
Lived Spaces in Roman Palmyra

Olympia Bobou^{*1,2} and Rubina Raja^{*1,2}

¹Aarhus University – Denmark

²Centre for Urban Network Evolutions – Denmark

Résumé

The city of Palmyra flourished in the first three centuries CE thanks to the wealth that came to the city mainly because of the successful exploitation of the trade routes between the Roman Empire and the East (Parthia, India, China). During those years, it was transformed from a small settlement to a city that had all the external markers of civic culture as it was understood in the Roman Empire. It had an assembly of the people with elected officials (demos and boule) with appropriate spaces for gathering and making decisions (agora and adjacent buildings), a theatre, baths, basilicas, and a multitude of honourific statues lining the streets and public spaces. At the same time, all these signifiers of civic culture were not copied but rather interpreted and adjusted to fit an already existing dynamic and strong Palmyrene culture. The tribal affiliation of the citizens was as important as stating one's patronymic, the statues were set up on columns as well as on bases, mosaics could be used as effectively as statues in spreading messages of power, and the depicted people were often dressed in their local garments rather than Greek or Roman costumes. In the funerary sphere, Palmyrene Aramaic and displays of local elite culture were used effectively to show the local Palmyrene identity.

The systematic exploration of the site, however, is uneven: it started by antiquarians and philologists in the late 19th and early 20th century, while archaeologists working from the 1930s onwards, focused on the city's Roman-period ruins, dismantling or disregarding the evidence from later periods. Also uneven are the sources surviving from the city: with the lack of textual sources from Palmyra itself, with the exception of epigraphic evidence, and scholars of all periods need to rely on archaeology and inscriptions for understanding how private and public spaces were established, used, and transformed.

The work conducted under the leadership of Rubina Raja since 2012, first with the Palmyra Portrait Project and then with the Circular Economy and Urban Sustainability in Antiquity and the Archive Archaeology: Preserving and Sharing Palmyra's Cultural Heritage through Harald Ingholt's Digital Archives projects, has clarified various issues of Palmyrene social structure, and has refined the chronology of its sculpture. It has also set the foundations for further investigations of the site through its publications and the material available on open access. In this panel, we wish to examine the histories of specific locations and spaces in Palmyra through an interdisciplinary lens. By using epigraphic, archaeological, historical, and even anthropological data, it is possible to approach the remains of buildings as sites of lived experiences and changes through time. In Palmyra, in particular, despite the flurry of recent publications, there are still questions that remain open. The use of space by different groups, be they tribal, elite, collaborating or competing, in specific buildings, such as the agora or the various sanctuaries, is one of them. The use of funerary buildings as ritual spaces for the living also remains largely unexplored in scholarship. Post-Roman Palmyra

*Intervenant

still needs to be investigated further.

By integrating different scientific methods and theories, the case-studies presented in this panel can give snapshots of how specific spaces were used through time. They, in turn, can open the wider discussion of archaeology of lived spaces in Palmyra, and, the archaeology of lived spaces in cities in the borders of or in-between empires, where local and international markers of identities mix with personal choices and family traditions, and where changes on the macro-political and economic level have effects on a micro- level.

Mots-Clés: Palmyra, archaeology, lived spaces, archives, funerary spaces, workshops, sculpture