REIMAGINING THE SILK ROADS

INTERACTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS ACROSS EURASIA

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Introduction

The oasis city of Palmyra in the Syrian desert is one of the most iconic sites of the ancient world (for overviews, see Will 1992; Sartre and Sartre-Fauriat 2008; Smith 2013; Sommer (ed.) 2020; Gawlikowski 2021; Raja 2022; Raja (ed.) 2024). A minor outpost for much of its history, Palmyra rose quickly from obscurity to opulence in the first century BC and became a vital hub for long-distance trade between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. Palmyra's heyday lasted some 300 years, and its fortunes were closely tied to Rome. It was Roman governance of the Near East that created stable conditions for Palmyra to flourish. And it was the uprising against Rome, under Palmyra's famous queen Zenobia, that brought about its spectacular downfall, ending her short-lived empire with the sack of the city by Aurelian's troops in AD 273. Yet, while its fortunes lasted, Palmyra enjoyed more liberties and privileges than almost any other community within the confines of the Roman Empire.

The fact that Palmyra prospered enormously under Roman rule is beyond dispute: the splendour of its key landmarks exudes prosperity and urban sophistication. Palmyra's crown jewel was the Temple of Bel. Inaugurated on the 6th of April in AD 32, this immense monument, set within a colonnaded courtyard of 200 by 200 metres, integrated the principles of Greek Hellenistic temple architecture of the highest order with Mesopotamian building traditions and idiosyncratic adaptations to accommodate local cult practices. Until its destruction by Islamic State militants in 2015, this temple stood as one of the most impressive material witnesses of any ancient civilisation in the Levant.

Palmyra is often dubbed a 'caravan' city. The term has been used in various ways over the years, but at its core, it denotes a city whose prosperity rested, to a considerable extent, on revenue from long-distance trade. The label 'caravan city' has been applied too loosely to include cities, such as Bostra, south of Damascus, Gerasa in Jordan, and Dura-Europos in northern Syria by the Euphrates – but Palmyra is the one instance where this appellation is fully justified. As the following pages show, Palmyra's fortunes were tied up with long-distance trade in a variety of ways, politically, economically, and militarily, and in particular, its elite found

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ingenious ways to establish Palmyra as an indispensable node on a vital trade route, and to profit from this position to entrench their own power.

Self-governance and military muscle

Pliny the Elder, writing in the 70s AD, in a famous passage paints a vivid picture of Palmyra as a city athwart the empires of East and West, skilfully navigating its own course between the two great antagonists.

> Palmyra is a city famous for its situation, for the richness of its soil and for its agreeable springs. Its fields are surrounded on every side by a vast circuit of sand, and it is as it were isolated by Nature from the world, having a destiny of its own between the two mighty empires of Rome and Parthia, and at the first moment of a quarrel between them always attracting the attention of both sides.[1]

Palmyra was annexed to Rome's *provincia Syria* probably in the early first century AD. No Roman garrison was established in the city until the 160s AD. Instead, the first military force attested there are Palmyrene troops serving as auxiliary units to Roman legions. This is but one indication that Palmyra enjoyed rights and privileges granted to hardly any other local community under Roman rule.

Palmyra was the only city in the Roman Near East where, alongside the standard Greek that was the official language of Rome's eastern provinces, the native (Palmyrene) Aramaic language was used in public inscriptions. Even though Aramaic was the spoken *lingua franca* across the Near East at the time, only Palmyra manifested the confidence and pride in its own traditions to elevate their native tongue on par with Greek in their public documents. Latin was also used occasionally, e.g. in a number of trilingual inscriptions, but to a much lesser extent, even though Palmyra became a titular Roman colony in the second century AD. Palmyrene vocabulary and personal names also show a distinct Arabic element, but it is unknown to what extent Arabic, too, was a spoken language among the people of Palmyra.

Throughout its history, Palmyra's commercial, social, and religious life was dominated by powerful groups of clans and tribes. The leading citizens of Palmyra formed a local elite with strong ties among priests and magistrates. The basis of their power was partly located outside the city itself. The Palmyrene elite maintained close connections, and perhaps familial ties, with the people of the desert.

First elements of a civic organisation are attested in the first century AD, with Palmyrene inscriptions naming civic offices such as treasurers and Greek-style civic institutions, namely a council (*boulē*) and an assembly (*dēmos*). At the same time, inscriptions also frequently mention the names of different tribes – a dozen or so are attested at first, but by the end of the first century AD, the number was reduced to just four (Kaizer 2002). It is thought that each of these four 'civic' tribes was in charge of one or two major sanctuaries at Palmyra. Thus, for instance, the sanctuaries of Baalshamin and Allat were linked to a tribe with an Arabic name (*Benē Ma'zin*, the "shearers") which had at first been located outside the city limits

but was later integrated into the city as Palmyra grew northwards (Yon 2022, 301). While these official four 'civic' tribes are amply attested in inscriptions, personal or familial tribal affiliations are not explicitly mentioned in the limited documentary record at our disposal, but one must assume that adherence to clans and tribes continued to constitute a significant force in the social life of the Palmyrenes.

Palmyra was located in a solitary fertile green spot in the midst of an inhospitable desert, but its exceptional position allowed it to control large tracts of the surrounding area. Palmyra's local militias, an elite camel corps of mounted archers, were not stationary in the city but patrolled the vast expanse of the surrounding desert of Syria between Emesa (Homs) and the Euphrates border to the north. The routes were thus protected by Palmyra's own military units, as evidenced by several inscriptions naming commanders (*stratēgoi*) and troops. With military muscle and diplomacy, they could therefore ensure safe passage for the caravans and organise appropriate guides, pack animals, and relay stations.

Trade, commerce, and caravans

Palmyra's quick and spectacular rise to prosperity, which manifests itself in the city's sumptuous monuments, was closely tied to long-distance trade. Caravans of camels and horses travelling the routes across the Syrian desert were Palmyra's commercial life blood (on trade in Palmyra; see in particular Matthews 1984; Gawlikowski 1996; id. 2022; Millar 1998; Young 2001, 136–86; Seland 2016; id. 2020). Palmyra's geography, positioned halfway between the Euphrates to the north and east and the Mediterranean coast to the west (some 200 km in either direction from Palmyra), was ideally suited as a stopover along the east–west trade routes. From the middle of the Euphrates, the Syrian desert route straight west through Palmyra represented the closest connection to the Mediterranean, and a considerable shortcut compared with the traditional route which followed the Euphrates all the way to its western bend, and from there into northern Syria and the Orontes Valley.

This desert shortcut was not a natural trade route; the route had to be created and maintained. It was especially under the Roman aegis over the region that the political, economic, and military conditions aligned in such a propitious way as to allow Palmyra to flourish as a major trade hub.

The importance of caravan trade in Palmyra's economy is reflected in the epigraphy. Some three-dozen so-called 'caravan inscriptions' illustrate the traffic between Palmyra and Mesopotamia between AD 19 and 260 (Gawlikowski [1996] lists the 34 caravan inscriptions known at the time). These inscriptions, written in Aramaic, often doubled with a Greek translation, originally accompanied bronze statues representing Palmyrene elites involved in trade. These bronze statues, like hundreds of others that originally populated the public spaces of Palmyra, are now lost, but from the tiny scraps that do survive, e.g. a left foot clad in a sandal, one can gather that they were originally dressed in Greek costume, with *chiton* and *himation*, or possibly with Roman togas. Most of these statues were no doubt brought in from outside Palmyra, as suggested by a passage from the famous "Tariff" regulating the import of such statues (Kropp and Raja 2014, 394).

The caravan inscriptions and statues were set up after the successful conclusion of a journey from the east back to Palmyra, and commissioned either by the merchants participating in a caravan or by the municipal authorities in their name. Among the destinations repeatedly mentioned are Spasinou Charax on the Persian Gulf and, somewhat closer, Vologesias in Babylonia on the lower Euphrates. The texts are disappointingly vague on the exact exploits of the beneficiaries. They are usually thanked in generic terms for having helped a caravan or "pleased the merchants in everything." No specific trade goods are enumerated, and no details are provided as to the finance, logistics, or organisation of caravan ventures.

Another notable omission from the caravan inscriptions is any destination to the west of Palmyra. The only travels mentioned are to and from Mesopotamia and the Gulf, never to the Mediterranean. It may be that only the eastern journeys were considered perilous and thus in need of organised and well-funded protection, which would then be rewarded with public honours in the shape of statues and inscriptions. Travel from Palmyra to Damascus and Emesa, and from there to the main seaports, was much less risky and in no need of organisation into large, well-armed caravans. Trade to the west was thus less worthy of note, and quite possibly in the hands of merchants from outside Palmyra.

The inscriptions thank the great notables as benefactors without whom the caravans would not be possible, but do not highlight any specific task or feat, probably because their contributions were elementary and too self-obvious to all parties involved to deserve special mention. The texts do, however, single out so-called caravan chiefs (*synodiarchai* in Greek), men whose responsibility was to lead the caravans safely from Palmyra to Mesopotamia and back, while also taking charge of organisational tasks. They, too, were no doubt members of the elite.

Palmyrene authorities seem to have distinguished between privately organised and public caravans. The former were in the hands of 'merchants' (*emporoi*), the latter were led by *synodiarchai* on officially sanctioned business. The striking designation of "caravan of all the Palmyrenes" found in one inscription appears to confirm this kind of distinction. There was thus a twofold structure with, on the one side, caravans connected to the civic organs of the city, and on the other side, elite members acting on their own accord.

As for Palmyra's commercial success, most profits appear to come not from taxing merchandise in transit, but rather from services rendered. Goods in transit probably never entered the city; they were stored in caravan stops built some distance away. Some of these *khans* at the outskirts of the city, where the goods must have been unloaded, taxed, and exchanged, have been documented and excavated, e.g. in the Valley of the Tombs (Gawlikowski 2021, 48–9 Fig. 22). The oasis was enclosed within an extended walled circuit, but this wall does not seem to have served a strategic purpose. It probably marked Palmyra's fiscal boundary, and is today still known as the "customs wall." This municipal privilege was leased, as was the privilege of collecting Roman customs duties, to private leaseholders at a small profit.

Camels and horses were the primary modes of transport for desert routes. In addition, one inscription indicates the use of boats on the Euphrates, which probably

implies that camels and horses were left to graze on the river bank, waiting for the traders to return. Palmyrene merchants established themselves in Mesopotamia from early on. By 33 BC, a Palmyrene community is attested at Dura-Europos, a town under Parthian control since the late second century BC. A community of Palmyrene and Greek merchants in Seleucia (presumably Seleucia on the Tigris) was established by AD 6. Palmyra's merchants also held permanent trading posts in Babylonia (Ctesiphon, Vologesias) and on the Persian Gulf (Spasinou Charax, Phorath, Bahrein).

Some Palmyrene merchants pushed further east: two inscriptions refer to traders going all the way to northwestern India (referred to as 'Scythia' in the texts) on boats owned by Palmyrenes, and there is further evidence for a Palmyrene presence in the Persian Gulf. By contrast, there is no evidence that Palmyrenes crossed into Iran or Central Asia, let alone China. Conversely, no merchants from the Far East are attested as travelling to the Roman Levant. Although Chinese sources seemed to be dimly aware of some names of Near Eastern cities, some Roman embassies may have reached China and some Roman material culture definitely did, we have no information about direct trade contacts (Graf 1996). But the lack of direct contact is not in itself significant. Trade in either direction did, of course, take place, but via middlemen along the way.

What items did the caravans carry? The caravan inscriptions do not specify the trade goods imported. Judging from what is known about Rome's eastern trade at large, they included exotic herbs and spices, principally pepper, but also ginger, cardamom, aloe, and spikenard; exotic woods such as teak; Indian muslin cloth, Chinese silk (brought via India), precious and semi-precious stones, and pearls from the Persian Gulf (Gawlikowski 2021, 48). What all these goods had in common was their portability, durability, and extreme resale value in cities across the Roman Mediterranean where these items were exceedingly rare and precious luxury commodities. Due to their value and rarity, such luxury goods are by definition hard to grasp archaeologically and rarely found in excavations, but one notable exception at Palmyra is Chinese silk.

Silk, either as raw silk or woven textiles, had to be imported to the west from China all through antiquity until the sixth century AD when the technique of raising silkworms was finally mastered in the west. In Palmyra, the tombs of the local aristocracy have yielded large numbers of silk textile fragments that give a vivid impression of the splendour of luxury clothing among the city's elite at the time. A good part of the silk reached Palmyra as ready-made textiles with monochrome decorative patterns. The number and quality of these so-called "Han damask" textiles in Palmyra are extraordinary and only comparable to those found in client kingdoms in western China where they were probably used and exchanged as tribute payments and diplomatic gifts. Besides Palmyra, there is no other location in the Roman Empire where Han damask has been found (Stauffer 2013, 132). Palmyra has even yielded two examples of Chinese silk with polychrome decorative patterns and Chinese lettering. Such textiles were only allowed to be produced in special workshops under Chinese imperial control. Again, Palmyra is the only Roman site to provide such finds. On the whole, Palmyra has yielded the largest amounts of

Chinese silks anywhere in the Roman Empire and thus allows for unique insights into the use of this sought-after fabric that spurred the imagination of contemporary observers and commentators as the epitome of luxury and decadence.

In addition to ready-made silk textiles, Palmyra also imported raw silk which was then used by local craftsmen to produce silk textiles on the spot. Technical analyses have shown that part of the silks were woven on horizontal Syrian looms and not on vertical Chinese looms (Ruffing 2022, 395). Furthermore, raw silk could also be rewoven in Palmyra together with other types of material, such as wool, cotton, or linen. The local textile manufacture in Palmyra profited in this way from its access to trade goods from the Far East. Palmyra was not just at the receiving end of long-distance trade, but could draw on these connections to draw positive impulses to its local economy and manufacture.

Palmyra's caravan trade peaked in the latter half of the second century AD. The caravan inscriptions are concentrated in the years between AD 130 and 161, though at least three more date from the late second or early third centuries. What followed was a noticeable decline in trade (with no caravan inscriptions between 211 and 247), possibly owing to conflict and insecurity in the region in the wake of the overthrow of the Parthians by the Persian Sassanids in AD 224. But, given the relatively small sample size, the absence of caravan inscriptions alone cannot be taken as a sure indicator of the demise of trade. Rather than the cessation of long-distance trade, the absence of these monumental inscriptions may, in part at least, hint at changes in habits of organising, recording, and rewarding caravan ventures. The trade routes certainly remained open to some extent, as shown by the continued presence of merchants in Palmyra, but we now learn from Palmyrene inscriptions of soaring interest rates raised on loans of 30 or 32 percent, reflecting the increased risks and insecurity (Gawlikowski 2022, 386).

At the same time, there is evidence to suggest a re-orientation in the third century, with new Palmyrene involvement in Egypt and on the Red Sea coast (Yon 2022, 291). Two individuals, identifiable as Palmyrenes by their names, were honoured at Coptos by Palmyrene wool merchants, under the name of "Palmyrene *nauklēroi* of the Erythraean Sea." Further new discoveries from various locations around the Arabian Peninsula attest to the exploration of new routes and outlets by Palmyrene merchants: Palmyrene inscriptions at Suqutra, Qani on the Yemeni coast, and South Arabian inscriptions in the Hadramawt where Indians, Chaldaeans (most probably people from southern Mesopotamia), and Palmyrenes met (Gawlikowski 2022, 382; Yon 2022, 291).

Visual evidence: camel and ship reliefs

In addition to material evidence of actual trade goods from distant lands found in Palmyrene tombs, and to caravan inscriptions celebrating elite citizens in public spaces, there is also visual evidence that is often taken as evidence of Palmyra's status as a caravan city: a handful of relief monuments depicting camels and, in one case, a ship, are regularly cited to prove the importance of long-distance trade in the economic life of the city.

The camel, the quintessential 'ship of the desert', was the indispensable means of long-distance transport across the arid deserts from its domestication, probably in the Arabian Peninsula in the course of the second millennium BC, until the early twentieth century. For the inhabitants of these areas, the camel was also an essential source of milk, meat, wool, leather, and fuel (Seland 2017, 106). In Syria and the Levant, the predominant camel breed was the one-humped dromedary, whereas in less arid areas from inner Asia to Asia Minor, the two-humped 'Bactrian' camel was more common.

In the Hellenistic and Roman Levant, horse- and camel-mounted troops were often employed jointly, both by native troops and the corresponding units in imperial armies. For instance, Palmyrene men are known to have served in the Roman army, usually as camel riders and archers, from at least the time of Trajan (early second century AD), e.g. in the *ala I Ulpia Dromedariorum Palmyrenorum milliaria*, which was first stationed at Palmyra, then moved to Arabia. Around the middle of the second century AD, the Roman garrison that was stationed at Palmyra, the *ala I Ulpia Singularium*, joined the existing Palmyrene *militiae* of camel riders to help patrol the countryside and protect the long-distance trade routes (Stoll 2022, 342).

In light of the camel's pervasive role in the life of their communities, depictions of domesticated camels are surprisingly rare in the artistic repertoire of ancient civilisations. Palmyra is one of the few ancient sites to have yielded such images. These consist of small-scale relief sculptures from sarcophagi or blocks from architectural structures. Some are ascertained to come from tombs, while others were found to be out of context or of uncertain provenance. They seemingly attest to the involvement of Palmyrene aristocrats in the lucrative caravan trade.

An architectural block found reused in the Justinianic city wall depicts, within a rectangular frame of leaf mouldings, a row of three camels resting on their haunches (Figure 5.1) (Colledge 1976, pl. 129; Tanabe 1986, nos. 92–93). The three animals are rendered identically. Each is equipped with a high-backed saddle covered with animal fur and flanked by shield, spear, and quiver. There is no indication of trade goods or transport here, and instead strong hints to a military context. The military connotation of this image is confirmed by other reliefs from Palmyra which depict camels with identical equipment but with the addition of

Figure 5.1 Monumental base with three camels.

Source: Palmyra Museum A24/1226. H 36 cm, W 173 cm. Photo A. Kropp.

riders on their backs who are unmistakably identified as warriors (or warrior gods) in native desert costume, holding swords or lances in their hands (Colledge 1976, 43 pl. 33; Tanabe 1986, nos. 141–2).

A second block, a sarcophagus panel found reused in the Camp of Diocletian (Figure 5.2), depicts a standing camel equipped in the same manner and flanked by two Palmyrene men in elaborate costumes, one of whom is holding the camel's reins (Colledge 1976, pl. 143). The depicted figures have been repeatedly identified as a caravan leader and his servant in recent publications (Sartre and Sartre-Fauriat 2008, 84; Smith 2013, 74–5), but as E.H. Seland correctly points out, there is no indication in the imagery of any connection with the world of trade or commerce, nor is there a visible distinction in status between the two figures (Seland 2017, 107–8). Instead, the military theme is once again prominent, with the left figure holding a spear and the right one a long sword.

Seland, however, misinterprets the costume: the two figures are not wearing "trousers suitable for riding" (Seland 2017, 108) but rather elaborate Persian costumes of the kind often found in funerary relief sculpture. They consist of richly embroidered long-sleeved belted cloaks, trousers, and soft-leather boots. Such costumes are never shown on figures on camel-back; they instead appear in civilian life, e.g. in the context of banqueting scenes at Palmyra, as elegant evening dress on the bodies of reclining revellers and their attendants.

The relief sculpture hence combines the display of martial prowess with the refined elegance of the Palmyrene elite lifestyle. To underline the elite status, the relief also depicts between the heads of the two standing figures a *modius*, the cylindrical hat worn by Palmyrene priests, to indicate priestly status. The monument hence puts on display the civilian as well as the military credentials of these Palmyrene citizens, without any hint to trade or commercial activities.

The iconography of the camels in both monuments provides important insights into Palmyra's material culture, as it includes historically significant antiquarian

Figure 5.2 Sarcophagus panel with camel and two men.

Source: Palmyra Museum 2093/7431. H 75 cm. Photo A. Kropp.

details: These images show what was at the time a new kind of saddle: a cross-bow saddle (*Kreuzbogensattel* in German) with a wooden construction around the hump of the camel. In contrast to traditional saddles, contraptions made of straps and cushions, this kind of saddle provided the rider with a stable seat and allowed the camel to carry a heavier load and thus cross longer distances than was previously possible. Bridging the vast expanse of the desert with greater ease, this innovation enhanced the power and income of those in control of desert routes for centuries to come. The Palmyrene camel reliefs, alongside images of Nabataean camels on Roman denarii minted in 58 BC, are among the very first known attestations of the new cross-bow saddle type (Kropp 2013, 41–2 n. 290, Fig. 1).

Of all the images of Palmyrene means of transportation, by far the most famous and unusual one is the so-called ship relief (Figure 5.3) (Colledge 1976, pl. 103). This fragment of a funerary relief was found in the tomb of Julius Aurelius Maronas (dated AD 236) in the western necropolis. It depicts a complex scene made up of disparate elements (Seland 2017, 112–13).

Its main feature is a detailed image of a large sailing ship with a rounded hull and equipped with rudder side oars. The ship is fully rigged and under sail. This is a striking image of a maritime vessel at a desert city hundreds of kilometres away from any sea coast. To the left of the ship, the relief shows the figure of a man of disproportionately large size in relation to the ship. The figure is fragmented, and only the lower part is preserved up to the chest. He seems to be clad in an unusually short belted tunic. With his left hand, he appears to be grasping, incongruously, the stern of the ship. With his right hand, he is holding the reins of a large animal, now broken off entirely except for the two front hoofs. The surface of the hoofs is too badly weathered to determine with certainty whether they belonged to a horse or a camel, but considering the context, the latter is by far the more likely (Seland 2017, 112). Of all the Palmyrene relief sculptures regularly cited in the literature as

Figure 5.3 Ship relief from the tomb of Julius Aurelius Maronas, AD 236.

Source: Palmyra Museum 1046/2249. H 85 cm. Photo A. Kropp.

evidence for caravan trade, the ship relief is the only one that stands up to scrutiny as testimony of Palmyrene long-distance trade. Gawlikowski (2021, 172) interprets the scene plausibly as "commemorating a caravan venture to the Gulf and a sea passage to India."

The relief also represents an entirely unique and original composition, juxtaposing a camel and a sailing ship scaled down to size, and in their midst with a firm grip on both, the towering figure of one Palmyrene aristocrat. This uniqueness underlines how out of the ordinary such celebratory images of long-distance trade were in the visual landscape of ancient Palmyra. There were no pattern books or visual formulas to fall back on for this subject. In contrast to the extremely repetitive funerary sculpture of Palmyra, reproducing the same visual formulas a thousandfold, images of caravan trade were not in any artists' repertoires – they had to be invented there and then.

Conclusion: silk trade *ante* Silk Road

This chapter has brought together the available material, epigraphic, and visual evidence for Palmyra's pre-eminent position within the trading and transit networks that connected the Mediterranean world with Asian markets. Palmyra's far-flung contacts are most vividly exemplified by Chinese silk textiles of impressive quality and quantity found in the tombs of the Palmyrene elite. No other site in the Roman Empire has yielded a comparable trove of Chinese silk. But findings such as these do not amount to evidence for the existence of an ancient "Silk Road" in the sense of either a continuous commercial link or a consistent vector of political encounter or cultural exchange between the East and West (Millar 1998). Contacts between the Roman Near East and China always remained indirect, sporadic, and haphazard, to such an extent that the two empires maintained no diplomatic contacts and were barely aware of each other's existence.

The lack of an ancient "Silk Road" can in no small part be attributed to logistics:

> The overland caravan route across Iran to Central Asia and beyond hardly existed as a sustainable commercial prospect. The cost of land transport was enormous, fifty times more expensive than sea shipping and five times more than river haulage. This cost, and political risks resulting from the strained relations between Rome and Parthia, as well as frequent passage fees levied even in friendly territory, made merchants choose land routes only when unavoidable.
>
> (Gawlikowski 2022, 382)

The situation was rather different for the sea lanes. As outlined above, two routes offered themselves to the merchants from the Roman Empire. One of them linked Egyptian Red Sea ports and the western coast of India; the other started at the head of the Persian Gulf to reach the same Indian ports. Palmyrene traders are known to have operated on both routes, and it was these routes, via Indian middlemen, that probably brought Far Eastern goods to Palmyra and helped transform it into a prosperous hub of commerce.

Appendix: a new typology of Palmyrene coinage

Palmyra's idiosyncratic coinage is a complex subject. In sharp contrast to scores of other cities of the Roman Near East, the coins of Palmyra are small, lightweight, and often of crude manufacture. Whereas other cities regularly produced civic bronze coinage in 3 or 4 different denominations, with the largest one often up to sizes of 30 mm and beyond, Palmyra's coinage is typically in the range of 10–15 mm and a weight of 1–1.5 g. It seems paradoxical that, of all Syrian cities, a phenomenally prosperous city of commerce such as Palmyra should produce a local currency so thoroughly unimpressive. But findings from on-site excavations have shown that the intermittent output of Palmyra's local mint may, in part at least, be due to the fact that

Figure 5.4 Standard typology of Palmyrene coinage.

Source: Krzyżanowska 1982.

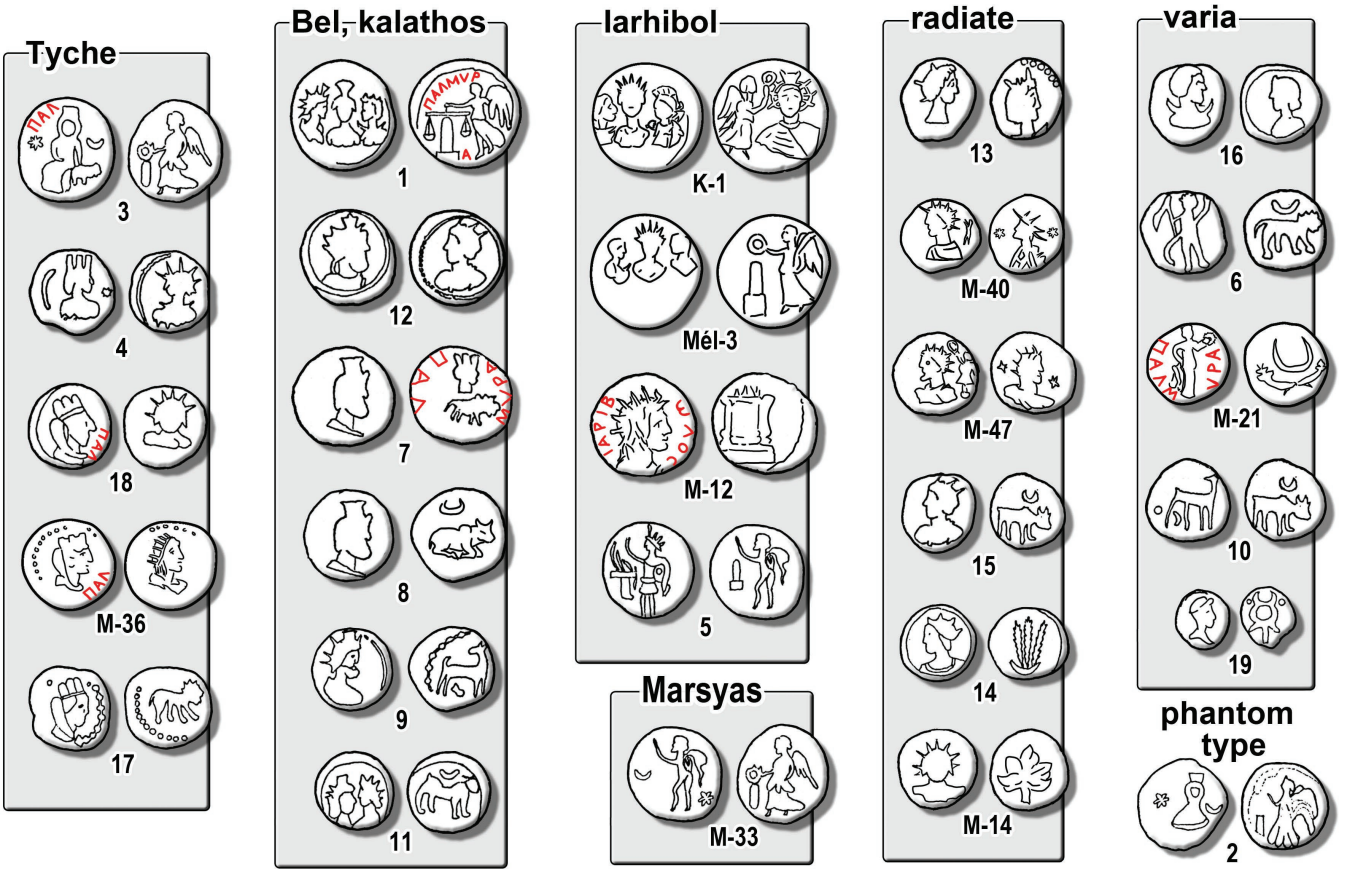

Figure 5.5 New typology of Palmyrene coinage. The numbering follows Krzyżanowska 1982 unless preceded by a letter.

Source: © A. Kropp.

other currencies from East and West circulated freely in Palmyra and were widely accepted as legal tender, thus rendering sustained local coin production obsolete.

The study of Palmyra's coinage had long been dormant but has seen renewed interest in recent years. Yet even in new publications, the coin typology that is still universally in use is the preliminary and incomplete one first presented by Krzyżanowska more than 40 years ago (Figure 5.4) (Krzyżanowska 1982).

I present here, for the first time, a new typology of Palmyrene coins that fundamentally overhauls the standard typology (Figure 5.5). This illustration is intended as a preview of an upcoming detailed study on Palmyrene coin typology. This new typology is based on a thorough review of all the available numismatic evidence and previously overlooked publications. It is hence more accurate and comprehensive than its predecessors, and it puts the coinage into a coherent thematic order (sorted by obverse iconographies) that visualises the internal coherence between these coin issues, forming a proper visual programme with a discernible rationale. This categorisation by iconographic themes offers new insights on local identities and religious life as set out by the mint of Palmyra and thus promises to set Palmyrene numismatics on a new footing.

Note

1 *HN* 5.88. Although written in the later first century AD, Pliny probably relied on sources that pre-dated Palmyra's annexation by Rome.

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