

# The Syrian Goddess

One surviving account of ancient Syrian religious customs is Lucian of Samosata's Greek essay *On the Syrian Goddess*, written in the second century CE. In this treatise, Lucian focused on the great temple at Hierapolis dedicated to Atargatis, a queen-goddess he described as the local counterpart to the Greek goddess Hera, and the features and practices to be found there, including the castration of a special cult of priests and the erection of monumental phalluses.

Source: Lucian, *The Syrian Goddess* (2nd century CE). Translation by Herbert A. Strong (1913).

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## The Sacred City

There is in Syria a city not far from the river Euphrates [*Bambyce, now Manbij, in Syria*]: it is called “the Sacred City” [in Greek, *Hierapolis*] and is sacred to the Assyrian Hera [*Atargatis, the queen of the gods*]. As far as I can judge this name was not conferred upon the city when it was first settled, but originally it bore another name. In course of time the great sacrifices were held therein, and then this title was bestowed upon it. I will speak of this city, and of what it contains. I will speak also of the laws which govern its holy rites, of its popular assemblies and of the sacrifices offered by its citizens. I will speak also of all the traditions attaching to the founders of this holy place: and of the manner of the founding of its temple. I write as an Assyrian born who have witnessed with mine own eyes some of the facts which I am about to narrate: some, again, I learnt from the priests: they occurred before my time, but I narrate them as they were told to me. 1

The first men on earth to receive knowledge of the gods, and to build temples and shrines and to summon meetings for religious observances are said to have been the Egyptians. They were the first, too, to take cognizance of holy names, and to repeat sacred traditions. Not long after them the Assyrians heard from the Egyptians their doctrines as to the gods, and they reared temples and shrines: in these they placed statues and images. 2

Originally the temples of the Egyptians possessed no images. And there exist in Syria temples of a date not much later than those of Egypt, many of which I have seen myself, for instance, the temple of Hercules in Tyre. This is not the Hercules of Greek legend, but a Tyrian hero of much greater antiquity than he. ... 3

Of all these temples, and they are numerous indeed, none seems to me greater than those found in the sacred city; no shrine seems to me more holy, no region more hallowed. They possess some splendid masterpieces, some venerable offerings, many rare sights, many striking statues, and the gods make their presence felt in no doubtful way. The statues sweat, and move, and utter oracles, and a shout has often been raised when the temple was closed; it has been heard by many. And more: this temple is the principal source of their wealth, as I can vouch. For much money comes to them from Arabia, and from the Phoenicians and the Babylonians: the Cilicians, too, and the Assyrians bring their tribute. And I saw with my own eyes treasures stored away privately in the temple; many garments, and other valuables, which are exchanged for silver or gold. Nowhere among mankind are so many festivals and sacred assemblies instituted as among them. 10

On enquiring the number of years since the temple was founded, and whom they deemed the goddess to be, many tales were told to me, some of which were sacred, and some public property; some, again, were absolutely fabulous; others were mere barbarians' tales; others again tallied with the Greek accounts. ... 11

I approve of the remarks about the temple made by those who in the main accept the theories of the Greeks: according to these the goddess is Hera, but the work was carried out by Dionysus, the son of Semele: Dionysus visited Syria on his journey to Aethiopia. There are in the temple many tokens that Dionysus was its actual founder: for instance, barbaric raiment, Indian precious stones, and elephants' tusks brought by Dionysus from the Aethiopians. Further, a pair of phalli of great size are seen standing in the vestibule, bearing the inscription, "I, Dionysus, dedicated these phalli to Hera my stepmother." This proof satisfies me. And I will describe another curiosity to be found in this temple, a sacred symbol of Dionysus. The Greeks erect phalli in honour of Dionysus, and on these they carry, singular to say, mannikins made of wood, with enormous pudenda; they call these puppets. There is this further curiosity in the temple: as you enter, on the right hand, a small brazen statue meets your eye of a man in a sitting posture, with parts of monstrous size. 16

### *The Origin of the Galli (Eunuch Priests)*

*[Lucian here tells the legend of Stratonice, a queen of exceptional beauty. Dreaming that a temple must be built in Hierapolis, she told the king, who sent the handsome young architect Combabus with her to see to its construction. Certain he would be accused of having an affair with her on his return, for which the penalty was of course death, in his extremity he castrated himself, then had his severed testicles stored in a sealed treasure box and presented it to the king as his most treasured possession, which he desired the king to look after during his absence.]*

*[Once at Hierapolis the queen attempted to seduce Combabus, only for him to show her the physical proof of his loyalty to the king.]* When the queen witnessed this unexpected proof her passion indeed was quenched, but she never forgot her love, but in all her intercourse she cherished the solace of her unavailing affection. The memory of this love is still alive at Hierapolis and is maintained in this way; the women still are enamoured of the Galli *[the eunuch priests at Hierapolis]*, and the Galli again love the women with passion; but there is no jealousy at all, and this love passes among them for a holy passion. 22

*[When on his return the king did indeed accuse him and condemned him to death, he had the treasure-box produced, the demonstration of his fidelity still within. The king then made him the most rewarded and trusted man in all his lands.]*

On his request that he might complete what was unfinished in the construction of the temple—for he had left it unfinished—he was despatched anew; and he completed the temple, and there he abode. To mark his sense of the virtue and good deeds of his architect, the king granted him a brazen statue of himself to stand in the temple of his construction. And even to the present day this brazen statue is seen standing in the temple, the work of Hermocles of Rhodes. Its form is that of a woman, but the garments are those of a man. It is said, too, that his most intimate friends, as a proof of their sympathy, castrated themselves like him, and chose the same manner of life. Others there are who bring gods into the story and affirm that Combabus was beloved by Hera; and that it was she who inspired many with the idea of castrating themselves, so that her lover should not be the only one to lament the loss of his virility. 26

Meantime the custom once adopted remains even today, and many persons every year castrate themselves and lose their virile powers: whether it be out of sympathy with Combabus, or to find favour 27

with Hera. They certainly castrate themselves, and then cease to wear man's garb; they don women's raiment and perform women's tasks. I have heard the origin of this ascribed to Combabus as well, for the following event occurred to him. A certain foreign woman who had joined a sacred assembly, beholding a human form of extreme beauty and dressed in man's attire, became violently enamoured of him: after discovering that he was unsexed, she took away her life. Combabus accordingly in despair at his incapacity for love, donned woman's attire, that no woman in future might be deceived in the same way. This is the reason of the female attire of the Galli. Enough of Combabus and his story: in the course of my story I shall make mention of the Galli, and of their castration, and of the methods employed to effect it, and of the burial rites wherewith they are buried, and the reasons why they have no ingress to the temple; but before this I am inclined to speak of the site of the temple and of its size: and so I will even speak.

### *Climbing the Phalli*

The place whereon the temple is placed is a hill: it lies nearly in the centre of the city, and is surrounded by a double wall. Of the two walls the one is ancient; the other is not much older than our own times. The entrance to the temple faces the north; its size is about a hundred fathoms [200 yards/183 meters]. In this entrance those phalli stand which Dionysus erected: they stand thirty fathoms high [60 yards/55 meters]. Into one of these a man mounts twice every year, and he abides on the summit of the phallus for the space of seven days. 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 from their neighbourhood hear his prayers. Others allege that this takes place in memory of the great calamity of Deukalion's time, when men climbed up to mountain tops and to the highest trees, in terror of the mass of waters. To me all this seems highly improbable, and I think that they observe this custom in honour of Dionysus, and I conjecture this from the following fact, that all those who rear phalli to Dionysus take care to place mannikins of wood on the phalli; the reason of this I cannot say, but it seems to me that the ascent is made in imitation of the wooden mannikin. 28

To proceed, the ascent is made in this way; the man throws round himself and the phallus a small chain; afterwards he climbs up by means of pieces of wood attached to the phallus large enough to admit the end of his foot. As he mounts he jerks the chain up his own length, as a driver his reins. Those who have not seen this process, but who have seen those who have to climb palm trees in Arabia, or in Egypt, or any other place, will understand what I mean. When he has climbed to the top, he lets down a different chain, a long one, and drags up anything that he wants, such as wood, clothing, and vases; he binds these together and sits upon them, as it were, on a nest, and he remains there for the space of time that I have mentioned. Many visitors bring him gold and silver, and some bring brass; then those who have brought these offerings leave them and depart, and each visitor gives his name. A bystander shouts the name up; and he on hearing the name utters a prayer for each donor; between the prayers he raises a sound on a brazen instrument which, on being shaken, gives forth a loud and grating noise. He never sleeps; for if at any time sleep surprises him, a scorpion creeps up and wakes him, and stings him severely; this is the penalty for wrongfully sleeping. This story about the scorpion is a sacred one, and one of the mysteries of religion; whether it is true I cannot say, but, as it seems to me, his wakefulness is in no small degree due to his fear of falling. So much then for the climbers of the phalli. As for the temple, it looks to the rising sun. ... 29

The greatest of the festivals that they celebrate is that held in the opening of spring; some call this the Pyre, others the Lamp. On this occasion the sacrifice is performed in this way. They cut down tall trees 49

and set them up in the court; then they bring goats and sheep and cattle and hang them living to the trees; they add to these birds and garments and gold and silver work. After all is finished, they carry the gods around the trees and set fire under; in a moment all is in a blaze. To this solemn rite a great multitude flocks from Syria and all the regions around. Each brings his own god and the statues which each has of his own gods.

### *Becoming Galli*

On certain days a multitude flocks into the temple, and the Galli in great numbers, sacred as they are, 50 perform the ceremonies of the men and gash their arms and turn their backs to be lashed. Many bystanders play on the pipes the while many beat drums; others sing divine and sacred songs. All this performance takes place outside the temple, and those engaged in the ceremony enter not into the temple.

During these days they are made Galli. As the Galli sing and celebrate their orgies, frenzy falls on many of 51 them and many who had come as mere spectators afterwards are found to have committed the great act. I will narrate what they do. Any young man who has resolved on this action, strips off his clothes, and with a loud shout bursts into the midst of the crowd, and picks up a sword from a number of swords which I suppose have been kept ready for many years for this purpose. He takes it and castrates himself and then runs wild through the city, bearing in his hands what he has cut off. He casts it into any house at will, and from this house he receives women's raiment and ornaments. Thus they act during their ceremonies of castration.

The Galli, when dead, are not buried like other men, but when a Gallus dies his companions carry him out 52 into the suburbs, and laying him out on the bier on which they had carried him they cover him with stones, and after this return home. They wait then for seven days, after which they enter the temple. Should they enter before this they would be guilty of blasphemy.

The laws which they observe are the following: Anyone who has seen a corpse may not enter the temple the 53 same day; but afterwards, when he has purified himself, he enters. But those who are of the family of the corpse wait for thirty days, and after shaving their heads they enter the temple, but before they have done this it is forbidden.

They sacrifice bulls and cows alike and goats and sheep; pigs alone, which they abominate, are neither 54 sacrificed nor eaten. Others look on swine without disgust, but as holy animals. Of birds the dove seems the most holy to them, nor do they think it right to harm these birds, and if anyone have harmed them unknowingly they are unholy for that day, and so when the pigeons dwell with the men they enter their rooms and commonly feed on the ground.

### *Pilgrims and Sacrifices*

I will speak, too, about those who come to these sacred meetings and of what they do. As soon as a man 55 comes to Hierapolis he shaves his head and his eyebrows; afterwards he sacrifices a sheep and cuts up its flesh and eats it; he then lays the fleece on the ground, places his knee on it, but puts the feet and head of the animal on his own head and at the same time he prays that the gods may vouchsafe to receive him, and he promises a greater victim hereafter. When this is performed he crowns his head with a garland and the heads of all those engaged in the same procession. Starting from his house he passes into the road, previously bathing himself and drinking cold water. He always sleeps on the ground, for he may not enter his bed till the completion of his journey.

In the city of Hierapolis a public host receives him, suspecting nothing, for there are special hosts attached to each city, and these receive each guest according to his country. These are called by the Assyrians teachers, because they teach them all the solemn rites. 56

They sacrifice victims not in the temple itself, but when the sacrificer has placed his victim at the altar and poured a libation he brings the animal home alive, and returning to his own house he slays his victim and utters prayers. 57

There is also another method of sacrifice, as follows: They adorn live victims with ribbons and throw them headlong down from the temple's entrance, and these naturally die after their fall. Some actually throw their own children down, not as they do the cattle, but they sew them into a sack and toss them down, visiting them with curses and declaring that they are not their children, but are cows.' 58

They all tattoo themselves—some on the hands and some on the neck—and so it comes that all the Assyrians bear stigmata. 59

They have another curious custom, in which they agree with the Troezenians alone of the Greeks. I will explain this too. The Troezenians have made a law for their maidens and youths alike never to marry till they have dedicated their locks to Hippolytus; and this they do. It is the same at Hierapolis. The young men dedicate the first growth on their chin, then they let down the locks of the maidens, which have been sacred from their birth; they then cut these off in the temple and place them in vessels, some in silver vessels, some in gold, and after placing these in the temple and inscribing the name on the vessel they depart. I performed this act myself when a youth, and my hair remains still in the temple, with my name on the vessel. 60