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The ‘Gesture of Blessing’ in the Greco-Roman East

The gesture of the raised right hand with the palm turned outward is very ancient and persists until the present day. When excavating at Dura Europos, Franz Cumont described it as ‘ritual gesture of the ancient Semites’ [7, p. 70]; many scholars refer to it as the ‘gesture of blessing’¹. Lucinda Dirven defines: “The gesture is open to several interpretations, depending on the context in which it occurs. In a cultic context it undoubtedly had apotropaic connotations; when performed by gods, it symbolized guardianship and benediction; it signified worship or prayer, finally, when performed by mortals” [8, p. 237].

The gesture occurs on diverse artifacts of different size and material like sculptures, stone reliefs, clay plaques and figurines. Common features are the right arm bent up, positioned closely to the body and raised to the height of chest and shoulder in combination with a strict frontality². Geographically the artifacts are wide-spread in the Levant, the Parthian Empire, the Nabatean realm, Egypt and the Christian East and can be attributed to several ethnic, religious and social groups all living within the area of the Greco-Roman koine. The objects fall within the time-span from the Persian period until the early Byzantine period, suggesting a continuity of traditions and conceptions. Though a universal gesture of long standing the artefacts themselves rarely provide evidence for interpretation and conceptualization. Besides presenting a short overview of the relevant groups of finds a number of questions will be addressed. Is there a mutual influence, an exchange of ideas, an interaction of concepts? Are there cult beliefs and practices inherent in all presentations or are there local indigenous trends and expressions?

¹ The title is chosen for convenience, yet it is a simplification, since a variety of meanings must be considered.

² Not taken into consideration are a number of depictions with persons raising their right bent up arm to the height of the head or persons with the out-stretched right arm, for example the winged spirits in the Temple of Bel at Palmyra [6, fig. 22; 28, pl. 55], the relief of Abgal and Ashar in the Damascus National Museum with Abgal seated frontally on a horse in profile and out-stretching his right arm [6, fig. 43; 28, pl. 136], the sacrifice scene of the Roman tribune Terentius in the Temple of Bel at Dura [7, pl. L], the relief to Allat and Shamash found in a small rural sanctuary ca. 58 km northwest of Palmyra [6, fig. 39]. In addition, reliefs with persons raising their right hand in front of their chest with the back of the hand towards the spectator are not included, for example the stele of a priest from Umm el-Amed [19, ill. 15c], two steles of male figures from Assur, where the right hand is raised towards a crescent and star, the symbols of sun and moon [20, figs. 41–42].

Phoenicia

Among Phoenician terracottas, a number of figurines of standing females (Fig. 1) and males (Fig. 2) have their right arm raised to shoulder height, the palm turned outward. The female is identified with the fertility goddess Astarte Tanit [27, pp. 11–13]; on some figurines the ‘sign of Tanit’ is shown³ [17, pp. 184–185]. The relatively young male is identified with a blessing god [27, pp. 10–11]. Particularly frequent along the Phoenician coastal sites the figurines came to light in sanctuaries as *ex-votos* and in *favissae*, in cemeteries as grave offerings and in cargoes of sunken ships [19, pp. 208–209; 23, pp. 68–69, pl. 41.140–143]. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods priests wearing the kalathos and individuals are depicted on funerary steles [22, pp. 304, 588, No. 23], often identified by accompanying inscriptions, for example the stele of the priest Apollodotos from Tyre [24, pl. 3.1]. More than life-size bronze hands date to the Roman period, uniform and restricted to southern Lebanon, particularly to the Beqaa Valley, which were offered by the worshippers in temples dedicated to different deities [12; 4, p. 218].

Syria

Extremely rare and thus difficult to interpret are uncontextualized statuettes of two females sitting on a camel. Their interpretation as votive figurines of goddesses, here probably the city protectress, is based on literary evidence that during the Roman period cult some statues were carried on camels in processions [1, p. 240, No. 282; 5, pp. 189–191, fig. 168d]. The imagery is related to the females on the Dura Europos (Fig. 3) and Palmyra plaques: the ribbed polos, the garment and the jewelry are common on Palmyrene sculpture. The figurines with female musicians on a camel are stylistically similar, and both types were apparently produced in the same Syrian workshops in the first and second centuries A.D. The musicians are either mortals or cult attendants playing their instruments in the processions and during the cultic activities [1, pp. 240–241, Nos. 281, 283–284; 5, fig. 168c].



Fig. 1. Phoenician female clay figurine. Hecht Museum, University of Haifa. Courtesy of Hecht Museum



Fig. 2. Phoenician male clay figurine. Hecht Museum, University of Haifa. Courtesy of Hecht Museum



Fig. 3. Clay plaque depicting female standing in aedicula. Dura Europos. After [2, pl. VIII:3]

³ The height of figurines varies. In the cargo of a merchant ship with more than 250 figurines, discovered off the coast at Shavei Zion north of Haifa, the size ranges from 13 to 40 cm, most examples are 16, 22 and 40 cm high [17, p. 184].

Palmyra and Dura Europos

In Palmyrene funerary sculpture, the deceased can be portrayed with the raised right hand and palm outward. The most common are rectangular, often inscribed limestone slabs, used to seal the burial niches in the tomb chambers (Ill. 10). The find-spot, context leave us no doubt about their function. However, the raised right hand is rare, more common with women than with men: with nearly 600 known busts only 18 have the palm outward gesture — 17 females and a single male [16, pp. 637–638, fig. 1 on p. 633; Appendix 1 on pp. 644–645]. Maura Heyn interprets the gesture as evidence of women’s “involvement of ritual activities in the city”, referring to additional indications of female participation in Palmyra and the region [16, p. 637]. Yet, the most frequent depiction on female busts is the right or left arm raised to cheek or collarbone level, expressing grief and mourning [16, pp. 635–637, figs. 4–5; see also 28, pls. 248–249 for the Hypogeum of Yarhai, constructed in 108 A.D.]. In the sacrificial fresco of the Konon family in the Temple of Bel at Dura Europos the worshippers raise their right hand: Konon’s daughter Bithnanaia, four men who are Konon’s grandsons and three additional adolescents [7, pp. 49–54, pl. XXXI].

Divinities and mortals share the gesture. On a Palmyrene altar the seated goddess Allat is depicted accompanied by a lion [6, fig. 49; 28, pl. 148]; the palm branch she holds in her left arm is an object with religious connotations carried by deities and mortals [6, p. 209; 8, p. 239]. On a relief depicting Atargatis and Hadad from the Temple of Atargatis at Dura Europos, the seated goddess raises the right hand, presumably with her palm outward [9, p. 9, pl. I.2]. Another example is the cult relief of the goddess Artemis-Azzanathkona, presumably, seated on a throne between two lions [9, p. 12, pl. II].

Clay plaques of female and male figurines were found in Dura and Palmyra, their iconography is related to a mould (height 12.5 cm) bought in Aleppo, possibly originating from Dura Europos [2, p. 243; 20, p. 219, fig. 85; 10, fig. III; 11, fig. 6; 13, fig. 123]. There are a female and a worshipper or a warrior figurines depicted in Parthian dress, the latter providing information on ethnicity and chronology. On four plaques from Dura the same figure is shown: a female standing frontally in an aedicula wearing the ribbed polos headdress, her right hand raised to the height of her chin; on the capitals eagles are perched (Fig. 3) [2, pp. 242–243, pl. VIII.3; 10, pp. 53–55, No. 7, fig. 6; 11, fig. 7]. Note the vestige of the male’s right hand indicating that the same of a similar mould was used. Six other plaques lack an aedicula and are cut off at about



Fig. 4. Nabatean clay figurine of standing nude youth. Hecht Museum, University of Haifa. Courtesy of Hecht Museum



Fig. 5. Clay figurine of Harpocrates. After Perdrizet P. *Les terres cuites grecques d'Égypte de la collection Fouquet*. Nancy-Paris-Strasbourg, Berger-Levrault, 1921, Pl. XXX centre

the middle of the thighs suggesting that they were meant to be inserted into something [10, pp. 39–40, 50–53, Nos. 1–6, figs. 1–5; 11, fig. 4]. Of this version a single plaque came to light in Palmyra [11, p. 254; 26, p. 307, No. 15]. The exact identification is difficult. The gesture as well as the dress, polos and jewelry are common with humans and deities. Polos, aedicula and eagle point to a divine status and, most likely, the goddess Atargatis is represented [2, p. 242; 10, p. 40]. Of the male figure eight plaques and a mould were found in Dura [10, pp. 14, 67–75, Nos. 23–31, figs. 22–29]; from Palmyra a fragmentary plaque with the same image is recorded [11, p. 255; 26, No. 21]. The find-spots do not help in determining the function; at Dura the objects were retrieved from fills in streets, in a tower, in private houses and in trenches made in the cemeteries. Their small size, relative uniformity and portability suggest a personal use with a probable apotropaic meaning.

Parthian sculptures

The standing goddess and the Parthian warrior on the mould bought in Aleppo and the separate plaques of the same figures from Dura Europos and Palmyra document the cultural relations and iconographic links between both towns, on the one hand, and the Parthian Empire, on the other [11]. Conquered in the first century B.C., Dura remained under Parthian rule until 165 A.D. and the Greek elite adopted the Parthian life-style [21].

At Hatra, over 300 life-size statues are recorded with a date range of c. 150–250 A.D. They represent members of the royal family, nobles and army officers; their “raised hand is a cultic gesture that probably expressed prayer” [8, pp. 237–238, pls. 71–72, 74–76]. The tri-dimensional sculptures are naturalistic and are meant to be seen from the front [20, pp. 73–74], half of them have religious connotations, the remainder are honorific [8, p. 209]. On the basalt relief of a man, probably a worshipper in the Metropolitan Museum (Ill. 11) [20, fig. 83] and on the stele of a male figure from Assur, probably a worshipper or a warrior [20, fig. 43], the forearm is pressed tightly against the body. The image of Allat on a relief from Hatra is different from the Palmyra altar described above. The goddess is flanked by two females with the right hand raised identified as subordinate deities [13, fig. 103]. It is dated to the time before the conquest of Hatra by Shapur I in 241 A.D.

Nabatean clay figurines

Among the Nabatean clay figurines the enthroned nude females [15, p. 283; 30, pp. 146–147, 372–484, Cat. nos. 2–15, in the corpus 50 identifiable figurines are recorded] and the standing nude youths are characterized by the raised hand (Fig. 4), both wear a crescent-shaped necklace [15, p. 283; 30, pp. 155, 400–407, Cat. nos. 31–40, in the corpus 34 identifiable figurines are recorded]. As such, the two types constitute the predominant Nabatean figurines. The combination of features such as frontality, nudity, a crescent necklace and the gesture of the right hand point to divine figures [30, pp. 270–272]. With about hundred samples they constitute the most comprehensive and well-defined class of coroplastic craft with a raised right hand and a palm turned outward. They can be classified as authentic and independent Nabatean images and products in an Oriental tradition dating mainly from the first and second centuries A.D. Their small size, relative uniformity and portability suggest a personal use at home with a probable apotropaic meaning. At the Jordan Conference of 2013 in Berlin,

Robert Wenning placed the standing nude youth in the tradition of Ptolemaic child gods and suggested Dushara, drawing on a passage about a mystery celebration related to the birth of a child god at Petra in the 'Panarion' by Epiphanius of Salamis, written in the second half of the fourth century⁴. Considering the standing nude youth and the enthroned female a pair, the identification of the female with the goddess al-Uzza as Dushara's mother is plausible.

Egypt

The enthroned nude Harpocrates is clearly defined through attributes, though the raised right hand is not a common feature (Fig. 5). Yet, the disparity with Harpocrates' mother Isis is evident: Isis is clearly identified by her specific garment and attributes; in the raised right hand she holds a sistrum, in the lowered left hand there is a small situla [14, p. 275, fig. 259]. Similar is the treatment of hair with three strands of hair on each side falling to the shoulder. The Nabateans adopted the cult of Isis [33; for figurines of Mourning Isis found at Petra see 33, pp. 360–361; 31, p. 65, fig. 4; 15, p. 283, fig. 7]. However, the rareness of the right hand with palm outward in Egyptian visual arts makes it unlikely that the prototype for the Nabatean enthroned nude female is Egyptian, while the standing nude youth appears to have been influenced by Harpocrates imagery [for finds in Petra see 32; 33, p. 357].

From Egypt originate two small clay votives depicting the right hand with the palm turned to the onlooker, surrounded by a wreath with buds [3, p. 279, Nos. 740–741, the height is 8.2 and 5.7 cm]. The concept is similar to the bronze hands from the Beqaa mentioned before; however, while the latter are tri-dimensional, the former are viewed frontally.

Rome and Byzantium

From the third century A.D. onwards Roman emperors are often depicted on coins with the raised right hand [18, pp. 141–142, fig. 100a-1]. Probably, it was a result of Oriental cults spreading to the west. It symbolizes the imperial omnipotence taken over by the Christian rulers (see the medallion of Valens and Valentinian: [18, fig. 100m]). Altogether, from the Byzantine period onwards there is much greater variety in oratorical gestures, a common position of the fingers is the *benedictio latina*: the three first fingers (thumb, index and middle finger) are stretched out straight and the ring and little finger are flexed against the palm. Christ is generally depicted with this gesture personifying and symbolizing the true Gospel — the logos [18, pp. 171–184, figs. 121–123].

Conclusions

In the visual arts of the Greco-Roman Near East the gesture of raised right hand is characteristic of two distinct classes: the first are stone reliefs and sculptures, the second are clay figurines and plaques. It has been pointed out at the beginning that the common features of the artifacts discussed are the raised right hand with palm turned outwards in combination with strict frontality⁵. While the gesture was used in Near Eastern art from early times, scholars differ on the

⁴ The evidence was presented in the lecture "The Many Faces of Dushara" at the 12th International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan in Berlin in 2013.

⁵ A deviation from this conception is the seated Allat on the altar from Dura Europos, where the chair and the lion are shown in profile and the goddess in frontal position. Furthermore, the bent right arm is out-

question of its origin, whether Oriental, Greek, or indigenous [6, pp. 123–128; 9, pp. 282–287; 20, pp. 27–28, 36–37; 25]. Particularly relevant is the observation that frontality was used “as a means of establishing direct, magical and religious communication between the figures in a work of art and the spectator” [9, p. 287]. Iconographic conceptions like frontality and gesture are expressions of non-verbal communication of messages and of ideas and feelings; the gesture can convey blessing, worship, prayer, adoration, protection, power. Admittedly, interpretation and contextualization are often hypothetical. It is not a satisfactory result to have to acknowledge that the specific significance can no longer be ascertained and that we cannot establish from where and when the gesture spread in the Greco-Roman Near East. Attempting to understand and define the probabilities of meaning and function I used the interpretive analytic model categories proposed by Chris Tuttle in his dissertation on the Nabatean coroplastic art. The majority of the artifacts discussed here can be attributed to the category “cultic”, describing “objects used in formal expressions of religious reverence or activities, such as ceremonies, rituals, and meditations” in “communal, personal, votive, funerary, functional” roles [30, p. 247–248].

The sculptural reliefs and altars from Phoenicia, Palmyra and Dura-Europos, along with the substantial group of funerary busts from Palmyra, had cultic and funerary functions. The Parthian statuary in the round, the life-size statues of members of the Parthian royal family, nobility and military, and the few reliefs represent mortals. They can be placed in Tuttle’s category “representations”, describing “figures or creatures of significance in the socio-cultural context” [30, p. 248–249].

The clay figurines and plaques had primarily a personal function as votives, some were found in funerary contexts. The function can also be deduced from the object’s size. The artifacts from Dura and Palmyra and the Nabatean figurines are relatively small with a height of ca. 8–13 cm; the Phoenician statuettes were manufactured in small and large dimensions and the Harpocrates statuettes are ca. 19–24 cm high. The images from Dura and Palmyra depict a goddess and a worshipper or a warrior, while the Nabatean figurines of the enthroned females and standing nude youths can be identified as divinities with a degree of certainty. This holds true also for the Phoenician statuettes. The rare terracottas of Syrian manufacture might have been used in communal cultic activities.

The cultic significance of raising the hand is underlined in a ritual text from Uruk of the year 270 B.C., describing the New Year procession. It reads: “Until Anu shall arrive at the foot-bridge in the Bark of Anu, the worshippers and the priests, by raising their hand, recite the incantation in honour of Anu...” [29, p. 110]. Right hands in bronze and clay from Phoenicia and Egypt also document its prominence⁶.

With the artifacts falling into distinct categories defined by material and size, iconographic styles and attributes, it is unlikely that the gesture of the raised right hand with the palm turned outwards can be taken as a sign of mutual influence and exchange. Furthermore, the objects were produced for local markets and not traded. The Nabatean figurines represent a specific native creation, while the identical and similar representations from

stretched and not held in front of the body [6, fig. 49].

⁶ The single moulded hands differ from the depiction of a pair or two pairs of upraised hands on votive altars in Palmyra, expressing prayer [28, pl. 152].

Dura and Palmyra indicate contacts between coroplasts and consumers in both cities. However, each category of finds has to be examined in the specific local contexts. The gesture of the raised right hand is neither a cultural nor an ethno-religious marker. The interpretation and understanding of the message it was meant to convey is always affected by modern conceptions.

Title. The 'Gesture of Blessing' in the Greco-Roman East.

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Abstract. In the Near East, the very ancient gesture of the raised right hand with the palm turned outward occurs on diverse artifacts of different size and material like sculptures, stone reliefs, clay plaques and figurines. These artifacts were attributed to several ethnic, religious and social groups all living within the area of the Greco-Roman koine. In combination with a strict frontality by which a direct contact between the figures depicted and a spectator is achieved, the gesture is an expression of non-verbal communication of messages and conveys ideas and feelings like blessing, worship, prayer, adoration, protection, power, though interpretation and contextualization are often hypothetical. The majority of the artifacts were produced for the local market, thus it is unlikely that there was a mutual exchange of artistic concepts and iconographic attributes, with the exception of clay plaques and figurines used in Dura Europos and Palmyra. Other categories like the Phoenician figurines, the Palmyrene funerary busts, the Parthian statues and reliefs and the Nabatean coroplastic craft are distinct indigenous creations. Consequently, the objects have to be examined in their specific local contexts. The gesture of the raised right hand is neither a cultural nor an ethno-religious marker. The interpretation and understanding of the message it was meant to convey is always affected by modern conceptions.

Keywords: Phoenicia; Syria; Parthia; Nabatea; Egypt; clay figurines and plaques; statuary and reliefs; raised right hand.

Название статьи. Жест благословения на греко-римском Востоке.

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Аннотация. На Ближнем Востоке изображение характерного для античной культуры жеста — поднятой правой руки с обращенной наружу ладонью — встречается на произведениях разных размеров и из самых разных материалов — скульптурах, каменные рельефах, глиняных табличках и мелкой пластике. Подобные артефакты создавались несколькими этническими, религиозными и социальными группами, населявшими эллинистическо-римские территории. Строгая фронтальность изображения способствует установлению прямого контакта между представленной фигурой и зрителем, а самый жест является невербальным выражением таких идей, чувств и действий, как благословение, поклонение, молитва, осенение защитой, сила; при этом интерпретация нередко остается гипотетичной. Большинство этих произведений были созданы для местного рынка. Следовательно, нет оснований предполагать существование обмена художественными концепциями и иконографическими схемами. Исключением являются лишь глиняные таблички и фигурки, которые использовались в Дуре-Европосе и Пальмире. Иные типы памятников, такие как финикийская мелкая пластика, пальмирские погребальные бюсты и рельефы, набатейская коропластика — автохтонные произведения. Следовательно, они должны исследоваться в своеобразном местном контексте. Жест поднятой руки не является ни культурным, ни этно-религиозным маркером, а интерпретация его смысла всегда оказывается под влиянием современных представлений.

Ключевые слова: Финикия; Сирия; Набатей; Египет; глиняная мелкая пластика и таблички; статуи и рельефы; жест поднятой правой руки.

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