Preface

While this manuscript goes into print, the world is in lockdown due to the Corona pandemic. The virus has caught us all off guard. Abruptly and unexpectedly, the benefits of a globalised world, taken for granted by billions nowadays, are no longer effective: large-scale mobility of people, intercontinental supply chains, division of labour on a global scale. The crisis has also shattered the perception of being invulnerable so common in modern, high-tech societies. The lesson may well be that we have not left our pre-modern past that far behind.

The spirit of invulnerability also prevailed in the ancient oasis city of Palmyra. By the first century AD, the Syrian city had become the major trading hub between the East and the Mediterranean West. It also had become fabulously rich. Until recently, the ruins of Palmyra's temples, public buildings and tombs have been the silent witnesses of the city's wealth and power.

What made Palmyra's business model so unique? Why could the city successfully outcompete other players in the intercontinental long-distance trade? The chapters collected in this volume revisit a number of areas fiercely debated in recent scholarship on Palmyra: the city's early history, the organisation of its trade, patterns of its elite and social stratigraphy, and Palmyra's short stint on the stage of world history in the 260s and 270s. The concluding chapter looks into the the area's dire present and near future, and hence into developments which will determine how and when fieldwork in Palmyra may become feasible again.

Oldenburg, April 2020   Michael Sommer

I. Inter duo imperia. The Palmyrenes between East and West

MICHAEL SOMMER

Palmyra, urbs nobilis situ, divitiis soli et aquis amoenis, vasto undique ambitu harenis includit agros, wrote Pliny the Elder, and: *velut terris exempta a rerum natura, privata sorte inter duo imperia summa Romanorum Parthorumque est, prima in discordia semper utrimque cura.* According to Pliny, Palmyra was privileged because of its location (*nobilis situ*), and the availability of arable land (*divitiis soli*) and water (*aquis amoenis*); it was remote from the rest of the world (*terris exempta*) by means of the "nature of things" (*rerum natura*), and hence protected from the vicissitudes of conflict between the great powers. It was subject to its own fate (*privata sors*) and "between the two empires" (*inter duo imperia*) of the period: the Roman and the Parthian one.[1]

Pliny's short sketch of Palmyra's geographical and geo-political situation is sufficiently clear. The polyhistor draws a vivid picture of Palmyra as a wealthy city in a remote location; he also suggests that it was in a position of, at least approximate, political equidistance from the neighbouring imperial powers. This leaves the question open as to which chronological horizon is being referred to by the passage. In the source section of his book 1, Pliny mentions "[Cn.] Domitius Corbulo" and "[C.] Licinius Mucianus",[2] who are both cited as authorities for the upper Euphrates in book 5.[3] Corbulo and Mucianus served as governors of the province of Syria from 60 to 63 and 67 to 69, respectively. Corbulo probably died in 66 or 67, while Pliny collected the sources for his *NH* in the late 60s and early 70s. As far as Palmyra was concerned, Pliny was certainly up to date.[4]

Yet the information he provides is usually discarded by modern scholars, as anachronistic at best or downright wrong.[5] Most researchers are convinced that by the time when Germanicus visited the oasis city, or at least by the Flavian period, Palmyra had become "officially part of "[6] or was "firmly within"[7] the Roman Empire and its province of Syria. This view is supported by six pieces of epigraphic evidence, namely:

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1   Plin. *HN* 5,88.
2   Ibid., 1,III auct. Cfr. Sallmann 1971, 44–47.
3   Ibid., 5,83.
4   Thus also Edwell 2008, 44: "Pliny's possible sources on Palmyra and its relationship to the Roman Empire could not have been more contemporary."
5   Bowersock 1973, 135–36, Dirven 1999, 20, Hartmann 2001, 49, Jones 1971, 267, Sartre – Sartre 2016, 37, Smith II 2013, 24, Starcky – Gawlikowski 1985, 37.
6   Smith II 2013, 5343; similarly Kaizer 2002, 37: "part of the empire".
7   Millar 1993, 34.

1. The oldest of the so-called caravan inscriptions, from the Temple of Bēl at Palmyra and dating from AD 18/19, mentioning a Palmyrene named Alexandros, whom Germanicus sent on diplomatic missions to Spasinou Charax in Mesene and to Emesa.[8]

2. An undated votive inscription for the emperor Tiberius, Germanicus and Drusus, erected by Minucius Rufus, legatus of *the legio X Fretensis*, whose statues had been put up in the cella of the Temple of Bēl.[9]

3. A military tomb stone, discovered in 2006 and published in 2010, which appears to indicate that Roman troops were garrisoned in Palmyra on a permanent basis as early as Tiberius' time, in September AD 27.[10]

4. A boundary stone found ca. 75 km northwest of Palmyra at Khirbet el-Bilaas marking the limits of a *regio Palmyrena*. The stone is dated to the year 153, but refers to a boundary that had been established under the governor Q. Caecilius Metellus Creticus Silanus (AD 12–17).[11]

5. The references to Germanicus, Corbulo and Mucianus in Palmyra's so-called tax tariff of AD 137.[12]

6. A milestone of AD 75 found at Erech, 27 km northeast of Palmyra, believed to belong to a Roman military road connecting Palmyra and Sura on the Euphrates. The stone is generally believed to be indicative of Palmyra being connected to the network of Roman military roads.[13]

Taken together, this evidence is thought to be conclusive inasmuch as it confirms a strong and permanent Roman presence in the oasis by the mid, if not early, 1st century AD. But is it really strong enough to disprove Pliny's statement about Palmyra? Was the polyhistor wrong in assuming that the city was located *inter duo imperia*?

Some of the arguments against Pliny can be dismissed without further ado. First, while the tax tariff of AD 137 mentions earlier laws issued by Germanicus and the governors Corbulo and Mucianus, it does not say explicitly that such laws applied to Palmyra. Why should the council of Hadrianē Palmyra, which in the meantime had been absorbed into

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8   *PAT* 2754: [--- d]y mtq rt ʾlksndws | [---] tdmryʾ dy hw ʿbd | [--- h] lqdmyn wšdrh grmnqs / [--- m]lkʾ myšny [ʾ w]lwt ʾrbz | [---] hʾ mn st[---] lyswdy | [--- šm]šgrm mlk [ḥmṣ mlʾkʾ ršy] | [---] wlwt [---].

9   Seyrig 1932, 274–75, no. 1: [Dr]uso Caesari Ti. Caesari divi Aug. f. Augusto divi Iuli nepoti Ge[rmanico Caesari] | imperatoribus posuit | [Min]ucius T. f. Hor. Rufus, legatus X Fretensis.

10 Gawlikowski 2010b: Μαβογαιον | Δημητρίοθ σ | τρατιώτη[ν] σπεί | ρης Δαμασκηνῶ | ν Αναμος καὶ Θαιμ | ος οἱ \ἐπίροποι α | ὐτοῦ ἀρετῆ | ς ἔνεκαν ηλτ ʹ | Γορπίου. See Kaizer in this volume.

11 Schlumberger 1939, 61–63, no. II: pp fines regionis Palmyrae | constitutos a Cretico Silano | leg Aug pr pr ex sententia Di | vi Hadriani patris sui restitu(i)t.

12 *PAT* 0259,73, 103 and 121.

13 Seyrig 1932, 276, no. 2: [Imp Vespasia] | [nus Caesar Au]g | [pontif max] | [tribun pot]est VI | [Imperat--] cos VI | [de]sig VII | [ett] Caesar Aug | [Ve]spasian [p]on | [tr p VI Imp-- co]s IIII | [sub] | [M Ul]pio [Tr]aiano | leg Aug pro | pr | XVI. For Jones 1971, 267, this is the central argument against Pliny.

the Roman sphere of power much further than previously, not make reference to any laws that had been issued for Syria earlier on? It is rather likely that such laws were put in effect in Palmyra by means of the decree of 137.

Similarly, it is far from certain whether or not the original boundary created by Creticus Silanus early in the 1st century AD matched the one marked by the boundary stone set up in AD 153. There is no conclusive evidence that a *regio Palmyrena* had been in existence back in the days of Creticus Silanus. Even if this had been the case, the inscription is no proof that direct Roman authority extended into the *regio Palmyrena*, especially since Emesa, whose territory would have been on the other side of the boundary, was an autonomous client kingdom throughout most of the 1st century AD and thus not subject to direct Roman rule.

No more compelling is, thirdly, the argument that makes the Palmyrene man called Alexandros, who had reportedly been "sent" (*wšdrh*) by Germanicus to Spasinou Charax and Emesa, a key witness for Palmyra being "part of" the Roman Empire. The mission in itself does not imply any relationship of direct authority between Rome and Palmyra. On the contrary, the choice of a Palmyrene envoy instead of a Roman one could indicate that a native of the oasis was more qualified for the job, due to linguistic and cultural skills, but possibly also because he was not perceived, within the Parthian Empire, as a representative of Rome.

The strongest case against Pliny — one that cannot be disputed away so easily — is provided by the milestone from Erech and the recently unearthed tomb inscription. The milestone was probably found *prope situm*, if not *in situ*. Its dating into the sixth year of Vespasian's reign and hence the year 75 is all but certain. Despite its fragmentary state of preservation, the inscription seems to indicate the presence of some Roman military infrastructure in the region around Palmyra. Much earlier, in the time of Tiberius, Roman soldiers appear to have been deployed in Palmyra, as the tomb inscription confirms. However, this does not automatically prove direct Roman control of the Syrian Desert. Roman military infrastructure was in place in many parts of the Germania Magna well beyond the defeat of Varus in AD 9.[14] Similarly, the Roman military was apparently committed to securing the desert to the north of Palmyra in some way or other by the Flavian period. Pliny's statement that Palmyra was located *inter duo imperia* is to be taken with a pinch of salt and not literally: therefore, *privata sorte* should not be confused with "equidistant from the two empires" or "no Roman presence at all".

The main problem with using the inscriptions under scrutiny here as evidence of Palmyra being "part of" the Roman Empire, is an epistemological one. It lies precisely

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14   Corbulo, for instance, had a fort built in the territory of the Frisii in AD 47 (Tac. *ann.* 11,19: *ac ne iussa exuerent praesidium immunivit*). According to Cass. Dio 72,20, Roman garrisons were deployed deep in the territories of the Marcomanni and Quadi. Elton 1996, 36, remarks that little difference was made between provincial soil, client kingdoms and the territories of tribes and kingdoms with which the Romans merely had struck peace treaties.

in the assumption that any city could become "part of" or even "officially part of" the empire at a given point in time, by means of a formal act of annexation. Such a binary proposition implicitly uses the modern nation-state as a heuristic model. In a nation-state, the intensity of governance is equally spread across the state's surface, which is limited by ideal stationary borders, there where the state's authority abruptly ends. Any geographical coordinate is therefore either within or outside the state's borders. In cases when the borders shift, the point may "become part" of the state.

The opposite applies to empires: their intensity of governance is subject to changes and variations across space and time. Their power does not end at once. It rather fades out little by little, across wide frontier zones with no neatly defined political and/or cultural affiliation. A city at the edge of an empire does not suddenly become "part of" that empire: it gradually grows into the imperial sphere of power, sometimes at a speed which makes the process hardly noticeable for the contemporary observer. Such were the conditions in the Roman Near East. A good way of describing Palmyra's status is probably that the city "had been put on a sort of 'waiting list'"[15] — in other words: that Palmyra, over the 1st and possibly early 2nd centuries AD, was in a very gradual process of being assimilated into Rome's architecture of power in the East.[16] Such a model reconciles Pliny's statement fairly well with the epigraphic evidence.

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The story of Palmyra as a centre in its own right, which was located in a twilight between the two empires, yet gradually moving towards Rome, can best be told in three different histories: first, the history of Palmyra as a trading hub between the East and the West; second, the history of Palmyra's symbolic world with its cults, deities and forms of artistic and architectural expression; and third, the history of Palmyra's institutions, of the set of patters and practices that shaped society in the oasis. None of these histories can be told in detail in the present chapter. But even brief sketches suffice to explain why and in which respects Palmyra differed from any other city in the Roman world: why it was a typological monolith whose history truly unfolded *privata sorte*.

Palmyra as a trading hub

Owing to the Syro-Austro-German excavations in the so-called Hellenistic City to the south of the imperial period's city centre, we now have available substantial data on the city's early history in the 2nd and 1st century BC. The record of imported pottery, patchy as it is, seems to suggest that Palmyra's trade with Mesopotamia increased in volume to-

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15   Yon 2010, 239.
16   Similarly Kaizer in this volume.

wards the middle of the 2ⁿᵈ century BC and again in the second half of the first century BC. This is surprising, considering that the trade took an upturn each time the region was affected by warfare. Normally, war and unrest are the natural enemies of commerce, but in Palmyra's case things were different. The city obviously benefitted from political fissures tearing the region apart.

Why the Palmyrenes were such wartime profiteers can be understood from their activities as highlighted by the caravan inscriptions of the imperial period. Once a year, a caravan left the oasis for Spasinou Charax in Mesopotamia, the Persian-Gulf port in which luxury items from India landed. The logistics of the inter-imperial trade was not trivial, though the Syrian Desert and the Euphrates valley provided for relatively easy travel. But nomadic tribes and Parthian authorities had to be dealt with. Navigating through this political jungle required skills, conections and, in particular, trust. Unlike people who came from the Roman Empire, which, since Crassus' abortive Parthian campaign in 53 BC, was in a latent state of war with its eastern neighbour, the Palmyrene traders enjoyed the trust of the Parthian officials and the merchant communities in the Mesopotamian cities, where they traded and where some of them established themselves permanently.

Mutual trust as a key resource repeatedly emerges from the epigraphic record: the Palmyrene Alexandros, whom Germanicus had sent to Spasinou Charax as an envoy, has already been mentioned. The Palmyrene Yarḥai served as governor of the island of Thilouana (Bahrain) for the king of Charakene, who himself was a vassal of the Parthian king;[17] another Palmyrene, Yarḥibōl, was sent to the kingdom of Elymais as an envoy.[18] Several Palmyrenes sponsored the building of sanctuaries in Parthian cities: a certain Aqqayh paid for an altar and a temple in Vologesias;[19] and one Šoʿadu, who was a very prominent figure in the mid-2ⁿᵈ century AD, even established a temple for the imperial cult in the same city.[20] Yarḥai, Yarḥibōl and Šoʿadu were all representatives of a lofty elite, far above the rank and file of the army of merchants treading the caravan roads year after year. On Parthian soil, such high-ranking Palmyrenes provided various services for the caravan traders and the Palmyrenes of the Mestopotamian trading diaspora, such as declaring goods and paying duties.[21]

What transpires from this evidence is the fact that at least the Parthians did not lump the Palmyrenes with their Roman adversaries. The caravan trade seems to have reached its peak in the 130s, 140s and 150s, and thus in a period when the relationship between the two powers was somewhat less hostile. Yet trust was the resource that guaranteed the Palmyrene merchants the leeway and legal security they required for their trade, and which

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17 *PAT* 1374 (AD 131): [Ἀδ]ριανὸν Παλμυρηνόν σατρά | [π]ην Θιλουανῶν Μεερεδάτου | βασιλέως Σπασίνου Χάρακος.

18 *PAT* 1414 (AD 138): […] καὶ π[ρεσβεύσαντα] αὐθαιρέτως | [πρὸς Ὀρώδην τὸν β]ασιλέα τῆς Αἰλ[υ] | [μήνης ---].

19 *PAT* 0263 (AD 108): […] *b ʾlgšy ʾ ḥmn ʾ | klh hw w ʾtrh w ʾp ṭll ʾdrwn ʾ.*

20 *PAT* 1062 (AD 145/46): [ἐ]ν Ὀλογα[σία ναὸν τῶν Σε]βαστῶν κ[αὶ] κ[α]θι | [ερώ]σαν [τα--].

21 E.g. *PAT* 2763 (paying duty), *PAT* 0263 (being helpful) and *PAT* 1584 (help with the construction of a temple).

others would have lacked. And trust went incredibly far, considering that Yarḥai, who came from Hadrianē Palmyra, held office as the virtual Parthian governor of Thilouana. People like Yarḥai were well-networked inter-imperial commuters whose scope of action dwarfed anything we know from local elites in the Roman Empire. If nothing else, this at least should explain why Palmyra was different.

Palmyra's symbolic patchwork

The cosmopolitanism of Palmyra's elite is mirrored by the iridescent equivocality of the symbolic universe inhabited by Palmyra's motley population. Whether or not the manifest incongruities in Palmyra's divine world are due to a supposedly ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse population, is subject to an ongoing debate.[22] What is more tangible is Palmyra's material culture which, at first glance, seems to be an amalgamation of 'western' and 'non-western' elements. The city's largest sanctuary, the Temple of Bēl, dedicated in AD 32, was in every detail inspired by a sanctuary in Asia Minor that was 250 years older: Hermogenes' Artemision of Magnesia on the Maeander. The Palmyrene temple, however, featured eye-catching oddities: instead of the pitched roof of the 'ordinary' classical temple, the Temple of Bēl had a terrace on its top, which was surrounded by a row of pinnacles and accessible via spiral staircases from the inside. The entrance to the cella was on the western long side. And on both the northern and the southern end, lay thalamoi, which were elevated by several metres against the level of the central part.

We know precious little about the rituals performed here, but it is evident that they differed considerably from 'western' religious practices. The sanctuary reveals the methodology applied by the Palmyrene builders: they borrowed the architectonic and artistic vocabulary from the Greeks and the Romans, but they adapted its semantics for their own purposes. The result is a temple that looks strikingly classical and non-classical at the same time. The Palmyrenes had hardly any choice. Their nascent urban society disposed of an inventory of religious and social practices, of deities and possibly stories and myths. But they lacked any sort of tools which could serve to monumentalise this inventory. The only way forward was to borrow the tools from the undisputed masters of monumentalisation.

Accordingly, the Palmyrenes adopted the Tyche of Antioch as the divine emblem of their city. They constructed a colonnaded street, which represented the epitome of urbanism in the East, but which was conspicuously absent in any 'Western' city. Next to it, they built a theatre, the symbol of Greekness in Roman Syria, but in the Roman style. What dramas were performed on stage and in which language, we do not know. They carved stone portraits of their dead in the Hellenistic style, but what mattered to them was social rank and status rather than individuality. Finally, in the 2nd century AD, they

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22   For an in-depth discussion Kaizer 2002, 35–66 and 261–62, Smith II 2013, 58–68.

decided to abandon the customary tower tombs in favour of structures that looked like Graeco-Roman temples. In all such cases, they borrowed 'Western' types, techniques and symbols, but put them to use in their very own ways.

In Palmyra, Hellenisation and Romanisation came with a 'twist'. The contact with the Roman world had a massive impact on local society and brought about numerous radical changes. The Greco-Roman look-and-feel of many monuments and works of art was far more than a façade, a veneer.[23] It was a means of expression cautiously and consciously adopted and adapted by the Palmyrenes, whose oasis society was a newcomer in an environment of mostly long-established urban centres. The urge to be pari passu with them and possibly outcompete such lighthouses of the Hellenistic oecumene as Antioch and Apamaea was a powerful driving force in early imperial Palmyra.[24] Yet the canon of Hellenism into which the Palmyrenes integrated was modular and flexible: it was like a big warehouse they could explore and from which they could chose what served their needs and leave behind what did not. What emerged from this process is the idiosyncratic symbolic patchwork that was Palmyra, not quite *inter duo imperia*, but certainly *privata sorte*.

Palmyra's institutions

Palmyra's third history needs to be viewed backwards, beginning with its demise as a trading hub and power centre, rather than as a city in itself. When the emperor Aurelian captured the oasis city in AD 272, a dozen years lay behind the Near East that saw Palmyra's rapid rise to a veritable power factor between the empires of the West, Rome, and of the East, Persia, and its likewise sudden downfall. Following Valerian's defeat at Edessa in the summer of AD 260, the eastern Roman provinces turned into a large-scale power vacuum with only dispersed Roman troops being present and alive with intensified Persian raiding activity.[25]

In this desperate situation, one man, Odaenathus of Palmyra, assembled what forces were available and, near the Euphrates, won a decisive victory over a retreating Persian army. A few years later we find the same Odaenathus besieging the Persian capital of Ctesiphon twice before he suddenly died under mysterious circumstances, probably in late 267. By that date, Odaenathus had become the undisputed political and military leader in the Near East, awarded with an array of pompous Roman titles.

His death caused a major succession crisis tightened by two different interpretations of Odaenathus's role in the Near East. From a Roman point of view, Odaenathus was just one

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23   This is the point of view of Ball 2000, 396: "Roman frills might be piled onto it, but the real architecture remained what it had always been: Near Eastern."
24   This is the convincing case made by Andrade 2013, 148–214.
25   On the following Burgersdijk 2007, Gawlikowski 2010a, Hartmann 2001, Hartmann 2016, Sommer 2008, Sommer 2018a, 139–170.

Roman official whose prerogatives fell back to the emperor at the moment of his death; from the Palmyrene perspective, Odaenathus's heirs — his minor son Waballat and his widow Zenobia – were not only entitled, but downright obliged to succeed him as ruler of Palmyra. In 270, this inextricable conflict prompted a civil war, which was ignited and lost in the end by the Palmyrenes.

What matters here, is the combination of military capability and dynastic tradition which becomes problematic if we follow the hypothesis that Palmyra had been just like any other Greek city in the Roman Empire. In the crisis of AD 260, no ordinary Greek city would have had the resources and the manpower to fight back an entire Persian army, let alone pursue the enemy deep into his own territory and put their capital under siege. Some resort to an ominous Palmyrene "militia", which, however, is not attested by any single source.[26] Palmyra's uniqueness against all other cities in the Roman world, however, is the consequence of its origin from, and proximity to, nomadic tribes. The people of the desert viewed themselves, and were viewed by the Palmyrenes, as kinsmen of the urban dwellers. It is hardly far-fetched to assume that Palmyra was in no short supply of military manpower because of the permanent availability of tribal warriors in its immediate neighbourhood.

The tribal, as it were polymorphic, patterns of Palmyrene society also explain the vitality of the dynastic principle in the event of Odaenathus' death. In this critical moment, the ruler's next of kin had no choice but to assume power for themselves. As far as we can see, Odaenathus' monarchic power as expressed in his Palmyrene title of *rʾš* ("head") was a completely new feature in Palmyra's political landscape. One scholar has hypothesised the "re-orientalisation" of Palmyra in the crisis prompted by Romano-Persian conflict since the 230s,[27] but it seems more likely that Palmyra had never fully embraced the constitutional order of a Greek *polis*. To be sure, the nomenclature of a full-fledged *polis* is not absent from Palmyra's epigraphic record. It appears in Greek and in Palmyrene transliteration: the *dēmos* as well as a *boulē* are mentioned,[28] and among other magistrates, a *stratēgos* held office.[29] Finally, Palmyra is explicitly referred to as a *polis*.[30]

Yet, the honorands of most of the honorific inscriptions do not seem to derive their lofty social status from any offices or magistracies. Rather than by such roles, the men are identified by their ancestors, of whom normally two generations, in some cases as many as four, are mentioned. The only function frequently brought up by the inscriptions is that of caravan leader, *synodiarchos*. Services to Palmyra's trade seem to outweigh the usual civic magistracies by several degrees. Only once, in the inscription for Aelius Borā

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26   The extensive scholarship on the "militia" has been collected by Hartmann 2001, 54.

27   Schmidt-Colinet 1997, 163–64, Schmidt-Colinet et al. 1992, 40–41. Similarly Hartmann 2001, 95.

28   *PAT* 0197 (AD 132), 1414 (AD 138), 1062 (AD 145/46), 1063 (AD 198) and 1378 (AD 199).

29   *PAT* 1063.

30   *PAT* 0269. The Greek nomenclature has been used by Sartre 1996 for making his case that Palmyra was a "Greek city" (cité grecque).

(AD 198), the honorand is identified as *stratēgos*, and only in the Greek text. Here, to the noun στρατηγός, the genitive object τῆς εἰρήνης is added. This could be owing to an emergency situation before the background of Septimius Severus' Parthian War.[31] Less than half of the inscriptions are marked as decrees of the *dēmos* and the *boulē* of Palmyra. Overall, the epigraphic record seems to reflect the outstanding importance of kinship as opposed to the 'civic' institutions of a Greek *polis*.

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To conclude, the Palmyra we know would have been unthinkable without the presence of the Roman Empire. Palmyrenes were sufficiently open-minded to perceive the opportunities that came with Rome: opportunities that improved the standard of living of the vast majority of the oasis dwellers and hugely enhanced options for upward social mobility and representation of social status. But the Palmyrenes' open-mindedness towards what Rome had on offer did not lead them to importing Roman culture and its symbolic baggage wholesale into their oasis. The result was a hybrid civilisation in its own right, where 'local' features cannot be distinguished from 'imported' ones.

The importance of Palmyra by far transcends the oasis and even the Roman Near East. Ultimately, any study of Palmyra is a case study in Romanisation, in Hellenisation and, more generally, in acculturation, paradigms that have been popularised long ago by Francis Haverfield's ground-breaking study in the Romanisation of Roman Britain.[32] Such analytical prisms are now under heavy pressure in Anglo-Saxon academia, while they continue to flourish on the continent. Across the Atlantic and the British Channel, the anti-Haverfieldian zeal is nourished by the currently prevailing orthodoxy of post-colonial theory.[33] The concepts are suspected to betray the colonial mindsets of their creators, from Mommsen through to the present. New, more fashionable analytical tools, such as 'globalisation', have been applied, more or less successfully.[34]

However, concepts such as 'Romanisation' and 'globalisation' are mere labels, ideal types in the Weberian sense, that do not exist in any given reality, but only in the minds of the researchers. There is no such thing as Romanisation or Hellenisation in the real world, just rather chaotic events, processes and structures that need be arranged in proper order by scholars in order to make sense. What ultimately matters, is not how we call our concepts, but how we define them. Therefore, any academic occupation with society is *also* the constant defining and refining of ideal types. Studying the Palmyrenes and their interaction with Rome helps towards a fine-tuned understanding of Hellenisation and Romanisation, an understanding that takes into account the agency of those who are

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31   Ibid.
32   Haverfield 1923.
33   For a critique see Sommer 2011.
34   See Hingley 2005 and the contributions to Pitts – Versluys 2015.

Hellenising or Romanising themselves, causing often perplexing and sometimes contradictory outcomes. Such an understanding is not entirely novel: it was more present in Francis Haverfield's work than his modern critics are inclined to accept.

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Regrettably, there is a second reason why, in recent years, Palmyra has been higher on the agenda of classical scholars than it used to be. In May 2015 — the Syrian civil war went into its fourth year — the fighters of Daesh, the so-called Islamic State, were about to bring havoc to Palmyra, the UNESCO world heritage site, a much-visited tourist destination before the war and the location of a high-security prison where the Baʿth party regime used to lock away political opponents. To conquer Palmyra made sense to the Islamists for a number of reasons. One of them was the importance the ancient city had for the Baʿthist charter myth of the modern nation-state of Syria: in a manner of speaking, Zenobia and her clan with their alleged revolt against Rome were forerunners to the Assad family. They were regularly brought back to life in the regime's struggle for creating a Syrian national identity that went beyond Islam. But the destructions brought upon Palmyra by the Islamist militia were also motivated by the repercussions such acts of barbarism would have on western media coverage of the war. Since at least the 18th century, Palmyra had been a celebrity among the ancient sites of the Near East, visited, since the time of Lady Hester Stanhope, by people who had been celebrities themselves. Capturing and mutilating the city for a second time since antiquity would be a display of the militia's power. It would hurt the west where it was most vulnerable: in its faith in the world as a place where, essentially, common sense prevailed.

The images of the destruction of the Tripylon, the Temple of Bēl and other landmark buildings sparked disbelief, anger and sorrow across the world. Academics, some of whom had been researching Palmyra for a lifetime, wrote newspaper articles and gave interviews in which they drew attention to the immense cultural loss, but also to the suffering of Syria's civilian population.[35] Predictably, the media hype about Palmyra was short-lived. Attention was soon drawn to the refugee crisis and away from Syria's cultural heritage.

It is not the intention of the editor of the present book to put up yet another tombstone for Palmyra.[36] Rather, the volume wants to flag recent research in the oasis city, research that has been pursued, cumbersome conditions notwithstanding, in numerous fields, re-

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35 In the aftermath of Daesh's conquest of Palmyra, the author of the present introduction has published an article on *Der Spiegel online*: Michael Sommer on *SPON* 24 May 2015 (http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/is-bedroht-palmyra-nimrud-hatra-aufsatz-michael-sommer-a-1035171.html (5 February 2019). He was, by some debaters in the forum section, criticised for caring about "a few old stones" while people were suffering, starving and dying. Setting off violations of human rights against acts of vandalism misconceives the strategic thinking of the terrorists for whom both serve the same objective.

36 See, for istance, Delplace 2017, Sartre – Sartre 2016 and, most notably Veyne 2017.

search that helps to write the three histories outlined in the beginning more clearly and more vividly. In the first place, this is partly owing to new research data having been made available through fieldwork, which has been conducted in Palmyra and in the Palmyrene right up to the war. This has produced a wealth of new information: most notably the excavations in the so-called Hellenistic City conducted by a Syrian, Austrian and German team,[37] the Norwegian *Palmyrena* project,[38] and the Syro-Italian Pal.M.A.I.S. project on dwellings in the northern neighbourhood.[39] Secondly, new insight is provided by new historical research attempting at synthesising the data collected by archaeologists.[40] Yet this process has only just begun. To show what paths it might take, is the purpose of this volume.

Ted Kaizer's chapter investigates the history of Palmyra's integration into the Roman Empire from the city's earliest, pre-Roman times, all the way down to post-Zenobian Palmyra. He shows how Palmyra gradually moved closer to Rome and became absorbed into the Roman sphere of power, with Germanicus' and Hadrian's visits to the oasis both as important steps, and the rise to the rank of *colonia*, Odaenathus' monarchic rule and the transformation into a late Roman fortress city as further stages in the process. Despite Palmyra's gradual and long-term absorption into the imperial power of Rome, the oasis city remained, according to Kaizer, a place unlike any other in the Roman world.

Michael Sommer looks into the data obtained from the fieldwork in the Hellenistic City and attempts at explaining the seemingly odd coincidence that in the 2nd and 1st centuris Palmyrene trade with Mesopotamia expanded each time the region was ravaged by war. The chapter argues that trust and the ability to mediate between the two powers was seminal for Palmyra's rise to the prime hub in the trans-Eurasian long-distance trade. The division of western Asia between two latently or openly hostile powers — first the Seleucids and the Parthians, later the Romans and the Parthians — paved the way for the Palmyrenes, whose caravans could permeate the frontier, because they were trusted by all other agents in the arena.

How did the Palmyrenes feed their people? In his chapter, *Jørgen Christian Meyer* explains how the Palmyrenes managed to cultivate land in the Syrian Desert, which was marginal only from a political point of view, but provided ecological conditions that could be exploited, provided societies made investments in the respective infrastructure. Maintaining such an infrastructure depended on wealth pouring into the urban centre in the oasis. Once the centre was in full decline, in the post-Umayyad period, floodwater farming was no longer an option, and soon the steppe was reclaimed by nomadic tribes.

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37 Schmidt-Colinet 2003a, Schmidt-Colinet 2003b, Schmidt-Colinet – al-Asʿad 2000, Schmidt-Colinet – al-Asʿad 2002, Schmidt-Colinet – al-Asʿad 2013.

38 Meyer 2017, Meyer – Seland – Anfinset 2016.

39 Grassi 2010, Grassi 2011, Grassi 2017, Grassi – Zenoni – Rossi 2012. At the conference, Lilia Palmieri has given a presentation on the preliminary results oft he Pal.M.A.I.S. excavations. Regrettably, her paper is not included in the present proceedings.

40 Most recently: Andrade 2018b, Grassi 2017, Seland 2016, Smith II 2013, Sommer 2018a.

"The personal circumstances and motivations that influenced individual Palmyrenes" to become engaged in the Red-Sea trade via Egypt are "beyond recovery". Thus *Matthew A. Cobb* summarizes his considerations on the Palmyrene diaspora in Egypt and its role in the exchange of commodities between Egypt and India. Potential explanations include the growth of a kinship and ethnicity-based networks of Palmyrenes in the Nile country, higher profit margins in the trade via Egypt and the attempt, on behalf of the Palmyrenes, to create an alternative route while the Syro-Mesopotamian trade was increasingly compromised by unrest and warfare. Given the nature and extent of the evidence, none of these explanations is conclusive, Cobb points out, but the fact that Palmyrene traders, from the later 2nd century AD onwards, increasingly diversified their activities, is an interesting feature in itself and seems to suggest that by then the bonds between Palmyra and the Roman Empire had become much tighter.

Two chapters deal with the Palmyrene elites. *Eivind Heldaas Seland* investigates the role of the upper echelons of Palmyrene society in the city's long-distance trade. In 20th century scholarship, Seland distinguishes three models of elite-involvement: the "merchant prince" (M. Rostovtzeff), the "tribal leader" (E. Will) and the "Roman aristocrat" (G. K. Young), criticizing their "static" character. As an alternative, he suggests a dynamic model that takes into account the archaeological and epigraphic evidence from Palmyra: in this model, the tribal organisation of Palmyrene society was, from the 2nd century onwards, increasingly challenged by a new class of wealthy merchants who claimed rank and social prestige for themselves.

Ann-Christine Sander searches for a Palmyrene aristocrat's sources of power. In her investigation of the epigraphic and iconic evidence, she highlights the paramount importance of military power that distinguished the Palmyrene elite from other local elites in the Roman world. Not accidentally are Palmyrene aristocrats commonly represented as warriors, accompanied by horses and camels. Likewise, military services dominate the caravan inscriptions as the prevailing motivation for honours being conferred on members of the elite. According to Sander, Palmyra's military aristocracy is the decisive factor creating a unique social setting in the oasis.

An important source for assessing Palmyra's role in the Roman crisis of the 260s and 270s is Zosimus' *Nea Historia*, scrutinized here by *Georg Müller*. The chapter first explores Zosimus' historiographical toolbox and his historiograhical perspective, before revisiting his Palmyra episode, its protagonists and background actors, Zosimus' sources and different 'foci'. By the time Zosimus wrote, it was agreed that Palmyra was an alien factor, intrinsically hostile to the Roman cause. Its dodgy role is epitomized by Zenobia's, a woman's, rule. To Zosimus, the episode is pivotal for understanding the third century crisis and Rome's recovery from Aurelian's reign onwards.

All future research in and around Palmyra will invariably depend on how the political situation in Syria develops over the next few years: reason enough why the final chapter of this volume focuses on the present civil war, the political interests of its main players and its possible outcomes. As *Alexander Will* observes, all information coming from

Syria is currently filtered by interested parties and hence by definition unreliable. Yet, it is foreseeable that the West will have little say in a post-war order. As Will points out, Israel, Iran, Turkey and Russia each pursue their own interests in the Levant. While Israel's and Turkey's strategies aim at holding down regional adversaries — the Kurds in the case of Turkey, Iran in Israel's case — Russia and Iran are pursuing more ambitious targets: for the Mullahs in Tehran, Syria is their prime base of operation against their main enemy in the region, Israel. For Russia's Putin, the Assad government is a strategic partner helping Moscow to get a foot in the door to the Near East and to project power into the Mediterranean. Little imagination is required to anticipate that access to a post-war Syria will have to be negotiated via Russia.

This holds true for any archaeological fieldwork as well. As of 2019, Russian archaeologists are keeping an eye on Palmyra, while the Russian government is investing substantial amounts of money in the country's archaeological research institutions.[41] Once again, a great power's archaeological and political ambitions are becoming closely intertwined.

41 https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2018/06/russian-archaeologists-eyeing.html#hUsqrUtgJ6oZ-7RYp.97 (5 February 2019).