

Palmyra: A Matter that Concerns us all

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ABSTRACT

Based on personal impressions gathered during my stay in the Middle East in 1998 and in 2002, this article focuses on the preservation of art in the Hellenistic city of Palmyra. The destruction of the ancient art produced in such a magnificent place means not only a breach with the past; it is also a bad omen for the very existence of art in the future of mankind. The Author thanks Professor Júlio Tadeu Carvalho da Silveira for his generous cooperation.

Keywords: Palmyra, Art, Middle East, Preservation, Humanity.

Palmyra has its own fate between the mighty Roman and Parthian empires

Pliny, the Elder

Beauty will save the world

Dostoevsky

A FOREST OR MARBLE

Palmyra is a forest of marble that contrasts to the ochre sameness of the deserts of the Middle East. Palmyra is also the main oasis on the desert fringe that fans out at the edge of Mesopotamia – the land whose ancient civilization (the oldest of all, hence the formula Mesopotamia = *cradle of civilization*) lived and thrived along the banks of two twin rivers, namely the Euphrates and the Tigris. Located at the geographical centre of the crossroads that linked the aged cultural poles of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and the Aegean Sea – let alone Phoenicia –, Palmira seemed destined to prosper culturally and economically. And it did. Due to that strategic position, Palmira became the most important staging point of the traditional caravan route that linked Mesopotamia to the eastern Mediterranean world. Blended into the surrounding landscape, where earthy tones of desertic nothingness prevail, numerous and majestic Roman ruins make Palmira not only the most beautiful city in Syria; it is also one of the largest and most expressive archaeological sites in the whole

world.¹ In the Middle East, Palmyra is second only to Petra. First mentioned on documents during the early 2nd millennium BC, Palmyra belonged to different empires before becoming part of the Roman world. Controversial issues concerning to what extent Semitic and Parthian art are present in Palmyra may well be set aside here, taking into consideration the scope of this article, which is limited to general information; let us leave such issues to experts such as Mikhail Ivanovich Rostovtzeff, Daniel Théodore Schlumberger, Michael Avi-Yonah and Josef Strzygowski.² Undeniable is that Greco-Roman artistic elements prevail, above all in the architecture.³

¹See N. A. Dmitrijewa et alii. *Allgemeine Geschichte der Kunst: die Kunst der Alten Welt* (translated from Russian into German by Ullrich Kuhirt et alii), Leipzig, Veb E. A. Seemann, 1961, t. I, p. 381 et passim.

² See Charles Greenstreet Addison et alii. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmyra> (2019).

³ For an overview of Palmyrene art as a whole, see Katja Fiederetalii. *Brockhaus, die Bibliothek: Kunst und Kultur*, Leipzig, Brockhaus, 1997, t. I, pp. 216-219.



Figure1. Palmyra

(Photo taken by the Author)

Before the Romans, the Greeks inhabited Palmyra; before the Greeks, the Persians; before the Persians, the Assyrians; and before all of them, the man of the Neolithic Age: such is the genealogical tree of this perplexing city which, due to the whiteness of its constructions and the place where it emerged, was dubbed “the bride of the desert”. Circa two millennia ago, Hellenistic settlements like Palmyra were an architectural *lingua franca* through the desert lands that stretch from what is now Morocco until the Middle East, thousands of miles away. Of most of them (Seleucia, Apamea...), little to nothing remains. Tip of an iceberg of beauty and culture (remember Alexandria, who outperformed Athens and became “light for the world”⁴), the few surviving “Palmyras” (that means, Volubilis, Leptis Magna [actually founded by Phoenicians in the 7th century BC], Bosra, Petra, Baalbek...) became, for the vast majority of mankind, nothing more than dots on the maps. All of them under the Islamic yoke for almost 14 centuries, no wonder that they are so vulnerable to vandalism and destruction in general. Palmyra is a recent example of that.⁵

⁴Jacques Boyer. *Histoire des mathématiques*, Paris, Gauthier-Villars, 1900, p. 10.

⁵ See, for instance, <https://theconversation.com/khaled-al-asaad-the-martyr-of-palmyra-46787> (2019).



Figure2. Palmyra

(Photo taken by the Author)

PALMYRA’S “15 MINUTES OF FAME”

During the III century AD, Palmyra achieved its “15 minutes of fame” in Human History. Actually, it did much more than that. By that time, Palmyra had even become the head of an empire of her own, under Queen Zenobia (c. 240 – c. 274 AD), whose origin and ancestry are still open to debate (almost sure, however, is that she had Aramean and Arab blood). Nominally subjected to Rome, Zenobia created a micro-empire inside the Roman world: “In 270, Zenobia launched an invasion which brought most of the Roman East under her sway and culminated with the annexation of Egypt. By mid-271 her realm extended from Ancyra, central Anatolia, to southern Egypt”⁶, creating so a micro-empire within the perimeters of the very Roman world. Clashes with Rome became unavoidable and Zenobia did not have to wait long to see a Roman army headed by the Emperor Aurelian himself at the gates of Palmyra. In 272, “the Romans were victorious after heavy fighting; the queen was besieged in her capital and captured by Aurelian, who exiled her to Rome where she spent the remainder of her life”.⁷ New Cleopatra, Zenobia– who, according to some sources, did descend from the most famous queen of Antiquity – inspired a thousand and one tales about her rise and fall, and became a magnet-subject for historians, artists and novelists. Already in the *Historia Augusta* (IV century?), Zenobia is described as a woman whose face “was dark and of a swarthy

⁶Nathanael J. Andrade et alii. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zenobia> (2019).

⁷ Ibidem.

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hue, her eyes were black and powerful beyond the usual wont, her spirit divinely great, and her beauty incredible. So white were her teeth that many thought that she had pearls in place of teeth”.⁸



Figure3. Palmyrene family
(Photo taken by the Author)

PALMYRA: SANCTUARY OF BEAUTY

After Zenobia’s times, Palmira was over shadowed both in History and Geography. For centuries and centuries, close to nothing was written about it. We know that it was invaded by Muslims in 634, razed by an earthquake in 1089, and rediscovered in 1691 by English merchants. Having visited Palmyra twice (1998 and 2002), I consider myself a fortunate man; having seen so many beautiful works of art in that archaeological site, it is my duty to bring to light my impressions on it; being true art something so rare to find in our more and more iconoclastic and therefore ugly world, preserving sanctuaries of beauty like Palmyra is

⁸ Apud Ibidem.

a matter that concerns everyone of us: from north to south, from east to west.



Figure4. Berlin, Alexanderplatz: who is the one that really cares about what happens around us?

(Photo taken by the Author)

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