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SUMER

JOURNAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY OF
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2021



Republic of Iraq
Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Antiquities
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A sculpture of 'The Good Shepherd' from Old Basra

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ABSTRACT

This short paper reviews the iconography of a marble sculpture found at Zubayr (Old Basra) at the end of the First World War and presented to the British Museum in 1919 by Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson. It shows a young Christ carrying a ram on his shoulders as a symbol of his role as 'the good shepherd' and care for his people. The style and material suggest that this was originally from Anatolia or the Levant, and brought to Iraq in Late Antiquity, most likely during a Sasanian military campaign. The hole through the mouth implies this sculpture was reused as a water feature, perhaps in a church or monastery, either in or very close to the ancient city of Zubayr where it was discovered.

The purpose of this short article is to draw attention to an important sculpture presented to the British Museum in 1919 by Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson (1884–1940) and reported as having been found 'at Zubêhr, the ancient al-Basrah' (British Museum 1919). Wilson was then the acting civil commissioner and political resident in the Arabian Gulf and had just been posted to Baghdad. Its exact findspot is unknown but it was presumably found either in construction or the digging of military trenches in the area as there was a substantial British military presence there at the end of the First World War, and the new Antiquities Law of Iraq was yet to be drawn up by Gertrude Bell and revised by Sidney Smith.

The sculpture is carved from coarse orange-veined marble and shows a

beardless youth with short curly hair, clad in a short-belted tunic with loose elbow-length sleeves and carrying a fat-tailed ram across his shoulders with its legs clasped with his right hand (Fig. 1). The rectangular pillared support at the back is hollow and opens into a spout through the man's open mouth. The lower legs of the figure are missing, as is his left forearm and hand; the surfaces are lightly abraded and the face is somewhat worn. The surviving height of the sculpture is 61 cm., and it measures 39.5 cm. across and 16.5 cm. thick. Although previously exhibited in a temporary display at the British Museum in 1998, a small special exhibition at Waddesdon Manor in 2014 and an exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in 2017 (Lidova 2017: 55–56, fig. 33), it has not been previously published in detail.

This sculpture is identical to another which was found in 1911 in the ruins of a Byzantine brick church in the village of Chinga near Panderma (present-day Bandırma) on the Sea of Marmara in northwest Turkey and soon afterwards acquired by the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. This figure is better preserved and is depicted wearing short boots, with the left arm extended, although it is broken at the wrist (Banck 1966: 334, pl. 10). A third very similar sculpture was found at el-Mina near Gaza, where it was believed to have been used as a tombstone (Palestine Archaeological Museum 1943: 102, exhib. no. 1772), and yet other versions are attested from elsewhere (Siebert 1990). These figures represent a popular image in early Christian iconography which is derived from the Classical Greek Hermes Kriophoros, or 'ram-carrier', who is said to have turned the plague away from a city by carrying a ram upon his shoulders as he walked around its city-walls. As leaders of their flocks, rams became symbols of leadership and of Christ as the leader of souls. From the late third century onwards this youthful tunic-clad and booted figure therefore became a metaphor for the passage in John 10:1–19 where Christ calls himself 'the good shepherd', and a literal rendering of the parable in Luke 15:5 where the discovery of a lost sheep is compared with the repenting of a sinner: 'And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home'. The Epistle to the Hebrews (13:20) returns to this theme where it refers to 'Our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep'. This scene is depicted on gems, bronze statuettes, lamps, mosaics and sarcophagi, and was a particularly popular subject on wall-paintings in the catacombs at Rome, where it features in over 120 instances (Beckwith 1979: 20, 36; Grabar 1967: 24, 29–30, 122–23, 127, 132; Hulme 1976: 50, figs 7–8). The funerary or, as in the case of Dura, baptismal context of many of these depictions may be explained by the belief that baptism guaranteed pastoral care in the next world, and underlying parallels noted between the marking of

sheep and the anointing of one's head with oil described in Psalm 23. Despite the caution of some modern scholars, the Christian symbolism of this iconography was appreciated by Early Christian writers: Hermas, one of the apostolic fathers, describes his vision of a man 'of glorious aspect, dressed like a shepherd, with a white goat's skin, a wallet on his shoulders, and a rod in his hand', while at the end of the second century Tertullian reports depictions of Christ as 'the good shepherd' on drinking-cups (Jensen 2000: 42). However, these depictions may also have had Mithraic resonance as the newborn Mithra was believed to have been adored by shepherds, and in his later life Mithra carried a bull across his shoulders.

The reported findspot of this object is significant within the context of the present discussion of the development of settlement in the Basra region in Late Antiquity and the rise of Christianity in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf in the early medieval period (Simpson 2018; 2019). This sculpture is said to have been found at Old Basra which corresponds to the Arab garrison town of Zubayr. This was founded in c. 637–639 during the early stages of the Arab conquest, and was said to be in the vicinity of several Sasanian frontier forts, and later drew much of its population from the nearby pre-existing Sasanian port of al-Ubulla (modern Ashar). The site of Zubayr is presently situated beneath the western suburbs of the modern city of Basra but, despite its accessibility, it was barely mentioned by early European travellers or archaeologists. The first recorded investigations were in 1907/1908 when the standing minaret of its Great Mosque was recorded by Ernst Herzfeld (Sarre and Herzfeld 1911: vol. I, 249–52, vol. III, pl. XXXVII). This building was partly excavated during 1972/73 by an expedition directed by Dr Khalid al-A'dami from the Department of History in Basra University which revealed its plan and the remains of the collapsed facade with Kufic inscriptions and

decoration in cut brick (Postgate 1973: 191–92). In 1978 large-scale excavations were renewed by Dr Kadhim al-Janabi and on behalf of the State Organisation of Antiquities, and revealed part of an early Abbasid residential quarter but only summary details are published (Postgate and Watson 1979: 147–48).⁽¹⁾

The original context and exact findspot of this statue are presently unknown, and Wilson's letters home to his parents do not refer to it. However, Wilson was interested in antiquities, stayed briefly with the French excavators of Susa in December 1908, and was instrumental in facilitating the exploratory British Museum excavations by Henry Hall (1873–1930) at Eridu, Tell al-Ubaid and Ur in 1918/19. The subject of the sculpture would have had a deep personal connection too as he was a devout Christian, his father – Reverend James Maurice Wilson (1836–1931) – was then a canon and vice dean of Worcester Cathedral, and Wilson was badly affected by the loss of his brother, Hugh Stanley Wilson (1885–1915), during fighting on the western front, as well as the loss of colleagues in Iraq.

This sculpture is part of the growing body of evidence for a strong Christian presence in southern Iraq during the Sasanian and early Islamic periods. Its discovery at Zubayr suggests that it may derive from another post-Sasanian church or monastery in or very close to this site, although the hole through its mouth suggests it was recycled at a later stage and the type of stone and its style indicate that it was brought ready-made from further west. How and when that was is a matter of speculation, but the most likely mechanism was as a result of one of the repeated Sasanian campaigns into these regions during the sixth or early seventh century when the bringing back

of spolia from churches and monasteries is recorded by a number of contemporary authors, thus for instance Khusrau I's sack of Antioch in 540, commemorated on a palace mural (Shahid 1995: 235–36), was accompanied by heavy looting, not just of the contents of personal properties but also churches. Moreover, Procopius refers to how he

'found stores of gold and silver so great in amount that, though he took no other part of the booty except these stores, he departed possessed of great wealth. And he took down from there many wonderful marbles and ordered them to be deposited outside the fortifications, in order that they might convey these too to the land of Persia' (Procopius Wars II.9.15–16).

The sack of Antioch is described in another source as follows:

'They burned it with fire and destroyed it. They stripped it and removed even the marble slabs, with which the walls were overlaid, and took them away to their country, since they were also building in their country a city like this one and named it Antioch' (Ps.-Dionysius Chronicle 64).

Zacharias gives more details of Kavād's sack of Amida in 502 and states that the

'gold and silver of the great men's houses, and the beautiful garments, were gathered together and given to the king's treasurers. They also brought down all the statues of the city, and the clock-towers and the marble; and they collected the bronze and everything that pleased (them), and they placed (them) upon wooden rafts that they made, and sent (them) by the river Tigris' (quoted by Greatrex and Lieu eds 2002: 66).

Unsurprisingly, these acts were viewed with horror by the contemporary Byzantine writers but were they simply violent acts of appropriation of valuable objects or were they part of something

(1) Limited rescue excavations were recently carried out in another area of the site and reported to reveal evidence for pottery production and/or several ovens or kilns but details are sketchy (Qahtan al-Abeed, pers. comm. 2010).

deeper? Khusrau II (590–628) ordered that the remains of the 'True Cross' held in Jerusalem be brought back, and the fact that they appear to have been later returned to Heraclius by Shahrbaraz, the general who took them, proves that they were not simply consigned to be burnt in a fire temple (Zuckerman 2013). The Patriarch of the Church of the East had his residence in the capital and the Christian community was a powerful one in Mesopotamia. Khusrau's leading wife, Shirin, was Christian, and he himself acknowledged the assistance of St. Sergius in helping him come back to the throne after a civil war early in his reign, and also in enabling his wife to conceive, and he therefore made public

dedications at his shrine in Sergiopolis (Fowden 1999: 128–29). Moreover, there was a deep and complex interplay of ideas and fashions between both empires from the fourth century onwards, and we should not simply regard the Sasanians and Byzantines as the equivalent of Cold War enemies divided by a wall but instead consider them as rival equals with common – as well as sometimes competing – goals, aspirations and enemies. Much still remains to be understood about this rich period of Late Antiquity but it is within this context that the sculpture found at Zubayr belongs, and further archaeological research in this important region of Iraq will one day throw more light on its significance.

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Fig. 1 'The Good Shepherd' sculpture found at Old Basra (British Museum, 1919,1213.1 = 114262).