



Attributes in Palmyrene Art and Sculpture

19 June 2018

Organisers:

Maura Heyn (University of North Carolina - Greensboro)
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CARLSBERG FOUNDATION

Outline

Palmyrene art and sculpture display a variety of attributes. Over the past years, the rich funerary sculptural corpus, in particular, has been studied in detail, and much new information has been gained about attributes carried and worn by deceased Palmyrenes and their family members. While attributes in the art of the religious sphere have often been addressed in scholarship, the funerary sculpture and public sculpture have rarely stood at the centre of attention. This workshop will, therefore, focus on the sculpture and the attributes in general in Palmyra, with a focus on the funerary sculpture.

Palmyrenes display a variety of objects in their funerary, public and religious portraits in the first three centuries CE. Women hold items that are associated with the domestic sphere: spindle and distaff, keys, a child, an unusual object that may be a calendar and, occasionally, a palm leaf. Most men hold a book roll in their left hand, and a few display other items such as swords and whips and have, therefore, been associated with caravan trade, although there is no hard evidence for such connections. Men also occasionally hold a twig or a branch in their hands. Palmyrene priests often carry a jug (libation pitcher) and an incense bowl. They wear the distinctly Palmyrene priestly hat and often a large and decorated brooch, which became part of their complete attire, holding their cloaks together.

These items, displayed by men and women, were presumably intended to communicate information about the deceased to the community. The character of this information is not straightforward, however – particularly since most of the female attributes drop out of use at the end of the second century. After this time, most women grasp, if anything, a loop of their cloak and often set themselves apart by their quantities of jewellery. It seems unlikely that this change in style correlates with a change of role in the household or community. But it does communicate a switch in display and representation.

The aim of this workshop is to bring together experts working on Palmyra, in order to explore in detail a range of the attributes in Palmyrene art and sculpture to begin to understand these better in their overall urban context over the three centuries in which Palmyra flourished.

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Programme

8.30–9.00	Registration and coffee	
9.00–9.30	Introduction Maura Heyn and Rubina Raja	
9.30–10.00	Plants in Palmyrene funerary iconography of adults Olympia Bobou	Chair: Rubina Raja
10.00–10.30	Discussion	
10.30–10.50	BREAK	
10.50–11.20	Between East and West: The iconography of the Palmyrene coinage	Chair: Michael Blömer
11.20–11.50	Nathalia B. Kristensen Discussion	
11.50–12.20	Drinking attributes in Palmyrene banquet scenes Maura Heyn	
12.20–12.50	Discussion	
12.50–13.50	LUNCH	

13.50-14.20	Tabulaea and schedulae: Writing attributes and male social roles reflected in Palmyrene portraiture Łukasz Sokółowski	Chair: Lidewijde de Jong
14.20-14.50	Discussion	
14.50-15.20	Why no attributes? Jean-Baptiste Yon	
15.20-15.50	Discussion	
15.50-16.10	BREAK	
16.10-16.40	Individualising Palmyrene priesthood through priestly attributes Rubina Raja	Chair: Maura Heyn
16.40-17.10	Discussion	
17.10-17.40	The “fringed” mantle and its relation to gender in Palmyrene funerary sculpture Fred C. Albertson	
17.40-18.10	Discussion	
18.10-18.30	Final discussion and closing	
19.00	Speakers' dinner Restaurant Ombord, Jægergårdsgade 71, 8000 Aarhus C	



Locus relief with male bust and camel, IN 2833 (Photo: Palmyra Portrait Project, courtesy of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek).

Plants in Palmyrene funerary iconography of adults

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When Colledge examined Palmyrene funerary iconography in *The Art of Palmyra*, he wrote that '[t]he earthly occupations of some are reflected in the objects they hold, usually in the left hand. Those with nothing, a 'book-roll' (schedula, volumen) or a leaf alone, reveal little.' In this paper, I want to explore the iconography and use of these so-called 'leaves', as well as that of plants when held by adults (children do not hold leaves, but they hold fruits instead). Branches, as well as fruits and pinecones, appear in 146 Palmyrene *loculus* reliefs and sarcophagi. In the best-preserved and best-carved pieces, it is possible to identify the plants with some certainty. Another intriguing aspect of the use of 'leaves' in funerary imagery is that they are held almost exclusively by men. Identifying the plants and connecting them to Palmyrene customs and traditions can perhaps illuminate their presence in funerary iconography and explain their role as attributes.

Between East and West: The iconography of the Palmyrene coinage

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Coins were the only mass media of the ancient world, and it was by issuing coins that a city could promote its social and political agenda. Under Seleucid and early Roman rule, Palmyra had depended on the coinage minted in other Syrian cities, particularly Antioch, but from the middle of the second century CE, Palmyra began minting its own local bronze coinage. The coinage has been described by travellers and scholars since the late nineteenth century but has never been included in numismatic studies of the Roman Near East. The Palmyrene coinage has more often been compared with the Parthian coinage than the Roman provincial coinage of the East, but it has, unfortunately, always been in passing, and no thorough study of the Palmyrene coinage, its iconography or outside influences have been done. This paper seeks to show that the iconography of the Palmyrene coins was, in fact, a local interpretation of both eastern and Roman traditions. The Roman civic coinage of Syrian cities was adorned with the head of the emperor on the obverse and depicted local deities, monuments, geographical features and cults on the reverse, as had also been customary before the Roman annexation of Syria and the rest of the Near East. Palmyra never placed the emperor's portrait on the coins but continued the Hellenistic traditions and adorned both sides of the coins with local deities wearing a radiate nimbus or kalathos, animals and Nikai. The coins were, however, executed very differently from the Roman provincial coins and are clearly more oriental in stylistic influence. Palmyra was a junction between East and West, and the coins became a local expression strongly influenced by the two empires in between which the city was situated.

Drinking attributes in Palmyrene banquet scenes

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This paper analyses the significance of the drinking cups and bowls that are held in the left hand of reclining males in the banquet scenes in Palmyrene funerary art. This scene is a common feature of the Palmyrene tomb in the first three centuries CE. Appearing in the first century on the exterior of the tomb, visible to all who passed, the banquet scene was moved inside the tomb in the second and third centuries CE, where its importance for the prestige of the family was indicated by its prominent placement in the tomb. The basic elements of the scene include a reclining man, sometimes two, who is joined by his wife or mother at the foot of the couch and other family members standing in the background or appearing as busts between the legs of the dining couch. Miniature banquet scenes also exist, abbreviated to the reclining male holding similar attributes and accompanied by an attendant. Contextual evidence from the site itself, as well as comparative evidence from similar types of scenes in the region, indicates that the ornately decorated, two-handled cup or shallow bowl are not just generic “banqueting” items but rather specific to the identity of the reclining figure.

Tabulaea and schedulae: Writing attributes and male social roles reflected in Palmyrene portraiture

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The men of Palmyra were notoriously shown with the writing tools hold in one of their hands, usually the right one. In fact, the writing tools constitute the largest group of Palmyrene male attributes, yet surely not a homogeneous one. At the beginning, it is worth drawing attention to the categories which appear within this broad set. On their funerary representations, Palmyrenians were shown keeping styluses, tablets, schedulas, rolls and open polyptychs, whilst the codexes and the capsas occasionally appeared at the background. Further, tablets can take the wide and narrow form when schedulas can be straight or curved. In fact, tablets and schedulas deserve special focus within the group. The representations with other objects are extremely interesting, because they document the familiarity of Palmyrenians with iconography of Graeco-Roman writing utensils. The representations are small in number, however – approximately less than a dozen. Contrary, the tablets appeared as male attributes from the very beginning and were later supplemented by schedulas. So, one can observe a chronological transformation of form between the first to the third century. In some cases, tablets are decorated by an inscription, in others by incisions reproducing the shapes of codexes. These transformations can probably be analysed statistically and be assigned to specific chronological periods. The writing tools could possibly express the several identities that were related to Palmyrenian male roles: (a) schoolboys; (b) citizens of the Greek polis and the Roman Empire; (c) merchants, caravan organisers, cameleers and meharists; (d) tomb owners; (e) priests. The wide spectrum of identifications depicts the broad range of social groups that used the attributes to represent themselves. It seems that in Palmyra, they were used more often and in a different contexts than in the case of Roman funerary portraiture known from Italy or the Roman East. Palmyrenes remained themselves but used means from other realms to express their values and identity.

Why no attributes?

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Inscriptions from Palmyra in Greek or Aramaic lack specific vocabulary referring to attributes. Despite this absence, the epigraphic vocabulary has means to represent status symbols. It is, surprisingly, very precise in other domains. This contribution will focus on the choices made by Palmyrenes in their expression of status and other social realities, and adduce contemporary evidence to explain the situation at Palmyra.

Individualising Palmyrene priesthood through priestly attributes

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Over the years, attributes in Palmyrene sculpture have received some attention; however, they have not been systematically studied. In this contribution, the focus will be on the attributes of the Palmyrene priests and their significance. Palmyrene priests make up approximately 25 per cent of all male representations in the funerary sculpture. This is a significant number. Palmyrene priests are characterised by their clothing and their distinct priestly hat, a cylindrical hat with a flat top. Furthermore, the priests often carry attributes such as a libation pitcher and a bowl, the latter of which is interpreted as an incense bowl. On top of that, numerous wear large and sometimes decorated brooches, which hold their cloaks together. These four attributes can be said to be the signifiers of Palmyrene priests and the most important attributes in the funerary images of the priests: the hat, the pitcher and the incense bowl as well as the brooch. In this paper, these four categories will be presented, and the ways in which these attributes were used to individualise the images of the Palmyrene priests will be investigated – which, in some ways, were very standardised. These four attributes, however, could be highly individualised and therefore add to the single image of the Palmyrene priest, setting him apart from the others while, on the other hand, underlining his belonging to the group of Palmyrene priests.

The “fringed” mantle and its relation to gender in Palmyrene funerary sculpture

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This presentation examines a small but significant group of Palmyrene funerary reliefs which portrays the deceased, both male and female, wearing a “fringed” mantle – a rectangular cloak decorated with short, twisted threads hanging from the edges of the long sides. Palmyrene men wearing such a mantle can be identified as individuals who either specifically served in the Roman army or belong more generally to the category of “men of the desert.” Thus, the Palmyrene representations maintain the military associations of their presumed external model, the fringed sagum worn by members of the Roman military. In contrast, while a fringed mantle in Graeco-Roman female dress would be worn by a mature woman, this mantle at Palmyra is a costume associated primarily with young females. The majority of examples depict women without the matronly attributes of a diadem and a veil covering the head; these examples also show the deceased wearing the Melonenfrisur and “tower-type” hairstyle, both fashions associated with Palmyrene woman of pre-marital status. This raises questions as to whether the fringed mantle at Palmyra was simply a fashion or designates a more specific aspect of the identity of a young women.



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