

PALMYRENA:
CITY, HINTERLAND
AND CARAVAN TRADE
BETWEEN ORIENT AND
OCCIDENT

PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE
HELD IN ATHENS, DECEMBER 1-3, 2012

edited by

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Cover: Relief from the Marona house-tomb, Palmyra (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

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Introduction

Jørgen Christian Meyer, Eivind Heldaas Seland, Nils Anfinset

In the archaeological collection in Palmyra Museum a famous relief from the Marona house-tomb, used to be on display until the sad events of the Syrian civil war. The relief, which is reproduced at the cover of this volume, dates to around the middle of the third century AD, depicts a merchant ship with a large square sail and double rudder. To the left stands a man, the head and upper part of the torso missing, wearing trousers and resting his left hand on the stern. In his right hand, he holds the reins of a camel, of which only the feet are preserved. The relief is a visual representation of the fact that the Palmyrenes not only engaged in caravan trade across the Syrian dry-steppe, but extended their activities to maritime trade in the Indian Ocean, as attested also by inscriptions from Palmyra itself, from Egypt, and from the Indian Ocean region.

Palmyrene inscriptions are also found all over the Roman Empire, from Syria to Hadrian's Wall at the river Tyne, where Barates from Palmyra, probably a veteran of the Roman army, erected a magnificent tombstone with a bilingual Latin and Aramaic inscription to his beloved Regina, a local slave whom he had manumitted and married. In Rome there was a Palmyrene community. Onomastics, worship of Palmyrene deities, the Palmyrene variety of Aramaic script, and the Palmyrenes' pride in their origin make it possible to map their presence outside their territory, but the Palmyrenes were not the only group in the Roman Empire that operated far from home. Safaitic graffiti, the script of the nomadic groups in southern Syria and northwestern Jordan, has for instance been found in the theatre of Pompeii, Italy. Soldiers from Thrace were stationed at a small military outpost northwest of Palmyra in the mid second century. Some of the mobility is due the recruitment of the local population into Roman legions and auxiliary forces, which were then stationed in other parts of the Empire. Others were probably sailors or merchants who settled far away from their native place. Geographical mobility, not only for the elite, was a common feature within empires before the rise of nation states in the 19th century.

To find Palmyrenes far away from their home is thus no surprise. What distinguished the Palmyrenes was that their network, apart from the Roman Empire, also encompassed the Indian Ocean, and areas controlled by the Parthians in Mesopotamia, with Palmyrene settlements fully integrated into the local community. Palmyra benefited from its relatively independent position within the Roman sphere of influence in the political border zone between the great empires. The

Palmyrenes utilized their close relationship with the Bedouin population on the dry steppe and their ability to function as brokers across political borders to open up a trade route between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, which replaced the old corridor along the Euphrates, and functioned as a supplement to the route via Alexandria and the ports at the Red Sea coast. It was also to the benefit of both the Romans and Parthians because of the taxes involved. The earlier late Hellenistic settlement in the oasis grew to one of the largest and most influential cities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

The culture of Palmyra displays, from our western classical point of view, an unusual mixture of Roman/Hellenistic traits on one hand, and Iranian, Mesopotamian and Arabian on the other. Some have characterized it as a *Kulturbegegnung im Grenzbereich*,¹ as the very place where the Orient and Occident came together. The Palmyrenes were clearly able to adapt to different gods, languages and cultural expressions, but it is highly improbable that they themselves considered their culture as hybrid between the Orient and Occident, which are modern western concepts. It was their own culture and they probably looked upon themselves, as all other communities normally do, as the center of the world. In all empires, throughout history, populations have been able to adapt to different local cultures, to the culture of the political center, and they have been able to activate different 'identities' according to the situation. While the growth of the city and the development of the caravan trade was undoubtedly related to Palmyra's position between two large empires, the diversity of Palmyrene culture was not due to that. Hybridization of cultural expressions was nothing new to the Middle East. Both the Achaemenid and Seleucid Empires, which spanned from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan and northern India, were multicultural, multireligious and multilingual. Locally it was very common to see a blend of different, from our point of view, cultural expressions. Within the Roman Empire there were great differences between Britannia, Rome, Antioch and Alexandria, even if the so-called Romanization or integration of the local population and elites lead to some standardization across the empire. The cultural mixture of Palmyrene culture and also networks far to the east, were thus no 'abnormality', but had roots far back in time and parallels elsewhere in the ancient world. What was special in a larger historical

¹ Schmidt-Colinet, A. 1995 (ed.): *Palmyra. Kulturbegegnung im Grenzbereich*, Verlag Phillip von Zabern, Mainz.

context, was the establishment in the late Hellenistic and Roman periods of a political border that separated the Eastern world from the Mediterranean, up to the Arab conquest.

This volume springs out of the Syrian-Norwegian research project *Palmyrena: City, Hinterland and Caravan trade between Orient and Occident* (2009-2013). The project, which was hosted by the University of Bergen and funded by the Research Council of Norway, asked two fundamental questions about Palmyra, namely ‘why?’ and ‘how?’. Why, among all the cities on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire, did Palmyra evolve into an important center of caravan trade in the first three centuries AD, when trade could and did also take place by ships in the Red Sea, presumably saving transport costs, and by way of the Euphrates valley, which was the normal corridor of travel and transport between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean in other periods? How was it possible to support a city of perhaps more than 100 000 people at its largest, in the environment of the Syrian Desert, more than 100 kilometers beyond the 200-millimetres isohyet marking the border between desert and agricultural land? These questions have been addressed by project members in a number of published and forthcoming works.² The project included four seasons of archaeological fieldwork in the mountains northwest of Palmyra, where traces of agriculture, pastoral activities, water management, settlement, and military presence were recorded in order to shed light on the ecological basis of the population center in Palmyra and its hinterland in the *longue durée* – from the Neolithic through the Early Islamic periods. In addition to this we conducted studies of published epigraphic, archaeological, literary and ethnographic sources.

Palmyra is an international field of research, and the project was able to draw on a century-long tradition of scholarship. A number of workshops, panels and a conference were organized in order to engage with other ongoing work. This volume, brings together papers read at the closing conference at the Norwegian and Danish institutes in Athens, December 1-3 2012, covering a number of aspects of Palmyrene history, archaeology and society.

The first group of contributions deals with trade, caravans and networks.

Kristina Hesse draws the lines back to the Bronze Age, and the interaction between pastoral nomads and the urban societies of the Middle East. She shows how the settled population of Palmyra oasis and the surrounding nomadic groups played an important role in the maintenance of the caravan routes through Palmyrena in the Bronze Age.

² See www.org.uib.no/palmyrena, which will be updated as long as publications related to the project continue to come out (accessed June 17 2015).

Michael Sommer investigates the relationship between the merchants and the elite in Palmyra. He suggests that the elite functioned not as institutionalized protectors of the caravans within the framework of a traditional *polis*, but rather as tribal leaders with close personal connections to the surrounding nomadic groups. Michał Gawlikowski points out that Palmyra had no connections with the overland ‘Silk Road’ through Iran. The main route from Palmyra went down to the Arabian Gulf. He suggests that though the trade through Palmyra was important for the existence of the city, the main market for the goods was not Rome, but primarily the Syrian market. Marta Żuchowska investigates the mechanisms that brought the silk from China to the Mediterranean, and how the trade was dependent on a specific development within the regions along route, which interacted with each other. Taco Terpstra turns the attention to the Mediterranean. The existence of a Palmyrene sanctuary in Rome is seen as a result of a trading diaspora in the imperial capital, and part of a much larger western Palmyrene commercial network.

The next group of papers deal with the city of Palmyra itself and the regional context.

Paola Mior discusses the sources for our reconstruction of the road systems between Palmyra and the Mediterranean. Claudia Bührig compares the layout of the city and monumentalisation of the public streets with other large cities in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Roland Linck shows how geophysical prospection, like magnetometry, and remote sensing in the form of satellite photo and radar are important tools to reveal covered structures and the extent of the city-area. Pavel Alipov makes a historiographical analysis of M. I. Rostovtzeff’s impact on the study of Palmyrene religious cult. Christine Ertel and René Ployer gives a critical supplement to latest publication of the excavations of the so-called ‘Hellenistic town’ in Palmyra and discuss the finds of unpublished glass from the excavations. Christiane Römer-Strehl relates the ceramic material from Palmyra (3rd century BC until the 3rd /6th century AD) to both Mediterranean and Mesopotamian traditions. Kiyohide Saito presents the latest investigations of a house-tomb in the northern necropolis, and Saeko Miyashita analyses the vessels in Palmyrene banquet scenes from three newly excavated tombs. The two papers of Takahiro Nakahashi and K. Yoshimura, Shiqin Wu, T. Nakahashi, and S. Saito uses the osteoarchaeological and dental remains from the tombs to investigate the state of health of the population, and also the genetic composition of the population.

The last paper of Knut Krzywinski and Jonatan Krzywinski is related to the project fieldwork north of Palmyra. It presents a pollen-analysis and an AMS radiocarbon dating from a mudbrick and discusses the

potential for cereal crop production in the hinterland of the city.

Many institutions and individuals contributed to the Palmyrena project. Besides the University of Bergen and the Research Council of Norway, we would like to thank the Norwegian and Danish institutes in Athens for their hosting our meetings. We would also like to express our gratitude to the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées (DGAM), Damascus, Dr. Bassam Jamous and Dr. Michel al-Maqdissi, the director of the Museum in Palmyra, Waleed al-As'ad, our museum liaison

Abdelbasit Kanawi, our guide Adeeb al-As'ad, and to the Turki family, Palmyra for all their co-operation, assistance and generosity.

In 2011 our last season of fieldwork was cut short by the events leading to the tragedy presently unfolding in Syria. Above all our thoughts go to the people of Tadmur and Syria, in remembrance of their hospitality and generosity during our many visits, in compassion with their current suffering, and in hope for a better future for their city and country.

Bergen June 2015

The editors

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