Preface

Palmyra was a unique place within the Roman Empire. The city, located in a Syrian oasis, preserved a culture and social organization of its own distinct character. It was closely intertwined with a larger region that extended beyond the boundaries of the Empire. Its livelihood was sustained through long-distance trade, not through agriculture or the production of commodities. And the people of Palmyra remained identifiable and distinguishable as Palmyrenes even when they left the oasis and established a life far from their homeland. Therefore, one can rightly speak of a Palmyrene diaspora, and it is the subject of investigation in this book.

A unique place in modern Europe is Villa Vigoni, a German-Italian conference center at the foot of the Alps on Lake Como. From October 13 to 16, 2020, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft funded conference "From Hadrian's Wall to India: The Palmyrene Diaspora in Europe, Africa, and Asia" was held at the Villa. To be more precise, it was supposed to be held there, but then the COVID-19 pandemic struck. As a result, only some of the conference participants could enjoy the hospitality of the Villa. Most had to settle for a virtual diaspora in front of a screen. Nevertheless, the organization of the conference would not have been possible without the team at Villa Vigoni, led by Dr. Christiane Liermann. The organisers are extremely grateful for the Villa's enormous contribution to the conference. They extend their thanks to all the participants of the conference who, despite the challenging circumstances, presented and discussed their work—and ultimately provided their contributions for this volume.

* * *

The volume is divided into four parts. Part I ("Diasporas") explores the significance of diaspora throughout history. The world-historically formative diaspora is that of the Jews, but there are many other diaspora groups from which we can learn much when researching historical diaspora phenomena. Part II ("Trajectories") is dedicated to the various – military, religious, social – dimensions of the Palmyrene diaspora. Part III ("Areas") examines the large regions – from Rome through Dacia to Asia – where Palmyrenes found a new home far from their oasis. Part IV ("Perspectives") ventures a look into the future study of the Palmyrene diaspora.

Palmyra was an 'idiosyncratic civilization' with idiosyncratic cults and gods. Ted Kaizer searches the traces of their idiosyncrasies: in Mesopotamian Dura-Europos, where Palmyrene religious life remained distinct from that of their environment and stands out clearly in the archaeological-epigraphic record, and in Dacian Sarmizegetusa, where a wealthy Palmyrene consecrated a temple to the native gods. But what does that mean? Despite the relative abundance of the evidence, Kaizer warns against jumping to premature conclusions. Too much eludes interpretation by modern scholarship.

The military dimension of the Palmyrene diaspora is appreciated by Stefano Magnani. He first explains why the Palmyrenes were so attractive for recruitment by the Roman army and then looks at their spread across the empire. Inscriptions and papyri provide information on the deployment of Palmyrene units. Magnani traces them from the Near East, through Dacia, to Britain and Numidia.

Who left Palmyra to settle in foreign lands on a long-term or permanent basis? Ann-Christine Sander and Peter von Danckelman show that quite a few of those who set out to leave their home had an elevated social standing in Palmyra, but were also better off than those who became their new neighbours. The diaspora attracted people whose goal it was to move upwards on the social ladder. But also those who already had reached the top were drawn towards the outside world where often high positions waited for them. Sander and von Danckelman show that for many Palmyrenes, the diaspora offered the possibility of accessing information and network contacts, and it was precisely such opportunities that were a strong incentive to maintain one's identity as a Palmyrene far from home.

All roads lead to Rome. It was the capital that provided more opportunities than any other place to those who were seeking them, which is why Rome is the ideal starting point for a geographical tour d'horizon of the Palmyrene diaspora. Tommaso Gnoli demonstrates, despite the scarcity of the evidence, how the Palmyrene ways of life along the Tiber gave visible expression to their identity as sons and daughters of the oasis city, without coming into conflict with the host society or isolating themselves unduly from it.

The diaspora of the Palmyrenes in Dacia was very different from the one in Rome. They came to the land on the Danube as soldiers, first to conquer the Roman province and then to defend it against the barbarians from the north. Ovidiu Țentea and Ioan Piso introduce us to several of the soldiers and veterans as well as their family members. They clearly stand out from the mass of provincials, if only because they are a lot more visible in the epigraphic record. These people remain distinguishable as Palmyrenes, while also harbouring ambitions in a local context. Quite a few of them achieve great prosperity and make a political career. Not unlike many Jews they became respected members of the communities where they settled, without however giving up their distinct Palmyrene identity.

Many Palmyrene soldiers were stationed in Egypt, possibly because their experience in desert warfare was of particular benefit to the Roman Empire in that arid environment. However, Palmyrene traders also operated from Egypt from the 2nd century AD onwards, as Matthew Cobb demonstrates. Egypt was attractive to them because the alternative

route to India originated from there, but also because the commercial diaspora could dock seamlessly with the military one. As far as we can see, the long-distance traders were members of a multicultural, prosperous community. However, as for other diaspora groups the caveat applies that many Palmyrenes probably escape our attention altogether because they were indistinguishably fused with their Egyptian environment.

The seminal case study on the Palmyrene diaspora that also coined the term was written some 25 years ago by Lucinda Dirven. Now, Dirven has undertaken another visit to the Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos, a venture well worth the while: nowhere else is there a comparably rich archaeological and epigraphic record of the daily life and religion of Palmyrenes living in foreign lands. At the same time, Palmyra was just around the corner, and the ties to the homeland remained close as long as the Parthians were the lords of Dura-Europos. Paradoxically, this changed when Rome expanded to the middle Euphrates and successively intensified its rule over western Mesopotamia: when the *cohors XX Palmyrenorum* took quarters in Dura, the military character of the diaspora became more dominant superimposing itself on the Palmyrene traditions. At the same time, the cult of the Palmyrene gods, which until then had been practiced exclusively by Palmyrenes, opened itself for other groups. What it meant to be Palmyrene was now defined along visibly different lines in the Roman garrison town of Dura-Europos as opposed to the Parthian border city Dura had been before.

Further southeast, in Babylonia, there was also a notable Palmyrene diaspora from at least the 2nd century CE onwards. It owed its existence to long-distance trade, but Eivind Heldaas Seland also wonders what other activities were pursued by the Palmyrenes in Babylonia. Little is known about them. At best, historical parallels such as the diaspora of the Jews, which was not primarily commercial, give clues as to how the Palmyrenes lived far from their homeland. Seland sees the most important function of the diaspora in the Parthian Empire for the Palmyrene long-distance trade in the establishment of trust. Only by means of peaceful coexistence practiced over decades, the transaction costs in the transfer of goods could have been reduced to a tolerable level.

Contacts between the oasis city and South Arabia are well documented: three people can be identified as originating from Palmyra in the epigraphic evidence. But while a permanent settlement of their compatriots in many places in the Roman Empire and in Mesopotamia can be easily proven, the Palmyrene presence in the Arabia Felix seems to have had a rather transitory character. If Palmyrenes moved to the region, it was most likely for economic reasons. But did they come as merchants, seafarers, or envoys? Did they come to trade or to establish long-term contacts? In her thorough study of the inscriptions, Danila Piacentini warns against premature conclusions, but notes that the findings fit well with the growing commercial interest, attested otherwise, of the Palmyrenes in the Red Sea route from the 2nd century AD onward.

The certainly ephemeral presence of a Palmyrene on Soqotra may also belong to this context. It is attested by an inscription from the Hoq Cave, a limestone cave on the island located about 230 kilometers off the Horn of Africa. Maria Gorea reconstructs the cir-

cumstances that led Abgar and his apparently motley crew to Soqotra sometime in the 3rd century. Whether Abgar and his crewmates stopped on the island voluntarily to trade or replenish their supplies, or whether shipwreck forced them to land, cannot be determined today. However, the circumstances of the inscription's discovery show that a Palmyrene like Abgar integrated effortlessly into the multicultural community of sailors and merchants who travelled in the Indian Ocean.

That Palmyrenes reached the west coast of India by sea has been proven beyond doubt by a number of caravan inscriptions. Yet, little is known about the presence of Palmyrenes there. Archaeological evidence for the region does hardly give a clue. Surveys on the coast of India have recently uncovered large quantities of so-called Torpedo jars attesting to intensive contacts with southern Mesopotamia, but this says nothing about a permanent presence of traders from the west or Palmyra in the Indian ports. Tomas Larsen Høisæter warns against jumping to conclusions: the presence of a Palmyrene diaspora in India must remain hypothetic for now.

The case studies show that systematic research on this diaspora is only just beginning. Yet, as Antonietta Castiello shows in conclusion, the diaspora as an ideal type is ideally suited in order to conceptualize the mobility of the Palmyrenes, their permanent or at least long-term presence in a foreign land, and the tenacity with which they held on to the traditions of their homeland. A conceptual approach is essential for any comparative investigation of Palmyrenes staying abroad, be it permanently or for longer periods of time. Such an investigation, in turn, can be expected to provide answers to several of the questions that keep busy and sometimes divide Palmyrene scholarship to this day: how unique was the oasis city's contribution to ancient Mediterranean civilization? Why did the Palmyrenes stand out so strikingly from their surroundings? What role did compatriots scattered across the Roman world and as far as India play in the Palmyrenes' long-distance trade? And finally, why did the diaspora disappear from the scene so rapidly after Zenobia's defeat by Aurelian, seemingly without leaving a trace?

Oldenburg, September 2024 MICHAEL SOMMER