

## A REPLICA OF THE HERMES PROPYLAIOS BY ALKAMENES FOUND AT QAŞR AL-ḤALLĀBĀT

*Ignacio Arce*

### **Introduction: Location and Discovery**

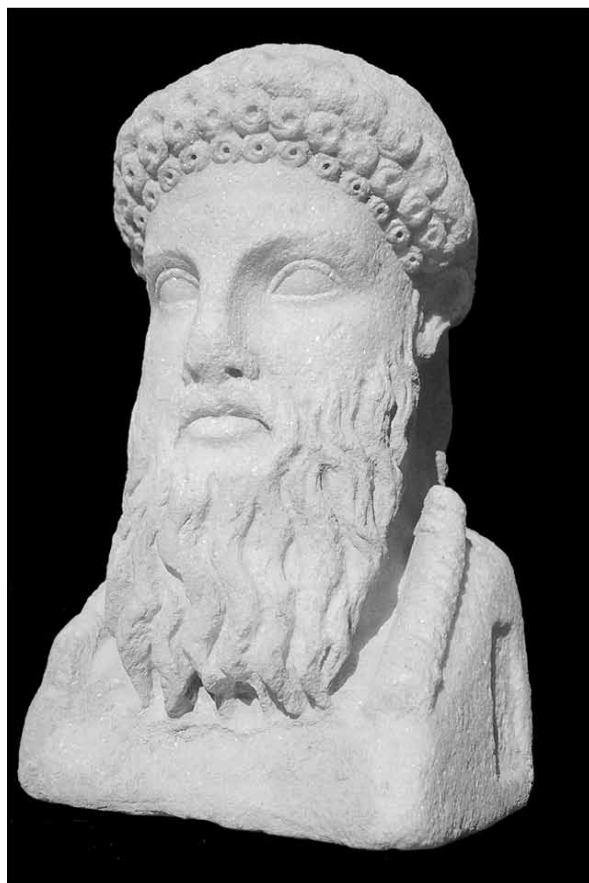
During the 2002 season<sup>1</sup> of the Qaşr Al-Ḥallābāt excavation and restoration project, a marble sculpture was found within the remains of the structure. It was located in collapse debris outside the south-eastern wall of the Qaşr, just outside Room 3 and close to eastern Tower 1. The extraordinary state of preservation<sup>2</sup> of the sculpture, which had just a few scratches, is all the more surprising considering the place from which it was retrieved.

### **Description**

The sculpture represents the bust of a bearded man with a distinctive hairstyle of two lateral braids (Figs. 1-8). It was carved from a prismatic block of medium- to macro-crystalline white marble, which was a little too small for the intended final dimensions. As a result, the otherwise well-proportioned head is slightly snub-nosed. At first sight, the nose appears to have been chipped as a result of erosion or damage, but a more accurate assessment of its profile (Figs. 2 and 3) indicates that the defect was the result of an inaccurate volumetric estimation on the part of the sculptor before work commenced. This can be also ascertained from the treatment of the hair at the back of the head, which is very flat and schematic for the same reason (Fig. 4). The sculpture does not display any trace of fine polishing, probably because of the type of marble used. The height of the piece is 29cm., its base measures 15 by 16cm. and its

weight is approximately 12kg.

This bust was certainly part of a herm (ἕρμα; plural: ἕρμαα, hermai) or bust that would have topped a high cubic, almost square-section shaft,



1. *Hermes Propylaios. Replica found at Ḥallābāt; oblique view of bust.*

1. This ongoing project started in June 2002, with the sculpture being found in mid-October. It is a collaborative project between the Jordanian and Spanish authorities, funded by the Spanish Agency for International Co-operation. It also receives logistical support from the Spanish Ministry of Culture and the Spanish

Embassy.  
2. The artefact did not require any conservation other than gentle brushing. It was not cleaned with water or any other solvent in order to guarantee preservation of paint, although none has been found so far, and its original patina.



2. *Hermes Propylaios*. Replica found at Ḥallābāt; left profile.



3. *Hermes Propylaios*. Replica found at Ḥallābāt; right profile.

usually carved from a single block with ithyphallic male genitalia below (see **Fig. 11**). This was a very popular type of apotropaic sculpture during the Classical period, which was originally closely associated with the god Hermes<sup>3</sup> (see below).

In our case the bust of the herm was placed atop a separate pillar-base, now lost. On its lateral sides are the two rough, rectangular depressions (common to all hermai) that were used for fixing two arm-like tenons that would have projected from either side of the column. A piece of cloth or garlands of flowers would have been suspended<sup>4</sup> from these wooden beams.

3. These pillars were also used to mark frontier and estate boundaries (see below).

4. In other examples, grooves for the attachment of chan-

The long-bearded head of the god is shown frontally, with the characteristic idealised countenance of calm and majesty that is typical of the High Classical period. The main fractions are proportionate, albeit with some slightly reduced dimensions in comparison with other examples (see below). The result, though peculiar, is balanced. This is especially true with regard to the ears, which are small in comparison with the head (see **Fig. 6**). The thin-lipped, wavy mouth is also small; it appears closed with the upper lip being almost obscured by the moustache (**Figs. 6 and 8**). The nose is narrow and straight, notwithstanding the abovementioned snub profile.

cels can be found at the sides of the base (e.g. those from the Fabricius Bridge on the Tiberine Island, Rome).

*I. Arce: A Replica of the Hermes Propylaios by Alkamenes Found at Qaṣr Al-Ḥallābāt*



4. *Hermes Propylaios*. Replica found at Ḥallābāt; back of bust.



5. *Hermes Propylaios*. Replica found at Ḥallābāt; detail of hairstyle.

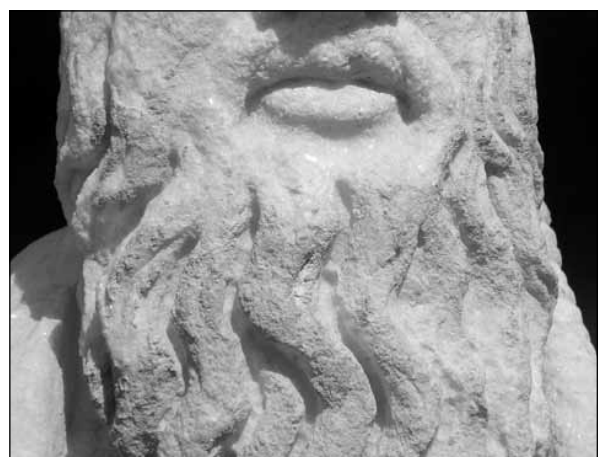
Its ridge merges without wrinkles into a flat forehead, emphasising its elegant length. The almond-shaped eyes glance calmly at the viewer. Embedded within the orbital cavities, they fix



6. *Hermes Propylaios*. Replica found at Ḥallābāt; detail of face.



7. *Hermes Propylaios*. Replica found at Ḥallābāt; detail of beard. Note macro-crystalline quality of the marble.



8. *Hermes Propylaios*. Replica found at Ḥallābāt; detail of mouth and beard. Note drill-work.

their expression by means of sharply cut lids, despite the absence of drilled pupils (**Figs. 1 and 5**).

The beard is carved in quite a naturalistic style, using a drill to create a remarkable chiar-oscuro treatment that enhances the volume of the head. The beard develops from the cheeks down to the chin, in an almost rectangular outline that is divided in curled pointed locks ending at the chest (**Figs. 1, 6, 7 and 8**). The hairstyle deserves special comment: it is tied by means of a thin taenia, or hair band, running above the ears and around the back of the head. This taenia also divides the hair into two different sections. First, in the frontal area the high forehead is surmounted by three rows of snail-shaped curls, decreasing in size with proximity to the brow (**Fig. 5**), that leave the conches of the ears uncovered. In contrast to other known examples, the singular coiffure of this particular example does not sharply frame the face of the god, but enhances the elegance of its clear forehead (compare with **Fig. 9**). Second, at the crown and back of the head, the hair is combed backwards in wavy strands (**Fig. 4**). These hang over the nape of the neck and down the back, where they take on the abovementioned simpler and more schematic appearance: almost flat with no volumetric treatment. Finally, two long spiral braids hang down each shoulder and on to the chest. They display the only evidence of damage on the statue, being an old fracture which is already covered with the creamy-golden patina of the figure as a whole. In other examples, e.g. that from Pergamon (see **Fig. 9**), these braids are substituted by two long locks brought forward over each shoulder.

The extensive use of the drill, e.g. in the strands of the beard or curls of the forehead, and simplification of other features suggests that this piece dates to the end of the 2nd or first half of the 3rd century AD<sup>5</sup>.

### Identification and Typology

Following a detailed assessment<sup>6</sup> of the or-



9. *Hermes Propylaios*. Replica found at Pergamon (Istanbul Archaeological Museum).

igin and character represented in this herm or bust, it can be confirmed that it is one of the better-preserved copies of the famous *Hermes Propylaios*, or *Hermes-beyond-the-gates*, carved by the great Classical sculptor Alkamenes. The original work by Alkamenes, which was most probably sculpted between 420 and 410BC, has been lost, but the fame of his work gave rise to several replicas during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.\*

Alkamenes, who lived between approximately 440 and 400BC, is thought to have been born, or at least raised, in the Athenian colony on the island of Lemnios. He was one of the most renowned Greek sculptors of the High Classical

5. Thus, coeval with the construction of the Via Nova Trajana and the initial fort at Hallābāt (see below).

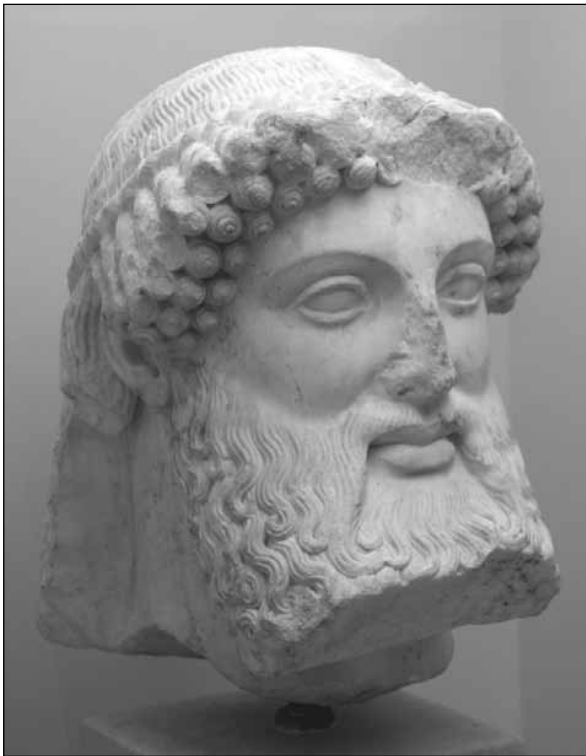
6. I am grateful to Dr Thomas M. Weber, Mainz University for his kind collaboration in this assessment and identification.

\* The Alkamenes' *Hermes Propylaios* would be an archaic, retrospective work which comprises different elements of Greek art dating approx. between 480 and 400BC. Francis (1998) undermines the traditional attribution of the Pergamene herm as a copy of the Al-

kamene type. The most striking point in her argumentation is her suggestion that the Pergamene specimen is apparently an ancient pasticcio, consisting of a head and a shaft originally not belonging to each other. Even if this would be the case (there is no consensus at all on this issue), other samples like the one from Ephesos (that bears also the same inscription that support the attribution of the original to Alkamenes), would support this more agreed hypothesis.

period, a disciple of Phidias with whom he collaborated on the reliefs of the famous Temple of Zeus at Olympia. His most renowned work, a cast-bronze statue of the Pentathlon Winner, was stamped “classic” by his contemporaries and given the epithet of “enkrinomenos”, much as the the Doryphoros of Polycleus was given the epithet “kanon”. Among his other remarkable works are the Aphrodite-in-the-gardens at Athens, or the colossal relief in pentelic marble of Athena and Herakles found at the Herakleion of Thebes, which was dedicated by Thrasybulos.

Among the best-known replicas of the original Hermes Propylaios are those from Athens, housed at The Agora Museum (**Fig. 10**), Thasos, Ephesos and Pergamon, housed at the Istanbul



10. *Hermes Propylaios. Replica found at Athens (Athens Agora Archaeological Museum). Photo: Bibi San Pol.*

Archaeological Museum (**Fig. 9**). The replicas from Ephesos and Pergamon are famous for bearing the inscription that identifies this recurring image in Classical sculpture with that described and praised by Pausanias, who saw it at the entrance, or Propylea, of the Akropolis at Athens from which its name was derived:

“I am not just anyone’s work: in my form, if you look closely you’ll see the most beautiful image wrought by Alkamenes, the Hermes Propylaios”.

“Pergamios offered it”.

“Know thyself”.

The basic figurative characteristics of hermai devoted to Hermes seem to have been established in Archaic period, as the collection from this period at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (**Fig. 11**) demonstrates. In this collection, the basic elements found in all hermai of the Classical period (and in later replicas from Roman and Hellenistic periods, like ours) are all present<sup>7</sup>, albeit represented in the hieratic style of the period. This was undoubtedly related to the popularity of the image and its serial production; there were actually artisans responsible for its production, who were known as Hermoglyphi pl. (see **Fig. 12**).

#### **Archaeological Context of the Findspot<sup>8</sup>**

The building where this herm was found was the result of a series of transformations by which a Roman military structure became, in the 6th century AD, a monastery and palace, before its final refurbishment as an Umayyad<sup>9</sup> Qaşr, destruction by earthquake, and eventual abandonment in the mid-8th century AD as a result of the Abbasid political take-over.

7. Later Hermes were to be represented as a young man, usually wearing a broad-brimmed traveler’s hat or a winged cap (petasus), wearing winged sandals (talara) and carrying a Near Eastern herald’s staff - either a caduceus entwined by copulating serpents, or a kerykeion topped with a symbol similar to the astrological symbol of Taurus the bull. Hermes wore the garments of a traveler, worker or shepherd, and was represented by purses or bags, roosters and tortoises. When depicted as Hermes Logios, he was the divine symbol of elo-

quence, generally shown speaking with one arm raised for emphasis (see Smith, Wayte and Marindin 1890).

8. For a complete analysis see Arce 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a and 2009b.

9. The Umayyads implemented a further refurbishment of the complex, enriching it with new mosaic floors, carved stucco panels and wall paintings, and adding an extramural mosque and a bath-house (Ḥammām as-Sarāḥ) located three kilometres to the south-east.



11. Archaic 'hermahermes' (Athens National Archaeological Museum). Photo: Bibi San Pol.

The original nucleus of the structure was a small Roman fort, most probably dating to the Severan period, which was intended for the defence of the Via Nova Trajana as part of the Limes Arabicus, or eastern border of the Roman



12. Depiction on an ancient Greek vase of a Hermolymphos at work, carving a 'hermahermes'.

Empire with their successive Persian opponents: the Parthians and Sassanians. This fort was enlarged during the Tetrarchic period, taking on the shape of a quadriburgium, i.e. fort with four corner-towers (see Arce 2008a).

In the 6th century AD, following its abandonment after a change in Limes Arabicus defence strategy by Justinian, who dismissed the limitanei and replaced them with Christian Arab foederati, and its destruction by an earthquake (probably that of 551 AD), the fort was rebuilt and re-used as a monastery and palatine structure.

The reconstruction and transformation of the fort into a combined monastic and palatine structure was most probably carried out under the patronage of the Ghassanids, the Christianised Arab tribe that was entrusted with the task of defending the Limes Arabicus in the 6th century AD. Their leaders were nominated by Justinian in the foedus of 530 AD as Basileus and Archiphylarchs of all the allied Arab tribes. Their political nomination as effective kings of the Christian Arab tribes and religious zeal in promoting Monophysite Christianity through monasticism, as a tool of proselytism, would explain this peculiar transformation of the former military structure (see Arce 2007, 2008 and 2009). This event would most probably have seen the final destruction and / or desecra-

tion of any remaining pagan cultic object, like our herm, which was likely embedded in the reconstructed perimeter wall, from the collapsed remains of which it was finally retrieved by us.

### **Significance of the Deity and Typology of the Sculpture: Hermes and herm**

Among the ancient Greeks, and as the related word herma (“boundary stone”, “crossing point”) would suggest, Hermes embodied the spirit of crossing-over.<sup>10</sup> He was thought to be manifest in any kind of interchange, transfer, transgressions, transcendence, transition or transit, all of which involve some form of crossing, including that of borders and boundaries. This explains his connection with transitions in one’s fortune, with the interchange of goods, words and information involved in trade, with the interpretation (hermeneutic) of what is hidden (hermetic) and needs an interpreter (hermeneus) to be comprehended, and with the transition to the afterlife.<sup>11</sup>

The primitive custom of worshipping the gods, especially Hermes, in the form of heaps of stones placed at crossroads or crossing points (where travelers added a stone to the heap to attract the divine protection<sup>12</sup>) gave way to the practice of erecting phallic pillars or cones<sup>13</sup> in the gods’ honor, which were in turn eventually replaced by hermai.

This association of Hermes with guarding borders and crossing points, and the traditional location of hermai in these places (as well as the etymological confusion between the name of

the landmark and that of the deity), is similar to that of the Roman god Terminus with the landmarks or boundaries<sup>14</sup> that are also denoted by the same term. Actually, the iconography of the god Terminus adopted the Greek model of Hermahermes,<sup>15</sup> i.e. hermai representing the god Hermes.

This all relates to one of the hypotheses to explain the presence of our sculpture at Qaşr Al-Ḥallābāt, viz. the fact that the Roman fort of Ḥallābāt protected traffic passing along the Via Nova Trajana and was also part of the Limes Arabicus, or eastern border of the Empire, could explain the presence of such a herm or terminus in this particular location.

### **Hypotheses for the Origin and Function of the Sculpture**

Although the original Greek sculpture, as well as most of the replicas, was in the form of a complete herm which combined head and shaft, in our case the bust was carved as a separate piece intended to be fixed to the top of the shaft (see above). This fact, together with the relatively high quality of the marble, means that it was probably a luxury object intended to be transported a long distance<sup>16</sup> from the original workshop which avoided the extra weight of the shaft.

How such an outstanding sculpture arrived in this remote corner of the Roman Empire is still unclear, as are the vicissitudes that befell it after the official adoption of Christianity and the abandonment of the Classical pagan cults.

10. It has been argued, following Karl Otfried Müller’s (1848) demonstration, that the name Hermes is derived from the Greek word herma (ἕρμα), denoting a landmark. However, owing to the god’s attestation in the Mycenaean pantheon as Hermes Araoia (“ram-Hermes”) in Linear B inscriptions from Pylos and Mycenaean Knossos (see Ventris and Chadwick 1973), the connection is more likely to have been the other way round, from deity to pillar representations. Subsequently, Hermes acquired patronage over land travel by association with these cairns, which were used in Athens to ward off evil, and also as road and boundary markers all over Greece.

11. As a crosser of boundaries, Hermes Psychopompos (Hermes-conductor-of-the-soul) was a psychopomp, meaning he brought the souls of the newly-deceased to the underworld and Hades.

12. It was customary for passers-by to show respect to the simplest form of the god, the heap of stones, by adding a stone to the heap. This practice can still be seen today at many crossroads; even on the extremely

Christian pilgrim route of St. Jacques, the so-called “Cruz de Ferro” (an iron cross on top a wooden pole which stands over a huge heap of stones, all thrown at its base by pilgrims) can be seen close to the final destination.

13. This was also the origin of the Nabataean betils (Gr. Baityloi).

14. In Roman religion, Terminus was the god who protected boundary markers; his name was the Latin term for such a landmark, an etymological confusion similar to that between herm and Hermes. Sacrifices were performed after erection to sanctify each boundary stone; landowners celebrated a festival known as Terminalia in Terminus’ honor each year on February 23<sup>rd</sup>.

15. According to the god that it was represented atop the shaft, we can have Hermahermes, Hermanubis, Hermares, Hermathena, Hermaphrodita, Hermopan, etc.

16. It must be mentioned the lack of true marble in the region, so that most of the marble sculpture from Classical period was imported from Greece or Anatolia.

Two main hypotheses can be put forward to explain its presence at Qaṣr Al-Ḥallābāt: The first is linked to its ‘use value’ as a cultic object, particularly its religious use and symbolism as landmark. The second is related to its ‘exchange value’, i.e. it may have been looted from a nearby urban settlement and retrieved by the Roman troops controlling the area. These troops were deployed not only to counter the Persian military threat, but also to guard against the unrest caused by pastoralists’ raids against the settled and urban areas under Roman control.

The first hypothesis is linked to the cultic value of the hermai and hermean heaps which, as discussed above, were used by the Greeks as landmarks and placed by them on public roads and boundaries. The function of Hermes as protector of roads and boundaries could explain its location at Ḥallābāt as border landmark, or terminus, of the Limes Arabicus. Any symbolic or cultic value associated with the defence and protection of the border would however have become redundant with the disappearance of this geopolitical frontier under the Umayyads, after their victory over both of their former rivals, i.e. the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires, or perhaps even earlier with the advent of Christianity.

The second hypothesis is more prosaic and circumstantial, as it sees the herm merely as a valuable object that would have played, or was intended to play, a symbolic role as described above but in a very different context, i.e. looted in a raid and afterwards retrieved by the Roman troops controlling the Limes. Despite its apotropaic character and possible intended use, it is strange to think that such a high quality, cultic piece could have been intended for such a small and forgotten military outpost of the Eastern frontier. After all, the other replicas are from important Hellenistic and Roman cities such as Pergamon, Ephesos and Thassos. Thus, an alternative hypothesis can be proposed, in which the presence of the sculpture at Ḥallābāt was the result of Roman troops confiscating goods looted by nomadic plunderers from an impor-

tant nearby settlement. Indeed, one of the roles of the Roman army was to provide protection and stability to the sedentary populations under their rule, in the face of periodic raids by pastoralists.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the sculpture’s final resting place, it can be hypothesized that it was embedded in the wall during the reconstructions of the 6th century AD, when the complex was transformed into a monastery and palace. Its fate would be thus similar to re-used basalt stones bearing the Anastasius Edict — seemingly brought from a nearby city<sup>18</sup> — which were utilised regardless their original function or purpose. In the case of our Pagan herm, it may have been treated with such disrespect precisely because of its religious origin and significance as a symbol of a Pagan past that Christianity was trying to obliterate from the region.

### Destination and Display

As part of the visitor presentation strategy, which is an integral part of the project, a site museum has been built at Ḥallābāt, where the bust will be displayed. A key role has been given to the herm as the character that welcomes and guides the visitor to the site-museum display, thereby fulfilling the role that Hermes played in Classical world as interpreter (*hermensus*), patron of commerce and eloquence, protector of merchants, travellers and whoever crosses borders and frontiers, travelling the roads and tracks of Earth.

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17. This was related to the twin nature of this border. In the area of the Limes Arabicus there were actually two different borders: the ‘external border’ between the two major regional political superpowers of Rome and Persia, and the ‘internal border’ separating the settled population of Hellenised villagers and townsfolk living in Roman territory west of the Limes from semi-

nomadic pastoralists living on the steppe margins between the Limes and the true desert (see Arce 2008b).

18. This could lead us to an even more prosaic hypothesis explaining its location at Hallabat, that would see the sculpture solely as reclaimed building material brought in with the basalt stones re-used in the 6th century AD reconstruction of the Hallabat complex.



*I. Arce: A Replica of the Hermes Propylaios by Alkamenes Found at Qasr Al-Hallābāt*

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