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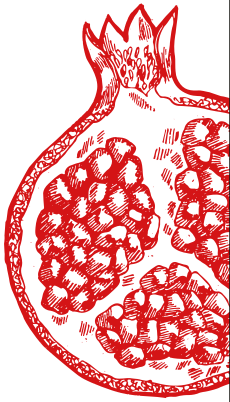

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ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

Thematic Issue: Global and Local Cultures in the Roman East

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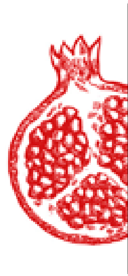

LOCAL AND GLOBAL NARRATIVES AT PALMYRA

Eivind Heldaas Seland

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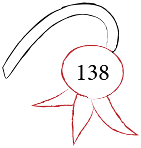
Abstract

While early scholarship aimed to uncover the Eastern and Western elements of Palmyrene identity, recent research appreciates that Palmyra was first and foremost at the center of its own world. At the same time, Palmyra was deeply embedded in networks spanning the length of Eurasia and far into the Indian Ocean. The Palmyrenes seem to have moved easily along and between these trajectories while maintaining group cohesion and orientation toward their common homeland. Here, they adopted and adapted the impulses encountered abroad in order to use them for their own purposes. In this article, I explore how Palmyrene iconographic, epigraphic, and architectural records might be interpreted as speech acts—performative statements—by which local elites inscribed themselves in a range of narratives that communicated on different scales. The Palmyrene cityscape thus integrated local, regional, imperial, and global representations in manners that signify integration, accommodation, and, in some cases, arguably also rejection.

Während die frühe Forschung darauf abzielte, die östlichen und westlichen Elemente der palmyrenischen Identität aufzudecken, geht die neuere Forschung davon aus, dass Palmyra in erster Linie das Zentrum seiner eigenen Welt war. Gleichzeitig war Palmyra tief in Netzwerke eingebettet, die sich über die gesamte Länge Eurasiens und bis weit in den Indischen Ozean erstreckten. Die Palmyrener scheinen sich problemlos entlang und zwischen diesen Trajektorien bewegt zu haben und dabei den Gruppenzusammenhalt und die Orientierung an ihrem gemeinsamen Heimatland bewahrt zu haben. Dabei haben sie die Impulse aus dem Ausland aufgegriffen und adaptiert, um sie für ihre eigenen Zwecke zu nutzen. In diesem Artikel untersuche ich, wie ikonografische, epigraphische und architektonische Aufzeichnungen aus Palmyrene als „Speech-acts“, d.h. performative Aussagen, interpretiert werden könnten, mit denen sich lokale Eliten in eine Reihe von Erzählungen einschrieben, die auf unterschiedlichen Ebenen kommunizierten. Das Stadtbild von Palmyra integrierte somit lokale, regionale, imperiale und globale Repräsentationen auf eine Art und Weise, die sowohl Integration als auch Anpassung und in einigen Fällen wohl auch Ablehnung bedeutete.



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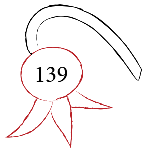


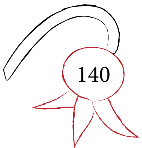
The Onion of the Desert

In the final act of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's widely performed *Peer Gynt*, the protagonist is trying to find out who he really is at the core. "I'm going to peel you like an onion," he says to himself, only to find out that an onion has no core; you remove layer after layer, until you are left with nothing but swathes in your hand.

Since the rediscovery of the ancient city in the late seventeenth century, Palmyra has been at the center of a struggle for heritage and identity. To modern observers, however, Palmyra resembles Ibsen's protagonist. Scholars keep peeling off layers, but there is no kernel in sight, and the identity of the inhabitants of the ancient city remains elusive. What is at stake is arguably nothing short of ownership of the past. To the first visitors, European merchants living as expatriates in Aleppo and carrying on trade between India, the Levant, and Europe, the Palmyrenes were bewildering: These people were ancients—Greek, Roman, and Oriental at the same time. They were venerable for their

architecture, art, learning, and general prowess, but sadly mistaken in their polytheism. They were wealthy to the degree of opulence and with connections to the biblical past.

However, they were also curiously like their discoverers.[1] This idea was not without justifications. These early commentators were observing Palmyra from the vantage point of a premodern world. They were personally engaged in the operation of long-distance trade, relying on camels for transport, much like the Palmyrenes had been. Although they were as ethnocentric as most people, they were living in a time before ideas of Western supremacy had been formulated, and when the perceived hierarchy in value and quality between expressions from different parts of antiquity had not yet been established. This was rapidly changing, however, and the process of detaching Palmyra from its regional roots and recasting it as a product of classical civilization would soon be underway. Robert Wood's *The Ruins of Palmyra* (1753) made the city famous across Europe and North America. Jen Baird and Zena Kamash (2019), in their study of the notes and sketches that formed the basis of Wood's book, demonstrate how Wood and his companions carefully curated their report of the site to fit contemporary ideals of classical architecture, playing down elements of Palmyrene heritage that did not fit this narrative, including the settlement's Semitic name, Tadmor.



Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars also wanted to cast Palmyra as a part of a Western tradition. Thus, the trading city in the Syrian Desert (Fig. 1) was seen as ruled by a merchant aristocracy, not unlike European cities of the medieval and early modern periods.[2] The idea of a connection between ancient Palmyra and later European history is still very much alive in book titles like Ernst Will's *La Venise des sables* [*Venice of the Sands*] (1992), and was also a subtext of much of the media coverage and some of the scholarly literature provoked by the destruction of Palmyrene monuments during the Islamic State occupation in 2015–2017.[3]

[1] Halifax and Conder 1890 (1695); Seller 1696: 12–13.

[2] Mommsen 1904: 428–29; Rostovtzeff 1932a; Seland 2020.

[3] McInnes-Gibbons 2016–2017; Nitschke 2020.

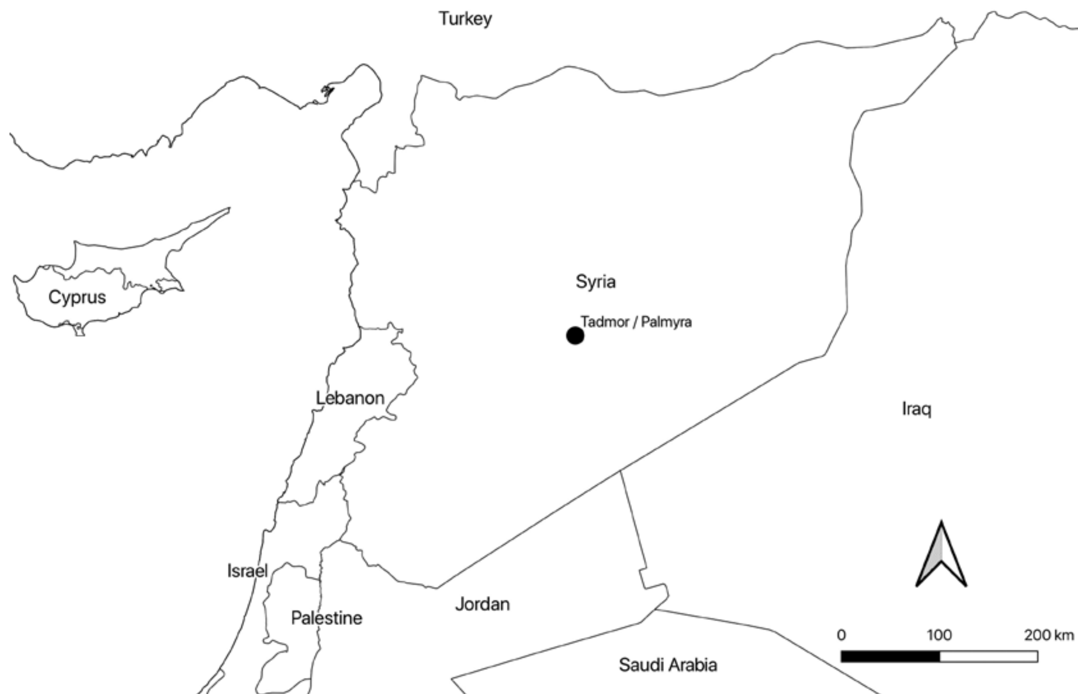
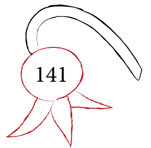


Figure 1. Situation of Palmyra. Eivind Heldaas Seland.



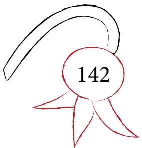
Quite apart from the popular and scholarly reception of Palmyra as part of the *glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome* that had been tragically lost to the encroaching forces of the desert, sober and careful arguments have also been put forth for Palmyra being an ordinary city of the Roman East.[4] Other scholars, however, see Palmyra as a child of the Orient, a place where Eastern traditions were shaped into a Western form, albeit imperfectly so according to early commentators,[5] and where the rich epigraphic and architectural heritage could offer insight into local and regional traditions preceding and in competition with the imperial (Hellenistic and Roman) traditions. These competing narratives of Palmyrene identity have to some degree converged—but arguably still coexist, with different emphases having been placed on imperial Roman, Hellenistic, Eastern, and local/regional aspects—since the emergence of the Roman Near East as a distinct historiographical category in the 1990s.[6]

[4] Seyrig 1932; Sartre 1996.

[5] Seyrig 1950; Richmond 1963.

[6] Millar 1994; Yon 2002; Butcher 2003; Sartre 2005; Andrade 2013; Smith 2013; Ball 2016; Sommer 2018.

The observation that scholarship on Palmyra has been influenced by modernizing, classicizing, Orientalizing, colonial, and postcolonial trends, often by the same scholars and within the same works, entails no accusation of hidden motives on the parts of past or present scholars of Palmyra. It is clear, however, that these traditions, although founded on careful and disinterested scholarship, cannot be seen independent of British, French, and Russian imperial ambitions unfolding in the Near East in the same period, or of Syrian and Arab nationalism and the process of decolonization. Moreover, all these narratives arguably find support in the iconographic, literary, epigraphic, and architectural records of Palmyra, but despite, or even because of this, they tell just one side of the story, and it is this polyphony and diversity in the material from Palmyra that makes the city such a fruitful object of study. While this polyphony is present across the Near East, Palmyra is one of the places where it comes to the forefront. This also makes Palmyra an interesting case for the study of processes relating to those we would today call processes of "globalization."



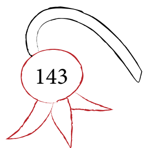
In a previous study, I argued that Palmyra is a case in point of how such processes played out in the ancient world, and how the main temple of Bel, the *necropoleis*, the colonnaded main street, the civic center around the agora, and the Roman amphitheater, if there indeed was one, epitomize arenas for the representation of different facets of Palmyrene identity that are visible in the urban plan of the city (Seland 2021). Below, I aim to expand on this argument along different lines in looking at how the Palmyrenes inscribed themselves into local and global narratives through the epigraphic and iconographic records that have come down to us.

Narratives and Self-Representation

The argument builds on the theoretical premise that no kind of source material from the past, whether historical, archeological, iconographic, or other by itself informs us about the past (Fletcher 2004). Rather they become meaningful because they belong in discursive contexts on which we depend to interpret them, while at the same time our data

feeds back to our understanding of these contexts. The example of the very different reconstructions of Palmyra as an either typical Greek or a typical Oriental community underlines how our interpretation is shaped by the discourses within which we are operating. The interpretation of Palmyra as a globalized community is also a product of such dialogues between past and present. One way to investigate such discursive contexts is to approach them as historical narratives, as stories that people create so that their situation fits in with their overarching ideas about how the world works.[7] In Palmyra, we find narratives, produced by the Palmyrenes themselves rather than by modern scholars, that communicated on various levels, from the small-scale and local, to the large-scale, and global.

There are at least three approaches to ancient globalization represented in recent scholarly literature, all of which are shaped by conceptions of what the global and globalization are in the contemporary world. One group of scholars has been interested in the establishment of communication and the development of economic and political hierarchies and interdependence, tracing such processes back to the Middle Bronze Age.[8] A second body of work emphasizes cultural contact and change, accompanied by the standardization and/or hybridization of cultural expressions (Hingley 2005). A third strand of investigation has studied self-conception, arguing, for example, that the successive Iranian empires and, more often, the Roman Empire were globalized in the sense that they claimed universal authority and that they perceived their empire writ large, *their* world, as being identical with *the* world (Pitts and Versluys 2014). Palmyra, positioned between two empires each making a claim to world power and acting as a hub in economic as well as cultural transfers between them is a case study of obvious interest within all these paradigms.



[7] Ricoeur 1990; Rüsen 2005.

[8] Gills and Frank 2003; LaBianca and Scham 2006; Seland 2008.

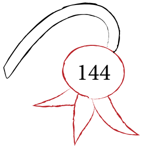


Figure 2. Funerary towers in the so-called "Valley of Tombs" northwest of Palmyra. Destroyed by the Islamic State in 2015. Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer.

Ancient Evidence as Utterances

One set of materials that allows us to identify and reconstruct how the inhabitants of Palmyra wanted to appear to the world is the inscriptional record from Palmyra. The city was to a large degree subject to what Ramsay MacMullen (1982) described as the "epigraphic habit." We have a preserved corpus of approximately 3,200 texts, most of them in Aramaic, more than 550 in Greek, many of them bilingual, and a small handful in Latin.[9] Fergus Millar described Palmyra as "the only publicly bilingual city of the Roman Near East."[10] Surely, this is significant, and it has indeed recently been addressed by Ted Kaizer (2018) in a study of how the Palmyrenes identified themselves on coins, and in inscriptions, sculptures, and works of art.

[9] Hillers and Cussini 1996; Yon 2012.

[10] Millar 1993, 470; Kaizer 2018, 76.

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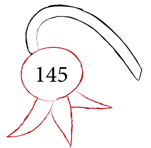
Each of the inscriptions can be interpreted as a speech act, that is as a performative statement. By such statements, the Palmyrenes and others who left inscriptions in the city consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly, subscribed to overarching narratives, some local, some, regional, and some global.[11] The interpretation of inscriptions as speech acts is relatively straightforward and presumably uncontroversial. Other utterances might also be interpreted in the same manner, including iconographic and architectural ones. Arguably, such data can be seen as statements and as parts of narratives that might bring us closer to appreciating how the Palmyrenes wanted to represent themselves. Perhaps this is a more fruitful approach than asking questions about Palmyrene identity, to which our chances of finding an answer are close to those Peer Gynt had of finding the kernel of an onion. Instead of asking where the Palmyrenes picked up this or that element of their material and epigraphic culture, we might ask what they were trying to express about themselves by using these elements. In this way, we may better cast the Palmyrenes as agents in their own life. Likely, the Palmyrenes told all kinds of stories about themselves, many of which we are not able to discern today. Nevertheless, a set of narratives may be identified that relate to scale. They range from stories relating to the very local—the family—to stories relating to lineage, tribe, city, region, empire, and the world.



Funerary Spaces

Starting on the local level, this is very much where the funerary spaces of the Palmyrenes belong. Over time, the dominant funerary custom changed from tower tombs (Fig. 2) by way of underground *hypogea*, to so-called "temple" or "house tombs."[12] More than 150 monuments are known. The largest have more than 400 *loculi*, or shelves, for individual burials, which were each sealed with a portrait depicting the deceased, in some cases with spouse and dead children or a servant, but more

[11] Searle 1969, esp. 14–19; Ober 1996, 10–11, 33.

[12] Gawlikowski 1970; Schmidt-Colinet 1992.

Figure 3. Funerary relief of Shalmat and Atenatan, mid second century CE, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek I.N. 1028. Photo: Eivind Heldaas Seland.

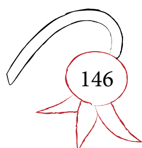
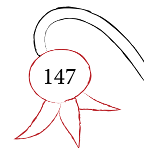


Figure 4. Banqueting relief depicting a priest and his family. Palmyra Museum A910. Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer.

often alone (Fig. 3). This material has recently been studied in detail by the Palmyra Portrait Project, which has identified more than 3,700 surviving funerary portraits (Raja 2018). Despite this impressive number, unparalleled elsewhere in the archeological record of the Roman world outside Rome itself, it is clear that only a minority of Palmyra's inhabitants over three centuries were buried in this fashion. The funerary monuments thus signify the self-representation of the Palmyrene elite, which one could access based on genealogical descent.

These monuments were neither private nor public, or perhaps they were both at the same time. The tombs seem to have been owned by individuals or small groups of named individuals, as foundational inscriptions document, and they were transferred as parts of inheritance and on occasion sold (Gawlikowski 1970, 184–219). Also, monuments celebrating the owner of the grave, sometimes depicted with his nuclear family in the background, survive. Nevertheless, it is clear that the tombs were used by larger groups than nuclear families. The funerary inscriptions are with some very few exceptions all in Palmyrene Aramaic. Except for the foundation inscriptions, they are brief and formulaic, giving names, family relation (son of, more rarely daughter of, wife of, brother of, sister of), and a brief "alas" (*ḥbl*). Most inscriptions give three generations of names, many five, some even more, a clear indication of the importance of patrilinear descent (Brughmans et al. 2021).



In many cases, the earliest ancestor given is clearly not an actual grandfather or great-grandfather, but the eponymous founder of the lineage. Details of the social organization of Palmyra are not clear, but commentators distinguish between families, clans/lineages, and tribes based primarily on the number of individuals belonging to the (often undoubtedly perceived) kinship networks described in the inscriptions.[13] Larger funerary monuments contain the burials of multiple nuclear families over several generations (Sadurska and Bounni 1994), and arguably they serve as celebrations both of the family and the lineage as well as the deceased individual. Despite claims to the opposite, we have very little information about the lives of the deceased documented

[13] Piersimoni 1995, 530–31; Smith 2013, 33–54.

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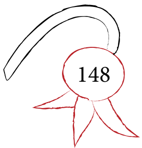


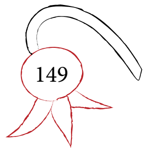
Figure 5. So-called funerary temple (TP 301).
Photo Jørgen Christian Meyer.

in portraits and inscriptions, the dominant profession visible being, as Rubina Raja's (e.g., 2017) work demonstrates, that of the priest, easily recognizable because of the characteristic hats (Fig. 4).

The stories told by the Palmyrenes in their funerary spaces play out on a very local scale. They communicate almost exclusively in Aramaic, so no advertisement is made to the official wider world of the Roman East, where most inscriptions were in Greek, although the many Aramaic speakers in the region would be able to understand to the extent that they were literate. Many genealogies, in some cases likely fictitious, in others, actual, go back to the urban beginning of Palmyra around the start of the common era. As Palmira Piersimoni points out, some genealogies are accompanied by the ethnonym *tdmry*ʾ, meaning "from Tadmor," perhaps separating themselves from newcomers and latecomers to the city (2015, 551). The funerary world of Palmyra is not, however, a completely closed one. There are many family graves. A few eponymous founders have names indicating Roman, Greek, and Iranian origins or freedman status (cf. Piersimoni 1995, 515). While

the Roman names in some cases clearly belong to Palmyrenes who had earned citizenship, some of these graves might have belonged to families originating outside Palmyra that had managed to become part of the local elite. A handful of inscriptions also detail the ceding of parts of a tomb to other families (Gawlikowski 1970, 204–19). Nevertheless, it is clear that this was a world with restricted access. The vast majority of people dying in Palmyra were not buried in these monumental tombs, and as of now we do not know what happened to them. However, the way into this world of the dead was not foremost through wealth, but through belonging to a group with traditional status and authority, something that had to be accumulated over time and that could only be faked or bought with effort and difficulty.

Starting with the mid-second century CE, a new type of tomb appears, the so-called "house" or "temple tombs" (Fig. 5). The tower tombs disappear, while new *hypogea* continue to be constructed. Michał Gawlikowski (1970, 129–47) and Andreas Schmidt-Colinet (1995, 30–52) both see this as Western/Roman imperial influence on Palmyra. The adoption of an architectural form common in other parts of the Empire, however, also entails Palmyrene agency. People who invested



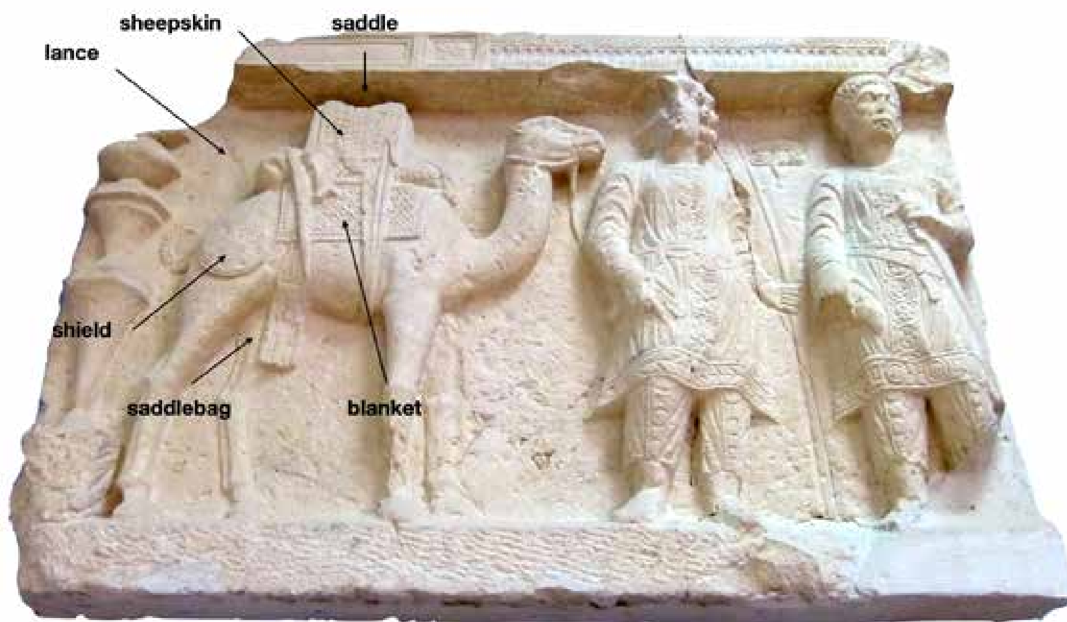
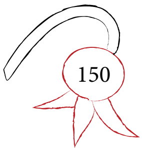


Figure 6. Palmyra Museum Inventory Number: 2093/7431.
Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer.

vast sums, comparable to the price of a ship or the annual pay of a military detachment, in a monument seem by this time to have wanted to tell a different story about themselves. By building funerary monuments in line with what was common elsewhere in the Roman Empire, they arguably wanted to represent themselves as other rich people in the Roman world rather than as clan leaders in the desert (Seland 2020). By doing this, they were inscribing themselves in a global narrative, to the degree that we are willing to accept the Romans' own view of their empire as a world-system of its own.[14]

Public Spaces

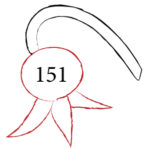


A third narrative told at Palmyra was that of the city. As was the case with the social organization, there is much that remains obscure about Palmyrene civic organization. From inscriptions displayed in the streets, squares, and sanctuaries of Palmyra, we have evidence both for the tribal structures visible also in the funerary inscriptions *and* for civic institutions such as "the people," "the council," and at least a limited range of magistrates including standard Greek offices such as the *strategos* ("military commander") and the *agoranomos* ("market overseer"). There is also evidence of offices elsewhere unattested, such as the *synodiarches* ("caravan leader") and the *archemporos* ("head merchant"). Some commentators propose that a full transformation from a system of governance based on traditional, tribal authority, to a civic model had taken place by the first century CE, and that the tribes encountered after that time are civic tribes analogue to those found, for example, in Athens and Rome (Sartre 1996). Others have held that the civic system was more or less a veneer over traditional power structures, where people held office and assemblies met, but where other ties—for example, of a tribal nature—ultimately decided matters (Ball 2016, 79–81). A third group advocates a hybrid model where the Palmyrene elite needed to navigate both Hellenistic-style city politics and traditional power structures.[15]

[14] Hingley 2005; Pitts and Versluys 2014.

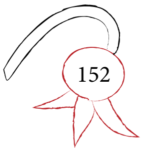
[15] Yon 2002; Andrade 2013; Smith 2013; Sommer 2018.

Figure 7. Parthian aristocrat, bronze statue in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran. Photo: Eivind Heldaas Seland.



Based on the stories that the people who dedicated the inscriptions were conveying about themselves, this appears quite unambiguous. By referring to decisions made in the council and the people's assembly, and by referring to holders of civic office, the Palmyrenes clearly inscribed themselves in the regional narrative of civic life in the Roman Near East. The Palmyrenes seem to be saying that they were no different from people in Antioch, Jerash, or Apamea. The question is thus whether we should believe them.

Judging from iconographic material from funerary settings as well as from certain elements of religious iconography, a tentative answer might be "no." A relief found in the Diocletian camp, but originally part of a monumental base, might serve as an example (Fig. 6). The relief depicts a camel and two men. The men have been interpreted as a pair of Palmyrene merchants (Smith 2013, 74–75) or as a caravan leader and a cameleer.[16] However, the camel is clearly a riding animal, and the men are soldiers, as should be evident from the lance, the sword, the shield, and the riding saddle with a sheepskin on it (Seland 2017, 107–8). In line with this, the motive has been described as that of a *méhariste* (Will 1992, 99–106). But this was the term used by the French for their locally recruited camel cavalry soldiers in the Sahara and the Levant in the early twentieth century, and an explicit example of an anachronistic colonial narrative of Palmyra (Sommer 2016). That does not mean that those depicted in these reliefs were not members of a regular military force; they might have been, as we know that the Romans recruited auxiliary soldiers in Palmyra (Edwell 2008, 52–53). The model for these depictions, however, were not Roman cavalry, but Parthian aristocracy (Fig. 7). Trousers for riding and the exquisite patterns on the clothes also find parallels in the region to the east of Palmyra (Will 1992, 99–106). This has of course long been noted and counted among the Parthian or Eastern elements in Palmyrene art (Colledge 1976, 76, 216–17).



This will have been evident also to the Palmyrenes commissioning, making, and viewing such monuments, but there is also a different story here. The camel, the lance, and the riding clothes arguably tell us that this man wanted to come across as part of the nomadic, aristocratic tradition of the Syrian Desert (Schlumberger 1951, 126–28). He is primarily part of a regional narrative that would probably not make sense in the Mediterranean West, but which would also resonate to the east, in the Parthian and Sasanian worlds, and south, toward Arabia. The same narrative is found in reliefs from the northern hinterlands of Palmyra and from certain urban sanctuaries, where mounted gods, on horses and camels, often appearing in pairs, were popular (Fig. 8).[17]

[16] Schmidt-Colinet 1995, 80; Sartre-Fauriat and Sartre 2008, 84.

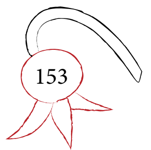
[17] Rostovtzeff 1932b; Seyrig and Starcky 1949; Schlumberger 1951.

In the historiography, these are sometimes called "caravan gods," but while members of caravans obviously had religious needs, any explicit connection with trade is lacking (Seland 2019, 183–85).

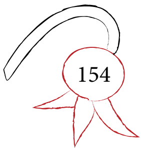
Identity, Narrative, and Agency at Palmyra

Palmyra is a rewarding case study because of the wealth of material and the clearly different traditions that meet in this material. Other elements of Palmyrene culture may also be structured along local, regional, and global narratives, but the point should be clear: the search for Palmyrene

Figure 8. Relief of unknown deity found in the Sanctuary of Allat. Palmyra Museum. Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer.



identity has had a tendency to look for Western, Eastern, and local traits and determine that none, some, or all of them are present. The ensuing conclusion may be that Palmyrene identity had elements of hybridity, that is of a combination of other identities, of creolization, implying a distinct, new identity emerging as a result of cultural encounter, or of globalization, in the sense that Palmyrenes adopted elements of the many different cultural expressions circulating in the first millennium *oikumene*. These conclusions all find support in the evidence but remain founded on the notion that cultural identity has an essentialist nature that can be identified on the basis of archeological, epigraphic, and iconographic material. By looking instead at Palmyrene cultural expressions as outputs resulting from active utterances in the sense of speech acts inscribing the people who produced them into narratives, we take a performative approach to the material, allowing for change, flexibility, and above all for agency. By viewing cultural expressions as active, if not necessarily therefore conscious choices, rather than responses to contact, we place the Palmyrenes at the center of their own world rather that at the periphery of the Roman and Persian worlds. Above, I have identified five such narratives that the Palmyrenes told about themselves: the family, the lineage, the city, the desert, and the world.



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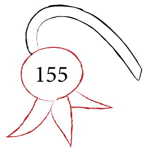

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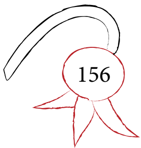

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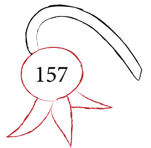

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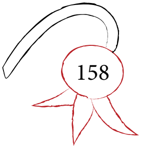

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