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Tadmor – Palmyra

A Caravan City between East and West



IRSA

Tadmor – Palmyra

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To our sons, Piotr and Jakub, to remind them of Palmyra in 1983

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Preface

On 21 May 2015, the town of Tadmor in the central part of Syria, better known as Palmyra, fell to the fighters of the so-called Islamic State (usually referred to under the English acronym, ISIS, or its Arabic equivalent, Daesh). This organisation intended to recreate the Islamic Caliphate of old, beginning with the large but mostly desert swathes of Iraq and Syria that it managed to conquer beginning in 2014. The massacres and destruction committed in the name of this utopian project are too well known to be detailed here. It is enough to say that the most remarkable monuments of Palmyra are no more.

Just one day before the takeover, the director of the Palmyra Museum, Khalil al-Hariri, together with his associates, managed to evacuate to Damascus some of the collection's movable monuments. The rest were left at the mercy of the conquerors, who consider unlawful all figurative art, and especially monuments of ancient religions, and who vowed to destroy any that they come in contact with in accordance with the extreme brand of Islam they profess. It cannot be stressed enough that such attitudes are not shared by the vast majority of Muslims.

Further reports from Palmyra were rare and uncertain, transmitted by local activists at considerable risk to themselves. Thus we learned that the lion of Allat, the huge figure standing at the museum's entrance, was crushed to pieces in the first weeks

of Daesh's rule. Three months on, a series of tragic events began to play out, events that were widely publicised by the culprits themselves. On 18 August, Khaled al-As'ad, the museum's first and long-time director, was beheaded for being a "keeper of idols" and, allegedly, for refusing to reveal the hiding place of the treasures imagined by his captors. Over the course of the two weeks that followed, all the major monuments of the ancient city were blown up and reduced to rubble: the temples of Bel and Baalshamin, seven well-preserved funerary towers, and, a little later, the monumental arch opening the Great Colonnade (which had no religious connotations whatsoever).

The infamous Daesh also proceeded to systematically smash all the sculptures on display in the museum, paying special attention to the destruction of any faces on view. The numerous pieces kept in the basement did not escape destruction either: they were dumped aside to make room for the so-called tribunal which condemned Khaled al-As'ad to death. When the barbarians were repelled a year later, the havoc they left behind was appalling. Working under Maamoun Abdelkarim and helped by Polish restorers, a devoted team from the Directorate General of Antiquities from Damascus managed to collect the debris of over two hundred sculptures and bring them to safe-keeping in Damascus before the fanatics returned. The museum building is now empty. The monu-

ments that have been saved shall be repaired in due time. As I write these words, the great lion of Allat, which once stood in front of Palmyra Museum, has just been restored in the garden of the National Museum in Damascus by Bartosz Markowski, who had already restored this monument in 2005 in Palmyra.

Many scars shall remain forever. A page of Palmyra's history has been turned. It shall never be the same place again. Under these circumstances, I finally decided to answer a longstanding invitation from my friend Józef Grabski to sit down and write a book on Palmyra for the *Bibliotheca Artibus et Historiae* series, which he founded and directs. Coming at the end of more than forty years of work there, not only would this be a summing up

of my career as an archaeologist, but also, unfortunately, the summing up of a period in the site's history. The ancient civilisation of Palmyra thrived for three centuries before being erased by the conquering legions of the Roman emperor Aurelian in AD 273. Brought to worldwide fame in modern times, the city had recently become a great tourist destination. It has been destroyed again in front of our eyes. May these pages be a personal homage to both the ancient and modern people who made Palmyra flourish, and a token of hope for better days for Syria and for my Syrian friends.

Warsaw, March 2019

Acknowledgements

This book results from the encouragement and friendly insistence of Józef Grabski, the director of the IRSA Institute. It was ably and carefully edited by Katarzyna Chrzanowska, Agnieszka Smołucha-Sładkowska and David Daniel, to whom go my warmest thanks.

It could never have been written, however, without all those who worked with me in Palmyra over many years. They are too many to be named, but the special place must be reserved to Khaled al-As'ad, who presided over the ruins and the Palmyra Museum as long as I can remember and whose revolting fate at the hands of fanatics is so widely known. I owe also much to his local associates: the Taha brothers, Ali and Ahmad, his son and successor Waleed, and hundreds of Palmyrenes who at one time or another worked on the excavation.

The Polish mission to Palmyra was active from 1959 to 2011, hardly ever missing a season. It was founded by my teacher Kazimierz Michałowski. During last forty years I have prof-

ited from the hard work and expertise of many, to name only those who have passed away: Anna Sadurska, Maria Krogulska, and Han Drijvers. Some of the younger generation will recognize themselves on several pictures included in this book. All those who have contributed their photographs and drawings are of course acknowledged in the illustration credits (pp. 437–447).

The views expressed in this book could not have been formed without many scholars whom I had read and met. They are again too many to be named. I will mention only Henri Seyrig, Daniel Schlumberger and Jean Starcky, whom I had the honour to know many years ago and to learn from them in the *Institut français d'archéologie* in Beirut. The historical chapters were written in the great library of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and they owe much to discussions with Glen Bowersock there. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for any mistakes and for such statements as may provoke disagreement.

Editorial note

I have simplified the spelling of Semitic names, omitting most of the diacritic points used in scholarly publications. Those who wish to know the difference between *h* and *ḥ*, *t* and *ṭ*, *s* and *ṣ*, should refer to the quoted sources. Non-Arabic speakers will presumably pronounce these sounds in much the same way anyway. I have also replaced *š* with *sh*, but retained the letter *ʿain*, marked with an inverted apostrophe; in some cases two vowels in succession mark its omission, as in *Baalshamin*.

In quoting genealogies, I use the Aramaic *bar* (often abbreviated to *b.*) rather than “son of” which

seems tedious when repeated several times. The plural form is *bene* and is also used in tribal names.

The native name of Palmyra is Tadmor, both in antiquity and today, and I try to use this name when the Greek and Roman name Palmyra seems less appropriate. The traditional adjective, inspired by Greek, is Palmyrene. It is preferable to such forms as Palmyrian, Palmyrean, or Palmyran, used in recent years by some authors. When dealing with bilingual inscriptions, I favour the Aramaic version, unless it is less well preserved. All dates are AD, unless otherwise stated.



1. The steppe crescent (*bādiya*) between the desert and the Fertile Crescent to the north

The early times

The two crescents

The term “Fertile Crescent” was introduced early in the twentieth century by James Henry Breasted.¹ It refers to a belt of cultivated land going north from Palestine along the coast to the first hills of Anatolia and then southeast at the foot of the Zagros Mountains beyond the twin valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris down to the Gulf. This is the land where farming was first introduced in the tenth millennium BC and where agriculture based on rainfall was possible, where the wild ancestors of our cereals have been found, and where wild sheep and goats were first domesticated. The southern limit of this belt runs in an arch roughly at the isohyet of 200 mm of yearly average rainfall, considered to be the lowest possible amount that allows for farming. In due time, agriculture spread to the river valleys, where rain is scarce but can be replaced by artificial irrigation. Indeed, irrigation brought unprecedented fertility and prosperity to the land between the two rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris. Known at the time as Mesopotamia, this land today forms part of Iraq.

Immediately to the south lies another crescent, defined by the isohyets 200 mm to 100 mm [Fig. 1]. This can be called the dry steppe zone, in Arabic *bādiya*. Here, the sowing ranges from very hazardous to impracticable, but there is usually enough rain for wild plants to grow in winter, making the desert green from November through April. This land can be used as pasture for a good part of the year, but the flocks must be led to tilled land after the harvest is over. This movement is usually regulated by agreements between tribesmen and villagers, but it can lead to conflict in meagre years.

A plain desert, in Arabic *hamad*, extends southwards offering only very harsh conditions for survival. There are, however, scattered water sources giving life to oases. Some of these are quite large, allowing important communities to live on their crops, mostly dates but also wheat. Others are just watering holes, crucial for nomads and travellers.

Palmyra is just one such oasis [Fig. 2].

¹ Breasted 1916, p. 91.

The oasis and its inhabitants through the ages

This place was called Tadmor as far back in time as our documents go. It lies in the middle of the Syrian desert, half-way between the Mediterranean and the Euphrates valley. The direct route passes through a saddle between the coastal mountain ridges of Lebanon and Jabal Ansariye, opposite the city of Homs. After some 150 km across the desert, another, much lower ridge of hills crossing Syria from southwest to northeast is interrupted by an easy passage right before the route arrives in Palmyra. This passage is called the Valley of the Tombs because of the number of funerary towers lining the path approaching the ancient city. Another desert track follows the eastern foot of the hills all the way from Damascus to Palmyra; it is more or less followed by a modern road. Further east, travellers can see an endless expanse of flat desert, the bottom of a prehistoric lake now seasonally submerged in water, where salt was and still can be obtained [Fig. 3]. Desert tracks go around this *sabkha* (as it is called in Arabic) and head to different points in the Euphrates valley, passing some desert wells, which are located few and far between. In the 1970s an asphalt road was laid to the modern city of Deir ez-Zor.

This situation made for the utter isolation of the oasis from all sides. It was able to exist as a settlement thanks to an abundant spring and the gardens it fed [Fig. 4]. This spring, called Efqa, provided tepid, sulphurous water gushing out of a grotto. The water, though unpleasant in taste, permitted the cultivation of date palms and olive trees, the main crops of the oasis. Sadly, the spring is now dry due to the excessive pumping of fossil waters in recent years. It must have been a marvel in antiquity, a sacred spot since time immemorial.



2. A view of the Palmyra oasis



3. The gardens and the salty marsh beyond the ancient ruins



4. The dried up Efqa spring after being excavated



5. A shepherd and his flock in Wadi Suraysir

Recently, a Pre-Pottery Neolithic (eighth millennium BC) settlement was excavated by the spring, at a hillock called Tell ez-Zor.² These inhabitants lived in tightly packed mud houses and cultivated some cereals on irrigated land (we do not know whether the date palm and olive tree, later the staple of the oasis, had already been introduced then), certainly keeping sheep and goats and probably hunting in the desert. Their village was not different from other contemporary settlements discovered elsewhere in Syria, the closest one being in the oasis of el-Kom some 100 km to the northeast. Nothing is known after this for thousands of years.

As Tadmor lies below the line of 150 mm of rainfall in an average year, agriculture without irrigation is not possible in a regular way. Following rainfall, wheat used to be sown in the past west of the oasis in a plain called al-Daw, with the hope that there would be more rain in order to obtain a meagre harvest, but this was a risky business. Herds of sheep and goats were pastured around the oasis, too [Fig. 5]. All this made for a hard living for the small population settled around the spring.

There was also another risk factor. The desert was inhabited by nomads living on their herds, and their livelihood was even more uncertain. The danger of their falling on the villagers and robbing their crops was always present [Fig. 6]. True, most of the time there were arrangements in which the peasants exchanged their crops for the nomads' animal husbandry products, but it was always possible that a dry year would ruin this coexistence. Naturally, the villagers were always on the defensive, and they were often caught in a helpless position when confronted with an adversary who could come and go at any time.

² Al-Maqdissi, Ishaq 2017, pp. 41–42.



6. Bedouin robbers falling on the artist's caravan on an engraving after Louis-François Cassas

Tadmor was a small oasis and too far away from any settled country to count on protection from external powers. No wonder it was quite insignificant for many centuries. After the first mention in written sources in the nineteenth century BC we have only three or four others before the first century BC when things began to change.

The first occurrence of the name Tadmor is only indirect: a certain Puzur-Ishtar served as a witness to a contract written in Akkadian on a clay tablet in the city of Kanesh, not far from modern Ankara.³ He is said to be a "Tadmorean", but there is no way of knowing how this member of the community of Assyrian merchants in Asia Minor got his Assyrian name and whether he maintained any links to his birthplace.

In the eighteenth century BC, Yasmah-Adad, a king of Mari on the Euphrates, received a report about a raid on Tadmor by sixty Sutu tribesmen. They killed a man there but came back empty-handed. A minor incident certainly, it was only noted because of the meticulous bureaucracy of the Mari court. It does illustrate, however, the exposed position of the oasis, even if, on that occasion, the inhabitants managed to defend themselves.⁴

The desert was indeed not impenetrable. Mari and the equally important Syrian kingdom of Qatna entertained friendly relations (Yasmah-Adad was married to one of the daughters of the king of Qatna), communication between them probably passing through Tadmor.⁵ The archives from Mari do mention the arrival of four Tadmoreans from Qatna, but we do not know what their business was. Travellers had to walk all the way or at best use donkeys, the only beasts of burden known at the time. This made them heavily dependent on the wells and water holes that they found on their way and so probably limited the time of travel to the winter and spring months. It does not seem that trade of any consequence passed

³ Eisser, Lewy 1933–1935, no. 303.

⁴ Dossin 1952, V, no. 23.

⁵ Durand 1987, p. 161.

along this route, the shortest one, though some traffic certainly passed through Tadmor, as confirmed by the seal of a Tadmorean called Giri, which was imprinted on a clay tablet found in Emar, a thirteenth-century Hittite stronghold on the Euphrates.⁶

The usual itinerary between Mesopotamia and Syria led, however, up the Euphrates to a point where the distance to the Mediterranean was at its shortest, about the present Syro-Turkish border. Along this route, there was a constant supply of water, fodder, and food. The safety of travel was much better, too, as the country was settled along the entire route and usually controlled by local powers. So the longer road was favoured throughout the ages and up until our own times, thus settling the fortune of the city of Halab (Aleppo), among others. In the meantime, however, a major cultural shift had taken place in the desert of Arabia. About the twelfth century BC, the camel was domesticated and began to be used for carrying burdens and riding. In time, the success of this novelty was enormous, to the point that wild camels do not exist anymore for many centuries. At once, far-reaching desert travel became possible.⁷ In the south, the Sabaeen civilisation arose in the highlands of Yemen at just about this time; the domestication of the camel was likely one of the conditions supporting this development. Large caravans of camels carried frankincense, the main export of the country, over the desert tracks to Mesopotamia and the whole Near East. Deep in the desert, isolated oases became connected with the world at large, while the nomads, until then uniquely sheep and goat herders, could greatly enlarge the territories accessible to them. They also gained an enormous advantage – mobility. They could now appear suddenly riding their camels out of nowhere and rob other people's flocks, or they could raid villages far from their camps and disappear into the desert just as quickly as they came. A particular Bedouin culture evolved, a warrior society based on notions of valiance, honour, and glory, and much dreaded by the sedentary.⁸ Much of the nineteenth-century European writing about the Near East is devoted to this phenomenon, either idealising or denigrating the Bedouin way of life.

It is not quite clear when the camel riders took over the Syrian desert. The annals of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1115–1077 BC) report no fewer than twenty-eight campaigns – year after year, and one year twice – that the king conducted against the nomads whom he called *Ahlamû Aramayē*.⁹ They were pastoralists in the dry steppe between the Euphrates and the Orontes, apparently organised into a kind of federation called the Ahlamû. The Assyrian king boasted that he had destroyed their encampments “from Tadmor in the land of Amurru to Anat in the land of Suhu and Rapiqu in the land of Babylon” (Amurru is a general Akkadian term meaning “West”, and Suhu was a part of the Euphrates valley immediately south of the present Iraqi border). Although these raids continued during most of his reign, they could only have been moderately successful at best. The very fact that the Assyrians bothered with the nomads at all shows that they must have become a serious annoyance, no doubt by raiding the rich Euphrates valley. There is no mention of camels yet, so their camps and herds, slow to move, would have been easily overcome by the Assyrian cavalry. This is the first ever mention of the Aramaeans, people who in the following centuries would settle down, dominating the whole Near East and imposing their language from the Mediterranean Sea to Iran.

The palace of Assurbanipal at Nineveh preserved reliefs from the seventh century BC showing for the first time Arab tribesmen and their camels. The king affirmed that he had routed them in approximately the same region where his predecessor had chased the Aramaeans, but this time the reference must be to an incursion of tribesmen from the depths of Arabia. They are shown wearing only loincloths,

⁶ Arnaud 1982.

⁷ Cf. Bulliet 1990.

⁸ Hitti 1956, pp. 6–17.

⁹ Grayson 1976, 3–4. Cf. Scharrer 2002.

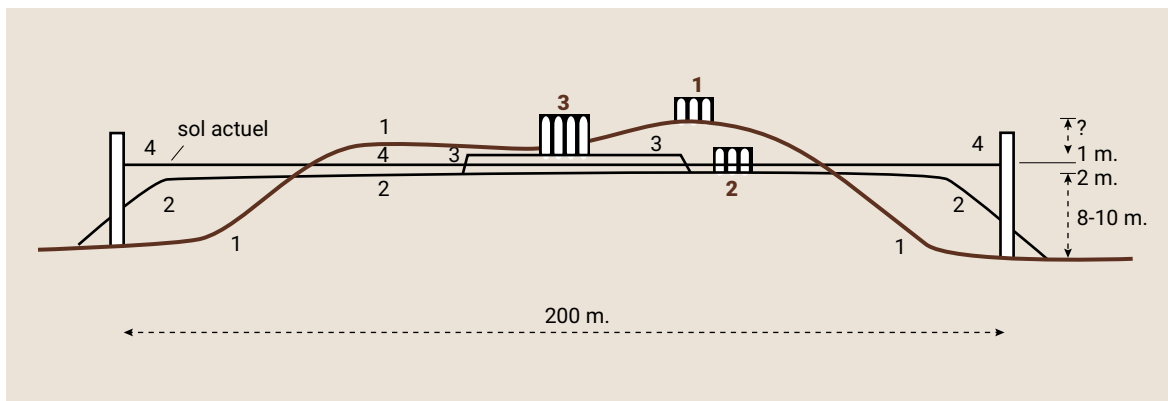


7. Arabs on their camels attacked by Assyrians. Relief from the palace of Assurbanipal, 7th century BC. British Museum, London

their long hair dishevelled by the wind, sitting two by two on camels, and running for their lives before the Assyrian horses [Fig. 7]. The Aramaeans were by then mostly sedentary, ploughing the land and living in towns and villages, while the desert was left open to the new arrivals.

The oldest remains of Tadmor found to date consist of a few sherds as well as a fragmentary ceramic relief of Mesopotamian inspiration, found in two deep soundings made in front of the Bel temple from 1965 to 1967. The results were later reassessed by Michel al-Maqdissi.¹⁰ The temple stood on high ground which proved to be a tell, which is how in the Near East they call artificial hills made from the accumulation of the remains of old buildings. None of these were unearthed so as not to disturb the majestic ruins of the Roman period. The above-mentioned soundings revealed archaeological levels that were 7 m thick, starting 12 to 11 m below the Roman level and going back to the Bronze Age (c. 2250–1200 BC). The settlement was apparently no more than a village, a few groups of mudbrick houses, perhaps protected by a defensive earthen wall, though this is sheer supposition. There were also most probably one or several shrines, marking as holy the ground that was later used to build the monumental Bel temple. Some time in the second or early first century BC, massive earthworks were conducted which removed all remains of the previous one thousand years or so. The levelling was about 2 m deep. A large flat platform was thus created to receive a monumental temple; a few broken columns were unearthed still in place to

¹⁰ Al-Maqdissi 2000; Al-Maqdissi, Ishaq 2017.



8. The stratigraphy of the Bel temple tell, schematic section in the archives of Robert du Mesnil du Buisson, Musée du Louvre. 1. Tell in the Hellenistic period; 2. Hellenistic levelling; 3. Temple of the Roman period; 4. Present level

the east of the temple, probably part of a subsidiary building [Fig. 8]. The oldest inscription in Palmyrene script was offered by the priests of Bel in the year 44 BC; they were officiating at this lost temple.

The temple we know stood 2.7 m above this Hellenistic level. Its foundations destroyed all traces of the earlier temple, except some loose fragments of archaic sculpture recovered from later foundations (see Fig. 171). Around it, there was a large, nearly square courtyard resulting from another levelling.

Some 2 km to the west, the Efqa spring gushed out, giving birth to a stream passing at the foot of the tell. On its way its waters gave life to some gardens of palm and olive trees before vanishing in the marshy and salty ground to the east. Tadmor, unlike many similar places in the Syrian desert, was destined for a great future, but this greatness took a long time to materialise.

The name of Tadmor, which is at least four thousand years old, means nothing either in Arabic or in Aramaic. It must be a remnant from some older language which is, perhaps, not totally unknown. The idiom spoken by the desert population in the second millennium BC (if not earlier), which modern scholars call Amorite, has not been transmitted in writing, but a few words and proper names quoted in the Akkadian cuneiforms allow for a dim idea of it. In particular, the royal name of Zimri-Lim, a king of Mari in the eighteenth century, can be explained as meaning “My protection is (the god) Lim”. The root *zmr* or *dmr*, a three-consonant scaffolding bearing a general sense, one of those on which Semitic languages build most of their vocabulary, is not attested later. As its meaning is “to guard” or “to protect”, I once suggested that Tadmor may be a nominal form (with an equally archaic locative prefix, that of *t-*) describing a “guarding post” or the like. This cannot be proved with any certainty, but other proposals have been much more far-fetched.¹¹

However it might be, when the people of Tadmor started to make their voices heard – and this means in the middle of the first century BC – they spoke and wrote in Aramaic. This language had taken shape about a thousand years earlier, and it is first known from inscriptions left by various minor Syrian kings from the ninth century onwards. They used the alphabetic script of the Phoenicians, marking in principle consonants only, to celebrate in stone their wars, their buildings, and their piety. As this system of writing, with only twenty-two letters, is much simpler than cumbersome cuneiform, it could have been mastered by many more people, and, naturally, documents on parchment or other perishable material must have existed, also for private use.

¹¹ Gawlikowski 1974. See also Maraqtan 1995, p. 91.

When the Assyrian Empire conquered the Aramaic kingdoms one by one and proceeded to deport mass numbers of people in order to resettle the core country of Assyria, Aramaic spread widely, and its advantages were recognized by the state administration. On some Assyrian reliefs we can see scribes recording the booty of the king, these scribes standing in pairs, some writing on clay tablets and some on scrolls, presumably parchment.

With the arrival of the Achaemenid Persian Empire in the sixth century, cuneiform writing was abandoned altogether except for the temple archives of Mesopotamia and otherwise on very rare occasions only. Aramaic, on the other hand, became the working language of the empire and was used for all official correspondence, court proceedings, and book-keeping. As such, the language spread far beyond the lands of its daily use, from the borders of India to the Caucasus and even to Egypt.

The uniform chancery script of the Persian administration survived as long as the Achaemenid Empire itself. It was replaced all over the Near East by the script and language of the Greek conquerors. Native idioms naturally survived in private use, and when Aramaic documents crop up again, they use a range of various styles of writing which had developed in the meantime.¹² So the same language came to be expressed in letters of differing forms: a person from Palmyra could probably readily understand another from Hatra, Petra, or Babylonia, but they had to learn to read each other's writing. Over time, the variant called Palmyrene developed into a monumental script carved in stone, but there also existed a cursive variety for use on parchments and papyri, of which only some wall scratches survive.

Tadmor does not appear at all in earlier Greek sources. The only hint of it is found in a description of the battle of Raphia in 217 BC, written in the following century.¹³ In this encounter between the Greek kings of Egypt and Syria a detachment of camel riders led by a certain Zabdibelos is described as having fought on the Syrian side. The name of the commander is well known later as being typically Palmyrene, so there is a good chance that his men came from the oasis.

The name of Tadmor does, however, appear in a Biblical story about King Solomon allegedly building "Tadmor in the desert" (2 Chron. 8:4). The date of the Books of Chronicles is indeed late, but they repeat and condense the earlier Books of Kings, where we only find a mention of "Tamar in the desert", a locality in southern Palestine. Later scribes added a D above the consonantal TMR, indicating it should be read Tadmor, and this interpretation was taken up by the Chronicles. There is no historical value in this, but it does hint that the real Tadmor was then deemed important enough to be counted among the cities that Solomon founded.

¹² Naveh 1987, pp. 132–162.

¹³ Sartre 2001, pp. 182 and 197.

The coming of the Romans

Tadmor under the Seleucids

After the conquests of Alexander the Great and the wars of succession between his generals, Syria (and a number of other former Persian satrapies) fell to Seleucus, who proclaimed himself king and became founder of a dynasty. Seleucus was also a great city builder: on the Syrian coast he founded Seleucia, a port named after himself, and in 300 BC he founded Antioch, his capital, nearby, naming it after his father or his son (today the city is known as Antakya). Together with Laodicea further down the coast and Apamea-on-the-Orontes farther inland (both names honour the king's wives), these four cities formed the core of the kingdom and its window onto the Mediterranean world. Other Seleucid possessions, at first reaching as far as India, shrank rather rapidly. After the conquest of Babylonia by Parthia (an Iranian kingdom founded by an originally nomadic tribe of Central Asia), which happened in 141 BC, Seleucus' successors were only left with control of Syria. Even this heirloom was rapidly disintegrating, with local chieftains grabbing what they could. In 63 BC, the Roman general Pompey annexed the remainder without opposition as the Roman province of Syria.¹⁴

The lot of Tadmor during this period is unknown. It must have recognised the authority of the Greek kings, at least nominally. A broken inscription partly preserved the Greek word for king, *basileus*, and a few letters without obvious meaning. In later times, the city used the Seleucid time reckoning system, which began in autumn 312 BC, but this system could have been adopted much later from other Syrian cities. At any rate, the oasis was unimportant and no ancient author bothered to mention it in relation to the Hellenistic period, as the modern scholars have agreed to call the time between the conquest of Alexander and the Roman annexation of the successor kingdoms.

However, life went on there. A tomb excavated in front of Zenobia Hotel contained some material from the mid-second century BC.¹⁵ The pottery and coins indicate that the oasis had relations with both the East and West, with both Babylonia and maritime Syria. Recently, some layers of the same period – containing pottery fragments, including stamped wine amphora handles from Rhodes – were identified by a German expedition south of the ancient ruins.¹⁶ This is all we can point to until the middle of the first

¹⁴ Among many general works on the history of the period, see *CAH* VII/1. 16, 1984; Sartre 2001, pp. 372–451.

¹⁵ Fellmann 1970.

¹⁶ Schmidt-Colinet, Al-As'ad 2013, II, pp. 268–276.



9. The oldest Palmyrene inscription, 44 BC. Palmyra Museum

century BC, when we can place, on indirect evidence, the foundation of a small shrine to the goddess Allat on the western outskirts of the settlement.¹⁷

A temple of Bel also certainly existed at this time. Actually, the inscription set up by the priests of this god in the year 269 of the Seleucid era (44 BC) is the oldest preserved text in the local script [Fig. 9].¹⁸ The priests set up a statue of a citizen, Goraimi bar Nebozabad, no doubt in the sacred precinct itself; only the caption remains, engraved in stone (see p. 205).

The first contacts with Rome

By this point, the Roman province of Syria had replaced the Seleucid kingdom. The name Palmyra is definitely Latin. The resemblance of the name Tadmor to *tamar*, meaning “palm tree” both in Hebrew and Aramaic, was certainly noticed and commented upon, as in the Biblical passage quoted above. One can well imagine a Roman officer to whom it was explained that Tadmor sounds close to *tamar* and who thus attached to the Latin *palma* an ending vaguely rendering the Aramaic *-mor* (the letter *y* was pronounced as the French *u*). The modern maps of European colonies are full of such approximations, which make no pretence of philological exactitude. One thing is certain: the name could not have been given by a Greek speaker, because the word for palm tree in Greek is *phoinix*. Still, the new name was regularly used in Greek, being the official name in the Roman provincial rosters. So Palmyra is mentioned under this name in a much later Greek source, though one that describes events in the year 41 BC. In a book on the civil wars of Rome by Appian of Alexandria (mid-second century AD) a curious incident is mentioned.¹⁹ Mark Antony, the Roman general famous in history and literature for his infatuation with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, is said to have sent a detachment of cavalry to Palmyra “close to the Euphrates” (in reality the distance is about 250 km) with orders to loot the city, which had grown rich thanks to the profitable trade between the East and West.

¹⁷ Gawlikowski 2017a.

¹⁸ *Inv.* XI 1965, 100.

¹⁹ Kaizer 2004.

When Cleopatra returned home Antony sent a cavalry force to Palmyra, situated not far from the Euphrates, to plunder it, bringing the trifling accusation against its inhabitants, that being on the frontier between the Romans and the Parthians, they had avoided taking sides between them; for, being merchants, they bring the products of India and Arabia from Persia and dispose of them in the Roman territory; but in fact, Antony's intention was to enrich his horsemen. However, the Palmyrenes were forewarned and they transported their property across the river, and, stationing themselves on the bank, prepared to shoot anybody who should attack them, for they are expert bowmen. The cavalry found nothing in the city. They turned round and came back, having met no foe, and empty-handed.²⁰

This text by Appian has been used rather uncritically by several scholars to argue various points: it was used to prove that Palmyra was an open settlement, perhaps little more than a nomad camp, because Antony's horsemen could hope to take it over; that it must have been quite small if full evacuation was possible at such short notice; that it must have been independent of both powers but an ally of the Parthians to whom the inhabitants turned for protection; and finally, and more importantly, that it was already a hub of caravan trade through the desert between Roman Syria and the Parthian East.

All this is highly doubtful. It looks as if Appian simply admitted that the Palmyra that he was writing about was a thriving caravan city of his day, two centuries later. There is no evidence that this was the case, nor is there any evidence for Palmyra having been then dependent on Parthia. It is not even certain that the oasis at this time was already known to foreigners under the name of Palmyra. Besides, it is unlikely that a small open settlement could have accumulated riches worth the trouble of a looting expedition if these riches were so easy to carry away. Even the mention of archers reflects rather the fact that the Palmyrenes of Appian's time often served in that capacity in the Roman army and were reputed for their excellence in archery. What really happened is open to conjecture.

It is well known that ancient authors were less aware than we are of the changes that time may bring and that they were much more likely to project onto the past the state of affairs of their own day. Moreover, they were prone to using rhetorical statements, often from antiquated sources, rather than making independent enquiries. This can be seen in a famous example that mentions Palmyra. Pliny the Elder, who finished his work in the seventies of the first century (he died in the explosion of Vesuvius that engulfed Pompeii in 79), described Palmyra in conventional terms that would have fit any oasis:

Palmyra is a city famous for its situation, for the richness of its soil and for its agreeable springs; its fields are surrounded on every side by a vast circuit of sand, and it is as it were isolated by Nature from the world, having a destiny of its own between the two mighty empires of Rome and Parthia, and at the first moment of a quarrel between them always attracting the attention of both sides. It is 337 miles distant from Parthian Seleucia, generally known as Seleucia on the Tigris, 203 miles from the nearest part of the Syrian coast, and 27 miles less from Damascus.²¹

Practically nothing in this description is correct. There are not and never were any fertile fields (though collected rainwater could sustain some cultures); the local spring smells of sulphur; even the distances that are given are off the mark. This description suggests that Palmyra was at least relatively independent and that the two powers engaged in frequent competition for its control. This was simply not true

²⁰ Appianus, *Roman History* III. *The Civil Wars* V 9, trans. H. White.

²¹ *Natural History* V 88 XXI, trans. H. Rackham.

at the time of writing, for Palmyra at this point was already firmly part of the Roman province of Syria, and there is no evidence whatsoever that such competition existed before Pliny's time. In fact, he must have imagined the situation he described, in spite of his having had first-hand knowledge of Syria.²²

It is, however, a historical fact that soon after the incident described by Appian, Parthian horsemen rode into Syria under a son of the Parthian king, Pacorus, staying there for two years. Whether this happened in relation to the Palmyra incident is another matter. They might or might not have reached Palmyra, but at any rate there is no reason to think they attached much importance to it. The invaders crossed the Euphrates further north, aiming at the great Seleucid cities of northern Syria. Perhaps they contemplated recovering the rest of the Seleucid kingdom, the major part of which they had already acquired in the East. This never happened, however, and they crossed back over the Euphrates in 38 after the young prince's death in combat. The idea that the action taken against Palmyra in 41 BC was the direct cause of the Parthian incursion must have been Appian's own guess.

As far as we know, no invading army in Antiquity ever crossed the desert via Tadmor. Such a march would have been next to impossible for a larger group of troops because of the scarcity of water and fodder. What would have been feasible for a caravan of camels, provided – as we shall see later on – adequate experience and good relations with the nomads, would not have been achievable by an army of thousands of men and beasts coming as enemies. All the invasions that took place always took the northern route, crossing the Euphrates at or near Thapsacus (later called Zeugma, which simply means “Bridge”, in southern Turkey).²³ This is the same route that most travellers and merchants took since at least Achaemenid times up until the nineteenth century. There was no reason to bother about an oasis lost in the middle of nowhere and make it a bone of contention.

The tribal confederation

It appears that if the oasis was ever independent, it would have been so rather as a result of its isolation and because of neglect from outside powers. Later sources show that it was a tribal society, composed of at least seventeen tribes.²⁴ Some simply bore the name of a common ancestor, as is the case today among Bedouins. These names are mostly Aramaic, for instance Gaddibol, Mattabol, Zabdibol. The man to whom the priests of Bel set up the above-mentioned inscription of 44 BC belonged to the Bene Komare; since the name means “Sons of Priests” in Aramaic, there is good reason to think that this tribe, which became very prominent in later times, played an essential role in the early establishment of the oasis. On the other hand, the Ma'azin were “Goat-herders”, from the Arabic word *mā'iz*, “goat”, suggesting a mixed group of Arab herders that only formed once they had arrived in the oasis. One of the clans of this tribe had an ancestor called Yedi'bel (again, an Aramaic name), who was the founder of the second-century tomb already mentioned.

Yedi'bel's great-grandson founded the shrine to the Arab goddess Allat about a century later, and three generations after him another heir proceeded in AD 11 to open and purify the tomb in order to establish the sanctuary of Baalshamin, a supreme heavenly god brought from western Syria.²⁵ This probably means that he had donated the piece of land on which to build the god's abode. The fact that two supreme god-heads, Bel and Baalshamin, could be worshipped in the oasis side by side is proof enough of the disparate origins of its population.

²² Will 1985b.

²³ Gawlikowski 1996a.

²⁴ Gawlikowski 1973, pp. 31–41.

²⁵ Gawlikowski 2017a, pp. 30–31.

It looks as if Tadmor had already started by then to attract new settlers and to grow in importance. The recent Austrian excavations between the ruins and the Efqa spring indeed found evidence of settled life in the late Hellenistic period. As the new people could only come from the desert, they certainly maintained close links with relatives who still remained under tents. The conditions for the development of the trans-desert caravan trade were thus put in place.

This multi-tribal society governed itself through a body called the “Community of the Tadmoreans” (*gebal Tadmorayya*). We do not know whether this was a general assembly of all the men, or whether it was rather a council of elders, but what is certain is that it represented all the resident tribes and acted in their name. The first mention of this body occurs in another inscription from 11, which was found in the gardens south of the ruins.²⁶ The stone must have been inserted into a mudbrick wall marking the border of the oasis. It is remarkable that the remains of an ancient wall crossing the desert plateau in this neighbourhood were called in modern lore *Sur el-Jamārek*, that is, the “Customs wall”. The text, conceived in rather awkward language, stipulated that the tax on camels passing the wall should go to the “People of the Tadmoreans”, except for the part due to one Atenatan bar Kappatut, no doubt the agent appointed by this body to collect the tax. The oasis remained marginal, not deserving so much as a mention in passing by the geographer Strabo, who at about this time or a few years earlier described Syria in much detail.

The annexation to the province

It seems that in the early days of the Roman province, the native system was left alone by the governors of Syria, but stricter controls were soon imposed. A governor called Creticus Silanus, in office between 12 and 17, took care to fix out in the desert the limits of Palmyra’s territory. Though it comes from a later time, a border stone inscribed in Latin bears his name as that of the author of the original demarcation. It marked the frontier between the pastures belonging to Palmyra and those belonging to Apamea, 75 km northwest of the oasis, in the hills known today as Jabal Bil’as. Another border stone was found 60 km southwest of Palmyra in the direction of Emesa (today Homs), but the exact location of the border between the two cities is not known, as the stone was used in a much later building.²⁷

It should be mentioned in connection with the above that not a single marker indicating the frontier of the Roman Empire has ever been found in any province whatsoever, and this surely means that none ever existed. The Roman *limes* was not a frontier in the modern sense, but rather the zone of the furthest effective presence of the Roman army and administration. On the contrary, the borders between cities and provinces were carefully defined, as they had to do with property and taxes. So when Creticus Silanus fixed the frontier between the two territories, he was considering both of them within the sphere of his authority, even if Emesa was a client kingdom.

Roman rule was confirmed soon after the demarcation by a visit from a military detachment led by Minucius Rufus, the commander of the legion stationed in Cyrrhus in northern Syria. This general must have had a serious and specific reason to go in person all the way from his headquarters at the present Turkish border. It seems likely that his mission was to formally annex the oasis into the province, as Henri Seyrig has convincingly proposed.²⁸ On this occasion, three statues were erected in the sanctuary of Bel: one for the emperor Tiberius, one for his heir apparent Drusus, and one for his nephew Germanicus. All three were inscribed in Latin.

²⁶ Gawlikowski 1993.

²⁷ Schlumberger 1939.

²⁸ Seyrig 1932.



10. The funerary stele of Mabogaios,
27. Garden of the Palmyra Museum

Germanicus was sent to Syria in 18, his mission being to put the empire's Oriental affairs in order. He died there late the next year, so the statues can be dated precisely to 18/19. We know from the tax law of Palmyra (p. 32) that he wrote a letter to a man named Statilius ordering that customs duties should be paid in Roman currency. This direct intervention proves the effective annexation of the oasis. Besides, Germanicus sent a Palmyrene by the name of Alexander on two diplomatic missions: one to a king of Mesene whose name is lost and to the king Orabzes of Elam, both these kingdoms being situated at the head of the Gulf, and the other to Shamshigeram, the "great king" of Homs/Emesa. The envoy was honoured by his native Tadmor with an inscription in Aramaic, which no doubt was accompanied by an honorific statue.

Alexander's mission neatly defines the extent of Palmyra's international relations: from countries at the estuary of the Mesopotamian twin rivers to Emesa in inner Syria. This was the caravan route which made the fortune of Palmyra in the two centuries to come.

The three imperial statues stood somewhere in the courtyard of the sanctuary. When the old temple was later replaced by the great monument that had survived to our times until it was blown up by Daesh, the statues were moved to the podium of the new temple, and the accompanying inscription was copied underneath. That this was done shows the importance that was attached to the moment when Roman power was established in the oasis.

A recently found tombstone was set up for a young soldier named Mabogaios by two of his comrades in arms from a unit raised in the territory of Damascus [Fig. 10]. The man died in 27, during the reign

of the emperor Tiberius.²⁹ We do not know for sure whether his *cohors Damascenorum* was stationed in Palmyra at this early date, but it seems very likely: the heavy monument could hardly have been set up by horsemen just passing through the oasis. Later, a regiment of mounted archers of the same name was at the garrison in Judaea. At any rate, Palmyra was by then firmly ensconced in the Roman province and was certainly paying its share of tribute to the authorities in Antioch, the provincial capital, just as any other Syrian community would have been doing. There was no room for jockeying between Rome and Parthia, as Pliny had imagined.

The institutions of Palmyra remained for the time being the same as before Rome's intervention. We have clear proof that this was the case from a statue that was erected in the sanctuary of Bel in 25.³⁰ As with several other early inscriptions, the dedication was copied about a century later from a free-standing pedestal, not preserved, to a column of the square courtyard of the temple, on its southern side:

In the month of Siwan of the year 336 [June 25], this is the statue of Maliku bar Nesha bar Bolha Hashash, from the tribe of Bene Komare, which was set up by the treasurers and the community of the Tadmoreans, because he was agreeable to them and to their city and to the house of their gods.

The Greek version that follows is shorter and contains no date. It was probably added only after the inscription had been copied. The treasurers were clearly the executive body of the community. The same man was also honoured by a statue in the same Seleucid year (November 24 by our reckoning); the inscription was likewise later copied on a column. This time the statue was offered by "all the merchants who are in the city of Babylon", because Maliku called Hashash "gave from his purse more than anyone else for the building of the temple of Bel". When the text was copied, a short Greek résumé attributed the dedication simply to the "people of the Palmyrenes". Three years earlier, the same Hashash had reconciled two quarrelling tribes, his own and the Bene Mattabol, and, as their common chief, "took good care of their affairs, great and small".³¹ Mediation of this kind, by a rich and influential citizen, suggests that there was no permanent authority in the oasis. It was not the Roman governor in faraway Antioch or a Roman military officer that assured peace among the tribes, but a local potentate acting apparently on common agreement.

The last mention of the *gebal Tadmorayya* is dated to 51. In this case, too, the text seems to have been copied close to the end of the century.³² The inscription honours one Moqimu bar 'Ogeilu, also known as Hokkaishu, for his offerings to the temple, as in the case above. Here, however, the main text was conceived in Greek, while the Aramaic is much shorter. The statue was offered by the city (*polis*) and the contributions of the benefactor are enumerated with precision: he gave a golden vase for liquid offerings as well as a golden incense altar, together worth 150 denarii; four golden cups worth 120 denarii; and bedding for the banqueting couch of the gods, the value of which is lost. This lavish equipment for the temple of Bel served for the daily sacrifices and perhaps for the ritual of the holy marriage of Bel and the goddess 'Ashtart.

The habit of erecting statues in recognition of private generosity or of other merits towards the welfare of the community was well established at this early date. We can only suppose that such decisions were taken at meetings of the tribes, either open to all or only to the elders. The officials who administered

²⁹ Gawlikowski 2010b.

³⁰ *Inv.* IX 12; *PAT* 1353; *IGLS* 17.

³¹ *Inv.* IX 11; *PAT* 1352; *IGLS* 16 and IX 13; *PAT* 261.

³² *Inv.* IX 8; *PAT* 269; *IGLS* 18.



11. The basin from the Efqa sanctuary offered by two curators in 38/39, reused as a baptismal font. Palmyra Museum

the public treasury (*'enoshta*) were apparently only charged with executing the motions to such effect, just as any other public undertaking. A “house of archives” is mentioned in a couple of very fragmentary inscriptions, as are some elected officials of particular tribes. One function of general interest was the supervision of the Efqa spring; the “chief of the spring” was chosen every year by the god Yarhibol, probably through some rite of divination or drawing of sorts, and the same god provided him testimony at the end of his term. In one case at least, there were two chiefs at the same time [Fig. 11]. Duties of the appointees were no doubt related to the cult, but very likely they also supervised the distribution of water in the oasis, a task of utmost importance that was strictly regulated until very recently. We know nothing about any authority, elected or otherwise, who administered the city. Soon, however, a major reform was to take place.

The city of Palmyra

The Council and the civic tribes

Some time in the course of the first century, Palmyra became a city in the Greek sense, with typical institutions such as a council (*boule*) and two archons elected for each year. The first known instance of such powers is inscribed in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic on a free-standing column dated April 74 [Fig. 12]:³³

The Boule and demos for Hairan bar Bonna, also called Rabb'el, decorator in the buildings of the gods and a patriot, have set up for him this statue in his honour, in the month of Nisan, year 385.

The three versions make it possible to safely complete the missing letters. The Latin text reads *Bule et civitas Palmyrenorum*, whereas the Aramaic simply transcribed the Greek terms *Boule* and *demos*. No longer were the “community of the Palmyrenes” just “the people”, but they were also a “city”, a citizen body organised according to the general norm of the empire. It is not clear whether the man whose likeness stood on top of the column was indeed a master sculptor or rather a generous donor for the long-term undertaking of the Bel sanctuary. The priests of Bel had already offered him another statue, or maybe even two: the relevant inscription gives two dates, the years 56 and 60; unless it is a simple mistake, this could consist in two separate dedications to the same man, copied from the original pedestals on a more recent column in the sanctuary.

Later, the Council honoured its secretary (*grammateus* in Greek, simply transcribed into Aramaic):³⁴

This is the statue of Zabdilah son of Shamshigeram Iyusha, the scribe who loves his city and in every matter was agreeable to his city and moreover in his office of scribe conducted himself with justice. For this reason the Council set up for him this statue, in the month of ... year 387 [75/76].

³³ PAT 1356; Inv. IX 20; IGLS 12.

³⁴ PAT 1375; Inv. X 39; IGLS 214.



12. The column of Hairan Bonna with a modern statue impersonator

The scribe was more than the name implies. Not only was he responsible for the minutes of the proceedings, but also for giving form to the resolutions of the Council. The executive officers, not mentioned in this text, were called archons; there were two each year, and they were accountable to the Council. We do not know how many councilors there were, and very few of them are known by name. Normally, they would have served for life. At the creation of the Council, one would expect that it was the most distinguished citizens – the heads of the principal clans and families enjoying wealth and public respect – who were invited to join this body. Later on, successively, former officials would have been co-opted. There were also elected officials other than the archons, such as the *agoranomos*, who was responsible for the orderly functioning of the market, and certainly others as well, who took care of different aspects of the city's life. All these people were expected to dispose of considerable means and to use them for the public good. This system replaced a general assembly of citizens with a body of officials with clear responsibilities who were easy to control by the provincial governor. In later inscriptions, the *demos* is not always mentioned after the Council; there was no legal reality behind any such mention, and the Council acted in the name of the “people”, who were always referred to with the Greek name in order to avoid the old word *gebal*, “community”, which had had legal powers.

A parallel reform of the tribal structure was introduced. Archaic Tadmor was a confederation of tribes based on parentage.³⁵ Some of these tribes may have been numerous and powerful, whereas others ranged from small to insignificant. There were no fewer than seventeen such groups, but maybe more, as they are always referred to by the expression “the sons of NN”, which also applied to the children of one father.

³⁵ Gawlikowski 1973, pp. 26–41.

Fourteen, however, are sometimes called *fahd*, literally “thigh”, but in Arabic also used in the sense of “tribe”, conceived as the descendants of a common ancestor. Their names reveal their mixed origins, some harkening back to a distant past, some suggesting that the tribe in question had only recently settled in the oasis. An interesting case is that of the Bene Komare; the name means “Sons of Priests”, and the tribe itself seems to have formed as a hereditary priestly tribe, from the Aramaic *kumra*, “priest”. In Greek they are called the Chomarenoi, a simple transcription, but they are once referred to as the Chonitai, from the Canaanite *kohen* of the same meaning. Because some fragments of religious texts seem to be in a dialect akin to Phoenician, the latter name may be very old indeed, though there are no grounds for holding that a Phoenician trading colony settled in the oasis in the Persian period.³⁶ On the other hand, I have already mentioned the Ma‘azin, the “goat-herders”, who seem to have been a grouping of late arrivals of various origins but who shared in the beginning a pastoral mode of life. Other tribes, however, bear the name of an ancestor, as is usual in traditional Arab society to this day, but the names of these ancestors were Aramaic. Names of Arabic etymology do occur in Palmyra, and it cannot be doubted that many of the nomads around the oasis, as well as some settlers, originally spoke some form of Arabic. A handful of graffiti in so-called Safaitic script belong to an Ancient North Arabic dialect different from, though closely related to, Classical Arabic. It seems that the assimilation of those who settled in Tadmor was rather complete.

Under the new regime the whole civic body was divided into four units called “the four tribes of the city”. We know the names of only three of them, and these were adopted from existing old tribes; they were the “Goat-herders” (Bene Ma‘azin), the “Sons of Priests” (Bene Komare) and Bene Mattabol (referring to a personal name). It can be safely admitted that these old tribes formed the core of the new creations, enlarged by the inclusion of other – presumably less numerous – clans, which were not abolished altogether but continued to be referred to in inscriptions, even if less and less often as time passed. The four tribes were presumably of equal or comparable numerical strength and perhaps based in distinct neighbourhoods. Such a system was first introduced in Athens in 508 BC and adopted by many ancient cities: the new tribes were artificial and in the Roman period usually named after various gods and sometimes emperors of the moment; the retention of traditional names is peculiar to Palmyra.

The four tribes are only known from a few inscriptions concerning individuals whom the Council voted to honour by way of four statues which were placed in the four sanctuaries belonging to the four tribes. These sanctuaries were as follows: the “Holy Grove” of the gods ‘Aglibol and Malakbel, administered by the Bene Komare; the sanctuary of Arsu of the Bene Mattabol; that of the goddess Atargatis of unknown patronage; and finally, two sanctuaries of the Bene Ma‘azin, that of Baalshamin and that of Allat, the relevant statue being placed in one or the other. We do not hear of the four tribes in any other circumstances, but it is obvious that they must have been essential in city politics, especially in the elections of the Council and magistrates. Even if the relevant inscriptions are all dated to the second century, these four new tribes were certainly introduced before the first mention of the Council in 74. There is no doubt that the reform in Palmyra was imposed by the Roman authority. Palmyra became a “Greek city”, to quote Maurice Sartre, taking up the new institutions, in spite of its having preserved its distinct culture and keeping Aramaic as its official language alongside Greek translations.³⁷

While the change certainly occurred between 51 and 74, it is perhaps possible to define the date more precisely. The evidence is admittedly slight, but it is convincing. A tower tomb was built in the northern necropolis in the year 79/80 by one Maliku b. Moqimu b. Bolbarak Hawmal, clearly a Palmyrene for many generations, who declared himself as belonging to the tribe of Claudias.³⁸ Unfortunately, none

³⁶ As proposed by Garbini 1996.

³⁷ Sartre 1996. Cf. Gawlikowski 2003.

³⁸ PAT 471; *Inv.* VII 6; *IGLS* 461.

of the other members of the well-known Hawmal clan has mentioned the tribe he belonged to. At any rate, the Claudias tribe could only have been so called under the emperor Claudius (41–54). This name is never mentioned again, so it must have been a short-lived designation, for some reason put forward much later by Maliku Hawmal. It should be indicated that the inscription of the year 51, which mentions the old “community of the Tadmoreans” for the last time, also used the term *polis* for the first time. It seems quite possible that the Greek term replaced the old one only when this inscription was recopied on a column of the Bel sanctuary about the end of the first century. As the reform of the tribal system was a prerequisite for the creation of a *polis* in the classical sense, the creation of the four tribes should go back to the years between 51 and 54.

Taxes

I have already mentioned a collector of tolls on incoming camels in 11. This man was a local and had a contract with the community, which was certainly represented by the treasury. The oasis was apparently independent from any powers, fiscal or political, from outside. However, as soon as the Romans took over, they imposed their taxes. In a Roman province, each dependent community had to pay a fixed sum to the provincial treasury. Because there was no state apparatus for their collection in the early Empire, taxes and fees were adjudicated to the highest bidder, who contributed the offered sum to the treasury in advance and then tried by means fair or foul to get it back with profit from the taxpayers. Called publicans, these professional collectors formed societies investing in this very lucrative business, usually taking up the taxes of a whole province. In Syria and Egypt, however, the revenue offices were rented one by one. A publican or his agent (often a former slave) charged passage fees, taxes on professional activities, and other dues for the city, putting aside the imperial tribute and not forgetting his own profit.

We know by name three such agents, all of whom were freedmen of Roman citizens and built themselves tombs in Palmyra. Only the foundation plaque remains of the one belonging to L. Spedius Chrysanthus and his family, the inscription being in three languages: Latin, Greek, and the shortest one in Aramaic.³⁹ The British Museum keeps a double tomb portrait, inscribed in Greek, of one C. Virius Alkimos and his wife, Viria Phoibe, both of them the freed slaves of someone called Virius (see p. 235, Fig. 215), unless it was Alkimos who freed his concubine after becoming free himself. This stone received little attention until a chance find in Palmyra brought to light another trilingual inscription mentioning the same Alkimos, this time with his partner T. Statilius Hermes, who together built a tomb in 56/57, one year before Chrysanthus, for themselves and their families.⁴⁰ This means that at least three collectors were active at the same time. Alkimos is mentioned later in a rescript by the governor Mucianus, who was in office between 67 and 69, while Hermes must have been a freedman of one Statilius, whom Germanicus had ordered forty years earlier to raise taxes in Roman currency. Alkimos and Hermes formed a team and contracted fees on products imported into or exported out of the oasis, on terms that were confirmed by the governor Mucianus upon his having received complaints: *Because quarrels about taxes have had arisen between the Palmyrenes and Alkimos the preceptor, I have decreed that the tax shall be collected according to the tax adjudicated there by Alkimos and his companion, according to the law.*

Mucianus' ruling quoted some earlier regulations, decided by his predecessors. Much later, to cut short any misunderstandings, the Council decided to put together all the precedents, together with the new regulations, into one document, the famous Palmyrene Tariff of 137 (see pp. 35, 267). The part

³⁹ PAT 591; Inv. VIII 57; IGLS 536.

⁴⁰ Gawlikowski 1998.

of it called “old law” was an agreement between the city and the publicans, concluded in the presence of the governor Marinus (or Marianus), otherwise unknown and of uncertain date. This agreement was supplemented by the rulings of later governors, first Corbulo (60–63) and then Mucianus (before 69), and attached to the law promulgated in 137, which was meant to complete the earlier usage and make it more precise. While the activities of Alkimos and his colleagues were formerly controlled by the governor of Syria, who imposed his will on the city, the new law was negotiated by the city with the publicans, apparently without the governor’s intervention. This does not mean that any future complaints on this matter would not be submitted to the governor for judgment, as would be the case for any other lawsuits falling under his authority.

Palmyra within the Empire

In the meantime, the Roman Near East was the theatre of great upheavals.⁴¹ In 66, a Jewish revolt in Palestine evolved into a full-fledged war, which culminated in 70 with the conquest of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple. This traumatic event changed forever the history of the Jewish people and the practice of the Jewish religion; even today it is an essential factor in the modern conflict. The destruction of Jerusalem also earned Palmyra the enmity of the Talmudic tradition, which maintains that 8,000 archers from Palmyra took part in the desolation of the holy city. They could well have been levied by the Roman general Vespasian to beef up his army. Vespasian himself was proclaimed emperor by his legionaries at the news of the death of Nero and left to fight his competitors in 69, taking Mucianus with him. The war continued with his son Titus, who had under his orders the Spanish general Ulpius Traianus and his son, a junior officer who was to become the emperor Trajan.

Traianus senior soon became governor of Syria, remaining at this post between 73 and 78.⁴² Under his watch the petty kingdom of Emesa (Homs) was annexed, and a road was traced between Palmyra and the fortified town of Sura on the Euphrates. We learn this from an inscription on a single milestone set up 16 miles (27 km) east of Palmyra (see note 27), but it is obvious that the road must have continued west of the oasis toward Damascus and Palestine. This was not one of those rightly famous Roman paved roads, rather a marked desert track with some stations along it, but in case of need it allowed for the rapid transfer of troops to the Parthian border.

The son of Traianus became emperor in 98 after being adopted by the ageing emperor Nerva who only ruled for two years. Trajan’s reign was one of war and annexation: he conquered Dacia (today Romania) in 106, and later that same year he annexed without combat the Nabataean kingdom centered in modern Jordan. The new province of Arabia also included Bostra, today in southern Syria, and vast swathes of deserts: the Negev, Sinai, and Hijāz, today in four modern states. A few years later Trajan embarked on the conquest of Armenia and Mesopotamia. He reached the head of the Gulf and was received by the king Attambelos, the last of the line of native rulers of Mesene, a kingdom in Lower Mesopotamia with its capital in Charax Spasinou, which was named after its first king, Hyspaosines, in the third century BC. The emperor is said to have made on this occasion a melancholic remark about his wish to sail to India were he as young as Alexander. He installed a Parthian prince as king in Ctesiphon, but a general uprising ruined his success, and he died soon afterwards in 117.

Trajan left no traces in Palmyra, though the Agora was probably laid out during his time (see pp. 95–99). However, a monumental column crowned with statues of Trajan and his adoptive father,

⁴¹ On the Roman Syria in general: Millar 1993; Sartre 1991, 2001; Ball 2000; Sommer 2005.

⁴² Bowersock 1973.

Nerva, was erected at the border between the territories of Palmyra and Apamea, fixed already in the early years of the first century and confirmed on this occasion in the year 102. An outline of an inn rather than a fort, a walled square with rooms surrounding a courtyard, was seen close to it in the 1930s. This probably means that the whole length of this road, the link to the provincial capital Antioch, had been arranged anew by Trajan, just as his real father had done before with the Euphrates road. More famously, he also laid a new road extending further south to the port of Aila (Aqaba, on the Red Sea). Palmyra thus became included in a network of roads linking it to the rest of Syria and beyond.

No one ever attempted to fix the territory of Palmyra to the south. In this direction the desert stretched deep into the Arabian Peninsula, making such delimitation entirely pointless. The nomads who haunted these solitudes were beyond any control and largely left alone. To the east, the desert was less forbidding and used seasonally by the Palmyrenes as pasture grounds and even for agriculture nearly as far as the cultivated Euphrates valley which belonged to the Parthians on both sides of the river. Palmyra could claim practically the whole Syrian desert, over 300, maybe 400 km east to west. The reality of this control depended not on regular administration but rather on more subtle understandings based on a network of relations and parentage.

From the Roman point of view, this was the best solution possible. Trying to sustain military control of the territory would have been costly and wasteful since there was no danger of an invasion. The Parthians would never have tried to cross the desert, always following the river valley to the settled land in northern Syria. Nomad tribesmen from the desert were best kept in check by people who knew them well.

Before his imperial advancement, Trajan became legal guardian of a boy called Publius Aelius Hadrianus, like him from a Roman family long established in southern Spain. Having himself been adopted, Trajan adopted Hadrianus as his successor. Hadrian took over in 117 and reigned for twenty-one years before adopting in his turn the next emperor and obliging his adoptee to follow his example. (Both Trajan and Hadrian were homosexuals and so had no sons to care for.) With Hadrian came the golden age of the empire. It lasted for sixty years, and the three successive emperors who reigned during this time are known collectively as the Antonines. It was at this point that an unworthy son inherited the purple. But let us return to Palmyra.

Hadrian embarked during his reign on a spell of journeys around his empire and was received everywhere with revels and festivities. He visited Palmyra in 131 and honoured the desert city by giving it his name: as of then it was called Hadriana Palmyra, and its citizens could identify themselves as *Hadrianoi Palmyrenoi*. The same distinction was given to several other cities in various parts of the empire, but the favour was not linked to any special privileges. In the case of Palmyra, Henri Seyrig concluded that Hadrian's decision made it a free city – free, that is, to use its own laws but also free in the sense of being exempt from the imperial tax. This great scholar was followed by most authors until Maurice Sartre demonstrated that there is no evidence for any change of status, fiscal or political.⁴³ As in any other city, the Council and the magistrates of Palmyra took care of local affairs as they had done before, and they were still subject to imperial legislation and occasional interventions from the governors. Free cities were in principle outside of the provincial administration, but only some of them received an exemption from taxation, and if they did it was usually only temporary and due to there having been a major disaster. Nothing suggests that Palmyra enjoyed either – or both – of these favours.

The imperial visit is recorded by an inscription in honour of the builder of the new temple of Baalshamin, on a bracket of one of the columns in the pronaos, this column once having held his statue. The temple is said to have been built in 130/131, coinciding with Hadrian's visit,⁴⁴ but the bilingual

⁴³ Sartre 1996.

⁴⁴ PAT 305; *Inv.* I 2. In November 130 the emperor was still in Egypt.

inscription and the statue were set up only after his death seven years later; we know this because the inscription refers to him as a “god”. I give here the translation from the Aramaic, which is more complete, the Greek adding only the surname of the man:

By a decree of the Council and the people, this statue of Male, also known as Agrippa, son of Yarhai Lishamsh Ra'ai, who was twice secretary and when the god Hadrian came here gave out oil to the citizens and to the military and foreigners who came with him, and was pleasing to the city in everything, and built the temple and the pronaos and its whole decoration from his own means for Baalshamin and for Durah[lun and Belti...] from the Bene Yedi'bel, in the month of ..., year [4]42.

Male Agrippa, the secretary of the Council on two occasions (thus, probably elected for one year each time), contributed from his own pocket to the certainly very steep costs of the visit, distributing oil to the imperial retinue and to his fellow citizens. Oil was principally used in bathing and as food, being considered one of the first commodities in the ancient world. We may only guess that the oil came, at least in part, from Male's own plantations in the oasis. Besides, he offered the new cella in the sanctuary of Baalshamin, by then over a century old (see p. 128). This small Vitruvian building with its colonnaded porch stood practically intact except for the roof until the barbarians from Daesh blew it up in August 2015. It was a symbol of the city's assimilation of the classical forms of architecture, even if the gods worshipped in it remained traditional (their names are supplied from another inscription). It was probably the clan of Yedi'bel, mentioned at the end in this damaged and unclear context, that offered the ground to build the original sanctuary, thus retaining a marked role in its day-to-day life.

The customs law

In April 137, still under Hadrian, the Council promulgated the famous Tariff, a bilingual decree meant to put in order all sorts of indirect taxes collected by the publicans on contract with the city. The Aramaic version is the longest known inscription in this language.⁴⁵ Here follows a translation of the Greek preamble. After the imperial titulature, the date, and the names of the president of the Council, the secretary, and the two archons, it runs:

Since in former times most of the dues were not set down in the tax law but were exacted by convention, it being written into the contract that the tax collector should make his exactions in accordance with the law and with custom, and it frequently happened that disputes arose on this matter between the merchants and the tax collectors, it is resolved that the magistrates in office and the *dekaprotoi* should determine the dues not set down in the law and write them into the next contract, and assign to each class of goods the tax laid down by custom; and that when they have been confirmed by the contractor they should be written down together with the first law on the stone stele opposite the temple called Raba-seire; and that the magistrates who are in office at any time and the *dekaprotoi* and syndics should take care to see that the contractor does not exact any excess charge.
(trans. John Matthews, with one minor change)

⁴⁵ PAT 258. Cf. Matthews 1984. The most up-to-date edition is Shifman 2014.



13. The Tariff in the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

This inscription was engraved in four columns on an enormous stone plate 5.5 m wide and 2.8 m high. It was discovered in 1882 by a Russian prince, Abamelek-Lazarev, and removed in 1901 to St Petersburg by the Ottoman sultan's leave [Fig. 13]. In 2011, the author of these pages was able to identify the exact original location of the monument and the remains of the chapel of the god Rab'asire at the foot of the Agora.⁴⁶

The *dekaprotoi* were a standing commission of the ten most senior councilors, whose principal charge was to maintain financial control; the syndics represented the city in the courts. The law is titled "The law of the *limen* of Hadriana Tadmor and of the water sources of Aelius Caesar". *Limen* is Greek for harbour, but in Roman administrative parlance it meant an emporium, a place of exchange, even if it was not, as obviously here, a real port. As to the water sources, Palmyra had at its disposal Efqa, the natural spring, which had a sacred character and would hardly have been renamed in Hadrian's honour, and two underground channels fed by aquifer layers west and north of the oasis. Only the first has been studied [Figs 14–15], its head having been identified at the place called Ruweisat, which is 9 km away, under a hill crowned with a Herakles statue standing on a column. The northern channel, called Biyar el-Amye ("Wells of the Blind"), has been inaccessible in recent years. Both aqueducts were named after the emperor, and perhaps they were financed by him on the occasion of his visit. Both are solid underground channels built in ashlar blocks. An early visitor has been able to visit the western one, going down a staircase of 16 steps and noticing the Greek letters which marked the stones of the channel 2 ft wide and 8 ft high.

The law is only concerned with local traffic, fixing the taxes for importing and exporting various kinds of common goods as per camel, carriage (counted as four camels), or donkey (half of a camel load). Traffic within the city's territory, which, as indicated above, was very large, was free of charge. The law also lists

⁴⁶ Gawlikowski 2013.



14. A view of the western aqueduct



15. Part of the underground channel of the aqueduct

the taxes on prostitutes, shopkeepers, and ambulant sellers. The tariffs are moderate except for the charge on the use of water (800 denarii yearly), but it is not clear whether this sum was due from each household or exacted otherwise.

This is followed by the dispositions of the old law, being the agreement between the city and the collectors concluded at an unknown date in the presence of a governor. A later agreement with the collector Alkimos was confirmed by Mucianus between 67 and 69. It seems to have remained in force, the taxes probably remaining the same in the new regulations and not repeated. The damage to the text in each language does not allow for a complete comparison. The earlier arbitrage of the governor, who did not intervene in 137, does not prove that the city status had changed. His only responsibility was to deal with the questions or complaints that were brought before him.

Neither the old nor the new legislation had anything to do with the caravan trade. Mucianus decided that for each camel brought from outside the city's territory, loaded or not, a denarius would have to be paid. This also seems to have applied to caravans coming from afar, but the goods they carried were of the competence of imperial agents acting for the imperial treasury.

The caravans

Palmyra was a caravan city. This label comes from the great Russian émigré historian Mikhail Rostovtzeff, who, in a book written in 1932, applied the name to four cities of the Roman Near East: Palmyra, Dura-Europos, Petra, and Gerasa.⁴⁷ Today, most scholars agree that only Palmyra deserves this distinction.⁴⁸ The caravan ventures of the Palmyrenes started in the first century AD when they took advantage of the *pax Romana*, the peaceful conditions that prevailed (even if often troubled) at that time in the Mediterranean world. This stability created a huge common market (much larger than the European Union of our day, though ancient and modern economies cannot be compared).

The new road

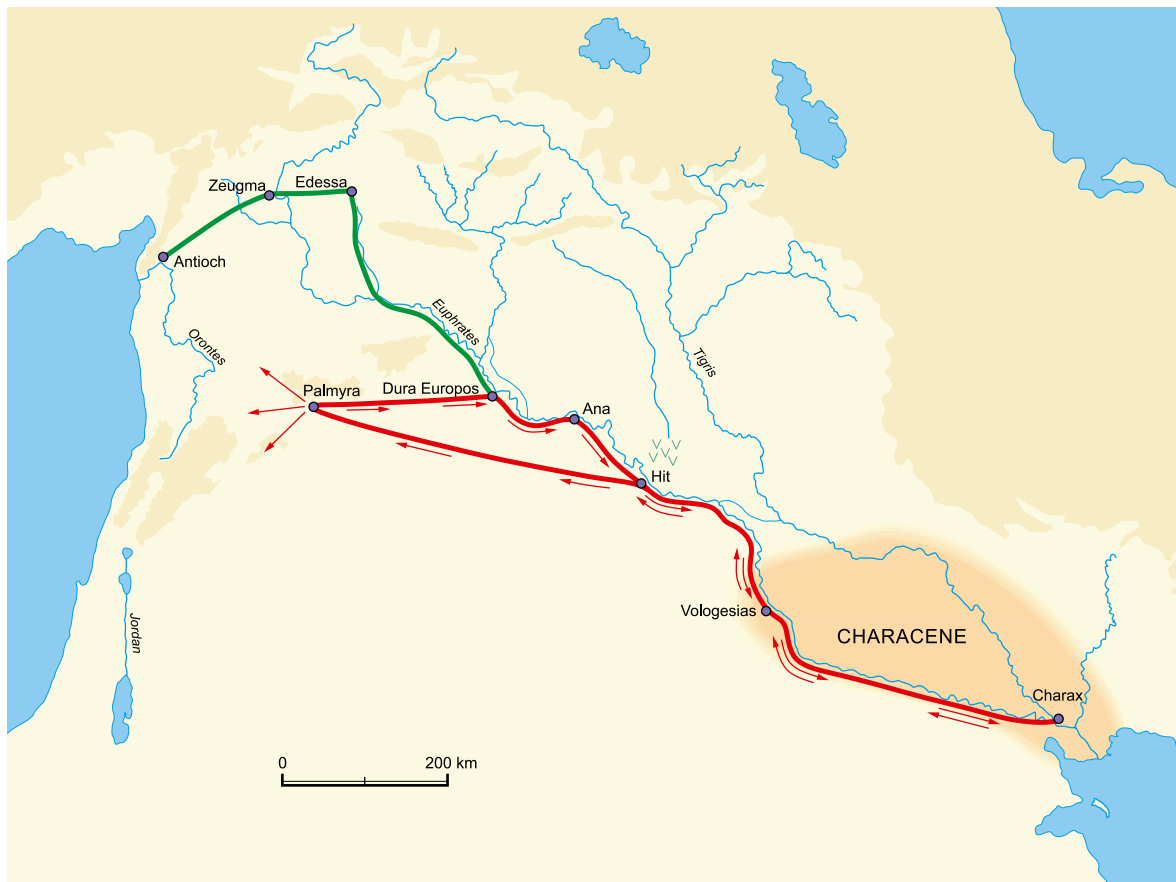
For millennia, the main land road from Syria to the east passed through the area where the distance between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean was at its shortest. At least since Persian times, this point of passage was at Thapsacus, later called Zeugma (in Greek “link” or “bridge”), now in Turkey. Of course, this did not concern Palmyra in any way. Writing at about the turn of Christian era, the geographer Strabo, using information collected during his extensive travels in earlier years, did not so much as mention Palmyra. Instead, he spoke of caravans going through the desert between the Tigris and the Euphrates, in order to avoid the exactions made by the tribal chieftains controlling the river valley.

The annexation of Palmyra to the province allowed the oasis to develop a short-cut from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean [Fig. 16]. Already, the legation of Alexander from Palmyra sent by Germanicus to the Gulf countries (see p. 26) strongly suggests that this part of the world was familiar to the Palmyrenes. Shortly afterwards, in 19, a statue was set in the Bel sanctuary for a citizen who had contributed to the building of the new temple. As usual, only an inscription (seriously damaged) remains.⁴⁹ The restored text in Greek and Aramaic states that this honour was awarded by merchants from Seleucia, who were both Greek and Palmyrene. It is generally admitted that the Seleucia in question was the great Greek city of that name on the Tigris. However, there were many Seleucias in the former Seleucid lands.

⁴⁷ Rostovtzeff 1932.

⁴⁸ Teixidor 1984; Will 1992, pp. 57–102; Young 2001, pp. 136–186.

⁴⁹ Gawlikowski 2016a, p. 19.

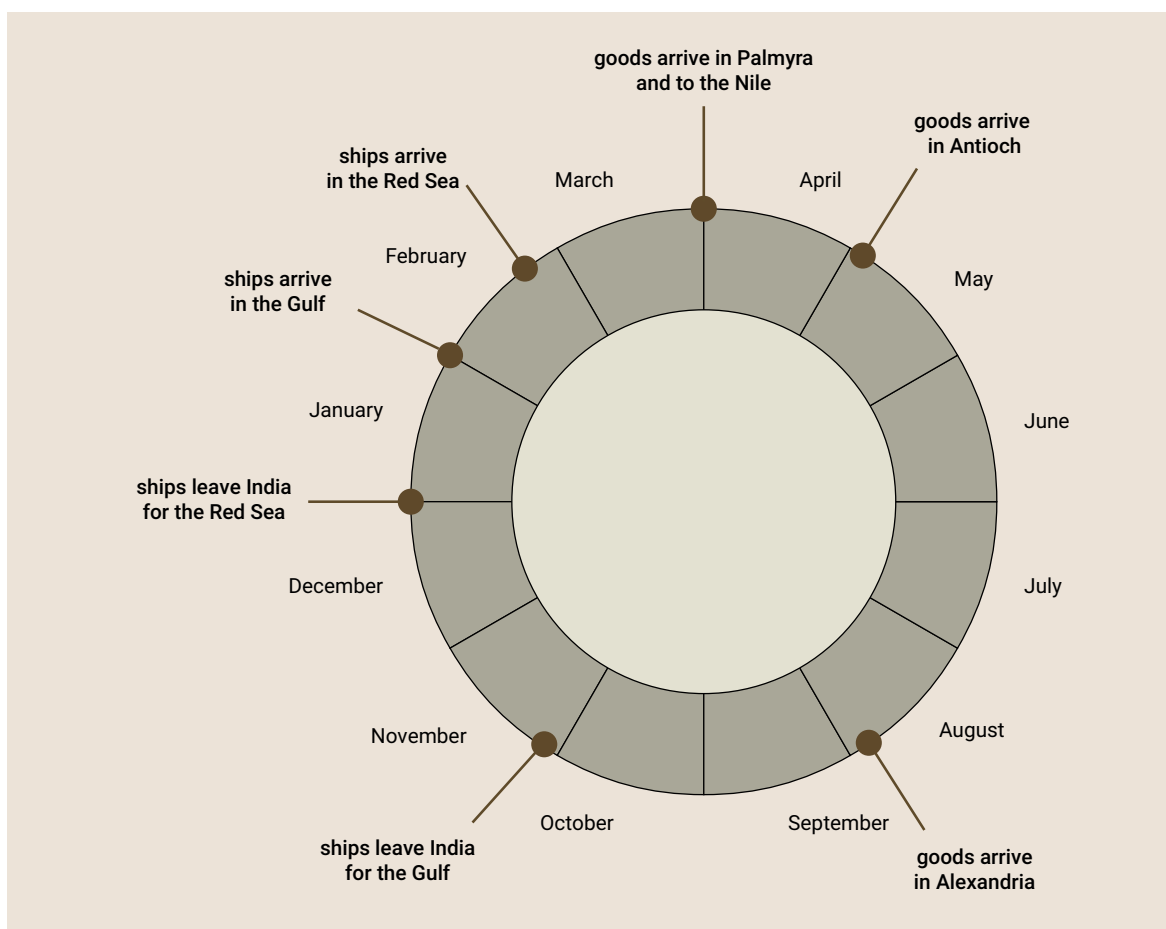


16. The two roads between the Gulf and the Mediterranean. In darker colour the probable extent of the kingdom of Mesene, also called Characene

Seleucia-on-the-Tigris was a Greek city close to Ctesiphon, the capital of Parthia, not far from present-day Baghdad. The special interest in Palmyra of the merchants in this city – not to mention the presence there of Palmyrene merchants – would seem to indicate that the caravan route led from Palmyra to the heartland of the Parthian monarchy and presumably beyond, towards Iran and Central Asia, along what in modern times has been called the “Silk Road”. This preconceived idea and the suggestive image of long trains of camels crossing the immensity of Asia clearly lay behind the restorations of the incomplete text. All this is written on sand.

On the contrary, we have specific and sustained evidence of the route leading to the head of the Gulf. There, the kingdom of Mesene (Maishan in Aramaic) was the turning table of commerce in exotic commodities brought by sea from India.⁵⁰ In 24, only five years after the sole mention in Palmyra of Seleucia, another contributor to the new temple was honoured by “the merchants who are in Babylon”. As with Seleucia, this is the only mention in Palmyra of this ancient city. Indeed, it was rather derelict at the time. Later, all caravans passed through the new city of Vologesias, which was founded nearby, downstream on a branch of the Euphrates, before reaching the city of Charax, the capital of the Mesene kingdom. Babylon lay on the same route. This is the only eastbound destination that we hear about later. In the course of the first century, we have four more texts concerning statues set up by Palmyrene merchants in honour

⁵⁰ Schul 2000.



17. The restored calendar of the Indian trade

of some of their countrymen, three of which specifically mention Charax as the start of their journey back home. This meant of course going beyond the *limes*, into the Parthian sphere of influence, if not Parthian territory, to make contact with merchants and sailors arriving from India and eastern Arabia. The risks and dangers of the route certainly justified the acknowledgments of those who protected and helped the merchants on their way. Unfortunately, the nature of services involved is usually not mentioned. These men could have been leaders of caravans, commanders of the caravans' armed escort, or they could simply have provided funds without ever leaving Palmyra.⁵¹ No doubt, every caravan was a large enterprise putting together the means of many merchants in order to hire men and camels and to acquire the goods for sale or cash for buying the desired commodities. Huge amounts of credit were probably necessary to make each caravan possible, as well as arrangements equivalent to insurance. We know next to nothing about all of this, but it would not be surprising if the city gave security assurances of a type, whether financial or military in nature or both. The expected profits would have justified the risk.

The caravans must have been seasonal because they indirectly depended on the monsoons of the Indian Ocean [Fig. 17].⁵² The caravans were probably leaving Palmyra about March/April to board in Mesene the ships sailing to India with the summer monsoon. The ships left India in about November

⁵¹ Seland 2016; Will 1992, pp. 58–102.

⁵² Seland 2011.

with the winter northeast monsoon to arrive in the Gulf in about January. Taking into account the time that would have been needed to take care of the formalities, a caravan could have left Charax for a one month-long trip to Palmyra not earlier than March, as the winter months were not a good time for travel on land. All of this is of course highly theoretical, but it seems reasonable to posit that there was just one great caravan every year or several travelling at about the same time.

The goods brought back from the East were charged by the Roman government with a massive 25% tax on luxury imports. Products from Arabia, India, and from further east fetched very high prices in the West. They were charged according to their estimated value upon reaching Roman territory. Because of the separate tax that was most certainly to be paid in Mesene, and because of the high cost of land transport, this road must have been more costly than the direct sea link between India and Roman Egypt. While the profit margin may have been smaller, it must have been sufficient to sustain the desert route from the Gulf.

Costs and risks

While the imports arriving at the Egyptian desert ports on the Red Sea were evaluated and sent under seal to Alexandria, where the tax could be paid by the financial establishment of this great city, the situation of Palmyra was different: this was the first city on Roman territory and an emporium capable of raising the customs dues. We know by name two second-century collectors residing in Palmyra; in Greek these men were called *tetartones* (“man of a quarter”). Both were foreign to Palmyra, as publicans usually were.

By a strange stroke of good fortune we have the draft accounts of another, who did not sign them, but who was certainly a local man; he scribbled the text of his accounts with a sharp object on plaster inside a dark tower tomb, where the writing was noticed by the author’s teenage son (it was at his eye-level).⁵³ The tower referred to here is unfortunately one of the seven that has recently been destroyed. The account covers one unspecified month, no doubt coinciding with the arrival of one or several caravans, and it mentions the sum total counted on this occasion: 3,728 talents and some change listed in detail, all the way down to single obols. The sum is high (nearly 90 million sesterii in Roman currency) but entirely plausible: it is about three times more than the value of the load of one ship sailing from India to Egypt, as recorded in a papyrus (the so-called Muziris contract).

The caravans needed armed escorts on their way to and from Mesopotamia to protect them from desert robbers. As did nomad tribesmen, the travellers always went about armed, carrying spears, bows, and sometimes swords and shields. Bows and arrows were contained in sheaths attached to the saddle behind the rider. We see persons so attired on many votive reliefs, either as desert gods or as their human worshippers [Figs 18–19, see Figs 178–179]. The richer townsfolk, when on the caravan track, could have worn cuirasses, too. It appears that irregular troops from Palmyra patrolled the desert or that they were even garrisoned at some outposts. The ruins of such stations have been identified, and though none have been excavated, inscribed reliefs found in some of them leave no doubt that they were manned by staff from Palmyra. Irregular troops commanded by officers called *strategos* kept the nomads in check, allowing safe passage for the caravans and also making possible other uses of the extensive territory nominally dependent on Palmyra. A stone found in the Qaara depression (in present-day Iraq) some 200 km southeast of Palmyra asks that six “reapers who have come to the limits with Abgar son of Hairan” be blessed and remembered; there is no date. Obviously, the harvest followed the sowing, and in the meantime someone had to guard the fields, probably a Bedouin chief who expected a share of the crops. In

⁵³ My first interpretation stands corrected by De Romanis 2004.



18. An armed camel rider in full gear. Palmyra Museum



19. A mounted god as a desert archer. National Museum, Damascus

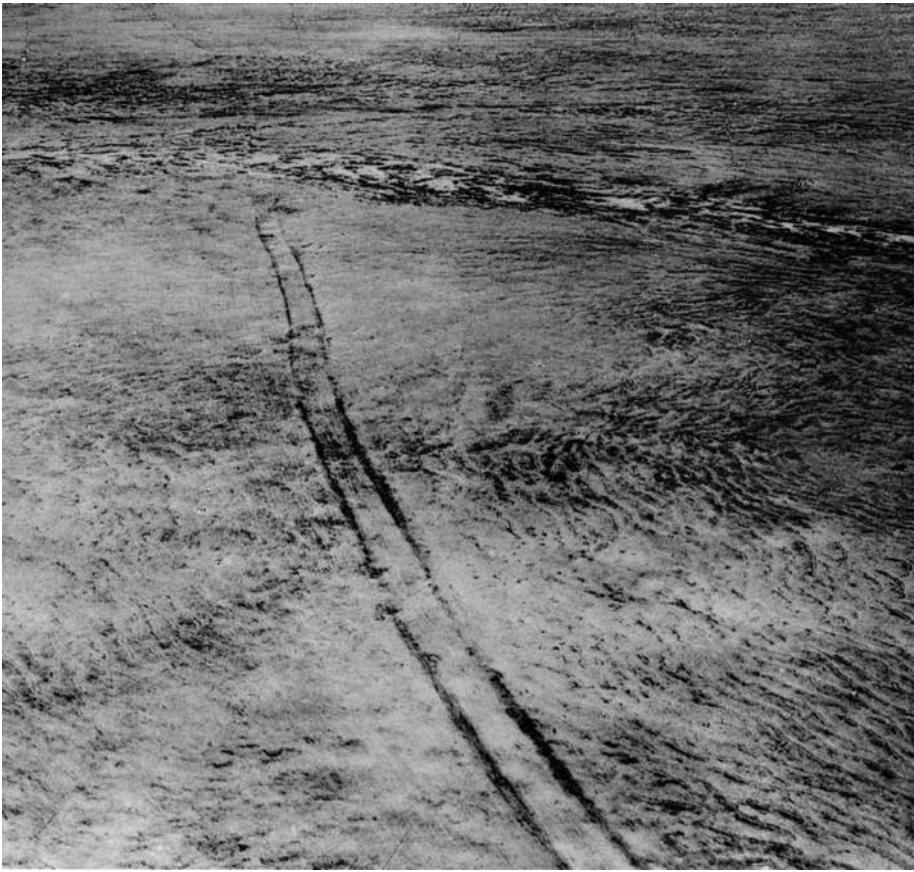
the recent past, the villagers of Tadmor used to sow some fields out in the desert; either there was a harvest or there was not, depending on whether it rained. The risks were divided between the participants in the venture. Another stone, found 140 km east of Palmyra, is dated 90. It is inscribed on a large flint boulder dressed as a stele (*masseba*) by one Hagegu bar Yarhai from the tribe of Bene Komare, when his brother 'Ogga was *strategos*. We have here a clear case of an armed native force stationed in the desert.⁵⁴ As a matter of fact, both the station of Bir Jal'ut, where it was found, and the Qaara basin are situated on the long track heading to the Euphrates. The aerial survey carried out by Antoine Poidebard in the 1930s discovered, on Syrian territory, a 120 km stretch of a straight path hardly visible from the ground today [Fig. 20].⁵⁵ The surface was cleared of stones so as to make an easy track some 12 to 18 m wide to manage the camels' hoofs. The Iraqi section of this road was surveyed, also from the air, by Sir Aurel Stein. The possible terminus was the city of Hit on the Euphrates, which is known as the limit of the water transport upstream.

I think this track was mainly used on the way back from the Gulf and that it started where the Wadi Hawran joins the river below the modern dam of Haditha.⁵⁶ A dozen Palmyrene inscriptions were found along the wadi some 30 km from the river and about 400 km from Palmyra. They are dated 98 and commemorate a group of herdsmen under a *strategos* called Zebida bar Hawmal. Indeed, the camels had to be guarded on the winter pastures waiting for the merchants coming up the river who then had to load up the goods and form a caravan heading back home. On the way from Palmyra to the Gulf, it would have been sensible to use the waterway of the Euphrates. There existed in Palmyra a guild of artisans that

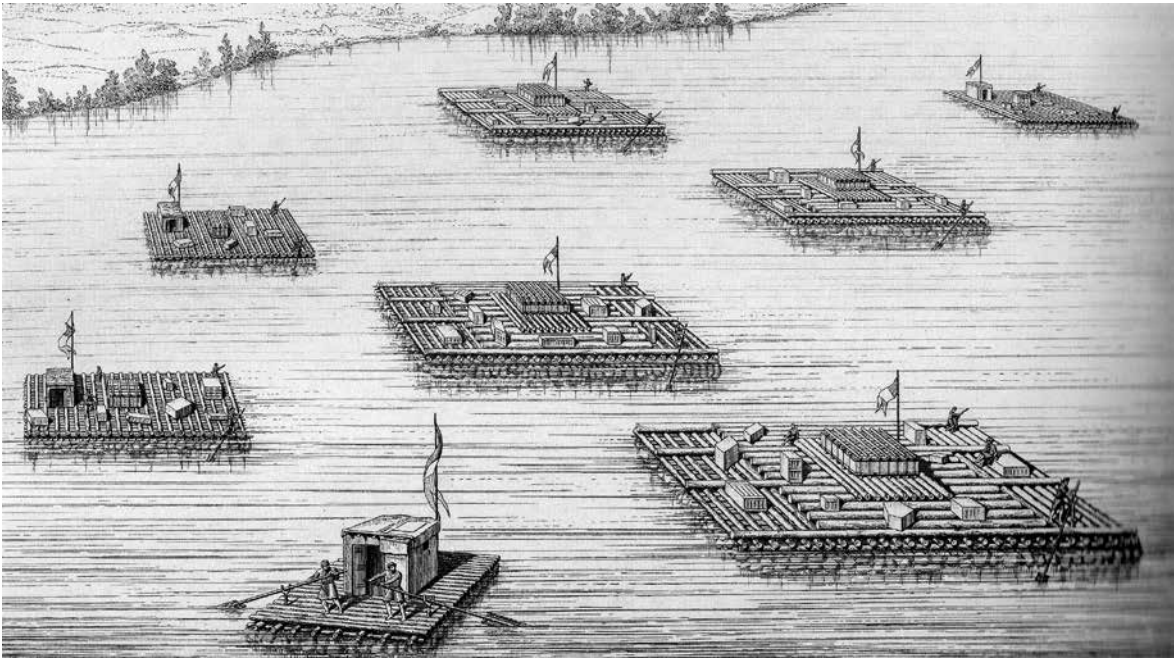
⁵⁴ PAT 2730–2742; Al-As'ad 2005.

⁵⁵ Mouterde, Poidebard 1931.

⁵⁶ Gawlikowski 1983, 1988.



20. The track from Palmyra to Hit, seen from the air in 1930



21. Traditional transport on the Tigris: the Khorsabad antiquities, before being lost in the river in 1855 (engraving by Eugène Flandin)

specialised in making goat-skin floaters such as carried rafts on the Euphrates well into the nineteenth century [Fig. 21]. The caravans could have boarded them at Dura-Europos, the closest point on the river (250 km from Palmyra), where a colony of Palmyrenes is well documented. A camp near the island city of Ana housed a mounted force, and at least one of these cavalrymen was a Nabataean who on his way back home in 132 left an altar in Palmyra dedicated to his tribal god. We do not know whether his comrades in arms were from Palmyra, but this seems quite possible.

Some modern scholars have insisted that Palmyra enjoyed autonomy within the Roman Empire, making it possible for the Palmyrenes to negotiate an understanding with the Parthians about the movement of the caravans. That such an informal understanding existed is indeed probable; it certainly would have been mutually beneficial. But there can be no doubt that Palmyra was just a city like any other within the Roman province of Syria. As in other cities, the police duties would have been taken care of locally. In Palmyra they were certainly more developed than elsewhere because of the particular conditions of the desert, but no independent policy would have been tolerated. Palmyra was well a subject of the empire.

Special relations

How come, then, the merchants of Palmyra were able to circulate freely on and along the Euphrates? How come their archers were allowed in the Euphrates valley, even if these irregulars were no match for the Parthian army? A possible explanation is offered, unexpectedly, by a spectacular find in Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, close to the royal capital Ctesiphon.⁵⁷

In 1984, the Italian archaeologists who have been excavating Seleucia for several decades found a bronze statue of Herakles of a type created in the fourth century BC by Lysippos. This fine example of a Greek sculpture was, however, not made in the great Greek city of Seleucia. On both thighs of the hero, an inscription is engraved in Greek and Pehlevi, revealing a historical fact hitherto unknown:

In the year 462 of the Greeks [150/151], the King of Kings Arsakes Ologasos, son of the King of Kings Miradates, made war in Mesene against King Miradates, son of Pakoros who was king before, chased King Miradates from Mesene, and conquered the whole of Mesene. And this bronze statue of Herakles the god he removed from Mesene and set up in this temple of Apollo the god, which is in front of the Bronze Gate.

This rather crude text is a literal translation from Pehlevi, the language of the Parthians. King Vologases, in Pehlevi *Volgash*, fourth of the name, ruled from 148 to 192. King *Meredates* (so spelled on his coins) was already known from an inscription from Palmyra dated 131, but we did not know that he was a member of the Arsacid dynasty.

When Hadrian became emperor after the death of Trajan, he immediately decided to abandon his predecessor's conquests in Mesopotamia. However, it appears now that this was not a simple evacuation; Vologases had to accept serious concessions. A cousin of Vologases became king of Mesene as a Roman client, and another cousin, Parthaspates, whom Trajan had made king in Ctesiphon, while removed from this position, was offered by the Romans the petty kingdom in northern Mesopotamia whose capital was Edessa. The Parthian king had to accept Roman puppet rulers on the southern and northern flanks of his capital. This arrangement enforced peace with Parthia for forty-five years, even if the two Roman clients did not last that long.

⁵⁷ Bowersock 1989.

This explains several long-known facts that were puzzling. From 131 to 161, some twenty caravan inscriptions are known, and more are mentioned in these texts, all by or in the name of merchants who had returned from the Gulf: nine of them mention Charax, six mention Vologesias, while still others are incomplete.⁵⁸ Later on, there are but a few. The numbers are too low to permit a statistical approach, but it is clear that these years were the heyday of the caravan trade. In 131, the merchants honoured a fellow-countryman whom King Meeredates of Charax (so spelled on this occasion) appointed as satrap of the Thilouanians, that is, the inhabitants of Tilouos or Tylos (the modern island of Bahrain). Two other Palmyrenes were archons in the kingdom, one in the city of Forat, which was close to the capital, the other “of the Mesenians”, so probably of the whole kingdom. The appointments, used by these officials to favour the merchants from Palmyra, are a very obvious sign of a special relationship and of dependence on Rome.

Another patron of the caravans went so far as to build a temple of the Roman imperial cult in Vologesias.⁵⁹ This city, named after a Parthian king of this name, was not a neighbour of Seleucia, as it was once thought, but was situated on a branch of the Euphrates below Babylon and almost certainly belonged to Mesene:

In the month ... year 457 [145/146], the Council and the people for Soados son of Bol-yades son of Soados son of Taimisamsos, pious and patriot, who on many great occasions sincerely and generously assisted the merchants and the caravans and the citizens, and because of this received letters of testimony from the late emperor Hadrian and the divine emperor Antoninus his son, and also a decree of Publicius Marcellus and his letter, and letters of governors who came after him, was honoured by decrees and statues by the Council and the people, by single caravans and by all the citizens, and now as the only one of all the citizens by his home city for his continuous and repeated good deeds with four statues on columns erected at public expense in the *tetradeion* of the city, and with three other statues in Spasinou Charax, in Vologesias, and in the caravan station of Gennaë by the Council and the people, and who built in Vologesias a temple of the emperors and consecrated ... and for whom, for his faithfulness and magnanimity, was given the whole power ...

The Aramaic version is too damaged to be quoted, except for the date, which is missing in the Greek version. It is surmised that Soados (Sho‘adu) was appointed head of the Palmyrene colony in Vologesias, but it is also possible that he administered this city on behalf of King Meredates. In any case, the fact that there was a temple of the imperial cult beyond the limits of the Roman Empire is extraordinary and goes to show the client status of the king.

The station of Gennaë (Aramaic for “gardens”) is most probably the place where the column with the inscription was found, close to a well, 22 km southeast of Palmyra; today it is a desolate desert site known as Umm el ‘Amed. It is uncertain as to what the *tetradeion* was; the name means something like “foursome” and was understood as to be a name for the agora square, where many statues on columns were erected, though it seems more likely that it was the four sanctuaries of the four tribes of the city that were meant. In later years, the four tribes repeated these honours for others, but the four temples were enumerated. Another inscription in honour of Sho‘adu two years earlier accompanied one of the four statues offered by a single caravan, as indicated in the Council’s decree mentioned above (see p. 134).

It is remarkable that even after the Parthian conquest of Mesene in 151 the caravans continued to circulate. No fewer than seven statues were erected after this date to honour Marcus Ulpius Yarhai, but all

⁵⁸ Gawlikowski 1994.

⁵⁹ Mouterde, Poidebard 1931; Milik 1972, pp. 12–14.

seven were only the result of two caravans which returned safely, the first in 157 and the second in 159. In these years, some Palmyrene merchants even owned ships on the Gulf and sailed to India, obviously with the acquiescence of the King of Kings, and came back with these two caravans protected by Yarhai. His Roman names make it practically certain that his father was a military man under Trajan. He himself could have been a Roman officer, or he could have commanded an irregular Palmyrene force escorting the caravans. The new powers in Charax found it advisable to let them come and go, either for trade profits or not to provoke Rome, or for both of these reasons. The last caravan before a lengthy pause was led by a brother of Sho'adu. After its return in the summer of 161, a contractor of the quarter tax was offered thanks; this contractor was also a councilor of Antioch. Named Asclepiades, this publican must have gone out of his way to help these merchants to merit their gratitude.

The next year, King Vologases invaded Armenia, defeated the Roman troops that he met there and installed his candidate on the Armenian throne. The challenge was taken up by the new emperor Marcus Aurelius, and the Roman armies soon won the upper hand, destroying Seleucia and Ctesiphon in 164. Upper Mesopotamia became Roman again and the city of Dura-Europos was annexed, with a garrison of Palmyrene archers. The caravan traffic did not come to a complete stop, but it seems to have been much less intensive. During the one-hundred-year period following 161, we can only indicate five dated caravan inscriptions: in 193, 199, 211, 247, and 258. This does not take the place of statistics, of course, but the fact that there were about twenty caravans during the thirty-year period preceding the war is striking and hardly accidental. The trip seems to have been at times less easy:

By decree of the Council and the people, these four statues of 'Ogeilu bar Maqqai 'Ogeilu Shewira were made for him by the four tribes in his honour, because he was agreeable to them in his many strategies against the nomads and in his assistance to the caravans he mounted with, because he took from his own means great sums and helped the merchants in every way, and led his career with distinction and magnificence, in the month of Tebet 510 [January 199].

The four statues were set up side by side on a stone ledge fixed to a wall of the Agora.⁶⁰ The *strategos* 'Ogeilu had to secure the desert tracks accompanying the caravans "mounting" back to Palmyra from the Gulf, incurring great expense in the process. He certainly commanded a local militia, as regular units were always led by Roman citizens, and 'Ogeilu was not one. The nomads (mentioned only in the Greek version) had obviously become a serious threat. This may have resulted from some tribal movements in Arabia about which nothing is known. The Parthians, for their part, did not seem to hinder the trade too much, as they no doubt profited from it.

It is remarkable that in Palmyra merchants enjoyed a high status unequalled in the rest of the Empire. The Romans in general held trade activities in disrespect, leaving work of this kind to lower social groups, though many an aristocrat employed his freedmen to do business for him. In Palmyra, caravan leaders and patrons were offered honorific statues more often than any other group, including the elected officials of the city: while there are twenty statues related to caravans, there are only twelve for city officials. There is no doubt that profits from the caravan trade made the oasis prosperous. The rich merchants were probably, at least in part, the same people who took up offices in the city and sat in the Council. These authorities appointed *strategoï* to command the mounted irregulars who protected the caravans, considered common ventures of the city and not just private enterprises.

⁶⁰ PAT 1378; Inv. X 44.

What did the caravans carry?

The inscriptions say nothing about the goods imported. Judging from what we know about the Roman eastern trade,⁶¹ they included Far Eastern spices, principally pepper, but also ginger, cardamom, aloe, nard, and many other exotic goods; also Indian muslin cloth, Chinese silk (brought to India by land), many varieties of precious stones, and pearls from the Gulf. The common denominator would have been the high price to be had in the West and the limited volume and weight. In the opposite direction the Western goods carried by the caravans might have included glass, purple-dyed textiles, and, in spite of the heavy weight of clay amphorae, perhaps wine as well. At any rate, the costs of transport were higher for the Palmyrenes than for the merchants who reached Egypt by the Red Sea. If they wanted to remain competitive, they would have had to take a cut in their profits.

Upon having reached Palmyra, the caravans were not allowed into the city. Contrary to popular imagination, they never passed along the Great Colonnade or other streets, even if the absence of pavement would have made these avenues easy for camels to tread. One of the pioneers of Syrian archaeology, René Dussaud, pointed out that in Ottoman times large herds of camels were kept outside the city of Iskanderun (Alexandrette), because of the insupportable smell. That this was so in ancient Palmyra, too, is not a mere supposition. Back in the 1990s, Jean-Marie Dentzer and René Saupin made use of a set of aerial photographs taken sixty years earlier by the *Aviation française du Levant*. On these photographs, they were able to identify dozens of structures consisting of rooms lining the four sides of large courtyards, all of them to the north of the area that was built up, in the vicinity of the tombs.⁶² The traces of these structures have since disappeared, as they have been systematically exploited for building material for the modern town. They cannot have been anything but inns and storage facilities in one, a typical feature known in the Islamic age as *khan* (in Turkish *karavansaray*). This is where the goods must have been unloaded, taxed, and exchanged, at an easy distance from the city but well outside of it. Only one such building has been excavated, located at the far, west end of the Valley of the Tombs [Fig. 22].

We have no hint about the caravans going west from Palmyra. This should not be surprising, as this destination was safe and could be covered by individual merchants leading a few camels or donkeys. A good part of the Oriental luxuries were probably sold locally in Syria, and there is no obvious port which could have exported the goods brought from the East via Palmyra. The shortest way to the coast goes through the city of Emesa (Homs), which flourished at the same time as Palmyra, and through a gap between the mountains of Lebanon and those of the Alawite range. To find a port city, however, one had to turn either south or north, to Tripolis or Arados, and neither of these cities was particularly significant in Roman times.

In spite of the great importance of caravans in Palmyra's economy, it is clear that, as in any other ancient city, trade alone could not have sustained the community. Palmyra commanded a huge territory which could have been put to use, at least in part. The hills to the northwest have been surveyed and a score of sites were excavated in the 1930s by Daniel Schlumberger, especially the high tableland of Jabal Shaar, which in modern times is only used as seasonal pasture.⁶³ There were no perennial springs there, and the ancient settlements depended entirely on winter rains collected in cisterns. Schlumberger thought that the farms he found had been used to breed horses for the caravans and the armed forces of Palmyra. This remains likely, but the recent survey by a Norwegian team led by Jørgen Christian Meyer has identified many more settled sites, sometimes as close to each other as 3 to 5 km. They were sustained

⁶¹ Young 2001.

⁶² Dentzer 1994; Byliński 1995.

⁶³ Schlumberger 1951.



22. A *khan* in the Valley of the Tombs

by elaborate systems of water catchment allowing cultures of wheat and barley to flourish; no doubt vegetables were also grown [Fig. 23].⁶⁴ The city of Palmyra received supplies from these farms, which were probably owned by rich townspeople and maintained by their tenants. The *Tariff* mentions these supplies as having been free from tolls, unlike the commodities brought from beyond the frontiers of the territory, such as wine, salted fish, fruit, and so on. Small shrines excavated by Schlumberger yielded ample evidence of an Aramaic-speaking population which worshipped the gods of the desert, often with Arab names, gods who were much less represented in the city. But there are also traces of other people: a small number of so-called Safaitic inscriptions in an old Arabian dialect testify to the presence of nomadic shepherds from southern Syria. They probably brought their flocks to graze the harvested land. They would have been tolerated because the animals' droppings fertilised the fields, but small forts along the tracks show that they were closely controlled. And these visitors had to pay for the grazing rights: the *Tariff* stated that the collecting agents could, if they wished, brand their animals, no doubt to see which had already been paid for.

The part of the country that has been surveyed is only a fraction of what might have been exploited, especially in the hills north of Palmyra. Palmyra could have lived without the caravans, but it would not have been rich without them.

⁶⁴ Meyer 2017.



23. The dense ancient settlement pattern in the hills northwest of Palmyra

A Roman colony

Roman citizens

All free Palmyrenes were citizens of their city and not of Rome. The privilege of Roman citizenship could be awarded as a special favour by the emperor, though this was only done very sparingly, or through military service. The legions were in principle only open to those who had been born as Romans, though exceptions were made during times of war. Those who served in the auxiliary units received Roman citizenship after twenty-five years of honourable service; at this point, they could settle into civilian life wherever they wished. The citizens of Palmyra mostly took up arms as mounted archers, and it was in this capacity that they became famous in the Roman world. They served as native units in places as far apart as Numidia or Dacia (corresponding to parts of modern Algeria and Romania, respectively), but also in Egypt and closer to home, in Dura-Europos on the Euphrates.⁶⁵ Just over twenty inscriptions from Palmyra mention Roman citizens;⁶⁶ those dating from the first and second centuries concern, there is no doubt, veterans of the army (with one probable exception, see p. 149), such as ten Ulpia who were granted citizenship by Trajan, or ten Aelia, who owed this to Hadrian. The three cases of that period that we know of in which other Roman names appear all belong to active military officers. It looks, then, as if remarkably few Palmyrenes chose to come back to their native city. Many must have stayed in the province where they had served; once they were demobilised, they often married locally and a replacement was simply recruited there to fill the ranks. At home, even very important public figures did not enjoy Roman citizenship. The veterans could have stayed under the Roman eagles as officers, but we only have evidence of nine equestrian prefects, that is, commanders of auxiliary units, who were of Palmyrene origin. They rose higher on the Roman social scale than any of their contemporary fellow Palmyrenes.

Then, in 212, the emperor nicknamed Caracalla bestowed his own name, Aurelius, on all his free-born subjects who were not yet citizens. At the same time, he apparently raised Palmyra to the status of a *colonia*, to the same effect. A range of cities beyond the Euphrates had received the same privilege some years earlier, under Caracalla's father.⁶⁷ The reasons were strategic: the cities recently retaken from the Parthians were to be confirmed in their attachment to Rome. Unlike in the old colonies, there was no population change, no veteran settlers. The citizens of Edessa, Nisibis, or Carrhae became Romans overnight, and

⁶⁵ In general, see Southern 2007, on the Palmyrene auxiliaries, pp. 123, 143.

⁶⁶ Schlumberger 1942.

⁶⁷ Millar 1990.

their cities adopted colonial institutions: a council and two *strategoi* who were elected each year. When the same thing happened in Palmyra, no real change was needed in the administration; instead of two archons, two *strategoi* were elected, apparently with the same or similar powers. Everybody except slaves became Roman citizens. Probably out of reverence to the mother of the ruling emperor, Julia Domna, a native of the neighbouring city of Emesa, the Palmyrenes adopted the double name Julius Aurelius.

Naturally, in the Empire at large, those who were citizens before this, including the old Roman aristocracy, did not change their names. And yet, all the Palmyrenes that we know of after this date (with one important exception) were *Julii Aurelii*. One theory, formulated in 1942 (note 66 above) and generally accepted ever since, has it that all the Roman names acquired earlier were exchanged in Palmyra, and perhaps also in Emesa, for those of the ruling emperor and of his mother. This would be a striking exception in the whole Roman Empire; conceivably, it would be a decision made by the city Council submitted for imperial confirmation. It is of course possible that no descendants of earlier citizens survived into the third century; at least there is no mention of them having survived in the extant inscriptions. There were very few of them anyway, most of them certainly or probably army veterans. In the third century, the auxiliary regiment stationed in Dura was called the “Twentieth Cohort of the Palmyrenes”.⁶⁸ (As it is improbable that the other nineteen cohorts were also originally recruited in Palmyra, we should rather think about twenty or more such units being levied at the same time in various places). The Twentieth Cohort was a *cohors milliaria*, counting in principle about 800 infantry and 240 horsemen or camel-riders levied in Palmyra probably in 165 and sent to the newly conquered Dura-Europos. Later on, the ranks were filled locally, with not all the soldiers being from Palmyra. After the Caracalla edict, they all became *Aurelii*, of course, but some also mention another name acquired earlier.

In Palmyra itself, we are still waiting for an inscription that clearly shows that a family swapped names in 212. We do know, however, of one family that did not. They got their Roman name *Septimius* from the emperor *Septimius Severus*, who died in 211, and they were promised a great destiny.

The new adversary

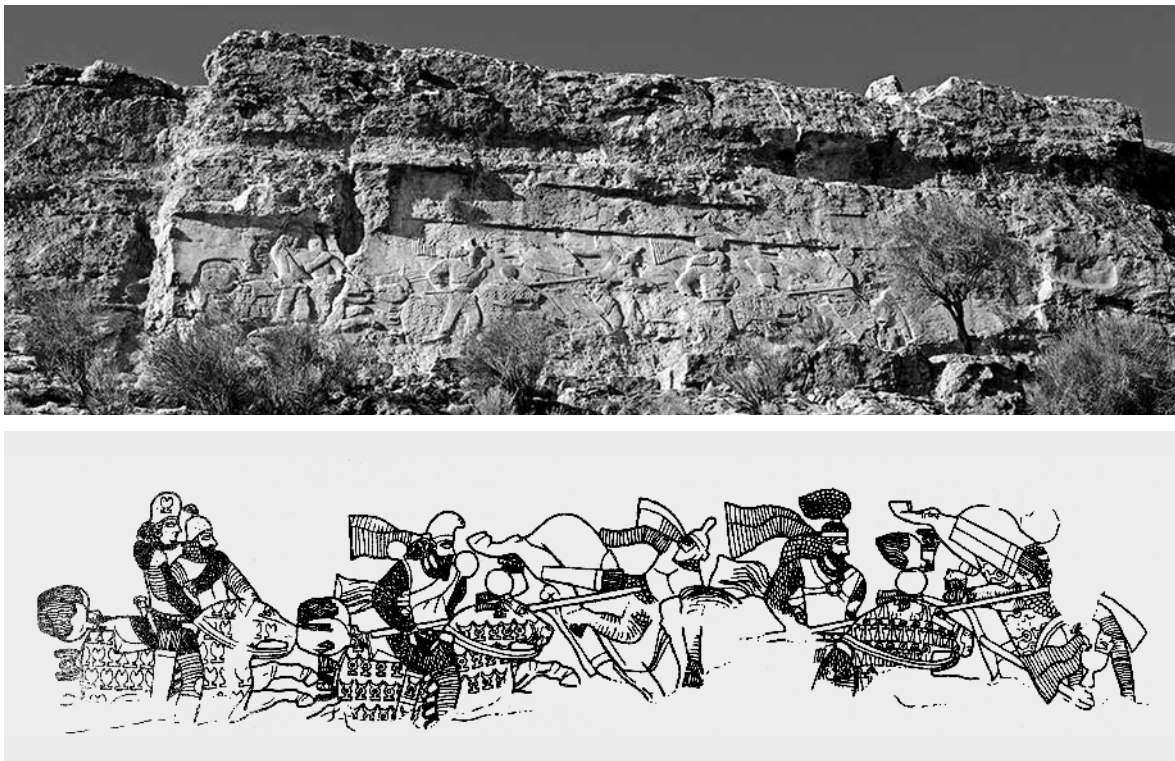
The Parthian war of *Severus* in the last years of the second century resulted in the annexation of a further downstream sector of the Euphrates valley. The island of Ana, which even before this had seen Palmyrene archers camped on the Syrian shore opposite, received a garrison under a *strategos* who commanded both the island and a place on the shore. His lieutenant, also a Palmyrene, is known from an ex-voto offered in 225 in a desert station far in the direction of Palmyra.⁶⁹ On the left bank, a Roman fortress was built in Kifrin not far away,⁷⁰ and several smaller islands in mid-stream were no doubt occupied, too. Later on, Ana was the first Roman city conquered by the Persians. Together with Palmyra, the new acquisitions belonged to the province of Syria Phoenice, with Tyre serving as the provincial capital. This province was one of the two resulting from the partition of the old province of Syria by *Severus*, who was anxious to prevent usurpations by governors who had grown too powerful, like the one he had to deal with at the beginning of his reign. Dura-Europos belonged to the other Syrian province, which was governed from Antioch.

The last emperor of the Severan dynasty, *Alexander*, tried to contain a new menace from the East. A petty ruler from Fars (southwestern Iran) named *Ardashir* managed to eliminate one by one other

⁶⁸ Dirven 1999, pp. 12–15.

⁶⁹ PAT 2757.

⁷⁰ Invernizzi 1986.



24. Ardashir the Sasanian unseating the last Parthian king Artaban IV, a rock relief near Firuzabad

dynasts in this part of the land before attacking his sovereign, the Parthian king Artaban IV. He claimed to have killed him personally in the battle of Hormizdagan in 224, after which he took over all his possessions [Fig. 24]. The new dynasty was known as Sasanian, after the name of an ancestor.

The kingdom of the Parthians was by then four centuries old. It was a rather loose conglomerate of small kingdoms, chiefdoms and cities, all subject to the Parthian king but enjoying a considerable degree of autonomy. The Parthians were often engaged in wars with the Roman Empire, most of the time without much success. Their last incursion into Syria occurred in 40 BC, with Roman onslaughts regularly taking place in Parthian Mesopotamia; once, the Romans even went as far as the Gulf. The caravans of Palmyra profited greatly from the weakness of the Parthians.

All this changed with the revolt of Ardashir.⁷¹ He and his son built a strong army and set on an aggressive course. It cannot be proven that they intended to recover the western possessions of the Achaemenian kings of old all the way to the Mediterranean, but they were in any case a very serious menace. Already in 230 Ardashir besieged the Roman colony of Nisibis in northern Mesopotamia (now in Turkey across the frontier from the Syrian city of Qamishli). Alexander Severus responded the following year with a three-pronged offensive which, however, ended in failure. On his way to the front, he visited Palmyra, as we learn from an inscription:

Statue of Julius Aurelius Zabdila b. Malku b. Malku Nashum who was *strategos* of the colony when the god Alexandros Caesar arrived, and helped the governor Crispinus when he

⁷¹ Potter 2004, pp. 217–257.

was here and brought here many times the legions; and he was *agoranomos* and incurred great expenses [to the city], and conducted his career in an orderly fashion. Because of this he received a testimony from the god Yarhibol and also of Julius [Priscus the prefect] of praetorium; and he loved his city. Set up for him by the Council and the people in his honour, year 554 [242/243].

The Greek name of the *strategos* was Zenobios.⁷² The passage of the army occurred at the beginning of the campaign of 231; it is the first known example of the desert road being used in war. Other army corps operated in Armenia and Mesopotamia, but the coordination between them was poor, and this led to the defeat of the Romans. The burden on the community to support the troops must have been heavy, but the contribution made by Zenobios seems to be linked to his later office as head of the market, maybe in the next year. Julius Priscus and his brother Philippus were praetorian prefects who accompanied the emperor Gordian on the next campaign against the Persians in 244, which ended in the death in battle of the emperor and the elevation of Philippus to the purple. After the death of the latter, the name of his brother was erased from this inscription on one of the columns in the Great Colonnade.

The last conquest of Ardashir was the city of Hatra, a rich holy city of the god Sun, ruled by kings dependent on the Parthian kings of kings. After two years of siege, in spite of Roman reinforcements, Hatra fell in 240 and was deserted, no doubt as a result of the deportation of all the inhabitants.⁷³ In the same year, Ardashir named as his successor his son Shapur, who, after his father died within a year or two, proved to be an even more formidable enemy.

⁷² *Inv.* III 22; *PAT* 278; *IGLS* 53.

⁷³ On Hatra, recently: Dirven 2013.

The Rise and Fall

Odainat, a great warrior

In the mid-third century, a man from Palmyra named Odainat b. Hairan became the first Roman senator from this city.⁷⁴ Soon, he was the head of his city and later the ruler of the whole Roman East. In modern literature we can sometimes read about a “principality” which could have developed in Palmyra in the third century under a long-established family of local potentates. The idea of the noble lineage of Odainat finds support in some ancient authors well after his time, but this seems to have been just a literary device.

To understand the real ancestry of Odainat we have no better means than his name. As a Roman citizen, he was called Septimius Odaenathus, the first element being the family name of the emperor Septimius Severus (193–211). Because the career of Odainat culminated in the 260s, he could not have been awarded the citizenship himself, being born about 200 at the earliest. It was rather his father or even his grandfather who had been so distinguished, perhaps upon being discharged from an auxiliary force or perhaps for some outstanding service. As a citizen and an experienced soldier, this ancestor of Odainat’s would have been able to continue to serve as the commander of such a unit. We do not know where his unit would have been stationed, but probably not in Syria: in 193, the Syrian legions proclaimed as emperor their commander Pescennius Niger, but Severus defeated them and disposed of this competitor. It seems quite likely that Odainat’s father or grandfather had served in this contest under Severus and was rewarded accordingly. We know their native names: Odainat was the son of Hairan and the grandson of Wahballat, all three names being Arabic (though the father could have been known in the army as Herodes son of Athenodorus, as these names were often translated). There is no reason to attach special significance to the Arabic etymology of their names and see in them some kind of desert sheikhs. All three names are typically Palmyrene, while their ancestor bore the Aramaic name of Nasor.

With the evidence currently available, Septimius Odainat is the only Palmyrene of his time not to be called Julius Aurelius. Later on, a few other Septimii do appear: besides Odainat’s immediate family, wife, and sons, we find not more than five persons, all of them his close collaborators and great dignitaries. They were probably favoured by Odainat with admission into his *familia* when he reached his paramount position in Syria.

⁷⁴ For historical narratives on the period, see in particular Millar 1993, pp. 159–273; Will 1992, pp. 172–204; Potter 2004, pp. 246–272; Sartre 2001, pp. 967–984; Smith II 2013, pp. 175–181. A useful anthology of relevant ancient texts in English translation: Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, pp. 49–110.

Odainat embarked in due time on a military career in the footsteps of his father. We first meet him in 252, when he was honoured by the president of an association, most likely that of the priests of Bel, with a statue in the Great Colonnade:⁷⁵

The statue of Septimius Odainat son of Hairan son of Wahballat Nasor, the most illustrious senator, *exarchos* of the Palmyrenes [Aramaic: “Head of Tadmor”], made for him by Julius Aurelius Ate‘aqab son of ‘Ogeilu son of Zabdibol son of Moqimu surnamed Qora, for his friend in his honour, during his presidency in the month of Nisan 563.

While the dignity of senator refers to the Senate of Rome and could only be bestowed by the emperor if it was not inherited, the title of *exarchos* is unusual. It is not one of the regular ranks in the Roman military or civilian administration, but at least three cases of its use are known of at the time. All three refer to commanders of military units, so-called *numeri*, which were formed to take advantage of the special skills of the natives, who were, for example, archers or camel-riders of Palmyra. It could be, then, that Odainat was head of some levies from Palmyra. On the other hand, the Aramaic rendering as “Head of Tadmor” implies a paramount position in the city, certainly not one of the usual civic offices. This led many to suppose that a kind of principality had been installed in Palmyra.

It might be recalled in this connection that an Aramaic inscription, found somewhere in Saudi Arabia and dated 356, concerns two cousins, one of whom was “Head of Tayma” and the other “Head of Hegra”, two major sites in northwestern Arabia. Another “Head of Tayma” died and was buried in Tayma in 203.⁷⁶ The office of Odainat was not an isolated occurrence in his time.

At any rate, Odainat’s later career bears no trace of this position, which was probably unofficial. The same titles are attributed to his son Hairan and were documented, no doubt only by chance, six months earlier than for his father.⁷⁷ Both father and son must have simultaneously held high positions, most likely of a military character.⁷⁸ The young Hairan must have been born about 225, if not earlier (the legal age for a senator was twenty-five). According to the ancient historians, who call him Herodes or Herodianus, his mother was not Zenobia, the wife of Odainat in the 260s, then a mother of a minor son. Her stepson Hairan could easily have been her elder.

We do not know whether the position of senator was given to Odainat rather than to his father, but this is likely the case. As far as we know, he was the first Palmyrene to attain this rank. A good opportunity for this promotion could have occurred during the short reign of Philip the Arab (244–249), a native of Shahba in southern Syria, who made his brother Priscus *rector Orientis*, that is, a kind of viceroy of the Oriental provinces. They could well have favoured their able countryman. The appointment indicates that the candidate must have had a considerable fortune, at least one million sesterii.

To become senator, Odainat first had to be a member of the equestrian order, and this also would have been dependent on his financial standing. Philip, himself an equestrian, had served in the Persian war of Gordian as the praetorian prefect, that is, the chief of staff. The war ended after the emperor’s death in combat, which was followed by Philip’s proclamation as the new emperor and a hastily drawn peace treaty.⁷⁹ Odainat could have been his companion in arms, but this is sheer speculation.

⁷⁵ IGLS 54. Cf. Gawlikowski 1985, p. 257, no. 13.

⁷⁶ Al-Najem, Macdonald 2009.

⁷⁷ IGLS 58–59.

⁷⁸ Cf. Millar 1993, pp. 157–158; Sartre 2001, pp. 973–975; Will 1992, pp. 173–174.

⁷⁹ Potter 2004, pp. 236–242.



25. The foundation inscription of the tomb of Odainat. Palmyra Museum

Odainat is also called a senator in a private inscription on the lintel of his family tomb [Fig. 25]:⁸⁰

This tomb was built by Odainat the senator, son of Hairan Wahballat Nasor, for himself and for his sons and grandsons, for ever.

The Greek counterpart gives Odainat the Roman name Septimius. Both texts bear no date and, unfortunately, the location of the tomb is unknown. The stone was in fact reused in the entrance to the medieval village of Tadmor in the enclosure of the Bel temple, where it was seen and copied in the late seventeenth century by the pastor Halifax from the Aleppo colony of English merchants, the leader of the first Western expedition to Palmyra in modern times (see p. 256). Removed from its secondary location, the inscription has survived to the present day. It was long considered as commemorating Odainat's grandfather, who was called Odainat the Elder, but the more recently discovered inscription, quoted above (note 75), makes it clear that both concern the same person. We do not know another Odainat in the family.⁸¹

The known pedigree of Odainat only goes two or three generations back, Nasor having probably been a more remote ancestor. There is no reason to suppose that a dynasty existed which held sway over the alleged "principality" of Palmyra. The city was governed by elected officials like any other *polis* in the Oriental provinces and beyond. And there is no evidence of Odainat having held any of these magistratures, though it is possible, of course, that he enjoyed informal influence in the city, to the point of being called a "patron" by some of his fellow-citizens (see below).

None of his ancestors are known from the epigraphic record for their own sake. There is just one possible exception: a century before Odainat, in 159, a priest called Hairan son of Wahballat son of Nasor offered two relief slabs in a temple in Dura [Fig. 26].⁸² The reliefs represent two tutelary deities, one of Dura and one of Palmyra. They are called *Gad* in the accompanying Aramaic inscriptions, so the temple is now known as the temple of the *Gadde* (plural), but the name is modern. The "Gad of Tadmor" is shown as an enthroned goddess imitating the traits of the famous Tyche of Antioch, putting one foot on a swimming figure probably personifying the Efqa spring. The priest Hairan stands to the side, offering frankincense on an altar. At the time, the city of Dura-Europos was not yet part of the Roman Empire and depended on the Parthian kingdom. Here, however, there was a sizable colony of Palmyrenes,

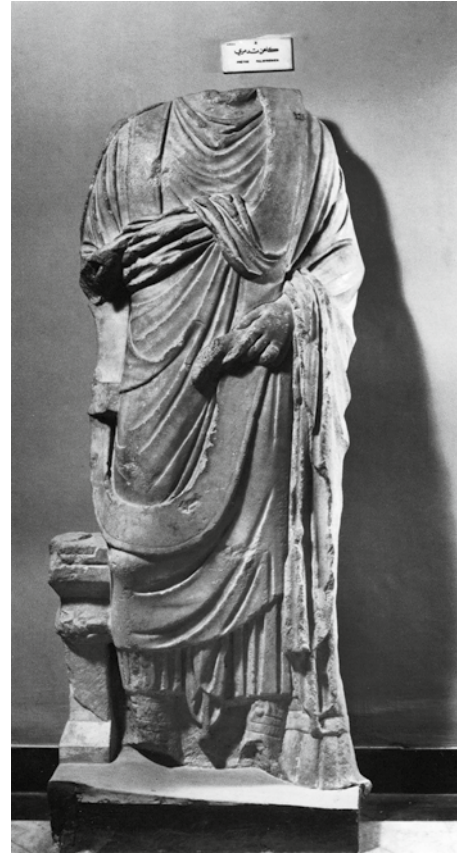
⁸⁰ IGLS 545; *Inv.* VIII 55.

⁸¹ Gawlikowski 1985.

⁸² Rostovtzeff 1939.



26. The priest Hairan sacrificing to the Tyche of Palmyra, from Dura-Europos. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.



27. A statue of a Roman senator, from near the Agora. National Museum, Damascus

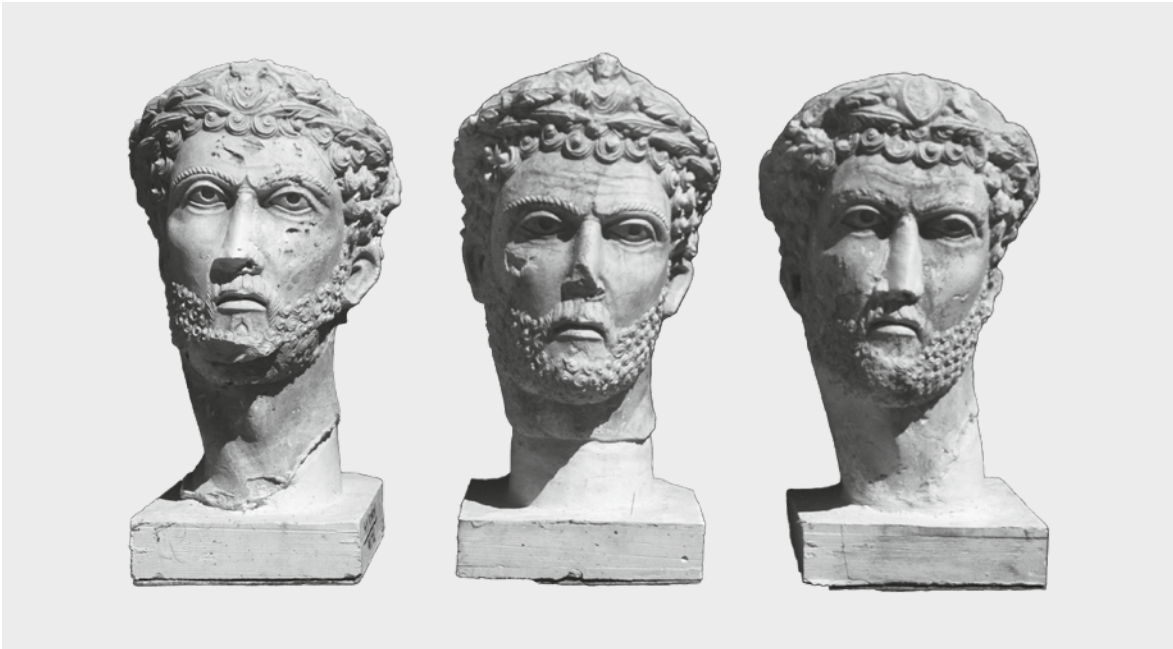
of which Hairan was obviously a member. His grandfather Nasor, a rare name, just might have been the founder of Odainat's line, but even if this is so, this would show only that the family already had some standing in the mid-second century.

During World War II, excavations in a banquet hall close to the Agora (known as "Senate") revealed a cache of marble statues. All are headless and seem to have been discarded. Two of these statues represent men. One of them is a Roman senator wearing an appropriate kind of toga [Fig. 27]. The other is also clad in a Roman toga and seems to be holding in his hands two heads, hardly recognisable now, but comparable to the ancestor portraits displayed by the famous statue Barberini in Rome. The Palmyra statues are supposed to be of Odainat at two stages of his career.⁸³ This is quite possible, but they could just as well represent any Roman officials of standing honoured in Palmyra. Together with the two *togati*, three marble statues of women were also found. It is by no means certain that all of them belonged to one family.

Two locally made oversize heads were also supposed to be portraits of Odainat (the non-existent Odainat the Elder, because their style suggests that they were made in the first half of the third century). One is kept in Istanbul and the other in Copenhagen.⁸⁴ Both are crowned with wreaths of oak leaves, in Rome a distinction awarded for saving a citizen's life. In fact, similar heads exist, and all of them were part of funerary banquets represented in tombs on slabs set upright on sarcophagi [Fig. 28].

⁸³ Balty (J.-Ch.) 2005.

⁸⁴ Ingholt 1976, pp. 115–116, pl. III.



28. Three heads from funerary banquets, from the hexagonal tomb in the North Necropolis. Palmyra Museum

A series of four contemporary inscriptions signals an important shift in Odainat's career.⁸⁵ They honour him as *hypatikos* or his son Hairan as the son of *hypatikos*. These inscriptions concern statues of the two men raised by professional associations from Palmyra. Most likely, this orchestrated move by local artisans was meant to congratulate the father on his appointment. They are all dated in the same year, 257/258 (Seleucid 569), but only one specifies the month. Let us read an example:

This is the statue of Septimius Odainat, the illustrious *hypatikos*, our lord, which was set up for him by the association of smiths working gold and silver, in his honour, in the month of Nisan, year 569 [April 258].

Moreover, we have a fragmentary inscription coming probably from a sanctuary in the countryside, dedicated to the god Abgal. It is made by one Neboza bar Kaffatut, who called himself a “servant of Odainat the *hypatikos*”, and dated March 258 (the first reading of the year as 263 stands corrected).⁸⁶

The Greek title, which is simply transcribed into Aramaic, is the normal way of translating the Latin *consularis*, as former consuls used to be called. While it is certain that Odainat was never a regular consul in Rome (we have a complete list of them, two for each year), current practice at that time was to appoint additional consuls, so-called suffect consuls, during the term, even every two months, just to make them eligible as provincial governors. Certain important provinces were indeed traditionally reserved for former consuls, and emperors tended to replenish the pool according to the needs. It was also common to employ the title of *consularis* when referring to the governors of such provinces. We may then assume that this series of inscriptions congratulated Odainat upon his appointment, which must have happened in the autumn of 257 or in the early months of the next year. Some modern authors tend to see in this

⁸⁵ IGLS 55, 56, 59, 143.

⁸⁶ Teixidor 1997.

distinction a mere honorific title, known in Roman practice as the awarding of *ornamenta consularia*. However, we can have a better understanding of later developments if we admit that Odainat was then appointed a provincial governor, even if there is no formal proof of this.⁸⁷

But governor of what? According to a rule that at that time had already been around for one century, no one could be appointed to rule his native province. Besides, Syria Phoenice, of which Palmyra was a part, only needed an administrator of lower, equestrian status, just as the province of Arabia bordering it to the south. Its neighbour to the north, Syria Coele, with its capital Antioch, was more important and needed a *consularis*. But the division of Syria into two provinces was decided by Septimius Severus in 194 in order not to make its governors too powerful and to prevent them from being tempted to rebel. Severus had removed the Syrian governor and pretender to the purple, Pescennius Niger, mentioned above. Would it have been sensible to appoint now in northern Syria a native of the southern part of the country, one with strong personal influence there? Such an appointment would have been a reversal of the careful policy that had been followed for half a century. And yet, it seems that this is exactly what happened.

Already in 252, the Persians had utterly destroyed a great Roman army at Barbalissos on the Euphrates; they had also taken thirty-seven cities, including Antioch, according to the boastful relation of King Shapur [Fig. 29].⁸⁸ Even if this expedition was just a looting raid, the blow was terrible. After three centuries of peace, the northern part of Syria lay in ruins, its riches robbed and many of its inhabitants led away as human chattel.

The Roman army in Syria had all but disappeared, but when the invaders approached the city of Emesa (today Homs), a priest of Aphrodite called Sampsigeramus – whose name suggests that he was related to the first-century kings of Emesa – is said to have assembled a motley force of local people and stopped a Persian raiding party at Arethusa (present-day Restan), some 20 km north of this city. The success apparently turned his head. He started to mint coins, the exclusive privilege of emperors, under the name of Uranius Antoninus. We do not know how he was disposed of, but it was done immediately after the Persian withdrawal.⁸⁹

Palmyra was a close neighbour of Emesa, some 150 km of desert track between them. Did the *exarchos* Odainat and his troops take part in this brave action of self-defence? This does not seem to have been the case, otherwise we never would have heard of him again. Rather, he cautiously waited; he may even have given a helping hand to the Romans against the usurper as soon as the Persians had withdrawn. At any rate, his position did not suffer.

Odainat must have been highly trusted by the emperor Valerian. It must be said at once that he later remained loyal to the emperor and to his son, as far as we know. But there must also have been an immediate practical reason for his promotion. The emperor was at this point preparing for a war with Persia. He came to Antioch in 254 and was there again at the beginning of 258 to be close to the theatre of the incoming struggle and to oversee the assembly of his army. In fact, there is no evidence of his having left the city at all after 254. If the Palmyrene general was appointed governor in Antioch, he would have been at the emperor's side. And his command of the Palmyrene levies would seem to me to have been essential to the planning of the war, as I shall explain later.

We should not attach much faith to a late report by one Petrus Patricius (sixth century), according to whom Odainat at one point tried to come to an understanding with Shapur. The story goes, however, that the Sasanian rejected Odainat's gifts and ordered them to be thrown into the Euphrates, at the same

⁸⁷ On the titles of Odainat, see Gnoli 2007.

⁸⁸ On these events, see Starcky, Gawlikowski 1985, pp. 57–61; Will 1992, pp. 172–185; Potter 2004, pp. 254–262; Sartre 2001, pp. 967–984; Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, pp. 50–56.

⁸⁹ Baldus 1971.



29. A silver head of a Sasanian king, probably Shapur. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

time sending an arrogant message to Odainat requiring his full submission. If such an episode ever took place (perhaps after the battle of Barbalissos), Odainat would have been left no choice but to remain on the Roman side. But would he have been forgiven and, even more so, rewarded with the consular rank?

Emperor Valerian came to Syria the next year, ordered Antioch to be rebuilt, and took back the Euphrates valley with the city of Dura-Europos. His coins give him the grandiloquent title of *restitutor Orientis*, but his success would not last. Shapur attacked again. He besieged Dura (which had already sustained Persian occupation for a short period of time on the previous occasion) and conquered the city in 256 in spite of the stubborn defence of the Roman garrison. The place was abandoned and the inhabitants killed or led away to Persia; no doubt many Palmyrenes were among the victims, though the 20th Palmyrene cohort apparently did not come back after the first occupation of the city a few years earlier. The blow must have been strongly resented in the oasis, even if the Persian impetus had lost its force. The *Victoria Parthica* proclaimed the following year consisted at best in having stopped the invasion. The emperor thought it necessary to secure a real success. The fact that Odainat was given the post of governor should be seen as an essential part of the preparations.

The Roman army was ready early in 259. Valerian took the field and went across the Euphrates to Edessa. Shapur was waiting for him there. Rather than engage in battle, the two monarchs and their retinues met outside the city to start negotiations. Valerian, however, was outwitted: Shapur took him prisoner together with his staff, a humiliation without precedent for the Roman Empire. The shock felt



30. Shapur's triumph over two Roman emperors, a rock relief in Naqsh-i Rostem

throughout the whole Roman world was enormous.⁹⁰ The Roman prisoners were deported to Fars never to return; they were made to build a city called Bishapur with a palace where mosaics in the Roman style have been discovered.⁹¹ It may not be true that the poor Valerian was used by his victor as a stepping stool to mount his horse, but it is certain that he died in captivity. In addition, there is no record of his son, Gallienus, attempting to rescue him.

A rock relief at Naqsh-i Rostem shows the king Shapur on horseback dealing with two Romans [Fig. 30]. One of them kneels in supplication – this is Philip suing for peace. The other Roman is being held by his wrist – this is Valerian, who was taken prisoner.⁹²

Many scholars give the date of Valerian's capture as 260. This dating comes from a rather specious and complicated argument, one that involves an unnecessary correction in the list of the popes of Rome. However, the only ancient author to provide a date for the event put it in Valerian's sixth year, that is, in 258/259. That Shapur's campaign took place in 259 is also stated very clearly in a Syriac chronicle. Another Oriental source adds a new argument.⁹³ This is a letter in Hebrew by Rav Sherira, the *gaon* (president) of the famous Talmudic academy in Pumbedita, in which it is stated that a certain Papa ben Nason destroyed the city of Nehardea, the seat of the exilarch, that is, the head of all the Jewish commu-

⁹⁰ Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, pp. 57–67.

⁹¹ Ghirshman 1956; Balty (J.) 1995, pp. 149–152.

⁹² MacDermot 1954.

⁹³ De Blois 1974; Gawlikowski 2010a.

nities in Mesopotamia and the seat of a Jewish academy, causing the scholars to move to Pumbedita. This is said to have happened in the Seleucid year 570 (corresponding to 259/260 if we count the year from April, as was the custom in Mesopotamia). The document is late (tenth century), but the learned rabbi had every reason to remember exactly the foundation date of the school he was head of. Nehardea was located at the mouth of the so-called Royal Canal linking the Euphrates and the Tigris, close to modern Faluja. But who was the terrible Papa?

Historians all agree that it must have been Odainat. We remember that Nasor was the name of his ancestor, the founder of his line. The nickname Papa would refer to the fact that his son was associated with his powers, as we have seen. Other Jewish sources are, as a rule, strongly hostile to Palmyra, for no apparent reason other than the fate of Nehardea. The memory of a warrior called Papa (Baba) has also survived in Arabic literature roughly contemporary with the quoted Jewish source, but in a dim historical context: he is presented as a local ruler in Iraq, one that was defeated by Ardashir. This “Baba ibn Bardaina” – taking into account that Arabic *ibn* and Aramaic *bar* both mean “son of”, so one is redundant – must have been the “son of Udhayna”, the Arabic form of Odainat’s name; only the initial vowel has disappeared, noted with a simple vertical stroke. So the fame of Odainat reached Islamic times, even if in a distorted form.

Why did he attack Nehardea? After the fall of Dura three years earlier, the Palmyrenes had good reasons to seek restoration of direct links with the Euphrates route. Following the well-trodden caravan tracks, the Palmyrene cavalry would easily have been able to surprise the enemy and reach through the desert the middle course of the Euphrates. Once master of Nehardea at the entrance to the Royal Canal leading to the heart of Shapur’s kingdom, Odainat would have been in control of the approaches to Ctesiphon, the capital. So the war plan, as reconstructed by Lucas de Blois, was a two-pronged assault on Mesopotamia: Valerian from the north and Odainat in the center. If the manoeuvre was successful, Shapur would have no other option but to retreat and defend his capital. The disaster of the Roman army at Edessa ruined this plan and obliged the Palmyrene general to retreat. This would have happened before April 260, the beginning of the next Babylonian year, and certainly not during the winter months, which were unfit for warfare.

So Valerian’s undoing must have taken place in 259, though naturally the Egyptian papyri of the time – our main source for fixing the precise chronology, as they date by the years of the ruling emperors – did not scrap his name immediately. How could his son Gallienus have ordered such a rash move, and, even more so, how would a scribe have dared to make the omission on his own? It would have been normal to try to ransom the prisoner and his soldiers. Unfortunately, the army comptroller based behind the lines in Samosata, a certain Macrianus, showed no inclination to do so, and what was left of the Roman army in the East was in complete disarray. Shapur used this opportunity to the full, taking by his account thirty-six cities in Cilicia and Cappadocia, provinces of Asia Minor, but it is not assured that the Syrian Antioch fell prey to him again. The Persian horsemen seem to have dispersed for booty, and some looting parties were first opposed in Cilicia by hastily reassembled Roman soldiers under an officer called Callistus or Ballista, but a real reverse was inflicted by Odainat. It is not clear whether he attacked the main army or rather some marauding bands, but it is reported that the king had to pay his free passage through the territory of Edessa in Mesopotamia. Upon this victory, both father and son took the resounding title “King of kings”, the one of Shapur. One source, not necessarily reliable, also reports that Odainat overran Shapur’s harem, which he then immediately presented to his son Herodes, that is, Hairan. If this story was not invented, the gesture would have been confirmation of Odainat’s new royal status in a way reminiscent of the time-honoured practice of Mesopotamian kings of old, who were in the habit of appropriating the womenfolk of their defeated enemies. Two inscriptions on brackets in the great arch in

Palmyra celebrated this victory in 260.⁹⁴ One of them is (or rather was until only recently) the epigraph for a statue of Herodianus (that is, again, Hairan):

To the King of kings Septimius Herodianus, crowned in inauguration of his royalty for his victory over the Persians, Julius Aurelius Septimius Worodes, *procurator ducenarius*, and Julius Aurelius Hermes, *centenarius*, both *strategoi* of the illustrious colony, in the year 571 [259/260].

The inscription is in fact badly damaged and much of the above is restored. Several scholars have worked on it over the years, including myself. My version of 2007 was corrected by Pierre-Louis Gatier, who eliminated the awkward mentioning, inherited from earlier editions, of the Orontes River, on whose banks the victory or its celebration were supposed to have taken place. Procurators were imperial plenipotentiaries of equestrian rank, appointed for various administrative tasks with a fixed yearly salary: either 200,000 sesterii (*ducenarius*) or half of this amount (*centenarius*). Both men were the highest officials of the city and were elected for one year.

Worod is known from several other inscriptions. In about 258 he was just Julius Aurelius as was everyone else in Palmyra; he was also a member of the Council. Two years later, Odainat added his own Septimius to Worod's Roman names (no doubt in an act of fictional adoption), while the emperor made him a procurator, and finally the Council elected him as one of the two highest officials. Other inscriptions show in which years he was not *strategos*, and the proposed date is the only one that fits the general picture. As rightly observed by Ernest Will, his was the brilliant municipal career of a provincial notable.⁹⁵ Strictly speaking, there is nothing behind the inveterate idea of his being a Parthian or Persian refugee, and even less a double agent. His is one of about a dozen Palmyrene names listed as Iranian, but this and the fact that his father's name is never mentioned do not yet warrant foreign origin. Two other grandees of the Palmyrene court, Zabda and Zabbai, both of whom bear names that are very common in Palmyra, were in the same position: the name Septimius bestowed by Odainat upon each of them no doubt distinguished them more than their ancestry.

The other statue in the main passage of the arch and close to the one of Herodianus must have been for Odainat himself, but only a few letters remained. These letters nevertheless make it possible to restore the title "*corrector* (in Greek *epanorthotes*) of the whole East", until now attested only indirectly: it was assumed by his younger son after Odainat's death. However, a late source, the chronicler Zonaras living in the twelfth century, wrote about Odainat being appointed "*strategos* of the whole East", a slightly altered piece of information taken from some older source. Odainat must also have been called "King of kings" in the missing part of the text, an epithet also attributed to him in a posthumous inscription.

The title of *corrector* was not just honorific. It implied that the holder was given actual control over several provinces in an emergency. It could only be given by the emperor, in this case the hard-pressed Gallienus faced with the ruin and possible loss of Syria and perhaps of Asia Minor as well. Indeed, the Persians found in the latter country communities of Iranian fire worshippers who had become established there centuries earlier; they attempted to make the cult of these Iranian colonists conform to their own. Was it not a prelude to annexation? This would seem likely, especially since Gallienus was retained in the West by a German invasion. Making a loyal general responsible for the Oriental situation was a sensible move.

The royal title is another matter. It sounds like a direct challenge to Shapur, who was already "King of kings". After all, his father had abolished the Parthian dynasty having ruled for four centuries. The chas-

⁹⁴ Gawlikowski 2007.

⁹⁵ Yon 2002, pp. 148–150.



31. A lead tessera of Herodianus, from Antioch (?). National Museum, Damascus



32. A lead tessera of Zenobia, from Antioch (?). National Museum, Damascus

ing of this usurper and the putting of a Roman of consular rank upon his throne as the new King of kings would indeed have been a great achievement for Rome. Even the menace of such a development was irritating enough. And it would not have been entirely without precedent. The model for it could have been the ceremony staged by Mark Antony three centuries earlier, when he promoted as Kings of kings his two sons from Cleopatra: Alexander was given Armenia, Media, and Parthia, with the appropriate high tiara, while his brother Ptolemy received Phoenicia, Syria, and Cilicia, with a traditional Hellenistic diadem (Plutarch, Antony 54,4). It was, of course, only posturing, for the two boys never held any power anywhere. Closer in time, Trajan had put a king of his choice on the Parthian throne in Ctesiphon, which he had conquered; this was a member of the royal family called Parthamaspates. Why not try again?

A lead token allegedly found in Antioch and published in 1937 by Henri Seyrig conveniently shows two portraits of a young man, described on each side as “King Herodianus” [Fig. 31].⁹⁶ One shows him crowned with a wreath of victory, the other with a conical tiara, such as was used by Parthian kings and by lesser Oriental rulers such as the kings of Edessa or those of Hatra. Herodianus is thus characterized as the king in ways understandable both to Syrians and to Iranians. In addition, another token, probably found with it, shows a female bust crowned with rampart battlements and labeled “Queen Zenobia” [Fig. 32]. We can compare these tokens to a clay tessera from Palmyra showing on one side a youth in a tiara, with the same thick bun of hair at the back of his head as on the lead token, and on the other side an older man crowned with a royal Greek diadem, that is, a headband with two loose ends hanging behind. These two images must represent Odainat and Herodianus [Fig. 33]. It is likely that these three objects commemorate the assumption of the royal titles by the family; they might possibly have been used as admission tickets for the relevant celebrations in Palmyra and Antioch. If so, they are contemporary with the inscriptions on the Palmyra arch and possibly with the arch itself.

A fragmentary marble head, now lost, was probably found with the marble statues of the *togati* mentioned above. It was brilliantly identified by Jean Balty as Odainat’s [Fig. 34].⁹⁷ It shows a bearded man with a portly, very un-Roman moustache, wearing some kind of cloth wound around his head. The cloth was cut horizontally and once completed by another piece affixed to it. As Balty rightly observed, this stone or metal accessory would have been a high crested tiara. This and another marble fragment with perhaps a royal headband are the only assured portraits of Odainat in existence.

⁹⁶ Seyrig 1963, pp. 168–172.

⁹⁷ Balty (J.-Ch.) 2005, pp. 330–333.



33. Odainat and Herodianus
on the tesserae *RTP* nos. 4–5



34. The head of Odainat, the conical
tiara missing. Present location
unknown

Not long after Valerian's demise, the treacherous comptroller Macrianus who refused to ransom him was proclaimed emperor by some Roman troops in Emesa. Macrianus declined to accept the troops' decision, citing his infirmity, but he put forward his two sons. This turn of events was recognised in Egypt in September 260; even up until late August, the official papyri there were dated by the reign of Valerian, who at this point had already been a prisoner for about one year in Persia. Macrianus and his older son, also Macrianus, marched to Europe in the following year, leaving in Emesa the younger brother, who was named Quietus, and the prefect Ballista. Soon, however, both Macriani were killed somewhere in the Balkans by troops loyal to Gallienus. At this news, Odainat, blocked in Palmyra but otherwise left alone, advanced to Emesa and persuaded the inhabitants to dispose of the remaining usurper. Odainat was left in full control of Syria; in addition, he was a loyal supporter of Gallienus, who had no one else to rely on in the East. Even after Gallienus managed to remove Macrianus, another, more serious usurpation took place in the West. There, the general Postumus was also proclaimed emperor; he ruled in Gaul, Spain, and Britain. And it was still possible that the triumphant Shapur would charge again at any time.

It was, however, Odainat who took the initiative.⁹⁸ In 263, in the words of the often fanciful *Historia Augusta*, "having first assumed the royal title, he marched against the Persians with the assembled army, taking with him his wife Zenobia, his elder son named Herodes and his younger sons Herennianus and Timolaus". As the last two sons are never mentioned anywhere else and are probably invented, the participation of Zenobia cannot be taken for granted. Hairan-Herodes-Herodianus was, however, a constant companion of his father, whose aim it was to confirm his royal claim and to take the place of Shapur on the throne. Some Roman troops probably participated in this venture; the expedition could have resulted in the installation of a new dynasty dependent on Rome. The siege was unsuccessful, however, and the party retreated to Syria. Nevertheless, late that year or in the following months, Gallienus assumed the title of *Persicus Maximus*, though he never set foot in the East and apparently never met Odainat. It was, of course, customary for emperors to appropriate the victories of their generals. Gallienus also issued coins marked with the slogan *Pax fundata*, "Peace established", to mark the hoped-for end to hostilities in the East. A sixth-century Greek historian Zosimus wrote that Odainat attacked Ctesiphon "not once, but twice", and a similar statement is also found in a twelfth-century Byzantine historian, Zonaras, who puts this second expedition in the year of Odainat's murder, but in the end it does not seem likely that Odainat marched on Ctesiphon a second time.

And so, the kingship of Odainat became an empty word. What could it have meant in the Roman world? From the Roman point of view, this royalty would not have been any more offensive than the titles of the client kings of the early Empire. But in Syria there were no other, lesser kings to justify the title. He was certainly not a "king of Palmyra", as some authors have imprudently written. Odainat's kingship was a hollow claim and nothing more. Looked at through the eyes of a Syrian, however, Odainat may have been regarded as equal in dignity to the Persian monarch.

All these events were described by much later authors, with the one closest in time writing about a century later. Unfortunately, this author is also the least reliable. This source, the *Historia Augusta*, is full of distorted or freely invented information. Other historians dealing with Odainat wrote drawing from each other, but also from writings which did not survive to modern times. The only literary piece contemporary to the facts is a versified prophecy known as the XIII Sibylline Oracle; it is purposely opaque and hardly understandable, as prophecies usually go. The recent edition by David Potter explains much of it.⁹⁹ In his view, this Greek poem was written by a Syrian who lionised Uranius Antoninus of Emesa as a "lofty Sun-sent priest from Syria". The poem ends with praise for this usurper without men-

⁹⁸ Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, pp. 68–74.

⁹⁹ Potter 1990; Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, p. 71.



35. A mosaic in a banquet hall by the Great Colonnade

tioning his fall. The prophecy was then completed by another author with a few lines about Odainat: he is described as a “Sun-sent, dreadful, fearful lion, breathing much fire. With great and reckless courage he will destroy the well-horned swift stag and the great, venom-spitting, fearsome beast discharging many shafts and the bow-footed goat... Fame will attend him; perfect, unblemished and awesome he will rule the Romans and the Persians will be feeble”.

This part of the oracle was obviously written in the lifetime of Odainat and after his Persian victories. Admittedly, it is not very clear. The “swift stag with great horns” is commonly understood to be Macrianus, but the image is particularly inappropriate: this Roman general was lame and for that reason did not assume the imperial power himself, instead ruling through his two sons; moreover, he never confronted Odainat but left Syria with one of his sons in a bid to secure the Balkans and Italy. The “bow-footed goat” in turn is seen as referring to the prefect Callistus, who was nicknamed Ballista, in reference to the artillery machine so called; but even if the Roman *ballista*, up to Trajan’s time a stone-thrower, was later an arrow-shooting machine, it does not explain this odd expression. However, a Talmudic commentary to the Book of Daniel mentions three horns (Macrianus and his sons) defeated by a “little horn”, this being the “Papa ben Nasor” we have already met before. The “great venom-spitting beast” must be Shapur himself.



36. The panel of the mosaic showing Odainat as Bellerophon killing Chimaera

As it happens, allegorical representations of Odainat's victories also found contemporary pictorial expression. During the Polish excavations in Palmyra, a mosaic was discovered whose subject alludes to the same events [Fig. 35].¹⁰⁰ While not directly illustrating the Sibylline Oracle, it used parallel symbols to glorify the triumph of Odainat and Herodianus over their Persian foe. The mosaic adorned a large room, apparently a banquet hall. In the middle, among the customary small pictures of birds, fish, and fruit scattered on the floor and symbolizing hospitality, two main panels show very unusual subjects [Figs 36–37]. One picture shows Bellerophon riding Pegasus and killing the Chimaera. This ancient Greek myth was met with renewed interest during the third century, after having been long ignored by mosaic artists. We know of a dozen Late Roman pavements with this subject from the western provinces, but this representation is the only one found in the Near East. The winged horse is flying over the monster whose three heads (a lion's, a goat's and a snake's) are spitting fire in the direction of the attacker. The hero has already thrown a javelin which has pierced the hind leg of the Chimaera, and is aiming at it with a lance.

While all these details conform to the Greek and Roman tradition, our Bellerophon differs sharply from all other known representations of him because of his Persian dress. He has trousers, an embroidered tunic, and an open coat with long sleeves. This is the well-known Palmyrene outfit worn by third-century local worthies, borrowed from the Persian models. On his head, Bellerophon wears a wide-rimmed helmet with a long flyer. To his right and left, two eagles approach him, bringing wreaths of victory.

¹⁰⁰ Gawlikowski, Żuchowska 2010.



37. The panel of Herodianus/
Hairan hunting Persian tigers

The other panel shows a horseman shooting his bow at a tiger. The animal, already wounded, stands on its hind legs, while a smaller tiger, probably a female, is lying on the ground under the hoofs of the horse. The characteristic pattern of stripes makes it possible to identify the species as one that until recently lived on the Persian shores of the Caspian Sea in ancient Hyrcania. The dress of the hunter is exactly the same as described above, but here the hunter's movement causes the coat to fly behind him, showing the quiver and bow sheath attached to the saddle. This composition allowed but one eagle with a wreath in its beak, flying from the left. The parallelism between the two heroes makes it clear that both represent, in an allegorical way, important contemporary figures. The date of the mosaic can be inferred on stylistic grounds as being of the mid-third century. In fact, some decorative bands closely resemble those on the only pavements found in Palmyra before ours, in the houses east of Bel temple.

There is a short inscription set within the stretched bow of the hunter, but it does not give the name of this mighty hero. Instead, we get, surprisingly, the signature of the artist, an extremely rare occurrence in mosaic art before the Christian period: *Diodotos has made this mosaic, himself and his sons*.

It is laid in Palmyrene cursive script, copied from a manuscript model apparently without understanding, as several letters are grossly altered. The inscription is definitely out of character with the splendid mosaic, which also shows other traces of repair. The pavement continued to serve, but the historical allusions were concealed, while the room was converted into a Jewish prayer hall.

Two letters strikingly different from the rest can be found at the end of this short text: they conform to the standard Palmyrene script and are definitely bigger than the preceding letters. They read MR and make no sense in their present context. It is my proposition that they are the remainder of an original inscription, at one point scrambled and recomposed as the signature of the mosaicist Diodotos. One has no difficulty in restoring the word "(our) lord", as applied in two inscriptions to Odainat. I am, however, inclined to think that the tiger hunter is the son, while the father was represented as the mythological hero (which would explain why no name was attributed to the latter figure).

If the Persian wars of Odainat are really commemorated in this mosaic, why were these particular subjects chosen? While the attire of the two riders was probably actually used by Odainat and his officers, and certainly seen as native in spite of its Iranian origin, the scene of the tiger hunt is obviously copied

from one of the splendid silver plates that the Sasanian kings commissioned and used to send out as gifts. These Hyrcanian tigers, famous in Antiquity for their fierce savagery, could be a fitting symbol of the Persian enemy. But why Bellerophon?

In the rather abstruse prophetic poem quoted above, the terrible lion ruling the Romans is construed as being Odainat, *corrector* of the whole East and King of kings. The relevant passage from the poem was added in the early 260s and presented Odainat's victory as the final fulfilment of the prophecy, just as an earlier version ended with the victory of another Syrian leader. A Greek pun makes "venom-spitting" homonymous with "shooting arrows", while the Persians' expertise in archery is a commonplace of classical literature.

The image is of course not a simple illustration of the prophetic poem, nor is the poem a description of the image. For one thing, the Chimaera is for the most part a lion. Nevertheless, the simple fact that the enemy is represented as a monstrous beast is common to both the poem and the picture. Both were no doubt referring to verbal imagery current in Syria at the time. The prophecy consists of an elaborate set of animal disguises, probably more open to the perspicacity of contemporaries, who understood the allusions better. In the case of our mosaic pavement, it is the old fable about Bellerophon and the Chimaera, as illustrated in some mythological handbook, that served as an allegory of Odainat's victory over the terrible foe.

Another allegory was supplied more obviously by the above-mentioned Sasanian's own propaganda tools – the silver hunting plates – which often showed kings on horseback shooting arrows at various animals. Here, this composition in a circle has been adapted to a rectangular frame, but otherwise the similarity is striking. The eagles crowning the protagonists refer directly to the royal titles that both assumed after their victory.

The failed expedition against Ctesiphon in 263 is reported in our sources very sparingly. In any case, the royal titles must have sounded pointless and embarrassing. Odainat was still the "*corrector* of the whole East", meaning he had responsibility for both Syrian provinces, the recovered province of Mesopotamia with Nisibis and Carrhae (Harran), and probably Roman Arabia. His authority may even have extended to parts of Asia Minor.

He could hardly have fulfilled his obligations if he were residing in Palmyra. It is more likely that he was constantly on the move between Antioch, Emesa, and other places. He certainly had the upper hand over the Roman legions that were stationed in the East: three in the two Syrian provinces, two in Mesopotamia, one in Arabia, two in Cappadocia, and a number of auxiliary forces. Altogether, this would have made for a considerable force; under Septimius Severus in the early third century, it would have been about 78,000 men, though we cannot estimate their number in Odainat's time. A very significant number of troops must have been recruited locally to fill the ranks after the heavy losses of the 250s. The native forces of Palmyra would only have made a fraction of these forces, though they have certainly supplied an important contingent of heavy cavalry, both men and horses wearing mail armor, their main offensive arm being a long lance [Fig. 38]. Imitating the Persian cavalry in outfit and tactics, they were called *cataphracts* ("covered over") or more colloquially *clibanarii* (something like "oven bearers", in reference to the shape of metal camp ovens).

Odainat was always a staunch and loyal subject of the emperor Gallienus. How sure Gallienus was of him is a moot point, as he did not have much choice with a rival emperor having been installed in Gaul and German barbarians menacing Italy. But in the year 267/268 both Odainat and Herodianus were murdered.¹⁰¹ This date is calculated backwards from the fourth year of reign of Odainat's younger son and successor Wahballat, as mentioned in the Egyptian papyri from December 270 (the Egyptian year ran from the last day of August). Before that, these years were probably counted according to the Syrian

¹⁰¹ Kaizer 2005; Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, pp. 80–82.



38. A reconstruction of the appearance of a *cataphract*

reckoning, which had the new year beginning in October, or maybe from the unknown date of accession. In any case, year one of Wahballat began in 267 or 268. One version transmitted by our sources, all of them much later and of unequal value, has it that the murder was inspired by the emperor, but another lays the blame on an offended cousin, and still another placed responsibility for the crime on Odainat's wife, Zenobia, and her jealousy towards her stepson. We simply do not know. Nor do we know where it happened: in Emesa at a banquet, or in Heraclea on the Black Sea. Our sources give all these versions, and there are no reasons to favour any one in particular, though the story in Zonaras sounds highly unlikely. Here, Odainat is supposed to have abandoned his siege of Ctesiphon in order to march against the Goths pillaging the Black Sea coast; he arrives after the enemy has already left, only to be killed by plotters in Heraclea. First of all, it would have taken Odainat's army a few months to get there, so he would have stood little chance of intercepting the invaders. Besides, in the last year of his life a Germanic tribe, the Herulians, devastated Greece, and one year after his demise the invading Goths were beaten in the Balkans. As far as we know, Asia Minor was only invaded earlier, still under Valerian. Anyway, it would have been rather foolish to abandon the siege of Ctesiphon for such an uncertain expedition.

Whatever actually happened, both Kings of kings were suppressed. Maybe by coincidence, we also lose trace of the high official Worod in Palmyra. As late as 267, he was still honoured by statues of him as *procurator* of the emperor and *argapet* of the city.¹⁰² We do not know what competences the latter office included. Acquired by Worod between 262 and 265, it might simply have been a Persian translation of the function of the *agoranomos*, the magistrate responsible for the proper working of the market. The most full and recent inscription concerning this eminent public figure has unfortunately lost its date:¹⁰³

¹⁰² Gnoli 2007, pp. 95–113.

¹⁰³ PAT 288; *Inv.* III 7; *IGLS* 67.



39. An aerial view of Zenobia (Halebiyeh) on the Euphrates

The Council and the People for Septimius Worod, the most powerful *procurator ducenarius* of the Emperor, *iuridicus* of the Metrocolony, who brought back caravans at his expense and was acknowledged by the chief merchants. He has been, in a splendid way, *strategos* and *agoranomos* of the same Metrocolony, and contributed very much from his own means, and was agreeable to this Council and to the People, and is now the magnificent symposiarch of the priests of the god Bel. To honour his honesty, in April of the year...

A metrocolony is probably just a resounding name for a colony, little more than an honorific title. As can be seen, all the functions here enumerated were already mentioned before, except for the *iuridicus*, that is, the chief judge and administrator of the city, as well as the presidency of the association of the priests of Bel. They must have been exercised in the last year of Odainat's life or even later. Anyway, we shall never hear of Worod again. His statue, however, was standing in the Great Colonnade close to a later one of Zenobia, so we should not suspect that he fell from grace.

The career of Odainat thus covers some seventeen years, the last seven of which were spent in continuous warfare. Commanding Roman forces including local Palmyrene ethnic units, he was able to repel the Persian onslaught and recover most of the lost ground. The new frontier was probably stabilised on the Khabur River and the fortress of Circesium at the mouth of this affluent of the Euphrates, where it is attested in the next century. Further upstream, some 140 km from Dura, at narrow straits of the river, called Khanuqa, there stand the ruins of two fortresses facing each other on opposite banks, Halebiyeh and Zalebiyeh [Fig. 39]. The existing ruins go back to Justinian in the sixth century, but the ancient name of Halebiyeh was Zenobia. It would make sense to suppose that Odainat or his widow fortified

this strategic passage in order to prevent a possible Persian invasion and to replace the conquered and abandoned Dura.

Odainat's official position within the Roman system was that of "*corrector* of the whole East", a sort of super-governor extraordinary. A posthumous inscription in his honour, set up in 271, calls him in Aramaic "*metqanena* of the whole East". The modern controversy whether this also means *corrector*, or rather *restitutor*, remains unresolved. Both are possible at this date, but *restitutor* was only attributed to emperors; a loyal supporter of the emperor could never assume it, however unofficially, during his lifetime. Odainat had certainly saved Syria in his day, and he saved it for Rome. He was not able, however, to fulfil a more ambitious program and conquer Lower Mesopotamia in order to make it a Roman client state.

Two more Roman wars were fought on Mesopotamian soil. The first was led successfully in 298 by the co-emperor Galerius, who as a result recovered the city of Nisibis which had fallen to the Persians shortly before this; then, in 363, the invasion by the emperor Julian failed and Nisibis changed hands again. It was not until 611 that the next great Persian invasion occurred, the result of which was that Syria was occupied until 629. It may be said, then, that Odainat's victories secured the Roman East for three and a half centuries. This is enough to remember him as a great warrior.

Zenobia, the unhappy queen

The murder of Odainat left his queen in limbo. A widow had no public position in the Roman system, and while her title of queen could inspire respect at a local level, it was otherwise of little use. She may have been born about 240 and was probably married to Odainat in the 250s, when he started his career in Palmyra. We know that her first son was still a minor at the death of his father. Since legal maturity was attained at the age of fourteen, he was born after 254.¹⁰⁴

Zenobia's ancestry is not a mystery as some fiction writers would have it but reasonably obvious. In Aramaic she is called Bat-Zabbai (literally "daughter of Zabbai"), but other official inscriptions call her the daughter of Antiochos. This Antiochos, otherwise unknown, need not have been Greek. This royal Seleucid name was common in the whole of Syria, and in Palmyra it was often a translation of the native Hoiifi. Zenobia's father was probably a member of a line going back to a certain Zabbai. The name Zenobia is a Greek approximation for Bat-Zabbai. The queen of Odainat was a Palmyrene, even if her flatterers would extend her pedigree back to Cleopatra. In the extant epigraphic documents we cannot find anybody who could be deemed her ancestor. There is no reason to suppose that her father was one Zenobios *vel* Zabdila, a *strategos* of Palmyra in 232 (see p. 54). While indeed of a great family, he was certainly not called Antiochos.

Under normal circumstances, the widow would have been expected to quietly retire. Securing the paternal powers for her child Wahballat (and in fact for herself) was a very daring idea. He stood no chance against his half-brother while the latter was alive. No wonder that when the inheritance fell to Zenobia's son it led to rumors that she was plotting to remove her stepson. The risk, however, would have been so enormous that the story is difficult to believe. Some intrigue at the imperial court in Rome seems more likely, even if an anonymous historian's account of a judicial case brought before Gallienus by one Odainat junior (a mistake for Wahballat) against a certain Rufinus – is an outright fabrication. The trial is difficult to squeeze in between the murder of Odainat some time in 267/268 (between October and September) and that of Gallienus in September 268. Even the story about vengeance by a cousin slight-

¹⁰⁴ On Zenobia, seriously: Equini Schneider 1993 (in Italian); Kotula 1997, pp. 89–144; Hvidberg-Hansen 2002 (in Danish); Sartre, Sartre 2014, 2016; Winsbury 2010; Andrade 2018. Less reliable literature is abundant. The primary sources collected in Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, pp. 83–101.

ed during a hunt cannot be entirely discounted. All these versions are reported by authors writing over a century after the fact or even later, though they certainly made use of accounts that have not come down to us. The plain, hard fact of the matter is that Zenobia did not intend to become a dowager.

While the portrait of Zenobia painted in the *Historia Augusta* (written about 400) is distinctly misogynistic, it also shows grudging admiration:

Now all shame is exhausted, for in the weakened state of the commonwealth things came to such a pass that, while Gallienus conducted himself in the most evil fashion, even women ruled most excellently. For, in fact, even a foreigner, Zenobia by name [...] boasting herself to be of the family of the Cleopatras and the Ptolemies, proceeded upon the death of her husband Odaenathus to cast about her shoulders the imperial mantle; and arrayed in the robes of Dido and even assuming the diadem, she held the imperial power in the name of her sons Herennianus and Timolaus, ruling longer than could be endured from one of the female sex.¹⁰⁵

Making of her a rare beauty, the author simultaneously paints her as a paragon of manly virtues and pursuits. She is an intrepid hunter, an enduring rider, and a heavy drinker when in military company:

Her face was dark and of a swarthy hue, her eyes were black and powerful beyond the usual wont, her spirit divinely great, and her beauty incredible. So white were her teeth that many thought that she had pearls in place of teeth. Her voice was clear and like that of a man. Her sternness, when necessity demanded, was that of a tyrant, her clemency, when her sense of right called for it, that of a good emperor. Generous with prudence, she conserved her treasures beyond the wont of women. She made use of a carriage, and rarely of a woman's coach, but more often she rode a horse; it is said, moreover, that frequently she walked with her foot-soldiers for three or four miles. She hunted with the eagerness of a Spaniard. She often drank with her generals, though at other times she refrained, and she drank, too, with the Persians and Armenians, but only for the purpose of getting the better of them.¹⁰⁶

This virago figure looks very much like a figment of imagination by a man whom the great historian Ronald Syme called a “frivolous impostor”. We need not take any of this seriously. A recent study has detected in this description an echo of one of the *Satires* by Juvenal,¹⁰⁷ a poet who cruelly mocked the vices of the Roman aristocracy, in this case of dissolute women who were the opposite of this portrait of Zenobia in every respect. The fanciful author of the *Historia Augusta* goes on to attribute to Zenobia the mastery of Greek letters (which is perfectly possible) and even the authorship of a brief history of Alexandria and of the East, this last bit likely referring mistakenly to a (lost) work written by one Callinicus of Petra, who dedicated it to Zenobia under the name of Cleopatra. The author also gave her a limited knowledge of Latin (which would not be surprising) and fluency in “Egyptian”, whatever this may mean (Coptic was not yet a literary language in Zenobia's time).

The author's purpose was to explain the incredible: a woman had grabbed power and fought the rightful emperor, a thing never before seen in Roman history.¹⁰⁸ Modern writers, including the great Edward

¹⁰⁵ *Historia Augusta* III, *The Thirty Pretenders* XXX.1, trans. D. Magie.

¹⁰⁶ *Historia Augusta* III, *The Thirty Pretenders* XXX.16–19, trans. D. Magie.

¹⁰⁷ Burgersdijk 2004–2005, pp. 141–144.

¹⁰⁸ Burgersdijk 2004–2005.

Gibbon, tended to take this description as the plain truth. Here is Gibbon's judgment, largely paraphrased from the above description:

Zenobia is perhaps the only female whose superior genius broke through the servile indolence imposed on her sex by the climate and manners of Asia. She claimed her descent from the Macedonian king of Egypt, equalled in beauty her ancestor Cleopatra, and far surpassed that princess in chastity and valour. Zenobia was esteemed the most lovely as well as the most heroic of her sex. She was of a dark complexion. Her teeth were of a pearly whiteness, and her large black eyes sparkled with uncommon fire, tempered by the most attractive sweetness. Her voice was strong and harmonious. Her manly understanding was strengthened and adorned by study. She was not ignorant of the Latin tongue, but possessed in equal perfection the Greek, the Syriac, and the Egyptian languages. She had drawn up for her own use an epitome of oriental history, and familiarly compared the beauties of Homer and Plato under the tuition of the sublime Longinus.¹⁰⁹

In the wake of Gibbon, other lesser authors made Zenobia a figure of popular imagination, quite unlike her husband, who was rather pushed to the backstage in spite of his victories. While he was recognised simply as a successful leader, his widow became a heroine of the Middle East, the conqueror of the Romans, the liberator of her country, and a fighter for independence. All this has nothing to do with real history.

At the death of Odainat, the army he had commanded – certainly some Roman legions and auxiliaries as well as Syrian and Palmyrene contingents – remained intact. For some reason, no governor felt able or inclined to fill his place. Gallienus was murdered shortly after the demise of his loyal supporter. The next emperor, Claudius, dubbed Gothicus for his victory over the Goths that same year, was in no position to intervene in Syria. He only reigned for two years before dying of the plague in the summer of 270.

Nothing is known about Zenobia's activity during these two years except that she must have secured herself as regent for her son Wahballat. The two boys named in the *Historia Augusta*, Herennianus and Timolaus (while Wahballat is not mentioned), are otherwise unknown and must be fictional. Apparently unopposed, Wahballat was invested with the paternal title of King of kings. As Odainat's son, he had the hereditary right to be called *clarissimus* (the most illustrious), but not *consularis*. No real power went with these honours. Later on, he was also styled *imperator* and *dux Romanorum*, these titles expressing the claim that he was commanding Roman troops. Some ancient and modern authors consider these titles as also having been inherited, but they are not attested for Odainat, who of course did command such troops.

Things started to move in 270. Zenobia sent an army under the general Septimius Zabda to conquer Egypt. The occasion was the absence of the governor Tenagino Probus, sent by the emperor Claudius to pursue Germanic pirates in the Mediterranean, and a revolt begun by a certain Timagenes, the "high priest for life of Alexandria and the whole of Egypt". Archaeological evidence from Alexandria shows massive destruction that can be dated to about this time. It seems likely that the rebel called Zenobia for help. When the Palmyrene expedition soon withdrew, leaving only a small force behind, and the governor came back from his naval venture, the fortune turned his way, but not for long. Zabda went back, and the governor Probus, defeated, committed suicide. Egypt was firmly in Zenobia's hands.

The Egyptian bureaucracy kept recognising the Roman emperors of the day: Claudius until the end of September, then for a short while his brother Quintillus, and finally Aurelian. Some papyri, however,

¹⁰⁹ *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. I, ch. XI, Everyman's Library, edition 1993, pp. 333–334.

omitted the name of Aurelian and of the current consuls for about two months of that autumn, as if in fear that acknowledging them would present a risk. All this shows that Zenobia jumped on the occasion to take hold of Egypt during the troubles experienced by the Empire as a result of the Germanic invasions in the West and the Egyptian revolt.

It is also possible that she was provoked. The notoriously deceitful author of the *Historia Augusta* mentions an expedition – utterly destroyed by the Palmyrenes – sent to the East by Gallienus under a certain Heraclianus. If this Heraclianus is no other than the Aurelius Heraclianus who orchestrated the plot to murder Gallienus, he could not have been sent by this emperor, who died in the same year as Odainat, as he could not have been both at the emperor's court and on assignment in the East at the same time. Perhaps, then, the story, if true at all, should be dated to the last months of the emperor Claudius, whose wish it was to put things in order.

At any rate, Egypt was occupied. On his way, Zabda had to pass through the province of Arabia, held by the Third Cyrenaican Legion stationed in Bostra. Apparently, he met resistance there. This is not only reported by the sixth-century writer Malalas, who speaks about the massacre of the Roman commander and his men, but also by a Latin military inscription found in Bostra commemorating the restoration of the temple of Jupiter Hammon, patron of this legion, “destroyed by the Palmyrene enemies”. And the *Historia Augusta* mentions that the temple of Bel in Palmyra was looted a few years later by the soldiers of the same legion. Even if this information is to be found in a faked letter, it serves to preserve the special grudge held against Palmyra on the part of the Third Cyrenaican.

So the takeover of Egypt coincided closely with Aurelian's proclamation in the autumn of 270. Already in December, a strange arrangement is documented: Egyptian papyri simultaneously start to mention two rulers. One is, quite regularly, Aurelian with all the usual imperial titles; the other ruler is Wahballat, styled as “Ioulios Aurelios Septimios Ouaballathos Athenodoros, the most illustrious king, consul, *autokrator*, *strategos* of the Romans”.

While Athenodoros is an exact translation of Wahballat (“Gift of Athena/Allat”), these trumpeting names stop short of calling him the emperor, though *autokrator* (in Latin *imperator*) was normally never attributed to anyone besides rulers in this period. The young king is described as the commander of the Roman troops, which he nominally was. But he certainly was not a consul. If he had been proclaimed an honorary associate consul in Rome, it could have been done only in the course of the year 271. Such things were practised at the time, but we can hardly imagine that Aurelian would have started his reign by making such advances to the boy pretender.

No exact date can be attributed to Zenobia's control of Antioch. For all we know, it could have been as late as after the takeover of Egypt. The mint of Antioch started, after a short break in its activities, to issue coins with the portraits of the two rulers on two opposite sides at the same time as they were jointly mentioned in the Egyptian papyri [Fig. 40]. As Wahballat's resounding titles could not be fit on the coin, they are abbreviated to VCRIMDR (*vir consularis rex imperator dux Romanorum*), that is “governor, king, emperor, commander of the Romans”. The boy wears a royal headband with flying ribbons behind. In Alexandria, the legends were in Greek with abbreviations to the same effect. At the same time, some milestones on roads in Syria, Arabia, and Judaea received new inscriptions in the name of Wahballat. They repeat the same titles of him in full, but no mention was made of Aurelian. This was a clear usurpation of the imperial prerogative. A milestone on the road from Palmyra to Emesa inscribed in Greek and Aramaic, clearly intended to impress the Syrian public:



40. A coin of Wahballat as king and "commander of the Romans", the other side shows the emperor Aurelian, mint of Antioch

For the life and victory of Septimius Wahballat Athenodoros, illustrious King of kings and *corrector* of the whole East, son of Septimius Odainat, King of kings, and for the life of Septimia Bat-Zabbai, illustrious queen, mother of the King of kings, daughter of Antiochos.¹¹⁰

It is often supposed that these measures were an attempt by Zenobia to come to terms with the new emperor. They would have been a kind of proposal that she hoped would be silently accepted. If any diplomatic overtures were made in this direction, we know nothing about them. At any rate, Aurelian would have been very unlikely to tolerate such an arrangement, equivalent to the sharing of power, even more so since he never recognised the so-called Gallic Empire, that is, another emperor independent of him ruling Gaul and Britain. It became obvious very soon that no understanding was possible.

About the same time, two generals set up on column brackets in the Great Colonnade in Palmyra two statues, one of the late Odainat, the other of Zenobia:

The statue of Septimius Odainat, King of kings and *corrector* of the whole East, erected by the most powerful Septimii: Zabda, commander-in-chief of the army, and Zabbai, chief of the army of Tadmor, for their master. In the month of Ab, year 582 [August 271].

The statue of Septimia Bat-Zabbai, illustrious and just Queen, their Lady... [the rest as above].

As we can see, the Roman name of Odainat is proudly borne by the two generals, who do not both even to mention their ancestry. The same was true of Septimius Worod, but here we cannot be sure whether the two generals held the name Septimius from Odainat or from his widow who herself was admitted into this narrow club by her husband. Most probably, they had served under Odainat in the lower ranks. They were not necessarily relatives of Zenobia, in spite of the resemblance of names, as these were extremely popular in Palmyra. It is usually taken for granted that Zabbai was commander of troops stationed in Palmyra, while his colleague had under his orders the entire army of Zenobia. It seems equally possible that the "army of Tadmor" meant local levies, while the Roman units were placed under Zabda.

Aurelian was ready to intervene the following year. A naval expedition under general Probus (not the same Probus who lost his life opposing the conquest of Zenobia) landed in Egypt and recovered the country apparently without meeting much opposition. The last known mention in the Egyptian papyri of Aurelian and Wahballat together dates to April 272; in June only the former name appears.

Confronted with this development, Zenobia took the last step, making herself and her son emper-

¹¹⁰ Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, p. 84.



41. A coin of Zenobia as empress, mint of Alexandria. National Museet, Copenhagen



42. Coin of "Vhabalathus Aug.", undetermined Syrian mint

ors. It was no longer possible to pretend that Wahballat was recognised by Aurelian as a junior partner. No doubt her army duly proclaimed the new Augusti and so accepted Aurelian's challenge. The Alexandrian mint still had time to strike some coins, very rare today, which show Zenobia as empress [Fig. 41] as well as others with Wahballat as emperor. Similar coins from Syria bear the strange misspelling VHALATHUS [Fig. 42]; their reverses – which mostly show armed goddesses, described as Venus or Victoria, and Hercules – also display astonishing mistakes in their Latin legends. The makers must have been Aramaic speakers and new to the job. According to Henri Seyrig, these coins were struck after Antioch had already been lost, probably in Emesa. Coins of Zenobia of the same makeshift mint are extremely rare (only six pieces are known), and her head looks very much as if it had been copied from earlier issues of Salonina, wife of Gallienus – this is just another sign of precipitation. While Wahballat as *Augustus* wears a radiate crown as any other emperor, his mother wears a kind of diadem seen in profile above her front – here it looks like a strange horn.

A second series of milestones also exists, this time with the imperial titles of Wahballat. They hail the youngster as the "great conqueror of the Persians, Arabs, and Adiabeniens", all empty boasts.¹¹¹ There was in his reign no war with Persia, and even less with Adiabene, a country across the Tigris. The Arabs could well have been engaged, according to an obscure tradition preserved in the Arab historian Tabari about Zenobia killing the king of the Tanūkh tribe, called Jadhima, who was avenged by his nephew 'Amr ibn 'Adi and who is credited with conquering Tadmor and killing Zenobia.¹¹² He never did it, of course, but the two Arab chieftains are real persons and they might have helped Aurelian's Roman troops. Before that, Wahballat could well have claimed a victory over the Arabs, this being the best proof that he did not consider himself an Arab. The Tanūkh had controlled the township of Umm al-Jimal, at the present northern frontier of Jordan, which was destroyed some time in the late third century. This was the resting place of one Fihr, son of Shullai, possibly a Nabataean, the teacher of the young Jadhima, the king of the Tanūkh, the same one mentioned by Tabari. The boastful Latin inscriptions that could be read on milestones along the roads from Bostra to the Red Sea, and also in Israel and Lebanon, were apparently meant to impress Roman soldiers loyal to Wahballat as the heir of the one who had led them before.

These were the last days of glory. The main army of Aurelian approached through Asia Minor. It is not clear how long the provinces of this region, Cappadocia and Galatia, were under Zenobia's control. It might

¹¹¹ Dodgeon, Lieu 1994, p. 88.

¹¹² Bowersock 1994, pp. 132–147.

have been only a year or so. At any rate, the city of Ankyra (Ankara) offered no resistance, and only Tyana in Cappadocia initially closed its gates – but it then surrendered without much delay. Aurelian arrived unopposed in the vicinity of Antioch, and it was on a plain west of the city, at a place called Immae, that the encounter took place. An account of it is provided by Zosimus, who, though he wrote about it more than a century later, made use of two authors contemporary to the events, whose works are no longer extant: Dexippus the Athenian and his continuator Eunapius of Sardes. Zosimus' account reads thus:

There finding Zenobia with a large army ready to engage, as he himself also was, he met and engaged her as honour obliged him. But observing that the Palmyrene cavalry placed great confidence in their armour, which was very strong and secure, and that they were much better horsemen than his soldiers, he planted his infantry by themselves on the other side of the Orontes. He charged his cavalry not to engage immediately with the vigorous cavalry of the Palmyrenians, but to wait for their attack, and then, pretending to fly, to continue so doing until they had wearied both the men and their horses through excess of heat and the weight of their armour; so that they could pursue them no longer. This project succeeded, and as soon as the cavalry of the emperor saw their enemy tired, and that their horses were scarcely able to stand under them, or themselves to move, they drew up the reins of their horses, and, wheeling round, charged them, and trod them under foot as they fell from their horses. By which means the slaughter was promiscuous, some falling by the sword, and others by their own and the enemies' horses.

After this defeat, the remains of the enemy fled into Antioch. Labdas, the general of Zenobia, fearing that the Antiochians on hearing of it should mutiny, chose a man resembling the emperor, and clothing him in a dress such as Aurelianus was accustomed to wear, led him through the city as if he had taken the emperor prisoner. By this contrivance he imposed on the Antiochians, stole out of the city by night, and took with him Zenobia with the remainder of the army to Emisa.¹¹³

Labdas of Zosimus is Septimius Zabda, the commander-in-chief of Zenobia's army. The fact that he made no attempt to defend Asia Minor and that he fled outright after the battle to Emesa, some 200 km to the south, suggests that his forces were not strong enough to confront Aurelian's legions. Had the charge of his armoured cavalry been successful, he would perhaps have won, but the trick of feigned flight, which has been used by mounted armies of all times, including the Parthian army, brought disaster to Zabda's *clibanarii*. Still, he was able to leave a force at Daphne, a suburb of Antioch, where he hoped to delay the enemy's advance. However, this rear-guard was overcome by the Roman *testudo* formation, which advanced in close ranks uphill covered by shields held overhead.

Having gained the victory, they marched on with great satisfaction at the success of the emperor, who was liberally entertained at Apamea, Larissa, and Arethusa. Finding the Palmyrene army drawn up before Emisa, amounting to seventy thousand men, consisting of Palmyrenes and their allies, he opposed to them the Dalmatian cavalry, the Moesians and Pannonians, and the Celtic legions of Noricum and Rhaetia, and besides these the choicest of the imperial regiment selected man by man, the Mauritanian horse, the Tyaneans, the Mesopotamians, the Syrians, the Phoenicians, and the Palestinians, all men of acknowledged valour; the Palestinians besides other arms wielding clubs and staves. At the com-

¹¹³ *Historia nova* 1.39–63, trans. Green and Chaplin, London 1814, online.

mencement of the engagement, the Roman cavalry receded, lest the Palmyrenes, who exceeded them in number, and were better horsemen, should by some stratagem surround the Roman army. But the Palmyrene cavalry pursued them so fiercely, though their ranks were broken, that the event was quite contrary to the expectation of the Roman cavalry. For they were pursued by an enemy much their superior in strength, and therefore most of them fell. The foot had to bear the brunt of the action. Observing that the Palmyrenes had broken their ranks when the horse commenced their pursuit, they wheeled about, and attacked them while they were scattered and out of order. Upon which many were killed, because the one side fought with the usual weapons, while those of Palestine brought clubs and staves against coats of mail made of iron and brass. The Palmyrenes therefore ran away with the utmost precipitation, and in their flight trod each other to pieces, as if the enemy did not make sufficient slaughter; the field was filled with dead men and horses, whilst the few that could escape took refuge in the city.

This action looks like a repetition of the first battle and seems for this reason a little suspect. In any case, the second battle was lost. Aurelian entered Emesa, and Zenobia's troops retreated to Palmyra. Emesa and Palmyra were only separated by a 150-kilometre stretch of desert. Aurelian's army would have been able to cross it in a week or so.

The Bedouin tribesmen would have harassed the advancing army, but according to the late tradition put to use by Glen Bowersock, other Arabs, those under 'Amr ibn 'Adi, the king of the Tanūkh tribe, were Zenobia's enemies. Even if they did not defeat her, as this tradition maintains, they could have helped the advancing Romans with supplies and guidance.

The *Historia Augusta* goes on to relate the siege of Palmyra. A few anecdotes typical of siege stories are reported, such as the insults exchanged above the walls, and even a wound suffered by Aurelian from an arrow shot from the battlements. Zosimus, for his part, quotes a letter, supposedly by Aurelian, relating the preparedness of the city to resist him:

The Romans are saying that I am merely waging a war with a woman, just as if Zenobia alone and with her own forces only were fighting against me, and yet, as a matter of fact, there is as great a force of the enemy as if I had to make war against a man, while she, because of her fear and her sense of guilt, is a much baser foe. It cannot be told what a store of arrows is here, what great preparations for war, what a store of spears and of stones; there is no section of the wall that is not held by two or three engines of war, and their machines can even hurl fire.

This cannot be trusted at all, not only because of the misogynistic remarks aimed at Zenobia. Palmyra had simply no walls to besiege. The modern archaeological research leaves no room for doubt about this. The existing ramparts were only built after the city had fallen, to shield the Roman garrison that was established there, probably already by Aurelian. Palmyra in its heyday was surrounded, both town and oasis, by a mudbrick wall which separated it from the desert [Fig. 43]. Apparently discontinuous, it is called the "customs wall" in modern lore and indeed it would have served to control the comings and goings of the caravans. At best, it could have prevented sudden nomad raids, but it was certainly no match for a regular army. The game was already lost at the battle of Emesa.

After having quoted from the letters allegedly exchanged between the emperor and the queen, in which the emperor demands that Zenobia surrender and in which she refuses to do so, the fanciful author of



43. The plan of the mudbrick ramparts of the oasis with the principal monuments marked. 1. The Efqa spring; 2. The Bel sanctuary; 3. The Nabu sanctuary; 4. The Theatre; 5. The Agora; 6. The Great Colonnade; 7. The Transverse Colonnade; 8. The Allat sanctuary; 9. The Baalshamin sanctuary; 10. The Arsu sanctuary and the southern town; 11. The first-century rampart

the *Historia Augusta* goes on to relate Zenobia's desperate flight on camelback in the direction of the Euphrates. It is said that she intended to ask her old foe Shapur for help but that she was caught at the banks of the river while embarking to cross to the Persian side and that she was then supposedly brought back to Aurelian. Unfortunately, this story resembles very much another one that can be found in the *Annals* of Tacitus, covering the first century (*Annals* XII 51).¹¹⁴ There, an Armenian queen also called Zenobia –

¹¹⁴ Burgersdijk 2004–2005, p. 148.

together with her husband Radamistus – flees on horseback from an implacable enemy; abandoned for dead on the way, she is found and brought to the enemy king, who treats her kindly. There is a good chance that the author remembered this episode from Tacitus and adapted it to his own account.

Zosimus is in error in the same way about the siege. He also speaks of Zenobia's flight on a swift camel in a bid to secure the help of the Persians, and of her interception on the Euphrates. Unless he used the *Historia Augusta* for this particular part of the story, his account would confirm the reality of this episode. According to him, the siege continued, but a peace party manifested itself, getting out in a procession to meet the emperor and offer the city's surrender. By a fortunate coincidence, we have two inscriptions that indirectly concern the city's takeover.¹¹⁵

One is engraved on a wall in a room inside the gatehouse of the Bel sanctuary. It was a decree to mark the end of the term of several officials serving in the society of the priests and of that of their president, the senator Septimius Haddudan. It is dated March 272, shortly before the New Year festival. This senator must have belonged to Odainat's close circle and got his Roman name from him; he was also a Roman senator by imperial appointment, probably by Gallienus on recommendation of the *corrector* of the East. The other inscription, much worn, is a loose stone plaque, no doubt originally placed somewhere in the Bel sanctuary. It is dated in the same month, but the year is not preserved. However, the same senator, Haddudan, is mentioned as having "helped the troops of our Lord, Caesar Aurelianus, in the month of August". This can only mean that the president of the priests of Bel was re-elected for the next sacred year, beginning in April 272, and that the taking of Palmyra by Aurelian took place in August of that year. After surrendering the city, Haddudan was left in his office and was duly thanked by his colleagues at the end of his second term.

His initiative to offer submission must have been immediate, given the lack of fortifications to resist. Zenobia's flight, if authentic, would have occurred at the approach of the Roman troops. The hope that Persia would offer assistance was unrealistic: any intervention would have been quite belated at that point. But it is possible that she simply sought refuge in the domains of her old enemy.

Eventually, she was taken prisoner and brought to Rome to figure later in Aurelian's triumph, together with some Germanic kings and his rival emperor, Tetricus from Gaul. Some writers say she died on the way from voluntary starvation, but another, more popular version has it that she marched in the triumphal procession, laden with all her jewels and bound in golden chains so heavy that a "Persian buffoon" had to help her carry them so that she could advance. It is said that her life was spared after this humiliation and that she was even offered a property in Tibur (Tivoli), where she lived with a new husband and children. All this is impossible to verify and of no importance to the history of Palmyra.

Zenobia had two lives. One was that of an ambitious mother who wanted to conquer the Roman Empire for her son, and the other is posthumous and legendary: centuries later, the extraordinary qualities piled upon her in Antiquity fed the imagination of European writers and artists, who took pleasure in portraying the tragic fate of this beautiful queen. Italian operas, tapestries, and paintings celebrated her, brooding freely on the already fanciful account from the *Historia Augusta*. In 1720, a Venetian Zenobio family ordered from Giambattista Tiepolo a series of paintings illustrating the rise and fall of Zenobia for their *palazzo* Ca' Zenobio. One of the pictures from this now dispersed collection shows the queen addressing her troops [Fig. 44]. The fascination with Zenobia goes on to this day, with a film in the 1950s starring Anita Ekberg as a sparingly clad Amazon; many novels and several more serious books have also recently appeared in Europe and America [Figs 45–46] (see note 104).

Zenobia is also presented as having had serious intellectual interests and as having held a court to sustain them. The queen was apparently celebrated by the rhetor Callinicus of Petra, whose lost history

¹¹⁵ Gawlikowski 1971, pp. 412–421.



44. Giambattista Tiepolo, *Zenobia addressing her troops*. The boy grasping her cloak is no doubt the young Wahballat. The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

of Alexandria was dedicated to Cleopatra. He must have meant by this Zenobia, perhaps playing on the name of her father, Antiochos, this being a popular name in Roman Syria, in reference to several Seleucid kings who were related to the Egyptian princesses named Cleopatra. Of course, it was the most famous Cleopatra that was being referred to here, the seventh with this name and the last queen of Egypt, who, as we know, committed suicide. So the compliment was somewhat ambivalent. This piece of flattery founded in part the assertion in the *Historia Augusta* that Zenobia was a descendant of Cleopatra, and even of Dido and Semiramis to boot.

The philosopher Cassius Longinus was associated with Zenobia more closely. He abandoned his teaching post at the Platonic Academy at Athens to come to Syria, being at least half-Syrian himself (on the side of his mother, who was from Emesa), and was admitted to the councils of the queen. He wrote for her a panegyric of Odainat, perhaps a funeral oration, one that was still read a century later. Longinus was a great admirer of the Neoplatonic Plotinus and asked one of Plotinus' more famous pupils, Porphyrius, to bring to him in Syria manuscripts of this leading philosopher of the time. Being ill, however, Porphyrius did not come; he then died in Italy in 270. None of Longinus' writings have survived. He was put to death by Aurelian on the charge of being a counsellor to the queen.

Janine Balty has convincingly argued that two mosaic pavements in Palmyra, one showing Achilles on Scyros and the other a beauty contest won by the mythical queen Cassiopea (see Figs 202–203), were inspired by Neoplatonic ideas.¹¹⁶ It is possible that this inspiration came from Longinus, though he was not necessarily living in Palmyra at the time, let alone in the house decorated with these pavements (see p. 224). As Longinus was the only intellectual we can associate with Zenobia, it is not advisable to add our voice to some modern writers that she held a “circle” and that she was a patron of arts and literature.

She is also credited with being vividly interested in religion, in particular in Judaism. The only reason for this claim is her alleged association with the bishop Paul of Samosata, who was elected to the see of Antioch in 259 or 260.¹¹⁷ The choice was not a happy one and the man soon acquired an odious rep-

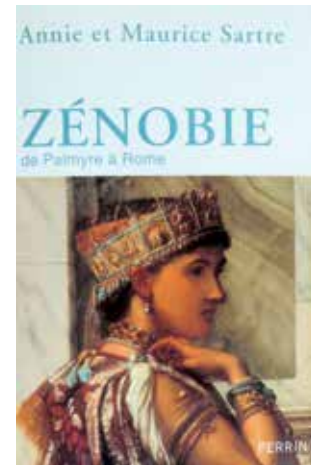
¹¹⁶ Balty (J.) 1995, pp. 291–297.

¹¹⁷ Millar 1971; Kaizer 2002, p. 16.

45. The cover of Winsbury 2010, using the marble statue by Harriet Hosmer, *Zenobia in Chains* (1864)



46. The cover of Annie and Maurice Sartre 2014, reproducing the painting by Sir Edward Poynter, *Zenobia Captive* (1878)



utation. Already in 264, other bishops demanded that he change his ways, but he disappointed them again and again in spite of his promises before he was finally deposed by a synod held in Antioch in 268. He refused to leave his ministry, and was eventually removed when Aurelian took control of Antioch. This was done at the demand of the bishop of Rome, to whom the synodal letter describing Paul's errors and mischiefs was sent. The letter is quoted at length by the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea and paraphrased by Edward Gibbon:

Paul considered the service of the church as a very lucrative profession. His ecclesiastical jurisdiction was venal and rapacious; he extorted frequent contributions from the most opulent of the faithful, and converted to his own use a considerable part of the public revenue. By his pride and luxury the Christian religion was rendered odious in the eyes of the Gentiles. His council chamber and his throne, the splendour with which he appeared in public, the suppliant crowd who solicited his attention, the multitude of letters and petitions to which he dictated his answers, and the perpetual hurry of business in which he was involved, were circumstances much better suited to the state of a civil magistrate than to the humility of a primitive bishop. When he harangued his people from the pulpit, Paul affected the figurative style and the theatrical gestures of an Asiatic sophist, while the cathedral resounded with the loudest and most extravagant acclamations in the praise of his divine eloquence. Against those who resisted his power, or refused to flatter his vanity, the prelate of Antioch was arrogant, rigid, and inexorable; but he relaxed the discipline, and lavished the treasures of the church on his dependent clergy, who were permitted to imitate their master in the gratification of every sensual appetite. For Paul indulged himself very freely in the pleasures of the table, and he had received into the episcopal palace two young and beautiful women, as the constant companions of his leisure moments.¹¹⁸

Gibbon repeats here the worldly accusations brought against Paul but is silent about the main reproach: heresy. This was passed over very shortly by Eusebius, who himself held similar beliefs. Yet Paul was abhorrent to his fellow bishops in the first place because he refused the equality of the three divine persons of the holy Trinity. This doctrine was later developed by Arius and came to be known as

¹¹⁸ *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. II; ch. XVI, ed. 1993, pp. 52–53.

Arianism; it was condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325. We should remark that Paul's conduct was, in Gibbon's words, "better suited to the state of a civil magistrate" than that of a bishop. Gibbon understood correctly, unlike some more recent scholars, Eusebius' text, in which it is said that Paul behaved like a *procurator ducenarius* and not that he was one. This high office (the same as Worod's in Palmyra at about the same time) was an imperial appointment. As his behaviour was condemned by the synod of 268, the year Odainat was killed, he could not have been a protégé of Zenobia's, as is often maintained. She did nothing to force his removal, but this is no reason to think that she was interested in the theological disputes among Christians, and even less in arbitrating between them. However, in the fourth century, when the Arian controversy was at its peak, the main proponent of orthodoxy, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, came out against Paul, throwing vitriolic remarks at him and accusing him of "judaising" the Christian religion.

Athanasius also accused Zenobia of being Jewish and of protecting Paul for this reason. This was repeated later by other Christian writers, though the charge was utter nonsense: Arianism had nothing to do with the Mosaic religion, and Zenobia was not a follower of either. Jewish writings give no hint that it could be so, and Palmyra had very bad press among the Jews to boot. Odainat's military action against Nehardea was bitterly remembered, and more charges were added: the archers of Tadmor are said to have helped in the destruction of the First Temple, which is improbable because of the insignificance of the oasis in the sixth century BC, and they are also accused of having participated in the assault on Jerusalem in 70. This latter charge is more likely to be true, as units from Palmyra could well have been incorporated into the Roman army of Vespasian. We can find in the Talmud pronouncements such as this one by Rabbi Yohanan: "Happy will be he who shall see the downfall of Tadmor" (Yer. Ta'an. IV 8); or this one by Rabbi Judah: "The day on which Tadmor is destroyed will be made a holiday" (Yeb. 166, 17a). Both sages would hardly have said such things if Zenobia of Palmyra had any known leanings toward Judaism.

Such considerations have not prevented some modern scholars from taking the words of Athanasius at face value and speculating on the queen's supposed monotheistic inclinations. Another dubious story was discovered in the Manichaean writings from Egypt. Some missionaries, it is said, sent by the prophet Mani to convert the West, visited a queen named Tadamor and cured her sister called Nafsha (meaning "soul" in Aramaic) of an illness; in another version the queen is called "Tadi, wife of Caesar".¹¹⁹ It would be very risky to lend credence to this legendary account and its blurred memory of Zenobia. We have no reason whatsoever to doubt that Zenobia participated wholeheartedly in the ancestral cults of her native city, offering due sacrifice to Bel and to the host of other gods around him.

In her native country today Zenobia is represented as a heroic fighter for independence from the Roman yoke and a prefiguration of modern Arab nationalist movements. In this version of history it is hardly noticed that her short reign ended in disaster. A more balanced view is less edifying. It must be observed in the first place that both Odainat and his widow never abandoned the Roman frame of reference in their actions. While Odainat always remained loyal to his emperor, Zenobia's problem was that she was not recognised – neither she nor her son – as Odainat's rightful successor. The royal title was hollow, and the Roman honours and charges piled on Odainat were in principle not hereditary. She first tried to find accommodation with Aurelian, and it was only when this failed that she proclaimed herself and Wahballat Roman emperors (*Augusti*). There were many such proclamations in the third century, a good dozen of them in the lifetime of Zenobia. Those hopefuls who failed in their quest are considered usurpers, and those who succeeded rightful rulers, but all grabbed power in exactly the same way. Zenobia sticks out in this crowd of pretenders only because of the fact that she was a woman.

As a matter of fact, Aurelian at his accession only ruled over the middle part of the Roman Empire:

¹¹⁹ Tardieu 1992; Hartmann 2001, pp. 308–315.

Italy, North Africa, the Balkans, and western Asia Minor. The western provinces of Gaul, Spain, Britain, and Germany knew a range of rulers who considered themselves legitimate, and the East was controlled by Zenobia. She was certainly not a “queen of Palmyra”. Nothing suggests that she wanted to build an Oriental empire as different and separate from the Roman Empire. Her bid for power did not involve secession: the normal ambition of a pretender would have been to fight for everything. Indeed, one victory in the field could have opened for her the way to Rome. Clearly, Zenobia had overestimated her forces and made the fateful decision too late, when her cause was already lost. There was no such thing as the “Palmyrene Empire”; it is a name just as abusive as the “Empire of the Gauls”. These were simply the domains of rival Roman emperors who did not make it to Rome.

Zenobia knew that other Syrians not long before her time had ruled the Roman world. The young emperors Elagabal (218–222) and Alexander Severus (222–235) were both scions of the family of the high priests from Emesa, the first of them himself being the high priest of the god Elagabal, whose name he bore and whom he took with him to Rome. Their elevation was arranged by their mothers and their common grandmother, who was a sister-in-law of Septimius Severus, an African of Punic descent. Septimius Vaballathus would have been no less fit, had Fortune been more kind to him.

The growth of a city

Tadmor before the Romans

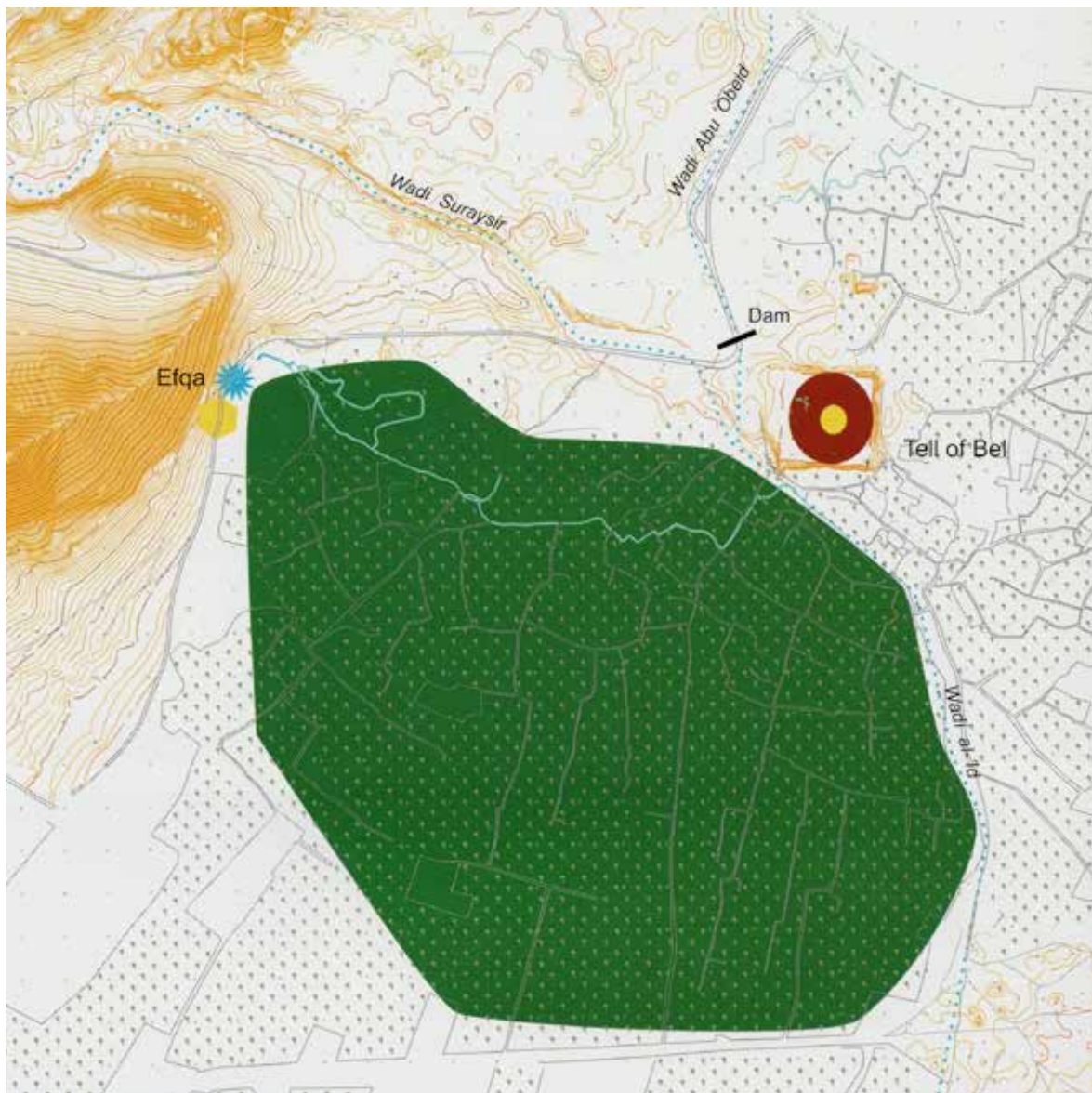
Little as we know the oasis in the centuries before the Romans arrived, we can be sure that the settlement was pretty small. On the site under the future temple of Bel, the slowly growing layers of debris reached, over the course of some two thousand years, a height of 12 m above the natural level of the ground. The resulting tell, as such human-made hills are called in Arabic, stood immediately to the east over the confluence of two wadis, that is, dry river beds that only fill up for a few hours after heavy rain [Fig. 47]. Today one of these is called Wadi Saraysir; it comes through a break in the hills that bar the plain from the west. Now passing at the foot of the late city wall, it can bring disastrous floods, as was recently the case in 1982 and then again in 2011. The other is Wadi Abu 'Ubayd, which comes from the northern hills and which is hard to trace on the ground today. After meeting at the foot of the Bel sanctuary, they turn, as one dry bed called Wadi Eid, around the sanctuary's southern flank.

Between the two wadis the ground is some 5 m higher. Another plateau at about the same level extends to the south of Wadi Saraysir, but it falls gently further on to let flow a perennial stream gushing from the Efqa grotto. When it was still flowing, the water was warm and smelled of sulphur, but after being in the open for a while it became good for feeding the olive and palm groves of the oasis. In its natural state the rivulet probably reached – as did the wadi just mentioned – the salty bottom of a pre-historic lake beyond, where the Palmyrenes of all ages extracted salt for themselves and for barter or sale. The intensive irrigation absorbed its waters in the gardens.

The Efqa spring was an underground river fed by many tributaries, all together about 800 m long. It went dry in 1993 because of excessive deep pumping, but until this point it attracted people from time immemorial: a pre-pottery Neolithic village of some nine thousand years ago has been excavated in the immediate neighbourhood. As the grotto was constantly used and its issue continuously transformed, it is next to impossible to follow these changes through the ages. We do know, however, that the site was sacred to the god Yarhibol. Benches cut in the rock, both outside and inside, show that it was also used for curative bathing (see Fig. 4).

It is not known whether the settlement under the Bel temple was the only inhabited site in the oasis during the Bronze and Iron Ages.¹²⁰ On the plateau overlooking the spring and the gardens, traces of

¹²⁰ Al-Maqdissi, Ishaq 2017, pp. 42–55.



47. The natural topography of Tadmor

buildings not older than the second century BC have been found [Fig. 48]. They are roughly contemporary with a lone tomb on the northern plateau. This is not enough to form an idea of what Hellenistic Palmyra looked like or how large it was. It certainly included several shrines on the tell and elsewhere, but no monumental buildings are recorded. Together with the gardens, it was surrounded by a mudbrick enclosure of uncertain date, which can be traced in the south and the west (see Fig. 43).

The first great monument to appear was the new temple of Bel (see pp. 113–128). It remained the biggest and the most accomplished ever to be built in the city. The first stones were laid at about the turn of our time reckoning. Even if the cella needed about a century in order to be completed, and even if the square courtyard was never finished with colonnades on all four sides, the sanctuary raised atop the tell was the major feature of the ancient city and of its ruins down to our time.



48. A mudbrick wall of the 2nd century BC, beneath the remains of more recent structures

Only after this construction was well under way did other monumental buildings start to arise [Fig. 43].¹²¹ The sanctuary of Baalshamin, which was probably founded shortly after 11, and that of Allat, which was built half a century earlier (but both in the beginning were rather inconspicuous), lay outside the enclosure of the oasis. These sanctuaries shall be described in more detail later on (pp. 128–145). Public buildings other than temples took longer to appear: the first agora and a wide elongated market known as the Transverse Colonnade were both traced in the late first century.

The first-century agora was a paved square laid about 1 m above the wadi bed, requiring four steps to span the transition. Four column bases were found in their original location, proving that the square was surrounded by a colonnade, at least partially. We do not know how big the first agora was: compared to the outline of the later monument above it, the eastern wall must have passed inside of it, but the southern wall was advanced towards the wadi. A pavement was found on this side passing beneath the later foundations. We know for certain that the old agora pavement surrounded on three sides a small, modest shrine, a square building of broken stones, barely 2.4 m wide inside but with walls over 1 m thick. It opened directly to the road running at the wadi bottom and was inset obliquely into the old agora outline.¹²² Left intact with pious reverence by the agora builders, it was one of the earliest temples of the oasis, at least as old as a similar shrine of Allat. Such shrines originally served to protect the nomads' sacred images and objects and were adopted for a while by their settled descendants. This one was sacred

¹²¹ An overview of urbanism and monuments: Delplace 2017. An up-to-date detailed plans of the site: Schnädelbach 2010.

¹²² Gawlikowski 2013.



49. The southern quarter as revealed by remote sensing

to an otherwise unknown god called Rabʿasire, meaning “Master of the fettered”. An image of him – in which he is represented as a cuirassed warrior holding the ends of chains binding two lions, one on either side of him (see Fig. 184) – can be seen on a stele found on the spot.

At least two more temples opened directly onto the wadi road. One was dedicated to Nabu, considered in Babylonia the patron of wisdom and writing; he was also the elder son of Marduk/Bel. The sanctuary certainly existed in the first century, but only some loose fragments from this stage were found (see pp. 145–149). The other one was the temple of Arsu. Located on the southern bank of the wadi, it was razed to the ground in late Antiquity. An archaic capital of the first century BC was found there, as well as an altar to Arsu and two other gods, offered in 63. All this clearly shows that the wadi road was Palmyra’s main thoroughfare.

On the plateau to the south, a residence built in the Augustan period (that is, at about the turn of our era) was excavated. A much larger area was surveyed by remote sensing, revealing a densely built residential quarter [Fig. 49].¹²³ This agglomeration, no doubt much larger than mapped, does not give the impression of having been planned; it seems rather to have grown spontaneously along two streets which apparently bifurcated from the track arriving from Damascus. Nothing is known about the settlement on the northern side of the wadi bed.

The Transverse Colonnade, as it is traditionally called, was an unpaved space 230 m long and 35 m wide at the western edge of the inhabited area, against the old enclosure wall on the outside. It was lined

¹²³ Schmidt-Colinet, Al-Asʿad 2013.



50. The first step leading to the Agora, the pavement of the old agora and the remains of the Rab'asire shrine beneath the Agora foundations

with shops on both sides and used as a passage between the tracks going to the cities of western Syria and the *khans* north of the town, which received the caravans from the East. Apparently, there was no direct connection to the residential quarters inside the wall. This market was adorned, mostly in the second century, with columns offered by private donors, some of them in honour of the solar god Shamash, whose shrine was on the open ground outside. Between the two rows of columns, perhaps never complete, a free space 22 m wide was left for circulation.

Sometime in the first century, Wadi Saraysir became, within the limits of the agglomeration, a paved road, laid with big irregular slabs of hard limestone. The slabs were laid against steps leading up to the agora, and may be contemporary with this monument [Fig. 50]. It was the main thoroughfare along the built higher ground towards which the temple of Bel and that of Nabu were turned, and towards which the agora and the Transverse Colonnade opened. To prevent flooding, a dam was needed to bar the wadi at the point where it entered the passage through the western hills [Fig. 51]. A modern dam was recently built in the same place and a lake is forming seasonally behind it [Fig. 52]. The other wadi was also barred with a massive dam, which was found under the courtyard of the modern building of the Ottoman *konak* (the seat of local authority). Two bodies of water were thus created, making rain water available for months. The paved road could then lead without impediment right to the entrance of the Bel sanctuary. Because there are no wheel grooves on the slabs, and because it is well known that camels do not like to walk on slippery stone surface, this was a *peripatos*, the main pedestrian boulevard intended to link the principal buildings of the city and serve the residential quarters which extended on either side.



51. The broken ancient dam west from the Valley of the Tombs



52. The lake behind the modern dam at the western entrance to the Valley of the Tombs

The columns had a meaning. They were not just supports for roofing providing much welcome shade along streets and around open courtyards. They were also, and perhaps above all else, a cultural reference. Each column had a capital, and in the Roman period these were overwhelmingly Corinthian. A Corinthian capital is an elaborately sculpted crowning displaying two rows of acanthus leaves on a round shaft, from which volutes grow outwards forming four angles to support the square abacus, which supports the architrave joining the columns [Fig. 53]. The capital was usually as high as the column shaft was wide. The innumerable variants of its form obeyed a general evolution that allows for approximate dating. Each Corinthian column had a base in the form of two convex roundels with a concave roundel between them (see Fig. 55). Less common were lower Ionic capitals, which are formed by two large volutes, while simpler Doric columns were even rarer. All three varieties are Greek in origin. Architecture making use of any of them proclaimed by the same token that it belonged to the classical tradition, going back several centuries to ancient Greece, a tradition that was fully assimilated in Italy and then in every Roman province.

A few early capitals in Palmyra come from the first century BC and may seem awkward imitations. They are politely called “heterodox”, because they do not follow the classical norm. However, this norm soon became universal. Wanting very much to belong, the Palmyrenes multiplied columns everywhere: in the temples, in the streets, and finally, in private houses. Their city came to resemble, at least superficially, any other in the Roman Empire.

Carving a Corinthian capital required a great deal of skill, and it was certainly expensive. So columns were also a mark of opulence. Old shrines had to do without them, and so did streets; after all, it was much easier to obtain shade by spinning a canvas between some wooden poles or by dressing up a tent, as the desert dwellers had always done. The colonnades around Greek and Roman temples can hardly be explained as a practical device.

In the Levant, colonnaded streets appear first as contributions by King Herod (37–4 BC), who tried in this way to make himself agreeable to several cities in Syria. He started in 20 BC with Antioch, the provincial capital.¹²⁴ This example was followed in other cities, according to the means available. Today, the best preserved street colonnades stand in Palmyra and in Apamea. In Palmyra, each column was equipped with a bracket jutting out from the shaft, on which a statue would have been placed. This particularity is seldom found elsewhere. As the statues were cast in bronze and empty inside, their weight was easily borne by the brackets, which hardly would have been able to support stone figures of natural size. However, the bronze has disappeared in smelting furnaces and all we are left with are the inscriptions on the brackets or beneath them identifying the honoured persons.

Early statues stood on inscribed stone pedestals and were often of stone themselves. Some, however, were cast in bronze and could have been transferred to columns when these appeared. Some such cases, certain or suspected, are revealed by inscriptions carrying old dates but in more recent lettering: several first-century texts were thus recopied onto columns in the Bel courtyard and in the Agora.

Indeed, the colonnades of the Bel sanctuary started to be erected in the 80s, and it took nearly a century for them to go round three sides of the court in two parallel rows. Here, the capitals show a steady evolution as the colonnades advanced, but some inscriptions contain dates clearly much earlier than the columns that bear them. The case of the Agora is less clear-cut, but the five earliest inscriptions, dating from 75 to 86, were obviously copied in the first half of the second century. The original inscriptions must have belonged to the older agora. Replacing this older agora, the later Agora is a rectangular space,

¹²⁴ Marshak 2015, pp. 191–226.



53. A Corinthian capital (reused in a Christian basilica)

71 by 83 m; it was surrounded on all four sides by 80 columns.¹²⁵ Built on an earthen embankment about 1.6 m above the older plaza, it seems to have been completed at one go under Trajan or Hadrian, that is, in the first quarter of the second century [Figs 54–55].¹²⁶ Curiously, there was no pavement such as covered the older agora. Possibly, the reconstruction was the result of a disastrous flood which destroyed the lower monument; one such flood in 1982 covered the new Agora with a layer of silt half a metre thick!

This new Agora had two sets of three gates, each at opposite ends, one facing towards the wadi and the other turned towards the north. Because the paved road at the southern side was at a lower level, nine steps were needed, reaching a platform about 3 m wide in front of the Agora wall [Fig. 56]. These steps most probably extended the whole length of the wall. Nothing is left of these approaches except some lower steps which could have been inherited from the older agora, unless the street pavement was laid at the same time as the new monument. The venerable old shrine of Rab'asire remained accessible, enclosed within the steps and the platform.

Opposite the new Agora, across the paved road, there is a clear trace of the Tariff, the enormous block of stone set up in 137 “opposite the temple of Rab'asire”. It was discovered in 1882 by the Russian prince Siemion Abamelek-Lazarev and transported twenty years later to St Petersburg. It was cut into four pieces to facilitate transport and remains today in the Hermitage Museum (see Fig. 13 and p. 267).

The very location of this important monument is proof enough that the Agora was considered the centre of the city. If trading went on here, it would have been done in removable stalls under the porticoes, but even this is doubtful. There were plenty of shops in town in solid buildings. Rather, the Agora should be seen as a meeting place whose focus was on social interaction, whether to do with politics or business. As more and more statues were set up on its columns, it also became a kind of hall of fame. What a pleasure to show one's children or friends the likeness of a family member, if not one's own!

¹²⁵ Delplace, Dentzer-Feydy 2005.

¹²⁶ There are five inscriptions dated under Trajan and six under Hadrian; the former may also have been recopied, but this cannot be proven.

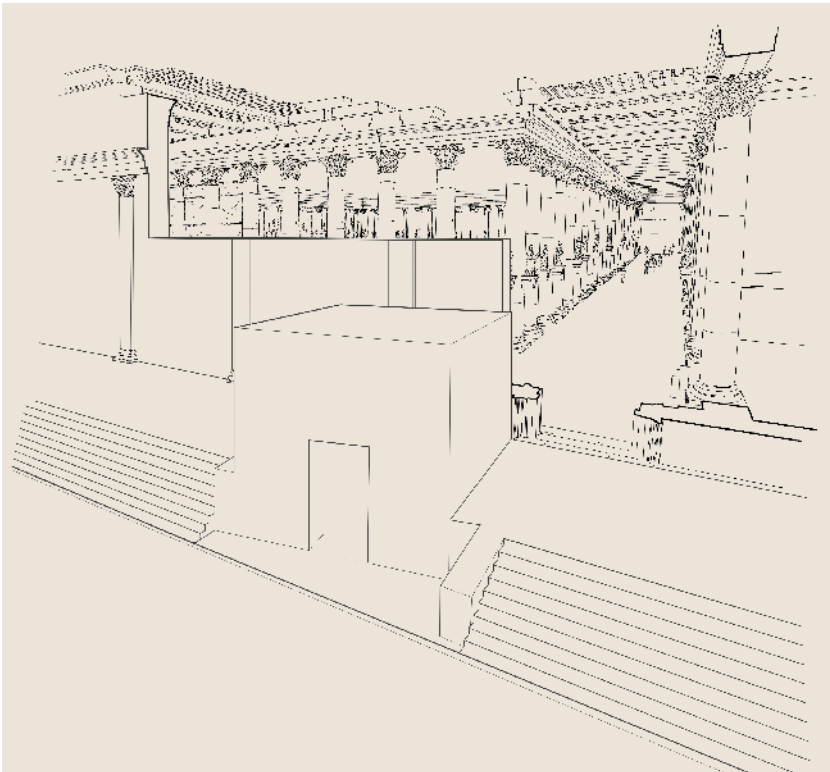


54. An air view of the Agora and the theatre. To the left, the Great Colonnade



55. A view of the Agora as seen from the southeast corner

The Agora had two dependencies aligned on the street in front. Both were built at the same time, and their walls were connected to those of the square. One was a large room opening in a corner at full width with two columns between the side walls [Fig. 57]. It was equipped with benches and a raised platform at the far end. First thought to be a temple, it has recently been identified as the meeting hall of the Council. The main arguments for this are the location of similar halls (*curia* in Latin) in some other cities, mostly in the West, but also the find nearby of a huge lot of impressions of the city's official seal, apparently the remains of the archives, which were probably burned right before or during the sack of 273. The other annex is much bigger; it is as long as the Agora but only half as wide [Fig. 58]. It



56. The southeast approaches of the Agora with the shrine of Rab'asire, restored



57. The entrance to the meeting room in the south-west corner of the Agora



58. The presumed basilica (left) and the gates to the Agora

opened towards the wadi road with a triple gate, and probably a row of outside columns. As its long walls were pierced with windows, eight on each side, plans may have existed to cover it with a roof. However, this would have required the existence of at least two rows of supporting columns. No column bases have been found, perhaps because the building was never finished. Covered halls such as these, called basilicas, used for legal proceedings and other public functions, were indeed often attached to Roman *fora*. The whole complex would have imitated the essential features of Roman cities in the West: a forum with a basilica, a meeting place for the Council, and a temple. In Palmyra, there is no temple, and the basilica was never completed, but in spite of this it can be argued that the Agora was meant to provide a civic centre to the city on the Western model, and that it came about as an imperial initiative.

The Great Colonnade

At about the same time as the Agora, another great project was put on the rails.¹²⁷ Today, it is called the Great Colonnade because, from the early explorers down to the tourists of our day, modern visitors saw this picturesque line of columns against the sky as the most memorable view of all [Figs 59, 61]. In fact, this could not have been the impression that it created in Antiquity, for the columns fronted buildings on both sides of the street, and they would only have been visible when one walked alongside it. The street was not built as a coherent project; its three sections of different orientation were laid out at different times [Fig. 60].

The first to be traced was the section extending in a straight line for 575 m from the western end of the city [Fig. 61]. This long stretch matches the orientation of the Agora, though it stopped at a certain distance from it. Among a score of inscriptions on its columns, the oldest one is dated 158, when the Agora had already been in place for half a century. Of course the street was traced before that date, and may have been planned together with the Agora. Indeed, the columns were set up intermittently and in

¹²⁷ There is no comprehensive publication on the Colonnade, but see Barański 1995, Żuchowska 2000.



59. One of the street colonnades as it appears today



60. A general plan of Palmyra within the late ramparts. The Great Colonnade and the Transverse Colonnade in grey

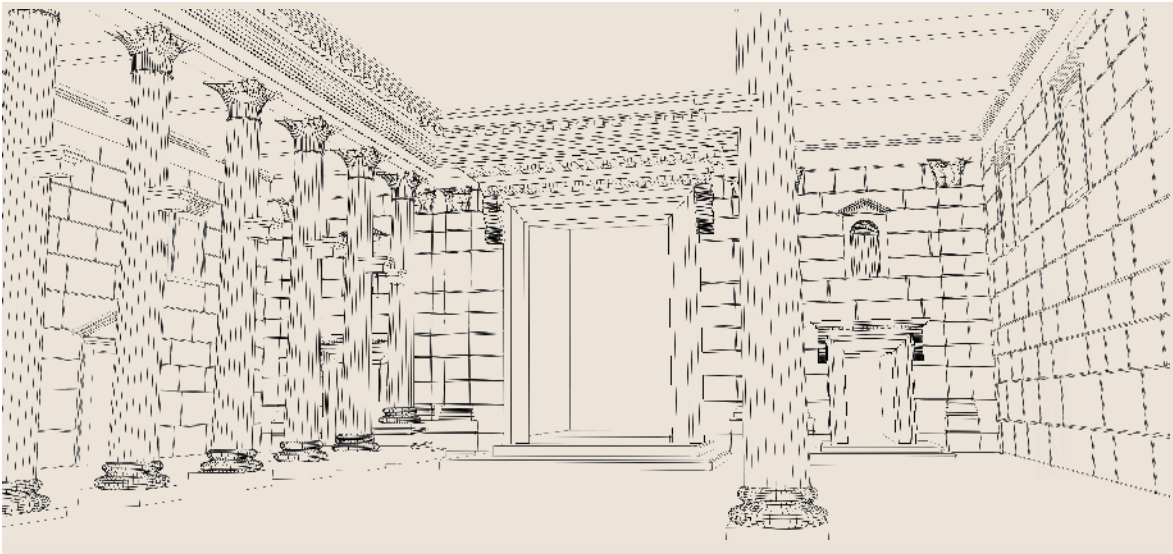


61. The western section of the Great Colonnade

sections corresponding to the blocks of buildings that came into existence – this probably would have been done by the private owners of each of these blocks. On the other hand, the street itself was traced by the city: at the head of each side street, two cornerstones were placed to guide future housing; in some places this housing never materialised, and the adjoining lots remained vacant.

It is possible that the street followed the line of the early wall which is apparent south and west of the oasis as it cut across the plain; this wall was partly replaced by the Transverse Colonnade. The course taken by the northern wall might have been followed by the new avenue, but it has not yet been found. At any rate, there is no doubt that the new street did not cut through the existing town but that it was meant to open a new quarter planned on empty ground to the north. Together with the Agora it was intended to transform the somewhat chaotic township of earlier days into an orderly city. A similar project was also launched by Hadrian in Athens. Is the same true of Palmyra, too? The fact that the city was renamed Hadriana Palmyra should mean that the emperor was considered its new founder. The opening of this new town could have been an imperial initiative, parallel to the new Agora. Perhaps future excavations will provide us with evidence one way or another.

The street was not particularly wide: it was only 12.5 m between the lines of the columns and 27 m between the buildings which stood opposite each other. The columns, however, rose to a height of 9 m, which is higher than the columns in most other colonnaded streets in the Roman East. At the western end, the street was closed by a triple gate, now a heap of fallen blocks. It was a huge affair with a high passage in the middle of the street and two lower passages under porticoes [Fig. 62]. All three could probably be closed if necessary, but this gateway was by no means a defensive work. It opened directly onto the necropolis and touched one end of the Transverse Colonnade with its two lines of shops. The other end of the western section did not originally stop at the Tetrastylon, a much later building, but continued for a while until it met at right angle a side street leading to the supposed basilica flanking the Agora. Recently, Jacques Seigne has identified the outline of a square monument in the middle of the street, one that had originally closed the western colonnade; it was probably a huge altar. At this point, the street was about 630 m long.



62. The western gate



63. A residential block excavated by the Great Colonnade

On paper, if the line of the western section is extended further to the east, it hits the entrance to the Bel sanctuary; this would make the Great Colonnade nearly 1200 m long from end to end. However, it could not possibly have been the intention of the first planners that the colonnade would take this route. Such a street would not only have gone right through the sanctuary of Nabu, which already existed, but it also would have gone through the theatre, which had yet to be built. The latter could very well have been planned along this long line if such an idea had indeed been considered. Instead, the theatre is oriented differently, while a short street and the gate allowing for the evacuation of spectators towards the southern part of the town goes roughly parallel to the neighbouring Agora and its annexed monument.

The oldest section of the Great Colonnade was not meant for transit circulation, as it was closed at both ends: by the western gate and by the square altar in the middle at the east. With its two lines of shops and workshops it made a huge commercial avenue serving the new extension of the growing city. It was linked with the civic centre formed by the Agora and its dependencies, though the intermediate space between them has not been fully excavated and the precise connection remains unknown.

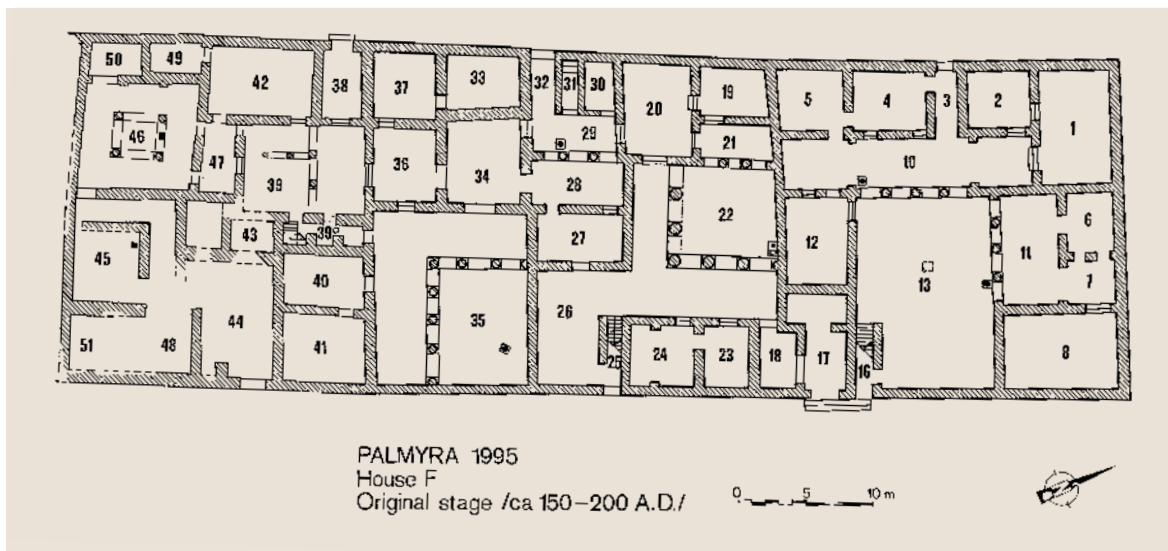
Only a small part of the housing in the new neighbourhood to the north has been investigated. The side streets are easily visible on the ground and run in long straight lines all the way to where older tombs marked the legal limit of settlement. They are parallel to each other but for some reason bifurcate from the main street at an angle. The grid extends only as far as the oldest, western section of the Great Colonnade. The courtyards of some houses are still marked by standing columns.

Only one house has been excavated there [Fig. 63].¹²⁸ It extended for 79 m between two streets 26 m distant from each other. This elongated shape contained no fewer than six courtyards of varying dimensions, all six with columns along one or two sides; about thirty rooms opened towards the courtyards on ground level and perhaps as many on the upper storey, where terraces above the columns allowed for coming and going around the house [Figs 64–65]. Several entrances opened on both flanking streets, and were it not for the internal passages revealed in excavation, one would think that as many separate houses existed here as there are courts. No wonder unexcavated residences appeared to researchers to be clusters of small independent houses, each consisting of four or five rooms built around a small courtyard. As now appears to be the case, these huge houses with several courtyards must have been inhabited by extended families and obeyed the Oriental custom of secluding women. We cannot identify the women's quarters with certainty, but they probably corresponded to the less accessible parts, while the male visitors were entertained in more impressive rooms opening from the best courtyard. It should be kept in mind that the more intimate rooms were probably located upstairs.

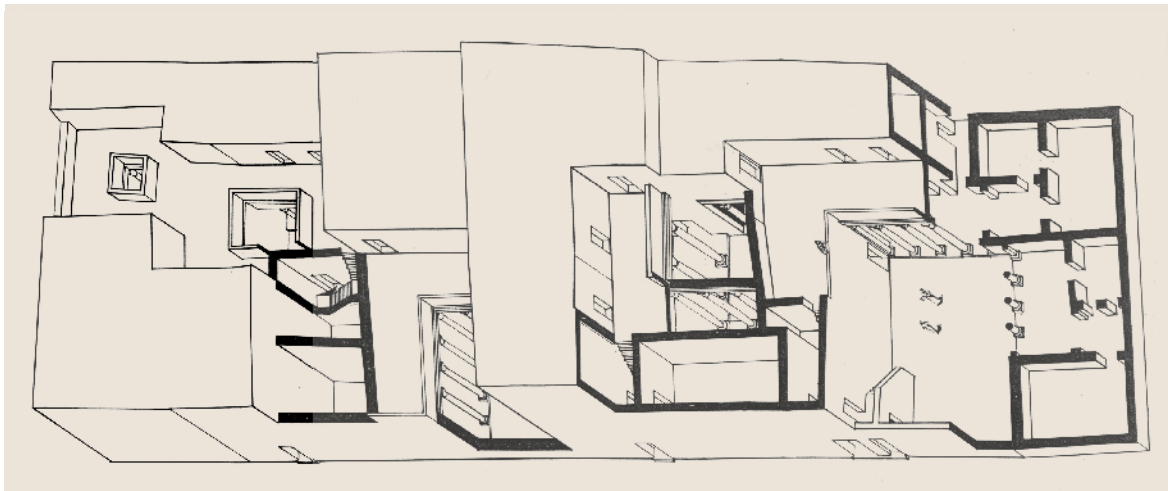
The lack of amenities is remarkable. They are limited to two latrines without running water, though they did have outlets emptying into street drains. Not only was there no bath, but there was not even a kitchen. It seems that cooking was done on movable grills and ovens. Water had to be brought from the public aqueduct. Several wells dug no deeper than 5 to 8 m into the ground were the cesspools intended to collect the rainwater. The water table could be reached over 20 m deeper.

This excavated house was built in the late second century. We know this from some pottery fragments found in the foundation trenches, but also from the style of the column capitals and from that of the decoration in some of the rooms. Indeed, elements of rich stucco friezes and cornices datable to this period have been preserved in several rooms. They survived on the walls as long as the wooden beams supported the ceiling, and they fell to the floor when these were removed from the abandoned house. Surprisingly, the floors were by then covered with debris containing pottery and coins that can be dated to the eighth or even the ninth century. This means that this particular house, and probably many more,

¹²⁸ Gawlikowski 2019.



64. Plan of the house excavated by the Great Colonnade



65. Axonometric rendering of the house

were inhabited without interruption for over six hundred years. In the meantime, Palmyra became Christian as part of the Byzantine Empire, then it was conquered by Islam and the everyday language changed from Aramaic to Arabic (as some graffiti make clear), but the house remained in constant use, maybe even by the same family. The original owners were definitely well-to-do, but the later occupants much less so, carving out small households by fencing the courtyards and introducing mangers for animals. Life went on in spite of all these social changes.

The part of the city to the east of the regular street grid remains little known, but it seems to have been laid out separately. While it is only a possibility that the Agora and the western section of the Great Colonnade were built during the time of Hadrian, it is certain that the temple of Baalshamin, which is located within the old, irregular enclosure, was built during this reign (p. 128). The temple, conforming to

the precepts of the Roman theoretician Vitruvius (who himself was heavily dependent on earlier theories of Greek architects) was put in place for Hadrian's visit. A very similar temple, that of Allat, was erected only a few years later (see pp. 134–145). Both show a strong desire to appear up to date and to conform to the classical standard. The layout of the colonnaded street and, even more so, that of the Agora with its basilica, reveals the same intention. All the same, the assimilation was not complete – far from it. Under this Graeco-Roman makeover, the old ways persisted and deeply marked not only the cult, but also other, more worldly aspects of life.

The next section of the colonnade was traced at an angle of 9° to the section to the west. This was not enough to go around the Nabu sanctuary, which stood in the way; there must have been an important reason for this shortcoming. This problem cannot be solved without digging more on the northern side of the street. Immediately beyond the Nabu sanctuary, the third section of the colonnade turns resolutely towards the gateway of Bel at an angle of nearly 30° to the central section. It was not possible to make the two sections meet until a corner of the sanctuary was cut off (p. 109).

The eastern section is significantly wider: while the porticoes are 7 m deep, as is the case elsewhere, the open space between them is about 23 m wide. Even if the details of its layout and measurements cannot be given precisely without excavation, it is clear that this section was even wider and only slightly longer than the Transverse Colonnade at the other end of the city. It must have served likewise as a market. It could have been traced after the wadi coming from the north was dammed not far upstream, thus forming a pool for the storage of rainwater. The meeting point with the paved road of Wadi Saraysir fell close to the Bel enclosure. The old marketplace could well have been located at the confluence of the two wadis. It would be replaced by this large colonnaded street which served the same purpose.

Coming from the Bel precinct, the left-hand line of shops has in part been unearthed. It was in place by 219, when eight columns and the corresponding two-storied shops were completed by a grandson of the original founder and offered to the city as a gift. The front line of this row of shops abutted the wall of the Nabu enclosure.

The oldest inscriptions on the central section were engraved in 224 and 242, meaning that the colonnade must have been in place earlier, though perhaps not much earlier; also, it may not necessarily be the case that this section met at first with the eastern section. It went along the façade of the theatre, where the columns bear inscriptions honouring Odainat, his son Hairan/Herodianus, his appointee Worod, and Zenobia. This series was started in the 250s.

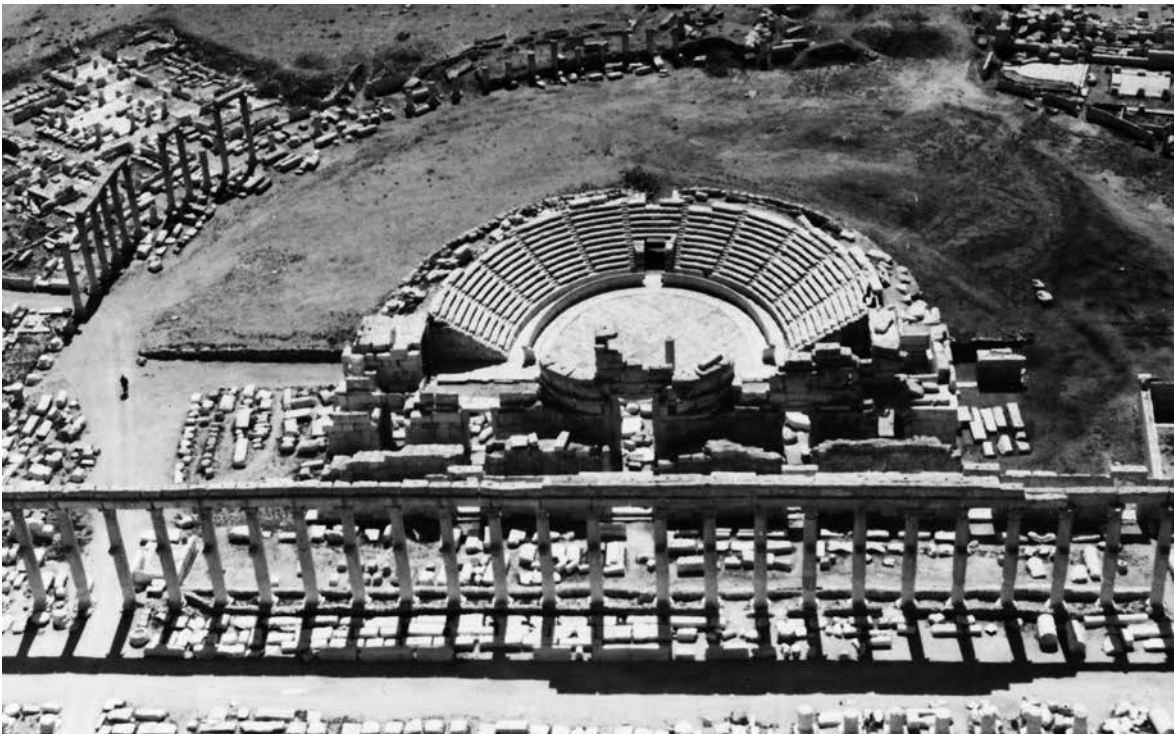
These columns extend between two arches giving access to the free space around the theatre. A date on one of them corresponds to 260 or 263. The theatre itself was never completed: only the lower tier of the hemicycle was built, together with the lower storey of the scene building [Figs 66–67]. Two more tiers for the *cavea* were obviously planned, as can be seen by the presence of a wide semicircular plaza boarded with colonnade around the existing building. The outer wall remained rough and was clearly waiting to be concealed by structures which were never built. It was only in our time that it was again covered with a stone revetment [Fig. 68]. While this part of the building is still in place, the elaborately decorated central canopy above the pulpit, which was restored with the preserved architectural members [Fig. 69], now lays in a tumble of stones.

The theatre is usually dated to around AD 200. There is no proof or hint that this is really the case. It could just as well have been built later, even as late as the 250s and thus contemporary to the stretch of the colonnade in front of it.¹²⁹ Otherwise, how could an unfinished building have been tolerated for 70 years in the very heart of the city? How would it have been possible for the statues of the most important personalities of Palmyra to be displayed in front of an abandoned project?

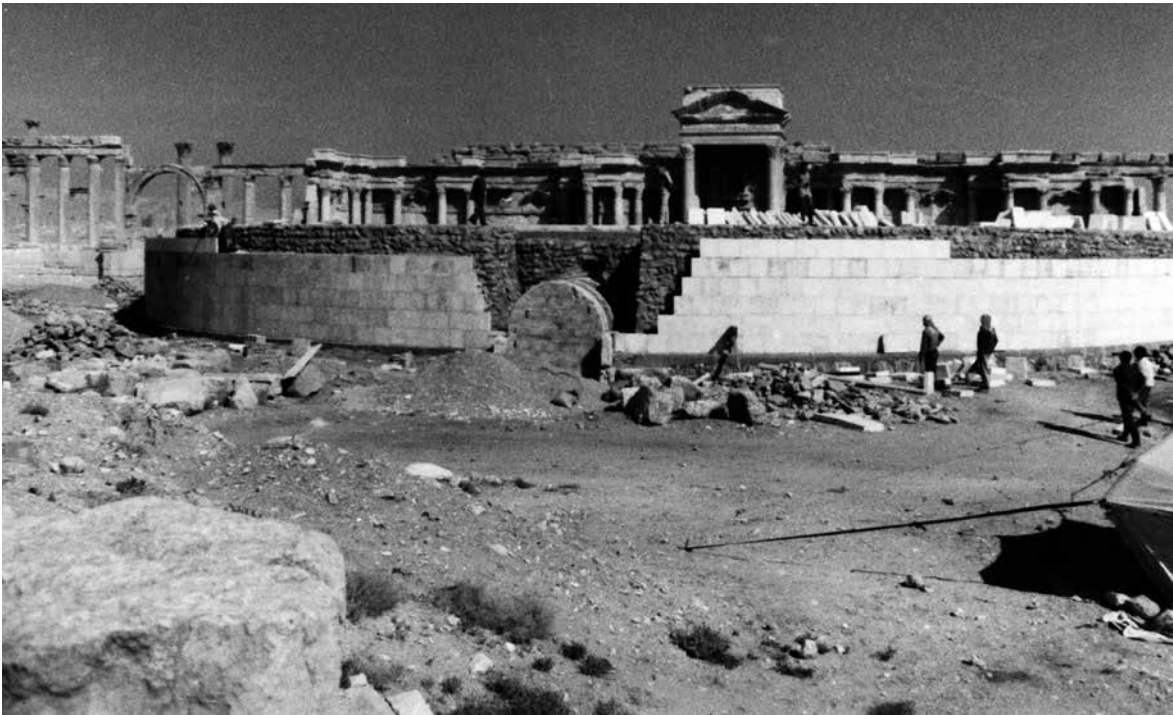
¹²⁹ Fourdrin 2009.



66. The cavea of the theatre



67. The theatre and the Great Colonnade from the air



68. The modern dressing of the cavea from outside in progress, the original structure still visible



69. The restored canopy of the scene building



70. The Tetrapylon as restored in 1967

The central section of the Colonnade had to be adjusted to the earlier parts at each end. So the square monument at the western end, aligned with the Agora, was razed to the ground. It was replaced with another, now called the Tetrapylon. This name is inadequate, as it is not a gate and even less is it “four gates” as the Greek name implies. However, it is too late now to change the name to the more appropriate *tetrakionion* without introducing misunderstandings. A massive square base 20 m wide supported four smaller ones, each carrying four columns and probably some statues. As restored in our times, the Tetrapylon consisted of four lofty canopies of no practical use [Fig. 70]. Passers-by would have had to go around it, guided by the colonnade around an oval plaza which was already in place by 242, as proved by the inscription of Zenobios of that year (p. 54). The monument closed the perspective of the western section of the avenue and concealed the change of direction. Its columns were of red Egyptian granite and were removed in later ages; only the broken half of one of them remained. The restoration of 1967 had to use artificial stone of similar colour. Today, after the columns have been dynamited by Daesh, only four out of sixteen are still standing.

At the other end, the perspective of the avenue was closed by a monumental arch concealing a much more important change of direction and the link to the market leading to the Bel sanctuary. Although it survived through the ages, it was destroyed in the recent barbarian onslaught. There were three arched passages through this wedge-shaped monument. When coming from the west, the smaller lateral arches were concealed under the porticoes of the street, while the columns of the wider eastern section gave full view of the triple arch [Fig. 71]. Both faces were profusely decorated with elaborated scrolls in relief, such as can also be seen in the third-century funerary sculpture on the garments of rich Palmyrenes, and even on some preserved textiles (see Figs 247–248).

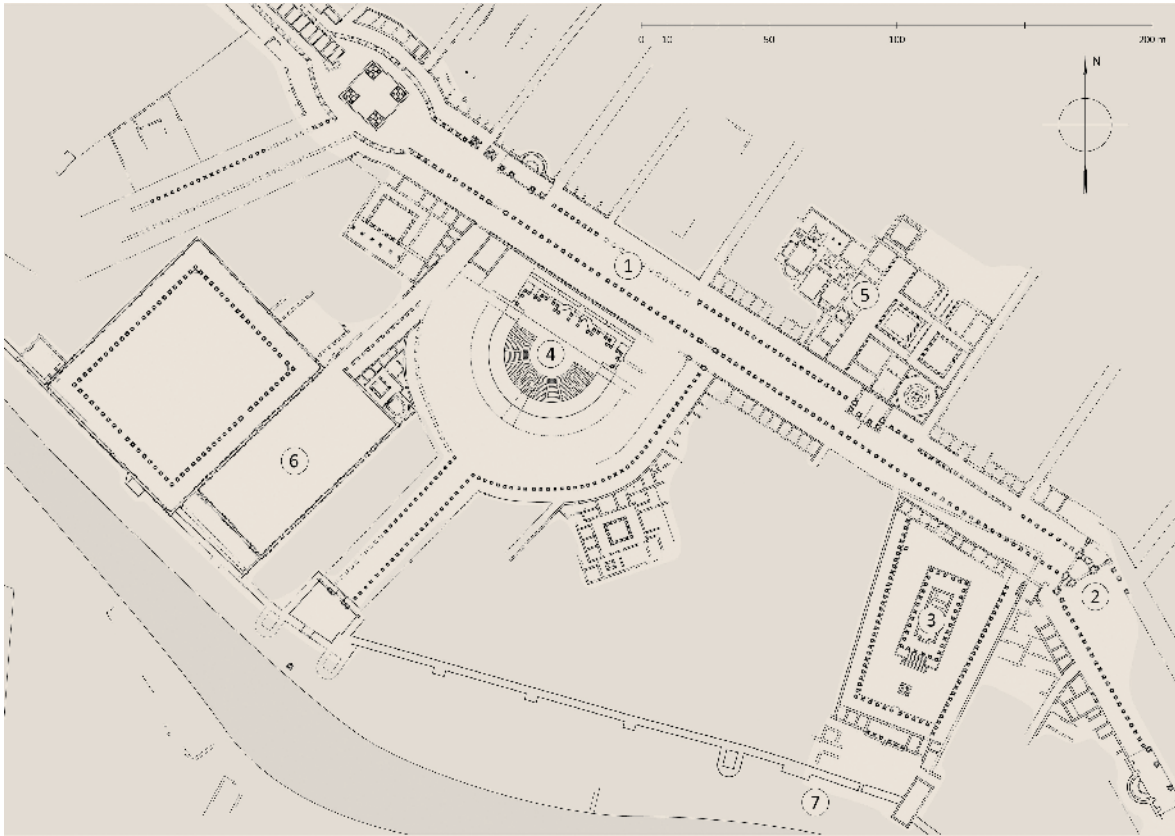


71. The Arch seen from the east

In the central passage there were two or three statues of which only two poorly preserved inscriptions remained. They celebrate the assumption of the royal titles by Odainat and his son Hairan/Herodianus after their Persian victory (p. 64) and are dated 260. It is tempting to suppose that the arch was built on the same occasion and for the same purpose. If so, the name Triumphal Arch, often applied to the monument in popular guides, has a grain of truth in it, though obviously the Roman triumph could only have been granted to the reigning emperor and never to a victorious general.

The Colonnade's central section was only able to meet up with the arch after encroaching, in a rather uncomely way, upon the property of the god Nabu. Indeed, the back wall of his enclosure – which included a portico on the inside as well as an imposing north entrance, with ten columns built in the second century – was removed entirely [Fig. 72]. The foundation of the original corner of the sanctuary was found in a sounding in the middle of the street. The shape of the truncated sanctuary thus became irregular. A rash action like this would not have been taken lightly, nor would it have been taken without opposition; arguments based on public convenience would hardly have convinced the priests and benefactors of the temple. The reason must have been overwhelming. The erection of the arch would have made no sense at all if the corner of the Nabu sanctuary remained in place concealing the right half of this monument. Moreover, the architect of the arch did not envisage that it would be joined to the colonnade: when the meeting finally took place, a bracket was inserted into the sculpted decoration to accommodate the architrave of the portico [Fig. 73]. This improvised and awkward solution proves that the meeting of the two colonnades was not planned, at least not in the way it was accomplished.

Though parts of the porticoes are earlier than Odainat's elevation, it seems that the final shaping of this part of the avenue is linked to it. So a building on the northern side of the street, known as the Baths



72. Plan of central Palmyra. 1. The Colonnade; 2. The Arch of Odainat; 3. The Nabu temple; 4. The Theatre; 5. The Baths; 6. The Agora; 7. The Roman rampart

of Diocletian, was at one point enhanced by the entrance jutting out into the street with a huge porch of four granite columns – this has certainly have occurred earlier than Diocletian's time at the very end of the third century [Fig. 74]. Together with the sixteen columns in the Tetrastylon, this batch of twenty could have been brought to Palmyra on one occasion. Indeed, the red granite was provided from quarries in Upper Egypt belonging to the emperor; it would not have been easily obtainable. The most likely moment that a load could have been secured in Alexandria and transported by sea and desert to Palmyra was during the short domination of Zenobia (see p. 77), though of course Odainat would have had the necessary clout to obtain such a favour from the emperor Gallienus.

Whatever happened, this part of the colonnade, 305 m long, became in the twilight years of Palmyra's greatness an imposing monument to the rulers of the East [Fig. 75]. Leading from the arch and the statues of Odainat and his son set in it to the Tetrastylon at the far end; passing by the porch of the baths (which, according to Rudolf Fellmann, may have been the royal palace); passing the line of the statues of the dynasts and of the grandees of their court in front of the theatre – this street became a monument to the glory of Odainat and Zenobia, possibly the scene of the state ceremonies in their honour. This glory did not last for long.

And thus, the layout of the ancient city was quite different than it appears today. When post-Zenobian Palmyra was constricted within the late ramparts, the Great Colonnade did indeed become the main avenue crossing the city from west to east. In the city's better days, however, the main boulevard was the paved road between the southern town and the new quarters to the north. A wide and long market



73. A secondary joint of the Colonnade and the Arch



74. The "Royal Mall" looking eastwards from the Tetrapylon and the Arch



75. The "Royal Mall" looking westwards from the Arch to the Tetrapylon



76. The Great Colonnade between the two markets joining it to the paved street in the wadi

opened at each end of this road: the Transverse Colonnade at one end and the colonnade by the Bel sanctuary at the other [Fig. 76]. Both are of comparable dimensions and frame the quarter in which some major monuments grew: in addition to the Nabu temple, the Agora and the theatre took their place there. The colonnaded avenue, an exterior boulevard so to speak, was started in the first half of the second century, and it was only completed in the late third century, to form the “Royal Mall” celebrating Odainat and Zenobia.

The temples

The temple of Bel

The new temple of Bel was a major financial effort as well as a bold innovation. It replaced a Hellenistic temple, which had been erected on levelled ground, thus condemning whatever older buildings may have been on the site. We have no idea what this Hellenistic temple might have looked like. Every trace of it was erased when deep foundations were laid for the new one. However, a temporary enclosure wall in front of the temple stood on a foundation made of discarded stones which belonged to the earlier sanctuary. It was a frequent habit in Antiquity to bury rather than to destroy objects once consecrated to the gods. This was done when the objects ceased to be useful through wear and tear or because they had become old-fashioned. This “Foundation T”, as the excavators called it, contained a great deal of broken architectural decorations as well as fragments of sculptures, all carved in soft local limestone in a distinct style. They seem to have been made mostly in the first century BC and not earlier. At discovery, these pieces were unique and lacked comparable parallels from other locations in the Near East. They are less solitary now, though they still clearly show a local touch.¹³⁰

The building of the new temple started at about the same time that the city was formally annexed to the province (see p. 25). The first mention of a contribution being made to the enterprise is dated 19. The Palmyrenes decided that it would be a grand affair. The project was commissioned from a good Hellenistic architect, and the master builders must have come from some major Greek city, probably Antioch, the capital of Roman Syria. Huge ashlar blocks of hard local limestone, which resembled marble, were adjusted together in a precise manner, without mortar, by trained stonemasons (the holes visible on the photographs were made in later ages to extract bronze clamps). Never before had this style of construction been practised in Palmyra, and no later building ever rivalled the Bel temple in size and magnificence [Figs 77–78]. The fact that construction continued over a long period of time gave local artisans an opportunity to learn their trade. It was these artisans who gradually transformed the way the city looked.¹³¹

The architect planned a pseudodipteros, that is, a temple surrounded on all four sides with columns but with enough space between them and the walls to contain a second row (as in a dipteros), which,

¹³⁰ Seyrig 1940.

¹³¹ Will 1971; Seyrig, Amy, Will 1968, 1975; Will 1992, pp. 134–145.



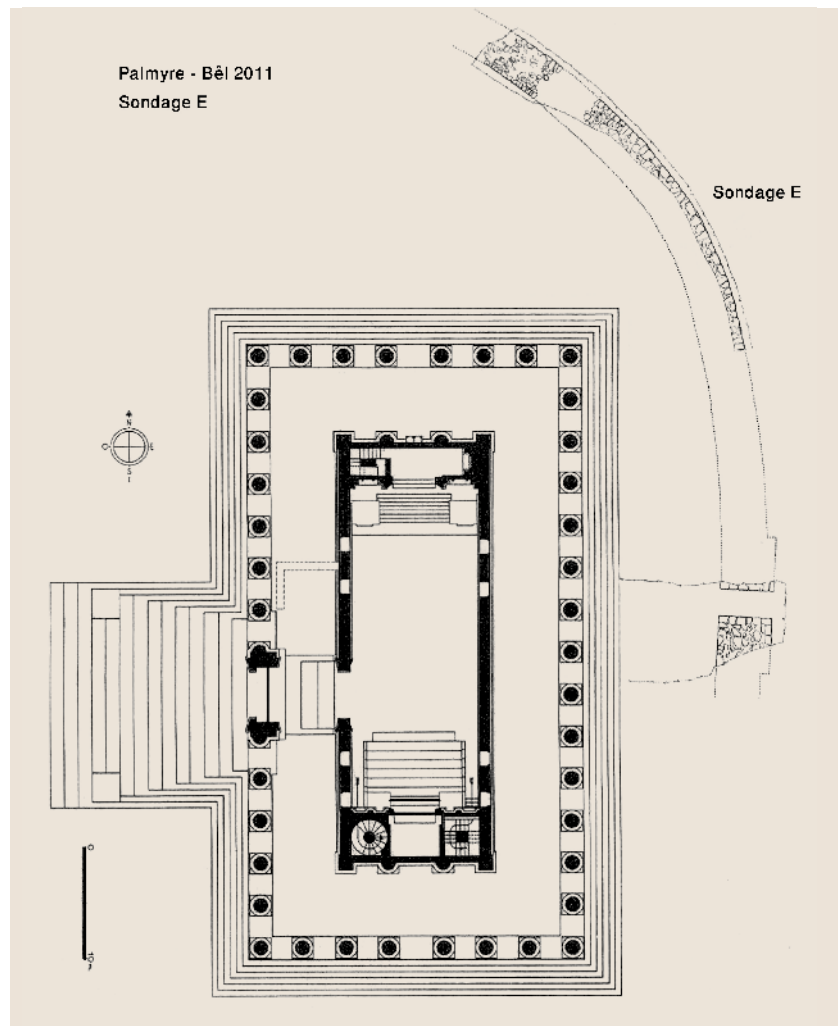
77. The temple of Bel
from the east



78. The temple of Bel
from the southwest

however, would not be built so as to offer ample room for walking in shade around the temple [Fig. 79]. Ernest Will has identified the ultimate model as the temple of Artemis in Magnesia (in Asia Minor) from the second century BC. It was built by Hermogenes of Alabanda, and it was he who invented this type of Greek temple. He described it in a book famous in Antiquity, one that was used by Vitruvius but which has not been preserved to our day. Hermogenes had many imitators, so it is likely that some such temple stood in Antioch and provided the direct model for the temple in Palmyra.

The original model was adapted to suit local conditions. The priests who commissioned the project had precise requirements which they imposed on the professional hired to draw up the plan. One essential condition was that two separate chapels had to be installed to replace old shrines condemned to



79. Plan of the Bel temple

disappear. Compared to the temple itself, they are very different in their construction and decoration (see Figs 83, 86). Thus, they could hardly be the work of the same architect. The original designer obliged as best as he could, closing the two shorter sides of the building so that the chapels could be inserted at opposite ends of the interior. Normally, a Greek temple should have a pronaos (an entrance hall) at one end, and often an opisthodomos, a back room, at the other end, both of which should be entered between two columns. In Palmyra, there are only two Ionic half-columns projecting from the wall on either side [Fig. 80]. Mimicking the classical disposition, this seems to have been a unique solution in Greek architecture.

This solution necessitated that the entrance be placed at one of the long sides. Not satisfied with having the door hidden behind the outer colonnade, the builders inserted a massive doorway between the columns to mark the entrance, a device equally unique in classical architecture [Fig. 82]. This doorway is now the only standing part of the temple after the atrocity committed by Daesh.

The grandiose building was surrounded by lofty Corinthian columns, fluted and capped with capitals covered with gilded bronze. The long sides of the colonnade were certainly decorated with rows of crow-steps, an Oriental motif that we can already find in Assyria and, closer in time, in Petra. The short ends of the temple were probably marked by triangular pediments, a concession to the classical model.



80. The temple of Bel seen from the south: the Ionic half-columns of a short side

Enormous sums must have been employed for all this, no doubt provided by the considerable profits of the caravan trade. Though benefactors competed to finance the building, the temple was only completed after about a century from the time that the first stones were put in place. It can no longer be maintained, as it had been previously stated, that the business was finished in the year 32. This date is given in an inscription in honour of the priest who proceeded to inaugurate the cult in the new temple:¹³²

In the month of Tishri year 357 [October 46]. This statue is that of Lishamsh son of Taibol son of Shokaibel of the Bene Komare, who has dedicated the temple of Bel and Yarhibol and 'Aglibol the gods, on their festival, the sixth day of Nisan, year 343 [April 32], set up by his sons to honour him.

This private dedication was offered fourteen years later by his sons, perhaps when one of them took up the yearly priesthood. Lishamsh himself carefully chose the moment, the beginning of the first month of the Babylonian calendar, Nisan (April), while the Palmyrene civil year started in Tishri (October). At any rate, the anniversary of the dedication was celebrated year after year as the “Good Day”, and a holocaust was offered to the gods (in this kind of sacrifice the meat of the victims was not distributed, as usually

¹³² PAT 1347; *Inv.* IX 1.

81. The temple of Bel and its courtyard



82. The doorway on the long western side



would have been the case, but burnt in its entirety in a disinterested gesture). It goes without saying that the *hanukta* of the Bel temple, like its Hebrew cognate *hanuka*, the solemn inauguration of the Jerusalem Temple, one of the greatest holidays in the Jewish calendar to this day, was conducted as soon as possible, without waiting for the building to be completed. Indeed, large parts of the walls were not put in place for many years. The best proof of this – though this is not the only piece of evidence – can be seen in the window frames. The temple had eight large windows on the long sides, each decorated with mouldings. Because the windows in the northern half of the building and those of the southern half have distinctly different styles, it is clear that the carvings are made by different craftsmen over an extended period of time. The northern part and its chapel were probably the first to be constructed; they were consecrated in 32. The rest of the temple, together with the other chapel, followed suit progressively over many years.¹³³ An inscription from 108 commemorated the offering of a roof and of bronze doors, so this

¹³³ Pietrzykowski 1997.



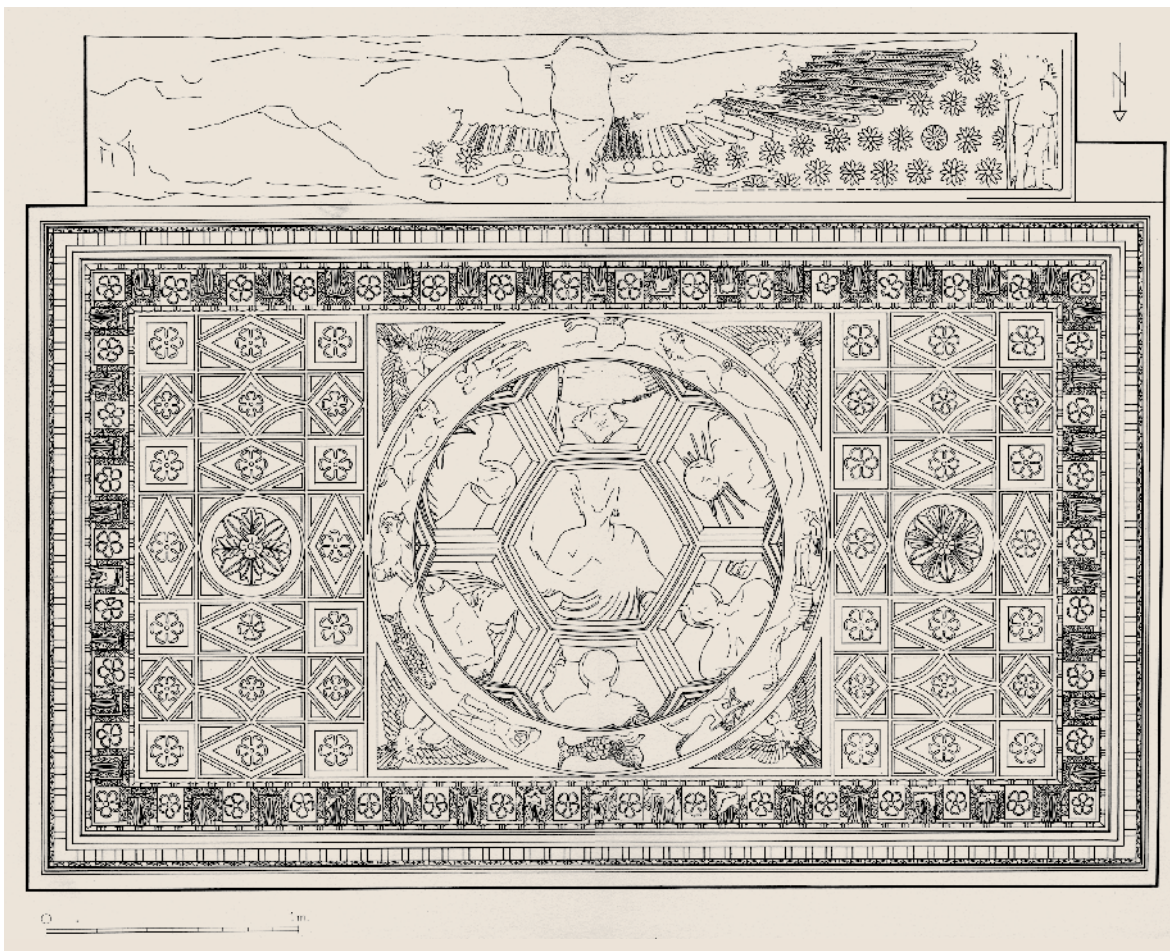
83. The northern adyton inserted between the walls at a short side of the temple. The steps to the niche have not survived



84. The ceiling of the northern adyton

could mark the end of the work, but unfortunately we are not sure that the roof and doors mentioned were those of this temple.

We do know some names of the builders involved. One offered a small votive altar, presenting himself in Greek as “Alexandros, architect of the god Bel”. It may be that he was even the original planner, but he could just as well have been one of the later professionals engaged in the building process. One column drum bears on the surface inscriptions that were invisible when the whole column stood in place; it is the signature of a master mason, one Loukios Heras Zabou, who signed his name in uncertain Greek and Latin. He was certainly an outsider, perhaps from Antioch, but his local helpers signed in good Aramaic.



85. The ceiling of the northern adyton

More important was another person, Hairan son of Bonna, celebrated by the priests of Bel in 56 and by the city Council in 74 (see Fig. 12). The city fathers called him “decorator of the Bel building”; he was probably the supervisor of all the carvings in the temple under construction, though it may be that he simply provided the funds (or both).

The northern chapel, referred to in modern literature by one of two ancient Greek terms (*thalamos* or *adyton*), is a very curious piece of architecture [Fig. 83]. It was literally inserted between walls which were already standing and then secured in place by stone struts. In the middle, a square niche open to the central space of the temple was covered by a single huge block of stone hollowed out to form a make-believe dome. To one side of it, there was a smaller room lodging the god’s ceremonial bed; to the other, a staircase leading up to the roof. The dome was designed as the heavenly vault: within the circle of the zodiac, with its twelve signs, there were seven busts representing the seven godheads presiding over seven planets known to the ancient astronomers [Figs 84–85]. We can recognize Sun, Moon, Mars, Venus, Mercury, and Saturn, disposed around Jupiter in the middle. The first four celestial bodies correspond, respectively, to the Palmyrene gods Yarhibol, ‘Aglibol (masculine, unlike the Greek Selene), Arsu, and Atargatis. While Jupiter stands for Bel himself, there are no obvious candidates for Mercury or Saturn.

The lintel of the niche was adorned beneath with an eagle spreading its wings across the star-spangled heaven, flanked by the two main luminaries, which are disguised as warriors in armour (only the Sun



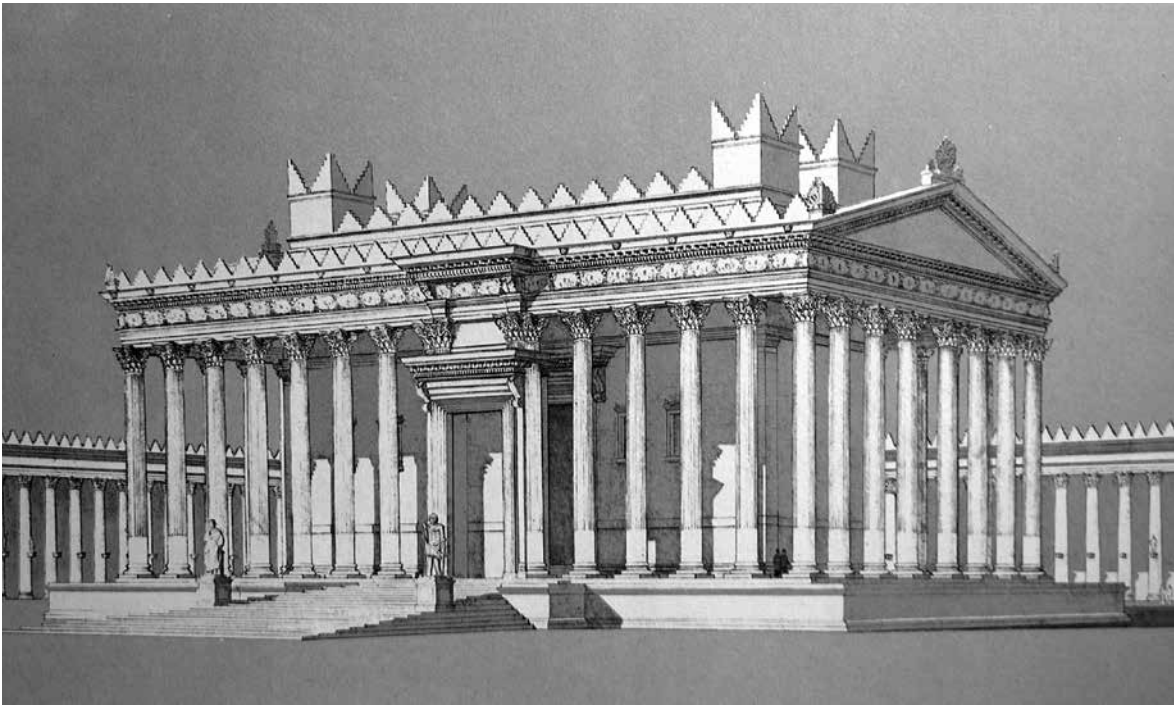
86. The southern adyton and a stepped ramp leading to it



87. The ceiling of the southern adyton

has survived to our time). All these symbols signify the dominance of Bel as Master of the Universe, supreme over all other gods. This astral theology, current in the Hellenistic age, takes its origin in ancient Babylonia.

The opposite, southern niche was not exactly symmetrical [Fig. 86]. It is open in front, too, but it was once provided with a sliding door. It had no dependencies; instead, two separate staircases flank it to the right and left. The ceiling, also monolithic, is decorated with an elaborate rosette and no human figures – this helped to keep it entirely intact up until August 2015. In fact, this niche housed, for some seven centuries, the *mihlabs* of the Friday mosque of Tadmor, whose carved decoration is still preserved in Damascus.



88. The restored view of the temple

The style of the carvings in the southern niche was clearly more advanced than those in the northern one [Fig. 87]. Moreover, it jutted up against the neighbouring window frames of the long walls, proving that the walls were in place earlier than the niche. It was approached by a ramp with very low sloping steps, suggesting it was used to carry in and out sacred objects of considerable weight. Another similar ramp led to the temple itself from the courtyard, so most probably such objects were carried in procession around the sanctuary and perhaps around the city at large. Nothing more precise can be said.

The presence of stairs, three sets of them, climbing to the top of the temple proves how important the upper reaches were. Rooms, entirely plain, could be found at the intermediate level; they were possibly used as treasure-houses. We know of such rooms in other Roman temples. However, the roof could certainly have been reached at each end of the building. In consultation with Henri Seyrig, the French architect Robert Amy restored on paper a flat terrace on top and four small towers at angles to cover the landings of the steps (one of them is only there for symmetry, as there was no staircase in the north-east corner). While this interpretation is indeed plausible, it must be insisted that we have no material remains to substantiate it [Fig. 88].

Some cult dealings must have been performed on top of the temple. These were probably offerings of some sort which took place under the open sky, though no animal sacrifice was possible because of the stairs; anyway, the sanctuary possessed a large altar outside of the temple suited for this purpose. It is likely that frankincense was burned. Was the temple entirely roofed? The width of the building may have been spanned with imported wooden beams obtained from the cedars of Lebanon, but no traces of their fixings remain, as the upper courses of the long walls did not survive. While the water channel under the floor suggests that there was an open space between the two niches, it might have served to drain away rainwater during the protracted time of construction; later, it might just have been used for floor washing. There is no conclusive answer.

The colonnade around the temple was roofed with stone plates laid in a slanting position. They were supported by thirty-four upright beams resting on the walls and on the entablature over each column. Their vertical surfaces bore reliefs, once brightly coloured, illustrating mythological scenes. This solution is not known to have been employed in any other Graeco-Roman building. It had the advantage of eliminating wooden beams, which would have had been brought to Palmyra through the desert all the way from the Lebanon mountains (were they brought in for the wider span over the cella?). Only two stone beams were preserved, both incompletely. They were sculpted in the Palmyrene style, that is, showing all the human figures in frontal view, mostly on one plane, with great attention given to linear detail. When in their original position, these images would hardly have been visible, perched high up close to each other in a rather dark place. It would seem that their very presence counted more than their visibility. But curiously enough, the lower surface of one beam, turned toward the ground, displayed the thoroughly Roman motif of a vinescroll peopled with winged cupids hunting wild animals, executed by a different hand. Such scrolls on the underneath of roofing beams are known in the city of Rome only from the 70s, and the Palmyra example cannot possibly have come from a date earlier than this.¹³⁴

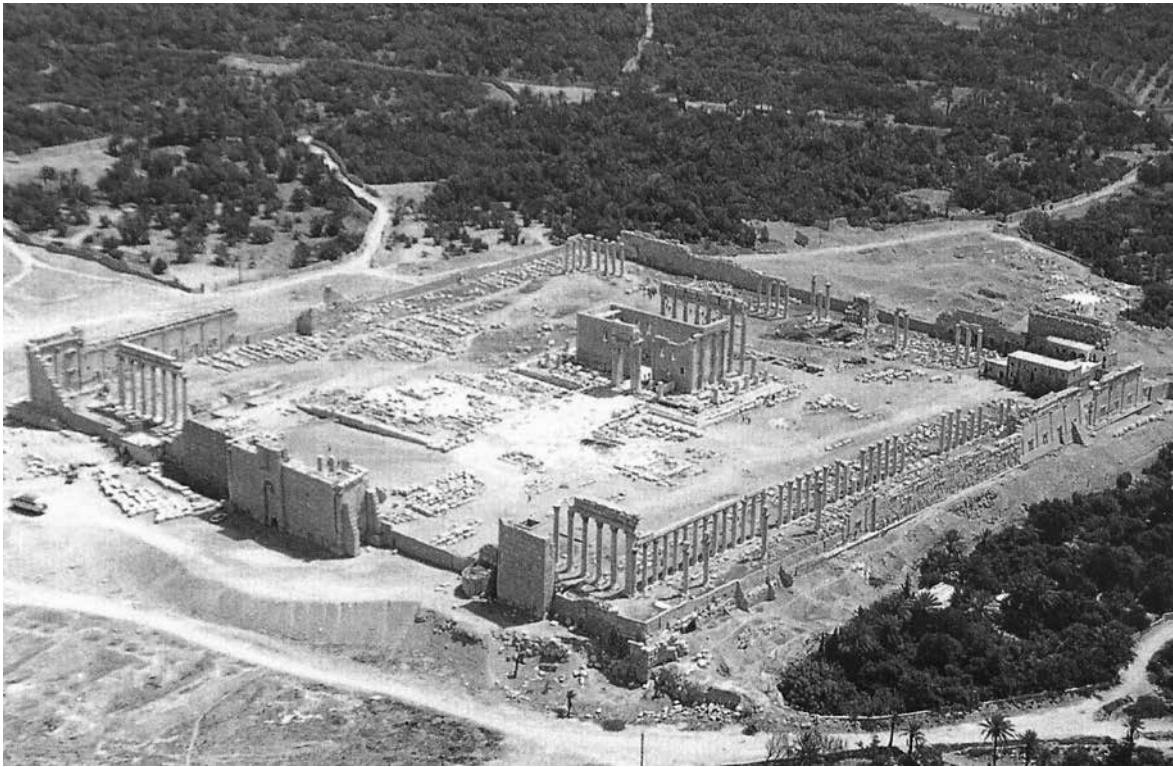
One beam relief showed the gods fighting against a primeval monster, strongly reminiscent of the Babylonian myth of Bel-Marduk killing Tiamat in order to make heaven and earth from her halved body, as told in the epic *Enuma elish* recited in Babylon on New Year's Day. As the main festival was celebrated in Palmyra at about the same date as the New Year in Babylon, at the beginning of Nisan (April), there is a good chance that the Palmyrene myth represented on this beam was indeed inspired by the Babylonian creation story.

Another scene is even more mysterious. The central figure here is a camel carrying a red palanquin, the contents of which can only be guessed at. It is being led by a cameleer, but before them a donkey is let loose, its bridle hanging free. This scene was interpreted as a procession being led to a place indicated by invisible powers. Indeed, in front of the two animals there is a poorly preserved scene in which a pole on which an armour is hung is being planted into the ground; this is the *tropaion*, a Greek memorial set up on a battlefield by victorious troops, in later times simply a symbol of victory. This curious scene is being watched over and applauded by four men and a few women, the latter fully veiled. We cannot be sure what was meant by this image. Some have argued that it may represent Palmyra's mythical foundation, or the foundation of the Allat temple (because a small relief with a similar subject was found there), but no one has been able to explain – in fact no one has even noticed – the *tropaion*. Both these scenes are described in more detail further on (p. 229).

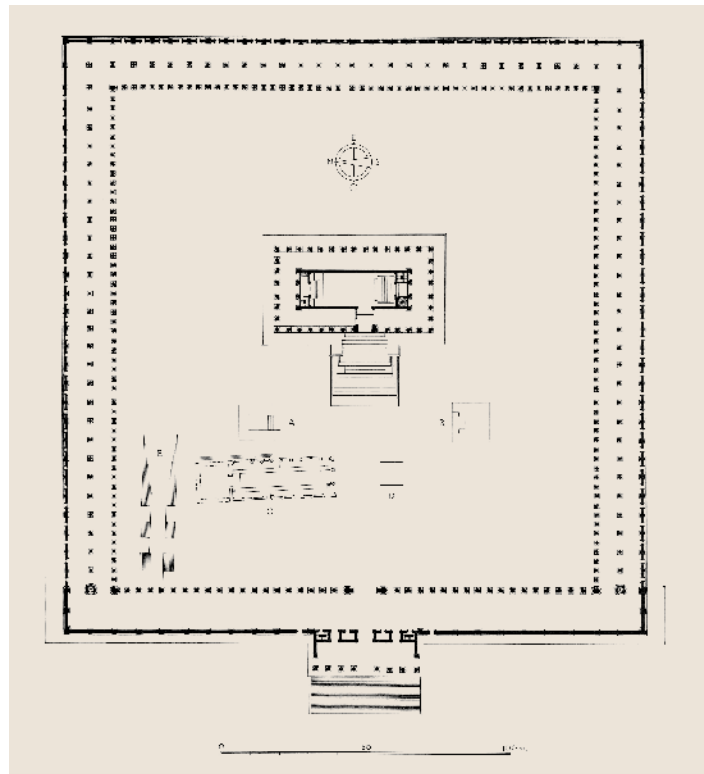
On the other side of each of these beams the reliefs are easier to read. One simply shows several priests standing two by two by portable altars. The other shows two gods shaking hands over an altar laden with fruit and set in a place marked by an olive tree and a small temple. This must be the Holy Grove of the gods 'Aglibol and Malakbel, the preserve of the tribe of Bene Komare. The complete set of reliefs, of which only these have survived until modern times, must have illustrated a large variety of local myths. The temple was thus a repository of tradition, even if the images were hardly visible under the roof. Without comparing the quality and style of the sculptures, the Panathenaic frieze of the Athenian Parthenon was also difficult to see in detail while it remained in place.

The temple of Bel originally rose on three steps which ran all around it, as was usual in Greece. Soon after the provisional enclosure (known as "Foundation T", already mentioned) was built around the temple a decision was taken to enlarge the precinct considerably. This involved a lot of terracing, and in order to reduce the volume of earth that needed to be brought from outside, the level around the temple was lowered about 1 m, exposing parts of the foundations. To conceal these, a podium was built. In the proper sense, a podium is an upright platform supporting a temple, but of course in this case it was

¹³⁴ Wegner 1957, pp. 9–12.



89. The Bel temenos from the air



90. The plan of the Bel sanctuary



91. The outer southern wall of the temenos

only a revetment covering the steps that came to be uselessly suspended in the air. A ramp leading to the doorway of the temple was raised accordingly. The very edge of the podium was occupied by statues of Tiberius, Germanicus, and Drusus (p. 25), probably because their original location was levelled.

The great courtyard shaped by the levelling is a square measuring close to 200 by 200 m [Figs 89–90]. Once completed, it was surrounded by walls provided at regular intervals with Corinthian pilasters; windows were located between them at eye level from inside. These walls towered high above the city, but only parts of this monumental enclosure have survived to modern times [Fig. 91]. On the western side, opposite the doorway of the temple, a grandiose gatehouse opened towards the town. It had three passages. Decorative niches were above them, and guard-rooms were between them. This elaborate façade is conserved on the inside only [Fig. 92], while the front with the entrance portico and steps leading to it have been replaced with a massive twelfth-century bastion (see Fig. 167) when the ancient enclosure became a fortress and the temple a mosque.

Internally, the courtyard was surrounded by colonnades. These were in two rows on three sides; a single but higher row stood in front behind the gateway [Fig. 93]. It has been proven by Daniel Schlumberger, who studied the style of the capitals, that the work on the colonnades started from the northwest corner and proceeded around the courtyard before arriving at the higher single colonnade in the southwest corner.¹³⁵ With work having started in the eighties of the first century, a century went by before the bronze gates of the precinct were dedicated in 175. The high colonnade was never completed.

On each column the architects put a bracket at about one-third of the column's height. Each of these brackets was a kind of protruding stone shelf intended to support a bronze statue of some person of merit. None of these statues survive, but appropriate inscriptions were carved on the bracket or immediately beneath, giving the name of the beneficiary and identifying the donors; the date was often mentioned and sometimes the reasons for the distinction. Dozens of such inscriptions survive entirely or in part, providing a rich trove of information, including the approximate date of the columns bearing them. However, in a few cases, the dates are far too early; it has been proven by the style of the script that they were simply copied from free-standing statue pedestals older than the laying out of the great courtyard.

On the left-hand side of the gatehouse, there was a vaulted passage through the wall from the level of the ground outside; it opened into a mounting earthen ramp which passed between stone steps on either

¹³⁵ Schlumberger 1933.

92. The propylaea on the inside (the outer front was blocked in the twelfth century)

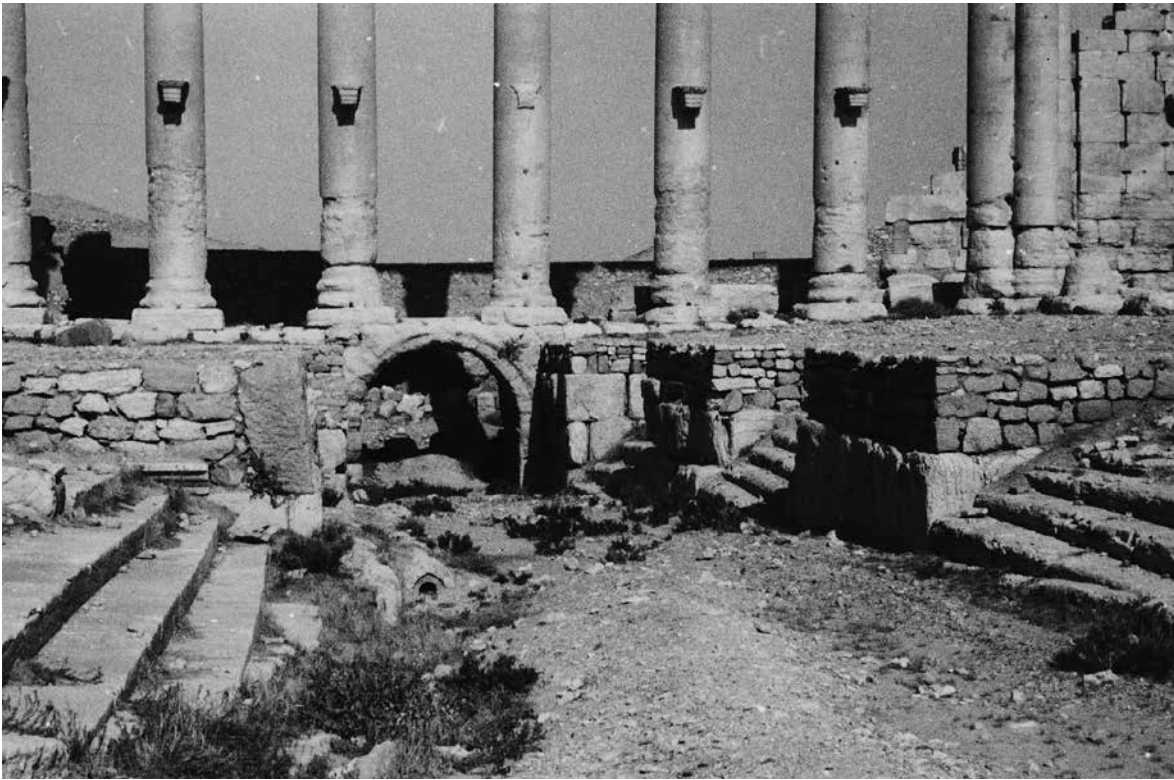


93. The high portico in the northwest corner of the courtyard



side before reaching the level of the courtyard [Fig. 94]. This was interpreted as the way for processions bringing sacrificial animals into the sanctuary. Indeed, to the right of where the ramp ended, there are the remains of a monumental altar standing in front of the temple to the left. Here, the animals were slaughtered on festive occasions and the meat distributed to the assembled worshippers. One can imagine them camping in the shade of the colonnades and getting merry over their meal, which perhaps was washed down with wine piously distributed by wealthy citizens.

Of course, some distinguished people deserved better accommodation. A long building, of similar dimensions to the temple but without its colonnade, served as a banqueting hall close to the altar. The long benches along the walls would have been able to hold dozens of diners. While feasting, they would have



94. The passage for sacrifice processions under the western portico of the Bel sanctuary

been able to see the temple nearby through a row of open arcades. Both the altar and the banqueting hall are as yet unpublished, so details are not available.

The temple was called by the Palmyrenes “the house of their gods”. This obviously means that it was common to the city as a whole, with all the citizens considering it their own. The inscription mentioning the inauguration in the year 32 names only three gods to whom the temple was dedicated: Bel, Yarhibol, and ‘Aglibol. On these grounds, it was surmised that there existed a “triad of Bel”, these three gods owning the temple. However, most relevant inscriptions and images represent or name more gods than these three. I think we should rather speak about the “group of Bel”, a lot of deities usually assembled around the supreme god, permanent or occasional hosts in his sanctuary (see p. 177). Some inscriptions from the older temple concern gods and goddesses otherwise unknown or seldom mentioned, apparently already hosted in the sanctuary in or around the old shrines. This practice was continued without ever putting in doubt the paramount position of Bel himself as master and patron of the oasis.

The name of Bel is distinctly Babylonian. Some fossilised proper names, both of gods and men, contain, however, the older form Bol, never used on its own in the extant inscriptions. We can conclude that the native name was replaced by the infinitely more prestigious name of the god of Babylon. The name of Zabdibelos who fought at Raphia suggests that this happened as early as in the third century BC.

Actually, Bel simply means “Lord” and this was how Marduk, the god of Babylon, came to be called in his country. His sanctuary, Esagila, was famous all over Mesopotamia for centuries and as late as Hellenistic times, even when the city of Babylon was slowly falling into disrepair and was finally abandoned altogether. Both names of the main god of the oasis were just different forms of the common Semitic name Ba‘al, “Lord”, commonly used elsewhere in Syria. While one, having lost its guttural middle

95. A restored section through the temple, showing the northern adyton and the hypothetical three cultic statues



sound, is typical of the Akkadian language, the other, with the same loss and a different vowel, cannot be explained by Aramaic and must have been inherited from some other, forgotten idiom, just as with the name Tadmor itself.

The adoption of the Babylonian name came no doubt hand in hand with the borrowing of some features of the Babylonian cult. One possible example is the myth of the fight with the monster, recalling the Babylonian creation myth. Otherwise, the cosmic dimension of the gods, expressed in the decoration of the main niche, is a frequent feature of Syrian iconography in general. For instance, the supreme god worshipped in the thoroughly Greek city of Apamea was called Zeus Belos and is evoked in a dedication by an Apamean in faraway Gaul as *Fortunae rector*, the ruler of human destiny through his domination over the stars.

Needless to say, it was not possible for the cult image or images of the temple to survive in the church, and still later in the mosque. We do, however, have smaller monuments that can be considered reflections of the main contents of the northern niche. One of them is a tessera, a tiny lump of clay with an impressed decoration representing three gods standing in a line, clad in Roman armour under a schematic pediment; they can be identified as Bel flanked by Yarhibol and 'Aglibol. These figures have been inserted in a drawing by Robert Amy as cult statues within the northern adyton [Fig. 95].

This cannot possibly be correct: had the statues been of reasonable proportions (as on Amy's drawing), they would have completely impeded access to the side room containing the divine bed and to the staircase opposite; the priests would have had to squeeze between them and the wall in a rather undignified manner. Some cuttings in the back wall of the room (if they are not of a later date) suggest the existence of a huge relief plaque with this or some similar subject such as, for instance, the beautiful monument in the Louvre (see Fig. 209). Indeed, in the year 32, when the adyton was consecrated, a relief conceived in the frontal convention would have been strikingly modern, and it would have been contemporary with the earliest known examples of this mode of representation. We can also think about a single statue of Bel, seated, wearing a lamellar cuirass and a cloak (see Fig. 208).

A short remark in a work by a late Greek historian mentions that the emperor Aurelian, after his conquest of Palmyra in 273, built in Rome a temple of Sun and placed in it statues of Sun and of Bel. It could well be that these were looted in Palmyra, but of course it does not lead us any closer to the idea of what the original cult object looked like.

The temple of Baalshamin

The small temple of Baalshamin, built by Male Agrippa (pp. 34–35) in 130/131 – right in time for the emperor Hadrian to see it on his visit to Palmyra, when he honoured the city by giving it his name – was the best preserved building among all the ruins until it was blown up by Daesh in August 2015 [Fig. 96].¹³⁶

The statue of the founder stood on a column bracket in the porch of the temple. It was set up later than the date mentioned in the inscription, as is clear from its reference to “divine Hadrian”, so after the emperor’s death in 138.¹³⁷

The temple had a classical aspect conforming to the precepts of Vitruvius widely followed throughout the Empire, but with a local touch. First, there were statue brackets protruding from the six Corinthian columns of the porch, four in front and one on each side. Several fallen blocks show there were triangular pediments on both short ends of the temple. The roof behind them, however, was probably not gabled but flat, as was usually the case in Palmyra, and it apparently had rows of crow-steps on the long sides between the mock pediments. The walls, preserved to their full height, were articulated by pilasters.

The temple stood alone in a part of the city where no other monuments could be seen. This was so until Swiss excavations in the 1950s unearthed the remains of three courtyards and their dependencies, making the temple itself a latecomer at the sanctuary, already over a century old [Fig. 97]. Paul Collart and his colleagues also found some fifty stone architectural members of a small monument, used in later times to block the porch and to create three tiny rooms in front of it, while a new entrance was pierced in the back wall of the temple. The Swiss architect Jacques Vicari dismantled these late structures and reassembled the collected pieces into an elaborate façade resembling certain solutions used in the ancient architecture of nymphaea and theatres. It consisted of an apsidal exedra flanked by two wings with niches and pediments, fitting tightly between the walls at the back of the temple [Fig. 98]. In spite of its classical appearance, it was a typical Syrian adyton, the repository of a cult image at the back of the temple. While the two adyta in the Bel temple were rooms raised above the floor, here the much smaller dimensions prevented such separation. However, the apse could be hidden by a curtain. In the middle was the frame of a huge relief representing the main god of the sanctuary, Baalshamin, simply called Zeus in Greek. Above it ran a lintel with the busts of the seven planetary gods, just as on the ceiling of the main adyton of Bel [Fig. 99].

Another coincidence is offered by a second lintel which fitted the frame of the god’s image and yet was discarded by the builders. It shows an eagle spreading its wings, flanked by smaller eagles and the busts of the Sun and Moon gods, a very fine example of early first-century workmanship [Fig. 100]; a vinescroll runs beneath and formed the original frame sideways. It follows that the lost image under this lintel had already been installed in an earlier building, together with two roughly contemporary cult niches reproducing the same motifs in miniature, which are a characteristic feature of Palmyrene religious sculpture

¹³⁶ Collart, Vicari 1969.

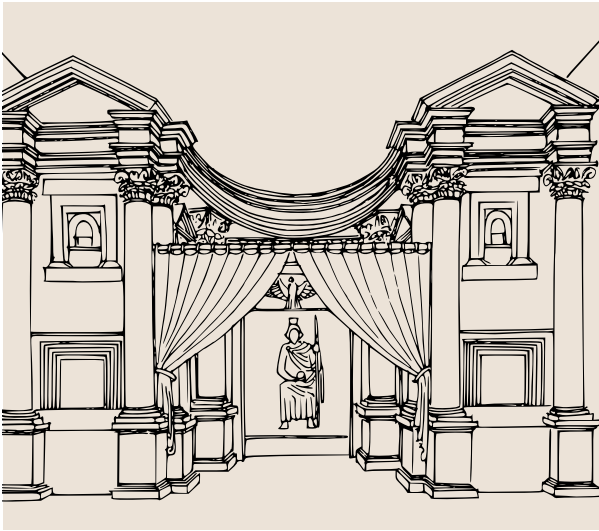
¹³⁷ Dunant 1971, 44.



96. The temple of Baalshamin



97. The temple of Baalshamin across the great northern courtyard



98. The adyton (reconstruction drawing)



99. The adyton of Baalshamin as restored in the temple

(see Figs 183–184).¹³⁸ This early chapel stood somewhere in the sanctuary as its focal point, perhaps at the very spot where the sacred image was transferred after the temple of Male Agrippa was ready to receive it. The original lintel for some reason could not be used, but it was piously concealed within the structure, where it survived in nearly perfect condition.

Two large windows made it possible to see in full daylight every detail of the decoration, and when the curtain was opened, it was possible to see the god Baalshamin, which in Aramaic means “Lord of the Heavens”, enthroned under the symbols of the celestial vault: first the eagles and later the personifications of the seven planets known to the ancients. His appearance can be restored from a small incomplete relief and from a rather awkward drawing left in a rustic shrine outside Palmyra by an impressed visitor [Fig. 101]. The same symbolism was applied to Bel (p. 119), as both gods were seen as masters of the Universe, each in his own right. The apparent contradiction of there being two supreme gods worshiped in the same city, both called Zeus in Greek translations, was not a scandal and a reason for bitter rivalry, as some modern authors have suggested. Rather, it can be explained by the different origins of the great gods: Babylon for Bel and western Syria for Baalshamin, the former long-established in the oasis and the latter a newcomer.

Thanks to an inscription, the probable founding date of the Baalshamin sanctuary can be recovered. Right behind the temple the excavators were surprised to find a tomb, the earliest one in Palmyra, with grave goods which go back to the second century BC. In 11, one Wahballat proceeded to “open and purify” this tomb.¹³⁹ By this I understand that the mortal remains were removed, these certainly being the remains of his ancestors, to another burial site; this would have made the construction of the sanctuary possible. His clan of Bene Yedi’bel later enjoyed special rights among the fervent of Baalshamin, who

¹³⁸ Gawlikowski, Pietrzykowski 1980; Dunant, Stucky 2000, pp. 39–43.

¹³⁹ Dunant 1971, 60.



100. The eagle lintel preserved from the earlier shrine



101. The temple on a drawing by an ancient pilgrim

formed the tribe called “Goat-herders” (p. 24). This name suggests that they were nomads, perhaps of varied origin, who settled in the oasis and were well received by at least one local clan.

The earliest dedication to the god that has come down to us was inscribed in 23, which is close enough to the removal of the burials. It concerns the offering of two columns by two sisters and another woman. Still another lady contributed a single column twenty years later. Neither of the inscribed column drums can be attributed to a precise location. The same is true of three statues set up in honour of their benefactors. These statues stood on column brackets dated from 32 to 61.¹⁴⁰ More such donations followed in 67 when several donors brought their means together in order to provide a colonnade on each of the four sides of a large courtyard in the northern part of the sanctuary (see Fig. 97). If these colonnades

¹⁴⁰ Dunant 1971, 10–11, 37–39.

were completed there would have been over sixty columns altogether, but many of these are missing and it may be that some were never built. Each donor carefully marked his contribution with an inscription on the architrave, repeated in short form on the column shafts.¹⁴¹ The columns were rather short. On two of them standing persons are sculpted in relief, these being the donors themselves [Fig. 102]. Others had brackets for statues. Many associated capitals of a peculiar type have been found, the acanthus leaves left plain as if unfinished and the abacus bearing on each side the small head of a priest. The architrave blocks all display a rough, bulging upper surface, showing that they did not carry any other members of the entablature but directly supported a light wooden roofing.

The original shrine of Baalshamin could not be, as the excavators believed, the building at the northern end of the sanctuary, partly inaccessible under the modern Zenobia Hotel. It consisted of rooms surrounding a square courtyard supplied with columns in the early second century and probably built at the same time to serve the sanctuary as an auxiliary facility. The real shrine was probably at the very site of the later temple, to the south of the great courtyard. Two parallel porticoes, set at a distance of 16 m from one another, were raised there in 90 and in 103/104.¹⁴² They must have flanked and enhanced the abode of the god, which at that point was probably small and modest. It may be that the big altar found standing in front of the later temple was in its original place. It was offered in 115 by four brothers to the “Lord of the World”, in Greek “Zeus the Highest”.¹⁴³

Besides Baalshamin, other inscriptions mention a god called Durahlun. We know nothing about the latter, and modern scholars can only speculate on the etymology of his name: rather than accept the translation “One turning-around”, as has also been proposed, we should follow Jean Starcky, who translated the name as “One of Rahle”, this being a reference to a locality on the slopes of Mt Hermon. Those worshipping Durahlun would have come from southern Syria, and they would have associated their god with Baalshamin, who, as the god of thunder and rain, the giver of life in this dry land, had arrived earlier and had in fact been well known in Syria for centuries.¹⁴⁴

When Male Agrippa, the son of one of the donors of the columns in 67, inserted the temple we saw standing between the two earlier porticoes [Fig. 103] and probably replaced the old shrine while rescuing the cult image of the god, another pre-existing building was also relocated. This was a banquet hall founded in about the year 60 for an association of at least eleven (probably twelve) members who used to dine and drink wine in honour of Baalshamin and his partner. Parts of the stone bench on which they used to recline were installed under one of the lateral porticoes.¹⁴⁵ The banqueters appropriated an altar dedicated to Baalshamin in 73, one of two which had stood at the “Great Gate” [Fig. 104].¹⁴⁶ We do not know where the main entrance to the sanctuary was located. It may be that this gate was replaced some years later by a new gateway, but the relevant inscription is incomplete.¹⁴⁷

South of the temple embedded in this long and narrow courtyard, there is another, bigger courtyard, provided with columns in the course of the second century. The only certain entrance (and the only one that has survived) to the whole complex is a doorway in the southeastern corner of this court. Certainly none stood opposite the temple. The several breaks that exist in the walls here and there seem to be late and connected to the Christian and Islamic occupation of the sacred enclosure.

¹⁴¹ Dunant 1971, 1–6.

¹⁴² Dunant 1971, 7, 43.

¹⁴³ Dunant 1971, 25.

¹⁴⁴ Niehr 1996.

¹⁴⁵ Dunant 1971, 21 (AD 59–68).

¹⁴⁶ Dunant 1971, 24.

¹⁴⁷ Dunant 1971, 49 (AD 81).

102. Columns of the great courtyard with a figure in relief



103. The temple of Baalshamin and the earlier altar in front between two colonnades



104. The banquet bench and an altar beside the temple of Baalshamin



The overall plan is irregular and conditioned by the space available to the builders. As it is, it measures about 160 by 60 m, but none of the angles are right angles, and the limiting walls do not run parallel to each other. The old tomb was carefully fenced off from the sanctuary and made inaccessible, but the outer street had to adjust and turned twice to circumvent it, though each single stretch is straight. The opposite street on the eastern side, though unimpeded, wavers a little in its course. Only extensive excavations around the sanctuary would explain these irregularities, but it seems clear that the founders were not free in drawing the limits of the sacred enclosure. It is not clear whether it was so shaped from the beginning or whether it was later extended, but even if the size of the plot did not change, it was certainly not planned, as the excavators have attempted to prove, according to a sophisticated geometric scheme involving diagonals of the courtyards and the squares built on them. The supposed project would have waited for more than a century to be implemented, while its crucial points do not appear to have been marked on the ground. Also, the resemblance of the plan to that of the sanctuary at Si'a in the Hawran (not very far from Rahle!) is illusory. The excavators were only able to use an approximate plan of Si'a made in the early years of the last century; the new, precise plan has annulled any similarity, even more so since Si'a was founded on several terraces, thus making the application of any overall geometric scheme impractical.

The sanctuary of Baalshamin was built and sustained throughout its history by the tribe of Bene Ma'azin. This tribe became one of the four civic tribes, and it funded one of the four honorific statues each time the Council voted to set them up in the four tribal sanctuaries. Three inscriptions remain, including one for the great Soados, who earned so many honours (see p. 46).¹⁴⁸ As we shall see, the twin sanctuary of Allat could have received some of these statues instead.

No destruction can be traced, either to the troops of Aurelian or to fourth-century Christians. The excavators thought that a church had been built into the sanctuary, the temple itself becoming a *bema*. However, a *bema* in Syrian churches was a raised tribune in the middle of the nave for the singers and for reading the Scripture. The ancient walls that were still standing until recently would have made the clerics invisible to the congregation and even to the priests. The temple was, however, certainly adapted to some profane use.¹⁴⁹ It remained nearly complete through the centuries until its recent annihilation.

The temple of Allat

This temple stood at the western end of the ancient city, in the beginning quite far from the settled area.¹⁵⁰ Later on, tombs were founded all around it, and the city edged closer, with the Transverse Colonnade extending just 100 m to the east. Behind, a steep rocky hill, in the modern folklore called *Jubwel el-Husayniyeh*, or "Fox Hill", rises over the plain. Several funerary caves have been hollowed out in its flanks, one of them for the important second-century family of 'Alaine, whose members donated some columns in the Transverse Colonnade.¹⁵¹ When the Roman legionary camp was installed around the Allat sanctuary about the year 300, the wall protecting it climbed the hill and incorporated these grottoes and two funerary towers as well.

When Polish excavations started in Diocletian's Camp, the first objective was to investigate the Late Roman remains consisting of a colonnaded street leading to the headquarters building (*principia*), which

¹⁴⁸ Dunant 1971, 45 (AD 132).

¹⁴⁹ Kowalski 1996.

¹⁵⁰ Gawlikowski 2017a.

¹⁵¹ Sadurska 1977.



105. The Diocletian Camp looking east, to the left the gate to the Allat sanctuary before being excavated

risers above the whole site on the slope of “Fox Hill”. The sanctuary was left for later, though its location was well known: the gate of the sacred precinct remained standing with an inscription quoting the name of the goddess [Fig. 105]. Behind, however, nothing was to be seen on the ground except for a line of big upright blocks which later proved to be a part of one of the temple’s walls. For fifteen years, the expedition’s tent was planted beside this wall, and the bikes of our workers used to lean against it.

Allat was an Arab goddess.¹⁵² Her name is a contracted version of *al-Ilāt*, “the Goddess” and the feminine form of *Allāh*. First mentioned by Herodotus in the fifth century BC as the main goddess of the Arabs living in the northern Sinai, she was later widely known among other tribes of Arabia and Syria. She is even mentioned as one of the three goddesses worshiped in Mecca during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. When represented in human form, she is usually armed, thus showing her quality as protector and defender of the desert nomads, who were always exposed to danger and eager to raid others. “Oh Lat, give protection and loot!” Invocations inscribed on desert rocks in the so-called Safaitic script use these or similar words and a variant of her name.¹⁵³

In due time some of her worshippers settled down and became exposed to the growing influence of Hellenistic civilisation. They found that among the Greek deities only one was similar to Allat: this was Athena, who wore a helmet and aegis (a kind of armour said to be made out of the hide of the goat Amalthea, who suckled the infant Zeus) and who often wielded a lance. The two became identified, the name Athena being treated as the Greek translation of the Arabic Allat. But at the same time, Allat

¹⁵² Starcky 1981.

¹⁵³ Seyrig 1970, pp. 82–83.

could also be visualised as a seated goddess, enthroned in majesty between two lions, just as the Syrian Atargatis.

In Palmyra, the sanctuary of Allat was patronised by the same tribe of Bene Ma'azin as that of Baalshamin.¹⁵⁴ This tribe seems to have been formed by settled nomads, perhaps of various origins. It is hardly a coincidence that both sanctuaries were founded outside of the early settlement, as if to be closer to the worshippers, who, perhaps, were established at a distance from the original village. While the Baalshamin sanctuary became in time embedded into the city fabric, that of Allat remained outside of it until the late period. But it was the latter which was older; in fact, it is the oldest in Palmyra of which material remains have been found.

In the late blocking of a passage in the building of the Roman headquarters, three stone fragments bearing letters were used. When put together they appeared to belong to an altar dedicated to the "Lady of the Temple" in the year 115. The donor stated that the Lady in question was the idol set up by one Mattanai, his ancestor seven generations back. He must have been born about 100 BC. This family line is identical with the one detailed by Wahballat, the owner of the tomb behind the Baalshamin temple, "opened and purified" in the year 11 (see p. 130).¹⁵⁵ This Wahballat was a great-grandson of the Mattanai who founded the Allat image in her temple and most probably the temple itself as well. In this way the two temples were closely linked to one and the same family going back to Yedi'bel, the first owner of the tomb in the middle of the second century BC. One of the family members built a shrine for Allat no later than the mid-first century BC, while the plot used to found the precinct of Baalshamin was offered to the god three generations later. The family was accepted into the tribe of Ma'azin who were prominent in both sanctuaries throughout their history.

What we found in 1975, when the excavations at last reached the sacred ground of Allat, were the remains of a temple of thoroughly classical aspect [Fig. 106]. Only the bases of the pilasters were preserved in place around the building, except for the northern wall mentioned above, which stood one course higher [Fig. 107]. A fragmentary inscription allows us to conclude that it was built in or about the year 148, shortly after the Baalshamin temple. The same inscription also mentions an "old shrine" referred to using the enigmatic term *hamana*. This name was long understood to proceed from the root meaning "to be hot". If this were the case, it should be transcribed with a double *m* (Aramaic does not mark double consonants), as in the Arabic word *hammam*, "bath". It had been thought that it would imply the presence of an ever-burning fire inside the shrine, as in Zoroastrian temples, but this assumption is entirely groundless. The single *m*, on the other hand, indicates the meaning "rampart, protection", a meaning that still exists in modern Arabic. We soon understood that the remains of this shrine remained in place. At the back of the temple, rectangular foundations of soft limestone were enveloped with precision by the new temple walls in the hard limestone usually used in Palmyra monuments [Fig. 108]. The interstice between the two was just 5 cm wide or even less. The builders went to great pains to preserve the old shrine inside of the new structure. By the same token, the old floor remained in use, together with the altar in front of the old shrine, which was well below the level expected in the new building.

This primitive shrine was small, just 7.35 m wide in front and 5.5 m deep, and had exceedingly thick walls, over 1 m thick [Fig. 109]. It was indeed well "protected". Inside there was a tiny chamber with a niche in the back wall. When the door wings opened, only the niche could be seen [Fig. 110]. It was framed by jambs decorated with a vinescroll and a lintel with a spread eagle, as was later the case with the framing of the relief of Baalshamin in the temple of this god (see Fig. 98). Inside, however, there was no relief but instead a life-size statue: the mortises in the well-smoothed hard limestone slab which formed

¹⁵⁴ Gawlikowski 2017a, pp. 152–154.

¹⁵⁵ Gawlikowski 2017a, pp. 30–31.

106. The excavated cella and the doorway of the Allat sanctuary

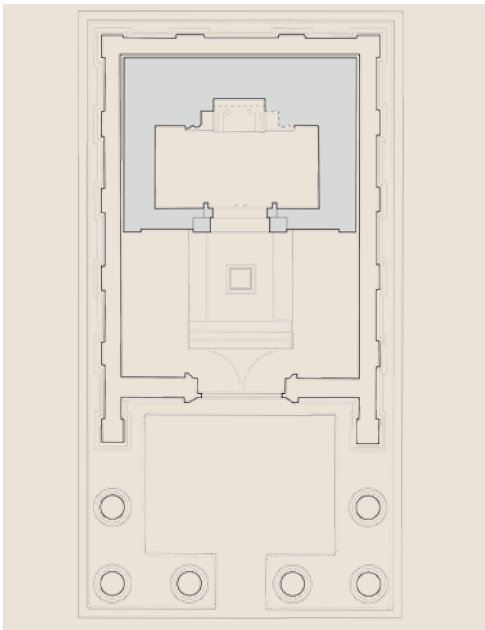


107. A side view of the Allat temple seen towards the north



the floor of the niche made it possible to restore the cult image of the goddess, which was fortunately imitated in some miniature sculptures (see Fig. 152): Allat was seated on a throne guarded by two lions, holding a long sceptre. There was no place inside for more than two or three priests, who would have performed their everyday motions around the statue. The altar right outside the door was used for sacrifices.

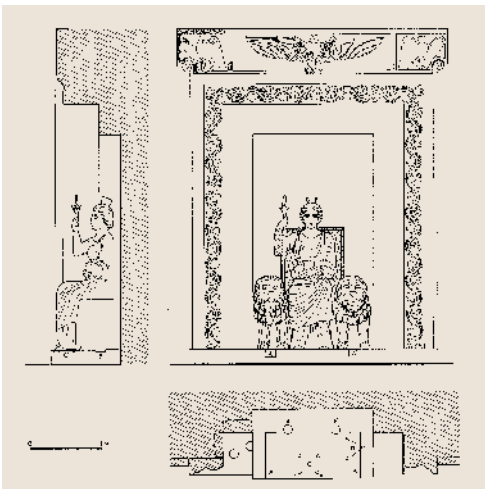
It seems quite probable that the statue was not of stone, but rather that it was a composite mannequin of wood, perhaps with some costly material for the bare parts, and real garments. It probably would have been possible to remove it from its place of rest and carry it on a chariot on certain festive occasions. That this was the case is suggested by a small fragmentary monument showing just such a chariot with a seated



108. Plan of the Allat temple with the embedded old shrine



109. Virtual rendering of the early shrine of Allat



110. The statue of Allat in her niche



111. The lion of Allat as restored in front of the museum by Bartosz Markowski in 2005

passenger, while on the other side of it a camel is followed by veiled women, a scene strikingly parallel to the one depicted on one of the sculpted beams of the Bel temple.

Because the shrine stood on open ground, the courtyard could be traced as a regular rectangle. It was surrounded by columns which slowly accrued in the course of the first century. There were at least three different types of columns raised by private donors at different times. Apparently, the long sides of the courtyard were never provided with them completely, though the surrounding wall was of course

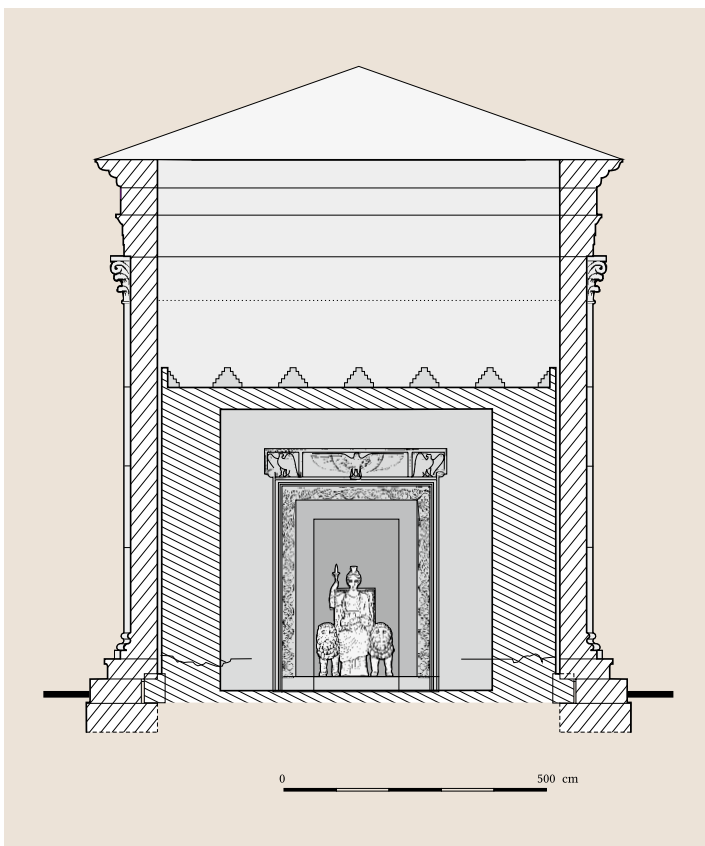
closed on all four sides. Jutting out from somewhere in this wall, presumably at the entrance to the sanctuary on the eastern side, was the imposing figure of a lion sculpted from ashlar of soft limestone [Fig. 111].¹⁵⁶ This enormous animal, over 3.5 m high, stood facing forwards, showing his fangs and staring menacingly at the viewer. Between his paws, however, an antelope rests comfortably – it is evidently under the benevolent protection of the terrible beast. This impression is confirmed by the words inscribed on one of the lion's paws: "May Allat bless whomever does not shed blood in the sanctuary". The obvious inference is that bloody sacrifice was not allowed within the sacred precinct. Were the offerings limited to frankincense and perhaps fruit? Perhaps liquids were also used? We have no way of knowing, but, in connection with this, it should be recalled that in the great and famous sanctuary of Atargatis in the Syrian Hierapolis animal victims were not slaughtered but hanged on trees and then burned. Whether Allat, represented exactly like Atargatis from Hierapolis, also required such rites cannot be demonstrated. At any rate, the idea that this inscription refers to the right of asylum, and that it guaranteed murderers safety as long as they remained in the sanctuary, cannot be maintained: the courtyard of Allat would simply have been too small to accommodate such criminals for any period of time whatsoever without seriously troubling the cult.

The courtyard did, however, receive statues of men who must have distinguished themselves by their piety and generosity. Their life-size stone likenesses probably stood under the porticoes. Some of them were eventually aligned against a wall in the museum (see Figs 186–187). Smaller reliefs showing gods and their servants offering frankincense on portable altars were also to be seen around the shrine. Many of them survived, more or less damaged, mostly thanks to their use as building material in late foundations all over the place. The great lion, too, was dismantled and its blocks buried in the courtyard, before it was found in excavations and restored to its former glory at the entrance to the local museum, first immediately after its discovery in 1977 by Józef Gazy, and then after it was refurbished in 2005 by Bartosz Markowski. Among the first monuments to be destroyed by Daesh, it now stands restored by the same Markowski in the garden of the National Museum in Damascus.

The old shrine apparently remained unchanged for two centuries. Elsewhere in Palmyra, the architectural landscape was in the meantime profoundly altered: new temples and colonnades were everywhere to be seen, while Allat had to manage with her modest and primitive abode as it was first built. This *hamana* was just a tabernacle, a stone shelter for the idol of the goddess. It was not the only one of its kind: a very similar coffer-like structure stood at the foot of the Agora. Respected for generations, it was painstakingly protected among the new structures (see Fig. 56). Other similar shrines, usually square and always with very thick walls, have been found on other Syrian sites. It can be supposed that such shrines originally served to protect the sacred objects of the nomad tribes while they were away on their wanderings. But after Baalshamin was provided with a classical temple, the twin sanctuary could not stay behind. So, in or around 148, a certain Taimarsu offered a new temple to Allat. He respected, however, the primitive shrine and ordered it to be preserved carefully within the new building. It stood within at the back, the old shrine and its altar open to the sky, while only the porch of the new temple was roofed [Figs 112–113].

The proportions and plan of the temple closely followed the same model as the temple of Baalshamin. The two temples are so similar in design that we can suppose that they were conceived by the same architect: both stand on a low podium, both have their walls marked with pilasters, both had a porch of four Corinthian columns in front and one behind on each side. When we consider their proportions and not their actual dimensions, their plans are very much alike, with the only difference being that one is just a little longer. Both had make-believe pediments at each end, but while Baalshamin was covered with a flat roof and needed windows to let the light in, Allat remained open to the sky above the old shrine

¹⁵⁶ Gawlikowski 2017a, pp. 95–98.



112. A section through the temple, showing the old shrine within



113. Virtual rendering of the Allat temple

and the altar in front of it. On the outside, it looked very much Roman, just as Vitruvius had prescribed, but in fact it was just an outer shell to contain the untouched original shrine.

Some of the columns around the courtyard had brackets for bronze statues of people deemed to be worthy of this honour. The following inscriptions are slightly older than the new temple:¹⁵⁷

[This is the statue of NN ...] A'aki, set up for him by Allat and the Bene Nurbel because he has pleased them, to honour him, in the month of Adar of the year 448 [March 137]. He has made in 438 [126/127], from his own means, a basin of gold and silver for his goddess Allat. And he has also made for Bel, Yarhibol, 'Aglibol, and Ashtart, good and rewarding gods, a basin whole of gold; and also offered to Baalshamin, Durahlun, and Belti the goddess a basin of silver for the sorts of the twelfth of Siwan [June], for 6,000 [denarii, for all three]. And he gave to the Bene ... forever, for them to bring to the Virgin Allat a sacrifice of the ninth of Elul, and on the seventh of Elul for the Fortune of ... He gave also to the Bene A'aki, from the house of his ancestors, from time to time every year, for his children and grand-children, forever.

The A'aki clan is otherwise known from other inscriptions in the sanctuary. In spite of the gaps in the text, which are due to damage, it provides interesting information about the drawing of sorts in several sanctuaries on fixed days, probably to appoint the yearly officials of these cults. It should be noted that Allat here is called a virgin, like the Greek Athena Parthenos.

Another inscription identified one of the many statues offered to Sho'adu for his merits in protecting the caravans and helping the merchants. In this case, the text is more detailed than usual:

These four bronze statues, one here in the sanctuary of Allat, one in the Garden of Gods, one in the sanctuary of Arsu and one in the sanctuary of Atargatis, were set up close to the former four by the first caravan for Sho'adu b. Bolyada' b. Sho'adu b. Taimishamsh, who fears the gods and loves his city, who for his good feelings and his magnanimity is rewarded with praise and great honours. They are set up by the caravan of the whole of Tadmor coming back from Vologesias, because he came forward with expertise and brought with him a strong force to confront 'Abdallat the Ahitaeon and the robbers whom he had assembled to wait for a long time in ambush to do wrong to the caravan, and this Sho'adu has saved them. For this reason they have established these statues in his honour, Male b. Shim'on Bazeqa and Hennibel b. Shim'on Bazeqa being leaders of the caravan, in the month of Siwan, year 455 [June 144].

We remember that Sho'adu (Soados) was a Palmyrene resident in Vologesias, in the territory of the kingdom of Mesene, in the thirties and forties of the second century (p. 46). He helped his fellow-citizens on numerous occasions when they went on commercial expeditions to the Gulf. On this occasion, it is clear that he also had an armed force of some consequence at his disposal, and was able to deter a raiding party led by a robber chief called 'Abdallat, that is, "Servant of Allat". This man was probably citizen of the village in southern Syria called in Greek Eeitha (today: Hit), probably an outlaw who threw in his lot with some desert tribesmen. In order to honour special merits, the city Council used to order the erection of four statues in the four sanctuaries by the four tribes forming the body of the citizenry. Three of these sanctuaries were always the same, but the tribe of Bene Ma'azin used two interchangeably, either the sanctuary of Baalshamin or that of Allat.

¹⁵⁷ Drijvers 1995; Gawlikowski 2017a, pp. 263–267. The second inscription also: *IGLS* 127.

The new temple with the old one inside of it remained in use until the disaster of Zenobia. When the troops of Aurelian came back in 273 to avenge the massacre of the Roman garrison left in Palmyra after the surrender of the preceding year, they certainly committed atrocities, even if the city's monuments mostly survived. The temples of Bel and Baalshamin seem to have escaped major damage, but that of Allat on the outskirts of the city was less fortunate: even if the walls remained standing, the venerable shrine and its idol were broken to pieces. An unreliable Latin work written about a century later, called in modern research *Historia Augusta*, our only source for these events,¹⁵⁸ speaks about the plunder of the temple of Helios. This is often referred to as the Bel temple, but this interpretation cannot stand: Bel was never a Sun god and his temple was not plundered. There was, however, a temple of Shamash ("Sun") located somewhere close to the sanctuary of Allat. Only a few dispersed stones coming from there have been found in the vicinity, so thorough was the destruction. Allat was treated no better, but it was not mentioned.

After the second taking of Palmyra, a Roman legion settled there; it was the First Illyrian, levied by Aurelian in the Balkans shortly before this. The quarters for the occupying force were established in the western outskirts, around the Allat sanctuary. Needless to say, the place could not have remained open. Walls were erected to protect it, using the hilltop behind as the vantage point. These walls also protected the ancient centre, with the Great Colonnade and all the monumental buildings that we see today, including the Bel sanctuary (see Fig. 60). The seat of the legion, nowadays called Diocletian's Camp, was indeed completed under this emperor and his three co-emperors (the so-called Tetrarchy). This imposing headquarters was built on an artificial terrace at the foot of the hill. Because of the lavish decoration that it received, it was even thought to be Odaenat's seat of command. However, although the elaborate columns and carvings all have their origin in the third century, they are not, at closer look, homogenous, and they were certainly scavenged in the ruins, most likely from funerary temples. Moreover, the Latin inscription over the entrance to the main room, the legionary shrine, clearly says that the camp (*castra*) was founded under the auspices of the four emperors by the governor Sossianus Hierocles, who was in office around the year 300. The barracks might, at least partly, go back to the years of Aurelian.

The same Hierocles also restored the baths by the Great Colonnade and called them "Diocletianic" (see p. 110). He was a convinced pagan and a persecutor of Christians, so it is no wonder that he allowed the reconstruction of the Allat temple (unless this had already happened before his time). This was all the more recommendable as the Greek equivalent of the goddess, Athena, was for the Romans Minerva and one of the army's usual patrons.

Civilians' access to the camp was of course restricted, so the cult must have been military, even if the new replacements for the veterans were recruited locally and were aware of the traditional persona of the goddess. As the old shrine and its contents were all broken and beyond repair, the remaining bits and pieces were piously collected and embedded in a kind of bench at the back of the temple, corresponding exactly to the outline of the destroyed shrine. Other fragments, including the ashlar bearing the great lion relief and parts of the broken honorific statues, were buried as foundation stones for the restored walls of the precinct. The walls of the temple itself remained standing.

A new statue of the goddess was of course needed. An inspection of public buildings in the city provided a solution: some of them were adorned with Greek sculptures, as was normally the case in the Roman world. The best candidates for the statue would have been the theatre or the baths. In one of these places there stood a beautiful statue of Athena and it was appropriated for the restored temple.

When, a century later, a Christian mob sacked the temple, they smashed this statue into pieces, leaving them on the floor. It was deemed dangerous to touch or visit the accursed places haunted by the devils

¹⁵⁸ Will 1966.



114. The remains of the old shrine and its altar within the temple

of old. So, nearly 1,600 years later, when we unearthed the temple, these remains were found where they fell during the sacking. They survived because the temple's floor, which corresponded to the pavement in front of the old shrine, lay beneath the expected level and was recovered with debris [Fig. 114]. The sculptor Józef Gazy put them together again. Some parts, though, were missing: the lower legs, the left arm and shoulder, and minor fragments here and there. Even so, the statue was restored and stood for forty years in the local museum as one of its most precious exhibits. Only the headless trunk remains now.

The statue was made of Pentelic marble and so is of Athenian origin [Fig. 115].¹⁵⁹ It was made some time in the second century as a copy of an original from the great period of Greek sculpture. It so happens

¹⁵⁹ Gawlikowski 1996a.



115. The statue of
Athena as restored
by Józef Gazy

that a torso identical to the corresponding part of our statue, and also of identical dimensions, was found in the Athenian Agora. It is dated to the last years of the fifth century BC and is believed to be the creation of a certain Lokros of Paros, known only from a single mention as the author of a statue of Athena on display in the temple of Ares in the Agora. Here, she was coupled with a statue of Ares of the type called Borghese after a Renaissance Roman family who owned a copy of it.¹⁶⁰

Our Athena stood draped in a peplos crossed by an aegis folded like a sash over the right shoulder. This motif was an invention of Phidias, first introduced in a pediment of the Parthenon and soon imitated in several less known sculptures. The helmet of the Athena from Palmyra is borrowed from Phidias, rendering the headdress of Athena Parthenos herself. A row of winged horses over her brow, griffins on the earpieces, and three sphinxes on top all conform to the description of the Phidian statue in Athens. Indeed, they correspond better to this description, provided by Pausanias, a Greek traveller of the second century, than any other copy that has come down to us. The statue of Athena might already have been imitated by Lokros, but perhaps it was only the order from Palmyra that required a Parthenos head which was duly supplied by the copyist. The Palmyra copy held a lance in her right hand and a round shield on her left arm, and it may be that the Lokros original did as well.

This splendid piece was not ordered in Athens for the new temple in the second century, as I had first thought. This could not have been the case as long as the archaic seated likeness of Allat remained in its place in her tabernacle. Only after its destruction was the marble statue brought from somewhere in town and installed in the middle of the temple under a canopy formed by four small, ill-assorted columns scavenged from the ruins. Their pedestals and bases are still in place, while the statue rolled aside.

The makeshift temple within the camp remained in use a little over one hundred years. In the last years of the fourth century, under the emperor Theodosius, well known for his edicts against pagan cults, the closure of all the temples which were still active was ordered by law. Closing the temples did not always mean their destruction, as the authorities were often aware of the artistic value of the buildings and their contents. Not so in Palmyra: the local Christians were induced to ransack all of the building. Some coins, left scattered on the floor out of fear of the pollution associated with them for having once belonged to the demons that had just been suppressed, aid us in dating the event, approximately, to the 380s. It is likely that other Palmyrene temples, or at least some of them, could have stayed open just as long.

The temple of Nabu

Mention has already been made, in the description of the Great Colonnade and the paved road in the wadi (see p. 93), of the last temple that will be covered here, the temple of Nabu. Excavated in the 1960s by Adnan Bounni and Nassib Saliby,¹⁶¹ the temple's remains that can still be seen are not earlier than the late first century, but a few loose stones that do not fit the existing ruins and are about a century older were found in the sanctuary: an ornate capital and fragments of early cult niches such as the main niche in the Allat temple and the eagle lintel from the temple of Baalshamin. The sanctuary opened to the wadi road in the south and formed a quadrangle which became larger as one moved from south to north. This layout must have been imposed by the limit of the available plot of land. As the temple and the colonnades around it were private offerings, so no doubt the purchase of the ground was certainly due to private piety as well. There must have been two streets or some buildings right and

¹⁶⁰ Stewart 2016.

¹⁶¹ Bounni, Seigne, Saliby 1992; Bounni 2004.



116. The temple of Nabu and the Tuscan columns of its courtyard



117. The entrance from the wadi road to the Nabu sanctuary

left of the outer walls, which were originally 86 m long, while the back façade was about 65 m wide and the front 44 m. These measurements cannot be very precise because of later changes, but they are close to the simple proportion of 4:3:2. Symmetrical in the beginning, the shape of the sacred enclosure was later truncated.¹⁶²

The courtyard was surrounded by colonnades of the so-called Tuscan order, being a Roman variant of the Doric [Fig. 116]. Only the bases and some drums remain in place, but many capitals and inscribed brackets were found scattered around. The entrance from the south opened in a gateway of six columns under a pediment, whose Corinthian capitals can be dated to the late first century [Fig. 117]. The inner side is not parallel to the front but to the temple in the middle of the courtyard. The temple closely follows Roman models in being raised on a podium 2 m high with steps in front on the sanctuary's axis of symmetry [Fig. 118]. The cella is fully surrounded by columns; this feature would have appeared rather old-fashioned in the Italy of that time, but it appears in the so-called Bacchus temple in Baalbek and some other Lebanese temples which imitate this example.

On closer look, Jacques Seigne has established that the podium carrying these columns was built at two different times: first in front and only afterwards all the way around, eleven Corinthian columns on each long side and six in the front and rear (counting the corner columns twice). The capitals, found scattered about, can be sorted into two distinct series. In the older ones, the acanthus leaves are plain and small heads adorn the top; we have already encountered such capitals in the great courtyard of Baalshamin from the year 67, but here they must be later, roughly between 80 and 100. In the other series, the acanthi are fully completed in detail.

The sanctuary was conceived as a coherent whole in the late first century, though some of its parts were completed later according to the same overall project: the northern portico was set up by one Honainu b. Haddudan, who owned a ship which sailed to India in the year 157. It was also the most short-lived because it was entirely removed, together with the back wall, in order to let pass the Great Colonnade, as has already been explained (p. 109). The symmetry of the precinct was disrupted when the sanctuary was truncated and the northern colonnade abolished. This happened in the third century, I suppose as late as 260, in connection to the great arch in honour of Odainat and his son.

The cella was covered by a flat terrace framed with crow-steps concealed in the front and rear by classical pediments. At the back, inside, there was a raised adyton that today is preserved just above floor level. It was flanked by two square rooms, one of them containing a staircase to the top. All these features mirror the arrangement of the Bel temple (except, of course, for the second adyton of the latter).

Nabu was the god of Borsippa in Babylonia, reputed there to be the first son of Bel/Marduk and the patron of writing and wisdom. Later, he was identified with the Greek Apollo, the patron of the arts, and represented as playing the lyre. This was apparently the form of the god adopted in Palmyra. We do not have, however, any assured images of the Palmyrene Nabu. He is mentioned only once in the extant inscriptions from his sanctuary, which appears to have been patronised by individual citizens only. On the other hand, the oldest Palmyrene inscription ever found, from the year 44 BC (see Fig. 9), already mentions the tribe of Bene Kahinnabu, the name of the ancestor meaning "Priest of Nabu". Thus, the arrival of the god in the oasis must have occurred several generations back.

The patrons we know by name belonged mostly to two families, both of a certain standing in the city. One of them is represented by four brothers, the sons of Belshuri of the Ba'a family, who also built for themselves a tower tomb in the year 83, before making some offerings in the Nabu sanctuary. The other

¹⁶² The most recent hypothesis by Jacques Seigne proposed that the primitive shape of the initial sanctuary was roughly the same as the last. The northern portico, built in the mid-second century, would have been located on a misappropriated piece of land claimed back by the city to let pass the Great Colonnade.



118. The Nabu temple. Behind the columns of the Great Colonnade



119. The altar of Nabu in front of the temple

family is known from another tower tomb, built in 103, also by four brothers (see p. 159). This is the tower known as Elahbel's, after the elder brother. This tower was very well preserved and was often visited before it was recently blown up. The temple was offered by the father and uncle of the four brothers, the former already dead when the tower tomb was built. In about the year 120, Elahbel set up in the sanctuary a statue of one of his sons as well as a statue of one of his daughters, apparently to publicise his Roman citizenship as Marcus Ulpius Elabelos of the tribe Sergia, obtained, as the name Ulpius indicates, from the emperor Trajan (98–117). He did not use this name in the foundation inscription of the tomb twenty years before, when he was already a father of five. It follows that he could not possibly have been a Roman veteran, i.e. one who had fulfilled twenty-five years of auxiliary service, before the tomb was built, as soldiers at that time were not allowed to marry. Thus, the favour must have been earned by a mature man in the later years of Trajan, perhaps on the occasion of the Parthian war. He himself or one of his sons completed the cella, according to the poorly preserved inscription on the rear pediment, in which their Roman name was mentioned and the temple was called [Apoll]onion.

The last addition to the sanctuary stood between the gate and the temple. This square altar, rebuilt from its scattered members, is a little over 1 m to a side, with an empty shaft in the middle to collect the ashes from the sacrifice [Fig. 119]. It stands on a base twice as wide supporting small columns, three at each corner. Their entablature reaches a height of 3.6 m.

About a dozen similar monuments exist in the Levant, principally in present-day Lebanon.¹⁶³ What they have in common, besides the features described above, is the lack of any means to climb to the top. We are obliged to admit that the priests had to go up a ladder applied to the altar each time a sacrifice was to be offered. Needless to say, no big animals could be lifted to the top to be slaughtered there, perhaps just parts of a dismembered victim.

The sanctuary of Nabu reunites some features that are typically Roman (an axial plan, a podium, Tuscan colonnades), some that are Hellenistic (a peristyle around the temple, already out of fashion in Italy in the imperial period), and some that are local or more generally Syrian (an adyton, a flat terrace, crow-steps crowning the walls). The same is true, if not in the same way, of all the other temples in Palmyra, which are dedicated to the local deities and yet attempt to look similar to what others would have recognised as being familiar. While the beliefs, as far as we can see, remained specific to Palmyra or to the Levant in general, the outer form of the temples is as close to Greek and Roman standards as the ritual admitted.

¹⁶³ Will 1990.

The City of the Dead

As with any other ancient city, Palmyra was surrounded by tombs. In Alexandria, the outside cemetery was so extensive that the geographer Strabo (XVII.1.10) called it a *necropolis*, that is, the “City of the Dead”. The name he invented is commonly used in modern times, not only in reference to the ancient world but also to any burial grounds. The old Roman law forbade burials within the city limits, and this interdiction was in principle observed everywhere in the Empire. We have seen that the oldest tomb on the grounds of the Baalshamin sanctuary, founded in the second century BC well beyond the settled area, had to be “purified” in order to make the implanting of the sacred precinct possible (p. 130). Other such cases must certainly have occurred later on, as we can see from seven ruined funerary towers left within the late rampart in the northern part of the city, intertwined with the street grid. They could not be used anymore and most probably had to be the object of some particular treatment. Most tombs remained outside, however, even if the Roman rampart of the late third century incorporated some of them to serve as bastions in the fortifications.

In Palmyra, the oldest necropolis is the western one, called the Valley of the Tombs [Figs 120–121]. It grew along the track from Homs (Emesa), passing through a break in the chain of hills to the west of the city. First on higher ground, but later also close to the road, it had many towers and other funerary monuments, which together gave the impression of a densely built town. A nineteenth-century traveller approaching Palmyra from the west was greeted by the oldest dated tower built by two brothers for their father Atenatan in the year 9 BC. A few paces further, there stood one of the most impressive towers founded, in 103, by Elahbel and his three brothers [Fig. 122]. Many more followed, in various states of disrepair, on both sides of the caravan track until the visitor came in full view of the rocky outcrop on his right, called by the Arab inhabitants Umm Belqis, the “Place of the Queen of Sheba”, in reference to the legend about King Solomon having built Tadmor for his august lover. In plain fact, there were eight towers standing in a row half-way up the slope and looking toward the living city [Fig. 123]. In the summer of 2015, seven of the most complete towers in the valley were reduced to rubble. The full extent of the damage cannot be appreciated yet, as the only sources of information available are satellite photos.

Another group of tombs, much less spectacular, lies by the modern road approaching Palmyra from Damascus. It is known as the Southwest Necropolis. Like the Valley of the Tombs, it stands right outside of the first mudbrick rampart of the oasis [Fig. 124]. There are some rather derelict towers and many underground tombs of which only one, called the Three Brothers tomb, used to be accessible. Far to the east, beyond the gardens, another group of underground tombs is the Southeast Necropolis. Several



120. The Valley of the Tombs, northern bank with the Kitot tower in the middle



121. The Valley of the Tombs seen from the city outskirts



122. The tower of Atenatan, the oldest dated tomb in Palmyra, in the background, the tower of Elahbel



123. A view of the hill Umm Belqis. On the right, the tower of Iamblichus



124. A view of the Southwest Necropolis



125. The tomb of Julius Aurelius Marona on the Northern Necropolis

of these tombs were excavated and carefully restored by the Syrian mission and later by the Japanese, but they have recently been robbed.

The Northern Necropolis is extensive but was utterly destroyed even before the recent disasters. A large part of it lies under the modern town and is irretrievably lost. The walls of only one tomb remain standing thanks to the fact that it was used in the medieval period [Fig. 125]. In Antiquity the tombs went around the city and joined those of the valley. When the late rampart surrounded the Roman camp at the western edge of the city, this unity was broken. Some funerary monuments remained inside the rampart, for instance the imposing mausoleum closing the perspective of the Great Colonnade [Fig. 126]. This rich tomb remains anonymous and is known today as the “Funerary Temple” because of its standing front of six columns under a pediment which indeed resembles an ancient temple. As a matter of fact, the cemeteries of Palmyra contained many similar buildings, just less well preserved. Though the term funerary temple is improper, the name stuck and is in common use.

We must disregard the individual burials grouped under the modern town. Nothing is known about them except that some were marked by small stone monuments showing the standing figure of the deceased and bearing his or her name (see Figs 212–214). Only these stelae have been collected. Until now only one individual burial from before the Christian times has been excavated; the Japanese mission found it in the Southeast Necropolis and dated it by carbon isotopes to the early Hellenistic period. The dead man was laid to rest in a wooden coffin with rich personal adornments.¹⁶⁴ With this exception,

¹⁶⁴ K. Saito, in Schmidt-Colinet 2005, p. 34.



126. The see-through porch of the anonymous tomb no. 86 before the restoration in the 1970s

other excavated ground burials are late, dating to about the sixth century. They were discovered during the construction of the museum.

All other Palmyrene tombs were collective, meant for extended families and ready to receive many burials, in some cases in their hundreds. They come in three general categories: tower tombs, underground tombs, and elaborate mausolea, usually called funerary temples. They all share two basic principles: the use of loculi and a standing marker above ground.¹⁶⁵

The loculi are deep and narrow slots in the tomb's walls in which dead bodies could be placed. It seems they were invented in Alexandria as a practical device to dispose of the dead of this populous city.¹⁶⁶ The first known loculi outside Egypt were found in the early Hellenistic underground family tombs in Marissa, belonging to a colony of Sidonians settled by the Ptolemies in southern Palestine.¹⁶⁷ Soon, they became the standard form of burial in Syria and Palestine, either hollowed in the walls of funerary caves or built into the masonry of surface tombs.¹⁶⁸ One or the other type occurs in every funerary monument in Palmyra.

In contrast to this Greek invention, the markers over the tomb stem from local traditions. Needless to say, tomb monuments, often with a likeness of the deceased, are common stuff in Classical Greece and elsewhere. However, the specific Near Eastern tradition was different: an upright stone or solid structure was called *nefesh*, "soul", and was originally meant to embody the spirit of the departed, in the same way

¹⁶⁵ Gawlikowski 1970; Henning 2013.

¹⁶⁶ Venit 2002, pp. 22–36.

¹⁶⁷ Peters, Thiersch 1905.

¹⁶⁸ De Jong 2017.

as rough stones called *bet-el*, “House of god”, could be revered as the real abode of a deity. In Palmyra, the tomb markers took the form of sculpted stelae or of stone towers, thus individual or collective. Both these very different monuments could be called *nefesh*. The case can be made that this custom has a nomad origin, that it was brought from the Arabian desert by migrating tribes, such as the Nabateans and some Palmyrenes. The strong sense of the notion faded away among the settled population, but the name crops up from time to time.

The oldest tomb in Palmyra, already mentioned, consisted of a single burial within a square, solid mudbrick structure certainly raised above ground. Later on, this was extended to house a set of loculi opening from a central corridor, four on the left behind the original tomb and five opposite. The loculi are built partly with rough stones and partly with bricks. The covering structure, possibly of a certain height, is not preserved.¹⁶⁹

While this tomb, founded in the mid-second century BC and put out of use in 11, remains isolated for the time being, we should not doubt that it was not alone on the outskirts of the early settlement. A few monuments of a different type can be seen on hilltops above the Valley of the Tombs. No inscription providing a date accompanies them, but they cannot be from much later and are probably earlier than the oldest dated tower, from 9 BC, that of Atenatan.¹⁷⁰

These monuments are built of broken stones bound in mortar. Each has a square base with a few steps in which several loculi open, and they each had a slim tower which consisted of a winding staircase leading to the top and sometimes gave access to a few more loculi. Three towers on the highest hill apparently have no loculi at all and are fully solid.¹⁷¹ They preserve some slabs of a carefully smoothed revetment. Rather than being older than the others, they seem to mark the burials of some rich or influential persons, perhaps remaining to this day sealed under the towers which are themselves inaccessible since a long time.

There are similar funerary towers with external loculi scattered on the banks of the Euphrates, in Zenobia, Dura-Europos, and some other places.¹⁷² Unlike the towers of Palmyra, they are decorated with plastered half-columns. Apparently of roughly the same time, they have no local posterity. On the contrary, in Palmyra the towers evolved over the course of a century and a half to become a prominent feature unique to this site.

On ground level the tower of Atenatan contained an elongated chamber with loculi regularly disposed right and left in two tiers of three one above the other.¹⁷³ Another chamber above, with a separate entrance on the opposite side of the tower, was similar but for the presence of stairs. Winding around the tapering tower, the stairs opened to small irregular rooms reserved in the core of the masonry with a few more loculi [Fig. 127].

All in all, there were in this tower forty loculi on eight levels. Those that were used for burials were broken into, and some bones, rags, and small belongings were left in disorder on the floor. Only one burial was overlooked and remained sealed. Here, the desiccated body of a man had been laid to rest naked, having only been enveloped in some kind of rough cloth soaked in fragrance [Fig. 128]. As his only gift he was given a wooden stick. This is the only burial found in a tower in controlled excavations.

The model of Atenatan was followed by two other towers, one very small, built in 33 for Hairan, and a larger one, that of Kitot, founded in 40 [Fig. 129]. They share the device of having two opposite doors leading to chambers, one above the other, the winding stairs starting in the upper chamber to give access

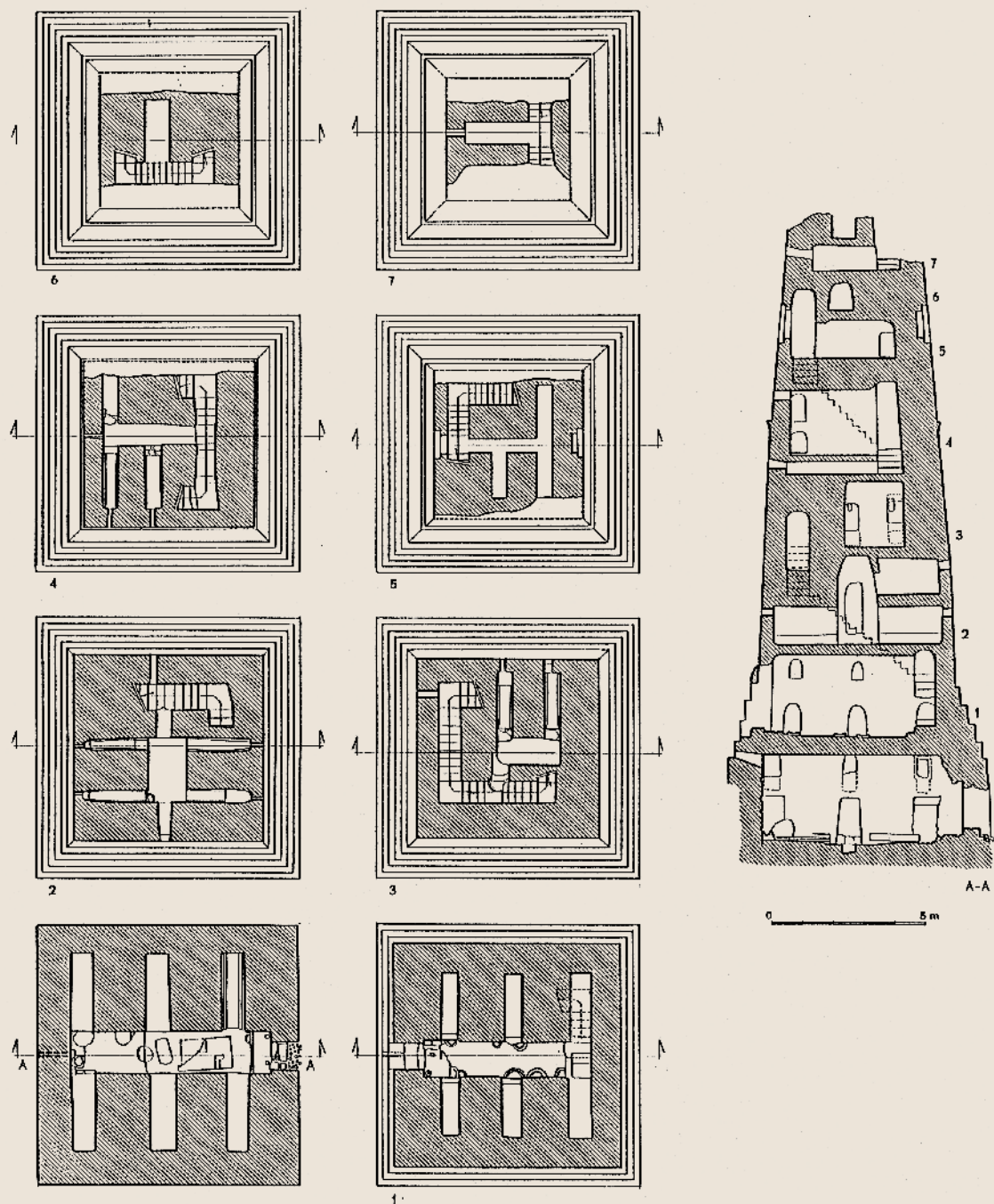
¹⁶⁹ Fellmann 1970.

¹⁷⁰ Will 1946/1949a.

¹⁷¹ Gawlikowski 1970, pp. 41–43.

¹⁷² Will 1946/1949b; Henning 2013, pp. 101–116.

¹⁷³ Gawlikowski 1970; Henning 2013; Witecka, forthcoming.



127. The section and plans of chambers in the Atenatan tower



128. The mummy found in the Atenatan tower



129. The Kitot tower, the side façade

to more rooms higher up. All the chambers contain loculi divided by ceramic plates into separate superimposed burials, walled up after deposition. None of these towers is complete to the top, but it seems certain that they had terraced roofs.

The diminutive tower of Hairan stands on the steep slope of Umm Belqis hill, and the builders used this location to extend the ground floor with a grotto cut into the rock behind it. The grotto is so destroyed that no burial arrangements can be seen, but a relief was found there showing Hairan reclining on a couch and his two sons tending crowns [Fig. 130]. This motif was used many times among later generations in Palmyra, in the first place in the Kitot tower: there, an arcaded niche was placed on an outside wall. Within it, under a vinescroll, a banquet scene reunited Kitot on his couch and his family standing behind him [Fig. 131].¹⁷⁴ Rather than an illustration of the world to come, this seems to be a picture of happy feasting together in this life; apparently, everybody was still alive when they were represented on the tower's side looking to the city. Neither can we envisage that funerary banquets shared symbolically with the departed were held in the tombs; there simply would not have been space enough for such reunions. We just find in front of some loculi small bowls modelled in plaster where it would have been possible to burn incense or deposit some food as an offering.

No dated inscriptions still attached to other funerary towers survive from between 40 and 79. Two towers from the year 79/80, one on Umm Belqis and the other in the Northern Necropolis, both contain a new device: the stairs no longer wind along the inner walls but form a staircase with two flights of steps between the storeys, packed in one corner of the monument. All the towers from then on followed this example. In this way it was possible for the chambers to become larger and identical in plan and for the loculi to continue from the ground floor to the top in vertical succession, so that they could be only divided by ceiling slabs. Such towers could receive many more burials. They were apparently planned for many generations, "for eternity", as the inscriptions say. It became possible to replace the rough structure of broken stones with smooth ashlar, and the vertical loculi could be more readily closed by sculpted slabs showing the likenesses of the deceased. As time went by, the chambers, especially the lower ones, must have become real portrait galleries of the ancestors, keeping alive their memory and the family's pride.

Among these towers, two stand out: that of Iamblichus, built in 83, and that of Elahbel and his brothers, built in 103.¹⁷⁵ Both were well preserved and restored, but they are no more. The tower of Iamblichus (Yamlikhu b. Moqimu) stood five storeys high (26 m). Two-hundred burials could fit into it [Fig. 132]. The ashlar walls were strictly vertical, allowing for architectural decoration: on the ground floor there were Corinthian pilasters between the loculi, which were surmounted by a classical entablature consisting of an architrave, frieze, and cornice. There were coffers in the ceiling: the stuccoed and painted lozenges and triangles contained busts, eagles, Erotes, and hunters fighting a griffin and a panther. The higher storeys only had cornices, but two small square rooms, each replacing two loculi slots, allowed sculpted banquet scenes to be arranged on three sides in a *triclinium*, that is, in an imitation of a dining arrangement in real life. On the tower's façade, a niche supported by winged Victories once contained a banquet scene similar to the one on the tower of Kitot. The typically local form of the funerary monument was thus enriched with classical ornaments and mythological references to advertise the assumed cultural identity of the owner.

The tower of Elahbel [Fig 133], built twenty years later, is very similar, both in its general disposition and classical decoration [Fig. 134]. The Corinthian pilasters, the cornices, and the coffered ceiling are also carved in hard white limestone resembling marble. However, the brothers did not refer to Greek

¹⁷⁴ Will 1951.

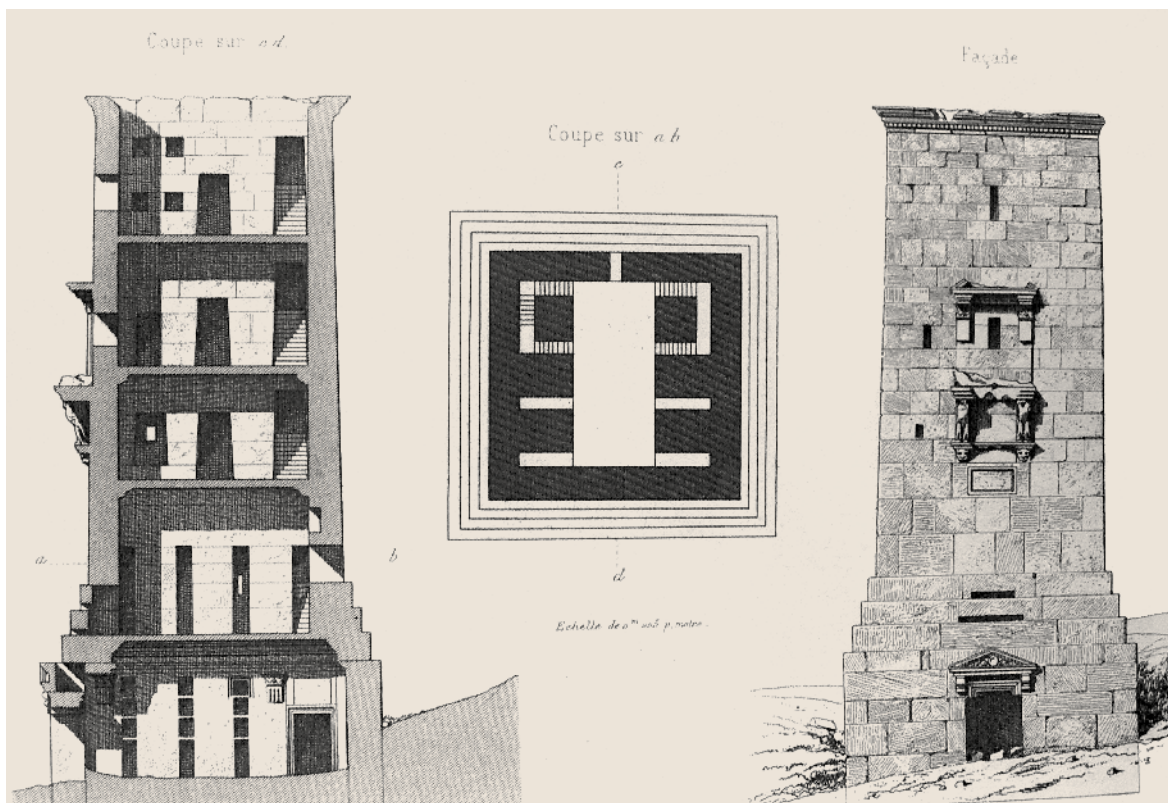
¹⁷⁵ Gawlikowski 1970; Henning 2013, pp. 66–73.



130. The relief of the sons of Hairan, from his tomb



131. The banquet of the Kitot family



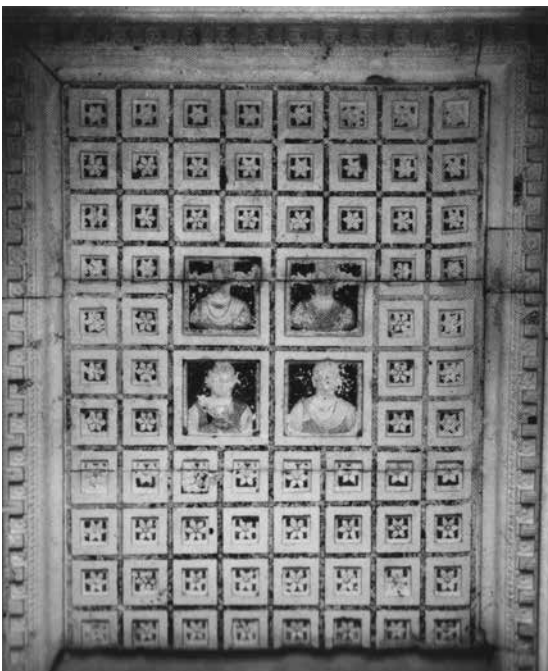
132. The tower of Iamblichus



133. The tomb of Elahbel and his brothers, a fully developed funerary tower



135. The interior of the Elahbel tower, ground floor



134. The coffered ceiling in the ground floor of the Elahbel tower



mythology but insisted on emphasising their family ties: the main room contained inscriptions naming, in order of seniority, ten men; it also held, separately, the busts of thirteen women, including the mother, the wives of the four brothers, and their daughters, three of whom were married to their cousins [Fig. 135]. All of them were apparently alive when their names were inscribed. The elder brother Elahbel had three sons at that time, one of whom was married to his cousin, and two daughters. One of his sons was appointed curator of the tomb. His father was still alive about 120, when he offered a statue of another son and one of a daughter in the sanctuary of Nabu (p. 149). By then he was a Roman citizen and was called Marcus Ulpius Elahbel.

Funerary towers went out of fashion perhaps already in the old days of Elahbel. The last one that preserved a date was built in 128, but of course the existing ones remained in use for some time. Even so, it is unlikely that any of them were filled to the brim. We know of one family, the Bene Ba'a, who in the space of some eighty years built three tower tombs, each new one larger than the last. They could hardly have needed more space but were rather following current trends.

All the towers were closed by stone doors and were accessible only to the relatives who had the right of burial in them. They were probably opened not only for funerals, but also on special days, such as anniversaries. We can only speculate as to these customs, but we know that incense was burned or food offered to the dead. On such occasions in many a tomb likenesses of the departed could be seen, each identified by an inscription. A real sense of continuity and a feeling of community with the ancestors must have been strongly felt.

For many centuries afterwards, however, the towers were wide open. There are reports that the mortuary clothes imbibed with resins were until recently considered an effective remedy for wounds suffered by domestic animals. At any rate, all the burial slots were broken into at one time or another. When an interest in Palmyrene art appeared in Europe in the nineteenth century, many sculptures were sold to intermediaries or travellers; hundreds of them are in foreign collections all over the world, but only some, mostly broken, could be found by archaeologists.¹⁷⁶

However, some remains judged worthless by the robbers remained in the dust filling the funerary chambers. Among them, the most interesting are the textiles. Many survived in the extremely dry and stable conditions within the towers. The towers that were systematically cleared (not more than five) yielded a collection of over 500 fragments.¹⁷⁷ These are not complete garments, just torn up rags used to wrap the bodies. While most are plain linen, there are also many pieces of local wool and some cotton woven in delicate colourful patterns. Most interesting, some Chinese silk fragments were found, the oldest ever found outside of China.¹⁷⁸ They were often made as gifts to tribal chieftains of Central Asia, but rather than being transmitted from hand to hand over the immensity of Asia, they could have reached Palmyra from India by sea and desert as valuable exchange goods. Locally made cloth, on the other hand, displayed patterns that were reproduced in sculpture on the luxurious garments of the rich as well as on monuments of architecture (see Figs 246–248).¹⁷⁹

Early on, some towers were provided with a gallery, either hollowed in the rock behind the lower chamber if the tomb was built on a slope, or underground if it was built on the plain. Several early towers contained steps leading down into a corridor dug into the compact soil of the Valley of the Tombs. In this way, the number of loculi available for burial was greatly extended. From the late first century on,

¹⁷⁶ The *Palmyra Portrait Project*, currently under way at Aarhus University in Denmark has already passed the figure of 4,000 items. See Raja 2017, p. 9.

¹⁷⁷ Schmidt-Colinet, Stauffer, Al-As'ad 2000.

¹⁷⁸ Żuchowska 2013.

¹⁷⁹ Schmidt-Colinet 2005, pp. 53–63.

appeared independent underground tombs (called *hypogea*) that were not part of a standing tomb.¹⁸⁰ After the earliest one, built before 87, many more filled all the *necropoleis* around the city. Most of these were founded in the second century, and most were used up to the disaster of 273. Only a dozen have been excavated and properly published, while about fifty have been recorded, and many more can be located by sunken ground.¹⁸¹ Work in hypogea is difficult and often dangerous, because the subsoil of the desert in which they are hollowed out consists of soft calcareous rock of loose texture prone to caving in. To prevent such accidents, the diggers plastered the walls and built in plaster or stone vaults and supporting arches, but such precautions did not always prove sufficient. In some tombs the plaster received painted decoration, but the most coveted finds, for archaeologists and robbers alike, are often intact sculptures.

These hypogea usually opened in a stone wall at the bottom of a trench provided with steps hewn in the soft rock [Figs 136–137]. A foundation inscription giving the names of the owners and a date could be engraved on the door lintel, or on a separate plate fixed above in the front wall. While the hypogea were always founded nominally as family tombs, they were usually too big and much space remained free for burial. Indeed, it had become frequent to concede parts of underground tombs to other persons, related or not. Quite often inscriptions were added on the doorframe to record changes of property. The extent of the concession is always described with precision, being often a summary of a notarial act. It was most probably a simple sale transaction, but the price is mentioned only exceptionally. Sometimes, the acquirer “for ever” passed his new acquisition to somebody else in a very short time. Let us look at an example:

Na‘ma‘in, Male and Sa‘edi, sons of Sa‘edi b. Male, who have dug out and built this hypogeum, have conceded to Haddudan b. Shalman b. Zabdibol four slots in the western wall of the southern exedra, which are after the two first slots, and all of the facing southern wall of this exedra, in which there is a row of four slots, to him and to his children and grand-children forever, in the month of Tishri, year 472 [October 160].

In the month of Iyyar of the year five hundred and two [May 191] Zabdibol b. Kappatut b. Borra has conceded to Narcissus, freedman of ‘Ogeilu b. Malku, the eastern wall of the southern exedra in which there is a row of eight slots, and three other slots at your left when you enter ... to him and to his children and grand-children forever. They were conceded to this Zabdibol by Na‘ma‘in, Male and Sa‘edi, sons of Sa‘edi, who have dug out and embellished this hypogeum.

And only two months later:

Narcissus freedman of ‘Ogeilu has conceded to Shim‘on b. Abba b. Honaina the four inner southern slots in the eastern wall of the exedra at your left when you enter the hypogeum, and two pure slots ... to him and to his children and grand-children in their honour forever. In the month of Qinyan, year five hundred and two.

These inscriptions were recorded on the doorway of a tomb known as the “Tomb of the Three Brothers”, located in the Southwest Necropolis.¹⁸² This tomb, discovered in the last years of the nineteenth century, was the first ever to be studied by archaeologists. It is remarkable for the wall paintings adorning

¹⁸⁰ Gawlikowski 1970, pp. 109–128.

¹⁸¹ Ingholt 1935; Saito 2018.

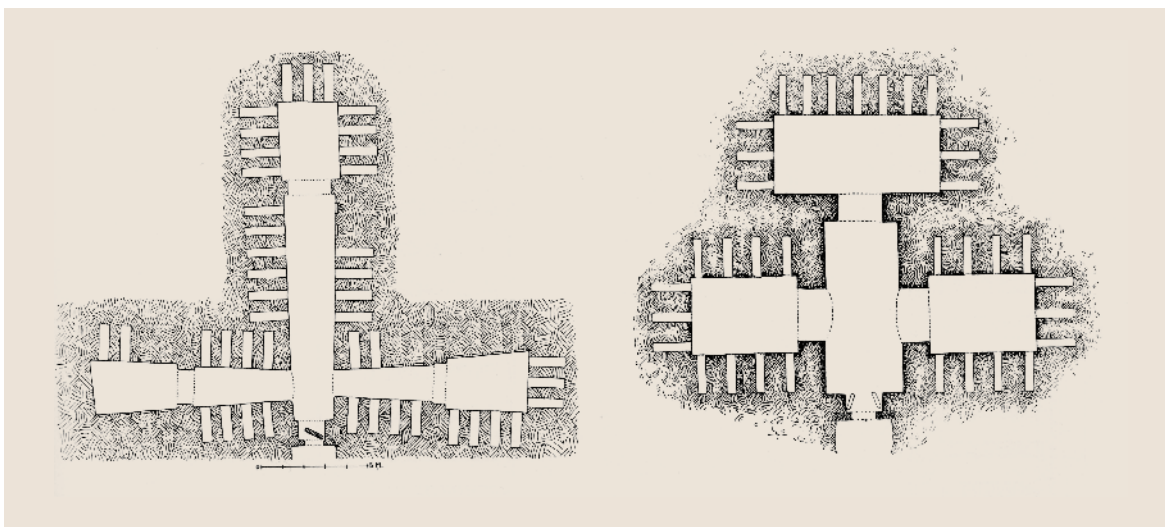
¹⁸² PAT 524, 526.



136. The access to an underground tomb



137. The same after restoration



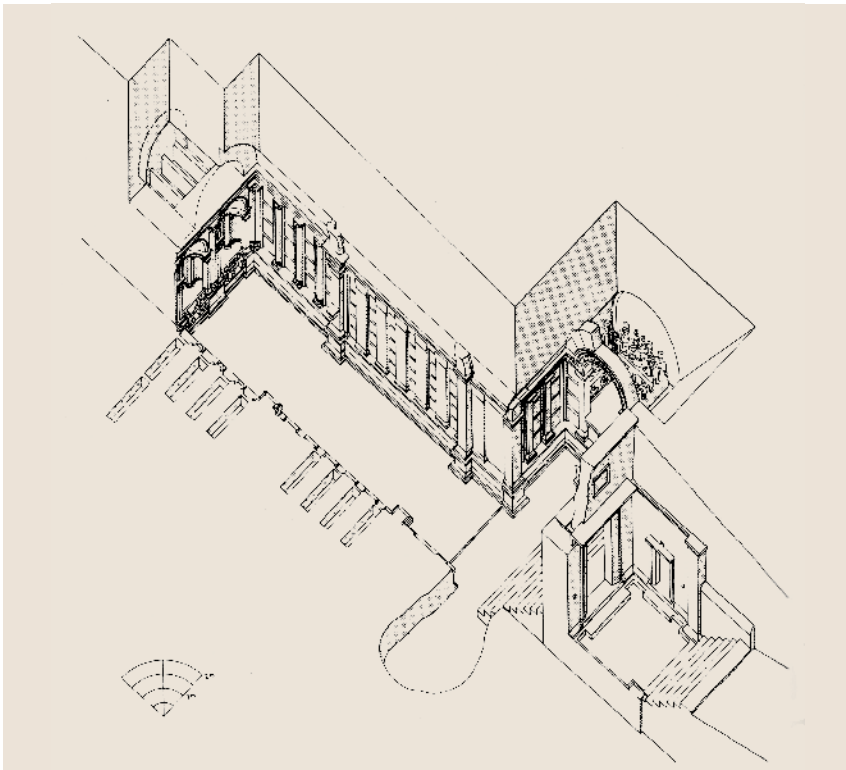
138. Plans of the tombs of Lishamsh (left) and Nasrallat (right)

the central, western gallery facing the entrance. Right and left of the door are the lateral galleries, one of which, called the “exedra”, was the object of the three transactions quoted above. This plan, which is in the form of an inverted T, is most frequent [Fig. 138], but other variants are also known, with real exedras, that is, deep niches in which sarcophagi could be placed on three sides as in the tomb of Yarhai, restored in the National Museum, Damascus [Figs 139–140]. There were rows of loculi in the walls, each burial usually closed by a slab bearing the likeness of the deceased [Fig. 141]. Sarcophagi could also be set up under arcades in the long walls leading to an exedra at the end of a long gallery [Fig. 142].

The sarcophagi of Palmyra are of a peculiar type [Fig. 143].¹⁸³ While they are basically stone coffins as everywhere else in the Roman world, they are always (with very few exceptions) locally made and represent a dinner bed with sculpted legs, mattress, and cushions. The space between them, that is, under the bed, is not empty but rather curiously displayed the busts of the children of the owner, or it is sometimes filled with more elaborate scenes of the servants carrying food and drink, or holding horses, or else the master is shown with attendants offering sacrifice (see Figs 243–245). Rarely do we see a table and crockery, which is what we would expect to see in front of the banquet bed; a fragment shows the leg of a stand which features, surprisingly, a nymph encouraging a satyr [Fig. 144].

The sarcophagi were placed against a wall, often three together on a podium forming the Greek letter Π and imitating the usual arrangement of a real dining room. Only one is known to have been sculpted on all four sides so as to be set in the middle of the room. Usually there was no lid, just a terracotta cover, but a slab was put upright on the outer edge, sculpted to show in high relief a reclining man, sometimes two, accompanied usually by a wife sitting modestly at the feet of her husband, and children or servants standing behind him and ready to fill his drinking bowl [Fig. 145]. We have already seen this composition in the Kitot relief on the outside of his tower, and later, on similar slabs, this same composition could be placed under an arcade in underground tombs [Fig. 146]. The sarcophagi are only known from the second and third centuries. They are not imitations of any Roman model and certainly cannot be traced back to Etruscan sarcophagi and urns, which have reclining couples

¹⁸³ Wielgosz 2004.



139. Perspective view of the underground tomb of Yarhai



140. The reconstruction of the main exedra of the tomb of Yarhai. National Museum, Damascus



141. Loculi in a wall of the tomb of Artaban



142. The main gallery of the tomb of Bolha and Borrefa, restored in the Southeast Necropolis



143. A typical sarcophagus in form of a banquet couch. Palmyra Museum



144. Fragment of a sarcophagus: a dining table decorated with figures of a nymph teasing a Satyr. Palmyra Museum

145. A sarcophagus complete with a banquet scene. Palmyra Museum



146. Zabdibol with his two daughters and a son. A banquet scene adapted to fill an arcade. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



on the lid and which are centuries older. It seems certain that banquet reliefs such as the one of Kitot were the source of inspiration for the sarcophagi of Palmyra when enough space was found for them in the underground tombs.¹⁸⁴ Imported sarcophagi from Asia Minor or Attica were a rarity, and only a few bits of them remain.¹⁸⁵

The same tomb of the Three Brothers mentioned above, which was the object of several transactions and as a result was shared simultaneously by several families, is famous thanks to its mural paintings.¹⁸⁶ While some other hypogea were also decorated in this way, only this one preserved nearly complete frescoes covering the exedra at the far end of the gallery opposite the entrance (see Fig. 196). Unfortunately, no inscriptions inform us about the owners of this part of the tomb or about the date of the paintings. Even more regrettably, the murals have become faded since their discovery over a century ago. A French restoration mission was recently able to document them and digitally recreate the original aspect, but the restoration work was discontinued due to the present civil war, and we have no news about their fate. These subjects are of the highest interest.

While the funerary busts and banquet scenes all refer, as far as we can say, to the past life of the persons depicted, the paintings in the western exedra of this tomb allude very clearly to the afterlife (see p. 223). Moreover, they illustrate beliefs about the salvation and blissful destiny of souls such as can be found in some philosophical writings and in funerary art of the Greeks and Romans, but which are hardly represented in Palmyra.

Unlike the towers, which were meant to serve a large family for generations to come, these hypogea mirrored a different social situation. They were obviously intended for a great number of burials, as many or more as in the towers, but they were often distributed among several owners. The people buried in them were middle class, like the freedman Narcissus of the inscriptions quoted above; these people would not have been rich or prominent enough to aspire to a traditional tower, but they still cared to have a dignified burial place. Like in the catacombs of Rome, it was possible for people of limited means to acquire one or several slots as needed. Though the old formula of an inalienable eternal resting place was still repeated, the social practice had already evolved. No wonder the *nefesh* monuments above ground were no longer associated with the hypogea: they made sense only if they were attached to one family.

People who were really rich introduced a new type of tomb indicating their importance. The first dated monument within the category called “funerary temples” was built in 143. It shows a clear relation to other architectural features of Western origin which appeared after Hadrian’s visit in 131. These tombs are not temples at all. Their essential feature is an opening in the roof supported by columns. Sarcophagi or banquet reliefs were placed on low benches with loculi around a gallery opening to the light well in the middle [Fig. 147]. The resemblance to peristyle courtyards inspired the French name *tombeau-maison*, though it is seldom used today. The ashlar masonry and the architectural decoration set them aside from the old towers, which at this point were not being built any more.

The exteriors of these tombs are mostly square and provided with Corinthian pilasters at the corners; these pilasters sometimes also appear along the outer walls. The smaller ones had no columns, just a narrow room flanked by benches for sarcophagi, while the opening in the roof is uncertain. The limited number of burials that were available is proof enough that these tombs were family monuments. A line of them flanks the track going from the Transverse Colonnade northeast towards the caravan inns scattered in the outer plain and the Euphrates road beyond. They have survived relatively well thanks to their inclusion in the Late Roman wall [Fig. 148]. Right inside the late rampart, a chaos of huge stones was once a great building

¹⁸⁴ Will 1951.

¹⁸⁵ Wielgosz 2001.

¹⁸⁶ Eristov, Vibert-Guigue 2019.



147. The "house tomb" of brothers Ailami and Zebida



148. A family tomb no. 175 preserved within late city wall and recently restored



149. A collapsed monumental tomb no. 173d by the entrance to the Great Colonnade

[Fig. 149]. What is left of the inscription does not preserve a name, but it describes well the exclusive family destination of the monument:¹⁸⁷

This tomb, I have built and consecrated for my male children and grand-children and they are not allowed to rent or alienate or concede it to anyone, as I have written...

Similar texts have been found relating to other mausolea. They are in stark contrast to the middle class burials in the underground tombs, which were easily transmitted to other people.

The imposing tomb of Marona in the Northern Necropolis was built in 236 (see Fig. 125). The walls still stand to their full height, but the interior installations were cleared and replaced by brick structures of uncertain date and purpose. The clearing of the tomb yielded some decorative elements and a remarkable, though fragmentary, relief representing a ship under sail and a camel led by its handler, clearly commemorating a caravan venture to the Gulf and a sea passage to India [Fig. 150]. Another tomb survived in the Southeast Necropolis because it was transformed into a house. An eccentric flier from the French *Aviation du Levant*, Captain Duvaux, took it over and used it as his lodgings, restoring the arched portico and furnishing his new home with sarcophagi collected in the neighbourhood. The clearing of this tomb by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet revealed an impressive collection of cognac and perfume bottles.

Most mausolea, however, were scavenged for building blocks and are now reduced to heaps of stones. Two of them were particularly imposing. Being anonymous, they are only known by the numbers attrib-

¹⁸⁷ PAT 570; Inv. VII 2; IGLS 475.

150. A relief showing a ship on which the tomb owner travelled to India, found in the tomb of Marona (see Fig. 125). A hoof at the left edge belonged to a camel



uted to them in the early years of the twentieth century (as with all the funerary monuments of Palmyra) by the German architects Carl Watzinger and Karl Wulzinger.¹⁸⁸

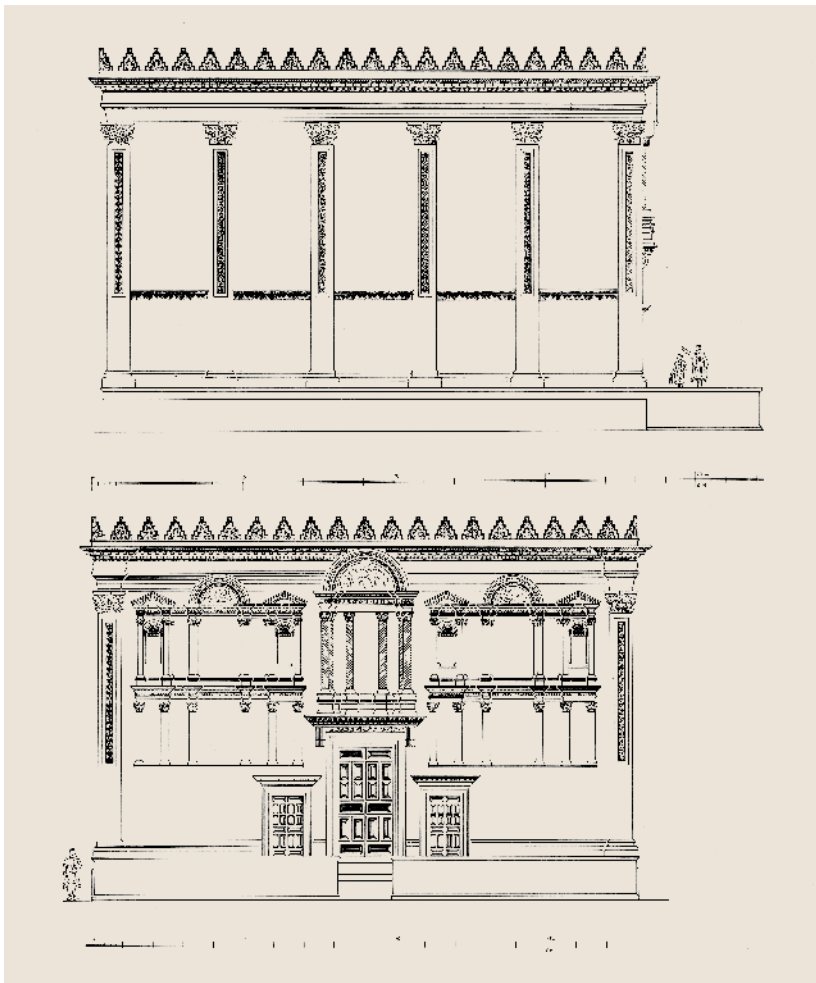
Tomb no. 86 stands right opposite the western end of the Great Colonnade (see Fig. 126). Its porch of six standing columns under a pediment is shown in the long perspective of the colonnade on many engravings and old photographs (see Fig. 267). The restoration of the back wall and a lateral one, completed in the 1970s, troubled this celebrated view while adding nothing to the understanding of the monument. Needless to say, when the gateway of the Colonnade was still standing, the effect was much diminished. Still, the location of Tomb 86 was certainly privileged, and we must regret very much that its founder remains unknown. The monument had a lower chamber accessible from behind, two tiers of columns around the central shaft, and profuse architectural decoration on the inner walls on two levels above the basement. Externally, the corner pilasters bear vertical bands of elaborately sculpted scrolls. As Andreas Schmidt-Colinet has established, there was no pediment on the back and no gabled roof, so the front pediment was just a sham.¹⁸⁹ Some other details of the interior as restored on paper by Watzinger can now be corrected, too, in the light of what was found in Tomb 36, excavated and studied by Schmidt-Colinet in the Valley of the Tombs.¹⁹⁰

The excellent documentation of this tomb by Carla Müting made it possible to restore its original aspect with a fair degree of certainty [Fig. 151]. The monument is square, 18 m to a side, and rose over 10 m from the ground to the top. It also had corner pilasters with vertical scrolls, but no columnar porch. Over a triple entrance at the front, there was a complex decoration remarkably similar to ancient theatre scene fronts, in particular the one in Palmyra. A huge rounded exedra in the middle, adorned with columns and covered with a conch, was flanked by smaller conches and triangular pediments arranged symmetrically on each side. These elements are mostly preserved, but the loss of the plain ashlar from beneath made the actual rebuilding impractical. The conches contained figural scenes of which the most remarkable shows a nude Eros riding a dolphin and holding an umbrella; this apparently free figment of the sculptor's imagination must have been in fact copied from a sarcophagus, as the motif also figures on one in Villa Albani in Rome.

¹⁸⁸ Watzinger, Wulzinger 1932.

¹⁸⁹ Schmidt-Colinet 2005, p. 48.

¹⁹⁰ Schmidt-Colinet *et al.* 1992, 2005, pp. 48–53.



151. The anonymous tomb no. 36, front and side view (restored)

Inside, a central courtyard is surrounded by columns, four to a side. They hold a coffered ceiling above a gangway giving access to loculi and niches for sarcophagi. An underground chamber was lit by the same opening surrounded by arcades supporting the columns on the ground floor. Higher up, the decoration was no less rich. The whole layout only reached to mid-height of the outer walls, but these were not apparent: whoever stood inside would only have been able to see the sky above and not the rough surface of the towering outer walls.

A score of such mausolea, of which no. 36 is the biggest, lined the track through the Valley of the Tombs in its eastern part down to the entrance of the Transverse Colonnade and then at the other end of this market place. With the funerary towers higher up the valley, they presented the impression of a real city.

While the influence of Western architectural decoration is obvious and overwhelming in the later tombs, it should be noted that the basics did not change: there were still loculi and banquet reliefs, as well as funerary portraits, that took shape in the first century and remained essential elements of the tombs of any kind down to the times of Zenobia. The baroque effects of the overloaded ornaments were an added value to the inherited way of burying and honouring the dead.

The gods

The Palmyrenes worshiped many gods.¹⁹¹ This obvious statement implies several consequences common to all the varieties of ancient polytheism as we know them and which are at the opposite of the monotheistic creeds that have conditioned our understanding of religion. First, there was no dogma. People believed what was transmitted by earlier generations but were not bothered by the differences they would meet when confronted with the beliefs of others. All were deemed true, even when contradictory. In the best known field of Greek mythology, the many variants as related by different authors were all admitted, free for anyone to pick up what he liked. There was no revelation and no binding authority for all.

Second, worship consisted in the observation of time-honoured rites. These rites were accompanied by prayers, consisting mainly in lavish praise of the powers and virtues of a particular god. They were performed by appointed people in the name of the community or privately. The making of a sacrifice was at the centre of religious practice and was understood to assure the goodwill of the gods if performed correctly.

Third, every sanctuary, every city, and every tribe had their own divine patrons worshipped in ways fixed by tradition. As the tradition knew scores of divine powers, people had their favourites and tended to turn their attention to them, but their attitude was not exclusive. The same applied to the beliefs of others. There were no false gods, only foreign gods who could be approached on occasion, as seemed appropriate.

The oasis of Tadmor was by its very location always set apart, but the rest of Syria was likewise divided into many communities of varying traditions.¹⁹² There was no common body of beliefs, as there was no Syrian nation. Greek colonisation imposed a kind of uniformity among the main cities, such as Antioch and Apamea, among others, but even there local differences existed. In Palmyra, the Greek influence remained feeble.

It is not possible to describe the beliefs of the oasis in any detail. No myths have survived, even if they were written down in Antiquity. Nor have any prayers survived, only short and stereotyped phrases saying very little about the divine powers addressed. A few fragmentary inscriptions, the so-called sacred laws – these being the collections of rules to be observed in certain sanctuaries and of the penalties for their transgression – are so badly damaged that a comprehensible translation can hardly be proposed. For all practical purposes, we only have short votive inscriptions and relief sculptures representing gods, often with their names inscribed. The resulting picture must be very incomplete and uncertain.

¹⁹¹ Overall presentations: Drijvers 1976; Teixidor 1979; Gawlikowski 1990; Kaizer 2002.

¹⁹² Gawlikowski 2017b.

The main temple of the city was consecrated to Bel and his companions, as described above (p. 113). It is clear from the extant decoration that the god was seen as the ruler of the Universe, symbolised by astral symbols and the gods of the seven planets. The most important of these, Sun and Moon, corresponded to Yarhibol and 'Aglibol, who are mentioned as the main partners of Bel. Their names imply that they were already linked to Bol, the god of the oasis in earlier times, before his name was changed to connect him to the great Bel of Babylon. This must have occurred under the Persian Empire, when the prestige of Babylon remained unchallenged, rather than after Alexander's conquest. The gods' combat with a female serpent-legged monster, as depicted on a beam of the temple, could be a reflection of the Babylonian myth adopted on this occasion (see Fig. 204).¹⁹³

The heavenly host present at this encounter included several gods wearing Roman armour, but also a nude Herakles, an obvious stranger. Some inscriptions a century earlier mention other divine figures worshipped in the sanctuary of Bel as Bel's guests, so to speak: the goddesses Herta and Nanai, both of Babylonian origin, and the Phoenician god Reshef, all three mentioned together; there is also Bol'ashtor, apparently an amalgam of the ancient Bol and 'Ashtor, a god known otherwise in Ugarit, South Arabia, and Ethiopia (as *Ashtar*); and Belhamon from Mt Amanus, in Northern Syria, together with his consort Manawat, of Arab origin. There was also a "Daughter of Bel", mentioned only once, so presumably there was also her mother. The whole crowd coexisted in the main sanctuary before it took the form we know.

Naturally, these gods may also have had shrines of their own in the oasis. Thus, Yarhibol was called the "idol of the spring" and used to appoint curators of the Efqa spring each year, giving them a testimony of good service at their release by means of some oracular procedure. Most probably, there was some kind of sanctuary nearby, but no convincing traces of it have ever been found. This place was of course the scene of intense activity through the ages down to our own times, and it has been deeply disturbed. Even the recent drying up of the spring did not reveal anything conclusive (see Fig. 4). As it was certainly a place of attraction and wonder from remote antiquity, there is a good chance that its divine patron was present there under this or another name for a very long time. His appearance in art as a cuirassed warrior with a nimbus with rays on his head cannot be older than the Roman period, but he could have been linked to Sun earlier. The name is inconsistent, however, with his solar character: the first element means "Moon" (or "month") in Aramaic. Explanations like "Sun is the Moon of Bol" are forced and groundless. A reference to another, earlier language is of course possible. It was once proposed that it rather goes back to the Hurrian name for "spring"; if so, this would go back to the second millennium BC. The first mention of this god, however, crops up in Dura-Europos, on the Euphrates, where, in 33 BC, a Palmyrene built a temple to Bel and Yarhibol, apparently considering them the main gods of his native city.¹⁹⁴ And no wonder: the old settlement grew between Efqa, the source of life for the oasis, and the tell covered by the Bel sanctuary.

The other companion of Bel, always in the third position, was 'Aglibol. In his case, the first element of the name means "heifer", and, as was often the case in ancient beliefs, the cattle horns refer to the Moon. Indeed, this god always had a crescent on his shoulders, in addition to a rayed nimbus. He, too, was worshipped independently of the great god, in a garden sanctuary. 'Aglibol was always accompanied there by Malakbel, that is, "Bel's Messenger", whose name probably replaced another, older one. Malakbel often had a rayed nimbus above his head, but it seems that he became a Sun god relatively late. Both gods were shown together on a beam in the Bel temple, shaking hands (see Fig. 205).¹⁹⁵ The figure of Malakbel is not preserved there, but as late as 235, on a stele in Rome, an Italian sculptor represented Malakbel as

¹⁹³ Dirven 1997.

¹⁹⁴ PAT 1067; Dirven 1999, pp. 41–66.

¹⁹⁵ Seyrig 1937b; Gawlikowski 1997.

a young man in civilian clothes shaking hands with 'Aglibol in armour, a cypress symbolising their garden behind them. An altar offered at Rome by three Palmyrenes but made by a Western artist shows on its four faces the four aspects of this god: as a young man emerging from a cypress and carrying a kid; as a man riding a chariot pulled by winged griffins; as a bust of Sun, borne by an eagle; and finally as an old man with a sickle.¹⁹⁶ Rather than the phases of Sun's daily course or the four seasons, we can see here glimpses from a lost myth; the story remains obscure, but it seems that the original character of Malakbel was linked to vegetation, its yearly renewal and growing. He was considered to be Sun only later, in the garden he shared with the Moon god and elsewhere.

The garden of the two gods, called in Greek "the holy grove", must have been a very old sacred place, because its local name, the "garden of gods", was half Aramaic and half Canaanite. It was the tribal sanctuary of the Bene Komare, one of the most important tribes in the oasis. Indeed, it is striking that these "Sons of Priests" should be attached to a garden sanctuary rather than to the great Bel temple. It is not surprising that this place was not identified until now amid the gardens, cultivated without interruption to our time. The inscriptions relative to the garden and its masters were found dispersed in two locations: one to the east at the edge of the oasis, the other in the west, in Diocletian's Camp; it is likely that they were brought to the latter place as building material for the headquarters of the camp. These monuments include two mentions of baths dedicated to the gods and a dedication of the statue of a Roman governor by their priests.

Remarkably, Malakbel is a second solar figure after Yarhibol. If this were not enough, several inscriptions address a god called simply Shamash, that is, Sun. All three personified the great luminary in the same time. This surprising fact can only be explained by their being worshipped by different people coming from different backgrounds with their own traditions. That such a thing was possible shows how loosely connected these various beliefs were. There was no Palmyrene religion, no commonly agreed system, just different cults. No cult was exclusive and they were all mutually accepted. How far removed this situation was from any dogmatic religion!

When the great clearing of the Bel sanctuary in the 1930s uncovered many new figurative monuments, they were first published and analysed by Henri Seyrig. This great erudite of far-reaching influence fixed for many years the ways in which scholars thought about the Syrian cults in general and the ones of Palmyra in particular. He described the system that was supposed to have been invented by the priests of Bel on the occasion of the new temple's construction.¹⁹⁷ They would have adopted the up-to-date Hellenistic astrology, hence the Zodiac and planetary gods on the north adyton's ceiling, and they would have added, as their original contribution, the "triad of Bel", composed of Bel, the solar god Yarhibol at his right, and the lunar 'Aglibol at his left. All three were represented armed and clad in armour in the Roman way, modern and powerful as the legions themselves (see Fig. 207).

In actual fact, we seldom meet these three gods alone. Apart from the inscription (quoted p. 116) mentioning the consecration of the temple, and a tessera, they are always in larger company keeping the established pecking order: fourth place goes to Arsu and fifth to the goddess 'Ashtart. Sometimes there are even more divine companions, added in loose order. The alleged triad is a modern construct, not an ancient institution. It is simpler to assume that lesser gods tended to congregate around the Lord of the Universe. The idea that gods of various sanctuaries were assembled in the new temple in an orderly way is sound and very likely. The heavenly court of Bel needed a grandiose setting. The two main companions of Bel, Yarhibol and 'Aglibol, occur only in the Palmyrene pantheon. They both implicitly refer to the ancient Bol, of whom they were already followers. The first mention of the two companions of Bel occurs in the inscription

¹⁹⁶ Cumont 1928.

¹⁹⁷ Seyrig 1933a.

referring to the consecration of the Palmyra temple in 32. It is very possible that their association only dates back to the founding of the new temple in the first years of our era, as posited by Henri Seyrig. The planets Mars and Venus – in local parlance Arsu and Ashtart – were also admitted to the inner circle. The ancient god of rain and thunderbolt, as so many Syrian forms of local Ba'als, has in this way become a universal ruler of the world, a *cosmocrator*, adapted to the advanced religious notions of the age.

Some reliefs show Bel and his usual companions and also the god Baalshamin. The blatant contradiction of worshipping together two supreme gods was apparently far from obvious to the authors of these dedications. In the city, the two high gods were not far away from each other. The exquisite small temple of the “Lord of Heaven” (see p. 128) stood within sight of the great Bel sanctuary. Whenever either of the two was invoked in Greek, he was always called Zeus. Moreover, the lost cult relief of Baalshamin in his temple was placed under a lintel with seven planetary gods, just like the image of Bel in his abode. Clearly, both had exactly the same characteristics as the rulers of the Cosmos, and still no one was obliged to choose exclusive allegiance to one or the other.

The explanation of this strange fact is to be found in the different origins of the two cults. While Bel was the ancestral patron of the oasis, with deep local roots, Baalshamin was a newcomer.¹⁹⁸ He had been known by the same name since the tenth century BC as one of the gods of the petty Aramaic kingdoms of Western Syria. At that early date he was probably conceived not so much as the ruler of the Universe as a more accessible god of thunder, a variety of the so-called *Wettergott* prominent in the Ancient Near East. It should be kept in mind that lightning and thunder were not, in that part of the world, symbols of divine wrath, but on the contrary announced and accompanied the life-giving rain. The Lord of Heaven was thanked for the growth of crops, the multiplication of the herds, and for prosperity in general. Under the rule of the Greek kings, this age-old Syrian god took the aspect of the Olympian Zeus, the dynastic patron of the Seleucids. He appears himself as a king, enthroned in Greek robes, holding a sceptre and a globe. It was in this guise that he arrived in Palmyra.

It was not until the first century AD that the sanctuary of Baalshamin was founded in Palmyra. As its keepers belonged to the tribe of Ma'azin (“Goat-herders”), there is a good chance that they were a cluster of several groups of nomadic people who settled in the oasis. A common cult was the best means of keeping them together.

When Henri Seyrig invented the triad of Bel, he also postulated its double: the triad of Baalshamin. The two would have been formed in the same time, as mirror images of each other, to stress the celestial kingship of both. The only monument alleged to illustrate the latter triad is a beautiful relief found at a desert well called Bir Wereb (see Fig. 209). It represents three gods facing the viewer, clad in armour and holding swords. Their names are not given. The most important one in the middle wears a royal diadem with loose ends floating behind his head. As a matter of fact, were it not for the beard, this could well be Bel (he is usually shown clean-shaven, but there are exceptions). A Moon god stands to the right of this god and a Sun god to his left. Seyrig has recognised in them 'Aglibol and Malakbel.

Seyrig could not have known then that the temple of Baalshamin was also dedicated to Durahlun, a god otherwise unknown and who may well have been the patron of a clan within the same tribe, just like the *Gad* (Fortune) of the clan of Yedi'bel, who is mentioned in the same inscription.¹⁹⁹ Besides, no confirmed representation of Baalshamin is ever cuirassed; rather, he wears a Greek-style himation. There is no reason to relate the monument of Bir Wereb to this god.

Both Bel and Baalshamin are shown seated at two ends of a relief now in Lyon (see Fig. 208). Bel wears armour under his cloak, and both are bearded. The same couple was most probably represented on

¹⁹⁸ Niehr 1996, 2003; Stucky 2000, pp. 75–80.

¹⁹⁹ *IGLS* 145.

a fragmentary stone basin reassembled from broken pieces. The armour of one of them is well visible. In this case, the vessel was offered by two keepers of the Efqa spring, appointed by Yarhibol for the year 38/39 (see Fig. 11). It probably served to mix wine and water at banquets held somewhere close to the spring.

The warrior god Arsu, already mentioned in Bel's company, was equated to the Greek god of war Ares, the accidental resemblance of names being no doubt helpful. He, too, had a temple of his own. If not wearing armour and a bell-shaped helmet, he looks like a desert camel-rider in native dress, armed with a lance and shield. He is the most recognisable figure among many similar Bedouin gods riding horses or camels. They were mostly worshipped out in the steppe and bore Arab names such as Abgal, Azizu, Sha'ad, Mun'im, Shalman, etc. These names, which could also be used by men, are all meaningful: they translate, approximately, as "Honoured", "Strong", "Fortunate", "Pleasant", "Wholesome". They appear in pairs or in larger company and all look the same. A long gown half-covered by a cloth fastened below the waist was also worn by the Bedouin of the time, and their spears and small round shields were also the standard equipment of the nomads. It is often not possible to tell the desert gods from their worshippers. They are mostly known from the countryside around Palmyra, peopled by recently settled Arab tribesmen. They are not frequently present in the city.²⁰⁰

The modest village shrines often contained reliefs showing several gods in a bid to win the attention of as many supernatural beings as possible at one go. Sometimes there are two riders on camel or horseback, looking very much like caravan escorts or robber parties. Sometimes we just see a line of identical figures collectively called the *djinns* (Aramaic *ginnayya*) of the place (see Fig. 177). Whenever the individual names are mentioned, their choice presumably reflected personal inclinations which might or might not have been shared by other people.

Among all these warriors, only one goddess stands out. She is more or less convincingly depicted as Athena. Indeed, Athena is the only Greek goddess to appear in arms: according to the myth, she jumped out of Zeus' head already fully equipped, as represented on one of the Parthenon pediments. A famous statue of Phidias standing on the Acropolis figured her as *Promachos*, the defender of the city of Athens. In Syria, however, her name was Allat or al-Lat, meaning "The Goddess".

Needless to say, Arab nomad tribesmen were not necessarily very familiar with Greek mythology. It seems that their imagination was aroused by the provincial versions of Greek statuary abounding in the Hawran region in the south of modern Syria. Many used to wander every year between the desert and the sown: the so-called Safaitic inscriptions, being graffiti scratched on rocks by idle shepherds, are found in their thousands in Arabia, Jordan, and the South of Syria, and some are documented in the neighbourhood of Palmyra. When these texts take the form of prayers, they regularly invoke al-Lat, whom the tribesmen called on for protection from their foes and for loot for themselves; these are naturally two sides of the same coin. No wonder they have imagined their goddess as a warrior.

Allat arrived in Palmyra in the first century BC, and a statue of her was installed in a small shrine (see p. 136).²⁰¹ Remarkably, she was not yet represented as an armed goddess but as a queen, seated on her throne flanked by lions and holding a long sceptre just like the power emblem of Bel or Baalshamin. We know what this statue looked like thanks to several miniature copies [Fig. 152]. On other reliefs, however, she is already Athena, standing with a Greek helmet on her head, wearing her aegis and holding a spear and a shield.

Another Arab god who found his way into the city was Shamash (in Arabic Shams), that is, Sun. His was a splendid temple close to that of Allat, utterly destroyed by the Roman troops of Aurelian, so that even its exact location is not fixed.

²⁰⁰ Schlumberger 1951, pp. 121–128; Seyrig 1970; Teixidor 1979, pp. 77–89; Gawlikowski 1990, pp. 2636–2639.

²⁰¹ Starcky 1981.



152. A miniature likeness of the cult statue of Allat. Palmyra Museum



153. Altars for the "Anonymous god" in the Palmyra Museum

There is no need to enumerate the other deities present in Palmyra, of which little can be said anyway. Some of them were borrowed from Babylonia, others from Phoenicia, but remarkably few came from the classical world: Herakles, Nemesis, Isis.²⁰² In other cases, a Greek name of a god is only applied to a local deity, often in a bilingual text. These are “translations”, so to speak, even when the differences are obvious. As Allat was Athena, and Arsu was Ares, so the Babylonian Nabu became Apollo. Sometimes the native name was just transcribed, for instance “Aglibolos and Malachbelos”, a clear admission of their being native.

A very peculiar cult must finally be mentioned. It is addressed to a deity generally known as the Anonymous God and finds its expression in over two hundred altars, of various size, which were offered by particular individuals to the “One whose name is blessed forever” [Fig. 153]. There is not a single image of this deity, and no temple. The believers addressed him with such epithets as “Merciful”, “Listening”, “Rewarding”, or “Compassionate”, and implore him to grant life to themselves and their relatives:

Blessed be his name forever, good and merciful! Made by Hairan, son of Yamla Moqimu, giving him thanks, for his life and the life of his father and his uncle, and his brothers.²⁰³

Sometimes they thank him for deliverance from danger and praise him for having answered their call:

Blessed be his name forever, merciful, good! To him gives thanks Bolaya Bat-Nesa, daughter of Bar'a, who called and was answered, for her life and the life of her father.²⁰⁴

To One whose name is blessed forever, merciful and compassionate, give thanks: Noarai son of Moqimu Titus Aelius and Ada his wife, and his children, and all those living in his house, because they have called him in distress, and he heard us and gave us relief.²⁰⁵

Such sentiments are seldom if ever expressed in dedications to other gods. One gets the impression to witness a new religious sentiment and a personal relationship to a divinity unlike anything in the traditional cults.

The first known instance of the anonymous formula appears in 114 and is an official act: the city has erected three massive altars bearing the same dedication at the crossroads west from Palmyra at a place today called al-Karasi (“The Thrones”) [Fig. 154]:²⁰⁶

[Greek] To Zeus Most-High and Listening, the City (in fulfilling) a vow...

[Aramaic] The city has made for One whose name is blessed forever from the funds of the treasury...

(in both versions what then follows is the date and the names of the four officials in charge).

This public initiative remains unique among the extant records. There is no reason to think that the cult was decreed by the authorities that year. All other altars are private offerings and were found in many locations around the city but never in established sanctuaries. If none is older than the three crossroads altars, it does not follow that they imitated the official example.

The question as to what divine name was replaced by the anonymous formula has been the topic of debate for nearly a century. Because the few inscriptions which have a Greek counterpart call the god

²⁰² Sartre 2019.

²⁰³ PAT 1909.

²⁰⁴ Al-As'ad, Gawlikowski 1997b, 9, p. 14.

²⁰⁵ PAT 1911.

²⁰⁶ PAT 340.



154. Altars erected by the city at Karasi, at the crossroads west of Palmyra as being examined by Khaled al-As'ad

“Zeus Most-High”, and this phrase is also used for Baalshamin, most modern authors think that the cult was directed towards this god and evolved in the second and third centuries to respond to a new spiritual mood. Other propositions have also cropped up. Although they put forward other divine names, they have not elicited much response. Some scholars have made reference to the influence of Judaism, where the Holy Name is unpronounceable. However, the fervent of the unnamed god were certainly not monotheists. A couple of altars even mention, alongside the standard formulation, the names of traditional gods, such as ‘Aglibol and Malakbel, who are sometimes called “two holy brothers”, while one dedication is offered by two lesser gods:

To One whose name is blessed forever, this has been made by Belhamon and Manawat from the purse of ‘Ate‘aqab son of Hairan, completely.²⁰⁷

Here, a private donor acted on behalf, and no doubt on the order, perhaps given in a dream, of a seldom mentioned god of Phoenician origin and of his Arab consort. The shrine of these two deities stood on top of a hill overlooking Palmyra from the southwest. In another inscription, an altar is offered on behalf of the elected officials of the temple of Bel by a man who introduced himself as a “house medic” and who probably also served in this sanctuary.

Clearly, the people engaged in this cult were part and parcel of the society in Palmyra. One also has the impression that many of them belonged to the less fortunate classes, as the expense involved was relatively modest. The unnamed god is present in the epigraphic texts more often than any other god, more often than all other gods taken together. It does not mean that he has replaced them.

²⁰⁷ Gawlikowski 1971, pp. 407–412.

On the other hand, the unnamed god has all the characteristics of a supreme deity. This results not only from the Greek translation quoted above but also from a unique text recalling the theological language of the philosophers of that time. This god's divine omnipotence is expressed here in wording that was later used in Christian Syriac writings:

To One whose name is blessed forever, good and merciful, Lord of the throne, to the One who possesses all and extends over all, this has been made by Annas son of Wahballat for his life and the life of his sons ...²⁰⁸

On the face of it, the unnamed god does resemble Baalshamin, "Lord of Heavens". He is sometimes called "Lord of the World" (or of "Eternity", as the Aramaic word has two meanings). Franz Cumont already in 1926 concluded that he was Baalshamin, and this conclusion has been followed more or less resolutely by other scholars. With his typical subtlety, Henri Seyrig speaks about "a new aspect which would reflect a new orientation of piety". These opinions, however, were formed before the Swiss excavations of the Baalshamin sanctuary. An important lot of inscriptions was discovered there, many of which mention Baalshamin by name, while only one small altar was addressed to the unnamed. Most probably, it had to have been brought to the sanctuary to be reused in a late structure.

As has recently been proposed, it may be that the anonymous formula covered various gods, depending on the donors' personal inclinations.²⁰⁹ If so, these gods each time would have been taken to be subjectively the most important, even unique. Such an attitude would not have excluded normal participation in the civic and tribal cults of the society in Palmyra. An altar was offered about 200 to "The one and only merciful god";²¹⁰ the donor was the president of the city Council, certainly engaged in other cults as his office demanded. The problem remains open, and we can hardly expect to find a clear-cut solution.

The worship of the unnamed consisted in the burning of frankincense on the altars – perhaps only once at the moment of consecration and during the accompanying prayers. Frankincense is the resin of *Boswellia* trees, which mainly grow in Yemen, but also on the island of Socotra and in parts of the Horn of Africa. Starting early in the first millennium BC, the kingdoms of South Arabia managed to organise the caravan trade across the expanses of Arabia to Gaza on the Mediterranean, mostly bringing this precious commodity, which made the fortunes of the region for centuries to come. Indeed, frankincense was burned in tremendous quantities in Babylonia, Egypt, and the Levant, but also in the West as soon as it reached those parts. Besides its main use in divine service, it was also used for fumigation, as a perfume ingredient, as medicine, etc.

In Palmyra, the regular sacrifice of frankincense was usually offered on metal stands, known only from inscriptions and depictions on reliefs. Stone altars are mostly known in the anonymous cult, but they could also have been consecrated to various gods called by their names. Besides the burning of incense, libations were poured on altars using juglets or shallow bowls. Some altars received offerings of fruit, as those in the Holy Garden shown on a beam of the Bel temple (see Fig. 205).

Needless to say, on solemn occasions animals were slaughtered. Their meat was distributed to the assistance or consumed in common during religious festivals. The practice is documented in Palmyra by tesserae, clay tokens with images and inscriptions impressed on them before baking. About twelve hundred different types of these are known [Fig. 155].²¹¹ The most common motif features one or two

²⁰⁸ PAT 1931.

²⁰⁹ Kubiak-Schneider 2021.

²¹⁰ IGLS 32.

²¹¹ RTP.



155. A selection of tesserae with banquet motifs

priests in characteristic headgear, reclining with a cup in hand, often shaded by a vine; priests also appear in bust. These tesserae were invitations to banquets, festive occasions on which wine was served. Wine was mixed with water in large craters, usually of stone [Fig. 157].²¹² The accompanying meal would have included sacrificial meat. Invariably, these meetings were placed under the patronage of a god whom the diners honoured in this way, and they no doubt started with a sacrifice. Several dining rooms have been identified in the town, the biggest of them all right in front of the Bel temple. More were excavated in the steppe to the northwest, equipped with lateral benches and a stone crater at the far end, in front of a cultic relief of a god mystically present at the feast [Fig. 156].²¹³

²¹² Briquel-Chatonnet 1995.

²¹³ Schlumberger 1951.

156. A banquet room equipped with a crater. Sanctuary of Abgal in Khirbet Semrin



157. A stone crater. Palmyra Museum



A distinction should be made between private and public occasions. The latter, held in sanctuaries, assembled large crowds which found shelter under the porticoes around the courtyard. We can imagine people picnicking there on festive days and getting their portions; for many, this would have been a rare opportunity to taste meat. In the sewer under the banquet hall of Bel, over eight hundred tesserae were found, many of the same type, all from the second half of the third century, shortly before the final catastrophe; these were discarded by people admitted to the hall, while those camping outside were probably less well served. In the ruins of the Arsu temple, a lot was discovered consisting of 125 identical tesserae; the beneficiaries could not possibly have dined on the spot for want of space; rather, they were handed their part and carried it home.

There were, however, formal dining societies which met regularly under the elected president. Their local name was *marzeha*, a word already known in Ugarit in the fourteenth century BC and later in the Hebrew Bible; in Greek, they are called *symposion*, just like the parties described by Plato or modern scholarly meetings. The size of the identified banquet rooms and some of the inscriptions there make it plain that the membership hardly exceeded a dozen members. Their meetings always had a religious dimension: there was a *marzeha* of Baalshamin, of 'Aglibol and Malakbel, and certainly many others. The most important was the *marzeha* of the priests of Bel.

The president of this association, elected for one year, was at the same time the high-priest of Bel. Greek inscriptions call him the "arch-priest and symposiarch", but in Aramaic "chief of *marzeha*" was enough to show his importance. He of course presided over the rites (which remain mostly unknown to us) but also over the regular drinking parties of his fellow priests. So, in October 243, the first month of the civil year, the *marzeha* president Yarhai Agrippa was honoured by the members because he "served the gods and presided over the distributions the whole year and provided old wine for the priests all year from his own cellar, and wine in skins was not mixed with it".²¹⁴

The text proceeds to commemorate his two sons, the secretary, the "overseer of the cauldrons", the wine mixer, and other helpers. The priests were especially impressed by the fact that Yarhai did not dilute his wine with poor stuff bought in goatskin containers and which probably smelled bad. That is why I cannot agree with the translation made by the original editor, that "the wine in skins did not arrive from the West", as if Yarhai had to make up for missing foreign vintages, or with others who think that the president's wine was "in skins, there was nothing mixed". We get here a glimpse of sophisticated gourmets who could appreciate a good treat.

The life of the priests was not all feasting, however. They had to burn frankincense and pour libations every day at prescribed times, and they certainly performed other ritual duties at regular times as well. The priests, at least those of Bel, wore high flat-topped caps (see Fig. 220), their heads were clean shaven, and they went barefoot when officiating. They were not professionals, but they were chosen by lot for a term. One of their duties was to perform a special sacrifice on the "Good Day", that is, the anniversary of the temple's consecration on the sixth of Nisan (April). This was a holocaust, that is, a sacrifice in which the offering was burned on the altar entirely, leaving nothing for the assistance. There were also processions of which we get a glimpse thanks to the reliefs found in the temple of Bel and that of Allat: a camel carried some sacred objects in a palanquin, probably from and into the southern adyton of Bel (see Fig. 206).

Worship was often performed in front of reliefs (maybe also of paintings) representing gods. The rule was not general, as the temple of Allat, the oldest known, contained a seated statue of the goddess. Baalshamin in his temple was also shown enthroned in royal majesty, but certainly in relief on a huge plaque, probably of bronze. Bel in his adyton was likewise a seated figure which could have been a statue,

²¹⁴ PAT 2743.

but perhaps he was only a relief on a similar plaque. In all probability, the cult reliefs were introduced at the same time as the frontal mode of representation in the early years of the first century AD (see p. 207). The worshippers could thus see their gods straight in the eye and feel their presence even when they were no longer sculptures in the round.

There is no trace of a Christian presence in Palmyra before the fourth century, that is, during the whole lifespan of the Palmyrene civilisation. A later story about a mission to Palmyra sent by the prophet Mani seems legendary. It tells about the queen Tadamor (no doubt Zenobia was meant) and her sister being healed by a missionary (see p. 86). While the possibility of such a visit is not excluded, the relation sounds like a fable rather than a historical fact.

A Jewish presence, on the other hand, is attested. There was a Jewish community in Palmyra, as there was one in practically every city throughout the Near East, but it does not seem to have been particularly strong. All in all, we only know by name three individuals. Two were brothers: Zebida (also called Zenobios) and Shemu'el, sons of Levy, who built a mausoleum for their family in 212. The relevant inscription uses the Palmyrene script and the usual wording. It was preserved in the ruins of the tomb itself, which is not different from the neighbouring monuments.²¹⁵ The other man was a certain Julius Aurelius Shemu'el, who conceded in 215/216 a part of his tomb (not located) to a man of Palmyrene name. All three seem to have been perfectly integrated into Palmyrene society.

The community possessed a synagogue founded in the new neighbourhood by the Great Colonnade, plotted in the second century. It was a rectangular room (about 22 by 13 m) with three doors in the northern wall leading from a courtyard surrounded by dependencies. Opposite the entrance there was, as usual, a raised platform for the tabernacle of the Torah scrolls. The building was taken away at an undetermined date and transformed into a church (Basilica I).²¹⁶ The synagogue was discreetly concealed behind various rooms and shops built against its walls, opening onto the adjacent streets. One of these rooms was a banquet hall embellished with a mosaic celebrating the triumph of Odainat (see Figs 35–37, pp. 69–70). The later Talmudic tradition has a definitely hostile attitude toward him (p. 86).

At a given moment after the fall of Zenobia, maybe only after the alienation of the synagogue, the room was taken over as a prayer hall. The mosaic was left in place, but a stretch, featuring a menorah and two pairs of open hands in a gesture of prayer, was added at the southern end, that is, in the direction of Jerusalem. The original inscription identifying Herodianus was scrambled and replaced, rather inexpertly, to give the name of the artisan, a certain Diodotos helped by his sons (see p. 70).

A nearby standing doorway with a Biblical prayer (the *mezuza*) engraved upon it marked the entrance to a Jewish home, of uncertain date.

²¹⁵ PAT 557.

²¹⁶ The publication of all churches is in preparation.

Byzantine Palmyra and Islamic Tadmor

When Zenobia and her dependents were taken to Rome as prisoners, only a small Roman garrison was left in the conquered city.²¹⁷ The civil administration was entrusted to a local worthy called Apsaios, certainly approved, if not appointed, by Aurelian himself. On one of the columns in the Great Colonnade, there stood a statue of his, inscribed in Greek as follows: “To Septimius Apsaios, citizen and patron, the city”.²¹⁸ This man was clearly a member of Odainat’s inner circle, as the name Septimius implies. It would only have been possible for him to become the patron (*prostates*) of the city after the demise of Zenobia in 272. His position, however, did not last long. According to the author of the *Historia Augusta*, the Palmyrenes massacred the six hundred bowmen (that is, a mounted cohort) with their commander Sandario and proclaimed as emperor one of Zenobia’s parents, whom he calls Achilleus. The more reliable chronicler Zosimus does not mention the massacre, but he does speak about a plot by Apsaios, who tried to induce the prefect of the East to rebel. However, this prefect, Marcellinus, informed Aurelian, who turned back from the Balkans. In the meantime, the Palmyrenes proclaimed a certain Antiochus as emperor.

While the historicity of Apsaios is confirmed by the inscription quoted above, we know nothing of certainty about the puppet emperor. If his name was Antiochus, he very well could have been the father of Zenobia. At any rate, the enterprise was very much ill-advised. Both authors agree that the returning Aurelian took Palmyra without combat and destroyed it utterly, but this is rather implied by them and not genuine information. In any case, the great temple of Bel survived, as did the temple of Baalshamin and many other monuments of the city, including the house that has been excavated (see p. 103).

One of the two inscriptions in honour of the senator Haddudan, the president of the priests of Bel, is dated March 273; it mentions that he helped Aurelian in August 272 (see p. 83). This surely means that the temple functioned without hindrance in the spring of the next year. On the other hand, clear evidence is available for the destruction of the Allat temple on the western outskirts of the city. Probably close to it stood the Sun temple, of which just two wandering stones remain. If the letter of Aurelian quoted by the *Historia Augusta* (and certainly invented) contains a grain of truth, however exaggerated, it must refer to this rather than to the Bel temple, as is often believed:

²¹⁷ For Palmyra after Zenobia, see Intagliata 2018.

²¹⁸ *Inv.* III 18; *IGLS* 77.

From Aurelian Augustus to Cerronius Bassus. The swords of the soldiers should not proceed further. Already enough Palmyrenes have been killed and slaughtered. We have not spared the women, we have slain the children, we have butchered the old men, we have destroyed the peasants. To whom, at this rate, shall we leave the land or the city? Those who still remain must be spared. For it is our belief that the few have been chastened by the punishment of the many. Now as to the Temple of the Sun at Palmyra, which has been pillaged by the eagle-bearers of the Third Legion, along with the standard-bearers, the dragon-bearer, and the buglers and trumpeters, I wish it restored to the condition in which it formerly was. You have three hundred pounds of gold from Zenobia's coffers, you have eighteen hundred pounds of silver from the property of the Palmyrenes, and you have the royal jewels. Use all these to embellish the temple; thus both to me and to the immortal gods you will do a most pleasing service. I will write to the senate and request it to send one of the pontiffs to dedicate the temple.²¹⁹

However this might have been, the cultural identity of Palmyra dwindled rapidly. Some tombs remained in use: in a hypogeum of the Southwest Necropolis, an Aramaic inscription dates to 274. It documents, as if nothing had happened, the cession of five burial slots "for the sons and grandsons" of the acquirer. This is the last certain use of the Aramaic script in Palmyra. In another tomb of the same necropolis, two Greek graffiti date to 312 and 333.²²⁰

The city was greatly diminished by the abandonment of its southern part, which was probably razed to the ground to leave the field open before the ramparts. As the city of Zenobia had no fortifications, the Romans built a wall surrounding the monumental quarters from the Bel temple to the legionary camp. Its solid square towers were regularly distributed and served as platforms for shooting machines, but they also included some tombs which happened to stand on its course. The southern wall of the Agora was dismantled and rebuilt as part of the rampart. The paved road beneath, traced at the wadi bottom, the main avenue of the city in the early period, became a dry moat in front of the rampart. The Great Colonnade, which doubled this road in the second and third centuries, remained in use as the principal link between the camp and the rest of the city. It seems that the wall was built soon after the suppression of the rebels in 273.²²¹ Indeed, it is hardly imaginable that the seat of a legion and the focal point of the military road called *strata Diocletiana*, which linked the Gulf of Aqaba to the Euphrates valley and the Persian frontier, would remain without strong fortifications.

Sometime between 293 and 303, under the regime of the four joint emperors known as the Tetrarchy and the governorship of Sossianus Hierocles, the headquarters of the camp at the western end of the city was completed.²²² It was an imposing structure built on a platform set against the hill slope [Figs 158–159]. At the top of the steps, the entrance porch rested on four monolithic columns and gave access to a long transverse hall, which took up the whole width of the building. Behind it, there were rooms which would have accommodated the legionary treasure chest, the archives, and the officers' meeting places. In the middle, a larger room ended with an apse. This was where the legionary standards were kept and where portraits of the emperors were displayed, where daily sacrifices were performed before them. While the building's plan was standard for every Roman camp in the Empire, this one was particularly magnificent due to the massive use of architectural members pillaged in the city and in its cemeteries: columns with Corinthian capitals, richly carved doorframes, niches – all these gave it a truly

²¹⁹ *Historia Augusta* III, The Deified Aurelian XXXI.2, trans. D. Magie.

²²⁰ Ingholt 1935, p. 102; *IGLS* 527.

²²¹ Juchniewicz 2013.

²²² *IGLS* 121; *Inv.* VI 2.

158. The main street of Diocletian's Camp looking from the gate to the headquarters



159. The headquarters of Diocletian's Camp seen from the front



palatial look [Fig. 160]. In front of this building and beneath, a plaza with an altar in the middle served as the roll-call ground for the troops.²²³

On the flat ground in front of the headquarters, the military engineers traced at right angle two streets which were also provided with colonnades.²²⁴ In military parlance, they were called *via praetoria* and *via principalis*. At their intersection, there was a square podium, at one time roofed, with pillars at the corners and columns in-between. This was a *groma*, the Latin name for an instrument serving to fix straight lines and angles; this was also the name of a monument marking the centre of a military camp. Because of its reused columns, we were first induced to believe that these streets went back to earlier times, but

²²³ Gawlikowski 1984.

²²⁴ Kowalski 1998.



160. Two decorated pillars from a tomb reused in the headquarters building

there is no doubt that the camp was planned at one go; only the precinct of Allat (p. 142) was preserved, while all the other constructions in the area were razed to the ground.

The camp was separated from the city by the line of shops open to the Transverse Colonnade. There were only two passages through it: a triple gate at the beginning of the main street (*via praetoria*) and a narrow one in a corner leading to the square where both the Transverse and Great Colonnades converged. As water pipes passed under the threshold of this narrow gate, we called it Watergate (it should be noted that this gate was excavated shortly after the memorable scandal of that name). The soldiers would have been able to use it to go to town, where the same Sossianus Hierocles ordered what he called Diocletian's Baths to be installed, using an old building of the same purpose.²²⁵ This fact alone is sufficient when it comes to understanding that the camp and the town were not opposed to each other. Just as in other contemporary garrisons, the soldiers' wives and children remained outside of their camp, to say nothing of other possible distractions.

In 303, Diocletian and his co-emperors started to fiercely persecute Christians, and this persecution would last in the East intermittently for twenty years. When the emperor Constantine, who favoured Christians, conquered the East and became the sole ruler, he convened in 325 the first oecumenical council of bishops in Nicaea, which was attended, among others, by Marinus, the first known bishop of Palmyra. At about this same time, we meet an administrator (*logistes*) of the city who ordered that some restorations be made to the Great Colonnade:²²⁶

Flavius Diogenes son of Uranius has restored and re-established during his curatorship the entire roof over eight spans of this portico which had been long destroyed, in the month of Gorpaios, year 639 [September 328].

²²⁵ R. Fellmann in Ruprechtsberger 1987, pp. 131–136, has proposed to see this building as being originally the royal palace of Odainat and Zenobia, but see Delplace 2017, pp. 119–122.

²²⁶ *Inu.* III 27; *IGLS* 101.

A similar action is recorded in two inscriptions in honour of a certain Moukianos and his son Malchos, who together offered a roof over “the great basilica of the god Ares”. What was called a basilica was in fact a part of the Great Colonnade, dependent somehow on the sanctuary of the god Arsu not far away. Both inscriptions were bilingual, but only a few Aramaic letters remain.²²⁷ The date seems to be [5]91, that is 279/280, and so these would be the last recorded Aramaic inscriptions from Palmyra. A date one century earlier ([4]91) is also possible. However, the fact that only a roof was offered, and not the whole portico, suggests that the colonnade was damaged or neglected as a result of the fall of the city.

The traditional cults were still tolerated under Constantine and the restored temple of Allat survived for a while in the midst of the barracks of the Roman legion. It was definitely destroyed in the 380s (p. 145). At about this time, a curious incident occurred. A Syrian monk called Alexander, who was known as Akoimetes (the Sleepless) because he made his followers sing Psalms around the clock (in shifts, of course) and who had lived for twenty years in a convent he founded on the banks of the Euphrates, decided to cross the desert with a group of monks. When they arrived at Palmyra, the townsmen closed the gates and refused to let them in, fearing that their provisions would be depleted.²²⁸ Eventually, Alexander founded another monastery in Asia Minor and died there in 403, so the confrontation at the gates of Palmyra should be placed roughly in the time when the temple of Allat fell prey to fanatical Christians. His later biographer said that the unfriendly Palmyrenes were “in fact Jewish although they called themselves Christian”. This nonsense was just a piece of purposeful slander, as were certain remarks that had been made earlier by some Church writers about Zenobia (p. 86).

We know next to nothing about Palmyra in the fifth century, either from written sources or from the archaeological record. The evidence from other Syrian sites shows that the country became entirely Christian during this century, with many churches and monasteries being built. All the pagan shrines were either destroyed or abandoned, and it was only Jewish worship that was grudgingly tolerated. In Palmyra, the only preserved remains of life going on consist of simple burials: they are clustered to the north of the rampart, some eighty of them excavated in the museum garden. Elsewhere, a dozen tombstones were found, all of them Christian, but only four of them dated. Engraved by inexpert hands in poor Greek, they come from the area taken over by modern housing. Only one deceased deserved that a little more than his name be mentioned, this being a certain Maranios who died in 469.²²⁹ Here, he is called *ekdikos*, the Greek equivalent of the Latin title *defensor civitatis*, a Late Roman name for a legal representative of a city and presumably the first civic officer. Palmyra still existed as a city, however derelict and impoverished.

The darkness becomes dispersed a little in the course of the sixth century. During the reign of the great emperor Justinian (527–565), his panegyrist (and secretly his detractor) Procopius had this to say about Palmyra:

This city, which through lapse of time had come to be almost completely deserted, the Emperor Justinian strengthened with defences which defy description, and he also provided it with abundant water, and a garrison of troops, and thus put a stop to the raids of the Saracens.²³⁰

“Saracens” is the name that was attributed to the nomad Arabs in this period. It should be remarked that the aqueducts of Palmyra go back to earlier centuries and that by this point the Roman garrison had already

²²⁷ *IGLS* 80–81.

²²⁸ Kaizer 2010, pp. 115–116.

²²⁹ Kowalski 1997, pp. 49–50; *IGLS* 496.

²³⁰ *De aedificiis* II.11.10–12, trans. H.B. Dewing.



161. The remains of a church restored in Justinian's time (Basilica III). In the middle, the cursive (*solea*) once leading to the pulpit

been present there for over two centuries. As the walls are certainly of an earlier time as well, the information provided by Procopius is usually understood as referring to the mere refurbishing of a fortification which had to have fallen into disrepair. As a matter of fact, they were strengthened at some point by the addition of large rounded towers of several storeys. Such towers could accommodate sophisticated torsion catapults using springs of twisted hair, shooting from each level. These towers are usually considered as having been added under Justinian, but in fact they could very well go back to the time of Diocletian. Indeed, very similar towers appear in several fourth-century Roman camps and fortresses in the East.²³¹

The Byzantine chronicler Malalas mentioned that Justinian sent to Palmyra the Armenian Patrikios, appointed in 527 Count of the East, with orders to restore some churches there.²³² Four churches close to each other were excavated by the Polish mission in the last twenty years before the civil war. One of them has preserved traces of a preaching pulpit in the middle of the nave with a fenced cursive (called a *solea*) leading to it from the altar, both added later [Fig. 161]. This feature is not found in Syrian churches, but it is present in Constantinople and in Asia Minor. Clear signs of a restoration suggest that the original building dates to the fifth century; it was only after 527 that Count Patrikios proceeded to repair the neglected church in the style of the imperial capital. Another church was built by taking over part of a neighbouring house and adding an elaborate baptistery [Fig. 162]. An Islamic inscription on one of the flagstones on the floor indicates a late building date, sometime in the eighth century. It must have been taken from some already disused building of Islamic character, probably without realising the offence. With some ancillary buildings in-between, these two seem to have constituted the episcopal complex of late Palmyra.²³³ The biggest church, which is a little further away, where excavations were interrupted by the outbreak of the civil war, was probably founded under Justinian [Fig. 163]. It survived well into Islamic times before it was converted to profane use sometime in the tenth century, when the other churches were dismantled stone by stone. All three described here were of the basilical type, with two side aisles divided from the nave by arcades borne on columns or pillars. None had a mosaic floor, so frequent elsewhere in Syria, but just simple stone pavements. The columns in those churches

²³¹ Juchniewicz 2013, figs 9–11, 13.

²³² Jeffreys 2000.

²³³ Gawlikowski 2001; Majcherek 2013.



162. Another church (Basilica II), built in the 8th century, complete with a baptistery, the remains seen from above



163. Another Justinianic church, partly excavated (Basilica IV)



164. The remains of a painting on a wall in the Bel temple: the Virgin Mary and Child between two saints, an angel flying above

were obviously taken from older buildings, and even the baptismal font was in fact a first-century stone basin offered to ancient gods, just turned around to show a blank side (see Fig. 11).²³⁴

Three more churches can still be recognised among the ruins by their apses directed to the east.²³⁵ Another was installed within the walls of the Bel temple: while all the built-in additions have disappeared as a result of the later transformations which turned the building into a mosque, there remain some Christian graffiti and, more importantly, the bleak remains of a painting laid directly on the antique ashlar on the inside of the western wall of the temple. The scene represented the Virgin Mary and Child, an angel flying above and two saint martyrs standing by [Fig. 164].²³⁶

Sixth-century Syria was the scene of a grave split in Christianity: two distinct Churches were formed. One was united with the Chalcedonian Church, oecumenical and Greek-speaking, while the Monophysite Church (also known as Miaphysite or Jacobite) followed a belief condemned at the council of Chalcedon in 451. It mostly used the version of the Aramaic language known as Syriac. The original difference concerned the nature of Christ and rested on subtle theological distinctions, but as time went on the controversy was fed to a larger and larger degree by the opposition of the urban elites and the countryside. The emperors tried in vain to suppress the dissenters, but the result was that they only exacerbated their alienation. The Jacobite bishops were often deposed and exiled, but the flame was kept alive by the monks, who were strongly opposed to the imperial government. There was a secular arm, too: the Arab kings of the Ghassān tribal confederation who controlled as Roman allies the desert between Damascus and Palmyra and thus offered a bulwark to the Empire against other Arab tribes, were firmly of this conviction. Their suppression by Justinian led eventually to the undoing of Byzantine rule in Syria when it was confronted with the assault of Islam.²³⁷

Before things came to this conclusion, the oasis remained a calm backwater. The town was living among the ruins of its former glory, protected by its garrison and under the guidance of its bishops (who seem to have been all Monophysite) more than that of any imperial officials. The fact that it lay on a military frontier road does not appear to have caused any notable upheavals. The repeated Persian incursions into Syria, which brought in their wake looting, destruction, and mass deportations, invariably chose the Euphrates route and aimed at Antioch and at other great cities. Palmyra remained safe in the midst of the desert.

After these raids came the final invasion, which aimed at a restoration of the Achaemenian Empire of old. The whole of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, as well as a large part of Asia Minor, were occupied for eighteen years by the Persian troops of Khusro (Chosroes), second of the name. Coinciding with the Avar incursion in the Balkans, this nearly caused the Empire to totally collapse. With the Roman administration gone, and the religious conflicts among Christians of no interest to the new masters, it was natural that the dissenters were relatively strengthened. When a successful counteroffensive by the emperor Heraclius imposed the evacuation of all the conquered lands in 629, the emperor convened the Syrian bishops to Hierapolis, where he took possession of the relics of the Holy Cross the Persians had robbed in Jerusalem and which they now gave back in fulfilment of the peace treaty. On this occasion, Heraclius tried to impose a new definition of Christ's nature to reconcile the two factions, but he only succeeded in earning the hostility of both. Bishop Thomas of Palmyra is mentioned as being one of the bishops who met in Hierapolis.

It is highly doubtful that the Palmyra camp was again occupied by the returning Roman troops. We have found there clear evidence of squatting, which could already have started under the Persian

²³⁴ Gawlikowski, forthcoming.

²³⁵ Majcherek 2005.

²³⁶ See Jastrzębowska 2013.

²³⁷ Genequand, Robin 2017.

occupation. There was simply not enough time to fully restore the civil administration and military establishment in Syria. Very soon, the country was overrun again, this time by the Arab Muslim armies, and this time the invaders stayed for good.

The last mention of Palmyra in a contemporary Greek text occurs in the life of St Anastasius the Persian.²³⁸ This Persian soldier converted from Zoroastrianism while in Syria, was arrested, brought back to Persia for trial, and martyred there. His body was collected for burial by some monks in Dastagerd. In 631, a delegation from Jerusalem went there to recover the saint's remains, stealing them when their request was turned down. On their way back, helped by an Arab chieftain, they passed through Palmyra. Only three years later, Palmyra was the first Syrian city to be occupied when, in 634, the Muslim commander Khaled ibn al-Walid went there from Iraq; it is the first and only known case of an invading army arriving to Palmyra from the east.²³⁹ The struggle for Syria did not last long and there was no resistance to speak of after the great battle on the Yarmuk River. The bulk of the population seems to have greeted the departure of the Romans with indifference. By 637 it was all over and a new era of history started in the Near East.

For the rest of the seventh century, both the Greek and Arabic written sources are silent about Palmyra-Tadmor. However, recent excavations leave no doubt that the city survived practically unchanged. Protected by the Late Roman rampart, it remained basically the same as in the preceding century. The large mansion uncovered close to the cathedral complex, which goes back to the second century (p. 103, see Fig. 63), was still in use – under the same roof and with its stucco wall decorations intact in several rooms – up until the early ninth century. One of the late tenants signed his name (Hasān ?) in Arabic Kufic script on the cemented floor of one room, when it was re-laid and still wet. The inhabitants were clearly impoverished and led a rather rustic life, keeping animals indoors and dividing the house into smaller dwellings. In the blockage of a disused staircase, coins were found dating this particular remake to about 700. At the same time, the abandoned monuments, such as the ancient sanctuaries of Baalshamin, of Allat, and of Nabu, were built over with modest housing, just as the streets of the former camp.²⁴⁰ There is no doubt that the Christians of Palmyra, after adopting the Arabic language as their own, called their city Tadmor, as it was called in Aramaic and is still called in Arabic today.

This period of history is also illustrated by two coin hoards. One was found under the floor of a shack in the middle of the main street of the camp and contained twenty-seven gold pieces of seventh-century Byzantine emperors, ending about 750 with Constans II. This emperor did not rule Syria anymore, but his coinage still circulated there.²⁴¹ The other hoard was abandoned in the street in front of one of the churches [Fig. 165]. It was once kept in a cloth purse and included over seven hundred silver Sasanian dirhams, mostly of Khusrō II minted in the years of his occupation of Syria, but also Arab imitations of Sasanian coinage from the later part of the seventh century (the latest coin being dated at 695).²⁴² This hoard has been buried under Caliph Abdel Malik b. Marwān. Most coins found elsewhere in the churches are issued by the same Abdel Malik or not much later.

A new complex was erected in the early eighth century in the Great Colonnade. In the middle of the ancient avenue, a long line of at least forty-seven shops rose up [Fig. 166].²⁴³ Opening to the north and to the old shops on this side of the Colonnade, together they formed a commercial mall, or rather a *sūq*, as it would be called today and as it was probably called at that time as well. Its existence is a sign of economic growth, even if the monumental aspect of the city was diminished by the same token.

²³⁸ Flusin 1992, I, pp. 102–103; Kaegi 1992, pp. 55–56.

²³⁹ Donner 1981, pp. 119–127.

²⁴⁰ Kowalski 1994; Intagliata 2017.

²⁴¹ Krzyżanowska, Gawlikowski 2014, pp. 60–64.

²⁴² Krzyżanowska, Gawlikowski 2014, pp. 71–120.

²⁴³ Al-As'ad, Stepniowski 1989.



165. A silver hoard of Sasanian/Islamic coins as found abandoned in the street



166. A line of shops built in the middle of the Great Colonnade. On the hill in the background, the 13th-century castle

The far-flung caravan trade was certainly no more, but the Bedouin of the larger countryside represented a substantial body of customers.

We touch here on the beginning of the process which transformed the ancient city into an Islamic city. Hugh Kennedy's ground-breaking paper from thirty years ago, "From *polis* to *madina*" (the Greek and Arabic names for "city"), showed clearly that this process was by no means one of decline: it was no sad winding down of ancient glories. It was, on the contrary, one of economic growth and social change which replaced the aristocratic landowner elites ruling the ancient cities with middle-class merchants and artisans, the people of the bazaar who are the core of traditional Oriental cities to this day.²⁴⁴

The shops probably came to a halt at the Tetrapylon, which at that point was still standing, but it is also possible that they extended on to the other side of it, in the middle of the Colonnade further east. If this was so, the remains would have been removed during the clearing out of this area in the 1960s. An early mosque was recently identified along the avenue, close to the Agora. It was installed in a second-century building with a colonnaded courtyard. A prayer hall with the *mihrab* niche was added in the far wall oblique to the courtyard in front in order to show the exact direction of Mecca.²⁴⁵ If the *sūq* had indeed extended both sides of the Tetrapylon, the mosque would have been situated roughly half-way through its whole length. At any rate, its presence indicates that Muslim merchants may have settled in Palmyra in the early eighth century alongside the Christian quarter.

The *sūq* in Tadmor is the best preserved example of the initial stage of this urban change, alongside the smaller markets later discovered in Beysan in Palestine and in Resafa in Syria, northeast of Palmyra. As the great French Orientalist Jean Sauvaget predicted eighty years ago,²⁴⁶ the modern *sūq* such as can be visited today in Damascus and until recently in Aleppo, with its labyrinthine lanes and innumerable shops, started with the encroachments of stalls on ancient colonnaded streets, slowly obliterating their original outlook. Sauvaget's sketch plans, entirely imagined, find full confirmation in the *sūq* of Tadmor, which was abandoned in the eighth or ninth century, thereby preserving the early phase of this development.

Under the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled the Muslim world from Damascus (660–750), the oasis of Tadmor was under the sway of the powerful tribe of Banu Kalb, which was in control of the vast swathes of desert from Damascus to the Euphrates. Other urban centres and bishoprics were included in their territory, encompassing al-'Urd (ancient Oriza, today Tayyibeh) and Resafa, with its famous basilica of St Sergius.

In the eighth century, the desert territory of Banu Kalb saw the foundation of several fortified residences linked to agricultural farms.²⁴⁷ The two most important are both called Qasr al-Heir ("Good Palace"): one, to the west of Tadmor, was built in 727 on the site of a sixth-century monastery, while the other, to the east close to al-'Urd, was built one year later, both on orders of the Caliph Hishām. Both of them have been excavated. The splendid stucco reliefs from Qasr al-Heir West are on display in the National Museum in Damascus, and the elaborate gateway of this palace is recreated at the museum entrance.²⁴⁸ Qasr al-Heir East consisted of two walled enclosures, one containing several residences and a mosque, while the other, smaller, was a *khan*, that is, an inn for travellers. A large enclosed space nearby was put under cultivation.²⁴⁹ Throughout his reign (724–743), Hishām resided further east, in Resafa, in a similar palace outside the walls of this centre of Christian pilgrimage. No doubt these establishments contributed to the propagation of Islam among the Kalbites, who were, even when they were still Christians, among the dynasty's staunchest supporters. Similar installations are scattered across Jordan and

²⁴⁴ Kennedy 1985.

²⁴⁵ Genequand 2008.

²⁴⁶ Sauvaget 1934.

²⁴⁷ Genequand 2004; 2012.

²⁴⁸ Schlumberger 1986.

²⁴⁹ Grabar 1978.



167. The entrance to the Bel sanctuary rebuilt in the 12th century



168. The 13th-century castle above the ruins

Syria; they were not “desert castles”, as they are often called, but country estates of considerable agricultural potential, where the rulers could reside for a time while they received the tribal elders to maintain the loyalty of the Bedouin. It can be supposed that they felt more at home there than in the cities, which were still overwhelmingly Christian.

In the last years of the Umayyad dynasty, the Caliph Marwān II ordered the destruction of the walls of Tadmor in reprisal for a revolt against him in 745.²⁵⁰ Only five years later, the dynasty was abolished by a new one, the descendants of Abbās, an uncle of the Prophet. The Abbassids had built for themselves a new capital they called Baghdad. This event marked the beginning of the slow decline of Syria, both politically and economically.

The last known bishop of Tadmor, John, came from the monastery of Deir Za‘afaran (near Mardin, in Turkey), which is the present seat of the Syriac patriarchate. He was ordained shortly after 818.²⁵¹ About this time the churches were abandoned, their walls systematically dismantled and limekilns set up in their ruins to make lime from the recovered stones. The doors to the mansion in the next block were all walled up, a typical sign of abandonment by inhabitants who may have hoped to come back. According to the tradition preserved in the Christian village of Sadād, 130 km to the west, their community came from Tadmor. There is no reason to doubt this information. They could well have found their position far out in the desert unsustainable after the Bedouin around them adopted Islam.

According to another tradition, this time of the Ismaelite sect of Islam, their first hidden imam, Muhammad al-Sadiq, died in Tadmor in 810 and was buried in a *wali* on a hill to the north of the site,²⁵² but this tomb is locally attributed to a son of ‘Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet. It was the first historical monument to be blown up by Daesh in 2015.

It seems that the Muslim community of Tadmor congregated, perhaps from the very beginning, within the walls of the Bel temple. The church installed there was already out of use by 729, the date of a pious inscription by two Muslims on an inner wall and over the remains of a Christian painting.²⁵³ About 985, the Arab geographer al-Muqaddasi reported that a *qasaba* (a fortified city) was located in Tadmor, one that was “spacious and pleasant”.²⁵⁴ It was certainly identical to the precinct of Bel, towering above the abandoned ruins. Whatever still remained standing fell victim to a terrible earthquake in 1043. The walls of the sanctuary were restored in 1133 by the emir Yūsuf bin Firūz, an agent of the princes of Damascus.²⁵⁵ He closed the ancient gateway with a massive wall and turned it into a high bastion still standing [Fig. 167], placing his inscription above the new narrow entrance, which was crowned with the lintel taken from the family tomb of Odainat (see Fig. 25). From the outside, the ancient sanctuary was probably very similar to its modern appearance. The only traveller other than Arab authors who reported on Tadmor about this time was a rabbi, Benjamin by name, from Tudela in Spain. In 1165 or shortly afterwards, he visited the Holy Land and toured on this occasion parts of Syria. He went from Damascus to Baalbek, then to Homs, Aleppo, and Raqqa, trying to attach a Biblical name to each place he visited and mentioning conscientiously the number of Jews in each, if any. He also described Tadmor, but it is clear that he only knew it from hearsay.

Thadmor in the desert was also built by Shlomo of equally large stones [the comparison relates to Baalbek and the colossal platform of the main temple, thought to be the palace

²⁵⁰ Bounni 1970/71.

²⁵¹ Charles 1936, p. 81.

²⁵² I thank Janusz Byliński for providing these details (from a manuscript quoted by Mustafa Ghalib).

²⁵³ Sauvaget 1933, pp. 50–51, 39.

²⁵⁴ Miquel 1963, pp. 164–165.

²⁵⁵ Sauvaget 1933, pp. 60–61, 54.



169. A view of the old village



170. An aerial view of the village within the Bel sanctuary, the clearing of modern houses under way

built for Pharaoh's daughter]; the city is surrounded by a wall and stands in the desert, far from any inhabited place, is four days distant from the abovementioned Ba'alath [Baalbek] and contains two thousand warlike Jews. These are at war with Bene Edom [the Crusaders] and with the Arab subjects of Nur ed-Din and aid their Ismaelite neighbours. (trans. A. Asher, slightly modified)²⁵⁶

At the time of Benjamin's journey, there was no place in Tadmor for this valiant Jewish colony (allegedly governed by three rabbis) at war simultaneously with the Crusaders and their arch-enemy, Nur ed-Din, the ruler of Damascus and Aleppo (1146–1173). The Crusaders never reached so far into the

²⁵⁶ Asher 1840, p. 87.

desert, and the Arabic sources are silent about such an extraordinary adversary to the sultan. The fortress installed in the Bel sanctuary was in the hands of the emirs of Homs, as proven by several inscriptions. Benjamin must have heard in Baalbek that there exists yet another city built by Solomon out in the desert, according to the Biblical tradition (see p. 19), and the rest is probably a misunderstanding.

The temple of Bel became a mosque perhaps as early as the eighth century. The southern adyton received two *mihrabs* (transferred to Damascus Museum) marking the direction of Mecca, probably when the sultan of Homs, al-Malik al-Mujāhid bin Shirqūh, had the mosque restored.²⁵⁷ The same ruler built “a castle on a lofty hill” in about 1230. This is the castle north of the ruins, which is still standing [Fig. 168]. When the early European travellers visited Tadmor in the eighteenth century, they were told that this was the castle of “Manoglu”, being a bungled rendering of the Turkish patronym of the Druze emir Fakhreddin bin Maan (1595–1634). Recent excavations by Janusz Byliński have proven that the castle was built four centuries before this, though some Turkish pipes were also found.²⁵⁸

The Bel sanctuary remained settled by the exclusively Muslim population until the 1930s [Figs 169–170], when it was evacuated by the French administration to the new village founded northeast of the ruins. This settlement grew considerably in the last thirty years thanks to the asphalted road from Damascus to Deir ez-Zor passing through it and to its catering to mass tourism. It is entirely ruined now.

²⁵⁷ Sauvaget 1933, pp. 62–63, 56.

²⁵⁸ Byliński 1999.

Sculpture and other arts

There is no hint that the early Tadmor produced any kind of artistic expression of its own before the first century BC, and even what it did produce did not appear, so far as we can judge, until rather later in this century.²⁵⁹ The very first monument on record is known only indirectly: it was the cult statue of the goddess Allat installed in her small shrine in the mid-first century. The venerable idol remained there until the sack of Aurelian in 273, but we have some miniature renderings of it, showing the goddess seated on a throne between two lions.²⁶⁰ One of these representations is rather crude and seems close enough to the original (see Fig. 152 and p. 136); another is the work of a better trained hand and perhaps idealised.²⁶¹ The statue was probably composite, assembling textile robes and a stone face on a wooden trunk, and could be promenaded in processions around the oasis on certain festive occasions. It is more than likely that other early sanctuaries also treasured divine images of the same kind.

There were also standing figures set up in public places and representing persons of merit, but only a few accompanying inscriptions remain and we cannot form a clear idea about their appearance. The only safely dated early epigraph went with the lost statue of Goraimi b. Nebozabad offered by the priests of Bel in 44 BC (see Fig. 9).²⁶² It was certainly not the only one in existence. Two fragmentary stone plates showing armour found in the temple of Bel once belonged to composite statues of warriors, human or divine.²⁶³

Also in the Bel sanctuary, discarded fragments of reliefs buried in later foundations about the temple featured files of worshippers. In the best preserved fragment, they advance with offerings toward a priest performing a sacrifice on a small altar [Fig. 171].²⁶⁴ The dress of the men and women is practically identical, consisting of a tunic with long sleeves and a mantle which in the case of the women covers their hair. The folds of their garments are straight, symmetrical, and parallel. They are shown in full profile, each figure seen separately, flat and linear, with no attempt being made to render the depth of the scene or background. This kind of composition is well in the character of the arts of the ancient Near East from times immemorial.

²⁵⁹ On the art of Palmyra, the most complete treatment is still Colledge 1976. A general overview: Schlumberger 1970. Tanabe 1986 provides a rich selection of sculpture in the Palmyra Museum, see also Sadurska, Bounni 1994. For other major collections: Dentzer-Feydy, Teixidor 1993, Raja 2019a.

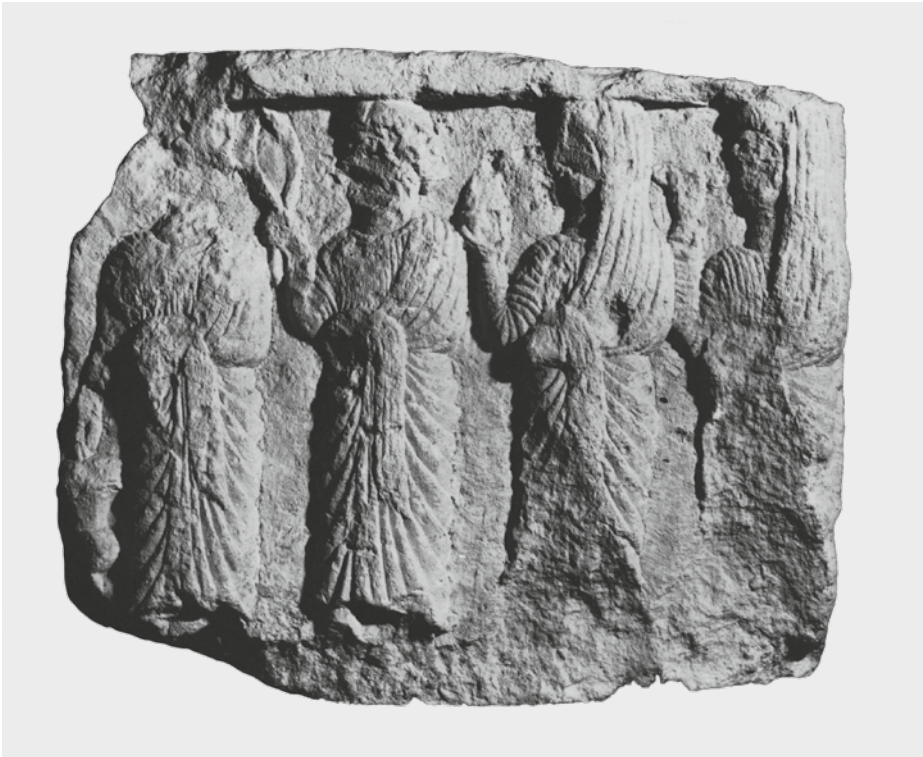
²⁶⁰ Gawlikowski 2017a, p. 211, fig. 176.

²⁶¹ Gawlikowski 2017a, pp. 55–57, fig. 34.

²⁶² *Inv.* XI, 100; *PAT* 1524.

²⁶³ Colledge 1976, p. 31, pl. 7.

²⁶⁴ Colledge 1976, p. 40, figs 19–20; Seyrig 1941; Morehart 1956/1958.



171. An early relief showing in profile a procession bringing gifts and a priest, 1st century BC, from the old Bel temple. Palmyra Museum



172. A horseman hunting a panther, part of a larger composition, an archaic relief of uncertain provenience. Palmyra Museum

Only one more ambitious scene has survived. It is a rectangular slab once part of a frieze adorning some altar or shrine. A hunter on horseback is shown shooting arrows at a panther which is turning back angrily [Fig. 172].²⁶⁵ Both animals look curiously similar in proportion and shape, the main difference between them being the panther's spots and the horse's hoofs. The rider's head is in full profile as he turns his back rather awkwardly to the viewer in the movement of spinning his bow. This relief is unique in Palmyra, but it can be placed in the long tradition going back to Assyria, though any direct influence must be excluded. In fact, a similar subject is depicted on the so-called Alexander sarcophagus, now in Istanbul, commissioned by a king of Sidon in Phoenicia in the fourth century BC from some well-trained Greek sculptor. This again was buried in a tomb until its discovery in the nineteenth century. The ways the motif reached Palmyra must remain a mystery. It was not repeated in the extant sculptures of the oasis.

Then, in the early first century AD, a major change occurred. All figures stand to front as on a military parade. Even horsemen and camel-riders, though sitting necessarily in profile on their mounts, invariably turn their heads to the front. The obvious result of this convention is that no movement or action can be represented in terms of the relations between the protagonists. This striking frontality is the main characteristic of the art of Palmyra. It implies a paratactic composition, that is, one that shows the figures separately and on the same, unique plan. They are sharply defined by contours and filled with a precise linear rendering of the details. As they seem to look the beholder right in the eye, much has been said about the alleged spiritual dimension of these reliefs, making the presence of the represented figures real and irresistible.

Until recently, the starting point of this remarkable convention was fixed at 32, the date of the consecration of the Bel temple, when the beam reliefs once high up under the portico roof were supposed to have been put in place (see p. 122).²⁶⁶ We now know that the building process was much extended in time and that the beams, necessarily among the last stones to be put in place, were not sculpted before the end of the first century.²⁶⁷ The new style had by then become well entrenched. Nevertheless, the earliest dated frontal sculptures from Palmyra are close in time to the now obsolete starting point: these are the reliefs from the tower tombs of Kitot (40) and of Hairan (33), both of which show the founders (see Figs 130–131).²⁶⁸ A figure in profile on a stele from Assur, the old Assyrian capital on the Tigris, is dated to 13 (this date was first read erroneously as corresponding to 88 BC); it was found together with another stele showing a man already *en face* [Figs 173–174].²⁶⁹ It is reasonable to assume that the tidal change occurred in the first twenty to thirty years of our reckoning in the region where both Assur and Palmyra lay (and also Dura, Hatra, and Edessa further north, these being other known centres of the art of this kind). This region can be described as the Syro-Mesopotamian steppe, the domain of the nomads sandwiched between the Iranian and Mediterranean worlds.²⁷⁰

It so happens that all these places ceased to exist (as Hatra and Dura) or changed completely (as Palmyra) in the third century. Hatra fell and was deserted in 240; Dura, in 256. Both were victims of the Sasanian westbound thrust. Palmyra was subdued in 272 by Aurelian (and sacked the following year), and its civilisation disappeared almost instantly. Edessa, annexed by Rome, became an early Christian city, and its funerary mosaics ceased to be produced. So, in the mid-third century we lose from our sight the arts peculiar to these cities. But lesser places, as yet unidentified, probably carried on. Frontality reappeared in the sixth century in the mosaics of Ravenna and continues down to our times with the icons

²⁶⁵ Gawlikowski 2009.

²⁶⁶ Seyrig 1934.

²⁶⁷ Pietrzykowski 1997.

²⁶⁸ Will 1951.

²⁶⁹ Colledge 1977, fig. 28.

²⁷⁰ Sommer 2005.



173. A stele with a man in profile, dated 13, from the gatehouse in Ashur. Istanbul Archaeological Museum



174. Another, presumably contemporary stele from the same location. Istanbul Archaeological Museum



175. The votum of Samga, president of a religious association, to four gods, from the Allat temple, 3rd century. Palmyra Museum

of Orthodoxy. In this way the great Byzantine tradition stems indirectly from a provincial development in the desert cities on both sides of the Euphrates.

A small votive relief found in the sanctuary of Allat is a good example of the fully developed Palmyrene style [Fig. 175].²⁷¹ On the ledge beneath, the incomplete inscription runs as follows: “These idols were made by Samga bar Iarhai from his own means and consecrated... when he was president of the thiasos, on the sixteenth day of Iyyar, forever, for his life”.

Samga offered this monument on the occasion of a holiday of the sixteenth of Iyyar (roughly May) of an unspecified year in the mid-third century when he presided at a cult association. He stands at the far left, dispensing frankincense on a portable altar, wearing the typical Greek costume of the town-dwellers everywhere in the eastern provinces: a tunic with sleeves and a cloak. His face is broken off, but the figures of the four gods he is offering a sacrifice to are nearly complete. On the right, the goddess Allat, under the traits of the Greek Athena, wields a lance and her breast is covered with the scaled aegis. An Attic helmet is on her head, and a round shield leans against her leg. Next to her the god Ares (Arsu) is in Roman military outfit. He wears an identical helmet, which is likewise pushed up to uncover his face. The helmet was once adorned with two jewels fixed in the eye-slots. Two other gods follow, their identity unknown to us: the third from the right holds a long sceptre crowned with a pommel. His costume does not differ from the clothes of the officiating donor; the head is damaged and no specific attributes appear. Finally, next to the altar, the fourth divine figure sports the garb of the desert riders: a tunic girdled with a piece of cloth bound below waist. He is brandishing a lance and a small round shield. The heavy wreath on his head had a jewel added in front, and another stone (maybe just a piece of coloured glass) was fixed in the centre of the shield. Many similar figures appear on other reliefs, representing the gods of the nomads, indistinguishable from each other if not named by inscriptions. For instance, an early relief, employed as a slab in the boarding of a well in front of the Bel temple [Fig. 176],²⁷² shows four deities aligned together: from right to left, a Sun god, a Moon god, a goddess, and finally the nude Herakles with his lion’s hide and club. All three local figures wear identical himations; the goddess, a himation over a long robe. The folds of the garments are just parallel grooves, the hair rendered as concentric rows of small coils resembling Cossack fur caps. On another relief, found in a village outside of Palmyra, six identical warriors, clad in desert fashion, in robes bound below waist with a kind of apron, stand in a row between a goddess and a man offering incense [Fig. 177]. They are referred to collectively as “the genies of Bet Pa-si’el”, protective spirits of the village so named.²⁷³ The “genies” (*ginnaye*) is the same word as Arabic *djinn*.

It can be argued that such lines of gods looking straight ahead were meant to impress on the beholders their actual presence. The Aramaic inscriptions call them *massebaya*, the word that is also used for statues, stelae, raised stones, and the like. If they seem to pay no attention to the donor and his sacrifice or to each other, this was certainly not the artist’s intention: likewise, on a relief in a private collection in Beirut, the donors do not look at their god on horseback, called “the good *djinn* Mun‘im”, all three looking at the beholder [Fig. 178]. Two other *djinn*s, Abgal and Ashad, seem to press their horses on the worshipper and the altar in front of him, all three looking straight ahead [Fig. 179]. This pictorial idiom was radically different from the Greek and Roman ways of rendering the world as it meets the eye, in all its variety and movement. The illusionistic ambitions of classical artists went against the millennial Near Eastern traditions; understanding their ways required thorough cultural assimilation. Such assimilation simply did not occur in Palmyra and other places in the Syrian and Mesopotamian deserts, but this fact does not explain another radical shift that occurred there, namely the abandonment of the very long

²⁷¹ Gawlikowski 2017a, p. 208, fig. 173.

²⁷² Drijvers 1976, pl. XIV; Gawlikowski 1990, pl. IV, fig. 10.

²⁷³ Schlumberger 1951, p. 55, pl. 29.1; Gawlikowski 1990, pp. 2637–2638, fig. 32.



176. An early votive relief depicting four gods in frontal view: Herakles, a goddess, a Moon god and a Sun god, found in a well boarding in front of the Bel temple, 1st century. National Museum, Damascus



177. The *djinns* of the village of Bet Pasi'el (today Khirbet Farwan), 191. National Museum, Damascus



178. The mounted *djinn* Mun'im and his worshippers. Formerly collection Henri Pharaon, Beirut

179. Abgal and Ashad, the “good *djinn*s” of the sanctuary of Abgal at Khirbet Semrin. National Museum, Damascus



tradition of Near Eastern narrative art using the profile view of human figures to show them in action and interaction, a tradition that was still followed in the few fragments that survived in Palmyra from the first century BC.

The first attempt at an explanation comes from Mikhail Rostovtzeff, the great Russian historian of antiquity who played a major role in the excavations at Dura-Europos in the 1920s and 1930s. The new discoveries at this city on the Middle Euphrates inspired him to qualify the art style found there and in Palmyra “Parthian”.²⁷⁴ According to his influential paper of 1935, frontality, rightly considered the main characteristic of this style, was introduced at the court of the Parthian rulers of Iran and Mesopotamia and spread beyond the frontiers of their empire to Palmyra. It is supposed to be laden with a high spiritual message expressed in “the large piercing eyes, full of religious fervour and enthusiasm”. Other characteristics as defined by Rostovtzeff include linearism and verism, that is, the stressing of contour, the lack of depth, and the careful rendering of details. While these other features can easily be found elsewhere, frontality as a general rule is specifically adopted in the art of Palmyra and in the art of Dura-Europos closely linked to it. For Rostovtzeff, they were a reflection of the art of Iran, at that time ruled by the Parthians.

The trouble with this interpretation is that nothing of the sort is known to this day in Iran proper or in Ctesiphon, the Parthian capital (which was located close to modern Baghdad). On the contrary, later excavations at Nisa, the first capital of the Parthian kings, now in Turkmenistan, only revealed works of Greek craftsmanship;²⁷⁵ also, the coins of these rulers were inspired by Hellenistic models and, with few exceptions, regularly show the royal portraits in profile. A few rather crude rock reliefs made for petty local dynasts in Elymais (southwest Iran) in the second and third centuries are the only other exceptions and can be best explained as having been influenced from the west.²⁷⁶

In spite of the lack of any convincing evidence, the phantom of “Parthian art”, in particular that of the entirely unknown official art of the royal court of Ctesiphon, still haunted the research for many years. Palmyrene art would depend, in this line of thinking, on the art of the great Greek city of Seleucia-on-the-

²⁷⁴ Rostovtzeff 1935 and 1938.

²⁷⁵ Schlumberger 1970, pp. 36–39; Lippolis 2007, pp. 147–153.

²⁷⁶ Vanden Berghe, Schippmann 1985.

-Tigris, the close neighbour of Ctesiphon. Palmyra was even declared a “spiritual daughter of Seleucia”.²⁷⁷ Unfortunately for this view, the Italian excavations in Seleucia have brought to light nothing but typical Hellenistic artefacts without a hint of frontality or any other characteristics of “Parthian” art.

A radically different point of view was proposed in 1955 by Ernest Will.²⁷⁸ This eminent scholar considered frontality the result of a misguided imitation of Greek art: while classical and Hellenistic reliefs and paintings strived for a realistic rendering of movement and action, showing human figures at any angle required by the subject, be it in profile, in three-quarters profile, *en face*, or even in back view if necessary, some imitators would only have picked up the frontal view as being the most expressive and most striking to their eyes; they made it general, in total incomprehension of the Greek illusionistic ideal. This limitation was of course at home only in the barely Hellenised Syrian interior and not in the great cities founded by Greek rulers in the western part of the country, such as Antioch and Apamea, or even in the regions where the imitation of Greek forms could be clumsy but in the main correct, as for instance in the basalt statues and reliefs of the Hawran. The frontal convention, for its part, was paramount in the towns and villages of the steppe on both sides of the Euphrates.

As the frontal view can give the impression of actual presence, it was employed exclusively in the statuary of the Ancient Near East and also in archaic Greece. Worshippers in temples could meet their gods so figured and perceive them as living beings. They could also offer their own statues to be eternally present before a god. Whenever a narrative scene was represented, however, the natural way to do it was to use a relief or a painting showing the figures in profile. Sometimes, however, a frontal view could occur to convey presence and relate to the viewer. Only Classical Greek art developed the illusionistic manner in trying to render the protagonists as they would be seen in real life.

In an overview of the arts of the Hellenistic East, Daniel Schlumberger has treated these creations as one of the “non-Mediterranean descendants of Greek art”, among which he counted also whatever was known from Iran, Afghanistan, and India with its splendid flowering of Buddhist sculpture known under the label of Gandharan art.²⁷⁹ In this way, several rather different styles were packed together, all having in common, in varying measure, their receptiveness of the Greek heritage. He concluded that the sculpture of the Kushan kingdom, which was roughly contemporary of Palmyra and flourished in modern Afghanistan and Pakistan, was created locally by absorbing the influence of the former Greek rulers of these lands into a vaguely Iranian substratum, and thus had nothing to do with the West. He did, however, retain the term “Parthian art” for commodity’s sake, while recognising that this conventional name did not really relate to the empire of the Parthians. The many editions that exist of Schlumberger’s influential book, which has appeared in several languages, have made his views the standard vision to this day. More recent authors still employ the Parthian label, even if they more or less agree it is improper. It is probably too late to eradicate this usage.

In actual fact, Palmyra was never dependent on the Parthians. The Greek city of Europos did belong to them, but no Iranian influence can be demonstrated there, whereas the Palmyrenes were very much present, even more so when the city was conquered by Rome.²⁸⁰ Hatra, like Edessa further north, was a vassal kingdom of Parthia.²⁸¹ However, this does not warrant the use of their monuments as substitutes for those of Ctesiphon.

As Ernest Will has remarked, *en face* figures, when they appear in Greek art, tended to be reserved for especially prominent protagonists: gods, kings, and heroes. This circumstance would have impressed local

²⁷⁷ Seyrig 1950, p. 5.

²⁷⁸ Will 1955.

²⁷⁹ Schlumberger 1960 and 1970.

²⁸⁰ Dirven 1999.

²⁸¹ Sommer 2005, pp. 355–388.



180. An Assyrian relief with a mountain god feeding goats flanked by two lesser deities, 15th century BC, from Assur. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin



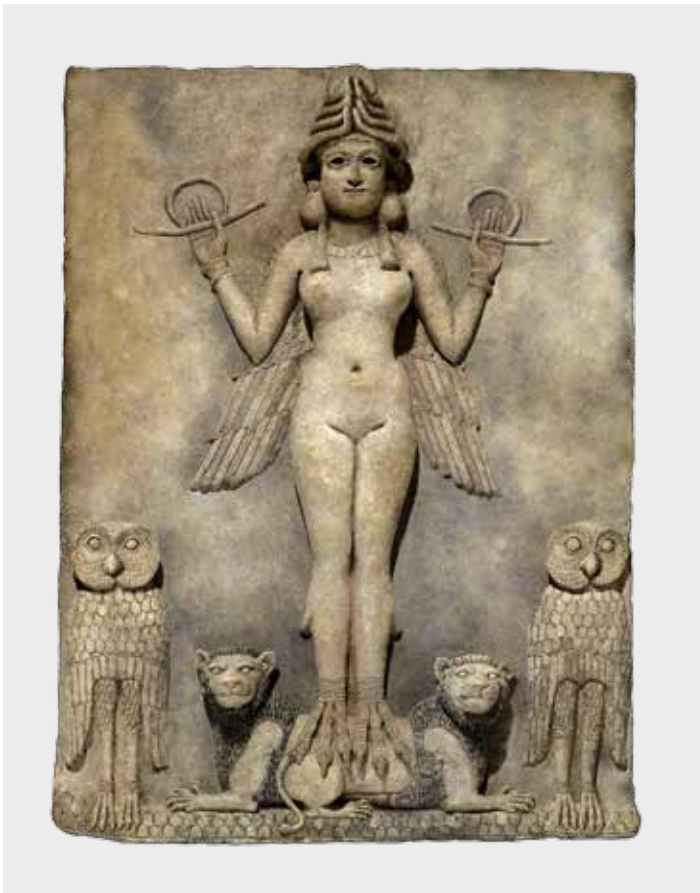
181. Stele of the healing god Shadrafa. The British Museum, London

artists to the point of imitating the frontal posture in exclusivity. Not enough mention is made, however, of the fact that frontal representations can be found in Mesopotamia many centuries before Alexander as a way to replace divine statues in the round as cult images. One such relief, found in the temple of Assur in the city of Assur, represents a god standing to front, flanked by two lesser goddesses likewise in frontal position, who dispense streams of water from the vases they hold [Fig. 180]. It had served the cult in the fifteenth century BC before being broken and thrown into a well. Some divine figures in Palmyra are shown in a similar way. For instance, the healing god Shadrafa, of Phoenician origin, stands to front on a stele dated 51 (this stele is now in the British Museum). In full armour, the god here holds a lance and a shield; a sword is at his side, and he is accompanied by a scorpion over his shoulder [Fig. 181]. A serpent is convoluted around the lance, this being the constant attribute of Asklepios, the healing god of the Greeks.

For centuries, small clay figurines of various gods have served private and domestic cults everywhere in Mesopotamia.²⁸² Some were placed in clay models of shrines or, naturally enough, represented in relief on flat tablets. Some of them were probably meant to represent large-sized statues in temples [Fig. 182].²⁸³ Very often, the identity of these deities can only be guessed at, but of course it would have been clear for the original users who prayed and presented offerings to them in their homes. Such

²⁸² Douglas van Buren 1930; Barrelet 1968; Battini 2017.

²⁸³ Battini 2017.



182. "Queen of the Night", a Babylonian goddess on a terracotta plaque, 18th century BC (restored). The British Museum, London



183. The upper part of the frame of a votive relief. Palmyra Museum

terracotta plaques have also been found in Syria; they can be attributed to both the time before and after the coming of the Greeks. It seems they could have served as the models for stone reliefs featuring gods facing the viewer.²⁸⁴

One early category of monuments unique to Palmyra consists in the so-called cult niches which could be votive offerings or, at least in some cases, cult objects in sanctuaries.²⁸⁵ They are remarkably uniform and consist of wide frames heavily decorated in relief with highly schematic vines and grapes, crowned with a flat lintel featuring an eagle spreading its wings and often flanked by two smaller seated eagles [Fig. 183]. The base of these niches was adorned with stars, rosettes, or figurative reliefs. In the middle of the frame, a smallish field, always found empty, was reserved. Henri Seyrig, who first identified this type of sculpture among the early debris of the first Bel temple, allowed them to be published by Paul Collart, who found several others in the sanctuary of Baalshamin, including the splendid lintel with eagles once crowning an exceptionally huge niche (see Fig. 100 and p. 128).²⁸⁶ A similar lintel surmounted the niche of the Allat statue (see Fig. 110). Even larger was the eagle over the aperture of the northern adyton in the temple of Bel (see Figs 84–85). The present author and a friend have suggested that these niches be understood as symbolising the vault of heaven, an appropriate framing for images of the supreme gods.²⁸⁷ Smaller, mostly monolithic niches could perhaps have accommodated images of lesser gods: the small central space now empty might have held a standing figurine, a relief plaque with a frontal figure, or a painted image, as Seyrig surmised. According to him, the niches were inserted in the mudbrick walls of the early sanctuaries.

In 1940, on the site of the small shrine for the god Rab'asire at the foot of the Agora, the excavator Raymond Duru found the lower part of such a niche [Fig. 184]. It shows a cuirassed god holding two lions on chains, while two eagles sit on their heads. As the name Rab'asire, a deity otherwise unknown, means “Lord of the fettered”, it is he who is understood as being the master of the lions.

Duru did not find the shrine itself. Its remains were about 1 m deeper in the ground and were only discovered in 2011. It was on this occasion that a lintel with eagles was found. It cannot directly be adjusted to the lower part because the intermediate fragments are missing, so it is not absolutely sure the two belong together.²⁸⁸ The sculptor signed his work on the upper surface, invisible when in place. This inscription is apparently from the turn of our time, while all the other known niches cannot be from much later. So the type counts among the oldest sculptures of Palmyra, even if it remained popular for about a century.

It seems to me that these niches could be bigger versions, sculpted in stone and more elaborated, of small terracotta plaques with frontal images that were made for private cults in homes or even carried around by their owners as amulets. These reliefs being obviously easier to make and cheaper than sculptures in the round, they could have been substituted for statues in the early shrines or presented, for example, as votive offerings. If so, their appearance would have coincided with the transformation of Palmyra into a city and thus it would have been a response to the need for more prestigious religious monuments, even if the technical expertise was still lacking locally. Rolf Stucky has even proposed that the appearance of frontality could well be a local development in Palmyra itself.²⁸⁹ Once frontal images of gods became familiar, why not align several of them on the same stone? Habit and tradition did the rest until the end of the polytheistic cults in the oasis.

²⁸⁴ For terracotta plaques in Palmyra, Seyrig 1951b.

²⁸⁵ Colledge 1976, pp. 32–34.

²⁸⁶ Collart, Vicari 1969, pp. 157–158, pl. XCV; Stucky 2000, pp. 38–43.

²⁸⁷ Gawlikowski, Pietrzykowski 1980.

²⁸⁸ Gawlikowski 2012 and 2013.

²⁸⁹ Stucky 2000, pp. 54–64.



184. The niche of Rab'asire, from his shrine. The National Museum, Damascus. The crowning may belong to another similar niche

The steppe villages around Palmyra (in fact only those in the hills north and northwest of the city have been mapped and partly excavated) developed ingenious systems for capturing rainwater; this allowed for the cultivation of crops to feed the oasis, and no doubt for the herding of camels for its caravans (see p. 48). These farmers and breeders, mostly of nomad ancestry, built in these villages modest shrines containing dining rooms so as to make it possible to gather at banquets in honour of their gods. In every one of these, a relief image of a god was installed at the far end, often behind a stone crater for mixing wine and water to accompany the sacrificial meats [Fig. 185].²⁹⁰ The sculptures, not always of good craftsmanship, always follow the frontal composition, assuring the actual presence of the gods at the banquet of his or her worshippers. Needless to say, it was easier to afford a relief than a statue; the cult image could at the same time be a votive gift of the person or persons offering it, as some inscriptions attest.

The habit of showing the gods in two dimensions, whether sculpted in stone or perhaps as painted images (though the latter are not preserved) started out as a cost-conscious expedient among a population that had only recently attained a certain level of affluence. These sculptures were the work of home-grown

²⁹⁰ Schlumberger 1951, pp. 93–105.



185. A stone crater in the sanctuary of Abgal in Khirbet Semrin

artisans not yet certain of their art. Even later, during the city's time of prosperity, the ancestral tradition persisted in the old ways. We only know of two cult statues, both not preserved: one was of Allat seated in her minuscule shrine, at least half a century older than the frontal convention (see Figs 110 and 152); the other would be the enthroned statue of Bel, possibly older than his first-century temple (see p. 230). We know for sure, on the other hand, that the temple of Baalshamin, which was erected to impress the emperor Hadrian and which certainly spared no expense, contained a large relief of the god seated in majesty, apparently transferred from his older abode.²⁹¹

The choice of the relief to represent the gods in their temples had far-reaching consequences. This development must have induced fundamental changes in the cult. In the traditions of the ancient Near East, statues were treated as living beings: the priests had to perform services to them as if they were kings. The presentation of food and drink was repeated every day in a prescribed manner, and other attentions, such as changing their clothes, washing and anointing them, were also repeated at fixed times, keeping the priests busy from sunrise to sunset. All these ministrations would have made no sense towards flat images. All one could have done in such cases was to burn frankincense in front of them and let them silently assist at drinking parties of their faithful. The images became a spiritual presence, and the gods became transcendent. Though there is no continuity, the way was open for the mediation of icons.

It does not mean, however, that statues in the round were rare. Three bronze statues were set up in the Bel sanctuary by a Roman legionary commander as early as 18 or 19; they represented the emperor Tiberius, his son, and his nephew, and they certainly conformed to the usual style of Roman imperial

²⁹¹ Gawlikowski, Pietrzykowski 1980; Stucky 2000, *Beilage* 4.



186. Honorific statues from the Allat sanctuary, 1st century, restored by Bartosz Markowski. Palmyra Museum



187. Honorific statues from the Allat sanctuary, another view

cuirassed statues (see p. 25). They were later moved to the edge of the temple podium, where their epigraph was copied and the statues themselves probably survived for centuries. Very many other bronze statues stood on column brackets, but all of them ended up in melting furnaces in later times. Only the inscriptions on the brackets remain in the Agora, in the street colonnades, and in sanctuaries. We learn from them that some effigies represented emperors and their family, Roman governors and military officers, but more often than not they represented the local worthies. Only two or three bronze fragments remain, and they do not differ from the usual Roman fare. As always, they were cast on a disposable core and were thus empty inside. Mention of them in the *Tariff* attests to their being imported, presumably from the great Greek cities of the West. There is no reason to believe, as it has been claimed, that they were brought from the Parthian East.

The column brackets, however, were invented no earlier than in the late first century, and most date to the second and third centuries. Until then, statues were set up on stone pedestals on the ground; some were replaced on brackets and their inscriptions copied, but the style of lettering is later than the dates. Those that were made of stone could not have been lifted up in this way, for they would have been too heavy to be supported. Only a few have been found, most of them carved in local stone.



188. Head of a honorific statue, from the Allat sanctuary, 1st century. Palmyra Museum



189. Torso in armour, part of a statue of a god, the Allat sanctuary, 1st century. Palmyra Museum

From a late foundation in the Allat sanctuary, a large number of broken fragments were recovered. Six statues were reassembled, none of them complete, and installed in the museum by Bartosz Markowski [Figs 186–187]. These statues show men slightly bigger than life size, clad in draped Greek cloaks, some worn over ample local trousers. Only one head was found, not matching any of them [Fig. 188]. Four very similar statues (and many fragments) were discovered in the Baalshamin sanctuary.²⁹² All are in the local soft limestone typical of the city's early sculpture, in the occurrence datable to the early first century. Sometimes, the figures are just sculpted in relief on column shafts (see Fig. 102).

One torso of a similar date, also from the Allat sanctuary, most likely represented a god [Fig. 189]. The figure wears armour of an early type, consisting of rows of tiny rectangular stripes between horizontal bands. Such so-called lamellar cuirass was made from hardened leather pieces sewn onto a cloth. Nothing of the sort was in use among Greeks and Romans; the closest parallels can be found in Central Asia. In Palmyra, lamellar armour appears in the first century as the outfit of the armed gods. Later, it is only the attribute of Bel, probably in imitation of the early cult image in his temple. If our torso indeed belonged to a god, it would be, together with another similar cuirassed fragment [Fig. 190], the only example of a divine statue preserved in Palmyra.

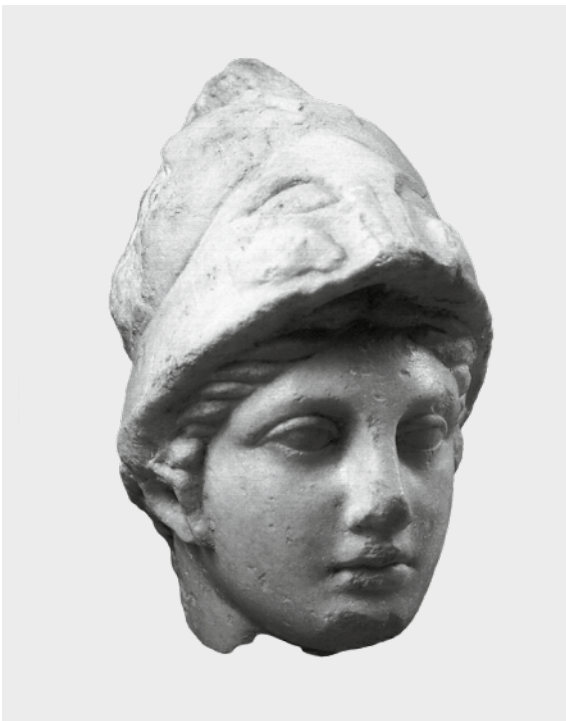
²⁹² Dunant, Stucky 2000, pp. 95–105, pl. 14–19.



190. An armoured torso, most likely another god. Palmyra Museum



191. Two funerary statues from the tomb called Qasr al-Abyad, examples of the "Parthian" costume. Palmyra Museum



192. Marble head of Athena, from a copy of a Greek statue of the Giustiniani type. Palmyra Museum



193. Limestone funerary statue of a woman, in the *Pudicitia* type. From the tomb of 'Alaine. Palmyra Museum

Later statues in the round are sometimes found in tombs but only very rarely. They are already carved in hard white limestone, a material in common use in the second and third centuries. Some display the local variant of the Iranian fashion: trousers and loose leggings, a short tunic, a dagger attached to the right thigh [Fig. 191]. A few are in imported marble and made by sculptors obviously trained in western workshops. They were destined to decorate public buildings, and indeed some were found in the Baths of Diocletian, which in fact was earlier than the name implies. Made from the marble of Proconnesos in the Marmara Sea, they represented Dionysos, probably Apollo, and at least two Romans, emperors or high officials.²⁹³ An Athena statue created in the time of Phidias for the temple of Ares on the Athenian Agora was copied on command in the second century in Athens in Pentelic marble;²⁹⁴ it probably would have been displayed in some prestigious surroundings before being removed to the Allat temple to replace the primitive statue destroyed there in 273 (see p. 142). An exquisite small head of Athena, also found in the Allat temple, was originally part of another decorative statue of the goddess [Fig. 192]. It belonged to the popular type known as Athena Giustiniani, copied after the fifth-century original attributed to Myron.²⁹⁵

Four natural size statues of Proconnesian marble were found discarded together close to the Agora and are kept today in the National Museum, Damascus (see Fig. 27). All four are headless. Two of them represented women draped in himations, being copies of types popular in Roman sculpture and known, respectively, as *Pudicitia* and *Grande Herculanaise*. Of the other two, one is holding effigies of his ancestors, following a custom of Roman aristocracy, and the other bears the marks of his senatorial rank. All four were made to stand against a wall and could form a family group. Jean-Charles Balty posited that what we have here is the royal family of Odainat and Zenobia (but who is the second lady?). This idea is founded on a fragmentary head (now lost) found probably together but not belonging to any of these statues, which Balty identified convincingly as a portrait of Odainat (see Fig. 34).²⁹⁶

In any case, these sculptures were made either in Asia Minor, close to the quarries, or by artists invited to work in Palmyra. Otherwise, we would in general expect the local production to show signs of acculturation to the Greco-Roman style. This, however, is minimal; I can quote just one funerary statue in local stone that more or less repeats the model of *Pudicitia* [Fig. 193], this being the funerary statue found by Anna Sadurska in the cave tomb of the 'Alaine family. Two similar fragments remain unpublished.²⁹⁷ All things considered, we can safely admit that two separate strains existed in parallel: a mass of local sculpture, both religious and funerary, and a few Western productions displayed in civic buildings. It would seem that the two styles had little effect on each other. While the proportion between the two might have been different because of the number of bronze statues that have been lost, this would hardly put into question their parallel, separate existence.

This is fully confirmed in certain arts other than sculpture. The architectural stucco decoration, for instance, does not differ in any way from the style of the time. The cornices, friezes, and figural elements such as human heads would have been at home anywhere in the Roman Empire. Such decorations have been found in four different locations in Palmyra, and yet they are largely uniform, even if some are of the late second century and others seem later [Figs 194–195].²⁹⁸ It is not unreasonable to suppose that there was just one workshop conveying the know-how acquired in western Syria over several generations, maybe owned by a Greek migrant family settled in the oasis.

²⁹³ Wielgosz 2000.

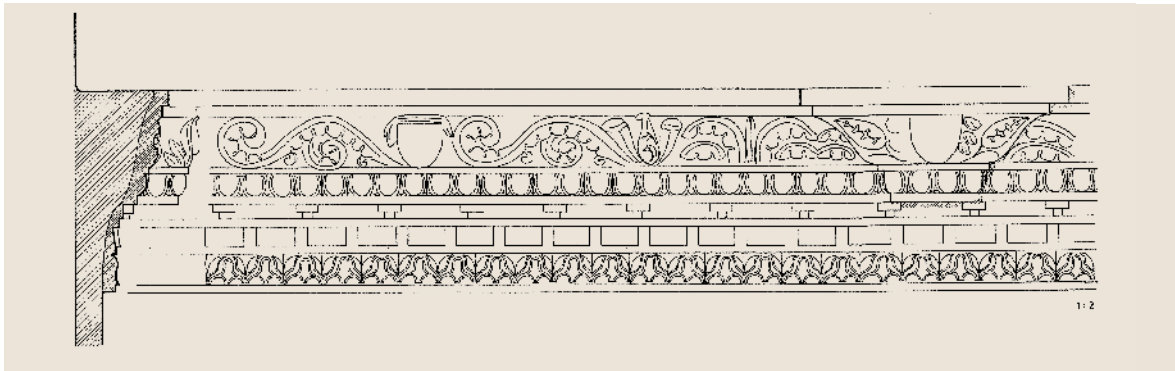
²⁹⁴ Gawlikowski 1996b. See recently Stewart 2016.

²⁹⁵ Gawlikowski 2017a, p. 223.

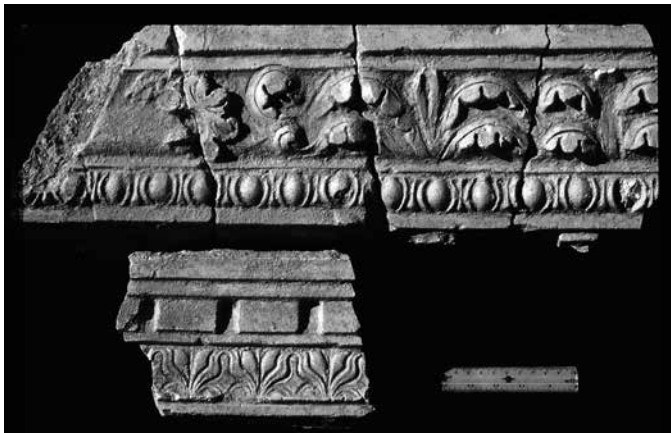
²⁹⁶ Balty (J.-Ch.) 2005, pp. 321–339.

²⁹⁷ Sadurska 1977, pp. 105–107 (hesitating on the prototype), but see Wielgosz 2000, p. 101.

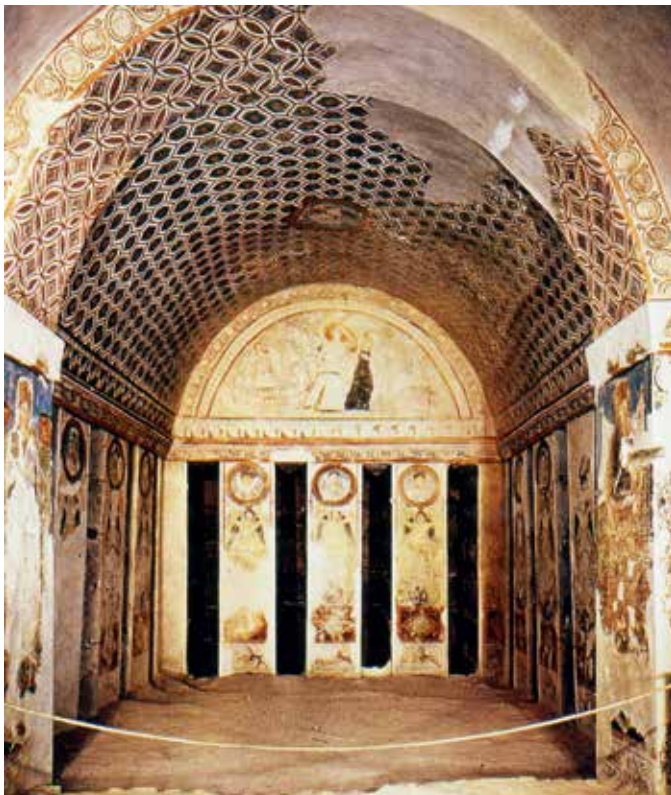
²⁹⁸ Parlasca 1985a; Fellmann, Dunant 1975; Fellmann 1975, pp. 61–97; Allag *et al.* 2010; Schmidt-Colinet 2005, pp. 54–62; Schmidt-Colinet, Al-As'ad 2013; Tober 2013, pp. 170–252; Dentzer-Feydy, Guimier-Sorbets, Delplace 2019, pp. 217–288 (papers by several authors).



194. A stucco cornice from a house in Palmyra



195. Another stucco fragment from the same house. Palmyra Museum



196. Front view of the painted exedra in the Three Brothers Tomb

Stucco work went hand in hand with painting. The use of colour tended to enhance at least some elements of friezes and cornices with gold or blue, a yellow line dividing them from the plain wall beneath, which was usually painted red. Not enough domestic architecture has been excavated to make generalisations. It cannot be excluded that painted scenes decorated the main rooms of some houses; after all, this was the case in Pompeii, a very average small Italian city, and the cost was certainly not prohibitive. The simple fact is that, whether they have been excavated or not, it is usually only the lowest parts of the houses, just above the floor, that are preserved.

As things now stand, the only painted decoration we know of in Palmyra that is more or less complete is in an underground tomb. It was founded by three brothers, Na'ama'in, Male, and Sa'edi, in the south-west necropolis and is known simply as the "Three Brothers Tomb" (see p. 163). The hypogeum was designed in the form of an inverted T, the entrance being at the meeting point of the three arms. The walls are pierced with sixty-five burial slots, making places for hundreds of bodies. In 142, the second brother made a monument for himself and his children in the left-hand gallery, probably not long after the tomb itself was ready. The front gallery ends in a square exedra opening under an arch. It is entirely painted [Fig. 196]. The colours have faded, in places to oblivion, since the tomb was discovered about 1900. Some visitors thought it clever to scribble their names over the paintings. The tomb served recently as the headquarters of a Daesh commander, and the paintings did not fare well under him. Fortunately, a few years before this, a program of recording and restoration was conducted by a French team headed by Hélène Eristov.²⁹⁹

The pillars dividing the *loculi* show winged Victories standing on globes and holding up roundels containing busts of men and women, thus symbolising their elevation to heavenly glory [Fig. 197]. It does not seem that precise individuals were meant. Equally anonymous are the figures of two women facing each other on the pilasters of the arch. Beneath the Victories there are small panels representing wild animals. The decoration was rather intended to impress the prospective buyers; indeed, a series of inscriptions documents sales by the three brothers of parts of the tomb to strangers.

The main scene filled the tympanum above the front *loculi*. It illustrates the well-known story of Achilles on Skyros [Fig. 198]: having been warned that he shall die young if he takes part in the Trojan War, the hero concealed himself in female disguise among the daughters of the king of this island, but he was discovered by a clever trick on the part of Ulysses, who pretended to be a merchant of arms. On seeing the tools of war, Achilles shed his robes to meet his destiny under the walls of Troy. Here, the hero, standing in the middle, is still in his queer attire, but already he wields a spear and shield. The frightened daughters of King Lykomedes try in vain to retain him. Ulysses is on the left, a trumpeter on the right. Here, Achilles symbolises the soul abandoning the material prison of the body on its journey to the heavenly sphere. On the vaulted ceiling, which is covered with a dense pattern of hexagons – each with a golden rosette in the middle suggesting the heavenly stars – there is a medallion which shows against a blue background the young Ganymedes being raptured by the eagle of Zeus. The mythical story of the beautiful shepherd, whom the father of the gods wanted for his cupbearer, clearly symbolised the soul being taken to heaven [Fig. 199]. All this carries a lofty message: the human soul should free itself from the worldly bonds to ascend to heaven. A similar idea would have been conveyed by a painting from the nearby tomb of Hairan of the early second century [Figs 200–201].³⁰⁰ Here, the decoration is not nearly as well preserved, but the winged Victories crowning a likeness of the deceased and the eagle spreading its wings on top of one wall seem to announce the journey to heaven. Such notions did not find their expression in other monuments and inscriptions at Palmyra. These Greek myths, illustrated in

²⁹⁹ Eristov, Vibert-Guigue 2019.

³⁰⁰ Ingholt 1932.



197. Victories carrying busts of the deceased, a side wall of the Three Brothers Tomb

purely Western style, show the degree to which certain circles in Palmyra – ones that were not necessarily deeply attached to ancestral traditions – were attracted by the esoteric Greek philosophy of the age.

The painter of the Three Brothers was obviously foreign or at least educated in a Greek city. Nor can we doubt that the artists of the mosaics were of foreign origin. The museum was in possession of five panels that were lifted from one house east of the Bel temple in 1940; another floor was found in 2005 in a banqueting hall by the Great Colonnade.³⁰¹ All are dated to the second half of the third century. As very few houses have been excavated in the town, we are unable to say whether mosaics were indeed rare in Palmyra. In the great Syrian cities, such as Antioch, Apamea, and Zeugma, they were a common sight in many rich residences, and later in churches, but they are conspicuously absent in all four churches excavated in Palmyra. At any rate, those that we have are connected with the time of Zenobia. The program realised in the house east of Bel has been deciphered by Janine Balty as an expression of Neoplatonist philosophy.³⁰² One of the leading representatives of this school was Longinus, the author of, among other writings, a funeral oration on Odainat; he was also one of Zenobia's close collaborators and paid with his life for having been her advisor (see p. 84). While this does not mean that he resided in the oasis, and even less in this very house, he was certainly appreciated in the high circles in Palmyra, and he might

³⁰¹ Stern 1977; Balty (J.) 2014; Gawlikowski, Żuchowska 2010.

³⁰² Balty (J.) 1995, pp. 291–297.



198. Achilles on Skyros, painting in the lunette of the back wall



199. The rapture of Ganymedes on the vault of the Three Brothers Tomb



200. The spread eagle, painting in the underground tomb of Hairan



201. A deceased being crowned by Victories (under the eagle, tomb of Hairan)



202. Achilles on Skyros, a mosaic from the house east of the Bel sanctuary. Palmyra Museum



203. Cassiopeia, queen of Ioppe (Jaffa) winning a beauty contest in front of Poseidon, mosaic from the same house. National Museum, Damascus

have advised the owner of the house how to render metaphorically the central idea of the program. This was the liberation of a noble soul from material bondage, symbolised by the myth of Achilles on Skyros [Fig. 202], which we have already seen in paintings from the preceding century. Another panel shows the judgment of the Nereids, who, contrary to the more popular version of the myth, give the prize of beauty to Queen Cassiopeia [Fig. 203]. The victorious lady reveals herself just as the hidden beauty of the soul is revealed by the doctrine of Plotinus.

The mosaic floor by the Colonnade is even more directly linked to the same period of history. It represents on two panels the husband of Zenobia, Odainat, and his son Herodianus. The allusion is to their victory over the Persians in 260 (Figs 35–37). This floor could have been executed any time between this date and their death in 267. Odainat is shown under the guise of the mythical Bellerophon riding the winged horse Pegasus and killing the monster Chimaera, symbolising the Persian king Shapur; far from the usual nakedness of Greek heroes, Odainat wears the local costume, consisting of trousers and a richly embroidered kaftan, while eagles bring him crowns of victory. His son is dressed in the same way and is hunting tigers, famously fierce animals living in Persia. The distinctive garb of the Palmyrene aristocracy points clearly to the two “kings of kings” who triumphed over the enemy and tried to take Ctesiphon and replace Shapur (see pp. 64–65). In spite of the local touch, the mosaic conforms in its composition and side motifs to contemporary floors in the Greek Syrian cities. It is clear that the artist responsible came from Antioch or another great city of western Syria.

A Western visitor to Palmyra probably did not feel that he was in an entirely unfamiliar place. The street view offered Corinthian columns crowned with an entablature not different from what could be seen anywhere else around the Mediterranean. If the column brackets were unusual, the bronze statues standing on them were probably very much like those in many other cities of the Roman Near East. Most doubled their Aramaic epigraphs with a Greek version accessible to strangers. Many passers-by wore Greek himations. True, some others sported Oriental trousers, embroidered tunics and kaftans, and the passing ladies were modestly veiled and perhaps covered their faces. But the temples looked outwardly classical and revealed their unusual features only on closer inspection. Foreign visitors might have found



204. A beam from the Bel temple showing the combat of gods against a monster, late 1st century



205. Aglibol and Malakbel shaking hands in their garden. The other side of the same beam of the Bel temple

the tower tombs surprising, but much less so the more recent mausoleums. The latter were decorated rather more generously than was usual around the Mediterranean, but the patterns were familiar: dense vegetal scrolls with grapes or other fruit, sometimes animated by birds or plump Erotes. A keen observer would notice that the same patterns occurred on the clothes of those members of the public who wore trousers and kaftans.

A visit to a sanctuary would confront the stranger with images completely different from what he was used to. The honorific statues of more or less familiar aspect and the ubiquitous Corinthian columns stood next to surprising sculptures in low relief offering the frontal view of gods and mortals. The most notable examples of these decorated the upright stone beams standing under the roof of the colonnade around the Bel temple (see p. 122). Only two beams sculpted on both vertical sides were partly preserved before the recent destruction, while thirty-two more had been lost earlier, except for some insignificant fragments. Judging from the two that can be safely described, these reliefs, once painted in bright colours, illustrated myths, godheads, and scenes of sacrifice related to various sanctuaries of the city.³⁰³ Especially striking is the combat scene involving a serpent-legged monster in female dress [Fig. 204], often interpreted as the primeval Tiamat of the Babylonian creation story known from its first words as *Enuma elish*.³⁰⁴ The poem was recited in Babylon at the New Year festival (in Akkadian called *Akitu*), which was also celebrated in Palmyra and which saw the dedication of the temple in 32. The monster is being attacked by a god in a chariot (on a broken fragment) and another on horseback, one of whom is presumably Bel himself. A dog is also taking part in the assault. A row of other gods, however, look straight ahead and seem to pay no attention to the ongoing engagement. It is their presence that was essential, and this is expressed by their frontal position, though no visual contact with the public was possible high above the columns. The scene is radically modernised by the aspect of the gods: the four standing right behind the mounted figure wear the muscled cuirass just like on statues of Roman emperors but also like legionary officers in real life, differing only in that they are holding the spears and small round shields of the local desert warriors. Their heads are intentionally damaged and we cannot attach names to them without guessing. At the right end of the beam stand the naked Herakles and a goddess of which only the lower brim of her long robe is preserved.

The other side of this beam showed the garden sanctuary of 'Aglibol and Malakbel [Fig. 205]. Above an altar laden with fruit, the gods shake hands not looking at each other but standing to front, as statesmen of today do when posing for the press. To their right a temple was represented, only partially preserved, and to their left, two figures in native dress. The feet of these are shown in right profile, but the torsos and probably the heads were frontal. This minor exception from the general rule of frontality cannot be explained anymore by the early date of the relief: as demonstrated above, the reliefs are not dated to 32 but rather to much later (see p. 117).

Another beam featured a camel carrying some unseen objects under a palanquin, led by a cameleer in the footsteps of an animal (a horse or donkey) which is let loose [Fig. 206]. In front of the procession, a *tropaion* is being fixed in the ground by a crouching person (a *tropaion* is a trophy, a piece of armour that is torn off a killed enemy and set up on a pole, in the Greek custom erected on a battlefield).³⁰⁵ The meaning of the scene in this case is open to interpretation. It has been speculated that a temple's site was thus chosen by the deity. Men and women assist at the scene, the men raising their hands in a gesture of wonder, the women entirely veiled. Because of this, this part of the relief has survived intact, while the faces and hands of the men, and even the body of the camel, have been carefully chiselled off.

³⁰³ Seyrig 1934; Colledge 1976, pp. 34–38.

³⁰⁴ But see Dirven 1997.

³⁰⁵ Gawlikowski 2016b.



206. The camel procession and planting of a *tropaion*. Another beam of the Bel temple

The other side of the second beam only showed priests standing in pairs on either side of altars with burning incense. It is possible that the missing beam reliefs illustrated the mythology of the oasis, now unknown. The surviving scenes give tantalising glimpses of it: an origin story, a “Holy Garden” (the only subject about which we are certain), and, finally, the mythical settling of the oasis or the founding of a sanctuary, perhaps, as recently proposed, that of Allat.³⁰⁶

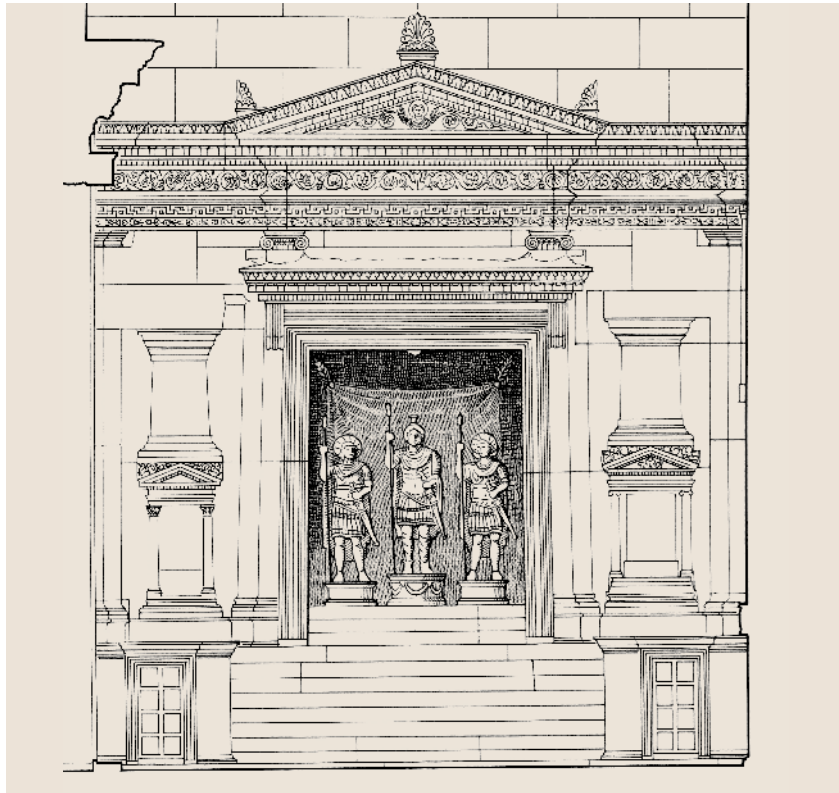
The cult image of the Bel temple could not have survived of course, either in the church or in the mosque that were installed in its walls in later centuries. The main niche preserved in its back wall several mortises which could have fixed a huge bronze relief. The idea that there were three standing statues, one each of Bel, Yarhibol, and ‘Aglibol, as proposed by the official publication [Fig. 207],³⁰⁷ cannot stand because the statues, unless they were preposterously small, would have blocked the entrance to the staircase on the left and a recess to the right where the rites of sacred marriage probably took place. An alternative view is offered by a votive relief dated 128, now in Lyon [Fig. 208].³⁰⁸ There, Bel is seated at the right, while Baalshamin is depicted at the left. Between them stand Yarhibol and ‘Aglibol in their Roman armour, but Bel wears the old-fashioned lamellar cuirass we have already seen on Shadrafa in 51 (see Fig. 181). It could be a reflection of the cult statue in his temple.

The difference between the two supreme gods of Palmyra is repeated on some monuments that are less well preserved. One of them, on a basin probably used to mix wine and water at cult occasions, dated 38/39, shows them feasting together (see p. 179). There is then good reason to suppose that the lamellar cuirass, once a popular type of armour in the Syrian desert, became the characteristic of Bel, as it could

³⁰⁶ Dirven 1998.

³⁰⁷ Seyrig, Amy, Will 1968, pl. 138.

³⁰⁸ Briquel-Chatonnet, Lozachmeur 1998.



207. Graphic reconstruction of the northern adyton of Bel



208. A votive relief with Bel and Baalshamin seated with two standing gods. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon



209. Three cuirassed gods from Bir Wereb, 1st century. Musée du Louvre, Paris

be seen on his statue in the temple. This statue could well be older than the temple itself in the form we know, having been transferred from the original shrine on the same spot to the new adyton as soon as possible to consecrate it in 32. Whether a statue or, less likely, a relief, the image was impressed on the imagination of the Palmyrenes and imitated as long as the cult continued. Likewise, the image of Baalshamin as a bearded figure in civilian clothes was inspired by the cult relief in his temple. We only have a clumsy drawing of it, made by an ancient visitor (see Fig. 101). As the frame of this image was found and reassembled in the temple, it is certain that it was a relief, and, given its dimensions, it could be only a bronze plaque (p. 128).³⁰⁹

I have already mentioned (p. 178) a magnificent first-century relief in the Louvre, found in the desert station of Bir Wereb on one of the desert tracks between Palmyra and the Euphrates [Fig. 209].³¹⁰ Three gods faced the worshippers, who have left a number of signatures in the field. All three wear lamellar armour and grasp the sword attached to their side, their right hands raised in a gesture of benediction. The faces are intact, a rare occurrence. In the centre stands a bearded god in narrow cylindrical headgear (called *calathos* in Greek) and a royal scarf wound on his front, the loose ends flowing behind. On his left there is a solar god with a rayed nimbus behind his head; on the right, a nearly identical Moon god with a crescent added to his nimbus. The relief was interpreted as representing the “triad of Baalshamin”, but the central figure, because of the armour, cannot be Baalshamin, at least not as he had always been represented in Palmyra.

The armed gods are typical of Palmyrene imagery. If not cuirassed, either as here in a peculiar type of armour or in a regular Roman military outfit, they were shown as desert warriors [Fig. 210]. With the exception of Allat (who is most often represented as Athena, sporting the aegis, a spear, and shield), the goddesses are not armed. The military character of this pantheon was explained by Henri Seyrig as characteristic of Arab cults.³¹¹ The Bedouin out in the desert were at all times, he says, either in danger of a sudden attack or preparing to fall on another camp themselves. These chivalrous robberies are indeed the subject of much of Pre-Islamic poetry and remained a very frequent activity in times not so remote.

³⁰⁹ Gawlikowski, Pietrzykowski 1980.

³¹⁰ Dentzer-Feydy, Teixidor 1993, pp. 144–145.

³¹¹ Seyrig 1970.



210. A relief with armed gods from the Palmyrene. Palmyra Museum

The settled population had good reasons, too, to seek divine protection against the desert robbers, who could appear any time. The caravans needed such protection even more keenly. So Palmyra relied on a host of warrior deities and adopted for most of them the appearance of the very best army of the time, the Roman legions.

One last example of a cult relief was found near the Nabu temple, though it was probably exhibited in a small shrine close by, later embedded in the Late Roman defensive wall [Fig. 211].³¹² It shows a goddess sitting on a throne, an eagle perched on it, and a dog sitting next to it. Her identity remains unknown, as the incomplete inscription has only preserved the words “the good goddess”. By her side, another goddess stands, holding an olive branch, a crown in the form of a fortified rampart on her head; she must be the tutelary deity of Tadmor/Palmyra. In Greek she was known as Tyche; in Aramaic, as Gad. The sitting goddess tramples the diminutive figure of a prostrate man with outstretched arms seen from behind, his face turned to show his right profile. The resemblance to the famous Hellenistic sculptural group of Tyche of Antioch, with the personification of the river Orontes swimming at her feet, led naturally enough to the greater goddess being considered Tyche of Palmyra and the little man as the Efqa spring. This can hardly be right, as the man is fully dressed; that the man would be swimming in a himation is very improbable despite the fact that this is what the movement suggests. This strange detail remains unexplained.

In this case, as also with some other sitting figures just quoted, the feet are shown in three-quarters view, but the rest of the body is turned to front. Such small and partial departures from the general rule are rare.

Early funerary reliefs did not differ in their mode of representation from votive reliefs. Modest inhumation burials were marked by stone slabs of soft limestone rounded on top, their lower rough part fixed

³¹² Will 1985a.



211. The “good goddess” and Tyche of Tadmor. National Museum, Damascus



212. Aitibel b. Zabda standing behind a curtain, 1st century. Palmyra Museum

in the ground. These stone slabs are usually about 40 cm high and bear a standing frontal figure identified by an inscription. There is no attempt at rendering the individual traits of a person; instead, all that is given is the image of a man, a woman, or a child. The males wear the local garb, consisting of a sleeved tunic girdled with a cloth bound at front; the women, a long veil over their robes. On some slabs a curtain is nailed behind the deceased, unless the person is half hidden behind it [Fig. 212] or the curtain is represented alone [Fig. 213].³¹³

Most of these small monuments were found to the north of the ancient city when foundations were dug for the houses of the new town in the 1930s. A few, however, were moved in antiquity to the underground family tombs of the southeast necropolis [Fig. 214]. They were called *nefesh*, that is, “soul” or “self” in Aramaic, suggesting that the dead were thought to inhabit the stone and to continue some kind of existence in their monument. With time, the word came to mean simply “funerary monument” and was sometimes applied to tower tombs.

More affluent families built towers to contain scores of burials in the *loculi* reserved in their walls. In the early towers, the burials were just walled up and the name of the deceased could be scribbled in wet mortar. The interiors were cramped and the walls leaned inwards, precluding a sculpted decoration.

In the second half of the first century, a new form of tombstone appears. The figures of the deceased were no longer portrayed as standing but instead were cut roughly at the waist. Their posture is strictly

³¹³ See e.g. Tanabe 1986, pl. 256–278; Sadurska, Bounni 1994, figs 1–7. A complete catalogue in Raja 2019b, pp. 76–144.



213. An early free-standing funerary stele with a veil signifying the departed, 1st century. Palmyra Museum



214. Stele of a standing woman ('Aguba b. Rami) from the underground tomb of Taimo'amad, Southeast Necropolis, 2nd century. Palmyra Museum

frontal as in the religious sculptures, but the relief is higher, the heads often just attached at the back to the slab forming the support. Hundreds upon hundreds of tombstones from Palmyra are kept in museums and collections round the world. The comprehensive corpus that is currently being prepared in Copenhagen goes beyond four thousand sculptures, complete or fragmentary, some grouping together two or three persons.³¹⁴ This number is more than preserved in any other place in the Roman Empire, excepting perhaps the city of Rome itself. The Palmyrene portraits are all very much alike: half-figures from the waist up stick out in high relief from rectangular slabs of fairly uniform dimensions, in general between 40 and 60 cm. Whoever has seen a couple of these likenesses will immediately recognise any other as Palmyrene.³¹⁵ This uniform class of artworks, mass produced and extending over two centuries, had to have a common origin.

The earliest such sculpture that can be approximately dated is now in the British Museum. The stele, rounded at the top, represents a couple whose half-figures are set on a ledge bearing the names of the deceased in Greek: Gaius Virius Alkimos and Viria Phoibe [Fig. 215]. Both were former slaves, freed by their master Virius (unless he had freed only Alkimos, who later freed his wife). The stone comes from a tomb which was founded in 56/57 by two publicans (tax collectors), Alkimos and his partner Statilius,

³¹⁴ Raja 2017, 2019.

³¹⁵ Principal collections: Ingholt 1928; Tanabe 1986, pl. 279–373; Sadurska, Bounni 1994; Raja 2019a.



215. Alkimos and Phoibe, double tombstone, from their tomb dated 56/57. The British Museum, London



216. A family tombstone from the region of Zeugma. Private collection

the inscription proudly proclaiming the foundation date in three languages: in Latin, Greek, and Aramaic.³¹⁶ Both men are mentioned in the *Tariff* recalling the precedents of their practice (see p. 32). They were strangers in Palmyra, but Alkimos' wife is dressed in local style, with a front band and veil, holding a spindle and distaff.

These half-figures were a novelty much more striking for the eyes of the Palmyrenes than they are for us. Up until then, all human figures in the art of Palmyra had been complete from the tops of their heads to their toes. Showing just one half of a person went against the habits not only of Palmyra, but those of the arts of the whole Ancient Near East from the very beginning, irrespective of the changing styles through the ages. It was definitely a Western concept, more precisely a Roman one.

Indeed, a series of half-figure tombstones existed in Italy and in particular in the city of Rome. They very often represent freedmen and their families, though by no means exclusively.³¹⁷ Usually, two or several persons are aligned together on the façades of family tombs, as can be seen, for instance, on the Via Appia in Rome. From Syria, we have a range of tombstones that show the deceased in half-figure in a niche from a region of the upper Euphrates, between Zeugma and Hierapolis.³¹⁸ Family groups of two to four half-figures also exist [Fig. 216]. It should be recalled that a Roman legion was stationed in Zeugma, so the area is likely to have been influenced by Italian habits, though none of these tombstones belonged to soldiers. At any rate, the freedman publican Alkimos did belong to the category of professionals who favoured this type of monument in Italy. While we cannot affirm that the tombstone of himself and Phoibe started the vogue of half-figure funerary sculptures in Palmyra, it is certainly the oldest one of this type known from the oasis.

The head of a woman in relief in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen is often quoted as the oldest sculpture of this type: it is dated about 10 years later, to 65/66 [Fig. 217].³¹⁹ In fact, it could have been part of a standing figure in relief. Such figures continued to be made well into the second century and later.³²⁰ A good example is the stele of 'Alaisha, who is marked as deceased by the veil hung behind him [Fig. 218]. Here, 'Alaisha is accompanied by his mother and his deceased younger brother; he is also consoled by his nurse (a woman called Zaqatrati, a foreign name of unknown origin hinting at her servile status), who hugs him affectionately.³²¹ The women hold bowls filled with food for the dead; the bigger one is for the elder brother, while the smaller one is for the boy. They are both dressed identically, with a sleeved robe folded over a belt and a long veil poised on the head. They wear no usual headbands or jewels to mark their mourning. It is remarkable that even their faces are nearly identical, while those of the brothers differ only by size.

The vast majority of the tombstones only present the upper body. Let us take a closer look at some of them. The man called Yarhibola b. Shalamallat, also known in Greek as Heliodoros, is shown wearing a long shirt with sleeves; his body is covered with a Greek-style mantle [Fig. 219]. His right arm hangs in the folds of the mantle as in a sling, while the left is enveloped in the loose end of the garment. This is the standard attire of a Greek gentleman, well adapted to leisurely strolling on the agora in the company of other respected citizens who never engaged in manual labour. His ample beard, often the conventional hallmark of a philosopher, may hint at his intellectual interests. Whether this likeness resembled the real Heliodoros is another matter. Most similar sculptures do not show any individual traits.

Another man, Malku b. Dionysios b. Hennibel, is clean-shaven. Having neither a beard nor any hair on his head, he wears a cylindrical headgear (probably made of leather in real life) marking him as

³¹⁶ Gawlikowski 1998.

³¹⁷ See e.g. Kockel 1993.

³¹⁸ Parlasca 1981, 1985b; Blömer, Raja 2019.

³¹⁹ Colledge 1976, pl. 77; Raja 2019a, p. 66, 1.

³²⁰ Colledge 1976, pp. 66–67, pl. 68, 71–75.

³²¹ Gawlikowski 1971, pp. 421–426.



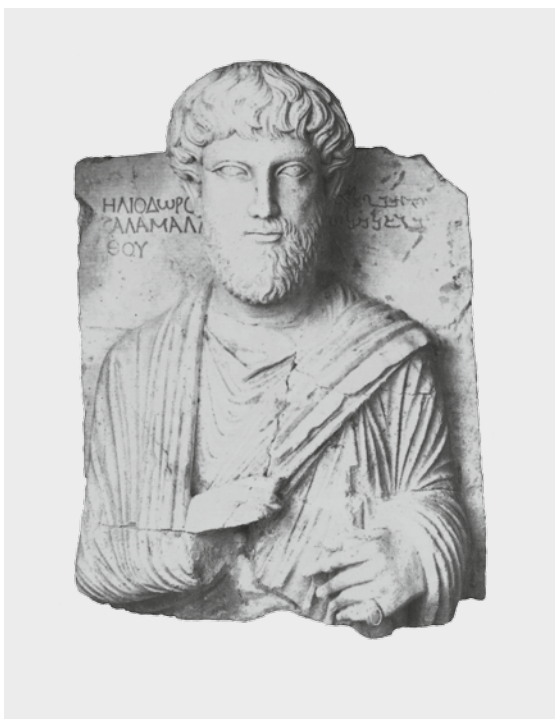
217. The head of the wife of Bar'ate, fragment of the earliest dated (AD 65/66) tombstone. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen



218. 'Alaisha comforted by his nanny, with his mother and little brother, late 1st century. Formerly collection Henri Pharaon, Beirut

a priest [Fig. 220].³²² His tunic is girdled and his shoulders are covered by a short mantle pinned on the right with a flower-shaped brooch. He is holding a small bottle and a box for frankincense, ready to sacrifice to his god. Between them, these two sculptures represent the great majority of all male portraits. Hardly any of them attempt to reproduce the individual appearance of the deceased, but a likeness, now in a wall in the Gołuchów Castle in Western Poland, seems to be one of the rare exceptions. The man, one 'Atiqā b. Malku, who died in 200, looks like a true portrait [Fig. 221]. Very rarely, do we find a hint

³²² Sadurska, Bounni 1994, 196.



219. Yarhibola-Heliodoros, from the tomb of Bariki, 2nd century. Palmyra Museum



220. Malku son of Dionysios in the priestly cap and with instruments of sacrifice, tomb of Shalamallat, 2nd century. Palmyra Museum



221. 'Atiqa son of Malku, dated 200. The Gołuchów Castle, Poland



222. A merchant and his camel, mid-2nd century. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen



223. A meharist (camel-riding soldier) Shokai, 2nd century



224. Vibius Apollinaris, a horseman of the *ala Herculiana*, a mounted unit stationing in Palmyra in the 2nd century. Musée du Louvre, Paris

of an occupation other than priestly duties: a man with a laden camel shown behind his left shoulder could have been a caravan merchant [Fig. 222]; another, who clasps the hilt of his sword, holds a whip, and carries a quiver behind his shoulder was no doubt a native soldier in a camel squadron [Fig. 223]. Another mounted meharist deserved an epitaph in Latin, being a Roman citizen [Fig. 224].³²³ A young deceased (as the curtain hanging behind him indicates) called Zabda b.‘Ogga also holds the hilt in his left hand [Fig. 225].³²⁴

The ladies are just as numerous. Before the second century, they were rather seen as housewives [Fig. 226]. Their effigies tend to show them without jewellery, or only with a very modest set of ornaments; in their left hand they hold a spindle and a distaff, symbols of the domestic occupations fit for a virtuous lady. They wear a veil over their head and put it aside with one hand to reveal their face. An early tombstone of a couple shows the modestly clad lady holding a ring set with knobs, being some domestic utensil [Fig. 227].³²⁵ In real life, the women probably went about in public entirely covered, as is frequently the case even today throughout the Near East (see Fig. 206). In tombs, however, the womenfolk were visited by their relatives only and thus were allowed to be seen. Later, ostentation clearly prevailed [Figs 228–229]. An anonymous lady [Fig. 230] was portrayed in full attire, proudly displaying all her jewels: necklaces studded with precious stones, elaborate pendants, a huge brooch with chains,

³²³ Seyrig 1933b.

³²⁴ Sadurska, Bounni 1994, 185.

³²⁵ Sadurska, Bounni 1994, 37.



225. Zabda bar 'Ogga grasping a sword, from the tomb of Zabda. Palmyra Museum



226. An old-fashioned housewife Bathanna, adept of weaving, holding spindle, distaff, and a key. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen



227. A married couple Malku and Abraniq, late 1st – early 2nd century. Palmyra Museum



228. Bust of Ba'a, tomb of Shalamallat, 2nd half of the 2nd century. Palmyra Museum



229. Portrait of Aqme in an elaborate bonnet, 3rd century, from the tomb of Bariki, Southwest Necropolis. Palmyra Museum

earrings with pearl pendants, granulated armlets and twisted bracelets; her hair is covered with a kind of turban, and at the front there is a large embroidered band on which more chains with inserted gems hang. All this was enhanced with painted colours, here well preserved.³²⁶ Another woman holds a baby in her lap without putting aside all her jewellery [Fig. 231].³²⁷ All these ornaments were surely of gold or silver, while the stones could be rubies, emeralds, or sapphires brought from India and elsewhere. Even today, many Oriental women carry their gold on them at all times.

All these slabs once closed the burial slots in towers, hypogea, and lavish mausolea around the desert city (see Fig. 141). The bodies were shoved head first into these deep and narrow compartments and walled up. The portraits were often painted with bright colours to enhance the jewels and let them shine in the glimmering light of oil lamps.³²⁸ Upon visiting the family tomb, the relatives would have been able to admire their ancestors of both sexes going back several generations, read their names, and learn about them from their elders.³²⁹ In modern times, all the standing monuments were already empty. Having escaped the attention of robbers, only a few dozen sculptures have been found by archaeologists in the underground tombs. Some of these tombs have been carefully restored after discovery and opened to the public, but they were broken into and destroyed by looters during the civil war, just like some others never opened before. If any intact tombs remain in Palmyra, nobody knows about them yet.

For many long centuries, however, nobody was interested. The sculptures were a far cry from the classical ideal and were judged provincial and primitive. The locals explored the tombs, of course, but hardly

³²⁶ Nielsen, Raja 2019, p. 10.

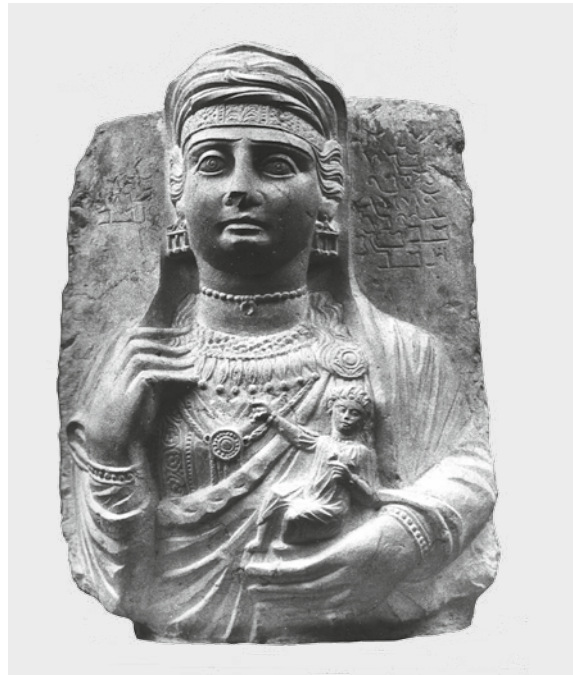
³²⁷ Sadurska, Bounni 1994, 190.

³²⁸ Buccarella Hedegard, Brøns 2019.

³²⁹ Yon 2002, pp. 165–232.



230. A portrait of a bejewelled lady, with remains of colours, the so-called Beauty of Palmyra, 3rd century. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen



231. Shulla and her baby daughter Amat, from the tomb of Bolbarak, 2nd century. Palmyra Museum

anything of value could be found there: the dead were deposited in their slots without any belongings, just bound up in linen straps and used cloth imbibed in resins which would assure the desiccation of the body. Because these rags were reputed to heal the wounds of beasts of burden, most burials were opened to recover them, but the sculptures sealing the burials were simply broken and sometimes taken away as building material. None left the oasis until they came to be popular among European collectors in the nineteenth century. The first major collection of Palmyrene sculpture was assembled by the brewer Carl Jacobsen in Copenhagen, who founded the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. His collection was acquired through the intermediary of Julius Løytved, the Danish consul in Beirut in the 1880s. Today, it includes 126 sculptures from Palmyra, this being the biggest collection outside of Syria.³³⁰ Before archaeologists seized their chance, hundreds of sculptures were expatriated.

The vogue saved the tombstones from destruction, but at a price. They are now, first of all, works of art detached from their original surroundings. Fortunately, many of them have the names of the depicted persons inscribed in stone, together with their genealogy and sometimes with the dates of their death; this makes it possible to regroup the families dispersed by looters and fix them in time. An attempt to classify these funerary sculptures was undertaken by the Danish scholar Harald Ingholt, who started with the Copenhagen collection and then went on to enrich his files with as many pieces from elsewhere as he could find.³³¹ He has distinguished three stylistic groups: the first going up to about 150, the second from 150 to 200, and the third up to 272, taking into account such traits as the way in which the iris was marked, the hairstyle, the manner in which the folds of the garments were modelled, etc. Needless to say, this chronology has since been refined on some points, but basically it still stands strong.

³³⁰ Nielsen, Raja 2019, pp. 23–39.

³³¹ Ingholt 1928. See Nielsen, Raja 2019, pp. 41–46.

A comprehensive corpus of Palmyrene portraits is now being prepared, also in Copenhagen, by a team headed by Rubina Raja.³³²

The changing fashions as depicted on the portraits of Roman emperors and their wives, which could be seen by everyone in public places and even more often on coins, was largely followed in the provinces as the so-called *Zeitgesicht*. These fashions, however, took some time to reach the Palmyra workshops. Just as the haircuts of the early emperors up to Trajan can be seen in short locks of hair combed down on the front, so the curly hair and beard of the emperor Hadrian and his successors are reflected in the regular rings of small coils from the middle of the second century. Both hairstyles run parallel for quite a while and seem to be more a matter of habit in particular workshops than conscious imitation of imperial iconography. The coiffures of empresses are harder to trace, as the ladies of Palmyra used to cover their heads, with only rare exceptions.

As with all other sculptures of Palmyra, funerary portraits are characterised in the first place by their frontality. Only a few third-century likenesses mark a timid turn of the head without really changing the direction of the gaze. All look us straight in the eye and show very little variation in gestures. The minute details of dress and adornment are rendered with the utmost accuracy. While the level of craftsmanship naturally varies, even the best pieces cannot pretend to be original creations. This was not the aim of the sculptors, who produced a few standard types, such as a man in Greek drapery, a priest, a woman, sometimes a married couple. Some ladies carry a baby in their lap; these are shown as diminutive adults. Other children stand sometimes behind the shoulder of a parent; their stature suggests they are minors, but they are clad in a complete adult attire. Preciously few pieces give the impression of a real portrait with individual features; most are practically interchangeable. Cases have been spotted of nearly identical sculptures inscribed with different names, and at least one lady, for some reason, had two different portraits prepared for her. Each time, the intention was to represent a particular person, but no physical resemblance was sought. Here, we are dealing with intentional portraits, not portraits in the proper sense of the word.

Some tomb owners attempted more ambitious commemorations. The earliest example still in place until it was dynamited in 2015 was the sculpture in the arcaded niche of the Kitot tower (see Fig. 131). Here, a dining bed in relief was placed under a vine scroll like in a bower. On a thick embroidered mattress, the master reclined while his wife and two sons stood behind him (the figure of a servant was broken off long ago). Under the bed, the inscription gave their names and a date corresponding to 40. A few similar niches in other tombs were empty when first recorded [Fig. 232], but a similar scene figures on a stone still lying in the Valley of the Tombs; its sides were also sculpted, one with the image of an ox pulling a wagon laden with a block of stone from the quarry [Fig. 233]. The quarry of white hard limestone, of which practically all standing monuments and sculptures but the oldest ones were made, was investigated by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet [Figs 234–235].³³³ The way from it to the city is scattered with blocks abandoned when a cart got broken and the stone could not be lifted on another one. Indeed, the charging could be done only on a ramp in the place where the block had been chopped off from the rock. Some half-finished columns were left in the quarry, probably marking the end of exploitation [Fig. 236].

Another early banquet scene was found in 1959 by Kazimierz Michałowski in the unfinished underground tomb of Zabda: a plaque with the intact figure, in high relief, of the reclining founder, cup in hand, was matched with the seated sculpture of his wife, Beltihan. This sculpture was made to be adjusted at the feet of her husband [Fig. 237].

³³² See, for the time being, Kropp, Raja 2014; Raja 2017.

³³³ Schmidt-Colinet 1990; Schmidt-Colinet in: Aruz 2017, pp. 69–71.

232. Empty arcade with a banquet couch. Front of the Elahbel tower



233. Transport of stones from the quarry. A relief in the Valley of the Tombs



The inscription over the likeness of the man runs as follows:

These are the images of Zabda son of Moqimu Bakri and of Beltihan daughter of Etpeni, his wife, who has made this house of eternity and the building above it. They are buried behind these images.

These first-century sculptures were simply deposited in the tomb, apparently abandoned before any orderly arrangement could be made. The plaque of Zabda features a mattress, but no banquet couch was found. Nor was any trace found of a structure above, as referred to in the inscription.



234. The quarry 10 km north from Palmyra, the source of the hard white limestone of which the city is built



235. Another view of the quarry



236. Shaped columns abandoned in the quarry



237. Banqueting Zabda and his wife Beltihan. Palmyra Museum



238. The triclinium in the Three Brothers Tomb

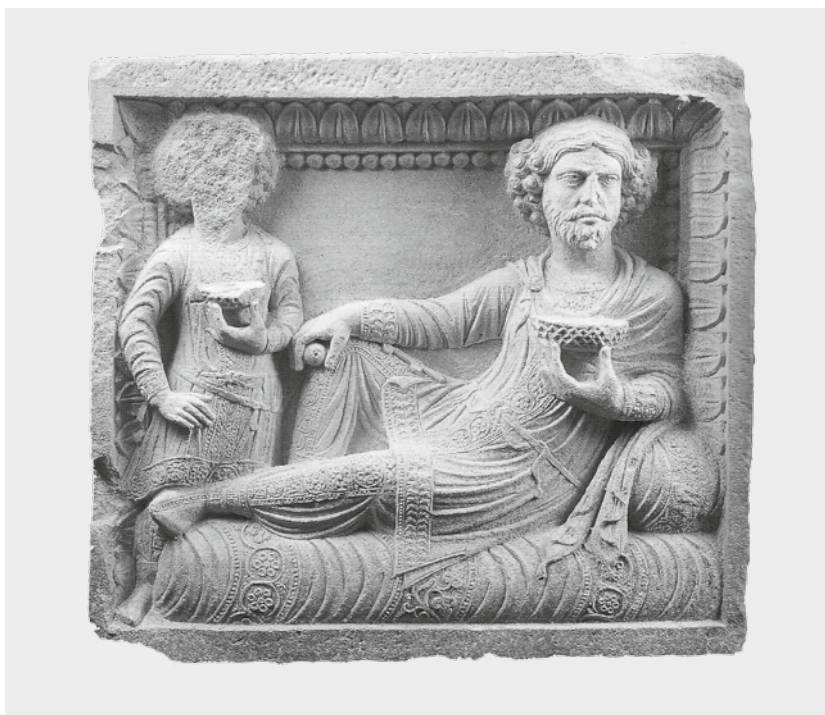
The habit of dining while lounging on a couch and propped up on the left elbow was customary among the Greeks and Romans. It was adopted among the upper class in the Roman Near East, while the common people rather favoured the squatting position, just as today. This solemn meal became a motif of funerary



239. The front of a sarcophagus with a riding camel led by a retainer. Palmyra Museum



240. A miniature banquet with a reclining man and his servant. Palmyra Museum



241. Another anonymous miniature banquet. Palmyra Museum

imagery, the deceased half-lying on a bed (Greek *kline*, hence “to recline”).³³⁴ In Palmyra, a new, peculiar development appeared in the second century: sculpted sarcophagi in the form of a banquet couch, with turned legs and a frame, depicting real wooden couches of this sort and the mattress on top. A number of these have been installed in underground tombs in groups of three to imitate *triclinia*, that is, the usual arrangement of Roman dining rooms [Fig. 238]. Imported marble sarcophagi are rare, and it is only broken fragments of several of them that have come down to us.³³⁵

Most sarcophagi were only decorated on the front side. A separate slab was placed upright on the front edge, featuring a second mattress on which one or two diners are represented in high relief, a cup in the right hand (see Fig. 145). Younger family members stand behind them, ready to fill the cup of their father from a jug. The wife usually sits on a chair improbably placed on the mattress. The front space between the legs of the couch can be filled with a row of busts identified as children or with standing servants. The detached front of a sarcophagus shows a saddled camel and a retainer bringing it to the master [Fig. 239]. Another depicts a sailing ship and beside it a standing man who is as tall as the ship, holding the bridle of a broken-off horse or camel (see Fig. 150). This highly unrealistic image was meant to recall a voyage to India by a merchant who had reached the Gulf with a caravan. Only two fragments depict utensils that were made frequent use of, such as craters; on one, two servants stand beside an elaborately decorated table support, with the figure of a satyr being teased by a nymph (see Fig. 144). Sometimes the banquet scene was detached from the sarcophagus and filled a decorative panel showing just a reclining man and a servant [Figs 240–241].

The meaning behind these Palmyrene banquet scenes is not obvious. At issue here is whether these scenes show families enjoying eternal bliss in the afterlife or whether what they show are the happiest moments spent together in this world, the whole family surrounding the proud father in his best clothes – in

³³⁴ Dentzer 1982.

³³⁵ Wielgosz 2001.



242. A sarcophagus of a Roman senator, being also a local grandee. Garden of the Palmyra Museum

other words, whether the scene is prospective or retrospective, as it was put by Erwin Panofsky.³³⁶ It would seem that Henri Seyrig's opinion is the most reasonable: these are depictions of real banquets, the most solemn and formal social occasions of the upper class. There is no hint whatsoever of an afterlife.³³⁷

An especially elaborate sarcophagus was until recently exhibited at the entrance to the museum. It showed a sacrifice being performed by a man in a Roman toga. The large vertical band called *clavus* on his tunic marked him as a Roman senator. He is accompanied by servants bringing various offerings: a plate with food, a casket, a bird, a jug to be emptied on the altar, and the bull to be slaughtered [Fig. 242]. The short sides depict a lady on a couch to whom a servant presents a necklace [Fig. 243] and a woman or goddess leading a camel [Fig. 244], all these scenes placed between the legs of the main couch. The sarcophagus was closed, quite exceptionally, with a heavy lid featuring the master reclining, this time in Oriental costume: puffy trousers, a knee-length tunic, both bordered with decorative bands, a sword at his left side, and a dagger attached to the right thigh. A horse in rich harness held by an attendant

³³⁶ Panofsky 1964.

³³⁷ Seyrig 1951a.

243. A lady with her servant on the short side of the same sarcophagus



244. A goddess (Allat?) leading a camel. The other short side of the same sarcophagus



incongruously stood on the mattress at his feet. Very similar motifs occur on another sarcophagus which would have stood in the middle of a tomb, because all four sides are sculpted. On one long side a sacrifice is represented, celebrated by two toga-clad Romans of senatorial rank, as shown by the large *clavus* falling down from each of their right shoulders [Fig. 245]. They also wear senatorial laced shoes (*calcei*). Both also owned Palmyrene priestly headdresses exhibited beside them on a pedestal. They are accompanied by their wives in local costume and by attendants.³³⁸

³³⁸ Wielgosz 2004, pp. 941–951, figs 12–12f; Schmidt-Colinet 2005, pp. 42–47, figs 60–66; Schmidt-Colinet, Al-As'ad 2007.



245. A sarcophagus with a sacrifice by two senators (detail). Palmyra Museum



246. A richly embroidered dress from the tomb of 'Alaine. Palmyra Museum



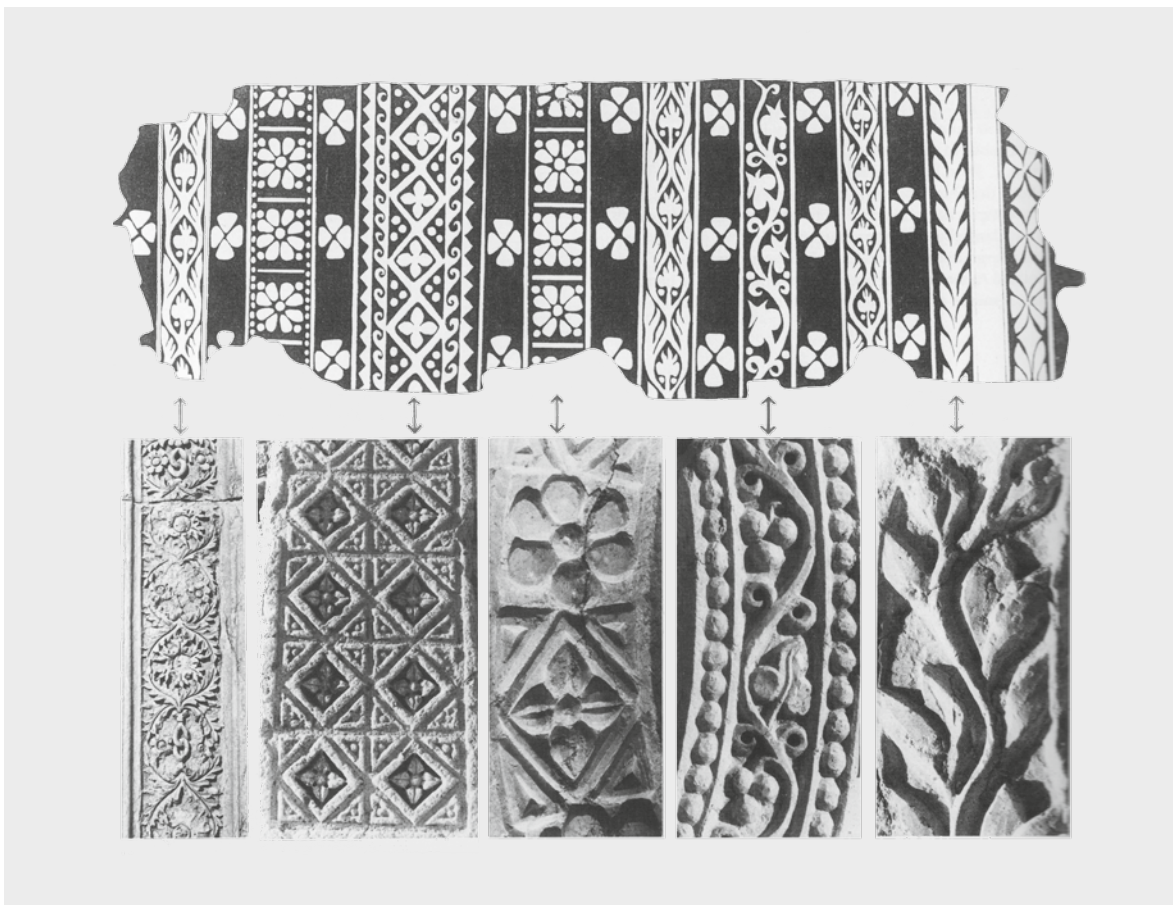
247. An embroidered dress compared to architectural decoration



Both sarcophagi remain anonymous. However, we know of only two senatorial families in Palmyra: one of them was the family of Odainat, who enjoyed this title from the early 250s, together with his son Hairan/Herodianus (see p. 57). The other known senator was Odainat's contemporary, the high priest Haddudan. It is quite possible that these sarcophagi had to do with them.

It is remarkable that most personages on sarcophagi are shown in a costume different from the draped himation we see on most tombstones. This attire was defined by Henri Seyrig as Iranian,³³⁹ and indeed such was the usual style in Iran and Central Asia. This costume consisted of trousers and knee-length

³³⁹ Seyrig 1937a.



248. Comparison of patterns in stone and on textiles found in Palmyra



249. A textile fragment found in the Kitot tower. Palmyra Museum

tunics, always associated with the carrying of arms. In the third century, an open kaftan was often worn over the tunic. The arms included swords and daggers, the latter in characteristic scabbards with four side rings so that they could be attached to the right thigh – these scabbards were of a form common in Iran and among the steppe peoples as far as Siberia. This Iranian – and more specifically Parthian – fashion was flavoured in Palmyra with a local touch.

Both the trousers and tunics were enhanced with colourful bands with decorative motifs, from geometrical to elaborate vegetal scrolls enlivened with various animals [Fig. 246].³⁴⁰ As demonstrated by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, the same or very similar bands can be seen on the textiles preserved in the tombs. While this is readily understandable, as the sculptures rendered the actual garments, it is more surprising that these scrolls were sculpted in stone in the *champlevé* bands of some prestigious buildings – such as the arch or the doorway of the Bel temple – and funerary monuments. Because the sculpture motifs quite obviously copied the real garments [Fig. 247], it results that the architectural decoration did as well, as Schmidt-Colinet has rightly observed.³⁴¹ It does not seem too far-fetched to suppose that the sculptors who made the relevant tomb sculptures were also responsible for the architectural decoration. The scrolls engraved on some buildings repeat the woven or embroidered bands on the clothes, both actual or represented in sculpture [Fig. 248]. Some scraps of real tissue have been preserved in tower tombs [Fig. 249]. Similar decorative bands would also have been ever-present in Palmyrene houses on carpets and wall hangings.

The biggest trove of Palmyrene antiquities in existence was to be found in the Palmyra Museum. Unlike the collections acquired by various museums in Europe and America, which were mostly interested in complete monuments, the museum in Palmyra also included hundreds of fragments recovered from later buildings or simply gleaned from the ground. This process started in the 1920s at the instigation of French scholars and was very consciously pursued by the local autodidact Obeid Taha, who was for many years responsible for the ruins. In 1961, a modern museum was built and the motley assemblage of stones in the old *Dépôt des Antiquités* was gradually transferred there. Only then did the export of monuments definitely come to an end: no longer were the more interesting pieces taken away to Istanbul, and later to Damascus, not to mention the antiquities market, legal or otherwise.

The collection was smashed to pieces in 2015. Whatever it was possible to save is now being kept in the National Museum in Damascus and waiting for better days. Fortunately, we do have records of what has been destroyed or damaged. Most of the pictures in this book represent buildings and sculptures which no longer exist or which have been irrevocably changed. It is to be hoped that future excavations shall bring new monuments to fill the gaps, at least partially.

³⁴⁰ E.g. Sadurska 1977, pp. 76–85.

³⁴¹ Schmidt-Colinet 2005, pp. 53–62. On textiles, Schmidt-Colinet, Stauffer, Al-As'ad 2000.

Travellers and archaeologists

Islamic Tadmor remained totally unknown in the West during the Middle Ages and well into the modern period. The desert tracks from Aleppo to Baghdad passed by Tayibeh (ancient Oriza), a large village situated 70 km northeast of Tadmor, at the time small and isolated within the walls of the Bel sanctuary. The first Western visitors we know of reached the oasis in the late seventeenth century.³⁴²

There were English merchants established in Aleppo. In that time the foreigners allowed to stay and do business in the lands of the Ottoman Empire were regrouped by nationality in closed compounds, where they remained in their own company and were only allowed to have limited interaction with the locals. Nevertheless, stories about the magnificent ruins of a city built by King Solomon had reached the English factory (as it was called) in Aleppo, and the merchants resolved to try and see it. The party set out in July 1678 and after five days arrived within sight of the castle overlooking the ancient site. They were stopped at the edge of the ruins by some horsemen sent by a Bedouin chief who was visiting at the time. The two envoys sent to his tent to negotiate were taken hostage and a ransom of 4,000 dollars was demanded. The English did a little bargaining before finally agreeing to pay 1,500 dollars in ransom money, part of this not in cash but in various possessions of the travellers. The dollars in question were German Imperial silver coins called *thalers*, in common use in many countries of the East.

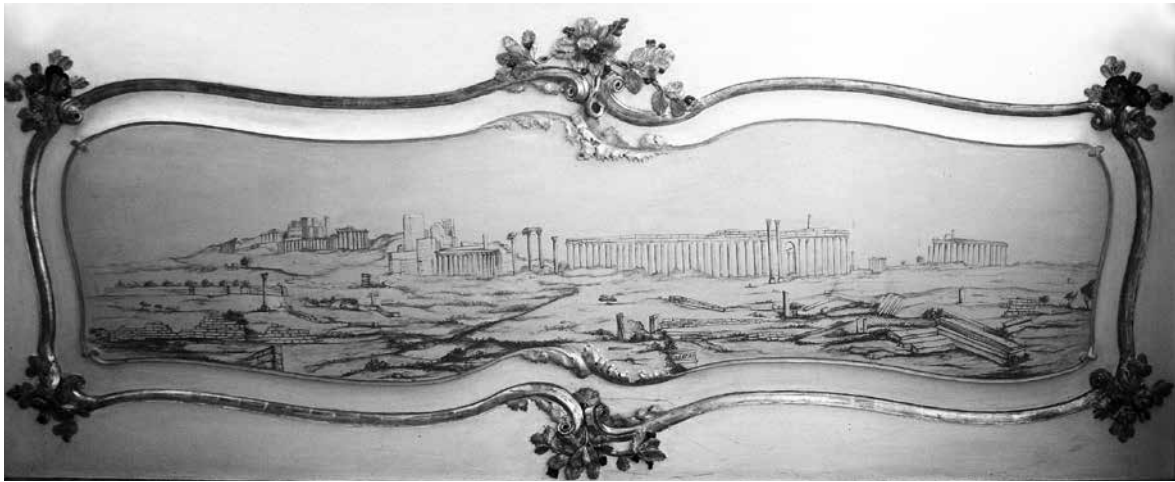
Thus plucked of everything they had except the clothes on their backs and their firearms, the merchants decided not to take any more risks. Instead of trying to visit the ruins, they went back to Aleppo. It is not true, as one can read in some recent books, that they were left to go naked; they would not have survived if this had been the case. The account of their adventure was published in the *Philosophical Transactions* together with the relation of a second expedition thirteen years later.³⁴³

The second party travelled in October 1691. This time they had with them letters of recommendation and could spend four days exploring the ruins. The leader was Rev. William Halifax, the chaplain of the English factory. His account was also published in the same scholarly journal in 1698.³⁴⁴ The learned Dr Halifax described as much of the temple of Bel as he could see behind the modern huts. He conjectured rightly that the temple was dedicated to “Jupiter Belus”. He mistook the standing columns of the Great Colonnade as belonging to a plaza but recognized correctly the purpose of the funerary towers.

³⁴² I have benefitted in the following pages from the documents collected by my wife, Krystyna Gawlikowska, some of which were used in her contribution to my book in Polish titled *Palmyra*, Warsaw 2010.

³⁴³ Halifax 1695, pp. 130–138.

³⁴⁴ Halifax 1698, pp. 83–110.



250. Panorama of Palmyra in the Johann Uphagen house, Gdańsk, made after Cornelis de Bruijn

First and foremost, his erudition enabled him to understand that Tadmor is the Palmyra of the ancient writers. He was also able to read the Greek inscriptions. His contribution contains the transcriptions of a score of them, mostly correct. All have survived to be edited in our times. Halifax noted the presence of accompanying inscriptions that he could not read and rightly supposed that they represent versions in the local language and script. In particular, he recorded the inscription from the tomb of Odainat, which was used as the lintel over the entrance to the sanctuary (see Fig. 25). It was made so narrow as to allow only a loaded camel to pass or two people to cross each other.

In the same issue of *Philosophical Transactions*, the results of the expedition were commented upon by Edmund Halley (1656–1742), better known as the astronomer who calculated the movements of the comet named after him. His contribution commands respect.³⁴⁵ He was able to give a short account of Palmyra's history from Solomon to Zenobia, quoting Pliny, Appian, and other ancient authors, the same that we can use today. He understood that the “Porphyry pillars” (in fact the red granite columns) that Halifax noticed must have been brought from Egypt. He discussed the coins of Zenobia and Wahballat as well as their titles, and he showed that the era used in Palmyra started with Seleucus. He also provided many judicious remarks on the inscriptions Halifax copied.

Rev. Halifax commented on the exquisite decoration of some of the monuments; their degradation he attributed to the Turks, the “zealous enemies of everything that is Splendid and Noble”. From our perspective, it should be rather remarked that the ruins were exceptionally preserved, due of course to the remoteness of the place and the small number of its inhabitants (thirty to forty families in all, in Halifax's estimation).

However, the most important result of the expedition was the panorama of the ruins drawn by a Dutch member of the party, Gerard Hofstede van Essen, the first depiction ever of Palmyra. Hofstede published an engraving made afterwards in the *Philosophical Transactions*. He also painted, back in Aleppo, an oil picture 4 m long, later the property of the mayor of Deventer, Gisbert Cuper (now in the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam [see p. 275]). This work by Hofstede is not a very faithful rendering of the ruins, but it gives a good idea of the site. Several views of Palmyra published shortly afterwards are

³⁴⁵ Halley 1698, pp. 160–175.



251. Panorama of Palmyra by Giovanni Battista Borra, the artist of Wood and Dawkins

just copies and variations on his work, the best known of them being an engraving by Cornelis de Bruijn, many times reproduced while the original engraving and painting were forgotten [Fig. 250]. This Dutch traveller published in 1698 a relation of his travels through the Levant, soon translated into French and English, in principle reporting only on what he had seen himself.³⁴⁶ However, he made an avowed exception for Palmyra, which he never visited, because of its importance.

The next Western visitor we know of was a French doctor, Tourtechot, also called Granger, who came to Palmyra in 1735. His relation in a long letter to a French minister remained unknown until it was discovered and published at the end of the nineteenth century.³⁴⁷ Granger's observations are detailed and precise, especially his description of the Bel temple and of the funerary towers, though he also formed the strange opinion that the columns of the Great Colonnade had supported an aqueduct.

Much different were the fortunes of the next travellers to see Palmyra, this being in 1751, sixty years after the English merchants and sixteen after Granger's relation which went unrecognised. Two Englishmen, James Dawkins and Robert Wood, arrived with a retinue of two hundred, including the Italian architect Giovanni Battista Borra. They spent fourteen days at the site, measuring and describing the principal monuments [Fig. 256]. Two years later, a folio volume appeared, simultaneously in English and French, which included fifty-three engravings after the original drawings by Borra [Figs 251–255].³⁴⁸ Wood, for his part, provided the text, which consisted of a historical sketch based mainly on classical authors and of remarks on the architecture. Four years later, he also published a volume on Baalbek, with engravings after Borra. Both volumes were reprinted in 1819.

The name of Borra is never mentioned, but the architect put his name on the plates prepared in London under his supervision. This publication immediately acquired great popularity and became an inspiration for many contemporary architects. Borra himself spent eight years in Britain after his return and was active there professionally, but none of his buildings in England or later in Turin can be described as a clear reflection of what he saw in Palmyra.

The Wood volume is of course not free of mistakes. To begin with, the temple of Bel, correctly attributed by Halifax to "Belus", became the "Temple of the Sun" because of a mention in the *Historia Augusta*, which, if true at all, refers to another monument (see p. 190). The explorers did not recognise the form of the theatre nor did they seem to understand that the "great portico" was part of the avenue we call the Great Colonnade. In the main, however, their judgment was sound and their observations sharp. The plan of the Bel temple and precinct is quite remarkable if we remember that it was filled with modern housing and that the temple itself was transformed into a mosque. This volume remained

³⁴⁶ De Bruijn 1698.

³⁴⁷ Chabot 1897.

³⁴⁸ Wood 1753.



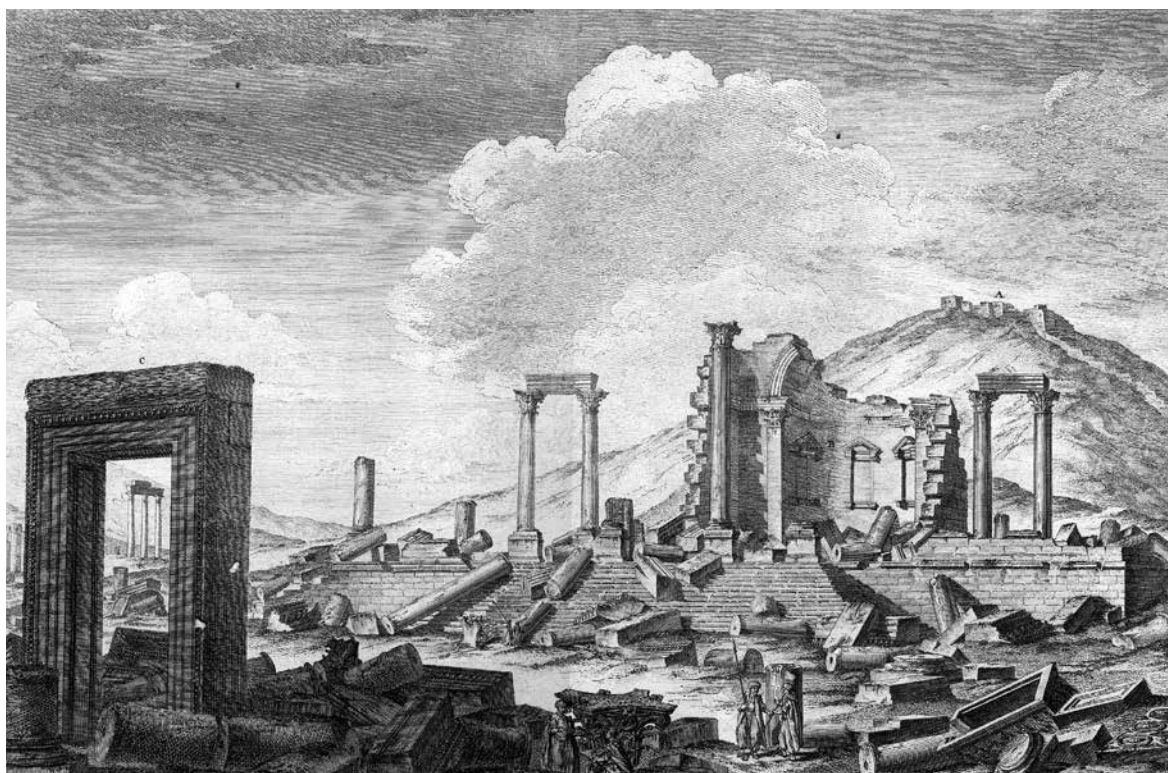
252. The Arch from the east,
by Giovanni Battista Borra



253. The temple of Baalshamin
by Giovanni Battista Borra



254. The sanctuary of Bel
by Giovanni Battista Borra



255. The principia of the Roman camp. In the foreground, the gateway of the Allat sanctuary, by Giovanni Battista Borra

the only source of information on Palmyra for a century and a half, and the plan of the ruins remained the only one in use until 1926.³⁴⁹

When, however, we compare the plates, especially the architectural details, with the actual monuments, it becomes clear that they are arranged to look more classical than they really are. This was inevitable given Borra's professional training and the short time he was able to spend on the site. His drawings must have been sketchy, and they were only finished in London. His employers were equally conditioned by their schooling. They appear on an oil picture by Gavin Hamilton in the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh (1758), discovering the ruins of Palmyra as two Romans draped in white togas, surrounded by their escorts in modern Oriental attire [Fig. 256].

The most important consequence of this publication was the decipherment of the Palmyrene script. The reasonably good copies provided by Wood inspired two scholars to read them independently and immediately, both in 1754: John Swinton published the complete Palmyrene alphabet in London, while *l'Abbé* Jean-Jacques Barthélemy presented the deciphered alphabet and a study of several inscriptions to the French Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.³⁵⁰ Once read, the language of the texts did not present any serious problem: it is Aramaic, well known through several passages of the Bible.

Thirty years later, another traveller arrived in Palmyra. Louis-François Cassas was a talented artist hired by the royal French ambassador to Istanbul for the task of travelling around the Levant and making drawings of remarkable views and monuments. He spent an entire month in Palmyra in 1785, where he

³⁴⁹ For instance, it is reproduced in *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, edited by J.-B. Chabot in 1926.

³⁵⁰ Swinton 1754; Barthélemy 1754.



256. Wood and Dawkins in Roman togas, looking at the ruins of Palmyra. Engraving by John Hall (1773) after the painting by Gavin Hamilton

executed a number of sketches. The ambassador, Count de Choiseul-Gouffier, planned to publish an album of engravings he would describe himself. After completing his mission, Cassas was sent to Rome, where he stayed five years preparing the plates at the ambassador's expense [Figs 257–260]. In the meantime, the French Revolution dispossessed Choiseul-Gouffier, who sought refuge in St Petersburg.

Cassas remained in Rome as long as his allotted funds allowed. His studio was visited by many curious people, one of them the great Goethe, who particularly admired a coloured drawing that is now lost, showing on the horizon the blue line of a mirage. Another view of Palmyra was copied in a famous book by the Enlightenment philosopher Volney (pseudonym of C.-F. de Chasseboeuf, formed of the first and last syllables of the names of Voltaire and of his residence Ferney), showing the author in Oriental costume looking at the ruins and meditating on the “revolutions of empires” [Fig. 261].³⁵¹

Eventually, Cassas returned to Paris and tried to support himself by selling his engravings. One-hundred-eighty of them were delivered by subscription in batches of thirty, leaving it to the trouble of

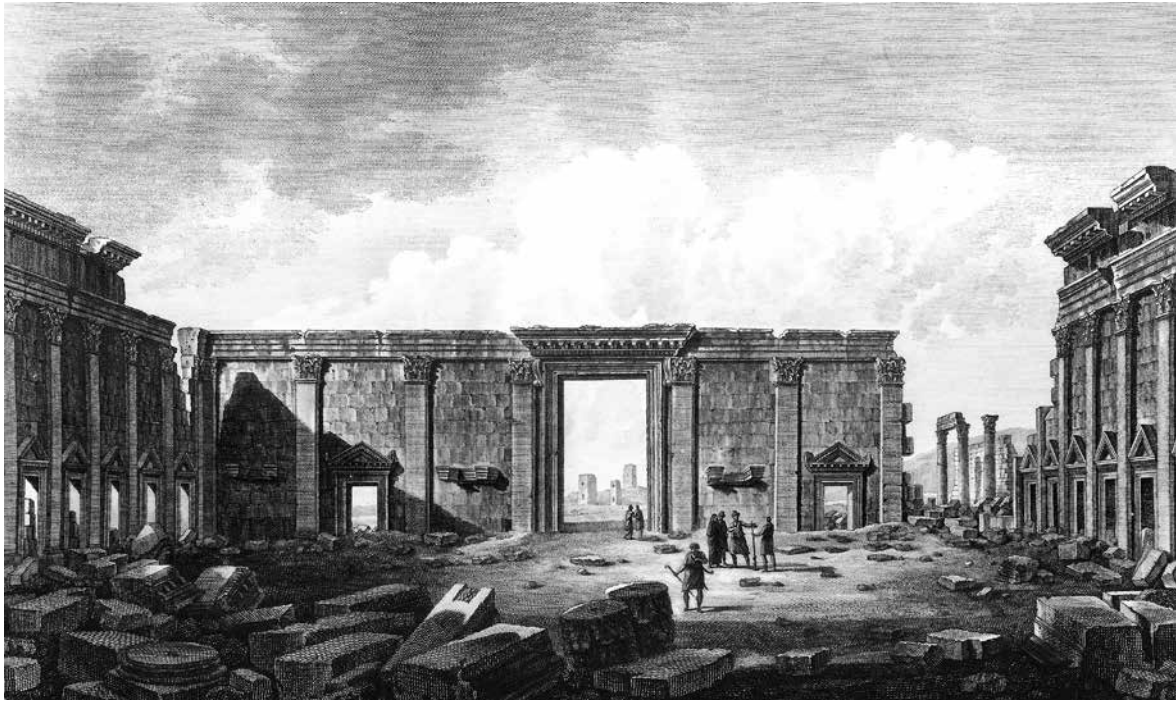
³⁵¹ Volney 1791.



257. The arrival of Louis-François Cassas in Tadmor by himself



258. A free composition of fairly precise renderings of various towers in the Valley of the Tombs. On the left foreground, the tower of Elahbel, at the far left end, the tower of Kitot, after Louis-François Cassas



259. The Annex of the Agora, believed by Cassas to be the “palace of Zenobia”

the buyers to bind them if they wished to do so, while many were also sold one by one, as were many hand drawings. No text has ever appeared.

For these reasons Cassas’ work remained little known and did not get the attention it deserves. Only quite recently did an exhibition in Tours, close to his birthplace, later shown in Cologne, assembled about a hundred drawings and many engravings, accompanied by a well-researched text.³⁵² They are vastly superior to Borra’s efforts, both as artworks and as documents. In particular, the plan of Palmyra, in spite of its many wrong interpretations, is much more precise and detailed than the plan in Wood’s volume, the only one in common use for one-hundred-seventy-three years.

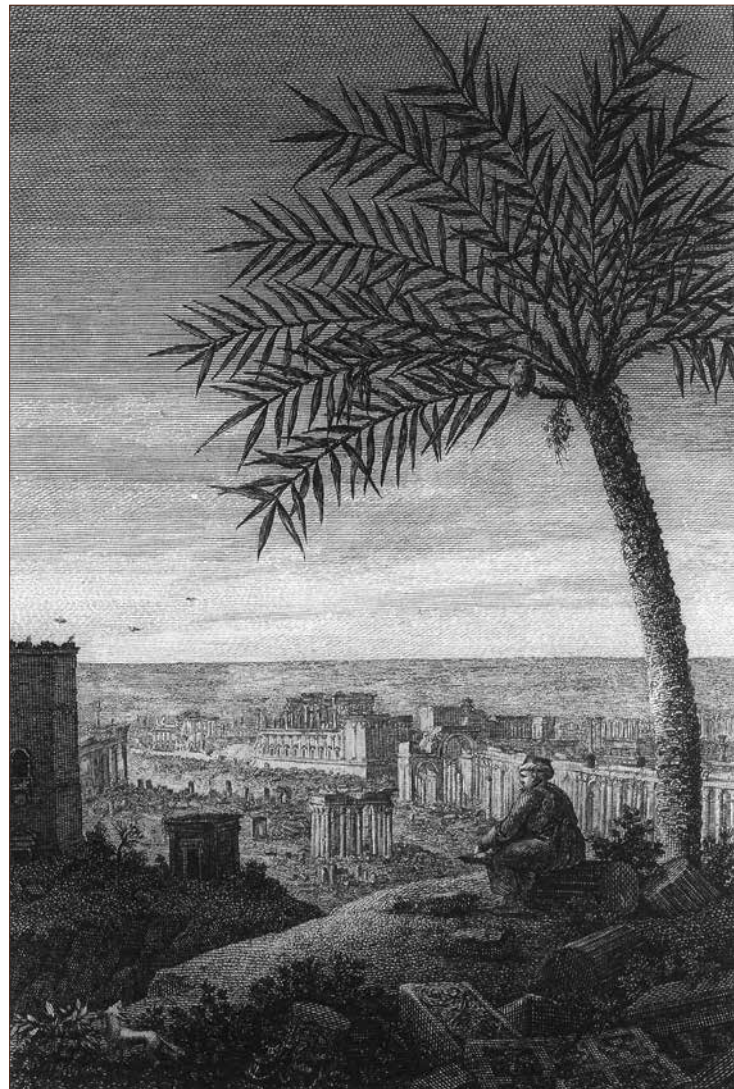
Cassas misunderstood the ruins of the theatre, making it somewhat similar in plan to the Pantheon of Rome. He also drew two rows of columns on each side of *la grande gallerie*, that is, the Great Colonnade. The legionary headquarters of Diocletian became in his imagination an open columnar hall. These shortcomings were probably unavoidable. One manner characteristic of Cassas was to people his drawings with the figures of locals, evidently sketched separately and added in the atelier to enliven the ruins. The vistas, however, are very faithful, and the field sketches on which they were based must have been excellent. Certain liberties were only taken when several drawings are compiled into one view.

For many years it was difficult to access the Syrian desert. In the nineteenth century, the occasional visitor started to trickle in, and some of these travellers left diaries, though they seldom made relevant observations on the antiquities. One such traveller was Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, a Swiss from Basel, famous as the discoverer of Petra, the capital of the Nabataeans. In 1810, on camelback and in native dress, he visited Palmyra; as he was familiar with Wood’s volume, he only briefly mentioned the place in his diary. According to him, the inhabitants formed a caravan to Aleppo once or twice a year to bring

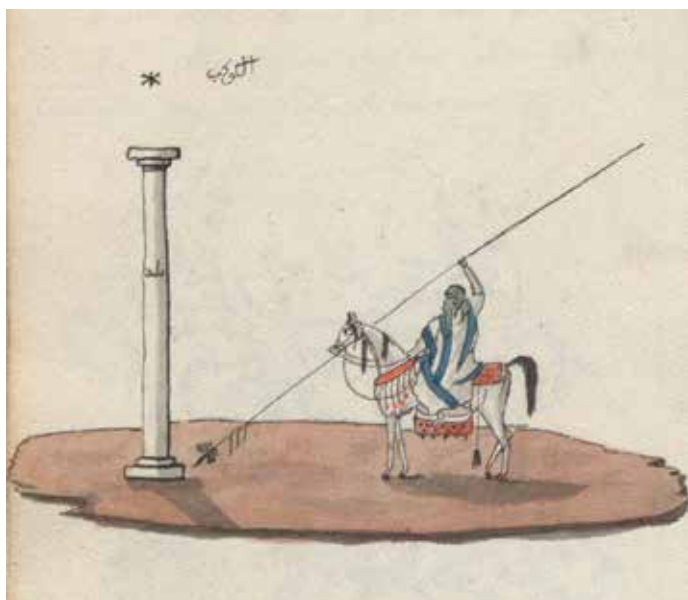
³⁵² Gilet, Westfelling 1994.



260. A caravan passing through the ruins on its way to Damascus, after Louis-François Cassas



261. Volney dreaming about the fall of empires, frontispice of Volney 1791



262. Emir Rzewuski and his secret sign (on the column), in his own drawing

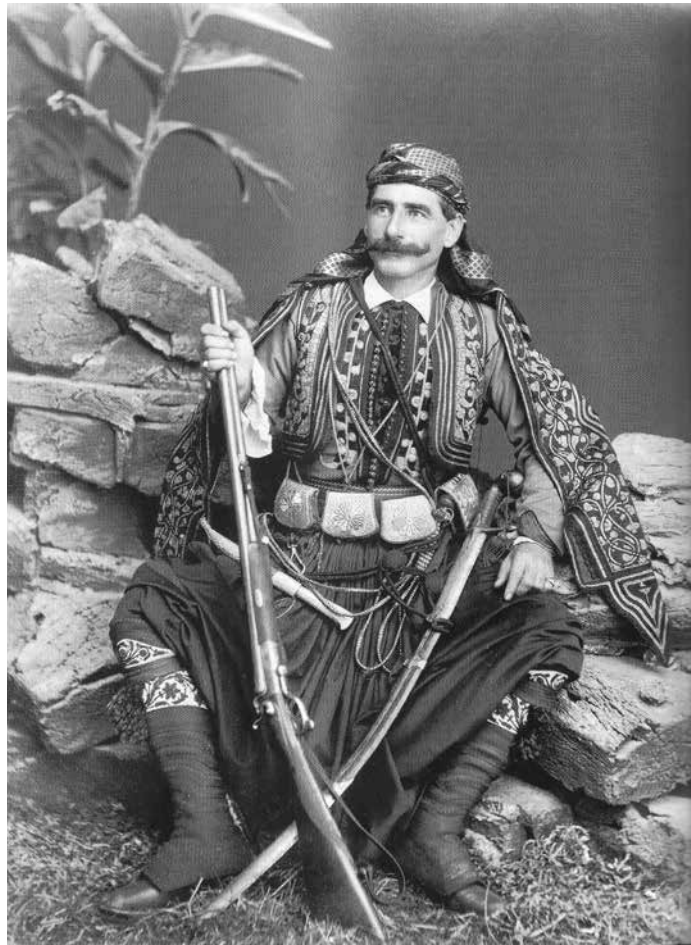


263. A view of the Valley of the Tombs. Lithograph by Léon de Laborde

alkali obtained from desert plants – they did this together with the people of Sokhne, a village 12 hours distant to the northeast, where he went the following year.³⁵³ Other explorers were mostly interested in horses, like the eccentric Polish count Wacław Rzewuski, who travelled across the Near East from 1818 to 1819 as one of the first modern Europeans to visit the Nejd in inner Arabia. His writings are full of confabulations and self-aggrandisement, but they contain many valuable observations on Bedouin life, especially on their horse-breeding. Rzewuski chose to call himself Emir Taj el-Fahr (“Wreath of Fame”, a supposed translation of his given name) and pretended to be “*Scheich des Arabes Bédouins*”. He allegedly left his mysterious sign on a column in Palmyra, but it has never been found [Fig. 262]. Even more eccentric was Lady Hester Stanhope, who lived in Djoun, in Lebanon, and played an Oriental princess; a visit to her was a must for every European traveller of higher standing.³⁵⁴ She once went to Palmyra,

³⁵³ Stucky 2017; 2019.

³⁵⁴ *Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope; forming the Completion of her Memoirs narrated by her Physician*, 3 vols, London 1846.



264. A dragoman, probably Melhem Wardi

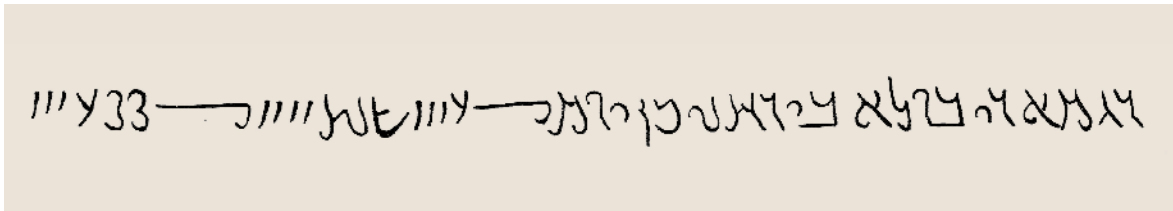
where she was greeted by the local girls, who stood and chanted on the column brackets – she figured herself a new Zenobia. These Romantic vagaries did not add anything to the knowledge of the site.

More ordinary tourists began to visit Syria later on in the nineteenth century, among them Léon de Laborde [Fig. 263]. They always came in a little caravan led by a local agent (*dragoman*) who spoke a Western language and took care of every practical aspect of the trip. One such visitor was Madame Le Ray, from Lyon, who came in a party of twenty-six, including a Greek Catholic priest from Damascus. On Easter 1885, they camped in the Agora and left an inscription in French on one of the fallen blocks, commemorating their Easter mass. The dragoman of the party was a certain Melhem Ouardy (Wardi), who was warmly recommended by several other travellers [Fig. 264]. A few years later, in 1893, he took part in the World's Fair in Chicago (the Columbian Exposition), where he managed a "Moorish Palace", complete with belly dancers, and promoted his trade by displaying camping equipment.³⁵⁵

Serious research started with Melchior de Vogüé, who visited Palmyra in 1853. At his instigation, William Henry Waddington went there several years later and copied over one hundred inscriptions.³⁵⁶ They were followed by several German scholars, who brought their own contributions. The general public could profit from the photographs of the ruins made by Félix Bonfils, who founded an atelier in Beirut

³⁵⁵ Yon 2011–2012.

³⁵⁶ Vogüé 1868; Waddington 1870.



265. Facsimile of the heading of the Tariff



266. A view of Palmyra by F. Quarelli. The Great Colonnade from the east. In the foreground, some Muslim graves



267. Another photograph by Quarelli. The Camp of Diocletian and the Tomb no. 86 known as "Funerary Temple"

in 1867. Bonfils commercialised thousands of his pictures from the East as souvenirs. At this point, the ruins of Palmyra had not changed noticeably since the time of the first explorers.

One major discovery occurred in 1882. In that year, a young Russian prince, Siemion Abamelek-Lazarev, newly graduated from St Petersburg University, made a tour of the Levant and arrived in Palmyra. His purpose was, modestly, to find some of the Greek inscriptions published by Waddington and read them directly from the stones. During his stay, he was shown a huge inscribed stone emerging from the sand. He hired workers to clear it and found a large stele over 5 m wide containing four columns of Greek and Palmyrene text. This was the Tariff [Fig. 265], the longest extant Aramaic inscription – both at that time and today – being the tax law decreed by the City Council in 137 and exhibited opposite an entrance to the Agora (see p. 35).

Prince Abamelek made a hand copy of the Greek and executed a squeeze on paper of the whole. When the squeeze was hopelessly mangled by the customs officers in Odessa, he commissioned a Beirut photographer, F. Quarelli, to go to Palmyra to take pictures of the discovery. Quarelli provided several views of the ruins, reproduced in a volume in Russian by the prince [Figs 266–267],³⁵⁷ but he was not allowed to remove enough sand to position his camera, and his squeeze was of inferior quality. Only the copy of the Greek text was sent to Paris, to the French *Académie*. Fortunately, a German consul in Damascus was able to take a photograph, later sent to Paris, too. Both versions of the Tariff were soon presented by de Vogüé.³⁵⁸ It was not until 1926 that the complete revised edition appeared.³⁵⁹

Years after the discovery, the Russian Embassy in Constantinople obtained permission to take the stone to St Petersburg as a gift from the sultan to the czar. The dragoman of the Russian consulate in Jerusalem, Ya'aqoub al-Khoury, was dispatched to Palmyra in 1901 and proceeded to saw the stone along the lines separating the columns of text to make it transportable [Figs 268–269]. The four pieces were reunited in the Hermitage Museum where they remain to this day (see Fig. 13).³⁶⁰

The first archaeological investigations took place at about the same time. First, there was a short campaign by the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople, which documented the underground tomb known today as the “Three Brothers Tomb” (see pp. 163 and 223).³⁶¹ Its wall paintings inspired an important book by Josef Strzygowski, the first treatment of Palmyrene art in a general context.³⁶² In 1902, and again in 1917, a German expedition led by Theodor Wiegand systematically documented the ancient city. Unfortunately, this excellent and thorough monograph was not published until fifteen years later, when new excavations had already made it partly obsolete.³⁶³ About the same time, two Dominican fathers of the French *École biblique* in Jerusalem, Antonin Jaussen and Raphaël Savignac, collected and documented inscriptions for the planned *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*. They spent the month of July 1914 in Palmyra only to learn on their return to Homs the latest news from Europe. In spite of their being citizens of an enemy power, they somehow managed to reach their convent in Jerusalem and to deposit their papers in a safe place. They were recovered when the war ended, and the *Corpus* finally appeared in 1926. Each inscription is transliterated in Hebrew letters and in a special font conceived for the occasion, translated anonymously into Latin and commented on in the same language by Jean-Baptiste Chabot. The plan of Palmyra at the beginning of the volume reproduced Wood's inadequate plan, even though the much better plan by Cassas was available in Paris.

³⁵⁷ Abamelek-Lazarev 1884.

³⁵⁸ Vogüé 1883.

³⁵⁹ CIS II 3913 (by J.-B. Chabot).

³⁶⁰ Gawlikowski 2013.

³⁶¹ Farmakovski 1903.

³⁶² Strzygowski 1901.

³⁶³ Wiegand 1932.



268. Ya'aqoub al-Khoury
in front of the Tariff
in 1901



269. Sawing the Tariff
stele in four columns
of text

A new chapter of research was opened after World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, when, for thirty years, Syria and Lebanon became the French mandate of the League of Nations. The new administration installed the *Service des Antiquités*, conducting and promoting proper excavations. In Palmyra, the first excavations were conceded to the Danish archaeologist Harald Ingholt, who explored about fifty underground tombs in the southwest necropolis. Regrettably, he only published, in several articles between 1935 and 1977, the inscriptions and sculptures found there, accompanied with sketchy plans of some tombs and no overall map of the necropolis. In the 1930s, Jean Cantineau also

started a survey of the inscribed stones found on the site, many of them by himself.³⁶⁴ His work has only recently been replaced.³⁶⁵ The architect Albert Gabriel, for his part, surveyed the whole site and published in 1926 a new plan of Palmyra, which replaced the eighteenth-century plans of Borra and Cassas.³⁶⁶

A great project was started in 1930 by Henri Seyrig, who in 1929 was appointed director of antiquities of Syria and Lebanon. Seyrig decided to evacuate the village of Tadmor from the Bel precinct and to resettle the inhabitants in the new village to the north, which in our time grew to become a city. The sanctuary was cleared of all modern structures except one house in a corner that for many years was used by archaeologists. In the early 1930s, the mosque within the temple was also removed and the temple itself unobtrusively restored and arranged by the architect Robert Amy. The monumental folio publication of the temple alone (but not the ancillary buildings or the porticoes of the courtyard) did not appear until 1975.³⁶⁷ Seyrig also excavated the underground tomb of Yarhai (recreated in the Damascus Museum) and ordered the restoration of the two best preserved funerary towers, that of Iamblichus and that of Elahbel. He also managed to launch the clearing of the Agora in 1940 before resigning from his post the following year (when he chose the Gaullist side against the Vichy administration). The Agora has only been published recently, using the papers of Seyrig and those of the architect Raymond Duru, who was in charge of the excavations.³⁶⁸

In those years, a French garrison was stationed in Palmyra. Jean Starcky, a young priest who at that point was studying Biblical subjects in Jerusalem, was appointed as their chaplain. His ministry apparently left him enough leisure time to study the inscriptions and the site in general, and he eventually became one of the most knowledgeable scholars in matters Palmyrene. His edition of the inscriptions discovered at the Agora; the first site guidebook, written by him; the concise popular book that he authored on Palmyra; the many articles written by him presenting new inscriptions – all these have established him as a great authority in the field.³⁶⁹ I cannot refrain from mentioning here my personal debt to this fine scholar of great learning and of even greater modesty and generosity [Fig. 270].

World War II and the first years of Syrian independence marked a pause in further research. Excavations resumed in 1954 with a Swiss project directed by Paul Collart. During three years, the sanctuary of Baalshamin was excavated in its entirety, and the remarkable adyton put together again at the back of the temple (see p. 128). Six volumes of the final publication have appeared over the years – five of them in short succession – bringing a great wealth of material. The sculptures found were studied much later by Rolf Stucky, who was too young to take part in the excavations but who has completed in an exemplary way the work of his elder compatriots.³⁷⁰

After the war, the antiquities of Palmyra were left in the care of a conscientious autodidact, Obeid Taha, who knew every stone in the ruins and guarded them scrupulously. He also cleared the theatre of sand and excavated some underground tombs in the southeast necropolis. From 1963 on, the Syrian archaeologist Adnan Bounni, always in tandem with the architect Nassib Saliby, cleared the central section of the Great Colonnade and the neighbouring sanctuary of Nabu.³⁷¹ Already in 1961, the museum was built at the northern entrance to the ancient city. All the finds from this year on were kept there.

³⁶⁴ *Inv.* I–IX, 1930–1933, continued by other authors.

³⁶⁵ *PAT*; *IGLS* (also including bilinguals).

³⁶⁶ Gabriel 1926.

³⁶⁷ Seyrig, Amy, Will 1975.

³⁶⁸ Delplace, Dentzer-Feydy 2005.

³⁶⁹ *Inv.* X, 1940; Starcky 1952.

³⁷⁰ Collart, Vicari 1969; Dunant 1971; Fellmann 1970; Fellmann, Dunant 1975; Dunant, Stucky 2000.

³⁷¹ Bounni, Seigne, Saliby 1992; Bounni 2004.



270. Jean Starcky and the author visiting the excavations of Diocletian's Camp, 1970s



271. Kazimierz Michałowski starting the excavations in Diocletian's Camp, 1959



272. Kazimierz Michałowski at the evening work in the excavation house, with Barbara Filarska and Marek Marciniak

In 1963, Khaled al-As'ad was appointed director of the museum and the site's antiquities and became over the years the man of Palmyra. Every archaeological mission working there is in debt to him, and his personal contribution to uncovering and restoring the monuments of Palmyra is remarkable. At the age of 81, he fell a martyr for his lifework.

The Polish excavations started in 1959. It was in that year that Kazimierz Michałowski, the founder of Mediterranean archaeology in Poland, opened the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology in Cairo, Egypt, which at that point was unified with Syria in a short-lived United Arab Republic. Offered to choose a site to dig at in Syria, he naturally thought of Palmyra. Jean Starcky's 1952 booklet mentioned two major sites within the ancient city deserving of excavation: the sanctuary of Baalshamin and Diocletian's Camp. The former had just been excavated, so the new mission took up the latter [Figs 271–272]. The camp of a Roman legion installed after the defeat of Zenobia at the foot of a hill overlooking the ruins promised to yield insight into the military life of Late Antiquity.

The first seasons brought a surprise: the legionary barracks had been overrun by squatters in the early seventh century, even before the arrival of the Muslim conquerors. The straight and wide streets became narrow irregular alleys, and the good ashlar masonry was overlaid by a maze of makeshift walls. Among these stones, many sculptures, inscriptions, and carved architectural members were employed; in particular, heads that had been chopped off from funerary banquets were handy for filling holes in a wall. Numerous finds of this kind provided the mission's members with an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the local art.³⁷²

Not that the legionaries were adverse to robbing the tombs of the fallen city, but they did it with more discernment. Soon after the start of excavations, a new and fascinating question arose: a scholarly paper proposed to see in the headquarters building of the camp the palace of Odainat, when he was the commander of the Roman army in the East.³⁷³ Indeed, this building was adorned with a number of profusely decorated architectural members. Only a careful analysis could prove that these stones, though all of roughly the same late third-century date, come from several different monuments, most probably tombs.³⁷⁴ In a ruined city, it was easier and cheaper to scavenge in the nearby mausoleums than to bring new elements from the quarries.

The sanctuary of Allat, founded outside the inhabited area, was later included in the camp. Excavated in the mid-seventies (p. 134) by the present author, appointed by Michałowski as his successor in Palmyra, it is a counterpart to the Baalshamin sanctuary, both being run by the same tribe. Mention should also be made of several tombs investigated in the western necropolis (the Valley of the Tombs) and in its extension overlapped by the camp. One of them contained the monument of Zabda (see Fig. 237), and another was identified right behind the headquarters building.³⁷⁵

Later on, the mission took up three blocks of the inner city, north of the Great Colonnade. A large mansion was excavated there, inhabited for six centuries without interruption (see pp. 103, 198, Figs 63–65). To our surprise, it appeared that over time it had found itself among Christian churches. Three of them were uncovered in the immediate neighbourhood. They apparently formed the episcopal complex (p. 194), which also included the bishop's residence, which we did not have time to excavate. These discoveries revealed the continuing urban character of the Palmyra of this time up to its abandonment in the ninth century.³⁷⁶

³⁷² Michałowski 1960–1966.

³⁷³ Schlumberger 1962.

³⁷⁴ Gawlikowski 1984.

³⁷⁵ Sadurska 1977.

³⁷⁶ Gawlikowski 2001.



273. The courtyard of the old excavation house



274. A view on the upper gallery in the excavation house



275. A palm tree in the courtyard

276. Ahmad Abu Ashayer,
the long-time guardian and cook
in the excavation house, 1960s



277. The veteran foreman of
the mission, Ali Muhammad,
better known as Abu Hillal



While in Palmyra, the Polish mission lived for many years in the old excavation house in the Bel precinct [Figs 273–275]. I cannot think about this time without remembering Ahmad Abu Ashayer, the long-time guardian and manager of this charming residence [Fig. 276]. In the early days, water was brought there in barrels on a donkey cart by Abu Hillal, who later became the trusted foreman at the excavation and a dear friend [Fig. 277]. Neither of them lived to see the disaster of their Tadmor.

An important contribution to the early history of the city was provided by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet and his team from Vienna.³⁷⁷ A remote sensing survey of the virtually empty area to the south of the ruins revealed a densely built neighbourhood between the Bel sanctuary and the Efqa spring [see Figs 48–49]. It had grown along the road to Damascus and was apparently the oldest part of the town, going back to the Hellenistic Age. Excavations uncovered one courtyard building which was probably destroyed or abandoned together with the rest of this quarter in order to clear the field in front of the Late Roman rampart. Here, deep soundings yielded much older material, including fragments of wine amphorae from Rhodes and characteristic black-glazed sherds, otherwise absent from the record in Palmyra. Between 1981 and 1992, the same Schmidt-Colinet excavated a huge funerary mausoleum in the Valley of the Tombs; his work, illustrated with architectural drawings by Carla Müting (see Fig. 151 and p. 173), is to date the first and only detailed study of a monument of this kind in Palmyra.³⁷⁸

Between this part of the town and the rampart runs a wadi which has its origin in the Valley of the Tombs. The quest for the original site of the Tariff revealed that it was a paved road passing in front of the Agora. These were the very last foreign excavations before the civil war.³⁷⁹ The paved street was the main thoroughfare of the city between the quarters which had grown on higher ground on both sides of it. These discoveries confirm and specify the insights of Manar Hammad on the development of ancient Palmyra in relation to its natural environment.³⁸⁰

Five other tombs were excavated and restored in the southeast necropolis by a mission from Nara in Japan, led first by Takeo Higuchi and then by Kiyohide Saito. They all consist of underground galleries dug into the soft rock as family resting places (see Figs 136–137, 142). Their vaults were restored and the funerary portraits were replaced carefully in the corresponding burial slots; the bones were also studied. This project makes up for the rather superficial work of Harald Ingholt in the southwest necropolis in the 1930s.³⁸¹ It is a great pity that these tombs were looted early into the civil war, many of their sculptures broken and stolen.

Palmyra has also seen in recent years other archaeologists joining the research in the field. A commercial building behind the museum was excavated by Christiane Delplace from Bordeaux. Interrupted too early by the civil war, the projects being led by Maria Teresa Grassi from Milan and by Cynthia Finlayson from Salt Lake City have had to be put off for the time being. Also interrupted was the Norwegian project in the Palmyra hinterland, led by Jørgen Christian Meyer (see Fig. 23). In this case, however, important results had already been obtained: many new sites to the northwest of Palmyra were identified. It is now clear that agriculture was practised in the country in antiquity and that the land was fully exploited thanks to the irrigation systems which caught rainwater, with the city being fed by the many farms and villages surrounding it.³⁸²

No fieldwork has been done for ten years now. When this shall be possible again, large untouched swathes of the ancient city will lie open for excavation. There is no doubt that many discoveries still await

³⁷⁷ Schmidt-Colinet, Al-As'ad 2013.

³⁷⁸ Schmidt-Colinet *et al.* 1992.

³⁷⁹ Gawlikowski 2012.

³⁸⁰ Hammad 2010.

³⁸¹ Higuchi, Izumi 1994; Higuchi, Saito 2001.

³⁸² Meyer 2013; 2016; 2017.

under the surface. The parts of the city that were uncovered during the eighty-odd years since the beginning of real excavations in the 1920s up to 2011 do not make up more than about 20% of the city. While major standing monuments cannot be expected to be found, modern archaeology may recover a great deal from more modest remains.

Probably, the pressure to restore what has been destroyed shall be strong. This must be done very carefully, if at all. While it may, perhaps, be possible to place many stones back in their original positions, the temples and funerary towers shall never recover the aspect we knew before the disaster. It is the firm belief of the present author that building them up with new stones from the local quarry, let alone with artificial replacements, would be a gross mistake. Ancient monuments must be authentic, not imitations, however exact. They came down to us as ruins, and it is as ruins that they should remain. Modern techniques can recreate virtually, for educational purposes, the Palmyra as it was before 2015, some monuments even as they were in antiquity, but this is quite another matter than actual rebuilding. One more chapter has just been added to the rich history of Palmyra. It cannot be deleted.

RVDERA. PALMYRAE. AD. VI. V. V. M. EXPRESSA. DONO. DEDIT. NOB.
PRAESES. G. V. PAPENBROECK.





A Promenade in Palmyra

Yesterday and today

← The first ever view of Palmyra by Gerard Hofstede van Essen. Oil painting, 1693. Allard Pierson Museum, University of Amsterdam



A plan of Palmyra with the virtual itinerary through the ruins. The numbers apply to sections illustrated on the following pages

I. Oasis

II. Museum

III. Sanctuary of Bel

IV. Monumental Arch

V. Sanctuary of Nabu

VI. The Baths

VII. Great Colonnade East

VIII. The theatre

IX. The Agora

X. The Tariff site

XI. Tetrapylon and surroundings

XII. Great Colonnade West

XIII. Sanctuary of Baalshamin

XIV. Residential quarter and churches

XV. Transverse Colonnade

XVI. Diocletian's Camp

XVII. Sanctuary of Allat

XVIII. The ramparts

XIX. The Valley of the Tombs and other tombs





I. Oasis
II. Museum



I.1



I.2

← A caravan en route to Palmyra. Anonymous etching freely inspired by Jean-François Cassas, 1799

I.1. Olive trees and date palms in the gardens of Palmyra

I.2. A lane between the gardens



I.3



I.4

I.3. A modern pool and watering channels

I.4. The oasis and the ruins seen from the Arab Castle



I.5



I.6

I.5. A lazy lizard in the ruins

I.6. A young shepherd



I.7



I.8

I.7. Pomegranates ripen in a garden

I.8. What water can bring out in the desert



II.1



II.2



II.3

II.1. The tourist market in modern Tadmor

II.2. Life coming slowly back to Tadmor after the disaster

II.3. Bird's-eye view of the city of Tadmor towards the oasis and the eastern horizon



II.4

II.4. The author with Khaled al-As'ad, Director of Palmyra Antiquities

II.5. The Museum building before the disaster

II.6. The lion of Allat – the unofficial logo of the Museum.
Inset: an oryx antelope in the Talila reserve near Palmyra



II.5



II.6





III. Sanctuary of Bel



III.1

← The southwest corner of the sanctuary of Bel, after Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte*, vol. I, Paris, 1799, 33

III.1. Temple of Bel seen from the terrace of the excavation house

III.2. The best preserved, northwest corner of the Bel enclosure

III.3. The southwest corner of the enclosure with 12th-century alterations



III.2



III.3







III.5

← III.4. A bird's-eye view of the enclosure of Bel with the oasis in the background

III.5. The temple and its doorway on the west side

III.6. Signatures of workers in Aramaic, poor Greek, and Latin on a column drum, invisible when in place

III.7. The gatehouse of the sanctuary from the inside

III.8. The doorway of the temple, after Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque...*, vol. I, 45 →

III.9. The same doorway, two hundred years later →



III.6



III.7







III.10

III.10. Kazimierz Michałowski and Barbara Filarska at work on the field journal, 1959

III.11. Krystyna Michałowska drawing one of the finds, 1961





III.12



III.13

III.12. Departure of the mission after the 1986 season

III.13. Józef Grabski in Palmyra, 2009



III.14



III.15

III.14. The excavation house after recent modifications

III.15. The last evening in the excavation house with Khaled al-As'ad (in the corner), 2011



III.16



III.17

III.16. A ceiling coffer with three godheads from the entrance to the temple

III.17. The abduction of Europe on a ceiling coffer from the colonnade of the temple

III.18. A thistle growing at the foot of a column

III.19. A winged Eros between garlands of fruit (pomegranates and pine cones), from the temple frieze



III.18



III.19



III.20

III.20. Mouldings over the doorway to the temple

III.21. Some of the columns around the courtyard





III.22

III.22. A 12th-century bastion made partly of column drums against the ancient wall

III.23. The northwest corner of the courtyard and the underground passage for processions

III.24. The same corner after Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque...*, vol. I, 35

III.25. Temple of Bel today →



III.23



III.24









IV. Monumental Arch



IV.1

← The Arch seen from the west, the Bel sanctuary in the background, after Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte*, vol. I, Paris, 1799, 71

IV.1. The Arch seen from the east. In the foreground columns of the wide sector of the Great Colonnade

IV.2. The bungled link between the colonnade and the Arch







IV.4



IV.5

IV.3. The elaborate carvings decorating the Arch

IV.4. The right-hand side smaller passage and the Baths in the background

IV.5. Bases of missing columns in front of shops of the wider part of the colonnade



IV.6



IV.7

IV.6. A view of the central passage of the Arch

IV.7. The ruins of the Arch in 2016

IV.8. A view along the Great Colonnade from the left side passage of the Arch





IV.9



IV.10



IV.11

IV.9. A glimpse of the Bel sanctuary through the Arch

IV.10. A line of shops along the Great Colonnade at the back of the Nabu sanctuary

IV.11. A modern tourist caravan advancing along the Colonnade





V. Sanctuary of Nabu
VI. The Baths
VII. Great Colonnade East



V.1

← The Great Colonnade west of the Arch, after Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte*, vol. I, Paris, 1799, 54

V.1. A side view of the entrance to the sanctuary. The Great Colonnade in the background

V.2. A glimpse of the Nabu sanctuary through the gate from the wadi road

V.3. The podium of the temple, side view



V.2



V.3



V.4



V.5



V.6



V.7

V.4. The so-called Tuscan columns of the Nabu courtyard

V.5. The Nabu temple from the front

V.6. A view from the temple courtyard to the west

V.7. The Great Colonnade and the theatre wall in the background as seen from the Nabu sanctuary



VI.1

VI.1. The columns around the pool of the Baths

VI.2. The red granite columns of the Baths porch





VI.3

VI.3. The entrance porch of the Baths seen from the west

VI.4. Remains of a floor composed of coloured marble pieces (*opus sectile*)

VII.1. The Great Colonnade looking toward the Bel sanctuary. The Monumental Arch at the end has been already destroyed →



VI.4





VII.2

VII.2. A public fountain bordering the Great Colonnade

VII.3. The keystone of the arch opening into the theatre plaza with an anonymous male bust

VII.4. Door lintel with a row of busts and a kneeling bull (detail)

VII.5. The Colonnade with the Tetrapylon in the middle. In the right foreground two columns in front of the public fountain →



VII.3

VII.4











VIII. The theatre
IX. The Agora
X. The Tariff site





VIII.2



VIII.3

←← The Agora and its annex seen from the Great Colonnade, after Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte*, vol. I, Paris, 1799, 57

← **VIII.1.** The arch of the Great Colonnade opening into the theatre plaza and its circular colonnade

VIII.2. The Great Colonnade between the Nabu temple and the theatre. Only the left (southern) row of columns survives

VIII.3. Columns bearing inscriptions of Zenobia and Odainat against the front wall of the theatre





VIII.5

VIII.4. The lowest tier of seats, the only part of the cavea to have been realized

VIII.5. The scene building of the theatre. The central canopy (now blown up) was restored



VIII.6



VIII.7



IX.1

VIII.6. The colonnaded street behind the theatre leading to the wadi road

VIII.7. The theatre gate opening into the wadi and the southern quarters of the city

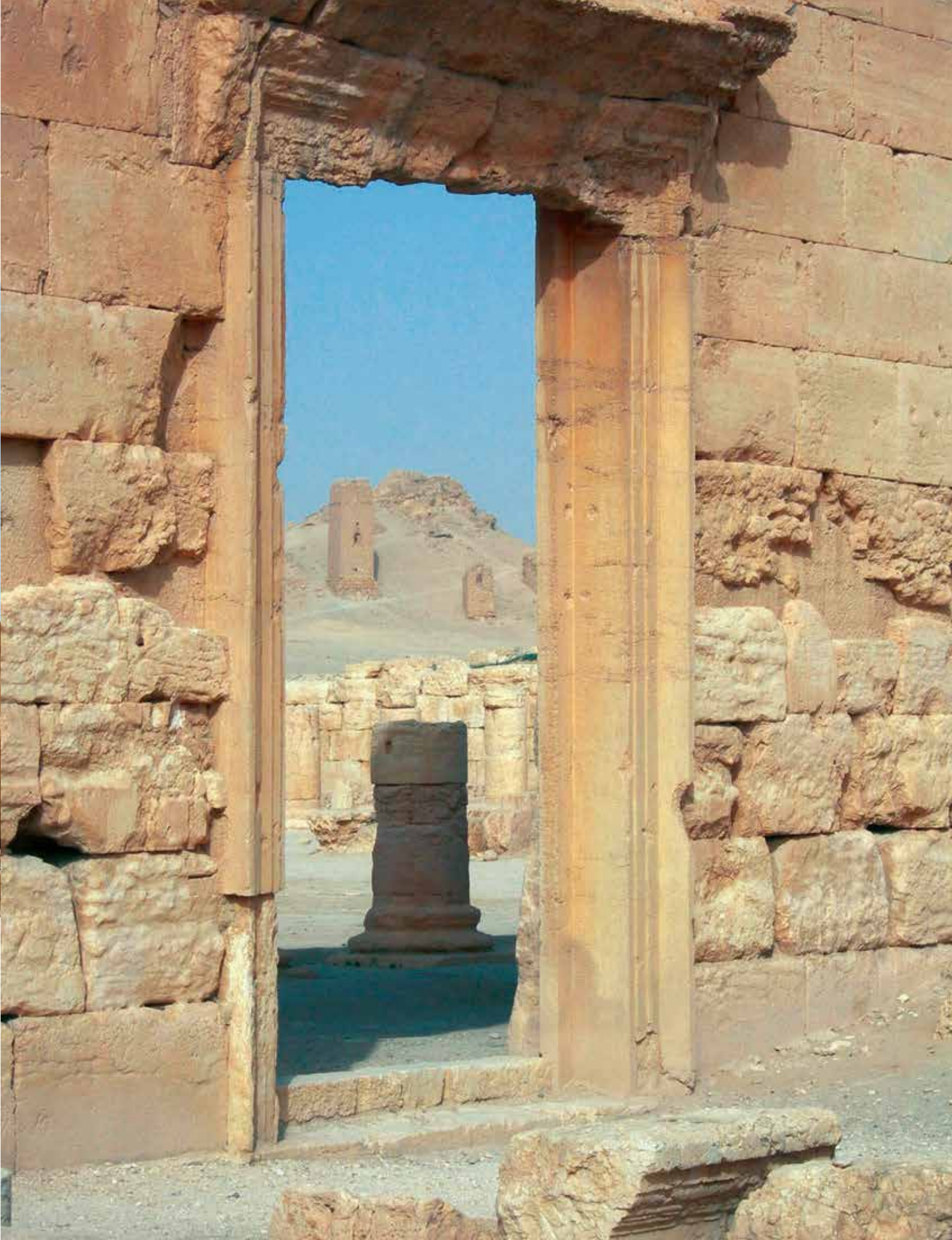
IX.1. The fallen east wall of the Agora annex (the unfinished basilica)



IX.2

IX.2. The Agora annex, with the main gate from the wadi road in the background

IX.3. A gate between the Agora and its annex





IX.4



IX.5



IX.6



IX.7

IX.4. Shops along the side street leading from the Great Colonnade to the Agora

IX.5. A gate of the Agora

IX.6. Front wall of a house in the theatre plaza

IX.7. A view of the Agora looking north



X.1



X.2



X.3



X.4



X.5

X.1. Krzysztof Jakubiak and the author discuss the original site of the Tariff

X.2. A tea pause of the excavators

X.3. Digging at the site of the Tariff and the paved wadi road

X.4. Moving a huge stone fallen from the Agora wall

X.5. The parking lot of our working team

X.6 The field of intact ruins south of the Great Colonnade. The ancient town is just beneath, waiting for future archaeologists. The blown up tower tombs in the far background →









XI. Tetrapylon and surroundings
XII. Great Colonnade West
XIII. Sanctuary of Baalshamin



XI.1

← A view of the theatre plaza through the Great Colonnade. The artist has omitted the theatre altogether. After Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte*, vol. I, Paris, 1799, 55



XI.2

XI.1. The restored Tetrapylon and the columns of the so-called Caesareum on the left

XI.2. A view of the "Royal Mall" from the Tetrapylon towards the Monumental Arch

XI.3. Tetrapylon looking west. Except for a half of one, all columns are modern replacements. The small statue is not in its original place →











XII.2

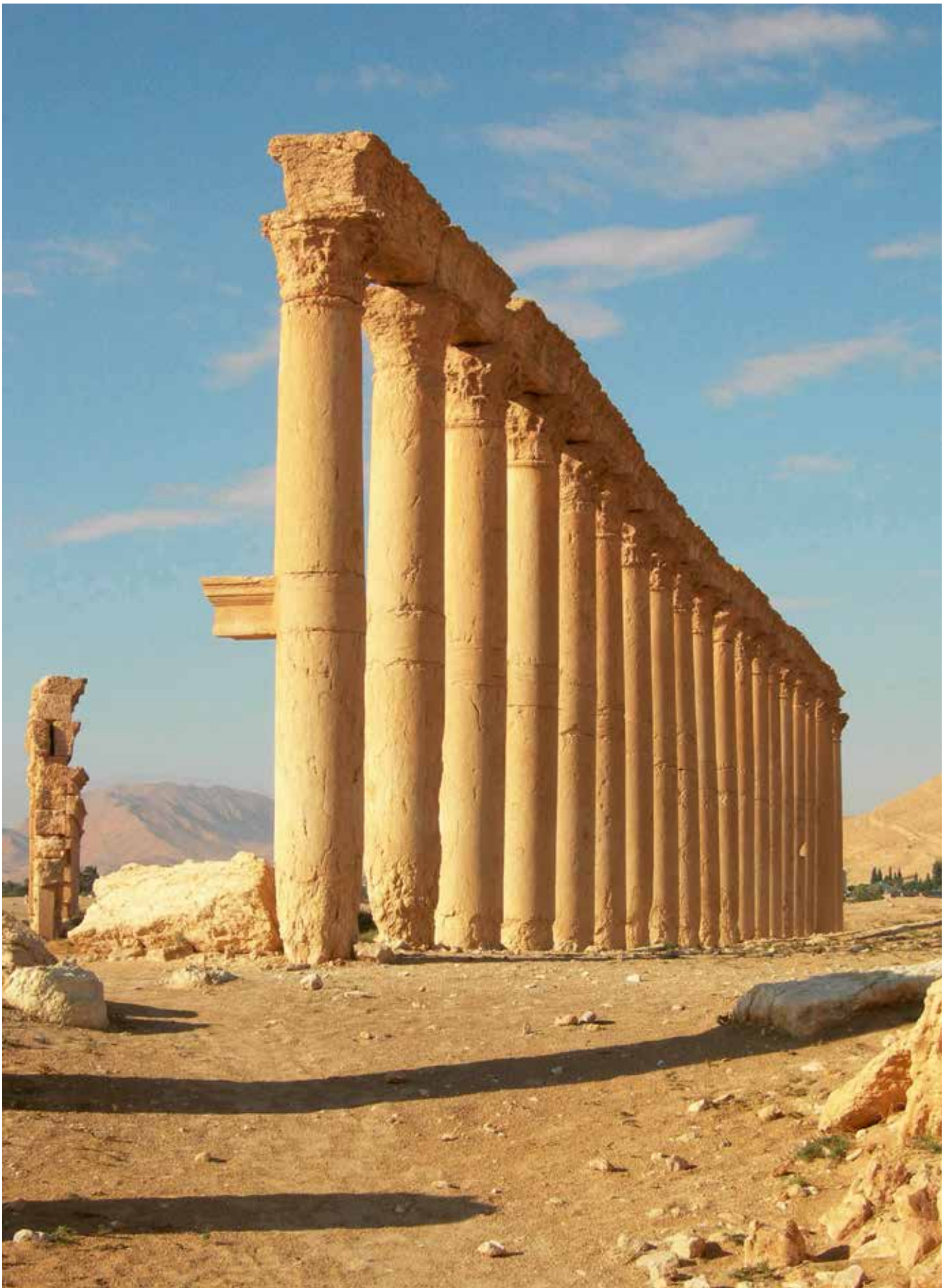


XII.3

← **XII.1.** Sand storm veiling the ruins seen towards the 13th-century castle

XII.2. –XII.3. Great Colonnade west of the Tetracylon after Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque...*, vol. I, 81 and today

XII.4. A colonnade branching from the Tetracylon and running along the Agora







XII.6

XII.5. A courtyard by the Great Colonnade with columns carrying brackets for statues, the so-called Caesareum

XII.6. The ruins of an early Islamic *sūq* (market) inserted into the Great Colonnade



XII.7



XII.8



XII.9



XII.10



XII.11

XII.7. A modern souvenir stall displayed in the ruins

XII.8. – XII.9. Animal life in the ruins

XII.10. A view of Palmyra under snow, 2002

XII.11. Another winter landscape, 2013



XIII.1

XIII.1. A bird's-eye view of the temple of Baalshamin

XIII.2. – XIII.3. The temple of Baalshamin as seen by Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque...*, vol. I, 75, and as it stood before 2015



XIII.2



XIII.3



XIII.4



XIII.5

XIII.4. The porch of the temple, complete but for the roof

XIII.5. Northern courtyard as seen from Zenobia Hotel

XIII.6. A window of the temple and a peep at a tree growing inside

XIII.7. The ruins of the temple today →











XIV. Residential quarter and churches







XIV.2

← ← The peristyle courtyard of a house standing amid the ruins, after Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte*, vol. I, Paris, 1799, 79

← **XIV.1.** Cleaning of the mosaic of Odainat

XIV.2. Plan of the Polish excavations in downtown Palmyra



XIV.3



XIV.4

XIV.3. View of the excavated house (see opposite plan, in the middle)

XIV.4. The unrealized project for the on-site shelter for the mosaic of Odainat. The virtual visitors are the Polish team of 2006



XIV.5



XIV.6

XIV.5. Basilica II seen from above. Only the floor remains intact

XIV.6. The baptistery attached to the basilica

XIV.7. A colonnaded courtyard, called atrium, in front of Basilica III

XIV.8. A single-space church by the Great Colonnade (Basilica I)



XIV.7



XIV.8



XIV.9

XIV.9. Starting the excavations in Basilica IV

XIV.10. Basilica IV, partly uncovered

XIV.11. A visualisation of the Basilicas I–III



XIV.10



XIV.11





XV. Transverse Colonnade
XVI. Diocletian's Camp
XVII. Sanctuary of Allat



XV.1

← The headquarters of Diocletian's Camp, anonymous artist after Louis-François Cassas, 1799

XV.1. A row of columns (partly restored) bearing inscriptions in honour of the members of 'Alaine family dated in 179. The tomb of this family is located behind the building shown on the previous page

XV.2. Columns around the oval plaza at the south end of the Transverse Colonnade. Note the impost of an arch on the right

XV.3. A view along the Transverse Colonnade, looking south



XV.2



XV.3



XV.4



XV.5

XV.4. The so-called Funerary Temple by Cassas (who called it “Temple de Neptune”), seen from the north, *Voyage pittoresque...*, vol. I, 87

XV.5. The same tomb after recent reconstruction of walls, from the northeast



XV.6



XV.7

XV.6. A view of the castle hill across the ruins. To the right, the tomb known as Funerary Temple

XV.7. Close view of the castle built in 1230 “on a lofty hill”, taken in 2016







XVI.2



XVI.3

← **XVI.1.** Diocletian's Camp seen from the hill behind (1970), the Great Colonnade at the upper left, the sanctuary of Bel and the oasis in the background

XVI.2. Headquarters of the Camp ("portique de Dioclétien"), a fanciful restoration by Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque...*, vol. I, 98

XVI.3. The headquarters seen from the south across the rampart



XVI.4



XVI.5

XVI.4. The camp seen from the east. Behind it, the rampart climbing up the strategic hill

XVI.5 The headquarters seen across the columns of the Transverse Colonnade



XVI.6



XVI.7



XVI.8

XVI.6. Kazimierz Michałowski and the trove of heads from a family tomb, scavenged by the Camp builders, 1962

XVI.7. A coffee break in the excavation house, 1962

XVI.8. The first day of Polish excavations in the Camp, 4 May 1959



XVI.9



XVI.10



XVI.11

XVI.9. The headquarters seen through the sanctuary of Allat

XVI.10. The watchtower of the headquarters

XVI.11. A rock tomb in the hillside behind the headquarters



XVII.1



XVII.2

XVII.1. The temple of Allat, with columns being raised. The back of the Funerary Temple in the background to the left

XVII.2. The gate of the sanctuary and the high column with a sundial



XVII.3



XVII.4

XVII.3. The senior worker Abu Shehade, always in white (1973)

XVII.4. A series of honorific statues (*cf.* Figs 186–187) from a late foundation

XVII.5. Excavations in the temple under way

XVII.6. Fallen columns and some of displaced ashlar stones behind the temple

XVII.7. Transport of the statue of Athena to the museum



XVII.5



XVII.6



XVII.7



XVII.8

XVII.8. Columns in front of the sanctuary gate

XVII.9. Pecking from the dig

XVII.10. The cornice of the temple



XVII.9



XVII.10



XVII.11



XVII.12

XVII.11. The temple of Allat and our Syrian colleagues in 2005, Rania al-Rafidi and Khalil al-Hariri, with a visitor

XVII.12. Work in progress in the sanctuary



XVII.13



XVII.14

XVII.13. Capital of an early column (see XVII.8 above)

XVII.14. Interior of the temple and the four column bases for the late canopy of the Athena statue



XVII.15

XVII.15. Removing a stray capital to the museum

XVII.16. Team leaders in 2005: the author between Grzegorz Majcherek (left) and the architect Wojciech Terlikowski

XVII.17. An on-site conference: Wojciech Terlikowski, the author, Szymon Maślak, Karol Juchniewicz



XVII.16



XVII.17



XVII.18

XVII.18. The Polish team by the temple of Allat: Dagmara Wielgosz-Rondolino, Karol Juchniewicz, Wojciech Terlikowski, and Marcin Wagner

XVII.19. Marta Żuchowska and Karol Juchniewicz exploring a well

XVII.20. The excavation tent



XVII.19



XVII.20



XVII.21



XVII.22



XVII.23

XVII.21. The author with Grzegorz Majcherek contemplating the sanctuary

XVII.22. A surprised viper basking in the sun

XVII.23. A view of tower tombs from a rock tomb (see above, XVI.11) in Diocletian's Camp





XVIII. The ramparts
XIX. The Valley of the Tombs
and other tombs



XVIII.1

← The Valley of the Tombs seen from the west towards the city. The tower of Kitot, here in the foreground, stood in fact at the far left outside of this picture. After Louis-François Cassas, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte*, vol. I, Paris, 1799, 101

XVIII.1. The remains of the Arsu temple in front of the rampart. The Agora and the Great Colonnade in the background

XVIII.2. The south wall of the Agora, rebuilt as a part of the late rampart

XVIII.3. The rampart north of the city, recently restored



XVIII.2



XVIII.3



XVIII.4



XVIII.5



XVIII.6



XVIII.7

XVIII.4. The restored wall seen from the Northern Necropolis

XVIII.5. The hill of Muntar, south of the ruins, with the old rampart on the ridge

XVIII.6. The summit of Muntar with the lintel of a small temple and a view of the oasis

XVIII.7. One of the rounded bastions added to the rampart to house catapults or ballistas



XIX.1



XIX.2

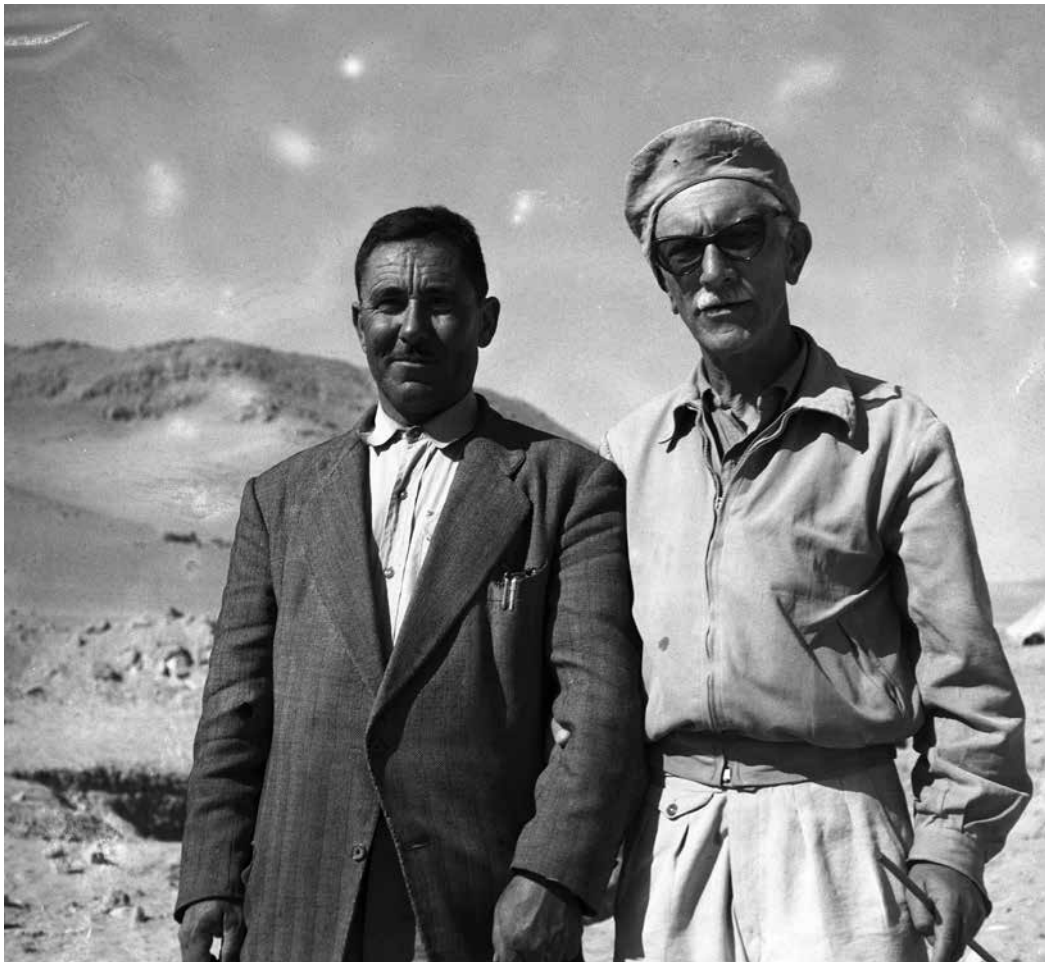


XIX.3

XIX.1. A wall across the Valley of the Tombs, possibly a flood breaker

XIX.2. The towers of Atenatan (right) and of Elahbel (left)

XIX.3. The plain in the middle of the Valley where the tomb of Zabda and other underground tombs were dug, seen from afar



XIX.4



XIX.5



XIX.6

XIX.4. Kazimierz Michałowski and Obeid Taha in the Valley, 1959

XIX.5. Starting the dig on the site of Zabda tomb, 1959

XIX.6. The relief of Zabda (see Fig. 237) being pulled out of his tomb, 1959



XIX.7



XIX.8



XIX.9

XIX.7. The Umm Belqis hill and its towers as they used to be before 2015

XIX.8. The same view after August 2015

XIX.9. The tower of Elahbel reduced to rubble





XIX.11



XIX.12

XIX.10. An anonymous funerary tower in the Southwest Necropolis

XIX.11. The underside of a lintel (see Fig. 149) in the ruins of a funerary temple

XIX.12. Fragment of a very ornate stone tomb door imitating woodwork. The small animals between nail heads are unique

XIX.13. The open door of the Artaban underground tomb, Southeast Necropolis →



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Abbreviations

AAAS (AAS) – *Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes*

BAH – *Bibliothèque archéologique et historique*

CAH – *Cambridge Ancient History*

CIS II – *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Pars secunda inscriptiones Aramaicas continens*, Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Paris 1926

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Illustrations in *A promenade in Palmyra*.

Yesterday and today

Opening: The first ever view of Palmyra by Gerard Hofstede van Essen. Oil painting, 1693 (courtesy of the Allard Pierson Museum, University of Amsterdam)

A caravan en route to Palmyra. Anonymous etching freely inspired by Jean-François Cassas, 1799 (Getty Research Institute)

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II.4 The author with Khaled al-As'ad, Director of Palmyra Antiquities (K. Gawlikowska, Warsaw)

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