

Palmyra, the Roman Empire, and the Third-Century Crisis: Zooming in and Scaling up from the Evidence

7–8 March 2024

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Khirbet al-Khalde, July 2023, overview photo of the fort ruins surveyed by the Khirbet al-Khalde Archaeological Project (Photo: Rubina Raja).

Front cover

The Wadi by Khirbet al-Khalde in July 2023 (Photo: Rubina Raja).

Table of Contents

Outline	4
Programme	6
Abstracts	
Rubina Raja: Palmyra and the Third-Century 'Crisis' at Home.....	11
Andrew Wilson: The Palmyrene Revolt, the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and Red Sea Trade in the Late Third Century.....	12
Tomas Larsen Høisæter: The Crisis of the 3rd Century in East and Inner Asia: Collapse and Change.....	13
Nathanael Andrade: Third-Century Palmyra after Das palmyrenische Teilreich? Palmyra and the Movement of Jewish and Christian Practices	14
Matthew Canepa: The Iranian World in the Third Century: A Time of Rupture and Renovation.....	15
Eivind Heldaas Seland: The Indian Ocean World in the Third Century CE.....	16
Emanuele E. Intagliata: Surviving the Crisis: Palmyra after the Third Century.....	17
Lucinda Dirven: Religious Life in Palmyra during the Crisis of the Third Century.....	18
Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet: The Development of Aramaic Writing between Palmyra and Edessa and the Turn of the Third Century.....	19
Wolfgang Spickermann: Religious Trends in the Roman Empire in the Third Century.....	20
Jean-Baptiste Yon: Inscriptions in Third-Century Palmyra: Where Is the Crisis?	21
Olympia Bobou: Palmyrene Art Production in the Third Century.....	22
Jen Baird: Sheltering from Crisis: Living the Third Century in Roman Syria.....	23
Venues	24
Organisers	25
Conference webpage.....	25

Outline

The so-called Third Century Crisis has been a pivotal theme around which many discussions and much research have revolved over the past decades. While some of the points have been called into question in recent scholarship, the third century, and particularly the five decades after 235 CE, has traditionally been seen as a period of deep crisis for the Roman Empire. The period, however, also represents the peak of Palmyrene prosperity and urban development. It spans the time of Palmyrene drift towards monarchy and political hegemony in the Near East, as well as the city's bid for imperial power and its brutal downfall in the years 270–273, followed by the transformation from semi-autonomous regional power to a Roman garrison town on the eastern frontier of the Empire. As more than a decade of research under the auspices of the Palmyra Portrait Project and the later Circular Economy Project draws to a close, we would like to highlight this critical period in Palmyrene and Roman history in a conference, which will be organised around sessions of two papers whereof one focuses on the evidence from Palmyra and the other on the broader evidence from the Roman Empire and beyond in order to, among other things, to hold the state of the evidence up against each other and to create a forum in which we can zoom in and out depending on the parallels or lack thereof in the evidence, and push for a more critical and detailed engagement with processes, local and regional situations as well as bring a more nuanced picture to the table.

The conference will gather specialists on Palmyra as well as on the Roman world and neighbouring regions in the third century. While one paper asks what happens in the Syrian Desert City, the other presents recent perspectives on the situation in the Roman Empire in the third century. Topics include urban, religious, political, military, environmental, and economic developments. We hope that the juxtaposition of case studies from a city that long seemed to benefit from the changing geopolitical situation with the archaeology and history of an empire in transformation will shed light not only on the destiny of Palmyra but also on the nature of the changes that took place in the Roman Empire in the same period.



The ruins of the so-called Synagogue-Church in Gerasa (modern Jerash) (Photo: Danish-German Jerash Northwest Quarter Project).

Programme: Thursday 7 March

8:45–9:00 **Welcome and Introduction**
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University) and Eivind Heldaas Seland
(University of Bergen)

Session 1: Was There a Third-Century Crisis, Can We Measure It?
Moderator: Eivind Heldaas Seland

9:00–9:45 **Palmyra and the Third-Century 'Crisis' at Home**
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

9:45–10:00 Coffee (3rd floor)

10:00–10:45 **The Palmyrene Revolt, the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and Red Sea Trade in the Late Third Century**
Andrew Wilson (University of Oxford)

10:45–11:30 **The Crisis of the 3rd Century in East and Inner Asia: Collapse and Change**
Tomas Larsen Høisæter (Western Norway University of Applied Sciences)

11:30–12:30 Lunch (3rd floor)

Session 2: Palmyra and the Third-Century World
Moderator: Rubina Raja

12:30–13:15 **Third-Century Palmyra after das palmyrenische Teilreich? Palmyra and the Movement of Jewish and Christian Practices**
Nathanael Andrade (Binghamton University)

13:15–14:00 **The Iranian World in the Third Century: A Time of Rupture and Renovation**
Matthew Canepa (University of California, Irvine)

14:00–14:45 **The Indian Ocean World in the Third Century CE**
Eivind Heldaas Seland, University of Bergen

15:00 – 17:30 Visit to Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

18:00–20:00 Speakers' dinner
Les Trois Cochons, Værnedamsvej 10

Programme: Friday 8 March

8:45–9:15 Coffee (3rd floor)

Session 3: Army and Empire
Moderator: Andrew Wilson

9:15–10:00 **Surviving the Crisis: Palmyra after the Third Century**
Emanuele E. Intagliata (Università degli Studi di Milano)

10:00–10:15 Coffee (3rd floor)

Session 4: Religion
Moderator: Rubina Raja

10:15–11:00 **Religious Life in Palmyra during the Crisis of the Third Century**
Lucinda Dirven (Radboud University Nijmegen)11:00–11:45 **The Development of Aramaic Writing between Palmyra and Edessa and the Turn of the Third Century**
Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet (CNRS)11:45–12:30 **Religious Trends in the Roman Empire in the Third Century**
Wolfgang Spickermann (University of Graz)

12:30–13:30 Lunch (3rd floor)

Session 4: Changing Material Worlds: Epigraphy, Art, Houses
Moderator: Christopher Hallett

13:30–14:15 **Inscriptions in Third-Century Palmyra: Where Is the Crisis?**
Jean-Baptiste Yon, Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée –
Jean Pouilloux14:15–15:00 **Palmyrene Art Production in the Third Century**
Olympia Bobou (Aarhus University)15:00–15:45 **Sheltering from Crisis: Living the Third Century in Roman Syria**
Jen Baird (Birkbeck College, University of London)15:45–16:30 **Closing Remarks and Discussion**
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University) and Eivind Heldaas Seland
(University of Bergen)

16:30–17:30 Drinks at the Academy (3rd floor)

Abstracts



The Monumental Arch, Palmyra, 2010 (Photo: Rubina Raja).

Palmyra and the Third-Century 'Crisis' at Home

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Palmyra in the third century has long been a focus in the discussions about the third-century crisis in the Roman Empire. Being situated, as Pliny noted, between two great powers located Palmyra close to the border of both the Parthian and the Roman Empire. This fringe or edge location has often been taken to both have given Palmyra's society an advantage and a disadvantage in the geopolitical power play. While such fluctuations in the influence of Palmyra on the surrounding regions, in particular in terms of the organization of the caravan and water-borne trade, certainly can be traced, it remains much more unclear how the geopolitical fluctuations in fact influenced the city itself. This paper addresses that situation, looking inwards to Palmyra and its archaeological and epigraphic evidence from the third century CE, and begins to disentangle the data – which on the one hand is plentiful and on the other hand is full of lacunae – presenting us both with problems and possibilities for understanding Palmyrene society's development in the third century in a more nuanced light.

The Palmyrene Revolt, the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and Red Sea Trade in the Late Third Century

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This paper examines the collateral effects of the Palmyrene revolt on the long-distance trade networks that linked India, the Arabian peninsula, and the east African coast to Roman Egypt via the Red Sea. It presents and analyses evidence that the Palmyrene revolt had far-reaching knock-on effects on maritime trade and on the overland trade routes across the Eastern Desert of Egypt, not only through the eventual dismantling of associations of Palmyrene shipowners in the Red Sea, but also through the withdrawal of Palmyrene units from forts along the route between Berenike and Coptos. It argues that the abandonment of these forts was a key factor in the loss of Roman control of the Eastern Desert to the Blemmyes, who went so far as to capture Coptos in the 270s. This severed the overland trade connection between the Red Sea and the Nile, forcing shipping to beat up the northern Red Sea with great difficulty against prevailing northerly headwinds. Although there was something of a resurgence in Indo-Mediterranean trade via the Red Sea in the mid to later fourth century, it never achieved the same levels as the trade of the mid first to mid third centuries, and this is arguably because of the resultant higher transport costs, and extended travel times, once the overland desert routes ceased to be viable. This disruption to trade patterns can therefore be seen as one of the byproducts of the Palmyrene revolt.

The Crisis of the 3rd Century in East and Inner Asia: Collapse and Change

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While the reality and severity of the 'Crisis of the Third Century' in the Roman Empire has been questioned and debated by scholars in recent years, the reality of a crisis in the third century cannot be questioned when it comes to China. Following a prolonged period of decline, marked by political chaos, rebellions, and destructive civil wars, the last emperor of the Han dynasty was forced to abdicate in 220 CE. The following hundred years was characterized by the political division of China into several successor states, migration from the north, and frequent warfare. The old Han territories were briefly unified by the Jin dynasty in 280 CE, but a series of civil wars and rebellions soon led to the complete political fracturing of the old Han territories, a state that would persist until the late sixth century. Naturally, the third century has been read as a period of political chaos and collapse in Chinese historiography. Yet, when looking at the wider situation in East and Inner Asia in the third century, the outlook is far less bleak. This contribution will give an overview of the third century in Chinese history and the decline of centralized imperial power in this period. It will then concentrate on the developments on the old northern borderlands of the Han dynasty, taking the Tarim Basin (West) and Korea (East) as two examples. The paper will argue that the weakening of imperial power created new opportunities in these areas for political and economic growth.

Third-Century Palmyra after *Das palmyrenische Teilreich*? Palmyra and the Movement of Jewish and Christian Practices

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Since its publication in 2001, Udo Hartmann's *Das palmyrenische Teilreich* has cast a huge shadow on research devoted to third-century Palmyra and the Near East. A monumental contribution to the imperial and political history of the period, the detailed work is also a valuable resource for social relations, economic production, and religious and cultural life at the oasis city when the dynasts Odainath and Zenobia were consolidating power. For decades research on third-century Palmyra or the careers of Odainath and Zenobia have had to reckon with its core narrative, even when critiquing or refining it.

What new paths of exploration can we find for third-century Palmyra? Taking its cue from recent inquiries into Palmyra's economy and religious life, this paper emphasizes its vital role as a continuous vector for connectivity between the south Levant and south Mesopotamia even as the caravan trade had peaks and lows. By the third century, these regions famously hosted a variety of Jewish and Christian communities, with some of these practicing what scholars sometimes call 'Jewish Christianity'. Can we detect the movement of their beliefs or practices through Palmyra or among Palmyrenes during the second and third centuries? Did Palmyra perhaps play a pivotal role in connecting such communities? This paper addresses such questions.

The Iranian World in the Third Century: A Time of Rupture and Renovation

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This paper explores the changes that the Iranian world experienced over the course of the third century and their impact on the Roman West. The rise of the Sasanian Empire (224–642 CE) was pivotal in these processes and marks a major point of rupture in Iranian history. Supplanting nearly five centuries of Arsacid rule in Western Asia and reducing the Kushan Empire in South Asia to a rump state, the Sasanians brutally and efficiently welded together an empire that eventually extended from the Tigris to the Hindu Kush. Naming their new creation Ērānšahr, 'the Empire of the Iranians', the Sasanians were the first to explicitly deploy 'Iran' and 'Iranian' as a concrete political entity and identity. Moreover, under the Sasanians, ancient Iranian epic traditions and even the Zoroastrian religion itself, took the forms in which they are recognizable today. The Sasanians not only transformed the Iranian world but were a major catalyst of Rome's 'Crisis of the Third Century'. The first two kings of the dynasty, Ardashir I and Shabur I, put pressure on Rome's eastern frontiers, raiding into Roman territory, even sacking Antioch, with multiple Roman emperors humbled or even meeting their end while campaigning against the Sasanians. While not a mercantile empire, the early Sasanians also enacted policies to capture and leverage trade routes. They destroyed Hatra (240/1), crushed the Palmyrene trading network, and eventually captured more and more of Indian Ocean and Central Asian trade at the expense of Rome. Taking shape during this pivotal period of the third century and fully developing over the course of late Antiquity, Sasanian art, architecture, and court culture created a new dominant global aristocratic common culture, which fascinated the Sasanians' Roman, South Asian, and Chinese contemporaries, and deeply imprinted the world of Islam.

The Indian Ocean World in the Third Century CE

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Far from appearing as a time of crisis, the third century stands forth as a period of new beginnings in the western Indian Ocean, with developments pointing towards the world of Late Antiquity. This is especially evident in the Red Sea, where several polities embarked on expansionist policies, causing a flurry of wars and diplomatic initiatives. Important events include the establishment of a Blemmyes-polity in the Eastern Desert of present-day Sudan, Aksumite expansion in the Southern Red Sea and the start of Aksumite coinage and monumental architecture, Hadrami ascendance in South Arabia, and Himyari attempts to counter the encroachment on its territory by its neighbours. In south Asia, evidence points towards contacts with the Persian Gulf and the Sassanian empire gaining prominence over direct contacts with Egypt and the Mediterranean. Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism, Buddhism and Brahmanic religion travel along trade routes and rub shoulders in port cities and at the courts of Indian Ocean rulers.

Inscriptional and literary evidence shows not only Palmyrene presence across this landscape, but also indicates that Palmyra at the time of Odainathus and Zenobia took active part in the geopolitical game for diplomatic and commercial positions in the Western Indian Ocean. Rather than being the story of a development cut short by the Roman sack of Palmyra the view from the Indian Ocean helps us appreciate how the Palmyrene bid for Roman imperial power became possible.

Surviving the Crisis: Palmyra after the Third Century

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The history of Palmyra after the third-century crisis is best described as one of resilience and change. The city appears to have survived the Zenobian collapse, but, after 272–273 CE, its society and urban fabric underwent significant transformations.

Under Diocletian, Palmyra became a frontier town hosting a large garrison partially housed in a military camp within its urban perimeter. Christianity arrived relatively early in the city and was responsible for significant changes in the urban fabric – including the construction of churches and urban cemeteries. The Islamic takeover did not mark the demise of the settlement. In the early Islamic period, Palmyra witnessed the intensification of urban phenomena – such as the privatisation of public space – which were already well known in Late Antiquity. Eventually, the collapse of the Umayyad dynasty marked a gradual abandonment of the city centre and the creation of a village within the temenos of the Sanctuary of Bel.

Little of this narrative of resilience and change has been known until recently when growing attention towards late antique and early Islamic urbanism has pushed scholars to review published and unpublished data on this neglected phase of Palmyra. This paper aims to present the status quaestionis on late antique and early Islamic Palmyra, focussing on what is now known and the research questions that still have to be fully answered.

Religious Life in Palmyra during the Crisis of the Third Century

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The third century is traditionally seen as a turning point in religious life in the Roman Empire. Following Franz Cumont and other early twentieth-century scholars, it has often been suggested that traditional religious experience was in crisis and that people were looking for other religious options. This would have led to the emergence of new religious movements and a religious marketplace in which groups vied for the attention of the population. Eventually, this culminated in the triumph of Christianity in the fourth century. In this paper I will explore the extent to which we can observe such a development in the oasis city of Palmyra. It has been argued in the past that the cult of 'He Whose Name is Blessed forever' and other so-called 'anonymous' deities should be understood in the light of such a development. To establish a possible development of religious life in the oasis, the situation in the third century is first summarized and analysed, and then compared with what is known about religious life in the oasis in the previous century. Despite several recent studies of religious life in Palmyra, religious change and development is still a very neglected subject. This is understandable, of course, given the paucity of sources available to us. The present paper is an attempt to remedy this situation.

The Development of Aramaic Writing between Palmyra and Edessa and the Turn of the Third Century

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Palmyrene writing in Aramaic is preserved in abundance in numerous inscriptions in the first three centuries AD. At the same time, Edessenian epigraphy is much poorer, both in terms of the number of inscriptions and the range of types of writing, but it nevertheless has its own specific characteristics. The fortuitous nature of preservation and discovery alone can hardly explain such a significant difference.

The third century AD marked a turning point with the disappearance of the Palmyrenian language and the development of the Edessenian language, which became Syriac and enjoyed an impressive literary fortune. Christianization was one of the factors that played a role, but probably not the only one.

The aim of this paper will be to study these two corpora and to examine the place of writing in Aramaic in their context, from a social, political, and cultural point of view. It will also examine the place of Greek and bilingualism, and the role of the two cities within and outside the Roman Empire, on the basis of this study of the written word.

Religious Trends in the Roman Empire in the Third Century

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My contribution will deal with the changes in the imperial cult under the Severan dynasty, which is linked to a new imperial titulature (*dominus noster*). This is accompanied by a change in the military cult, for which imperial festivals played a prominent role (see *feriale Duranum*). 'Group religions' with community-like structures spread throughout the Roman Empire, including Christianity alongside Mithras, Mater Deum, Isis, and Serapis. With the exception of Christianity, most of these cults could be linked to the imperial cult. This is by no means the result of a crisis situation felt throughout the Roman Empire, but can be traced back to philosophical and theological developments that emerged as early as the second century CE in the context of the so-called Second Sophistic and finally culminated in the Neoplatonism of the third century CE. Concerning the material culture, climatic changes, pandemics, and barbarian invasions, for example, caused partial economic problems, which led to a change in the donation of votive monuments in many parts of the Roman Empire in the middle of the third century and, above all, to the end of the votive inscriptions, especially in the West.

Inscriptions in Third-Century Palmyra: Where Is the Crisis?

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The dramatic disappearance of almost all inscribed documents from the moment of the fall of Zenobia is striking. Admittedly, some texts were inscribed later than 272, but their number is in no way comparable with the previous period. Besides, all traces of the Aramaic language have disappeared from the epigraphic record. Yet, in the years before 272, the epigraphic habit was thriving.

This paper will compare the situation in Palmyra before and after the crucial years of the third quarter of the century to understand the role of epigraphy and to gauge the changes that took place in the city during the century. It will not only focus on the funerary material, absent from the later period, but also on the building inscriptions and dedications that dealt with the civic life of the city.

Palmyrene Art Production in the Third Century

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The third century CE has long been considered a period of crisis. In Palmyra, however, the same period was one where new opportunities and avenues of prosperity appeared as a consequence of the political and military crisis that the Roman Empire faced. Perhaps this is nowhere more obvious than in the artistic production of the city in the third century, especially that connected to the funerary sphere. While the tower tombs may have been the most prominent monuments, the temple or house tombs that appear from the later part of the second and dominate the funerary landscape in the third century are the most extravagant funerary structures of the city. Just as extravagant, labour-intensive, and costly were the numerous funerary reliefs that are dated in this period

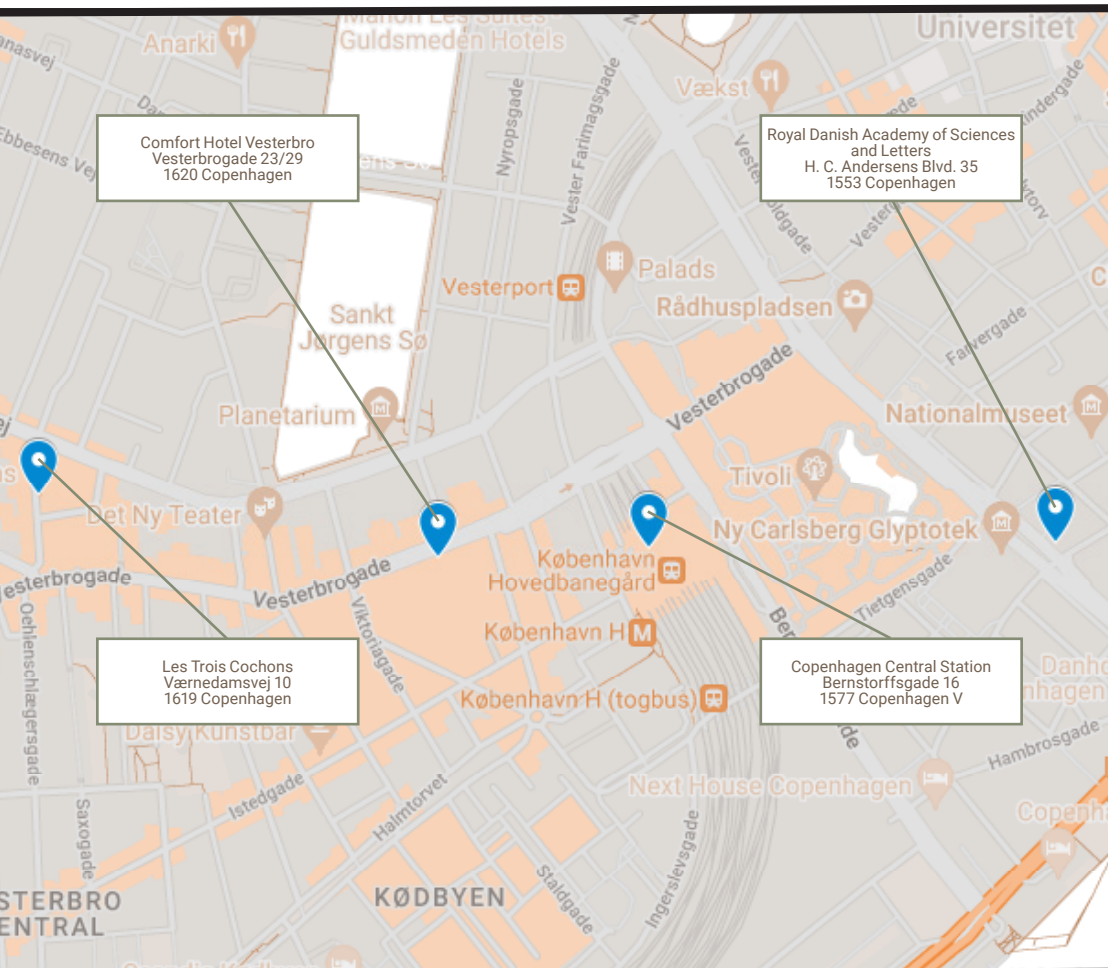
Thanks to the Palmyra Portrait Project, it has been possible to refine the periods of production in the third century and connect phases to specific events. In this paper, I will focus on the aspect of conspicuous display and the production of costly objects, especially those made for the funerary sphere, and highlight how the third-century crisis was a time of great opportunity for Palmyra, which resulted in highly sophisticated forms of art for the members of the city's wealthier strata.

Sheltering from Crisis: Living the Third Century in Roman Syria

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What does it mean to live through times of crisis? Can urban landscapes be used to understand the third-century crisis on a human scale? Looking particularly at the transformations of houses in the urban environments of Syria at sites such as Zeugma, Palmyra, and Dura-Europos, this paper uses archaeological evidence to examine the lived experience of the third-century crisis. Dwelling on the ephemeral and ordinary as a means of accessing the lives of those whose stories are occluded by more spectacular historical crises, and drawing on lessons about dispossession, displacement, and domicide from contemporary disasters, it asks what happens when we are more attentive to the slow violence that occurs, generally unremarked, in the background of the historical narratives that frame our chronologies and approaches.

Venues



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Conference webpage

<https://projects.au.dk/circulareconomy/events/2024/third-century-crisis>



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Back cover: Bust of Malku, inv. no. IN 1052 (Photo: Sune Berg, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek)