Hierapolis/Mabbug in Late Antiquity

A Place of Competitive Veneration and Co-Production between Atargatis, the Syrian Mother Goddess, and Mary, the Mother of God?

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1. How to identify shared sacred spaces in Late Antique Syria

A border region between the Graeco-Roman and Persian empires, Syria has been a diverse cultural landscape since Hellenistic times.[1] The great roads that connected East and West were not only used for trade, but also promoted intensive cultural and cultic exchange.

The regional population consisted of the long-established Aramaic Syrians, Greeks, and Macedonians, as well as of Jews who had settled there in Seleucid times, and of Romans and Christians from the 1st century onwards.[2] Syria in Late Antiquity is therefore often considered a region of cultural-cultic coexistence *par excellence*.[3] One might therefore expect to find in this environment convincing examples of shared holy places or "antagonistic tolerance"[4] at cultic sites commonly used by people who claimed different religious belongings.

Yet, the material and literary evidence for such places of religious sharing is meager. So far, it is limited to the metropolis of Antioch[5] and the nearby sanctuary at Daphne, which was the cultic center of the greater Antioch urban area and offers a good example of what we could call "competitive sharing" in Late antiq-

1 See Reinink, Klugkist 1999; Todt, Vest 2014; Fauchon 2013; Loosley 2018.

2 As a matter of fact, Antioch is said to be the first city where Christians were actually called "Christians" (Χριστιανοί, cf. Acts 11:26)

3 See Maraval 2003.

4 Hayden *et al.* 2016.

5 On religious competition in the urban space of Antioch see Sandwell 2007, esp. 39–47, Shepardson 2014, as well as Bergjan, Elm 2018. In the 4th century, members of various religious communities populated the city: adherents of the ancient Hellenistic-Roman cults were as strongly represented as Jews and Christians of various theological and denominational orientations. In day-to-day life, religious affiliation seems to have been largely irrelevant. In the course of the 4th century, numerous Hellenistic-Roman sanctuaries appear to have been profaned and reused, or even just neglected and left to decay. The traditional religious festivals, however, remained an integral part of urban life, but they seem to have been popular less for their cultic elements than for the games, contests and local traditions connected to them.

uity.[6] Can we identify others? The sanctuary of Atargatis at Hierapolis/Mabbug, located about 200 kilometers east of Antioch, could be a candidate.

From the Hellenistic period onwards, Hierapolis/Mabbug was one of the most important regional centers for the cult of the Syrian Goddess Atagartis in Northern Syria. However, the evidence for Late Antiquity, both literary and archaeological, is scarce even here. What did the sanctuary of Hierapolis look like between the 2nd and 5th centuries? Can a barely known apocryphal legend help us reconstruct what happened there during this timespan? Is there a connection between the worship of the Syrian Mother Goddess and the veneration of Mary, the Mother of God, which was so controversially disputed among Christians in the 5th century? Did pagans and Christians somehow share the magnificent sanctuary of Hierapolis between them? As we will see, there is some evidence that points in that direction. But how might this kind of sharing be rightly described?

Very few sources for the religious sites and cult practices in 3rd- and 4th-century Syria are available to us, and this lack of evidence makes it difficult to evaluate the testimonies of later Christian authors. Scholars rightly tend to see a large portion of wishful thinking in the triumphal statements of a Theodoret of Cyrrhus or a Jacob of Sarug concerning the crumbled and destroyed temples of Syria.[7] However one assesses the historical value of this kind of polemical triumphalism, these works at least show that the names and also the functions of those sanctuaries were still known at the time, even if there is little direct evidence for the shared use of sanctuaries. Read against the grain, the polemics of Christian theologians about syncretisms of various kinds indicate that the victory of Christianity was not always as clear-cut and "pure" as religious authorities wanted their audiences to believe.

Yet, material evidence does not make it easy to tie this general statement to specific case studies. To give an example, a two-sided mold of limestone from the late 4th or 5th century testifies to vivid Hellenic or Hellenized cults in the region of Syria-Palaestina (fig.1).[8]

This mold was most probably used to stamp cakes or pilgrim souvenirs made of soft metal. One side shows three persons sitting in front of a tree around a three-legged table in the upper register. This image is clearly connected to the sanctuary of Abraham in Mamre in Palestine, for which literary sources explicitly mention a rather peaceful shared veneration by pagans, Jews, and

6 See Kondoleon 2000; Wiemer 2017; and most recently Attali, Massa 2021. The classical references for Antioch in Antiquity would be Downey 1961, 1963; more recently see De Giorgi 2016; De Giorgi, Eger 2021.

7 See Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A Cure of Greek Maladies* and Jacob of Sarug, *On the fall of the Idols*, with special reference to Hierapolis in chapter 1 (see below).

8 See Frazer 1979, and a detailed discussion in Cline 2014.

Fig. 1: Two-sided mold, 4th to 5th century, limestone, 13.8 cm diameter. Malcove Collection M82.271, Gift of Dr. Lillian Malcove, 1981. Courtesy Art Museum University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Christians in the 5th century.[9] The other side of the mold shows a female deity on a throne in the midst of four cypress trees. She is wearing a mantle and a veil, both decorated with stars, and has a crown on her head. The inscription – ΔΕΧΟΜΕ ΧΑΙΡΩΝ ΤΗΝ ΟΥΡΑΝΙΑΝ: "I joyfully receive the heavenly one" – identifies her with Urania, the heavenly queen, an epithet attributed at that time to various oriental goddesses, such as Isis, Aphrodite, Atargatis, or Astarte.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to assign this image to a specific cultic site.[10] The combination of a celestial crown with the ears of grain is very similar to what we find with Atargatis, the Syrian Goddess, in Damascus and Edessa.[11] Does the mold hint at a practice of shared and/or competitive worshiping of the Heavenly Goddess, akin to the competitive veneration of Abraham attested at Mamre in Palestine? Could it be linked to Hierapolis/Mabbug? It is possible but cannot be affirmed with any certainty. This two-sided mold might simply testify to the survival of pagan cults in Late Antique Levant.

In evaluating the hypothesis that Hierapolis/Mabbug may have been a possible place of religious sharing in Late Antiquity one must stay aware that ancient sources do not provide any kind of reliable evidence. I believe it is nonetheless useful to discuss such a hypothesis, even at the risk of entering highly speculative grounds.

9 For a comprehensive study of the shared religious site at Mamre, see Heyden 2020a; for the archeological evidence see Drbal 2017.

10 Cline 2014 dates the mold to the middle of the 4th century and identifies the goddess as Aphrodite Ourania of Aphaka in Lebanon. He suspects that the mold was used to imprint pilgrim memorials at two different places.

11 SC 2:2450–1, see Wright 2012, 199–200; Green 1996.

2. The sanctuary of Hierapolis: assembling the scattered evidence

Visitors of the modern city of Mambij, or Menbij, will hardly encounter any remains of what in antiquity was a huge and splendid temple area and a center of regional pilgrimage. Nowadays, the city probably lies almost completely destroyed by the recent civil war in Syria. Even before the outbreak of the war there was not much left to see of the once-magnificent holy place.[12] The site has never been systematically excavated, and for the reconstruction of the ancient sanctuary one has to rely on a rather haphazard collection of sources of different nature: scattered or questionable literary references, accidental archaeological remains, a few inscriptions, and the descriptions of travelers who visited the place before its modernization in the 19th century.[13]

There most probably existed an important cult center and regional pilgrimage site already in Persian times, controlled by a local priestly dynasty and therefore enjoying a certain autonomy.[14] The famous temple of the Syrian Goddess Atargatis was purportedly founded by queen Stratonike I, the wife of Seleukos I Nicator, in the 3rd century BCE.

Hierapolis enjoyed a strategically important position: it was situated west of the river Euphrates, at an intersection on the major road from Antioch via Berroae (today Aleppo) to Sarug. One branch led to Carrhae (Harran), the other via Edessa to Nisibis and Babylon – all important economic and cultic-cultural centers. In the early 4th century, Hierapolis became the capital of the *Provincia Augusta Euphratensis*. When the Western noble woman Egeria visited the metropolis in the 380s, she praised it, saying that it was "very beautiful and rich and abound[ed] in everything".[15] The fact that Hierapolis was a station on Egeria's pilgrimage journey testifies to the attraction of the city for Christian travelers from afar.

At least until the 7th century, Hierapolis seems to have been a lively city, visited by many travelers and repeatedly granted imperial endowments. There is

12 See Kondoleon 2000. Greenhalgh 2016, 243, states that the city of Menbij "has lost most of her monuments, because the town stood at a busy set of several crossroads".

13 Goossens 1943 has been the pioneer in collecting all the material; more recently see Todt, Vest 2014, 1264–1281; for the inscriptions see Jalabert, Mouterde 1929. Despite the challenging state of the available evidence, there are some convincing reconstructions of the sanctuary and cultic life from the sources: Lightfoot 2003; Wright 2012, 189–220.

14 See Drijvers 1991; Wright 2012, 199–200.

15 Egeria, *Journal* 18.1: *et inde ingressa fines provinciae Augustofratensis perveni ad civitatem Hierapolim, quae est metropolis ipsius provinciae, id est Augustofratensis. Et quoniam haec civitas valde pulchra et opulenta est atque abundans omnibus, necesse me fuit ibi facere stativam, quoniam iam inde non longe erant fines Mesopotamiae* (translation by McGowan, Bradshaw 2020, 108).

no evidence for the violent destruction of the antique temples in these centuries, neither on the part of the Christians nor in connection with the Arab conquest of 637/8. The 12th-century chronicle of Michael the Syrian notes that an earthquake in 749 destroyed "the great churches" and "the walls of the city".[16] However, the city was reconstructed and remained an important regional center throughout Arab times, when it was known for its antiquities just as it was for its specialty dessert of dried grapes, nuts, pistachios, and sesame oil.[17] No wonder it was repeatedly at the heart of conflicts between Arabs, Byzantines, and Crusaders.[18] Arab sources of the 13th and 14th centuries still mention a "Temple of the Sun" and a "Temple of Venus/Aphrodite" in Mambij, and the ruins of that antique sanctuary were visible to European visitors until the end of the 19th century. When Austrian scholars Klaus-Peter Todt and Bernd Andreas Vest explored the site in 2002, they could still spot numerous ancient and Byzantine *spolia* (tombstones, columns, statues) in the entry zone of the modern city park. Given the scattered state of the evidence, how might we imagine cultic life in the city in Late Antiquity, and does the source material provide any hints of competitive sharing?

If we are to construct a viable framework for imagining cultic sharing within Late Antique Hierapolis on the basis of scattered sources, we should start with two texts: the short Greek work *On the Syrian Goddess* (2nd century CE) on the one hand, and the 6th-century work entitled *On the Fall of the Images of the Gods* by the Syrian Christian author Jacob of Sarug on the other. The latter only briefly mentions Hierapolis, in a list of sanctuaries which, according to the theological narrative of that work, were established by Satan in order to cover the whole world with idolatry. "He made Mabbug the city of idol priests and gave it an appropriate epithet (i.e. Hierapolis)", the poem says, "to bind it forever to the service of idols."[19] Although Jacob claims that idolatry has been overcome by Jesus Christ, these verses show that Hierapolis was still famous for its temple in the 6th century; they might even indicate that the cult was still intact at that time. The first-mentioned work, *On the Syrian Goddess,* provides the only detailed description of the sacred area and the cultic practice there. For the period that falls between these two texts, the written sources are rather silent as far as the cultic life in the city is concerned. They provide ample information about emperors staying in the city and preparing military operations against Sassanid Persia, but no description of the sanctuary or the cultic life in the city.

16 Michael Syrus 2.510 (11.10).

17 For the respective Arabic and Syriac sources, see Todt, Vest 2014, 1278, fn. 56.

18 See Todt, Vest 2014, 1266–1271.

19 Jacob of Sarug, *On the Fall of the Idols* 1; Syriac text: Bedjan, Bock 2006; see Schwartz 2016.

At what point Christianity became a relevant factor in Hierapolis is not entirely certain. The first bishops are attested in early-4th-century council acts. Local tradition traces Christianity back to its very beginnings at Hierapolis: in various legends, the evangelist Matthew, or the apostles Bartholomew and Philip, together with Philip's sister Mariamne, are presented as the founders of the Christian community in Hierapolis. These constitute, of course, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, "inventions of tradition",[20] but it is not unlikely that there were Christians in the city already before the 4th century. We do have some information about the Christian community in the 4th century, and we know from the acts of church councils that the bishops of Hierapolis were very much involved in the 5th-century Christological controversies.[21] The Christological controversies after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 resulted in a schism between the Greek-speaking Melkites (who followed the Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ), the Syriac-speaking Jacobites (who espoused a miaphysite Christology), and the Syriac-speaking (so-called) Nestorians who refused to venerate Mary as θεοτόκος, the God-Bearer.[22] Yet, none of this means that the pagan sanctuary was closed or neglected. If Hierapolis was the emperors' headquarters for military campaigns into the Orient from the 4th to the 6th centuries,[23] there must have been a cultic life in the city which was adapted to the different cultic needs of the soldiers and generals. The emperor Julian, who stayed at Hierapolis in March 363 and was hosted in the house of the Neoplatonist philosopher Sopatros, did not mention Hierapolis even once in his works. This may indicate that he found an intact cult in Hierapolis – unlike Daphne – and simply had nothing to complain about. However, *argumenta e silentio* are always delicate, of course, and it also could mean the exact opposite, i. e., that Hierapolis was no longer important enough for Julian to mention it. As a matter of fact, however, Macrobius writes about the cultic veneration of Apollo in Hierapolis in his 5th-century *Saturnalia*,[24] and the already-mentioned Jacob of Sarug may (or may not) point to Hierapolis as an important cultic center in Syria some decades later.

Overall, if we want to know what this cult looked like, we can only rely on the 2nd-century *On the Syrian Goddess*. This Greek work gives a short but precise description of the temple in Hierapolis, its cultic *modus operandi*, and the respective local traditions, myths and interpretations that were linked to it.[25] Although its attribution to Lucian of Samosata and its exact nature remain disput-

20 Hobsbawm, Ranger 1992.

21 See Todt, Vest 2014, 1272–1275.

22 Todt, Vest 2014, 1272–1275.

23 See Goossens 1943, 148; Todt, Vest 2014, 1264–1267.

24 Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.23.17.

25 On this threefold perspective in the analysis of sacred places, see Heyden 2020.

ed, particularly with regard to the satiric character of the work, scholars unanimously regard this work as a valuable and reliable source for the description of the cult in Hierapolis.[26] Its author claims to be a native Assyrian himself and an eyewitness of the cults,[27] while at the same time writing with some reservations about the various stories he heard concerning the temple and some of the cultic practices he saw.[28] His obvious goal is to present an *interpretatio graeca* of the gods and the cult practices at Hierapolis.

Of all the ancient and marvelous temples in Syria, he claims that of Hierapolis to be the greatest, wealthiest, and holiest one. Here is the reason he gives for this assertion: "In it are costly works and ancient dedications and many marvels and images worthy of divinity. The statues in the temple sweat and move and deliver oracles, and there are often cries in the sanctuary when the temple has been locked up."[29] The focal point of veneration there is said to be the female deity, whom the author calls "the Hera of the Syrians" in his very first sentence.[30] The golden cult images of Hera and Zeus are enthroned side by side in the inner chamber of the temple, which could only be entered by the high priest.

In describing the cult statue of Hera, the author emphasizes that elements of many other goddesses are incorporated in it. The image of Zeus, in contrast, "looks entirely like Zeus", although the locals might name him differently, and "you could not identify it otherwise even if you wished".[31] About the statue of the goddess, the author notes: "In one hand she has a scepter, in the other a spindle, and on her head she wears rays, a tower, and the belt with which they

26 See first the works of Lightfoot 2003, who considers Lucian the author, esp. 184–221; so does Drijvers 1991, 28. Dirven 1997 denies authorship, but emphasizes that the work was written by an eyewitness and that the content is confirmed by archaeological evidence; Todt, Vest 2014, 1275–1276 seem to follow Dirven's judgement. Andrade 2013 emphasizes that this "complicated text" (288) shows how Syrians "could constitute 'Greek' and '(As)Syrian' as intersecting, shifting categories expressed by the same signs and not possessing clear, coherent boundaries" (312). His interpretation of the work supports my argument of the fluidity and, as a result, of the "co-production" of religious identities in Late Antique Syria.

27 *On the Syrian Goddess* 1: γράφω δὲ Ἀσσυριος ἐών (I myself that write am an Assyrian, transl. Lightfoot 2003, 249).

28 *On the Syrian Goddess* 11: τοὺς ἐγὼ πάντας μὲν ἐρέω, δέκομαι δὲ οὐδαμά (I shall relate them all, but by no means accept them all, transl. Lightfoot 2003, 253).

29 *On the Syrian Goddess* 10: ἔνι δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ ἔργα πολυτελέα καὶ ἀρχαῖα ἀναθήματα καὶ πολλὰ θωύματα καὶ ξόανα θεοπρεπέα. καὶ θεοὶ δὲ κάρτα αὐτοῖσιν ἐμφανέες: ἱδρώει γὰρ δὴ ὧν παρὰ σφίσι τὰ ξόανα καὶ κινέεται καὶ χρησμηγορέει, καὶ βοὴ δὲ πολλάκις ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ νηῷ κλεισθέντος τοῦ ἱροῦ … (transl. Lightfoot 2003, 253).

30 *On the Syrian Goddess* 1: … καὶ ἔστιν ἱρὴ τῆς Ἥρης τῆς Ἀσσυρίης (… and is sacred to the Assyrian Hera, transl. Lightfoot 2003, 249).

31 *On the Syrian Goddess* 32. Καὶ δῆτα τὸ μὲν τοῦ Διὸς ἄγαλμα ἐς Δία πάντα ὁρῇ καὶ κεφαλὴν καὶ εἵματα καὶ ἕδρην, καί μιν οὐδὲ ἐθέλων ἄλλως εἰκάσεις (transl. Lightfoot 2003, 271).

adorn Urania alone. Outside she is coated with more gold and extremely precious stones, some white and others limpid, many wine-colored, many fiery, and on top of that there are many sardonyxes and hyacinths and emeralds, which are sent by Egyptians, Indians, Aethiopians, Medes, Armenians, and Babylonians."[32] Even more noteworthy is, for the author, that "she wears a stone on her head called a lychnis, whose name coincides with its properties. By night a bright light shines from it, under whose rays the whole shrine is illumined as if by lamps."[33]

Besides Zeus and Hera, there are other gods in the sanctuary: Dionysus, Apollo, Atlas, Hermes, Eileithyia – all of them moving around and crying loudly by night. Among them, Dionysus plays a prominent role, because he is considered the mythical founder of the sanctuary.

Of special importance for cultic life in Hierapolis was a lake below the hill on top of which the temple of Atargatis was located. The form of the lake is still recognizable today in the landscape, even though it is dried up and has been converted into a football field (fig. 2).

In this lake, according to *On the Syrian Goddess*, sacred fish were kept, as it was the case in many sanctuaries of Atargatis. Some of them were extremely large and one even had a golden piece of jewelry fastened onto its fin. There was a daily ritual swimming to the altar located in the middle of the lake, which was also the hotspot of great festivals. On these occasions, the images of the gods were carried from the temple down to the shore. In these processions, the statue of Hera took first place in order to prevent Zeus from being the first catching sight of them, as the author of *On the Syrian Goddess* points out.[34]

The treaty also describes in great detail cultic acts that took place at the pillars located in the gateway to the temple. Those acts were not performed by the cult staff but by the so-called *phallobatoi* (φαλλοβάτοι): "One of these phalli is climbed twice a year by a man who lives in the top of the phallus for a span of seven days. The reason for his ascent is supposed to be this. Most people think he converses with the gods up there and asks blessing for whole Syria, and they hear his prayers from the near hand."[35] This passage is intriguing and has pro-

32 *On the Syrian Goddess* 32: χειρὶ δὲ τῇ μὲν ἑτέρῃ σκῆπτρον ἔχει, τῇ ἑτέρῃ δὲ ἄτρακτον, καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ ἀκτῖνάς τε φορέει καὶ πύργον καὶ κεστὸν τῷ μούνην τὴν Οὐρανίην κοσμέουσιν. ἔκτοσθεν δέ οἱ χρυσός τε ἄλλος περικέαται καὶ λίθοι κάρτα πολυτελέες, τῶν οἱ μὲν λευκοί, οἱ δὲ ὑδατώδεες, πολλοὶ δὲ οἰνώδεες, πολλοὶ δὲ πυρώδεες, ἔτι δὲ ὄνυχες οἱ Σαρδῷοι πολλοὶ καὶ ὑάκινθοι καὶ σμάραγδοι, τὰ φέρουσιν Αἰγύπτιοι καὶ Ἰνδοὶ καὶ Αἰθίοπες καὶ Μῆδοι καὶ Ἀρμένιοι καὶ Βαβυλώνιοι (transl. Lightfoot 2003, 271).

33 *On the Syrian Goddess* 32: λίθον ἐπὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ φορέει: λυχνὶς καλέεται, οὔνομα δὲ οἱ τοῦ ἔργου ἡ συντυχίη. ἀπὸ τούτου ἐν νυκτὶ σέλας πολλὸν ἀπολάμπεται, ὑπὸ δὲ οἱ καὶ ὁ νηὸς ἅπας οἷον ὑπὸ λύχνοισι φαείνεται. (transl. Lightfoot 2003, 271).

34 *On the Syrian Goddess* 45–47.

35 *On the Syrian Goddess* 28: τὸν ἕνα φαλλὸν ἀνὴρ ἑκάστου ἔτεος δὶς ἀνέρχεται οἰκέει τε ἐν ἄκρῳ τῷ φαλλῷ χρόνον ἑπτὰ ἡμερέων. αἰτίη δέ οἱ τῆς ἀνόδου ἥδε λέγεται. οἱ μὲν πολλοὶ

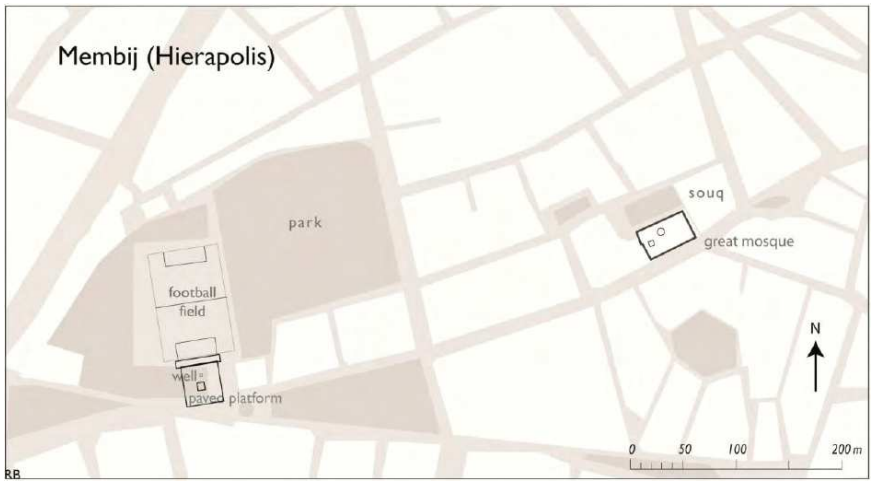

Fig. 2: Modern Membij, Ross Burns (Wright 2012, 194). The ancient temple was located in the area of the great mosque, the sacred lake where the football field has been built.

voked much discussion among scholars.[36] The author of *On the Syrian Goddess* seems to (over)emphasize the sexual connotations of this ritual when he calls the pillars *phalloi* and to have interpreted it as a Dionysian ritual. In fact, the *phalloi* erected for Dionysus in various Hellenic sanctuaries were not substantial enough to hold a human being for a week, as David Frankfurter has rightly pointed out.[37] This is not the place to discuss this in further detail, but it is worth emphasizing that we already find here a good example of competitive religious sharing at Hierapolis. The author of *On the Syrian Goddess* provides a misleading *interpretatio graeca* of an apparently popular local cult that took place in front of the sanctuary, was performed by laymen, and obviously attracted a lot of attention.

Scholars have widely and controversially discussed a possible connection between the *phallobatoi* of Hierapolis and the Christian stylites of the 5th and 6th centuries. Indeed, there are striking parallels between the performances and symbolisms of the two. Yet, whether or not the Christian stylites can be regarded as successors or competitors of the *phallobatoi* of Hierapolis also depends on the larger question of how long the sanctuary of Hierapolis had remained intact and had functioned as an actual cult place. This is where a Christian apocryphal legend comes into play.

νομίζουσιν ὅτι ὑψοῦ τοῖσι θεοῖσιν ὁμιλέει καὶ ἀγαθὰ ξυναπάσῃ Συρίῃ αἰτέει, οἱ δὲ τῶν εὐχωλέων ἀγχόθεν ἐπαΐουσιν (transl. Lightfoot 2003, 267).

36 See Frankfurter 1990; Grünbart 2018.

37 Frankfurter 1990.

3. The "Legend of Aphroditianus" – a missing link in the history of religious sharing in Late Antique Hierapolis?

The so-called *Legend of Aphroditianus* presents an imaginative narrative about the magi who came to worship the newborn Christ, in Bethlehem with his mother Mary, according to the *Gospel of Matthew* 2:1–12.[38] The transmission history of the legend is complex but does clearly point to an origin in Western Syria. The Greek text was used liturgically as a table reading by the Patriarch of Antioch. It was incorporated into a fictional novel composed in Syria and John Damascene cited this legend in a Christmas sermon. It is much more difficult, however, to determine when the legend was created. The *terminus ante quem* is most probably given by the *Historia Christiana* of Philip of Side in the 420s,[39] but before that, any date seems possible.

In its first part, presenting the story of what happened shortly before the biblical veneration of the magi, the legend describes miraculous events in a temple of Hera in Persia: singing and dancing statues of the gods giving oracles, the appearance of a star above the statue of Hera, the announcement of a divine birth in Bethlehem, and the falling down of all the statues in veneration before the goddess. In the second part, the legend tells of the magi's journey to Judaea, their encounter with Mary and her child in Bethlehem, and their return home. The point of the legend is that the magi bring home from Bethlehem a portrait image of Mary and Jesus and place it in the temple where the images of the gods have given oracles and fallen down before the statue of Hera. The accompanying inscription is said to have read: "In the heaven-sent temple,[40] the power of Persia dedicated this to Zeus Helios, the great God, King Jesus."[41] The images of the Hellenistic gods are thus replaced – or simply complemented – by an icon of Mary and Jesus in the sanctuary.

38 English translation and commentary: Heyden 2016; Greek and church Slavonic text versions with German translation: Heyden 2009, 308–359. The name is explained by the fact that in the 5th- or 6th-century Greek *De gestis in Perside* this legend is attributed to Aphroditianus, the philosopher and arbiter in the disputation between Hellenes, Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews (see Heyden 2020b). There is a kindred apocryphon in Syriac, called "The Revelation of the Magi" by Brent Landau (2014; 2016), which provides a slightly different but comparable story of the revelation of the star and the magi's journey to Bethlehem.

39 See Heyden 2006.

40 Some Slavonic manuscripts read "in the divine temple of Dionysos and Hera" instead of "heaven-sent".

41 *Legend of Aphroditianus* 8.5: καὶ ἀνετέθη ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ, ἐν ᾧ ἐχρηματίσθη ἐν τ ῷ διοπετεῖ ἱερῷ Διὶ Ἡλίῳ θεῷ μεγάλῳ βασιλεῖ Ἰησοῦ τὸ Περσικὸν κράτος ἀνέθηκεν (transl. Heyden 2016, 17).

The legend presents itself as a trustworthy copy of a report, which is "inscribed upon the golden tablets and laid up in the royal temples".[42] However, there can be no doubt about its fictional character, which is to be recognized by the fact that a temple of Hera in Persia is historically impossible. At best, it is an *interpretatio Graeca* of an Oriental mother deity. It is therefore all the more important to ask ourselves in what context and with what intention such a story was created. This is where Hierapolis/Mabbug and *On the Syrian Goddess* become important.

3.1. Striking parallels

In the first part of the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, striking parallels to the description of the cult in Hierapolis in *On the Syrian Goddess* appear:

Firstly, as *On the Syrian Goddess* did, the *Legend of Aphroditianus* also emphasizes the rich and expensive furnishings of the temple, which is said to have been built by king Cyrus.[43] It mentions the statues made of gold and silver and the precious stones found all over the temple, which corresponds to what is found in *On the Syrian Goddess*.[44]

Secondly, in the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, it seems to be almost normal that the images of the gods sing and dance in the temple of their own accord – a fact that is considered particularly worthy of mention in *On the Syrian Goddess*.[45]

Thirdly, in both accounts, the main deity in the sanctuary is called Hera, and is at the same time given many other female deity names: Athena, Aphrodite, Selene, Rhea, Artemis, Nemesis, and the Fates in *On the Syrian Goddess*; Πηγή ("Source, Fountain"), Μυρία ("Thousandfold"), Tyche, and Karia in the *Legend of Aphroditianus*. Both sources describe her as Οὐρανία, the Queen of Heaven.[46]

Fourthly, the description of the statue fits the epithet of Urania: both sources mention a crown on her head made of precious stones, which illuminates the whole temple with its bright light.[47]

Fifthly, both accounts pay special attention to the Sun God Ἥλιος. *On the Syrian Goddess* relates that in Hierapolis there is a throne of Helios but no statue or image of that God because everybody can see him with their own eyes. Instead, there is a statue of Apollo, a sun god as well, beyond the empty throne of

42 *Legend of Aphroditianus* 1.1: ὡς γὰρ ἐν ταῖς χρυσαῖς ἀρκλαρίαις κεκόλαπται καὶ κεῖνται ἐν τοῖς ἱεροῖς βασιλείοις (transl. Heyden 2016, 11).

43 *Legend of Aphroditianus* 1.2.

44 Cf. *On the Syrian Goddess* 10 and *Legend of Aphroditianus* 1.

45 Cf. *On the Syrian Goddess* 10 and 36, and *Legend of Aphroditianus* 2–5.

46 Cf. *On the Syrian Goddess* 32 and *Legend of Aphroditianus* 2. 4, 5.

47 Cf. *On the Syrian Goddess* 32 and *Legend of Aphroditianus* 1.3 and 1.5.

Helios.[48] The *Legend of Aphroditianus* does not mention a statue of Helios per se, but it does emphasize the motif of heavenly marriage between Hera-Pege and Zeus-Helios. In fact, this marriage is the crucial event that provokes the joyful excitement among the statues of the gods, i. e., their singing and dancing.

Sixthly, fish play an important role in both texts. Lucian mentions that the fish in the lake respond to their names, and that one of them was extremely large and adorned with a precious stone. The *Legend of Aphroditianus* says of Hera-Pege: "a spring of water continuously sends forth a spring of spirit containing a single fish, which is taken with the hook of divinity and which sustains with its own flesh the whole world, dwelling there as though in the sea".[49] In the broader context of the legend it becomes clear that this fish (ἰχθύς) is an allusion to the famous acronym "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Redeemer".[50]

Last but not least, the role of Dionysus should be mentioned. The author of *On the Syrian Goddess* tries to show that the god is the real founder of the sanctuary of Hierapolis.[51] In the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, Dionysus appears in the middle of the night to explain to the other deities the significance of the miraculous events. He proclaims that the end of their veneration has come, because the goddess Hera-Pege "is no longer one of us, but she stands far above us, since far above us she gives birth to a human being, the fetus of divine Fortune (Tyche). […] Removed from us is the honor. Inglorious and unrecompensed we have become, and one only has received her proper honor."[52] This proclamation then prompts the gods to venerate Hera-Pege as the "Mistress, Spring-Bearer and Mother of the heavenly light-giver" (Κυρία Πηγὴ ναματοφόρε, ἡ οὐρανίου φωστῆρος γεναμένη μήτηρ), and the Persian King to send out the magi to Bethlehem to worship the newborn who was announced in his temple – this turns out to be Jesus the son of Mary in the second part of the Legend.

These parallels raise the question of whether this legend offers indications of a competitive sharing of the cult of Hierapolis in Late Antiquity – and if so, what the nature of this sharing exactly was. Eduard Bratke, who first recognized certain similarities between the two works, interpreted the *Legend of Aphroditianus* as an ironic Christian replica of Lucian's writing and as an apologetic transformation of the very popular cult of Hierapolis.[53] Bratke, however, did not say anything about the reason why an unknown Christian author might have

48 *On the Syrian Goddess* 34–37.

49 Cf. *On the Syrian Goddess* 45 and *Legend of Aphroditianus* 2.

50 On the fish symbol in early Christianity, see Engemann 1969.

51 *On the Syrian Goddess* 16.

52 *Legend of Aphroditianus* 5: Πηγὴ οὐκέτι μία ἐξ ἡμῶν ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς χρηματίζει, ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς τινα γεννῶσα ἄνθρωπον θείας ὄντα σύλλημα Τύχης· […] ἤρθη ἀφ' ἡμῶν ἡ τιμή· ἄδοξοι καὶ ἀγέραστοι γεγόναμεν, εἷς μόνος ἐκ πάντων τὴν ἰδίαν ἀναλαβὼν τιμήν. (transl. Heyden 2016, 14).

53 Bratke 1899.

written this parody and in what historical context this might have happened. To get an idea as to whether or not the legend can fill the gap in the evidence regarding the cult of Hierapolis, we need to precisely ask these questions, which are of course interrelated.

The first observation regards the very character of the parallels between the two works. Even though there are clear similarities, there is no literal correspondence and also no direct reference to *On the Syrian Goddess* in the *Legend of Aphroditianus*. Does anything at all suggest the possibility of an intertextual relationship here? From my point of view, the clear but vague parallels between the texts can be very plausibly explained if we assume that both writings refer, in different ways and maybe at different times, to the cult practice the authors found in Hierapolis. The following point could reinforce this idea: the epithet for the goddess that is most disputed among the gods in the *Legend of Aphroditianus* is that of Πηγή. Her being "source, fountain" is indeed the decisive trigger for the veneration of the images of the gods and their subordination to her. Interestingly, though, the Πηγή-motif does not play any role in *On the Syrian Goddess*. However, the Assyrian name of the town, Mabbug, is clearly derived from the Assyrian root *mbʿ*, which means "bubble, swell", and the sacred lake was most probably fed by a spring that welled up in the sanctuary.[54] At this point, I conclude, the *Legend of Aphroditianus* refers to knowledge that it cannot have taken from *On the Syrian Goddess* but is clearly connected to the place of Hierapolis/Mabbug. This does not exclude, of course, that the author knew *On the Syrian Goddess* at all, but it means that he could not have got all his information exclusively from that work.

3.2. Dating the legend

Dating the legend becomes all the more relevant when we consider that, assuming the tale refers to a living cult, it might help us draw conclusions about the duration of cultic life in Hierapolis. So, when could this story have first been written? To avoid circular reasoning, we must look for hints from outside *On the Syrian Goddess*.

An early date is probably supported by the almost literal correspondences between the epitaph of Abercius from the early 3rd century, in which the motifs of spring, fish, and food occur, and the *Legend of Aphroditianus*.[55] In addition, the *Revelation of the Magi*, written, according to Brent Landau, in Syriac in Edessa in the 2nd or 3rd century, was probably intended to demonstrate the connectivity of Christianity with pre-Christian religious traditions of the Orient.

54 See Goossens 1943.

55 Heyden 2009, 243–261.

One could regard the *Revelation of the Magi* and the *Legend of Aphroditianus* as two complementary apocryphal narratives, which in Late Antique Syria – a linguistically, culturally, and religiously diverse world – took the biblical magi pericope as an opportunity to accommodate Christianity to previous and existing religious traditions.

Another clue could be that the philosopher and theologian Bardaisan lived in Hierapolis and received his education there.[56] According to later Syrian tradition, Bardaisan was even a priest of the Dea Syria before he became Christian and returned to Edessa. Even if we cannot prove that it was a historical fact, this tradition shows that the sanctuary of Hierapolis had a history with (some) Syrian Christians. This tradition also points to yet another direction: when Bardaisan returned from Hierapolis to his hometown of Edessa and became advisor to king Abgar VII, the famous Abgar-Legend is said to have been written in his circle.[57] It is important to notice that this legend contains a feature strikingly similar to the *Legend of Aphroditianus:* in both texts, an authentic image – of Jesus in the first, of Mary with the infant Jesus in the second – is brought to the respective city. We know how important the Mandylion of Edessa became for the history and piety of that city.[58] Is the *Legend of Aphroditianus* to be regarded as something comparable to the *Legend of Abgar?* Does it offer the etiological tale of an actually existing cult of an image of Mary at Hierapolis? This is a natural assumption, if not demonstrable: unlike for Edessa, we have no evidence for such an image in Hierapolis. (In contrast, a copy of the Edessenian Mandylion, an imprint on a brick stone, the famous kerameion, is said to have been in Hierapolis in the 9th century).[59]

However, it remains questionable whether the intensity of Marian devotion, as expressed in the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, is already conceivable in the 2nd/3rd century. Overall, it cannot be excluded that the *Legend of Aphroditianus* was composed later, in the 4th/5th century, using older material – as is the case also of the *Legend of Abgar*, first recorded in the *Doctrina Addai.*[60] What we do know for sure, however, is that the *Legend of Aphroditianus* was continuously revisited and reused: in the early 5th century in the *Christian History* of Philip of Side, in the 6th century in the *De Gestis in Perside*, a fictional report about a religious conference at the Sassanian court, and in the 7th century in a Christmas homily

56 See Possekel 2007 and Thomassen 2018; on the influence of Persian thinking and narrative traditions about the Magi on Bardaisan, see Jurasz 2014.

57 See Ramelli 2009.

58 See Cameron 1983; Guscin 2009; Eastmond 2015.

59 Leo Diaconus 70–71 (IV, 10).

60 See Mircovic 2004; Corke-Webster 2017; on the possible origins of the Abgar Legend, see Ramelli 2014.

by John of Damascus.[61] This shows that the legend enjoyed popularity throughout Late Antiquity.

All of this does not mean, though, that cultic activity in the sanctuary of Hierapolis was intact throughout this period. Yet, we have no evidence that the cult was abandoned, or the sanctuary closed at a certain point in history. Since almost all public buildings in the town were destroyed by earthquakes in the 8th century, it is impossible to know whether a church was ever built in the sacred area. Alternatively, it is possible that Christians did not become dominant in the city of Hierapolis at all until the Arab conquest of Syria, and that religious coexistence und variety simply continued to be the norm. With regard to the connectivity of pre-Christian and Christian stylites, David Frankfurter states: "We must regard the rural Syria of Late Antiquity as containing a religious culture, a complex of traditions, not a singular and monolithic 'paganism'."[62] With this statement, Frankfurter rightly questions the research paradigm of the "survival of paganism" in Late Antiquity. "In religion", he concludes, "continuity is by necessity change, and the 'novel' is always what is most vividly traditional."[63] This shift also implies that we no longer look for clear successions, transitions, or transformations from "pagan" to "Christian" cult practices, but rather seek to identify and explain overlapping and intermingling practices and identities of persons and places.

What does it mean to apply these general statements to the question of the relation between the veneration of the Dea Syria in Hierapolis and the *Legend of Aphroditianus?* If we imagine a continuous adaptation and transformation of cultic and cultural traditions, as was always typical of Syrian society, the *Legend of Aphroditianus* turns out to be indeed the missing link between the 2nd- and the 6th-century Hierapolis. Read in this light, the legend testifies to a certain sharing of the Hierapolitan cult tradition by Christians. The exact character of this sharing remains to be discussed.

4. What kind of sharing in Hierapolis?

Since other sources, especially archaeological ones, are lacking, it remains impossible to determine whether this sharing took place on a literary level alone, or whether the *Legend of Aphroditianus* also reflected an actual sharing of the cultic site. That does not mean, though, that we cannot learn anything about competitive sharing from this case at all. It should encourage us, on the contrary, to

61 For a comprehensive discussion of the reception history of the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, see Heyden 2009.

62 Frankfurter 1990, 179.

63 Frankfurter 1990, 191.

explore and evaluate the various possibilities of competitive sharing and antagonistic tolerance in Late Antique Hierapolis.

4.1. Supersessionary appropriation

By falling down in front of the statue of Hera-Pege, the images of the gods themselves acknowledge that the time of their being venerated has come to an end. Thus, the images of the gods are taken into service of the Christian truth, and they bear witness against themselves. In this tale, the pagan deities are forced to become prophets, and even worshipers, of Christ and Mary. This technique of appropriation and supersession is very popular in Late Ancient Christian apologetics.[64] It is sometimes referred to as *interpretatio christiana*,[65] but this kind of interpretation does not content itself, like the *interpretatio graeca* or *romana*, with identifying the own gods (if we can call Christ, or Mary, gods) with deities of other traditions. This type of interpretation goes one step further in claiming that those deities themselves deliberately abolish their being worshiped, as they realize that they are not gods at all. Re-semantization would be probably the more apt term to describe this type of interpretation.

The superiority of Mary the mother of Jesus over Hera-Pege is made manifest in the fact that the magi have a portrait image of Mary and Jesus affixed to the temple after their return from Judaea – and this as well is an act of supersessionary appropriation of that cult and sanctuary. The legend does not specify whether the images of the gods were replaced or just supplemented with the icon of Mary and Jesus, but the scene leaves no doubt about the fact that this was an image of higher dignity than the dancing and singing statues formerly in that temple.

A third aspect is the setting of events in Persia. If it is true that the narrative originated in North-Western Syria and was inspired by the cult of Hierapolis, then it is necessary to ask why the events in the temple are located in Persia. We have noted that Hierapolis was the military headquarters for the Oriental campaigns of Roman emperors in Late Antiquity. It was from here that the emperors set out against Persia, not only the military archenemy of the Roman Empire, but at the same time a place of alternative religious orientation which sometimes attracted people from the West. We know that Neoplatonic philosophers lived in the city of Hierapolis and that it became a place of encounter between Hellenistic and Persian culture because of its location. "From Persia Christ was known

64 On this well-known strategy, see most recently Adrahtas 2021, and the essays in Nisula, Iriza, Laato 2021.

65 See Eberlein 2006.

from the beginning, for nothing escapes the learned lawyers of that country",[66] is the very first sentence of the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, and it uses Persia and its image as a place of great wisdom in order to appropriate the "pagan" cult of a female goddess, replacing it by something greater at the same time.

By this threefold supersessionary appropriation, the *Legend of Aphroditianus* testifies to a subtle mode of what we can very aptly call the competitive sharing of a religious site. The question that remains is whether this competitive sharing must be understood as a mere literary fiction or whether it can be envisioned as taking place in reality.

4.2. Literary or actual competitive sharing?

We know little about the balance of power and the numbers of religious communities in Late Antique Hierapolis. General estimates suggest that perhaps fifty percent of Syria's population was Christian by the middle of the 5th century.[67] The sanctuary and the sacred lake of Hierapolis must have occupied a large space in the city (see fig. 2). Even if we do not know whether the readers of the *Legend of Aphroditianus* ever actually entered the temple, we should imagine that whoever lived in the region or visited the city was aware of its cultic heritage (if not a still-intact cult).

In this context, it is perhaps not really critical to determine whether we are dealing with a physical sharing in cult activity "on the ground", as it were, or with a "spiritual" sharing in oral, and later written, legends. In a sense, tales and texts can also be places of religious sharing. Given the complex religious history of Northern Syria and the presence of a certain cultural traditionalism in the rural regions, we must be careful not to think of religious identities as being too fixed or stable there.

Syria witnessed fluid religious identities, and it is especially in shared holy places that we can observe such fluid identities: for the (limited) time of sharing, identity is not shaped through correct demarcations – be they defined by theologians of their time or scholars of religious history in ours –, but rather by the current, and transient, ritual community. Christians in Hierapolis could very well have harmonized the veneration of Mary with elements and motifs of the Hellenized cult of the *Dea Syria*.

This could have been the case in purely literary terms. Imagine the Christians of Hierapolis witnessing the daily worship and the great festivals in the temple and at the sacred lake. The city must have been full of pilgrims. The

66 *Legend of Aphroditianus* 1: Ἐκ Περσίδος ἐγνώσθη Χριστὸς ἀπ' ἀρχῆς. οὐδὲν γὰρ λανθάνει τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ νομομαθεῖς ἅπαντα φιλοπονοῦντας. (transl. Heyden 2016, 11).

67 Todt, Vest 2014.

Christians did perhaps not participate actively, rather observing what was going on – and telling each other stories to prove the superiority of Mary, the mother of Jesus, over the mother goddess worshiped by their neighbors. We could call this a kind of "spiritually antagonistic tolerance". Purveyors of that kind of competitive sharing do not have the power to prevent cultic practices of others in real life, but they can claim interpretive sovereignty over cultic practices for themselves, and they can do so by inventing supersessionary traditions like the *Legend of Aphroditianus*.

The most common explanation would probably be that such a legend was invented in connection with the conversion of the pagan temple into a church. However, we know nothing about a church as a successor building of the temple of *Dea Syria* in Hierapolis. We also do not know, as mentioned above, whether the Christians ever clearly had power in the city – not to speak of the diversity among Christian groups itself, with which we must also reckon.

Therefore, we should also try to imagine for a moment that not all Christians avoided entering the sanctuary. Maybe at least some of them sought their place in it, perhaps even decorating it with a cult image. If we follow this idea, then the legend would legitimize the participation in the festivals and traditions of the popular regional cult center while at the same time claiming the superiority of the Christian truth. By providing such a legitimation, it would distinguish itself from the polemics of a John Chrysostom and other Christian preachers and polemicists against "Hellenizing" or "Judaizing" Christians.

In order to demonstrate that such an idea is not pure fantasy, it will be useful to come back to the limestone mold with the representation of Urania (fig. 1). The Christian author Epiphanius of Salamis, in his 4th-century *Panarion*, reports of certain Syrian Christians, called Kollyriandrians, who worshiped Mary as the Queen of Heaven (Urania) and offered cakes to her.[68] If the assumption that our limestone mold was used to imprint soft materials like cakes is correct – as we know it was the case of the sanctuary of Abraham in Mamre – then we may have here not only literary but also archaeological evidence for Marian devotion in continuity with regional Syrian cultic traditions. This could maybe also explain the stark reaction of certain Antiochian theologians against the liturgical veneration of Mary as the "Mother of God".

68 Epiphanius of Salamis, *Against heresies* 79.1 (in Dummer, Holl 1985, 475–476); cf. Isidore of Pelusium, *Letter* 56 (*PG* 78, 215–218). With reference to these, Frazer 1979, 142 also interprets the woman on the mold as the Virgin assimilated with Atargatis/Hera and Aphrodite Urania.

4.3. Tolerance, competition, co-production

On whatever level the competitive sharing in Hierapolis may have existed, I have tried to show that we should not operate with sharp religious demarcations and hermetically sealed notions of belonging when tentatively applying the model of "antagonistic tolerance" to such cases as Hierapolis. What notions of "identity" do we apply when asking the question, "Who tolerates whom?" The notion of belonging to the city and region was perhaps more important to people of that time than some unique religious belonging or "identity". In the end, the very concept of a single religious identity appears to be a distinctively Judeo-Christian religious concept, a concept not suitable for grasping the diversity and permeability of "paganism" (another Judeo-Christian concept) at all. Given the fact that the city of Hierapolis was a regional cult center with a long tradition, it is very reasonable to assume that Christians tried to reconcile this tradition with Christian doctrine (or what they understood of it). The manner in which they did so can well be described as competitive sharing, even if that sharing took place only or mainly on a literary or semantic level. Understanding such processes as processes of religious co-production may even be perhaps more appropriate.[69] The concept of tolerance, in contrast, presupposes power relations and clear religious identities, and there are good reasons to question if this really applies to the case of Hierapolis and to Late Antique Northern Syria in general.

With regard to the aforementioned sanctuary of Abraham at Mamre near Hebron, I have proposed elsewhere differentiating three different but interrelated ways by which a place can be sanctified: structural layout, cultic performance, and the semantic interpretation of the site.[70] If we apply this distinction to Late Antique Hierapolis/Mabbug, because of the scarce evidence provided by the sources, we could easily conclude that there is no confirmation of Christians actually participating in structural preservations or modifications of the sanctuary of the Dea Syria. Yet, thanks to the *Legend of Aphroditianus*, we do have reasonably good evidence that they appropriated the veneration of the Syrian mother deity on the interpretive or semantic level by making her the model for Mary, the Mother of God. As far as the middle category, cultic performance in place, is

69 The concept of co-production has not yet been sufficiently elaborated within the history of religions, despite an increase in interest in the interactions and entanglements of religious communities throughout history. I will tackle this desideratum as it relates to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the years to come together with David Nirenberg in our research project: "Interactive Histories, Co-Produced Communities". Religious co-production is not limited to those three traditions, though. The phenomenon of the sharing of religious sites between "pagans" and Christians in Late Antiquity is also ideally suited to studying the function and effects of co-production – a claim which I hope can be supported by the present study in the case of Hierapolis-Mabbug.

70 Heyden 2020a.

concerned, we cannot get beyond speculation. This means that whether or not we assume actual sharing at Late Antique Hierapolis probably says more about our own desires for interreligious living together in our own times than it does about our source-based knowledge of the past.

List of figures

Fig. 1: Two-sided mold, 4th to 5th century, limestone, 13.8 cm diameter. Malcove Collection M82.271, Gift of Dr. Lillian Malcove, 1981. Courtesy Art Museum University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Fig. 2: Modern Membij, Ross Burns (Wright 2012, 194).

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