

Palmyra in Perspective

8–9 December 2022

Organiser:
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)



Front cover

1. Temple of Baalshamin (Photo: Rubina Raja).
2. Temple of Allat (Photo: Rubina Raja).
3. View of the Temple of Baalshamin and the courtyard next to it (Photo: Rubina Raja).
4. Steppe Desert close to Palmyra (Photo: Rubina Raja).
5. Female fragmented sculpture originally from a sarcophagus lid (Photo: Anders Sune Berg; ©Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen).
6. Tessera from the collection in Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, showing servants mixing wine (Photo: Rubina Raja).
7. The so-called Triumphal Arch in Palmyra (Photo: Rubina Raja).

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Outline

After more than a decade of intense scholarship undertaken on Palmyra – independent of, but unfortunately in parallel with, the civil war in Syria, which still is raging in the country – we now stand at the end of the Palmyra Portrait Project. The corpus, comprising almost 4,000 Palmyrene sculptural objects, is in press and will, when published in 2023, change the way that sculptural material from the Roman period must be dealt with in the future. There is no doubt that the corpus will be the baseline for a paradigm shift in scholarship on Roman-period sculpture, as well as the archaeology of the site more broadly. Over the years, numerous new research questions have arisen out of the Palmyra Portrait Project. Some of these have been tackled in the spin-off projects of the Palmyra Portrait Project: Archive Archaeology: Preserving and Sharing Palmyra's Cultural Heritage through Harald Ingholt's Digital Archives and Circular Economy and Urban Sustainability in Antiquity: The Case of Palmyra. However, numerous other questions have been researched in tandem with colleagues around the world, and many have initiated new projects of their own, focusing on a variety of other questions concerning the archaeology and history of Palmyra.

This conference aims to bring together scholars working on Palmyra and open a joint reflection on the scholarship undertaken on the site over the past decade – also, but not only, in light of the conflict in Syria and the massive destruction of cultural heritage at the site and beyond. Furthermore, the intention is to set out a new set of research questions that must be answered collaboratively in the future and to identify the evidence and skills needed in order to address new avenues of research. The key questions to be addressed in each paper – through the evidence you are working with – are:

- What has been the core of your research on Palmyra in the past ten years? And what difference has it made to the field overall?
- Which lines of enquiry are missing in the landscape of Palmyrene scholarship? And what sort of data will therefore need to be collected and tackled in a different manner?
- Which parts of your research questions could ideally be expanded to the broader region of the Near East?
- Which research question do you need someone else working on Palmyra to answer in order for your research to benefit from it in the future?
- How, if at all, has the ongoing conflict in Syria and the destruction of cultural heritage shaped your approach to Palmyra?

The conference papers will be published in the series *Studies in the Archaeology and History of Palmyra* (Brepols Publishers).

Programme: 8 December

8:30–9:00 Coffee and rolls (3rd floor)

SESSION 1 (CHAIR: RUBINA RAJA)

9:00–9:30 **Perspectives on Palmyra**
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

9:30–10:10 **The Past, Present, and Future of Post-Classical Studies in
Palmyra: A Critical Overview**
Emanuele E. Intagliata (Università degli Studi di Milano)

10:10–10:50 **The Contribution of the Palmyra Portrait Project to Research on
the Epigraphy of Palmyra**
Jean-Baptiste Yon (Laboratoire HiSoMa)

10:50–11:10 Coffee break

SESSION 2 (CHAIR: CHRIS HALLETT)

- 11:10–11:50 **Using Legacy Data: Harald Ingholt's Archive and Excavation Diaries**
Olympia Bobou, Rubina Raja, and Julia Steding (Aarhus University)
- 11:50–12:30 **Bel in Perspective: Selective Destructions, Selective Memories**
Jen Baird (Birkbeck, University of London), Zena Kamash (Royal Holloway, University of London), and Rubina Raja (Aarhus University).
- 12:30–13:10 **Does Palmyra Still Have a Future?**
Annie Sartre-Fauriat (University of Artois)
- 13:10–14:10 Lunch (3rd floor)
- 14:10–14:50 **Palmyra and the Problem of Parthian Art**
Henry Colburn (New York University)
- 15:00–17:30 Visit to the Glyptotek
- 18:00 Speakers' dinner (Restaurant Pluto, Borgergade 16)

Programme: 9 December

8:30–9:00 Coffee (3rd floor)

SESSION 3 (CHAIR: CHRIS HALLETT)

9:00–9:40 **Shifting our Perspective on the Female Portraits**
Maura K. Heyn (University of North Carolina – Greensboro)

9:40–10:20 **Small Coins, Big Implications?**
Kevin Butcher (University of Warwick)

10:20–10:40 Coffee break

10:40–11:20 **Palmyrene Long-Distance Trade in Perspective**
Eivind H. Seland (University of Bergen)

11:20–12:00 **Moving South: Long-Distance Contacts and New Alleys of Research**
Katia Schörle (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique)

12:00–13:00 Lunch (3rd floor)

SESSION 4 (CHAIR: TED KAIZER)

- 13:00–13:40 **Perspectives on the Palmyrene Religious Epigraphy: Cultural Context, Presentation in Space, Organization of Religious Life**
Aleksandra Kubiak-Schneider (University of Wrocław)
- 13:40–14:20 **Palmyre et les autres**
Maurice Sartre (University of Tours)
- 14:20–14:40 Coffee break
- 14:40–15:20 **Systematic Reconstruction of the Population Dynamics in Roman Palmyra Using Formal Computational Modelling Methods**
Iza Romanowska, Joan Campmany Jiménez, Katarína Mokráňová, and Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)
- 15:20–16:00 **Discussion**
moderated by Chris Hallett, Ted Kaizer, and Rubina Raja
- 16:00–17:00 Drinks at the Academy
- 18:00 Speakers' dinner (Kiin Kiin Bao Bao, Vesterbrogade 96)

Abstracts

The Past, Present, and Future of Post-Classical Studies in Palmyra: A Critical Overview

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The fall of Zenobia and the alleged siege and destruction of Palmyra (AD 272–273) had traditionally been interpreted by the scholarly community as the beginning of an inexorable phase of decline of this settlement. However, studies published in the past decade have been pivotal to reframing our understanding of Palmyra in Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period; it is now evident that the site survived the catastrophic events of the late third century to become a new city whose function was rather different than before. In fact, Palmyra (re-)grew to host a sizable urban community capable of large building enterprises. However, although many questions about this critical phase of the history of Palmyra have been answered, many others remain.

What is the future of the study of post-Classical Palmyra? How can we enhance our understanding of the late antique and early Islamic history of Palmyra, given that it is now difficult to gather new, fresh data from this site? This paper aims to explore the *status quaestionis* of the research dedicated to post-Roman Palmyra. It also aims to identify research areas worthy of attention and viable options to continue this research.

The Contribution of the Palmyra Portrait Project to research on the epigraphy of Palmyra

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Some years ago, at another Palmyra conference at a different location, I presented the projects relating to the epigraphy of Palmyra at a time when fieldwork had been impossible for five years—and unfortunately the possibility of fieldwork is still very remote. At that time, the Palmyra Portrait Project (PPP) was in its early years. Now that several volumes related to the project (most prominently Harald Ingholt's diaries and, in the very near future, his archives) have been published and the corpus itself will be published next year, the conference at Copenhagen is a welcome opportunity to review what has been done on the epigraphy of Palmyra in the context of the project. New personal names, additions to the lexicon of Palmyrene Aramaic, new inscriptions, and interpretations of already known inscriptions have been made available to scholars. Obviously, these raise many new issues and research questions to be discussed. To follow up on the questions presented in the conference invitation, there are topics and lines of enquiry that call for future research; one example that springs to mind could be the necessity to improve our knowledge of palaeography. New research on this topic, possibly expanded to other regions of the Near East, could help to better grasp the chronology of Palmyrene epigraphy and have an impact on prosopography or social history.

Using Legacy Data: Harald Ingholt's Archive and Excavation Diaries

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Even though Palmyrene artworks have been of interest to antiquarians and the general public since the 18th century, systematic archaeological research in Palmyra goes back to the time of the French Mandate in Syria. One of the archaeologists excavating at Palmyra in the 1920s was Harald Ingholt. His annotated photographic archive together with his diaries have formed the core of our research on Palmyra in the last ten years, bringing to light objects that have not been published elsewhere or are currently in private collections, in addition to adding to our knowledge of objects that are in museum collections and have been documented by other scholars. The ongoing civil war, however, has made his archive an invaluable resource as objects recorded by Ingholt are now destroyed or their whereabouts are unknown.

Dealing with legacy data, however, also means dealing with the biases of the archaeologist who created the archive, and, in effect, with the preconceptions of their era. While unlocking the potential of the archive as a scholarly resource is a laborious but fairly straightforward process, untangling Ingholt's archival material from early 20th century colonialism and imperialism in Syria during the French Mandate is more difficult. Beginning with the understanding of what Ingholt deemed important to record in his archives, we can begin to repopulate Ingholt's world between excavation and urban milieu in Syria of the 1920s.

Bel in Perspective: Selective Destructions, Selective Memories

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This paper looks at the building usually known as the Temple of Bel at Palmyra, and its transformation over two millennia, and asks why and how certain parts of its history have come to be seen as the most important ones. Drawing on archival documents and photographs, we focus on its transformation in the twentieth century, including through the eyes of the archaeologists who worked at the site, and what they did – or did not – record.

We will provide a brief survey of the main phases of the building in the Roman period and beyond. Through an analysis of e.g. archaeological archives, photographic archives, and guidebooks, we will explore the ways in which the building and its immediate surroundings have been emphasized, ignored, appropriated, and 'heritagized'. We will demonstrate that the built heritage of the Temple of Bel has long been the focus of attention, resulting in a concomitant lack of attention to the living population. This is a habit that has had severe consequences in the events of the recent past where the destruction of the building, and the haunting images of the lone surviving gateway that now circulate widely, have been emphasized while the voices, stories, and experiences of those who lived through those events have been sidelined or even ignored.

Does Palmyra Still Have a Future?

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As I am not particularly involved in scientific research on Palmyra, the approaches I suggest are rather reflections on the areas that are still incomplete, and these perspectives are addressed to the researchers still active and to those who, hopefully, in the years to come, will be called to work on the site itself.

In the absence of being able to go to the field since 2011, publications have multiplied, and it is to be hoped that, in the future, this will not slow down. From this point of view, the creation of the Palmyra Portrait Project is a great initiative, which allows access to scattered documentation that is little or not accessible. Thus, new research on portraits will be able to emerge in order to better understand the Palmyrene population and society through their way of presenting themselves. It is also expected that the publication of the corpus of inscriptions, notably Aramaic, will be pursued in order to complete the contributions of the images, in a city where the field of religious beliefs and practices is poorly documented.

In connection with other research (stratigraphy, study of pollens, water circulation, trade routes, etc.) it may be possible to move towards a better knowledge of local economic activities and their fluctuations, in the relations of Palmyra with the steppe world and the villages of Palmyrene, and with more distant worlds.

The eventual resumption of cultural relations with Syria in a context of peace should not aim at a hypothetical reconstruction of the destroyed monuments, but should on the contrary encourage excavations in the field, in particular the uncovering of new tombs, the exploration of the Hellenistic part and the area of the Temple of Bel in order to provide information on the earliest periods of the city of which we know so little.

Palmyra and the Problem of Parthian Art

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What can Palmyra tell us about Parthian art? The city was never under Parthian control, and previous scholarship on Palmyrene art has focused mainly on its interactions with Roman art and its influence on the art of Dura-Europos, its neighbour to the east. Yet it is undeniable that there are convergences in style and iconography between Palmyrene art and the art of the Parthian period in Mesopotamia and western Iran. These include frontal renderings of the human form, the presence of the Iranian riding costume and reclining banqueters, and even the treatment of bodily proportions. Rather than focusing on origins of certain motifs or the artistic influence of one cultural entity upon another, it is more useful to consider what these convergences might tell us about the nature of Parthian imperialism. Following Mikhail Rostovtzeff, I argue that Parthian art was a cogent – if currently unknowable – phenomenon that affected other artistic traditions within and adjacent to the empire as people forged putatively ‘Parthian’ identities for themselves. In the case of Palmyra, ‘Parthian’ was one of many identities that the people there considered to be useful, appropriate or otherwise desirable, and this is reflected in the art they produced. Palmyra, therefore, is an essential part of the solution to the problem of Parthian art.

Shifting our Perspective on the Female Portraits

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Since 2012, the focus of my research, which has profited in myriad ways from the dialogue and exposure to materials made possible through the Palmyra Portrait Project, has largely been the female portraits and the insight they provide into identity and agency in ancient Palmyra. My research has shed light on the mutability of female portraiture versus male portraiture with regard to dress, attributes, and gesture, and the significance of these representational trends for understanding the function of the portrait in the tomb. I have an ongoing interest in the dialectic between female representation in the tombs and the experience of women in the living society: how can the funerary portraiture contribute to an understanding of the lived experience and vice versa? Such an analysis would be particularly useful in Palmyra, where knowledge about daily life is not easily accessible. Attention to this transition from the city of the living to the city of the dead would focus on the experience of moving from the relationships and activities of the city to the portraits in the tomb, and how these transitions and changing contexts would have framed the impression of the funerary portraits. Such an approach would require a theoretical underpinning drawing on the ideas of Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty. It would also benefit from a better understanding of who saw the portraits in the tomb; what kind of access was maintained; how often the tombs visited; and the kinds of activities that took place there.

Small Coins, Big Implications?

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The study of the production of coinage in Antiquity seems to focus heavily on the supply of coin, particularly the role of state transfer or payment. The small coins of Palmyra, and other classes of small coins from the Roman East, raise interesting questions about the potential role of demand on production.

Palmyrene Long-Distance Trade in Perspective

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Palmyra's key role in the long-distance trade between the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean was part of the city's claim to fame in Antiquity and has remained at the core of scholarly interest in the Syrian desert-city since its rediscovery in the late 17th century. Looking at the last decade of scholarship in the field of Palmyrene long-distance trade, our general understanding of the subject has improved through the investigation of specialized case studies and topics such as infrastructure, itineraries, organization, the roles of religion, temples, elites, nomads, the natural environment, the diaspora, and the development over time. Further questions have been raised regarding markets, scale, and elite involvement. Issues that need to be addressed in a broader setting include that of Palmyra's perceived exceptionality. Could Palmyra inform the study of other frontier communities of the Near East? Are insights from the quantitative turn in the field of Roman Economies, and the archaeologically much better documented Red Sea region, transferable to the Palmyrene setting? New material, especially from survey archaeology, is much needed in order to test, develop, and expand on recent insights, which have primarily resulted from new readings of already well-known material.

Moving South: Long-Distance Contacts and New Alleys of Research

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This paper aims to focus on Palmyra's connections to southern places and in particular investigating or thinking about connections to the southern routes, more specifically via the Red Sea and Arabian Peninsula, as well as the oases of the wider East that have similar connected questions and lines of research. The idea is to push for further research interaction. For example, how did Palmyrenes and Nabatean interact? Surely frankincense transited, but may there have been another commodity transiting between the two places – if so, how and which ones? One of the new interesting discoveries at Hegra, a southern Nabatean oasis, is silk, although other textiles of clear Indian Ocean origin have been found. Perhaps the concept of silk routes and silk cities may be a timely concept to investigate in order to reassess Palmyra in its wider context. Certainly connections between oases or 'silk' cities were not direct as in the case of Nabateans; probably Petra would have been the more direct central place in terms of north–south connections, but keeping in mind the wider web of connections may shed light on new perspectives and research alleys along the string of oases or 'silk' cities of the East.

Perspectives on the Palmyrene Religious Epigraphy: Cultural Context, Presentation in Space, Organization of Religious Life

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The cultural context of the Palmyrene cults is very complex: from local through the ancient Mesopotamian roots to the new clothes of Graeco-Roman interpretations and habits. Research on the religious systems and practices of Palmyrenes delivers more than 100 years of scholarship. My PhD research on the votive inscriptions shed light on the strategies of naming the gods in Palmyra and on the worshippers using the specific formulae in the form of address to the gods, and solved the pertinent question of the anonymity of the worshipped deity. It opened a path to go beyond the gods themselves and look at the organization of the cults and administration of the temples. This issue was never studied before. My new projects aim to explore the organization of the religious life within a sanctuary from an administrative and economic prism, worshippers, their identity, their role in the cults, and their perception of the gods through the epigraphic and iconographic sources presented in the well-defined space of the Palmyrene sanctuaries. This paper will present in two big clusters my ongoing research on the epigraphic culture with a focus on the inscriptions related to the cults and gods in Palmyra as well as on the worshippers of Allat and Atargatis.

Palmyre et les autres

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Plus de trois siècles après la redécouverte de Palmyre par les Européens, un siècle et demi de travaux scientifiques, que peut-on attendre des travaux de l'avenir, si celui-ci s'éclaircit et qu'un vrai travail scientifique peut reprendre un jour ? Pour l'historien du Proche-Orient gréco-romain, toute découverte des périodes plus anciennes – y compris le II^e Millénaire – peut changer les perspectives, mais il me semble que trois questions semblent largement sans réponse ou avec des réponses insuffisantes.

Premièrement, quelles furent les relations (politiques, économiques, culturelles) entre Palmyre et les royaumes grecs issus de la conquête d'Alexandre qui l'entourent de tous les côtés (sauf, peut-être vers le Sud) ? À moins d'imaginer une oasis sans aucune importance (ce que démentent, apparemment, les fouilles allemandes du « quartier hellénistique »), Palmyre a nécessairement entretenu des relations avec les pouvoirs installés en Mésopotamie et en Syrie. L'unique probable allusion de Polybe à un Palmyrénien au temps d'Antiochos III (il ne mentionne d'ailleurs pas Palmyre explicitement) constitue un indice précieux mais insuffisant : seule la fouille étendue du quartier sud-ouest peut apporter davantage. L'usage du grec avant l'annexion romaine incite à envisager des relations anciennes.

Deuxièmement, les textes d'époque impériale éclairent quelques aspects des relations conflictuelles avec les gens du désert. On ne peut oublier qu'entre oasiens et nomades, il s'agit de deux modes de vie radicalement différents et en même temps de deux sociétés intimement soudées. L'exploration du territoire peut-elle conduire à de nouvelles découvertes ? Les travaux norvégiens, après ceux de Daniel Schlumberger, sont porteurs de beaucoup d'espoirs.

Troisièmement, la multiplication des travaux archéologiques dans des sites du désert, proches ou lointains, doit inciter à multiplier les études comparatives. Il est frappant que depuis Rostovtzeff – qui faisait fausse route en incluant Gerasa dans ses Caravan Cities (1932) – on n'a guère songé à comparer, fût-ce pour les distinguer, Pétra, Hegra, Dumata, Leukè Kômé. Naturellement, des travaux en Babylonie et le long de l'Euphrate irakien seraient également souhaitables, mais les perspectives ne peuvent qu'en être lointaines.

Systematic Reconstruction of the Population Dynamics in Roman Palmyra Using Formal Computational Modelling Methods

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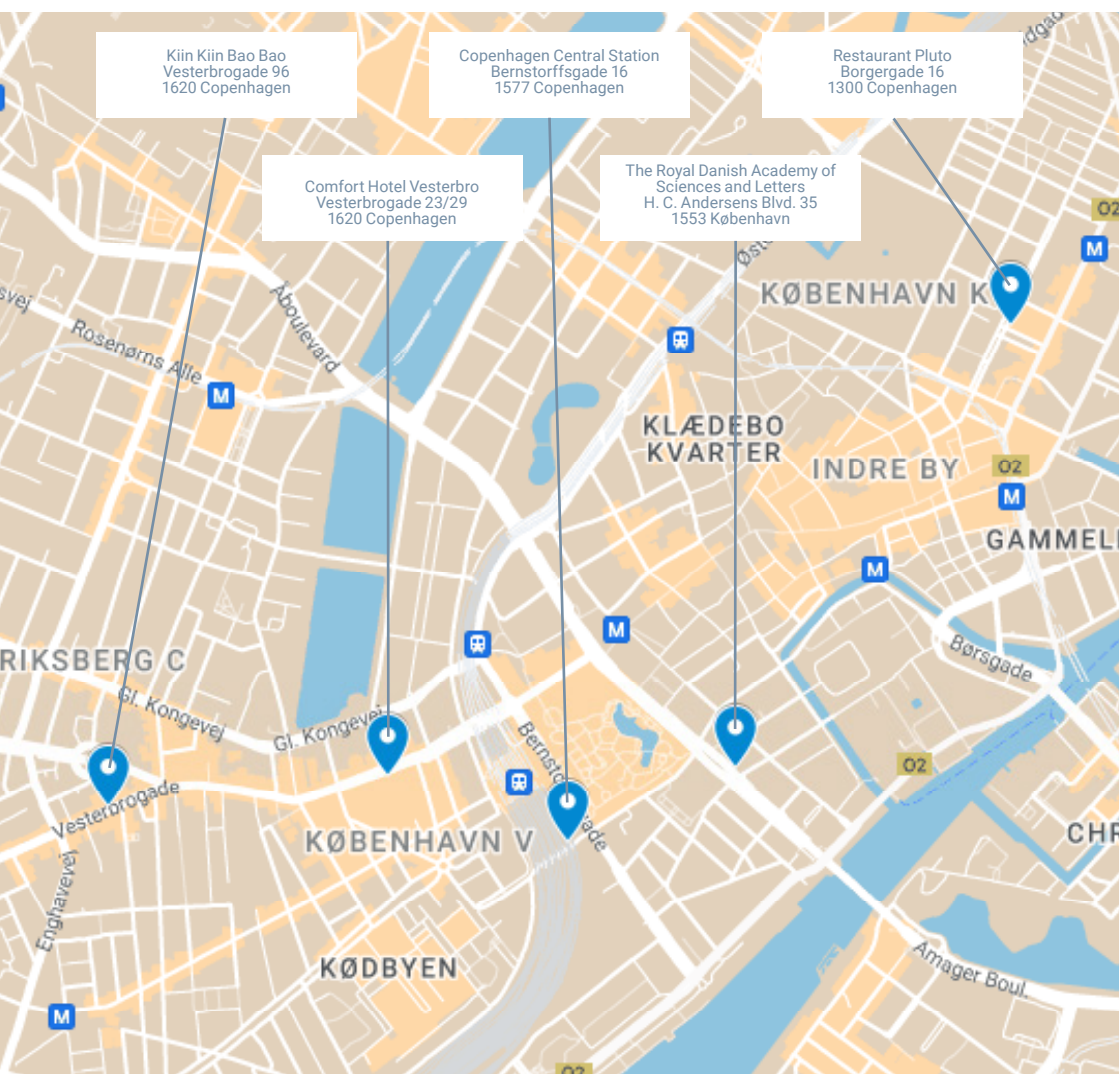
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Demography is the backbone of any systematic description of human groups in the present and the past. Without a good baseline for the number of people involved, reconstructions of economic, social, or cultural processes are hard to develop. It is particularly critical for evaluating food security of past groups in the face of changing environmental and social circumstances. Here, we apply formal modelling approaches to study the demographic reality of the important Roman city of Palmyra against the backdrop of climate change and historical events.

Despite its location in the semi-arid environment and therefore lacking a strong hinterland, Palmyra grew from an oasis with a small caravan settlement to become one of the major geopolitical players in the region and an important trading city between the Roman and Parthian Empires. Thus, its demographic trajectory exceeds what would be expected from a resource-based simple linear model of urban growth. A combination of modelling techniques including land-use and paleoclimate modelling, built environment reconstructions, and artefact frequency counts enabled us to estimate the population changes in Palmyra, but also showed the interplay between the growing population of Palmyra and the availability of food resources. The findings agree at large with the previous reconstructions of the trends in population dynamics in Palmyra but also reveal signs of potential for increased food insecurity around the mid-third century CE, a period of significant social and historical transformations. The use of formal quantitative techniques means that these results are fully reproducible, and the research pipelines can be applied to other ancient cities in a similar environmental context.

Venues



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Conference website

<https://projects.au.dk/palmyraportrait/events/palmyra-in-perspective>



Book of abstracts Palmyra in Perspective, 8–9 December 2022

Organiser: Rubina Raja (UrbNet, Aarhus University)

Editors: Christina A. Levisen and Rubina Raja

Back cover: View of Palmyra (Wikimedia, Public Domain); Camels in Palmyra (Wikimedia, Public Domain)