the iconographic evidence concerning related activities with phalloi there is little doubt that the magical and ritual function of the phallos was to compel or ensure fertility and that the positioning of phallic puppets on a phallos was to intensify this function. The puppets were examples of "sympathetic" (and

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12. There was once an attempt to see a plastic Phallobates in a bronze statuette (v. "Ein Phallobates" in *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archaeologische Institut*, XXVII, 1912, p. 14). However, this seems on maturer consideration to have been identified as a Nubian street vender.
 13. A good collection of these scenes is to be found in Deubner, "Attische Feste". Darmstad, 1956.
 14. v. History II, 48, 49.
 15. v. de Iside 12.
 16. Plutarch specifically and Herodotos by inference.

even at the same time "homeopathic") magic. This is presumably the line Lucian's explanation follows and which he "would not say". Whether of course, it is correct one is another thing.

In assessing the feasibility of this explanation it is apparent that the basic factor is whether, in the eyes of the devotees of the cult, the pair of columns in the Temple at Hierapolis possessed a phallic significance. The phallic significance of columns which stood before the entrance to Semitic temples is a matter which has been adverted to in various connections. It is a contentious matter and certainly such a significance, if it existed, is manifestly not exclusive. As is well known, such pairs of columns existed elsewhere, e.g., in Solomon's temple at Jerusalem, in the Temple of the Punic Herakles at Tyre, and in that of the Great Goddess (she was only named Aphrodite at a late date) in Paphos. Robertson Smith in his classic work on the "Religion of the Semites" was inclined to deny such a significance to the generality of such columns and other holy pillars—and basically his view seems reasonable.¹⁷ However, it must be pointed out that it is not the possible phallic significance of the generalia of pillar cults or temple pillars which is at issue. The concern is with the significance of the column, *which a man climbed at Hierapolis*,¹⁸ and further the possible influence this had on the austerities of St. Simeon Stylites.

In seeking to establish a phallic background to this aspect of the cult at Hierapolis, there is available a most striking piece of evidence which concerns nothing other than the veneration of St. Simeon. This must now be related. Evagrius, that interested and observant visitor to Qalat Seman, described the saint's pillar and the church which enclosed it in his day, 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). That is, the saint's column, 100 years after his death, had become a "maypole". It was thus a cousin of the European Maypole which undoubtedly had its ancestors in that of the "Roman" rites of the Hilarion which were celebrated on the first of May. These rites, as is well known, have nothing "Roman" about them. They celebrate Cybele, the Magna Mater, and Attis the god of the dying and reviving vegeta-

17. For this question in general, v. "Religion of the Semites", Robertson Smith, New York, 1951, at p. 457 ff and Sir John Evans on "Tree and Pillar Cults" in *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 1907, pp. 99-203.

18. 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. *Compte Rendue, Academie des Inscriptions* 1937 p. 204).

tion. The Maypole, a pine tree, was brought from the wood of Cybele outside Rome and it represented the tree under which Attis was said in the myth to have killed himself by castration, though behind this may lie an earlier symbolism of Attis in a vegetation capacity as a sacred tree. Since the Syrian peasants danced about Simeon's column it seems possible that the column at Hierapolis had a similar connotation. In this event Lucian could be pardoned for seeing a Dionysiac (Bacchanalian) side to the ritual there, exactly as at the Roman Hilarion.

With these remarks a full circle has been drawn around Hierapolis and Qalat Seman. It seems that the cult of the Syrian goddess and her male paramour was neighbour in most respects to that of the Phrygian Great Mother. This being so it is not unreasonable to conjecture that in local consciousness (and perhaps in his own sub-conscious) St. Simeon's position on his pillar recalled an ancestral vegetation fertility god, and thus, whatever may have been the reaction of visitors, the spectacle was perfectly congruous in local eyes. A collateral descendant of the same ancestor would be the Green Man of Western Europe. Did any pilgrims to Qalat Seman from this quarter sense a relation?