

JOURNEYS TO

TADMOR

HISTORY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN PALMYRA
AND THE MIDDLE EAST



THIS CATALOGUE supplements the exhibition *Journeys to Tadmor: History and Cultural Heritage in Palmyra and the Middle East*, which was on display in Bergen at Bryggens Museum in the summer of 2017.

It relates the story of Palmyra and the Middle East as a meeting place, from the Bronze Age till the present day. *Journeys to Tadmor* was a part of the research project *Mechanisms of Cross-Cultural Interaction: Networks in the Roman Near East* (2013–2017), which explored how ties based on trade, political power, ethnicity, tribe and religion tied the Middle East together in what we today would term social networks. Palmyra was used as one of multiple examples in this project, which aimed at challenging the traditional emphasis on the role of the state, in order to better understand how pre-modern societies worked. The exhibition also drew on the results of an earlier project: *Palmyrena: City, Hinterland and Caravan Trade between Orient and Occident* (2009–2013), which investigated how a city of this large size could survive in the desert in a world without modern means of transport. How did the Palmyrenes acquire food, water, fuel and animals for transportation? The project also aimed at explaining how and why Palmyra grew to become such an important centre of trade despite not being located on the shortest or easiest route between east and west. Both projects were hosted by the University of Bergen. They, and the exhibition, were funded by the Research Council of Norway.

At the University of Bergen the archaeology and history of the Middle East from the Stone Age up until the present day are both researched and taught. Through international research collaboration scholars and students explore subjects related to development, democracy and forms of government, nomads and permanent residents, trade and finance, religion and ideology, conflict, war and cultural heritage.

The catalogue contains two additional articles. Haian Dukhan wrote about life in Palmyra before and during the civil war. His text is followed by a contribution from the multi-disciplinary artist Amanda Chambers on her sculpture installation *Exhume*, which was part of the exhibition. The work was inspired by the destruction of Palmyra's monuments during the Syrian civil war that started in 2011.



The Middle East as a meeting ground



Caravan en route to Palmyra, anonymous artist after Louis-François Cassas, ca. 1799. The Getty Research Institute.

The Middle East has always been a place people travelled through. Lone travellers, caravans, nomadic tribes, armies and even entire peoples have crossed this area on their way to Africa, Asia and Europe. The people who settled here created lasting civilizations and eventually empires. This role as a crossroads between continents is partly why the Middle East is the complex region we see today.

The Middle East is not easily definable in geographic terms, but in pre-Islamic times we normally mean the area between the Taurus Mountains in Turkey to the north to Yemen in the south, and from Egypt in the west to the Iranian Plateau in the east. Here we encounter massive mountain ranges, coastal areas, desert, steppe, forest and fertile plains. In the first couple of centuries AD the Roman conquest gradually reached large parts of this area. Around the year 200 it covered the provinces Syria (Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine and parts of southern Turkey), Arabia Petraea (parts of Jordan and Israel, and the Sinai Peninsula), and Mesopotamia (Northern Iraq and south-eastern Turkey). To the east the boundary of the Roman Empire ran along the river Euphrates.

One of the most important routes from the Euphrates led through Syria to the city of Tadmor, known in Greek as Palmyra. Despite its arid surroundings the city grew to become a flourishing centre for trade, when its residents led caravans with silk, spices and other exclusive goods between the Roman Empire, the Persian Empire and India. After an eventful epoch during which the city under Queen Zenobia unsuccessfully challenged the great powers of the day, the city lost its position of power, but kept its importance in other areas.

Palmyra was only one of several nodes in the networks that tied the world together, from China in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. But with its distinctive culture, well-preserved ruins and enigmatic location in the middle of the desert, the city has always piqued the curiosity of outsiders. Today in tragic ways it has received renewed attention and relevance through its role in the ongoing Syrian civil war.

Who are the tadamera?

Modern life among the ruins of Palmyra | Haian Dukhan

After the Roman Emperor Aurelian captured it in AD 272, Palmyra was reduced to a village that rarely appeared in historical records. The different dynasties that ruled Syria continued to use the Temple of Bel as a garrison for imposing law and order against the nomadic Bedouin tribes in the Syrian Desert. The current people of Palmyra, called Tadamera in Arabic, are the descendants of a small group of families that inhabited a village built inside the Temple of Bel for hundreds of years. The Tadamera lived out their lives, raised their families and gathered their memories inside the archaeological site for a long period of time. The archaeological site was a place that provided them with shelter from the dangers of the Bedouin tribes who used to raid the settled areas and the hardships of living in the desert. I remember my grandfather telling me with passion and sadness about his early life inside the Temple of Bel and how the French obliterated their old town, asking them to move to the new one next to the ruins.

After the horrific destruction that Palmyra was exposed to in the last two years, most of the media attention was focused on the archaeological site and its monuments. The people of Palmyra, however, who inhabited the site itself for hundreds of years and continued to live in the city of Tadmor adjacent to the site until the present time, are rarely mentioned in the daily news from Palmyra. For the Tadamera them-

selves, Palmyra provided a palpable link to the past, for they once assumed that their distant descendants were part of a great civilisation. Before discussing what the ruins of Palmyra meant for the Tadamera, it is important to mention that the Syrian memory of Tadmor is dark tainted by the fact that many Syrians are more familiar with Tadmor prison, which was used by the Assad-regime for decades to imprison political dissidents from the whole country, than with Zenobia. Nevertheless, Palmyra's monuments were held in common by Syrians, regardless of sect or politics. They provided a focus for nationalist pride and belonging where many Syrians proudly proclaimed that they were the 'grandchildren of Odeina and Zenobia' (ancient king and queen of Palmyra. Ed.). The engagement between the Tadamera and the ruins of Palmyra is deep-rooted and, in a sense, it can express the attachment of the Tadamera to the history of their old town and their gratitude towards what the ruins offered them.

In homage to the past, many people in Tadmor gave their children the name of Zenobia or Odeina. Although the majority of Syrians would usually give an Arab Muslim name to their eldest child, it was more common for the people of Palmyra to use an old Palmyrene name for their firstborn child. This was an affirmation of their strong attachment to their Palmyrene roots and culture. Moreover, the two major



◇ Village in the Temple of Bel
(Photo: Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-matpc-12341)

schools in the town were given the names of Zenobia and Odeina in order to remind the students of the importance of their history and their connection to a great era. Shops, restaurants, hotels and other major facilities in the town held names like Tetrapylon, Baalshamin and Agora. Wherever you went in the modern town of Palmyra, you would come across names that link the present with the past.

To this day, the residents of Palmyra all own gardens in the millennia-old oasis that surrounds the ruins. The oasis adds an exceptional beauty to the ruins, bringing a green element to the archaeological scenery and differentiating it from the surrounding desert. The oasis had about 1,000 hectares of irrigable land that was intensively planted by the Tadamera with palm, olive and pomegranate trees. While the Tadamera worked continuously to preserve this amazingly green spot in the desert, the oasis in return, gave them some of its bounty and provided them with a place for recreation and relaxation.

All in all, the Tadamera constituted an important element of a trilogy that made Palmyra such a unique place: the ruins, the oasis and the people who worked for centuries to preserve it.

A large number of the local population of Palmyra worked for decades with national and international missions to excavate the ruins of Palmyra and restore them as much as possible. Most of the staff that worked for the Directorate of Antiquities to guard and preserve the ruins of Palmyra were Tadamera. These local people not only brought direct knowledge of the site to the world but also considerable documentation of its monuments and artefacts. Though little noted, Palmyrene preservationists have proven crucial in discovering and preserving the ruins of Palmyra over many decades.

The ruins of Palmyra provided an important source of income for the Tadamera. While a large number of them worked for preserving the ruins, another large

segment of the community was central to the local tourism industry. The majority of the hotels, restaurants and shops in the town were owned by local Palmyrene people. Apart from offering general services for the tourists visiting Palmyra, the Tadamera were keen on integrating the traditional elements of their life into the tourist industry. This included shows of Palmyrene folk dancing in addition to providing authentic Palmyrene food for the tourists. For the Tadamera, working in the tourist sector did not only mean offering paid services. The internet is replete with stories of Palmyrene families hosting travellers in their homes. Even though most of the Tadamera belong to poor socio-economic backgrounds, they were generous with their time and resources. They believed that Palmyra should not be only a touristic product but rather a place where cross-cultural dialogues can take place.

None should forget the sacrifice of the Tadamera during the Syrian conflict. The majority of them chose to take a neutral position during the conflict because they were concerned about any potential destruction that could be inflicted upon their ancient town. However, some skirmishes between the rebels and the regime between 2011 and 2014 led to large areas of the oasis being burned. Of all the terrible attacks on Palmyra, none has shaken the world more than the beheading of Khaled al-Asaad, the Palmyrene archaeologist who played a pioneering role in discovering and preserving the ruins of Palmyra for fifty years. The importance of Palmyra, historically and strategically, exposed it to continuous fighting between the regime and the 'Islamic State' fighters. The battles to control Palmyra led to both sides damaging the ruins and the modern city as well. The Tadamera left Palmyra completely, escaping the brutality of ISIS and

the indiscriminate bombing of the Syrian regime warplanes. The majority of them ended up living in miserable conditions in a desert camp close to the Jordanian border without any support from the international community.

One day, ISIS and the regime's oppression in Syria will be history. Palmyra will be a permanent lesson about the darkness into which extremism and oppression can sink. The heritage of Palmyra had survived millennia. Palmyra was at the crossroads of several civilizations and it is hoped that once the war is over, it will be one of the main factors that foster unity and identity for the Syrian people. The preservation of Palmyra is inseparable from the protection of lives of Syrians in general and the Tadamera specifically.

HAIAN DUKHAN was born in Palmyra in 1981 where he lived most of his life. He received his BA in English Literature from Al-Ba'th University in Homs in 2003. He worked with the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture, the Syrian Ministry of Tourism, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Palmyra for several years. He then obtained his MA in International Development from the University of East Anglia in the UK. He went back to Syria a few months before the uprising started to work for the development sector in Palmyra. When the Syrian Uprising started, Dukhan recorded his observations about the resurgence of tribalism in the protest movement, which was turned into a PhD project at the University of St Andrews. He has recently completed his PhD at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. During the past four years of Dukhan's work on his PhD, he published many papers that were cited in different media outlets like: Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising - The Islamic State and the Arab Tribes in Eastern Syria.

EXHUME

Amanda Chambers

Background

My work considers our connections to the past. It comes from a need to make contact with history in a way that we can't easily define but that feels instinctive. But why is the past important to us? Why does it often feel like a place we know when we have no way of physically being there? — does this matter?

What is important to me is making physical contact with the fragments of the past: texts, artefacts, places, music etc. I then place physicality at the heart of each piece of work, in doing so I can resolve the distance between the past and present – tie it down and get its measure. In the process I create new meanings and narratives so the past is always present. I like what the British author Hilary Mantel has said: 'The past is not behind us, it is alongside'. This makes sense to me. When choosing materials to explore this idea, I find that clay, with its tactile and elemental qualities, has an extraordinary connecting power — both for me and for audiences.

Exhume

I often look to the past to make works in the present but when the destruction of Palmyra took place in 2015 I realised I could make work that had a very contemporary relevance. This was not premeditated. When I saw the news footage and particularly the Google Earth images of 'before' and 'after' the ISIS attack, I felt a powerful, visceral response, which stayed with me. I was also aware of the debate that followed in the UK, where as onlookers, we were shocked by the architectural damage as well as the loss of human life in Syria. The UNESCO heritage site received dramatic coverage — some said too much.

I found this very interesting — this juxtaposition of art vs. humanity. But I found myself wanting to do something — and to build a 'construction' was how the work began.

Building the work

I like art that challenges me and will increasingly only produce pieces that have taken me on some kind of journey. If I am excited then I think this transmits itself in the piece — and to audiences too. It is a baseline criterion.

I saw the images for Exhume in my mind before I made them but had no idea how I could practically build large scale works out of clay without firing as I had no kiln. I had to talk myself into attempting this idea — it scared me a little — and I felt that was good. I knew about an 'air-drying' clay which can be used to harden over night – often used by schools for children to create work quickly and see results. I liked the idea of this simple medium being used on a much larger scale.

I realised I would need a simple armature so I created one from wire mesh — normally used for fencing — which was then removed when the structure was stable. I then made a few small prototypes. This led to a larger scale piece and then several more getting higher and higher. The tipping point came at around two metres (human height) at which point the sculpture collapses. I soon had a group of sculptures in my studio, and it came to me that rather than buildings I had created a family group. As the clay dried out away from the armature it was as though they took on an organic quality. This was very exciting, as they seemed to be reaching out and taking on a new life despite appearing fragmented and damaged.

I now saw how the futile destruction of Palmyra and the human need to renew and recreate could sit together in one piece. I used the term 'Exhume' (which in English is normally used to describe removing bodies from the grave) to respect the fact that people were dying but that as humans we would inevitably re-build both lives and communities again.

Journeys to Tadmor

I wanted to show these works in settings that were both relevant to the history of Palmyra and also offered a contemporary view of the world today. I was looking for a museum to work with and the University of Bergen research project was recommended to me. It is very exciting to me that this work has travelled from its beginnings in the UK to meet a team who has researched and also travelled to Syria and the Near East. We have both reached Palmyra from different pathways but arrived together in Bergen to share this exhibition with others and continue the cycle of connections and discussions.

Amanda Chambers
Shigaraki, Japan, March 2017



AMANDA CHAMBERS is a British multi-disciplinary artist. Her work centres around our proximity to the past and its residual traces found in objects, places and spaces. She has worked with national and international museum collections for the last 12 years including the Natural History Museum and The Bodleian Library at Oxford University. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA) and a member of the Royal West of England Academy of Arts (RWA). She completed a ceramics residency in Japan in March 2017, funded by the Daiwa Foundation and Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation, as part of long term project to explore her relationship with clay. She has subsequently been awarded an Arts Council England grant over three years to develop this research. www.amandachambers.co.uk

◇ Photos: Max McClure



The Syrian Desert

Where the mountains meet the plain in the middle of the Syrian Desert lies Tadmor, better known as Palmyra. The desert is not comprised of dunes of sand, as for instance in parts of Saudi Arabia, but is rather an arid, wide steppe. The mountains to the north are bordering on the fertile zone in northwestern Syria, where grain can be cultivated – Homs, Hama and Aleppo. The mountain pass forms a gateway for all who travel between the agricultural areas and the desert. The route through the desert was a shortcut for travellers between the Mediterranean to the west or Damascus to the south and Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris.

It is a landscape filled with contrasts, and through the ages it has received attention from far outside the borders of Syria. In his encyclopaedic *Natural History* from around 70 BC, the Roman writer Pliny the Elder wrote that Palmyra was known for its location: a small area of water sources and arable land bordered by desert on all sides. The waters of Efqa, the main wellspring of Palmyra which waters the city's gardens, is sulphurous. To have an adequate supply of drinking water,

Archaeological map of the city. The city's main water source, the hot spring Efqa, is indicated on the map. Efqa supplies water to the gardens of Palmyra. The water is sulphurous and was probably not used as drinking water to any large extent. Efqa was considered holy, and the ruins show that the Palmyrenes bathed in it. The spring is still there, but in the 1980s it disappeared below ground level due to dropping water levels. (Map: Klaus Schnädelbach)

the Palmyrenes had to augment the supply with water from other sources. Such springs existed in the mountains to the northwest of Palmyra, and water from these springs was led to the city in subterranean pipelines. Archaeologists have also found traces of cisterns for the storage of rainwater. This purpose was aided by the soil in the area, which prevented the water from penetrating down into the ground.

The presence of water along with its location made the oasis an important stopover for travellers between east and west. Nomadic tribes made use of the desert as early as the Stone Age, while the name 'Tadmor' appears in texts from the Bronze Age. The Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I claimed to have defeated the Amurru (an Aramaic-speaking people) and conquered Tadmor around 1100 BC. According to the biblical tradition 'Tadmor in the desert' was founded by king Solomon. This is most likely due to confusing it with 'Tamar', another location altogether, but it contributed to the later interest in Palmyra. Today's ruins in Palmyra stem from Roman and Islamic times.



A city between empires

After the conquests of Alexander the Great, present-day Syria and the Middle East came under Greek rule. From the first century BC the nomadic population of the steppe gradually settled down and organised themselves to protect the caravans that were to make Palmyra famous. Palmyra became a city with Greek political institutions whose inhabitants described themselves as Palmyrenes. The first two centuries AD saw the construction of public monuments characteristic for Greek cities, like a market (*agora*), a theatre, temples and a main broad colonnaded street. While other cities in the Near East went through similar processes, Palmyra developed an urban culture and appearance of its own, in which tribal identity remained important.

Between Rome and Parthia

Rome and Parthia were the great powers of the time, and Palmyra was situated right in between. Palmyrenes residing in Parthian towns like Dura-Europos, Seleucia, Babylon and Vologesias facilitated exchanges of goods and culture with the east. Rome had the strongest political impact on Palmyrene life. In the first centuries before and after the turn of our era the eastern Mediterranean came under control of Rome. Palmyra was probably incorporated into the Roman Empire in the first decades of the first century under emperor Tiberius (14–37), but kept considerable autonomy. Emperors like Hadrian (117–138) travelled through the eastern regions and stopped at Palmyra, situated on the most eastern border of Roman territory. Until the later third century there were few signs of friction. Roman soldiers and officials came through Palmyra and dedicated inscriptions. There was also a Palmyrene unit of dromedary riders in the Roman army: the Ala Ulpia I Dromedariorum Palmyrenorum.

◆ The Great Colonnade: Across ancient Palmyra ran two broad streets flanked by rows of columns. These were multifunctional urban spaces. The wide streets separated wheeled traffic from pedestrians and eventually connected the main urban areas and temples. The porticoes opened up to shops. The long rows of columns carried consoles with statues of Palmyrenes and inscriptions in which different individuals and groups presented themselves and their commitment to the city. Many consoles and inscriptions can still be seen. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

Monumental arch: The richly decorated arch linked the main colonnaded street with the Bel temple and was one of Palmyra's most famous sights. It was built in the third century during the reign of emperor Septimius Severus. The arch was largely destroyed September or October 2015. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

The large market court (*agora*) was the hub of Palmyrene commercial and political life. It was developed in the last quarter of the first century and measured 71 by 84 metres. Inscriptions commemorated the actions of prominent citizens who facilitated the caravan trade. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

The Tetrapiylon was situated on an oval plaza and consisted of four gates formed by columns made of pink granite and carried from Egypt. It functioned as a monumental roundabout on a major crossing in the colonnaded street. The monument as seen until 2017 was reconstructed. Only one of the original columns survived. The Tetrapiylon was severely damaged early 2017. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

Construction of the Roman theatre along the colonnaded street began in the second century, but was never completed. Besides performances, political meetings were probably held here as well. The architectural background of the stage was damaged early 2017. (Photo: Guillaume Piolle / CC BY 3.0)



From the desert to the sea



The basis for Palmyra's wealth was long-distance trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Traditionally this trade took place along the rivers Euphrates and Tigris. This route, however, ran through many minor kingdoms, all demanding tolls and tariffs from travellers. The changing political situation in the lands separating the Roman and Parthian territories contributed to making the situation unpredictable. In the first century AD this caused Palmyrene traders to start transporting goods using caravans through the desert to central and southern Mesopotamia.

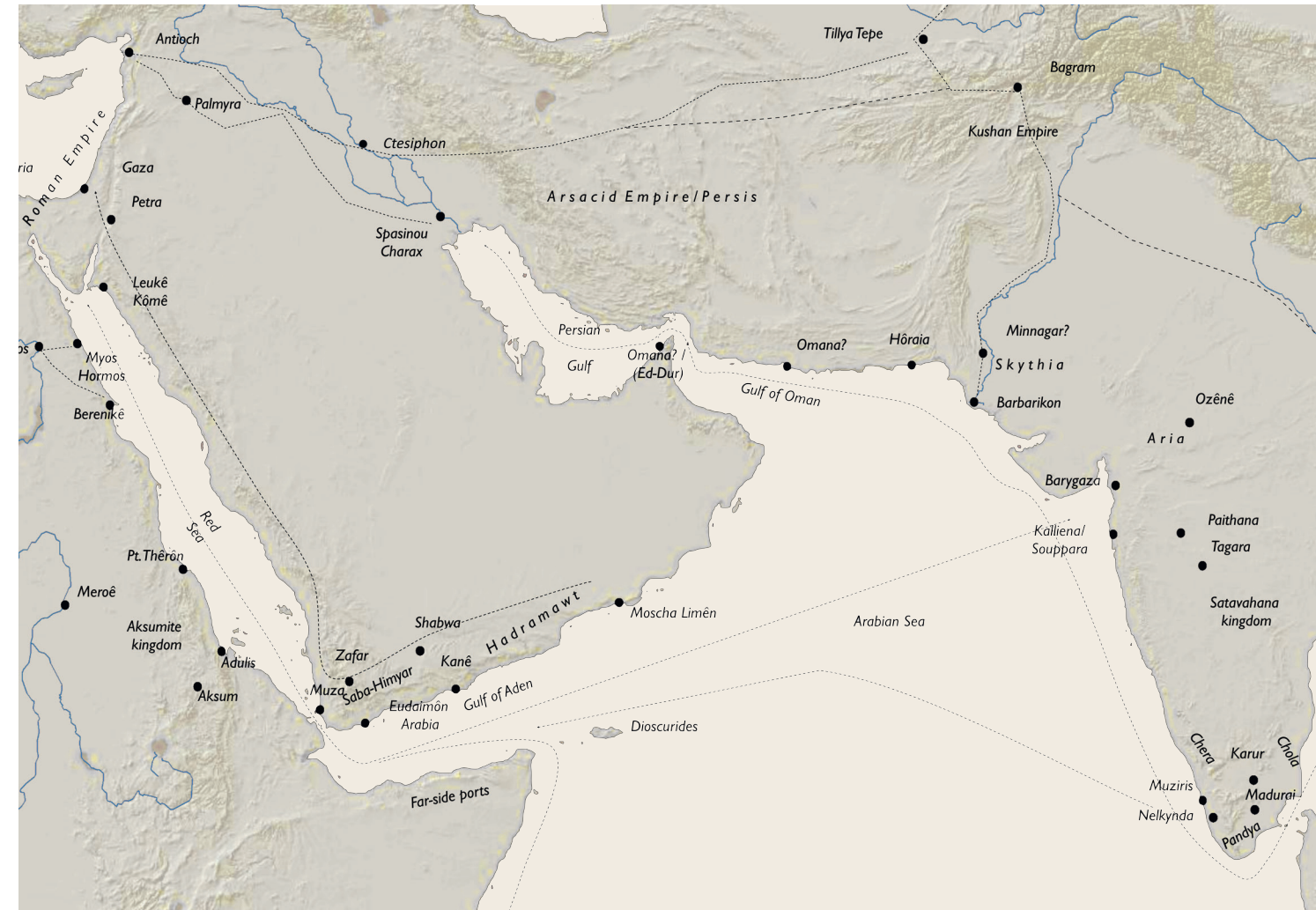
Although traveling through the desert was harder, the route became an attractive one. Every autumn the caravans left in a south-easterly direction, laden with among other things wine, metals and glass. At the Euphrates the cargo was loaded onto rafts made from inflated animal skins and shipped downriver. The camels were sent to pasture in the borderlands between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. In ports on the Persian Gulf the goods

were loaded onto ships sailing to India and Arabia. In spring the ships came back carrying spices, silk, cotton, dyes, frankincense, myrrh and gemstones. The caravan then set a course back towards Palmyra, a journey of well over a month. At Palmyra the cargo was examined and went through customs before it was sent on to the Mediterranean coast and then on to the rest of the Roman Empire.

Over time the Palmyrenes expanded their activity. They sent their own ships to India and Arabia, and settled in Egypt to conduct trade on the Red Sea and along the Nile. The Palmyrenes left behind them inscriptions in stone. From these we know that the Palmyrenes were active in some thirty places, from Pakistan to the east and Yemen to the south to Egypt and Rome to the west. Everywhere they went, they formed ties with the local community, for instance by entering public service, donating to local shrines or forming clubs.

◆ The portrait bust depicted on the coin (obverse) is probably that of Phraates IV, who ruled the Parthian Empire from 37 until 2 BC. He wears a pointed beard and has the so-called 'royal wart' on the brow. The other side (the reverse) shows a Greek inscription and a seated archer carrying a bow. Phraates IV waged war against Mark Anthony and Octavian, the future Augustus. Palmyra profited from the increased safety of the transport routes after a peace treaty was struck between these empires in 20/19 BC. (University Museum of Bergen, BMM 3366)

The basis for Palmyra's wealth was trade between the Mediterranean area and the Indian Ocean. The map shows the most important trade routes in the heyday of Palmyra. (Map: Eivind Heldaas Seland, Basemap (c) ESRI 2017)



The caravans, the city and the surrounding area

The caravans were important to the city as a whole. The wealthy invested money and supplied guards and animals. Traders joined the caravans to trade, and soldiers and camel drivers handled the day-to-day practicalities. Heading the caravan was a caravan leader elected by the traders. The return of the caravans must have been cause for celebration. The travellers had been on the road for more than half a year, and surely brought both gifts for their families and stories from afar. Sometimes a caravan would run into problems, for instance with bandits or foreign princes. If all went well, the traders would erect a bronze statue in the city square (*agora*), and had inscriptions made honouring those helping them. The statues are long gone, but many of the inscriptions are preserved, relating details of the expeditions.

Most goods arriving at Palmyra were meant for other destinations, but some were also sold locally. Among these were myrrh and silk, used for embalming the dead. Palmyra also turned into an important financial centre in its own right. The Greek and Aramaic 'Tax law' from the time of emperor Hadrian (AD 117–131) set forth tariffs and fees. It reveals a lot about daily life in the city and the surrounding area. The inscription was placed in full view in a street near the *agora*, and specified that

water for garden use must be paid for, and the right to use pastures and wells. Animals for slaughter, and everything going in and out by camel, donkey or wagon were in addition taxed by the load, but the local population were exempt. Special goods like bronze statues, wool, slaves and perfumes had their own rates. Peddlers and prostitutes also had to pay taxes. Similar regulations existed in most cities in the Roman Empire, but Palmyra's tax law is one of the few that have been preserved.

In the mountains to the north of the city were many small villages. Using simple means, water was gathered for animal husbandry and in some places growing grain. The villages fed Palmyra, and those who lived there appear to have been considered a part of Palmyrene society.

On the steppes to the south lived nomads who followed the camels between the summer pastures at Palmyra and the winter pastures in the borderlands between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The Palmyrenes were of nomadic origin, and there is much to indicate that they had close bonds with the desert-dwelling groups. In this way they had access to knowledge, pack animals, labour, and protection, which was hard to come by for other traders.

◇ The Palmyrenes started out as caravan traders, but soon branched out into shipping. This relief was created for the tomb of Julius Aurelius Marona, which was completed AD 236. It shows a wealthy Palmyrene man holding a camel in one hand and a ship in the other. Only the legs and harness of the camel remain. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)



The journey of the Palmyrene tax law

Photo: Courtesy of Hajan Farjani

Visiting Palmyra in 1882, the Russian-Armenian traveller, archaeologist and prince Semyon Semyonovich Abamelek-Lazarev (1857–1916) uncovered a massive stone tablet measuring over two metres high and five metres long. It rose from the ground close to the agora and carried a substantial inscription in Palmyrene and Greek, which would become known as the Palmyrene tax law. It contained regulations for the payment of import duties in Palmyra. At this point in time Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire. Through the work of Russian diplomats, Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909) decided to give the ancient monument as a gift to the Russian tsar. And so the Palmyrene tax law began its journey from Syria to St. Petersburg, where it can be seen today. The beginning of this journey is recorded on photographs made in 1901. To enable transportation the stone had to be cut up in four pieces. The blocks were loaded on carriages and slowly made their way to Damascus. Then they went by train to Beirut and by sea to Odessa, which was then part of the Russian empire. There the tax law remained at the customs office for two years: the import taxes had not been paid.



Atenatan and Salmat

This stone slab, dated to AD 135–150, closed off a burial niche (*loculus*) in which the dead were placed. It is carved with the portraits of the deceased man and woman. The Palmyrene-Aramaic inscription identifies them:

«Atênatan son of | Bôlhâ | alas Šalmat | his wife alas | (this is) made by Yarhaî | their son»

Thanks to this inscription we know that the male portrait represents someone named Atenatan. We also know the name of his father, Bolha. We know that the female portrait depicts a woman named Salmat, who was Atenatan's wife. And we know that they had at least one son, whose name was Yarhai, who had commissioned the funerary portrait. Since the size of the slab is appropriate for a single grave, it is likely that one of them died before the other. The niche was reused and provided with a new cover when the second person died.

Palmyra's funerary portraits reveal much about the lives and ideals of the wealthier Palmyrenes. Salmat and Atenatan are depicted with symbols of their status and social position. As is the case with other portraits of Palmyrene women, Salmat wears elaborate jewellery (diadem, broche and earrings), a tunic, cloak and a veil, held by her right hand. In the other hand she carries a spindle and distaff, tools of cloth production. Atenatan wears a tunic and a mantle (*himation*) and carries the legal deed confirming ownership of the tomb. His hairstyle reflects Roman fashion of the time. The Palmyrene portraits show how local sculptors drew on artistic traditions of the Roman west and the Parthian east. This bust belongs to the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, which houses the

largest collection of Palmyrene funerary sculpture outside Syria. There is a long Danish tradition of researching these portraits. The archaeologist Ingholt (1896-1985) pioneered the study of Palmyrene sculpture in 1928. Since 2012 the Palmyrene Portrait Project led by Rubina Raja compiles a database of all known funerary portraits from Palmyra that are spread across the world. More than 3,000 portraits have been documented so far. The existence of such an inventory is of great importance in light of the illegal trade in portraits, which intensified since the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011.

Cities of the dead

The tomb reliefs were stylized depictions of the dead, placed inside the tombs. The relief of Atenatan and Salmat was not meant for public display, but for the eyes of visiting family members. As elsewhere in the Roman Empire, relatives came to the tomb to take part in meals and to remember the dead in their presence. Immediately to the west of Palmyra we find Wadi al-Qubur – 'Valley of the Tombs' – one of four large tomb cities (necropoleis) just outside the city limits. Here the dead were buried, originally in tower tombs, but later also in subterranean tombs and temple-shaped house tombs. The oldest tombs date from the second century BC, and the tradition lived on until the third century AD. The buildings were consecrated to house the souls of the deceased. The wealthy had their bodies preserved through embalming. Normally members of the same family were entombed in the same building, and relatives dedicated frescoes, inscriptions and tomb reliefs to the deceased.



Funerary bust of Atenatan and Salmat, Palmyra, AD 135-150
(Photo: Palmyra Portrait Project, courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Inv. Nr: IN 1028)





◇ Tower tombs from the western tomb city (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

Multilingual

The inscription on Atenatan and Salmat's relief is written in the Palmyrene dialect of Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Arabic and Hebrew. Circa 3,000 Palmyrene inscriptions have been recovered and published, of which the large majority is in Aramaic. There is also a relatively large number of bi- or trilingual inscriptions that use both Palmyrene and Greek or, less frequently, Latin. The intensive and long-lasting use of bi-lingual inscriptions is a distinctive feature of Palmyrene culture. It was also helpful for the decipherment of the Palmyrene script in the eighteenth century. Thanks to the popular book of Robert Wood, a sufficient number of these inscriptions became available to scholars who were eager to decode another ancient language. Inscriptions in Palmyrene Aramaic were found as far away as Hadrian's Wall in Britain and the island of Socotra in the Arabian Sea. This indicates that language was an important part of the Palmyrene identity in the first three centuries. The use of Palmyrene for inscriptions corresponds to the city's glory days. The oldest surviving inscription dates to 44 BC. The last dates to AD 280, a few years after the city was sacked by the Roman emperor Aurelian.

Social media

Inscriptions are found in various areas of the city. In these different urban spaces the texts communicated to different audiences. Graves, for instance, were associated with the private life of the family. The inscriptions here are virtually all in Palmyrene. They identify and commemorate deceased family members and in this way bind together individuals, families and tribes after death. In public spaces such as the Temple of Bel, the *agora* or the great colonnade, Greek and occasionally Latin is used alongside Palmyrene. Here prominent Palmyrene citizens were honoured with a statue for their contributions to the city. Tribal and professional groups erected inscriptions to mark the occasion and in this way claimed their own place in the city landscape. For Palmyrenes, as for others in the Roman world, inscriptions were important media to advertise and shape social networks. For the modern researcher they are valuable sources for the social and cultural lives of the Palmyrenes.

Religious life in Palmyra

Palmyra was a city full of gods. The temples housed a variety of deities who had been brought to the oasis by the people who settled there or by those who passed by. The city's largest sanctuary was dedicated to the god Bel (Baal), whose cult had Mesopotamian origins. He was often portrayed with the typically Palmyrene deities Yarhibol and Aglibol. The cult of Palmyra's other main god Baal-Shamin had Phoenician roots, while the goddess Allat is thought to have travelled to Palmyra with Arabians from the south. Most of these gods were also worshipped under their Greek names, like Zeus (Bel and Baal-Shamin) and Athena (Allat). Palmyra had a resident Judean community as well. This complex world of the gods, as well as the combination of architectural styles in the temples, show how influences from east and west contributed to Palmyra's own distinctive culture. Palmyra had a rich and varied religious life, of which many aspects are still not well understood. We are for instance not well informed about the ideas Palmyrenes had about their gods, since we have no myths, liturgical texts or prayers that were written down and survived. It seems that particular families or tribes had special connections to particular sanctuaries, but we do not know exactly how the many deities were related to each other and to the different groups that made up Palmyra's complex society.



Temple business

The wealthy merchants who formed Palmyra's elite spent some of their profits on the monumental temples that came to fill the city. Temples and shrines were always under construction. Through gifts such as new gates, floors or columns, wealthy individuals, families and groups showed their commitment to the city and to the gods. These inscriptions tell us that participating in the religious life of the oasis was a way to express relations with the community as a whole.



Previous page: The richly decorated Temple of Baal-Shamin in the north of the city is a good example of the use of Graeco-Roman building styles and techniques in Palmyra. From an inscription found inside the temple we know that a Palmyrene citizen named Male Agrippa paid for a large-scale reconstruction in AD 131, the year that the Roman emperor Hadrian visited the city. (Photo: Bernard Gagnon / CC BY-SA 3.0 (2010))

Below: The Bel temple was a massive complex. A monumental entrance gate led to a large enclosed court (*temenos*) where the Palmyrenes gathered for festivals and banquets. The actual shrine (*cella*) was situated on a platform in the middle of the court. Inside were two chambers housing statues of the gods that were worshipped in the temple. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)



Palmyrene tesserae (Photos: Palmyra Portrait Project, courtesy of Ny Carlsberg Glyptoteket, Copenhagen)

Who is coming to dinner?

The Temple of Bel was the place where all Palmyrenes gathered for festivals and cultic banquets. It had a banqueting hall with a kitchen and place for more than a hundred diners.

Other temples also had banqueting rooms. The find of tiny clay tokens (*tesserae*) that served as invitations and entrance tickets to such banquets confirms the importance of meal gatherings to social and religious life. They also show that priests who hosted these banquets played an important role in Palmyrene society.

More than 1500 tesserae are known. Most of them were found in or near the sanctuaries, which suggests that the diners would leave them behind after the meal. They show a lot of variety in shape and iconography. Many tokens depict a deity in whose honour the banquet was held as well as the priest who issued the invitation and paid for the banquet. Even though we do not know exactly how these banquets were organised and who got to be invited, these tokens illustrate the role that temples and ritual dining played in Palmyra's social networks.

The Danish excavator Harald Ingholt (1896 – 1985) gathered a large number of tesserae in the 1920s. These are now part of the Palmyra collection at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen.



The journeys of the Palmyrene gods

When Palmyrenes left their city, their gods went with them. Traders and soldiers serving in the Roman army made sacrifices to their ancestral gods. Palmyrene altars and inscriptions have been found in Egypt, on the island of Kos, in Rome in Italy, and even in Northern England. Palmyrene emigrants did not forget their home city. An inscription from the Temple of Bel honours Palmyrenes living in Babylon and Seleucia – cities in the Parthian Empire close to present-day Baghdad – who contributed towards financing the temple.

In Syria the Palmyrene cult was spread through Palmyrenes settling in other cities, as displayed by finds from Dura-Europos on the Euphrates. Here archaeologists have found Palmyrene stone reliefs and shrines. They stretch from 32 BC up to the destruction of Dura-Europos in AD 256. A mural from one of the cities' temples depicts Roman soldiers sacrificing to Palmyrene deities. It was not only their own gods the Palmyrenes honoured. In a cave on the island of Socotra off the Horn of Africa a Palmyrene traveller dedicated a wooden tablet to a nameless local deity.

◆ Altar (c. AD 150-250) from a Palmyrene sanctuary in the city of Rome. The Latin inscription states that the altar was dedicated to the sun god Sol, who is depicted. The Aramaic inscription mentions the god Malakbel and 'the gods of Palmyra'. The persons who dedicated the altar have Roman names. (Musei Capitolini, Rome. Photo: Birgit van der Lans)

A mural from Dura-Europos depicting the Roman officer Julius Terentius sacrificing incense to the gods Iarhibol, Aglibol and Arsu in front of his unit, Cohors XX Palmyrenorum ('Twentieth Cohort of the Palmyrenes'), c. AD 239. (Photo: Yale University Art Gallery).



New religious impulses

New gods also took root among the Palmyrenes. In the year 168 AD a company of Palmyrene archers stationed in Dura-Europos sanctified a mithraeum, a shrine to the originally Persian god Mithras. Mithras had become very popular among Roman soldiers in the first few centuries. During this period Christianity also reached Palmyra. Palmyrene traders may have been among those bringing Christianity further east to the Sasanid Empire.

There are stories of a trader, Ogg, who around the year 240 allegedly set sail for India from the Persian Gulf. His name can be derived from the god Aglibol, and so he was likely a Palmyrene. On board he carried Mani, 'Apostle of the Light', founder of a faith later known as Manichaeism. The story is part of the account of Mani's life as told by his own followers, the Manichaeans. Palmyra was probably one of the early centres of Manichaeism. They took up the Palmyrene alphabet and claimed to have converted Queen Zenobia's sister to their religion. It is hard to judge the reliability of these Manichaean stories. In any case, Palmyrene travellers were active participants in the rich religious landscape of antiquity.



◆ Odaenathus (c. 220-267) was appointed ruler of Palmyra during the difficult period of the mid-200s. The third-century mosaic portrays Odaenathus as the Greek hero Bellerophon (Photo: Michal Gawlikowski)



Palmyra under Queen Zenobia: rise and fall

The Sasanids arrive

Palmyra rose to greatness under Roman supremacy. In the third century the Roman Empire entered a long period of crisis. At the same time, a new Persian dynasty came to power in AD 224: the Sasanids. The first two kings, Ardashir and his son Shapur, proved far more formidable than the Parthian rulers they replaced. The balance of power shifted. In only a few years Persian armies had won several decisive victories over the Romans, defeated and killed one Roman emperor (Gordian III in 243) and captured another (Valerian in 260). At the same time, the Persians had conquered Roman Syria, sacked its capital Antioch and razed several cities: Hatra in 242, Ana in 252, and Dura-Europos in 256.

Odaenathus and Zenobia

Around the year 250, power in Palmyra resided with a single family. It was headed by a certain Odaenathus, who was granted many honorary titles, among them 'leader of Palmyra'. In AD 261, following the humiliating defeat of emperor Valerian, he put down a rebellion against the Roman emperor. Following this he gathered an army of Palmyrene and Roman troops and in 262 he drove the Persians out of the region. Odaenathus was not alone in organizing defences in the absence of Roman assistance. Something similar happened in the neighbouring city of Emesa. But Odaenathus went further. Around the year 267 he led a campaign all the way to the Persian capital of Ctesiphon. Odaenathus was murdered under unclear circumstances upon his return. His underage son Vaballathus was appointed new leader. Power now shifted to Odaenathus' second wife and Vaballathus' mother, Zenobia.

The Palmyrene Empire

Odaenathus led Palmyra with the blessing of the Romans and was granted senatorial status by the emperor. Zenobia, on the other hand, seems to have had greater ambitions, as evinced by coins minted during her reign (approximately AD 268–272). During the years 270–271 she took control of Syria, Palestine, Egypt and parts of Asia Minor. Zenobia granted herself and her son imperial titles, and gathered an intellectual and vibrant court that would become legendary. Zenobia is said to have been especially talented in both language and military strategy, and among her councillors she counted many philosophers, one of them the renowned Platonist Longinus. She also supposedly supported both Judaism and the Christian bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata. Her sister is said to have converted to Manichaeism. There is no doubt that her court was a lively intellectual centre.

Unfortunately for Zenobia, the new and powerful Roman emperor Aurelian gained full control in the west in the year 270. Perhaps Zenobia bestowed imperial titles on both herself and her son because she knew Aurelian would not accept her position? Aurelian's army came east two years later, and after two decisive battles Zenobia's army was pushed back to Palmyra. Aurelian then went on to besiege the city. Zenobia allegedly escaped, but was captured as she was about to cross the Euphrates. What happened afterwards is unclear. The sources tell differing tales. Some claim that she died en route to Rome, others that she was paraded in Aurelian's triumphal procession, and spent the rest of her life in Rome.

Palmyra was spared – for now. A year later, the population rebelled once more, and again Roman soldiers entered the city. This time the city was sacked. The memory of Zenobia, however, lived on through the Middle Ages, both in the Arab world and in Europe.



A Syrian emperor: Elagabalus (218–222)

Elagabalus came from Homs in Syria where he first served as high priest of the god after whom he was named. He became famous for introducing Syrian cults in the city of Rome. This silver tetradrachm was struck in Antioch, Syria, AD 219/220. Elagabalus' bust wearing a laurel crown is depicted on one side, on the other an eagle with a wreath in its beak. (University Museum of Bergen, BMM 3371)

The Palmyrene rebellion: Aurelian (270–275) and Vaballathus (267–272)

Coins issued during the Palmyrene rebellion show how the Palmyrene rulers gradually assumed greater powers. This coin, minted in Antioch in AD 271/272, advertises the kingship of Zenobias' son Vaballathus, but still recognizes the authority of emperor Aurelian by including his portrait on the other side. One side (the obverse) shows the bust of Vaballathus wearing a laurel wreath. The reverse shows Aurelian with a crown depicted with rays that signified his superior power. (University Museum of Bergen, BMM 3368)

Support the troops: Aurelian (270–275)

This coin dates to AD 272–274 and was minted in Rome after Aurelian's victory over Palmyra. It shows emperor Aurelian with radiate crown wearing military armour. The emperor is also depicted on the other side (reverse), holding a sceptre and a globe. A soldier hands him a statue of the goddess Victory. Coins of this type honoured the bravery of the army and were used by emperors to maintain a good relationship with their troops. (University Museum of Bergen, BMM3367)

The new order: Diocletian (284–305)

After the Roman sack of Palmyra Diocletian fortified the city and the eastern frontier against the threat of the Persian Sasanids. This coin was struck at Rome in AD 296/7. Diocletian's bust and titles are visible on the obverse side. The reverse shows the protective spirit of the Roman people (*genius*) with attributes that symbolize piety (ritual bowl) and abundance (horn of plenty). (University Museum of Bergen, BMM 3370)

After the fall: Palmyra in late antiquity

The story of Palmyra normally ends on the rebellion of Zenobia and the triumphal procession of emperor Aurelian through the streets of Rome. However, inscriptions on monuments dated after the Roman destruction of 272/73 show that life went on. The temples were repaired and new baths were built.

The city came under direct Roman rule. Emperor Diocletian (284–305) placed a military camp here, which is visible to this day, where troops from Illyricum (present-day Croatia) were later stationed. One indication that the city's cultural identity changed is the disappearance of Palmyrene inscriptions after AD 280, and the gradual disappearance of the local burial traditions.

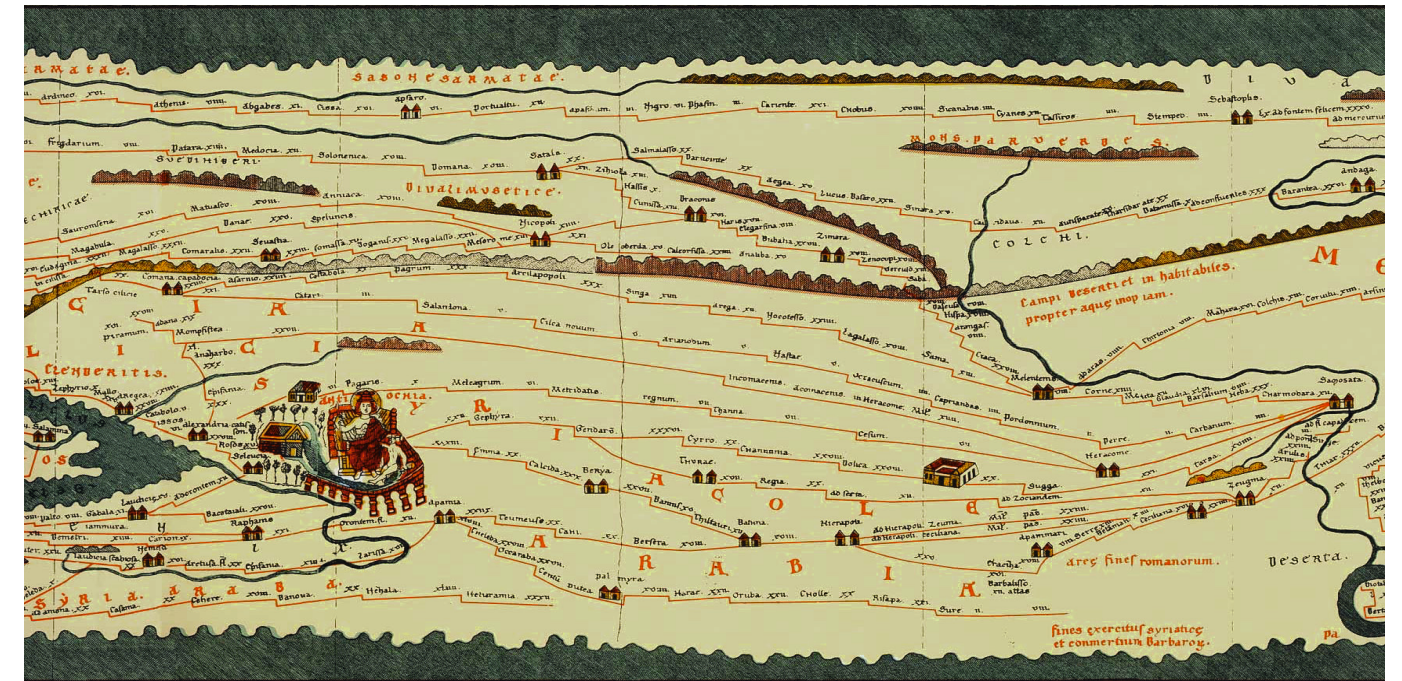
This was also the period when Christianity took root, and Palmyra is among the cities that sent a bishop to the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. The Temple of Bel was turned into a church. Monks and hermits settled in the desert.

Palmyra was still of interest to traders and armies. One sign that the city played an important role as a stopover for

travellers is the so-called Peutinger Map – a depiction of the military road network of the Roman Empire from the fifth century. In the sixth century, when conflicts between the Romans and the Persians intensified, emperor Justinian had new walls built around the city.

Cooperation between the Palmyrenes and nomadic tribes had formed the basis for the city's wealth, but the balance of power had shifted. In the early fifth century a monk known as Alexander the Sleepless was given aid by the tribes around Palmyra when the inhabitants refused to open the city gates. By the end of late antiquity the city had become a tribal stronghold, and two Arab tribes – the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids – contended for dominance.

In AD 634 Arab-Muslim armies reached Palmyra. Still, some of the old rebellious spirit of the city seems to have survived: the armies had to take the city twice.



Detail from Tabula Peutingeriana. Palmyra is depicted as two towers at the bottom centre. (Image: Konrad Miller / public domain)

Palmyra's city wall was probably first built by emperor Diocletian (283–305) to strengthen the city's defences against a Persian invasion. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)



Empire and trade in the Early Islamic period

Syria flourished under the rule of the Umayyad caliphs (658–750), who established their capital in Damascus after the Muslim Arab conquests of 635–636. Damascus became the centre of a Muslim empire that at its height stretched from the Atlantic coast to India and from Central Asia to Yemen. Trade networks were established throughout this empire. Through these networks flowed not only goods, but also new religious ideas and practices. As the major trade routes came to be dominated by Muslim merchants, the Islamic religion was carried further along these roads.

Syria profited from the incomes of this vast empire. The Umayyads invested in urban building projects that were the first great monuments of Islamic architecture, such as the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque of Aleppo, which was severely damaged in the recent war. In the Syrian Desert the Umayyads built fortified lavish residences. Syria's importance diminished when the empire's capital was moved to Baghdad by the Abbasid dynasty that succeeded the Umayyads in 750.

Meanwhile, Palmyra remained a regional centre of some importance. Officials and merchants travelling between Damascus in the west to the Euphrates in the east would stop here to rest, buy and sell. Changes in the urban layout reflect the town's commercial function. Shops were built into the monumental colonnaded street, which now served as a market or *suq*. Close to the shopping area a Roman building was turned into Palmyra's first mosque. This stage of Palmyra's history is less visible among the present-day ruins. Some of the archaeological remains dating to the early Islamic period were cleared to expose the Roman-period buildings, for which there has been a stronger interest.

Over time, Palmyra's importance diminished. Around 1400 the invasions of the Central Asian warlord Timur Lenk (Tamerlane) brought new destructions. By this time, the village had retreated within the precincts of the Temple of Bel. It became quiet in the once buzzing trade centre.



◆ Remains of shops built into the western part of the Great Colonnade during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. The *suq* (market) consists of a row of at least forty-seven shops built in the middle of the street. It was discovered during excavations led by the Museum of Palmyra between 1977 and 1984. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

The south wall of the inner shrine of the Bel temple was adorned with a niche indicating the direction of Meqqa (*mihrab*). Inscriptions show that the sanctuary was used as a mosque already by 728/9, after having served as a church. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)



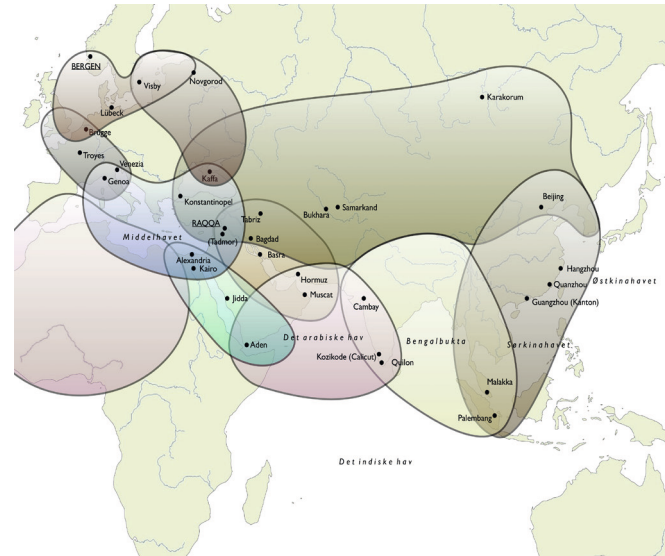
A piece of Syria in medieval Bergen

◊ In the Middle Ages Europe, Africa, and Asia were connected through overlapping trade networks. Bergen was well connected to the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. In the Middle East trade routes met in the Mediterranean, through Central Asia, and across the Indian Ocean. (Map: Eivind Heldaas Seland)

Photo: Bryggens Museum/Birgit van der Lans

These broken pieces of a small ceramic jar were discovered during the excavation of Bryggen, the medieval wharf in Bergen (1955–1972). They were found under a building in a layer of fill dated to the period 1248–1332. The type of blue glazing suggests that it was made in Syria, probably in the northern city of Raqqa. Today Raqqa is better known as headquarter of the Islamic State, but it was an important industrial centre for the production of fine glass and ceramics between ad 800 and 1200.

Pottery from Syria was distributed widely in the Islamic world and beyond. We do not know precisely what this fine jar was used for and how it ended up at Bryggen. Perhaps individual travellers brought it along, but it is more likely that it was traded as luxury tableware or for its contents. Medieval Bergen was connected to the Islamic world through interlocking long-distance trade systems. Our jar may have travelled westwards via Italy and Western Europe, or taken the northern route via the Bosphorus and along the great Russian rivers to Novgorod and the Baltic Sea.



The rediscovery of Palmyra in the seventeenth century

In seventeenth century Europe interest in far-away lands exploded. The successful expansions of the British and Dutch trading companies were making the world bigger and bigger. Their ships carried explorers, scholars and artists to gather knowledge of exotic flora and fauna, strange religions and languages as well as the cultures described in the Bible. News of archaeological findings spread quickly through the letters exchanged by scholars and diplomats.

The Syrian Desert in this period was under control of the nomads known as the Bedouin, whose descendants still inhabit the Palmyrene region. The Bedouin organised caravans

between Basra and Aleppo, much as the Palmyrenes had done 1500 years earlier.

Members of the British Levant Company based in Aleppo expeditions set out to find Tadmor, the legendary city of Solomon in the desert. The journey through the desert was difficult and dangerous. It was necessary to make sure that the nomadic peoples residing in that part of the Syrian Desert would receive the explorers favourably. In 1691 a mission led by the chaplain William Halifax obtained permission from the local sheikh to visit the Palmyrene oasis.

Halifax' travel report was published in two issues of the journal *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* in 1695 ('A Relation of a Voyage from Aleppo to Palmyra in Syria'). It came with the first published image of Palmyra in the form of a panoramic drawing that served as a visual guide to Halifax' itinerary through Palmyra's ruins. His report was an instant success. It was spread across Europe and served as a basis for the first scholarly descriptions of the classical monuments and the Palmyrene language, which was yet to be deciphered.

Geert Hofstede van Essen, *Gezicht op de ruïnes van Palmyra (View over the ruins of Palmyra)*, 1693. Based on the sketch made during Halifax' expedition of 1691, the Dutch traveller and artist Geert Hofstede van Essen produced the first painting of Palmyra's ruins. The Dutch consul to Aleppo, Coenraad Calckberner, sent the painting to the influential intellectual and politician Gisbert Cuper (1644-1716), along with Halifax' report. Cuper enthusiastically spread the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions from the travel journal to scholars in his network of correspondents. He also planned to have the report translated into Latin, as he and many of his colleagues could not read English. (Courtesy of the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam)



Zenobia and Palmyra in Europe

Palmyra and Queen Zenobia were never quite forgotten. In the Middle Ages Muslim writers linked her to the queen of Sheba, or the family of the biblical Amalek, a descendant of Abraham. In the 1300s European writers such as Petrarca and Boccaccio retold the story based on sources from antiquity, often with a moralizing angle. In *Canterbury Tales* (approx. 1385–1400) Chaucer let Zenobia appear as the only female among famous tragic figures such as Lucifer, Croesus and Julius Caesar.

As European travellers again started visiting the Middle East, the fascination with ‘the Orient’ arose. As early as 1625 Zenobia appeared in a play by the Spanish Golden Age dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca (*La gran Cenobia*). Further into the 1700s and 1800s more tragedies and operas appeared, by for instance Tomaso Albinoni (*Zenobia, Regina di Palmireni*, performed in 1694), Arthur Miller (*Zenobia*, performed at the Drury Lane Theatre in 1768) and Gioachino Rossini (*Aureliano in Palmira*, performed at La Scala in 1813).

In the mid-1700s the British scholar Robert Wood published his work *The Ruins of Palmyra*, with detailed drawings of Palmyrene monuments. It became immensely popular. Architects used themes from the book, and even the eagle in the Great Seal of

the United States was supposedly inspired by one of the images from Wood’s book. The ruins made a strong impression also during Romanticism. In 1805 Thomas Love Peacock published a collection of poems entitled *Palmyra and other poems*. The titular poem deals with human greatness and decay, as symbolized by the ghostly ruins of Palmyra.

The story of Palmyra and Zenobia also reached Scandinavia. In the middle of the 1700s, Ludvig Holberg published a collection of edifying stories where Zenobia appears. In contrast to Boccaccio and Chaucer, Holberg was a child of the Enlightenment, and in his take on the Zenobia motif the moral is that women, when they receive the right upbringing, can display the same virtues as men. A romantic variant is found in Maurits Hansen, the first Norwegian writer who tried to make writing his livelihood. In 1819 he published a short-story entitled *Palmyra*. While Holberg’s starting point was the legend of Zenobia, Hansen was interested in Palmyra as a fabled oriental city, and the short-story depicts a visit to Palmyra in its heyday. The fascination was not limited to writers. In 1874 Hølen engineering works in Larvik built a barque, ‘one of the most beautiful vessels ever made in Larvik’, which was christened ‘Zenobia’.



◆ Queen Zenobia's Last Look Upon Palmyra (1888), painted by Herbert G. Schmalz (1856-1936). Schmalz is often associated with the so-called Pre-Raphaelites, who aimed to return to a style similar to that of the Italian Renaissance painters, among them Raphael. (Photo: public domain)

Oil painting of the barque 'Zenobia' (Photo: Wolday Mekonen / Larvik Museum)



Archaeology and colonialism

For hundreds of years Palmyra was an important source of inspiration for artists. As the nineteenth century was coming to a close, archaeologists too became interested in the city. Large numbers of Palmyrene artefacts reached European and American collections through the antiquities trade. Archaeologists from various countries competed to find the most spectacular relics of the past. German, British, Russian, French and Danish expeditions were all active in the area.

Upon the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1921 European powers already had a firm foothold in the Middle East. Syria was turned into a French Mandate. To facilitate the excavations at the Temple of Bel, the French in 1932 moved the entire village, which was still within the temple grounds, to its present location north of the ruins. Also the exhibition of archaeological material was controlled by the French Mandate authorities. Artefacts from the excavations at Palmyra, Mari and Dura-Europos in the 1920s and 30s were divided amongst the National Museum in Damascus and museums abroad. At the National Museum the French emphasized that Syria had prospered under the Greeks and Romans in order to support the legitimacy of the French Mandate of the French Mandate.

After the Syrian independence in 1946 the National Museum in Damascus focused on the Islamic cultural heritage. Excavations at Palmyra continued and contributed a steady stream of new finds to the museum. Until the start of the civil war in 2011 a series of excavation projects were being carried out in the city in which international and local archaeologists cooperated.



Palmyra, Zenobia and modern Syria

◊ Syrian school children visit Palmyra in April 2005
(Photo: Birgit van der Lans)

Just like the Viking and Middle Ages were used in building a Norwegian national identity, the Palmyrene Empire was important to Syrian nationalists in the late 1800s. Queen Zenobia appeared as a heroine in the works of early Syrian historians. In the first modern historical work on Syria, written by Ilyas Matar and dedicated to the Ottoman sultan, the Palmyrene Empire was described as Syria's lost independent Golden Age. For another important historian, Jurji Yanni, the Palmyrene Empire represented the first example of Syrian national consciousness.

The establishment of Syria as a so-called Mandate under France was followed by the Great Syrian Revolt in the years 1925–1927. The revolt was brutally crushed by the French occupants. A lack of cooperation between various ethnic and religious groups contributed to the defeat. Following this, nationalism lost ground to pan-Arabism – the idea of Arab unity. Palmyra remained a unifying symbol to Syria's panoply of religious and ethnic groups. Both president Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar exploited this actively in propaganda for their regime. Zenobia was portrayed as a heroic proponent of Arab independence from Western tyranny, as in the book *Zenobie de Palmyre* (1985) written by former Syrian minister of defence

Mustafa Tlass. The ruins were depicted on Syrian bank notes and were a popular destination for school trips.

The story of Zenobia also played an important part outside the political sphere. In 1870–1871 Salim al-Bustani wrote a historical novel about the queen. This was considered one of the earliest examples of modern Arabic novel writing, and introduced Zenobia into modern Arab popular culture. Since then many plays have been written.

Starting in the 1970s, Syrian TV has produced multiple TV series about Zenobia. In 1997 the large-scale production *Al-Abadid* ("The Anarchy") appeared, a series of 22 hour-long episodes. Featuring famous Syrian actors and partly recorded in the ruins, it was very popular, seen by millions of people in the Arab world. In the series, civilized Tadmor stands against the uncivilized and brutal Roman Empire, as an image of the relationship between the Arab world and the West. A grand musical about Zenobia written by the renowned composer Mansour Rahbani appeared in Dubai in 2008. It had camels, horses, and more than a hundred dancers, and a Lebanese pop star as its lead.

Tourism and Tadmor

Under the French colonial rule Palmyra became a popular destination for affluent European and American travellers. Over time the well-preserved remnants of the ancient world attracted visitors from all over the globe. Its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1980 put Syria on the tourist map as a country with an ancient history and culture. Before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, Palmyra was one of Syria's top tourist destinations.

Modern Tadmor was an economic centre for Syria's desert region. It was also home to the infamous Tadmor prison, where political prisoners were kept under brutal conditions until 2001, and again after 2011, as well as to a number of military installations. International and domestic tourism was an important source of income and jobs for the nation and the region. According to the World Tourism Organisation, tourism accounted for c. 6% of gross domestic product (GDP).



The lives of the people of the modern town Tadmor were closely connected to the neighbouring archaeological site. For some families it was only two generations back that they lived inside the Temple of Bel. Parents gave their children names like Zenobia and Odeina. Many of Tadmor's inhabitants found employment in preserving the ruins and in the tourist industry. In the names of establishments like 'Hotel Zenobia' and 'Baal Shamim Hotel', Palmyra's heydays lived on.

Amidst the ruins peddlers offered souvenirs, refreshments and camel rides. Bedouin culture was a source of inspiration for the production of souvenirs marketed for foreign visitors. The camels, woven rugs, water pipes, Bedouin jewellery and metalworking evoked the romantic images of 'the Orient' that early European travellers had brought home. Many Bedouins have given up the nomadic life because of environmental changes and governmental pressures.



◇ American visitors pose in front of the Temple of Bel and the monumental arch (1929) (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-matpc-13950, LC-DIG-matpc-13947)

Previous page: Shops in Tadmor sell souvenirs associated with different stages of Palmyra's history. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

Palmyra and the Syrian civil War

Since 2011 Syria has been struck by civil war. What started as an uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad turned into a complex battle between groups fighting for different causes, backed by various international powers. So far the Syrian crisis has seen nearly 500,000 people killed. 12 million people – half the country's population – have been displaced from their homes.

The Syrian war has had dramatic effects on Palmyra and on the people committed to the historical ruins. Due to its strategic location and the presence of an airport and an infamous political prison, Tadmor and the adjacent archaeological site were turned into a military zone early on. The modern town is presently largely abandoned.

Palmyra hit the front pages when Islamic State (ISIS) militants captured Tadmor in May 2015 and closed down its prison. The next ten months saw a series of horrific events. In August 2015 the world was shocked by the brutal execution of the archaeologist Khaled al-Asaad (1934–2015), who had been in charge of the site and the museum for decades. He had devoted his life to

the research and preservation of Palmyra. Through the efforts of al-Asaad and his colleagues, part of the valuable collection of Palmyra's archaeological museum was secured and moved to Damascus, but much unfortunately also remained. Trade in looted Syrian antiquities is a source of revenue for well-organised groups such as ISIS, as well as for individual plunderers.

Shortly afterwards ISIS released images that publicised its destruction of Palmyra's most famous and best-preserved monuments. The temples of Bel and of Baal-Shamin were blown up and reduced to rubble. Several of the distinctive tower tombs were partially or fully destroyed, in other graves mural paintings were whitewashed. The monumental arch on the colonnaded street was also severely damaged.

In March 2016 Palmyra was recaptured by the Syrian regime, with the support of Russian forces and militias from Iran and Lebanon. Between December 2016 and early March 2017, however, ISIS regained control over the site, and damaged the theatre and the Tetrapylon monument. Since then Palmyra has been under the control of governmental forces.



Khaled al-Asaad (1934-2015). (AFP / NTB scanpix)

The monumental arch after the IS occupation of 2016, with a photograph from 2014 (Joseph Eid/ AFP)





3D replica of Palmyra's monumental arch in London with St. Paul's Cathedral in the background (Jeff Gilbert / Alamy Stock Photo)

New digital techniques and 3D computer models can be used to visualise and reconstruct lost or damaged antiquities. More so than in earlier cases of cultural heritage destructions, we have seen the use of these new tools to voice protest against the destructive actions of ISIS in Syria and Iraq.



A 3D replica of Palmyra's monumental arch was displayed in London, New York and Firenze. For some the accuracy of these copies symbolises commitment to the preservation of cultural heritage and the ability to reconstruct what has been lost or damaged. Others think that these modern replicas create a false impression of authenticity when they are used as stand-ins for physical remnants of the past.

Palmyra as a symbol

Palmyra is perhaps more famous now than ever before. Images of the ancient city have been spread across the world through digital media, newspaper articles and exhibitions. Through this, Palmyra's archaeological heritage has turned into a symbolic battleground. The parties involved in the conflict present widely different interpretations of Palmyra and of the destruction of its remains.

Media outlets of the Islamic State say that the historical monuments are attacked because they are associated with the worship of images and idols (*shirk*). Others interpret the destructions as attempts to erase the local histories and identities of the Syrian people, or to generate responses from different audiences in the West.

Shortly after the recapture of Palmyra in March 2016, a Russian orchestra performed in the Roman theatre. In a video message the Russian president Vladimir Putin celebrated the withdrawal of ISIS as a victory over barbarism. Using the term barbarian could be seen as a way to present one's own party as civilized.

Palmyra is often described as a symbol of diversity and religious tolerance. For UNESCO-director Irina Bokova, 'Palmyra symbolises everything that extremists abhor; cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, the encounter of different peoples in this centre of trading between Europe and Asia'. These may not be the words ancient Palmyrenes would use to characterise their society, but are values that appeal to many people today.

Rebuilding Palmyra?

In the immediate wake of the destructions there were calls to rebuild the destroyed monuments. International leaders rushed to state their willingness to contribute. Some would like to reconstruct the site to the way it was before the outbreak of conflict in 2011. Yet the Palmyra of 2011 was not a site that survived in its pristine state since the glory days of Zenobia. It was a curated site, the product of archaeological excavations and restoration of particular stages of Palmyra's long history. The site of the ancient city remained in use and suffered damage by the hands of humans, nature and time. The purposeful destructions of 2015 and 2016 are now also a part of Palmyra's history.

If and how this stage will be made visible among the ruins is up to the different parties involved. Palmyra is one of the best documented archaeological sites of the ancient world. Syria has a professional archaeological service and a long tradition of cooperation with international experts. These have expressed concerns regarding restoration work that is too hastily done amidst an ongoing conflict situation. Heritage is work in progress: how we treat and view the material past develops as preservation techniques advance and political and cultural contexts change.



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