PALMYRA IN THE (ARCHAEOLOGICAL) NORTH

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REGINA LIBERTA ET CONIVGI
BARATES PALMYRENVS NATIONE
CATVALAVNA ANN XXX

More legacies of antiquity, reworkings of what remains. Displacements.

Funerary portraits.

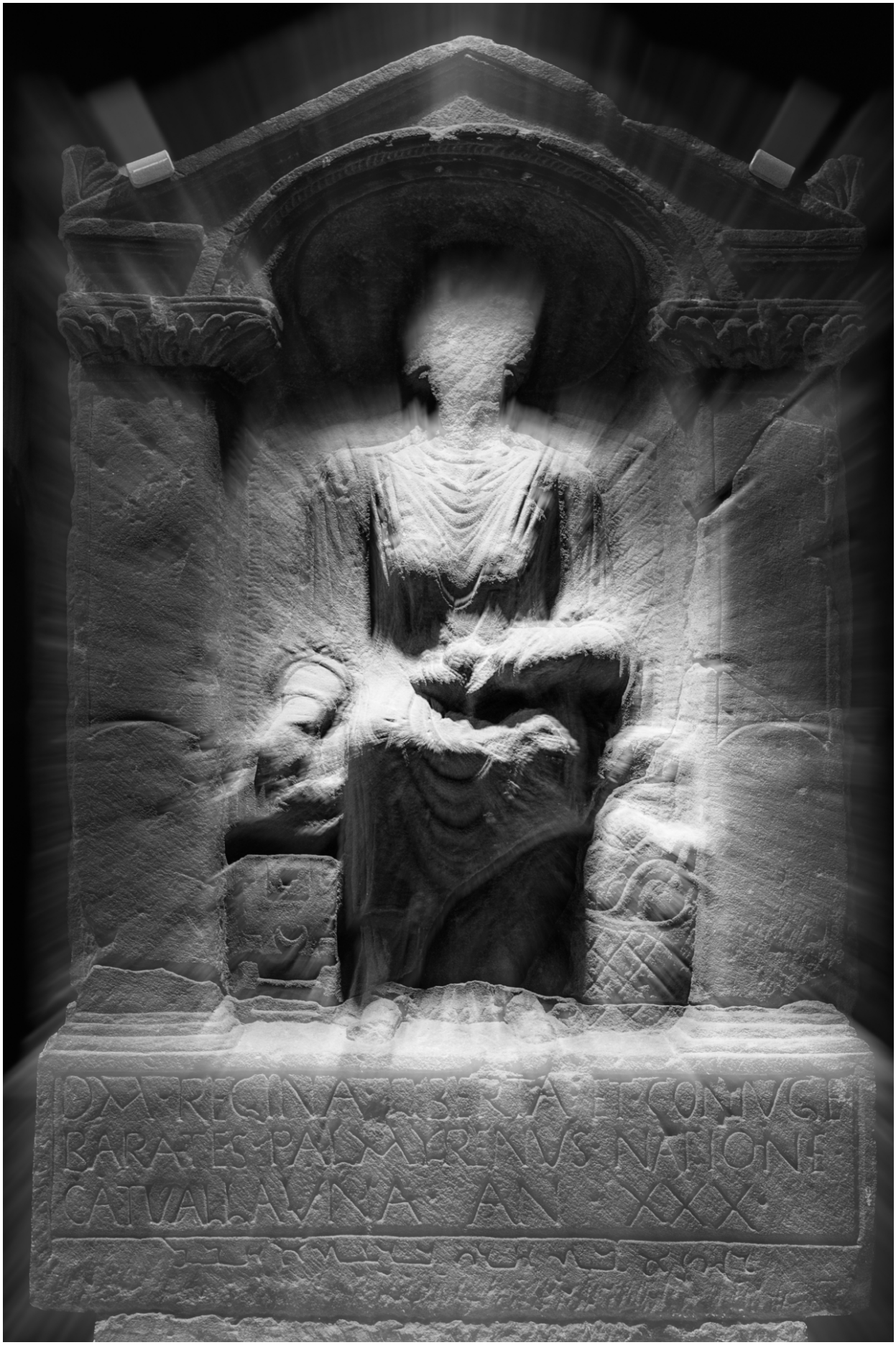
Loss and the burden of interpretation.

I have been posting some photographs of statues from the extraordinary collections in the Glyptotek in Copenhagen. The museum also holds a large collection of funerary reliefs from ancient Palmyra, the oasis city in Syria that once served as a vital, wealthy trading hub connecting the Roman Empire with Persia, India, and China.

Bôrrofâ of Palmyra. Deceased c150 CE. Now in the Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Acquired 1883-1887. (IN 1037)

ʿAttā and her deceased daughter Shalmat. From Palmyra c250 CE. Now in the Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Acquired 1883-1887. (IN 1025)

Given my ongoing research in the Roman north, how could I not bring to mind a tombstone from Roman Arbeia, a port servicing the borders that included Hadrian’s Wall in what is now the north-east of England.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Tombstone of Regina, freedwoman of the Catuvellauni, a British community in what is now southern England. Date – second century CE. Found at the northern edge of the Roman empire in South Shields, the Roman Arbeia, in 1878. (RIB 1065)

The inscription reads:
D(is) M(anibus) Regina liberta et coniuge
Barates Palmyrenus natione
Catuallauna an(norum) XXX
To the spirits of the departed (and to) Regina, his freedwoman and wife, a Catuvellaunian by community, aged 30, Barates of Palmyra (set this up).

Beneath the Latin inscription in Aramaic Palmyrene – RGYNʾ BT ḤRY BR ʿTʾ ḤBL
(transliterated)
Regina, the freedwoman of Barates, alas.

Details matter

The inscription in Palmyrene is much more confidently cut than the Latin, and the sculptural style is an amalgam of local Romano-Celtic and Palmyran – was the mason Palmyran himself?

And – Regina was defaced, quite deliberately …

Reused as a paving stone in nearby Coria (Corbridge) (RIB 1171), is a shattered tombstone, dated to about the same date, or a little later, whose inscription reads

[D(is)] M(anibus)
[..]rathes Pal-
mo<=re>nus vexil(l)a(rius)
vixit an(n)os LXVIII

To the spirits of the departed: […]rathes, of Palmyra, a flag-bearer, lived 68 years.

Was this Barathes? Was this Regina's husband? Reconnected after nearly 2000 years?

The burden of interpretation

The stone, Regina's memorial, bears an interpretive load out of all proportion to its five lines. Regina has become something of a near-archetypal Romano-British woman, an emblem of enslavement followed by legal and social absorption into the empire. Since 2015–16 the stone has been celebrated and circulated as an insight into the everyday diversity of the Roman empire, and as a parable for Syrian mobility amid European anxieties about refugees.

Barathes was a common name in Palmyra …

Palmyra – Tadmor in Aramaic and in the Mari archives of the early second millennium BCE – was an oasis settlement at the Efqa spring, midway across the Syrian steppe between the Orontes valley and the Euphrates. Its ancient significance rests in the three centuries from emperors Augustus to Aurelian, when a population of Aramaean, Arab and Amorite descent turned a watering station into the organizing node of long-distance trade between the Roman Mediterranean and the Parthian Gulf: Palmyrene merchant houses maintained agents at Spasinou Charax and Vologesias, ran caravans across the desert under armed escort, and shipped Indian Ocean goods up to the Levantine ports. The wealth financed the Temple of Bel (dedicated 32 CE), a grand colonnaded street, elaborate tower tombs and hypogea, and an epigraphic culture that was bilingual as a matter of course – Palmyrene Aramaic beside Greek, occasionally Latin. Politically it was a hybrid: a Greek-style polis and later a Roman colonia that never ceased to be a local confederation, whose autonomy peaked under King Odaenathus after Shapur's defeat and ended with Zenobia's breakaway empire and Aurelian's sack of 273 CE when the city was leveled.

Conflict in the region from 2015 involving Islamic State, the Assad regime and its Russian support, damaged the site. Bombardment came from the regime and Russian forces. The site was militarized (a Russian base established on the site in 2016).

Between May 2015 and March 2016 and then again December 2016 to March 2017 the forces of Islamic State occupied the city ruins. Tadmor prison, the notorious detention center of the Assad regime, was demolished. And so too were several major buildings and monuments of the ancient city, as well as some Islamic shrines – seven tower tombs and likely five more, the temples of Baalshamin and Bel, the great monumental arch, the stage buildings of the theatre, the Lion of Al-lāt, and the Tetrapylon (a columned monument). Antiquities in the Palmyra Museum were destroyed; items were looted for sale.

Archaeological theatre

The destruction was carefully staged as spectacle, dreadful archaeological theatre to achieve greatest shock. Khaled al-Asaad, the octogenarian head of the city's antiquities department, was publicly beheaded in the Roman theatre. The destruction was choreographed for circulation – sequenced over months, filmed by the perpetrators, and constituted as fact for the world through UNOSAT and ASOR remote sensing. The response followed the dramaturgy. Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, labeled the destruction as war crime and cultural cleansing, framing Palmyra as a crossroads of civilizations.

On 5 May 2016, a little over a month after Russian air strikes had helped push IS out, the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra under Valery Gergiev played in Palmyra's Roman theatre to an audience of Russian soldiers, Syrian government ministers and journalists. The event was billed as "With a Prayer for Palmyra"., On the Mariinsky's web site – "Praying for Palmyra: Music Revives Ancient Ruins". Gergiev opened by calling the concert a protest against the barbarians who had destroyed monuments of world culture. The music program included Prokofiev's Classical Symphony – Gergiev said this demonstrated a respect for history that separates the anti-terrorists from the terrorists. Putin appeared by video link from Sochi, calling it an amazing humanitarian act and a sign of gratitude, remembrance and hope, and linking Palmyra's revival to the deliverance of civilization from terrorism.

Both parties used the same stage as a broadcast studio: IS filmed its executions there for circulation; Russia filmed Prokofiev there for state television, and the world. Note also a profound irony at the heart of this heritage theatre. The ruins of the Roman theatre at Palmyra are largely twentieth-century neo-classical reconstruction. Prokofiev's Classical Symphony is itself a historical confabulation enlivened by fantasy. This revival of ancient ruins was performed inside a modern replica, to music imitating a past that never sounded that way. Set beside the Institute for Digital Archaeology's replica Palmyra arch unveiled in Trafalgar Square a fortnight earlier, the concert reads as as a Russian entry in a shared Western genre: heritage as the theatre in which great powers perform their own civility.

Spectacle answered spectacle in the same universalizing register, while the town

emptied and Tadmur prison, the site of the Assad regime's own atrocities, went unmentioned. The Palmyrene diaspora that put Barates on the Tyne is the quieter counter-narrative: mobility, bilingualism, the portable funerary portrait – precisely the entangled mingled connections that neither the iconoclasts nor the civilizational rhetoric had much use for.

The burden of interpretation – details matter

We remain in the wake of Volney and his best-selling work – *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (1791), a philosophical reflection upon the fall of civilization (implicated in my recent commentary on Christopher Nolan's film *The Odyssey* [Link]). The ruins of Palmyra have become an allegory – a "crossroads of civilizations" caught in a contemporary ideological clash between fundamentalism and world cultural heritage. Caught in-between, then-and-now, us-and-them. This hybridity is why it matters.

But take note – this index of achievement of civilization that Palmyra has become in heritage rhetoric is a modern construction that the Palmyrenes of Zenobia's time would not have recognized at all – they were not a "crossroads of civilization".

And more. Tadmur was continuously inhabited after Aurelian's destruction. He restored the temple of Bel and it later became a church, and then part of a mosque complex. The settlement concentrated within the temple precinct with fortifications above the town. In 1400 the caravans were diverted, but the town lived on.

The ruins attracted northern European interest from the seventeenth century. English merchants from Aleppo reached the ruins in 1678 and, under the chaplain William Halifax, in 1691; an account in the *Philosophical Transactions* of 1695 and a panorama painted for Gisbert Cuper introduced Palmyra to Europe. Wood and Dawkins's *Ruins of Palmyra* (1753), from their visit of 1751 with Borra, made the site a neoclassical pattern-book – its soffits reappear on Robert Adam ceilings in Britain – and gave Barthélemy the bilinguals from which he deciphered Palmyrene in 1754. Volney set his *Ruines* (1791) there; Cassas drew it in 1785; Vignes photographed it for the Duc de Luynes in 1864; Waddington and de Vogüé harvested the inscriptions in the 1860s; the Tariff (an extraordinary epigraphic document of economic activity) was found in 1881 and shipped to St Petersburg in 1901; Puchstein's German survey of 1902 and 1917 produced Wiegand's *Palmyra* (1932); and

Ingholt dug the necropolis for Copenhagen in 1924–28 (he prepared the inventory of the funerary reliefs in the Glyptotek, pictured above).

Clearance of the old city ruins

What of the locals? In the twentieth century the villagers of Tadmur still lived in mud-brick houses within the sanctuary of Bel, whose temple had served as the mosque since the twelfth century, as just mentioned. In 1929 the French Mandate authorities announced they would be moved to a hastily built village nearby so the site could be given over to excavation and tourism. Seyrig, as director of antiquities, had everyone out by 1932, when the village was razed

It was archaeologists who obliterated old Tadmur and much of the site's post-antiquity fabric, including fortification walls. The "ruin" IS attacked and destroyed in 2015 was itself a product of the 1930s, made by removing the living town to create a monumental and fragmentary relic of a faintly-recalled but celebrated past.

A view of Palmyra, before Islamic State destroyed some of the major monuments. The

old Islamic village was removed in the 1920s to leave only the ancient ruins. The Tetrapylon, center left middle ground, was a modern concrete reconstruction from the 1960s.

“Palmyra (Tadmor). Native village among ruins of Temple of the Sun”. Photograph in the Library of Congress. The village in the temple precinct, removed 1929-1932. https://lccn.loc.gov/2019702979