Culture and History of the Ancient Near East

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VOLUME 22
A Journey to Palmyra

Collected Essays to Remember Delbert R. Hillers

Edited by

Eleonora Cussini
Nearly a half century has passed since the publication of *Recueil des tessères de Palmyre*, a fundamental reference work for all those interested in Palmyrene civilization, in the religious iconography of Roman Syria, and in the role and function of *thiasoi* in the Greco-Roman world. Even if this landmark publication of commendable scientific merit requires but little revision, the last few decades have nevertheless witnessed numerous excavations at the site of Palmyra, not only those conducted by the Syrian Department of Antiquities but also those undertaken by various international teams, among which the Polish Mission deserves special mention. All of these excavations have yielded new finds of *tesserae* which have enriched the collections of the Palmyra museum. Furthermore, when found outside of controlled archeological excavations, these small objects circulate easily, and thus inevitably appear with some regularity on the antiquities’ market. A rapid examination of several private collections has permitted the present authors to observe that a considerable number of unpublished *tesserae* have yet to be inventoried, and, for those already inventoried, photographs of the better struck or otherwise better preserved specimens could be published.

With this in mind, a research project devoted to the Palmyrene *tesserae* was launched, of which team the present authors are members. The primary objective was the preparation of a supplement to *Recueil des tessères de Palmyre*. In the long term, a systematic review of the entire corpus is envisioned, in database form. Such a treatment allows not only the systematic recording of the known number of examples of each *tessera*, but also remains open to future finds.

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1 The authors are very thankful to Robert Hawley who translated their text into English.

2 Ingholt–Seyrig–Starcky 1955.
The present article is the fruit of this collaboration, and it is a pleasure to publish it here, in *A Journey to Palmyra*, offered in memory of Delbert Hillers, whose *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts*, written with E. Cussini, has so quickly become a standard reference work for which all who study Palmyra are grateful.3

The Ar şu Temple was discovered fortuitously in September of 1980 by Ernest Will.4 The attribution of the sanctuary to the Arabian god Ar şu was permitted by the discovery of an altar dedicated to this god, as well as to Qismayâ ("he who is in charge of fate") and to "the daughters of the god" (*bnt 'l*).5 The site was then the object of a salvage excavation conducted by the Palmyra Museum and under the direction of Kh. As'ad. Of these excavations, only a brief note has been published thus far, by A Bounni.6 In addition to the altar published by J. Teixidor and Kh. As'ad, and a number of lamps, a large number of *tesserae* were also discovered on this occasion, all of the same type and all found in a jar (see below and Fig. 1). Several photographs from the archives of the Palmyra Museum allow some light to be shed upon the sanctuary and this veritable treasure trove of *tesserae*.

The sanctuary sits to the southwest of the *Agora*, on the other side of the *wadi*. It belongs therefore to what has been called the "Hellenistic City". It is known that this part of the site, between the Temple of Bêl and the Efqa spring, formed the original heart of Palmyra, a fact which is clearly evident from the orientation to the southwest of monuments such as the *Agora* or the Sanctuary of Nabu.7 It was only after the construction of the wall called "of Diocletian," during the period of the Tetrarchy, that the city was divided in two. Unfortunately, very little is known about the evolution and ultimate fate of this zone, despite the recent work by the team of A. Schmidt-
Colinet. In fact, like the Arṣu temple itself, all of the monuments from this part of the site are very poorly preserved. This may have been due to natural erosion, but it is equally possible that the events which followed the capture of the city by Aurelian in AD 273 were a factor.\(^9\) Whatever the date of its destruction be, very little of this sanctuary has been preserved, and the meager remains which have survived reveal precious little about its structure. As Fig. 2 illustrates, for the most part only the foundation still exists, save in the northwest corner where a few portions of a stone wall have been preserved as well.\(^10\) This area of twelve meters (north-south) by fifteen meters (cella?) was, it would seem, surrounded by several rooms which could have served cultic purposes. Only the northern and eastern portions of this complex have been excavated, however, and this reconstruction is, of course, necessarily hypothetical.

The meager architectural remains described above provide a striking contrast to what is known about the sanctuary on the basis of epigraphic sources: namely, that it was the sanctuary of one of the four tribes constitutive of the city of Palmyra, and one of those in which the great benefactors were honored.\(^11\) It was specifically the altar and the *tesserae* discovered in this location that confirmed not only the link between Arṣu and the tribe of the Bani Mattabôl, but also the status of the latter as one of the four tribes.

One must nevertheless admit that the mere presence of *tesserae* in the name of a particular divinity do not, in and of themselves, constitute a proof that the temple was dedicated to that god. In the sanctuary of Baalshamin, for example, none of the *tesserae* discovered there carried that god’s name;\(^12\) Two among them mention the name of Nabu, though such a cult is not explicitly attested in this location (nos. 5 and 6). Likewise, among the most common type of

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8 Schmidt-Colinet–al-As‘ad 2000.
9 Note the remarks of Will 1983, p. 76 (= Will 1995, p. 518): “très détruit anciennement déjà, au moment des événements de 273 ...” It is difficult to know on what basis he made this judgement. Further on (p. 78), he seems to assume (but on what grounds?) that the Hellenistic city had been destroyed by Aurelian’s troops. Perhaps on-going research will supply information on this matter.
10 The probable thickness of the wall was 75 cm.
11 See the text recently published by Drijvers 1995. The statues were erected in the sanctuary of Allat, in the sacred garden (the sanctuary of ‘Aglibol and Malakbel), in the sanctuary of Arṣu, and in the sanctuary of Atargatis (lines 1-2).
12 Dunant 1959.
tesserae found in the sanctuary of Bêl (see below), one finds not Bêl but instead two female divinities of uncertain identification.

The tessera found in one hundred twenty-five examples during the excavation of the temple of Arsû corresponds to a type already known, this bearing number 174 in the Recueil (= PAT 2174).¹³ It is rectangular in form, greater in height than in width, and measures 17 mm. by 23 mm. The specimens were all modeled from a very fine and pure terracotta base, and have a slight orange tint. For convenience, we reproduce here the description given in the Recueil (Figs. 3 and 4):

Face a: Arsou debout, en tunique à manches, cuirasse et anaxyrides, coiffé d’un casque en cloche, terminé par un bouton. De la main droite, il s’appuie sur sa lance; la main gauche semble posée sur la poignée d’un glaive; un petit bouclier est passé à son bras et apparaît derrière l’épaule gauche. En bas à droite, tête de bœuf et globule. À gauche: TYM’MD, Taimoamad; à droite: TB’WT, Tabaout. Grênetis. Face b: Chameau à droite, apparemment chargé. Devant lui, Hermès nu, debout, de face, avec de petites ailes au sommet de la tête. De la main droite, il tient sa bourse et un rameau de feuillage; la main gauche, ramenée sur la poitrine, tient le caducée appuyé sur l’épaule. Filet au pourtour.

The inscription contains only two proper names, of which the first is well attested at Palmyra.¹⁴ The second is found only here; its restitution was proposed on the basis of another tessera (PAT 2184). The most likely reading is probably TD’WT (or TR’WT).¹⁵ A. Caquot has suggested that the ending -WT is the suffix one often finds attached to abstract nouns, and that such a noun is here employed as a proper name.¹⁶ Should the preceding element be derived etymologically from the root YD‘ “to know”? Instead of imagining two separate individuals jointly sponsoring the banquet, one must no doubt interpret the second proper name as the patronym of the first. Such an omission of expected BR is not uncommon.¹⁷

One may attempt to situate more precisely the striking of this tessera

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¹³ P. 12.
¹⁴ Stark 1971, pp. 55 and 117.
¹⁵ Since the reading of the B sign in the tessera PAT 2184 is questionabt is conceivable that it too bore the name TD’WT. Incidentally, it also refers to the cult of Arsû.
¹⁶ Ingholt–Seyrig–Starcky 1955, p. 166.
¹⁷ See, for example, Briquel-Chatonnet 1990; and PAT 1489, PAT 1519, and PAT 1522.
in the history of Palmyra on the basis of palaeography. On the one hand, the estimated date should not be placed too high, since the signs surpass neither the upper nor lower “margins” of the lines of writing. On the other hand, the legs of the signs are still linear, which would normally indicate a rather high dating. In fact, however, it appears that the epigraphic miniaturization necessary for the striking of tesserae was accompanied by certain graphic modifications: more specifically, the use of non-linear strokes in the legs of signs, which is normally considered to be characteristic of a later phase, is rather frequently found in monumental inscriptions. This greatly complicates the firm establishment of datation criteria. The Y forms an acute angle, and its summit is opposed to the line of writing. In a more rounded version, it is a form current at the end of the 1st century and in the 2nd century AD. The sign later has a tendency to be rotated 45°. The T is upright, and resembles our modern “Y” sign, positioned upon the line. The form of this sign, as those of Y and T, finds parallels in PAT 0482 (= CIS 4130), which is dated to AD 95. The M signs have a rather particular form: the right leg is attached directly to the left leg at the summit of the sign, and a horizontal oblique stroke is joined to the left leg as a mere appendage. One finds an identical disposition of the M sign in the tessera PAT 2124 (= RTP 118), which is also, unfortunately, of uncertain datation. A form which is in some respects comparable is found in the text PAT 0472 (= CIS 4123), dated to AD 83. The T is simple, composed of neat linear strokes, without embellishment. Additionally, one notices that the right leg does not rest upon the line, a feature which appears only at the beginning of the 2nd century AD. The leg of the W is linear, and the top of the sign is slightly inclined to the left. The leg of the D/R is linear, and almost upright; it is not pointed. In sum, it appears reasonable to propose a dating toward the middle of the 2nd century AD.

In terms of the sheer number of tesserae of the same type and of their archeological context, this lot sheds fascinating light on the function of the sacred banquets. It is generally admitted that the

18 See, for example, the inscription published by Drijvers 1995 (cited above in note 11).
19 See, for example PAT 1381.
20 See also PAT 2197, PAT 2243, and PAT 2247, to name other examples; these also are undated.
tesserae, having been distributed along with the invitations to participate in these banquets, served as a sort of “admission ticket” to the latter.22 The tesserae under study here, recovered in controlled excavations, seem to have tumbled out of a fallen vase, presumably knocked over at the moment of the destruction of the edifice. Two hypotheses come to mind to explain the uniformity of this lot. In the first, the tesserae had been struck, but not yet distributed: in this case they would have been intended for use in connection with a banquet that never took place. The second hypothesis is that these tesserae represent those brought to the banquet by the invited guests: in this case we can suppose that the collection was assembled by the person in charge of admission at the entry to the banquet room, who tossed the collected tesserae into a vase as they were received. The first hypothesis seems to us less probable, if only because a few examples of this tessera had been found elsewhere, prior to the discovery of the sanctuary and the vase. We are entirely ignorant, however, of the provenance of such isolated token finds. It cannot be excluded that they too derive from the contents of the vase (see the photo), whether they were found on the surface or collected at this precise location. It is possible that all the tesserae of the various banquets which took place during a certain span of time were archived; such would at least explain why so many have been found.

The number of recovered tesserae which are of the same type23 also permits a few reflections. It implies first of all a banquet in which a considerably large number of guests had assembled. On present data, however, only one banquet location was of sufficient size to accommodate such an assembly, the banquet hall of the temple of Bêl, where, according to E. Will,24 over one hundred individuals could have found a place among the beds of the banquet.25 Nothing of

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23 One hundred twenty-five were found in the course of regular excavations, but others, of unknown provenance, are known. Five exemplars are mentioned in Ingholt–Seyrig–Starcky 1955. A private collection in Damascus, which we have begun to inventory, contains another three. It is unlikely, of course, that this listing should be exhaustive.


25 H. Seyrig interpreted also the building to the west of the Agora as a small temple, subsequently converted into a banquet hall, in which he supposed about forty guests could have assembled (Seyrig 1940b, pp. 236-239 = Seyrig 1985, pp. 235-248), but on this see now Balty 1991, pp. 50-56 and 591-593.
the kind applies to the temple of Arṣu, at least inasmuch as the meager remains permit a reconstruction. The conventional representation of guests in pairs, reclining on beds as they eat, such as one can observe, for example, on certain *tesserae*, was probably not the case here. Only the *rab marzeah*, the priests of the cult of Arṣu, and certain “V.I.P.’s”26 of the tribe of the Bani Mattabōl were probably so installed, most likely in one of the smaller annexes of the cella described above. The other guests must have crowded into any free space available throughout the sanctuary.

Such an assemblage of *tesserae* of the same type is not, in fact, without precedent. In the foundations of the banquet hall situated in the court of the temple of Bêl, a large number of *tesserae* were recovered, among the drainage and washing installations. For certain types, more than a hundred examples are attested (RTP 422 and 429). It is necessary, however, to note that this location concerned all of the residents of Palmyra, unlike the tribal sanctuaries, such as that of Arṣu. In addition, *tesserae* mentioning other gods than Bêl, Nabu for example, were found there. It is thus reasonable that very large numbers of guests could be there accommodated.

This lot of *tesserae* allows us better to evaluate the popularity of the cult of Arṣu in the 2nd century AD27. It is known that this cult was active in the course of the 3rd century AD. In fact, several inscriptions mention the construction of a basilica for the god Arṣu in the Great Colonnade.28 This could be an indication that the sanctuary, situated as it is in the old part of the city, had been somewhat abandoned by the Mattabōl tribe, who preferred in this period to honor their god in the new urban center which lined the Great Colonnade.29 Such an abandonment could explain the fact that the archives of the temple had preserved this evidence regarding ancient banquets.

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26 Following the terminology of Will 1997, p. 878.
27 Gawlikowski 1990, pp. 2621-2623 and 2648-2649.
29 Yon 2002, pp. 75-78.
Fig. 1. Jar containing tesserae (Photo: Palmyra Museum)

Fig. 2. Foundations of the Arsé temple (Photo: Palmyra Museum)
Fig. 3. PAT 2174 (= RTP 174) Private collection, face a.
Fig. 4. PAT 2174 (= RTP 174). Private collection, face b