Palmyra as a Caravan City

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Generally the caravan trade leaves few traces except for some anecdotal literature and what remains of the goods carried by it to its destinations. Hence the existence of Palmyra, which is recognized by even the most critical historians as a true caravan city, is an important resource in the study of the Silk Road.[1] There are of course the impressive remains (Fig. 2) brought to light by travellers, first in 1678, and by archaeologists in more recent times. Even more importantly, there are the bilingual inscriptions in Aramaic and Greek which give first-hand information about at least one relatively short stretch of the Silk Road.[2] Of added interest is the romantic story of Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, who is so celebrated in the works of Roman historians, in Chaucer's "Monk's Tale," in art and in drama.[3]

Palmyra is in modern Syria in the middle of the desolate Tadmorean Desert (see maps, Figs. 1, 3). All around are natural barriers, dry and bare mountains to the north, west and southwest (the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mts., cutting off the Mediterranean coast), while to the east and south are dry flatlands, with the volcanic basalt desert of the Hauran merging into Jordan and to the southeast into Iraq and then Saudi Arabia (Sanlaville and Traboulsi 1996). To the east, beyond the desert with its wadi and passes, runs the Euphrates River, but rather than being a barrier, it permitted traffic by river to come in through the Persian Gulf from northwest India and beyond. The Tadmorean mountain range meant that roads either went north or south. The southern one came through Palmyra which then became the hub of a series of roads. Thus geographically Palmyra was well-served to become an important center of trade if the decision were made to cross this desert rather than take the longer route around it.

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Fig. 2. Palmyra from the air at dusk.

The beginnings of Palmyra are not clear. There are natural springs of sulphurous water which are thought to have attracted the first settlers drawn from the nomads who lived in the surrounding desert. A settlement called Tadmor is mentioned as early as the eighteenth century BCE when Amorites settled at the spring. The name appears in the Bible, which claims it was built by Solomon, although this is now known to have been a mistake for Tamar, in the Judean desert.[4] Much is made of an event in 41 BCE when Mark Anthony led an army through the region. In the face of his attack, the inhabitants of the village, most likely nomads who had settled by the springs, melted into the desert with all their goods so that the Romans came up empty-handed (Seyrig 1950: 1, citing Appian).

By the first century CE Palmyra had become a city because of the development of its caravan trade. As early as 19 CE there is an inscription that mentions the contribution to the

Adapted from Gawlikowski (1983): 54.

Fig. 3. Palmyrene trade routes.

building of a temple by the Palmyrene and Greek merchants from Seleucia, though it is not known if this was the famous Seleucia on the Tigris or one of several others with this name. In 24 CE there is mention of another contribution to this temple by "all the merchants in the city of Babylon" (PAT 0270 and 1352).

The period of Palmyra's rise coincided with Roman control of Syria. Earlier, Syria had been conquered by Alexander the Great (332 BCE). Thereafter ruled by the Seleucid line of kings, it had become subject to Hellenizing influences, although the Greek influence was felt more on the Mediterranean coastal area than it was east of the mountains. Rome had acquired what is modern Syria in 64 BCE and made it a Roman province with Antioch as its capital. The major Greek cities such as Antioch and Seleucia were given autonomy under the supervision of the provincial governor. Arab dynasts at Emesa and Edessa, for example, were left in place as long as they supported Rome, and there was a province-wide land and poll tax. The province became increasingly important as a bulwark against threats first from Parthia and then the Sasanids to the east and was a base for military campaigns against them. Rome exercised hegemony over Palmyra, and it seems to have become a tributary city with a garrison from 19 CE, with the name Palmyra coming to replace the older Tadmor. Trajan's ill-fated attempt to conquer Parthia in 117 CE created much difficulty for Palmyra, whose prosperity depended upon peaceful relations between the two powers. His death in 119 and reversion to a policy of peace by Rome in their eastern holdings eased the situation. Palmyra became a metropolis with "free" status under Hadrian (117-38), who visited there in 129, and was named a colony in 231, but withal retained its own forms of government.

The language of the area was Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew, and written with the same alphabet. Aramaic became the *lingua franca* from the time of the Assyrian Empire (eighth century BCE), because the Arameans were a significant sector of the population of Assyria and Babylon, and their writing was simpler than the cuneiform Akkadian (Beyer 1986: 9-14). The religion and customs were those of the local population, originally Amorite but with a representation of Arabs, who were a part of a later Nabatean wave from the south, and various other groups (on religion see Dirven 1999; Teixidor 1979). There was also a layer of Hellenic civilization: Greek was spoken. The inscriptions which remain are bilingual, in Aramaic and Greek; a few with Latin also survive but only from the later years of the city (As'ad and Delplace 2002).

The clothing as seen in the sculptures of that time also represented the two cultures, Greek and Central Asian. For the men, the Greek garments consisted of a *chiton*, a long, sleeveless tunic with the cloth, generally of linen, covering to the elbows. Over this was worn a large cloak, the *himation*, of linen or wool. It was usually draped so as to provide a support for the right hand. At least in the sculpture, there was no ornamentation. The priests, who can be recognized by the cylindrical headgear and the containers of incense that they hold, wore more ornate costumes, tunics with embroidery and a cloak fastened by a large metallic plaque decorated with a stylized floral pattern (Internet images: 1). Fragments of patterned cloth of linen, wool and silk have been found, as well as fragments of Chinese silk (Maen-chen-Helfen 1943; Stauffer 1995; Stauffer 1996).

The other style was what generally is called Parthian. It consisted of a long-sleeved tunic, short, belted and split at the sides, and trousers that were tight at the ankles, and shod in supple boots. Unlike the usual Greek fashion, this style is highly decorative with bands of ornamentation on the tunic and along the limbs. A cloak was worn over the tunic. The women also wore a long, belted tunic with either tight or full long sleeves with a decorative cuff, or without sleeves, like that of the men. From the first century on, the clothing became more complex, with a cloak over the tunic and held by a broach on the left shoulder, a kind of turban and over it all a long veil covering the head, shoulders and arms. The women wore jewelry such as ornate necklaces, rings, and earrings. The sculptures pose them with one hand seeming to draw back the veil a bit, and the other holding a spindle and distaff, symbolic of their household duties (Internet images: 2, 3).

The inscriptions indicate that the early socio-political organization of the city was based on four tribes, each settled in a different part of the city. These were: a sacerdotal tribe, the Bene Komare (Kohenite); an Arab tribe, the Bene Maazin or Ma'zyân; the Bene Mattabol, also of western origin; and a fourth whose name is uncertain. Each had its own cult temple, but that of the god Bel represented all of Palmyra (Schlumberger 1971).

The primary temple in Palmyra was that dedicated to Bel, and his temple is the most impressive relic that remains (Figs. 4-5; Seyrig, Amy and Will 1968 & 1975). Bel (originally Bol, which occurs in names) had a cosmic role in the pantheon of the city. The temple is in two parts: a large

Fig. 4. The exterior of the cella at the Temple of Bel.

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Fig. 5. The interior of the cella at the Temple of Bel.

courtyard, 205 by 210 meters, and the cella. The cella is a rectangular building upon a podium raised in the center of the courtyard. Entrance to the inner court of the temple was through a propylaeum, a powerful gate 35 meters wide, with a monumental staircase leading into it. Nothing remains of the furniture, statues or cultic objects, but an inscription dated 51 CE mentions libation vases, a golden censer, and libation bowls, no doubt to be used in the ceremonies. There may have been processions carrying the image of Bel about the city.

Another important deity was Baal Shamin, the ancient god of the Canaanite and Phoenician coast. His name means Lord of Heaven, and he was the lord of the Heavens, the supreme weather god, a patron of farmers and shepherds. In Palmyra he was especially associated with the Bene Maazin tribe, who had settled the land on which his temple was then built around 131 CE. He is often shown with Yarhibol and Aglibol, the one an ancestral deity in the oasis and the other a deity from northern Syria. The two became the sun god and moon god, respectively; Yarhibol was a deity in his own right, as a judge and dispenser of benefits.

The sanctuary of the goddess Allat has been found in the area of the temple of Baal Shamin, in the Arab quarter, where it must have been the cultic center of those tribes. She became the female companion of Bel and had the epithet *blty* "My Lady." In the cosmopolitan environment of

Palmyra Allat became assimilated to the Syro-Phoenician Astarte, and the Greek Aphrodite. She was also called Ishtar, an Assyrian deity who gave victory in battle. As Ishtar she was the goddess par excellence, with a variety of cults worshipping her as the "Arab Venus" of the Bedouin. By the second century, following a vogue in iconography, her traits had become those of the armed Athena, with the Medusa-head breastplate of scale armor, spear and shield.

Other names that occur in inscriptions include Manawat, an Arabian goddess, Herta and Nanai, Babylonian godesses, and Reshef, a Canaanite deity. There were hundreds of altars at Palmyra, attesting to the worship of many other deities, not all of which have left traces. A further example of the range of religions to which the Palmyrenes adhered is a relief of Mithras from Dura-Europos, dated March 169 CE, dedicated by a Palmyrene who was stationed there. The inscription reads:

dkrn tb 'bd 'tpny 'strtg'
br zbd'h dy 'l qsht dy bdwr'
byrh 'dr shnt 480

A good memorial erected by
    Etpani the strategos,
son of Zabde'a, who is in
    command of the archers
who are in Dura. In the
    month Adar, year 480.

Branch establishments of Palmyrene merchants or fonduqs such as this at Dura-Europos were to be found in many cities, even as far as Egypt and Rome. The reference to the military title of *strategos*

is a reminder that Palmyra was able to field archers, mounted on camels and horses, who protected the caravans against the marauding desert nomads (Ingholt 1976).

With the standoff between Rome and Parthia, Palmyra in effect came to occupy a no-man's land criss-crossed with caravan routes. Palmyra profited from its location, for there was a demand from Rome for the luxuries of the East — silks and spices — and Parthia, with its growing interest in Hellenistic culture, wanted the goods of the West. There was some sort of tacit understanding between the two powers, which enabled Palmyra, a neutral, semi-independent town, to become the middleman in this trade with its enormous profits.

This flow of wealth supported building on a grand scale (Chamdor 1953; Gawlikowski 1973). With its temples and their grounds and civic buildings such as the Agora, Monumental Arch, Grand Colonnade and Theater, Palmyra became the most luxurious and elegant city in Syria. Even today enough remains to indicate the magnificent city of that time with its splendid architecture built of a local pale gold limestone. At the city's center, the public meeting place or Agora (probably built in the middle of the first century) was the same as that found in all Graeco-Roman cities. The brackets on the columns on the east side were reserved for statues of senators, on the north for officials, on the west for soldiers, and on the south for caravan leaders — in all some 200 would gaze down at the goings-on in the Agora itself. Probably the most famous of all the Palmyrene structures is the Monumental Arch (Fig. 6), which marks a shift in the

Fig. 6. The Monumental Arch.

direction of the Grand Colonnade. The colonnade (Fig. 7), which runs along the 1100-meter length of the major thoroughfare, originally contained some 375 columns, most of which are 9.5 meters high and 0.95 meters thick. About half remain. There would have been shops and trading stations under the porticos on both sides, with statues and their inscriptions atop the brackets, ten feet off the ground.[5] The Theater, built in the early second century, is one of the best-preserved buildings of its kind. It may originally have had 30 rows of seats in three stories, probably with a pillared loggia at the top. Facing the seats

Fig. 7. The Grand Colonnade.

was the stage whose backdrop was a wall with doorways, pillars and panels of sculpture, a standard design in the late Hellenistic-Roman world. There was not much room backstage, as it bordered directly on the Grand Colonnade. There are other impressive buildings such as Diocletian's Camp and the Diocletian Baths, but these date after the fall of Palmyra, when it was turned into a Roman camp and was no longer the center of the caravan trade that it had been earlier.[6]

The main burial grounds were to the southwest of the city (Schmidt-Colinet 1989). The types of graves at Palmyra changed over time and reflected the status of the deceased. Simple burials were marked by a pile of stones. More elaborate ones contained sarcophagi of terracotta or plaster and were marked by a gravestone which could feature a full-length human figure. By the first century CE, in a wadi to the west of the city called the Valley of Tombs, appears the sepulchre, with a doorway, a corridor, and a number of burial compartments and graves, and containing grave goods of lamps, pottery, alabaster vases, jewelry, and coins. Increasing prosperity coincided with the building of soaring, rectangular stone towers, generally lining a road running through the wadi (Fig. 8). These became increas-

ingly elaborate with adjoining sepulchres or underground cemeteries, called *hypogeum*, and with ever more sophisticated architecture. While by the second century the towers ceased to be built, the sepulchres in a sense took off. Known as *bt 'lm*, "houses of eternity," the elaborately decorated chambers might have a group of three richly sculpted sarcophagi around three walls, to form a banquet scene, and individual portraits of the dead marking the niches into which their remains were laid (Internet images: 4, 5). These were the wealthy Palmyrenes: priests, municipal officials, military commanders, caravan owners, etc. Almost half of the surviving Palmyrene inscriptions (1371) are funerary.

The inscriptions, usually bilingual, are on the pedestals or consoles of statues of the men being honored. None of these statues survive, but of the 181 honorific inscriptions that have been found some 36 relate to the caravan trade.[7] A typical inscription reads:

> Statue of Marcus Ulpius Yarhai, son of Hairan, son of Abgar, dedicated by the caravan that came from Charax Spasinou, as he has helped in all things, in his honor, during the time that Zabdela, son of Yadaya, was chief of the caravan. Dated August 466 [= 155 CE].

The term here for chief of the caravan is *synodiarch* in Greek and *rb shurt* in Aramaic. Other inscriptions give a bit more information, and mention other names and titles, but unfortunately there is no solid information on what goods were carried, who carried them, how the caravan was organized, and so on. These inscriptions and the statues that they accompanied were of the city's elite, and were pats on the back, as it were.

The inscriptions provide incomplete evidence of Palmyra's trade routes. They mention only one caravan route, from Spasinou Charax (Hansman 1967; Matthews 1984: 165)[8] on the Persian Gulf up the Euphrates through Vologesias[9] (west of Babylon) probably to Dura-Europos or another river port such as Hit (neither of these are mentioned), and from there overland to Palmyra. There are two cases of ships owned by a Palmyrene that arrived from Scythia, by which is meant the Indus estuary area in northwest India. As Michal Gawlikowski has observed, in the inscriptions "there is nothing to suggest that the Palmyrenes were interested in the land route through Iran and Central Asia," which is usually taken as the route of the Silk Road (Gawlikowski 1994: 29). Rather they would appear to have channeled the trade from India and
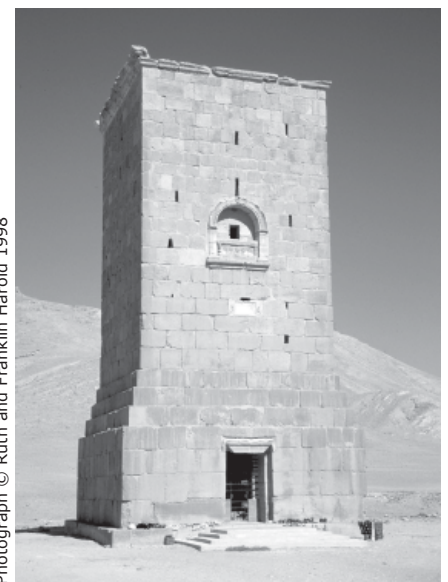

Fig. 8. A tomb tower.

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China through the ports in India and up the Persian Gulf. Some Palmyrenes were appointed by the king of Mesene (the territory covered the estuary of the Tigris and Euphrates and beyond, whose capital was Charax) to govern what is modern Bahrein and other cities of that kingdom. There is some question about the role of the desert nomads in all of this. Their sheiks may well have profitted by the trade, supplying the camels needed and perhaps receiving other payments. But there is also mention in several inscriptions of danger from attacks being averted by the prompt action of armed forces sent from Palmyra.

The goods coming into Palmyra had to go somewhere; so there is no doubt that there were other routes out of the city (Fig. 3). The silence of the inscriptions may be explained in various ways. Since caravans going westward to the Mediterranean through Roman-controlled territory were under Roman protection, there may have been no need to offer thanks for services in that direction. A more likely explanation is that Palmyrenes were involved in funding only the caravans to the south, while other routes were underwritten elsewhere. If so, this would also open the possibility that caravans were reaching Palmyra from the east by routes other than that along the Euphrates, and thus Palmyra was on the traditional Silk Road after all. Appian, the Roman historian of the early second century, said of the Palmyrenes, "Being merchants, they bring the products of India and Arabia from Persia and dispose of them in Roman territory." They were undoubtedly involved in the lucrative silk and spice trades.

The caravan leader who is featured in many of the inscriptions either as the person being honored or as the one dedicating the statue must have been involved in the organization of the caravan itself. Michael Rostovtzeff suggested that he was little more than a specialist or technician, hired to provide the animals, camels and horses, and the personnel to care for them and to guide the party through the desert. In addition to doing all the preliminary tasks such as obtaining the necessary food and water, he also protected the party against attacks by nomads and carried out any diplomatic negotiations with the relevant authorities (Rostovtzeff 1932: 806). Rostovzeff further believed that the members of the caravan were the merchant-princes who formed into a company for each journey and chose from among themselves their own leader who might also be the caravan leader, but not necessarily so. The caravan would simply disband at the end of each trip.

Ernest Will has emphasized the complexity of the caravan's organization, for beside the caravan leaders and merchants, there were the funders or entrepeneurs, the fonduqs or trading communities outside of Palmyra, and the *strategoi* who provided for the caravan's security, including any necessary diplomatic negotiations (Will 1957).

Will's emphasis on these other roles in the caravan trade perhaps unduly diminishes the importance of the caravan leader. Some of those to whom statues were dedicated clearly were major players in the Palmyrean commercial scene and quite likely supplied the capital necessary to carry on the trade. In a mountainous area northwest of Palmyra there is evidence of agriculture and pasturage and extensive development, such as villages, shrines and wells dating from the period of Palmyrean prominence. These discoveries point to the source of the wealth and resources that men such as Marcus Ulpius Yarhai may have invested in the caravan trade (Schlumberger 1951).

In an eloquent article, J. F. Matthews went further and described these eminent men as having been Bedouin sheiks who brought to Palmyra their close connections with the nomads and thus the ability to police the desert and protect the caravans. While not themselves merchant-princes, they could serve as protectors and patrons of the merchants. Once Palmyra fell to Roman armies in 272 CE, they simply moved back to the desert, having enjoyed "a phase of magnificent, but relatively short-lived, urban grandeur" (Matthews 1984: 169). While this interpretation is plausible, it is not documented in the inscrip-tions. Who these men were, their role in that society, and much else about the caravan trade remain tantalizing vague.

A breakdown of the delicate balance between the Roman Empire and its eastern neighbors, the Parthians and then the Sasanids, would threaten Palmyra's affluence. The Roman emperors Crassus in 54 BCE, Trajan in 114-117 CE, and Caracalla in 216 CE all failed in their efforts to control the frontier. Caracalla at least tried to come to terms with the Parthians by offering to marry the daughter of Artabanes V. The Romans suggested that a union of the two empires would then rule the world, the result being that the spices and wonderful cloth of the Persians, on the one hand, and the manufactured goods of the Romans on the other could be exchanged directly without middlemen and would thus no longer be difficult to obtain and in short supply. Was this in reference to the caravans of Palmyra? Artabanes V was not convinced of the merits of the offer.

The rise of the Sasanids created new difficulties for the Romans, who were beset on all sides and weakened internally by pretenders to the throne. The expulsion of the Romans from Mesopotamia began with Ardashir in the 230s CE. His successor Shapur I routed a Roman army in 244. Dura-Europos fell in 256, and Palmyra would appear to have been next. Shapur's triumph was complete when he captured the Roman emperor Valerian in 260.

At this juncture Odenathus and his wife, Zenobia, appear on the scene (Stoneman 1992). A member of one of the leading families of Palmyra, Odenathus gained power through his military successes in support of Rome during these trying times. He became Palmyra's ruler and the recipient of many titles awarded by the grateful Roman emperors and senate. A victory over two claimants to the Roman throne gave him even greater visibility. As a Roman historian put it, he became in effect "emperor over almost the whole East," which meant that Odenathus' Syria was an important player in the destiny of Rome. He attacked the Persians in 262, drove them back

across the Euphrates, captured the wives and children of Shapur, and was thus hailed as the savior of the empire. A further attack in 267 forced the Persians back to the Tigris. Following the pattern of that age, Odenathus might next have declared himself a Roman emperor, but on his return from that campaign he and his son were assassinated at Emesa.

Who and why the murder? Power passed to Zenobia, his second wife and the mother of his second son, Wahballath, for whom she was regent. One version of the history of Zenobia is to be found in Chaucer's "Monk's Tale," where she is portrayed as the warrior queen, famous for her beauty and her ambition. Some have suspected her of being something of a Lady Macbeth in plotting her own husband's death. At very least she was of noble lineage, claiming descent from the Ptolemies and Cleopatras of Egypt and from a king of Syria. Rome's troubles on other fronts meant that little attention was paid to Syria. Zenobia quickly asserted her control over the various desert nomads and the other cities and towns of central Syria, sent armies south to the Arabian peninsula and, finally, in open revolt from Rome, even invaded Egypt. She extended her rule to include Antioch and even distant Ankara in the north, and she was well on the way to establishing an independent kingdom. The legend on one of her son's coins calls him "King of Kings, corrector of all the world, and prince of Palmyra." He took the title of Augustus in 271, which signaled the break with Rome. Some surmise that her intention was to rule Rome itself, either alone or as the consort of the new emperor Aurelian (270-75).

Unfortunately for her, Aurelian was a successful general who turned the declining fortunes of Rome around. He was able to defeat the Goths and Vandals who had crossed the Danube, and the Germans who had invaded Italy, and later was to recover Gaul, Britain and Spain. Aurelian sent one army to recover Egypt (the breadbasket of Rome), while he led another through the Balkans and Anatolia and, turning south, crossed the desert to arrive at Palmyra in 272. Deserted by her

allies, among them the Armenians, Zenobia fled with a small party toward Persia to seek aid but was overtaken and captured by the Romans. She was brought back to Rome to be paraded in golden chains in the victory march, and lived out her days in a villa at Tivoli, just northeast of Rome. In Chaucer's words,

> Aurilian, whan that the governaunce
> Of Rome cam into his hondes tway...
> He made hir flee, and atte last hir hente,
> And feterid hir, and eek hir children tweye,
> And won the lond, and home to Rome he wente....
> Bifore this triumphe walkith she,
> And gilte cheynes in hir necke hongynge;
> Corounèd she was, as aftir hir degree,
> And ful of jewels chargid was hir clothynge.

Palmyra declined into a provincial market town for the nearby nomads, occupied for a time by a Roman garrison. The caravan routes moved to the north, through Asia Minor and on to Constantinople, and Syria itself was no longer part of the Silk Road.

Europeans rediscovered Palmyra, the city, in the seventeenth century, and the reports and wonderful illustrations brought back to Europe in the eighteenth century created a Palmyrean craze. The authoritative early study was Robert Wood's *Ruins of Palmyra* (Wood 1753). Its renderings of the ceiling of the Temple of Bel, drawn by Wood and James Dawkins, helped inspire the Palmyrean interior decor of lavish estates, such as can be seen in the ceiling of the drawing room of the Osterley Park House, designed by Robert Adam in 1775 (Osterley Park). That fashion too faded in time, leaving us with the wonderful legacy of the funerary sculptures, now to be found in museums all over the world, and the magnificent ruins of the city itself (Dentzer-Feydy and Teixidor 1993; Ruprechtsberger 1987).

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Notes

1. Finley (1999: 59) mentions Palmyra as an exception in his general dismissal of the claim that caravan cities existed in the Greco-Roman period that he examines. Millar 1998 disputes Finley's generalization that trade was never a dominant factor in the economy of any ancient city, but while Millar emphasizes such trade, he agrees with Finley that at the least, Palmyra was indisputably a "caravan city."

2. The surviving Aramaic texts, numbering 2832, with the Greek counterparts where available, are included in Hillers and Caissini 1996, hereafter PAT. On the language of the inscriptions, see Drijvers 1995.

3. The most inclusive bibliography of Palmyrean materials is Degeorge 2001: 302-307.

4. For the earliest occurrences, see Bounni 1989: 251.

5. As Will (1992: 59) points out, only a few of the statues in stone have survived. Those of bronze were probably melted down when the city was sacked in 273.

6. Among the many accounts of Palmyrean architecture, see, for example Abdulhak and Abdulhak 1996 and Gawlikowski 1973.

7. Thirty-four of these are listed in Gawlikowski 1997: 142-143, and a few others are found elsewhere.

8. This was the capital of Mesene or Maishân, on which see Gawlikowski 1994: 28-29. The city was founded by Hyspaosines, originally a Seleucid governor of the area; its name, Charax Spasinou, means Palisade of Spasines or Hyspaosines (Hansman 1967: 23-24). The usual name in the Aramaic texts is *krk myšn*. St. Thomas mentioned Maishân as the "meeting-place of the merchants of the East" and "the haven of the merchants, That sitteth on the shore of the sea" (Bevan 1897: 15, 25).

9. On the location of Vologesias, see Maricq 1959. Disagreeing with him are Chaumont 1974 and Gawlikowski 1994: 29-30. See also Matthews 1984: 165-166.