



Notables and urbanism in Palmyra

Jean-Baptiste Yon

► To cite this version:

Jean-Baptiste Yon. Notables and urbanism in Palmyra. Luke Lavan. Recent Research in Late Antique Urbanism, Journal of Roman archaeology, pp.173-181, 2001, Journal of roman archaeology, Supplementary series, 1-887829-42-3. halshs-04424155

HAL Id: halshs-04424155

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04424155>

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JOURNAL OF ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY

SUPPLEMENTARY SERIES NUMBER 42

General editors of this volume:
S. Herson and J. H. Humphrey

p. 173 - 181 :

J.-B. Yon, "Evergetism and
urbanism in Palmyra"

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

RECENT RESEARCH IN LATE-ANTIQUE URBANISM

edited by
Luke Lavan

with contributions by

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Portsmouth, Rhode Island
2001

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All dates in this volume are A.D. unless otherwise indicated

ISBN 1-887829-42-3

ISSN 1063-4304 (for the supplementary series)

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Printed by Thomson-Shore, Dexter, Michigan

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JRA®, 95 Peleg Road, Portsmouth, RI 02871, U.S.A.

Telephone (USA) 401 683 1955 telefax (USA) 401 683 1975 e-mail: jra@JournalofRomanArch.com
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Evergetism and urbanism in Palmyra

J.-B. Yon

Despite some distinctive local characteristics, such as the consistent use of a Semitic language, Palmyra in the first centuries of our era can be clearly related to the Greek cities of the Roman empire.* It has been shown that the city's institutions, even its administrative structures, belonged mostly to the *koiné* of cities of the Greek part of the empire.¹ Likewise, the decoration of the city's monumental architecture belongs to the same sub-region of the empire. As elsewhere, leading families controlled the city. By their wealth and their gifts, they contributed to the monuments that have made the site so well-known, such as the monumental tombs and the great colonnades.

The ruins of Palmyra today largely correspond to the state of the city at the end of the 3rd c., though the site continued to be occupied long after this time. However, the absence of systematic excavation designed to study the later period limits our knowledge to part of a colonnade, the city wall and the camp of Diocletian.² As E. Will has recently shown,³ the main change in the organisation of the city was the displacement of the monumental centre northwards, after 200. Excavation and survey work currently focusses on the S part of the city, which had been largely ignored. This was probably the centre of the Hellenistic and Early Roman city. At this time, nothing more can be said about the topography of the early city. Nevertheless, the rôle of the local élite in the urban organisation of Palmyra and in its development can be surmised, at least partially, from inscriptions.

Thanks to the quantity of epigraphic evidence, one can chart the process of urbanisation at Palmyra more closely than in any city of Syria, including Antioch. The surviving texts give a relatively coherent, if not complete, picture of the city and its buildings, permitting us to see how Palmyra developed as an increasingly classical city under the Empire. At the same time, the urban development of Palmyra differs from that of most other cities in the empire in the degree to which evergetism played a rôle in construction and in respect to how much of the new construction was connected to the practice of religion. These activities were not confined to limited areas of the site, but encompassed the entire city. Thus, although the city became increasingly Romanised, many local features were retained. This paper examines Palmyra as a case study of the blending of imperial and local characteristics within an urban context.

Religious evergetism and urbanism

Sanctuaries

In all areas of the city where archaeological work has been done, it is clear that the building activities of the Palmyrene élite relate almost exclusively to sanctuaries. The most important of these, on account of its huge size and number of inscriptions found, is the Sanctuary of Bel. Whatever date we assign to its construction (after 32), it seems to have been the object of

*Frequently cited epigraphical volumes:

CIS J.-B. Chabot, (ed.), *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum*, pars secunda, tomus III: *Inscriptiones Palmyrenae* (Paris 1926 and 1947).

1. *Ilion* P. Frisch (ed.), *Die Inschriften von Ilion* (IGK 3, Bonn 1975).

Inv. *Inventaire des inscriptions de Palmyre*, vols. I-IX by J. Cantineau; vol. X by J. Starcky; vol. XI by J. Teixidor; vol. XII by A. Bounni and J. Teixidor (Beirut-Damascus 1930-75).

1 M. Sartre, "Palmyre cité grecque," *AAAS* 42 (1996) 385-405.

2 On the history of Palmyra in general, J. Starcky and M. Gawlikowski, *Palmyre* (Paris 1985); R. Ruprechtsberger (ed.), *Palmyra, Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der syrischen Oasenstadt* (Linz 1987); E. Will, *Les Palmyréniens, la Venise des sables* (Paris 1992); and F. Millar, *The Roman Near East* (Cambridge, MA 1993).

3 Will (*supra* n2) 120-30.

continuous benefactions from the Palmyrenes.⁴ In this way they contributed to the construction and improvement of the temple and its surrounding buildings. Like most monuments in Palmyra, the work was not done over a short period but was carried out in a succession of relatively restricted episodes. Building work followed a general plan, though with periodic interruptions and some alterations, such as the construction of buildings in the great esplanade in front of the temple. Epigraphic evidence can be related to only a few building events, such as when (in 175) the statues of two cousins were erected by the Council and the People (*boulé kai demos*) because they had donated new bronze gates to the sanctuary.⁵ In the same manner, in the city centre itself during the 1st c., several dedications of columns (sometimes a single column) were made to the Sanctuary of Nabu, as offerings for the god.⁶ These columns were located midway between the Temple of Bel and the agora; these were both places where the Palmyrene authorities erected statues to their benefactors. Consequently, the spot was probably very prestigious; it must have been a great honour to contribute to the development of the sanctuary.

Thus, leading families were trying to make their mark in many different parts of the city. Evidence of this kind of building activity is found throughout the city, even in zones that could be considered marginal. For example, many texts have been discovered in the excavations of the Sanctuary of Baalshamin, which actually lay north of the city limits in Early Roman times. Most of the inscriptions found here are religious dedications; they are in Aramaic and use special formulas which make no reference to the Greek vocabulary of evergetism. Rather, they show the deep ties between the cult of Baalshamin and the Bene Mazin, one of the local tribes.⁷

The pervading influence of the local élite

Any discussion of the sanctuaries must be placed in the context of the specific position they held in society. The Sanctuary of Bel was the great sanctuary of the entire community of the Palmyrenes: consequently, it is possible to give a quite different interpretation to the benefactions made for its building. Motivation to donate money for construction of a portico here could have been twofold. It was certainly a demonstration of piety, but it was also a deed for the city.

The Sanctuary of Baalshamin belonged to one of the four civic tribes of the city. A good example of the ambiguities involved in religious benefactions is provided by an inscription of 130-131 found on one of the temple columns; it records the deeds of one Male-Agrippa. *Grammateus* of the *boulé*, he provided oil for the population at the time of Hadrian's visit to Palmyra, and he also built the Temple of Baalshamin. Here we are confronted with a clear, if rare, case of classical evergetism (the supply of oil). However, it is known to us only because the same Male built the temple.

Some ambiguities

Clearly evergetism existed in Palmyra, as the case of Male-Agrippa demonstrates. However, the great difference between Palmyra and the rest of the Roman world lies in the small number of secular buildings constructed. This is not to say that none were undertaken, but they are not epigraphically visible. Even though local benefactors may have built the theatre of Palmyra, or the agora, they produced no inscriptions to record these deeds. There are, however, some clear examples of evergetism, such as that by Iulius Aurelius Zenobios, who was responsible for the reception of the Roman army when the emperor Severus Alexander came to Palmyra. An honorific inscription recalls that he led the entire *cursus honorum* of the city magis-

4 See now M. Pietrzykowski, *Adyta Swiatyn Palmyrenskich* (Warsaw 1997) 132-33 [Polish; French summary].

5 CIS 3914 = *Inv.* IX 25.

6 The final report on the excavations (by A. Bourui) is in preparation, but some of the texts have been published by J. T. Milik, *Dédicaces faites par des dieux* (Paris 1972) 241-43.

7 C. Dunant, *Le sanctuaire de Baalshamin*, vol. 3: *Les inscriptions* (Rome 1971).

trates, not spending his money sparingly (CIS 3932 = *Inv.* III 22). Although it is very possible that he spent some of this money on public building, the text does not provide further details. Unambiguous cases of evergetism in Palmyra either concern the caravan trade (CIS 3948 = *Inv.* III 28) or are imprecise (CIS 3942 = *Inv.* III 7: *πλεῖστα οἴκοθεν ἀναλώσαντα*, i.e., 'spending much in his home town').

The distinctive tradition of Palmyra is illustrated well in benefactions relating to civic buildings. A woman named Thomallachis offered part of a new building for some baths (*bala-neion*); these baths actually belonged to the Sanctuary of Malakbel and Aglibol. Thomallachis was from a family and tribe whose ties with the cult of these two gods are well known. It seems likely that her piety played a major part in this benefaction.⁸ Likewise, several phases of building work in the Transverse Colonnade are explicitly connected with the cults of Arab gods, who have their sanctuaries nearby (CIS 3951 and 3955 = *Inv.* V 2 and 8) — this feature once led to the proposal that the colonnade was more of a religious zone than a civic monument. It is important to stress that gifts were small: often they comprised only a few columns. Thomallachis, for example, offered only a sum of money towards the baths, one which would not have been enough to pay for the entire building.

To find parallels, we must look to other Mesopotamian cities of the same period, such as Hatra. Here most building inscriptions were also dedications of religious structures. Hatra is thought to have been a city of pilgrimage, which Palmyra never was. Despite this and other differences, however, the two cities seem to belong to the same world, in which buildings like *gymnasia* or *thermae* had much less importance than temples.

Changes of the 3rd c.

Arsu

It is striking that Palmyrenes were following their own tradition not only in the first years of the Roman occupation, but also during the last years of the 3rd c. The porticos consecrated to the cult of the god Arsu in the Great Colonnade provide a good example. Some recently-discovered texts reveal new information about the development of this section of the colonnade: a roof was built over the 'Great Basilica of Arsu' (*μεγαλὴ βασιλική* and *[b]slk'* in Aramaic).⁹ At Palmyra the word *basilica* denotes the colonnade itself; we have one example of the term used at the Sanctuary of Bel. The dedication was made by two rich benefactors, Maliku and his son Mucianus-Moqimu. One of the texts gives a date of 279-280. This religious dedication proves that even after the fall of Palmyra local traditions were still alive. But this may have been an isolated survival; fifty years later, in 328, one Φλ(άβιος) Διογένης, *logistes*, restored some columns near the Basilica of Arsu. This second text does not allude to any religious construction (*Inv.* III 27).

In other cities of the Greek East, there are examples of porticos or buildings dedicated to divinities. The case of Palmyra is not unique: at Halicarnassus a portico was consecrated to Apollo as well as to the king Ptolemy.¹⁰ At Ilion, a portico was dedicated to the family of the emperor Claudius, to Athena Ilias and to the *demos*.¹¹ At Palmyra, however, no dedications of civic buildings to the imperial family are known, nor are buildings to a civic body (*demos* or *boulé*).¹² The existence of a Caesareum at Palmyra shows that the imperial cult was not ab-

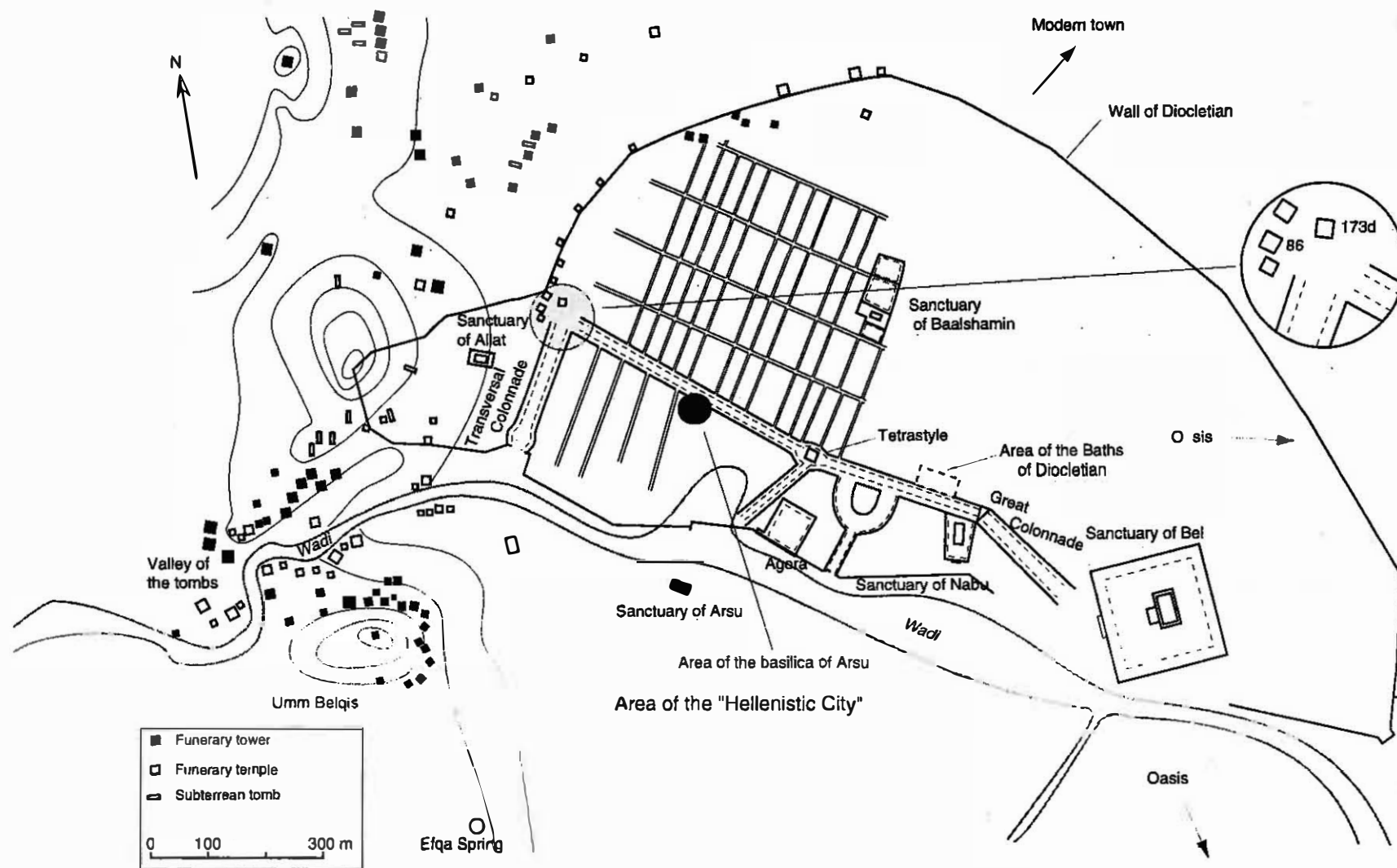
8 The inscription was published by H. Ingholt, "Inscriptions and sculptures from Palmyra," *Berytus* 3 (1936) 109-12, no. 11. See also Milik (*supra* n.6) 31-35.

9 Those texts are to be found in K. As'ad and M. Gawlikowski, "New honorific inscriptions in the Great Colonnade of Palmyra," *AAAS* 36-37 (1986-87) 164-71.

10 Between 279 and 221 B.C. (Ptolemy Philadelphos or Ptolemy Evergetes); see L. Migeotte, *L'emprunt public dans les cités grecques* (Québec-Paris 1984) 322-23, no. 103.

11 Inscription I. Ilion no. 90.

12 A text published by H. Seyrig ("Antiquités syriennes 23: deux inscriptions grecques de Palmyre," *Syria*



The wall of Diocletian shows
the extension of the 4th century city

Fig. 1. Palmyra, the city and its monuments around A.D. 272 (J.-B. Yon with C. Yon).

sent.¹³ Nevertheless, it was rather marginal compared to its presence in other cities of the empire. Palmyra's main distinguishing characteristic is that the dedications of porticos or even civic buildings relate only to divinities; this is quite different from the situation that prevailed in Asia Minor and other parts of the Greek East.¹⁴

The transformation of Palmyra

The texts of the Great Colonnade should be placed in the more general context of broader changes to the urban environment. From the end of the 2nd c. the urban topography of Palmyra underwent increasing change, a part of which involved the movement of the city centre to the north. The city of Palmyra, as it appears today on a map, is in fact the city of the 3rd c. However, most of the older monuments do not follow the alignments of this period, and indeed the central part of the city, sometimes called the 'Hellenistic city', was situated to the south of the wadi: the great gates of the Sanctuary of Nabu and of the agora are still extant, reminding one of the city's earliest orientation. Likewise, the propylea of the Sanctuary of Bel opens in the same direction. The agora, where statues of the great men of Palmyra, caravan traders and magistrates, were erected, and a possible *bouleuterion* prove that the administrative centre of the city was in this area. The N area of Palmyra is the result of later development. The Great Colonnade was built progressively throughout the 3rd c., except for a part of its W section, which is slightly older. For a long time the W part of the city was an outlying area; only in the mid-2nd c. did it truly become part of the built-up area, as it is on the map today.¹⁵

It is significant that there is as yet almost no evidence for the construction of any religious buildings after the 2nd c. The only exception is the basilica dedicated to the god Arsu. A very fragmentary text of 272 may allude to a temple of the imperial cult and a sanctuary of the sun-god, but the stone is heavily damaged.¹⁶

New strategies

In the new urban development of Palmyra, the building of the Basilica of Arsu can be understood as a kind of compromise between Greco-Roman architectural models and local traditions. New possibilities were introduced in the development of monuments and city-planning during this period and they were used by the local élite. Discerning the exact meaning of the colonnades for the Palmyrenes is quite another problem. The Transverse Colonnade seems to belong to the category of religious building because all its texts pertain to religious matters and because it was built next to an area filled with temples. Similarly, the Great Colonnade may have played a part in the religious life of Palmyra; it could well have been used for the processions during religious festivals of the city.¹⁷ The colonnade and its shops were most probably rented out to the advantage of the sanctuary's treasury. It is certain that shops were built along the street, and a text of the 3rd c. gives evidence of the construction of workshops in that area (*Inv.* XII 29).¹⁸

18 [1937] 372) is only an apparent exception. As has been noted by Milik (*supra* n.6) 7, the dedication of two columns seems to have no link with the emperor. Another inscription (*IGRR* III 1026) refers to a gift of money by Hadrian (for a building?), but nothing more can be said. For a text of 272, see below.

13 Milik (*supra* n.6) 309-12.

14 E. Will, "Le développement urbain de Palmyre: témoignages épigraphiques anciens et nouveaux," *Syria* 60 (1983) 69-81. Furthermore, it is probably significant that the Sanctuary of Arsu itself is situated relatively far from the basilica and south of the agora. Between them there is a distance of at least a few hundred metres. Moreover, Maliku and Moqimu belong to a family whose members had statues erected in the colonnade from the moment construction works began there. Therefore the texts of Arsu in that area should be understood within the context of a family tradition.

15 See Will (*supra* n.2) 120-30.

16 M. Gawlikowski, *Le temple palmyrénien* (Warsaw 1973) 100.

17 *Ibid.* 83. Some evidence indicates that the colonnaded street was created because of overcrowding of the older street along the wadi in the south.

18 In a later period, when rules restricting encroachment were forgotten, the street itself was occupied by

From the time of its construction, the new urban main street was integrated into local tradition, first as a religious building, then as a shopping street. It is possible to see this development as part of an evolution in the strategy of the élite: monuments were still built, often with religious goals, but they were not restricted to the enclosure of the sanctuary. There is a clear tendency for aristocratic building to enter the wider civic space, using new monumental forms. Porticos and columns had been employed in Palmyrene sanctuaries prior to this time; now, however, they were built directly in the streets. There is a clear evolution, though the word used in Palmyrene and in Greek (the word *basilica* in both languages) also demonstrates continuity. Thus the followers of Arsu took advantage of the new urban model, by the creation of an annex, without moving the sanctuary itself: what was classical was used in an unclassical way.

This change in construction strategy by the élite, from almost exclusively religious buildings to those representative of classical evergetism, can be related to wider cultural change in the city. For example, classicism predominated in the art of Palmyra in the 3rd c., as elsewhere in the Greek East. This was also true of the political institutions of the city, which was now a *colonia*.

Palmyra in the 3rd c.: a twofold society

The downfall of Nabu

In the 3rd c. the over-riding influence of the sanctuaries — and of religious buildings in general — seems to have been challenged. Rivalries or power struggles now made their mark on urban topography inside the city itself. This seems to have happened at the Sanctuary of Nabu,¹⁹ a complex that antedates the central section of the Great Colonnade. When the street colonnade was built at the beginning of the 3rd c., part of the portico of the N side of the sanctuary had to be destroyed to make way for the new avenue. At this time, names of families with strong documented ties to the sanctuary no longer appear in inscriptions. The first family, of Elahbel, is not recorded after 130 and this also seems to be the case for the family of Belshuri. These changes might indicate internal tensions in Palmyra at this time. It seems likely that some kind of conflict occurred and that the disappearance of these two families left the way open for the new street. Part of the sanctuary was thus amputated to allow for a major urban development. However, there is very little information about the construction of this section of the colonnade, and even less about the people directing the project. As in the other sections, the work was accomplished in several stages, around 220, in portions of 6 or 10 columns but without references to any god or sanctuary.

The downfall of Nabu cannot be related to a supposed rise of municipal power over the influence of the leading families. Municipal power still depended on them. One such family must have been prominent at the time and may have been behind the decline of Nabu. Indeed, certain tombs at the border of the urban area show, without a doubt, that some aristocrats were still highly influential. However, the tools by which they demonstrated their power now con-

new shops. This was the last stage in a process which led to the development of a *souq* of an oriental type. Recent excavations have shown that this must have been the condition of the area at least until Islamic times. There is, however, no further trace of religious activities; this is comparable to situations known elsewhere in Syria and provides another interesting case of the transformation of monumental architecture. See A. Bounni, "Vierzig Jahre syrische Ausgrabungen," in A. Schmidt-Colinet (ed.), *Kulturbegegnung im Grenzgebiet* (Mainz am Rhein 1995) 20.

- 19 Will (supra n.2) 123. Will proposed that this event was the result of the choice to support Pescennius Niger against Septimius Severus made by Palmyrenes. Whatever the cause of the decline of these families, it seems simpler to think that the authorities in charge of urbanism took advantage of the disappearance of the families supporting the sanctuary (for whatever reasons) in order to construct the new street; indeed, the interval between the last texts of Elahbel and Belshuri and the destruction of the N portico is too long for a more precise explanation.



Fig. 2. Temple-tomb no. 86, view of façade (J.-B. Yon).

cerned not only the religious world, but also owed much to methods common in cities elsewhere in the Roman empire.

The adoption of temple-tombs

Even though, technically, funerary monuments were situated outside the city limits, aristocrats must have used them as a manifestation of their power and wealth. The city of Palmyra was surrounded by several necropoleis, located on the roads which today lead out from the city centre, following the main axes used in antiquity. The inner limits of the necropoleis, as far as can be known today, demarcate precisely the limits of the urban area of Palmyra,²⁰ which was indeed encircled by tombs at the end of the 3rd c. Although both temple-tombs and tower-tombs were spread throughout the necropoleis, they were generally sited in prominent and conspicuous places, serving for self-advertisement.

Of special interest is a group of tombs located at the beginning of the Great Colonnade: among them is tomb no. 86, on which the view down the colonnade falls (fig. 2). The crossroads between the Transverse Colonnade and the Great Colonnade also occurs in front of this monument (see fig. 1). The external aspect of this structure makes it a perfect example of a temple-tomb: it has a *pronaos* with 6 columns and covers an area of 18.5 x 15.5 m (14 x 14 m for the *cella*); its podium enhances its height, and underneath the superstructure was a crypt where bodies could be buried in *loculi*, as in all Palmyrene tombs.²¹

The building, its decoration clearly inspired by Greco-Roman models, gives an overall impression of considerable wealth. Standing at the point where two of the main streets crossed, it would have been a very impressive monument. A purely stylistic analysis dates the monument to c.210, but no inscription has been found. It would be very interesting to know which among the leading families of the city could have afforded such an impressive tomb at so striking a location. The nearby tomb no. 173d, also at the heart of the urban system, is another example of a choice location. From available evidence, the Transverse Colonnade can be dated

²⁰ On the necropoleis of Palmyra, see especially M. Gawlikowski, *Monuments funéraires de Palmyre* (Warsaw 1970). On the use of funerary monuments by the aristocracy, see J.-B. Yon, "La présence des notables dans l'espace péri-urbain à Palmyre," in *Construction, reproduction et représentations des patriciens urbains de l'antiquité au XX^e siècle* (Tours 1999) 387-400.

²¹ Gawlikowski (supra n.20) 140-44.

to the early 2nd c., and the W section of the Great Colonnade is slightly later.²² The aforementioned tombs must date later still, as they fit the organization of the streets in this zone. Furthermore, the tombs seem to have been designed to fit in perfectly with all the existing monumental structures in this area. There were, of course, some earlier tombs in the vicinity, but they were situated further to the west, clearly outside the urban area.

The adoption of temple-tombs can be linked to a marked increase in Roman influence. They find contemporary and earlier parallels in the Roman empire. Temple-tombs combine the palatial and religious architecture of the Western Roman world with elements belonging to the tradition of Palmyra's own funerary monuments. A strong Western influence is obvious in the architectural principles, which are clearly Greco-Roman, even when they are used in a programme deeply influenced by local traditions. The *pronaos* is counterbalanced by the use of *loculi*, so typical of Palmyrene funerary architecture.²³ It may be that the choice of this type of monument by wealthy Palmyrenes reflects an attempt to find ways of increasing social differentiation. Tower-tombs could aptly be described as monuments that reflected the wish of the Palmyrene élite to stand apart from the rest of the population; this seems even more true for the temple-tombs.

It should be emphasised that construction of the temple-tombs coincides chronologically with the greater adoption of Roman influences in public building. The upper classes of Palmyra, like their contemporaries in Antioch or Apamea, now belonged to an élite whose cultural and artistic references were increasingly those of the Roman empire.

The princes of Palmyra

The family of Odeinath and Zenobia, who are sometimes called the princes of Palmyra, was in many respects characteristic of the new city. Though this was the first family from the oasis to be fully integrated into the first *ordo* of the empire, the senate, there is no evidence to show that they contributed to religious buildings. Even more striking, there is hardly a record of the family in any kind of building. The only exception is indirect: a recently-published inscription records the construction of a meeting-room by a freedman of Odeinath in honour of the god Abgal,²⁴ though, as recognised by the editor, this dedication of 263 is not from the city itself but probably comes from a rural district of the city's territory.

Before this period, honorific inscriptions of local dignitaries were to be found in the temples and, most often, in the agora. Now, in an impressive manner, the princes of Palmyra and their entourage (Septimius Worod, Septimius Zabda) placed their statues and dedications in a section of the colonnade, next to the tetrastyle. The clan of Odeinath had settled in the new centre of the city. This event was contemporaneous with great changes in Palmyra's urban organisation. According to a very attractive theory, the palace of Odeinath and Zenobia was nearby, where the so-called Baths of Diocletian now lie, identified from a text dating to 284 (SEG VII 152).²⁵ To a certain extent, the area had lost its sacred character, being now of particular political importance. The area reminds one of the centre of Roman towns elsewhere in the empire, where the best positions were reserved for the members of the ruling classes, among them the emperor. "Access to public places for the purpose of setting up honorific inscriptions" was largely governed by formal rules.²⁶ Although we are now presented with a

22 See Will (*supra* n.2) 123.

23 For an example of such analysis in the case of tomb no. 36, further into the Valley of the Tombs, see A. Schmidt-Colinet, *Das Tempelgrab Nr 36 in Palmyra* (Mainz am Rhein 1992).

24 J. Teixidor, "Nouvelles inscriptions palmyréniennes," *Semitica* 47 (1997) 68-71.

25 See R. Fellmann, "Der Palast der Königin Zenobia," in Ruprechtsberger (*supra* n.2) 131-36.

26 See now O. van Nijf, *The civic world of professional associations in the Roman East* (Amsterdam 1997) 115 and W. Raack, "Der mehrfache Apollodoros. Zur Präsenz des Bürgers im hellenistischen Stadtbild am Beispiel von Priene," in M. Wörle and P. Zanker (edd.), *Stadtbild und Bürgerbild im Hellenismus* (Vestigia 47, Munich 1995) 231-40.

spatial organisation that was widespread across the Roman world, this does not mean that the city had lost its local traditions: the Basilica of Arsu and the continued use of Aramaic serve as reminders that they persisted.

Unfortunately, the urban evolution of Palmyra stopped quite abruptly after 272, when the city fell. The city retained its constitution for some years and Aramaic was still used epigraphically for a while, but before the end of the 3rd c. both came to an end. Thus, the Palmyra of the beginning of late antiquity was quite a different city from the one of the early Imperial period or even that of 272. Perhaps this was because it had lost its civic élite: as A. Lewin has shown, classical evergetism by local élites was rare at this time in the Greek world. Palmyra in the 4th c. had become a normal city and the old gods had all disappeared: a bishop was functioning in 325 and henceforth epitaphs were Christian.

The gradual urban evolution of Palmyra, in which indigenous elements had been fused with characteristics of the Greek cities of the Roman empire, thus came to a rather abrupt end: the city became a provincial garrison town. Religious dedications were still made during the next two centuries, but they may be described, at best, as a small survival of an earlier tradition. The new function of the city is made clear by the monumental camp of Diocletian and the wall of the same period, which excluded the old city centre from its protective circuit.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers for inviting me to the conference and to L. Lavan for improving my English. This paper and my research on Palmyra (*Les notables de Palmyre*, Université de Tours 1999, thèse de doctorat under the supervision of Prof. M. Sartre) are preliminary studies for the corpus of Greek and Latin inscriptions of Palmyra in the series *Inscriptions grecques et latines de Syrie (IGLS)*.