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Monuments, landscape, and memory

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MONUMENTS, LANDSCAPE, AND MEMORY: THE EMERGENCE OF TOWER-TOMBS IN TADMOR-PALMYRA*

LIDEWIJDE DE JONG

Abstract: Little is known about the emergence of the iconic tower-tombs in the first century BCE in Tadmor-Palmyra, the oasis settlement on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire. Scholarship has concentrated on the grand towers erected in the first two centuries CE, yet it is the older and simpler group of towers that holds the key for understanding their appearance. They reveal breaks with existing burial customs and a need to carve out a new memorial landscape in the desert. This article offers a new perspective on the tower-tombs, building on theoretical approaches to monumentality, landscape, and memory. In settings that were simultaneously conspicuous and distant, the towers represent monumental proclamations aimed at the residents of Tadmor-Palmyra and the people of the desert. As tombs, they kept alive the memory of some members of the community, becoming focal points for the (re)production of lineage identity. Internal developments, sedentarization, or migration made such identities vulnerable, and new avenues for competitive innovations about the shared past were sought. The tower-tombs provide the first glimpses of a new Tadmor-Palmyra.

In the second half of the first century BCE, a new type of tomb arose in the oasis of Tadmor-Palmyra. The tower-shaped tombs, built in stone and placed on elevated parts of the landscape, represented a significant break with earlier traditions of underground burial and the need for a new language of commemoration. Over the following decades, tower-tombs became the burial of choice for Tadmor-Palmyra's prominent families. By the time the last one was built, early in the second century CE, around 180 of them surrounded the settlement (fig. 1).

Considering their prominence, it is surprising that the motivations behind the emergence of tower-tombs in the first century BCE largely escape us. We do not know why older traditions were pushed aside, who was behind the construction of the towers, nor what they meant for the populations of the Palmyrene oasis. Two factors influence this limited understanding. The earliest group of tower-tombs, consisting of at least 16 examples built in the hills to the west of the settlement, is hardly known. Most have never been excavated and, with one exception, none contained a founding inscription. By contrast, the tower-tombs built after the first century BCE yielded numerous epitaphs and were adorned with statuary of founders and family members. The lavishness of these later examples has overshadowed the study of the earlier towers.

This article takes a new look at the oldest group of tower-tombs and the possible motivations behind their construction. The same obstacles that hindered my predecessors—a lack of evidence and the long shadows of the later towers—are of course still in place. However, I argue that we can investigate what the construction of, and interaction with, the new tombs allowed people to say and do, enabling us to formulate hypotheses about the reasons for their construction. In order to do this, the shadows of the later tower-tombs

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Figure 1. Tower-tombs of Tadmor-Palmyra in the background, with the ancient city and modern oasis in the foreground. (Photo: Ian Plumb—Flickr creative commons: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/65709822@N00/3837212427/in/album-72157652917133528/>)

need to be removed and a novel theoretical perspective added, drawing from approaches to three themes: monumentality, memory, and landscape. By conceptualizing the tower-tombs as monuments, we can begin to explore their role in the creation and affirmation of memorial landscapes. The next section outlines which of the elements in memory studies, the archaeology of landscape, and theoretical approaches to monumentality have the potential to shed new light on the processes fuelling the erection of the tower-tombs.

Monuments, memory, and the funerary landscape

The tombs discussed in this paper can be considered monuments. A monument is meant to be seen, to capture attention, and to endure. Considerable resources are spent on the construction and adornment of a monument. In the definition employed in this paper, monuments are built to memorialize something or someone, such as a past event, person(s), a supernatural force, or other entity. Being visible and durable, monuments emit a sense of permanence and stability, allowing for continued interaction.¹ However, monuments tend to outlive the society responsible for their erection. Over time, the cultural meanings attached to them change, are redefined, or repurposed. Despite the projections of continuity, therefore, interactions with monuments are far from consistent.

¹ Hallam and Hockey 2001: 51.

Osborne refers to monumentality as ‘an ongoing, constantly renegotiated *relationship* between thing and person, between the monument(s) and the person(s) experiencing the monument’.² In my approach to monuments, I emphasize visibility, size, durability, and memorial function in a relational, contextual, and embodied approach. Monuments interact with people in particular settings, the meanings of which are not fixed. Instead of being passive and objective pieces of evidence, they are part of a dialogue. The study of monuments, thus, is not about construction or choice of location *per se*, but about their conversation with the intended makers, users, or viewers. Tombs, or memorials to the deceased, are a particular kind of monument: they are built to remember. I harness two types of approaches to monumentality that I believe will help us to unravel how these monuments functioned in Tadmor-Palmyra. These are memory studies and landscape archaeology, as discussed next.

Studies of social or cultural memory ask how communities remember a shared past, and how this process produces and is produced by the social and power relations of the said community.³ The past can be a powerful factor in the identity formation of groups and in making sense of the here and now. Social memory brings the past to the present for the future. What communities remember is always fragmentary, and forgetting is also an integral part of memory processes. Tangible objects, from small mementos to large monuments, play a role in the process of remembering. People interact with objects that have the capacity to evoke memories.⁴ Monumental structures in particular may accommodate prolonged interactions with memories.⁵ Archaeological studies of memory often focus on interactions of a community with older monuments, constructed a long time ago but which still play a central role in ongoing social interactions.⁶ This article is concerned with a different time-perspective, that of monument building and its initial phases of use.

Scholarly approaches to memory are often inspired by Hobsbawm and Ranger’s concept of ‘invented traditions’, sets of new practices that attempt to establish continuity with the past.⁷ Monuments are frequently embedded within past traditions, for instance by choice of location, close to areas of high significance such as cult places, or by incorporating symbolic language, such as funerary iconography, from times long past.⁸ The concept of social memory is also useful when considering funerary monuments. Connerton distinguishes between two types of social memory: one in which memory is inscribed, by storing information on things and places, and one incorporated through bodily practices.⁹ Both types feature prominently in monumental tombs, which inscribe the memory of a person or group such as a family or lineage, and also function as a focal point for incorporating practices, both during the funeral and for other remembrance rituals. By interacting with the tomb, memory is evoked, embodied, and made meaningful.¹⁰ Graham gives the example of how the senses,

² Osborne 2014: 3.

³ Cf. Alcock 2002; Connerton 1989.

⁴ Alcock 2002: 19. See also Graham 2011.

⁵ Cf. Osborne 2014: 10.

⁶ See for example: Alcock 2002; Rojas and Sergueenkova 2014.

⁷ Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

⁸ See examples in Harmanşah 2011 and Kelp 2013.

⁹ Connerton 1989.

¹⁰ Cf. Nelson and Olin 2003: 6; Williams 2004: 52.

for instance the sounds and smells of a Roman funeral, added to a multisensory experience, thereby recalling previous funerals and thus implanting and activating memories in the minds of the participants.¹¹ As mnemonic devices, monumental tombs assist memory processes. Their focus on deceased members of the community, whether individual or a part of a collective, is made visible through the tomb, as well as through physical interaction with the tomb and other funerary rituals.

Monuments are not isolated constructions, but stand in conversation with their built and unbuilt surroundings. Historically there has been a distinct spatial component to their study, involving the setting and the meaning of this setting in a larger cultural context; emphases on these elements fall under so-called landscape archaeology. The term ‘landscape’ here refers to the amalgam of settings, from natural to human-made, from physical to conceptual, and their significance for human actors.¹²

Landscape approaches consider the placement of monumental tombs *vis-à-vis* other tombs or places of dwelling, worship, and agriculture, and routes of communication. Blake, for instance, using variables such as tomb orientation, relative altitudes, and intervisibility between tomb and settlement, illustrates how Nuragic burial monuments in Sardinia affirmed the identity of communities at a time when they were becoming more dispersed and autonomous. Links between the settlement and the tomb were strengthened and imbued with meaning, a process that Blake calls the formation of a ‘locale’ or place of social interaction.¹³ Natural features of the landscape, including those imbued with mythical references—springs, rock formations, and the like—should also be taken into account when assessing the choice of setting. Harmanşah draws attention to the concept of ‘place’: a culturally significant locale within a landscape, which is made meaningful through everyday experience and stories shared by a particular community.¹⁴

Other studies focus on monumental tombs, or clusters of these, as signalling boundaries, such as those between the realm of the living and the spiritual world, but also of landownership, territorial power, or communication.¹⁵ Interpretive options are legion; the point here is that the setting of monuments, in all its facets, should be an integral part of the study of monumentality. Landscape archaeology, or approaches to setting, locale, and place, stimulates a keen understanding of the broader environment within which monuments are placed. Landscape is not a passive backdrop to human action, but active in both shaping human action and being shaped by it.

Monuments are meaningful constructions, in their particular setting, and are imbued with messages about the past, present, and future. In the following section, I analyse how we can extract these messages from the process of tower-tomb building in Tadmor-Palmyra in the first centuries BCE and CE. The tower-tombs have attracted a steady trickle of scholarship, yet, as remarked, we know very little about the motivations behind their original construction.¹⁶ The oldest towers are poorly preserved, and we know nothing about the treatment of the bodies, which items accompanied them, nor what happened during the funeral. The next part starts with an introduction to the site and a description of the tower-tombs. The subsequent

¹¹ Graham 2011. See also Pearce and Weekes 2017.

¹² Cf. Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 2.

¹³ Blake 2001.

¹⁴ Harmanşah 2014: 1.

¹⁵ Cf. Gebauer 2015.

¹⁶ The most prominent studies of the tower-tombs are those of Gawlikowski 1970 and Henning 2013.

section looks at earlier interpretations and possible models for towers, and then investigates the towers as mnemonic devices in their contemporary landscape. In the final portion of the paper, I expand the discussion to wider societal changes in Tadmor-Palmyra and assess the possible actors behind the tower construction. The conclusions at the end return to the active role that monuments played and suggest that the towers were not reflections of societal change, but part of it. The construction and use of the tower-tombs stimulated new memory practices, forged on elements of the past but, perhaps even more, on forgetting the past. The new memorial landscape that emerged may have facilitated the conditions for the subsequent social and urban transformation of Tadmor-Palmyra.

A new tomb type

The site of Tadmor-Palmyra developed as an oasis fed by underwater springs in the Central Syrian Desert. The Wadi as-Suraysir, flowing from the hilly region in the west into a flatter area with a tell, cuts the area in half (fig. 2). Habitation extended on both sides of the wadi. Offering water sources in an arid region, the oasis was an important stopping point for people crossing the desert throughout its history.

In the first century CE, Tadmor-Palmyra was situated on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. We know little about the political affiliation of the oasis dwellers in the centuries

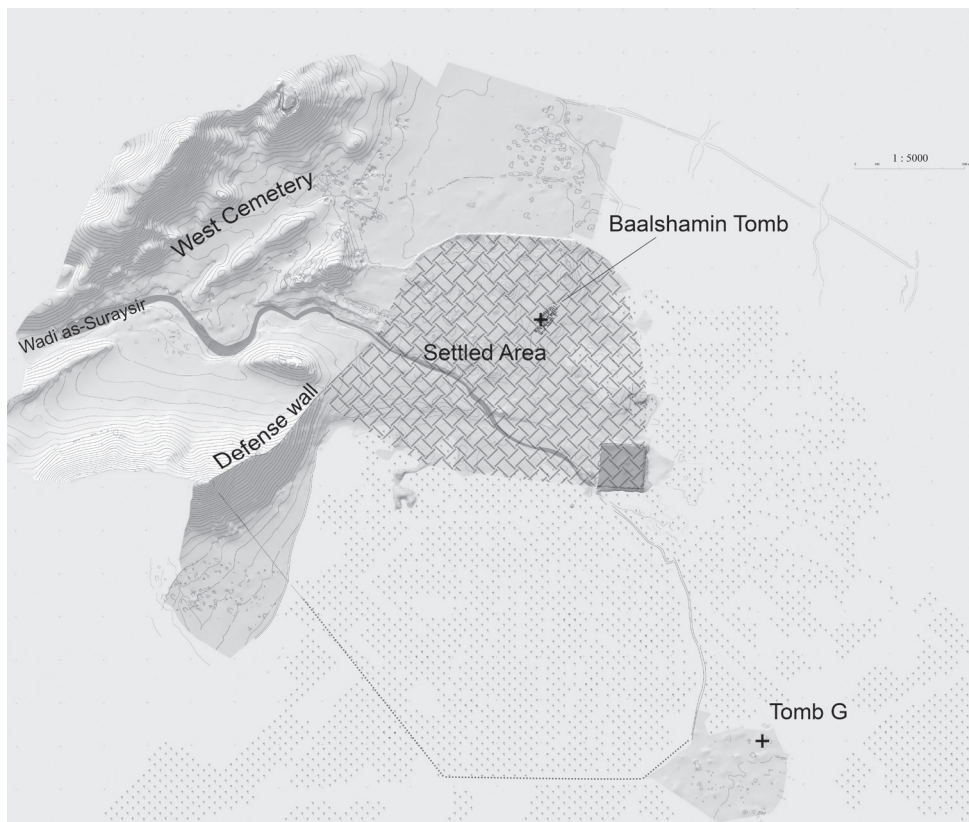


Figure 2. Plan of Tadmor-Palmyra showing the settled area and the West Cemetery. (Image: drawn by W. Torres, after Schnädelbach 2010.)

directly preceding this period, despite the region being part of the often disputed zone of influence of the Seleucid, Parthian, and Roman empires, and likely also of local kings and chiefs. Our understanding of the settlement before the first century CE is equally limited.¹⁷ Mudbrick architecture and water features dating to the third and second centuries BCE were discovered south of the wadi and on the tell. In this period, pockets of domestic, agricultural, religious, and funerary activity spread out over an area of more than 300 hectares, probably comprising several hamlets, rather than a single site. In the first century CE, stone architecture emerged in several locations, including the first version of the monumental Bel Temple on the tell. Typical urban features, such as a civic plaza and rectilinear street grid, may date to this period. A massive wall defended the area of habitation as well as the springs and orchards on the south and west sides.¹⁸ The development of Tadmor-Palmyra as an urban centre coincided with its gaining of long-distance trade connecting Mesopotamia and territories further east towards the Mediterranean coast. This trade mostly crossed Parthian territory, despite the fact that the site was now firmly affiliated with its enemy, the Roman Empire.

The events we focus on in this article started earlier, in the second half of the first century BCE. Tall stone towers arose to the west of the inhabited area of Tadmor-Palmyra (fig. 2). They had a stepped base, measuring 6 x 6 metres on average, which supported a square shaft reaching several metres in height (fig. 3). The tower-tombs are not preserved to full height, but the base and shaft combined are likely to have reached over 10 metres in height. Inside the shaft, a winding staircase led to a possibly flat roof. Structurally, the base and the shaft were separate constructions. Based on the layout, this oldest group, consisting of 16 tower-tombs, is dated between 50 and 1 BCE.¹⁹

The towers spread out over a triangular area covering several hectares, which in modern times has become known as the Valley of the Tombs or the West Cemetery (fig. 4). However, the term ‘cemetery’, that is, a bounded space, is hardly appropriate. The tower-tombs were spaced irregularly over a wide area, standing between 35 up to almost 450 metres from each other. They also stood at considerable distance from the area of habitation (0.5–2 kilometres). Most were built on top of small hills or outcroppings (fig. 5), and their doors pointed in all directions, except perhaps directly to the settlement.

Burial in the towers occurred in longitudinal niches, known as *loculi* in the archaeological literature, in various configurations. Some included exterior *loculi*, made in the stepped base of the tomb, and sometimes stacked on top of each other (fig. 3).²⁰ In these examples the *loculi* were accessible only from the outside and the tower itself did not appear to contain burials. Other towers had exterior *loculi* as well as *loculi* inside a room in the base or inside the shaft of the tower.²¹ Tomb 7, known as the Tomb of ‘Atenatan (fig. 6), contained only interior *loculi*. The original placement of *loculi* could not be established in the case of five

¹⁷ See de Jong 2018 for an overview of the early evidence. See also Kaizer 2017.

¹⁸ Hammad 2010: 84; Gawlikowski 1974; Schmidt-Colinet and al-As’ad 2000: 63.

¹⁹ Tower-tomb 2 (Q287), 4 (Q147), 5 (Q146), 6 (Q145), 7 (Tomb of ‘Atenatan/Q279), 10 (Q144), 11 (Q143), 12a (Q282), 24 (Q148?), 25 (Q149), 26 (Q150), 27 (Q151), 29 (Q135), 52 (Q233), 52a (Q225), and 71a (Q219). A full description of these tombs can be found in Henning 2013. The Q numbers correspond to the features on the map of Tadmor-Palmyra published by Schnädelbach 2010. For a discussion of the date, see Gawlikowski 1970: 47–48 and Henning 2013: 14. Three tower-tombs (Tombs 25–27) did not yield any burial spots, but are assumed to have been (early) tower-tombs as well, based on their shape and location.

²⁰ Tombs 2, 4, 29, 52, and 52a.

²¹ Tombs 5, 10, 24, 6, and 71a.

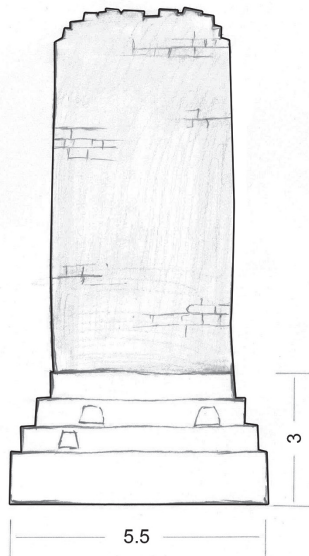


Figure 3. Artist's impression of a tower-tomb of the early type (dimensions in metres). (Image: Drawn by W. Torres.)

tower-tombs.²² The total number of *loculi* preserved was, on average, eight, excluding the much larger Tomb of 'Atenatan with 78 examples. It is possible that the differences in shape and burial numbers reflect typochronological development, but the lack of further chronological refinement impedes this investigation.

Few clues remain about how people were interred in the towers. Grave goods and mummified remains were discovered in the Tomb of 'Atenatan, but they cannot be securely dated to the earliest phase of usage.²³ They include textile fragments, jewellery, and perhaps oil-lamps and pottery vessels. The oldest tower-tombs remained undecorated and only that of 'Atenatan had an inscription. It states in Palmyrene Aramaic: 'This tomb is that of 'Atenatan, son of Kohailo, which Kohailo and Hairan, his sons, built for him, of Bene Maitha, in the month of Kanun of the year 304 (November 9 BCE).'²⁴

The construction of tower-tombs continued in the first and second centuries CE and, thanks to the work of Henning, we understand their chronological

development.²⁵ By the end of the first century BCE, the use of exterior *loculi* ceased, and all burial spots moved inside. A little later, underground chamber-tombs (*hypogea*) were sometimes dug below the tower-tombs, thereby enlarging the number of burial spots. Tower-tombs arose closer to the settlement and to the wadi, and their doors often aligned with the wadi or settlement. Early in the first century CE, tower-tombs also emerged to the north, southeast, and southwest of the settlement (figs 1, 7). In total 68 tower-tombs are commonly dated before c. 65 CE, in addition to the 16 already mentioned.

After the mid-first century CE, the towers became more ornate, with reliefs and painted embellishments. Burial could now also occur in decorated limestone sarcophagi, and the now-famous portrait busts began to adorn the *loculus* openings. Henning demonstrates that the towers became standardized in terms of shape and building technique. As well as the tombs, the number of burial places also increased in size, with some having hundreds of *loculi* (fig. 8). Many towers sported founding inscriptions that mention the family to which they belonged, going back several generations and stipulating usage intended for multiple

²² Tombs 11, 12a, 25, 26, and 27.

²³ Mummification at the site involved first drying the corpse, then wrapping it in cloth and covering it with several layers of myrrh paste. See Schmidt-Colinet, Stauffer and Al-As'ad 2000.

²⁴ PAT 0458; translation by Gawlikowski 1970: 184.

²⁵ Henning 2013. See also de Jong 2017: 288, 322–24.

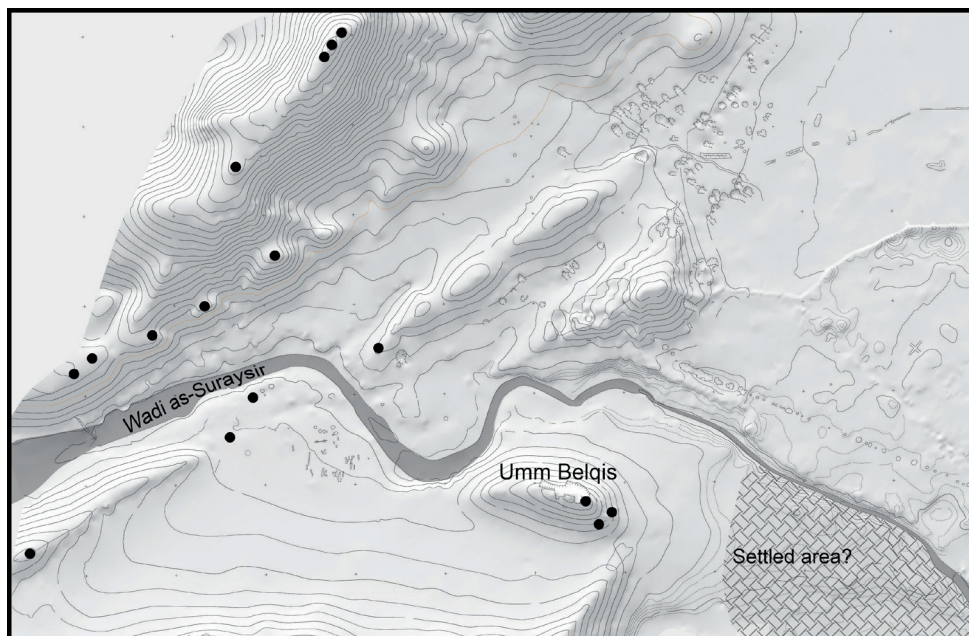


Figure 4. Distribution of the earliest group of tower-tombs (circles). (Image: drawn by W. Torres, after Schnädelbach 2010.)



Figure 5. West Cemetery of Tadmor-Palmyra, with the older towers in elevation position on the left and right, and the later tower-tombs closer to the road. (Photo: courtesy of the author.)



Figure 6. Tower-tomb of ‘Atenatan. (Photo: Thomas Schrunk, [http://dcl.elevator.umn.edu/asset/getEmbed/577ff1567d58aeb209bea66a/null/true; creative commons](http://dcl.elevator.umn.edu/asset/getEmbed/577ff1567d58aeb209bea66a/null/true;creative commons).)

future generations. The interior spatial arrangements grew complex and allowed for hierarchical groupings of important (dead) family members. The combination of epigraphic and archaeological data suggests a building boom around 70/80 CE.²⁶ In total 181 tower-tombs have been identified in Tadmor-Palmyra. The last recorded construction took place in 120 CE, but finds and inscriptions demonstrate that the tower-tombs remained in use until at least the mid-second century CE.

A break with the past

All tower-tombs, including the smaller and less impressive early group, can be considered monuments. Being large and made of durable material, they were intended to memorialize those buried inside, and their tall frames and placement on hilltops make them visual statements that were meant to last. As such, they stand out compared to earlier customs. Two older tombs discovered at Tadmor-Palmyra—a small pit-grave dated between 380 and 160 BCE containing a single inhumation (Tomb G, fig. 2), and a large

communal chamber-tomb (approx. 22 x 11 metres)—were in use between 175/150 BCE and 50 BCE/11 CE.²⁷ The communal tomb, known as the Baalshamin Tomb, was made of mudbrick walls on a limestone foundation and was partly or entirely underground. Most deceased occupied stacked niches along a central corridor. Both tombs contained small numbers of items placed with the dead, predominantly consisting of items of personal adornment and pottery and alabaster vessels. Neither was reminiscent of a tower-shape. Although two tombs hardly provide solid grounds for comparison with the later tombs, they repeat patterns detected in the vicinity of Tadmor-Palmyra. Gravefields excavated at Dura-Europos, Jebel Khalid, and Tell Sheikh Hamad show a preponderance of simple pit-graves and larger chamber-tombs from the third–first century BCE, all underground and unadorned.²⁸

Elements of the tower-tombs, such as (stacked) *loculi* and communal burial, find predecessors both in and outside Tadmor-Palmyra. Yet there are no local parallels for the base and shaft combination, staircase, use of exterior *loculi*, and placement of the corpse above the ground. Comparisons for the monumentality are also lacking. Although the Baalshamin Tomb was a large burial complex, the use of stone, the size, and the tower-shape of the new

²⁶ Henning 2003: 98.

²⁷ Fellmann 1970; Saito 2005: 34.

²⁸ De Jong 2017: 61–63.



Figure 7. Cemeteries around Tadmor-Palmyra (first to second century CE). (Image: drawn by W. Torres, after Schnädelbach 2010.)

tombs represent a departure from the earlier traditions, and a new effort and ability to create monuments. The towers also arose in a new location, west of the settlement and far from the older places of burial. In doing so, Palmyrenes created a new memorial landscape.

Towers as tombs

The provenance of the shape of the Palmyrene tower is debated, and there are no obvious models in the archaeological record. Scholars have mentioned various points of origin: (pre-) Hellenistic Syria, the Phoenician Levant, Persia, and Arabia.²⁹ However, none of these regions provides convincing matches for the towers, which remain distinctive in shape, mode of burial, and construction. Yet it would be wrong to completely discard these regional traditions as they may help us to clarify some of the choices made in Tadmor-Palmyra.

Tall, stone tombs with an above ground portion or an emphasis on visibility, such as rock-cut façades, were built in the Levant in the second and first centuries BCE. Examples come from Jerusalem, Petra, and perhaps Hermel.³⁰ They were unusual and likely to have been restricted to members of a high (royal) elite. They did not resemble the Palmyrene towers, but do illustrate that the concept of monumentality in funerary architecture had predecessors in the display tombs of the Hellenistic Levant.

²⁹ Ball 2000: 366; Clauss 2002; Mouton 1997; Watzinger 1932; Will 1949; see also de Jong 2018.

³⁰ De Jong 2017: 61–63, 320; Fedak 1990: 140–160.

Henning draws attention to the winding staircase and flat roof of the tower-tombs. She proposes a local origin, linking them to rooftop ceremonies of pre-Hellenistic Syrian sanctuaries.³¹ Mouton, building on older work, suggests a non-local point of origin: the Arabian Peninsula. He also connects the towers to a ritual practice; in this case, an above-the-ground structure to house the ‘soul’ of the dead, which is distinct from the actual grave containing the corpse. Such a monument is called *nefesh* in various Semitic inscriptions, which, according to Mouton, finds its origin in sedentary communities in Arabia that have a nomadic background and were possibly involved in caravan trade. The actual shape of the *nefesh* varies per region and develops in separate ways.³² Given the widespread occurrence of *nefesh* inscriptions in the Near East, tracing their provenance to the Arabian Peninsula is problematic.³³ In Tadmor-Palmyra, furthermore, only a handful of inscriptions among the total corpus mention *nefesh*, and, although the shaft and base were distinct at first, both received burials.

Small quantities of tower-tombs also emerged at sites in the mid-Euphrates region, possibly at around the same time as in Tadmor-Palmyra.³⁴ Variation exists in their construction and decoration. Lack of chronological refinement prohibits detecting stylistic development within and between these sites. The increased popularity of tower-tombs in Tadmor-Palmyra after the mid-first century CE, however, is not mirrored at the other sites, where their construction ceased.

Interpreting the tombs: previous approaches

Few scholars have investigated the emergence of the tower-tombs in Tadmor-Palmyra of the first century BCE. Perhaps this is related to the fact that the grand towers of the first and second centuries CE eclipsed their simpler and, in the words of some, ‘primitive’ precursors.³⁵ By focusing on the later towers, questions about why they were built in the first place are ignored.

The later towers, in fact, pose an interpretive challenge for the earlier ones. We know much more about them, who built them, for whom, and when. But it remains to be seen if the motivations behind the later group can be transported back to the earlier ones. Take the example of the founders. It is generally assumed that Tadmor-Palmyra’s elite produced the large tower-tombs. Foundation inscriptions clearly mark them for family burial, and they could accommodate extended families and perhaps even people in the household such as (former) slaves. Yon argues that they were reserved for the grandest Palmyrene families, with considerable economic and perhaps political power. They stand testimony to intense competition between these families, translating into larger and more ornate tombs aimed at highlighting lineage.³⁶ The interior space offered a variety of burial options, in a *loculus* or

³¹ Henning 2013: 117.

³² Mouton 1997; see also Clauss 2002. *Nefesh* (*nš*) refers to the self or soul, and perhaps to the spirit of the deceased. Debate exists about whether *nefesh* was a funerary monument, such as a tower, or the name and patronym of the deceased, a rock-relief of a person, or an aniconic shape such as a cone or pyramid-shaped roof. For a discussion of the term, see Kühn 2005.

³³ See examples in de Jong 2017: 159–160.

³⁴ Tower-tombs were discovered at Baghuz (5), Dura-Europos (7/8), al-Qaim (1), al-Susa (1), and Tabuz (1): see Clauss 2002; Geyer and Monchambert 2003; Henning 2013: 103, 116; Toll 1937, 1946. A larger collection, usually dated to the third and fourth centuries CE, was discovered at Halabiye: see Blétry 2015 and Lauffray 1991.

³⁵ Will 1949: 260.

³⁶ Yon 1999; 2002: 8, 42.



Figure 8. Tomb of Elahbel, constructed in 103 CE. (Photo: Jørgen Christian Meyer, 2009, <http://kark.uib.no/antikk/Dias/Palmyra/NekroW/Data/page.htm?15,0.>)

sarcophagus, with or without a portrait and inscription, and thus presented the opportunity for constructing spatial hierarchies among the deceased.

The oldest tower-tombs, with the exception of the Tomb of ‘Atenatan, not only lacked foundation inscriptions, but also were smaller, less ornate, and held fewer burial spots. It is not clear how spatial hierarchy could be achieved, in particular with the towers that only had exterior *loculi*. In other words, they were not likely to have been designed to hold the extended family or household, nor did they offer opportunities to emphasize particular burials within that group.

Differences also exist in the location. The earliest group was barely spatially linked to the settlement, whereas many of the later examples were built along the wadi, which was a major route to and from the settlement (fig. 5). We should, therefore, entertain the thought that the early tower-tombs had a different purpose from the later ones, and refrain from uncritically using the better-known examples for an interpretation of the emergence of the tower-tombs. This is not to say that there was a clear cut-off point between a first and second phase: it is more likely we are looking at a slow development. Above I noted a lack of consistency in burial method in the first group, which included various combinations of interior and exterior *loculi*. Perhaps this was the result of experimentation with the new concept of the tower-tomb. Over the next 100 years, standardized shapes emerged. After the mid-first century, the more-or-less roadside location of the towers; their decoration, in paint and plaster on the walls and *loculus* slabs; as well as the use of inscriptions and coffins correspond to stylistic and burial traditions popular across Roman Syria. By that point, thus, aspects of the tower-tombs, such as their decoration and spatial organization, were fundamentally different from the oldest examples.

Questions about the appearance of the tower-tomb in Tadmor-Palmyra are also addressed in studies of the origin or models for the tower shape, albeit indirectly. Will, for instance, links the introduction of the tower to cultural influence of the Hellenistic world and its widespread popularity in the Roman period.³⁷ Whereas such influence is clear for the later towers, as explained above, it is lacking for the older group. Furthermore, cultural influence as such has little explanatory power. One still has to work out why importing a foreign building tradition was considered a good idea in Tadmor-Palmyra of the first century BCE.

Using different arguments, both Henning and Will draw attention to the cultic function of the tower-tomb, such as rituals of ascension in the shaft or conceptualizing the tomb primarily as a memorial and only secondarily as a place of burial.³⁸ The towers, thus, stand witness to the introduction, or reworking, of a particular ritual need. Clauss and Mouton see the tombs in Baghuz and various sites in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates as potential founder monuments, housing the important ancestors of an extended family or clan, or larger kinship units such as tribes. They were the focus of expressions of lineage identity, with relatives interred in the simpler tombs dug around the tower-like monuments.³⁹

None of the studies mentioned above focus explicitly on reasons behind the monumentalization of funerary architecture in Tadmor-Palmyra in the first century BCE. Nevertheless, they highlight four key themes which I believe are relevant in understanding the emergence of the tower-tomb: founders, sedentarization, competition, and ritual function. In the next section, I switch to approaches from studies of monumentality, memory, and landscape, before returning to these four themes.

Landscape, memory, and the tower-tombs

Monuments stand in conversation with their surroundings. Chronologically, the towers may have been the earliest structures at Tadmor-Palmyra to be erected entirely in stone and possessing a monumental character. Other parts of the site, most notably its sanctuaries, received monumental upgrades early in the first century CE.⁴⁰ The choice of location for the earliest tower-tombs was guided by the presence of elevated features in the landscape, but this appears to have been the only guiding element. The irregular spacing and orientation do not reveal other preferences (fig. 4), although viewshed and other spatial analyses have not been applied to the study of Tadmor-Palmyra. Tombs were scattered across several hectares, yet because of their elevation, it is possible that most tombs were intervisible. The lack of proximity, therefore, may have been countered by visibility (fig. 5). To my knowledge, no other (non-funerary) built structures were found in the western hills contemporary to or predating the towers, and the area was perhaps untouched by human modifications before their erection.

The early towers stood far away from the older burial places described in the previous section. The same is true with regard to the dwelling areas (figs 2, 4). I have suggested elsewhere that the inhabited area contemporary to the first tower-tombs consisted of several small, loosely organized nuclei.⁴¹ This settled area was located close to the water

³⁷ Will 1949.

³⁸ Henning 2013: 117; Will 1949: 307.

³⁹ Clauss 2002: 170; Mouton 1997.

⁴⁰ See also de Jong 2018.

⁴¹ De Jong 2018.

sources and the tell. Most tombs stood at considerable distance from these nuclei and their associated farmlands. The three built on Umm Belqis were likely to have been visible from the inhabited area, and on the approach to Tadmor-Palmyra along the wadi bed, one could also see some of the towers (fig. 4). It cannot be ascertained whether the remainder of the towers were visible from the road, the settled area, or the farmland. Proximity to the areas of daily activity was not likely to have been a dominant structuring principle in selecting the location of the tombs. As the tombs do not appear to tower *over* something—a road or settlement—the act of *elevation* may have been the primary role of their placement. They elevate the dead and other possible activities associated with the tower.

Osborne warns against a tendency to overemphasize form at the expense of meaning, and this seems pertinent for Tadmor-Palmyra.⁴² The oldest group of tombs was highly conspicuous in its size and location, suggesting a wider audience, but it is unclear who this would have been. The tombs stand on isolated peaks in a barren and possibly unbuilt landscape. They were hard to reach and not always visible, simultaneously conspicuous and distant. There is no obvious connection, in orientation or otherwise, to the domestic and agricultural areas, or to the routes of communication. In fact, we do not know if the early towers belonged to the sedentary population of Tadmor-Palmyra: it is only because of the slow encroachment of the towers to the settled spaces of Tadmor-Palmyra in the first century CE that the towers are associated with the residents of the oasis.

It is difficult to assess how Palmyrenes conceived of this desert landscape around the oasis and its cultural significance as a *place* or *locale*. The loose and dispersed character of the cemetery possibly mirrored the settlement's organization. The isolation of the funerary space itself may have been intentional, as the builders of the towers did not want to push their new idea onto the already inhabited landscape of the oasis. The choice could also have had cosmological importance, or be a strategic one, with tombs functioning as 'watchtowers' of the desert.⁴³ Alternatively, their placement could speak to semi-nomadic pastoralists or traders traversing the region and frequenting the springs of Tadmor-Palmyra. In any case, the western hills were part of a mental map for Palmyrenes and others using the space. We do not know the outlines of this map. However, something changed when monuments were inserted, and the modified landscape offered a novel geography of the dead.

Building a new tomb: continued interaction and innovation

The tower-tombs offered a new type of memorial for the Palmyrene dead, one that used considerable resources and was conspicuous yet also somewhat isolated in the arid hills around the settlement. The monumentality of the towers enabled prolonged or continuous interaction between the living and the dead, or rather *some* dead, as the small number of burial spots are not likely to have contained the entire oasis population. The memory of this selective group was embedded in the landscape.

We do not know the identity of these dead. Neither shape, iconography, nor placement emphasize a professional or status identity, or at least this is not marked in a way that is visible to us. More likely, those buried in the tombs had a special position within kinship groups. Epigraphic sources indicate that virtually all tombs in Roman Syria are familial

⁴² Osborne 2014: 8.

⁴³ Cf. Will 1949: 312.

monuments, built by and providing final resting places for family members.⁴⁴ Above I have noted that the later practice of accommodating extended families in tower-tombs is not likely to have occurred in the earlier examples, as they lacked the space. The towers, then, drew attention to specific family members whose burial sites were deemed to be in need of elaboration. One can think of ancestor memorials, built to contain members of a small or extended family who held central importance for the lineage identity. Perhaps it is significant that the oldest inscribed tomb was not built by ‘Atenatan, but by his sons, thus marking a posthumous event. As mnemonic markers, the towers embedded ancestral power within the landscape. A counterargument here is that, unlike the examples from Arabia and the Euphrates sites, the towers were not surrounded by simpler graves reserved for the rest of the clan, although I am not certain if this was ever investigated thoroughly in Tadmor-Palmyra. There is nothing that explicitly identifies them as ancestor memorials.

The previous section demonstrated how the towers represent a break with older burial practices, in choice of location, shape, and above ground placement of the dead. One can ask if, and how, they were still embedded in pre-existing traditions. We have seen that this is an important feature of memory studies: the conscious signalling of the past in order to create a sense of continuity—this is how our ancestors did it—even if such traditions were in fact invented.

Aspects of the tower-tomb burials indeed copied earlier customs: inhumation, the use of rectangular compartments (pit, *loculus*), the stacking of *loculi*, and adding gifts of clothing, jewellery, and possibly vessels and lamps. Core elements of the treatment of the body, therefore, repeated older traditions. These parts of funerary ideology, the established norms on how to bury and commemorate the dead, were not altered by the introduction of the tower-tomb. Does this mean that the new tower shape in fact masks a deep continuity?

To me, the answer to this question is ‘no’, as we can identify a significant break in ritual practice. Although the body entered the grave in similar ways to what went before, now it was placed above the ground with a towering staircase on top. Perhaps we should read the preservation of old traditions of the treatment of the body as a form of ‘anchoring’ the novelty of the tower: by embedding the towers into existing beliefs and values, they became acceptable.⁴⁵ New is the location of the tombs, their visibility, shape, material, size, and, later in the first century CE, adornment. The towers present an innovation, centred on the outward appearance and, perhaps, accommodation of ascension rituals. Their monumentality diverged strongly from older building traditions and remained without obvious reference models, although a loose connection to sacral and sepulchral architecture in the region and further afield can be postulated. Ultimately, the tower-tombs proposed different forms of commemoration.

The towers inscribed memories of a person or a group, *i.e.* a family or lineage. Yet they also functioned as a focal point for incorporating practices. The community came back for new burials. When they did this they interacted with earlier interments, thereby establishing continuity between the past and present. The towers formed links among networks of living and deceased family members.⁴⁶ There may have been other moments in time when these links were activated, such as annual memorial rites. Unfortunately, the lack of excavation data prohibits us from reconstructing activities other than interment at

⁴⁴ De Jong 2017: 128–130.

⁴⁵ Cf. Sluiter 2017 on the concept of anchoring innovation.

⁴⁶ Cf. Nelson and Olin 2003: 6.

the tombs. Nonetheless, finds from the better-known example, the Tomb of ‘Atenatan, span at least 150 years, illustrating a long-term commitment to these towers.

Discussion: newcomers and societal stress

The innovative shape and placement of the tower-tomb allowed for the prolongation of memories of, and continuous interaction with, some members of the community, and for the creation of a new set of memory practices—ones that are more visible and more monumental. Monumentality and the embodied experience of monumentality enabled this process. The tombs were possibly both family monuments and focal points for the formation of kinship and lineage identities. The choice in location demonstrates the creation of new places for meaningful interactions—places that were not overtly connected to the settled area. Rather, the towers faced the desert, perhaps entering the realm of those for whom the desert was a primary place of activity or of cosmological importance.

Above I proposed that the continuity of certain ritual practices concerning the body eased the acceptance of the new monuments. Yet, the towers still represented a radical break with older traditions, and a swift one at that. At least 16 towers arose in 50 years or less, signalling the sudden introduction of monumentality for funerary architecture. I consider them ‘innovations’, which Sluiter defines as conscious changes intended to ‘solve newly identified problems or to cope with old issues in as yet unexplored ways’.⁴⁷ Why was this necessary in Tadmor-Palmyra of the first century BCE?

Studies of mortuary archaeology often propose a correlation between sudden monumentality and significant changes in society, such as altering power structures or religious beliefs, or the influx of new goods, ideas, and people. Parker Pearson calls the linking of monumentality to moments of political uncertainty a ‘quasi-universal approach’.⁴⁸ Times of rapid change stirred a need for greater ostentation. Memory can play a key role in these events. Alcock gives several examples of pronounced manipulations of the past, occurring precisely at moments of marked change, such as annexation, exile, or exploitation.⁴⁹ In these times, memories of shared pasts were modified, reconfigured, or invented.

It so happened that Tadmor-Palmyra underwent major transformations in the first half of the first century CE. The inhabited space expanded in size, as did various buildings, including temples. The town had perhaps already acquired features of an urban site, such as a civic plaza, defensive wall, and gridded street plan.⁵⁰ The growing population consisted of people from various backgrounds, including sedentarized communities. Epigraphy states their tribal affiliations and that they are generally considered to have come out of semi-nomadic pastoralist groups in nearby desert regions and further afield.⁵¹

At the same time, the Palmyrene trade network becomes visible in the material record. This lucrative business turned the oasis into an important trade port and stopping point for

⁴⁷ Sluiter 2017: 21.

⁴⁸ Parker Pearson 1999: 40.

⁴⁹ Alcock 2002: 32.

⁵⁰ See for instance: Delplace 2017; Gawlikowski 1974; Hammad 2010; Schmidt-Colinet and al-As‘ad 2000: 63.

⁵¹ Smith 2013: 33–53; Teixidor 1979. For debates on the Arab or Aramaean background of the settlers, see Gawlikowski 1995 and Yon 2002: 57–97 (online version Chapter II).

caravans.⁵² Also in the first half of the first century CE, the Roman Empire started to interfere in Palmyrene affairs. Roman administrators drew administrative boundaries and invested in the cult of the Roman emperor. They collaborated with Palmyrenes in mercantile and diplomatic enterprises, and Roman soldiers were stationed at the site.⁵³

By all accounts, the first century CE was one of rapid change, when existing power structures were redefined, trade brought in goods and wealth, and new people arrived to settle at the site, which took on an increasingly urban form. Whereas the relationship between these factors is outside the scope of this paper, the timing of change is worth considering in the context of the monumental tombs. There is a catch, however. The tower-tombs were built at some point between 50 and 1 BCE; the only dated example of the Tomb of 'Atenaten (9 BCE) is considered to be a latecomer in this group. The changes in Palmyrene society just described become visible around the 10s and 20s CE, leaving a chronological gap of as little as 20–25 years or as much as 75 years.

If we consider the chronologies of change as linked, the monumentalization of funerary architecture could be a response by some Palmyrenes to showcase and claim political and social power by drawing attention to their access to resources and labour. Monumentalization, then, was a tool in local strategies, perhaps with the administrators of the new Empire intended as a secondary audience. The display tombs of the Hellenistic Near East, associated with royal or high elite power perhaps served as (partial) models. In this line of reasoning, societal instability led to a crisis of legitimacy, which stimulated competition and the increasingly elaborate nature of family tombs. This is not to say that change produced the tower-tombs. Rather, monument building became a part of reconfiguring memory through landscape modifications.

This explanation fits the second phase of tower-tomb building of the first century CE. From this period we know that important families built the towers to house their extended family and household. They may have been involved in organizing the trade and dealing with Roman powers-that-be, as well as rulers encountered during their eastward trade. The towers arose from competition between members of the local elite entangled in, or trying to gain access to, the changing social landscapes of Tadmor-Palmyra. As tombs started to encircle the settlement, the open and dispersed character of the latter transformed into a more fixed and urban one.⁵⁴ The tombs, furthermore, while maintaining a distinct local character, increasingly reflected the elite taste of the Roman Empire.

However, the differences with the earlier phase of tower-tomb building should give us a pause. The 'sudden monumentality' after all, occurred at a distance from the site and had little spatial connection to the urbanization of the town. They also did not copy known display tombs or Roman taste. To be sure, the first century BCE was not a quiet one in Syria. Rome was expanding eastwards and clashed with Parthian(-backed) forces in the territory of Syria, and embroiled the province in its own Civil War at the closing of the century. Old power structures were eroding on a regional level and new ones were not yet in place. Yet, the extent of involvement of Palmyrenes in these events, if any, is unknown. Other than the tombs, there is little material and textual evidence from this period to work with.

We can, thus, formulate a second scenario, which sees the first towers as precursors and perhaps even catalysts of social change. In other words, they *were* the change. The

⁵² Recently analysed in Seland 2016.

⁵³ Gawlikowski 2010; Millar 1993: 34; Smith 2013: 23ff.

⁵⁴ The link between urbanization of the site and long-distance trade is explored by Gawlikowski 1994.

tower-tombs, or more precisely, the necessity to break with existing building traditions, to monumentalize — perhaps elevate — some dead, and to introduce a ritual of ascension, illustrate the introduction of new concepts in Tadmor-Palmyra. Group identity formation became a key factor, and tombs, as timeless memorials to the family, were an excellent place to reformulate such identities. Perhaps we can take this hypothesis even further and see the towers as evidence for the emergence of close-knit kinship groups responsible for redirecting long-distance trade to the oasis. Their leaders formed recognizable partners for Roman interaction. In other words, the social change of which the introduction of tower-tombs were part created the conditions for the transformation of Tadmor-Palmyra in the following century. The monuments enabled new social conditions and cultural values.⁵⁵

Perhaps those responsible for the new tombs were migrants to the oasis. Despite the unpopularity of such interpretations in current archaeological studies, it is worth exploring migration as one of the possible explanations. The origin of the newcomers to Tadmor-Palmyra is not certain. We have already seen that the towers lack direct connections to other funerary traditions, though they may be linked to customs of sacred and royal funerary architecture in the region. Experimentation with the shape of the earliest towers and the slight differences from the Euphrates examples could indicate that the builders did not mimic a pre-existing type, but rather a concept. In other words, perhaps we should not be looking for a model of the tower type, but rather imagine a group of people with similar ideas about memorializing some of its members, who turned up in Tadmor-Palmyra and the Mid-Euphrates sites.

In such a scenario, the monumental constructions in Tadmor-Palmyra could represent attempts to establish a foothold in the oasis, by elaborating the final resting places of people important for group identity. They would perhaps offer a place of ritual activities of ascension, away from the other sacred places in the desert. The tombs created new social memories—of space, of people, and family or lineage—acting as statements for the future about the past. They produced narratives of origin, embedding ancestors or founders in a new landscape, an act of central importance for new residents. Status and power-uncertainty made bold proclamations of monumentality necessary. Competitive statements emitted from the towers were possibly directed at the original occupants of the oasis and those who were ‘living off’ the desert, such as semi-nomadic pastoralists and caravan merchants.

Although an attractive theory, at this point we simply cannot ascertain whether newcomers built the towers. In any case, without corroborating evidence, linking new material culture to immigrants is highly problematic. New concepts can just as well arise out of the native population facing altered circumstances or formulating new attitudes to existing ones.

Conclusions: making a new Tadmor-Palmyra

Whatever scenario we pick to explain the emergence of the tower-tombs, we can acknowledge a number of things. In the late first century BCE, bold statements in the form of elaborate architectural settings that (re)defined social memories of a shared past were declared. Whoever was responsible for the construction of the tower-tombs felt compelled to make proclamations about lineage. Ancestral power was perhaps integrated into this ‘new’ past, which could be capitalized on in future claims. For the success of a community, cosmologically speaking and otherwise, it was important to offer a monumental ‘coffin’ to

⁵⁵ Barrett 1999: 257.

some of its members. It seems possible that the narrative of the origin of the tomb builders was in peril or disrupted, through migration, sedentarization, or other factors, and needed to be fixed in the landscape in an imposing way. Coming back to the tomb for subsequent burials and potential ascension rituals incorporated memories into the fabric of the community. As such, they converted places into sites of memory.⁵⁶ Through the construction and use of the towers, we thus detect processes of the making of a *new* Tadmor-Palmyra, with a novel set of mortuary rituals.⁵⁷

It is relevant that these processes centred on mortuary architecture, instead of on other types of memory locales. Monumental tombs aim to insert the memory of people permanently into a landscape. It may have been a strategic choice to create a memorial landscape and geography of the dead as part of ongoing strategies for the living. Yet, a tomb is not only a vehicle for strategic claims, it is also intended to provide a proper burial and to deal with a bereaved community that has lost one of its members. In Tadmor-Palmyra, group identity formed particularly around those buried in the tower, whose death was perhaps especially disruptive and fraught with danger, and required elaborate treatment. One can think of tribal ancestors, founders, original settlers, or other people with prominent social or political sway before or after death. These identities, whether held in life or not, were mapped onto their final resting places.

The isolated placement of the early towers and the phase of experimentation with its layout could indicate uncertainties about how to approach new circumstances. The translation of commemorative rituals into architecture was not fixed. Only by the first century CE was a successful formula decided upon, now with the entire tower serving as a tomb for many or all members of the extended family. Perhaps they illustrate a consolidation of kinship identity. After the mid-first century CE, the original concept of the tower-tomb merged with Hellenistic-Roman trends in display tombs, ornamentation, and urban identity. A new Tadmor-Palmyra emerged again, one that now can also be traced in the archaeological record of its sanctuaries, infrastructure, and other public places, as well as in the epigraphic habit of its prominent inhabitants. For the next hundred years or so, the tower-tombs remained prominent *locales* for conversations about power, shared pasts, and the dead.

This paper has illustrated that monumental tombs are not passive reflections of a status quo or signifiers of change, but active forces in negotiations.⁵⁸ The tower-tomb construction was not an end result whereby it was decided who was important, but part of a process of changing perceptions. Using memory studies helps us to envision the towers as mnemonic devices, capable of creating a shared past centred on a selection of group members. The monuments allowed for prolonged interaction with a memory (or memories). Whereas memory studies often focus on continuation, true or invented, and how monuments embed themselves into past practices, less attention is paid to breaks. These forms of forgetting the (local) past are equally powerful statements.

Using approaches derived from landscape archaeology, we can envision the towers not as isolated constructions, but as part of a landscape. The arid hills to the west of Tadmor-Palmyra, where the towers arose, became a space of social interaction, though one only minimally connected to the site itself. This locale kept its importance after the first century, when it redirected its gaze from the desert to the booming settlement. The single-site focus

⁵⁶ Harmanşah 2011: 77.

⁵⁷ Cf. Barrett 1990:183.

⁵⁸ Cf. Osborne 2014: 3.

of this article prohibits detecting regional patterns, such as the position of cemeteries in local cosmologies and establishing boundaries between the realm of the living and the spiritual world. Although not possible at the moment due to the ongoing civil war in Syria, one hopes that the tower-tombs in Palmyra and at other sites, and the landscape they inhabit, can one day be more thoroughly investigated and excavated.

The Palmyrene tombs give us important clues about society as a whole. Before the settlement attained urban features, and even before great temples arose, monumental memory statements were made in the funerary realm. The period of 50–1 BCE, about which we know little from other sources, was one of experimentation and transformation. In many scholarly works, Palmyrene history starts, somewhat abruptly, in the first century CE. I hope to have shown that the decades leading up to this period were of crucial importance in our understanding of Tadmor-Palmyra.

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Abbreviations:

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