

Palmyra

An Irreplaceable Treasure

Originally published as
Palmyre: L'irremplaçable trésor

By

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

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Introduction

Having studied Greco-Roman antiquity my entire professional life, I have often encountered Palmyra. Of course its destruction by the terrorist organization Daesh (ISIS) did not simply destroy the subject of my research; it obliterated an entire fragment of our culture.

A dozen or so years ago, I wrote a long preface about Palmyra in a wonderful book of art and photography by Gérard Degeorge.¹ In 2005 that text was expanded, enhanced with scholarly notes, and republished in a book series I coedited for Éditions du Seuil.²

This small book is completely different: it is much shorter, and it is written not for scholars but for general readers. It allows me to raise new questions, because current events are pressing.

Why does a terrorist group destroy inoffensive monuments from the distant past (or put objects up for sale)? Why did they destroy Palmyra, which was classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site? And why are there so many massacres, including the torture, suffering, and decapitation, on August 18, 2015, of the Palmyrene archeologist Khaled al-Asaad, to whom I dedicate this book?

In spite of my advanced age, it is my duty as a former professor and as a human being to voice my stupefaction before this incomprehensible destruction, and to sketch a portrait of the past splendor of Palmyra, which now can only be known and experienced through books.

1

Riches in the Desert

A current victim of terrorist barbarism, the Greco-Roman archeological site of Palmyra was perhaps the most extraordinary that archeologists had ever uncovered, alongside Pompeii, near Naples, and, on the Turkish coast, the vast ruins of Ephesus. Around 200 CE the city was part of the vast Roman Empire, at the height of its power at that time, which extended from Andalusia to the Euphrates, and from Morocco to Syria. When a traveler arrived in the merchant republic of Palmyra, a Greek or Italian trader on horseback, an Egyptian, a Jew, a magistrate sent by Rome, a Roman publican or soldier—in short, a citizen or subject of the empire—the newcomer immediately realized that he had entered a new world. He heard an unknown language being spoken—a great language of the civilized world, Aramaic—and everywhere he saw inscriptions in mysterious writing.

Every rich person he encountered knew Greek, which was the English of that time, but the person's name had guttural consonances that were difficult to grasp or to pronounce. Many local residents weren't dressed like other inhabitants of the Roman Empire. Their clothing wasn't draped, but sewn like our modern clothing, and men wore wide trousers: outfits for hunting and fighting that looked a lot like those of the Persians, the legendary enemies of Rome. This was because,

as an author of that time wrote, Rome and Persia “had divided up the world” on either side of the Euphrates River. Those noble Palmyrene horsemen, lords of import-export, wore daggers at their waists, defying the prohibition against carrying weapons on one’s person that was imposed on all citizens. The women wore full-length tunics and cloaks that concealed only their hair; they wore embroidered bands around their heads, with twisted turbans on top. Others, however, wore voluminous pantaloons. Their faces weren’t veiled, as was the custom in a few regions of the Hellenic world. And so much jewelry! Some even wore a ring on the middle part of their little finger! They may have been in the heart of the desert, but everything exuded wealth. There were statues everywhere, but they were made of bronze, not marble; in the great temple the columns had gilded bronze capitals.

To the south, and to the west as far as the eye could see, the desert, until quite recently, was scattered with a great number of ostentatious monuments, funerary temples, hypogea, or multistory rectangular towers (figures 2 and 3). These were the mausoleums where the great families, those who managed part of the trade between the Roman Empire and Persia, India, and China, buried their dead (whereas the Greco-Roman custom was cremation).

To the north, outside the city, the visitor might have noticed strange beasts: camel caravans were stationed around large warehouses; one sensed that nomadism was not far off. When the visitor’s gaze turned back to the city and to the palm grove with its olive trees and vineyards, the massive sanctuary of the Temple of Bel, the patron god of this land, towered above the single-level houses—a sure sign, like the sight of a minaret for Westerners today, that one had indeed entered a new civilization. This Temple of Bel, recently destroyed in our own time, rose up at the end of a long colonnade, which for

a moment reassured the visitor because it seemed to belong to the “true” civilization; and at first the shape of the temple itself was reassuring, as it resembled that of all temples in the empire. Its details were also familiar; it spoke the customary architectural vocabulary of columns. The newcomer was familiar with the shape of its Corinthian capitals, and its Ionic capitals, a bit old-fashioned in 200 CE, were thus nothing out of the ordinary.

But when studied more closely, the building was disconcerting: the visitor discovered that it was the bizarre temple of a foreign god. The monumental entrance was not at the front, as would have been logical: it was surprisingly placed on one of the long sides. The top of the building was heavily crenellated (figures 4 and 5), something seen only in the Orient. And it had windows; a temple with windows, just like those in the houses of humans, had never been seen before. Most surprising was that instead of having a roof with two sloping sides, as did all temples, it was covered with a terrace—again, just like a private dwelling. In this region people went up to the roof terrace to eat, feast, or pray to the divinity at the risk of falling off, as did a young man, according to the Acts of the Apostles.

Without doubt the visitor had seen a great deal, and his sense of normalcy was shaken: in the Roman Empire, or rather the Greco-Roman Empire, everything was uniform: architecture, houses, written language and writing, clothing, values, classical authors, and religion, from Scotland to the Rhine, the Danube, the Euphrates, and the Sahara, at least among the elite. Palmyra was indeed a city, a civilized and even cultured place, but it was dangerously close to nomadic noncivilization and a civilization of “the other,” that of Persia or of an even more remote place. And the visitor would begin to make generalizations: “Syrians are a nasty breed, a

kakon genos,” as a Roman or Byzantine soldier in garrison had engraved on a rock in a very busy place. The visitor was mistaken: Palmyra was not a Syrian city like others, just as Venice, in contact with Byzantine and Turkish civilization, was not representative of all of Italy.