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Palmyra: City of Churches and Mosques

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INTAGLIATA, EMANUELE E. 2018. *Palmyra after Zenobia, 273-750: An Archaeological and Historical Reappraisal*. Oxford: Oxbow. 168pp, 72 illustrations. ISBN 9781785709425.

A detailed engraving by Giovanni Battista Borra published in Robert Wood's 1753 *The Ruins of Palmyra, Otherwise Tedmor in the Desert*, illustrates the building now known as the Sanctuary of Bēl (Figure 1).¹ It was through such images of monumental ruins of the Roman period that Palmyra became known to Western audiences.² More recently, of course, it has been images of destruction that have become more familiar, with the Sanctuary of Bēl infamously damaged in spectacular fashion by ISIS explosives.³ In Borra's engraving, the interior of the sanctuary walls are shown to be populated with what the eighteenth century caption calls "the huts of the Arabs". That is to say: histories of Palmyra after the Roman era, of the people that lived there in Late Antiquity, in the Early Islamic period, and far beyond, have been known as long as the Western study of the site has existed. And yet, those periods have received relatively little scholarly attention. In the volume under review, *Palmyra after Zenobia, 273-750: An Archaeological and Historical Reappraisal*, Emanuele Intagliata does a great service in bringing together much of the evidence for the site after its fall in 273 until 750, a service that is particularly significant given that the post-273 evidence is largely missing, or treated very briefly, in the substantial number of recent surveys of the site.⁴

<Insert Figure 1. The Sanctuary of Bēl at Palmyra, as illustrated in Wood 1753, plate 21. The original description was "View of the temple of the sun, taken from the north-west corner of the court." Letters identified certain features: "C" denoted "Huts of the Arabs".
Scan via <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wood1753/0001.>>

Based on the author's Ph.D at the University of Edinburgh, the book aims to trace the history of Palmyra from its capture by Aurelian until the end of Umayyad rule in the middle of the 8th century, dividing this time into Late Antiquity (for I.'s purposes, 273-634), and the Early Islamic period (for I., from the Muslim conquest of Palmyra in 634 to the end of the Umayyad dynasty in 750).⁵ The work draws on both archaeology and texts including epigraphic evidence and Arabic sources, and two appendices supply a selection of the written sources in

¹ Wood 1753; the houses are disproportionately small in Borra's rendering, as noted in Press 2016a.

² Baird and Kamash 2019; Dardanillo 2013; Matta 2015.

³ For critical assessments of ISIS' damage at Palmyra, see e.g. Harmanşah 2015; Jones 2018. There was much popular media coverage, e.g. Barnard and Saad 2015.

⁴ E.g. it is not mentioned in Veyne 2017, the 2016 German translation of which was usefully reviewed by Kaizer 2016; another survey can be found in Sartre and Sartre 2016, focussing on the Classical material but with four of its 29 short chapters devoted to the contemporary Syrian conflict. Sommer's Palmyra survey does include a millennia-sweeping summary of the site after 272: Sommer 2020, 210–29, followed by one on the Syrian conflict; Raja's forthcoming survey has a similar ending structure, with a chapter on the site post-272, and one on the Syrian conflict: Raja 2022. The new volume by Gawlikowski, one of Palmyra's excavators for decades, includes a chapter on the Byzantine and Islamic site: Gawlikowski 2021, 189–204.

⁵ The designation, throughout the volume, of pre-273 material as 'Roman-era' in comparison to the later third and fourth centuries was sometimes confusing, particularly when the (late antique) Roman military remains are under discussion.

translation. After a useful introductory survey of previous work, I. appraises, in six chapters, different aspects of the site: its hinterland, townscape, housing, religious and military lives, and city walls. The penultimate chapter provides a historical summary of Palmyra after Zenobia and the final one a brief conclusion, 'Palmyra in Perspective', which gives some context by examining what happened to other sites, such as Antioch and Apamea, in the same period.

From Caravan City to Fortress Town

Much continuity after 273 is evident in the material I. assembles. The Palmyrena (as the territory outside the city is known) of Late Antiquity remained an active landscape enabled by the existing road network, of monasteries, farms, villages, and forts.⁶ The latter became unnecessary when the Roman frontier system collapsed, and in the early Islamic period the best documented evidence is that of the opulent elite residences.⁷ From the hinterland I. moves into the city, which continued with its legal status as such after 273. The occupation history thereafter is complicated, with the settlement broadly reducing in size to within the city walls (enclosing 127 ha., this was still a large area). Within Palmyra, the occupation trajectory is a familiar tale of the transformation of urban space, with the pre-existing Roman-era site providing the backdrop and material preconditions for the later ones, from building materials to water supplies.⁸ A new military role meant the city evolved into a fortress. Alongside this was a civilian community, increasingly a Christian one, known from presence of churches, including those along the great colonnade, which also became a bustling commercial hub of shops. The existing roads were maintained in much of the city, and so too was the water supply. Housing changed form, with smaller units carved out of what had been larger houses, and productive installations installed within them.⁹

Pagan religious life continued alongside the increasingly Christian one, at least for a time, with the last pagan inscription in the early 4th century. Long before ISIS, Palmyra's religious buildings have been violently made a point of, however, and in the late fourth century, possibly because of the edicts of Theodosius, the deliberate mutilation of pagan sanctuaries is attested in the archaeology – including a head struck off the cult statue of Athena

⁶ On this region from the Roman era to early Islamic period, see now Meyer 2017. Intagliata refers to the territory as the Palmyrene, but to avoid confusion with the adjective, here I use Palmyrena for the territory (following the Norwegian team), for the French Palmyrène. I am grateful to Ted Kaizer for advice on this, comment on a draft of this review, and all things Palmyrene.

⁷ For Umayyad elite residences in the Palmyrene and beyond, Genequand 2012.

⁸ For Roman Palmyra as the material backdrop to the Late Antique site, Kaizer 2020, 36.

⁹ Recent work aids discussion, and as cited by I., including the Italian-Syrian PAL.M.A.I.S project directed by the late Maria Teresa Grassi and Waleed Al As'ad, which began in 2007. This work was cut short by the war but is continuing to be published, including the excavation of a peristyle building in the southwest quarter of the site, with evidence for building between the 2nd and 8th centuries. Grassi and Al As'ad 2013, Grassi *et al* 2015, Grassi 2019.

in the sanctuary of Allāth, whose altar was also cut.¹⁰ Palmyra had an early bishopric, and at least eight churches are the best known public buildings of the period, including those along the great colonnade and those along ‘Church street’, perpendicular to the colonnade.

Long occupation histories make specific chronologies of monuments blurry. I. nonetheless draws together what is known, for example, of the church which was situated within the sanctuary of Bēl, probably from the 4th to 8th centuries, evidence which is mostly that of installations which had been added (of which all that remains are recesses and sockets in the stone walls), but also Christian paintings. Other churches (prosaically known as church II and III) became the setting for lime kilns, and still others have different taphonomic problems which make a full picture of their design and use difficult. And yet, I. is able to make a clear case for the way Palmyra’s churches fit well into northern Syrian architectural traditions, well known from the limestone *massif*.¹¹ However extensive Christianity in late antique Palmyra, it was not wealthy—building material was spoliated, unlike the fresh cut stone of Apamea or Al-Rasafa, and without the level of decoration found at those sites.

Palmyra in late antiquity was a military stronghold, with the Legio I Illyricorum attested there. Archaeologically, the military camp and the city circuit walls, known as the ‘Wall of Diocletian’, are the best preserved and best-known remains. The city walls have long been noted (Wood, for his part, believed them Justinianic) but like other parts of Palmyra lack full publication or scientific dating, as I. points out, with assessment relying heavily on photographs in the archive of the Sapienza survey.¹² Several third century phases are evident, later strengthened with abutting U-shaped towers. The ‘Camp of Diocletian’ was built in the late third/early fourth century in the western side of the site, on a slope that had been a suburb neighbouring the necropolis. The camp had been investigated by a range of teams (notably, the Polish concession under Michałowski and then Gawlikowski from 1959-1987), although some details are still not well enough known to draw conclusive interpretations about, as I. well demonstrates with the discussion of the features (perhaps shops, perhaps barracks) which separate the camp from the rest of the site, along the earlier city wall. Hypogea and other local buildings were pillaged for materials with which to build the camp, demonstrating another way in which Palmyra has long been in a process of destruction and reconfiguration.¹³

¹⁰ Underpinning I.’s discussion of this is Gąssowska 1982.

¹¹ On which see especially Butler 1929; Tchalenko and Baccache 1979; Tchalenko 1990; Loosley 2012.

¹² Wood 1753, 39.

¹³ On destruction and the transformation of cultural heritage at Palmyra, Holtorf 2015, 416; Munawar 2019.

Early Islamic Palmyra

The Islamic takeover of Palmyra in 634 did not mark an immediate nor major break, either materially attested or in religious life of the site, but was a time of continuing transformation. No monumental structures on the scale of the camp or city walls were constructed, but I. is able to nonetheless bring together a range of evidence testifying to the site in early Islamic times. A *sūq* was built in the Umayyad period in the western stretch of the great colonnade, and there are five buildings identified as Mosques (although their identifications are less well attested and secure than churches; I. hints this is to do with archaeological interest as much as other factors). One which I. believes to be secure in its identification is the Congregational mosque adjacent to the Umayyad *sūq*, repurposing a Roman building. Burials by this time, unlike the famed predecessors of the Roman era, were usually within the city walls and were not monumental, with inhumations made in pits or cists. While the burials are relatively numerous they are not well published (e.g. 78 post-Roman burials excavated in the 1960s by Syrian teams outside the modern archaeological museum). One group of c. 30 burials, near the ‘Dura Gate’, excavated in 2001 had a mix of N-S and E-W burials which can perhaps be interpreted as Christian and Muslim communities burying their dead in the same place. A Jewish community was also present at Palmyra from the Roman period, and attested through small finds (lamps decorated with menorahs in fourth century contexts) and inscriptions; I. suggests that the Jewish community attested in the 12th century might have been their descendants.¹⁴

Other aspects of the site, after the fall of the Umayyad dynasty, are similarly elusive, and I. closing epilogue states that “The city centre seems to have been deserted already by the mid-9th century...By the end of the 10th century the settlement might already have shrunk into the Sanctuary of Bel...”.¹⁵ The plan of Palmyra included in Wood’s book indeed depicts a mosque which was visible there in the 18th century, but the millennium between the mid-eighteenth century and Wood’s ‘discovery’ are beyond the purview of I.’s book.¹⁶

Palmyra from *Colonia* to Medina to World Heritage Site

¹⁴ The complexity of the textual evidence for Judaism and Christianity in Late Roman Palmyra is well discussed in Kaizer 2010.

¹⁵ Intagliata 2018, 107. On the latter point I. cites Gawlikowski 2009, 91, who is more slightly more specific about what is known and unknown about this period; see also now Gawlikowski 2021, 204.

¹⁶ Wood 1753, panorama, plate 1, F: ‘a ruinous Turkish mosque, with its minaret’ and plan, plate 2, 4, ‘Turkish mosque’ (roughly placed south of the Great colonnade, outside the Temple of Bel). The label ‘Turkish’ is applied to these and other post-Roman material (including the fortifications and castle) fairly indiscriminately in Wood.

While the material in *Palmyra after Zenboia*, including the most recent archaeological results, has been diligently assembled by I., it is not the fault of the author that the result is often frustrating. The problem is just how poorly the post-272 material has been treated and studied: chronologies are messy and incomplete, structures fragmentarily and often simply incidentally recorded, and far too much relies on partial plans of poorly phased and dated architectural remains. Given these existing issues, the volume under review might have been easier to follow if arranged chronologically rather than thematically. The structure means it is often repetitive, and sometimes difficult to follow.¹⁷ I.'s interpretation relies heavily on existing narratives of the transformation of Syrian cities and indeed, the chapter conclusions often seem to project from Kennedy or Liebeschuetz backwards onto evidence that can't always bear it.¹⁸ The plans of the volume, of which there are many, are sometimes difficult to follow. Because so many different teams and standards have been employed at Palmyra over many decades, the plans lack consistent scales, orientations, or conventions. While a useful site plan marks the main structures discussed in the volume, the lack of phased plans of the city showing the changes so carefully mapped out would be helpful in visually bringing together the many fragments.

In some cases, the post-Aurelianic remains at Palmyra are genuinely more ephemeral than those that came before, but the fact that the monumental remains of the later period, including the city walls, are scarcely better known, is harder to excuse. I. has done as much as one could (e.g. examining unpublished archival photographs), but these are problems that go beyond the character of the archaeological material and its preservation and speak instead to the taphonomies of archaeological practice itself: to what is valued and worthy of study, what is not, at 'Classical' sites.¹⁹ Methodologically, at Palmyra as elsewhere, there has been a tradition of clearing architecture rather than excavation of contexts, something also glaring in the lack of material culture evidence.

Palmyra's is a story which doesn't end in 750. Until the Syrian conflict began, tourists visiting Palmyra would have entered the Sanctuary of Bēl through a gate and walls that had been restored in the 12th century, and while the citadel of Palmyra often serves as a picturesque backdrop to the monumental colonnade which frequents book covers (including I.'s) we rarely read of it, or the Druze who fortified it in the 13th century.²⁰ Readers of *JRA* might

¹⁷ The story of the same time frame is now told, in a much more general but also more comprehensible way, by Gawlikowski 2021, 189–204.

¹⁸ Kennedy 1985; Liebeschuetz 2001.

¹⁹ Archives holding Palmyra material cited include the Fonds d'Archives Paul Collart (Université Lausanne); Centro di Documentazione di Storia dell'Arte Bizantina at the Sapienza, Università di Roma; and the Browning archive at the Palestine Exploration Fund (London). For a recent summary of the 1800 years of Christian and Islamic heritage erased at Palmyra through selective study and clearances, Mulder 2017.

²⁰ E.g. The citadel is visible, in the blurry background, on the covers of a number of the recent surveys, including Sartre and Satre 2016 and Sommer 2020. For work on the citadel and its dating, conducted as part of the expedition led by Gawlikowski, Bylinkski 1999.

well ask why such later periods should matter to them. The answer is that the occlusion of later periods at sites like Palmyra that are key to our discipline has been a real and often deliberate consequence of the work of Classical archaeologists at those sites. This is not only a matter of lack of proper attention to later (sometimes tellingly labelled “sub-Roman”) material as having historical importance in itself, but also borne out in the consequences for living populations, such as the selective erasure of post-classical structures, and the forcible relocation of communities as was the case of the homes from inside the Sanctuary of Bēl under the French Mandate. The people gestured to but diminished by the ‘huts of the Arabs’ in Borra’s engraving (Figure 1) are still missing from Palmyra’s history: arguably, such histories, and a history of the foreign interventions at the site, are more urgent than the scramble to reconstruct it, either digitally and in the field.²¹ We only know Palmyra as a classical site because it has been invented as one, from Wood to the French Mandate to UNESCO’s assertion of its “universal value” as a first and second century site.²² That invention is not only about sweeping away the Arab houses from the Sanctuary of Bēl to create an empty ruin but also about not telling the history of how and by whom it came to be excavated, of the mechanisms by which Palmyrene sculpture can now be found globally in public and private collections. Intagliata’s diligent work brings us a closer to knowing a fuller version of the history of Palmyra, but he also shows how difficult a task we have made for ourselves. The responsibility of that task is a burden far greater and more difficult than re-erecting fallen column drums, perhaps even impossible: dealing with the legacies and human impacts of Palmyrene material that has already been “discovered”, excavated, sold and accessioned.²³

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²¹ In October 2021, in a (now deleted) Facebook post, the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) of Syria announced the start of a joint Syrian-Russian team, funded by Russian sources, to work at the site. Further on recent Russian interventions at Palmyra, Meskell 2018, 176–80. For critical views on rebuilding: Schmidt-Colinet 2019; Munawar 2017. For critique of claims being made through digital archives of Syrian archaeology, Baird Forthcoming. On responses to the ‘rebuilt’ arch of Palmyra, Kamash 2017. On the later, forgotten, histories, of Palmyra, Press 2016b; for insight into Russian agendas at Palmyra, Plets 2017.

²² UNESCO, “Site of Palmyra”: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/23/>

²³ Some aspects of such work has begun in some quarters, e.g. The Palmyra Portrait Project (Aarhus) has sought to catalogue the more than 3000 Palmyrene reliefs scattered globally; the publication of Harald Ingholt’s Archive, one of the many unpublished archives of Palmyrene archaeology, has begun: Bobou, Miranda and Raja 2021; Ingholt *et al.* 2021.

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