Idalion

Before the Romans came, the Cypriot crossroads of Idalion had also been home to Phoenician speakers, Macedonians, and other Greeks.

Beth Shean

Locals in the Roman Empire

Meet the people of Palmyra and Idalion. They lived under from the first century BCE. these cities created distinct by combining Roman and clothing with local from further east

2100 BCE

Style Across the Roman East

Wealthy residents dress and death. Comp from their the

Palmyra

ed in a desert oasis in present-day Palmyra was a key stop on the Silk Road. trolled trade between the Roman Empire Persia, India, and China.

Curator Lauren Ristvet points to one of the Palmyrene funerary busts in the Eastern Mediterranean Gallery; photo by Eric Sucar.

Family Portraits

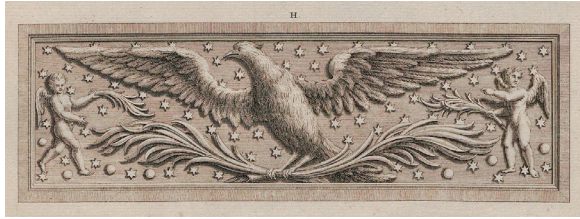## FROM PALMYRA TO PHILADELPHIA

BY LAUREN RISTVET

Palmyra, "the city of palms," was one of the most important trade centers of the ancient world. An oasis city in the Syrian desert, it lay midway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River. Many of the merchants who supplied the Roman empire with Chinese silk, Indian steel, or Parthian carpets stopped here to water their animals on their way to the Mediterranean. Beginning in the 2nd century BCE, Palmyrene families took over much of this Eastern trade, amassing enormous wealth. By the 1st century CE, Palmyra had become part of the Roman empire. But the city retained much of its autonomy. In 270 CE, its famous queen Zenobia declared her independence and conquered much of the Eastern Roman empire before being defeated in battle. Following Zenobia's death sometime after 274 CE and another failed revolt, Palmyra was razed and mostly abandoned.

The ruined city fascinated travelers crossing the desert. In 1753, Robert Wood published *The Ruins of Palmyra*, a romantic account of his journey with three companions alongside exquisite illustrations of the ruins. The book inspired poets, philosophers, architects, and artists in the West. The eagle on the Great Seal of the United States was based on a motif contained in Wood's book. There are even 19 towns named Palmyra in the United States. The story of Zenobia was also influential. Nathaniel Hawthorne used the famous queen's name for the feminist heroine of *The Blithedale Romance*.

Left: Robert Wood's illustration of the Eagle. **Right**: A 19th-century photograph of three funerary busts at Palmyra, Débris de statues trouvées à Palmyre / Maison Bonfils, taken between 1867 and 1899. Prints & Photographs Division Library of Congress, [LC-DIG-ppmsca-04394].

By the 19th century, a specific type of artwork, the funerary portrait, came to represent Palmyra in museums across Europe and the United States. Most of these portraits are busts of a man or woman, carved partly in the round, often inscribed with the subject's name and patronymic in Palmyrene Aramaic. Funerary sculptures from Palmyra collected by Charles Howard Colket (later a member of the Penn Museum's Board of Managers) were some of the first antiquities that the University of Pennsylvania acquired. They were displayed in College Hall in 1889, the first exhibition of reliefs from Palmyra in the United States. Dr. John Peters later procured other Palmyrene sculpture for the Penn Museum in 1889 and 1890, on his way to excavate at Nippur in Southern Iraq. Other objects from Palmyra in the collection were donated by Philadelphia collectors including Francis Campbell Macauley, one of the Museum's founders.

I begin with this modern history because it has shaped both the ways that scholars have interpreted this material and the fate of Palmyra itself. In 2015, when the Islamic State took over Tadmor (the name of both the administrative district and a city in Syria near the ancient Palmyra/Tadmor), they dynamited temples, tombs, and columns lining Palmyra's processional way. Daesh—the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—destroyed these ancient ruins to shock the West, as a type of symbolic revenge. They could do so because for centuries, Europeans and Americans had positioned themselves, and not the modern inhabitants of Tadmor, as its true heirs. Travelers like Wood had removed modern Palmyrenes and their houses from drawings and early photographers followed suit. In the 1930s and 1940s, the French Mandate government made this removal permanent when they destroyed the houses that lay among the ruins, displacing people in order to create a pristine archaeological site. Seeing Palmyra as a Roman city, rather than a Syrian one, not only put the ruins at

risk, but has also obscured many aspects of the site, and the interpretation of its sculptures. The reinstallation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gallery, which displays three portraits from Palmyra, gives me an opportunity to place Palmyra in its local, excavated context.

THE PLACES (AND FACES) OF THE DEAD IN PALMYRA

A caravan approaching Palmyra during its heyday would have traveled down roads that were lined with family tombs. These included multistory tower tombs, which could be 65 feet (20m) high; house or temple tombs with elaborate columned facades; and hypogea, underground tombs hollowed out of the bedrock. Vast cemeteries have been found surrounding the city walls to the north, west, east, southeast, and southwest. Merchants from Damascus, Emesa (modern Homs), or the Euphrates would travel through cities of the dead before entering the city of the living.

The same was true, of course, of other cities in the ancient world. In many ways, the tombs at Palmyra seem to follow empire-wide fashions, particularly in their arrangement outside of the city walls. In Italy, the Via Appia Antica southeast of Rome is also lined with monumental tombs, as is the Porta Nocera at Pompeii. Wall paintings, architectural carvings, and sarcophagi have all been found in excavations at Palmyra, similar to

monumental tombs known from Italy and other parts of the Roman Empire. Funerary inscriptions are abundant at Palmyra and are common across the Roman world and by most accounts form the single largest epigraphic source. A few of the earliest tombs at Palmyra have funerary busts of their founder in external niches, much like some of the tombs of freedmen at Rome and the tomb of the Flavia at Pompeii, visible for everyone to see. Most of these busts at Palmyra, however, were located inside the tombs. The same is true for many funerary portraits that have been found elsewhere in the Roman empire. And like Roman sculpture elsewhere, surviving

traces of pigment on the reliefs show that they were once brightly painted.

But the Palmyrene tombs also have many unique elements. For one thing, the sheer number of funerary portraits is unknown elsewhere. The Palmyra Portrait Project, which was begun in 2012, has recorded more than 3,000 individual portraits; only Rome has produced more. At Palmyra, people buried in any of the known tomb types were represented by means of a carved portrait. In addition to the portraits, most of which are busts, there are occasional scenes of banquets, most of which feature the paterfamilias—with other family members in many cases.

Elsewhere in the empire, wall paintings, mosaics, and sarcophagi were far more common, but although present at Palmyra, they were overshadowed by the thousands of portraits. The busts themselves do not resemble sculpted portraits from elsewhere in the empire in either style or content. They do not show the attention to naturalism that is familiar to us from Italy, nor do they show the same stylization as funerary portraits from elsewhere in the Eastern Roman Empire, such as Beth Shean or Cyprus. The sculptors at Palmyra adopted a naturalistic style but chose not to carve exact likenesses. Instead, the portraits tend to be of types, each slightly different, but rendered with far more attention to detail than those elsewhere in the East. The subjects wear a combination of Greek and Iranian (Parthian) styles, with many clearly Palmyrene features, rather than formal Roman clothing and imperial hairstyles, which are common both in Italy and in the Eastern Roman empire. Moreover, the

Top: Tomb of the three brothers, right-hand chamber showing sarcophagi, loculi and portrait and group carvings; American Colony (Jerusalem), Photo Department, between 1920 and 1933, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, [LC-DIG-matpc-00718].
Right: Reconstruction of the original colors of the portrait of Ma'an, in the Eastern Mediterranean Gallery's Paint the Past interactive, which allows visitors to see a plausible recreation of the original painted sculptures, based on surviving pigments, Palmyrene textiles, and references to other Palmyrene portraits.

Reconstructed

Right: Funerary portrait of Yedi'at; B8905.
Left: Funerary portrait of a youth from a banquet relief; B8908.

sculptors highlighted things that received little attention in other contexts. Women's headdresses, for example, are finely detailed. Finally, the manner and language of the funerary inscriptions at Palmyra are different. Elsewhere, funerary inscriptions, written either in Latin or Greek, usually contained the subject's name, their father's name, and (in the case of a man) his profession or the offices that he held. At Palmyra, however, almost all the inscriptions were in Palmyrene (more than 1,100), a dialect of Aramaic, with only 32 in Greek and 5 in Latin. These Palmyrene inscriptions were short, listing the subject's name and their father's name. There are almost no examples that provide a man's profession or details about his public persona.

In the not-so-distant past, art historians dismissed such idiosyncrasies as the result of the sculptors' provincialism, as though artists so close to the borders of the empire were simply incapable of mastering the realism that we admire in Classical sculpture. But more recent research has eschewed this approach, recognizing instead that the fine workmanship of the sculptures testifies to the skill of their sculptors.

This means that we should ask why the artists carved the portraits in this style, and why people in Palmyra commissioned these types of representations.

Analysis of the archaeological context of these portraits—both within the tombs as well as in relation to the city itself—suggest some answers. Although the reliefs in the Museum's collection were excavated by amateurs in the 19th century with no information on context, excavations during the 20th century did provide evidence for how people might have seen these portraits—and why certain details were highlighted, and others were omitted. It's important to remember that very few examples of funerary portraiture were visible on tomb facades. Instead, portraits usually marked loculi, the niches in tombs where the body of the deceased was laid to rest. In other cases, funerary portraits decorated the inside walls and ceilings of tombs. The secluded position of the portraits tells us something about their intended audience and about the subject's family and descendants.

Understanding that the sculptures were not made to be shown to the public at large helps to explain why some of these sculptures do not look like those elsewhere. Palmyrene families valued different things in the privacy of their tombs than other Romans might have. The portraits clearly show that these families were not interested in depicting their dead as powerful Romans, given the lack of Roman costume, and the

omission of an individual's public roles from the inscriptions.

The portraits also give us a few clues about what the Palmyrenes did find important and wanted to communicate to their descendants: lineage, wealth, and trading connections. The many distinctive patterns on women's headdresses might be related to clan affiliation. Most women were depicted wearing jewelry, often large amounts. The delicate carving of brooches, earrings, necklaces, and rings emphasizes wealth, social connections, and access to trade goods. The portraits also draw attention to dress, and particularly the quality of the cloth and its design. Given the importance of the textile trade in Palmyra, this is probably another way to index wealth or trading connections (particularly with the East).

We can see attention to the same ideas in the male portraits, particularly in the priest and caravan leader portraits. In the priest portraits, men wear a tall cylindrical hat that is unique to Palmyra. Rubina Raja has suggested that priest was a hereditary role, which might be why it is emphasized in these portraits, rather like the women's headdresses. It is also likely that the temples (and priests) played an important role in Palmyrene trade. Caravan leaders wear long-sleeved tunics and have their cloaks thrown backwards over their shoulders, probably indicating that they are wearing Parthian apparel such as trousers. This may be because such a costume was far more appropriate for riding and travel than the awkward toga, but it also demonstrates that Eastern connections were important, at least for this

Feasting banquet token from Palmyra, donated by Francis Macaulay in 1891; MS334B.

familial audience. The many banquet relief scenes—which show a man reclining on a couch, surrounded by his family—also gesture to the importance of kinship, wealth, and trade. They probably illustrate not the funerary feast, but the religious feasts that occurred in the temples of Palmyra and that seem to have been important to the social organization of long-distance exchange. Besides the funerary portraits, one of the most ubiquitous finds at Palmyra were clay tokens (tessera) that served as tickets to these banquets.

Other aspects of the portraits may also be explained with reference to family ideology. Both the style of the carving and the nature of the inscriptions might also point to the importance of lineage. Perhaps Palmyrene sculptures may were not true likenesses, because representing the uniqueness of each individual was not important; what was significant was the subject's position with regard to their family as a whole. There was no need for the sculptures to be recognizable, after all, when what mattered was their collective nature. Similarly, the inscriptions contain individual names, but their focus is on genealogy.

Below: Banquet relief from Palmyra of Malku, son of Moqimu, wearing Parthian style clothing, on display in the Rome Gallery; B8902.

Like the family vaults in New Orleans cemeteries, the tower tombs and underground hypogea of Palmyra were only opened on special occasions—for funerals or commemoration rituals. Light came from the entrance(s) and probably did not penetrate far into the interior. Given this, it is not surprising that discarded oil lamps were some of the most common artifacts found in the Palmyrene tombs. People would have seen the portraits in soft, flickering light. The colors of the portraits in the niches along the wall would have been visible, but the same was not true of the portraits located higher up on the wall. A grieving relative might glimpse the shimmer of gold from a necklace or the rich crimson of a cloak in the glow of the lamp. But the overwhelming presence of the ancestors—the rows of illustrious forebears lining the walls—would have been the most striking aspect of a visit to these tombs. When we remove the Palmyrene reliefs from their empire-wide context and consider them instead as family portraits, we can begin to understand the city better. In 2015 and afterwards, the losses at Palmyra were mourned as losses of universal significance, of a place that mattered to the world. But the losses can also be seen in a different light, one that emphasizes the very local significance of these pieces, which could exist nowhere else.

Palmyrene oil lamp, collected by John Peters at Palmyra. A winged Eros rides on the back of a dolphin; B9065.

FOR FURTHER READING

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