II – VARIÉTÉS

THE PALMYRA PORTRAIT PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Situated between the two mighty empires of Rome and Parthia, halfway between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean Sea, Palmyra's special role and character have long been recognised. Palmyra's languages, society and religion, its art and architecture speak of a rich and varied heritage, a unique synthesis of East and West that continues to fascinate and inspire scholarly research [1]. The *art* of Palmyra, however, has received remarkably little in-depth research, despite its appeal and familiarity [2]. Most Classicists will have glimpsed in the general literature images of wide-eyed Palmyran gods or citizens lined up in stiff postures, looking back at the viewer; but despite the familiarity of this kind of sculpture, academic ground work is still lacking. This is especially true of the English-speaking world, where the excellent handbook *The Art of Palmyra* by M.A.R. Colledge [3] remains the only work of its kind.

One area that especially deserves closer attention is Palmyra's portraiture. Bluntly put, its funerary portraiture constitutes *the largest corpus of portraits in the Roman world outside Rome*. There are well over 2,000 pieces scattered across the world's museums, private collections, and antiquities markets.

A comprehensive corpus of this material is still lacking, not to mention a synthetic study of Palmyran portraiture as an artistic and cultural phenomenon [4]. Several attempts at compiling corpora were made in the past decades, but none were brought to fruition [5]. The lack of such an elementary tool means that one still has to work with an incomplete set of data; with material that is published, if at all, across a wide range of books and journals which may contain partial or outdated information, or lack adequate documentation. It is an impasse that hampers all further progress in the study of Palmyran portraits.

It is our aim to address this lack with a new research project. The Palmyra Portrait Project (PPP), directed by the authors, was initiated on 1 Jan 2012 and is scheduled to run until the end of 2015, thanks to the generous funding of the Ny Carlsberg foundation in Copenhagen. It currently employs two

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1. General literature: STARCKY & GAWLIKOWSKI 1985; WILL 1992; MILLAR 1993, p. 319-36; SCHMIDT-COLINET 2005; SARTRE & SARTRE-FAURIAT 2008.

2. The lavishly illustrated catalogue of the most important exhibition in recent years, *Moi, Zénobie, Reine de Palmyre* (CHARLES-GAFFIOT 2001) contains 30 specialist articles, none of them on sculpture, painting or other visual arts!

3. COLLEDGE 1976.

4. SADURSKA & BOUNNI 1994 is the only book-length study so far. But it deals exclusively with portraits from identified hypogea.

5. PARLASCA 1990, p. 133-134 sketches some of these attempts: His catalogue of Palmyran portraits in the "mitteleuropäischen Raum" was due to appear 1989; at this time, M.A.R. Colledge had, according to Parlasca, completed his manuscript of a catalogue of all Palmyran portraits in British collections; this too remained unpublished. Ploug, in her catalogue of the NCG collection states that "the writer has finished the manuscript on *The Relative Chronology of the* [sic] *Palmyrene Busts*" (PLOUG 1995, p. 12); this has not been published either.

postdocs, one PhD and three student helpers. In the following pages we present the scope, methodology, aims and objectives of the PPP.

The first task of the PPP is to compile a detailed comprehensive corpus. The first collection we have worked on is the one at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (NCG), one of the largest collections of Palmyran bust reliefs outside Syria. All of its 122 portrait reliefs have been published before, with various degrees of detail [6]. Furthermore a host of public and private collections across the globe, sales catalogues and auction websites have also been registered. Our documentation consists of new measurements (incl. those of individual elements like the heads and the depth of the reliefs), detailed descriptions of poses, faces, hairstyles, clothing and attributes, and high resolution photographs of (ideally) all four sides and salient details. Members of the team will conduct autopsies wherever the material is retrievable and accessible.

The documentation of this material will, when completed, be accessible in a new online database which has been developed specifically for this purpose. In the database each object is registered and furthermore every portrait on each object is given a subcategory. Such detail is indispensible since many portrait slabs depict two or more portraits; this means that the overall measurements of the entire slab are almost meaningless for the study individual portraits. With this data it will be possible for the first time to have precise information on each head (height, width, depth etc.) and to make it comparable to others, a practice that is long established in the study of freestanding heads and busts. The data base also offers fields for entries on present collection, former collection and provenience when known. Other parameters such as gender, colour traces, hair styles, dress and jewellery are registered in the database and will be searchable. This gives an idea of the kind of standard we are aiming to maintain as we peruse other collections. The database currently holds some 2,000 portraits which have been entered with all the relevant information. Already at this point it is clear that the material offers vast opportunities for research. Statistics can be made in refined ways and material compared across and within certain sub-groups such as depictions of priests, women, men, children or even just a single attribute such as a spindle or a certain piece of jewellery.

The second part of the PPP will consist of an interpretive, synthesising text volume with research articles by collaborators, dealing with questions of style and craftsmanship, realism and idealism, context and identity, gender roles as expressed through dress codes, hairstyles, jewellery, attributes and insignia, and several other aspects.

CORPUS

The portraiture of Palmyra falls into two categories of very uneven size, public and funerary portraits. In the public sphere, honorific standing statues were set up for local notables. Their placement in the urban context is a Palmyran specialty: They were set up on brackets halfway up the columns overlooking streets, temples and the agora (**fig. 1**).

The bulk of these statues was made of bronze of which only tiny scraps are preserved [7]. Most of them were no doubt brought in from outside Palmyra, as suggested by a passage from the famous "Tariff" regulating the import of such statues [8]. There are however torsos of a dozen statues of imported marble depicting Palmyran notables [9]. Half of them are male, all wearing togas. This is in stark contrast to funerary portraiture where the two standard dresses are the Greek chiton and the Parthian (or Persian) garb, while togas are exceedingly rare [10]. The marble togati are of inferior quality compared to others across the Greek East. Since the entire Near East lack marble quarries, the material had to be brought in from the West, and it is generally assumed that the statues were imported as finished products.

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6. PLOUG 1995.

7. See one bronze foot from Palmyra in COLLEDGE 1976, p. 90 fig. 124; PARLASCA 1985, p. 346-347 pl. 146.2.

8. PARLASCA 1985, p. 346-347.

9. WIELGOSZ 2010.

10. PARLASCA 1985, p. 350, quotes a bust in Frankfurt as the sole funerary portrait of a togatus. To this must be added a relief on the front of a recently found very large third-century sarcophagus in the Palmyra Museum, SCHMIDT-COLINET 2004, p. 193-194; 2005, p. 42-43 fig. 60, 63; 2009, p. 223-225 fig. 1-8; SARTRE & SARTRE-FAURIAT 2008, p. 39.

Figure 1. Palmyra, colonnaded street. View towards the arch at the eastern end © A. Kropp.

As for the huge number of funerary portraits [11], by far the most numerous and best-known kind are locally produced bust reliefs carved on loculus slabs. These roughly square-shaped slabs were used to cover the opening of individual loculi (i.e. burial slots). Since these loculi were arranged like shelves by the dozens or hundreds inside tombs, the visitor would be faced with vast portrait galleries. In the course of the first century AD, these loculus busts came to replace an earlier form of commemoration in Palmyra, namely free-standing funerary stelae with rounded tops showing full-length figures in relief, a format more akin to Hellenistic models [12]. Loculus slabs typically depict more than what the term "bust" normally implies: Beside head, neck and shoulders, the arms and hands too are included, holding attributes or arranged in meaningful gestures. The term "half-figure" would in fact be more accurate, but for convenience we retain the term bust that is used in all the relevant literature. The shape and size of the cut-out itself can also serve as a chronological marker since it develops over time; early examples often have a cut-out which reaches down to the navel [13]. The immediate models of loculus reliefs are thought to be the freedman reliefs produced in Rome by the hundreds, esp. in the Augustan period [14]. One can think of both the loculus busts and the freedman reliefs as excerpts or citations of full-sized honorific statues with their pose, dress and attributes [15]. However, unlike the togati in freedman reliefs, the portraits of Palmyran men imitate honorific statues from the Greek East, normally wearing a chiton and himation and holding a book scroll. Also, the format and placement of the portraits within the tombs was adapted to the peculiar circumstances of Palmyra where, unlike Rome, inhumation was the rule. The transfer of these half-figures to loculus slabs is an ingenious adaptation that was made in Syria, or perhaps even in Palmyra itself, in the first cent. AD [16]. In terms of style too, there is a deliberate and distinct departure from Roman imperial and provincial models.

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11. Summary of different types in COLLEDGE 1976, p. 63-82.

12. PARLASCA 1976, p. 34-39; 1982, p. 22-23.

13. PARLASCA 1994, p. 300.

14. KOCKEL 1993. From Italy there are some 270 reliefs with 450 portraits; a remarkable 85% come from Rome and date to the time of Augustus.

15. KOCKEL 1993, p. 11.

16. DENTZER-FEYDY & TEIXIDOR 1993, p. 66.

Other than on loculi, bust reliefs were placed in all kinds of locations in tombs. They could decorate walls, lintels, gables, and even coffers in ceilings [17]. These busts were not associated with specific burials and hence did not represent the features of any particular deceased person. Other reliefs depict banqueting scenes [18]. They usually consist of a reclining male figure accompanied by smaller figures standing in the background or seated to his feet. This motif, the so-called "Totenmahl", was very common in funerary art across the Roman empire [19]. But the Parthian costume that is often used for these scenes is a specifically Palmyrene ingredient inspired from the east. Banquets are also depicted in life size on sarcophagus lids. Though this format would naturally lend itself to three-dimensional sculpture, here too the Palmyrene sculptors preferred working with an upright stone slab from which the figures project in relief. There are only few examples of truly free-standing statues inside tombs. This preference for relief work is also mirrored in the religious sphere where cult images of deities are often worked as reliefs rather than statues.

To facilitate our work on the corpus, an important, hitherto untapped, source of material is the Ingholt archive, which was given to the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek by Yale University where Ingholt worked for many years. It comprises illustrations of more than 1,000 portraits which Ingholt had collected over the years, from the 1920s to the 1980s. This includes many unpublished pieces, e.g. ones that briefly appeared on the art market and whose current whereabouts are unknown. Each photo comes with annotations by Ingholt and additions by Ploug. The PPP has digitised this archive and will make it available to a larger public online. Furthermore the information contained in the archive is currently being entered into the database as well and in this way a concordance between the archive and the database holdings is made. At the end of the project it will become clear how many of the pieces in the Ingholt archive are not in accessible collections anymore.

The large number of specimens allows for meaningful statistics [20]. They can shine a light on different formats beside the ubiquitous loculus reliefs. It is easily forgotten that there was a wide variety of alternative formats, even though their numbers are far smaller than those of loculus reliefs. Also, thanks to the corpus, it will be possible to verify e.g. which particular dress is preferred for a particular context. For instance, scholars have remarked that reclining banqueters (who are, without exception, always males) often favoured the richly embroidered Parthian garb. Such suggestions which specialists have so far only been able to report anecdotally, based on their individual knowledge of the material, will be proven through reliable numbers and percentages. New patterns will emerge, detailing which elements of clothing are worn for specific contexts. Furthermore, it has been noted that of the various different formats, the reliefs depicting banquet scenes are particularly prone to use generic, de-individualised facial features [21]. This would mean that Palmyran artists adapted their style depending on the kind of image they were asked to produce: for a banquet scene, in which the host wears Parthian costume and often priestly paraphernalia, it was apparently considered appropriate to use a portrait style that was furthest removed from the conventions of Roman portraiture. If true, one could establish a connection between context —costume— portrait style and quantify the occurrence of various combinations of these elements. The groundwork of the corpus will hence allow broaching questions that could not be addressed previously for lack of specific data.

Another set of figures to come out of the corpus will be measurements. Comparing sizes of loculus slabs across the board, it should be possible to see to what extent they were standardised, and if so,

17. PARLASCA 1985, p. 348-349.
18. PARLASCA 1984, p. 285-389.
19. STEWART 2008, p. 161 with lit.
20. See HEYN 2010 for excellent groundwork with a sample of 876 specimens examining the connection between gender and gesture in Palmyran funerary portraits.
21. SCHMIDT-COLINET 1992, p. 139; SKUPINSKA-LØVSET 1999, p. 203.

what were the standard measurements, and what kinds of units of measurement were used [22]. These figures need to be compared to measurements of loculi in tower tombs and hypogea. This will in turn give a better idea of how workshops and their production were organised. If standard measures were consistently applied, one does not need to assume that the relief slabs were custom-made and fitted for each individual tomb. Instead, standardisation would raise the possibility that relief portraits were available "off the shelf", an assumption that would in turn affect our understanding of the portraits (s. below).

CHRONOLOGY

Palmyran portraiture occurred in a relatively narrow time bracket, namely the first three centuries AD. Of the relief busts, up to 10% are also explicitly dated by accompanying inscriptions (**fig. 2, 4**). These precise dates are invaluable fix points for the study of key features. H. Ingholt has established a feasible chronological framework in his classic publication, where he differentiated between three stylistic groups (AD 50 to 150; 150 to 200; 200 to 273) [23]. Although this framework was entirely based on busts from the art market and museum or private collections, all devoid of archaeological contexts, it is by and large still valid. Some refinements of the chronology have been made in more recent studies [24] and thanks to in situ finds from intact tombs in properly documented excavations. Some 20 of these tombs with inscribed foundation dates allowed for establishing entire genealogies of Palmyran families, which in turn allowed each generation and each individual member to be dated with a good degree of certainty [25]. The result is a remarkably close-knit net of dates with a number of chronological fix points, a feature that in its scope and precision is virtually unmatched in the arts of the Classical world. It has e.g. been possible to show that there could be a considerable time lag between the inscribed dates and the depicted portraits. On one relief slab of a couple, the inscription states the year of death corresponding to AD 181, while the woman's hairstyle rather points to the 150s [26]. The ability to discern such chronological discrepancies between text and image raises fundamental questions about how funerary portraiture was used and conceived, and it provides vital clues to the production process (s. below).

While the parameter of time can often be determined, one component that is rarely verifiable is the physical context. Only a small minority of sculptures were found in situ in controlled excavations. The bulk of museum collections consists of pieces from the antiquities market whose precise origin cannot now been ascertained. Thus for a number of Palmyran busts of the NCG the only available information on provenance is that they were acquired from "a French Jew in Damascus" [27]. The reconstruction of the original contexts will hence rely on the few well documented examples [28] and the relief slabs themselves, i.e. their size and shape, the pose and composition of the depicted busts etc. In addition, the excavation diaries of Ingholt will lead to contextualisation of further pieces.

The corpus will enable us to trace, on the one hand, developments in iconography such as changing tastes and fashions detectable in changes in hairstyles, costumes, headdresses and jewellery in female

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22. SCHMIDT-COLINET 1992, p. 227-228 notes the use of the Phoenician cubit (51.5 cm) in some of Palmyra's architecture. For the Temple of Bel, SEYRIG, AMY & WILL 1975, p. 119-120 discovered a basic unit of 27.27 cm; this is shorter than any known foot standard, but it corresponds to half a Babylonian cubit (54.5 cm).

23. INGHOLT 1928

24. PLOUG 1995, p. 25-33.

25. See lit. in SADURSKA 1982, p. 270 n. 5.

26. PARLASCA 1976, p. 40-41.

27. PLOUG 1995, p. 10.

28. See also the examples discussed in SADURSKA & BOUNNI 1994, passim. The portraits in the well-known tomb of Yarhai that is reconstructed in the basement of the Damascus Museum are actually for the most part plaster casts of portraits from a variety of different contexts; SEYRIG 1950.

portraits, and on the other hand stylistic developments, showing e.g. how facial features are rendered over time (shapes of ears, lips, noses, eyes and eye lids; incisions of the pupils etc.) [29]. Since in recent decades there has also been progress in the study of portraiture of contemporary art centres in Syria and Mesopotamia [30], Palmyran portraiture does no longer need to be treated as an entirely isolated and solitary phenomenon. While there is no denying the distinctness of Palmyran style, it is also evident that Palmyra shared a common substratum with the wider region [31].

Thanks to the exceptional number of dated specimens one can explore the dynamics and rationale behind the process of production. It will become possible to ascribe individual works to specific "hands" or workshops. One will also be able to gauge the impact of historical events on Palmyra's artistic output. It will no doubt emerge more clearly that none of the artistic developments described above, be it in style or iconography, occurred in entirely linear fashion, one after the other. The mere fact that at any one moment different generations of artists worked together (masters and apprentices) and different generations of people had their portraits made (grandmother and granddaughter etc.) means that different styles and iconographies existed side by side, overlapping and encroaching on each other; some rapidly evolving in lockstep with new fasions, others stubbornly holding on to traditions (the phenomenon known in German academia as the Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen). All of these aspects are still awaiting extensive study.

As a good example of the kind of questions we would like to address, one can look at one particular female hairstyle at Palmyra that K. Parlasca has convincingly analysed [32]. This hairstyle has the locks piled up on the head like a cone and divided into vertical strands capped with a flat top tied with a horizontal braid (**fig. 2**).

The division into individual strands of hair is remindful of Hellenistic "melon" hairstyles, while the overall conception is distantly reminiscent of a hairstyle introduced by Faustina the Elder, wife of Antoninus Pius (AD 138-161). Similar hairstyles were used by women in other Syrian cities, e.g. in Hama [33]. The importance of this style in Palmyra lies in the fact that it is exceptional; whereas Palmyran women typically cover at least part of their heads with a veil, these examples show the entire head exposed. Is this a transitory fashion, devoid of deeper meaning? A sign of Hellenisation/Romanisation? Is it a visual statement that articulates a cultural change in how women saw their role in society? Is it correlated with changes that we can discern in Palmyran society, or particular historical events? Parlasca has shown that this "liberale Haarmode" [34] must have started in the Hadrianic period and only lasted a few decades in the second cent. AD. Its emergence hence coincides with crucial changes in Palmyra's political setup. Following the emperor's visit in AD 129, it was elevated to the status of a free city with the title Hadriana. This event is thought to have triggered the introduction of "westliche Modegewohnheiten" [35] among Palmyrene women. The corpus will provide further data and new relevant examples to tackle such questions, confirm the proposed chronology and yield more insight into the correlation and significance of a variety of factors responsible for innovations in style and form.

29. See e.g. PLOUG 1995, p. 25-29.

30. E.g. SKUPINSKA-LØVSET 1999, passim.

31. SKUPINSKA-LØVSET 1999, p. 133, 197, 200 etc. emphasises the dependence of Palmyra on western Syrian models, esp. the Orontes Valley: "Stylistically, it [the portraiture of Palmyra] forms a branch of a geometrized style en vogue in the entire inland Syria", p. 203. But for now, the evidence from Emesa, Hama etc. is rather too thin and too late to warrant this assertion.

32. PARLASCA 1987; PLOUG 1995, p. 50-51.

33. Portraits from the Habbasi tomb, PARLASCA 2006.

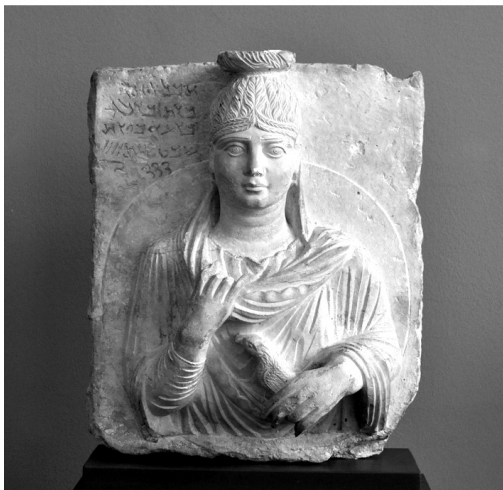34. PARLASCA 1987, p. 112.

35. PARLASCA 1987.

Figure 2. Portrait of Aḥā, daughter of Zabdelah, AD 149. H 0.55 W 0.45. NCG 2794,
PLOUG 1995, no. 6 © A. Kropp.

DRESS CODES AND GENDER ROLES

Clothing expresses prestige, status and identity. It has long been recognised that Palmyran citizens wore an exceptional variety of garments of Graeco-Roman, Parthian/Persian and local origins [36]. The preliminary results of one recent research project on the clothes depicted in Palmyran funerary sculpture have singled out some 50 different items of clothing with distinct forms, cuts, lengths and decorations [37]. In addition, the discovery of textiles on Palmyran mummies has shown that the sculpture does in fact represent actual costumes worn at Palmyra. The fabric used is mostly wool. Besides, one finds some linen, cotton and even Chinese silk. The textiles, together with rare Palmyran tomb paintings, also give an idea of the colouring that is now largely lost on the sculpture.

The use of these different costumes followed discernible patterns, though apparently no strict rules. As mentioned above, the men on funerary busts are often dressed in Greek manner with chiton and himation, while the full-length banqueters are depicted with richly embroidered garments consisting of a knee-length tunic, baggy trousers and soft leather boots. Priests are distinguished by their shaven heads and faces and their cylindrical hat (modius) (**fig. 3**).

No inscription on a loculus slab explicitly calls a modius bearer a priest. But the identification as priests cannot be in doubt due to the attributes, the shaved heads, the explicit labelling on tesserae, and the obvious parallels from neighbouring regions. The cylindrical shape of the Palmyran modius is somewhat surprising, since the closest parallels to hand, from Hierapolis to the north and Dura to the east, consistently show priests with tall conical hats. The cylinder shape is instead popular on the Phoenician coast [38]. Priests frequently wear a chlamys tied to one shoulder rather than a larger himation. They hold a bowl (of incense) and a jug, the tools of their trade. From roughly Hadrianic times into the third century, the modius is often tied with a laurel wreath that sometimes has a central medallion at the front, depicting a nondescript male bust [39]. These armless busts, sometimes wearing a modius, have been variously interpreted as a symbol of the priest's rank, as a badge of clan membership, or to express connections to some ancestral cults [40].

Other male figures often hold a scroll. This is not necessarily a clue to their specific occupation, but a token of education. Different costumes are not mutually exclusive. It is not unusual to find a man in Greek dress side by side with a man in eastern embroidered costume. It is as yet unclear whether there were "dress codes" in how costumes are combined, i.e. rules that the wearers and the viewers would immediately grasp, but currently elude us. "Did the choice of a Greek mantle for a man make a statement about cultural allegiances, to the polis and/or to the Roman empire?" [41]. It may be possible to ascribe a particular meaning to each costume depending on the context.

While men often wore Greek costumes, women retained more "Oriental" fashions. As elsewhere in NE, in visual representations as well as in onomastics, women tended to stick more closely to tradition than men. Palmyran women wore combinations of tunic, cloak (larger than a Greek himation), headband ("diadem"), turban and veil. As for attributes, spindle and distaff were especially popular symbols of their domestic tasks in early portraits, but fizzled out in the second century. Other women held keys, calendars or children. The jewellery of Palmyran women is especially rich. While the fashion of up to 9 hoops framing the entire ear disappears early on, jewellery on the whole sharply increases in the second cent. AD: bracelets, forearm clasps, row upon row of colliers, brooches, and chains attached to their headdresses. The corpus will document not only changing fashions but also patterns of clothing among particular social groups such as tribes and families. It has e.g. been suggested that the tribal affiliation of women may be signalled by particular details of their turban decoration [42].

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36. See the classic study SEYRIG 1937, which is however limited to male costumes. See also STAUFFER 2010 with lit.
37. STAUFFER 2010, p. 210.
38. See e.g. Hellenistic stelae from Umm el-'Amed in GUBEL 2002, nos. 150, 157-160.
39. See in detail RUMSCHEID 2000, p. 93-108, with sensible interpretations of the different types of wreaths.
40. PLOUG 1995, p. 61; See examples and discussion in RUMSCHEID 2000, p. 103-105, 243-249 nos. 332-352.
41. BUTCHER 2003, p. 329.
42. SCHMIDT-COLINET 2004, p. 191 referring to an unpublished PhD thesis by C. Finlayson (University of Iowa, 1998).

Figure 3. Portrait of a Yarḥai, son of Yerībēl. Early 3rd c. ad. H 0.55 W 0.43. NCG 1034,
Ploug 1995, no. 75 © A. Kropp.

"Tableaux de famille"

The bulk of research on Palmyra has occurred in the francophone world. Palmyran portraits in particular were brought to the attention of a larger public thanks to the perceptive observations of the French writer and national icon André Malraux. In his *Les Voix du Silence*, 1951, he praises their aesthetic value [43], not so much for particular formal aspects or skills of the sculptors, but for the exotic rendering of human faces. With their large, "hypnotic" eyes, Malraux suggests, the portraits look beyond the here and how. They have left behind mortal affairs and reached out to eternity. In brief, Malraux found in Palmyran portraits a mystic depth and spirituality that Roman art lacked. These alleged qualities of Palmyran portraits match those imputed to Byzantine art by art historians of Malraux' day. At this point, Palmyra was in fact considered a critical forerunner of Byzantium. In the meantime, it has been shown that this connection is rather feeble. For one, the portraits that have an especial "Late Antique" look about them are actually the early ones, dating to the first and second cent. AD. They show the stiffness, frontality and exaggerated large staring eyes [44]. Furthermore, as mentioned above, with the intensification of research in the wider region, the art of Palmyra now appears as less of an isolated and solitary phenomenon, and is hence less likely to be responsible for general stylistic trends of late Roman art.

As for the expressiveness of Palmyran portraits, some of the standard literature still echoes Malraux' thoughts: Starcky and Gawlikowski detect in Palmyran sculpture "l'inspiration orientale qui était en quête de l'être permanent des objets et des personnes" [45]. Colledge deviates uncharacteristically from his sober description and analysis and comments: "from their great eyes, staring fixedly into the unknown, shines out an unworldly, even fanatical spirituality." [46]. These remarks show how much the academic approach has shifted in recent years. The fascination with Palmyran portraits remains unbroken, but few archaeologists or art historians today would feel inclined to comment on the spirituality and transcendence of their object of study. In the framework of the PPP, the striking style and iconography of Palmyran portraits shall rather be analysed with verifiable criteria as an art-historical phenomenon whose emergence and significance still await further exploration. It is however justified to inquire to what extent these funerary monuments expressed beliefs in and expectations of the afterlife [47]. E.g. it has often been debated whether the curtains or dorsalia often depicted on early stelae hanging behind the heads of many of the deceased has a symbolic value. While this item is already found in Hellenistic reliefs to indicate an interior space, some argue that it underwent a semantic shift in Palmyra and would see it as an access to the afterlife, the nomadic counterpart of the doors depicted in Greek, Roman and Etruscan funerary art [48]. The keys, mostly held by women and sometimes inscribed with pithy phrases such as "House of Eternity" or "Victory of Zeus" have been interpreted in similar ways: "they open the gates of heaven and give the soul entrance to Bel-Zeus, the cosmocrator and life-giver" [49]. Others meanwhile interpret them more pragmatically as actual keys to the deceased's property. Finally, the banqueting scenes too are perhaps ambiguous or multivalent: Do these images show banquets past when the deceased enjoyed the pleasures of life? Or are they funerary banquets in the company of the souls of the deceased? Or feasts taking place in blissful afterlife?

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43. Malraux 1951, p. 180-85; s. also Veyne 2005, p. 413-14.
44. Parlasca 1985, p. 353-356
45. Starcky & Gawlikowski 1985, p. 128.
46. Colledge 1976, p. 68.
47. See esp. Drijvers 1982; Dentzer-Feydy & Teixidor 1993, p. 76-78.
48. Gawlikowski 1970, p. 37; Parlasca 1976, 41; Drijvers 1982, p. 720.
49. Drijvers 1982, p. 720.

Many different answers have been given over the years. It is worth quoting the astute observations of one of the greatest specialists of the Roman Near East, H. Seyrig. Against the transcendental interpretations of his own day he judged banquet scenes as "désespérément profanes," devoid of any religious connotations. "Jamais un emblème divin, comme le chacal d'Anubis ou le faucon d'Horus aux pieds des défunts égyptiens, ne rappelle l'idée de la mort ; jamais […] une forme quelconque d'héroïsation." [50]. The deceased are instead represented as they would have liked to be seen in real life, enjoying worldly pleasures. "C'est probablement un tableau de famille, où le père, la mère et les enfants sont figurés dans l'acte le plus superbe, le plus officiel, le plus représentatif de leur vie en commun, les hommes dans leurs vêtements les plus élégants, les femmes couvertes de parures. Cet étalage de richesse, complété souvent par le luxe des lits de banquet, de l'argenterie, des serviteurs nombreux, est celui où se complaisait l'opulente bourgeoisie de caravaniers qui régnait sur Palmyre." [51]. Rather than spiritual inspiration, what singles out Palmyran portraits and asks for an explanation is their striking down-to-earth character and omission of direct references to death and afterlife.

STYLE: CONFORMISTS AND INDIVIDUALISTS

Especially in English publications Palmyran portraiture is sometimes described as a branch of Roman provincial portraiture, alongside the other large body of contemporary "Oriental" portraiture, Egyptian mummy portraits (aka Fayum portraits) [52]. This labelling suggests that Palmyran portraits, like Egyptian ones, follow imperial styles and fashions. But this is hardly even a half-truth. On the contrary, Palmyran portraiture stands out for its own distinct, de-individualised style which owes little to imperial Rome. Broad general trends such as the growing popularity of beards in the second century are represented in these portraits, but there are only few of the 'Zeitgesichter' that are so common in Roman provinces, i.e. portraits with the typical features of the period as embodied esp. by the emperor and his consort. One hardly finds e.g. the "heavy eyelids" of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus that were eagerly adopted in the Egyptian portraits from the Fayum. The few examples with a more Roman appearance also stand out with Greek inscriptions and have therefore been ascribed to 'foreign' (perhaps north Syrian) sculptors working in Palmyra [53]. Beside these exceptions, the style and iconography of Palmyran portraits diverges from the conventions of Roman portraiture in significant ways.

Many Palmyran portraits show little effort to render the exact facial features of individual persons. "Ausdrucksstarke, naturalistische Bildnisse fehlen jedenfalls in Palmyra fast ganz". [54]. Personal features are often replaced with stylised, generic and repetitive visual formulas [55]. The sculptors reduced the human face to "des schémas de carte d'identité (« nez droit, front moyen, visage rond »), sans avoir le talent ou le désir de donner l'impression de l'individualité". [56]. Rather than portraits in the usual sense, these sculptures show conventional types, man, woman (young and mature) boy, girl. Even the signs of old age are reduced or avoided. Some Palmyrans did of course reach very old age, but the artists rarely added wrinkles and crow's feet to indicate the real age of the deceased and instead showed them in the prime of life. This stylisation contrasts not only with Roman portraiture in general, but even with neighbouring regions in Syria itself. Belkis-Zeugma and Hierapolis have yielded extensive series of funerary relief busts that come much closer to what one would expect of Roman provincial portraiture [57].

50. SEYRIG 1951, p. 38.

51. SEYRIG 1951, with DENTZER-FEYDY & TEIXIDOR 1993, p. 78.

52. WALKER 2000, p. 23.

53. PARLASCA 1985, p. 349-353; VLIZOS 2001, 194-96; SKUPINSKA-LØVSET 1999, p. 205.

54. PARLASCA 1985, p. 350.

55. COLLEDGE 1976, p. 62; PARLASCA 1985, p. 350-351; VLIZOS 2001, p. 193; SCHENKE 2003, p. 110.

56. VEYNE 2005, p. 417.

57. PARLASCA 1982, passim; PARLASCA 2005.

This apparent indifference is illustrated by some pairs of representations of the *same* person, which do not look alike! ʿAla the daughter of Yarḥai who died in AD 114 is depicted on two loculus reliefs bearing the same names and date (**fig. 4**) [58].

Figure 4. Two portraits of ʿAla daughter of Yarḥai, AD 113/4. Left: BM 125695, H 0.56. Image 01097852001 © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Right: NCG 1079, H 0.56 W 0.46. PLOUG 1995, no. 3 © A. Kropp.

The dresses and attributes are similar, but one notices immediately that there is little resemblance between the two faces, in particular the shape and size of the eyes, the nose, the lips etc. This is at least one clear case where the customers were obviously happy to buy two sculptures that did not depict the woman in question, or any particular woman at all.

Does the absence of individual facial features affect the meaning of these portraits in the eyes of buyers and viewers? Did imperial fashions simply not reach Palmyra, or do the portraits reveal a different approach to the purpose and function of portraiture? Did Palmyrans put less value on "individualism" and instead promote conformity? Do the portraits articulate a different "Selbstverständnis" as citizens?

It would be unhelpful to interpret the absence of personalised facial features as a *lack* or *deficiency*. It is almost impossible to imagine that Palmyra lacked skilled sculptors or that they were simply ignorant and cut off from prevailing trends in the empire. One only needs to look at the architectural decoration of Palmyra's temples to realise they kept up with the best that Rome's eastern provinces had to offer. Instead, this type of portraiture expresses a *choice* for different, un-classical principles for representing men, women and children. Rather than diminishing the value of these portraits as historical documents, this ostensive renunciation of artistic conventions that were so common at the time demands an explanation. The apparent indifference of Palmyran sculptors towards individual characterisation is therefore a key theme that our research needs to address.

There can be no doubt that, like their realistic counterparts, non-individual portraits too expressed a whole range of values and identities. These sculptures are "Zeugnisse des Selbstverständnisses und der Selbstdarstellung", providing crucial evidence for the "kollektive Wertvorstellungen" [59] of the wealthy

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58. London BM 125695 and NCG 1079; COLLEDGE 1976, p. 62, 70 pl. 63-64; PARLASCA 1985, p. 351; SKUPINSKA-LØVSET 1999, p. 204. There are also further examples (all of them females) of this peculiar, unexplained phenomenon of two loculus reliefs for the same person. HEYN 2010, p. 640, raises the possibility that the deceased wanted to be represented both in the tomb of her family and that of her spouse.

59. ZANKER 1992, p. 339.

citizen class at Palmyra. Their dresses, poses and attributes leave no doubt that they wanted to be seen as "vorbildliche Bürger" [60]. The main difference is that at Palmyra, self-representation was constructed with different tools. The exploration of Palmyran portraits promises to yield insights into collective civic values.

Looking beyond heads and faces, the combination of text and image is crucial for our understanding. On the loculus slabs, the field beside the head normally carries a brief inscription, almost exclusively in Palmyrene, identifying the deceased and thereby insisting that each bust is meant to represent one specific individual. One inscription even specifies that the portrait was made from the features of the living model [61]. The portraits were thus individualised not through individual facial features, but thanks to the accompanying inscriptions [62]. Does this mean that the close friends and family members who visited the tombs and who could easily identify the deceased through the inscription were indifferent to the specific facial features?

Epigraphists have long noted how little there is to learn about the deceased as individuals, not only from the idealised portraits, but also from the bland inscriptions. Palmyrene inscriptions in general, and funerary ones in particular, tell us little about citizens' professions or careers [63]. The funerary inscriptions hardly ever mention the public office of the deceased, even when he is patently depicted as a priest performing ritual functions. What they do proclaim instead are their distinguished pedigrees. Almost uniquely in the Graeco-Roman world, Palmyrans list their ancestors sometimes up to the fifth generation. This is clear evidence for the great importance of family bonds over public office at Palmyra. One will have to examine to what extent these generational bonds are reflected in the choice of style and iconography and whether these distinct social attitudes could be linked with the exceptional character of Palmyran portraiture.

Other explanations for the peculiar portraiture of Palmyra are more prosaic. The avoidance of personal features may indicate that the portraits were not custom-made products according to the customers' wishes. The relief slabs could instead be "mass products" which the sculptor could stock up and then retail "off the shelf" [64]. Beside the case of 'Ala the daughter of Yarhai and her uneven pair of portraits, there is further evidence to support this. Sometimes relief busts were re-used: On some slabs, the name has been erased and replaced with a new one [65]. Here, again, the customers were not concerned with how the "portrait" actually looked which carried their name; any bust would do, as long as it was properly labelled.

Arguing from what we know about funerary customs in Palmyra, some suggest that lifelike representation was irrelevant since the relief slab in itself was charged with spiritual value, regardless of its appearance [66]. Calling the relief busts portraits and juxtaposing them with Roman examples would therefore mean not comparing like with like: "ce n'est pas son portrait, mais le mémorial de sa personne sous forme de visage humain." [67]. Possible confirmation of this line of thought comes from the fact that the relief busts are regularly referred to as *nefesh*, a form of commemoration of the deceased that is typical for the Near East [68]. *Nefesh* literally means breath or soul [69], as well as spirit of the departed [70].

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60. Zanker 1992, p. 343.

61. Dentzer-Feydy & Teixidor 1993, p. 79.

62. "Offensichtlich genügte die Festlegung der Person durch die Inschrift," Parlasca 1985, p. 350; Schenke 2003, p. 110.

63. Yon 2002, p. 36-40, 222-26. Only some 40 magistrates can be identified, a very small number compared to Greek cities.

64. Parlasca 1985, p. 350; Dentzer-Feydy & Teixidor 1993, p. 79.

65. Parlasca 1985, p. 351 n. 50.

66. Colledge 1976, p. 66-67.

67. Veyne 2005, p. 419.

68. Among the abundant recent literature on the subject, the most exhaustive treatments are Triebel 2004; Kühn 2005.

69. Occurence and etymology in all Semitic languages, Triebel 2004, p. 7-19, 53-61, 117-226; Kühn 2005, p. 109-233.

70. Triebel 2004, p. 241-246, 252-255.

The most ancient Aramaic attestation of the term was found in 2008, on the stele of Kuttamuwa at Zincirli [71]. From early on the term was applied to stones or monuments in memory of the deceased. In the fifth cent. BC inscriptions from Central Arabia name grave stelae *nefesh* [72]; the stone is made the resting place of the soul of the deceased. In analogy to the 'house of the god', which is the baetyl, the *nefesh* becomes the 'house of the soul' [73]. The term spread throughout the Aramaic koine and appears in funerary contexts time and again, in Petra, Palestine and Palmyra [74]. It seems that in Roman times a drastic semantic widening of the term *nefesh* took place, as it could be applied to humble gravestone as well as a full-fledged tomb. In Palmyra even a large tower-tomb is called *nefesh* and στήλη in a bilingual inscription [75]. In the latter meaning it perhaps came to represent the 'souls' of an entire family, while at the same time acting as receptacle for their burials. As such, *nefesh* supplanted the customary term for tomb, QBR' [76]. As for the relief portraits, it is especially the predecessors of loculus slabs, namely freestanding stelae with rounded tops, which researchers have taken as evidence Palmyran funerary portraiture too stems from the conception of a *nefesh* stele [77]. The de-individualised style of the relief busts may hence express a fundamentally different attitude to portraiture in general, and a different conception of how to represent and commemorate the deceased in particular. Explanations of the distinct Palmyran style of portraiture therefore require looking beyond aesthetic and art-historical questions and considering funerary customs and religious beliefs that were apparently still intact at Palmyra despite the impact of Graeco-Roman culture.

We have outlined the main lines of inquiry of the PPP as well as given the current status of the project. The project promises to bring incremental progress towards a deeper understanding of the phenomenon that is the portraiture of Palmyra.

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71. NIEHR 2010, p. 282-284.

72. Stelae from Tayma: TRIEBEL 2004, p. 53-56; KÜHN 2005, p. 136-141.

73. TRIEBEL 2004, p. 253.

74. GAWLIKOWSKI 1972 lists more than 100 attestations; Petra: KÜHN 2005, *passim*. Palestine: TRIEBEL 2004, p. 151-166; Palmyra: TRIEBEL 2004, p. 142-147, 207-220. Architectural examples in GAWLIKOWSKI 1970, p. 22-43.

75. Tomb 66a: *PAT* 1134. Two further bilinguals, *PAT* 1221 and 2819, translate it as μνημεῖον. Tombs called *nefesh* in monolingual inscriptions: *PAT* 0516; 1896; 0509 (*nmš'*, thought to be scribal error for *npš'*, cf. GAWLIKOWSKI 1972, n. 39).

76. GAWLIKOWSKI 1972.

77. GAWLIKOWSKI 1970, p. 33-43; PARLASCA 1976, p. 34-39, esp. 37; SKUPINSKA-LØVSET 1999, p. 203-204.

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