

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

REVISITING THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF PALMYRA

21-22 SEPTEMBER 2017



ORGANISED BY
RUBINA RAJA, AARHUS UNIVERSITY

HOSTED BY
THE ROYAL DANISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND LETTERS



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Outline.....	4
Programme.....	6
Abstracts.....	8
Ted Kaizer.....	9
Maurice Sartre.....	10
Tommaso Gnoli.....	11
Signe Krag.....	12
Maura K. Heyn.....	13
Eleonora Cussini.....	14
Aleksandra Kubiak-Schneider.....	15
Jean-Baptiste Yon.....	16
Eivind Heldaas Seland.....	17
Lucinda Dirven.....	18
Nathanael Andrade.....	19
Achim Lichtenberger & Rubina Raja.....	21
Dagmara Wielgosz-Rondolino.....	22
Speakers' dinner and hotel.....	24
List of participants.....	26
Palmyra Portrait Project.....	28
Organiser.....	31
Conference website.....	31

OUTLINE

Various aspects of the religious life of Palmyra have been featured in a number of prominent publications over the last decades. We have gained much knowledge about different developments through analysis of evidence coming from archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence. The comprehensive overview and analysis published by Ted Kaizer in 2002 constitutes the last large monograph publication on the religious life of Palmyra. However, a number of other contributions in the shape of important articles have also dealt with aspects of the religious life after this publication. On the basis of the research done until now and the advances made over the last decades, it is time to bring together scholars who have and are working on a variety of aspects of the religious life of Palmyra, in order for them to present and discuss new finds as well as new approaches to the already existing material.

Several cults of Palmyra have been described as coming from different cultural backgrounds having been brought together by the sedentarisation of the region, which we assume took place, and through which the city of Palmyra came into being. Furthermore, the influences of the assumed Roman influence on Palmyra from the 60s BCE onwards have also been discussed. The sources testifying to the religious life of Palmyra, however, confront us with a variety of dilemmas, some of which remain basic to our assumptions about Palmyrene religion and the way in which the religious life and the various cults in the city functioned and developed.

While scholars have attempted to give accounts and explanations for a variety of aspects of the city's religious life, and in which way these were connected to social and political developments, it has still not been attempted to bring together scholars across disciplines, who have worked on such issues in order to together discuss the status of research. The

idea of this conference is to produce an agenda volume on the religious life of Palmyra, which outlines research done, present new research as well as set the line of enquiries, which scholars interested in the religious life of Palmyra should investigate in the years to come. The conference papers will be published in the series *Palmyrene Studies/Palmyrenske Studier* founded and edited by Rubina Raja and published by the Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters.



PROGRAMME

21 SEPTEMBER

8.30 Registration and coffee

9.00 Rubina Raja — *Introduction*

9.15 Ted Kaizer — *Patterns of worship at Palmyra: Methods and approaches*

10.05 Break

I — GODS IN PALMYRA

(chair: Rubina Raja)

10.45 Maurice Sartre — *Greek gods in Palmyra*

11.35 Tommaso Gnoli — *'Les dieux armés' in Palmyra: Religious, iconographic and ethnic considerations*

12.25 Lunch

II — PARTICIPATION IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF PALMYRA

(chair: Eivind Heldaas Seland)

13.25 Signe Krag — *Women and religion in Palmyra*

14.15 Maura K. Heyn — *Worship or supplication? The significance of the orans pose in Palmyrene art*

15.05 Break

(chair: Jørgen Christian Meyer)

15.35 Eleonora Cussini — *Images of individual devotion in Palmyrene sources*

16.25 Aleksandra Kubiak-Schneider — *Bel the Merciful*

17.15 Drinks at the academy

19.00 Dinner in town—Madsalen

22 SEPTEMBER

8.30 Coffee

III — MOVEMENT OF RELIGIOUS CULTURE

(chair: Rubina Raja)

9.00 Jean-Baptiste Yon — *Foreigners and outsiders: The religious life of Palmyra seen from the outside*

9.50 Eivind Heldaas Seland — *Portable religion and the Palmyrene diaspora*

10.40 Break

(chair: Achim Lichtenberger)

11.10 Lucinda Dirven — *Images as windows into the religious life of Palmyra*

12.00 Nathanael Andrade — *Palmyra, the Acts of Thomas, and the movement of religious culture through Asia*

12.50 Lunch

IV — RELIGIOUS VISUAL LANGUAGE

(chair: Nathanael Andrade)

13.50 Achim Lichtenberger & Rubina Raja — *The so-called 'curtain of death' in the Palmyrene funerary sculpture*

14.40 Dagmara Wielgosz-Rondolino — *Mourning rituals in the Palmyrene tradition: The West and the East?*

15.30 Final discussion

16.30 Drinks at the academy

19.30 Dinner in town—Cofoco

ABSTRACTS



*Patterns of worship at Palmyra:
Methods and approaches*

Our understanding of the patterns of worship at Palmyra has come a long way since Février in 1931 published the first overall study of Palmyrene religion, through contributions by Henri Seyrig, Michał Gawlikowski and many others following in their footsteps. Now that our discipline, which until recently was understandably fronted by the ongoing discoveries made by the various archaeological missions at work at the site itself, will have to undergo (at least temporary) reorientation towards approaches that are less dependent on new excavations, the moment seems appropriate for us as conference attendants to make up another balance – fifteen years after my own attempt at an overview – and especially to reflect on ways in which the field can develop further and on directions which our research may take next. My paper will therefore aim, firstly, to provide a critical consideration of the latest historiography on the subject and of current projects and, secondly, to present some thoughts on the contributions that future collaborations through exploration of archival material and analysis of updated databases, catalogues and digital collections may make to research into the religious life of Palmyra.

Maurice Sartre

Greek gods in Palmyra

In a recent book, Paul Veyne wrote that no Greek god was honoured at Palmyra. The *auctoritas* of the former professor in the Collège de France and the prestige of one of the most famous French specialist of Roman History can give this opinion a credibility which the documents deny. Despite of Veyne's affirmation, there are several Greek gods attested in Palmyra, not only as figures on paintings or mosaics but also as recipients of worship or cultural ceremonies. We will not return to the problem of Semitic gods with Greek names, but we will examine some Greek gods who are worshipped for themselves, because they are Greek gods, and who have the attributes of the Greek gods. We shall take the change to wonder what impact the images of Greek gods, their names, their myths, their iconography and the rites of their cults have on the Semitic gods so disguised.

'Les dieux armés' in Palmyra: Religious, iconographic and ethnic considerations

Henry Seyrig started his short communication at the 1971 9th International Conference of Classical Archaeology stating that: “Un des caractères les plus singuliers de la religion palmyrénienne consiste dans la proportion particulièrement forte des divinités en habit militaire.” His statement rested upon a perfect knowledge of all the iconographical materials available to him, but maybe his position in relation to the ethnic identities in Syria, as much as elsewhere, was too much confident. His proposal to understand the armed deities as the testimonies of the progressive expansion of the Arabs all-over Syria cannot be accepted anymore after the in-depth analysis of the religious life of Palmyra by Ted Kaizer and of Syrian ethnicity by Nathanael Andrade. However, the category of the ‘armed gods’ has been overlooked in the work by Kaizer, most probably because of its ubiquitous presence in Palmyra. Nevertheless, I propose to recover it at least from a historical and artistic point of view. To depict gods as armed characters – so also female deities – represents a precise pan-Syrian *Darstellungstypus* which not far from Palmyra also affects deities who are well known in all the Roman world, where they never appear as armed: it is the case e.g. of the extraordinary Mithraic bas-relief of Arsha-wa-Qibar (CIMRM 71) in which, one on each side of a rough tauroctony, Cautes and Cautopates are portrayed according to the specific iconographical type of the ‘armed gods’.

Women and religion in Palmyra

The religious role of women in Palmyra has not received much attention within research. However, although no priestesses have so far been identified in the city, women could participate in both religious processions and sacrifices. This is affirmed by few religious reliefs found in the city. Women are encountered in religious dedications in which they dedicate architecture to the gods alone, together with relatives or as members of tribes; this is rare. The largest bulk of material testifying to the participation of women in religion is small altars spread across the city and also outside the city at the Efqa spring. These altars might offer a better insight to the character of female participation in the religious life of Palmyra.

The paper will concentrate on the altars dedicated by women to their relatives as well as altars dedicated to women by their relatives. Who were the receivers of the female dedications and why? And secondly, who dedicated altars to women? Furthermore, which phrases are used in the dedications and which gods are addressed? Besides dedicatory inscriptions, few altars carry reliefs depicting either full-figure individuals or palms turned outwards, and these will also be addressed to reach a better understanding of female participation in religion in Palmyra.

Worship or supplication? The significance of the orans pose in Palmyrene art

This paper will revisit the significance of the ‘palm forward’ gesture in Palmyrene funerary and religious art. Women holding their right hand in this manner appear in the funerary art in the earliest phase of production. Colledge (1976, 138) distinguished the significance of this funerary gesture from that made by civilians and priests who appear on the sides of limestone altars dated to the third century CE. These human figures, depicted frontally in smaller scale, raise both hands with the palms turned forwards. The funerary gesture is interpreted as apotropaic or as symbolizing worship, whereas the gestures displayed by those on the altars are characterized as adoration or supplication. It is not clear that these gestures should be differentiated, especially since regional comparanda show both men and women raising only the right hand in religious (non-funerary) contexts. The almost exclusive association of the ‘palm forward’ gesture with women in the Palmyrene tomb is an enigma. Even more interesting is the connection between the limestone altars, the majority of which are dedicated to the Nameless God, and female patterns of worship in the city. This paper considers these differing manifestations of the orans pose in their archaeological and cultural contexts in order to offer new insights into its meaning in Palmyrene art.

Eleonora Cussini

*Images of individual devotion in
Palmyrene sources*

An incense altar, housed at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (NCG 1080) portrays a woman and a child with upraised hands. It bears a dedicatory inscription (PAT 0420) and records the name of a woman and her son who offered the altar to the Anonymous God. This is just one example out of hundreds formulaic dedicatory inscriptions known so far, offered to Palmyrene gods. A closer look at the surviving evidence may reveal details on the identity of the worshippers and, in some cases, the reason why they dedicated artifacts or offered *ex-voto*. Stemming from my ongoing research, the paper focuses on the study of individual stories. Rather than evaluating the evidence from a quantitative/qualitative standpoint only (e.g. types of formulae and their structure, diachronic attestations) the emphasis is on a microhistorical approach, aiming at reconstructing aspects of individual devotion in the framework of Palmyrene religious life.

Bel the Merciful

The figure of Bel is placed in the centre of the Palmyrene pantheon, dwelling in the greatest sanctuary in the city and being the 'national' god of the inhabitants. The name and iconography of this divinity reveal the connection to the Babylonian religious tradition. The famous reliefs from the temple of Bel depict the glorious defeat of Tiamat described in the *Enuma Elish* epic. What is more, according to the theology of Babylonian Bel-Marduk, one of his names was the Merciful, Remmenu. My research on the votive dedications from Palmyra led to the conclusion that Bel was an addressee of a group of texts, where he was simply called the Merciful. In this paper I will show how the Babylonian traditions are present in the Palmyrene cult of Bel.

Jean-Baptiste Yon

*Foreigners and outsiders: The religious life
of Palmyra seen from the outside*

A different view on Palmyrene religious life may be obtained by looking at it from outside. Numerous documents from Palmyrenes abroad offer insights into the reality of their religious experience. Documentary evidence from Dacia, Rome or Dura Europos compared to material from the oasis can contribute to determine religious patterns and to appraise if Palmyrene cults abroad were the plain continuation of patterns of worship and practices at Palmyra. It may form an excellent test case of the role of different gods and their relative importance in the diaspora, illuminating in return the religious life of Palmyra itself.

Portable religion and the Palmyrene diaspora

The epigraphic corpus from Palmyra as well as the inscriptional record of Palmyrene activities outside the city document the participation of people for Palmyra in acts of religion related to a number of deities and faiths. In this paper I approach these activities in light of two analytical models, viz. William McNeill's of the 'portable religion' and Jonathan Z. Smith's division into religion 'here, there, and anywhere'. I argue that this helps us understand how religion was useful for maintaining group cohesion among Palmyrenes abroad as well as for establishing and maintaining contact with other groups, and thus in facilitating the extensive trading activities which contributed towards the wealth and fame of the Syrian city.

Lucinda Dirven

*Images as windows into the
religious life of Palmyra*

Traditionally, representations of deities have been one of the main sources in reconstructing religious life in Palmyra. So far, discussions have mainly focussed on the iconography of deities. From here, investigations were made into their origin, character, and divine associates. In this paper I want to take another approach. Instead of looking at images as illustrations of religious life, I set out to study them as religious objects that may provide insights in the religious mentality of their users. Starting point of my talk is the outspoken rigid and hieratic style that is traditionally used for representing deities in Palmyra. Since this style is typical of religious images, we may rightfully ask how it relates to the religious function of these representations. I shall argue that context and use are crucial in understanding this phenomenon. For this reason, religious representations from the temples of Bel, Baalshamin, and Allat will serve as the starting point of my talk.

Palmyra, the Acts of Thomas, and the movement of religious culture through Asia

Recent scholarship has illuminated the dynamics of Palmyra's long-distance trade and its contact with the Indian Ocean world. This presentation explores how Palmyrene trade facilitated the movement of religious culture. To this end, it discusses in general terms the cultural contributions that the Palmyrenes made to eastern Christianity and Manichaeism. But it also focuses on the Palmyrenes' contribution to a text that circulated promiscuously among Christians and Manichaeans alike: the *Acts of the Apostle Thomas*. According to the *Acts of Thomas*, probably written in Syriac at third-century Edessa, the apostle Judas Thomas arrived in India after being sold as a slave by the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth to an Indian merchant named Habban. As the text claims, Habban had been sent to Jerusalem to acquire a slave by a king of India named Gudnaphar (or Goundaphores in Greek). The reference to Gudnaphar/Goundaphores seems to be based on the existence of Indo-Parthian kings who bore the name or title Gondophares during the first century CE. As a result, scholars have often treated the *Acts of Thomas* as documenting a voyage that an apostle had actually made to India in the first century CE.

In my recent scholarship on this issue, I have expressed skepticism at the value of the *Acts of Thomas* as a source for Christianity's arrival in India. Beyond the reference to the name Gondophares, the text says nothing specific about India at all. The narrative of Judas Thomas' trek to India, in

Continues on p. 20

Nathanael Andrade (continued)

my view, reflects a third-century literary agenda at Edessa. Since prior traditions had placed Thomas in Parthia, the text shifted the apostle Judas Thomas to India in order to create space for the work of the apostle Addai and his Edessene converts in Mesopotamia and Iran. But if the traditions of the *Acts of Thomas* were entirely invented and reflect no direct contact between Edessenes and India, how did the name of an actual Indo-Parthian king make its way into the text?

As this presentation argues, the Palmyrenes were almost certainly responsible for transporting the culture of Gondophares' name from North India to the Roman Near East. The Palmyrenes famously established direct commercial contact with North India, and they were unique among Roman Syrians in doing so. While the chronology of the Indo-Parthian kings is debated, they appear to have been active as late as c. 100 CE. As a result, they were still reigning when the Palmyrenes were beginning to reach the peak of their contact with the Indus River region. So it was through the activity of Palmyrenes that Syrians and Upper Mesopotamians came to associate the name Gondophares with kings in India, and we can accredit the Palmyrenes for their impact on one of the most famous and celebrated narratives among late antique Christians and Manichaeans.

The so-called 'curtain of death' in the Palmyrene funerary sculpture

The numerous so-called dorsalia, pieces of cloth hanging behind the deceased, represented in the funerary reliefs from the Palmyrene graves have long been argued to be attributes alluding to the afterlife, which would have awaited the deceased behind the curtain. However, as far as we know Palmyrene religion did not operate with ideas about an afterlife and nothing in neither the religious sphere or the funerary sphere indicate that such beliefs were held among the Palmyrenes in the period between the first and the third centuries CE when the reliefs were produced. The interpretation of these curtains seems to have been rooted in a naïve approach to the meaning of attributes in the relief. Furthermore, the reliefs depicting these curtains have never been assembled and addressed as a group in its own right, which also has hampered further interpretation. In this paper, the corpus of dorsalia represented in the funerary sphere in Palmyra will for the first time be addressed collectively in order to explore the meaning of this attribute within the funerary sphere, both within a local Palmyrene tradition as well as within the broader visual language of the funerary sphere in the Roman world.

Dagmara Wielgosz-Rondolino

*Mourning rituals in the Palmyrene tradition:
The West or the East?*

Mourning for a deceased person is one of the most atavistic rituals of mankind expressed by a specific code of behaviour and gestures. Ancient literary sources as well as the material culture offer rich evidence of different mourning practices. Unfortunately, our knowledge about the religious rituals in Palmyra is still very limited. Some speculations, however, can be made through the sculptural monuments. Few Palmyrene busts represent persons with physical signs of deep sorrow. While looking at them we need to ask the question to what extent the mourning rituals in Palmyra grew from the Semitic tradition and how much they owed to the Graeco-Roman rituals.



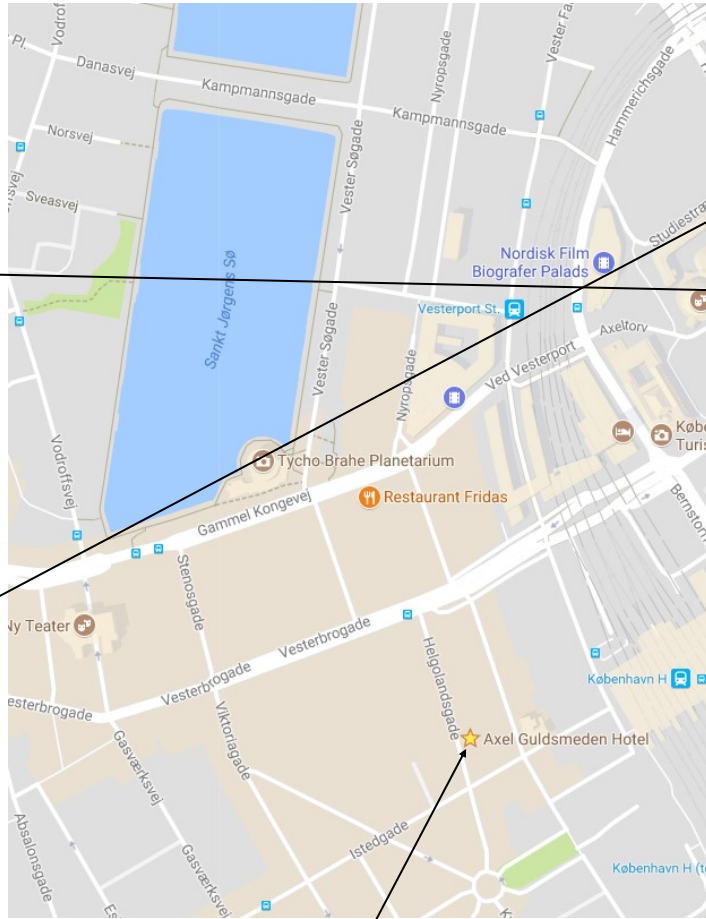
SPEAKERS' DINNER AND HOTEL

21 September 19.00

Restaurant Madsalen
Farvergade 15
1463 København C

22 September 19.30

The Italian—Cofoco
Vester Voldgade 25
1552 København V



Axel Guldsmeden Hotel

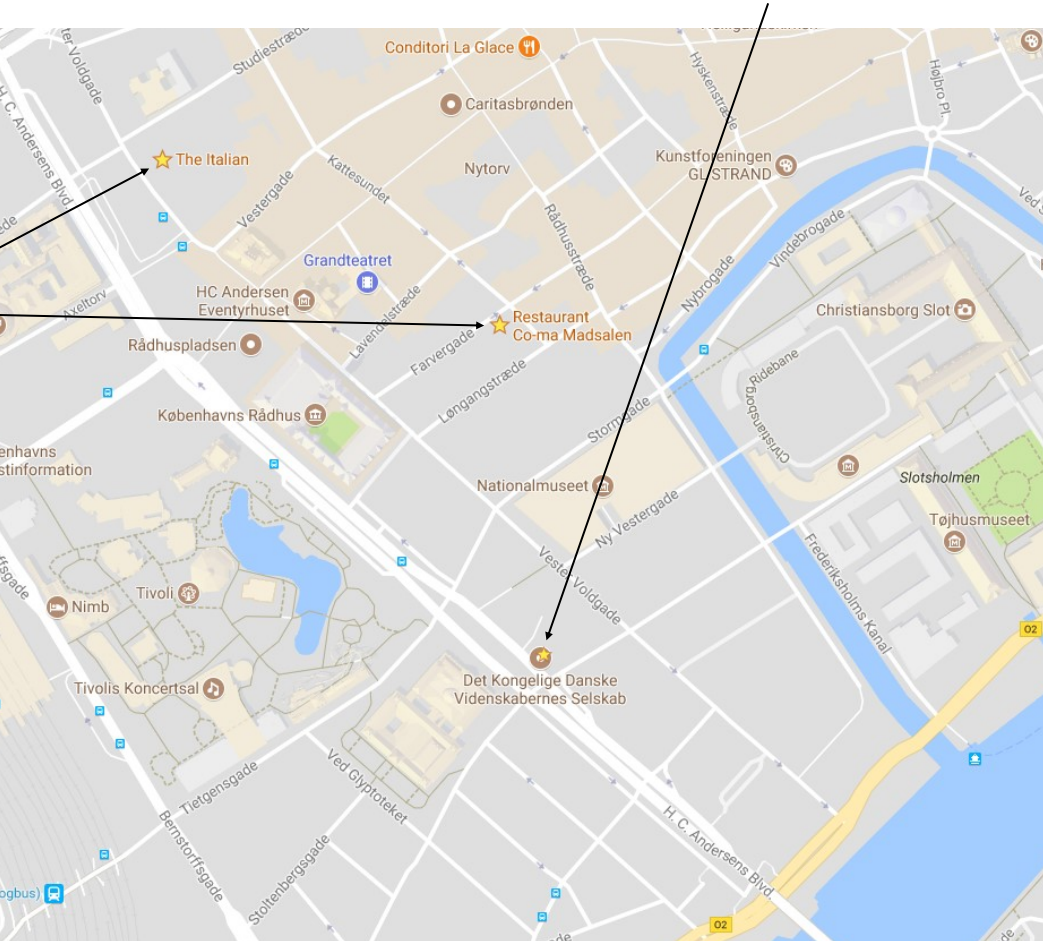
Helgolandsgade 11
1653 København V

<https://guldsmedenhotels.com/axel-guldsmeden-hotel-copenhagen-vesterbro/>

Conference venue

The Royal Danish Academy of
Sciences and Letters

H. C. Andersens Boulevard 35



Please note that meals are only included for invited speakers.
Coffee breaks are for all.

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PALMYRA PORTRAIT PROJECT

The conference is part of the Palmyra Portrait Project based at Aarhus University and directed by Prof. Dr. Rubina Raja.

Palmyrene funerary sculpture is the largest corpus of portrait sculpture in the Roman world outside Rome, which makes this group of material extremely significant both in relation to issues of identity in the Roman provinces, as well as in comparison to core-Roman portraiture studies. Especially in the English-speaking world, Palmyrene portraits have been misinterpreted as being Roman provincial portraiture. This would imply that they follow imperial styles and fashions. This is not the case. They follow a trajectory of their own. Unlike Roman portraits, they are not individualised, but idealised – mostly with generic facial features. Through their clothing, jewellery and gestures, they communicate their local identities in a very distinct way, blending Greco-Roman, Parthian and local elements. Rather than a haphazard blending of elements, they express a highly developed knowledge of current fashions and trends in the outside world and use them in a unique way in their local context.

Palmyrene portraiture has been studied for more than a hundred years, but still there has been no attempt at compiling a comprehensive corpus or understanding the portraits within their Roman imperial and local contexts. There are more than 3000 pieces scattered through various museums and private collections across the world. Furthermore, the Harald Ingholt archive in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek provides an important insight into the chronology of the portraiture and holds more than 800 illustrations with notes by Ingholt.

The aims of the Palmyra Portrait Project are therefore threefold: to compile a corpus of all known Palmyrene funerary portraits, to digitise the Harald Ingholt archive and to produce text volumes to accompany the corpus, as well as a number of publications on various aspects of Palmyrene sculpture. The corpus and the archive will be made available online.





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Professor Riis, P.J.
 Roskildevej 102, Valby, D.K. 2500 ~~71 32 73~~
 011 45 Copenhagen ~~102~~ ~~71 32 73~~
 - Items in case of emergency for sale 71 32 73
 Statue de femme, pierre calcaire, provenance Paris AA, 1965, n.
 565, 2.66

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WEBSITES

Conference website

<http://projects.au.dk/palmyraportrait/news/show/artikel/revisiting-the-religious-life-of-palmyra/>

Palmyra Portrait Project website

<http://projects.au.dk/palmyraportrait/>

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Page 30: The Palmyra Portrait Project, Ingholt Archive

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